

Notes from the Field

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Faro, Portugal, June 2011.

Hi,
I just received an email from our new Editor of CFM, Gillian Turnbull, inviting me to start off the new “Notes from the Field” column. Years ago, I initiated the “EthnoFolk Letters” column in the “Bulletin” incarnation of CFM, and it seemed a good idea to make the transition to this column.

This is actually an atypical “field” summer for me: usually I’m based in Spain and Portugal all summer, and take advantage of low cost airlines to take side trips – singing and/or doing research in the Balkans and the Baltics, in Turkey or Greece or Israel or Morocco or wherever. But this summer I’m only briefly here on this side of what Spaniards call the “pool”, the *charco* – the Atlantic – before heading back to Washington DC, where the “field” is my cubicle at the Kluge Center of the Library of Congress.

As the first Alan Lomax Fellow of the American Folklife Center / John W. Kluge Center, my project is a combination of Alan Lomax’s “notes from the field”, from his Spanish trip in 1952, and my own field experiences in many of the same villages over half a century later. My cubicle is in the Kluge Center, in the spectacular Jefferson Building of the LC, a floor up from the American Folklife Center, where the Lomax materials are actually held. As soon as my marks were handed in to York’s music department in April, I took the midnight bus from Toronto to DC (Megabus, for a total of \$5.50). In Washington, or rather just over the Maryland border, I rent a room in the spacious old house of singer-songwriter Jennifer Cutting, a folklife specialist at the AFC, and during my very first week in DC found myself playing hand percussion for her Ocean Band in a Faerie Festival in Pennsylvania.



Before I knew what had happened, Jennifer had dressed me up in ocean blues and greens with ribbons braided through my hair and sparkling purple Faerie Gloves. (For better or for worse, she was out of Faerie Wings that day, and the usual Wings vendor at the festival wasn't there.) Fellow AFC folklorist Steve Winick was there too, as a singer, and a key member of the Beneficent Order of Green Men; yet another AFC colleague, Stephanie Hall, came along and took splendid photos. The morning after the festival I was up by 5:30 to walk over to the Takoma Park green, where Morris Dancers were dancing in the May sunrise. And here is a phrase I have never before used in any publication: you can check the photos out on my Facebook page.

I had longstanding commitments to a couple of conferences in Portugal, and in between them visited

my daughter, Tamar, whom some of you readers know. She's just finishing a year studying flamenco singing at a flamenco academy in Seville, where the idea of Gitano ("Gypsy") singers showing up at 9:00 a.m. to teach flamenco in classrooms has many people (including the Gypsies and the students) shaking their heads. While in Seville, I took the opportunity to go to a couple of nearby villages to track down a few more people whom Lomax had recorded in 1952. It was the fiesta of the Virgin of the Rocio (Dew), and there were processions through Seville's oldest, narrow, cobblestoned streets, with extravagantly decorated ox-drawn carts (one had to press up against the doorways to avoid being accidentally gored by ox horns), a marching band and a *tamborilero* with his pipe and tabor, playing entirely different music at the same time.



In the villages, enquiries in local bars produced the information that several of the singers Lomax recorded in 1952 had passed away, and their children had moved elsewhere. But the “tamborilero de Bollullos” was still alive and physically well, they told me, but suffering from Alzheimer’s. I found the house, and his wife and daughter welcomed me in but warned that it had been years since José Manuel had been capable of having a conversation. He had been only a bit over 20 when Lomax recorded him as a tamborilero (i.e., performer on the three-holed pipe and tabor) in 1952. I took out my little netbook, found the relevant MP3s, and clicked on Lomax’s recording of José Manuel playing “Alba y camino”. To his wife and daughter’s surprise, he perked up immediately and listened attentively. I asked whether they still had his three-holed flute and they said yes, although they’d sold the drum years earlier. “May I see it?” And when his wife took the flute out of the drawer, José Manuel picked it up and began to play, one melody after another, for the first time in years. Then he shook his head and said, perfectly rationally, “The mouthpiece has dried out; let me see if I can fix it.” He tinkered with it a bit and played some more. His wife and daughter were astonished.

Change of venue – now back in Madrid, writing from an outdoor café off the main square, after a long meeting with Argentinian colleagues who also work with Sephardic music. From my vantage point at the café, I’m watching a noise-making mini-parade of the remnants of the protestors who have been occupying the square for a couple of months. There’s also a mariachi band, two Romanian brothers playing cimbalom and accordion, and several students singing and clapping flamenco songs. Street music in Spain is pretty ubiquitous – at the bus stop returning from the village to Seville the other day, a small group of “Trianeras” (women from the Triana neighbourhood) were dancing and singing.



I held up my camcorder with a questioning look, and they responded by singing more loudly, with cheerfully off-colour lyrics and clapping flamenco rhythms in the bus (when it finally showed up), all the way back to the Seville. I’ve just sent them copies of the videos, and also sent the tamborilero’s family both Lomax’s and my recordings of José Manuel.

