

Anthony Lambright and Jacob Nikolson (editors)

“A minority within a minority”:

The Joseph Cordova Interview (February 6, 1973)

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California State University, Fullerton (CSUF).

The Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History.

Project: Sephardic Jews.

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Oral Interview with Joseph Cordova, conducted by Roberta Britt,

February 6, 1973, Los Angeles, California.

Introduction

The oral history interview transcribed below belongs to a collection held in CSUF's Lawrence de Graaf Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), titled "Sephardic Jews." The interview with Joseph Cordova was conducted by Roberta Britt on February 6, 1973, in Los Angeles, California. The interview lasted 1 hour and 38 seconds, and it is archived as a digital recording/audio file at COPH (see "Copyright Advisory" below). The verbatim transcript edited here was prepared in 2022 by Anthony Lambright and Jacob Nikolson.

Joseph Cordova covers a wide range of subject matters, namely the state of the domestic Sephardi Community and abroad and the push to keep the embers of their otherwise small sect burning in the face of assimilation into other Jewish groups such as the Ashkenazi Jews or culturally in the diaspora such as in Greece. He also gives a detailed history of the Sephardic community and how they originated in Spain with their own style of liturgy and language called Ladino, which is Spanish Yiddish, before being expelled during the Inquisition era and scattering abound. Mr. Cordova also details the push from the community, mainly the older generation, to keep their heritage alive by fostering more community among the youth and promoting religious education in their communities due to many Sephardim leaving for Ashkenazi or other sects and the difficulties that lie therein. Lastly, Mr. Cordova talks about the interaction between the Sephardim and various Los Angeles communities.

The audio recording offers insight into how communities change over time and how the generational divide affects that change. In addition, it offers insight into what constitutes identity and community, whether Jewish or Gentile, as the Los Angeles Sephardic community seeks to answer these questions. Lastly, it offers a look into how an ethnic minority operates and lives in a place known for being a hub of different ethnicities and cultures such as Los Angeles, while retaining their unique voice and perspective. Therefore, this recording should be of interest to social, cultural, religious, and Jewish historians as well as sociologists and anthropologists. Likewise, anyone of Jewish descent should find this recording

edifying. The audio recording possesses a good quality, despite some sporadic background noise, however, one can understand both parties without difficulty.

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Verbatim Transcript (O.H. 1278)

LAWRENCE DE GRAAF CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR: Joseph Cordova [JC]

INTERVIEWER: Roberta Britt [RB]

DATE: February 6, 1973

LOCATION: Los Angeles, California

PROJECT: Sephardic Jews

TRANSCRIBERS: Jacob Nikolson and Anthony Lambright

RB: Mr. Joseph Cordova, Grand Trustee for the Sephardic¹ Hebrew Center² in Los Angeles. This is conducted as part of a Communications Master of Arts thesis, entitled "Los Angeles Sephardim: Community Relations, Problems, and Needs," employing oral history techniques. The interview is being conducted by Roberta Britt in Los Angeles, which is the public relations firm of Mr. Cordova and Associates. The date is February 6, 1973. It is 12:00 o'clock PM. Mr. Cordova, how do you feel the Los Angeles Sephardic community can better understand and develop their sense of identity?

JC: Well, as far as identity, I think that, uh, realizing we are a minority within a minority as far as Sephardim. We, uh, do have within the Sephardic

¹ Generally speaking, members of the Jewish diaspora communities in the Iberian Peninsula and their descendants ("Sepharad" is the Hebrew term for "Spain").

² Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel, Los Angeles (established 1920).

community, uh, variations of people that are labeled Sephardim. We have the Sephardim of Ladino³ background that, uh—of course their roots go back to Spain, and they are Spanish-Portuguese and do have the Ladino, uh, liturgy and, uh, language. And, uh, a lot, of course, uh, of our generations, uh, settled in the Levant⁴ and then coming to this country, uh, at the turn of the century. And then you have others that are designated as, uh, Sephardim. The Oriental or Arab country, uh, Sephardim,⁵ uh, they are not Spanish-speaking per se, uh, and, uh, but they have adopted, uh, over the centuries—over the years—the, uh, the Sephardic, uh, Tefilah⁶ or our liturgy, uh, uh, and have been labeled Sephardim per se. Uh, but as far as our particular group, I think there's a need, uh, uh, to further identify ourselves and to, uh, show in some form or manner the differences, uh, that exist in—within the Sephardim themselves, uh, and the two groups that I mentioned here, you see. But, uh, I think as far as what has been done and what can be done, I think there is a tremendous need, I think that, uh, it, it gets down to a problem, I think, of communications. Uh, those of us in the professions, I think, are, uh, uh, addressing ourselves to this problem. Uh, whether we survive as a, uh, Jewish culture, uh, or not, uh, I think, uh, has a great deal to do with it becau—especially, I think, in this country where the language, uh, uh, problem exists where there—Ladino is not spoken that frequently. I myself am a first-generation, uh, Sephardim, my parents, uh, having been born on the island of Rhodes,⁷ uh, in the Aegean,⁸ which at one time was a, uh, flourishing Sephardic-Ladino community, uh, within the, uh, influences there of, uh, Greek, Turkish, Italian rule. But, uh, there has been, published, uh, over the years, certain materials, certain books, certain articles, uh, in the press and, uh, what not, uh, but as far as why dissemination as to who are the Sephardim and, you know, uh, I think, uh, there just hasn't been too much done in this area. I think even within the Jewish community itself, you know, that, um, uh, the Ashkenazi,⁹ uh, uh, community, I think, uh, they know that Sephardic communities do exist, and, uh, some of them do know the contributions of the Sephardim to, uh, Jewish, uh, literature, to Jewish litur—liturgy. But, um, there still are some misconceptions. Uh, uh, you can talk about identity—I think in Israel, for example, uh, anybody that is not identified as Ashkenazi, which, uh, is

³ Judeo-Spanish language.

