

[Image 1]

Survey of Sephardi/ Mizrahi Archives in Northeastern United States

(supported by a grant from NHPRC)

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Purpose and Goals

In the late Spring of 2011 the American Sephardi Federation (ASF) was awarded a NHPRC grant to conduct a 12 month survey project to identify, document and, where appropriate, expedite the processing of existing collections of archival materials relating to Sephardi/ Mizrahi Jews in the north-east region of the United States.

Some of these records are held in well-established repositories - both Jewish and non-Jewish - others are held in small synagogues, community centers, or are in the hands of individuals. We felt that it was critical to locate and evaluate the extent and condition of Sephardi archival collections because the Sephardi/ Mizrahi populations living in North America are among the last of such remaining groups in the world.

This paper will summarize the major steps in the grant application process, review our progress to date and outline future plans and what we have learned so far.

The project has 5 primary objectives

(1) to document the location, extent, and content of the existing collections of Sephardic archival materials in the North-Eastern region of the United States;

(2) to identify and assist in the stabilization and processing of at-risk and under-utilized collections ;

(3) to provide and maintain an on-line guide and website rendering accessible the results of the survey;

(4) to ensure that any newly discovered, valuable historical records are deposited in an appropriate repository;

(5) to launch the first phase of what ASF projects to be a national survey of Sephardic archival materials.

So far we have mostly concentrated on objective 1. However we have had three small collections donated and processing has begun on these. We have also surveyed two non-text collections and these will require a second grant to stabilize them.

Background

I want to start with a little bit on the background on the project. In 2009 we were directed to look for library grants, and on speaking with our Chief of Libraries and Archives – Bob Sink – it was suggested that we start with a survey of Sephardic Archival Materials in United States. We found a similar survey by Marquette had been awarded a grant in a previous year. They had carried out a survey of Native American archives in the Western United States¹. We spoke with Mr. Mark Thiel, Marquette’s chief archivist and found that he was not only very informative, but helpful in working our way through our grant process. The big challenge was getting the narrative (including the plan of work) into 20 pages. In previous years there had been no limit placed on the grant narrative, but the federal government had cracked down and limited the length. Another difficulty was constructing a plan of work and designing a budget for fieldwork without knowing where we would end up one year down the line.

Once we had drawn up our narrative (including design of project, justifications, personnel, and plan of work), we submitted a draft (optional) to our liaison at the Federal government. This was submitted in August and we were given some further guidance on putting our application together by our liaison at NHPRC. We then submitted a modified project in October, along with a large number of letters of support and a budget to accompany the narrative. In Spring, 2010, we received comments from reviewers, along with additional questions. The reviewers were generally quite positive in their responses, but some were a little

¹ <http://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/teaching.shtml>

skeptical because they believed that the project was very ambitious, especially for an organization as small as ASF. We submitted our responses, and asserted that we did not see our project as covering every foot of the United States, but that we would concentrate on specific pockets of Sephardim in such locations as New York, Los Angeles, and Seattle. In June, 2010, we received the verdict—we were told that the government could not fund the project because it was too ambitious in its scope.

In October, 2010 ASF applied again, but in this case we reduced our scope to a smaller regional grant concentrating on the Northeastern region of the United States. We basically used a similar narrative, but tailored it to this region. In June, 2011, we were awarded a grant of \$46,800, approximately 46 % of the total that included an additional \$48,000 of cost share. With the guidance of the NHPRC liaison we then set up a set of contract goals. We set our sights on surveying at least 75 sites, to include communal, institutional, or individual entities. A guide to these sites was to be created. We would also seek to organize and create new finding aids for archival collections that happen to be donated to our project. The contract also included requirements that a paper be presented at an appropriate conference and submitted for publication. In order for the project to be deemed successful 75% of these goals must be achieved.

