Judeo-Spanish Texts in Latin American Genres: Language Revival and National Identity in Contemporary Argentina

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In the Primer Simposio de Estudios Sefardies held in Madrid in 1964, León S. Pérez claimed that Latin America was the ideal place for the creation of an ‘area of secondary Sephardization’. He came to this conclusion in large part because most of Latin America, after all, speaks Spanish. Pérez argued that Latin America provides linguistic and cultural conditions which encourage the ‘process of creating a Sephardic cultural type’ (Pérez 1970: 142). This vision of a new Sephardic type, resulting from the encounter among Ashkenazim, Sepharadim, and the many cultures that are the foundation of Hispanic Latin America, announces the possibility of a new Sephardic cultural production, including a new Sephardic literature.

The Sephardic Symposium also addressed ‘the situation of Judeo-Spanish’, with several talks stressing the ‘decadent state’ of the language and its imminent death. Manuel Criado de Val, a Spanish scholar, suggested that Judeo-Spanish should be endowed with ‘a literary content’, designed to increase the language’s prestige, thereby overcoming the shame native speakers felt over their language. Criado de Val (1970: 277–279) defended organizing a Judeo-Spanish dictionary and a grammar. In his way, Criado de Val also expressed what in his polysystem theory Itamar Even-Zohar (2005) explains as the important role of translated literature as provider of models for imitation and creation, a role that increases if the receiving literature is newer or weaker. Criado de Val claims that the only available contemporary
means for Judeo-Spanish to amass the much-needed literary content was to translate Spanish works into Judeo-Spanish:

We cannot attribute any literary content to Judeo-Spanish by means of contemporary literary works: finding a writer in Judeo-Spanish who has the luxury to publish and to offer a work of literature would not be easy. But there are Spanish works which indeed share that kind of prestige, and which could be offered in Judeo-Spanish versions. (Criado de Val 1970: 278)

In this paper I will address two such works that could add content and bring prestige to Judeo-Spanish. Neither of them is from Spain, as Criado de Val had anticipated, but from Latin America itself: the Argentine national epic poem, *Martín Fierro*, by José Hernández, and Argentine tangos. These are texts which acquired national and international literary prestige, and which, by means of translation, are now part of the Judeo-Spanish canon and contribute to a specifically Latin American Sephardic literature. As I examine the uses of Judeo-Spanish in Latin American literature, I interrogate why ethnically Sephardic Jews, non-ethnically Sephardic Jews and even non-Jews would decide to use an endangered and markedly Jewish language in their cultural works today. What are the current circumstances (political, religious, literary, artistic, aesthetic) that have converged to make Ladino a compelling linguistic option now? How is it being used by artists to say something about themselves and their place in the society and in their nation? Why are these artists finding an audience? What does this cross-over appeal of dialectal genres and languages tell us about changes in conceptions of nationality?

On July 8, 2005, the Editorial Milá from Buenos Aires published 1,105 copies of José Hernández’s book *El Gaucho Martín Fierro*, with the undertitled inscription: ‘Tresladado al djudeo-espanyol por Carlos Levy.’ Milá is the publishing house run by the largest and most important Jewish center in Argentina, the AMIA (Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina). It is also the ‘default’ Jewish center, usually associated with the Ashkenazi majority, given that there is a specifically Sephardic Cultural Center, the CiDiCSef (Centro de Investigación y Difusión de la Cultura Sefardí). The unusual publication of a book in Judeo-Spanish by the AMIA shows us that the channels of communication and cooperation
between the two communities are perhaps more open than in the past. It is also ironic evidence of Judeo-Spanish’s increasing recognition within the larger Jewish community of Argentina.

The first question prompted by this translation is: Who is the intended audience? The Sephardim, Judeo-Spanish-speakers in Argentina, much like their Ashkenazi counterparts, are fully integrated into the country, speak current Castellano—as the Argentine national variety of Spanish is called—and have probably read this classic text in school. As in other parts of the world, classes in Ladino are on the rise, and students, nostalgic for the language of their parents and grandparents, gather to share memories and learn about their culture.