⁴ Lands of the Eastern Mediterranean.

⁵ Oriental Sephardim, also known as Mizrahi, are the Jews of Western Asia and North Africa impacted by Sephardic laws and customs.

⁶ Jewish prayer.

⁷ Island in the Eastern Mediterranean/Aegean Sea.

⁸ Mediterranean Sea between Greece and Turkey.

⁹ Members of the Jewish diaspora communities in Central and Eastern Europe.

the Eastern Jewish, uh, cultures and ethnic background—the German or Russian, whatever—is put in the category of Sephardim. Now, uh, uh, this is true to a sense in—as I mentioned before—there is the Oriental or Arab-country Sephardim who are not the Spanish-speaking Ladinos. And, uh, and, uh, this poses a big problem. I think Israel faces a situation there where they have Black Panthers,¹⁰ uh, identified as Sephardim. But these are the dark-skin Oriental, uh, uh, uh, people and ethnic group that are labeled Sephardim. But they are not, in the true sense, Sephardims. Sephard, meaning, you know, an identification to those that, uh, uh, lived, uh, in the Iberian Peninsula¹¹ and the Sephardic communities there. And it's referred to in the Bible and, uh, in our, uh, Testament,¹² uh, and this, uh, was so labeled even to the times of the Phoenician,¹³ uh, um, uh, existence or explorations and settlement of colonies in, uh, Iberia, and this goes back before the Visigoths.¹⁴ But I think, again, the identity thing—uh, what has been done i—is very minor. I think there's not enough that has been done. Now the whole question is, why do you want identity? I think it's, it's—to me, and I know to a handful of other Sephardim of Ladino background, and whose families came from the Levant—and before that from Spain—that, that it's a question of the survival of our partic—particular ethnic culture. And this is, uh, one of the foremost problems that we face. Now we are in the process and have been in the last year of organizing a worldwide basis, and in the local Sephardic communities a Sephardic Federation.¹⁵ I am the chairman of the Federation committee to organize here in the Los Angeles community. Uh, so far we've had a certain amount of success in bringing together the leaders of the different congregations—Sephardic organizations—in groups, uh, not only from the men's organizations, but from the sisterhoods and from the, uh, youth, uh, groups. But it still hasn't caught on. Uh, I don't know. I, I am, I'm concerned that there's just a nucleus of people that are concerned about this survival of our culture. There aren't, uh, uh—those of us in the first generation, I think, you know, there isn't a grassroots within the ten-thousand or so Sephardim that are here in the community. Uh, that, yes, my gosh, uh, this, something should be done. We should unite as Sephardim to not only contribute, uh, but to have our identity survive and to push our culture forth and to show our contributions to, uh, society, to, to Judaism, I think, and, uh, to who we are

¹⁰ Israeli protest/social justice organization (a.k.a. “the Israeli Black Panthers”) of Jewish immigrants from Northern African and Middle Eastern countries (active 1971–1992).

¹¹ Peninsula in southwestern Europe (Spain and Portugal).

¹² Tanakh (a.k.a. “the Old Testament”).

¹³ Ancient Semitic people, lived in modern-day Lebanon.

¹⁴ Germanic tribe that invaded the Iberian Peninsula in the early fifth century CE.

¹⁵ American Sephardi Federation (established 1973).

and what we are. Uh, but the Federation, hopefully, will—once it's organized locally, uh, you know—do all of this and, uh, hopefully have a program that's gonna be constructive—

RB: In terms of bringing, uh, greater cohesiveness in the community—

JC: Well, I think so. I think that this is, uh—we need something to galvanize our community. I think that Sephardim, uh, you hear—and possibly, uh, from others you've talked to—that, uh, there's always been the problem of their getting together. Um, maybe because of certain differences, because of—they originated in different geographic areas,

[00:09:41]

JC: I mean, whether it be the Levant, in the Balkans, in Greece. You see, we—those of us in the Ladino—I'm speaking now in the Ladino, the Spanish-speaking Sephardim, who are the, in quotes, "pure" Sephardim, you know, uh—that, uh, there are those differences. I don't think the temperament, uh, (pauses) carries that much, and I'm speaking of those that, uh, were in the Levant area in the eastern Mediterranean—in Greece or Turkey, the Greek islands, uh, and so forth. Uh, I think we were quite similar in many ways. But, um, there has never been, uh, to my knowledge, I mean, anything to galvanize the group together to, to, to have a cohesiveness. When we get involved in, uh, Jewish affairs or, um, civic affairs or whatever, uh, we're, we're brought together—the different organ—Sephardic organizations or congregations—as a Sephardic division. And we raise money that way, and we, you know—but, uh, I think that, um, there just hasn't been, uh, the emergency to draw these people together. I think the leadership realize it—and I don't know whether my generation will succeed. I think we're making some headways. I think those that, we succeed, those that came to this country at the turn of the century, uh, had their own ways of doing things. A lot of them, uh—there are a lot of success stories that, uh, much like, uh, with other Jewish immigrants to this country that, uh, succeeded here and, um, but, uh—hopefully those of my status or, uh, my generation, I think might see the light here and, and come up with something, uh, that will be, you know, fruitful. But we need that catalyst, we need that galvanizing force that's gonna bring us together.

