In 1909, thousands of mostly Yiddish-speaking young Jewish women staged a massive strike in New York’s shirtwaist industry, known as the “Uprising of 20,000.” The uprising—the largest strike by women in US history—combined with bitterness provoked by the devastating Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911, produced arguably the most intense period of women’s labor militancy in US history. One scholar argues that “the unquestionable highpoint for progressives” and their demands for industrial reform arrived when former president Theodore Roosevelt visited a group of young immigrant women on strike in 1913 in the kimono and wrapper factories on the Lower East Side.¹ The New York Times reported on the front page that Roosevelt interviewed several of the 500 to 600 mostly teenage women assembled at the Henry Street Settlement House about their plight, the first an “attractive-looking Spanish girl.”² So moved by her tale and those of other striking women who, in Greek, Turkish, Italian, and French, decried the grueling hours, poor work conditions, minimal pay, sick family members, and loss of dignity, Roosevelt promised swift action. Even middle- and upper-class suffragettes and university students joined the picket lines, partly because the strikers were producing a key fashion symbol. Due to its comfortable, simpler, and flowing style shaped by its foreign “oriental” motifs that stood in contrast to more confining Victorian aesthetics or even the “Gibson Girl” image characterized by the mass-produced shirtwaist, the kimono came to embody

the modern freedoms of the American “New Woman.”3 As the strike spread from the kimono factories throughout the entire white goods industry to encompass an extraordinary 100,000 men and women workers,4 Roosevelt’s lobbying and the unprecedented public sympathy for the workers’ plight provoked an investigation and reforms in the garment industry and in industrial labor across the country, and ultimately contributed to the formation of the Department of Labor later in 1913.

But what the New York Times, like the Yiddish press and the socialist newspaper The Call,5 as well as scholars since, missed about this transformative turning point in American labor history was that the “Spanish girl,” the spanische maydel,6 who captured Roosevelt’s sympathies and became an anonymous but frequently-quoted voice in the revolt against “twentieth-century industrial slavery,”7 was a Jewish woman from the Ottoman Empire who spoke to Roosevelt not in “Spanish,” but rather in Judeo-Spanish (i. e., Ladino)! Only New York’s Ladino weekly, La Amerika, identified the woman by name: Sarah Aldoroti, a 17-year-old from Gallipoli, an Ottoman town soon to be the site of the eponymous battle during the Great War.8 She had arrived at Ellis Island in 1910 where immigration officials had classified her as “Ottoman” by nationality, “Hebrew” by race, and “brown” in complexion. She lived with her mother, ill father (who soon died), and siblings in East Harlem, then a center of Ottoman and general Jewish settlement prior to its transformation into a principally Puerto Rican neighborhood beginning in

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4 “Waist makers vote for general strike,” The Call, January 14, 1913, 1.
5 “Little bosses say waist makers’ union sold out,” The Call, January 22, 1913, 1, 3.
6 Die yidishe teglikhe prese, January 29, 1913, 1.
7 Editorial, The Ladies’ Garment Worker IV, no. 2 (February 1913): 9-10.
8 “El eks-prezidente S. Tedor Rozvelt [sic] i nuestras lavoraderas de shastreria mientres el straik (greva),” La Amerika, January 24, 1913, 1; “La avla de nuestro redaktor en la yunyon de nuestras ijas de la greva,” La Amerika, January 31, 1913, 2.
1917. Aldoroti numbered among many of “our Turkins” (Ladino shorthand for Ottoman Jewish women) on strike—a demographic that likely accounted for those who spoke to Roosevelt not only in “Spanish” but also Greek, Turkish, and French (La Amerika identified one of the French-speakers as Rebecca Behorova from Sofia). La Amerika suggested that Roosevelt gravitated to those speaking “Spanish” because their language was more familiar to him from his “Rough Rider” days in Cuba during the Spanish-American War in 1898.

Roosevelt’s encounter with these “girls”—and the newspaper depictions—encapsulated typically misogynistic, patronizing, and sexualizing attitudes combined with an interest in social reform that characterized the Progressive era, more generally.9 Only after the Federation of Oriental Jews, a body established in 1911 that sought to represent the interests of Ottoman Jews in New York, wrote to Roosevelt did his magazine, Outlook, try to clarify that the first “little girl” he interviewed, and whose story the magazine recounted in-depth, was a “Spanish Jewess.”10 Other publications sought to make sense of the women by resorting to mismatched pairings of identity and geography based on assumptions about where Jews in the United States must come from: “Spanish Jews from Russia [sic].”11 Also perplexed about how to characterize these women, The Ladies’ Garment Worker, the magazine of the famous International Ladies Garment Workers Union that helped to organize the strike, generally did not describe them as Jews at all and instead referred to them as “Spanish and Turkish girls” who recently arrived from

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“Turkey, Spain, Greece, etc [sic].”\textsuperscript{12} Invoking pejorative language, \textit{The American Jewish Chronicle} referred to them as “Oriental Jewesses” who, due to their “physical condition, mental development, economic standing and social attitude,” were neither “European” nor organiznable: “Seldom robust in health, these women from the Orient are like tender exotic plants that droop and die when transplanted from foreign soil.”\textsuperscript{13}

Even Roosevelt continued to interchange and conflate the Mediterranean reference points for the women’s origins while emphasizing both their unmatched vulnerability and their potential to contribute to American society. When he encouraged Michael Schaap, the Progressive floor leader of the New York Assembly, to introduce legislation to protect working women and their unionizing efforts, Roosevelt referred explicitly only to one group whose plight demanded action: “Turkish Jewesses…from Southern Spain and from the Turkish Empire.” Regardless of their immediate origin, Roosevelt recognized that these women were at a particular disadvantage because they “could not speak English, and although they were of Jewish faith they could not speak Yiddish, so that they were peculiarly helpless under our conditions here.” Acknowledging their status as linguistically orphaned, “these young girls from Turkey,” Roosevelt continued, “represented the lowest and poorest paid workers that we saw.” Despite their miserable circumstances, Roosevelt expressed “deep sympathy” for them, not only because they “are to be the future mothers of part of our American citizenship of the next generation” but also due “the


larger question of the social good of the whole race.” The convergence of race, class, and gender transformed them into the community with whom Roosevelt drew the line between those who would be deemed “white” and eligible for citizenship and those not, even while as women, they would remain ineligible to vote for several more years.

“Spanish” or “Turkish” or “Oriental” Jews likes Sarah Aldoroti are almost completely absent from, and almost inconceivable within, the annals of American labor history and radical politics, especially when refracted through the lenses of American Jewish history and collective memory. The invisibility is particularly felt especially given how prominent and celebrated the participation of Jews have been in organized labor and the radical political tradition. In these domains of scholarship and memory, “Jewish” and “Yiddish” have been conceived of as synonymous, both ideologically, as some Yiddish socialist intellectuals like Chaim Zhitlovsky argued, and practically, based on the principal characteristic—namely, the ability to speak Yiddish—that rendered one a “real Jew,” especially in the world of organized labor. In the literature, I have found only two exceptions. A relatively obscure account of the Jewish labor movement written in Yiddish in 1929 acknowledged the conspicuous role played by “Sephardic

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15 I have not found one study of American Jewish labor movement or American Jewish radical politics that refers to Ottoman or Sephardic Jews. Daniel Katz, All Together Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers, and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 132, 172, refers to organizer Saby Nehama, but identifies him as a “Spanish-born Jew,” even though he born in Salonica, then part of the Ottoman Empire. Kenneth Burt, “The American Communist Party’s Spanish Bureau: Third Period Activities and some Subsequent Impact,” American Communist History 11, no. 3 (2012): 265-283 refers to Alberto Moreau as “Argentine-born” when in fact he was born in Salonica, then part of the Ottoman Empire.

girls from Salonica and Palestine” in the 1913 strike.17 Meredith Tax’s historical novel, 
*Rivington Street* (1982), celebrated by The New York Times for its convincing depictions of 
Yiddish-speaking women garment workers and radicals in early twentieth century New York, 
includes one character identified as a “Sephardic Jew.” His name is “Yoski Nigger” due to his 
“swarthy complexion”; he is a gangster.18 These exceptions in an obscure Yiddish account and 
the denigrating reference in a popular novel prove the rule and obscure the dynamism and 
vitality that animated the labor organizing and radical politics at the core of an emergent “Ladino 
Left” that people like Sarah Aldoroti forged in New York during the early twentieth century as 
they sought to navigate their new country of residence and to transform their exploitative labor 
conditions, their liminal racial status, and the dominant Jewish culture that they felt excluded 
them.

This chapter constitutes a first attempt to recuperate the experiences of the “Ladino Left” 
with a focus on the movement’s dramatic rise, suppression, and resurgence centered in New 
York from World War I through the Great Depression. The “Left” refers to a constellation of 
social movements dedicated to revolutionary or evolutionary alternatives to capitalism expressed 
through the promotion of, or sympathy for, various strains of socialism and communism and 
labor organizing.19 The Ladino Left emerged through the work of Turkinos organizing at their 
cafes and in their mutual aid societies, through social gatherings at clubs and at the Ladino 
threater, through the galvanizing force of radical Ladino newspapers, and the formation of 
Sephardic branches of both the Socialist and Communist parties. These spaces of engagement

17 Bernard Weinstein, *Di yidishe yunyons in amerike: bleter geshikhte un erinerungen* (New York: Fereynigte 
yidishe geverkshaftn, 1929), 223.
Class History* 17, no. 2 (May 2020): 11-45.
formed a distinctive Ladino radical culture—the only radical Jewish culture in the U. S. aside from that articulated in Yiddish.

Radical Ladino culture became mainstream—indeed institutionalized—within New York’s Turkino “colony” through the Great Depression. *La Bos del Pueblo*, a socialist Ladino newspaper (est. 1915), and later, *La Vara* (est. 1922), whose editors supported the Workers (Communist) Party, gained exponentially more readers than all other New York Ladino publications combined. Moreover, Turkinos affiliated with the Socialist Party before any other US political party and maintained their own branches of radical political parties until 1929, much longer than any other party. These factors rendered New York the center of the Ladino Left in US and one of the only other centers of Ladino radical culture anywhere in the world beyond Salonica.\(^20\) By drawing on publications in Ladino and English (and some in Yiddish, Hebrew, Greek and Turkish), Bureau of Investigation reports (the FBI’s predecessor), records of the U. S. Postmaster General, hearings of the Committee on Un-American Activities, memoirs, personal papers, oral histories, and proverbs, this chapter explores radical Jewish politics and the history of the “immigrant Left” through the lens of Levantine Jewish activism.\(^21\) But even here, there are limits to the sources: in response a Freedom of Information request for the FBI file of the most prominent Salonican radical in New York, Alberto Moreau (né Moise), the National Archives


replied that the file exceed 3,900 pages; the wait for the file to be redacted and released is twelve years!

