

*A Tale in the Language of “My Mother Spain”:
Carmen Pérez-Avello’s Un muchacho sefardí*

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Abstract

This article focuses on Carmen Pérez-Avello’s Un muchacho sefardí (A Sephardi Boy), a novel for young readers that that writer, who also happened to belong to Catholic religious order, published in Spain in 1965. The text’s multiple layers make it possible to examine contradictory meanings associated with Jewish and Sephardi themes in the decade that preceded the end of the Francoist dictatorship. On the one hand, Un muchacho sefardí stands out in a historical period in which Paloma Díaz-Más identifies an “absolute silence” with regard to Jewish characters and Jewish themes in Spanish literature. On the other hand, Pérez-Avello tapped into what could be called a “Philo-Sephardi catalogue” in order to craft the book. Un muchacho sefardí represents a unique opportunity to further understand a moment of gradual change and transition with regard to gender roles, the role of the church, and, of course, Spain’s relationship with Sephardi Jews.

Unruly Sisters

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Un muchacho sefardí

The Language of “My Mother Spain”

Unruly Sisters

In 1965 *The Sound of Music*, known as *Sonrisas y lágrimas* (Smiles and Tears) in Spain and as *La novicia rebelde* (The Rebellious Novice) elsewhere in the Spanish-speaking world, won the academy award for best picture, making steadfast, courageous, yet still pious nuns (or, at least, novices) visible in popular culture and mass media. The “Singing Nun” (Jeanne-Paule Marie “Jeannine” Deckers) may have started this trend a few years earlier with her hit song “Dominique.” In Spain, where Francisco Franco ruled with the loyal support of the Catholic Church, the trend continued with the upbeat protagonists of two comedies, *Sor Citroen* (Pedro Lazaga, 1967), and *Sor Ye-Yé* (Ramón Fernández, 1968).

These last two characters may look remarkable in a country where women belonging to religious orders had long been in charge in prisons and reformatories. In the decade that followed the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) nuns were often complicit in a violent purge of all forms of political dissent. Yet the light-hearted figures that appeared in the films depicted a change that was only skin-deep.¹ In the mid-1960s nuns were no longer watching over public morality with the same agency and intensity as the interdependence between the Francoist state and the Catholic Church enabled in the earlier decades of the dictatorship. However, the heroines of the “desarrollismo comedies,” *Sor Citroen* (Gracita Morales) and *Sor Ye-Yé* (Hilda Aguirre) are safe and unthreatening characters.² They may hint at women’s evolving roles, even within the confines of a religious order and the hierarchy of the Catholic church, yet structural change is not exactly on their agenda. Characters like *Sor Citroen* and *Sor Ye-Yé* may be unconventional, yet

¹ Aurora G. Morcillo “Walls of Flesh. Spanish Postwar Reconstruction and Public Morality,” *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 84, no. 6 (2007): 737-758; 742; Frances Lannon, “Ideological Tensions. The Social Praxis and Cultural Politics of Spanish Catholicism,” in *Spanish Cultural Studies. An Introduction*, eds. Jo Labanyi and Helene Graham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 277.

² “Desarrollismo” refers to “the series of socio-economic and cultural transformations that took place in Spain from around 1960 to the mid-seventies.” Jorge Pérez, “‘Hay que motorizarse!’: Mobility, Modernity, and National Identity in Pedro Lazaga’s ‘Sor Citroen’,” *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 11 (2007): 7-24; 8-9.

they ultimately reveal “that spiritual values have to stay attuned to market demands and progress.”³

In this context of a gradual transformation in a dictatorship that lasted for another decade, an intriguing story about a real-life Spanish nun, Carmen Pérez-Avello (1908-1999) intersected with the genealogies of Sepharad. In 1965 Pérez-Avello published the children’s book *Un muchacho sefardí* (A Sephardi Boy).⁴ Note that this time rather than the nun herself, the book’s main character, José Albazanel, happens to be steadfast and courageous.

The book’s plot is rather predictable: a young protagonist embarks on a quest and along his journey he encounters a range of colorful characters. Some are shady, others menacing, yet the majority support his endeavor. After some troubles and tribulations, the child succeeds and so the book ends with an uplifting message. Nothing in this story stands out until the protagonist’s identity and the reason for his quest are considered. In 1913, José Albazanel decides to follow his dream, and travel from Salonika to “Sepharad, distant and beautiful like a star,” in order to “learn the Spanish they speak over there and then teach it to all the Sephardim. And bring back books and ballads.”⁵

On the one hand, *Un muchacho sefardí* stands out in a historical period in which Paloma Díaz-Más identifies an “absolute silence” with regards to Jewish characters and Jewish themes in Spanish literature.⁶ On the other hand, this brief description already reveals that Pérez-Avello tapped into what could be called a “Philo-Sephardi catalogue” in order to craft *Un muchacho sefardí*. While modern Jewish Studies in Spain dates back to the nineteenth century, a Philo-Sephardist movement emerged in the early twentieth century, under the leadership of

³ Pérez, “Hay que motorizarse,” 16.

⁴ Carmen Pérez-Avello, *Un muchacho sefardí* (Madrid: Doncel, 1965).

⁵ “Sefarad lejana y bella como una estrella”; “estudiar bien el español como lo hablan allí para enseñarlo después a todos los sefardíes. Y traer libros y romances a España.” Pérez-Avello, *Un muchacho sefardí*, 58 and 31

⁶ Paloma Díaz-Más, “Judíos y conversos en la literatura Española,” in *From Iberia to Diaspora. Studies in Sephardic History and Culture*, eds Yedida Stillman and Norman Stillman (New York: Brill, 1999), 346-361.

physician and senator Ángel Pulido.⁷ Pulido's work, as well as one of the earliest artefacts of that repertoire—Ernesto Giménez Caballero's film *Jews of the Spanish Homeland* (1929)—, are travel chronicles, from Spain to the Sephardi and Ladino-speaking worlds in the Balkans and Southeastern Europe. Pérez-Avello's protagonist reverses the direction of that journey, as her José Albazanel travels from Salonika back to Spain, to Sepharad.

The text's multiple layers, that also include the illustrations of Máximo San Juan (who would become one of Spain's most important editorial cartoonists of the transition and post-transition eras), make it possible to examine contradictory meanings associated with Jewish and Sephardi themes in the decade that preceded the end of the Francoist dictatorship. Stated differently, this work of children's literature echoes philo-Sephardi motifs that were common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the same time it anticipates mainstream perceptions of Sephardi culture and of Sephardi Jews that would later inform the recovery of a Jewish past in the Iberian world, or, as Daniela Flesler and Adrián Pérez Melgosa have called it, the "memory work of Jewish Spain."⁸ While *Un muchacho sefardí* is a largely forgotten text that today can be mainly found in Antiquarian bookshops or stores dedicated to Judaica, it still represents a unique opportunity to further understand a moment of gradual change and transition with regards to gender roles, the role of the church, and, of course, Spain's relationship with Sephardi Jews.⁹

⁷ Andrew Bush, "Amador de los Ríos and the Beginning of Modern Jewish Studies in Spain," *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (2011): 13-33; Michal Rose Friedman, "Jewish History as 'Historia Patria': José Amador de los Ríos and the History of the Jews of Spain," *Jewish Social Studies* 18, no. 1 (2011): 88-126.