RB: Mr. Cordova, how do you feel the Sephardim can best avail themselves of the media, such as the use of professional public relations or community relations, et cetera?

JC: Well, I think the whole handle for this would be the, this whole formation of the Federation I was talking to you about. I think the congregations themselves and the organizations carry on a certain amount of publicity. Uh, I know that, uh, Rabbi Ott,¹⁶ uh, in his temple have been active in, uh,

¹⁶ Rabbi Jacob Ott (1919–2005) of the Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel, Los Angeles.

in, uh, communicating from time to time. I knew that they had a Sephardic cookbook which they published, which was well publicized. I know there have been articles in the Seattle community, uh, from time to time. Uh, there was one in "Gourmet Magazine,"¹⁷ but his has to deal with the food. But in, uh, food and, uh, uh, the delicacies and, uh, of the Sephardim – but woven into these articles are some of the background, uh, and, you know, rich, uh, history of, uh, uh, these groups. Uh, as far as professional assistance, hopefully, uh, this will come from the formation of our Federation and, uh, we will have a planned program, a newsletter –

RB: Amazing –

JC: Uh, we will con – uh, right. Now at the, uh – there is a Sephardic studies, uh, section at the Yeshiva¹⁸ in New York, which you, I'm sure, are aware of. And Dr. Dobrinsky¹⁹ and, uh, others, and they have publications which they send out. They, uh, they do issue, uh, publicity, uh, from time to time, but there's not a concerted program of, uh, people. You see, we have a lot of Sephardim that are not involved – I mean, they are born of Sephardic parents – they are not involved with Sephardic community activities, and they're in, within the diaspora²⁰ – really as, as we call 'em here even in the States.²¹ And hopefully a program like this, I mean, you don't just throw out a public relations or communication program without some reason for it. I mean, uh, either you do it, uh, as a, as a personal, uh, aggrandizement, uh, approach, where somebody's offered all the glory and what not, uh, to build themselves up, or you're trying to develop a product or something. But our particular pitch here would be, uh, I think, to draw back a lot of these young Sephardim and to make them realize that, uh, you know, there is a ongoing area of, of activity here within Sephardic communities, within Sephardic congregations within the community, that they should be a part of. Um, but there's a lot of, uh, uh, lackadaisical²² attitude. I think, uh, empathy over the young that have assimilated, uh, married into Ashkenazim, uh, families and have drifted away from the Sephardic community activities. Um, maybe this program will be successful on that light, and hopefully this Federation, through a concerted program of publicity and, uh, communications and, uh, um, various visual activities – audio-visual activities – will, will, will have this galvanizing force I've been talking about earlier. Now, I don't know that – how concerted it's gonna be – I don't know. It's, uh, (door squeaks) depending, you know – because,

¹⁷ Magazine, focused on food and wine (published 1941–2009).

¹⁸ Private Jewish university in New York City (established 1886).

¹⁹ Herbert C. Dobrinsky, scholar/administrator at the Yeshiva in New York City.

²⁰ Greek term for "scattered," used for population groups displaced from their place of origin.

²¹ United States.

²² Careless.

you see, we're, we're not that large a community. We'd, we'd like ourselves to be better known, to be better understood –

RB: Yes –

JC: And one of the things – in addition to galvanizing, bringing back a lot of people into the Sephardic communities and making realize that these are vibrant, viable organizations, communities within the sphere of Judaism – um, I think you – we have the youth problem, where, where, where the younger generation is drifting away. I think there's a lot of rich material within the Sephardic liturgy and, uh – whether you go to the Kabbalah²³ and the, uh, mysticism²⁴ there that, uh, people can explore and find, you know, be part of. But I think it's all part of the evolution, changing times and changing moods. But, uh, this is something that has to be (laughs) analyzed very carefully and thought out. And, uh, it's not only the Sephardim. I think the entire Jewish population or Jewish life is facing that in this country and elsewhere. I think religion in general is facing this problem. And, uh, there is this year, you probably know, this Key 73 Program,²⁵ which, within the Christian community, is sending out to build up their following. How much of this will draw in the Jewish community, uh, to say, you know, that they should follow Christian beliefs instead? I don't know. It, uh, there's quite a controversy on this point right now. And, uh, communication problems, I think, uh, in this other area will, will erase these mins – misconceptions. We – that's one of the foremost things – the misconceptions about, well, who are the Sephardim, what are they? I mean, the Birmingham, um, book,²⁶ uh, was good to some extent. I think, uh, this is a best-selling book that got wide distribution and, uh, people got to know more. But it wasn't well-rounded, I mean a full, you know, description or, uh, true picture of who the Sephardim are. Uh, we as a, as a people, I think, we blend well into the communities we are. I mean, we – in, in working ourselves, uh, into the professions – those of Sephardic background – uh, with the Christian community. I think there's, there's never been any problem there. And, uh, there are those, and I have colleagues that are Catholic or Protestant or whatever that, uh, once they know my background, I mean, it – to me and my education and upbringing has been, uh, of course, in and out of the Sephardic community and what not. So – whereas this wouldn't have been possible if I were born in Rhodes, uh, in the small island community there within the walled city. We would've been somewhat restricted.

²³ Branch of Jewish mysticism.

²⁴ Contemplative approach to the Divine.

²⁵ Nationwide evangelical program in the United States (1973).