Between Seville and Faro, I’d been at a conference in Lisbon, the Music and Media section of the International Musicological Society. It was also Portugal Day, and then it was Lisbon Day and then St. Anthony’s Day, one after the other, so there were street processions and parades and, of course, grilled sardines at improvised street stands. I had to go back to Madrid before the ballad conference in Faro, to listen to the Kurt Schindler Spanish recordings from 1932, which have finally been digitized and are in only one library, at the old student residence where the great poet García Lorca often stayed – his piano is still there. On the way, I took the bus from Lisbon to the village where I’ve been doing field work off and on with the Crypto-Jews for the past 15 years, but this time I was there only for a quick visit to them and my neighbouring Cigano (Gypsy) friends; also, to have a reunion with a couple who were there visiting family. They left the village some years ago to live in a small town in Germany, where, they say, they can live an ordinary Jewish life without anthropologists and tourists constantly coming to see them and treating them like an exhibit in a human zoo. They didn’t mean me, of course – or at least I hope not.

Back to Madrid on the bus – which arrived in the village 90 minutes late because the driver had decided to have lunch earlier than the schedule specified – where I spent two days listening to the digitized recordings of Schindler’s aluminum discs, made in some of the same villages Lomax recorded in exactly twenty years later. I stopped by the Sephardic synagogue and, next door, did my usual short interview at Radio Sefarad, for whom I recorded a series on Sephardic songs this past winter.

Then to Faro. The conference (International Ballad Symposium) included two concerts. The first was a small group of energetic women in their 70s and 80s, singing their oldest songs, including a few ballads, accompanied by two younger men on accordion and guitar and directed by a priest – a pretty typical set-up in Portuguese villages. The opinion among conference participants was somewhat divided – some thought it was all wonderful, one confessed to me that he thought it was boring, and a few thought it was “a shame” that they had to add melody instruments, played by men, and, especially, that they had to be directed by

another man, with the authority of the church. (The second piece he chose for their programme was a very long, slow, drawn-out Christmas song, in late June.)

The second concert was by a professional women's ensemble, Cramol, which for many years has specialized in traditional women's polyphony from Portugal, especially, though not exclusively, the northwest. (Anyone from York who was at my students' World Music Chorus concert in March heard one of these pieces.) Reaction to them was uniformly enthusiastic, though again, the revelation that their director was a man was met with some perplexity. After both concerts, the managers of the little club space let us stay till 1:00 a.m. to sing; it's traditional at the ballad symposium for participants to trade ballads at least one evening. At this meeting there was the usual mix of people from various countries in the Americas, and from Latvia, Hungary, Norway, Serbia, Sweden, England, Turkey, Italy, etc. I think someone tallied 31 countries (and we were only about 60 people). Most of us sang a capella, though there was a *bağlama* and also a mandolin at some point, as well as my frame drums. The last night in Faro was St. John's Eve, with music and grilled sardines and street theatre all night long. In between, I also visited the old Jewish cemetery-museum and was given the historical tour by the elderly couple who developed and maintain everything on their own.

Venue change: Spanair flight Madrid-Washington D.C. Back in Madrid from Faro, along with a meeting with Argentinian Sephardic colleagues on their way back to Buenos Aires after touring in Spain and Israel. We'd been in touch over the internet for some years and I never cease to marvel at the charm of meeting e-friends face to face. So, these "notes from the field" are not nearly as field-focused as they would be almost any other summer, or, indeed some other seasons. Besides the usual fairly intensive fieldwork in Spain and Portugal, and in far-flung Sephardic communities – late summer 2009 singing and interviewing people in my grandparents' home towns of Riga and Vilnius... in recent years, also the south of Italy... Morocco... Prague... Israel... Turkey... Bulgaria... and this past fall, via a musicology conference, a reunion in Sarajevo with a Muslim family who had rescued my sister and myself outside a mountain village 31 years earlier. And there's all the field work I *didn't* do this time – why didn't I take the time to interview the protestors still camping out in the main squares of Madrid and Seville about what they were singing and/or listening to?

But I often recall, rather sadly, something an anthropology doctoral candidate said to me when we

met in a village in Portugal years ago, "it's all data", she kept repeating, "all data". It's made me wary of being too quick to consider people in a fieldwork context. With that, I'll close this file, ready to send off to Gillian, and consider the work from Lomax's and my own field notes to take up tomorrow morning, back in My Cubicle. Meanwhile, I see on the airplane map screen that we are flying over Newfoundland, where I will see many of you in just a very few weeks – or, by the time you read this, where I will have seen you. Notes from the field, notes from over the ocean -

Judith Cohen. Faro / Madrid / Somewhere over the Atlantic. June 2011.



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