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Ashkenazim and Sephardim: Language Miscellanea



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Language as *Oikos*: The Case of Margalit Matitiahu's Poetry

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to study the poetic works by Margalit Matitiahu, written in Judeo-Spanish, by reference to the interdisciplinary reflection on home as proposed by Tadeusz Sławek, Aleksandra Kunce and Zbigniew Kadłubek (2013) and defined by them as *oikology*. Such a reading of Matitiahu's poems reveals multi-layered nature of her *oikos* – i.e. home or place of belonging in physical, cultural and symbolic meaning – which combines her present Israeli cultural identity with the history and cultural legacy of her Sephardic ancestors. The central aspect to be analyzed is the Judeo-Spanish language, chosen by her as a means of expression in times when it is regarded as severely endangered.

Keywords: *oikos*, oikology, Judeo-Spanish, Sephardic poetry, Margalit Matitiahu

In the recent years, Tadeusz Sławek, Aleksandra Kunce and Zbigniew Kadłubek (2013) initiated a reflection on the meaning of the term 'home' and its various manifestations in the language and cultural texts, describing this analysis as *oikology*, "the study or science of houses/homes".¹ This proposal, multi-faceted and interdisciplinary, seems still open, as its heuristic potential surpasses definitely the boundaries of cultural anthropology, ethnology or politics concentrated on preserving local historical memory, permeating into the area of literature studies and philosophical reflection on the subjectivity. The aim of this article is to continue and amplify the reflection on *oikology* by using it as an interpretative frame for literary texts; to be exact, a number of selected poems by an Israeli author Margalit Matitiahu.

What is *oikology* and what perspectives does it open for literary interpretation? Etymologically, the subject of its studies is *oikos*, an ancient Greek term meaning 'house', 'dwelling', 'residence', 'family', 'fatherland', as well as its derivatives: *oikeios* – 'homely', 'familiar', 'congenial', 'intimate', 'belonging to', or *oikeion* (also *oikeios*) – 'family member' (but also 'slave', 'servant'), 'relative', 'kin', 'an intimate friend' (Węclewski 1929: 476–477). Although the founders of *oikology*,

1 For the sake of clarification, it is appropriate to specify that what Sławek, Kunce and Kadłubek set out is rather philosophical and speculative considerations that go far beyond the ordinary and down-to-earth sense in which oikology concerns mainly the maintenance, sanitary conditions of houses and homes.

being more interested in the present, do not concentrate their research on the ancient world, in order to establish basic meanings of the words deriving from the root *oikos*, they turn to ancient literature. Thus Kadłubek, presenting the bases of *oikology* (Kadłubek 2013: 168–169), mentions, by way of introduction one of the platonic dialogues, *Lysis* (dedicated to friendship), in which Socrates is reported to conclude during his conversation with the aforementioned disciple (*Lysis*) that friendship is condensed in the noun *oikeion*. Developing this line of thought, Kadłubek makes use of the interpretation of *Lysis* performed by Gadamer (1980), who stresses that *oikeion* is a colloquial term for a place “where one feels at home, where one belongs and where everything is familiar” (Gadamer 1980: 18), a place that pertains to him/her and she/he pertains to it, it is something “that answers to me and that to which I answer, because it pertains to me”² (Gadamer 1980: 19). According to Gadamer (and Kadłubek) in *Lysis* the term in question expresses a tense relation, in which longing and fulfillment coexist, and embraces “a need of that which pertains to me. And that is a need which does not cease when it is met, and that in which the need finds fulfillment does not cease to be dear to me. That which pertains to me and to which I belong, is as reliable and constant for me as everything in my household” (*ibidem*). It seems that among many connotations and interpretative hues that can be traced with reference to the analyzed Greek term the one that stands out is the concept of *belonging to*.

Moreover, Plato’s *Lysis* and its Gadamerian interpretation suggest *implicite* a continuous dialectics of longing and fulfillment – the mutual relationship between the two does not end when the longing is satisfied, it does not become something durable, closed, finished. As a result, *oikos* is not something to which we simply pertain, but a goal to be continuously achieved, a place to be re-discovered. Therefore Kadłubek, additionally employing philological data, reminds us that the Indo-European root of *oikos*, *VIK*, includes in its semantic field the concepts of being in the course of “settling down, getting inside, coming home, entering a certain state” (Kadłubek 2013: 169–170), from which he deduces that home is “a non-place of eternal coming” (*ibidem*).

