



Longing for a Lost Past: *Kula 930* and the Istanbul Jewish Community

Añorando un pasado perdido: *Kula 930* y la comunidad judía de Estambul

Rivka Bihar

Independent researcher, Türkiye

rivka.bihar@gmail.com

ORCID: 0000-0001-6317-2895

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Abstract

Kula 930 is a play written, produced, directed, and performed exclusively by members of the Istanbul Jewish community. It was first staged in 1978 and is considered to be the first play in Türkiye since 1947 that was predominantly performed in Ladino (Judeo-Spanish). This study examines the reasons behind the success of the play, from its first rendition in 1978 to its fourth rendition in 2017. The paper analyses the circumstances and the meaning of the play's language and its characteristics while highlighting the evolution of the play within the socio-historical context of Jews in Türkiye.

Keywords: Sephardi; Istanbul; Jewish; theatre; Türkiye.

Resumen

Kula 930 es una obra de teatro escrita, producida, dirigida e interpretada exclusivamente por miembros de la comunidad judía de Estambul. Se representó por primera vez en 1978 y es considerada la primera obra teatral escrita y representada en Türkiye desde 1947, año en que se representó predominantemente en ladino (judeoespañol). Este artículo examina las razones detrás del éxito de *Kula 930*, desde su primera versión en 1978 hasta su cuarta versión en 2017. El artículo analiza las circunstancias y el significado del lenguaje de la obra y sus características al tiempo que destaca la evolución de ella dentro del contexto sociohistórico de los judíos en Türkiye.

Palabras clave: Sefardí; Estambul; judío; teatro; Türkiye.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Kula 930, a play written, produced, directed, and performed exclusively by the members of the Istanbul Jewish community, is a satire of community life when many of Istanbul's Jews lived in the working-class neighbourhood of Galata, by the Golden Horn in Central Istanbul. The Istanbul Jewish Community considers *Kula 930* a classic. It was the first play in Türkiye since 1947 that was performed dominantly in Ladino (Judeo-Spanish), the traditional lingua franca of the Jews of Türkiye. Following its first staging in 1978, other versions of *Kula 930* were performed in 1987, 2002, and 2017, with potential future productions in the pipeline. With the steady and persistent decline of Jewish population in Türkiye, and the concurrent decline of Ladino and Sephardic culture, *Kula 930* has become an ode to a long-lost *way of life* that lives in the *shared history* of the elderly members of the Istanbul Jewish community. This paper argues that *Kula 930* represents a reflection of the transition of the Jewish Community of Istanbul, having become increasingly alienated from its traditional Sephardic culture and identity because of the decline of its Ladino vernacular and its identity markers notably *way of life* (active marker) and *shared history/ancestry* (passive marker) (Eberhard, 2018: 34).

There are but a handful of scholarly studies written in Turkish on Jewish theatre in Türkiye. Of these rare studies, such as those conducted by Yaycıoğlu on Sephardic theatre in Türkiye, which includes *Kula 930*, are based primarily on printed materials such as translations by prominent academics like Romeros' and Díaz-Mas' among others, or on the information featured in the play's published brochure. Sephardic theatre in Türkiye has therefore been relatively underexplored. This article is the first study to offer a perspective based on primary sources that focus on *Kula 930* seeking to help remedy this dearth of scholarly inquiry by examining one of the most important plays of the Istanbul Jewish Community with an understanding of the language in which it was performed, namely, Ladino. The recordings of the play from its first rendition in 1978 onwards were accessed and a series of interviews were conducted with those involved in the writing of *Kula 930* including İ. İzzet Bana, Jojo Eskenazi Gözcü, Ferit Kohen, Karen Gerşon Şarhon and Yuda Siliki. Some printed and/or visual sources were obtained for the purpose of this article thanks to the neatly kept personal archives of İ. İzzet Bana and Beno Levi and the efforts of Jojo Eskenazi Gözcü. This access to primary source material and knowledge of Ladino contribute to a deeper and thorough analysis of the play and its broader societal implications. Sephardic theatre in Türkiye is subsequently detailed in this paper and is followed by an explanation about the play, its production, the reasons for its popularity and influence, as well as its underlying meanings.

2. JEWS IN TÜRKİYE

Today the Jewish population of Türkiye stands at 12-14,000 individuals out of a total Turkish population of over 84 million. However, this was not always the case. Upon the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923, the number of Jews in the first census was 81,872 out of a total population of 13 million (Shaw, 1991: 246). Ottoman Empire was composed of various ethnical and religious minorities called *millet*s. Following the foundation of Turkish Republic, series of nationalist policies were enacted in order to unite the multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious structure of what was left of the Ottoman Empire, many of which targeted minorities within the Republic including the Jewish community.

Historian Kedourie calls the effects of nationalism on minorities:

[...] a curse the west has indeed brought to the east [...] A rash, a malady, an infection spreading from western Europe through the Balkans, the Ottoman empire, India, the far east and Africa, eating up the fabric of settled society to leave it weakened and defenceless before ignorant and unscrupulous adventurers, for further horror and atrocity (Kedourie, 2004: 286).

