

Video Clip: Bouena Sarfatty Garfinkle

The Kompla Queen

Born in Salonica, Greece, in 1916, Bouena Sarfatty Garfinkle grew up in an historic Ladino-speaking Sephardic community. However, in 1941, when the Nazis invaded Greece, Garfinkle's warm upbringing was tragically interrupted. Bouena recorded much of what she witnessed during the occupation in writings, interviews, and poetry she penned in Ladino. She is best known for her *coplas*, a unique poetry style.

Suggested Implementations

Language Arts

1. Poetry styles: *coplas*

History

1. World War II and the Holocaust
2. Illegal immigration into Palestine
3. The Jewish city of Salonica

Background

Born in 1916, to a soon-to-be single mother, Bouena was one of six children. When she was about three years old, her father passed away, leaving the oldest child, Eliyahu, to become the new head of the family. In her youth, Bouena was raised in Zionist movements such as Keren HaYesod, while simultaneously integrated into Salonica's high society, attending debutante balls from the age of 18.

However, when the Nazis invaded in 1941, things began to change in the city. Salonica saw its young women leaving their exciting and whimsical lives to volunteer for the Red Cross, distributing food to the poor. Starting in July 1942, the Nazis sent the city's young Jewish men to forced labor camps, many of whom died of starvation. As a volunteer cook with the Red Cross, Bouena often overheard what became of the young Jewish men. She even wrote Ladino *komplas* on the news she was hearing. And, she was able to convey information to the family of those men who were taken, valuable information about their whereabouts and status.

One particularly striking story recorded in her poetry is the time that she and her sisters brought bread and water to POWs and noticed a wounded British soldier with a mezuzah on his chest. They courageously snuck him into their home, attempting to take care of his wounds but ultimately to no avail, as the soldier died of a fever. They buried him secretly that very night, risking severe consequences for the entire Jewish community in Salonica. Fortunately, they were not discovered and Bouena's descendants today still have that mezuzah.

Bouena notoriously struggled with the local head of the collaborators, Vital Hasson. His brutal persecution of Bouena started when he beat her and forced her to drink such an excessive amount of the powdered milk that she became sick. His perverse vendetta against Bouena, which was intricately described in her *komplas*, culminated in Hasson informing the Nazi authorities that Haim, Bouena's fiancé, had fled his labor camp. They promptly killed him on his wedding day. While walking to what she thought was her wedding she found Haim slain under the *huppah* at the Beit Midrash.

For her perceived role in her murdered fiancé's escape, Bouena was forced into the Pablo Mela prison run by the local Nazi headquarters. A partisan disguised himself as a Nazi officer and successfully ordered that she be released. After the war, Bouena searched for her rescuer but learned that he had been killed by Nazis. Bouena managed to escape and board a train; she later claimed that while boarding the train, she saw Hasson, who for an unknown reason did not turn her into the authorities.

Bouena reached northeastern Thrace, where she became known as Maria (Martisa) Serafamidou. Fighting with the partisans, Bouena smuggled children to safety in Palestine, consistently risking her life throughout the journey. At first, she joined the Loyalist partisans and eventually fought alongside the Communist partisans. But for her it was about saving her people, not the politics behind it. She also attended to the injured and pregnant throughout that mission. She served with the partisans for the rest of the war.

After the war, in June 1945, Bouena returned to Greece with the Palestinian Jewish Relief Unit of UNRRA. Bouena posed as a dietician while her real goal was to set up an undercover operation to establish an underground railroad leading to Palestine. While there, she learned that her brother Eliyahu, sister Regina, grandmother and aunts were all murdered in Auschwitz.

In Greece, Bouena met her husband Max Garfinkle, the unit's quartermaster. They married in 1946 and moved to Max's kibbutz, Ein ha-Shofet. However, being a strong, proud Sephardi Jew, she found that the Ashkenazi kibbutz did not accept her, despite her Zionist and partisan activities. The Garfinkles moved to Montreal in 1947 where she lived for the rest of her life and wrote her memoirs. Bouena died on July 23, 1997, but the *komplas* and writings she left behind are a living testimony to the destroyed world of Salonican Jewry, a vanished but once rich and colorful heritage.