The reference to Augé and his concept of non-places (fr. *non-lieux*) supports the view that *oikos* does not need to be something fixed, immovable, but quite the contrary: it may be inscribed in constant change, which is either forced upon it (by historical, family or economic circumstances), or voluntary. We navigate through the vicissitudes of our lifetime we try to tame, ‘domesticate’ the

2 In German: “auf das man hört oder das auf einen hört”.

encountered reality and we keep asking questions about our place of belonging. This situation is especially common nowadays, which finds its reflection in the field of humanistic and social studies, where the issue of ever-changing reality and (the lack of) belonging has grown into one of major topics of analysis.³

In any case, according to Kadłubek the semantic field of *oikos* comprises the notions of both transitiveness and arrival: "In essence, from the etymological point of view, oikology may manifest itself in phrases or terms in which transiting, going, coming, approaching are the basic areas of meaning, becoming a kind of hodosophy" (Kadłubek 2013: 170).⁴ Home is a place where you arrive, but also leave (voluntarily or not), change, move – which involves the idea of transitiveness – and then again arrive at something, someplace that becomes a new home, and so on. In this context the question about belonging – about where and what to we belong, and what belongs to us – begins to exceed the simple understanding of home as a house, as a certain section of space or a physical spot; we may find our *oikos* in a real house in which we used to live, with its characteristic atmosphere, habits, attitude towards the neighbors, its surroundings (a village, a district), but it may also be found in language, literature, religious customs, sometimes superstitions, evoked in proverbs, typical sayings or specific names of things. This list could be continued. Approaching *oikos* from this perspective we are entering the area of hermeneutics.

Ślawek, Kunce and Kadłubek occasionally refer to the founders of hermeneutics, mainly Heidegger (although it seems that Ricoeur with his proposal of "narrative identity" may also be an enriching source of inspiration for *oikology*⁵), and obviously this link is not accidental. The term *oikos*, although not as basic and fundamental as Heideggerian *Dasein*, 'being-there', 'being-in-the-world' etc., is nevertheless closely connected with this concept. How we discover our belonging, what our home is, what we identify with, what the building blocks of our 'I', of our identity, are – all those may be considered manifestations of our being (*Dasein*). Thus oikology may be perceived as intellectual reflection on one of the aspects of *Dasein* – namely the one that constitutes our belonging to *oikos*.

Following this train of thought, one could say – partially with reference to Ricoeur – that looking for one's home, one's place, and ultimately one's 'I', one's

3 Zygmunt Bauman's concept of 'liquid modernity' (2000) may serve as a good example, another one being the aforementioned theory of 'non-places' by Marc Augé (1995).

4 Hodosophy may be explained as 'wisdom of the road', 'wisdom consolidated along the way' (gr. *hodos* – 'road', way and *sofia* – 'wisdom').

5 See Ricoeur 1992 and an investigation into the relationship between Ricoeur's hermeneutics and literature in Reut 2010: 61–75.

'identity' requires narrative, telling a story, expressing oneself. Sometimes this narration takes on the form of literature, although not necessarily prose, which might be suggested by the term 'narrative', but also poetry or drama. Indeed, there is a kind of writing in which different facets of *oikology* are explored (Slawek *et al.* analyze numerous examples from this area), and such literature reflects the authors' search for their *oikos*. Therefore, the oikological approach may turn out to be useful when applied to literary studies.

The literary production of an Israeli author Margalit Matitiah is a good example of writing where such a perspective may be employed. It should be admitted that the unobvious meaning of *oikos* is rather typical of the Jewish culture circle, as its members tend to live in diasporas, on the intersection of different languages and cultures, at the same time showing concern for continuity and upholding the community and family past. However, Matitiah's poetry stands out as a particularly clear case of 'home-seeking'. The first argument to support this claim is that the poet chooses as a means of her poetic expression the Judeo-Spanish language, also known as *Ladino* or *Judezmo*,⁶ which was the language used by her parents and herself in her childhood (however, she used other languages in different contexts). It should be kept in mind that this language is considered to be endangered (Harris 1994; Harris 2001). The second important argument in favor of the abovementioned claim lies simply in the content of Matitiah's poems, where we witness a hermeneutic dialogue with her family's and community's past, and this dialogue causes a shift towards new layers and new aspects of 'being-in-the-world'. Such search for *oikos* may be compared to deciphering a *palimpsest* – under the outer layer of writing other meanings and directions are to be discovered.

