

## IN THE SHADOWS OF THE INQUISITION: THE JEWS OF COLONIAL MEXICO AND THEIR UNCERTAIN LEGACY

*Libby White*

**Description:** In the early modern period pervasive discrimination and intense persecution prompted many Iberian Christians of Jewish background--forced and voluntary converts and the descendants of converts--to seek new lives in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies of the New World, despite the opposition of Crown and Church. Among the immigrants were some who attempted to secretly practice Judaism. These communities, isolated from the mainstream Jewish world, practiced a syncretic Prominent Jews included Luis de Carvajal, the younger and Tomas Trevino de Sobremonte. Both men were martyred, and their families destroyed by the Mexican Inquisition. Centuries later, the exploits and contributions of this once-despised minority have become the stuff of legend and art. This tragic history impinges upon the Jewish present also. In the early twentieth century various Native American/Hispanic groups declared themselves the descendants of secret Jews. More recently, some scholars identified an emerging movement of "return" by Hispanics to colonial Jewish roots. The historicity of such claims to a Jewish past remains uncertain. Yet, the lifestyle and passionate determination to be a part of Jewry that characterize many claimants seem utterly convincing proofs of a belief in their own authenticity.

**Libby White** is the librarian of the Beth Israel Congregation Hebrew School in Owings Mills, MD. She also directs the Jewish Vocational Service Library in Baltimore, MD. Libby has been a Reference Librarian at a large public library system in upstate New York and was coordinator of the Summer Sessions on Judaic Studies at Skidmore College in Saratoga Spring, New York. Libby reviews for the AJL Newsletter, School Library Journal, and the Baltimore Jewish Times. She has been consultant to *Funk and Wagnalls Encyclopedia* and to *Magazines for Libraries*. She contributed an essay on Balkan Jewry to the *Reader's Guide to Judaism*. Since 1999, Libby has been a member of the Sydney Taylor Book Award Committee. At the 2001 AJL Conference, she will participate in the Sydney Taylor Award Panel session. Libby is a PhD. Candidate in Jewish History at Baltimore Hebrew University.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries secret Jewish communities flourished in the Roman Catholic colony of New Spain--in the territory which is today Mexico and the American Southwest. By the end of the seventeenth century these communities had been suppressed by the Mexican Inquisition.<sup>1</sup> Luis de Carvajal, the Younger was a symbol of the Mexican Jewish past. Carvajal was a soldier, teacher, merchant, an adventurer, and the nephew, namesake, and heir of a Spanish conquistador. He was also a religious mystic and the leader of the sixteenth century secret or crypto-Jewish community. His autobiography, poetry, letters, and Last Will and Testament represent the only known extant writings by a Jew during the Spanish colonial period, 1521-1821.<sup>2</sup> In 1596 Luis, aged thirty, his mother, and three of his sisters were executed in Mexico City for returning to the practice of Judaism. A clerical observer wrote of Luis, "he reconciled his understanding which was

very profound and sensitive with his highly inspired determination to defend the (Mosaic) Law of God: If he had lived before the Incarnation of our Redeemer, he would have been famous in the Bible."<sup>3</sup>

In our own time large numbers of Indians and Hispanics have claimed descent from colonial crypto-Jews. Describing themselves as "anusim," i.e. "forced ones," they insist that they are returnees to

mainstream Judaism. The phenomena among these groups of fragments of rabbinic customs and tombstones inscribed with Stars of David and personal names such as “Adonay” have been the subject of much scholarship and controversy. Anthropologist Raphael Patai studied Mexican anusim beginning in the 1930’s; he was doubtful about their claims and speculated about their relationship to the Protestant fundamentalist Church of God.<sup>4</sup> In the 1980’s historian Stanley Hordes theorized that crypto-Jews fled north into what is now New Mexico to escape the Inquisition and intermarried with the Indian population, that among their descendants Judaism was preserved.<sup>5</sup>

After the Inquisition began to hound converted Jews and their descendants, settlement in Mexico became an attractive option both for crypto-Jews and for believing Christians of Jewish origin. Mexico offered economic opportunities in agriculture, mining, and trade and a familiar culture.<sup>6</sup> Jews came to Mexico with Hernando Cortes. In Diego Rivera’s mural of Cortes’ landing at Vera Cruz, his Jewish associate Hernando Alonso is prominently depicted. Alonso would become the first Mexican “Judaizer” to be burnt at the stake in 1528.<sup>7</sup> In 1569 the Mexican Inquisition was formally established. Its records are the main sources of information about Jewish life in colonial Mexico.<sup>8</sup>

