Syrian Jews: Renaissance and Modern Era

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The late Joseph Sutton, born in Aleppo, was a proud member of the Syrian Jewish community in Flatbush, Brooklyn. He devoted many years to researching and writing about the history and traditions of his community. This article is excerpted from his book, “Aleppo Chronicles,” Thayer-Jacoby, New York, 1988, and is printed in Conversations with the permission of his family. We have retained his spellings of transliterations. This article appears in issue 7 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Some Spanish Sepharadeem, refugees, made their way to Aleppo and Damascus early in the 16th century; and many more to Constantinople, Salonika and Izmir. In Damascus, where they had arrived in larger numbers than in Aleppo, they established their own synagogues, houses of study, and burial grounds, alongside colonies of Karaites, Samarians, Iraqis, and the native Jews (the Musta-Arab-een), we are told by Rabbi Moshe Basola of that period. With time, they abandoned the use of the Spanish language and before long became acculturated, an integral part of the native Jewish community. Their more worldly education saw many of them in a prosperous state and in the leadership of Jewish life, positions they maintained for centuries. Aleppo’s Spanish refugee Sepharadeem, fewer in number, had also been received with cordiality and the respect due their scholarliness. A separate section of the Great Synagogue was reserved for them. This too passed away as the ‘Spaniol became embodied in the Jewish life of the city, although they continued to be distinctive. Among them were members of the Kassin (Qaaseen) and Laniado (Langiado) families, who contributed leading rabbis to the city for hundreds of years and to the present day, in Aleppo-in Flatbush and other Syrian colonies. The Dayan family, also distinguished scholars in Aleppo for centuries, had originated in Baghdad and lay detailed claim, generation by generation, descent from King David. It was the Dayans who established the revered House of Study — and prayer — Bet Nasi, “The House of the Prince.” It functioned in Aleppo until the “days of trial” in 1947, a harrowing period which the testimony of refugees now in Flatbush will reveal to us.

Yet another wave of European Sepharadeem came, a small one, mostly from Italy, who were to be continually distinguished and prestigious in Near East Jewish life. Perhaps among the first of them to come was a maternal forebear of this writer, Signor Isaaco Silvera from Livorno (Leghorn, Italy), earlier from Gibraltar and Spain.

His presence in Aleppo was uncovered to me by Gershom Scholem in his biography (1973) of Shabbetai Sebbi (Sevi), the false Messiah. Scholem relates that among the foremost advocates of Shabbetai prior to 1666 the date of enunciation of Shabbetai's 'Messiahood', were". . . Signor Hakham Shelomo Laniado and Signor Isaaco Silvera." To Hakham Laniado, Shabbetai had awarded the " Kingdom of Aram Soba" (The Hebrew term for Aleppo, Psalms 60:2), and to my ancestor Silvera, the "Kingdom of David." No doubt Silvera had contributed importantly from his considerable wealth to the Messiah's mission. With Silvera's presence in Aleppo, other wealthy Italian Sepharadeem had followed, to form a small but eminent group.

Soon after the Crusades, Aleppo had become increasingly important in commerce with Europe. Earlier, such trade had been small although continuous for many centuries. Thanks to the sharpened appetite for Oriental spices and silks and the like, brought back with them by the returning Crusaders, and with the advancing decay of the feudal system, the rise and the influence of the Towns, and the revival of a money economy in place of barter, European trade with the Orient began to grow and to become a source of great wealth.

It was largely to Halab (Aleppo) that the early Venetians, the Dutch, and the French had arrived to establish trading colonies; "Alep", as the French 15th and 16th century traders had labeled it; the Italians had transposed it to "Alep-po," the name used by the English. How to negotiate this trade with Aleppo's merchants, since the English spoke no Arabic and the Aleppoans no English? Through local Aleppoans with a knowledge of Italian, French, or Spanish, largely the Spanish Sepharadeem and the Italian Jews. In addition to the Jews, Armenians and native "Byzantines" (Greek Orthodox Catholics) also participated.

The English Levant Company

Consul North tells us of the importance of the Aleppo Jews in their relations with the English and others. Said North: "The factoring trade is in the hands of the Jews, dominated by them." Further, he states that, "When a European began to trade through a Jew, no other would take his 'commission,' for by a compact among themselves no other was permitted to accept the client." The Jewish agents earned the esteem and confidence of their clients, they were highly spoken of and their reputation spread in England for their uprightness and trading skill.

