

HALAPID



THE SOCIETY FOR CRYPTO-JUDAIC STUDIES



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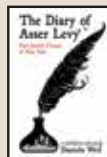
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HEY, SCJS MEMBERS!



Please send your favorite
pictures, interesting
anecdotes, remembrances
and highlights from past
conferences to celebrate
our 30th conference year!
jb.corinne@gmail.com

Fostering research of
the worldwide history
of the crypto-Judaic
experience and
the emergence of
hidden descendants from
the Iberian Peninsula.

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FROM OUR PRESIDENT



Cynthia Seton-Rogers
SCJS President

As 2020 draws to an end, I am struck by just how much change this year has brought. I know that I could have never imagined the events of the past several months, and I am sure that the vast majority of you would agree.

We have all endured our own hardships and (I hope) celebrated our own triumphs. SCJS was founded with the dedicated focus of studying and preserving the legacies of the crypto-Jews of Iberian origins, and few groups are as familiar with having to find a way to persevere in the face of adversity. I believe that our members are resilient and shall hopefully emerge from 2020 stronger and wiser. The pandemic has made it impossible for us to have any in-person events, but virtual platforms such as Zoom have made it possible for us to connect with others around the globe. We have learned to adapt, and we move forward with the benefit of the lessons we have learned.

I always try to keep in mind this poem by an unknown author that begins, "I heard that we are in the same boat. But it's not that. We are in the same storm, but not in the same boat. Your ship can be shipwrecked and mine might not be. Or vice versa..."

As we look forward to 2021 and the hope for a gradual return to what we consider normalcy, I can only promise this: we will weather this storm together.

Stay well and be kind to one another.

Cynthia

Cynthia Seton-Rogers
SCJS President



The Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies, an international academic and secular association, fosters research, networking of people and ideas, and the dissemination of information regarding the historical and contemporary developments involving crypto-Jews of Iberian origins and other hidden Jewish communities around the world. Membership dues fund the programs and publications of this non-profit 501(c)(3) organization, open to any and all individuals interested in learning more about this cultural phenomenon.

DEVELOPMENT & SUPPORT



**Long range plans require
everyone's help.
Join us as a
development partner.
Contact Merrill Shapiro
ygarsaduta@gmail.com**



FROM THE EDITOR

Our Greatest Strength Lies Within Us



Corinne J. Brown
Editor in Chief
weathering COVID-19

I have said this before: in my view, the greatest asset we have in the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies is our members. Over this past summer several individuals reached out to us in search of online data/information about Jewish history in Mexico. One, a graduate student, was denied access to libraries due to COVID-19 but had a hard deadline for a paper. We supplied her with a list of qualified academics

from our membership who were able to help, including Dr. Stanley Hordes, and they stepped up. The other inquiry, from an SCIS member and *converso* descendant searching for more info about a certain part of Mexico, was referred to Dr. David Gitlitz, who provided good counsel. Yet another inquiry just recently came from an SCIS member in California who is a devotee of Tarot and was intrigued with the article on that topic in our Autumn/Winter 2019 issue of *HaLapid*. I sent him the French tarot deck with hidden Jewish symbols on loan to me for his inspection.

That is just who we are; ready to help when we can. We are a group of like-minded individuals who love to share what we know. That said, wherever I turn these days I see the names and faces of our members on Zoom, either giving a lecture or sitting in themselves. Of recent note was Norma Libman and a brilliant talk on Christopher Columbus — "Was He Really a Jew?" (courtesy of the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society). I hope you tuned in — it was outstanding.

In our Spring issue, you learned that Lisbon is finally recognizing its Jewish history with a new museum. In medieval times, many Jews who lived there were sailors involved in maritime trade. In use at that time was the astrolabe, an invention made and used by Jewish navigators. Be sure to read the explanation of the striking cover for this issue. Beyond that, numerous fascinating articles and member news await in the ensuing pages. Enjoy them all.

The year is drawing to a close and we miss not gathering in person. With great regret we forfeited the 2020 conference. We are working on plans for next year. Stick with us — there is more to come.

Corinne Joy Brown
Editor

ABOUT THE COVER



"Astrolabes"
Acrylic on Canvas
30" x 48"

Michael B Schwartz (BFA, Tyler School of Art/ MFA UA School of Art) is a contemporary painter and public artist who has collaborated with many organizations including the City of Philadelphia and Tucson Mural Arts Programs, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Fleisher Art Memorial, International Council of Adult Education, and Tucson Arts Brigade. Awards include the Puffin Foundation and Art Matters Fellowships.

"Astrolabes" is part of *misTaken Identities*, a collections of paintings and drawings by Schwartz, inspired by stories of Jewish invisibility in the Southwest.

"Tucson has a mesmerizing ambiance," says Schwartz. "There have been people at these crossroads for thousands of years... The stories, songs and legends that permeate the dinner tables and camp fires, the names of streets, founders and organizations all have clues to this history. As I listened carefully I realized clues were being dropped, bread crumbs for me to follow."

(See page 37 for "About the Back Cover.")



Antique astrolabe



Michael B Schwartz
Artist • Tucson, Arizona
www.MichaelBSchwartz.com



NEWS AND NOTES

A cook's inspiration

Corinne Brown has recently been sharing the story of crypto-Jews via Zoom by invitation to special groups. At a recent lecture for the Rocky Mountain chapter of Hadassah, she shared a Spanish Jewish recipe for dafina, (or cholent to the rest of us.) It is a dish HaLapid looked at a few months ago thanks to SCIS member and food enthusiast, Rifka Cook.

The recipe shared on this occasion used meat instead of eggplant.

Here's what one attendee had to say:



Yummy dafina

I'm forwarding this picture because my friend Harve in Chicago so enjoyed your *converso* presentation that he made the recipe! He said it was really good but he cut the amount of meat it calls for.

— Andy Mallen



Words of thanks

Thank you for a really fascinating journal. I read them cover to cover.

— Barbara Allman



Tarot comments

Thank you for sending me my missing HaLapid and for your note marking the article. It doesn't say very much and I plan on buying his book when I have extra money. He uses the Marseilles deck which I am unfamiliar with. I use the Rider-Waite deck. In that deck the Seven of Cups reflects a story about the Baal Sham Tov to my observation. The cards also reflect the *sephiroth* on the Kabbalah Tree of Life for which there is extensive literature.

You have done a magnificent job with HaLapid and I congratulate you.

— Mark Bennett

A poet's appreciation

I appreciate you sending me the issue of HaLapid — it is fantastic. What a great publication, so beautifully rendered, interesting and important as a resource.

The way my article, poem and photos were placed in the issue is beyond my expectations but knowing you, I am not surprised.

Having Jean-Jacques' work represented and offering him the opportunity for people to learn about the project for the Lisbon museum is also so awesome. When you meet him you will understand even more who this man is through his elegance, intelligence and sweet disposition. He is a true gem of a human being and I wish for him great success in getting this museum up and running.

I am delighted to be an instrument in the orchestration of important work for the Jewish people. I am grateful for my growing friendship with you.

— Penny Nisson, Mizel Museum, Denver



Thought provoking

Thank you. Great issue of HaLapid. I really liked the *Petenera* piece. Very intriguing and somewhat wandering — raises some perplexing possibilities.

— Lorenzo Trujillo



Portugal's honor

Regarding the honor of Sousa Mendes in Portugal.

I knew the son of Aristides de Sousa Mendes. I first met him at a program at the Museum of Tolerance in L.A. They were honoring righteous gentiles including his father.

Later he and I put on a program at my Sephardic temple. He spoke about his father and I spoke about the history of Portuguese Jews.

He told me that his father suspected that their family had a Jewish background. I told him about a Jew named Benveniste de Calahorra who was expelled from Spain in 1492 and who went to Portugal with his two sons. One son, Francisco, grew up to marry Doña Gracia. When the Portuguese Jews were forced to convert, Benveniste de Calahorra took the name Mendes. So there may be a connection between our families.

In 1994 SCIS held its conference in Portugal and we traveled to Jewish sites there. One of our visits was to the home of de Sousa Mendes. In his honor, we planted a tree at the home.

— Art Benveniste



An invitation

I received the new issue of the magazine, and it looks great — thank you!

So much information, like places to visit, books to read! I still want to go to Portugal and several years ago prepared an itinerary. Now just waiting until it's safe to go anywhere other than grocery store.

I would love to see more of my poems in HaLapid, though I know about space limits. In the meantime, my website, www.henryrasof.com, now has a PDF called "Rivers in Paradise: Jewish Poetry and Prose," that includes all of my Jewish stuff not in the two print books. The "Imaginessays" (toward the end) are about the medieval Jewish poets. www.henryrasof.com/rivers-in-paradise has links to two versions, one with many photographs and the other with just a handful. "Bulerias for the Second Emanation" has some Spanish flavor. Many thanks.

— Henry Rasoff

Please consider this an invitation to visit Henry's website for more of his compelling poetry. —Ed.



OUR NEWEST SCJS BOARD MEMBER DONNA MEDINA

I was born and raised in Denver, Colorado, but my ancestral Jewish heritage came down the Santa Fe Trail in the 1800s and settled in Trinidad, Colorado for a while before moving to Denver. Two rabbis told my parents they thought we were descendants of children of the Spanish Inquisition and that news started my long journey of personal discovery.

I have a BA in music education from Metropolitan University Denver with graduate work in theory, composition and instrumental music from Denver University, University of Colorado and Mozarteum University in Salzburg, Austria. I have been both the district and

state representative for the Colorado Music Educators Association in 1981-82 and played in theater orchestras, as well as the Shakespeare and Renaissance festivals. My choir and dance troupe performed for national music conferences; and my Shakespeare troupe participated in Shakespeare festivals for over eight years.

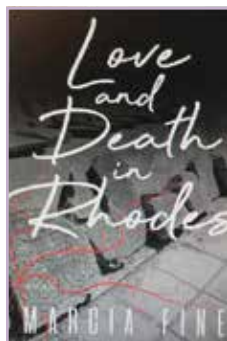
Currently I am a board member of the Colorado Hebrew Chorale planning committee and a friend of Temple Aaron, Colorado. I am a life-long member and committee member for the Colorado chapter of Hadassah; also a supporter for the Israeli American Council and the Jewish National Conference. In addition,



Donna Medina
SCJS Board Member

I have attended the North American Jewish Zimor choral festival and Cantors Assembly workshops. 🎵

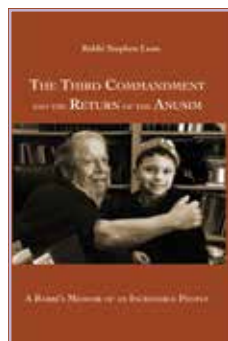
CURRENT BEST-READS



Love and Death in Rhodes
MARCIA FINE
Llimage Press • 2020

Award-winning author Fine's ninth book examines Rhodes, where archaeology meets biblical history. Based on letters—the largest archive ever found in a cave—from date farmers Luna, Shabbatai Tzvi and Babatha,

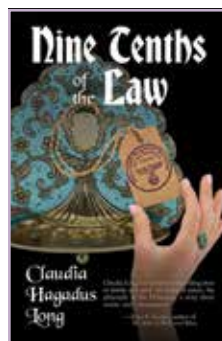
\$16.95 • www.MarciaFine.com and Amazon



The Third Commandment and the Return of the Anusim
RABBI STEPHEN LEON
Gaon Books • 2017

El Paso, Texas Rabbi Leon's lifelong memoir of his journey into the heart of the Southwest and its crypto-Jewish descendants, reveals a lost community's intimate portrait of spiritual discovery and rebirth.

