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An Overview of Ladino: The Origins, Survival and Resurgence of Judeo-Spanish

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An Overview of Ladino: The Origins, Survival and Resurgence of Judeo-Spanish

An Overview of Ladino: The Origins, Survival and Resurgence of Judeo-Spanish

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Teaching degree at
the SIT Graduate Institute,
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Abstract

This paper will examine the historic and linguistic roots of the development of the language of Ladino, also referred to as Judeo-Spanish. The paper explores the early Jewish community in medieval Spain and the development of a dialect of Spanish and Hebrew. The paper will also examine the results of the community's expulsion from Spain in the 1490s and the consequential Diaspora. The paper analyzes the linguistic components of Ladino and the role of print media, both journalistic and creative, in its survival. The paper also discusses the resurgence in interest in Ladino since the Holocaust and its current uses via online Internet pages, in educational programs and in a variety of heritage and cultural interests.

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Educational Resources Information Center Descriptors:

Jews

Spanish

Hebrew

Cultural Pluralism

Uncommonly Taught Languages

Cultural Awareness

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1. Introduction

This paper began as a self-reflection of my own connection to the subject that I teach. I am a high school Spanish teacher in the United States. As a non-native speaker I have always had a nagging doubt that I was somehow ‘unqualified’ to teach the language. Language is one of the most intimate and personal connections to a culture. As a non-native speaker, there is often a self-consciousness and hyperawareness of one’s alien stance in another language. The nuances and cultural implications of Spanish always seemed to be slightly out of my reach. The initial proposition of this paper was to find a link between my heritage as an American Jew to the Spanish language and culture so my teaching would be more ‘authentic.’ The link that I discovered is the language of Judeo-Spanish; an odd and beautiful mixture of two languages that are both important to me.

As I began to delve into this project, it became clear that a very rich and interesting story lay beneath the surface connection of Judaism and Spain. Despite the break between Spanish Jews and Spain in the late fifteenth century, a remnant of that relationship still exists in the twenty-first century: Ladino. The story of the language of Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish, is multifaceted. It is a narrative of how political and economic maneuvering led to a global dispersal of a language. It is the story about a language of a small community that was almost obliterated by the Inquisition and the Holocaust. And it is an account of how human desire to know one’s family history has led to a resurgence and re-emergence of an old language.

In the same year that Christopher Columbus (Cristobal Colón in Spanish) set sail for the Americas, another group of people were also setting out from Spain. The Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabel, had issued a proclamation of expulsion of all Jews who did not convert to

An Overview of Ladino: The Origins, Survival and Resurgence of Judeo-Spanish Catholicism. While the exact number is not known for certain, according to Joseph Pérez, somewhere between fifty and one hundred thousand Jews left Spain by the end of 1492 (2004). While for the fifteenth century this was a significant number of people, it was by no means a mass exodus. So the question becomes, how does a language spoken by a relatively small community in medieval Spain survive into the modern day and why does it matter? There are several factors involved in its survival that will be discussed in this paper including the Diaspora of the Sephardic Jews (Sephardim); cultural and religious norms of the Sephardim; the appearance of Ladino text written in the Latin alphabet and modern quest to discover one's heritage and roots.

2. An Overview of Jewish History in Spain

Before the above questions can be answered, we must explore the history of the Jewish people living in the Iberian Peninsula prior to 1492. While Jews were present in Iberia during the rule of the Roman Empire and then the Christian Visigoth kings, the relevant time period of this section focuses on the eras of Moorish and Catholic rule. The Moors, Muslims from North Africa, ruled most of the Iberian Peninsula from 711 C.E. until around 1230 C.E. and were defeated entirely by 1490 (Lau & Tan, 1993). Most historians view this as the most tolerant era of Spanish history. Following the collapse of the Roman Empire, Europe devolved into fragmented states with illiterate, uneducated populations living in poverty. Spain, under Arab rule, was none of those things. The Muslim emirs resurrected the economy through trade and technological advances and “introduced Europeans to Hindu-Arabic numerals, higher mathematics, new medical techniques and fresh approaches to philosophy (Lowney, 2005).”

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While in the most simplistic view this was an age when the three major monotheistic religions (Christianity, Islam and Judaism) co-existed in harmony, the reality is there was a much more complex dynamic among them. The Arab emirs were foreign rulers and quickly realized the native populations would be easier to control through benevolence rather than brutal repression. They were tolerant of local Christian and Jewish communities already in residence, but only to a necessary degree. Christians and Jews were viewed as ‘people of the Book’ and were therefore, able to practice their religions openly and freely. This does not mean, however, they had equal footing as compared to Muslims. ‘Non-believers’ were subject to heavy taxation as well as codified discrimination from the Muslim overlords (Pérez, 2004).

While Christians unhappy with their lot in Arab Spain had the choice to flee to the Christian controlled Northern Spain, Jews had no such option. But neither did they suffer as badly under Muslim rule as they had under Roman Christian rulers. Jews quickly integrated into the Muslim hierarchy; learning Arabic and specializing in trade and finance. These newly acquired skills allowed the Jews to enter into administrative posts of the Moorish government, particularly the rather onerous ones such as tax collection (Pérez, 2004). The Moors, ever fearful of Christian uprisings, placed the Jewish minority in positions of temporary authority over Christians; a divide and conquer methodology (Lowney, 2005). However, the Jewish population was always at the mercy and dependence of their Moorish masters. ‘Non-believers’ could contribute to society, but would always be considered second-class citizens. If a Jewish merchant or administrator acquired too much power or influence, he could easily find his fortunes reversed.

