

Competing Musical Traditions in the Holy Land in the 20th Century and How They Found Their Way into the Synagogue of Belgrade¹

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Zusammenfassung

Die Analyse der Entwicklung der aktuellen liturgischen Musik in der Belgrader Synagoge zeigt, dass sie in den letzten Jahrzehnten mittels moderner Medien vielen Fremdeinflüssen, zumeist levantinischen, ausgesetzt war. Es ist daher fast unmöglich, von einem Status quo zu sprechen, da dieser alsbald zumindest in der Melodienwahl veraltet sein könnte. Der Wandel in den letzten zwanzig Jahren erfolgte nicht aufgrund von Akkulturation durch den Kontakt mit Serben, sondern auf Basis der individuellen musikalischen Präferenzen des Rabbiners und Kantors. Es ist kein Prozess, der automatisch als Anpassung abläuft, sondern bewusst gesteuerte Veränderung. Um den nach dem Fall des Kommunismus eingepflanzten neuen Ritus unter dem Namen *nusah sepharadi-yerushalmi* in seiner Entwicklung zu verstehen, muss man den regionalen Boden temporär verlassen und sich mit der ersten großen *Aliyah* nach Israel begeben, um von dort aus seine Entstehung, Beschaffenheit und Verbreitung zurückzuerfolgen.

Abstract

The development of the current liturgical music used in the Belgrade synagogue is (in the last decades) heavily influenced by foreign traditions (mostly *levantine*) that are brought to Belgrade by modern communication systems. Therefore it is nearly impossible to speak of a status quo that might be possibly obsolete by tomorrow – at least with respect to the melodies. The great changes within the liturgical music occurred

¹ This paper is based on the dissertation *Wie viel Wandel verträgt eine Tradition? Gesang und Gebet der jüdischen Gemeinde Belgrad in den Herausforderungen der Gegenwart* by Jasmina Huber which was approved by Staatliche Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst Mannheim on June 25, 2012.

not due to acculturation into the Serbian majority but due to the personal preferences of the religious leaders of the Belgrade Jews. The alterations are a conscious process which is precisely the consequence of the musical taste of the local Rabbi and Cantor and not occurring autonomously. In order to understand the new *nusah sepharadi-yerushalmi* that took the place of the forlorn *nusah* after the downfall of the Communist regime it is deemed necessary to look towards Israel where the rite developed.

Introduction

Due to different surroundings during the time of the diaspora Jews developed a multitude of musical styles for chanting. The Jews of Belgrade never lived isolated from the outside world but coexisted with the nations oppressed by the Turks like Serbs, Bulgarians and Greeks and with the Islamic upper class. In this region there were many more ways to interact with other people than was the case for the Ashkenazim in Central Europe. The nature of Balkan society under Turkish rule, coupled with the virtual lack of opposition on the part of Jewish authorities towards the use of non-Jewish music, led to the quick incorporation of other peoples' music both into liturgical and into secular Jewish music. Altogether, it was a fertile ground for the adaptation and incorporation of various new musical elements into the Jews' own tradition.

Viewed from a sociological and musical perspective, the chanting performed today within Belgrade's synagogue "Sukkat Shalom"² is a unique phenomenon compared with other Jewish congregations on the territory of former Yugoslavia. Both the musical heritage and recent imports from various eastern musical traditions are cultivated with equal care.

Today's service in Belgrade, however, follows the sephardic-jerusalemite rite or – in Hebrew – *nusah*³ *sepharadi-yerushalmi*. This is a specifically Israeli

² Since the Sephardic synagogue "Bet Izrael" was destroyed during the Second World War the synagogue "Sukkat Shalom" these days is the only operating synagogue of Belgrade. The synagogue is located in the centre of the city in the street Maršala Birjuzova 19 (formerly Kosmaiska ulica). After the decimations in the wake of the Second World War one synagogue is sufficient for the Jews of Belgrade (for more information see Huber, 2012 – Chapter "Der soziokulturelle Rahmen der Musik").

