

FROM SEPHARAD TO THE WORLD: THE HERITAGE LIVES ON¹

NÓRA RÓZSAVÁRI²

Abstract

Ladino holds a vital place in Sephardic identity and cultural heritage, embodying the legacy of the descendants of Spanish-speaking Jews who were exiled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492. This language is not simply a linguistic blend; it is a unique fusion of Old Spanish with elements of Hebrew, Arabic, Turkish, Greek, Italian, French, and other languages, reflecting the diverse regions and cultures Sephardic Jews encountered over centuries. Ladino developed and thrived in Sephardic communities across a wide geography, including the Balkans, North Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean, and eventually the Americas, adapting to each locale while retaining its foundational Spanish roots. As a living repository of Sephardic history and values, Ladino has served as a vehicle for storytelling, poetry, music, religious expression, and daily communication, embodying both resilience and continuity. However, as the number of native speakers has diminished, Ladino is now classified as an endangered language. Recognizing its cultural and historical significance, numerous initiatives today are devoted to its preservation and revitalization. Scholars, cultural organizations, and community members are working together to document the language, produce new literature, teach it to younger generations, and promote its use in digital media. These efforts aim to ensure that Ladino continues to be an enduring part of Sephardic culture.

Keywords: Ladino, Linguistic heritage, Cultural legacy, Multilingual influences, Identity

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing curiosity about the Judeo-Spanish language, leading to a resurgence in its study and preservation efforts. As interest in Sephardic heritage deepens, more individuals and institutions engage in research, language courses, and cultural programs dedicated to Ladino. However, the topic has not been explored in great depth in Hungary. This article aims to introduce the subject, offering insights into the historical and cultural significance of Judeo-Spanish and contributing to a broader understanding of this unique language and its legacy.

The Judeo-Spanish language known as Ladino (Judaeo-Spanish, Djudeoespanyol, etc.) has been a vivid expression of the rich cultural heritage of the Spanish-speaking Jews who were dispersed worldwide after their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492. To put it simply, we could say that Ladino, a unique blend of Old Spanish and

¹This article provides a summary of the most important points from a previously composed article in Hungarian. While it draws on the same foundational research, this version has been restructured and refined to suit an English-speaking audience, highlighting the core findings and insights. As such, it offers a distinct and focused contribution, aligned with the standards for a separate publication.

²Pázmány Péter Catholic University Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Institute of Classical and Neolatin Languages, Spanish Department

elements of other languages such as Hebrew, Arabic and Turkish, has flourished in Sephardic communities in different parts of the world, from the Balkans to North Africa and the Americas, but it is much more than that. It is a living, evolving language that has faced many challenges over the last centuries that have threatened its survival.

In this article (using the terms Ladino and Judeo-Spanish synonymously), we will examine the history and characteristics of the language, highlighting its role as a symbol of cultural identity for the Sephardic people and its relationship with Spanish. We will also examine current efforts to preserve and revitalise it.

Historical overview

*Sepharad 1 – Beginnings*³

The exact time when Jewish communities first appeared on the Iberian Peninsula remains uncertain. A significant number of Jews likely arrived in the region during the latter half of the 1st century AD, following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD. Many Jews sought refuge in various parts of the Roman Empire, including Iberia. It was during this period that Jonathan ben Uzziel, a disciple of Rabbi Hillel, identified Spain with *Sepharad*, a name that would later give rise to the term *Sephardic* (Spanish *sefardí*) to describe Spanish Jews and their distinct cultural, linguistic, and religious heritage (Ruiz Sousa, no date).

Over time, the Jewish presence in Iberia grew stronger, leading to thriving communities that exerted significant cultural and economic influence. Jews established synagogues, and educational centers, and played a key role in trade and agriculture across many cities. However, their coexistence with Christian communities was not without tension. Emperor Constantine (306–337 AD) imposed restrictions on Jews, forbidding them from owning Christian slaves and regulating their obligations to the state. Theodosius I (378–395 AD) adopted a more tolerant stance but condemned mixed marriages between Jews and Christians as acts of adultery. In 305-306, the Synod of Elvira held in the city of Iliberis (modern Granada), issued decrees that restricted interactions between Jews and Christians, including a ban on interfaith marriages (Ruiz Sousa, no date).

Following the collapse of the Roman Empire, the situation for Jews worsened under the Visigothic rule in the 5th century. The conversion of King Reccared I to Catholicism in 589 AD, marking the Visigoths' shift from Arian Christianity to Catholicism, ushered in the concept of a unified religious nation. Jewish communities were increasingly seen as outsiders, and a series of anti-Jewish measures followed. In 613, the Third Council of Toledo, under King Sisebut, mandated the forced baptism of all Jews. Later, in 653, the Eighth Council of Toledo enacted additional measures aimed at eradicating "Jewish influence", further restricting their religious freedom and social participation.

