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La ermoza istorya de Robinzon o la mizerya: Sephardi Versions of Robinson Crusoe

Abstract

In the second half of the 19th century the Haskalah, an intellectual movement whose objective was to educate and westernize Eastern European Jews, also reached the Sephardic communities in the Ottoman Empire. As a result, there emerged Sephardic modern secular literature, represented mainly by narrative fiction, theatre plays and press. It should be added that modern Sephardic literature is primarily based on translations or adaptations of Western novels. Among these texts we find Sephardic editions of classics of European literature, such as *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe and *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift.

I have found four different versions of *Robinson Crusoe* that were written in Judeo-Spanish and edited in *aljamía*. Two of them were published serially in Sephardi press, one in Salonica in 1881 and the other in Constantinople in 1900. The other two editions were prepared by Ben Tsiyon Taragan and published as complete versions, the first one in Jerusalem in 1897 and the second one in

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Constantinople in 1924. The aim of this paper is to provide a brief analysis of the Sephardic adaptations of *Robinson Crusoe* by Taragan.

Keywords: Sephardic literature, Judeo-Spanish, Ladino, Taragan, adaptation, Robinson Crusoe.

In the second half of the 19th century the Haskalah, an intellectual movement whose objective was to educate and westernize Eastern European Jews, also reached the Sephardic communities in the Ottoman Empire. As a result, there emerged Sephardic modern secular literature, represented mainly by narrative fiction, theatre plays and press. It is worth noting that the novel became the preferred genre for Sephardic writers (Borovaya, 2012, p. 23; Díaz-Mas, 2006, p. 196; Romero, 1992, p. 177). Furthermore, newspapers were instrumental in the diffusion of modern Judeo-Spanish literature because lots of novels and theatre plays were serialized in journals or appeared as chapbooks (Borovaya, 2012, p. 24; Díaz-Mas, 2006, p. 196; Romero, 1992, p. 179).

Modern Sephardic literature is primarily based on translations or adaptations of Western novels. The translations were ordinarily published in instalments in newspapers (usually distributed by subscription) or as chapbooks without indication of the source version and its author (Borovaya, 2003, p. 152). Both kinds of editions were quite cheap and widely available. The texts were often abridged to some 20 pages and appeared with the indication *trezladado* (translated), *rezumido* (summarized), *imitado*, *adaptado* (arranged) or *reeskrito* (rewritten), the terms being used synonymously (Borovaya, 2003, p. 32; Díaz-Mas, 2006, pp. 198–199). Moreover, the translation and publication of translated works aims, on the one hand, to create a Judeo-Spanish version of the style that corresponded to literary or cultured language in its written form; on the other hand, in this way Sephardic authors intended to educate and civilize their readers while entertaining them (Borovaya, 2003, p. 32; Linde-Usiekiewicz & Kacprzak, 2016, p. 44). It is important to note that literary texts in Judeo-Spanish were printed in *aljamía*, i.e. Rashi script, a semi-cursive typeface of the Hebrew alphabet. Among these texts we find Sephardic editions of classics of European literature, such as *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe, *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, *The Children of Captain Grant* by Jules Verne, *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas

père, and *The Lady of the Camellias* by Alexandre Dumas fils (Borovaya, 2012 p. 148; Díaz-Mas, 2006, p. 199; Romero, 1992, pp. 247–248).

I have found four different versions of *Robinson Crusoe* written in Judeo-Spanish and edited in *aljamía*. Two of them were published serially in *Berakah ha-meshuleshet o las tres luzes* [Triple Blessing or Three Lights] under the title *El asolado en la izla* [The Lone Survivor on the Island]. The first one was edited by Refael Yishak Benveniste and issued by the Etz he-Ḥayim printing house in Salonica in 1881. The second one, edited by Eliyahu Levi ben Naḥmias, was released by Arditi in Constantinople in 1900 (Šmid, 2017, p. 264). The other two editions were prepared by Ben Tsiyon Taragan and published as complete versions. The first one entitled *Robinzon o la mizerya* [Robinson or the Misery] was printed in Jerusalem in 1897, but unfortunately we do not know the name of the printing house. The second one was issued by the publishing house of Shelomo Israel Sherezli under the title *La ermoza istorya de Robinzon o la mizerya* [Robinson's Beautiful Story or the Misery]¹ in Constantinople in 1924. This piece of writing is analysed below.

