

The Victor Perera Papers: The Archive of a Twentieth Century Sephardic-American Writer

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ABSTRACT

The author shares the circumstances that led to his encounter with the personal archives of Victor Haim Perera (1934–2003), an award-winning Sephardic-American writer, journalist, environmental and political activist, and academic born in Guatemala City. Perera published six books on topics as varied as Sephardic history, the Maya Indians, and the Loch Ness monster, and contributed dozens of articles, short stories, and essays to newspapers, trade journals, magazines, and literary anthologies. This paper also provides an overview of Perera's life and work and shares information about the Victor Perera Papers collection at the University of Michigan Library. It presents a case study illustrating that library catalogers can improve discoverability of and access to library special collections by expanding beyond their core duties and investigating the contexts behind the materials that cross their desks. The article ends with a preliminary bibliography of Perera's works.

Keywords: Perera, Victor; Sephardic authors; Sephardim; Pereira family; Guatemala; Guatemala Jews; Archives; Cataloging; Library special collections; American literature—Jewish authors

INTRODUCTION

I came across the name Victor Perera for the first time in September 2018, when I was the cataloger for Judaica and Western European languages at the University of Michigan (U-M) Library. A volume of the journal *Santa Cruz Express*, published in 1982, came across my desk from the U-M Library Special Collections Research Center (SCRC). A slip of paper laid in the journal provided the following instruction: “Analyze pages 10–12.” In the cataloging context, to “analyze” means to extract specific content such as an article, interview, poem, or short story from the item in question, and to catalog it as an independent work. In this case, the content to be analyzed was an interview with Victor Perera by Stephen Kessler (“Victor Perera: Citizen of the World”). On the same slip of paper was an additional instruction to add two notes in the catalog record: “Gift of Victor Perera,” and “From the library of Victor Perera.” Reading the interview, I was surprised to discover that Perera was not just a Guatemala-born American author, but also a Sephardic-American writer. I later learned that Perera had been a graduate student in the University of Michigan's prestigious Hopwood Program in the Department of English and was a winner of the Avery Hop-

wood Major Award in Essay.¹ A collegiate professorship at the university is named after Perera and the author's personal library and papers had been donated to the U-M Library in 2002.

A number of studies have demonstrated the pivotal role catalogers play in enhancing access to libraries' special collections. Bradshaw and Wagner (2000) of the University of Oklahoma stressed the necessity of sticky cooperation between catalogers and curators in special collections departments. They pointed out, however, that in many cases catalogers do not work in special collections departments, but rather in technical services units—a divorce that decreases regular communication and poses barriers for cooperation between catalogers and curators. Catalogers who do work in special collections departments are in a good position to enhance the visibility of materials. Rosenberg (2017) reported the discovery of many “previously buried treasures” by catalogers working with rare books at the University of Chicago Library Special Collections Research Center. Several examples of successful alliances between catalogers in technical services units and librarians in special collections have also been reported. Lundy (2007) described a newly implemented workflow at the University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries, which enabled a student cataloger in a technical services unit to supply provisional access to two previously hidden special collections. Reflecting on the George A. Smathers Libraries at the University of Florida, Simpson (2007) argued that the role of catalogers encompasses the catalog, but also extends beyond it, requiring “a heightened level of collaboration which takes catalogers outside their traditional confines and puts them at the forefront of library initiatives” (Simpson 2007, 510).

Providing their perspective from the Binghamton University Libraries, Turner and Schuster (2019, 144) reiterated Bradshaw and Wagner's (2000) conclusions, arguing, “While not much research has focused specifically on cataloging for special collections, what is clear from past studies is that it is imperative for special collections and cataloging [departments] to work together for increased discoverability and access for the patron.” Concerned with the divide between technical services and public services departments where curators usually serve, Tarulli (2014, 31–32) observed that, “rather than a cohesive workplace, many larger libraries continue to operate an organization comprised of silos, assuming traditional roles and applying traditional job descriptions.” Tarulli commented that, although they do not deal directly with the public, technical services staff are also providers of public services, especially in the digital age. She argued for a change in terminology, proposing the terms “front line” and “back room” as replacements for public services and technical services (33).

This paper provides an overview of Perera's life and work and shares preliminary information about the contents of the Victor Perera Papers. It also follows the unusual path that led to my encounter with Perera's personal archives and demonstrates that catalogers can improve the discoverability of library special collections by investigating the contexts of the materials that cross their desks.

¹ Perera's winning essay was titled, “From the Margin: Three Essays, a Parody, and Excerpts from a Journal.” The Hopwood Program has sponsored writing contests for University of Michigan students since 1931. Winners include Arthur Miller and Marge Piercy, among many others. A list of all Hopwood Award winners is available at <https://lsa.umich.edu/hopwood/people/winners.html>. For more information, see Jones and Beam 2006.

