

JEWISH EDUCATION: A FORCE OF CULTURAL CHANGE IN SALONICA

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## Introduction

*I know that I am an ignoramus when compared to scholars who have studied the holy tongue in depth. In short, these cruel school teachers are directly responsible for the harsh reality of those of my generation who have nothing to show but our ignorance. I consider myself the more knowledgeable among them! Clearly, it was the unconscionable behavior of these teachers that sank everyone in deep and dark ignorance.<sup>1</sup>*

*Sa'adi Besalel A-Levi*

Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi (1820–1903) was a progressive Salonican Jew, critical of his community's “ignorance” and traditional ways. His personal accounts recorded in his memoir elucidate the memories of his past— seemingly tormented by his childhood classroom experiences as well as resolute in supporting educational reform.<sup>2</sup> His memoir is rich with personal anecdotes and is a springboard into uncovering the power of Jewish education in the Salonican community of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. By the turn of the 20th century the Jewish community of Salonica had undergone societal changes— Ottoman horizons widened to slowly welcome ideologies of the West, economic struggles as well as successes ensued, and gender norms were subtly shifting. Any historian would likely argue that these same changes occurred in a myriad of other communities during the same time period. This thesis investigates the seeds of social and religious change in the Jewish community of Salonica, beginning in the 1870s', and it argues that educational reforms provided the primary stimulus for these changes.

Chapter 1 of the thesis provides a brief overview of the history of the Sephardic Jewish community in Salonica and early Jewish education. The primary focus of the Chapter is on the memoir of Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi, the aforementioned Salonican Jew. It is utilized to gain an insider understanding of what education was like at the cusp of change, and how initially the

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah A. Stein and Isaac Jerusalmi, *A Jewish Voice from Ottoman Salonica: The Ladino Memoir of Sa'adi Besalel A-Levi* (United States: Stanford University Press, 2012), 19. From this point on I will refer to this book in short title A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 1 for more information on Sa'adi and his memoir.

community responded hesitantly to the idea of reform. It carries this narrative to Chapter 2 where the Bulletin of the Alliance Israelite Universelle highlights the institutional perspective of these educational reforms, and the Western values from which they stemmed. Finally, Chapter 3 examines the memoir of Leon Sciaky to analyze how the community's stance on education shifted from the distaste present in Sa'adi's memoir to the embracing of changes, especially by the younger generation, in the early 1900s. Since Sciaky writes about a time after the Alliance has already gained its footing in Salonica, and certain educational changes had already become a norm, his memoir is conducive to extrapolating the social changes that were linked with the changes in education. Combining these three perspectives provides a unique view into the impact of education on the social realities of the Jewish community of Salonica, thus contributing to the argument that schools and Jewish education are central to Jewish communities.

As a unique type of institution that provides for communal needs across ages, the education system is a catalyst for change. What is taught in schools seep into familial and communal values. The hours spent in school nurture children, their opinions, values, and ideals. They return home everyday to share ideas and grow into adulthood with a paradigm of thought that is different from that of their parents, and thus communal change is stimulated with the turnover of generations. And all that is needed for such drastic development is one teacher, in one classroom. This is precisely why education is so influential— it is so basic in daily life and yet so critical. People may disagree on the proper method of teaching, or the most salient information to be learned, but the existence of schools and education at its essence is supported and encouraged by almost all. Salo Baron, in opening his opinionated essay printed in the March 1948 volume of *Jewish Education* journal writes:

Without attempting to offer here a sketch concerning the historic responsibility of the Jewish community for Jewish education, it may nevertheless be said, by way of

introduction, that a people, which two thousand years ago had pioneered in compulsory education for boys, and which in its community sponsorship for educational endeavor was far superior to its neighbors, including even such enlightened nations as the Greeks and the Romans, such a people has known for ages that the community at large is responsible for education.<sup>3</sup>

Baron highlights the simple but powerful reality that over the course of history, the Jewish community has remained responsible for its education. Jewish education became an undeniable necessity in communal cohesiveness.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the vital nature of Jewish education and its noteworthiness in Jewish communal development, spurred my research into the impact it had in the Jewish community of Salonica.

Although Jewish education shapes many communities across the world, I chose to focus on the experience in Salonica, for the primary reason that I am personally invested in investigating the history of Sephardic Jewish people and communities. Salonica was one of the major cities in which a Sephardic community reestablished itself and thrived after the Spanish expulsion of 1492. In addition to its importance as a center of Jewish life and culture, Salonica was a major port city in the Ottoman Empire. That it was called the “Jerusalem of the Balkan’s” indicates its dual importance as both a major city and center for Jewish life. In this way, Salonica was a city with a bountiful history well worth investigating.

Upon embarking on the endeavor to uncover more about the Jewish community of Salonica certain sources were specifically useful in setting the foundation for my research. Devin

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<sup>3</sup> Salo W. Baron, “The Jewish Community and Jewish Education,” *Jewish Education* 19, no. 2 (March 1948): 7-13.

<sup>4</sup> In context Baron is arguing that despite the differences developing among Jews it is crucial to preserve communal responsibility for education and work together. He writes, “However well-meaning, our diverse education systems would thus become a disintegrating force, a force of dividing the Jewish people, if not into ideological, at least into national groups. This danger is more tangible than many of us realize. If we want to maintain the unity of Israel—and I assume that most of us do—we must take full cognizance of the existing menace and of the measures necessary to forestall it.” Baron, “The Jewish Community,” 11.

Naar's book *Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece* and specifically his chapter, "More Sacred than Synagogue: The School," details the progression of education in Salonica, from the establishment of the Talmud Tora, dating back to the 1500s and evolving over time, through modern Greek institutions of the 1900s. His detailed research provides a well rounded picture of the educational progression of Jewish Salonica over time, even if it does not specifically consider the impact of the Alliance. Nonetheless the research he contributes was useful in comparing the memoir's historical accounts to what can be considered as his more 'objective' imparting of history. Additionally, his source was useful as an initial support to my argument, being that he focuses on the transition of Salonica into a Greek state and attributes significance to the role education played in this change.

Another crucial source that this thesis has referred to was research done by Rena Molho. Molho compiled much of her research into *Salonica and Istanbul: Social, Political and Cultural Aspects of Jewish Life*. Within this trove of research and information that pertained to my point of interest, two works, particularly "Education in the Jewish Community of Salonica in the Beginning of the Twentieth Century" and, "Female Jewish Education in Salonica at the End of the 19th Century" were instrumental in the construction of the argument presented here. Molho's research in these articles focuses on the Alliance, and it was tremendously useful to refer back to when considering the historical accounts in the memoirs I looked at. Molho also uses primary material from the Alliance, which led me to utilize the Bulletin in my second chapter. While I have leaned on significant sources my work differs from them in that it aims to see the social impact of educational reform through the perspective of people experiencing these changes first hand. Thus it compares the individual perspective present in the memoirs with the institutional

perspective of the Alliance, to gain a comprehensive understanding of Jewish education in Salonica during a crucial period of historical change.

## Chapter 1: Sa'adi Besalel a Levi: Insights on the Early Phases of Educational Change in Salonica

### *Historical Background*

Expelled from Spain in 1492, thousands of Sephardic Jews were forced to leave their homes and communities, relocating and rebuilding themselves anew. Under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, Jews were given protection as *dhimmi*s and encouraged to settle in Ottoman lands.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, many cities opened their doors to Jews, allowing them to practice their religious traditions freely. Salonica, or Thessaloniki, was one of these cities that became a thriving center of Jewish life. During the remainder of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, exiled Jews from Portugal, Italy, Sicily, France, and refugees from North Africa also settled in Salonica. By the middle of the seventeenth century about 30,000 Jews lived in Salonica, which represented half of the total population of the town.<sup>6</sup> Thus, while countless Jewish lives were physically uprooted, communal values and traditions were able to live on through the new communities they established.

At first, refugees from Spain and other Jewish centers established separate synagogues named after their native countries. Soon after, the need for the centralization of educational and religious affairs became evident, since maintaining separate institutions for each of the more than 30 *kahalim* became practically impossible.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, the Talmud Tora Hagadol was formed in 1520 as a communal solution to education. Salonica soon became a center of Torah learning and attracted many students from abroad. During the late sixteenth century there were approximately 10,000 students enrolled as well as numerous important rabbis whose influence

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<sup>5</sup> *Dhimmi*s in the Ottoman Empire were considered a monotheistic minority that had both rights and restrictions placed upon them, and were protected as long as they paid the special *jizya* tax.