Close attention to the paratextual material clarifies the translator’s motivation to undertake such a task, as well as his emotional attachment to the Sephardic language and the Argentine text. I quote from his note:

Este lavoro de tresladación del *Martín Fierro*, non tyene otro propozito ke aportar a la rekuperasión de la kultura Sefaradi i el Ladino, ya ke rekodrando a Unamuno ambezimos ke el sprito de los puevlos bive i si transmite en los dizires de su lingua. Al mizmo tyempo profito de rendir omenaje al poéma máksimo de esta, mi tiera, i la ke adoptaron mis antepasados, a la fin de un largo peregrinaje, komo suya, maike dayinda eskarinyados con Sefarad i Turkiya. Mientras lavoraba e iva topando las avlas, me parecia aver inventado una maraviyosa mákina del tyempo, ke gozozamente me aboltaba a los modos, djuegos i kantes kon los ke mis kuavtro avuelos djudios dieron sintido a mi chikez. Leshos de la academia i de kualkier religiosidad, so io djudio agnostiko i komplettamente asimilado, e optado por realizarlo akodro al sistema de ‘Aki Yerushalaym’, talvez por kreyer ke es esta la eskola ke fonetikamente aserka kon mayor fasilida i felisida mis oyidos a la dulse muzika de sus avlas. (p. 5)

Carlos Levy establishes from the start that his main goal is ‘to recover’ Sephardic culture in general and Ladino in particular. He joins the larger movement of revitalization of Ladino, as he calls the Judeo-Spanish vernacular language, seeking to grant it continuity and a renewed presence in today’s world. Levy also participates in the valorization of
unambiguous ethnic—Sephardic—markers, and expands the language, since translations add to the patrimony of any language, when they offer new genres and introduce new words and concepts. In fact, Levy includes a glossary of 71 words or expressions with ‘avlas gauchas,’ donning Judeo-Spanish with very specific local colors. Some examples: ‘Palenque: payo de ande se atan los kavayos’; ‘Cimarrón: mate. Vebida krioya. Infuzyon en base a yervas. Se toma djeneralmente sin asukar’; or ‘Ladino: en la lingua de los gauchos, inteliyente, ma tambien se dize de astutos o del ke azte trampa’ (pp. 65–66). In providing new words from a different and local setting, Levy contributes to the development of Judeo-Spanish as a possible vehicle of literary expression.

Levy also seeks to combine his allegiance to the Sephardic culture with his attachment to Argentina, choosing to translate one of the most important markers of ‘Argentinidad,’ a fact he is well aware of as he calls Martín Fierro ‘el poéma máksimo de esta, mi tiera’. Before I expand on the poem itself, for now it suffices to say that, published in 1872, at a crucial moment in Argentine history, two decades after the fall of the dictator Juan Manuel Rosas, Martín Fierro expresses the plight and the discontent of the gaucho minority —the itinerant inhabitants of the countryside— who at that time were all but disappearing. As the gaucho is a typically Argentine character, Martín Fierro became a distinctively Argentine work, not only for its theme and setting, but also for its verse structure and its language, which reproduced the popular speech of the pampas, the countryside, at a moment when Argentines were striving to differentiate themselves linguistically from Spain. Martín Fierro is the most popular Argentine publication, and has been translated into at least 20 languages.

Unlike its usage in the Ottoman Empire, where the language had flourished in exile, to speak of Judeo-Spanish in Latin America is to speak of “Sepharad 3”, conventionally defined as areas of a third phase of Sephardic presence (see Hassán 1981: 58). Considering this fact, I would like to say a word about Levy’s awkward construction: ‘el poéma máksimo de esta, mi tiera.’ Argentina is defined contextually and geographically: ‘esta tiera’; but as if correcting himself, Levy adds the personal, affective, emotional, and —why not?— national element, interrupting via the emphasized personal pronoun: ‘mi tiera’. A second-generation Argentine, Levy feels comfortable enough to identify Argentina as his land and himself as its citizen, fully integrated into the uses and customs of the nation. His self-described agnosticism and his
professed removal from religion serve to reinforce his secular, assimilated Argentine identity: ‘so io djudio agnostiko i kompletamente asimilado’. Unlike his own, his family’s relationship with Argentina requires a much longer, explanatory circumlocution: ‘mi tiera, i la ke adoptaron mis antepasados, a la fin de un largo peregrinaje, komo suya, maike dayinda eskarinyados con Sefarad i Turkiya’. The Sephardic exile, generally referred to as ‘double exile,’ but which can already be seen as a triple one, is traced in this one sentence, and so is the nostalgic link to Spain. Following the pattern of the diasporic Sephardic experience, Argentina may be his own homeland, but it is only the adopted homeland of his ancestors, who, coming from Turkey, still feel connected to an idea of the ancestral land of Sepharad. Argentina is not their land but it is as theirs. Curious, however, is the use of the word ‘peregrinaje’: even as it speaks of a long journey—from Spain to Turkey to Argentina—it also has the connotation of a voyage to a shrine, which, should we pursue the metaphor, would be Argentina.

