The Genre of Folk Tales in the Sephardic Culture

Represented in the Context of Literary Works Collected by Matilda Koén-Sarano

Ritgerð til MA-prófs í Bókmenntir, menning og miðlun

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The Power of the Pen

*Man’s wisdom is at the tip of his pen,*

*His intelligence is in his writing.*

*His pen can raise a man to the rank*

*That the scepter accords to a King.*

Samuel ibn Nagrela HaNagid (993-1055/56)
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Abstract

The Jewish religion is subdivided into various currents and communities. One of those currents is the group of the Sephardim, the Sephardic Jews. Their ancestors descended from the Middle East and the Iberian Peninsula, from where they were expelled to countries all over the world between the years 1492 and 97 (Toledano 7).

During the flight from their Spanish home country, the Sephardim carried with them a rich culture of literature, linguistic skills and scientific knowledge, that they carried to places such as Turkey, Palestine, North Africa or Italy (Toledano 7). The Sephardic literary production was extremely active throughout the years before and after the expulsion and has been partially preserved until today. It contains a broad range of genres and works of sophisticated elaboration. The Jewish-Spanish, the unique language of the Sephardim is conserved in those literary works and can be examined by linguistic and historical researchers.

Upon closer examination, the Sephardic folklore, in particular the Sephardic folk tale, contains numerous details and broad information about the life of the Sephardim in past times and functions as a testimony of the cultural, religious, communal and superstitious beliefs that were commonly shared among the community members. By analysing the Sephardic folk tales that were compiled by Matilda Koén-Sarano in the works Folktales of Joha. Jewish Trickster (2003) and King Solomon and the Golden Fish. Tales from the Sephardic Tradition (2004), it is easy to understand social and religious structures of the Sephardim. The folk tales incorporate for example motifs of strictly divided gender roles and, at times, a misogynic attitude by the men towards womankind. Another key thing to mention is that the folk tales give an insight into the religious rites of the Sephardim and how they penetrated the communal life in every daily aspect. With regards to the superstitious beliefs, the narrations show that the people cultivated a strong belief in magical elements and mystical creatures, such as demons.
Introduction

The Jews have always been a people with a unique culture, tradition, maintenance of its religious customs and feeling of worldwide unity. A person who is born as a Jew belongs to the big and wide circle of Jewish members who can all come home, anytime, to their, as true home-country considered land, Eretz, Israel. The Jews are a people that not only looks back on a profound and deep-rooted history and tradition but also on an, at times, extremely tragic destiny.

In Matthew 27.24-25, the Jews take on them the responsibility of Jesus being crucified and speak: “His blood be on us, and on our children.” (The Bible, Authorized King James Version, Matthew. 27.24-25). A guilt with which the Jewish people has been burdened not only once but innumerable times during the history of mankind. Centuries after centuries, Jews were persecuted for practicing their faith, excluded from society and forced to leave their home-countries. One of those countries was Spain, in which in 1492, the ruling Catholic Monarchs issued a landmark edict, which officially expelled the Jewish population, forcing them to convert to Christianity or to leave Spain within four months (Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 22). While a staggering number of the Jewish population decided to undergo a conversion, a big percentage of it left Spain for good (Bernecker 14; Gerber 140).

The community of Jews descending from Spain received its nomination from the Hebrew word for Spain, Sepharad, in Hebrew letters ספרד (Gerber ix). During their diaspora they took with them not only their ethnical heritage but further the Spanish language that was in vernacular use during the fifteenth century. Further, within their transnational networks, they maintained their customs, their cultural traditions and their oral and written treasury of folk tales, which they managed to pass on and preserve until today. The folk tale has constantly played a central role within the Sephardic literature. It has been transmitted among the community members with the purpose to entertain but also to hand on their history and culture across successive generations. It was a tool of self-humoristic and yet serious stories that used to teach people of all ages, to make them laugh and cry about the beauty of life and the irony of fate. It can be considered as not merely a Jewish linguistic genre but as an
essential and profound part of their culture that helped them to keep their history and beliefs alive, as well as to stay optimistic and humoristic in times of dread and fear.

Taking into consideration the importance and value of this treasure of history, writers like Matilda Koén-Sarano who until today maintain the Ladino language in their works and write about Sephardic folk tales, hold more than the position of an author. They become the transmitter of a heritage in the form of stories that would have possibly fallen into oblivion, had it not been preserved in a written form. Nowadays, the Sephardic folk tales are published in several languages so that people from all over the world find access to them. To evaluate this literary treasure, the underlying work investigates the genre of Sephardic folk tales as historical sources of the Sephardic society in times past. With this in mind, this thesis relies on the folk tales of two published compilations by Matilda Koén-Sarano. Further, the reader is provided with a historical and linguistic frame about the Sephardic tradition and language in order to receive background information about the ethnic group of the Sephardim.

The main body of the thesis is structured into three chapters: The first chapter gives a general overview in section 1 and 2 of the Sephardic people and a historical background of the Jewish population living in Spain between the first Jewish settlements on the Iberian Peninsula and their expulsion in 1492. Their existence under the period of Arabic rule over the Iberian Peninsula is examined in section 2.1 and the increasing discrimination, persecution and oppression by the Spanish government and society is demonstrated in section 2.2. What is more, a summary of the Jewish life under the rule of the Catholic Monarchs and of the official expulsion from the Hispanic country is given in section 2.3. The historical overview ends with their search for refuge and their settlement in the Ottoman Empire during the seventeenth century AD.

In chapter two, this work investigates on the unique language of the Sephardim, the Jewish-Spanish, which is examined in subdivision 3 in order to understand its history and its crucial part within the Sephardic society. To conclude the second chapter, a summary of the most essential genres of the Sephardic literature that have been maintained over the centuries and a look at the significance and history of folk tales is given in the sections 4, 5 and 6.

The third chapter focuses specifically on the analysis of the Sephardic folk tale, leaning on two literary compilations of folk tales by Matilda Koén-Sarano: *Folktales of Joha,*
Jewish Trickster and King Solomon and the Golden Fish: Tales from the Sephardic Tradition. The features of the folk tales portrayed in those collections will be examined in subdivision 7.1, while information on the author Matilda Koén-Sarano is given in section 7.2. During the following analysis of the single folk tales in section 7.3 to 7.9, the work points out, how the social and communal form of the Sephardic society is represented in the narrations. The investigation focuses on the features of the Sephardic communal life and the organization of its gender roles. In the single chapters, the religious customs, as well as superstitious and magical components within the narrations, are examined.

By including a personal interview in the Appendix with Professor Samuel Hassid, a Greek Jew with Sephardic roots, the work gives insight into the personal and authentic experience of a Sephardi and how he perceives his connection to the folklore of the community.

This thesis is meant to explore the Sephardic tradition of folk tales and their historical value as documentations of the structures of the daily life of the Sephardic society in old times, putting this point in a historical, cultural and linguistic context.
Chapter One

1. Definition of the Term “Sephardim”

The term *Sephardim*, referring primarily to Jews of Spanish origin, is for many people meaningless and hard to connote with a specific definition when they hear it for the first time. In general, the history of the Sephardim on the Spanish peninsula is rather unknown to the broad masses, and people do not have much insight into the topic. When it comes to the definition of “Jewish”, most people think primarily about the Ashkenazim and the Jewish population of Israel. Judaism is mostly connected to the idea of the “holy land” and its “chosen people”. That the Jewish population also traces back a long way in the Spanish history, is, for many people, an unexplored subject. Nonetheless, the Sephardic community represents an ethnic group with a far-reaching history and deeply rooted tradition within the Iberian context.

The term *Sephardism* is not limited to a geographical, linguistical or ethnical definition, but only to a cultural distinctness from the other Jewish currents (Toledano 9). Notwithstanding, the members of Sephardic origin attribute their feeling of unity to mutual local origins, a shared language, a strong literary tradition and commonly shared rites with regards to religious practices, social norms, culture and food (Alexander-Frizer 12). The denomination Sephardim has its roots in the Hebrew word *Sepharad*, a word that, until today, refers to the people and country of the Iberian Peninsula (Bossong 13). The definition is mentioned in one passage from the Bible, more specific in the prophecy of Obadiah, in which it refers to one of the locations where deported people of Jerusalem found a place to live (Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 23). The local attribution of the Sephardim differs from other Jewish groups like the Ashkenazim who descend from Mid-Europe and Eastern countries such as Germany, Poland, Russia, Hungary, or Lithuania (Bossong 8).

Even though the term is frequently used as an oppositional group to the Ashkenazim, the Sephardim’s way of practicing the Jewish belief does not differ in any spiritual form from the Jewish customs that the Ashkenazim cultivate (Bossong 9; Alexander-Frizer 12). The definition as an ethnic group, referring to the common cultural and local origin of the people,
is complex in the case of the Sephardim. Through their dispersal after the expulsion from Spain in 1492, the emigrating groups experienced many influences from the countries where they settled down, so that many smaller sub-groups came to existence (Alexander-Frizer 12). The single communities turned into Sephardic sub-groups that inhabited, amongst other places, territories of the Balkan States, Maghreb, or Israel. Momi Dahan, Professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, is of the opinion that the modern definition of Sephardim refers to those Jews who descend from Asia, Africa, or are born in Israel but whose fathers descend from these countries (Dahan qtd. in Alexander-Frizer 20). Nevertheless, the term Sephardi refers in its core to the Jews who belong to the progeny of Spanish Jews who were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492.

In Israel, where both groups, the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim, lead a life of coexistence, the Sephardim are a group of a strict traditionalism that is opposed to any kind of secular or modern way of living (Bossong 12). They founded their own Israeli political party in 1984, which is assessed as an ultra-conservative party (ibid.). Frequently, the Sephardim complain about a downgraded status within the Israeli society and about having an inferior status compared to the Ashkenazim. Despite of the original place of descendance, the Sephardic ethnic group is united by the use and knowledge of an ancient form of communication. Descending from the Medieval Spanish, the traditional Judeo-Spanish language, also commonly called Ladino, even though this denomination refers only to the written form of the language, can be considered of having the same status for the Sephardim as the Yiddish Language, or also called Jewish-German, for the Ashkenazim (Bossong 9). Beside of the Jewish-Spanish, nowadays spoken by only a small part of the Sephardic community, its members are also used to another way of pronouncing the Hebrew, which is an essential part of the individual identity of the ethnic-group. The pronunciation distinguishes the Jewish sub-groups in the way of speaking Hebrew, as well as in their way of praying, and opens the way for identifying each other, meaning the Sephardim can make out another Sephardi only by their way of speaking. The linguistic aspects are hence extremely essential and important in the field of identity and intersectionality of the Sephardim.
In the self-recognition as Sephardic Jews, there are two currents that help the community of today to be self-aware and hand on their traditions and culture in a feeling of pride: The first current of self-identification is attributed to the feeling of being a single member of the big entity of connected community members that not only have their Jewish belief in common but in addition their local and cultural Iberian heritage; and the second current is the identification as Sephardic through a big protective coverage that is formed by history, culture, language and literature (Alexander-Frizer 12). Those two types of self-identification and acceptance are portrayed and implemented in the Sephardic folk literature. Like this, the literature gains in importance with regards to its ethnic significance. Alexander-Frizer states that, by the incorporation and reflection of Sephardic “communal themes, norms, and group values” plus “the storyteller’s identification with the narrated material as an expression of ethnic belonging” the Sephardic folk literature functions as representation of the Sephardim as an ethnic group (12). Both implementations of ethnic belonging within the folk literature of the Sephardim go primarily back to their extended and profound history on the Iberian Peninsula, which will be examined now.

2. History of the Sephardic Jews on the Iberian Peninsula until the 17th Century AD

The history of a Jewish existence on the Iberian Peninsula and the Jewish people as an essential part of the early Hispanic society goes back to the very past times. Yet, theories about the earliest settlements and migrations to the territory can only be based on assumptions, since no certain proof exists, and the investigations rely on uncertain sources. Historians like Díaz-Mas claim that a first possible arrival of a growing number of Jews to the peninsula was favoured by trading relations with the Phoenicians that took place since the tenth century BC (“Los Sefardíes” 17). Other historical sources date a Jewish presence back to the sixth century BC, a period of the Iron Age on the Spanish territory (“Los Sefardíes” 17).

During this time, in 586 BC, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar the Second, who ruled the Babylonian dominion between 605 and 562 BC, conquered Jerusalem for the third
time and ordered the complete destruction of the first Temple of Jerusalem plus the
deporation of Jews to Babylonia (Biografiasyvidas.com). As a consequence, the Jewish
population fled their territory in the East and settled, according to legends, amongst other
places, on the Iberian Peninsula (Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 17). On the peninsula, that was
sparsely populated by Celts and Iberians at this point of time, the refugees could find a land
to settle down (“Meilensteine der Geschichte Spaniens”). Another assumed existence which
relies on archaeological discoveries such as grave stones, goes back to the 1st century BC
(Rehrmann 43).

First evidence for an officially archaeologically proven Jewish existence on the
Iberian Peninsula can be dated back to the dominating presence of the Roman Empire on the
territory, which lasted for over seven centuries, from 206 AD until 625 BC (Bossong 15;
“Meilensteine der Geschichte Spaniens”). In the year 70 AD, the destruction of the second
Temple of Jerusalem by the emperor Titus (39-81 AD) made the Jewish home-territory
inaccessible for its former inhabitants and led to an arbitrary dispersal of the Jewish people
within the Roman Empire (Bossong 15). Hebrew inscriptions that serve as archaeological
evidence verify that the Jewish refugees that came all the way down South to the province of
Hispania settled down mostly in cities on the Spanish coastlines of the Balearic Islands, such
as Menorca, and on the peninsula itself, in cities like Granada, Córdoba and Zaragoza, where
they experienced a life without religious persecution (Bossong 15ff.). They developed a
Hispanized form of existence, adjusting to the social and economical way of living that was
pre-dominant on the peninsula, while they could keep their Jewish belief and the rites that
came with it. They found their occupation primarily in the work sectors of trading, in skilled
works, and in the agriculture and viniculture (ibid.).

However, the predominance of the Christian belief successively increased on the
peninsula and thus, the period of peaceful coexistence and interaction between Christian and
Jewish communities concluded bitterly with the events of the first episcopal Synod of Elvira
in 305 AD (Bossong 16; Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 18). The synod prohibited for example
mixed-marriages between Christians and Jews, the blessing of Christian fields by Jewish
believers, and the participation of Jews in common social activities, such as banquets (ibid.).
The Jewish population and their religious presence in Iberia were considered as a threat for
the Christian belief and its dominion over the religious groups. An ongoing conversion to Christianity of the occupying Germanic tribes, since the beginning of the fifth century AD, led to a significantly deterioration of the relations between the distinct religious communities. In 587 AD the, at this point of time ruling Visigothic king Reccared the First, gave up the pre-dominant faith of Arianism and adopted the Catholic Christian belief with the determination to solidify it within his kingdom (Bossong 17). By that, for the first time in history, the Iberian Peninsula formed a territory that was united under one monopolistic political and religious force (ibid.). This was a redevelopment of the kingdom that facilitated the ruling over the sovereign territory and its trading with other countries but at the same time opened the way for a constantly widening gulf within the religious society (Bossong 17; Queralt del Hierro 36).

Along with the establishment of the Christian faith as the dominant religion within the country, the Jewish believers were considered as pagan and inferior to the Christian population, facing obligatory restrictions and prohibitions imposed on the expression of their belief and their free interaction in the daily life of the society. Henceforward, Jews were not allowed to fill public positions, have Christian slaves, which extremely complicated a successful work in the agriculture at this point of time, and to erect synagogues ad lib (Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 18; Niemetz). Another step further towards the religious discrimination and expulsion of Jews was taken by the Visigoth King Sisebut, who issued an edict of forced conversion in the years 615 and 616 that demanded from the Jewish population to choose if they wanted a conversion to Christianity or to leave the Christian kingdom (Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 18). The resolution was based on King Sisebut’s fear of a possible porosity of the Christian belief coming from an assumed proselytism of Christians by the Jews and turned him into, according to Bossong, the first and original initiator and inventor of the Spanish Anti-Judaism (Bossong 18).

A steady increasing experience of extremely harsh and constrictive limitations imposed on the free expression of their religion, and undignified degradations within the Hispanic class of society, because of their spiritual conviction, made the Jewish population feel desperate, worn out and receptive for a cultural renaissance. They were hoping for a rethinking among the society towards a more liberal coexistence between the different
religious currents (Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 18f.). This form of rethinking was introduced only one hundred years later by an invading force from the South.

2.1 Life under Arabic Rule

A change of circumstances was literally washed ashore on the Iberian Peninsula in the year 711 AD when Muslim troops, Moors and Berbers, with the order to conquer the territory arrived under the command of Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād (“Ṭāriq ibn Ziyād”; “Meilensteine der Geschichte Spaniens”). The military offense descended from the northern part of Africa, primarily from Egypt and Maghreb. The first groups of invaders set ashore in Gibraltar, a small tail of land in the South of the Hispanic Peninsula (Queralt del Hierro 41). From there they gradually began to invade and conquer the Visigothic territory of dominion. The last Visigothic king, King Roderick, fell in 711 during a battle on the field against the Arabs (“Roderick. King of Visigoths”). The following conquest took place successively but steadily and defeated the porous powers of the Visigothic ruling order throughout the following eight years. In this short period of time, the Arab invaders managed to occupy almost the whole Hispanic part of the peninsula, minus a small territory in the North that was inhabited by Asturian Christians, who showed a vehement resistance towards the new-comers. However, in the year 755 AD, the biggest part of the area had been converted into a unified Arab dominion under the name Al-Andalus, province of the Muslim empire, that was subdivided into caliphates, strongly religiously influenced Muslim states, that reigned the segregated areas (Tabuenca).

In the same year, Abd-Al-Rahman the First, descending of the Omeya dynasty, received enough support from the population on the Iberian Peninsula in order to become the new emir of Al-Andalus (Tabuenca; Queralt del Hierro 44). He established an emirate that was independent from the caliphate in Baghdad and was organized by its own governance and bureaucracy (ibid.). During his reign, political remnants and commercial relations were cut off to the still partly existing control by the religious government in Baghdad. From this time onwards, Abd ar-Rahman the Third was an autonomous caliph who reigned the unified
territory of Al-Andalus, keeping his headquarters in Córdoba and spreading his control and governmental power from there over the other caliphates of Al-Andalus (Queralt del Hierro 45). During the term of office of Abd ar-Rahman the Third and his son al-Hakam the Second, ruling between 961 and 976, who both governed in a wise manner of religious openness and guided by the idea of forming a monocultural and unified kingdom under their rule (Tabuenca; Queralt del Hierro 45).

During all these immense changes, movements and interferences in the country, the Jewish population on the Iberian Peninsula was comparatively well off. From the moment of the arrival of the Muslim troops in Gibraltar, the Jews who had suffered from an increasing number of setbacks in the preceding years under Visigothic rule, sensed its chance to regain its former freedom and recognition. Therefore, the Islamic arrivals were considered liberators of the Jewish people and became quickly associated with the Jewish home front, establishing together with them a form of resistance and defence (Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 18; Toledano 31ff.). Occupied places like Granada, Córdoba, Seville and Toledo were put into the protective hands of Jewish defenders who helped to prevent Christian troops from reconquering them (Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 19). Thus, the conquest of the territory was facilitated and a first bonding between the two religions was established, which was favoured by the common Christian enemy (Toledano 32).

