

LÁZARO ASCHER¹

Distinguished business owner, banker, defender of Jewish culture. We already published two short letters of his in article III (page 35). The longer letter below contains curious facts and some personal information that we urged him to include. We apologize to the illustrious Mr. Ascher for making this public, but we consider it a valuable informational document.

¹ Lazar Ascher (1839–unknown): businessman and community leader. Born to an affluent textile-importing family, Ascher grew up in Bucharest and studied business in Dresden. He was active in many Jewish community projects led by his elder brother, the philanthropist Moscu Ascher (1826/27–1905).

The brother, Moscu, first gained attention as a Jewish educational reformer in mid-nineteenth-century Bucharest, and went on to develop scholarships and vocational training programs for Jewish youth. Moscu was a board member of organizations such as Bucharest's Sephardic Community Council, the Romanian committee of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the Sinai philanthropic society, and the Zionist organization Choweve Sion. His strongest ties, however, were to the boys' school run by Rabbi Bejarano, which he visited almost daily. As a young man, Moscu had married into the wealthy Halfon family. For many years, the Halfons provided most of the operating money for the city's two private Sephardic schools.

By the late 1870s, Lazar and Moscu were both on the board of the Bucharest Sephardic Jewish Primary Schools Society (a.k.a. the Talmud Torah Committee). They served on its board for more than twenty years. A roster from 1900 shows Moscu as president and Lazar as vice president. After Moscu's death, Lazar assumed the presidency. He was still on the board as late as 1910, as vice president. Lazar was also active in the Great Spanish Temple of Bucharest: he was, for instance, the contact person when the synagogue advertised for a new cantor in 1900.

Bucharest, February 16, 1904.

Esteemed sir and dear friend:

It was an indescribable pleasure to receive your fine letter of the 29th of last month, together with the two issues of “El Siglo Médico.” I also enjoyed reading the praiseworthy description of your trip and what you saw in our city (incidentally, for “city,” we say *ciudad* instead of *ciudad*), for which I thank you very much. I was equally overjoyed to learn you are writing articles about the Spanish Jews, and that you want me to send photographs of our Temple and School. I am glad to say I acted quickly (we say *en lugo*, not *en luego*) and had photos taken of two parts of the Temple’s Moorish-style interior and of the facade. I also had photos taken of our Jewish Community Schools for boys and for girls. I hope these are of use to you. I beg (*rogo* here, not *ruego*) your forgiveness for the delay, but it took some testing to be sure the pictures came out perfectly and I only just got them back today. One was taken facing the Altar: at right you will recognize our friend Mr. E. Bejarano in priestly robes, as he is also our Temple’s Preacher, and at left is Mr. David Isac, the Temple’s main Minister and officiating Cantor. The second picture shows the other end of the Temple, including the main entrance and, above that, the choir loft and organ. The other three photos show the facades of the Temple, the Boys’ School, and the Girls’ School.

I am sending you prints of these five photographs, which I think will meet your needs.



MR. LÁZARO ASCHER

PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF THE SYNAGOGUE
AND OF THE SPANISH-JEWISH SCHOOLS OF BUCHAREST

The Temple, built (we say *fraguado*) in 1817 and rebuilt in 1852, has 350 seats for men downstairs and 150 for women up in the gallery. The left and right galleries have entrances separate from the entry to the lower level. Our Community has had its Boys' School since 1730. The school did not originally have its own space, but in 1817 four rooms (we say *camaretas*) were built for it on the grounds (*cortijo*) of the synagogue, and in 1894 the current building was erected. It is overseen by a five-man Committee. The Institute bears the name "School for Sons of the Spanish Israelite Community."

The narrow street to the left (we say *izquiedra*), which is the Temple's alleyway (*calleja*), is called "Strada Spaniola."

Our Community has had its Girls' School since 1878. The sons and sons-in-law of the late Nissim and Lea Halfon donated 60,000 francs through their foundation, and the School is called the "Nissim & Lea Halfon Foundation School for Daughters of the Spanish Israelite Community." The education is the same as at the Boys' School. It teaches the national curriculum in Roumanian, and Religion and the Bible in Spanish. Primary education lasts four years. The current building was erected in 1891 at a cost of 120,000 francs. The five-man Committee is the same as for the Boys' School, but this Institution also has a Ladies' Committee consisting of Mrs. Esther S. Halfon, wife of the President of our Community, Mr. Salomon J. Halfon; Mrs. Sarah S. Rizo, a co-founder of this Institute, daughter of the late Nissim and Lea Halfon; and Mrs. Thamara L. Ascher, my wife. This is a permanent Committee with lifetime appointments that the foundation made in 1878. My brother and his wife,



MRS. THAMARA ASCHER
WIFE OF MR. L. ASCHER

Paloma, a daughter of the late N. & L.H., are no longer living. I am anxious to hear from you that the photographs are publishable. Despite my best efforts, we could do no better in the winter light.