<sup>6</sup> ANU Museum of the Jewish People. "The Jewish Community of Salonica." Beit Hatfutsot Open Databases Project. Accessed April 1, 2021.  
<https://dbs.anumuseum.org.il/skn/en/c6/e171262/Place/Salonika>.

<sup>7</sup> *Kahalim* is the plural form of *kahal*, it means community in the Hebrew language.

spread beyond the borders of Salonica.<sup>8</sup> After a long period of ascendance and success the Talmud Tora began to decline, leaving space for new educational institutions to take root.<sup>9</sup>

The following sections of the Chapter will look at a memoir of a member of the Salonican Jewish community, how he depicts educational experiences of the 1800s, and more importantly how his personal accounts shed light on the different phases of communal contention towards educational reforms.

### *Understanding the Memoir*

A typical trope surrounding historical thinking is ‘history is written by the winners.’ In a way, institutional perspectives are similar to the ‘winners,’ while the voices of individuals, whether man or woman, are more easily lost. This section of the thesis aims to incorporate a voice less heard — Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi's perspective on Jewish education in Salonica — to formulate an insider understanding of attitudes towards education. While Sa'adi does not represent all community members and their outlooks, his memoir does indeed give insight into larger communal sentiment. Additionally, while the Bulletin of the Alliance, that will be analyzed in Chapter 2, provides for a view on the matter from an institutional perspective, the memoir of Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi provides an individual's standpoint to gather a better understanding of Jewish education, ranging from its practical organization to the ideologies involved.

The memoir is the first known memoir in Ladino and is an illuminating frame of reference to underscore the changes that percolated during the mid to late nineteenth century in

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<sup>8</sup> Yitzchak Kerem. “The Talmud Torah of Salonika: A Multi-faceted Changing Institution From 16th Century Traditionalism Until Modern Political Zionism” in *The Heritage of the Jews of Spain; Proceedings of the First International Congress Tel Aviv, July 1991*, ed., Aviva Doron (Tel Aviv: Levinsky College of Education Pub. House, 1994), 161.

<sup>9</sup> For more on this subject, see Kerem, “The Talmud Torah of Salonika,” 162-163.

Salonica.<sup>10</sup> The memoir consists of 42 chapters, their lengths ranging from less than a page to multiple pages. While education is a focus in only 6 chapters, they make up about one third of the entire memoir.<sup>11</sup>

Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi (1820–1903) was a member of the Salonican Jewish community during this period. The memoir, written over the course of nine years beginning in 1881, reflects Sa'adi's life as a singer, composer, publisher, journalist, father, but perhaps most significantly for the focus of this paper— as a progressive or rebel, especially in the area of education.<sup>12</sup> As will be fleshed out in the pages to follow, Sa'adi attempted to reform communal institutions and create new schools, engendering unpopularity among traditionalist elites that were predominant in Salonica's Jewish community. His memoir details the numerous instances in which he felt attacked, or underappreciated by other community members. Ultimately, what others perceived as his rebellion against the Jewish communal leadership, leads to his excommunication.

The reader of this preface to Sa'adi and his account may question the role of the memoir as an objective portrayal of history. While it is clear that Sa'adi may not be representative of every individual, and at points even on the fringe of the community, his memoir is nonetheless vital. Stein and Rodrigue, the memoir's editors, eloquently comment regarding the bias of the memoir:

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<sup>10</sup> Ladino is the Judeo-Spanish language of the descendants of the Jews expelled from Iberia who settled in Ottoman southeast Europe and Asia Minor beginning in the fifteenth century. Additionally, this memoir is notably one of the only Ladino memoirs existing from its time and place. Any quotes used are from the English translations of the memoir in: Sarah A. Stein and Isaac Jerusalem, *A Jewish Voice from Ottoman Salonica: The Ladino Memoir of Sa'adi Besalel A-Levi* (United States: Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> In its English translated printed form the memoir is 145 pages; 50 or so of these pertain to education related topics. Other examples of topics addressed in the memoir include: Sa'adi's interactions with the rabbinic leadership, crises such as earthquakes and fires that occurred, sickness that spread, and political events.

<sup>12</sup> Sa'adi began to write the memoir in 1881, prompted by his frustration with the traditionalist elite. Most of the memoir includes Sa'adi's memory of past instances as opposed to occurrences as they were lived.

What is special about this memoir is not its facticity or neutral rendering of events: on the contrary, herein we discover a man in all his passions, meditating on past and present, a personal, even psychological, view of a milieu that is otherwise difficult to see in any way other than highly abstracted. Like all such texts, this deeply personal representation and idiosyncratic fashioning of events past does not make the text less valuable for the historian. On the contrary, together with other sources, it contributes significantly to the weaving of a rich and multicolored historical tapestry.<sup>13</sup>

With this “rich and multicolored historical tapestry” in mind, I now turn to the memoir to uncover more about Sa’adi’s positioning, and his depictions of earlier traditional education practices in contrast with his reflections on education in its early transitional stages to becoming modernized. In order to understand these later changes to Jewish education, I will first describe the individualistic experiences that Sa’adi documents. I will then analyze their significance in revealing the traditional educational ideas and practices that persisted in Salonica and the great influence on its social life.<sup>14</sup>

From the first line of his memoir Sa’adi Besalel a-Levi declares, “My purpose in writing this story is to inform future generations how much times have changed within half a century,” and continues within the first paragraph to say that customs, habits and behaviors of men and women, young and old, have shifted greatly over his lifetime.<sup>15</sup> Thus, right from the start he establishes that the memoir will highlight the ways things have changed, and not simply be a narration of his life’s story. Additionally, the first paragraph’s mention of both sexes demonstrates that the memoir does not solely focus on the male experience.

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<sup>13</sup> Aron Rodrigue and Sarah A. Stein, “Editors’ Introduction,” in *A Jewish Voice from Ottoman Salonica: The Ladino Memoir of Sa’adi Besalel A-Levi* (United States: Stanford University Press 2012), xlv.

<sup>14</sup> The reader should know there are countless accounts in the memoir that highlight social life, however, I for the most part, will focus on those as they related to education.

<sup>15</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 3.

### *Traditional Jewish Education*

At the head of the Talmud Tora, were its *hahamim* and other religious elite.<sup>16</sup> Sa’adi highlights the Talmud Tora’s multiple functions and the ways in which its leaders had control over numerous facets of social life.<sup>17</sup> ‘Educated’ people being respected and responsible for the way society runs, is a marker to the value placed on knowledge. Sa’adi mentions, “Whenever the communal leadership wanted to spend money frivolously, they used the *kolel* fund; as a result this public fund became depleted. This plague has lasted to our own day,”<sup>18</sup> hinting to the economic hardships the community was experiencing during the years the Talmud Tora began to descend.

Chapter 12 in A-Levi’s memoir provides for a more specific focus on the educational system that was in place during Sa’adi’s childhood years.<sup>19</sup> The first section of Chapter 12 describes the progression of learning, and the focus on religious studies is quite evident. It was a rule that small children, at the ages of four to five, were to attend the Talmud Tora. The children were first taught the Hebrew alphabet, and the vowels, consonants and letter pronunciations in order to combine words. Every year, each class was tested by Talmud Tora leaders who then decided if the children were ready to be promoted to learn under a new teacher and advance in their studies. For example, after mastering reading they were taught poems of the morning prayer

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<sup>16</sup> *Hahamim* is the plural of *haham* which is a title given to a Jewish man educated in rabbinic writings and Jewish thought. *Haham* in the Hebrew language translates to wise or smart.

<sup>17</sup> For examples of the Talmud Tora’s multiple functions, it was a place where judgement was exacted, a place to gather, and a place of organization and safety during crisis. For one such example of control in social life see A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 30-32, where Sa’adi describes an instance in which an unmarried young girl became pregnant and her boyfriend fled. The *hahamim* ordered her to be caught, and she was then brought before the rabbinic court and sentenced to get one hundred lashes in the Talmud Tora. However, when the Ottoman government became involved she would be helped by the *hahamim*, who would marry her using funds from the *kolel* on condition that she would deny everything when summoned by the *Vali* (Ottoman governor).

<sup>18</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 16.