Delays and Problems—There then occurred what might be termed a “Lemony Snicket Series of Unfortunate Events”. There was a significant shakeup in our staff in which we experienced the loss and replacement of both our ASF director as well as our financial administrator; an explosion in a transformer in front of our building which shut down our computers for a month; and then we had tremendous difficulty locating a project archivist. We finally selected an excellent Project Archivist at the end of February, several months after we originally intended to hire.

Website : (<http://sephardicarchives.org/>)

Nevertheless we did start by creating a website. The website developer for the ASF survey project was originally scheduled to terminate his service at the end of August 2011, and with this concern in mind, we embarked on the project at the beginning of August rather than, October as had been the original plan. The initial website was created quickly and efficiently, over a period of 20 hours in August. The domain name was purchased for and is hosted by “Pair Networks, Inc.” (2403 Sidney St., Suite 210, Pittsburgh, PA.15203).

The web developer is still employed at ASF on a part time basis and since August has made a number of additions to the site. These have included project descriptions (<http://sephardicarchives.org/pd.html>) and an outline of Sephardic immigration to the United States (<http://sephardicarchives.org/si.html>). Further developments are being planned to include a blog², a geo-locator plug-in and links to the project Facebook page.

Supervisory Committee

As far back as 2009 it was the plan to have a Supervisory Committee and this committee has been critical element in this project. After we had begun the operation, and established the website, the next task carried out was contacting and meeting with our Supervisory Committee. This was complicated by the fall Jewish holidays. Nevertheless everyone was brought together in a conference call meeting on October 11, 2011, between 1:00 and 2:00 pm. The participants were Professor Henry Green (University of Miami); Professor Aviva Ben-Ur (U.Mass-Amherst); Professor Jane Gerber (Director—Sephardic Center, CUNY Graduate Center); Ms.

² The blog is now up and running.

Laura Leone (CJH Director of Libraries and Archives); Mr. Mark Thiel, C.A. (Marquette University) ; Dr. Stanley A. Urman (Executive Director—American Sephardi Federation); Mr. Randall C. Belinfante (Project Director). Ms. Anne-Marie Belinfante (Research Assistant on the project and a Reference Specialist in Jewish Studies at New York Public Library) was also included in the meeting. The committee approved the website as well as the employment offering for an archivist. There was a very useful discussion of the survey questionnaire forms and a number of changes were made. These changes were intended to make the forms more accessible to the non-archivist/librarian while eliciting information of value to researchers /historians. Recommendations as to possible recipients of the surveys were made. The committee has been essential in identifying new sites and repositories.

Survey Questionnaires

Following the meeting of the Supervisory Committee, we embarked on the creation of three sets of surveys: one set to be dispatched to Congregations and communal organizations; one set to go to established repositories (such as libraries and museums); and a third set to be sent to individuals. In addition to offering a pdf or word document on our website, we also developed an on-line version (suggested by one of the grant reviewers) which was created by Laura Leone (Supervisory Committee and CJH) using the “Survey Monkey” program. The links were incorporated into the website along with a brief project description.. Pdf versions which can be printed out and returned to ASF were also added : (<http://sephardicarchives.org/sf.html>). The online survey monkey questionnaire is here (<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/sephardi-mizrahi-orgsurvey>).

Distribution of Survey Forms and Outreach

At the end of January 2012, the pdf form, along with a letter, an explanation of the survey, and a sample news-release were dispatched to more than 150 sites and addresses of known Sephardic/Mizrahi Congregations throughout the north eastern region of the U.S. The news release, created by our researcher, Ms. Anne-Marie Belinfante, was included with the hope that the synagogues and communal organizations would use it in their newsletters.

As of May 15, 2012, we have mailed 296 surveys to congregations, museums, archives, historical societies, scholars and private individuals. From those 296 surveys, 108 were sent to congregations, and 188 to historical societies, museums, archives, scholars, and private individuals. The congregations were taken from a list of Sephardic congregations put together several years ago by the American Sephardi Federation. Several of the surveys were returned because the congregations had moved, or were now defunct. Of those that were returned, new, updated addresses were found for eight and were resent.

