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# Ben-Ur, %22When Spanish Is No Longer a Jewish Language%22.pdf

Aviva Ben-Ur



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## *Sephardi Lives*

STANFORD STUDIES IN JEWISH HISTORY AND CULTURE

EDITED BY *Aron Rodrigue and Steven J. Zipperstein*

# Sephardi Lives

*A Documentary History, 1700–1950*

*Edited by Julia Phillips Cohen  
and Sarah Abrevaya Stein*

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*To Aron Rodrigue, teacher, mentor, friend*

Kien en buen arvol se arima, buena solombra lo kuvija  
*(Whoever leans against a good tree, is covered in good shade)*



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## 126. WHEN SPANISH IS NO LONGER A JEWISH LANGUAGE: IMMIGRANT ENCOUNTERS ON THE STREETS OF NEW YORK CITY (1928)

*As a new generation of Sephardi Jews settled in the Lower East Side, Harlem, and other immigrant neighborhoods in New York City, they encountered other émigré communities, including Spanish-speaking non-Jews from Puerto Rico and elsewhere in Latin America. Because Ladino and modern Spanish are mutually intelligible, these encounters sometimes led to personal relationships and cultural affinity. Tensions, however, also could attend the meetings of Spanish and Judeo-Spanish speakers in the “veritable Tower of Babel” of New York City, as is suggested by this pseudonymous letter by the Salonican-born Moise B. Soulam (1890–1967), editor of the Ladino newspaper La Vara, and author of its successful advice column.*

Dear *Vara* of my soul,

Wherever it may be, I am always hit in the face by a pet peeve, some vexation and angst, due to the misbehavior of certain of our women who still do not know whether they are in New York, in the city of the veritable Tower of Babel, where many languages are spoken, or whether they are living in the old Turkey, where our women used to speak not only shouting through the streets, but also moving their hands and feet.

Here it is the same with some of our women, who, without even knowing who is sitting by their side, in the car, elevated train, and subway, go around speaking to each other in Spanish, and shouting as if they were litigating.

If I write this to you, *Vara* of my heart, it is because on Monday, two Sephardi women living in . . . Harlem, were on the elevated, returning from downtown to their homes, speaking not only [by] shouting, but also gesticulating with their hands.

What was remarkable about the conversations that the women in question were having on the elevated was that one of them was speaking about matters between husband and wife. The woman speaking should have spoken to her friend either very softly or when they were alone in their homes.

Besides this they began to mock in Spanish a fat man who was sitting in front of them, and began to say things about him, both truths and untruths, ugly words that would make you want to block your ears.

Everything was going fine until the two women left the station at 116th Street, but as they walked down the stairs, they found themselves behind a Puerto Rican good-for-nothing, to whom they did not pay attention at first.

The women were walking on 116th Street, returning to their homes, and the Puerto Rican also continued to walk behind them.

The two ladies turned onto Park Avenue, when the Puerto Rican suddenly came to their side. After greeting them in Spanish, he invited the two to come to his house. . . .

You can well imagine that the two Sephardi women did not answer him, and the Puerto Rican continued to follow them. But seeing that he was not getting any response either to his greeting or to his inauspicious invitation, he ventured to speak a few dirty words to the two Sephardi women, who answered him brazenly, "What do you think we are? Get out of here before we call a policeman."

Upon hearing this the Puerto Rican told them:

"Excuse me, ladies, as I was sitting next to you on the elevated, I heard that you were speaking in Spanish some words that you will readily recall, and I thought that you two were——

Thus saying, the Puerto Rican started walking rapidly or, better said, started running, before the two women could call a policeman. . . .

Don't ask me, dear *Vara*, how I came to know this, since my grandmother used to say, "do not pay money to learn a secret." This applies even more in this case because women cannot keep secrets. These two ladies told the story to their female neighbors, their female neighbors told their nieces, their nieces told their girlfriends, their girlfriends told their husbands, and before you could say "and the cat came and ate the kid, and the dog came and bit the cat,"<sup>18</sup> I also got a bite of this gossip. What I mean to say is that I came to know the matter and told it to you so that this may serve as a lesson for those women of ours who, finding themselves on the streets or in cars, on the elevated and in subways, be careful not to speak [by] shouting, because as I told you before New York resembles the Tower of Babel. Here there are peoples and individuals who speak various languages, and without knowing or thinking about it we can be heard, understood, and ac-

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18. From *Had Gadya*, a traditional song in the Passover Haggadah.

cused by strangers, and the best thing of all is to behave yourself while talking.

Bula Satula (pseudonym of Moise B. Soulam), *La Vara*, November 30, 1928, in Aviva Ben-Ur, "'We Speak and Write This Language Against Our Will:' Jews, Hispanics, and the Dilemma of Ladino-Speaking Sephardim in Early-Twentieth-Century New York," *American Jewish Archives Journal* 50:1-2 (1998): 136-38. Translated from Ladino by Aviva Ben-Ur.

## 127. MUSLIM PUPILS IN A JEWISH SCHOOL: A SEPHARDI TEACHER FROM THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN SETTLES IN TUNISIA [1931]

*Born in Edirne to a family of intellectuals and rabbis, Vitalis Danon (1897-1969) was educated in a traditional Jewish school until the age of eleven, at which point he was enrolled in the local Alliance Israélite Universelle school. Upon graduation Danon was recommended for admission to the École Normale Israélite Orientale, the AIU's prestigious teacher-training college in Paris and later sent to Tunisia to serve the organization. Danon remained in Tunisia for five decades, serving as a teacher and director of schools in Tunis, Sfax, and Hafsia, marrying a former pupil, and raising a family. During his time in Tunisia, he wrote exhaustively, contributing to journals including L'Univers Israélite, and penning various novels, a novella, a work of Jewish history for AIU pupils, and a sociological study of the Jews of the Jewish district (hara) of Sfax that was published in French, English, and Spanish. In the following letter, which Danon sent to the president of the Alliance Israélite Universelle from Sfax, he describes the matriculation of Muslim students into the local AIU school, a development Danon viewed with favor. During his time in Tunisia, Danon successfully petitioned for French citizenship, which he was granted on account of his work with the AIU.*

Sfax, October 7, 1931

Mr. President,

I have the honor to confirm my letter from the first of the month. As soon as I wrote it we reopened the school on Monday, October 5, as we are typically closed the day after Sukkot. This has been the best opening of the school year since I have been in Sfax. In previous years parents would bring their children some time during the first fifteen days of classes. Classes wouldn't be full and ready until the end of October. In 1930 the youngest class started with little more than four students. This year we already have fifty-four. Others will come later. Where will we put them all? . . . Regarding the Muslims, that day represented a