



## The Jews of Albuquerque

by Noel Pugach

*Editor's Note: This article is a slightly condensed and revised version of Noel Pugach's keynote address at the opening of the Albuquerque Museum exhibit, "The Jews of Albuquerque: Building Community along the Rio Grande" on November 20, 2016.*

**A**lbuquerque grew by leaps and bounds from the decision of the Santa Fe Railway to establish a depot and railyards on a piece of barren mesa about two miles east of the village of Old Town. From its earliest beginnings in the 1880s to the present day, members of the Jewish faith and community have been an integral part of New Town, soon renamed Albuquerque. Subsequently, they participated in all of its stages of growth and development, and frequently led the way. They had a common destiny and rich partnership with Albuquerque's diverse settlers and residents; they shared in their successes and achievements, but also in their setbacks and disappointments.



*Medallion from the Economist shop, courtesy of the Museum of Albuquerque*

### Present at the Beginning

That was true from the moment that Kaufman Mandell stepped off the Santa Fe Railway at its New Town depot in 1880. It is not known what brought this Alsatian Jewish immigrant, Union army officer, and businessman to that location. But as Kaufman gazed out at the bleak landscape, he saw opportunity. Before returning to New York to manage his extensive business affairs, Kaufman purchased land for housing lots north of present-day Lomas Boulevard and

between Fourth and Sixth Streets NW. Named the Mandell Addition, it proved to be a pretty good piece of real estate.

Two years later, he sent Mike Mandell, his cousin and future son-in-law, to Albuquerque to look after his affairs and exploit the opportunities for himself.

Mike was soon joined by members of four Alsatian Jewish families—Mandells, Weillers, Benjamins, and Dreyfusses. They were united by blood, marriage, and business interests, and they would play a very important role in the creation of Albuquerque's downtown business district.

Solomon Weiller, another newcomer, started out working for the Ilfeld family in Old Town, then opened his own shop on Romero Street. But seeing where the real action was, he partnered with Solomon Benjamin in a store on Central Avenue. The Grant Bull store, later renamed the Economist, also moved from Old Town to Central Avenue SW.

Over the following two decades, dozens of other Jewish families, mainly from Germany, settled in Albuquerque. They were joined by thousands of non-Jews who also saw great opportunities in this new settlement that was quickly transformed from a raw frontier town, with numerous saloons and bordellos around the rail station, into an orderly

city. By 1900, Albuquerque counted 6,000 residents and before World War I claimed over 10,000 people, overtaking Las Vegas as the population, commercial, and financial capital of the newly admitted state of New Mexico.



*Noel Pugach*

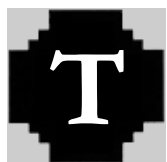
Over the remainder of the 20th century, Albuquerque's Jews enjoyed great success and considerable prestige in the economic, social, cultural, and political spheres of the city's life. To be sure, there were failures. But we don't know much about them because those individuals did not leave a legacy or records. Many, however, stayed and their story is at once fascinating and instructive. Later on in this talk, I will attempt to account for the factors that contributed to the overall success in the city's *external* life of those who stayed here. On the other hand, until the last decades of the 19th century, Albuquerque Jewry did not achieve notable progress or achievements in the *internal*

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## President's Column



The fascination with *Conversos* and crypto-Jews in New Mexico's unique history still holds tremendous sway. In fact, because of this fascination, I've chosen to devote my President's Column to a review of our fall 2016 conference. Its theme, "Jewish Identities: Lost, Rediscovered, and Reclaimed," proved that very point by attracting over 140 people to listen, learn, and digest the history of Jews in Spain and Portugal. Their dramatic expulsion and resulting Diaspora throughout the world was presented in great depth by the conference's Visiting Scholar, Dr. Jonathan Israel.

Against this background, the audience was treated to an interesting presentation of crypto-Jewish influence on the Golden Age of Spanish literature, a little-known topic. However, on a personal note, as a former Spanish language and



*NMJHS President  
Linda Goff*

literature major, my favorite course was this period of Spanish literature with the reading of *Lazarillo de Tormes* and *La Celestina*. A wonderful trip down memory lane!

We also enjoyed a wonderful balance of views about Doña Teresa, Was She or Wasn't She? Tori Erhart, one of our two presenters on Doña Teresa, interwove great humor with her historical research as we learned an interesting factoid that the torque wrench and its tightening may be attributed to the greatly feared Grand Inquisitor, Tomas de Torquemada, and his use of often-cruel torture techniques at the height of the Inquisition. Dr. Frances Levine, our second distinguished speaker, treated everyone with her detailed research leading to her most recent book, *Doña Teresa Confronts the Spanish Inquisition: A Seventeenth Century New Mexican Drama*.