In the context of the Turkish Republic, what Kedourie calls horror and atrocity was carried out through a set of nationalist policies known today as the “Turkification process”. For example, in 1928 there was the *Vatandaş Türkçe Konuş!* (*Citizen, Speak Turkish!*) campaign in which minority groups such as Armenian, Jewish, Greek, Kurds and others were forced to speak only Turkish in public places and public gatherings such as cinema, theatre, tea houses, and public transport. If they refused to comply, they were physically assaulted or in some cases arrested (Bali, 2017). In 1934, there were the Thrace pogroms which took place in highly Jewish populated cities in the European side of Türkiye such as Edirne, Tekirdağ, Çanakkale and Kırklareli. Turks looted Jewish homes, stealing, or destroying their possessions (Bali, 2017). After these pogroms, many Jews moved to Istanbul, while others continued their journey towards the Land of Israel. In 1941, during the height of World War II, and as news trickled in about German atrocities against the Jews, the *Yirmi Kur’a Nafia Askerliği* (*incident of the Twenty Classes*) occurred. Legislation was introduced for the male non-Turkish minority population including the elderly and mentally ill. They were gathered in labour battalions and forced to work in road construction in deplorable conditions. The following year, the *Varlık Vergisi* (*Capital Tax*) was instituted. The tax imposed arbitrary and often unpayable capital taxes on Jews, Armenians, and Greeks and those who could not pay within a month were sent to labour camps in Aşkale and Erzurum to the East of the country where they faced the full force of the sub-zero winter with little provisions (Bali, 2011), a burden they faced while absorbing the news of the horrors of the

Holocaust befalling Europe's Jews. The result of the tax and forced labour was the economic destruction Türkiye's minority groups and the transfer of wealth, production, and economic activity from the minorities to Turks, which effectively amounted to nothing less than the Turkification of the economy (Bali, 2011). As a result, and especially after the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, mass emigration of Jews from Türkiye started.

The following decade the Jewish community witnessed and even fell victim to the 1955 Istanbul pogroms when Turkish mobs attacked private shops and businesses owned by members of the Greek community after false news reports that the government of Greece had bombed the Turkish Consulate in Thessaloniki, the Greek city where Türkiye's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was born in 1881. Although the attacks were largely directed towards the Greek community, shops owned by Armenians and Jews were also plundered and communal properties such as churches and synagogues, cemeteries, and schools were set on fire, leaving over a dozen of people dead (Zayas, 2007). Since the 1970s onwards the community has been physically targeted with deadly terrorist attacks such as the 1986 Neve Şalom Synagogue shooting which left 22 worshippers dead, and the 2003 simultaneous synagogue bombings that claimed the lives of 28 victims.

Language plays a key role in forming unity either as a community or as a nation. Kedouri indicates that "[...] certain European principles made language and nationality synonymous." In this sense, it is worth mentioning that back in late 19th century and early 20th century the French Jews had already initiated spreading French nationalism constituted of French ideas, culture, and values among Sephardic Jews of the Ottoman lands through their secular schools *Alliance Israélite Universelle* (AIU) set up in the region. Although the goal of AIU to bring their Sephardic Jewish coreligionists the knowledge and understanding of how to improve Jewish ideals on self-sufficiency and self-defence through education and vocational training was to some extent noble, by implementing the language of education as French, they, among other things, caused language shift within the Sephardic Jews who until then only spoke Ladino as the language of communication. On the importance of education on language, American linguist Fishman states that authorities of an educational system are deeply implicated in planned language shift since like other agencies of government; education is focused on formal and written language (Fishman, 2006: 320). Fishman asks "What is lost when a language is lost?" and answers:

[...] the heart of what is lost when you lose a language is that most of the culture is in the language and is expressed in the language. Take it away from the culture, and you take away its greetings, its curses, its praises, its laws, its literature, its songs, its riddles, its proverbs, its cures, its wisdom, its prayers. Culture could not be expressed and handed on in any other way. What would be left? When you are talking about the language, most of what you are talking about is the culture. That is, you are losing all those things that

essentially are the way of life, the way of thought, the way of valuing, and the human reality that you are talking about (Fishman, 1996: 80).

The new Turkish Republic, adopting the European principles on nationalism and language, also tried to achieve language uniformity through its Turkification process. After all, speaking same language means sharing the same culture and having the same values that forms a basis of the social entity called nation (Özkan, 2003). Fishman indicates that whenever a weak culture is in competition with a strong culture, it is an unfair match (Fishman, 1996: 85). Hence, Istanbul Jewry's obligation having to embrace first French and then Turkish as the language of communication and education, and refusal to pass Ladino on to next generations for various reasons resulted the inevitable decline and eventual loss of Ladino and therefore its Sephardic heritage.

3. SEPHARDIC THEATRE IN TÜRKIYE

In her PhD dissertation, academic Lockowandt argues that there is little recognition of the Sephardim within hegemonic Ashkenazic and Eurocentric discourses and therefore Sephardic theatre is consequentially relegated to a limited number of specialist studies (Lockowandt, 2012). Perhaps, but one should not forget that there is a significant quantity of academic literature on Sephardic theatre written in Spanish by Spanish speaking academics. Possibly, it is because of the current dominance of English in academia and because it is imperative to know Spanish to understand Ladino that there are few studies on Sephardic theatre in English. In the Turkish context, when one considers the language factor, the small size of the Jewish community, its unwillingness to open up to outsiders so it may keep a low profile, and because recordings were poorly stored, adds to the perceived lack of visibility of Sephardic plays in Türkiye.

