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LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY AMONG THE JEWISH  
COMMUNITY FROM THE VIDIN REGION

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**Abstract.** The paper explores the relationship between language and identity through the example of Judeo-Spanish and the Jewish community from the Danubian region in the North-Western part of the Bulgarian lands. The main focus of the paper is the region of Vidin as an urban center where Sephardi Jews, carriers of this language, settled as early as the 16th century and where the memory of this community is preserved to this day.

Examples of other urban centers in the region, such as Lom, are cited as well, taking into account the migration processes through the Danubian region. The study is based on field research, as well as on data that can be divided in two groups, the first covering examples from the period from the settlement of the Jews to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the second corresponding to the 20<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> century. The first part of the paper places the analyzed examples in context, by outlining briefly the history of the Sephardi community focusing on Vidin and its region. The second part examines specific examples of the relationship between language and identity in the above-mentioned periods.

**Keywords:** identity, Judeo-Spanish, Ladino, Jews, Vidin, Lom.

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The paper explores the relationship between language and identity through the example of Judeo-Spanish and the Jewish community from the Danubian region in the North-Western part of the Bulgarian lands. The main focus of the paper is the region of Vidin as an urban center where Sephardi Jews, carriers of this language, settled as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century and where the memory of this community is preserved to this day<sup>1</sup>. Examples of other important urban centers in the region, such as Lom, will be cited as well, taking into account the migration processes through the Danubian region. The study is based on field research, as well as on data that can be divided in two groups, the first covering examples from the period from the settlement of the Jews to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the second corresponding to the 20<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> century. The field research, conducted in 2023 – 2024, gathered information on the community in the region and, more particularly, evidence of its multilingual milieu through materials in the archive of the Vidin synagogue related both to religious practice and to everyday life (religious corpora, rabbinical answers known as *responsa*, correspondence and literary translations, such as editions of Shakespeare, among others), mostly dated in the period 18<sup>th</sup> – 20<sup>th</sup> c. This information was supplemented by informal conversations allowing to trace testimonials on the community related to everyday life and language use among its descendants in Bulgaria during the 20<sup>th</sup> c. (published in N. Nenov, B. Charalanova and T. Shtereva, cited below). Additionally, the study draws on the author's personal observations on the use of Judeo-Spanish among Sephardi descendants. The data included in the study of I. Dobрева<sup>2</sup> is of particular interest for the period from the settlement of the Jews to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, examples from this study are examined with respect to the Vidin region

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<sup>1</sup> Through the Cultural center Jules Pascin, housed in the renovated building of the Vidin synagogue, Cultural center Jules Pascin. Online. Available from: <https://www.cc-pascin-vidin.eu/en/category/7/node/8>. [Accessed: 2025-06-25], as well as through the Monument of Gratitude (also known as The Jewish monument), installed by the Vidin Jewry in the city-center in memory of their life and rescue. The cultural center regularly holds exhibitions dedicated to aspects of Jewish life and history. During my visit in April 2024, the exhibition "For Justice and Humanity", curated by the State Archives in Vidin, was dedicated to the life and work of Metropolitan Neofit of Vidin and the rescue of the Bulgarian Jews.

in this period. The collection of interviews and personal accounts published by N. Nenov, B. Charalanova and T. Shtereva<sup>3</sup> and focused more generally on the memories of Bulgarian Jews in the 20<sup>th</sup> c. offer valuable resources allowing to reconstruct aspects of the language use in the region in more recent times. Examples from this collection are cited and analyzed within the proposed research perspective in the second part of the paper. The relationship between language and identity has been explored by numerous studies addressing subjects such as plurilingualism and multilingualism, migration, national and local identity, urban space, gender etc<sup>4</sup>. With regard to the specific part of the Danubian region, aspects of this topic have been addressed by M. Markova and M. Marinova (in the current issue). Taking into account these perspectives, the paper also addresses issues related to the historical development of Judeo-Spanish and its use with regard to other Balkan languages, insofar as these aspects reflect the specific worldview of its carriers in a given moment. In order to place the analyzed examples in context, I will first outline briefly the history of the Sephardi community focusing on Vidin and its region. In the second part of the paper, I will examine specific examples of the relationship between language and identity in the above-mentioned periods.