²⁶ Stephen Birmingham, *The Grandees: America's Sephardic Elite* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

[00:20:00]

JC: But even there, uh—this is diverging a little bit from your—

RB: That's okay—

JC: question there—but even there, those in the leadership in our community in the island of Rhodes did co-mingle with, uh—whether it was the Greek civic community there and the Greek leadership, the Greek merchants, or whether it was with the Turkish. More so I think with the Greek, um, community. But there was this interrelationship. Um, there's an interesting aspect, you know, the—the Sephardic Hebrew Center²⁷ is located now—we call that ecumenical square. There's a, uh, Armenian Orthodox church and a, uh, Presbyterian church within that square, and we cooperate with each other and, uh, there's, there's no problem of assimilating. The Armenians maybe more so because our food and our culture from that part of the world is quite similar. And, uh, I'm always amazed really—not really amazed anymore—that they know more about our culture than we do. And it's amazing. And, uh, I even got this, uh, some years ago. I was doing some public relations work for, uh, an organization in New York that was handling, um, some, uh, international fundraising for the Pro Deo University,²⁸ which is run by the Vatican to sell de—democratic concepts worldwide. And, uh, Father Morlion²⁹ was the dean of the Pro Deo University at the Vatican—was here, and I was, uh, discussing our background of Sephardim and what not. And he says, “oh, we, we know more about you in the Vatican than you do.” And I says, “well I believe it” (laughs). And, uh, and, uh—but this is, you know, the interrelationship—but we've never had that problem of assimilating with other groups, especially, I think, in Spanish-speaking communities for—you see, because of our language. Now myself, I could be mistaken as a, as a Greek, Italian or whatever or—and, uh, I have been, you know, as far as background is concerned. Getting back to the problem again of communications, uh, I hope—and I have communicated with Professor Elazar³⁰ at Temple University³¹ who's now the chairman of the U.S. branch of this newly reconstituted, uh, World Sephardi Federation,³² U.S. branch,³³ that, uh, this is one of our biggest problems, I think, i—in communication is to come up with a concrete program that is going to, uh, set these misconceptions

²⁷ Reference to Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel, Los Angeles (established 1920).

²⁸ Private university (established 1966 in Rome, Italy).

²⁹ Father Félix Morlión (1904–1987).

³⁰ Daniel Judah Elazar (1934–1999), political scientist, professor at Bar-Ilan University (Israel) and Temple University.

³¹ Public university in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (established 1884).

³² International organization (established 1925 in Vienna, Austria).

³³ American Sephardi Federation (established 1973).

straight as to who the Sephardim really are—so that people will know. I mean, in an educational communication program—whether it be through the religious editors of newspapers, the Jewish press, and, uh, and, uh, publications that do get, uh, wide exposure, I think through radio and television exposure—I think that this is, this is important. I have told, um—well, not told, but actually at our temple organization each Jewish New Year’s, uh, Rosh Hashanah,³⁴ we put out our yearly bulletin, and, uh, last year, I wrote an article, and this had to deal with, um, a heritage tour which I conducted last May to, um, Rhodes, Turkey, Israel, and Spain, tracing the—of course, our lineage and, uh, and heritage to those particular countries. We visited some 1920s Sephardic synagogues and, uh, communities, and I met with community leaders there, and, uh, it was very interesting. But the whole upshot of it was that, I said in this article—and you’d be interested—that one of the greatest things that we can do or develop would be something that would tell the story of our people comparable to the *Fiddler on the Roof*,³⁵ which deals with the—

RB: Hm—

JC: —Russian community to show, you know—exactly—this is, you know, the nucleus, this is the, the thread of, of Sephardim, and to show their Jewishness and contributions to Jewish literature and what their community life was all about. And, uh, all their, uh, you know, greatest success stories, uh, of the Sephardim, uh, from time to time that come out, you know, but, uh, but you don’t hear about ‘em and, uh, and what happens to them, you see. And this thing that’s happening in Israel, or has been happening now, where we become identified with the Oriental Sephardim. And there, there—it’s, it’s a big problem. There’s no question about it. Uh, but I think within Israel itself, they need a communication program to, uh, to identify, you know, who, who are the Sephardim, you see. Because they—they’re erroneously labeling—they’re doing some labeling here that is, that is incorrect in my estimation. But hopefully I’m going to be in New York, uh, for the founding convention, later this month, for the World Sephardi Federation in the U.S., uh, branch of it, and, uh, I’m going to address myself to this very thing, hopefully with some of the other Sephardim that are in the communications industry that, uh—and advertising, public relations, in the media, that we will organize a, uh, a committee or, uh, a ad hoc group to, to work on this problem.

RB: In other words, there is a need to establish some form or greater use of these different media in terms of, um, implementing them in, in the World Sephardi branch. For example, if it were established—

³⁴ Jewish New Year.

³⁵ Musical (opened 1964), set in Tsarist Russia (music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, book by Joseph Stein, based on the characters created by Sholem Aleichem).

