

Ladino Imprints  
From the 16th Through  
the 20th Century:

an exhibition

prepared by

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This exhibition has been prepared for a public library just outside of New York City. Many people in the local community are Sephardic Jews. They wish to acquaint the young people of the community with something of their heritage. It is hoped that this exhibition will give them a sense of their long history and stimulate new interest in helping to preserve the remnants of an ancient culture.

Ladino, the spoken and written Hispanic language of the Jews, has been known over the centuries under various names: Judezmo, Judeo-Spanish, Romance, Spaniolit. It is spoken by the Sephardim, those Jews who trace their ancestry back to the Iberian peninsula prior to 1492. Ladino does not, as has occasionally been supposed, refer exclusively to the sacred language of the Bible translations and prayer. Jews throughout the world, but particularly in the Balkan States, Morocco, Palestine and North Africa, communicate in Ladino. Smaller groups in Europe also continue to speak it and, due to ongoing emigration, there are Ladino-speaking groups in many parts of Central and South America and the United States. The largest Ladino-speaking population today is located in Israel, with some 200,000 people who still speak and understand the language to varying degrees. Very few, however, can still read Ladino and even fewer write it.

Ladino began to be a specifically Jewish language after the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. Long segregation in Jewish ghettos helped to minimize external influences on the language but there has, inevitably, been some distortion of the original. Linguistically, Ladino preserves all the characteristics of the language spoken and written in Spain in 1492, the year when the first grammar of the Spanish language was written. It employs hundreds of archaic Spanish words, some of which are not present in modern Spanish and others which have acquired new meaning among the Sephardim.

Written Ladino has generally employed the unvocalized Rashi Hebrew script. In the 19th century, many Ladino books were printed with the square Hebrew lettering, but Rashi script still remained the most popular. Few books were printed in Roman script and it was only in the 20th century that this practice spread, particularly in journalism, but it never affected the output of materials in the Hebrew script. Very little is still printed in Ladino and its spoken use is also diminishing. Major projects of investigation and compilation are now underway to capture the dwindling remnants of this once vital language.

The Christian Reconquest of Spain created innumerable difficulties for the Spanish Jews. After a long-standing contribution to the culture of Moslem Spain, the Jewish intellectuals were forced to undergo a complex social, cultural and linguistic adaptation in the face of the Reconquest. Just when the Jewish intelligentsia believed that they were integrated into the new system, the first Inquisition, in 1391, threw everything into confusion. Under pressure, many Jews converted to Christianity or feigned conversion. The Marranos, as they were called, led a double life. But their outward acceptance of Christianity at least enabled them to continue to take part in Spain's cultural and political life. A popular endeavor among the pre-Expulsion Jews was the translation of the Bible from Hebrew into Spanish, a task which satisfied them intellectually and which contributed immeasurably to the development of the Spanish language.

In the years following the Expulsion, the Sephardim transported the basic Bible translation to the cities where they found refuge. One of the principal havens for the tens of thousands of dispatriated Jews was the Ottoman Empire. Constantinople was a favorite spot of the Sephardim, as witnessed by this earliest complete extant version of the Old Testament, by Avraham Assa, published in five volumes between 1739 and 1744. The Hebrew and Ladino appear in parallel columns.

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Bible. O.T. Hebrew and Ladino. 1739-44.  
Arba' we-esrim.  
Constantinople, 1739-44.  
Yale University.

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Translations of the Bible and other religious literature were commonly undertaken in the post-Expulsion Sephardic communities. They seldom approached the task systematically, but rather responded to the needs of their synagogues and to the demands of Jewish education in general. Thus, the Book of Psalms appeared in translation in Constantinople around 1540; the Pentateuch in 1547; the Major Prophets, in two editions, in Salonika between 1527-1568 and between 1583-1585.

The piecemeal Biblical translations completed by the eastern Sephardim in the 16th century served as the foundation for Assa's later complete version and as a source for the books of moral teaching, the manuals of religious ritual and the Biblical criticism and interpretation which followed. The real flowering of Ladino writing took place in exile. An example of a work in this tradition is Bachya ben Joseph ibn Pakuda's Hovot ha-Levavot (Guide to the duties of the heart) printed in a Ladino translation in the customary Rashi characters with the Ladino title: El dover de los corasones, Constantinople, 1550. Pakuda, himself a Spanish Jew of the 11th or 12th century, first wrote his book in Arabic so that the Jews of Spain who were not Hebrew scholars would be able to read it. It is appropriate that it should later have been translated into Ladino, the language of the people, to serve the descendants of those earlier Spanish Jews in the same way as the original version served them. The book was a popular book of Jewish ethics which drew heavily upon Moslem sources. The title derives from the distinction made by Moslems between outward observance, so-called "duties of the limbs", and inward feeling, the "duties of the heart."