In order to better understand the approach adopted in this article, it seems necessary to mention a couple of biographical, as well as bibliographical facts regarding Matitiah. She was born in 1935 in the Land of Israel (as Jews used to refer to their country before it was officially established in 1948), into a Sephardi family of Greek roots. Her parents grew up in a Sephardi community in Thessaloniki, but, being young and convinced that the Land of Israel should be their home, they left Greece, thereby leaving behind most relatives. Most probably that decision saved their lives, as 95 % of Jews from Thessaloniki, 43 000,

6 In this article all the three terms describing this language will be used as synonymous, leaving aside the terminological differences outlined by specialists in Sephardi linguistics. Matitiah herself seems to prefer the terms 'Judeo-Spanish' and 'Ladino' (see: Matitiah 2001b).

were deported to concentration camps between March and August 1943, and the vast majority were gassed shortly after arrival (Fleming 2008: 125).

It should be highlighted that the Greek city was not merely one of many Sephardi communities in the Turkish-Balkan diaspora, but, along with Istanbul, the most significant one. Refugees from Spain started to settle down in the area as early as the end of 15th century, shortly after their expulsion from Spain, and they were welcomed by the Ottoman authorities' intent on colonizing the newly conquered region of the empire. In the following decades and centuries the local community grew considerably. Due to its harbor, within a short period, Thessaloniki developed into a major Mediterranean trade center controlled predominantly by Sephardi Jews, as well as a place of dynamic growth of crafts, textile production and, unquestionably, culture and religion, as the affluent families brought voluminous libraries which, supported by local patrons, gave rise to an important center of *Torah* studies. A couple of printing offices were set up whose initial focus on the Hebrew works expanded into a larger scope of Judeo-Spanish religious literature starting from the 18th century. Afterwards, in the 18th and 19th century press and lay literature appeared in Thessaloniki, especially Sephardi versions of the European novels and theatre plays characteristic of those times.⁷

For a long period of time the Sephardim were the most numerous ethnic and religious group in the multicultural Ottoman city, and the Judeo-Spanish language reigned on streets and in the harbor. Sometimes Christians and Muslims were also able to communicate in this language on a basic level. As Jews were members of all social classes and representatives of almost all professions, in the reminiscences of the city dwellers and their descendants, as well as in the broader group imagination inspired by the Sephardi sources, Thessaloniki is considered a legendary Sephardi paradise, a real Sephardi metropolis. Some historical accounts refer to it by the title 'mother city of Israel' or 'Balkan Jerusalem' (Molho 2013: 290). During the Balkan wars the leaders of the local community tried to persuade the European empires and Jewish world organizations to support the idea of converting Thessaloniki into a free city, exempt from the supervision of any state (Fleming 2008: 68–70).

In 1913, when the city was annexed to Greece, Jews made about 40 % of the population⁸. The new authorities introduced a policy of Hellenization; still, until

7 On the history of Thessaloniki see e.g. Benbassa, Rodrigue 2004 and Molho 2013; on the literature, Díaz-Mas 1986: 131–184 and Romero 1992.

8 Orthodox Greeks made 30 %, Muslims 25 % and other ethnic groups the remaining 5 % (Fleming 2008: 86).

1923 the community enjoyed many liberties, as having a right to days off on Sabbath and other Jewish feasts (*ibidem*: 87). However, the community experienced a considerable blow in 1917, when a huge fire consumed large sections of Jewish districts situated in the city center whose partially wooden houses were crammed close together. Also, many synagogues, libraries, schools and archives were lost to fire, which fact was assiduously taken advantage of by the new authorities willing to replace the multicultural character of the metropolis with a modern Greek identity informed by the Hellenic tradition.

In the 1920s and 1930s a gradual exodus of the Sephardim takes place. They often choose to re-settle in the countries of the so called Second Diaspora, while the Greek population grows. Probably Matitiahu's parents belonged to that emigration wave propelled by the surging nationalism and antisemitism. However, the picture of the city they kept at heart was one of the Sephardi, Judeo-Spanish cultural cradle. The following events of Holocaust, which ultimately terminated the Sephardi chapter of Thessaloniki, contributed to this idealization and even mythologization. Naturally, the events of World War II left a sense of devastating loss, augmented by the perceived indifference of the Greek toward the Jewish plight and their eagerness to seize hold of the abandoned houses and institutions, accompanied by a repression of the memory of Sephardi presence in that area (see Pfeffer 2013).

Describing her childhood, Matitiahu highlights the fact that the language of her family household was Ladino, but her education was carried out in Hebrew, as result of the efforts by the authorities to unify the citizens of a freshly established state of Israel⁹. She published her first poetry volumes in the 1970s, They contained poems written in Hebrew, being, of course, directed at the Hebrew reader.

