

New show puts Sephardi voices centre stage

Belly dancing and henna-painting are among the experiences on offer at a new festival at the Jewish Museum London. **Gaby Sheldon** reports

An exciting new show at the Jewish Museum London this summer is focusing on the experiences of the UK's Sephardi community. The exhibition, called Sephardi Voices, is co-curated by oral historian and social anthropologist Dr Bea Lewkowicz.

Bea, who is executive director of the organisation Sephardi Voices UK, says the aim of the exhibition is "to introduce the visitor to the history of the Jews from North Africa, the Middle East, and Iran, who left or were expelled from their countries following the rise of nationalism and the creation of the State of Israel post-1948. Their voices have been captured by the oral history project Sephardi Voices UK. These Jews often migrated to more than one country and their family networks span different continents."

The exhibition will grab the attention of visitors the minute they enter the museum. Displays in the museum's foyer will be based around interviews, films and photographs collected by Sephardi Voices UK. There will also be a timeline of key events in the history of Sephardi Jewry. Bea's interviews for Sephardi Voices have been running in JR over the last year and some of these will be on display.

The exhibition, which is sponsored by Dangoor Education, will also highlight how the influx of Sephardi Jews has changed the face of UK Jewry. Despite their relatively small number, the Jews of Sephardi and Mizrahi [Middle Eastern] origin represent the largest group of post-World War II Jewish migrants. "They have transformed the nature of the pre-existing Sephardi communities, such as those based at the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue at Lauderdale Road in London and Shaare Hayim Synagogue in Manchester, and have made an impact on British society in the fields of philanthropy,



business and art."

It's estimated that there are around 7,000 Sephardi and 8,000 Mizrahi Jews in the UK, representing in total about 6 per cent of British Jewry, with communities largely based in London and Manchester.

The exhibition will be linked to a wider festival of Sephardi culture. One session will feature food writers Claudia Roden, Linda Dangoor and Sami Zubaida, and co-founder of The Gate restaurant, Michael Daniel, who will be discussing the evocative food of their childhood. And if all the talk of food leaves the audience drooling, they can rest assured – falafels will be served.

In another talk, Philip Mansel, author of *Aleppo: The Rise and Fall of Syria's Great Merchant City*, will be discussing the history of Aleppo, where for hundreds of years, inhabitants of different faiths lived in relative harmony.

"In the current political climate, where religious minorities are under threat in the Middle East, it is of utmost importance to learn that Jewish communities existed for many centuries in North Africa, the Middle East and Iran. Jews were an integral part of these

Photos from Sephardi Voices interviewees: Bettina Caro's mother and sister, Tangier, 1959; Rabbi Moshe Dadoun's brit milah, Casablanca, 1952

societies. They and other minorities should not be written out of history books. Their presence should be remembered and those memories can prevent ethnic and religious conflict," says Bea.

There will be a Sephardi salon with music, belly dancing and even a Jewish Moroccan henna ceremony. Israeli musician Yair Dalal, who is of Iraqi descent, will perform Sephardi and Mizrahi music during one of the final evenings of the exhibition. There will also be a walking tour of Mile End and Stepney with Blue Badge Guide Rachel Kolsky, which will visit two historic Sephardi cemeteries.

Bea hopes the exhibition "will enrich the visitor by having encountered stories from the often neglected Sephardi and Mizrahi segment of the British Jewish community. These stories shine a light on the interviewees' stories of homes and belonging, uprooting and resettlement, trauma and resilience." ■

Sephardi Voices at the Jewish Museum, London from 8 June to 7 September in association with JR, Harif and the Jewish Music Institute. See www.jewishmuseum.org.uk. What's Happening p62. This article appeared in SHamas, the magazine of South Hampstead Synagogue. **Gaby Sheldon** is co-editor of SHamas.

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