The settlement of Sephardi Jews in the Danubian region began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, only a few decades after their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula<sup>5</sup> and continued through the century in urban centers such as Vidin and Nikopol and beyond the Danubian area, towards the South (Plovdiv)<sup>6</sup>. In Vidin, the Sephardi Jewry found

<sup>2</sup> DOBREVA, Iskra. The Multilingualism of Balkan Jews as Reflected in Judeo-Spanish Sources From the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. In: *Jewish Literatures and Cultures in Southeastern Europe. Experiences, Positions, Memories*. Renate HANSEN-KOKORUŠ; Olaf TERPITZ (eds.). Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2021, pp. 129–142. ISBN 978-3-205-21288-1.

<sup>3</sup> *Страдание и спасение: паметта на еврейските общности в Русе, Шумен и Варна*. Николай НЕНОВ; Бета ХАРАЛАНОВА; Татяна ЦЕРЕВА (състав.). Русе: Сдружение „Европейски пространства 21“, 2015. ISBN 978-954-91968-6-3.

<sup>4</sup> *Language and masculinity*. Sally A. JOHNSON; Ulrike Hanna MEINHOF (eds.). Oxford: Blackwell, 2004. ISBN 978-0-631-19767-6; *Discourses of endangerment: ideology and interest in the defence of languages*. Alexandre DUCHÊNE; Monica HELLER (eds.). London: Continuum, 2008. ISBN 978-1-84706-322-9; *Multilingualism and Identity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Wendy AYRES-BENNETT; Linda FISHER (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Online. Available from: <https://www.doi.org/10.1017/9781108780469>. [viewed 2025-06-30]; МАРКОВА, Мира. *Локални култури и традиции*. София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2022. ISBN 978-954-07-5518-2.

<sup>5</sup> COLLIN, Gaëlle; STUEMUND-HALEVY, Michael. Un trésor oublié : le fonds judéo-espagnol de la bibliothèque municipale Ivan Vazov de Plovdiv (Bulgarie). *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos. Sección de Hebreo*, 2006, 55, p. 109. Available from: <https://digibug.ugr.es/handle/10481/73424>. [Accessed 2025-03-06].

<sup>6</sup> KEREN, Zvi. On the History of the Jewish Community in Vidin, 16th to 18th Centuries. *Études balkaniques*. 1996, no. 1, pp. 83–84. ISSN 0324-1645; МУТАФОВА, Красимира; ВАСИЛИЕВ, Младен. Еврейската общност в Никопол и Плевен – опит за съпоставително изследване. *България, българите и Европа – мит, история, съвремие*. 2013, 6, № 1, с. 146–149.

already existing Romaniote and Ashkenazi communities<sup>7</sup>, towards the 17<sup>th</sup> century Jews inhabited the localities of Varosha and Kaletto, the latter preserved its importance for this population until the migration towards Israel in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>8</sup>. As with other known examples, the Ashkenazi and Sephardi groups initially had separate places of congregation up until the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the community already gathered in one synagogue<sup>9</sup>. The now-restored Vidin synagogue (today, Cultural center Jules Pascin) was built at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, Jews in urban centers such as Vidin and Lom also had established their schools<sup>10</sup>. Jews from the region have entertained various relations with other major urban centres in the area, due to travel, commerce as well as to marriage. As early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century such a process marked the arrival of Jews from Vidin and other cities along the Danube to Ruse<sup>11</sup>. In more recent times, families moved from Lom to Vidin and spent several years there as one of the parents worked in the city<sup>12</sup>. In other cases, family members living later in Lom were told stories about specific important moments, such as marriage, that took place in Vidin and were specifically related to the city's synagogue<sup>13</sup>. As we will see, these migration processes can be directly related to the language competence and the way it relates to identity negotiation among the members of the community.