A SEPHARDIC-AMERICAN AND LATINO AUTHOR

Victor Haim Perera was born in Guatemala City on April 12, 1934 to Sephardic parents from Jerusalem, who crossed the Atlantic in their mid-twenties to start a family and business in the New World. Among his ancestors were high-profile rabbis including Yitzhak Moshe Perera (?–c. 1921) of Jerusalem; Aharon Haim Perera (?–1923), the former Sephardic rabbi of Hebron; and Nissim Ohanna (1882–1962), who was the chief Sephardic rabbi of Haifa. Israeli writer Yehuda Burla (1886–1969) was Victor Perera’s great-uncle. In 1948, when Perera was twelve years old, he moved with his parents and little sister (referred in Perera’s books as Rebecca, or Becky) to the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn. After graduating from Brooklyn College (1956), Perera obtained a master’s degree in English literature from the University of Michigan (1958) and completed pre-doctoral exams there in 1961, although he apparently never defended a dissertation. That same year, he won the Avery Hopwood Major Award in Essay. At the University of Michigan, Perera met the India-born author Padma Hejmadi. They married in 1960 and divorced in 1972. After spending some time teaching journalism and creative writing at Vassar College, Perera moved in 1972 to the West Coast to teach writing at the University of California at Santa Cruz (1972–1993) and later at the University of California in Berkeley (1993–1998). He also worked as a fact-checking editor for *The New Yorker* magazine and as a reporter for the *New York Times Magazine*. He co-founded Ivri-NASAWI (New Association of Sephardi/Mizrahi Artists & Writers International), a nonprofit organization that promoted Sephardic-Mizrahi art and culture. In the summer of 1998, Perera suffered a stroke that put an end to his writing career. He passed away on June 14, 2003 at the age of sixty-nine.

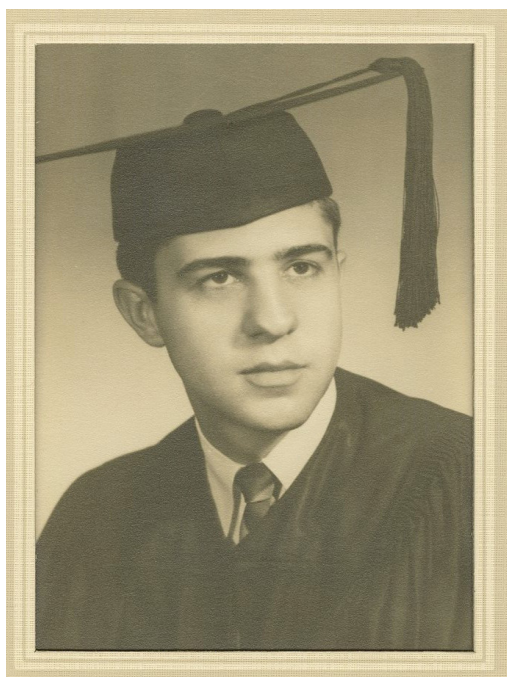


Figure 1. Victor Perera, c. 1956. Victor Perera Papers, box 60 (provisional location). University of Michigan Library

A prolific, award-winning Sephardic-American writer, journalist, and academic, Victor Perera published six books and contributed dozens of articles, short stories, and essays to trade journals, newspapers, magazines, and anthologies. Perera’s first book, an autobiographical novel titled *The Conversion* (1970), narrates the adventures and misadventures of Stanley Bendana, an American graduate student of Sephardic background who travels to Spain to write a dissertation on Byzantine conventions in the writings of Miguel de Cervantes and their influence on seventeenth-century English pastoral poetry. Along his journey, Stanley crosses paths with many characters, among them Jacob Perlman, an exiled painter and survivor of the Nazi gas chambers. After recounting a Hassidic tale, Jacob tells Stanley,

My dear, it seems to me there is a rabbi inside you screaming to get out, just as there was in your father. If you give in to your blood and let him out, I think it will make you a better man, a pillar of your Community. But to sit tight on him might make you someday an artist. The choice is yours. (149)

Perera's second book shifts to a different topic. *The Loch Ness Monster Watchers: An Essay by Victor Perera* (1974) focuses not on the legendary creature itself, but rather on the motivations of people who visit the site, determined to document the existence of the enigmatic animal. The book is based on Perera's experience as a journalist at the Loch Ness site and its tone is personal. *The Last Lords of Palenque: The Lacandon Mayas of the Mexican Rain Forest* (1982) is Perera's third book, an ethnographic study written together with linguist Robert D. Bruce.

Perera's fourth and perhaps most celebrated book, *Rites: A Guatemalan Boyhood* (1986), is "a slightly fictionalized account of his childhood in Guatemala" (Savin 1998, 226). *Rites* explores some leitmotifs that also appear in other Perera's writings, for example his second circumci-

sion, performed when the author/narrator was six years old because "the first job, performed by a Gentile doctor, was pronounced unclean by our new rabbi" (3). In *Rites*, the reader also learns about the threat promulgated by Victor's great-grandfather, Rabbi Yitzhak Moshe Perera, prohibiting all family members and their descendants from leaving the Holy Land.