⁸ Daniela Flesler and Adrián Pérez Melgosa, *The Memory Work of Jewish Spain* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020).

⁹ Another publishing house, Everest, came up with a second edition in 1992, therefore coinciding with the events that the year of the 500 anniversary of the Expulsion made Sephardi lives—at least slightly—more visible in Spain.

Children's Literature under Franco

The illustrated book appeared in the collection *La Ballena Alegre* and received a state-sponsored award for children's literature, the Premio Doncel, in 1965.¹⁰ The books that belonged to this collection were aimed at children and young adults, and while their contents were not strictly ideological, the texts often could be considered didactic, if not moralizing.¹¹ As María Elena Soliño has shown, even though prizes for children's literature that were created in Spain the 1950s aimed to promote literary innovation and to "offer the reader a more realistic portrait of life," not only the stylistic quality of the awarded works often was lacking, the portrayals of gender roles also were ultraconservative.¹² Following this trend, the protagonists of the *Ballena Alegre* books usually were well-behaved boys who never transgressed the moral codes of the period.¹³ The most recognizable one of these characters may be young Marcelino in José María Sánchez Silva's *Marcelino pan y vino* (*Miracle of Marcelino*) (1953).¹⁴ Ladislao Vajda adapted the book for the big screen, making it one of the most successful Spanish films of all times. The book's (and the film's) religious message is evident: the eventual death of the young protagonist, writes Justin Crumbaugh, "is widely considered to be an affirmation of the official ideology of mid-1950s' Francoism."¹⁵ Sánchez Silva's book was not the sole "Ballena Alegre" book with such a subject matter, and so many of the texts in the collection equated children's reading habits with Catholic religiosity and its moral codes.¹⁶

¹⁰ *La Ballena Alegre* was a publishing house that the Delegación Nacional de Juventudes established in 1959 and the Doncel award was given for the first time in 1961. See Rosario Vega García, "Literatura infantil y juvenil en la España de los años sesenta: La Ballena Alegre," *Espéculo. Revista de Estudios Literarios* 42 (2009).

¹¹ A few works by Swedish author Astrid Lindgren also appeared in translation in this same collection, representing an exception to this rule.

¹² María Elena Soliño, *Women and Children First: Spanish Women Writers and The Fairy Tale Tradition* (Washington DC: Scripta Humanistica, 2002), 66.

¹³ Rosario Vega García, "Literatura infantil y juvenil en la España de los años sesenta."

¹⁴ José María Sánchez Silva, *Marcelino pan y vino* (Madrid: La Ballena Alegre, 1953).

¹⁵ Justin Crumbaugh, "Spectacle as spectralization, untimely timelessness: 'Marcelino pan y vino' and mid-1950s' Francoism," *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 15, no. 3 (2014): 338.

¹⁶ Other religious texts include *Manuel y los hombres*, by Miguel Buñuel and the *Ángel en España* series by poet Jaime Ferrán, that also include *Ángel en USA norte* and *Ángel en USA sur*. These books were travel narratives, making them somewhat comparable to *Un muchacho sefardí*, except

Nothing of this is surprising, given that in the 1950s and 1960s books written for children and young adults still were the subject of strict regulations and censorship. A decree from 1955 ruled that publications for young audiences had to rigorously respect religion—which in this sense clearly meant Catholicism. Consequently, “narratives and comic books that contained examples of laicism and that featured biased descriptions of rituals and customs from other religions or confessions, that can lead to misunderstanding or scandal,” were to be avoided.¹⁷

Given these rules, one may wonder why Pérez-Avello’s *Un muchacho sefardí* was not only deemed appropriate for young readers in Francoist Spain, but also the recipient of a state-sponsored award. To make matters more complex, the same 1955 decree also ruled that, “foreign sounding expressions and phrases as well as constructions that reveal a deficient or incorrect use of the Spanish language” were unfitting for books written for children and young adults.¹⁸ Yet even with these restrictions Pérez-Avello managed to write a book, that, according to Rosario García Vega, “not only contributed to a better understanding of Sephardi culture, inspired by a period that is of great interest, but that also contained a message of tolerance towards other races and political as well as religious ideologies.”¹⁹ While *Un muchacho sefardí* is about a Sephardi child who dreams of a “Sepharad, beautiful and distant like a star” the text underscores what Maite Ojeda Mata has called an “ambivalent conceptualization of Sephardic identity in Spain.”²⁰ In this

that here Ángel is an angel, sent by God to help men. This allows him to first take a trip to Spain and eventually the United States.

¹⁷ “narraciones o historietas que contengan ejemplos destacados de laicismo, descripciones tendenciosas de ceremonias o costumbres correspondientes a cultos de otras religiones o confesiones, que puedan inducir a error o escándalo,” Paloma Uría Ríos, *En tiempos de Antoñita la Fantástica* (Madrid: Foca, 2004), 17.

¹⁸ “las expresiones y giros extranjerizantes, así como las construcciones que revelen deficiencia o incorrección en el uso de la lengua española,” Uría Ríos, *En tiempos de Antoñita la Fantástica*, 17.

¹⁹ “no solo contribuyó a un mayor conocimiento de la cultura sefardí, inspirándose en un período de gran interés, sino que contenía un mensaje de tolerancia hacia otras razas e ideologías, tanto políticas como religiosas,” Rosario García Vega, “Literatura infantil y juvenil en la España de los años sesenta.”

²⁰ Maite Ojeda Mata explains that, “while a Philo-Sephardic project of political inclusion did develop, the Sephardim were never accepted as full citizens in modern Spain.” Maite Ojeda Mata, *Legitimizing Identities: Modern Spain and the Sephardim* (London: Lexington, 2018), xviii.

sense, Jewishness remains invisible and in silence (to evoke Díaz-Más) in the book. Stated differently, the “Philo-Sephardi catalogue” conceals more than it reveals about “Jewish Spain.”²¹

Pérez-Avello’s text displays the tensions of Spain’s complicated and ambivalent relationship with the Sephardim and, in a broader sense, with a Jewish presence in Spain in the 1960s. *Un muchacho sefardí* is a well-researched work (considering the limited resources that may have been available for Pérez-Avello) and, to an extent, the book does succeed in providing information about a community that indeed was largely unknown for mainstream audiences. The book’s form (an illustrated children’s book) and the largely conventional, if not conservative story it tells make *Un muchacho sefardí* a depiction of Sepharad that is simultaneously unthreatening and bold.