Because of this 500-year secret history, the Return to Judaism has taken on new meaning in New Mexico. Adherents are sometimes referred to as the "New Jews." Rabbi Neil Amswych, Temple Beth Shalom, Santa Fe, presented a fascinating overview of Halacha law and its interpretation of "what constitutes" the definition of "Who is Jewish." He set the stage for perhaps the most deeply meaningful as well as emotional stories of three Hispanic women who shared their personal journeys of discovery and practice of Jewish faith and heritage.

Capping these very personal stories was the discussion of "The Law of Return," recently promulgated by the Spanish government, offering the opportunity for Sephardic descendants to reclaim Spanish citizenship. This is not an easy process, but with great commitment, it can be achieved. Sara Koplik movingly reminded the audience that, as Jews, we welcome everyone, and with the unique history of New Mexico Jews, we are a growing group, not a dwindling one.

In all, the conference featured a balance of academic, research papers and perspectives with moving personal stories that touched very deep chords of emotion for everyone in the room. ☆

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5520 Wyoming Blvd. NE  
Albuquerque, NM 87109  
Telephone: (505) 348-4471  
Fax: (505) 821-3351  
website: [www.nmjhs.org](http://www.nmjhs.org)  
email: [admin@nmjhs.org](mailto:admin@nmjhs.org)

Administrator: Anne McCormick  
Office Hours: Monday/Wednesday/Thursday  
9:30-1:30 PM  
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## The Jews of Albuquerque *(continued from p. 1)*

Jewish sphere—religious, spiritual, and cultural.

### Shaping Downtown Albuquerque

From the 1880s until the end of the Second World War, the most striking economic achievement of Jews was the creation of the Downtown Business District. Jewish merchants owned and operated the major shopping emporiums on Central Avenue and on a number of the side streets, from First Street to Sixth Street. They totally dominated the block between Second and Third Streets. In the earlier years, these included Weiller-Benjamin, Mandell-Dreyfuss, the Economist, Rosenwalds, Meyer & Meyer, Golden Rule Dry Goods, the Popular Dry Goods, Julian Dreyfuss's store on First Street, and the Golden Peacock.

After 1930, they were joined by a diverse group of entrepreneurs who created specialty stores, some of which expanded beyond the old downtown boundaries: American Furniture, H. Cook Sporting Goods, Simon's Western Wear, the Stork Shop, People's Flowers, Abe Cohen's Payless Drugs (which he sold to Walgreen's after World War II), Phillips Mercantile, Zork Hardware, and El Cambio, the Brombergs' market in Barelás. Jews were certainly not the only merchants in the downtown area; they worked closely with Hispanos, Italians, Greeks, and others, gathering for meals at local restaurants and cafes, especially at Magidson's Delicatessen in the later years. But for a number of years, Jews set the tone, temper, and culture of downtown commerce.

In addition, Jews entered the growing business of marketing Indian arts and crafts. Several major merchants in the 19th century—the Bibos and Seligmans—had established trading posts on Pueblo and Navajo lands. Now, newcomers saw a growing popular market for Native American wares that appealed to locals and tourists in Albuquerque and other towns. The Freedts, Maisels, Chernoff-

Bobricks (Wright's Trading Post), and Goodmans (the Covered Wagon in Old Town) entered the retail and wholesale markets to take advantage of the growing trend.

Some of the retail enterprises failed during the Great Depression as residents struggled to survive. Others could not compete with the new 5 & 10 stores and the branches of national chains, such as JC Penney, Montgomery Ward, and Sears. But a substantial number weathered the economic storm because they sold goods on credit and formed personal ties to customers. However, a number of downtown stores were forced to close because of death, old age of the proprietors, and the unwillingness of their college-educated sons to stay in retail. Finally, there were a number who succumbed to the demise of the Downtown Business District as consumers shifted to the shopping centers and malls in the Northeast Heights. This was symbolized by the closing of the downtown store of Mandell-Dreyfuss, one of the most prosperous stores, and the opening of a ladies clothing store in Coronado Shopping Center by Joe Mandell, Julius's son. Others—H. Cook, American Furniture, and Judd Jewelers—made the successful transition to the Heights.

### Jewish Activity after World War II

Meanwhile, as a result of the importance of atomic weapons in America's defense structure, New Mexico and Albuquerque served as centers for nuclear research and development. That brought in a new generation of Jews from outside New Mexico schooled in the sciences and engineering, as well as other professionals in medicine, law, economics, and government operations. The University of New

Mexico increased its student enrollment enormously and in 1964 opened its medical school, creating demand for professors, physicians, and researchers. Among them were a sizable number of Jews who benefited from the collapse of the old restrictions and quotas on Jews entering the medical fields, academia, the professions, and eventually the corporate world. These new arrivals changed the face of the Jewish population in Albuquerque and would significantly alter its outlook.

Jews migrating to Albuquerque since the 1980s have shown greater diversity, which is not possible to characterize economically, as was true in the merchant and post-World War II eras.