An example of such is given in *A Vanished World: Muslims, Christians and Jews in Medieval Spain* by Chris Lowney. Lowney describes the rise and fall of the family of Samuel ha-Nagid in the 1010s C.E. in the city of Córdoba. Samuel rose to unparalleled heights as a military

An Overview of Ladino: The Origins, Survival and Resurgence of Judeo-Spanish commander of Muslim forces. However, his success rested on continued success. While he maintained his position of authority, he was able to protect the local Jewish community from high tax rates and attacks from less tolerant Muslim neighbors. Following Samuel's death, his son Joseph inherited his administrative posts, but not the respect held by his father. Joseph quickly encountered resentment and hatred from the Muslim population that had been forced to bow down to Samuel during his heyday. This animosity boiled over into a deadly Muslim riot in the Jewish quarter (2005). The protection offered by Samuel ha-Nagid was limited to his lifetime.

There was discord within Jewish communities as well. Many of the devout Jews felt that it was scandalous at best (heretical at worst) to willingly serve the Muslim rulers¹ and to publicly engage with them. Economic divisions exacerbated the issue. The working class and the scholars felt that their brethren had sold-out. Those with government posts, wealthy merchants and moneylenders viewed their services not only as a means for personal gain but as a way to safeguard the Jewish community. There was always a sense of balancing on an edge: preserve traditions and religious law yet navigate the demands of secular living; maintain one's identity yet accommodate another's. While life under Muslim rule could be precarious at times, it was for the most part stable. Life would become far more dangerous under Christian rule.

In the year 1212 C.E. the various northern kingdoms of Spain united under the call of the Pope Innocent III to push the Muslims out of the Iberian Peninsula. The Christian kings were able to drive the Moors almost completely out of Spain (Lau & Tan, 1993). Although the kings then engaged in wars amongst each other, they succeeded in reverting the area back to Catholicism. The Muslims might have viewed the Jews as 'non-believers,' but the Catholics saw

¹ The same issue would arise regarding Christian monarchs.

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them as the murderers of their deity. The Jewish communities in the conquered territories now found themselves with masters who viewed them as an economic necessity but a religious scourge. Despite a lull at the beginning of the re-conquest, anti-Semitism would rear its ugly head all too soon.

During this time of constant warring between Christian kingdoms and Moorish territories, the Jews filled the void left by able-bodied men fighting the Crusades. They were:

not only farmers, artisans and merchants, but also physicians, land surveyors, engineers, mathematicians, salt miners, tax collectors, tax farmers, administrators, translators, diplomatic emissaries, and functionaries in a variety of other professions, in which they excelled and kept perfecting themselves from generation to generation. (Netanyahu, 1995 pp.64-65)

They performed vital tasks to keep the fragile Christian kingdoms from falling back under Muslim control or for that matter, into chaos. The Christian kings recognized the important contributions their Jewish subjects provided and valued their loyalty and industriousness. Due to these factors, the kings welcomed outstanding Jewish individuals into their courts and allowed them unprecedented access into royal financial and administrative matters (Netanyahu, 1995). This prosperous and fairly serene epoch would only last for a short time.

While vital to the kingdoms in which they lived, Jews were not citizens and remained 'outsiders' to the mainstream Christian culture and yet they fell under the direct protection of the kings. For a couple of centuries, the monarchs either tempered or failed to enforce the papal mandates coming from Rome regarding how Christians and Jews were to interact. For example the Council of Lateran of 1215 had stressed that contact between Jews and Christians was to be solely limited to economic transactions (Pérez, 2004). However, it wasn't until the Cortes of Valladolid in 1351 that royal agreements were made to have Jews live in separate quarters of the city (Netanyahu, 1995). It becomes apparent the monarchs had not been enforcing papal

An Overview of Ladino: The Origins, Survival and Resurgence of Judeo-Spanish instructions or at least limiting their full implementation. Events were unfolding that would lead to the Catholic monarchs removing their protection. Their outsider status, their influence at court and the devastating Black Death would soon lead to a very dark period for the Jews. The Jewish community had long viewed itself as an ‘outsider’ community, living in exile, awaiting the return of the Messiah and a chance to return to the holy land. As such, they had maintained separateness from the local cultures where they resided. Many, even prior to laws requiring them to live apart from Christian society, chose to live in segregated areas and neighborhood known as *aljamas*² (Rawlings, 2006). The *aljamas* were self-contained mini-societies that allowed for relative autonomy. The Black Death spread through the Iberian Peninsula in the mid-fourteenth century, decimating the population. The Jews living in the *aljamas* fared far better than society at large due to their segregation and many religious laws exhorting cleanliness. With the Jewish population largely spared, their perceived wealth intact, and an aura of ‘otherness,’ the popular masses, provoked by anti-Semitic clerics, viewed the Jews as the source of the tragedy that had befallen them. Beginning in 1391, the Sephardim would find themselves, first, the targets of deadly popular riots, and then later, legal persecution (Rawlings, 2006). Pérez writes of the violence that spread through the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon:

From Seville, the rioting spread to the whole kingdom of Castile. In Cordova, Ubeda, Baeza, etc. similar scenes of looting and murder were repeated. The *aljama* of Ciudad Real was wiped out, and those of Toledo and Cuenca were sacked...the violence soon spread to Aragon. In the month of August 1391, Saragossa, Barcelona, Lerida, Gerona, Valencia and Majorca were all affected. The same scenes were repeated everywhere – massacres, rape, looting - and the same consequences followed: many Jews converted, others fled. (2004, pp. 9)

² . The *aljamas* will play an important role in the development of Ladino and will be explored further in the next chapter.

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The fear, intimidation and the on-going persecution lead many Jews to convert to Christianity. Approximately half of the 200,000 Jews of Spain chose conversion (Rawlings, 2006). While conversion was not required at this point, it was recognized as the most viable route of survival. These New Christians or *conversos*³, were initially absorbed into the Christian culture with little controversy. *Conversos* no longer faced the same obstacles that their Jewish counterparts did and quickly became important members of the ruling society. *Conversos*, with their deep financial pockets, married into the nobility and some even became members of the Catholic clergy. The bishop of Burgos, of the late fourteenth century, was originally a rabbi named Salomon ha-Levi (Pérez, 2004).

