Going Out on a Limb: Joha

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Dr. Jane Mushabac teaches Creative Writing at City Tech, a CUNY college. She is the author of the 2016 novel, His Hundred Years, A Tale, which she wrote with the pen name Shalach Manot. A Mellon Fellowship gave her time away from teaching to write the novel. This review essay originally appeared in 2003 in Midstream magazine in one of its ground-breaking Yiddish-Ladino issues.

Folktales of Joha, Jewish Trickster, collected and edited by Matilda Koén-Sarano. Translated from the Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) by David Herman. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003, 296 pp., $30.

In a world saturated with sophisticated entertainment, it would seem we are well beyond Joha, and wouldn't need Matilda Koén-Sarano's 2003 collection of tales about this celebrated Middle Eastern-Sephardic wise fool. Think again.

Pronounced *Joe Hah*, with the accent on *Hah*, this underdog doesn't really promise big laughs. The punch lines are anticlimactic, the situations silly, the scope limited. Joha, in fact, in many of the tales, has no money, no work, no food, nothing but a donkey, or an olive he keeps chasing around the plate to get on his fork. And yet Joha is Joha; when his Turkish friend gets the olive with one deft stab, he cheerfully says, "Don't forget, if I hadn't tired it out you would never have managed to catch it."

Reading through this collection, we go from one tricky quandary to the next. When you write the number three hundred thirty-three, which three do you put first? Do you sleep with your beard under the covers or on top? At the end of the final *Ne'ilah* prayer, which word is it, *echad* or *acher*, and as soon as you've got

the answer the two words keep going back and forth in your head, so you've got to chase the rabbi to ask him again, and again—and again. How do you get the rich man to serve you the big fish instead of the little one, when he charitably invites you to Shabbat dinner? And what do you do, when beneath a big ugly stone you find a bag of gold, and suddenly you are the rich man? If you are Joha, you keep a fancy little box with dung in it, and each day you open it to remind you of what it was like to have nothing.

Joha is the self before the self was invented. He is the self with no self, no borders or boundaries. He is the fool liberated from the terrible fear that plagues most people most of the time—the fear of looking foolish. Sent to buy sweets, he eats all but one before he gets home, and when asked how he could do that, he demonstrates by eating the last one. He lights all the matches to make sure they all work. He talks to his donkey and to the train. He stamps the behinds of the thieves who come to relieve themselves on his grave, then rounds them up after his faked death, and proves they are all his branded servants.

I grew up with the stories of Joha, told by my father. My father, known for his outgoing charm and warmth, didn't know how to tell a joke but that never stopped him. He would get the wording wrong, tell the same story many times. A punchline was as uncharacteristic of him as a punch.

Two Joha stories were favorites, nonetheless, at our dinner table in a two-bedroom second-floor apartment in the 1950s. To call them stories is like calling a grain of kosher salt a diamond, but they managed to season and ornament a childhood, even provide a sense of self and a worldview—what an Ashkenazi might call a *Weltanschauung*, a word a Turkish Jew would not use and never heard of and would not be caught saying. Joha is sitting on a branch, sawing away, and when he is warned that he's cutting off the branch he's sitting on, he scoffs, and keeps sawing away. Sure enough, when he finally cuts through the branch, he falls to the ground. Instead of complaining and crying in pain, he is astounded by the person who had been warning him. "Fortuneteller! This man is a fortune-teller!" he shouts. "A genius!"

It turns out that the story continues, somewhat elaborately. However, for this one listener, if the rest of this tale was ever told, it went unheard. It probably wasn't ever told in the hubbub of the dinner table: amidst the various hectoring complaints that are such an important part of family life; the political news; the gobbling up of juicy zucchini with tomatoes, lively salads with olives, onions, cucumbers, and generous fistfuls of parsley. The images from Joha's world that remained over the years were of Joha cutting off the branch he is sitting on and

the sage warning him he'll fall—and the point: Joha isn't fixated on his mistakes; without missing a beat, he cheerfully moves on.

The second favorite is even simpler. Joha wants to count the donkeys he is bringing to market, and so he does. He carefully counts one, two, three, four, five. But he is supposed to have six. So he gets off his donkey, and counts again, slowly, deliberately, and this time there are six. When he gets back on his donkey, it is five again. Joha can't figure it out.

