



LADINO NEWS

ADAM MAHLER, TEACHING FELLOW

LADINO CLASS IN THE JEWISH STUDIES READING ROOM IN WIDENER LIBRARY

ELIZABETH VERNON

FIRST LADINO COURSE AT HARVARD



ILENE PERLMAN

ADAM MAHLER

“I learned so much about Sephardic culture and heritage, Judaism and the Jewish diaspora. This course has made me more attuned to Sephardic cultural and literary contributions and makes me want to deepen my study of these texts and this history.”

— Student evaluation

Spring 2023 marked a major moment for Jewish language instruction at Harvard, our first-ever Ladino course. Ph.D. candidate **Adam Mahler** taught LADINO 16: *Beginning Judeo-Spanish*, in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, with support from the Center for Jewish Studies, Professor David Stern, and Professor Luis Girón Negrón. Though a handful of universities offer courses in Ladino across the United States, LADINO 16’s chief innovation lay in the unique blend of historical, sociolinguistic, and literary materials it utilized throughout the semester.

“I believe that a successful campaign to revitalize any endangered Jewish language ought to expose students to that language’s long historical arc, its most distinguished cultural artifacts, its storied past and uncertain future,” Mahler said.

An intensive course designed to support undergraduate and graduate students’ continued study of the language beyond the classroom, LADINO 16 drew on a wide range of texts from 17th-century

“I have taken away so much. I feel I have a basis for moving forward with my Ladino reading and can explore more difficult texts.”

— Student evaluation

Ladino-language prayer books printed in the Netherlands to 20th-century Ladino-language periodicals and satires that circulated in New York and Istanbul. Each session blended a seminar-style discussion of literary texts with conventional coursework in language learning. Students also had the opportunity to develop basic conversational skills and conduct creative end-of-term projects, including a collection of Ladino-language recipes, a translation of Ladino periodicals’ accounts of the end of WWII, and an arcane will composed in Judeo-Portuguese and undersigned by a member of the Monsanto family.

“The course’s greatest strength was, unsurprisingly, the students themselves,” Mahler said. “With healthy enrollment and numerous auditors, LADINO 16 brought together students with deep expertise in other Jewish languages, liturgy, and linguistics. Their diverse array of skills and interests greatly enriched course discussions.”

Course highlights included a screening and conversation with Somerville-based filmmaker Brooke Saias, whose documentary work on the Sephardic diaspora has been featured at the Seattle Jewish Film Festival. A research visit to Harvard University Library’s Judaica Collection, organized by Mahler and librarians Vardit Samuels and Elizabeth Vernon, also yielded countless insights into the rich Judeo-Spanish archives housed at Harvard, underscoring the editorial work and research that remains to be done.

An accredited Harvard Ladino summer course for 2024 is currently in planning, and Mahler intends to offer LADINO 16 in future semesters. ■