

Newsletter

The Society For Crypto-Judaic Studies

NOVEMBER 7, 1992

NATION

Spotlight on New Mexico's Secret Jews

The Spanish Expulsion 500 years ago brought their ancestors to the Southwest

By Arlynn Nelhaus
Jerusalem Post

Albuquerque, N.M.

"Grandpa!" the boy hollered in confusion, "Why are you pouring water on my head?"

The two were kneeling beside a stream in the isolation of New Mexico's northern mountains. Back at the house, the family had been celebrating the boy's 12th birthday. Then the grandfather told him, "It is time for us to take a walk."

"Tell me, Grandpa," the boy, his hair dripping wet, anxiously insisted. "Why?"

"To remove the baptism," the grandfather solemnly declared. "Antonio, you are not Catholic. You are 'Judio.' Your name in the old language is Aaron."

Antonio burst into tears. "No! It isn't true. I can't be Judio. I don't want to be Judio."

This is how Antonio Lopez, growing up in a tiny village in a Hispanic, Roman Catholic remote corner of the United States, learned of his Jewish heritage.

When he was a boy, his church, playmates and everyone around him made it plain that Jews were to be despised. How could he be happy to learn that he was what everyone hated?

But, Lopez recalled, when he

knew that fact about himself, much in his life became clear: the way his grandfather, with other older men, would close themselves off in a shed on Saturdays and chant words the boy did not understand, and why members of his family would not eat pork, claiming that it upset their stomachs.

Privately Jewish

Antonio-Aaron Lopez is one of perhaps 1,500 Americans of Spanish descent in New Mexico alone who outwardly live as Christians, usually Roman Catholics.

Privately, however, they adhere to certain Jewish customs, or practice what they remember of Judaism 500 years after the Spanish crown forced the religion out of Spain or underground.

Only within the past 10 years has their existence become known to the outside world and the observance this year of the quincentennial of the Spanish Expulsion has turned an unwelcome spotlight on this reclusive group.

A conference is being held on the history of New Mexico's Secret Jews, today and tomorrow, in Santa Fe.

Stanley Hordes, now a profes-

sor at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, inadvertently became the authority on these crypto-Jews after he was hired as New Mexico's state historian.

It became known that his doctoral thesis was on 17th century crypto-Jews of Mexico and that he, himself, was Jewish. Hordes recalls how "people began dropping into my office, leaning across my desk and whispering that a neighbor lit candles on Friday night or didn't eat pork."

At first, he could not believe that after 500 years, Jewish customs survived. But the rumors persisted, and so did Hordes.

Now, 10 years later, the historian and Tomas C. Atencio, a University of New Mexico sociologist, have encountered crypto-Jews far beyond New Mexico, most of whom are Roman Catholic or of other Christian faiths and who have no link to or knowledge of their Jewish roots.

In this 500th year since Columbus's voyage to the New World, Hispanics, more than ever, have become curious about their genealogy. Because of church records and Spanish ship manifests, theirs are among the easiest to trace.

Some reject their Jewish heri-

tage completely. Others look at it simply as an interesting fact of their family history. These people remain firmly and unruffled Christian.

A few who learn of their Jewish ancestry have converted and made contact with mainstream Judaism.

Outside the Mainstream

But contact remains tenuous. One reason is that mainstream Jews reflect Anglo culture, whereas secret Jews are Hispanic and with a far different set of reference points. Also, secret Jews are uncomfortable going public.

Even with his credentials, Hordes has been unable to make contact with what he hears are whole crypto-Jewish communities with secret synagogues.

Urgency pushes Hordes' research. After 500 years, he worries that the Southwest's crypto-Jews may soon fade into extinction.

Perhaps the most dour — and brutal — view of the future comes from Lopez, whose grandfather "washed away" his baptism. Lopez eventually abandoned both legacies, Roman Catholicism and Judaism, which he later studied. He is now a Russian Orthodox priest.

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THE SAN ANTONIO MEETING

In November, 1993 The Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies will hold their annual meeting in the historic city of San Antonio, Texas. On hand will be the dynamic speaker, Mr. Richard Santos who with his sense of humor should make for an interesting meeting.