The available sources make clear that veterans of Salonica’s Socialist Workers Federation (est. 1909) took the leading role in organizing Turkinos in the US and viewed their activism as an extension of their work in their native city—despite the state surveillance they experienced in both locales.22 As in Salonica, the hallmarks of New York’s Ladino Left involved union efforts, including against Jewish bosses; a combative approaches to the state; the critique of communal leadership; a reliance on Ladino newspaper culture; the centrality of cafes, clubs, and the theater; efforts to attract middle class sympathizers; roles available to women; and internationalist cooperation. They were not new but rather adapted from the Ottoman context (e.g., the unfamiliar term yunyon [“union”] was initially glossed as sindikat de lavoradores [“workers’ syndicate”]).23 New York’s Salonican Left expanded into the broader Ladino Left through the participation of those from other urban centers like Istanbul and Izmir, and provincial towns like Gallipoli, Kastoria, and Monastir, who often encountered radical politics for the first time in New York. While the United States presented different material, political, cultural, and demographic dynamics than the Ottoman Empire, it was the inability of the Ladino Left to be recognized in New York as a legitimate voice of organized “Jewish” labor that was


23 “Los yunyones no achetan la nueva konstitusion,” El Progresso, October 17, 1915, 1.
particularly striking and which contributed to some galvanizing New York’s “Latino Left” (the subject of the next chapter).

**Salonica’s Socialist Workers Federation and Origins of the Ladino Left**

Unlike the much larger contingent of Yiddish-speaking Jews, many of whom became politicized in New York in the late nineteenth century and exported their radicalism to Eastern Europe, the first leading Ladino-speaking radicals arrived in New York a generation later, in the early twentieth century, already politicized due to their involvement in Salonica’s Socialist Workers’ Federation. However, unlike Russian Jews, whom (non-Jewish) German-speaking socialists embraced in New York, Ladino-speaking radicals were not welcomed by any established community.²⁴ While Daniel de Leon, the leading figure in the Socialist Labor Party of America, was born in Curaçao’s Spanish and Portuguese Jewish community, no particular affinities developed between him and Ladino-speaking Jews.²⁵ In contrast to Yiddish-speaking radicals, the founders of New York’s Ladino Left struggled to establish a foothold and instead came to be viewed as exotic and isolated as evidenced in the previously-mentioned depictions of “Turkish Jewesses” by figures like Teddy Roosevelt.

When the most prominent Ottoman Jewish socialists in the United States arrived around World War I, their trajectory already had been shaped by processes of politicization, industrialization, and labor exploitation in the Ottoman context. Early twentieth century

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²⁴ See Michels, *A Fire in their Hearts*.
accounts, however, often imagined Ottoman Jews as either apolitical, pre-political, or incapable of politics—their lives were allegedly dictated by “fatalism” and “inertia” as they were “content to remain in the sunny lands of the Levant.” Some Ottoman-origin Jews even internalized orientalist perceptions of their “simple” and “docile” nature and imagined their society as static. The Ladino refran (proverb), “No kale karishterearse en los meseles del hukumet” (“One must not get involved in state affairs”), further presumes an aversion to politics among Ottoman Jews. The policy of kayadez (“silence”), which still shapes official Jewish attitudes in Turkey, emerged as a political strategy of quietude to navigate the Ottoman and Turkish state frameworks in which non-Muslims, especially Armenians and Greeks, became the targets of state violence that also threatened Jews. But kayadez was just one of several competing political dispositions that varied by class and geography. Another Ladino refran attributes the proclivity to speak up to Salonican Jews: “El selanikli tiene la repuesta en la lingua, el izmirli en la aldikera, el estambuli en kaza” (“The Salonican has the answer on his tongue, the Smyrniote in his pocket, and the Constantinopolitan at home”). Considering that Salonica was a major Jewish demographic, cultural, and economic center—the only Ottoman city where Jews constituted the plurality of the population—it is not surprising that a sense of confidence would be attributed to

29 David Bunis, Voices from Jewish Salonica: Selections from the Judezmo Satirical Series Tio Ezrá I Su Mujer Benuta and Tio Bohor I Su Mujer Djamila (Jerusalem: Misgav Yershalayim 1999), 84.
the city’s Jews. Salonica became a major center of political ferment and home to the largest socialist movement in the region, tied to transformations across the Atlantic.

In the wake of the American Civil War, the emancipation of slaves in the South and their flight from plantations upended the exploitative and lucrative production of agricultural staples in the US, like tobacco. Changing tastes in Europe also increased demand for a new product: cigarettes rolled in paper with “Turkish” tobacco. The Ottoman state, seeking to manage massive war debt, established a state monopoly to raise capital and to meet international demand for “Turkish” cigarettes.30 The first Ottoman Jews arrived in the United States as representatives of the sultan to participate in the Chicago World’s Fair (1893) where the Schinasi brothers, from Manisa (near Izmir), introduced an automated cigarette rolling machine and then established a tobacco factory in Harlem that hired (and exploited) Ottoman Jewish laborers.31 The estate of another Ottoman Jewish tobacco merchant, Maurice Amado, who migrated from Izmir (1904), later endowed one of the first chairs in Sephardic studies at a US university—UCLA.32

The industrialization of tobacco processing in the Ottoman Empire developed in parallel to transformations in politics and labor. Tobacco factories employing hundreds or thousands of workers each—especially underpaid women and girls—emerged in Istanbul, Izmir, Aleppo,
Janina, Erzurum, and Salonica. Salonica was the only Ottoman city where the industrial working class—toiling in factories for tobacco, cotton, bricks, flour, beer, raki, soap, and textiles—like the population, generally, was overwhelmingly Jewish (80-90,000 in a city of 170,000). David Ben-Gurion, the Labor Zionist leader, even declared in 1911 that Salonica “is a Hebrew labor town, the only one in the world.”

By the time of Ben-Gurion’s visit, the co-called Young Turk Revolution in 1908 had overthrown the autocratic sultan, re-introduced the constitution and parliament, and ushered the slogans of liberty, fraternity, and equality into the Ottoman realm. A socialist Jewish teacher in Bulgaria, Avraam Benaroya, returned to his native Salonica after the revolution and harnessed the new freedoms of press and association to organize tobacco laborers and printers, insisting that not only class solidarity, but also communal difference, be acknowledged for Jews, Bulgarians, Greeks, and Turks. Wedding socialism to a local vision of multi-ethnic Ottomanism and engaging with autonomism, he argued that revolution ought to be brought to each community. Valuing the vernacular of the proletariat, the Federation initially published its organ in four languages. Journalist Sam Lévy and Joseph Nehama, the director of the local Alliance Israélite Universelle, considered the new movement to represent the avant garde. Sympathizers came from workers guilds, mutual aid societies, and even the middle-class society, Club des Intimes. The Federation quickly enrolled thousands of members, many of whom socialized at

aptly named cafes like El Amaneser (The Dawn) and El Nuevo Mundo (The New World).

Forced to work to accrue dowries necessary to marry according to rabbinic law, women played an important role despite the persistence of patriarchy in labor negotiation and leadership.37

Working as an embroiderer in a factory, Rose Saffan conceded that the Federation’s organizers “convinced us that we had power.”38

The Federation’s newspaper, theater, and Workers Club cultivated educational, social, and even religious engagement. Free classes for men and women focused on literacy in Ladino, Greek, and French; socialism, industrialization, colonialism, worker’s rights, and women’s rights; and music lessons. The Federation’s theater troupe organized “literary and artistic soirees” and performed Ladino adaptations of plays by Molière, Mirabeau, and Tolstoy.39 Local newspapers credited the Federation with executing the first “popular” Ladino theater productions that awakened the Jewish masses to the importance of arts and culture. Mostly men but also some women wrote in Ladino for the Federation’s daily newspaper, Avanti (1912-1934). Buena Nehama insisted on referring to her fellow female workers not as ninyas (“girls”) but with the more dignified elocution, mujeres lavoraderas (“working women”). Familiar with socialist discussions in Spain and Latin America translated in Avanti, she also selected the term

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38 David Saffan, “The Fall of Jewish Salonika, 1900-1944” (Unpublished paper, State University of New York at Old Westbury, 1974), 65-69
kompanyero/a (from the Spanish compañero/a) to designate “comrade.” She embraced the word kompanyera—in the feminine form—because of its use in the Ladino translation of the biblical Song of Songs (2:2), familiar to Jewish workers.40 The Federation attracted additional adherents because it did not undermine religion, but rather hosted Sabbath services at its center.

The Federation also mobilized workers to strike and to demand concessions from factory owners—until the Ottoman, and later, Greek, state suppressed their efforts. In 1909, the Federation organized 8,000-10,000 tobacco workers to strike and shut down the industry. Intra-Jewish class struggle intensified as many workers and owners were Jews. The Young Turks soon imprisoned and exiled Federation leaders, including Benaroya. After Greece conquered Salonica during the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), the new sovereigns suppressed the Federation’s leaders again. Confrontations in the streets between Jewish women strikers, women scabs (many of them Muslim refugees), and Greek policemen became ferocious—while men negotiated behind closed doors.41 Greek annexation introduced another dynamic absent from the Ottoman context: the “Jewish question.” Now a minority in a nationalizing state, Federation leaders wrote, in French, to the Bund requesting advice on two new problems: Greek antisemitism and Zionism.42

Continued war, a revolution in Greece, compulsory military conscription, and the government’s crackdown on labor organizing provoked emigration. Avanti already began advertising the Restaurant Salonique on Chrystie Street on the Lower East Side in 1912.43

42 Joseph Hazan, secretary of the Socialist Workers Federation of Salonica, to the Bund, Geneva, May 20, 1913, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, Bund Foreign Committee Records, RG-1401, box 9, file 149. Thanks to Arielle Angel and Molly Crabapple for directing me to this file.
43 “Restoran Salonik,” Avanti, December 26, 1912, 4.
Wilson’s declaration of neutrality during the Great War drew Salonican Jewish anti-war socialists to the United States. Nearly two thousand fled in August 1916 alone.\textsuperscript{44} Levantine Jews became the largest Jewish group arriving at Ellis Island at the time.\textsuperscript{45}

Many, however, anticipated their sojourn to be temporary. Some hoped that the war would provoke a “cleansing deluge” that would facilitate their return through the establishment of an independent Macedonian state, a socialist-inspired Balkan Federation, or the transformation of Salonica into a city-state as an alternative to nationalist violence.\textsuperscript{46} Salonican Jewish radicals in the US, like those in New Brunswick (New Jersey) who established a short-lived Ladino socialist newspaper, \textit{El Emigrante} (1917), affectionately invoked the image of their “‘mother’ Federation”: “though we are far from there [Salonica], we remain close, very close, to the [Federation’s socialist] ideal, which we will never abandon.”\textsuperscript{47} In Chicago, Raphael Hasson transposed multi-ethnic Ottomanism onto the US context by organizing Turkinos, other “Spanish-speakers” (likely Mexicans), and those maligned (by other socialists!) as “modern

\textsuperscript{44} “Detayos de la revolucion en Saloniko,” \textit{La Bos del Pueblo}, October 6, 1916, 5.
white coolies”—Greeks, Armenians, Turks, and Bulgarians. Hasson promoted the Federation’s internationalist goal: the “emancipation of all peoples.”