They are employed

in many different areas—technology, real estate, and business. A number of them are retirees who have moved to Albuquerque because their children and grandchildren live nearby or because of its delightful climate and relatively low cost of living. As a result of this trend and the out-migration of younger Jews seeking better employment opportunities, New Mexico Jewry is ageing, as the recent Jewish Federation's important and revealing demographic study indicated.

### Accounting for Success

But we see a continuous record of economic success. How do we explain it? There are many reasons. Most important, from the outset, Jews who settled in Albuquerque, as well as throughout the territory and state, were welcomed. They rarely encountered discrimination or barriers to advancement. Some claim that as Anglos, in a sea of Hispanos and Native Americans, they were valued as

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*Kaufman Mandell, courtesy of Natalie Glasgall*

**The Jews of Albuquerque** *(continued from p. 3)*



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allies. But it went deeper. From the outset they were considered productive and useful citizens, who brought needed and useful services to the community. For example, within two years after its founding, a Jew, Henry Jaffa, was elected as the first mayor of New Town (1885) and six years later another Jew, Mike Mandell, was elected to that office.

A second reason is that none of the people entering business in Albuquerque enjoyed any special advantage at the start. There was a level playing field. Subsequently, they had networks of family and friends who provided employment, encouragement, housing, capital, and guidance in the ways of doing business here. That was also true of the Italian, Greek, and other immigrant groups. A third reason, drawing on Jewish commercial habits, they quickly learned the local languages (English, Spanish, Pueblo dialects, etc.), customs, and business practices. They understood the need to give customers personal attention and provide goods on credit. That enabled them to meet the onslaught of the chain stores. They were attached to the community and few wanted to leave. As a group, they had an excellent reputation and were able to get credit at the local banks. Just think of Julius Mandell, who had eloped to Los Angeles with his fiancé Marie Benjamin. He was able to start his business, Mandell-Dreyfuss, with a loan from First National Bank soon after his return to Albuquerque.

Fourth, even though many would find relatives and friends here, they were risk-takers from the start. They left the security of place, family, religious orthodoxy and the European Jewish environment for the uncertainties of new and different geography, peoples, language, and culture, as well as the dangers of travel across the ocean and the American continent. Julius Mandell expressed reluctance to leave his home, but his semi-Americanized cousin Sol Weiller, visiting Alsace in 1906, prevailed upon him—not

by stressing the promise of riches, but the beauty, freedom, and intangible benefits of New Mexico. Mannie Blaugrund opened American Furniture during the Great Depression and Harold Gardenswartz brought H. Cook to the city as it was pulling out of the crisis. The Liberman-Grevey family started Duke City Lumber in the midst of World War II after obtaining a little experience in the wood business in France.

Fifth, while they were newcomers to America, they were forward-looking innovators, who were quick to adopt new technologies and new business methods while they responded to changing consumer tastes. The downtown merchants clearly took advantage of the railroad; some of them, like Julius Mandell and Julie Dreyfuss, went on buying trips to the major markets of New York and Los Angeles. They brought the department store to New Mexico, with an emphasis on clothing, soft goods, and household items, in place of the general store. They were among the first to enter the field of specialized retailing, selling such items as furniture, maternity clothes, photography equipment, and sporting goods. The Friedmans caught a new wave of retailing with the opening of Value House, a catalog store. The scope was broad—and so it continues today.

European scientists fleeing Nazism pioneered in the development of atomic energy. They and American-born Jews filled the ranks of scientists, engineers, and technicians who staffed the labs and government facilities in New Mexico. The need for talent combined with the decline in anti-Semitism after World War II eliminated the quotas and other barriers that limited the number of Jews in the professions. These professionals poured into fast-growing Albuquerque from all over the United States. If you listen to the taped interviews of some 20 prominent Albuquerque Jews in the “The Jews of Albuquerque” exhibit,

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# NMJHS Announces New Program Initiatives

by Linda Goff



It's been a busy year for the board and its committees, brainstorming about new programs and initiatives to promote, preserve and disseminate

New Mexico Jewish history. Following are three new programs we've initiated in the last year.

## The Visiting Scholar Program (VSP)

The goal of the Visiting Scholar Program is to invite one or two Visiting Scholars to New Mexico to present a variety of topics, including Jewish history, arts, and culture. In February 2016, the NMJHS launched its first VSP by bringing well-known Jewish DNA genealogist Bennett Greenspan, president of Family Tree DNA, to present a two-part program entitled: "DNA, Genetics and Genealogy: What It Means and Finding New Mexico Family Connections." Over 100 people attended his full-day presentation from throughout the state as well as Texas and Colorado. A number of them took advantage of DNA test kits that Greenspan offered at a discount.

The next one was Dr. Jonathan Israel, retired, Institute for Advanced Studies, Princeton University, who served as the 2016 Fall Conference Opening Keynote. His topic was: "Why did the Main Persecution of New Christians for Crypto-Judaism End in Mexico in the Middle of the 17th Century?"