- JC: –Oh, yeah. No, no, no question that, um—I think—don't get me wrong—I think that the, uh, and I don't deny, and, and certainly as—that this is, uh, the Oriental Sephardim. They are justified in being called Sephardim because they have adopted themselves, but, but I do want, uh, an explanation or, uh, people to understand in, in the overall Jewish community as well as the overall, you know, general community that, uh, there is this difference in, uh—
- RB: If you were to establish, in the World Sephardi Federation, this type of information program, taking full advantage of different media—what are some of the main problems, in addition to the one or two that you've mentioned in terms of, um, uh, misconceptions and trying to educate the youth or make them more aware—what are some of the main problems that you, in the community relations sense, feel address involving the Sephardim?
- JC: You mean how—what would we do to, uh, get the Sephardim more involved in the comm—in their communities?
- RB: What are some of the problems that you would deal with that concern cohesiveness, that concern needs?
- JC: Well, I think the, uh, initial step in a program like this would be, first of all, to, uh, clarify the identity of the Sephardim and to establish that. And then to pinpoint some of these problem areas. Uh, and some of them I've already mentioned to you. I think, uh—
- RB: Right—
- JC: You know—
- RB: Yes—
- JC: –the misconceptions, I think the youth problem, the, uh, the Sephardim that are drifting away from their background. I think that, um, you know, believe it or not, we, we have more Ashkenazim that are interested in Sephardic culture than, than in, in some respects, than we have, uh, uh, Sephardim. But where we were in Israel last May, the Sephardic community there, at the Hadassah,³⁶ I was with David Setung,³⁷ who was the executive secretary at the Sephardic community in Jerusalem. And I attended services there and Shabbat,³⁸ and, uh, there were three or four, uh, Ashkenazi scholars from the States. One from—he had been a professor at Columbia, and a few others that were there that were regular attendants, and, uh, at, at their, uh, services and followed their activities religiously, and research, and study. Um, and this is not uncommon. We have the same thing here.

³⁶ Charitable organization in Israel.

³⁷ Spelling and identification unclear.

³⁸ The Jewish “Lord’s Day of Rest,” celebrated from Friday sundown until Saturday sundown.

RB: And yet I've been told by a lot of people that there is a fear in Sephardim of possibly, um, possible assimilation, and, and I've often wondered how – what do you feel would be the best ways to try to eliminate the fear that, that does exist in some temple members that they're going to be overwhelmed by non-Sephardic culture?

JC: Oh (pauses), well, it almost gets down to the point where you have to get people together as, as missionaries, people like myself and others in my generation that wanna see this perpetuated. But, what, what's gonna galvanize 'em? I mean, uh, those in my generation – of course, our parents are gone now, most of, uh, but, uh – but it's how dedicated we were to them and those that preceded them and, uh, you know, uh, in perpetuating our Sephardic culture, uh, where will our temple, for example, be, uh, you know, ten, fifteen, twenty years from now?

[00:30:00]

JC: Uh, your schools are important. I think that, uh, education is important. I think, uh, that our local communities here operate pretty much independently. There have been attempts in the past to have Sephardic councils. Nothing has materialized. Uh, but education, uh, Jewish parents – whether their Sephardic or Ashkenazi – are certainly interested in, uh (break/pause in the audio).

JC: Uh, one thing I'd like to bring up, uh, the area of communication and organization. I think we've never had a central organization in the United States or, um, Los Angeles per se. Oh, we've had! I think there's, there's been a Union of Sephardic congregations, uh, with Victor Tarry, uh, whose real name is Victor Tarica,³⁹ in New York at the Shearith Israel⁴⁰ and, um, Dr. de Sola Pool,⁴¹ who of course wrote our Tefilah, our prayer books. But nothing constructive as a way – as an organization should be, and I'm speaking now like the United Synagogue,⁴² which represents the, uh, conservative congregations. We at the Hebrew Center joined this, uh, United Synagogue some two, three years ago, and I think are the only Sephardic congregation per se. We, we are conservative. We, we do not claim to be Orthodox, although the, uh, great majority of, uh, Sephardic congregations now are Orthodox or had been Orthodox, I think. But more are leaning toward the conservative, uh, Reformed⁴³ we'll never be – I know that for sure. But I think we've reached that point now. I think in the New World here in the U.S. that we are conservative. But the United

³⁹ Victor Tarry/Tarica (1904–2002), Sephardi organizer.

⁴⁰ Synagogue in New York City (established 1904).

⁴¹ David de Sola Pool (1885–1970), English/U.S. American Sephardic rabbi.

⁴² United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (established 1913).

⁴³ Reform Judaism, emphasizing ethics over ceremony.

Synagogue, I think is a, is a perfect example of what should be done to federate, to bring together, to serve the needs of Sephardim communities, uh, organizations uh, not only, um, in communications, in publicity—I mean, they publish every month or so a magazine. As a member of the Hebrew Center, I, uh, receive this because our congregation is affiliated with the United Synagogue. Uh, they put out various guides on organization, on community projects, on about, uh—well it, it just covers the whole gamut, you see, of community life within a congregation and, uh, and, uh, it's excellent! Now I'd like to see this done for the Sephardic community. I think locally and nationally, and hopefully from the Federation we will have this. Uh, it's not gonna be easy. I think, uh, as far as bringing our people together, I think this problem with the Oriental Sephardim is, is a, is a big problem. I think that we, we face it here in this community. Uh, there's no problem when we see, uh, we think alike—the Hebrew Center and Rabbi Ott's temple,⁴⁴ and, uh, our organizations. Uh, but there are here Assyrian congregation who are Sephardim. There's Kahal, Kahal Joseph,⁴⁵ which is, uh, Indian-Iraqi Sephardim. But there's a real problem of our assimilating to them. I mean, you know, we were similar in some ways, but they were not, uh—but I think if we make any headway, and I—if, if the two Ladino congregations can, can push, push this, you know, through our leadership and through the national organization and hopefully form the Federation on the basis of serving the need of Sephardic causes, Sephardic organization, unification. Uh, but this should be one of our prime goals, but, uh, un—unfortunately, one of the overriding factors is this, this whole thing of setting up priorities, and one of the big priorities is, is the plight of the Oriental Sephardic community, uh—people within, uh, Israel and assisting them, you see. But, uh, there are those of us that contend, uh—let's us first organize as Sephardim and our causes and bring our people together and, uh, address ourselves to a lot of the problems I've been discussing earlier. And, hopefully, if we can model ourselves, uh, not exactly but along the lines of United Synagogue and, uh, United Sephardic, uh, Federation or whatever you want to call it along those lines, that we can best, uh, serve these problems and best, uh, tackle them, you know—whether it's the youth problem, or assimilation, or losing our identity, or whatever. And, uh, and I have strongly urged—I sent a memorandum to, uh, New York, uh, in December, uh, stressing a lot of these points. And one of the things, uh, I said, uh, that we need to galvanize our group would be a national newsletter for the Federation, and then I also said there should be a press and publicity campaign to support the launching and subsequent development of the organization and a special

