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# Serbo-Croatian as a Language of Sephardic Literature: The Cases of Isak Samokovlija and Jacques Confino

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## Abstract

The early twentieth century saw a rise in Jewish writers in what is traditionally considered non-Jewish languages in the Balkans like in the rest of Europe. In light of this phenomenon's significance, we pose the question why and how Serbo-Croatian became a language of Sephardic literature. The article questions the accepted narrative of 'linguistic acculturation' of Sephardic Jews in the Balkans and unearths the complex cultural, but also political background of this Jewish phenomenon using the examples of two prolific, recognized, and celebrated writers of Sephardic background, Isak Samokovlija and Jacques Confino. Through historicization of Sephardic multilingualism in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina from the 1890s to the 1920s, it argues that the adoption of Serbo-Croatian was motivated equally, if not dominantly, by Jewish political aims in the region rather than the pressures of emancipation only. Samokovlija and Confino's biographies and cultural choices, therefore, illuminate an unlikely Sephardic history.

## Keywords

Sephardic literature – Jacques Confino – Isak Samokovlija – Serbo-Croatian – Balkan Jews

## 1 Introduction

It is impossible to imagine the history of literature in Serbo-Croatian without Jewish writers.<sup>1</sup> The list of Jewish authors whose stories, critical essays, and papers became inseparable elements of Serbo-Croatian literary history is long, including Hajim Davičo, Paulina Lebl Albala, Oto Bihalji-Merin, Oskar Davičo, Danilo Kiš, and David Albahari, to name just a few. A number of Jews held prominent positions in Yugoslav cultural life. Contemporaries declared Stanislav Vinaver (1891–1955) to be the best stylist and connoisseur of Serbo-Croatian of his generation, and it is still the opinion of many quarters that he retains this position today. Geca Kon ran a publishing house that played a substantial role in the Yugoslav interwar literary scene. Isak Samokovlija (1889–1955) and Jacques Confino (1892–1975) also contributed a uniquely Jewish perspective to the corpus of literary realism in Serbo-Croatian.<sup>2</sup> Samokovlija's approach to the everyday ethical choices of mainly poor and underprivileged characters sheds light on some doubly marginalized groups in society. Confino, on the other hand, portrayed everyday life in the south of Serbia, both Jewish and non-Jewish, with a large dose of satire, appealing to both audiences alike.

The examples of Isak Samokovlija and Jacques Confino, established literary figures of the first half of the twentieth century, shed light on the Sephardic intellectuals who adopted Serbo-Croatian as their language of artistic expression. Their success questions the commonly held assumption that the boundaries of the Sephardic world ended at its first historical language, Judeo-Spanish. However, this insistence on the primacy of a single language excludes those Sephardim who have used a palette of different languages. Explored here is the larger political and cultural debate on the use of the South Slavic vernacular within the Jewish community at the beginning of the twentieth century. This debate offers a new perspective on the active choice of appropriating Serbo-Croatian first as the language of the Yugoslav Zionist movement, and ultimately, as the language of Jewish literature. The paradigm of Serbo-Croatian in the Sephardic community presented here does not just question the ways in which the state influenced and pressured the boundaries of this community. It will also become apparent that Jews, and especially Sephardic Jews, actively

1 I use Serbo-Croatian as a linguistic term that originates in the Literary Agreement in Vienna in 1850, an agreement that unites all languages and dialects understood today as Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, and Montenegrin.

2 The name of Jacques Confino also appears in the spelling Žak Konfino (mostly in Cyrillic), or even as Jacques Konfino. On his registration form at the University of Vienna (Nationalen) Confino used Jakob, the German version of his name. I opt for Jacques Confino, as this is how he signed his correspondence and articles in the Jewish press.

appropriated the South Slavic vernacular for their political and cultural needs. We will be invited to look at Serbo-Croatian as a tool for revising and expanding the boundaries of the Sephardic community.

The role of Serbo-Croatian in the history of Balkan Jewish communities has been primarily defined by the political and historical framework, in the context of either different ethnic communities or nation-states in the nineteenth century, or the Yugoslav state after 1918. This view has regarded language, in this case the use of Serbo-Croatian, as one of the outcomes of the Jewish emancipation process in nation-states. State-directed pressure, namely the obligation of Jewish children to learn and use only Serbian and limiting time and space for learning Jewish religion in schools in Belgrade, definitely played a significant role in the enforcement of the language, and thus imposed linguistic assimilation. However, the appropriation of the South Slavic vernacular was a Jewish choice as well. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Serbo-Croatian did not pose a direct threat to Judeo-Spanish; rather, the two languages both became vehicles for the production of Sephardic culture.

The case of Serbo-Croatian is only one among several languages that Jews adopted in modern European Jewish history as part of their emancipation. The best example and the richest in terms of its meaning and paradigmatic status is German.<sup>3</sup> Within the Balkan context the acquisition of (Ottoman) Turkish and Greek also had an impact on the formation and self-perception of the local Jewish communities.<sup>4</sup> The role of Serbo-Croatian is no less relevant as an example of the plurality of Jewish language(s) in modern Europe. Furthermore, Serbo-Croatian played the paradoxical role of becoming a vehicle both of emancipation and Jewish nationalism simultaneously. Finally, as the examples of Samokovlija and Confino show, it also became a language of Sephardic literary expression in the third decade of the twentieth century.

Literary scholars have noted the place of Sephardic writers within the history of literature in Serbo-Croatian. From the perspective of literary history, this linguistic assimilation seems inevitable. Predrag Palavestra's 1998 study focused on Jewish writers "[b]orn mostly in Serbia or among Serbs, [who] became Serbian writers [and formed] an inseparable part of Serbian spiritual culture and Serbian literary tradition precisely through and by language." He interpreted the acceptance of Serbo-Croatian as the language of choice for

3 Marc Volovici, *German as a Jewish Problem: The Language Politics of Jewish Nationalism* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

4 On the case of the Ottoman empire, see Julia Philips Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans: Sephardi Jews and Imperial Citizenship in the Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19–44. On Greece, and Salonica in particular, see Katherine E. Fleming, *Greece – A Jewish History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), 32–48, 67–88.

Jewish literature, thanks to an environment in which the Jews could retain their identity intact, while accepting “[c]onsciously or unconsciously the strength of Serbian spiritual culture in the Balkans.”<sup>5</sup> In his view, the acceptance of Serbo-Croatian as a Jewish literary language reflected the tolerant and amicable conditions that existed in modern Serbia, which enabled a successful balancing of Jewish and Serbian identities.

Krinka Vidaković Petrov also questioned the transition “from Sephardi traditional to modern Serbian/Yugoslav literature,” recognizing three periods in this process: modernization and integration, followed by the era of the first Yugoslavia (1918–1941), and then the second Yugoslavia (1945–1991). The first phase, modernization and integration, was initiated by nation-states, whose policies encouraged “breaking [the] isolation and integrating into the environment. Coupled with modern education and emancipation of women, the result was linguistic assimilation.”<sup>6</sup> However, while literary scholars have justifiably directed their efforts towards incorporating Jewish writers into mainstream Serbo-Croatian literature, here the emphasis is on how the Jews themselves appropriated the South Slavic vernacular.

