

## The Ethnofolk Letters 11

[We don't have the date when this column was written, but it's been held over a couple of issues, so "this spring or summer" in the last paragraph actually refers to the spring and summer just completed. —JL]

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!

I knew, because a month earlier I'd been travelling in Turkey, you see, in exotic, dry Cappadocia, and outside a tiny, dusty, pink, cheap (about 35 cents a night) hotel in Urgup there was a tree hung with plastic cucumbers, and because this was an all-around Learning Experience, I examined the tree carefully. So I'd know how to recognize a cucumber tree anywhere else....

But I digress. (They still talk about the Canadian and her Arbre de Concombres back in the Czech village!)

Oh yes, fieldwork and fields work. Up till this project, I'd done all my fieldwork in the more or less virtual field, i.e., the city. Istanbul. Thessaloniki. Tel Aviv. Paris. Tangier. Montreal. Los Angeles. Seattle.... I understand cities. Subway systems and I intuitively get along immediately, and pavement somehow feels just right to the soles of my feet. The countryside, however, tends to confuse me—the street lamps never come on at night! And here I was having to ask—what songs were sung for picking olives? crushing grapes? using the scythe? winnowing? threshing? Not words I understand well even in English, let alone in their various Spanish, Galician and Portuguese incarnations. Ramon taught me a lot of the vocabulary (and the necessity of acquiring it), having grown up himself in a village along the Spanish-Portuguese border in Galicia—and just yesterday, giving a presentation in a Portuguese Senior Citizens group in Toronto, I was able to dazzle the participants by casually tossing off questions about what they sang during *as malhas* or *as ceifas*.

Moving along logically from the field to the kitchen, one of my main fieldwork breakthroughs was the Great Potato-Peeling Session. In the main Portuguese village where Crypto-Jews are easily identified and many have actually "re-converted" to formal Judaism, we were delighted and moved to be honoured by an invitation to stay with one of the women for Passover, traditionally a central aspect of Crypto-Jewish practices. On the afternoon of their "modern" seder (Passover ritual dinner), they were short of people to help; I wandered in, and was handed a barrel of thin-skinned new potatoes and a knife fit for slaughtering mad cows. Yes, I'm—as you now know, if you didn't before—a city person. My idea of a major sport is to ride my bike at right angles over streetcar tracks, or walk daringly on boards from one sidewalk to the other if a street's being repaired. And I use nice urban potato peelers to peel potatoes, as did my equally urban mother before me. Well, there in the Portuguese mountain village, at my first tentative slice, an anguished chorus rose up—"She's slaughtering the potatoes, she's massacring them!" I persisted heroically, for three solid hours, and the next morning, doors opened to us all over the village, closed faces became smiling ones, and interviews became immeasurably easier to obtain. In fact, on a return trip months later, I was thumbing my way toward the village, and about 50 km away I started to hear, "You're from Canada? Oh, YOU must be the Canadian professor whose mother never taught her how to peel potatoes!"

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So, what about the music anyway? Well, it's a long story;

[The last EF Letter was in 30.2, June 1996. We've missed you, Judy!]

[The editors of the Bulletin would like to second the closing request for input from readers to this column. When Judy began *The EthnoFolk Letters*, earlier in this decade, she never intended it to be only a vehicle for her voice. —GWL]

it'll have to be, you know, one of those Articles sometime. Basically, the Crypto-Jews sing the same repertoire as everyone else, though their prayers are different (now chanted rather than sung) and they often identify certain parts of local repertoires as their own. The few songs which only they sing seem to me to be more or less of turn-of-the-century (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup>, I'll soon have to specify); others are local songs of which I'm still trying to figure out the criteria for their definition as "ours" or "theirs." There are a lot of other issues, ranging from bibliography to fieldwork and publishing ethics, all of which occupy a lot of my time (as does trying to figure out how to make a living while keeping the project going, as the travel funds inexorably run out).

But meanwhile, fieldwork remains addictive. 95-year-old women still working at their looms, or even in the fields, still singing (sometimes distinctly off-colour verses, too). White-haired Concha telling us proudly how in her youth she'd been paid NOT to sing because her voice was so beautiful that the young men just stood there listening to her, transfixed, and the harvest remained unharvested. Esther, an ancient shepherdess as gnarled as the gnarled trees on her lonely windswept hilltop, devastated us by remarking blithely that she didn't really like the old songs much, she preferred the louder, noisier ones. But then Maxima, with her black head-scarf and gold earrings, stirring the soup pot which bubbled over her open hearth one cold, damp evening, told us that whenever she can't sleep, she lies down in the darkness and sings all the oldest ballads she knows, one after another, till she finally drops off.

One evening, we tagged along after Olinda in a historically Crypto-Jewish village as she delivered fresh milk to her neighbours in the gathering twilight—as she strode along she hollered at the top of her lungs, "OK, everyone, the Canadian professor's here! Get outside right now and sing!" (Much more effective than our usual polite "Um, if it wouldn't be too much trouble to, um, ask that you be so kind as to, um, accord us a few moments of your important time...".) The women did come out. And sang, and did playparty dance-songs they hadn't thought of in years, while one husband called out in vain for his dinner. Or the unforgettable moment when I came home and showed Tamar my video of the village gypsy girls dancing and singing in front of the medieval castle ruins, and my daughter pointed out witheringly that I'd failed to identify their repertoire—what the young Portuguese *ciganas* of this mountain village were performing for me was their phonetic rendition of the Spice Girls!

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Anyway, this year I've been working on a Canada Council Artists Grant which will allow me to go back this spring or summer and work on learning women's vocal and percussion technique along the same border area. I'll write again—but, hey, it's YOUR turn next time! You write next, and I'll write back, ok?

—Judith Cohen