Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews in America

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The Maurice Amado Foundation: Promoting Sephardic and Jewish Cultural Heritage in America

An Interview with Elaine Lindheim and Sam Tarica

by Saba Soomekh

One of the most important American foundations that has supported the study of Sephardic Jewish history, culture, and heritage over the past half century is the Maurice Amado Foundation. The Foundation was established in 1961 and has been directed by Maurice Amado’s family since Mr. Amado’s death in 1968. For several decades, the main goals of the Foundation were to support organizations that serve the Sephardic Jewish community, promote knowledge of Sephardic Jewish culture and heritage, and expand knowledge of the contributions of Sephardic Jews to Jewish life.

The Foundation was among the first to recognize the significance of supporting Sephardic Jewish scholarship and education. In 1989, the Foundation provided an endowment to the University of California, Los Angeles, to establish a chair in Sephardic Studies and to support programming in Sephardic Studies. Initially UCLA hosted a series of distinguished and diverse scholars to serve as Visiting Maurice Amado Professors for one quarter each year. Since 2008, the Maurice Amado Program in Sephardic Studies at UCLA has been directed and led by Professor Sarah Abrevaya Stein, the Maurice Amado Chair in Sephardic Studies. The Maurice Amado Program in Sephardic Studies at
UCLA offers students at the undergraduate and graduate level the rare opportunity to focus intensively on the study of Sephardic history and culture. It also hosts lectures, workshops, and symposia open to the academic and wider Los Angeles community that cultivate and stimulate this field and situate UCLA as one of its principal hubs. In addition, the Foundation has supported international scholarship, building on the solid research and teaching program developed over the course of a decade and a half of Maurice Amado Lectures and more recently by the Maurice Amado Chair.

The Maurice Amado Foundation supports the study of Sephardic Jewish history and culture at other universities, including the Maurice Amado Foundation Lectures at California State University, Northridge, where, according to Jennifer Thompson, CSUN’s Maurice Amado Assistant Professor of Applied Jewish Ethics and Civic Engagement, “The purpose of the Maurice Amado lecture is to help people think about issues that affect their daily lives using the resources of Jewish ethics.” The Foundation has also been a longtime supporter of the University of Southern California’s Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in American Life as well as providing grants for the USC School of Dentistry (where Foundation Board members Sam and Mark Tarica attended dental school).

The Maurice Amado Foundation also has sponsored cultural exhibitions, including “Romance & Ritual: Celebrating the Jewish Wedding” at The Skirball Cultural Center and Museum in Los Angeles and “Jewish Life in the American West: Generation to Generation” at the Autry National Center, a museum in Los Angeles. Other significant Sephardic educational and cultural activities supported by the Foundation include a Sephardic curriculum project with Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, Sephardic cultural programs at the Houston, Texas Jewish Community Center, a Sephardic apartment at the Lower Eastside Tenement Museum in New York City, and support for students in Sephardic Studies to participate in programs of the Association of Jewish Studies.

On September 12, 2014, I sat down with Elaine Lindheim, one of the directors of the Foundation, and Sam Tarica, former president and advisor, in order to discuss the Foundation, its history, goals and interests, and to learn a bit about Maurice Amado, the man.

**Saba:** Can you please tell me a little bit about your affiliation with The Maurice Amado Foundation?
Elaine: I am one of the directors of the Maurice Amado Foundation. I was president a while ago. My role as a director is to represent the interest that is most immediately related to me. My mother, Stella Amado Lavis, was also president and one of the directors from the previous generation. Right now the MA Foundation Board consists of lineal descendants of Mr. Amado.

Sam: I am Sam Tarica; I am the current chief financial officer of the Foundation and an advisor and I have been president. I represent my family and my brother; my mother was Regina Amado Tarica. She was a niece of Maurice Amado.

Saba: Did Maurice Amado have any children?

Elaine: No. His wife, Rose Amado, had a son but Maurice never adopted him so Maurice was childless. But his older brother, Raphael, had five children. It is down from that family line that the foundation is drawn. We should point out that we are all related to Maurice.