Having examined these historical aspects, let us now turn to the Judeo-Spanish language and its use within the community. For the purpose of this paper, the term “Judeo-Spanish” will be used with reference to the language, spoken and written, by the Jewry of Sephardi descent. Other terms, such as “Ladino” will be used in specific citations<sup>14</sup>. Associated with the Sephardi community, who established a large diaspora throughout Europe after leaving the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Judeo-Spanish is defined as a vernacular language that evolved through

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<sup>7</sup> KEREN, Zvi, *Op. cit.*, pp. 81–82.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 86.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 85; КЕРЕН, Цви. Еврейската общност във Видин през XVI–XVIII век. *Историческо бъдеще*. 2013, № 1–2, с. 179. ISSN 1311-0144.

<sup>10</sup> KEREN, Zvi. *Studies of Jewish life in Bulgaria: from the 16th to the 20th century*. Tel Aviv: ContentoNow, 2015, The school. ISBN 978-965-550-670-9.

<sup>11</sup> *Страдание и спасение...*, с. 53; КЕРЕН, Цви. Еврейската общност във Видин..., с. 187, KEREN, Zvi, *Studies of Jewish life in Bulgaria...*, p. 57.

<sup>12</sup> *Страдание и спасение...*, с. 127.

<sup>13</sup> *Пак там*, с. 131.

<sup>14</sup> Specialized linguistic studies provide more details on the historical development of the language and the terminology adopted for its varieties, cf. КЪНЧЕВ, Иван. Към зalezа на един език. *La Estreya. Списание за еврейска история, изкуство, култура*, 2016, № 9, с. 24–35. ISSN 1313-8200; BUNIS, David M. Lexical Elements of Slavic Origin in Judezmo on South Slavic Territory, 16–19<sup>th</sup> Centuries: Uriel Weinreich and the History of Contact Linguistics. *Journal of Jewish Languages*, 2017, 5, no. 2, pp. 217–252. Online. Available from: <https://www.doi.org/10.1163/22134638-05021121>. [viewed 2025-06-29].

the centuries and adopted influences from various languages it came into contact with<sup>15</sup>. Use of the language is generally considered to cover everyday life, with Hebrew being reserved for religious purposes<sup>16</sup>. However, in reality, the boundaries between these areas seem to have been flexible with Judeo-Spanish being used, at least in some instances, in ritual and religious context (cemetery inscriptions) on Bulgarian lands<sup>17</sup> and beyond<sup>18</sup>.

Linguists have observed specific features of the language as it came into contact with the languages of the Balkan Peninsula. This type of language adaptation is attested in other regions as well, with specific linguistic elements corresponding to the area<sup>19</sup>. In the Balkans, these features include but are not limited to lexical elements and language structures<sup>20</sup>, the latter reflecting common traits of the Balkan languages, such as the replacement of infinitive by subjunctive structures<sup>21</sup>. These changes are important, as they can be interpreted not only on linguistic level but also in anthropological perspective, as showcasing the specifics in the collective way of thinking and articulating ideas and as a part of the larger expression of collective worldview<sup>22</sup>. In fact, the choice of vocabulary was perceived by Jews as a part of the way they were seen by their peers, as attested by the childhood memories of a Sephardi descendant in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On one occasion, she chose a word used in her family, *colcha* (quilt), to describe a blanket in front of Bulgarian children, and felt mocked, quickly resorting to the use of the term *yurgan*, a more popular word with Turkish

<sup>15</sup> PASIKOWSKA-SCHNASS, Magdalena. *Ladino: Judeo-Spanish language and culture in Europe*. UNESCO, 2023, pp. 2–3. Online. Available from: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/739299/EPRS\\_BRI\(2023\)739299\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/739299/EPRS_BRI(2023)739299_EN.pdf) [viewed 2025-06-28].

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> COLLIN, Gaëlle; STUEMUND-HALEVY, Michael. *Op. cit.*; FAY, Richard; DAVCHEVA, Leah. Zones of interculturality and linguistic identity: tales of Ladino by Sephardic Jews in Bulgaria. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 2014, 14, no. 1, p. 10. Online. Available from: <https://www.doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2013.866122>. [viewed 2025-06-20]; DOBREVA, Iskra. *Op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>18</sup> KIRSCHEN, Bryan. Judeo-Spanish as a Jewish Language: Linguistic Realities and Ideologies. In: *Judeo-Spanish and the making of a community*. Bryan KIRSCHEN (ed.). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015, p. 18. ISBN 978-1-4438-7805-0.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 18–19.