³ In Hebrew one can distinguish between a purely phonological and a morpho-phonological transliteration. As I am primarily interested in the sound of the spoken words I decided not to employ the so-called scientific transliteration in order to enable readers without knowledge of Hebrew to read the words as they are spoken. For transliteration I used the method provided by the DIN-Norm 31636 (last version February 2006; http://www.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/judaica/umschrift-hebraeisch_06.html, accessed 29 Jan 2014) modifying it slightly for the

rite that was established during the 20th century in the Holy Land. Before indicating the journey this rite took until it was firmly established in Belgrade, I would like to explain that – apart from peculiarities in prayer recitation – the local sephardic *nusḥaot* differ primarily in their choice of melodies for certain liturgical sections and in the way these melodies are performed and in the choice of Hebrew liturgical poetry in the service.⁴ In the current Israeli *nusah sepharadi-yerushalmi* both the recitatives and the prayer melodies follow the system of *maqamat*.⁵

Influences on the development of the current rite

It took a long time until the *nusah sepharadi-yerushalmi* in the Belgrade community was introduced.⁶ Therefore the currently existing form of the rite in Belgrade is characterised by musical variations born out of regional tradition. In the former Ashkenazi synagogue “Sukkat Shalom” the neologue orientation prevailed before the Second World War. After the war social changes led to a restructuring of the liturgical content and music in this synagogue. The formation of a single congregation was due to the decimations of the Jewish population during the war; communism prevented the occurrence of a positive Jewish identity for the greater part of the congregation. After the Second World War initially predominantly Ashkenazi rabbis (mostly guest rabbis from neighbouring Vojvodina) led the services until Cadik Danon (1918 Sarajevo – 2005 Belgrade) assumed control in 1972: He, with the support of the rabbi

purpose of musicology. These rules take into consideration the modern Israeli pronunciation that is based on a Sephardic pronunciation. The transliteration into the Latin script follows Anglo-American rules.

⁴ One of the best explanations of the term *nusah* (plural *nusḥaot* oder *nusahim*) is given by Frigyesi, Judit: “Nusah means something like ‘the traditional way of [singing] according to the given liturgical function and local custom’” (Frigyesi, J., “Preliminary Thoughts toward the Study of Music without Clear Beat: The Example of ‘Flowing Rhythm’ in Jewish Nusah”. In: *Asian Music*. Vol. XXIV–2 (Spring – Summer 1993), pp. 59–88 (here p. 69).

⁵ There are as many definitions of the Arabic term *maqam*, plural *maqamat* (Turkish *makam*, plural *makamlar*) as oriental musical traditions. Generally it is the principal melodic concept in Middle Eastern musical thought and practice (based on the use of non-tempered intervals and scale-systems) that differs among various traditions and countries. This leads to different interpretations by musicians and theorists. The *maqam* is not equivalent to the western concept of scale but characterised by the starting tone, finalis, tonic, dominant, common modulations, cadential formulae, leading tones, direction of the melody etc. It is mainly determined by the quality of the intervals between consecutive tones of a scale.

⁶ See Huber, 2012: pp. 63–96.

Josif Levi,⁷ introduced a Sephardic rite with particular regional elements. During Danon's time, however, Ashkenazi melodies noticeably became part of the rite and are still performed in Friday evening service.⁸

The development of the *nusah* in Belgrade was profoundly influenced by geographically and historically remote places. This concerns both the liturgical and the musical characteristics of the service. These influences are still present today and can be heard to a varying degree: The growing together of Sephardic and Turkish music culture in the Ottoman Empire (from the middle of the 16th century up until the end of the 19th century) and the influence of the Central European liturgical reform movement around the *fin de siècle*.