The Carvajals were high profile victims of the Inquisition. Conquistador Luis de Carvajal, the Elder was a military hero who received a large land grant, the Kingdom of New Leon. As governor, he subdued the Indians and founded the city of Monterrey, Mexico. He had some Jewish antecedents, but was a devout Catholic. When members of his family were arrested as Judaizers, the governor was charged with not reporting their activities. He was sentenced to expulsion from New Spain for six years, but died soon after in the Inquisition prison at 51.<sup>9</sup> The Carvajal line disappeared from the Inquisition records and from Mexican Jewish life.<sup>10</sup>

A large payment to the Spanish monarchy in 1604 secured several decades of toleration. This period came to an end in 1642.<sup>11</sup> Between 1646-49 approximately two hundred sixteen Judaizers were tried in a series of autos-da-fe. The April 1649 auto-da-fe was called “the Great One.”<sup>12</sup> Among the executed was Tomas Trevino de Sobremonte, the heroic leader of one of Mexico City’s “synagogue” gatherings. The Jewish community was broken spiritually and economically, never to recover.<sup>13</sup> This was the Inquisition’s high-watermark. Although not abolished until 1821, the year of Mexican independence, the Inquisition tried fewer Judaizers and meted out less severe sentences. The crypto-Jewish remnant was absorbed into the Mexican population.<sup>14</sup>

Historians estimate that at its peak the Jewish population of Mexico was 10% of the non-Indian population in all of New Spain, which included the southwestern United States, Mexico, Central America, the Spanish Caribbean islands, and the Philippines, perhaps 2,500 people. Communities, often referred to as “synagogues” by the Inquisition, existed in Mexico City, Guadalajara, Zacatecas, Puebla, Veracruz, Campeche, in the Yucatan and along the Caribbean. Documents mention three synagogues in Mexico City and one in Guadalajara.<sup>15</sup> Mexican Jews had ties to Jews in tolerated communities, Jews in Iberia, and Jews in the Land of Israel.<sup>16</sup> Jews attempted to marry within the community. Crypto-Jewish families were close and typically large, with 5 to 8 children. Children were generally not told about their ancestry until they were 13. Often one child was encouraged to enter the Church, both as a cover and to afford the family access to religious literature.<sup>17</sup>

Luis de Carvajal, the Younger, in his Last Will and Testament, expressed beliefs in one God, the Law of Moses, and Jewish chosenness.<sup>18</sup> Crypto-Jews found a link to their authentic Judaism in the Vulgate Bible. They accepted the Old Testament and Apocrypha, not realizing that the latter were not part of the Jewish canon. Daniel and Psalms had a special appeal to crypto-Jews.<sup>19</sup> Luis de Carvajal had read commentaries on Maimonides and Josephus' History of the Jews. He was unaware of the Oral Law.<sup>20</sup> Crypto-Jewish religion was marked by much prayer-but not in Hebrew, which had been lost even among communal leaders. These leaders were charismatic but often not learned. Apparently, there were no ordained rabbis. Crypto-Jews fasted often and for long periods, perhaps due to feelings of guilt about conversion or residence in a land where Judaism was prohibited.<sup>21</sup> Observance of the Sabbath was important, if difficult. Several traditional holidays were also celebrated--Passover, which featured unleavened tortillas; "Kippur" or the Great Day of Atonement, a three-day Fast of Esther, and Tisha b'Av.<sup>22</sup> Attempts were made to avoid forbidden foods.<sup>23</sup> In life-cycle matters, crypto-Jews led a double life, publicly observing Christian rites which were supplemented privately by Jewish ceremonies.<sup>24</sup>

Historians agree that crypto-Judaism was sustained by the courage of its women--women like Blanca Enriques, whom the Inquisition called "a famous dogmatist and rabbina." These women directed ritual, taught Torah, and passed on Jewish culture and identity. They were often martyred.<sup>25</sup> A strong strain of messianism also preserved the community. In the seventeenth century Mexican Jews believed that deliverance was at hand. Some thought that the Messiah had been born in Mexico already; others awaited the Messiah's birth to a devout Jewess in the community led by either Simon Vaez Sevilla or Tomas Trevino de Sobremonte. There are descriptions of the communal adoration of the pregnant Ines Pereira, niece of Tomas.<sup>26</sup> This focus on the person of the mother of the Messiah was one of many Roman Catholic influences on crypto-Judaism. Others were a belief in the concept of salvation from eternal damnation, the practice of mortification of the flesh, and the designation of biblical heroes and outstanding contemporaries as saints.<sup>27</sup>

Interest in crypto-Judaism continues to grow, with further research and publication, formation of new associations, and development of internet web-sites. In the 1980's Raphael Patai acknowledged that some Hispanic claimants might be descendants of crypto-Jews.<sup>28</sup> More recently, anthropologist David Gradwohl wrote, "I think it is difficult to reject out of hand the possibility that there are some sorts of Judaic identity that continue today. If crypto-Jews exist in Portugal and Spain (as they have proven to) why would they absolutely not exist in the American Southwest?"<sup>29</sup> Jewish historic memory although sometimes tricky is powerful.

