

Linguistic- Historical Research on the Surnames of the Sephardic Jews in Bulgaria

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Famous Linguists of Ladino

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In Sephardic (Spanish- Jewish) Studies, the chapter about Names and their Origin should be constantly updated. The Sephardic Names have undergone modifications over the centuries, they have merged, phonetically and morphologically with other local languages, especially in the Balkans. Some examples will be presented in this paper.

Index:

1. A practical approach to the possible origin of some Sephardic Names in the Balkans.
2. Sephardic Onomastics in the Balkans: the impact of the local languages during the Ottoman rule and the migration of the Jews to and from the Habsburg Monarchy
3. Examples of Sephardic Surnames in the Balkans emerging from the different countries of residence on the way to the Balkans after the expulsion in 1492-1498.
4. Synonyms and Homonyms in Sephardic Surnames created in different places of origin/ residence.
5. Rare Sephardic Given Names and Surnames, explanations of their linguistic origin.
6. Historic and linguistic studies on the existing Ashkenazic (so called “Kinnuim”) or Nicknames and on the Etymology of Sephardic Nicknames, created in the countries of residence.
7. Further Studies

1. A practical approach to the possible origin of some Sephardic Names in the Balkans

After the expulsión from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492-98, the Jews were wandering and residing in different countries, many of them eventually reaching the Balkans, a part of the Ottoman Empire. This migration explains the multilingual origin of the Sephardic names in the Balkans.

Following linguistic cases are quite interesting:

- One surname, but from two totally different linguistic origins and meanings- **surname homonyms**,
- Two different surnames, but with the same meaning, because of different linguistic origin- **surname synonyms**.
- Some traditional Sephardic Spanish surnames were directly translated into Turkish. There are even Compound surnames comprising two parts: Turkish and Hebrew (or Spanish)

Literature Sources used for this study

This study is based on my limited own knowledge and research on Names in the Sephardic Communities in the Balkans, like Bulgaria, Ex-Yugoslavia; Greece, Turkey, but some literature sources were also used.

The literature used is mostly about sources of the origin of the Sephardic names, as listed in the Reference file attached.

(19) Mathilde Tagger

(1) Kaganoff, B.C.

(20) Studemund Halevy, M.

(22) Schwarzwald, O.R.

(8) ANU Museum of the Jewish People in Tel Aviv (Database)

(10) Moscona, I.

(16) Faiguenboim ; Valadares ; Campagnano

(21) Gutstadt, C.

(23) US Holocaust Memorial Museum, Data Base Holocaust Survivors

(26) Stechauner, M.

2. Sephardic Onomastics in the Balkans: the impact of the local languages during the Ottoman rule and the migration of the Jews to and from the Habsburg Monarchy

The Surnames in the Balkans are mostly derivatives of Jewish Names from Iberia with borrows from other local languages spoken in the countries of residence after their expulsion from Spain and Portugal in 1492- 1498.

Moreover from the 18th century on Ottoman Jews started moving for business to West Europe and settled in the Habsburg Monarchy and Germany. In Germany there were already Sephardim living from the 16. century.

They were called there : “Sephardim, Spaniols, Turkish Jews”. New Sephardic Communities were created in Vienna, Budapest, Hamburg, Berlin.

Many surnames of community members in these communities didn't exist or were rarely found in the Balkans like:

Zakuto, Bessudo, Aschil, Matalon, Russo

3. Examples of Sephardic Surnames in the Balkans emerging from the different countries of residence on the way to the Balkans after the expulsion in 1492-1498.

Surnames after flowers

- **Chichek** (Çiçek – Turkish) - Flower
- **Youlzari**: this surname has 3 interpretations
 - from Gül – Rose and Sari – Yellow (Turkish)
 - or Gül – Rose (Turkish) and Zari – Strange (Hebrew)
 - or Gül- Rose and Zarif – Elegant (Turkish)

Surnames after profession:

- **Tutunovich** (Turkish, a commercial of Tobacco)
- **Hodjaolu** (Turkish : hoca oğlu) – Teacher's Son

Surnames after cities or countries of origin

- **MiTrani** (From- Hebrew, the city of Trani, Southeast Italy)
- **Madjar** (Magyar) – Immigrants from Hungary in 15-16 century

Examples of Sephardic Surnames, contd.

Surnames derived from social behavior

- **Molkho** , from Hebrew , means Majestic
- **Chelibon**, from çelebi (Turkish), means well behaved, educated

A combination of Given name/ Surname of different origin.

