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## Eliezer Papo's Ludus and Loghothesis

**Abstract:** In this paper, I examine Eliezer Papo's language creation, i.e. the signifying practices he applies, shaping a new language and generating a new layer of poetic expression.

**Keywords:** Sephardim, ludus, loghothesis, meaning, language creation

The literary work of Eliezer Papo is a novelty on the literary scene. It is literature characterized by an abundance of literary devices and meanings, as earlier research has pointed out.<sup>1</sup> At the turn of the century, as postwar Yugoslavia was falling apart, rabbi and scholar<sup>2</sup> Eliezer Papo appeared on the literary scene. First with *Se-*

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<sup>1</sup> The author of this paper has published several studies on this topic, on which this paper relies, and which are listed in the literature.

<sup>2</sup> In 2020, part of the Papo's doctoral dissertation on parodies of the Passover Haggadah was translated into Serbian, under the title *Borba, duh i opstanak: Partizanska agada: Jedinstvena pashalna parodija iz vremena Holokausta* [Fighting, Laughing and Surviving. The Story of the Partizan Haggadah, a Unique Passover Parody Composed in the Holocaust], transl. Gordana Todorčić, (Novi Sad: Futura publikacije: Jevrejska opština Novi Sad, 2020). <https://jevrejskadigitalnabiblioteka.rs/handle/123456789/1497> The writer's inclination towards researching linguistic material could also be seen in this book, primarily in the exceptional translation of the poem into Serbian.

*fardske priče* [Sephardic Tales]<sup>3</sup> and *Sarajevska megila* [Megillah of Sarajevo]<sup>4</sup> (2001). These were followed by the books *Nesabrane priče i još nesabranije misli i crtice, a o decetercu da se i ne govori* [Uncollected Tales and Even More Uncollected Thoughts and Lines, Not to Mention Decasyllabic Verse], published in 2022<sup>5</sup>, *Časovničar i sačasnici* [The Watchmaker and His Peers] (2007, revised 2023)<sup>6</sup>, with the subtitle *Zbirka postistorijskih priča (s domaćim zadacima) podijeljena u pet časova i najmanje četiri odmora* [A Collection of Post-Historical Tales (with Homework) Divided into Five Classes and at Least Four Breaks]. A new, revised edition of the collection of short stories *Sefardske priče* was published 2024, under the title *Zbrka riješenih zadataka iz života i poetike* [A jumble of Solved Tasks from Life and Poetics]<sup>7</sup>. A new and revised edition of the Sarajevo Megillah was published in February 2026.

One of the issues that could be considered when approaching the work of Eliezer Papo is the problem of classifying this literature. In other words, is it Serbian literature or Jewish literature, especially if we consider that the writer is originally from the former Yugoslavia, that he writes in Serbian, but that the works were created in Israel, where he has lived and worked for years. This question has not yet been given a single literary-theoretical answer.<sup>8</sup>

From a literary-historical perspective, I believe that, in the case of Eliezer Papo, we could speak of works of Serbian literature that fully restore the continuity, forcibly interrupted by the Holocaust, with the literary work of Jewish writers of interwar Yugoslavia, who, in terms of thematic and/or stylistic aspects, nurtured the tradition

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<sup>3</sup> (Beograd: Centar za stvaralaštvo mladih, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> (Beograd: Centar za stvaralaštvo mladih, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> (Novi Sad: Zrenjanin: Agora; Beograd: Narodna biblioteka Srbije, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> (Tuzla: Bosanska riječ – Das Bosnische Wort; Zenica: Opća biblioteka, 2007), (Novi Sad :Zrenjanin: Agora; Beograd: Narodna biblioteka Srbije, 2023). <https://jevrejskadigitalnabiblioteka.rs/handle/123456789/1207>

<sup>7</sup> (Zrenjanin; Novi Sad: Agora, Beograd: Narodna biblioteka Srbije, 2024). <https://jevrejskadigitalnabiblioteka.rs/handle/123456789/3190>

<sup>8</sup> Krinka Vidaković Petrov also wrote about this problem in the study *Culture of Spanish Jews on Yugoslav soil: XVI-XX century* and Predrag Palavestra in the book *Jewish writers in Serbian literature*.

