Becoming Illegal: Sephardi Jews in the Opiates Trade

“$150,000 in Heroin Labeled ‘Olive Oil’: Two Men, Claiming Shipment from Istanbul, Arrested at Brooklyn Pier,” proclaimed a headline on page 4 of the Wednesday, January 6, 1932 edition of the New York Times as it announced one of the largest seizures of heroin ever made at the busy New York port.¹ 260 pound of heroin, the article detailed, had been concealed within wax-enclosed tin boxes submerged within 35 barrels of olive oil, transported from Istanbul to the United States on the Greek steamship Byron. This shipment, sitting unclaimed for months, prompted the suspicion of customs officials, who examined its contents and discovered contraband. The two men who eventually sought to claim the barrels were subsequently arrested. However, 35 year-old Naftali Ojalvo, described in the article as a native of Mexico, and 43 year-old Isaac Sevilla, a Spanish citizen, proclaimed their innocence. When they had been in Paris several weeks earlier, an unnamed stranger had asked them to call for the olive oil in Brooklyn on his behalf, and they were simply doing him a favor, wholly unaware that the barrels contained anything more than olive oil.

And yet, the New York Times article concealed more than it revealed. Customs officials in New York city did not just stumble upon the heroin in September 1931 after no one had claimed what was ostensibly Turkish olive oil for months. Rather, they had been alerted to the possible presence of heroin on this very ship by American officials in Istanbul, a testament to the United States’ growing preoccupation with monitoring and seizing what American law deemed illegal

drugs before they could reach American consumers. And, while Naftali Ojalvo and Isaac Sevilla might have possessed Mexican and Spanish papers respectively, and been residents of Mexico City, they, too, had an Istanbul connection—both men had been born in that city when it was the Ottoman capital of Constantinople. Isaac Sevilla had lived in Mexico City already by 1909, Ojalvo arriving a decade in 1920 after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Indeed, the author of the *New York Times* article never mentioned, and was likely unaware of, an essential element of this particular heroin tale—the owners of the Istanbul refinery whence the heroin originated were Sephardi Jews, one of the informants Sephardi, those arrested in New York for attempting to claim the heroin Sephardi, and suspected distributor in Mexico Sephardi. This extensive transnational smuggling network relied on, and was embedded within, an expanding Sephardi diasporic world.

It was the tumult of the post-World War I years that, in part, laid the groundwork for the large-scale migration of Sephardi Jews from their places of origin in the eastern Mediterranean and Balkans. This massive migration, of Sephardi Jews millions of others, intersected with the

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creation of new states, and the attendant drive for these new states to create coherent and cohesive national bodies. The regulation and control of migratory populations, and the exclusion of those deemed undesirable along racial, economic, health, gender, or a plethora of other reasons, like the regulation and control of the trade of materials, and the exclusion of those deemed undesirable, were central means by which states asserted their own authority as they shaped their national visions. Concurrently, international bodies like the League of Nations sought to bring states together to enact and enforce legislation on a global scale, but not all states were signatories to these international agreements, or felt the same impetus to enforce these new rules. Sephardi Jews, like other transnational communities with wide networks, challenged the policing and enforcement of restrictions on their mobility, and that of the goods they traded. They could potentially slip between the holes that existed between local, national, and international legal regimes regulating mobility of people and goods. They did so by drawing on their extensive connections across land and sea, at times strengthened though connections of family and patronage, and a long history of licit and illicit trade. So, too, did they play divergent legal systems against each other, as well as stereotypes and assumptions about Jews and Jewish criminal activities, thereby at times strategically drawing on the unclear place of Sephardi Jews in the years after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.³ Examining the untold history undergirding the heroin bust on that Brooklyn pier in 1931 brings into relief the ways in which Sephardi history interplays with intersecting local and global histories of narcotics trade and regulation, criminality, and migration.

Much of the scholarship on Jewish involvement in various types of trafficking has embedded this history within the broader context global movements of Jews and millions of others during the years of the great migrations, of the upheaval of the first decades of the twentieth century that redrew political borders and ushered in new national and international legal regimes, and of the economic chaos and attendant possibility inherent within profound transformations, particularly for those willing to skirt the edges of legality. And if many contemporary Jewish immigrants to the United States were involved, for example, in countering nativist claims of Jews as merchants of vice, concerned that such perceptions could cohere into laws that restricted Jewish migration, historians have likewise paid attention to the ways in which Jews sought to organize against claims of Jewish criminality, in part to bolster the perceived desirability of Jewish immigrants. Historians have likewise analyzed the ways in which the occasional activities of Jews involved in vice intersected with the transforming nodes of transnational Jewish networks, and the ways such individuals exploited legal and geographical disjunctures to enable or justify their activities. When one of world’s major narcotics traffickers

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was questioned in Athens in 1931, the man, raised in Constantinople though of Greek citizenship, described another trafficker of Russian extraction as “a despicable, double-crossing, thieving Jew, like practically all the traffickers.”⁶ This was an exaggeration, the negative characterization of a competitor not uncommon among the statements of competing traffickers preserved in the archival record. Nonetheless, certain traits of common among the Jewish, Greek, and even Italian diasporas—including cultural commonalities, a shared language, geographical dispersal and wide connections—likely facilitated involvement in narcotics trafficking, as well as in licit transnational trade.

Yet, even when these networks traversed through areas with large Sephardi populations, like Constantinople, which was a hub of sex-trafficking linking Eastern Europe with the wider Mediterranean and Atlantic worlds, Jewish historians have played little attention to the ways in which Sephardi individuals or communities intersected with, drew on similar strategies to enable,

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⁶ Statement by Elie Eliopoulos regarding the narcotic traffic, made at Athens, September 21-24, 1932, in “Eliopoulos Case,” RG 59, Name Files of Suspected Narcotics Traffickers, 1927-1942, Box 4, NARA.
or organized against criminal activities in which Jews were engaged. In contrast, many studies of Ottoman opium note that Jews, like Armenians, and, in the twentieth century, Greek Orthodox subjects, held prominent positions as opium merchants, brokers, and exporters, but often without analyzing what precisely about Sephardi Jewish diasporization might have facilitated this. Sephardi Jews by no means monopolized the contraband trade of narcotics, though at certain historical moments, analyzed below, parts of the supply chain of were largely in the hands of specific Sephardi families. And while, in certain ways, Sephardi involvement in the trade of opiates followed earlier Mediterranean practices of relying on family trust networks to facilitate their activities, in other ways it differed dramatically. Ryan Gingeras, in a recently published book on heroin and organized crime in modern Turkey, discusses the enterprise of one prominent Sephardi family, the Tarantos, who were the refiners at the center of this case, but within the


limited context of Turkish organized crime.\textsuperscript{9} By the 1920s and 1930s, members of Taranto family, who had, as discussed below, been involved in the Ottoman Empire’s opium trade for generations, lived in Istanbul, Piraeus, Paris, and New York, involved in the various stages of distributing opiates from the family-owned refinery in Istanbul throughout the western hemisphere.\textsuperscript{10} But even the Tarantos’ networks included many beyond their family; while some, like Naftali Ojalvo and Isaac Sevilla, were also Sephardi Jews of Constantinopolitan origins, their networks extended to French and German chemists imported into Istanbul to work in newly-opened refineries, Greek Orthodox financiers and distributors from the Aegean littoral, predominately Greek and Italian seamen who were implicated in transporting contraband, Russian Jewish distributors as far afield as Shanghai and Dairen, and New York gangsters of Jewish and Italian extraction.