The Muslim tolerance and acceptance towards *ahlu al-kitab*, Arabic for “People of the Book”, referring to religious believers that, just as Muslims, base their religious belief and customs on a holy book, opened the way for an extremely peaceful and respectful coexistence between Muslims and Jews within the Al-Andalusian territory (Toledano 27, 32; Romero Castelló and Kapón 26). Even though the Jews faced personal limitations, those boundaries were tolerable and widely accepted by them. They received a secondary social status as *dhimmis*, “protected minorities”, had to pay a special per-capita tax called *jizya* and faced a number of restrictions opposed on their everyday life (Bossong 20ff.; Toledano 32). Regardless, the Jewish population was free in expressing and cultivating their belief and was allowed to participate unrestrainedly in the economical, social, educational, judicial and cultural happenings (ibid.). This relatively peaceful era allowed the inhabitants of the Spanish
Peninsula to focus on activities other than war or defense and shifted their interests to areas of the humanistic, scientific and other educational fields.

At the beginning of the 8th century, the Jewish population that had left the country years before due to the religious restrictions of the Visigoths, dared to re-enter the Spanish territory. The Sephardic people who had undergone a forced conversion reconverted from Christianity to Judaism and a new Sephardic identity of self-confidence began to form under the Muslim rule (Bossong 21). The Sephardic culture manifested itself more and more among the Spanish society and experienced its Golden Age in culture and education between the 10th and 11th century, side by side with the other religions that cohabitated Spain during this period. Iberia experienced a splendid era of social and artistic movement, an extremely rich period of cultural transformation, literary translations, trading cooperation, exchange of languages, ideas, as well as goods, and a flow between the arts.

The Golden Age not only supported the artistic and scientific enrichment of the individual but also of the whole society, making education, investigation and research more available to the people. An immense number of libraries was established, a staggering number of seventy in Córdoba alone, but also the architectural sector progressed widely (Gerber 29). Córdoba was recognized as the centre of medicine and technology and other Spanish cities like Seville and Toledo were known as some of the most culturally flourishing cities of the Western Hemisphere (ibid.; Romero Castelló and Kapón 26). During this time, the Jewish population participated freely and generously in the political and social life. Jews showed great activity in scholarly positions, led schools of translation and held important positions in the dominant Islamic culture.

While, for a long time, Latin and Greek had been the lingua franca of the Middle Ages in religious and scientific subjects and literary works, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries a translation between a broader field of languages evolved. Especially Toledo became a linguistic assembly point, where the Toledo School of Translators, La Escuela de Traductores de Toledo, quickly gained reputation among the scholars of Europe (Lebert). The school was a widely known and acknowledged working space for European scholars, owing to its high educational standards and the comparably high incomes that a scholar could gain there (Lebert). The linguists, who came there from all over the world to practice their
profession, focused on translating major philosophical, religious, scientific and medical works from one language to another: from Arabic and Greek into Castilian, Latin or Hebrew (Decter in Zohar 86; Lebert). During this process, the Jewish scholars commonly functioned as mediators between the languages, orally translating an Arabic scripture into Castilian, while a Christian scholar would transcribe the Castilian and translate it into Latin (Decter in Zohar 86).

Notwithstanding, a free scholarly and economical activity was only possible, as long as the Muslim religion was acknowledged by the Jews as the superior religion of the country, while, simultaneously, they had to accept their own status of inferiority (Bernard Lewis qtd. in “Muslim Spain (711-1492)”). Still, the members of the Sephardic population could keep their customs, were not forced to live in ghetto-like quarters within a city, nor to convert to Islam. Furthermore, they were not banned from any particular work sector or profession besides positions in high government offices and within the medical sector, in which they experienced restrictions respectively (Toledano 32). The freedom, acceptance, esteem and fast progress that the Jewish people experienced on the Spanish territory during this time favoured the cultural and scientific progress of Jewish scholars in this territory, such as Saadiah Gaon (892-942), whom Haim Henry Toledano calls the “founding father of Sephardic culture” (6). Saadiah Gaon conducted profound and sophisticated studies, in both Arabic and Hebrew, in the linguistic, grammatical, translational and theological field (Toledano 6ff.). He came to admirable achievements in the Hebrew poetry and in the recording of the Jewish law (ibid.). Further, he was active in all possible fields of research and represents until today a milestone of Jewish scholarly progress.

Yet, even though the scientific and eager will to learn was spreading rampantly among the Sephardic community of Spain, their ways of proceeding and their spiritual work were extremely entangled with the Babylonian Yeshivot, a Jewish educational institution, situated in Baghdad (Toledano 6). The breaking away from this institution and the evolution towards an independent Sephardic culture happened gradually during the lifetime of Hasdai ibn Shaprut (915-975), whose philosophical and scientific work attracted many other Spanish-Jewish scholars to come to Spain (Toledano 6ff.). Similarly, Samuel ha-Nagid (993-1055/56), Solomon ben Yehuda Ibn Gabriol (1022-1058/70) and Judah ha-Levi (1075-1141)
are all Spanish-Jewish representatives who conducted their philosophical, scientific and linguistic studies on the Iberian Peninsula.

Moreover, the Jewish poet Dunash ben Labrat (920-990), who was one of the inventors of the Spanish-Hebrew poetic art, modified the Hebrew expression in such a way that it imitated the Arabic poetic style of rollicking meters (Decter in Zohar 79). Like this he made it possible for the Hebrew speaking population to express themselves in a novel and elaborated poetic style of their own language (ibid.). The artistic work of Dunash was supported and protected for a long time by Hasdai ibn Shaprut (915-970), who himself was a Jewish medic, conducting translations of manuscripts of the botanical and medical field between various languages, such as from Greek to Latin and from Latin to Arabic (Bossong 21). Later, Moses Maimonides, born 1138 in Córdoba, became one of the most famous Sephardic philosophers and scientists of his time, studying amongst other disciplines, physics, law and ethics (Blau in Stillman and Zucker 203). Even though he and his family had to leave Spain when he was around twenty years old, he never stopped considering himself as a Spaniard and cultivating the Jewish-Spanish beliefs and traditions (ibid. 203.ff). Other Judeo-Spanish scholars and intellectuals descended from an important scientific and spiritual centre of the Jewish intellectual life that was located in Lucena, a municipality of Córdoba (Gerber 38f.). The progress of Jewish scholars in education and literature was admired among the Spanish society but the coming centuries ruptured the participation of the Jews of Spain within the society due to the religious battles for dominance.

2.2 Persecution and Oppression

In the peaceful and steady time of progress under Arabic rule, the Jews of the Aljamas, the Jewish communities of Spain, not only enjoyed an immensely impetus in their social ranking but also a profound and acknowledged manifestation in their status within the Spanish society (Romero Castelló and Kapón 42). They were not only tolerated but rather formed a contributing part to the intellectual and economical upswing and development on the Iberian territory. They considered it as their homeland, a second Jerusalem that they defended against
others (Gerber ixf.). To this homeland they served physically, as well as educationally, contributed materially, spiritually and paid their taxes (ibid.). This made it even harder and more hurtful for them, when the discrimination against their religion and participation in society flared up again.

In the next centuries, an increasing exclusion, based primarily on a religious breeding ground, was set in motion through the invasion of the Almoravid and Almohad Moors, beginning in 1085AD, who overthrew the reigning liberal caliphate and began to persecute both Christians and Jews on the Peninsula (Romero Castelló and Kapón 28; Kamen 19). Additionally, was the exclusion favoured by negative developments in the economy, the trading sector, and a competition among the skilled traders. A feeling of anger and jealousy among the non-Jewish society towards the Jewish inhabitants might be comprehensible up to a certain point, considering that the Jewish people enjoyed a strong connection to the upper class of the Spanish society and cultivated high ranks in the society (Romero Castelló and Kapón 42). One advantage over the Christian population was that they were allowed to lend money and, thanks to their religious education, most of the Jewish people knew how to read (ibid.). According to Kamen, the Jews held a monopoly on the performing of the medical profession, which means that people of other religions were either less educated or not able to practise medical professions because of the Jewish dominance (21).

Notwithstanding, an economical separation and social exclusion were rather the consequence of a religious, strategic and political ideology, to which they fell victims. The proliferating intolerance approached successively over the following centuries, favoured by the Reconquista, the gradual reconquest of the peninsula by the Christian troops. In combination with the proceeding Christian belief, Europe suffered from a lot of harsh conditions during the twelfth and thirteenth century: Famines, desperation, the raging black death that spared no social class, and ongoing, cruel religious wars and conflicts (Domínguez Ortiz 15). The discontentment, violence and hopelessness among the Spanish society found its climax in a wave of antisemitic pogroms that began in 1391 and would last for one year (Gerber 113f.). The first uprisings against the Jewish population began on the recaptured Catholic territories and marked the last chapter of the Sephardic Jews living as tolerated citizens in Spain (Gerber 114).
In June of the mentioned year, peninsula wide antisemitic movements arose, stirred up by local anti-Semitic preachers like the agitator Ferrán Martínez, an archdeacon of Ecija (Gerber 113). Martínez had been vehemently lashing out against the Jewish population and had been arguing in favour of a strict expulsion of the Jewish population from Spanish towns for already more than thirteen years before the pogroms (Gerber 113; Lea 209ff.). The tumults of 1391 led to the murder and enslavement of thousands of Sephardic Jews, the destruction of Jewish Quarters, their synagogues, workshops and farms. At the same time, it culminated in a forced conversion to Christianity of up to one-third of the Spanish-Jewish population, equalling a figure of around 100,000 Jews at that time (Coleman 5; Gerber 114). Particularly harshly affected was Seville, where over 4,000 Jews were killed (Kamen 20). Domínguez Ortiz claims that, even though the actual reasons of the slaughtering are not clear, the happening of the pogroms can be attributed to an extreme usury by the Jews, that must have awoken the anger of their debtors, or the competition among the Jewish and non-Jewish tradesmen (15). On the other hand, Bossong states that this massacre was mostly the overflow of a religious fanaticism, that targeted the elimination and desecration of the Jewish belief and further, its substitution by the Christian one (48).

Hence, one of the most humiliating and drastic consequences of the pogroms for the surviving Jews were the forced conversions to Christianity, ordered by local Christian leaders. The conversion was conducted by baptism, an act that, in the Christian belief, is irrevocable (Bernecker 14; Bossong 59). The converted Jews were called judeo-conversos, cristianos nuevos, meaning “New Christians”, or marranos, literally translatable to “pigs” (ibid.). After this wave of involuntary conversions, there existed three groups of Jewish members in Spain: One group that openly and vehemently continued to practice Judaism; a second group that became or had become conversos during the attacks; and a third group that had officially changed their religion but privately renounced their forced baptism and stayed Jewish, continuing to practice Jewish rites (Gerber 119ff.). With the purpose to proselytize as many Jews as possible, laws were passed with the purpose to label, denunciate and separate the Sephardic population from the Christian people.

Therefore, in 1412, the Dominican Vincent Ferrer and the bishop Pablo de Santa María issued various edicts according to which the Jewish population had to distinguish itself
by the way of dressing, being allowed to wear only certain fabrics and in addition an identification mark on their clothing (Bernecker 14; Kamen 24). In addition to that, they were prohibited from trading, interacting, and even speaking to Christians (ibid.). Further, they were extremely limited in their choice of profession since, in order to find work, they had to provide a proof of “blood purity”, the so-called estatutos de limpieza de sangre (ibid.). It consisted of made up Christian rules that should prove that one had no Jewish ancestors (ibid.). Those restrictions did not only shift the focus of discrimination away from the religious aspect and towards the racial one but also drove high numbers of Jews, out of desperation and helplessness, to undergo the process of conversion during the following century (Bernecker 14).

Notwithstanding, a mere conversion did not satisfy the advocates of the expanding Christian belief which at this point of time dominated already most parts of the Spanish territories. A problem, that was determined as the Converso Problem, emerged due to an immense number of Judeo-conversos who converted solely on the surface but clandestinely kept their Jewish traditions (Coleman 5; Kamen 27). An increasing fear and obsession about these “troublemakers” arose among the Christian clergy. The Christian ambassadors developed a sheer panic over the New Christians, who would not give up their former religious rules, practiced Jewish customs and secretly hid their true conviction. Their mere existence in the Spanish country seemed to endanger the unification of the territory under Catholic rule. The converso problem led to a pathological suspicion, inspection and persecution of the formerly Jewish converts and their ostensible Catholic descendants. The inspection would soon find its peak in the establishment of the Spanish Inquisition, set up by the Catholic Monarchs in 1478.

2.3 Expulsion in 1492 and Search for Refuge

The Reconquista that had been in a constant progress from the North of Spain down to the South since the year 722, steadily forcing back the Arab occupiers from their dominion, found its strong and strict leadership in the unification of the royal houses of Castile and
Aragon. Their amalgamation was sealed with the marriage between the successors to the throne Isabella the First of Castile and Ferdinand the Second of Aragon. Their official marriage took place in 1469 (Bossong 51). Owing to their harsh will to spread the Christian belief, and their political understanding that they had to reinforce the kingdom with one single religion and one single language, which was Spanish, in order to regain a united country of inner-strength and solidarity, they were given the name Catholic Monarchs (ibid.). From the year 1476 they initiated their rigorous politics, manifested in the organization of an authoritarian monarchy (Queralt del Hierro 64).

Although their way of proceeding against the non-Christian population of the united country was extremely fanatic and cruel, it must be admitted that they were facing no easy task when they ascended the throne. At this point of time, Spain was in a political and religious disorder, with deep gatts between the single religious groups, civil-war-like conflicts among the inhabitants of the provinces, and a precarious financial situation (Kamen 9). Hence, the biggest challenge of the Catholic Monarchs was to bring peace to the agitated masses, and their method for that was to force it upon them by a missionary, Catholic zeal (Kamen 9). Even though neither Isabella nor Ferdinand felt a particularly personal animosity towards the Sephardim out of racism or on the base of purely religious reasons, they felt the urge to rule them out for the sake of a political enthusiasm of creating a unified, economically and politically stable Spain (Domínguez Ortiz 28ff.). Therefore, they developed an increasing fear of heresy and crypto-Judaism, meaning the outwardly adhering to the prevailing social-religious mores and values, while secretly maintaining loyalty to the Jewish nation and religion. To eradicate this “omnipresent” crypto-Judaism, the monarchs decided with the permission of the pope to establish the Spanish Inquisition, which only a couple of years later, in 1481, began to function in Seville, where the first ones to burn at the stake were various members of the best known converso families (Coleman 5; Gerber 130).

In spite of the triumphant progress of the Inquisition throughout the next years, as well as the harsh control and punishments of the Sephardic Jews that led to a number of fairly voluntary conversions, the Catholic monarchs decided to expel the Jewish community from Spain. This decision was based on a couple of incidents between Jews and non-Jews during the following years of 1478. As a consequence, on March 31, in 1492, the Catholic Monarchs
issued a landmark edict, the *Edict of Expulsion of the Jews from Spain and its possessions*, which drastically changed the life of the Sephardic population, as well as the entire Spanish nation, forever (Borovaya 6). The edict stated that every Jew who was not willing to convert to Christianity by baptism within four months, until July 31, 1492, would either have to leave the country or be executed (Kamen 29).

Although it is complicated to estimate an accurate number of Sephardim living in Spain at this point of time, due to the high figures of *conversos*, it is possible to calculate a figure of circa 235,000 Jews who were affected by the landmark edict (Domínguez Ortiz 44). The numbers regarding the Sephardim who emigrated also vary extremely in their exactness. While some historians talk about up to 800,000 or even two million Jewish believers who left the country, the most accurate figure varies around 100,000 people (Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 23; Domínguez Ortiz 43). Domínguez Ortiz explains that of the Jewish population, a number of 165,000 members took the decision to leave Spain, of which around 20,000 died on the way (44). The atmosphere was quick-tempered, and the Jews were forced to act rashly and impulsively. Like this, even though the Spanish-Jews felt betrayed and disappointed of the exclusion from their home-country, in an act of panic and fear around 50,000 of them decided to convert to the Christian belief and were baptized (Domínguez Ortiz 44; Gerber x;). The people who left their home-country faced high costs that they could hardly cover with the money that they received by selling their belongings. Further, due to a prohibition on the export of gold and silver for the Jews, they could primarily bring non-monetary belongings and traded their properties for relatively cheap means of exchange (Kamen 30). Kamen explains that, in some cases, the affluent part of the Sephardim could help the Jews of the middle class with covering the upcoming costs for the journey, while others who tried to interchange their goods, were treated with disrespect and humiliation by the Spanish population (ibid.). The costs of the exile forced the impecunious part of the Jewish population to stay and accept the imposed conversion to the Christian belief because they could not afford to set off to another country (ibid.).

The Sephardim who took the decision to leave their home behind had to find, within an extremely short time, a country to which they could move. In the process of an arbitrary
dispersal, the first destinations were some of the neighbouring countries of Spain, for the simple reason of their geographical proximity and, most likely, also of the linguistic similarities that existed in countries such as Portugal and France. While one part of the Spanish-Jewish refugees proceeded down to the South and settled down in territories of Maghreb, the majority of the expelled Jews, around 70,000, migrated to Portugal, where they could settle down among already existing Jewish communities or from where they continued the diaspora to other countries, such as France, the Netherlands, England, or Germany (Bossong 57, 70; Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 56). Inclusive in Portugal the asylum was only of a limited period of time, since the marriage between Isabella the Second of Castile, the Catholic Monarchs’ daughter, and the King don Manuel the First built the foundations for an expulsion of the Jews in 1497 (Bossong 70; Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 57).

Another destination of refuge was Italy, where they could quickly find their place in society and gain recognition in the fields of trades and manual crafts. What is more, they could develop their own writing culture, open printing houses and publish literary works in Spanish and Ladino, as for instance the Ferrara Bible (1553) that represents one of the greatest literary and cultural achievements of the Sephardic community in Italy (Vicet 66). Publications in their own mother tongue were a great achievement that helped them to maintain their identity and tradition (Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 56). Yet, also from Italy they had to leave due to an increasing ghettoization and hostility towards them. During the sixteenth century they were successively expelled from all parts of Italy, except Rome and Ancona (Bossong 86).

After periods of seeking for asylum and suffering from captivity, enslavement, murders, further persecutions and expulsions, the Jewish refugees found one place in the world where they were welcomed with open arms and could settle down in a relatively stable peace: The Ottoman Empire.

The Ottoman Empire, at this point of time, experienced its “Second Period”, which took place between the years 1413 and 1566 (Frank 57). In this epoch, the Ottoman Empire reached its most brilliant peak in cultural and economical aspects, and its farthest territorial expansion under Sultan Suleiman the First, the Magnificent, who reigned between 1520 and 1566 (Frank 57, 98ff.). Thanks to a high heterogeneity and a variety of distinct nations and
religions living in the Empire, it was welcoming towards the arrival of the Jewish religion. All the same, the primarily leading religion of the country was the Islam (Molho 1; Meyuhas Ginio 56).

Sultan Bayezid the Second, the “holy” Sultan, who reigned the Ottoman Empire between 1481 and 1512, comprehended the value that the Jewish migrants brought with them in the form of wisdom and educational abilities. He allowed the Jewish immigrants to enter and live freely in his Empire, expecting in return something that is nowadays called “brain-gain” for his society: The gain of educated people, who could support and help his territory to further progress and blossoming. Ironically, it has been conveyed that his death might have been provoked by his Jewish personal physician, who is said to have poisoned him on authority of Bayezid the Second’s son during a journey (Frank 86).