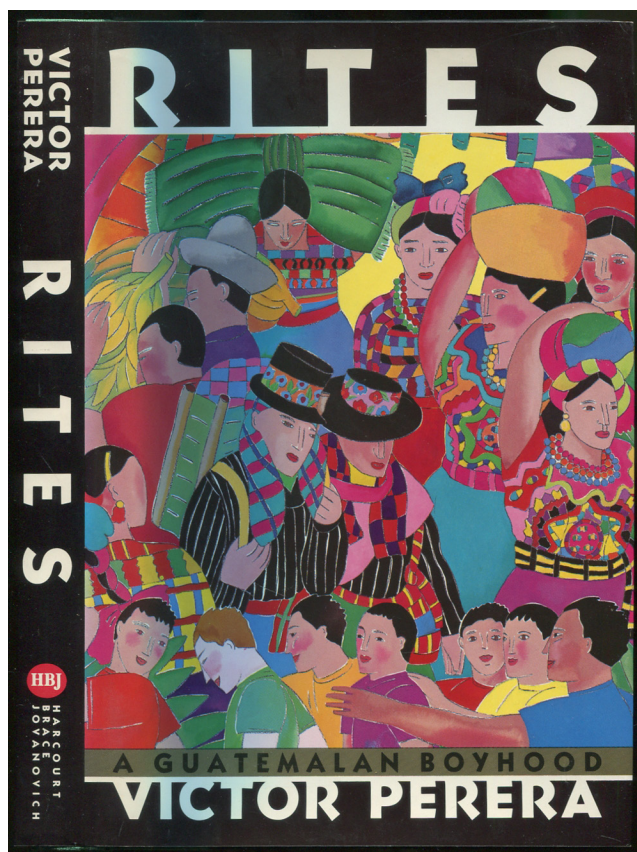


Figure 2. Perera's 1986 book, *Rites: A Guatemalan Boyhood*, cover (first edition). Image: Between the Covers: Rare Books bookstore website

Perera's fifth book, *Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy* (1993), expresses the author's deep concerns about marginalized communities and oppressed ethnic minorities. The book interweaves personal narrative, reportage, and oral testimony on the civil war in his home country. It focuses, according to the author's introduction, on "four highland regions where guerilla insurgency, military counterinsurgency, and evangelical conversion had the most dramatic impact on traditional Mayan patterns of subsistence—the Ixil Triangle, Atitlán, Huehuetenango, and Chimaltenango" (13).

The Cross and the Pear Tree: A Sephardic Journey (1995) is Perera's last published book. A blend of memoir and history of the Perera family, *The Cross and the Pear Tree* is one of the most creative studies of the Sephardic Jews recently written. (Perera, also spelled "Pereira", means "pear tree" in Portuguese.) The famed Chilean writer Isabel Allende endorsed the book, observing on the Alfred A. Knopf edition's dust jacket that, "Victor Perera combines his best talents as scholar, political journalist and storyteller."² The motive of the great-grandfather's threat