Seville Has Major Archive for Crypto-Jews

Seville Has Major Archive for New World Crypto-Jews

Deposited in the Archives of the Indies in Seville, Spain, are nine million maps, drawings, letters, church records (and New Christian/Hebrew/converso church records). Many of the Spaniards who colonized the New World were, in fact, secret Jews. Large numbers settled in New Mexico or in Mexico City. Spain warehoused all the documents generated from New Spain in the archives in Seville. Included are records of conversions, births, marriages, deaths, etc.

These records have been computerized to make them more easily available to researchers, including genealogists. The records were enhanced in the process of being digitized; the computer eliminated water stains and deterioration. This removed the problem of ink bleeding from one side of a page to the back of the page. Now one can see one page at a time, as clearly as a computer copy.

In the U.S., these records can be obtained through the Huntington Library in San Marino, CA. Via satellite, the library's computer terminal links with Seville's main database. One can, for example, simply go to the Huntington Library, type in the name of an ancestor and ask the computer to search for records available. If the name is there, the computer will list all records (and dates) in which it appears. For example: Sebastian Cardoso, Mexico City, 1596-1649.

After that, the computer will search the years indicated and come up with the secret Jew named Sebastian Cardoso who was named in the Mexican Inquisition archives of the 17th century and who eventually fled to Salonika or Venice to join other Jewish relatives. Then you could search Greek records to determine which of his brothers became a rabbi in Greece or Italy and who from his family remained in Mexico, loyal to Spain and pretended to practice Christianity. The printer can also print out a copy of the original documents.

Anne Cardoza, a descendant of marranos, rejoined an Orthodox Sephardic congregation after documenting 500 years of her family history. She is a writer who lives in San Diego, CA.

New Mexico Conference

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This was followed by a book singing reception and viewing the photographic display, "Voyages of Freedom," an exhibit on Jews in the Americas provided by the B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League.

Saturday evening was highlighted by a formal banquet. Entertainment was provided by the "Alabados" who sang early Sephardic liturgy going back to the time of the Expulsion. The music was augmented by explanation of the music by Dr. Jose Griego and Felipe Ortega.

Two lectures highlighted Sunday's program: A talk by Rabbi Joshua Stampfer of Congregation Neveh Shalom, Portland, Oregon, who talked on, "The Crypto-Jews of Belmonte, Portugal," and Dr. Tomas Atencio of the Latin American Institute, University of New Mexico, whose subject was, "Ethnographic Profile of New Mexico's Crypto-Jews." This was followed by Dr. Rowena Rivera of the Latin American Institute, University of New Mexico who talked on, "The Folklore and Music of New Mexico's Crypto-Jews."

The Conference concluded with a panel discussion, "The Modern Sephardic Diaspora," with the moderator, Ariel Zamarripa of Chicago, Illinois. Others included Emilio Coca, Ramon Salas, Paul Mares, Dr. Victor Zaima, Ed. Mazria, and Michael Maloney.

THE BELMONTE MEETING

In November, 1994, SCJS will meet in Belmonte, Portugal, the only known village in the world that still has practising Crypto-Jews. A side trip to Spain is also planned.

WELCOME NEW MEMBER

Mr. Arthur Benveniste who has been our first contributor to the Newsletter. We know that through input from people as Arthur, our Newsletter will grow in importance. It is through input from our members that its success will be insured.

The study of Crypto-Judaism is a fascinating subject and we welcome anyone who has an interest in this subject to join the Society with us. Applications can be obtained from our treasurer, Gloria Trujillo, or our secretary, Mona Hernandez at 2000 Brooklyn Avenue, Monterey Park, CA 91754.

Also if you contact the editor you can get them from him.

MEMBERSHIP ROSTER

We hope to have an up to date membership roster out in the near future. We have four prospects in mind and as soon as they become members we will include them on the current roster and we will then mail the roster to our members. We thought that this may be a better way for our members to contact one another before the November meeting.

There is so much to exchange and share with one another. Having a list of all the members should make for a lot of good correspondence and who knows, we may learn something about ourselves that we never knew before.

INFORMATION EXCHANGES

We will accept any information that you might want to share with the other members. Send it in.

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