Within the Empire, the Sephardim counted at their most present times, by the turn of the twentieth century, with around 250,000 members, who segmented themselves into different groups of organization and functioning (Borovaya 4; Meyuhas Ginio 63). Their central locations of their flourishing Sephardic culture lay in the cities Istanbul, Salonica, and Izmir (Borovaya 5). The Sephardim quickly gained a foothold in the local sections of the economy, the military, in offices and tradesmen occupations. In general, they could live under relatively good circumstances since, like under the Arab occupation of Spain, they had the status of “People of the Book”. The Sephardic community quickly counted more members than the community of the Byzantine Jews, who slowly adopted their religious rites and language, and the Judeo-Spanish gradually turned into a lingua franca between the existing Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire (Gerber 156; Romero Castelló and Kapón 48). In addition to this, the Jewish communities could maintain their own modes of organization, their traditions, dress codes and religious costumes. Through their connection to other Jewish communities in Europe, they developed with them a blooming trading activity with goods like silk, herbs, cotton, leather, pearls or wax (Romero Castelló and Kapón 50). Notwithstanding, they were obliged to pay the jizya, the additional tax, and if they wanted to hold a higher position in society, they had to convert to Islam (Romero Castelló and Kapón 48ff.).
In the light of this tempestuous and proud but tragic history of the Sephardic Jews, the field of literature and folk lore reaches a new significance. In times of literary progress but especially during the time of persecution and oppression, the Jewish people needed a form of staying alive, a form of humour that simultaneously would convey their traditions, with the purpose to hand them down to the successive generations. Happiness and suffering in times of war and peace were packed into stories and tales, which could then be handed on to another believer. The rich treasure of this literature, in particular, the genre of the folk tale, will be examined in the following chapters.

Chapter Two

3. The Judeo-Español: History and characteristics of the Ladino language

The most common names used for the Sephardic language are Jewish-(or Judeo-) Spanish, Ladino, Spanyol, Judezmo, españolit or espaniol (Benabu; Hassid “Re: Master thesis”; Sheer 1). The term Ladino is an ancient expression of the Spanish Middle Ages, descending from Spanish Latino, which was used to describe a person of Semitic ancestry who had knowledge of Romance or another local variety of the Vulgar Latin (Vicet 17). The term Ladino is many times incorrectly used for the language in its spoken and its written form while, in reality, the definition of Ladino refers solely to the written form of Spanish in Hebrew letters (Roth in Stillman and Stillman 253). Ladino has never existed in an oral form but has always been used in a literary form, while its spoken version can be basically called Spanish or like one of the other mentioned terms above (ibid.). Another term that needs to be determined more closely is the definition of Judezmo that originally refers only to the colloquial espaniol of the Balkan countries that was used during the modern period (ibid. 251).

Linguists discuss if the Jewish-Spanish is an own language or rather a dialect of the Spanish language. While Molho states that the Jewish-Spanish is nowadays “un dialecto moribundo”, a dying dialect of which it is almost impossible to trace back its origins and
ways of development, Borovaya argues that the *espaniol* is and always has been the language of use for the Sephardim (Borovaya 16; Molho 18). While Judeo-Spanish is questioned in its existence and its characteristics as a proper language, Yiddish, the ethnic language of the Ashkenazi Jews, is rarely described as a dialect of German but rather as the own language of the Ashkenazim (Borovaya 16). The reasons for this distinction between the two ethnical languages is not entirely clear. With the purpose to reference between the status of a language and the status of a dialect, four indications are taken as a guideline: First, compared to a language, a dialect does not have a standard or codified form; second, it is never, or only in rare occasions, used in a written form; third, the speakers of the dialect do not belong to a state of their own; forth, the dialect is inferior in its status with regards to its prestige compared to the standardized form of communication within a country (Vicet 5). Referring to the Judeo-Spanish, only the third point of these guidelines does not match with the Sephardic language.

The similarity between the modern form of Spanish and the Jewish-Spanish can be compared to the relations between Middle High German and the modern form of German. Middle High German was an ancient form of German that was used in a spoken and written form during the High Middle Ages, by the middle of the eleventh until the middle of the fourteenth century. It can still be read and understood to a big part, by German speakers but is not used in a colloquial form anymore. In this light, the Jewish-Spanish can be clearly determined as an own language since also Middle High German is considered as a language that marks a stage of development of the German language but fell into obsoleteness. With this in mind, the *espaniol* and the Ladino become a symbol for a national and cultural pride and will be considered and treated as an independent language in this text (Borovaya 16).

The roots of the Jewish-Spanish lie in the Romance language, that was in a vernacular use among the Spanish population during the Middle Ages (Meyuhas Ginio 21). In this time, a number of dialects existed, such as the Castilian, the Aragonese and the Catalan dialect. Since the biggest percentage of the Jewish population lived in the Kingdom of Castile before they were expelled in 1492, the dialect of Castile was the most notably adopted one in the Jewish-Spanish (ibid.). Initially, the language was written in the special design of the Rashi letters, that was called *hatzi qumulus* or *Soletreo* (Meyuhas Ginio 22). Nowadays, there are
only few people left, mostly descending from Mediterranean countries of the former Ottoman Empire, who can still read and understand the Ladino written down in the Rashi script (Sheer 1).

The term Judeo-Spanish refers to the Old Spanish used by the Jews in Spain before 1492, including Hebrew terms and unique linguistic features (Benabu). It was used for several centuries as a vernacular in informal atmospheres but also for business relations and during religious gatherings (Armistead and Silverman, “The Judeo-Spanish Ballad Chapbooks” 17; Besso, “Judeo-Spanish Proverbs: An Analysis” 22). It was taught already to the youngest generations by making it an integral part of the religious education in the cheder, the traditional Jewish elementary school, where children would learn the basic knowledge of the Jewish religion and its writing (Besso, “Judeo-Spanish Proverbs: An Analysis” 23). Additionally, the Jewish-Spanish was used as a medium of translation and religious works such as the Bible were transcribed into Ladino, giving it the same status of importance as other languages of translation, such as Latin and Greek (Armistead and Silverman, “The Judeo-Spanish Ballad Chapbooks” 17; Besso, “Judeo-Spanish Proverbs: An Analysis” 22).

At the time of their expulsion from Spain, the Sephardim experienced an abrupt cut in the development of the Jewish-Spanish and its connection to the Spanish spoken on the Iberian territory. When a small ethnic group is locally divided and separated, not only its traditions and customs are endangered of vanishing but also its language is cut down to a minimized use between the remaining communities of the ethnic group. Over the course of time, the influences of more dominant languages of other countries imprint their characteristics on the original language of the ethnic group. The same happened to the Judeo-Spanish. In 1492, the Sephardim lost their linguistic common base and simultaneously, Antonio Nebrija (1441-1522), Spanish scholar, historian and linguist, published the first grammar of the Spanish language, called Gramática de la lengua castellana. Since the Sephardim did no longer live on the Spanish territory, they missed any of those developments of the Spanish language (Meyuhas Ginio 22ff.).

In addition to that, even though the Sephardim brought their language with them when they left Spain, its use diminished quickly. According to Borovaya, the function, cultural prestige and status of Ladino and espaniol changed in a nonlinear fashion, predicated on its
interaction with other languages used in the countries where the emigrants settled down (16). In addition to that, owing to the traumatic experience of their expulsion and the betrayal by their home-country, the Sephardim hesitated in publishing works in their own language and restricted the activity for a while on religious works and the translation of great works that only existed in other languages than Spanish (Sheer 1). They kept the Jewish-Spanish and Ladino as languages of their own but, knowing that they would not return to their former home-lands, they adopted rapidly to the languages spoken among the new societies, incorporated new expressions, influences of other idioms, changes of terminology and of their form of expression (Besso, “Judeo-Spanish Proverbs: An Analysis” 22; Meyuhas Ginio 22).

Settling as strangers in different host countries, the Sephardim adjusted their behavior, form of communication and linguistic knowledge to the new countries (Borovaya 16). Nonetheless, at the same time, the members formed their own transnational networks and developed a *diglossia* or *polyglossia*, the use of two or more languages in specific situations or under different circumstances within a community (Borovaya 16). In cities like Salonika where the Jewish population formed the largest religious group, Sephardic members who limited their social life to interactions with other Jews of the community, they could live their entire life without speaking any other language than the Judezmo (Rozen qtd. in Borovaya 17). Hence, the *espannolit* spoken in Salonika is one of the purest forms of its kind that is still preserved up until today, while other variants of Judeo-Spanish became strongly “contaminated” with loanwords and changes by other languages, such as Turkish (Molho 5).

The Turkish language was, by far, the language with the biggest impact on the Jewish-Spanish, not only influencing but also substituting and erasing an immense part of its words and expressions (Molho 5). In territories, like South America, the more-progressed Spanish and Portuguese had large influences on the espaniol-speaking communities and successively turned into the first mother tongues of the Sephardic generations that were born there (Cazés and Bunis 66). The same phenomena occurred in other parts of the world: In Europe, the United States, Israel and other host countries, the language that once enjoyed a status of prestige and sophistication, fell gradually into oblivion. The intent of a language maintenance
within the dominating cultures turned slowly into a language shift that resulted in the replacement of the Ladino and its spoken version by other forms of communication within the new territories (Cazés and Bunis 66). It was gradually reduced to a usage among the elderly Jewish circles (ibid.). While the replacement of the language within the younger generations can be considered as something normal, coming with the adoption of the identity of the host country, among older generations, the linguistic integration occurred especially fast among the bourgeoisie, most likely due to their will to do business and trade with the existing societies (Molho 18).

The biggest and last existing community of traditional *espangnolit* speakers was in Salonika until it was exterminated in 1943 (Molho 18). No monolingual speaker of the *Judezmo* survived the Holocaust (Borovaya 16). Nowadays, the Jewish-Spanish exists in small communities but at the same time, new generations of the Sephardic Jews tend to adopt other languages as their mother tongue and its use is gradually increasing and diminishing (Armistead and Silverman, “The Judeo-Spanish Ballad Chapbooks” 17). Only a small number of writers make an effort to keep the ancient language alive and present. Yet, the maintenance, preservation and ability to understand this language, are a privilege and necessity that once it is lost, it will be irretrievably gone.

Since the Judeo-Spanish is a historical witness and preservation of the Old Spanish of the time before the sixteenth century, inclusive all its grammatical and lexical characteristics and forms, it is one of the most valuable linguistic treasures that the linguistic researchers have of this era (Benabu; Meyuhas Ginio 22ff.). Lester Fernandez Vicet concludes that, after the expulsion in 1492, the Spanish of the Sephardim was almost completely isolated in its own milieu and so disconnected from the peninsular evolution that the medieval Hispanic epic and lyric traditions were preserved intact in the heart and everyday life of the Sephardim (23). The treasure of those written down sources represents a record of an archaic stage of Castilian and moreover, “a tremendous opportunity for the historic, linguistic and literary study of Spanish and European culture in general”, for which it is highly significant to preserve it for the coming generations (Vicet 23).
4. A historical review of the Sephardic literature

The Sephardic literature is rich, diverse and colourful with regards to its history, traditions, origins and genres. Even though the folk tale occupies a big part of the literary works that represent the Sephardic literary culture, other genres were not less influencing or of less significance for the transmission and dispersal of information about the cultural heritage, linguistic preservation and religious teachings of the Sephardim. Defining the term Sephardic literature, this text relies on the studies of Norman Roth who includes an extremely broad and reasonable spectrum of literature into the definition (Stillman and Stillman 250ff.). Roth defines Sephardic literature as the works of “creative or imaginative narrative, whether prose or rhyme, which is essentially fictional”, written down before or after the expulsion from Spain in 1492, composed in Ladino, Jewish-Spanish, Jewish-Arabic or another language, as long as the Sephardic background of the work’s author can be determined (Stillman and Stillman 250ff.). In the light of this definition, the genres of the Sephardic literature will be examined.

The Sephardic folk tale is undoubtedly one of the most significant and most developed literary heritages of the medieval Spanish literature and played a big role among the literary genres of the Renaissance and the Spanish Golden Age (Fontes 55). Those folk tales often contain a high number of euphemisms, conundrum, meaning riddles and word puns, as well as etiological jokes, which make them a pleasant and entertaining genre to read (Fontes 63). Still, there are other literary genres of the Sephardim that enjoy until today popularity and consideration because of their high literary elaboration and artistic sophistication of poetry. One of them is the genre of the ballad or in specific, the romancero, or romansa (epic), which is an entire corpus of a collection of Spanish folk ballads. It combines influences of Hispanic, Greek, French, Arabic and Turkish literary works and refrains (Haboucha xiv).

The traditional folk ballads find their origin already during the Middle Ages on the Iberian Peninsula (Armistead and Silverman, “Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews Volume II” 3). From there they were brought to other countries, orally or written down, by the expelled Sephardim of the year 1492 (ibid.). Therefore, the Sephardic ballads are considered
as extremely valuable survivals and contemporary testimonies of the medieval time period (ibid.). During the time of asylum in the Ottoman Empire, the Jewish *romansa* was conserved among the emigrants as one of the oldest sung genres, keeping the Sephardic literary and linguistic tradition alive (Armistead and Silverman, “The Judeo-Spanish Ballad Chapbooks” 173). By sustaining its lyrics, the people remembered their Spanish home-land, and cultivated a melancholic feeling towards the lost homes, families, and everyday life (ibid.). Especially women incorporated the *romansa* in their daily life by singing them with the purpose to entertain their children or to pass their own time (Sezgin in Zohar 221). Notwithstanding, in most cases only single sections, isolated lines of the original entire corpus or allusions to the performers, survived the relocation (Armistead and Silverman, “The Judeo-Spanish Ballad Chapbooks” 173). The ballads, just as the folk tales, which we will study more detailed later in this work, give historians and literary researchers an immense insight into the medieval society and Jewish culture, which makes them valuable and respected as archaeological time sources. Sephardic ballads such as *Roncesvalles, Mocedades de Rodrigo* or *La Mort Aymeri de Narbonne* exist frequently in different versions and forms, owing to their transmission between different performers, audiences and countries (Armistead and Silverman, “Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews Volume III. II.” 13; Armistead and Silverman, “The Judeo-Spanish Balad Tradition” 635).

In their distinctive and unique form, each ballad is a sophisticated work of art, a rounded off literary product, that passes on the history and destiny of itself, the author and a whole community (Armistead and Silverman, “Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews Volume III. II.” 15; Armistead and Silverman, “Folk Literature of the Sephardic Jews Volume II.” 26). It gradually emerged through a creative process, that formed and reshaped it over the course of time, adjusted by the person that would interpret it and to the listeners (ibid.). The Sephardic ballads count as one of the most important and impressive Jewish literary genres that were preserved until today. Written down in verses and interpreted with music during the presentation, the ballad was different to the folk tales in its outer form, transmission and way of performance yet showed a resemblance with regards to its content and target group.

Other literary genres that were used in a domestic and familiar context owe their abundance in number and variety to their simple and easy form of coming to existence. Those
genres are proverbs, refrains and sayings, in Judeo-Spanish *refranes i dichas*, word plays, and riddles, so-called *endivinas* in *Spanyol*. These stylistic forms of informal conversation were well known among the Sephardic society, transmitted orally between the individuals but also implemented in literary works. Beginning in the thirteenth century, authors of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance inserted popular folk materials, such as proverbs and sayings, in their poems and works of prose (Fontes 1ff.). Those insertions that were a good tool for the writers to build up an intimacy or connection between the audience and their works, reflected the personal opinion of an author and demonstrated an allusion to a commonly accepted truth.

Beside of the proverbs and sayings, the composers included riddles, refrains and other short excerpts from folkloric knowledge, expecting the audience to recognize and assimilate them with their own knowledge (Fontes 56). The proverbs, sometimes referred to as “transistorized wisdom”, are meant to underpin a conversation or text with a short, quickly understandable sentence that is used as a comment on a happening of any kind of circumstances (Besso, “Judeo-Spanish Proverbs: An Analysis” 22). Even though the origins of proverbs are extremely complex to trace back, experts assume that the they descended from the Occidental, Indian, Greek, or Roman culture and found their origin of use among the rural or domestic people (Molho 21; Besso, “Judeo-Spanish Proverbs. Their Philosophy” 370). Due to the truth within the sentence, accepted in an unspoken, mutual agreement by a society, and its moral value, combined with a timeless ability, the proverbs enjoy to this day, a wide popularity and use among all social classes within the Sephardic community (Besso, “Judeo-Spanish Proverbs: An Analysis” 22).

Among the Sephardim the genre of the proverb has always been immensely popular and can be traced back to the Old Testament, to the Book of Proverbs. Beside of that, there exist hundreds of proverbs that the Sephardim collected and used during any kind of period of the Spanish history, as well as after their expulsion to other countries (ibid. 22). The proverbs can be considered as short hints and summaries of the Sephardic tradition, their psychology and social rules, but at the same time are helpful for a linguistic analysis with regards to the Judeo-Spanish and the biblical Hebrew, the two languages in which they often quoted the proverbs (ibid. 22). The proverbs were used as a form of daily education for the
children but also for the grown-ups, giving advice about social ethics, human morals, and the communal life together (Armistead and Silverman, “The Judeo-Spanish Ballad Chapbooks” 17ff.). Some famous proverbs that are still kept until today in Judeo-Spanish are *No te burles del d’enfrente, ke te vine a la kavesa*, "Don’t laugh at your neighbor, it can happen to you, too", *De boka en boka, la pulga se haze gameyo*, “From mouth to mouth the louse becomes a camel”, *Mijor es tomar ombre sin paras, ke paras sin ombre*, “It’s better to take a man with no money, than money without a man”, or *Kon pasenya i fatiga, el elefante se kazo kon la ormiga*, “With patience and hard work, the elephant married the ant” (Tudorancea Ciuciu and Waldmann 129ff.). The rich treasure of proverbs is an evidence that the Sephardic community was in a strong communicative interaction and cultivated a high standard of literacy and eloquence. Its members cared about the behaviour of the others and observed the happenings within the ethnic group. Their way of teaching and educating each other, as well as the recognized importance of keeping alive morals, human values and a respectful form of living together, is a sign of a literary skillfulness, as well as an educated form of sophistication.

In a similar wide abundance exists a treasure of refrains and sayings in the Sephardic literature. Just as the proverbs, they were used to liven up the daily context of conversation and the literary works of the Sephardic writers. The Sephardic refrains and sayings are laconic expressions that were shared spontaneously, according to the situation and by representatives of any kind of social class, gender or age group (Cazés and Bunis 159; Molho 21). Their content was considered as a truthful statement and their purpose was to comment a matter, summarize an argumentation, convert a direct opinion into commonly known metaphors, give a sarcastic or ironic statement, manifest one’s approval or disapproval with a situation or to teach someone a lesson by applying a figurative example (Cazés and Bunis 159). Referring to their educational function within the social and religious context, the refrains are sometimes called the “small gospel of the people” (Molho 21). This name indicates their daily and rigid use, almost as a by-product of the Jewish religious rules and expressions, plus the firm belief of the people that a refrain stated verity. In comparison to the proverbs, the refrains are more melodious and frequently include a rhyme that gives them a catchy melody. Examples of this can be seen in the refrains like *Pujados ke no amenguados*,
“Bids that do not diminish”, Kaveza abokada no le akoza filo de espada, “A defended head cannot be spoiled by a sword’s blade”, Amigos i hermanos semos, a la bolsa no tokemos, “Friends and brothers we are, the bag we do not touch”(Yad be Yad). Although the Sephardim have been using the refrains and sayings over a long course of time, there has not been much undertaken to preserve them in a manifested and written-down form, which has led to their gradual incomprehensibility and disappearance (Besso, “Judeo-Spanish Proverbs: An Analysis” 25).