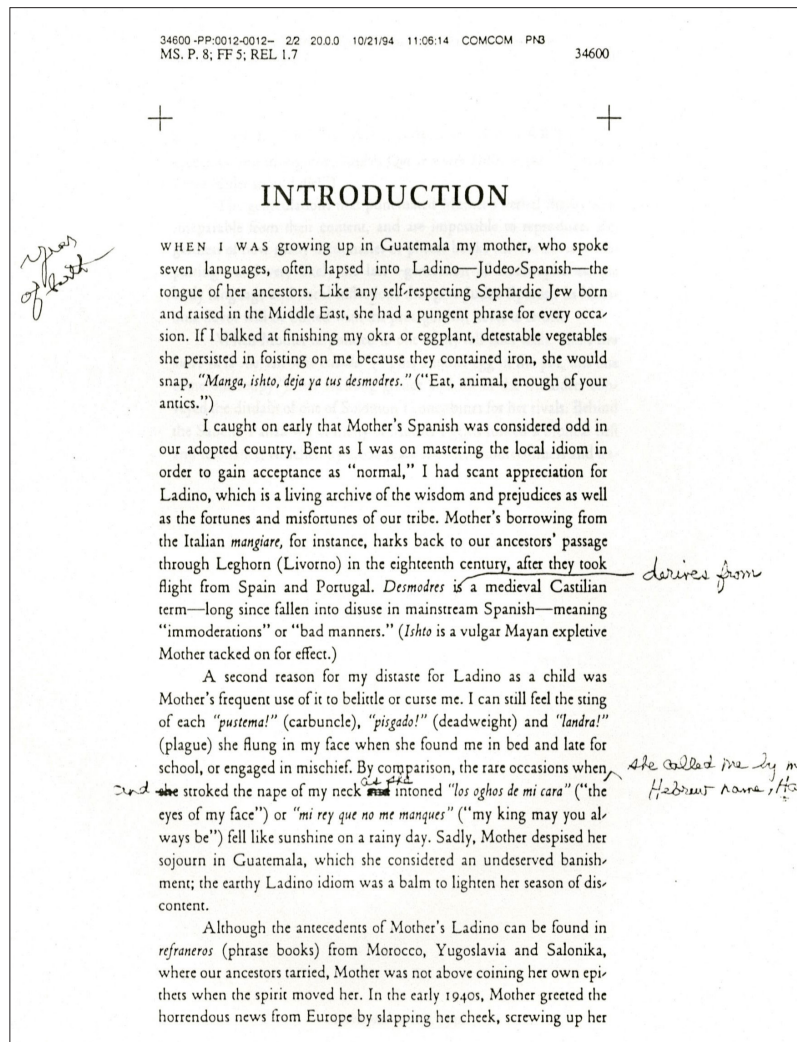


Figure 3. *The Cross and the Pear Tree*, Introduction's first page, draft inscribed by Victor Perera. Victor Perera Papers, box 1 (provisional location). University of Michigan Library

² In the book acknowledgments section Perera explained, "In assembling this book, I have taken the storyteller's license above that of the untrained historian's. I have left many stones unturned on the often tortuous but never insignificant trails blazed by my ancestors. Apart from my immediate family and my direct ancestors—those I was able to trace—I have chosen members of the extended Pere(i)ra family whose lives illuminate important facets of the Sephardic experience. I did not have very far to look for illustrious or reprobate representatives of my clan to flesh out this chronicle, as the Pere(i)ra name contains multitudes."

poignantly surfaces in several passages, one of them in the last paragraph before the epilogue:³

My father's legacy weighed so heavily on my shoulders, I made a decision in my twenties not to father children, for fear they would inherit the family curse my sister and I have had to grapple with and which I only dimly understood at the time. By remaining childless, I have internalized my father's unarticulated desires to end the Perera line, and paid the penalty exacted by my great-grandfather. (258)

Perera passed away before completing his seventh book, about whales. Bound typewritten print-out of the unpublished manuscript, titled *Of Whales and Men: Patagonian Encounters*, are held by the University of Michigan and the University of Pennsylvania libraries.⁴ He also published two English translations of Spanish titles: *Testimony: Death of a Guatemalan Village* (1987), and *Sculpted Stones* (1995), both by Guatemalan anthropologist Victor Montejo.⁵ His short stories and excerpts of his books appeared in various anthologies, among them *Tropical Synagogues: Short Stories by Jewish-Latin American Writers* (Stavans 1994), *Heart of the Land: Essays on Last Great Places* (Barbato and Weinerman 1994), *Sephardic-American Voices* (Matza 1997), and *The Schocken Book of Modern Sephardic Literature* (Stavans 2005). Perera also edited an anthology of California prison writing (1981). His work attracted the attention of a few scholars, among them, Steven Hunsaker (1997) and Ada Savin (1998, 2001, 2006).

Peter S. Beagle (1974, 7) observed in his introduction of *The Loch Ness Monster Watchers*, that Perera was more than a journalist, essayist, memoirist, novelist or historian. His unique writing style brings “a special kind of sensitivity to supposedly commonplace subjects, and a wry humanity to romantic and grandiose matters.” Critic Ada Savin (2006, 140) described the Guatemala-born author as an *avis rara* in the Jewish-American literary world because although his language of expression was English, “his autobiographical writings are rooted in the ambivalent relationship between the Latino and the Ladino cultures.” Perera is, in fact, an uncommonly eclectic writer. His fictional writings are highly autobiographical, full of humor, and genre-fluid. His nonfiction and academic work is rigorously researched and deeply concerned with politically marginalized communities and ethnic minorities, including oppressed native Latin American populations and underrepresented communities in the State of Israel, such as the *Mizrahim* (Oriental Jews) and the

³ Yitzhak Moshe Perera's Hebrew-written threat, or “family curse,” was reproduced on the title facing page of *The Cross and the Pear Tree*. After completing the book, Perera told the *Jewish News of Northern California* he realized that, “behind the curse is a marrano anxiety.” In that same interview, Perera also criticized his father because he “all but turned me into a marrano” by shunning religious education and ritual” (J. Correspondent 1995). For a discussion about this curse, see Elgrably 1995.

⁴ Elgrably (1999) observed that Perera was working on this new book until the summer of 1998, when a stroke prevented him from picking up his pen.

⁵ According to an article Perera published in *The Nation* (“Guatemala's new martyr,” 1998), he was preparing a translation of the oral histories of the Kogi Indians of northern Colombia. We can infer that the translation was interrupted because of the stroke he suffered in the summer of 1998.