Linguists and scholars of Judeo-Spanish have written detailed and meticulous studies on the multilingualism of the Balkan Jews, and of the Sephardim in particular.<sup>7</sup> Ivana Vučina Simović discussed the language choices made in Belgrade’s Sephardic community between 1840 and 1940, showing the level to which bilingualism existed and persisted in the urban setting.<sup>8</sup> However, a purely linguistic approach does not provide any insight into social and historical factors, how the languages were used, or the meaning of using a particular language in a specific context. We need to shift our attention beyond bilingualism to understand the circumstances under which both languages were employed. For instance, recent research in anthropological linguistics has shown that in bilingual communities, the use of two languages can

5 Predrag Palavestra, *Jevrejski pisci u srpskoj književnosti* (Belgrade: Institut za književnost i umetnost, 1998), 86–87. In the writers born “in Serbia or among Serbs,” Palavestra included Isak Samokovlija.

6 Krinka Vidaković Petrov, “From Sephardi Traditional to Modern Serbian/Yugoslav Literature,” in *Around the Point: Studies in Jewish Literature and Cultures in Multiple Languages*, eds. Hillel Weiss et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 437–438.

7 Jelena Filipović and Ivana Vučina Simović, “El judeoespañol de Belgrado (Serbia): Un caso paradigmático de desplazamiento lingüístico en los Balcanes,” *Hispania* 95(3) (2012): 495–508; Ivana Vučina Simović, “The Sephardim and Ashkenazim in Sarajevo: From Social, Cultural and Linguistic Divergence to Convergence,” *Transversal: Zeitschrift für jüdische Studien. Sepharad in Österreich-Ungarn* 13(2) (2012): 41–64.

8 Ivana Vučina Simović, “Elección de lenguas entre los sefardíes de Belgrado en la época moderna,” *Balkanica* (2015): 74–99.

forge a hybrid identity, in contrast to the dichotomy between two monolingual groups.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the choice has never been a simple either/or. Accordingly, we should regard Serbo-Croatian as a language of Sephardic literature, not in opposition to Judeo-Spanish, but alongside it; together forging a new Jewish cultural space in the Balkans. In order to understand this process, it is necessary to tackle two issues, namely the question of linguistic assimilation as the end result of Jewish emancipation in the Balkans, and the wider debate on the South Slavic vernacular within the Jewish community in the first decades of the twentieth century.

## 2 Serbo-Croatian and Jewish Emancipation

The question of language was at the core of the Jewish experience in the early part of the twentieth century and was most certainly central to emancipation. David Sorkin has pointed out how emancipation and assimilation are “reciprocally dependent processes.” While emancipation meant the equal rights that states were to grant their Jewish citizens, assimilation was “what the Jews were to give in return.” In addition to occupational restructuring and a version of religious reform, necessary prerequisites for the achievement of social and political equality also included reeducation and adopting the language of the state.<sup>10</sup> Embracing the language of the state or of the dominant cultural-linguistic group became a political issue for all Judeo-Spanish-speaking communities in the Balkans in the second half of the nineteenth century. In Salonica, for example, during the last decades of Ottoman rule, learning the Turkish language became the ultimate proof of patriotism. However, as some sources testify, only a quarter of Salonica’s Jewish population actually knew any Turkish by the end of the Ottoman period.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, other European languages, primarily French, but also German, Italian, and English, figured significantly as cultural, class, and (to a certain extent) political markers throughout the Eastern Mediterranean Sephardic world.<sup>12</sup>

9 Janet M. Fuller, “Language Choice as a Means of Shaping Identity,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 17(1) (2007): 110.

10 David Sorkin, “Emancipation and Assimilation: Two Concepts and their Application to German Jewish History,” *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 35(1) (1990): 18. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/leobaeck/35.1.17>.

11 Devin Naar, *Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 145–146; Cohen, *Becoming Ottomans*, 26–34.

12 On the case of knowledge and use of French, Italian, and English among the Sephardim in Belgrade, see Ivana Vučina Simović, “In Search of the Historical Linguistic Landscape

In Bosnia-Herzegovina under Austro-Hungarian rule, German was the state language, and was introduced in the Condominium as the language of administration and the press (notably the *Bosnische Post*,<sup>13</sup> and the *Sarajevor Tagblatt*). German was also a language most commonly spoken by the Ashkenazi population in Bosnia and Herzegovina. German-speaking colonists were the second largest group that settled there from other provinces of the Dual Monarchy. However, it is impossible to quantify how many Jewish immigrants spoke German upon settling in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The census of Jewish communities in Sarajevo in 1910 only distinguished between Judeo-Spanish speakers and “other languages.” However, according to the 1931 census, German was the third language among the Sarajevo Jewish community with 3.48 percent or 269 speakers.<sup>14</sup> German also figured as the first “learned language” (with 5,648 speakers) based on the census of 1910, followed by Turkish (2,289), Italian (591), and Arabic (448).<sup>15</sup> Yet, while these languages gave nuance to the Jewish–state-language disparity, they did not play a dominant role in this part of the Balkans.

The defining language for Sephardic Jews in the region was Serbo-Croatian. This language, introduced and labelled as Serbian, Croatian, or Bosnian, depending on the context, was primarily instituted through the growing system of state education, starting in the mid-nineteenth century and reaching its peak in the first decade of the twentieth century. While there were no Jewish educational options beyond the traditional structure of the *meldar* (the traditional religious school), the nation-states aimed to formulate a uniform education with the standardized vernacular at its heart. Behind this plan was the idea of *Kulturnation*, which was introduced in the first half of the nineteenth century and was popular until the 1870s in the German lands. According to this concept, the nation was based on linguistic and cultural ties, rather than on shared historical tradition or state boundaries, which were still changing in the nineteenth century.

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of the Balkans: The Case of Judeo-Spanish in Belgrade,” *Menorah* 7 (2013): 185. Moreover, Sephardim did not insist on the boundaries between Romance/Latin languages: Naar, *Jewish Salonica*, 105.

- 13 Carl Bethke, “The *Bosnische Post*: A Newspaper in Sarajevo, 1884–1903,” in *Language Diversity in the Late Habsburg Empire*, eds. M. Prokopovych et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 87–114.
- 14 Harriet Pass Freidenreich, *The Jews of Yugoslavia: A Quest for Community* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), 215.
- 15 Bethke, “*Bosnische Post*,” 88. Bethke quotes *Die Ergebnisse der Volkszählung in Bosnien und der Hercegovina vom 10. Oktober 1910* (Sarajevo: Landesregierung für Bosnien und die Hercegovina, 1912), 54–55.

