

Judeo-Spanish and the Making of a Community

Edited by

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ANA ĆIRIĆ PAVLOVIĆ

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to reveal how the Alliance influenced the utilization of Judeo-Spanish language through its educational curriculum. I argue that this organization had an enormous impact upon the demise of the language by actively promoting other languages. The latter was embodied in the public display of the Alliance's members' opinion and the introduction of French and other languages in the Alliance's schools, none of them being Judeo-Spanish. What is more, the officials of this international association spared no words in arguing against Judeo-Spanish, believing it was not a language but a jargon, incompatible with a modern, civilized and educated Jewish community that they strived to forge in the Orient. Examples of the three major Sephardic centers in the Ottoman Empire—Salonika (Thessaloniki), Smyrna (Izmir), and Adrianople (Edirne)—mirror the dynamics of linguistic acculturation of the community. The principal sources for my analysis are reports of the Alliance's schools published in the *Bulletin d'Alliance Israélite Universelle*, the main organ of this organization in the period between 1860 and 1913.

In addition, other historic circumstances exerted joint influence upon the decreased utilization of the Sephardic mother-tongue. Namely, the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the creation of nation-states, especially in the Balkans, maximized the pressure on the Sephardim to assimilate and use more a domestic language. Another powerful demand was placed upon them at the turn of the century. The Zionist Executive sought to create a

rather uniform concept of Jewishness, admitting no Sephardic particularity, and thus being equally hostile to separate Sephardic identity as the AIU. Hence, Judeo-Spanish had three influential opponents: the ideologies of the AIU, the building of nation-states, and Zionism.

2. The Alliance's "*mission civilisatrice*"

The *Alliance Israélite Universelle* represents a paradigm of Jewish solidarity. It had the specific purpose to help Jews in need to obtain national citizenship, gain material security, and make "moral progress".¹ After its foundation in 1860 in the French capital,² the Alliance was primarily focused on advocating for the rights of their brethren in the East and establishing schools in the Orient based on the Western model. These activities were grounded in the belief of its founders that Eastern Jews were backward but could be "regenerated" through achieving political rights and having access to a proper education.³ Although it was an international organization with members living throughout the world, it was controlled by French Jews, which was mirrored in the very ideology of the Alliance. It embraced French republican values, among which secularization had a special place. In addition, the language of instruction in the schools was always French. What is more, the Alliance developed a strong diplomatic activity, advocating for the rights of their less fortunate brethren. For Balkan Jewry, their engagement at the Berlin Congress played a decisive role in promoting and ensuring their rights in front of the countries just gaining their independence. In fact, newly recognized states had to agree to respect their Jewish minorities by a contract with the Great Powers.

One could assume that the Alliance actively promoted a better integration of Jews in the local societies, since in the teaching curriculum for boys

¹ See "The Alliance Israélite Universelle (1860-1895)", in Mendes-Flohr and Reinharz, eds., *The Jew in the Modern World, a Documentary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 317-21.

² In 1791, French Jewry was the first in Europe to be emancipated, that is, to become equal citizens. Additionally, they enthusiastically embraced the achievements of the French Revolution, endeavoring to apply the same model on the Sephardim of the Orient.

³ Lisa Moses Leff, *Sacred Bonds of Solidarity: The Rise of Jewish Internationalism in the Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 159.

there were always one or more local languages.⁴ If one counts, that would be at least three languages taught in the school, that is to say, French, Hebrew, and one or two local ones. In the nineteenth century, Judeo-Spanish was a language of the great majority of Turkish Jewry, excluding the relatively small Ashkenazi community. Rather surprisingly, most of the leaders of Turkish Jewry argued for the abandonment of the language of their forefathers,⁵ and precisely at the time of its renaissance, since “there was an explosion in Judeo-Spanish literary and journalistic activity”.⁶ They regarded this language as useless and anomalous, described it as “miserable” and “mean”, thus a part of the “civilizing mission” was to eradicate the language that was incompatible with modern civilization.⁷

Conversely, it is beyond any doubt that the organization “was very much the product of time and place”⁸ as the negative vision of the Orient was common-place in nineteenth century Western Europe. As the historian Aron Rodrigue indicates, the West European Jews assumed their moral superiority, as they had greatly benefited from the Industrial revolution maximizing their material achievements. Therefore, their mission in the Ottoman Empire was “a paternalist one” and is probably best described by the work of Isidore Loeb, a distinguished Judaic scholar and secretary of the AIU Central Committee (1869-92), who believed that Oriental Jews were “children, thoughtless, light-minded, superficial.”⁹ Moïse Fresco, a renowned member of the Alliance, director of its schools, and ardent opponent of Judeo-Spanish, pictorially portrayed his standpoint in one of his reports emphasizing that “Turkish [language] is borrowed, French is a

⁴ Female schools were usually founded later than male and generally girls did not learn local language. Consequently, their integration in the Ottoman and, afterwards, in the milieu of the newly created nation- states was slower.