<sup>19</sup> Chapter 12 is titled, “Our cruel teachers,” indicative of Sa’adi’s negative feelings regarding his own educational experiences, and foreshadowing of the type of educational experience he had.

service; moving then to learn how to read sections of the *parasha*, including musical notes and tunes to the reading, followed by sections of the *parasha* read in Ladino.<sup>20</sup> Finally in eighth grade, the young students were taught by a *haham* the entire *parasha* and *haftara* in Ladino, prophetic readings from Jeremiah and Isaiah, and some Rashi commentary on the *parasha*.<sup>21</sup> Eighth grade, based on Sa'adi's account, seems to be a turning point towards more intense in depth studies.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, these accounts show religious texts as the focus of curriculum, and provide insight into the progression of schooling for youth.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to curriculum, teachers and educators themselves were crucial in setting the tone of Jewish education. To Sa'adi, his eighth grade teacher is viewed with utter disgust and vulgarity, and consequently he had a negative educational experience.<sup>24</sup> He depicts his, and other students' experiences on the receiving end of violence being beaten:

Such outrage on the part of the teacher utterly scared the students, as they wondered whose bad luck was next. Then, the *haham* would signal one of the monitors to grab the child, throw him on the floor, and put his feet in the *falaka*. He, then, would descend on him like a lion and gnashing his teeth like a tiger, he would start to beat him on his feet brutally...Finally, when they lifted up the child, he could not stand on his feet because of the blisters that now plagued him.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Parasha* is the weekly Torah portion read. In regards to reading in Ladino, Sa'adi notes that many of the students did not even understand what they were saying.

<sup>21</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Though Kerem, "The Talmud Torah of Salonika," 160, notes that they also studied Talmud by their 5th year studies.

<sup>23</sup> Additionally it is important to point out that this experience seems to be provided to the young boys; girls excluded from this process of learning.

<sup>24</sup> The following is an excerpt from the description of this cruel teacher, to allow the reader to better gage Sa'adi's animosity towards him: "This teacher, whose name was H. M. S., was one of the most cruel tutors of the Talmud Tora; he was of medium size, heavy, and hairy like Esau. On summer mornings he would come to his office... with his naked feet stinking to high heaven. He would roll up his pants to his knees and his sleeves up to his elbows that were covered with hair and looked like a scorpion fish...To those students who took a look at him, he seemed like the Angel of Death. He grabbed a dry beef tendon to use as a whip..."A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 18. Personal, and descriptive accounts such as these, often lost in generalized historical accounts, are a unique treasure housed in the memoir.

Sa'adi notes three boys who could not tolerate such fear and literal pain anymore, and converted to Islam.<sup>26</sup> This is not even written shockingly, perhaps testament to the true nature of torture some students went through. In addition to the violent nature of educators, the lack of training given to these teachers is contrasted with the priority to supply schools with quality teachers that developed later on.<sup>27</sup>

Considering the negative atmosphere Sa'adi describes, one might find it surprising that this type of Jewish education continued to remain active. In a way, the fact that this system of education continued emphasizes that proceeding in these studies was expected and valued in the Jewish community. For example, Sa'adi continues to write about his own experiences, fleeing from the wrath of this teacher, ultimately leaving him, "...placed... in the Talmud Berahoth class, where I found some peace of mind. But unfortunately, I was left far behind from mastering the Bible. This is the individual responsible for my remaining an ignoramus."<sup>28</sup> Sa'adi's disappointment in mastering the Bible, to the point of referring to himself as an "ignoramus," is a clear indicator of the value of that attribute in Salonican Jewish society.<sup>29</sup> What is more, it is quite telling that education was a significant facet of communal life, since even Sa'adi, a more

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<sup>26</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 36.

<sup>27</sup> See Chapter 2 of this thesis for more information pertaining to educational reforms brought about by the Alliance Israelite Universelle, such as the undertaking to supply schools with qualified teachers.

<sup>28</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 19. Interestingly, as an orphan Sa'adi runs to his grandmother, who after seeing him so frightened insists on taking him away from the cruel teacher— perhaps indicative of the characteristic of women of the community, and the possibility of their involvement in numerous areas, especially family life.

<sup>29</sup> For more information on the value placed on and respect given to learned Bible scholars in Ottoman Jewish communities see Joseph Hacker, "The Intellectual Activity of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire During the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1987) 96-135.

progressive member of the community, cared about it.<sup>30</sup> Sa'adi continues his attack on the educators saying:

I know that I am an ignoramus when compared to scholars who have studied the holy tongue in depth. In short, these cruel school teachers are directly responsible for the harsh reality of those of my generation who have nothing to show but our ignorance. I consider myself the more knowledgeable among them! Clearly, it was the unconscionable behavior of these teachers that sank everyone in deep and dark ignorance.<sup>31</sup>

Within this criticism of his cruel teachers, Sa'adi points to his progressive educational values.<sup>32</sup>

Although he is unlearned in religious subjects he considers himself more knowledgeable in other regards—likely modern and secular subjects. And his position that these teachers have sunk *everyone* into deep ignorance, hints to his involvement and support in establishing modern schools to better the entire community.

#### *Communal Contention Towards Early Educational Reform*

A notable first attempt at educational reform occurred during the 1850's with the formation of the Hesed Olam Fund, created by Moise Allatini.<sup>33</sup> Sa'adi holds Moise Allatini and his efforts to open new modern Jewish schools in high regard. He writes, "In an attempt to bring

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<sup>30</sup> Salonica, besides for being a center of thriving Jewish studies, was also known for its success in expounding secular studies, even in the earlier centuries. This, however, seems to be an aspect achieved by individuals rather than taught to the average student. For one such example of individual expertise, notice R. Moses Almosnino and his works explicating astronomical concepts, dating back to 16th century Salonica. Additionally, it is important to note that while religious studies were a focus, many people engaged in other professions and trades. Sa'adi, for example, was a printer. For more examples of business involvements of the Jewish community, see Paul Dumont, "The Social Structure of the Jewish Community of Salonica at the End of the Nineteenth Century." *Southeastern Europe* 5, no. 2 (1978): 33-72.

<sup>31</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> In the same section of his memoir Sa'adi also mentions making some progress in the study of the Bible through conversations with Protestant Missionaries who had arrived, again hinting to his open and more progressive nature.

<sup>33</sup> Moise Allatini was a prominent Jewish philanthropist. Allatini sponsored the Kupat Hesed 'Olam (Mutual Welfare Fund), a society that taxed Jewish merchants in order to fund the reform of community institutions, and he later collaborated with independent Jewish thinkers such as Judah Nehama to open a new Jewish school in Salonica even before the first Alliance Israelite Universelle schools were founded. Sa'adi was a close contemporary of Allatini and notes the formation of the Hesed Olam Fund extensively in his memoir.

civilization to the people of Salonica, the tireless and enthusiastic *sinyor* Moizé Allatini... thought of creating a special fund, called Hesed 'Olam."<sup>34</sup> The efforts put forth by Allatini indicate that he did not simply *want* to educate, rather he saw a *need* to civilize his community by means of improved education.

Sa'adi's memoir, and the educational changes he aimed at implementing, directly comment on the existing organization of the schools. After introducing the Hesed Olam Fund, the memoir proceeds to a long passage containing crucial information on several important aspects of educational reform that the Fund focused on. "First on their agenda was the education of children in the Talmud Tora, which until then was based on deplorable teaching methods."<sup>35</sup> This first agenda highlights the centrality of education, and the low teacher quality they previously had. "After that, they tackled the job of establishing schools for boys and girls."<sup>36</sup> Quite notably here is the intention to establish schools for both boys and girls. Seemingly prior to this change, girls were excluded from receiving the same traditional education boys were receiving.<sup>37</sup> The dense section of the memoir also brings to light communal feelings towards introducing the teaching foreign languages in schools:

Yet the *talmide hahamim* started to grumble, saying, "Foreign languages should not be taught in the school, since we do not know any of them." For that, *sinyor* Allatini had to obtain a *firman* from the imperial government stipulating that every Jew who can support the work of the schools has the obligation to give his maximum support to it. The *talmide hahamim*, headed by the chief rabbi, had to help the proponents of said work on behalf of schools to teach foreign languages as well as the language of this country. This *firman*

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<sup>34</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 32. Additionally, next on the agenda of the fund was to set a Bikkur Holim to mitigate the suffering of the poor.

<sup>36</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 32.

<sup>37</sup> Though most change for girls in education came about in later years of the Alliance school in Salonica. See Rena Molho, "Female Jewish Education in Salonica at the End of the 19th Century," in *Salonica and Istanbul: Social, Political and Cultural Aspects of Jewish Life*. (Turkey: Gorgias Press, LLC, 2010), 140-150.

was read in the presence of the General Assembly and the entitled hahamim. In 1856 the first school for boys opened with sixty paying and forty tuition-free students.<sup>38</sup> There are a few important aspects to reiterate from this account and contrast to the traditional school structure. Firstly, there is an evident enmity conveyed by the *talmide hahamim* in their reluctance to include foreign language within their teaching.<sup>39</sup> On top of this the need for government involvement suggests that if it was up to the community they would not support this educational reform.<sup>40</sup> Finally Sa'adi recounts, "They also brought a teacher from Paris whose name was Musyu Lipman who was extremely smart and knowledgeable in both our religion and the French language."<sup>41</sup> Bringing in Lipman to teach from Paris, was an impactful step in transitioning to a modernized education; higher quality educators who both respected the religion in Salonica as well valued Western language and ideas were crucial components of educational reform. They also allowed students to attend paying tuition through a system in which, "each one of them was evaluated according to his means resulting in three categories and a range of payments;" an indicator that access to education was a universal priority, not simply one for elite or rich members.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, Sa'adi's narration of the reform process reveals the traditional characteristics evident in the community, as well as early indicators of change.

