Return policy

Long past their years of rejection and rebellion, Rabbi Efraim Stauber’s safety net is helping yesterday’s success stories stay winners.
Close to a million Jews fled their native Arab lands after 1948, leaving behind not only billions of dollars worth of confiscated wealth, but also thriving communities that had existed for centuries. But as memories fade and people pass on, who will be left to remember?

Professor Henry Green is traveling the world in his race against time to record this forgotten exodus for future generations.

Before it’s too late.
There aren’t too many people who can compete with Professor Henry Green for the number of heartbreaking stories he’s heard over the past decade — stories of Jews expelled from their homes, of ancient traditions being lost to the next generation, of thriving communities looted and exiled.

Close to a million Jews from Arab and Mediterranean lands, from Baghdad to Aleppo to Cairo to Casablanca, whose rich Jewish traditions go back many centuries, faced growing discrimination and brutality beginning in the 1940s, when violence and expulsion put an end to once-thriving communities and a rich heritage that went back hundreds, or even thousands, of years.

But a majority of those displaced Sephardic Jews are no longer alive, and of the ones who are, many are no longer physically or mentally capable of sharing the personal testimonies of their early lives and the trauma of exile they faced. As memories fade and people pass on, Professor Green is more desperate than ever to record the witnesses to this “forgotten exodus” in his own race against time to capture and document the lives of a Jewish populace on the verge of disappearing.

Yet why is a Canadian-born, Ashkenazi-rooted sociologist and Judaic studies professor at the University of Miami so driven to preserve these testimonies, to the point where he created Sephardi Voices, a collection of digitally recorded audiovisual histories of hundreds of Sephardic emigrants? What has motivated Dr. Green to travel the world seeking out their stories before it’s too late?

“Growing up in a small Ashkenazi Orthodox community in Ottawa in the ’50s and ’60s, all I learned was that Israel ‘saved’ the Sephardim by facilitating their immigration. I thought I was a relatively learned Jew, but when I came to Israel in 1971 while pursuing a master’s in sociology at Hebrew University, I learned I was ignorant,” Dr. Green explains. “As an Ashkenazi, my understanding of Sephardic history ended with the Inquisition in 1492. In Israel, suddenly I was able to meet Yemenite and Iraqi Jews — I had no idea that Jews came in all colors and shapes. But I was also naïve. I had no knowledge of the discrimination they were facing.”

The Sephardic disparity in Israel dates back to the country’s statehood in 1948 when it was home to some 600,000 Jews, predominantly of European, Ashkenazi descent. Over
From Baghdad to Casablanca, Jewish communities boasted a rich, ancient heritage. After it was all destroyed, can memories keep traditions going for the next generation?

The following decade, 400,000 more Jews arrived from Europe, along with 500,000 from Muslim nations in the Middle East and North Africa.

The new arrivals found the pre-1948ers firmly ensconced in all the important political, economic, and cultural positions. Sephardic Jews were plunked into absorption centers, then sent to settle cities in the periphery where jobs and educational opportunities were scarce.

That’s when the social and economic gaps between the two main Israeli sectors opened into the festering wounds that have yet to be fully healed. Even today, the average worker born to a father of Western heritage will earn almost 30 percent more than his Sephardic counterpart.

The year Henry Green arrived to study was the year the Israeli “Black Panther” movement — a political pressure group made up of frustrated and disenchanted second-generation Moroccan Sephardim — raised Israeli consciousness about discrimination in employment and education, as well as disrespect toward Sephardic traditions and culture.

“But I was disillusioned,” Dr. Green remembers. “Their protests brought about social change for the better and religious change for the worse.”

Squeezed into the Mold When Green came back to Israel as a doctoral student five years later, he was asked to write up a grant proposal for a literacy program geared toward helping Sephardim better integrate into a labor market dominated by secular Ashkenazim.

