

# JUDEO-SPANISH TRADITIONAL SONGS IN MONTREAL AND TORONTO\*

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This paper is an overview of my current research on the survival of the Judeo-Spanish traditional song among Sephardic communities in Montreal and Toronto. It is only recently that serious research on Canadian Sephardic communities has begun, and little of this work directly concerns music.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, my first (and present) task has been to contact and interview members of the community and to collect songs — as well as other aspects of oral history, where possible. Detailed analysis of the song corpus will constitute a later stage of this project.

## Scope of study

The term “Sephardic” (substantive plural: Sephardim) referred originally to descendants of Jews expelled from the Iberian peninsula during the Spanish Inquisitions, the biblical name “Sefarad” being interpreted as “Spain.” Today “Sephardic” is also used to refer to French-speaking Jews from such countries as Iraq, Iran, and Yemen. However, as this study concerns songs in Judeo-Spanish, my informants are drawn from among Sephardim who speak, or spoke as children, Judeo-Spanish as their first or main language.<sup>2</sup> My work with French-speaking Sephardim, for example, is mostly limited to making contacts within the Montreal community.

In terms of the material itself, this study is limited for practical reasons to secular and some paraliturgical music; that is, to songs and hymns sung in Judeo-Spanish as opposed to Hebrew. Still, it is important to note that the secular melodies of the Judeo-Spanish *romancero* very often appear in the service as vehicles for parts of the synagogue service, conducted of course in Hebrew (or Aramaic).

## Sephardim in Montreal and Toronto

By far the largest group of Sephardim in Canada is composed of emigrants from Morocco, to the extent that speakers of Judeo-Spanish from Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria are rarely mentioned in printed sources.<sup>3</sup> The larger group of Sephardim is that of Montreal, numbering some 11,000 in an early 70s census<sup>4</sup> and considerably more at the present time. The majority of them are French-speakers from Morocco. Those who speak a form of Judeo-Spanish come from Moroccan cities such as Tetouan, Larache Alcazarquivir and Tangiers; or from Eastern Mediterranean

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centers such as Salonika, Istanbul and Izmir. The Montreal Moroccan Sephardim are connected through the CSQ (Communauté Sépharade du Québec) and other organizations closely associated with it, such as the Club Sépharade d'Age d'Or and the Chorale Kinnor; they have also founded a francophone Sephardic school, Ecole Maimonide.<sup>5</sup>

The Moroccan Judeo-Spanish community in Toronto mostly come from the city of Tangiers. They have established their own synagogue, the Petah Tikva Anshe Castilla. Functioning as a religious centre as well as a community centre and focus for family activities, the Petah Tikva enjoys active participation and commitment from its members.

The Eastern Mediterranean (hereafter referred to as "Eastern" for the sake of brevity) Judeo-Spanish speakers are only a very small fraction of the Moroccan community. In Montreal, they often attend the English-speaking Spanish and Portuguese congregation, along with Western European descendants of the early Sephardim who no longer speak Judeo-Spanish. In Toronto, where they are even fewer in number, probably under two dozen families, those who are regular synagogue attenders go to the Petah Tikvah in a few cases but are more likely to attend Ashkenaz congregations.

There is little official communication between Moroccan and Eastern Judeo-Spanish speakers on the one hand, and between Sephardic communities in Montreal and Toronto on the other (though individuals in the two cities are often closely connected through family ties).

### **Informants**

I used three main methods to contact potential informants: talking with community and group leaders; publicizing my work in two periodicals likely to be read by the community; and performing Sephardic songs for groups I hoped would respond by offering their own material. Word of mouth and chance encounters were also important factors in meeting people. In Montreal, contacting a rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue led to meeting most of my Eastern informants, while performing at the Club Fraternité and the Club Sépharade d'Age d'Or led to interviews with several Moroccan women. In Toronto, my Moroccan material came through contacts made at the Petah Tikva, as well as at the Baycrest Geriatric Centre and the B'nai Sefarad. (Two of these groups, the Club Sépharade d'Age d'Or in Montreal and the B'Nai Sefarad in Toronto, have as one of their prime *raisons d'être* the organization of weekly Bingo games, and some of my taped material is sung to the background of Bingo numbers called out in Spanish or French). In Toronto, I have also met a number of people in the small Eastern Sephardic community, through individual contacts.

