

A CHANGE OF SCENE, A CHANGE OF FORTUNE: CINEMATIC VISIONS OF THE SEPHARDIC JEW

*"Aboltar cazal, aboltar mazal"*¹

by

Linda C. Ehrlich

Linda C. Ehrlich, associate professor at Case Western Reserve University, has published articles and reviews about cinema in *East-West Film Journal*, *Journal of Film and Video*, *Post Script*, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, *Cine-maya*, *Japan Forum Cinema Journal*, and *Film Quarterly*, among others. She has co-edited *Cinematic Landscapes*, an anthology of articles on the interface between the visual arts and the cinemas of China and Japan (University of Texas Press, 1994). In addition to her publications on Asian cinema, she has written on the films of Spanish directors Victor Erice and Carlos Saura.

The term "Jewish film" has tended to be associated with Yiddish films or with contemporary productions from the state of Israel. Only recently have special film exhibitions revealed another kind of Jewish film—feature films and documentaries about the Sephardic Jew.² What better way to explore this rich historical and cultural tradition than through the subtlety

¹A Ladino saying which can be translated as "A change of scene, a change of fortune" (from Moshe Lazar, *The Sephardic Tradition: Ladino and Spanish-Jewish Literature* [New York: Norton, 1972], p. 145).

²Note, for example, the exhibition by The Film Society of Lincoln Center entitled "The Other Jews: Sephardim in the Cinema" (December 1992), and "Cultural Identities in Transition: A Sephardic Film Festival" (April 1995), both co-sponsored by the Sephardic House and the Yeshiva University Museum. The National Center for Jewish Film has also organized a travelling film series entitled "A Modern Lens on Sephardic Jewry."

and intensity of the cinema? As anthropologist Harvey E. Goldberg notes: "Today, Sephardi Jewry constitutes less than 20 percent of world Jewry, but the importance of Sephardi communities within the modern Jewish world outweighs their numerical value."³

The story of the Sephardic Jew is one of dramatic ascents to positions of political and economic strength, often followed by crises. This large group of Jews, expelled from Spain in the fifteenth century, subsequently made their homes throughout the Mediterranean region, farther north to Holland and England, and even over to the New World.⁴ Once the ascendent force in world Jewry, their influence lessened by the mid-seventeenth century. During World War II, whole communities were wiped out by the Nazis. Israel's subsequent rise to power led to a rise in anti-Semitism among the non-Jewish populations in various lands where the Sephardim had established communities.

The story of the Sephardic Jew reveals a strong inner core of continued, if often hidden, tradition. The act of hiding has at once diffused and intensified their sense of identity. Known for their deep religiosity and yet flexibility in the face of surrounding cultures, the Sephardim have preserved a powerful sense of communal memory. These exiles carried with them a distinctive language and set of religious traditions which carried over to the details of their daily life and their music.

How can a filmmaker depict such a world in which the past colors so many present encounters? Many of the documentary films on this topic focus on a Sephardic woman as the unique carrier of tradition, and as a unique spokesperson for a rich past. Another common element is that many of the films open with a montage of still photos, as haunting faces gaze down at us from the wall. We are privileged by a view of the private life of families, with the world of memory repeatedly coming to the fore. As film critic J. Hoberman has pointed out: ". . . nostalgia for a vanished world is in itself a Jewish trait. Modern Jewish history is full of lost, sacred sites."⁵ The documentary films present attempts to preserve, or revive, or merely recall lives and traditions in transition.

³*Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries: History and Culture in the Modern Era*, ed. Harvey E. Goldberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 2.

⁴The word "Sepharad" is mentioned in Obadiah 1:20, and is connected with the Latin name for Spain, Hispania.

⁵J. Hoberman, "Diaspora: Artists Invent a New Jewish Tradition," *Village Voice* (April 18, 1995), p. 29.

This article will explore a select group of films which (except for the film on Cochin) are available in video format from U.S. distributors. The various cinematic styles reflect the vision and background of the individual directors rather than any unified aesthetic style. The films to be discussed here present a diverse group of histories and personal portraits representing Sephardic Jewish life in eight geographical centers. They do not represent a total list, nor do they include the growing body of feature films on this subject. These feature films range from the carnivalesque, often heavily theatrical, popular films (the so-called "bourekas") to the more serious treatments of Sephardic life such as Moshe Mizrahi's *I Love You Rosa* (1972), set in the Jerusalem of the late 1880s, *Braids* (1991), directed and scripted by Israeli director Yitzhak Halutzi, about several years in the life of a young Zionist in Baghdad, and *Pillar of Salt* (1980), a film by Israeli director Haim Shiran, based on the autobiographical novel of Tunisian sociologist Albert Memmi.⁶

