

Special Feature

Dr. Samuel Nunez's Escape From the Inquisition

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

Introduction

In 1478, Pope Sixtus IV (1414-1484) established the Spanish Inquisition. It was most active during the 15th and 16th centuries and was finally abolished in 1834. The Inquisition originally began with the goal of seeking out and punishing those who held "heretical" (non-Christian) beliefs. However, it soon adopted more materialistic, racial and political motives. It focused primarily on *Conversos* (also called *Anusim* and *Marranos*), i.e., Jews who had been pressured to convert to Christianity yet continued to observe some Jewish rituals. Anyone living on the Iberian Peninsula or in any part of the New World under Spanish or Portuguese control had good reason to fear the Inquisition.

"The Spanish Inquisition was particularly terrifying because of its inherent characteristics. The accused never knew who their accusers were. Once arrested, the accused heretic's properties were then administered at first by the Crown, and later by the General Inquisitor. This fostered the means for anyone to accuse for personal reasons, or to get gain. In many areas ... men began to wonder whether a man's worldly wealth, as well as his descent, was now become [sic] an incriminating circumstance." (Roth, 1964, *The Spanish Inquisition*. United States of America: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. p. 60).

Even if the accused was now a devout Christian, he was tried as severely as possible because of his roots. The accused was also not allowed to have a lawyer or counsel for his defense, and the names of all witnesses were kept secret from him.¹

It was only natural that *Conversos* living under such terror would want, if at all possible, to escape to countries where they could openly practice Judaism without fear of retribution. Below is the tale of one *Converso* family that managed to escape the clutches of the



Commodore Uriah Phillips Levy, a great-grandson of Sipra Zipporah Nunez.

Inquisition.

A Daring Escape

Dr. Samuel Nunez Ribiero (known primarily as Dr. Samuel Nunez) was born in 1668 into a *Converso* family in the Portuguese municipality of Idanha-a-Nova. He was baptized as Diogo Nunez (or Nunes) Ribiero. The date of his death is unknown.

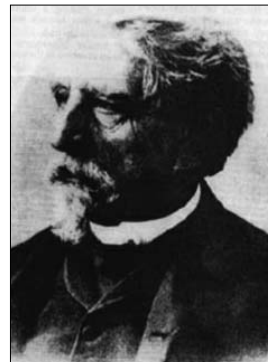
"Dr. Samuel Nunez, whose name belonged to a distinguished family in Lisbon, was a physician of eminence, [and] had an extensive practice, even in times when the Jews of that city were under the surveillance of the Inquisition. Jealousy and rivalry, however, caused him to be denounced to that dreadful tribunal, and himself [sic] and family were arrested as heretics, and thrown into the dungeons of the Inquisition. At that period, the Jews were not permitted openly to follow their religion; they had no synagogues or places of public worship, but assembled for devotional purposes in each other's houses, and their prayer books were concealed in the seats of chairs, and opened by springs. It had long been observed that the families never ventured abroad on Friday evenings, being the evening of the Sabbath, and suspicions were awakened as to their real faith, although for form sake they all attended mass. The familiars of the

Inquisition, who were generally spies, were set to work to discover what their pursuits were on the Sabbath, and detecting them at prayers, seized their Hebrew prayer-books and threw them all into prison.

"Doctor Nunez, who was a most popular and skilful man, was physician to the Grand Inquisitor, who was anxious to save him. He did all in his power to alleviate the suffering of his family; but one of them, Abby de Lyon, who died in Savannah, carried to her grave the marks of the ropes on her wrists when put to the question.

"They remained for some time in prison; but as the medical services of Doctor Nunez were very much in demand in Lisbon, the ecclesiastical council, under the advice of the Grand Inquisitor, agreed to set him and family at liberty, on condition that two officials of the Inquisition should reside constantly in the family, to guard against their relapsing again into Judaism.

"The Doctor had a large and elegant mansion on the banks of the Tagus [River], and being a man of large fortune he was in the habit of entertaining the principal families of Lisbon. On a pleasant summer day [in 1726], he invited a party to dinner, and among the guests was a captain of an English brigantine anchored at some distance in the river. While the company were amusing themselves on the lawn, the captain invited the family and part of the company to accompany him on board the brigantine and partake of a lunch prepared for the occasion. All the family, together with the spies of the Inquisition and a portion of the guests, repaired on board the vessel, and while they were below in the cabin enjoying the hospitality of the captain, the anchor was weighed, the sails unfurled, and the wind being fair, the brigantine shot out of the Tagus, and was soon at sea, and carried the whole party to England. It had been previously arranged between the Doctor and the captain, who had agreed, for a thou-



Major Raphael Jacob Moses, a great-grandson of Sipra Zipporah Nunez.

sand *moidores* in gold, to convey the family to England, and who were under the painful necessity of adopting this plan of escape to avoid detection. The ladies had secreted all their diamonds and jewels, which were quilted in their dresses, and the Doctor having previously changed all his securities into gold, it was distributed among the gentlemen of the family and carried around them in leathern belts. His house, plate, furniture, servants, equipage and even the dinner cooked for the occasion were all left, and were subsequently seized by the Inquisition and confiscated to the State."

