

Los crypto-judíos del Nuevo Mundo

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Spanish 5, Fall 2006

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THE CRYPTO-JEWS OF THE NEW WORLD

I INTRODUCTION

Carlos Fuentes, *The Buried Mirror* :

“...the colonization process could be highly selective. Jews, Muslims, and heretics were expressly excluded from transatlantic immigration.” (p. 195)

In truth, starting with Columbus' first sailing and continuing nearly two centuries, there was a veritable flood of people with Jewish roots arriving on the shores of the New World. Called marranos, conversos, or New Christians, there were only brief periods during which they could live openly. As a result, across Latin America there are persons currently called “crypto-Jews,” with family traditions they often don't understand the basis for. The focus of this essay is on the crypto-Jews of northern Mexico and the southwestern USA.

II The origins of the crypto-Jews in Spain

The reconquest of Spain was as much religious as it was political. Pogroms against Jews started in 1391. In 1478, Isabel and Ferdinand petitioned Pope Sixtus IV for permission to start Inquisitions against heretics. He responded with a Papal Bull giving the Catholic royals the right to establish their own inquisitions. When pogroms were replaced with autos-de-fe, Jews had few options. Many died and many more converted. Some departed for Portugal, where they would be secure for several decades longer (not subject to expulsion until 1540), so many that later in the New World the word “Portugese” would come to signify Jew.

We cannot know how many conversos were sincere. What is certain is that neither the Church nor the Crown felt secure, and with the reconquest of Spain complete in 1492 the Jews were expelled from Spain and the conversos there continued to live in terror of the Inquisition.

But there was a new option. Traveling with Columbus in 1492 were at least seven conversos. These included the physician, Master Bernal, and the interpreter, Luis de Torres. Each ship sailing across the Atlantic brought Jews to the New World. However, the danger also crossed the sea. During the conquest of Mexico by Cortez, Bernal Diaz del Castillo wrote of the murder of soldiers found to be Jews. Soon after that, in 1569, Inquisitions were established in Mexico and

in Lima.

III The example of the Carvajal family

Between 1569 and 1650 the official policy towards Jews in Mexico changed frequently. When they lacked colonizers for new regions, they loosened the criteria for “pure blood.” When they realized that a population of Jews had been established living more or less openly, the tribunals and autos-de-fe were activated. The Carvajal family is an instructive example.

Luis Carvajal y de la Cueva was a Portuguese royal accountant and a “New Christian;” that is, either a converso himself or the son or grandson of one. In 1582 he received a charter from the King of Spain to establish a colony in an area near the northeast frontier. It specified that New Christians could populate Nueva Leon. Thus the colony of Nueva Leon, including the city of Monterrey, was founded by Carvajal and his immigrants.

In 1589, the Mexican authorities decided that Judaism was being practiced in Nueva Leon. Carvajal died in prison. Many relatives were punished or killed. Others renounced Judaism and were pardoned. One small group left, changing their surname to Lumbroso, and became Rabbis in Italy. For those who remained in Mexico, killing and punishment continued at intervals and eventually culminated in 1649 with the immolation of Carvajal's niece and other women of the family in an auto-de-fe.

Yet throughout this era, the immigration of conversos continued. In the 17th Century they arrived with more knowledge of Judaism owing to commercial travels through the Netherlands, Italy, and Greece. But in the New World suppression led them towards the northeast, across the Sierra Madre and Chihuahua, as far as El Paso and Santa Fe. And the example of the Carvalos taught them the value to secrecy. The Jews would survive by living clandestinely.

IV The secret household life

Traditional Jewish life has two aspects: the world of men; that is, the rituals of the shul and the yeshiva education, and the household, controlled by women. The latter is where culture resides, the heart of Judaism. And when the formal institutions couldn't function, it was the women whose traditions would persevere. Across the centuries, across Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and areas of Mexico, on farms, in villages and in large cities, thousands of people lived according to odd traditions they often could not explain.

Important rituals included lighting candles, observing dietary laws, following personal hygiene rules, and observing holy days. Examples often cited across the entire region include:

- Candles lit Friday evening, often replaced by oil lamps with long flaxen wicks so they would burn overnight, “for the souls of dead relatives.” In Mexico, at times the purpose was further obscured by lighting the candles of oil lamps on Friday evening in church.
- Dietary rules were strongly maintained. Many people related that their family tradition included checking eggs for blood spots, separating meat from dairy, and avoiding eating pork (though they would keep pigs to maintain appearances). Kosher style slaughter was common.
- During the Inquisition, it was not possible to maintain the ritual bathing of a mikvah. In the New World, ritual bathing after menstruation and childbirth was often done in the river.
- Just as the syncretic Christianity of the New World often incorporated aspects of the gods of the Aztecs or of the Orishes of the Yoruba people, so the religion of the crypto-Jews was a mixture of Jewish and Christian lore. The heroine of Purim, Esther, became Saint Esther. The lights of Chanukah easily translated to the Posadas of the week before Christmas. Matzoh for Passover became “pan de semita” or “capirotada.”

V The crypto-Jews of today

In many families, nobody spoke openly about their roots. The fear of punishment never disappeared. Recent history (the Holocaust and widespread anti-Semitism in the hispanic world) reinforced the need for secrecy. Older relatives remained silent or evasive.

Deathbed confessions of Jewish heritage were not infrequent. Others discovered the truth when genetic diseases associated with Judiasm manifested.

In 1992, around the marking of the 500th anniversary of the expulsion from Spain, and again in 1996 marking the expulsion from Portugal, there appeared a rash of studies and conferences on the role of crypto-Jews in preserving Jewish life. Shortly after, with the availability of DNA testing, a new chapter opened in their history. Studies of hispanic populations show that 10 – 15% of the men in New Mexico, southern Texas, and northern Mexico carry a Y chromosome associated with Semites. It is also now possible to indentify men with the Y chromosome with roots in the “Cohanim.” In a study of 78 men in New Mexico, 30 were positive.

Community reaction has varied. Some people are very uncomfortable with the news and cling to their Christianity. Many are interested in exploring their roots, and of those many seek ways to reconcile their Jewishness with their Christian identities. Some travel to Spain to study documents of their antecedents and to fill in their geneologies. Some end up reconverting to Judasim. For almost all, the important thing was to finally make sense of the aura of secrecy that filled their lives and to find a way to integrate this knowledge into their family life.

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