Most of the non-feature films discussed below adhere to the pattern that film scholar Bill Nichols has called the "expository documentary," a form which offers a narration apparently based on careful research and discussion.⁷ It is easy as audience members to be "seduced" by the sense of authority in such a narrative. A few of the films employ the "interactive" mode, as Nichols calls the third possibility for documentary narratives. This form of documentary frequently uses the interview as a means of offering the effect of greater immediacy. Nichols writes: "The [interactive] mode introduces a sense of partialness, of *situated* presence and *local* knowledge that derives from the actual encounter of filmmaker and other."⁸ Whichever mode is used, the result is the opening of a window onto a world of memory and lived experience.

⁶For further reading on the feature films, note Ella Shohat's "The 'Bourekas' and Sephardi Representation," in her *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), pp. 115-178. Shohat points to the "parodic and self-parodic reflexive quality" of many of these "bourekas" (p. 127).

⁷Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 32-75.

⁸*Representing Reality*, p. 44. As Nichols reminds in a subsequent book, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (1994): "Once selection and arrangement occur in less carefully regulated ways, all the issues of truth, objectivity, authenticity, power, knowledge, and control that make the interpretive arena so vital and contentious arise" (p. xi).

Films

Spain

1492 marked the beginning of voyages of discovery, and voyages of exile, from Spain. The tragic expulsion of Spanish Jewry followed a relative Golden Age of Jewish culture on the Iberian Peninsula between the eighth and fourteenth centuries. The privilege of self-government offered by the Islamic rulers of Spain to the Jews also helped ensure group cohesion. This was a culture that produced great thinkers in the fields of philosophy, poetry, mysticism, and medicine. During this period, Spanish and Portuguese Jews were active in such trades as leatherwork, tanning, jewelry-making, but especially as merchants in a growing import-export business.

As the political times worsened, however, pogroms and the Inquisition eventually offered three "choices": death, expulsion, or conversion to Catholicism for "conversos" (many of whom secretly remained Jews). Following the issuing of the Edict of Expulsion on March 31, 1492, as many as 100,000 Jews began a dispersal of Sephardic culture across Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and the Atlantic Ocean. This Edict was officially still valid in Spain as late as 1968.

Several filmmakers have returned to Spain to seek traces of this Golden Age Jewish culture. This "rediscovery" of the Sephardim by Spain is actually a process that began in the mid-nineteenth century (if not earlier) with Spain's African campaign in which Spaniards met with Jewish communities in Morocco.

Girona: The Jews of Catalonia (Pat Snyder, U.S., 1988) opens with an historical overview of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. We are shown what little now remains of a prosperous Jewish community in the northeast corner of Spain, between the Mediterranean and the Pyrenees: a tombstone, an empty slot where a mezuzah had once been placed, a hole in the ground that used to be a *mikvah* (ritual bathing place). This city was one of the few given the title "Mother of Israel" because it was considered a resting place for the wandering Jew. A pan across letters, and a close-up of a hand writing a careful Hebrew script, stresses for the viewer the power of letters in the Kabbalah, in this city which was the center of the Kabbalist Rabbi Isaac the Blind.

Staccato presentations of doorways are interspersed with details from paintings and drawings to help us catch a glimpse of what Jewish life might have been like in this part of Catalonia relatively untouched by Moorish influence. The Jews of Girona, who worked in a variety of jobs

from carpenters to physicians (but especially as moneylenders, a job prohibited to Catholics by the Church), enjoyed the protection of the monarch. On the other hand, as accusations that the Jews had caused the Black Plague raged, violent attacks began, especially during Christian holidays. As the film moves into the period of pogrom and expulsion, the montage of images of the narrow streets and walls of the former Jewish section of Girona becomes more and more insistent, drawing the viewer into a claustrophobic universe.

The second part of the film is a present-day return to Catalonia, to the synagogue in Barcelona established in 1954—the first synagogue constructed in Spain since the expulsion. Interviews with elderly Jews reveal that they were met both with suspicion and with curiosity as they began to live openly as Jews in Spain. During the Spanish Civil War, they decided to meet in private apartments but now they maintain open services.

The offscreen narrator informs us that in the fifteenth century, the Jews of Girona who did not convert were given three months to leave Spain, and that now no Jews live in Girona. Nevertheless, the historical restoration of the Jewish neighborhood of Girona has begun, as has the revival of Sephardic songs written in Catalan but with Hebrew letters.