## Reference Notes

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2. Seymour Liebman, The Enlightened: The Writings of Luis de Carvajal, the Younger (Miami, FL: University of Miami Press, 1967), 9.

3. Martin A. Cohen, The Martyr: The Story of a Secret Jew and the Mexican Inquisition in the Sixteenth Century (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1982), 257; Seymour

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4. Raphael Patai, "Vento Prieta Revisited," Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review 18 (1996): 18.

5. Barbara Ferry and Debbie Nathan, "Mistaken Identity? The Case of New Mexico's Hidden Jews," Atlantic Monthly 283 December 2000, 6.

6. Alicia Gofman de Backal, "Anusim Women in America," Shofar 18 (Fall 1999): 10.

7. Seymour Liebman, "Hernando Alonso: The First Jew on the North American Continent," Journal of Inter-American Studies 5 (April 1963): 291-95; Seymour Liebman, New World Jewry, 51; Jacob R. Marcus, The Colonial American Jew 1492-1776 v.1 (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1971), 64; "Jews of Mexico," Am Yisrael Mexico ([www.amyisrael.co.il/na/mexico/](http://www.amyisrael.co.il/na/mexico/))

8. Salo W. Baron, A Social and Religious History of the Jews: Late Middle Ages and Era of European Expansion 1200-1650 v.15 (NY, London: Columbia University Press: Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 269.

9. Martin A. Cohen, The Martyr, ch.3,4,6,7; Jacob R. Marcus, 51; Allan Metz, 211; Arnold Wiznitzer, "Crypto-Jews in Mexico during the Sixteenth Century" in The Jewish Experience in Latin America: Selected Studies: The Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, ed. Martin A. Cohen (Waltham, MA: American Jewish Historical Society, NY: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1971) 113.

10. Salo W. Baron, 286; Seymour Liebman, The Enlightened, 140.

11. Allan Metz, 214-15.

12. The auto-da-fe (act of faith) was a spectacular dramatic ceremony during which the accused heard their sentences. For a description, see Seymour Liebman, New World Jewry, 48-49.

13. Seymour Liebman, "Tomas Trevino de Sobremonte: A Jewish Mexican Martyr," Jewish Social Studies 42 (Winter 1980); 163-74; Arnold Wiznitzer, "Crypto-Jews in Mexico in the Seventeenth Century" in The Jewish Experience in Latin America, 224, 229-39.

14. Seymour Liebman, ed., The Jews and the Inquisition of Mexico: The Great Auto Da Fe of 1649, as related by Mathias de Bocanegra, SJ (Lawrence, KS, Coronado Press, 1974), 23; Seymour Liebman, New World Jewry, 33; Jacob R. Marcus, 33.

15. Seymour Liebman, New World Jewry, 87.

16. Alicia de Backal, 10; Seymour Liebman, New World Jewry, 42; Allan Metz, 224.

17. Alicia de Backal, 10.

18. Martin A. Cohen, "The Religion of Luis Rodriguez Carvajal: Glimpses into the Passion of a Mexican Judaizer," American Jewish Archives 20 (April 1968): 44.

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20. Arnold Wiznitzer, Sixteenth Century, 116-117.

21. Moshe Lazar, "Scorched Parchments and Tortured Memories: The Jewishness of the Anusim" in Cultural Encounters: The Impact of the Inquisition in Spain and the New World ed. Mary Elizabeth Perry and Anne J. Ortiz (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), 186.

22. Martin A. Cohen, "The Religion of ...," 41.

23. Alicia de Backal, 10.

24. Arnold Wiznitzer, *Seventeenth Century*, 268.
25. Alicia de Backal, 11-12; Seymour Liebman, *The Jews and the Inquisition*, 97-106.
26. Seymour Liebman, *The Jews and the Inquisition*, 101-2, 106; Arnold Wiznitzer, *Seventeenth Century*, 266-7.
27. Arnold Witznitzer, *Seventeenth Century*, 268.
28. Schulamith Halevy, "Manifestations of Crypto-Judaism in the American Southwest," *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review*: 72.
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**A comprehensive bibliography may be obtained by contacting the author.**