Obviously here we are not speaking of jokes. We are hardly even speaking of humorous stories, although that's what they are. Jokes and humorous stories are different. Jokes must have come in with the Enlightenment, with the scientific method. They are efficient, establish credibility, lead you along, build to a climax, then boom: "You see, it's working already." That's the one about the Russian who asked the Jew how come Jews are so smart, it's because we eat herring, would you happen to know where I could get some herring. I happen to have some here—we all know this one—how much would it cost, well, three rubles, and after he finishes it, the Russian suddenly says, I could have bought that same herring in the market for two rubles, then "You see, it's working already."

You don't want to know how this "joke" is told in Koén-Sarano's collection. The narrator of this particular tale flubs it, flunks the science of jokes. And the one about the man—in another tradition it would be Hershele Ostropoler—who threatens the innkeeper that he will do what his father did, frightens the innkeeper so badly that the innkeeper provides a great meal, and after he is finished eating, when the innkeeper timidly asks what it was the man's father would have done if he had been denied the meal, Hershele says, "He would have gone away hungry."

Told as a Joha story, it's not about a meal, but a jacket. He would have "bought himself a new jacket," especially if you know the other version, just does not cut it. You wince, you cover your eyes. Perhaps this is actually a story that modern Joha raconteurs have taken from eighteenth-century Eastern Europe, changing a Hershele into a Joha, but let's not go there—because it's the genius of Joha that we want, not grafts (or branches) from or to other trees.

Who is Joha? He is from before television, before Einstein, the sewing machine, Isaac Newton, the Enlightenment, Shakespeare. He is from before the Inquisition, the Crusades, before the automobile, the pressure cooker, and Dannon's packaging of yogurt, which used to be made in a big pot swaddled in blankets left to sit for eight hours in a warm spot. Joha is from the ninth century, and from

medieval Turkey. This folk hero, perhaps little talked about in Manhattan, is known in about 35 countries, by a different name in each culture, but each derived from the Turkish wise fool Nasreddin (*Nas reh deen*) D'Hodja. Hodja means teacher, and this legendary or historical popular figure was said to be born in thirteenth-century Turkey, and to have died in the Turkish town of Aksheir, which in our own times still celebrates an annual Nasreddin festival. His grave there is famous for having a large locked gate attached to no fence.

Sephardic Jews, forced to flee Spain in the fifteenth century were, as we know, welcomed to settle in the Ottoman Empire. Many did, while others went to Portugal, then Amsterdam and other cities of Western Europe. Spain was foolishly and brutally depopulating itself at the same time that the Ottoman Turks were seeking to populate a vast new territory, and one of the treasures of the new land for Jews who survived and went East to Turkey was the Turkish folk hero, Nasreddin. Sephardic culture was transmitted in Ladino and Hebrew, in prayers and songs, and the many languages of the new home—Turkish, Greek, Armenian—but it also found expression in the tales of Nasreddin, called by a variety of names by the Jews: the Hodja, Nas al-din, and Joha.

Adopting the Hodja was a way of mediating with Turkish culture, and of finding familiar folk values, pleasures, and realities, an overlapping that is all the more of interest in our own time, with its Muslim-Christian-Jewish tensions. The stories are simple, yet at the same time, extensive, rich, varied, energetic, a cultural feast of insubordination, stubborn survival, cheerful unmovable optimism and play. Joha is always what people have needed to survive. Joha is Jewish play with Middle-Eastern *yichus* (pedigree).

For a Jew growing up in New York City with bits and pieces of Joha stories, the word Joha cut two ways. If you said someone was a real Joha, it was no compliment; it meant, what a dope!! But on the other side, unspoken, never mentioned, was the daring, wit, and totally unselfconscious audacity of Joha, the liberation of Joha. Joha has deep Jewish meaning. The laugh and a cheerful approach to life represent a core Jewish religious belief. It is liberating to hear stories about someone who circumvents rationality, and effortlessly embraces the folly that is wisdom. But more specifically, Joha's stories represent the willingness and the daring, in the best sense, of going out on a limb. Abraham left the sophisticated civilization of Ur, Sarah laughed, David took a slingshot to Goliath. Joha is the other, who laughs and calls life as he sees it. Joha flouts the arrogant assumption that rationality trumps all.

Matilda Koén-Sarano has given us a great gift with this collection in English, *Folktales of Joha: Jewish Trickster*. The excellent introduction by Tamar Alexander contextualizes Joha in the Turkish tradition, and provides a brief thoughtful folkloric analysis. Alexander holds the Estelle Frankfurter Chair for Sephardic Culture, and is Chair of the Folklore Program of the Hebrew Literature Department, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Alexander dates Joha to ninth-century Arabic, although one wonders when Jews first encountered this folk hero, if he came with the Arabic that Jews spoke beginning in the ninth century, or if he was only a post-1492 treasure.

