



by Shelomo Alfassa

the **HIAS** *Oriental Bureau*

Isak Alfassa from Turkey (center) with his children and their spouses, in New York, 1925.

In the beginning of the twentieth century the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society dealt primarily with Ashkenazi Jews. The organization – its constituency, its staff – generally all spoke or corresponded in Russian or Yiddish. Yet, between 1900 and 1921, tens of thousands of Sephardic Jews arrived in America, and the organization would find itself unprepared to deal with the large influx of these so-called *Oriental Jews* from the former Ottoman Empire.

The largest assemblies of Sephardim were the Ladino speakers who arrived from Adrianople, Chios, Constantinople, Kastoria, Monastir, Rhodes, Salonica, Smyrna, and the Dardanells. The Arabic speakers came from the Syrian cities of Aleppo, Kilez and Damascus. The Greek-speaking Jews came from the city of Janina. None of them spoke any of the Ashkenazi languages, and almost all of them found difficulty within the first few steps they took leaving the ship that bought them to America.

A particular Sephardic businessman named Moise Gadol (1874-1941) arrived in America from Bulgaria in 1910.

Speaking 11 languages, he was said to be a man of great culture. On the Lower East Side, Gadol developed a new Ladino newspaper known as *La America*, one he thought would become a vessel to help newly arriving Sephardim. Rabbi Marc Angel of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York said that through his paper, Gadol helped many people find jobs and gave advice on how to keep their jobs. In the pages of *La America*, he printed a glossary in order to teach Sephardim English. Interestingly, he also included Yiddish definitions, believing that many Sephardim worked for Yiddish-speaking employers.

While many programs existed for new Jewish immigrants, the Sephardim could not benefit from these programs. Jewish organizations that attempted to assist immigrants often did not even recognize that the Sephardim were Jews. Many Sephardic immigrants would complain that they were believed to non-Jews by Jewish officials. Gadol noticed that his fellow Sephardim were struggling. The Bulgarian realized what HIAS had been doing for the Ashkenazim, how they provided helpful programs for the new Jewish immigrants, and from this he developed an idea.

Gadol reached out to HIAS to develop a program where Sephardic immigrants would be met by fellow Sephardim at Ellis Island, the largest immigration receiving center in the United States¹. Gadol's idea was met with success; at a HIAS board of directors meeting in December of 1911, the president said that "after careful investigation," it was realized that it was necessary to develop an *Oriental Bureau* for the purpose of assisting the Sephardic Jews². After this, it wasn't long before HIAS had a Ladino, Greek and Arabic speaking division.

Moise Gadol was made the first secretary of this *Oriental Bureau*, and it was planned that he would later be succeeded by Jacob Farhi, a fellow leader in the Sephardic community.³ Gadol spent many hours helping newly-arrived Sephardic immigrants who had been ignored to get through the immigration process. He used the pages of his newspaper to appeal for funding from the Sephardim; he asked them to support HIAS' *Oriental Bureau*, which in turn would help their fellow Sephardim. Tens of thousands came. The Sephardim flooded Chrystie, Eldridge, Ludlow, Broom, Allen, and Orchard streets in New York. Some families migrated to Atlanta, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, Portland, and Seattle. And while the need for services existed, the need outran the available funding. By 1915 there was no more money.⁴

Not only was HIAS forced to close the *Oriental Bureau*, but some within HIAS questioned the need for special

services for Sephardic Jews in the first place. Infuriated by such a question, the newly founded *Federation of Oriental Jews* protested, and in response, HIAS added a Sephardic Jew to its general staff; they did this in order to "Give Sephardi immigrants assistance, advice and information. . ."⁵ With the addition of the Sephardic staff member, appreciation and support was restored for HIAS.

During this period, the *Committee on Sephardic Jewish Immigrants* was established. However, proper nomenclature being just as important then, as it is now, a debate developed over the term *Oriental*. While the arriving immigrants called themselves Sephardic, they also used *Oriental* as a popular descriptive term to describe their lot. But this term was less than acceptable with the old established Sephardic stock of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York. Thus, in a move which would keep the peace among his congregation, Rabbi Dr. David DeSola Pool – at the time, the leading Sephardic figure in America – had HIAS change the name of its *Committee on Sephardic Jewish Immigrants* to the *Committee on Oriental Jews*.⁶

When literacy became a national buzz-word in Washington for accep-

tance into the country, HIAS held mass protest meetings where the new Sephardic immigrants represented themselves as "The best and most honest among the Sephardim in Turkey." They represented themselves, as they truly were, a people motivated to leave their old country because of "unfavorable economic and political conditions."⁷ These protests were among the many made by both Jews and non-Jews, and they helped defeat the potential threatening Congressional mandate of mandatory literacy for refugees.