An important factor that reshaped the melodies the Jews had brought from Spain⁹ was the regional *sevdalinka*, a lyrical Turkish song that was regularly performed in Islamic urban society in the western provinces of the empire. In his study of the performance practice of Sephardic romances, Israel Katz noted the different kinds of singing prevailing among western (that means North African) Sephardim and eastern Sephardim who dwelled in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰ The characteristics of the secular mode of singing among eastern Sephardim lie mostly in their diatonic character and the freely flowing rhythms. Additionally, there are both phrases similar to declamatory recitatives as well as phrases enriched with melismatic ornamentations and melodic improvisations. These traits are valid for the majority of the romances sung in the "Turkish

⁷ Rabbi Josif Levi attended the Sarajevo Jewish Theological Seminary in his youth. This is where Rabbi Danon studied, too. Levi's and Danon's threads of life often met. Levi regularly prayed in the Belgrade synagogue. Even if he was never an official rabbi of the Belgrade congregation he was considered as an authority equal to Danon by today's spiritual leaders and as a treasury containing a bulk of information on melodies chanted in the regional *maqamat*. He taught both Rabbi Asiel as well as *hazan* Sablić the major parts of the regional *hazanut* and secular melodies which were deeply oriental.

⁸ Rabbi Danon himself was a Sephardi from a traditional Bosnian family that produced some generations of rabbis. He learned the Ashkenazi melodies in his native city Sarajevo from his teacher, the *hazan* Isak Kalmi Altarac (1890–1941). Altarac studied at the Vienna conservatory being cantor at the Viennese Turkish-Israeli congregation. After his return from Vienna, Altarac reformed the Sephardic liturgy of Sarajevo.

⁹ The first Sephardim came to Belgrade after the city was occupied by the Turks in 1521. Their settlement was in downtown Dorćol neighbourhood which was known as *Jalija*. The Ashkenazim who were present in the city since the 13/14th century settled on the bank of the Sava. The two Jewish communities lived apart from one another and had separate synagogues for a long time. After the reconstruction of the Ashkenazi synagogue "Sukkat Shalom" in December 1944 the Ashkenazi and the Sephardi communities merged.

¹⁰ Katz, Israel J., "A Judeo-Spanish Romancero", in: *Ethnomusicology*. Vol.12 (1968), No. 1, pp.72–85 (here p.78).

style”, but equally for the newer Sephardic love songs (*kantigas*) that are modeled on the *sevdalinka*.

Why is this important for liturgical music? This style of performance was not only limited to the area of secular music but advanced into liturgical chant as there was hardly any barrier between secular and religious life for the Sephardim of earlier times. For the adaptation into the liturgy *contrafacta*¹¹ were employed. That means that melodies were chosen such that they suited the religious Hebrew text.

Another characteristic of the regional secular and synagogue chanting was in the practical dealings with the tonal system based on *maqamat*. The Bosnian *mekam* that developed in this most western province of the Ottoman Empire was not unknown to the former rabbi Cadik Danon who hailed from Sarajevo. This style of performance was an umbrella term for a number of different musical characteristics that were based on the Islamic-Oriental tonal system. Thus, Bosnian *mekam* was adapted over time to Turkish *maqamat*, which in turn progressively diverge from the original Arab *maqamat*.

In her study “Correlation between the Musical Content of Jewish Sephardic Song and Traditional Muslim Lyrics”, Ankica Petrović described how the Sephardim themselves differentiated between the *Bosnian mekam* and the *Turkish mekam*, as they called it. The latter was used in Priština, Skopje and Prizren and in the Anatolian towns of the empire where the Sephardim were in direct contact with Turkish music through the local Turkish population.¹² Therefore it is not surprising that up until the present rabbi took office, the *maqamat* used were of the “Turkish” kind. Rabbi Danon and even more so Josif Levi (who was born in Priština) knew this style of *maqamat* and sang in *adjam*, *hidjaz*, *huseini*, *bayat*, *nabawand*, *nawa*, *rast* and *saba*.

What are the differences between the Jewish liturgical music of this region and that of other regions of the Ottoman Empire? In which way did the last transformation from the regional Sephardic *nusah* to the Israeli *nusah sephardi-yerushalmi* occur? What is the difference between these two rites? What

¹¹ *Contrafactum* (plural *contrafacta*) is – generally considered – the substitution of one text for another without substantial change to the music. In the case of the current liturgical practice in Belgrade one either takes a new melody (irrespective of its background) to suit the text or one only changes the words of the *piyutim* themselves to the words of the prayers in liturgy.

