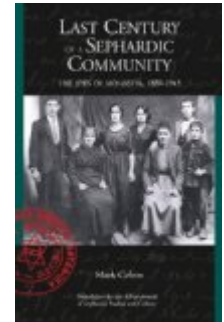


**Mark Cohen.** *Last Century of a Sephardic Community: The Jews of Monastir, 1839-1943.* New York: Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, 2003. 382 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-886857-06-3.



**Reviewed by** Steven Bowman

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The many monographs on specific Sephardi cities in the Balkans raise the question whether and when a history of the Balkan Jewish experience can be written. Monographs on Salonika, Castoria, Ioannina, Monastir, Larisa, and Volos have long been available, while recent studies of the Alliance Israelite Universelle have examined specific regions. The Balkans have also been included in wider surveys of the Ottoman Empire beginning with Frankl and Rosanes and most recently Benbassa. The latter is the only text to incorporate the chronological range and experience of the Sephardi Balkans in a modern scholarly history. Still, much remains to be done including the Romaniote and Ashkenazi communities as well as a thorough analysis of the impact of nationalism and the response of the Alliance and Zionism to this new "religion."

Monastir from 1839 to 1943 experienced the vicissitudes of the Balkans in transition, and its Jewish community prospered and declined according to local experiences. It appears from the author's description that the Jews had no control over the rhythm of events during this century. Be-

tween the two fires of 1835 and 1863 Monastir was rebuilt on a western model by its Ottoman governor and the seeds of modernism took firm root. Yet the traditional Sephardi life of the Balkans preserved in this pocket survived among those born in this generation until the eve of the destruction of the community. This paradox summarizes the difference between the Jewish response to modernity and that of the neighboring ethnic groups. The latter's absorption of modernity nurtured an ancestral lust for liberty that used the most modern weapons to bomb the Ottoman Empire into the fragmented Balkans of today.

This new modern western outpost burned to the ground in 1863. Coupled with administrative changes in a subsequent reorganization of regional government, Monastir entered a period of decline that lasted until the end of Ottoman rule. At the same time western Jews began their mission in Monastir first with Moses Montefiore, then with the Alliance, and finally with Zionism. The declining economic situation, exacerbated by local brigandage and terrorism and the European interest in the fate of Macedonia (a vast unde-

financed area that constituted the bulk of Ottoman Europe at the end of the century), set in motion waves of emigration. Soon aid to the local Jews began to come from the spreading Monastir diaspora in Salonika, South America, and the United States.

With the arrival of the railroad and the Alliance in the mid-1890s the pendulum swung toward prosperity for a brief decade. And it is from this next generation of educated and westernized Jews that the fine collection of photographs in this book is drawn. These photographs represent the minority who were successfully entering the middle class as opposed to the thousands who were emigrating and the thousands too steeped in poverty to better their position. Yet the latter preserved the age-old culture of Monastirli Sephardim, which they shared in daily speech and evening entertainment. One should beware, however, of being caught up in the nostalgia that permeates this well-crafted study.

The following decade (1904-1912) exacerbated the chaos that presaged the radical change from Ottoman unity and tolerance to nationalist chaos. The new states of Serbia, Bulgaria, Montenegro, and Greece evicted the Ottomans from Macedonia in 1912-1913. The Ottomans retreated to Monastir for a last defense from which they were quickly dislodged. The Bulgarians foolishly set their eyes on Salonika and mistakenly allowed the Serbs to take Monastir. The subsequent Serbian regime began imposing its language and culture on the area. During the ensuing World War I the Bulgarians occupied the city. The French bombed Monastir for one month, shocking the population into the twentieth century; they had never seen a plane before. In November 1916 the Bulgarians and Germans blew up the city's defenses preparatory to abandoning the city to the entente. But they did not go too far, only to the next mountain from which, for the next twenty-two months German guns bombarded the city with incendiary and poison gas in a daily rain of

death. Monasterlis fled to New York where they were welcomed. Over one thousand fled to Salonika, only to become homeless again after the great fire that gutted that city in 1917.

After the war the new state of Yugoslavia incorporated Monastir with but 3,200 remaining Jews, and of these one third were on complete state relief. Zionism, which the younger Monasterlis embraced, succeeded in bringing a little over four hundred Jews to Palestine where they resettled as pioneers. In 1941, Hitler fulfilled a burning desire to destroy Yugoslavia, to him a bastard state. In 1942, Bulgarian persecution of the Jews began and the following spring the Monasterli remnants--numbering 3,276 individuals from nurslings to octogenarians--were deported to Treblinka, so ending their exile that began in 1492.

Cohen provides a service to the Monasterli diaspora (and to scholars in various disciplines) by listing all the deportees according to the extant German lists. While the author apologizes for the German rendering of the names, still it is disturbing that this last injustice has been done to the victims when the author had available the original lists prepared by survivors.

The Holocaust material introduces the second half of the book and is counterbalanced by a wonderful appendix of local songs, proverbs, and folktales that the author solicited from scholars such as Susanna Weich-Shahah (of Jerusalem), the prolific Samuel G. Armistead who comments on several unique romances that were preserved in a quiet Balkan niche for nearly five centuries, and Reginetta Haboucha. Together these last sections provide an epitaph for a community that survived the exile from Spain and flourished under Ottoman hospitality for centuries. The vicissitudes of its last century is a reminder to contemporary Monastirli and other Jews of how fragile and precarious is Jewish life among gentiles. As the author commented on the appearance in the Nazi death list of the birth date of 1855 of Haim

Muschon Kalderon: "In Monastir, a single lifetime was long enough to experience traditional Jewish life in an Islamic empire and the collapse of civilized life in Europe" (p. 202).

This biography of a Jewish city counterbalances somewhat the plethora of studies on the Macedonian Question and the many monographs on the nationalist rivalries in the Balkans during the nineteenth century. Cohen has provided for the reader a microscopic focus on the Jews in his encyclopedic biography of a unique Jewish community during its last century of existence. Into that multi-faceted story he weaves both the local and the regional history of one of the world's most complex areas. And he completes his survey with a nostalgic compilation of Sephardi cultural memories: Monastirli proverbs and Iberian *romances*. The reader will probably find the book more than sufficient to learn about the individual as well as the collective experience of the Sephardim of Monastir and its widespread diaspora which is all that remains of a uniquely typical community. Unique in the sense of its home-grown customs and adaptations to the wide variety of Balkan influences and typical in that it shared a broader Judeo-Spanish culture even as it responded differently to historical stimuli.

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