

Interviewee: Adriana Fallas

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Interviewer: Rebeca Perez

Transcriber: Suzanne Mascola

## ABSTRACT

Adriana Fallas is a Sephardic Jew and Latinx artist who works with clay, making ceramics and mosaics. She discusses her ancestors' origin stories and migration from Syria and Turkey to Buenos Aires, Argentina, describing their settlement process, occupations, and the challenges they faced, including discrimination. Fallas describes the relationship between the Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities in Buenos Aires and Houston and how her Sephardi and Latina identities blended within her family, art, and community. She expresses her conception of Jewishness and its impact on her childhood and marriage, as she grew up in a predominantly Ashkenazi community and is married to an Ashkenazi man. Fallas discusses passing down both of her heritages onto her daughters, through language, food, and art, and she outlines how her ceramic *mates*, menorahs, and mosaics represent her Argentinian and Jewish heritage.

RP: It is March 29, 2022. This is Rebeca Perez, Hallie Hanna and Tina Gutierrez interviewing Adriana Fallas through Zoom for the Sephardic Latinx Oral History Project at the University of Houston and Holocaust Museum of Houston. Tell me about your childhood living in Argentina.

AF: Sure. I was born in Argentina. I am second-generation in Argentina. And I think my childhood was as normal as could be. For the first part of my childhood, I stayed enclosed in a Jewish community. I went to a Jewish school until college. I went to Jewish school from kindergarten through high school. But, you know, I lived in Buenos Aires, and Buenos Aires is a huge city. We have a huge Jewish community there still, but also, there are so many different communities, mostly from Latin America, from other countries in Latin America, but also communities from Italy, Spain - mostly Spain. So, for me, what can I tell you? It was just a normal childhood.

RP: Tell me about your great-grandparents' immigration.

AF: Grandparents. So, I am what is considered a Sephardic Jew. My grandparents came to Argentina, came from Syria. Actually, three of them from Syria, Aleppo, and one of them from a small part of Turkey. Back then, what they told me was that they didn't have to leave Syria in a hurry. They left Syria because of the economical situation. They

weren't persecuted there. Even though they were a minority as Jews, they got along with their Muslim neighbors, and actually, when they settled in Argentina, when they settled in Buenos Aires, most of them would settle... my grandparents would settle... their friends from Syria also settled, friends meaning Jews and non-Jews, friends, also Muslims. So, in Buenos Aires, you would find originally... maybe nowadays, it is a little bit different, but back in the day, you would find all the immigrants from Syria, either Jews and Muslims, living in the same neighborhoods because they knew each other from Syria. And usually, they didn't have a lot of money back then in Syria, so they would send one member of the family, the one member of the family that might be able to work hard enough to get more money and send the money to Syria, and in that way, bring another member of the family, and so on. So, they moved from Syria to Argentina, like, in stages, one member of the family at a time or a few members of the family at a time. And the only reason they did that was because of the economical situation.

RP: Okay. Your family in Argentina, the ones that first came in to settle, do you know what their occupation was, what they did, how they managed to...

AF: Commerce, retail. Also, for them, it was really hard because, you know, the language was so different. They couldn't read because the letters are different. They knew how to write and read in Arabic but not in Spanish, so that was a challenge for them. And what I recall, they told me that sometimes, quite often actually, they felt that they were singled out as immigrants, ignorant just because they didn't know how to write, and sometimes because they were Jews but mostly because they were immigrants. It didn't matter that they were Jews - they were immigrants.

RP: Can you tell me about the Jewish community in Argentina?

AF: Sure. So, that Jewish community in Argentina, it is a huge community, mostly in Buenos Aires, but there are some parts of the country, other cities - Cordoba, Rosario - there are quite a few places in Argentina where you could find a large Jewish community. Most of the Jewish community in Argentina is what is considered Ashkenazi and the Sephardic Jewish community is a minority within the Jewish community. So, when you have a large community of, whatever, you would find different institutions, a lot of institutions, a lot of Jewish institutions. So, you can find a lot of different types of institutions - institutions that are more religious and less religious, and Ashkenazi institutions and Sephardic institutions. I'm sorry for my voice. So, when you live in a large community, you can choose to spend some time in one institution or another or either. Sometimes, I would spend time in the Sephardic institutions and sometimes in the Ashkenazi. And, for me, it was just fine, when you have the option, right? Sometimes I know that Jews that live in places where maybe there are not many Jews, so they don't have too many options.