<sup>20</sup> КЪНЧЕВ, Иван. *Цум. съч.*, с. 25; MINERVINI, Laura. The role of merchants in the linguistic history of the Sephardic Jews. *RiCOGNIZIONI. Rivista di Lingue e Letterature straniere e Culture moderne*, 2020, 7, 13, p. 32. Online. Available from: <https://www.doi.org/10.13135/2384-8987/4493>. [viewed 2025-03-06]; MARCEL, Israel. Historical and linguistic study of the Ladino language spoken by the Sephardic Jews of the Balkans in the age of the Ottoman empire. *Хармония в различията*, 2024, № 1, с. 501–508. ISSN 2367-7899.

<sup>21</sup> DOBREVA, Iskra. Final Subordinate structures in Balkan Judeo-Spanish. *Филологически форум*, 2016, № 2, с. 87–101. ISSN 2367-8119.

<sup>22</sup> *Discourses of endangerment...*, p. 2.

origin, that the other children could understand<sup>23</sup>. This example illustrates some of the implications of the vocabulary choice in multilingual context. As the individual is confronted with multiple possibilities to express the same idea, he may have to go through a mental process in order to choose a term, based on his knowledge of the public. This choice is then determined by the speaker's willingness to establish a level of mutual understanding and integration with the group. This type of situation may result in avoidance of specific lexical heritage or in refusal of using a language altogether.

In the context of a large migratory process started at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman territories welcomed Sephardi communities who came into contact with preexisting Jewish population speaking other languages<sup>24</sup>. As we have seen, this was the case with the Vidin region. Beginning with the 16<sup>th</sup> century and up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Judeo-Spanish seems to have gradually become a *koiné* (common language) for the Jewish population by adapting and absorbing elements of these spoken languages<sup>25</sup>. In the period from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Jewish population developed multilingual communities and communicated in Judeo-Spanish, Bulgarian and Turkish. I. Dobрева, following D. M. Bunis<sup>26</sup>, has studied relevant examples of multilingualism among Jews in Vidin and the Danube region. In her study, she highlights that the use of multiple languages in the period is attested both among women and men<sup>27</sup>, thus becoming a common characteristic of the Jewish population. Moreover, it was during that period that Judeo-Spanish developed its "Balkan pragmatics", while the Jews were sharing a common reality with other Balkan people<sup>28</sup>. The last observation indicates also a shift in the worldview of the language's carriers.

If we examine more closely some the examples cited by I. Dobрева, we can observe that the communication described is relevant to various contexts, such as everyday life, juridical context, commerce. It appears that, during the period, the relation between Judeo-Spanish and Jewish identity was stable, as this language was the preferred medium inside the community in these contexts, and was used not only in private but also in public context, such as, for instance, rabbinical court cases<sup>29</sup>. Judeo-Spanish may also have been the preferred way of communicating with newly arrived Jewish families. The language has served as a type of international medium

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. account published in *Страдание и спасение...*, с. 284.

<sup>24</sup> DOBREVA, Iskra. The Multilingualism of Balkan Jews..., p. 155.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 134.

<sup>26</sup> BUNIS, David M. *Op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> DOBREVA, Iskra. The Multilingualism of Balkan Jews..., pp. 139–140.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 140.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 136–137.

of communication for the Sephardi Jewry, providing, in some cases, a helpful instrument during the establishment of families coming from other regions and unable to speak local languages. One of them, coming from Vienna, later hired a teacher to learn Turkish in order to integrate more easily into the commercial life of Vidin during the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>30</sup>. In fact, from the period of their arrival in Vidin, trade was one of the main activities of Jews and the Sephardi community in particular. This contributed to their cosmopolite identity through the connections in the Ottoman empire and beyond, and it also favored linguistic exchange<sup>31</sup>. It appears then that proficiency (spoken and written) in specific languages, such as Turkish, was considered by the Jewish families an important asset for the social integration into the Balkan urban centers. As a consequence, these languages were learned by both men and women who were able to use them with their customers. In this case, the adaptation to the reality and identity of Balkan Jewry seem to pass through effectively communicating in at least one of the commonly used local languages.