The year 1986 brings a clear change of direction – Matitiahu's mother dies and a few months later the author sets out on a journey to Greece, where she looks for traces of her family's and their community's past. It is important to mention that the first two books which may be considered the fruit of that tour, *Kurtijo kemado* [Burnt Courtyard] (Matitiahu 1988) and *Alegrika* (Matitiahu 1992), were published in a bilingual, Judeo-Spanish and Hebrew, version. From this it may be gathered that the poems included in those volumes were directed at the Hebrew-speaking reader possessing a certain degree of fluency in Ladino. Obviously, the poems may be as well read by Hebrew-speaking readers who are

9 Matitiahu stresses a strong influence of her mother, an advocate of 'tolerant Zionism', on shaping her personality, worldview and political beliefs. Her sense of belonging to the Hebrew nation is founded, in the first place, on the political principles of justice, co-existence and equality, religion being a secondary factor (see Morales 2005: 11).

not familiar with the Sephardi language, but simply identify with their ancestors' culture. In the publications and re-editions that follow important changes are introduced on the linguistic level. First, they are published in Spain¹⁰ in Judeo-Spanish only; second, the spelling applied resembles the norms employed in Spanish. It may be assumed that the purpose of these innovations was to make Matitiahú's poetry accessible to the Spanish-speaking reader. Indeed, compared to other Sephardi authors, Matitiahú seems to enjoy great popularity in Spain, as may be concluded from invitations to numerous festivals, as well as from the fact that in 1997 a fragment of her poem was engraved onto a monument commemorating an ethnic cleansing incident perpetrated in 1196 by the armies of Alfonso VIII of Castile and Pedro II of Aragon against the Jewish community of Puente Castro district in León.¹¹ Due to this inscription, the monument acquired the status of a symbol of reconciliation between the descendants of Spanish Jews and *Sefarad*, their homeland during many centuries from which they were expelled.

Based on Matitiahú's biography and literary path, it can be supposed that the shift towards Ladino is an oikological decision, as the author seems to find in it a safe haven where she can express things with an authenticity that Hebrew or other languages she speaks do not provide. Let us highlight that Judeo-Spanish is not her language of everyday communication and in that sense it cannot be treated as her first language. However, it was spoken by Matitiahú's parents, and she chooses it as a language of her personal expression, a means through which she wants others to understand her, elevating it to the rank of her unique individual *oikos*. On the other hand though, it is also her cultural *oikos*, shared by other Sephardi Jews, a common space of sounds, a speech shared by the community in Thessaloniki to which her forebears belonged.

How is the choice of language reflected in Matitiahú's poetry? The death of her mother is a clear turning point, as the author is given a dramatic impulse to reflect on her family's lot, which is hinted upon already in the first poem opening the book *Kurtijo kemado*. The author's journey towards her origins, being at the same time a journey towards Judezmo, begins symbolically at her mother's grave.

"Before leaving for the door of your childhood

I came my mother

To knock on the stone of your eternal home

10. In 1997 Matitiahú publishes two books of poetry exclusively in Ladino: one in Israel, *Matriz de luz* (Matitiahú 1997), another one in Spain, *Vela de la luz* (Matitiahú 1997a).

The second volume comprises some pieces published earlier in *Kurtijo kemado* and *Alegrika*.

11. See *Red de juderías de España – Caminos de Sefarad*. León.

And to tell you that I go
 Where your soul grew up
 Where your father sowed in you the seed of poetry." (Matitiahu 1988: 9)¹²

The poem describes the author's visit to the cemetery¹³, referred to as the 'eternal home' (*kaza eternel*), which is a calque of a Hebrew phrase *bet ha-olam* (literally 'the house of eternity'). This is a place where the author's desire to talk to her mother rebounds off the cold barrier of the earth and stone. Also, the plan of going to visit Thessaloniki, her mother's birthplace, is conceived there (or at least is formulated); the poet refers to it with the phrase *portal de tu chikes* (*ibidem*), 'the door of your childhood'. The door, or, to be exact, the doorpost, the threshold of the house, as this is *portal's* true meaning in Ladino, makes reference to the origins of life and the cultural roots of Matitiahu's mother. On the other hand, analyzing this image in the context of the author's life, we may interpret it as a threshold she has to pass in order to touch the truth about her own history and identity. She feels a necessity to physically get inside houses that were once filled with Ladino sounds and culture in order to be able to find them inside herself, and preserve them.

In Jewish houses the doorpost is a place to affix *mezuzah*. Jews touch it in order to be reminded themselves about the essence of Judaism. We can observe an analogy between this ritual gesture and Matitiahu's desire to touch the difficult truth about the Greek past of her own cultural community and keep that truth inside herself. She refers to this ritual directly in a different poem, where she writes: "with a mark of pain in the body/ like a mezuzah/ kiss it, kiss it and remember" (Matitiahu 1988: 13).