Even before this common vernacular was created, or, more precisely, systematized through the teaching of orthography and grammar, the idea of a shared language for all South Slavic peoples had persisted since the Renaissance through the concept of the 'Illyrian language.' In the 1830s, a number of intellectuals from Croatia-Slavonia propagated the union of all South Slavs under the banner of 'Illyrianism.' However, Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, a self-taught Serb, developed a standard language that was based on popular dialect with the help of a Slovenian, Jernej Kopitar, in Vienna in the 1820s. This language, Serbo-Croatian, was the basis of the so-called Vienna Agreement of Slavists from Serbia and Croatian lands in 1850.<sup>16</sup> From that point onwards, this single language, under different names and with certain differences within its dialects, was the basis of state education in Serbia, Croatia-Slavonia, and eventually Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Compared with Serbia and Croatia-Slavonia, where the cultural elites initiated and developed the systematization and advancement of the common vernacular, in Bosnia and Herzegovina the state took on this role. The Habsburg empire also consciously capitalized on the use of the language to unify the ethnically and religiously diverse population of its only colony.<sup>17</sup> From this aspiration came the broad social and cultural project of the Austro-Hungarian minister of finance and administrator of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Benjamin Kalláy (1839–1903). Kalláy's ambitious undertaking had, among other things, introduced Bosnian (a variant of Serbo-Croatian) as one of the languages of the empire and the national language in Bosnia-Herzegovina (as noted in new textbooks from 1884).<sup>18</sup> Having in mind how crucial, both ideologically and practically, the state language was for the identity of the Serbian state, but also for the cultural principles of Austro-Hungarian rule in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it is not surprising that the states insisted on the acquisition of the language in state schools.

Almost a decade after official emancipation in the Serbian principality (1888) and two decades in the case of the Condominium of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1878), the Jewish communities of both regions were still caught between communal autonomy, as traditionally enjoyed, and full civic and

16 Marie-Janine Calic, *The Great Cauldron: A History of Southeastern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 252; Andrew Wachtel Baruch, *Making a Nation, Breaking a Nation: Literature and Cultural Politics in Yugoslavia (Cultural Memory in the Present)* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 20–66.

17 Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 654.

18 Robin Okey, *Taming Balkan Nationalism: The Habsburg 'Civilizing Mission' in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 1878–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 68.

political rights, in the modern sense. These Jews held on to longstanding practices, the *meldar*, the traditional religious school, being central among them. In correspondence with the Ministry of Education in 1896, the Jewish community in Belgrade stressed that the Jewish school had existed *od vajkada* [since time immemorial].<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the Jewish school lay at the heart of every Jewish community. Jewish boys would start attending *meldar* at the age of five, where they were taught to read the Hebrew Bible and Talmud, and to sing the liturgy. Jakov Maestro, who attended Sarajevo's *meldar* at the end of the nineteenth century, described his school as a large room next to the synagogue, where up to fifty children would sit around a *melamed* [teacher], who was usually also the rabbi.<sup>20</sup> The language of instruction was Judeo-Spanish, but the purpose of the school was to introduce boys to the study of Judaism and ensure that they had sufficient grasp of Hebrew in order to say their prayers fluently. This tendency to marginalize Judeo-Spanish as the language of reading was, arguably, specific to Sephardim living in the Serbo-Croatian realm. Sarah A. Stein underlined that other Sephardic communities enhanced their mother tongue through reading Judeo-Spanish translations of the Bible and the *Me'am lo'ez* (an encyclopedic Bible commentary that was composed by a variety of scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries), and this was later furthered by reading the Judeo-Spanish press. While the objectives of education changed over time, and communities later tried to offer a broader curriculum, furthering literacy in Judeo-Spanish never became a part of the communal agenda for education or culture.<sup>21</sup> This attitude encouraged Sephardic literary expression in Serbia in languages other than Judeo-Spanish.

Across Europe in the mid-nineteenth century Jewish boys were offered lessons in other languages. In Belgrade, as early as the 1860s, they learnt "some Serbian and German."<sup>22</sup> In other Sephardic settings, Alliance Israélite Universelle, the French Jewish organization committed to establishing a network of schools for Jewish children in the lands of the Ottoman Empire, offered a broader secular curriculum.<sup>23</sup> Despite the efforts of Benjamin Russo,

19 Belgrade, Archive of Serbia, Ministry of Education, Sector for Education [hereafter AS, MPS-P] 1899, F 4, R 56 (4 October 1896).

20 Jakov Maestro, "Naš stari meldar," in *Spomenica o proslavi tridesetogodišnjice sarajevskoga kulturno-potpornog društva La Benevolencija*, ed. Stanislav Vinaver (Sarajevo: La Benevolencija, 1924), 103. Maestro also noted that the conditions of *meldar* in Sarajevo were similar everywhere in Bosnia.

21 Sarah A. Stein, *Modern Jews: The Yiddish and Ladino Press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 60.

22 AS, MP 1861, F VII, No. ii55. [n.d.].

23 Aron Rodrigue, "From Millet to Minority: Turkish Jewry," in *Paths of Emancipation: Jews, States and Citizenship*, eds. Pierre Birnbaum and Ira Katznelson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 253.



a well-connected member of the Belgrade community, only one Alliance teacher was appointed to the Jewish school in Belgrade and he left his post after only two years because the community could not support his salary.<sup>24</sup> The Alliance made no plans to establish a school in Sarajevo, the center of one of the most significant Sephardic communities. In this way, Judeo-Spanish speakers in the Condominium of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbian principality were isolated from the norm of cultural, and thus linguistic, practice in the rest of the Ottoman and post-Ottoman Jewish communities.

Hand in hand with these efforts, in 1861, almost three decades before civic emancipation in 1888, two affluent members of Belgrade's Jewish community asked the Ministry of Education to set up classes for Jewish pupils within the state system: thus, exclusively Jewish classes were established in two public schools in Belgrade. One class took place in a school in the Jewish neighborhood of Jaliya. The other was in the city center, although still within walking distance of the Jewish area.<sup>25</sup> The community continued organizing *meldar* for boys in the afternoons on working days, on Sundays and Christian holidays, within their own communal spaces.<sup>26</sup> Thus, Belgrade's Jewish boys were receiving both secular, public, and religious education in two different settings. To some extent, this coexistence of public and Jewish communal schools was exceptional. In Sarajevo, for instance, in the mid-nineteenth century, the Ottoman authorities did open a public school, but not many Jewish pupils attended.<sup>27</sup>

After civic emancipation, the state aimed at gaining more control over Jewish education. The Ministry of Education decided to raise the standards for entry into the public school. After a complaint that Jewish pupils were not capable of following their Serbian teacher, the state introduced a language proficiency test in 1894 for all Jewish children whose comprehension of Serbian was not satisfactory. Previously, Jewish students had been given the opportunity to learn Serbian when they entered the public-school system, but now they were excluded unless their language skills were adequate. However, not all Jewish children lacked knowledge of the Slavic vernacular. Sultana Levi appealed to the ministry to have her daughter accepted into the school because, at the age of six, Rashela "[Did] not speak any Jewish, but only Serbian." Three teachers, one of whom, Jelena De Majo, was Jewish, examined Rashela and confirmed that her knowledge of Serbian was satisfactory for enrolment in

24 Noémie Duhaut, *Redrawing Boundaries in the Jewish World: The 'Alliance Israélite Universelle' and Serbian Jews, 1860–1880* (MA thesis, University College London, 2011), 18–19.

25 AS, MP 1861, F VII, No. 1155 (24 February 1864).

26 AS, MPS-P 1899, F 4, R 56 (12 November 1895).

27 Freidenreich, *Jews of Yugoslavia*, 14.

the first grade of primary school.<sup>28</sup> Jewish communal officials “[p]roudly” claimed “that our children speak Serbian as well as their own [language], [and] as proficiently as *Serbian children*.”<sup>29</sup> However, this still did not convince the Ministry of Education.

