

Luis de Carvajal, Jr.: In the Clutches of the Inquisition

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

*Note: The article below is based on **Crypto-Jews in Mexico during the Sixteenth Century** by Arnold Wiznitzer, *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, 51, 1962. Wiznitzer's article may be accessed at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>. Additional information is taken from **Oh Lord have mercy on Your people**, available at <http://my.opera.com/Rev4u/blog/show.dml/834923>. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from the article by Arnold Wiznitzer.*

Introduction

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Catholic Church did its utmost to root out any vestige of Jewish religious observance by New Christians. New Christians, also known by the names *Anusim* and Marranos, were descendents of Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity in Spain and Portugal during the last decade of the fifteenth century. Some were willing to risk everything in order to maintain as much Jewish practice as they could. Being accused of Judaizing (practicing Jewish rituals) meant undergoing torture, loss of one's property and social status, and, if all else failed, death by burning at the stake. Nonetheless, not an inconsiderable number of *Anusim* clung to their Jewish faith even though the easiest thing for them to do would have been to renounce it.

The Inquisition followed the Jews to the New World, and a number of trials of Judaizers were held in regions that were under the control of Spain and Portugal. One of the most interesting personalities to be tried by the Inquisition in Mexico during the sixteenth century was Luis de Carvajal, Jr. (1567 – 1596). His commitment to and the sacrifices he made for Judaism are nothing less than inspiring.

Sketch of the Life of Luis de Carvajal, Jr.

Luis was born in Benavente, Portugal and was baptized by the Bishop of Benavente. His early education consisted of studying reading, writing, and basic mathematics. Later, he attended a Jesuit school for three years where he was taught Latin and rhetoric. His father, Francisco Rodriguez, was a Marrano who influenced his wife and most of his nine children to live as crypto-Jews. In 1584 Luis and his family immigrated to Mexico with his uncle. This uncle, who became the Governor of the New Kingdom of Leon in Mexico, had no sympathy for Marranos despite his Jewish background, and Luis could never reveal to him his family's secret Jewish practices. His father died not long after the family arrived in Mexico, and Luis succeeded him as the head of their large family.

Luis explored the northern territories of Mexico with his uncle. On these journeys he sought the company of fellow crypto-Jews and attempted to learn what he could of Judaism from those who knew more than he did. Although well-educated for his time, Luis' Jewish learning was limited and his Jewish practice was based on a Latin translation of the *Tenach* and a few fragments from the Jewish prayer book. Nonetheless, his memoirs clearly evidence his insatiable desire to acquire Jewish learning and to observe as much of Judaism as he could.

His drive to become an observant Jew is clearly evidenced in his description of how, after his father's passing, he circumcised himself in a ravine of the Panuco River:

When the Lord took my father away from this life, I returned to Panuco, where a clergyman sold me a sacred Bible for six pesos. I studied it constantly and learned much while alone in the wilderness. I came to know many of the divine mysteries. One day I read chapter 17 of Genesis, in which the Lord ordered Abraham, our father, to be circumcised -- especially those words which say that the soul of him who will not be circumcised will be erased from among the book of the living. I became so frightened that I immediately proceeded to carry out the divine command. Prompted by the Almighty and His good angel, I left the corridor of the house where I had been reading, leaving behind the sacred Bible, took some old worn scissors and went over to the ravine of the Panuco River. There, with longing and a vivid wish to be inscribed in the book of the living, something that could not happen without this holy sacrament, I sealed it by cutting off almost all of the prepuce and leaving very little of it. (Translated by Seymour B. Liebman in **The Enlightened, The Writings of Luis de Carvajal**, The University of Miami Press, 1967.)

Luis and some of the members of his family became the focal point of a network of crypto-Jews based in Mexico City. He and some of his siblings encouraged former Jews to return to Judaism. Through their efforts, Jews were circumcised, studied *Tenach* together and observed the festivals. It was only a matter of time before his Judaizing would come to the attention of Catholic officials.

The First Trial

On April 20, 1589 a warrant for the arrest of Luis was signed by the Inquisitional Judges of the Public Prosecutor of the Holy Office in Mexico City. It was based on testimony obtained from his uncle and his brother while they were being tortured. The reader should note that Luis' uncle was most certainly not a Judaizer. In fact, he was strongly opposed to those who were. Nonetheless, he was brought to trial on trumped up charges, tortured, and finally "confessed" to "observing" some Jewish rituals and implicated members of his family for the same "offenses."

Luis, who had gone into hiding, was found in his mother's house on May 9 and immediately imprisoned. He was questioned a number of times over the next few months

and urged to confess his “crimes.” However, he consistently maintained his innocence, and insisted that he had nothing to confess.

“The Public Prosecutor, Dr. Lobo Guerrero, finally read a writ of accusation against him during the hearing of July 27, 1589:

Luis, a baptized and confirmed Christian, is a heretic and apostate against the Catholic Church. A descendant of Jews, he has returned to Judaism and has practiced the ceremonies and rites of the Law of Moses, believing that he could obtain salvation in that way.

A number of detailed charges were leveled against him, viz.:

A parent [father] of Luis had asked him while he, the father, lay dying to wash his corpse according to the Jewish rite in order that it should not be buried unclean; Luis had studied the Old Testament and the Prophets in order to be more knowledgeable in his practice of Judaism; he quoted the Prophets habitually; and it was impossible to convince him that the Prophets had predicted that Jesus Christ would come as the Messiah; he had run away to Vera Cruz when his sister, Isabel de Andrade was imprisoned by the Holy Office and finally that he had protected Judaizers by not denouncing them.