**La Bos del Pueblo and New York’s First Radical Ladino Voice**

Salonican journalist Maurice Nessim (1892-1964) argued that the United States—despite the promise of the American dream—was no different from the Ottoman Empire or other countries across the world. Prior to being arrested during the Red Scare, Nessim railed against the injustices of American society. In *La Bos del Pueblo* (1915-1919), he likened the murder of Black people in the United States, especially the East St. Louis massacre (1917), to the mass murder of Armenians by the Young Turks (the Armenian Genocide). “You should not be surprised,” he cried, “that such disgraceful acts like those perpetrated in Turkey are committed here!” The United States, he claimed, was no democracy; it was a plutocracy. Reporting on the Chicago race riot (1919), Nessim condemned the “white pogromists” (*pogromistas blankos*) perpetrating the violence, likening their behavior to the antisemitic mobs murdering Eastern European Jews. Exasperated by the repression of demonstrations in New York later in 1919, Nessim denounced the mounted police as the “Cossacks” and President Wilson as an oppressive “czar.”

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51 “Revolusioen Shikago entre pretos i blankos,” *La Bos del Pueblo*, August 1, 1919, 1.

“old world” and the “new” was that working conditions in the United States were “more hellish than in Salonica” but at least the bosses were explicit about their intentions to exploit their workers whereas back home, they feigned respect and hospitality. Labor exploitation and racism led former contributor to Salonica’s Avanti, Albert Levy, to pun in his satirical journal El Kirbach Amerikano ("The American Whip") that the United States (Estados Unidos) ought to be called the “rotten states” (estados pudridos).

The critique of American exceptionalism was shared by Yiddish and other radical newspapers. Such perspectives resulted in the New York State Joint Legislative Committee listing La Bos del Pueblo, with a circulation of approximately 2,000, among the sixty most “revolutionary and subversive periodicals published in New York.” The Post Office suppressed at least one issue. While it had to abandon its initial name, El Progresso (deemed to be too close to an Italian-American newspaper Il Progresso), La Bos del Pueblo alluded to a popular proverb in its tittle: vox populi, vox Dei (in Ladino: “boz del puevlo, boz del sielo,” “the voice of the people [is] the voice of the heavens”), which repudiated the policy of kadayez (“quietude”). Despite its radicalism, La Bos del Pueblo gained the trust of the Ladino-reading public in New York, New Brunswick, Chicago, and Seattle by defending Turkino men and women workers. The newspaper railed against self-proclaimed leaders of the Turkino colony—those ish biteridjis (“go-getters”) who advanced their own interests—and abuses by Yiddishim (Yiddish-speaking

53 “Emigrantes de Saloniko avrivan,” La Bos del Pueblo, February 18, 1918, 2.
New York’s Ladino public sphere expanded with five additional (short-lived) weeklies during World War I that transformed the political culture of Ottoman Jews across the US.

A former secretary of Salonica’s Federation, the son of a respected Hebrew teacher, and an alumnus of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, Nessim arrived in New York in 1914 and began working for the only Ladino weekly then operative, *La Amerika* (1910-1925), despite the more moderate outlook, benign politics, and often conciliatory approach to the Yiddishim favored by its older Zionist editor, Bulgarian-born Moise Gadol (1874-1941) (the Bureau of Investigation called *La Amerika* “harmless”). Gadol published editorials in Yiddish to attract more Jewish readers, campaigned to teach Turkinos English and Yiddish, and endorsed Zionism, which he hoped would enable Sepharadim to be recognized by Ashkenazim as a legitimate branch of the Jewish nation expressed in genealogical, even racial, terms: as “Jews, sons of Jews.”

Gadol has served as the primary representative of the Ottoman Jewish experience within communal memory and in US Jewish historiography. Although scorned by some peers, Gadol became a palatable figure more easily integrated into the American Jewish narrative. One study included a reproduction of the frontpage of *La Amerika* featuring an article in Yiddish as the only illustration of Ottoman Jewish life in the United States. While within communal memory Gadol has been celebrated as a “heroic figure” and the “greatest voice of the immigrant Sephardic community,” scholars of American Jewish history have insisted that he was “in no way comparable to Abe Cahan” (the famous editor of the Jewish Daily Forward) because, despite Gadol’s efforts, “the Levantines persisted following their own, relentlessly insular, Near East

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57 “El progreso de la Ermandad Salonikiota,” *La Amerika*, November 10, 1916, 3-4; Angel, *La America*, 129-137
traditions.” Such orientalist depictions explain why scholars have viewed the US Ladino press as a tool that “guided new immigrants, offered advice columns, connected diverse groups of Sephardic Jews, and reported on communal activities.” That framework occludes La Bos del Pueblo’s major influence on culture and politics.

A different image of Turkino American life emerges once orientalist presumptions are abandoned. Personal and ideological differences led Nessim to break with La Amerika to establish an oppositional voice in Turkino communal life. La Bos del Pueblo worked to maintain “independence” but also pushed a socialist agenda and brought a more “progressive” and “emancipatory” voice to the Ladino public sphere. It claimed on its masthead to be a “journal of pleasure and enlightenment” and published original fiction in Ladino—by men (like Simon Nessim’s novella, Amerika! Amerika!) and women (such as Esther Barki’s novella El Nafraje [“The shipwreck”])—plus Ladino poetry and theater reviews. It claimed to be the only “legitimate” American Ladino newspaper—a rebuke of La Amerika.

La Bos del Pueblo sought to develop a class of “enlightened youth” to serve as the new leaders of the “colony,” drawn together by cultural expression in Ladino, socialist politics, labor organizing, and a drive toward Turkino communal unity—distinct form, although not completely unconnected to, New York’s “Jewish” community (when Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem died, the newspaper dedicated the front page to mourning his loss). La Bos del Pueblo also made women integral components of the public sphere, writing of sefaradim lavoradores i lavoraderas (“Sephardic men and women workers”) rather than sefaradim i sus damas (“Sephardim and their wives”), but often criticized Turkinas for not being more politically active. La Amerika

immediately denounced *La Bos del Pueblo*’s “socialism” as an expression of atheism and rejection of Jewish nationalism. Gadol excoriated his competitor as *la boz del guerko* (“the voice of the devil”) and demanded that it adopt Jewish nationalism or fold.63 Gadol further denounced Nessim as a “Salonican Jew” who was “propagandizing to deny our religion”—a slight that alienated Turkinos who saw Salonica as a cultural center.64

Nessim gained the trust of readers by arguing that an embrace of socialism would not constitute a liability but instead bolster Turkinos’ material and moral position. Nessim sought to soothe readers’ anxieties by emphasizing that he considered himself “religious in my own way” and that he wished to “conserve the characteristics of his people.” But he also added that “progress” and “great benefits to humanity” will come through collaboration between different peoples.65 He regularly denounced “national chauvinism.”66 Although formally anti-Zionist, *La Bos del Pueblo* accommodated a range of views and published Ladino poetry about Palestine and promoted efforts to aid Jewish workers there.67

Yet some contributors advocated for merging Jewish nationalism and socialism. The editor’s brother Simon Nessim passionately argued that the “social question” could not be divorced from the “Jewish question.”68 He co-founded a New York outpost of Salonica’s Maccabi club and published a socialist-Zionist Ladino newspaper, *La Renasensia* (1917-1922).69

The Women’s Section of the Maccabi Club organized events that drew hundreds of participants,

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such as a speech in 1917 (in French) by the prominent (Ashkenazi) Zionist from Jerusalem, Itamar Ben-Avi, the first speaker of modern Hebrew. Yet Maurice Nessim publicly denounced Ben-Avi and opposed the establishment of a Jewish military in Palestine.\textsuperscript{70} Maurice Nessim and his circle further led a contentious campaign for Turkino institutions to boycott the American Jewish Congress (1917) in opposition to the congress’ endorsement of Zionism, which they viewed as posing an existential threat to Ottoman Jews (as Palestine remained Ottoman) and an expression of Ashkenazi “chauvinism.”\textsuperscript{71}

*La Bos del Pueblo* also promoted discussions about religious practices and communal issues that attracted more readers. Nessim’s circle even included two prominent alumni of Salonica’s famed rabbinical seminary: Albert Matarasso, who led a fundraiser for Salonica’s Federation, was also recognized as a Talmudic sage and used the title *haham* (“rabbi”);\textsuperscript{72} and the aforementioned Albert Levy published Ladino poems about the High Holidays and midrash.\textsuperscript{73} Furthermore, *La Bos del Pueblo* praised a Passover seder held by Turkinos at a café; lauded a congregation’s acquisition of a new Torah scroll; announced the opening of a new synagogue; and advertised High Holiday services.\textsuperscript{74} The newspaper also covered the wars in the Balkans and Anatolia. Nessim viewed a devastating 1917 fire in Salonica as an unbearable cost of war and

\textsuperscript{70} “Nuestras ijas se organizan,” *La Bos del Pueblo*, February 9, 1917, 4; “Nuestras ijas salen a la luz,” *La Bos del Pueblo*, October 12, 1917, 4.


initiated a fundraiser that enhanced his standing in the colony, garnered support from the American Joint Distribution Committee, and received coverage in *The Washington Post*.\(^\text{75}\)

*La Bos del Pueblo* continued to argue that socialists would best protect the interests of working Turkinos, Jews, and humanity. The newspaper credited the Socialist Party for denouncing the lynching of Leo Frank and advancing women’s suffrage.\(^\text{76}\) It encouraged Turkinos to participate in May Day celebrations and to form a new “Sephardic section” of the Young People’s Socialist League, the Socialist Party’s youth arm.\(^\text{77}\) Nessim praised the People’s Council of America, which galvanized anti-war support from workers and intellectuals.\(^\text{78}\) He applauded those willing to go to jail rather than serve in the army (several Salonian Brotherhood members instead fled to neutral Spain).\(^\text{79}\) Nessim further encouraged those Turkinos who had gained American citizenship to “vote a straight socialist ticket!”\(^\text{80}\) He saw the gains made by Socialists in the 1917 local elections as a sure sign that revolution was afoot.\(^\text{81}\)

*La Bos del Pueblo* achieved greater legitimacy as a defender of Turkinos by exposing negative depictions of his community in the press (e.g., as “strangers on the east side”), and by denouncing what Turkina women viewed as abuses by New York’s Yiddish-speaking shop

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\(^{78}\) “Konferensia de el konseyo de el puevlo,” *La Bos del Pueblo*, September 7, 1917, 4.