The text continues with some common tropes when discussing the transmission of Judeo-Spanish and Sephardic culture. The connection between transmission, memory and genealogy frequently appears among ethnically Sephardic artists. Levy’s reference to ‘una maraviyosa mákina del tyempo’, stresses the value of time, a recurrent motif in contemporary Judeo-Spanish poetry. Language itself is what triggers the memory of a past in which ‘modos, djuegos i kantes’ are the ordinary and familial ways of transmission and preservation of traditional Sephardic culture. Genealogy is represented by the reference to his ‘kuavtro avuelos djudios’. On the one hand this reference implies the missing parental link, as Levy’s parents most likely do not speak Judeo-Spanish and do not share the same cultural trove. This parental absence is ratified later in the epigraph, were Levy dedicates his work to his four grandparents, three great uncles and, oddly enough, three uncles: ‘de eyos la erensia de la lingua’. On the other hand, it is a semi-veiled affirmation of pride in a completely Sephardic genealogy, reminiscent of the Sepharadim Tahor. Also, it is his affirmation of a Jewish identity: notice that he admits being assimilated and disconnected from religion immediately after asserting his pristine genealogical lineage. Levy’s claims of Jewishness thus center on a genealogical basis.

But if Judeo-Spanish appears in the text as the site of memory, it is also that which can save memory, and which can now affirm a Sephardic identity. Removed from its original role as a language of
communication in the lives of organic communities now disappeared, Judeo-Spanish —Levy’s Ladino— becomes essentially a cultural language. Even when still used as a language of communication, it had symbolic and affective value for Sephardic Jews; but presently, following the annihilation of most of its speakers, the Sephardic language has acquired new symbolic values, and has taken different uses. It is here a mark of Sephardic identity, enveloped in affectionate images of childhood and sounds of ‘dulzura’. In a dimension much greater than in the past, the language stands for an ethnic Jewish and a sub-ethnic Sephardic identification, now separated from any religious connotation.

In his acknowledgements, Levy reveals his participation in the greater Sephardic diaspora, currently enhanced by modern means of communication and technology in general. The virtual community Ladinokomunità is obliquely present in the reference to Güler Orgun’s Dictionary, and Levy thanks Israeli poet Margalit Matitiahu ‘por sus akodros i desakodros’. In this translation, as in the works of Franco-Bosnian Clarisse Nicoïdski, Margalit Matitiahu and other Sephardic poets, Judeo-Spanish is thus a language to recover the past, to claim an ethnic identity, to assert membership in a community, and reaffirm the links maintained with the Sephardi diaspora.

José Hernández’s Martín Fierro is an intriguing translational choice, presented as an homage to Argentina. It is a 2,316-line poem, structured in six-line stanzas with verses of eight syllables. Written in a realist style when Argentine modernismo, leaning towards ‘art for art’s sake’, was in vogue, it nevertheless captured a large audience, with its vivid portrayal of the life of the gaucho, and for its oral qualities and appeal. Fernández reproduces the peculiar prosody and speech pattern of the Argentine pampas, basing his written text on an essentially spoken language, and breaking with the prevailing elitist and urban language in Argentina. Also in his treatment of themes of minority oppression, forced circumscription, governmental violence, and social exploitation, in what can be called a poem of protest, Fernández gives voice to a specifically Argentine minority group threatened with extinction. Frank Carrino, one of Martín Fierro’s English translators, affirms that ‘the poem supplied a historical link to the gauchos’ contribution to the national development of Argentina, for the gaucho had performed a major role in the country’s independence from Spain’ (Carrino 1974: 3). His opinion, shared by
others, is that *Martín Fierro* could be appropriated by other minority groups today in different parts of the world.

Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, one of the most important critics of the poem, claims that quite often the six verses of the stanzas have the precise and syntactic value of a tercet, and he enthusiastically compares Hernández’s verse to those found in Keats’s and Dante’s sonnets. (Martínez Estrada 1948: 11) Critics generally describe *Martín Fierro* as having assonant rhymes, but Martínez Estrada claims instead that it has imperfect or ‘frustrated’ consonant rhymes. He adds that the combination of two eight-syllable verses gives the verse its unity, ‘restituyendo así la unidad del verso del romance, que fué de diecisésis sílabas, como se encuentra a menudo en el Cantar de Mio Cid’. (ibid., p.13) To the critic, Hernández’s verse offers a restorative quality (which might suggest some insight into Levy’s translational choice): it gives the old Castillian verse ‘su estructura y su verdadera vertebración’ (ibid., p.13).