Elena Romero coined the term 'Judeo-Spanish theatre' for published texts or performances that fulfil at least one of the following criteria: that they are written or expressed in Judeo-Spanish. They have been created by a member of the Judeo-Spanish community, they have been written, or staged for a Judeo-Spanish audience (Romero, 1979: 426). During the 1960s onwards, the Sephardic Jewish community of Istanbul continued its cultural activities through the establishment of several youth clubs such as Dostluk Yurdu Derneği – DYD (Friendship Association), Yıldırım Spor Kulübü – YSK (Lightening Sports Club) and Göztepe Kültür Derneği - GKD (Göztepe Culture Association). Seeking to unify and consolidate dwindling Jewish community through a range of cultural and sportive initiatives, these clubs became the focal point of the community and were administered entirely on voluntary basis and generated financial

resources by receiving charitable donations and assistance from the Chief Rabbinate. These clubs became a crucial support system for the community and provided a secular outlet for expressions of Jewish identity outside of the synagogue. Amateur plays within the Istanbul Jewish community blossomed through these youth clubs with at least one new production performed every year. Usually, they were performed in a mixture of languages used by the Jewish community, usually Turkish, French, and Ladino. But if in Ladino, it was just partially and scattered into the script.

The Istanbul Jewish community chose not to open its cultural activities to the rest of Turkish society and keep their cultural activities away from “outside eyes.” The writers and producers of these community plays wrote for an audience that was exclusively their community co-religionists. Since “a play’s success is measured by its ability to deliver a feast of affects” (Schaefer, 2016) and “considering that affect is tied to the expressive and representational dimensions of art, to the feelings and emotions that art elicits [or not]” (Ott, 2017: 3), it would be fair to say that the success of a community play was based on the emotions that it stirred within the members of the Jewish community in Istanbul exclusively. In other words, from inception to production to performance, the very thought that the play would either be viewed or attended by individuals outside of the community was both unfathomable and unwelcomed.

Members of the Jewish community in Istanbul gave little thought to the broader societal significance of the meaning of these plays, both in terms of what they portrayed, and, to some extent, what they suppressed¹. These annual amateur plays were performed and created with the sole intention of entertaining, pleasing, and educating members of the community, while also raising funds from ticket sales for those in need. Their significance was so underappreciated that Bana, the director of the first three renditions of *Kula 930*, recalls that the plays were not even recorded because the required equipment was seen as an unnecessary expense². Even when community plays (and other cultural events taking place on stage) were finally recorded, they were not given the necessary care and attention in both their recording and preservation. The lack of attention to the storage of recorded files was also due to the change of location and the later closure of some of these community clubs³. Thus, only a handful of recordings are now available for researchers, and, alas, the same is true for printed materials such as brochures, fliers, and leaflets. The idea that these

¹ Interview with Ferit Kohen, Istanbul, 7 December 2021.

² Interview with İ. İzzet Bana, Istanbul, 29 November 2021.

³ DYD and YSK merged in 2013 to become Alef. GKD was obliged to move to a new venue for a couple of years due to an urban transformation project in the Asian side of Istanbul. Interview with Ferit Kohen, Istanbul, 7 December 2021.

plays, which were amateur, fun, and their primary purpose was to get members of the community together (including the opportunity for young men and women to meet), and raise funds would be of academic interest was, at the time, inconceivable. Recordings are few and far between and limited to those made by private members of the audience, which is extremely difficult to locate. In this study, three out of four renditions' recordings were viewed. Although the 2002 and 2017 recordings of *Kula 930* were at one time available to see on the Internet, the recording of the 1987 rendition was obtained thanks to the personal archives of one of the main playwright's Bana. There are only either short or blurry images of the first rendition in 1978, kept by Beno Levi in his personal archive.

4. *KULA 930*: SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

Kula 930 (1978) was the first ever play that was staged dominantly, and not just partially, in Ladino in Istanbul by DYD. There were some precursors and sources of inspiration for *Kula 930*. One was a short 15-minute sketch called *Fikso*. Fully performed in Ladino, *Fisko* was staged by DYD a year before *Kula 930* and helped identify the demands and expectations of the audience⁴. *Kula 930*, set in the Jewish neighbourhood of Galata, follows the life of the neighbourhood drunk, Moiz, who seduces Bulisa who is married to Mando, a man considerably older than her. After Mando discovers the affair, his marriage to Bulisa is in turmoil. Meanwhile, the play follows a parallel story about young Sara, who has two suiters for her hand in marriage.

