



“Expulsos :”Sephardim and Crypto-Jews from 1492 to 1942 –
A Cultural and Personal Journey •

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Deportees / Ekspulsados¹

מגורשים

i touch the wings of their garments,

אני נוגעת בכנפות בגדיהם,

caress their eyes, as they

מלטפת את עיניהם, והם

are striding:

פוסעים:

a thousand uprooted roses,

אלף שושנים זקורות,

four hundred shattered pomegranates,

ארבע מאות רמונים מנפצים,

ninety violated orchards

תשעים בקטנים פרוצים

and two women singing to lift their spirits.

ושתיים נשים משוררות לעודד את רוחם.

i touch their tambourines

אני נוגעת בתפיקן

only the melody

ורק הנגון

is vanished

נעלם

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¹ Michal Held, *Zman HaRimon, / Time of the Pomegranate*, 1996, p.23 [translated into English by Michal held].



ANAIIS ELETRÔNICOS
1ª EDIÇÃO
SIMPÓSIO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS CRIPTOJUDAICOS
CRIPTOJUDAÍSMO E CABALA

The following discussion presents some initial thoughts concerning the connection between the Anussim² and the Sephardic community and the faith of its members. It derives from my interest in the Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) language and culture that has been central to my scholarly and creative work for many years, and may lead to a reconsideration of it in a new light.³

Being born as an eight generation in Israel to the Delarozza family, whose members arrived to Jerusalem after the Spanish expulsion, I carry a living childhood memory of my grandfather pleading to make sure I was aware of the fact that we have roots in the Medieval Spanish city of Cordoba. Years later, when visiting Cordoba, I turned to the local tourist information office, wishing to locate the old Jewish cemetery. "Señorita, aquí ya no hay un cementerio judío" – Young lady, there is no Jewish cemetery here, insisted the clerk, whose reply I refused to accept, calming, in my grandfather's native Ladino: "No puede ser! Mi nono me disho ke estamos de aki!" – This cannot be! My grandfather told me that we are from here!

I never found the tombstones of the Delarozza family members in Cordoba, since the Jewish cemetery was indeed demolished centuries before my arrival to their ancient hometown. When I took a walk on the wide Roman Bridge along the Guadalquivir River with my camera hanged on my shoulder, a local passerby recommended that I hold it more carefully so that it doesn't get snapped.

This incident often re-occurs in my mind, making me realize that I did not ignore the friendly advice out of underestimation of the danger of losing the camera. It actually had to do with the fact that, metaphorically, the danger itself was meaningless, as our Spanish homeland does not depend on conventional documenting tools like a camera, but is kept alive inside us on a much deeper and complex way. As Sephardic Jews, we do not need pictures to remind us that wherever we are in the world, we are always walking along the bank of the river in the Spanish city from whose soil our ancestors' graves were uprooted. In a way, it brings us quite close to the Anussim.

² The Hebrew term "Anussim", literally meaning forced (including in the context of rape), refers to the Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity under the laws of the inquisition in Spain and Portugal in the 15th century. I find it much more appropriate than the less accurate terms Crypto-Jews, Conversos or Marranos, and thus it will be used in this discussion. The experience of Bnei Anussim – the sons and daughters of the Anussim, including those who in 1498 were expelled from Portugal taking with them a rich Portuguese Jewish culture and heritage, form part of the phenomenon at which we are looking. The term Spain, or "Sepharad", refers to both Spain and Portugal as a unique region in Jewish history and identity.

³ See for example Michal Held, *Bo'i asapper lach / Ven te kontare: 'lyyun rav-techumi be-sippurim ishiyyim shel mesapperot amamiyyot doverot Sfaradit Yehudit (Ladino) [Let Me Tell You a Story / Ven te kontare: The Personal Narratives of Judeo-Spanish Speaking Storytelling Women, An Interdisciplinary Study]*. Jerusalem, 2009.



A few years after the visit to Andalusia, I coincidentally met in Jerusalem a non-Jewish man from Spain whose last name was Delaroza. He proudly told me that this name is carried by the descendants of the Anussim whose forefathers, being forced to hide their Jewish names, refused to replace them with Christian ones, and thus adopted for themselves neutral names related to plants.