\(^{79}\) “Tu estas libero,” and “Yo refuzo de irme al servisio militar,” *La Bos del Pueblo*, September 14, 1917, 1; Devin E. Naar, “‘Spaniards we were, Spaniards we are, and Spaniards we will be’: Salonica’s Sephardic Jews and the Instrumentalization of the Spanish Past, 1898-1944,” in Dalia Kandiyoti and Rina Benmayor, eds., *Reparative Citizenship for Sepgardi Descendants: Returning to the Jewish Past in Spain and Portugal* (New York: Berghan Books, forthcoming 2023).

\(^{80}\) “How to solve the food problem?” *La Bos del Pueblo*, November 2, 1917, 4.

owners. In 1917, Nessim revealed that Turkina women were being “cheated and mistreated” by butchers, bakers, grocers, and fishmongers because they spoke neither Yiddish nor English.\textsuperscript{82} The Jerusalem-born Zionist and representative of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, Nissim Behar, the “father” of the Turkino colony, praised \textit{La Bos de Pueblo}’s exposé. He encouraged Turkino men and women to take English classes to better defend themselves; he also brought the issue to the mayor’s office.\textsuperscript{83} New York’s mayor was previously asked to intervene in an intra-Jewish conflict: some Eastern European Jews had petitioned the mayor to remove “Turks in our midst” responsible for “disturbances” in their neighborhood. When the residents learned, however, that the “Turks” were “in reality” Jews, they withdrew their request.\textsuperscript{84} Nessim’s role as a defender of the colony nonetheless elevated his stature enough for wealthy Turkinos, like tobacco tycoon Edward Valensi (from Izmir) and leaders of the Federation of Oriental Jews, to cross class lines to campaign with \textit{La Bos del Pueblo} to establish a new community center.\textsuperscript{85}

\textbf{Mainstreaming the Ladino Left: From Social Clubs and the Theater to the Socialist Party}

While \textit{La Bos del Pueblo} garnered recognition as a defender of New York’s Turkinos, Maurice Nessim worked to disseminate radical politics beyond his newspaper through other key sites of socialization: from cafes and mutual aid societies to social clubs that organized balls, lectures, and the Ladino theater. \textit{La Bos del Pueblo} hoped that the clubs would “take up the responsibility of educating our masses.”\textsuperscript{86} The resulting collaboration provoked the formation of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{82} “Nuestras mujeres son rovadas. Es eskandalozo!” \textit{La Bos del Pueblo}, June 8, 1917, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{84} Papo, \textit{Sephardim in Twentieth Century America}, 43; Ben-Ur, \textit{Sephardic Jews in America}, 108.
\item \textsuperscript{85} “A la atansion de todos los djidios orientales,” \textit{La Bos del Pueblo}, June 22, 1917, 4.
\item \textsuperscript{86} “Ya es ora,” \textit{La Bos del Pueblo}, December 21, 1917, 2.
\end{itemize}
the Sephardic Branch of the Socialist Party of America in 1918—a highpoint in Turkino radicalism upended by the censorship of the Bureau of Investigation and the Palmer Raids.

Nessim initially partnered with fellow Salonic socialist, journalist, and satirist Moise Soulam, then also working for *La Amerika*, to form New York’s first Turkino socialist group (1914). Reflecting the rhetoric of the era, they established the Oriental Socialist Federation of New York. Organized around Salonica’s Federation veterans, the new group on Eldridge Street aimed to “develop the moral and material status of Orientals in America” by offering classes—for men and women—in English and Ladino, on sociology, civics, socialism, and syndicalism; the group also sought to find work for unemployed members.87 In 1916, the group distanced itself from the maligned category of “Oriental,” became the Sephardic Socialist Federation, and convened its first meeting of 95 people to discuss the work of Marx and the French socialist, Jean Jaurès, who had deeply influenced Salonica’s Federation.88

New York’s Turkino cafes, like Greek *kafenia*, emerged as socialization hubs that further facilitated radical politics.89 Arriving Turkinos often gave café addresses to immigration officials as their final destinations, and then frequented those cafes to meet friends, read newspapers, receive mail and place phone calls, purchase tickets for Ladino theater shows, order masá *shemurá* for Passover, drink coffee, play backgammon, smoke narghile, consume foods prepared *a la Turca*—and debate politics and organize. While the more than twenty cafes tended to be

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owned and frequented by Turkino men from the same locale, the co-owners of El Paladar (featured in *Amerika! Amerika!*) came from different places: Gallipoli (Abraham Gormezano) and Salonica (Joseph Saltiel). The connection between Gormezano and Saltiel likely resulted in El Paladar being frequented by Turkinos from multiple locales and, with Saltiel’s link to *La Bos del Pueblo* as a contributor of original Ladino poetry, may explain the overrepresentation of Gallipolitanos in the Ladino Left.

Nessim and his circle drew upon café culture and mutual aid practices familiar from Salonica’s Federation to convene Salonican “youth” at the Salonica Café on Chrystie Street in 1915. That meeting sparked the foundation of the largest and most prominent of New York’s several dozen Turkino mutual aid societies: the Salonician [sic] Brotherhood of America (both Nessim and Joseph Saltiel served as founding officers). Even *La Amerika* conceded that the new organization surpassed the other societies in the colony due to its promotion of literature, art, and the sciences rather than burial or medical benefits alone. Even though the founders included veterans of Salonica’s Federation, the Brotherhood ultimately did not become a socialist organization. A Federation veteran known for saying “never do what the bosses tell you,” Yudá Saady pleaded with the Brotherhood’s members to unite, socialists and Zionists alike, rather than fissure. The Brotherhood’s ecumenical approach was a blow to the Ladino Left and explains why Nessim resigned in 1917, but also why the organization gained a vast membership—a

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thousand families in the wake of World War I. The Salonian Brotherhood became the first Turkino mutual aid society to enroll members from other cities, a change confirmed through its reorganization as the Sephardic Brotherhood of America (1922). By 1927, the American Jewish Committee legitimized the Brotherhood as one of four “national” landsmanschaftn (the others representing Romanian, Polish, and Hungarian Jews).

Recognizing that the Brotherhood would not promote socialism even if many of its members supported the cause, Nessim and his circle cultivated relationships with Turkino social and literary clubs that emerged during the Great War. Founded on the principle of hemşehrilik (“local compatriotism”) like the dozens of synagogues and mutual aid societies, social clubs organized Turkinos’ scarce leisure time. As Turkino proletarian socialization expanded beyond the cafés, La Bos del Pueblo co-sponsored evening soirees, lectures, and theater productions that enhanced the newspaper’s reputation and injected political messages into leisure settings.

La Bos del Pueblo first collaborated with the Haskalah Club to co-host a ball with music and dancing that inspired public lectures on socialism. Established in 1915 by 25 Jews from Gallipoli, the club focused on the “physical and intellectual development of our youth.” The club was named after the Jewish Enlightenment to signal that membership was open to “every youth of the Orient” and because of the negative associations conjured by Gallipoli (and the eponymous World War I battle). The sold-out ball, which continued until 4:30 am, convened friends of La Bos del Pueblo, the Haskalah Club, and societies from Salonica, the Dardanelles, Istanbul, and Kastoria.

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96 “El Askala klub fiesta su segundo aniversario,” La Bos del Pueblo, January 26, 1917, 4; “El sukceso del balo maskaro del Askalah klub,” La Amerika, April 6, 1917, 2; Papo, Sephardim in Twentieth Century America, 324.
The successes of social gatherings primed the Haskalah Club, amidst the Russian Revolution in 1917, to host Nessim for a lecture entitled “How to Succeed in America” that introduced attendees to “class struggle.” To a packed audience, Nessim argued that American society was “badly organized from an economic, political, and social perspective” and that the only way for workers to “emancipate themselves and break the chains of slavery that imprison them” would be to join the Socialist Party.\(^97\) The political conversation thus moved from the newspaper and the café to public lectures hosted by social clubs—and then the theater.

Turkino social clubs developed an active Ladino theater scene during World War I that, like Ladino theater in the Ottoman Empire, served as a key tool of “instructive entertainment.”\(^98\) But the New York Ladino theater, like the more expansive Yiddish theater (in which one Turkina actress, Lisa Varon, also performed\(^99\)), elevated the enterprise with elaborate set designs, costumes, music, and a degree of seriousness reflected in the establishment of the Sephardic Actors Union—the only known semiprofessional Ladino theater troupe.\(^100\) Staged weekly in rented theaters during the Great War, the plays occasionally attracted a thousand attendees and sometimes served as war relief fundraisers for Jewish communities in the “Orient.” Announcements for shows even advertised the availability of onsite childcare—an invitation for mothers to attend. The Ladino shows often involved a three-act drama followed by a comedy routine and then live music and dancing with the club’s representatives offering speeches during

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\(^{97}\) “Konferensia de nuestro editor,” *La Bos del Pueblo*, May 11, 1917, 2.


\(^{100}\) “Serklo de aktores sefaradim formado,” *La Bos del Pueblo*, February 9, 1917, 3; “Enkorajar el arte dramatiko entre los sefaradim,” *La Bos del Pueblo*, January 25, 1918, 1.
intermissions. New York’s Ladino proletarian theater paralleled the more expansive and famous Yiddish counterpart later encapsulated by the Artef (Worker’s Theatrical Alliance).  

Nessim now relied on the Ladino theater to disseminate socialist messages among Turkinos. He even composed his own three-act play, *Los Dos Amantes Sefaradim* (The Two Sephardic Lovers) and his newspaper boasted a “Dramatic Critic.” *La Bos del Pueblo* also succeeded in securing print jobs for playbills and praised the socialist Ladino theater troupe, Los Liberros Pensadores (“The Freethinkers”), in New Brunswick. Most significantly, Elie Mushabac (1894-1983), a worker in New York’s garment industry and the president of the Dardanelles Social Club, composed popular original Ladino plays that *La Bos del Pueblo* viewed as promoting socialist ideals. In *La Famiya en la Gera* (The Family at War)—celebrated as the best theater production in the colony and performed three consecutive springs (1916-1918)—Mushabac depicted the devastating impact of nationalism and war on an Ottoman Jewish family. The elaborate scenery evoked the ambiance of the old world through set design by Nissim Sedaka, who also sang Turkish *makames* and *sharkis* plus Ladino *romansas* (his grandchildren include singers Edyie Gormé [née Gormezano] and Neil Sedaka). *La Bos del Pueblo* viewed the drama as based on “ideas engendered by the great Karl Marx” and “purely socialist doctrines.”  