⁵ Aron Rodrigue, “La guerre des langues,” in *De l’instruction à l’émancipation: Les enseignants de L’Alliance israélite universelle et les Juifs d’Orient 1860-1939* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1989), 111-17.

⁶ Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews: the Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey, 1860- 1925* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 85. Paradoxically, some of those magazines in Judeo-Spanish were financed by the AIU and reflected a cultural mimicry of the Franco-Jewishness. See Sarah Abrevaya Stein, “Creating a taste for news: Historicizing Judeo-Spanish periodicals of the Ottoman Empire”, *Jewish History* 14 (2000): 9-10.

⁷ Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews*, 85.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

gala suit, Judeo-Spanish is an old gown for a comfortable room where one feels at one's ease".¹⁰

The impact of the Alliance on the educational improvement and material welfare of Turkish Jewry is unquestionable. In the 1880s the Alliance had about 30 schools¹¹ in the Ottoman territory, while in 1912 the number had grown to 115 schools and the total amount of students was about 19,000.¹² Consequently, as Rodrigue affirms, the Empire was the main center of the Alliance's educational activities,¹³ where the latter organization was a relevant catalyst of social amelioration by improving educational prospects of the local Jewry. However, it was not without bias because, while actively advocating against Judeo-Spanish, it affected the Ottoman Sephardic self-perception and self-esteem, leading them to believe that the language of their ancestors was inferior and unworthy, juxtaposing it always with French.

3. The Dynamics of Language Preferences

The *Bulletin d'Alliance Israélite Universelle* was published annually and biannually and contained valuable information and reports about schools, decisions of the *Centrale*, detailed lists of members, and other useful data. This makes it a *sine qua non* reference point for researchers for it is a window into the Sephardic world in the Orient, no matter how small these communities might have been.

The Bulletin's 1893 issue informs that the syllabus concerning the studies was, in the beginning, somewhat uniform but it underwent changes, according to the needs of the respective country or region, in order to promote better integration with mainstream society. In the Ottoman Empire, Turkish was taught in all the male schools of the Alliance, and there was an effort to overcome the difficulties of teaching languages and especially the deficiency of competent professors. The same

¹⁰ Rodrigue, *De l'instruction à l'émancipation*, 115.

¹¹ Georges Weill, *Émancipation et progrès: L'Alliance israélite universelle et les droits de l'homme* (Paris: Alliance Israélite Universelle, 2000), 199.

¹² Avigdor Levy, *The Sephardim in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, New Jersey: The Darwin Press, 1992), 164. Other authors, such as Aron Rodrigue suggest that the number of schools in this period was 108, see Aron Rodrigue, "Jewish Society and Schooling in a Thracian Town: The Alliance Israélite Universelle in Demotica, 1867- 1924", *Jewish Social Studies*, 45 (Summer-Fall 1983): 264.

¹³ Rodrigue, "Jewish Society and Schooling in a Thracian Town: The Alliance Israélite Universelle in Demotica, 1867- 1924," *Jewish Social Studies*, 45 (Summer-Fall 1983): 264.

1906							
Students	507	431	272	322	303	1236	560
Teachers	3 Hebrew 2 Turkish 1 German 1 English 1 Italian	1 Italian	3 Hebrew 2 Turkish	6 Hebrew 1 Turkish 1 English	1 English	12 Hebrew 5 Turkish	1 Hebrew
1912							
Students	930	625	308	321	422	1023	929
Teachers	3 Hebrew 4 Turkish	1 Turkish 1 German	2 Hebrew 2 Turkish	2 Hebrew 3 Turkish 1 English	1 English	2 Hebrew 2 Turkish	1 Hebrew 1 Hebrew 5 Turkish

Table 7.1 Number of students and language teachers in Salonika, Smyrna, and Adrianople; source: *Bulletin d'Alliance Israélite Universelle*

Notes for Table:

¹ The reports sometimes included a reference “other”, denoting usually the Talmud Torah schools, which were a separate entity.

² These languages were taught by teachers, it does not necessarily reflect their nationality.

³ An evident shift from rabbis to Hebrew professors in the teaching personnel reflects the overall Alliance’s secularization strategy to provide an education that would be less based on religion while still maintaining the importance of Hebrew language.

⁴ The data displayed are from the year 1903 since those from 1901 for Salonika were not available.

issue contains reports that in Asian Turkey, Tunisia, and Morocco, Arabic was taught by particular professors, while German, English, Italian, and Spanish were introduced alike in the AIU’s institutions throughout the Ottoman Empire, Middle East and Northern Africa.¹⁴ The following table shows the number of language teachers and students in the schools of three communities—Salonika, Smyrna, and Adrianople. The years 1882, 1901, 1906, and 1912 are chosen with respect to data availability, as they appeared in the *Bulletin*.¹⁵