Saba: Who was Maurice Amado?
Elaine: He was our parents’ uncle; the younger brother of Raphael Amado. He was from Izmir, Turkey. He came to this country in the early 1900s, 1904 perhaps. He came with his brother Raphael and Raphael’s wife Ester, our grandparents, and their two oldest children, who were born in Turkey. The whole family is from Izmir, Turkey. Maurice was fifteen or sixteen at the time he immigrated. His brother Raphael was in the tobacco business. Maurice was primarily an investor. He stayed in America, living for a while with his brother and family in Brooklyn. Raphael traveled back and forth with his tobacco business and was actually stuck in Greece during WWI.

Maurice married Rose Bernstein, who was an American dress designer. She was quite avant-garde for her era to be a businesswoman. She owned a high-end dress shop on Madison Avenue in New York City during the 1940s. They lived in New York and ultimately, by the 1950s, moved to Los Angeles. While he was still a bachelor, Maurice was present at the time that Sephardic Temple Tifereth Israel was built on Santa Barbara Avenue in the southern part of Los Angeles. It was the middle of the Depression but his brother Raphael was quite active in financing and finding people to finance the community and Maurice was present at that point.

We remember his wife Rose as a Christian Scientist. She died when I was sixteen and Maurice died when I was twenty-five. Maurice and Rose lived on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. They had a house that is still there and Maurice took great pride in his garden. Every time you went to see him he would take you to his garden. He also read a great deal and enjoyed discussing philosophy and current events.

Sam: Mark (Sam’s brother) and I were young and he didn’t like kids to be noisy. He was not a kid person. He did enjoy celebrating the Jewish holidays at the homes of his nieces and nephews and was especially fond of the special Sephardic foods that were associated with each festival.

Elaine: His foundation was incorporated in 1961. The original directors included his attorney and a close friend as well as his nephews Richard and Milton Amado. Maurice died in 1968.

Saba: Maurice was married to a woman who wasn’t Jewish, let alone, a Sephardic Jew. He was coming to your parents’ homes to eat Sephardic food. What about being Sephardic was important to him?
Elaine: I don’t know. Why was Maurice attracted to the Sephardic heritage? I would say the Sephardic heritage more than Sephardic rituals. . . . Part of it was because he was a part of this family. I think it travels through the family. It was important that our grandparents continued on with the religion and the culture. Ester (our grandmother and Maurice’s sister-in-law) taught her daughters how to observe the holidays and prepare the foods. Another factor was his relationship with Rabbi Jacob Ott, at the Sephardic Temple. The two bonded when Rabbi Ott recognized that Maurice was someone who could be philanthropic and also was very intelligent and a good reader.

Sam: Near the end of his life he became more philanthropic in his thinking. He was influenced by the people around him. I don’t recall Uncle Maurice being active in Jewish things, such as in the community and in the synagogue, before he was befriended by Rabbi Ott.

Elaine: Rabbi Jacob Ott was from Chicago. He was the rabbi for thirty-five years (at the Sephardic Temple). He was quite involved in the outside world and Zionist causes. He managed to give people at the synagogue a real sense of what was special about being Sephardic. He would write and talk about it.

Sam: Maurice was a great investor. He continued his investment interest throughout his life. He would always look at “how the market did today.” People would ask him for investment advice.

Elaine: If you look back in the history of philanthropy, this foundation was created at a time when a lot of family foundations were founded. People were told it was a good tax strategy. Maurice did very little granting of his own out of it while he was alive. But it did say in the papers that it was to be for Sephardic causes. He did establish other things, outside of the Foundation. At the Sephardic Temple there is a scholarship fund and a merit award fund, both of which honor young people. And he funded a building at Technion University in Israel.

Maurice made Richard and Milton (his nephews) Foundation trustees before he died. The brothers lived here and they were close to him. One was an attorney and the other was in finance. And when Maurice died, they were left with this responsibility. They brought their older sister Lucy Amado Touriel, onto the Board. And then she got ill and Richard died. And Milton was left alone so he brought in my mother. Ultimately, the nine children of Maurice’s nieces and nephews—our generation of cousins—were brought onto the
Foundation Board. That is the initial story. Everything else that has happened has been done in his name but not due to any particular mandate from him.