The arrival of the Arabs in 711 AD dramatically transformed the situation for Jews on the Iberian Peninsula. Under Muslim rule, particularly in the region of Al-Andalus, a more tolerant environment emerged, allowing Jews to practice their

³In this article we follow the periodization established by I. M. Hassan, Iacob M.: *Los sefardíes: Concepto y esbozo histórico*. In Díaz-Mas, Paloma (ed.): *Los sefardíes: Cultura y Literatura*. San Sebastián: Univ. del País Vasco, 1987. 11-22. For the historical overview, we have used the works of P. Díaz-Mas (2006) and M. A. Bel Bravo (2006).

religion and play active roles in society. During this period, many Jews rose to prominence as court officials, doctors, scholars, and philosophers. The Caliphate of Córdoba (756–1031 AD) marked a golden age for Jewish cultural and intellectual life. One of the most renowned Jewish figures of this period was Maimonides (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon), a philosopher and religious scholar whose works remain influential to this day.

Despite the relative prosperity and freedom experienced under Muslim rule, Jewish communities occasionally faced persecution, as exemplified by the Almohads, who forced Maimonides and his family to flee to North Africa. As Christian forces gradually reconquered the peninsula, Jewish communities encountered growing intolerance and discrimination. By the late 14th century, many Jews began emigrating to North Africa. The reign of the Catholic Monarchs, starting in 1479, marked a decisive turn in the history of Jews in Spain, culminating in their expulsion or forced conversion to Christianity.

Sepharad 1 – The Catholic Kings and the 15th-16th centuries

The reigns of Isabella I of Castile and Ferdinand II of Aragon, known as the Catholic Monarchs, hold great significance in Spanish history for several pivotal reasons. Their marriage in the late 15th century united the various peninsular kingdoms, laying the groundwork for a modern, centralized Spanish state. Under their rule, Spain established a strong and stable monarchy, which would later expand into a global empire following the conquest of the Americas. One of the key objectives of the Catholic Monarchs was to complete the *Reconquista*, a campaign that spanned nearly eight centuries, aimed at reclaiming Muslim-controlled territories on the Iberian Peninsula. The capture of Granada in 1492 not only marked the conclusion of the *Reconquista* but also symbolized the Catholic Monarchs' goal of achieving both political and religious unity in Spain, with Catholicism as the unifying force of the monarchy and their growing empire.

To maintain this ideological unity, the Catholic Monarchs established the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in 1478. The Spanish Inquisition's primary mission was to root out heresy and religious dissent. Although it was formally an ecclesiastical institution, the Inquisition was directly controlled by the monarchy, functioning independently of Rome. The monarchs appointed and dismissed the chief inquisitors, who focused on persecuting those of other faiths, particularly Jews and Muslims.

In 1492, the Catholic Monarchs issued the Alhambra Decree, which required all Jews to either convert to Catholicism or leave Spain within three months. Those who chose conversion became known as *conversos* or "new Christians." However, many of these converts, often referred to pejoratively as *Marranos*, were accused of secretly practising Judaism, a behaviour known as "Judaizing." Between the 15th and 17th centuries, the term *Marrano* became widely used to label those suspected of pretending to be Christians while adhering to Jewish customs. The Inquisition heavily targeted conversos, leading to widespread arrests, torture, and executions.

There are no precise records of how many Jews either converted or fled Spain following the 1492 decree, but estimates suggest that between 100,000 and 300,000 Jews were expelled from the country. The expulsion and forced conversions left a lasting impact on the Jewish community in Spain, dramatically altering its historical trajectory.

Sepharad 2 – The post-expulsion period – primary diaspora

While the first period of Sephardic history, *Sepharad 1*, was marked by open interactions, both geographically and culturally, with other nations living alongside the Jews, the second period is characterized by a more insular and closed phase. Except for merchant families and business networks that crossed religious boundaries for trade, the Sephardic diaspora largely lost contact with Spain and became an ethnic minority, or *millet*, in their host territories. This era, spanning over 500 years, presents a complex and varied picture.

Many scholars divide the Sephardic diaspora, which resulted from migrations until the mid-17th century, into two primary regions: a western, North African area, initially centred in Fez and later in Tétouan, and a broader eastern region within the Ottoman Empire (Hassan 1987). In the eastern part, major centres of Jewish life emerged in cities like Constantinople and Thessaloniki, with additional significant communities forming in Edirne and later in Izmir. Flourishing Jewish communities also developed along the Anatolian coast, on the Aegean islands, and across much of the Balkan Peninsula, with offshoots even reaching Vienna and Buda.

This geographical division is also reflected in the evolution of the Judeo-Spanish language, as the Sephardic diaspora in these areas resisted assimilation and preserved their language, which developed new linguistic features over time. Beyond these regions, it's important to mention other migration paths, as large numbers of Sephardic Jews emigrated from the Iberian Peninsula to Western Europe.

Initially, the majority of Jews expelled from Spain—about 120,000—fled to Portugal. However, they faced a similar fate there, as the violent persecutions and pogroms of 1496-97 forced them to move once again. On December 5, 1496, King Manuel I of Portugal ordered the expulsion of Jews, and by March 19, 1497, they were summoned to Lisbon to prepare for their departure. Instead, they were forcibly gathered and baptized (Beinart 1992). The relentless pressure of the Inquisition, forced conversions, and the growing anti-Jewish sentiment led many Jews still living on the Iberian Peninsula to emigrate for a second time in the 16th and 17th centuries. This time, they headed to Western Europe, arriving as Christians due to their earlier conversions. This migration gave rise to a new Sephardic presence in Western Europe.

