IBERIAN ADVENTURES: 20TH CENTURY SEPHARDIM IN MEXICO

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast; passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by HUC Connect. The Hebrew Union College's online platform for continuing education. I'm Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's Skirball campus, and your host. Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, and a conversation with Professor Devi Mays, Associate Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Michigan. Dr. Devi Mays studies the transnational Jewish networks of the Mediterranean and the globe, with a focus on Sephardic Jews, gender, and identity. In her 2020 book, "Forging Ties, Forging Passports", she tells the stories of Sephardi migrants to Mexico with their networks among formerly Ottoman lands, France, the US, Cuba, as well as Mexico itself. Mostly, Dr. Mays points out the manner in which geographic and social mobility challenged the physical borders of the state and the conceptual boundaries of the nation. "Forging Ties" won 2020 National Jewish Book Award and a 2021 Jordan Schnitzer Book Award. Congratulations on your successes and welcome to the College Commons Podcast.

Devi Mays: Thank you so much for the warm introduction. And I'm very happy to be with you.

JH: Your book gives us a sense of the arc of 20th Century Sephardi migration to Mexico in particular. What are the six chronological chapters into which you divide your book and what are the primary historical watersheds that define those chapters to help orient our listeners?

DM: So the first chapter of the book opens around 1900 with the immigration of... Among the first Ladino-speaking Sephardi Jews to Mexico, and goes from the period of that early immigration up until the Young Turk Revolution in the Ottoman Empire, and concurrently moves into the second chapter, which is really focusing on how a number of different wars in the 1910s shaped Sephardi experiences, and the Ottomans contacts that would be the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, and then World War I, and in the Mexican context, the Mexican Revolution. The third chapter looks at the period immediately after the Mexican Revolution and World War I, when the world was really trying to get a sense of what would come after The Great War and what states would look like, what nations would look like, what peace processes would look like, and the status of minorities, particularly religious minorities within this new post-war reality. And

in this period of profound uncertainty, what I also argue is that this was really a period of possibility and the imagination of all sorts of different futures that Sephardi Jews and others experience, and that they really try to shape their present in accordance with what they imagined their future might be. So it's this moment of overwhelming possibility, and then doors are progressively closed over the course of this five-year period.

DM: Chapter four really looks at the 1920s, so the immediate post-war period. And again, in the context of nation building and nation shaping and the beginning of global restrictions on migration, starting first with the United States in 1921 and 1924, and how these restrictions in the US were at odds with Mexican conceptions of immigration, particularly regarding Sephardi Jews who were seen as having a specific type of Iberian heritage that distinguish them from other Jews, from other former Ottoman subjects, and as perhaps assimilable into this Mexican nation that was being forged. And chapter five looks mostly at the 1930s, and a period of increasing restrictions this time including Mexico as well, and other places in the world, during a period which as we know as historians of Jewish history, where there was increasing anti-Semitism and xenophobia on a global scale, in which Sephardi Jews, among other Jews, and other racialized peoples were seen as increasingly undesirable as migrants and as immigrants. And then the final chapter follows the trajectory of one particular Sephardi migrant who was born in Constantinople and moves to Mexico and becomes a Mexican diplomatic figure, who then served in Paris as a Mexican diplomat when the city came under Nazi occupation.

DM: And follows his story through World War II and afterwards as a lens into how some of these processes and experiences of Sephardi migration and community on a transnational scale start to fall apart during World War II, just at a time when they're the most important for the attempts to protect or maintain Sephardi lives among other Jewish lives during the Holocaust.

JH: Part of the complexity that you try to capture in this book is illustrated in the life, it seems, of passports, indeed as the title of your book indicates, "Forging Ties, Forging Passports". You get at the ways in which passports seem to capture the malleability of people's national identities, and maybe even the idea of the nation or the nation state itself. I was particularly captivated by the passports story of Gabriel Yermia Valanci. So I was wondering if you could tell us the story of Valanci's passport in relation to the lived experience.

DM: Yeah, so one of the sources that I used in this book was the sort of physical documents of passports themselves, and World War I is often described as ushering in what's called the Passport Age, although passports and travel documents existed earlier. So for the Ottoman Empire, for example, Ottoman subjects were required to get passports for external movement as well as internal movement within the Empire, starting in the late 1860s. But on a global scale, it was really World War I that prompted the monitoring of foreigners who could potentially be enemy spies or enemy aliens, and that led to the proliferation of passports for international travel, and of the need to get visas for international travel. And this is a period right after World War I in which passports are relatively new and what they mean is not fully understood by

diplomats who are issuing them or by the people who are bearing them, and how they're acquired isn't yet regularized. So Valanci was born in Constantinople. It's not clear from the archival record, but it seems like he bribed a judge to declare that he was born in Mexico, not in the Ottoman Empire. And because of that, he was able to acquire a Mexican passport, and this passport is a fascinating document in and of itself.

