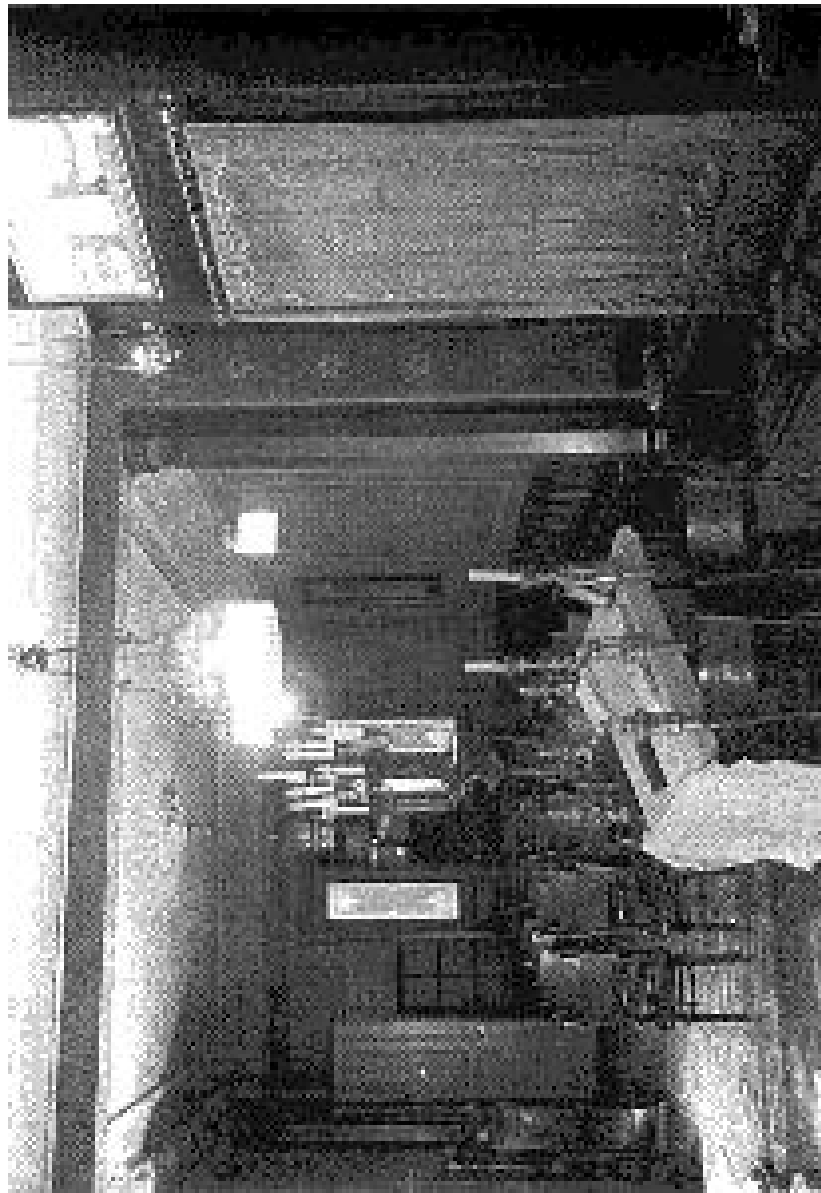


Searching for Sephardic History in Berlin.

In: Serels, M. Mitchell (Ed.): *Semana Sepharad: The Lectures. Studies on Sephardic History.* New York, 2001, pp. 33-56



Searching for Sephardic History in Berlin

Arnold Groh

Technische Universität, Berlin

There is no doubt that Sephardim have made substantial contribution to Jewish life in Berlin. The city's modern Jewish population is based on Sephardic immigrants, at least, there are enough hints that allow us to infer Sephardic backgrounds. The Sephardim of Berlin have hardly left any traces. The reasons of this phenomenon cannot be found in the Holocaust alone; there must be other factors, as many Ashkenazic - or indifferently Jewish - data are manifest in historical records, archeological findings, etc. With regard to Sephardic life in Berlin, all we can state is the unsuccessful efforts of research; present the scarce results; and point out possible reasons.

Some last traces

To begin with, there are very few records in the archives concerning the Sephardic congregations which existed before the Holocaust, such as the *Israelitisch-Sephardischer Verein* with a private Synagogue and a school in Schöneberg, Lützowstraße 111, or the congregations which followed the Nusah Sfard of the Hasidic groups such as the „Betstube“ (prayer room) of the *Verein Synagoge Tyfereth Israel* in Dragonerstraße 45 of the „Scheunenviertel“, a Jewish quarter of Berlin. The files went to the Gestapo archive which was bombed, and others went to the Board of Works. Some information could be gathered from the Landesarchiv for the period around 1930:

- Chairman of the *Israelitisch-Sephardischer Verein* was Davisco J. Asriel; Leo Kohen was vice-chairman.