These examples show the variety of ways the language played a significant role in negotiating and articulating identity both in private and public life, among families, men and women<sup>32</sup>. Lexical choices and multilingualism can be related to efforts for preserving aspects of cultural identity or to adaptation to a new cultural and linguistic context. Communicating in a given language could be a matter of personal or collective choice for the members of the community, as they opted for mutual understanding and inclusion in various contexts.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and up until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Judeo-Spanish was actively used not only in everyday life but also in periodical press<sup>33</sup> and in printed literary works. In some regions with important concentration of Jewish population, Judeo-Spanish was the mother tongue for nearly 90 percent of the Jewish population<sup>34</sup>. Thus, for the generations born before the 1940s, this language was firstly associated with the family circle.

In childhood memories and description of their personal life, Jews from Vidin and Lom born before the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century describe Judeo-Spanish as closely related

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 140.

<sup>31</sup> KEREN, Zvi. *Studies of Jewish life in Bulgaria...*, Economics and commerce in the Vidin community; BUNIS, David M., *Op. cit.*, p. 221–222.

<sup>32</sup> With regard to women, it is interesting to note that Jewish women could benefit from certain privileges due to their knowledge of Turkish, as opposed to Christian women. A particular example of this is cited in an excerpt from the *Biography of the Family Arie*, 9, in a description relative to Samokov, but, in light of the information cited above, it could be interpreted in a larger geographical context, cf. DOBREVA, Iskra. *The Multilingualism of Balkan Jews...*, p. 138.

<sup>33</sup> *Страдание и спасение...*, c. 56.

<sup>34</sup> COLLIN, Gaëlle; STUDEMUND-HALEVY, Michael. *Op. cit.*, p. 109.



to the family, to activities of everyday life and to the traditional calendar. With regard to age and family figures related to the language, grandparents and, in some cases, parents are cited as speaking Judeo-Spanish fluently. In the two examples examined below, published in N. Nenov, B. Charalanova and T. Shtereva, women in particular are identified as carriers of the language and, more generally, as preserving the Jewish tradition. Naming after grand parents with Judeo-Spanish names was a practice in some families, together with the use of other traditional Jewish names such as Isaac<sup>35</sup>. For instance, Viktoriya Yosif Levi-Almaleh (born in 1931 in Vidin) affirms that she was named after her grandmother (whose name was Ventura) who raised her and told her Sephardi tales that she remembers and is able to reproduce in Judeo-Spanish. She indicates that the language spoken in their family during her childhood was “Spanish”: “at home, everyone spoke Spanish”<sup>36</sup>. While speaking about the language and this period of her life, another member of the community, Madlena Vasileva (born in 1947 in Lom) uses the term “Ladino” to describe the language and establishes a kind of hierarchy, saying that she belongs to the “lost generation”, i.e. those born after 1945, who knew nothing of their “Jewish origin, very few of them knew Jewish traditions, most of them don’t know Ladino at all”<sup>37</sup>.

In this respect, the language is a part of the knowledge belonging to the older generation, that carries knowledge of origins (often transmitted to children as tales), tradition and language. These elements belong to an area of specific knowledge that was not accessible to everyone. As Madlena puts it, she recognised a specific holiday approached by the smell of the traditional food that her grandmother used to prepare on that occasion and she also listened to Ladino that was spoken by her grandmother and her mother in daily life<sup>38</sup>. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Judeo-Spanish was thus a part of the Jewish identity, such as transmitted in the family circle and the practice of tradition. The latter was understood not so much as having to do with religion as to being related to the history of Jewish people through narratives of events related to traditional calendar. Not all family members grew up in the same conditions and some were not placed under the responsibility of the grandparents (and, especially, the female figures). As a result, they do not have the same outlook towards their identity: “my son was also raised by her [her grandmother]. And that is why my children are turned towards the Jewishness. But my sister, who lives in Lom, she has never turned towards the Jewishness, as she was raised in kindergartens, she was not under the care of my grandmother”<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> *Страдание и спасение...*, с. 74.