The riddles and word play that were likewise a popular method to ease a written text or the atmosphere between an author’s work and the audience, functioned as a form of entertainment, helped to make a joke, and humorously diddled the audience or readership (Haboucha xv). It was a form of interplay between the writer and the reader. In their polished use of linguistic twists and turns, unexpected answers and plays with homonyms and homographs, the authors surprised and amused their audiences (ibid.). The word plays that were commonly applied among the Sephardic community, especially among the children, existed in various forms and interpretations (Cazés and Bunis 165). One form implied that a Jewish-Spanish word, descending from one stock language like Spanish, would be reinterpreted by a homophone that came from another language, such as Hebrew (ibid. 162). Moreover, when an ironic message or undertone should be conveyed, a rather positive word was replaced by an (artificially-devised) homophone that had a negative connotation (ibid. 163). In addition to that, authors made use of methods such as the addition of lexemes, alliterations or repetitions of suffixes that helped to construct a word play (ibid. 164).

The Jewish press which, due to its nature as medium of communication, is not clearly determined as an own literary genre, is mentioned in this section because it was the earliest and, for a long time, most influential form within the Ladino print culture for writing, distributing information and communicating among the Sephardic community (Borovaya 23). Even though in past times the Jewish press publicised primarily religious, scientific and philosophical works, it helped to promote the publication and dispersal of Ladino belles lettres, secular prose and the Sephardic Theatre (Borovaya 23; Wacks). The history of the Jewish print culture in Spain goes back to the late fifteenth century (Wacks). Astoundingly, this is the same century in which the Sephardim were expelled, putting forward the
assumption that the historical happenings of their persecution and separation stand in a connection to their high activity in the printing culture and the need of quickly distributing information.

Nevertheless, also after the expulsion from Spain, the activity of the Jewish press did not halt but commenced to work from the host countries to which the Sephardim had fled, such as North Africa, Italy, France, Israel and, above all, the Ottoman Empire (Bunis in Zohar 66). They were primarily functioning in city centres like Izmir, Sofia, Ruse, Bucharest, Venice, Jerusalem, Cairo or Sarajevo (ibid.). While in the beginning, the language of printing was mostly Hebrew, the wish and need for a printing press in the Sephardic ethnical language led to the publication of the first newspaper in Ladino named Sha’arei mizrach, “Gates of the East”, in Izmir, in 1845 (Borovaya 25). Henceforth, other Ladino periodicals like Or Israel, translated to “Light to Israel”, in 1853, and El Jurnal israelit, in 1860, were published in cities like Istanbul.

As for every ethnical minority group, the publication in their own traditional language, was an immense progress and sign of pride and unification for the Sephardim. The Ladino press did not reach a broad circle of readers since only a small group of the population was able to read and understand the published texts, however, it was a good tool to reach the members of the Sephardic communities in different countries. Hence, it quickly gained popularity among its members and achieved wide-reaching influence in the community (Borovaya 47). The development of the Sephardic press was one of the milestones of their written culture, propagated the circulation of knowledge among the Sephardic members and helped to promote their literary works. Until today, it still serves as a historical source and indication for the internal and external happenings that the Sephardim experienced over the course of time.

5. Importance of Folk Tales and their Analysis in the Sephardic Context

The historical and social value of the folk tales that date of a far-reaching tradition and elaboration among the different inventors and authors, is specifically obvious in the literary
production of the Sephardic community. The Sephardim experience, based on the content of the ancient folk tales, a new form of cherishing and maintaining their identity. The tales help them to remember their cultural uniqueness and to form a tighter solidarity among the society in which they live, keeping the balance between having an own identity and separating from the other ethnic groups (Alexander-Frizer 22). The knowledge and cultivation of their historical heritage, preserved to a big part in their literature, allow the Sephardim to have a sharper ethnic consciousness, which is accompanied by a social process and a political awareness (ibid.). This combination of awareness has led to the establishment of the National Authority of Ladino Culture in 1996 (ibid.). It has an eye on the increasing attempt to maintain the Jewish-Spanish by teaching and researching on it at universities and special research centres (ibid.).

Alexander-Frizer states that, “as long as there are ethnic groups and distinctions, the telling of folk tales will continue to express the identity of such groups and their members’ awareness of belonging”, which gives the folk tale a powerful status that, in a process of analysis and conservation, needs to be understood (22). This process is not only the mere preservation of the Sephardic tradition or the focus of investigation on orally transmitted stories and testimonial evidences. It is further the research on contemporary proofs of witness in the form of written down, literary records, as they are to find in the form of folklore, printed media and manuscripts (Díaz-Mas, “La Literatura oral” 94). In order to continue and keep this process going, a profound, and perpetual investigation on the matter of the Sephardic folk tales is imperative.

A folk tale of the Sephardic community conveys the expression of an ethnic determination and separation from other ethnic groups by specific identification signs (Alexander-Frizer 12). Identification motifs of this transmitted and preserved ethnic awareness that, was it not documented in those texts might have been lost already, can thus be made out by implemented modes of external identification, based on the model by Pnina Morag-Talmon (ibid.): The most obvious form of identification in the Sephardic case, is the use of a specific language, in more detail, the ethnic language Judeo-Spanish, which was mostly used for the oral transmission of the matters over the centuries. A language that, just as the Sephardic tradition itself, falls gradually into oblivion and is used less as a language
of daily communication. Therefore, the written down folk tale turns into a historical source for the linguistic investigation and analysis of the development, the evolution of the functions and the status of the language over the course of time (Borovaya 16; Díaz-Mas, “La Literatura oral” 94).

A linguistic aspect of interest for the Sephardic community and the researchers on the texts is a look at the Sephardic use of Israeli Hebrew and family names (Alexander-Frizer 12ff.). An investigation on this can give an insight into the distinct forms of development and evolution of Hebrew and how it differed in its use between the same ethnic groups in various local areas (ibid.). The record of Sephardic family names is helpful for information regarding genealogy and the recognition of community members (ibid.). Further, inside information about the Sephardim’s usual ways of behavior among their society and in a religious context, for example in the synagogue, during the annual- and life cycle can be gained (Alexander-Frizer 12). Since folk tales are frequently set in the domestic, rural, or religious context, they explain a lot about the applied rituals, customs and rules of the Sephardic community and their daily habits.

Another source of ethnic consciousness that is found in the Sephardic folk tales, is the form of emotional identification, which implements stories and folk songs that were used to form a feeling of unity and social bonding among the audiences and readers (Alexander-Frizer 13). The creators of the folk tales played with the emotional reactions of the audience, by touching their feelings and memories that led to a sentimental formation of solidarity among the community (ibid.). The investigation on this topic is of importance because it portrays a lot about the interplay among the members of the Sephardic community and how the authors made use of the shared historical background, suffering and happiness. According to Alexander-Frizer, an author can represent in his text a neutral mindset towards the community by choosing carefully the repertoire that he uses to define the origins of the audience but gives preference to rigid adaptations of stories adopted from the surrounding ethnic, cultural and social environment (13ff.).

Based on the importance of the folk tales for the Sephardic community, the process of analysing them requires big efforts and a profound knowledge with regards to the historical background of the Sephardim, their language, as well as their religion. An analysis is done
in various steps and levels, proceeding from one literary level to the next, considering not only external factors like the author and language of use but also internal contents, characters and ideas portrayed in the work. According to the information that shall be gained, the investigator adopts to the work. The folklorist Alan Dundes states that there exists a three-level model of analysis of folk literature which researches on the texture, the text, the context, and, possibly, its purpose (Alexander-Frizer 14).

The model is segregated into the linguistic aspect, the context of narrative performance and the world of the tale (Alexander Frizer 14ff.). It is significant to look at the storyteller, or author of the tale, since his way of thinking, personal characteristics and social, political and ethnical ideas are obviously present in the story. Notwithstanding, it is often hard to distinguish one single inventor of the Sephardic tales, due to their long-ongoing oral transmission. When the origin of the text can be determined, the urge to look closer at the storyteller and his own ethnic affiliations that are manifested in the work arises (Alexander-Frizer 16). Depending on the original function and supposed purpose of the work, the author must have left traces of attitude about his ethnical awareness (ibid.). Those traces can be an emotional identification, expressions that imply his approval or disapproval of matters and the language in which the tale is written (ibid.). The target group of the audience is not of less significance for the analysis, since it influences and determines expressions, explanations and the way of getting in contact with the readership. An author writes his work with the idea in mind to make it available and comprehensible for a specific group of people, to which he can already plan and establish an ethnical, ideological, religious, or social intimacy while composing his text.

The last point in analysing folk literature, according to Morag-Talmon, are the circumstances of narrative performance that consider the place, time and conditions under which the work was composed and narrated (ibid.). Localities, such as the synagogue, the domestic home or the circles of relatives of the community are the most common circumstances under which the folk tale was told (ibid.). The folk tale served as a form of entertainment, education and transmission of history in reoccurring religious events and during social gatherings of the families during which the folk tale was shared among all ages and generations (Haboucha xix). When researching on Sephardic folk tales, it is advisable to
examine the inner structure of the tale, the manner of how it is built up and which stylistic, characteristic, as well as chronical components it includes. In this part, the investigator scrutinizes the individual characters of the work, whether they appear alone or in groups, their way of proceeding and in which manner they show an ethnic belonging (Alexander-Frizer 18).

The stated levels, forms, and structures of analysing and scrutinizing the Sephardic folk tales are a profound and reliable way of getting to know the tales, their authorial sources, messages, and the historical information that is entangled in the written source. The mentioned models and methods are also applied during the investigation on the folk tales recollected by Matilda Koén-Sarano.

6. History and Definition of the Genre Folk Tale

The genre folk tale is frequently anchored in the general knowledge of people as an ancient story or narration that is told in an easily understandable manner. In general, due to its linguistical simplicity it can be orally transferred in an effortless manner. It deals mostly with happenings in the real world but stands often in a nexus to the supernatural world. Owing to a primary oral transmission from generation to generation, the author of the folk tale is often difficult to make out and there naturally exist different versions of one single story. In a short, official definition of the Oxford Reference, the folk tale is considered as “a story passed on by word of mouth rather than by writing, and thus partly modified by a successive retelling before being written down or recorded. The category includes legends, fables, jokes, tall stories, and fairy tales or Märchen. Many folk tales involve mythical creatures and magical transformations.” (“Overview folktale”). In the light of this short but explicit definition, this work investigates on the history and genre of the folk tales in a Sephardic context.

The custom of narrating stories orally to each other about one’s emotions, primarily love, a hero’s adventures, or significant occurrences of the timeline, has existed among mankind since the human species can remember and invent (Fontes 1). The oral transmission of texts and stories was used with different purposes, for the sake of leisure activity but also
with a spiritual and superstitious ulterior motive: While some mantras, sayings and incantations were invented and reused for protective means, such as shielding one from feared harms, evil spirits, natural catastrophes or diseases, other forms of story telling were used as a form of entertainment and enchantment (ibid.). Those fictional prose narratives with the primary purpose of entertaining and teaching the audience in moments of leisure, are nowadays commonly known as folk tales (ibid.). They were originally passed on from person to person, from generation to generation, in an oral and later, written-down tradition (ibid.). The initial inventor of a folk tale is frequently unknown, since it is extremely complex to trace back its varying forms over the course of time, back to its first version. In addition to that, the tellers of the folk tales invented them in many cases themselves but did as well draw on other sources such as their neighbors or relatives, who, again, might have heard them from another source of origin (Fontes 1).

With regards to their content, folk tales in general are the creation of a linguistic production with a thematic story as its foundation (Schwartz 5). They are highly influenced by the customs and settings of the culture in which they have come to existence (ibid.). Though a line between literary fairy- and folk tales is complex to draw, contrary to the timeless fairy tales, the folk tales cannot exist without their historical and social background that forms the skeleton of the story (Warner 41). The fairy tale is ahistorical, consisting of components such as fantasy and surrealism (Zipes 59). Proceeding in worlds of utopia, it can be told in whichever topicality and in any kind of era. In opposition to that, the folk tale is so much associated and grown together with the era in which it came to existence, that it is not ahistorical but has undergone various changes of style in different epochs throughout which it was transmitted (Zipes 59).

In this way, the language and people of the story might have been adopted and adjusted to the changing diachronic settings, but the core of the folk tale is based on the point of time at which it was invented. Similarly, Zipes explains that the “classical” folk tale differs in many drastic ways from the romantic fairy tale (69). The folk tale does not set the focus on or culminate in a human or social emancipation, as the fairy tale does, but tends to keep a symmetry regarding its form and social harmony within the story (ibid.). This consideration of a harmonic composition and a clear purpose of the folk tale is shown in a flow, a pleasant
or easy-readable text constellation, which is frequently the precondition for a happy and content resolution for the protagonists (ibid.). However, folk tales are in their chronological and social aspects realistic and authentic documentations of the ancient times and become hence, historical sources that portray the actual living conditions of the people that appear in the story. In this way, they can give an evidence of the life in the past and under which conditions people like the Sephardim used to live (Warner 62).

Further, a folk tales can include in its storyline the information about local food, dressing codes, professions and religious customs. In addition to that, the political occurrences become obvious in the narrations and explanations of the power struggles between different protagonists, parties, kingdoms, as well as in the love stories between people of distinct social classes, or children who live in an immense poverty or wealth (Zipes 23). Zipes states that a folk tale, in its true and deep meaning, can only be completely understood when the tale is seen as a whole, in its full context and when “the magic spell of commodity production is broken” (23). Therefore, the single components of utopia and real life of the story need to be analyzed in view of a socio-historical background that peels off the entertaining layers of the tale until only its skeleton, the pre-capitalist folk form, remains (ibid.).

The stories of folk tales deal with the occurrences in the life of ordinary characters, in most cases working people, who are confronted with an unordinary happening (Warner 57). Their actions are led by simple intentions and, since the stories are “real” happenings, the driving forces are often of human nature and emotions, such as hunger, poverty, grief, hatred, love (ibid.). The protagonists tell the stories of power relations and social evils (Warner 58). The characters are frequently taken out of their daily routine and are challenged by happenings and prohibitions, that put them to the test and force them to go through a trail of distress and sorrow until they end up in a higher understanding, a moral relief or a happy ending in which justice victimizes over injustice (Lüthi 78).

In Spain folk tales in the form of epic find their origin, to some extent, in the indigenous Iberian folk songs and later in the heroic songs that were transmitted and introduced to the population of the Iberian Peninsula by Germanic tribes that invaded and occupied the territory for several centuries (Fontes 2). In specific, the folk tales and legends
of the Jewish-Spanish population, the *konsejas* and *maasiyod* as they are called in the Jewish-Spanish language, were either originally invented by the Jewish population or found their basic idea in non-Jewish tales of the same area or of neighboring countries (Bunis in Zohar 64ff.). Many of the Jewish folk tales included characters that clearly resembled folk heroes of other cultures (ibid.). Hence, protagonists like *Djohá, Bohoriko* or *Moshiko* remind of the Turkish figure of *Nasreddin Hodja*, who is the entertaining character in many Turkish folk tales, as it will be explained later in this thesis (ibid.). The inventors of those oral narrations and legends were frequently anonymous or unknown due to a long way of subjectively interpreted mouth transmission of the texts (Fontes 2). The sole oral transmission made it complex to archive and trace back the history of a tale but gave its development and its interpreters an immense narrative freedom (Schwartz 6). The oral transmission was carried out by private persons, at home or in other commonly shared places, as well as by minstrels, who performed and recited the epics again and again in front of the public audiences in courts, castles and public squares (Fontes 3). Naturally, the audience kept single passages of the lyrics in mind and started reciting them to others. A process, that slowly turned the epics into historical ballads, such as Carolingian ballads (Fontes 3).

The oral transmission of the poetic and linguistic works of art made it hard to keep a consistency of the contents, form and lengths of the texts (Zipes 13). This way of transmitting was revolutionized by the transformation of the oral tale into the literary production, which marked a significant historical turning point in the arts, favoured by the uprising of technical advancements like the printing press during the fifteenth century (Zipes 13). Yet, the written documentation of oral works in Spain had its commencement already during the early twelfth century when pieces like the *Disciplina clericalis* (circa 1106) by Pedro Alfonso and the *Scholar’s guide* were written down (Fontes 3). Although the words were captured now in a written form, the works developed constantly since the writers did not cease to implement and incorporate folkloric contents into their written texts (Fontes 4). During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, there existed a high number of illiteracy and semi-illiteracy among the population, for which reason the broad masses of audiences, had to be captured by reading the literary works out loud (ibid.). To increase the identification of the audience with the text, the authors implemented folk literature into their pieces (ibid.). Additionally, they used
different methods such as working with intertextualities, using the folk tales as a story frame for their own amended narrations, or adding direct allusions in the form of specific character names and repeated key expressions (Fontes 55). Sometimes they also completely rewrote the folk tales and used them within their works (ibid.). Those adoptions helped both author and audience. The author in terms of gaining popularity and fame among the people, while similarly, it helped the audience to recognize and derive pleasure from listening to the read out loud work (Fontes 4). Since many people of the audience did recognize the allusions and remembered the traditional folk tales, they adopted some of the written works as their own, which makes it hard to distinguish nowadays if a work is of adopted or self-invented origins (ibid.).

In general, the form of the folk tale as we know it today, found its commencement during the end of the seventeenth, beginning of the eighteenth century, and was utterly favoured by writers such as Charles Perrault and the Grimm Brothers (Warner 38). Detailed information about Sephardic literary activities during the seventeenth century is hard to find and not much is known regarding the Jewish-Spanish literary productivity during this century, mainly because a big part of the literary works got lost over the course of time (Bunis in Zohar 67). Nevertheless, during the establishment of Sephardic communities in the Ottoman Empire during the eighteenth century, the Judeo-Spanish literature experienced a rapid progress and high creativity (ibid.).

Because the folk tales convey not merely an entertaining story but also a great treasure of historical and socio-economic information, it is of immense importance to preserve and maintain those works. Sephardic folk tales convey information about the early life of the communities on the Iberian Peninsula and enrich the knowledge of our time about the Middle Ages, the early Sephardic tradition and literature (Armistead, Samuel G. and Joseph H. Silverman, “The Judeo-Spanish Ballad Chapbooks” 17; Fontes 4). A loss of these works, or a gradual forgetting about them, would be an irretrievable loss of historically valuable works that have their origin in a spiritual, ethnical, local, and documental assemblage. By investigating on them, the archaeologic and material documentations can be set into a broader context. They can help to explain historical events and traditions of specific communities,
such as the Sephardic community. Therefore, an investigation on several Sephardic folk tales will be conducted in the following chapter.