Determining whether his claim derived from a historical truth or was based upon a common belief is impossible. Furthermore, coming to decipher the phenomenon of the Anussim, such a resolution is actually unnecessary, since the very essence of their experience is anchored in a constant blur – a construction of a complex structure of identities, the core of which has been for hundreds of years the insistence on preserving a Jewish awareness. I take the explanation of Señor Delaroza who appeared and disappeared instantly in my life to symbolize the idea that both as Sephardim is Benei Anussim our very existence springs **de la roza** – from the heart of the Spanish rose out of which we all come.

One of my creative responses to being a descendant of the Delaroza family was formed in the following poem that fuses Hebrew and Ladino – the two languages and cultures that the Anussim and the Sephardim share openly and latently:

שׁוֹשְׁנַת הַרוֹחוֹת

אַהֲבָה אֲשֶׁר אַהֲבָה

שׁוֹשְׁנָה כִּי שׁוֹשְׁנִים הִיוּ

אַמּוֹתַי

אַשֶׁר אַהֲבָה

אַהֲבָה

הַיּוֹנָה שְׁבִישִׁיר

בְּיָם נֶצֶב מְגִדֵּל אֵין לֵה מֵאֵר אֵיי אֹנֵה טוֹרֵי

בְּמִגְדֵּל חֵלוֹן אֵין לֵה טוֹרֵי אֵיי אֹנֵה בִּינְטָאנֵה

בְּחֵלוֹן יוֹנָה אֵין לֵה בִּינְטָאנֵה אֵיי אֹנֵה פֵאלוֹמְבֵה



ANAIS ELETRÔNICOS
1ª EDIÇÃO
SIMPÓSIO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS CRIPTOJUDAICOS
CRIPTOJUDAÍSMO E CABALA

לְיִוְרְדֵי הַיָּם קוֹרְאָה קִי אַה לּוֹס מַאֲרִינֵירוֹס נִיאֲמָה
וְיִוְרְדֵי הַיָּם אֶת הַשִּׁיר שְׁרוֹת מְאוֹת שָׁנִים אֲמָא שְׁלִי וְסִבְתָּא שְׁלִי וְאֲמָא שְׁלָה
אַיְנָם שׁוֹמְעִים אֶת
עָלֵי הַכּוֹתֶרֶת שְׁלָהּן מְרַחֲפִים עַל הַיָּם שְׁהוֹפֵךְ כְּלוֹ אַגּוּאָה רוֹזְאֵנְהָ
מִי וְרָדִים

The poem was translated into Portuguese by Moacir Amancio:

Rosa dos ventos

Serei o que serei
rosa pois rosas foram
minhas mães
o que eu for
serei
a pomba da canção

En la mar hai uma torre no mar há uma torre
en la tore hai uma bentana na torre há uma janela
en la bentana hai uma na janela há uma
palomba pomba
que a los marineros iama que aos marinheiros chama

Essa canção cantaram por séculos minha mãe e minha
avó e a mãe dela e os marinheiros
não ouvem as



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1ª EDIÇÃO
SIMPÓSIO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS CRIPTOJUDAICOS
CRIPTOJUDAÍSMO E CABALA

pétalas das corolas delas adejando sobre o mar que se torna todo

águas rosadas

águas de rosas

Let us return now to the fracture of 1492 – a point in history that determined the faith of the Sephardim and the Anussim alike. Both groups had been persecuted during the Spanish inquisition that preceded the expulsion, and in 1492 their roads parted. The Jews fled openly to save and develop their tradition outside the borders of the Iberian peninsula, whereas their secret brothers and sisters stayed behind or found their way elsewhere to places like the Canary and the Caribbean islands and the new world of Latin America where they nourished their tradition in their hearts.

While silence was forced upon the Anussim and muteness had become their expression tool, the expelled Jews had at their disposal a Medieval Spanish that evolved to become the Judeo-Spanish language – a mold into which they casted their heritage and by which they further devolved it.

Jewish presence existed in the Iberian Peninsula even before the Romans exiled the Jews from the Land of Israel in the year 70AD. Under Muslim rule, the Jews of Spain, often referred to as "Sephardim" (a word originating from the Hebrew *Sepharad*– Spain) developed a rich culture, especially in the 9th-13th centuries, during the period named "Tor HaZahav", The Golden Era. Following the Christian Reconquista and the inquisition, the Jews were expelled from Spain and Portugal in 1492 and 1498 respectively.

