

***Folktales of the Canadian Sephardim.* By André E. Elbaz, ed.  
(Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1983, Pp. 192)**

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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left. However, as George Cockayne says: "I think it's a privilege to be poor, as long as you've got a few brains to make something out of nothing."

The second part of the study consists of a catalogue of Cockayne's work. Each item is photographed, documented and enlivened by Cockayne's observations. He liked to potter around and collect anything that might come in useful at a later date. He recycled everything with artful inventiveness. I am thinking of No. 37 "Horse head". This carved horse's head has real teeth. They are George's \$ 50.00 teeth, "a lovely set of teeth, but I could never wear them".

A carved and painted board depicts the house of his neighbours who were killed on the railway track in the winter of 1973. Two crows fly over the house "meaning they died, get the idea . . . that man was my neighbour for thirty-five years, think of all the memories." Mr. Inglis has carefully noted Cockayne's speech pattern and reading the text is like listening to a tape. George Cockayne's down-to-earth philosophy, his sense of humour, his cheerful acceptance of life and his innovative capacity of "making use of things" shine through the study. At first he did not sign his work, but when he found people paid money for his carvings, he decided to add a signature. Sometimes this takes the form of a line, "this is a Cockayne" or to go one better "this is another Cockayne".

George Cockayne is losing his sight and how long he will be able to continue his bachelor existence on the farm is uncertain. Some of his carvings serve as markers so he can find his way around the property. His carving days may soon be over, but his spirit can not be dimmed.

His work is difficult to define. Some of it is crude, some humorous like the "First Lady" who serves as a doorpost and some very fine like the woman's body carved on a shelf bracket in the 1930's. As Jean-François Blanchette, Head, Material Culture Research, says

in his foreword: "This book is eloquent testimony that progress in the study of folk art will depend on our considerations not only of the works in this genre, but also of the artists at work and of the forces underlying the relationship between artist and creations."

Stephen Inglis' sensitive approach to a folk artist and his work is a moving example of how we should look at the bright world of folk art.

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### **Folktales of the Canadian Sephardim**

*By André E. Elbaz, ed.*

*(Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1983, Pp. 192)*

This volume presents 80 authentic oral tales selected from a larger collection of 341 narratives collected by the editor from Moroccan-born Sephardim in Quebec, Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto. The 43 informants, 31 men and 12 women ranging in age from 30 to 84 years, narrated their tales in Judeo-Arabic, French, Judeo-Spanish, or Hebrew, in descending order of frequency. *Folktales of the Canadian Sephardim* is an English version of the original French manuscript attractively illustrated by R. Benchetrit. It includes a short glossary of non-English terms used in the texts, a selected bibliography, an index of informations, type and motif indices, as well as a brief general index.

According to the author, 15,000 Moroccan Sephardim made their way to Canada in the 1960s and 1970s from important urban centres as well as from the mountains of the High Atlas. Three distinct cultures had contributed to give form to the Moroccan Sephardic community in its native land: the surrounding Arabo-Berber majority, with the longest impact; the French, due to the colonial presence and that of the Alliance Israélite Universelle; and lastly

the Spanish, effective mostly in the north, in Spanish Morocco. The westernization of the urban sector of this Jewish community, therefore, began long before its emigration to Canada. Upon leaving the land of their forefathers, the Jews took away with them a varied educational background as well as a socio-cultural and folkloric heritage. In Canada, they came under the influence of Anglo-Saxon culture which naturally accelerated the process of distancing them from their ancestral mores.

Elbaz examines this singular culture through its oral tradition which he considers a symbolic representation of the "collective consciousness of the traditional Sephardic community" in Morocco. There, the folklore of the Sephardim, an isolated and deeply religious group, was greatly influenced by local elements and by Arabo-Berber traditions such as the cult of the marabouts. A marabout is a dervish or Moslem ascetic who devotes his life to contemplation and to the study of the Koran. Credited with supernatural powers, he is devoutly revered by the masses. Among the Jews of Morocco, the syncretic process applied characteristics of the Islamic marabout to rabbis believed to be miracle-workers. Many a local wise man or rabbi was thus venerated, at times by both Jews and Moslems. The tales often testify to the protection afforded by these Jewish holy men to those who have faith in their supernatural ability or merit their help.