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Bachya ben Joseph ibn Pakuda.  
Sefer Jovot ha-Levavot; El dover de  
los corasones.  
Konstantinopla, 1550.  
Library of Congress.

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Throughout the Ottoman Empire, new communities of Jews arose and older ones expanded, from the Balkans through Asia Minor and down to Egypt and in conquered North Africa as well. Samuel Usque, a refugee from Portugal, declared: "The great Turkish empire, boundless as the seas that wash its shores, opened wide before us ... Without fear you may profess your faith there, you can begin a new life ... and return to the age-old wisdom of your ancestors."

One who took advantage of this freedom was Joseph ben Ephraim Caro, born in Spain or Portugal just four years before the Expulsion. He went first with his family to Nicopolis in Turkey. However, the more spiritual-minded Sephardim seemed to migrate to Palestine, the Holy Land, and it was here that Caro finally settled, in Safed about 1535. Caro was soon recognized as the greatest authority upon the Law in his time. His work Beth Joseph is a scholarly treatise that identified him as one of the greatest Talmudists of all time. Yet his Shulhan 'Aruk, of which this is a Ladino translation, written in his old age for the benefit of those who did not possess sufficient education to understand the more complicated Beth Joseph, became the code for all Jews who sought to live according to rabbinical law. It was frequently criticized and Caro himself did not hold a particularly high opinion of it. Yet the frequent criticisms, continuing for nearly a century, ultimately gave the work its greatest authority. By the 18th century, the time of this translation into the common vernacular of the Sephardim, the authority of the Shulhan 'Aruk was so firmly established that it was considered indisputable. It is still considered an authority today.

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Caro, Joseph.  
Sefer Shuljam ha-Melej. Es jibun de Shuljan 'Aruj.  
Kushtadina, 5509/1749.  
Library of Congress.

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Caro, the logical and methodical Talmudist, the producer of the Shulhan 'Aruk, had another side. He was both a student of the Law and a dreamer of dreams. He dedicated his mind to the Talmud, but his heart and soul belonged to the Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition. Because he was passionately devoted to the teachings of the Mishnah, the codified oral doctrine set down in writing so as not to be lost, it became for him a living reality, a mentor, a guardian angel. Caro believed that the voice of the Mishnah often spoke to him, directing him to lead the life of an ascetic, exhorting him to read more devotional books, especially Pakuda's Duties of the heart, and promising him the longed-for martyr's death if he followed the guidance of the Mishnah. The voice of the angel was always an inspiration to him to walk in the path of perfect piety and he kept a diary of his recollections of all that had been revealed to him. It is here represented by this 1712 imprint in Ladino, Mesa de el alma. Caro, like many Sephardim, embraced both the intellectual and the mystical sides of his faith. It is therefore fitting that both aspects of his work should have been made available to the masses of Sephardim through Ladino translations.

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Caro, Joseph.

Shulhan ha-panim : Mesa de el alma.

Venice : Nela Stamparia Bragadina, [1712-13]

Schiff Collection, New York Public Library.

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Two centuries after the Expulsion, Ladino literature comprised a varied and rich collection of adapted and original works on ethical and religious themes, including history, ethics, poetry, mysticism, medicine and Biblical interpretation. Original works composed in Ladino increased in number during the 18th century. Since Ladino, by its very nature, is a popular language, only a small part of the total output in this language has been preserved.

The work which has probably had the greatest influence on the Sephardic masses to this day is the masterpiece begun by Jacob Culi in 1730, the Me-am Lo'ez, an ethnico-homiletical Bible commentary in Ladino, represented here by this 1773 imprint from Kushtadina. This thesaurus of Sephardic knowledge, drawing its inspiration from the traditional sources of Jewish thought, such as the Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash and Kabbalah, was an attempt to put Jewish tradition within the reach of the people who were increasingly unable to use the Hebrew sources. The commentaries on Genesis and Exodus were the most popular, having at least six editions on Genesis between 1730 and 1897 and eight on Exodus between 1733 and 1884. Argüete modeled this commentary on Deuteronomy on Culi's earlier works.

