

LADINO

21 February International Mother Language Day

Many Turkish Jews have used Judeo-Spanish as the domestic language in their households until the 1970s. However, today it has lost this function.

Karen Gerson ŞARHON

Istanbul - BİA News Center

21 February 2012

Judeo-Spanish was the language of Ottoman (and later, Turkish) Jews until the 1970s. These Ottoman Jews had come from Spain with migration waves that lasted for several decades starting from 1492. In those years, Spanish Inquisitionist states did not accept Jewish or Muslim population within their borders. Jews found a safe environment in Ottoman Empire and settled in Western Anatolia, Trakya, and the Balkans. They spoke the language they brought from Spain for the 500 years that followed their migration. This language was a medley of many others that were spoken on the Iberian Peninsula during the Middle Age. Since only Jews in the entire territorial domain of Ottoman Empire spoke this language, Turks called it “Jewish”. Academia has later identified it as Judeo-Spanish; in other words, Medieval Spanish that has wrapped itself around a Jewish identity.

Many Turkish Jews used Judeo-Spanish as the domestic language in their households until the 1970s. However, today it has lost this function. Today’s generation cannot learn this language from their parents like the way we did. We (the 1940-1960 generation) are the last generation who speaks this language. The youngest ones who can still speak Judeo-Spanish as their mother tongue were born in 1945. When they pass away, there will be no one left who speaks Judeo-Spanish as their native language.

Judeo-Spanish is not an abstract thing that is hung on the air; it carries the cultural heritage, character, humor and thoughts of Ottoman Empire’s Sephardic Jews. Losing this language will not only impoverish the Turkish Jews, but Turkey’s entire cultural heritage.