It would be false, however, to include unquestioningly those involved in opium and heroin trades as part of “organized crime” or as a criminal enterprise. For much of its centuries-long history, opium was commonplace, by the 19\textsuperscript{th} century regulated for quality but not legality. Only in beginning in 1909 did opium and its byproducts come to be regulated or legislated against, and then, only in a piecemeal fashion. When Ojalvo and Sevilla were caught claiming contraband heroin in Brooklyn in 1931, the importation of this product was illegal according to American laws, and broader League of Nations statutes against the refinement and importation of


\textsuperscript{10} For example, Leon Taranto lived and worked in Istanbul and New York City, Richard Taranto in Piraeus, and Albert Taranto in Paris.
white drugs for non-medical purposes. Turkey, however, was not a member of the League of
Nations, and Turkish authorities felt little bound by League of Nations calls to prohibit the
refinement of opium into its derivatives of morphine and heroin. Therefore, while American
authorities were bribing informants in Istanbul to report on suspected smuggling activities, the
refinement of opium into heroin and other opiates in the Tarantos’ factory in Istanbul was
entirely legal according to Turkish codes.

A Brief History of Opium

The domestication and cultivation of the opium poppy \( \textit{papaver somniferum} \) in the
eastern Mediterranean dates back to roughly the fourth millennium BCE, thriving in marginal
soils and requiring minimal water.\(^{11}\) Within the lands of the Mediterranean littoral and the
broader Middle East, opium was traditionally consumed orally in small quantities; mothers
would give infants and children opium tea to assist sleep, and adults ingested small quantities to
induce calm and reduce pain.\(^{12}\) As the New World stimulant, tobacco, entered the world market,
opium first began to be smoked, mixed together with tobacco and inhaled through long pipes.
Opium, too, was consumed in other forms, at times for medical purposes, but for some slipping
into addition and abuse. Laudanum, a tincture made with powdered opium and other ingredients
intended to counter the opium’s bitterness, has existed in some form since the sixteenth century,

\(^{11}\) Kyle T. Evered, “Traditional Ecologies of the Opium Poppy and Oral History in Rural

\(^{12}\) Rudolph P. Matthee, \textit{The Pursuit of Pleasure: Drugs and Stimulants in Iranian History, 1500-
1900} (Princeton: Princeton University Press)
use to aid sleep, ease pain, and counter diarrhea; a standard 19th century recipe included 10% opium mixed with alcohol, saffron, clove, and cinnamon.\textsuperscript{13} Morphine, an opium derivative, was isolated in 1806, and marketed to the general public as a pain medication and a treatment to alcohol and opium addiction in 1817. Heroin, a derivative of morphine requiring knowledge of chemistry and requisite facilities, meanwhile, was first marketed as a cough suppressant by the German company Bayer in 1898, and initially in the same class of painkiller as Aspirin, which the company had introduced the year before.\textsuperscript{14} Raw opium, then, was sometimes consumed directly, whether through ingestion or inhalation, and sometimes refined into more potent forms, ostensibly for medical purposes. Until the 1920s, most Anatolian opium was exported in raw form, to Europe or the United States, where it would then be refined or exported onward.

Within the Ottoman Empire, the cities of Izmir and Istanbul, and to a lesser extent Salonika, were critical to the opium trade. Ottoman poppies contained high levels of morphine, making Anatolian opium particularly desirable for refinement into opiates like morphine or heroin.\textsuperscript{15} Izmir, the Aegean entrepôt, bore close proximity to the opium-producing fields of


\textsuperscript{14} Frank Bovenkerk and Yücel Yeşilgöz, \textit{The Turkish Mafia: A History of the Heroin Godfathers} (Wrea Green, 2007), 37.

western Anatolia, and from its port, large shipments of raw opium went through Holland directly to the Dutch East Indies, or through British firms to British imperial holdings in Asia in particular.\textsuperscript{16} Although the British East India company sought to prevent Ottoman opium from reaching China, as well as the illicit traffic in opium from Malwa and Bengal, China nevertheless remained a lucrative destination for Ottoman opium.\textsuperscript{17} Well into the early twentieth century, Ottoman Jews paid attention to the demand for opium in China, and various supply lines, since this affected their fortunes as well.\textsuperscript{18} Later on, as opium was refined into morphine and laudanum, and the United States became a primary site of opium refinement, American merchants took on a greater role in opium export from Izmir.\textsuperscript{19} As increasing European and American demand for Anatolian opium expanded, merchants in Ottoman Izmir became increasingly interested in the lucrative trade, and petitioned the sultan to be allowed to act as brokers. In 1811, a Jewish broker’s petition to the sultan was approved amidst the protests of

\textsuperscript{16} Jan Schmidt, \textit{From Anatolia to Indonesia: Opium trade and the Dutch Community of Izmir, 1820-1940} (Istanbul: 1998), 2.


\textsuperscript{18} “El Afyon,” \textit{El Meseret}, April 30, 1908, 2.

several other potential brokers; the former agreed to supply the vakif of Istanbul’s Lâleli mosque with 150 okkas of olive oil in lieu of license fees.\textsuperscript{20}

In the early 1800s, merchants—predominately Armenians of Ottoman origins—purchased opium at weekly markets in the Anatolian interior, which was then bought by licensed brokers—predominately Jews—working for Izmir firms. The final purchaser brought the opium before an experienced public examiner, who checked the opium by color, smell, and texture, in exchange for a commission of half a percent of the selling price from the buyer and a ball of opium per bag from the seller. In the first half of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the opium examiners in Istanbul were Bochor Taranto (d. 1844) and Ishak Abulafia, assisted by Bochor’s son Nissim and Haim Gabbay. As the names suggest, all these men were Jews. In 1831, the Ottoman Empire moved the monopoly opium depot to Istanbul, and Bochor Taranto, accompanied by his son, was appointed the monopoly’s official inspector in the Ottoman capital.\textsuperscript{21} The prominence of these families in the opium trade continued well into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{22} By 1910, two-thirds of the opium trade in Constantinople passed through the company belonging to Nissim Taranto and his sons; Nissim, noted a 1913 French publication on opium commerce in the Ottoman Empire, was one of the first to give any importance to the subject and therefore possessed the oldest


\textsuperscript{21} Schmidt, 49.

\textsuperscript{22} Schmidt, 35.
laboratory in the city dedicated to that trade. Further, his sons were both distinguished chemists who studied in the best laboratories of Europe.  