The stakes of emancipation were raised. In 1898 the Ministry of Education revoked the classes held exclusively for Jewish pupils in the public schools, for the sake of mixed classes of Jewish and non-Jewish pupils. These classes also took place in the afternoon, during the time when Jewish boys had previously attended *meldar*. Thus, the *meldar*'s timetable was amended: the time Jewish pupils would have spent at the Jewish school between Monday and Friday was limited to Jewish religion classes held only when the Christian pupils were attending their lessons on religion, liturgical singing, and Church Slavonic. They attended *meldar* on Jewish community premises only on Sundays and Christian holidays. Furthermore, the Jewish community had to bear the financial costs of their staff employed in the state schools.<sup>30</sup> This merging of classes effectively squeezed out Judeo-Spanish from the everyday curriculum, and Hebrew soon followed. The official excuse was that learning in two languages overburdened children's brains and was limiting the academic success of the school. The school administration even asserted that “[Jewish] [r]eligion can be taught in Serbian. It is only a matter of old Jewish books in the old Jewish language; however, the religion is not taught in Serbian but in broken Spanish.”<sup>31</sup> A community representative tried to insist on the importance of learning “the Jewish language,” that is, Hebrew, as the only way “to celebrate the greatness of God.”<sup>32</sup> Although this appeal was in vain, the language battle was not lost, as *meldar* survived emancipation. While school days from Monday to Friday were off-limits, the *melamed* gathered pupils together on Sabbaths and Sundays. Even in a small town such as Goražde, Samokovlija was able to attend both public school and Jewish school.<sup>33</sup> In Confino's native Leskovac, where only a dozen Jewish families lived, boys were gathered for *meldar* in a small room next to the synagogue up until the Second World War.<sup>34</sup>

28 AS, MPS-P 1896, F27, R190 [n.d.].

29 AS, MPS-P 1899, F 4, R 56 (12 November 1895), underlined in the original.

30 AS, MPS-P 1899, F 4, R 56 (22 August 1896).

31 AS, MPS-P 1899, F 4, R 56 (15 December 1897).

32 AS, MPS-P 1899, F4, R 56 (12 November 1895).

33 Sarajevo, Museum of Literature and Performing Arts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Isak Samokovlija Collection [hereafter MKPU BiH, Zaostavština Isaka Samokovlije], J 915–1733; 145; 1221.

34 Ženi Lebl, *Do 'Konačnog rešenja.' Jevreji u Srbiji* (Belgrade: Čigoja štampa, 2002), 54–55.

*Meldar* was certainly affected by the state-imposed time constraints. Yet, the curriculum and language used in school were matters of communal autonomy and individual practice. Linguistic assimilation was not necessarily linked to the process of emancipation. Historical linguistics provides an interesting insight here. Vučina Simović has shown how Serbo-Croatian and Judeo-Spanish bilingualism in the Sephardic community in Belgrade was already common during the period prior to civic emancipation, with a high number of men and women born between 1840 and 1879 speaking both Serbo-Croatian and Judeo-Spanish: 73% of women and 85% of men. In the same generation, only 17% percent of women and 27% of men used only Judeo-Spanish, while 4% of women and 1% of men were Serbo-Croatian monoglots. Bilingualism peaked in the generation born between 1880 and 1917, that is, in the period following civic emancipation. During this golden age of bilingualism, 79% of Jewish women and 84% of Jewish men could use both languages. However, in this generation no men or women spoke only Judeo-Spanish, while the trend towards monolingual Serbo-Croatian rose to 21% of women and 16% of men.<sup>35</sup> This research reveals how emancipation did not directly lead to linguistic assimilation, abandonment of Judeo-Spanish for the sake of Serbo-Croatian, but rather how it enhanced bilingualism.

Judeo-Spanish, the language of centuries of Jewish educational tradition and Sephardic culture, endured, despite changing patterns of Jewish education. Space was left for the coexistence of *meldar* and public school and resulted in parallel education in both Serbo-Croatian and Judeo-Spanish. Often omitted in linguistic studies on Sephardic bilingualism is the gap between spoken and written language. Hence, knowledge of Judeo-Spanish and Serbo-Croatian did not necessarily mean that a person could read and write in one or both languages. The greatest contribution of the state-imposed learning of Serbo-Croatian was not reflected in an abandonment of Judeo-Spanish, but rather in *reading* and, finally, *writing* in Serbo-Croatian.

Focusing on the final product of both types of education sheds light on this phenomenon. Although Judeo-Spanish was the language of instruction in the *meldar*, traditional education was not directed towards learning to read and write Judeo-Spanish, but simply used the language as a spoken tool to facilitate a grasp of Hebrew sufficient to understand the Torah. Thus, the curriculum first introduced the Hebrew alphabet: learning the letters and the formation of words. The next stage focused on reading the Hebrew prayers and parts of the *parashah* (weekly Torah portion). The aim was to achieve fluency in the liturgy and comprehension of the whole *parashah*. The final step in this pedagogic

35 Vučina Simović, "Elección de lenguas," 86–88.

system was to teach pupils to translate the Torah into “Spanish” by means of rote learning. The teacher would read out the translation and the students would repeat it after him.<sup>36</sup> Thus, while the public school stressed the use of Serbo-Croatian equally in speaking, reading, and writing, the purpose of the *meldar* was to prepare the next generation of men to participate in religious services. Even when the timetable did leave room for secular subjects (as in the aforementioned case of Belgrade from the 1860s), the emphasis was on understanding the Hebrew Bible and other religious texts. Active proficiency in reading and writing Judeo-Spanish was never the intention. The method and emphasis in learning in *meldar* did not, however, lead directly to abandoning the long-standing Sephardic language. The conditions of *meldar* do, nonetheless, highlight the conditions that arguably challenged a potential increase of literacy in Judeo-Spanish at the time of growth of print culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The lack of interest in Judeo-Spanish may also explain the unsuccessful attempt to establish a secular press in Judeo-Spanish in Belgrade and Sarajevo. The language used was Ladino, printed in Rashi script. In Belgrade, the newspaper *El amigo del pueblo* [The Friend of the People] was published for the Jewish community between 1888 and 1892.<sup>37</sup> Sarajevo’s newspaper was *La Alborada* [The Dawn], which also lasted only briefly, from 1900 to 1902.<sup>38</sup> The reasons accountable for arguable failure to establish a long-lasting press in Judeo-Spanish were at least two. First, in order to sustain their imprint, editors often struggled to obtain enough subscriptions that would allow for a long-term planning. This was an issue, as Olga Borovaya convincingly showed, in the entire space between Izmir (Smyrna) in the south and Zemun (Semlin) in the north and reflected the poor economic status of the majority of Sephardic households.<sup>39</sup> Second, the readership of these publications was limited to those literate in Ladino, namely a highly polished calque of Judeo-Spanish and Hebrew that some scholars recognize as a language parallel to the Sephardic

36 Maestro, “Naš stari meldar,” 103.

37 Biljana Albahari, “Pregled jevrejske periodike u Srbiji (1888–1941),” *Čitalište* 28 (2016): 88.

38 Freidenreich, *Jews of Yugoslavia*, 133; Krinka Vidaković Petrov, “La presse séfaraide de Belgrade et Sarajevo de 1888 à 1941,” in *Recensement, analyse et traitement numérique des sources écrites pour les études séfaraïdes*, eds. Soufiane Roussi and Ana Stulic-Etchevers (Bordeaux: Presse Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2013), 69–96; Eli Tauber, *Jevrejska štampa u BiH 1900–2011* (Sarajevo: Mediacentar, 2011), 15–16.

