Ladino: Judeo-Spanish language and culture in Europe

SUMMARY
Europe has been home to Jews for thousands of years. They have contributed to the continent's artistic achievements and material prosperity despite discriminatory laws and recurring acts of persecution. With their 'final solution', the Nazis aimed to eradicate Jews from the continent and erase all trace of their culture, destroying synagogues, Jewish archives and works of art.

Although the Nazis did not achieve their objective, they left ruins that bear architectural witness to Jewish presence on the continent, as well as decimated and traumatised Jewish communities. The courage of these communities to continue to bear witness to Jewish life and culture has been essential to the preservation of Ladino – a language condemned to death by the Nazis – and its culture, music and literature.

The language itself testifies to the persecution of European Jews. The 1492 Expulsion Edict forced Jews living in Spain to either convert or leave. Most chose to leave, and took with them the language they had spoken in Spain – Judeo-Spanish, also known as Ladino. No longer connected to its Spanish roots, Ladino preserved the original structure of 15th century Spanish, together with Hebrew script and a vocabulary with Aramaic elements. The language evolved with the Sephardi Jews as they moved across North Africa, Europe and Türkiye, incorporating vocabulary from the local languages: Greek, Turkish, Arabic and Balkan languages.

Ladino speakers who survived the Holocaust often left Europe and settled in Israel and the US. Although some linguists think the survival of Ladino – at least in Europe – is in doubt, a rise in on-line interest in the language during the COVID-19 lockdowns suggests that the trend is reversible. The EU meanwhile has an important role to play in preserving this valuable element of its cultural and linguistic heritage.

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Introduction

Jews’ historic presence in Europe has contributed to the continent’s material prosperity and artistic achievements over millennia. However, discriminatory laws (special taxes, banned professions and areas), pogroms, and the destruction and looting of property have been a recurring phenomenon.

With its **1492 Edict of Expulsion** (the Alhambra Decree) forcing its Jews (known as **Marranos**) to convert or to leave the country, Spain stands out. The Jews did leave, in two waves. Some hoped to find a new home in **Portugal**, but five years later it too forced them to leave, mostly for the Americas (**5 000 people**). Others went north, to settle in France and Italy (**12 000**), Holland (**25 000**), London and Hamburg. Many chose North Africa (**Algeria 10 000, Morocco 20 000, Egypt 1 000**), and Türkiye (the European part – **90 000**), spreading to the north of the Balkans (the former Ottoman Empire) (see Map 1). Sephardi (**Sefarad** is the Hebrew name for Spain) life and culture flourished in **Salonica** (ancient Thessaloniki), **Istanbul, Sofia, Bucharest, Sarajevo, and Belgrade**, often alongside Ashkenazi culture and the **Yiddish** vernacular. In 2015, more than 500 years after the Edict of Expulsion, Spain granted nationality to Sephardi Jews, thus recognising the wrongdoing.

Map 1 – Migration of Sephardi Jews after 1492 Edict of Expulsion

Source: Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture.

Ladino: Judeo-Spanish

Jews scattered across the European continent and beyond used Hebrew for liturgical and religious purposes but their everyday communication was strongly influenced by the vernaculars spoken around them as they interacted with local communities. This resulted in languages such as Judeo-Persian, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Spanish and Yiddish.

In this way, the Jews expelled from Spain brought with them two languages: one used for liturgy and the other for everyday life. Ladino is a widely used name for the Jewish language spoken by Sephardi communities. Other terms are also used. These include Judeo-Spanish and *judezmo* (a name recorded in Türkiye, Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Hungary), which has become Judezmo in English. This latter term points to the fact that Ladino was seen as a Jewish language and part of Jewish culture, as opposed to a Romance language or a variety of Spanish. Rabbis and religious elites have however considered Hebrew to be the only Jewish language, and the sacred language of Jewish communities. Linguists recognise the Judeo-Spanish used for liturgy and classify
it as a 'calque language' since it calqued the Hebrew-Aramaic grammatical structures of original religious texts while replacing the original vocabulary word by word with local Spanish vocabulary. Its oral use was limited to liturgy and learning biblical or prayer texts.

The Ladino used for common communication, a Judeo-Spanish vernacular, is a 'fusion language'. Its roots are in medieval Spanish, Hebrew and Aramaic and it evolved across centuries in the areas where the Sephardi settled. It integrated elements of both languages spoken by pre-existing local Jewish communities and autochthonous Turkish, Greek, Arabic, French, Italian and southern Slavonic populations, borrowing their vocabulary and structures. The result was a form of linguistic fusion. In the 16th century, Jewish emigration from Spain stopped, ending the Spanish influence on the language. Up until the Holocaust, it was written in Hebrew characters, but Latin script had already been introduced at the end of the 19th century, particularly in Türkiye and Yugoslavia. Cyrillic can meanwhile be found in Judeo-Spanish texts in Bulgaria. Like Yiddish, Ladino is a non-territorial language as it spread across the continent (and the world) as a minority local language. In contrast to Yiddish, Ladino adopted a Latin script at the end of the 19th century in Türkiye.