- RP: For the Sephardic, for the Jewish institutions that you were referring to, what were they? Schools?
- AF: Everything, from schools and cultural institutions, community centers and everything that you can...
- RP: How did being a Sephardic Jew in Argentina affect your experience there? Would you say you were marginalized?
- AF: I never felt marginalized. I know that I was a minority but that was it. No.
- RP: We read that the Ashkenazi and Sephardic relationship in Latin America varied. What was it like in Argentina?
- AF: Probably was tighter at the beginning of times and I think nowadays, it got better. I mean, it doesn't make any difference right now. Maybe there was a difference between the Ashkenazis and Sephardi when my grandparents lived, but not anymore.
- RP: We read about instances of antisemitism and discrimination in Argentina. How did this impact your Jewish identity and experience there?
- AP So, I think that Argentina is a very welcoming country and the people over there are very welcoming also. Of course, there are some groups as, everywhere in the world, you can always find some groups that are antisemitic. Sometimes, every now and then, you could hear some events. Probably when I was a kid, I took it as the normal thing. Every now and then, it happened and that was normal. As you get older, you realize that that doesn't have to be normal, this is not normal, of course. So, in Argentina, we had, I don't know if you are aware of this, but we had two huge terrorist attacks to the Israel embassy first and then, to an institution, a bomb burst attack. A lot of people died. That was almost 30 years ago. But that was something that we knew it was brought from abroad the country. Even though we knew those attacks had, like, local connections, local people that helped, but we knew that those attacks came from outside Argentina. So, if you ask me, I always felt safe in Argentina. After the attacks, it was normal for all the Jewish institutions in Argentina to get, like, concrete fence, so that was the normal, and if you wanted to go into a Jewish institution building, you had to have security. That was normal.
- RP: What Argentinian practices did you and your family adopt? How did you blend Argentinian and Jewish customs?
- AF: We speak Spanish. We still do. We drink *mate*. I don't know if you know mate. It is an Argentinian kind of infusion drink. And so many songs and food and culture. We embrace almost everything.
- RP: Why did you decide to immigrate from Argentina? How did you choose Houston?

AF: So, my husband worked in a company that moved his position from Buenos Aires to Houston, so we moved. That was 8 years ago. So, we didn't choose Houston - we just got here.

RP: Tell me about your experiences in the United States after immigrating.

AF: And one more thing about that - with my husband, we lived before that, as soon as we got married, we lived in Boston for 4 years and then, we went back. He was studying in Boston, so we spent 4 years there. Then, we went back to Argentina, and we came back 8 years ago. So, my experience as a Jew or as a Latin American person?

RP: As an immigrant moving, I would guess in Boston because that was your first experience in America.

AF: So, apart from the language, I never felt as an immigrant, I mean, as something different. So, it was always a positive experience, and I always felt welcomed, either in Boston and here in Houston.

RP: Where in Houston did you settle and why?

AF: Great question. I live in the Meyerland area, and we chose this because we wanted to be close to some of the Jewish institutions here.

RP: Did anything about the culture surprise you?

AF: In a good way... I didn't know anything about Houston before coming, and I got a really good surprise about the people here, and everyone is kind and warm and welcoming. So, I didn't expect that. Again, I came from Buenos Aires. Buenos Aires is a huge city, and you don't get to interact a lot with strangers. But here, I feel more relaxed, and you can have a conversation with a stranger without... It's just normal. And you don't do that in Buenos Aires. It's not that common.

RP: There has been sufficient evidence in American history of some separation between Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities within the same cities. Did you witness this within Houston?

AF: I could say that there are some institutions that are mainly Ashkenazis and some institutions that are mainly Sephardic, and that is where you could find the separation if that is the right word - I don't know. But being Sephardic or Ashkenazi, you can choose wherever you want to go and, I mean, we do that, and we are fine. Actually, my husband is Ashkenazi, and I am Sephardic, and, for us, it's the same.