A Sephardi migrant from Izmir noted in a later memoir that in his youth, “opium dealers and exporters were still legitimate merchants and this product was not yet a government monopoly or otherwise regulated by the state”; such had been the view in Salonika as well. Far from being perceived as smugglers or criminals, the Taranto family, like other prominent families of Jews in the opium trade, were elite figures within the Ottoman Jewish world, entrenched in positions of communal leadership, who hob-knobbed with Jewish religious figures and Ottoman authorities alike. Nissim Taranto was the eleventh man to join Constantinople’s B’nai B’rith lodge; he, his sons, and other relatives were members and one even the president of the L’Amicale, an association for the alumni of the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle; they served on the board of the Or Ahayim Jewish national hospital in Constantinople, and on the Meclis Umumi (lay council) of the city’s Jewish community. In

1892, the Constantinople-based Ladino periodical *El Tiempo* noted that for the second time that year, *Sinior* Nissim Taranto, known opium examiner, together with a Greek Orthodox colleague, had donated opium to the various hospitals of the city, included the *Or Ahayim* hospital, adding that “may this good example be imitated by others who are in the state of doing so.”\textsuperscript{27} Indeed, the Tarantos regularly donated to Jewish and broader Ottoman causes within the city, actions publicized in the Jewish and non-Jewish press, a practice that continued well into the second decade of the Turkish Republic.\textsuperscript{28}

**Restriction and Suppression of the Opium Trade**

Opium and its derivatives became increasingly restricted, monitored, and policed over the course of the first decades of the twentieth century. The first international opium convention was

\textsuperscript{27} “Dono al espital Or Ahayim,” *El Tiempo*, August 4, 1892, 3.

held in 1909 at the behest of China, marking the beginning of a series of multilateral conferences
convened to stifle the trade of opiates. The Ottoman Empire refused to take part.\textsuperscript{29} Several years
later, in 1912, representatives of the Germany, the United States, China, the United Kingdom and
its dominions, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands, Persia, Portugal Russia, and Siam met together in
The Hague to hash out a further agreement. This agreement categorized opium into three
categories: raw, prepared, and medicinal; contracting parties agreed to prevent the export of raw
opium to countries that had prohibited its entry and stipulated that the import and export of raw
materials should be the sole prerogative of “duly authorized persons.”\textsuperscript{30} Much of the agreement
concerned China, including adopting “the necessary measures to restrict and control the habit of
smoking opium in their leased territories, settlements, and concessions in China….\textsuperscript{31} The
government of the Netherlands agreed to invite “all the Powers of Europe and American not
represented at the conference” to sign the convention at The Hague.\textsuperscript{32} The Ottoman Empire,
however, together with Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, Peru, Romania, Serbia, and Uruguay
refused to sign the 1912 convention, nor did they sign the protocol conceived the following year
at the Second International Opium Conference, earning the rebuke that “The Conference is of the

\textsuperscript{29} Gabriela Recio, “Drugs and Alcohol: U.S. Prohibition and the Origins of the Drug Trade in
University Press, 2014), 65.


\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 29

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 30.
opinion that the abstention of these Powers would prejudice most seriously the humanitarian ends sought by the convention. The Conference expresses the firm hope that these Powers will alter their negative or dilatory attitude.”

Even in the final convention of 1914, the Ottoman Empire was not a signatory. Neither were Greece or Bulgaria, the other opium-producing states of the Balkans. Greece and Belgium later ratified the convention. Turkey, as the eventual successor of the Ottoman Empire, did not. The United States, in contrast, passed the Harrison Act in 1914, which required all dispensers of opium and its derivatives to register with the federal government, a measure that still allowed for the importation of opium for medicinal purposes.

In spite of U.S. restrictions against the import of opium, as soon as World War I’s end heralded the reopening of Ottoman borders to émigrés, Sephardi Jews of Ottoman origins flocked to New York to establish houses of commerce. These businesses imported Turkish and Balkan goods—including opium—into the United States, while exporting foodstuffs and machinery back across the Atlantic and indeed throughout the world. Newly arrived in New York was Leon Nissim Taranto, a son of Nissim Taranto. During World War I when Leon had fled to Salonica for trade purposes, his established family connections to the well-known British opium house of Whittall and Company had allowed him to serve as an unofficial intermediary between the Ottoman government and Great Britain in a failed attempt to broker peace.

33 Ibid., 37

34 Gingeras, 61.

35 Feroz Ahmad, “The Special Relationship: The Committee of Union and Progress and the Ottoman Jewish Political Elite, 1908-1918,” in Jews, Turks, Ottomans: A Shared History,
New York, he opened a firm that exported flour, sugar, paper, and glassware to Constantinople and Smyrna, while importing into the United States, among other Anatolian goods like pistachio nuts and mohair, opium. He registered his incorporation with New York state in 1924, with active capital of $20,000. Leon Taranto’s “very luxurious office in the center of town” in Manhattan also served as the temporary address and reception space of Ottoman Chief Rabbi Haim Nahoum on his visit to the United States in 1921 as part of a mission to engage the Sephardi communities in the United States and to advocate for Turkish interests. Opium, not entirely illegal in the United States but no longer fully legal, followed the same flow through the same Sephardi providers and distributors as fully legal goods originating in Ottoman and formerly Ottoman lands. And such individuals, like Leon Taranto, were still enmeshed within Ottoman Jewish networks of commercial and religious authority.

As progressive League of Nations dictums sought to limit the production and refinement of opiates to meet but not surpass medical needs, in the late 1920s, the geographies of opiate refinement shifted. Paris had been the major European center for the trade and refinement of

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opium. After France decided to shut down most of the major factories in that city, some factories went underground; in May of 1935, a clandestine narcotic factory in Paris exploded, badly injuring the Bulgarian Benjamin Anavi, one of the suppliers of the opiates, who was promptly arrested, while his brother Isaac escaped.\textsuperscript{39} Marseilles, given its central location as a major port city linking the Mediterranean and Atlantic, also proved a key site for underground opiate factories, as well as for transshipping contraband and licit goods from the eastern Mediterranean to the Americas, a “French Connection” \textit{avant la lettre}.

The closing of French factories shifted the center of opiate refinery shifted east across the Mediterranean toward the fertile poppy fields of Turkey, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia. There, opium continued to be sold on the exchange market, and three large opiate refineries were opened in quick succession in Istanbul in the late 1920s. One of these factories was financed by Japanese investors; French financiers, whose factories in Paris recently had been shuttered, opened a second factory across the Bosphorus in the district of Kuzguncuk.\textsuperscript{40} And the third, founded in


\textsuperscript{40}Z.I. Recanati and Company of Constantinople alerted an American firm to the opening of Devineau’s company, which in turn alerted the State Department. See Wilbur J. Carr to Charles Allen, October 23, 1929, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Turkey, 1910-1929, 867.114, microfilm roll 39; Z.I. Recanati and Company to Malinckrodt
May, 1929, was the Etkim (Ezca-yı Tibbiye ve Kimyeviye) Limited Sirketi in Eyüp, on the southern side of the Golden Horn. It belonged to Leon and Richard Taranto, sons of Nissim Taranto, and Isaac de Taranto, a relative and doctor involved with the Or Ahayim Jewish National Hospital in Istanbul. While the Tarantos’ factory had the lowest consumption of raw opium of the three factories—50 to 70 cases in 1930, U.S. consular officials noted that as “for some thirty years one of the most important handlers of raw opium,” the Tarantos likely had access to far greater quantities of raw opium than they officially reported.

