


Potomac

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**Washington's
Moroccan Jews
-a community
of artisans**

When they talk to each other, it is either in Arabic, French, Spanish or English (in that order); when they dine together, it is more likely to be *cous-cous* (a kind of semolina with meat and vegetables), *harira* (a dry vegetable soup heavily flavored with lemon and yeast) or *ftyre* (a triangular Napoleon filled with meat and spices); when they party together, the men wear conventional dress, but the women wear caftans (a long velvet or silk dress with buttons down the front, usually embroidered in silver and gold); when they sing and dance, it will usually be to a *huud* (a stringed instrument similar to a guitar), a *darbouka* (tambourine) or a mandolin; when they pray together, it will be a Sephardic service in Ladino (a mixture of Spanish and Hebrew) and usually at the 16th Street orthodox Chev Shalom Synagogue, which they rent for the high holidays.

Who are they?

They are Washington's Moroccan Jewish community, which numbers some 250 in about 60 close-knit and often intermarried families. Like other ethnic groups in pluralistic Washington, they are often indistinguishable from the mainstream of the city's population, and yet like many other foreign-born, they cling tenaciously to the customs and habits of their country of origin. For the Sephardic Jews of the Middle East, whether Moroccan, Tunisian, Algerian, Syrian, Egyptian,

Schulter edits a semi-monthly local newspaper here called The Intowner.

Lebanese, Greek, or Turkish, these customs date back some 500 years to the Spanish Inquisition when the Jews were expelled from Spain during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella.

They serve the Washington community in many ways: hairdressers, barbers, plumbers, electricians, restaurateurs, etc. It is no caprice that many of the leading beauty parlors of Greater Washington (Maison Marcel, Michel et Patrick, Maison Jacques, Jean Paul et Norbert, Daniel, Val's Hair Stylists, Elysee) are owned and operated by

Moroccan Jews, for the dean of the Moroccan Jewish community is Marcel Cadeaux, 68-year-old cosmetologist, wig and toupee maker, who served as chairman of the D.C. Board of Cosmetology for 10 years (1960-70). The owner of one of the largest beauty culture schools in the District is Albert Emsellem, also originally of Morocco.

Cadeaux is usually the first person that an itinerant Moroccan Jew will contact upon arrival in Washington. Even as Cadeaux was being interviewed, a call came that a Moroccan family of

seven was arriving that afternoon from Rabat. "They will have dinner at my house tonight," said Cadeaux. "Naturally, I can not ask my wife to prepare dinner for so many people, so she will call other members of our community and they will come, each bringing some dish, and we will have a party. We love Arabic things and we are at home with the food and the music."

Cadeaux has earned his role as mentor, counselor, and the elder statesman to the Moroccan Jewish community for having launched scores of them in business and professions and by virtue of his seniority. He came to this country in 1924 when, he estimates, there were about 50 Moroccan Jewish families in the United States. "It was the Second World War that accelerated the migration of the Moroccan Jewish families," he explains. "American soldiers found our daughters interesting and unique, married them and brought them over. The daughters, in turn, brought over other members of the family, usually the mother or father, and that's how it went."

The subsequent emigrations, though, have been more political and economic than filial, especially since Jews throughout the Middle East are finding it increasingly difficult, since the escalation of Israeli-Arab hostilities, to pursue a profession or earn a living. In the case of the Moroccan Jews, actually only a scattering have come to this country. Most of them have gone to either France or Israel, where their prior knowledge of the language and French citizenship provided

Three branches of Jewry

Sephardim, Ashkenazim and Oriental Jews are the three major divisions of the Jewish people.

The Sephardim are Jews whose ancestors lived in the middle ages in Spain (Sepharad in Hebrew). After their expulsion from Spain (1492) they settled in France, Holland, England, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Palestine, and North Africa as well as overseas, where they have continued to live. They preserved their own customs, religious ritual and the Ladino (Judeo-Spaniolic) language, a form of medieval Spanish with some Hebrew terms, written in Hebrew characters. The Sephardim numbered about 500,000 by the 1960s.

The Ashkenazim (from the Hebrew Ashkenas, Germany) are Jews whose ancestors lived in the middle ages in German lands and migrated thence to east and west Europe, and, in the 19th and 20th centuries, abroad. Their customs

and religious ritual differ markedly from those of the Sephardim. Up to the end of the 19th century most Ashkenazim everywhere spoke Yiddish or Judeo-German, a form of medieval German with a certain percentage of Hebrew expressions, written, like Ladino, in Hebrew characters. The total number of Ashkenazim in the 1960s was estimated at 10,000,000, including almost all the 5,000,000 Jews in the U.S. and some 3,000,000 in the Soviet orbit.