The intensity of emotions expressed in the poem *Antes de arriivar a Saloniki* [Before the Arrival to Thessaloniki] contrasts with the silence of the cemetery and the heftiness of the tombstone. Still, in the end, the author decides to break the silence with her whisper, she wants to be heard:

"I'm coming closer to your silent pain
 To stones which have no light
 But all this was not in vain
 I'm gonna whisper into your ear of soil." (Matitiahu 1988: 9)

12 All the poems, if other translator is not mentioned, are translated by Agnieszka August-Zarębska. I would like to thank Ewelina Topolska for valuable remarks concerning the final version.

13 Some of the poems analyzed here have been already discussed in a different context. See: (August-Zarębska 2013; 2015; 2016).

Another poem, *Enflamada* [Inflamed] from the volume *Matriz de luz* [Matrix of light] written probably soon after, alludes to the sensations experienced during the visit to the cemetery:

"Inflamed with words
 Which come up from an abyss
 Which fall onto the soil to sprout
 And carry meanings
 To the unknown.
 I go to the soothsayer
 To understand noises coming from the walls
 To discover movements
 Under the transparent roofs,
 To bring to my entrails
 The wisdom of my mind
 To fill up my empty hands,
 And release the pain
 Covered with voices
 From other worlds." (Matitiahú 1997a: 81)

The term 'Ladino' does not appear at any point in this emotional poem. However, the author employs a metaphorical image of "words coming up from an abyss", an abyss being a dwelling place of the dead. The words "fall onto the soil to sprout", they "carry meanings to the unknown". The author seems to hear them and tries to understand and clarify them. She feels them inside, it is a gut feeling, but also beside her, as if they lived with her at home (reference to the walls). Getting in touch with these voices entails a need to open up and welcome the unknown, which, in spite of filling the void left by her mother, does not soothe the author; on the contrary, it brings more pain. The poem depicts a situation in which the persona opens up for a dialogue with the past, and the past itself starts to speak ("words... from an abyss", "noises coming from the walls", "voices from other worlds"), demanding to be understood, and ultimately to be expressed with words.¹⁴ One can assume that these voices resound with the language of the author's ancestors, Ladino. Leaving aside the question of linguistic code, is the

14 It is not the only poem by Matitiahú where she talks about sensing voices and shadows. One has an impression these elements are embedded in her mental image of home, which is further proved by the the following fragments: "In the rooms/ memories were locked/ muted voices/ start to scream..." (Matitiahú 2001: 30); "In the evening/ to know how to be with you/ in the tightness of the night/ amongst the shadows..." (*ibidem*: 26). Sometimes getting in touch with them is abrupt and disturbing: "Suddenly, the veins of my neck/ got inflamed with voiceless cries" (Matitiahú 1992: 45).

message of the voices understandable? The persona of the poem seems to believe so as she talks about her visit to a soothsayer. We can consider this act to mark the beginning of a hermeneutic process of understanding and opening up to the “truth of interpretation”, as Gadamer puts it. It ensues from the fact that the soothsayer always gives answers, but enigmatic as they are, they require of us a further effort of interpretation before we are able to grasp the real meaning of the message. That process of acquiring understanding is simultaneously the process of self-understanding. The usual questions directed at the soothsayer, like those addressed to the oracle in antiquity, revolve around ourselves, as we look for the meaning of the events that happened, are happening or will happen in our lives (it is worth remembering that the Delphic oracle welcomed its visitors with the inscription “Gnothi seauton” – ‘know thyself’). It can be assumed that in case of the analyzed poem the goal consists in understanding the past and the forming parts of the author’s identity, all of which leads to understanding her own *oikos*.

Another poem raising the issue of a language on the brink of extinction is *La memoria* [Memory]. The poet depicts herself on her way to the unknown (a metaphor of a sea travel), suspended between light and darkness, existence and non-existence, sometimes tormented by strong feelings. The phrase “Time is a cut tongue” emanates despair, as she finds herself in the liminal space between a world that has irrevocably disappeared and her memory at whose bottom lie her dearest recollections. Language is the key to the memories enclosing that bygone world; still, fewer and fewer people are able to speak it, and those who do, often use it for limited, particular purposes only. Its extinction as a vehicle of literature and culture seems inevitable. An effort the poet makes to cultivate the Sephardi cultural heritage is tainted by resignation, but eventually hope prevails, which is reflected in the last two stanzas:

“I stretch my hesitant hand
 in the memory
 Tying there seven wounded horses
 That are jumping between light and darkness,
 Time
 is a cut tongue,
 in front of me
 it thrashes about and disappears.
 The memory unfurls,
 becomes palpating sails.
 I cling to them
 Turning myself over to a future current.
 Suddenly
 The lines of air lost all oxygen.