\$18.00
Amazon • Barnes & Noble



Nine Tenths of the Law
CLAUDIA HAGADUS LONG
Kasva Press • 2020

Long's fifth novel is a contemporary intrigue about two sisters, their mother, a Nazi thief, and the menorah he stole in WWII. This link that binds them uncovers secrets that might tear them apart.

Price varies
Amazon • Barnes & Noble



Recipes of My 15 Grandmothers
GENIE MILGROM
Gefen Publishing • 2019

An award-winning, rich collection of recipes and stories passed down to Milgrom by a long line of women from Spain and Portugal preparing meals while in hiding as crypto-Jews.

\$19.95
Amazon



No Matter How You Spell It – Finding Jewish Life in

Majorca

BY DANI ROTSTEIN

In November 2014, I moved to Majorca (or Mallorca), an island off Spain, thinking I would never meet another Jewish person there. I was quickly proven wrong when I found out about a volunteer-led synagogue with a small group of followers on the island. As I sat at one of the services, I learned that not everyone there was Jewish. In fact, there's a group of people on the island known as Chuetas (spelled Xueta in Catalan, which is spoken on the island), who identify as Catholic yet who quietly preserve the light of a Jewish community nearly forgotten. The Chuetas are descendants of Majorca's once-thriving medieval Jewish community, and some feel connected to their Jewish ancestry to this day. This discovery blew me away as I thought about how powerful Jewish history is: These people are resurrecting a nearly-dissolved Jewish legacy from over 600 years ago!

I was soon invited to attend monthly Shabbat dinners with a small group of Chuetas who had converted and/or returned to Judaism. I looked forward every month to spending time with them, learning from them, hearing their incredible family stories that were untold to the general public. I brought my non-Jewish girlfriend at the time (now my wife and mother of our son) who also began to express an interest in learning about Judaism, as I was expressing an interest to re-learn my Judaism. You see, history and culture and what binds us together as a people with a collectively-shared past – that is what excites me. And who better to learn from than a group of people that are reconnecting to their ancestors' faith from centuries ago? >>>



Above, author
Dani Rotstein

Right top,
Camp de Mar
coastline,
Majorca, Spain





Rav Joseph Wallis with volunteers and board members of La Sinagoga Balear: From left, Eliezer Lewinsky, Rav Wallis, Ari Molina, Dani Rotstein. Front, Toni Pinya



Chueta board member and journalist Miquel Segura with wife Margalit at Limud Mallorca's inaugural event, April 2018

This spiritual and cultural revelation reminded me that for millennia, the Jewish people have overcome darkness. We have prevailed against those who sought to destroy us in each generation by carrying forward our beliefs, traditions, culture, and most importantly, our strong sense of peoplehood. Rabbi Hillel reminds us in *Pirkei Avot* 1:14 “If I am not for myself, who is for me?” implying that each one of us can carry the torch and lead our communities out of darkness. And this flame can continue to glow when we are connected and dare to share the beauty of our people with the world around us.

Early on in life, I was raised with a strong sense of Jewish identity, although I was never very observant. Growing up in New Jersey, USA my parents sent me to a Jewish sleep-away summer camp where I befriended other Jews from around the country and learned the song *Wherever You Go, There's Always Someone Jewish*. At 18, I had a unique opportunity to live and learn in Israel, participating in the Young Judea Year Course program. There I strengthened my relationship with Israel and the Jewish people. From learning Hebrew and being able to communicate with my Israeli grandparents, to training with the Israeli Air Force for a week, to living on a religious kibbutz, it was the best year of my life. As I witnessed Jews from around the world come together in Israel, it opened my eyes to the value of our Jewish family — for myself, my friends, and the global community.

After returning to the United States and graduating college, I worked in film production in Miami and New York but was starting to feel the need for a change. I missed that same sense of fulfillment I experienced in Israel. It wasn't until I moved to Mallorca five years ago that I found my purpose in the Jewish community.

So I became more involved, determined to instill the passion for Jewish life around the island. I started by hosting challah-baking



Limud Mallorca's Second Annual Conference in May 2019



workshops and Purim parties, and from there, the excitement spread to others. Our numbers kept increasing, and we became a tighter knit community. In fact, we are now up to 60-70 attendees at our Shabbat dinners.

My wife and I founded Limud Mallorca, a Jewish cultural association intent on bringing Jewish culture and life to disconnected Jews living on the island, families of mixed-marriages, and those non-Jews interested in learning about and connecting with Jewish values and history. We organized multiple learning conferences that are trilingual – in English, Spanish, and Majorcan (a dialect of Catalan that is spoken on the island). We are a volunteer-run organization that is now working with the city to organize cultural activities and social events – documentary screenings, book presentations, choir concerts, lectures, seminars, holiday celebrations and community Shabbat dinners at different vegetarian restaurants around the island. Last year, the Department of Education asked us to visit different public schools, and conduct workshops centered on Holocaust education. >>>



*Santa Eulalia Church of the Conversos -
site of the 1435 mass conversion*



Mediterranean Sea view of Es Malgrat Islands off the northwest coast of Majorca

Our first educational Jewish learning conference was in April 2018 and we expected around 20-30 people, but more than 85 attended from around the world! The following year we had over 150 participants. Soon after our first event, the president of the local synagogue decided to resign and nobody wanted to fill his shoes. I decided to step up to the task and was elected to sit on the synagogue board of directors. With me were three other Jews-by-choice, two of whom were Chuetas. This was the first time in over 600 years that Majorcan natives with Jewish ancestry were once again part of the leadership of the local Jewish community. The synagogue was started in the 1970s by British Ashkenazi Jews who had retired and moved to the island and since then has been lead by Jewish expats or Spanish nationals from outside the Balearic islands.


In August 2018, not only was the new board elected but two Chuetas traveled to Israel to be married under a chuppa – the first wedding in history between two Chuetas to be held there. The other event worth noting was the inauguration of a memorial to the crypto-Jews who were burned at the stake in Plaza Gomila in 1691. A memorial had been under petition for at least 40 years and finally manifested itself in the same month as the other events. We are living through watershed moments within Majorcan Jewish history.

After volunteering with the synagogue and Limud Mallorca, I finally decided to make the final leap of faith – to leave my work as a TV commercial producer and open up an educational tourism company called Jewish Majorca. Our mission is to offer an interactive learning experience that engages both visitors and residents alike and sparks further curiosity. We opened in May 2019 and had a wonderful first summer, and we already had bookings for a 400-person Kosher-for-

Pesach holiday in 2020 along with multiple *b'nai mitzvah* cruise trips and Jewish destination weddings planned. All of this was stopped in its tracks due to the arrival of “Señor COVID.” Instead of shutting down operations and giving up our dream however, we decided to adapt and innovate.

We now offer virtual Zoom tours to different communities around the world and even have a stand-alone video virtual tour that you can purchase and download from our website. The fact that international tourism has been temporarily suspended has actually encouraged us to do what we have always been wanting to do – go online and share the Jewish, *converso*, and Chueta history of Majorca with the global audience.

Throughout my life I have been blessed to witness the beauty of Jewish life and the immense power of a connected community, whether in NYC or in Israel. And now on the tiny island of Majorca, I hope to continue sharing that light with others, showing that anyone can come together and live in harmony. My experience in Majorca shows how the spirit of the Jewish people lives on in each one of us. Together we can help reignite the flames of Majorca’s Jewish community and unite the global Jewish community.

For more info or to learn how to support us – please visit www.JewishMajorca.com or email us at JewishMajorca@gmail.com. 



The Jewish Quarter in Palma



New memorial for the Chueta victims of the Majorcan Inquisition located at the site of the mass burnings in Plaza Gomila. Inaugurated August 2018



Sephardic symbol in pavement, Palma



Reclaiming a Lost Inheritance Through the Life of *Doña Gracia*

ADAPTED FROM THE ARTICLE, "LIFE AFTER DEATH, THE FAR-REACHING HAND OF AN INQUISITION-ERA HEROINE," BY SURI H. COHEN
PUBLISHED IN *INYAN, HAMODIA'S WEEKLY MAGAZINE*, VOL. XX NO. 966,
JUNE 28, 2017. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION FROM THE AUTHOR.

*By what miracle have I been
brought to this spring? An ancient
well of fresh water – life-giving
water – that is Judaism?
Thank you, Creator!*

— May 26, 1998,
diary entry of descendant
Rosalinda (Chana) Mendez



Above
Rosalinda (Chana) Mendez

Left, Doña Gracia Nasi Mendes
(re-enactor)

The Inquisition has been abolished for nearly 200 years and yet its malign influence lingers like wisps of gray smoke in far-flung corners of the countries where it held sway. Where Spanish is spoken, many Catholics practice customs they cannot explain, such as avoidance of pork, and lighting candles in basements on Friday nights. The Jewish sparks imprisoned in their souls are searching for connection to the masses who once stood with them at Sinai.

What follows is the story of two women linked by a surname — Mendes — redolent with the scent of Jewish history. It is the tale of the seismic influence of a woman who lived over 500 years ago, and

whose inspiring life of activism on behalf of her people reached out far beyond the grave to lead a lost Jewish soul back home. >>>



Doña Gracia Nasi Mendes was born in Portugal in 1510. One of the wealthiest women of Renaissance-era Europe, she saved hundreds from the Spanish Inquisition. A patron of Talmudic study and of Rabbi Yosef Karo, author of the monumental *Shulchan Aruch* (*Code of Jewish Law*), and a visionary who attempted to initiate Jewish colonization of Israel, Mendes was fearless in her advocacy on behalf of Jews. She even organized a trade embargo against Pope Pius V in retaliation for the burning of Jews at the stake.

Fast-forward to the mid-20th century. Rosalinda Carrasco Mendez (today Chana) began her life as a daughter of Mexican Catholics in the backwoods of Texas. From the beginning, she felt a stirring she could not comprehend. For years she searched with growing purpose and determination for someone to guide her. Ultimately, the hand that reached out and fanned her Jewish spark into an intense flame was that of the woman whose surname she shares, Doña Gracia Nasi Mendes.

From Spain to Texas

Chana Mendez, now a retired college professor in Los Angeles, explains. “My grandparents and parents were originally from Chihuahua, a state in northwest Mexico that borders New Mexico and Texas. This area was part of the northern frontier of New Spain after the Spanish conquest of Mexico. When the Inquisition came to Mexico City in 1535, it persecuted indigenous people as well as secret Jews who thought they had found safety in the New World. As a result, crypto-Jews fled, south as far as Brazil, others north to Chihuahua, Texas, and New Mexico.

“I was raised in Ysleta, a small Rio Grande town in Texas, now incorporated into El Paso. Our neighbors would sweep dirt out the front door, something prohibited in our family. Instead, we swept one room, scooping up dirt into the waste bin, then

went to the next room and repeated the process. Much later, I discovered from SCIS member Art Benveniste that crypto-Jews had the practice of hiding their mezuzot inside the doorpost, and it was deemed disrespectful to sweep dirt past a mezuzah.