**After the Holocaust: Near extinction and current revival**

Sephardi Jews in the Balkans shared the tragic fate of the Holocaust with Ashkenazi Jewish communities across Europe. For the five centuries preceding World War Two (WWII), they lived mainly in the Balkans – Greece, Yugoslavia (Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Bulgaria. Their chances of survival from the 1930s onwards differed depending on whether the area was occupied by Nazi Germany or had a pro-Nazi government. Of approximately 80,000 Jews living in Yugoslavia, only about 14,000 survived. Bulgaria ultimately spared its own Jews, while allowing the deportation of Jews on territories it occupied. Out of 77,000 Greek Jews, 60,000 were murdered. In Thessaloniki, home to the largest Jewish community in Greece, fewer than 2,000 Jews survived the Holocaust, out of about 50,000 who lived in the city at the time of the German occupation. France (mainly Paris, Lyon and Marseille) and the Netherlands also counted Sephardi Jews among their Jewish communities exterminated during the Holocaust. Of the 365,000 Sephardim living on the continent in 1925, it is estimated that around 160,000 perished. In March 2003, 60 years after the deportation of the first group of Greek Jews, a commemorative plaque, written in Ladino, was unveiled at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial, to pay tribute to the Sephardi Jews who perished there.

**Renewed interest**

The decimated population traumatised by the Holocaust has had difficulties keeping their language and culture alive. In recent years, there has been a rise in interest in Ladino throughout the academic world. However, a weak rate of intergenerational transmission is putting the language at risk, and in 2004 a UNESCO conference suggested a network of Judeo-Spanish communities across the world was needed to help protect the language.

As one of the last speakers of Ladino in Bosnia passed away in Sarajevo at the age of 93 in October 2022, the question remains as to whether it is still possible to revive the language. However, interest in the language already began to decline among its speakers when national states emerged in the former Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires. The exact number of Ladino speakers today is not known. Some estimate that 160,000 Jews in Türkiye, the Balkans, North Africa, Israel and the Americas speak Ladino, other estimates set the number at 200,000.

France, home to a significant Sephardi Jewish community, has recognised Ladino as a 'non-territorial' language, one of 75 'langues de France' that are to be preserved and taught. Since 1967, Ladino has been taught at INALCO, which is also gathering oral records of the language. The Paris-based Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture benefited from support from the European Bureau for Lesser Used Languages (EBLUL), co-funded by the European
Union. EBLUL, which stopped its activities in 2010, was set up following a May 1982 European Parliament resolution on minority and regional languages.

L’Institut Sépharade Européen has organised two sessions at the European Parliament devoted to Ladino, one in 1999 – to have it recognised as a minority language in anticipation of the European Year of Languages – and another one in 2010. In April 2000, the European Parliament held a debate on ‘2001: European Year of Languages’. A call was made for special attention to be paid to Yiddish and Ladino, as examples of languages that ‘have no country, maternal languages which often have no school and no teachers; languages which are spoken throughout Europe, which no state accepts and which will never become official’.

The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (ECRML) of the Council of Europe (CoE) is a voluntary instrument adopted and ratified by CoE member countries, according to which they undertake to protect and promote the languages they declare as traditionally spoken by their populations. Of the CoE’s 46 member countries, Bosnia and Herzegovina was the only one to mention Ladino, together with Yiddish (also referred to by seven other countries). Neither Bulgaria nor Greece signed the ECRML, while North Macedonia signed but has not ratified it.

After WWII, many Sephardim left Europe, mostly for the US and Israel. Israel’s National Authority of Ladino estimates that the country has about 300 000 Ladino speakers. In 2018, together with the Spanish Royal Academy, the National Authority of Ladino set up the National Academy of Judeo-Spanish, to raise interest in and promote the language and preserve this heritage. The academy, established in Israel, will join an international network of academies in countries where Spanish is an official language or where the language is spoken. Many projects devoted to Ladino/Judeo-Spanish, Yiddish and other Jewish languages, as well as on Sephardi history in Europe, have been put in place in Israel – home to the majority of the global Sephardi population – and in the US.

The Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities have lived in Europe for centuries, and contributed to its cultural and linguistic heritage. Both cultures have universal value and reflect Europe’s rich and diverse history. The EU keeps a record of Ladino and Sephardi culture in its Europeana digital archives, co-funded by the European Union’s Connecting Europe Facility. With COVID-19 having caused a spike in on-line interest in the language, it is clear that more could be done, for instance through the European Languages Equality project, to preserve and promote Ladino, and ensure a more prominent online presence of teaching materials for European students.

MAIN REFERENCES

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eprs@ep.europa.eu (contact)

www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu (intranet)

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