39 Olga Borovaya, *Modern Ladino Culture: Press, Belles Lettres, and Theatre in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 52–60.

vernacular.<sup>40</sup> The editors must have been aware that they could not stray far from the spoken language in order to maintain their newspapers but it was often too big of a gap to bridge. Although very short-lived, these newspapers anticipated the rise of a secular Jewish press in the Serbo-Croatian language in the first decades of the twentieth century.

### 3 Serbo-Croatian as a Language of Sephardic Literature

The history of Serbo-Croatian as a language of Sephardic literature started with Hajim Davičo (1854–1916), who was a writer, diplomat, and theatre critic. Born in Belgrade in 1854, he belonged to a generation that experienced life before and after the civic emancipation of Jews in the Serbian principality. Although the cultural élite initially became acquainted with his writing through his theatre reviews, Davičo's first literary work, *Slike iz jevrejskog života na Jaliji beogradskoj* [Images of Jewish life in Belgrade's Jalija] appeared in 1881 in the Belgrade-based newspaper *Otadžbina* [Homeland].<sup>41</sup> Davičo wrote mostly about Jalija, the *mahala* or neighborhood in which the majority of Belgrade Jews lived. He was the first writer in Serbo-Croatian who depicted Belgrade in literature and was an exceptional figure in several respects.

Decades before the emancipation of the Jews in the Serbian principality, Davičo managed to access education in Serbian public institutions normally closed to non-Christians, from elementary school right up to Velika škola, the institute for higher education in Belgrade, where he studied law. His father's personal contacts made this all possible,<sup>42</sup> but his Jewish background prevented him from practicing law until after the emancipation. Until then, he took a clerical position in Belgrade's Jewish community, perhaps the first person in such a role to be proficient in Serbian. Previously, the community had relied on translators to communicate with state officials.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, he

40 Haïm Vidal Séphiha, *Le Ladino, judéo-espagnol calque: structure et évolution d'une langue liturgique. 1. Théorie du Ladino* (Paris: Vidas Largas, 1982); Haïm Vidal Séphiha and Bruce Mitchell, "The Instruction of Judeo-Spanish in Europe," *Shofar* 19 (2001): 62.

41 Hajim S. Davičo, "Slike iz jevrejskog života na Jaliji beogradskoj," *Otadžbina* 3(7/26) (1881): 296–301.

42 The Davičos were a well-known family of traders. Hajim Davičo's father, Samuilo Davičo (1832–1911) ran the successful family business and was also an honored member of the Belgrade Sephardic community, serving several terms as president.

43 Ivana Vučina Simović, "Život i delo Hajima S. Daviča (1854–1918). Između slave i zaborava," *Nasleđe* 31 (2015): 111.

started writing in Serbo-Croatian and thus opened the door to its use as a linguistic vehicle for Sephardic literature. His decision to write in the language of the non-Jewish majority did not go unnoticed: Davičo received a letter from an anonymous critic from the Jewish community who accused him of lacking “both religion and nationality.”<sup>44</sup> This may have been the reason why Davičo turned his back on fiction, and thus “allowed the silencing of the Jewish *mahala* that had made him a writer in the first place.”<sup>45</sup> Nor did he have any immediate disciples to follow his lead. It took an entire generation before Isak Samokovlija and Jacques Confino inherited Davičo’s legacy.

Samokovlija and Confino took their first steps towards becoming writers in early adolescence. Both born in provincial towns, they were obliged to move to the cities in order to attend high school, a prerequisite to enrolment at university. Confino, originally from Leskovac, graduated from the Prva kraljevska gimnazija [First Royal High School] in Belgrade.<sup>46</sup> Samokovlija, a native of Goražde, went to the Obergymnasium [Great High School] in Sarajevo.<sup>47</sup> Naturally, state education exposed them to Serbo-Croatian, specifically the Serbian variant in the case of Confino in Belgrade, and Bosnian in the case of Samokovlija in Sarajevo. Samokovlija’s *marljivost* [diligence] was described in his school reports as *nestalan* [inconsistent] and his progress in Bosnian as merely *dostatan* [sufficient].<sup>48</sup> However, this did not prove to be an obstacle to his literary ambitions in the language.

The careers of Confino and Samokovlija coincided with an era when literature was actively shaping the lives of the young. Belles-lettres became a battlefield on which the new, burgeoning generation could challenge the established order. Literary circles existed in almost every town. Sarajevo’s high school, in particular, was known as a melting pot of youth organizations and it was in this setting that Samokovlija presented his early works. Ivo Andrić, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1961, was a fellow-student of Samokovlija’s at the high

44 Vučina Simović, “Život i delo Hajima S. Daviča,” 111. On Davičo’s cultural impact, see Krinka Vidaković Petrov, “Identity and Memory in the Works of Haim S. Davicho,” in *Los sefardíes ante los retos del mundo contemporáneo: identidad y mentalidades*, eds. Paloma Díaz-Más and María Sánchez Pérez (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2010), 307–316; Krinka Vidaković Petrov, “Književnost Jevreja u Bosni i Hercegovini: označavanje identiteta,” in *Sto dvadeset pet godina visokog obrazovanja u Bosni i Hercegovini. Filološke nauke* (Istočno Sarajevo: Filozofski fakultet Pale, 2008), 288–299. On Davičo’s career as a state official, see Bojan Mitrović, “From ‘Court Jew’ Origins to Civil-Servant Nationalism: Hajim S. Davičo (1854–1916),” *Quest: Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC* 7 (2014), www.quest-cdecjournal.it/focus.php?id=362.

45 Palavestra, *Jevrejski pisci u srpskoj književnosti*, 90.

46 Vienna, Archiv der Universität Wien [hereafter AUW], Jakob Konfino, WS 1910.

47 AUW, Isak Samokovlija, WS 1910.

48 MKPU BiH, Zaostavština Isaka Samokovlije, J-915-1733; 157; 1234.

school. He remembered when they first met, on a sunny day in the park behind the school. Samokovlija approached Andrić and his friend, Marko Vidaković, who was already a renowned poet among young people with literary ambitions. He presented them with a “thick student notebook in navy blue,” full of his verses for them to read and appraise. Andrić noted that Samokovlija’s poetry was in the style of contemporary, so-called “Belgrade lyricism”; his verses describing stars and lakes, evening light, and the reflections of willow trees in the water. He wrote about love and eternity, tropes emblematic of adolescent poetry of the time.<sup>49</sup>

Enthusiasm for poetry was part of a wider cultural movement among the youth of Sarajevo. Mlada Bosna [Young Bosnia] was then one of the most prominent literary circles, and both Andrić and Vidaković were active participants in their events. Since Mlada Bosna was never constituted as an official organization and existed only through its meetings and publications, it is difficult to say whether Samokovlija found any of its political ideas appealing. What is certain, though, is that he was among the editors and contributors to *Zolja* [Wasp], a prominent ‘*samizdat*’ youth magazine begun in 1908. Only copies of the February and March 1908 issues survive, leaving more room for speculation than for definitive judgements.<sup>50</sup>

