# The Sephardic Immigrant from Bulgaria: A Personal Profile of Moise Gadol

*Albert J. Amateau*

The 150,000 Sephardic Jews in the United States are not generally included in written or oral considerations of the country's Ashkenazi Jewish community, five million strong. The Ashkenazi immigrants came from lands in Eastern Europe to escape discrimination, anti-Semitism, harassment, and pogroms. The great majority of the Sephardic immigrants came from lands in the Ottoman Empire where, in the fifteenth century, their ancestors had been made welcome by the sultans, following the expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal.

During their five-hundred-year sojourn in the Ottoman Empire, they had not been subjected to discrimination, anti-Semitism, or massacre. On the contrary, they had been granted freedom of religious observance under their semi-autonomous communal organizations, and the chief rabbi of each community had been recognized by the Ottoman government. Chief rabbis had the authority to enforce Jewish religious observances in regard to the dietary laws, Sabbath and holidays, marriage, divorce, circumcision, and burial. Jews were permitted to conduct their own community schools and to educate their children, using any language they desired. Moreover, they had the right to engage in any legal trade, occupation, or career, and to buy, sell, and own real property.

What motivated them, then, to emigrate from a country that treated them so well?

The underlying causes that led large numbers of Sephardim to come to the United States from the Ottoman Empire in the period from 1900 to 1914 deserve further research. Also deserving of notice are the aspirations of Moise Gadol to the leadership of the new arrivals, his establishment of *La America*, a weekly tabloid in Judeo-Spanish (the mother tongue of the majority of the immigrants), and the causes for his failure. It all constitutes part of the unpublished history of the Sephardic community in the United States.

*Moise Gadol (1874–1941)*

(Courtesy of Rabbi Marc D. Angel)

## *The Sephardic Immigration*

Between 1900 and 1914, some 30,000 Sephardic immigrants entered the United States through Ellis Island. Of these, 20,000 remained in New York. Others were attracted to opportunities for gainful occupation in other parts of the country. Even before the outbreak of World War I in 1914 there were sizable Sephardic communities in Detroit, Chicago, Atlanta, Montgomery, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Seattle.

Most of the immigrants were ill prepared, lacked knowledge of English, and had no trade skills or business experience. A great many found work in menial jobs at low pay, in bakeries, restaurants, laundries, and an electric battery manufacturing plant where they performed the lowliest tasks. Others found employment as janitors in theaters and office buildings, while a few checked hats and coats for concessionaires in restaurants and night clubs.

Those among them who had attended the schools of the Alliance Israelite Universelle in Turkey found that the French they had learned had no economic value in the United States. All could read enough Hebrew to recite the prayers, but most of them did not understand it. The majority spoke Judeo-Spanish as their mother tongue, but few could actually read or write the language, which was written with Hebrew Rashi characters.

Most of the immigrants were single men. Guided by HIAS they generally found accommodations as roomers or group tenants in walk-up tenement apartments on the Lower East Side in the area bounded by the Bowery, Clinton, Houston, and Canal Streets. At that time the area was largely settled by Romanian Jewish immigrants. The new immigrants could buy kosher foods and delicatessen, and by walking a few blocks on the other side of the Bowery, they could shop in Little Italy for olive oil (which they used instead of fat), olives, pungent cheeses, and the vegetables and fruits they were accustomed to from their native lands.

Working twelve and fourteen hours a day, cooking for themselves, laundering and tidying up their rooms did not leave much time for leisure, social, or religious activities and/or attending classes at the local public schools to learn English. Yiddish they did not know, and the strangely pronounced and peculiarly accented Hebrew of their Ashkenazi neighbors kept the newcomers away from the Jewish reli-

gious and cultural centers of the area. Most never learned to read and write English, though some did learn to speak it in the manner in which they heard it spoken. Few had any technical education or possessed the qualities or experience for leadership. The High Holy Days brought immigrants from the same city together to pray in rented halls.

Sephardic youth had emigrated to seek better economic opportunities, and in 1908–1910, especially to escape the application of the new law enacted by the Turkish parliament making all non-Turks in the empire subject to military service.

### *Moise Gadol*

In 1910 a newly arrived immigrant from Bulgaria seemed to stand out from all the other Sephardic immigrants. Moise Gadol was in his early fifties, well educated, amd fluent in a number of languages, including Yiddish and Judeo-Spanish. He appeared to be affluent and experienced in business. Disregarding his practical business experience, he became mesmerized with impractical schemes calculated to exploit the Sephardic immigrants under the guise of benevolent leadership.