Chapter Three

7. Analysis of Sephardic Folk Tales

While there exists such a broad variety of Sephardic literature and different genres of the literary production of this ethnic group, the folk tale is one of the most essential and known literary creations that have survived and have been passed on from generation to generation between the Sephardim. The folk tales have survived the diaspora, their structures and characters have been kept alive and still resonate with the audiences and readerships of today. Some of the contents and motifs have been transmitted as a symbol of cultural heritage and pride to the progeny of all countries in which the Sephardic Jews settled down during their diaspora because. Also, the religious contents of the texts have not changed much over the decades and are still relevant for the Jewish believers of today. Entertaining parts of the folk tales are used nowadays to pass the time with storytelling or for daily activities like bringing one’s children to bed (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” xi).

By analysing a number of Sephardic folk tales, we will come to understand how far-reaching and profound the Sephardic tradition is. It becomes clear of how much importance the information that is contained within the tales is for the readership of today, giving us deep insights into the Sephardic society of ancient centuries. The genre of the Sephardic folk tale is a witness of the Sephardic society of past times and is available to a broad readership without any connection to Judaism, thanks to the work of literary researchers and authors like Matilda Koén-Sarano, who have been doing the effort to compile Sephardic folk tales with the purpose of bringing “to readers tales reflecting the Judeo-Spanish culture in its characteristic colors” and representing the tales in such an accessible and appealing form “that even a reader disinterested in the research apparatus that accompanies them would find
the tales interesting and derive enjoyment from them” (Perez in Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” xv).

In examining the Sephardic folk tales, I lean on the two compilations of Sephardic folk tales collected by the Israeli author Matilda Koén-Sarano, Folktales of Joha. Jewish Trickster (2003) and King Solomon and the Golden Fish. Tales from the Sephardic Tradition (2004) that offer a broad overview and insight into a number of folk tales of the Sephardim and give explications and additional information on the books, the author herself and the content of the tales. I focus on the analysis of the social structure of the Sephardim, their communal organization, gender relationships, religious contents as well as superstitious and magical symbols within the stories. I argue that the collections and the messages of the tales reflect the attitude and beliefs of the Sephardim and can be seen as a “photographic” heritage that captured the communal life of the Sephardim of ancient times.

7.1 Folktales of Joha. Jewish Trickster and King Solomon and the Golden Fish. Tales from the Sephardic Tradition

As stated before, the Sephardic folk tale has been collected in a written form and by word of mouth over several centuries. Due to the expulsion from Spain and the worldwide dispersal of the Sephardim, many of their stories, works and entire corpuses of folk tales have gone lost during the diaspora. What is more, the original authors or sources of the texts have fallen into oblivion. However, some literary researchers of today try to keep the repertoire of the Sephardic folk tales alive by translating them from Ladino to other languages. Like this, they want to conserve the Sephardic works by making them understandable and accessible for a broader group of readers. Naturally, during this process of conservation and preservation a part of the meaning, motifs and original ideas of the texts have forfeited.

Particular expressions or proverbs within the texts cannot be translated word-for-word because some of them are unknown to the readers of today and out of use. In many cases, a direct transcription would confuse the reader, and the original sense or meaning of the sentence would go lost (Haboucha in Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” xx). If an entirely
literal translation was done, it might not be easy to understand for a reader of the modern time. Regardless, in order to preserve the general idea and the historical value of the works, a literary preservation and a translation into various languages is imperative to make it accessible for a worldwide readership and for the coming generations that, in their majority, will not be able to understand the Jewish-Spanish. The conservation of the folk tales must be done urgently before some of the last living witnesses, who can pass on the stories and help to translate the Ladino texts, pass away.

One of the literary active authors of our times who has achieved great accomplishments in collecting and preserving Sephardic folk tales is the Israeli author Matilda Koén-Sarano, who has published numerous works in the Jewish-Spanish language. Matilda Koén-Sarano has made immense efforts to maintain Sephardic memories and keep their traditions alive. Further, she has contributed to making them accessible for the group of readers that does not know Ladino.

7.2 Matilda Koén-Sarano and her work

Matilda Koén-Sarano defines herself as a writer, scholar, poet and storyteller, who was born in Italy, in the city of Milan, in 1939 (Koén-Sarano, “Curriculum Vitae”). She is of Turkish-Sephardic descendence but grew up in Milan, where she attended later the Bocconi University (Koén-Sarano, “Curriculum Vitae”). After marrying the later Director General of The National Authority for Ladino and its Culture in 1960, Koén-Sarano moved to Israel the same year, where she has been living in Jerusalem since 1962 (ibid.). Koén-Sarano graduated from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in the bachelor’s degrees of Italian Literature, Judeo-Spanish, and Folklore, and has, since then, been working in different professions and fields of work (ibid.).

Employed for the Israeli radio station Kol Israel, she has been presenting the news and hosting her own radio shows in the Ladino language since 1985 (Koén-Sarano, “Curriculum Vitae”). For many years, it has been of great importance to Koén-Sarano to spread and conserve the Ladino language through passing it on to other people and the
coming generations, for which reason she has been teaching the language at the Ben-Gurion University in the Negev and in various other cultural and state-run institutions, such as the Midreshet Amalia in Jerusalem, or the Society for Advancement of Education (ibid.). Her attempt and life mission are to spread the Sephardic culture, language and tradition worldwide, make younger generations aware about the Sephardic existence and to preserve the cultural heritage of the Sephardim (ibid.) Koén-Sarano has published an extended number of written works, dealing with the topic of the Sephardic language, culture and folklore, and is counted among one of the most famous writers in the Ladino language.

Her published works belong to different literary genres. Some of her books deal with the Sephardic folklore, while others are text and grammar books of the Ladino language. A big part of her works are collections of Sephardic folk tales, poems, songs or recipes that were written by herself or by other authors. Koén-Sarano has also published plays and musical comedies, like Mil i un Djohá (1998). Her works are published in Judeo-Spanish, as well as in Hebrew, English, Italian, and other languages. An extract of her works are the books De Saragoza a Yerushaláyim (1995), written in Ladino, Lejendas i kuentos morales de la tradición djudeo-espanyola (1999), published in Jewish-Spanish and Hebrew, Tabelas de verbos en Djuedo-Espanyol (Ladino) (1999), Kuentos salados djudeo-espanyoles (2000) and Kon bayles i kantes, Sefaradis de dor en dor (2009) composed in Ladino, respectively. The topics of the works are primarily the traditions of the Sephardim, the teaching and preservation of the Jewish-Spanish, and the compilation of Sephardic folk tales. In specific, the compilation of folk tales, their history, preservation and analysis has been a big part of Koén-Sarano’s life.

Matilda Koén-Sarano’s efforts and attempts to preserve the Sephardic treasury of folk literature and to spread the knowledge and wisdom about this topic have supported and driven forwards the process of informing, teaching and making people aware of the history and the significance of the traditional Sephardic folk tale. Its conservation is of great interest for literary researchers owing to the fact that it is not only an authentic bearer of the Sephardic culture and traditions that were cultivated over centuries and incorporated into the happenings of the tales by contemporary witnesses, but also a linguistic source of an old, uniquely preserved form of the ancient Spanish language.
7.3 Subject of Investigation

When attempting to gain information about past events by analysing literary sources and investigating on historical events or societies, written down relics of the past become the research material of the investigators. The material is confined to official documents that include details about political processes, official events or the organisational structure of a society of the past (Simon in Stillman and Zucker 83). Those documents are for example scientific and scholarly testimonies, declarations of war or peace between two nations, legal decisions, biographies or official reports by spokespersons of the State like ambassadors or monarchs, to name a few (ibid.). This research material can give an insight into the superficial and official course of events in a communal living and inform deductively about official topics, but they hardly touch “the social, economic, and cultural context in which affairs of paramount concern develop” (ibid.).

However, when investigating on a political, legal or belligerent issue of a society, it is of vital importance to understand and comprehend its social character, as well as its personalities, the customs, belief systems, form of education and daily habits of a community (ibid.). Since the investigation about societies of ancient times is limited to non-photographical or non-electronically recorded evidences, two of the main sources for a research project of this kind are literary and cultural heritages that have remained, as Rachel Simon, researcher on the literature of the Libyan Jewry during the Ottoman Period, explains (Stillman and Zucker 83ff.).

Because literary works cannot always be seen as fully realistic, meaning that some of the appearing events use to include anachronisms, overstatements, subjective and likely doubtful misrepresentations, they need to be understood as personal snapshots or paintings of the society that they describe, rather than an objective, fully accurate social report about a community (Rachel Simon in Stillman and Zucker 84). Literary sources and oral tradition of the people of a society, like the Sephardic folk tales, mirror the essence of the beliefs, attitudes and routines of the daily life of a community and plant them into an imaginary, often magical atmosphere of a structure-giving storyline (ibid. 85). The Sephardic folk tales are a remnant of a society that has tried to teach and entertain at the same time by telling folk tales
to their fellow beings, and combining real characters, places and social norms with the supernatural world of the tales (ibid.).

Rachel Simon observes that “cultural work, and especially literary work, can provide information concerning the social composition of a population, its mode of habitation, its family life, its women, relations among various components of its population and their relationship with the authorities and its socioeconomic structure” (Simon qtd. in Stillman and Zucker 84). In the light of this idea of the significance of folk tales as bearers of cultural and social values, traditions and interactions of a society, an analysis of Sephardic folk tales is conducted in this work to investigate on the gender roles within the Sephardic community of old times and understand the social structure of their society, their religious customs and beliefs, as well as the superstitious way of thinking, according to how they are portrayed in the tales.

Several folk tales of those remaining works have been compiled in two of Matilda Koén-Sarano’s literary publications Folktales of Joha. Jewish Trickster (2003) and King Solomon and the Golden Fish. Tales from the Sephardic Tradition (2004). The tales will be examined entirely with the purpose to portray the communal life, gender relationships, religious rites and the superstitious and magical components that they contain. A systematic and theoretical analysis will show if the single characters give information about issues related to the Sephardic community life and if the tales contain reappearing social motifs and religious patterns. While the social and political happenings of the tales are taken as authentic, a clear distinction to the magical components is taken to maintain an accurate and trustworthy interpretation of the real communal living of the Sephardic society. The storylines of those folk tales are surrounded by a magical and spiritual aura that goes in combination with supernatural phenomena which are considered as realistic by the characters of the story (Haboucha xxv). The key motifs that reappear throughout the folk tales are, according to Haboucha, “abduction, enchantment, magic objects, magic power, magic helpers, various forms of recognition, and other supernatural motifs” (ibid.). Those motifs are embedded in an authentic, quotidian environment that reflects the every-day life of the Sephardic community and tells the readership about the Sephardic routines, ways of proceeding in personal affairs and religious rites, such as the celebration of Jewish holidays.
In a psychological aspect, the stories reflect the common way of thinking, social values, but also wide-spread problems and worries of the Jewish people. They inform about the human, and, in specific, Sephardic form of using humor and wit for self-preservation (ibid.). The disputes and problems that are tackled and demonstrated in the folk tales are mostly of an interpersonal, intercommunal, or interdenominational character (ibid.).

Both *Folktales of Joha. Jewish Trickster* (2003) and *King Solomon and the Golden Fish. Tales from the Sephardic Tradition* (2004) contain folk tales that were compiled and documented in their original form, in the Ladino language, before they were translated into idiomatic English. Reginetta Haboucha, researcher on the Jewish-Spanish oral narrative, transcribed the work *King Solomon and the Golden Fish. Tales from the Sephardic Tradition* into English while David Herman translated *Folktales of Joha. Jewish Trickster* (Koén-Sarano “King Solomon” Book cover; “Folktales of Joha” Book cover).

The fifty-four tales of *King Solomon and the Golden Fish. Tales from the Sephardic Tradition* were orally accumulated and recorded in Jewish-Spanish and written down in one book by Koén-Sarano (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” Book cover). Further, she collected, over twenty-one years, the narrations about the folk legend Joha (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 6). The Judeo-Spanish speaking narrators descended from countries all over the world (ibid.). Since the folk tales’ original sources remain anonymous, they are only written accounts of the original stories, quoted by Matilda Koén-Sarano or by a variety of people, men and women from countries of the traditional geographical central points of the dispersed Sephardic communities, such as Turkey, Egypt, Greece, Italy, Israel or Bulgaria, to name a few (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 6). The over eighty narrators, born between 1898 and 1992, stand in various relationships to the author: Some of them are family members or friends, others, like Beki Bardavid are researchers and folk tale collectors of the Sephardic community themselves (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” Book cover, 7).

The narrations compiled by Koén-Sarano in the two analyzed collections of folk tales did not receive any literary appropriations or adaptations (Perez in Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” xvi). Therefore, they were collected and conserved in the language in which they were originally told, the Jewish-Spanish, as well as in the structure and the performance of their traditional form (ibid.). A more detailed look at the two examined works will be taken
in the following chapters, to acquire information about the previously mentioned topics of the Sephardic communal life, gender relationships, religious rites, as well as superstitions, and how they were perceived and included in the Sephardic folk tales of old times.

7.4 Overview of Folktales of Joha. Jewish Trickster

The collection *Folktales of Joha. Jewish Trickster* contains fifteen chapters, of which each incorporates around ten to fifteen stories of Joha, a Jewish fortune hunter and sometimes trouble maker. The subdivision is segregated by Joha’s interaction with distinct clienteles, social groups, economical entities, religious masters or by his experiences with the environment. He interacts vividly with nature and does not make a distinction in the treatment of humans, plants, animals or objects, since he believes in a possible transformation between the single entities (Alexander in Koēn-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 11). The tales deal with the daily incidents of Joha who, by his funny and innocent way of behaving, knows how to enchant and entertain the people around him. Some of them are also driven to despair by him. His naïve but nice characteristics reflect the general way of thinking of the Sephardic society, expose human failures and laziness, but at the same time reflect a wiliness that brightens up dreadful or sad happenings and events.

The satirical figure of Joha, Gioah or Yoha, is also known to many other communities of the Mediterranean region, North Africa and the Middle East (Haboucha xxv). Due to the diaspora and the resulting settlement of the Sephardim in countries all over the world, Joha was adopted as a folk hero among the Sephardic communities that lived in those areas and cultivated cultural interaction with their neighbouring communities (Haboucha xxv). His character appears under different variations of the name Nasreddin Hodja or Hassan, as a thirteenth-century fictional character that, very likely had its origin in Anatolia, Turkey (Ashliman, “Nasreddin Hodja”). Additionally, his character can be compared to two German literary figures: The Taugenichts, who appears in the novella *Aus dem Leben eines Taugenichts* (1866), “From the life of a good-for-nothing”, by Joseph von Eichendorff; and
to *Till Eulenspiegel* (1515), a sly young man who leads a vagabond life and plays tricks on the people he encounters (Ashliman, “Nasreddin Hodja”).

The context and background of the stories of Joha can be serious and sad, at times even take place during a war or a famine. Yet, Joha finds a way to surprise and cheer up his fellows, as well as the readership of the narratives. His way of entertainment is at times deliberately, at times unintentionally. Frequently, a funny story is provoked through his misunderstandings or “literal interpretation of advice” (Haboucha xxv). Regardless, he is a witty and smart man who knows how to escape unfortunate incidents through opportunistic methods. In situations in which an argument between a group of people, or a conflict between two parties is about to escalate, Joha can often find a rather simple solution and resolve the dispute. Even though his methods do not necessarily make sense to others or are not rationally explicable, they give the story a humoristic turn and show the readership that fighting is unnecessary and there is a resolution for everything. Joha’s credulous, at times unquestioning, character has become a stereotype and has been present in many Sephardic folk tales over the history, owing to his broad popularity among the Sephardim, which might be attributed to the feeling that Joha represents a victorious Jewish hero, who wins against the bellicose opponents of Judaism, even though in his behaviour and appearance he is a literary anti-hero (Haboucha xxvi).

Through this humorous way of satirizing and interpreting situations of despair by telling stories, it is notable that the Sephardic community has tried to find a way to make the best out of painful and precarious moments throughout their history. Tamar Alexander explains that laughter in the way of a humoristic form of dealing with traumatic and negative experiences is a form of social device that avails to preserve social norms (Alexander in Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 14). It facilitates a person to rebel peacefully against the norms of society and to deal more easily with taboo subjects, such as death, personal fears and negative life circumstances (ibid.). Therefore, the topics of sexuality and pornography that normally represent a taboo subject in strictly religious communities, can also be found in a number of stories (ibid.). Additionally, humor serves the society and its individuals to express a form of sanction through making fun about occurring social or political happenings, and work as a valve, that is used to ease social pressure (ibid.).
The magical influences incorporated in the tales show how big the wish was among the Jewish population to flee miserable and hazardous situations and change their destiny through a peaceful, or “magical” way, while, in reality, they were unconditionally left to their fate. Joha mirrors the hopes, beliefs and convictions of the Sephardim and draws a portrait of the Sephardic community, which is proud, tragic and funny at the same time. He becomes a hero by surviving times of hardship and misfortune through miracles and by overcoming the opponents through religious and loveable superiority (Haboucha xxvi). He acts in scandalous manners, saying out loud things that people are normally not allowed to express and does things that are against the permitted norms (Alexander in Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 14). Even though his character is an anti-hero, he has the ability to rescue the Jewish people from their doom, and his literary figure is therefore even compared by researchers to other representors of the Spanish-Jewish cultural elite such as Maimonides or Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (ibid. 13). His figure appears likewise in stories of the work King Solomon and the Golden Fish. Tales from the Sephardic Tradition, which will be scrutinized now.

7.5 Overview of King Solomon and the Golden Fish. Tales from the Sephardic Tradition

The repertoire of King Solomon and the Golden Fish. Tales from the Sephardic Tradition is the first, entire compilation of Sephardic folk tales ever that, quoting Yoel Shalom Perez, “unadulterated by literary adaptation or significant editing – except of course, in the process of translation – has been published in English in an annotated scholarly edition” (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” xv). It was assembled by recording thirty male and female narrators (ibid. xix) The narratives include characters descending from distinct social classes, who are confronted with material or spiritual issues that can mostly be resolved in a liberatingly humorous way (ibid. xii). The stories have been used as a form of entertainment for children and adults and were passed on as a cultural heritage from the parents to the children, from the old to the young (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” xif.). The narrations served as a form of diversion from the everyday life and at the same time were a method of surviving. Magical
and supernatural influences make the impossible possible and guide the readership through a world in which realistic and unrealistic happenings merge with each other.

The konsejas, the Judeo-Spanish word for “stories”, of the book are segmented into six comprehensive chapters that include the division into Tales of Supernatural, Tales of Fate, Tales of Elijah the Prophet, Romantic Tales, Tales of Cleverness and Wisdom and Jokes and Anecdotes. Each folk tale is analysed and commented in a short extent by Reginetta Haboucha, who takes a closer look at the incorporated characters, symbols and happenings of the storyline. The characters of the stories in King Solomon and the Golden Fish are extremely distinct but are normally people of the real world who appear as simple people, (spiritual) heroes, as likeable or dislikeable, with human needs, desires, faults and vices (Haboucha in Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” xxvii). The figures are divided into moral and social categories that are very roughly divided into good and bad, rich and poor, as well as the powerful and the weak part of society, who live, compete, combat, struggle and make peace with each other (ibid. xxviii). Even though a big part of the characters is timeless, meaning that they do not belong chronically to any specific era or any point of time in history, it is to mention that some of the stories are connected to the lunisolar Hebrew calendar and the Jewish calculation of time (ibid. xxvii).