Our third VSP will feature Rob Martinez, assistant New Mexico state historian, on February 26th at JCC, Albuquerque. The goal is to rotate the VSP in

the state; it is our current hope to plan a program in Las Cruces in 2017.

## New Mexico Jewish History Research Fellowship

NMJHS, in collaboration with the Historical Society of New Mexico, will offer a \$1,000 Research Fellowship coordinated through the New Mexico office of the State Historian in 2017.

NMJHS will develop a Call for Proposals outlining specific guidelines and criteria for applying. The fellowship opportunity will be open to qualified teachers, undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and researchers to undertake a research project focusing on New Mexico Jewish history. Other fellowship requirements related to public presentations and publication will be outlined in the Call for Proposals to be issued in August 2017.

This fellowship provides a special first-time academic research opportunity to encourage, promote, and continue ongoing research into the diverse richness of New Mexico Jewish history.

## Speakers Bureau

We are grateful to the Jewish Federation of New Mexico for providing seed money to launch our long-awaited Speakers Bureau. It will feature NMJHS members as speakers at civic, historical society, and other organizations wishing to learn more about New Mexico Jewish history. Topics include pioneer families, early immigrants, and leading contributors to the growth of New Mexico, including

statehood. Speakers are also available to present on the fascinating history of New Mexico's crypto-Jews.



Linda Goff

NMJHS Speakers Bureau participants will be professors, educators, writers, and journalists who are well-versed in these topics. Organizations requesting presenters must be Historical Society of New Mexico members or apply for membership. Each organization may request up to two speakers per calendar year. If you or an organization in which you are active is interested, please consult either the NMJHS or HSNM websites for further information.

## How Can You Help?

Each of these programs requires additional NMJHS fund-raising, and we have established restricted funds for each of these three programs. Membership dues, the Fall Conference, and some individual programs with suggested donations provide our main revenue streams for general society operations.

You can help us by considering a donation at a level of your choosing and earmarking it to any one or all three of our new exciting initiatives that raise the NMJHS profile not only within the state but also regionally.

For further information on how to donate, please contact Anne McCormick, NMJHS administrator, at 505-348-4471 or by email at [admin@nmjhs.org](mailto:admin@nmjhs.org) ☆

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## The Jews of Albuquerque *(continued from p. 4)*

you will understand how Albuquerque influenced their lives and careers as well as the attitudes of 20th century Albuquerque Jewry. In turn, you will see how they elevated and shaped New Mexico Jewry and how they contributed to the

economy, culture, and social well-being of Albuquerque.

By the end of the 20th century, Albuquerque Jewry had been placed on a firm economic, political, and social founda-

tion. But to what extent did it create a Jewish way of life? That question will be explored in the second part of this article in the spring issue of *Legacy*. ☆

# In the Interstices of Recorded History

by Claudia Long



Last summer I had the honor of addressing the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies, where I presented a short discussion of the problems and joys of writing about Jewish women of the past. This article is based on that talk.

In a sense, our stories are *midrash*, reading the story in the interstices of reported history. In my own family's story, most of the words are still unsaid. Five hundred years ago, Portuguese and Spanish Jews dispersed throughout the world. The majority may have been traceable to the New World, or Morocco or Amsterdam, but a few went to Poland, invited by the king to settle there. If they converted, they would be given land. If they didn't, they could live as artisans and workers in metals. Those threads came together and my mother, whose name was Maria and whose mother was Francziska, was born in Poland in 1927. These were not the typical names of Ashkenazi Jews, but of those whose families' roots stretched back centuries to another world.

When the Nazis came, only my mother survived, and after coming to the United States, she moved with my father to Mexico City, where I grew up. But she never told her story—the pain was too great. I was left to tell tales of another people, other secret survivors of the Diaspora and the Inquisition, stories of women in Mexico whose names were forgotten. I do this in my mother's honor and her memory. I will, someday, write her story, but for now, I circle, I dodge and weave; the electric charge of her personal history remains too great for me to face head-on.

## Our stories are gleaned from the details

History is written by the victors. Until recently, women were not the fight-

ers of battles, but rather the collateral damage, and so the written word so often excluded our story. But women, of course, were very much a part of history, not as generals but as participants—both on the front lines and behind the scenes. History is more than battles and treaties, but because we weren't the generals or the winners, research is more difficult.

Our ability to understand the lives of crypto-Judaic women had a breakthrough with *Secrecy & Deceit* by David Gitlitz, the brilliant *A Drizzle of Honey* by Gitlitz and Linda Kay Davidson, and Stanley Hordes' *To the Ends of the Earth*. They took the records of the Inquisition, and the few letters that survived, and created the path to knowledge that we follow today.

Gitlitz and Hordes were able to review those rare documents and glean history from them. The meticulous record-keeping that accompanied the Inquisition's brutal torture (a precision echoed by the Nazis 450 years later) allowed these ground-breaking historians to reconstruct a bygone era for us. Those lists and letters inform our knowledge today.

