

**LADINO BOOKS IN THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS:
BRINGING HENRY V. BESSO'S BIBLIOGRAPHY AND BEYOND TO THE WEB**

by

Peggy K. Pearlstein

Description: This presentation will describe a team project currently underway at the Library of Congress to digitize and make available on the Library's website *Ladino Books in the Library of Congress; A Bibliography*, compiled by Henry V. Besso and published by the Library in 1963. In addition to the close to 300 Ladino (also known as Judezmo or Judeo-Spanish) titles listed in the compilation--almost none of them cataloged--the project also includes another 100 items acquired since the Besso publication, titles in microform, and romanized Ladino books. An account will be given of the various challenges faced in preparing the Besso text for mounting on the Library's website and in scanning the title pages of books for placement next to their bibliographic descriptions.

<p>Peggy K. Pearlstein is the Area Specialist in the Hebraic Section of the Library of Congress. She is president of the R&S Division of AJL. Past chair of its Judaica Bibliography and Reference Book Awards Committee, she has also contributed to Judaica Librarianship.</p>

“El libro es el mejor amigo,” the book is the best friend, is a proverb dear to researchers and librarians in any language. In this instance, the language is Ladino.¹

Also known as Judezmo or Judeo-Spanish, Ladino is the vernacular language of Ottoman Sephardic Jews, themselves the descendants of Sephardi exiles from the Iberian peninsula. These Jews lived primarily in the Balkan peninsula under Ottoman Turkish rule until the beginning of the twentieth century. Ladino's origins are in medieval Castilian, with mixtures of Hebrew, Turkish, Portuguese, Aramaic, Italian, French, Greek, and Arabic, and additional regional languages. It was traditionally written in Hebrew, employing rabbinic Rashi script. The inroads of secularization and the outlawing of non-Roman alphabetical systems by the Turkish government in 1928 led to the adoption of Romanized Ladino by the Jewish community residing in that geographic area.²

¹ Elli Koen and Dahlia Kohen-Gordon, *Ladino-English, English-Ladino Concise Encyclopedic Dictionary (Judeo-Spanish)* (Hippocrene: New York, 2000).

² Aviva Ben-Ur, *A Ladino Legacy; The Judeo-Spanish Collection of Louis N. Levy* (Alexander Books: Alexander, NC, 2001), 4.

Prior to the Holocaust, more than three quarters of world Jewry spoke Yiddish, the language of the Jews of Ashkenaz. Less than half a million Jews in the same time period spoke Ladino.³ Nevertheless, there is an important corpus of Ladino literature, both religious and secular. A “golden age” of Ladino religious literature flourished in the early 18th century; a “golden age” of secular literature flowered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴ Then, eighty per cent of Ladino speakers, readers, and writers perished at the hands of the Nazis. The Ladino that appears today is mostly in Latin letters, and very little of it original.⁵ Two examples are books that appeared in 2004 by Avner Perez in Maale Adumim, outside of Jerusalem. One is titled, *MosheDavid Gaon: Poezias*. First published in 1925, this edition includes the poems in Ladino written in both Latin and in Hebrew script and also translated into the Hebrew language. The second work is Hayim Nahmias’ *Diario 1917-1918*. It is the diary of a Jewish soldier in the Ottoman army during World War I. The handwritten diary entries are reproduced together with a Hebrew translation and a Ladino transliteration in Latin letters. Included for the reader is a dictionary of the Turkish words in the diary. They appear in Latin transliteration, Hebrew script and in translation into Hebrew.

There are perhaps 3,000 titles that were written in Ladino between 1540 and the present. Not surprisingly, the most complete Ladino collections are in libraries in Israel, currently home to possibly as many as 200,000 Ladino speakers. The largest collection, 1,300 titles, is in the Ben-Zvi Institute in Jerusalem. The major collections in institutions in the United States are held by Yeshiva University, Harvard College, New York Public Library, the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, and the Library of Congress.⁶

³Ibid., 6.

⁴Ibid., 17.

⁵Aviva Ben-Ur, “Ladino in Print: Toward a Comprehensive Bibliography,” in *Jewish History*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2002, 321.

⁶Aviva Ben-Ur, “Ladino in Print: Toward a Comprehensive Bibliography,” in *Jewish History*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2002, p. 311.

