

The Inquisition in Mexico

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I. Inquisition

In the middle of the twelfth century, fanatical Almohad Muslims overran Southern Spain, causing a massive Jewish exodus to the Christian North. At first, the Christians proved to be as tolerant to Jews as were the Muslim rulers of the Golden Age. However, in the thirteenth century matters began to deteriorate.

In the 1300s, the situation worsened drastically. The Black Death struck Spain, and rumors of Jewish responsibility spread through the country. In response to the disaster, both Christian religious consciousness and open anti-Semitism increased.

In June 1391, riots broke out in Seville, rapidly spreading through the country. By the time the riots died down -- a full two months later -- 50,000 Jews were dead, and numerous, ancient communities were completely destroyed.

MASS CONVERSION

During the riots, Jews were offered the option of conversion to Christianity or death. Sadly, for the first time in Jewish history, large numbers of Jews converted, both under immediate coercion and in fear of future pressure. In 1411, a priest, Vincente Ferrer, later to become St. Vincent, embarked on a major mission to secure even more Jewish converts. Estimates put the number of Jews who converted during these two great waves, 1391 and 1412, as high as 400,000.

There was the widespread feeling that insincere conversion to Christianity was not such a bad thing, and that the Jews would revert to Jewish practice as soon as the pressure was off. Alas, the Jews did not realize that after conversion there would be no turning back.

A shocking phenomenon occurred in Spain -- the conversion to

Christianity of prominent Torah scholars. The most infamous of these was the rabbi of Burgos, Solomon HaLevi, who became Pablo de Santa Maria. Rising to the position of bishop in the Catholic Church, he persecuted Jews with fiery zeal. Playing a major role in enacting decrees that degraded unconverted Jews, such as forcing them to wear coarse sackcloth upon which was sewn a red badge of shame, Santa Maria also forbade Jewish men to trim their beards...

THE CONVERTS' DILEMMA

After the fury of the pogroms and anti-Jewish decrees abated, many converts desired to return to Judaism. Alas, this was not possible according to Christian law. The Pope ruled that only those Jews who were dragged to the baptismal font vehemently protesting their opposition were permitted to rejoin the Jewish faith. Anyone who converted under threat of harm, and surely those who accepted baptism in anticipation of threats, was considered by the Church to be full-fledged Christians. Reversion to Jewish practice was considered heresy, which was punishable by death. These conversos lived in limbo, despised by both Jews and Christians. Jews looked down on them for forsaking Judaism and Christians saw them as insincere, which many were.

Even while outwardly professing Christian belief, many conversos retained Jewish laws, privately mocking the Christian religion. However, Jewish religious observance gradually faded. For example, it was impossible for conversos to circumcise their sons; if the heretical act were discovered, it would lead to death. Similarly, since these Jews were unable to provide their children with a Torah education, their children grew up with just a smattering of Jewish knowledge.

By 1492, the third generation conversos were overwhelmingly Christian, with lingering traces of Judaism. Faithful Jews attempted to bring the conversos back to Torah observance, but the Jews' efforts were stymied by the Church's ruling that anyone causing a Christian to leave the fold would incur the death penalty.

In 1469, Ferdinand of Aragon (who had converso ancestry) married Isabella of Castille, uniting the two most powerful Spanish regions

under one royal family. Despite Ferdinand's power and lineage, anti-converso feelings remained at a fever pitch, with the people demanding a resolution of the issue. An Inquisition court was set up to ferret out insincere converts.

The Inquisition publicized signs of heretical behavior for faithful Christians to watch for and report, including changing linens on Friday, buying vegetables before Pesach, blessing children without making the sign of the cross, fasting on Yom Kippur, and refraining from work on the Sabbath. Interestingly enough, Jews who never converted to Christianity were not under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition, and could practice their religion freely and openly. It was only conversos who were considered heretics for forsaking the Christian creed and practicing Judaism.

PUNISHMENTS & TORTURES

If the Inquisitors could not obtain a confession from a suspected heretic, they employed torture to extract one. Interestingly, as gruesome as these tortures were, they were designed not to spill blood, a practice forbidden under Christian law.