⁴⁴ Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel, Los Angeles (established 1920).

⁴⁵ Kahal Joseph (Mizrahi) Congregation, Los Angeles (established 1959).

committee organized of Sephardim in public relations advertising in the media who can assist in this sector, you see.

RB: That's what I contend.

JC: Um-hm, and, uh, but this is gonna take time. I think that, uh, there's no budget at present to support this thing. I think that, um, if we can convince, at the national founding convention, that there should be professionalism attached to this as far as retaining counsel, you see. Those of us in the profession I think will give of our service voluntarily. I mean, it's almost like a chamber of commerce where you're a businessman and you give your services to the benefit of the business community or the commerce, uh, activity within the area. And, uh, but we need secretariats.⁴⁶ I think, uh, paid secretariats. Uh, there is one in New York now, um, that we could call our own. Uh, we would need one here, in Seattle, in different—large—Sephardic communities, this⁴⁷ being the second largest Sephardic community, in Seattle the third. Of course, New York is the first. But that's one of the problems, I, I said that, um, in this memorandum, getting back to what should we work for—as far as a public relations program—well, you have to establish priorities and objectives before you, as you well know—and I said that our prime objectives, our “raison d'être,”⁴⁸ reason for being, of course, should be by working for Sephardic causes and the preservation, perpetuation, and growth of Sephardism, uh, within the frame—framework of our Jewish faith and Zionism.⁴⁹ And by doing this we also help sustain, preserve, and advance Judaism in Israel, you see.

[00:40:00]

JC: And, uh, one of the priorities I mentioned, uh—not only let's, let's organize ourselves, let's address ourselves to Sephardic problems within the framework I mentioned—but let's also address ourselves to this problem of the Sephardic Oriental community in Israel—education, housing, and they're not getting a fair shake.

RB: Right.

JC: And, uh—but it has to be a grassroots thing. I think when people raise money, whether it's through the Jewish Agency⁵⁰ or for whatever Jewish cause there is or—of course, there are the large moneyed interest in those that do contribute—but I'd, I'd like to see more involvement by the, uh, Sephardic individuals, whoever they are, whether it's a housewife, a

⁴⁶ Administrative units.

⁴⁷ Reference to Los Angeles.

⁴⁸ French for “reason for being.”

⁴⁹ Jewish movement (since nineteenth century), emphasizing the return of the Jews to the land of Israel.

⁵⁰ Jewish Agency for Israel (established 1929).

widow, or a professional man, uh, or a student—to get them involved in something like this. I think, you know, the world is full of causes now. There's the black cause or, uh, the minorities or, uh—you know, everybody's got (laughs)—but, uh, here's, here's something that we can really address ourselves to. And this, this might be the galvanizing force that's gonna bring, you know, these people together—culturally, uh, religious stand point, you know, give them something to really hang on to. But we need professional guidance on this thing. We don't—we shouldn't do it just, you know, matter-of-factly. I think it's one thing that the Ashkenazim have. They, they have that, that great force for organizing, for doing things in this manner, you see, for raising money, for being—you know, whether it's 'cause of the Germanic background, you know, where people address themselves—but, but we have it too. But sometimes we, we, we lose it, uh, and, uh, there has to be, uh, a renaissance⁵¹ and an understanding of what Sephardim are, and we address ourselves to these problems, you see. And, uh, locally here, uh, it's not gonna be easy, but I think that, uh, if we have the nucleus and we do become a viable organization, as the as Federation of the chapter here is concerned, that I think a lot of this will follow, and, uh, that, uh—it's not gonna be easy. There are a lot of overriding problems. And one of them, we discussed earlier, that, for some reason or other, the—we've just never been able to get Sephardim together in a concerted effort, you see—because everybody, whether it's 'cause their geographic background or what not, they just—and then again, you, you say, well isn't this something they could be doing within their own congregations? Well, it's true, but even the congregations themselves are deluded to a certain point where they, they, they're not part of the mainstream of the Sephardic community or the overall Jewish community, you see. And how involved they get—there, there, there's a lot lacking there. Some of our men, some of the ladies have actively participated, but to the average congregant, to the, you know, Mr. and Mrs. A and two children, and they're in their teens, for example—I mean, uh, fine, they know that, uh, they're Sephardim, they belong to a Sephardic congregation, they like to see what's happening, but they go to temple services, their social events in their congregations, I think, because, to them, it's a sense of belonging. And they enjoy the company, they enjoy the culture, the religious aspects of it, and they're devoted, devoted to this. But you don't have as much of that dedication here because we're spread out. That, that closeness, attachment that they would have had in the island community of Rhodes or Salonika⁵² or Istanbul or Smyrna⁵³—whatever—

⁵¹ Rebirth.

