An American Sephardic Memoir

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These are excerpts from Rabbi Marc D. Angel's book, A New World: An American Sephardic Memoir, Albion Andalus Books, Boulder, 2019.
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By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

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Transitions.

Things stay the same, but not really. Things change, but not totally.

My grandparents were among the 30,000 or so Sephardic Jews who came to the United States during the early 20th century. They were born and raised in Turkey and the Island of Rhodes. They had little formal education, little money, but a lot of courage.

They brought the "old country" with them to the new world. Their language was Judeo-Spanish. Their culture was the traditional Sephardic Judaism of Ottoman Jewry. They settled in Seattle, Washington, and were part of a vibrant Sephardic enclave with large extended families.

My grandparents were of the "old world" and they sought to transmit their ideals and values to their children. Their children were of the "new world." Life in America was very different from the tradition-centered life of the Jews in Turkey and Rhodes. The children's generation respected their parents; but this new American generation was restless. They wanted to adapt fully to American life.

How much of the “old world” could they carry with them? How much of it had to be left behind?

By my generation (I was born in 1945), the Americanization process was well advanced. We loved and admired our grandparents and their generation; but we were full-blooded Americans, many of us with American-born parents. The “old world” was remote, somewhat exotic. It didn’t define who we were.

Our children and grandchildren are further removed from the “old country.” Most have never heard a conversation in Judeo-Spanish. Most have not had personal contact with members of my grandparents’ generation.

The Americanization of our family over the past hundred years has brought many changes. We are far better educated than the immigrant generation. We are generally more affluent, more “successful,” and more integrated into American society. We have shared in the American dream.

But we have also incurred losses in the generational transitions. Life is not static. Things change. Circumstances change. People change. Whereas most of our family once lived within the same neighborhood in Seattle, now we are spread out all over the country. Whereas most of our family once felt a strong sense of belonging to the Sephardic Jewish tradition, now we are much more diverse in our religious and cultural patterns of life.

While we can’t go back to the “old days” and the “old country” way of life, we can draw meaningful lessons for ourselves and our next generations. In assembling the memoirs for this book, I have chosen people and events that have left a lasting impression on me…and that I think can leave a lasting impression on many others. This book is one man’s record of an era which is rapidly coming to a close. I acknowledge that memoirs are subjective; each person experiences life through his or her own eyes and each remembers things differently.

My mother used to say that we could learn almost everything we need to know about human nature from our own extended family. Some relatives were wise, some foolish; some were successful, some failures; some optimistic, some morose; some pious, some rebellious. Our family included intellectuals and people of very limited intelligence. We had courageous and outspoken individuals, and we had timid, quiet types. Some had phenomenal senses of

humor, and some would hardly ever laugh. In the family, one could experience love, hatred, selflessness, jealousy, greed, generosity, spirituality, materialism, seriousness, humor.

The family included people of great mind and heart, people who were handsome and beautiful, people of striking personality. It also included, without embarrassment, people who were quite ordinary, as well as individuals who had various physical, emotional and mental disabilities.

My grandfather Angel had a shoeshine stand. My grandfather Romey was a barber. My father was a grocer. Among my uncles were a butcher, fish salesman, rabbi, printer, storekeeper, bartender, college professor, and assorted unskilled laborers. Various relatives were real estate speculators, never-do-wells, while others were employees of Boeing. In the days of my childhood, most of the women of our family did not work outside the home.

By the next generation, the extended family came to include rabbis, teachers, attorneys, insurance and real estate agents, a political scientist, skilled employees in various companies, a merchant marine, salespeople, athletes, a nurse, and several authors of books.

My mother saw the family as something of a microcosm of humanity in general and society in particular. We could understand the world around us if we could understand ourselves.

In those days, the family was large, diverse and whole. We mostly lived in the same neighborhood; we got together often; we recognized a strong vital sense of kinship among ourselves.

One of the focal points of my childhood was the home of my maternal grandparents at 214 15th Avenue in Seattle, Washington. Even now, so many years after their deaths, I often find myself reminiscing about that house, remembering so many details about it. It has stood as a symbol in my mind of our family together. It calls to mind a simpler time, a time when life seemed whole and connected.

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My grandparents and their generation have passed away.

My parents and all their siblings have passed away.

My generation is getting on in years. Some of my cousins have died or are in declining health. Some still live in Seattle, but some live in Portland, Los Angeles, Sioux Falls, New York, Jerusalem…and other places. Some are religiously traditional, and some have moved far from Jewish religious observance.

Our children and grandchildren live in a world much removed from the “old neighborhood” in Seattle where I was born and raised. They have little contact with the children and grandchildren of the cousins of my generation. They have hardly heard (or never heard) Judeo-Spanish as a living language. They have no first hand memories of the lives of the pioneer Sephardic immigrants who came to America in the early 20th century.

Peter Berger, an eminent scholar of modern American civilization, has noted that moderns suffer from a deepening condition of spiritual “homelessness.” The old anchors and moorings have not held.

The old days are gone forever. Looking back can be pleasant; but it cannot create a new framework for society. It is not enough to have a “home” in the past. We need to be at home in the present and to create homes for our children and grandchildren.

My “old country of Seattle” cannot be put back together. It is gone, never to return. But values can live on; attitudes can be transmitted; ideas can transcend time and space. Moderns need not be spiritually homeless if they can create a society based on love, trust, shared values and ideals. Our sense of being at home will come from inner strength, from our immediate family and friends, from our communal structures. For our future generations to feel that life is whole, meaningful and secure, we will need to create frameworks where they feel “at home,” comfortable with themselves, comfortable with the world in which they live.

Our grandparents and parents and their generations left us a powerful legacy of memories, values and ideals. As we draw strength and wisdom from their lives, we face the present and the future with increasing confidence. We can’t go home again, but neither can we ever really leave home.