Sephardic Jewry is the community of the expelled Jews and their descendants who continued to develop a rich heritage in the Ottoman Empire and northern Morocco, where the Judeo-Spanish language, literature and culture flourished over the next 500 years in contact with Hebrew and the Jewish values of its users, as well as with the non-Jewish linguistic and cultural features of their new surroundings.⁴

Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) is mainly a Romance language with embedded Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Turkish, Balkan and European components. Originating in medieval Spain, it became a widespread Jewish language when the descendants of the expelled Jews used it in oral and written form. The

⁴ For a detailed historical background see for example Paloma Diaz-Mas, *Sephardim: the Jews from Spain* (G. K. Zucker, Trans.). Chicago 1992.



ANAIIS ELETRÔNICOS
1ª EDIÇÃO
SIMPÓSIO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS CRIPTOJUDAICOS
CRIPTOJUDAÍSMO E CABALA

language received various names down the centuries, including "Ladino", which originally referred to the dialect used in the translation of the Bible and other sacred Jewish texts since the 16th century.

From the early 20th century, the status of Ladino has deteriorated because of various social developments, such as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the rise of Zionism and the revival of Modern Hebrew. A major branch of Sephardic life was tragically demolished during the Holocaust, when as Ashkenazi Jewish life in central and Eastern Europe was destroyed by the Nazis, the Ladino speaking communities also disappeared.

Our opening poem derives from a wish to reconstruct the musical baggage of the Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain, and from a realization that we can only assume what they were singing, embarking on the forced journey to an unknown future. Sephardic Jews were expelled from Spain and refused to depart from their Spanish heritage; Crypto-Jews were expelled from themselves and refused to let go of their Jewish identity. The poem follows both their journeys that started in 1492. This context invites another reading of the poem that was previously presented in English, this time in Judeo-Spanish.

Ekspulsados

Trekladado al Judeo-espanyol por Vitali Haim Ferera

Yo toko los bodres⁵ de sus vestidos,
afishugo sus ojos, i eyos
andan:
Mil trandafilas arankadas,
Kuatrosientas granadas enroturadas
Noventa verdjeles destruidos
I dos mujeres kantan a enkorajar sus spiritos.

Yo toko sus panderos
I solo el kanto

⁵ Originally: las olas.



ANAI ELETRÔNICOS
1ª EDIÇÃO
SIMPÓSIO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS CRIPTOJUDAICOS
CRIPTOJUDAÍSMO E CABALA

Se esparesio

Today, Ladino is a language of music (with a renaissance around the world), a language of culture (with numerous activities evolving around it in Israel and abroad), and language of study (being taught and researched in three major universities in Israel, and in other parts of the world.) Yet, it still is a disappearing language that children no longer use as a mother tongue and their grandparents are losing as a spoken one; an endangered language refusing to die and reappearing as a cultural and psychological state that I defined as "a personal ethnicity": a psychological identification of the individuals whose social ethnic group is being disentangled.

The contemporary status of the Judeo-Spanish language and culture may be understood in the light of Benedict Anderson's concept of the imagined community⁶ and of the concept of the transportable homeland interpreted by Jean Amery:⁷

If I am permitted ... to give an answer to the question how much home does a person need, I would say: all the more, the less of it he can carry with him. For there is, after all, something like a transportable home[land],⁸ or at least an ersatz for home. That can be religion, like the Jewish one.⁹

The transportable homeland powerfully re-connects us to the Anussim who, like the Sephardim, have lived through the last 600 years between losses and Diasporas, attempting to reconstruct a multi-layered system of homelands. Having lost its function as a tool of communication, I conceive the Ladino language today as a metaphoric place in which an identity can be built. It feels up the void of a realistic or an imagined Sephardic community, when the ethnic language that represented the fragmented collective identity becomes a replacement for the Sephardic

⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983.

⁷ Heinrich Heine originally presented the concept of the portable homeland. For his consideration of the Jewish Portable Fatherland, see Henryk Broder, *A Jew in the New Germany*, translated from the German by the Broder Translators' Collective, edited by Sander L. Gilman and Lilian M. Friedberg, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 2004, p. 41.

