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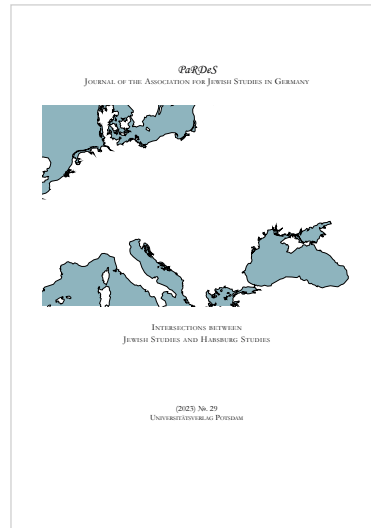
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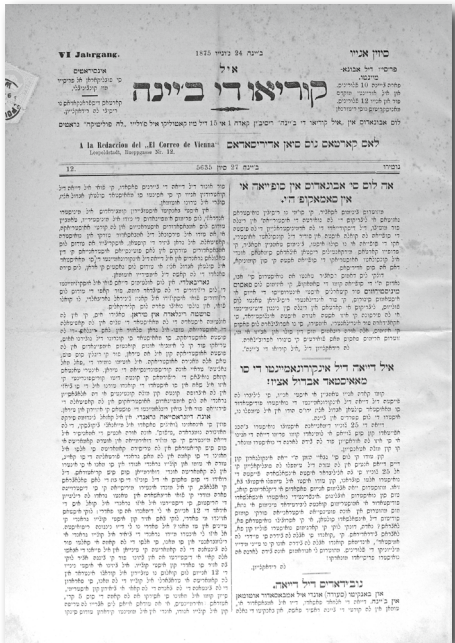
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“Domestic Foreigners”: The Trans-Imperial Loyalties of Sephardic Jews in Vienna

by Martin Stechauner

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between the Sephardic Jewish community of Vienna and the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires in the latter half of the 19th century. The community’s legal status was transformed following the emancipation of Austrian Jews, but very few first-hand accounts of these changes exist today. The primary sources analyzed in this paper are Judezmo-language newspapers published in Vienna at that time. The paper emphasizes the historical and political contexts surrounding these sources, particularly the community’s close ties to the Ottoman and Habsburg regimes.

1 Introduction

This paper explores the complex relations between the Sephardic Jewish community of Vienna and the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires during the second half of the 19th century. As a result of the emancipation of Austrian Jews, the community’s legal status underwent significant changes during that time. Unfortunately, only few testimonies informing us about these changes and stemming from the community itself have survived until the present day. The primary sources presented here include Judezmo-language newspapers,¹ such as *El Nasiona* (1866–1967) and *El Koreo de Viena* (1869–1883). *El Nasiona* was owned and edited by Yosef Yaakov Kalvo (or Josef Jakob Kalwo in German,

¹ Judezmo, the traditional vernacular of Eastern Sephardic Jews, including the ones in Vienna, is a Jewish language based on medieval Castilian Spanish, with some Hebrew and Turkish, later also French, Italian, and South Slavic loanwords. It was traditionally written with modified Hebrew characters, the so-called Rashi script. The language is nowadays also known as Judeo-Spanish and Ladino.

ca. 1800–1875). *El Koreo de Viena* was owned by his close friend Shem Tov Semo (or Alexander Semo in German, 1810 or 1827–1881) and edited by Kalvo. After Kalvo's death, it was edited by Semo's son-in-law Adolf von Zemlinszky (1845–1900). Although these newspapers were run as private enterprises, they were often considered the official mouthpiece of the Viennese Sephardic community. While analyzing these sources, it is important to consider the historical and political contexts, especially the community's close relations to Ottoman and Habsburg Empires.