The 1929 silent film *Jews of the Spanish Homeland*, by Spanish director Ernesto Giménez Caballero, presents a fascinating, idiosyncratic, collection of images, marking the traces of Jewish life left in Spain. These traces include archaeological remains such as cemeteries and signs on buildings, as well as the words of prominent scholars, politicians, and merchants, among others. Particularly notable are brief glimpses of individuals who have been instrumental in the preservation of Sephardic culture, including the scholar of the *romancero*, Ramon Menendez Pidal, and the politician Dr. Angel Pulido Fernandez who coined the phrase “Spaniards without a homeland” to describe the Sephardim.⁹

The intertitles in Spanish, with English translation provided on an accompanying sheet, help identify the locations in Spain and overseas. Carefully juxtaposed images of street scenes in Spanish cities like Toledo, Cordoba, Seville, and Barcelona, are followed by pictures of synagogues and other Jewish institutions of the Jewish dispersion in Rumania, former Yugoslavia, Salonika, Sofia, Greece, and Istanbul.

⁹Dr. Pulido's writings on this subject include *Los Israelitas Españoles y el Idioma Castellano* (Spanish Israelites and the Spanish Language, 1904) and *Españoles sin Patria y La Raza Sefardí* (Spaniards without a country and the Sephardic race, 1905).

The *Catalogo del Romancero Judio-Español* by Menendez Pidal was published in 1927.

The six-hour *Voices from Sepharad* series, a Spanish-Israeli-French co-production, travels from Spain to such locations as Caracas, Curacao, London, Paris, Belgrade, Jerusalem, Turkey, and New York to present a multitude of approaches for the appreciation of Sephardic culture through song, poetic recitation, travelogue, and occasional documentary footage. With its emphasis on smoothness of presentation, there is some regrettable sacrifice of a sense of authenticity. This is compensated for, to a certain extent, by the positioning of musicians in front of sites which hold historical significance for Sephardic culture. The interspersing of scholarly explanation helps identify some of these sites and melodies, but too often the viewer is left wondering.

In some of the sequences, the Sephardic melodies are performed on historical instruments; at other times, the songs are “jazzed up” in the style of the Broadway musical. This mixture, while helping to provide variety, can also be jarring. Most effective are scenes like those of the seven-year-old daughter of a Belgrade rabbi singing a traditional melody, or the glimpse of the oldest synagogue in the Americas, in Curacao.

This production is subdivided into seven chapters (52 minutes apiece) about such topics as: The Sephardim and Spain, Spain and the Jews, The Great Dispersion—Spanish Jews in the Mediterranean, Folklore of the Sephardim, “To Europe, to America!,” The Dispersion of Spanish Jews in the Twentieth Century, and The Sephardim Today. These productions stress the paradox that the Sephardim preserved the language of those who had treated them so cruelly. Featured in different segments of this series are such diverse figures as King Carlos of Spain, soprano Victoria de los Angeles, and the Kibbutz Dance Company of Israel.

Along with the presentations of secular and sacred music are lengthier discussions of such topics of concern to Sephardic Judaism as: the Kabbalah, Jewish life in Fez, and the life of Maimonides. This series is available in Spanish with English voiceover or subtitles.

Portugal

The Last Marranos (Frederic Brenner and Stan Neuman, France, 1990), one of the most painful of the documentaries to watch, offers a record of a small group of surviving “Marranos” (Crypto-Jews) who proclaimed Catholicism but secretly practised Judaism.¹⁰ In the fifteenth century, over 200,000 Jews underwent forced conversion in Portugal, and

¹⁰This 65-minute color film is in Portuguese with English subtitles. It is generally believed that the word “Marrano” means “swine.”



The Last Marranos. France, 1990. 65 minutes, color. Portuguese with English subtitles. Based on an idea and research by Frederic Brenner and Stan Neumann. Distributed by: National Center for Jewish Film.

Jews were officially expelled from Portugal in 1497. This series of interviews, in Portuguese with English subtitles, reveals a hidden form of existence in which even the private practice of Jewish traditions could threaten one's life.

Through his visit to a Marrano community in Belmonte, Portugal, the narrator offers us a rare insight into a very personal form of Judaism, long divorced from mainstream traditions. While attending church on Sundays (and having to call on a priest at time of death), the Marranos also bake matzoh, light candles on Shabbos (often inside a cupboard, for secrecy), and recite flowing prayers in Portuguese (with the Hebrew word for God inserted), covering their eyes, in a double form of secrecy, in the privacy of their homes with shutters drawn.

Women play a key role in the preservation and recitation of this oral transmission of traditional prayers which has taken place over five centuries. In this community without rabbis, synagogue, or Hebrew school, the older women become the reference sources about tradition. During scenes of baking bread or cooking in large ovens, the women tell what they had known of the Inquisition and of Jewish history, often disregarding chronological coherence. Often christened and married in a church, these "conversos" would recite a prayer when entering: "I worship neither wood nor stone." They report that the graves in the Jewish cemetery are marked with crosses "so our parents can be left in peace and not be hurt by the Christians."