Meyer Kayserling's 1890 *Biblioteca Espanola-Portuguesa-Judaica* was the first bibliography that included Ladino works, listing 65 Ladino or Judeo-Spanish titles *transliterated* (Italics in original) in Latin characters. Abraham Yaari's 1934 *Catalogue of Judeo-Spanish Books in the Jewish National and University Library at Jerusalem*, contained 866 titles printed in Hebrew characters.⁷ In 1959, Henry V. Besso's "Bibliography of Judeo-Spanish Books in the Library of Congress" appeared in the journal, *Miscelanea de estudios arabes y hebraicos*. The Library of Congress published a revised edition in 1963 under the title, *Ladino Books in the Library of Congress: A Bibliography*. [IMAGE] In the Besso bibliographies, the Hebrew character titles are transliterated into Latin characters. Most recently, Dov Cohen, Deputy Director of the Ben-Zvi Institute has been compiling a comprehensive bibliography of Ladino literature published up to 1960. The database, almost entirely in Hebrew, is available through the ALEPH electronic catalogue of Israeli universities.⁸

The Library's collection of Hebrew-script Ladino materials sits on several shelves in the stacks of the Hebraic Section, a part of the African and Middle Eastern Division. Most of the works are in brittle condition, bound in red and black boards. What is perplexing is that they do not bear any acquisition stamps. We do not know their provenance, when they arrived at the Library, or even if the books came as a group.

What we do know is that the original corpus of 289 works of Judeo-Spanish literature interested Henry V. Besso so much that he compiled a bibliography of the titles. [IMAGE] Born in Salonica, in northern Greece in 1905, Henry Besso joined a brother in New York City following college and the death of his parents. While working in a business, he earned a bachelor's degree in linguistics from City College of New York in 1931 and a master's degree from Columbia University in 1934. Besso relocated to Washington, DC in 1940, where he worked for the Voice of America for several decades. He also served as General Editor of the

⁷Henry V. Besso, "Bibliography of Judeo-Spanish Books in the Library of Congress," *Miscelanea de estudios arabes y hebraicos*, vol. 8, fasc. 2 (1960), 55-134, quoted on 57-58.

⁸ Besso, "Bibliography of Judeo-Spanish Books," 57-58; Ben-Ur, "Ladino in Print," note 13, p. 323. Besso's compilation for the Library is also the seventh title in the Hispanic Foundation Bibliographical Series. Correspondence between Dov Cohen and Isaac Yudlov, Director of the Institute for Hebrew Bibliography at the Jewish National Library, with the Library of Congress to obtain title pages of 54 Ladino books held by the Library began in December, 2002.

Hispanic Foundation of the Library of Congress in 1947, and “was responsible for several volumes issued in the library’s series of guides to the official publications of the other American republics.”⁹ Upon retirement he moved to Florida, and passed away there in 1993. A major promoter of Sephardic studies and preserver of Sephardic heritage, Besso’s library and archives are at YIVO.

Among the titles listed in the 1959 “Besso Bibliography” is one book from 1550 – in original boards – a dozen published between 1700 and 1850, close to a hundred printed between 1850 and 1900, and the bulk, more than 175, that came out between 1900 and 1942. Subjects include Bible, biography, liturgy, folklore, grammar, novels, poetry, theater, and history. There are translations, adaptations, and “imitations” from French, German, Hebrew, Italian, and Turkish. The majority of the books were published in the Balkan countries; others were printed in Vienna, Cologne, Livorno, Belgrade, Jerusalem, and New York.

In Besso’s first bibliography, he checked books against printed catalogs. The entry number in Avraham Yaari’s bibliography was listed next to the title as well as information on holdings in other libraries in the United States. There were also indices of authors’ names and of subjects. All of this was eliminated in the Library’s 1963 edition.

⁹Henry V. Besso, comp., *Ladino Books in the Library of Congress: A Bibliography* (Washington, 1963), v.

The 1963 revised “Besso Bibliography” published by the Library has been difficult to use for two reasons: a double numbering system and a less than satisfactory transliteration scheme. [IMAGE] Here is how Besso described his system: “The dictionary arrangement of the bibliographical text includes authors and anonymous titles in one alphabet. Each entry is serially numbered. At the close of the entry is the number of the volume in the Library of Congress collection.”¹⁰ This combination of both a serial number and a shelflist number has been confusing to both researchers and staff.