Bana recalls that the primary aim of his play was to revive and reintroduce Sephardic songs back into the Jewish community in Istanbul (Bana, 2007). One of the sources of inspiration was the play *Boustan Sephardi*. Staged in Israel in 1970, *Boustan Sephardi* was written and directed by non-other than Yitshak Navon, the fifth President of the State of Israel whose paternal ancestors were Sephardic Jews who settled in the Ottoman lands. The play tells the story of a Sephardic neighbourhood in Jerusalem during the 1930s through a mixture of song and narrative which together celebrate the vibrant lives of the community's residents. Despite the fact that none of the *Kula 930* writers had actually watched the play yet heard it by word of mouth after it was staged, Bana indicates that *Kula 930* is inspired by *Boustan Sephardi* in concept only and it has a completely different plot and narrative. This was eventually acknowledged by Navon himself who had previously accused Bana of

⁴ Interview with I. İzzet Bana, Istanbul, 29 November 2021.

plagiarism, only to take back this accusation after actually seeing the third rendition of *Kula 930* performed in Israel in 2003⁵.

In 1974, singer Yehoram Gaon (the son of Sephardic Jewish parents) released an album containing Ladino songs which later, after some time, reached Bana's ears around the same time as *Fikso* was being written. Bana recalls that this album was "mind-blowing," hearing the tunes and rhythms which he had heard his parents and grandparents hum, beautifully composed and played by an orchestra and sung by a well-known singer⁶. Hearing these Ladino songs, Bana felt inspired to create not only *Kula 930* but also the recording group *Los Pasharos Sefaradis*⁷. The four playwrights of *Kula 930*, namely, İ. İzzet Bana, Jojo Eskenazi Gözcü, Selim Hubeş and Yuda Siliki came together in 1976 to shape *Kula 930* and base the play around Ladino songs such as *Ay Dos Anyos*, *Adio Kerida*, *Durme Durme*, *Avre Este Abajur* and *Tres Kalvinas en un tiesto*. In other words, *Kula 930* was born as a result of the desire of a handful theatre and music loving amateurs to *reconnect* with their Sephardic heritage through Ladino expression⁸.

The challenges of producing a play featuring Ladino songs while also depicting Jewish lives in the Galata neighbourhood were numerous. Bana recollects that it was difficult to cast the appropriate Jewish actors to star in the play. For one, during the 1970s, women who appeared on stage were frowned upon by Turkish society including large sections of the Jewish community; however, this problem was partially mitigated by the fact that the Istanbul Jewish community was both small and insular meaning that because everybody, more or less, knew each other it was tolerated that women would appear in community plays. Still, there was a limited number of candidates which meant that nobody was actually turned down for a part due to the tonality or pitch of their voice⁹. Participation in *Kula 930* was never closed, and all were welcome¹⁰. In 1978, the play was staged in DYD by 13 amateur actors, which was just about the right number for the 20 square meter stage. However, as the play garnered more attention in subsequent years and attracted wider community audiences, the production was moved to bigger stages including those of up to

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Based in Istanbul, *Los Pasharos Sefaradis* is a Sephardic vocal and instrumental group primarily composed of four members who have performed together since 1978, namely, Karen Gerşon Şarhon (voice), İ. İzzet Bana (voice), late Selim Hubeş (voice, oud, guitar), Yavuz Hubeş (voice, kanun, oud), the latter two members left the band in 2001.

⁸ Interview with İ. İzzet Bana, Istanbul, 29 November 2021; Interview with Jojo Eskenazi Gözcü, Telephone, 22 December 2021; Interview with Yuda Siliki, via Zoom, 6 January 2022.

⁹ Interview with İ. İzzet Bana, Istanbul, 29 November 2021.

¹⁰ Ibid.

100 square meters. As a result, as the size of the audience grew so too did the size of the cast and the production in general. Another challenge was the play's promotion. In 1978, as communication technologies were limited, the main channel for publicity was through the announcement section of the community's weekly newspaper *Şalom*. Other methods included putting up posters on the DYD bulletin board for club attendees to see. News of the play was also spread through word of mouth by regular attendees of these plays. Such methods have been used for over 40 years to promote each rendition of the play. However, with new technologies and developments in communication, adverts for the play are now also emailed, posted on community's social media accounts, and shared on instant messaging platforms, a more effective and direct way for the play's promotion.

In every rendition of the play, there was a live band. In the first 1978 version, there was a very small two-person band. However, by the time of the last rendition in 2017, directed not by Bana who oversaw the first three renditions, but by Ferit Kohen upon the special request of the Jewish Community Management, the band increased from two to ten musicians and featured additional instruments such as the kanun and the flute while the band was supervised by a professional music director¹¹. According to Kohen, who is a stage schooled performance professional and a younger member of the Istanbul Jewish community, every aspect of this rendition of the play was planned by professionals including direction, setting, lighting, and music¹². However, one of the main reasons of *Kula 930*'s success lies in the actors who have been acting the same role over forty years. Although throughout the forty years some extra scenes were added, the plot in itself has not undergone a major change but the interaction and bond between the characters and the audience have certainly improved in each rendition establishing the success of the play.