2 The Historical Beginnings of the Community

Since the late Middle Ages, the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires had been rivals, fighting for supremacy in Southeastern Europe. The Treaty of Karlowitz (1699) initiated political and economic reconciliation between the two empires.² It was further refined in the Treaty of Passarowitz (1718), which allowed Ottoman subjects – in most Habsburg sources generally referred to as “Turks,” also serving as a synonym for Ottoman Muslims³ – to trade almost freely within the Habsburg domains and vice versa. However, it was primarily Ottoman Greeks, Armenians, and Jews – the latter usually referred to in Habsburg sources as “Turkish Jews” – establishing trading posts in Vienna. As some of these traders decided to stay in Vienna permanently, this led to the foundation of the first Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Ottoman Jewish congregations in the Habsburg capital.⁴ The latter was officially referred to as the “Turkish-Israelite Community of Vienna” (*Türkisch-israelitische Gemeinde zu Wien*).⁵ A few historical sources also use the term “Spanish” or “Spanish-Israelite” Community of Vienna,⁶ while designating its members as “*sefardim*”⁷ (Sephardic Jews) or “*espanyoles*” (Spaniards),⁸ in reference to the

² Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 64–66.

³ “Türken (Begriff),” Wien Geschichte Wiki, accessed March 3, 2023, [https://www.geschichte.wiki.wien.gv.at/Türken_\(Begriff\)](https://www.geschichte.wiki.wien.gv.at/Türken_(Begriff))

⁴ Anna Ransmayr, *Untertanen des Sultans oder des Kaisers: Struktur und Organisationsformen der beiden Wiener griechischen Gemeinden von den Anfängen im 18. Jahrhundert bis 1918* (Göttingen: V&R unipress/Vienna University Press, 2018), 38.

⁵ Adolf von Zemlinszky, *Geschichte der türkisch-israelitischen Gemeinde zu Wien von ihrer Gründung bis heute: nach historischen Daten*, ed. Michael Papo (Vienna: Michael Papo, 1888).

⁶ Zemlinszky, *Geschichte der türkisch-israelitischen Gemeinde*.

⁷ “Avizos tokantes a la nasyón israelita,” *El Koreo de Viena* 1, no. 1, December 19, 1869: 6.

⁸ “Sovre el modo de predikar en Turkía,” *El Nasiona* 1, no. 45, October 23, 1867: 363.

Spanish origin of its members.⁹ For this reason, the congregation has also become known as the Sephardic community of Vienna,¹⁰ although this expression was never officially used by the Viennese Sephardim themselves.¹¹

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, more Ottoman Jews arrived in Vienna, making up 12.5 percent of the city's Jewish population in 1818.¹² They maintained their Ottoman citizenship to retain their legal status in Vienna, where Habsburg Jews were only "tolerated." This meant that the latter were not allowed to move freely and settle down in Vienna or Lower Austria, unless they were able to pay a prescribed toleration tax.¹³ The only Jews able to meet these strict requirements were so-called "Court Jews," wealthy Jewish individuals, specialized in rendering their financial and diplomatic services to Christian monarchs.¹⁴ The Ottoman Jews in Vienna, predominantly merchants, were generally exempted from that tax. As subjects of another state, their legal status was stipulated by the bilateral treaties mentioned above.

3 The Formation of a Trans-Imperial Expat Community

Whenever they had to deal with the Habsburg authorities, the Ottoman Jews simply sought help from the local Ottoman embassy, for example, when establishing a new house of worship in the 1840s.¹⁵ The authorities eventually

⁹ The ancestors of most Ottoman Jews were refugees from Spain and Portugal who arrived in the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. Since the Middle Ages, the Iberian Peninsula has become known as *Sefarad*. Georg Bossong, *Die Sepharden: Geschichte und Kultur der spanischen Juden* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2008), 13.

¹⁰ E.g. see Nathan M. Gelber, "The Sephardic Community in Vienna," *Jewish Social Studies* 10:4 (1948): 359–396; Manfred Papo, "The Sephardi Community of Vienna," in *The Jews of Austria: Essays on their Life, History and Destruction*, ed. Josef Fraenkel (London: Vallentine-Mitchell, 1967), 327–346; Michael Studemund-Halévy, Christian Liebl, and Ivana Vučina, eds., *Sefarad an der Donau: Lengua y literature de los sefardies en tierras de los Habsburgo* (Barcelona: Tirocinio, 2013).

¹¹ In the Viennese Judezmo press the community is sometimes referred to as "*komuné sefardit de Viena*" ("Sephardic community of Vienna"), e.g. see "La komuné sefardit de Viena i 'El Koreo de Viena,'" *El Koreo de Viena* 2, no. 19, October 13, 1871: 1.

¹² In total, 45 Turkish Jewish families or 214 individuals. Nathan M. Gelber, "The Sephardic Community," 367.

