

***Sephardim in Argentina, Their History and the History of the
Main Sephardic Institution, the CIDICSEF (Cidicsef-Centro de
Investigacion y Difusion Cultura Sefardi - Research and
Dissemination of Sephardic Culture)***
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Description: This is a short introduction to the first Sephardic immigration to Argentina, including the four main groups according to their places of origin, their institutions, synagogues and schools. Rita Saccal will be specifically referring to the CIDICSEF, the only academic Sephardic institution in Latin America, their activities, publications and library.

Rita Saccal was the Director of the Library of the Seminario Rabinico Latinoamericano for twenty-five years. Currently, she is volunteering in Fundacion Judaica with disabled people and social programs until the new library is finished at the new Jewish Communal Center. She will be in charge of organizing this new library within the program of the new Reform Seminary under the auspices of HUC.

As I mentioned in several opportunities, Argentina used to be the world's third largest Jewish community, with half a million Jews in the 70's, due to a public policy that called "all well intentioned men" from throughout the world to come and populate the country. For decades foreigners made up almost 70 percent of the population of Buenos Aires (where up to a third of the entire population was concentrated).

As Jacobo Drucaroff, a Jewish Argentine born writer said:

*They came from all over the world: Samarkand, Odessa, Smyrna,
Aleppo, Warsaw, Marrakesh
They brought their identity, their scrolls of wisdom and in their hand
hardened by endless despair, a few seeds and the dancing steps to
enliven their future harvest time.
They arrived at the Fresh Sea as on a new Ararat there to find the
promised fatherland in a path of men
.....They go on living in the wit, the faith, the solidarity gesture
and in our daily hope*

The first Sephardic immigration wave to Argentina comes from Magreb followed by the Spanish speaking people of Greece, the Islands and the Balcans. Moroccan Jews began arriving in Argentina in 1875, though they were few in number until 1880. (There are documents that a son of Don Isaac Benchetrit, would be the first sephardi born in Buenos Aires, on June 2, 1891 and that his brit mila was made by a Jewish -italian doctor). There were also Sephardim from Gibraltar, many of them related to the Moroccans by marriage. A few arrived after spending some years in Brazil, since some parts of Morocco had been under Portuguese rule. Unlike the West European Jews who favored Buenos Aires, Sephardim tended to settle in the interior of the country, beginning as itinerant merchants and ending as store owners in the provinces of Santa fe, Entre Rios , San Luis and Salta. A few of them ended in the pioneering agricultural colony of Esperanza (in the province of Santa Fe) .

Years later Jews from the Middle East (from Aleppo and Damascus, Syria), from Turkey and those from Beirut also settled in Argentina.

We can also find smaller groups that came during the first decade of the last century from Palestine, the Ierushalmin, as well as Italian Jews, ladino speaking people from Yugoslavia, Rumania and Bulgaria. Egyptian Jews and some of Asia; like kurds, gurdjis or georgians, persians and bujaralies.

Unlike the Ashkenazi immigration, the sephardic immigration came by its own means, they are not the consequence of persecutions, but from the need to improve their precarious everyday life and from the wish to avoid military enlistment (for example during the Balcan Wars in 1912-13) or during the First world war. They left those countries where they were "tolerated", and where they had freedom of religion. Mostly the sephardic immigration was individual.

They brought nothing with them, just the clothes they were wearing. Those who spoke djudeoSpanish, found it easier to integrate themselves with the local people. This was their great advantage in comparison of those who came from the Middle East who kept the arab language as theirs.

The Sephardim, like other groups of immigrants settled close to other families they knew from their country of origin- Their organizations were based on two common factors: community of origin and area of residence in Buenos Aires. Most of the institutions founded by them were limited in their scope. They were divided between religious institutions, charities, burial societies, and social clubs. Only gradually they developed into four distinct communal networks of organization, each centered around its separate cemetery- The morrocan, the turks , the greeks and those people from the Balkans spoke mostly in Spanish (some in Ladino), while the descendants of Aleppo and Damascus kept the arab as their language. The Halebis preferred to continue speaking in French among them.

Parents were required by law to send their children to the first few years of public school, but after that, continuing with schooling depended on the situation at home. If there were many siblings to look after, older daughters tended to stay at home and help their mothers, especially in the interior towns and cities, where life was harsh and labor intensive. Education for women was not always a priority among Sephardic families.

Nowadays, the new Argentine-born generation of these immigrant families have more social contact with other Jewish groups, and marriage between other Sephardim and even to [Ashkenazim](#) became more common, although not always welcome.

