

OFDA Research Café with Judith Cohen and Helen Winkler

By Leon Balaban

On Saturday, March 18, 2006 OFDA held a special folk dance event "Research Café" at the Ralph Thornton Centre (765 Queen E. Toronto). Two OFDA members collaborated to combine and present their research in their respective fields of interest: Judith Cohen, an ethnomusicologist, performer and instructor at York University <http://www.yorku.ca/judithc/> who's specialty is Judeo-Spanish music (also called Ladino) and Helen Winkler who teaches international and Israeli dance and who's specialty is dances of the Jews of Eastern Europe (also known as Ashkenazi). Helen also authors a web site dedicated to that dance form: www.yiddishdance.com

Another feature of that event was that for the first time, the dance music program and requests were run by volunteers who participated in the Leadership Workshop Feb 25, 2006.



The evening started at 6 PM and was attended by a record number of dancers from all various groups in Toronto and out of town too. Buffet tables were set with many varieties of salads, meats, fish, cheeses, baked goods, fruits and beverages and a festive dinner at large round tables followed.

After dinner the tables were moved and everyone joined in rows. Helen Winkler introduced the program and outlined what was to follow.



Judith started with a background review of her work and her research methods that included a lot of field work in North Africa, Europe and the Mediterranean. She explained the two main streams of the Ladino music, Moroccan and Turkish (Ottoman Empire) and the language usage of Judeo-Spanish music from ancient Castilian to later day Spanish. Judith continued to demonstrate on the tambourine the different rhythms used for songs like a difficult 9/8. To demonstrate the language used in the songs, Judith taught us a few lines from songs while accompanying herself on a Lute type medieval bowed instrument called Vielle. We had a lot of fun trying to sing and pronounce the words correctly.



Helen told us how she got interested in Yiddish dance while still living in Calgary and her efforts to find more information about the dances. She managed to compile dance descriptions and words to "tanz lieder" (dance songs) from online discussion groups and others who volunteered to translate texts or sent pictures. Now her web site became a repository of information of eastern European Jewish folk dances.



Helen started the dance portion by teaching a bridal couple dance in formation of 4 couples where alternate couples form an arch and the rest of the couples pass under. The dance was to the tune of Judith singing in Yiddish and playing the Vielle.

A "Broygez" dance (Broygez – anger in Yiddish) followed. This is a dance about a quarrelling couple who then manage to reconcile. Everyone joined in an open circle clapping hands in rhythm to the music. Judy Silver joined Helen in the middle of the circle to be part of the couple. The first steps were apart, turning backs to each other, argumentative gestures, foot stomping and pondering gestures. Slowly, with words of encouragement from the rest of the clapping dancers, the couple "reconciled" and danced together to cries of "Mazel Tov".



Helen, waving a brightly coloured sash, continued to lead the dancers in a Freylech dance, snaking around the hall to the music of Judith playing the recorder. The single line circle then split into couples and then fours while many were singing mazel tov. This was a long and joy filled dance that combined all the fun elements of Yiddish dance.

A few request dances followed and the night ended with one circle of the slow Israeli dance "Erev Ba" (evening fell). This was a most enjoyable evening; hopefully there will be more like it in the future.

OFDA (Ontario Folk Dance Association) web site: www.ofda.ca