

The Sephardic Jews

Luna Ereza Diamond

THE SEPHARDIC COMMUNITY of Washington, D.C. was born in 1914 when a small group of Sephardic Jews organized the Yom Tov Sephardic Congregation. Until 1921, when my father, Sol Ereza, arrived in Washington to become its Haham, or titular head, little was done about a place of worship. Approximately ten families met in members' homes to worship. All they had in the way of equipment was taleths and ladino prayer books, with no Torah.

At a meeting of the Yom Tov, two months before the High Holidays in 1921, Mr. Ereza asked if he could make an effort to find a place of worship other than a private home. Upon getting permission to do so, he went to the Washington Hebrew Congregation at 8th and Eye Streets, N.W. and met with Dr. Abram Simon. Dr. Simon was so pleased to hear that there was a group of Sephardim in Washington that he allowed it to use the vestry room of the Temple to conduct its services. He also gave them a Torah and other material. The members were elated. Since Sol Ereza was the son of a Head Rabbi in Constantinople and Bulgaria, he conducted the services for the group, a position he held for over 40 years. He is now Rabbi Emeritus.

Among the families who were here when Mr. Ereza arrived were Alegre and Isaac Taranto, Victor Sidey, Jacob Benquiat, Dora and Morris Errera, Ralph and Esther Errera, David Avayou, Emanuel Mordecai, Nessim and Rebecca Penso, Albert Segura and Victor Behar, and the Dayans. Mrs. Taranto was the first president of the women's auxiliary and Mr. Albert Segura was the first president of the men's club.

The Yom Tov met at Washington Hebrew Congregation for two years—until the Vestry room was needed for auxiliary services. They moved to the sunporch of the Hebrew Home for the Aged where they stayed for 25 years. As the needs of the Hebrew Home grew, they had to relocate themselves in the Hebrew Academy where they worshipped for three years in very small quarters.

Once again, the expansion of the Hebrew Academy made it necessary for them to leave. Their next location was in the small vestry of the Ohev Sholom Synagogue, which proved a most satisfactory location. They have been housed there ever since.

The regular meetings of the Yom Tov Congregation took place in private homes with the men meeting in one room and the ladies in another. This was followed by a social hour at which traditional Turkish

and Greek delicacies would be served and singing and dancing or records would be played.

In its formation, only Spanish Sephardim would attend their services, but after they moved to the Hebrew Home for the Aged, they were joined by Syrian Jewish families (Abe and David Beyda, Joe Chabot, Sam Dweck, Morris Rishti, Nissim Aboud, to name a few). Mr. Aboud had three sons who went to the Hebrew Academy and the Yeshiva, one of whom became an ordained Rabbi and conducted services for us for several years. A very fine relationship with the Syrian Jews existed for all these years, though they never joined in the social festivities of the Congregation.

The services on the High Holy Days were delivered in Hebrew and the sermons in Spanish. In deference to the Syrian congregants, Mr. Ereza began to speak and make his appeals in English.

As the years moved along some of the Spanish Sephardic families moved and in their place the Moroccan Jews came to pray with the Yom Tov Congregation. The first Moroccan who came to pray with us was Marcel Cadeaux. He sponsored many Moroccans to the United States, finding them jobs, mostly in the beauty parlor business, including Mr. Emsellem, their present leader. They grew so great in number that they formed their own congregation—the Magen David Sephardic Congregation, meeting in the Temple across from Ohev Shalom. In 1974 the Magen David Sephardic Congregation moved to the Ohev Shalom Synagogue worshipping in the large auditorium. They obtained the services of a Moroccan Rabbi living in Israel, brought him here for the High Holy Days—and the services were well attended.

Early in the formation of the Yom Tov Sephardic Congregation, 75-80 lots were purchased in the National Hebrew Cemetery with the first \$500 they raised. This was their first official act and has had a great deal to do with keeping the group intact. In recent years they have also bought lots in King David Memorial Cemetery.

