

# A Bosnian Sephardic Woman in Kahnawake, Quebec

by Judith Cohen

*L'auteure évoque les souvenirs de son amie, une femme sépharade de la Bosnie qui a vécu dans une réserve Mohawk du Québec pendant plus de trente ans.*

Nina Vuckovic spent 30 years of her life on the Kahnawake Mohawk reserve, near Montreal. I visited her there often.

In Nina's house, opposite the Chief Poking Fire Museum, Greek and Yugoslav embroideries and handwoven rugs, samovars, European art books, and feather-head-dresses were juxtaposed in an unlikely harmony. Nina would serve us *huevos haminados*,<sup>1</sup> *burek*,<sup>2</sup> and Turkish coffee. A Serbian *kolo* dance tune would often play on the record player. The Sephardic population of the reserve consisted entirely of Nina, and, until his death several years before I met her, Nina's husband.

How Nina and her husband came to be living on a Mohawk reserve requires two stories: Nina's and the Canadian Sephardic community. Sephardic refers specifically to the descendants (often including cultural descendants) of the exiled Iberian Jews. It has, however, come to be used somewhat confusingly, to refer to almost any non-Ashkenazi Jews. In Canada, the Sephardic population is referred to in this latter "pan-Sephardic" mode. Within it, the Judeo-Spanish<sup>3</sup> speakers are a minority, several hundred families living mostly in Montreal and Toronto. Within that minority, Judeo-Spanish Sephardim from the former Ottoman lands are another minority; most are from northern Morocco. There are really only a handful of families in Canada from Turkey, Bosnia, Greece, Bulgaria, and other former Ottoman areas—the opposite of the demographic situation in the States.

So, of necessity, most of my work recording Judeo-Spanish songs and traditions in the Canadian Sephardic community has taken place with Sephardim from northern Morocco, especially Tangier, Tetuan, Larache, and Alcazarquivir. Over the years, I have been privileged to record and learn from many women in these communities (some men too!). But in general, the Judeo-Spanish repertoire is kept alive and transmitted by women, while men occupy themselves more with Hebrew and the liturgy.

One evening in the early 1980's, *Gerineldo*—a Montreal-based Moroccan Judeo-Spanish ensemble, of which I am its only non-Sephardic member<sup>4</sup>—had invited Flory Jagoda to perform with us for the Sephardic community in Montreal. Flory, like Nina, is from Bosnia, though she grew up in a small mountain town outside Sarajevo. Now she's a grandmother in her 70s, singing the songs of her own grandmother (*Nona*), with three albums of Bosnian

Judeo-Spanish songs to her credit and an international following. At intermission, I heard her speaking Serbo-Croatian with a diminutive, white-haired lady. This, of course, was Nina, who promptly invited me to visit her in Kahnawake. "Kahnawake???"

"Just come to see me there and I'll tell you all about it."

On my first visit, as we drank our Turkish coffee with beaten egg yolks, Nina told me her story, and let me tape it. She came from a wealthy Jewish family in Sarajevo. She and her husband regularly entertained in their large house, and she was known as a generous patroness of the arts. She and Flory both played accordion and piano, and sang—at that time, Flory was still a teenager. Now, Nina went on wistfully, she herself no longer played accordion, because the instrument had grown too heavy for her. When I asked if she still sang, she went into the back room. In a moment, a haunting melody floated out from a baby grand piano, and over it Nina's voice, fragile but still sweet and true, was singing a well-known Bosnian *sevdalinka*, *Kad ja podoh na Bembashu*.<sup>5</sup> When she returned to the living room, I realized who she was. "Nina," I said quietly, "you must be the *Bulbul*!"

Tears filled her eyes. How had I known that? Not long before, I'd read Rebecca West's stunning book about Yugoslavia, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. In one of the chapters on Sarajevo was an affectionate portrait of a young Sephardic Jewish woman, who lived in a gracious house, a patroness of the arts who had a beautiful singing voice which had earned her the nickname of "nightingale"—*bulbul*.<sup>6</sup> She made more coffee and told the rest of her story.

