

On Language BY PHILOLOGOS

Un Ladino, Dos Ladino, Tres Ladino, Cuatru

A reader who prefers that his name not be published writes:

"I am trying to learn how to count to ten in Ladino. I found a list of the written words, but with no pronunciation guide. Also, this written list appears to be inconsistent with some pronunciations that my young son came home with in a song he learned. Can you help me?"

The inconsistencies that our shy reader encountered may have to do with the fact that there were different regional dialects of Spanish, or Judezmo, Spanyolit, or Judeo-Spanish, as it is also known. Spoken for hundreds of years in what is today Bulgaria, the former Yugoslavia, and in Greece and Turkey, Ladino was brought to the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean by Jews exiled from Spain in the great expulsion of 1492. Many found refuge in the Ottoman Empire, where they continued to speak Spanish while linguistically assimilating the small Jewish communities they found there on their arrival. With the passage of time, the Spanish spoken by them became unique for two reasons. One was its admixture of Hebrew, Slavic and Turkish words. The other was the fact that while developing new features of its own, it continued to retain various phonetic and grammatical aspects of 15th-century Spanish speech that eventually vanished in both Spain and Latin America.

Broadly speaking, Ladino can be divided into two main dialects: a Western one, spoken in Serbia, Bosnia, Macedonia and northern Greece, and an Eastern one, spoken in Turkey. Although in both dialects, the numbers from one to 10 are identical or close to those in modern Spanish, there are a number of departures from the latter, especially in the Western dialect. Thus, modern Spanish has *uno, dos, tres, cuatro,*

cinco, seis, siete, ocho, nueve and *diez*; Eastern Ladino changes *seis* to *sesh, siete* to *sieti* (SYEY-tee) and *nueve* to *mueve*, and many forms of Western Ladino also change the final vowel of *uno, cuatro, cinco* and *ocho* from "o" to "u," yielding *unu, cuatru, cincuu* and *ochuu*. (There are some areas in which the final "s" is dropped, as well, giving us *do* and *tre*.)

Final -u in place of -o is typical of the Spanish spoken in various Northwest dialects of Spanish, such as Asturian, Leonese and Gallego, and its characteristic presence in Western Ladino has been used by some linguists, along with other

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evidence, to argue that the Jewish exiles settling in the Balkans came more from northern Spain, while those making their new homes in Turkey came from Castile in central Spain. Yet, other linguists have dismissed this argument as both inconsistent with other features of Ladino and overlooking the fact that o-to-u is a common vowel shift in many Romance dialects, such as Neapolitan and Sicilian in southern Italy. So is the thickening of the "s" to "sh" that one finds in Ladino *sesh*, "six," which is common in many parts of Spain, as well as in Portugal.

The initial n-to-m shift that one finds in *mueve*, "nine," on the other hand, is, to the best of my knowledge, unique to Ladino. (Final m-to-n, however, is common in Portuguese, in which Spanish *bien*, "good," is *bem*, Spanish *orden*, "order," *ordem*, etc.) Initial n-to-m also

occurs in other Ladino words, such as *muevo*, "new," in place of Spanish *nuevo*; *mosotros*, "we," instead of *nosotros*; *muestra*, "our," instead of *nuestra*, and so on. This is a feature of all dialects of Ladino.

But to those of you who know Spanish, the most striking phonetic difference between it and Ladino is a sound shift that did not take place in the latter, which missed it by a few decades. It was in the 16th century, not long after the expulsion of the Jews of Spain, that Spanish underwent a major phonetic transformation in the course of which, among other things, the sounds represented by the letters *x, j* and *g*, which until then had resembled the "sh" in English "shout," the "z" in English "azure" and (before front vowels) the "g" in English "gem," moved farther back along the roof of the mouth to a common position on the velum or soft palate, where all turned into a "kh" like the "ch" in "Bach."

Thus, in contemporary Spanish, the words *dejar*, "to leave" (which in medieval Spanish was spelled *dexar*); *hijo*, "son," and *gente*, "people," are pronounced "dekhar," "ikho" and "khente," all with the same velar fricative. Yet in Ladino, none of these changes took place. These words, and others like them, are still pronounced as they were in the 15th century. If you're merely ticking off the numbers from one to 10, this doesn't matter, but if you're counting sheep in bed at night, each newborn Ladino lamb is 500 years old in Spanish. *Un hijo de oveja, dos hijos de ovejas, tres hijos de ovejas...* by the time you get to 10, you should surely be sound asleep, because 5,000 years have already gone by.

Questions for Philologos can be sent to philologos@forward.com.

Martyrology

Had I been there, I would not have entered the Mumbai Jewish Center. I am invisible there. Worse, the rabbi was trained not to see the likes

of me. He would have welcomed someone I'm not. *Always*, the Nagid says, *when you most expect it. I warned my son to watch for the mobs of Granada. It took*

ten years, but they came, rest his soul. Oy, the rabbi's wife, my daughter's age. The rabbi looked like me back then. There but for the grace of God. I am bereft.