A news release was also distributed to a list of more than sixty news organizations via email. We used a somewhat old list that was compiled by the American Sephardi Federation for its events, etc. Of the 60 dispatched, 15 were returned as undeliverable. A Face-Book account has been created to reach out to the more computer-savvy interests. Using our blackboard through one of the periodical facebook pages with whom we were connected (Image Magazine), we were able to send the survey out to over 2000 facebook friends. The release was also sent to a number of listserves.

Project Archivist

Originally the archivist was to have begun work in October. However for a number of reasons the post was not advertised until December. The position was advertised on a number of local list-serves (including “Metro”, Queens College, and Ha-Safran).

We selected Ms. Catherine Ziegler, who was fresh out of library school. Ms. Ziegler is not only extremely well-organized but she is also proficient in the technical skills needed for developing our website. She began work on February 20th and has brought much enthusiasm to the position and experience in social networking.

Survey Responses:

At first, we were concerned because we received very little response from those to whom we had sent surveys. However, Catherine Ziegler got down and started making phone calls, and sending emails, and we did begin to have responses come in. We have, as of June 14, 2012, received 80 responses from mailings and site visits. **[Image 2]**. The overwhelming majority of these (56) have been from established collecting repositories, such as museums, archives and historical societies. An additional 18 are from religious congregations and organizations (excluding religious-based historical societies and other established collecting repositories). The remaining six (6) have come from individuals.

[Image 3] We have received 49 responses, through the survey or site visits, which state positively that they have collections or material relating to Sephardi/Mizrahi communities.³ One additional response, from the National

³ As of August 15, 2012, we have received 62 positive responses and 31 negative responses.

Archives in Philadelphia, stated that due to the prominent and historic local Sephardic congregation in the area (Mikveh Israel) it was likely that they did have materials relating to Sephardi/Mizrahi communities or individuals, but it would take a researcher to spend some time in their archives to determine what, if anything exists. A research visit at Yale University's Beinecke Library has shown that there are materials related to the early Sephardic community in Newport, Rhode Island, and there are very likely more to be found by a dedicated researcher with more time to spend in the library.

Site Visits

Ms. Ziegler has derived a great deal of information through site visits. We had originally received a negative response from Kehila Kedosha Janina for example, but when she visited the synagogue, the president informed her that they possessed a great deal of otherwise unknown material.

We had been unable to make contact with the Near Eastern communities in Brooklyn, NY, but with the help of Ms. Sarina Roffé, we were able to come up with a great solution: we were able to recruit some Yeshivah of Flatbush (High School) students who were members of the community, and with their help, we were able to gain access to seven sites (mainly synagogues) of the Near Eastern (Syrian) community in Brooklyn. **[Image 4]**

Ms. Ziegler ventured into the Northeast, conducting two field trips, and was able to obtain some other fascinating responses. Two of our committee people (Dr. Aviva Ben-Ur and Dr. Jane Gerber) offered two collections of audio and video tapes. Dr. Aviva suggested that we could copy her collection of audio tapes of Sephardic in—a collection of some 137 tapes with more than 78 individuals, and to

copy them to MP3s would have required 25 days working at 8 hours per day. There are thus far no established archival standards (i.e., by ALA) for sound recordings in the U.S., so we have resorted to International Standards for archiving this material. We use a wave document but for patron use, we use the MP3. In any case, the NHPRC was unwilling to allow us to spend this kind of time creating MP3s, but instead, we were instructed to survey and sample the materials. So saying, Ms. Ziegler went to Dr. Ben-Ur's home in Amherst on 5/11/2012 and was able to survey Dr. Ben-Ur's collection and recorded two tapes containing one of the more valuable oral histories, i.e., that of Rabbi Solomon Maimon of Seattle.