A Christian man in the village reports that there are now "more Jews dead than living" in Portugal. In general, the Portuguese villagers interviewed (from laborers to clerics) show a marked degree of ignorance and superstition about Jews. With only about 100 Jews remaining in Belmonte, there is little chance for interaction. One Jewish woman recalled how she had suffered as a child from the taunts people would throw at her. In one scene of preparing the dough for matzohs, this woman and her family, clad in white, jump at hearing a knock at the door. On the other hand, this same woman was not eager to join the one-room synagogue being set up by the bolder younger generation inspired by the more open form of Judaism seen in Lisbon. For her, being Jewish is to maintain the prayers taught by her parents, in secrecy.

Salonika

The short (11-minute) documentary *Communities in Exile: Salonika* (Beth Hatefutsoth, The Museum of the Diaspora, Israel, 1985) explores the lives of Jews in the important diaspora city of Salonika between 1890 and World

War II. It opens with a studied contemplation of an old family photograph, accompanied by the filmmaker's statement that "This might have been my family." This peaceful introduction to the world of the Salonikan Jew takes on added significance when we are shown abruptly at the end of the film how members of this uniquely stable community of 80,000 people were marched off to the Nazi gas chambers, a terrible echo of the leisurely Sabbath promenade along the beach seen earlier in the film.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Jewish population in Salonika swelled, and Jews developed leading roles in the tobacco industry and in the workings of the port. In fact, this city became known as "the Balkan Jerusalem" and the port shut down on the Jewish, not the Christian, sabbath. At one point there were 36 congregations in the city based on country of origin, but these coalesced after World War II. During World War I, Salonika became part of Greece, losing the relative protection afforded by Ottoman rule.

As in so many of the other countries where Sephardic Jews settled, this was a world where the old and new mixed. In one telling dissolve, the face of an elderly rabbi becomes that of a small child. Jews of Salonika assumed professions ranging from stevedores and woodcutters to men of letters and doctors. Guilds and trade unions flourished. Perhaps most importantly, Jews became merchants with international connections, developing skills as translators and intermediaries.

The film ends with photographs of faces full of hope, but the voice-over narration reminds that the march to Auschwitz took place on the holy Sabbath. In contrast to the films that offer in-person interviews that could distance the viewer from a sense of involvement, this reliance on photographs and other archival images draws us into the picture. As the narrator reminds: "I might have been born in Salonika, a Jew."

Turkey

Bonnie Burt's *Trees Cry for Rain* (U.S., 1989) is a testimony to the memories of another Sephardic woman, Rachel Amado Bortnick, who was born in Izmir in 1938.¹¹ In a series of sequences, edited in a staccato manner, we hear of the life of a young woman who grew up speaking

¹¹The name Rachel is pronounced with a soft "sh" sound, rather than the harder "ch" sound of English.

Judeo-Spanish (Ladino, also known as Judezmo).¹² As we focus on the face of this still-lovely woman, a remote world of a recognizable order opens before us—a world where small occurrences, like the approach of a comical eggman (“clucking like a chicken”) or the Jewish wineman, whose wine sometimes turned to vinegar, still brings back smiles of delight. The face of the child appears in the woman’s face. In contrast, near the end of the film, Rachel notes that the refrain of the Sephardic song that most touches her—as a middle-aged woman now married and living in St. Louis, Missouri—is: “I will die in a strange land.”

The long-takes that director Burt employs allow us to reconstruct Rachel’s story as she herself narrates it. This is a singularly effective documentary technique. As anthropologist Leslie Devereaux notes about this technique:

When documentary film refrains from forcing the viewer’s gaze, and attention, to follow it through fast cutting and short takes, the viewer can look at leisure at the image. . . . [W]ith a relatively still camera, the distance and angle of viewing held constant, the viewer can find her own position not wholly dominated by the camera, and she can choose to change that position and take up another.¹³

Rachel recalls that women’s lives were generally limited to the home in Sephardic communities in Turkey, but that there were frequent visitors, greeted by a tray with two kinds of sweets. Turning the coffee cups upside down on the saucer to “read” the grounds and perhaps predict the future . . . developing songs to sing communally . . . airing out one’s best clothes . . . these were all part of the tradition of such visitations. Rachel also recounted her memories of cooking sweets to take to the Turkish bath, as part of the preparation for the Sabbath.