5. THE PLOT AND CHARACTERS OF *KULA 930*

The lead male character, Moiz, is a drunkard and womanizer who is despised by his neighbours. However, what is striking is that throughout the play he is never made to feel an outcast and the audience likes him. This begs the question, what is it about the Moiz character that is endearing? Eskenazi Gözcü recalls that in the Jewish neighbourhood of Galata there was in fact a drunkard nicknamed Şap who could always be seen, bottle in hand, swaying this way and that, and was the source of inspiration for the character Moiz¹³ and the audience was reminded of him or perhaps, the audience is responding to the

¹¹ Interview with Ferit Kohen, Istanbul, 7 December 2021.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Interview with Jojo Eskenazi Gözcü, Telephone, 22 December 2021.

portrayal of Moiz by actor Jojo Eskenazi Gözcü who has played Moiz in every version of *Kula 930*. Eskenazi Gözcü made the character Moiz resonate through the character's wit and clever use of language and improvisation and his ability to manipulate the nuances of Ladino. This makes Moiz a comical rather than a tragic figure who dominates the play. Indeed, as soon as Eskenazi Gözcü appears on the stage stumbling with a bottle in hand, the crowd erupts into applause, even before he has uttered his first line. Eskenazi Gözcü's popular characterization of Moiz has reached such a level of popularity that it has led to a spin of series of *Moiz plays*¹⁴.

Equally important is actress Karen Gerşon Şarhon's portrayal of the leading female character Bulisa in three renditions of the play (1978, 1987 and 2017). Like Eskenazi Gözcü, Gerşon Şarhon's mastery of Ladino is key to her successful characterization. She is able to go back and forth with Eskenazi Gözcü whenever he slips off script and improvises, creating comical scenes, often in a household setting, that highlight family tiffs and banter in a way that appears natural and easy. In the Sephardic theatre tradition, both theatrical and intellectual texts praise the Sephardic lifestyle of old which emphasize the importance of traditional roles for women such as being faithful to the wishes of their husbands or to being a doting mother while the man is faithful to his religious obligations and other social conventions (Valentín, 2010: 96). However, Bulisa, who is married to an older man named Mando, is unfaithful to her husband and, finally, caves into Moiz's advances and does so when everybody else is at *selihot*¹⁵, indicating her lack of religious feeling. Bana states that this character is believable since such affairs were rumoured to have actually happened in real life. Gerşon Şarhon remembers that because of her role which depicted a cheating wife, some members of the community, unable to separate fiction from reality, made disparaging and inappropriate remarks to her parents¹⁶! Luckily, the actress's parents simply shrugged them off as nonsense. However, in the play the real reason why Bulisa has an affair with Moiz is because the scriptwriters needed an excuse for Bulisa's husband Mando to perform one of the most famous Ladino songs, *Adio Kerida* (Goodbye My Love), after he catches them together. At first Mando breaks up with Bulisa but takes her back once she returns home

¹⁴ A series of approximately fifteen plays featuring Moiz have been performed; however, now he is a settled family man, and feature comical circumstances of Moiz's Jewish home life. Since Jojo Eskenazi Gözcü has played the character Moiz, so often some community members even think that he is in reality Moiz rather than an actor. These Moiz plays are produced by the Istanbul Jewish community and performed predominantly in Ladino until 2007 and predominantly in Turkish onwards.

¹⁵ From Rosh Hashanah, Jewish New Year, to Yom Kipur, the Day of Atonement, a series of special prayers for forgiveness takes place before sun rise called Selihot because early morning hours are considered a time of mercy and request before God, see Behar, Nisim, 2004, 259, *El Gid Para el Praktikante – Dini Uygulama Rehberi* (Istanbul: Gözlem Gazetecilik Basın ve Yayın AŞ).

¹⁶ Interview with Karen Gerşon Şarhon, via Zoom, 28 December 2021.

apologizing after her relationship with Moiz falls apart, and, soon, happiness and order is restored to the household.

The theme of restoring order and happiness is also reinforced by the marriage of the younger couple Sara and David. Sara has two suiters who compete for her hand, namely, Sami and David. Sami is from the Kuledibi neighbourhood, one of the surrounding areas around the Galata Tower, but David, whose father owns a jewellery store, lives in the more well-to-do Yazıcı Sokak. Throughout the play, Sara's parents¹⁷ are enthusiastic about the potential match between Sara and David. Through Sara and David's courtship, the audience gets a glimpse of how relationships developed during the 1930s, highlighting the lack of liberty and choice for women when it came to their future and the heavy involvement of parents in their children's marital choices. The final act of the play is the wedding of Sara and David, leaving the audience at the play's most delightful and celebratory stage, but also on a conservative form of reinforcement that, in the end, everything ends as it should be; Bulisa is reunited with her husband, a young Jewish couple get married, while Sami, the failed suiter, finds another Jewish girl in the later renditions. Thus, the play ending by establishing a Jewish family through marriage and another one on the horizon implies the continuity of the Istanbul Jewish community for generations to come.

6. REASSURANCE OF CONTINUITY: THE EMOTIONAL APPEAL OF *KULA 930*

In order to understand the reasons for *Kula 930*'s popularity, it is important to explain its characteristics, its meaning, its significance, and the emotions it imbues. *Kula 930* breaks many traditions associated with Turkish Sephardic theatre; it does not retell a biblical story, explain the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, or adapts a European play unlike many other community productions. Instead, the playwrights of *Kula 930* wanted to satirize their own community for the viewing delectation of community members¹⁸. The play is akin to an insider joke made at a time when Istanbul Jewry was experiencing social change and cultural transition. The community was seeing its numbers dissipate after mass immigration to Israel between 1948 and 1951 (Toktaş, 2006: 505). Those who remained became part of a post-ladino identity shift, developing an identity that was more secular and less associated with religious tradition and practice or the use of Ladino. These changes in identity offered

¹⁷ Sara's father was performed by Selim Hubeş and Sara's mother was performed by Rozet (Haim) Hubeş who were also the artistic consultants of the play. Rozet Hubeş pursued a professional acting career and is currently a permanent cast member of the Istanbul Municipality City Theatre.