The penalties imposed by the Inquisition included monetary fines, confiscation of all property, public humiliation, and flogging. Most severe of all punishments were the death sentences. Since the Church did not spill blood, but only saved souls, the victims were handed over to the secular authorities for execution.

On March 31, 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella signed the Edict of Expulsion in the Alhambra Palace in Granada, giving Jews until the end of July to leave the country. Justification for the decree was that the “Jews are instructing them [conversos] in the ceremonies and observances of their religion, seeking to circumcise them and their children, giving them prayer books, supplying them with matzah on Passover, and kosher meat throughout the year.”

II. Portugal – perhaps 100,000 (>150,000) Jews fled here.

Of those Jews who chose to flee Spain in 1492, large numbers went to Morocco, Italy and to the Ottoman Empire. But, the greatest number,

perhaps half of the total went to Portugal. King João II, of Portugal, allowed them to enter. He was preparing for war against the Moors, and he needed the taxes collected from these Jews to finance that war.

Permanent residence was granted only to 630 wealthy families who were allowed to establish themselves in several parts of the country upon payment of 100 cruzados. Others were allowed to settle for only eight months upon payment of eight cruzados for each adult. The king then bound himself to provide shipping so that they could leave. One hundred thousand refugees may have entered under these conditions. At the end of eight months, however, the king saw to it that little shipping was available and few could leave. Those left behind were declared forfeit of their liberty and were declared slaves of the king.”

The situation of the Jews continued to deteriorate. Pressure was exerted upon them to convert to Christianity. Those who did not were told that they had to leave Portugal. However, in the end, the vast majority of Jews were not allowed to leave, and any who had not undergone conversion were forcibly converted. “Holy water was sprinkled on them and they were declared to be Christians. King Manoel (the successor to King João II) then informed the Catholic Kings of Spain, ‘There are no more Jews in Portugal.’

III. Columbus and the Jews - Columbus was not a Jew IMO (Dr. M. Kayserling, Christopher Columbus and the Participation of the Jews in the Spanish and Portuguese Discoveries

A. Columbus used Rabbi Abraham Zacuto’s astronomical tables.

B. Jews who sailed with him – Interpreter Luis de Torres, Alonso de la Calle, ship-physician Maestre Bernal, surgeon Marco

C. October 12, 1492 was Hashanna Rabba

IV. Jews wanted to escape from Spain and Portugal – came to New World because it offered financial opportunities. Also thought that they would not be bothered by the Inquisition. Came to Brazil and Mexico. Portuguese shipped some repentant heretics to Brazil.

VI. 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.

VII. 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.

VIII. The First Trial

A. Warrant for his arrest issued April 20, 1589. Found hiding in his mother's house on May 9.

B. Questioned over several months and accused of Judaizing

C. Accusations - 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.

D. Denied everything – Threatened with being tortured. 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.’].”

E. 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.

IX. 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 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.

X. 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.

XI. Release and Then Imprisonment Again

A. 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.

B. Remained free for only 3 months. Arrested again

C. Many witnesses testified against him

XII. Luis realized that since he was 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.

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.

Thomas Sobremonte

Thomas Sobremonte was born in the town of Medina de Rioseco in Castile, Spain. His mother, Dona Leonor Martinez de Villagomez, was imprisoned by the Holy Office in Valladolid and died there. His ancestors on his father's side had been Old Christians and noblemen. (Old Christians were those who supposedly had no Jewish ancestors in contrast to New Christians whose ancestors had been Jews and had converted to Catholicism.) Thomas was baptized at birth and confirmed at the age of seven or eight.

Sobremonte could correctly recite the paternoster and other Catholic prayers. "He knew how to read and write in his own language and in Latin because he had attended the College of the Jesuits in Valencia, Spain, for one year and had studied canonical law at the University of Salamanca."