Of the Nusah Sfarad congregations that are listed in government records as Sephardic, we know the following:

1. In Neukölln, Hermannstraße 171, there was the office of another Sephardic congregation, the *Synagogenverein Schomre Hadass* with D. Reissfeld as chairman and Aron Kost as vice-chairman;¹ Ch. Rosenfeld as treasurer; and M. Feuer as secretary.
2. The *Verein Synagoge Tyfereth Israel*, with its office at Steinstraße 1; chairman was Abraham Frommer; heads of the synagogue were Markus Fisch and Isaak Binder; H. Schneebaum the treasurer; and Moses Treff the secretary.
3. *Beth Hamidrasch Schomrei Schabbos*, a Verein (society) with a hall for "Sephardic" prayer and ambitious in a strict education of the youth, had an office at Alte Schönhauser Straße 10; chairman Nathan Pilz; vice-chairman L. E. Kestenbaum; treasurer Max Last; heads of the school Lasar Kormann and Josef Weichselbaum; secretaries Josef Birnbaum² and Isaak Jevet; controllers Markus Rebhuhn and S. Alster.

The respective files have been lost from the *Vereinsregister* (archive of societies) of the Amtsgericht Charlottenburg.

A few more details can be found in the literature:³

- The *Israelitisch-Sephardischer Verein* had about 500 members. It had been founded in 1905 by a carpet-merchant named Chasan who had come from Smyrna. Eli Cappon, Jacob Cohen, Moseo Covo, Josef Farkitsch, Leo Kohen, and Isaac Schmill were heads; Eli J. Uziel was general director. All of them were „spaniolische“ Jews, most of whom were engaged in supporting German-Turkish trade relations. In

1915, a Sephardic school was added. In the 1920s, 70 children were educated.

Of the Nusah Sfarid congregations, the records show the following:

- The „Betlokal“ *Schomre Hadass* at Jägerstraße 72, probably belonged to the Synagogenverein Schomre Hadass of Hermannstraße 171.
- The Bethaus of *Tyfereth Israel*, situated in Dragonerstraße 45,⁴ had been founded in 1920. According to Sinasohn (1971), all of its 40 members were Chassidim, praying with Sephardic rite. Other Gabbaim, besides the ones mentioned above, were J. Araten, L. Knisbacher, and N. Langsam.
- *Beth Hamidrasch Schomrei Schabbos* was founded in 1895. Only those men who were ready for daily Torah study and for strict observance of the teachings of the Shulhan Arukh could become members. There were the Gabbaim Mosche Kaufmann, Josef Rottenberg, J. Schreiber, and David Stern. The Verein Beth Hamidrasch Schomrei Schabbos maintained a *Betsaal* with Sephardic rite. Probably, there was a predecessor of the Verein in Grenadierstraße 6 where changing Minyans had their „Stibel“.

Galliner et al. (1987) report of a Sephardic service in Berlin for the high holidays of 1891.

Also named Beth Hamidrasch, was a yeshivah with a private prayer hall just in front of Berlin's first public synagogue in Heidereutergasse 4. Its first *pinkas* was installed in 1743 by Veitel Ephraim and Daniel Itzig (Stern, 1933).⁵ As we will see soon, there is reason to assume that these two men from the elite dynasty were of Sephardic background. Under the Nazis, this Beth Hamidrasch prayer hall was confiscated and appropriated by the Reichspost, together with the Old

Synagogue; the buildings perished in the bombs, which were to follow. Anyway, the name of the Verein Beth Hamidrasch Schomrei Schabbos probably was not pure coincidence.

In 1935, an article by Bath Hillel on Sephardim in Berlin was published in the *Gemeindeblatt der Jüdischen Gemeinde zu Berlin* (paper of the Jewish community), interesting enough to render its main points:

According to Hillel (1935), there were small congregations in the heart of Berlin of Jews who still lived the ancient ways of their forefathers, like in the times when they were still sitting on the banks of the Tago river, earning honours at the Spanish court as ministers, or as poets and philosophers. After the expulsion from Spain in 1492, those Sephardim had made a long migration, which in the course of the centuries brought them to Turkey and other oriental countries before they eventually came to the occident. The Sephardic community of Berlin had a temple, a school, and a haham of their own. There was a distinct feeling of solidarity: If one of them died, all of the men came to the cemetery and afterwards, they gathered for at feast. Equally, weddings were celebrated by the entire congregation. A large fish was essential for the wedding meal, surrounded by green herbs, because Jacob's blessing of fertility was referred to fish. Most members of the community were simple people like carpet weavers who handed down their skills from generation to generation. Yet, some wholesale dealers were in important positions. Women, in Spanish manner, used to stay at home, even send their husbands for shopping, and produced colourful embroidery and woven goods. There were family names like da Costa, da Silva, Uziel, Cappon, and Covo. But even before those families arrived in Berlin at the beginning of the 20th century, there were a few Sephardic families in Berlin, probably having come from Hamburg. Among the descendants of these families were Henriette Herz,