Ethiopian Jewish community.⁶ Yet even in his nonfiction works, Perera writes in a very personal, sometimes humorous tone. The opening sentences of *The Last Lords of Palenque*, a description of his first encounter with Lacandon Indians, are a good example:

In November 1938, when I was nearly five years old, the President of Guatemala, General Jorge Ubico, commemorated the seventh anniversary of his “bevolent” dictatorship with a national fair that was to rival in everything but size the World’s Fair in New York. I was taken to the fair by Emma, a pretty salesgirl in my father’s department store, who had just turned sixteen and was wearing lipstick and silk stockings for the first time. (36)

According to Savin (1998, 235), it was due to Perera’s criticism of Israeli nationalism and his idealistic views of Jewish-Arab relations that he “[...] has been denounced by American Zionists as a Sephardic counterpart to Philip Roth, another ‘self-hating Jew.’” One can argue, however, that Victor Perera and Philip Roth (1933–2018) have more in common than just their supposed Jewish self-hatred. In fact, a vague stylistic resemblance between Perera and the famed Ashkenazic writer was already comically noted on the back cover of Perera’s first novel, *The Conversion*: “If Don Quixote were Jewish, and Portnoy had a Spanish mother, the book would be ‘The conversion’” (Pyramid edition, 1971). Perera’s *Rites* (1986) also has similarities with Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Authored by sons of immigrants, both texts are autobiographical and approach with humor and drama topics like family ties, childhood and youth, patriarchy, and gender and sexuality. In linguistic terms, both *Portnoy’s Complaint* and *Rites* are permeated by Jewish languages: Roth occasionally plays with Yiddish expressions and inflexions, while his “Sephardic counterpart” Perera, with Ladino. Perera provided a compelling account of his relationship with Ladino in the introduction of *The Cross and the Pear Tree*; expanded discussions of the use of Ladino in Perera’s writings are provided by Hunsaker (1997) and Savin (2001). Aesthetic parallels between the works of Roth and Perera are, however, beyond the scope of this essay.⁷

Notwithstanding his literary achievements and favorable book reviews in both general audience publications and trade journals, Perera’s work has not gained much visibility in academic circles. He remains a relatively obscure author in the fields of Sephardic studies, Latin American studies, and Jewish-American literature. Jewish literature of the United States has been dominated by authors of Eastern European, Ashkenazic backgrounds (Matza 1997, 1–13). In the Jewish Latin American arena, the literary anthology *Tropical Synagogues* (Stavans 1994) gives short shrift to Sephardic writers. Among the twenty authors published in this anthology, Victor Perera is

⁶ See for example the discussion about the Israeli Black Panthers in the last chapters of *The Cross and the Pear Tree*, as well as in Perera’s 1980 reportage, “Peace Now: Approaching a Crossroads.”

⁷ In a review of *Rites*, Kellerman (1986) affirmed, “Take a young Portnoy, clean up his act a bit and plop him down in Guatemala. That should give you an idea of Jaime Nissen, the protagonist of this odd little book by Victor Perera, a Sephardic Jew who grew up in Guatemala.” Jaime Nissen is the fictional name Perera chose to represent himself in the book. The name interplays with Perera’s middle name, Haim, and his mother’s maiden name, Nissim. According to Alix Wall (2003, unpaginated article online), “Berkeley author Rebecca Camhi Fromer compared Perera’s influence on modern Sephardic culture to that of Philip Roth or Bernard Malamud on 20th century Ashkenazi culture.” The source of Rebecca Camhi Fromer’s remark is not provided.

apparently the only one of Sephardic background and/or concerned with Sephardic topics. The same applies to *Echad, an Anthology of Latin American Jewish Writings* (Robert and Roberta Kalechofsky 1980). This anthology features twenty-five authors; among them, only three are of Sephardic stock: Victor Perera; the Venezuelan novelist, playwright, and translator Isaac Chócron (1930–2011); and the Peruvian expert on the Jews of Iquitos, Yaacov Hasson (born c. 1930). Historically, Sephardic authors such as Perera and his associates Ruth Behar and Jordan Elgrably have been largely overlooked.

A Cuban-American author and scholar of both Sephardic and Ashkenazic descent, Ruth Behar has been a faculty member at the Department of Anthropology in the University of Michigan since 1989. In 2010, Behar became a collegiate professor—an honor the University of Michigan awards to faculty members. Behar was given the opportunity to name her new academic position after any scholar formerly affiliated with the University of Michigan. She decided to name her collegiate professorship after Victor Perera because his writings had been a source of inspiration for her own work; the two knew each other personally and Perera encouraged Behar to research her own Sephardic heritage.⁸ Surprisingly, the news that the U-M Library holds the archive of Victor Perera reached Behar subsequent to her decision to name her collegiate professorship after him.

Jordan Elgrably, born in Los Angeles to French Moroccan parents, is a journalist who co-founded The Markaz, “LA’s Center for the Greater Middle East, where arts and humanity give voice to our dreams for peace.”⁹ In 1996 Elgrably, along with Perera and Behar, founded the Ivri-NASAWI association, whose acronym was devised to create a Mizrahi or Arabic sounding name (Jordan Elgrably Correspondent, email message

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Figure 4. Laid-in pamphlet, *NASAWI News* 1:1. (Summer 1997). Gift of Victor Perera, University of Michigan Library

⁸ Behar has recently published a poem in Perera’s memory, titled “The Last Perera” (2019).

