

# H-Net Reviews

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**Salvador Santa Puche.** *Introducción a la literatura de los judíos sefardíes.* Valencia: Palmar editorial, 1998. 170 pp. \$29.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-84-923716-3-1.



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*Introducción a la Literatura de los judíos sefardíes* is a concise (170 pages) guide in Spanish to the pre- and post-expulsion literature of the Sephardim. Ladino-speaking Sephardim and others who may not be fluent in modern Spanish will find that this is rather easy—and certainly worthwhile—reading, even if one occasionally has to refer to a dictionary. Almost encyclopedic in scope, this little gem includes not only a virtual “who’s who” of Sephardic literary and intellectual figures and their works, but also the essential historical and cultural information that puts the people and their achievements in context. To our knowledge no similar work exists in English. Such information must be gathered from many sources, and this the author – a young (b. 1971) Spanish philologist – has done for this book, which is largely based on his doctoral dissertation.

About two-thirds of the book is dedicated to the Jewish achievements in Spain prior to 1492. This very comprehensive section includes not only the many well-known luminaries—Maimonides, Nahmanides, Ibn Gabirol, Yehuda Halevi, etc. – but many other lesser-known authors. It concludes with a chapter on the conversos in Spanish literature, where we find names such as Fernando Rojas, author of *La Celestina*, and Miguel de Cervantes—suspected, but not proven, to have been a descendant of Jewish converts. The section on the post-

1492 era reveals a thorough understanding of the nature of the judeo-spanish language and culture. Particularly impressive is the author’s sensitivity to the devastation caused by the Holocaust. For example, in reference to the decline of the judeo-spanish language, and the lack of literary output between the years 1940 and 1970, he writes:

“...fue el exterminio nazi el verdadero y nico factor que puso al judeo-español al borde de desaparición, y no, como se ha pretendido, el supuesto descrédito que esta lengua tenía entre los propios sefardíes.”

(...The Nazi extermination was the true and only factor in bringing judeo-spanish to the brink of disappearance, and not, as has been suggested, the supposed discredit (low esteem) which it had among Sephardim themselves.)

The various areas of literary production in the Sephardic diaspora are covered—Bible, prayer books, original narratives, poetry (liturgical and secular poems and songs), theater, and translations from French and other literature. (In fact, *Robinson Crusoe* was translated into Judeo-Spanish from the Hebrew as “*La hermosa historia de Robinson*”, meaning “The Beautiful Story of Robinson”.) Present-day Sephardic authors who have produced works in and on Judeo-Spanish are also included: Hank

Halio, Matilda Koen Sarrano, Moshe Shaul, Haim Vidal Sephiha, David Siman, and David Altabe among them.

The epilogue in the book considers the question of the future of Judeo-spanish, about which the author is very optimistic. He cites the feverish efforts in the last two decades to promote and preserve the language, particularly in Israel where the formation of the government-financed "Autoridad del Ladino" has great promise. The book is not without its faults. Some authors, especially of the post-1492 era, are overlooked. One reason may be due to the absence of English-language books and articles in the book's otherwise very extensive bibliography (consisting of Spanish, French and Ladino works). If Santa Puche had consulted, for example, Marc D. Angel's *Voices in Exile: A Study in Sephardic Intellectual History*, he would not have missed including such an important post-expulsion author as Eliezer Papo, author of *Pele Yoets*, a very influential work of moral guidance published in Sarajevo in the beginning of the 19th century. Also, *Leha Dodi*, the popular Sabbath-eve hymn, is mistakenly attributed to Moshe Cordovero instead of

to Rabbi Shelomo Alkabetz, Cordovero's contemporary and fellow-mystic. The absence of a name index means one cannot easily locate the various areas in which certain figures (Maimonides, Yehuda Halevi, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Abraham Ibn Ezra, and others) distinguished themselves. However, the book's clear organization, both chronological and thematic, is a big help. The table of contents appears in back of themselves. However, the book's clear organization, both chronological and thematic, is a big help. The table of contents appears in back of the book.

Overall, *Introduccion a la literatura de los judios sefardies* is a valuable work that presents the wide scope of Sephardic literary and philosophical creativity of the last eleven centuries. It is all the more valuable since, despite its few deficits, it is the most comprehensive book to date on this subject.

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