The Western Diaspora – Morocco

In what is now Morocco, there were already Jewish communities, known as *Toshavim*, who spoke Arabic or Berber but used Hebrew for religious rituals. After the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, around 40,000 refugees, referred to as *Megorashim*, arrived from the Iberian Peninsula and settled in cities like Casablanca, Tangier, Ceuta, and Melilla, as well as in the existing centres of Fez and Tétouan. These newcomers were granted a degree of autonomy, allowing them to organize their communities and establish extensive trade networks, particularly with Jewish communities in Italy and the Netherlands.

Over time, the Sephardic language spoken in Morocco began to diverge from the evolving Spanish spoken on the Iberian Peninsula. Due to their isolation, Moroccan Sephardim no longer adopted linguistic innovations from Spain, while their language, enriched by neologisms from Arabic, became known as *Haketía*. This dialect was used in daily communication with family, friends, neighbours, and commercial dealings with other Jewish communities. Though *Haketía* survived until the 20th century, its

linguistic records are limited, as there was no significant printing or publishing activity in Morocco. Only a few manuscripts and oral traditions remain as evidence of its use.

In the 19th century, Morocco, along with its Sephardic communities, came under French and later Spanish influence. The Franco-Spanish Treaty of 1912 established a Spanish protectorate in northern Morocco, with Tétouan as its capital. For the first time in centuries, the Sephardim expelled from the Iberian Peninsula officially reconnected with peninsular Spaniards. This encounter sparked a process of rehispanisation among Moroccan Sephardim. However, following the abolition of the protectorate in 1956, the rise of Arabization led to the gradual disappearance of Sephardic communities and the emigration of their members. As a result, *Haketía* also began to fade, surviving only in remnants — proverbs, special words, nicknames, and a few songs and folktales (Schwarzwald 2019).

The Eastern Diaspora – Ottoman Empire

Sultan Bayezid II (1481-1512) warmly welcomed Sephardic Jews into the Ottoman Empire. After overcoming the initial challenges of resettlement, Jewish communities thrived economically, with many becoming wealthy through trade, arms manufacturing, glassmaking, and particularly textile production. Jews were highly sought after as doctors, interpreters, and diplomats, playing a crucial role in Ottoman diplomacy, which preferred Jewish envoys over Christian subjects when dealing with Western rulers (Romero 1992). They were also granted religious freedom, allowing them to maintain their traditional institutions, including synagogues.

At its height in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Ottoman Empire encompassed vast territories, including modern-day Turkey, Greece, parts of the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Romania—regions where Jewish communities had already existed. Sephardic Jews became integral to these societies and played a prominent cultural role. Notably, they introduced and monopolized the printing press in the Ottoman Empire until 1727 (Romero 1992).

The Ottoman Empire's cosmopolitan, multilingual, and multi-religious environment allowed Jewish culture to flourish. However, this cultural golden age was disrupted in the mid-17th century by the pseudo-messianic movement of Shabatai Zevi, a scholar from Izmir who proclaimed himself the Messiah. Despite being excommunicated and eventually forced to convert to Islam by Ottoman authorities, Zevi's movement briefly captivated many Jews before collapsing, leading to a period of disillusionment and a temporary decline in cultural and literary activity. However, by the 18th century, a cultural revival began, particularly in Sephardic culture and the Ladino language.

The 19th century brought significant changes as the Ottoman Empire began to decline politically and economically. Nationalist movements in the Balkans led to the creation of independent states, which, combined with external interference and the turmoil of World Wars I and II, dramatically reduced the Sephardic population in these regions. Due to the empire's reforms, including the work of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (founded in 1860 to defend Jewish rights), which promoted French-language education across the Mediterranean and former Ottoman territories, many Sephardic Jews abandoned Ladino in favour of French. This led to the adoption of many French neologisms into Judeo-Spanish.

Today, Turkey remains the most significant hub of the Sephardic diaspora, though the community's autonomy ended with the modernization reforms of Kemal

Atatürk, who made the Turkish language compulsory. Despite these pressures, around 15,000 to 20,000 people still speak or understand Judeo-Spanish (Hassan 1995).

In Greece, Thessaloniki was a major Sephardic centre from the 15th century until World War II. Often referred to as the Sephardic capital, the city was home to between 100,000 and 150,000 Jews of various origins (Angoso, no date). However, following Ottoman rule, the Greeks, like their Bulgarian, Macedonian, Romanian, and Serbian neighbours, began erasing the pluralistic and tolerant past. During the German occupation of Greece in World War II, the Gestapo murdered 75,000 Jews from Thessaloniki, decimating the Sephardic community and eradicating the use of Ladino in the region.

