

Burned Alive at the Stake

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INTRODUCTION

Jewish history is, sadly, replete with instances where Jews have been persecuted. Indeed, over the centuries, Jewish blood has in general been cheap. Jews have been beaten, tortured and killed. Far too many Jews have died *al Kiddush Hashem*. During the sixteenth, seventeenth, and even into the eighteenth century, the Catholic Church, in its attempts to root out every vestige of Judaism in countries controlled by Spain and Portugal, was responsible for more than its share of spilled Jewish blood through the practices of the feared Inquisition.

One of the primary concerns of the Inquisition was to find and punish Jews whose ancestors had been forcibly converted to Christianity during the last decade of the fifteenth century and who still clung to some Jewish practices. Such Jews were known as New Christians or Marranos or *Anusim*.

These Marranos knew very little about Judaism. It was impossible for them to

have any real Jewish education. They could not read Hebrew, did not have access to a Jewish calendar, and knew only a smattering of *halacha*. If they were caught practicing anything that even smacked of Judaism, the result was torture, imprisonment and confiscation of one's property. Indeed, the easiest and safest thing for New Christians to do would have been to completely abandon their Jewish origins and accept Catholicism as their religion and live by its tenets. Despite this, historical records show that a not insignificant number of New Christians practiced as much Juda-

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ism as they possibly could. This inevitably led most of them into the clutches of the Inquisition.

Being accused by an Inquisitional Court of Judaizing (practicing Judaism) meant being interrogated, more often than not under torture. The goal was to get the "heretic" to confess his or her sins, repent, and become reunited with the Church by affirming his or her belief that Christianity was the true religion. For a first offense, such reconciliation usually involved forfeiture of one's property, loss of one's social position, and the wearing of the *sambenito*, a special garment of shame, for

a period of time. Sometimes a reconciled Judaizer was required to leave Mexico, despite the fact that this was virtually impossible, since he or she had no money to pay for their passage. A second offense usually meant a death sentence.

The death sentence was not carried out by the Church. Indeed, the Church itself never actually killed anyone. The Inquisitional Court turned the heretic over to the secular authorities with the request that he or she be treated "mercifully." If the person sentenced to death acknowledged that Christianity was the "true" re-

ligion, he suffered the "less painful" death of first being garroted (strangled) and then burnt at the stake. "The condemned was placed with his back to a wooden pillar, his neck tied to the pillar (stake) with a thick cord on which an iron tourniquet was twisted, to strangle the condemned gradually." If the prisoner had the courage in his final moments to refuse to accept Christianity, then he was actually burned alive at the stake.

Marranos immigrated to the New World in the hope that this would keep them relatively safe from the Inquisition. Unfortunately, this turned out not to be the case, and the Inquisition was quite active in Mexico, Peru, Brazil and other Spanish and Portuguese colonies. This article relates the story of the persecution in Mexico of Thomas Trebino de Sobremonte, a martyr who was burned alive at the stake on April 11, 1649.

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

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 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 Moshe in the desert and that in order to obtain salvation (deliverance from sin and eternal punishment) he would have to believe in the G-d of the Jews. Under her influence, he accepted Hashem and the Torah.

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

Sema, Hashem, Beruto, Ceolan, Banel [obviously the *tefillah* of *Shema: "Shema Yisroel Hashem Elokenu Hashem Echad. Boruch Shem Kevod Malchuso Le'olam Vo'ed"*].

His mother "had owned a notebook entitled '*Los Siete Sabnos 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 *Shabbos*. Sometimes they had to eat pork in order not to attract attention. He was taught to wash his hands before each meal and to *daven*:

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 Moises [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 L-rd and the Law of Moshe].

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 performed a *bris milah* on Thomas.

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

The crypto-Jewish community in Mexico in general did not have access to a Jewish calendar. In 1640, Sobremonte and Vázquez 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 Vázquez. 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 vol-

untary 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,

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

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 kept the laws of *kashrus* and only ate kosher food; that he covered his head with a cap when he recited *Tehillim* in Latin; that the crypto-Jewish community of Mexico considered him a "rabbi;" that he *davened* 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 Hashem 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 phrase *auto-de-fé* refers to the ritual of public penance of condemned heretics and apostates that took place when the Inquisition had decided their punishment.)

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 *Perek Tes* of *Sefer Doniel* to him, in which the

appearance of *Moshiach* is prophesied, and showed him several other 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 Yisroel. 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 *Yiddishkeit* was limited, and he had never seen Judaism practiced fully, his commitment to the faith of his ancestors knew no bounds.