These are the four different Sephardic groups according to their places of origin. (see power point)

For many years there were no academic studies since the Sephardic culture would only be transmitted through storytelling

As one of the presidents of a Sephardic Synagogue said: **"you have to understand that our way of interpreting history is different to yours (meaning the Ashkenazi way). We keep lots of traditions that are transmitted in oral way, from generation to generation"**

In 1992, coinciding with the 500th. Anniversary of the Jewish expulsion from Spain, the four groups joined and published the book "Presencia Sefaradi en Argentina" (Sephardic Presence in Argentina) together with the Centro Educativo Sefaradi (Sephardic Educational Center) and with the now disappeared Banco Mayo. All these four congregations agreed with this project and immediately started cooperating together with a group of anthropologists under the leadership of the world well know professor and historian Yaakov Rubel. It was a very difficult task because, as I said, there were no archives, no documents, no written information. Only oral history. There were the child remembrances, genealogy, family papers and oral tradition. With all this information, and with a photographer who took the pictures of all the Sephardic institutions in the different neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, researchers could start their work.

And this is brand new: A month ago, and for the first time in Argentina, the documental movie "In Search of Sepharad" was presented. So, as you can see documents and testimonies are little by little starting to appear.

The main and only Sephardic Academic Institution is the CIDICSEF, Centro de Investigación y Difusión de la Cultura Sefaradí (Research and Promotion Center) which was founded

in 1975 in Buenos Aires. by the Federacion Sefaradí Latinoamericana. This Centre stems from the Congregation Chalom while Michel Molho, who escaped from Salonica was the rabbi. By that time Dr. Jose Menascé, one of its founders, was in charge of a very small library, (maybe 20-30 books) which was moved to a new building and was officially re opened in 2006.

The CIDICSEF was created as an academic and cultural institution, in order to seriously research the Sephardic history, the language, the poetry, literature, philosophy , history, music, and the Torah studies, according to the sephardic thinkers, uses and costumes and to spread it not only in Latin America, but also worldwide. Men like the Nobel Prize Camilo Jose Cela, Julian Marias, Ernesto Sabato, Haim Vidal Sephiha, are honorary members of this institution. During the years people like Moshe Shaul, Mordejai Arbell, Shmuel Hadad, Carlos del Valle, Maria Jose Caro (Granada University), Margalit Mathitiau, Anita Novintsky, Angelina Huberman, etc. came to Argentina to participate in the different international symposiums held by CIDICSEF together with the Universidad Maimonides.

CIDICSEF is in charge of three areas:

The Musical Area, under the leadership of Eleonora Noga Alberti,; The History Section in charge of Mario Cohen and the Language and Judeo-Spanish Jewish Literature area in charge of Jose Menascé.

These are some of the different activities held by the CIFICSEF:

- The 4th. International Congress of the Spanish Language took place in Buenos Aires. Many international guests attended this congress, but we have to specially mention the presence of Henry Besso, who was born in Salonica but lived later in New York. He presented a paper related to

the origins of the judeo Spanish, the several meanings given to this language, its preservation during the centuries and about the world sephardic population. In this congress he paid a special tribute to Rabbi Michal Molho

- The Photographic exhibition " Descubriendo América Colonial Judia" (Discovering Jewish Colonial America) at the Sociedad Hebraica Argentina, whose producer was Dr. Mario Eduardo Cohen.
- Eleonora Noga Alberti, organized the singing festival " De los Alamos vengo" in the House of Spain, in Buenos Aires. This exhibition continued growing and it is now a permanent exhibition at the CIFICSEF
- The First Encounter with the Sephardic song during the Maimonides' s Month.
- First Annual Course on the Sephardic History and culture.
- Dr. Jose Menasche and Dr. Mario Cohen, President and Secretary of the CIDICSEF were honored by the Ambassador of Spain with the Oficial Orden del MERITO Civil, in the name of the King of Spain, Juan Carlos I, because of their commitment to spread and revitalize the roots of the community in Ancient Sepharad.
- CIDICSEF together with the IWO (YIVO) organized the Symposium "Puntos de Encuentro de las Culturas Sefaradi y Ashkenazi (Meeting Points of Encounter of the Ashkenazi and Sephardic Culture) with the presence of international professors, such as Haim Vidal Sephiha and Dov Noy of the Hebrew University.
- CIFICSEF , Latin American Sephardic Federation and the Argentine Government discovered a plaque in the Maimonides Plaza in commemoration of the nine centuries of the poetic creation of the Jewish Spanish poet Yehuda Halevi,
- The Itinerant exhibition on Maimonides 800. Encounter of Faith and Reason. This exhibition travelled to the

different provinces in Argentina as well as to other Latin American Countries. They built a puppet exactly as Maimonides, as you can see in the picture. Same sizes and physical structure. In this picture you can see Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, before becoming Pope Francis, visiting the exhibition.