Confino and Samokovlija also shared the Viennese student experience, in the years between 1910 and 1914. They studied medicine together and lived only a couple of minutes apart by foot, respectively in Kochgasse and Laudongasse in the Vienna neighborhood of Josefstadt.<sup>51</sup> They were also members of Esperanza, Sociedad per los Judios Espanioles en Viena [Hope, Society for the Spanish Jews in Vienna]. At its foundation in 1897, Esperanza was only one among several Jewish student societies flourishing at the time at the University of Vienna. In 1882, Nathan Birnbaum, Reuben Bierer, and Moritz Schnirer had founded the first exclusively Jewish student organization Kadimah [Forward/Eastwards] at the university. Soon after, other Jewish student associations emerged, with agendas that opposed assimilation, promoted Jewish nationalism, and engaged in fighting antisemitism.<sup>52</sup> Esperanza

49 Ivo Andrić, “Letnji dan: Kratko sećanje na mladost Isaka Samokovlije,” *Savremenik* 1–2 (1955): 254–255.

50 Marko Marković, “Isak Samokovlija,” in Isak Samokovlija, *Nosač Samuel: Pripovetke* (Sarajevo: Svijetlost, 1946), ii; Predrag Palavestra, *Književnost Mlade Bosne* (Belgrade: Institut za književnost i umetnost, 1994), 221–222.

51 AUW, Jakob Konfino, WS 1910; AUW, Isak Samokovlija, WS 1910.

52 Marsha Rozenblit, *The Jews of Vienna, 1867–1914: Assimilation and Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 160–162; Jess Olson, *Nathan Birnbaum and Jewish Modernity: Architect of Zionism, Yiddishism, and Orthodoxy* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 73–82.

targeted specifically “Spanish Jews” in the Habsburg capital, with the aim of “nurturing Spanish language and enabling the academic and literary instruction of [its] members.” It wanted to cultivate “Israelite science and literature” through debates, acquisition of journals, and the creation of a library.<sup>53</sup> In line with university regulations, Esperanza abstained from any political activity. Emphasizing Spanish or, more accurately Judeo-Spanish, as the hallmark of Sephardic identity, ironically, the society was immediately accused of neglecting Jewish values and the study of Hebrew.<sup>54</sup> These criticisms probably emanated from strongly Zionist circles in Vienna, which were sensitive to the idea of any kind of internal particularism among Jews. However, Esperanza adopted a Zionist agenda in 1904.<sup>55</sup> Samokovlija and Confino most likely became members of the society immediately on their arrival in Vienna in 1910, since they had become Esperanza’s officials by the following year, 1911; Samokovlija as secretary and Confino as the librarian of the society.<sup>56</sup> By that time, Esperanza had developed a strongly Zionist orientation, as is evident from a letter sent to the Central Zionist Office in 1914, signed on behalf of Esperanza by Jacques Confino.<sup>57</sup> Esperanza was now in tune with fin de siècle Vienna, where a balance between Zionism and Sephardic particularism was possible.

The Viennese experience and Esperanza helped unite young Jews from different parts of the Balkans. On encountering fellow students from Sarajevo in Esperanza, Jacques Confino wrote: “We were still in two hostile countries then. We did not even know the road to Sarajevo. We did not suspect that you [Sarajevans] would rejoice with our joy and cherish our song.” Singing seems to have been an important feature of Esperanza meetings, since Confino mentions two songs by name: *Los arboles* [sic] *lloran por lluvias*, a romance in Judeo-Spanish and *Dunje ranke, kruške karamanke*, a Serbo-Croatian folksong.<sup>58</sup> Apparently, Judeo-Spanish and Serbo-Croatian were unifying factors, but the language issue soon led to discord.

Esperanza did not remain the only Balkan Jewish society for long. Bar Giora: Društvo Židova akademičara iz jugoslovenskih zemalja [Society of Jewish Scholars from the Yugoslav Lands] was founded in 1902 at the Viennese

53 AUW, Rekt. 3734 ex 1896/97.

54 Amor Ayala and Stephanie von Schmädel, “Identitätsdiskurse und Politisierung der Sepharden in Wien am Beispiel des Studentenvereins Esperanza (1896–1924),” *Transversal* 11(2) (2012): 85.

55 Moritz Levy to Dr Angel Pulido, in: Angel Pulido Fernández, *Intereses españoles: Españoles sin patria y la raza sefardí* (Madrid: Establecimiento tipográfico de E. Teodoro, 1905), 123.

56 “Esperanza”, *Židovska smotra*, 15 December 1911, 217.

57 Jerusalem, Central Zionist Archives, A119\199-148, 149 (5 January 1914).

58 Jacques Confino, “Sarajlijama,” *Jevrejski život*, 24 June 1924, 1.



Technische Hochschule. This association was dedicated solely to the Zionist cause and targeted all Balkan Jewish students in Vienna, regardless of their background. The “Yugoslav” in their official title echoed contemporary debates in Croatia under Austro-Hungarian rule about the possibility of creating a political unit that would unify all the lands of the South Slavs. Moreover, Bar Giora intended to unite Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews from across these territories.<sup>59</sup> Drawing on the political ideas of both Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau, Bar Giora was deeply rooted in Viennese Zionist, and thus predominantly German-speaking, circles.

Esperanza and Bar Giora were, at the same time, natural allies and rivals. Overcoming differences between the two student organizations became a pressing issue and set the tone for the future relationship between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in the Balkans. Agreement over Zionism notwithstanding, the question of Sephardic “separatism” remained unresolved. Reflecting retrospectively (in 1928) on his time in Esperanza, Confino wrote how Bar Giora was constantly questioning whether Esperanza had “a *raison d’être* [*sic*], whether we, Sephardic Jews, are indeed such an *Extra-Wuršt* [very special], whether we have the right to self-organize, or not?”<sup>60</sup> Confino was here paraphrasing a German idiom expressing disapproval of someone who always wants to be special. Still, this reference to *extra-wurst*—a type of Austrian cold cut made from mixed meat, including pork—indicates the deep unease of Sephardic political positioning.

The issue of precedence in the Zionist movement also caused tension. Esperanza felt that they were being patronized by Bar Giora and retaliated by asserting the need to “avoid the notion that Zionism is an Ashkenazic movement because it is mostly spread and propagated by them.”<sup>61</sup> Both ideological and cultural differences lay at the heart of these arguments. Confino blamed the language issue for dividing them into “two worlds”: “On the one hand, we were with Spanish, or Serbian; on the other, they were with German, or Croatian. [...] In a word, they were there [in Vienna] as if at home, and we were pariahs and newcomers.”<sup>62</sup>

What seemed like an insurmountable divide in Vienna receded upon their return to their native communities. At the First Congress of Jewish Graduates, organized by Bar Giora in Osijek in August 1904, it was decided that Croatian

59 Emil Kerenji, *Jewish Citizens of Socialist Yugoslavia: Politics of Jewish Identity in a Socialist State, 1944–1974* (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2008), 49–51.