DM: So passports at this time were not the booklets that we're familiar with, but they were a large sheet of paper that had on the front full-frontal photograph as well as a profile shot of the bearer of the passport as well as identifying information, so their height, their face shape, their nose shape, etcetera, and then on the back was where all of the border crossings and visiting to police prefectures to register in these new cities would be stamped. So Yermia Valanci acquired this fake passport in order to go back to the Ottoman Empire, and he acquired this fake passport and the entire back is completely covered with stamps showing the multiple layers of bureaucracy that he had to go through to make this travel through the United States, through France, through Spain, through Greece, through Switzerland, to the Ottoman Empire, and there it was stamped by Ottoman authorities as well as the inter-allied authorities. And so it tells the story of the levels of bureaucracy, but also hints at what it was he was trying to accomplish with this trip, when it notes that he married in Constantinople a woman named Fanny Levy, who then returned to Mexico with him. And so this is sort of a love story in a way, or gets at the complexities of what was a common practice of Sephardi men returning to their natal cities to marry somebody.

DM: But in order to do this, he had to acquire a fake passport, perhaps because he left the Ottoman Empire bearing irregular papers, which would complicate his effort to re-enter the country. It's not clear what his rationale for this was, but he was able to get married and through this marriage, with these fake papers, his wife would be able to travel back with him, and crucially her father, who was named Abraham Levy, also traveled back with them, although on Mexican immigration documents, it said that he was a retiree. In fact, he was a Rabbi and became the first Rabbi of the Sephardi community of Mexico City where he was incredibly beloved. So this one piece of paper, this one large passport contains a number of stories, including the travails that this one man went through to marry his wife, how the Mexican Sephardi community were able to bring to Mexico their first Rabbi, because it was very difficult to get entry permits for a religious figure into Mexico at this time, regardless of their religion, and also the many, many layers of bureaucracy that this man had to go through, none of which caught that his passport was indeed not representing the truth of where he was from and what his nationality was.

JH: Or as maybe you would argue, it was precisely representative of the fluidity of his nationality.

DM: Right, exactly. The fluidity of his nationality, or how adept he was at recognizing that he could play with these categories in order to accomplish his goal of marriage and perhaps his goal of helping the new Rabbi to come to Mexico.

JH: One of the complexities and sources of richness that you bring to this arc of 20th century migration is the stories of various women. Can you share with us a particularly compelling story that illustrates what it is that you're trying to communicate?

DM: As many of us who are historians know, women often appear less obviously in archival records than men do. It's not to say that they're absent, it just means that it requires a little bit more digging or attention to detail to see where and how women are recorded and how they appear in archival records. And so one of the things that I recognize as a shortcoming in the book is that I wasn't able to show the same level of attention to women as I was able to do with men, but nonetheless, where it was possible for me to do that, I tried to do it as much as possible. And one of the things that I try to explore in the book is the transnational networks that Sephardi migrants created between the different locales where they were living trans-nationally. And in one sense, I argue that this opened up the possibility for freedom of movement, new patterns of associational life, creating new communities in places where there weren't established communities beforehand, and really through that, being able to hash out what they wanted to reproduce from the communities they came from and what other things they wanted to incorporate into their new communities.

DM: But also, I wanted to look at how these networks exerted control in some ways over the types of behaviors that migrants were able to engage in. But I think the story that stands out to me the most in terms of a particular woman's story in this book was this story of a woman named Belina Cadranell, who came first to the United States, from the Ottoman Empire, and she had naturalized in the United States. She had married another Sephardi migrant in the United States, and she had established a life there, had multiple children in the US with her husband, but relatively early on in her marriage to him, he became physically abusive. And she describes how she went to multiple authorities in the United States to try to prevent his abuse of her. But then what she ends up doing is taking her children and going to Mexico. And her sister lived in Mexico. Her sister owned her own property in Mexico. She was married, but she was a business woman in her own right. She had taken a number of people to civil court in Mexico over not paying her what they had promised to pay her for.

DM: So she was familiar with the Mexican legal system. And at this time, when Bellina went down to Mexico with her children where her sister Louisa lived, Mexican divorce law was far more lax than American divorce law was. And so Bellina was able to acquire a divorce from her abusive husband in Mexico and full custody of her children. And then she herself became a successful business woman. She was a dressmaker in the city of Puebla, South of Mexico City, and also like Sephardi men, continued to travel abroad to acquire wares that she imported to Mexico and then sold there. So this was just one example who really struck me of a woman who went through multiple nationalities over the course of her life, but also exhibited a real knowledge of how she could try to position herself in a country that had a legal system that would enable her to protect herself and her children. And I thought that was a really profound story.

