Notes from the Field

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In April, I rarely travel further from home than the neighbourhood coffee shop, to which I repair with stacks of final exams and essays to mark. But in January of this year, 2013, a mysterious email message arrived from Morocco, in Spanish, saying that the writer had come across one of my CDs of Sephardic music and was intrigued by the fact that I knew songs from the old, now non-existent, Sephardic Jewish community of his home town, Larache. The web page where he'd seen the CD, apparently, incorrectly identified my own origins as being from Larache – I explained to him that in fact my grandparents had arrived in Canada over a century ago from Eastern Europe, and that my connection with Sephardic Morocco was professional, and had nothing to do with my family's origins. The writer wrote back, explaining that he – Mohamed Laabi – had started a small annual festival in the town, together with the cultural association of which he was the president, and asking whether I would come in April, and give a concert and a workshop of the old Sephardic songs of the region. This seemed impossible to me, partly because of the timing and partly because of the lack of funding for the trip – but within a month or so we had managed to persuade the Canadian Embassy in Morocco to cover the actual trip, I offered to forego any fee, and Mohamed and his wife Fatima Zôhra invited me to stay with them. I gave my last exams, marked almost everything, and took the rest with me over the ocean.

The two weeks in Morocco were very intense – not to mention the late nights communing with student essays. Most of the time was spent in Larache, but the Canadian Embassy also invited me to give a concert at the Ambassador's home in Rabat, and arranged for me to do one in Casablanca, at the country's one remaining Jewish high school. At the high school, I was surprised to learn that many of the students are Muslim. I had been asked to perform Moroccan Sephardic songs, but one of the Muslim students asked whether I could sing at least one in Arabic, which I did. At the Embassy, while a programme of Moroccan Sephardic songs had also been requested, I added a couple from Francophone Canada and, on reflection, in Yiddish, the mother tongue of my late grandparents. It seemed to me that Yiddish was probably not often heard in Morocco ... and a Quebecoise member of the Embassy staff enjoyed playing spoons with my *chansons-à-répondre* ... .

Morocco has a long history of thriving Jewish communities. Today, of the many thousands who lived and worked there for centuries, only a few are left; some 3000 in Casablanca, and only a few hundred scattered throughout the rest of the country. The ones I have worked with are of the north, where most were descendents of the Sephardic Jews exiled from Spain and Portugal in the late 15th Century. Those of the centre and south, including Berber regions, have lived there for centuries longer. I had been in Larache (El-Araish) 20 years earlier, when a few elderly Sephardic Jews were still living there – but only for a day. I had spent a little more time in Tangier and Tetuan, when there were still a few hundred people in their Jewish communities, and back in the early 1970s had spent some time in Marrakech and other towns on the hippie route. I had stayed in small, cheap, family-run *pensions* at that time, and in the 1990s had stayed with Sephardic families in Tetuan and Tangier. But I had never lived with a Muslim family, treated as "one of us", and it was a very moving experience, especially in these sensitive times.

Figure 1: Larache. A typical woman's hat.

The plan in Larache was for me to work with a small group of young women who sang the traditional Sufi *hadra*, in the old style, accompanying themselves with hand percussion only. I taught them the refrains of several old Sephardic wedding songs from the region, and a song about the *hilulá*, the ritual visit to the tombs of venerated religious leaders – the Jewish version of the local Muslim custom. While the melodies were not familiar to them, the rhythmic patterns, which they played on various instruments, and general singing style – including the traditional ululation – were. Zahraâ (Fatima Zahraâ El Bouânani), the teacher and leader of the ensemble, sang some songs with me and also played the oud. She had planned to ask one of the town's male musicians to play it, but I suggested keeping it a women's

performance, and this worked out very well. I also taught them the same Arabic wedding song I'd sung at the concerts in Casablanca and Rabat, which I'd learned many years earlier, from George Sawa.

I had learned these songs as part of my doctoral research on Sephardic music in the 1980s, mostly from elderly Moroccan women who had recently emigrated to Montreal, in most cases to join their adult children. I spent many hours in their homes, and also at their social club in the Jewish Community Centre, where their endless bingo games were aurally ornamented with snatches of narrative ballads recounting the deeds of long-dead Spanish royalty. For many years, I also performed the songs as a founding member of the Moroccan Sephardic ensemble GERINELDO, founded and directed by Dr Oro Anahory-Librowicz, with Solly Lévy, a world expert in Moroccan Judeo-Spanish (*haketía*) language and culture, and singer Kelly Sultan Amar.

The very first woman from whom I recorded these traditional songs, years before meeting the GERINELDO folk, was herself from Larache, and the town had always had a special resonance for me; it was exciting to be bringing the songs back home. While the older people in Larache remembered the Jewish presence vividly, and often spoke of specific people they had been friendly with, the younger generations had no memory of a Jewish presence, much less of their songs.

Figure 2: With Lalla Mennana.