from which they originated. Let us acknowledge that Papo's literature is also connected to that tradition not only by restoring the religious canon, but also by actualizing the experience of interwar Jewish literature (and often that written much earlier) through a significantly innovative apparatus that he brings to the contemporary literary moment. Finally, regardless of issues of classification within the literary canon, one thing is certain. The Jews of the European diaspora wrote with their eyes fixed on the Promised Land. From the texts of the Passover Haggadah to the poems of Judah Halevi, and to rabbinical treatises, among which those of the Rabbi Yehuda Alkalai of Zemun are particularly interesting for the Serbian region, all were written with the awareness that they are exiles and with the hope that they will one day return to their Promised Land. Eliezer Papo, without forgetting such a heritage, writes from Israel, from Haaretz, establishing a two-way bridge not only between two contemporary literatures, but also between the past, in which his ancestors were forcibly stopped by the Holocaust, and the present. That continuity alone would be reason enough to think about Papo's literature. And that is not all.

“According to historian Niall Ferguson’s research, every great civilization that collapsed, first lost its capacity for gratitude toward its ancestors.”<sup>9</sup> If we ask ourselves what it would mean to renew feelings of gratitude towards our ancestors, the answer could be found in a statement of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. In one of his podcasts, Douglas Murray, British neoconservative political commentator, cultural critic, and journalist recounted how Rabbi Sacks corrected Isaiah Berlin's claim that to be Jewish means to have a sense of history. According to Rabbi Sacks, to be Jewish is to have a sense of memory.<sup>10</sup>

As an academic and rabbi, Eliezer Papo researches Sephardic culture and makes significant references to it in his literary work. Thus, the initial keywords for considering his literary procedure could be gratitude toward ancestors and the question of the sense of memory.

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<sup>9</sup> Douglas Murray, “We Have Six Months Left”. Published January 19, 2024, date of access: 16. 11. 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4gwpfi71ss>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

While the first term *gratitude toward ancestors* does not necessarily require explanation, when talking about a writer who, in addition to his academic expertise, possesses respectable rabbinic knowledge, I will attempt to explain the use of the second term – *the sense of memory*.

In my previous papers,<sup>11</sup> I pointed out the genre and linguistic diversity in Eliezer Papo's books. It turns out that he is a writer who, from a stylistic point of view, has a sovereign command of the language and whose semantic field relies heavily on the poetic register of the literary language. Furthermore, the writer demonstrates that he is the inheritor of some postmodern practices, which could be described as transcending genre boundaries.

One of the important questions regarding Papo's literary text concerns the meaning of the actualization of the decasyllabic verse, the traditional meter of Serbian oral literature, which appeared in his renditions of the *Book of Esther*/ מגילת אֶסְתֵּר / Megillat Esther and the *Book of Ruth*/ מגילת רות / Megillath Ruth, as well as in the author's poems. In the meantime, Papo's rendition of Jeremiah's (ירמיהו) *Book of Lamentations*/ אֵיכָה, also appeared, in the form of the traditional Serbian lament meter (a trochaic verse of eight syllables with a four-syllable addition, functioning as a kind of refrain). This shows that the writer has an enduring interest in the question of poetic language, in particular the layer of sound and the layer of meaning, according to Roman Ingarden's terminology. Furthermore, in his last two books, he expresses a noticeable actualization of multilingualism, through which he raises the question of a stable signifier.

Starting from the stance that, by actualizing the verse of oral literature, he brought something new to 21st century Serbian literature, I will attempt to carefully consider his poetic procedures, which are more than unconventional, and to understand the connection with the Sephardic literary tradition.

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<sup>11</sup> The latest is *To Read, to Listen, to Understand or: How to recollect yourself in the Text* (2025).

In my previously mentioned paper, I introduced and elaborated on the term *khôra*<sup>12</sup>, in the sense given to it by Jacques Derrida, aiming, without pretensions to engage in a philosophical discussion of this term, to highlight a phenomenon significant for Papo's literary procedures. Among others, it can be said of Papo's literature that "it is not just a record of people and events which no longer exist, so they are not (only) the material of the discourse of nostalgia. Rather, one would say that, primarily in form, they appear as a mode of speaking about non-time and non-space, which would be comparable to Derridian *khôra*"<sup>13</sup>. It therefore indicates not only that Sephardic literature existed in the Balkans and what it was conceptually, but also remembers its violent interruption, caused by the Holocaust. Moreover, this literature establishes continuity, which is a qualitative shift.