The most significant and admirable positions within a story take the characters of a magical or religious background, who act as miracle workers, sages and martyrs (Ben-Amos 160ff.). According to Ben-Amos, a unique character among the appearing characters of the Jewish folk literature is the adaption of the Biblical Prophet Elijah, or Eliau, who plays a pioneering and meaningful role in the Sephardic folk tales and has a profound connection to the mysterious and religious world (Ben-Amos 161; Haboucha xxv). He is a divine power manifested in a human body and can transcend metaphysical limits and influence mortals through appearing in their visions or daily lives (Ben-Amos 161). The beneficial description by Ben-Amos of Eliau’s character reminds of the criticized folk hero Robin Hood: “He guides the perplexed and puzzles the confident, hurts the haughty and supports the needy” (161). Eliau’s appearance is generous but strict, loving but determined and works as a moral guidance for the humans. Yet, criminal and violent characteristics as Robin Hood has them, are left out.
Other estimable figures are based on famous Jewish philosophers such as Moses Maimonides, and on Biblical aristocratic figures like King David, the second king of Israel, who functions as the stereotypical image of a king within the narratives (Haboucha in Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” xxvii; Haboucha xxv). Nevertheless, many figures, protagonists, as well as side-characters of the konsejas, remain anonymous and receive no specific name. This anonymity does not assume that they are inconsiderable for the plot of the folk tale. Their role is meant to convey the socially-acceptable and honourable norms of the Sephardic community, for which reason they are frequently included in moralistic tales (Ben-Amos 161). Among those characters of the tales, many male characters enjoy a strong and decisive position while the female figures are frequently meant to remain in a subordinated role within the power-constellation of men and women. According to a Jewish rabbinical oral literature, the female characters are weak and dependent on the wise strength of male guidance, which is patient and understanding with the female foolishness, over and over again (Ben-Amos 161). How the gender constellation and relationships are portrayed in the Sephardic folk tales will be examined further in the following chapter.

7.6 Sephardic Society, Communal Life and Gender Roles in Folktales of Joha. Jewish Trickster and King Solomon and the Golden Fish. Tales from the Sephardic Tradition

The Sephardic society represented in these short stories collected by Matilda Koén-Sarano, is framed by a hierarchical, Jewish religious order that penetrates every daily aspect. In this social ranking of the stories, destitute characters come often into contact with the peak of the hierarchy, the monarchs themselves or their descendants. Frequently an unfulfilled or hopeless love between two people of two different social classes, is the main conflict in the story. In those conflicts, the condition and circumstances under which the protagonists of the different social classes live are perceived as divine fate that is uniquely determined for them by God before they were born and cannot be changed by human actions. This motif of trusting in God and being patient with his divine plan is a vital pre-setting of the stories, represented for example in the tale “The Man without Mazál” (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 89). This
story depicts the destiny of a man who is, as it is the case in many of these stories, “very, very poor” and works for little money in carding cotton (ibid.). Even though the king decides to help him by sending him gold ducats hidden in food, the man cannot flee his fate of being poor and remains without mazāl, the Hebrew word for “luck” or sometimes equated with fate, as in the tale “The King’s Daughter and the Gardener’s Son” (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 71). In “The King’s Daughter and the Gardener’s Son”, the king’s daughter is supposed to marry the gardener’s son. When the king wants to kill the gardener’s son to avoid his daughter marrying someone out of her league, Eliau interferes and makes a marriage possible, just as it was divinely predicted (ibid. 72).

Those stories hypothesize that an unjust distribution of wealth reigned the Sephardic society, which divided the social classes through a deep gulf from each other. The tales raise the question why the rich part of society stays always rich and the poor always remain poor, just as well as why a social rank can hinder people from loving each other (ibid. 93). In order to alleviate those unfair conditions of which many people in society suffer, a way of easing them has been invented that attributes them to an unavoidable fate of life and a “divine plan” that controls the path of life for every human being (Haboucha in Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 91). By representing a man who does not manage to escape from his miserable life as a poverty-stricken labourer, the man becomes a metaphor for every worker of the Sephardic society who is lacking mazāl in his life. Haboucha explains that he “becomes Everyman” and hence, solaces the readership that can recognize itself in him (ibid. 93). On the contrary, stories like “The King’s Daughter and the Gardener’s Son” give hope to the readers, who believe that their divine mazāl will happen, even if human forces and wills try to prevent it.

The ancient Sephardic community represented in Folktales of Joha. Jewish Trickster and King Solomon and the Golden Fish. Tales from the Sephardic Tradition gives the idea that the aristocratic part of society, like the monarchs, used to have the legal power to help people but also to remove everybody who was against their will. The stories convey the idea that the representors of the state normally had the means to execute and punish arbitrarily according to their will, just as it happens in “King Shelomó and the Golden Fish” (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 5). The tale is dominated by magical incidents like a talking fish
that rewards a fisherman with diamonds and gold. The fish further tells King Shelomó that his wife is committing adultery with one of her slaves and she is therefore executed by her husband (ibid. 8). After her death, the king decides, struck by his grief, to get married to the youngest daughter of the fisherman and, in addition to that, to marry the remaining six daughters with state minister of his government (ibid. 9). The ending of this tale shows that a communication and interaction between the social classes existed, but a true mingling could only happen through “magical” influences. The help of aristocracy for the poor happened often only with their own benefit in mind.

Additionally, interpreting the gender ratio of the story, the relationship between women and men was imbalanced and unequal with regards to the woman’s position and rights within the Sephardic family and society. This clear distinction of the gender roles within the Sephardic families, religious context and society is notable also in other folk tales. In the context of a family, the role of the mother holds a high social rank, from where she controls the happenings within the family, takes care of the household chores and the education of the children. She mostly occupies the role of the wife, mother, grandmother and housewife. In several stories, Joha receives food or the order to buy groceries, so that his mother can use them for cooking, as for instance in the tales “Special Eggplant” and “The Cow’s Feet”, both part of the collection of Folktales of Joha. Jewish Trickster (27). This hypothesizes that the mother was the person in charge of kitchen tasks and responsible for cooking for the family. Nonetheless, a traditional family structure was not necessarily a given thing within every Sephardic family. In the story “What a Family!”, Joha lives alone with his mother, without a father or any other mentioned member of the family (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 29). Yet, it is not revealed to the reader for which reasons they live alone, if his father died or his mother and father got divorced. It might also be possible that the term “alone” includes family members of which the reader is not informed in the story. In any case, according to the tale, it was possible for a Sephardic woman in the past to live alone, without the father of her children and without a man by her side (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 29). Additionally, the story “Mother’s Advice” postulates that it was not always common that the younger and the older generation of a Sephardic family lived in one house together (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 25). In the named tale, Joha is supposed to go
and visit his grandmother who gives him presents and food (ibid.). The fact that Joha is told by his mother to go to his grandmother’s place, shows that she does not share the same house with them, but also that there existed a form of respect and caring towards the elderly generation.

Another motif of lacking social commitment that hints at the way of association between men and women in the ancient Sephardic society, is the absence of marital faithfulness in many of the stories. In combination with a committed unfaithfulness, the narratives frequently tell of Jewish-religious people who strongly contradict adultery and even call it an abomination, as it is notable in the story of “King Shelomó and the Golden Fish”, in which King Shelomó executes his wife and her lover, punishing his wife’s disloyalty and her lover’s lust and irresponsibility (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 8, 13). According to Haboucha’s explication, adultery in a Jewish context might be considered and put on the same level as idolatry, which is condemned as a sin and as punishable before God (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 13). This belief is strongly connected to a religious point of view and supports the idea that the Sephardic society handed on religious morals and values through the genre of folk tales.

In the story “To Everything There Is a Solution” in Folktales of Joha. Jewish Trickster, both father and mother brag with their committed adultery and their extramarital children. During a dialogue between Joha and his parents it turns out that, while Joha’s father has illegitimate children with several other women of the village, also Joha, according to his mother, is not his father’s son (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” , 31). Several other narratives hypothesize that unfaithfulness and cheating on one’s partner were a common thing to do or were at least something secretly desired by some parts of the Sephardic society. In the story “Why Only Me?” in the same book (115), Joha’s wife cheats on him with three other men while he is not at home, and in “What an Excuse!” his wife explains to Joha that the new-born baby is the neighbor’s daughter (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 118). The simultaneous incorporation of the two topics of adultery and giving birth is interesting and shifts the focus away from the act of a woman giving birth, which is considered as extremely important in Judaism (Ben-Ami in Stillman and Zucker 257). The act becomes medical and religious at the same time. Jewish believers think that all malicious forces gather up in the
room, while holy obstacles like a Thora tied to the bed and a key to the synagogue in the room are supposed to counteract their evil powers (ibid.). The story of Joha and his wife disputing over the gender of the baby and the committed adultery during this process, ease the importance of the situation, give it a humorous touch and disregard the Jewish conventional way of thinking. The motif of adultery can be based on the actual existence of those profanities among the Sephardic society, or the wish of the inventors of the stories to condemn those acts (Ben-Amos 160). The same principle goes for flagrant acts like sleeping with a prostitute, as it is included in the story “Joha’s Half” (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 106), in which Joha is interested in buying a French prostitute while his wife is waiting only a few meters away at a table.

In general, the adultery shown in some of the Sephardic konsejas might be tied to the tradition that marriages were not only freely chosen but were often forced or arranged by the parents. According to some of the Sephardic folk tales, if the son or daughter had reached a certain age and remained still without a partner, the parents would try to find a match for their child and to arrange a marriage. Haboucha explains that the Sephardim usually arranged marriages to a wide extent because the parents felt responsible for marrying their child with a befitting spouse (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 145). The story “Married Life” shows that “[…] Joha never wanted to get married. His family always made arrangements for him” (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 93). The tale depicts a family that is desperately trying to marry their son, who does not want to get married. The story deals with a topic of this time which seems to be completely normal but nonetheless inconvenient. Therefore, the story ends with a humorous turn during a conversation between Joha and his uncle. In the narration “Joha’s Wedding”, it is particularly his mother who arranges the marriage between Joha and a woman that he does not even know. In the beginning of the story she informs him that she has found a good-looking woman with whom he will get married (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 89). The fact that Joha is not asked if he wants to get married and that the story depicts an arranged marriage, is eased by the humoristic detail that Joha is too naïve to convince the bride of getting married with him.

Nevertheless, the information that in the Sephardic tradition the parents had the power to decide over the love life of their children, might explain the misogynistic content of some
of the other folk tales. A feeling of hatred and discontentment easily arises between two people who do not want to be with each other. In the gender ratio and in the way, it is portrayed in the Sephardic folk tales collected by Matilda Koén-Sarano, the woman frequently holds the role of the malice, ugly, dumb, or nagging character that gets on the nerves of the male counterpart. In several paragraphs, a woman is described as “very ugly” or “very, very ugly”, as for example in “The Ugly Wife” (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 108) and “His Wife’s Face” which is a part of the same book (102). The tale “His Wife’s Face” expounds how a husband has never seen his bride before the marriage but later asks her to keep her veil over her face whenever she talks to him so that his does not have to see her ugliness (ibid.). On the contrary, the beauty of the men is rarely questioned or mentioned in any of the stories, while it seems of great importance that a woman fulfills the man’s expectations on her appearance. This reflects the stereotypical way of thinking about a standardized beauty of the genders and the unequal way of judging the beauty of women and men.

Moreover, the way of how the male protagonists talk to and treat their wives is extremely often coloured by a despising and disrespectful manner. It is portrayed as a common and daily habit that the husband beats his wife. The abuse and humiliation of women is a central motif of gender relations in the stories and appears also in connection to the religious aspect, for instance in “Beaten Wife” (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 106). In this konseja, Joha’s wife comes to a rabbi and tells him that she suspects that her husband has stopped loving her, since he has stopped beating her. In “The Neighbor’s Seder”, Joha takes his neighbor as an example and starts beating his wife because she does not contest him immediately when he asks her something (ibid. 109). The examples of those stories are meant to be funny and yet reflect a cruel and humiliating behaviour of the husband towards his wife. The idea that the violent husband is meant to entertain the readership assumes that the gender ratio of the times in which the stories have their origin, were unequal and that the women had only little power to defend themselves.

The social motif of male disrespect towards women is also expressed in Joha’s incidentally made comments that are of a repelling and shocking character for readers of gender equal societies. In “A Purely Coincidental Connection”, the husband answers his wife
on the question when he would finally kiss her before the mezuzah, a religious Jewish object, that this will happen not sooner then when he sees her hung there (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 106). On the question if he could say some warm words to her, he contests “May I see you fry and toast in Hell!” (ibid.). The comical character of Joha suddenly loses his sympathetic characteristic, the words of his mouth seem to come from a frustrated narrator, who has packed his anger against his wife into a satirical story of Joha. The topic is also tackled when Joha spits on the ground when he thinks of his wife in “A Costly Trip” (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 107f.) and tells her that he will kill her if she bears him another daughter instead of a son in the tale “What an Excuse!” (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 118).

In *King Solomon and the Golden Fish*, the story “The Woman from Makeda and the Papías” (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 294) mirrors the opinion that women have a foolish, at times, malice and naïve character that frequently results in an impetuous decision, harming the male character. This is similarly represented in the tale “The Snake Woman” (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 110). In “The Woman from Makeda and the Papías”, the man presents the woman with some geese which she decorates with her expensive jewelry and sends away. When the man returns home, he scolds her that “You go as well, together with them!!” (ibid. 294). The wife’s dumb way of proceeding and sending the geese away represents the woman as ignorant and lacking common sense (Haboucha in Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 295). According to Haboucha, the story “focuses on the stupid wife and her absurd behavior” and highlights the “absurd short-sightedness” of a “brainless woman”, who disrespects the extremely valuable presents that her husband gave her (ibid.). The laughter provoked by the story is attributed to the obtuseness of the female character and, hypothesizes that a woman should not be in charge of the income, valuable possessions or financial matters of the family.

Moreover, the tale “The Rights of Widows and Orphans” (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 15) demonstrates in which miserable social position and dilemma a woman could end up in case her husband died early and left her as a widow. The female protagonist of the story is a single mother of five children. She does not receive any salary from her employers, the king and queen, so that she needs to feed the children with the dough on her hands that is
left after she has baked bread for the monarchs’ children (ibid. 15ff.). The konseja points out the moral importance and obligation of the rich to support the poor, especially single mothers and their children, who, according to the story, frequently lived under miserable circumstances in the past and had no chance to defend their rights (ibid. 16) The misogyny and hatred against women that was supposedly rooted within ancient Sephardic communities, comes to light in the Sephardic folk tales that tell of gender relationships and how they were perceived by the inventor of the stories.

In view of this, Haboucha analyses an additional folk tale named the “Tale of the Talking Birds” and explains, basing her claim on this narrative, that, looking impartially at the status of the female characters in the story, it is obvious that the story is told in a misogynic bias (Haboucha in Stillman and Zucker 243). At the same time, the woman is portrayed as independent, strong and breaking free from the traditional, conventional and restricting rules of the Jewish society (ibid.). Haboucha states that women in Sephardic folk tales are looked at in an ambivalent attitude of misogyny, the hatred, and philogyny, the love, towards women (Haboucha in Stillman and Zucker 244). The konsejas represent the female characters ambiguously as cunning snakes or powerful heroines who work against the dominant will of a patriarchal society (ibid.). The women portrayed in the folk tales mirror subjectively the status of women within a Sephardic society, respected and admired, yet condemned and restrained at the same time (Haboucha in Stillman and Zucker 245). The alleviating argument of Reginetta Haboucha is understandable and compatible with many of the analyzed folk tales of this work, nonetheless, is not applicable to the Sephardic folk tales, in which the male character becomes violent or physically, as well as orally insulting, towards the female character.

7.7 Religious Contents and Social Values

Just as the Sephardic folk tales give information about the social, communal and gender relationships of the Sephardim, they contain a lot of material about the religious rites and habits of this ethnic group. The stories in King Solomon and the Golden Fish and Folktales
of Joha. *Jewish Trickster* are full of religious allusions, parables and traditional customs that were meant to educate the people who would read or listen to the stories. Since in Judaism the religious leader, the rabbi, in Hebrew *rav*, incorporates not only a significant role in the religious life of the community but also takes the responsibility of an advisor for questions of the everyday life, his figure appears in many of the folk tales. The figure of the rabbi is connotated with different religious nominations that hint at the status or the religious current of the rav. In “Eliau Anaví and the Mother-in-Law” (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 122) a rabbi is denominated a *mekubál*, in Hebrew the word for “accepted”, which hypothesizes that he belongs to a cabalist current of Judaism. In the tales “When the Mouth Is Used” (ibid. 227) and “Only One” (ibid. 202), the figure of the rabbi is described as a *hahám* (Jewish-Spanish) and *hacham* (Hebrew), referring to a religiously educated, wise man. Those denominations portray the high and admirable status that a rabbi enjoyed among the community.

This high status results in a notable classification and social hierarchy between the simple people and the religious leader. To give an example, the narrative “Everyone to His Own System” (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 198) contains how the rabbi is invited to join a feast of the highest politician of the city, the sultan. Moreover, the rabbi works as a highly appreciated advisor for the religious people in “Eliau Anaví and the Mother-in-Law”, being consulted by many citizens from “everywhere”, who come to see him (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 122). In addition to the positive portrayal of the religious leaders in both books, the characters of the folk tales talk about religious topics, use religious objects and consume typical Jewish food. Furthermore, they keep the Jewish holidays, which gives an idea of how those festive seasons were usually kept during the time of the origin of the narrations. In the folk tale “The Jewish Festivals” (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 171), Joha starts enumerating all the Jewish holidays that need to be kept and thus, gives insight into the usually celebrated Jewish holidays. Joha names them in their Hebrew nomination, since the Hebrew naming of the Jewish festive days is universally known to the Jewish believers. Among the holidays mentioned are *Rosh Hashana*, the celebration of the Jewish new year, *Yom Kippur*, the day of Atonement, *Sukkot*, the Feast of Tabernacles, *Hanukkah* and *Nahamu*, the Shabbat after Tisha B’Av (ibid.). Through the strong connection between
the social life and the religious aspects, merging in almost every aspect of the daily life in Judaism, as it is portrayed in the analyzed folk tales, the readership gains an understanding of the traditional habits and rituals, as well as the religious beliefs, of the traditional Sephardim. What is more, through the use and the mentioning of religious objects in the tale’s contexts, a political opinion of the narrator can be determined. In turn, those political messages that latently underly the entertaining character of the story can indicate a story’s chronological origin.