Already past military age and experienced in business, Gadol seemed to have had no compelling leave Bulgaria. As a result, the Sephardic immigrants were suspicious of him, ascribing ulterior motives to all his efforts to befriend and lead them. During his first few months in this country, as he met immigrants and attempted to interest them in his schemes for an organized community with a newspaper as its public relations organ, he was challenged again and again by a Judeo-Spanish saying: *Beudico dio. Agora estamos en La America—kada uno por si* ("Blessed God. We are now in America, where everyone is responsible for himself").

The death of two individuals, one in 1905 and the other in 1907, had made the immigrant Sephardim painfully aware of death and of their lack of the kind of communal facilities which back home automatically provided funeral services. But they mistrusted the idea of a formally organized community. They remembered their experiences in the old country with autocratic communal administrators, chief rabbis, and *gevirim* (communal notables) who arrogated to themselves the enforcement of conservative social and religious mores. They rejected as impractical Gadol's radical idea that the existing

group associations could be transformed into a communal organization with a chief rabbi to be brought from Turkey.

But Moise Gadol, intelligent though he was, had a one-track mind, an exaggerated ego, and the well-known stubbornness characteristic of Bulgarians. Oblivious to all opinions opposed to his schemes, he proceeded to implement his plan. As a first step he established a printing shop with roman and Hebrew type fonts, and launched an eight-page tabloid weekly newspaper in Judeo-Spanish with the title *La America* on its masthead. He employed two Ashkenazi Jewish typesetters who had to work with painstaking slowness, letter by letter, because they could recognize the Hebrew characters but did not know the Judeo-Spanish language.

Gadol's ill-conceived plans miscarried and all his subsequent efforts went awry. Yet he persevered and for a number of years made heroic efforts, both in personal dedication and investments of money, until, completely disillusioned, broke, and disheartened, he gave up. He stopped publication and disappeared. His health had suffered greatly and he died a broken man, saved from interment in potter's field by the timely rescue of few well-wishers.

The reasons that motivated Moise Gadol to aspire to leadership of the Sephardic immigrants, his persistence in publishing the weekly newspaper, and the causes for his failure deserve to be recorded as part of the early history of the Sephardic immigrants in America. I happen to be the only contemporary still alive who cooperated and collaborated with him in the initial stages of his efforts. I can see him now, as in a dream . . .

### *Gadol and the Author Meet*

Midafternoon of an unseasonably cold day in September 1910, the chill in my unheated tenement room on Forsyth Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan had compelled me to seek comfort in A. Levy's coffee house a block away at the corner of Chrystie and Rivington Streets. Fellow Sephardic immigrants were seated around tables, sipping Turkish coffee and playing cards, dominoes, or backgammon. The doors were closed to retain whatever heat was given off by the large gas heater in the center of the room. A few nonplayers like myself sat beside the large plate-glass windows, watching the parade of peo-

ple walking gingerly in the snow dropped by the preceding night's storm.

A man peered through the window, hesitated a moment, and then slowly opened the door and came in. He was wearing a heavy overcoat with an Astrakhan collar, had a Russian-type kalpak on his head, pulled well down over his ears, and carried a heavy black, silver-headed walking stick in his gloved hand. The sudden draft of cold air caused everyone to look up toward the door. Instant suspicion was stamped on every face. He was an *ajenou* (stranger), and of course no one recognized him. The newcomer looked around slowly, scanning every face.

"Can I be of help to you, sir?" I volunteered.

"Thank you." He spoke with a peculiar foreign accent that I couldn't identify. He continued in Judeo-Spanish:

"Isto bushkandou al Sinior Jack Farhi. Mi disheroun que aqui lou puedou toupar." (I am looking for Mr. Jack Farhi. I was told I could find him here.)

Levy, the proprietor, entered the conversation to say that Farhi was expected. The stranger introduced himself. "Mi yamou Moise Gadol. Vengou di Bulgaria." (My name is Moise Gadol. I come from Bulgaria.)

"My name is Albert , and I come from Turkey."

He asked if all the men present were from Turkey too.

"The majority here are from Rhodes, a few from Gallipoli and the Dardanelles."

"Is this a holiday?" he asked.

"Why do you ask?"

"Seeing them here in the coffee house during the day. Don't they work?"

"Most of them are night workers. Some work for concessionaires or own a concession where they sell refreshments or check coats and hats in hotels or night clubs. They will be gone soon to work from 6:30 to past midnight."