Saba: The Foundation has evolved philanthropically from something that was specifically focused on the Sephardic Temple to a broader sense of Sephardic Jewish philanthropy.

Elaine: At one point, in the Foundation documents, there was a possibility that the Sephardic Temple would be the sole beneficiary of the Foundation.

Saba: Do you think that was because of your generation coming in?

Elaine: No, it was the generation prior to us. The Temple was a beneficiary of the money from our parents’ generation. The Sephardic Temple was the primary focus of the giving when the nephews were living.

Saba: How does Sephardic history and culture influence your own personal life?

Sam: My Sephardic culture and experience is primarily familial. It comes from what we ate, family experiences, and the sense of being the other. Everybody else would talk about their Ashkenazi background and experience. My brother and I, we came from a different heritage and background that as time has gone by—this heritage has become more important, not so much personally but in the Jewish community in Los Angeles. The term “Sephardic” has risen with the influx of Israeli and Persian communities. I still am latched to the concept that we are Sephardic, that we came from the olive oil rather than chicken fat parts of the world.

Elaine: I identify as Sephardic, not just Jewish, and a lot of it comes from the Foundation and being involved with its efforts. I say I am Sephardic because our Temple doesn't associate with any particular movement.

I have been involved with the Sephardic Temple for quite a while. I am interested in Sephardic history and culture. More than thirty years ago, the Temple Sisterhood published a cookbook of Sephardic recipes. These were mainly from the Ottoman Jews from Turkey and Greece. The Sisterhood now includes a whole new younger group of members because our congregation has expanded so broadly culturally. Now we have members originating from Egypt, Persian, Morocco, and Cuba. I said I would be interested in putting together a new edition of the cookbook. The cookbook committee consists of
twenty women who get together at lunch, share recipes and learn about each others’ family stories.

My daughter is married to a Syrian Jew and his customs are different than ours. He was raised in a more observant family so it is interesting to me to see what they do and learn about their traditions and culture.

Our generation, as Sam said, felt marginalized. We were all American born but still felt marginalized. Maurice and his brother Raphael were determined to speak English and be modern. They both probably went to Alliance Israélite Universelle schools in Turkey. I was told Maurice would go to New York to hear Stephen S. Wise when he was preaching to listen to him speaking in English. Raphael made sure that all five of his children, including his three daughters, were college graduates. Their degree of literacy and education may differentiate them somewhat from other Sephardic families that came at the time. That led Maurice to become interested in education. That is why he established scholarships and education and merit awards. That thread has followed through generations with educational projects being something that people have looked to. There is a strong emphasis on education and merit. There are some minor gifts to Israel but it is not a Zionist foundation.

**Saba:** The foundation has given a lot of grants to universities, museums, and libraries. Is there a grant that you have given that spoke out to you, something that you read and said I really want to support this?

**Sam:** Certainly more in the past than in the present, we were very collaborative. There was enough money to do many things based on the way we have granted. We have been able to have many foci. That’s very positive.

**Elaine:** If you ask me which one I was most excited about, I think going back to my parents’ generation, I can speak for my mother and my two aunts. They were very engaged with the grants to the Temple and the Los Angeles Jewish Home for the Aging in support of the Alzheimer’s Unit. Those grants were very important to them. For our generation, I get most excited about Sephardic studies and the chair of Sephardic studies at UCLA. Our grants to Hebrew Union College and the Skirball Museum make us very excited. We have given funding towards a gallery at The Skirball Museum.

**Sam:** That also was exciting (Skirball). It is a wonderful, we see the positive of it, and that’s what makes it exciting.
Elaine: To see what UCLA and The Center for Jewish Studies has done. Now Mark Kligman, who coordinated the Sephardic curriculum development project for HUC, has joined the faculty at UCLA.

Sam: We have done a lot of museums and a lot of education.

Saba: Do you think education is the best route to teach Sephardic history and culture?

Elaine: I think it is everything—all of the above. We are all products of public schools and didn’t feel included. We went to Jewish Sunday schools; the feeling of our group was that we were marginalized. As Foundation members thinking about how to increase knowledge about Sephardic Judaism, we began by thinking that we should do things for K–12 religious schools. As we explored what was available and what strategies worked, we learned about the importance of the academy and how there has to be serious scholarship at the university level first and everything else will spin off this work and trickle down. You can’t ask a teacher in a religious school or day school to teach something that they are not familiar with or don’t feel comfortable about. Also having multiple representations, museum and other places is where learning also happens.

