

## World War II and the Decline of the Ladino Language

Languages are ever-changing- constantly being modified to accommodate new inventions or concepts, earning new meaning as people use them in different ways, and sometimes even being created or destroyed entirely. It is no surprise that languages originating from the Jewish religion, a religion that has similarly endured many trials and changes in environment, are no exception to this rule. One of the most prominent Jewish languages- Ladino, a form of Judeo-Spanish- has experienced a steady and devastating decline throughout the past few centuries, leaving fewer than 200,000 Ladino speakers alive today. While World War II and its devastating impacts on the Jewish population play a large factor in the decline of Ladino, this downwards trend can be traced back much further than the war. During World War II, the influx of anti-Semitic feelings and Jewish deaths acted as the final factors in the ultimate decline of the Ladino language; however, Ladino's decline actually began far before the onset of the war due to increasing nationalism, improved education, and pre-war anti-Semitism.

In the century leading up to World War II, revolutionary improvements and ideas in the education system for Jews stressed the importance of more universally recognized languages such as French, consequently lessening the emphasis placed on studying Ladino. One of the most important institutions for Jewish education in the period before World War II was the Alliance Israélite Universelle. Founded in 1860, the Alliance Israélite Universelle was a Jewish educational and philanthropic organization that worked to promote the self-sufficiency of Jews who wouldn't otherwise receive a good education. The AIU emphasized the use of French, among other languages, to its students as a more relevant and practical language for communication and education. The AIU catered this "conformity with modern European civilization" to many Sephardic, Ladino-speaking Jews: "generations of Sephardim received

their education in alliance institutions, which provided them with an essentially French education” (Rodrigue & Benbassa, 83). A conversion to French as the main language for education among Sephardic Jews, facilitated by the AIU, minimized the importance of Ladino and caused many young Sephardic Jews to become more fluent and comfortable speaking French than they did speaking their native language as they had before. “Although Judeo-Spanish was predominant until the end of the nineteenth century, the trend was gradually reversed. The part that education played in the process of change was central. The Alliance schools Gallicized certain classes of Jews, putting them into direct contact with the West” (Rodrigue & Benbassa, 92). With the introduction of AIU education for Sephardic Jewish children, the Sephardic Jewish population became gradually westernized and more distant from their Ladino roots and culture. And the AIU was not the only school of its kind- other Jewish schools had similar impacts: “At the rabbinic seminary of Constantinople, all subjects were taught in Turkish starting from 1900” (Harris, 198). By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prominent Jewish educational institutions had almost entirely abandoned their use of Judeo-Spanish as a scholarly or educational language in place of more generally accepted languages, leading Ladino to see a decline in its use in the decades leading up to World War II as westernization settled in.

A rising sense of nationalism and westernization before WWII and the policies it implemented in many countries minimized the importance of Ladino as it emphasized other languages instead. Nationalism and westernization were on the horizon in most parts of Europe throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the importance of languages based on the state they were spoken in began to take precedence over those based in religion. For example, in the Balkans, nationalism undermined Sephardic culture- “as a result of the advent of nationalism in the Balkans, the traditional Sephardic culture and life style started to crumble and the language

was relegated to the intimacy of the family” (Harris, 199). Nationalism played a huge part in the decline of Ladino as a scholarly and internationally-recognized language. Another example of this widespread nationalization can be seen in the Ottoman Empire. Once a vibrant hub for Ladino culture and language, the Ottoman Empire underwent a series of reforms that “significantly eroded the legal autonomy of the Jewish community” (Rodrigue & Benbassa, 70). The importance of state nationalism and pride began to overtake that of religion, causing the importance of religion-based languages such as Ladino to decrease. Many of this newfound nationalism also manifested itself in forms of Westernization as the Ottoman Empire began to adopt more ideas from the Western world. Westernization tactics “aided in changing Jewish customs and ways of thinking to a more Europeanized ideal. Unfortunately, in the assimilation process the mother tongue often has to take a back seat” (Harris, 201). While Westernization may have provided new opportunities, it simultaneously pushed aside non-western traditions and cultures such as Ladino. The results were laws and practices in many areas that eliminated Ladino as a suitable language choice. “In 1923, the Jews lost the right to keep their accounting books in the language of their choosing [in Salonika]” (Rodrigue & Benbassa, 99). More Western languages were taking over as the default for many states, which unfortunately had a very negative impact on Ladino. A reorganization of priorities in terms of religion versus state, in addition to this influx of Western ideas into once Ladino-rich places such as the Ottoman Empire both played important roles in the declining importance and prominence of Ladino among Sephardic Jews.

