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### [Review of: N.Z. Davis (2022) Listening to the Languages of the People: Lazare Sainéan on Romanian, Yiddish, and French]

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## Listening to the Languages of the People

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### Cities of the Plain

Cities of the Plain—not the ones in the Book of Genesis, but those scattered across Wallachia, between the southern Carpathians and the lower Danube. For most of the medieval and early modern periods, this territory was a borderland between Christian and Ottoman Europe. There had been many palisade towns and staging posts here but, from 1800, these started to grow into regular municipalities, from the medieval centres of Argeş, Câmpulung, and Târgovişte to the more modern establishments of Piteşti, Ploieşti, and Bucureşti. The *-eşti* ending is a plural in Romanian and designates a collectivity, so these last three place names could be read to mean ‘the people of Bread’, ‘the people of Rain’, ‘the people of Joy’, from their radicals in the local language (*Pită*, *Ploaie*, *Bucur*, used as personal names). The people of Joy became the capital, but the people of Rain—famous later as the centre of the country’s oil industry—were at an important fork in the roads to the north, leading either north towards Moldavia and the Eurasian steppe, or north-west to Transylvania and central Europe.

Today Ploieşti boasts around 200,000 residents, called *plowieşteni*, or *plowieştence* if they are women. While the city holds few attractions for tourists, there is a monumental Palace of Culture dating from 1906, a fine market hall, and some not inelegant civic sculpture. These sculptures mostly commemorate classic writers of Romanian literature from the late 19th century, with a bust of Nicolae Iorga, the leading national historian, who briefly taught Latin here in 1890 before moving to Bucharest; of Ion Luca Caragiale, Romania’s most celebrated playwright, who was born just outside Ploieşti but attended high school here in the 1860s; and of Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea, an exile from Tsarist Russia who became the most important socialist theorist to write in Romanian and who for some time managed the railway station restaurant. Of Lazăr Şăineanu, perhaps the city’s most distinguished native-born son—and the subject of Natalie Zemon Davis’s short but captivating book—there is not a trace.

As Davis relates, Şăineanu was born Eliezer Schein to a family of artisans in 1859, three months after Wallachia and Moldavia proclaimed their union, the first step in the creation of a new independent state, Romania. As will become clear, Davis is very attentive to her subject’s adoption of different names (Schein, Şăineanu, Sainéan) at different times and places. Here, I try to use the form he himself went by at the respective moment. Schein’s father Moses, although an observant Jew, earned a living as a painter of church frescoes, based on artisanal training apparently undertaken in Vienna. After a brief sojourn in the United States, Schein senior returned to Wallachia and fell from a scaffold while practising his trade in Bucharest, dying there of gangrene in January 1879, just as the country was being born. Eliezer had shouldered some paterfamilial responsibility even before his father’s untimely passing. Looking after his siblings and mother he persuaded them, for example, against his father’s plans for the family to up sticks and try for a new life in

the US. Impressions of his youthful personality are scarce, but he was apparently a communicative, combative teenager, holding his own in what must have been the quite rough schoolyards of his home town.

According to Davis, Eliezer's mother—Debora, née Rubin—was the daughter of a distinguished Talmudist. According to another source, she was the daughter of a Bucharest merchant.<sup>(1)</sup> Whatever the case, young Eliezer clearly acquired a formidable knowledge of languages, speaking Yiddish at home and Romanian in the town, while learning Greek and Hebrew through private tutors, and Latin and French at Romanian public schools.

Șăineanu has been classified among Romanian-Jewish writers using the suggestive term '1878 generation'<sup>(2)</sup>, alongside numerous scholars who made significant contributions to Romanian philology at the moment of national independence consecrated by the Congress of Berlin. In this field, the most important of Șăineanu's contemporaries were Moses Gaster and Heimann Hariton Titkin, authors of landmark works of folklore and lexicography respectively. Other notable figures included the Moldavian brothers Elias and Moses Schwarzfeld, as well as the aforementioned Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea. But these men all had somewhat different backgrounds and agendas. Gaster came from an elite Sephardic family and produced outstanding work, including the remarkable *Literatura populară română*, published in 1883. Titkin, the son of a well-known Breslau rabbi, moved to Moldavia upon marriage to a local businessman's daughter in the 1870s. Dobrogeanu-Gherea was an immigrant from Tsarist Russia. By contrast, Schein (Șăineanu, later still Sainéan) was a local boy: one of the rainy people of Ploiești, eager to join the happy people of București.