Pérez-Avello therefore still fits in with her peer group of cheerful and slightly unruly nuns. Yet her accomplishment may pale in relation to those of the other (mainly fictional) nuns mentioned in the introduction: neither does she become a quasi-celebrity like the “Singing Nun,” nor does she flee from the Nazis across the Alps with a musical family, as the heroine of *The Sound of Music* does. Nevertheless, Angela Lamelas, a former student of the author, recalls that for her Pérez-Avello completing *Un muchacho sefardí* felt like climbing “her Aconcagua,” the highest peak in the Spanish-speaking world and outside of Himalaya.²²

In 1964, just a year before Pérez-Avello’s book appeared, Francoist Spain had just celebrated itself, proclaiming the so-called “25 Years of Peace.” This “great state performance” was an effort to rebrand a dictatorial regime that had now become institutionalized.²³ Stated differently, the “25 Years of Peace” really were 25 more years of war for large segments of the Spanish population: individuals who

²¹ I am using “Jewish Spain” here as a complicated misnomer. See Tabea Alexa Linhard, *Jewish Spain: A Mediterranean Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

²² Clementina Giménez, “Carmen Pérez Avello y la literatura infantil y juvenil,” *Biblioteca Virtual Universal* (2010), <https://biblioteca.org.ar>, accessed November 10, 2020.

²³ Julián Díaz and Asunción Castro, *XXV años de paz franquista: sociedad y cultura en España hacia 1964* (Madrid: Silex, 2017), 11.

remained in exile, in prisons, and who were enduring, mostly in hiding, the trauma of civil war and of post-war repression. Yet it also is true that the 1960s were a period of economic and social transformation in Spain, changes that ranged from the appearance of (foreign, scantily-clad) bodies on the country's beaches, of capital in the country's coffers, and of dissent in public and private spaces.²⁴

And it is in these private spaces where Pérez-Avello's own form of (albeit rather limited) dissent materialized into a book for Spanish children with a Jewish protagonist. Not much is known about Pérez-Avello's biography. She spent most of her life in Spain's northern regions of Cantabria and Asturias, where she studied education and worked as a schoolteacher for 42 years. It is unclear at which point she joined the order of the Esclavas del Sagrado Corazón.²⁵

Lamelas, Pérez-Avello's above-mentioned former student, remembers her teacher's fondness for books and language, explaining that she always looked for "constructive books, and was in love with the Spanish language; in class we did exercises that were about the richness of the Spanish language."²⁶ Yet Pérez-Avello's devotion to literature and language was not unconditional. The times when she lived, the education she received, and the institutional rules she obeyed, restricted this love. Amelas also recalls that while Pérez-Avello admired novelist Ana María Matute's writing, she was not fond of the "types of sad children" and "repetitive environments" that were common in Matute's works.²⁷

²⁴ For Spain and tourism see Eugenia Afinoguénova and Jaume Martí-Olivella, *Spain is (still) Different: Tourism and Discourse in Spanish Identity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008); Justin Crumbaugh, *Destination Dictatorship: The Spectacle of Spain's Tourist Boom and the Reinvention of Difference* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010); Flesler and Pérez Melgosa, *The Memory Work of Jewish Spain*.

²⁵ Her first book *El gato que llegó a la luna* (1964) was later republished as *Sueños de un gato negro* (1983). In 1965 she published *Un muchacho sefardí* which was then followed by *Unos zuecos para mí* two years later.

²⁶ "Buscaba libros constructivos y, enamorada de la lengua española, en clase hacíamos ejercicios sobre la riqueza de nuestro lenguaje." Giménez, "Carmen Pérez Avello y la literatura infantil y juvenil," 10.

²⁷ "tipos tristes de niños;" "ambientes muy repetidos." Ibid., 11.

This last comment speaks volumes about Pérez-Avello's own protagonist in *Un muchacho sefardí*: José Albazanel could not be more different than one of Matute's saddest child protagonists, Matia in *Primera memoria* (Awakening).²⁸ Not only Matia's sorrow makes *Primera memoria* relevant in this context: another undeniably sad protagonist of the 1959 novel is Manuel Taronjé, a "chueta," a descendant of Majorcan Jews who converted to Christianity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The echoes of the violence committed against the Majorcans of Jewish descent in the seventeenth century, and how these relate to the violence of the Spanish Civil War are among the main themes in *Primera memoria*.²⁹

While both *Un muchacho sefardí* and *Primera memoria* have a relationship with the intersections between Spanish history and Jewish history, the texts differ greatly. Trauma and loss shape the cruel and maddening world in which Matia resides, a world torn apart by the legacies of anti-Jewish sentiment and the violence of the Civil War. Yet Matia's understandable grief may have made Pérez-Avello disapprove of this novel.³⁰ By contrast, Pérez-Avello's Sephardi boy, even in his darkest moments, does not seem to allow himself to feel any other emotions than boundless love for the lost homeland and the language he has committed to keep alive.

One may attribute these differences to genre and audience: *Primera memoria* is a book with a young protagonist, yet it is not a children's book. *Un muchacho sefardí* is an illustrated book with children and for children. *Un muchacho sefardí*

²⁸ Just like *Un muchacho sefardí*, *Primera Memoria* also received an award, yet a much more prestigious, and still existing prize, the Premio Nadal in 1959. The novel has been translated twice, *The School of the Sun* (Elaine Kerrigan, New York: Pantheon, 1963) and *Awakening* (James Holman Mason, London: Hutchinson, 1963).

²⁹ While Matute's novel takes place during the first year of the Spanish Civil War, it also evokes the violence that the *chueta* communities endured in Majorca in the late seventeenth century and that culminated when the Majorcan Inquisition held trials (*autos-de-fé*) for more than 70 individuals accused of heresy. All were tortured, and roughly half burnt at the stake. Francesc Garau, a Jesuit theologian, documented these events in *La fe triunfante*, a book that also became a widely used tool of anti-Jewish propaganda. In *Primera memoria*, one of the characters is a proud owner the book.

³⁰ See Scott Macdonald Frame, "A Private Portrait of Trauma in Two Novels by Ana María Matute," *Journal of Romance Studies* 21, no. 1 (2003): 127-138.

has an uplifting ending, as does another one of Matute's works, *El polizón del Ulises* (The Stowaway of the Ulises) published the same year as Pérez-Avello's book, and also aimed at younger audiences.³¹ Given the above-mentioned restrictions for children's literature that the Francoist government had imposed, it hardly is surprising that this tale ends in a sanguine, if not inspirational tone. The young protagonist not only survives after almost drowning, his lived experiences (that include sheltering a fugitive political prisoner, the stowaway from the book's title) also allow him to mature intellectually and emotionally—as José Albazanel also does.