daughter of the physician de Lemos, and Jeanette Schwerin whose maiden name was Abarbanell. The service of the congregation followed the ancient Sephardic rite. Head of the school was the haham Avigdor, who still knew a lot of the forefathers' ways. He arrived from Adrianople (Edirne) where he went to the Alliance school before attending the Hochschule für die Wissenschaften des Judentums in Berlin. Among the Sephardic community, ancient Spaniolic, also called Ladino, was spoken, which originated from Spain. Every child of these families learnt this mother tongue. Similar to Yiddish, there were still old forms and pronunciations surviving in their Spaniolic, reflecting the ancient Spanish. Other words had been picked up during the migration, like „Yosay“ for German „Jahreszeit“ (season, time of the year), as Jews don't have a word for this concept.⁶ The writing was similar to the one used in Jüdisch-Deutsch, derived from the old Rashi style, with characteristics of its own kind. But there was only little knowledge of Hebrew among this community, though men did learn it, with a pronunciation different from the common Sephardic one; the Taf was replaced by a sound similar to the English Th, and final Tsadi was spoken just like voiceless S. But women usually didn't learn Hebrew at all. So, the services were held in Ladino. As a special custom of Simhat-Torah, the Hatan Bereshit was lifted upon his chair and flung above the heads until he paid a toll of wine or something else.⁷

A Brief Look at History

Compared to other German cities, Berlin is quite young. It was founded in the course of colonisation towards the east, on the territory of Slavic people who were then living on the ground of an even older tribe, the Semnones. The formation of towns, which were later to become the city of Berlin date back

to the 12th and 13th century. But even before that, Jews and Chasars⁸ frequented the region. A clear distinction between Sephardic and Ashkenasic Jews seems problematic as an Arab source of the 9th century, Abu'l Kasim Obbaidallah Ibn Khordadbeh, reports of a Jewish trade network, covering Spain, France, Slavic territory, Persia, Arabia, India, China, and other countries. Main eastbound trading goods were slaves, brocade, furs, and swords. On their way back to Europe, these Jewish tradesmen brought spices, ivory, perfume, gems, and pearls.⁹

Documents of the early 4th century prove the existence of a Jewish community in Cologne. However concerning eastern Germany, records showing that Jews were living there only date back to the 10th (Magdeburg) and the 13th century (Spandau, Berlin, and Frankfurt/Oder). In the following time, Jews were allowed to settle in Berlin and other towns of the region in order to improve the economy. But when the plague came to Europe in 1348, Jews were blamed,¹⁰ the *Jüdenhof* in Berlin was burned down and the Jews were expelled. Nevertheless, in 1354, Jews returned into the Markgraf's service. Subsequently, there were periods of expulsion and return.¹¹ For one century, until 1671, Berlin was officially „judenrein“; Jews were allowed in only for the purpose of trading. Then the Große Kurfürst Friedrich Wilhelm who had met Jews of both Iberian and Polish provenance in Holland and who had a Jewish purveyor, Israel Aaron, allowed 50 Jewish families who had been expelled from Vienna to settle in Berlin. Aaron took care that these immigrants had to prove sufficient means and that they submitted to an agreement not to interfere with his monopoly; only then they were given a „*Schutzbrief*“ (letter of protection). Just seven of these 50 families settled in Berlin itself; the others went to the surrounding Mark Brandenburg. However, the presence of wealthy Jewish businessmen had a catalyst effect, as they attracted quite a

number of poorer Jews who earned their living as servants of the privileged „*Schutzjuden*“ (protected Jews) or as pedlars. These „*unvergleitete Juden*“ (Jews not accompanied by a letter of protection) were expelled at several instances. The number of „*Schutzjuden*“ increased quickly in Berlin; 70 families are recorded for 1700. After some rivalry about different private synagogues, the first public synagogue was opened in 1714,¹² just before Rosh HaShanah. When King Friedrich Wilhelm I came to visit a Shabbath service in 1718, he donated a curtain for the Torah *aron*, a precious gobelin tapestry of 1590. During his reign, the number of Jewish families in Brandenburg increased to 200; half of them with „*Schutzbrief*“.

