

# “Es como llevar naranjas a ... Sefarad”: Tales of Ladino from the Bulgarian Sephardic Community

Leah Davcheva & Richard Fay

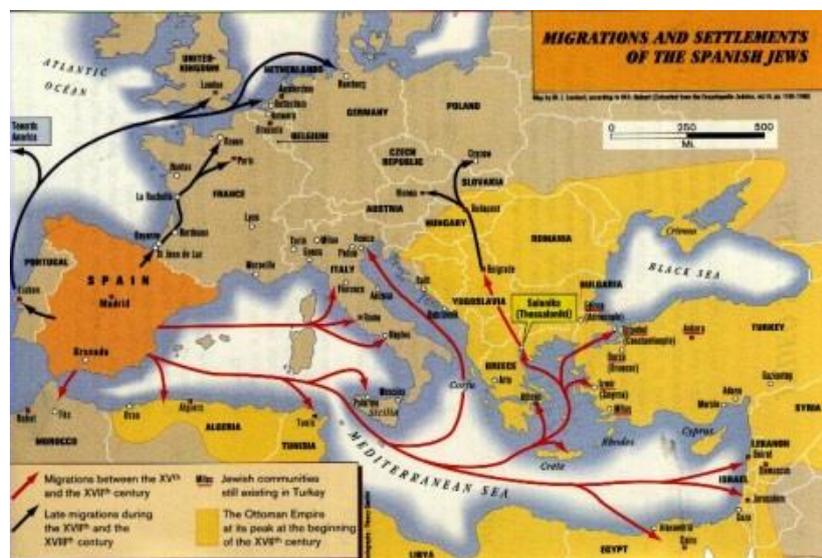
I have a sense of Spain being a motherland to me. When I talk with Spanish people in Spanyol, they say, “But yours is the language of Cervantes. It is a very old version of our language”. This is what made me understand how previous generations had handed this language down, from father to son, mother to daughter, and managed to keep it alive. That’s how the language has survived for so many years – thanks to them. And what did we do? We lost it. Because that’s true - that we lost it, while they kept it alive.”

(Itsko Finzi, January 2011).

**Dr. Leah Davcheva** (AHA Moments Centre for intercultural Learning) is an intercultural trainer, coach, researcher and (co-)author of books, articles and learning resources. She designs and delivers training programmes for educators, youth workers and business professionals, both internationally and at home. Leah has contributed to and was instrumental in building up the foundations of intercultural education and intercultural communication training in Bulgaria. Since 1998, she has collaborated with Richard on numerous educational projects and narrative research studies including the *Tales of Ladino* project being presented in this guest lecture.

**Dr. Richard Fay** (Manchester Institute of Education, The University of Manchester) is a Lecturer in TESOL and Intercultural Communication/Education. He co-ordinates the LANTERN (Language Teacher Education Researcher Network) doctoral community and directs and teaches on the MA TESOL (intercultural education) and MA Intercultural Communication programmes as well as jointly leading the Manchester Global Award. His research contributes to the fields of critical applied linguistics, critical intercultural studies, education and ethnomusicology, and he has recently published in the areas of researching multilingually, English as a lingua franca, criticality, intercultural competence, and Ladino. Since 1998, he has collaborated with Leah on numerous educational projects and narrative research studies including the *Tales of Ladino* project being presented in this guest lecture.

**Tales of Ladino** - In this multilingual, narrative project, often elderly members of the Bulgarian Sephardic Jewish community speak about their heritage language and what it means to them. Various called Judesmo, Spanyolit, Judeo-Espagnol, in our research we use the name Ladino for this language based on medieval Spanish and enriched by



Hebrew, Arabic, French, Turkish, Bulgarian and so on - it is a language that picked up lexical flavours and turns of phrase, idioms and proverbs, as its speakers settled (often against their will) in new territories. Thus, despite the passage of more than five centuries since the Jews were expelled from Spain, and despite the vicissitudes of intervening years, it is still possible to find amongst Bulgaria's much reduced Jewish population (now numbering only several thousand), individuals who speak or know some Ladino. This endangered language holds a special place in their affections, and they make great efforts to maintain their connections with it and the cultural-world it voices. In our research, we invited fourteen members of this Bulgarian Sephardic community to tell us the stories of their experiences of Ladino and what it meant, and means, for them. At the time of these encounters, our eldest storyteller was 93 years of age, and since then two of them have passed away. The project sought to capture these stories before it was too late but also to celebrate the often forgotten cultural-linguistic world in which Ladino played the central role. As intercultural educators, we were also interested in, and have accordingly analysed these stories in terms of, the storytellers' Ladino-oriented performance of identity within and across different parts of their lives.



**Our Talk** - Ladino is a fascinating linguistic phenomenon for Romance language scholars, but the linguistic analysis of the characteristics of Ladino is the topic for another day. Instead, in this talk, we provide an account of our multilingual, collaborative and narrative research project and also present our interculturality-framed analysis of these Tales of Ladino. Much intercultural communication discussion speaks of the dynamism of, and impetus for, intercultural communication, and it emphasises the processes of globalisation and internationalisation, as well as the transnational flows of people, ideas and products and the role of technology and mobility in these processes. Such discussion also focuses on the interculturality arising as migration of all kinds creates increasingly multicultural contexts. However, through these Ladino-focused stories, we can explore the interculturality of earlier times and note that there is nothing new about cultural complexity and the identity-work needed when

living in diverse societies and living through times of danger and oppression as well as of community and intimacy. These Tales of Ladino are far from being an epitaph for an endangered language and a lost cultural identity. Instead, they open a window for us into what it can mean to be intercultural.

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