By 1879, Schein began a collaboration with the Jewish-Romanian weekly *Fraternitatea*; his first published work was a translation of extracts from a German study on Jewish intellectual life in the Middle Ages.<sup>(3)</sup> He also, interestingly, reviewed a work on the role of Jewish women in medieval Europe<sup>(4)</sup>, and seems to have joined *Fraternitatea*'s editorial committee around this time.<sup>(5)</sup> His biographical study on the noted Jewish Enlightenment figure Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) was serialized there, and then appeared as a short book.<sup>(6)</sup> However, he soon became more involved with another publication, the *Anuar pentru Israelii*: Lazar Schein appears not just as an author but as an organizer of a fundraising list in the 1879-1880 issue of this Yearbook.<sup>(7)</sup> In subsequent numbers, he contributed articles on historical topics, including three chapters of a projected twenty-chapter work on the fate of the Jews in the Middle Ages, and a study on the calumny of Jewish blood libel.<sup>(8)</sup>

In 1881 Schein enrolled at Bucharest University, where his curiosity was stimulated by encounters with professors Alexandru Odobescu and Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu, figures of international standing in their respective fields of archaeology and philology. This led him to take an interest in Romanian topics, and in 1882 he was awarded his baccalaureate for a thesis on the Romanian patriotic writer Ion Heliade Rădulescu.<sup>(9)</sup> His next studies, appearing now under the Romanianized name Lazăr Șăineanu, took in the most diverse subjects: he wrote on Turkish lexical borrowings in Romanian; on the *iele* or spirit fairies of Romanian folklore; and—for his university bachelor thesis—on the 'semasiology' of the Romanian language. 'Semasiology' was a 19th century term for what later became known as semantics, and this last work has some claim to international originality in the field: while Șăineanu built on the insights of French and German pioneers such as Bréal and Schuchardt, he also formulated clear and novel principles for explaining changes in the meanings of words. The examples given, however, show something of an effort to cleave to Romanian national positions, for example by defending the tenet that some of the key vocabulary of Christianity in Romanian showed a continuous link with Roman Latinity and was not borrowed from the neighbouring Slavic peoples. Based on this work, the Romanian Academy awarded him a scholarship—endowed by Jewish banker Hillel Manoah—to undertake doctoral research, which he did in Paris and Leipzig, leading to a thesis on a folkloric theme: 'the days of the old woman', awarded at Leipzig but published in French in Paris in 1889.

This did not, however, mean an abandonment of research on Jewish topics. In the same year as defending his doctoral thesis abroad, in Bucharest Șăineanu published 'A dialectological study of the Jewish-German tongue'. Davis notes that this may partly have been a tribute to his mother, Debora, who had passed away the previous year, and from whom he had surely learnt the language as a child: the work is dedicated to her memory. However, his ambitious combination of oral evidence, historical contextualization, and morphological analysis made it one of the first serious scholarly cases for the acceptance of Yiddish as a language in its own right, although he expressed pessimism as to its future viability. The work also made an

argument for dialects and vernaculars to be accorded equal, if not superior, value to that of formal literary languages such as German.

These erudite treatises were combined with didactic publications which, although directed at more popular audiences, must have cost at least as much labour: in particular a two-volume Romanian-German/German-Romanian dictionary aimed at high-school students that appeared at the end of the decade. We should not forget a school edition, with commentary, of Caesar's Gallic Wars; a textbook of Latin grammar; and a glossary of the chronicle of 17th-century Moldavian historian Miron Costin.

In 1893, at the age of 34, Șăineanu married a beautiful woman, 13 years his junior. Cecilia was the cherished daughter of Ralian Samitca, a leading member of the Jewish merchant community in the western Wallachian city of Craiova, and director of the Samitca press, which played a pioneering role in producing schoolbooks, dictionaries, and translations of international literature aimed at the nascent Romanian reading public. Whether or not it was a love match—we have hardly any account of her feelings—it was a success: at the very least, Cecilia was a constant presence and support to Lazăr for the rest of his life. In 1896 she bore him a daughter named Elisabeta, possibly in homage to Queen Elisabeth of Romania.