“Most of my cousins lived in Mexico, plus I had relatives in New Mexico, a center for crypto-Jews who are discovering their roots. My cousins used to warn me not to drink milk with meat. *Tehacedano*, ‘it harms you,’ they would caution. In December, around Chanukah time, my

mom would make *bunuelos* (fried flour tortillas) coated with honey. During Lent, before Easter, which usually comes around Passover, we had a tradition to make *capirotada* — cubed leftover bread layered in a deep pot with nuts and raisins, topped with melted brown sugar. This special dish was created with lots of trimmings, perhaps to disguise the fact that its original purpose was to get rid of all the *chametz* in the house. We also grew up exclaiming ‘mah?’ when confronting something ridiculous. I always thought it was Spanish, but now I know it is Hebrew for ‘what?’”

I was raised in Ysleta, a small Rio Grande town in Texas, now incorporated into El Paso. Our neighbors would sweep dirt out the front door, something prohibited in our family.

“”

Discovering Doña Gracia

Reflecting on the anti-Semitism that permeated her Catholic school education, Chana explains, “Somehow, I was not infected by it. But I used to wonder why people hated Jews. In Ysleta, I grew up with people whose names often appear on lists of crypto-Jews, like Carvajal, Franco, and Sanchez. In an area with a large indigenous population, these



Shapio Rivas Mendez (right), Guadalupe Carrasco Mendez, and young son Saul in Santa Ana, California (circa 1965)



faces looked very Sephardic. Since childhood, I instinctively assessed every person I met, wondering if he/she was 'one of us,' without knowing why. Today, as a Jew, I realize it was a certain nobility of spirit that resonated in their features. Of course, I was polite to everyone, but certain people evoked a kinship.

"When I was 15, my family moved to Los Angeles where I rode to school by bus. In conversations with elders, they would often tell me that Mendez was a Jewish name. I began to wonder, could we be Jewish? In college, there were courses on the races of mankind. I searched for a description of what a Jew looks like, and one description caused a double-take — a verbal depiction of the image of my father!

"After graduation, I began teaching Mexican-American history to Mexican-American students in various California colleges and universities. I decided that if I was teaching Roman Catholic students about their cultural ancestry, I had to trace it all the way back to its Jewish roots."

Avidly seeking information, Chana attended a secular course on Judaism, where she read the writings of historian Cecil Roth and discovered, to her astonishment, that there had once been a sizable Jewish population in Spain.

"I knew my family had roots in Spain. I also learned about Doña Gracia Mendes, and felt a strong identification with her. When I discussed my discoveries with Eugenia Kutler, a Jewish friend, she replied, 'My mother, in Mexico City, has a book on Doña Gracia. Next time I visit, I'll ask if I can borrow it for you.' I was so grateful that her mother, Busia Kostov, agreed to lend me this precious book, which was out of print. It turned out to be a Spanish translation of Cecil Roth's English biography of Doña Gracia!"

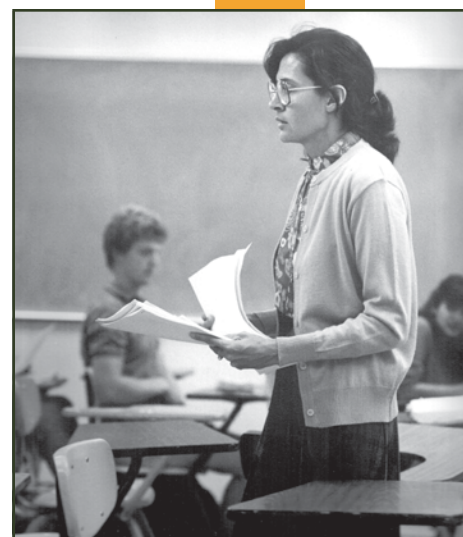
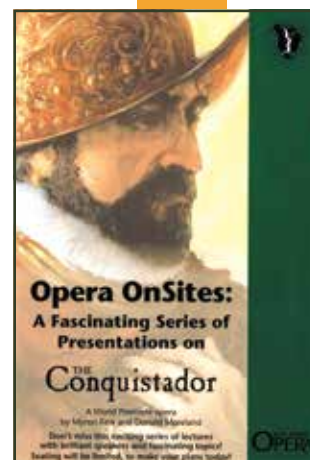
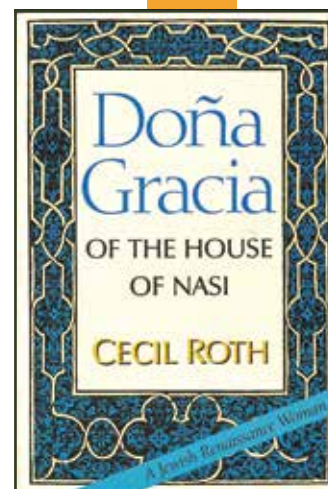
The first chapter details the history of Jews in Spain from the time of the

destruction of the First Temple. Gracia Nasi's aristocratic family was originally from Spain but following the Edict of Expulsion in 1492, her *converso* family fled to Portugal to escape the Inquisition. Her Christian name was Beatrice de Luna. In medieval times, it was common for *conversos* to intermarry, "to marry into each other's families," to keep Jewish lineage pure. Gracia married a wealthy cousin, Semah Benveniste, known to gentiles as Francisco Mendes. The house of Mendes traded in precious stones and spices and served as bankers to royalty.

Left a young widow upon Francisco's death, Gracia escaped Portugal with her young daughter Reyna, ahead of the Inquisition and ended up in Antwerp where her husband's brother, Diogo, who had married her sister, had set up a branch of the House of Mendes. Jealous competitors denounced him to the Inquisition, which prompted many influential citizens to come to his defense since his presence as a premier European banker under-girded their financial stability. Ironically, England's King Henry VIII, who broke away from the Catholic Church, wrote a letter attesting to Diogo's impeccable status as a devout Catholic!

Following Diogo's demise in Antwerp, his estate was willed to his young daughter Gracia under the trusteeship of her aunt and namesake rather than his wife, whom he apparently trusted less to maintain their child's interests. By this time, Gracia Mendes was living in Venice. When Reyna demanded that her sister Gracia surrender her husband's estate, Gracia refused, citing Diogo's express wishes as stated in his will. Incensed, Reyna denounced Gracia to the Inquisition, which eventually arrested both sisters to expropriate their entire fortune. Both young daughters were placed in a convent.

Gracia's nephew, Joseph Nasi, had a powerful friend in the son of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, ruler of the Ottoman Empire. When the Sultan was



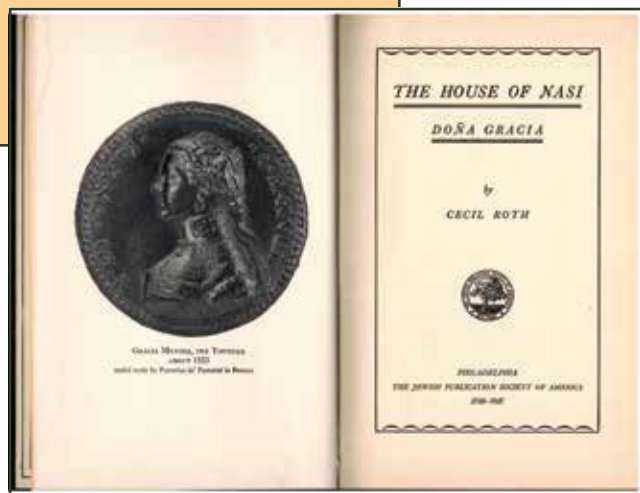
Rosalinda Mendez Gonzalez teaching at San Diego State University, 1980s



Though many people (including the *Jewish Encyclopedia*) think the medallion is an image of Doña Gracia, Cecil Roth explains carefully that it was minted in 1553, when Doña Gracia was in her 40s. It depicts a young girl of about 18, and it is actually an image of Doña Gracia's niece, Gracia.

Since it is common in the among Sephardim to name people after parents or living relatives, you always distinguish between family members of the same name by identifying each as "La Grande" or "La Chica". So the image is of Gracia La Chica, not of Doña Gracia.

It is still a family likeness. However, that image has come to be so identified with Doña Gracia, that even Israel issued a stamp in her honor with that likeness.



Doña Gracia book title page and medallion

the benefits that would accrue from her presence to his empire and sent ships to threaten Venice were she not released. His threats worked and Gracia was freed. The Sultan welcomed Doña Gracia, her sister, and their daughters to Constantinople, where Gracia discarded any pretense of Christian identity and began living openly as a Jew. While running a vast economic empire, Doña Gracia threw herself into Jewish activism, funding Jewish education, seeing to Jewish interests wherever they were threatened, and sponsoring the publication of numerous Torah books in Ladino. Poems by rabbis still exist in which they praise her and compare her to great women in the Bible.

"It was in reading this history," Chana Mendez muses, "that I first came across actual passages from the Torah. The Catholic church in which I grew up did not encourage first hand Bible study, so I was unfamiliar with it. Some of us were even told that reading the Old Testament would cause us to go insane! Reading these verses, even in translation, gave me the sensation of looking through a narrow window at a luminous diamond. I felt a tremendous love coming through the words and read with tears falling from my eyes, only realizing it when they fell on the page. My soul, which had been parched for so long, was finally getting its first taste of the life-giving water of Torah. It was through Doña Gracia that I came to discover the richness of the Bible.

"In the course of my academic work, I had organized historical conferences at Southwestern College in San Diego on

the Indo-Spanish heritage of Mexican Americans, and the multicultural heritage of Mexican-Americans. I included the Sephardic cultural heritage, and invited the Mexican-American community in San Diego.

"For 1997, the San Diego Opera was planning a performance of the world premiere of *The Conquistador*, an opera about the life of Don Luis de Carbajal, an Inquisition-era governor of the northern provinces of New Spain, who brought his family from Spain. Ultimately arrested by the Inquisition, the family revealed under torture that they were secret Jews. Details of their last days were taken from a diary kept by Don Luis's nephew, Luis de Carbajal el Mozo (the Younger). The family was burned at the stake, openly declaring their Jewish identity and refusing to accept Christianity, while Don Luis perished in prison, the charges against him never proven.

"In a college meeting where the subject of the opera came up, a faculty member expressed his distaste, using offensive, anti-Semitic language. Incensed, I defended Jews and Jewish history. My dean, Dr. Barry Russel, was present at that meeting. The Opera had an outreach program of free public lectures on the historical background of the operas being performed. Dr. Russell invited me to a meeting with Adam Eisenberg, lecture organizer for the Opera. It seemed to me that the world needed to know about Doña Gracia, so I suggested a lecture, 'Women in the Age of Conquest,' starting with Queen Isabella and weaving Doña Gracia into that context. Eisenberg loved it. 'Great idea,' he said. 'Do it!' I agreed and began my research in earnest.

"The sense of the miraculous throughout this process was unbelievable. At one point, I went into a bookstore in San Diego, headed for the Judaica section, and reached for the top shelf - a book literally fell into my hands. Looking down, I was incredulous to see that I was holding Cecil Roth's original English biography of

informed that Gracia wished to settle in Constantinople, but was being detained by Venetian authorities, he perceived



Doña Gracia, which was out of print. How it came to be there I have no idea. Elated, I went to check out. The cashier took it from me and said, 'This is not our book. It's not in our system.' I was adamant. 'But I found it on your shelf. I'm paying for it. I'm not leaving without this book!' By the time I was ready to give the lecture, I knew what I really wanted – to go to a synagogue and study Torah.