When World War II broke out, Nina's house was commandeered almost immediately by the invaders. She and Flory ended up on an island in the Adriatic. Eventually Flory went on to Italy and then America, while Nina and her husband were sent to a camp in the Sinai. Nina spoke English, and translated for the Red Cross nurse who, one day, showed her a brand-new book—none other than *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. Nina looked through the sections on Sarajevo and showed the nurse the part about herself. The nurse said nothing then, but quietly wrote to Rebecca West care of the publisher and the authoress responded. "You see?" Nina said. "A language is a treasure." Nina and her husband were finally able to leave the camp (though their children, said Nina, didn't want to leave the cats). When they were permitted to emigrate to Canada, Nina's husband, a doctor, offered to work with any First Nation or Inuit community needing medical help. At the time, Kahnawake had no resident doctor. That's how a Bosnian-Sephardic couple ended up on a Mohawk reserve.

After Dr. Vuckovic' death, rather than join her adult children in the city, Nina preferred to stay on "with my Mohawk friends, they are my family now." She had helped her husband deliver many of the babies and



Nina Vuckovic with Judith Cohen, Kahnawake, Québec, 1984.

watched them grow up and have children of their own. When I met her she was in her 80s, still volunteering her time to help the physically disabled on the reserve, and still taking the long train trip to New York every so often to visit and help care for an aunt even older than she was. One particularly cold winter, when I phoned her, she told me all the water pipes on the reserve had frozen, and she was lining up every day in sub-zero temperatures to get her ration of bottled water trucked in from Montreal.

In 1986 many First Nations people regained the status which had been taken away from them or their parents in earlier decades. Suddenly, numerous people were moving into the reserve, and Nina was told that the house she rented (as a non-First Nations person, she hadn't been able to buy it) was needed and she would have to leave the reserve after having lived there over thirty years. She was heart-broken. I visited her, with my daughter, Tamar, shortly after she had rented a small apartment in Montreal. She played with Tamar, then barely two, but it was clear her heart wasn't in it, and she spoke in an absent, preoccupied way entirely unlike her usual sparkling animation. A few months later, Nina died.

I will not forget this unique person, her pure voice, her humour and humanity—or her unique Canadian diaspora.

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<sup>1</sup>Or, in Serbo-Croatian, *sefardski yaya*, Sephardic eggs: eggs cooked with the *hamin* or Sabbath casserole, or, slow-cooked alone for several hours with onion skins, to give them a delicate colour and taste, and a long "shelf life."

<sup>2</sup>Phyllo pastry filled with meat or cheese.

<sup>3</sup>The commonly used term *Ladino* technically refers only to literal translations from Hebrew, such as the *Haggadah* (Passover narrative) or the *Song of Songs*, not to the spoken language. Moroccans observe this distinction, using *haketta* to refer to the vernacular; former Ottoman-area ("eastern") Sephardim used *spaniol* or sometimes *djudezmo*, but *Ladino* has become increasingly popular. Though "Judeo-Spanish," the umbrella term, is awkward, it includes all the possibilities, and many eastern Sephardim now use it too, saying *Judeo-Espanyol*. "Sephardim" is the plural noun, meaning "Sephardic Jews."

<sup>4</sup>*Gerineldo*, based in Montreal, is composed of four core members: founder-director Dr. Oro Anahory-Librowicz, Kelly Sultan Amar, Solly Levy, and myself. We often invite Moroccan-Israeli Charly Edry as our guest artist, on Middle East-style violin, and my daughter, Tamar Cohen Adams, now ten, has sung with us on an occasional basis since she was six. Oro is a specialist in Judeo-Spanish folktales and balladry, Kelly has been a soloist in Montreal's Sephardic choir, and as our only male member, Solly specializes in the northern Moroccan Sephardic liturgical repertoire and also authored the three musical theatre works we perform, in *haketta*. One of these plays is issued on a video, and we have produced four recordings of traditionally performed songs which we learn directly from oral tradition.

<sup>5</sup>Basically, a love song, from Turkish *sevda*. Nina said: "it can be the love for a river, a mountain, it doesn't even have to be the love of a boy for a girl." This particular song is also sung as an *ilahi* (Turkish Muslim hymn) and in Judeo-Spanish and Hebrew at the end of the Sabbath.

<sup>6</sup>Farsi, adopted by neighbouring languages: Arabic, Turkish, and Slavic languages of the former Ottoman area.

## References

West, Rebecca. *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. New York: Viking, 1941.