The privileges of their foreign patrons sometimes rubbed off on to the Jewish agents, who were thus placed in particularly high regard in their community. They became Nafs Firmanli, an Ottoman-Decree (Protected) Individual. In some few instances their patrons bestowed on them full foreign national status, including Extra Territorial Rights, endowing them with greater prestige.

In addition to the migration into Aleppo of the refugees from Spain as was noted, there were the Italian Jewish merchants. The Italians sent younger sons to serve their needs at first hand. They came on buying 'visits', but instead stayed, and soon married the daughters of Spanish and Musta-Arab-een (indigenous) Jews. They become known as "Francos" (French) and "Franj," enjoying the rights and privileges of Extra- Territoriality. They were always referred to as Signors, ("Sir, in Italian; "Signor-eem" is the Hebrew plural term for this Italian title). Through their wealth and aristocratic status they became the most distinguished of the local Jews. Their piety, scholarliness and generous support of community organizations placed them at the pinnacle of their co-religionists' esteem. The leading family among them was that of Picciotto; who were to become De Picciotto when they received titles of knighthood from the Austrian Emperor Joseph II, whom they served as consuls. Picciotto, Belilos, Bigio, Farhi, Ancona, Silvera, A1tar and a few others constituted the Franj group in Aleppo. In Damascus it was the families of Angel — ("Shemaya), Pinto, Molcho, Farhi, Attieh Lisbona and others, who were the elite Franj.

Late in the .18th century Shalom Ha-Cohen of Aleppo ventured into India and with the assistance of others from Halab, members of the Shaib, Tebele, Duek, Laniado families, two Settons/Suttons, as well as several Baghdadians, served to found the Calcutta Jewish community. It flourished for almost 150 years, until the British left India in 1947.

Everyday Jewish Life

From the many recent spoken histories of individuals who recounted to me memories of life experience in Aleppo/Halab and in Damascus, we are further able to reconstruct the everyday life of

the Jews there from some years before the beginning of the 20th century. In many ways it was typical of Jewish life throughout the Near and Middle East. Arabic was the universal language (except in Turkey, and some European countries under Ottoman rule.) Arabic was the common language from Iraq (Mesopotamia) on the East, to Morocco, facing the Atlantic Ocean. Culturally, too, there was broad commonality characteristic of almost all Fertile Crescent lands.

At the crest of Aleppo and Damascus population early in this century, each city had perhaps 15,000 to 20,000 Jews. In Aleppo, everyone Jewish lived within the confines of the old and virtually invisible city-wall lines (the inner city), until about 1900-1905, when a small movement began to the-then outskirts of the city, to the Quarter called the Djamil-iyeh (named after Djamil Pasha), with broad streets and fresh air. (In the last three or four decades almost all Jews had moved there, except the direly poor.) The community was firmly ruled by the Bet Deen, the religious Court, supported by the Comite (Fr.), the community committee, formed of leading individuals— ah-kalz-behr, "notables" which administered the Jewish institutions. It was self-ruled, as was previously observed, in accordance with Ottoman and earlier, Roman and Arab regulations, which gave due recognition and respect in most periods, to each of the religious communities. This permitted an orderly and stable life over the centuries, one in which the Aleppo and Damascus Jewish populations led a generally satisfying life — constrained only by personal economic limitations.

The Hakham Báshi was the Chief Rabbi, an institution established in Istanbul/Constantinople some four hundred years ago, largely a political one. The local Hakham Bashi was appointed by the Chief Hakham Bashi, an influential Ottoman Empire official in the Capital — with the consent of the city's Jewish elders. He was frequently a non-native of Aleppo or Damascus, hailing from Smyrna, Istanbul, or Salonika. Often he did not match the scholarliness of the cities' native rabbis or their religious authority, although his Office was held in much awe by the populace. The Bet Deen, the religious court, set the rules and standards for rigid religious and civil observance for the mass of Jews. They ruled in disputes between Jews, and so universally and highly were they regarded, that a Muslim with a civil complaint against a Jew preferred to have it adjudicated by the Bet Deen. He was confident that the ruling would be unbiased and just. Leading rabbis were highly respected by the Muslim leaders and their counsel was often sought.