⁸ Amery uses the word "Heimat" (capitalized in the German original), which refers to a homeland as well as to a home. Thus, here I am using "Homeland" in accordance with Amery's Hebrew translation, as it seems more accurate in the context in which it appears.

⁹ Jean Amery, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, translated from German by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1980, p. 44.



ANALIS ELETRÔNICOS
1ª EDIÇÃO
SIMPÓSIO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS CRIPTOJUDAICOS
CRIPTOJUDAÍSMO E CABALA

homeland, or rather the system of homelands that Sephardic Jews yearn back to on the axis of Jerusalem, Spain, the Ottoman Empire and Israel.

The experience of the Anussim shares many of the Sephardic historical and cultural characteristics, yet it centers on an even deeper wound: that of yearning secretly to the hidden Jerusalem and Spain and to the concealed Jewish identity that is embedded in the memory of them.

From a phenomenological point of view, I suggest that Displacement and Diaspora are an integral part of the Sephardic identity, which at our times is being shaped into a memory yet after centuries during which it had been practiced as a living culture, as apposed to the culture of the Anussim that had until recently been forced to be hidden in the realms of the unknown.

Jean Amery noted that, especially in exile, the homeland is often treated like a lost mother tongue that cannot be reacquired. A meaningful linguistic difference between the two journeys out of Spain with which we are concerned has to do with the fact that the Sephardim relied on the Ladino language for shaping their life and their identity and are only recently losing their mother tongue, whereas the Ansim were muted from the very beginning of their existence, having no ethnic mother tongue to use and to lose.

Having traced some of the threads that tie together the two groups that were born in medieval Spain and took separate roots out of it, I would like to suggest that the Anussim and the Sephardim represent a latent level in each other's identity. Following Pierre Nora's definition of the cultural stage in which when "lieux de memoire" no longer exist, "milieux de memoire" are created,¹⁰ we can say that the fragments of the individual and the collective identity of each group are forming lieux de memoire that are subconsciously reflected in the other.

¹⁰ Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire", trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations* 26 (1989), pp. 7–25.



ANAI ELETRÔNICOS
1ª EDIÇÃO
SIMPÓSIO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS CRIPTOJUDAICOS
CRIPTOJUDAÍSMO E CABALA

In my family, as in those of many Sephardim, it is forbidden to point at the sky in public when counting the three stars that mark the end of Shabath. We respect this costume as free people centuries after our ancestors were expelled from Spain, as a reminder of the inquisition's attempt to burn alive whoever was caught practicing a Jewish tradition. I find this to be a symbol of the deep connection between Sephardim and Anussim, who kept their Jewish costumes secretly like we did with regard to counting the stars, that shall hopefully be further explored scholarly and creatively.

The identity of the Anussim and their descendants is formed around a trauma that started in Medieval Spain and remained present until today. The Sephardim share a trauma that is not identical but similar. Unfortunately, an incomparable part of it is the complete destruction during the Holocaust of the Sephardic communities of Greece and the former Yugoslavia, and the murder of Sephardic Jews originating in France, Belgium, Italy, and other European countries, have long been met, for the most part, with undeserved silence. The life of these communities continued from 1492 to 1942, and the appalling similarity of these numbers emphasize the fact that it lasted from the Spanish expulsion to the expulsion to Auschwitz.

As noted by Esther Benbassa and Aron Rodrigue, while "most people are aware of the destruction of the Ashkenazi heartland in the middle of the twentieth century, [they are unaware of the fact that] its Judeo-Spanish counterpart also disappeared at approximately the same time"¹¹. The distance between the Balkan countries, most of whose Sephardic Jews were deported, and the death camps to which they were sent was not only physical but social and cultural as well. Unlike the German Jews, who as early as the 1930s were living amidst and suffering from the conditions that accompanied the gradual rise of Nazism, the members of the Sephardic communities could have never anticipated or imagined them.

The Holocaust is a meaningful part of my identity, even though my immediate family was not murdered. My father and his Ashkenazi family lived in Romania. My grandfather was sent to forced labor but, fortunately, the family was not deported. My mother was born to a Sephardic family in Jerusalem and always reminds us of how fortunate she was. My relationship with the Holocaust became more personal as my contacts with the Sephardic community deepened.