My body comes
 And weaves a net
 To hold the memory
 In the moment of its fall.¹⁵ (Matitiahú 1997a: 72)

Our attention is called to the metaphor of seven wounded horses moving swiftly between light and darkness. It may refer to time, to its basic division into weeks (hence the number seven) whose days are filled with an acute nostalgia for the relatives who passed away, and meditation on the volatility of everything that we hold dear. Additionally, the suggestive image invokes connotations with *shiva* (Hebrew: שבועה, literally 'seven'), a week of intense mourning after the death of first-degree relatives. During this period the feelings caused by the loss are at its highest and their expression is regulated by specific norms.¹⁵

Just like the poems analyzed previously, *Memory* makes reference to the period after Matitiahú's mother's death, but also after the visits to Greece, the dwelling place of the Sephardi community for centuries. Passing of her relatives who remembered the atmosphere reigning in these communities, as well as being confronted with the void caused by the Holocaust at the places previously brimming with Jewish tradition and people foster a change of her perception of herself, influencing her personal and literary life (see Morales 2005: 12). She felt a pressing need to safeguard the memory of the language of her ancestors, as well as the memory of the world and culture that manifested itself via this code.¹⁶ Moreover, she realized her vocation to prolong the existence of Ladino, mainly through poetry. According to Shmuel Refael, this step required a considerable courage, as it supposed creating new expression tools in a language whose

15 For example mourners should stay indoors, sitting on low stools or even on the floor, as was the custom in Thessaloniki, where the floor used to be covered with a black textile. It was also customary to turn the household mirrors toward the wall. Close relatives do not wash or cut their hair, men do not shave. They do not eat meat or drink wine, as well as they do not indulge in pleasurable activities. Other relatives call upon the mourners to console them. In the Turkish-Balkan diaspora the visitors were in charge of bringing meals to the bereaved. Moreover, *Kaddish* is recited every day (see Unterman 1989: 201; Molho 1950: 198-199).

16 Matitiahú carries out this self-imposed task through multiple initiatives aimed at maintaining Judeo-Spanish alive and spreading knowledge about it. To name a few, she participated in creating broadcasts in Ladino for the radio *Kol Israel*, she researched Judeo-Spanish press published in Thessaloniki before WWII and together with her son Jack co-authored a movie about the Spanish roots of the Sephardi community.

natural evolution came to a halt both on the level of everyday communication and literary expression.¹⁷

The author comments upon her search for poetic words in Ladino in the piece titled *Las palabras* [Words]. She writes:

“Words
become skeins.
I unwind them
roll them
until they lose their sense
crazy of not being
I knead them again
And give them life:
They are born to be my bread,
they are born to be my wine,
they don't wrinkle
in the time
of the eternal zone.” (Matitiahu 2001: 93)

Let us pay attention to the fact that the process of finding adequate Ladino words is depicted through metaphors of such household chores as weaving and kneading.¹⁸ On the one hand the woman molds, shapes words, but on the other hand they become as necessary for her as bread and wine. These simple products evoke an image of a traditional, unsophisticated home-made meal. Additionally, in the context specific of the Jewish culture, they may be treated as a reference to the religious rules that must be observed on various occasions, especially Sabbath, when challah and blessed wine are consumed, the latter playing an important part in the rituals of *kiddush* and *havdalah* that respectively open and close the festive time (Pecaric 2011). Also during Passover it is required to consume unleavened *matza* and four glasses of wine distributed at fixed moments of a special dinner, *seder*. In that sense, bread and wine, employed in the poem as a metaphor of language, make reference to the order and well-being ensuing from a predictable dynamic of everyday affairs, ruled by cycles and repeatability, its monotony broken from time to time by the cathartic power of the festive days. If

17 Matitiahu did not limit herself to imitating the Sephardi literary tradition and nostalgic recollections of the past, although such strategy could possibly contribute to her gaining more popularity and readers (Refael 2001: 13–14).

18 It was an unquestioned custom among housewives in Thessaloniki to knead bread dough on Friday morning. This bread was eaten not only on the Sabbath, but also throughout the week. (Molho 1950: 151).

working with language can be compared to household chores, and words become self-made bread and wine that accompanies it, if giving meaning to words and maintaining that meaning can be compared to efforts typical of running a house, does not Ladino become a synonym of *oikos*?