Sarajevo, once known as Little Jerusalem due to its large Sephardic population, also experienced a significant cultural decline. By the late 19th century, under Austro-Hungarian rule, many Sephardic Jews had lost their language and influence. According to a 1921 census, around 10,000 Sarajevo residents still spoke Judeo-Spanish as their mother tongue. In Serbia, the Jewish population, mostly Sephardic, was much smaller, with about 10,000 Jews living there before World War II, primarily in Belgrade. Over 80% of them were Sephardic (Angoso, no date). However, the devastation of World War II and the later South Slavic Wars drastically reduced the number of Sephardic Jews in the region, leading many to emigrate to America and Israel.

Emigration to Western Europe

After the expulsion of 1492, many Sephardic Jews sought refuge in Italy, where they settled in cities such as Ferrara, Pisa, Venice, and Livorno. They were well-received and quickly became influential in Italian trade, leveraging strong connections with Sephardic communities in North Africa and the East. Their contributions extended beyond commerce, playing a significant role in the cultural sphere as well. In 1553, Ferrara saw the publication of the first Latin-letter Bible in Judeo-Spanish.

Another common destination for Sephardic Jews was the Low Countries, which had come under Habsburg rule in 1482 and later became part of the Spanish Empire through Charles V, grandson of the Catholic Kings. Despite their connection to Spain, the provinces maintained considerable autonomy. During the 16th century, the Protestant Reformation swept through the Netherlands, fostering an environment of religious freedom. This made the region an attractive haven for Sephardic Jews escaping the Inquisition. They found a more tolerant society in which they could engage in both economic and cultural activities, particularly in cities like Antwerp and Amsterdam. The Sephardic communities there flourished, contributing to the economic and cultural landscape. Prominent figures such as Jeronimo Nunes da Costa, Manuel de Belmonte, and David de Castro Tartas — who founded the first Spanish-language newspaper, *La Gazeta de Amsterdam* (1675-1690) — emerged from these communities (Diaz Noci 2001-2002). In 1657, Jews were officially recognized as full citizens of Amsterdam, allowing them to openly practice their religion. Over time, however, they became more disconnected from their Spanish heritage, increasingly adopting Dutch as their primary language. By the 18th century, the use of Judeo-Spanish had significantly diminished, eventually fading away altogether.

The Jewish communities of Amsterdam later played an essential role in establishing Jewish communities in Hamburg, London, and even the early United States. They also strengthened Jewish populations in the Caribbean. In England,

during the reign of George I (1714-1727), Jews born on English soil were granted citizenship without needing to convert to Christianity. By the late 19th century, there were an estimated number of 250,000 Jews in the UK, the majority of whom had integrated into British society (Angoso, no date).

A smaller number of Sephardic Jews settled in southern France, particularly in Bayonne and Bordeaux. Some estimates suggest that around 40,000 Sephardic Jews lived there during the French Revolution (Angoso, no date).

Over time, Sephardic communities in Western Europe gradually lost their connection to the Judeo-Spanish language, which had been a key cultural marker. In the Netherlands, while some literary works were produced in the 17th century, they did not reflect the same inspiration or linguistic characteristics as those from the Sephardic communities in the Balkans. Dutch gradually replaced Judeo-Spanish. In Italy, Ladino was similarly overtaken by Italian and the local Judeo-Italian dialects. In southern France, the language faded as well, surviving only in a few synagogue prayers (Romero 1992).

Sepharad 3 – Secondary diaspora deriving from 19th-20th century migration

The secondary Sephardic diaspora began to take shape in the 19th century, marked by openness to other cultures and societies. Unlike the primary diaspora, which was rooted in maintaining traditional customs and lifestyles, this new wave was characterized by Westernization. The collapse of the once-powerful Ottoman Empire, coupled with rising tensions in the Balkans and instability in North Africa, led many Sephardic Jews to seek security and new opportunities abroad. At this crucial moment, migration to the Americas and the ancestral lands of Israel and Judea became especially appealing. America, seen as a land of freedom and opportunity, offered the chance to start a new life, while Israel, established in 1948, held profound historical and religious significance for Sephardic Jews as the homeland of their ancestors.

In North America, Sephardic Jews primarily settled in New York, which had been a hub for Jewish communities since the days when it was New Amsterdam. By 1900, New York boasted the largest Jewish population in the world, comprising both Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews⁴. By the second half of the 20th century, the Sephardic population in the United States reached approximately 120,000, with the majority living in New York. However, due to the dominance of English and cultural assimilation, their Judeo-Spanish language gradually faded, and today it is estimated that only about 15,000 speakers remain.

With the establishment of the State of Israel, many Sephardic Jews returned to their ancestral homeland. However, as Israeli identity solidified and Hebrew became the dominant language, Sephardic traditions and Ladino began to decline. Despite this, Israel remains home to the largest Ladino-speaking community in the world, and efforts are being made to preserve this cultural heritage.