While these factories produced opiates for medical purposes, they also came to be suspected of supplying a number of largescale smuggling chains. This increased international pressure upon Turkey to act against these factories. In 1931, Turkey participated in the Geneva Conference, resulting in the temporary closure of opium refineries in Istanbul. Etkim was closed from May until July, although it was permitted to continue to manufacture codeine, and was fully operational by October. But despite these changes to Turkish legal codes to satisfy pressure

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Chemical Works, August 27, 1929, Constantinople, Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs of Turkey, 1910-1929, 867.114, microfilm roll 39.

41 According to U.S. reports from the period, the Taranto factory may have had financial backing from Paul Mechelaere, who had operated the Comptoir Central des Alcaloides in Paris before that was closed. See Charles E. Allen to Secretary of State, June 25, 1930, Constantinople, RG 84, Consular Posts, Istanbul, Turkey, volume 349, NARA.

42 Charles E. Allen to Secretary of State, June 25, 1930, Constantinople, RG 84, Consular Posts, Istanbul, Turkey, volume 349, NARA.

43 “Eyüp’teki afyon fabrikası tekrar açılıyor,”Cumhuriyet, October 13, 1931, 3.
from Geneva, local informants disclosed to American consular officials that factories continued to operate as usual, with the occasional bribe to representatives from the Ministry of Health, and that local police took no action against illegal shipments of narcotics from Istanbul because there was no financial incentive for them to do so. Prominent opium merchants from Izmir and Istanbul, including the Tarantos, publicly agitated for the continued trade of Turkish opium without a central administration, concerned that Bulgarian and Yugoslavian cartels would supplant Turkish opium providers and refiners, negatively impacting the personal wealth of such individuals as well as the economic benefit that the Turkish state derived from the opiate trade.

However, in early 1933, the Turkish parliament adopted all international conventions on opium, placing a governmental monopoly over the manufacture and sale of opium and its derivatives, and in the summer of that year, the penal code was likewise changed to make smuggling or the illicit sale and use of opiates punishable by fines and imprisonment. Such was the fate that awaited, for example, Albert Calderon, a cashier working for the prominent Jewish banker Davit Safra; both men were arrested in Istanbul in 1933 for involvement in heroin

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44 Charles Allen to the Secretary of State, Istanbul, March 19, 1931, RG 84, Consular Posts, Istanbul, Turkey, vol. 473, NARA.


smuggling and their names splashed across the Turkish press as heroin smugglers.\textsuperscript{47} Calderon, whose brother Nissim in Paris was the intended recipient of the heroin and was arrested there with a fifty kilograms of morphine, was convicted and sentenced to one year and two months in prison. Safra, who proclaimed his innocence, was acquitted in 1934 based on lack of evidence although a charge of possessing smuggled alcohol had also been laid against him.\textsuperscript{48} Yet in spite of Turkish laws regulating the refinement and sale of opiates, informants in Istanbul still reported to American consular officials in that city that shipments of mohair from the Tarantos might still contain drugs, and that, as late as the end of 1933, the Tarantos had supplied a trafficker with


1,500 kilos of opium that the latter sent to Albania for refinement.\textsuperscript{49} And in 1938, when erstwhile Peruvian Consul General to Vienna, Carlos Bácula, was arrested in what one French newspaper stated to be the opening declaration of the war on drugs, the article detailed that one Albert Taranto, Leon’s relative, was also connected to the case.\textsuperscript{50}

American interest in Turkish opium surged in the late 1920s, as the center of refinery moved from France to Turkey. The American Federal Bureau of Narcotics [FBN], founded in 1930, paid informants in Istanbul and elsewhere to monitor those suspected of being key players in the international drug trade, as well as the products they refined. On a 1931 list shared with the American consular post in Marseille, one of the major via points for drugs trafficked from the eastern Mediterranean across the Atlantic, roughly one-third of those suspects connected to Turkey were Jewish, while others were Greek Orthodox of either Greek or Turkish citizenship, Turkish Muslim, Armenian, French, Polish, Italian, Spanish, and Mexican.\textsuperscript{51}

The U.S. Consulate in Istanbul paid minute attention to exports of opiates, transmitting reports to the FBN, and regularly paid informants to reveal dates and methods of illegal shipments in an effort to stave off illegal importing into the United States. The export of illegal white drugs from Istanbul often paralleled, and was indeed sometimes literally embedded within,

\textsuperscript{49} In Georges Bakladjoglou, RG 59, Name Files of Suspected Narcotics Traffickers, 1927-1942, Box 1, NARA.

\textsuperscript{50} “Ce ne sont pas seulement les “lampistes” de la drogue qu’il faut pourchasser,” \textit{L’Oeuvre}, June 4, 1938, 3.

\textsuperscript{51} “List of Aliens Suspected of Being Engaged in the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs,” RG 84, Consular Posts, Marseille, France, Vol. 432, NARA.
the trade of legal exports. United States consular officials stationed in Turkey and Bulgaria regularly wrote to the State Department reporting that drugs were hidden within packages of furs, mohair, or, more rarely, barrels of olives and olive oil, cans of tomatoes, and rounds of cheese.\textsuperscript{52} Heroin, given its smaller size and lack of noxious odor, was easier to conceal than opium or morphine, and most of those caught for trafficking heroin were sailors or passengers with small quantities of the drug concealed in false-bottomed shoes or in personal luggage. Further, exporters forged papers and bills of lading, or, as in the case that entrapped Sevilla and Ojalvo, sent drugs ingeniously hidden but not addressed to a specific firm or person.\textsuperscript{53} But United States interest was not solely in narcotics destined for the U.S. Consular officials closely followed the activities of American citizens and others—including a number of Sephardi Jews—


\textsuperscript{53} Frank Bovenker and Yücel Yesilgöz, \textit{The Turkish Mafia}, 39.
who sought to import opiates into Mexico and Argentina.\textsuperscript{54} In June of 1930, American consular officials were aware of two large shipments to Mexico that yielded “clear profits of 400\%.”\textsuperscript{55}

On August 19, 1931, one Nissim Levy wrote to “Mr. Hallen [sic],” the American consul general in Istanbul, that the ship \textit{Byron} that left Istanbul the previous Friday was bearing 35 barrels of olive oil, marked “X.V.K.J.Y.” that contained “a very important quantity of heroin.”\textsuperscript{56} This information—one of several reports from different informants concerning this shipment—came a little more than a month following a July 27 unsigned report that stated that the S.S. \textit{Exilona}, which had sailed from Istanbul directly for the United States, held 68 cases of soap containing 250 kilos of heroin and 150 kilos of morphine and 25 barrels of olive oil containing 300 kilos of heroin.\textsuperscript{57} Similarly, American authorities were notified that the steamers \textit{Exarch}, \textit{Exanthia}, and \textit{Byron} all contained large shipments of heroin hidden within barrels of olive oil, olives, and soap originating from the Tarantos’ Etkim Limited Şirketi, shipments perhaps