We'd paid the bishop for our rights, wails Kalonymus of Mainz. He was supposed to protect us from the crusading hordes, the dogs!

Refuse to be drawn into the cycle, but they would've killed me too. Jewish lives not more precious. Jewish deaths oh so painful.

Imam Yahya of Georgetown mourns brokenhearted for Jewish blood spilled— even for those who would dance on his grave. Speedily in our day may I rise to his level.

— Jacob J. Staub

Rabbi Jacob Staub is professor of Jewish philosophy and spirituality at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

Jewish Jamaican Art

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occupation, which lasted from 1494 to 1655." Isaac Mendes Belisario's father, Abraham Mendes Belisario, arrived in Kingston in 1786 and went to work for Alexandre (Elisha) Lindo, a prosperous slave trader and wharfside merchant whose daughter he married. Their son, Isaac, would become an artist despite his family's expectations that he join their businesses, and despite the fact that as a young man, he worked as a stockbroker in London, where the first began to publicly show his watercolor paintings. When Isaac returned to Jamaica in 1834, seeking a warm climate to soothe his respiratory ailments, it was as an artist that he set up his studio in the Parade, Kingston's main plaza.

African in origin, Jamaican Jonkonnu (a term perhaps derived from an alteration of the name of an 18th-century West African (businessman-chief) refers to a masquerade festival that evolved during the age of slavery. It took place at Christmastime, when, for a few days, plantation owners allowed their slaves to bang drums, make music and celebrate. Since slaves and their owners alike joined in the festivities wearing costumes and masks representing both mythical and real-life figures of the times, Jonkonnu became a great, if only temporary, leveler of the slavery era's strictly hierarchical society.

Jonkonnu celebrations developed their own stock characters, such as the Queen (or "Ma'am") of the singing and dancing Set Girls, and Jack-in-the-Green, a male figure covered with a palm-frond shroud. In representing these characters, Isaac Mendes Belisario took a turn away from the landscapes and society portraits for which he was known, capturing for posterity a form of cultural expression that had become an integral part of Jamaica's multi-racial society.

Despite Ranston's exhaustive research, Belisario remains something of a cipher; if anything, Ranston's book leaves a reader wanting to know more details about the artist's upbringing and everyday experiences; however, there simply is not enough existing historical material to fill in all the details of his life. In 2007, Yale University's Center for British Art presented "Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds," an exhibition commemorating the 200th anniversary of the British Parliament's abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. It featured Belisario's "Sketches of Character" prints, artifacts from the slavery era and a massive accompanying catalog.

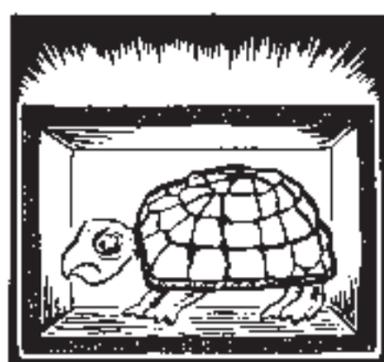
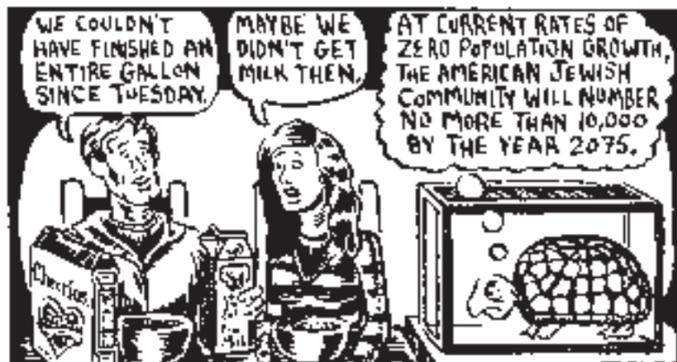
Although considerable resources supported Yale's presentation, some of the university's researchers still got basic facts about Belisario's life wrong. For example, confusing Belisario with one of his Jamaica-based cousins who shared the same name, they claimed the artist had owned slaves. In fact, as Ranston has established, the painter-printmaker was never a slave owner, despite his family's close ties to the controversial business.

"Every event that is recounted in this book — we have proof that it all really happened," Ranston told the Forward. An impressive scholarly achievement, packed with illuminating — and intriguing — maps, photographs and genealogical charts, her book makes the lasting significance of Belisario's art understandable to both general art enthusiasts and cultural-history specialists. As Ranston puts it, describing her findings, "In recovering these families' stories, we gain a sense of what is part of our common humanity."

THIS IS SATIRE, FOLKS: Comics Rescued from a Burning Synagogue in Bialystok And Hidden in a Salt Mine Until After the War

BY ELI VALLEY

STUART THE JEWISH TURTLE!



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