Another obstacle to springboarding these reforms was an absence of technical and vocational training which led the community into economic and social decay. In order to

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<sup>38</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 32.

<sup>39</sup> Beyond the ideological objection of *talmide hahamim* towards these changes, five years later there was ultimately a closure of the new "modern" schools as a result of rabbinical opposition.

<sup>40</sup> Devin Naar notes, "Jewish leaders in Salonica sought to preserve their sense of communal autonomy and considered the self-administration of their own schools to be the cornerstone of their privileges in the late Ottoman era and, later, of their minority rights in Greece after World War I" (140); thus, although there was contention surrounding educational reform and different visions of what the education should look like, there was a steadfast commitment to communal Jewish education among both liberal and conservative members of the community. See Devin Naar, *Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece*. Stanford Studies in Jewish History (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016), 140-142.

<sup>41</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 32.

<sup>42</sup> Though equal access to education was more so a continued value, not as much a previous problem.

“...remedy this pitiful state of affairs, to avoid compromising irreversibly this community’s future”<sup>43</sup> certain men, such as Allatini had undertaken educational renewal as a way to contribute to the development of Salonica.<sup>44</sup> It is striking to see the recognition in this period of educational reform as a solution to economic problems.

### *The Brewing of Communal Educational Reform*

Writing over a period of transition Sa’adi Besalel a-Levi’s highlights the old traditional education, the proposals for and opposition to reform, as well as the new establishments of successful modernized schools. The latter portion of the transitional phase in Salonica includes a revelation of sorts in which the religious leaders begin to give way and see value in new modes of education. Efforts to have Allatini removed to “curtail the influence” he had in the city resulted in the school falling apart.<sup>45</sup> Subsequently, “Leaders became aware of the mistake they committed by not supporting Si. Allatini in the good deeds he performed and the excellent results the boys' school had yielded.”<sup>46</sup> The outlook on education was shifting, albeit slowly, as leaders aligned themselves with the benefits and communal prosperity that would potentially come with reformed education.

After the closure of the Hesed Olam Fund school, some individual graduates tried to open their own schools including elementary French in the curriculum. This is also a gateway to what was to follow— both ideologically as a support of a western education, and practically the establishment of an Alliance Israelite Universelle school in Salonica in 1873. The founding of an

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<sup>43</sup> Marcado J. Covo, “Contribution à l'histoire des institutions scolaires de la Communauté israélite de Salonique jusqu'à la fondation de l'école de garçons de l'Alliance” in *L'Almanach National de l'hôpital Hirsch 1916*, Salonique (1916), 97-103, as quoted in Rena Molho, “Education In The Jewish Community Of Salonica In The Beginning of the Twentieth Century,” in *Salonica and Istanbul: Social, Political and Cultural Aspects of Jewish Life*. (Turkey: Gorgias Press, LLC, 2010), 127-130.

<sup>44</sup> Molho, “Education In The Jewish Community Of Salonica,” 128.

<sup>45</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 34.

<sup>46</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 42.

AIU school was a turning point that brought Jewish education in Salonica to a more modern course of study. As written by Sa'adi, the mission and goal of the institution was:

... to enlighten the Jews of the Orient, and its curriculum was geared to spreading the French language, the national language of the country, as well as Hebrew...The Alliance in Paris promised to send a qualified director...They rented two large houses, one for the boys' school and another for the girls' school...placed every student where he belonged. In appropriate level classes<sup>47</sup>

Thus Sa'adi's memoir elucidates the process by which modern Jewish education began to take root in Salonica. The jump from the religious nature of education as a manifestation of Jewish identity seeped in primary Biblical studies and learned from a *haham*, to educational and social change that then came about with the AIU, took time and involved much disagreement.

Additionally, the memoir sets the context to which the Alliance was introduced into the Jewish community, and allows us to see how different and evolving the educational standards were.

Moreover, Sa'adi's memoir illuminates the complexity and controversial nature of progressiveness, especially in regards to something as central as education.

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<sup>47</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 42.

## Chapter 2: The Alliance Israelite Universelle: An Institutional Perspective on Jewish Education in Salonica

The previous chapter of this thesis provided an in depth analysis of Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi's perspective on Jewish education in Salonica as depicted in his memoir. His account highlighted traditional educational views that existed throughout most of the 19th century, as well as opposition to initial educational reform within the Jewish community. As Sa'adi mentions, the *Alliance Israelite Universelle* established its first school Salonica in 1873. This chapter will focus on the AIU and the changes they made to Jewish education in Salonica. The memoir provided insight into personal and communal reactions to the Alliance's program. This chapter will look at the *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle* in order to gauge the reforms that it proposed.

The *Bulletin of the Alliance Israélite Universelle* was the, "official organ of the Alliance."<sup>48</sup> It was distributed across the world, included minutes from the AIU's Central Committee and organizational meetings, written communications between the organization's leadership and Jewish communities, and provided a rich source of information on the inner lives of Jewish communities. Every issue of the Bulletin contained lists of AIU members in every city, information reported from local committees, and lists of donors. Additionally, the data on the AIU schools provide information about the number of schools in each city, the number of students, the make-up of the teaching staff, and the schools' budgets.

While the Bulletin of the AIU contains accurate data, it is important to consider potential biases that are likely woven in as well. Considering that this was the organization's inner publication, the descriptions, while often honest, are institutional, and thus do not include any of

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<sup>48</sup> "Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle," National Library of Israel. <https://www.nli.org.il/en/newspapers/bul>.

the personal negative reactions that were likely present among community people. In this way objections to the Alliance's arrival and reforms, such as those mentioned in Sa'adi's memoir, are not included. As one such example in an 1882 publication reveals: "We can say, without fear of our being accused of exaggeration, that all that is currently being done in Salonica is due to the regenerative breath of our Committee of the Alliance."<sup>49</sup> This assertive claim clearly holds the AIU and its successes in high esteem. Yet at the same time, where the critical reader might find faults and bias, the historian finds a trove of insights into the time and place being studied— Salonica in the late nineteenth century.

### *The Alliance Israelite Universelle*

The *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, was a political organization founded in France in 1860 by a group of Jews, for the purpose of providing assistance to Jews throughout the world — whether through offering political support, helping individuals emigrate, or setting up Jewish education programs.<sup>50</sup> Fittingly, launching in 1860, the aims of the Alliance were three: "to work everywhere for the emancipation and moral progress of the Jews; to offer effective assistance to Jews suffering from antisemitism; and to encourage all publications calculated to promote this aim."<sup>51</sup> In this way, fortunate Jews who had acquired emancipation and had assimilated were turning to help Jews in other countries who were not yet in this situation. The Alliance was also

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<sup>49</sup> *Bulletin de l'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, January 2, 1882. Note: Access to the *Bulletin de l'Alliance* was acquired through the National Library of Israel website, and all quotes have been translated from the original French publication.

<sup>50</sup> Two of the founder-members were J. Carvallo and Charles Netter. In June 1860 they published their manifesto which stressed the need for solidarity on Jewish matters, and stated that the Alliance would serve as a stimulus to Jewish regeneration. Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Alliance Israélite Universelle," Encyclopaedia Britannica. February 2, 2009, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Alliance-Israelite-Universelle>.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in "Alliance Israelite Universelle," Jewish Virtual Library. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/alliance-israelite-universelle>

an expression of French patriotism and pride in French language and culture which was intended to be disseminated among the Jews of the world.<sup>52, 53</sup>

The AIU, the first modern international Jewish organization, supported a world-Jewish self-help agenda. In Hebrew the organization was called “Kol Yisrael Chaverim” which translates into “all of Israel are comrades”—an ideology on which the organization was based. As one example, this ideology was apparent in the allocation of funds.<sup>54</sup> In the 1865 Bulletin, it is noted that the Salonica Regional Committee, announced the founding of a French-Italian college, and requested a grant to promote the free admission of a certain number of poor children to the establishment. As was written, “the Alliance reserves its support for schools open to all classes indiscriminately, that the Committee's wish is to see the bases of the new institution broaden....”<sup>55</sup> Ensuring ample funding for all students—rich and poor—was a priority for the Alliance and its Committees. This is one example of the Alliance aiming to provide resources indiscriminately to Jews in a plethora of communities and countries, across Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa. Thus, the organization aimed to reflect a renewal of Jewish cohesiveness.