Rabbis of the city were also highly esteemed by fellow Jews in Palestine, Mesopotamia (Iraq) and other parts of the Ottoman Empire; respected for their learning and devoutness, from the days of Saadia, Maimonides and earlier. Over the centuries only a few had succeeded in having their scholarly religious works published. Some with valuable texts did not possess the means and know-how to achieve publication in one of the principal Sepharadi centers, in Livorno, Istanbul, Amsterdam. Only now are some of these early works being uncovered and published.

In Syria, relations with Islamics were amicable, but formal. A state of inward uneasiness always marked the sentiments toward those of the dominant religion. The Muslims were generally friendly, but "no one put complete trust in goyeem" (Hebrew maxim) or in their continuing peacefulness, since not all Muslims were educated, or well-mannered.

The Dhimmis: 'Protected' Jews and Christians

What is the reality of conditions under which the Dhimmi, the so- called 'Protected' people, lived? Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians who believe in one God, had special status following the teaching of Muhammad. They were known as Ahhl il Dhimmi [pronounced "thzimmeh"], People of Faith, Conscience. They were to be protected, allowed to lead a self-ruled life, following their religion, unmolested both in their faith and in their civil rights. However, because they would not accept Islam, they were to have measures of humiliation shown to them, they were to regard themselves as "inferiors." A special small tax was imposed on them, a jizya (a penalty). In other ways too in some periods, they had to have their inferiority made evident — through dress, restrictions on the height of their houses of worship, the lowly animals (donkeys, etc.) they were permitted to ride, the need to give way before a Muslim, and similar means of indicating their inferiority. In everything else their rights were to be protected. The Covenant could be annulled at will by Muslims when they alleged violations on the part of a minority, to be replaced with still greater severities, sometimes demanding conversion to Islam, on pain of death.

Good Relations with Muslims

The Muslims of Aleppo were indeed of a more peaceful character than those of Damascus. No uprisings, no massacres of Jews in Aleppo have ever been uncovered by this writer. Jews accepted their role of submissive inferiors, but with dignity. They knew their own worth, and their economic importance in the metropolis, a bustling city of traders. Aleppo Jews seldom had to submit to more than petty abuse, and only from individual ignorant and fanatic Muslims. Such elements had created riots and massacres in Aleppo in 1659-1860, but directed against Christians, with no major disorders since that time.

In earlier periods, prior to the advent of surging nationalist Zionism in Palestine, many commercial Jewish partnerships existed with Muslims and Christians, often in enterprises involving agricultural products; Jews were partners with herders, in large-scale operations involving sheep, etc. The Jews had confidence in the integrity of their Muslim partners, their courteous friendliness and their faithfulness to their religion. Sometimes the partners were bedu (bedouins), nomads. Jewish Murad Faham and members of the Jemal/Djmal families owned huge herds consigned to Muslims, or were partners with them; both were important manufacturers of cheese. Faham is the hero who was later to rescue the ancient and sacred Aleppo Codex: the Codex of ben Asher, spiriting it out of the country to Israel at considerable risk to his safety.

With educated Muslims a cordiality, somewhat formal, could exist, formed perhaps through commercial transactions. However, intimate friendships with Muslims were not common. Despite cordiality with some, there was little social interaction, Jewish and Muslim families did not exchange visits; men customarily socialized in cafes. Nevertheless, on respective holiday occasions the men would sometimes pay courtesy calls to their friends of the other religion. The Governor, too, the Pasha, would pay such a courtesy call to the Chief Rabbi. In turn, the Hakham Bashi would acknowledge an Islamic or governmental holiday by a visit to the Pasha.

Everyday Life in Twentieth Century Syria

Everyday activity in the early years of the twentieth century in Aleppo and Damascus continued the traditional and unhurried life in the midst of the countless minarets and the many large and important souks. Earlier, Jews lived — by choice — in their separate Quarters, the Saha, il Illeh, Bah-seeta, and Harrit il Yahood, the Jewish Quarter and other nearby neighborhoods, sometimes neighbors of Muslim families, but never of Christians. They occupied residences with an inner courtyard, with chambers around it, rooms not interconnected in most instances. Outhouses provided the sanitary facilities (which were periodically — sometimes tardily — emptied by the cesspool cleaner). Wealthy families occupied a private residence; others had contained two or three families, each occupying one or two rooms to accommodate their usually large numbers.