However, for the vast majority of the New Christians, their conversion was based more upon coercion and necessity, then a deep religious belief. While not rejecting their new faith, many *conversos*, still practiced⁴ some aspects of Judaism such as; abstention from eating pork, the keeping of the Sabbath on Saturday, reading and speaking Hebrew, or lighting oil lamps on Friday evenings (Rawlings, 2006). For “Old” Christians, this awakened a deep suspicion and fear of religious corruption that would eventually lead to the institution known as the “Holy Inquisition.”

While the reasons behind the Inquisition are myriad and complex, the official reason given by the monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, was the rooting out of heretics in the now Catholic Spain. Isabella, while an astute queen, was also pious. Despite the many benefits her Jewish and *converso* subjects brought her, she was a devout Catholic and would not tolerate heresy in the

³ Sometimes called *marranos* as well. *Marrano* is derived from words related to pigs and dirtiness, so it was also used as an insult.

⁴ The *Kol Nidrei* service preceding *Yom Yippur* (Day of Atonement) includes a statement disavowing all personal oaths and pledges made the previous year. While the statement predates the Inquisition, many *conversos* used it as a way to cleanse their spiritual unfaithfulness.

An Overview of Ladino: The Origins, Survival and Resurgence of Judeo-Spanish kingdom. The queen established the Holy Office of the Inquisition in order to ferret out ‘false’ Christians. It is a common mistake to assume that the Jewish community was the direct target of the Inquisition. Anti-Semitism was the underlying reason, but the Inquisition was intended to find judaizing Christians (Lowney, 2005). In 1482 Isabella’s personal confessor, Tomás de Torquemada, became the first Grand Inquisitor. Torquemada authorized thousands of *auto-de-fes* (trials, torture and burnings at the stake) of those suspected of being secret Jews (Kritzler, 2008). As the Inquisition spread through Spain, suspicion did fall on unconverted Jews as well. The situation for Jews deteriorated further and it was only a matter of time before it became untenable.

With pressure now coming from the Office of the Inquisition and from the general masses, Ferdinand and Isabella issued a royal decree of expulsion on 31 March 1492. Jews had four months to either, convert, leave or face the death penalty. Spain had to be purified of its ‘Jewish problem’.⁵ The remaining Jewish population was now faced with a terrible dilemma: convert and possibly face the Inquisition; flee, penniless, for shores unknown; or remain with a price on their head. August 1, 1492, the day Christopher Columbus set sail on his historic voyage, was also the day Spain banished its Jews from its shores (Kritzler, 2008)⁶. The Sephardim now faced the second Diaspora.

In the map below it is possible to see where and when they dispersed. It is paradoxical to note that the intention of the Spanish monarchs to eliminate the Jews had the opposite effect. The Sephardim became a global community stretching from the shores of the New World all the way

⁵ It is interesting to note that the expulsion of the ‘Jewish Problem’ is what led to Ladino spreading throughout Europe, into Greece and Turkey, North Africa and the Americas. The infamous final solution of the ‘Jewish Problem’ of Nazi Germany is what led to the near disappearance of Ladino.

⁶ The date may not be as much of a coincidence as it seems. There have been rumors in the Jewish community for centuries that Columbus was descended from either a Jewish or *converso* family in Genoa, Italy. Kritzler offers some intriguing conjecture on the subject in his book “Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean.”

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3. What is Ladino?

With the dispersal to various parts of the globe, the Sephardic community had to make many adjustments and sacrifices. With all the changes, they clung to their religious practices and their language. That language is known today by many names: *Ladino*, *Judeo-Espanyol*, *Judeo-Spanish*, *djudezmo*, and *djudó* are some of them. At the time of the Expulsion, it was simply known as *Espanyol*.

There are some differences implied by name choice. Ladino historically refers to liturgical use and was the preferred method of religious instruction by rabbis to those who spoke Spanish. Marie-Christine Varol, explains it as “this artificial language, using solely the vocabulary of Spanish, follows word for word the syntax and even the morphology of Hebrew” (Varol, 2008, p. 14). Judeo-Spanish is communally described as the colloquial, social language. Despite the religious connotation, Ladino has also become a term synonymous with Judeo-Spanish and is often the most easily recognized term for the layman. For the purpose of this paper, Ladino will refer to the religious and social aspects of the language and Judeo-Spanish refers solely to the social language.

Within the scholarly community there is some debate as to whether Judeo-Spanish constituted a separate language or dialect in pre-Expulsion Spain. Some scholars believe the Spanish spoken by the Jews varied only slightly from Christian Spanish. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, Jews lived in the segregated *aljamas*. Given the amount of linguistic research that suggests community segregation leads to linguistic variation⁹, it seems apparent that Judeo-Spanish was different from contemporary Christian Spanish (Miller, 2009). While

⁹ Researchers such as Basil Bernstein, J.K. Chambers, and William Labov have written extensively on sociolinguistic variation.

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Jews must have spoken standard Spanish with the wider Christian community in the royal courts or in the marketplaces, within the *aljamas* it was more probable that a distinctive linguistic standard was employed. The religious and cultural importance of Hebrew, meshed with contemporary Spanish¹⁰ and remnants of Arabic most likely formed the beginnings of Ladino.

Ladino, in its initial form, was limited to the three languages above. With the Expulsion and following Diaspora, Ladino would be influenced by many other languages. The main structure of the language remains Medieval Spanish, but the non-Spanish elements are what have changed it from a dialect to an outright separate language with its own dialects. The movement of the Sephardim to many parts of the world had created a language whose existence depended on both segregation from and adoption of the local languages. This duality led to variances in vocabulary and sound of Ladino depending upon the speaker's origin. Linguistic elements come from Italian, French, Turkish, Greek, Balkan languages, and to a lesser degree, English.