Appendix III of Besso’s *Ladino Books* contains “A Note on Ladino and Problems of Transliteration”, a Judeo-Spanish Transliteration Table, and a Hebrew Transliteration Table. Here too, the lack of a standardized transliteration method also confused researchers and staff. [IMAGE]

In fact, the transliteration of titles between the 1959 and the 1963 bibliographies has been inconsistent. In the 1959 publication, there is an entry for Kabuli, Yaacob who becomes Kabuli, Ya’akov in the 1963 version. The title is transliterated differently in each bibliography. In addition, the English translation of the work is dropped in the second edition. [IMAGE] [IMAGE]. In the webliography, the researcher can now examine the title page itself.[IMAGE]

Most problematic of all, because the Ladino materials have remained almost entirely uncataloged, researchers have not been aware of their existence. The only way for a researcher to know about the collection has been to physically check our manual card catalog or the Besso Bibliography if he or she has a copy in hand. The close to 60 titles acquired since the bibliography was published appear only in the card catalog of the Hebraic Section.[IMAGE]

But the ever increasing and sophisticated technological tools of today and the powers of the computer and the internet have made possible new approaches to bibliographic access. Spurred on by these developments, we began a multi-layered multi-team project at the Library of Congress to make available on the Library’s website a complete listing of all of the Ladino works held by the Library. This presentation describes the several layers of the project and does not focus on the content of the Ladino collection. The titles that are being gathered into this “webliography” include the uncataloged 289 Hebrew script works listed in Besso’s 1963 compilation, *Ladino Books in the Library of Congress: A Bibliography*, Hebrew script books acquired since then and accessible in a manual catalog, Hebrew script Ladino in microprint, and Ladino items published in Latin characters and found in the Library’s general collections. The

¹⁰Henry V. Besso, *Ladino Books*, viii.

online bibliography will also include non-print materials such as sound recordings and the cataloging record for each of those items. [IMAGE] The most recent component added to the project includes a conservation survey of the Hebrew script Ladino books, placement of those materials in proper housing, and recommendations for care and handling of the fragile items. Optimally, we would hope to be able to digitize and make available on the web as many of the Hebrew script Ladino titles as possible held by the Library of Congress.

The genesis of this project began three years ago with the submission of a proposal by Dr. Everette Larson, Head of Reference in the Hispanic Division, to BECites+ (Bibliographies plus: Enhanced Citations with Indexes, Tables of contents, Electronic resources and Sources cited), itself a project of the Library's Bibliographic Enrichment Advisory Team (BEAT). One component of BECites+ is to digitize out-of-print guides to special collections of the Library in response to continuing requests by researchers. Examples of other Library publications that have been or will be digitized are Thomas Jefferson's Library: A Catalog With the Entries in His Own Order (<http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/becites/main/jefferson/88607928.html>) and A Checklist of Manuscripts in the Libraries of the Greek and Armenian Patriarchates in Jerusalem.

As a first step, Everette Larson re-keyed Besso's *Ladino Books* bibliography into a new database using Procite software. Titles were divided by each letter of the alphabet and put into html files. Everette used Dreamweaver software as the editing program. He also added to the database the online records of about two hundred Romanized Ladino titles that are part of the Library's general collections. These items were compared with the Harvard list and reflect the Harvard, Yaari and LC numbers if the items are in the LC collections. Procite created problems which entailed reediting of many of the files. In addition, Procite did not allow for all the diacritics we needed. Everette entered them manually [IMAGE].

We needed assistance to proofread the "new" Besso webliography that was evolving. Dr. Ralph Tarica, a frequent researcher at the Library, volunteered his services. Professor Emeritus of Romance Languages at the University of Maryland, Dr. Tarica, is a native of Atlanta, Georgia. He grew up in a Ladino-speaking family that was originally from the Isle of Rhodes, once Turkish, then Italian, now Greek.. For more than two years, he has reviewed successive drafts of the Besso webliography. [IMAGE]

In a 1995 issue of *Judaica Librarianship*, our colleague, Zachary Baker, published an article titled, "Some Problems of Ladino/Judezmo Romanization." In it, he argued that, "While ALA/LC standards have been developed for the Romanization of Hebrew and Yiddish for

bibliographic purposes, the lack of such a standard for the Romanization of Ladino/Judezmo impedes access to materials in that language.”¹¹ There has been some progress on this front. In June, 2003 a proposed ALA/LC Ladino Romanization Table appeared. However, it remains in draft form. In addition, the Library still does not have unicode, which is a character for character system useful for typing, cataloging and displaying items in foreign languages. On our web pages for the webliography, HTML composition was done through HTML 4.01 using ISO character set 8859-1.

How were we to romanize the titles acquired since the 1963 Besso publication? In Dr. Tarica’s words, “under instructions from Everette, I left the Besso entries exactly as they were, despite my better judgement...for the post-Besso entries (that is the fifty or so Hebrew script Ladino titles acquired since 1963) I used the “Aki Yerushalayim” style of phonetics, the one that is accepted by mainstream scholars in Judeo-Spanish today.”¹²

The romanized spelling of each author’s name was checked through the LC authorities file. When that was not available, we used the spelling in the online JewishEncyclopedia.com. Unfortunately, the Ladino transcription of some names was eclectic to say the least – and varied from book to book. Bibliographies such as Yaari’s and the Harvard list provided a standard that we tried to follow. Besso himself confused various names and spellings. We tried to modernize place names wherever we could. The question remains, how do we represent the original script? Do we transliterate everything, or present it in a way more acceptable to Spanish speakers or to Hebrew speakers, or present it in one dialect of Ladino or another?

