

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 22)

The Inquisition in Mexico

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

For centuries Mexico was inhabited by a number of different Indian races. There were many native cultures in México, but only six are considered to be the most influential. The Olmecs, the Teotihuacans, the Toltecs, the Mayans, the Zapotec/Mixtec, and the Aztecs each developed during a different epoch of the history of ancient México.

Historians date the beginning of the Colonial Period of Mexico from August 18, 1521, when a Spanish force, commanded by Hernando Cortéz, conquered the city of Tenochtitlán [later called Mexico City], the capital of the Aztec empire. México did not get its independence until 1821. During its colonial period Mexico was known as New Spain.

Cortéz and his *conquistadores* [conquerors] found Mexico to be rich in precious metals with vast expanses of arable land. In addition, the native population provided a ready source of slave labor. The possibilities for enrichment seemed almost limitless, and soon many enterprising adventurers were attracted to New Spain. Included in these entrepreneurs were a number of “New Christians” (Marranos, *Anusim*), those Jews from Spain or their ancestors who had accepted baptism in order to remain there at the time of the expulsion in 1492. Others had fled from Spain to Portugal in 1492, only to be forcibly converted to Christianity in 1497.

Some of these New Christians did become observant and devout Catholics. However, a considerable number of them remained underground Jews for centuries. Outwardly they appeared to live as Catholics, going to Church and publicly observing Catholic rituals. However, at the same time they continued to practice Jewish rites and ceremonies in secret. Such Jews were mercilessly persecuted by the Inquisition for the “crime” of Judaizing in both Spain and Portugal.

Therefore, it was not just economic opportunities that attracted the *Anusim* to Mexico. At least as important was the hope that in the New World they would be far from the suspicious eyes of the Inquisition, thus enabling them to secretly practice the religion of their ancestors without interference from their Christian neighbors. History shows that they were sadly mistaken, because the omnipotent

Inquisition soon followed them to New Spain, where it was their pitiless and deadly enemy.

Initially the Inquisition in Mexico functioned in a primitive manner. The bishops in their respective diocese were made agents of the Spanish Inquisition and were given inquisitorial powers. On July 22, 1517, Don Fr. Francisco de Cisneros, Archbishop of Toledo and General Inquisitor of Spain, issued an order empowering all bishops in New Spain to investigate, imprison, prosecute, and punish heretics. Power was also given to the bishops to release to the secular authorities for capital punishment anyone convicted of Judaizing. (The Catholic Church did not actually execute anyone it convicted of a crime. The carrying out of a death sentence was left to the secular government authorities.)

In 1571 these primitive inquisitorial tribunals were replaced. Philip II, King of Spain, gave the General Inquisitor of Spain, Don Diego de Espinosa, the authority to appoint Dr. Pedro Moya de Contreras as Inquisitor for New Spain. Assuming his new duties shortly after his arrival in Mexico on September 12, 1571, he set about making the entire population of the colony aware that the Inquisition was in full force. On November 4, 1571, an impressive ceremony in the Cathedral of Mexico City was held in the presence of the entire population of the city.

Everyone twelve years and older had been summoned the day before by town criers to assist in inaugurating the founding of a Holy Office in New Spain. All those present were required to agree under oath that they would not tolerate heretics. The people had to swear that they would denounce to the Holy Office anyone suspected of heresy. Furthermore, they were to help persecute them as "wolves and rabid dogs." Any individual failing to do this would himself suffer major excommunication.

An Edict of Grace was proclaimed, admonishing those who were practicing Jewish rites and ceremonies to denounce themselves within six days. Those who did were assured that they would be treated with mercy.

The Edict of Grace of November 4, 1571 ushered in a reign of terror and panic. Within six months, the Holy Office was busy investigating over 400 denunciations. As was often the case, most were without foundation; nonetheless, 127 persons were arrested. Preparations were soon made for the first *auto-da-fé*.

Note: The phrase **auto de fe** refers to the ritual of public penance of condemned heretics and apostates that took place when the Inquisition had decided their punishment (that is, after the trial). *Auto de fe* in medieval Spanish means "act of faith". The phrase also commonly occurs in English in its Portuguese form *auto da fe* (or **auto da fé**). (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auto_de_fe)

Interestingly enough, Judaizers were not the main concern of the Mexican Holy Office. During the nearly 300 years from the conquest of Mexico to its independence from Spain, Judaizers represented only about sixteen per cent of all the people tried by the Inquisition there. There was not a single Judaizer among the victims of the first three autos-da-fé.

The procedures employed at inquisitional “trials” are described in many publications dealing with the Spanish Inquisition. People were not told what their “crimes” were or who had accused them. Instead, they were first asked to confess their “sins.” If there was no confession or if the sins mentioned were not sufficient for a tribunal, then methods of torture were employed.

The severity of the torture was increased until the tribunal got the confessions it sought. Only a few were able to resist this barbarous torture. Indeed, it was not uncommon for people to die after being extensively tortured. However, in Mexico the methods of torture used were somewhat milder than those used in Spain. The methods included cords [*cordes*] and the rack [*potro*] often combined with iron rings [*garrotilhos*]. Water torture [*agua*] was another favorite of the Mexican Inquisition.

The property of those convicted of heresy was confiscated and turned over to the Church. This alone was sufficient reason for many who were completely innocent to be denounced, tried and convicted. However, ostensibly the main objective of the Inquisitors was to get the accused to repent and return to the Catholic Church. In this way the soul of the heretic would be “saved” during his or her lifetime and for all eternity.

Given the barbarous torture utilized by the inquisitors, it is not surprising that the great majority of accused Judaizers in Mexico (as elsewhere) eventually declared that they were repentant and begged for mercy. They were then condemned to appear at an *auto-da-fé* in order to abjure their heretical errors publicly and to hear the recitation of their sentence. The sentences ranged from loss of one’s possessions through confiscation, to prison terms, to expulsion from Mexico to Spain. It was not uncommon for public lashing to be added to this list.

Those condemned Judaizers who had been reconciled to Catholicism were known as *Reconciliados*. Those who were to be expelled were required to return to Spain at their own expenses. This was almost impossible, given that all of their money and property had been confiscated as a result of the verdict imposed upon them. Most of those who could not pay for their trip to Spain managed to remain in Mexico illegally. After some time it was not unusual for these wretched individuals to find themselves again in trouble with the Holy Office.

The *autos-da-fé* were celebrated in Mexico with extraordinary splendor. They served as great spectacles in which the Holy Office impressed the populace and satisfied its penchant for cruelty. *Autos-da-fé* were often held in the largest public

square in Mexico City, where large platforms were erected for viewing these events.

The great majority of those to be released to the secular authorities for capital punishment (*relajados*) appeared in the procession of the auto-da-fé with a cross in their hands. This they kissed publicly, and then recited a Catholic prayer. The reason was that one who did this was first strangled by garrotes and then his dead body was burned. This was preferable to being burned alive. However, there were heroes and martyrs who refused to give in, preferring to be burnt alive and have their deaths be a *Kiddush ha-Shem* [a sanctification G-d's name.]