Other tales express mythical and religious beliefs, borrowed from Talmudic and Midrashic sources. Elbaz raises the question as to whether such Jewish tales, which enter the oral stream from traditional written sources, can in fact be considered oral literature. Most of the informants are older, respectful of religion and ancestral traditions. Their tales reflect this attitude in their depiction of a people also respectful of traditional practices and ethical precepts. The setting for the tales is often in familiar surroundings, a town or city known

to teller and audience alike and inhabited by relatives, friends, and neighbors, as well as by "miracle-working rabbis, angels of God, witch-craft, with its accompaniment of magic, charms, incantations, exorcisms, protective amulets, *jnun*, *ghouls*, and other occult powers, the evil eye, etc.". It shows a world in which the evil eye holds immense power and in which superstition and belief in predestination and in miracles prevail. Many of these practices are accepted as true by informants.

Religious and political figures as well as Biblical personages and restrictions can be ridiculed with impunity in the tales, which also become a vehicle whereby the simple people poke fun at themselves and at their neighbors, and reveal a wide range of feelings which would otherwise remain unexpressed. They tell a story of oppression and abuse in the midst of a sometimes hostile nation where Jews believed they could only be saved through miraculous intervention or by their wits. In their interpersonal relationship with their Jewish neighbors Moslems are depicted as cruel or naive. The Jew as the underdog is usually afraid of them and, in order to save himself or his community, he has to draw upon his bag of tricks when supernatural help is not forthcoming. He usually comes out victorious against his enemies.

This volume also includes etiological tales clarifying unexplained local phenomena as well as edifying tales condemning cruelty to animals, hypocrisy among the overly pious, dishonesty towards Moslems, and exalting charity, hospitality, and friendship. In contrast, several tales are anecdotal while others are humorous, having as a central figure *Jha*, the famous numskull of the Moslem world. Perhaps, rather than group the narrations by teller, Elbaz should have grouped them for the benefit of the reader, according to one or two basic elements, such as a central theme or character. It would have resulted in a

more focused or organized view of the culture in question.

Elbaz appends to his collection the "Ballad of Sol the Just," in English, as well as another version in Spanish, with a free English translation. Although he chooses the term "Judeo-Spanish" to identify the dialect used by his informants, it does not apply to the transcription of the ballad. The question remains as to whether the author mistakenly identifies the language or simply transcribes it incorrectly, allowing himself to be influenced by modern Castilian. It is also curious that he does not use "Hakitia" which is the term generally applied to the dialect of the Sephardim of northern Morocco.

The editor accurately points out that his collection belongs to a passive repertoire since there appears to be no Canadian public for the Sephardic performers of tales. There are seldom authentic tale-swapping sessions in their natural context in Canada. Such events are understandably rare in the foreign and uninspiring surroundings of their new homes, where the ethnicity of the group is being rapidly undermined and eroded by the proximity of the mainstream culture. The observation by Elbaz that he attended only three authentic traditional storytelling sessions which, furthermore, were organized on his behalf, points unmistakably to the fact that younger and modernized Moroccan Sephardim in Canada have lost faith and interest in the legends of their once revered marabouts. It is difficult for newcomers to escape the acculturating pressures of life in a new country and even more difficult to resist the powerful desire to belong and to be accepted by the country of adoption.

In the traditional context of Elbaz's narrators, the tales bear the stamp of authenticity. To support the truth they relate, many of the tellers note that they witnessed a miraculous event themselves or heard it directly from a reliable source who is often a relative and frequently a descendant of the respected

rabbi. With the radical change of environment, however, a change in attitude also occurs. Some tellers who in the old country firmly believed in their legends now candidly show signs of uncertainty about whether to continue giving credence to them. Others who still retain their faith in these customs are frequently almost apologetic about them. In addition, the removal from the original cultural context of the tales has adversely affected their transmission process, favoring the introduction of anachronistic details and eliminating many of the conventional formulas, although traditional euphemisms and code-switching still occur. Elbaz tells us that the community character of this distinctive ethnic group has suffered a radical change in the New World but his selection of tales scarcely illustrates this point, unlike Jerome Mintz's collection, *Legends of the Hasidim*, for example, which shows curious Hasidic adjustments to life in the United States as well as traditional beliefs, daily customs, life style, and values, as reflected in the legends.