### *The Alliance in Salonica*

Discussion of bringing *Alliance* schools to Salonica began in the 1860's.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> See Chapter 1; the AIU encountered difficulties since members of the Salonica community viewed the propagation of French culture in the schools established by the Alliance as a danger to the traditional framework of Jewish life. At some point it was even criticized by some for being too French and not sufficiently universal.

<sup>53</sup> Not only did the French intend to disseminate their culture, Naar also notes, “The Ottoman Empire looked to France as its model for state educational reform, the establishment of public schools, the training of teachers, and the development of textbooks;” indicating that French methodology was actively sought after, and not simply imposed. Naar, *Jewish Salonica*, 140.

<sup>54</sup> “Alliance Israelite Universelle,” Jewish Virtual Library.

<sup>55</sup> *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, January 2, 1865.

<sup>56</sup> *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, January 1, 1864. As it is noted in the publication, “The Bayonne committee communicates a project appeal which it proposes to send to the Israelites of this city, to encourage the development of the Society. Mr. Nehama, Rabbi in Salonika, announces the constitution of a local committee in this city.”

During this period the community was beginning to lean into economic and social decay because of lack of technical and vocational training of the Jewish working class. Subsequently, certain elite Jewish men undertook an educational renewal to help general development.<sup>57</sup> Additionally, the *Alliance* by its virtue would combat Protestant Missionaries who had arrived during the nineteenth century.<sup>58</sup>

The educational situation prior to the arrival of the *Alliance*, as seen in Sa'adi's memoir, was that of a limited elementary education through the Talmud Tora and other religious schools. In his eyes, the quality of the teaching was very low.<sup>59</sup> Also seen through the memoir, the Alliance was initially received with skepticism especially by the religious leaders. The religious party, who prior to this point in time had exercised majority of the control on religious and secular matters, were not interested in changing their traditional ways to novel seemingly controversial ones.

#### *Educational Success and Reforms*

Undoubtedly the Alliance had a large effect on Salonica. One aspect of reform was the shift in education. A few years after the boys school was established in 1873 and the girls school in 1874 this account was printed in the Bulletin:

Examinations which took place at the boys' school, in the presence of officials sent by the governor of the city, once again demonstrated the excellent results obtained by the principal, Mr. Marx. The girls' school, which had one hundred and five students when it

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<sup>57</sup> Molho, "Education in the Jewish Community of Salonica," 127-128.

<sup>58</sup> For more information see Cengiz Sisman, "Failed Proselytizers or Modernizers? Protestant Missionaries Among the Jews and Sabbateans/Dönmes in the Nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire." *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 6 (2015): 932-949.

<sup>59</sup> Teachers were underpaid and inadequate as a result of an old rabbinical law which granted hereditary rights to Talmud Tora teachers who were not required to possess a diploma before exercising such important functions. Molho, "Education in the Jewish Community of Salonica," 128.

opened on September 5, 1874, now receives one hundred and sixty-four, of which fifty-five are free.<sup>60</sup>

The description is a clear indication of academic success, which meets the Alliance's standards, as well as evidence of its growing expansion and attraction. The increasing numbers of girls attending also demonstrates how the impact of the Alliance was slowly seeping into the community, considering girls were likely not previously encouraged to obtain the same level of education. In addition to increasing the number of students, the Alliance brought a change in school curriculum.

The Italian language forms the basis of education. The program includes the study of this language, arithmetic, history, geography, calligraphy, drawing, etc. Ms. Caro also teaches French to those students who have learned this language before entering school. The results obtained are most satisfactory. All students attend school diligently; rich and poor compete zealously and make remarkable progress.<sup>61</sup>

This excerpt from the Bulletin indicates that the Alliance offered a wide array of subjects, even for the girls school. Again, noting the "remarkable progress" of both the rich and poor students demonstrates the extent to which the Alliance was impacting the entire community, while succeeding all the while.

With increasing students, and learning progress, the first years after its inception were clearly very successful in the eyes of the Alliance. They were proud of and satisfied with how the schools in Salonica were shaping up to be:

All the reports agree that the educational institutions in Salonika are model schools and are in no way inferior to the best establishments in our countries. This remarkable organization is due to the local committee and mainly to Mr. Dr. Moïse Allatini, who has made the greatest and most laudable sacrifices for his schools. Each of the two schools now has its own house which was built for this special destination. For the year 1878, the

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<sup>60</sup> *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, January 3, 1876.

<sup>61</sup> *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, January 3, 1876.

Central Committee voted a subsidy of 1,000 fr. for the improvement of the teaching of Turkish.<sup>62</sup>

Comparing the schools in Salonica, to those in Europe, and describing it as a model school is testament to its greatness. Something to note is that the school was expanding, receiving more funds, and teaching new languages, adapting to the needs of the community. Additionally, in reference to the boys school, the 1882 Bulletin noted, “This institution, the best in town, is also one of the most flourishing in the Alliance, thanks to the generous help of a good man, Mr. Dr. Allatini and the Committee he heads;”<sup>63</sup> again demonstrating how the Salonican schools were held in high regard in the Alliance. Another focus of this excerpt is the mention of Allatini. It is interesting to compare Allatini in the eyes of the Alliance, to his place in the community as noted in Sa’adi’s memoir. In the memoir Allatini is perceived as more controversial, whereas he is idealized in the Bulletin. As Sa’adi records in his memoir:

*Sinyor* Allatini had invested much effort and took pressure from his entourage to create the Bikkur Holim, the Talmud Tora, and the school. Yet our gentlemen from Salonica, instead of rewarding him for his good services and the benevolence he showed to the Jewish population, tried to foment a plot that forced him to resign.<sup>64</sup>

The Bulletin is honest in Allatini’s commitment to developing Alliance schools, yet excludes the reactions of the community; thus having both the institutional perspective as well the communal one is critical in formulating a comprehensive understanding of the educational sentiment present in Salonica.

The AIU also brought about a significant change to hire a diverse teaching group, including, French, Italian and Spanish teachers.<sup>65</sup> By 1872, women were also included in the

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<sup>62</sup> *Bulletin de l’Alliance*, July 2, 1877.

<sup>63</sup> *Bulletin de l’Alliance*, January 2, 1882.

<sup>64</sup> A-Levi, *Ladino Memoir*, 61.

<sup>65</sup> *Bulletin de l’Alliance*, January 2, 1882.

Alliance teaching force. Since few French Jews were willing to serve as teachers in the villages and towns of North Africa and the Middle East, the Alliance sent the brightest students from its schools to be trained in Paris. They differed in background, language, piety, temperament and intellect.<sup>66</sup> The Alliance's goals of westernization and modernization were demonstrated in its women teachers, who were models of autonomy and literacy. These female teachers spoke not only to the Alliance's vision of forming female students into good mothers and wives, but also to the empowerment of young girls, intellectually, physically, and professionally.<sup>67</sup>

Beyond supplying the schools with higher quality teachers, the AIU contributed to the occupational success of many of its students. In an 1886 Bulletin it was noted that:

53 apprentices were placed successively... 19 have completed their apprenticeship, they are: 6 cabinetmakers, 6 tailors, 3 shoemakers, 1 painter, 1 cooper, 1 blacksmith, 1 silversmith. 28 are still in apprenticeship including 9 shoemakers, 6 tailors, 8 coopers, 2 lithographers 1 goldsmith...<sup>68</sup>

As noted, Salonica went through a period of economic troubles, so indicating the plethora of occupations of its student's salutes the school's success.

### *Religion and the AIU*

The AIU brought about curriculum changes, growth of schools, diverse educators, in addition to providing quality education for boys and girls, rich and poor. The AIU also impacted

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<sup>66</sup> Frances Malino, "The Women Teachers of the Alliance Israélite Universelle 1872–1940," in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. J.R. Baskin (1998), 259.

<sup>67</sup> Malino, "The Women Teachers of the Alliance," 248–69. For more accounts of female educators in the AIU see *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, January, 1908.