<sup>36</sup> *Пак там*, с. 73.

<sup>37</sup> *Пак там*, с. 127.

<sup>38</sup> *Пак там*, с. 128–129.

<sup>39</sup> *Пак там*, с. 129.



The words of Madlena highlight the situation of the language in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. What she feels and expresses as a “lost generation” is her belonging to a generation of Bulgarian Jews who gradually lost connection with Judeo-Spanish. This situation was not only due to political reasons and, in some cases, was a personal or family’s choice. It can be assimilated to a shift towards national identity which, as observed, is usually related to the influence of official narratives, images and institutions<sup>40</sup>. In this respect, it is useful to turn to other sources as they can help us to better understand this choice. Some members of the Jewish community from the Danubian region indicate that they avoided speaking the language during the above-mentioned period, as they seem to have associated it to an older generation and this generation was not perceived as a carrier of traditions and knowledge as much as belonging to the past. To this, was added an identity actively perceived as Bulgarian, as indicated by Sinto Mois Yulzari (born in 1946 in Ruse) who recalls the following about his parents: “They wanted us to feel Bulgarian. Even I, whom I tell, they do not believe me. Even my parents, because they were Sephardi, Spanish Jews, and they knew Spanish, too, when they wanted to hide something from us kids – my sister and me, they spoke in Spanish. Otherwise, at home they spoke exclusively Bulgarian. My sister is five and a half years older than me. She spent part of her childhood with my mother’s mother, with our grandmother, and she insisted on speaking Spanish”<sup>41</sup>. The same type of refusal is attested by Sofka Ovadya Farhi (born in 1935 in Varna): “Now, my mother and father spoke in Ladino, and I can translate entirely into Ladino, but I cannot speak. For the simple reason that, because of my stubbornness, I refused to speak in Ladino”<sup>42</sup>. Explaining her refusal, she indicates that, as a child, she confused Bulgarian and Judeo-Spanish words and this confusion led her to feel embarrassed in front of her peers.

With regard to this shift, the Danubian region seems to follow a more general trend, attested also in Southern Bulgaria where, up until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Judeo-Spanish was the first language for a good number of members of the Bulgarian Jewry<sup>43</sup>. In linguistic terms, the shift’s stages are described as follows: 1) the language carriers are able to master the new language and 2) due to objective reasons, they begin to communicate exclusively in this new language. Finally, due to the shift, the original language becomes static<sup>44</sup>. As a consequence of this choice, the language

<sup>40</sup> MARKOVA, Mira. Dynamics of identities: the example of the Vlachs from the Vidin region. *GSU-IF*, 2025, 1. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.60053/GSU-IF.1.108.201-214>; Cf. АНТОНОВА, Радостина. В: *Променящите се ромски общности*. София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2024, с. 7. ISBN 978-954-07-5900-5.

<sup>41</sup> *Страдание и спасение...*, с. 82.

<sup>42</sup> *Пак там*, с. 285.

<sup>43</sup> COLLIN, Gaëlle; STUEMUND-HALEVY, Michael. *Op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>44</sup> КЪНЧЕВ, Иван. *Цит. съч.*, с. 25.

competence gradually diminished among some Danubian Jews or disappeared altogether among others. Thus, in addition to being initially related to inclusion and belonging to a community, Judeo-Spanish started to be associated to a feeling of exclusion as well<sup>45</sup>. In this regard, it is noteworthy that it gradually acquired the status of “secret-sharing language” in some families: the parents, who were still fluent in Judeo-Spanish, used it to communicate when some information needed to be kept away from their children<sup>46</sup>.

