

**Michal Held**

**Let Me Tell You a Story**

**Ven te kontare<sup>1</sup>**

The Personal Narratives of Judeo-Spanish<sup>2</sup> Speaking Storytelling Women  
An Interdisciplinary Study

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<sup>1</sup> The title of the book includes an excerpt from a popular Judeo-Spanish folk song, starting with the words "*povereta muchachika*" (poor girl).

<sup>2</sup> Judeo-Spanish is mainly a Romance language with embedded Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Turkish and Balkan components. Originating in medieval Spain, it became a widespread Jewish language; the descendants of Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492 continued to use it in oral and written form in their newly established communities in the Ottoman Empire and Northern Morocco. The language received various names down the centuries, including the term, "Ladino", which originally referred to the Judeo-Spanish dialect used in the translation of the Bible and other sacred Jewish texts since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This claque dialect differs from the spoken and written language used by Sephardic Jews. The language used by the informants whose personal narratives are analyzed in this research is thus referred to as "Judeo-Spanish".

## **Tree / Arvoles**

A Ladino song **torno i digo ke va ser de mi**

Wandering i ask what shall become of me

In the song trees cry for rain and mountains for air

**arvoles yoran por luvias i montanyas por aires**

In the song an angel stands upon me beholding me with his eyes

and i beg to cry

but cannot

And you in the song are draped in

white

white flowers are dropping from you

from your beauty

When i sing this song once chanted by Sephardic women

draped in white and shedding white flowers

in Izmir and Salonika in Jerusalem and Tangiers

When i sing this song

trees cry tears of rain and mountains tears of air

cry for you singing women who have vanished from the world leaving your song

inside me

deserting me to wander and sing **ke va ser de mi**

what shall become of me and to seek

the angel

Poetry as a part of an academic research such as the one upon which this book is based is unusual. The decision to expose, at the very beginning of the book, a poem that was written in response to the research, derives from the fact that I see no other way to look at the complex cultural phenomenon of the personal narratives I have collected from elderly women storytellers. Only a careful fusion of the intellectual and the emotional perspective may, I believe, allow us to reach the most exclusive possible understanding of a human experience transformed into a narrative. I shall return to the poem at the end of this abstract, after having described the book in a formal manner.

The research that this book presents originates in a PhD dissertation written at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem under the supervision of Prof. Moshe Bar-Asher and Prof. Galit Hasan-Rokem. The research is anchored in an approach that defines the personal narrative as multi-faceted. Therefore, it uses multidisciplinary tools to examine the narratives with which it is concerned. Following the research, the book sets out to explore and interpret the personal narratives of Judeo-Spanish speaking women storytellers created in the linguistic and cultural climate of contemporary Israel. The narratives, collected during fieldwork conducted during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are examined not only from the evident linguistic, literary and folkloristic perspectives, but also in relation to relevant works from disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy and the study of culture.

Although it is uncertain whether the Jews who lived in the Iberian Peninsula until the Spanish Expulsion in 1492 used a Judeo-Spanish dialect or not, there is no doubt that they left Spain with a rich cultural heritage that continued to develop in their newly established communities in the Ottoman Empire and northern Morocco. Judeo-Spanish language and culture thus flourished over the next 500 years in contact with the Hebrew and Aramaic traditions and the Jewish values of its users, as well as with the non-Jewish linguistic and cultural features of their new surroundings.

From the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the status of Judeo-Spanish has seriously deteriorated because of various social developments, chief among them being the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The Nazi extermination of the Judeo-Spanish communities of the Balkans brought their culture to a tragic end. The otherwise fortunate events of the rise of Zionism and the revival of Hebrew also contributed to the decline of Judeo-Spanish language and culture. The informants whose personal narratives are analyzed in this book may thus be considered as belonging to a unique group of Judeo-Spanish speaking storytellers representing the last descendants of a rich Jewish tradition.