Beyond the United States and Israel, secondary Sephardic diasporas have also formed in Western Europe and South America. After World War II, many Sephardic Jews who had fled the Greek War of Independence or had been expelled from North African countries settled in France. Today, France hosts one of the largest Jewish

⁴ La diversidad ha definido durante mucho tiempo a la comunidad judía de EE. UU. *ShareAmerica*, 2022, <https://share.america.gov/es/la-diversidad-ha-definido-durante-mucho-tiempo-a-la-comunidad-judia-de-ee-uu/>

populations in Europe, with Sephardic Jews playing a vital role in French culture and public life. Notable figures from this community include Nobel Prize-winning author Patrick Modiano, Moroccan Jewish writer Éliette Abécassis, writer Clarisse Nicoïdski, historian and politician Esther Benbassa, singer and musician Enrico Macías, and philosopher Jacques Derrida.

As for the number of Ladino speakers, accurate data is scarce, and their numbers are likely very small, particularly in South America. Many Sephardic Jews in that region have adopted Spanish as their primary language to better integrate into local society and communicate more easily with the surrounding population.

Ladino

The language of the Sephardic people has several names, with Ladino and Judeo-Spanish being the most common today. In Romance linguistics, the term Judeo-Spanish is preferred, though *sefardí* or *español sefardí* is gaining ground among Spanish specialists. Some scholars differentiate between the two: Ladino refers specifically to liturgical translations from Hebrew, while Judeo-Spanish is used for everyday communication (Schwarzwald 2019). Most speakers of the language are bilingual or trilingual, and current estimates suggest around 200,000 speakers worldwide (Fodor 1999). However, according to Refael Shmuel, a professor at Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv and co-founder of the *Akademia Nasionala del Ladino* (National Ladino Academy), there may be between 350,000 and 500,000 Sephardic people in Israel who speak or have some knowledge of Ladino. Additionally, 200,000 to 300,000 Sephardim in America and Europe are thought to have varying levels of proficiency, though these are only rough estimates⁵. The term Sephardic itself is not always limited to Jews of Iberian descent, as it is sometimes used broadly to refer to non-Ashkenazi Jews in general.

Throughout history, Jewish communities, no matter where they lived, adopted elements of the local languages while retaining distinct Jewish interpretations and versions of those languages. This was the case in the Iberian Peninsula, as well as with Yiddish (based on German) and Judeo-Arabic (based on Arabic in North Africa). Jewish communities in Spain gradually formed a rich and unique identity through linguistic and cultural exchange. Before their expulsion from Spain, the Sephardic Jews considered the Spanish monarchy their homeland and spoke Spanish.

Numerous studies have explored how the Spanish spoken by the Sephardim before the expulsion might have differed from that of their Christian neighbours. Linguistic evidence suggests that, apart from some lexical differences related to lifestyle and traditions, the two groups likely spoke a very similar variety of Spanish (Penny 1996). During the reign of the Catholic Monarchs, Peninsular Spanish was in its Preclassical phase, and it was this version of Spanish that the Sephardim spoke. When Spanish underwent significant phonetic, morphological, and syntactic changes during the Golden Age (1492–1681), modern Spanish was born. Since the Sephardim were no longer part of Spain, their Judeo-Spanish language did not undergo these changes, leading to the view that it is an archaic form of Spanish. Many Spanish linguists consider Judeo-Spanish a dialect of Spanish, given their shared roots (Zamora Vicente 1985). However, this perspective is somewhat misleading, as Judeo-Spanish has developed independently over time and is now a distinct linguistic

⁵ Nadie sabe cuántos volverán a Sefarad. *eSefarad*, <https://esefarad.com/nadie-sabe-cuantos-volveran-a-sefarad/>

system. Rather than being a "frozen" version of Spanish, Ladino has evolved and acquired its own unique identity, separate from modern Spanish.

This study does not aim to provide a full linguistic analysis of Ladino but will highlight a few of its distinctive features. Phonetically, Ladino retains elements of Preclassical Spanish, such as the preservation of the palatal fricatives [ʃ] and [ç], which no longer exist in modern Spanish. Similarly, the medieval initial "f-" sound is maintained in words like *fazer* (modern Spanish *hacer*, 'to do'). The verb system in Ladino is also distinct, with forms like *so*, *se* (modern Spanish *soy*, 'I am'), and *sos*, *ses* (modern Spanish *eres*, 'you are'). Ladino does not use the polite form *usted* — which developed in Spain during the Golden Age — opting instead for *vos* or *él* for formal address (Fodor 1999).