Commenting on another play, *El Kriminel*, *La Bos del Pueblo* reiterated that Mushabac “is a true socialist” for he reveals society’s “plagues.” Mushabac’s niece, writer Jane Mushabac,

suspects that he later destroyed the scripts fearing that their political content could endanger the family.\textsuperscript{105}

Most dramatically, Nessim and his circle helped to transform the Sephardic Social Club from an organization that promoted Zionist theater in Ladino to one that affiliated with the Socialist Party of America. Although formed in 1916 by Jews from Kastoria, many of whom worked in the garment industry, the Sephardic Social Club’s ecumenical name attracted varied members.\textsuperscript{106} The club debuted with a Purim party that concluded with the Star Spangled Banner and Hatikvah (in Hebrew and Ladino).\textsuperscript{107} The club later performed a play, \textit{Izabela}, which dramatized the Inquisition and featured a Zionist speech by the former chief rabbi of Kastoria, Isaac Zacharia, who argued that Turkinos must preserve their national identity despite the vagaries of exile just as their forebears had during the Inquisition. The performance concluded with Hatikvah and the waiving of the Zionist flag.\textsuperscript{108}

The revolutionary fervor provoked by the Russian Revolution in 1917, however, inspired the Sephardic Social Club to embrace socialism and elite Turkinos to express their sympathies. At the initiative of its president, Salomon Rousso, the Sephardic Social Club invited Nessim to lecture on the “social question.” Nessim provocatively enumerated the “plagues of capitalist society” inflicted on the working class and the necessity of class struggle.\textsuperscript{109} Nessim returned with suffragist Molly Gold, a \textit{yiddisha}, to encourage Turkinas to petition the state legislature to

\textsuperscript{105} Likely during the McCarthy era: personal communications from Jane Mushabac, May 15, 2021 and February 22, 2022.


\textsuperscript{107} “Purim en el sefaradim sosial klub,” \textit{La Amerika}, March 24, 1916, 2.


form the Food Council of Greater New York, which coordinated food distribution. Seeking sympathizers among the “intellectual aristocracy,” Nessim established Cercle Amical Français (1918) with 35 other French-educated Turkino men and women, including Istanbul-born philanthropist Rebecca Mayorkas (great-aunt of Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas); they hosted salons on socialism, feminism, prohibition, and French literature.

Advocacy for the creation of a Sephardic socialist center, like the Salonica Federation’s Workers Club, to further “awaken” and unionize Turkino workers, catalyzed the merger of the Sephardic Social Club and Nessim’s socialist group to form the Sephardic Branch of the Socialist Party of America in 1918. Significantly, the leadership was drawn from places beyond Salonica: the men’s section was led by Abraham Cohen, a Federation veteran who spoke ten languages, and Salomon Rousso, the former president of the Sephardic Social Club, from Kastoria, who now wrote op-eds like, “World revolution nears”; and the women’s section by Victoria Fiss (likely from Istanbul). The transformation of a Turkino social club staging Zionist plays into an official branch of the Socialist Party was a revolution itself. At the first meeting of the new Sephardic Branch, on Rivington Street, more than 150 new members registered, suggesting that the total membership exceeded two hundred. The group planned May Day

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111 “Cercle Amicale Français,” La Bos del Pueblo, March 29, 1918, 1; “Un nuevo klub formado,” La Bos del Pueblo, March 29, 1918, 4; “Cercle Amicale Français,” La Bos del Pueblo, April 12, 1918, 1; “ Primer sukseso del Cercle Amical Français,” La Bos del Pueblo, April 19, 1918, 1; “Lekturas en el Cercle Amical Français,” La Bos del Pueblo, April 26, 1918, 1; “Aktividades en el Cercle Amical Français,” La Bos del Pueblo, May 31, 1918, 1; “Debate en el Cercle Amical Français,” La Bos del Pueblo, June 7, 1918, 1.
112 “Deven nuestros lavoradores sufrir?” La Bos del Pueblo, November 30, 1917, 3; R. Ergas, “Un sentro sosialista es posivle?” La Bos del Pueblo, April 5, 1918, 4.
festivities and distributed the first issue of *El Proletario*, the Sephardic Branch’s new Ladino organ.\textsuperscript{114}

While no copies survive, articles republished in *La Bos del Pueblo* and a Bureau of Intelligence report reveal *El Proletario*’s agenda. The U. S. Post Office censors intercepted correspondence from the editors, Abraham Cohen and Alberto Moreau (né Moise), sent to Jacques Amariglio, the secretary of Salonica’s Socialist Workers’ Federation. The correspondence revealed the publication to be “extremely radical.” After complaining about the near impossibility of translating “the language spoken by Levantine Jews” and misreading “Sephardic branch” as “separatist branch,” the Bureau of Intelligence detailed the newspaper’s focus on the plight of workers in the “Judeo-Spanish community.” The newspaper reported on unionizing efforts in the garment industry, May Day festivities, Marx’s centenary celebration, and a social ball that concluded with The Internationale. As a “defensive weapon” in support of “union and solidarity,” the paper railed against the “treachery of the capitalists and plutocrats” (Republicans and Democrats alike) and identified “race hatred” as the principal obstacle to uniting workers against the common enemy—capitalism. The only solution was “the conquest of the world by the people.” The newspaper listed subscribers, publicized activities of Salonica’s Federation, and advertised socialist buttons, a “socialist Sephardic barber,” and sympathetic cafes across the city. The newspaper’s first issue sold-out of its 500 copies; the next issue aspired

for 1000. But the Bureau concluded that *El Proletario* was aligned with the “radical socialist movement,” was deceiving the censors, and that the Post Office must cease delivering it.\(^{115}\)

Although the Bureau suppressed *El Proletario*, the Sephardic Branch of the Socialist Party continued its unionizing campaigns and garnered fleeting recognition from the International Ladies Garment Workers Union.\(^{116}\) Moreover, the Sephardic Branch initiated a new “Communist Library” in 1919. While it echoed the “Communist Library” published by the Salonica Federation that included a Ladino adaptation of the Communist Manifesto (1914), the New York enterprise began with *Kansionario Sosialista* (Socialist songbook). The booklet included more than a dozen socialist songs adapted into Ladino, including The Internationale, the Red Flag, the Workers’ Marseillaise, the First of May, and others that praised the Russian Revolution, socialism, and workers, or condemned war and capitalism. A foreword to the booklet, printed by a former typographer for *La Bos del Pueblo*, explains that while the “Communist Library” sought to provide Judeo-Spanish readers with “class education,” the first volume in the series was the *kansionario* due to popular demand: the Sephardic Branch’s sympathizers requested lyrics of socialist songs in Judeo-Spanish presumably to chant on the picket line and to make their voice and language heard.\(^{117}\) The last song in the collection, however, was a Greek version of The Internationale, a sign that Turkino radicals saw themselves linked to Greek radicals. Some read the Greek socialist newspaper, *Organosis*.\(^{118}\) In Chicago, other Turkinos joined Greek Orthodox Christians to co-found the Greek Federation of the

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115 “Radical Socialist Movement: Albert Cohen,” Investigative Case Files of the Bureau of Investigation, 1908-1922, National Archives and Records Administration, M1085.


Socialist Party and, following the split in 1919, the Greek Federation of the Communist Party that cultivated *taxisinidisia* ("working class consciousness" in Greek American parlance).\(^{119}\)

The centrality of the songbook further reveals how social dynamics facilitated radical politics among Turkinos, a dimension reinforced by one of the first public events organized by New York’s Sephardic Section of the Socialist Party. During the *medianos de Pesah* (the intermediate days of Passover) in 1919, the branch hosted a two day “Turkino bazaar” capped nightly with an “Oriental ball.” *La Bos del Pueblo* advertised the extravaganza and invited the public to bring Ottoman sartorial items for the party.\(^{120}\) The mainstreaming of radical politics thus passed from the newspapers and cafes to the social clubs and their balls, lectures, and Ladino theater productions, and now back to a social starting point: not a ball that happened to involve socialists, but now, a socialist ball—*a la Turca*. Radical Jewish men donned fezzes and Turkish caftans, and radical Jewish women dressed in *kofyas* (ornate headdresses), smoked narghile and sang and danced to “Oriental” music with tambourines and zurnas. Did their embrace of radical politics, a sign of their “modern” and “progressive” worldview, enable them to relax for a moment to dress up as themselves—or to perform their former identities on the political stage a final time? They did so without worrying about the gaze of Yiddishim. Even *La Amerika’s* Gadol included the Sephardic Branch of the Socialist Party on his list of more than forty Turkino “congregations and societies” in New York in 1919—a recognition of the socialists’ successes and legitimacy.\(^{121}\)

\(^{119}\) “*Los gregos de Shikago se organizan,*” *La Bos del Pueblo*, December 13, 1918, 2; Storch, *Red Chicago*, 23, 87, 105; Karpozilos, *Kokkini Ameriki*, 84-86 and ch. 2.

\(^{120}\) “*Atansion! Todos akeyos ke tienen en sus kazas algunas vestimientas o partida de vestimientas orientalas, como fez, kalpak, kushak, charukas, etcetera, son rogados de adresarsen a s. Maurice Nessim, en la redaksion,*” *La Bos del Pueblo*, April 4, 1919, 1; “*Venid kon los amigos,*” *La Bos del Pueblo*, April 4, 1919, 4; “*Bazar turkino,*” April 11 and 18, 1919, 4; Julia Phillips Cohen, “*American Days, Turkish Nights,*” https://sephardiclosangeles.org/portfolios/american-days-turkish-nights/

\(^{121}\) “*Kongregasiones i hevrot de los djudios sefaradim de Amerika,*” *Kalendario* (New York: *La Amerika*, 1919), [4].
The Repression and Resurgence of the Ladino Left

Seeking information on “Ladino Jews” in New York in 1925, a Columbia University graduate student indicated that a “Sephardic” branch of the Workers’ (Communist) Party operated in the city, but she could not locate a meeting and managed to meet “but one member.” She concluded that despite continued discontent among Levantine Jews working in kimono and skirt factories, “there is little overt activity among Ladino Jews as such.” The student’s observations suggest that the central role that Maurice Nessim and fellow radicals had played among New York’s Turkinos during World War I evaporated after the war. Radical Ladino newspapers like *La Bos del Pueblo* or *El Proletario* indeed no longer operated due to government pressure. The Sephardic Branch of the Socialist Party, however, did not dissolve but rather aligned with the left-wing following the 1919 split and reorganized itself as a branch of the Communist Party and then of the Workers Party (the front for the Communist Party, 1921-1929). Despite the Red Scare, the liabilities associated with radical politics, and the emergence of a new Sephardic club that supported the Democratic Party (1924), Turkino leftists contributed to the resurgence of radical Ladino culture in the 1920s not only through their party branches, but also their own club, the Sephardic Progressive Club (1923-1929), and new Ladino publications like *La Vara* (1922-1948). During the Depression, however, continuing liabilities forced a remnant of the Ladino Left to organize in private; the Sephardic Brotherhood even began to purge from its own history the central role radicals once played.