\begin{footnotes}
\item[54] Robert Woods Bliss to Secretary of State, January 14, 1931, Buenos Aires, RG 84, Consular Posts, Istanbul, Turkey, volume 349.
\item[55] Charles E. Allen to Secretary of State, June 5, 1930, Constantinople, RG 84, Consular Posts, Istanbul, Turkey, volume 349, NARA; Benjamin Cohn Express, 1931, RG 59, Name Files of Suspected Narcotics Traffickers, 1927-1942, Box 3, NARA.
\item[56] Nissim Levy and Mario Lorenzetti to Charles Allen, August 18, 1931, Constantinople, RG 84, Consular Posts, Istanbul, Turkey, volume 349.
\item[57] Letter to Paris, July 28, 1931, Constantinople, RG 84, Consular Posts, Istanbul, Turkey, volume 349.
\end{footnotes}
facilitated by the brother Richard Taranto who lived in the busy Greek port of Piraeus. The *Exilona, Exanthia* and *Exarch* were searched but no contraband found, though the *Byron’s* contraband of 94 kilos of “practically pure diacetylmorphine hydrochloride” was discovered in 12 barrels of olive oil in a consignment of 35 barrels, matching Nissim Levy’s report. U.S. narcotics agents helpfully sent back to Istanbul a sample of the rubber that had encased the heroin inside the barrels. Charles Allen, the American consul to Istanbul, reported that the local shipper was endeavoring to ascertain the identity of the informant, and that local rumors confirmed that the narcotics shipped on the *Exarch* and *Exanthia* had made it to their destination. He recommended as well that U.S. customs officials try to follow the withdrawal of the shipments of olive oil from customs in order to apprehend the importers of narcotics. The trap that caught Naftali Ojalvo and Isaac Sevilla was set months before they arrived at the Brooklyn Pier.

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58 Charles E. Allen to Secretary of State, 10/27/1931, Consular Posts, Istanbul, Turkey, Record Group 84, volume 349.

59 Treasury Department to the American Consul in Charge in Istanbul, September 14, 1931, Washington DC, RG 84, Consular Posts, Istanbul, Turkey, volume 349, NARA; Narcotics Seizure report, United States Treasury Department Bureau of Narcotics, September 17, 1931, RG 84, Consular Posts, Istanbul, Turkey, volume 349.

60 Olive oil-soaked wax, RG 84, Consular Posts, Istanbul, Turkey, volume 349.

61 Charles E. Allen to Secretary of State, October 27, 1931, RG 84, Consular Posts, Istanbul, Turkey, volume 349.
When Harry Helfand travelled to the United States in 1933 to stay with his brother in Brooklyn while he represented several Mexican clothing stores as a buyer, he likely did not know that his name was included on a confidential list of suspected narcotics traffickers that had been distributed to American consulates throughout the world. The blonde-haired, blue-eyed 35 year-old with a slight build, born in Minsk but residing for some years in Mexico City, was likely confused and afraid when called to an interview with a representative of the Treasury Department and interrogated about his involvement in smuggling hundreds of pounds of heroin on the S.S. Byron from Turkey to Mexico via the United States, and his knowledge of two men named Naftali Ojalvo and Isaac Sevilla.

Helfand was not alone in his confusion. Although the New York Times article detailing the arrest of Ojalvo and Sevilla had mentioned that the two men explained their calling for the barrels of olive oil as a favor for an unnamed stranger they had met in Paris, Ojalvo and Sevilla had indeed given American authorities a name of the ultimate consignee of the shipment of olive oil: Henri Helfon. But when shown a picture of Harry Helfand, Ojalvo and Sevilla expressed confusion as well. This was the same man from Paris. American authorities had mistaken Helfand with Helfon, and continued to suspect Sevilla and Ojalvo of being narcotics smugglers.

62 List of Aliens Suspected in Being Engaged in the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs, RG 84, Consular Posts, Marseille, France, Vol. 432, NARA.
63 April 18, 1933, RG 84, Consular Posts, Mexico City, Mexico, vol. 612, NARA.
64 Acting Secretary of State to Thomas D. Bowman, June 16, 1933, RG 84, Consular Posts, Mexico City, Mexico, vol. 612, NARA.
but clearing up this confusion required working with counterparts in Mexico, the three men’s

country of residence and the ultimate destination of the heroin.

In the years before the Mexican revolution, there was little public attention given to the
importation and use of laudanum and other opiates, often associated with the upper classes, or, in
the case of smoking opium, with Chinese immigrants. Far greater attention was paid to the use of
marijuana, associated with the lower classes, soldiers, and prisoners, and with the vice of
alcoholism, as well as with broader criminality. Following the Revolution, in 1917, Mexico’s
Department of Public Health was founded, and began to focus both on the abuse of alcohol and
the consumption of opium, heroin, marijuana, and cocaine. By 1923, Mexican President Álvaro
Obregón had prohibited the importation of opium and its derivatives, and his successor, Plutarco
Elías Calles, in 1925 ordered the arrest of all users and dealers, and the deportation of foreigners
and naturalized Mexicans engaged in the drug trade, under Article 33 of the Mexican
constitution, which permitted the expulsion of those of foreign birth deemed to be “pernicious”
for political, economic, or moral reasons. In the wake of these laws, traffickers began to plant
small poppy fields in northern Mexico, but the smuggling of opiates, often from India or Burma,

65 Luís Astorga, El Siglo de las drogas: El narcotráfico, del Porfiriato al nuevo milenio (Mexico
City: 2005), 17, 19, 23.

66 Elaine Carey, “Selling is More of a Habit than Using: Narcotraficante Lola la Chata and Her
Threat to Civilization, 1930-1930,” in Smugglers, Brothels, and Twine: Historical Perspectives
on Contraband and Vice in North America’s Borderlands, eds. Elaine Carey and Andrae Marak
(Tucson: 2011), 144.
transshipped through Shanghai into ports on the Pacific coast of Mexico, remained common.67 The Atlantic trade of opiates into Mexico, entering through the port of Veracruz, largely evaded the notice of officials.

“Jew means war, hunger, and prostitution, Chinese means syphilis, trachoma, degeneration, and tuberculosis,” proclaimed a flyer distributed in 1936 by the Unión Comerciantes Mexicanos de Fresnillo in the state of Zacatecas, one of the many xenophobic trade unions and organizations that sprouted up in Mexico in the late 1920s and onward, which often cast themselves as “pro-Raza and public health.”68 A 1930 letter to Mexican President Pascual Ortiz Rubio from the Unión Nacionalista Mexicana of Mexico City noted that the Chinese constituted a “racial problem that calls for immediate resolution,” having “quietly, humbly, and hypocritically infiltrated into our midst” during the years of the Porfirian dictatorship, until they converted themselves into despot. Jews, in contrast, posed an economic problem through their common occupation as peddlers, thereby undermining established businesses, encouraging tax evasion and contraband goods.69 Jews, regardless of geographical


68 Dir. Gral. de Gob., Israel, 2/360(28)17737, caja: 8, exp: 54, AGN.

69 Union Nacionalista Mexicana, Pro-Raza y Salud Publica to Pascual Ortiz Rubio, Mexico City, Nov. 6, 1930, Collection Pascual Ortíz Rubio, exp. 215, registro 5036. 1336, AGN; for other anti-foreigner activities that targeting Chinese and Jews specifically, see Liga Nacional Pro-Raza, 1926, Veracruz, Dir. Gral. de Gob., 2/362.1(6-1)1, caja 14, exp. 1, AGN; Centro Indo-Latino Pro-Raza, 1930, DIR. Gral. de Gob., 2/360(29), caja 10, exp. 55, AGN.
origin, often were stereotyped similarly to Arab immigrants, who occupied similar economic roles in peddling and the sale of clothing.\textsuperscript{70} While Jews and Chinese were favorite targets of these movements, the discourse surrounding the undesirability of Jewish and Chinese presence in Mexico differed in key ways that likely contributed to the ability of Sevilla, Ojalvo, and Henri Halfon to evade detection for their involvement in opiate smuggling.