~Notes on *Coplas*~

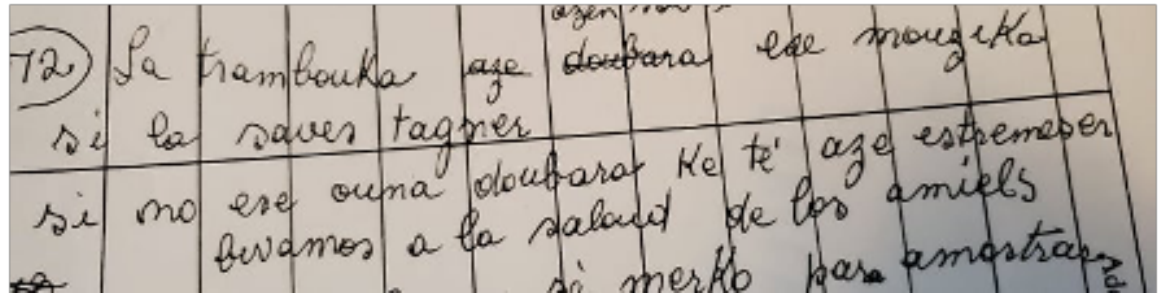
Salonican Jews was known for their *coplas*, the Spanish word for a four-line stanza, usually a rhyme. Bouena wrote down many of the community's *coplas* from before the war but she also had her own twist on them. She used the term *komplā* to describe a *copla* in the form of a toast, often improvised at the Shabbat table. The name of the person or organization being toasted usually rhymed with the last line of the *komplā*, like this one:

*The drum is music[al] if you know how to play it
If not, it's a noise that makes you shudder
Let's drink to the health of the Amiels.*

[see link to Dr. Judith Cohen's recording of the *komplā*].

*La trambouka ese mouzika si la saves tagner
 si non ese ouna doubara ke tè aze estremeser
 bivamos a la saloud de los Amiels.*

Cohen collection: BSG-JRC Komplas 72-1
 (Melammed #268, p. 94)



Bouena composed many *komplas* herself, while other *komplas* were popular in the neighborhood or circulated in local Ladino papers. Even children made them up. She told ethnomusicologist Dr. Judith Cohen that she'd compose a *kompla* and recite it to a neighbor who would then add to it. "We'd write down a new one as soon as we heard it."

Because most *komplas* are short and simple, one can easily imagine families sitting around the table and taking turns improvising them, or people quoting them later.

The later *komplas* in the Cohen BSG collection are longer and more complex with less, or even devoid completely of assonance. These were the ones that coincided with WWII. These include a set that reveals uncomfortable confrontations with the leader of the Jewish collaborators, Vital Hasson. One is particularly tragic in telling about her close friend Sarah:

Sarah Trabout sè kazo kon el ermano de Hasson. El padre atheto porke sè espanto. Hasson lé dicho o estè kazamento sè va azer o tous ijos van a despareser. La houpa sè izo kon flores i ouna ermoza limouzine pasearon a los novios a las kayes del Baron de Hirsch bivamos a la saloud de Sarah ke se kazo kon un antisemite

(Cohen 19-4 1982)

Sarah Trabout married Hasson's brother.

Her father agreed because he was intimidated

Hasson told him, "either this wedding takes place or your children will disappear."

The Hipparchus was prepared with flowers and a beautiful limousine took the newlyweds through the streets of Baron de Hirsch.

Let's drink to the health of Sarah who married an antisemite.

Many of the songs Bouena wrote were recorded by Judith Cohen in 1981-1982. Like the *komplas*, the songs ranged from light-hearted and satirical to Biblical stories connected with the Holocaust. "Nada de

nada,” the first song she chose to sing for Cohen, refers to the recurring theme of “hevel havalim” from the book of *Kohelet*, or *Lamentations* – these words were used as used as a Sephardi coded greeting.

Collection Judith Cohen #22-4

*Judit te souheto suxes a estè projeto,
Espero ke algouno t`e va ayoudar
I lo vas aprintar estè modo el moundo
Va saber koualo foueron izieron) los Almanes
Komo destrouyeron famias a Salonique a djouderia de Salonique.
Bivamos a la saloud de tou suxes kon alegria*

*Judith, I wish you success in this project,
I hope someone will help you
And that you'll publish it; thus, the whole world
Will know what the Germans there did
How they destroyed families in the Jewish quarter of Salonika.
Let's drink to the health of your success with happiness.
(Translation: J. Cohen)*

Questions for Discussion

1. When we think of the Holocaust we think of Eastern Europe. However, the Jewish population of Salonica was all but decimated by the Nazis, many sent to Auschwitz. What do we know about the city of Salonica and its Jewish population? What were the effects of the Holocaust there?
2. What does it say about Jewish prejudice that a partisan who helped save Jewish lives was discriminated against for being Sephardi?
3. After reading about the *komplas*, take a period of a hero's life and write a *kompla* about it. Then write one about a period of your own life. Which is more difficult? Which comes more naturally? Why?

Suggested Readings

Cohen, Judith R. *Selanikli Humour in Montreal: the Repertoire of Bouena Sarfatty Garfinkle (1916-1997)*. Judeo Espaniol. Ets Ahaim Foundatiohn, Thessaloniki, 2011.

Cohen, Judith R. *Three Canadian Sephardic Women and their Transplanted Repertoires: From Salonica, Larache, and Sarajevo to Montreal and Kahnawa:ke*. Folk Music, Traditional Music, Ethnomusicology: Canadian Perspectives Past and Present. Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007: 150-162.

Melammed, Renée Levine. *An Ode to Salonika: The Ladino Verses of Bouena Sarfatty*. Indiana University Press, 2013