¹² Petrović, Ankica: “Correlation between the Musical Content of Jewish Sephardic Songs and Traditional Muslim Lyrics, *sevdalinka* in Bosnia”. In: D.2. Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies. Art, Folklore and Music. Ed. by David Assaf 1990, pp. 165–171.

lies behind the *nusah sepharadi-yerushalmi* with its name that refers to two geographic regions that are so far away from each other?

The development of *nusah sepharadi-yerushalmi*

The original Castilian *hazanut*¹³ that developed before the final expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 was subsequently transmitted orally both in Palestine and in the Sephardic diaspora communities. In order to understand the development of *nusah sepharadi-yerushalmi* we temporarily leave local ground and look at the first great Jewish immigration to Palestine (1882 – 1903) to follow and understand the emergence and characteristics of the rite. During the 19th century, the original *nusah* of the Castilian Jews was sung in the synagogues of Jerusalem that at that time belonged to the Ottoman Empire. Until the 1930s all new Jewish immigrants from Northern Africa and the Middle East had to accept this *nusah*. Initially, the decision to follow the *nusah* of the Castilian Jews was strictly enforced. During the British Mandate (1922 – 1948) this policy started to change when major waves of immigration from the Middle East and the Balkans occurred.¹⁴

At what point, however, was this new mixed rite born? At the beginning of the 20th century, in the wake of the immigration of Jews from Aleppo who were known as caretakers of the *pizmon* and *pilyut* tradition, the change commenced.¹⁵ After their arrival only a minority of Jews in Jerusalem still adhered to the original Sephardic *hazanut* tradition. The melodies of *baqashot* they brought were enthusiastically accepted in the synagogues of Jerusalem and integrated into the prayers. The *baqashot* are songs and prayers that have been sung for centuries by Syrian Jews and other congregations – also in the Balkans – each week on the Shabbat from midnight until dawn. The *baqashot* tradition became a part of the new *nusah sepharadi-yerushalmi*, which gained popularity in the Jewish world due to the beauty of its melodies (*lahanim*). The majority of *baqashot* melodies that are sung today during the service in

¹³ *hazanut* is a Hebrew term for Jewish cantorial performance.

¹⁴ For examination of the processes and the changes which occurred in the tradition of *hazanut* of Spain see Barnea, Ezra: “The Tradition of the Jerusalemite – Sephardic ‘hazzanut’; a Clarification of ‘nusah hatefillah’ as Dominant in our Era”. In: *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy*. Vol. 19 (1996–97), pp. 19–29.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Belgrade originally hail from Arab countries, whereas the traditional *baqashot* of this region already disappeared before the Second World War.

The Jews that came to Israel from the Arab states between 1948 and 1957 continued to use their own rites and therewith further pushed back the influence of the Castilian *nusah*. This way the originally Sephardic *ḥazanut* was enriched with a multitude of new musical elements. Another factor that influenced the emergence of the new rite was the increased intermarriage of Jews from different traditions. As a consequence, the Castilian *ḥazanut* survived only in a few Jerusalem synagogues.

For the development of the *nusah sepharadi-yerushalmi* it is significant that the Jews from Persia and Buchara who immigrated in the 1890s also adapted the sephardic *nusah*.¹⁶ I mention it because the role model of *ḥazan* Stefan Sablić¹⁷ of Belgrade is the Israeli *ḥazan* Yigal ben Hayyim who was born in 1935 into a family from Buchara which already boasted eleven generations of cantors. Ben Hayyim's recordings of the complete Shabbat liturgy in the most important *maqamat* serve as a main source of inspiration for Sablić.