Salonika, the biggest Sephardic community in the Empire, was the most illustrative of the linguistic diversity introduced in the schools of the Alliance. Since the second half of the nineteenth century when the school for boys was founded, the teaching personnel consisted of teachers of Italian, Turkish, and Greek, also including rabbis who taught Hebrew. However, at the turn of the century, instead of Greek, German and English were included in the educational scheme. In Smyrna, boys had classes in Turkish, English, and Hebrew. According to available reports from this city, in the Talmud Torah schools, boys received classes in Hebrew, French, and Turkish.¹⁶ In comparison, the school of Adrianople, which had the highest number of students, about one thousand on the eve of the Great War, had teachers of German, Hebrew, and Turkish.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Bulletin d’Alliance Israélite Universelle*, January 02, 1893, 68-9, last accessed June 23, 2014,

<http://www.jpress.org.il/Default/Skins/TAUEn/Client.asp?Skin=TAUEn&enter=true&sPublication=BUL&Publication=BUL&Hs=advanced&AppName=2&AW=1403858307759>.

¹⁵ The report in the Bulletin usually contained only statistical data about the Alliance’s schools, leaving the interpretation and explanation of their meaning to researchers and historians.

¹⁶ BAIU, January 01, 1901, 138.

¹⁷ BAIU, January 01, 1901, 125.

Apart from promoting languages other than Judeo-Spanish, the schools reduced the importance of religion. The increasing demand for the secularization at the beginning of the 1900s had an obvious repercussion. Namely, not only in Salonika, Smyrna and Adrianople, but also in almost all the Alliance's schools in the given period, rabbis were replaced by Hebrew professors in both male and female institutions.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Alliance's schools enabled Sephardic female education in the Orient for the first time. It was a decisive step forward for Sephardic women. However, the beginnings were rather modest if one compares their curricula with the male schools. As a general rule, girls received regular instruction in sewing, French, and one additional language, usually not the domestic one. For decades, the primary purpose of their education was not their factual empowerment, but their preparation for marriage.

The syllabi of the female schools in Salonika during the 1880s are exceptional in terms of the quantity of languages introduced. Besides French, girls studied under teachers of Italian and Spanish. In the following years, only teachers of Italian appeared in the reports sent by the school to the Alliance's Centrale.¹⁸ On the eve of the Balkan Wars (1912-13), girls learned Turkish and German.¹⁹ Strangely enough, Turkish was not normally taught in the female schools, however this undertaking in Salonika represented the effort to integrate Sephardic women in the overall society, since their male counterparts had been learning Turkish starting from the foundation of the first schools with the same goal. In Smyrna, girls were taught Hebrew and English courses, depending on the year when they attended classes.²⁰ The girls of the biggest school, the one in Adrianople, learned only Hebrew.

Based on the insight into the reports published in the Bulletin, one can conclude that boys were more exposed than girls to linguistic acculturation, since their teaching curricula comprised of a variety of languages. The superiority of French was assumed in most of contemporary Europe. Furthermore, female and male Sephardim alike interiorized the French language and culture as both dominant and elevated, given that it was the language of their brethren who founded and largely financed their schools. The latter understood the gradual retreat of Judeo-Spanish, characterized as unsophisticated, from the public to private sphere, and indeed, for most of the Sephardic communities of the time,

¹⁸ BAIU, January 01, 1906, 138-39.

¹⁹ BAIU, January 01, 1912, 120.

²⁰ BAIU, January 01, 1906, 140.

family was one of the last bastions of their distinctive Judeo-Spanish culture.

4. Conclusion

The arrival of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle* in the Ottoman territory produced significant social changes among the local Jewry in various ways. First of all, it helped their faster integration in Ottoman society by enforcing the instruction of the Turkish language. Further, the Alliance contributed to the more rapid modernization of the Ottoman Sephardim by secularizing education. Together with plurilingualism, it enabled greater social and occupational mobility of local Jews, which would eventually maximize their chances for progress of every kind. Finally, and perhaps the most dramatic change introduced by this organization was the foundation of schools for girls in the last decades of the nineteenth century, pioneering female education in the Ottoman Jewish community.

However, the Alliance propagated the demise of the Sephardic mother-tongue, Judeo-Spanish, considering it as backward and useless. Besides the local language, numerous others were part of the syllabi, dominated by French, which was regarded as the most distinguished. Gradually, the Ottoman Sephardim themselves interiorized that Judeo-Spanish was a sign of their inferiority, while the French language and culture of their Western brethren denoted education, respectability and progress.

Furthermore, a number of other factors contributed to the decreased utilization of the Sephardic language. During the long nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire underwent a piecemeal disintegration, allowing the creation of nation-states, and thus producing the greater assimilation of the local Jewries. The linguistic adaptation and shift from Judeo-Spanish to local languages, which was promoted by the Alliance in the Empire, continued in the newly created states. Additionally, this eventful epoch was marked by an influential pan-Jewish ideology, Zionism, favoring the concept of one people for all Jews, which meant there was no place for a special Sephardic identity and their own language. Ultimately, the Shoah annihilated almost all Sephardic communities in the Balkans, particularly in the territories of Greece and Yugoslavia. It inevitably changed the local demographic landscape and, even more, endangered the transmission of Sephardic heritage (and language) to the following generations.

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