The rooms necessarily served as living quarters by day and as bedrooms at night. They were sparsely furnished. In the poorer homes the furniture consisted of a low table with a mansaf, a large tray, and cushions, dishaks, on which they sat, close to the floor. One or two large armoires, chests, held their clothes and household wares. A deewaan, a sofa, was found in most homes, reserved for visitors. Except for the wealthy where beds were used, bedding consisted of mattresses placed on the floor. These were aired in the morning, then piled in a corner of the room, freeing it for daytime use. For those in modest circumstances and the poor, heating the chamber was by means of braziers in which a few sticks of charcoal were burned. Illumination was provided by one or more wan-a-seh, a pan filled with oil, with lighted wicks, or by kerosene lamps. Some rooms had a small raised alcove, a m'rah-bah which added to the useable space. A small deep cellar, m'gha-ra, usual in every home, provided an area where perishable food was kept somewhat fresh. A floor covering was a necessity. Those who could afford them had rugs on the floor, from Ajam, (Persia), or from Turkey. Others laid down a haseereh, a large woven mat of vegetable fibers.

Housewives whose husbands had means could employ domestic help. For the majority — the poor and the near-poor — the housewife was responsible for restoring the sleeping room into a sitting room, airing the bedclothes and storing them in a corner. She washed the clothes, cooked the meals, drew

water from the cistern for the family needs, and sewed or repaired the clothing. In addition, of course, she attended her many young children. She saw to the grinding of her wheat at the local mill and prepared the dough for the bread, a large part of every meal. This was sent out usually twice a week — to a nearby baker, a soo-sahnie.

Those in the middle and upper classes usually retained a Jewish female domestic worker, who went to her own home at the end of a demanding day. She, too, washed, cooked, kneaded dough, and looked after her other household chores. Servants were often, but not always, married women. The poor provided the wet nurses for those who could not nurse their own children.

Since clothing factories did not exist, tailors and dressmakers often gave sewing work to be performed in the home — at niggardly prices. Some women were skilled seamstresses; others, makers of wigs and hair-pieces, etc., who spent individual days working in the homes of patrons, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian. (This contradicts the popular belief that wives of Oriental Jews did not work gainfully like Jewish matrons in Eastern Europe; there, it was not uncommon for some women to be actively engaged in commerce.)

For the poor, breakfast usually consisted of bread and white cheese; some could afford only bread and inexpensive zatar, a combination of tangy herbs. (Bread was dipped into oil and then into the zatar.) A piece of halava served as ‘dessert.’ Lunch and supper often comprised the leftovers of the food of the previous day or else of an omelet, prepared with cheese, potatoes, eggplant or other available vegetables. Laban, yoghurt, was a staple, widely consumed, in addition to cereals and beans of every description; they were cheap. The principal meal was in the evening. Few meat dishes were available, they were too expensive for most, but were served at the Sabbath meals.

Most Jews were either lower-middle class or (the greater number) — were poor. They were craftsmen, stall-keepers, cobblers, clerks, peddlers, porters and others without skills.The life of the middle-class Jews and the wealthy permitted comfortable homes and enabled them to live well in all respects, enjoying a wide variety of foodstuffs, meat, fish, seasonal vegetables and delectable fruits.

Marriages

Jewish marriages in the Orient were almost always arranged by the parents, usually with the aid of a semi-professional, part- time broker, a khat-ahb. He knew most families, and thus could recommend suitable mates; it was important to find spouses of suitable lineage — those of the same social class. A marriage could sometimes be arranged with another, but only one class level above or below. Among the poor, marriages were more expeditiously arranged, without the need of an intermediary — and negotiations.

Entertainment

Rich and poor delighted in the Sabbath, a day of complete relaxation. Some relished the occasional Sabt, the festive mid day elaborate celebratory Sabbath breakfasts after synagogue service. These often were accompanied by the singing of traditional pizmoneem, non-ritual religious songs. Aleppoans are very fond of music, outstandingly so.