Ben Tsiyon Taragan (Jerusalem, 1870-1953) was a writer, editor and translator of works into Judeo-Spanish. He was also a teacher of Hebrew, and worked in the printing house of Eliezer Ben Yehuda in Jerusalem. In 1902, along with Sherezli, he founded *Guerta de Yerushalayim* [The Garden of Jerusalem], a yearbook which published collections of European novels translated into Judeo-Spanish. Moreover, Taragan translated a burlesque Haggadah of Purim in praise of the wine entitled *Haggadah shel Purim* [The Purim Haggadah] into Judeo-Spanish (Jerusalem 1894). This is a version of *Haggadah leleil shikorim* [Haggadah for the Night of Drunkards] by Hirsch Sommerhausen written in Hebrew-Aramaic and first published in Lemberg in 1847. In addition, Taragan translated *La Ermoza Rahel* [Beautiful Rachel] by N.M. Shalkevich from Hebrew into Judeo-Spanish (Jerusalem 1904) and adapted such novels as *Itamar* (Jerusalem 1903) – a Sephardic version of the novel *Ben Hur* by Lewis Wallace, *Los Buchukes* [The Twins] (Jerusalem 1903) – an adaptation of the *Comedy of Errors* by Shakespeare, *El Salvador: kuento miracle ke akontesio en tiempo de la Inkisision en la Ostria* [The Saviour: Miraculous Story that Occurred at the Time of the Inquisition in Austria] (Jerusalem 1911) and, of course, *Robinzon o la mizerya* (Jerusalem 1897; Taragan, 1897) and *La hermoza istorya Robinzon o la mizerya* (Constantinople 1924; Taragan, 1924), Sephardic versions of *Robinson Crusoe* by Defoe (Romero, 1992, pp. 68, 231, 246, 247, 2012, p. 432).

¹ I analyse these four Sephardic versions of *Robinson Crusoe* in the doctoral dissertation I am currently writing at the University of Warsaw under the co-direction of Dr Katja Šmid from the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC).

The Judeo-Spanish adaptations of the story about the world's most famous castaway developed by Taragan are almost identical. The discrepancies mainly concern morphology and orthography. This paper aims to provide a brief analysis of the second edition entitled *La ermoza istorya de Robinzon o la mizerya*. It consists of 150 pages and is a bit longer than the first edition, *Robinzon o la mizerya*, with 124 pages. Apart from that, the content of both is the same and the versions seem to be quite faithful to the original text by Defoe. The syntax, however, indicates that Taragan's translations were not based on the original but probably on a Hebrew version. I have not found out yet which version it actually was. Nevertheless, in Romero (1992, p. 247) we can read that Taragan's translation of *Robinson Crusoe* was based on a Hebrew version which was first published in Vilnius in 1862.

It is worth mentioning that at the end of *La ermoza istorya de Robinzon o la mizerya*, in addition to the story about Robinson Crusoe, there are three short texts of a moralistic, educational nature. The first one, entitled *Komportamyento del padre i la madre kon sus kriaturikas*, is a set of advice, probably from the author, for parents on how to educate their children so that they become good people. The second one is a moral tale entitled *Las tres demandas de Frederiko El Grande*. The last text, *Konsejos a los mansevos*, is a compilation of advice written in verse, primarily aimed at young girls.

With regard to the content, Taragan's translations of *Robinson Crusoe*, as mentioned above, seem to be fairly faithful to Defoe's original text; however, Taragan cut the plot a bit and removed all references to Jesus. We can see that the author Judaized the text, because his Robinson celebrates Shabbat and holidays. As we read in the third chapter:

I looked for a tree and I started to scratch into it: 'On 30 September 1659 Robinson landed on the island'. And below, every afternoon day by day I scratched the name of the day of the week and the day of Shabbat and the day of the first day of the month in large letters. In this way I could know the count of the days in order and I was resting on the same day that people in populated places rested and I was celebrating Passover along with them during their Passover holidays. (Taragan, 1924, pp. 46–47)²