The Jewish elite of the years to come predominantly was either of Viennese provenance, or they came from commercial towns like Hamburg, Königsberg, or Copenhagen, which definitely can be connected with Sephardim.¹³ These families were protagonists for assimilation. There was great interest in secular fine arts and in intellectual exchange with Christians. Daniel Itzik, who was the head of Prussian Jewry, had a *Stadtpalais* (city palace) of his own,¹⁴ supported Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, who was the private teacher of his daughter Sara. The most famous of the salons was run by Henriette Herz (daughter of Benjamin de Lemos), who became a Protestant in 1817.

In 1919, there was a pledge both in the *Deutsche Levante-Zeitung* and in a Jewish weekly paper for involving Sephardim in improving international trade.¹⁵ A special exhibition (1937) of Berlin's Jüdisches Museum (organized by Pressen, Ismar Elbogen, Arthur Spanier, and Josef Fried) was dedicated to Don Isaac Abravanel who played an important role during the exodus from Iberia (Simon, 1983). In fact, the award of an Abravanel-Medal to the president of Berlin's Jüdische Gemeinde, Heinrich Stahl, was a political event: In the oration,

Stahl's current task was compared to that one of Abravanel. The exhibition was dedicated to the descendants of „*Don Jizchak*“ such as the medical Senator Eduard Abarbanell (1818-1865), buried in the Berlin cemetery in Alte Schönhauser Allee, and his daughter Jeannette Schwerin, who installed social services and who died in Berlin in 1899 (some living descendants attended the exhibition). – Today, Jewish Berliners with Sephardic ancestry can occasionally be found, but they are not organized. A famous Sephardic family of the recent time is Nachama. The world-famous cantor, Estrongo Nachama from Thessaloniki, who died in 2000, came to Berlin after WW II as a Holocaust survivor, and his son, Andreas, became president of Berlin's Jewish community in 1997.

Sephardim or Ashkenazim?

Only presumptions can be made about the cultural background, Sephardic or Ashkenazic, in most of the cases when Jews came to settle in and around Berlin. Quite surely, the majority of the poorer Jews who arrived from Poland and other east European regions were Ashkenazim. But when families of Sephardic descent came to Berlin after intermediate stations - how long, or how many generations, did they have to be under Ashkenasic influence to be regarded as Ashkenazim? Yet, there are several hints of Sephardim who came to stay arriving at different periods. Who came with “Sepharad I“, i.e. from Hamburg or Holland, with Iberian roots, and who came with “Sepharad II“ i.e. from the former Ottoman Empire?

- Berlin was easily accessible for the “Sepharad I“-Jewry; trade relations between the area that was to become Berlin and Hamburg can be traced back, at least, to the Middle Ages;¹⁶ in the mid-15th century, the Dutch gained trade power to the disadvantage of „*Niederdeutsche*“ merchants.¹⁷

- Several of the Jewish families who arrived in Berlin had Spanish or Portuguese surnames. Benjamin de Lemos, whose family lived in Hamburg, went to Halle where he completed his medical degree in 1746, before becoming the first head of Berlin's Jewish hospital. But these apparently were only single families without tight connections. Names like da Costa or da Silva can still be found in Berlin today.
- Sephardim from Hamburg typically came as single family units. This is still true in the late 19th century for families such as Ricardo, Rocamora, or Sealtiel.
- In 1687, specialists in the manufacturing of fine Spanish wool fabrics came to Berlin from the Netherlands. In 1783, the king had a factory built for them. After a strike in 1795 they were imprisoned in Spandau and it was decided that there should be no more „*Spanische Fabrikation*“ in Berlin. Consequently, this trade was shifted to other towns. There was an unsuccessful attempt by another company to elude the ruling by merging with a Potsdam factory and reintroducing the „*Spanische Weber*“ to Berlin.¹⁸
- The tapestry which the king had donated in 1714 and which was used as a curtain for the Torah *aron* in the synagogue, in 1917, was referred to as the „*Türkenfahne*“, Turk's flag, or the „*Türkenteppich*“, Turk's carpet (cf. Simon, 1983, p. 32), thus giving evidence of the Viennese Jews' Ottoman-Sephardic background.
- In 1750, the Potsdam rabbi was portrayed with a crescent on top of a Turkish-style hat - an indication of Sephardic-II-origin. At the same time, a large number of Turkish Jews came to Vienna from where they continued to maintain strong ties to Turkey¹⁹.