The subject of Șăineanu's doctoral thesis, as mentioned, was 'The Days of the Old Woman', a motif to be found in folk legends from Syria to Scotland and many points in between. At the start of March, an old woman thinks the weather is improving, and leaves the house, sometimes removing her winter coverings. But she is caught by a cold snap, and in some versions of the legend turns into stone. (This is the source of the name for the famous rock formation in the Carpathian Mountains, now a popular tourist attraction, called *Babele*—the old women.)

Șăineanu might have identified with the motif for several reasons. Like the old woman, he felt the need to emerge in his environment. Obtaining teaching work at Bucharest University and at various high schools, but often without remuneration, he took steps to integrate by regulating his status and applying to become a citizen of the new kingdom. But he was met with a frosty reception. As a Jew, Șăineanu would have been ineligible for citizenship under the terms of Romania's 1866 Constitution, which restricted this right to practising Christians. An amendment introduced in 1878 at the behest of the Great Powers upon recognition of Romania's independence enabled Jews to apply for citizenship by petitioning Parliament, if they could prove they had made a significant contribution to the activity of the new state.

The government's attitude to applicant Jews had been both obstructionist and arbitrary. Șăineanu's friend and mentor Moses Gaster had been unceremoniously expelled from the country in 1885 after publishing articles allegedly critical of the state. Others, such as the socialist Dobrogeanu-Gherea, had obtained citizenship relatively easily in 1890, despite having an ostensibly far more radical political profile. Șăineanu began the process of applying for citizenship in 1887. By 1901 he had been thwarted no fewer than four times, despite the extraordinary steps he took to ensure his acceptance, which included baptism into the Orthodox Christian religion, as well as endless lobbying of Parliament and of individual dignitaries. After the rejection in 1901, Șăineanu's patience wore out, and he moved with his family to Paris, where he remained for the rest of his life. He published an account of the tergiversations to which he was subject, both in French (*Une carrière philologique en Roumanie*) and in Romanian (*O carieră filologică în România*). Both editions bore his name followed by his positions, as 'Doctor in letters, former assistant professor at the University of Bucharest, laureate of the Academy and the University'.

Șăineanu's departure from Romania was a disgrace for the country not just insofar as it showed up the hypocrisy or simple prejudice within its intellectual and political elite in relation to his plight, but because his contributions to national scholarship and conceptions of identity were quite extraordinary. In the 1890s, despite the obstacles in his way, he managed to publish, among many other things, three vast thousand-page works, each of which was to be fundamental in advancing understanding of the national culture and language. The first was *Basmele române* [Romanian folktales, 1895], a comprehensive survey of Romanian-language folk narratives that was at once highly scholarly and comparative, while also being readable and methodical as a general reference work.

The second was *Dicționar universal al limbei române* [Universal Dictionary of the Romanian Language, 1896] which, unlike the abstruse publications of the academicians, aimed at a popular, middlebrow audience after the model of the French Littré. Despite pedantic criticism from (probably envious) specialists,

Șăineanu's *Dicționar* went through at least 10 editions to 1945 and became the most widely-used general dictionary among ordinary Romanian readers during the first half of the 20th century.

The third was *Influența orientală asupra limbii și culturii române* [The Oriental influence on Romanian language and culture, 1900], a study focused on Ottoman Turkish cultural influences in Romanian life, encompassing both a socio-historical survey (Volume 1) and an analytical repertory of vocabulary, divided into 'popular' words still in everyday use, and 'historical' ones, connected to specific administrative or commercial practices that had become obsolete (Volume 2, in two parts).

All these works bore the Șăineanu trademark of presenting masses of complex and rare information in comparative context but, above all, in a well-organized and readable format, in stark contrast to the whimsical, sometimes meretricious erudition of his Romanian contemporaries. His dictionary, for example, stands as a model of how to make general knowledge available to the people: its style and purpose could not be more different from that of his mentor Hasdeu's incomplete *Etymologicum Magnum Romaniae*, which contained sprawling, sometimes scintillatingly erudite but often digressive entries, some treating a single word over dozens of pages, and which never advanced beyond the letter B.