¹⁸ Interview with İ. İzzet Bana, Istanbul, 29 November 2021; Interview with Jojo Eskenazi Gözcü, Telephone, 22 December 2021; Interview with Yuda Siliki, via Zoom, 6 January 2022.

significant ammunition for satire. Thus, *Kula 930* served as a mirror to Istanbul Jewish community's life in Galata neighbourhood that although already obsolete still existed in living memory. In fact, one or two of the playwrights had actually grown up in Galata¹⁹.

The play starts with a Jewish Professor alone on stage²⁰. The year is 2030 or 2528 depending on the rendition. The historicizing professor of the future eruditely explains to the audience about how Judaism and Jews still exist in Türkiye, and then goes on to set the scene of the play by drawing the audience's attention to how Jews lived back in the 1930s in the Galata Tower area (in Ladino *Kula*, hence the name of the play). The professor's narration from the future features in all of *Kula 930*'s renditions, the underlying purpose of which is to reassure the audience of the continued existence in Türkiye of Judaism, its traditions, culture, and values. This professor from the future intervenes in the play on several occasions to offer his opinions about Judaism, relationships, and women. However, those who have viewed more than one version of *Kula 930* would have no doubt noticed that the playwrights revised the professor's remarks about women over the years. His comments in early versions (and later version too) sound, if not misogynist, then passé for 21st century tastes. For example, in the second rendition, when Bulisa's husband Mando takes back his wife after she has a brief affair with Moiz, the Professor remarks, "Here we see the superiority of man as he is forgiving." Siliki, one of the playwrights, states that he and Hubeş had progressive ideas even for their period and these remarks were intentionally introduced for two reasons; to break the dull narration of the professor and to cause stirs in the audience by these appalling remarks²¹. However, even the cast of the play did not understand this effort as these kinds of remarks were seen as normal in the 70s or 80s and were not challenged neither by the cast nor by the audience²². Eventually, this line disappears in the 2002 and 2017 versions of the play. In fact, in 2017, a Jewish woman from the future is introduced in attempt to equal the gender balance of the narrators. However, she is still portrayed as intellectually inferior – she is a student of the male Professor. Reflecting on this, Kohen states that with a play so rooted as *Kula 930*, and still acted by many of the same cast, even as director he was not at liberty to make too many modifications²³. Instead, later renditions included greater interactions between the Professor and Moiz, the only character who can actually see the scholar from the future.

¹⁹ Interview with Jojo Eskenazi Gözcü, Telephone, 22 December 2021.

²⁰ In the second rendition, the Professor is acted by Mario Levi, a renowned writer in Türkiye.

²¹ Interview with Yuda Siliki, via Zoom, 6 January 2022.

²² Interview with Karen Gerşon Şarhon, via Zoom, 28 December 2021.

²³ Interview with Ferit Kohen, Istanbul, 7 December 2021.

The playwrights Bana, Eskenazi Gözcü, Hubeş and Siliki, as well as leading actress Karen Gerşon Şarhon, who was part of the revision process of the play's second rendition in 1987, have all insisted that when creating *Kula 930* they had no specific agenda or ulterior motive other than to entertain their friends by satirizing people who spoke Ladino or the francophone Jews who spoke French²⁴. However, the phenomenal success of the play lies in the audience's reaction to it. Although Ladino was less spoken, it was not yet obsolete and there were many Jews who knew Ladino even though they were reluctant to pass it on to the next generation. This fact found its way into the play. It is noteworthy to mention that in the first two renditions of the play, it is not only the leading male and female characters Moiz and Bulisa who speak Ladino but all the characters with the deliberate exception of the young couple (Sara and David) and the heartbroken suiter (Sami) who speak Turkish. Gerşon Şarhon indicates that having the young couple speak Turkish is an anachronism since back in the 1930s all Jews, young or old, would and could speak Ladino²⁵. Also, Bana admits that already in 1978, the younger generation could not speak proper Ladino and therefore, they opted for the young actors to talk in Turkish rather than broken Ladino²⁶ highlighting the generational language shift. On the loss of a language Fishman indicates:

[...] a new *modus vivendi* has worked out. When languages die, people do not stop talking. Cultures do not fold up and silently steal off into the night. They go on and they talk the new language. They go on in the other language; they work out a new relationship between language and culture. [...] because of that new relationship, it becomes very difficult to bring back and to strengthen the old language, which is already undergoing so many stresses (Fishman, 1996: 86).