- There were those who arrived from Vienna who had left that city *before* it received a wave of Sephardic immigrants from Turkey. At war, when the Turks approached (there were battles in 1663/64), the Jews took refuge in the city centre, and denied any affiliation with the enemy. Yet, before the great siege (1683), King Leopold ruled that all Jews had to be expelled. When the Vienna Jews had settled down in Frankfurt/Oder, ceremonial disputes with Jewish newcomers from Poland escalated. The rabbi in charge, Simon Berendt from Berlin, had to ask the Große Kurfürst to order the local commander to support the disciplinary measures.²⁰
- The Große Kurfürst Friedrich Wilhelm (reigning from 1640 to 1688), known for his religious tolerance, had immigrants from Holland as well as Huguenots come to the Mark Brandenburg. As he had been impressed by Iberian and Polish Jews in Holland, it might well be that also Sephardim were among the migrants.
- Other hints are only vague - the Kurfürst (Friedrich III, who became King Friedrich of Prussia in 1701) had two Turkish stallions bought by the Saxon „Hofjude“ Moyses Bonaventura (who served as Jewish judge in Prague). Jews were involved in procuring subsidies²¹ from the Spanish Crown in Vienna.²²
- In the 17th and 18th century, many Jews came to Berlin from intermediate places such as Halberstadt. The latter town might have been attractive to Sephardim, as its population had joined the Reformation by 1541.
- Jews were often invited to towns in order to increase the tax receipts. A tribunal councillor suggested colonizing a town with rich Jews from Holland. The king, however, rejected the idea.²³

- The richly decorated 1714 synagogue not only ranked as Europe's most beautiful,²⁴ but it was also compared to the great Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam.²⁵ In 1925, the *Israelitisches Familienblatt Hamburg* wrote highly of this first public synagogue of Berlin.²⁶
- Veitel Ephraim, like his cousin Daniel Itzik, the head of Prussian Jewry, had a fleet of his own, trading via Hamburg with France and Turkey.²⁷ He was involved in political affairs, often in the king's service, transferring bribes to Turkey.²⁸
- Probably, there were more Sephardic immigrants from the Ottoman Empire to the German *Kaiserreich* than just the 500 of the Israelitisch-Sephardischer Verein. The 1917 great fire of Saloniki also caused intensified migration on that route.
- After the fragmentation of the Ottoman Empire, a number of Sephardim went to Paris and the USA. Because of Ottoman-German ties, some might have come to Berlin as well.
- Graduates of the German Gymnasium (classical secondary school) of Constantinople, were motivated to go to the *Kaiserreich* and, very likely, to Berlin.
- Some of Berlin's Sephardim neither came with "Sepharad I" nor with "Sepharad II": e.g. those who arrived in 1912 from Vienna, when the Viennese community was somewhat deteriorating. Their ancestors had come from Italy where they had arrived probably from Iberia under the guidance of Don Isaac Abravanel.²⁹

The Viennese Jews of supposedly Sephardic background lived in certain segregation from the Ashkenazic Jewry of Berlin, and they quickly assimilated to the gentile upper class,

being of similar socio-economic status. The same is true for Sephardic families from Hamburg or the Netherlands. They showed even less cohesion when they did not come directly from a Sephardic community, but through intermediate stations. They had lost much of specifically Sephardic culture. Only the relatively late arrival of Sephardim from the Ottoman Empire, before WW I, yielded a coherent *kehilah* for the remaining years.

Consequently, before the Shoah, Berlin's only congregation which was definitely of Sephardic ritual was the *Israelitisch-Sephardischer Verein*, whereas the other congregations listed as „sephardisch“ - *Tyfereth Israel*,³⁰ *Schomre Hadass*, and *Beth Hamidrasch Schomrei Schabbos* - were synagogues of Nusah Sfarad, a Hassidic ritual which historically was only incited by Sephardism (cf. Benzion, 1927), but which then spread among Ashkenazi Jews.³¹ The reason why the Landesarchiv listed them as „sephardisch“ might have been just a differentiation from the usual Ashkenazic or Hassidic congregations. But in order to avoid confusion, the distinction has to be pointed out.

Why Did the Traces Fade Away?

The problem with Sephardim in Berlin is not a quantitative one - their number was not that small, compared to other European cities where Sephardic life had been. Rather, it is a problem to find some traces. In order to understand this interesting phenomenon, it is worthwhile to have one more glimpse at history.

The exile from Sepharad was caused by the forced choice the Spanish Jews were confronted with in 1492 to either convert to Catholicism or leave, and by a similar ruling of Portugal, to where many had fled, only five years later. Not all Iberian Jews were able to emigrate immediately. Those who

could leave at all were those who had the means to do so. Often, there was a latency of years or even decades before all things were arranged to settle down in another place. Those who eventually arrived in Amsterdam or Hamburg represented a social group that was entirely different from local Ashkenasic Jewry.

The Sephardic newcomers were an elite, both in economical and in educational terms. They were embedded in a world-wide trade network, both in the Old and the New World.³² Often, they had studied in Spain or Portugal before they left. They were familiar with Christian theology (officially, they had been Catholics for a number of years), and they knew Latin, among other languages. When they arrived, they turned back from Crypto-Judaism to overt Judaism (and, as we know from the Inquisition files, some Iberians who had come together with them, became Crypto-Christians by officially joining the Sephardic community³³). With these preconditions, integration was easy, as there was an immediate intellectual exchange with the Protestant elite of the new context. Interestingly, in the time to follow, there was a renaissance of Hebrew language.

