

CHAPTER 21

Appendix: Additional notes on songs presented in Alberto Nar's article

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Alberto Nar's article about contacts between Jews and Rebetiko was published in Greek in 1999. It was a groundbreaking study of the subject, based in part on Nar's own field recordings of elderly members of the Sephardic community in Thessaloniki. They were singing in the traditional language of the Sephardic communities – the Ladino (Judeo-Spanish, Spanyol). Among these recordings made by Nar there are versions that were not documented elsewhere and are the only testimonies of the existence of certain songs in the oral tradition.

Most of the songs in Nar's article belong to the genre of *kantes populares* (Ladino: popular songs). This term refers to new songs in Ladino that were written to melodies of popular songs of various musical cultures. This new genre in Sephardic poetic literature developed mainly in Thessaloniki between the world wars. It reflected intensive cultural changes in the Jewish society in Thessaloniki, exposure to surrounding cultures and absorption of elements from these cultures. The new texts in Ladino were published in Ladino satirical journals, always with an indication of the melody to which they should be sung. The song whose melody was adopted for the new text is called the model song. In addition to publication in print, these new songs were performed by amateur musicians in family and community events, as well as in local cafés. Many songs of the genre became very popular, and despite the short time of their presence in the Sephardic culture in Thessaloniki, survived in oral tradition. Nar succeeded to document a number of them.

Two prominent figures in the creation of *kantes populares* were Sadik Gershon and Moshe Kazes, who were known as the duo Sadik i Gazoz. Their songs were published in various Ladino satirical journal in Thessaloniki, such as *La Vara*, *El Rayo* and *El Rizon*. Every now and then the songs were republished in booklets, often with the title *Los kantes populares de Sadik i Gazoz*. Their songs are among those documented by Alberto Nar.

Alberto Nar portrays the years 1930s as the significant years of contacts between Jews in Thessaloniki and the world of rebetiko. I would broaden the time and include also the former decade – the 1920s. As we shall see, a number of the songs presented in the article were composed during these years.

Since the publication of Nar's article, more studies on *kantes populares* were done about the songs he discussed, and many recordings were collected and documented. Part of the information known so far is presented in this appendix. In addition, almost all the songs in the article are included (texts and recordings) in the book: *I Remember... Holocaust Survivors Sing Sephardic Songs* (Thessaloniki: Ianos, 2020), edited by Leon Nar.

Few words on a personal level: I had the privilege of meeting Alberto Nar twice in Thessaloniki. I met a warm and knowledgeable person, willing to share his knowledge and encouraging others to participate in revealing the treasures of the Sephardic culture of the city. En ganeden se repose su alma.

Yedi Kule

The song *Yedi Kule* (also known as *La huérfana abandonada* or *La huérfana del prisionero*) is one of the most widespread and popular songs in the Ladino oral tradition from Thessaloniki. The song is a dialogue between a prisoner in *Yedi Kule* – an infamous

jail in Thessaloniki – and an orphan girl he loves. The prisoner blames her for a murder he committed out of jealousy and laments his poor conditions in jail. The girl answers by blaming him for abandoning her, saying that now, after his crime and his imprisonment, she has found another man whom she can trust.

A study of sources from Thessaloniki showed that the song is a combination of verses from two separate texts. One is a monologue of the prisoner, the other (in reply to his monologue) – a monologue of the beloved girl. The prisoner’s monologue must have been published sometime in 1926 or 1927 in the satirical journal *La Gata* and was titled *Serenada*. It is known from one source only, a personal notebook into which this text was copied. Its melody, as indicated in this source, is *Sabahtan kalktim yunesh parliyor* (Turkish: *Sabahtan kalktim güneş parlayor*) [I woke up in the morning, the sun is rising].

The girl’s monologue was published sometime later in the same journal and was included (as Nar correctly mentioned) in the booklet *Los kantes de La Gata* (1927), a compilation of songs formerly published in *La Gata*. The girl’s monologue is titled *Estate kayado!... – repuesta al kante del prizonero* [Keep quiet! A reply to the song of the prisoner] and it is signed “Gilda”, probably a pseudonym. It is also said to be sung to the melody of *Sabahtan kalktim*. This means that both songs were sung to the same melody.

As sometimes happen in oral tradition, the two texts, having been sung to the same melody, were combined, thus creating a dialogue between the prisoner and his beloved. The text presented by Nar reflects this process.

