PREFACE

The Sephardic community of New York City is, without doubt, an excellent source of balladic material, given that there are representative numbers of families from all the Eastern Judeo-Spanish settlements, as well as from Morocco.¹ As a matter of fact, there exist throughout the city beneficent societies for groups from such locations as Salonika, Monastir, Istanbul, Adrianopolis, Silivri, Gallipoli, Dardanelles, Ankara, Smyrna, Chios, Rhodes, and so on. These places would scarcely tempt any scholar, since the cost of a research trip to collect ballads in such remote sites would surely be prohibitive. But unstable political conditions in the Eastern Mediterranean area during the early years of this century gave impetus to the emigration of Jews from Turkey and the Balkan countries to the United States and to South America. So it is convenient that in New York City, with a Sephardic population of approximately twenty-five thousand, only time and patience are needed to interview native informants from all these distant communities.²

And yet this bright view must be qualified by several factors: a large number of young male Sephardic immigrants who do not sing ballads, the negative linguistic influence of the French-oriented Alliance Israélite Universelle, and

¹The Preface adapts certain passages from the original introduction to Professor Benardete’s thesis. Thus it reflects, at various points, the circumstances of the early 1920s.
²In a report prepared under the auspices of the Bureau of Jewish Social Research on behalf of the New York Federation, Louis M. Hacker stated that there were, according to conservative estimates, approximately forty thousand Sephardic Jews in New York City at the time of his investigation. Dr. Hacker indicated, on the basis of rather sketchy immigration figures, that between 1899 and 1925, 25,591 men, women, and children of Sephardic origin entered the United States from Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, and Greece. See "The Communal Life of the Sephardic Jews in New York City," Journal of Jewish Communal Service, 3 (1926), 32–40: 32 and 34. For more details on this period, see Joseph M. Papo, "The Sephardic Jewish Community of New York," Studies in Sephardic Culture: The David N. Barocas Memorial Volume, edited by Marc D. Angel (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1980), pp. 65–94. [Note of SGA and JHS.]
the deleterious effects of the phonograph on folk traditions. As one elderly woman who sang for me explained, many ballads have disappeared because “los fonógrafos nos siegaron los garones” (‘phonographs have cut our throats,’ i.e., for singing). In truth, the phonograph has done away with the need to learn ballads by heart and, because of its easy availability and reasonable price, it has become the new source of family entertainment. Although the fondness for romances continues among the Sephardim of New York, the phonograph record—as performed by singers who scarcely know the lyrics and are accompanied by Turkish instruments, playing Turkish melodies—now prevails over the traditional family singer. So a heavy influx of young immigrants, a dearth of elderly singers, a growing interest in French and, of course, English, and the attractiveness of readily available phonograph records have all led inexorably to a marked decline in traditional ballad singing.

The Sephardic Jews of New York live in each of the city’s boroughs, particularly in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, as well as in its numerous outlying districts. It is not easy to locate them and most have a distinctively Hispano-Arabic sense of the sanctity of the home, zealously guarding their privacy. For these reasons, it has taken considerable effort to make contact with ballad singers.

In general, I collected my ballads from women, most of them of at least forty years of age and some with excellent repertoires. Mrs. Moché, from Salonika, whom I visited three times, gave the most texts—twenty-two altogether—even inviting me back to her home once again because she had remembered three more romansas. A young married lady, Mrs. Moreno, from Izmir, gave me seven texts; Mrs. Rica Levy, from Tangier, eight; Mrs. Fihma, from Tetuán, seven. Mrs. Rosina Sedacca and Mrs. Levy, from Dardanelles (Çanakkale) offered me their variants, as did Mrs. Aboulafia, from Gallipoli.

Now, after almost sixty years, it is a source of great satisfaction that this collection should become available to ballad scholars in published form.

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