

First Coming or Passion of Jesus. Silveyra was not, of course, the only crypto-Jewish writer who published stories taken from the Hebrew Bible,<sup>1</sup> but the depiction of Jewish heroes in the context of that most aristocratic of literary genres, the epic poem, is particularly worthy of note.

Moshe Lazar cites another contemporary fan of Silveyra's poem,<sup>2</sup> who considered this to be one of the world's five greatest epics, along with those of Homer, Virgil, Tasso and Camoens. But whereas in each of these other works the poet was glorifying national heroes, the nation being glorified in this poem is not Spain or Portugal, but Israel. □

*Reviewed by Ralph Tarica*

Isaac Papo

### VIAJE EN EL OCASO DE UNA CULTURA IBÉRICA<sup>3</sup>

**U**pon finishing a leisurely reading of this thick book, I wondered how Isaac Papo could have written all these pages, which reflect such a cosmopolitan outlook steeped in mediterranean culture. The reasons for producing such a book are many, but foremost is his mastery of four languages besides Judeo-Spanish which makes him stand out as a man of many cultures.

Isaac Papo, born in 1926 into a Jewish family from the Balkans - in Adrianople (Edirne)<sup>4</sup> - lives in France, but continues to make frequent business trips to Milan where he practiced and taught medicine after studying and living in Barcelona. His life spent in various countries influenced the way he observes the world, always comparing and keeping his distance while displaying a vast culture and a readiness to learn.

The places where his family lived are the main focus of the book, while his life or the life of his family come second. He blends together, and in an harmonious way, anecdotes, political remarks and observations.

One would not necessarily expect this book to be written in Spanish but rather in Judeo-Spanish. This was probably a requirement of the editor, who is based in Barcelona and is the publisher of a series entitled *Estudios de Cultura Sefardi* (Studies of Sephardic Culture). Papo's Spanish is pleasant and easy to read.

To set the decor, Papo starts with describing how his family settled in Edirne. For the readers who might not be familiar with this region, one must mention that Edirne, this little Turkish city in Thrace located on the northeast border with Greece, has always been a crossroad, sometimes a place where Turkish, Greek and

Bulgarian nationalisms conflicted. At the time of the big fire of August 1905, the city of Edirne - for a number of years the capital of the Ottoman Empire before the conquest of Constantinople in 1453) - had maybe 20,000 Jewish inhabitants<sup>5</sup> out of a total of 120,000. Now the entire population of the city is much less than half the latter figure.

The original Jewish community was Romaniote then became Sephardic with the arrival of numerous new immigrants. The author knows about his local ancestry on his mother's side, but on his father's side even the date of birth of his father is unclear. We learn, however that his father was an educated man who liked to read history books. Isaac Papo takes after him!

As far as Papo remembers, his family was always in the silk trade, which permitted them to live well in spite of some hard times. His parents had an arranged marriage in 1915. The author describes his parents' marriage in a pleasant manner, looking upon his own family history in the context of the region and the time, underlining the importance of women in the oral transmission of the Judeo-Spanish culture, a well accepted fact.

The arrival of the extended family to Milan after WWI marked an important cultural change for all. The author's mother, who had an educated father, but used to living in a male-oriented society, never got used to the change. She outlived her husband by 38 years.

Papo was sent to the school of the Jewish community of Milan more because of its geographic proximity than because of his parents' commitment to a Jewish education. He writes kindly about about his schoolmates.

Then he touches upon the delicate question of the acceptance by Jews of the Fascist regime until the anti-Jewish measures of 1938. He also writes about the summer of 1939 and WWII. His father continued to travel for business in the Balkans in the beginning of the war. In the summer of 1942, his father did not yet feel the incoming danger; the coming and going of Italian troops to the Eastern front with its headquarters in Lvov did not apparently bring information about the systematic extermination of Jews. The family, however, decided to look for a haven in Spain, an ally of Italy, which was not at war, and where cousins from Sofia and Milan had previously found refuge.

The author also discusses the Primo de Rivera decree of December 20, 1924, which gave Spanish-speaking Jews the option to ask for the Spanish nationality, but few took up the offer. He then examines at length the following difficult question: "to what extent did the Spanish

<sup>1</sup> Generally published in France and other places outside of Spain, in any case.

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Enriquez Gómez, himself the author of an epic poem on Samson.

<sup>3</sup> *Recuerdos y reflexiones de un médico Sefardi* (Journey Within a Declining Iberian Culture; Memories and Thoughts of a Jewish Sephardic Doctor) In Spanish Tirocinio, Barcelona, Spain 2006 369 pages. ISBN: 84 930570 7 www.tirocinio.com

<sup>4</sup> Edirne was the capital of the Ottoman Empire before the 1453 conquest of Constantinople (Istanbul).

<sup>5</sup> On page 60, the author lists the most common patronymics in the city besides COHEN and LEVY: the rabbinic families GUERON et Bejmoaras, then ASSECO, AVIGDOR, AZARIA, BEJARANO, BEJAR, BENARONIA, BENBASSAT, BENUSSAN, CANETTI, DANON, ELJAKI, ESKENAZI, MAIM, MITRANI, NAVON, OVADIA, PISA, PAPO, PINHAS, RODRIGUE, SARFATY, TARANTO, and TOLEDO.