Entertainment in earlier years — 70 or 80 years ago was quite limited. Apart from visits to cafes, family and friends, public entertainment was narrowly circumscribed. Once or twice each year there was a gala concert of Arabic music. A little music was available publicly in some cafes, mostly by means of phonograph records. The “Shahh-bandar,”, a large cafe on what was then the outskirts of the city — it has since been absorbed by the exploding city — featured vocalists and a live musical ensemble. Those who could afford it thronged this green oasis in a city denuded of trees (cut down for fuel during World War I, and never replanted). On a pleasant evening, one of the residents, usually among those in humbler circumstances, would produce an ood, a lute, to be joined by neighbors in his courtyard, and often by those of an adjoining courtyard, who would enjoy and contribute to the quiet entertainment.

Community Organizations

The community had several social institutions in addition to the kteh-teeb, the Hebrew Schools. Mohar u-Mattan was concerned with facilitating marriages for the poor. A few gold pounds were made available to a poor couple, to permit them to buy the minimum household needs. Without the means to buy these articles, marriages could be delayed indefinitely. Sedaqa u-Marpeh, “Charity and

Healing," looked after the needy sick. It maintained a clinic and a couple of 'hospital' beds, the part-time cooperation of a trained doctor, as well as a drug dispensary. Mattan ba Seter was a fund which assisted the genteel poor who would not openly accept charity. A large Fund saw to the needs of the many poor families who were regularly allotted small sums to keep them from starving. A pittance was doled out, too, to dozens of poor rabbis, to allow them adequate Sabbath meals.

There were many orphan children, numerous offspring of impoverished, undernourished parents who died young; outbreaks of tuberculosis or cholera, plague, typhus or diphtheria, were common in some earlier years. A sizeable orphanage was maintained, whose support was made barely adequate by appeals to Syrians living in New York, Manchester, Egypt and Buenos Aires. "Joe" Duek, a successful businessman, retired early to devote his time and efforts to the needs of "his" orphans.

Jewish Commerce and the Souks

Aleppo's merchants, Muslim, Jewish, and Christian, are traditionally serious-minded men, in a city which lacks the heady, irresponsible effervescence of Damascus. Halab had less politics and less fanaticism. While Damascus is the town of the "Arab," Aleppo is the city of the merchant.

A large part of trade and commerce was dominated by the Jews of Aleppo. A small number were private bankers, called sir-eh-feen, 'changers', money-changers (sar-raf, sing.). In a country and city where its residents had no faith in paper money — their confidence was in dahab-at — gold pieces!. Some of their trade in silver and gold pieces was international in scope. Their activity and that of the many Jewish merchants dealing in textiles and a variety of other important commodities permitted them the acquisition of impressive fortunes, very discreetly held, and most 'modestly' spent.

The merchants of Aleppo carry on their activities in the khans and souks. A khan is a caravanserai (a "palace" for caravans). A souk is a trading street or lane, in some countries referred to as a "bazaar." But not all souks are alike. Those who visited Jerusalem and its souk ("shouk," in Hebrew) can little imagine the size and scope of Aleppo's souks. The latter are roofed, and constitute a sizeable "town" extending for many miles; souks which are deemed more important than those of Damascus and Cairo. Off the principal souks are found the many khans. In several of them our Jewish merchants carried on their trade, principally in the huge Khan ii Gimrog — "the Customhouse Khan" and the vast Khan il Qassabiyeh — the "Khan of the Gold Threads." There they maintained their offices, attached to which were their sizeable warehouses. Each craft, in traditional fashion, is established in its own "street" and thus the visitor progresses from the leather workers to the smiths, to the merchants of silks and cotton cloths, or to the souks which sell spices, with their curious haunting fragrances. Aleppo has more than 150 hammams, 'Turkish baths', whose beauty and luxuriousness were highly praised.

Jewish Schools

In Aleppo as in Damascus, in the unhurried and traditional life of old, few influences of the Age of Enlightenment had penetrated or were available to the people of the cities and to the Jewish population. Exceptions were the relatively small but important number of Jews who were able to attend the schools of the Alliance Israelite Universelle. With the self-esteem and self-satisfaction with which they lived, Jews (and Muslims), lacked the quest and thirst for secular education, which characterized the Jews of Europe. Jewish education, except for Alliance students, was in the ktehteeb (kittab sing.) elementary Hebrew schools, for boys. When boys "graduated" at about age thirteen "they went down to the souk" to seek gainful work. Children of families with some means remained in the Alliance until they achieved 'senior' graduation at ages 17 to 20.