The paradigm of this literary procedure could be recognized in the traditional song *Mi kamoha*<sup>14</sup>, which was sung by the Sephar-

<sup>12</sup> "Khora is to be understood as a kind of mirror; on her immeasurable surface the eternal Ideas are reflected without mixing with (their own) reflections. The reflection does not really exist. The "real reality" is only that of the reflected Idea. The two of them never meet each other. The process of reflection, however, provides the reflection (that is, the sensible thing) with a kind of existence, albeit temporary as well as conditional. The mirror itself (the khora) suffers nothing. It "is" nothing. As long as the Idea is reflected, it "gives place" to the reflection, once the Idea "turns its back and leaves" the mirror returns to what always has been, an anonymous, amorphous, indifferent surface with no attributes whatsoever." Khora's function in Plato, therefore, is that of metaphysical police. It is khora that prevents and even prohibits a coincidence between what really is (the Ideas) and what is not (their sensible reflections). In other words, she prevents nothing less than the collapse of the entire Platonic universe. By virtue of this function, khora makes language possible. Khora herself cannot be subject of the language, granted, but without the khora language itself would have been impossible (John Manoussakis, "Khora: The Hermeneutics of Hyphe-nation," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 58, no. 1 (2002): 94, date of access: 16. 11. 2025, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40337673>).

<sup>13</sup> Gordana Todorčić, *To Read, to Listen, to Understand or: How to recollect yourself in the Text*, 2025. (forthcoming, 2025)

<sup>14</sup> *Mi kamoha* is a four-language piyyut (liturgical poem) from a Sarajevo pizmonjer (a collection of traditional Jewish songs (pizmonim) and melodies sung with the intention of praising God as well as learning certain aspects of traditional religious teachings. The verses and the Serbian translation are in the book *Ljepša i starija Sarajevska megila – skica za portret jednog svijeta u trinaest di-*

dim from Kosovo and which Papo integrates into the corpus of his latest book. It is a poem of six quatrain stanzas, the peculiarity of which is that each verse is sung in a different language: Hebrew, Ladino, Turkish and Serbian. These people sang about the difficult life in the Diaspora and asked God for help and deliverance, to be achieved by returning to the Land of Israel. They sang in the languages they were surrounded by and which, with varying degrees of skill, they had to use in order to survive. Based on his academic expertise, Papo knows all this, yet he does not create a nostalgic compendium of something left behind in the past.

If for the Sephardim in the 19th and early 20th centuries, multilingualism was a mode of survival, for Eliezer it is the starting point for language creation. In several stories from the book *Uncollected Tales*, Ladino is integrated with accompanying translation in Serbian, the language in which the stories were written. Thus, both languages are placed on an equal footing. In the story *Ni evet-zet ni jok-zet* [Neither evet/son-in-law nor jok/son-in-law]<sup>15</sup> from the same book, Turkish and Ser-

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*jelova: deset poteza perom i tri horske pjesme*, which was published 2026. Here we quote only the first three stanzas, in the transliteration of Eliezer Papo:

*Mi kamoha needar behol dar vedar,  
A tu ižo kisto mira d'ajudar,  
Ne zor ajlaj uglum čiker bu kadar.  
Zašto čineš tako naše Gospodar?  
Neeman, neeman, neeman Sur Goali,  
Jaale, jaale, jaale šir miluli.*

*Tešalah haroneha beohele ami,  
Komo los kulevros me morden a mi,  
Efendum Sultanum baken elimi,  
Otima na dušman, ajduk, harami.  
Neeman...*

*Timhe et Amalek ki jad al kes Ja,  
Tanbjen a Jišmael ke es mala haja,  
Malimi dilir duja, duja,  
Boska me ostave bres košulja.  
Neeman...*

<sup>15</sup> Eliezer Papo, *Nesabrane priče i još nesabranije misli i crtice, a o десетерцу да се и не говори* (Novi Sad; Zrenjanin: Agora, 2022), 179.