Ladino's vocabulary can be divided into three main components. The core vocabulary is primarily Spanish, enriched with elements from other Ibero-Romance languages, such as Portuguese and regional dialects. Many of these Spanish elements are archaic, such as *topar* 'to find', *merkar* 'to buy', *agora* 'now', and *kavesal* 'pillow' (from Old Spanish *cabezal*). Ladino has also developed new words through internal linguistic evolution, using common Spanish roots combined with productive suffixes to create words like *chiquez* 'smallness', *derechedad* 'straightness', and *boracheza* 'drunkenness'. One unique verb in Ladino is *meldar* 'to read', derived from the Latin MELETARE 'to learn', which has no equivalent in modern Spanish. The third component of Ladino's vocabulary consists of loanwords and neologisms borrowed from the many languages Sephardic Jews came into contact with. For example, Turkish-origin words include *asquier* 'soldier', *uda* 'room', and *chelebí* 'lord'. Ladino also features Italianisms like *lavoro* 'work' and *libero* 'free', as well as Arabic words like *hazino* 'sick' and *anbar* 'warehouse' (Gruss 2019). French has influenced Ladino as well, contributing words such as *orozo* 'happy' and *suetar* 'to wish'. Hebrew has played a significant role in Ladino from the beginning, contributing both religious and everyday terms, such as *menora* and *kipá* (Lapesa 1980). An interesting example of Hebrew influence is the word *desmazalado* 'unfortunate', which blends Spanish with the Hebrew word *mazal* 'luck' and shows that Judeo-Spanish borrowed not only religious but also general expressions from Hebrew (Schwarzwald 2019). Even the Spanish word for God, *Dio* in Ladino (instead of *Dios*), reflects this influence, as Sephardic speakers removed the final -s to avoid any associations with the Christian Trinity (Lapesa 1980).

There are various ways to periodize Ladino's history, one of which divides it into three main stages (Gruss 2019):

1. The development of its characteristics and functions
2. The period of its flourishing, during which it was widely used for both oral and written communication
3. Its decline

The first period of Ladino's development spans from the pre-exile era until the 17th century. During this time, the linguistic unity with Spanish was broken, and Ladino began to evolve with its distinct characteristics. A linguistic consciousness gradually emerged.

The second period begins in the 18th century. As noted in the historical context, Ladino persisted longest in the eastern diaspora, and since we have little written documentation of the western Moroccan areas, we can trace its heyday mainly in the Balkans. In the 17th century, after the disillusionment following the failed messianic claims of Shabatai Zevi, literary activity primarily focused on reprinting liturgical

texts. However, a group of writers emerged intending to revitalize traditional religious values and strengthen the community's identity. To reach a broad audience, these efforts needed to be communicated in a language that everyone could understand — thus began the golden age of Ladino. Sephardic printing presses flourished, producing a wide range of works in Ladino well into the 20th century. In the 19th century, the Alliance Israélite Universelle schools not only promoted the "Frenchization" of students but also exposed Sephardic Jews in the Ottoman Empire to Western, non-Jewish cultural influences, which had previously been unfamiliar to them. While traditional religious literature remained important, new secular genres began to appear, including journalism, theatre, drama, fiction, biography, and narrative works (Romero 1992). Efforts were made to modernize Ladino and elevate it to the level of a literary language. Although no formal language normalization body existed at the time, the press played a significant role in standardizing the language to some extent.

The 20th century marked the decline of Ladino, due to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, widespread emigration, and the devastating impact of the Holocaust.

Literature in Ladino

Traditional religious literature

Between the 16th and 20th centuries, 140 partial or complete translations of the Bible were produced in Judeo-Spanish. Several of these translations were published in Thessaloniki, including the first and second books of Chronicles (1573-1586), the Book of Psalms (1585-1583), and the Song of Songs (1600), among others. The Ferrara Bible (1553), edited by Abraham Usque (also known as Duarte Pinel) and Yom Tob Athias (Jerónimo de Vargas), was published in two editions and reprinted several times in Amsterdam during the 17th century. Another significant translation, by Abraham Asa, appeared in Constantinople in the 18th century (1739-1745), featuring both the Hebrew text and the Judeo-Spanish translation for the first time.

Many other publications aimed to reinforce and promote Jewish thought and tradition. Notable among these are the homilies of Rabbi Moses Almosnino of Salonika, entitled *Regimiento de la Vida* (1564), which he wrote as a life guide for his son. Another key work is *Me'am Lo'ez*, a renowned commentary on the Hebrew Bible written in Judeo-Spanish, published in Constantinople in 1730 under the direction of Rabbi Jacob Kuli. Numerous revised editions appeared in the 19th century, expanding the body of Biblical commentaries, including Menahem Mitrani's *The Book of Joshua* and Refael Pontremoli's *The Book of Esther* (Gruss 2019).

One of the most important genres of traditional Ladino literature was the *copla*, a paraliturgical verse song. This genre thrived from the 18th to the 20th century, proving Ladino's capability for not only translations and prose but also poetry. More than 400 *coplas* have survived, characterized by variable metrics and structured in stanzas, sometimes guided by the content or arranged through acrostics (where the first letters of each line spell out a word). Many *coplas* included refrains and often employed half-rhyme (Díaz-Mas 2003). Their content ranged widely, from poems about holidays and moral teachings to reflections on the history of the Jewish community, recounting events such as fires and wars, or commenting on contemporary changes in fashion and customs. Men typically sang these songs by reading from booklets printed in cities like Constantinople, Izmir, Livorno, or

Thessaloniki. The primary purpose of the *copla* was to transmit Jewish values to the Sephardic people (Weich-Shahak 2011).

Sephardic *romances*, part of the community's folklore, were epic lyrical poems passed down orally, most often through song. Structurally and thematically, these *romances* were rooted in medieval Spanish tradition. The Jewish communities preserved the themes of this era but also adapted them over time, incorporating new topics and motifs, either of their creation or borrowed from the cultures of their host societies (Díaz-Mas 2005). These songs were not only performed for entertainment but also played a role in various aspects of daily life: they were sung to lull children to sleep, set a rhythm for work, and were performed at celebrations such as weddings and circumcisions, as well as at moments of mourning.

