

# 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. 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.

## Topics for Integration

1. Poetry styles: coplas
2. Underground railroads
3. World War II and the Holocaust
4. Illegal immigration into Palestine
5. The Jewish city of Salonica

## Background

Born November 15, 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 son, 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. Like many in Salonica, she was a descendent of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula.

Bouena's story is full of ups and downs. In 1940, she became engaged to a young man named Haim who was recruited to the Greek army and sent to fight Mussolini's troops after they attacked Greece on October 28, 1940. Haim was sent home when the Greek army retreated. When the Nazis invaded Salonica on April 9, 1941, the city saw its young women, like Bouena, leave their exciting and whimsical lives to volunteer for the Red Cross and other organizations, distributing food to the poor.

This volunteering opened a door for Bouena. Starting in July 1942, the Nazis sent the city's young Jewish men to forced labor camps, many of whom died of starvation while there. As a volunteer cook with the Red Cross, Bouena often overheard what became of the young Jewish men. She was able to convey information to the families of those men who were taken, valuable information about their whereabouts and status. Bouena wrote Ladino komplas<sup>1</sup> on the news she was hearing, giving her an outlet for her emotions, and giving us valuable historic insight.

One particularly striking story recorded in Bouena's 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.

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<sup>1</sup> An explanation of what coplas and komplas are appears later with examples.

Bouena notoriously struggled with the local head of the Jewish police (*politofilaka*), Vital Hasson. She had been volunteering at the Matanot LaEivonim Association, distributing food to hungry souls in the city and offering (condensed) milk to children from needy families. She and her friend Sarah Trabouet were devoted to their work at this soup kitchen. Vital decided that Sarah would make the perfect wife for his younger brother – and even threatened her father and her family if she wouldn't marry him. Due to her defense of Sarah as well as disclosing information about the newly built ghetto in Salonica, Vital beat Bouena and forced her to drink such an excessive amount of 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 what was supposed to be his wedding day. While walking to what she thought would be the happiest moment of her life, Bouena found Haim slain under the huppah at the Beit Midrash.

For her perceived role in her murdered fiancé's escape from the labor camp, 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 the 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 (Maritsa) Serafamidou. Fighting with the partisans, Bouena smuggled children to safety in Palestine via Turkey and Syria, continuously risking her life throughout the journey. She also attended to the injured and pregnant throughout that mission, and participated in daring maneuvers en route to Palestine. 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 served with the partisans for the rest of the war.

Bouena Sarfatty served in various capacities, some of which were routine and others dangerous. For example, when in Veria she was a courier who secretly exchanged bags with another partisan. Another task of hers while in the underground was to gather information while posing as a cook in a German kitchen in Crete. She was successful in getting the commandant there captured and delivered by her group to a British submarine for interrogation in England.

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 escape route leading to Palestine. While in Salonica, 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 quartermaster of the relief unit stationed there, and they married in July of 1946. Together, they helped reopen an orphanage and within this framework, organized a two-week retreat for fourteen teens who had survived the war by hiding out. They then moved to Max's kibbutz, Ein ha-Shofet. However, being a strong, proud Sephardi Jew, Bouena 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~

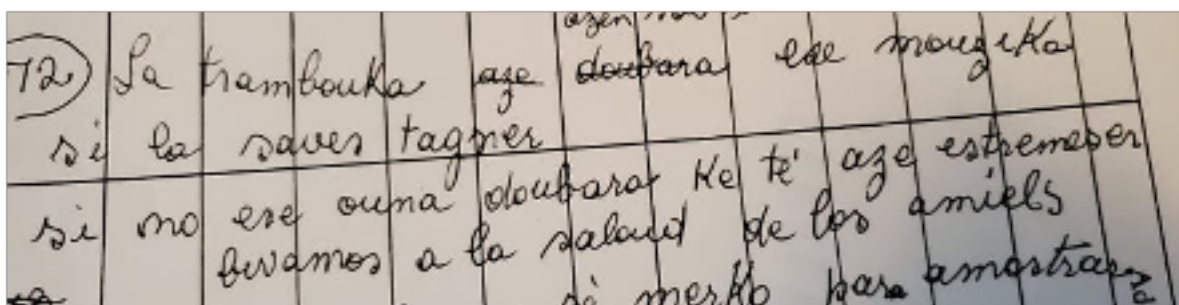
Salonican Jews were known for their coplas, the Spanish word for a four-line stanza, usually a rhyme. Bouena wrote down many of the community's coplas from before the war, but she also had her own twist on them. She used the term kompla to describe a copla in the form of a toast, often improvised at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

*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)

*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 kompla].



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 talking about her close friend Sarah:

*Sarah Trabout sè kazo kon el hermano 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)

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*Sarah Trabouet 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 Huppah 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 Dr. 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 a Sephardi coded greeting so that they would recognize one another as Sephardim particularly from Salonika.

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 Salonika was all but decimated by the Nazis, many sent to Auschwitz. What do we know about the city of Salonika 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? Salonicans, like Bouena, have expressed these prejudices in the camps during the Holocaust as well as afterwards.
3. After reading about the komplas, take a period of a hero of yours' 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?
4. Underground Railroads: we see that Bouena was part of a full system of helping people escape persecution and make it to British Mandate Palestine. Compare and contrast this

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5. system with another system around the world (e.g. Yemenite orphans, Crypto Jews on the Iberian Peninsula, American slaves)
  - a. Interview with Bouena <https://intheirownwords.net/bouena-garfinkle>

### Suggested Readings

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

Cohen, Judith R. "Three Canadian Sephardic Women and their Transplanted Repertoires: From Salonika, Larache, and Sarajevo to Montreal and Kahnawake." *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