Sam: Things have changed in the last forty years. When we began, Sephardic studies didn’t exist in any of the curriculums. It certainly didn’t as we were growing up. The surveys we did showed us that it didn’t exist. I think as a result of our focus we helped move it along.

Elaine: Something else we wanted to focus on and promote was the integration of the Sephardic story into the general Jewish story. The Sephardic culture is alive and thriving and should be integrated and looked at.

Saba: Are you worried that Sephardic culture will slowly disappear?

Elaine: Ladino is a dead language. It is taught and used for scholarship. None of us were raised speaking the language. Our parents were the last generation of native Ladino speakers.

Sam: I don’t think it is possible to revive it. If we decided to make it a focus or initiative, we won’t have the impact to make it happen.

Elaine: There are not many native speakers who speak it who are still alive. It is good that Ladino has a unique connection to Medieval Spanish making
non-Jews interested in working on it. At least there is enough reason to make it a subject of study, from the academy perspective; it is going to be documented.

**Saba:** Is the Foundation concerned that living in a Jewish pluralistic environment that Sephardic and Ashkenazi culture is going to morph together and there won’t be a pride and distinction with Sephardic culture and heritage?

**Sam:** Only one of my children has married a Jew, and that is my son who has married another Jewish man. We will be lucky if the Judaism gets translated and the whole concept of being Jewish goes down the line. There are so many things to worry about in life. I am more concerned about being Jewish.

**Elaine:** I think in regards to what influence the Foundation can have, because it is family focused, I can’t predict where it will be. It is important to involve our children philanthropically and have their interests represented.

**Saba:** How have you raised your children or grandchildren with the Sephardic culture?

**Elaine:** My daughter married a Syrian Jew and my granddaughter is becoming bicultural like we were. She is going to an Ashkenazi religious school and experiencing Sephardic culture at home. My son married a non-Jew and has gotten himself involved in the Sephardic Temple. He’s very traditional in that sense. My daughter loves Sephardic food but my son doesn’t like any of it. Beyond that, whatever is going to happen will happen. Sam and I came from homes that were strictly Sephardic. Sam is the only one married to a Sephardic Jew. I see among my daughter’s generation of Amado cousins, there is an interest to know about this. Even the children of intermarriages, who will be millennial descendants, are interested in coming to the cultural things. In any family, the first generation of children have one hundred percent of what their parents are interested in, and then it gets filtered down. . . . We are getting down to the low percentages; we are four and five generations into this.

**Sam:** I hope that we can have some Jewish interest with the Foundation going forward. I hope that our children will take some identity if through nothing else, the food. It is a very powerful identifying marker. I get very proud when I go to the Skirball (Museum). We do good things, certainly for me, we are not out for recognition, and we’re not out to be recognized. We are very happy to be involved and help and go on our merry way. I don’t know that my kids even now, when we tell them we are coming into a Foundation granting cycle, we
want your input/ ideas . . . is there an organization that you’re interested in? My son is interested, my older daughter is having children and not that interested. My younger daughter, I hope, will continue the identity but I don’t know if she will have interest in the Foundation going further. I just hope that we can find good fulfilling projects.

Elaine: What project excites me? I am an advisory board member for The Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies at UCLA and I have been for awhile. I am very pleased with the work we have done at UCLA. I am very happy when I hear Prof. Sarah Stein (the Maurice Amado Chair in Sephardic Studies) talk or when I read what she is writing. She personifies for me how excited we are that she is there, working with students and colleagues around the world to document and tell the Sephardic story.

One final thought. I often wonder what Uncle Maurice would think if he were able to see what he started when he decided to create a foundation that is now more than fifty years old. Because Maurice wanted his foundation to exist in perpetuity, the governance of his foundation will soon be in the hands of family members who never knew him. I am confident the next generations will be responsible stewards of this remarkable legacy.

Saba: Thank you both for your time and for the excellent programs and academic institutions that The Maurice Amado Foundations supports.