Mexican ideas of “degeneracy” linked both drug use and genetic admixtures to the broader national body.\textsuperscript{71} In Mexico—as in the United States—drug archetypes located the epicenter of drugs on the “outside”; the purity of the nation could be protected by closing borders both to drugs themselves and to their nefarious users.\textsuperscript{72} On both popular and governmental levels within Mexico, opium came to be associated, not with Jews, but with Chinese, as Mexican officials responded to internal and American pressure to prevent the trafficking of opium products from China into the United States.\textsuperscript{73} Discourse surrounding opium smuggling and use was linked to the perceived ways in which the genetic contribution of Chinese men preying upon susceptible Mexican women would bring disease into the Mexican national body; José

\textsuperscript{70} Campaña Nacionalista en Chiapas, 1937, Dir. Gral. de Gob., 2/360(5)24732, Caja 2, exp. 20, AGN.

\textsuperscript{71} Isaac Campos, “Degeneration and the Origins of Mexico’s War on Drugs,” \textit{Estudios Mexicanos} 26, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 379-408, esp. 380, 390, 395-396.


Vasconcelos, the famed philosopher who supported mestizaje in the name of creating a cosmic fifth race, wrote that from the standpoint of “ideal mestizaje,” the Chinese represented a “step backward in the anthropological search for the prototypical man.”74 Intermarriage between Chinese men and Mexican women were prohibited in certain states, and the anti-Chinese fervor culminated in 1931 in the large-scale expulsion of thousands of Chinese men and their families, many of whom were Mexican-born, from Mexico.75 Meanwhile, nationalist groups throughout Mexico sought the expulsion of Chinese, with whom the trafficking and use of opium was associated, and many such individuals were indeed expelled under Article 33.76 A 1934 report on those expelled under Article 33 broken down by nationality and rational noted that all 53 individuals expelled for organized crime were Chinese, and of the twenty expelled for trafficking drugs, fourteen were Chinese. The report concluded that a modest and healthy current of immigration could bring positive results for Mexico, but that the population of potential immigrants should be chosen in light of their “customs, capacities, and racial characteristics.”77

74 Quoted in Robert Chao Romero, The Chinese in Mexico, 1882-1940 (Tucson: 2010), 89.
75 Chao Romero 2, 77-78. For more on the use of Article 33, see Pablo Yankelevich, “Extranjeros Indeseables en México (1911-1940): Una Aproximación Cuantitativa a la Aplicación del Artículo 33 Constitucional,” Historia Mexicana 53, no. 3 (January-March 2004): 693-744.
76 Dir. Gral. De Gob., 2/362.2(3)16, caja 2, exp. 17, AGN; Dir. Gral. de Gob., 2/362.2(7-4)3, caja 3, exp. 6, AGN; Expulsión de chinos, Veracruz, 1928, Dir. Gral de Gob., 2/362.2(26)41, caja 14, exp. 20, AGN;
77 Dir. Gral. de Gob., 2/360(29)8143, caja 11, exp 14, AGN.
Certainly this did not mean that other national groups were not engaged in the trafficking and use of narcotics. Rather, the popular and official attention directed toward Chinese migrants created a loop of confirmation that both led to increased surveillance of Chinese migrants for involvement in the opiate trade and therefore more arrests, and likely enabled others to continue undetected.

Such was the likely case when it came to Henri Halfon, Isaac Sevilla, and Naftali Ojalvo. As American officials struggled to work with their Mexican counterparts to trace the distribution network intended for the shipment of heroin found on the Byron, they requested information on these men from Mexican officials and were frequently stymied by the slow responses. Through their own investigations, American consular officials in Mexico City noted that, rather than appearing like the blond-haired, blue-eyed, short-statured Helfand brought before Treasury Department officials for questioning, but rather over six feet tall, with a dark complexion, and of Turkish extraction. He was well known in the Oriental colony of Mexico City, regularly traveled to Europe, had lived in China for some time, and spoke Chinese, Turkish, Spanish, and a bit of Yiddish. Mexican police, the report noted, suspected Helfon of smuggling and lending money at illegal rates of interest.78

Some two months after the American Consul in Mexico City requested that the Chief of the Commission of Public Security of the Mexico City’s police look into Halfon’s criminal history, a police agent brought by a short memo. Henry Helfon, or Henry Fitz—Mexican naming practices preserve both the father and mother’s surnames, and in most Mexican documentation,

78 Letter from Acting Secretary of State to Thomas Bowman, June 16, 1933, RG 84, Consular Posts, Mexico City, Mex, vol. 612, NARA.
he appears as Henry Halfon Fitz or Fiss—indeed had garnered police attention. This was not for suspicion of bringing contraband into Mexico through the curiosities from China that he imported—the memorandum noted they had no indication of such—or for his wife in the Philippines with whom he corresponded regularly. Rather, what had drawn police interest was that his office building had burnt in a suspicious manner and Halfon had received a large payout from the insurance company. While the smuggling of opiates might have been racialized as a Chinese crime within Mexico, insurance fraud, particularly through a suspicious fire that resulted

79 There are three court cases in Mexico in which Henry Halfon is named, never as a suspect or defendant, but rather as the victim of a robbery in 1928; in 1933 as the victim of a violent assault by a fellow Sephardi migrant when Halfon attempted to recover a debt; and in a 1932 civil court attempt to reclaim a debt. See Henry Halfon Fiss, 1928, TSJDF, sección: siglo XX, serie: archivo historico, caja: 2145, folio: 390638, AGN; Henry Halfon Fitz vs. Roberto Nagmias, 1933, TSJDF, sección: siglo XX, serie: archivo historico, caja: 2770, folio: 584480, AGN;

80 Members of the Halfon Fitz family had been involved in trade in the Philippines since at least 1914. See Simon Lahana to American Consulate, in Correspondence to the Hahambaşı, November 30, 1914, microfilm at CAHJP- HM2/9073.2, Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem, Israel.

81 Memorandum re: Henry Helfon o Henry Fitz, August 25, 1933, Mexico City, RG 84, Consular Posts, Mexico City, Mex, vol. 612, NARA.
in a large payout, was a crime popularly associated with Jewish and Arab immigrants in Mexico, and regularly listed as a cause for expulsion from the country.\textsuperscript{82}

In fact, among the expulsion investigations opened against foreigners under Article 33 of the Mexican Constitution concerning narcotics, only one involved a Sephardi Jew. In 1935, a complaint was filed in the Mexican state of Durango against Vida Nahum Altaled, a woman of Turkish Sephardi origin. The complaint alleged that she had entered Mexico illegally, lived in concubinage with her brother, and sold drugs and alcohol out of the clothing store she owned in Durango’s central plaza, acquired through frequent trips north of the border. Police looked the other way, the letter alleged, because Nahum had paid them off.\textsuperscript{83} After checking the records, investigators concluded that Nahum had entered Mexico legally in 1923 as an immigrant, where

\textsuperscript{82} See, for example, the expulsion case against Israel and Alberto Treves, 1931, Dir. Gral. de Gob., 2/362.2(26)74, Caja 15, exp. 25, AGN; Sade y Gaber, expulsion, 1931, Dir. Gral. de Gob., 2/362.2(3)28, caja 2, exp. 27, AGN; “Ecos del incendio del Teatro Guerrero en Puebla,” El Imparcial, February 13, 1909, 5.