After all these centuries, the Spanish Jews preserve a striking number of old customs. For instance, we refer to parents, older siblings and aged relatives as *Señor Padre*, *Señora Madre* and so on. We address them with the formal “you” (not *tú*), and on holidays we kiss their hands. We address old men and old women who are not our relatives as *Tío* (Uncle) or *Tía* (Aunt). If a child falls down, people say to him “la hora buena” (“I wish you well”) or “crescas como el piscadico en agua fresca” (“may you grow like a little fish in fresh water”). When a child sneezes, they say “crescas y enflorescas” (“may you grow and flourish”). Even meals differ from those of our neighbors and closely resemble those of Spanish Jews in other places. For instance, they cook *Almodrote* (eggplant, with fat or oil, with cheese), *Cucharicas* (made by cutting an eggplant in two, scalding it, scooping out the inside and mixing this with egg and cheese, chopping the mixture with a wooden knife to keep it from turning black, stuffing it back into the skins and frying them in fat or olive oil). They also eat lentils on Fridays, which I imagine was an old Spanish custom because the great Cervantes says Don Quixote ate lentils on Fridays. Meatballs.

They bake treats with Spanish names such as *pastellilos*, *pastel*, *bollos* (even on the street, you hear people shout “*Bollicos!*”), *quesadas*, *roscas* (made with dough, flour, oil



SPANISH-JEWISH TEMPLE
THE COMMUNITY'S TEMPLE IN BUCHAREST

and egg) filled with *alhasuo*² (a finely crushed mixture of nuts and crunchy cookies, with honey), *marzipan*, *mustachudo* (made with a small amount of flour, with sugar and wet almonds), and *almendrada*. Clearly I am no cook, so forgive the talk of food, but I wanted to show again how much my fellow Jews preserve your language and customs. Even our fellow Bucharesters call us simply “Spanioli,” Spaniards, as if we were members of the noble Spanish nation (if only that had been God’s will).

Now let me tell you a bit about my family.³ My Father was born here in 1797 and my Mother in 1804. In 1813, my Father inherited my Grandfather’s business, selling English fabric imported via Constantinople. My father was the first to import directly from England: cotton, thread and tools, filling entire ships. I was born in 1839, on March 8, and I learned Roumanian, French and German. In 1857 my Father sent me to Dresden, where I graduated from the School of Business, and in 1860 I joined my Father’s business. My three older brothers already held responsible positions in the firm, and my Father gave me stock and I became a partner. In 1861 I began traveling to Austria, Germany, France, England, Switzerland, Belgium, Holland and Italy three times a year, so I would be here for a month and then away on business for three months. In 1863 my Father retired and

² *Alhasuo*: from the Ibero-Arabic *al-hasú* (‘the filling’). In Jewish cuisine today, the word survives in the name of traditional Sephardic Purim cookies: *roscas di alhasu* (literally ‘ring-shaped baked items with filling’). In modern Spanish, *al-hasú* evolved into *alfajor* (‘filled cookie’).

³ **PULIDO’S NOTE:** At our request.



INTERIOR OF THE SPANISH SYNAGOGUE
OF BUCHAREST
(FACING THE ALTAR)