bian are already combined in the title, in order to emphasize the theme of the story about the search for a son-in-law. The first part of both compounds is of Turkish origin, even though the story is about the Sephardim. Finally, in the decasyllabic verse translations of *The Book of Esther* and *The Book of Ruth*, Turkisms, once more prominent in the Serbian language, contribute to the authenticity of the decasyllabic verse, the kind recorded in the collections of folklorists, primarily Vuk Karadžić. Perhaps the most radical example of linguistic procedures can be found in the short story “Sarajevski doprinos razvoju opšteg jevrejskog prava” [The Sarajevo Contribution to the Development of General Jewish Law] from *Uncollected Tales*, where a Turkism is explained in Ladino. Papo writes: “Između tih dviju tragedija, bosanski su Sefardi mahom vodili jedan neopterećen život, u kome su malo ugađali Bogu, malo više sebi, a sve to natenane i po istilahu, sin siklet i sin ađile, bez srkleta i bez žurbe” [Between those two tragedies, the Bosnian Sephardim mostly led an unencumbered life, in which they pleased God a little, and themselves a little more, all of this leisurely and according to the term, sin siklet and sin ađile, without *srklet* and without haste]<sup>16</sup>. The words have been brought into the relationship of synonymy: *po istilahu* (with the Serbian prefix -po), *sin siklet i sin ađile*. The meaning would be, “slowly, no haste, no stress”. Arranged in this way, they are an example of hypertextuality in Gérard Genet’s sense of the word.

However, when such words are found in the author's decasyllabic poem, with a contemporary and no longer biblical or, as in the original poems, heroic theme, they become a stylistic device that generates the estrangement effect<sup>17</sup>, in the sense given to that term by Bertolt Brecht<sup>18</sup>. And although Brecht uses that procedure to draw attention to the political situation in interwar Germany from a Marxist perspective, methodologically, these procedures are com-

<sup>16</sup> Papo, „Nesabrane priče“, 103. All translations of Papo's literature are mine.

<sup>17</sup> The term *Verfremdungseffekt* is rooted in the Russian Formalist notion of the device of making strange (приём остранения/приyom ostraneniya), which literary critic Viktor Shklovsky claims is the essence of all art.

<sup>18</sup> Brecht first used the term in his essay “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting” first published in 1936, in which he described it as performing “in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play”.

parable. By constructing a language that is sometimes difficult for the modern reader to understand, Papo actualizes the memory of the vanished Sephardic linguistic bricolage, but for the Serbian reader, he expands the semantic field with the memory of the epic oral tradition. Finally, both of these streams constitute a new, authentic linguistic expression, based on a stable value pattern. After the twentieth-century disorientation, clearly diagnosed by postmodern theories, the establishment of a *fulcrum*, or *point of support*, with a capital G in the word God, as in Papo's literature, naturally required a new linguistic expression.

When literary theorist Roland Barthes wrote about the language of Marquis de Sade, Jean-Baptiste, Joseph Fourier and Ignatius of Loyola, he observed: "The language they found is obviously not linguistic, a language of communication. It is a new language, traversed by (or traversing) natural language, but open only to the semiological definition of Text. (...) Were logothesis to stop at setting up a ritual, i.e. rhetoric, the founder of a language would be no more than the author of a system (what is called a philosopher, a scholar, or a thinker). Sade, Fourier, Loyola are something else: formulators (commonly called writers)."<sup>19</sup> And if, according to Roland Barthes, the foundation of the language of a literary text can be called a logothesis, and the founder – a logothete, we can also think of Eliezer Papo in the same way. Sensing this, Papo also added dictionaries to his books *Uncollected Tales* and *A Jumble of Solved Tasks*. On the first semantic level, dictionaries are there to explain words and expressions to the contemporary reader of the Serbian language, primarily from Turkish, but also Ladino and Hebrew, without which the text would be unreadable. However, if we recall that Danilo Kiš also added a postscript to his *Encyclopedia of the Dead*<sup>20</sup>, in which he included comments arguing for the documentary approach, that is, for reality that is the material for fiction, then Papo's decision to include a dictionary of foreign words and expressions can be interpreted similarly. If this is the case, we are left to think about the pro-

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<sup>19</sup> Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Danilo Kiš, *Enciklopedija mrtvih* (Beograd: BIGZ, 1990).

cess by which this material is transformed from reality into fiction. Since we are talking about linguistic material, the poetic process ultimately results in a creation of a new language – logothesis.