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Argüete, Itzjak ben Shemaria.  
Sefer me-'Am Lo'ez. Jelek Rishon Shel sefer devarim.  
Kushtadina, 1773.  
Library of Congress.

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Culi derived the title Me-am Lo'ez from the original Hebrew of Psalms 114:1 "When Israel went forth out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language;" It has come to mean "language of the people." Culi died in 1732, two years after his first volume of the work was published, leaving many unfinished manuscripts which formed the basis for many of the later works. His simple, popular ladino which followed the style of the traditional storytellers laid the foundation for the continuation of the project by later writers, like Argüete, and formed the basis of the work's popularity. The different places in which it was published and the frequency of its printing, bear witness to the work's widespread popularity.

For a long time, the Me-am Lo'ez was the only literature for thousands of Sephardic families and its reading was often considered a religious duty. Volumes of the Me-am Lo'ez typically also contained a rich mine of popular legends and proverbs, anecdotes and community experiences. It thus mirrors the modes of thought, speech and behavior of the Sephardim of the Ottoman Empire in the 18th and 19th centuries.

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Argüete, Itzjak ben Shemaria.  
Sefer me-'am Lo'ez.  
Saloniko : Betzalel Halevi, 1829.  
Library of Congress.

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While the Sephardim had found new homes in various cities around the world, they were seldom really fully accepted or integrated into the larger society. Always wary of some new purge directed against them, they kept to themselves as much as possible and continued to uphold their traditional values and beliefs. Favorite among the Sephardic masses was Purim, the so-called Feast of Lots.

The story behind Purim is found in the Biblical book of Esther. Although the story is believed to have no real foundation in history, it is nevertheless historically accurate (for) its portrayal of anti-Jewish persecution to which all Jews were routinely subjected at some point in their history. The book of Esther tells of the moral and actual victory of the Jews over one of their persecutors, the vicious Haman, viceroy to King Ahasverus of Persia and Media. King Ahasverus scoured his kingdom for a new bride and chose the beautiful Jewess Esther, ward of the sage Mordecai, to be his wife, unaware of her ancestry. Mordecai later offended Haman by refusing to bow down to him and Haman arranged for a massacre of all Jews in retaliation. His plans are thwarted by Esther who reveals her ancestry and asks the King to halt the planned massacre. Haman ends by suffering the fate he had orchestrated for Mordecai and the Jews are victorious.

Purim is observed by a period of fasting, followed by a period of feasting and celebration. The Sephardim took this festival to their hearts, representing as it did the eventual victory of the righteous Jews over their persecutors. There were printed many Ladino versions of the story and Ladino editions of the songs and coplas used in the festivities, such as this 1792 poetic compilation printed in Livorno, Italy.

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Sefer Salme Simjah; o Sea la alegria kumplida  
para alavar a Dios en la festividad de Purim...  
Livorno : En la imprenta de los egselentisimos  
siniores Yaacob Nuñez váez [y] Rafael Meldola, 1792.  
Library of Congress.

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Original poetic works in Ladino are scarce, perhaps suggesting that the oriental Sephardim were not partial to this form of expression. Some poetic tradition did exist, however, even prior to the Expulsion, as illustrated by such works as the Proverbios Morales (Moral proverbs) and the 14th century Poema de Yoçef (Poem of Joseph).

Joseph remained a favorite personage among the Sephardim and stories regarding him were often part of the festivities of Purim. The recurring theme of the eventual victory of the righteous (Joseph) over vicious persecutors (his brothers) may help to explain its inclusion in the Purim celebrations.

Avraham de Toldeo produced a popular, widely-known poem on Joseph and his brothers in 1732 under the title: Coplas de Yoçef ha-Tzaddik (Stanzas on Joseph the Righteous). One of the versions chanted during Purim in many communities, this poem contains some four hundred quatrains and is possessed of its own unique melody that identifies it as a Sephardic work. While Toledo's poem used the same sources as the 14th-century Poema de Yoçef, the two works are independent of each other.

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Toldeo, Avraham de.  
Coplas de Yoçef ha-Tzaddik.  
Constantinople, 1732.  
University of Granada, Spain.

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While the Sephardim directed much of their creative energy to religiously-oriented writings, they were conscious of their role in the secular world as well and produced histories and translations of other works on the history of the Jewish people. The 19th century, in particular, witnessed the development of a greater social awareness among all people and this was reflected among Sephardic works of the time. People everywhere were anxious to understand their beginnings and the Sephardim were no different from other people in that respect.

