The Golden Garden (La Guerta de oro, Livorno, 1778) is the only extant secular work produced in Ladino in the eighteenth century. It was written and printed by David Attias, a Sephardi merchant who was born in Sarajevo but spent many years in Livorno.\(^1\) As can be seen from the Foreword, Attias’s anthology\(^2\) includes writings on various subjects ranging from an introduction to the Italian language and the Greek alphabet to a treatise on physiognomy and ways of curing infertility. At the time when Sephardi rabbis concerned about the ignorance of Ottoman Jews, actively promoted a program of religious education, Attias was the only Sephardi author to advocate secular education, the study of European languages, and practical knowledge. He declared that this was essential for Ottoman Jews if they wished to achieve success in business, catch up with Europeans, and eventually compete with them in trade.

Addressing Ottoman Sephardim whose reading was, even in the so-called “Golden Age” of Ladino literature, limited to religious books, Attias openly challenged the rabbis by declaring that not all youngsters were interested in studying the Torah and hearing the same things repeated all over again.

The Golden Garden reveals the author’s familiarity with some works of contemporaneous Italian and French literatures and the chapbooks on business etiquette then popular in Europe. Attias’s intended readers were young Sephardi merchants whom he encouraged to read parts of the book to their illiterate wives and fiancées, because, according to him, it is the mother’s responsibility to provide her son with appropriate moral education and practical guidance. While the Foreword lays out the purpose of Attias’s endeavor, the First Treatise teaches Ottoman Jews how to read and write in Italian. Even though the author’s linguistic and pedagogical skills are not perfect, his
The project is impressive. The most interesting part of his lesson is a dialogue between two friends called Simon and Reuben, which were the impersonal names of the protagonists of many rabbinic responsa. In this dispute, Attias usurps the rabbis’ authority to pronounce the final judgment.

The language of this book is characterized by a great number of Turkisms and Italianisms and contains few Hebraisms. The Italian dialogue, which may not have been written by Attias himself, is archaic and at times bizarre, possibly due to dialectal variations. It has many spelling and punctuation errors corrected here for clarity. The Ladino translation often calques the Italian text to the point of becoming incomprehensible on its own.


2 “Anthologia” (ανθολογία) means “flower garden” in Greek. Poetic anthologies and collections of stories in Castilian and Ladino were commonly called “huerta/guerta” (lit. “garden”).