Davis produces some valuable new documentation from the French archives regarding Sainéan's naturalization and other legal aspects of his and his family's move to Paris. His situation was initially precarious, and he appears to have lost the support of his former mentor Moses Gaster around this time—Gaster, a rabbi and committed Zionist now based in London, took a dim view of his former protégé's conversion, seemingly undertaken for pragmatic purposes as part of his unsuccessful Romanian citizenship application. But Sainéan found succour elsewhere: his work on Oriental influences was awarded the Prix Bibesco in 1901, an award sponsored by the Romanian aristocrat Alexandre Bibesco for endeavours in Romance philology, beating what would have been the conventional choice, the *Histoire de la langue roumaine* by Bucharest professor Ovid Densusianu. Reworking his key findings into French-language survey articles, Sainéan placed them in publications such as the *Mémoires de la Société Linguistique de Paris* and the leading Romance philology journal *Romania*.<sup>(10)</sup>

As Davis shows, the support of his erstwhile professor Gaston Paris, who edited *Romania*, was clearly important. But the reborn Lazarus—now publishing under the French name Lazare Sainéan—did not confine his ambition to philological circles, also placing his work in journals with a broader remit, such as the *Revue de synthèse historique*, the *Revue internationale de sociologie*, the *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, and the *Revue des traditions populaires*. This signalled his intention not only to contribute to questions arising within linguistics, but to apply the new insights to debates in history and sociology. Throughout his career he insisted on the historically and socially situated nature of language, and sometimes saw himself as contributing to those disciplines too.

However, having summarized and restated his findings, Sainéan largely abandoned Romanian and focused for the next three decades on the history and development of French. His publications in this field are no less imposing than those on Romanian. His first major monograph on a French subject, *L'argot ancien*, appeared in 1907 and attracted favourable reviews, including by the young Lucien Febvre, later a founding figure of the prestigious Annales school of historiography. Impressed by the work's originality of topic and approach, Febvre commended it to colleagues in history and sociology as well as in linguistics.<sup>(11)</sup> In 1908 *L'argot ancien* was awarded the French Academy's prestigious Prix Volney.

Sainéan's work on argot led to him joining the team for a major edition of the works of François Rabelais, for which he produced pages of erudite notes over four volumes appearing from 1912 to 1922, and a two-volume survey in 1922-1923. During the First World War, Sainéan put his expertise to use, studying the slang used in the trenches by France's increasingly cosmopolitan soldiery, resulting in *L'argot des tranchées* (1915). The culmination of his work on the history of French was an analysis, this time over three volumes, of what he called 'the indigenous sources of French etymology', published between 1925 and 1930. To this he added a fourth volume, largely a vindication of his method and response to critics, which appeared in Florence in 1935, one year after he passed away in a Paris hospital at the age of 75, after an unsuccessful prostate operation.

Sainéan's tombstone in Montparnasse Cemetery—provided, Davis tells us, by his daughter—bears no indication of religion or nationality, only the designation 'philologue'. His career nevertheless seems to fall into two phases: a Romanian one, followed by a French one, and this is how Davis proceeds. There is some

imbalance in her account, with over 100 pages dedicated to the former, and only 30 to the latter. What she shows fascinatingly is how both were inflected by his often fraught life circumstances and by his approach to heritage, including his mother tongue, Yiddish. Furthermore, his work on all three languages was influenced not just by his personal life but by contemporary trends in comparative philology. This then highly fashionable discipline promised an emancipation from traditional theological approaches and an alternative outlook on roots and relationships. As linguists borrowed templates from simultaneous discoveries in the natural sciences—particularly geology and palaeontology—some envisaged words as fossils encasing deep clues as to primordial forms, scarcely subject to the varying verbal weather conditions of recent centuries. Long-term factors such as phonological and morphological change were privileged over the agency of individual speakers, and enshrined as invariable laws of word formation, impossible to contradict through the invocation of isolated instances. Sainéan kicked against this palaeophonological paradigm, seeking above all to highlight the role of individual speakers in linguistic innovation—this is the *Listening to the Languages of the People* of Davis's title.

A few examples may serve to explain his approach more clearly. In his work on Romanian, Şăineanu was in one way following a trend. The time of the pure Latinists had passed, and scholars had already started to frame the history of the language as one of successive strata of Slavic, Greek, Turkish, and other accretions, abandoning futile attempts to purify it of such perceived 'foreign' layers. But there remained a tendency towards deep history—Şăineanu's mentor Hasdeu, who had been among the first to broach the subject of Turkish lexical influence on Romanian in a scholarly way, had tried to prove that much of it predated the Ottoman conquest, being rather the result of earlier interaction with Turkic peoples of the Eurasian steppe. Şăineanu successfully refuted this, placing the emphasis on administrative, military, commercial, and cultural contact between Romanians and Ottomans, particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries. Beyond a layer of purely administrative vocabulary which did not impact popular speech, a vast storehouse of Turkish-influenced language remained as an essential part of everyday parlance.