⁹ See the center’s Twitter account for this self-description (<https://twitter.com/TheMarkazLA>; accessed March 13, 2020) and its website for mission and activities, at <https://www.themarkaz.org>.

to author, November 27, 2019).¹⁰ The organization’s mission was to promote Sephardic-Mizrahi art and culture, and it planned to accomplish that goal by publishing a national magazine for Sephardic and Middle Eastern culture called “Ivri, People without Boundaries.” Ivri was never published, however, for lack of resources; instead, the association printed a simpler version on low-grade paper, titled *NASAWI News*. Elgrably edited the magazine; Perera, Behar, and Ammiel Alcalay served on its advisory board. The first volume of *NASAWI News* was published in the summer of 1997 (see the issue cover art), but the magazine was short-lived due to lack of funding.¹¹ According to an interview with Elgrably (2007, 151), the association was active for a few years, producing public programs in Los Angeles, New York, and the Bay Area; it was largely funded by membership dues and grants, whose proposals were written by Elgrably himself.¹²

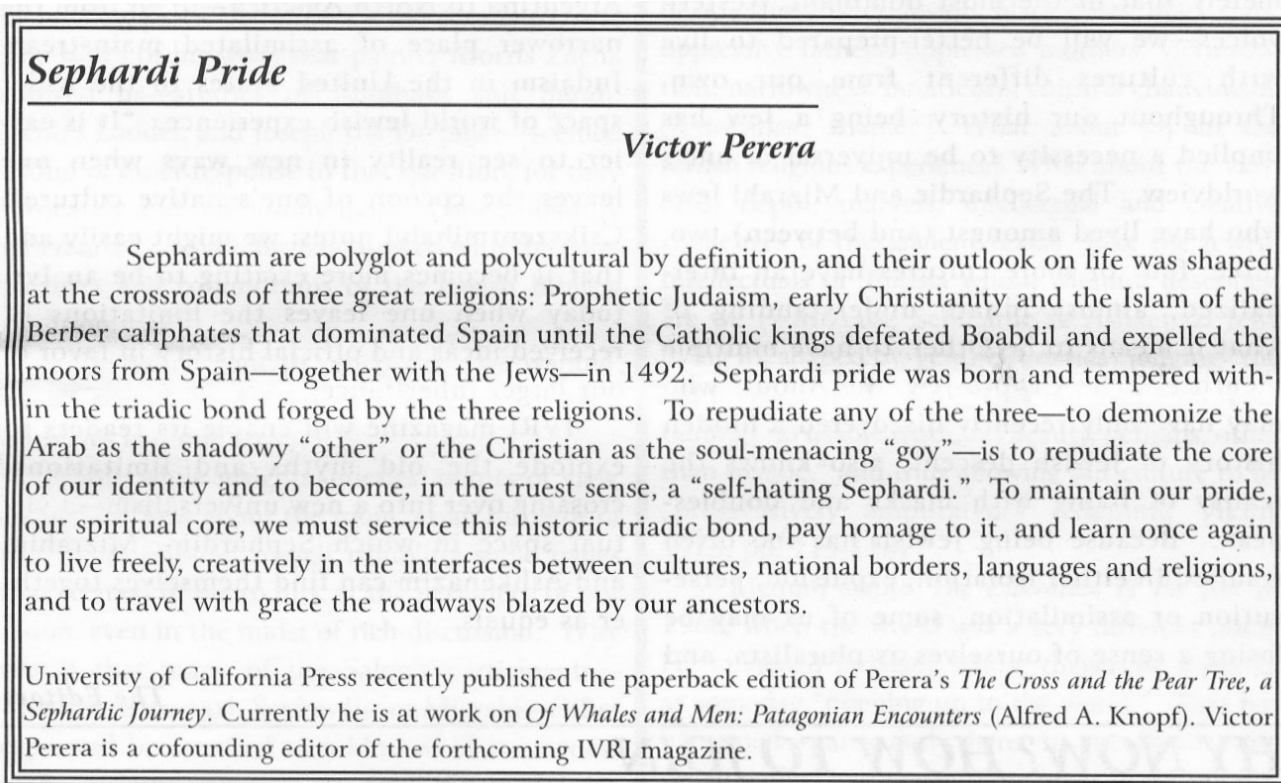


Figure 5. “Sephardi Pride,” Victor Perera’s short manifesto, *NASAWI News* 1:1 (Summer 1997), p. 7. Gift of Victor Perera, University of Michigan Library

¹⁰ The organization was initially called “National Association of Sephardi/Mizrahi Artists & Writers International,” but changed its name to “New Association of Sephardi/Mizrahi Artists & Writers International.”

¹¹ Volume 2:1 was published in January/ February 1999 and volume 2:2 in November/ December 1999.

¹² More information on Ivri-NASAWI may be found in that 2007 interview and in Elgrably’s forthcoming book, which has one chapter that includes interviews and correspondence with Perera (Jordan Elgrably, Correspondent, email message to author, November 27, 2019).