He had a rather long face, swarthy completion, stood five foot seven or eight, a little rotund. He looked to be in his early fifties. The black hair on his head and his moustache was sprinkled with a few threads of white. His small hands looked well tended, indicating that he was not a manual worker. His small feet were shod in high-necked black

leather shoes buttoned on the side over which he wore rubber overshoes.

He asked me: "How long have you been in America?"

"Since last August."

"You must have known English before you came." "Yes. I studied it in school in Turkey."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I am a movie projector operator."

"Did you do that kind of work in Turkey?"

"No. I was a graduate of the law school of the University of Istanbul."

"Why did you emigrate?"

"To escape military service."

"What kind of work does Mr. Farhi do?" That question startled me, and I could see that several men who were sitting nearby were surprised too.

"I thought you knew Mr. Farhi!"

"No, I don't. A friend gave me his name and said that he is from Bulgaria and that I could find him here."

"Mr. Farhi sells insurance, helps immigrants with their personal and family problems. He acts as arbitrator in business or personal controversies. He helps to organize religious and burial societies and acts as agent in the purchase of cemetery plots."

"You mean, there are many such societies?"

"Oh, yes. The immigrant groups from the different cities in Turkey, in Greece and Syria—each has its own religious and burial society and cemetery."

"Why not all one community?" he asked in wonderment.

"They have so little in common. Each group is addicted to the distinct music of their prayers. They say they feel more comfortable among themselves than with people from other cities."

"What a shame! What a pity! They should be united in one community. They shouldn't imitate the Yiddishim."

"I agree with you, but it seems very difficult for them to overcome their mutual suspicions and prejudices." I noticed a folded *Morgen Journal* on his lap and asked: "Can you read Yiddish?"

"Yes, and German, and Bulgarian, some Russian, and Romanian."

Then he noticed the book I held in my hand. It was Rambam's *Moré*

*Nevuhim* ("Guide for the Perplexed").

"Do you know Hebrew well enough to read your book in Hebrew?"

"Yes. I had a good Hebrew education. My maternal grandfather, Rabbi Moshé Franco, chief rabbi of Rhodes, taught me a great deal during my annual vacations with him in Rhodes."

When Jack Farhi arrived I introduced them. After a few preliminaries in Judeo-Spanish, Gadol conversed with Farhi in Bulgarian. As I rose to leave, he extracted a card from a fine leather wallet and offered it to me, asking for my card in return. I wrote my address on a piece of paper and told him I had no card or telephone. He lived on Seventh Avenue in Harlem, considered a desirable residential area at the time.

### *Gadol's Proposal*

A few days later I received a note from Gadol inviting me for lunch in a restaurant on Lenox Avenue at 111th Street. His wife, Rachel, a short, buxom woman of forty or forty-five, sat quietly throughout our conversation of almost an hour. Their attire was definitely a cut above what was available to most of us immigrants, and he told me that he had been a successful merchant in Bulgaria, engaged in the export/import trade with Austria and Germany. Try as I did, then and later, I could not get him to tell me why he had decided to leave Bulgaria.

The Gadols had no children, and both were ardent Zionists. He asked if I would help him organize a Sephardic community with a Zionist orientation, and my answer was direct.

"I would be happy to help organize a community but without Zionist ties. As I understand the Zionist program, it is to establish in Palestine a political home for Eastern European Jews. As subjects of the Turkish sultan we have been treated with tolerance and consideration, and therefore the Jews of Turkey cannot afford to take a position favorable to Zionism, for it would be considered subversive. I will not advocate Zionism. We must do nothing to jeopardize the safety of our people in Turkey. If the Zionists obtain the sultan's consent, it would be a different story."

Farhi had told Gadol that most of the Sephardic immigrants were almost completely unschooled, that they had come from the poorest and lowest social classes in Turkey. They had no ideals; their sole aim

was to make money. They had only a fanatical adherence to religious observance, and their interest in religion was confined to the High Holidays and to religious burial. Farhi maintained that it was too early to interest them in a formal community.

I agreed with Farhi's analysis but not his conclusions. I suspected that Farhi and the group leaders had other reasons for opposing the formation of a community and for their reluctance to discuss the subject. The group leaders were in the business of selling insurance or jewelry to the immigrants, guiding them to lawyers and doctors, recruiting them as workers for factories, acting as arbitrators in controversies, and selling cemetery plots. An organized community structure would deprive them of their group leadership, their influence, and their business perquisites. It was in their own self-interest that they opposed the formation of a communal organization.