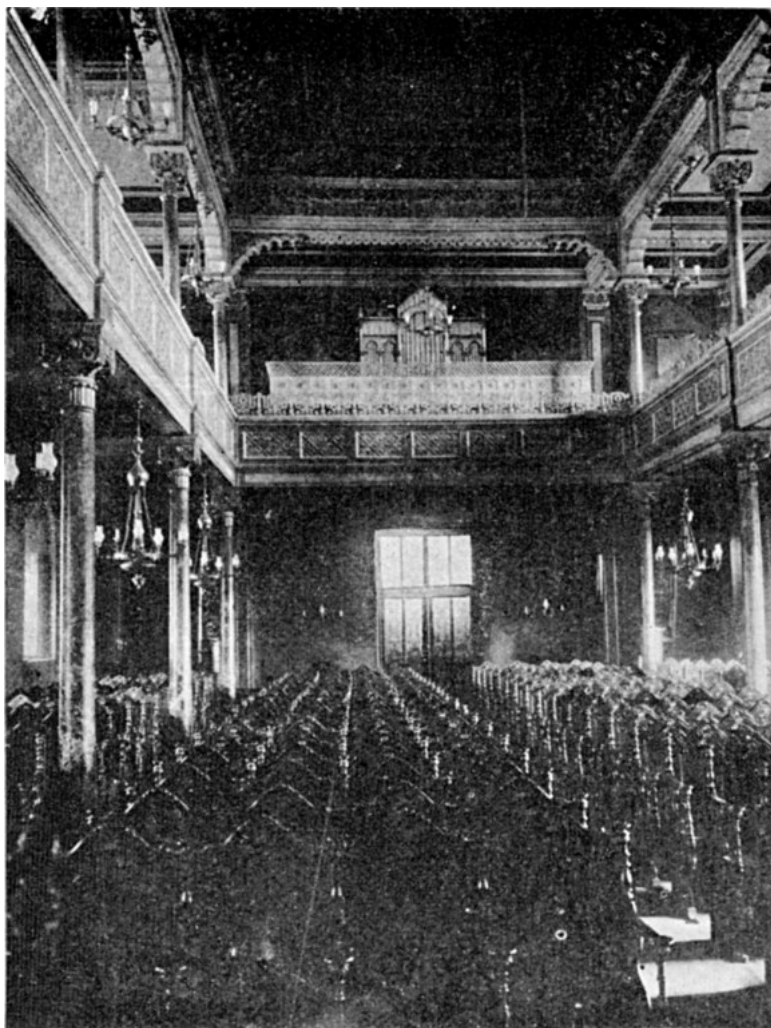
left his four sons to carry on the company. In 1866 we lost my Mother and a year later my Father, may they rest in peace.

My Father left four identical wills, one for each son, written in Spanish in the Hebrew alphabet. The advice it contained included this: “You know, my dear ones, that our family’s watchword is ‘Honor before earnings.’ That was a legacy from my Father, your Grandfather, and now I leave it to you. I followed it most religiously. May you do the same, and so may the children of your children forever.” All of us did follow it, and still guard it like the eyes in our heads.

In 1873 two of my brothers left the business. One went to Vienna and the other to Paris. In 1876 my older brother and I established a bank here, the Bank of Bucharest, with ten million francs in capital, along with eight other founders, including Princes Démètre Ghica and Alex. Styrbey. After six years, we liquidated the Bank. It had not been right for us—though it was still giving us 17 to 18% dividends a year—because every day either my brother or I had to go to Board meetings or senior management meetings, and all the founders were neglecting our own businesses, and my brothers are now dead. I left the business 14 years ago.

In 1872 I married a daughter of the late Lázaro de Mayo. The languages I know are Spanish (as you can tell), Roumanian, French, Italian, German, English. I also have a reading knowledge of Hebrew.

My wife knows Spanish, Roumanian, French, German and English, and plays the piano. I have three children. The



INTERIOR OF THE SPANISH SYNAGOGUE
OF BUCHAREST
(FACING THE ORGAN)

eldest son, now 24, graduated from the local lyceum with great success and earned his diploma, and also graduated from the conservatory here, winning the top prize. Now he is at the University of Liege, where he passed every exam with distinction, the last of which granted him the title of *Candidat Ingénieur avec distinction* (Engineering Candidate with Distinction). He knows Spanish, Roumanian, French, German and English, belongs to two music appreciation societies, and is much loved by all who know him, including some Spaniards he knows there named Moreno, who mistook him for a fellow Spaniard. Our second child is our 18-year-old daughter, Lucia, named after my mother, who has the honor of maintaining correspondence with your dear daughter. Our friend Mr. E. Bejarano tells me they resemble each other greatly. She knows Spanish, French, German and Roumanian, plays the piano and paints.

The third is León, aged 13. After completing all four primary-school years at our Spanish School, he is now in his second year at the local Business School. He knows Spanish, Roumanian, French and German, and plays the piano. During my frequent travels, my greatest pleasure was to make the acquaintance of Spaniards in the hotel where I was staying and spend the evening with them. It was almost like being at home.