Drinking from the Well

“Through the lecture series, I met hundreds of people, and shared that I thought I had Jewish roots. People reached out, and I began attending Torah classes in a local Reform temple. But I, the outsider, often ended up defending the Torah, while some Jews in the class would be criticizing it. Crazy! The experience clearly indicated I should join an Orthodox shul. But I had no idea how to go about it. Then my friend Anita called and said, 'I hear you want to study. I know a rabbi in La Jolla, but I have to warn you, he's Orthodox.' I was so excited! And that's how I ended up sitting in the Monday night *Pirkei Avot* class taught by Rabbi Jeff Wohlgelelnter of Congregation Adat Yeshurun. I quickly joined the Wednesday *Navi* class and the Thursday *Parsha* class. I went to every seminar he offered.

“When the rabbi asked me about my conversion intentions, I naively replied, 'I've already converted in my heart.' He gently explained that my noble intentions were insufficient. 'We are talking about a binding contract from which there is no going back,' he continued. 'But if conversion is your intention, you are welcome to stay.'

“I wanted so deeply to become Jewish. But I was scared. Six hundred

I had planned to devote myself to genealogical research on my family. Instead, by Divine Providence, through Doña Gracia, I have been brought to Torah, to Judaism, which I believe is the family inheritance my sister spoke of. Doña Gracia didn't just rescue crypto-Jews in her lifetime; she reached across the centuries and brought me back as well.

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and thirteen commandments! Plus all the rabbinical add-ons? How on earth could I commit to that? I continued to study. I struggled. Finally, I reached a decision. I had to take the plunge. I was put in touch with Rabbi Avrohom Union of the RCC (Rabbinical Council of California) in Los Angeles who sent me a conversion packet. After filling in many pages of questions and sending it back, I met with Rabbi Union in Los Angeles. He asked me to tell him my story.

“I told him about my upbringing and my feeling that my family on both sides were *convertos*, descended from crypto-Jews. In my application, I had also described dreams in which I saw ancient, sacred Hebrew writings, and the name of G-d. I also saw the word *chai*, and heard it pronounced. Not recognizing it, I thought that I had heard *pi*, and seen the mathematical symbol. A few weeks later, I passed a shop, and saw a *chai* pendant in the window. My heart raced as I entered and asked what it was. An Israeli saleslady explained that it means life, then pronounced the word *chai*. I was shocked. It was the *pi* from my dream! I bought it, and began wearing it.

“In spite of pouring out my heart and spiritual yearnings to Rabbi Union, he told me to look back over all the years and places I had explored – the churches, Indians, New Age thinking, and war protests in my college years – and consider their effect. 'If you feel empathy for Jews,' he said, 'maybe it's because



your whole adult life you've fought for the underdog. It's not necessarily Judaism that's pulling you.'

"In response, I said, 'This is not about empathy. Once I've found gold, I'm not going back to copper. I'm not leaving!' The rabbi then told me to continue studying and return in a few months. And so I kept on. Eventually I was accepted as a candidate for conversion, and began studying privately with Rabbi Wohlgernter. It was daunting, because there was no guarantee that at the end of the process I would be allowed to convert. I rented a room from a local family in La Jolla so I could also learn from them. The Saloveys, a branch of the Soloveitchik family, kindly took me in.

"The most difficult part of this experience was changing myself. Rabbi Wohlgernter warned me, 'You are going to embark on the process of self-transformation.' I honestly hadn't seen it that way. I thought the course of study would be an intellectual one, after which I would take a test, like in college. But I learned that it would be a transformation at the core level. The rabbi also told me that it would be up to me to breach the community walls and win people over, much as a new bride needs to be accepted by her husband's family. This was so very hard, this metamorphosis, and it's still going on."



The most difficult part of this experience [conversion] was changing myself... I thought the course of study would be an be an intellectual one, after which I would take a test, like in college. But I learned that it would be a transformation at the core level.

“ ”

me. I went to them often for Shabbat and met members of the Orthodox community in their home, all deeply connected. I prayed for guidance and to find a part-time job within the community, preferably working with Jewish children with disabilities, and be close to these holy people. Families with special children are often elevated themselves.

"Shortly thereafter, my friend Raizy called and urged me to make the move to LA. 'Come!' she insisted. 'You are welcome here. And if you come, would you work with my Down Syndrome daughter in Bais Tzivia?' This was exactly what I had been praying for."

When asked about the effect Chana's conversion has had on her family, she answered, "My siblings were very accepting. My mother though, was quite hostile. 'Why are you joining the people that killed the Savior?' she asked. Then she thought it through. All the years when I was anti-religious, as a protest against the Church's history of cruelty, she never stopped praying that I would come back to G-d. Now He had answered her, and she realized she preferred me being a Jew to being an atheist.

Growing and Returning

Chana continues, "There is a concept in Judaism that at the moment of naming a child, parents are granted divine inspiration. On the day of my conversion to Judaism, I was inspired to choose the name Chana. One day, a few months later, I realized with a shock that Gracia is the Spanish version of Chana! (The word 'grace' is an approximate translation of the Hebrew *chein*.) Without realizing it, I had chosen Doña Gracia's Hebrew name!"

After her conversion, Chana retired from teaching. But her internal journey was far from over.

"I understood that to continue growing, I had to relocate. My condominium in La Jolla was lovely, but I was getting too comfortable. I decided to move to Los Angeles, to be closer to my children and grandchildren. Friends from San Diego, the Dimensteins, who had moved to LA, had been inviting



“My daughter however, was raised with my former atheistic values and was initially hostile to my Jewish identity. She is a filmmaker and wanted to make a documentary about the different faiths in our family. My son is married to a Persian Muslim, so there is a lot of diversity. She asked permission to film one of Rabbi Wohlgelehter’s classes. To my surprise, he agreed. She was impressed. I later found out that she was concerned I was caught in a cult; her formerly feminist Marxist/Leninist mother lost in Orthodox Judaism!”

It isn’t only Chana who has sensed her link to the past.

“Years earlier, when my younger sister Oralia was still in high school, she came home one day and informed me that an elderly man who had never seen her before that day, told her amazing things about her life. Among them, she related, ‘The man told me that our family was from Spain, that I was descended from royalty. He said that I have a sister, a scholar, who would research and discover our family inheritance in Portugal.’”

Chana concludes: “I turned out to be that scholar. I had planned to devote myself to genealogical research on my family. Instead, by Divine Providence, through Doña Gracia, I have been brought to Torah, to Judaism, which I believe is the family inheritance my sister spoke of. Doña Gracia didn’t just rescue crypto-Jews in her lifetime; she reached across the centuries and brought me back as well.” 🕯



Doña Gracia's Modern-Day Resurgence

Though Doña Gracia disappeared into oblivion almost immediately after her death in 1569 and remained hardly known for the subsequent 500 years, that is now changing, possibly due to a new sense of relevance among today’s women. Indeed, Doña Gracia is fast becoming a cult figure on the world stage. New York City designated a Doña Gracia Day in June 2010, followed by a similar proclamation in Philadelphia a year later. Israel’s political leaders honored her for the first time in October 2010. A dedicated website was launched in 2011. She now has a Facebook page. The Turkish government sponsored a Doña Gracia evening in New York City and has also sponsored an exhibit in Lisbon. There have been lectures, articles and festivals in her honor all over Europe. The growing numbers of women in business and the professions who attend the programs identify with her ambition, courage and even personal loneliness. An Italian white wine has been named after her. The Israeli Government Coins and Medals Corporation has produced a commemorative medal. She now has a museum in Tiberias devoted to her life and deeds.

She is idolized by the descendants of *conversos* she saved, now living in southern Italy, Central and South America, and the United States. In the TV series *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*, Gracia Mendes Nasi is portrayed by Turkish actress Dolunay Soyser.

— Wikipedia



Inquisition and the Jews. Doña Gracia's museum in Tiberias



Hidden Roots in *New England?*

BY HARRY EZRATTY

Natalia Muñoz is a Latina social activist. She and my wife Barbara are longtime friends, going back decades to the days when we all lived in Puerto Rico. Natalia was Barbara's editor when they both worked for the *San Juan Star*, at the time Puerto Rico's only English-language newspaper.

Years ago, Natalia moved to New England to edit a Spanish supplement of an English newspaper. She wound up in Holyoke, Massachusetts, where she is now news editor for Holyoke Media, a multimedia



Natalia Muñoz

non-profit community. She is active in Holyoke's Latino community. The city, as many of America's small manufacturing centers, has suffered from the rush of its businesses overseas to take advantage of cheap labor and to avoid high American taxes. It is home to a Latino community working hard to educate their children.

Natalia tries to make the Latino community aware of the other groups that live in their city and she wants them to relate to one another. So she planned to have a



Paulo Freire Social Justice Charter School host a very diverse population!



Harry Ezratty

Harry A. Ezratty, SCJS parliamentarian and counsel, is a graduate of New York University (BA History) and Brooklyn Law School. Maritime law was Ezratty's specialty. He lived and practiced law in Puerto Rico for 45 years and during his work there, met the descendants of crypto-Jews who settled throughout the islands. The result of this life-long acquaintance was his book *500 Years in the Jewish Caribbean - The Story of Sephardim in the West Indies*, recently released in its third edition. The author of four non-fiction history books, four novels and two "how-to" books, Ezratty has lectured on the history of the Sephardim for the last 35 years throughout the U.S. and Caribbean at colleges, universities and seminaries.

weekend where the Puerto Rican and Jewish communities of Holyoke would get together to learn about each other; their aspirations and problems, and to understand where each community is heading.

Natalia invited Barbara and me to tell the group about the long relationship and historic relationship between Jews and Hispanics going back to pre-medieval times. It was, according to Natalia, a success. She invited us back for a second time. This time to talk to the children of a school: the Paulo Freire Social Justice Charter School. Freire was a noted Brazilian philosopher and educator. The school's students are mostly from Holyoke's working-class families.

"How do we approach the students?" We asked some of their teachers during a



conference call. “We’ll get back to you,” they said. But they were so busy moving to new quarters they never responded. The day we were supposed to come to Holyoke was a week away and we thought for certain our visit was canceled. But no, they were expecting us. Not knowing anything about the students we tried to beg off. They were expecting us — we had to come.

When we arrived at the school we were met by its highly competent and cheerful administrator, Rhonda Soto. “You’ll be addressing about 200 students, but in our new home we have no auditorium. You’ll have to work four sessions of 50 students over two days,” she informed us.

The students to be addressed were high school junior and senior boys and girls. Not all were Latinos and not much different from teenagers we see in shopping malls or pizza parlors. Except for a few who sat in class, their ears stuffed with earbuds listening to music, most were respectful. I told them that as a fellow Hispanic (and a Sephardic Jew) I had much in common with them. I grew up as a minority within a minority. Like them, I am also a descendant of people who had lived in Spain and Portugal. Most American Jews are not aware of the history of fellow Jews who lived in Iberia for over a thousand years. They called us “spics” and otherwise looked down on us as lazy and ignorant. I used this history to show the students that I understand what they face daily. I told them that in my home we ate food similar to what they eat, and we Jews with a Spanish heritage spoke a Spanish dialect at home instead of the Yiddish most Jews spoke.