<sup>68</sup> *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, January 1, 1886. The AIU also followed up with students, about success in later work, which contributed to bettering the community. "Over the past year, 15 apprentices have completed their apprenticeship, including 4 carpenters, 4 tailors, 4 shoemakers, 5 coopers and 1 typographer. All these apprentices had spent three years in apprenticeship; they are undoubtedly not yet accomplished workers but they have a good beginning; their profession already gives them some small gains, and above all they have acquired the habit of manual work, which is essential; there is therefore no longer to fear that they will give up their profession; they will continue to work, gradually improve their skills and eventually become good workers. Almost all of them continue to stay with their former bosses." *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, July 1, 1886.

religious learning. Maintaining traditional learning was a point of tension in Salonica at the advent of the AIU. Rabbis feared religious learning would fall to the pulls of secular education. This proved to be one of the greatest and most consistent sources of criticism of the Alliance in Salonica. In 1908, about 30 years after the Alliance had rooted itself in Salonica, the Bulletin reported:

What concerns the observance of religious practices; some strictly follow its proscriptions, others are less strict. Their conduct in this regard depends largely on the example they have had under the eyes of the father, but also on the religious attitude of the environment in which they live; and finally, for those who have acquired an independent situation, their individual conceptions or the economic difficulties with which they are in...

Here the Alliance seems intent on escaping any responsibility for a decreasing level of education in religious subjects, such as the study of Torah and Talmud. The Bulletin report then continues by taking a different tack: denying that there has been any evidence of decrease or weakening in religious education.

They are few in number, who do not strictly observe religious prescriptions. It is not related to the fact that they attended Alliance school, but because they were affected by the contagion of the emancipation movement and...of the spirit of the times which the Oriental also knows and feels, or because, under the pressure of economic conditions, they have been allowed to neglect certain religious practices. This, rabbis have told us.

The report concludes not by denying responsibility for failure, but by taking credit for actually maintaining and strengthening Jewish culture in the cities of the Sephardic world.

What is astonishing is that, in big cities like Alexandria, Cairo, the districts of Galata and Pera in Constantinople, where the transgression of the Sabbath has become the rule and where the observance of religious practices is so frequent that it does not even surprise any more... We can also see the opposite phenomenon in other cities such as Damascus, Salonika, and Adrianople. There,

as the entire Jewish population attaches the greatest value to the observance of religious principles, the former students of the Alliance are themselves, with few exceptions, scrupulous observers of religion.<sup>69</sup>

In addressing religious observances, the AIU purports that it has not had a negative impact on religious observance, but rather other external circumstances and individual choice has led to a decline in religious observance in some places. It is interesting that they put blame on economic troubles and other external forces, yet do not consider how new thought they introduced to many communities likely permeated outside of schools into other facets of daily life. Being an international source of information, the Bulletin provides unique insight into how numerous communities compare on the same issues. This account notably suggests that Salonica was one of the cities that retained meticulous religious observance among its people, and even more so that it was the former students of the Alliance who were exemplars of this observance as well.

Considering the great extent to which the Alliance implemented new educational standards, it is important to note the fluid nature of its development and its openness to working with the different communities to create schools they were happy with as well. One such example of their flexibility occurred in Salonica in 1886, when the Alliance removed several courses in ancient history and substituted them with classes in the history of the Ottoman Empire. Curriculum changes such as these had an impact on the material learned by students, but also on their families. Where it was clear the Alliance originally experienced backlash by the traditional community members, this shift to more recent local history saw, “interest to parents, who are happy to be reminded of events they witnessed or heard about from their grandfathers.”<sup>70</sup> By working with the Salonica community, rather than completely imposing certain views, the AIU was able to engage adults, fostering greater interest and support for the

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<sup>69</sup> *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, January 1, 1908.

<sup>70</sup> *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, July 1, 1886.

schools.<sup>71</sup> Another aspect of the AIU's flexibility was the honest nature in which it approached ways of improvement. As the 1886 Bulletin notes, "In the contemporary part, we should have extended ourselves a little more; that will be the business of next year."<sup>72</sup> These types of changes and considerations continued throughout the existence of the schools and allowed for the growth of the AIU in Salonica.<sup>73</sup>

Even in the face of conflict and war surfacing in the 1900s, The Alliance Israelite Universelle stood by its core values to support Jews internationally. As was written, "...the Alliance made all the necessary sacrifices. She was able to accomplish her task thanks to the spirit of solidarity of the Israelites around the world."<sup>74</sup> The Alliance exemplifies the solidarity of Jews around the world. These priorities were at the core of the educational changes brought to Salonica. Pertaining to Salonica, more specifically, the AIU spearheaded reform in areas relating to the curriculum, the teachers and their training, the occupations they encouraged and taught, the education of women to the same level as that of men (which represented an immensely significant social advance), and at the same time, important elements of Jewish religious practice. The Bulletin served as an important source of information on all these projects, and provided these insights into the inner workings and the impact of the AIU.

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<sup>71</sup> A clear indication of the Salonican community gradually coming to appreciate the reforms of the Alliance is highlighted by excerpts from Leon Sciaky's memoir, the focus of Chapter 3 of the thesis. For one such example, see Leon Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica: City at the Crossroads* (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2003), 93.

<sup>72</sup> *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, July 1, 1886.

<sup>73</sup> For example, *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, January 3, 1898, notes at least 8,000 pupils— thousands more than its inception.

<sup>74</sup> *Bulletin de l'Alliance*, January 1, 1913.

### Chapter 3: Leon Sciaky: An Insider Account of the Social Impact of Education in Salonica

The previous chapter of this thesis dove into the early educational realities in Salonica. Sa'adi Besalel a Levi, writing during the 1880's, documented his experiences and endeavors bringing educational reform to the Jewish community. He supported Moise Allatini and other endorsers of the Alliance Israelite Universelle. His insider views were valuable in understanding the daily educational experiences of students prior to the Alliance, as well as initial communal pushback to the Alliance. The AIU was an international organization. While Sa'adi's memoir highlighted communal reactions, the second chapter of this thesis used the Bulletin of the Alliance, the organization's publication, to explore more about the AIU, its educational values, standards, and goals. Expounding upon what they stood for and what they promoted in the communities they were situated in, allows us to better understand how the Alliance impacted more than just the classroom structure. Its core values to promote Western language, provide diverse teachers, and introduce new subjects, and at the same time attempt to respect traditional values, allowed for its impact to extend beyond the classroom. Due to the Alliance, people's value of education increased and Western ideas were slowly seeping into everyday life. The following section of the thesis will utilize a later nineteenth century memoir to gain insights into the personal experiences of Salonican Jews, after the AIU had already gained a foundation in the city. Leon Sciaky's *Farewell to Salonica: City at the Crossroads* illuminates the transition period after the Alliance became more established and how the widening horizons that came with the Alliance had larger social repercussions.

Leon Sciaky was born in 1893 in Salonica to a Sephardic family. His memoir is indicative of the integration of Jews into the city and the diversity present in Salonica during his childhood. At the age of 23, following the Balkan Wars and the onset of World War I, Sciaky left

Salonica in 1915 to pursue a better life in New York with his family. During the time he left Salonica, the peaceful acceptance of people's diverse and religious backgrounds that existed during his childhood was slowly unraveling. While his autobiography also discusses his time in the United States, this thesis in its focus on the Jewish community of Salonica, will primarily highlight his memories and experiences from Salonica.<sup>75, 76</sup> It is also important to consider that Sciaky and his family lived in the Muslim quarter of the city, as opposed to the Jewish quarter, and were likely more integrated into Turkish life. Additionally, five generations of Sciaky's family had lived in Salonica as merchants and respected community members; they retained their Spanish customs and language while simultaneously increasing their involvement in the social and commercial life of the city. Thus, Sciaky's historical background sheds light on his dual attachment to both Sephardic Jewish culture and the Turkish society.

#### *Leon Sciaky's Early Education*

Sciaky describes, quite vividly, certain aspects of his early education:

Our classroom was on the upper floor and in the rear of the building... To the shrill accompaniment of the cicada on hot summer mornings, under the sleepy supervision of a round-faced, thick-lipped young man, we chanted the "Perek" in unison. Even in its Spanish version, the abstruseness of these aphorisms of old Hebrew philosophers totally defied our comprehension.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> For more information on the unique nature of the memoir see Diane Matza, "Jewish Immigrant Autobiography: The Anomaly of a Sephardic Example." *MELUS* 14, no. 1 (1987): 33-41. Matza notes, "Farewell to Salonica is the only autobiography written by a Sephardic immigrant who came to the United States in the 1880-1924 period. It is the only autobiography to paint a picture of the world from which fifty thousand Sephardic Jews came during the great migrations. It is also the only Jewish immigrant's autobiography written in English to be devoted almost exclusively to limning life and feeling in the country of origin, the only memoir in which not America but the old country and history are claimed as the shapers of the narrator's consciousness" Matza, "Jewish Immigrant Autobiography," 33.