On another trip, Ms. Ziegler visited Newport, R.I. and met with Dr. David Kleinman on May 15, 2012 to survey the materials held by the Touro synagogue (the oldest standing synagogue building held in North America). Nearly all of the colonial materials from Touro synagogue are already held by the American Jewish Historical Society here at the Center for Jewish History. However, Ms. Ziegler did identify some materials, but they were largely of Ashkenazi content.

Several other repositories were visited along the way. These included the Newport Historical Society, the Norwalk Historical Society, the Fairfield Jewish Historical Society, and the New London County Historical Society. She met with varied success, with some repositories reporting that they held Sephardic materials, while others insisted that they did not, even though Ms. Ziegler had found information indicating that they did possess some information. A research visit at Yale University's Beinecke Library has shown that there are materials related to the early Sephardic community in Newport, Rhode Island, and there are very likely more to be found by a dedicated researcher with more time to spend in the library. We did obtain some images of Aaron Lopez Papers **[Image 5]** at New

London Historical Society but it generally appears that there seem to be papers of Aaron Lopez in a wide number of sites scattered throughout the Northeast.

We have received 30 responses, through the survey or site visits, which state that they do not have collections or material relating to Sephardi/Mizrahi communities in the United States. Of these, 3 were obtained through site visits.

Looking Forward.

Despite the obstacles the work of the survey is now gathering momentum. The schedule obviously will need revision; we estimate that we may be one month to six weeks behind. The official end of the project is July 31st - but we have applied for an extension⁴. Over the next few months we are looking forward to further field work in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and upstate New York while continuing our site visits within the five boroughs.

The next task will be to start putting the guide together⁵. Initially it will be a pdf - modelled on the Marquette example:

<http://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/NativeGuide/Wguide-intro-main.shtml>

; <http://www.marquette.edu/library/archives/NativeGuide/NM/W-376.pdf> - note that pages for individual repository give contact info, notes re-restrictions and some history as well as records available.

What we have learned .

Some important considerations have come to light over the past months

- 1) Outreach and the identification of survey targets are organic processes that are often driven by chance meetings and comments.

⁴ We have indeed received that extension.

⁵ As of August 17, 2012 all responses received (positive and negative) have been entered into the website guide and are available for viewing. (<http://sephardicarchives.org/results.htm>)

2) As already noted the online survey forms were very helpful - clicking through boxes is a very common experience these days AND it sort of walks people through the process.

The paper forms were competently dealt with by collecting repositories but may well have been misunderstood by non-specialists in congregations and organizations - they didn't seem to realize the importance of the ephemera of newsletters, flyers, modern photos. That is the enormous value of site visits that has already been mentioned. Even guiding through the form on the telephone can be helpful - however for some of the small congregations it is next to impossible to find someone on the end of the line.

3) When the grant was reviewed we were asked how we would "get into" some of these communities and our then director planned on contacting the "elders" of the community. As has already been described we have had the good fortune to be guided into the Syrian community by its young people.

4) For the repositories site visits are important because the non-Jewish ones cannot always differentiate the types of Jewish material that they have.

5) The Facebook experience has produced some "friends" but only one contact for survey material.

6) One important lesson has been that the planned fieldwork schedule became largely theoretical. Fieldwork had to be built around survey responses and the schedules of those who were facilitating our visits. Flexibility is the key.

7) Another happy lesson has been the incredible responsiveness of the Federal agencies we have been working with and their willingness to guide beginners through the process. BUT it is very important to keep up with registrations and password updates that are required.

8) One aspect that is a cause for concern is the move many congregations have made into digital world - newsletters, photos maybe even membership records are not in hard copy anymore. Years down the line it seems there may well be no ephemerera for special collections - even in digital form.

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National Sephardic Library <http://Sephardiclibrary.org>

ASF/NHPRC Survey Project <http://Sephardicarchives.org>

For researchers, genealogists, and the Sephardic community, this project will facilitate access to a wide variety of lesser known and underutilized records and will further NHPRC's goals of preserving and making accessible the documentary record of the American experience "essential to understanding our democracy, history, and culture."