“You should be proud of your Hispanic heritage,” I told them. “It is a culture that has benefited the world with its language and literature.” I emphasized that Spaniards came to America 100 years before the English, the French and the Dutch, and that they had a history and the same stake in this country as had other groups. I told them that, as my parents wished a better life for me, their parents want a better life for them and struggle to realize that dream. I wanted them to overcome the idea that they might feel inferior. I told them that I was from a lower middle-class



background and despite that, I was the first in my family to go to college and the first to get a graduate degree. “If I did it, so can you,” I emphasized.

During our first session I had an idea. Were these youngsters in some way descendants of Jews centuries ago? Did their families retain some Jewish practices through the centuries? So here is what I did. I asked seven questions of the students at each of the four sessions. I was surprised at the results, as you might be. Maybe I shouldn’t have been, as I’ll explain later. Here are the questions, with the answers, session by session.

Questions	No. of Answers by Session			
	1	2	3	4
How many mothers, aunts or grandmothers in your family light candles on Friday nights?	2	5	1	2
How many in your families are told not to eat pork?	4	-	2	5
How many families throw bread in a lake, river, or ocean to get rid of their sins?	3	1	-	1
How many people have candelabras at home that are regularly lit? (I described the traditional Jewish Menorah)	5	2	--	1
How many bury their family dead rapidly?	3	8	1	2
How many in your family fast one day a year during the Fall season?	3	-	2	4
How many of you have parents who never go to church?	-	13	2	3

Obviously something is going on here that requires further study. I never discussed with the students that these were Jewish religious practices. I did not want them going home and telling their parents that the school was trying to find out if there were Jews among the students. A delicate matter. Oddly, no student ever asked me about the significance of my questions. It seems that vestiges of Jewish rituals may have been retained in these families now living in a small New England town. More study might illuminate the situation. Some students were Puerto Rican and others were from Central America. I did not try to find out where the responding students came from.

As we traveled through the halls of the school, we were stopped by many students who thanked us for coming and asked when could we return. It was obvious that I gave them something to think about. Afterward, in a conference with Rhonda Soto and her teachers, we learned that the students continued talking about the sessions in a positive way. 🍂



Editor's Note

For many years I attended SCIS conferences and always paid close attention when a certain member presented. She was always articulate, sophisticated and interesting, with a beautiful, subtle accent. I learned over time she is a specialist in Ladino, her native language. I have always wanted to learn more about her. Join me as we meet Rachel Bortnick. —Ed.

Halapid: How does your upbringing as a Sephardic Jew from Turkey influence your sense of identity?

Rachel Bortnick: In every way. Coming to America solidified my sense of identity as a Turkish Sephardic Jew.

I was born in 1938 in Izmir, Turkey, and raised in a traditional Turkish Jewish community. I came to the United States on a university scholarship to Lindenwood College in St. Charles, Missouri. Imagine, I had never been out of Izmir except for two school field trips. I found myself in Middle America, a Turkish Jewish girl alone in a new land.

My father wanted me to honor our traditions and continue to observe Shabbat. He arranged in advance through the university that I meet a local Jewish family. The Kaplans were, of course, Ashkenazi with very different customs than our Sephardic ones. The first Friday night I joined them for dinner I was unfamiliar with gefilte fish and other dishes that were prepared. The whole family spoke Yiddish, a language I had never heard before. "Are you sure you're Jewish?" the hostess asked me. They had never met a Sephardic person before. But they continued to invite me and I went there for many Shabbat dinners.

Although I was lonely in St. Charles, I stayed, eventually obtaining a BA in chemistry and earning a scholarship to Smith College (Northampton, Massachusetts) for graduate school. But two weeks before graduation I met Bernard Bortnick, in St. Louis. That changed all my plans.

H: In what way?

RB: I gave up my plans for love! Bernard and I returned to Izmir and got married



Rachel
Amado
Bortnick

Dedicated
to
Ladino's
Survival

in a traditional Sephardic wedding at our synagogue and from there, we went to Holland for his work (he is an architect). After two years in Holland we went to live in Israel, but by 1965 we were back in the United States and settled in St. Louis for the next 17 years. By then we had three children.

H: Did you ever use your chemistry training?

RB: Yes. In Holland I worked at an artificial fertilizer plant; for awhile I was a research assistant at Washington University (St. Louis, Missouri); a lab assistant at University of Missouri - St. Louis (UMSL), and at a dental laboratory. I eventually

changed my profession and became an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher after taking courses at UMSL, and later again at San Francisco State University. I was an ESL teacher for 35 years after that, and have worked in that profession wherever we lived.

H: You moved to San Francisco?

RB: Yes. In 1982 circumstances took us to California and the Bay Area for Bernard's work. This is where I met my first Sephardic contacts. At a Hadassah lunch meeting at our synagogue, I met a fellow Sephardi Jew from Salonika, Greece, who spoke the same Judeo-Spanish I did. She introduced me to her husband and other Greek Jews, most of whom were Holocaust survivors. That was the turning point: I said, "We have to start a club so we can speak Ladino!" Thus was born the Los Amigos Sefaradis (LAS) club in 1984.

H: What did the club do?

RB: Connect, primarily. I wrote a letter to the San Francisco Jewish Chronicle in which I explained the club's formation and invited anyone to join who spoke Judeo-Spanish or had this background. Soon some 30 enthusiastic people met once a month. We always had a program, a speaker, and food. People loved getting together. The local newspaper wrote an article about us and the group grew as non-Sephardic people joined us. As president of LAS, I was also invited as a speaker on Ladino to the Yiddish club. Then in 1986, I received a letter from the Spanish consul in San Francisco asking me to speak at a program at the Judah Magnes Museum (now part of the University of California at Berkeley). On behalf of Spain, the consul apologized for the persecution and the expulsion of Spain's Jews, and that news made the local papers as well.



Another result of the success of *Los Amigos Sefaradis* was the film, *Trees Cry for Rain: a Sephardic Journey*, produced by a non-Sephardic member, Bonnie Burt, who was then launching her career in making Jewish-themed documentaries. Filmed at my house in Oakland, California, this 35-minute film has been shown at Jewish film festivals around the world and on public television. Judy Frankel, of blessed memory, a talented musician with a crystal voice, is also in the film, as she was learning from me the correct pronunciation of the words to the Ladino song *Arvoles Yoran por Luyas* (*Trees Cry for Rain*) which gave the film its title.

H: Is LAS still in existence?

RB: Forever on the move, my husband and I relocated again in 1988, this time to Dallas. The LAS organization was taken over by another member and continued without me for three more years, and then it dissolved.

H: How did you adjust to Dallas?

RB: We moved because Bernard found a better job in Dallas. I became very philosophical at this point, uprooted so many times. When you are born in a different country and you move around so much, no place feels like home. Recently, I had a Zoom experience with the Jewish community of Izmir, Turkey. I realized that there is no question about it - I am an *Izmirli*, one who calls Izmir her home. To cope in a new place, I think you learn to have another persona, a mask you wear on the outside. You become someone else when you speak another language. But my sense of being a Turkish Jew never

changed. I'm happy now because I can express my Sephardic self.

H: Explain further, please.

RB: In my youth, everyone around me spoke Ladino. Our neighborhood was mostly Jewish; the store owners, street peddlers, everyone spoke it, since we were all Sephardic, exiles from Spain since 1492.

In fact, we called our language Espanyol. When I left Turkey,

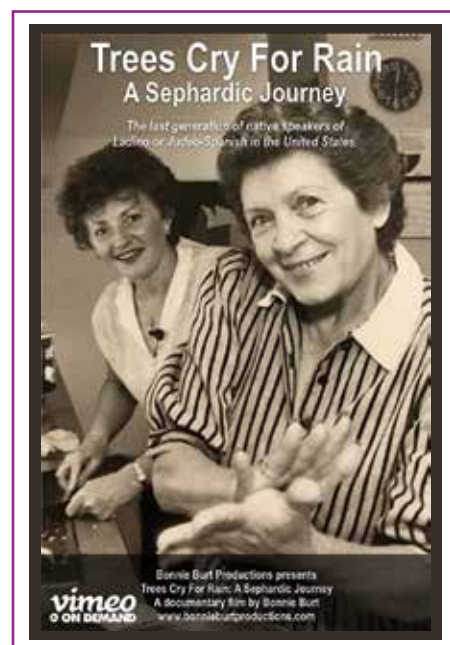
I corresponded with my parents in Ladino as well. I come from a large extended family and when they started to pass, I felt I had lost my language, as I had no one to speak it with. But when I started meeting people in the Bay area, things changed. I had never studied my culture's literature and folklore and now I can say I think it is the most interesting language there is. Within Judeo-Spanish is our entire history, where we came from, where we passed through, who our neighbors have been. Ladino has retained the sounds and vocabulary of medieval Castilian which no longer exists in modern Spanish. Do you



Love wins out for Rachel and Bernard



Rachel with Domingo Sanchez, Spanish consul, March 2, 1986, at Judah Magnes Museum, San Francisco



Film featuring Rachel

realize there are three different sounds for the letter "j"?

H: How did you gather the international group with whom you are now working?

RB: In 1999, I began an online community called *Ladinokomunita*. It is a group corresponding exclusively in Ladino. The idea was born at a conference I attended in Israel organized by the National Authority for Ladino and its Culture (NALC) on standardizing Ladino spelling in Latin letters. Ladino was written with Hebrew characters even back in Spain, but with a Sephardic variation of the alphabet (Rashi used that script for his commentaries). Our grandparents wrote only in Rashi script, both a cursive and a printed font.

Non-academics are learning that script today and using it! (Note: the Rashi-like script is called *solitreo*.)

Around the turn of the 20th century, Sephardic people began to write Espanyol (now called Ladino) in Latin letters, rather than in Hebrew, but there was no standardized way of spelling it in this Western alphabet. The Israeli conference attempted to standardize the written language. There, Moshe Shaul, the NALC vice president, suggested using the internet to promote the standardized method which the conference attendees had voted to adapt. That is how I got the idea to start an online community. Once home, I contacted some of my old friends and asked if they would join a new group with this mission in mind, and *Ladinokomunita* was born. First 10, then 20, then 500 people became members within a few months. Eventually as many as 1,700

Our grandparents wrote only in Rashi script, both a cursive and a printed font. Non-academics are learning that script today and using it!

“ ”

people joined, although today we are down to 1,500. The URL is <https://Ladinokomunita.groups.io>.

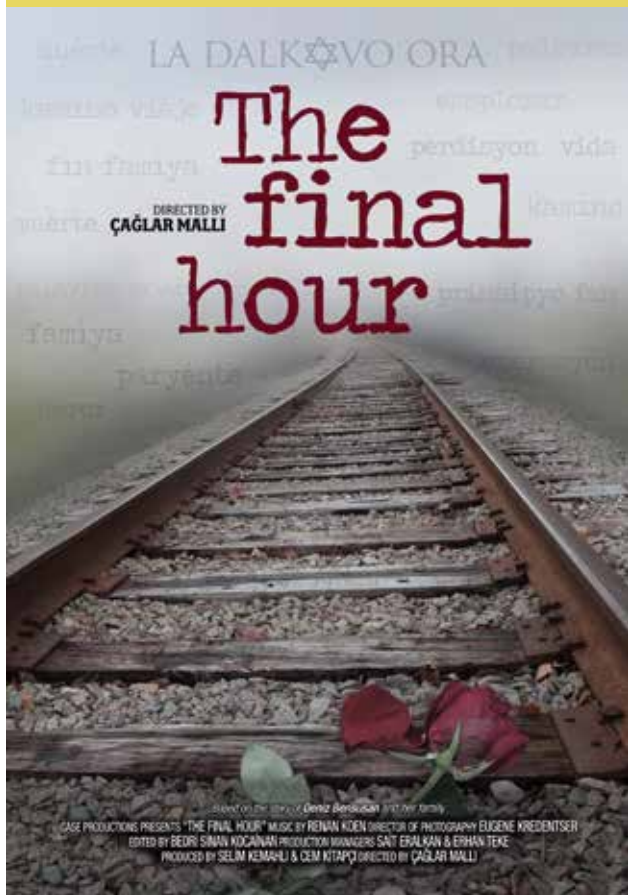
H: How does your family feel about your involvement? And where else has it led you?

