The Western Sephardi Diaspora was established by New Christians from Spain and Portugal who abandoned Iberia in order to affiliate with Judaism. However, it should be noted that only a minority of the Iberian New Christians of Jewish descent left Iberia, and not all who did so reverted to Judaism in their new places of residence. Moreover, those who chose to live openly as Jews in communal frameworks did not do so for the same reasons, nor did all of them find sought-after spiritual tranquility in their old-new faith. While many hundreds of conversos were absorbed within Judaism and adopted a way of life based on honoring the halakha and on identification of some sort with the Jewish people, the encounter with the Talmudic-rabbinical tradition caused severe crises of identity for not a few of these “New Jews,” bringing them into intellectual confrontation with the community leadership. The Christian concepts that they had imbibed did not facilitate the transition to Judaism, and the skepticism that gnawed at the hearts of some of them ultimately distanced them from any affiliation with the Jewish people.

But even those who reached a safe haven in the “lands of liberty” and decided to live openly as Jews did not necessarily sever themselves from connections with the lands of their Iberian origins. The burden of fear to which they had been subject as members of a discriminated and persecuted community did not erase their longings for their original homes and for the landscapes of their childhood. From Amsterdam,
Hamburg, Leghorn, and London their hearts were still drawn to the towns and villages of Spain and Portugal.²

The former marranos maintained an affiliation with Iberian culture even after their return to Judaism. They continued to write in Spanish and Portuguese, and they took note of every new creative development in the Iberian culture of their time. They collected the best works of Spanish and Portuguese theological thought in their impressive libraries, the literary academies that they established were a perfect copy of the Hispanic academies of their time, and the theater that they fostered until the early eighteenth century remained Spanish in content and form.³

Most of the members of the Western Sephardi Diaspora who fled from Iberia left behind family members and relatives, and they retained their business connections, which frequently led them to return to the ports of Andalusia and Portugal. The members of the Sephardi diaspora called those forbidden countries “terras de idolatria” [lands of idolatry], both because they were Catholic countries—and they defined Catholicism as idolatry—and also because those who sojourned there were required to deny their Judaism and publicly observe Christian ceremonies.⁴ The phenomenon was also familiar among the marranos who were absorbed by the Sephardi communities in the Ottoman Empire and in North Africa, though one gets the impression that it

⁴ On the attitude toward Catholicism as idol worship among the marranos who returned to Judaism see Y. Kaplan, From Christianity to Judaism. The Story of Isaac Orobio de Castro (Oxford 1989), pp. 259–61. The Portuguese concept terras de idolatria usually refers to Spain and Portugal, though it also refers to other Catholic countries where the Jewish religion was prohibited. The Spanish expression vivir en idolatria (“to live in idolatry”) was used by the Spanish Jews to condemn the New Christians of Jewish origin who denied the Jewish religion in their way of life. See Abraham Israel Pereyra, La Certeza del Camino [Amsterdam 5426 [1666]], pp. 141–47. Pereyra devoted Chapters Two and Three in the sixth part of his book to condemning this phenomenon: De la miserable vida de los que viven en idolatria (On the miserable life of those who live in idolatry). See the new edition published by H. Méchoulan, Hispanidad y judaísmo en tiempos de Espinoza (Salamanca 1987), pp. 203–7; see also Y. Kaplan, “The Travels of Portuguese Jews from Amsterdam to the ‘Lands of Idolatry’ (1644–1724),” in Jews and Conversos. Studies in Society and the Inquisition, ed. Y. Kaplan (Jerusalem 1985), pp. 197–224.