Like many of the other documentaries, Rachel’s narration is interspersed with photographs: those of a young girl attending a Jewish school, and then later a Turkish public school; a young woman ready to embark on studies in the U.S.; a mother of grown children who will never be able to fulfill her dream that they should visit the Sephardic community in Turkey as she knew it. (Such communities are now greatly altered, and Turkish, not Ladino, has become the common language.)

¹²This language contains loan words from languages such as Hebrew and Turkish, as well as some archaic forms of Spanish.

¹³Leslie Devereaux, “Experience, Re-presentation, and Film,” in Devereaux and Roger Hillman, ed., *Fields of Vision: Essays in Film Studies, Visual Anthropology, and Photography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 72–73.

Along with the photographs, the director intersperses maps, engravings, oil paintings, and Turkish miniatures to fill in the historical background about a nation where the observant ruler realized that Spain's folly could be Turkey's gain. After the expulsions from Spain and Portugal, Sultan Bayezid II (1481–1512) invited those in exile to settle in his realm. He was attracted by the economic and intellectual potential of the Jewish immigrants, as well as by the hope that they would prove more loyal to him than the large Christian minority in Turkey. Later the community grew to include Jews from Italy, the Maghreb (North Africa), and an Ashkenazi minority.

Jews and Christians living in the Ottoman Empire were considered *ahl al-dhimma*, a special status reserved for non-Islamic religions that allowed for considerable protection but also for high taxation and some restrictions. Separate residential areas were not required by the Ottomans, but such communities tended to be chosen by Jews themselves.¹⁴ As the power of the central government began to fail during the seventeenth century, however, life for the Jews became more difficult.

The transition to life outside of Turkey was not always easy for these relatively protected Jews. Rachel recalls how her very Jewishness was questioned by Ashkenazi acquaintances when she first moved to the American Midwest. As Rachel points out, she didn't know about *latkes* or *dreidels*, nor did she know Yiddish, but rather she enjoyed customs which seemed foreign to the Jews she met in St. Louis. She traces her roots, not to Eastern European villages or cities, but back to Granada, Spain. Another difference that arise in an "intermarriage" (between Sephardim and Ashkenazi) is in the naming of the babies, where the Ashkenazim only name the children for the dead while Sephardim try to carry on the name of living elders.

¹⁴Note the following description of life in Turkey during this "Golden Age": "Jewish, Christian, and Muslim men constantly met at the workplace and in the markets; they spent hours together, working and drinking coffee in the coffehouses. The women, however, almost always remained at home, and the few who ran stalls in the market had little contact with the surrounding society. The men developed personal and cultural ties thanks to mixed guilds, businesses requiring close cooperation, and the interaction between buyers and sellers. Many Jews spoke Turkish, Greek, or Arabic, and words from these languages began to infiltrate Judeo-Spanish, the Sephardi's first language. The surrounding culture also influenced popular music and dance. Thus, despite their closed religious and family life, there was an openness to the day-to-day contact between the various communities." Jacob Barnai, "On the History of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire," *Sephardic Jews in the Ottoman Empire: Aspects of Material Culture*, ed. Esther Juhasz (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1990), p. 32.

With a friend, Esther Levy (born in Egypt but with parents from Izmir), she prepares *bourekas* (a traditional pastry) and listens to Esther sing a haunting, and surprisingly erotic, song about a sailor-lover. It is precisely in these songs that Rachel sees the possibility of survival of the Ladino language. Bonnie Burt writes in the small brochure that accompanies the film: "Due to the Holocaust, nationalism, and assimilation, Bortnick's generation is probably the last to speak Ladino."¹⁵

Cuba

In addition to her focus on one woman's testimony of life in Sephardic Turkey, Burt has directed two documentaries on Jewish life in Cuba. Although not totally on Sephardic communities, the two films (*The Believers: Stories from Jewish Havana* [15 min.] and *Abrabam and Eugenia: Stories from Jewish Cuba* [32 minutes]) offer glimpses into the rebirth of interest in Judaism in religious communities that had become virtually dormant in the days of the ascendancy of communism on this island-nation. Since 1991 it has become acceptable to be both a Party member and a member of a religious group. A series of interviews with a handful of Cuban Jews are interwoven with tales of economic hardship affecting all Cubans, resulting in a shortage of food, medicine, school supplies, and even gas for buses to take children to school.

Since the revolution in 1959, more than 90 percent of Cuba's Jews emigrated, leaving now only approximately 1,500 Jews. Misconceptions about the Jews are apparent in statements like that of one of the grave-diggers for the Jewish cemetery (established in the early 1900s): "The Jews bury people standing up." In contrast, one senses a higher level of understanding in the non-Jewish gravekeeper, now retired, who continues to volunteer his services.