Şăineanu paid special attention to morphological hybridity, noting, for example, Turkish words such as *divan* (court) which could nevertheless take a suffix of Latin origin—a member of such a court could in Romanian be called a *divanist*. Conversely, *pavaj* (paving) is a modern neologism, borrowed from French like the thing it described (*pavage*)—but an installer of such paving could be a *pavagiu*, using an adaptation of the Turkish suffix *-ci*, applied broadly to indicate professions. Machiavellianism is a modern term of political doctrine, which entered many languages from Italian: in Romanian this could be not just *machiavelism*, following the French or Italian forms, but *machiaverlâc*, again using a Turkish suffix (*-lık*, indicating an abstraction).

Şăineanu used such examples to argue not for the Romanian language's impurity, but for the creativity of its speakers, who frequently found *ad hoc* but subtle and durable solutions to problems of communication and labelling. He had in fact already observed these kinds of cultural and morphological crossover in his studies on Yiddish, where he took an interest in dialectal forms such as *țarener* (peasants), made up of a Romanian word (*țăran*) and a German suffix (*-er*); or *handl* (inn), which—contrary to what one might think—had nothing to do with *Handel* (trade), but was an adaptation of the Turkish *khan* (caravanserai) with a Germanic diminutive (*-dl*). He showed also that numerous sayings deemed to be quintessentially Romanian—'water flows, but the stones remain [*apa trece, dar pietrele rămân*]'; 'kiss the hand you cannot bite [*sărută mâna ce nu poți mușca*]'; or 'the sword won't cut a bowed head [*capul plecat sabia nu-l taie*]', for example—were of common Turkish origin. He did the same for simpler expressions—in colloquial Romanian you 'drink' tobacco (*bea tutun*) but 'eat' a beating (*mânca bătaie*)—and these, too, turned out to be calques on Turkish forms. Occasionally this led him to what today might be considered somewhat essentialist pronouncements: 'fatalism, in its Oriental form, is deeply rooted in our people and has nothing to do with the fatalism of the Bible'.<sup>(12)</sup>

Sainéan's work on French etymologies culminated in his three-volume *Sources indigènes*, which he considered 'the capital work of my activity and its final statement'.<sup>(13)</sup> In it, he followed principles similar in some respects to those underpinning his work on Romanian. The tradition of seeking venerable pedigrees for French words had led scholars to posit classical roots for many of them. Part of this tendency involved sincere attempts to conjecture about the fate of Romance-speaking populations after the fall of the Empire; others were coined with an eye to controversies over areas of settlement in contemporary Europe, and the purported racial background of the current French population. Reconstructing classical Latin origins was a respectable option, even if the forms were unattested in ancient sources. Again, Sainéan swam against convention, invoking the creativity of the ordinary people. He undertook vast research into medieval French

sources, particularly from neglected textual and oral traditions. He also drew on evidence from the *Atlas linguistique de la France*, the classic survey of regional dialects undertaken by Jules Gilliéron, published between 1902 and 1910.

Without entering too much into technicalities, a few examples of how Sainéan interpreted some French words familiar to English speakers may help illuminate his method and conceptions. The origins of ‘bigot’ are frequently ascribed to a Germanic *bei Gott*, a presumed utterance of a person of rigid, formalistic religious opinions. Sainéan, on the basis of dialect research, derived it from a Provençal term for ‘goat’ (*bigota*), applied first to the Normans by southern French speakers. ‘Brouhaha’ is said by many to derive from the Hebrew *barukh haba* (‘blessed is he who comes’), a standard formula in Jewish prayers, allegedly interpreted by the common people as a harbinger of some untoward event. Sainéan, on the basis of examples from Rabelais and other writers, read it as simple onomatopoeia. ‘Chicane’ is said to be of Germanic origin, related to *schicken* ‘order, send’ (hence *Schick*, ‘style’, which is agreed to be the origin of ‘chic’), in the case of *chicane* referring to a dubious legal or administrative procedure. Sainéan argued a derivation from *chique*, a French regional word for a bowling ground with a potentially uneven surface.