By virtue of its very form and language, the poem stresses its own spoken character: the speaker, who narrates his story, begins by situating it in the realm of song, of chanted language. In Castilian:

Aqui me pongo a cantar  
Al compás de la vigüela,  
Que el hombre que lo desvela  
Una pena estroordinaria,  
Como la ave solitaria  
Con el cantar se consuela.

In Levy’s translation:

Aki me meto a kantar yo  
a al tanyer de la gitara,  
kualo al ombre ke lo apanya  
un penserio ingrandesido  
bigibiliko solitario  
kon el dizir se konsola.

Another stanza pursues the theme:

Cantando me he de morir  
Cantando me han de enterrar,
Y cantando hé de llegar  
Al pié del Eterno Padre--  
Dende el vientre de mi madre  
Vine a este mundo a cantar.

In Judeo-Spanish:

Kantando m’e de murir  
kantando me an d’enterar  
i kantando e de yegar  
del bendicho Dió al pié,  
de la tripa de mi madre,  
al mundo a kantar vini yo.

Here we see not only that the Christian Eternal Father becomes a ‘bendicho Dió’, but also that the original Castilian version of the poem uses unusual forms such as *dende* for *desde*. One can also find *ande* for *donde* and some old Spanish forms such as *mesmo* for *mismo*, *trujo* for *trajo*, and *ansí* and *ansina* for *ásí*. Martínez Estrada (1948: 43) once again connects the text to a past moment in the Spanish language and literature, since he sees in these obsolete forms not the ‘dialecto gaucho’ identified by other critics, but ‘el idioma castizo del siglo XVI que trajo el conquistador, como se le puede encontrar en textos literarios de la época’.

We could say that *Martín Fierro* has natural affinities with Sephardic literature among Judeo-Spanish speakers. I will venture that the eminently oral character of the text, its use of archaic Spanish forms, and its applicability to other minority groups, makes *Martín Fierro* an attractive choice to incorporate into the Sephardic and Judeo-Spanish canons. The fact that it is at once a canonical Argentine national poem and a text that speaks of a marginalized group asserting its historical presence in the nation, makes it more suitable to be claimed by writers who are also trying to insert the Jewish contribution into the national cultural and historical narrative.

The conflation, or negotiation, of an Argentine and Sephardic identity is taking place not only with the translation of poetry, but also with the incorporation of a markedly Argentine musical and poetic genre: the tango. Indigenous to the cultural context of the region of La Plata, tango continues to attract the attention of Sephardim who live in this
milieu. Names such as Luis de León and Liliana Benveniste, among others, translate the lyrics of traditional tangos and draw this material for their own creation, as they also write original tango lyrics in Judeo-Spanish. This is a pattern of translation, absorption and re-elaboration that can be seen in several instances in the history of Judeo-Spanish literature. In fact, the incorporation of new genres, or ‘adopted genres,’ in Iacob Hassán’s words (Hassán 1981), is a studied phenomenon in Judeo-Spanish literature. Iacob Hassán (1981), Elena Romero (1992), and Olga Borovaya (2003), to mention but a few, have examined different genres that were adopted through the contact with the surrounding non-Jewish culture and due to the political, social and cultural changes within the Jewish community. These genres may include autograph poetry (poesía de autor), journalism, theater, the essay, and the novel. Susana Weich-Shahak (2000), Rivka Havassy (2004), and Judith Cohen (1990) have studied musical examples of adopted genres. Weich-Shahak (2000: 336) specifically delved into Argentine tango. She showed how tango was broadly disseminated in the Sephardic world and appropriated in Greece, Bosnia, Bulgaria and Macedonia, entering the Judeo-Spanish repertoire, and acquiring ‘a recognizable place in the tradition and the life of the Sepharadim’.