Rabbi Simon Bernfeld, chief rabbi of the Sephardic community of Belgrade, produced in Hebrew a history of the Jewish people from their beginnings to his day, represented by this 1891 translation printed in Belgrade for the benefit of his eastern brothers. He wrote several monographs on Jewish history and philosophy, including an anthology of historical sources on the persecution of the Jews from the earliest periods up until the Ukrainian pogroms of 1768. Bern's work reflects the growing Sephardic interest in their place in history.

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Bernfeld, Simon.  
Istoria de los gudios dezde el prinsipio  
asta nuestros dias.  
Belogrado : Estamparia de Shemuel Horovitz, 5651/1891.  
Added t.p. in Serbian.  
Library of Congress.

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Knowledge of the history of all Jews was important to the Sephardim, but they were also deeply interested in issues that touched them more especially. The Marranos, those Jews of Medieval Spain who succumbed to official pressure to convert to Christianity, often under the threat of death, were of particular interest to the Sephardim.

Many of the Marranos left the Iberian peninsula and rejoined the Sephardim who were living in the Ottoman empire. The Spanish and Portuguese soon sought to stem this exodus by forbidding the "New Christians" the right to emigrate. This Ladino translation of the history of the trials faced by the Marranos was made available in 1896.

There have been numerous explanations for the term "Marrano", including the Aramaic-Hebrew Mar Anus (Mr. forced convert), the Arabic Mura'in (hypocrite) and others. But the most likely derivation seems to be from the Spanish word for swine which was already in use in the early Middle Ages. It probably did not refer to the reluctance of the New Christians to eat pork, as some have suggested, but rather was used to convey the sense of loathing that the word commonly conveys in many languages.

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Los Maranos. Un paso de los gudios en Espania  
en el 15 en siklo. Trezladado de Ya'akov ben  
Jaim. Editado de Mijael Shelomo Bedjarano.  
Rustchuk : Tipolitografia Peretz Yosef Alcalai, 1896.  
Library of Congress.

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The Ladino press expanded due to the reluctance or the inability of the exiled Sephardim to learn the languages of the countries in which they had settled following the Expulsion. Because they had only a rudimentary knowledge of the local vernacular, there was a growing need for some kind of Ladino reading material. The first Jewish newspaper to appear was the 1675 Gazeta de Amsterdam, printed in Ladino, showing the influence and far-flung locations of the Sephardim. This first Ladino newspaper lasted less than a year and then there appeared no others until the beginning of the 19th century. In 1882, there were reportedly 103 extant Jewish newspapers, six of which were in Ladino. An example was La Puerta del Oriente (Door to the Orient), published in Smyrna in 1846. It, too, lasted only a year.

Some journals were published partially in Ladino and partially in other languages. Salonik, which derived its name from the city Salonika where it was published, was one that was printed in Ladino, Turkish, Greek and Bulgarian. With the rise of Zionism, Hebrew was revived as a spoken language. Many Sephardic publications were jointly Ladino and Hebrew after that. According to Moshe David Gaon, there were 296 publications in Ladino between 1845 and World War II and Salonika was the center of Ladino publishing.

The Scottish Mission, with perhaps the first outside effort to keep alive the dying Ladino language, became involved in publishing El Manadero (the Spring or Source). It was an instructive magazine that they published in standard Spanish printed in Hebrew characters. It contained scientific, historical and geographical articles, as well as articles on Judaism.

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El Manadero; o La Fuente de Sensia para el Pueblo.  
Konstantinopla : Estampado en la Estamperia de la  
Mision de la Iglesia de Escosis en Haskioy, 1885-1888.  
Library of Congress.

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A large segment of Ladino literature was not originally written down. As with other wandering groups, oral tradition was very important to the Sephardim, particularly among the eastern settlers. The romancero occupies the most prominent place in the literature and everyday life of these people. The Jews who left Spain after the Inquisition retained countless romances or traditional Spanish ballads as part of their oral tradition. These were ballads that had been widely dispersed throughout Spain during the 14th and 15th centuries. They were set to very characteristic melodies which facilitated their memorization and thereby contributed to their preservation from the 16th century to the present day. While never popular among the western Sephardim, the ballads are still sung by the descendants of those who originally settled in the Balkans, Turkey and North Africa. Because the language is spoken and understood by an increasingly smaller group of people, researchers are now seeking to preserve on paper and tape as many of these ballads as they can before the last generation of those who know them is gone.