In *Les Sources*, Sainéan applied this method across the French lexicon. The result was, in some ways, similar to his approach to Romanian: the roots of the modern language were to be found not in antiquity but in the medieval and early modern periods. His frequent invocation of certain phenomena—especially metaphor, onomatopoeia, infantile speech, human-animal relations, and the jargon of distinct social and professional groups—remained constants in his thought, and can be traced at least as far back as his 1887 Romanian-language *Semasiologia*. In other ways, the effect of his work on French was completely different from that on Romanian: it involved not just rejecting Latin, Celtic, or Germanic etymologies, but attempts to disprove Arabic, Romanes, and Basque etymologies. To give just one example, *tripe* had been said by previous researchers to come from Arabic (*thorb*, ‘bowels’), but Sainéan posited Flemish *strip* ‘tissue’. This was indigenous French, without significant foreign admixture, untethered from the moorings of the ancient past and created by the people in present-day French territory.

Nevertheless, the work received a cool reception in academic circles: Antoine Meillet, the *eminence grise* of the Société Linguistique, who had earlier been sympathetic to Sainéan and helped him establish himself in Paris, published a distinctly lukewarm review in the Society’s Bulletin. Here he accused Sainéan, among other things, of underestimating the intelligence of goats—which rendered them an unlikely source of reference for stupid people—and of attributing a maritime origin to dialect words from the region of Metz, without being able to explain how they travelled so far inland from the coast.<sup>(14)</sup> In one of the few other French-language reactions, Maurice Delbouille, writing for the *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire*, categorized Sainéan’s method as ‘lexicological miracle-working’<sup>(15)</sup>. Meanwhile the distinguished Academician Antoine Thomas wrote dismissively that he ‘could not find anything that seems worth retaining’ in what was supposed to be Sainéan’s *magnum opus*.<sup>(16)</sup>

*Les Sources* was initially better received in Germany, being favourably noticed in several reviews; but in 1931 was the subject of an annihilatory assessment by Ernst Gamillscheg, the leading Berlin-based Romanist, in the *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur*. Over 16 sarcastic pages, Gamillscheg, himself an influential representative of the conservative approach to language history, charged Sainéan in turn with vanity, naivety, amateurism, and even ‘methodological Bolshevism’ in his disregard for established principles.<sup>(17)</sup> Gamillscheg’s imperious reaction undoubtedly had a chilling effect on Sainéan’s reputation. It is illuminating, if dismaying, to contrast the subsequent fates of the two men: Gamillscheg went on to become a leading figure in the Prussian Academy in Nazi Germany, and played a role on the cultural side of the German-Romanian alliance during the Second World War, being appointed director of the German Institute of Sciences in Bucharest from 1940 to 1944. Even after Hitler’s downfall, Gamillscheg found a professorship at Tübingen and was garlanded with no fewer than five Festschriften. The 1969 revised edition of his French etymological dictionary remained a reference point in the second half of the 20th century.<sup>(18)</sup>

Sainéan’s *Sources indigènes*, by contrast, were rarely cited; the work he prepared in response to critics was rejected by his Parisian publisher, and had to appear posthumously in Florence. This did result in one of the few notices Sainéan received in English-speaking publications: but while Grace Frank of Bryn Mawr College, writing in *Modern Language Notes*, praised his ‘many interesting, stimulating and plausible suggestions’, she regretted his ‘immoderate pretensions and polemical bias’, as well as finding forced his

ascription of gentility to the weasel, an animal to which other scholars, using the same source material, had attributed an evil disposition.(19)

For his part, Sainéan considered his enterprise a modern, democratic one, and indeed accused his French critics of being out of tune with the times.(20) Aspects of his approach bore traces of what might today be called populism. While his term of abuse for his opponents was ‘constructivism’—in reference to their tendency to reconstruct imaginary classical genealogies—he himself could be said to have constructed a different vision of the French people, perhaps as part of an unconscious need to give a strongly-contoured form to his adoptive *patrie*. Always alive to telling details, Davis notes that when Sainéan’s work was neglected by the mainstream academy, it was picked up by the populist Léon Daudet, who wrote highly favourable notices in the journal of the far-right *Action Française* movement. These associations did not run deep and seem rather to have been cultivated by Lazare’s brother Constantin than by himself.(21) However, they may have coloured the reception of his work.