Traditional early Jewish schooling taught the male children prayers, and the Bible — which was taught in Hebrew of course, but with some chapters memory-instilled in formal (archaic- classical) Arabic translation, very likely the translation of Saadia Ha-Goan, achieved almost one thousand years ago. The boys became familiar with AinYaacob, a simple recounting of rabbinic aggadah (parables, legends), and other similar works. Most students, with their bar mizva, went out to seek work; but children of wealthy parents, if not at the Alliance school, continued their studies, going on to instructions in the Talmud and other rabbinic works, in batteh midrash, halls of study. They attended there for a few years, before going on to the serious business of gaining money, in order to permit them to marry and to establish their own families. Newlyweds without much means lived with "his" or "her" parents, depending on their relative means, for a few years. A few wealthy men with large homes

maintained several married sons and their families in a patriarchal pattern, as a truly “extended family.”

In addition to study of religious texts in the kittab, the traditional Hebrew elementary school, an hour or so every other day was devoted to learning to read and write Arabic and write the customary cursive Hebrew Script known as nus’alam (‘half a pen’) somewhat similar to Rashi script. This is a medieval form of the written Hebrew coming down to us in the Cairo Geniza fragments of the 10th to 14th century. The men of ancient Cairo, like present-day Jews in Aleppo and Damascus, used the Hebrew script to write letters whose texts were often in Arabic. The students, particularly those whose learning years were limited by the need to work, left the kittab without much ability to write either Hebrew or Arabic — but, were of course, able to read Hebrew printed texts.

The overwhelming majority of both Jews and Muslims — particularly the latter, had no mastery of writing, although every Jewish child submitted to some schooling with the consequent ability to read (Hebrew), and perhaps to read and write some Arabic. Limited writing lessons introduced into “senior” classes in the kitttab left the boy little time to master writing before he left school at age thirteen.

The Alliance Israelite Universelle and other Schools

Alliance Israelite students did acquire the ability to write French, some Arabic and Hebrew. They received a Western style education which included a few hours every week of Hebrew prayers and some Biblical texts. Very religious parents provided private tutors for additional religious studies. Otherwise, most Alliance education was in French. Advanced students who deviated by speaking any Arabic in the school were made to pay a small fine for infractions.

The Paris-based Alliance had its European-trained Sepharadi Jewish teachers. “Sophisticated” and “not very religious,” they were looked at with some suspicion by the ultra Orthodox. They had little regard for the religious element, although they were careful in Aleppo not to flout the orthodoxy of the community. Despite some mild disapproval on the part of some unsophisticated Aleppo rabbis, parents continued to send their children to the Alliance. Commercial advancement was impossible without the education the Alliance Israelite was able to provide — in a community of merchants.

The brightest Alliance graduates were offered tuition-free advanced study in the Alliance schools in and near Paris. These were teacher-training schools, which required graduates to take teaching posts for a period of several years at the discretion of the Alliance in any Near/Middle East country where the Alliance had schools. Not enough can be said, or is acknowledged, of the benefactions that the Alliance Israelite Universelle schools brought to the Jews of the whole of the Near and Middle East, Turkey and Greece, (and some Balkan countries). This blessing is taken for granted, even by many who gained immeasurably by attending. The Aleppo school was established in 1869 for boys, a school for girls was instituted few years later. The lives and careers of Alliance students were affected, to benefit them for many years, in the Near East, and when many went to distant lands and new endeavors.

In later years some Jewish families eager for more intensive education for their male children enrolled them in the superior school operated by the monks, girls at the convent schools of the the Sisters — the nuns. Jewish and (the fewer) Muslim students there were excused from attendance at Mass and from classes in Christian theology. In Aleppo, no Jewish children were ever known to have converted to Christianity. A recently-arrived reliable informant stated that in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s, 20 percent of Jewish families had given their children such Catholic school education — families which were regarded as of ‘normal’ Jewish observance.

With the installation of French Mandatory rule in 1922, the French authorities had established the Mission Lycee, the Laique, the secular school of high caliber. The curriculum began where the Alliance ended. Graduation from the Laique school enabled students to qualify for college or university education in Beirut or in Paris, for such as wished to pursue a career in law, medicine, or other professions. A few Jewish Laique graduates did so, to become lawyers and physicians.