When he was about fourteen years old his mother explained to him that Christians adore figures of wood and metal, while Jews adore *HaShem*, who gave the true law to Moses in the desert and that in order to obtain salvation (deliverance from sin and eternal damnation) he would have to believe in the God of the Jews. Under her influence he accepted *HaShem* and the Law of Moses.

His mother instructed him to keep his Judaism secret in order not to endanger their lives. She taught him several prayers but did not allow him to write them down. One of these prayers, which he was able to recite in broken Hebrew, was:

Sema, *HaShem*, Beruto, Ceolan, Banel [obviously the Shema prayer: "Shema Israel *HaShem Elokenu HaShem Ehad. Baruch Shem Kevod Malchuto leolam Vaed*"].

His mother “had owned a notebook entitled ‘*Los Siete Salmos Penitenciales*’ [the Seven Penitential Psalms] including psalms in her own handwriting. On the day before Yom Kippur the whole family assembled, took baths, and put on fresh linen, and ate fish. The same evening all prayed together while standing until two in the morning, and they also discussed the Law of Moses. They fasted a day and a night, [and] then dined on fishmeal.”

Sobremonte’s family rested on Shabbat. Sometimes they had to eat pork in order not to attract attention. He was taught to wash his hands before each meal and to pray:

Bendito sea el Poderoso HaShem, que en las enseñanzas me enseñaste el lavar de las manos, boca y ojos te alabar y servir en loor y honra del Señor y en la Ley de Moisen [Blessed be the Almighty HaShem, who taught me in his teachings to wash hands, mouth, and eyes in order to glorify and serve in praise and honor of the Lord and the Law of Moses].

Mexico and the Inquisition

Thomas was appointed “a page of Don Rodrigo Enriquez de Mendoza in Medina de Rioseco. One day, another page in the same service called him ‘Jew,’ and in anger Sobremonte killed him. Because of this he went into hiding in a neighboring convent and changed his name to Jeronimo de Represa. In the year 1612 he sailed from Cadiz to Mexico and settled as a trader in the town of Guaxaca.”

He immigrated to Mexico with the hope that he could avoid persecution by the Catholic Church in the New World. There he married Maria Gomez and became financially successful.

“Sobremonte was arrested by the Inquisition for the first time on March 1, 1624, and removed from Antequera, Mexico, to Mexico City on November 23, 1624.” During his hearings he eventually revealed his Jewish background and the religious practices outlined above.

“Sobremonte told the Court that he relented of having followed his mother's instructions and was willing to return to Catholicism. Even so, on February 1, 1625, the Promoter Fiscal [Ecclesiastic Attorney

General] demanded capital punishment for him. The Court condemned him to appear at the March 25th auto-da-fé as a reconciled Catholic wearing the *sambenito* [penitential garment]. He was also sentenced to serve one year in prison and to confiscation of all his belongings. Besides, he was required to assist every Sunday and on holy days at High Mass and to attend the sermons in the Convent of the Dominican Friars.”

Steadfast Commitment to Judaism

If the Inquisition thought that it had “cured” Sobremonte of his Judaizing, it was most certainly mistaken. While in prison he requested that the Inquisitional Court assign Antonio Váez, another New Christian convicted by the Inquisition, to be his cell mate. While together in prison Antonio circumcised Thomas.

Both men were subsequently released and resumed their practice of Judaism. They did whatever they could to assist other Marranos in their Jewish religious practices. The following amazing story illustrates the depth of Thomas’s and his family’s commitment to Jewish observance.

The crypto-Jewish community in Mexico in general did not have access to a Jewish calendar. In 1640 Sobremonte and Váez had a long discussion concerning the date of Yom Kippur, because an error had been made in the observance of the appearance of the new moon. Sobremonte claimed that Yom Kippur was to be observed one week later than the date determined by Váez. In order to be sure that they observed Yom Kippur, Sobremonte and his family fasted for eight consecutive days!

Under the Watchful Eye of the Inquisition

After his release from prison on June 20, 1626, Thomas resumed his business endeavors and was quite successful. However, the Inquisition, always suspect of those who had reconciled with the Church, kept a watchful eye on him.