In the Istanbul Jewry context, this new relationship was formed due to the loss of active identity markers namely *place of residence, way of life* and *social networks* (Eberhard, 2018: 34) that led to decline of Ladino. After the 1970s, much of the Jewish population migrated, primarily, to other Istanbul neighbourhoods such as Kurtuluş, Şişli and Gayrettepe (and later on to the more outer Sarıyer and Göztepe neighbourhoods) into modern houses with better infrastructures leaving the Jewish neighbourhood of Galata where they could live their Jewish identity to a full extent enjoying openly the cultural heritage of their *shared history/ancestry*. As anthropologist-linguist Sapir indicates "language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives" (Sapir, 1921: 100). As the neighbourhood of the

²⁴ Interview with İ. İzzet Bana, Istanbul, 29 November 2021; Interview with Jojo Eskenazi Gözcü, Telephone, 22 December 2021; Interview with Karen Gerşon Şarhon, via Zoom, 28 December 2021; Interview with Yuda Siliki, via Zoom, 6 January 2022.

²⁵ Interview with Karen Gerşon Şarhon, via Zoom, 28 December 2021.

²⁶ Interview with İ. İzzet Bana, Istanbul, 29 November 2021.

Sephardic Jews of Istanbul dispersed, they began to lose elements of their Sephardic cultural traits as a result of losing their active identity markers. They also gradually lost their language, another active marker, which was replaced with Turkish language and culture.

7. CHALLENGING PERCEPTIONS OF JEWS IN TÜRKIYE

The Jews portrayed in *Kula 930* challenge stereotypes associated with Jews in Türkiye being a wealthy and educated elite and shows that such presumptions are not historically accurate. In the first rendition the male characters are simple tradesman while the women are homemakers. In the third rendition, a Jewish doctor is introduced. Also in the third rendition, one of the main playwrights, Hubeş, expanded the play to include an opening song (in Ladino) which retells the life in Galata Jewish neighbourhood and introduced new characters such as Matmazel Behar, her lover who is a sailor, and a Greek woman named Sarımadam, and, based on an apparent real-life story of a boy with a worn-down shoe during the Jewish celebratory festival of Purim.

One of Hubeş' additions in the third rendition is a letter that Moiz receives from France. The audience discovers that Matmazel Behar is the only person in the entire neighbourhood who is literate because nobody else is able to read it. In the fourth rendition this development is modified to have Matmazel Behar being the only person who can read French. Still, this highlights the levels of literacy and education among many Jews in Türkiye and contrasts the impression made in scholarly work or oral history projects on Jews in the Galata/Pera districts, sources which focus on the cultural and socio-economic contributions of wealthy Jewish families such as Kamondo, Barnathan, Boton, to name a few (Gabay, 2020). Being depicted as poor or illiterate are not positive recollections and often suppressed in memory and it is therefore unsurprising that written historical sources tend not to dwell on such hardships and difficulties, and instead, focus on the rich Jewish culture and the sense of community. However, such positive recollections offer an incomplete picture of the history of the Istanbul Jewish community, even reinforcing the "Jews are an elite" stereotype. In this sense, *Kula 930* serves a sobering reminder that many within the community were culturally rich yet materially poor.

Kula 930 avoids direct engagement with politics, and it is also noteworthy that there are no Muslim characters in the play while there is a synagogue right in the middle of the set, which is frequently used and referred to as it is the heart of Jewish communal life and Jewish identity. Gerşon Şarhon and Siliki both stated that the presence of Muslims was a taboo subject for many in the community and the elders thought that speaking Ladino would keep them away from having to blend in with Muslims: "if you cannot speak their language, you

cannot fall in love” as some elder members of the community liked to say²⁷. As the Istanbul Jewry lost its vernacular Ladino, *Kula 930* started falling from grace. In addition, the change in the socio-economic structure of the Jewish community in Istanbul over the forty years of time does not favour the play’s success causing the play have a shelf life.

8. A PLAY WITH A SHELF LIFE

As the popularity of the play grew, the production’s running time also increased. The first rendition was only 90 minutes long; however, the third stretched to two and a half hours and featured additional songs, scenes, and children’s dances. For the fourth rendition Kohen says that he and his team embarked on a process of breaking and bending the play, excluding certain parts and extending others in order to decrease its running time which he felt was too long and to add depth and substance into the characters and story arcs which was especially necessary some of the characters who had been added over the years such as the Greek woman Sarımadam, a tea house proprietor who performs a classic Greek song²⁸. One of the main playwrights Eskenazi Gözcü recalls that this specific addition originates in the third rendition of the play and was based on an actual tea house that existed²⁹. It was a place where many Jewish men would stop after work for a game of backgammon or a chat with friends before going home. Bana explains that this character was introduced because many members of the audience recalled their friendship with members of the Greek community, so much so that some Jews could speak Greek and were familiar with Greek music. It signifies that the Jews of the Galata district were not totally insular and mixed with non-Jews, albeit few Muslims. Still, in Bana’s version Sarımadam plays only a small part and appears quite suddenly in the production. Under Kohen’s later direction, Sarımadam is developed by highlighting a doomed romance that occurred between her and Moiz that was unable to overcome their religious differences. This back story explains why Moiz is partial to a beverage. Another change under Kohen’s direction was to increase the number of parts spoken in Turkish, even tuning down the use of Ladino in some parts of the play by providing Turkish translations of the Ladino in Turkish through the lines of another character during the play and also having Turkish subtitles in the up-title device.