In conclusion, Davis quotes Sainéan’s own assessment of his situation at the end of his long career: ‘indeed, here, in regard to social relations, I am always still “the intruder”’. One of the virtues of her book is that she does not seek to hide her subject’s foibles—including a somewhat thin-skinned insistence on his own rightness, a certain defiant self-regard, a pragmatism that didn’t always do him much good. Rather, Davis goes constantly in search of more complex motives behind Sainéan’s scholarly preoccupations and life choices: this renders us a very human figure, whose story serves as a litmus for the atmosphere of the times through which he lived. His interstitiality is characteristic of many notable figures in modern intellectual history (and has been a theme in Davis’s previous books), yet she manages to bring out the particularities of his situation in late 19th-century Romania and early 20th-century France. *Listening to the Languages of the People* is a work of restitution, but certainly not one of martyrology.

I got slightly less sense from Davis’s book of the status and validity of Sainéan’s research principles today. What can be retained from his bold attempts to undo the grip of tradition, and to abandon rigid adherence to classical templates in favour of the creativity of ordinary speakers of Romanian, Yiddish, and French? His approach clearly chimes with Davis’s lifelong advocacy of the agency of ‘the common people’, and willingness to challenge conventional templates of interpretation. But mightn’t such an enterprise risk falling into the trap of Romantic populism? Davis offers superb encapsulations, but no comparison to present state-of-the-art. Reading around this, I could find only a few contradictory assessments from earlier scholars. According to a writer on Romanian lexicography, around 90 percent of Șăineanu’s etymologies from his *Dicționar universal* were agreed with by the Romanian Academy dictionary.(22) A scholar who tried to evaluate his work on French was far more negative, reckoning that only a fifth of his proposed etymons could be retained.(23) Both assessments are brief and hazardous. Davis’s monograph would be well supplemented by a reconsideration of his contributions, not just in the field of etymology, but in folklore, semantics, literary history, Renaissance studies, Ottoman studies, and cultural history generally. But that would be a monumental task beyond the confines of this slim but hugely suggestive book. We can hope its appearance will provoke further research.

A curiosity of the Sainéan family story is that while Lazare’s career underwent its vicissitudes, his daughter Elisabeth, having been taken to the theatre from an early age by her mother, went on to become a leading actress in the Comédie Française. She even gained some repute as a silent film actress, starring in several early Abel Gance movies in the 1910s. Davis has dug up Elisabeth’s assessment of her father, ‘whose life was entirely given over to his books and philological studies, and [who] hardly ever went out’. Șăineanu nevertheless had enough modernity in him to take pride in having included entries for novel phenomena such as aviation, automobiles, and the cinema in later editions of his Romanian dictionary (not to mention Bolshevism, Fascism, and pogroms, which were included when they became topical). Being the son of a fresco painter and father of an actress was yet another form of in-betweenness for the scholar Sainéan. We should remember, though, that philology and history are also, in many ways, arts of forming images, so perhaps his drudgery was in tune with theirs after all. If a muralist or actor could be found today to broadcast the figure of this eminent and colourful *plouieștean* in his home town, or even in Bucharest or Paris, it would be a deserved reparation. And they could thank Davis for giving us the script that would sharpen such a picture.