One of the particularly attractive features of this volume is the deep understanding that Elbaz brings to his collection and to the tellers he interviewed. Himself a native Moroccan Sephardi, he gives an insightful interpretation of their devotion to local saints in Morocco and of the subsequent transplantation to a far away land where such customs and beliefs could scarcely survive. Although he nostalgically responds to the culture he studies, he approaches it from a scientific point of view and successfully accomplishes his stated goals. He collects authentic texts in the original tongue of the informants and provides us with verified translations. He gives us information about the tellers, indicating the name, age, profession, and place of birth of each individual. He also offers contextual information regarding the surrounding ambiances of story-telling sessions as well as of the original cultural context of the tales.

Although his selection gives but a glimpse of the world view of his subjects, Elbaz's interpretation is sound and perceptive and results in the arousal of interest in the intriguing Moroccan-Sephardic tradition with its syncretic characteristics and its deeply-rooted faith in the supernatural. One is left wanting more, such as details about the daily life of the common people, special occasions, values, and customs. One hopes that the entire collection will be published soon to offer a more complete picture and broader view of the rich culture it depicts. This is an immigrant culture in transition. Now is the time to focus on it.

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**Songs of the Iron Trail:  
The Canadian Railroad Experience in  
Song**

*By Barry Luft and Tim Rogers with Grit Laskin;  
Patty Rogers, bass, Roy Warhurst,  
fiddle.*  
(Calgary: Sefel Records Ltd, 1983.  
SEF83/T01)

To begin with, I must say that it is hard to say much about this album without quoting at least 65% of whatever one might need directly from the liner notes: "It is a mosaic of songs about the tremendous impact that the railroad has had on the lives of Canadians as our country has evolved. An impact that is so much a part of our history that it is impossible to visualize Canada — as a country — without reference to the railroad".

This is for the most part a very smooth piece of work, from "Dennis Budgen's marvellous painting for the cover" —

"tasty"/"delicious" was my first reaction — through the liner notes and performance and recording quality. Last first for simplicity: clearly recorded and very cleanly pressed. Nicely balanced too, all the instrumental work is there in its fullest clarity for you to enjoy and swipe licks from, and none of it overrides the word/voice combination which is the heart of this or any folk music. "I need more guitar in the mix, more!" Nonsense; here the instrumentation is best subordinate to the voice. Did you ever notice the incongruity of addressing any singer/songwriter or traditional balladeer with, "What kind of music do you play?" so commonly asked, instead of "What kind of music do you sing?"? Back to the words. The songs have been selected in such a way that since their individual contents have a great deal of detail spreading out from the core of each piece, the totality is an effect of a much more complete coverage/cross-view than is actually possible within the scope of a single LP. Very pleasing. You would not convince me that the Canadian railroad experience might actually be well covered in eleven songs... All the more reason to own this LP. All of this is enhanced by good notes that give background, settings and sources to the proper degree (for me, anyhow) of fulfilment, that I might visualize the action musically taking place, or feel conveniently pointed in the right direction to look, did I feel I had to know more. Nokena's comments, from which the album title is taken, are as valuable as they are funny; both, because of their outside perspective. That I can always take more of, for the insight as well as the giggles, and for the savoury consciousness thereof.

For me, the "choice centre cuts" on this platter are "Hudson Bay Line", the touching "Prairie Harvesters' Song", "Hobo's Song to the Mounties", "B.C. Rail" and "Wreck of the Evening Mail"; the others are "heavy outside cuts": good, crisp and tasty, but a bit thick. That is not a putdown, as Tim