60 J. Confino, “Uspomene i refleksije,” *Jevrejski glas*, 14 September 1928, 5–6.

61 Jacques Confino, “Zadatak i rad sefardske akademske mladeži,” *Židovska smotra*, 20 February 1914, 55.

62 Confino, “Uspomene i refleksije,” 5–6.

would be the language of Zionist campaigns.<sup>63</sup> Thus, Bar Giora's annual reports and the first Zionist newspaper *Židovska smotra* [Jewish Review] founded in 1906 in Zagreb, were written in Serbo-Croatian, which thereafter became the language of the movement in the Yugoslav lands. The fact was that all Jews, regardless of whether they were Ashkenazim or Sephardim, comprised an insignificant portion of the population. The formation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes in 1918 encouraged the use of Serbo-Croatian as the most effective tool for spreading the Zionist message throughout the region. The new Zionist newspaper *Židov* [The Jew] (Zagreb, 1917) claimed the right to speak in the name of all Jews living in the new Yugoslav state. Zionists were forging a pan-Yugoslav Jewry. In the words of the scholar Emil Kerenji: "If they were to be serious about their Zionism, they had no choice but to become 'Yugoslavs' in form."<sup>64</sup> So it was that Serbo-Croatian became not only the unifying language of the Yugoslav state, but also, among its Jewish minority, the unifying language of the Zionist movement, precisely in the formative years of the two aspiring writers, Isak Samokovlija and Jacques Confino.<sup>65</sup>

The First World War disrupted education in Vienna. Samokovlija and Confino were obliged to move to Geneva and Bern respectively in order to finish their medical degrees. Upon graduation, they each returned to their hometowns, which turned out to be a step on the way towards the careers awaiting them, in Belgrade in Confino's case and Sarajevo in Samokovlija's. Whether and to what extent they pursued their literary ambitions in this period is difficult to assess because of the dearth of sources. However, during the 1920s, when they were in their early thirties, Samokovlija and Confino emerged as the leading storytellers of the Jewish *mahala* in Serbo-Croatian. They both wrote short stories containing candid and colorful descriptions of this milieu, but employed different styles. Samokovlija was interested in a sensitive portrayal of the moral and emotional dilemmas faced by individuals, whereas Confino resorted to satire. Collections of their stories were published throughout the interwar and postwar period in Yugoslavia. Both writers were commissioned to write for the theatre; arguably Samokovlija was the more successful playwright.

63 Ljiljana Dobrovšak, "Prvi cionistički kongres u Osijeku 1904 godine," *Časopis za suvremenu povijest* 37(2) (2005): 489.

64 Kerenji, *Jewish Citizens of Socialist Yugoslavia*, 81, 87.

65 This, however, did not mean that Hebrew was by any means marginalized in Zionist plans in this region. A genuine consensus between both Ashkenazic and Sephardic Zionists understood that Hebrew was the language of the future Jewish state. The disagreements arose only on the topic of the languages used in the diaspora, as seen in a text by Aleksandar Licht from 1914: A. Licht, "Naše jezično pitanje," *Židovska smotra*, 22 January 1914, 17–19.

During the 1920s Jewish publishing in Yugoslavia was at its height, not only in the urban centers of Sarajevo, Belgrade, and Zagreb, but also in provincial towns. Geca Kon headed his own eponymous and well-regarded publishing house in Belgrade. Ever more space was given over to publishing belles-lettres in newspapers that had previously focused almost exclusively on communal politics. Sarajevo-based weekly *Jevrejski život* [Jewish Life] featured a “*Književni dodatak*” [Literary Supplement] to which David S. Pijade, Buki Finci, Laura Papo Bohoreta and others, regularly contributed alongside Samokovlija. When the still active and prolific Sarajevo Sephardic society La Benevolencija produced a volume to mark its thirtieth anniversary (1924), significant space was dedicated to literature. Included was Samokovlija’s cycle of three poems: *Venac gluhih samovanja: čežnje i vizije* [The Wreath of Silent Solitude: Yearnings and Visions].<sup>66</sup> The Jewish newspapers published literature in Judeo-Spanish, in Latin script, and Serbo-Croatian, often side by side. However, Serbo-Croatian predominated. Kalmi Baruh and Jovan Palavestra started publishing literary criticism in Jewish newspapers in Serbo-Croatian.

Despite this growing literary output in Serbo-Croatian, the audience and critics still only regarded works written in Judeo-Spanish as genuinely Sephardic. In 1925, Kalmi Baruh asserted in print that “Sephardic Jews do not have artistic literature.” Balkan Sephardim, in particular, historically had been “separated from the rest of the world,” and were deeply embedded in “primitive patriarchal life” and in an atmosphere “which killed all individuality.”<sup>67</sup> By contrast, Baruh praised the literary achievements of his contemporaries as the “higher expression of the environment from which they stemmed.” He was inspired by Buki Finci’s drama *Esperansa* [Hope] and also drew attention to works by A. Kapon, Sabetaj Djaen, and Laura Papo Bohoreta.

In 1925, Samokovlija directly defended his choice to write in Serbo-Croatian:

By moving down to the Balkans we became part of a “primitive society.” We willingly closed ourselves in a ghetto of our pseudo mother tongue. It is not so much religion as the fault of the Spanish jargon that we are lagging behind, and find ourselves in a time where hidden forces are more destructive than creative [...] And what is happening to us? We are almost hermetically sealed in our language ghetto.<sup>68</sup>

66 On this volume *Spomenica...* see note 20 above. It also included a poem by Isak Samokovlija: “Crvena mora, delite se do dna” (Red Seas, Split to the Depths) on p. 102.

67 Kalmi Baruh, *Izabrana djela*, ed. Vojislav Maksimović (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1972), 323.

68 Isak Samokovlija, “Jevrejski život i njegovo značenje,” *Jevrejski život*, 27 March 1925, 4.

Samokovlija's resentment of what he saw as the limitations of Judeo-Spanish was typical of the views of Sephardic intellectuals of his generation. They did not "envison the development of Ladino culture as an achievement towards which Sephardim in general, and Sephardi youth in particular should strive." However, this negative attitude towards Judeo-Spanish was not attributable to "the virtual lack of Sephardi Diaspora Nationalism or a large-scale Sephardi working class movement,"<sup>69</sup> as has been argued by recent scholars such as Sarah Abrevaya Stein. Rather, the motivation was a pragmatic one: the need to simply unite with their Ashkenazi brethren, given the fact that the Jews were such a small minority in Yugoslavia. Neither Samokovlija nor Confino really aimed to undermine or marginalize Judeo-Spanish but realized that Serbo-Croatian would reach a far wider audience.

Samokovlija's breakthrough as a writer and his warm reception in the Jewish community demonstrated that his position was justified. Erih Koš, Samokovlija's contemporary and an Ashkenazi Jew, who was a connoisseur of the cultural scene in Sarajevo, noted that nobody had taken Samokovlija's literary ambitions seriously:

The things he published from time to time in *Jevrejski glas* [Jewish Voice] his coreligionists did not see as his [greatest] work. [His literary output] was regarded as a sort of hobby and as his own private entertainment, just as someone else would collect stamps and badges and photographs. When the esteemed *Srpski književni glasnik* [Serbian Literary Herald] published his story, it was accepted as the sort of success about which only a few Sarajevo writers could brag. Only after this did he break into Sarajevo's intellectual circles and those of his fellow writers.<sup>70</sup>

Koš was referring to Samokovlija's story "Rafina avlija" [Rafi's Yard], which appeared in *Srpski književni glasnik* in 1927.<sup>71</sup> Clearly, Jewish opinion on Sephardic literature in Serbo-Croatian had changed.