The oriental Jews, more varied in their ethnic characteristics than either the Sephardim or the Ashkenazim, are the descendants of Jews who, following the Assyrian, or Babylonian, or Roman exile from Palestine, settled in countries of the middle east and North Africa.

Source: Encyclopedia Britannica



easier access into the economic life.

Entering the American mainstream has been for the Moroccan Jew relatively easy, certainly easier than it had been for earlier Jewish arrivals, despite his unfamiliarity with the language. For one, he has come during a period of relative affluence, from 1952 on, and having marketable skills, he has quickly secured employment. Moreover, the tradition of self-help, particularly strong among all Sephardic Jews, served always to provide a bed and a meal and even a financial stake until the migrant was established. Cadeaux estimates, however, that some 10 per cent of those arriving are rich men, bringing with them fortunes in excess of \$100,000, or more. "You must remember," he says, "that Sephardic Jews have traditionally been some of the world's leading diamond merchants and naturally some of them have settled in this country." This scarcely compares with the first settlement of Sephardic Jews who came to New Amsterdam in 1654 from the Portuguese colony of Brazil, sick with scurvy and dressed in rags.

Washington's Moroccan Jews defy the usual stereotype of an ethnic group that has traditionally followed the mercantile profession of buying and selling. In the main, they are artisans of one kind or another. Since so many of the leading hairdressers in Washington are Moroccan Jews and since so many Moroccan Jews in Washington are hairdressers, this occupational incidence suggests some explanation. Here the trail inevitably leads to Emsellem, owner of the Capitol Beauty Institute at 1012 H St. NW.

For 15 years, he traveled the national and international beauty culture circuit as Albert de Paris, lecturer, instructor, hair stylist. His knowledge of seven languages enabled him to work on three continents. To the Moroccan Jewish community and to the women of Washington who patronized his establishment on Connecticut Avenue for 20 years, he is Albert Emsellem, owner and operator of one of the largest beauty culture schools in the District.

one of Jewry's celebrated experts on the Cabala, a collection of mystic religious writings. His father's 800-page book is now being printed in Hebrew in this country. The son recalls with some pride the visits of Chaim Weizmann, the first president of Israel, to his father's home. "My father, besides being a rabbi, was also a chemist and he and Mr. Weizmann used to discuss chemistry at our home as a kind of relief from their Zionist work." When the elder Emsellem died in Jerusalem, a day of mourning was declared in the city.

Already familiar with English when he came to America in 1928, Emsellem started life here as a Fuller Brush salesman. "I had to find an occupation in which I would not have to work on Saturdays," he explained (the Jewish sabbath is from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday). At night he attended a beauty culture school, which started the career he has followed ever since. He came to Washington in 1941 as the proprietor of the Louey Venn of London, Inc., a cosmetic and beauty shop. The only other Moroccan family in the city at that time was the Cadeaux family.

Unlike other Moroccan Jews, Emsellem joined an Ashkenazi group because, as he says, there were not enough Sephardim in the city to form a congregation. He went on to help organize the orthodox Tiffereth Israel Synagogue, on 16th Street, where he served two terms as its president. Now settling comfortably into late middle age, the former Albert of Paris is still active in his business, but is more content to dabble in real estate, play with his four grandchildren, and arrange for the publication of his father's work.

Emsellem estimates that from 60 to 70 per cent of those hairdressers in Washington who came from Morocco were trained in his beauty culture school. The others either learned their trade in Morocco itself or in Paris, where many of them went when Morocco attained its own sovereignty. Did they make good students? "Very good students," he said. "A good hairstylist must be



of one of the District's largest beauty schools.

Born in Fez, Morocco, son of a distinguished rabbi and an early pioneer in Zionism, Rabbi Macklouf Emsellem of Fez and Jerusalem, Albert learned the ways of the Sephardic people as he learned to walk. His father was

something of an artist. He must have a soft, delicate touch and know what he is doing. Otherwise he could create a lot of mischief."