Burt has a particular skill in showing women's faces and in encouraging them to talk. Her interview with Eugenia, the mother of two teenaged girls who grew up in an observant Jewish household in the city of Santiago in the interior of Cuba, offers insights into the waves of changes in the life of the Cuban Jew. Eugenia reports that there were many Sephardic Jews from Turkey and Greece who settled there and who spoke Ladino when they arrived (followed by Jews from Poland and Russia after World War II). The memories of her father's teachings helped her maintain her faith

¹⁵This brochure provides brief background information, a timeline about the history of the Sephardim, a list of possible goals and objectives in showing the film, discussion topics, suggested activities and projects, key words and concepts, and a list of suggested readings.

despite the absence of a rabbi in the community and the absence of Jewish men to marry. Her face is radiant as she recounts tales of her youth and of the support of her non-Jewish husband who has turned out to be, in her words, an excellent partner. She recalls hard times as well—how there were not enough candles for the eight nights of Chanukah, and so they lit one per night. Now, however, she feels a renewed sense of hope as her children openly learn about the traditions. In an afternote, Burt informs us that the synagogue in Santiago is to be returned in 1995.

The last sequence of the film presents a celebratory scene of the bar mitzvah of the son of Abraham Berezniak, one of the stalwarts of the Jewish community in Havana, leaving us with a sense of community and of continuance.

Fez

In his *The Jews of Islam*, Bernard Lewis writes:

The *mellab* of Fez was founded in 1438 on the model of the earlier *juderias* of Spain, situated near the royal residence and offering protection. The *mellabs* established in other towns by later rulers were more definitely intended to isolate and penalize rather than to defend or protect their inhabitants.¹⁶

The 14-minute film *Communities in Exile: Fez* (Beth Hatefutsoth, The Museum of the Diaspora, Israel, 1976) presents the self-contained quarter of the *mellab* as a famous center of learning for the Jewish exiles, and as a geographical location which the sharif viewed as a buffer between himself and his subjects. The Jewish community of Fez was populated from before the eighth century C.E. A large number of Spanish and Portuguese Jews fled to Morocco between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, and some tensions arose between what were viewed as the elite Spanish exiles (who became the spiritual leaders of the community) and the Moroccan Jewish residents. Fez was also the home of Moses Maimonides after he fled from Cordoba in 1148.

As Daniel Schroeter notes in his “The Jewish Quarter and the Moroccan City,” there were several ethnic groups in precolonial Morocco which tended to live in quarters. In addition to the Jews, these ethnic groups included descendents of slaves from the Western Sudan, military

¹⁶Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984], p. 149.

tribes, Christians, and renegades.¹⁷ Schroeter notes that these quarters tended to be "ethnically and socially diverse" and that the Jewish identity was that of "being both different and yet sharing certain things with the community as a whole. . . . The Jewish quarter in Morocco, therefore, can be seen both as a means by which the government could protect the Jews while at the same time humiliating them."¹⁸

In this quarter, the gates were shut against "outsiders" at night, but Jewish residents were free to interact with the Muslim populations during the day. "Jews were able to maintain their distinctiveness precisely because the division between the world of family and religion and the world of business was so clearly demarcated in the wider urban context."¹⁹ Unlike the situation in most European ghettos, the Jews in the Moroccan *mellab* could own property. Through a series of black-and-white photographs, the film presents a world of crowded streets, but a vital world in which rich and poor lived side by side. At times the camera moves rapidly into these archival photos, introducing a sense of movement into the two-dimensional form.

The Jewish community in Fez rose to prosperity in the 19th century and boasted more than thirty synagogues and an elaborate system of schools, and social and judicial services. In 1925 a new and more Europeanized section of Fez was founded. Jews in Fez served as links between Moslem and French culture, with the Jewish life in Fez maintaining a mix of old and new ways. Along with the Moroccan Jew in the latest French fashion was the member of a multi-generational family in which polygamy was not unknown.

Despite all of these signs of peaceful co-existence, the *mellab* of Fez was ransacked in 1912, forcing Jews to seek protection in the palace grounds. During the World War II period, the French ordered all Jewish families, traditional and "European" alike, to move back to the deteriorating *mellab*. In 1956 Morocco obtained its independence from France and the fate of the Jews worsened. Now, according to the film's off-screen narrator, there are only about 1,000 Jews in Fez (compared to 22,000 in 1947), as many Jews have emigrated elsewhere, primarily to Israel. Many

¹⁷Daniel Schroeter, "The Jewish Quarter and the Moroccan City," *New Horizons in Sephardic Studies*, ed. Yedida K. Stillman and George K. Zucker (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 68.