¹³ Michael K. Silber, "Josephinian Reforms," in *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, Volume 1, ed. Gershon David Hundert (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 831–834, here 832.

¹⁴ Kurt Schubert, *Die Geschichte des österreichischen Judentums* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2008), 49–55.

¹⁵ Gelber, "The Sephardic Community," 373; Kaul, "Die spanischen Juden," 150–151.

approved the Viennese Sephardim's request, however, not without letting the Ottoman emissary know that in return for this favor the Habsburg government hoped that the Habsburg merchants in the Ottoman Empire would be treated in a similar way.¹⁶

The diplomatic and commercial dimension of their legal status certainly shaped their identity as a collective group. To be sure, they were not simply economic migrants, as this term is today often associated with refugees and asylum seekers. In a historical perspective, this term has also been used to describe the situation of so-called *Ostjuden*, poor and disadvantaged Ashkenazi immigrants from Eastern Europe, settling down in Western European metropolises, including Vienna.¹⁷ In contrast to these, the Viennese Sephardim should be viewed as a mobile expat community who, in reference to Alexandra Peat, practiced a voluntary "in-betweenness," distinguished by a flexibility of movement between different states and identities.¹⁸ They were a privileged but confidently separated community of foreigners who managed to live under the protection of two multicultural empires. For this reason, we can also describe them as "trans-imperial subjects," which E. Natalie Rothman characterizes as "self-proclaimed foreigner[s]," who nevertheless felt part of the "local metropolitan elite."¹⁹

Despite their privileged expat status as domestic foreigners, the legal situation of Viennese Sephardim was further complicated by the emancipation of Habsburg Jews beginning in the mid-19th century. Following the revolutionary years of 1848/49, the Habsburg Jews gradually gained the right of free exercise of religion and free movement. Also, the toleration system was finally abolished. As a result, more Ashkenazi Jews moved to the city, many of them poor, from the northern and eastern parts of the empire – principally

¹⁶ Kaul, "Die spanischen Juden," 151.

¹⁷ Klaus Weber, "Zwischen Religion und Ökonomie: Sepharden und Hugenotten in Hamburg, 1580–1800," in *Religion und Mobilität: Zum Verhältnis von raumbezogener Mobilität und religiöser Identitätsbildung im frühneuzeitlichen Europa*, eds. Henning P. Jürgens and Thomas Weller (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 137–168, here 137–138. For more information on the reality and the myths surrounding the "Ostjuden" in the late Habsburg Empire, see Philipp Mettauer and Barbara Staudinger, eds., "Ostjuden" – *Geschichte und Mythos* (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2015).

¹⁸ Alexandra Peat, *Travel and Modernist Literature: Sacred and Ethical Journeys* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 102.

¹⁹ E. Natalie Rothman, *Brokering Empire: Trans-Imperial Subjects Between Venice and Istanbul* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 1.

Bohemia/Moravia, then Hungary, and finally Galicia/Bukovina²⁰ – causing the Viennese Sephardim to become a small minority.²¹ This was also the time when the Viennese Ashkenazim were able to establish a proper community of their own, the *Israelitische Kultusgemeinde* (IKG).²² When the IKG tried to incorporate the Sephardic community in its own administrative body – following the “Inter-confessional Law” (1868)²³ and the “Israelite Religious Law” (1890)²⁴ – the Sephardic community’s leadership vehemently protested. Despite or rather because of being quite a wealthy community, its members did not want to pay any dues to their Ashkenazi brethren. As usual, the Sephardic community leaders simply turned to the local Ottoman embassy to avert this fusion.²⁵

The embassy supported the Viennese Sephardim’s appeal by writing petitions to the Habsburg authorities. Yet, despite these efforts, the Sephardic community was eventually incorporated as a *Verband* (association) into the IKG in 1906. When the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy collapsed in 1918, the Sephardic association withdrew its membership from the IKG and the Ottoman embassy formally recognized the reestablishment of an independent community. Finally, in 1922, the Sephardic community was once again incorporated into the IKG. However, this time, the IKG reassured its Sephardic members that their inner autonomy and privileges would remain unaffected in the future.²⁶

²⁰ Robert S. Wistrich, *The Jews of Vienna in the Age of Franz Joseph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 62.

²¹ Kaul, “Die spanischen Juden,” 187–188.