In both cities, then, my contacts with the Moroccan community came about largely through group settings, and with the Eastern community mostly through individual contacts. This is a logical outcome of the much greater degree of social organization among the Moroccans, who have the sheer numbers required for such activities. Articles in the *Canadian Jewish News* and in *La Voix Sépharade* led to a few telephone calls but few concrete results. Another valuable source of information as well as informants which I had not planned for was the formation of the performing group GERINELDO under the direction of Dr Oro Anahory-Librowicz. As a member of this four-person ensemble dedicated to performing the Moroccan Sephardic repertoire in a traditional way, I have been able to learn a tremendous amount about performance practice, to acquire a wide repertoire of songs which would otherwise have been unavailable to me, and to profit from the ensemble's contacts with the community, both as individuals and as performers. In fact, my status as a recognized performer of Sephardic music with GERINELDO, and of Sephardic and other types of music as a soloist, seemed to give considerable credibility to my work as a collector as far as many informants were concerned.<sup>6</sup>

In both cities, setting up interviews with informants once they had agreed to meet with me was somewhat problematic. The combination of a Canadian winter's effect on the health of many older people (or the departure of many others to Miami for the winter) and the cycle of Jewish festivals slowed the process down considerably between the fall of 1981, when I began systematic collection, and the end of Passover in the spring of 1982. Informants who were enthusiastic, of course, always managed to find time; others, less sure of their willingness to participate, would, in successive conversations, agree to meet with me at specific times but continue to put the dates forward until the next holiday should be over, the weather become warmer, visiting relatives return home, etc.

Eventually, a core group of some fifteen informants emerged, about two-thirds of them from Morocco, and the others from Salonika, Istanbul, and Izmir. On the whole, the latter group are younger, with an age range from the mid-thirties to the mid-sixties, while my Moroccan informants are between 65 and 75 years old. Although there are several older communities of Greek and Turkish Sephardim in the States,<sup>7</sup> the Canadian Eastern Sephardim have been in this country only a short time, and many lived in Israel before emigrating here. The inhuman massacre of the entire Salonikan community is well-known, and it is no surprise that the post-war immigrants to Canada from that area are few in number and relatively young. This age difference is an important factor in the differences between the Moroccan and Eastern material in my collection.

A significant discovery for me has been that the Eastern Sephar-

dim, despite their small numbers and lack of a central organization such as those enjoyed by the Moroccan communities, are deeply aware of their culture and tend to have very well-informed opinions on its linguistic, historical and social aspects — even if they know few songs (and fewer *romances*). It has not been uncommon to hear them say such things as “We are the *real* Sephardim” or “We are the ones who speak the *real* Ladino.” This is certainly not to imply that the Moroccan Sephardim in any way lack this awareness — far from it — rather to point out that the somewhat precarious existence of the smaller community seems if anything to have spurred its members to cling to their identity, even if on the surface they lead perfectly ordinary North American urban lives.

### The Repertoire

Some song texts in the Judeo-Spanish repertoire can be traced back to medieval and Renaissance Spain, having survived in oral tradition when, in many cases, the same text has become extinct or very rare in non-Jewish Hispanic communities. Other texts were composed after the expulsion from Spain, for example, certain Biblical *romances* with the same poetic structure as the songs from the older *romancero*, and *cantares de boda* (wedding songs) of varying age and venerability. In the Eastern Mediterranean especially, a dynamic Sephardic community continued to compose songs up to its tragic annihilation in World War II; these songs, in both text and music, were often influenced by contemporary Western art and popular forms, as well as by indigenous traditions. Many early scholars, in their excitement at discovering a corpus of early texts alive in oral tradition, either ignored the musical aspect of the songs, or sought songs only from the *romancero*, or both. This is no longer the general case, but its effects are still felt in a division of material by students of Sephardic folklore — a division which is very rarely made by native singers themselves.

