

WE CONTINUE OUR SERIES, BASED ON INTERVIEWS AND IMAGES FROM THE ARCHIVE OF SEPHARDI VOICES UK, THAT UNCOVERS THE STORIES OF SEPHARDIM FROM AROUND THE WORLD



## THIS ISSUE: Passion and couscous: life in 50s Tangier

**Bettina Caro** was born in Casablanca, Morocco, in 1955 but moved to Tangier at the age of one. She tells **Sharon Rapaport** about the vibrant traditions of her childhood

**SHARON RAPAPORT:** Tell me about your mother.

**BETTINA CARO:** She was called Estrella. She was born in Casablanca and married my father, Isaac Caro, who was her first cousin. Later on, my parents moved to Tangier with my two sisters and I. My mother, Estrella, loved to sew. She would make wedding dresses and had a nice little business as a designer and a seamstress and also taught young brides how to stitch and sew.

**SR:** Where did she learn to sew?

**BC:** It must have been from her grandmother, Mama Gimol, who was the first person to have a Singer sewing machine in Tangier. She was called 'Gimol la de maquina' – Gimol of the machine.

**SR:** Where did your mother and father meet?

**BC:** At my mother's parents in Casablanca. It was Succot. My father was a bachelor

in Tangier and involved in politics. Although they were first cousins, they lived in different cities and only met when my mother was in her twenties. My sisters and I have kept wonderful letters that they wrote to each other when they were apart. These letters are amazing – full of love and affection.

**SR:** How did they develop the relationship whilst living in different cities?

**BC:** I remember my father telling me that sometimes on Shabbat, he would drive all the way to Casablanca just to see my mother – to kiss her, to hold her hand and then go all the way back to Tangier. It was a real love story.

My father's mother had concerns about them marrying because they were such close cousins but over the years my father's family grew to love her because they realised what a wonderful lady she was.

They went on to have three daughters: my two sisters and myself.

**SR:** What did your father tell you about his childhood?

**BC:** He had a very happy childhood, but his father died young, so from the age of 12 he had to look after the family. He left the French Lycée Regnault in Tangier and started a furniture business. Then, in the early '60s my father traded in commodities, particularly in sugar and coal and travelled widely, including Cuba.

**SR:** Where did you live in Tangier?

**BC:** We had a villa near the beach. We lived in a beautiful house and led a privileged existence with maids and nannies.

**SR:** Do you remember any problem because you were Jewish?

**BC:** I never had any problems with antisemitism even during the Six Day War. My best friends in Tangier were Muslims and during the Six Day War my father, who was very involved in politics, was looked after by our Muslim friends.

**SR:** Did you have any involvement with the Jewish community?

**BC:** There were big divisions between the Jews in Tangier and also between the Jews of Tangier and Morocco. The affluent Tangier Jews felt superior to the Jews of the Mellah [the area where the poorest Jews lived], and to Jews living in the south and centre of Morocco. They would call them 'forasteros', a pejorative name for foreigners. There were a number of aristocratic families; the Toledanos, the Marques, and the Azaguri – mostly bankers. My father used to do business with them.

**SR:** Let's talk about your family traditions.

**BC:** We always started our Friday night meal with an array of cooked salads: aubergine, carrots, beetroot, peppers and more. After that we ate fish (fish represented wealth). For Saturday lunch we had meat adafina, the equivalent of the Ashkenazi cholent cooked before Shabbat. Adafina is made of chickpeas, potatoes, eggs and meat. My mother made a big pot on Friday afternoons and a little boy, a 'terrah', would collect these pots from all the neighbourhood families and take them to the local oven.

Another important tradition was the 'noche del Berberisca' – night of the Jewish bride. The bride-to-be wore a ceremonial dress called 'traje del Berberisca', which was loaned by aristocratic families. Even today, young brides wear these 2-300 year

old dresses in a pre-nuptial ceremony. Part of the tradition is to give money to charity rather than to the family lending the dress. I, and my daughters, wore such dresses when we got married.

The dress came with a chaperone, because it was very precious. The ladies of the guild would come and dress the bride.

The velvet skirt was always embroidered with symbols of fertility and longevity. The colour depended on the region of Morocco that you lived in: dark red for Tangier, blue for Tétouan in the north; emerald green for Casablanca.

The skirt had 12 long fringes representing the 12 tribes of Israel. The top was made with a loose corset embroidered with a tree of life to symbolise luck.

A wonderful sash made of gold silk was bound around the waist in the same way that a sash is tied around the Sefer Torah.

Finally, you had the headdress, a triangle with a veil, made from silk or velvet and embroidered with semi-precious or even precious stones to symbolise luck.

**SR:** Tell us about the dress you had when you got married [Caro went to university in Madrid before coming to live in London].

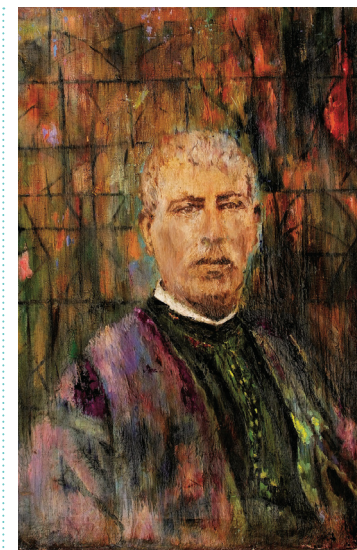
**BC:** I was married in London in June 1981. My cousin's family owns one of these beautiful dresses and she brought it from Madrid and lent it to me for the occasion.

We also celebrate these weddings with the 'noche del Berberisca', a beautiful ceremony that involves all the men going to the bride's room to escort her into the 'courtyard' to sit on a throne. And they sing 'piyutim' – wedding songs – to the bride. It is very moving.

**SR:** What about Mimouna [a North African Jewish festival celebrated on the day after Passover]?

**BC:** The Mimouna is still a big celebration. After eight days [during Passover] of being forbidden to eat flour, you welcome it back. The table is set with sweet pastries to herald a sweet year. I remember just before the end of Pesach, my mother would bake terride (also called mufletas), which are a sort of pancake made with flour, oil and water, baked in clay pots. In Tangier we would eat them with honey. People would promenade from house to house to eat terride and wish each other 'terbah' – a good year. ■

Based on an interview in the Sephardi Voices UK Archive: [www.sephardivoices.org.uk](http://www.sephardivoices.org.uk). Bettina Caro's story also features in the Sephardi Voices show at the Jewish Museum London that runs until 7 September. [www.jewishmuseum.org.uk/sephardi-voices](http://www.jewishmuseum.org.uk/sephardi-voices).



## WHAT I BROUGHT WITH ME...

Bettina Caro, who is a painter (see left, in her studio), continues to be influenced by Morocco in London

## INSPIRATION FOR MY PAINTINGS

I was given a black-and-white photo of my great-grandfather, Papa Abram. I painted him (above) with his Shabbat clothes, including a typical velvet jacket of the time. It had lots of little buttons down the front, and you can see a tiny bit of the collar at the top, which was always starched.

I painted Papa Abram with the background of the stained-glass window in the synagogue. I wanted to convey that he was a very nice, observant gentleman, and represented a typical religious Moroccan Jew of the time. I wasn't lucky enough to meet him but my father told me lovely stories about both my great-grandparents.

## THE WEDDING DRESS

When my daughters, Alessandra and Ilana (below) got married, they both wore the same 'traje del Berberisca' dress which my cousin – acting as the chaperone – brought from Spain. It was blue turquoise and made in the traditional way it is done in the north of Morocco. ■