These changes also reflect the wishes of the directorate of the Jewish Community in Istanbul who wanted to open the production to broader Turkish audiences. Indeed, from the late 1990s onwards, the Jewish Community in Türkiye began reconsidering the necessity

²⁷ Interview with Karen Gerşon Şarhon, via Zoom, 28 December 2021.

²⁸ Interview with Ferit Kohen, Istanbul, 7 December 2021.

²⁹ Interview with Jojo Eskenazi Gözcü, Telephone, 22 December 2021.

of keeping a low profile and decided to open up, at least partially, to Turkish society. However, this broader Turkish public was carefully selected and consisted of people considered “friends.” Which group is more “likeminded” to the other, though, is the question that needs to be asked. Opening the play to Turkish friends who are likeminded to them may not present any issues for the Istanbul Jewry since Istanbul Jewry has assimilated to the secular liberal Turkish way of life well.

The use of Ladino and the way of life of a Sephardic community in a Jewish neighbourhood could have been appealing to other Sephardic communities outside of Türkiye such as those in the Balkans who originally settled in the former Ottoman Empire or in the Americas who also had similar, if not the same, Ladino songs, which are the core of the play. In other words, *Kula 930* would have had broad resonance with those Sephardic communities that emigrated from the Ottoman lands. In fact, the play was supposed to travel to Greece and the US, but due to financial constraints and a lack of sponsorship, these invitations were reluctantly declined. Instead, the play’s performances were limited to Türkiye and Israel. *Kula 930*, which was written for a Jewish audience in Türkiye, travelled to Israel and performed to Jews of Turkish origin. Members of the Sephardic communities of Bulgaria and Greece attended the play in Israel as well as the Spanish and Portuguese ambassadors with significant interest and enthusiasm. This was bittersweet as many Jews migrated from Türkiye to Israel and some members of the audience were reminded of their former lives of a bygone year. On this note, Gerşon Şarhon indicates that since *Kula 930* is a dynamic play with modifications and improvisations in later renditions³⁰, some jokes that highly amused the audience in Türkiye were lost on the audience in Israel, having lost touch with their Turkish roots and had assimilated to Israeli culture over the years³¹. The same fate may soon befall renditions of the production in Türkiye when performed to younger members of the audience who do not understand Ladino. In other words, in Israel, the play was not Sephardic enough and in Türkiye it is not Turkish enough. Perhaps this could be remedied by more parts of the play being performed in Turkish, as Kohen did in the fourth rendition, but this only highlights the demise of the traditional lingua-franca and cultural marker of the Jews of Türkiye.

9. CONCLUSION

Considering the fact that the Jews of Türkiye faced oppression over the past century, *Kula 930* presents rose-tinted past of the Jewish community’s heyday in Republican Türkiye

³⁰ Interview with Karen Gerşon Şarhon, via Zoom, 28 December 2021.

³¹ Ibid.

when Jews were able to live a full cultural life and experienced it together in a community. This represents longing for a mythical golden age of Jewish life. Its success demonstrates the nostalgia of many within the Jewish community that there was a period in Turkish history that Jews could be part of the national project while also maintain a strong communal identity. The key factor for the success of the play is its fans, audience members who had actually experienced life in Galata, could if not be fully accepted as Turkish, speak Ladino, and lived his/her Jewish identity within the confines of the neighbourhood. And that this cultural life, although poor and experienced a turbulent relationship with broader Turkish society, was culturally vibrant. For those who did not experience this, the play's intricacies and significance are harder to grasp let alone understand the language in which it is performed. Regrettably, this means that the play has an expiry date and a short one at that. As the brochure of the third rendition in 2002 states:

Those who were children when *Kula '930* was first staged are now grownups. They have their own children now. The children who at least understood Judeo-Spanish that day left their place to a generation that does not understand a word of this beautiful language. Also, many of the older generation who spoke this language have passed away. However, we have prayers and traditions that we want the new generation to know. We have beautiful songs that we do not want to be forgotten. That is why, 23 years later, we are playing *Kula '930* once again with the same cast, the same text, and the same songs.

As this shared history of Ladino fades, so does the meaning of *Kula 930*. This is why in the fourth rendition of the play in 2017, Kohen tuned down the Ladino parts. However, *Kula 930* is a unique play that gets its strength not only from its language but also from the feelings and emotions that it stirs. If this is also lost – and from the interviews conducted with the actors, this is possible, – what is left of the play is a frail plot and not fully developed characters as their traits and identity is assumed by the traditional audience. Hence, *Kula 930* is a classic with a shelf life of two decades at best.

Kula 930's birth, popularity, its success over four decades, and its eventual decline resembles the Sephardic Jewish community's life span in Türkiye. Although Jews are not Turks because of their ethnic and religious differences, there are little cultural traits that allow them to define themselves as Sephardi Jews while the community dwindles into oblivion. Yet, in each rendition *Kula 930* accomplishes documenting the way of life Sephardic Jews in Istanbul had until recently. It might be said that Istanbul Jewry is at the verge of losing its Sephardic traits having shifted steadily to Turkish traits and *Kula 930* is the reflection of this.

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