While pronunciation varies region to region, the most important aspect of these borrowings relates to vocabulary. In her discussion of multilingualism, Varol writes about the importance of preserving a multilingual Ladino:

There are those who would seek to purge Judeo-Spanish of its borrowings, but then it would not survive as Judeo-Spanish. Irony, distance, puns, the endless play on meanings and stylistic nuances bouncing back and forth, make this language of quotations, double entendres, discreet jokes that seem indecipherable, of implied or overly-clear meanings, into an original and eternally renewed linguistic system steeped in a devastating sense of humor that can only be achieved through a knowledge of several languages- a knowledge that gives it its strength, its richness and its freedom. (Varol, 2008, p. 18)

¹⁰ Spanish of the Middle Ages was not a language with an established set of rules. There were spelling, grammar and syntactical variations among Catalan, Aragonese, Castilian, Gallego, Andalusian etc.

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It is the effect of having a multilingual experience that makes Ladino what it is. The incorporation of various languages from newly adopted homelands, in essence, allowed Ladino to flourish and grow.

Vocabulary, phonetics, and syntactical structure were incorporated from each of the above languages into Ladino creating a rich variety of dialects. For example, the Spanish phoneme *ch* has been changed into the French *ç* for many French and Turkish speakers of Ladino and the French phonemes *ö* and *ü* are also common to modern Ladino.

Since the creation of the modern State of Israel, much has been done to standardize the pronunciation, writing and lexicon of Ladino. The challenge has been to do so without restricting the natural variations of the language. The image below from *The Manuel of Judeo-Spanish* (Varol, 2008) gives a more detailed look at a few of the pronunciation norms that have been adopted by many Judeo-Spanish textbooks and dictionaries. Despite a normalization among most printed materials, many communities maintain distinct pronunciation habits that reflect the regional development of the language

Symbol	As spelled
[a]	a: el kal , ayá
[b]	b: Shabad , bever , la djumba (cf. English boy)
[d]	d: danyo , dos , ánde , sivdad (cf. dog)
	Between two vowels:
[d̥]:	d: el dedo , la boda (cf. those)
[e]	e: este , beve , el
[f]	f: fransé , falso , bafo
	Before the [w] sound the f tends to become h [x]: fui ⇒ hui – esfuenyo ⇒ es-huenyo (Note: a hyphen is inserted to separate the -s and -h; do not pronounce as -sh.)
[g]	g: guay , gayna , godro , gato (cf. gallon)
	Before the [w] the g sounds like a slight guttural h
[g̊]	g: agua , djugueves

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As there are many oral variations of Ladino, there are also several written differentiations as well. Religious Ladino was and is, for the most part, Spanish transliterated into the Hebrew alphabet. Other Judeo-Spanish documents were also transliterated in the same manner.

For non-religious texts this writing style was known as *Aljamiado*. There can be a few difficulties in using this method due to the fact that Hebrew does not have certain consonantal sounds nor vowel letters. Vowels are constituted of dashes, dots and comma-like markings that are placed beside, above or below the consonants. The position and consonant have an effect on the pronunciation of the vowel. In traditional Hebrew writing, the vowels are left out almost all together. In the introduction of the Concise Dictionary of Ladino-English the authors discuss this issue:

However, vowels are quite significant in Spanish and Judeo-Spanish. The Aljamiado written system, which was formalized after the advent of printing presses in the Ottoman Empire, partially resolved the problem, by co-option of a limited number of consonants which would serve as vowels. Other difficulties in Aljamiado were consonantal sounds in Judeo-Spanish which did not exist in Hebrew, and single sounds represented by more than one Hebrew consonant. (Kohen & Kohen-Gordon, 2000, p. 2)

Another custom related to Hebrew is the manner in which to read it. Hebrew, and many other Semitic languages, are read and therefore written from right to left.

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WRITING SYSTEMS IN JUDEO-SPANISH				
Latin character	Cursive character (Solitreo)	"Rashi" character	Square character	Examples
a		א	א	אמיוגו amigo
b		ב	ב	בוקה boka
v		ב'	ב'	ב'אזו vazo
g		ג	ג	גאיו gayo
dj / ch		ג'	ג'	ג'ינטי djente ג'יקו chiko
d		ד	ד	דולור dolor

Two other Hebrew based written forms that have fallen out of practice, are known as *Soletreo*¹¹ and *Rashi*. *Rashi* was the print form of characters, while *Soletreo* was a cursive, handwriting style (Varol, 2008). The image above illustrates the different writing styles. With the dispersal of Sephardim to many European areas and the introduction of the Latin alphabet in Turkey, the Hebraized forms of writing fell by the way side in favor of the Latin alphabet.

The introduction of the Latin alphabet profoundly altered Ladino as a written medium. With older forms of written Ladino an extensive knowledge base of Hebrew was required for both readers and writers. With a Latin alphabet a larger audience had access to the language. This allowed for an increased dissemination of written materials to a community spread over vast distances. In the next chapter I will examine how this print material solidified and modernized the language as well.

¹¹ Also written as *Solitreo*, it was also called 'ganchos' (hooks in Spanish) in the Jewish areas of the Ottoman Empire. (Kohen & Kohen-Gordon, 2000)

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4. Analysis of Ladino in a print context (newspapers, poetry, autobiography)

As a language moves from being an oral mode of communication, into a written format the purpose of the language changes. Ladino is no different in its evolution.

Aside from the daily use of Judeo-Spanish for familial and business interactions, there was an initial literary context. Most of these early texts were written in Hebrew script. There were carry-over Spanish court traditions such as the *coplas* and *romances*. These medieval couplets and poems showcased the juxtaposition of biblical knowledge with the secular topics of the day.