One night in 1878, when I was in Paris with a Jewish friend from here, we were coming back from the Opera House with a Spanish gentleman whose name escapes me. As we entered the hotel and were talking of Spain, we

thought of possibly traveling there. Our Spanish companion was to return there two days later, and we considered taking advantage of the timing. The three of us spent the night with an atlas and timetables, trying to figure out whether it was practical in the few days we had. But business comes before pleasure, and we needed to be at a trade show in Leipzig. So we gave up the trip to the land where orange trees blossom.⁴ And since he who hesitates is lost, I missed my chance to see the land of my ancestors, which we all hold so dear.

Just now, as I was about to end this letter, I received *La Ilustración Española*. Thank you a thousand times over. I read it to my family and we were overcome with pleasure and delight at all your efforts and your praiseworthy patriotism.

God speed your work. I remain at your disposal.

Sincerely,

Lazaro Ascher.

⁴ Given Ascher's knowledge of German, this may be a paraphrased reference to the Goethe novel *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. In that book, the character of Mignon sings a song of longing for her native Italy, which begins "Do you know the land where the lemon trees blossom...?" ("Kennst du das Land, wo die Zitronen blühn...?").



MR. LÁZARO ASCHER
AS A YOUNG MAN

Bucharest, February 24, 1904.

Esteemed sir and dear friend:

I take the liberty of enclosing a Spanish translation of a poem composed in Hebrew by the distinguished poet Abulhassan Yehuda Ben-Samuel Halevi, known as Judah Halevy, born in old Castile in 1086.⁵ Like all verse by this great poet, philosopher and physician, who was much sought after in Toledo, this text is sung in all Spanish-Jewish temples in all countries, always in Spanish and, curiously, always with the same melodies, reflecting their origin in Spain.

Our prayer books contain all the poems by this sage and by others born in Spain, translated into Spanish in Hebrew letters. However, I copied this poem from a small daily prayer book inherited from my father, God rest his soul, who inherited it from my ancestors. It is only in Spanish (with no Hebrew) and was printed in the year 5494 (our year counting from the creation of the world), 1734, and is paraphrased from the Book of Esther. This poem is sung in the Temple in Spanish by five students from our School on the Sabbath before the holiday of "Purim." This year, it is this coming Sabbath, February 27, and the holiday of Purim falls on Tuesday, March 1.

You no doubt had heard of the poet Judah Halevy, who wrote poems not only in Hebrew but also in Arabic and Spanish. To our misfortune, we have only his Hebrew verse.

⁵ **PULIDO'S NOTE:** Not included in this volume.

His poems in other languages were burned and lost. If we had them today, Spain would be so honored to have possessed such great geniuses eight centuries ago. I also take the liberty of enclosing a poem by the poet Heinrich Heine, entitled “Jehuda Halevi,” with which you are surely familiar, in which he praises this erudite gentleman.

Thank you for sending the newspaper “El Liberal,” in which I was happy to read your letter to the president of the organization La Esperanza in Vienna. Let me say (just between us) you were right to call the Spanish of the Viennese Jews an error-laden jargon.⁶ If they speak a ten-word sentence, four words are in degenerated Spanish and the other six are German with an Austrian dialect. This is because their schools do not teach Religion and the Bible in Spanish, and their prayer books include German translations (even the ones we have with Spanish translations come from Vienna) and not pure Spanish transcribed into Hebrew letters. They do not speak this beautiful language at home and do not give sermons at Temple in this language. While they have and do everything in German, we have and do everything in Spanish, as Jews do in the East. Last Sabbath, our friend Mr. Bejarano gave such a beautiful sermon in Spanish in the Temple. In Vienna they cannot do this, as we do here and in the East, because their younger generations will not understand or comprehend it, which is why I allow my-

⁶ It was the Vienna student organization La Esperanza, not Pulido, that described Ladino as an “error-laden jargon.” Pulido merely quoted them.

self to hope that all your efforts to propagate Spanish will be crowned with success.

With deepest respect.

Sincerely,

Lázaro Ascher.

M. GAÑY¹

Head of an agency representing the Nationala
insurance companies in Rosiori, Roumania

In article III (page 34) we published another of his
letters.

Rosiori, Feb. 26, 1904.