There was an extreme difference from the Ashkenasim, the majority of who were poor, who lacked secular education, who were not even allowed to stay in Hamburg (except as servants of the Sephardim). Sephardic families avoided intermarriage with Ashkenasim. Obviously, this situation led to religious tensions. The Sephardim were very liberal. For example, they did not prohibit certain images, as we can still see at the skillfully decorated Sephardic tombstones. They were not interested in submission to rigid ritual laws after the experience of having been free from it for all those previous years (or even generations) on the one hand. On the other hand, They had left behind the Catholic Inquisition with its spies as to

the kinds of food the families were buying, in order to hunt down Crypto-Jews. They were striving for a (re-)construction of a Jewish identity. Rabbis were asked to come,³⁴ who, however, were shocked about the religious moral. The most frequently disciplinary measure documented of this time (i.e. the early German Sephardim) was the *Herem* ban.³⁵

These historical and psychological preconditions are important to know so as to understand what happened to German Sephardim in the further course of history. Financial repressions of 1697 caused many Sephardim to leave Hamburg. In new places like Berlin, they often filled upper-class positions, either in business, administration, or science. These families were more often interested in their trade than in Jewish life or in internal Sephardic cohesion. Apparently, different views of *halacha* led to tensions in Berlin, as well. For example, also in 1697, a certain Levi Wulff wanted to be musician in the synagogue, but he was kept from doing so by the congregation.³⁶

Quarrels among the Berlin Jews often escalated, so that the King had to intervene;

“the descendants of the Viennese refugees and the rest of the community were sharply divided and could not even agree on the appointment of a rabbi. The building of the community synagogue was delayed for years by a division of the community, which resulted in the creation of two and later four private synagogues. Each of the main court Jews of the period, Jost Liebmann and Markus Magnus, had his own party.” (Lowenstein, 1994, p. 16)

A crucial factor for the “Ashkenization“ of Sephardim in Berlin - a melting pot, anyway - was the employment of Polish schoolmasters for the Jewish education of the youth, as well as books for women written in Jüdisch-Deutsch.³⁷

After the arrival of the Viennese families, the right to settle in Berlin and the Mark Brandenburg was restricted to „*Schutzbrief*“ holders. Only with permission were Jews allowed to have ”officially protected“ children. Unprotected offsprings were exposed to the edicts of expelling „*unvergleitete Juden*“. It is possible that families with sufficient means arranged to raise their ”non-permit“ children in gentile families, which obviously led to a cultural alienation and at the same time left the number of official Jews restricted.

In the history of Sephardic life, little reservations regarding contacts with Non-Jews can be found. The physician Benjamin de Lemos, for example, welcomed the King’s sister, Prinzessin Amalia, in his *sukkah*. Strong impulses for religious liberalization and the Reform movement came from Jews of Sephardic background. In 1818, a Reform Temple was established in Hamburg, the same thing happened in Berlin in 1854, as well as in other places. Religious approaches even led to the „*Unparteiische Universal-Kirchenzeitung für die Geistlichkeit und die gebildete Weltklasse des protestantischen, katholischen und israelitischen Deutschlands*“ (edited in Frankfurt/Main, 1837), a newspaper for Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergy.

The connections of Sephardic cultural background, Berlin’s Jewish elite, their multiple interconnectedness by marriage, and their role in the *haskala* cannot be denied. Beardlessness and gentile dress appeared among the men of Berlin’s Jewish elite already in the 17th century. Authors like Lazarus Bendavid urged for emancipation and the reform of Judaism. Contemporary documents reflect a closeness to Christianity in 18th/19th century Berlin, manifest either in conversion (and maintaining relations to the non-converted) or the wish to join Christianity without leaving Judaism (like David Friedländer) and, for example, in the celebration of Christmas even in non-

converted families.³⁸ The wave of conversions cannot be explained merely in terms of opportunism and social factors, but rather by extending emancipation to religious autonomy, as documented by faith-reflecting statements and personal engagement of the converts (Lowenstein, 1994). Even after the rise of neo-orthodoxy, this trend continued. In the early 20th century, the Berlin *Gemeindeblatt* ceased to publish the converts' names; these lists were almost like a Who is Who of the prominent. Many of them were upper-class, both socially and intellectually, well-known Jews, and naming them might have had an incentive effect.

From these constellations, we can now filter out answers as to why Sephardic traces have been lost:

- It is evident that the association of Sephardim with assimilation and a number of “un-Jewish“ traits is quite at odds to common positions in Judaism.
- Assimilation also took place in the form of adaptation to Ashkenasic Jewry, which put an end to Sephardi culture.
- Wherever assimilation led to conversion, the traces, for obvious reasons, came to an end.