There were many religious texts as well. The *Bet Yosef* and *Shulhan Aruch*, for example, codified the laws according to Sephardic interpretation. Readers were also able to ponder on the works of the Jewish philosopher Maimonides and the subsequent commentary. This limited the literate community to those who had significant training in Hebrew and studied Torah. The general Sephardic community had far less exposure to Hebrew-based print material.

None the less, the Sephardim exile community had a long history of printing. The first printing press in the Ottoman Empire was established in Istanbul by the Spanish exile brothers Samuel and Davis Ibn Nahmias in 1493. In the city of Salonica, the heart of the Sephardic community, the Soncinos, a Jewish family from Italy established a press in the 1520s. (Borovaya, 2012)

These early printers continued a tradition of informing and educating the community as well as being the genesis of a newspaper community in the Ottoman Empire.

The continuation of this textual culture was one of the reasons Ladino was able to persevere despite the almost total destruction of the community in the 20th century. The printed texts survived even while the speakers perished in death camps or scattered to far off lands. The language was not solely based in oral tradition. It was also the ability to use print media to

An Overview of Ladino: The Origins, Survival and Resurgence of Judeo-Spanish advance questions and problems of the Jewish community that lead to a cultural revolution with a political bent. Sarah Stein in her book, “Making Jews Modern” states the following:

By the late nineteenth century, Yiddish and Ladino were being used to produce new genres of Jewish culture, resulting in original works of poetry; drama; fiction; scholarly essays; dictionaries and encyclopedias; translations of world literature; and daily, weekly and monthly periodicals. In these media, readers and writers of Yiddish and Ladino debated and displayed what it meant to be modern and Jewish. (Stein, 2004, p. 4)

The speakers of these languages reflected back the unending struggle to be a nation without a state, to be a people sojourning in the homelands of others. The language reflects the physical and emotional roots of its culture. As Europe and Ottoman Asia moved away from monarchies and other autocracies and into modern nation-states, the Jewish communities found themselves debating how they fit within these secular nations. Newspapers and other periodicals offered an arena in which to debate and theorize about the Jewish place and purpose.

Newspapers:

The emergence of periodicals created an alternate purpose for the language. Ladino newspapers in the Ottoman Empire were influential in creating a modern Jewry through secularization of the language and creating a gateway to political activism. The creation of words related to modern day situations re-energized the language and allowed for a new secular purpose. (Stein, 2004) The existence of a Ladino press in the US between 1910-1948 that was brought stateside by the arrival of Turkish and Balkan Jews was a concurrent Jewish periodical experience to Yiddish present in America. Professor Tracy K. Harris notes that the Judeo-Spanish press was “a means through which Sephardim maintained and vitalized language and literature, and was often the only channel through which they kept abreast of events occurring in the outside world.” (Sollors, 1998, p. 64) The newspapers in both Europe and the Americas sought to energize their Ladino readers.

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Papers such as *El Tyempo* and *El Avenir* advocated study of topics outside of religion, but also promulgated political viewpoints, such as Zionism. (Borovaya, 2012) Many of these journals and newspapers were circulated throughout Greece, Turkey, the Balkans and other areas of the Ottoman Empire. While the demand was a boon for publishers it created tension for the governments of these areas. The Sephardic communities dwelling within their national borders lived in a vague no-man's land of citizenship. While the communities had been living in these areas for significant periods of time, in some cases for centuries, they were often "guests" in these adopted lands. There were many restrictions on areas ranging from property rights, to taxation rates. Jewish communities were always aware of their outsider status. It was due to this, that many newspapers of the day promulgated a Jewish homeland. They also debated their own status as quasi-members of the lands in which they resided. It was this kind of debate that worried many local and regional governments. There was a fear that this outsider community would decide to overthrow them. (Benbassa, 1995)

Music, Poetry and Folktales

While newspapers and periodicals sought to transform Judeo-Spanish into a modern tool for the promulgation of political purposes, poetry, music and folktales preserved the ancestral traditions of the language. While many songs and tales abounded in oral format prior to the Holocaust, they have only recently been put into writing. The fears of loss and annihilation have been a constant pressure facing the speakers of Ladino. Within the cultural expressions of the language, there has been a sense of nostalgia and remembrance. Coupled with that is the need to therefore preserve and maintain Judeo-Spanish so it is not destroyed by oblivion.

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The poetess Rita Simantov has published two books of Ladino poetry focused on the themes of Jewish unity in times of peace and war and the preservation of Sephardic tradition. (Pomeroy, 2004) Her work recalls her childhood growing up in Greece just prior to World War II and the upheaval that followed. When asked by Maria Esformes why she chose to write in Ladino the poet responded:

“First and foremost Judeo-Spanish represents my Jewishness, my identity as a Sephardic Jew. Second, it reminds me of my family, my heritage and my youth. Third, it is my way of keeping alive a rich tradition and a language that is fading into oblivion.” (Pomeroy, 2004, p. 170)

The question of identity and the need to prevent the extinguishing of a language are a constant presence in the poems and letters of the post-Holocaust era.