² "Bushkí un árbol i enpesí a_kavakar sovre él: «En 30 septembre 1659, entró Robinzon en la dita izla». I abasho kavakava kada tadre día por día, nombre del día de_la semana i el día de shabat i el día del primo de mez kon letras grandes. En esta regla podía saver la kuenta de los días en regla i olgava en el día ke olgan en él la djente povlada i paskuava djunto kon eyos en sus paskuas." All translations from Judeo-Spanish into English are by the author of this paper. In the transliteration from Hebrew Rashi to Latin letters I follow the modified system of the magazine "Aki Yerushalayim" putting written accents (tildes) according to the rules of accentuation in Spanish.

As we can see, Taragan keeps the dates based on the Julian calendar. Furthermore, in his versions of *Robinson Crusoe* we can also observe some Christian elements, for example when Robinson is sick and gets on his knees to pray:

Yesterday's thoughts passed through my mind and also the fears of death and the torrential waves, also the great mercies that the High God granted me appeared before my eyes, I got down on my knees and I praised God the Saviour of my soul! (Taragan, 1924, p. 29)³

I knelt on my knees and made my prayers to God. (Taragan, 1924, p. 52)⁴

Throughout the text, Robinson gets down on his knees six times, to pray or to thank or praise God.

Another thing that stands out when reading Taragan's adaptations of *Robinson Crusoe* is the use of Hebraisms, for example the cardinal points always appear in Hebrew.

...but he decided not to go fishing in the sea; unless it is clear in the part of tsafón (north) and without taking food. (Taragan, 1924, p. 19)⁵

I tried to turn my ship back to the part of tsafón (north) that is towards the island. (Taragan, 1924, p. 61)⁶

Another very interesting issue is the moment when Robinson, having recovered, is exploring the island to find a suitable place to build a house:

...it seemed to me that I was in paradise (Gan Eden). (Taragan, 1924, p. 53)⁷

It seemed to me that I was adam harishón who was in paradise before he had a woman. (Taragan, 1924, p. 55)⁸

As we can see, the Hebraisms also serve as glosses;⁹ Taragan introduces the word *paradizo* and in parentheses writes *Gan Eden*, meaning "the Garden of Eden" in Hebrew. In the same way, he introduces the word *lapa*

³ "Me pasaron por tino todos mis pensamyentos de ayer, tambyén los myedos de muerte i las olas aravdonantes, tambyén los grandes mercedes ke el Dyo Alto izo kon mí, se aparavan kuentra mi ojos me echí sovre mis rodías i alaví al Dyo Eskapador de mi alma!"

⁴ "Me arodií sovre mis rodías i ize mi orasyón al Dyo."

⁵ "(...) ma él aresivyó sovre él de no abashar más en mar por peshkar, sin ke de la parte de tsafón este byen klaro, i sin tomar kon eyos vianda."

⁶ "Apreví de aboltar mi navío para la parte de tsafón ke es para la izla."

⁷ "(...) me paresía ke me topo en el paradizo (Gan Eden)."

⁸ "Me paresía komo *adam harishón* ke estava en el paradizo antes ke tuviera mujer." In Hebrew *adam harishón* means "the first man."

⁹ To translate the glosses I used the following dictionaries: *A lexicon of the Hebrew and Aramaic elements in modern Judezmo* by David M. Bunis (1993), *Dictionnaire du judéo-espagnol* by Joseph Nehama (1977) and *New Redhouse Turkish-English dictionary* by James William Redhouse (1968).

that derives from Portuguese and means “cave”; Taragan glosses it with the Hebrew word *meara*. It should be added that explanatory glosses were a typical feature that Judeo-Spanish authors used to introduce new concepts which were related to the non-Sephardic world, or to replace words that derived from non-Romance languages with contributions from Romance languages (like French, Spanish or Portuguese) (Bunis 2011, p. 27; García Moreno, 2010, p. 80; Subasi, 2016, p. 456).