These examples clarify the expression “lost generation”, showing that it can refer to individuals who chose not to use the language and preferred to communicate in Bulgarian instead. A similar situation of identity negotiation occurs among young individuals in plurilingual milieus and, particularly, in urban centers where various migrant communities coexist<sup>47</sup>. Through the process, individuals gradually rethink their identity, preserving aspects of their linguistic, culinary or other type of knowledge and choosing a way (and a language) to articulate it. As competence in one language declines and is supplanted by another, a new sense of social solidarity emerges<sup>48</sup>.

In contemporary context, Judeo-Spanish also provides a sense of belonging to a larger community and this applies to two areas, both in terms of language and identity. The first of these areas corresponds to the Balkans, as a region of emergence of a common form of the language, and the second, to Spain and Romance-speaking countries as spaces of linguistic and cultural proximity. To grasp this level, it is necessary to take into account the interest in the language on a more general level and beyond the Danubian region. In fact, the Jewish community in Bulgaria has shown interest in preserving this linguistic heritage through specific club activities. In their study centered around this phenomenon, R. Fay and L. Davcheva have highlighted examples showing that the language is perceived as a way of communication with speakers from the Balkans and from Romance-speaking countries in Europe and beyond<sup>49</sup>. These examples demonstrate that, despite the processes that took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Judeo-Spanish remains a part of the way descendants of Sephardi

<sup>45</sup> FAY, Richard; DAVCHEVA, Leah. *Op. cit.*, pp. 6–8.

<sup>46</sup> *Страдание и спасение...*, с. 82, 185.

<sup>47</sup> SABATIER BULLOCK, Cécile. Migrants’ Identities in Multilingual Cities: Plurilingualism as Transformative Social Asset. In: *Multilingualism and Identity: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Wendy AYRES-BENNETT; Linda FISHER (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 91–108. Online. Available from: <https://www.doi.org/10.1017/9781108780469>. [viewed 2025-06-30].

<sup>48</sup> КЪНЧЕВ, Иван. *Цит. съч.*, с. 33.

<sup>49</sup> FAY, Richard; DAVCHEVA, Leah. *Op. cit.*, pp. 10–12. The study focuses on members of the community aged aged between 43 and 93 years in 2014, FAY, Richard; DAVCHEVA, Leah. *Tales of Ladino*. Online. Available from: <https://talesofladino.wordpress.com>. [Accessed: 2025-06-20].

Jewry understand and express their identity. The latter is now articulated in the context of the common European heritage, of exchange and communication in a global world. With this respect, it is noteworthy that publications on the Jewish community in Vidin are now accessible in Spanish, thus possibly filling a gap between individual perceptions or experiences and the outlook of the “others”<sup>50</sup>.

It has been observed that the Jewish community of Vidin and the surrounding area was historically small in numbers and that, due to its geographical situation, it also appeared to be isolated from major centers of Jewish life on the Balkans<sup>51</sup>. However, as we have seen, there is sufficient data that illustrates the way identities among the Sephardi Jewry in the region were articulated, negotiated and understood with regard to and through Judeo-Spanish. As in other urban areas, the language has played an important role in identity dynamics, preserving specific aspects of the Sephardi culture and worldview while also being an integral part of its adaptation.

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**Резюме.** Статията изследва връзката между език и идентичност въз основа на примера на юдео-испанския език и еврейската общност от Дунавския регион в северозападната част на българските земи. Основният фокус е регионът на Видин като градски център, където сефарадските евреи, носители на този език, се заселват още

през XVI в. и там споменът за тази общност е съхранен и до днес. Приведени са примери и за други градски центрове в региона, като Лом, предвид миграционните процеси в рамките на Дунавския регион. Изследването се основава на теренно проучване, както и на данни, които могат да бъдат разделени на две групи, като първата обхваща примери от периода от заселването на евреите до XIX в., а втората съответства на XX – XXI в. Първата част на статията поставя анализирания пример в контекст, като очертава накратко историята на сефарадската общност с акцент върху Видин и региона. Втората част разглежда конкретни примери за връзката между език и идентичност през гореспоменатите периоди.

**Ключови думи:** идентичност, юдео-испански, ладино, евреи, Видин, Лом.