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The Effect Genocides Have On Minority Languages

“I have come to the realization that so many Jews with my Sephardic background, were deported, never to return, and that hit me like a sledge hammer”(Harrison, 33:01).

Luna Harrison, a survivor of the Holocaust, spoke this powerful statement during her interview with the USC Shoah Foundation. Harrison mourns the loss of not only her Sephardic brethren, but also the loss of her beloved Ladino, a Judeo-Spanish language. Approximately 6 million Jews were killed during the Holocaust. Along with their deaths, came another loss, the decline of the Ladino language. Sarajevo and Salonika were both cities once rich in Sephardic culture and Ladino. However, these cities are no longer hubs of Sephardic language and culture. Similarly, following the Armenian Genocide, there was a decline of Western Armenian language. This paper seeks to explore the negative effects genocides have on minority languages, particularly the Ladino language following the Holocaust, while the loss of the Western Armenian language following the Armenian Genocide is used as a comparable case.

Before examining the decline of Ladino language, it is essential to discuss the high regard the Ladino language once held. Julia Phillips Cohen’s and Sarah Abrevaya Stein’s *Sephardi Lives* uncovers primary sources and allows the reader to experience the lives of Sephardic Jews. After the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, Sephardic Jews resettled; however, these Jews continued to speak Judeo-Spanish, while also adopting

words and phrases from their surrounding areas. This included Greek, Turkish and South Slavic languages. Cohen and Stein state, “In the early twentieth century one was more likely to hear Ladino spoken on the streets of Salonika than any other language; many non-Jews even learned Ladino at school or for business”(Cohen and Stein, 7). This further illustrates the popularity of Ladino, which was also considered the “mother tongue” to many Sephardic Jews. A rising print culture also gave way to the cultivation of Ladino newspapers. Many periodicals were published in Ladino, while other works of literature were translated into Ladino. This language truly globalized all Sephardic Jews throughout the world. Unfortunately, this language did not popularize much longer.

Ladino was oftentimes considered the mother language to many Sephardic Jews. Henry Levy, a Sephardic Jew born in Salonika, hid in Athens while Germans invaded Greece during World War II. When asked what language he spoke at home, Levy responded, “We always spoke Spanish. Not only at home, at plays and everywhere. Jews with origins from Spain maintained their language”(Levy, 11:09). Similarly, Leon Calderon, a Sephardic Jew born in Salonika, experienced death marches and survived five concentration camps. When discussing his childhood, Calderon stated, “We used to speak Ladino in the house. It is a language that is from Spain, which from generation to generation we kept speaking. It was our mother language” (Calderon, 6:00). Calderon went on to say that Sephardic Jews mostly inhabited Salonika and that usually Sephardic Jews did not interact with Greeks. Greeks were able to identify Jews by the way Sephardic Jews spoke. Calderon describes Sephardic Jews speaking with a “musical tone” and a slight accent. Ladino was not only a language, but also an identifying trait of

Sephardic Judaism. With the passing down from generation to generation, Ladino developed into a culture, which many Sephardic Jews lived by.

The film, *Saved by Language*, describes the life of Moris Albahari, a Sephardic Jew, who utilized Ladino in order to survive the Holocaust. Albahari is from Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia Herzegovina. Sarajevo was known for being multi-religious before World War II. As a result of the Holocaust, 80% of the Jews in Sarajevo lost their lives. Albahari recalls a time when the streets of Sarajevo were filled with Sephardic children playing in the streets and speaking Ladino to one another. However, this joyous period was short-lived. When American soldiers came to liberate Italy, Albahari, who was a part of a partisan group, utilized Ladino and spoke with an American soldier who spoke Spanish. Ladino truly saved Albahari's life; however, the Ladino language did not have the same fate. Albahari stated, "But World War II ended my use of Ladino because I was in the mountains. I no longer lived with my family, and so I forgot my Ladino"(Albahari, 3:54). Albahari's separation from his family during World War II and the death of other Sephardic Jews contributed to the decline of Ladino in Sarajevo. Although the film discussed the importance of Ladino, the entire interview is conducted in English. Unfortunately, there are only 4 speakers of Ladino in Sarajevo today, a place that was once rich in Sephardic culture. Tillie Molho, a Sephardic Jew from Salonika, went into hiding in Athens during the Holocaust and felt the absence of her culture once she returned. She stated, "All the kids in Salonika, not anymore, they used to speak Ladino, now maybe nobody"(Molho, 9:00). Molho and Albahari both feel the loss of their language in places that were once both a metropolis of Ladino language and Sephardic culture.

Through the execution and deportation of millions of Jews, the Ladino language quickly declined. Henry Abramson's "A Double Occlusion: Sephardim and the Holocaust" discusses the untold experiences of Sephardic Jews during the Holocaust. Abramson states, "The treatment of Sephardic Jews in Greece and Yugoslavia followed precisely the German model of persecution, ghettoization, deportation and murder"(Abramson, 297). A method of persecution which was utilized by Germans was restricting Jewish press. When the Germans invaded Greece, "Jewish newspapers were closed, including the last Judeo-Spanish periodical to use "Rashi" script"(Abramson, 290). This restriction of press also impacted the literacy of Ladino overtime. While discussing the demise of Ladino culture, Luna Harrison stated, "Some of the culture seems to be lost forever because the children are not being taught what I was taught and tried so hard to forget about and suppress all these years"(Harrison, 45:01). The decline of newspapers written in Ladino and the death of thousands of Sephardic Jews ultimately led to the demise of the Ladino language.

The disappearance of a minority language following a genocide is not a unique case. There are many other instances of minority groups losing their language. An example of this is the loss of Western Armenian language following the Armenian Genocide. After observing the decline of Western Armenian language, historians are beginning to study Armenian history as a way to make sense of the rapid disappearance of the language. On April 24, 1915, Ottoman Turks decimated the Armenian population, while also repressing Armenian culture and language. While discussing the loss of language, Reverend Krikor Maksoudian, a professor of Armenian literature at Colombia University, stated, "You lose expressions used in households, terms of endearment and

intellectual concepts. Each language has its own way of describing and asserting human experience. We are losing another perspective on the world”(Hedges, 3). A loss of a language is a grave loss to humanity. Unfortunately, the Ladino language is following a similar decline.

The Armenian Genocide and The Holocaust are testaments to the negative effects genocides have on minority languages. Through the visual archives of the Shoah Foundation, one is able to see how the Ladino language is no longer a part of a Sephardic household. The United Nations agency UNESCO listed both Western Armenian and Ladino as seriously endangered. The decimation of a minority group creates an irreplaceable loss in culture and language. A loss of language silences disregarded groups of people whose stories shall remain forever unheard.

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