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ATHENS, SALONIKA AND ISRAEL IN MARGALIT MATITIAHU’S POETRY

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Resumo

Como se sabe, Matitiahu nasceu e cresceu em Israel. Ladino era a língua de sua mãe e de sua própria infância, língua que voltou à tona depois de sua visita à Grécia em 1986, quando se deparou com os edifícios e praças que no passado foram habitados por uma próspera comunidade.

O lar de Matitiahu é em Israel, mas como filha de imigrantes, ela presenciou a nostalgia de sua mãe por seu próprio lar, Salônica. Elementos não-espaciais como tradições, costumes, identidade étnica e língua, que também definem o que é um “lar”, foram trazidos à casa por sua mãe. A língua judeo-espanhola, o Ladino, preservada em sua casa, substituiu o “lar” que era Salônica pela pátria, aceita por todos, que era Israel. Entre os dois lares, entre o “aqui” e o “acolá”, Matitiahu se recordará (principalmente através de memórias herdadas) do “lar” e o recriará, ao escrever sobre Atenas e Salônica.

Minha leitura de “En las calles de Atenas” centra-se sobre os recursos poéticos e linguísticos em- pregados pela poeta. Fazendo uso de Bahloul, Hirsch e de Certeau, também observo a relação estabelecida no poema entre lar, língua, memória e morte.

Palavras-chave: Ladino; memória; lar; língua; Sefardi

Abstract
This paper discusses the poem “On the streets of Athens,” published in 1992 in Matitiahu’s second bilingual book, Alegrika. The poem reveals, through
bold and colorful metaphors, the powerful effects of the poet’s encounter with Greece, and tells the story of the “reactivation” of her memory.

As is well known, Matitiahu was born and raised in Israel. Ladino was her mother’s tongue and the language of her own childhood, which only resurfaced powerfully upon her trip to Greece in 1986, before the images of buildings and plazas that were once inhabited by a thriving community.

Matitiahu’s home, in the private sense, is in Israel. However, as a daughter of immigrants, she witnessed her mother’s nostalgia for her own home, Salonika. Non-spatial elements such as traditions, customs, ethnic identity and language, which also define “home,” were brought home by her mother. The Ladino language preserved in the household replaced the “home” that was Salonika for the accepted “homeland” that was Israel. Positioned between the two homes, being “here” and “there,” Matitiahu will remember (mostly through inherited memories) and recreate “home,” as she writes about Athens and Salonika.

My reading of “On the streets of Athens” focuses on the poetic and linguistic devices employed by the poet. Using Bahloul, Hirsch and de Certeau, I also observe the relationship established in the poem among home, language, memory and death.

Keywords: Ladino; memory; home; language; Sephardic

In his studies of threatened languages, Joshua A. Fishman summarizes the confluence of ancestral emotional and cultural elements that conjugate life and death in the process of intergenerational and ethnocultural continuity through language maintenance. His words could well describe Margalit Matitiahu’s position as she attempts to maintain, with Ladino, the “symbolic heritage” (as used by anthropologist Joelle Bahloul)¹ of her family and ethnic group. Observing the problematic relationship between memory, home and homeland in Matitiahu’s use of Ladino, this paper departs from the poem “On the streets of Athens.”

¹ “What is at stake is the preservation of the symbolic heritage of a domestic group after migration and deracination.” Bahloul, 1996, p. 132.
ברוחנית אתונה

אל רוחונית אתונה ישארית מיקוחה יחלות
בכאת שמחת, ע Newtonsoft רוחות
לשלוף כל ישראל מרשף.

נ欢迎您ש קסמה עזקסא י"עדהו
סילויות וכותב כללות שפיח שחרית
משייר הגא'ן.

ברוכב תושב רעש בשור מות
ברוכב בם.
움וזות ומוזות ערבינה
 orch עליה עהל נשביע ערב.

עיין קיו ולא פתי ענוש
ණורח שלדיי טום
שחיה ביעמות והופת
של אונר ואפר.'

. מלחה - רבר

published in 1992, in Matitiahu's second bilingual book, Alegrika. This volume follows Kurtijo Kemado, a book marked by the ominous shadow of the Shoah in Jewish-Greek history, as it speaks of destruction and desolation in Salonika. It is a project of life marked by death. Alegrika, however, returns to the same house that appears burned in Kurtijo Kemado, but depicts it as it was before the war: full of life, sounds, real people and real names.
EN LAS KAYES DE ATHENA

En las kayes de Athena
Yevava la validja envizible de mi chikes
Eya konservava nombres, kolores, i golores
Ke se desvainavan komo kartas de mi memoria.
Los choros desbrochados por la fuente
En la plasa “Homonia”
Se aunavan kon los sones de la lengua
Venida mezo los rekords de mi kaza.