Dear Mr. Pulido:

Your beautiful letter of the 11th arrived promptly and it
is my pleasure to reply.

We are so happy that honorable men of position in our
Mother Country are taking an interest in the Spanish Jews.

Establishing affectionate relations between Spain and
her children in the East will take a lot of effort: I believe the
Spanish have forgotten their far-off brothers and that the
Hebrews have lost hope of ever seeing their Motherland.

¹ M. Gani (fl. 1890s–1910s): co-owner of the Gheorghiu & Gani insurance agency in Rosiori, Romania; a former student of Rabbi Bejarano's. Additional correspondence from this affluent entrepreneur appears in Pulido's follow-up book.

As previously noted, Gani's Ladino is strikingly different from modern Spanish. There are archaisms, unusual transcriptions into the Latin alphabet, and a strong influence of French and Italian. When unsure of a word, he adds a French translation in parentheses: "coraçon (coeur)," "aspero (j'attende)." In one case, he simply puts the French "introduire" in quotation marks, followed by an explanation that mixes Italian and Spanish elements: "non conosco la palabra" ("I do not know the word").

The movement you are undertaking with your articles in Spanish periodicals, which are read by Jews in the East, awakens in us a feeling that lay hidden at the bottom of our heart.

Yes, we speak Spanish and always call ourselves “Spanish Jews,” and our communities are separate from those of other Jews. We do not mix at all with the people known as German Jews.²

We retain a Spaniard’s fine, proud character and are proud of our origin.

What happened four centuries ago is forgotten, and if the Grandees of Spain see fit, Spain will become involved in schools in the East to “introduire” (I do not know the word) the Spanish language into the classrooms.

Clearly this will entail some sacrifice on Spain’s part, but many thousands of hearts will think of their dear Motherland with much more love and interest. The language we speak is surely mixed with many foreign words, and we cannot express ourselves as sweetly as we should like. Those of us who had some schooling in Spanish literature are far behind the times.

It was a great pleasure to read the periodicals I received, and their sweet articles inspired in me a feeling of recognition.

I sent the periodicals to my friends. Could you please subscribe me to “El Liberal”? I shall send you the cost of a six-month subscription.

² *The people known as German Jews:* Ashkenazic Jews. Jewish documents from Romania in this era usually refer to Ashkenazim as “Western-Rite Jews” and Sephardim as “Spanish-Rite” or “Eastern-Rite Jews.”



MR. M. GAÑY

HEAD OF A LARGE AGENCY IN ROSIORI, ROUMANIA

Rosiori, Feb. 26, 1904.

To Mr. Pulido.

I sent my teacher, Mr. Bejarano, an issue of *El Liberal*, which I think he will enjoy very much.

I await the promised dictionary and wonder if you could please also enclose two or three books of advice on the Spanish language. I shall reimburse you for all of these.

Thank you in advance. Also, please let me know if you can understand everything I write.

I get the impression my style is hard to understand, as not all the words are in modern Spanish.

Warm regards and a friendly handshake.

M. Gañy.

MOISES FRESCO¹

Distinguished educator, headmaster of the Jewish boys' school that the Alliance Israélite Universelle founded in Galata, author of several education books, Judeo-Spanish journalist

Constantinople, February 10, 1904.

Mr. A. Pulido, Senator—Madrid.

Sir:

I was fascinated and most happy to read the words you spoke in the Senate on November 13. I am writing this letter of thanks in the Judeo-Spanish language that we use here, except that we write it in rabbinical characters.

¹ Moïse Fresco (1859–1912): teacher and headmaster at various AIU schools in Turkey from the 1880s to 1909. His published works include teachers' manuals and numerous textbooks for elementary and secondary schools. In 1889, Sultan Abdul Hamid II decorated him with the Order of the Medjidie.

Pulido calls him a journalist but, as Fresco points out in his letter of February 24, 1904, the author confused him with the newspaper editor David Fresco. Moïse Fresco did, however, publish a twice-weekly bilingual magazine for teachers from 1889 to 1891 in Smyrna: *El Maestro* (איל מאאסטרו), also known by its Turkish title, *Oustad*. He left the AIU schools in 1909 to work for the Turkish Ministry of Public Education and to join the faculty of the Constantinople Teachers' College.

Not to be confused with Rabbi Moïse Fresco (1780–1850), who had been the chief rabbi of Constantinople.

