Dear CSTM/SCTM People

Well, it's been a while. Actually, I started a few letters to you, and then abandoned them because I didn't really know where to start. But now that I've reached the august stature of Past President, maybe it's time to try to be a little more august.

Over the past couple of years, I've been in and out of the Iberian Peninsula, working on a project (thanks to the help of York University's Office of Research Assistance) called—most recently—"Towards a Musical Ethnography of Crypto-Jewish Regions of Spain and Portugal." If that sounds a little cryptic, it has been, more than I'd imagined. After years of focusing on the Judeo-Spanish Sephardic tradition, and on medieval Iberian music, it seemed logical to see what was happening with the Jews who never did leave the Peninsula, but stayed on as Christians, at least officially as Christians, and survived the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions with at least some Jewish practices, in some cases consciously thinking of themselves still as Jews, in some cases with less or even no awareness. However, since the "crypto" ("secret") part is now thoroughly built in, it's not always easy or even possible to tell what this degree of awareness really is, or who's who, or how long they have been who they may say they are, &c., &c., all of which has made the fieldwork particularly intriguing.

The fieldwork has mostly been along the Spanish-Portuguese border area, largely in villages with a documented Inquisition history. It's illogical to restrict it to people who actually present themselves as Jewish, so the interviews have been with all kinds of people. From July 1996 through July 1997 the fieldwork was carried out with the collaboration of my multi-skilled research assistant, Jose-Ramon Aparicio, of Galicia, and much of the time with my intrepid daughter Tamar Ilana, whom many of you know, in charge of videotaping and/or still photography. In August and again in November 1997 I was on my own, on public transportation—or hitchhiking, as in the "old" days.

One of the most unexpected aspects of this fieldwork has been putting the "field" back into "fieldwork"—not the ethnographic field, but the actual fields, vineyards and threshing grounds. Now, I'm a city person. Did I ever tell you how I learned how cucumbers grow? I was in my early 20s, and it was about 30 km outside Prague; my friend Edith’s mother-in-law gave me a basket (after I'd arrived, thoroughly disheveled, at 6:00 a.m. on a railway employee’s motorbike, but that’s another story) and told me in exquisite French to go down to the garden and pick cucumbers; she'd make me a special salad. Normally I would have asked politely how to recognize them but—I knew!