In 1981, the writer Marcel Cohen published a “letter” in Ladino to the Spanish artist Antonio Saura that also is filled with a sense of longing and memorializing of a language long past its hay day. The irony the author felt was that his text, *In Search of a Lost Ladino*, published in Judeo-Spanish, would be accessible to a Spanish audience that was composed of the descendants who had expelled his ancestors nearly 500 years prior. Cohen’s letter is part autobiography and part essay on the historic and geographic migrations of the Sephardic migration. But pervading the whole is the constant sense of exile, regret and lamentation of a community lost. (Cohen, 2006)

While many works produced after the Holocaust have an underpinning of sadness, the music and folk tales that go back generations contain a vibrancy and joy for life. There is a wide range of songs in Judeo-Spanish and the music plays an important role in the life of not only Sephardic culture, but Ashkenzai as well. According to Varol, music is so integral to the culture,

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 “one cannot learn Judeo-Spanish without learning how to sing.” (Varol, 2008, p. 25) One of the most popular songs today is a light and fun Hanukkah song. “Ocho Kandelikas” is a song written in the contemporary era by Flory Jagoda, but based on the music her grandmother taught her as a child. “Ocho Kandelikas” follows a Jewish custom of using numbers and repetition as a way to teach holiday traditions to children. The lyrics, in Ladino, recount the joy and excitement of lighting the Hanukkah candles for eight nights.

Ocho Kandelikas

Hanukah linda sta aki, ocho kandelas para mi,
 Hanukah Linda sta aki, ocho kandelas para mi. O...

Una kandelika, dos kandelikas, tres kandelikas,
 kuarto kandelikas, sintyu kandelikas,
 sej kandelikas, siete kandelikas, ocho kandelas para
 mi.

Muchas fiestas vo fazer, con alegrias i plazer.
 Muchas fiestas vo fazer, con alegrias i plazer. O...

Una kandelika, dos kandelikas, tres kandelikas,
 kuarto kandelikas, sintyu kandelikas,
 sej kandelikas, siete kandelikas, ocho kandelas para
 mi.

Los pastelikos vo kumer, con almendrikas i la myel
 Los pastelikos vo kumer, con almendrikas i la myel. O...

Una kandelika, dos kandelikas, tres kandelikas, kuarto kandelikas,
 sintyu kandelikas, sej kandelikas, siete kandelikas, ocho
 kandelas para mi.

Beautiful Chanukah is here, eight candles for me.

One candle, two candles, three candles, four
 candles, five candles, six candles, seven candles, eight
 candles for me.

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Many parties will be held, with joy and with pleasure.

One candle . . .

We will eat pastelikos [a Sephardic delicacy] with almonds and honey.

One candle . . .¹²

In addition to songs and poetry, folktales were another important way in which both Ladino language and culture were preserved. The most widely known stories feature the character Joha. Joha is the archetypal trickster and a beloved character for managing to always survive, a common thread of Ladino. Several hundred of these oral tales were collected in their original language and then translated into English by Matilda Koen-Sarano. As the introduction to the collection of “Folktales of Joha, Jewish Trickster” states,

“Joha, according to Ladino tradition, is a popular folklore character, one who is conniving yet also beguiling. He plays many roles: He makes us laugh; liberates us from taboos; makes it possible to tell the whole, sometimes painful, truth in a humorous way; and helps us triumph over our enemies through laughter.” (Ko, 2003)

In the *Manual of Judeo-Spanish*, there are a few short transcriptions of the Joha tales focused on word play and jokes. In one tale, Hodjá, the Turkish form of Joha, walks the streets in the middle of the night in search of his sleep. It plays on the idiomatic phrase “Tuvyendo esfuenyo” expressing the idea of sleepiness as a possession that must be found. “Me se fuyó el esfuenyo i salí a bushkarlo,” Hodjá tells the police officer when questioned about his reason for wandering at such a late hour. (Varol, 2008, p. 261)

The preservation of these tales for a wider audience suggests that while Ladino might never return to prominence as a fully spoken language, it will never disappear from the language map

¹² [http://zemerl.com/cgi-bin/show.pl?title=OCHO+KANDELI KAS+\(EIGHT+CANDLES\)](http://zemerl.com/cgi-bin/show.pl?title=OCHO+KANDELI+KAS+(EIGHT+CANDLES)) accessed 12/10/13

An Overview of Ladino: The Origins, Survival and Resurgence of Judeo-Spanish either. It lies in a strange half world, a zombie language, as it were. The native speakers of Ladino are often the elder members of small communities where oral transmission of the language has faded over generations. Yet, an interesting phenomenon has transpired over the last two decades. Younger generations are eager to know more about their ancestry and want to engage with it. The invention of the Internet and the ability to track down obscure information instantaneously has revolutionized the way people are able to interact with the once hidden past.

5. Ancestral Roots, The Digital Age and the Rebirth of Ladino

The American civil rights movement, born in the 1960s, was the birthing ground for renewed pride and interest in minority experiences. The effects of the movement have rippled through the cultural fabric of the United States in many ways that founding members couldn't begin to fathom at the time. Universities have created departments devoted to African-American studies, Judaic Studies, and Hispanic studies to name just a few. The explosion of genealogy websites and DNA analysis has created an insatiable need for individuals to know where they come from; who they are in essence. In this section, I will trace how the emergence of minority studies and the explosion of Internet resources have led to a renaissance of Ladino language and culture.

The interest in civil rights led to the broadcast in the 1970s on American television of the miniseries "Roots". The semi-biographical story, written By Alex Haley, traced the life of a man born free in Africa and then enslaved in America. Although Haley's book focused on the African-American experience, it touched a nerve within many minority and ethnic communities in the United States. Since the founding of the thirteen colonies, Anglo-Saxon Protestant norms had undergirded society. Assimilation to these norms was the standard by which immigrant communities strived to achieve. "Roots" on the other hand, sought to reinvigorate a community

An Overview of Ladino: The Origins, Survival and Resurgence of Judeo-Spanish that had been denigrated by those standards, by celebrating and proclaiming its ancestral heritage. No longer was difference something to be hidden or shunned. Instead, one's ethnic, racial, religious or linguistic variance was seen as a unique and vibrant aspect to a multicultural society.