Nowadays, the Sepharadim of Argentina, descendants of the Jews of Rhodes, Salonica, and Istanbul, continue to enrich and revitalize the Sephardic poetic-musical repertoire. They are translating traditional Argentine tangos and also creating new tangos in Judeo-Spanish. Singer Liliana Benveniste is at the forefront of this activity. So far, she informs me, there are three translated tangos: Enrique Cadícamo’s *Los Mareados* / *Los Shasheados*, Gabino Coria Peñaloza’s *Caminito* / *Kalishica*, and Carlos Gardel and Alfredo Le Pera’s *El día que me quieras* / *El dia ke me keres*. Especially encouraging for the viability of Judeo-Spanish as a medium of literary expression and cultural production is the news that there is also a fresh original tango in Judeo-Spanish, with lyrics by Argentine poet Beatriz Mazliah and music composed by Benveniste herself. Unlike the older Sephardic tangos that would substitute ‘términos no claros para el judeo-hispano parlante […] por ejemplo, palabras en lunfardo que serán absolutamente incomprehensibles para los “no-porteños” (Weich-Shahak 2000: 330), this Sephardic tango from Buenos Aires addresses an audience that is familiar with at least some Lunfardo
words that entered the mainstream Castellano of the city. The tango is titled *Pebeta Sefaradí*, *pebeta* being a Lunfardo word used to refer to a young girl.

I refer to a personal e-mail (6 June 2008) in which Benveniste answers some of my questions. She explains that she, along with friends, began translating a number of tangos for fun, ‘como una broma’. Her friends, it turned out, were José Mantel and Luis León, the latter a Sephardic author, translator, and compiler of proverbs, and an important name in the city’s Jewish cultural scene. They substituted expressions that are very *porteñas*—typical of Buenos Aires— with Judeo-Spanish phrases with similar meaning, trying to maintain the rhyme as close as possible to the original. They liked the final result and she included some tangos in her concerts, to the delight of the audience. It is still not clear to me how this audience is divided between Jews and non-Jews, but I know there are among them Sephardim, who, she says, ‘no longer speak Ladino or have already forgotten it, and who enjoy the translations and ask for copies so as to sing them’. I have no doubts that among them as well are many Ashkenazim, who share with the Sephardim an appreciation for the melodies and lyrics of Argentine tango. Benveniste informs me that in addition to tango she is also working with Argentine folk songs, which, again, are appreciated by most Argentine Jews, and more recently by an international audience.

Benveniste is quite aware of the attempt to combine the expression of two cultures represented by the translation of tangos. She places it in a historical dimension: ‘Si tengo que analizarlo más profundamente, te diría que para mí es la unión de dos culturas que hacen a la inmigración sefaradi en la Argentina’. What I would like to stress, though, is that tango is a genre that evolved into one of the most important expressions of Argentine national identity. It is the cultural expression to which any Argentine in exile reverts, in a mixture of longing and pain. Translating well-known traditional tangos to Judeo-Spanish in Buenos Aires proper is to give this national cultural symbol a markedly Jewish accent. To create original tangos in Judeo-Spanish in Buenos Aires has a double effect. On the one hand it affirms one’s identity as Jewish and Argentine, stressing here the Jewish contribution

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1 Lunfardo is not a language but a code—a vast amount of terms and locutions—originated in Buenos Aires as a result of the mixing of languages brought about by immigration, coupled with the language of the *gauchos*, who had left the rural areas.
to Argentine culture, and the Argentine national identity of the Jews from Argentina. On the other hand it simultaneously adds the Sephardic contribution to the already recognized Ashkenazi voice in the history of tango, evident in Yiddish tango and ghetto tango. Thereby it affirms a sub-ethnic, specifically Sephardic identity in Argentina.

The Sephardic experience and discourse of exile, as well as its general nostalgic pathos, also find affinities with the discourse of tango, which speaks of exile, abandonment and loss in touching lyricism. As Thompson (2005: 25) puts it: ‘If nostalgia is a country, tango is its capital. Tango writes of time, love and loss.’

In conclusion, I would like to point out that this general and renewed enthusiasm and productivity in Judeo-Spanish parallels a stage in identity politics when several minority communities feel comfortable to accept and even flaunt their ethnic and cultural specificities. But treatments of multiculturalism, together with inevitable historical changes, have also affected conceptions of nationality, broadening the concept of ‘national citizen’ to include expressions of the ‘other.’ In this context, I can place new textual experiences in Judeo-Spanish in Latin America within the framework of

1) A conscious effort towards language maintenance and survival;
2) An attempt to create a specific Latin American Judeo-Spanish literature which is still connected to the larger canon of Sephardic and specifically Judeo-Spanish literature of the worldly Diaspora;
3) An effort to enlarge the linguistic repertoire of the Judeo-Spanish language, with the incorporation of new words from a Latin American, and, specifically, national reality;
4) A connection to, and incorporation of, different genres into the canon of Sephardic and Judeo-Spanish literature.
5) An affirmation of a Jewish, Sephardic, Latin American identity.

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