There are actually more glosses in the text, for example in the fourth chapter when Taragan refers to the Bible, he uses the Hebrew acronym referring to the Hebrew Bible, *Tanah*. Nevertheless, in the text we can also find glosses in Turkish, for example in the second chapter we read that “Kesori topo una lyevre (taushán) i la kasó por muestra komida” (Taragan, 1924, p. 21) (“Kesori found a hare and hunted it for our food”); Taragán uses the word *lyevre* taken from the Spanish and in parentheses he glosses it as *taushán*, which derives from Turkish.

The influence of Hebrew on the vocabulary of Taragan’s *Robinson Crusoe* deserves special mention. Below are some examples to appreciate expressions that derive from Hebrew, for instance: “topó grasya en sus ojos” (Taragan, 1924, p. 23) (“He found grace in his eyes”) is a tracing of the Hebrew expression *matsa hen be-einav* (מצא חן בעיניו) which means “he liked it”. We can find another case in the phrase “ke no se vyeron de tyempo”, where *de tyempo* is a tracing of the Hebrew expression *mizman* (מזמן), “for a long time”. Another example worth mentioning is the phrase “i lo mirava komo demandándole por su pas” (Taragan, 1924, p. 110) (“And he was looking at him as if asking about his peace”), which is equivalent to the Hebrew expression *lishol ma shlomo* (לשאול מה שלומו), meaning “ask/asking how he is”.

On the other hand, the influence of Hebrew is also discernible in the syntax of Taragan’s versions of *Robinson Crusoe*; this mostly concerns nominal phrases, such as “Si me alegraré ke djente de mi puevlo eyos!” (Taragan, 1924, p. 114) (“If I will be glad that they are people of my nation!”) or “Uno de eyos ke paresía ser el más grande respondyó por nombrado de todos: mozotros todos esclavos” (Taragan, 1924, p. 127) (“One of them that seemed to be the greatest answered on behalf of all: we all slave”). In these phrases the syntax seems Hebrew, from a nominal phrase, because the verb *to be* has been suppressed. Moreover, throughout the text we can observe a lot of long and compound phrases that also closely resemble the style of writing in Hebrew.

In summary, the aforementioned abundant Hebraisms and syntactic elements, such as nominal phrases and numerous traces of Hebrew expressions, confirm that Taragan’s Sephardic adaptations of *Robinson Crusoe* were based on a Hebrew version of the story.

With regard to the vocabulary, we can observe glosses of the words used in parentheses. It was a typical feature of Judeo-Spanish literature for introducing new concepts which were related to the non-Sephardic world, or replacing words that derived from non-Romance languages with contributions from Romance languages. Taragan's translations of *Robinson Crusoe* show a considerable influence of Portuguese, Turkish, and especially of Hebrew.

As far as the literary content is concerned, both of Taragan's adaptations seem to be quite faithful to Defoe's original text. However, it is notable that the author Judaized the texts, as his Robinson celebrates Shabbat and Jewish holidays, and all references to Jesus have been removed. We can also notice the educational value of the narrative and interpret the moral of the story as a warning against travelling away from one's home and the consequences of disobedience and opposing one's parents' will.

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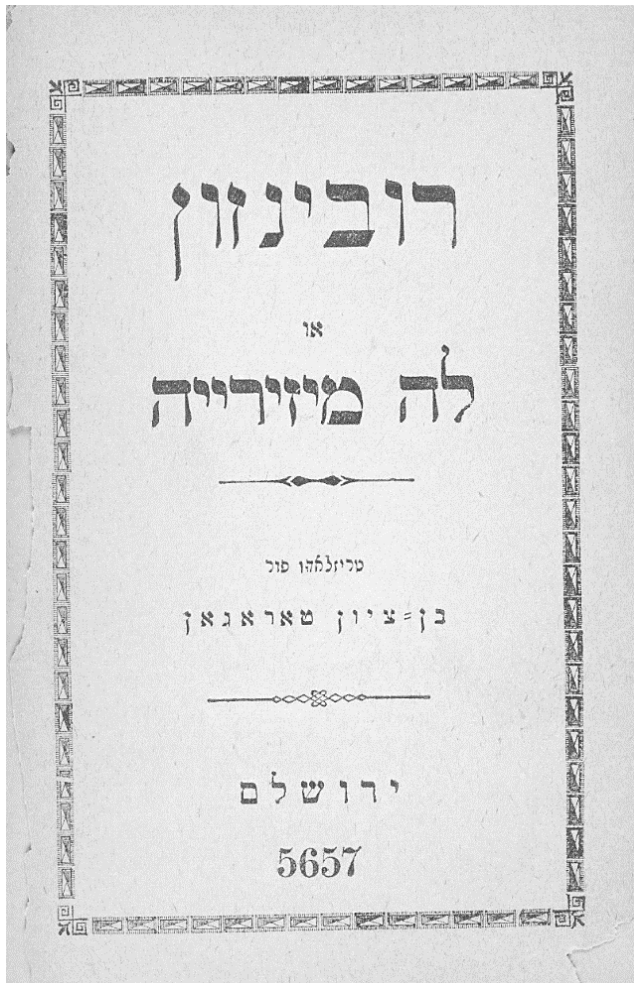