Surely you will understand me, since we did not need a dictionary to understand the transcript you thoughtfully sent to Mr. Dalmedigo. After sharing it with several fellow Jews in Constantinople, I translated it into French and sent it to Paris, to French friends who do not know Spanish.

You were right about the warm feelings we Eastern Jews all profess for the Spanish language. Even as a child, I was curious to read something in Spanish, but I could never find a book in this language.

The first time I was able to find a text in this beautiful tongue was in a French book, Corneille's *Le Cid*, which also included the ballads about El Cid:

Delante el rey de León
Doña Ximena una tarde
Se pone á pedir justicia
Por la muerte de su padre, etc.

Before the king of León
One afternoon Doña Ximena
Begins to petition for justice
For the death of her father, etc.

I was amazed to find I understood it all, as if it were in our own native language, which it is.

When I spent time in Tangier, Morocco (twenty years ago), I had the chance to read some works in Spanish, especially *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, which impressed me greatly. That was the moment when I really understood the huge



M. FRESCO
JOURNALIST, HEADMASTER OF THE
ALLIANCE ISRAËLITE SCHOOL FOR BOYS
IN GALATA, CONSTANTINOPLE

difference between a translation and its original. I had enjoyed Don Quixote's adventures in a French translation, but I still did not see why it deserved universal acclaim or should be called a masterpiece. However, reading the original, I understood and knew it was worthy of all the praise and enthusiasm it inspires, for I felt the enthusiasm myself. I realized that the best thing about this book is not the adventures, as entertaining as they are, but the naturalness and truth of the characters and speech. The dialogue is full of Don Quixote's wit and judgments and Sancho's delicious words, which even the best translation cannot capture.

"Traduttore, traditore" say the Italians, and (if memory serves) Cervantes' hero compares an original work and its translation to a tapestry: the original is the front and the translation the back. A very apt comparison.

Reading the book, I also felt a kind of echo in my heart and seemed to hear a familiar, beloved voice: though the characters were from a distant time, they reminded me of my contemporaries and my family. For instance, when Juana was talking and complaining to Sancho, I could almost hear one of our lower-class Jewish women from Haskeuy or Balat (in Constantinople). Everything in this superior book is sweet, funny and pleasant.

I have also read other Spanish books, and one I liked very much was *The Seagull* by Fernán Caballero. I especially enjoyed the part where old María and Brother Gabriel care for a sick stranger. "Perhaps he is a Jew," says Brother Gabriel. "God help us!" the old woman cries. "But stay! If he

were a Jew, shouldn't we have seen his tail when we undressed him?"²

This novel includes a song very similar to some folk songs sung by our old women in Turkey.

Here are the first four lines:

Estando un caballerito
en la isla de León
se enamoró de una dama,
y ella le correspondió.

When a young cavalier
Was on the isle of León
He fell in love with a lady,
Who requited his love.

Spanish theater, so original and so little known around the world, has provided me with good reading. I enjoyed plays such as *Guzmán the Good* (by Gil y Zárate, I think), which is so dramatic. Also *Die and You'll See* (by Bretón): I wonder why there is no French translation of this comedy (*dont la donnée est extrêmement originale*).³

² **FRESCO'S NOTE:** I copied down several pages of this novel, which paints such a vivid portrait of folk customs and ideas in Andalusia.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Dialogue is quoted here from Augusta Bethell's English translation, *The Sea-gull*, published in London by Richard Bentley in 1867. That edition omits the song, which I have translated literally.

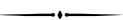
³ French for "...whose premise is extremely original."

I also read Cadolso's Moroccan letters, which resemble Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, and the excellent translation of *Gil Blas*. But this was all twenty years ago.

I am happy that this opportunity arose to recall these excellent works of which I have fond memories.

With esteem and regards.

M. Fresco



Constantinople, February 10, 1904.

Sir:

I am sorry to have missed you when you were in our city. I would be very glad to receive a picture of you. If I had one of myself, I would have mailed it to you. However, I enclose a portrait of my son and daughter.

I also enclose a copy of the holy story, part 1 (from the creation to the death of Moses), written in Judeo-Spanish in rabbinical Hebrew characters, which I composed and published for our little students in the small Jewish schools known as *Talmud-Torahs*.

Yours truly,

M. Fresco.



MOISÉS FRESCO'S CHILDREN
CONSTANTINOPLE