The realization that 70 years after the end of World War II, a long enough time for substantive research and documentation to be completed, published and used for as an educational tool, people in Israel and abroad are still not always aware of the fact that the German plan to demolish the Jewish People included

¹¹ Ester Benbassa. & Aron Rodrigue, *Jewish communities of the modern world: The Jews of the Balkans: The Judeo-Spanish community, 15th to 20th centuries*. Berkeley and Los Angeles 2000, p. xxiii.



ANALIS ELETRÔNICOS
1ª EDIÇÃO
SIMPÓSIO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS CRIPTOJUDAICOS
CRIPTOJUDAÍSMO E CABALA

Ladino-speaking Jews, led me to understand that it was my duty to listen to the Sephardic survivors remaining and to implore others do the same. I found myself on a scholarly and poetic journey founded on three principles: *listen, create, and educate*.¹²

This essay was written during the week between Passover and Yom HaShoa, the Israeli Holocaust Memorial Day – two major events in Jewish and Israeli life that center on Memory and Freedom. I wish to conclude with a poem written in reaction to my visit to the death camps, and accompany it with a hope for remembrance and regeneration of both the nomadic culture of the Crypto-Jews and the Sephardic Jews alike.

סול

דיאמאנטי

ב'ידה

בואינה

(ב'ידה בואינה?)

אורו

סול

אליגרה

סול

חיים זָהב טובָה שְׁמָחָה יְהִלּוּם שְׁמִשּׁוֹת שְׁלִישׁ

כָּל אֵלֶּה מְגִיתִי בְּשִׁמּוֹתֶיהֶן שְׁל נְשׁוֹת סְלוֹנִיק

שְׁהִגִּיעוּ בְּטָרָאֲנִסְפּוֹרְט לְאוֹשׁוֹיץ

¹² For a detailed discussion of this journey see 18. "Listen, Create, Educate: The Sephardic Holocaust from Scholarly and Personal Perspectives", *Prism* 7, 2015 pp. 56-62.



נאחזות בשק תפצאים אסופים בתטרף

אפילו מזודה שאפשר לרשם עליה שם וכתבת

לא יכלו לארז

בוהה בשמות מתחת לזכוכית התצוגה בביתן מספר ארבע עמדתתי מולן

ולרגע היתה נשמטן בצרור הסיים

ישערן האפור מגז נצבע שוב

היתה אדמונית אורו

לרגע

Sol

Diamante

Vida

Buena

(Vida buena?)

Oro

Sol

Alegra

Sol

Tres soles diamante alegria buendad oro vidas

Lo konti todo esto en los nombres de las mujeres Selaniklias

ke yegaron en un transporto a Auschwitz

deteniendosen en sako de artikolos arekojidos en ora apresurada

Afilu validja en la ke se puede eskrivir nombre i adereso

no pudieron enpaketar



ANAIIS ELETRÔNICOS
1ª EDIÇÃO
SIMPÓSIO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS CRIPTOJUDAICOS
CRIPTOJUDAÍSMO E CABALA

Mirando atudrida los nombres basho'l vidro ke en el blok numero kuarto estuve
aparada en frente de eyas
i por un momento se arre bivieron sus almas en la vida eterna
i sus kaveyos engrizados del gaz se kolorearon de nuevo

Oro se enruvesio
por un momento

Tre zladado al Judeo-espanyol por Vitali Haim Ferera

Sol
Diamante
Vida
Buena
(vida buena?)
Oro
Sol
Alegra
Sol

three suns a diamond happiness goodness gold life

all these I found in the names of the women of Selanik
who arrived in the transport to Auschwitz
clinging to a bag of hastily collected objects
even a suitcase on which a name and an address may be inscribed



ANAIIS ELETRÔNICOS
1ª EDIÇÃO
SIMPÓSIO NACIONAL DE ESTUDOS CRIPTOJUDAICOS
CRIPTOJUDAÍSMO E CABALA

they could not pack

staring at the names suffocated in a vitrine

in block number four i stood in front of them

and for a single moment their soul was bound in the bond of life

and their gas-grayed hair was colored again

Oro was red-headed

For a moment