New genres

The rise of the press in the 19th century played an essential role in shaping Sephardic communities, driving modernisation, education, and the spread of information. It also introduced new genres, including novels, poems, plays, and humorous writings, offering fresh perspectives on entertainment and leisure. Over 300 different newspapers were published across various locations, with notable concentrations in Thessaloniki (105 newspapers), Constantinople (45), Sofia (30), and Izmir (23). Ladino-language press also emerged in cities such as Vienna, New York, and Jerusalem. A few key examples include *Puertas del Oriente* in Izmir (1845), *La Luz de Israel* in Istanbul (1853), and *El Avenir* in Thessaloniki (1898). Some sources even cite the founding of *El Luzero* in Hungary in 1905 (Fodor 1999). After World War II, several Ladino newspapers were published in Israel, such as *La Boz de Israel* (1949), *La Verdad* (1949-1972), and *Aki Yerushalayim* (1979-2017).

Ladino novels appeared relatively late, towards the end of the 19th century, focusing on traditional and historical themes like the lives of *conversos* in Spain or the Inquisition, along with adventure and detective stories. Many of these novels were serialized in newspapers. One of the most famous and beloved Ladino authors was Yitzhak Ben Rubi Bitti (1903-1977), whose works, written during the second half of the 20th century, include *El sekreto del mudo* (1952), set in the Sephardic community of Salonika, *El amor ke mata* (1955), and *Sangre, fuego y amor* (1962).

Theatre also flourished during this time, with numerous amateur theatre companies forming to perform plays in Ladino. Laura Papo Bohoreta (1891-1942), a Bosnian Sephardic writer, translator, and playwright, was the first to write plays in Judeo-Spanish. In the 1930s, her works, such as *Avia de ser* and *La madrastra el nombre le abasta*, were performed in Sarajevo and Belgrade. Yitzhak Ben Rubi, in addition to his novels, authored two plays: *Simón Blum* (1933) and *Lokos con seriedad* (1952).

Modern Ladino poetry found expression in the works of poets such as Clarisse Nicoidski (*Lus ojus. las manus, la boca* 1978), Margalit Matitiahu (*Kurtijo kemado* 1988), and Myriam Moscona (*Tela de sevoya*). Common themes in their poetry include death, silence, and the imminent disappearance of the Sephardic past (Sefamí 2012).

The Ladino spelling

Looking at all this religious and secular literature, one might wonder how these texts were written. Initially, Hispanic Jews transcribed their language using Hebrew script, a practice known as *Aljamía*. This system remained in use until the early 20th century,

though some works, such as the Ferrara Bible mentioned earlier, were written in Latin script. After the expulsion, the Hebrew alphabet continued to be used in both the Eastern and Western Sephardic diasporas, while those who fled to Western Europe adopted the Latin alphabet. The Hebrew script had various forms, with the Rashi alphabet being the most common for printed works. To make reading easier, vowels were often marked in addition to consonants.

In the modern era, the continued use of Hebrew and Rashi script came to be seen by many as an obstacle to Ladino's survival and modernisation, prompting a gradual transition to the Latin script. This shift was accelerated by several factors, including Kemal Atatürk's language reforms in Turkey, which mandated the use of Latin letters, and the educational influence of the French-language schools run by the Alliance Israélite Universelle. For many students, writing in Hebrew script became a thing of the past or was no longer familiar.

The switch to Latin script, however, posed challenges in accurately representing the sounds of Judeo-Spanish. As previously noted, there has never been a unified standard for Ladino transliteration, leading to different systems. There is a Turkish-style transcription that uses typical Turkish symbols, one that follows French phonetic rules, and the *Aki Yerushalayim* transcription, which is now the most commonly used. Since its inception, the *Aki Yerushalayim* newspaper sought to impose some order on the chaotic state of Latin transliteration. The spelling system it adopted is phonetic, meaning that each sound is represented by a letter, and each letter corresponds to a single sound. This method is straightforward and practical, making it accessible for people to read and use.

Efforts to preserve the language

During the 20th century, Ladino began to decline as new social and cultural changes nearly eradicated Sephardic culture. In the emerging Balkan states, the language lost its prestige among Sephardic Jews. Assimilation, waves of migration, the deportation and destruction of Sephardic communities during the Holocaust, the creation of the State of Israel, and the rise of Hebrew all severely impacted Ladino. Additionally, the shift in writing systems created a generational gap, as younger people were unfamiliar with traditional scripts and grew less connected to religious traditions.

Many scholars and community members have expressed concern that Ladino is on the verge of extinction. However, there is a paradoxical trend: as the language falls out of daily use and is spoken less in homes, interest in Ladino has grown, revealing an unexpected vitality. Increasingly, surveys and studies are being conducted on Ladino. For example, in 2007, Elterné Czöndör Klára researched the language use of participants in the *Ladinokomunita* online forum⁶, concluding that Ladino was primarily spoken within families, especially with older generations and friends, while its public use was minimal. Although many acknowledged Ladino's endangered status, few took active steps to pass it on.

