

Natalie Zemon Davis, *Listening to the Language of the People: Lazare Sainéan on Romanian, Yiddish and French* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2022), pp. 200.

by *Andreea Kaltenbrunner*

The famous historian of the early modern period Natalie Zemon Davis surprises her readers with a biography of the Romanian-Jewish linguist Lazare Sainéan (1859-1934). Sainéan is often being mentioned in studies on the Jewish emancipation and the fight for citizenship rights in late nineteenth century Romania. The linguist, whose research focused on Yiddish, Romanian and French struggled for more than ten years to become a naturalized Romanian citizen, before he gave up and established himself in France in 1901. For scholars of Romanian-Jewish history, Zemon Davis's book is a long-awaited contribution as it covers important issues of this topic.

Although the research on Jewish history in Romania before World War I made significant progress in the past couple of years, there is still little understanding of the Jewish communities in Romania and their reactions to the emancipation debates and the growing modern antisemitism. Relying on Sainéan's studies, published correspondence and memoirs, the author conceived the book with two goals: to write Sainéan's intellectual biography and to determine how "ideas about language and folklore fare in a Europe infused with national sentiment and conflict over the status of Jews" (p. 2). The book is therefore a history of linguistics as much of a history of Jewish emancipation in Eastern Europe. It is organized chronologically in two main parts: the first one focuses on Sainéan's career in Romania, and the second one deals with his life in France.

Born in the city of Ploiești, Wallachia, as Eliezer ben Moses Șain, Sainéan showed from early on an interest in languages. His father, who had studied in Vienna and became a painter of decorative murals for private homes and public buildings, supported his interests. Ploiești's closeness to Bucharest allowed Sainéan to befriend Moses Gaster and Moses Schwarzfild, two intellectuals representing the "circles of modernizing Jews" in Romania. Gaster, native of the Romanian capital, studied in Leipzig and Breslau while Schwarzfild hailed from a literary family of Moldavian activists for Jewish enlightenment and emancipation. In his first book,

published at the age of 21, Sainéan wrote a celebratory biography of Moses Mendelsohn and included numerous thoughts on the Jewish emancipation in Romania.

Under the guidance of the linguist and literate Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu, Sainéan as a doctoral candidate immersed himself into the study of semasiology, the study of the meaning of words, and into Neogrammarian theories that were concerned with how the language and the sounds change. Sainéan completed his studies for his dissertation in Paris and Leipzig and upon his return, he published a study on Yiddish, which constituted also his first scientific work. Besides being an unusual topic, he was also “relatively on his own in such a scholarly choice” (p. 29). Among Haskalah Jews, Yiddish had a negative reputation as an “obstacle to the acquisition of a true culture, both of their own and that of the countries in which they lived.” (p. 32). As Davis explains, such a topic did not help him move up on the career ladder, as this was “not going to advance the cause of the Romanian language as a Roman language.” Sainéan was personally attached to Yiddish, the language of his mother, and was fascinated by an almost unexplored field. He conducted research in Berlin and Leipzig and analyzed the speech practices of five Yiddish speakers living in Bucharest. He understood Yiddish in part as mixed language, as a “dialect of Middle High German, which over time had become autonomous with sub-dialects of its own.” When analyzing the lexicographic elements, he identified words especially from the Bavarian dialect, Hebrew, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian. Roman and Latin influences were present in the Danube region in words referring to everyday life. By looking into the Wallachian Yiddish, Zemon Davis wrote that “Sainéan was affirming the historical presence of Jews in his native land” (p. 39). It would have been interesting to learn more on the Wallachia Yiddish as differed from that of Moldavia, where Romania’s largest Jewish population lived. But neither these differences nor other information about the Jewish communities in the two regions is included.