Fig. 1. *Robinzon o la mizerya* (Jerusalem, 1897; Taragan, 1897, title page)



Fig. 2. *La ermoza istorya de Robinzon o la mizerya* (Constantinople, 1924; Taragan, 1924, title page)

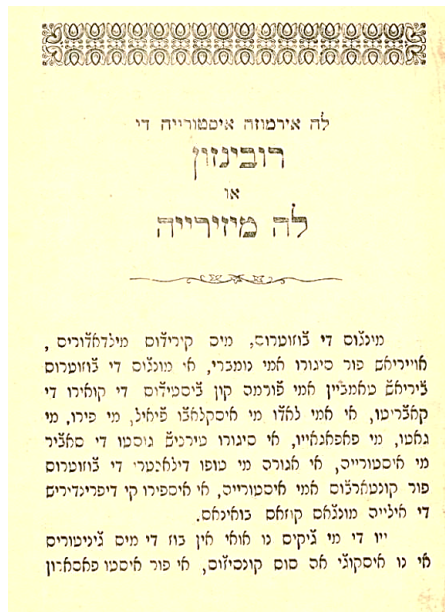


Fig. 3. *La ermoza istorya de Robinzon o la mizerya* (Constantinople, 1924; Taragan, 1924, p. 3)

*La ermoza istorya de Robinzon o la mizerya:
sefardyjska wersja Robinsona Crusoe*

Haskala, zwana także Żydowskim Oświeceniem, to ruch intelektualny, którego celem było odrodzenie kulturowe i społeczne Żydów z Europy Wschodniej oraz ich integracja ze środowiskiem lokalnym. W drugiej połowie XIX wieku *Haskala* objęła także społeczność Żydów sefardyjskich zamieszkujących tereny należące do Imperium Osmańskiego, w wyniku czego powstała współczesna, świecka literatura sefardyjska reprezentowana głównie przez prozę, sztuki teatralne oraz prasę. Warto dodać, że współczesna literatura sefardyjska oparta jest przede wszystkim na przekładach lub adaptacjach powieści uważanych za klasykę literatury europejskiej, takich jak *Romeo i Julia* Williama Szekspira, *Robinson Crusoe* Daniela Defoe czy *Podróże Guliwera* Jonathana Swifta.

W trakcie prowadzonych przeze mnie badań natrafiłam na cztery różne, judeo-hiszpańskie wersje *Robinsona Crusoe*, które zapisane zostały alfabetem hebrajskim, tzw. pismem Rasziego. Dwie z nich ukazały się w prasie sefardyjskiej, jako powieść w odcinkach, pierwsza w Salonikach w 1881 r., a druga w Konstantynopolu w 1900 r. Pozostałe dwie, autorstwa Ben Tsiyona Taragana, zostały wydane w całości, pierwsza w Jerozolimie w 1897 r., druga zaś w Konstantynopolu w 1924 r. Celem tego artykułu jest prezentacja oraz krótka analiza sefardyjskich adaptacji *Robinsona Crusoe* autorstwa B. T. Taragana.

Słowa kluczowe: literatura sefardyjska, judeo-hiszpański, ladino, Taragan, adaptacja, Robinson Crusoe.

Note

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