²² Tim Corbett, “The Israelitische Kultusgemeinde in Vienna: The Transformative Continuity of Jewish Collective Representation in Austria from Early Modernity to the Present,” *Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 21 [forthcoming].

²³ Anonymous, “Gesetz vom 25. Mai 1868, wodurch die interconfessionellen Verhältnisse der Staatsbürger in den darin angegebenen Beziehungen geregelt werden,” in *Reichs-Gesetzblatt für das Kaiserthum Österreich (RGI)*, no. 49/1868, 99–102.

²⁴ Anonymous, “Gesetz vom 21. März 1890, betreffend die Regelung der äußeren Rechtsverhältnisse der israelitischen Religionsgesellschaft,” in *RGI* no. 57/1890, 109–113.

²⁵ For more information on these interventions, see Mordche Schlome Schleicher, “Geschichte der spaniolischen Juden (Sephardim) in Wien” (PhD Thesis, Universität Wien, 1932), 172–186; Christina Kaul, “Die Rechtsstellung der türkischen Juden in Wien: auf Grund der österreichisch-türkischen Staatsverträge” (MA Thesis, Salzburg University, 1990), 40–63.

²⁶ Schleicher, “Geschichte der spaniolischen Juden,” 194; Manfred Papo, “The Sephardi Community of Vienna,” in *The Jews of Austria: Essays on their Life, History and Destruction*, ed. Josef Fraenkel (London: Vallentine-Mitchell, 1967), 327–346, here 344; Kaul “Die Rechtsstellung,” 64–66.

4 Proclamations of Loyalty Towards the Habsburg and Ottoman Regimes

Despite their strong ties to the Ottoman Empire, many Sephardic Jews in Vienna had developed great affections for their actual country of residence. Nathan M. Gelber (1891–1966), an Austro-Israeli historian and a self-proclaimed Zionist, pointed to the fact that “a majority of the Turkish Jews had been born and raised in Vienna and looked upon Austria as their second fatherland.”²⁷

This sentiment was also echoed in the Viennese Judezmo press, which is full of examples demonstrating loyalty to both political entities. For example, when the Austro-Hungarian Empire was established in 1867, the editor of *El Nasiona* explicitly referred to the Dual Monarchy as “our country.”²⁸ Moreover, Emperor Franz Joseph I (r. 1849–1916) was often described as a strong and respectful father figure, for example, in expressions such as “our high-born Emperor, who is working hard to fulfill the wish of his peoples.”²⁹ The Viennese Judezmo press also covered the royal family extensively, as did both the Jewish and non-Jewish Austrian press.³⁰ Austrian newspapers generally wrote very favorably of the monarch, certainly out of fear of strict censorship of the press.³¹ Likewise, the Jewish and non-Jewish press published in the late Ottoman Empire was replete with articles about the Sultan, usually drawing a very favorable image of his reign,³² which in many cases can be assessed as a form of self-imposed censorship.

The Judezmo press of Vienna was no exception to this common, yet purposeful practice. One example of this was the welcoming of Ottoman Sultan Abdülaziz I (r. 1861–1876) by the Sephardic and Greek Orthodox communities of Vienna in 1867. The Sultan had been invited to the International Exposition

²⁷ Gelber, “The Sephardic Community,” 372.

²⁸ “Revista de la semana,” *El Nasiona* 1, no. 26, June 12, 1867, 203.

²⁹ Untitled (editorial note), *El Nasiona* 1, no. 43, October 8, 1867, 343.

³⁰ Jacob Toury, *Die jüdische Presse im österreichischen Kaiserreich: Ein Beitrag zur Problematik der Akkulturation 1802–1918* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, Paul Siebeck, 1983), 19, 36.

³¹ Philip Czech, *Der Kaiser ist ein Lump und Spitzbube: Majestätsbeleidigung unter Kaiser Franz Joseph* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2010), 297–344.

³² Palmira Brummett, *Image and Imperialism in the Ottoman Revolutionary Press, 1908–1911* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 1–9; Julia Phillips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 122–131.

in Paris and used the opportunity to tour other European capital cities, including Vienna, where he had been invited by the Habsburg Emperor. The Ottoman Jews and Greeks in Vienna formed delegations to greet their ruler and reaffirm their ties to the Ottoman regime.³³ This display of loyalty was financially beneficial, as the Sultan left a donation of 1000 florins for the poor and needy of each community.³⁴ It also strategically reaffirmed their expat status towards the Viennese public and Habsburg authorities, while demonstrating the Sultan's authority towards his hosts.