\textsuperscript{83} Queja contra Vida Nahum Altaled, SC196 Dirección General de Gobierno. Clasificación: 2/013.0 (7) 2512. Caja 2, AGN. Mauricio (Mochen) Eghise, a Turkish national of unclear religious affiliations, listed at times as Jewish and at times as Armenian, while this was a common surname for Constantinopolitan Karaites, was arrested in 1937 as part of the bust of an international drug ring that linked China, the United States, and Mexico. See Carey, Women Drug Traffickers, 84-85; Mauricio Eghise, 1937, Dir. Gral. de Investigaciones Politicas y Sociales, Caja: 327, exp. 10, AGN; “Drug Gang Suspect Stabs Himself: Maurice Eghise in Serious Plight in Hospital,” The North China Herald, February 17, 1937, 280.
she joined her brother who had arrived in 1917, and that “she observes an honest life and dedicates herself to her work in the trade of clothing.” The investigation into Altaled concluded after investigators decided that accusations against her likely stemmed from economic competitors.

The allegation against Altaled reveals the links between real practices of female involvement in the smuggling and distributing opiates, the common if rarely reported bribes to officials, and the imagined sexual, economic, and patriotic impropriety of foreigners like the Altaleds. It was not unheard of for women to be involved in smuggling and distributing opiates. Women, Sephardi and otherwise, at times worked as both mules and as distributors. Traffickers held that women, particularly those who were married, perceived as white, and middle class, could more easily evade the attention of customs officials and police. Bribes might grease the


85 See, for example, the British-born Sephardi Victoria Salti née Behar who worked as an importer of opiates into England as part of the ring involving Peruvian diplomat Carlos Bácula. Psalti may or may not have been operating with her husband’s knowledge, and who perhaps was romantically involved with Bácula, Mrs. Victoria Salti, RG 59, Name Files of Suspected Narcotics Traffickers, 1927-1942, Box 12, NARA; correspondence between Salti and Bácula throughout 1938 in Carlos Bácula, RG 59, Name Files of Suspected Narcotics Traffickers, 1927-1942, Box 1, NARA; or the involvement of Berta Bruns, née Kirschner, who was both a mule transporting opiates as part of the Eliopoulos operation, as well as the mistress of one of the
cogs, too. As historian Elaine Carey notes, the air of xenophobia circulating in Mexico included the perception that foreigners were willing and able to bribe police and other governmental officials to the detriment of honest Mexican businessmen. Jews, additionally, were often associated discursively, and in practice, with prostitution. This stood in marked contrast to the ideals of the new Mexican nation with its focus on hygiene, political order, and legal economic growth centered within the Mexican Republic. The investigation into Altaled also emphasizes the suspicions raised by the frequent, and entirely legal, practices of Sephardi migrants in Mexico to travel abroad—whether to New York, Paris, or even further afield—to purchase merchandise, often from coreligionists who had migrated to those cities in large numbers. Such overseas networks facilitated the economic upward mobility of Sephardi migrants in Mexico, who could attract clientele with their imported clothing and other merchandise. Concurrently, these same networks could enable the movement of contraband, whether in the form of clothing declared at customs to be for personal use and thereby avoid fees, or heroin carefully packaged within olive oil.

Ultimately, as improbable as it sounds, Sevilla and Ojalvo were released from custody in New York due to lack of sufficient evidence linking them to the barrels of olive oil that had been transported on the Byron, and were returned to Mexico. American officials remained convinced, main traffickers, Seya Moses. Statement from Berta Bruns, Mannheim, June 28 and 29, 1932, in British Memo Regarding Eliopoulos Case, RG 59, Name Files of Suspected Narcotics Traffickers, 1927-1942, Box 5, NARA.

86Carey, Women Drug Traffickers, 15.

87Carey, Women Drug Traffickers, 15-16.
however, that the two men were implicated in heroin trafficking, not only for the discovered white drugs on the *Byron*, but for a second seizure of 84 pounds of heroin that had been discovered in November of 1932 on board a 1931 run of the *S.S. Exanthia* discovered hidden within 18 barrels, this time, of olives; 23 barrels of olives from the same shipment had been allowed to be transshipped to Mexico on the *S.S. Orizaba* and officials feared that those barrels had contained heroin as well. Ojalvo and Sevilla, the forwarding agent informed the State Department, ordered the transshipment. They were further suspected of involvement in what American officials believed to have been a successful smuggling operation on board the *S.S. Exarch* in July, 1931, the heroin having been expertly concealed and undetected. 88 By 1932, agents of the judicial division of Mexico’s Health Department, too, suspected Isaac Sevilla of illicit activities. They labeled Isaac Sevilla a suspicious person, notorious as a drug addict who socialized with elegantly dressed escorts in Mexico City’s swanky theaters, and who used his upscale retail store in women’s clothing as a front for smuggling heroin. They, too, made note of Sevilla’s social and business connections with one Henry Helfand. Mexican officials, like their American counterparts, elided Hary Helfand with Henri Halfon. 89

However, such suspicions seemingly had little impact on the lives of Sevilla, Ojalvo, and Halfon. Certainly, Isaac Sevilla was successful, living in an upscale building on a swanky street

88 Letter to Dudley G. Dwyre, January 18, 1933, RG 84, Consular Posts, Mexico City, Mexico, vol. 612, NARA.

in the fashionable district of Roma Norte. Soon after Sevilla returned to Mexico, his son married another Sephardi migrant from Constantinople, and lived a fifteen-minute walk away just on the other side of Cuauhtemoc, the broad avenue separating Roma Norte from the less affluent Doctores district that was closer to the city center where both men worked. And in 1936, Sevilla and his wife Clara officially married before Mexican civil officials; their decades-old Ottoman Jewish religious ceremony was not binding in Mexico. That both he and Ojalvo were widely listed as references for numerous Jewish migrants—male and female alike—from Turkey and Greece now in Mexico City suggests that they held a prominent position within the Sephardi community of Mexico’s capital, and that official association with these men carried no negative repercussions.

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90 Marriage of Jose Sevilla Ruso y Sara Menasse Barouh, January 12, 1934, Mexico City, Mexico, Civil Registration. Registro Civil del Distrito Federal, México. Courtesy of the Academia Mexicana de Genealogía y Heraldica, p. 5.


Nonetheless, in spite of any suspicions they aroused within Mexico, neither man was expelled for their activities, nor was Henry Halfon. Even with their arrest record in the United States and the fact they were both listed on the confidential list of suspected narcotics traffickers, both Ojalvo and Sevilla continued to travel between Mexico, the United States, Argentina, and

France throughout the 1930s. Only those with narcotics convictions were generally ruled inadmissible to the United States.