Numerous factors contributed to the transformation of the Ladino Left in the wake of World War I. The Palmer Raids (1919-1920) led to the arrest and deportation of socialists,

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anarchists, and communists—principally Italian and Eastern European (Jewish) immigrants—and crippled the Ladino Left. Halloween night 1919, at Bowery and Kenmore, detectives arrested Nessim, then serving as a secretary of the Communist Party’s Lower East Side branch, for distributing leaflets in English calling for boycotts of upcoming elections, participation in a Bolshevik Revolution celebration, and a national strike of steel workers, longshoremen, printers, milliners, and coal miners to provoke a crisis to the “capitalist system.” The police then raided La Bos del Pueblo’s office on Eldridge St. and another printshop where they confiscated 25,000 copies of the “seditious” circulars Nessim had been distributing. Charged with promoting “criminal anarchy” in violation of New York state laws, Nessim was jailed. J. Edgar Hoover expressed interest in Nessim—described by the Bureau of Intelligence as “a prominent member of the Communist Party of New York”—and wanted to deport him. Disputes between Hoover and New York state authorities resulted in Nessim being released on bail after two weeks.123

Nessim’s arrest and the continued fear of government crackdowns sent shockwaves through the Turkino colony. La Amerika denounced Nessim as an “undesirable element” who ought to be deported. As Gadol’s recriminations continued and Hoover’s office prepared a deportation warrant, Nessim clandestinely fled to France. Nessim’s staff closed La Bos del Pueblo, but soon reopened the press under a new name, La Epoka de Nu York, and with a new editor: teacher and US army veteran, Alfred Mizrachi, from Bergama, near Izmir. La Epoka de Nu York projected an image of Turkins as upstanding people who “do not seek to destroy a nation that welcomed them in with open arms” and who address problems “within the limits of

law and order.”¹²⁴ The apologetics and preference for kayadez (“quietude”) did not prove attractive; the newspaper folded after a month. Meanwhile, indiscretions by a Turkino communist derisively nicknamed Hastron (“the bungler”), accused of mismanaging money raised to support Salonica’s Avanti, and of betraying the working-class by organizing ice cream cone factory owners into a protective association, continued to be “mourned” for years in satirical Ladino dirges that parodied the Tisha Be’Av liturgy.¹²⁵

Despite numerous obstacles, Salonican leftists revitalized Ladino radical publishing in New York. Although “independent,” the new publications critiqued the government, advanced pro-labor interests, and satirized the self-proclaimed leaders of the colony in a manner that came to be identified (and criticized) as “in the Salonican style” (al uzo de Saloniko). Nessim’s brother, Simon Nessim, the author of Amerika! Amerika!, launched La Luz (“The Light”) in 1921 (in La Bos del Pueblo’s former print shop). A journal of “ideas,” the paper’s first issue blasted the KKK and the government’s inadequate responses; critiqued the new “inhumane” immigration quotas; and called for the imposition of limits on income.¹²⁶ La Luz promoted unionization and reported on the activities of the new Sephardic/Spanish Branch of the Workers Party, including a lecture in Harlem by rising Salonican communist, Alberto Moreau: “The Position of the Worker in regard to Religion”—on Yom Kippur afternoon.¹²⁷ Moreau, a former editor of El Proletario, and Albert Palombo, an NYU medical student from Ankara who became a psychiatrist and president of the Sephardic Social Club in Brooklyn, engaged in a polemic in La Luz over the meaning of “education” that pitted Marxism against liberalism. Moreau

¹²⁴ “Nuestro dover verso la Amerika,” La Epoka de Nu York, December 2, 1919, 2.
¹²⁵ “Las echas i fasfechas de un hastron,” La Vara, August 1, 1924, 4; “Kinot le-Tisha be-Av,” La Vara, August 8, 1924, 3; “Las echas i fasfechas de hastron,” La Vara, August 15, 1924, 4.
¹²⁷ “Avizo,” La Luz, October 1, 1922, 4.
advocated for workers education to help Turkinos transform and overthrow the exploitative conditions of capitalist society whereas Palombo advocated for middle class liberal education to help Turkinos rise within the system, escape their plight, and then give back to society.¹²⁸

As La Luz closed in 1922 so that Simon Nessim could focus on his university studies—hinting at the growing appeal of Palombo’s liberalism—his business partner Albert Torres joined two other Salonican leftists, Albert Levy and Moise Soulam, to launch the most successful Ladino weekly in history, La Vara (“The Staff”). The name and accompanying masthead reflected the editors’ desire to rebuke so-called leaders, whether of the US government or the Turkino colony: to beat the hypocrisy out of them with “the staff.”¹²⁹ While neither La Amerika nor La Bos del Pueblo exceeded a circulation of 2,000, La Vara claimed a circulation of 16,800 by 1931—massive numbers considering the US population of Ladino-speakers stood around 75,000 (a main Ladino daily in Salonica, El Puevlo, reached a circulation of 5,000 whereas El Tiempo in Istanbul reached 10,000).¹³⁰ Sam Lévy, the doyen of Salonican journalism, then in Paris, suggested that, with La Vara at the helm, New York had emerged as the new center of world sefaradizmo—Sephardic identity and culture—since the 1917 fire in Salonica had decimated the city.¹³¹ With the establishment of a literary monthly El Luzero Sefaradi (The Sephardic Beacon, 1926–1927), La Vara’s editors promoted sefaradizmo and nearly initiated a


daily, but financial obstacles derailed the plan. As a sign of *La Vara*’s popularity, the editors complained that journals in Salonica plagiarized their poetry and satire.\(^\text{132}\)

*La Vara* drew on practices from Salonican styles of journalism employed by earlier New York Ladino papers: the social consciousness and pro-labor advocacy of *La Bos del Pueblo*; the biting satire of *El Kirbach Amerikano*; and the focus on “ideas” and communal unity of *La Luz*. Having written for Salonica’s *Avanti* and New York’s *El Proletario*, where he called for the abolition of private property, Albert Levy became *La Vara*’s principal intellectual force.\(^\text{133}\) His papers, preserved in Seattle where he drew on his rabbinical training to serve as the director of the Sephardic Talmud Torah in the 1930s, reveal his radicalism: Ladino newspaper clippings of his articles on teachers’ unionization and the means of production; original poems praising Lenin, Trotsky, and May Day; and lyrics to two known Ladino socialist anthems and one in Bulgarian (in Hebrew letters).\(^\text{134}\) Under Levy’s aegis, *La Vara* envisioned the Turkino colony as a community of “Spanish Jews” or “Sephardic Jews”—no longer “Orientals”—albeit working class and aspiring for communal unity. The newspaper shared this goal with the Sephardic Brotherhood, for which assistant editor Moise Soulam had served as president and to which *La Vara* dedicated a weekly column.

*La Vara* also played a key role in promoting unionization efforts among Turkinos working in skirt sweatshops through a concerted campaign in 1923 in which editor Albert Levy and Alberto Moreau, both affiliated with the Workers Party, gave impassioned speeches. The newspaper further praised the Young Friends of Monastir Club, founded in 1916 to advance the

\(^{132}\) “Non saven azer djornalizmo,” *La Vara*, October 24, 1924, 9.


\(^{134}\) Albert Levy, “Suvenires de mis aktivdades en Nuyork dezde el 1920 asta el 1931,” and handwritten pocket notebook, University of Washington Sephardic Studies Collection, ST00105 (courtesy of Sephardic Bikur Holim) and ST00682 (courtesy of Levy’s granddaughter, Linda Robke).
moral, material, and literary position of its forty members by organizing Ladino theater productions, balls, lectures, and a library—and by hosting union rallies. Such meetings were so well attended that the club acquired a larger space and reorganized itself in 1923 under a more ecumenical name, as the Sephardic Progressive Club. The founding president (and Ladino theater actor) Menashe “Max” Farash (from Monastir) had worked with Alberto Moreau to organize Turkinos into the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (1922). Vice president Louis Mizrahi (from Izmir) wrote numerous editorials in La Vara calling for Turkinos to break the chains of capitalism as he recruited them into Local 23 of the ILGWU. Farash’s successor as president of the Sephardic Progressive Club, Leon Alcosser (from Monastir), later joined Local 23 and became its business agent, and even served as vice chairman of the ILGWU’s executive board.

When Shabetai Djaen, the chief rabbi of Monastir, visited New York in 1925, he recognized how central radical culture had become to the Sephardic Progressive Club. At a major meeting at the club, with an attendance of 300, Djaen tried to convince his audience to embrace ancient and contemporary Jewish “national” literature by arguing that the teachings of the Torah resonated with socialism: “Marx, Engels, and Lasalle and other socialists agree with the social order proposed by Moses.” Notably, however, the embrace of socialism did not negate their embrace of Judaism: when Irving Peres, the Chorlu-born chair of the organization’s

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membership board, suddenly died at age 20 in 1926, the leadership of the club wrote a flowery obituary in *La Vara* that invoked divine protection and comfort for his family; it concluded with the Hebrew acronym for a traditionally referenced passage from 1 Samuel (25:29): “the soul of my lord will be bound up in the bundle of life...” Ideological differences did not rupture family bonds either, as Peres’ father, Bohor Peres, numbered among the members or Berith Shalom, a congregation composed of upwardly-aspiring Levantine Jews administered by Shearith Israel, the uptown Spanish and Portuguese synagogue, which arranged the burial.

While it never became a branch of a political party as the Sephardic Social Club had for the Socialist Party (1918), the Sephardic Progressive Club nonetheless contributed to the resurgence of the Ladino Left in the 1920s—one that included not only Salonicans, but also those from Monastir, Izmir, Chorlu and elsewhere. While communal historian Joseph Papo identified the Sephardic Progressive Club as “one of the largest young adult clubs in the Sephardic community,” his whitewashed account offered no clue as to its radical orientation. A more recent account acknowledges *La Vara* editors’ forays into “socialism” but not their endorsement of the Workers Communist Party.

*La Vara* publicized the open-air meetings in Harlem and the Lower East Side of the Sephardic/Spanish Branch of the Workers Communist Party in the section of the paper dedicated to “Activities in the Colony”—along with meetings of the Sephardic Brotherhood and other mutual aid societies, philanthropies, and synagogues—thereby normalizing communism within the framework of acceptable communal life. Like *La Bos del Pueblo* and *La Luz, La Vara*

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139 Papo, *Sephardim in Twentieth Century America*, 327
interchangeably invoked both designations—sefaradi and espanyol—to describe the branch, hinting at the path that some Ladino leftists ultimately pursued, outside of Jewish life and into the Spanish-speaking world. Announcements in The Daily Worker, the official newspaper of the Workers (Communist) Party, captured the tension by describing the open-air meetings as “Spanish” in headlines but then specifying the “Spanish-Jewish fraction of the party.”