When analysing the motifs of the Sephardic folk tales that represent the religious rites of the Sephardim, it attracts attention that many of them imply Biblical topics or seem to have adopted stories of the Bible and transformed them into folk tales with different characters and slightly varied objects. Additionally, the protagonists frequently talk about important Jewish books, prayers, festive holidays and moralistic laws and values that were commonly known and accepted among the religious Sephardim. Biblical metaphors and stories of the Old and New Testament that serve as a base for the structure of some of the folk tales are detected in the tales of “The Father’s Will” (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 53), “A la Fin Everything Comes to Light” (ibid. 22) and “Eliau Anavi and the Gevír” (ibid. 107). “The Father’s Will” deals with a man whose father dies in the beginning of the story. The father inherits the son all his riches but imposes one wish that forbids him to enter a boat to cross the sea (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 53). When the son breaks this prohibition, he comes into a storm, the boat sinks and he, as the sole survivor, manages to swim to a lonesome, unknown territory. The basic structure reminds the reader of the story Jonah and the Whale in the Old Testament, Jonah 1:1-17. Jonah is chosen by God to go to the city Nineveh to speak up against the evil will of its inhabitants (The Bible, Authorized King James Version, Jonah 1:2). Yet Jonah fears the will of God and flees on a boat to the city Tarshish (ibid. Jonah 1:3). During the voyage, God sends a storm that induces the other people on the boat to throw Jonah overboard so that the wind would calm down (ibid. Jonah 1:15). Contrary to the protagonist of the Sephardic folk tale, Jonah is swallowed by a big fish, in which he stays for three entire days. The motifs and symbols of the Biblical story, the disregard of the father’s will, the process of losing one’s way and the isolation in an unknown place, are adopted and included in the Sephardic tale, changing them slightly but transmitting
the same idea: The will of the father, God in the Bible, needs to be obeyed. In any way, there is no chance to escape his will, which leads back to the Jewish belief that every human life is tied to a divine, inevitable fate (Haboucha in Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 91). In a case of disobedience or the attempt to escape God’s order, one would come to a place of desolation and solitude in life.

In the second story, “A la Fin Everything Comes to Light”, the Biblical story of the fratricide between Cain and Abel is addressed by showing how one Sephardic Jew kills his Sephardic neighbor for no specifically mentioned reason and buries him in his cellar to hide the fateful deed (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 23). The crime cannot be concealed for long, since a vine starts growing out from the cellar and is detected by the king, who eats its grapes. He sends his soldiers who discover the skeleton of the murdered person. The homicide of the Sephardic community member is, according to the text, equal to the murder of a brother of which, as in the story of Cain and Abel, only God is witness. Despite of the human attempt to cover up the crime, God will not leave the deed unpunished. The narrative refers to Genesis 4.8, in which Cain murders his brother Abel and commits the first homicide between two humans, which has become an ancient metaphor for any deadly conflict between two people, tribes or nations (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 25; The Bible, Authorized King James Version, Genesis 4.8). The story condemns human virtues such as jealousy, greed, anger and a lack of self-control, out of which Abel has killed his brother Cain (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 25). By taking the story of Cain and Abel as its base, the story discusses the topic of an original sin, human failings and the urgent need to control one’s emotions. In addition to that, importance is shown of sticking to the laws of God, the ten commandments in the Torah, of which the sixth commandment says “Thou shalt not kill”.

The tale “Eliau Anáví and the Gevír” resembles the Biblical story of the tax collector Zacchaeus, that is written down in the New Testament, Luke 19.1-10. In the Sephardic tale, the prophet Eliau appears to a rich man who is worried about losing his material belongings (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 107). On the contrary, the destitute people of the village, living in a poor neighborhood called Karité, in Jewish-Spanish the word for “charity”, own almost nothing and live from one day to the other (ibid.). Eliau convinces the wealthy man to be content with his belongings and to give to other people so that he can find inner peace and
obtain the grace of God. The rich man understands the words of Eliau, gains a deeper understanding of life and decides to change his behaviour by sharing all of his possessions with the poor. In the Biblical narrative, Jesus encounters the rich Jewish tax collector Zacchaeus and changes his perspective and his way of interacting with the people around him. Zacchaeus who used to rook other people with the purpose to enrich himself, finds peace in sharing his riches and in repaying the ones he has cheated (The Bible, Authorized King James Version, Luke 19.8). In both narrations, the main message is that a wealthy human being is transformed by a human with divine characteristics who shows him the unjust circumstances of society and how important it is to take care of each other. The Jewish idea of charity, communal solidarity as well as moral responsibility of the rich towards the poor is portrayed in this tale (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 109). The significance of self-reflection, solidarity and the trust in religious principles is pointed out in the tale that might take therefore the story of Jesus as its base.

A key motif in the form of a Jewish value included in the tales, is the death of an authoritative person, who requires one last promise of another character before his death in the beginning of the story. In Judaism the symbol of a promise made to a dying person is deeply connected to a high form of respect that the living must show to the dead. “The Father’s Will” and “Shlomó Ameleh and the Birds’ Eggs” (Koén-Sarano,”King Solomon” 156) both include a promise towards a dying person that is imprudently broken and leads to a deteriorating situation for the person who has given the promise at the deathbed. In “The Father’s Will” it is a lawful, eager Jew who studies the Talmud. Yet when he breaks his father’s promise, he runs into serious difficulties and regrets to not have obeyed a dying person’s wish. The story emphasizes that, since he studies the Talmud, he should have considered that the oral wish of a man on his deathbed conveys the wish with the same legal power as a written last will (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 61).

In “Shlomó Ameleh and the Birds’ Eggs” there are two promises included in the text, that are given to a man on his deathbed. The first promise is given by a wife to her husband, promising him to stay faithful and to not get remarried after his death (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 157). Yet, after his demise, she desecrates his corpse by cutting out one of his eyes, in order to run away with a thief (ibid. 158). According to this story, the oral promise
breaks the religious written law of the halakha, deriving from the Hebrew word for law, rule or theory. The halakha or rather, the books of halakhot are the written down collection of Jewish religious laws that, according to Toledano, “follow the order of the tractates of the Talmud” and “state the final conclusion or ruling” of a legal problem (85). The books of halakhot state that a marriage can be brought to an end by divorce or by the death of one of the partners, as it is the case in the story “A la Fin Everything Comes to Light”, in which the husband dies and the woman is free to remarry (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 28). Since it is represented as something outrageous that the woman runs away with the thief and breaks the promise to her deceased husband, the motif of an orally given commitment seems to be of greater value than the law of the halakha. The second promise in the story, given to a father by his son, highlights likewise the importance of the moral value of a promise to a dying person. When the son is in difficulties, the simple answer, according to the text, is “Why? Because he had not followed the will, the savá, of his father!” (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 160).

While the Sephardic tales seem to adopt some of the features of older stories, the reoccurring motifs of a “last wish” and moral vices that need to be kept in order to succeed in life, show how close the storylines of some original Sephardic folk tales and some non-Sephardic folk tales are. Ashliman explains that “folktales, of one sort or another, have always been with us, and their themes and motifs have been adopted and re-formed by literary artists throughout the ages (“A Guide to Folktales” xii). This phenomenon of interpreting and re-adopting the themes of Sephardic folk tales can be seen in a comparison between the structure and the motifs of Sephardic folk tales of times past and tales that came to existence in later centuries. Their form and storyline extremely resemble the Sephardic version. A comparison hypothesises that the later story is based on the original tale and points out that many European folk tales have a mixed heritage, deriving from different sources and story tellers (Ashliman, “A Guide to Folktales” xii). In some cases, the folk tales include the same topic and differ from each other mostly in the choice of the characters.

To give an example, in the second promise, given to a dying person, in the story “Shlomó Ameleh and the Birds’ Eggs”, the central wish of the dying father is that the son will marry only the woman, whose foot fits into a shoe, that the father will give to the son.
The son must go looking from place to place, for the woman whose foot fits into the shoe, until he can trace her (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 159). In its central motif of the shoe and the importance that the foot of the woman needs to fit into it, as well as the exclusiveness that it can only be her whom the son marries, are the same storyline as in the well-known version of Cinderella (1697) by Charles Perrault. In the version of Perrault, the prince, after finding Cinderella’s shoe, does not stop looking for her until he can make her his princess (Ashliman, “A Guide to Folktales” 107ff.).

The same principle of looking for “the one”, the only person that fits into the idea and wish of one of the parents, appears likewise in the folk tale “The King’s Daughter and the Three Fostanes”, in which the queen dies and leaves the king with the only promise that he will marry the woman whose finger fits into the diamond ring that she has given him before her death. In a lunatic delusion, the king wants to marry his daughter, since her finger is the only finger that fits (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 149). In the light of analyzing the reoccurring motif of a dying person that states their last will at the beginning of a tale, it is obvious that the motif is used as a form of provocation of an ambivalence. David Pace, retired Professor of the Department of History at the Indiana University in Bloomington, explains that in a folk tale, the motif of the removal of a male at the beginning of a story provokes a conflict (Pace 4ff.). By the death of the husband or the father, an imbalance occurs which can only be rectified by the introduction and the righteous way of proceeding of another male (ibid.).

Another social value is the motif of marriage that also takes a central role in the Sephardic folk tales. In folk tales, the symbol of marriage is frequently the central point of the argument and leads to the escalation of a situation (Pace 5). It is considered a social status that completes a person. In the Sephardic folk tales, it is more than just a commitment to the opposite sex, it is a vow that can only be broken by God or by death. Therefore, it is portrayed in the folk tales that a man and a woman can be united by only two things in life: Blood or marriage (ibid.). Their main task throughout the marriage is to bear children and to reproduce, for which an infertility of one of the partners is perceived as a punishment by God (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 43). Since the marital status and its fruits is of such great importance in Judaism, the religious sanctification, unification and blessing of two people is frequently
described as the climax of an argument in the Sephardic tales. The marriage between a Jew and a non-Jewish person is considered as something upsetting, disgraceful and shameful for the whole Jewish family, as it is metaphorically stated in the story “The Tale of the Questions” (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 213). A Jewish father explains to his son that by marrying a non-Jewish woman, he disrespects his efforts to raise and nurture him all his life. The urge to maintain a Jewish bloodline and to respect the Jewish religion are portrayed in some of the Sephardic folk tales with pride. According to the tales, intermarriage between the religions is something non-negotiable and results in an insult of the Jewish parents.

The ethnical identification with the Jewish people and the holy land arise likewise in other religious motifs that are strongly connected to the Jewish people and Israel. One of them is the symbol of vine and its fruits. The vine is a re-occurring symbol of the Bible and is commonly known through stories of the Old Testament or parables of Jesus. Metaphorical explanations of Jesus describe God as a vinedresser, Jesus as the vine and the people who follow him as grapes (The Bible. Authorized King James Version, John 15.1-15.5). The motif of vine and grapes in the Sephardic folk tales is therefore quickly associated with those passages from the Bible. The plant is considered as deeply symbolic and represents more than a mere resource for making wine. In the Old Testament it symbolizes the sweetness and the glory of Israel, as well as the richness of the promised land to the Jews and is often used in metaphorical descriptions. In one passage Jacob says to his son Judah that he would be “binding his foal unto the vine, and his ass’s colt unto the choice vine” (The Bible, Authorized King James Version, Genesis 49.11-13). Further, “he washed his garments in wine, and his clothes in the blood of grapes: his eyes shall be red with wine, and his teeth white with milk.” (ibid.). Relying on parable like this, the vine and the grapes are connotated with sweetness and blood. The vine motif itself in the Sephardic folk tales might likewise be a symbol for the truth of God and for something immaculate.

In another passage of the Old Testament, Moses sends out twelve spies who receive the order to see if the land of Israel is fertile and inhabited. The spies decide to return to Moses with sweet fruits like a branch of grapes, to show him the fertility of Israel. Therefore, “the place was called the brook Eshcol, because of the cluster of grapes which the children of Israel cut down from thence” (The Bible, Authorized King James Version, Numbers 13.23-
Leaning on this passage, the vine and its fruits hypothetically represent a metaphor for the homeland of Israel, the fertile and fruit-bearing lands that stand for the glory of God and their right to return to the land. They are a symbol for truth and connection between Yahweh and the Jewish people.

As a matter of course, the vine and the grapes play a decisive role in some of the Sephardic tales compiled in Koén-Sarano’s works. In “A la Fin Everything Comes to Light” a vine plant helps to expose a conducted crime in the narrative. When the grapes of the vine, consumed by the king, begin to bleed, he realizes that something not trustable is happening. The grapes represent a violation of the truth and that the connection between God and the man who killed his neighbor was broken. The king realizes by eating the grapes that something fatal has happened. God’s will has been ignored. In a more casual contexts, the grapes portray a religious understanding or wisdom. In the tale “Tasty Work” (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 48), Joha goes to the cemetery and tries to vend grapes to the dead people. After his unsuccessful attempt to sell grapes at the marketplace, he goes to the Jewish graveyard where he starts eating them himself. The place where a Jewish person is buried is of immense importance in Judaism. The belief says that every dead man will be resurrected when the Maschiach, the Messiah, arrives (Beyrodt). He would enter Jerusalem through the Golden Gate, or also called the Sha’ar Harachamimi, the Gate of Mercy, in the East of the city. For this reason, the most popular place for a Jew to have his grave is close to the Golden Gate and close to Jerusalem (Beyrodt).

The fact, that Joha starts eating the grapes himself at the Jewish cemetery because all was quiet and “there was no sound or reply” of the dead, shows that the cemetery is an extremely peaceful and quiet place, where the dead people are normally shown respect (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales” 48). According to the tale, it was something uncommon to sell good at the cemetery, for which reason there is no noise or tumult around the graves when Joha is there. His action of eating grapes is, hypothetically, a symbol of eating the truth and the wisdom of God by consuming the spirit of Israel. Joha, the credulous but foolish character who disrespects the deceased and, in a gluttonous manner, eats up all the grapes himself, needs to learn more about the Jewish belief, its rules and virtues. He is waiting for the dead to answer him and for a client to appear, which signifies that he, never in his life, has learnt...
enough about the Jewish circle of life and the Holy Books to understand the significance of his way of acting. His lack of wisdom about Judaism is represented by the number of grapes that he needs to consume until he can return home to his mother.

In addition to the Biblical symbols and Jewish moralistic beliefs that appear in the folk tales, a lot of information about the way of praying and the Holy Books of Judaism is given in the stories. Therefore, the use of some of the Jewish prayers like the Birkat Hamazon, the grace which is spoken after every meal that contains bread, the Nei’la, the concluding prayer that is said at the end of the final service of Yom Kippur, and the Shmone Esrei, the most important prayer of Judaism, is mentioned during the plots of the tales (Beyrodt; Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 192, 202ff). The prayers that follow a strict and rigid manner of reciting them, are comparable to the Jewish religious laws that are written down in some of the Holy Books. How some of them are included in the Sephardic folk tales in Koén-Sarano’s works will be examined in the following chapter.

7.8 Religious Laws and Objects

Many plots of the Sephardic tales build their subject matter on the breaking of a religious law, for instance the law of keeping Shabbat. The holiday of Shabbat begins every Friday before sunset and ends Saturday at nightfall. In “King Shelomó and the Golden Fish”, a talking fish with material riches, is caught by a fisherman after the beginning of Shabbat: “The fisherman wanted to finish early, to return home and welcome the Shabát. At dawn, he took himself down to the Kinneret. He cast his net” (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 6). A shomer Shabbat, a Jewish observant of the Shabbat, according to the halakha, is not allowed to do any productive, creative, economical, or active work, such as business, household chores creational tasks (“The Shabbat Laws”). Moreover, it is proscribed to use or move specific objects called the muktzeh in Hebrew (“The Shabbat Laws”). Those laws of Shabbat are attributed to distinct reasons, for example because they are mentioned in the Torah (“The Shabbat Laws”). By casting out the net, the fisherman in “King Shelomó and the Golden Fish” breaks the laws of Shabbat and provokes a supernatural but also fatal and dodgy
experience. The magically speaking fish is a life-changing experience for the fisherman’s and the king’s family (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 8). The fact that the fish was caught during a “prohibited” action means, that the fish likely comes from a suspicious, non-religious source, warning the reader that by breaking the rules of Shabbat, precarious things can happen.

A similar phenomenon occurs in the tale “The King’s Lost Son Transformed to a Dog” (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 41), in which a young girl needs to break Shabbat in order to take some water out of a well for her poor family (ibid. 42). When Shabbat has already set in, she is still involved in the act of fetching water and thus, breaks the laws of Shabbat. Her disregard of Shabbat turns her into a witness of magical happenings of the otherworld, during which she sees how the queen’s son is transformed into a dog (ibid.). The breaking of Shabbat in the Sephardic folk tales is hence accompanied by a rather bewitching and supernatural effect. As in Christian folk tales it is often the time of Christmas during which something magical and unexpected happens, Shabbat seems to have the same enchanted status for the Sephardim.

The breaking of other religious laws is directly excoriated in some of the narratives. To give an illustration, the condemnation of the disregarding of the ketubá, the Jewish form of a marriage contract, is analysed in the story “The Father’s Will”. The son who crosses the sea against his father’s last will, comes to an isolated land of demons and gets married with a demon, who happens to be the daughter of the rabbi. The rabbi himself arranges the marriage for them (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 57). Nevertheless, the son returns to his homeland and refuses to go back to the demon, for which reason he is told: “Amá you gave her an oath and a marriage contract, a ketubá. Agora you can’t just leave her like that!” (ibid. 59). The ketubá was originally incorporated in the Jewish law with the purpose to strengthen the rights of a woman in case her husband wanted to get a divorce (Haboucha in Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 66). The ketubá should bind him legally to a moral commitment but also to the payment of an appropriate support to the wife after the divorce (ibid.). It could be used as a form of legal pressure and financial obligation that involved a reputational risk for the man in case he would illegally break the ketubá, as it is similarly portrayed in the folk tale. The story continues with the demonical wife confronting her husband with the claim
that he needs to come back, since he has signed a *ketubá* (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 60). After the son still refuses, the woman is buried by so much shame and anger that she chokes him with a kiss (ibid.).

The story conveys the unequivocal message that a man who commits to a woman by marrying her, needs to observe the religious rules of the *ketubá* if he does not want to bring shame on the woman, her family and inclusive, himself. If he decides to flout the Jewish standards, it might even be justifiable for the woman to kill or degrade him. The narration highlights that the Jewish laws bind the social interactions of Sephardic community to a legal standard and to rigid values that cannot be interpreted ad lib by each individual of the group. The members must be conscious about their actions and act responsibly according to the religious laws. Arrangements like the *ketubá* and other norms must be observed and respected in order to maintain a harmonic unity and to provide for the protection of the right of the weaker parts of society, in this case, the woman.

Other Sephardic rules that are mentioned throughout the storylines are for instance the mentioning of the obligation to fast during the holiday of Yom Kippur in the story “Breaking the Fast” (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 205), or the consummation of kosher food which is not combinable with other habits such as smoking on Shabbat. An act represented as “crazy” in the tale “Religiosity” (ibid.). About the narration “The Donkey Knows How to Read” (ibid. 201), Koén-Sarano states: “The setting of our tale could not be more Jewish. There are rabbis, a Jewish community council, a synagogue, a sexton, a book of Gemará, as well as the customary religious acts such as fasting, penitence, prayer, and the giving of charity as a means of seeking salvation from a calamity” (ibid. 207). The incorporation of a wide number of Jewish religious aspects, figures and principles makes the Sephardic folk tales distinguishable from other folkloric works, binds them to the Sephardic tradition and provide the readership with a broad knowledge about the conventional norms of the community.

Beside of the religious laws, several Jewish-religious objects are mentioned in the folk tales of Matilda Koén-Sarano’s literary collective bodies. Those religious objects give information about the admiration and cultivation of specific religious trends, as well as about the Jewish current that might have influenced the author of the tale. One example of a
religious object mentioned in the texts that could give information about the author’s religious conviction, is the mezuzah. It is a small box that contains excerpts of the Torah and is attached on the door frames of Jewish houses. The motif of the mezuzah is mentioned in the story “A Purely Coincidental Connection”, in which the wife of Joha impatiently asks him, when he would kiss her before the mezuzah (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 106). The mezuzah symbolizes for the wife something holy and blessing for the marital harmony but simultaneously gives information about the status of the mezuzah for the Jewish author of the tale.