<sup>76</sup> Sciaky's autobiography includes 16 chapters (282 pages), 2 of which address education specifically. Education is mentioned in other chapters in addition to the plethora of memories and experiences Sciaky recollects.

<sup>77</sup> Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica*, 86.

Looking at this excerpt in conversation with Sa'adi's memoir one cannot help but notice the similarities. Both mention the reading of religious texts in unison as well as provide detailed descriptions of their teachers.<sup>78, 79</sup> Neither memoir is solely dedicated to elucidating the educational scene in Salonica, yet in sections where education is discussed this specific memory is highlighted, suggesting how central it was to the everyday life of a Jewish student in Salonica. Interestingly, Leon Sciaky was born in 1893, a few years after the Alliance was brought to Salonica; signifying that traditional education methods were continued. Change did not happen immediately. Additionally, similar to Sa'adi, Leon criticizes this school experience as well.

Sciaky valued the atypical things he learned with his teacher Selim Effendi over the basic traditional classroom learning:

Selim Effendi soon befriended me and took a special interest in my progress. With infinite patience he taught me the *alif-ba*; with even greater patience he showed me how to sharpen a reed pen, how to cut its tip at the proper angle, how to use just the right amount of ink in the porcelain well loosely stuffed with fiber, and how to hold the paper on my knee.... Unlike the other teachers, whose emphasis on adherence to rules and stiff class behavior made for dullness and boredom, Selim Effendi brightened school hours by

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<sup>78</sup> Doctor Meir Yoel who documents his experience in the early 1900's also notes this experience. As he writes, "But let's get back to our times. Because that is when, along with the traditional schools in which illiterate and high faulting rabbis trained our youth by means of perpetual reading of the *Haftarah* and *Parashah*, some modern schools began appearing on the scene, most of which were run by foreigners." Yoel Meir, Rena Molho, and Petros Martinidēs. *The Memoirs of Doctor Meir Yoel: An Autobiographical Source On Social Change In Salonika At the Turn of the 20th Century* (Beylerbeyi, İstanbul: Isis Press, 2011), 20.

<sup>79</sup> It is interesting to note that this is the first thing Leon shares of his teacher— not what he taught but rather what he looked like. Perhaps this was also indicative of the pervasive Western influences in Sciaky's daily life as it came through the classroom. See quote: "Of the three teachers who undertook to unfold the world of knowledge for us, the tall, melancholy Turk with swarthy face who guided our stumbling first steps in that none too easy language soon became my favorite. Selim Effendi could not have been more than in his late twenties when I first knew him, and yet his tobacco-stained, bony fingers trem-bled as he rolled his cigarettes, or when he sipped his cups of black coffee. His large dreamy brown eyes imparted an unexpected gentleness to his irregular and homely features. The nostrils of his long, hooked nose were like sensitive mirrors which reflected his emotions. They quivered when, from his pulpitlike desk, he quoted the poets." Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica*, 87.

his friendliness and understanding. He had a saying for everything and a ready anecdote to fit all occasions.<sup>80</sup>

Effendi was an impactful teacher in what he taught, his priorities, and treatment of students.

Sciaky also notes Effendi's opinion on language, as Sciaky documents him saying, "Learn the language well," he would urge. "As the saying goes, 'The tongue has no bones, but it breaks bones;'" suggesting how central and influential language was in Salonica. Sciaky actualized his interest in language and science through learning and reading on his own:

One afternoon Father came home with a neatly wrapped package, which he handed to me. "This is for you," he said, "I think you will enjoy it very much." It was a beautifully bound book with gilt edges and richly decorated red covers. Until then I had spent many an hour engrossed in the yellowed pages of the old French encyclopedic dictionary in two volumes that I had discovered among I read by myself, and it completely captivated me. Not only was I fascinated by the story of those courageous characters who transform a wilderness into a habitable place, lacking few of the comforts or even luxuries to which they were accustomed, but the book became for me a dramatic illustration of what science could accomplish.<sup>81</sup>

Sciaky lived the discoveries of the West through exposing himself to its literature. His depictions of being engrossed in learning and the beauty he saw in the physical books accentuates the extent to which he valued learning new ideas that were born outside of the confines of Salonica. In this way it fits that Leon was a young person excited by and supportive of institutions such as the AIU, as will be considered later in the chapter, and in the same vein that he was not content with the education he received in the community school:

At the age of eleven I had reached a point in my growth which made the Shalom School an extremely distasteful experience. I was conscious of a vast and fascinating outside world. There were questions which rose to the mind and came to the lips, puzzling events that begged clarification, dramas in the street or under the vines of the garden which

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<sup>80</sup> Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica*, 88.

<sup>81</sup> Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica*, 94.

stirred one to new emotions. But the teachers were unapproachable people on inaccessible pinnacles, the classroom an isolated cosmos aloof from the resurgent life outside its four drab walls. Boredom lengthened the day, and week succeeded week in an unvarying dullness of learning a Jugglery of lifeless symbols. Arithmetic and geography grammar and language, were meaningless and unappetizing empty shells with which a hungry mind refused to be content. More and more did I rebel savagely against the deadening routine. To my distressed and horrified parents I declared my wish to leave school and learn a trade.<sup>82</sup>

From unanswered questions, to unapproachable teachers, classrooms isolated from the enlightened outside world, and dull routines, Sciaky longed for change. It is also thought provoking to note that Sciaky's parents felt a distaste towards the Shalom school as well:

But my parents were very much aware of the shortcomings of the Shalom School and had been anxiously casting about to find an institution more in keeping with their ideas.

Father, who sensed its parochialism and narrowness, had once asked me whether I would like to enter the preparatory school at Robert College in Constantinople. Mother, feeling I was too young to be away from home, had been against my going, and I had not found the prospect too alluring myself.<sup>83</sup>

This excerpt encapsulates the mixed reactions and opinions on what was considered a proper and adequate education. On the one hand schools like the Shalom school were not sufficient, yet on the other hand, schools out of the community were not encouraged either. Here, both his mother and Sciaky himself are not content with his leaving to Constantinople, and yet are both sure the Shalom school would no longer suffice his educational needs. Moreover, through understanding the school experience Leon depicted, it sheds light onto the reality that the Alliance's impact was not totally widespread nor its impact immediate from the time of its inception. Although it was a slow process, there were still substantial shifts occurring within the social makeup of the

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<sup>82</sup> Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica*, 148.

<sup>83</sup> Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica*, 149.

community. It is also evident that the Western values were slowly becoming a priority, especially to the younger generation..

### *Sciaky and the Older Generation*

To better understand the social differences between the younger generation in search of widened perspectives, and the older generation holding onto tradition, one can dive deeper into the recorded interactions between Sciaky and his grandparents.<sup>84</sup> Although the Salonican community was not initially welcoming and supportive of the Alliance, it is interesting to see what Sciaky writes about the older generation's reaction to the Alliance and traditional ways changing, several decades after it was established in the city.<sup>85</sup>

When Nono had urged her [great-grandmother Miriam] to move to the big house, she refused. "Go, my son," she had said. "At my age it is hard to change." Life had changed enough about her. Had not the Jewish women and girls discarded the veil, to go about with their faces uncovered? Had not Western fashions come to the city, to change the appearance of the younger generation? New schools had been opened and were now teaching in foreign tongues. The young people were forgetting the traditions of their fathers and made little of age-old customs. God preserve us! She did not want to live to see the day when Spanish, the language of our ancestors, would be forgotten. For all that, she was inordinately proud of her grandson. Whereas Nono had had no schooling whatever, Father had gone to the School of the Alliance; then to the Tereki School to learn to read and write Turkish.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Nono Plata was Leon Sciaky's grandfather. In Sciaky's childhood years Nono would travel to the ports for business. Sciaky would engage in many conversations with Nono, bringing to light the mysteries of the outside world for Sciaky. Sciaky's great-grandmother Miriam, an older and more traditional woman, is depicted as reluctant to change numerous times throughout the memoir.

<sup>85</sup> Although Sciaky did not personally enroll in an Alliance school he refers to the institution and school throughout his memoir. While I chose to focus on the Alliance in Chapter 2, this thesis is not limited to exploring the impact of Jewish education solely through the Alliance; rather other impactful educational experiences, such as those mentioned by Sciaky are equally significant in tracing the influence of education in shaping the Jewish community of Salonica.

<sup>86</sup> Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica*, 44.