La Vara made clear that whether described as sefaradi or espanyol, the branch hosted meetings in djudeo-espanyol, a sign that the Turkinos remained the primary audience. In the summer of 1924, La Vara’s editors attended and reported on an open-air meeting in Harlem of the “Spanish branch of the Workers’ Party” that marked a turning point in the public and political uses of Ladino in the US:

It was quite a scene to see our friend Alberto Moiz [Moreau] up on the soapbox, sweating buckets, in the middle of the street, speaking about the putrid and deceitful old parties of Republicans and Democrats and the need for every Sephardic worker, pushcart peddler [pushkarchi], and shopkeeper [butikadji] to vote for the Workers Party.

Alberto Moiz, who is already known as an orator whose words are as sweet as honey, made everyone’s jaws drop, and even the Yiddishim were amazed, since it was for the first time in the history of the Sepharadim in America that, in the leadup to elections, a Sepharadi could be seen in the middle of the street speaking in the Judeo-Spanish language.

…If the words of the speaker are heeded, the Republican and Democratic parties will be completely eviscerated and the poor of this nation will finally be saved.

This account reveals how Turkinos harnessed Ladino on the streets and in the press—a specifically US idiom as evidenced by neologisms like pushkarchi—to court the votes of working and lower middle class (i.e. shopkeepers) Turkinos for the communist party. The characterization of the response by Yiddishim—impressed by the spectacle of Moreau’s captivating public oratory—is a noteworthy departure from more common depictions of

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142 “Spanish open air rally,” The Daily Worker, October 1 and 3, 1927, 5.
143 “Postadas diversas,” La Vara, August 15, 1924, 10.
Ashkenazi attitudes toward Turkins that ranged from neutrality to scorn. Moreau’s preaching and La Vara’s endorsement of the communists were particularly bold considering that the Immigration Restriction Act (1924) had just passed at the initiative of eugenics-motivated nativists who sought to exclude Jews, those from the former Ottoman Empire, and radicals.

Even more famed for its humor than its labor organizing, La Vara couched its boldest claims in satire that did not abate despite anxieties provoked by immigration restriction. In anticipation of the 1924 elections, in a rhymed satirical poem, “The Best Party,” Moise Soulam endorsed the Workers Party. Denouncing Democrats and Republicans as capitalist instruments and lamenting that the Socialist Party turned out to be “another Sabbetai Sevi” (i. e. a sham), Soulam asserted that the Workers Party alone “fights for the poor and the suffering” and deserved the Turkino vote.144 As election season coincided with the High Holidays, La Vara parodied the opening of the Rosh a-Shaná liturgy, to be sung to the melody of Ahot Ketana. Hahamim (rabbis) Avram a-Leví and Moshé Soulam (the editors’ Hebrew names) prayed that the Almighty deliver them and vanquish their enemies: protect the Jews of Salonica, Turkey, and the Balkans against antisemitism; provide politicians with a mind; destroy the capitalists/ make the fascists disappear/ annihilate the KKK since they are against our nation; bring harmony to the colony in New York and to those across the country; and, finally, make sure that readers pay their subscriptions!145 Meanwhile, Soulam spent the High Holidays lobbying Ellis Island officials to release Rabbi Avraham Maimon and family who had been classified as “Turks” by race, detained for ten days on trumped-up charges that Vida, the rubissa (rabi’s wife), was

145 “Tefila de Rosh a-Shana,” La Vara, September 12, 1924, 3.
suffering from trachoma, and nearly deported. Such efforts garnered further praise for the newspaper.146

While the Ladino Left experienced a resurgence in the 1920s, a more moderate political force increasingly attracted New York’s Turkinos: the Democratic Party. After the reorganization of the Sephardic Brotherhood in 1922, its first non-Salonican president, Albert Amateau, from Milas, near Izmir, founded the Sephardic Democratic Club on Rivington Street (1924). He observed that Yiddishim, themselves once poor, had achieved respectable positions in the Democratic Party and hoped that his community would follow suit. With 48 founding members, the Sephardic Democratic Club admitted US citizens or those who had submitted first papers; conducted meetings in English; and required higher membership fees. It appealed more to middle class Turkinos. Meetings drew 300 attendees and began with the American national anthem and Hatikvah. The club invited as guests local Democrats like alderman Moritz Graubard and lawyer Alexander Kaminsky—building bridges to Jews of eastern European background through American patriotism and Zionism. Amateau even invited La Vara’s Albert Levy to speak at an event. Although a supporter of the Workers Party, Levy lauded the club’s goal to enhance Turkinos’ civic engagement.147 The club nonetheless suffered from internal disputes and closed, although additional Sephardic Democratic organizations later emerged (1936-1940).148

Turkinos increasingly moderated their politics through education and class ascent. When Simon Nessim graduated from New York School of Law in 1924, La Vara celebrated the

148 Papo, Sephardim in Twentieth Century America, 186-189.
achievement and mentioned several accomplishments but not his role as a labor organizer or his socialist-inspired novella—a sign of the changing times. A member of the Sephardic Brotherhood like Nessim, Marguerite Saltiel sold Salonica’s Ladino socialist newspaper as a girl, attended the Alliance Israélite Universelle, and became one of Salonica’s few female journalists, writing for L’Indépendant. Drawn to New York by the suffrage movement, she worked in a sweatshop, traveled in socialist circles, and dated Alberto Moreau. But marriage to a Jewish businessman from Tangier stymied her path: she lamented the conservative American middle-class values that resigned her to life as a Brooklyn housewife. Kimono striker Sarah Aldoroti, with whom this chapter began, similarly followed the path of marriage and life as a housewife, with memories of her earlier political activism largely lost within the family even as she and her husband, Joseph Fins, remained active in the Turkino colony: upon their marriage, Joseph made a donation in his bride’s honor for the purchase of a new Torah scroll for the Sephardic Talmud Torah in Harlem.

Exceptions to the trend included scions of some of the first Ottoman Jews in the United States. Altina Schinasi, the Schinasi tobacco fortune heiress and inventor of the Harlequin glasses, increasingly sympathized with communism and racial justice causes. A grandson of one of the first Ottoman Jews to attain US citizenship (1891), Edouard Roditi participated in the Harlem Renaissance, published the first manifesto on Surrealism in English, and later wrote on

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149 “Nuestro amigo S. Simon Nessim es admitido avokato,” La Vara, November 28, 1924, 9.


151 “Donos echos por la merkia del sefer tora para el T’T sefaradi de Harlem,” La Amerika, December 19, 1919, 4.

Sephardic and queer themes, but was fired from his position as an interpreter following accusations that he was a communist.153

While figures like Schinasi and Roditi gravitated toward radicalism, the continued provocative rhetoric and success of La Vara in the 1920s provoked the ire of moderate leaders like La Amerika’s Gadol. While scant scholarship about the conflict between the newspapers has emphasized personal vendettas, the feud must also be viewed as an ideological rift that reflected broader Turkino divisions. As he had done to La Bos del Pueblo, Gadol denounced La Vara, its satirical “Salonian style,” and its use of “filthy language,” and warned editor Moise Soulam that the government could “put him prison” for promoting an “immoral spirit.”154 He similarly railed against La Vara’s other editor, Albert Levy, reminding readers that the latter had referred to the United States as the “rotten states of America.” To Gadol, this unwarranted criticism of the “land of opportunity and freedom” revealed Levy to be an “undesirable element” whom the government could deport. Gadol also claimed that the disrespect shown by his former employee Soulam paralleled the disrespect shown by Turkino workers to Turkino manufacturers in the garment industry: rather than express their “thanks and gratitude,” the editors of La Vara, like Turkino workers, “exploited” their bosses.155 Gadol’s approach revealed his growing opposition to workers that may have alienated readers. The conflict between the newspapers soon provoked complaints from readers, lawsuits and countersuits from each side, with the Brotherhood in the middle. Ultimately, the dispute led to the closure of La Amerika in 1925 and Gadol’s fall.156

155 “La konduka de los sefaradim en el negosio,” La Amerika, September 8 and 15, 1922, 4; “Djornalistas bufones de Saloniko,” La Amerika, April 18, 1924, 7.
156 Angel, La America, 118-128; Papo, Sephardim in Twentieth Century America, 79-81
Now with the monopoly on Ladino publishing in New York, *La Vara* ceased to serve as an oppositional voice and emerged as a pillar of the community. While *La Vara* tempered some of its political positions, it covered debates sponsored by Turkino clubs that pitted liberals and radicals against each other. The Salonican Social Center hosted a debate on “Moral Slavery of the Jews and its Solution” in 1925 in Harlem featuring well-known communist Alberto Moreau and Robert Fresco, the Istanbul-born former agent of *La Amerika* and co-editor of the Zionist *La Renasensia*. Moreau advocated class revolution whereas Fresco advocated national revolution in the form of a Jewish state.157 *La Vara* also continued to publicize meetings held in Ladino and English on street corners and in rented halls in Harlem and the Lower East Side organized by the Sephardic/Spanish Branch of the Workers’ (Communist) Party.158 Following his visit to Moscow in 1927, Moreau spoke about the Soviet Union and its influence in the Balkans, whereas guest Rebecca Grecht, a communist organizer and representative of the National Council for the Protection of the Foreign Born, also spoke.159 With the changing times, however, the membership of the Sephardic/Spanish Branch of the Workers Party dwindled to 45 in 1928.160

In 1930, as the Depression hit, the Brotherhood’s Bronx branch hosted a landmark debate on the question of philanthropy. The Salonica Federation veteran Yudá Saady, advancing the radical position, argued that philanthropy must be replaced by mutual aid. His opponent, Simon Nessim, who, thirteen years earlier had penned the socialist novella with which this chapter began, now repudiated his former support for mutuality and instead insisted that

philanthropy—class hierarchy—must be preserved. Now a middle-class lawyer, Nessim embodied the aspirations of many Turkinos who increasingly placed their faith in navigating, rather than overturning, the capitalist system—a posture that, in addition to the contentious reorganization of the Communist Party in 1929, contributed to the dissolution of Sephardic/Spanish Branch of the Workers Party.

The shift also anticipated La Vara’s embrace of the Democratic Party and, like other Jews, Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal. One of La Vara’s Los Angeles columnists, the psychologist and self-described Spinozist, Dr. Vitali Negri, from Istanbul, even helped to organize Upton Sinclair’s (unsuccessful) campaign for California governor on the Democratic ticket (1934). In New York, Albert Amateau, who had founded the Sephardic Democratic Club (1924) and graduated from Fordham Law School (1930), directed voter registration drives among naturalized immigrants to support the Democratic candidacies of FDR for president and Herbert Lehman for NY governor. Some Turkinos invoked the Ladino proverb, El rey es kon la djente (“The king is with the people”), to justify their support for the Democratic Party: nobility of character required a close relationship with working people. Other Turkinos even embraced nativism, perceiving themselves to be “‘one hundred percent Americans,’ who think that Japanese, Communists, Socialists, and foreigners (who criticize America) all should be thrown out.”