Children's and young adult literature published in the earlier decades of the Francoist dictatorship also represented radical departures from the more complex, richer and avant-garde influenced works published during the Second Republic and for the duration of the Spanish Civil War (between 1931 and 1939). The Francoist victory not only meant that most of these books' authors (Antoniorrobles, María Teresa León, Salvador Bartolozzi, Magda Donato, Elena Fortún) were in exile, it also led to severe restrictions when it came to the kind of books that could be published: works with religious themes or texts that narrated exemplary children's lives strictly adhering to the moral codes that the dictatorship had imposed.³² Moreover, and as mentioned earlier, these books also still were the subject of strict regulations and censorship.

The fact that Pérez-Avello writes about a Jewish child could suggest that the author was using this highly regulated genre in a subversive manner. While there may be some truth to this, the Sephardi traits of her characters reveal that the subterfuge here is limited. Pérez-Avello's Sephardi protagonist and the members

³¹ Ana María Matute, *El polizón del Ulises* (Barcelona: Lumen, 1965).

³² Elena Fortún's life (née Encarnación Aragoneses) and her books focalized on the character Celia are outliers in these sense that the author published books about the young *madrileña* before, during, and after the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, the book series is rather complex, as the works oscillate between resistance and accommodation to patriarchal, racial and moral codes of the respective periods when Fortún wrote them. For more information on the author and her character, see Uría Ríos *En tiempos de Antoñita la fantástica* and Carmen Toro, "Infancias imaginadas: Creciendo en España en el Siglo XX con Elena Fortún y Miguel Delibes" (PhD diss., Washington University in St. Louis, 2018), <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0149-2214>, accessed November 10, 2020.

of his community actually are rather similar to Sephardi characters that have appeared in other Spanish novels: his already mentioned devotion to and nostalgia for Sepharad and the Spanish language is a common trait among Sephardic characters, and so is his righteousness.³³ Another attribute that Sephardim depicted in Spanish novels share is a sense of “Sephardi Supremacy,” that is, a racialized understanding of Sephardi and Ashkenazi mythologies in which “Sephardi Jews were considered superior to Ashkenazi Jewish because of having “mixed” with Christian Spaniards.”³⁴ Pérez-Avello’s tells this same old story in a simpler way: she downplays her characters’ Jewishness and so such a hierarchy becomes irrelevant, given that non-Sephardi Jews do not seem to exist in the world that Pérez-Avello creates.

Un muchacho sefardí

There is another fundamental difference between the protagonist of Matute’s *Primera memoria* and Pérez-Avello’s *Un muchacho sefardí*: the main characters of all of Pérez-Avello’s books are boys, not girls. Even though she was surrounded by young women and was probably far more attuned to their worldviews, desires, and needs in Francoist Spain, she wrote about a Sephardi boy and not about a

³³ While Jewish characters are abundant in Spanish literature in the nineteenth and twentieth century, these figures oftentimes are a compendium of positive and negative stereotypes with little or no relationship to reality. Novels with Sephardi protagonists include Vicente Blasco Ibañez’s *Luna Benamor* (1909), Concha Espina’s *El caliz rojo* (1923), and Azorín’s *María Fontán* (1944). These three texts are discussed in a brief essay by Rafael Pérez de la Dehesa, published in *Tesoro Sefardí* in 1963. Pérez de la Dehesa makes it evident that these novels convey the notion that, given their Hispanic origin, Sephardim are not only fundamentally different, but also superior to Ashkenazim. Rafael Pérez de la Dehesa, “El judío sefardí en la novela española moderna: Blasco Ibañez, Concha Espina, Azorín,” *Tesoro de los judíos sefardíes. Estudio sobre la historia de los judíos sefardíes y su cultura* 6 (1963): 47-51.

³⁴ Michal Rose Friedman, “Orientalism between Empires: Abraham Shalom Yahuda at the Intersection of Sepharad, Zionism and Imperialism,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 109, no. 3 (2019): 435-451; 439. As Friedman herself points out, a longer discussion of this process of this racialization can be found in Friedman, “Recovering Jewish Spain: Historiography, Politics and Institutionalizations of the Jewish Past in Spain” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2012); Joshua Goode, *Impurity of Blood: Defining Race in Spain, 1970-1930* (Baton Rouge: U of Louisiana Press, 2009); see also Ojeda Mata, *Legitimizing Identities*.

Sephardi girl. She knew well that in Francoist Spain only boys would be free enough to have an adventure or go on a quest.”³⁵

The young women in Pérez-Avello’s classrooms in the decades that followed the Spanish Civil War endured the consequences of strictly gendered rules and expectations. In 1938, when the Spanish Civil War was in its second year, most of the reforms that were carried out during Spain’s Second Republic were reversed—with a vengeance. The reinstatement of the Civil Law Code turned women into de facto non-citizens who could neither inherit nor own property. In Francoist Spain, women became, “the guarantors of the renewal of national purity through the mandates of chastity and married motherhood.”³⁶ When Pérez-Avello, neither wife nor mother, joined a religious order she made “the only free decision a woman could take.”³⁷ Having said this, it is important to not see Pérez-Avello as a spirited rebel, as tempting as that may be. Instead, from her position as a woman belonging to a religious order, as a schoolteacher tasked with educating young women for the only imaginable future in Franco’s Spain, and as a successful author of children’s literature, Pérez-Avello negotiates transformation and preservation.³⁸

The Nationalists’ victory in 1939 signified that no religions other than Catholicism could be practiced in Spain, at least not in the near future. While specific Jewish congregations, among them Barcelona’s Jewish community resumed their activities as early as 1945, official status was not possible until 1968.³⁹ For the

³⁵ Giménez, “Carmen Pérez Avello y la literatura infantil y juvenil,” 20.

³⁶ Morcillo, “Walls of Flesh,” 738.

³⁷ Morcillo, *The Seduction of Modern Spain*, 80.

³⁸ “Nuns had a very important role in the social services of the state. They became prison’s wardens, teachers, and nurses along with their lay counterparts, the members of the Women’s Section of Falange. Their work fitted in the symbiotic union between Church and state during Francoism. They were instrumental in shaping the identity of the official True Catholic Womanhood with the implementation of the 1950s New National Catholic high school curriculum.” Morcillo, *The Seduction of Modern Spain*, 82.