It was by means of this ruse that Dr. Nunez, his wife Rachel, his mother Zipporah, his two sons Daniel and Moshe and his daughter Sipra (who also had the Hebrew name Zipporah) managed to escape from Portugal to London. He and his sons were circumcised shortly after their arrival in England. Furthermore, on the 11th of Av, 1726, Dr. Nunez remarried his wife according to *halachah*. Rachel Nunez died in London and Dr. Nunez remarried there. His second wife was named Rebecca.

"On the arrival of Doctor Nunez and family in London, the settlement of Georgia, and the fine climate and soil of that country, were the subjects of much speculation." Based on this, Dr. Nunez and his family decided to immigrate to Georgia. He and his family, except for his wife who left later, sailed from London in January 1733.

"When the ship first started, she sustained some serious injury in the river Thames, and was compelled to land her passengers and undergo repairs. After this was accomplished, a re-embarkation of the passengers took place, and the ship set sail for the 'New World.' The passage was a disagreeable and boisterous one; gale succeeded gale, and the ship came near being wrecked off the coast of North Carolina, and was forced to seek safety in 'New Inlet,' where she was necessarily

detained for some weeks. She again set sail, and arrived and landed her passengers in Savannah on the 11th day of July, 1733 ...²

Dr. Nunez and his family were amongst the first forty-two Jewish settlers of Savannah. At the time of his arrival, Savannah was in the midst of an outbreak of an infectious disease, which Dr. Nunez was able to stop.

One of the doctor's daughters, Sipra Zipporah Nunez (1714-1799) was an interesting person in her own right. She was 19 years old when she arrived from abroad with her father. Zipporah was born in Portugal and was baptized (as all *Conversos* were) and given the Christian name Maria. In 1733, she married David Mendez Machado, who served as the *chazzan* of Shearith Israel Synagogue in New York from 1737 until his death in 1746.

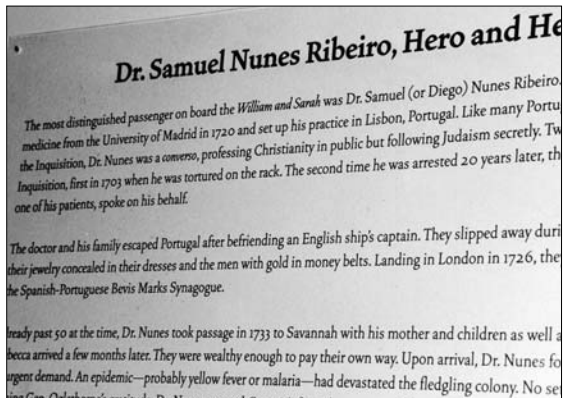
Her contemporaries considered Zipporah Machado an unusual woman, charming and cultured. She was known for her charity and supported a variety of worthy causes. Amongst her many accomplishments was her fluency in six languages. Until her death, she maintained a lofty dignity. She was the mother-in-law of Jonas Phillips (1736-1803), a Revolutionary War veteran. She was also the great-grandmother of the following distinguished men: United States Navy Commodore Uriah Phillips Levy (1792-1862); Mordechai M. Noah (1785-1851), a Jewish leader who served as Grand Sachem of Tammany Hall; and Major Raphael Jacob Moses (1812-1893), a successful businessman who fought for the South during the Civil War and had the distinction of carrying out the last order issued by the Confederacy.

Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from "Statistics of the State of Georgia: Including an account of Its Natural, Civil, and Ecclesiastical History; Together with a Particular Description of Each County, Notices of the Manners and Customs of Its Aboriginal Tribes, and a Correct Map of the State," George White. Savannah: W. Thorne Williams, 1849, pages 619-620.

Footnotes:

1. angelfire.com/al/AttardBezzinaLawrenc/TheSpanishInquisition
2. "The Occident and American Jewish Advocate," volume I, No. 8 (November 1843) page 383.

Dr. Yitzchok Levine retired in 2008 from a forty-year career as a professor of mathematics at Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. He is currently teaching at Stevens as an adjunct professor. He can be contacted at llevine@stevens.edu



A plaque honoring Dr. Nunez's accomplishments.



Marker at spot where Oglethorpe landed in Georgia.