In a 2020 study, Shmuel Refael Vivante, a professor at Bar-Ilan University's Salti Institute, surveyed attitudes toward Ladino in Israel. Respondents recognized the importance of preserving the language and emphasized its distinctiveness from Spanish. They acknowledged the challenges of transmission but stressed that formal education could secure its future. The study also highlighted Ladino's precarious state

⁶Ladinokomunita is a popular online discussion group where Judeo-Spanish is actively used (<http://www.sephardicstudies.org/komunita.html>)

in Israel, urging both personal and institutional efforts to preserve and develop the language.

Today, modern media helps facilitate the flow of information about Ladino and Sephardic culture. Numerous websites, such as the Society for Sephardic Studies, Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood of America, and CSIC (Spanish National Research Council) offer insights into the language and its heritage. *eSefarad: Noticias del Mundo Sefarad* provides weekly updates on Ladino and Sephardic communities, while *Kol Israel* and *Radio Exterior de España* broadcast regular Ladino-language programs, promoting and maintaining Sephardic culture and language.

At the institutional level, efforts to preserve Ladino have gained traction. In 1997, Israel established the *Autoridad Nacional del Ladino* (National Ladino Authority) to study and protect the language. The organization collects and catalogues Ladino literary works, publishes contemporary authors, and organizes cultural programs to introduce Sephardic traditions to the community.

Several universities, including the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Bar-Ilan University of Tel-Aviv, are actively involved in Ladino research and education. Bar-Ilan's Salti Institute offers advanced degrees in Ladino studies.

Another important development came in 2015 when the Spanish legislature allowed Sephardic descendants to apply for citizenship, seeking to redress the historical injustice against the Jews expelled from Spain. By 2019, over 241,000 people had applied for Spanish citizenship under this law, with 71,795 successfully receiving it. The law expired in October 2019⁷.

In the same year, the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE) recognized the importance of Ladino by electing eight academics in the field to its ranks. In 2018, the National Judeo-Spanish Academy was established in Israel, succeeding the *Autoridad Nacional del Ladino* and becoming the 24th member of the Association of Spanish Language Academies. One of its key goals is the standardization of Ladino spelling.

Summary

Closer ties with Spain allowed Sephardic communities to reconnect with and enrich the culture from which they were once expelled. Examining Ladino's history, we can discover how the language has evolved and adapted over time, resisting extinction. Sephardic communities have contributed to the richness of cultural diversity, showing that identity is never one-dimensional, it is not static but an ever-changing concept. Their experience demonstrates how cultures and languages can develop and adapt to shifting contexts, while the spirit of the past remains present.

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Links

Ladinokomunita <http://www.sephardicstudies.org/komunita.html>

Ministerio de Justicia

https://www.mjusticia.gob.es/es/Ciudadano/Nacionalidad/Documents/Estad%c3%adsticas%20nacionalidad%2030_09_2023.pdf

SZEFARADBÓL A NAGYVILÁGBA: AZ ÖRÖKSÉG TOVÁBB ÉL

RÓZSAVÁRI NÓRA

A ladino nyelv fontos szerepet tölt be a szefárd identitásban és kulturális örökségben, mivel az 1492-ben az Ibériai-félszigetről elűzött spanyol ajkú zsidók leszármazottainak örökségét testesíti meg. Ez a nyelv nem csupán egy nyelvi keverék; egyedi fúziója az óspanyolnak, valamint a héber, arab, török, görög, olasz, francia és egyéb nyelvek elemeinek, amelyek tükrözik azokat a változatos régiókat és kultúrákat, amelyekkel a szefárd zsidók évszázadok alatt találkoztak. A ladino a szefárd közösségekben széles földrajzi területen fejlődött és virágzott, beleértve a Balkánt, Észak-Afrikát, a keleti mediterrán térséget, végül pedig az amerikai kontinent is, alkalmazkodott minden egyes helyszínhez, miközben megtartotta spanyol alapjait. A ladino, mint a szefárd történelem és értékek élő tárháza, a történetmesélés, költészet, zene, vallási kifejezés és a mindennapi kommunikáció eszköze volt, megtestesítve az állandóságot és az ellenálló képességet. Az anyanyelvi beszélők számának csökkenésével a ladinót ma már veszélyeztetett nyelvként tartják számon. Kulturális és történelmi jelentőségének felismerése jegyében számos kezdeményezés irányul napjainkban megőrzésére és újjáélesztésére. Tudósok, kulturális szervezetek és különböző közösségek tagjai működnek együtt a nyelv dokumentálásában, új irodalmi művek létrehozásában, tanításában, valamint a digitális médiában való használatának elősegítésében. Ezen erőfeszítések célja, hogy a ladino továbbra is a szefárd kultúra élő és tartós része maradjon.

Kulcsszavak: ladino, nyelvi örökség, kulturális örökség, többnyelvű hatások, identitás