Over the past decade, several recordings of Judeo-Spanish music have appeared. These are either field recordings, largely issued by researchers in Israel, or “commercial” recordings of popular Israeli and Spanish recording artists, or, more recently still, of medieval and renaissance music ensembles who have “discovered” Sephardic music. While the field recordings range over several types of Judeo-Spanish song, the popular recordings and the early music groups almost all use the four-volume Levy anthology as their source. This anthology contains some *romances*, as well as a large selection of relatively recent lyric songs, the majority of which were collected from Eastern Mediterranean informants. Thus, for a general public becoming aware of Judeo-Spanish music through popular and “early music” recordings, the term “Sephardic” has a fairly specific meaning — the songs in this anthology, as interpreted by the artist(s) on their record(s). At the same time, these records have

found their way into the homes of nearly every one of my informants, both Moroccan and Eastern. Moroccan women have learned songs from these records which they would not ordinarily have come across, and Eastern informants have re-learned songs which they had forgotten, partially or completely. While all this is going on, scholarly studies of Judeo-Spanish music still tend to concentrate on the *romancero*, which, when it does appear on "commercial" recordings, usually does so in a much-shortened form.<sup>8</sup> To sum up, then, Sephardim very often listen to records of Judeo-Spanish songs performed by popular Israeli artists, who tend to use a Western-influenced orchestration with some Middle East "touches," e.g. a *derbukka* (goblet drum). Western European and North American non-Sephardim are exposed to recordings mostly from the Levy collection by such artists as Victoria de los Angeles; and, more recently, early music groups who try to re-create a medieval Iberian atmosphere using a combination of Western vocal technique, reconstructions of early instruments — and a vaguely Middle Eastern "atmosphere." Scholars listen to field recordings, and text specialists in particular tend to select items from the *romancero* for more intensive study. Clearly, there is a good deal of overlapping, but what does emerge is a different perception of what is "Sephardic" by different groups of people and, as well, a mixture of widely differing influences — outside the synagogue — on the Judeo-Spanish song tradition.<sup>9</sup>

To return to my own collection, it is divided roughly as follows: approximately 50 pieces from the Moroccan Sephardic tradition, nearly all *romances* and *cantares de boda*; and some 80 pieces from the Eastern tradition, mostly shorter modern songs.<sup>10</sup> As well, there are some 15 liturgical and para-liturgical pieces, and a few songs in Spanish, Hebrew, and Greek. Of the Moroccan songs, about a dozen were sung by more than one informant; of the Eastern songs only some 6 or 7 are repeated. Only 2 *romances*, both in fragmentary form, appear in my Eastern collection; this is due at least partly to the lower age of the Eastern informants. There is no overlapping of melody and hardly any of text between the Moroccan and Eastern pieces on my tapes. Most of the Moroccan songs may be found listed in the Armistead Catologo, several of the Eastern songs are in the Levy collection or on recordings. Some however, especially from among those sung by Mrs Bouena Sarfatty Garfinkle of Salonika, I have not been able to match with other collections. In several cases, Eastern informants said they had heard parts of their repertoire on commercial recordings before singing them for me, and a couple deliberately listened to their records just before my visit to refresh their memories. Mrs Hanna Pimienta, of Tetouan, Morocco, recalled several long *romances* which she sang for me on my first visit to her; on a subsequent visit she sang about 10 Eastern songs which she had learned directly from a record of the popular Spanish singer Joaquin Diaz. (For a

comparative transcription of one of these songs as sung by Diaz and as sung by Mrs Pimienta see example 4 below.)<sup>11</sup>

I have chosen to transcribe four songs here. The first is a *romance* sung by Mrs Pimienta. The second is a traditional song for the circumcision ceremony, sung by Mrs Garfinkle (not given in entirety). The third is a short song of fairly recent composition as sung by a young (35) singer from Istanbul, David Beyo. Finally, I have transcribed a song sung by Joaquin Diaz as he sings it, and as Mrs Pimienta learned it from his record.

## FIGURE 1

from "Rosafloreda y Montesinos"  
(Armistead CMP B20)  
as sung by Mrs Hanna Pimienta, age 75, of Tetovan, Morocco;  
Montreal 1981. Coll. J.R. Cohen Tape 1, No. 2-1.

VERSE 2. \* Del o-ro De la Tur-avi-A  
RODE-A-DO ESTA- DE ALME-NAS, DEL O-RO  
DE LA-TUR-AVI-A- , Yen-tre-al-mena y al-me-na.

## FIGURE 2

From "O Ke Mueve Mezes."  
Circumcision song. Sung by Mrs Bouena Sarfatty Garfinkle of Salonika, Greece (age 63),  
Montreal, 1982. Coll. J.R. Cohen, Tape 13, No. 1-4.