## Notes



1. This second source, not used by Davis or apparently by any other scholar, is a memoir by Șăineanu's niece-by-marriage Madeleine Samitca, summarized in Constantin Matei, 'Mărturii biografice inedite despre Lazăr Șăineanu', *Limba română* 33:6 (1984), 465-67. [Back to \(1\)](#).
2. Lucian-Zeev Herșcovici, 'The Maskilim of Romania and the Question of Identity: "The Romanian Israelites"', *Analele Universității din București. Seria Științe Politice* 20 (2018), 5-26. [Back to \(2\)](#).
3. M. I. Schleiden, 'Iudaismul și știința în evul-mediu', trans. L. Schein. *Fraternitatea* 1, nrs. 1-13 (June-September 1879), being excerpts translated from Matthias Jacob Schleiden, *Die Bedeutung der Juden für Erhaltung und Wiederbelebung der Wissenschaften im Mittelalter*. Leipzig, 1877. [Back to \(3\)](#).
4. S., 'M. Kayserling, *Die jüdischen Frauen in der Geschichte, Literatur und Kunst*', *Fraternitatea* 1:24 (7 dec 1879) 6-7. Although signed simply 'S.', the review is attributed to 'L. Schein' in the table of contents of this issue (2). [Back to \(4\)](#).
5. *Publicațiunile periodice românești*, t. I. Bucharest, 1913, 271. [Back to \(5\)](#).
6. Lazăr Șain, *Moisi Mendelsohn. Viața și activitatea sa. Studiu biografic*. Bucharest, 1880. [Back to \(6\)](#).
7. Lazar Schein, 'Representanții Școalei Judaico-Alexandrine', *Anuar pentru Israeliti* 3 (1879-1880), 82-90; 'Lista d-lui Lazar Schein', *ibid*, 135. [Back to \(7\)](#).
8. L. Schein, 'Corifeii rabinismului antic, I: Rabi Achiba', *Anuar pentru Israeliti* 4 (1880-1881), 54-72; L. Schein, 'Israel în evul mediu', *Anuar pentru Israeliti* 5 (1881-1882), 1-14; L. Schein, 'Calomnia luării sângelui, istoricul ei în România', *Anuar pentru Israeliti* 5 (1881-1882), 55-92. [Back to \(8\)](#).
9. Anon, 'Bacaloriați', *Fraternitatea* 4:39 (15 Oct 1882), 300, reports that Schein was among five Jews to achieve this distinction in the Bucharest lycées that year. [Back to \(9\)](#).
10. The title of this journal refers not to the country of that name but was a conventional term for the Romance linguistic area. [Back to \(10\)](#).
11. Lucien Febvre, 'Une monographie de l'argot ancien', *Revue de synthèse historique* 17:2 (1908), 233-36. [Back to \(11\)](#).
12. Șăineanu, *Influența orientală*, i:cxi. Cf. *idem*, *Încercare asupra semasiologiei*, 108. [Back to \(12\)](#).
13. Letter to Constantin Șăineanu, 5 April 1927, in Lazare Sainéan, *Lettres*. Bucharest, 1936, 52. [Back to \(13\)](#).
14. Antoine Meillet, in *Bulletin de la Société de linguistique de Paris* 27 (1926), 114-17. [Back to \(14\)](#).
15. M. Delbouille, in *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 11 (1932), 735: 'thaumaturgie lexicologique'. [Back to \(15\)](#).
16. A. Thomas, *Mélanges d'étymologie française*. Paris, 1927, viii. [Back to \(16\)](#).
17. Ernst Gamillscheg, in *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur* 54 (1931), 199-215: 'wissenschaftlicher Bolschewismus', 213 (Gamillscheg's emphasis). The term 'Bolshevism', as well as referring to Sainéan's attempt to overturn most existing theories, likely had antisemitic overtones, given the widely-circulating stereotype of the 'Judeo-Bolshevik'; see the excellent study of this trope by Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe*. Cambridge, MA, 2018. [Back to \(17\)](#).
18. On Gamillscheg see especially Y. M. [Yakov Malkiel], 'Ernst Gamillscheg (1887-1971) and the Berlin School of Romance Linguistics', *Romance Philology* 27:2 (1973), 172-89. On his wartime activities in Romania see Daniela Olărescu, 'Das Deutsche Wissenschaftliche Institut (DWI) in Bukarest', *Südost-Forschungen* 69-70 (2010), 330-57; Irina Matei, Lucian Nastasă-Kovács, *Cultură și propagandă. Institutul Român din Berlin, 1940-1945*. Cluj-Napoca, 2018, 45-59. [Back to \(18\)](#).
19. Grace Frank, in *Modern Language Notes* 51:1 (1936), 63-64. [Back to \(19\)](#).
20. Sainéan, *Sources*, iii:499. [Back to \(20\)](#).
21. See Sainéan, letter to Constantin Șăineanu, 18 February 1932, in *idem*, *Lettres*, 66; Constantin Șăineanu, *Memorii*. Bucharest, 1947, 165. Davis's older work on the politics of Rabelais scholarship in mid-20th century France (which she modestly refrains from citing) makes great background for understanding the stakes here: Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Rabelais Among the Censors (1940s, 1540s)', *Representations*, nr. 32 (1990), 1-32. [Back to \(21\)](#).
22. Mircea Seche, *Schiță de istorie a lexicografiei române*, vol. 2. Bucharest, 1969, 91. [Back to \(22\)](#).
23. Wolfgang Hillen, *Sainéans und Gilliérons Methode und die romanische Etymologie*. Bonn, 1973, 129-48. [Back to \(23\)](#).

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