RB: Well, we only spoke English to our three children, but they respect and support my passion. Recently I gave a six-week course in Ladino via Zoom, organized by the Sephardic Jewish Brotherhood of America. Our youngest son, Sam, who lives in Dallas, was my Ladino student, as was Art Benveniste.

You should know that I learned about SCIS from Art Benveniste back in 1992 and soon after, became a member. I felt that the crypto-Jews were my long-lost relatives. Art, a long-time SCIS member who lives in Los Angeles, is a Sephardic Jew whose family is from the Greek island of Rhodes.

These days I spend many hours online speaking to my global community. It is so important to remember from where you came. 🔥

FILMS



The Final Hour

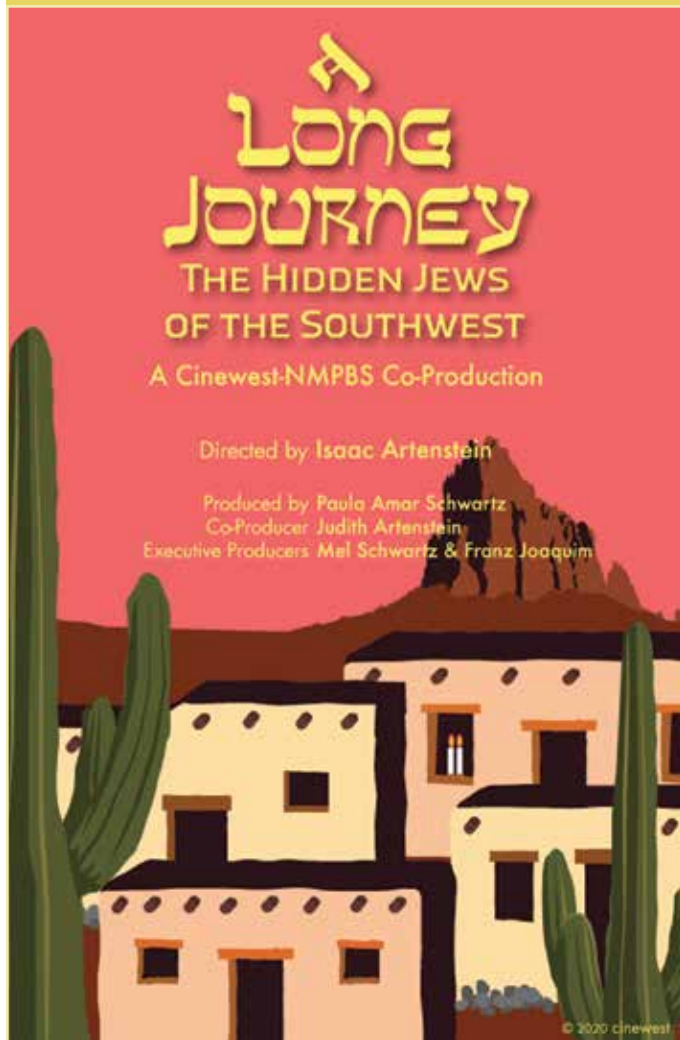
Faced with the imminent extinction of her ancestral language, a young woman embarks on a voyage across Europe to discover her origins and her dying culture.

The award-winning documentary, *The Final Hour*, by Turkish director Çağlar Mallı, follows Deniz Bensusan, a young Sephardic girl who realizes her ancestral language, Judeo-Espanol – Ladino – is on the verge of extinction. Losing this language means the community also stands to lose their identity. Alarmed, she embarks on a journey attempting to unearth her culture, language and roots. As she uncovers relatives in distant lands and traces 63 family members to their ends in Auschwitz, her interest in Sephardic history grows stronger.

Her character develops as she moves from being indifferent to accepting mature responsibility to fight to save her ancestral culture.

Her journey is emotional and often humorous as Deniz meets small surviving communities of Sephardic Jews and discovers her past. To keep the culture and language alive, the Jewish community must live as a closed, isolated society and not intermarry. While she grows to appreciate the importance of heritage and culture, she is not convinced that she should make this life-long sacrifice to keep this dying culture alive. www.TheFinalHourMovie.com 🔥





A Long Journey

The Hidden Jews of the Southwest

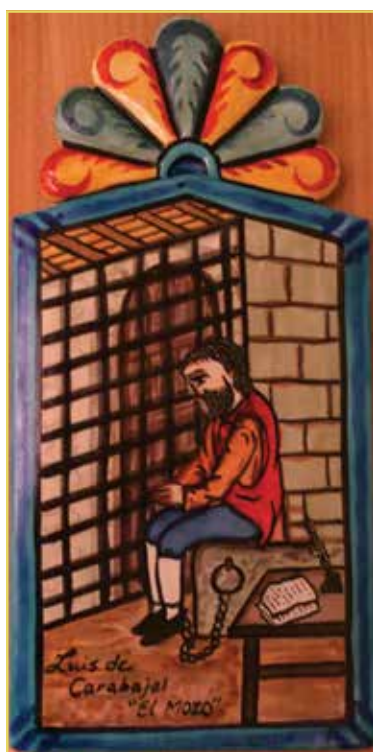
From the sky-filled, opening aerial shot of a lone cowboy riding across the New Mexico desert to the joy-filled faces of the returning descendants in Juarez, Mexico, this moving, hour-long documentary makes the viewer appreciate the power of film to tell a story — one of Iberian Jews forced to convert to Catholicism four centuries ago, concealing their identity over the ages, only to be reclaimed in our time.

The vision of producer Paula Amar Schwartz (*Challah Rising in the Desert: The Jews of New Mexico*) and the cinematic expertise of award-winning, director Isaac Arstein, *A Long Journey* reveals the lives of memorable individuals who have experienced this remarkable homecoming. Among them is Tim Hererra, a New Mexico cattle rancher whose life, and that of his entire family, has been transformed by finding his roots and understanding Jewish traditions that have been part of his world for generations. Blanca Carrasco, a program administrator at UTEP, and Bill Carvajal, a descendant of one of the most famed *conversos* in Mexico's history, work together at El Paso's Anusim Center, and share emotional journeys of discovering how their ancestors fought to hang on to their religion and culture. New Mexico folk artist, *santero* Charlie Carrillo, also reveals — in his own devotional art — the profound effect that learning about one's Jewish heritage can have. The physical journeys of secret Jews — *conversos* — might have ended in colonial times, but their spiritual journey continues to this day.

Genealogist Dennis Maez and Sara Koplik (Jewish Federation of New Mexico and the Sephardic Heritage Program) provide valuable context, along with the historical narratives about the Expulsion and persecution of *conversos* by the Spanish Inquisition as told by New Mexico historian and author Ron Duncan Hart and Arizona novelist Marcia Fine. The haunting score by acclaimed composer Mark Adler with guitar performances by Tim Torrance and Adler, add a riveting, soulful framework throughout the documentary. The closing segment about El Paso Rabbi Stephen Leon's outreach to the hidden Jews of

"A Long Journey: Hidden Jews of the Southwest" will air November 19 on KNME-NMPBS and can be viewed at www.NewMexicoPBS.org. Check your local PBS affiliate for more broadcast times. To watch the trailer, visit www.ChallahRising.com. The companion book, *Crypto-Jews: The Long Journey*, by Ron Duncan Hart, Gaon Books, is available from several sellers online.

Juarez is an absolute celebration. *A Long Journey* is personal, profound and beautifully filmed. Not to be missed. A film for audiences of all backgrounds. 🌟



Retablo painting of Luis de Carvajal, *El Mozo* in the Inquisition jail in Mexico City, (far left) by Charlie Carrillo (above left), *santero* and retablo painter, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Tim Hererra, New Mexico cattle rancher (left).

At many gatherings attended by *anusim* and descendants of crypto-Jews, a special song is sung after a meal in modern Spanish, not Ladino. It has a haunting melody and repeating refrain. It was sung recently at the remembrance ceremony in Denver by Rabbi Moch.

SCJS member Lorenzo Trujillo wrote to Seth Ward, who presented at the event, commenting, “The song was truly beautiful and in pure traditional style. Can you enlighten me as to the use of two languages? Was it a modern composition?”

Ward answered, “I am surprised you have not yet encountered it! *Bendigamos* is sung by many Sephardic communities either before, after or in place of the *Birkat HaMazon*, (grace after meals). That is why most versions of the hymn refer to food. Many think that it originated in the Bordeaux region of France among Spanish expellees. Others have different ideas; it is possible that it may be more recent or, more likely, its broad diffusion is more recent. Professor Edwin Serrousi is probably the best authority on this song. He wrote an article showing that it probably goes back to Livorno (Leghorn), Italy, but is most likely an amalgam of a number of strands. You can find many performances of it on YouTube.”

Editor’s Note: Further details found in Wikipedia suggest the song may have originated with Sephardic Jews living in Spain who then immigrated to Turkey, other locales in the Ottoman Empire, and the Netherlands. It may also originally have been written as a secret way to say the *Birkat HaMazon* when practicing Judaism in Spain and Portugal was forbidden in the 15th century. From France, the *Bendigamos* song was probably brought to the Dutch West Indies (Curaçao) in the mid-19th century and then taken to New York and Amsterdam.