The professions of hairdressing and barbering have historically

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favored the immigrant all over the world. Compared with other professions or trades, it requires only a minimum of training and communication. Unless the operator is a loud mouth, which is not uncommon, he can learn the essentials in months and get by with no more than a few hundred words. Reading and writing are not necessary. Hence, in most urban areas, these professions are nominally filled by foreign-born. A seeming preference on the part of women for beauty parlors with foreign-sounding names is a further advantage.

Given these favorable factors, the Moroccan coming to Washington found an already built-in, if not institutionalized, setup that allowed him to enter a profession that lent itself to immediate financial return. However, given the high priority that American Jews accord to education and the professions, it is dubious whether the profession of hairdressing will pass on to the second and third generations. Indicative of this upward mobility is the Cadeaux family itself, which now finds one son as consul for the State Department in London; another son a lawyer; and a daughter married to a lawyer.

Heavily interwoven into the lives of all Middle Eastern Jews without exception is the religious and cultural impact of the Sephardic branch of the Hebrew faith. Although they were spared the worst of the excesses of the Hitler period, each recalls, as if by rote, the expulsions from Spain, said now more in pride than in anger.

Washington's Sephardic historian is the 75-year-old, multilingual (Turkish, French, Spanish, Greek, Italian, and Hebrew) Rabbi Solomon Ereza, somewhat immobile as a result of a foot injury, but nevertheless very much alive and sustained by the warm and personal reminiscences from 40 years of unpaid service to the District's Sephardic community.

Rabbi Ereza came to Washington in 1921. He now resides in semi-retirement at 3801 Connecticut Ave.

There were no Moroccan Jews in Washington in 1921 and the 45 Sephardim in the city largely came from Turkey, Greece, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. As he relates the story, the initial group of Sephardim met in the home of one of the richer members. There was no Shofar (a ram's horn) and no Arc to hold the Torah (the holy book). Pained by the inadequacy of such a service, Rabbi Ereza went to see the late Dr. Abram Simon, who, at that time, presided over the Washington Hebrew Congregation, then on 8th Street, between H and I.

Rabbi Simon was surprised and delighted to hear that there were Sephardim in Washington and, taking Rabbi Ereza by the hand, led him into the vestry, saying, "Here. It is all yours. We are all Jews and this will be your home." In 1926 the Sephardim moved to the old Hebrew Home for the Aged, then on Spring Road. There they formed the Congregation Yom Tov ("Good Day" in Hebrew), and there they worshipped for 21 years. The rabbi's daughter, Mrs. Luna Diamond, wife of attorney Norman Diamond, remembers as a little girl seeing the congregation praying on the porch of the Home, always with Rabbi Ereza as their spiritual leader and guide. Although the seven or eight Turkish Jewish families and an occasional Egyptian and Syrian family continued to remain as the core of the congregation, it was the subsequent infusion of Moroccan Jews into the congregation that gave it its present numbers, as well as new life and vigor.

"For 500 years we have stayed together—ever since the Inquisition," Rabbi Ereza says proudly. "We still speak the same Ladino that we brought from Spain and we have carried it intact throughout the Levantine as far as India."

Rabbi Ereza, son and brother of distinguished rabbis, was born in Istanbul (then Constantinople), Turkey. He came to this country when he was 16. He learned the religion at his father's knee and he was first sought out in New York, where he conducted his original Sephardic service on Coney Island. After a short sojourn in Atlanta, one of the nation's largest Sephardic centers,

Victor Handeli, 74, of 2200 19th St. NW, is one of the few living Turkish Jews who was a member of the original group. According to him, the group failed to grow in the 1920 due to the then-prevailing immigration laws. "The quota for Turkish citizens at that time was only 200 a year and this number was largely taken up by Turks of Moslem faith. Although we Jews carried

Turkish citizenship, we were never considered to be real citizens by the Turkish government." (It should be added that the Turkish rulers of the Inquisition period opened the doors of their country to the Spanish Jews and that some 200,000 settled there.) Like many immigrants who did not know English, but did know how to cook and wash dishes, Handeli went into the restaurant business. He and his partner, Cadeaux, built up the Le Petit Paris on Connecticut Avenue. Handeli retired from the business two years ago.