THE LIBRARY OF VICTOR PERERA

After cataloging the interview with Victor Perera conducted by Stephen Kessler (1982), I started wondering about the scope of Perera's personal library, donated to the U-M Library in 2002. Searching for the phrase, "Gift of Victor Perera" in the U-M Library catalog, yielded 196 items, among which at least 63 are author-inscribed books, dedicated to Victor Perera. Some 133 titles are written in (or include) English, 65 are in (or include) Spanish, and a smaller number are written in (or include) Czech, Dutch, French, German, Hebrew, Ladino, Mayan languages, and Portuguese.

Among the materials held by Perera in his personal library are various editions of the books he published. There are also books by Latin American Jewish authors like the Mexican writer, essayist, and critic Margo Glantz (born 1930); Argentinean poet Juan Gelman (1930–2014); and Brazilian novelist Moacyr Scliar (1937–2011). These three authors presented Perera signed copies of their books with warm dedications to him. Correspondence between Gelman and Perera (1996–1999) is part of the Juan Gelman Papers collection at the Princeton University Library's Manuscripts Division.¹³ Among Perera's friends were non-Jewish Latin American authors, such as the Uruguayans Juan Carlos Onetti (1909–1994) and Eduardo Galeano (born 1940). Galeano, who, like Perera, was deeply concerned with politically marginalized communities and ethnic minorities, presented him with a copy of *Walking Words* (an English translation of *Palabras andantes*). Perera established relationships with Israeli writers as well, among them Yehuda Amichai (1924–2000), whose *Songs of Jerusalem and Myself* (1973) is in Perera's library.¹⁴

Perera's library also contains many trade journal publications written by or about him that, like the interview in the *Santa Cruz Express*, were analyzed and cataloged as independent pieces. Among them are short stories published in small-circulation magazines like the student journal *Arbor* (1960), as well as in better known journals like *The Partisan Review* (1960), which published Perera's short story, "At Sea with the Beats."¹⁵ As Perera's first book-length work appeared in 1970, these journal and magazine publications provide a unique window into his early writing.

Although rooted in a specific time and place, Perera's writings are relevant today. One example from his library is the 1984 article, "Guatemalan Refugees: A Political Dilemma for Mexico," published in *The Nation*. Another item of interest is the *Counter Catalog*, a course review catalog published by the University of California Santa Cruz's students in 1972, which includes two reviews of courses taught by Perera, one on Spanish drama of the Golden Age and the other on Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote de la Mancha*.

¹³ The Juan Gelman Papers, Series 2: Correspondence; subseries 1: General; Box B-000728 folder 19, Princeton University Library's Manuscripts Division.

¹⁴ On the interactions between Victor Perera and Yehuda Amichai see Perera's *The Cross and the Pear Tree*, 174–175, 181, 188, 192.

¹⁵ The beat in question is Gregory Corso (1930–2001), the youngest of the inner circle of Beat Generation writers.

BEYOND THE LIBRARY OF VICTOR PERERA: THE VICTOR PERERA PAPERS

An e-mail correspondence with staff in the SCRC confirmed my suspicion that the other books from Perera's library had already been cataloged and that the interview in the *Santa Cruz Express* was the last item from his library to be added to the catalog. Nevertheless, the same correspondence provided astonishing new information: The U-M Library had also received some, if not all, of Perera's personal papers.

The number of gifts received in large research libraries often exceeds the capacity to describe and catalog them. Drawing on the 1998 survey of special collections conducted by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), Jones (2004, 90) writes that, "Libraries are simply unable to keep up with the backlogs, especially for those materials in nontraditional formats." According to the survey, about 15 percent of collections of printed volumes remained unprocessed or uncataloged. The 82 institutions reporting on manuscripts collections indicated that 27 percent of these collections remained unprocessed (Jones, *idem*). According to Greene and Meissner (2005, 208), the problem of growing backlogs is "exacerbated by many of the traditional approaches to processing collections that archivists continue to practice."

Cataloging priorities can be set by patron demand or by other factors like potential research interest in the collection. Due to the high volume of backlogs in large university libraries, identifying potential research interest in uncataloged materials can be challenging. Catalogers equipped with subject expertise, intellectual curiosity, and an interest in the library enterprise as a whole, are in a good position to collaborate in identifying this kind of material.

The personal papers of Perera have not been fully processed yet, but because of my interest in the collection, they were placed in the SCRC processing queue. Getting into the processing queue does not mean that the collection will receive immediate attention; in large institutions, archival processing and description must go through a prioritization process. Additional formal and informal conversations I had with colleagues, supervisors, and faculty members have led to the designation of the Victor Perera papers as a high priority. Work has begun compiling an inventory, the first step in processing the collection.¹⁶

An internal two-page accession form about this gift, compiled under the supervision of SCRC Archivist and Curator Kathleen Dow and dated February 24, 2010, indicates that this collection, called *Victor Perera Papers*, includes 67 boxes that take up 66.5 linear feet. The collection formerly comprised 84 boxes (87 linear feet); from these, books and serials, including some duplicates, were removed for selection and cataloging. These books and serials included the volume

¹⁶ The inventory is being compiled by Irmarié Fraticelli-Rodríguez (Association of Research Libraries/Society of American Archivists Mosaic Fellow and Intern at the U-M Library), under the supervision of Caitlin R. Wells (U-M Library Collection Services Librarian). I would like to thank Irmarié Fraticelli-Rodríguez for bringing to my attention some of the Victor Perera Papers materials referred to in this article.

of the *Santa Cruz Express* that contains the interview with Perera. The Victor Perera Papers accession form divides the collection by format as follows:

Papers. Boxes 1–57: Mixed manuscripts, personal and business correspondence, records, clippings, and ephemera.