A-political Jewry

Jews in Syria and in most other Ottoman countries were entirely a-political. They could not participate in partisan politics because of the delicacy of their situation in a Muslim world. Content to lead their separate community life without molestation, they were grateful for the privilege of being left to live in peace. Thus they did not have the urge of fervent Zionism, like the oppressed Jews in Czarist countries. As I witnessed in a 1933 visit to Aleppo, the Jewish community leaders were required by the Muslim authorities to publicly "disavow any sympathy with Zionism." It was only in the mid-to-late 1930's that Zionism began to grow in Aleppo — although not to flourish. Zionist-influenced sports and cultural activities on a small scale began then, manifested by the "Maccabi Football (soccer) Club" and small Zionist discussion groups. Jewish recruiters from Palestine visited Aleppo in the late 1930's and early 1940's; they influenced a small number of young people to move to the Holy Land. The majority, however, were satisfied to continue their accustomed pattern of life, although they became increasingly uneasy. (Some Aleppoans and Damascenes who later located in Egypt and Lebanon tell us in their oral memoirs of bustling but discreet Zionist interest and activity there.

Beginning Migrations

With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, some Aleppoan and Damascene Jews migrated to Egypt seeking better economic opportunities. Others, merchants, had gone to Manchester, England to represent their partnerships and family enterprises which had been importing English cotton goods through commission merchants.

Toward the end of the 19th century, a few intrepid pioneers set out from Syria, seeking the opportunity to earn enough money to provide them with a small capital, and to return to their native cities. The incentives for travel were World Fairs, the Expositions in Paris in 1859 and the Columbian Exposition in 1893. At the end of the Expositions, alas, none had made their fortune. Some returned to their native city; others stayed on waiting for the next Fair — the Pan American Exposition of 1901 in Buffalo, or the St. Louis World's Exposition of 1903. Except for one individual, none had settled in the United States before 1903, when several Aleppo and Damascus Jews decided to stay and make their home in New York.

The Nucleus of Mass Migration

Dire need in many Jewish families in Syria was aggravated by the several economic crises, worldwide depressions which affected Aleppo's commerce as well. 1903 saw such slack in trade, to be repeated in 1907. Commercial houses went bankrupt or were compelled to discharge employees — who were left destitute, with no income or the means to secure food. Having heard of the few Jews who had migrated to the Americas, pioneers who wrote back reporting their ability to work and earn in New York, Mexico, and Buenos Aires, an emigration trend, a small tide set in, inducing men with hungry homes to leave their cherished families and friends and the accustomed orderly Jewish life, to seek a livelihood elsewhere. Most of them left with little more than the clothing on their backs to go to distant and strange lands where they arrived like deaf-mutes, unable to speak the new languages, to understand and to be understood. Since an alternative to the helpless misery of their life in Aleppo and Damascus presented itself, they had seized it, those with courage enough to embark on the unknown. Still another factor encouraged emigration.

The "Young Turks" movement of army officers had forced the abdication in 1908 of the despot Sultan Abd il-Hamid II, who had clung to the politics of an earlier and antiquated era. Turkey was humiliated by defeats in several small wars, because of the archaic and thoroughly corrupt official government structure. With the overthrow of Abd il-Hamid the Army sought greater strength — and large numbers of soldiers. This was a calamity for Jews under Ottoman rule. Under the old regime Jews and other minorities were "not desired" to mingle with the Muslim soldiers; with the payment of a f'kehk, a "release," a small tax, non-Muslims were considered to have made a substitute contribution. The need for a new and larger army ended this exemption; every able bodied 'young' man was made subject to conscription. As soon as conscription appeared imminent, Jewish men quietly disappeared, to make their way to a new and strange land.

Encouraged by the reports from New York from the early immigrants who were sending money to their impoverished families, many more made their way to New York's Lower East Side. Buenos

Aires, Mexico, and New York were equally known in Damascus and Aleppo as the “goal” for those compelled to emigrate. (Some who were denied entry at Ellis Island also turned to Argentina or to Mexico.) The years 1908-1913 saw the nucleus of a Syrian community in Mexico as well as in Buenos Aires and New York.