As committed expats, the Sephardic Jews of Vienna closely followed the politics in the Ottoman Empire, as well as its official protocols. To express their loyalty on a public stage, the community celebrated the anniversary of the Ottoman Sultan's coronation every year. Yet, while this ceremony was frequently attended by Ottoman officials from the local embassy, the editor of *El Koreo de Viena* – annoyed and embarrassed – pointed to the fact that many fellow community members abstained from attending these celebrations. In fact, he wrote, the “temple remained largely empty” on that day.³⁵ As usual, only the most elderly and poorest community members showed up. Although the editor did not go into further detail about the reasons behind this certainly quite awkward situation, we can assume that this might have been a passive form of protest. In fact, Abdülaziz did not enjoy an upright and unstained reputation among all Ottoman Jews, especially those living in the Ottoman Empire. Orthodox Jewish traditionalists often felt ashamed and restricted by the Sultan's reformist government.³⁶

In addition, in the case of the generally quite liberal-minded Viennese Sephardim, the reason behind this scandal was a much simpler and trivial one. As one article in *El Koreo de Viena* reveals, many Viennese Sephardim, especially the younger ones, already born and raised in Vienna, simply found such official ceremonies – especially in the form of a traditional religious service – utterly boring and outdated.³⁷ Consequently, in 1880, the community

³³ “El Sultán en Viena,” *El Nacional* 1, no. 33, July 31, 1867: 260.

³⁴ “El Sultán en Buda-Peshta,” *El Nacional* 1, no. 34, August 7, 1867: 272.

³⁵ “El día del enkoronamiento de su maestad Abdul Atsiz,” *El Koreo de Viena* 6, no. 12, June 24, 1875, 47.

³⁶ Phillips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans*, 21.

³⁷ “La komuné sefardit de Viena i ‘El Koreo de Viena’,” *El Koreo de Viena* 2, no. 19, October 13, 1871, 1.

employed an Ashkenazic cantor by the name of Jacob Bauer (1852–1926) and a professional choir, and the celebrations, as well as the religious service in general, took on a new reformist character.³⁸

Considering this generational and cultural gap, we could assume that the younger members of the community, might have held stronger feelings for the country's dynasty in which they were living. Indeed, *El Koreo de Viena* informs us that the Viennese Sephardim also took part in the annual birthday festivities for the Austrian Emperor, as did most Habsburg Jews.³⁹ However, once again, the editor of *El Koreo* critically pointed out that although the synagogue was again beautifully decorated, it was nevertheless “empty of people.”⁴⁰ Only the less affluent members of the community had followed the call, while the young and wealthy had decided to abstain from the event. Maybe they did so out of personal interest, in order not to be obligated to give charity to the poor at the end of the ceremony, as used to be the custom on such occasions.⁴¹

Yet, this scene might also point to another dimension of Jewish loyalty and patriotism, especially in Austria. Most Austrian Jews had a greater inclination towards legalistic than dynastic patriotism, meaning that they generally felt more loyal “to a constitutional monarchy” and “not to a dynasty” as such.⁴² The same can be said about Ottoman Jews, including the ones living in Vienna, who had definitely adopted many ceremonial manifestations of modern Ottomanism such as the public celebration of the Sultan's coronation day.⁴³ However, we may assume that the Sephardic Jews in Vienna, like their co-religionists elsewhere, did so with a purposeful rationale in mind – the veneration of the ruler was merely a pragmatic necessity in exchange

³⁸ Martin Stechauner, “Vienna: A Cultural Contact Zone between Sephardim and Ashkenazim,” in *Sephardim and Ashkenazim: Jewish-Jewish Encounters in History and Literature*, ed. Sina Rauschenbach (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 183–208. See also Edwin Seroussi, “Sephardic Fin des Siècles: The Liturgical Music of Vienna's Türkisch-Israelitische Community on the Threshold of Modernity,” in *Jewish Musical Modernism, Old and New*, ed. Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 55–79.