- The First Latin American Congress dedicated to the Sephardic World in its cultural diversity took also place in Buenos Aires, during the "Month of the Jewish '-Morrocan culture" . More than 2500 people attended this Meeting.
- Vth. And VIth. Academic Congresses on Judeo Arab Literature and Music in the Sephardic Diaspora also took place in Buenos Aires with the presence of Dr. Edwin Seroussi , Director of the Centere for the Investigation of the Jewish Music of the Hebrew University, as well as of Dr. Leonardo Senkman, It is very important to point out that one of these meetings took place in the University of Buenos Aires, in the Literature and Philosophy Faculty. Only since the last years have Jewish conferences or symposiums been held at the University of Buenos Aires. Years ago we could never think of it.
- Symposium on Maimonides, his life and work, - took place .at the Universidad Maimonides with the participation of 400 people. International visitors such as Shalom Rosemberg, Dr. Carlos Del Valle Rodriguez from Spain, Prof. Moshe Shaul from Jerusalem, and others, were present during this improtant Symposium.
- As you probably know, Jorge Luis Borges, one of the best Argentine writers was a very good friend of the Jews, and very committed to Israel. Some researchers are still trying to find his Jewish roots thru his mothers ancestors. During the 30th. Anniversary of his death an international symposium was held on Borges and Judaism
- Cidicsef also holds a TV programme, every two Sundays, within the Jewish Hour produced by AMIA.

I would like to point out that mostly all the CIDICSEF activities are carried out together with the Universidad Maimonides. Although this is a non Jewish private University specialized in Medicine and Humanistics . they are very committed with Jewish activities and they sponsor and support the International Symposiums , held every two years, within the Philosophy Department.

Last April, and coinciding with the commemoration of the 70th. Anniversary of the Creation of the State of Israel, a full day conference was held, together with the Argentine Friends of the University of Tel Aviv, on Borges and Israel. Maria Kodama, his partner and companion during his last years, and very important speakers attended this activity, pointing out Borges interest and friendship with the Jewish People and specially with the State of Israel.

And, as I mentioned before, the first, and only Sephardic Library, called the Biblioteca Mois Chami, was re-opened in 2006, in a new section of the CIDICSEF Building, under the auspices of the the International Sephardic Federation, Sephardic House, the Instituto Arias Montano, Asociacion Vidas Largas of Haim Vidal Sephiha, and others.

They share the building with two other Institutions and a beautiful and very small synagogue which only carries services during High Holidays. The rest of the time CIFICSEF uses the synagogue for cultural events.

The library occupies two rooms in the lower floor of the building, and the person in charge is Sara Beatriz Azar de Moussali. They normally open on Tuesdays, but, if requested by any researcher they will open any other day. International requests are also served. They have 4000 books mainly in Spanish or Ladino, but they also have a few in English. They only collect those books

related with Sephardic History and tradition. One of the rooms has like a small auditorium, for some smaller activities. Searching for books is very simple, either by Title or Author. They have a very easy searching software, and only one computer.

They publish an Academic journal, *Sefardica*, every two years. The purpose of these publication is to reproduce the various symposiums held in Argentina and the writings of the great Sephardic Thinkers. Maria de Azar is the responsible for this publication. Up to date they have published 22 issues.

By the way let me tell you that Maria Azar, which I mentioned at the very beginning, is a preeminent writer and she has just published two very important books; 100 YEARS OF Bene Emeth (Beneficence and Burial Society) , and the History of the Jews of Damascus. It took her more than 4 years to get these books ready, because there are not written documents on the Sephardic history in Argentina.

Apart from *Sefardica*, many other books have been published, but as everything in Argentina, it is very difficult and expensive to maintain.

CIDICSEF is also always present at the International Book Fair that takes place in Buenos Aires every April. They have a stand of their own. In the 2009 Fair, they officially announced the re opening of the Mois Chami Library. The also have a very active participation during the Jewish Book fair, which also takes place almost every year-

In spite of all the economic problems Beatriz and Maria manage to sustain and keep alive this small but very important library. As I mentioned some years ago synagogues or congregations, even schools in Argentina, have no libraries, so it is a big task for them to keep this important reservoir open..