¹⁸*The Jewish Quarter and the Moroccan City*, pp. 67, 69-70.

¹⁹*The Jewish Quarter and the Moroccan City*, p. 73.

images shown earlier in the film are repeated at its close, in a celebration of a once-dynamic way of life.

As in the French film *Embroidered Canticles* (Izza Genini, 1991), Moroccan-Jewish music (*matruz*) in *Communities in Exile: Fez* presents a delicate aural “tapestry” against which the visual images gain additional clarity. *Embroidered Canticles*, produced by Izza Genini, also features interviews with performers and scholars of this music derived from Hebrew and Arabic sources which helped link Jewish and Muslim societies. Another film on this general topic, *Songs for Shabbat* by Izza Genini, documentarist of Jewish life in Morocco, cross-cuts between scenes of a gathering of *bazanut* (cantors) from the U.S., Israel, France, and Morocco, and images of the sun rising over a landscape of fields or setting over the ocean. As one commentator in the film notes: “If the soul is to speak, the Soul of the Soul is to sing.”

Egypt

I Miss the Sun (U.S., 1983) opens, like many of the other films, with a family photograph. Narrator and director Mary Halawani, a grandchild of Nona, the woman whose life is presented in the film, tells of the expulsion of the Jews from Egypt in 1959 (a “second exodus from Egypt”) following the resurgence of Arab nationalism that accompanied Nasser’s rise to power. The grandmother, now resettled in Brooklyn, speaks candidly of how she misses “the sun, the friendliness” of her life in Egypt, hence the film’s title.

Nona was married in Cairo at the age of 16 or 17, and had three sons and one daughter before her husband died when she was around 35 years old. In 1959, she fled from Egypt by herself, carrying her sewing machine but being forced to leave all but \$16 behind. After spending some time in detention camps, she was brought to the U.S. with the help of the Red Cross. As the camera cross-cuts between documentary footage of the exodus of contemporary Jews from Egypt, the Passover service in Brooklyn with Nona’s multi-generational family, and the woman alone recounting her memories, *I Miss the Sun* retains the quality of a home movie.

The meandering cinematic style of *I Miss the Sun* follows Nona as she serves a large Passover meal to her extended family, and laughingly quips that she has come out of the exodus from Egypt to spend her days in an American kitchen! The camera pans slowly over the dishes (prepared by the grandmother over a period of twenty days), pulling in for a close-up of stuffed grape leaves, and, in a telling juxtaposition of images, another close-up of children’s faces. Nona, now a stooped-over woman who walks



I Miss the Sun. USA, 1984. 20 minutes, color. A film by Mary Halawani. Distributed by: National Center for Jewish Film.

painfully down steps, seems to prefer her vivid memories to her current life, despite its freedom from political oppression. It is clear that one reason the granddaughter made this film was to capture those memories, in all their immediacy, before they would disappear.

This film is particularly effective when Nona is allowed to tell her own story, away from the somewhat bland questions of the narrator. The director tends to show her grandmother in solitary shots, whether she is in the kitchen, out shopping, or sewing in her own apartment. Close-ups of the elderly woman's hands contrast with the deep-focus shots of the whole family gathered together. Another striking contrast is the final shot of the back of a group of Brooklyn row houses in a desolate winter landscape as we also catch a glimpse of a bustling Egyptian street under a warming sun.

India

Although not solely about the Sephardic Jew, the documentary *Next Year in Jerusalem: A Film on the Jews of Cochin*, directed by Indian director Chetan Shah, presents another window onto the world of exile and resettlement of the wandering Jew. The residents of "Jew Town" in Cochin include Malabari (Black), Pardesi (White) and Manumitted (Brown) Jews. Although a Jewish presence can be traced in India as early as 52 C.E., Sephardic influence can be seen among the Indian Jewish community from at least the 16th century as Jews from Spain and Portugal merged with leading families in India to form the "White Jews" or "Pardesi" (foreign) Jewish population.

Mass emigration to Israel in the early 50s has left this community without its once-vibrant core. At the time of filming, the number of community members was down to about forty; subsequent to filming, several more left to join children in Israel.

One of the director's aims, in his own words, was "to recreate the textural quality of what it was like to live through the last thirty-five years during the decline of a civilization."²⁰ This once-vibrant community now has trouble gathering enough men for a minyan and, except for a group of highly educated elderly women, is suffering from a lack of both members and dynamism. One unique aspect of the Cochin Jewish community is the second *bimah* in the women's section for this distinctive group. Despite the drain of Indian Jews from Cochin, the strong convic-

²⁰Chetan Shah, brochure: "The Making of 'The Jews of Cochin'," p. 7 (unnumbered pages).

tions of existing members is apparent in the rare wedding scene, and in the private interviews.