³⁹ See Danielle Rozenberg, “Minorías religiosas y construcción democrática en España. (Del monopolio de la Iglesia a la gestión del pluralismo),” *Reis* 76 (1996): 245-265; Rozenberg, Danielle. *La España contemporánea y la cuestión judía: Retejiendo los hilos de la memoria y de la historia* (Madrid: Casa Sefarad-Israel, 2010); Martine Berthelot, *Memorias judías: Barcelona 1924-1954: Historia oral de la Comunidad Israelita de Barcelona* (Barcelona: Riopiedras, 2001).

duration of the dictatorship, in the country at large, and possibly even more in Cantabria and Asturias, Jews and Sephardim were largely invisible. Older, religious anti-Jewish sentiments therefore co-existed with a general ignorance about Jewish culture and history.⁴⁰

Un muchacho sefardí appeared two years prior to the passing of the 1967 “Law of Religious Freedom.” This change, that took place in relation to the reforms of Vatican II (1962-1965), had been in the making before the right to practice religions other than Catholicism in public became a reality. Needless to say, none of these transformations occurred quickly. The book therefore appeared in the earlier years of a “gradual disengagement” between church and state and so the book simultaneously displays continuities and ruptures.⁴¹

Even though the protagonist of Pérez-Avelllo is a Jewish child, she could have never called her book “A Jewish Boy” not only because the censorship apparatus may have not allowed such a book to appear in print, but also, perhaps more importantly, because in the 1960s (and, in fact, until recently) *judío*, was used as a pejorative term, an insult.⁴² Pérez-Avello almost exclusively uses *sefardí* to refer to José Albazanel and his community, making it clear that her characters are emotionally attached to Sepharad, to the Spanish language, yet not at all to Jewishness.⁴³

All of this begs the question of what Pérez-Avello’s sources for her book were and why a Spanish nun chose to write about a Sephardi boy in the first place, considering also the pedagogical materials that were available when she wrote the book. Many of the textbooks conceived and published in the 1930s and 1940s were still in usage in the 1960s, and these books were filled with anti-Jewish stereotypes. The stories told in the textbooks were of Jews as powerful masterminds, responsible for blood libel and a long list of other crimes. Stated differently, the

⁴⁰ Paloma Díaz-Más, *The Sephardim: The Jews from Spain*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁴¹ Lannon, “Ideological Tensions,” 276.

⁴² Rozenberg, *La España contemporánea y la cuestión judía*; Davide Alberti, *Sefarad, una comunidad imaginada* (Madrid: Marcial Pons Historia, 2018).

⁴³ “*Hebreo*” and “*hebreos*” appear 4 times (9, 10, 18 and 47); “*hijos de Israel*” twice (10 and 14).

authors of the textbooks added no new ideas to very old and deeply ingrained anti-Jewish sentiments.⁴⁴ The treatment of the 1942 Expulsion in the textbooks is also not surprising: the expulsion is not only justifiable, it indeed appears described as a “brilliant foresight,” as shown in Feliciano Cerceda’s 1940 *Historia del Imperio Español y la Hispanidad* (History of the Spanish Empire and Hispanidad): “The world has now shown us that we were right, and after four centuries, the majority of the politicians have adopted the advice of our Catholic Kings, expelling from their territories this very dangerous race.”⁴⁵ The fact that such statements still circulated into the 1960s (and possibly beyond) is distressing, and while Pérez-Avello softens this perspective, she does not go as far as challenging earlier representations of the 1492 Expulsion.⁴⁶ *Un muchacho sefardí* indeed begins with the words “It was a day in July of 1492,” which is then followed by a brief narration of the departure of the Albazanel family from Toledo.⁴⁷ Yet the expulsion is neither questioned, nor critiqued. In Pérez-Avello’s book the expulsion causes sadness and pain, but never rancor, only an infinite nostalgia for a lost paradise.

⁴⁴ As Michal Rose Friedman has shown, philo-Sephardist and fascist ideologue Ernesto Giménez Caballero is the author of a pedagogical guide for high-school instructors *Lengua y Literatura de España y su imperio* (Language and Literature of Spain and its Empire), published between 1940 and 1953. “While the guide by and large presents a traditional Catholic interpretation of the Spanish past, it also includes sections on Jewish authors and texts from medieval Spain, descriptions of Jewish influences in the great works of Spanish literature, and references to Judeo-Spanish as a Hispanic language. In discussing the origins of Castilian literature, Giménez Caballero indicates that Hebraic authors, such as Maimonides and Yehuda Ha-Levi, played an essential role in the formation of the *verdadero genio español* (genuine Spanish spirit). Apparently, even within Fascist Spain, the Jews—or at least the memory of them—might occupy a distinguished place in the Patria.” Michal Rose Friedman, “Reconquering ‘Sepharad’: Hispanism and Proto-fascism in Giménez Caballero’s Sephardist Crusade,” *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (2011): 95-120; 56.

⁴⁵ “El mundo nos da ahora por fin la razón, y, después de cuatro siglos, los mayores políticos adoptan el consejo de nuestros Católicos Soberanos, expulsando de sus territorios a esta raza peligrosísima.” Feliciano Cerceda S.I., *Historia del Imperio Español y la Hispanidad* (Madrid, Razón y Fe, 1940), 23 cited in Andrés Sopeña, *El florido pensil* (Barcelona: Booket, 2016), 157.

⁴⁶ Arguably, the information about the Nazi Genocide was rather limited in Francoist Spain, yet not even that would justify the circulation of this type of “pedagogical” materials. See Alejandro Baer, “The Voids of Sepharad: The Memory of the Holocaust in Spain,” *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 12, no. 1 (2011): 95-120.

⁴⁷ “Era un día del mes de julio de 1492,” Pérez-Avello, *Un muchacho sefardí*, 9.

In this way the author manages to invent a Sephardi character for whom her young readers could root. She also eludes all possible controversy by not engaging with negative stereotypes about Jews and Sephardim, and instead builds the plot around the protagonist's devotion for the "language of my mother Spain," as Pérez-Avello herself puts it in the introduction to her text.⁴⁸ This is, as Díaz-Más has noted, a common vision about Sephardim that in many ways still endures:

(T)he Sephardim are Spaniards without a country; they long for Spain and hold a deep love for the country, proven by their conscious and deliberate retention of Judeo-Spanish as a remembrance of their lost homeland and by their preservation, for five centuries, of the keys to the houses and their ancestors abandoned in Toledo when they were expelled from Spain.⁴⁹

Many of these commonplaces, including the key to the abandoned home in Toledo, also appear in Pérez-Avello's book.