Sarah Ovadia - Isaac Papo's mother - as a young girl.

<sup>1</sup> Sephardic Treasure  
Folklore of the Jewish  
Family and From Head to  
Toe)

A set of two books of  
Judeo-Spanish proverbs  
and sayings in Judeo-  
Spanish with Turkish,  
English and French  
translations

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<sup>2</sup> In Ladino, French, Turkish  
and English.  
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government help Jews attempting to flee occupied Europe?" This question has been much debated in the French edition of *La Lettre Sépharade*. This can be summarized as such: if the Spanish government did not implement a policy to save Jews in countries occupied by the Germans, it did not penalize the Spanish consuls who helped, taking their own risks.

Papo also discusses his every day life in Barcelona where he started studying Medicine. He tells us, for example, of the beauty parlor of Muntaner street where he was a patron and where he listened to people who talk about the Caudillo (Franco) and other more or less sensitive topics.

Later, he writes about the Italian community of Barcelona, as well as the daily life of the Sephardic community and its language. In February 1946, he was able to return to Milan - a city in ruin - via Paris where he saw the US army and its Military Police. He describes with humour the set of the hotel Bergère in Paris where he stayed a while with some compatriots, and where all spoke Judeo-Spanish, living from small jobs, which permitted many from the Balkans to survive after the war.

In Italy, the toll of the survivors and the dead was slowly accounted for: during 20 months of German occupation about 7,000 Jews were deported. Pepo mentions the names of his old friends, but he is far from finding them all!

The Jewish community of Edime had disappeared. His correspondence with a few friends in Turkey gave him the opportunity to remind the readers of the dire consequences of the *Varlık Vergisi*, the special tax on wealth - in theory only 5% - abolished in 1946 - levied on minorities only, essentially the members of the Greek, Jewish and Armenian communities. It was quite arbitrary and there was no possibility to appeal. This tax left many families destitute and contributed to an even greater number of Jews leaving for Palestine.

The book ends with an overview of the Jewish communities of the former Yugoslavia, which have quasi-disappeared as well as the Jewish communities of Bulgaria, Salonika, Rumania and even Poland where Papo travelled once. He is surprisingly discreet on the subject of xenophobia, or anti-Semitism, which still subsists in many of those places without Jews!

An abundant bibliography and a glossary show how serious the author was in studying the historical and cultural context of his family odyssey. From the above, it is obvious that Isaac Papo is a chronicler who has much to share! □

Reviewed by Jean Carasso\*

\*Translated  
by Rosine Nussenblatt.

Beki Bardavid and Fani Ender

## TREZORO SEFARADI DE PUNTA PIE A KAVESA FOLKLOR DE LA FAMIYA DJUDIA<sup>1</sup>

Twelve years ago, we were treated to an excellent collection of Judeo-Spanish proverbs and sayings in the book, *Erensya Sefaradi: Proverbos i Dichas* a collaborative effort of Istanbul residents Klara Perahya, Suzi de Toledo, Suzi Danon, and Fani Ender.<sup>2</sup> Now we have another, more comprehensive and differently organized, collection in a set of two books: *Folklor de la Famiya Djudia* (Folklore of the Jewish Family) and *De Punta Pie A Kavesa* (From Head to Toe) or more literally (From the Tip of the Foot to the Head) compiled by Beki Bardavid and Fani Ender. In these books, every proverb and saying is in *Ladino* immediately followed by its translation (and sometimes an additional explanation) in Turkish, English, and French. The Preface, Foreword, and credits in the books are also in the four languages. The groupings are based, not on general concepts, as they were in *Erensya Sefaradi*, but on a specific word which appears inside each of the proverbs in that group.

*Folklor de la Famiya Djudia*, as the name implies, groups the proverbs and sayings around Jewish family life, life-cycle events and celebrations, and concepts related to these. The categories - 22 of them, in 226 pages - are alphabetically ordered according to the word in the proverbs that gives its name to the category. Thus we have *ashugar* (trousseau), *benadam* (human being), *bida/bido* (widow/widower), *boda* (wedding), *ermana/ermano* (sister/brother)... all the way to *yerno* (son-in-law). The first category, however, before the As begin, is *Refranes i Proverbos*, proverbs about proverbs!

We must note here, as the authors do in their Preface - both books contain the same Preface - why the *Ladino* word for proverb is most often *refran* (related to the word refrain in English) and not *proverbo*. It is, to quote the authors, "because most of these sayings rhyme, and possess a musical and rhythmic quality."

Indeed, it is easy to see here, if proof were needed, that the translation into another language does not do justice to the pleasant sound, and the resonating images of the original. *El ombre goza del nombre*, for example, is translated as Man enjoys his good name - weak and vague compared to the clear message a *Ladino*-speaker gets from the rhythmic and rhyming few words in the *refran* (that the person finds true joy only in having a good name, or reputation, in the community.)