The way of *nusah sepharadi-yerushalmi* to Belgrade

How is a new rite transplanted from the Middle East to the Balkans? The most significant influence was the training of new cantors in schools organized by the “Renanot” Institute for Jewish Music in Israel. This Institute was founded in 1959. Its aim is the conservation of old liturgical chants that are in danger of being lost. “Renanot” focuses on studying and preserving the musical traditions of the distinct ethnic Jewish groups throughout the diaspora including, for example, Ashkenaz, Morocco, Afghanistan, India, Sephardic Jerusalem and Yemen. The following method is employed: old liturgical chants were collected and recollected, and schools for cantors were created. The curriculum of these schools consists of teaching the prayer rite which is sung in all existing *maqamat*, and of teaching *piyutim* (liturgical poetry). Furthermore, the biblical *te'amim* (special signs indicating musical motifs) for the proper cantillation of the Torah and the style of performance of prayers for Jewish holidays are taught. The fruit of these collecting efforts was a rich archive that offers a

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22–23.

¹⁷ For more information about Stefan Sablić, the *ḥazan* of the Synagogue “Sukkat Shalom”, see Huber, 2012: pp. 137–139.

solid base for work with liturgical materials and whose staff these days teaches the techniques employed for the collection of musical material. Ezra Barnea, the founder of this central school of *ḥazanīm*, taught *ḥazan* Sablić from Belgrade.

Another important source of inspiration for Sablić is the collection of songs called *Sefer shirei z'imrah*¹⁸.

It is a publication that contains not only materials from the Syrian Jews of Israel (mainly situated in Jerusalem) but of all *Yerushalmi*-Sephardim whose tradition is the product of the mutual amalgamation of the various traditions of the Sephardic Jews of the Levant. The book contains the texts of the *piyutim*, mentions the source of the melodies (*labanim*) and their authors if known, and is organized around *maqamat* and religious holidays on which the respective *piyutim* are performed.

Sablić himself does not necessarily use these melodies in the context of those liturgical sections mentioned in the book, but instead employs them in a free manner. The adaptation of melodies for liturgical purposes is carried out by simply taking melodies from this book and chanting them to different texts. Two kinds of songs exist in the book: the older ones dating from the beginning of the 20th century are Hebrew poems on Arab melodies, the younger ones that were created during the last twenty years are taken directly from Middle Eastern popular music with the words composed specially to fit a tune. Sablić employs both newer melodies from the Arab context as well as older *pizmonim* (a collection of traditional Jewish songs and melodies that are used throughout the year on the Shabbat, Holidays, and other traditional occasions).

Today, every interested person who knows Hebrew can learn the melodies of the *pizmonim* whose roots are to be found in the tradition of the Syrian Jews through the sources that are available on the internet. In the *pizmonim* book from the Aleppo Sephardic community in Brooklyn “Shir Ushbaha Hallel VeZimrah” the *pizmonim* are classified according to the Arabic *maqam*. The goal of the website “Sephardic Pizmonim project” is to collect recordings of

¹⁸ There are four different editions of this book (the first two editions were published in 1936 and 1953 by Hayim Shaul Aboud. After his death his son issued editions in 1988 and 1995). A comparison of these publications depicts the changes in the use of the *maqamat* between 1936 and 1995 (as an example see the replacement of the *maqam rahav-nava* through the *maqam nahawand* in the ‘*arvit*-liturgy) and the growing adaptation of the Israeli *maqam* system to the system used in Brooklyn (see Kligman, Marc: *Maqam and Liturgy. Ritual, Music, and Aesthetics of Syrian Jews in Brooklyn*, Detroit 2009, p. 181–182).

each song in this anthology. It includes the liturgical traditions of Aleppo's Sephardic community and the surrounding Jewish communities of Damascus, Beirut, Baghdad, Jerusalem, and Cairo.¹⁹

In order to study *piyut* melodies, that means melodies to liturgical poems sung during religious services, Sablić also uses the well-known Israeli website "An Invitation To Piyut", founded by the Avi Chai Foundation in cooperation with "Kehilot Sharot" (Singing Communities), an organization also supported by the Avi Chai Foundation.²⁰ The website contains *piyutim* sorted according to different criteria: according to Jewish ethnic traditions, the life cycle, the yearly cycle, *maqamat* and poets. The website also includes chants that are actually not part of the *piyutim* (for example parts of the Psalms and traditional prayers); however, they are tightly interconnected with the world of *piyutim* both functionally, aesthetically and in terms of the practice of performance.