The story that Pérez-Avello tells begins in 1492, when José Albazanel's ancestors are expelled from Toledo, taking with them, as is to be expected, not much more than the key for their home. The key, one of the most recognizable tropes of the "Philo-Sephardic catalogue," is mentioned in the moment of expulsion and also roughly five centuries later, when José Albazanel, the Sephardic boy, decides to travel from Salonika to Spain. In the book the (highly overused) symbol of the key also conceals far more than what it could ever reveal about the history of the Sephardim. *Un muchacho sefardí* is an illustrated book, and yet the key is the sole image that visually connects the book with the Sephardim, or at least with myths about the Sephardim. With the exception of two illustrations, Máximo's work could depict any young child's quest, anywhere in the Mediterranean world. The two exceptions are a watercolor rendering of José Albazanel's ancestors who, after having been forced out of Toledo, are standing on a hill outside beyond the city's

⁴⁸ "lengua de mi madre España," Ibid.

⁴⁹ Díaz-Más, *The Sephardim*, 168.

limit (fig. 1).⁵⁰ The fact that the man (Elías Albazanel) and not the woman (Sara Albazanel) in the depiction holds an unusually large key (even for the period), is hardly a coincidence: “returning” to Sepharad in the book clearly is a masculine endeavor.



Fig. 1. Illustration from Carmen Pérez-Avello, *Un muchacho sefardí* (Madrid: Doncel, 1965), n.n. .

⁵⁰ Every effort has been made to contact copyright holders of material reproduced in this article (fig. 1 and fig. 2). We would be pleased to rectify any errors or omissions should they be drawn to our attention.

The other image is a much more minimalist black and white sketch of young José Albazanel (fig. 2).⁵¹ His head is shown next to table with an open book and a closed one with the title “Sefarad” featured on the cover.

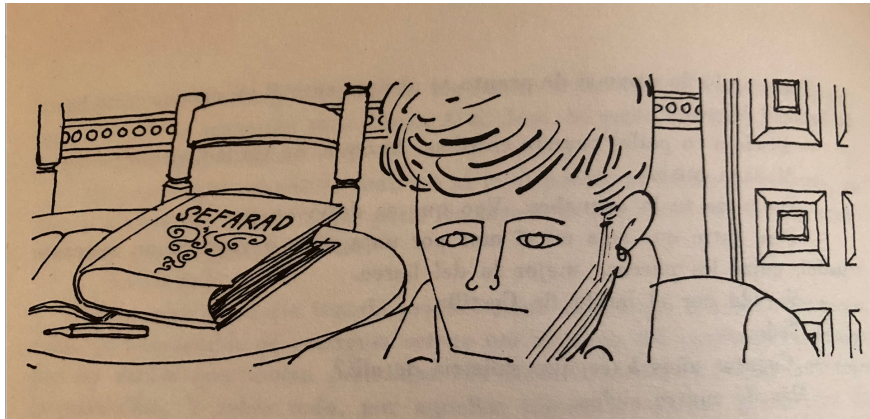


Fig.2. Illustration from Carmen Pérez-Avello, *Un muchacho sefardí* (Madrid: Doncel, 1965), 65.

Having said this, it is important to point out that Pérez-Avello did corresponded with Isaac R. Molho, the editor of *Tesoro de los judíos sefardíes. Estudio sobre la historia de los judíos sefardíes y su cultura*, published in Israel between 1959-1965. Molho briefly mentions Pérez-Avello and her book in a 1965 article, expressing admiration for her work. He adds that in a private letter to him she confessed that with the book she intended to bring Spanish youth closer to the Sephardim, who feel a strong connection to Spain. She also mentions that in her imagination she always travels to Jerusalem, where “such pleasant and historic memories fill my deep experience.”⁵²

Additionally, Pérez-Avello must have been familiar with at least some of the academic initiatives that in the 1960s centered on Sephardi Studies. Even though anti-Semitic discourse was prevalent in Spain during World War II, this was not an obstacle for the creation of the “Instituto Arias Montano de Estudios

⁵¹ Despite attempts, it has not been possible to trace the image right holders.

⁵² (Melumadot Sefaradiot Ve-Hokhmat Israel) *Tesoro de los judíos sefardíes* 8 (1965): 129-131. A review of *A Sephardi Boy* was appeared in the same publication. I wish to thank Asher Salah for providing me with the reference and Stacy Beckwith for help with the translation.

Hebraicos y Oriente Próximo” in 1941. This institution, writes Anna Menny, illustrates the regime’s ambivalent position towards Jews and Jewishness.⁵³ The Institute and its activities operate in relation to what Menny calls an official, conservative Philo-Sephardism. Yet while academic studies focusing on the Sephardim and Sephardi culture took place for the duration of the dictatorship, a relation with the actual lives of Sephardi Jews (some of who were, as late as 1945 still deported from Rhodes and other places to Auschwitz) was basically non-existent. In the 1960s academic discourse on Sephardic topics operated in relation to rapprochements between the Francoist government and the State of Israel. The Exposición Bibliográfica Sefardí Mundial (1959), the Simposio Sefardí (1964) and the creation of the Museo Sefardí de Toledo were among the most visible initiatives.⁵⁴ Pérez-Avello’s version of Sepharad does not differ greatly from what came across these institutional venues and channels. Stated differently, *Un muchacho sefardí* is as sophisticated and as limited as other, contemporary and also earlier stagings of Sepharad.

The Language of “My Mother Spain”

Pérez-Avello’s descriptions of the Sephardi characters’ love for homeland and language echo Ángel Pulido’s *Espanoles sin patria y la raza sefardí* (Spaniards without a Homeland and the Sephardi Race) particularly when it comes to the notions of what a correct Spanish is and why it matters. In his first reference to Ladino, Pulido describes it as an “incorrect Castilian” that nevertheless deeply moves him, since it conveyed “love for the Spanish land, expressing with mournful

⁵³ Anna Menny, “Sepharad—object of investigation? The Academic Discourse about Sepharad and Sephardim in Spain” *Jewish Culture and History* 16, no. 1 (2015): 6-23; 10. Isabelle Rohr, *The Spanish Right and the Jews*; Ojeda Mata, *Legitimizing Identities*.

⁵⁴ While the museum was created by decree in 1964, it did not open its doors until 1971. It is impossible to know whether Pérez-Avello was one of the roughly 12,000 visitors who had a chance to see the exhibit during the month it was open. See Flesler and Pérez Melgosa, *The Memory Work of Jewish Spain*; Guillermo Olagüe de Ros, “La Exposición Bibliográfica Sefardí Mundial (1959) y el primer Simposio Sefardí (1964),” *Raíces* 93 (2012-2013), 80.

emotion delicate and tender adages, bearing witness to a religious tradition.”⁵⁵ In his different encounters with Sephardim, Pulido repeatedly emphasizes this love, tenderness, and devotion to language and homeland, “our beloved fatherland,” yet he also points out the flaws of the language, that appears with all degrees of imaginable deficiencies.”⁵⁶ Pérez-Avello’s book consistently reflects these same sentiments, and the references to the characters love for the *lengua española* are numerous.⁵⁷ José is determined to become a teacher, which makes his quest not so much about reaching Sepharad, but about returning with the qualifications that would make it possible for him to remedy such degeneration. He explains to anyone willing to listen that he yearns to “arrive and return, with that rich and beautiful language well learned.”⁵⁸ To be clear: he does not wish to return to Sepharad to claim a home that once was his (an actual return to Spain may have been far too problematic), but simply to become better at a language that was supposed to be his own in the first place.