The Inquisition lasted well into the late 1700s, and while the Holy Office focused on more than just ferreting out "secret Jews," it is that aspect that interests us. From letters and records we learned that you could be tortured and killed for bathing on Friday, cooking without blood, or changing your sheets. It was the women's job to keep the home and that job could prove deadly. Records show denunciation by servants: "My mistress boiled the sheets for the bed, and dried them so they could be put on the bed on Friday." "My mistress took the pork she bought at the market and gave it to me to take home." Generous and thoughtful homemaker? No—Jew!

## Our stories are dressed in painting and poetry

Historical novels are far more than recitations of history. The letters and customs are keys, but we are still looking through the keyhole. What other sources could we use? We need to look beyond history to the arts.

To clothe a character, I look at paintings. To understand speech patterns, I read plays of the era, especially those that had "homely" stories of lovers and housewives, rather than princes and queens. Plays and essays also show how our future characters were portrayed before the world. For imagery and the secrets of the heart, I study poetry.

And, of course, the greatest gift to storytelling is the imagination. From two sentences in an accusation, I can create an entire story.

*She bathed on Friday afternoon, and changed the sheets on her marital bed. When her uncle died, she stood in the doorway while the priest gave him last rites.*

Who is she? She is Susana, from my book, *The Duel for Consuelo*. Let's imagine her story:

*It's early on Friday morning, and Susana's legs feel heavy from scrubbing the floors. Her knuckles are raw, and she still needs to wash the sheets and change them. The sun is already up, and she wonders, yet again, when she will find the time to get to market. She must have the dinner for tonight, and the dinner for tomorrow cooked and on the coals before sunset. On this winter day, with the skies so leaden, her joints hurt, and she knows that brings rain. The sheets will never dry in time; the day will be short and damp.*



Claudia Long

(continued on p. 7)

# Moroccan Sephardi Women's Songs and the Community's Jewish Survival

by Vanessa Paloma Elbaz

**I**n the Moroccan town of Alcazarquivir (Ksar el Kebir), at least until the 1940s, women would sing all night for a woman who had just

given birth (*parida*), as well as for a baby boy the night before his circumcision. In addition, in the week preceding Passover, as women gathered and spent the entire night cooking Passover *matza* (unleavened bread) for the community in the communal oven—which had been made kosher for Passover—they would sing songs until dawn.<sup>1</sup> In 1940s and 1950s Tangier, a mixed choir of

prepubescent boys and girls sang during the Sabbath afternoon prayer (*minha*) at a synagogue on “la calle Italia” in the old city, where many Jews lived.<sup>2</sup> In an interview, Rachel M., who still lives in Tangier, told me about the wife of Rebi Yamin Cohen, who would come to her

family's house for lunch on the second day of Passover. Year after year, for all present, she would sing *El Romance de Sol*, a song about a young Jewish woman from Tangier who was beheaded in Fez in 1834.



*Reina Benarosh continuing the Moroccan tradition in Caracas, Venezuela, 1982.*

In fact, in all the Jewish communities of Northern Morocco, the women sang wedding songs (*cantares de novia*). Women also were called upon to sing songs of mourning called *endechas*. The traditional women's repertoire included songs of different genres: narrative poems for the bride with a repeating melodic phrase that spoke about faithfulness and

unfaithfulness (*Romances*), *coplas*<sup>3</sup> for holidays such as Purim and Passover, *romances* about incest that served as lullabies, and *endechas* for the mourning period of *Tisha Be'Av* (the ninth of the Hebrew month of Av).<sup>4</sup>

The texts of these songs served as musical commentaries that women would sing when faced with different situations. Maurice H., originally from Tangier, shared in an interview his belief that the songs women sang served as means of expressing what was unmentionable in normal conversation: “When they sang these songs they probably were saying what they felt they could not say out loud. But they were themes that they felt they must address.”<sup>5</sup> Even today, though these repertoires have lost much of the centrality they had prior to the large waves of Moroccan Jewish emigration, when a woman or a man sings, she or he always comments about the story the song is telling. The narrative itself becomes material for conversation about what can happen in reality, how the characters of the song reacted to the situations they faced, and whether such responses are to be emulated or avoided.



*Vanessa Paloma Elbaz*

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## In the Interstices of Recorded History *(continued from p. 6)*

*Her daughter, Marcela, is crying. She picks the baby up, but she doesn't have the energy or the time to put her to the breast. Why is it that religions put all the burden on us, she wonders, not for the first time.*

*A man is approaching. He is wearing a long black cassock, with an enormous red cross on it. She feels her stomach tighten as he nears. Her nerves are vibrating so loudly that she almost can't hear what he is saying. But she makes out the words nonetheless. "Consuelo de Leon? Come with us...."*

One thing the novelist is often asked is: “Is the story true?” I always answer that

it is fiction, based on history. “But that's not what I thought history said,” has been said to me. “That's not the truth!” Those who ask that question often limit their knowledge of history to the popular version, or the one they learned in high school. History may be in the past, but discovery doesn't stand still. New items are found daily, new interpretations are given to us by historians, new views from “the other side” are published. Think back to what you were taught about the American Civil War or Manifest Destiny. What do you know now that you never thought of then? I look at the unsung heroines and ask, *what's been left unsaid?*

So what makes history interesting? Viewpoint, emotion, credibility and detail. And a novelist to imagine it all for you.