“The communities I visited were Moroccan, Yemenite, Tunisian, and others. They lived in squalor. In some cases their housing was made out of tin or corrugated metal; others lived in dilapidated apartment blocks that were dirty and infested,” he remembers. “The mothers wanted to help their children and wanted to be part of the process.”

The program, called Etgar or HIPPY, was aimed at illiterate Sephardic mothers who were taught to read so they could teach their own preschool children to read. The program was later written up in Dr. Green’s book Research in Action (which Hillary Clinton referenced in her book It Takes a Village).

“My heart went out to them and their children who were desperately trying to squeeze themselves into a European, Ashkenazic mold, which was foreign to them,” says Dr. Green. “They encapsulated the immigrant experience shared by all Sephardim, displaced from their homes and having lost their sense of identity and pride in the process. Seeing this up
close, I felt compelled to help empower them to reclaim their voices."

After completing his PhD, Dr. Green went on to become director of Judaic studies at the University of Miami in 1984. With his long-standing interest in and concern for Sephardic issues, he added Sephardic studies to the curriculum and initiated courses relating to Sephardic history and heritage. At the time there was a growing population in Miami of Sephardic Jews who had fled Latin America because of political upheaval, but they were having a hard time integrating into the existing Jewish community. Dr. Green was also involved in creating a program that would accommodate their needs and Sephardi educational demands.

But it wasn’t until 2002 that Dr. Green embarked on a project that was to transform his — and countless others’ — relationship to Sephardim and their rich heritage. He began collecting oral histories of Sephardi immigrants, on the initial premise that he was dealing with a human rights story, a major issue few connected with the Sephardi immigrant experience.

“I soon discovered, though, that the subject was much bigger than human rights,” Dr. Green explains. “It encompassed Jewish peoplehood itself. But as heartrending as my first Miami interviews were, they alerted me to how limited I was in taking on this project. I just didn’t know enough about the towns and histories to fully understand what these refugees were telling me. I realized that the only way I could move forward was by creating and teaching a class on the subject, but there wasn’t enough material available that could fully capture these experiences.”

Even the Steven Spielberg digital collection proved disappointing. “I was astounded to find that of their 52,000 interviews, fewer than 400 featured Jews from North Africa and the Middle East, and those were mainly of Greek Jews whose stories were more European than Middle Eastern. There was not one interview on the Farhud, a horrific Nazi-incited pogrom that took place in Iraq in June 1941. I realized that the only way to develop such a course was to have my students mine the information themselves by speaking directly to these immigrants. By doing this, we waded into uncharted waters.”

Record of Lost Lives
Given refugees’ declining years and fading memories, Dr. Green knew that time was of the essence. In 2005, he presented his plan to collect these histories at the World Congress of Jewish Studies and, despite the exorbitant costs involved, Sephardi Voices was officially launched four years later in London, England. Dr. Green’s team set out to record the histories of these Sephardic expats who fled under the threat of extortion, torture, and even death, in a project modeled after film director Steven Spielberg’s Shoah Foundation.

In the last six years, Dr. Green has traveled the globe seeking out the stories while they’re still to be had. To date, they’ve collected over 200 interviews from France, Canada, the US, “Some people have litigation pending against the Egyptian and Iraqi governments and are concerned that their testimonies may prevent their children from laying claim to these properties”
Britain, and is to create an extensive international digital archive of testimonies and photographs and thereby ensure the preservation of the history and heritage of Sephardic Jews for scholars, educators, the general public, and, most importantly, to give their own progeny — many of whom have assimilated — a real connection to a rich religious and cultural past.

The project has also had political ramifications. In designating November 30 as a day of remembrance for Sephardim, the Israeli government essentially acknowledged that most Sephardic immigrants were refugees rather than simply a people returning to their homeland. Sephardi Voices provides the source materials that help enable human rights activists like Irwin Cotler and advocacy organizations like JAC (Justice for Jews from Arab Countries), JIMENA (Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa) and the UK-based Harif to argue for inclusion of Sephardi rights into any future Palestinian peace agreement with Israel. Finally, there is an acknowledgment that more than 600,000 Jews who were displaced from Arab lands forcibly left behind valuable properties and are entitled to billions of dollars in compensation.

