

Glimpses Into American Jewish History

Escape From The Inquisition

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The Inquisition

“In 1478 at the request of the Spanish sovereigns Ferdinand and Isabella, Pope Sixtus IV (1471-84) issued a papal bull allowing for the creation of the Spanish Inquisition. It lasted until it was "abolished" in 1834, although its most fervent activity was during the 15th and 16th centuries. The Spanish Inquisition is the notorious for two reasons. First, it was more cruel precisely because it was administered by the secular government. Second, it was concerned, in large part, with the conversos. These were Jews who had converted either under duress or out of social convenience, and were suspected of secretly practicing the Jewish faith.”¹

“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 seized. These 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). The Inquisition certainly did not limit itself to purifying only those of the Jewish faith. This was especially true if the accused was found to have any Jewish blood in his ancestry. 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.”²

“More than 13,000 Conversos were put on trial during the first 12 years of the Spanish Inquisition. Hoping to eliminate ties between the Jewish community and Conversos, the Jews of Spain were expelled in 1492.

“The next phase of the Inquisition began around 1531, when Pope Leo X extended the Inquisition to Portugal. Thousands of Jews came to Portugal after the 1492 expulsion. A Spanish style Inquisition was constituted and tribunals were set up in Lisbon and other cities. Among the Jews who died at the hands of the Inquisition were well-known figures of the period such as Isaac de Castro

Tartas, Antonio Serrao de Castro and Antonio Jose da Silva. The Inquisition never stopped in Spain and continued until the late 18th century.

“By the second half of the 18th century, the Inquisition abated, due to the spread of enlightened ideas and lack of resources. The last auto-da-fe in Portugal took place on October 27, 1765. Not until 1808, during the brief reign of Joseph Bonaparte, was the Inquisition abolished in Spain. An estimated 31,912 heretics were burned at the stake, 17,659 were burned in effigy and 291,450 made reconciliations in the Spanish Inquisition. In Portugal, about 40,000 cases were tried, although only 1,800 were burned, the rest made penance.”³

In 1497 all Jews living in Portugal were forced to convert to Christianity. These Jews were known as “New Christians” or Marranos. Despite the obvious dangers involved, a considerable number of these New Christians while outwardly professing to be devout Catholics, secretly kept as many *mitzvos* as possible. They remained loyal Jews for hundreds of years, and married only other “New Christians” who did the same. Of course, if at all possible, these New Christians sought ways to flee from Portugal. Their goal was to go to a country that would allow them to openly practice Judaism. Very few families actually succeeded in doing this.

A Daring Escape

“Dr. Samuel Nunez ... was an eminent physician in Lisbon during the Inquisition. They, although of the Jewish persuasion ... had long been professing Christianity, but by pursuing their religious devotions privately, were enabled to remain secretly true to the faith of their ancestors. The Doctor was one of the court physicians, but even this did not save him from the wrath of the Grand Inquisitor when it was ascertained that his Christianity was but a pretense; he, with the members of his family, was cast into prison, and remained there until the medical services of the Doctor being called into requisition, they were liberated by the Ecclesiastical Council upon the advice of the Grand Inquisitor, on condition, however, that two officials of the Inquisition should reside in the family as spies upon their religious practices.”⁴

“The Doctor had a large and elegant mansion on the banks of the Tagus, 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 thousand *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.”⁵

In this manner Dr. Nunez, his wife Rebecca, his mother Zipporah, his two sons Daniel and Moshe, and his daughter Sipra (Zipporah) escaped from Portugal to London. As was the case with many New Christian men who escaped from the Iberian Peninsula, he and his sons were no doubt circumcised shortly after their arrival. On the 11th of Av, 1726, Dr. Nunez remarried his wife Rebecca according to *Halacha*.⁶ On July 11, 1733 Dr. Nunez and his family (except for his wife who had apparently died while they were living in London) arrived in Savannah, Georgia.

Zipporah Nunez (1714-1799⁷) “was a young lady nineteen years of age when she arrived from abroad with her father. Zipporah [apparently originally named Maria] had been born in Portugal, a Catholic, and she grew up in this land to marry [in 1733] a ‘rabbi,’ Mr. [David Mendez] Machado, the hazzan of Shearith Israel [Synagogue in New York]. Her contemporaries agreed that Zipporah Machado was an unusual woman, charming and cultured, mistress of six languages. Her charity, which she bestowed as her means permitted, was ‘unbiased by national or sectarian prejudices.’”⁸ Zipporah “was a woman of many accomplishments, conversant with several languages, and until her death maintained a lofty dignity, and was known in her earlier years as a great beauty.”⁹ “She was the mother-in-law of a Revolutionary veteran (Jonas Phillips) and the great-grandmother of a commodore in the United States Navy (Uriah P. Levy) and of a Grand Sachem of Tammany Hall (Mordechai M. Noah), all Jews.”¹⁰ She was also the great-grandmother of Raphael Jacob Moses.¹¹ Raphael Moses was a successful businessman and a staunch fighter for the South during the Civil War. He had the distinction of carrying out the last order issued by the Confederacy. He and his extended family were all observant Jews.

¹ <http://www.geocities.com/iberianinquisition/>

² <http://www.bibletopics.com/biblestudy/64.htm>

³ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/Inquisition.html>

⁴ **Family History of the Reverend David Mendez Machado**, N. Taylor Phillips, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, 1894; 2, AJHS Journal page 45. This article is available online from AJHA at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>.

⁵ Ibid., pages 46 – 47 quoting **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.

⁶ **New Light on the Jewish Settlement of Savannah**, Malcolm H. Stern, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, volume 52, 1963. Reprinted in **The Jewish Experience in America** edited by Abraham J. Karp, Ktav Publishing House, New York, 1969, page 72.

⁷ **The Record Book of the Reverend Jacob Raphael Cohen**, Allen D. Corré with biographical annotations by Malcolm H. Stern, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, volume 59, 1969, footnote 105. This article is available online from AJHA at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>.

⁸ **Early American Jewry, Volume II: The Jews of Pennsylvania and the South, 1655 – 1790**, Jacob Rader Marcus, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1953, page 335.

⁹ **Family History of the Reverend David Mendez Machado**, page 50.

¹⁰ **Early American Jewry, Volume II: The Jews of Pennsylvania and the South, 1655 – 1790**, page 335.

¹¹ **The Last Order Of The Lost Cause: The Civil War Memoirs Of A Jewish Family From The 'Old South': Raphael Jacob Moses, Major, C.S.A., 1812-1893**, Mel Young, University Press of America, 1995, New York, page 334.