For two decades, mainly in Jerusalem, twenty, sometimes thirty, women in their sixties, seventies and eighties have been meeting once a month to tell each other folk tales in a Jewish language that has ceased to exist as a vital tool of communication. Unlike the storytellers' folk tales that were transcribed and published by the group's founder Matilda Koen-Sarano, their personal narratives had never been documented and analyzed before this research. The personal narratives analyzed here, as well as the group activity that serves as their conceptual framework, may very well be deciphered in the light of Benedict Anderson's definition of an "imagined community",<sup>3</sup> as the reconstruction of an imaginary Judeo-Spanish identity based on a culture that has virtually no function in today's world.

The book's opening chapter is devoted to the presentation of the conceptual frameworks and definitions required to encompass the following parts of the discussion. It is here that the characteristics of the Judeo-Spanish language and culture, as well as those of the storytellers' group activity and of the personal narrative as a genre, are presented and clearly defined. Some of the definitions offered include pioneering approaches to aspects of culture that had not yet been fully researched. Central to these is the attempt to define the personal narrative as a legitimate genre of folk literature. Based on a close study of the texts collected, the suggested definition considers the personal narrative as a story; as a constantly-changing process of reconstructing the life of the narrator; as a system of identity formation; as a dialogue and as a combination of realistic, fictional and folkloric materials. Having

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<sup>3</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983.

conceptualized the genre's definition, a deconstructive part is added to it, implying that the personal narrative is a phenomenon that refuses to be subject to the boundaries of a single, "closed" definition. Therefore, a suggestion to see it as a non-defined, ever changing genre is offered as a complementary part of the previous, more conventional definition of the way in which people tell their own stories.

In the second chapter, the collective aspects (ethnicity, gender and reflexivity) characterizing the personal narratives studied are described and analyzed. From the aspect of ethnicity, the leading question raised in this chapter is if and how contemporary personal narratives created by Judeo-Spanish speaking women reflect the collective identity of the Sephardic ethnic group which, historically, is on the decline. The conclusion offered is that current Sephardic self-awareness is sufficiently multi-faceted to allow for the existence of a Judeo-Spanish-Ottoman-Israeli identity.

Among the other collective issues it raises, the second chapter attends to the question of gender expressed by the women storytellers whose narratives it explores. The personal narratives investigated in this research may be defined as feminine manifestos, as they reflect the voices of women stepping out of traditional society and earning acceptance as equal members of modern society. Should these narratives be regarded as a feminist genre? Do they convey a feminist message? The answers to these questions are rather complex. For example, the informants seem to declare in their personal narratives that their voices should be heard and their independence be allowed, but they also imply in the hermeneutic interpretation of their lives that feminine freedom should be achieved within the traditional social setting rather than in rebellion against it.

From the aspect of personal experience, the second chapter offers an elaborated discussion of the researcher's position in the research, and of its dialogic nature. Being a young woman from a family of the Jerusalem wing of the Sephardic Jewish group, makes me "an insider researcher". How does this affect the narratives that older women of my ethnic group created for me? The concluding part of this chapter is devoted to an analysis of the notes I made in response to the interviews of women participating in my research and to the group meetings in which I participated.

My own reminiscences are linked to the abovementioned linguistic, literary and ethnic questions, enriching them from the dialogical point of view.

Focusing on literary perspectives, the book's third chapter takes on the genre's definition offered in the first chapter, following it with a careful reading of the narratives collected for the research with which the book is concerned. The reading reveals characteristics recurring throughout the corpus of personal narratives studies in the research. Thus, it leads to a conceptualization of the "narrative package" - a dynamic development of traditional formalistic theory on written and folk literature, Having been formed here for the first time, the term narrative package may include various aspects of plot and content, of material culture and of intertextuality – all of which are used in the personal narratives.

The specific narrative packages identified and analyzed in this research are the following: the story and the storyteller; the loss of a meaningful other; birth and giving birth; geographical locations and movement from one to another; womanhood and independence; matchmaking and marriage; war and traumatic historical events; Judeo-Spanish characteristics/traits (language, culture, ethnicity); objects of material culture; food and recipes; intertextuality and childhood. Each of these narrative packages illuminates the individual and collective messages that the storytellers apparently convey.

Three of the above mentioned narrative packages are analyzed in depth in this chapter. Birth and giving birth – demonstrating how plot is dealt with in the personal narrative; loss of a meaningful other – demonstrating psychological notions at work in the personal narrative, and intertextuality – demonstrating the way in which different textual materials (especially folk tales and proverbs) are interwoven and utilized in the personal narrative.

