

## **Being Jewish in Bulgaria: The changing stories of Sephardim about Ladino**

Richard Fay (The University of Manchester, UK)

and

Leah Davcheva (Aha Moments, Bulgaria)

The social, political, cultural, and linguistic history of Sephardic Jews in Bulgaria over the last century is a complex one involving periods of relative stability as well as times of imminent danger, oppression, and stark choices between emigration or integration into the dominant Bulgarian national identity. It is against this backdrop that we are researching the storied experiences of elderly (the eldest is 93) and middle-aged (the youngest is in his mid-40s) Sephardic Jews still living in Bulgaria. As we analyse their stories, we have a particular focus on their identity-play and the role within it of Ladino, the language (based on medieval Spanish) most closely associated with their Sephardic identity. Although we only have one recent iteration of each participant's life-story vis-a-vis Ladino-informed identity, in two ways, these stories reveal much about the changing patterns of Sephardic life-storying and identity over time in the Bulgarian context. First, many of the stories cover a considerable part of the complex history of the last century and enable us to see how being Jewish in Bulgaria has taken on quite different forms during this period. Second, there are interesting differences between the storied identity of elderly and middle-aged participants, thus providing us with access to variations in generationally-located identity.