Although there were once seven synagogues in the community, only one is currently active. One dilapidated synagogue has been remade into a flower nursery, *Cochin Blossoms*, by the brothers of the Elias family. This transformation is their way of preserving the synagogue from destruction by local authorities.

Included in the film is a sequence of the marriage of a member of the community to a Bombay Jewess in the *Pardesi Synagogue*. This marked the first marriage of two Indian Jews in the synagogue in nine years, and it was particularly auspicious that it could be captured on film. The community would not allow filming during a regular Sabbath ceremony, but the caretaker Jackie Cohen's explanations of the art and architecture of the synagogue (including floor tiles from China) give some idea of the atmosphere of a service there.

Another memorable sequence is that of a Passover Seder at the home of 84-year-old Satto Koder, the senior member of the Cochin Jewish community. Although several family members stayed away because of the presence of the camera, the open invitation for any Jewish tourist to join in the Seder insured a table with no empty chairs.

An interview with Professor Nathan Katz of Florida International University who was in Cochin conducting research adds another level of insight into this rare community. Professor Katz points out how the semblance of a caste system among Cochin Jews, in which an "intermarriage" between a so-called Black Jew and White Jew was frowned upon, is now generally a thing of the past. Another enlightening interview is with the Indian scholar Premdass Yehudi, who describes the arduous process of his conversion to Judaism.

At the close of the film, a montage of group photos, showing weddings and other ceremonies, are mixed with photos of Cochin Jews who have emigrated to Israel, and images of paper blowing down empty streets. The faces, now familiar to us from the earlier interviews, appear particularly fragile.

Concluding Notes

In watching the mixture of information and entertainment presented in these diverse films on the Sephardim, I was reminded of the words of Robert A. Rosenstone in the introduction to his *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*:

The documentary may seem closer to fact [than historical films], but fiction almost always enters it in generous amounts—the most obvious example being the use of generic, illustrative images from the past that are not specifically the scenes they purport to depict. Such elements only underscore the idea that film must be taken on its own terms as a portrait of the past that has less to do with fact than with intensity and insight, perception and feeling, with showing how events affect individual lives, past and present.²¹

What links the disparate places in this narrative is not only a common point in history before dispersion, or a common language (with variations), or similar customs and foods. More fundamentally, there is a sense of place—place lost and place remembered—that is as much a matter of feelings as it is of geographical location. As Rachel Amado reminds in *Trees Cry for Rain*, many Sephardim in exile retained the key to their homes in Spain, fully expecting that they or their descendents would return one day.

The importance of these kinds of documentaries is beautifully expressed by film historian Annette Kuhn in her *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*:

Memory work makes it possible to explore connections between “public” historical events, structures of feeling, family dramas, relations of class, national identity and gender, and “personal” memory. In these cases, histories outer and inner, social and personal, historical and psychical, coalesce: and the web of interconnections that binds them together is made visible.²²

This web of interconnections becomes surprisingly clear as one views, and reviews, these documentaries. They stand as an entirely different testimony than the group of feature films based on this theme, and proof that at time fiction detracts rather than adds. One is left with a sense of the sun—at times welcoming, at times scorching—that shone over a people sure of its identity yet able to adapt with the changing historical climate. “A change of scene, a change of fortune”: a continued tapestry of memories captured in cinematic montage and in the story of exile, return, and remembrance.

²¹Robert A. Rosenstone, ed. *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 7.

²²Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 4.

Distributors

Trees Cry for Rain, The Believers: Stories from Jewish Havana, and Abraham and Eugenia: Stories from Jewish Cuba

Bonnie Burt Productions
2600 Tenth Street, Suite 205
Berkeley, CA 94710
Phone: (510) 548-1745
Fax: (510) 658-1583

Next Year in Jerusalem: A Film on the Jews of Cochbin

Cintel Communication
7 Sriramnagar South Street
Madras 600 018 INDIA
Phone: 453028

Other Films:

Contact: The National Center for Jewish Film

Lown Building 102

Brandeis University

Waltham, MA 02254-9110

Phone: (617) 899-7044

Fax: (617) 736-2070

E-mail: NCJF@logos.cc.brandeis.edu

I would like to thank the following people for their assistance: Dr. Janice E. Ovadiah, Executive Director, Sephardic House (NYC), filmmaker Bonnie Burt, the National Center for Jewish Film (Brandeis University), Professor Nathan Katz, Department of Philosophy and Religion, Florida International University, and Professor Greg Kaplan of the University of Tennessee/Knoxville. A small grant from the Department of Romance and Asian Languages of the University of Tennessee allowed for the viewing of many of these films.