"Human rights are the currency of how we understand things today," says Dr. Green. "So the Sephardim now have more of a voice in this UN-dominated arena."

But, admits Dr. Green, it's a double-edged sword. "Some people whose dramatic testimonies we want to archive have litigation pending against the Egyptian and Israeli governments for properties that were confiscated. They don't know how long this will take and are concerned that their testimonies prevent their children from laying claim to these properties."

The biggest challenges in accessing testimonies, though, are the clouded memories as well as the fear of reliving the trauma of the past. Many were only children when they escaped. One Egyptian Jew related how, at the age of 12, he watched his father stagger into the house bruised and bloodied after being beaten by
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police and how his mother swallowed the family jewels to pay for passage, in rickety boats, out of Egypt. A refugee from Iraq recalled how in trying to escape, she and her mother were separated from her father and brothers and thrown into separate jails and how her doll, the one item she still retains from her life in Baghdad, was torn open by authorities searching for Zionist subterfuge; they claimed that the doll’s tape-recorded “Mama” was a Zionist espionage devise.

“I tell them that by sharing their stories, they leave behind a tangible, permanent record of their lost lives,” Dr. Green explains. “Their children and grandchildren are not returning to Iraq, Morocco, or Libya, they don’t speak Arabic or Ladino. They need to know their parents’ histories and to feel proud of their heritage.

“Knowing the past helps place the present within a context,” Dr. Green continues. “Some argue that the murder of four Jews in the kosher supermarket in Paris last January indicates the new face of anti-Semitism today. But I wonder how many of those Jews who arrived in France from Casablanca or Tunis will, within one generation, leave to come to Canada or Israel, given that three of the four victims were the children of immigrants from Tunisia and Algeria. In fact, about 35,000 Sephardim have left France in the last five years, but there’s nothing new about it.”

**Untold Narratives**  Dr. Green says that the support from people like Rabbi Eille Abudie of the Edmond J. Safra Synagogu in New York City and Canadian legislator Irwin Cotler notwithstanding, not all his friends and colleagues understand his passion.

“On the other hand,” says Dr. Green, “how can I expect someone to fully appreciate the magnitude if they haven’t experienced, as I have, the unfolding family narratives that are so deeply moving and heartfelt? Watching my student Elena Scarama interview her grandfather, I felt I was witnessing two dramas playing themselves out simultaneously. Professor Charles Dianine, an Algerian Jew who teaches at the Sorbonne in France, began his story with the statement, ‘I was four years old when I saw my father for the first time.’ His father, together with other Algerian Jews, had been transported to a concentration camp before Charles was born [concentration and labor camps were not restricted to European Jewry], Professor Dianine couldn’t hold back his tears as he recounted the horrors of his youth, which Elena was hearing for the first time.”

At the age of 18, Dianine was conscripted to fight for the French against his fellow Algerians, some of whom were his friends. He had no choice — insubordination was punishable by death. He went on to describe the terrors of war and all he had to endure; when he finally returned to his tiny home in the Jewish ghetto, he found a Muslim family living there instead, as his parents had fled to France while he was away fighting. He had no home, no money, and felt utterly alone. Somehow, he managed to scrape together enough funds to travel to France and reunite with his family. But there was no happy ending. His father died shortly afterward, having succumbed to the strain and trauma of exile and separation.

“Elena had no idea about this history,” says Dr. Green. “I watched as she tried to comfort her grandfather, while his tears mingled with hers as he realized he was giving her a legacy, an intergenerational connection.”

**Who Am I?**  The stories convey a rich multilayered tapestry of Sephardic cultural and spiritual life, and each country — even every area within that country — greatly varied, creating a prism of Jewish life. Tangier, which was Spanish Morocco, was different from urban areas like Casablanca in French Morocco, which was different from the Atlas Mountains, which is also French Morocco, but further south.