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JH: Let's talk for a second about the power of language. Jewish languages are regional languages as spoken by Jews in their own dialects, which are often influenced by Hebrew and Judaism. You focus on the population of Jewish migrants who speak Jewish, Spanish, or Judeo-Spanish or Judezmo, or Ladino as it is variously called. How did this population's Spanish language affinity help the Sephardim in Mexico?

DM: The language question, I think really shaped their experience, the experience of, for simplicity's sake, I'm going to call it Ladino, there's a, as you alluded to, a large debate around what term should be used in the plethora of different terms that are used for it. But for Ladino-speaking Jews, their knowledge of a Hispanic language differentiated, I would say, their experiences in Mexico and perhaps elsewhere in Latin America from other Jewish migrants, whether those were Yiddish-speaking migrants, or in the case of Mexico and elsewhere in Latin America, a very substantial number of Arabic-speaking migrants, predominantly from what is today's Syria and Lebanon, as well as Morocco, and also from other people of Ottoman origins who are not Jewish. So I'll just say that Ladino was the language that Sephardi Jews in the Ottoman Empire spoke at home, but they were very multilingual and literally zero of them spoke only one language.

DM: But the primary language that they would speak amongst themselves would be Ladino or Judeo-Spanish, which is similar in some ways to the Spanish that's spoken in Mexico. And this affected their migratory experience in a number of ways. One of those was from the perspective of the Mexican state, for example, which in the 1920s was trying to create a Mexican nation built on this idea of mestizaje or racial mixing, which in contrast to this scientific racism prevalent in Europe, where the Anglophone world at this time which held that racial purity led to the strongest populations in Mexico was believed that through intermixing of predominantly indigenous and European elements, that the strongest nation could be formed. And it was in the idea of many Mexican thinkers, especially José Vasconcelos, it was really the Spanish blood that was prized amongst European blood.

DM: And so Sephardi Jews having roots in Spain and continuing to speak a Spanish language, was proof in the eyes of some Mexican migration officials that Sephardi Jews were assimilable, that they were in the words of one, equally Spanish as Jewish, and that therefore they were potentially desirable immigrants. This was the conception amongst those Mexican officials who advocated and successfully established honorary consulships in Istanbul after World War I in the hopes of drawing Sephardi migrants to Mexico. So that's from the vantage point of the Mexican state. For Sephardi migrants themselves, knowing Ladino could offer a level of familiarity.

DM: So a trope that I came across over and over and over again, whether from Mexico or from Cuba, was migrants coming off the ship and hearing Spanish being spoken and thinking that everyone there was Jewish because in the Ottoman Empire, a Spanish-like language was a Jewish coded language. So there was a level of comfort that people expressed in hearing that language. For Sephardi Jews who went first to the United States, often not knowing English, so in the large linguistic repertoire that they had, rarely was English one of those languages. So when they came to the United States, they found themselves in more menial professions. And I found numerous immigrants who then moved from the United States to Mexico sometimes after having acquired American citizenship and becoming far more economically and socially mobile in Mexico than they had been in the United States, by virtue of the similarities between Spanish and Ladino. It made it much easier for them to come to Mexico to be able to conduct business, whether that was through peddling or setting up a small dry goods store.

DM: Initially, the similarities between Spanish and Ladino meant that it was far easier for them to communicate with their clientele in Mexico. And then finally, the similarities between Ladino and Spanish meant that as the early Jewish community in Mexico was being established in the 19 teens, first with purchasing and establishing a cemetery, so it was the first action that the Jewish community as a whole undertook in Mexico. It was Ladino-speaking Jews who served as the intermediaries between the Jewish community as a whole, which was composed of Ladino-speaking Jews, but also Arabic-speaking and Yiddish-speaking Jews and the Mexican government, whether that was the national government or the municipality of Mexico City. And so the ease with which Sephardi Jews were able to acquire Spanish because of similarities between Spanish and Ladino, positioned them advantageously as intermediaries between the larger Jewish community and Mexican officials.

JH: And equally interestingly, if I recall correctly, you point out that there's a fourth element, which is that they were able to deploy their Spanish language affinity to counteract some of the religious disadvantage of being Jewish by contrasting themselves with the Maronite Christian Catholic Arabic-speaking population from the same part of the world, from the Ottoman Empire. Is that accurate?