³⁹ Daniel L. Unowsky, *The Pomp and Politics of Patriotism: Imperial Celebrations in Habsburg Austria, 1848–1916* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2005), 138–144.

⁴⁰ “El día del enkoronamiento de su maestad Abdul Atsiz,” *El Koreo de Viena* 6, no. 12, June 24, 1875: 47.

⁴¹ Unowsky, *The Pomp and Politics*, 141.

⁴² Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867–1938: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 181.

⁴³ For other examples, see Phillips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans*, 45–73, 104–131.

for protection and legal rights. As has been mentioned before, ever since the establishment of the *IKG*, the Viennese Sephardim tried hard to keep their autonomous status. This might explain why the editor of *El Koreo de Viena*, in solidarity with the congregation's leadership, was quite embarrassed by the fact that so many community members had abstained from the celebrations honoring the Sultan and the Emperor.

Yet, to make these intertwined dependencies even more obvious, there were also occasions when the Ottoman Sultan and the Austrian Emperor were simultaneously honored during the same ceremonial act. Such was the case when the New Turkish Temple was inaugurated in 1887. As an article of the *Österreichisch-ungarische Cantoren-Zeitung* (edited by the Viennese Sephardim's new Ashkenazi cantor Jacob Bauer) reveals, both monarchs and their households were honored with the so-called *Kaisergebet* (imperial prayer), as well as the performance of the Austrian and the Turkish anthems.⁴⁴

As pointed out by Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson, Jewish loyalties in the 19th century – like those of other groups in the Habsburg Empire – did not necessarily have to be unilateral or one-dimensional but “of course, [could] be directed to more than one target.”⁴⁵ As the simultaneous veneration of the Austrian Emperor and the Ottoman Sultan reveals, multiple loyalties could easily be expressed concurrently, at the same place, and within the same ceremonial framework. The simultaneous patriotic declarations towards the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires during the inauguration ceremony of the new Sephardic synagogue can definitely be viewed as a purposeful act of a Jewish community which, given its expat status, relied on the protection and beneficence of two states at once. Another visual token of the Viennese Sephardim's purposeful and simultaneous loyalty to the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, both embodied by their rulers, were two life-size portraits of Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) and Emperor Franz Joseph, which were placed in the reception hall of the newly inaugurated synagogue. These paintings remained there until the end of World War I – then being replaced by large mirrors – as both empires were eventually dissolved and turned into republican states.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ *Österreichisch-ungarische Cantoren-Zeitung* 7, no. 31, September 22, 1887: 5.

⁴⁵ Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson, “Emancipation and the Liberal Offer,” in *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States, and Citizenship*, eds. Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 3–36, here 34.

⁴⁶ Papo, “The Sephardi Community,” 335.

5 Conclusion

As we have seen, the Sephardic Jews in Vienna had a strong attachment to both the Ottoman and the Habsburg Empires, while calling the latter their actual home. While they expressed loyalty and affection towards the rulers of both political entities, their patriotism was more legalistic in nature, rather than dynastic. The absence of younger community members in such celebrations points to the fact that these demonstrations of loyalty fulfilled a rather pragmatic purpose, reaffirming their expat status towards the Viennese public, as well as Habsburg and Ottoman authorities. As has been discussed, this status and its legal implications depended heavily on the benevolence of both states.

The Viennese Judezmo press sheds light on the complex and nuanced nature of this purposeful trans-imperial patriotism. Although being private entrepreneurs, the editors of *El Nacional* and *El Koreo de Viena* felt a great responsibility in representing their community in a certain light, especially at times when their community's autonomous legal status was at stake. Of course, we must keep in mind that institutions such as community boards and newspapers, do not necessarily represent an entire religious group as a whole⁴⁷ – again, this is alluded to in the behavior of certain community members, which was openly criticized in the Viennese Judezmo press. Yet, as long as we read carefully between the lines, both *El Nacional* and *El Koreo de Viena* provide important insights for the valuation of public demonstrations of loyalty towards the late Ottoman and Habsburg Empires. Apart from having quite practical effects, these twofold loyalties helped the Viennese Sephardim to manage their shared and yet hybrid status of being trans-imperial expats.

⁴⁷ Rogers Brubaker, "Ethnicity without Groups," *Archives européennes de sociologie* 42:2 (2002): 163–189, here 171–173.

