

Glimpses Into American Jewish History Part 28

David Mendes and Zipporah Nunes Machado

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One of the truly amazing aspects of Jewish history is that there were Jews who secretly maintained as much religious observance as they could while living under the merciless eye of the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal. These Jews, while outwardly professing Christianity, wanted nothing more than to escape to a country where they could openly practice the religion of their forefathers. In 1531 the Inquisition was officially instituted in Portugal. Yet, more than 200 years later, we find certain Marrano families who married only amongst themselves and clung to Judaism.

Two people who came from such families were David Mendes Machado and his wife Zipporah. Both were born in Portugal during the Inquisition - he in 1695, and she in 1714. Both were, of course, baptized, since this was the only way that their families could outwardly appear to be loyal Christians while maintaining their secret Jewish practices. Indeed, Zipporah's Christian name was Maria Caetana.

Reverend David Mendes Machado

According to Naphtali Taylor Phillips,¹ David Machado escaped from Portugal with Dr. Nunes and his family in 1732. However, Rabbi David and Tamar De Sola Pool point out that this date must be incorrect.

According to the tradition transmitted by his descendants, Hazzan Machado began life as a Marrano, that is a Jew who could practice the faith of his fathers only in the secrecy of his heart and hearth. His older brother, whose loyalty as a Jew was discovered before he could escape his tormentors, was burned at the stake. In 1732, David Machado, it is said, escaped from his spiritually strangled existence in Portugal and came in the following year, 1733, to Savannah proudly professing his Judaism.

Though there is no reason for doubting the basic story, the dates call for revision. The records of the congregation show that already in 1728 David Mendes Machado was one of its contributing members. This earlier date explains how in 1736 he could enter the Jewish ministry after a life of Marranoism in which Jewish observance was a perilous matter of life and death, and the acquisition of Hebrew learning was virtually impossible. For a Marrano brought up under the watchful eyes of the Inquisition who wished to return to Judaism, there was much both to learn and unlearn, and in addition in order to be minister in Shearith Israel

he had to acquire a knowledge of English. More than eight years of freedom of worship in New York could well have opened for him the gates of Hebrew knowledge, and given him familiarity with the synagogue ritual and acquaintance with the complex rules of shehitah, enabling him to become the religious leader of the synagogue.²

Reverend Machado served as the Hazzan of Shearith Israel Synagogue in New York City from 1737 until 1747. His responsibilities were not limited to leading religious services. He was also hired “to keep a public school in due form for teaching the Hebrew language, either the whole morning or afternoon as he shall think most proper. Later, the Reverend Mr. Machado had to keep school in the Hebra building, mornings from nine to twelve and afternoons from two to five.”

Another of his duties was to give a certificate of kashruth for all kosher beef exported to the Caribbean communities. For this service it was agreed in October, 1747, that he would be paid six shillings for every twenty barrels of kosher beef, so as to make up the relatively large increment of £ 20 a year that had been voted him. Less than two months later, on December 4, 1747, he died. The congregation paid £ 18.7.0 for funeral charges and for clothing for his widow and children. He was given a worthy tombstone with the epitaph inset on a lead plate. Some thirty years later during the Revolution, that lead was taken from his tombstone. (In those days lead, needed for bullets, was taken from windows, from the weights on fishing nets, and even from tombstones.) Therefore Hazzan Machado's memory is preserved not through any tumulary inscription, but in a living line of descent that was outstanding in every generation in Shearith Israel's history.³

Zipporah Nunes Machado

Zipporah Nunes came from another Marrano family. She and other members of her family were at one point imprisoned by the Inquisition for practicing Judaism. However, her father, Dr. Samuel (Diogo) Nunes (Ribeiro), was a well-respected physician, and his medical expertise was needed by the royal court in Lisbon. Therefore, the family was eventually released. However, the Church wanted to insure that the Nunes family would not return to secretly practicing any Jewish rites. Therefore, two Christian “spies” were required to live with the family.

This made life intolerable for the Nunes family, and, in 1726, they escaped from Portugal to London. (For the details of this bold escape see Glimpses Into American Jewish History: Part 9, “Escape From The Inquisition,” **The Jewish Press**, December 1, 2005, http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/19159/Glimpses_Into_American_Jewish_History_%28Part_9%29.html.)

In 1733 Zipporah came with her father and two brothers to settle in Savannah, GA. Her mother arrived some months later. Thus she was amongst the first Jewish settlers of Savannah. (See Glimpses Into American Jewish History: Part 10, “The Jewish Settlement of Savannah, GA,” **The Jewish Press**, January 4, 2006,

http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/19160/Glimpses_Into_American_Jewish_History_%28Part_10%29.html.)

Crypto-Jewish women displayed exceptional religious tenacity and were the primary transmitters of secret Jewish rituals on the Iberian Peninsula. A Nunes oral family tradition reveals that the women were so conditioned to leading a double life that for years after their move to America they continued to recite their Hebrew prayers with the aid of the Catholic rosary. Zipporah's great-grandson, Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785-1851), recounted that she would repeat a silent prayer whenever the clock struck. This prayer had some reference to her imprisonment by the Inquisition.

“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.’”⁴ She was known in her youth as a great beauty.

In 1733 Zipporah married David Machado. They did not have children until 1746 when Rebecca was born. Sarah was born a year later. However, Hazzan Machado never really knew his two daughters, because he passed away in 1747 leaving Zipporah a widow with two young children.

In 1753 Zipporah married Israel Jacobs of Philadelphia. “Her marriage with Jacobs was considered somewhat of a *messalliance*, he being a man of ordinary attainments. He was familiarly known by the term ‘Daddy,’ applied on account of his fondness for children, from whom when separated he was never happy and in whose society he spent much of his time.”⁵ They had one child Rachel, who was born in either 1754 or 1760. Zipporah died in 1799 at the age of 85. Israel outlived her, passing away in 1810.

Zipporah's oldest daughter Rebecca married Jonas Phillips, a Revolutionary War veteran. (For information about her life see *Glimpses Into American Jewish History: Part 13, “Rebecca (Machado) Phillips: Colonial Jewish Matriarch,” The Jewish Press*, April 5, 2006,

http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/17894/Glimpses_Into_American_Jewish_History_%28Part_13%29.html.) Zipporah was also the great-grandmother of Uriah Phillips Levy (1792 – 1862), a commodore in the United States Navy, and of Manual M. Noah (mentioned above), a Grand Sachem of Tammany Hall.

¹ **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 AJHS at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>.

² **An Old Faith In The New World, Portrait of Shearith Israel 1654 – 1954**, by David and Tamar De Sola Pool, Columbia University Press, New York, 1955, pages 162 – 163.

³ *Ibid.*, page 163

⁴ **Early American Jewry, The Jews of Pennsylvania and the South, 1655 – 1790, Volume 2**, by Jacob Rader Marcus, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1953, page 335.

⁵ **Family History of the Reverend David Mendez Machado**