The mezuzah was, for a long time, widely discussed between rabbinic authorities and a Jewish current that believed in its mystical interpretation (Levine 2). This Jewish current used to incorporate additional texts of magical content to the texts of the Torah, which turned it into an object of supernatural belief (ibid.). The use and widespread increase of the application of the mezuzah as a significant religious part of Judaism amassed rapidly between the beginning of the Middle Ages and the fourteenth century (Levine 8). Hence, the motif of the mezuzah as a “magic object” of blessing for the married couple hints at the time of origin of the tale and at the religious attitude of the author of “A Purely Coincidental Connection” (Koén-Sarano, “Folktales of Joha” 106). However, since the answer of Joha is “When I see you hung there!”, the author might have had an aversion to the magical use of the mezuzah and was rather a supporter of the rabbinic group that vehemently wanted to “limit the mezuzah as a religious symbol alone” in order to “distinguish the practice from irrational, and thus forbidden, magic and superstition” (Levine 2). The strong connection between the Sephardic folk tales and their religious, as well as social components, is of highest importance to look at, since it demonstrates the religious tradition of the Sephardim and how it was intertwined with the daily routines. As seen in the example of the mezuzah, the religious belief of the Sephardim could have been strongly tied to a belief in superstitions and magical worlds that could influence the human world. The line between religious ideas like the belief in prophets is distinguishable from the superstitious beliefs, since the creatures of superstition are rather fantastic spirits and clearly, non-human beings.
7.9 Superstitious and Magical Components

One key motif of Sephardic folk tales is the implementation of superstitious, portentous and mystical beliefs in the form of supernatural happenings and creatures that visit and manipulate the human world. The narratives frequently incorporate wondrous elements of a magic spell that seemingly have evil, malicious intents against good-natured Jewish believers (Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 148). By combining the components of the real with the ones of a supernatural world, the Sephardic folk tales take often place in an atmosphere of Magic Realism. Magic Realism is defined by the Encyclopaedia Britannica as a “matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction” (“Magic Realism”). Díaz-Mas describes that the appearing magical components are often creatures called “los d’embajo”, in Jewish-Spanish “the ones from the underground”, or “los mejores de mosotros”, espagniol for “the better ones of us” (Díaz-Mas, “Los Sefardíes” 148). They descend from imaginary spheres and are, out of superstition and fear, not dared to mention by other names than euphemisms since the narrators of the folk tales do not want to call or attract their spirits (ibid.). Those creatures of the folk tales appear in absurd, animal-like forms, just as well as in the form of humans of flesh and blood. A common form of fantastic beings is the demons, in Hebrew the shedim, referring to the devil or another evil spirit. The appearance and way of behaving of the demons frequently resonate with literary and Biblical figures that are known to the people through the stories of the Talmud.

In the narration “The Father’s Will”, the shedá, the female demon married the young Jewish protagonist, mirrors the Biblical figure of Lilith, the first wife of Adam (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 63). Based on the Biblical character, the shedá personifies the contrary of a well-behaved, good-willed woman and represents the characteristics of a femme fatale, a cunning, sly and outrageous woman that corrupts the good spirit of men (ibid.). That is why her husband feels repelled from her and prefers to be with a Jewish woman. Other demons that interact in the storyline of the folk tales appear in the narrative “The King’s Lost Son Transformed to a Dog”, in which the male royal descendant is transformed into a black dog by some demons celebrating the Shabbat. He can only be re-transformed by the mystical remedies of a magician, which likewise hints at a belief in magical substances such as magic.
The superstitious belief in the mingling of demons with humans is a popular feature of Sephardic folk tales and is taken from Talmudic passages that include demonic creatures (Haboucha in Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 62).

The demons of the tales seem to be organized and have their own hierarchy, which is ruled by the king of demons called Ashmedáy and the queen Agrath (ibid. 64). The king and his subjects are equipped with human-like characteristics but are physically stronger and more stupid than the humans (ibid.). In various stories, as in “The Father’s Will”, they resemble zombies that can “smell the scent of a human” before they find and kill them (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 55). This works as a scaremongering for the readers and warns them to stay away from evil, non-Jewish spirits. Nonetheless, in other passages the shedim remind in their literary description rather of holy, angel-like beings that work as mediators of God. Hypothetically, the Sephardic belief in demons must have varied between fear and reverence.

The superstitious, rigid idea of the Sephardim that demons could have an enormous impact on human-beings, shows, according to the tales, that part of the Sephardic community used to take Talmudic writings literally and incorporated even mystical superstitions into their daily lives. The magical interaction between two worlds might have been believed to occur in a meaningful manner and to teach, educate or frighten a Jewish believer, did he not follow the Jewish virtuous or moral path. Yet, Haboucha mentions in King Solomon and the Golden Fish that, even though the belief in demons was widely spread among the Sephardic community, not all members shared this superstitious assumption (62). Great philosophers like Maimonides denied and criticized the theory of their existence (ibid.).

A similar concept of mystic creatures, challenging and bewitching human beings, appears in the story “When There Were No Mirrors in the World” (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 47). A witch named Witch Malice, instantly connotated with a bad and evil character, interacts with the monarchical family of a fictitious land with the purpose of curing two royal human beings from their bad virtues. She comes to the prince of the Land of the Green Eyes and punishes him for treating her impolitely by turning him into a kambúr, the Ladino word for a “hunchbacked and hideous” mass (Koén-Sarano, “King Solomon” 48). When he is laughed at by the princess, the witch deforms also the princess and turns her blind and ugly. Yet, the ending of the tale points out that only through the lesson of the Witch
Malice and the transformation of the arrogant monarchs, a true love can be felt between them. The true love unites both characters and turns them back into human beings (ibid. 49). The initially suspected negative character of the witch becomes positively meaningful and profounder by the end of the story. This shows that the magical protagonists of a Sephardic folk tale can be helpful and salutary even though their ways of proceeding have an ambiguous character. Figures like the Witch Malice might also stand for the obstacles of life that can be challenging for the humans and yet, follow a divine plan that has a positive outcome in mind.

The incorporation of mystical creatures like demons and witches with supernatural skills into the Sephardic folk tales, hints at a prevailing superstitious belief of the Jewish authors in extraordinary creatures, mythology and witchcraft, as it was extremely widespread among the European population and its literature during the fifteenth century until the beginning of the nineteenth century (Klaniczay and Pócs 2,4). Even though the humans and the magical beings of the stories interact in human ways with each other, for instance get married or dine at the same table as the humans, the witches and demons frequently disturb the seemingly peaceful life of the human characters and get them off their initial course of behaving. At the same time, a reoccurring motif is the instructive and spiritually healing outcome of the contact between the humans and the supernatural beings. Anna Brzezińska describes that the idea of a witch was frequently connotated with healing practices of witchcraft and a “diabolic” quality that was ascribed to those practices due to the unconventional and as “magical” considered medications that were used by the witches (Klaniczay and Pócs 6). Witches were believed to possess those practices and to be able to cure or becharm humans with their powers, which, according to the common Sephardic belief portrayed in their folk tales, were applied to human beings (ibid.). These healing manners, portrayed as magical skills in the folk tales of the Sephardim, do not only affect the human protagonists in a way of transforming their physical bodies but rather educate them spiritually, teach them a lesson and improve their virtues of how to interact with their fellow beings, as shown in the narratives “When There Were No Mirrors in the World” and “The Father’s Will”.

By implying magical, supernatural creatures and elements into their folk tales, the Sephardim seized on the prevailing belief in metaphysics and nourished the already present
superstitious way of thinking among their community. In the Sephardic folk tales, the creatures’ surprising, frightening and yet didactic manner of transforming human beings physically and spiritually, is used as an impressive lesson for the readership to convey humanistic virtues to the broad masses. The method of scaring, entertaining and fascinating at the same time, is used in the narrations as a manner of teaching and convincing through metaphors. By passing on the message of the importance of being morally good, in fantastic pictures and explications, the tales were easy to understand and to memorize for the Sephardic readership of distinct countries and for all age groups.

Conclusion

The main focus and the findings of this study can be understood as the investigation on the historical and cultural background of the Sephardim, setting it into context with their linguistic knowledge, literary culture and the preservation of one of their most important literary tools to pass on their religious rules, social virtues and moral convictions: The folk tale.

Concluding, this work has summarized the Sephardic tradition and has viewed it in the light of literary compilations of the Israeli author Matilde Koén-Sarano. Koén-Sarano has assembled Sephardic folk tales in the works Folktales of Joha. Jewish Trickster and King Solomon and the Golden Fish. Tales from the Sephardic Tradition. Both books are collections of traditional folk tales that have been published in the English language.

A discussion on the symbolic contents, motifs and social structures represented in those folk tales, as well as their interpretation, has been provided and has given an insight into the ancient Sephardic way of life and attitude towards gender roles, religion and superstitious beliefs.

Likewise, an embedding of the research on the Sephardic folk tale into an accurate depiction of the historical happenings, linguistic and literary developments of the Sephardim has been given. A summary of the Sephardic tradition has shown that the Sephardim have been plagued for centuries by religious persecution and expulsion. This is an important point
in the understanding that both the exclusion and the expulsion possibly have contributed to
the Sephardic literary production, their unity and their conservation of traditional folk tales. The analysis of the historical summary indicates that the folk tales have been of extreme
significance for old and young generations of the Sephardim to keep the tradition and ancient
knowledge alive. The interpretation of the folk tales in Matilda Koén-Sarano’s works has
further pointed out that the ancient Sephardic society was coined by typical gender-roles, a
strong religious influence into every aspect of the daily life and a firm, superstitious
interpretation of the religious and daily life.

It is a question of future research to investigate more on the topic of the Sephardic
literature, keep the Sephardic tradition alive and attempt to preserve the Ladino and the
Judeo-Español. The possibility of a future vanishment of this linguistic and literary treasury
would be a loss of an ancient, unique and irretrievable culture that has been conserved since
the centuries before 1600. The Sephardic tradition is one of the richest cultures that has
survived religious fanaticism over the last centuries and therefore, future research should be
devoted to conserve, support and cherish its different cultural aspects.
Bibliographic References


- “Re: Master thesis on Sephardic Folk Tales.” Received by Linda Dotterweich, 6 Dec. 2018.


Appendix

Personal Interview with Professor Doctor Samuel Hassid

For the Sephardic community, the genre of the folk tale has a deep meaning and is the heritage of an oral and literary production of Sephardim from all parts of the world, where they have come to settle after the forced diaspora from Spain. The folk tales of this ethnic group were invented and conserved in their unique ethnic language, the Judeo-Spanish, but also in other languages like Jewish-Arabic, Hebrew, Italian, Turkish.

After analysing the history of the Sephardim, their language and their folkloric literature, it is interesting to hear about the presence and importance of folk tales and the cultivation of the Sephardic tradition from a primary source. With the purpose of collecting information about the life of a Sephardi and his connection to folk tales of his own ethnic group, as well as to a possible connection to the author Matilda Koén-Sarano, an interview was conducted about the literary, linguistic and cultural heritage of Professor Samuel Hassid. Professor Hassid is a former staff member of the Civil and Environmental Engineering at the Technion, the Israel Institute of Technology. He is of Jewish Greek descendance, living in Israel with his family.

The interview was conducted to get an idea of how the understanding and appreciation of the Sephardic folk tale is still manifested in the current generations and is handed on to the future generations. Professor Hassid grew up in Greece and explained in the personal interview that during his youth in Greece he experienced the unity of a Jewish community, within which, for a long time, it was distinguished between the Eastern Mediterranean Jews and the Jews of Spanish origin (Hassid, “Personal interview”). This had meant roughly the distinction between “Greek speaking Romaniotes and Ladino-speaking Sephardim” (ibid.). Hassid said that this ethnical and religious segregation that had not existed “in the framework of the pre-1918 Ottoman Empire”, had vanished nowadays but the difficulty of identifying with an ethnicity or the misuse of the Sephardic ethnicity for political reasons still existed (ibid.).
With regards to Ladino and the use of Judeo-Spanish as his mother tongue or within a context of *diglossia*, Professor Hassid answered that he had never spoken the Jewish-Spanish with anyone of his family, neither with his wife, with whom he spoke in Greek, nor with his children, whom he raised speaking Hebrew to them (Hassid, “Personal interview”). Even though he concerned that the usage of *espaniol*, the most common description of the Jewish-Spanish by those who spoke it in Greece, had been decreasing, he would not consider speaking in Jewish-Spanish to his children and compared the - by him appreciated - attempt of conserving the Ladino language to Don Quixote’s fight against the windmills (Hassid, “Personal interview”; “RE: Master thesis”).

When asking about the Sephardic folklore, in specific the significance of folk tales in the Sephardic tradition, Professor Samuel Hassid responded that he had never thought about that subject (Hassid, “Personal interview”). Yet he remembered that his mother and her generation, who still spoke the Jewish-Spanish, used one expression that said “Salonik del tempo de Joha”, *Thessaloniki of the time of Joha* (ibid.). The saying hypothesises that the character of Joha and the Sephardic folk tales stood in a strong connection with the daily life and the interactions between the inhabitants of Thessaloniki. Professor Hassid mentioned that he was familiar with the folkloric character of Joha but clarified that he had thought of him as the “Judeo-Spanish equivalent of Nasradin Hodja”, until he had come into contact with a narrative in which both characters appear (ibid.) He had realized that, while Nasradin Hodja was “a symbol of life wisdom”, the figure of Joha the Jewish trickster was just “ridiculous” (ibid.).

About Professor Hassid’s connection to Matilda Koën-Sarano he stated in the interview that his only knowledge about Joha had come through the information and folk tales about Joha that he had read in Matilda Koën-Sarano’s books (Hassid, “Personal interview”). This points out the importance of Koën-Sarano’s work of compiling the traditional *konsejas* and making them available in book form to a broad readership. Moreover, Professor Hassid mentioned his personal relationship to Koën-Sarano and his appreciation of her work (ibid.). He made clear that Matilda Koën-Sarano was one of the last people living in Israel who had still a perfect knowledge of the Ladino language, which made
it possible for her to see and know what later and coming generations “misunderstand or not understand at all” (ibid).

To sum up the personal interview and the message of Professor Samuel Hassid, it is essential to quote his statement saying that “it is important for future generations, to show we had such a culture” (Hassid, “Personal interview”). His attitude toward the Sephardic culture, its language and the folkloric literature reflects and concludes the analysis and examination of the Sephardic tradition and the folk tales that were accumulated in Matilda Koén-Sarano’s works. While the language and the tradition of the Sephardim is considered as something unifying, it is obvious for the current Sephardic community that the descendance of their ancient language is unstoppable. An adoption to other cultures and language communities has progressed too far to return to a widely, commonly used lingua franca between the ethnic group. Nevertheless, the conservation of Ladino and the spoken Jewish-Spanish are appreciated and cherished by the community members.

The connection and passing on of the Sephardic folk tales to younger generations exists and is supported by the Sephardic community, owing to their identification with the ethnic group and the pride about their heritage. Yet a similarly strong connection to the folk tales’ characters and their localization, as mentioned about Professor Samuel Hassid’s mother’s generation, is unlikely existing among the young Sephardim of today.

**Personal Interview with Professor Doctor Samuel Hassid**

Interview for the master thesis “The Genre of Folk Tales in the Sephardic Culture - Represented in the Context of Literary Works Collected by Matilda Koén-Sarano” by Linda Dotterweich, with Professor Doctor Samuel Hassid, on December 6, 2018.

Dear Professor Hassid,

1) Which status has the term *Sephardim* for you in your life? Would you say that it attributes you to a religious community or do you see it as an ethnic group? Did you grow up with other people telling you that you are part of the Sephardic community rather than the Jewish community?
In Greece we spoke of a Jewish community (the difference there used to be Greek speaking Romaniotes and Ladino-speaking Sephardim – but it does not exist any more). In Israel I think of myself as a Jew of Greek origin – I just cannot identify with those who abuse the difference between Sephardic and other Jews for political purposes. Certainly not with the guy who is speaking in terms of Sephardic Jews not being confused with Mizrahi ones and the latter “stole” from us the “Rishon leTsion” ....

Let me also add that in the framework of the pre-1918 Ottoman Empire – the millet system did not differentiate between ethnic and religious communities – but since then things have changed.

2) Did, or do you use the Ladino language in order to communicate with your family or your religious community? Would you say that you use it in a form of diglossia (Two languages (or two varieties of the same language) are used under different conditions within a community, often by the same speakers, e.g. you speak the Jewish-Spanish with your family but Hebrew with other members of your religious community)?

No. We occasionally make some jokes with my wife. NO I do NOT speak Judeo-Spanish with anyone in my family – I speak Greek with my wife and Hebrew with my son and her daughter (our version of diglossia – incidently a Greek word)

3) Do you experience that less people know the Ladino language? Did, or would you talk to your children and the coming generations in Ladino (do you think it is important to teach it to them)?

Indeed, the number of people speaking Judeo-Spanish decreases. No, I would not talk to my children “ladino”. I also told Prof Naar once that his trying to teach ladino to his son in the US is like Don Quixote’s Air Mills and that although I appreciate his work on ladino conservation – his thinking of it as means to fight Trump, xenophobia and Islamophobia has nothing to do with reality.

4) Did you grow up with other people telling you folk tales of the Sephardic tradition? If yes, in which situations (before you went to sleep, at the synagogue, during social gatherings…) and which ones were the most common ones to tell? Are you familiar with the character of Joha the Trickster?
I am familiar with Joha – I thought it is the judeo-spanish equivalent of Nasradin Hodja till my wife’s daughter brought me a Mathilda tale (kuento) in which Joha was discussing something with Hodja. I know little about the Joha tales apart from what I read in Mathilda’s books. (I was once told that Hodja the arab-persian-turk is a symbol of life wisdom – whereas “our” Joha is just ridiculous.)

5) Would you say that the folk tale has a special status within the Sephardic tradition? In the way you experienced the use of folk tales between the Sephardim, has it been used by the Sephardim to pass on their heritage and culture?

Never thought about the subject. Actually – the expression among my mother’s generation was “Salonik del tempo de Joha” for things irrelevant today.

6) Have you heard of the author Matilda Koén-Sarano? She has collected and preserved many Sephardic folk tales in books published by her. Do you consider the preservation and conservation of traditional Sephardic folk tales as something important and necessary for the coming generations?

I know her personally and appreciate her work. Yes, it is important for future generations, to show we had such a culture. In Israel – she is among the last ones who speak perfect ladino and knows what we later generations misunderstand or not understand at all.
Academic Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this master thesis and that I have not used any sources other than those listed in the bibliography and identified as references. I am aware of the University’s (Háskóli Íslands) regulations concerning plagiarism, including those regulations concerning disciplinary actions that may result from plagiarism. Any use of the works of any other author, in any form, is properly acknowledged at their point of use. I further declare that I have not submitted this thesis at any other institution in order to obtain a degree.

Student’s confirmation: __________Linda Dotterweich____________________

Name (in capitals): __________LINDA DOTTERWEICH____________________

Date and Place: __________Munich, 24.04.2019____________________