



Sephardi artifacts go on display

By SHERI SHEFA, Staff Reporter

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TORONTO — A year-long exhibit of Sephardi Jewish artifacts from around the world opened last week at Baycrest’s Morris and Sally Justein Heritage Museum.

Rivka, 8, dressed in a traditional Moroccan Henna dress, admires a display case of cultural artifacts from her Sephardi heritage.

The grand opening of Our Precious Heritage: A Celebration of Sephardi Culture, held in Baycrest’s Silverman Garden Court, was attended by more than 100 people.

They heard from several speakers, including Liberal MP Joe Volpe; co-chair of the Baycrest Museum, Anna Vandelman; and vice-president of the Sephardic Kehila Centre, Maurice Benzacar.

“Internationally, [Baycrest] is a place that people look to to establish this type of community. And it is a community,” said Volpe, who is not Jewish but often supports Jewish causes.

“Today, we celebrate the Sephardi community. Sephardi Jews have always had a very happy history. It is rich in experience, rich in diversity and in its creativity,” he added.

“I want to say to all the members of that community is that that richness, that diversity, that creativity of Sephardic Jews everywhere is very welcome here. We should get more of them to come to our place, because they shape society and create a dynamic and they give it personality. They become Canadian. Ashkenazi or Sephardi, they are known for what they leave behind and what they leave behind is a culture of marvel.”

Vandelman said she was excited to present the exhibit two years after the concept was born and thanked the many people who donated their time and money to make it happen.

“The concept for this exhibit started more than two years ago when we met with Maurice Benzacar to discuss our idea. He gave us advice and most wonderful of all,

connected us with his daughter, Raquel,” she said, referring to Raquel Benzacar Savatti, chair of the Sephardic heritage exhibit committee.

“We took bits and pieces from everywhere and made the whole much more than the mere sum of parts.”

Vandelman said they gathered artifacts from more than a dozen countries, including Morocco, Tunisia, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, Turkey, Greece, Syria and India, and from more than 40 individuals from the Toronto Jewish community.

“These precious artifacts which you have entrusted to us make this event a reality. The focus of our exhibit is on culture and tradition,” Vandelman said.

“We hope you will find your journey into the Sephardi world interesting and inspiring just as we have. We have no doubt that the thousands of people who live here at Baycrest and those who visit everyday will enjoy this unique artistic and educational exhibit.”

The exhibit includes artifacts and displays such as a red and gold henna dress worn by Sephardi brides in the Moroccan tradition; a table set for the Mimouna, an after-Pesach festival during which people drop into one another’s homes to share pastries and sweets; a Shabbat lamp from India; hand-painted ketubot; and a silver case to protect and adorn a Torah from Egypt.

Vandelman said that since many of Baycrest’s residents can’t physically make their way down to the museum, the museum will make their way up to them.

“What we do is our museum-on-wheels program, and we will make presentations on the floor of the hospital and the home. We take objects from the museum and we go up on the floor, and allow people to touch everything and explain everything so that they, too, get a piece of the experience.”

Benzacar, who was one of the first Moroccans to move to Toronto, thanked the staff and volunteers for putting the exhibit together.

“In the 51 years since I first arrived from Morocco, I have devoted much of my time to preserving the customs of our Sephardic heritage,” he said.

“When I first arrived, the few families that had recently immigrated from Morocco naturally sought each other out, because as much as we tried to integrate into the Jewish life in Toronto, it wasn’t so simple.”

He said their customs were very different from Ashkenazi customs and soon the growing Sephardi community gathered to create the first Sephardi synagogue in Toronto at the YMHA at Spadina Avenue and Bloor Street in 1957.

“Today, more than 50 years later, I am proud of what we have accomplished in this city. We are doctors and lawyers, entrepreneurs and entertainers, rabbis and educators. We have contributed

to the community at large, all the time keeping the traditions of our ancestors alive through our synagogues and day schools, and most importantly our homes,” Benzacar said.

“This exhibit showcases how in every aspect of our Jewish life, we savour our heritage. It makes me feel proud.”

Admission to the museum is free, and guided tours are available. For more information about the exhibit, call 416-785-2500, ext. 2802.