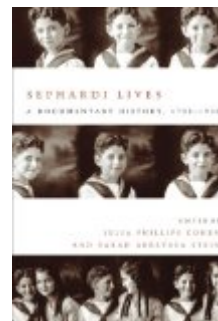


Julia Phillips Cohen, Sarah Abrevaya Stein, eds.. *Sephardi Lives: A Documentary History, 1700-1950*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014. 480 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8047-9143-4.



Reviewed by Diane Matza

Published on H-Judaic (January, 2015)

Commissioned by Matthew A. Kraus (University of Cincinnati)

Sephardi Lives: A Documentary History, 1700-1950 is a gem of a book. It contains an expansive array of documents never before gathered together—memoirs, letters, official papers, speeches, news articles, pleas to administrators of communal institutions—with their translations from the many languages of the Sephardi world—Ladino, Hebrew, French, Italian, Turkish, and more. This pioneering work by the editors Julia Phillips Cohen and Sarah Abrevaya Stein highlights a minority within a minority group, barely visible in standard Jewish history courses and texts, despite a flurry of excellent work in this field in the last few decades. With its depth and breadth of scholarship, *Sephardi Lives* both undergirds the studies that have preceded it and points the way forward. Indeed, the work has the potential to transform the teaching and understanding of modern Jewish history if it receives the attention it deserves.

We expect a historical document to provide a glimpse into the past in real time, and the documents presented here do not disappoint. A few ex-

amples are enough to reveal the range covered here. Part 1 of the book opens with a moving report of the Izmir earthquake of 1688, penned by Rabbi Elijah HaCohen. His liturgical cadences offer both a description of the disaster and a prayer for the dead. In part 3, an excerpt from *The Memoirs of Dr. Meir Yoel* gives us in vivid dialogue the political awakening of two Salonican Jews caught up in the Dreyfus Affair in 1890s Paris. In various sections of the anthology are documents by women calling for greater gender equality, challenging the standard view of Sephardi culture as restrictively patriarchal.

Although each document is interesting in its own right, Cohen and Stein have done much more than successfully undertake the daunting task of compiling and organizing a multiplicity of materials written about disparate topics and across more than two centuries. They have made all this material accessible with an excellent armature for the work, including a thoughtful introduction, an intelligently arranged table of contents, solid introductions with notes to interpret and contex-

tualize each document, and an easily navigable index. This integration of content and format reveals the editors' deeper purpose: to explore how the Sephardim, with their deeply diverse religious, social, economic, and political landscapes, managed to preserve tradition and play an influential role in the larger cultures of which they were a part.

Cohen and Stein's beautifully written introduction summarizes the Sephardim's history in a turbulent period of natural disasters, economic upheaval, emerging movements of self-determination, and war. The editors' focus is on the dynamism of Sephardi identity. Always hybrid, it continued to undergo change as Sephardi Jews encountered shifting forces outside individual or group control. Responding sometimes to local conditions, sometimes to global ones, the Sephardim maintained an essential Sephardism as they also cultivated broader definitions of belonging. As the documents show, a host of differences among these Jews—in religious observance, level of education, political affiliation, and so on—shaped their perspectives and their activism.

The editors begin with "Everyday Life: On the Street and in the Synagogue, from Court to Courtyard." This section covers religious questions, local events, class conflict, and social behavior. A variety of voices weigh in on issues facing individual communities: Sephardi leaders promote or reject Western reformist ideas, rabbis react to the decline in Hebrew fluency, a journalist evaluates behavior appropriate for women, and ordinary individuals comment on cross-religious integration. Part 2, "Violence, War, and Regional Transformation," examines how Sephardim adapted to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. With changing geopolitical pressures, chief among them the transformation of minority rights, Sephardim faced a mixed bag of benefits and challenges. Some Sephardi Jews perceived an increase in European-style anti-Semitism. Others created novel arguments to secure more favor-

able positions; particularly noteworthy is a document that lays out the case for Salonica becoming an international city. In part 3, "Political Movements and Ideologies," we find references to feminism, socialism, and a fascinating Sephardi variant on Zionism, which allowed for multiple allegiances. Repeatedly, the voices of real people caught up in tumultuous events suggest ways to revise commonplace generalizations of the Sephardi experience. In the same way, part 4, "The Second World War and Its Aftermath," provides a valuable corrective to Holocaust studies devoted exclusively to the Ashkenazi horror. Firsthand accounts tell of devastating local conditions in Monastir, Sarajevo, and Salonica. Valuable material appears here on Portugal's role as a haven for some Jews, as well as interviews with survivors. Part 5, "Diasporic and Emigre Circles," ranges across the period 1911-51, when Sephardim immigrated in sizable numbers to western Europe and the United States and in smaller numbers to Central and South America. For the first time, the non-Yiddish-speaking Sephardim found their Jewishness questioned by the dominant Ashkenazi population. How they re-oriented themselves in this next cross-border journey is the primary subject of the section. Finally, in a brilliant move, the editors close the book with part 6, "The Emergence of Sephardi Studies," a survey of the field's cultural riches—historical, musical, linguistic. In this chapter, I also find an implicit call to action. First, the multicultural nature of the Jewish experience must be communicated more broadly. Second, the Sephardi studies movement must be pushed into the present day, not only to ask what it has accomplished but what it has yet to do.

The comments above attest to the book's usefulness to scholars. Teachers, too, will find *Sephardi Lives* suitable as a basic text to stimulate student research and discussion. As Cohen and Stein explain, their six-part organization provides one contextual lens for examining the documents, but "these section headings [are] guides rather

than strictures and [readers] are encouraged to utilize the index to pursue particular themes or the lives of particular authors across chapters” (p. 19). Students will find the documents’ accessibility makes it easy to identify topics worthy of their attention. Gender roles, the growth of nationalism, and the contradictory attitudes toward or against one language or another are just a few examples to investigate further.

In closing, I want to emphasize that *Sephardi Lives* is not a book just for scholars and students. The story of a minority group’s frequent journeys of acculturation, how they made a life while sharing public and private spaces with people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds, is especially timely and should be of interest to any contemporary reader.

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Citation: Diane Matza. Review of Cohen, Julia Phillips; Stein, Sarah Abrevaya, eds. *Sephardi Lives: A Documentary History, 1700-1950*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. January, 2015.

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