While African-Americans were struggling with racial inequality, Jewish Americans were contending with religious prejudice. It was legal to use religious affiliation to deny access to jobs, education, community organizations and clubs, and even housing.¹³ Despite many American Jewish communities trying to distance themselves from the horrors of the Holocaust by downplaying their religious and ethnic customs, society at large still considered them outsiders.

The Civil Rights movement led younger generations of Jewish communities around the country to embrace the outsider status and re-engage with their ethnic and religious heritage. The first concrete evidence of this was the development of Jewish Studies programs at the university level. In 1925, Harvard University was the first higher level institution in America to have a Chair in Jewish Studies. In 1978 it created the Center for Jewish Studies. For the first time, an important academic institution was focusing resources on a field of interdisciplinary study that would encompass and include history, language, philosophy and religion (Harvard, 2009). With the entrance of Harvard into this arena, many other universities and colleges began creating their own Jewish Studies programs. However, these programs seemed to focus exclusively on the Ashkenazi, or Eastern European Jewish experience. This was understandable. The vast majority of Jewish immigrants to the United States had come from Eastern Europe, both prior to and after World War II. The Sephardim, in turn, emigrated to either Spanish-speaking Latin America or to

¹³ My own grandfather was denied entry into a medical school because the program had already met their quota of Jewish students.

An Overview of Ladino: The Origins, Survival and Resurgence of Judeo-Spanish the newly created state of Israel. There were only a few small pockets of practicing Sephardic Jews in the United States mainly located in New York City and the West Coast.

However, as these Jewish Studies programs developed, it was increasingly apparent that the history of modern Judaism was not limited to one area of the globe. In recent years, there has been a kind of explosion of sorts in uncovering the Sephardic experience in the New World. In an ironic twist, many of the *conversos* or crypto-Jews of the 15th and 16th century settled in what is now northern Mexico, Texas and New Mexico. Their descendants, described as Hispanic or Latino, are only now discovering their Jewish roots. In 2013 Texas A&M Hillel announced the opening of its center for the study of Crypto-Judaism and Hispanic-Jewish relations. The center “will produce academic conferences and serve as a living memorial for people who do not want their family histories to be forgotten. It will also serve as a resource center for those interested in learning more about their personal or family histories.” (Jewish Outlook, 2013, p. 86)

In yet another recent story, Devin Naar, a professor at University of Washington, has started a project to create a storehouse of both digital and physical Ladino source material. Professor Naar, drawing on his own familial experience, realized that the language was in danger of being lost. According to the Daily of the University of Washington, “he hopes to create the first online Ladino Resource Center and make the UW a center for the study, preservation, and transmission of the Sephardic culture.” (Veyera, 2012) These current stories highlight a movement that had began about a decade ago.

Early on in the academic study of Ladino were several professors on the East Coast. Gloria Ascher at Tufts University and Daisy Braverman of the University of Pennsylvania were two of the first professors to teach classes in Ladino. Ms. Ascher began teaching a Ladino course at Tufts in 2000 after a chance meeting with Matilda Koen-Sarano, a leading figure in the

An Overview of Ladino: The Origins, Survival and Resurgence of Judeo-Spanish preservation of Judeo-Spanish. As for so many enthusiasts of the language, a personal connection to Ladino is what inspired Ms. Ascher to consider teaching the language. Her own family had immigrated to the United States from Turkey and Ladino was spoken at home. Knowing that the language was in dire need of speakers, Professor Ascher took up the challenge and offers regular courses on modern Ladino. (Sander, 2007)

In 2007, an article was published in the Jewish Exponent, a Philadelphia Jewish periodical, in reference to Ms. Braverman's class at University of Pennsylvania. Teaching Ladino in a classroom setting was a novelty and the language was fading away. As a visiting professor at University of Pennsylvania, Braverman has said that while Judeo-Spanish may never again be a language transmitted through use at home "her main goal is to enable students to converse in Judeo-Spanish." (Silverman, 2007)

This is a point that many researchers and historians of Ladino make: the language, while not dead, is not one that will be commonly spoken in day to day life. Without parents teaching their children and using the language at home for daily interaction, Judeo-Spanish faces the prospect of becoming a studied rather than spoken language. The act of learning and speaking Ladino is an act of historic and cultural preservation. For some, that preservation occurs by learning it in an academic setting. For others, a more informal setting fits the bill.

With the ability of the Internet to connect people regardless of distance, websites have allowed for "informal" learning circles to develop and maintain the language. The Internet has allowed Ladino to reach a myriad of potential speakers and learners in ways that 50 years ago would have been unimaginable.

Ladino's survival may also be one of the first examples of a language saved from disappearance by the internet. Ladino is currently used sometimes for communication, sometimes as an art or musical form, sometimes as a topic of foreign language study or

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linguistic or literary or culinary study. In our continuing age of the all-powerful nation-state, Ladino is hardly likely to have the same chance as Hebrew has had to emerge from the shadows and miraculously become a flourishing national language. Like Yiddish or Latin, it must survive partly through these ambiguous instances of often internet-enabled communication. Our consolation must be that for this type of language survival, Ladino's future is looking good. (Roumani, 2011)

One of the websites that has established a significant core of Ladino speakers and learners is Ladinokomunita. This is a correspondence circle hosted by Yahoo!Groups with almost 1500 members. The moderator, Rachel Amado Bortnick states that

The purpose of the Ladinokomunita is to: 1. promote the use of Ladino; 2. spread the use of a standardized method for spelling Ladino with Roman characters, according to the rules established by the journal "Aki Yerushalayim." (http://www.aki-yerushalayim.co.il/ay/075/075_05_grafya.htm); 3. promote knowledge of Sephardic History and culture. (Amado Bortnick, 2000)

The group has done much to preserve and grow the language. It has brought together those who desire to communicate in a language where the speakers are far flung. All communication between members must be in Ladino and the site has a created a multilingual dictionary in order to ease the language barriers among those posting messages.