HIAS helped Sephardim in many different ways. In 1911 when six Turkish Jews were about to be rejected from entering America, HIAS filed a writ of *habeas corpus* in the court system, which allowed the detainees to seek relief from government deportation. These Jews spent a week staying in the homes of individual members of HIAS until they could safely and legally be sent to Cuba.⁸ In this case, HIAS saved these Sephardic immigrants from being sent back to Europe, and furthermore offered them an opportunity to live in Havana. In 1908, the first Sephardic immigrants had arrived in Cuba from Turkey and, to a lesser degree, from Syria and Greece.



Alfassa family: Rosa, Esther, Eli, & Victoria (front) before leaving for America c. 1911 in front of the Turkish flag.



Certificate of U.S. Naturalization for Rosa Yerushalmi (Nee) Alfassa.

Cuba was a popular choice, as it was the closest Spanish speaking country to the United States.⁹

Cuba was singled out as a place many *Oriental Jews* desired to settle. In addition, HIAS' president felt that *Oriental Jewish* immigrants were failing economically, "Partly because of their lack of energy in the northern climate." He believed that climatic conditions in Cuba were "Equal to those of their native countries."¹⁰ While this would be a quite controversial statement if made today, HIAS did in fact make an observation that went without question – that the newly arriving Sephardim could not communicate with the established Yiddish speaking Jews of New York. HIAS reported:

*They speak mainly Spanish, a language unknown in the Jewish districts of New York where their immigrants settle. They are often exploited by their countrymen because of their ignorance of the language of the country, or of any language other than used by their exploiters.*¹¹

Members of HIAS, or more likely the HIAS Committee on *Oriental Jews*, were considered delegates when the various Sephardic organizations got together in 1913 representing all Sephardic organizations in a vote to centralize all of the various Sephardic organizations.¹² HIAS had become so integrated with the Sephardim that one need only look at a prayer that was published in *La America* during a transitional period when a chief rabbi was being selected by the Turkish community. It was entitled, "The Morning Prayer of an Immigrant," which beseeched the Almighty to bring, "...Blessings on the HIAS and the realization of the plan to bring a chief rabbi to our community."¹³

HIAS and its *Oriental Bureau* were responsible for helping settle tens of thousands of Sephardic Jews into America, people who were escaping appalling conditions in their former homelands. HIAS also had people on location in foreign countries that were there to assist those fleeing. The HIAS eyes and ears on the ground made it so, that many times, it was HIAS that first brought news to the American Sephardic community about the suffering in the old country, such as in this report on the plight of Sephardic Jews in Europe:

*Incredibly sad. . .plight of our Sephardi immigrants during the past year. Forced by famine and unspeakable catastrophes (such as fire in Salonica which left some 8,000 people homeless) to flee from their homes in Turkey and Greece and turn to America for refuge and succor.*¹⁴

In the years after WWII, HIAS came to the Sephardic community in New York seeking assistance from the Union of Sephardic Congregations and the Central Sephardic Community of America under Chief Rabbi Isaac Alcalay. Both organizations (now defunct), continued to respond to HIAS tracers and missing person letters, some, with positive results.

While the *Oriental Bureau* had long been dissolved, HIAS did in fact help over 10,000 Sephardic Jews that came from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and other Arab countries between 1970 and 1990. It was once said that HIAS has "Touched the life of nearly every Jewish family in America," and for the Sephardim, it is without doubt.

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1: Papo, Joseph. *Sephardim in the Twentieth Century*. New York, 1984 p.48

2: HIAS, Minutes of the 10th Board of Directors meeting, 1911

3, 4, 5: Papo p.48

6: Papo p.54

7: Papo p.75

8: HIAS, Minutes of the 10th Board of Directors meeting, 1911

9: The first early Jewish life began in Cuba in 1906 when men involved with the railroad and sugar cane industry joined with Jewish American officers that were part of the Liberation Army of Cuba and founded a congregation.

10: HIAS, Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Board of Directors, December 21, 1911

11: HIAS, Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Board of Directors, December 21, 1911

12: Papo p.143 (More information can be found in Rabbi Marc Angel's book *La America*, JPS 1982)

13: Papo p.99

14: 1917 HIAS Annual Report