For the many who have asked about the words and what they mean, we are sharing them with you here. 🕯

BENDIGAMOS SERPHARDIC SONG OF THANKS

*Bendigamos al Altísimo,
Al Señor que nos crió,
Démosle agradecimiento
Por los bienes que nos dió.*

*Alabado sea su Santo Nombre,
Porque siempre nos apiadó.
Load al Señor que es bueno,
Que para siempre su merced.*

*Bendigamos al Altísimo,
Por su Ley primeramente,
Que liga a nuestra raza
Con el cielo continuamente,*

*Alabado sea su Santo Nombre,
Porque siempre nos apiadó.
Load al Señor que es bueno,
Que para siempre su merced.*

*Bendigamos al Altísimo,
Por el pan segundamente,
Y también por los manjares
Que comimos juntamente.*

*Pues comimos y bebimos alegremente
Su merced nunca nos faltó.
Load al Señor que es bueno,
Que para siempre su merced.*

*Bendita sea la casa esta,
El hogar de su presencia,
Donde guardamos su fiesta,
Con alegría y permanencia.*

*Alabado sea su Santo Nombre,
Porque siempre nos apiadó.
Load al Señor que es bueno,
Que para siempre su merced.*

*Let us bless the Most High,
The Señor/Lord who created us,
Let us give thanks
For the good things which he gave us.*

*Praise his Holy Name,
Because he always took pity on us.
Praise the Lord for he is good;
Let your mercy endure forever.*

*Let us bless the Most High,
First for his Torah,
Binding our people
With the heavens continuously,*

*Praise his Holy Name,
Because he always took pity on us.
Praise the Lord for he is good;
Let your mercy endure forever.*

*Let us bless the Most High,
Secondly for the bread,
And for the delicacies
We ate together.*

*As we ate and drank merrily
His mercy never failed us.
Praise the Lord for he is good;
Let your mercy endure forever.*

*Bless this house,
Home to his presence,
Where we keep his festival,
With joy and permanence.*

*Praise his Holy Name,
Because he always took pity on us.
Praise the Lord for he is good;
Let your mercy endure forever.*



An Epic Save: Portugal Dedicates Long-Awaited Monument to Sousa Mendes

BIOGRAPHY-COURTESY-YAD VASHEM

The Portuguese diplomat, Aristides de Sousa Mendes, was his country's consul general in Bordeaux, France. The German occupation prompted tens of thousands of refugees, including thousands of Jews, to flee southward from the northern départements in the hope of exiting France via the only remaining avenue of escape, the southern border into Spain and Portugal, and



Aristides de Sousa Mendes

then sailing for America. The Portuguese dictator, António de Oliveira Salazar, permitted holders of visas for overseas to transit through Portugal, but closed the borders to refugees without visas, thus shutting the last avenue of hope. Some 30,000 refugees, including 10,000 Jews, were desperately trying to obtain the piece of paper that would extricate them from France. Sousa Mendes, a devout and good-hearted Catholic, decided to help the

refugees despite his government's orders. He promised Rabbi Haim Kruger to issue transit visas to everyone in need, adding that those who could not pay the fees would receive them at no charge. He then set up an improvised office in the consulate and with the help of two of his sons and several Jews who were waiting nearby, began to issue transit permits.

A rumor about Sousa Mendes' actions reached Lisbon, which summarily ordered him to return to his homeland at once. The Portuguese government dismissed Sousa Mendes from his position in the Foreign Ministry and left him destitute and unable to support his large family. He explained his actions: "If thousands of Jews are suffering because of one Christian [Hitler], surely one Christian may suffer for so many Jews." Sousa Mendes died penniless in 1954; not until 1988, thanks to external pressure and his children's efforts, did his government grant him total rehabilitation.

It was not until 1986 that Sousa Mendes was reinstated posthumously into the diplomatic service. Finally, on June 9, 2020, Portugal's parliament decided to recognize its disobedient diplomat with a monument bearing his name in the National Pantheon. 🇵🇹



*Many thanks to
Lorenzo Trujillo for
this newspaper clipping*

Sunday, June 25, 1967

Sunday Empire, Caroussel

Not the least of the many cultures which contributed to settlement of our western and southwestern frontier were Jewish refugees from the Spanish Inquisition, according to a monograph, *Some Early Jewish Settlers on the Southwestern Frontier*, by Dr. Floyd S. Fierman. Names such as Lopez, Aguilar, Sanchez, Gomez and Rivera came from famous Spanish-Jewish or Portugese-Jewish "Marrano" (Christianized Jewish) families. Villages and families bearing the name Aguilar, for example, got the name from Moses Raphael de Aguillar, [a] Jewish scholar who became one of the West's first cantors, D. Fierman says. — *Lance Robbins, Albuquerque, N.M.*

(*Empire* was once the Sunday magazine of the *Denver Post*.)



Editor's Note —

It is a mere coincidence that both book reviews in this issue are targeted to young readers. This tells me something important: more writers are considering the history of the Iberian Diaspora worthy material for YA (young adult) readers and more publishers are seeing its merit as well.

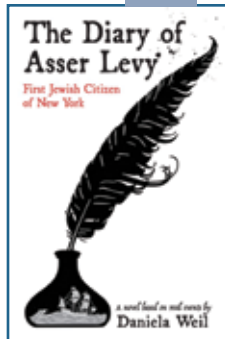
This is huge. We have arrived, so to speak. I encourage those of you reading these reviews to also read these books. They are fresh, new material told in a memorable way. — CJB

The Diary of Asser Levy – First Jewish Citizen of New York

By Daniela Weil
Pelican Books, 2020

The dramatic history of the Iberian Jews and their flight around the world in the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries is mind-boggling for most adults, and even more complex for younger readers trying to get a grip on the medieval period of Jewish history. That is why this enchanting book, based on facts and impeccable research, brings to life the story of one very real figure among the lucky few to escape the Dutch colony of Recife, Brazil, in search of a life free from persecution.

Protagonist Asser Levy, a teenaged boy from Holland, brings us into the mid-1600s through his detailed diary, recounting in the first person the frightening conquest of the colony by the Portuguese and his family's decision to leave. Finding passage on a ship to escape, the challenges only increase as they end up in New Amsterdam instead of Holland, and are unable to pay the captain's transport fee. Unwelcome in New Amsterdam, they endure a hard winter



with little sustenance or support until a contingent of Dutch Jews from Holland arrives to intervene on their behalf. Peter Stuyvesant eventually relents and welcomes them as rightful citizens.

The story, full of conflict, intrigue and suspense, carries the reader through the plight of these committed refugees. Put to print in an unusual new font upon semi-glossy pages, the entire work is designed to make reading easier for those in need. It is an aesthetic pleasure to advance each page.

Enriched by maps, paintings and historic references, the narrative rings true with an authentic voice as believable as any first-hand account might have been had Asser Levy been able to write it himself. Further, the detailed author's notes, excellent glossary, and historic timeline provide good sources for further discussion.



Author Daniela Weil approaches the subject with a fresh eye and a clear voice, making this a quick and palatable read for any middle grade student and/or adult. Currently a Texas resident, Daniela was born in Brazil and her inspired vision for the story took her back to Latin America to bring it to life. Clearly on to something, this debut book is a winner. One can only hope there is more to come.

— Corinne Joy Brown



Eggshells on the Ceiling

By Gail Carson Levine
Harper Collins Children's Books
2020

As a Harper Collins release for young readers, everything about this 371-page, hardcover book came as a surprise to me: the length, the subject matter (a family torn apart by the Spanish Inquisition in the late 1400s), a protagonist who is 7 years old when the story begins and 16 when it ends, and the scope of the story line, encompassing the life of medieval Jews in Spain and the forces that threatened them. Told in the first person in the voice of Paloma, or "Loma" as she is called, we get a unique view into the home life of a Jewish family in the *aljama* (community) of Alcala de Henares in central Spain just a few years before the fall. The story closes following the proclamation of the Alhambra Decree, or Edict of Expulsion, and the drive to uproot the entire population.

In the duration, young, precocious and smart Loma who has a great aptitude for math, becomes the favorite of her grandfather Belo, a protected tax collector, and joins him on his long trips by horseback to provide comfort and company as they travel into outlying Jewish communities. They eventually win an audience with Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand, wherein Loma, hoping to sway their growing prejudice against their Jewish subjects, imagines



herself to be like Queen Esther and hopes to plead for mercy for the Jewish people.

Pressure to convert to Christianity divides her family, and her loathsome older brother and his wife succumb, willfully taking the cross. Loma, determined to remain a Jew and be loyal to her grandfather, grows in wisdom and courage while Belo, the family's protector, grows more frail, often suffering "paroxysms" or mini-strokes that leave him unable to speak or move. As Loma matures, she misses her opportunity for betrothal, condemned to being without a husband and childless in her teen years. Her commitment to Belo enables him to continue his work and save Jews. Unknowingly, she both endangers and saves his life as she helps him get out of Spain.

Accompanied by their dedicated Muslim house servant, Hamdum, who eases them through Muslim communities, the story winds to a terrifying end as Jewish families are forcibly dispatched to ports unknown. In a surprising twist, Loma herself is imprisoned by the Inquisitors, held for weeks, and finally freed so that she might escape with her parents to Naples.

Gail Carson Levine is a seasoned and celebrated writer of children's books with a wide audience. This novel surely was not directed to Jewish children alone, although if used as assigned reading to bar- or bat mitzvah-age kids, it would open a healthy discussion about what happened to Iberia's Jews. Necessarily, the storyline embraces the theocracy of Isabelle's Spain, the greed

of the Church to usurp Jewish holdings, the promised salvation of conversion, the severe punishments of the Inquisitors, and the various economic and political forces that were sweeping Spain at this time in history. It is ambitious for a juvenile read. In fact, most adults would find it absorbing. Yet the child protagonist prevails as the central character.

Of special note is the author's biographical data at the end of the book confirming Gail Levine's own Sephardic ancestry and stimulus for writing this story. She also credits some of our finest academics to whom she turned for research: historians Dr. Jane Gerber and Dr. David Gitlitz. Perhaps we might encourage her to join SCIS and learn even more. — CIB 📖



A Gamez Mill House RARITY

In light of our last issue and the Andrée Brooks story about Luis Moses Gomez, we thought the availability of this rare manuscript by his great-grandson Isaac would be of interest to anyone who is a fan of this historic homestead and foundation. Many thanks to Dan Wyman Books of New York. — CIB

Selections of a Father for the Use of His Children

By Isaac Gomez. New York, 1820. 1st edition. Period full leather with spine label, 8vo, viii, 9-408 pages. Singerman 322; Rosenbach 209. The tipped in recommendation slip signed in the print "Ph. Milledolar," as noted by BAL, is present. President John Adams wrote of this literary anthology that it was "worthy to be presented by every father to every child, and deserve a place in every family."

This is the earliest children's book by an American Jew. Isaac Gomez (1783- 1831) was prominent in Jewish communal affairs. This volume was intended to entertain and educate young children and contains selections on astronomy, geology, literature, zoology, anatomy, and moral guidance.

Gomez's Jewish affiliation resonates in the book with his decision to include a selection from *The History of Pope Pius V*, which is the source for the "pound of flesh" incident in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. As opposed to Shakespeare's telling, in the *History of Pope Pius V*, it is the Jew who is the victim and the Christian who threatens him. Gomez prefaced the selection by writing: "The following subject shows that Shakespeare altered the character of Shylock, making him to be of the Jewish nation, when in reality he was not." As Louis Harap notes (*The Image of the Jew in American Literature*, p. 260), "Gomez was obviously trying to combat the effects of the Shylock stereotype."

Isaac Gomez (1768-1831), whose great-grandfather had fled from Portugal to New York in 1703, was active in New York's Jewish community. The few early literary contributions by American Jews "was anything but impressive, but Gomez's book is worth remembering as one of American Jewry's earliest literary efforts... Gomez, both a devotee of the humanities and a committed Jew, lived comfortably ensconced in the two worlds of the Jew and the cultured American." (J. R. Marcus, *United States Jewry*, vol. 3, page 455). See also Blau and Baron, *The Jews of the United States, 1790-1840, Vol. II*, pages 440-2. The last copy to appear at auction in the US in 2013, sold for over \$1,800 (with commissions). Foxing as expected. All endpapers present, and original period binding remains very handsome. A very good copy in outstanding original period binding. (AMR-57-12) \$1,700. 📖



Crypto-Jews Online at the Jewish Learning Channel

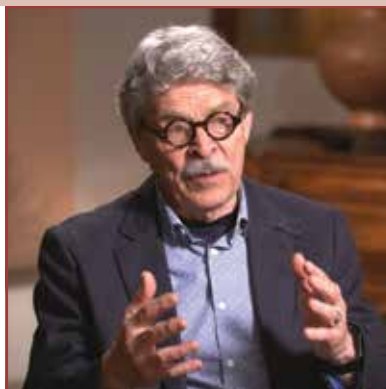
Crypto-Jews, hidden Jews, and the *b'nai anusim* have a growing online presence on the Jewish Learning Channel (www.JewishLearningChannel.com). Presently the JLC has 16 films on the life and legacy of hidden Jews, featuring crypto-Jewish/*anusim* researchers and spokespeople from Stanley Hordes to Rabbi Stephen Leon, John Garcia, Sonya Loya, Isabelle Medina Sandoval, Blanca Carrasco, Margarita Sosa Munoz, and more.