These changes in education and nationalism resulted in an evident decline in the use of Ladino as it became an outdated language that was unfit for younger generations of Sephardic Jews. Sam Cohen, born in Salonika in 1922, explains his usage of the Ladino language as mainly

a way to communicate with his elderly relatives, but not as something he would ever use among peers. Cohen describes that he would speak “Greek with my friends, Ladino with my mother, or with the older people who would speak Ladino” (Sam Cohen, 17:30). By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Ladino was no longer a language used for scholarly or general communicative purposes. Ladino became more of a secondary language used to hold onto heritage that rarely held any sort of political or educational purpose: “Judeo-Spanish has shifted from being an international trade language and language of prestige in the Levant, to the colloquial language of the home and as a means of communication reserved for older people.” (Harris, 228). In her book “Death by Language,” Harris further describes how this restriction of Ladino to intimate, familial settings allowed it to lose its “ability to express many abstract notions or elevated ideas or to evoke the contemporary realities of an advanced culture,” something that is necessary for a language to survive in today’s vibrant and international political, social, and economical settings (Harris, 229). The language of Ladino was becoming unfit for the rapidly advancing modern world, and being diminished to an outdated language of elderly people. Michael Bar-Zohar, a Bulgarian Jew, says that Ladino “went from generation to generation, including the songs, lullabies, the love songs on which I was raised” (Michael Bar-Zohar, 21:55), but Ladino became inevitably lost in translation as it moved between generations in an informal way, setting the language up for a massive decline as younger generations retained less and less of the Ladino language and culture than their parents before them. Younger generations began to value the importance of other languages above Ladino, and saw Ladino as nothing but an outdated tradition that could only be used with grandparents or parents. Younger generations simply did not feel the need to retain their language with friends or the generations that followed them.

With these beginnings to the decline of Ladino already set in motion, the explosion of anti-Semitism that overtook the world with the onset of World War II and the Holocaust greatly contributed to the decline of Ladino as it became embarrassing or even dangerous for Sephardic Jews to advertise their religion through the use of this language. In the period before World War II, many Jews began to feel embarrassed or ashamed of their religious ethnicity, and detected the animosity that gentiles directed towards them. Jackie Martin, a Sephardic Jewish woman and Holocaust survivor born in Istanbul, Turkey in 1921, recalls the anti-Semitism that she experienced in her youth and the embarrassment that she often felt towards her religion. Jackie and her cousin, who at birth were both given the Jewish name of “Sarah,” went so far as to change their names in order to avoid this anti-Semitism. “France was a very anti-Semitic country, and going to school, as we grew up and became teenagers, we didn’t like the names we had been given. We were called ‘dirty Jews’ - they knew we were Jews- so we decided we would give ourselves a nice name: ‘Jacqueline’” (Jackie Martin, 18:00). This embarrassment and maltreatment at the hands of their peers was common among Jewish youth, but their Jewish identities were marked by far more than just their names. Language also played a huge part in facilitating this anti-Semitism. Because only Sephardic Jews spoke the language of Ladino, this was a certain indicator of who was of Jewish heritage and who was not. Henry Levy, born in Salonika, Greece in 1924, says “because most of the time we would speak Spanish, we had a kind of accent, and always you could tell somebody [was Jewish] because we had an accent that only the Jewish people usually had” (Henry Levy, 12:30). Leon Calderone, a Sephardic Jew also born in Salonika, similarly states that because all the Jews in Salonika spoke Ladino at home, they had a distinct accent no matter how well they could speak Greek. People in Salonika could recognize someone was Jewish not by their face, but by the way they talked (Leon Calderone,

10:50). Traces of Ladino, detectable even when speaking other languages with fluency, made it blatantly obvious who was Jewish. Many Jews, already uneasy about publicizing their religion as a result of growing anti-Semitic feelings, were understandably not eager to continue using Ladino as their language of choice when it helped to attract this anti-Semitism. These fears were especially real during the terrifying period of Hitler's rule and the Holocaust.

The enormous number of Sephardic Jewish deaths that resulted from the Holocaust and World War II added to the immense decrease in the number of living Ladino speakers. As a result of Nazi ideology and Hitler's "Final Solution" to exterminate all of the Jewish people, millions of Jews were tragically murdered in the Holocaust throughout World War II. These rapidly dwindling numbers of Jewish people included many Sephardic Jews, and therefore had a lasting impact on the Ladino language. "The alarming rapid reduction in the Sephardi population, resulting from either extinction or assimilation, is one of the major phenomena characterizing the Sephardim today. The total decrease of Sephardim in the Levant alone after the Second World War is estimated at some 215,000, out of 281,000 before the war... a reduction in the Sephardi population is naturally accompanied by a reduction in the number of speakers of Judeo-Spanish" (Harris, 228). With fewer Jews alive after the war to continue speaking Ladino and to keep the culture and language alive, Ladino was undeniably effected as a result of World War II in a way that it was never truly able to recover from.

Today, if you asked a random group of people what "Ladino" is, chances are that most of them would have no idea. The language of Ladino has become so obsolete that not only have people stopped speaking it- people have stopped granting it recognition or notice altogether. While World War II had tremendous impacts on all aspects of Jewish life, and surely did on the use of Ladino as well, the language's decline was on the horizon for long before the war began.

Ladino was simply not prepared to survive under new ideas of nationalization, westernization, and education that Sephardic-populated countries were beginning to introduce. And it hasn't stopped- these factors continue to play a large part in today's world, leaving Ladino little chance to make a comeback. Although the language may be beyond revival back to its original prominence, it remains important to study and to recognize the Ladino language and everything that it entails. Ladino carries with it a rich culture and history of the Sephardic Jewish people that has been declining in historical importance over the last century. Sephardic culture is something that we need to hold on to and continue to celebrate in order to gain a complete historical context when studying Jewish history, and the language of Ladino plays an enormous part in this history and acts as a flawless way to facilitate this remembrance.

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