The melody of the two texts was adopted from an Armenian exile song (sung in Turkish) about the Armenian genocide in 1915. It is also known as *Derzor Çöllerinde* [In the desert of Der Zor]. The melody was preserved in all the Ladino oral versions of *Yedi kule*. For the Armenian song, see here:

<https://sfi.usc.edu/video/hovsana-kumjian-sings-ballad-der-zor-chollerende>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VtcSavLRWpE>

A los banyikos de la mar

This is another example of two independent texts that were written to the same melody and were combined and mixed in oral tradition. The first five lines come from a song published in 1928 or 1929 in another satirical journal in Thessaloniki, *El Rizon*, and was later included in the booklet *Los kantes populares de Sadik i Gazoz* (1929). The song is titled *Ven chika nazliya* [Come, little naughty girl] and the subtitle says: “to be sung to the melody of the very popular Turkish song *Niçin gördüm seni*” [Why did I set eyes upon you?]. This refers to a Turkish song, recorded by the singer Hafiz Burhan (Columbia 12289 W 22076, Istanbul 1927).

Evidently, this Turkish song was very popular, since another text in Ladino was set to its melody. Its title is not clear, but its subtitle mentions the same Turkish song as the model song. It was published in the monthly periodical *Kantes diversos* (no. 1, 1929) in Thessaloniki. The second strophe of *A los banyikos de la mar* (last five lines) derives from this song. In Iakov Halegua’s version, as recorded by Alberto Nar, the two texts were combined to one song.

Ven chika nazliya has some similarity to its Turkish model: *Ven, ven* [come, come] follows the equivalent line *Gel gel* in Turkish. For the Turkish song see:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEr9_5bqSOU

No amo las ijikas

The text preserved by Iakov Halegua derives from another song by Sadik i Gazoz *Los ke preferan la mujer de 40 anyos* [Those who prefer a 40-year-old woman]. The song is

included in the booklet *Los kantedes populares de Sadik i Gazoz* (1935), a compilation of songs by the duo that were first published in the satirical journal *El Rayo*. It was written to the melody of the Greek popular song *I sarandara* [The 40-year-old woman], composed and performed by Antonis Dalgas in 1931 (His Masters Voice Ελλάδαος AO-2014). The Ladino song follows the idea of its Greek model song: the advantages of a mature woman and the troubles caused by younger women. For the Greek model song see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z-oOTOCaS4w>

Salonik ya se troko

This song was also written by the duo Sadik i Gazoz. It is included in the booklet *10 kantes populares de Sadik i Gazoz* (ca. 1927). The title of the song is *Saloniko!* and it was written, according to its subtitle, “to the melody of the French pretty foxtrot *Mon Paris* from the review show *Candid*”. *Mon Paris* [My Paris] was composed by L. Boyer (lyrics) and V. Scotto (music) and performed by the French singer Henri Alibert (France, Gramophone 1925). The French model song is a nostalgic elegy to old Paris, when it was still a familial village. The Ladino song follows this theme, lamenting old Thessaloniki, before technology turned it into a modern city. *Saloniko!* is a typical example of *kantes populares*. Just as its text describes the combination of old and new in Thessaloniki, like “modern” cars running in dusty burnt-out streets, the song combines the traditional language Ladino with new popular Western music.

For the French model song see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wkHE7YuEk6U>

Jako

In a column in the Ladino journal *Aksion* (1938), Moshe Kazes describes the circumstances of the composition of the song. According to Prof. David Bunis, who found this column, the song was written by the duo Sadik i Gazoz, and the hero's surname was Koen (D. Bunis, *Voices from Jewish Salonika*, 1999, p. 334). Jako Koen was a musician (*chalgidji*) like Sadik Gershon. The column in *Aksion* contains a citation from the song, partially parallel to the version presented by Nar. For the model song *Elenitsa mou* see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpWRhC-nQHI>

Dechidi de me kazar

As Alberto Nar wrote, this song is a Ladino version of the Greek song *Εγώ Θέλω πριγκηπέσσα* [I want a princess]. Moshe Halegua who is the source of the text, rightfully attributes it to Moshe Kazes and Sadik Gershon. Sadik i Gazoz' Ladino version was published in the satirical journal *El Rizon* on 27/11/1936, under the title *Dechidi de me kazar* [I decided to get married]. The subtitle indicates that it should be sung “to the melody of the Greek rebetiko song *Ego thelo prinkipessa*”. The Ladino song, like its Greek model song, is a description of the desired woman, but the ideal woman is portrayed differently by the authors of the two songs, as presented by Nar. The Sephardic ideal woman is a down-to-earth woman, a fun loving, coquettish and attractive woman of a rich family, who will admire her man. Interestingly, few months later (2/4/1937) an answer to the song was published in the same journal, by the same authors. The reply's title was *El novio ke kiero yo* [the man I want] and it presents the point of view of the woman, describing the ideal male partner. For the Greek model song see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DjrU3OIwz1M>

Nikos Ordoulidis wrote an exhaustive article about the Greek song *Ego thelo prinkipessa*: Ordoulidis, Nikos. 2021. "The Peregrinations of a Princess... Urban Popular Music of the 20th Century in the Network of Eastern Europe, the Balkans and the South-Eastern Mediterranean." *Association of Recorded Sound Collections Journal*, 52 ed.: 249–82.