Koén-Sarano is a writer, scholar, poet, storyteller, and broadcaster for the Israeli radio station *Kol Israel*. She reports the news in Ladino, and entertains listeners with Sephardic music, poetry, and tales. An eminent, prolific folklorist devoted to preserving Sephardic oral culture, she has been collecting Joha stories since 1979; her first collection, a 400-page compilation, was published in Jerusalem in Ladino and Hebrew (Kana, 1986, 1991).

One of the most satisfying aspects of her collection is her respect for the narrators, their wording, and their individuality. The description of the narrators at the end of this 2003 volume is a good read. Move over Goldberg and Greenberg. Welcome Avzaradel, Babani, Bahbout, Bardavid. Diversity has a different geography here. Koén-Sarano's narrators come from Tripoli, Salonika, Istanbul, Milan, Oran, Russhuk, Sliven, Cairo, Beirut, Buenos Aires, Izmir, Tunis, Bursa, Marseilles, Beit Shean, Jaffa, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem. The 82 narrators, the folk who have told the tales, were born between 1898 and 1993. Perhaps because many are women from an era before careers, the listing tells the schools and universities the male and female narrators attended, and so emphasizes institutions of cultural transmission, in itself a fascinating survival story; occasional glimpses let us know they studied many things from Italian literature to ritual slaughter to classical dance. There are, yes, a couple of lawyers, a violinist, a professor at Tufts (the only narrator from New York City), but the bios for all of them are folk bios, a couple of times with the neighborhood of birth thrown in, ("Born in Jerusalem in the Shama neighborhood at the foot of Mount Zion, 1910"), once with the number of grandchildren (12 in Koén-Sarano's case), one Salonika man's World War II survival of eleven concentration camps, another's exile by the Turks from Palestine to Syria, and the somber fact that one man—Pinhas Tokatly—was killed by a suicide bomb attack in Jerusalem last year.

Just folks. It's a refreshing change from the professional bios we're used to reading, with awards, titles, organizational affiliations, a lot of careerist huffing

and puffing. “*Dios nos lleva a Yerushalayim,*” says the 13-verse Ladino Passover song; many of the narrators have had several migrations in their lives, for instance, from Istanbul to Marseilles to Turin, but three quarters of them by birth or eventual nationality are Israelis.

Hank Halio’s *Ladino Reveries* (The Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, 1996) is another good source of Joha or Djoha stories, a couple of dozen of them sprinkled in Ladino and English into a chatty collection of proverbs and reminiscences.

But when we read Koén-Sarano’s collection, we don’t stop off for a *meldado* or the recipe for Turkish coffee. It’s straight, 300 short takes ranging from a few lines to a few pages, and presented in chapters on school, work, animals, the law, and so on. When you read about Joha, you don’t expect to laugh out loud. But you’ll be with a character who is first cousin to all the underdog wise fools from around the world. It’s an immersion, like a novel before the first novel. The narrations are refreshingly direct, and as Koén-Sarano notes of Joha in one of the best tales she herself narrates, “pure of heart.”

In a tale I recently heard, Joha was spooning yogurt into a lake. The story was told to me by a Turkish Jew who grew up in Istanbul in the 1950s, before television had arrived, and who said he and his friends used to read Hodja stories all the time. There were lots of collections of the tales, and it was great fun. They loved them. But he doesn’t tell the stories to his daughters growing up on Long Island, because, well, they wouldn’t laugh. A man asked Joha what he was doing, and then asked him why. Joha said he wanted to turn the lake into yogurt. But the man said “That isn’t possible, is it, for a little yogurt to turn a whole lake into yogurt.” “No,” said Joha, “but what if it does?”

A few spoons of inspired foolery can shape the way we view the world. In terrible times, dare we waste time on humor? Dare we not?

One more, from Koén-Sarano.

“Thieves entered Joha’s house. Joha already knew that he was poor and had nothing in the house. The Thieves were searching very slowly. Joha got out of bed and started to search behind them, slowly, slowly. When they reached the corner, he said: ‘Look, if you find something. . .fifty-fifty!’”