Sainéan’s relationship to his doctoral advisor Bogdan Patriceicu Hasdeu was marked by highs and lows. Hasdeu was a complex figure with an even more complex view towards the Jews in Romania. Born in Khotyn, Bessarabia in the Tsarist Empire, into a multilingual family, he had grown up surrounded by Yiddish, the language of his paternal grandmother. Hasdeu opted for a Romanian identity and migrated to Romania where he pursued an impressive academic

career. He was against the emancipation of Jews, but agreed there were remarkable Jewish men of letters, Sainéan included. Hasdeu supported Sainéan's research and professional aspirations but failed to be on his side when Sainéan needed him most—during the tedious process of becoming Romanian citizen.

Sainéan made three attempts to be naturalized: in 1890, in 1895 and in 1901. Since the Berlin Congress in 1878, Jews could obtain citizenship under special circumstances, although the numbers of naturalizations remained extremely low. For example, Sainéan's father-in-law Ralian Samtica, owner of a renowned publishing house in Craiova, was the only Jew to be naturalized in 1889. Sainéan's requests for naturalization coincided with a rise in modern antisemitism and each request required an adaption of his strategy. His research interests also focused in this period on Romanian fairy tales and Romanian language, questioning the hyper-Latinism of the nationalist linguists. With each failed attempt the question of leaving Romania became more acute. From a young Jewish activist who believed in emancipation, he felt more and more "as a persecuted Jew" (p. 76).

To increase his chances of naturalization, Sainéan took the difficult decision to convert to Orthodox Christianity in 1899. Zemon Davis reflects on "the model of baptized Jew" Sainéan might have imagined. It seems that the idea had come from his brother Mariu Şaineanu. Mariu was an instructor of French and history at a gymnasium and although he had a doctorate, he could not obtain a chair for French language in Bucharest. It was in this context that Take Ionescu, member of the ruling Conservative Party and Minister of Public Instruction, suggested Mariu to get baptized—an advice the brothers followed in 1899. Sainéan lost through this gesture his friendship to Moses Gaster, who lived as a Zionist in London, but he inspired others to try this path.

Finally, 48 deputies voted against and 45 in favor of Sainéan's naturalization in the Chamber of Deputies. Antisemitic politicians simply could not accept a Jew to teach Romanian language. Sainéan analyzed in a new study the influence of Ottoman-Turkish on Romanian and emphasized the linguistic mixture of Romanian despite the nationalist discourse.

Sainéan never mentioned his conversion in any writings, a fact that Zemon Davis interprets as shame. Before leaving for France, the linguist wrote an article in which he complained that modern antisemitism became in Romania a "patriotic delirium." In the meantime, his brother Mariu Şaineanu succeeded professionally.

When Constantin, as Mariu Șaineanu called himself after baptism, published an article in which he denied the persecution of Jews in Romania and defended the country's policies, he was awarded a teaching position at a prestigious military school in Bucharest.

Less detailed than in the first part, the author covers in the second one Sainéan's life in France until his death in 1934. He continued to publish on Romanian topics, did translations and supported his family through private investments. But soon Sainéan discovered new research interests in the popular language of France, publishing on the vernacular spoken in the streets of nineteenth-century Paris. He went on to study the language of the Renaissance writer François Rablais. It was through his writings on Rablais that Zemon Davis became interested in Sainéan. It is clear that once in France, the identity question no longer preoccupied him as much as back in Romania. When he arrived in France the linguist changed his name from Lazar Șaineanu into Lazare Sainéan, acquired French citizenship and was well received in various scientific societies. There is little information on how his reflection on his Jewishness developed in France, an interesting aspect since Sainéan was in close contact with Dreyfusards through his work.

There are many gaps and unknowns in Sainéan's biography, as the linguist wrote only a short memoir and left no personal papers. Either by reconstructing the linguist's social networks or by tracing his intellectual influences, Zemon Davis fills the blank spaces with great accuracy and helps us understand how transfer of ideas and Sainéan's reflection on identity and sense of belonging evolved. This way Zemon Davis manages to write a biography that can serve as a starting point for the research of modern Jewish history in Romania and beyond.

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