⁵² Thessaloniki, Greek port city on the northwestern Aegean Sea.

⁵³ Today known as Izmir (Turkey), port city on the eastern Aegean Sea.

where they were, they were close nit. I mean, they, they actually, I mean, their commerce was tied together, their (laughs), their community living was tied together, and, uh, their civic life was drawn together as a, as a Sephardic community. All of that was integrated, and when they did deal, of course, with the, the, uh, government, uh, in these communities – I mean, there was a certain interrelationship there, too, but they were much more closely integrated. So, it, it's a problem, and how do you overcome this? I think it's a question of communication again. And, uh, this has to be – I think, uh, one of the driving forces that's gonna galvanize a lot of the people together again. It's – you take an example of, uh, let's say the son of a Sephardic community that, uh, uh, a Sephardic, uh, family here in the community, uh, that his parents passed away. He married, uh, let's say an Ashkenazi girl, and, uh, they, uh, joined, uh, an Ashkenazi temple, if at all they joined a temple, you see. Well, he has drifted away, but, yet, he was brought up in Sephardic culture. He knows it, and all of a sudden he realizes I, uh, I'm, I'm missing something here, you know. That, uh, this was the way I was brought up and, uh – well, what's gonna motivate him to say, let, uh, I want to get back into the mainstream of Sephardic community life here. Well, he, he takes a look at the congregations and one is way out here, and one's in the other part of the city, and he doesn't live close to any of them, and he has to go great distances, you know, to come to these, uh, things. We have within our temple organization, and I'm sure at Temple Tifereth,⁵⁴ you do, too, that, uh, we only see some people during the High Holidays⁵⁵ that just come, you see. And we like to see them involved – we, we carry on membership drives, but it almost has to revolve itself down to our becoming missionaries, those of us that are really concerned. And, um, we do it by communication and by getting involved, by offering again a product, and a realization, and an eye-opener. Our temple is six, seven years old – the new one. The Rabbi's Ott's temple hopefully will be another source to draw back, you see, a lot of the Sephardim. But, uh, myself, as an example, uh, I've been active, uh, in temple affairs now for seven or eight years. And I hadn't been up to that time. Oh, I had, you know, attended services and what not. But then, then I felt, uh, what motivated me, for example, I think it, uh, it was a deep sense of tradition, of, uh, the way I was brought up and, uh, what I felt, you know – that I wanted to be part of that life. But you have to feel it, you have to be motivated. I think that, uh, uh, nobody's forcing you to do it, you know. And – but we know there are people within the community that can be drawn back again. And I think if they see that certain things are happening that, that – where they can get re-involved with, you know, their

⁵⁴ Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel, Los Angeles (established 1920).

⁵⁵ Principally Rosh Hashanah (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement).

family life, um—I think can materially benefit. I think just the association of being, you know, with other Sephardim. I think this, this is gratifying. I think people nowadays, I think, don't wanna be loners. I think they, they wanna belong to something—I really do. I think that, uh, uh, oh, that you may have certain personalities that exist where people are always gonna be hermits and they just don't want to draw themselves to any kind of community life or, you know, activity. But, by and large, I think people have to gravitate, I think, to something like this. I think it's to their own benefit. Uh, but how we get 'em back, it's, it's, it's, it's one of the problem areas of course.

RB: Could I ask you one last question, 'cause I know, um, you're busy, and I really appreciate your time—

JC: Um-hm. Um-hm—

RB: You've given me some excellent material this is exactly—

JC: Well, I hope I've given you some leads, you know, that, uh—

RB: This, this is what I'm trying to identify. I'm trying to identify problem areas, not trying to solve them. I'm just trying to identify various areas—

JC: Um-hm. Um-hm—

RB: Um, through my interviews with these different people, such as yourself—we started to go into this one particular area, and I wonder if we could go into it a little more. Um, how was community relations dealt with in these flourishing cities and in these flourishing areas as you mentioned, such as where your family, uh, originated from?

[00:50:00]

JC: Well, uh, within these communities, of course, they had their own temple organizations. I know, uh, their own, uh, uh, temple, uh, boards. They had, uh, their own bylaws and so forth. I mean, that's, that's—in Rhodes, for example, I know at, at the height there of the community they had something like four or five synagogues. But there was, as I understand it, a central council, you know, for the community there. Uh, now I can't give you an exact description. I think when you talk to Dr. Benveniste,⁵⁶ for example, I think he can give you more of the civic aspects. I mean, how they dealt with, uh—as far as governing themselves—

RB: Does he come directly from there? Does he have—

JC: Oh, yes—

RB: Exposure there—

JC: He was born there. Oh, yes. Right. Yeah. And, uh, he, uh, he's written various articles, uh, along these lines. But I think he'd be more conversant with you on thi—on this subject as far as the, the community life there, what their problems were. Uh, naturally, they would be more strict, uh, more

⁵⁶ Presumably Dr. Irving Benveniste of the Sephardic Hebrew Center, Los Angeles.