Current liturgical music of the Belgrade synagogue

These musical changes that one encounters in the recent history of the Shabbat liturgy lead to even greater confusion when trying to define the regional musical tradition. Due to the influence of modern media the liturgical music in the Belgrade synagogue has been exposed to a multitude of foreign influences in the past two decades. Therefore it is nearly impossible to speak of the status quo as this state may already be dated tomorrow, at least with respect to the choice of melodies. One can state, however, that at this moment there are two pillars of tradition in the liturgical music of Belgrade synagogue: The first pillar is the regional musical tradition that is preserved through the continuous singing of orally transmitted melodies. These melodies were recorded by the young Isak Asiel (current Chief Rabbi of Serbia) in the 1980s and survived to our time particularly in the songs the whole congregation sings together. They are characterized by diatonic intervals, a mostly strophic form of melody, and western style of singing. Part of this first pillar are the melodies the current cantor inherited from his first teachers, the rabbis Cadik Danon and Josif Levy. All this implies that he does not neglect local tradition.

As orally transmitted music necessarily changes, Sablić is able to introduce additional new elements into the liturgy that become integral parts of

¹⁹ <http://pizmonim.org> (accessed 29 Jan 2014).

²⁰ <http://www.piyut.org.il> (accessed 29 Jan 2014).

the Shabbat service of the Belgrade community. These new elements are the second pillar. The new style that exists concurrently to the old, inherited style has, as mentioned before, been imported from Israel. It is based on a non-tempered *maqam* tonal system. In its secular variant, Middle Eastern instruments and an oriental style of singing are used.

At the end of this paper I would like to give you an example of the music I have been speaking about²¹. It hails from Kaddish prayer which is an integral part of every service. The first part is musically based on the Bosnian song *Kad ja podoh na Bembašu* that is popular among the people of this region. The second part of the example is an improvisation on an Israeli melody that was itself taken from the repertoire of the Arab diva Umm Kulthum (1899 – 1975). The example reveals the coexistence and mutual interwovenness of these two styles in an exemplary fashion and shows the successful combination of the diatonic and the *maqam* structure of the melody.

²¹ Transcription of a traditional Kaddish, singer: Stefan Sablić, CD “Shira u’tfila, Shaharit shel Shabbat”, 2005, Track No.9. The example can be listened to on the following internet site: <http://www.beogradskasinagoga.rs/EN/HAZANUT.html> (accessed 29 Jan 2014).

Kaddish

Traditional, sung by Cantor Stefan Sablić,
 CD "Shira u'tfila, Shaharit shel Shabbat", 2005 Track No. 9
 Transcribed by Jasmina Huber

(♩ = 58)

Hazan

Yit - g - dal_ ye - yit - ka - dash she - meh ___ ra - ba' be - 'al - ma ___

di ve - ra' khir' - u - teh ___ ye - yam - likh ___ mal - khu - teh ___ ye -

ya - tsmah ___ pur - ka - neh ___ yi - ka - rev me - shi - heh

be - ha - ye - khon uv - yo - me - khon uv - ha - ye de - khol - bet ___ Yis - ra - 'el ba'a -

ga - la' u - vi - zman ka - riv ___ ye - 'im - ru ___ 'a - men

ad libitum

yeh' she - meh ra - ba' me - va - rakh

le - 'o - lam ul - 'ol - me 'al - ma - ya' yit - ba - rakh

ye - yish - ta - bah ye - yit - pa - 'ar

ye - yit - ro - mam ye - yit - na - se' - ye - yit - ha - dar

ye-yit-'a - leh _____ ye - _____ yit - ha - lal

she - meh _____ de-ḵud - sha' _____ be - rikh

hu' _____ le - 'e - _____ la' _____

min kol bir-kha-ta' shi-ra - ta' tush-be-ḥa-ta' ye-ne-ḥa-ma - ta' _____ da'a-mir - an _____

be-'al-ma' _____ ye-'im - ru _____ 'a - men. _____