Even though Pérez-Avello writes with such devotion about language, a linguistic hierarchy is evident throughout the text, given that she also describes Ladino, again echoing Pulido, as an “impoverished version” of the language. Stated differently, the Sephardim that Pérez-Avello imagined in the 1960s love Sepharad and its language, even though the love they profess still situates them below the subjects who reside in places like Toledo.

For José and also for his grandfather the language they use and also love so much is deficient, as Pulido would have it. This explains the boy’s desire to return to Toledo, become a teacher and to educate the members of his community in the “living” Spanish. Even though Pérez-Avello makes it clear that the language spoken in Salonika is not proper Castilian and has its shortcomings, the text also

⁵⁵ “amor á la tierra hispana, que hubo de expresar con emoción lacrimosa y frases de extremada delicadeza y ternura, como atestiguando un culto religioso” Ángel Pulido, *Españoles sin patria y la raza sefardí* (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 1993), 2-3.

⁵⁶ “nuestra querida madre patria,” “la cual aparece con todos los grados de degeneración imaginables.” Ibid., 4 and 61.

⁵⁷ Pérez-Avello, *Un muchacho sefardí*, 20, 31, 34, 46, 49 and 58.

⁵⁸ “llegar y tornar con aquella lengua rica y hermosa bien aprendida.” Pérez-Avello, *Un muchacho sefardí*, 83.

highlights the emotional attachment of the characters to Ladino. It may not be the language of Toledo, but the characters still prefer it to French, the language that due to the presence of the Alliance Israélite Universelle schools would rapidly spread across the Sephardic Levantine world, or to Greek.⁵⁹ And here Pérez-Avello again echoes Pulido, who wrote in support of sponsoring the establishment of Spanish Schools in the Levant. These schools, however, never became a reality: “It is unlikely that Spanish-speaking schools, had they been established, would have attracted more pupils than those of the Alliance.”⁶⁰

This is not the story, however, that Pérez-Avello chooses to tell. When a “foreign” teacher—whose nationality is never specified—appears in Salonika with the intention of opening a new school, the entire community resists this endeavor.

Mateo, the merchant of the Valencia plaza assured everybody he had heard that in less than a year he would rip out that old tongue from the children, the language they still spoke, Judeo-Spanish, and from then on they would communicate in that other modern language that he would implant, by force.⁶¹

This leads the Salonika youth to defy the foreign teacher and eventually find a way to make him unceremoniously leave the community. As the teacher departs, Mateo (the above-mentioned character) cries out that their language is “from Castille,” and that “neither him, nor anyone will rip it out.”⁶² Ladino not only is likened to a tongue that nobody should dare to tear out (Pérez-Avello here plays with different meanings of *lengua*, as it can mean “tongue” and “language”), a slippage also occurs here. Pérez-Avello has substituted “Judeo-Spanish” with “the

⁵⁹ Aron Rodrigue, “The Ottoman Diaspora: The Rise and Fall of Ladino Literary Culture,” in *Cultures of the Jews, A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken, 2002), 863-885.

⁶⁰ Michael Alpert, “Dr Ángel Pulido and philo-Sephardism in Spain,” *Jewish Historical Studies* 40 (2005): 105-119; 114.

⁶¹ “Mateo, el Mercader de la placita Valencia aseguraba haber oído decir que en menos de un año arrancaría a los niños aquella lengua antigua que hablaban, el judeo-español, y que les haría entenderse con otra lengua moderna que él, por fuerza, había de implantar.” Pérez-Avello, *Un muchacho sefardí*, 76.

⁶² “¡Pero el nuestro, el de Castilla, ni él ni nadie nos lo arranca!” Pérez-Avello, *Un muchacho sefardí*, 76.

language from Castille.” Even though the hierarchy between Spanish and Castilian is maintained throughout the text, it becomes less important when both languages—both tongues—are threatened by other “foreign” and “modern” languages that could be either French or Greek.

The fact that neither the nationality, nor the language of the foreigner are mentioned make French and Greek interchangeable in this context, even though historically this was not the case. It may be more likely that the foreigner was trying to teach Greek to the Salonika youngsters, given that the city had only become part of Greece a year before the narrative begins. The first Alliance school was established in Salonika in the late nineteenth century.⁶³ Yet for the kind of world Pérez-Avello imagines for her Sephardic boy, any language that was not Ladino or, of course, the language of her “Mother Spain,” would be foreign to the community she envisions. And this depiction of the community differs from a historical reality in which, as Devin Naar has shown, as early as 1912, the Salonika elites developed new national narratives, based on shared citizenship and genealogy. This made it possible for Salonikans to be Greek and Jewish at the same time, instead of stubbornly insisting, as Pérez-Avello’s characters do, on an identity based on nostalgia.

Stated differently, even though *Un muchacho sefardí* may take its young readers to Greece and to other places, the book never really leaves its Spanish context and the dreamed-up version of Sepharad.⁶⁴ It is in this sense that some of the book’s blind-spots and contradictions—that also make it more interesting and worthy of further scrutiny—become prevalent. As mentioned earlier, even though Pérez-Avello lived and worked in a largely female world, her hero and most of those who

⁶³ “While a major influence in Jewish communal politics from the late nineteenth century through World War I, the power of the Alliance in Salonika waned during the interwar years.” Devin Naar, *Jewish Salonica: Between the Ottoman Empire and Modern Greece* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

⁶⁴ Another student remembers that Pérez-Avello would always prioritize her pedagogical responsibilities: “Pérez-Avello trabajaba en la novela entre clase y clase [...] Y el muchacho sefardí quedaría agazapado tras el montón de cuadernos con los ejercicios corregidos, aguardando estoicamente el turno de mañana,” Giménez, “Carmen Pérez Avello y la literatura infantil y juvenil,” 20.

support him are male. José's mother appears briefly, and only in her role as his nurturing caregiver, and not in relation to the meanings attached to language and homeland. In her introduction to her own text, however, the author immediately brings up what Monique Balbuena has called the "feminine trappings" of Ladino.⁶⁵