Luis was again questioned about his Jewish practices and threatened with being tortured in order to make him confess the truth. Finally, on August 7, 1589, apparently seeing no way out of his predicament, he voluntarily appeared before the Inquisitors, “went down on his knees, kissed the floor, shed tears, beat his breast, and said: ‘*Peccavi, misericordia*’ [‘I have sinned, mercy, mercy.’].”

Luis appeared before the court several times during August and September. He confessed that his father had taught him that the Law of Moses is the only true law; one is forbidden to eat pork and fish without scales; and the reasons for observing the Sabbath, Passover and other Jewish holidays, rites and ceremonies. He also said his father had read the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah and had told him that the messiah had not yet arrived. He told the courts that these teachings of his father had influenced him to practice Judaism, and that he had indeed practiced Judaism for the past five years.

He followed this confession with the claim “that his heart had been entirely converted to Christianity during the last few days. After having made his depositions, Luis kneeled again and declared that he was a believing Catholic willing to live and die as a good Christian. Following the usual legal procedures of the tribunal, on February 24, 1590, Luis was permitted to be reconciled to the Catholic faith at an auto-da-fé, after public abjuration of his errors. He was condemned to wear the penitential cloak [*sambenito*] and to perpetual imprisonment.”

Imprisonment

The Holy Office in Mexico did not have a prison for those sentenced to lifelong imprisonment. As a result, Luis was transferred to San Hipolito Martyr, a convalescent home in Mexico City, where he was required to perform any services that the hospital administrator would require of him. He spent two years at this hospital doing all sorts of menial labor, completely isolated from his family.

Luis' mother and four sisters, who had also been tried for Judaizing and been reconciled with the church in the auto-da-fé of 1590, were confined to an isolated house near the College of the Holy Cross of Tlaltelolco in Mexico City. In 1592 one of Luis' brothers-in-law petitioned the Inquisitors to allow Luis to live with his mother and sisters, so that they would not be left without a man's protection. The request was granted. Luis "found his mother and sisters completely overcome by their experiences with the Inquisition, but it was not long before he persuaded them again to practice Jewish rites."

The College Library

The Carvajals developed a relationship with Fr. Pedro de Oroz, the supervisor of the College of the Holy Cross. As a result, Fr. Pedro made Luis his private secretary and a Latin instructor at the college. He also gave Luis the keys to the college's library. This gave Luis access to many classical works, including Josephus Flavius' **History of the Jews**. After the students left each day, Luis spent hours studying the Bible and other works. One day he came across a book that contained the Rambam's Thirteen Principles of the Jewish faith. These *Ikarim* were completely unknown to those living under the Inquisition. The net result was that Luis immensely increased his knowledge of Judaism.

Release and Then Imprisonment Again

For several years a relative of the Carvajals had been petitioning the authorities for their release. In 1594 this request was granted, and, after the payment of a fine, they were released from all of the penalties imposed upon them in 1590.

Luis remained a free man for a little more than three months. "On February 1, 1595, the Public Prosecutor of the Holy Office denounced Luis, then twenty-eight years old, as a relapsed heretic, apostate, and Judaizer, and obtained from the Inquisitors an authorization for Luis' arrest, which was executed during the night of February first and early the next morning. When he was searched by the jailer of the secret prison, a leather bag was found on his person which contained three small books in black leather and bearing the hand lettered titles *Psalmorum*, *Prophets*, and *Genesis*."

The Second Trial

"The new prosecution of Luis was based upon the testimony of some seventeen witnesses, all of whom confirmed the fact that Luis engaged in Judaizing practices after

his reconciliation to Catholicism in 1590; but as it turned out, the most damaging witness was Luis himself.”

One of the witnesses testified that Luis and his family greeted him in the Jewish manner with the words “May G-d be with you.” He also said that on Yom Kippur he saw Luis, his mother and sisters on their knees facing east, praying and weeping. A cell mate, Luis Dias, who was a planted informer, testified that Luis prayed in his cell for hours, kneeling with his face to the east while wearing a hat. In addition, he said that whenever Luis pronounced the name of Ha Shem, he would kiss the floor. He and other witnesses reported many other Jewish practices of the accused.

Luis realized that since he was as a relapsed apostate who had abjured his heresy in 1590, he would most certainly be sentenced to death at his second trial. Furthermore, he was now at the age of twenty-eight a very different man than when he was first tried. At that time his knowledge of Judaism was rudimentary, whereas now he knew the Bible and some of its commentaries well. Furthermore, he had become an enthusiastic follower of Judaism, as well as “a mystic who was given to fasting and praying, and the writing of religious poetry.”

Therefore, at this trial he openly declared his Jewish beliefs and practices. When asked whether in the future he desired to follow Judaism, he “responded that he wished to live and die observing the Law of Moses.” In response to another question he gave nine reasons for denying the Catholic faith.

In the end, “Luis was imprisoned and tortured for nearly two years and finally, on December 8, 1596, he was burned at the stake in Mexico City with his mother, Francisca, and three of his sisters, Isabel, Leonor and Catalina. No Jewish woman had been executed in Mexico until then. Conflicting accounts of his death have been circulated. Before his body was consumed in the flames a priest claimed that he had been garroted [strangled]. The same priest suggests that he kissed a crucifix held up to his lips. If the priest's account is correct (which is by no means certain), he almost certainly did so solely to avoid the pain of being burned alive, for such was the price of an expedited death. He was survived by his saintly sister, Anica, and a beloved disciple, Justa Mendez. His brothers, Baltazar and Miguel, escaped to Europe. (<http://my.opera.com/Rev4u/blog/show.dml/834923>)

Sadly, this marked the end of Luis Carvajal, Jr.'s short life. One can only marvel at his commitment to Judaism in the face of unbelievable opposition and ruthless oppression.