Another Turkish Jew of the original group who found economic sanctuary in the restaurant business is the 65-year-old Jack Angel of 3201 Cummings La., Chevy Chase. With his brother, Angel owned the old Angel Restaurant on the present site of the Manger Annapolis and then ran another restaurant at 12th Street and New York Avenue before that site was torn down. Angel came to this country in 1928 from Verria, a small town near Salonika, Turkey. "Those were difficult days for us," he recalls. "We were lucky to be able to find enough men for a 'minion' (service which requires 10 people). Most of the Sephardim who came to this country remained in New York, where by the '20s, there were already from 150,000 to 200,000."

can male prefers one of his own when it comes to marriage," says Cadeaux. "In that sense we are very Arabic. Our men are spoiled brats. Their mothers wait on them in the Middle Eastern way and they expect their wives to do the same. An American Jewish girl is not going to do that."

This view of Moroccan singularity is disputed not only by Robert Cadeaux, Cadeaux' son, but also by other young people. The younger Cadeaux is 33 and a member of the law firm of Middleton, Jasen and Cadeaux. "When I marry it will be because of reasons not necessarily religious," he says. The view of the elders is also disputed by Henri Fedida, a hairdresser at Jean Paul et Norbert on L Street. Fedida, age 36, has been in this country four months and is married to a Moroccan Jewish girl. He maintains that, although the younger Moroccans share the religious views of the older generation, they feel no compulsion to worship in a Sephardic synagogue or to marry within the Sephardic branch. He and his family worship at the Ashkenazi Summit Hill Synagogue.

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The generation gap between old and young, between those born here and in Morocco, is beginning to assert itself on such fundamental questions as marriage and religious customs. Whether out of wish fulfillment and/or self-deception, the older generation tends to pooh-pooh the idea that a Sephardim from Morocco would want to marry anybody else but a Moroccan Jewess. "The Moroc-

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Do they (the Moroccan Jews) feel a strong sense of identity towards other members of the Jewish community?

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Not especially. Ethnically and culturally, Moroccan Jews are Arabs. Their preference in food and entertainment differs radically from that of the European Jew.

Family ties among the Moroccan Jews are patently and obviously closer than they are among Jewish families who have been in this country for a longer period. Respect for parental wishes and customs is still a very important consideration and probably would be decisive where marriage is concerned. This may well erode as the older generation dies out and the newer generation becomes more firmly implanted in the American milieu.

Are their views on the Arab-Israeli conflict any different from those of other members of the Jewish community?

Says Robert Cadeaux, "They are very pro-Israel. The Moroccan Jew has strong cultural ties with the Arabs, but always as a subculture within the larger Arab nation. The Moroccan Jew has a greater practical awareness of a homeland. The European Jew is more motivated by an ideal."

The history of the Jews in their 5,000 years of dispersion from the Holy Land has long been a subject of intensive study by scholars and historians. As the eminent social anthropologist, Franz Boaz, has documented, the Jews do not constitute a race. Over the centuries

the influence of the Spanish and Middle Eastern cultures in both appearance and in family names. Almost uniformly dark complexioned, very much like other Middle Eastern peoples, dark-haired with closely set eyes, their noses tend to be straight, coming high from the forehead. They appear to be a relatively small people. The women are equally dark, and generally dressed in the most cosmopolitan attire and makeup. In disposition, they appear to be soft and gentle and more disposed to an oriental rather than a western aggressive posture. If the latter attribute were not there in the first place, they have acquired it as a consequence of their profession of hair dressing.

Whatever their family names may have been in antiquity, they now carry the flavor of their Spanish and Arabic hosts. The local community consists of such family names as Morena, Atias, Suissa, Kadoch, Colon, Haim, Benisty, Assarass, Sousse, Silvera, Elmaleh, Nahoum, Ben Simon, Coan, Tatiaro, Benjoar, etc. These names are as familiar in the Sephardic community as Goldberg, Weinberg, etc., are in the Ashkenazi branch, denoting strong Germanic origin.

The desire on the part of Washington's Sephardic community to achieve its own autonomy and thereby preserve its own individuality is now attaining full flower in

a race. Over the centuries they have so intermarried and so intermingled with the populations of their host countries that they have lost many of the characteristics, physical and cultural, that might have distinguished them from other peoples; e.g., Chinese Jews look like other Chinese, Ethiopan Jews are dark skinned, Indian Jews are undistinguishable from other Indians, etc.

The Moroccan Jewish community also reflects

attaining full flower in their plans to build the first Sephardic synagogue in Washington. According to Marcel Cadeaux, they have already acquired enough money to purchase the land and the drive is on now to secure enough money to erect the building. According to Cadeaux, every Sephardic family engaged in business will be asked to contribute \$1,000 per household. This should ensure the down payment for a modern synagogue. ■