*Claudia Hagadus Long is the author of Josefina's Sin, The Duel for Consuelo, The Harlot's Pen, and Marcela Unchained. She lives with her husband in Northern California, where she practices law as a mediator of complex employment discrimination cases, and writes fiction of Mexico in the 17th and 18th centuries and San Francisco in the 1920s and 1930s. Her website is [www.claudiahlong.com](http://www.claudiahlong.com) Her Facebook author page is [www.facebook.com/ClaudiaHLong](http://www.facebook.com/ClaudiaHLong).✪*

**Moroccan Sephardi Women's Songs** *(continued from p. 7)*

Before Morocco's independence, women performed vernacular, secular, sacred and semi-sacred songs in gender-separate and gender-mixed groups. The variety of situations, languages, and musical genres represented in these performances reflects the universality of women's singing in Moroccan Jewish life, and its entertainment as well as ritual value. Through my fieldwork, I learned of several ritual uses of song by various groups of Jewish women in pre-independence Morocco.

At all of the public communal life-cycle celebrations of Moroccan Jews, and during family gatherings during the holidays, women's sung voices have traditionally been center stage. It is telling that the Haketía, Judeo-Arabic, and Judeo-Berber languages, with their deeply emotional forms of expression, are the languages linked to Moroccan Jewish women's cultural contributions. In the seminal 1972 feminist theory article, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?," scholar Sherry Ortner asserted that in patriarchal societies, women's biological status as the continuer of the species through childbirth and lactation, along with her function as the first socializing factor in the life of an infant, places her in an intermediate position between nature and culture. Men, she stated, generally are considered more transcendent within systems of patriarchy due to their distance from the long creative process of renewing the species. Their position, she hypothesized, accounts for the greater focus of their creative energies on abstract cultural development.<sup>6</sup>

If we link Ortner's theory to the linguistic and literary pattern of oral narrative, it is clear that a hybrid language that combines what is perceived as "lower" and "higher" languages presents an interesting parallel with feminine narratives in Moroccan women's songs, which are always in these hybrid vernacular languages. Are women's oral traditions

then functioning within Moroccan Jewish communities as a means of carving out a "transitional" path between nature ("female/vernacular") and culture ("male/Hebrew")? Hebrew poetry and ritual generally have been considered within Judaism to be "higher" and more "refined" than women's sung narratives in the Judeo [Spanish, Arabic and Berber] languages, which many Jews see as "lower," more intrinsic, emotional, and unconscious linguistic and literary creations. After careful analysis and observation, I believe that creative expression in the Judeo languages may be the foundation on which Moroccan Jews begin the process of socialization of each generation, particularly as regards gender and societal norms.

Not only is the women's literary realm, embodied in their songs and stories, a "lower" and thus, more natural and visceral hybrid language, it is also oral, and carries the inherent fragility that is present in non-documented forms of expression. Frequently, both religious scholars and the general population see oral traditions as the "lesser" forms of religious tradition because of the impossibility of tracing their origins and the difficulty of measuring their value. In Morocco, however, orality is held in high regard by men and women in the Jewish community, accounting for the transmission of many customs and traditions exclusively through oral means.

Scholars considered the Jewish vernacular languages to be "lower" languages that restricted the value of women's contributions in the family only to the transmission of culture in the child's initial years of life. Yet, after the establishment of Morocco as a French<sup>7</sup> and Spanish<sup>8</sup> Protectorate, the shift toward French or peninsular Spanish language and culture introduced the notion of women as cultural transmitters of what was considered "higher," more abstract European culture, the literature of the ruling European elites. In fact, some

Berber Jewish women from the Atlas Mountains learned Arabic during the Protectorate years and early years of independence as a way to communicate outside of their community.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, women generally embraced the change in language from Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish, or Berber to French, Spanish, or Arabic as a means of social change and increased social, educational, and economic opportunity.

