

Ladino – Language of the Sephardic Jews 2012-04-03

Speaking Ladino, or the older Castilian dialect, may indicate possible Jewish ancestry

Ladino, also sometimes known as Judeo-Spanish, Sephardic, Crypto-Jewish, Judezmo, Hakitia, or Spanyol, had its origins in 1492, when Jews were expelled from Spain. Over the centuries, the Spanish of the late 15th century as spoken by those Jews underwent changes as it was influenced by the various languages of the countries to which the Sephardic Jews emigrated.

Ladino meets the criteria of a distinct language, and is not merely a dialect of Spanish. Yet it and Spanish are not so different that speakers of the two can't communicate with each other. There are strong and obvious similarities, just as there are, for example, between Spanish and Portuguese.

The language of the Sephardim

When the 150,000 to 300,000 Jews left Spain, they took with them their languages. They took Hebrew, the language of prayer and study, which was not used at home or in the streets. The language of daily use was Castilian Spanish as it was spoken in the late 15th century. The language that many Jewish exiles took with them as they left Spain in 1492 still coincided with Castilian in many particulars, but had followed its own evolution down from Judeo-Latin, combined with Hebrew, Aramaic, the various peninsula dialects, and Judeo-Arabic over the centuries. In each of its new homes, it acquired elements from the surrounding languages, while preserving its Iberian core. It became a unique expression of Jewish traditions, lifestyle, culture, institutions and beliefs.

It is interesting to note that one notable grammatical difference between Spanish and Ladino is that the latter doesn't use the *usted* and *ustedes* forms of the second-person pronoun; their use developed in Spanish after the Jews had left. Similarly, Ladino distinguishes the sounds of the B and the V. Again, it wasn't until after the 15th century that Spaniards gave those two consonants the identical sound. Some other features of Spanish, such as the inverted question mark and the use of the Ñ, are also absent.

Traditionally, Ladino was written using the Hebrew alphabet with the writing from right to left. Today, the Latin alphabet (the same one used by English and Spanish) is used most commonly except in some religious writings.

Ladino certainly wasn't preserved because of a love of or loyalty to Spain. Much

suffering was involved in the Expulsion, the forced conversions, and the persecutions by the Inquisition over the centuries. It was the maintenance of Jewish life with its religion and all its special practices that kept Ladino alive. Practicing Jews had to live in cohesive communities. They maintained Ladino because they stayed together. Living sometimes in remote places, they may not even have realized that their language came from Spain.

Since the Expulsion, Ladino has been spoken in North Africa, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, France, Israel, the United States and Latin America.

An endangered language

Every few years, the United Nations agency UNESCO produces an [Atlas of Endangered Languages](#). Ladino is listed as being "seriously endangered." Apart from a small group of enthusiasts and academics, the world has taken little notice of Ladino's demise.

Today, only between 100,000 and 200,000 people speak Ladino, mostly people over the age of 50, many of them having emigrated to Israel where the language was not transmitted to their children or grandchildren.

So the question remains whether Ladino will become extinct. It is the language of Maimonides, the poet Yehuda Halevi, and the entire tradition of Kaballah, the Zohar, and the Code of Jewish Law by the Sephardic Rabbi Joseph Caro. While scholars will still be able to read Ladino, once a language is no longer "living" it ceases to contribute to the cultural, social and intellectual development of a people.

A Ladino Revival

There are efforts being made to keep Ladino alive. It is experiencing a minor revival among Sephardic communities, especially in music, which boosts a wider audience than ever before. There are Ladino cultural festivals, and the five major Israeli universities all teach Ladino and have departments concentrating on Sephardic studies

If Ladino and its rich culture are to be handed on to future generations, an enormous effort will be required to teach and use the language, even in a secondary way.