

DEVI MAYS, *Forging Ties, Forging Passports: Migration and the Modern Sephardi Diaspora* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020). Pp. 360. \$90.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9781503613201.

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In this absorbing study into early to mid-twentieth-century Sephardic migration to the Americas, Devi Mays illustrates the complex ways in which identity – national, transnational, ethnic, and ethnoreligious – is constructed and negotiated. *Forging Ties, Forging Passports: Migration and the Modern Sephardi Diaspora* is a historical exploration of an often-understudied group within the larger field of Jewish migration in which Mays adeptly analyzes the tension between nation-state, citizenship, transnationalism, and malleable ethnicity. Through archival data from seven countries, Mays illustrates the ways Sephardic Jews capitalized on different aspects of their ethnicity to forge new livelihoods as they migrated from the Ottoman Empire to the Americas.

The reader experiences the journey of Sephardic Jews through family stories that Mays reconstructs through letters, photographs, census records, and travel documents. The migration of the Appel brothers is one such story. In retelling the ways in which the Appel brothers left the Ottoman Empire and eventually settled in Mexico, Mays weaves a narrative of transnational ties and ethnic flexibility that paved the way for Sephardic Jews to stake a claim in their new countries. Mays is careful not to make assumptions or draw conclusions about ethnic identity, Jewish identity, or ethnoreligious construction, but rather illustrates the ways in which Sephardic Jews had access to and were able to highlight national identities or national ties that were often regarded as culturally or racially superior in their adopted countries. Their racial ambiguity also served them well: “These are peculiar people in as much as they are Jewish in blood and religion, are Turkish citizens and speak Spanish. They do their writing

with Hebraic characters but write in the Arabic language” (82). This quotation by a border official along the US-Mexico border is describing the Sephardic Jews that crossed into Mexico and accurately captures the complex, multifaceted yet malleable ethnocultural and ethnoreligious identities that Sephardic Jews embodied at that time.

War was a constant theme in the lives of Sephardic migrants – the wars at home and the Mexican Revolution affected their larger communities as well as personal livelihoods. Mays examines both the fallout and opportunities that resulted from these conflicts. The book highlights how war and conflict presented prospects for integration into the Ottoman Empire – as soldiers and as Ottoman “brethren” – yet also catalyzed the great migration that prompted thousands of Jews to flee to the Americas (North and South). Facing war once again during the Mexican Revolution, Sephardic Jews were often able to capitalize on their transnational connections and employ their experiences as peddlers, salespeople, and traders of goods to cement a place for themselves within the Mexican economy.

Mays paints the ensuing effects of World War I and the Balkan War as a chaotic scene, particularly for Jews whose ties and loyalty were simultaneously local and cosmopolitan. Sephardic Jews, Mays argues, while loyal to the Ottoman Empire for giving Jews safety and refuge following expulsion from Spain and Portugal in the late fifteenth century were as (or more) loyal to their coreligionists beyond the border of the empire. As Mays writes, “Transnational familial and economic connections propelled the creation and perpetuation of a Sephardi, and at times, a broader Jewish collective that transcended borders” (56). Sephardic Jews accessed transnational ties as they traversed the globe, seeking welcoming locations to settle, conduct business, and form families. The post-war period was characterized by new national borders, nation-state building, increased national political identities, and, as Mays deftly illustrates, heightened bureaucracy and bureaucratic decrees. It is here that we see how the different identities and localities of Sephardic Jews play out – as is the case of Gabriel Yermia Valanci, who made the decision to falsify documents and appear as a Mexican native in order to obtain a passport and return to Constantinople where he was born. The historical records of Valanci not only show a hypermobile person who traveled frequently and had strong ties to the Sephardic communities in Turkey yet, but also reveal how he made calculated decisions surrounding his nativity, national allegiance, and ethnicity that

allowed him greater mobility in a world that was increasingly characterized by surveillance and national documents.

Mays concludes the book by telling the story of Ovadia Nathan, born in Constantinople in the late 1800s and beginning his journey as a hypermobile individual in 1909. Through archival and census records in Mexico and the United States, Mays illustrates how Nathan – who never achieved what might be deemed as social or financial success – traversed the world, “emphasizing his wide knowledge of languages, moving from peddler to shopkeeper, drawing on ties to family and coreligionists” (242) to travel, relocate, and insert himself in various locations across the United States and Mexico. He revealed different aspects of his personal life depending on context and place, altering some of the details such as his place of birth or marital status to best fit the situation he found himself in at that moment in time. Yet it appears that he was able to fabricate a believable narrative that allowed him to be hypermobile and gave him entry into a wide range of social spaces. While, as Mays points out, Ovadia Nathan was not successful in the traditional sense of the word, he was successful in embodying different identities and cultures to insert himself in a changing world.

Mays has written a book that begs to be read. The reader is asked to think more deeply about why people engage in the act of migration and how access to different political, social, cultural, and ethnic identities allow certain groups greater mobility and entrée into new social worlds. Sephardic Jews were well poised to take advantage of the changing world order and capitalize on their various ethnic markers, which, as Mays shows, they adroitly did. Captivatingly written, this is a book that greatly deepens our understanding not only of Sephardic Jewish immigration during the early twentieth century but of the global forces that impelled migrants to disperse across oceans and continents.