DM: Yeah. That is accurate. So Maronite Arabic-speaking Catholics, also from the Ottoman Empire, from what later became Lebanon, parlayed their common Catholicism in Mexico as a way to show that they were assimilable or that they were potentially desirable immigrants. And

of course, Jews couldn't do that, right? Their religion set them very much as a minority in what was post-Mexican Revolution, a secular country, but staunchly Catholic. But what they did have was this Spanish-type language. So they could, and were in some cases able to play that up as a way of showing that they were assimilable in a way that even other Catholics weren't. Because these Maronite Arabic-speaking immigrants might have a shared religion, but they didn't have that shared language. And I think one other point that I should mention is that this also wasn't one of the number of things that enabled Sephardi Jews to sort of avoid broader antisemitism that became more prevalent in the 1930s, because they were not immediately identifiable as Jewish. And this is also something that Adriana Brodsky has explored for the case of Sephardi migrants in Argentina. So this is not exclusively a Mexican Sephardi experience, but perhaps a more hemispheric experience.

JH: You frame the experiences of your subjects, that is Sephardi migrants to the new world in Mexico in relation to the idea of the state. You say, "Their story cannot be told without simultaneously exploring how states became states and how this was inextricably connected to the process of creating nations." As a medievalist, I am tempted to ask, isn't it the opposite? Don't nations create states rather than vice versa, even if it's also true that the states are never coterminous with the nations that they purport to represent, and isn't peoplehood and nationhood something much deeper, and for lack of a better term, more real than statehood, even if the nation idea also has periphery that complicate its definition?

DM: I'm not a medievalist, and so I come at this question from the vantage point of someone who works on 19th and 20th century history, and particularly coming out of the history of experiences in the Ottoman Empire. If you're looking at an entity like the Ottoman Empire or some of these other large empires that existed and then fell apart during and in the aftermath of World War I, these were incredibly linguistically and ethnically and what we might say nationally diverse empires. And it provoked the question afterwards of how should states be made, and what does that mean about how a nation is understood in the establishment of states that are created out of these empires.

DM: And what I argue is that part of this is really crucially deciding who fits or not, and that can be linked to who is a desirable immigrant or not, and I think this is something that we're all very familiar with on a global level right now, with discussions of immigrants and refugees and privileging certain populations over others, often along political ideology about who fits and who is assimilable and who doesn't. So, what I argue in the book, and sort of what I see when I'm looking at this period in the aftermath of World War I is that there might have been the fiction that a coherent nation existed and that states were established around that, but then through immigrants and emigrants, and it's in part through this that the concept of a specific nation was formed and was refined to be in some ways more coterminous with the borders of the state.

DM: In the case of Mexico, for example, it's after the Mexican Revolution where this ideology of mestizaje, of racial mixing really becomes how this new Mexican state is being defined. And that's really not based on the idea that there is a pre-existing nation, it's based on the idea that

it's possible to create an ideal people and an ideal nation through a certain process of racial mixing of immigrants who were deemed desirable for oftentimes racial reasons. And I think in a lot of ways, one of the things that was so fascinating for me with working on this book is how many of the experiences of individual migrants, of families of migrants and of communities that I'm looking at in a century ago, but that really bears so much in common with experiences and debates that are going on today, and so then even though this is a book of history, it's one that really resonates with contemporary experiences and also the experiences of people who were not Sephardi, that I think this story sheds light on a particular community, but in doing that also sheds light on other communities as well, all the way up until the present.

JH: I'd like to ask you to take us home for the end of the interview with a brief example or a story of something that surprised you in the process of writing this book or researching for it.

DM: So much of doing the research for this book really surprised me. And when I was doing the research, I wanted to write a book that focused on history through the lens of individuals and their experiences. So, I'm engaging with questions of the state but looking at how individuals navigated these profound historical, social, cultural, economic changes that characterized the first half of the 20th century. And I think what I kept coming back to over and over again, what continued and continues to surprise me in the research for this book, and then also in the research that I'm currently undertaking is just how creative and resilient and brave so many of these people were, and how adept they had to become at looking outside of the boxes because they didn't fit.

DM: So how could they make their not fitting within national boxes or religious or linguistic boxes work for them instead of what one might automatically assume of working against them. And I've just been in awe so many times and so surprised to just come across example after example of creativity and ingenuity and how people worked together and formed a really transnational community that was very important to them, through individual actions and through this creativity and through their resilience. So I think for me, it's not one example, but it's the overwhelming sense over and over again of the weight of all of these individual stories and individual lives and the profound courage and resilience that their lives were a testament to.

JH: Well, I love the idea of ending on the note of creativity, resilience and bravery, to which I will only add gratitude to you for this incredible book with these great individual stories and the arc of history that is so close to all of us and really rich and wonderful to read. Professor Devi Mays, thank you so much for joining us.

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DM: Thank you so much for having me.

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