En las kalejas del soko se sentia
El ruido de la karne muerta a la kolor
De sangre,
I los taxis amariyos en koriendo
Arojavan sovre mi la mala kolor.

Fiksando la mirada en las fachas de la djente
Bushkava restos de fizacionomias
Ke bivian en los ojos (agora muertos)
De mi padre i mi madre.

The suppression of the diasporic elements to live up to an ideal of “muscular Jewry” in Palestine\(^2\) required much forgetting of the past. Driven by death, Matitiahu sets out to enliven the past, to relive her mother’s memories of Salonika. Her first two bilingual books are an attempt to reconfigure the world of her parents before their emigration to Palestine. Because Matitiahu did not grow up in Salonika, and did not have first-hand knowledge of traditional life in the city’s Jewish community and the experiences she tries to recast in her poetry, her task is to translate into verse her mother’s memories as received from home.

performances of memory: conversations, stories, common perusal of old books and newspapers.

It is reported that Matilde León, Matitiahu’s mother,

never stopped loving her birth city. She fervently collected newspapers and journals published by the Jews from Salonika, turning her home into an invaluable cultural site.3

Matitiahu recognizes the role played by her mother’s chest of textual, material memories in both her mother’s and her own lives and literary development. She writes,

Books were her life. She collected many of them: history books, novels, short-stories, coplas, newspapers and journals (more than 120), and other materials. All of this she brought with her to Israel. Books accompanied her throughout her life. Now they accompany me, since my childhood.4

In fact, both in her poems and in interviews, Matitiahu refers to “stories” that conjured up the Jewish world of interwar Salonika. These stories will eventually fashion her poetic construction of memory, her shaping of a vanquished world that appears to her as heavily dominated by strong women and their relationships, figuring Matilde Reytan’s influence as deep-rooted memory: “las memorias plantadas en mi por mi madre,” she writes in Ladino.5

“On the streets of Athens” reveals, through bold and colorful metaphors, the powerful effects of the poet’s encounter with Greece and tells the story of the “reactivation” of her memory. As the title suggests, it is an urban poem, a sort of “scenes in the life of the city,” or a depiction of a day in Athens in which the speaker herself is the passer-by. The particular syntaxes of Ladino and Hebrew and the characteristics of each language are at play helping to shape the two versions of the poem. The Ladino

4 MATITIAHU, 2000, p.115.
5 “Saloniki” in MATITIAHU, 1988, p.17.
version, in general terms, is more prolix than the Hebrew one, bearing more verbs and pronouns. But both versions offer the same mixture of acute concreteness and abstraction, and heavily synaesthetic images.

Each poem begins with the speaker carrying a suitcase. But here the suitcase is not by her side, to be filled by the departing poet. The poet in fact has left already (significantly, from the “final destination,” Israel, back to exile), and the suitcase—a concrete noun and object—is doubly qualified as invisible, at least hidden, and it is a suitcase that dates back to her childhood, a detail that alters the metaphor, adding a certain degree of abstraction. In Hebrew it is in fact a haunting image. Because of the built-in ambiguity of the Hebrew construct state (smichut), מְצוּדָהּ לַעֲדוֹת סְמוּיָה, “mizvadot ialdut smuyiah,” can be translated either as “invisible/hidden suitcase of childhood” or “suitcase of an invisible childhood,” linking it to the experience of the Shoah and the transports.

The invisible suitcase of childhood holds not clothes or even pictures one might carry along his or her dislocations, but “names, colors and scents”—the personal and intangible “baggage” acquired in childhood. The verb “to draw” (“desvainar,” in Ladino, and לְשָׁלוֹן, “lishlof” in Hebrew) implies suddenness if not violence, related as it is to guns and weapons in general, as in the expression “to draw a gun,” or “to unsheathe a sword.” In this case, the speaker’s memory is quickly and effectively triggered. The names, colors and scents of childhood, probably received in the home run by her immigrant mother and which she holds closely, suddenly resurface. These first three verses in Hebrew or four in Ladino offer two concrete nouns—“suitcase” and “letters”—around which more conceptual and abstract, or at least intangible elements are structured, establishing a strong connection among memory, landscapes and physical senses.