Another area in which the Internet has birthed a connection to Judeo-Spanish is through the access to genealogical research and family trees. Anyone is now capable of tracing back their family lineage several generations, if not more, if they have even the slightest clue from family lore. It is now possible to create a detailed family tree with simply a birth date or a given name. Census records, entrances from Ellis Island, marriage licenses and birth certificates are public records which may viewed online. Genealogy sites such as Ancestry.com and Familysearch.org

An Overview of Ladino: The Origins, Survival and Resurgence of Judeo-Spanish have enormous searchable databases.¹⁴ The general public has swarmed to these sites and many others. Tracing one's roots has become a media darling. American network television has aired several programs featuring celebrities tracing their background. *Finding Your Roots With Henry Louis Gates, Jr.*, on PBS and *Who Do You Think You Are?*, airing on TLC tap into the desire for individuals to identify their roots and understand who they are in the big picture.

These programs and websites have allowed individuals to tease out the hidden stories that so many families have. Sometimes the concealment was simply to avoid the black sheep of the family or an embarrassing event. Other times, families had to change their entire identities in order to survive. Covering up a religious background in order to avoid persecution was a common experience for Jews throughout the world. For many of their descendants, they may not even have a clue about their Jewish past until they start researching. For example, many Hispanics with a last name ending with "ez" or referencing a geographic site or flora, such as Ríos or Flores, are descendants of those long ago *conversos*. (Jewish Outlook, 2013) The tools available via these genealogical websites have connected individuals to long forgotten family information. Along with the historic documents, the ability to test DNA has also pulled out the unique threads in the tapestry of Jewish migration. The use of DNA testing has revealed that Jewish communities as distant as Europe to Africa to India share common genetic forbearers. This recent discovery of long-forgotten mutual ancestors strengthens the current bond that links Jews all over the world.

As modern technology and science continue to advance research of Sephardic topics, a very old-fashioned area has kept Ladino culture alive: cookbooks. Food, its flavors, aromas and

¹⁴ I have used ancestry.com and traced back family on my mother's father's side back to the 1760s in Poland. It is truly awe-inspiring to be able to make a connection to someone who lived centuries before and know that were it not for them, I would not be here. It makes history personal.

An Overview of Ladino: The Origins, Survival and Resurgence of Judeo-Spanish preparation, are a primal connection to any culture. It is no different for the Sephardim. Like the language, the cooking of the Sephardim adapted and adopted many of the regional styles where they settled. Even with the intermixing, there are still very clear indications that the recipes retain Iberian characteristics. Sometimes the ingredients reflect the recipe's origin. Other times, the name is in Judeo-Spanish or the method of preparation hearkens back to Spain or Portugal.

Joyce Goldstein has written several cookbooks that not only contain hundreds of traditional Sephardic recipes, but also trace the migratory routes they traveled. There are dishes with Italian, Turkish, and Mediterranean twists. For those with a knowledge of Spanish, reading the names of dishes it is easy to spot the ones of Iberian tradition: *Gayna kon manzana*, (chicken with apples), *Peshkado Frito* (fried fish), *Kodrero kon Ajo Fresco* (lamb with fresh garlic). (Goldstein, 2000) These are some dishes typically prepared for holidays. The recipes show the concern that the Sephardim had for following Kosher and Sabbath law. For example, *cocido*, one pot meals often containing beans, were often cooked prior to the Sabbath as not to conflict with Sabbath laws.

As Goldstein notes,

The importance of *cocido* and beans in the Sephardic kitchen is revealed in the fact that the Spanish word both for bean and for Jewess is *judía*. In Spain, *cocido* eventually was used by leaders of the Inquisition as a litmus test of faith for *conversos*. Confronted with a *cocido* prepared with lard of pork, true *conversos* would eat it. Anyone who refused revealed his or her continued adherence to Judaism. ((2000, p. 79)

The cookbooks are interspersed throughout with Judeo-Spanish vocabulary. Even though transmission of the linguistic aspect is not the primary concern of the cookbook, the language is ever present. Food is a universal connector of human beings and one of the most enjoyable ways that culture is spread. Perhaps, by linking Ladino to food preparation, a wider audience becomes aware of this beautiful language.

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VI. Conclusion

Judeo-Spanish is a byproduct of one of humanity's longest and most convoluted Diasporas. From its humble beginnings as a "second-class" language to its current study in academic institutions and use online, the language has had many divergent purposes. And is that not what all languages serve to do: communicate the ideas and needs of its speakers in a particular time and context? A language can fade when there is a dearth of native speakers. But so long as it evolves to fulfill a different use, it will not disappear. As the context and era of the speakers of Ladino have changed, so has the mode and purpose. And in an almost poetic twist of fate, the Spanish government is now offering Sephardic Jews the chance to apply for citizenship and the opportunity to return to Spain.

As with so many others who have stumbled across Judeo-Spanish, the language has seeped into my soul. It seemed that as I was writing this paper, the universe was constantly dropping breadcrumbs along my path: a blurb in a newspaper about DNA testing in North Africa revealing Sephardic genetic roots, a co-worker sharing his experiences with Ladino music, a family friend reminiscing about her schoolmates in Uruguay speaking Ladino, an acquaintance who had only recently discovered she was Jewish and with roots from Spain. These bits of information gleaned from those around me, propelled me to keep writing and learning about a language that is most definitely alive.

As a final note, I'd like to acknowledge those who helped me in this process. Thank you to Leslie Turpin and Thomas Ventimiglia. I would like to thank my SMAT 27 cohort, in particular, Nasra Adan, Megan Pugh and Roger Ramirez. The bonds we formed reach beyond borders. Thank you to my family for their love and support, especially my mother, Barbara Brooks Goodman. And to my husband, Jerrel Duffy Jr., *te amo mucho*.

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