161 “Branch numero 3 dela Ermandad Sefaradith de Amerika,” La Vara, March 28, 1930.
164 Angel, A New World, 96.
The Demise and Echoes of the Ladino Left

Threats of repression, arrest, and deportation by the US state increasingly forced Turkino radical politics out of public venues like cafés, social clubs, and the theater and into the privacy of the home. Those linked to the Brotherhood who sympathized with the CP, like Moise Soulam, Samuel Dassa (denied his 1923 naturalization petition not on racial grounds but rather due to CP affiliation), and Sabetay “Edward” Ayash, cautiously continued to gather in the East Bronx residence of Federation veterans Yudá and Alegre Saady.166 Discretion did not prevent Ayash, a pharmacist and founding treasurer-secretary of SEIU 1199 (1932)—the largest union of healthcare workers in the country, the first to desegregate, and Martin Luther King Jr’s “favorite union”—from having to hide in a secret corridor in a cousin’s home in Bordentown, NJ when hounded by the FBI regarding “communist infiltration into labor unions.”167 David Amariglio, a member of the Brotherhood and the treasurer of the CP whom US Intelligence designated an “active leader” in the “subversive situation” in New York (1932), continued to read The Daily Worker at home in the housing projects in East New York but hid his communist library behind the liquor cabinet; the family papers and photos were eventually purged of any evidence of radical involvement.168 Under the alias David Leeds he once surreptitiously deposited in two

166 Personal communications from David Saffan, July 14 and 19, 2020.
167 Personal communications with Irving Ayash, May 31 and June 7, 2018, and June 13, 2020; Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg, Upheaval in the Quiet Zone: 1199SEIU and the Politics of Health Care Unionism (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 20-21, 24, 61, 102; Investigation of Communist Infiltration into Labor Unions which serve the Industries of the United States, House of Representatives Committee Rept. No. 16, December 17, 1948, 12.
168 Headquarters Second Corps Area Office of the Corps of Area Commanders, “Estimate of the Subversive Situation,” November 10, 1932, US Military Intelligence Reports: Surveillance of Radicals in the United States, 1917-1941, File Series 2262, RG-165, Records of the War Department General and Special Staff, National Archives, College Park, MD. David was the brother of Jacques Amariglio, the secretary of the Socialist Workers Federation in Salonica who later fled to France where he was killed in the resistance against the Nazis. David’s son, Jack Amariglio (named in memory of his uncle), a noted scholar of Marxism and founding editor of the academic journal, Rethinking Marxism, dedicated his dissertation to his father, “whose lifetime of political commitment and social struggle, as well as his love and compassion, has served as the major inspiration for my work.” Jack
banks a half million dollars from the NY State CP. Soulm’s niece, Rachel “Rae” Sevy worked the switchboard at CP headquarters and married Jack Johnstone, the noted Scottish-American union organizer and CP national committee member. Sevy’s radicalism attracted the scrutiny of the FBI, which classified her as being of “Spanish-Jewish nationality” and compiled an extensive dossier tracking her activities.

The liabilities associated with radical politics also contributed to the erasure of the Ladino Left within Sephardic American collective memory. Even the Sephardic Brotherhood rewrote its official history: an essay celebrating its twentieth anniversary in 1935 did not mention Maurice Nessim, La Bos del Pueblo’s editor who had called the meeting that facilitated the organization’s founding (and was arrested during the Palmer Raids). In 1923, Nessim had returned to the United States from exile in France. He became a naturalized citizen under the pseudonym Maurice Lacoste, fraudulently claiming to have been born in Cairo, “Spanish” by race, and previously a Persian national. He published several French weeklies and promoted Franco-American friendship, opposed fascism, and defended immigrants. When he died in 1964, the Brotherhood arranged for his Jewish burial even though he was not a member and married to a French Catholic woman. That act of charity in the wake of McCarthyism did not repair prior rifts and the exclusion of Nessim/Lacoste continued in memoirs: one of the Brotherhood’s other


Personal communications with Sevy and Johnstone’s daughter, Patricia Johnstone, California Democratic Party region director, May 8, 2019 and December 18, 2020.


founders conveniently omitted him from his 1981 account of the organization’s establishment.\textsuperscript{173} The Brotherhood’s official narrative elides its founders’ radical background—a sign of the “upstanding” image the organization seeks to project.\textsuperscript{174} Yet echoes persisted: Bertha Menashe, a Salonica-born member of the Brotherhood, never joined a political party, but in the 1970s she transcribed from memory Ladino songs, including a socialist anthem nearly identical to one published by the Sephardic Branch of the Socialist Party (1919)—a sign of how radical Ladino culture once wove through the Brotherhood’s social fabric.\textsuperscript{175}

The demise of New York’s Ladino radical culture did not stem principally from “insufficient interest” among Turkinos, as has been surmised until now, but rather US government repression and continuing liabilities.\textsuperscript{176} Moreover, the Holocaust and the deportation of Salonica’s Jews to their deaths at Auschwitz-Birkenau, followed by the Greek civil war that resulted in some surviving Jewish communists being stripped of their citizenship and exiled to the new state of Israel—where the Federation’s famous founder, Avraham Benaroya, spent his final years in obscurity—brought an end to the transnational Ladino Left.\textsuperscript{177}

During the main periods of activity of the Ladino Left in the US, from World War I through the Depression, perhaps no radical figure embodied the “multi-rooted” Levantine Jewish posture like Nessim Hanoka. Designated a “chief of radicalism” in Chicago and arrested during the Palmer Raids as a Communist Party secretary (1920), Hanoka fled to New York where he established a dental practice in Harlem, participated in Sephardic communal life, and avoided

\textsuperscript{177} Eleni Beze, “Being Leftist and Jewish in Greece during the Civil War and its Aftermath: Constraints and Choices,” \textit{Historien} 18, no. 2 (2019).
deportation only due to the Knights of Labor intervening with President Coolidge’s secretary. Yet he viewed his multilingualism as an inherent feature of “Sephardic” identity, of his organizing practices (with the CP and later the Farmer Labor Party, a left-wing coalition of agricultural and industrial workers), and of his business strategy, as a Ladino advertisement indicated: “Being a Sepharadi, Dr. Hanoka speaks Judeo-Spanish, Greek, Turkish, French, etc.” Those languages, including the “etc.,” motivated his radicalism as he supported desegregation and anti-colonial movements. He befriended Elijah Mohammad, leader of the Nation of Islam; Pedro Albizu Campos, leader of the Puerto Rican independence movement; and Mahatma Gandhi, leader of India’s independence movement. Hounded by the FBI, Hanoka has been referred to, only erroneously, as a “Turkish-born Muslim” or “from India” or an “Indian-American” (South Asian) in scant published references. Perhaps Hanoka reflected what avant-garde anarchist critic with family roots in Izmir, Richard Kostelanetz, views as the inherent “deviance” of the Levantine Jewish experience and its creative cultural and political potential.


180 *Kalendario La Vara* 5685 (1925) [n. p]; Doktor N. Hanoka, “Porke partido votar?” *La Vara*, September 27, 1935, 6.


The recuperation of the Ladino Left and its previously invisible tributaries compels us to move beyond the communalist approach to the US Jewish past by centering Jews who “proclaimed” their Jewishness in different languages, with different names, appearances, geographic origins, cultural practices, and political coalitions, and who turned New York into a transnational center of Ladino radical culture. This story upends cornerstones of still-dominant narratives of US Jewish history that often emphasize the notion of American Jewish exceptionalism, reinforce filiopietistic representations of Jewish progressive politics, minimize discussions of intra-Jewish prejudice, and provide little room for non-Ashkenazi/European Jews.

This chapter also elucidates why archives in Ladino are sometimes called papelikos satanikos (“little devilish papers”\textsuperscript{183}): they reveal windows onto the past that present-day communal and academic gatekeepers would prefer not be opened for the counternarratives they unlock may threaten their own claims to authority. The first and longest organized political movement among Ladino-speaking Jews in the US, as Ladino-speaking Jews, congealed around the Ladino Left, drew inspiration from Salonica’s Federation, and disseminated radical political culture via Ladino newspapers and cafes; social clubs, lectures, and debates; the theater; and through activism with specific “Sephardic” or “Spanish” branches of the Socialist Party, the Communist Party, and the Workers (Communist) Party (1914-1929) for which Ladino emerged for the first (and perhaps only) time in the US as a public language of party politics. The first two Ottoman-born Jews to run for elected office in the United States did so as communists: Alberto Moreau for New York state assembly (1928) and David Amariglio for New York state senate (1932) and New York supreme court justice (1935). (They preceded lawyer Louis Gorman [né Lazar Gormezano in the Dardanelles], who ran unsuccessfully as a Democrat for the Bronx

\textsuperscript{183} Bali, \textit{The Silent Minority in Turkey}, 158.
district assembly [1937]. Naama [Naomi] Behar, a dress factory worker from an Edirne family, likely became the first elected Turkina women, for the second assembly Bronx Democratic committee [1940]). Radicalism, therefore, stands at the foundation of Levantine Jewish American politics even if that point of origin—like the interconnected streams of radical engagement with other Jews, Greeks, or “Latinos”—has been erased due to the inconvenience that it poses to the communalist narrative.

The opening that this chapter provides is but a start, one that should also make way for an investigation into the histories of other radical Jews outside the communalist purview who “proclaim” their Jewishness in yet other ways: Greek-speaking Romaniote Jews from Ioannina who participated in the 1913 kimono strike on the Lower East Side, and Arabic-speaking Jewish radicals, like Sam Nahem, a right-handed Major League Baseball pitcher with left-wing politics born on the Lower East Side to parents from Aleppo. He joined the CP, advocated for desegregation in baseball, and was blacklisted. And what of the echoes of the Ladino Left in the post-World War II generations? Perhaps Bronx-born Michael Castro, the son of communists with roots in Salonica and Ioannina, offers a clue: a scholar of Native American studies and co-founder of River Styx (one of the country’s first multicultural literary journals), Castro defined himself as a “Hispanic Jew,” served as St. Louis’ first poet laureate and, in verse, delved into the power of the Ladino press, the allure of medieval Spanish Jewish mysticism, and the imperative

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185 “Waist makers vote for general strike,” The Call, January 14, 1913, 1; “30,000 girl strikers will hold parade against brutality,” The Call, January 24, 1913, 1-2.

186 Peter Dreier and Robert Elias, “Out of Left Field,” Jacobin, July 11, 2017. As another example, ILGWU leadership asked the Syrian Jewish woman, Nettie Harari Shrog, involved in the theater troupe, to get a nose job, but she is not identified as Syrian or of Arabic-speaking Jewish background: Katz, All Together Different, 213-219.
of Black Lives Matter. In short, this chapter has sought to recuperate the Ladino Left and its multiple radical trajectories that sought not only to navigate but also to transform American society; to highlight the limits of extant frameworks for conceptualizing US Jewish (radical) history; and to begin the process of reimagining them. That process continues in the next chapter, which explores the roles that Turkinos played in forging New York’s “Latino Left” between the World Wars.

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