I wish, with my modest work, to collaborate in the broader knowledge of and love for the Sephardic people, who took even to the most remote regions the language of my mother Spain.⁶⁶

While Sepharad, "distant and beautiful like a star," mainly has female attributes in the text, the ties with Sepharad and with the Spanish language appear to be an exclusively male endeavor in the text—as even the earlier described illustration indicates. Pérez-Avello loved language, yet language itself also ends up betraying the coherence of her narrative. José's quest to return to Sepharad really begins when he becomes an apprentice of San Remo, an old Irish fisherman. While Pérez-Avello provides no reason for why the Irishman has an Italian surname, San Remo does explain that he found employment on a merchant ship when he was a boy himself. After sailing across the world, he settled in the Aegean shores, yet he also affirms that he ultimately intends to spend his old age in his homeland, Ireland. Even though he has made friends across the world, he feels compelled to return to Ireland, as *Dios lo manda* (God requests this).⁶⁷ By contrast, José departs his community for the first time when he begins working for San Remo. The man and the boy leave Salonika in order to find work together in a coastal town. Pérez-Avello never specifies what language the Sephardi boy and the Irish man with an Italian name use to communicate with each other, or what the lingua franca is in the coastal town. There they meet the local mayor, and after San Remo asks him about a place to stay, the mayor immediately responds (presumably in

⁶⁵ Monique Balbuena, *Homeless Tongues: Poetry and Languages of the Sephardic Diaspora* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 2.

⁶⁶ "Quiero, con mi modesto trabajo, colaborar en la obra de un mayor conocimiento y amor hacia el pueblo sefardí que llevó hasta muy apartadas regiones la lengua de mi madre España," Pérez-Avello, *Un muchacho sefardí*, 7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

Greek): “I did not know you were a sailor.”⁶⁸ He then proceeds to explain that he recognized San Remo’s profession because he used the female article “*la*” and not “*el*” for the sea, so “*la mar*.”⁶⁹ This choice of article would then reveal San Remo as a man of the sea. San Remo indeed consistently uses “*la mar*,” not “*el mar*” in the book.⁷⁰

The use of article requires further contextualization. In Spanish, using “*la*” instead of “*el*” *mar* connotes a close relationship with the sea. Thus, San Remo’s usage of the female article (and the mayor’s recognition of this) would be consistent.⁷¹ In Ladino, as in Spanish, both “*la mar*” and “*el mar*” could be used. Indeed, the titles of many Sephardi romances suggest that “*la mar*” may be quite common.⁷² Yet San Remo is not Sephardi and given that the old man and the boy have now left Salonika, the entire conversation with the mayor would, in all likelihood, not take place in Spanish or Judeo-Spanish. In Greek “*Thalassa*” (sea) is always female, as in French or Romanian, but not in Italian.⁷³ Irish, presumably San Remo’s own mother tongue, is tricky here: while “*fárraige*” (sea) is considered to be feminine, the definite article “*an*” (the) has different uses depending on gender and whether the noun begins with a consonant, or a vowel.⁷⁴ What matters here more than the intricacies of grammatical gender in Irish is that the use of gender does not correspond to the ways in which “*la mar*” and “*el mar*” operate in Spanish and Ladino.

⁶⁸ “No sabía que usted era marino.”

⁶⁹ “La ha llamado usted al mar ‘la mar.’ Eso fue todo.”

⁷⁰ Pérez-Avello, *Un muchacho sefardí*, 36.

⁷¹ See Olav K. Lundberg, “On the Gender of Mar: Precept and Practice,” *Hispanic Review* 1, no. 4 (1933): 309-318. It is clear that the gender varies, the tendency that more popular forms and folklore, as well as poetic, figurative language *la mar* is preferred. Given that the author comes to this conclusion by examining classics of Spanish literature, these uses probably were familiar to Pérez-Avello.

⁷² The romances here would include: “Si la mar era de leche;” “Ya salió de la mar;” or “La Sirena”

⁷³ English has not grammatical gender, yet words still have gendered attributes. Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* comes to mind: “But the old man always thought of her as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favors, and if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could not help them. The moon affects her as it does a woman, he thought.” Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952), 30.

⁷⁴ Micheál Ó Siadhail, “A Note on Gender and Pronoun Substitution in Modern Irish Dialects,” *Ériu* 35 (1984): 173-177.

At no moment it becomes clear what language the characters are speaking in this exchange. This can have two different meanings: first, that even though the author situates this part of the plot in Greece, she never leaves a Spanish context where the difference between “*la mar*” and “*el mar*” make sense.⁷⁵ And second, perhaps more provocatively, Pérez-Avello uses the Sephardi catalogue to tell a story that really does not have all that much to do with the Sephardim. Instead, the story she really wants to tell is about an old Irish sailor with an Italian name who wants to, as San Remo confesses in the book, write his life memories of his Mediterranean journeys. Máximo’s illustrations—with the exceptions of the two earlier discussed images—also help to move the story further away from its Sephardi or Jewish context.

In this sense, Pérez-Avello’s book ends up being not about a Sephardi boy, but about a Mediterranean Sea that unites and separates the fates of the characters, conjuring up the *longue durée* of cultural crossings, exchanges, and conflicts in the region and perhaps also the swift cultural changes that were taking place on the country’s beaches, now enjoyed by large numbers of tourists. In the mid-1960s’s José Albazanel unthreatening return to Sepharad was the only one that could be imagined: not only because the protagonist is a child, but also because said child’s return is to language, to correct grammar. And that may be the only story that the “Philo-Sephardi catalogue” can deliver in the 1960s. Fifty-five years after the book’s publication, Spain’s Instituto Cervantes announced the opening of an extension in Salonika, where, as per the Institute’s announcement, Spanish language lessons will be offered to the Sephardi community in addition to other cultural and academic activities that will make it possible to enhance and disseminate the Sephardi legacy in Greece’s second largest city.⁷⁶ Stating that this initiative represents the fulfillment of José Albazanel’s dreams of Sepharad probably is a facile reading. Yet time will tell whether the new institute will prove

⁷⁵ The toponyms, supposedly Greek, would also require further examination, given that all names are given in Spanish: Cala de Oro, Ensenada Verde, Punta de Cuerno.

⁷⁶ “El Cervantes abrirá una extensión en Salónica para promover el legado sefardí,” in “Sala de prensa”, *cervantes.es*, accessed November 10, 2020 https://www.cervantes.es/sobre_instituto_cervantes/prensa/2020/noticias/extensi%C3%B3n_salonica.htm.

whether Carmen Pérez-Avello was an obedient or an unruly sister. Or perhaps a combination of both.

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Keywords: Philo-Sephardism, Ladino, Francoism, Children's Literature, Carmen Pérez-Avello

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