Postscript

In 2014, Eliezer Papo, Director of The Sephardic Studies Research Institute, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, spoke at the JCC of Manhattan about the difference between Ashkenazic and Sephardic humor. His talk resonated with me. I can be irritated and nonplussed, for instance, by a kind of Ashkenazic humor that is smart-alecky and depressed. Some Joha stories of course are over-the-top feeble, but nonetheless Joha is a gift. With a free hand, Joha cuts us loose from solemnity and pretentiousness.

Papo said Ashkenazic humor comes from the harsh climate (and pogroms) of Eastern Europe, while Sephardic humor comes from Mediterranean Ottoman lands with their relative tolerance and mild weather, plus the luscious fruit on the trees and the fish in the sea, free for the picking. Perhaps what's considered lowbrow about Joha is its optimism, an attitude that may be antithetical to what's widely known as "Jewish humor." In an article about Jewish humor (by which he means Ashkenazic humor since he speaks of nothing else), Joseph Epstein says optimism is foreign to it. ("Jokes: A Genre of Thought," *Jewish Review of Books*, Winter 2017).

Joha in fact is absurdly optimistic. Joha is cheerful, idiotically cheerful, and his good cheer, because of its patent absurdity, is balm for all of us caught in the net of what I as a child named "disaster orientation."

The odd thing is that the instinctive habitual love of cheer, the desire to sing, the desire to tell stories and talk, the refusal to give up a chance to join in an argument, even when Joha, for instance, is happily presumed dead and is being carried home on a stretcher in a procession of the whole community, is so natural. Well, the neighbors carrying his stretcher are arguing about the shortest route to his house! Joha's inclinations and instincts ring true. And what's more, his responses are at home in a culture that accepts religion in a natural uncomplicated way. The luscious fruit of spiritual gratitude frees Joha.

Incidentally, perhaps the proof of the pudding for a Joha story is not a laugh out loud, but a little gleam of understanding in the eye accompanied by a compulsion to reply in kind. And so, when a Sephardic friend read my 2003 Joha article when it first came out, and loved it, of course he had to tell me about when Joha finds a glittering shard of a broken mirror on the ground. Joha picks it up with excitement and holds it up to his face to admire it. But when he sees a face in it, "That's

ugly," he says with repugnance. "No wonder someone threw that away!"

Other notes:

Folktales of Joha: Jewish Trickster is currently available at over 1400 libraries worldwide (WorldCat database).

Matilda Koén-Sarano's prolific output of works on Sephardic culture continues apace since 2003 with publications in Jerusalem, Istanbul, Paris, Berlin, Buenos Aires, and Genoa; in Ladino, Ladino and Hebrew, Ladino and French, and Italian, including CDs and books ranging from *Gizar kon Gozo* and a Hebrew-Ladino Dictionary to a Ladino conversation manual expected out soon (Wikipedia, Nov. 21, 2016; CV, March 2017).

In 2015, Tamar Alexander was appointed chairperson of the National Council for Ladino Culture, replacing Yitzhak Navon, chair until then.

The Turkish-American Jew who told the story of Joha spooning yogurt into a lake, is Selim Sadaka. His father, Haim Vitali Sadacca, is a Ladino poet published by the the Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture; his daughter Janine Sadaka has remarkably transcribed a Ladino short story of mine into Solitreo.

If you wondered how Joha can date from both the ninth century and the thirteenth century, Tamar Alexander's statement in her "Introduction" explains: "The origin of the name is unclear," she says of Joha, "but we do know that he is first mentioned in Arabic stories dating from the ninth century. A similar character, Nasr-a-din Hodja, appears in medieval Turkish stories. According to Turkish literary tradition such a man really existed…Eventually the two characters' names merged" (*Folktales of Joha: Jewish Trickster*).

The Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood of America, active over the past century and now energetically revived by Director Rabbi Nissim Elnecavé, features a weekly Joha story in its online newsletter. Each brief tale is presented in Ladino, English, and a Ladino voice recording by Rachel Bortnick (Devin Naar, "The Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood of America Celebrates its Centennial," *Tablet*, Sept. 22, 2016; *La Boz Sefaradi*: *The Sephardic Voice*).

Finally, for your information: Koén-Sarano herself provides 40 of the stories in her collection, Beki Bardavid 27, Eliezer Papo 19, and Gloria Ascher is the New York City-born narrator who contributes one story—in verse: this Tufts University professor has been teaching Ladino and the Sephardic Tradition at Tufts for years;

she founded the Judaic Studies program there and has been its long-time Co-Director.