Introduction

Research on Sephardic Oral Culture in Israel Today

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Definitions and Delineation

This issue is devoted to the study of Sephardic oral culture in Israel today. The term “Sephardic Jews” refers to the descendants of Jews expelled from Spain in 1492, with their common denominator—aside from their geographic origin—Judeo-Spanish (which is also called Ladino).

This volume focuses on different aspects of this culture as handed down through oral tradition from one generation to the next.

Owing to the limited framework of the anthology’s structure, the specific focus is directed solely to the aural verbal sphere: poems and various forms of narrative transmitted through aural tradition, as distinct from the visual or conceptual spheres dealing with customs and folk beliefs.1

We also delimited the discussion as to time and place. Included are only studies dealing with the culture of the Sephardic group in Israel today, and by scholars currently working in Israel.

In recent years, we have seen a blossoming of academic research in Israel in the field of Sephardic culture. At present, all of the Israeli universities (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, Beersheba, and Bar-Ilan) teach Ladino language, literature and culture. Every year gives birth to a new generation of young scholars who have received master’s degrees and doctorates in Ladino culture. Some of them join the teaching staff in institutions of higher learning. Grants and disbursements are given for this field; prizes and sizeable fellowships are awarded to outstanding students on a competitive basis.

Eleven years ago (2004), two research centers were founded, one at Bar-Ilan University (Salti Center) and the other at Ben-Gurion University in the Negev (Gaon Center), which work toward the advancement and nurturing of research into Ladino culture.

The drastic change that occurred in Israel at the end of the 1970s, the shift from a cultural “melting pot” policy to a pluralistic one encouraging ethnic group heritage, certainly contributed to the development of research into Sephardic culture. The new approach was expressed in modifications in curricula at schools under the Ministry of Education, allotment of enhanced resources for universities, legislation of a law for the establishment of a National Authority for Ladino Culture (1996), and most particularly in changes in the Israeli public’s attitude.

Most of the members of the veteran generation of Ladino scholars did not begin their academic careers with research into Ladino but rather switched to that focus at a later stage in their lives. So, for example, Prof. Yaakov Bentolila and Prof. Ora Schwarzwald concentrated first on Hebrew language; Prof. Aliza Meyuhas Ginio dealt with the general history of Spain and Prof. Tamar Alexander explored the Ashkenazic Hasidic story. Once the scholars had established Ladino research as a recognized academic field, the younger generation of researchers no longer had to make a career change and they dealt from the outset of their careers with Ladino. Among them are Dr. Eliezer Papo\textsuperscript{2} as well as Dr. Nina Pinto-Abecasis\textsuperscript{3} and Aviad Moreno\textsuperscript{4} who contributed to this issue.

The solid establishment of the field made it possible to intensify the depth of the research as well as to expand its purview. Works were no longer panoramic books on the culture of the Sephardic community as a whole as if it were one indivisible block but focused on communities and secondary groups. Illustrative of this newer direction in research is work on Haketia culture, previously neglected and now the object of recent studies, for example, by Yaakov Bentolila and Tamar Alexander.\textsuperscript{5} The work of Nina Pinto-Abecasis\textsuperscript{6} in language and literature, Aviad Moreno\textsuperscript{7} in history, and in the field of ethnomusicology, the work over years by Susana Weich-Shahak on music among the

\begin{itemize}
  \item Eliezer Papo, \textit{And Thou Shalt Jest with Thy Son. Judeo-Spanish Parodies on the Passover Haggadah} (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2012) [Hebrew].
  \item Nina Pinto-Abecasis, \textit{The Peacock, the Ironed Man and the Half-Woman: Nicknames, Humor and Folklore in the Day-to-day Speech of Tetuan’s Haketia-speaking Jews} (Jerusalem, Ben-Zvi Institute, 2014) [Hebrew].
  \item Aviad Moreno, \textit{Europe from Morocco: The Minutes of the Leadership of Tangier’s Jewish Community (the Junta), 1860–1864} (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2015) [Hebrew].
  \item Tamar Alexander-Frizer and Yaakov Bentolila, \textit{La palabra en su hora es oro. El refrán judeoespañol en el Norte de Marruecos} (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2008), 142–172 [Hebrew], *31–*44 [Spanish].
  \item Pinto-Abecasis, \textit{Peacock, the Ironed Man} (see fn. 3 above).
  \item Moreno, \textit{Europe from Morocco} (see fn. 4).
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