Here Leon not only hints to changes in social norms but also to the perspective of the older generation. His great grandmother is presented as somewhat unyielding to change, while each subsequent generation, from his grandfather Nono, to his father, is seen as increasingly accepting of Western culture. A focus of this excerpt is the noteworthy change in education that impacted the slow abandonment of the Spanish language. Considering the distaste for Western ideas present in great-grandmother Miriam's character, she surprisingly reacts to Leon's father receiving an education with pride. Quite possibly, her pride indicates that the Alliance was a successful bridge between ideas of the West and traditions of Jewish Salonica. From Sciaky's account the Alliance seemed to have not faced as much opposition as other things like changing fashion; though it is also important to consider Sciaky's bias here as an endorser of Alliance's efforts. Moreover, small detailed moments that Sciaky shares of his childhood shed tremendous light on the social dynamics of the community. Here we see an account hinting to a greater interest in the children's education by the grandparents.

Nono would invariably be waiting for me at home. Ever since we had moved from the big house, not a day passed but he would come to visit us in the afternoon. "Tell me about school," he would say after an affectionate hug. "What did you do today?" And I had to recount all the little events of the day; the games we had played, what the teachers had said. "You're doing very well," he would say encouragingly; "it is hard to learn the many things they teach you today, and you must be patient. 'He who wants the rose must overlook the thorns.'" Then, with a sigh: "There were no schools like yours in my day; that's why I grew up like this, an ignoramus."<sup>87</sup>

Nono inquiring about the school day is indicative that education was shifting to become a priority and valued—by young and old alike. Nono referring to himself as an 'ignoramus' confirms the pride he has for his grandson becoming an educated person, an opportunity he did

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<sup>87</sup> Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica*, 93.

not have as a child. Furthermore, schools were taking a turn. To the grandparents it was an immense change, though to the younger generation like Leon, it seemed insufficient.

*Leon Sciaky and Western Values: The Themes of Tradition and Change*

In several early chapters Sciaky introduces the theme of outside cultures demanding change from the often resisting inside world:

The century was drawing to a close. Stealthily the West was creeping in, trying to lure the East with her wonders.... We caught a glimpse of her brilliance, and timidly listened to the song of the siren. Like country folk at a banquet, we felt humble and awkward in our ways. But vaguely we sensed the coldness of her glitter and the price of her wooing. With uneasiness we gathered tighter the folds of our homespun mantles around our shoulders, enjoying their softness and warmth and finding them good.<sup>88</sup>

Evident in the memoir is a vacillation between accepting Western ideals and holding onto tradition; Sciaky finds himself at the crossroads of timelessness and change in his daily life. Even Sciaky's living room is a microcosm of the Eastern and Western cultures meshing together in Salonica:

Of all the frequent visitors to the big house, none was looked forward to as eagerly by every member of the house-hold as Han David Boton, the scholarly headmaster of one of the Schools of the Alliance. On winter evenings he would arrive directly after supper, and as soon as coffee was dispatched he would settle himself comfortably in one corner of the divan. In the general expectant hush he would bring out the sheets of paper and, adjusting his glasses, begin his reading. For the benefit of Nono and Grandmother, who knew no French, he was translating *Les Miserables* into Spanish.<sup>89</sup>

This highlights the reality of the state of transition the Salonican community was in. It is apparent that his grandparents needed a Spanish translation, and simultaneously were accustomed to Western culture and embraced it, in certain regards. Also notable, as will be

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<sup>88</sup> Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica*, 20.

<sup>89</sup> Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica*, 19.

discussed more, was that the Alliance was being respected, and its educators and leaders were a bridge to western culture.

In continuing his commenting on the West, in comparison to Salonica Sciaky notes:

And while the East, farther away from the center of this activity and slower to change, was not at first greatly affected, yet the accelerated means of communication, the shrinking distances between peoples were to bring to Turkey echoes of the dawning new era and to rekindle the glimmer smoldering under the general ignorance and apathy of the Salonicans. For great disparity in states of culture cannot subsist for long, and ideas have a way of crossing boundaries without benefit of passports and spurning the staying hands of those who would hold them back. A few men in Salonica were to combat the stubborn opposition of the obscurantist reactionaries who were unwilling to recognize the trend and to accept new ideas. They sponsored schools that were to dispel the fog and introduce light into the slumbering city. The Allatinis, the Fernandezes, the Modianos, and the Perreras fought a hard battle before the first school staffed with European teachers began to teach French and Italian out of foreign books in 1848.<sup>90</sup>

Leon Sciaky seems to be quite critical of some in the Salonican community for being ignorant and resistant to change. At the same time he praises the efforts of those who aimed to dispel the fog of ignorance that laid over Salonica. Looking at this excerpt through a lens of uncovering social changes that were happening in Salonica provides for very rich insights. In talking about Western ideals slowly sweeping into the way of life of the East, Sciaky does not note trade, or business as the means of these exchange of ideas, but rather education as the conduit for these new values to make their way into Salonica. Sciaky's account is thus testament to the influence education had on social changes in Salonica. While explicit mention of the Alliance is sporadic throughout the memoir, Sciaky's reference to schools being established, the bringing of European teachers and the teaching of other languages, in essence is what the Alliance

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<sup>90</sup> Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica*, 150.

strengthened in Salonica.<sup>91</sup> Sciaky resumes his assessment of the Salonican community's ignorance and the new direction they were heading:

By the turn of the new century a few people began to be aware of the necessity for bettering the schools and for the need of an education which would cross the narrow boundaries of nationalities in our own city. They became conscious of our immediate neighbors, the Greeks, the Bulgarians, the Jews, the Turks. The schools of the communities, attended by children of the same faith, had done their work well, but now there were wider fields to cultivate, broader horizons to scan. Those who had visited the capitals of Europe and been dazzled by their brilliance had returned acutely aware of our provincialism in the face of this larger world.<sup>92</sup>

Sciaky saw educational reform as a necessity. While he does not entirely put down the traditional schools of faith, he does clearly praise the European educational ideals as superior, being “dazzled by their brilliance,” accentuating the provincialism he saw present in Salonica.

Beyond his overarching acceptance of Western values, Leon Sciaky attributes admiration to the Alliance. In talking about increased identification with France he states:

And in no other nationality was this truer than in the case of the Spanish Jews, who, having already been reawakened of the world by the Alliance Israelite Universelle, were much like a palimpsest on which French culture and thought were superimposed upon a tongue and customs of a dim past, now bereft of intellectual content. It afforded us the link with the outside world; it extended a friendly hand which we gratefully grasped to lift ourselves out of the isolation in which we no longer were content to remain.<sup>93</sup>

The once ignorant Spanish community of Salonica, according to Sciaky, was “reawakened” by the AIU. Again he considers the Alliance as the link, or bridge, to the intellectual and cultural world outside of Salonica. He sees it as something to be grateful for. There is little to no trace of condemnation of the organization as was apparent in Sa’adi’s memoir.

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<sup>91</sup> For more details on the specific changes the AIU brought to Jewish schools in Salonica refer back to Chapter 2 of the thesis.

<sup>92</sup> Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica*, 151.

<sup>93</sup> Sciaky, *Farewell to Salonica*, 157.

Moreover, Leon Sciaky's memoir *Farewell to Salonica: City at the Crossroads* validates the impact education had in turning Salonica into a Westernized city. Schools, such as the ones established by the Alliance Israelite Universelle, were the bridge to Western ideas, language, and culture.

## Conclusion

When viewed together, the memoir of Sa'adi Besalel a-Levi, the Bulletin of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, and the autobiography of Leon Sciaky provide for a unique insight into the inner workings of Jewish education in Salonica and the process by which it became a force of cultural awakening within the community.

When it becomes clear that Jewish education was the link to Western ideas and an impetus for social change in Salonica, it lends to a greater understanding of the centrality of Jewish education within Jewish communities. To see the childhood classrooms experiences of Sa'adi and Sciaky come to life in their memoirs, in such detail, was almost surprising. The clarity with which they recall their teachers, and the emotion present in the way they describe learning, is indicative of how pivotal those memories were in their development. It truly demonstrates the immense force of education and how lasting its impacts are. Similarly, to become aware of the inner workings of the Alliance reveals how committed they were to helping other Jewish communities, primarily through the means of educating. Unraveling these narratives has allowed for this thesis to transform. What began as tracing the power of education in shaping Jewish communities, led to a world of captivating stories that, beyond any previous expectation, have demonstrated that fleeting moments situated in the classroom, in time, extend far beyond.

One cannot make the claim that educational reform was the sole reason for social reform in Salonica; however, it is undeniable that it did have a tremendous impact. Education was a means to widen horizons. Once the door was opened it allowed for other ideas and Western values to be pushed through. Ultimately education, and specifically the changing nature of Jewish education, was the link by which Jewish Salonica saw most of its evolution.

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