confining. Living within a walled city, I, I don't think it would be called a ghetto, except in time of war or something like that. But, uh, but they had their own, uh, shopping area. They had their own doctors, uh, bankers, professional people, uh, and those that were in the elite, I guess, uh, that were high in the professions that, uh, worked outside of the walled city or had their, uh, homes outside of the particular walled city there in the community. But this existed, to a certain extent, and, uh, but to the regular Sephardim that lived within the walled city, I mean, they, they had all the conveniences there. Uh, but there was this interrelationship with what—whatever, uh, the existing, uh, culture was there at the time. Predominant, uh—whether, uh, the Island was ruled by the Greek government or the Italians or the Turkish, they had a good working relationship with those governments and those people. It's interesting, uh, I think, it's—you mentioned assimilation—that to, to this day there are Greek merchants, jewelers, people in the other crafts on the island of Rhodes and the community there that speak Ladino just as well as our, uh, people do. And, uh, they were taught their trades—a lot of them in the leather crafts and so forth. But, uh, our people, I guess, if you wanted to describe, uh, you would say they would be, by and large, artisans. I think that, uh, in the various crafts and, uh, a lot of merchants. I mean, um, dealing in produce and, um, and you even get it now where quite a few Sephardic merchants are involved in flower shops, you know, and, uh, selling fresh flowers, cut flowers, and—but they are—what they do do, they do as artists, I think, uh, in that particular area.

RB: Yes.

JC: And a lot of that is carried over, and, uh—oh, I'm sure a lot of community problems existed there and problems of intermarriage. Uh, and they used to, uh, they used a word, and you may have heard this already, but anybody, any Sephardim that were not *Rodesli*,⁵⁷ those that lived within that community, were called *agenos*.⁵⁸ And that would mean “strangers” or what not. I mean, if they were from Izmir⁵⁹ or Smyrna.

RB: Would you spell that?

JC: Oh, a-g-e-n-o-s—I think with a tilde over the n, uh, probably would be the correct spelling on that.

RB: Thank you.

JC: I always thought that meant—was a derivative from “Aegean” but it's not (laughs). It, it may well have been. I don't know. But, uh, it'd be interesting, you could probably ask, uh, Dr. Benveniste. He could probably give you some more background on that. But, you see, a lot of that carried over to

⁵⁷ Sephardim with ties to Rhodes.

⁵⁸ Greek term for “strangers.”

⁵⁹ Formerly known as Smyrna, port city on the eastern Aegean Sea.

the community here, too, where you had those from Turkey, uh, belonging, by and large, and, uh, maybe some from Salonika that belonged to, uh, I think most of them from Turkey, though—from either Istanbul or, or, uh, Izmir or some of the other larger Sephardic communities. And we as *Rodeslis*, you know, pretty much, because their confinement on an island, naturally, I mean, they were identified as *Rodeslis* and, uh, it carried through, uh, uh, I wouldn't say prejudice. But, I mean, you know, a certain amount of pride in who they were and what they were. Now, to my generation, uh, sure—I'm extremely proud that I'm descended from *Rodeslis*. Uh, what contributions we did make, uh, you know, in the island there, three or four centuries. But I also, uh, am extremely proud of the fact that we're Sephardim of Ladino extraction, and, uh, and our contributions, you know, are there. But, uh, this shouldn't enter into, you know, any (laughs)—in my estimation your interests of opinion are differentiations. And, uh, that's, uh, a bit—one of the stumbling blocks of local unity. But I think it will be past, say, uh—and I think it's, it's evolving itself around that right now, I think with my generation and succeeding generations. But I think Americanization of the generation after mine will (inaudible), will become, you know, Americanized. I think that's gonna happen, as a certain bearing (inaudible). Would you go to community like Argentina or Buenos Aires⁶⁰ or Montevideo,⁶¹ any of the Spanish countries, you know. I think they're a little more closely knit there because their language has been preserved more. But here, we've become Americanized, and there's nothing wrong—I, I contend that we have developed here American Sephardim, and I think this is the name of the publication⁶² that comes out of New York.

RB: Right.

JC: So, we have developed, uh, American Sephardim with our roots going back. Hopefully, uh, the Ladino language will be preserved, I think, uh, in these other Spanish-speaking countries. And it will be here. I, it may be a shelf item within the next fifty to a hundred years in, in the States, uh, 'cause it's gradually disappearing. Now I will insist and almost put into our liturgy, uh, Ladino from time to time, and I wanna see it, you see, 'cause I think it has a certain amount of beauty. And, and, and I think this is one of the factors. I think that, you know, you talk about communications and I think within the Spanish-speaking community—I'm no longer talking in the Sephardic, I'm talking about, you know, outside of our Sephardic community—that they're interested in our particular Ladino and our Spanish, and it's, it's, it's very interesting. I think you have a lot of Spanish

⁶⁰ Capital of Argentina.

⁶¹ Capital of Uruguay.

⁶² Presumably a newsletter published by the then emerging American Sephardi Federation.

scholars that, you know, have done extensive studies on this and published papers, articles, and, uh, that I don't think, uh, will be lost. But it's, it's, it's interesting, you know, it's, uh, what has, uh, taken place in that area. And, uh, if this is gonna be one of the things, you know, that's gonna bring people back together to – they were brought up as kids listening to this in their home, they spoke it to a certain extent. But now we, in our generation, don't speak it at home as much, you know. Uh, and not even the – my generation where they're Sephardic married to Sephardic, you see. Oh, they will speak it, but when will they speak it – when we get together, you know, at a, at a function at our organization or temple, and, uh, they speak the language. But, um, it's different. I mean, if, if you go to South America (inaudible) naturally Spanish is spoken. But they will maintain their, their dialect. Even then, I think there, there's a certain evolution where they adapt themselves to the Spanish of that particular country.

RB: Of course. I wanna thank you very much, Mr. Cordova, for spending this much time and for giving me your insights into the community relations, needs, and problems with the Sephardim, and I apprec – appreciate your professional expertise additionally.

[01:00:38]

END OF INTERVIEW