At the sight and sound of a concrete, particular view — the water spurting from the fountain at Homonia Square — the sounds of Judeo-Spanish, the language spoken in the poet’s home, are reactivated in her memory. It is both a language of speech and a language of stories.
about the old home in Salonika. Matitiahu visited her mother’s house in Salonika. In the poem, however, she is not in Salonika but in Athens, which becomes a place in lieu of true memory, a construct enabled by language. There is a confluence of sounds, those of the water and those of the language, expressed by the poetic verb “aunar” in Ladino, and by the more concrete, “reality-based” Hebrew verb פְּנָיוֹ “lidvoq.” The rushing sounds of water may recall certain sounds characteristic to Ladino — sounds that do not exist in Castilian/Modern Spanish but are still present in Aragonese and Leonese dialects — such as the voiceless palatal fricative sh. However, the connection of spouts/sprays and sounds of language is not limited only to sounds in the verse. In fact, image and sounds are bound in the process of recapturing childhood memories. The spouts adhere to or are made one with the sounds of the language from home. I see the fountain spouts, in their strong, “sudden” movement as analogous to the drawing or unsheathing of names, colors and scents “like letters from the memory/head.” It is a concrete, almost surreal visual image that resembles the manner in which these elements from the past are unearthed or recalled by the speaker. There is a certain power, strength and suddenness even in the repetitive movements of the spouts, and these characteristics are enhanced especially in Hebrew by the use of the verbלָעַנְי, “lehagiach.” Meaning “to sally,” “to emerge,” “to reappear from behind a wall, a hidden place,” or simply “to pop up,” it implies not only a somewhat violent outpouring, but also a birth—the baby emerging from its mother’s womb.

Towards the end, the reader follows the speaker’s eyes as they focus on the faces of people whom she sees perhaps only once, in the fleeting seconds when they cross paths on the streets of Athens. The speaker, whose sounds and images of childhood were reawakened by contact with the Greek city, is at this moment consciously seeking to relive her parents’ impressions, however belated and fragmentary they will unavoidably be. Verses of remarkable grammatical and syntactical simplicity (especially in Hebrew) express the speaker’s attempt
to internalize visions that her parents might have seen, in an effort to identify with them and affirm some continuity. Life and death are again treated in the poem, but this time the dead parents, synecdochically represented by their "dead eyes," are revived through their living daughter, whose eyes become an extension of their own.

Walking along the streets of Athens, Margalit Matitiahu is performing more than one return. Against the necessary injunction to forget in order to foster the nation-building project, and following the Jewish precept to remember, Matitiahu strives to remember her parents' past. Although not exclusively, her own past is made up of remains of her parents' world, carefully built upon memories of Salonika, and recomposed at home in Israel with texts, images, colors and scents—her inner invisible suitcase. Marianne Hirsch's concept of "post-memory" is useful to describe Matitiahu's relationship to her mother's memories which she inherits. Rather than a direct recollection, one's memory and perception of an object or event is mediated by the personal memories of an earlier generation. These memories produce a narrative which dominates the experience of second-generation family members. In Hirsch's own words:

Postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. ... Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.\(^6\)

In Greece, Matitiahu tries to perceive the world as her parents had perceived it, and to locate herself in relation to their past. It is a constructed perception, because she knows these memories are not her own, and in

\(^6\) HIRSCH, 1997, p.22.
the case of this poem, it is not even a “return” to the same place: she is in Athens, not Salonika, and the two are very different cultural sites. Matitiahu’s deliberate identification with her parents is shadowed by the conscious realization that what is left is nothing more than vestiges of a past which can never again be fully apprehended: “I searched for remains of features/ That once lived in the (now dead) eyes/ Of my father and my mother.” Still, if the past certainly cannot be relived, there is hope that she can unearth elements of this past and recuperate them as a living part of the present. This hope is however complicated: it co-exists with a self-awareness of the inauthenticity of memory or the impossibility of return.

Home, language, memory and death are interwoven in “In the Streets of Athens.” The concept of “home” itself is problematized in the poem, especially in the differences presented in the Ladino and Hebrew versions. “The spouts released by the fountain …/ Merged with sounds of the language/ Which came back to me amidst memories of my home,” reads the Ladino poem, while the Hebrew reads: “Sprays clung to sounds of the language that emerges/ From the memories of home.” In the Hebrew version “home” is not accompanied by a possessive, first person singular, nor by the idiomatically required definite article that would suggest the sense of “my home.” The context clearly establishes that this is the speaker’s home, but the grammatical and syntactical structure allows enough ambiguity which, in hindsight, evokes a connection between “home” (in “יִכְרוֹן בטאָט,” “zikaron bait,” literally “home memory”) and the dead parents.

