Professor Devin Naar is "almost single-handedly saving the Ladino language."

Submitted by Eric W. Johnson on August 11, 2014 - 2:04am

Professor Devin Naar continues to impress the Seattle community and global community of Jewish Studies scholars with his work preserving the Ladino language and the culture of Seattle's Sephardic Jewish community. His work and community engagement were recently highlighted in a story in Tablet Magazine as well as in a radio interview aired on KUOW.

Tablet Magazine Feature: "Seattle's Sephardi Jews Brought Us Starbucks: Now They're Trying To Bring Back Ladino"

A recent story in Tablet Magazine does not exaggerate when it observes that "at 31, Naar is almost single-handedly saving the Ladino language and the customs of Seattle's Sephardic Jews from vanishing along with its aging community."

Naar... joined the University of Washington faculty in 2011 as an assistant professor of history and quickly emerged as a salutary figure. An expert in Salonika and the fate of that Greek community's Jews during World War II, he is one of the few people in greater Seattle fluent in Ladino—also known as Judeo-Spanish, Judezmo, or any number of other names no one can quite agree on—a dialect that mixes Medieval Spanish with elements of Hebrew, Turkish, Arabic, French, and Italian that Jews who were cast out of Spain into the Mediterranean world picked up in the 500 years following the Expulsion.

Perhaps the only person in Seattle who can read the ancient Hebrew-based Ladino script, Naar has spear-headed an effort to create a digital archive of local Ladino language books and artifacts. When he put out a call to the Seattle Sephardic Jewish community asking to borrow documents to add to his archive, the response was overwhelming.

"People came up with some of the most amazing things you could possibly imagine," he said. "Books from the 1600s, 1700s, 1800s. All of these things having been preserved physically, but without necessarily a lot of knowledge about what the contents were, but a lot of wherewithal to know they were worth preserving."

A resulting digital museum and archive, the Seattle Sephardic Treasures Initiative, will open this fall. It is expected to be the largest Ladino library in the United States.

In the two years since his initial solicitation, Naar has lured so many materials out of local attics, basements, and bookshelves...
that the collection will have more items of its kind than the Library of Congress, Harvard University, Hebrew University, Yeshiva University, YIVO, or the National Sephardic Library of the American Sephardi Federation.

KUOW Radio Interview with Devin Naar: “How Do You Save A Dying Language?”

In a recent KUOW radio interview, Professor Naar answers questions about the origins of Seattle’s Sephardic Jewish community (the third largest in the U.S.) and the history of the Ladino language, the language of the Sephardic Jews he is fighting to save from extinction. Naar is one of the few people in Seattle able to read and write Ladino in Hebrew script. He discusses the implications of preserving the language for the fate of the stories and histories written in it. What began as a quest to reconstruct his own family’s history, became a life’s mission and academic career for Naar. In the interview Naar talks about the collection of Ladino records, and artifacts that he is busy collecting through the University of Washington, in conjunction with the Sephardic Studies Center of Seattle. Listen to the interview to find out more and to hear a sample of the Ladino language.

Image credit: Mary Levin

People Involved: Devin E. Naar

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