Angel Pulido Fernandez (1905) gives us an impression of the situation at the beginning of the 20th century. He quotes from a letter by Fina Haim³⁹ and Licco Covo, dated 6 July 1904, in which the following “Spanish Israelites” of Berlin are mentioned: *Isidoro Covo and L. Haim, merchands of oriental rugs; Victor Albahary, a commissary; Elías Benyaisch, Mosco Calmi, Ernest N. Covo and N. Romano, businessmen; Licco Covo, Bension Benvenisto, A. Rosano, Nissim Cohen, Eskenazy and Heinrich Levy, E. Y. Uziel and Israel. Kamerman, comissary; Navon, a student of German and a teacher of Spanish; Dr. Samuel, a teacher of French; Dr. Benaroyo, a*

physician; Dario Errera, mechanical engineer; Cappon, an employee, etc., and three or four more.

According to Covo (as quoted by Pulido, 1905), *the German Sephardim in general did not occupy positions in the government; they did not publish periodicals in Judeo-Spanish, and they did not have Spanish schools. Yet, there were those who understood Spanish, like the teacher Pedro de Múgica who taught Spanish at a respected grammar school of Berlin which was headed by his wife Celes Seydel. Those who still knew their native language, Jodeo-Spanish, conserved it, and accepted with pleasure relationships with their Spanish homeland. They did not suffer from special laws or persecution. They did not have their own community bur were incorporated within those of the Germans.*

In 1905, one year after the letter was written, the *Israelitisch-Sephardischer Verein* of Berlin was founded, as mentioned above. Just before WW II, there were efforts to invigorate Sephardi culture. In Vienna, the *Union universelle des communautés sépharades* was founded; holding its first congress in London in 1935, followed by a second congress in Amsterdam in 1938. Joseph Shealtiel pledged solidarity among the Sephardim of Berlin, Hamburg, and Vienna. His speech was published in the Portuguese journal *HaLapid*.⁴⁰ There was even the idea of a joint emigration from these three Central European cities (there might be a connection with the reference to Abravanel during the 1937 exhibition; see above). But what happened to the Sephardim of Berlin in the Holocaust? Did anyone protect them?

Quite surely, the Nazis made no distinction between German Jews of Sephardic and Ashkenazic background. But most probably, the members of the *Israelitisch-Sephardischer Verein* were holders of Turkish passports, which might have protected them from immediate threat, so that there was hope that they

had enough time to leave. There is reason for this hope as the Sephardic tradesmen of Hamburg who held foreign passports emigrated in 1933, mostly to England, Holland, and Belgium. The remainder of the Hamburg Jewry was deported to Theresienstadt, whereas converts survived. Although the article in the *Gemeindeblatt* reports of the Sephardic congregation existing in 1935, some may have managed to escape. Possibly they fled to London, and it would make sense to search for traces of Berlin's Sephardim over there.

Outlook

The Sephardim who left Iberia after the prosecutions of the late 15th century not only had sufficient financial means to move, but they were well educated. Thus they were an intellectual enrichment for the new places where they settled down. When they were forced to leave again, the same factors were applicable when they came to places like Berlin. We can assume that among those who managed to escape from the Nazi terror there were quite a number of descendants from Sephardim - especially with regard to the Jewish scientists from Berlin who continued their career in Britain, America, and other places.

This reminds us of the biblical words, that we find a blessing within a curse; and Sephardim who were blessed to survive became a blessing for other nations.

Still, many questions about Berlin's Sephardim are left unanswered. It would be worthwhile to dedicate a research project to this issue. It would take a lot of work to find out more details - going through an enormous amount of files like those of the *Geheimes Preußisches Staatsarchiv*; those taken to Moscow; investigating the cemeteries; examining literature; looking for Sephardic names (although many names have been

changed, either by translation, by marriage, or in order to assimilate); searching in places such as the Portuguese Synagogue of London for arrivals from Berlin; looking for clubs of former Berliners in countries of probable destination, etc. But it would be more than interesting.

In addition to correspondence, information for this article was gathered from the following sources. Special thanks to Michael Halévy for providing valuable assistance.