Matitiahu’s home, in the private, familiar sense, is in Israel. In the dichotomy home vs. homeland, her home is also Israel, the concrete territorial location normalized as the homeland of the Jews.7 However, as a daughter of immigrants, she witnessed her mother’s nostalgia for her own

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7 National discourses use the idea of “home,” transferring or projecting the private, familiar home onto a national home, which replicates the same ties that link family members. Cf. ANDERSON, 1983, and SAID, 1983. For different articulations of “home” and its symbolic boundaries, configuring discourses of inclusion and exclusion, see also MASSEY, 1992 and 1991; DOUGLAS, 1991; RATHZEL, 1994; SIBLEY, 1988 and 1995.
home, Salonika. At the same time, those elements her mother brought home to the poet’s specific childhood house were non-spatial elements which also defined “home”: traditions, customs, ethnic identity, language. In fact, the language carefully preserved in the household replaced the “home” that was Salonika for the accepted “homeland” that was Israel. There was never a complete resolution of the conflict between “here” and “there,” “now” and “then”—“foreign” elements that supposedly would have disappeared among the new “locals” were somehow preserved. This is evident in cultural differences within Israeli society, differences that remain despite the efforts to construct, out of a centuries-old diasporic nation, a homogeneous national citizen around one land, one language, and one national culture. It also confirms the trend to relegate Ladino to the domestic realm, so that it symbolically came to represent home, thereby preserving Hebrew’s status as the worldly language of education, administration and other state affairs.

Matitiahu’s mother’s “home” (in Salonika) is not Matitiahu’s home, and yet it is that too. Living her mother’s second-hand memories throughout childhood, Matitiahu was already positioned between the two homes, ambivalently being “here” and “there.” By way of speech and written texts—newspapers and books that her mother brought in a trunk when she immigrated to the homeland—language was preserved, and language was the crux of memory and its recreation of home. The intimate connection between home and language, interwoven by memory, is expressed in the verses that speak of “the language/which came back to me amidst the memories of my house,” or “the language that sallies from the memories of home.” Note that in Ladino the article that precedes “language” is always the definite “the,” qualifying the unnamed language as the only one that is brought back by memory. Curiously, this language—vernacular Ladino, or “Spanyol,” as Matitiahu prefers—

8 Matitiahu uses many names to refer to the Judeo-Spanish language in articles and interviews. In a personal correspondence with me she states that she prefers “Spanyol” or “Spanyolit,” as it was called in her home.
is the one element that, conversely, has the power to bring back memories, to promote Matitiahu’s return not only to her childhood, but to her mother’s childhood: her “home.”

Significantly, the violent or sudden reactivation of the speaker’s memory that we witness in this poem happens as the poet returns to the location of her mother’s pre-Palestine life. And a further complication: Matitiahu is returning to her mother’s literal home—her actual house in Salonika. In this poem, it is Athens, a metonymic deflection from the “real” or “actual” home. This is a strange return: strictly speaking, Matitiahu cannot “return” to Greece, since she has never been there. However, her physical displacement represents a symbolic return to her mother’s diasporic life, and a literal presence in a land that was home and motherland, but was never homeland. Michel de Certeau writes that memory is “mobilized relative to particular events.”9 Death was just such an event for Matitiahu, as her return (her “triggering trip”) was only performed following her mother’s death, as if a definitive and traumatic event were necessary to unblock a series of associations that had been repressed for some time; as if death required, or were the foundational moment of a new ritual, a new order in one’s life. Usually this new order comes from a need or desire to establish continuity with those who died. For Matitiahu, her mother’s death prompted her to revisit “diaspora” (while visiting the diaspora) and revive images and sounds from the past. She seeks to preserve them, rescuing them from death and restoring them to life. Ladino is one of the most important defining elements of Sephardic ethnocultural identity. Matitiahu’s connection to the past and to the language bears the imprint of migration and Jewish genocide, an example of Joelle Bahloul’s assessment that “The relations of the vast majority of contemporary Jews to

9 DE CERTEAU, 1988, p.86.
their past is marked by the experiences of genocide or emigra-
tion or both."\(^{10}\) Returning to the language of her childhood, her
mother’s language, Matitiahu embraces her mother’s memories
and imposes herself as both a link to the past and an effective
guarantor of the transmission of Sephardic culture.

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\(^{10}\) BAHLOUL, 1996, p.125.