In fact, of all those involved in the heroin discovered on the S.S. Byron in 1931, it was Leon Taranto who faced the greatest consequences in the long run, although his activities, at least within Turkey at the time, had been entirely legal. He, like many other Turkish Jews, as well as Greek Orthodox and Armenian Christians, had been assessed a large capital tax as part of Turkey’s 1942 Varlık Vergisi, an attempt to further redistribute capital from religious minorities to Muslims. Like others assessed, Taranto was given a very short deadline to pay his assessed tax of 2,000,000 Turkish lira, and was forced to sell his textile factory valued at 1,500,000 lira to a


94 Memorandum for Mr. Dwyre, Jan. 23, 1933, RG 84, Consular Posts, Mexico City, Mexico, vol. 612, NARA.
Muslim associate for 450,000 lira, lest he be sent, like those who did not pay their taxes by the imposed deadline, to forced labor camps in the east of Turkey. After the repeal of the Varlık Vergisi in 1946, Taranto sued the purchaser of his plant, and lost, but then took his case to the court of appeals. He, like many other Turkish Jews and Christians who had had to liquidate property and other assets under duress, awaited the outcome of his case with bated breath, hoping to have precedent for their claims.95 After ten years, Taranto’s final appeal was rejected, and his attempt to regain his assets went in vain.96 When he died in 1965, services were held in the Neve Şalom Synagogue in Galata, and his body interred in the Jewish cemetery across the Bosphorus in Haydarpaşa.97 Meanwhile, in November of 1949, Taranto’s visa application for a visitor’s visa to the United States was denied. His entry as person 88 on the list of suspected narcotics traffickers was invoked as the rationale.98

Conclusion

Historians Itty Abraham and Willem van Schendel have distinguished between what states consider to be legitimate, or “legal,” and what individuals involved in transnational


98 Leon Taranto, November 4, 1949, RG 59, Narcotics Suspects Files 1926-1942, Box 4, Leon Taranto, NARA.
networks consider to be legitimate, or “licit.” They note that while the transnational movements of people, commodities, or ideas can be deemed “illegal” because they defy the rules of formal political authority, these same flows may be licit in the eyes of the participants.99 States make smuggling, through laws and their enforcement, and smuggling in turn makes a state.100 Borders become fraught sites that expose the political and geographic limits of sovereignty, particularly when individuals employ strategic mobility in order to play neighboring states’ divergent definitions of legality against each other, as was often the case in the trafficking of opiates.101 Contrabandistas, smugglers, border dwellers, and border crossers creatively construct networks and fluidly respond to bureaucratic changes; bureaucracies, in turn, are less quick to adapt.102 American and British officials might search baggage for address books, intercept letters, and crack traffickers’ codes, but they were often at least one step behind.103 Contrabandistas


100 Peter Andreas, Smuggler Nation: How Illicit Trade Made America (New York: 2013), 2.


103 See, for example, the discovery of the address book of Argentine opium smuggler Juan Matelon in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in September 1938, Bernard Wait to the Commissioner of
exploited weak states in the tumultuous years following World War I, drawing on underpaid governmental officials like customs agents and local police, who could be persuaded to look the other way for a small bribe, even as they also forged crucial connections with the political elite, who would therefore be disinclined to legislate or enforce legislation against them.104

Narcotics trafficking, as historian Cyrus Schayegh has suggested, highlights distinct and multilayered patterns of territorialization, of states and leagues asserting or defending their sovereignty.105 Even as states enacted laws limiting the movement of certain goods and certain peoples, individuals reacted by subverting border controls, penetrating territories, seeking

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Customs, Paris, December 5, 1938, RG 59, Name Files of Suspected Narcotics Traffickers, 1927-1942, Box 10, NARA; coded letter between Stroungoula Cohne and Moisse Eghise, Jan. 24, 1937, Cairo, in Mauricio Eghise, RG 59, Name Files of Suspected Narcotics Traffickers, 1927-1942, Box 4, NARA; correspondence between Carlos Bacula and Victoria Salti, RG 59, Name Files of Suspected Narcotics Traffickers, 1927-1942, Box 1, NARA; code and address book found in the luggage of trafficker John Voyatzis in Egypt, British Memo Regarding Eliopoulos Case, June 27, 1932, RG 59, Name Files of Suspected Narcotics Traffickers, 1927-1942, Box 5, NARA.


markets, and finding customers.\textsuperscript{106} Such trafficking demanded a certain know-how as well as financial capital and international connections. It often ran parallel to, or even within the same networks as, the legal movement of goods and people; it was not coincidental that the heroin discovered in Brooklyn was concealed in barrels of olive oil, given that opium and its derivatives counted among the various agricultural products that Jews and others exported from the fertile fields of western Anatolia to the United States and elsewhere.\textsuperscript{107} What, in part, makes the history of Sephardi involvement in the trade of opiates so fascinating is the gradual transformation of opium and its derivatives from a fully legal and highly lucrative commodity into one that was increasingly regulated and made illegal, but in a piecemeal fashion on a global scale. This shift in the national and international regulation of opiates, in turn, propelled the transformation of those involved in the trade of opiates from communal elites in the late Ottoman Jewish world to men who skirted the edge of legality, whose connections to political figures existed simultaneously with, and at times enabled, their connections to notorious members of a global narcotics underground.\textsuperscript{108}


\textsuperscript{107} Eduardo Sáenz Rovner, \textit{The Cuban Connection: Drug Trafficking, Smuggling, and Gambling in Cuba from the 1920s to the Revolution} (Chapel Hill: 2008), 2, 12.

Illegal flows thrive on being invisible.\textsuperscript{109} The historical record preserves little regarding successful smuggling operations. It is only when—from the view of the smugglers—that their system breaks down that their broader networks and endeavors flash into relief. Nonetheless, the reports of paid informants could be inherently unreliable; one of the informants that reported on the shipment that led to the arrest of Naftali Ojalvo and Isaac Sevilla, for example, was widely suspected by American consular officials in Istanbul and Paris to be engaged in shakedown operations, threatening the Tarantos and other refiners with exposure should they not pay him the equivalent of what the American consulate would pay him for information leading to a successful bust. In the case that they did pay him, he would transmit information to American officials only once it was too late for them to confiscate the contraband and thereby remain in good standing as an informant.\textsuperscript{110} In contrast, the firm of E. Feldman et Fils, operated by Esther Feldman and her sons in Istanbul and Prague, was reported for allegedly smuggling drugs within the sausage casings they exported from Istanbul to New York City. This led to a detailed investigation of the Feldmans’ activities and finances, and their being placed on a list of potential narcotics traffickers that was shared among American consulates worldwide. Their names were not removed even after investigators concluded that a business competitor had levied these


claims against them falsely. Nonetheless, moments of visibility shed crucial light into how individuals contend with different geographic scales, from the local and national, to transnational and international, and how individuals faced transforming obstacles at different points along their trajectories when the goods they sell, and they themselves, became illegal in the eyes of certain states through which they moved.

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111 E. Feldman et Fils, RG 59, Name Files of Suspected Narcotics Traffickers, 1927-1942, Box 5, NARA; List of Aliens Suspected in Being Engaged in the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs, RG 84, Consular Posts, Marseille, France, Vol. 432, NARA; List of Aliens Suspected in Being Engaged in the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs, Jan. 1933, RG 84, Consular Posts, Mexico City, Mex, vol. 612, NARA.