Yet, the changes brought about in the Protectorate period and by the Alliance Israélite Universelle schools were not only linguistic. The schools were also transformative for gender roles and educational and economic opportunities for women. Young Jewish girls were educated in the Alliance schools, which ensured that they knew how to read, write, speak French, and learn a trade, such as teaching or sewing. It is clear from my interviews that women who considered themselves educated learned more French and Spanish literature and fewer traditional songs and proverbs.<sup>10</sup> Julia B., from Asilah, a coastal town in Northwest Morocco, and who worked in banking in Tangier for over 30 years described this erosion of these oral traditions:<sup>11</sup>

*I'm not talking about when things were progressing more and more and we started taking everything in a more modern manner. We'd say, that's not in fashion, that used to be sung in the olden days, my mother sang that, no, it's not in style anymore and so everything was being sung less and less, and all those songs of the Romancero<sup>12</sup> started to get lost. It was like that.<sup>13</sup>*

The *cantares de las antiguas* served as a ritual declaration in a prescribed communal voice. During wedding celebrations, women's singing provides a ritualistic transformative function for the bride, who is undergoing the life transition from girl to woman. The *coplas* which celebrate her beauty and exhort her to fertility, accompany her during what was

*(continued on p. 9)*



**Moroccan Sephardi Women's Songs** *(continued from p. 8)*

traditionally a week-long celebration. Contemporary practice has diminished to four days (Thursday Berberisca/Henna, Friday and Saturday Shabbat night and day, and Sunday Ketuba/Huppa). The continued public role of women's singing during these celebrations demonstrate the public association of women with fertility and reproduction, giving them considerable power and prestige.<sup>14</sup> Contrary to the Romances which are sung in quotidian contexts and focus on guarding the boundaries of the group, celebratory wedding *coplas* focus on the positive and public aspects of sexuality.

During a woman's wedding her contained sexuality becomes an asset and not a threat because of the imminent transformation of her sexuality into fertility. As Rahel Wasserfall's analysis on Moroccan immigrants of Sefrou to Israel concludes:

*In this process of transforming sexuality into fertility, purity has a central role, as it transforms fertility into Jewish fertility. This transformation takes place through... the acceptance of Jewish law, and the bride's promise to visit the mikveh and thereby actualize both the bridegroom's and her own fertility.*<sup>15</sup>

Thus, the songs sung by older women to the young bride during the *mikveh* celebration, the Berberisca, the shabbat and the wedding, reiterating the bride's purity, beauty and her fertility serve as oracles for her future holiness as the carrier of *tabara* for future generations. The *cantares de las antiguas* impregnate the body of

the bride, and exhort her to embody the powerful symbol of holiness that will guarantee the community's survival.

*Vanessa Paloma Elbaz has performed and lectured on five continents. Her groundbreaking work has been featured on PBS, NPR, PRI, the New York Times, France24 and Al Jazeera International amongst others. She has written numerous academic articles for academic presses in Israel, Great Britain, Spain, Morocco and the United States. Paloma Elbaz is the founder and director of KHOYA: Jewish Morocco Sound Archive. Currently a research associate of the Hadassah Brandeis Institute of Brandeis University and a Ph.D. candidate at the Sorbonne, she lives and works from Casablanca.* ✧

**References**

- <sup>1</sup> Alegria B. and Lili B., 2014
- <sup>2</sup> Sonia C., interview, May 30, 2011
- <sup>3</sup> strophic songs, in many occasions they were paraliturgical songs
- <sup>4</sup> three-week period which mourns the destruction of the first and second Temples of Jerusalem and many calamities which befell the Jewish people
- <sup>5</sup> Maurice H., Interview, July 15, 2012, Paris.
- <sup>6</sup> Ortner, 1996: 29
- <sup>7</sup> for Judeo-Arabic speakers
- <sup>8</sup> for Haketia speakers
- <sup>9</sup> Private conversation, Sara H. who was an Alliance teacher in Demnat during the 1940s. March, 2013, Casablanca.
- <sup>10</sup> Rogelia M. January 21, 2011, Tangier; Hilda Pinto, June 2008, Tangier; Simone Mellul, February 10, 2014, Paris; Marie

Benhamou, January 20, 2015, Casablanca.

<sup>11</sup> Julia B., April 7, 2008, Interview, Tangier.

<sup>12</sup> Sephardi long narrative poem-songs in Judeo-Spanish.

<sup>13</sup> "No te hablo de cuando ya mas tarde que fue progresando la cosa y fuimos tomándolo todo a lo mas moderno. Y decíamos ay no eso ya no es de moda, eso lo cantaban antiguamente, eso lo cantaba mi madre, no eso ya no es de moda y ya se empezó a cantar menos, todas esas canciones del romancero que se fueron perdiendo. Entonces pues era así."

<sup>14</sup> Becker, 2006: 161.

<sup>15</sup> Rahel Wasserfall, "Community, Fertility, and Sexuality: Identity Formation among Moroccan Jewish Immigrants," *Women and Water: Menstruation in Jewish Life and Law*, Wasserfall, R., ed., (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 196.

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**Book Award Winners**

In November, the New Mexico Book Co-op announced the winners of the 2016 NM-AZ Book Awards. Following are the winners, written by Jewish authors and/or on topics related to NMJHS.