The first person buried was Mr. Nessim Benquiat in 1922—75 years old and father of Mrs. Victor Sidey. In 1924, Mr. Nissim Isaac Levy (father of Mrs. Rebecca Penso) was buried; Isaac Avayou in 1933; Mardy Emanuel in 1941 and his wife in 1950 and their son-in-law Ralphael Errera in 1955. Services were conducted every year before the Holidays.

The notes of the Yom Tov Sisterhood reveal the following: The first meeting was March 1, 1937; bylaws and constitution was adopted May 16, 1937. They were organized as a social and beneficial organization in the City of Washington, D.C. They could not be chartered until the sum of \$500 was placed in a bank in their name. They were recorded officially in the Office of Recorder of Deeds on Nov. 14, 1944. The men's organization was incorporated on April 15, 1924 as the Sephardic Brotherhood of Washington, D.C. under the name of Yom Tov Hebrew Congregation. Minutes showed that a motion was made that all major discussions be in Spanish, but it was decided that this was impossible since the secretary

could not take the minutes. It was finally decided that a member would provide translation into Spanish.

Money for charitable purposes was raised at weddings, bar mitzvahs and other get-togethers, sometimes from card games or by placing money on the dancer's forehead as they did the oriental Turkish dances. Among the charitable contributions they supported: United Jewish Appeal, National Coordinating Committee for Jewish Refugees; U.S. Bonds, Ladies Auxiliary of the Sephardic Brotherhood of America for Sephardic War Refugees; American Jewish Congress; Walter Reed Hospital veterans; Yemenite Jews in 1941. Sephardic families in Italy and Greece were adopted through Adopt-A-Family Overseas Plan. The men and women sponsored Hanukah parties, Purim parties, annual picnics, bingo, Bay Ridge picnics, boat rides and dinner-dances.

There were four charter members of the Ladies Auxiliary: Mrs. Alegre Taranto, Rebecca Penso, Esther Dayan and Sarah Ereza.

Other members of the auxiliary were: Clara Angel, Fannie Raphael, Drucilla Saul, Rachel Algaze, Diane Habibe, Bella Barocas, Louise Barocas, Rebecca Behar, Pearl Barocas, Rachael Benveniste, Rose Amato, Lea Amato, Estrea Amato, Wilma Aboud, Jeanette Penso, Regina Angel, Luna Ereza, Mary Coune, Miriam Casuto, Sarah Behar and Louise Casuto, Esther Errera, and Rebecca Penso.

Spanish was spoken in all the homes. As the children left and married other than Sephardic mates, and especially after the parents died, the custom of speaking Spanish has slowly declined. Only in communities like New York, Los Angeles, Seattle and Atlanta, where there are large numbers of Sephardim and Sephardic synagogues, does Ladino still flourish. However, during periods of mourning or happy occasions, the group rallies and becomes a cohesive group. The leaders at present are Mrs. Taranto and Mrs. Errera and Sol Ereza and Jack Angel.

Washington's Sephardim were generally tradesmen, hardworking, industrious people: several restaurateurs, hat checking concessionaries—and in the second generation, government workers, furniture representatives and the like. They are family people and their community activities are generally confined to work in their own Temples.

All the young men of the Sephardic community were in the service and one woman, Jeanette Penso, who was a WAC. One died in the service of his country, Lt. Monty Ereza, in Germany in World War II.

A convention in Atlanta of Youth Sephardim on November 21-25, 1973, brought 450 persons from throughout the United States to form a National Youth Movement. Their hope was to join hands with their Ashkenazi brethren to combat ignorance and indifference. It is important to assist in the survival of Sephardic Tradition in the United States and I hope that this young group will help bring it about.

Adella (married Martin Weisman) and Marie (married Robert Sinker).

1922

Esther and Morris Dayan

Morris was a door-to-door salesman of corsets and bras.

Jack and Sam Angel—from Karaferia, near Salinika, Greece

Sam Angel married Clara Mardy. Children: Leon, Florence and Elizabeth. Jack Angel married Regina Penso. Children: Leonard, Conrad, Albert and Eddie.