Farhi had told Gadol that I had organized the Brotherhood of Rhodes and was teaching elementary English to a class of ten Sephardic adults.

"You are a young and progressive leader. We should work together. The Yiddish press is full of maneuverings by the Jewish communal politicians for and against the formation of a general Jewish community, a Kehillah, by Rabbi Judah Magnes, one of the rabbis of Temple Emanu-El. He is a liberal who became Orthodox through his adherence to Zionism, yet he is being sponsored and financed by wealthy German Jews."

"Why are they doing it?"

"For self-protection, and to control the masses of Yiddish immigrants from Eastern Europe, just as we should control the Sephardic immigrants.

"You and I should have a talk with Rabbi Magnes and through him obtain financial support for a Sephardic community and for a weekly newspaper in Judeo-Spanish to serve as our medium of propaganda. With such support and with the veiled threat in the paper of unmasking them, the leaders would not dare continue to oppose the formation of a Sephardic community. I am sure Rabbi Magnes would be interested in the prevention of societies like landmanshaften."

He persuaded me to join him in pleading the cause of a Sephardic community.

### *La America*

A week later Rabbi Magnes summoned Joseph Gedalecia to meet with him in the Jewish Charities Building at 356 Second Avenue, where the Kehillah had its office. Gedalecia was the manager of the Bureau for the Placement of the Handicapped of the Jewish Community. Rabbi Magnes delegated him to investigate the merits of our proposal. It turned out that Gedalecia was a native of Istanbul; his mother was Sephardic and his father was Donmé. Gedalecia had been educated at the German Buerger Schule in Istanbul, and was fluent in English, German, French, Judeo-Spanish, Turkish, and Yiddish. He had been a social worker for the city of New York at Bellevue Hospital prior to organizing the Bureau for the Jewish Handicapped.

In ensuing meetings Gadol discussed his plans in detail and asked for Gedalecia's help. Gedalecia reported to Magnes that the Sephardic group leaders were absolutely opposed to a community, but that they might agree to join a federation of societies under which each group would maintain its own identity while participating in joint discussions of communal affairs. The leaders, as delegates to such a federation, would meet, get acquainted, and perhaps eventually trust each other sufficiently to agree to the formation of a community. He endorsed Gadol's proposed weekly in Judeo-Spanish and recommended an annual subvention of $10,000.

At that time we were not aware that the wealthy German Jews, the power behind the Kehillah, were opposed to Zionism. Gadol was asked to submit a detailed report on his project and he had emphasized Zionism. He was led to believe that his project was being seriously considered, but nothing happened. Becoming impatient, Gadol established a small print shop on Rivington Street near the Bowery, and early in November 1910 he launched *La America*.

### *Relations with Shearith Israel*

The Kehillah's refusal to sponsor either a federation or a Judeo-Spanish weekly came in the form of a proposal which, at first blush, looked promising. Cyrus Sulzberger, married to a Sephardic lady, was a trustee of Temple Emanu-El and, as we later discovered, a spokesman for Jacob Schiff, Felix Warburg, the Wertheimes, the Seligmans, the Lehmans, the Lewisohns, and other German Jews who were promi-

nent in Jewish communal affairs. He proposed that Shearith Israel, recognized as the Sephardic religious entity in New York, be asked to sponsor and guide the proposed federation and the publication of the weekly.

Gedalecia and I met with Rabbi Mendes, the minister of Shearith Israel, Rabbi Pool, his assistant, and N. Taylor Phillips, one of the congregation's foremost lay leaders, but Gadol pleaded inability to join us. The Shearith Israel leaders, without definitely committing themselves, promised to be helpful.

Gedalecia won considerable influence among the Sephardic immigrants by securing jobs for them through the Bureau for the Handicapped, declaring them eligible for the agency's services on the grounds that their lack of industrial skills and their ignorance of English were handicaps. However, this activity gained him the secret animosity of some of the group leaders.

The first meeting to organize a federation was also attended by officers of Shearith Israel. Gedalecia acted as temporary chairman and was elected president, defeating three group leaders who had been nominated. Gadol had asked some of the delegates to place his name in nomination for the presidency, but no one did.

Two names were proposed for the organization: New York Sephardic Federation and Federation of Oriental Jews. The Shearith Israel delegation favored the latter name, arguing that Jews from Arab countries, Morocco, Yemen, Persia, and India could be won over to a federation with the "Oriental" appellation.