On June 20, 1629, he was again denounced to the Inquisitors by the Attorney General, because he was seen horseback riding, publicly bearing arms, and dressed in silk and fine clothes—

conduct as such was forbidden to persons reconciled by the Tribunals of the Holy Office. Several witnesses confirmed the denunciation. Despite all this, Sobremonte was not imprisoned; however, he was frightened. In 1633, he wrote to the Holy Office offering one hundred pesos as a voluntary fine for delaying to present his rehabilitation document dated May 6, 1631, in Madrid, and signed by the Cardinal and General Inquisitor of Spain, Don Antonio Zapata. According to this document Sobremonte was entitled to wear arms and expensive clothes, to ride a horse, and to enjoy other privileges usually forbidden to the *reconciliados*.

Sobremonte was then left in peace by the Inquisition until 1644. In that year the Attorney General denounced him on the grounds that, since his reconciliation with the Church in 1625, he had been practicing Judaism.

Many witnesses claimed that he had celebrated his marriage to his wife in accordance with Jewish tradition; that he and his family kept the Jewish dietary laws and only ate kosher food; that he covered his head with a cap when he recited Psalms in Latin; that the crypto-Jewish community of Mexico considered him a “rabbi;” that he prayed three times a day, his head covered with a cap to which was tied a towel for drying his hands after washing them.

Furthermore, he and his family were accused of attending Mass and making confession only to deceive their neighbors and the authorities. Also, their Church attendance was always preceded by fasting at home and asking G-d to forgive them for this sin.

During his second trial Sobremonte steadfastly denied everything that he was accused of. In addition, he did not denounce anybody. The trial continued for five long years. One can only imagine the horrors that he experienced under the questioning of his Inquisitors. He often fasted during this period and became emaciated.

On February 21, 1649, Sobremonte was condemned to capital punishment and sentenced to be burned alive at the stake on April 11, 1649 at an auto-de-fé.

The Death of a Martyr

Still, the Church would not let him rest. Beginning the day before his scheduled death, all sorts of efforts were made to convert him to Catholicism before his execution. Three clergymen visited him in his cell the entire night before, admonishing him to die as a Catholic. They would not desist, even as Thomas was being taken to the auto-de-fé. At one point Sobremonte told the clerics that they should convert to Judaism, because Judaism was the only true religion!

When Sobremonte arrived on the stage of the auto-de-fé, priests of all orders tried to persuade him to change his mind and accept Christianity. Though he had been fasting for four days, he refused the food and drink offered him. A priest explained chapter 9 of Daniel to him, in which the appearance of a Messiah was prophesied, and showed him several other Bible passages. Finally Sobremonte answered:

“Do not exert yourself to convince me, for I must die as a Jew. It would be better to convert yourself to Judaism.”

At one point, due to the fact that Sobremonte had uttered blasphemies, he was gagged. “When other condemned Judaizers were brought upon the stage, he tried to give them signs with his eyes that they should remain firm and die as Jews. When his mother-in-law, Leonor Gomez Nunez, her daughter Maria Gomez [Sobremonte’s wife], and her other daughter, Ana Gomez, all condemned to death, appeared on the stage, Sobremonte [obviously not gagged at that time] said: ‘Remember the mother of the Maccabeans!’”

When his sentence was read, Thomas said that he believed only in the G-d of Israel. All attempts to get him to acknowledge Catholicism failed, despite the fact that such an action would have meant that he would have been first strangled before his body was burned.

The thirteen others who were also executed on this terrible day “chose” to be garroted rather than be burned alive. Among them were Sobremonte’s mother-in-law Leonor Gomez Nunez, his wife Maria Gomez Sobremonte, and his sister-in-law Ana Gomez. Not Thomas Trebino de Sobremonte. He endured the horrible death of actually being burned alive at the stake when he died *al Kiddush HaShem*.

Despite the fact that his knowledge of Judaism was limited, and he had never seen Judaism practiced fully, his commitment to the faith of his ancestors knew no bounds.