RP: You said that your husband is Ashkenazi - how did your family react to that being you are Sephardic?

AF: There is no reaction.

RP: No reaction? Okay. How did you maintain the Latino and Sephardic heritage in a new country?

AF: I try to be myself. I don't know...

RP: What secular Jewish customs do you maintain here in Houston?

AF: Do you mean religious customs?

RP: Secular or religious.

AF: I try to go to the synagogue maybe twice or three times a year. I know it is not a lot, but I try. I try to keep some customs and traditions.

RP: What Latino customs do you maintain?

AF: I speak Spanish at home with my family and also with some of my friends, Latino friends. I love to cook, and some of my recipes are from Argentina, Argentina's recipes. And so, food, language, culture. I love Argentinian art and culture, and I try to go there every time I can. So, mostly food, culture, and language.

RP: Thank you. Houston has had large Latino and Jewish communities for generations, but the Sephardic community, however, is very small. In what way do you feel you were received by the Latino and Jewish communities?

AF: I felt welcomed, but not only by the Latino and Jewish community, I felt, and I do feel welcomed by the whole community.

RP: Your husband being Ashkenazi, would you say you maintain both heritages - Ashkenazi and Sephardic in your family?

AF: Oh, yeah. Yeah. The differences are mostly probably food, food-wise, so, yeah.

RP: You said that you felt welcome by both communities, the Latino and Jewish. Did this help you in your settlement process here in Houston?

AF: Oh, yes, of course. Your life is easier when you have welcoming face or person in front of you.

RP: Because of the obvious cultural differences, were there any differences between Houston and Argentinian Sephardic customs?

AF: Not that I know.

- RP: How did you... Oh wait... Has migrating to Houston strained your Sephardic Jewish identity and your Latina identity being away from Argentina?
- AF: Can you repeat that?
- RP: Yes. Has migrating to Houston strained your Sephardic Jewish identity and your Latina identity now that you are away from Argentina?
- AF: Probably my identities... I feel probably a stronger feeling about both, at the Argentinian Latina identity and Jewish identity. That's a very good question. When you migrate, you try to probably think of what you are, where you come from, so, yeah...
- RP: Okay. How would you say it's different being a minority in Argentina being a Sephardic Jew to being a minority here in Houston, by being both Jew and Latina?
- AF: Once you are a minority, you are a minority, so it doesn't matter. Jew, Latina, I don't know, also a woman, consider? I don't know. Probably everything is at the same thing - being a minority... But, you know, here in Houston, Houston is so diverse, so diverse, and also, the Latin American community here in Houston is incredibly huge. So, I didn't feel that much of a culture shock. When I moved here, I felt something familiar.
- RP: How have you maintained Sephardic customs in your family? For example, do your daughters go to Jewish schools?
- AF: They went when they were younger in Argentina and here in Houston, too. They are grown up, so they don't live with us anymore. They already left the house, the home. Sephardic customs... You know, I usually don't think about Sephardic customs and Ashkenazi customs. For me, everything is Judaism. Of course, there are some things different, but I usually don't pay that much attention to it.
- RP: Texas has a history of different forms of discrimination. For example, the recent synagogue hostage crisis and numerous hate crimes against Latinos. How has being a... Do you feel that you are different being here in the United States as a minority, especially in Texas?
- AF: So, for me, I don't know, for some reason, when you study the history of the Judaism and the Jewish people, you will find so many, so many events where we were persecuted in maybe more or less great. So, we know that there are some haters out there - we know that - and, I don't know... I am optimistic. I think that, as humans, we are in a road to a better understanding of we, as people... I don't know if I am right or wrong, but I think that we, as humans, we are getting better at getting along, and I hope that I am right.
- RP: You being an artist, how would you say you maintain your Jewish heritage through your art?

AF: So, both my Jewish and my Latino heritage, I try to channelize all my feelings and my identity through my art. And so, everything that I make, for me, has a meaning, and I put so much in each piece, so, it's my whole identity is in each and every one of my pieces. And that is why I make ceramic *mates* and that's why I make ceramic menorahs. I feel that I need to express that, in a way. This is who I am.

RP: I think that will be all for today.

AF: Thank you.

[End of Interview]