Cookbook: Sharon Niederman, *New Mexico Farm Table Cookbook* (tie)

Fiction: Historical Fiction: Corinne Brown, *Hidden Star*

Fiction: Adventure: Sabra Brown Steinsiek, *In the Fullness of Time*

Fiction: Romance: Sabra Brown Steinsiek, *Time's Secret*

Nonfiction, Other: Siegfried Heckler, *Doomed to Cooperate*

Poetry: NM: Miriam Sagan, *Geographic*

Religious Book: Mary Carter, *A Non-Swimmer Considers Her Mikva* (tie)

Religious Book: Ilan Stavans, *The New World Haggadah*, (art by Gloria Abella Balen) (tie) ✧

# 2016 Conference Highlights in Photos

Photos by Ed Goff and Stu Simon



*Rabbi Neil Amswych*



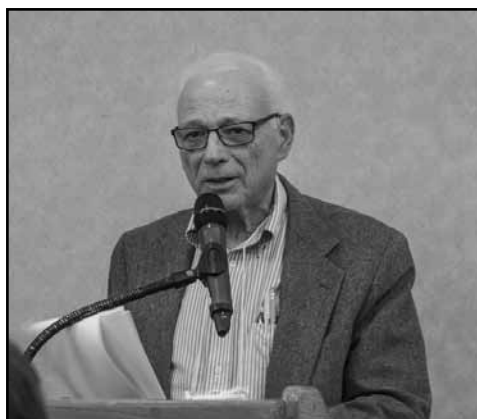
*Richard Melzer*



*Bianca McDermott*



*Marcia Torobin*



*Noel Pugach*



*Sara Koplík*



*Waiting for the keynote speaker at the New Mexico History Museum auditorium*



*Left: Rabbi Jack Shlachter*



*Right: Conference Bustle*



*Noel Pugach chats with Murray Tucker*



*Far right: Maria Sanchez, presenter*



*Maria Apodaca, panelist, with Richard Melzer*



*Murray Tucker and Ron Duncan Hart*



*Andrew Wulf, director, New Mexico History Museum*



*NMJHS President Linda Goff*

### Welcome New Members

- Bo Keppel
- Ellen Premack
- Marsha Lefkovits and Richard Quick
- Rachel Sternheim
- Estelle Miller
- Joyce and Joe Weiser
- Diane and Michael Schaffer
- JoAnn Tapia
- Alan Wagman
- Alice Quintanilla
- Jonathan Israel
- Gaon Books
- Estelle Quain
- David Goodman

### Many Thanks for Your Contributions

**Pioneer**

- Doris Francis-Erhard
- Irene Roberts
- Laura Murra

**Friend**

- Jewish Community Council of Northern New Mexico

- Temple Beth El
- Helen and Stan Hordes
- Lilo Waxman
- Harold Melnick
- Susan Michelson and William Stein
- Diane and Alan Chodorow
- Lisa Witt

**Sponsor**

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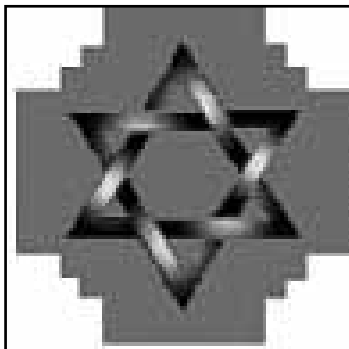
**Guardian**

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- Sheldon and Leslie Weinstein

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## Membership in NMJHS

For information contact the NMJHS office at 505-348-4471 or [admin@nmjhs.org](mailto:admin@nmjhs.org) to request a membership brochure. Alternatively, you can download a membership application from the NMJHS website [www.nmjhs.org](http://www.nmjhs.org)



## Calendar of NMJHS Upcoming Events

Check for future events at [www.nmjhs.org](http://www.nmjhs.org)

**Through April 2, 2017:** Exhibition: “The Jews of Albuquerque in the 20th Century: Building Community Along the Rio Grande.” The William A. + Loretta Barrett Keleher Gallery, The Albuquerque Museum. See Noel Pugach’s article on page 1 for background on the exhibit.

**February 15.** Lecture by Ambassador Dennis Ross. Topic: “Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Trump.” 7:00 p.m. James A. Little Theater, 1060 Cerrillos Road, Santa Fe.

**February 16.** Lecture by Ambassador Dennis Ross. Topic: “Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Trump.” 7:30 p.m. Hotel Andaluz, Albuquerque.

**February 26:** Spring Visiting Scholar Program. Rob Martinez, New Mexico Assistant State Historian will speak on “Days and Nights in Havana: Conducting Research in Search of Jewish Cuban Communities.” 2 p.m., JCC, Albuquerque.

**Date to be determined.** Montefiore Cemetery Clean-up Program.

**Memorial Day Weekend:** Visit to the Hertzstein Memorial Museum and surrounding places of interest in Clayton, New Mexico. The Hertzstein family was one of the early settler families in northeastern New Mexico, and NMJHS has published a Pioneer Family booklet recounting their history. Details to follow.

**November 4 and 5:** 2017 Fall Conference to be held in Las Vegas, New Mexico. Details to follow.