¹¹Zachary M. Baker, “Some Problems of Ladino/Judezmo Romanization,” in *Judaica Librarianship*, Vol. 9, No. 1-2, Spring 1995-Winter 1995, 48.

¹²Ralph Besso to Peggy Pearlstein, email correspondence, May 20, 2005.
Proceedings of the 40th Annual Convention of the Association of Jewish Libraries (Oakland, CA – June 19-22, 2005)

Dr. Tarica examined all of the Hebrew script titles personally and compared them against the new bibliography created by Everette Larson. He added subject keywords to most of the titles, using those that appear in the *Guide to Ladino Materials in the Harvard College Library* (Cambridge, MA, 1992). The 384 Ladino titles, transliterated according to the table adopted by Besso, form part of the microfiche collection, “Hebrew Books from the Harvard College Library.”¹³ This collection is available at the Library of Congress and the Ladino titles have been incorporated into our gradually expanding Besso webibliography.

Eventually we decided that we needed to scan the title pages of each of the Hebrew script books and place them next to the bibliographic entry for that work. This would enable a researcher to see the bibliographic elements exactly as they appear in the vernacular on the title page, hopefully eliminating ambiguities or inconsistencies of transliteration. The title pages were digitized in jpeg format in a thumbnail version and placed next to the bibliographic record. The thumbnail record was then linked to a larger jpeg to allow for an easier view.

Chana Stein, one of our dedicated Israeli volunteers, also worked with the scanned images. Two summers ago she reframed and printed out each title page on acid free paper. [IMAGE] Because of the way the scanner was constructed then, we digitized only the title pages of each book in order to minimize damage to it.

The newest phase of this long-term project began in April this year. Under the leadership of Beatriz Haspo of the Preventive Preservation Section of the Library’s Conservation Division, a conservation survey of the Ladino Hebrew script collection is underway. [IMAGE] Every Thursday morning, Beatriz and other Conservation staff come to the Hebraic Section to assess each Ladino Hebrew script book sitting on the half dozen shelves in the stacks. Information such as a book’s condition, its dimensions, and needed housing requirements is keyed into fields on an evaluation form that has been loaded onto a Personal Desk Assistant [IMAGE of database format] Created by Beatriz with the support of the technical staff in the Conservation Division, this unique program was designed using a software called J-file for PDA’s which permits searching and sorting by any field. The correct size pamphlet folders and the boxes made to exact size on the Library’s box making machine will be brought to the Hebraic Section. This will minimize handling the books when they are rehoused. The acid-free photocopy of the title page will be affixed to the housing to quickly identify the book and to ensure that they are returned to

¹³*Guide to Ladino Materials in the Harvard College Library* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), xii.

the proper housing. [IMAGE] Many of the books are so brittle that they cannot be digitized or even served to readers at the present time. [IMAGE]

Aviva Ben-Ur notes that Ladino bibliographies have usually been enumerative, listing only authors, titles, dates of publication and publishers. She suggests that new bibliographies should include information about typeface, binding, paper quality and printer's marks that might yield information about readership and consumer taste. In addition, Ben-Ur advances the idea that adding descriptions and analysis of thematic content will make bibliographies more useful to the researcher and "facilitate the use of Ladino as a historical source."¹⁴

While this new and enlarged bibliography of Ladino materials held by the Library of Congress cannot include the additional criteria suggested by Aviva Ben-Ur, it nevertheless offers distinct advantages over what has been available up to now for researchers seeking Ladino titles at the Library. The webliography will be freely available on the World Wide Web 24/7. It will include all of the Ladino materials available at the Library, in both Hebrew script and in romanization and in non-print format such as sound recordings. We expect that it will eventually contain the digitized full text of many titles, preserving them in a unique manner. And it will make the world of Ladino literature more readily available to researchers and to those interested in their Sephardi heritage.

Little by little, we are moving towards the end of this multi-layered, multi-year project. I draw hope for its completion from another Ladino proverb: "A damla damla se inche la bota," drop by drop, the barrel fills up.¹⁵

¹⁴Ben-Ur, *Ladino in Print*, 310.

¹⁵Elli Kohen, *Ladino-English*, p. 571.