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NOTES

- ¹ Sinasohn (1971) names „Kurz und Reichsfeld“ as heads, but the above information by the Landesarchiv Berlin seems more reliable.
- ² Birnbaum is the German translation of Perreira, Schönberg the translation of Belmonte, etc.
- ³ cf. Sinasohn, 1971; Galliner et al., 1987
- ⁴ It might be notable that also of the Verein Synagoge Tyfereth Israel was Rabbi Jair Peterseil, born 1869 in Wisnice, who was a follower of the Berser Rebbe, and held office (as Rabbi and Dayan) in Marmarosch Soged, Hungary, before coming to Berlin in 1908. The Nazis made the house where he lived in Grenadierstraße 4 a, a „Judenhaus“: Jews moved there when their former houses had been made „arisch“ (Sinasohn, 1971, as well as others - presumably quoting him - writes „Grenadierstr. 49“, but the official 1932 address book says 4 a). Rabbi Peterseil moved to Israel in 1934 where he died four years later. In Tel Aviv, he was head of a *minyán* in 36, Rechov Yam, and was busily corresponding with Grand Rabbi Kook and Rabbi Schor of Jerusalem.

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- ⁵ The founding of Beth Hamidrash in 1743 by Veitel Ephraim and Daniel Itzig is somewhat contradictory to Lowenstein (1994) who writes that both were “opponents”, “despite the family relations between them”, before the death of Hertz Moses Gumpertz, another dynasty member, in 1758.
- ⁶ Contrary to this explanation given by Bath Hillel, it seems more likely that “Yosay” refers to Yiddish “Yortsayt” (anniversary).
- ⁷ cf. Gemeindeblatt der Jüdischen Gemeinde zu Berlin, 7-7-1935, p. 2
- ⁸ cf. Wolbe (1937)
- ⁹ cf. Gidal (1988)
- ¹⁰ The ritual hygiene was a protection against infection.
- ¹¹ The situation was, to some extent, comparable to Poland, with antisemitism on the one hand and, in the 17th century, an invitation of the Polish king on the other hand. Jews from Amsterdam and Hamburg came to Danzig and Posen.
- ¹² The building perished in the WW-II-bombings.
- ¹³ cf. Hirschler (1995); it is obvious that Hamburg or Amsterdam based Sephardic merchants must have played a role in these protestant trade cities
- ¹⁴ In his *Palais*, Itzik had a private synagogue, as well as a private gallery with paintings of Rubens and other masters. His cousin, Veitel Ephraim, also had a famous *Stadtpalais*.
- ¹⁵ Klötzel (1919); there are some racist sounds in this article
- ¹⁶ Rachel et al., 1934/1967
- ¹⁷ Rachel, 1931
- ¹⁸ Rachel (1931), according to whom the original factory was quite international with Roussel as head, journeymen „aus dem Jülichsch“ and workers from the French colony
- ¹⁹ cf. Hirschler (1995)
- ²⁰ Wolbe (1937)
- ²¹ When Vienna was threatened by the Turks, 8,000 Brandenburg troops were sent there. As repulsion of the Turks was in the interest of most European countries, the Spanish subsidies made sense in that context.

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- ²² Wolbe (1937)
- ²³ Wolbe (1937)
- ²⁴ Geiger (1871)
- ²⁵ Wolbe (1937)
- ²⁶ quoted in Galliner et al. (1987)
- ²⁷ Wolbe (1937)
- ²⁸ Gidal (1988)
- ²⁹ Descendants of these “Italian-Viennese” Sephardim still live in Berlin today.
- ³⁰ In the case of the Betstube Tyfereth Jisroel, one might assume only a so-called Nusah Sfard, in opposition to the „Jecke“ *minhag*, but there might as well have been a Bulgarian, Romanian, or Yugoslavian background. This might account its association with Hassidism.
- ³¹ Benzion (1927), pointing out that Sephardim had a “Hassidism” of their own, apparently refers to Nusah Sfard. In the Galilee, there were Rabbi Ha-Ari and his *talmid* Maarchu with the kabbalistic influence on the Spanish refugees. This movement had a large congregation in Jerusalem, led by Schaarabi; the building was destroyed by the earthquake of July 1927.
- ³² Unfortunately, slave trade was in their hands.
- ³³ This is substantiated by members of the Hamburg Sephardic community who settled in places like Venice where they re-converted (they had to present evidence of their former Catholicism).
- ³⁴ Jehuda Jacob Leon Templo might have been the first one in 1627 - cf. Herzig (1994).
- ³⁵ Even the expression “rabbinic inquisition” was applied to this period. However the ban was usually not a big problem for the banned, as they went to the colonies, occasionally returning with rich cargo.
- ³⁶ Wolbe (1937)
- ³⁷ Wolbe (1937); cf. Stern (1934)
- ³⁸ This is common in today’s Berlin as well.
- ³⁹ About Fina Haim, Pulido (1905, p. 295) writes: *Her parents own the best store for rugs and tapestries, which exists in Berlin. She has three other*

sisters, no less enchanting than Fina. They are called Maria, Clara and Rosa. Cf. Pulido, 1905, pp 294f, for the following passages.

⁴⁰ The 1st edition was in 1938

⁴¹ 1st impression was edited in 1934