Joseph Amira—a cousin of the Angels

1923

Victor and Rebecca Behar—from Constantinople

Rebecca Behar was a sister of Sol Ezeza. Operated a fruit store at 14th and G Sts. Children: Sadie (married Manuel Mardy), Louise (married Sam Barocas), Joseph (married Molly Behar) and Jack (married Mary Mushabac). This is the only family with professional careers: Dr. Jack Behar was a podiatrist and both of his sons, Victor and Raymond, were physicians.

1925

Victor Handeli—from Turkey

Was secretary of the Yom Tov Congregation for many years. A waiter at Duke Zeibert's restaurant.

1929

Sam, Leon and Leo Barocas—from Corlu, Greece

Brothers. Sam married Louise Behar. Children: Renee, Betty, Victor and Irving. Sam was a wine broker and distributor and night club operator.

1931

Mary and Jack Coune

Operated Coune's Restaurant across from Hecht Co. and Vick's restaurant (in partnership with Victor Raphael) across from the Mayflower Hotel. Since moving to Florida in 1958 they have formed a new Sephardic group in Miami that meets every Friday evening in a building and loan hall. Children: Maddie (married Irving Bokar).

Fanny and Victor Raphael

Fanny was the sister of Mary Coune. Operated Vick's Restaurant with Jack Coune and Solomon Hakim across from Mayflower Hotel. Moved to California after selling the restaurant in 1937.

*The Sephardic Jews of
Washington in Order of Their Settlement*

1914

Dorris and Morris Errera—from Smyrna

Operated a fruit and candy store on 9th St. between D and E Sts.

Alegre and Isaac Taranto—from Smyrna

First merchant to own his own home, on Quebec St. off Georgia Ave.; and his own business, the Taranto Glass Shop. Children: Sue (married Dr. Sidney Fellman) and Mike.

Victory and Isaac Sidey—brothers of Alegre Taranto

David, Shlomo and Abram Hakim

Jacob Benquist—brother of Mrs. Victory Sidey

1917

Emanuel and Esther Mordecai—brother and sister from Karaferia, Greece

Emanuel later changed the family name to Mardy. He married Sadie Behar. Children: Ora (married Harry Yolles) and Betty (married Joe Arogetti).

1919

David Avayou—from Smyrna

Rica and Morris Segura

Morris was the first president of the Yom Tov Congregation.

1920

Rebecca and Nissim Penso

Rebecca was from Constantinople and Nissim was from Shanakalis, Dardanelles. Nissim Levy, Rebecca's father, lived with the family. Operated a fruit and candy store across from Thompson School and a hat-checking concession with Sol Ereza. Children: Victor, Jeanette (married Abe Kopan) and Regina (married Jack Angel).

1921

Sarah and Sol Ereza—from Constantinople

Met and married in the home of Nissim Penso in New York City. Sol was the son of a head rabbi in Constantinople and Sofia, Bulgaria. Operated a hat-checking concession. Sarah was a charter member of the Ladies Auxiliary of Atlanta's Sephardic congregation as well as that of Yom Tov Congregation. Children: Luna (married K. Norman Diamond) and Monty, the only son of a Washington Sephardic family killed in World War II.

Ralph and Morris Errera

Ralph operated a food stand at the end of a trolley line at Chevy Chase Circle. He married Esther Mardy. Children: Irving, Morty,

1933

Leah and Chilibi Amato—from Rhodes Island, Italy (now part of Greece)
Owned shoe repair shop at Connecticut Ave. and K St. Children:
Estrea and David.

1935

Drusilla and William Saul
William managed the Statler Hilton checkroom. They were the
first of Washington's Sephardic community to intermarry.

1936

Rachel and Isaac Benveniste—from Rhodes Island, Italy (now part of Greece)

1941

Henry V. Besso
Writer and translator for Voice of America, authority on Sephardic
culture, author of numerous books and articles and delegate to
many Sephardic congresses.

1942

Marcel Cadeaux and wife—from Morocco
Hair stylist and wig expert. Sponsored many Moroccans to the
United States and set them up in business.

1948

Robert Assael and wife—from Greece.