Besides working with Zahraâ and the other members of Lalla Mennana (the name of the patron saint of Larache, one of very few Moroccan towns with a woman patron saint), I attended the other events of the mini-festival. A small wind band played unlikely arrangements of Arab-Andalusian classics and Spanish pasodoble tunes. Local Gnawa musicians accompanied poetry readings. Two fine Andalusian ensembles performed, and a young street theatre group from Tangier presented a stirring spectacle, complete with giant walking puppets, musicians, and high drama (the battle of Hercules and Atlas.) During the day, when not otherwise occupied (or marking papers), my favourite haunt was Larache's *Zoco Chico*, or "small market-place", a rectangular cobblestoned plaza full of colourful small stores and temporary stands – fruits, vegetables, tin, copper, embroidered shirts, blue jeans, CDs, shampoo, imitation Crocs ... . One little store was particularly irresistible, with its small collection of hand-painted frame drums from the Marrakech area, a few of which, inevitably, made their way back to Toronto with me.

Figure 3: Local Gnawa musicians.

Figure 4: Street theatre from Tangier.

Figure 5: Judith with Moroccan frame drum.

One day was set aside for visiting Mohamed and Fatima Zôhra's Tangier home, their main base, as they both teach Spanish in the city. A digital copy of Paul Bowles' spectacular Moroccan field recordings of 1959-60 is now available for listening in the American Legation; the collection itself is housed at the Library of Congress. I had also reserved a day to visit Ksar-al-Kebir, known in Spanish as Alcazarquivir. Of the Moroccan Sephardic women who sang for me in Montreal the 1980s and 1990s, many of the best singers were from Larache or "Alcazar". In the 1990s, I briefly visited Ksar-el-Kebir, just 30 or so kilometres away from Larache; only eleven Jews remained in Larache, and none at all were left here. That day in the narrow streets of Ksar-el-Kebir's old medina, a small, bright-eyed girl came up to me and asked, in Moroccan Arabic, who I was; she took me to meet her mother, a young widow with several children, of whom the girl, Meryem, was the youngest. I spent the afternoon with them, sharing mint tea and pita, and teaching the older children how to use my then brand-new video camera. This time, I went to the entrance of the medina and showed the photograph I'd taken 21 years earlier. Meryem, now married and herself a mother of three, was still living right there – she came rushing downstairs, recognized me right away, hugged me, sent a child out to tell other family members to come, took me upstairs for tea, and sent another child out to get some henna to paint my hands. They sang a few henna songs for me, as Meryem's talented niece applied it. A week later, as I was walking around Rabat before my plane home left, people stopped me to ask where I had gone to have those beautiful designs done.

Figure 6: Henna hands.

After our day in Tangier, we were walking back to the little house in Larache, from the Zoco Chico – still lively at 10:00 p.m. – down the steep, uneven stone steps that constitute our street. The door to the little building at the top of the street was open, and women were inside, singing; it was a henna night for a local bride. We requested, and were given, permission for me to attend – and I was permitted to record and film, although two or three women politely asked that I not photograph or film their faces. The bride sat, dressed and veiled in emerald green, on a green dais, while her hands were painted, and women sang the refrains to an old henna song one older woman sang. Every now and again, a small group of male musicians entered and performed for a while, with shawms and hand drums. Two of the women, sisters, who spoke quite fluent Spanish, invited me to return the following night for the "real" wedding party. I asked if Fatima Zôhra could attend with me, and was told, "of course!" She loaned me one of her good kaftans for the evening. It was held in a banquet hall, and the same musicians were there, but they played only sporadically – most of the time a DJ spun a mix of popular Arabic and Moroccan music. The bride was now unveiled, and changed her spectacular kaftans twice during the evening; the groom appeared first in a sober Western suit, and then in a long white robe.

Figure 7: Our street in Larache.

Figure 8: Street off the Zoco Chico.

Figure 9: The bride with painted hands.

All too soon, it was Saturday night, my last night in Larache, and the night of my concert with Zahraâ and Lalla Mennana ending the festival. We had worked it out that I would do the first part, Moroccan Sephardic songs from Larache and neighbouring towns (and introducing the songs in French rather than Spanish); then we would all do the second part together, and Lalla Mennana would end the evening with their repertoire of *hadra*. Mohamed had arranged for the concert to be held in the town's remaining Catholic church, so that the three Abrahamic religions were represented. Several government representatives were present, a few people from the Canadian Embassy drove up from Rabat, and the guest of honour was André Azoulay, a unique case today: the Jewish senior adviser to the King of Morocco.

Performing Sephardic Jewish songs with Moroccan Muslim women in Larache was the culmination of one of the most moving and rewarding experiences I have ever had. Mohamed, Fatima Zohra, Zahraâ and I are discussing a longer-term project: comparing Larache's Muslim wedding songs and customs the old Sephardic Jewish ones. I am looking forward to continuing to work with these new friends / colleagues.

Writing from Madrid, Spain, August 2013.

For general remarks on Sephardic music:

Cohen, Judith, 2010. "Sephardic Music: A Pan-Mediterranean Interactive Tradition." *TRANS* 14 Online Journal of the SibE (Sociedad Ibérica de Etnomusicología). http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/trans14/art13.htm

For the Sephardic songs of Larache and Alcazarquivir / Ksar-el-Kebir:

Cohen, Judith. 2007. "Je chante en bas esperando el taxi: Les Romances d'Alcazarquivir vus par les femmes qui les chantent", in Kelly Basilio, ed. *Romances de Alcácer Quibir.* Lisbon : University of Lisbon, Arts Faculty / Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnología, 125-139.

Recordings: Contact Judith for recordings of GERINELDO as well as her own.