YA VIENE EL PA-RI- DO —, con LAS COM-BI-DA-DOS,  
DI-ZE LA KU-MA-DRE: "AI-DE, AI-DE, AI-DE"  
DIZE LA PA-RI- DA: "O, BIO ES KA-PA-VE....."

## FIGURE 3

Sung by Mr. David Beyo (age 34) of Istanbul; Toronto, 1982.  
Coll. J.R. Cohen, Tape 10, No. 1.

LA AGUA PASA, LA ARENA QUEDA, EL AMOR ME QUEMA EN MI CORA-SON.  
(Same text)

## FIGURE 4

### "DESPEDIDA DE LA NOVIA"

Diaz: Temas Sefardies,<sup>1</sup> JOAQUIN DIAZ, MOVIE PLAY 53 0103/9 (audio cassette) No. 1A4.  
 Pimienta: Sung by Mrs Hanna Pimienta, Montreal, 1981, Coll. J.R. Cohen, Tape 2, No. 2-12.

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system has two staves: the top staff is for 'DIAZ (with guitar, acc.)' and the bottom staff is for 'PIMIENTA'. The second system also has two staves: the top staff is for 'DIAZ' and the bottom staff is for 'PIMIENTA'. The lyrics are written below the staves: 'QUE YO IRME AVE-RI-A A SERVIR BUENHA-RI-DO, A PO-NEA-LE LA ME-SA, LA DEL PAN Y DEL VI-VO DEL VI-VO.' The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4.

To sum up, there are flourishing Sephardic communities in Montreal and Toronto which have largely been neglected by scholars. Both cities have a large majority of Sephardim from Morocco and a small group from the Eastern Mediterranean. Neither group is particularly concerned with the transmission of traditional Judeo-Spanish songs, though some older people still remember them. Both groups listen to commercial recordings, mostly of songs from the more recent Eastern tradition, and usually strongly influenced by Western performance practice. It is possible that the fusion of the "commercial" and the traditional repertoire which seems to be taking place among several of my informants may represent the only means of survival of the Judeo-Spanish ballad tradition in the New World.

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## FOOTNOTES

- 1 See for example Clarfield, Elbaz, Lasry, Pelinski, and Salama. Oro Anahory Librowicz is also carrying out research on the *romancero* tradition — primarily texts — in Montreal.
- 2 For a bibliography on the language consult Bunis, items 24-512; and pp x-xii for a summary of the history of its nomenclature. "Judeo-Spanish," "Judezmo," "Ladino," and "(e)Spanyol" have been used by various authors and native speakers; "haketia" is the term for the Moroccan dialect. For my purposes I find "Judeo-Spanish" the most useful term, though Bunis (p. xi) deems it "artificial."
- 3 For a history and overview of the North African community in Canada see Lasry, Carusa, and "Mosaïque Sépharade" in *La Voix Sépharade*, 13:2 (1982), 3-11. In the U.S., by contrast, the majority of Sephardim are of Eastern Mediterranean origin.
- 4 Lasry, p. 226.
- 5 See for example *La Voix Sépharade* 13:3 (1982), 32-44.
- 6 In this regard see Koning.
- 7 For information on work among the Sephardim in the States see Armistead & Silverman. For Eastern Sephardim in the States see, for example, Benmayor. See also Abraham Lavender, *A Coat of Many Colours* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977), pp. 281-317.
- 8 This is a generalization; a few records (Roffe, Diaz, Abinun) do contain fairly complete versions of *romances*. Watch for the forthcoming discography of Sephardic music in preparation by Dr Israel J. Katz for more complete documentation on the subject of Judeo-Spanish recordings.
- 9 Spanish popular music, and flamenco, have also had a good deal of influence, but this is not really the place to discuss it.
- 10 The discrepancy between the greater number of Eastern songs and the smaller number of Eastern informants is explained by the fact that one Salonikan woman, Mrs Buena Sarfatty Garfinkle, contributed over 50 of the 80 Eastern songs.
- 11 *Romances* and wedding songs are generally sung by women, while liturgical music and *piyyutim* (hymns) are usually men's repertoire. This is not in any way a rule, and there are many exceptions; rather, it is a reflection of the organization of religious and daily life.

(For Résumé, see p. 60)