Yosef Akban, an Iranian Jew, resides in an exclusive area of London. His large, beautiful home is filled with priceless Iranian antiques. The interview with Dr. Green took place in his kitchen and progressed easily enough: his life in prewar Iran and his work as an antiquarian there. Yet toward the end of the interview he ventured into chopper waters and shared the story that haunts him to this day.

Akban had the misfortune of having the same first and last name of a man suspected by the Iranian authorities of spying for Israel. As such, he was tried for treason, convicted, and sentenced to die by firing squad. By an act of G-d, a supplementary panel member, who personally knew the real Yosef Akban, recognized this as a case of mistaken identity and insisted that this Yosef Akban be released. The authorities refused — the fact that he was a Jew was reason enough for a conviction. Yet this individual, not to be deterred, arranged to have Akban freed — on condition that he leave the country within 24 hours. Penniless, he arrived in Britain, where he eventually created an outstanding life for himself and for his future family. Ezra Zilkha, an investment banker, is an impeccably dressed gentleman who speaks many languages. In the **Sephardic Voices** testimony, we see a collection of photos that decorate his office walls as he stands beside the who’s who of the US political world. Seated comfortably behind his desk, he speaks about the intricacies of the private banking world in the Middle East. An Iraqi Jew, he and his family lived in Lebanon and then moved on to Egypt, where they were instrumental through private banking, in helping support Palestinian Jews during the pre-World War II period.

“This was a revelation to me,” says Dr. Green of the interview. “I had no idea that substantial
Jewish funds were flowing into Palestine from within the Middle East itself. Zilkha, in fact, was one of the few Jews who expressed pride in his Arab heritage; most Sephardim I interviewed saw themselves as second-class—although well-integrated—citizens and felt betrayed by their governments. They carried with them a great deal of anger. Interestingly, Moroccan Jews wax nostalgic about their homeland, remembering it as a paradise."

The videotaped interviews generally take place in interviewees' homes, where Dr. Green and his team are treated to warm Sephardic hospitality, "We are given baklava or homemade cookies and Turkish coffee—first we eat, then we talk," says Dr. Green. "And then the photos are brought out. Here is a five-year-old boy dressed in a school uniform. There is a mother dressed in a Western-style dress; a grandmother dressed in traditional Sephardic clothing. Slowly a whole life begins to unfold. Families gathered for the holidays, the long walks to school, the smell of the Tigris River in the summer, the embrace of the breeze at night as children and adults bunk down on rooftops to sleep, the melodies sung in synagogues. There is nostalgia; joy mingled with pain as other memories begin to intrude. We try to sympathize, but can we really understand what it's like to lose a vital part of oneself forever?"

Every interview is an independent piece of history, but some manage to touch Dr. Green in a more profound way. "Such was the case with Abdullah Dangoor," he says. "A poised, thoughtful man, he was eager to share with Sephardi Voices the intricacies of his immigrant experience: his life in Baghdad, his escape to Lebanon and then to Britain, and his resettlement there. When asked how he defined himself, his answer stopped me in my tracks. 'I'm a British Jew,' he answered. Then he paused and reconsidered. 'Well, I lived in Iraq for 3,000 years, and I lived in the UK for 60 years, so really how can I deny that I'm Iraqi?' He said this with such a deep sense of melancholy that I was at a loss for how to respond. A civilization around since the time of Yirmiyahu Hanavi just disappeared."

"Abdullah Dangoor was 97 years old when he gave his interview. He passed away a short time later. In fact, 70 percent of Sephardim born in Arab lands are no longer around to share their memories. There are few communal records left. With their deaths, dies the possibility of knowing the nature of these ancient communities that had prospered for millennia and are now gone. So I go where the stories take me—London, Paris, Madrid, Johannesburg, so that I can really hear and appreciate the experience of displacement and the rebuilding of a life. The stories sadden me, but also make me feel as if I'm a part of something privileged. And so I've spent the last decade trying to beat the clock."