Personal. Box 58: Small address books/ diaries, engraved silver tray, leather shoulder bag, woven/ fabric objects, and 3 wallets.

Oversize. Box 59: 11 mixed posters/ prints and 1 rolled set [of galleys?] from Akwesasne Notes for an unidentified publication.

Photographs. Boxes 60–61: Hundreds of mixed photographs, some in envelopes and albums.

Slides. Boxes 62–65: ~6,000 slides, housed in carousels and small boxes.

Audio/ Video. Box 66: ~175 cassette tapes, 4 reel-to-reel tapes, and 2 VHS tapes.

Video. Box 67: 18 VHS tapes, commercial and privately recorded.

Of the 67 boxes, we have been able to compile a preliminary inventory of just six so far.¹⁷ Among several documents of interest in box number 1 are fellowship applications, which provide valuable information about Perera's life and work, including lists of publications and accounts of his career. This box also includes draft versions of *Rites: A Guatemalan Boyhood*; an apparently unpublished fiction manuscript, titled, "The Little Gray Whale" (30 pages); and manuscripts of the reportage "Guatemala's Democracy under the Gun: Vinicio Cerezo's First Hundred Days".¹⁸ Box number 2 includes various clippings of texts Perera published in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and other newspapers and magazines. In boxes 2 and 3 are typed excerpts of a Spanish translation of Perera's *Rites: A Guatemalan Boyhood*, a book which has not been published in translation. Box number 5 includes correspondence with Juan Gelman, Eduardo Galeano, and Gioconda Belli (1948), among others. In box 67 we find at least three privately recorded VHS tapes containing interviews with Perera. Despite the fact that in his books Victor refers to his sister as Rebecca, or Becky, documentation in box number 60, such as Victor's father's will and a baby daily log ("Album del niño") kept by Victor's mother, indicates that his sister's name is Ruth Raquel. It is possible that, after referring to his sister as Becky in his first novel (*The Conversion*), Perera decided to keep this fictional name in his 1986 and 1995 books, although the latter is the least fictionalized (if fictionalized at all) of his three autobiographic works.

¹⁷ The location in the above-mentioned boxes are provisional and may change after the collection is processed.

¹⁸ This reportage apparently was never published, but most likely was used by Perera in his book, *Unfinished Conquest: The Guatemalan Tragedy* (1993).

CONCLUSIONS

In addition to introducing the Victor Perera Papers—a still unprocessed collection housed at the U-M Library SCRC—this article shows that when catalogers expand beyond their core duties, they can play a role in improving visibility of and access to material in special collections. Contributions of this type are most likely to occur when catalogers have subject expertise, intellectual curiosity, and institutional support. The volume of the *Santa Cruz Express* (1982) containing an interview with Perera was the very last item from Perera's personal library to be sent from the U-M Library SCRC to the Technical Services cataloging unit. Considering the fact that this item led to the discovery of the Victor Perera Papers, one cannot deny that library hidden collections may be exposed at the intersection of serendipity and synchronicity or, in other words, as a coincidence.

The Victor Perera Papers collection entered the processing queue in the U-M Library SCRC earlier this year and has since been recognized as a high priority. The inventory now being compiled is the first step in processing the collection. Future projects may include a comprehensive, annotated bibliography of Perera's work, as well as digitization of materials and collaborative enterprises with other libraries and archives.

The Perera collection complements archives of other Latin American authors held at university libraries in the United States, including the papers of the above-mentioned Argentinean poet Juan Gelman at Princeton University, those of Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío (1867–1916) at Arizona State University; papers of Brazilian author, poet, and literary critic Leila Miccolis (b. 1947) at the University of Miami; and of Chilean poet and Nobel laureate Gabriela Mistral (1889–1957) and Peruvian author and political activist Magda Portal (1900–1989), both at the University of Texas at Austin. The availability of Victor Perera's papers could spur new interest in one of the most talented and exciting, yet still relatively unknown, Sephardic-American writers of the twentieth century.

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APPENDIX: A PRELIMINARY BIBLIOGRAPHY OF VICTOR PERERA’S WRITINGS

This appended list is not a comprehensive compilation of Victor Perera’s publications; it was compiled based on materials from the University of Michigan Library and other libraries’ catalogs, as well as databases such as EBSCO, HAPI, ProQuest, RAMBI, and WorldCat. With a few exceptions, materials from the Victor Perera Papers were not included. The processing of the Victor Perera Papers will likely reveal additional, currently unknown and/or unindexed texts.

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