Regarding the second oikological aspect mentioned in the introduction, namely home as a palimpsest, let us quote a fragment of Gabriela Marszolek's article *The Hearth of the Earth. Oikologically on the Liquidity of Place*:

"Home is not a real, tangible place where we could hide to shut out the outside world, but it is a memory of the place where we grew up, and out of which we grow later, and it ceases to be a place that encloses us to become a place we enclose in our mind. However, such memory of a place is never fixed. It gets worn out, fades, becomes changeable, inexact, fragmentary, it grows out of the world [...]" (Marszolek 2011: 24)

Marszolek speaks about our multi-layered and liquid notion of home, and in that sense it may be considered palimpsest-like. However, in the case of Matitiahu we can find different associations. First, a deeper sense is discovered if we take into account the historical context of the home, not only individual places where a person resided. Adopting this perspective, *oikos* may be found in a house, district or a city where one's parents or grandparents had lived long before I was born. Second, home is not necessarily a house with its residents, but it has a broader meaning of a *locus* where one feels 'at home'. This feeling may be created by language, culture and experiences, either the decisive ones, or the ones resulting from an everyday dynamics of the community with which one identifies. The metaphor of home as a palimpsest suggests that the layers composing it do not cover the previous ones completely. We can discern traces of the previous layers, just as the oikological cultural sphere is still perceptible under many other layers of signs.

Thus Matitiahu's *oikos* comprises different places. She clearly tries to integrate the experience of her present home with the experiences and memories of previous ones, especially the place where she was raised, but also the one in Thessaloniki, where her mother spent her childhood. Memory helps the author to observe glimpses of other, bygone places under the surface of the present. In the poem *Torno a mi kaza* [I'm Coming Home] the author writes: "I see my home again/ a bulk of my life is showing through" (Matitiahu 1988: 31), whereas in another poem, *Recodro* [Recollection], she says:

"The past unfurls
like sails in my eyes.
A blind hand
is groping and pointing out..." (Matitiahu 2001: 30)

In the fragment quoted above the “blind hand” evokes an image of groping about in the dark. Just as a blind person navigates through space mainly thanks to touch, similarly the persona discovers traces of her *oikos* – on the one hand visiting places connected with her family, on the other “touching” the past with her thoughts. That leads her to understanding better her own being-in-the-world. Rediscovering the meaning of her memories and interpreting them from a new perspective acquired as a result of fresh experiences, she integrates them in her horizon of self-understanding. The horizon amplifies for example during the journeys, when she sees, touches and in a sense absorbs the places important for her. The poem *La kaza de mi chikez* [My Childhood House] talks about her first stay after many years at her childhood home in Tel Aviv:

“On the place
 Where my childhood house stood
 The grass has already grown old
 And in the emptiness of its ruined rooms
 The tree which used to find shelter
 In its fragrant shade
 Is dry and leafless now.
 The rain, the path,
 The porch...
 I don't know what time I'm in...
 If it's tomorrow
 Or another day is happening to me.” (Matitiahu 1992: 49).

The open ending of this poem confirms that the past described by the persona is not completely closed, as it continues shaping her present. The broadly understood heritage of her family home exerts influence upon and must be included in the experience of her *oikos*.

In a different poem, *En las kayes de Athena* [On the Streets of Athens] that heritage was depicted as a suitcase that accompanies the author along her way through life:

“In the streets of Athens
 I carried the invisible suitcase of my childhood
 It held names, colors and scents
 Which were drawn from my memory like letters.
 The spouts released by the fountain
 In “Homonia Square”
 Merged with sounds of the language
 That came back to me amid the memories of my home.” (trans.: Balbuena 2016: 72–73).

In Athens and Thessaloniki Matitiahú moves according to a mental map whose draft is based on the stories told by her parents. She looks for the names of streets mentioned by them, putting an imagined topography over a real Greek city. She acts as if she was “recreating a cognitive map of her mother” (Refael 2012: 331), which is why “her poems may be considered a journey to [...] some regions of the memory of her mother” (*ibidem*: 330). In *Thessaloniki* Matitiahú herself comments on this topic:

“I walked hurriedly
 Along the sidewalks of Thessaloniki
 A spell pushed me onto the streets
 Known by my childhood imagination.” (Matitiahú 1988: 19).