Koš also mentioned the Grupa sarajevskih književnika [Group of Sarajevo Writers], founded in Belgrade in 1928. This group aimed to act as a trade union to represent the material needs of its members, as well as to promote

69 Sarah Abrevaya Stein, "Asymmetric Fates: Secular Yiddish and Ladino Culture in Comparison," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 96(4) (2006): 503, 506.

70 Erih Koš, *Odlomci, sećanja, pisci* (Belgrade, Budva and Novi Sad: Matica Srpska, Prosveta, Mediteran, 1990), 37–41.

71 Isak Samokovlija, "Rafina avlija," *Srpski književni glasnik* 21(2) (1927): 323–332.

contemporary Yugoslav literature, in a manner comparable with the Belgrade Jewish publisher Geca Kon's book series under the title *Naša knjiga* [Our Book].<sup>72</sup> They all wanted to introduce the Serbo-Croatian readership to contemporary Serbo-Croatian writers. Confino also began to contribute to *Naša knjiga*, starting in 1934 with a humorous collection of stories called *Moji opštinari* [People from My Community].<sup>73</sup>

The Group of Sarajevo Writers was also featured in the Jewish press. In 1928 *Jevrejski glas* reported on an "artistic evening" that the Group had held on 13 June in Sarajevo's National Theatre. The review was written by the renowned literary critic Jovan Palavestra, who highlighted the role of Samokovlija at the event, and hailed him as "the first and only storyteller from Bosnia." Palavestra compared the writer to Hajim Davičo, but felt that Samokovlija's prose, its young audience notwithstanding, had deeper motives, in accordance with contemporary realism. Palavestra described his literary landscape as "typical Bosnian, dark and obscured, psychologically complex and hidden," but presented through the prism of the Jewish *mahala* and its patriarchal structure.<sup>74</sup>

Indeed, Samokovlija's prose ventured into unyielding depictions of the life of Sarajevo's Jewish poor, most of whom were Sephardim. His fascination with maids, carriers, and workers of all sorts profoundly engages the reader; it offers novelty and depth to both fabulae but also depicts compassionate emotional and psychological portraits of the people living in Sarajevo's outskirts, Bjelave first and foremost. Confino, for his part, went even deeper into unknown areas, staying loyal to his native Leskovac. Dedicated satirist, Confino aimed at portraying his fellow coreligionists with a dose of criticism; it was never a question of simply opening a disclosed communal life to the foreign eye, rather he aimed at challenging this micro society with his witty remarks. From these inquisitive rather than descriptive narratives it comes clear that neither Samokovlija nor Confino's work were ever considered to be only a Jewish niche in the Yugoslav literary world, a marginal type of folklore writing. Furthermore, they opened the Yugoslav literary scene for other Jewish writers and topics. They pioneered what is today a continued Jewish presence in Yugoslav literature both in topics and in writers active in the scene.<sup>75</sup>

72 B. J., "Grupa sarajevskih književnika," *Kalendar srpskog privrednog i kulturnog društva Prosveta*, 1 January 1936, <http://www.idoconline.info/article/838375>, accessed 5 September 2019.

73 Žak Konfino, *Moji opštinari* (Belgrade: Geca Kon, 1934).

74 J. Palavestra, "Pripovedač Isak Samokovlija. Umjetničko veče grupe Sarajevskih književnika," *Jevrejski glas*, 5 June 1928, 22.

75 See Hinko Gotlieb, Danilo Kiš, David Albahari, Filip David, etc.

The event at the National Theatre most probably inspired “the first literary evening” organized by La Benevolencija, the Sephardic cultural organization, which took place at the Jewish Centre on 26 January 1929. Once again, Samokovlija was the centerpiece. After an introduction on “Značaj kulturnog djela Jevreja” [The Importance of Jewish Cultural Work], Samokovlija read his story “Hajmačina radost” [Hajmača’s Joy]. Braco Poljokan, an esteemed Sephardic lawyer and political and cultural activist, rounded off the evening with a reading of Samokovlija’s controversial story “Plava Jevrejka” [The Blond Jewess].<sup>76</sup>

The wording of the announcement publicizing this event underscored its significance for the Jewish community:

Indeed, for some time now our community has been exposed to many cultural endeavors and upheavals. However, these upheavals are far from being culturally creative, with rare and minor exceptions. Only with the appearance of Mr Isak Samokovlija can we say that our community has advanced into the realm of groups that produce culture. And that he, with his literary creativity, should encourage La Benevolencija to arrange a literary evening where one may hear the spoken literary word, about life in our world, written by a man who comes from it and who has developed within it.<sup>77</sup>

#### 4 Conclusion

Isak Samokovlija’s and Jacques Confino’s personal trajectories and careers are indicative of the significant changes that were taking place both in the Jewish and wider world. The main focus here has been on the changes that took place in the school system and the introduction of Serbo-Croatian as a vehicle for teaching Jewish children in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia in the late nineteenth century. However, this was not the whole story: Jews themselves embraced Serbo-Croatian as a language of Jewish cultural expression for a variety of reasons of their own.

The examples of Samokovlija and Confino showcase the paradoxical role that Serbo-Croatian played in the Jewish communities in the lands of the South Slavs. On the one hand, the fact was that Serbo-Croatian was a precondition for emancipation within both the Serbian principality and Bosnia and

76 “Književno veče La Benevolencije,” *Jevrejski glas*, 22 February 1929, 3.

77 “Prvo književno veče u našoj zajednici,” *Jevrejski glas*, 22 February 1929, 4.

Herzegovina: both societies expected their Jewish communities to accept the national language in order to take part in political and cultural life as equal citizens. On the other hand, Serbo-Croatian was also adopted as the language of the Zionist movement in these territories, as a common vernacular shared by multilingual Jewish communities. Thus, while the language served as a means of promoting conformism to the nation-state, it also became a tool of Jewish nationalism in the region. Jewish attitudes to Serbo-Croatian explain its intermittent but recurrent use to express Jewish political and cultural ideas.

The role of Serbo-Croatian for the Sephardic Jews in the Balkans, examined here through the examples of *Samokovlija* and *Confino*, is in accordance with its role in the wider Jewish linguistic setting in the region. Serbo-Croatian became a language, alongside Judeo-Spanish, in which Sephardim chose to actively participate in the life of the non-Jewish majority, but they also employed it to express their own political, cultural, and artistic ideas. Finally, Serbo-Croatian gives us a paradigm by which to examine the boundaries of the Sephardic community through Sephardic cultural activity beyond its traditional limits, and to expand these boundaries accordingly.

*Samokovlija* and *Confino* have most certainly challenged and crossed the boundaries of cultural limitations Jews had previously met in their surroundings. Their success, within and beyond the Sephardic and all-Jewish sphere, testifies to their talent and novelty of topics and depth found in their prose. *Samokovlija* and *Confino* were the torch carriers for the Sephardic and Jewish presence in Serbo-Croatian literature and they succeeded in setting a path for other Jewish writers to become part of the Yugoslav literary scene both before and after the Second World War. To this day, in contrast to the minute Jewish presence in the region, the Yugoslav literary canon includes a number of Jewish writers. Moreover, Jewish tropes, themes, and writers also stand for the continuous presence of minorities in the multinational Yugoslav cultural realm.