To yelekaki

Alberto Nar presents two Ladino texts that were written to the melody of the Greek song *To yelekaki* [The little vest]. The first one, by Jack Mayesh, is discussed briefly later. The second one, whose opening line is *Kien te va ver kon kacharas* [whoever sees you with fashionable haircut] is part of a longer text by Sadik i Gazoz, published in the booklet *Los kantes populares de Sadik i Gazoz* (1933). This text's title is *El falsador* [The cheater] and it is said "to be sung to the melody of the joyful Greek tango *To yelekaki pu foris*". Unlike what Nar writes, there is some relation between the Greek song and the Ladino version. The first strophe of this Ladino text seems to reflect the opening of *To yelekaki*, both having a girl talking to a young man, for whom she prepared a cloth (a vest in the Greek song, a pair of pants in the Ladino song). The rest of the text is indeed different.

To yelekaki became very popular over time, as seen in the use of its melody for another Ladino text. This one was titled *La bivdika i el hashishli* [The widow and the hashish smoker] (*La Gata* 27/1/1933). This title reflects another component of *To yelekaki*: the fact that the melody of its refrain derived from an old Greek rebetiko song, *I hira kai I damira* [*Ἡ χήρα και ἡ νταμίρα*, The widow and the hashish]. *La bivdika i el hashishli* is said "to be sung to the melody of the delicious popular Greek song *Aide to malono, to malono*", referring to the opening words of *To yelekaki*'s refrain. For *To yelekaki* see:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPQUQsq7hKw>

For *I hira kai I damira* see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPEi63T9aAs>

Mil i kinientas liras

Nar cites a short text in Ladino that he learned from his mother, and identifies its model song as the old traditional Greek song *Omologies*. Indeed, the similarity between the two songs is clear. Nar assumed that there was more to what his mother remembered, and he was right. The strophe he cites is part of a whole text in Ladino, written by Sadik i Gazoz and published in *Los kantes populares de Sadik i Gazoz*, (1929). Its title is *Si no me dan tus parientes* [If your parents won't give me], "to be sung to the melody of *Omologies* or *Aide duru duru*". The words *Aide duru duru* refer to the refrain of *Omologies*. In both the Greek and the Ladino songs, a man presents a series of conditions (mainly financial demands) to the family of a girl he considers a candidate for marriage.

But this is not all. As seen before, additional song was written to the same melody by Sadik i Gazoz (*Los kantes populares de Sadik i Gazoz*, 1929). The second song, titled *Kuantes paras vale un novio* [how much money is a groom worth] is a *repuesta* [answer] of the girl to the young man who posted exaggerated demands to her family, as conditions to marry their daughter. In the second song the girl speaks: "Who are you anyway? Just a good-for-nothing who thinks he is something! I wouldn't marry you anyway". Similar to cases presented above, the two texts sung to the same melody were combined and mixed in oral tradition. An example can be heard here: <http://folkmasa.org/avshir/shirp.php?mishtane=1058>

For *Omologies* see here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLEFTq5-8AU>

A second phase of Ladino songs and rebetiko: Jack Mayesh

In the first decades of the 20th century, Sephardic immigrants settled in the United States and established communities. The Sephardic culture continued and thrived, and Ladino songs were created and recorded. A prominent figure in this field was Jack Mayesh, who recorded songs in Ladino (in addition to prayers and hymns in Hebrew) in the years 1941-1944 (under his own label, Mayesh Phonograph Record) and in 1948 (under the label Me-Re). Mayesh lived in Los Angeles but recorded in New York. He wrote the Ladino texts of the songs he recorded, for most of them he used melodies of Greek and Turkish songs. Later, his songs were performed and recorded by others.

Alberto Nar identified one song as one created by Mayesh – *Onde topo una ke es plaziente?* – the Ladino version of the Greek song *Pou na vro gynaiika na sou moiazei?*. Mayesh recorded the song twice (Mayesh 1440; Me-Re 6003-A). The title of his recording is *Onde que tope una que es plaziente*.

Other songs by Mayesh included in Nar's article are (in their order in the article).

Kanaraki – Recorded by Mayesh under the title *Ven canario* (Me-Re 6001A). Later performed by Jo Elias.

To γελεκόκι – first Ladino version, recorded under the title *Mostrame gracioza* (Me-Re 6003B). Later performed and recorded by many, among them the ensemble Los Pasharos Sefardis and Liliana Treves-Alkalai.

Misirlu – Recorded by Mayesh under the title *Missirlu* (Mayesh 1367), later performed by Liliana Treves-Alkalai.

Blonde Jewish Girl – Mayesh recorded his Ladino version under the title *No seas capritchoza* (Me-Re 6002A). Performed by Jo Elias in 1992.

All the information about Jack Mayesh and his recordings is taken from the excellent website “Sephardic Music: A Century of Recordings”. For more information see: <https://www.sephardicmusic.org/artists/Mayesh,Jack/Mayesh,Jack.htm>