There is an important moment when she manages to find a house owned formerly by her grandfather. Matitiahú dedicates a separate poem to this extraordinary event, testifying to the strong feelings she experienced:

“(On the street where my mother grew up)
 The street seemed to swell with my deep feelings,
 I was walking and looking for my old name.
 Afternoon shadows
 started to descend over the houses.
 The closed windows seemed to enter
 Into a silent war with the bygone times.
 Among the memories my mother sowed in me
 I suddenly saw the house shrink
 Till it touched the ground of the courtyard
 where the voices from the past still echoed in the air.
 And I heard a name resounding
 Like a bell
 swinging in time and saying.
 <<Thesaloniki, odos theoienos Harisis 59>>” (Matitiahú 1988: 17)

The appearance of the courtyard, a kind of epiphany described in this poem becomes possible thanks to saying its Greek address aloud. This act opens access to the past, initiates an alternating movement between two time dimensions. Just as was the case with some previously analyzed poems, the contact with the past is connected with hearing voices that “echoed in the air”.

In *Kurtijo kemado* (Matitiahú 1988: 25), a poem describing a dream and included in a homonymous book, again we encounter an image of a courtyard (*kurtijo*). In Matitiahú’s poetry it usually represents everyday Sephardi life and social bonds customary among neighbors. However, in this particular poem it also becomes a symbol of the whole Judeo-Spanish and Greek past of the author’s

family and community marked by the Holocaust. The persona confesses her urge to escape a recurring, nightmarish vision of a burnt house, that keeps calling her through enigmatic, silent signs. This symbolic image communicates the pain and effort inherent in discovering one's history, but at the same time an imperative of a complete commitment to understanding one's cultural identity.

A continuation of this trope is to be found in a volume published four years later – *Alegrika*. It comprises poems in which the traditional Sephardi courtyard, typical of pre-war Jewish districts in the Turkish-Balkan cities, is imaginatively brought back to life as the space and fills with people. They emerge from oblivion together with the objects, colors, smells and sounds that formed part of their surroundings. Each character is portrayed through his or her unique characteristics, gestures or behaviors. And thus we meet *tia* Dudun – cat feeder; *tia* Diamante – singing traditional Ladino songs; *tio* Shabtay drowning his sorrows in *ouzo* and *retzina*; Yudachi Bahar whispering his prayers; a hard-working washer-woman Sunhula; garlic-smelling *tia* Ester who shouts at children in fits of anger; and, last but not least, a nameless mother of a large family appearing in the poem *Las paredes del tiempo* [Walls of Time]. Thus, we are offered a section of the bygone Sephardi world with its homes and courtyards located in Thessaloniki or Smyrna, memories of which are cultivated by the nostalgia-ridden author.

Another layer of the palimpsest, the cultural one, leads Matitiahu to direct her steps towards Spain, the mythical *Sefarad*, whose city León was a place of origin of her ancestors. During the travel she enjoys the sound of Spanish, perceiving in it distant echoes of the Ladino language. She decided to visit Spain as, in her opinion, her feelings for this land were transmitted to her with her mother's milk; and so she sets on a journey:

“[...] to get to know the air
to touch the roots
to sow my words
and to stretch out my hand again
to León and Puente Castro.” (Matitiahu 2001: 55)

In a sense, she goes in the contrary direction to the Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492. She reaches out, touches stones, stops at the place that used to host a Jewish district Puente Castro, destroyed in the 12th century. That is where she can contemplate the depth of her roots:

“I, like a leaf
that came with a gush of poetic wind,
descended to the nest of roots and branches
to find the past

of the forefathers of my forefathers.
In Puente Castro in León." (Matitiahú 2001: 52)

The reference to a nest is significant in this poetic picture, as young birds have to leave their temporary home when they mature and set on a journey to create their own nests, their own homes. This image is reinforced by the tree metaphor (the roots, trunk, boughs), in which the author perceives herself as a leaf. Fragile and vulnerable to the wind, the leaf may also represent the lot of her family and community, vulnerable to the wind of history. It is not accidental that the book comprising these verses is titled *Vagabondo eternal* [Eternal Vagabond].

The aim of the above analysis was to show the oikological dimension of Margalit Matitiahú's poetry. There were two claims underlying this assumption: first, it is possible to apply the oikological perspective to the literary, cultural and biographical phenomenon that the author's art and professional activity constitutes; second, that her poetry is replete with topics and associations that are significant from the point of view of oikology as defined in the introduction. The examples quoted and analyzed in the article seem to appositely exemplify the initial assumption. The choice to use a moribund language as a poetry code may be understood as an oikological decision, and the subject matter, as well as the dynamics of Matitiahú's texts are marked by the search of a sphere of home – a sphere of profound and mutual belonging (as we pertain to it and it pertains to us). The author finds this sphere in the palimpsest-like memories of her childhood home, the dwelling places of her ancestors, as well as the culture, language and history of the community she originates from. An important role is played by the themes of running a household, everyday efforts to maintain it on a satisfactory level, or, in other words, by the efforts directed at keeping the author's home, her *oikos*, alive.

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