Gadol did not object or seem displeased. Later he confided to me that he had not objected because he had been afraid to displease the Shearith Israel leaders. He claimed that they had promised him their financial backing for the publication of the weekly. Later he criticized them in an article for reneging on "the promise made to me by Rabbi de Sola Pool."

### *Federation Problems*

I had been elected secretary of the Federation of Oriental Jews.

At that first meeting and before the election took place, Gadol had attempted in a rambling speech to offer his own candidacy as president and dwelt on the importance and the need for a news medium for the Federation and the societies. He moved that the Federation, in

formulating its budget, make provision for a subvention of $6,000 to *La America*. When no one else seconded his motion, I did. Many spoke in opposition, maintaining that it was premature for a new organization, unsure of its income, to commit itself to supporting a privately owned newspaper. In addition, the Arabic- and Greek-speaking delegates were opposed to a newspaper in Judeo-Spanish because that was not the language of their constituents and therefore it would not serve their interests.

Gadol could not take defeat with good grace. I found myself pleading with him to support Gedalecia and the Federation, and to trust the few of us who favored subventing his paper to find a way eventually to accomplish that aim. He became morose and uncooperative, and initiated a campaign against Gedalecia. He entitled his first attack "An Ashkenazi Should Not Be the Head of a Sephardic Organization." He refused to recognize that Gedalecia was not an Ashkenazi, and that even if he were, no one except Gadol himself wanted the presidency because of the effort and time the office demanded.

### *Failure and Bitterness*

The meager advertising Gadol obtained from business establishments and professionals who catered to Sephardic immigrants hardly covered the cost of paper and printing. He depended on job printing to make ends meet. The few readers of the paper resented his constant criticisms and moralizing. His frequent articles advocating Zionism caused resentment because his readers saw the Zionists as jeopardizing the historical bond of friendship and understanding between Jew and Turk.

Three young Sephardic immigrants, Moise Soulam, Moise Varsano, and Albert Levy, worked for Gadol for a while, but left him and launched a rival weekly in Judeo-Spanish. Their paper, *La Vara*, was published in a humorous vein accompanied by rough cartoons. In one of the articles in *La Vara*, poking fun at his serious and solemn style, Gadol was called "Yermiah el choron" (Jeremiah the lamenter). Soon, whenever Gadol appeared at a meeting or social gathering, word was whispered around, "Yermiah el choron is here."

Being ridiculed hurt Gadol deeply. He was unable to understand that a newspaper supposedly dedicated to serving a community could not be used to further his own capricious ideas. *La America* was his

baby. He sacrificed money, time, effort, and leisure, and he was going to use it just as he saw fit.

Within two years, without the subvention of funds from any outside source, his private resources were depleted and he was having a difficult time making ends meet. He was still wearing the clothing he had brought from Bulgaria. He smoked incessantly. He had become extremely short-tempered. His resentment at having lost out in the Federation presidency, at having been denied the help he thought he deserved in publishing *La America,* at Shearith Israel's "reneging" on its promise, all made him very intolerant. Full of self-pity, he considered himself a victim for having devoted his money and efforts to a community which did not appreciate him.

His bitterness was patent in his writing, and his exhortations and actions fostered antagonism and active opposition by many in the community. He would go out of his way to praise and then suddenly turn on them with criticisms and attacks.

Moise Gadol's openly avowed aims were to influence the Sephardic immigrants into merging their religious and burial societies into a Sephardic community capable of providing the social, religious, and cultural services they needed, to alert the community to its responsibility to future Sephardic immigrants, and to prepare facilities for their reception and guidance.

His secret, unspoken aims were to advocate Zionism and propagate its adoption by the Sephardic community, and as a leader of the Sephardic community, to wield political influence in New York City.

Profit-making was not his principal motivation. He could have been successful in other endeavors for which he had ample qualifications. The risks he took, the frustrations he endured, the efforts he continuously made assuredly indicated his determination to achieve political aims he considered worthwhile. His ego and bulldog tenacity did not permit him to stop publishing *La America* until he was destitute.

The frustrations and privations he had endured soured him to the point of paranoia, bringing him animosity, ostracism, and a pauper's death.[1]

## *Note*

1. For a published assessment of Moise Gadol, see Marc D. Angel, *La America: The Sephardic Experience in the United States* (1982).

Albert J. Amateau was born in Milas, Turkey, in 1889. At the age of 101, he is still fully active in a number of interests, especially in foreign-language translation for business and industrial films and in maintaining the heritage of Turkey's Sephardic Jewish community.