The name of a Jew in our community in Bulgaria was:

Chelebi Taranto:

Chelebi (Turkish), Taranto (a city in South Italy)

Sephardic Female Given Names as diminutives:

Sol-chi, Sol-ucha - from Sol (Sun)

Buka, Bukitza - from Bohora (the oldest daughter)

Reni - from Malkah (Hebrew) – Reina (Spanish)- Queen

4. Synonyms and Homonyms in Sephardic Surnames created in different places of origins/ residence.

Surname Synonyms:

- **Faraggi** or **Faraçi** (from Farsi), a synonym to **Mashiah**
It means Redeemer or Messiah
- **Soreph** or **Zoreph** (Hebrew), means Jeweler, Goldsmith, a synonym to **Kuyumciysky** (from Kuyumcu , Turkish -Jeweler)
- **Sidi** (Arabic), means Master, Lord, (from Spain 13th century) a synonym to surname **Maestro**
- **Atias** (from Arabic- Atiyyah), it means God's Gift a synonym to surname **Prezenti**
- **Farhi**,(from Arabic) means a cheerful person a synonym to the surname **Alegri**

Surname Homonyms:

- **Meshullam**, from the Bible 2. Kings 22:3, it means Befriended or **Mechulam**, from meçhul –Turkish: Stranger / Foreigner
- **Bourla**, means Good Luck (Turkish: Uğuroła, pronounced Urla) or the University town **Vurla** (Greek Βουρλά) near Izmir
- **Perahia**, means Flower (Perach in Hebrew) or Pera , means Pear (Spanish)

5. Rare Sephardic Given Names and Surnames, explanations of their linguistic origin.

We are talking about the Sephardic Jews in the Balkans, 16 – 20th centuries, that means in the Ottoman Empire, where beside Turkish, many languages were spoken. This explains the multilingual origin of some Sephardic names in the Balkans. We would like to add some examples:

Examples of rare Surnames:

- **Stroumtsá** – the origin could be from the small town of Stroumitsa in Macedonia or after the river Struma (or Strimon) between Bulgaria and Greece.
- **Kuyumdjiysky** – the Surname is based on the Turkish Word Kuyumcu, what means Jeweler.
- **Gurmisan**- after “Gormaz”, a town near Soria, Spain
- **Bichacho** in Bulgaria, **Bichachi** in France, a rare surname, it could mean a follower of the Jewish Karaite movement (ref. 10)
- **Yilda**, a female given name, comes from Turkish **Yildiz**, means a Star, it exists also as a Nickname of a lady named **Estreya** (Star)
- **Aguadish**, after “Guadix”, a town near Granada in Spain

6. Sephardic Nicknames, Practical Approach, Examples

The Hebrew word “Kinnui” means Nickname – a secular name of a Jewish individual created in the environment of the country of residence.

It is possible to define certain categories of Nicknames.

Examples of Sephardic Nicknames in the Balkans, their origin and meaning:

1. Nicknames describing some anecdotic reality or behavior of the person

- “**Gevzo**” – from Turkish: Gevezelik – means Babbling.
- “**Pepino**” to someone who is always in a bad mood, like a bitter cucumber
- “**Kalavasa**” to someone who is quite stupid, has the head like Pumpkin
- “**Kurshum**” from Turkish: kurşun - lead, for a very annoying person

2. Nicknames in the daily life:

Usually Turkish words were used to create the Nicknames, like:

- a beautiful and kind young Jewish lady got Nicknames, like:

“**Elmas**”, which means a Diamond or “**Fidan**”, which means a Young Tree,

The Sephardim already had their surnames since medieval times, unlike the Ashkenazim until the end of the 18th century. They did not have surnames and were forced by the Austro-Hungarian King and Emperor Joseph II by a decree from 1787 to take surnames. Since then Ashkenazic surnames were created and added, such as Apfelbaum, Feigenblatt, Lustiger, Landauer, Bernstein, Rubinstein, etc.

In the late 18th century. Sephardim from the Balkans emigrated for business to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and formed Spanish-Jewish communities in Vienna and Budapest. About this there are interesting stories, even anecdotes, such as:

- The Sephardic Beto Alegri from Plovdiv/Bulgaria settles in Vienna and to improve business he accepts a new Ashkenazi last name: Lustiger. On returning to Bulgaria he continues with his original surname Alegri.

Sephardic Nicknames, continued

In Bulgaria many Jewish Artists had artistic Bulgarian Nicknames as Pseudonym

Examples:

Jewish Theater and Movie Directors:

- Jacques Nissim Melamed became: Dragomir Assenov
- Buko (Bohor) Danon became: Boyan Danovski
- Noah Weissberg (Ashkenazi from Russia) became: Niuma Belogorski

Jewish Writers :

- Theodora Peisakh Gabai became: Dora Gabe
- Valeri Nissim Mevorakh became: Valeri Petrov

The famous in Bulgaria born Jewish French Painter

- Jules Pascin was originally: Julius Mordehai Pinhas

Jewish Musicians:

- Emil Isaak Levi became: Milcho Leviev

7. Further studies

The Sephardim in each country of residence created during the centuries quite a lot of Nicknames to the people of the community. Some of them are funny, others are naughty.

In spite of all these nicknames are of great linguistic importance.

That's why I think, we should explore the Sephardic nicknames more profoundly.