One of the aspects shared by and unifying all Jewish languages in a single linguistic category is the Hebrew and Aramaic component embedded in them. The book concludes with the fourth chapter, devoted to a linguistic analysis of the Judeo-Spanish personal narratives collected for the study, and focusing on the Hebrew component. All the Hebrew words incorporated into the personal narratives of the Sephardic women interviewed are listed in the appendix to the book, accompanied by

the Judeo-Spanish phrase in which they originally appeared and with its Hebrew translation. The forth chapter suggests a consideration of the Hebrew component from some general viewpoints: its functioning in a Jewish language in contact with modern Israeli Hebrew, and its role as a poetic strategy in the texts in which it appears. To determine, whether a Hebrew word embedded in the Judeo-Spanish examples discussed is traditional or modern, five parameters are defined: its historical occurrence in Judeo-Spanish; its formation and phonology; its occurrence in a traditional Jewish expression; the applicability of traditional linguistic systems to it; and its context.

The study of the Hebrew component according to these parameters shows that it is in many cases impossible to distinguish between traditional and modern Hebrew components used in contemporary Judeo-Spanish. In this part of the book, the analysis of specific examples aims to explain how the interaction between the Jewish language and contemporary Israeli Hebrew leads to interesting linguistic phenomena that reflect questions of identity on both the personal and collective levels.

Opening with a survey of the outer ethnic circles that envelop the broad circle of literary aspects and the minutest linguistic aspects of the narratives scrutinized, the book leads to the realization that taken together, the three entry points enable us to regard the narratives explored as Judeo-Spanish "lieux de memoire", to borrow Pierre Nora's definition.<sup>4</sup> Implicit in the conclusion are fragments of the individual and collective Judeo-Spanish identity reflected in our narratives.

The attempt made throughout the book to decipher the personal narratives of contemporary Judeo-Spanish women storytellers leads to the following realizations:

**Personified Language.** The personal narratives dealt with in this research express a quest situated between losses and Diasporas, as well as an attempt to reconstruct a multi-layered system of homelands. Having lost its function as a tool of communication, the language used by the narrators is now conceived as a metaphoric place in which an identity can be built, filling the void of a realistic or imagined

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Nora, "General Introduction: Between Memory and History" (1984) translated from French by Arthur Gold hammer in Lawrence D. Kritzman, ed. *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past / Under the Direction of Pierre Nora*, New York 1992, Vol 1 pp.1-20.

Judeo-Spanish community. The personal narrative unfolded in the ethnic language that represents the fragmented Judeo-Spanish collective identity thus becomes a replacement for the Sephardic homeland, or rather the system of homelands that Sephardic Jews yearn back to (Jerusalem, Spain, the Ottoman Empire, the State of Israel – to name just a few.)

**Memory.** Displacement and Diaspora are an integral part of Judeo-Spanish identity, which at our times may very well be regarded as nothing but a memory. The movement between the lost collective identity and the personal identity of our narrators – which we have referred to in this research as "personal ethnicity" – characterizes an attempt to construct a Judeo-Spanish memory in our times.

**Exchange.** The research includes an attempt to understand the reflexive dynamics on which it is based. It is almost impossible to unravel feelings and meanings surrounding the narrative situation in which personal narratives were recounted to me in my grandmother's mother tongue. The threads of the informants are so interwoven with my own that they create a virtually seamless dialogue.

It is this dialogue that is reflected in the poem with which the book opens. Originally written in Hebrew and containing some Judeo-Spanish phrases, the poem echoes a traditional Judeo-Spanish folk song opening with the line "**Arvoles yoran por luvias i montanyas por aires**" (Trees are crying for rain and mountains for air). The traditional folk song's fictional narrator laments his or her fate, while wandering far from his or her beloved to die in foreign lands. It was re-versed and performed during World War II when Balkan Sephardic Jews transported to the death camps by the Nazis found its words particularly relevant. The contemporary echoing of it captures the double dialogue that I maintain, as both a researcher and a participant in the Judeo-Spanish culture, with the women who unfurled their personal narratives for my research and kindly took me into their world.