SEPHARDIC GENEALOGY: DISCOVERING YOUR
SEPHARDIC ANCESTORS AND THEIR WORLD
Jeffrey S. Malka
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This nice sized volume brings together in printed form for the first time a collection of sources for obtaining genealogical information which may be of use to Sephardic Jews researching their family tree. It is a well assembled work of some 360 pages with a very useful set of indexes divided by Sephardic surnames as well as general terms. Broken up into four core divisions, the book covers history of the Sephardim, fundamentals of genealogy, country resources divided by specific country, and Internet resources. There are multiple appendices which cover material such as forms, charts and historical data. Under the country headings is a very useful recommended reading list for each specific country. Other than the United States, the author includes data on countries from where the Sephardim came from which include Algeria, the Balkans, Egypt, Italy, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Netherlands, Spain, Sudan, Syria, Turkey (and the Ottoman Empire) as well as countries of the Caribbean and South America.

The reader will particularly appreciate large amount of Sephardic surnames which have etymological origins, as well as their own index. It covers source material both in the modern era, as well as potential sources for genealogical information prior to the Iberian expulsion. An index of subjects printed in Jewish journals related to the Sephardim provides a handy reference. The utility of this work is found in the listing of specific addresses where one can send correspondence to seek information. Under each country are archival sources, listed with various points of contact. The fifteen page bibliography is itself a tool for those conducting Sephardic ancestral research.

Dr. Malka accurately explains the little known fact that “population trades” existed between Spain and Morocco. This helps understand who is “Sephardic” when looking back at ones own history. He incorporates both Mizrahi (eastern Jews) with Jews whose descent is from Iberia in his definition of “Sephardic.” Though many Judeo-Spanish Sephardim do not support this inclusion, he is correct in his grouping of Jewish people from countries which made up the former Ottoman Empire as being Sephardic. This includes such modern countries of Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Utilizing expert opinions such
as those by the late Sephardic scholar Daniel Elazar, the author upholds a popular academic and religious point of view that Sephardim—those who follow the religious rite and laws which are outlined in the Babylonian Talmud and the Shuklan Arukh, the Code of Jewish Law.

The title of the book “Sephardic Genealogy: Discovering Your Sephardic Ancestry and Their World,” is appropriate. The author has assembled a well written condensed section of Sephardic Jewish history, from the times of the Prophets to modern day. The incorporation of Sephardic history in a book on genealogy gets my praise, as I feel one who researches their own family history, should also learn something about their people’s history. Peppering the initial portion of the book with paragraphs on Jews in Babylon, the Gaonim and subjects as unusual as Jews in the Amazon, make this book more than just a simple list of sources.

There are 19 illustrations and maps which though are fundamental, can aid understanding of some key issues. In the sources for genealogical information sections under specific country headings, it is clear that the author has integrated up to date information. As one example, he notes that in Egypt, though it is difficult and may take years to obtain genealogical data, the elderly members of the Jewish community are currently seeking Hebrew readers from abroad to help them “organize their records.” Sometimes gathering material from Sephardic lands, former or present, may involve issues pertaining to politics, language barriers and indifference. Malka clearly states this, and occasionally provides tips on how to address some of these issues.

While “Sephardic Genealogy: Discovering Your Sephardic Ancestry and Their World” documents the existing sources where one potentially may obtain data, the genealogical professional may be left looking for a slightly deeper examination of each of these sources. I would be remiss if I did not mention one of the most significant strong points of this publication, it is its existence. Until this was published, there were no books for the genealogist who is descendant from a Sephardic family. Malka’s documentation of obscure sources are impressive.

Written at a time when Sephardic genealogy is quite popular, this book will fill a vacuum which has existed since the Internet helped develop the explosive growth of researching ones family tree. Unlike numerous recent Jewish genealogical books, usually by non-Sephardic Jews, Malka himself is Sephardic, and he is writing for the masses with an intrinsic interest to help lead his fellow Sephardi to obtain information. A large majority of the material which went into this work came from the authors own website, which he had previously researched and assembled. Given the “here today gone tomorrow” aspect of the Internet, the printing of this book allows the material to have a permanent record. “Sephardic Genealogy” is an embarkation into the new genre of Sephardic genealogical research. With this book, Malka has planted the seeds where I suspect new flowers will germinate. The book is recommended to all persons interested in researching their Sephardic Jewish family roots.

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