One of the most painstaking of these researchers was Ramón Menéndez Pidal who, at the turn of the century, produced a catalog of Ladino romanceros which he had collected from all over the world and which are now maintained in the Archivo Menéndez Pidal in Madrid, represented by this ballad titled: La Expulsión de los judíos de Portugal (the Expulsion of the Jews from Portugal) It was collected in Salonika.

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Diez del cielo, Diez del cielo,  
Que éramos las tres hermanas,  
Las dos ya están cazadas,  
.....  
sinon por falta de ventura,  
Estas palabras diziendo,  
que se le murió la hermana;

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Diez del cielo, hazed conmigo  
hija del rey dolorido.  
la chica no le dan marido.  
Que de oro está cozido;  
que del cielo no la ha venido.  
haberjís que le han venido,  
en su lugar la han metido.

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The Ladino romancero was essentially a continuation and adaptation of the traditional Spanish romancero of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Some of the Ladino romances are still to be found in Spanish poetry collections, others are variations of those and still others are ballads that died out in the Iberian peninsula and survive only in the Ladino version. In addition, there are numerous original Ladino romances and songs of later composition. The subject matter varies according to the distance of a given Sephardic community from Spain. But all share the characteristic of having been "de-Christianized." The Jews naturally tended to eliminate any original elements that implied adherence to Christian beliefs and practices.

All the categories of romances found in the romancero of Spain still exist in the Ladino versions: classical and historical, tragic and amorous, humorous and satirical. El Conde Alarcos, from Salonika, in the Menéndez Pidal collection, deals with a girl who laments not being married yet. Her father tells her that it is all her fault because she had the chance to be married to the Count of Seville who is now married to another. Both the theme and the language identify it with Medieval Spanish.

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Triste iba la enfalta,	triste más de cada día,
porque no la cazó el padre,	ni en su cuidado tenía.
Mosa, qu' eran de quince años,	marido e hijos tenían.
Esa, que es de veinticuatro,	por e[re]s]pozar la tenía;
- Vuestra culpa es, la inflata,	vuestra, que no era la mía.
Vos ya estuvierex cazada	con el conde de Seviya.
Agora ya está cazado,	mujer y hijos tenía.

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Of all the popular efforts to record in printed form the reliques of Ladino balladry, the most extensive are those of Yacob Abraham Yoná. Yoná was a Salonikan Jew of modest means who used to collect, edit and publish small pamphlets of ballads in which he also included poetry and prose of his own inspiration. The pamphlets of Yacob Yoná were for the daily use of the Sephardic masses and so few survive. They were printed on cheap, fragile paper and priced at a few pennies. He wrote poems about many events in the life of Salonikan Jewry and sold his pamphlets during the evening in the Jewish quarter of the city to help support his family. A number of his chapbooks survive in only a single copy. Some boast two copies but rare indeed is the booklet, such as this Gu'erta de romances importantes, of which four copies are known to have survived.

His ballads reflect oral tradition with surprising exactitude. Characterized by all the authentic irregularities, contaminations and imperfections of traditional poetry, his ballads preserve precious evidence of the Salonikan romancero. At a time when Salonikan Sephardim were experiencing rapid westernization, Yoná, the street minstrel and self-appointed repository of the ancient folk poetry of his people, stands out as a remarkable anachronism. Today the Salonikan ballad tradition is slowly dying out in various diaspora communities, notably in Israel and the United States.

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Yoná, Yacob Abraham.  
Gu'erta de romansos 'importantes.  
Saloniko, [before 1905]  
University of California, Los Angeles.

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Apart from the romancero, 19th century and later Ladino secular literature is made up chiefly of translations or adaptations of novels and plays, especially from the French. These served principally to stimulate Sephardic writers to produce a number of original plays, historical novels and other works. They are, however, generally mediocre in literary terms. They take nothing from Sephardic experience and are purely derivative. Most of these, such as this drama from Viena, have been forgotten.

Thus, Ladino publishing effectively ends in the 19th century. A dying language, Ladino is of interest now chiefly to the Hispanic linguist. 20th century publications in Ladino will reflect the archivist's efforts to preserve and not an individual's attempt at self-expression in his native language.

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Behar, Yakim.  
La famia misterioza. Teatro en 4 aktos.  
Viena : Josef Schlesinger, 1889.  
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