Explaining the dualistic polarity within which the four categories of games (*agon, alea, mimesis and ilinx*) can be variously placed, Roger Caillois in his book *Les jeux et les hommes* [*Man, Play and Games*] writes that *paidia*, or uncontrolled fantasy, is a spontaneous form of play through improvisation, the rules of which are created during the course of the game. *Ludus* requires effort, patience, skill, or ingenuity, its rules are set from the outset, and the game is conceived before it is played. According to Caillois, *paidia* reflects the moral and intellectual values of a culture. In this context, *ludus* is described as a convention, technique, or device that structures play, whether in the ordering of the days of the week or in a children's game. The feeling of satisfaction that arises from overcoming a deliberately set obstacle is what Roger Caillois calls *ludus*. One of the most striking examples can be found in Papo's short story, *Popis* [Census]. After a series of hilarious scenes, in which each member of one Jewish family in Sarajevo declares a different ethnicity and religious affiliation, the writer ends the narrative with the words: "Izgleda da svim tim Jevrejima, Sefardima, Jugoslovenima i Izraelcima nije smetalo da u porodici imaju i Bosanku. Svima je bilo jasno da njen novi identitet proističe iz njene ljubavne veze, ali se niko nije petljao. Svak je na jedvite jade pronašao svoju ravnotežu, tako da nikom nije padalo na pamet da remeti tuđu." [It seems that none of those Jews, Sephardim, Yugoslavs and Israelis minded having a Bosnian woman in their family. It was clear to everyone that her new identity stemmed from her love affair, but no one meddled. Everyone struggled to find their own balance, so no one thought of disturbing someone else's]<sup>21</sup>.

Hakham José Faur, one of the hakhamim before whom Papo studied Torah, speaks of God as a writer<sup>22</sup> (Faur 1989). The fundamental canon that Papo follows, which in his literary work can be

<sup>21</sup> Eliezer Papo, *Zbrka riješenih zadataka iz života i poetike* (Zrenjanin; Novi Sad: Agora, Beograd: Narodna biblioteka Srbije, 2024), 110.

<sup>22</sup> Josef Faur, „God as a Writer: Omnipresence and the Art of Dissimulation“, *Religion and Intellectual Life* 6, 1989, 31–43.

described as *Imitatio Dei*, is an apparent form of *ludus*. The essential innovation of this literature, its ability, as the writer sometimes says, to “keep several balls in the air and juggle them, without abandoning the path of God”<sup>23</sup>, could be the essence of the expression with which I have titled this paper.

## Summary

The first decades of the 21st century included several books by Eliezer Papo in the corpus of Serbian literature. In their content and form, these books represent a significant novelty, as they open a new chapter in the literature written by Jews in the Serbian language.

The writer, through his books of short stories and other genre variations, posed several hermeneutical tasks to readers, the most important of which was the status of the signifier.

In this paper, we focused on what the Russian formalists called poetic language. A process comparable to the “alienation effect”, the metrical play with verse and numerous other processes that can be observed in Papo’s literature, require a careful balancing between *ludus* and *loghotesis* (in the sense that Roland Barthes gives to these terms) that this literature generates.

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<sup>23</sup> יהוה said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you”. Genesis, 12:1.

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## Лудус и логотезис Елиезера Папе

### *Резиме*

Прве деценије 21. века обухватиле су неколико књига Елиезера Папе у корпусу српске књижевности. Својим садржајем и формом, ове књиге представљају значајну новину, јер отварају ново поглавље у књижевности коју Јевреји пишу на српском језику.

Писац је својим књигама кратких прича и другим жанровским варијацијама пред читаоце поставио неколико херменеутичких задатака, од којих је најважнији статус означитеља.

У раду смо се фокусирали на оно што су руски формалисти називали песничким језиком. Поступак упоредив са „ефектом очуђења“, метричка игра стихом и бројни други поступци који се могу приметити у Папиној књижевности, захтевају пажљиво балансирање између лудуса и логотезе (у смислу који Ролан Барт даје тим терминима) које та књижевност генерише.

**Кључне речи:** Сефарди, лудус, логотезис, значење, стварање језика