It includes a film on the kosher taco truck from El Paso, a project of the El Paso City Councilman Peter Swarzbein. Rabbi Leon sings *Hashivenu Adonai*, and Miguel Flores Zuñiga talks about the Juarez Torah study group. There are another 15 films on Jewish history, music, and cultural life in Spain, and more films are being added.

The most recent addition to the channel is a talk by Ron Duncan Hart about his new book, *Crypto-Jews: The Long Journey*, which is a global cultural history of the lives of crypto-Jews from the beginning of the persecutions in Spain in the 1300s, to the Expulsion, and the migrations across the Americas.

In the Jewish Learning Channel video "Crypto-Jews: The Long Journey from the Inquisition to the Jewish Identity Movement Today," Hart talks about the years of research that went into writing this book:

"Twenty-five years ago I sat in the Archivo Histórico Nacional (National History Archives) in Madrid awaiting the first Inquisition trial transcript that I would read. It was about a midwife in her 80s who was arrested because she had been accused of washing the baptismal water off new babies. When they brought the inches-thick stack of hand-written parchment from 500 years ago, I sat in silence, contemplating what was on the table before me — a life in parchment, bound in ribbon. I saw the vulnerability of an 80-year-old woman who had been dedicated to bringing life into this



Ron Duncan Hart



world, and now the power of life or death over her rested in the hands of these Inquisitors, the gatekeepers of Catholic conformity in this land.

"It was her third arrest for the same offense, and normally that would have meant a strong sentence and a prohibition against acting as a midwife for life. But she pleaded age and infirmity and after a stern rebuke, her case was left in abeyance, not acquitted, but left open like a wound, a threat, a reminder of the power that could be re-activated at any moment. In the thousands of cases against accused Judaizers in Spain and the Americas over the centuries, mothers and fathers were arrested because they did not eat pork or maybe they took baths on Friday. Maybe they did not work on Saturday. It was all to erase the taint of Judaism from Christian lands."

The lives of Jewish *conversos* and crypto-Jews were linked from Spain and Portugal to Amsterdam and London, then New York,

Cartagena, Lima, Recife, and Mexico. It is a compelling story of people and their movements, marriages, successes and failures, all under the shadow of one of the most pernicious anti-Semitic entities in history, the Spanish Inquisition, which included offices in Mexico City, Cartagena, and Lima. Sometimes there are surprising linkages between world events and the lives of hidden Jews in the America. For example, how did the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 contribute to the settlement of crypto-Jews in New Mexico? Or, what did the Dutch defeat of the Portuguese in Recife, Brazil in 1630 have to do with Doña Teresa Aguilera y Roche, the only woman arrested by the Inquisition in Santa Fe?

How did it all start? Spain once had the largest Jewish population in Europe, but in the 1300s and 1400s anti-Semitism rose dramatically in that country, especially fanned by Dominican friars whose mission was to pressure Jews to convert. Their fiery sermons stirred up Christian mobs who would then attack Jews with clubs and chains, destroying businesses and homes and killing people.

Many Jews converted to save their lives during these attacks. Thousands of *conversos* became hidden or crypto-Jews, continuing to practice their Jewish tradition in secret. By 1492, there could have been 100,000 to 200,000 *conversos* in Spain, and we can only imagine the number that would have been crypto-Jews. The Jewish Learning Channel tells this story in free, informational films. All ages can learn in this entertaining format of video as researchers talk about the history of crypto-Jews in Spain and Portugal and the descendants of those hidden Jews across Latin America to the American Southwest talk about their lives today. For more information contact Hart@JewishLearningChannel.org.



An Old Recipe Uses a Family Garden Staple

BY DIANE MOCK

Aside from a stockpile of zucchini bread recipes, it seems like there is a shortage of flavorful methods to cook squash. Once you try *calabacitas* you will want to add it to your culinary collection of delicious dishes.

My mom was raised on a small farm in Alamosa in southwest Colorado. Grandma Dulcé prepared and fed mom and the family a squash dish called *calabacitas*, midsummer into fall when zucchini and yellow squash grew bountifully in the region. I have read that squash was a crop of Native Americans and adopted by Latinos.

Mom moved to Denver and brought this seasonal tasty tradition with her. Every year I looked forward to *calabacitas*. Her recipe was simple, equal parts sautéed yellow and green squash, with onion, garlic, salt and pepper. I have kept this tradition going and overtime, I embellished her basic recipe. It is what you see here.

ENJOY!



Diane Mock



Calabacitas

Ingredients

2-3 zucchini or Mexican squash*
1-2 yellow squash
1 medium onion
2 or more garlic cloves
1 14-oz can diced tomatoes, drained,
½ cup frozen or fresh corn
high-temperature cooking oil (olive or vegetable) for sautéing.
diced green chilis to taste (optional)
salt and pepper to taste

"I prefer Mexican green squash (pictured) to zucchini. It is not as watery so it stays firmer when cooked. However, unless I grow it (I do), I have to buy it in a Mexican store!"

Prep

Slice all squash into equal thickness rounds. Place squash rounds into a bowl and LIGHTLY drizzle with olive oil. Dice the onion and set aside on cutting board. Press or mince at least two garlic cloves (I love garlic so it's at least four cloves for me.) Set aside on cutting board.

Sauté

Heat 1 tbsp high temperature oil in a large sauté pan. Add diced onion to the hot oil and cook until tender (2-3 minutes). Add the squash rounds and sauté until slightly brown, but still somewhat firm. (5-7 minutes). Add tomatoes, corn, chili, salt and pepper. Cook all ingredients together until hot, about 3-4 minutes. Serves 4-6.



We WILL Get Through This!

With regret, we can still only offer an uncertain update from our 2021 conference chair, Cynthia Seton-Rogers. Not surprisingly, the 2021 venue, the University of Texas at Dallas, cannot commit to hosting any live events on campus until it is safe to do so. SCJS committees have begun making plans for a virtual conference for next summer, and we will update you as we ourselves learn more.

Despite the upheaval and uncertainty that the pandemic has created, we can still plan for a bright future! Keep in mind, next year marks our 30th anniversary conference and we will celebrate — one way or another. We will publish a special edition of *HaLapid* and plan to continue our tradition of bringing outstanding speakers and contributors to SCJS.

With that in mind, be thinking about your topic or abstract to submit when we are ready to release the call for papers. Let us all look forward to seeing one another again — virtually or live — to share our stories and mutual heritage. Stay with us. We are here for you.

In the meantime, think back to conferences of years past — how fine they were, who you met, what you learned. Enjoy these images and may they spark fond memories. 🍷



CALLING ALL SCJS MEMBERS

2021 marks our
30th Anniversary
conference year!

To celebrate, we will publish a special edition of *HaLapid* — and we need your help.

Please send us your favorite pictures, interesting anecdotes, remembrances, and highlights from past conferences. We will include them in this nostalgic look at the legacy that is SCJS

Please email to jb.corinne@gmail.com by March 15, 2021

Watch for a lively lecture series in Spring 2021 via Zoom, bringing you a taste of what the SCJS summer conference will offer. Details soon in *La Granada*, our online newsletter.



THE GRANDEES

Has History Been Kind?

BY CORINNE JOY BROWN

Over the last few months SCIS board members have discussed many topics, sometimes alluding to publications first released decades ago, illuminating various stages of Sephardic and crypto-Judaic history. One such publication is *The Grandees* by Stephen Gardner Birmingham, published first in 1971 by Harper & Row.

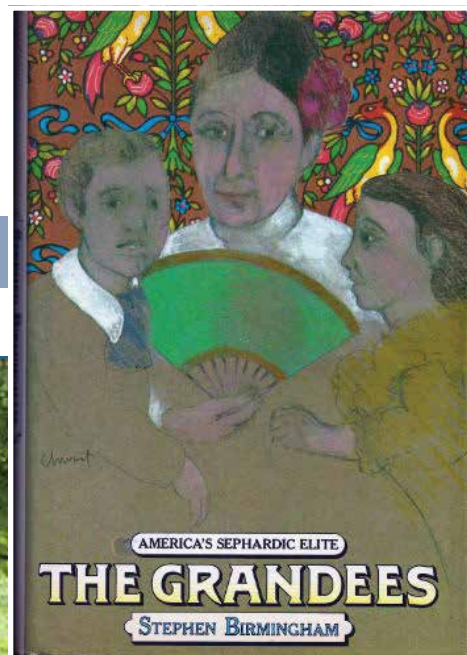
Birmingham (May 28, 1929 – November 15, 2015) was an American author known for social histories of wealthy American families, often focusing on ethnicity, national origins and geographic locale. His Jewish trilogy: *Our Crowd*, *The Grandees: America's Sephardic Elite*, and *The Rest of Us: The Rise of America's Eastern European Jews*, is most remembered and led people to often assume that Birmingham was Jewish himself (he was not). Other subjects include African-Americans (*Certain People*), the Irish (*Real Lace*), and the Anglo-Dutch (*America's Secret Aristocracy*) as well as several novels about wealthy people.

The Grandees retells the story of the refugees who left Recife, Brazil in 1654 and anchored in New Amsterdam. These 23 individuals would comprise the original families of the American Sephardic elite. Among the families of Spanish Sephardim could be found names like De Sola Pool Nathan, Hendricks, Levi*, Gomez, and others. Together they formed an upper crust that stayed quietly amongst themselves and avoided publicity. They married amongst each other, started their own synagogues, and engaged in all trades and professions. Some were traders who brought slaves and rum to the New World. Others like Uriah Levy, served in the US army and had to battle anti-Semitism. Many played a part in the burgeoning fur trade, others in underwriting presidents. (*See our *Diary of Asser Levi* book review, page 24.)

One reader states that *The Grandees* is “an informative, quick read that moves along like a well-crafted novel.” Critics however, were not so kind. In 1971 the Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture in New York City put out four formal



The Grandees
Bronze sculpture by Philip Jackson



reviews on Birmingham's book. The reviews were by people from the academic community, within the very community he wrote about.

One said, “...Mr. Birmingham addressed a gathering on October 10, 1968 at Shearith Israel [the very congregation he writes about]. Mr. Louis N. Levy, president of the Foundation, asked whether he proposed to also write on the Balkan Sephardim. For some reason the audience burst into laughter and the answer was not heard.” Further, “Birmingham is so eager to show that the *Grandees* were aloof and snobby that he ignores reality. He interprets things as he wants them to be, not as they are.”

Rabbi Angel of Shearith Israel wrote: “His book is plagued with factual inaccuracies and poor historical perspectives. Unfortunately, many Jews and non-Jews are reading it and their opinions are molded by it because they know little or nothing about Sephardim.”

Sephardic scholar David N. Barocas said, “To rely on hearsay information, or to select random passages from books and then try to weave them into the fabric of one's text or report constitutes, in the final analysis, a combination of misstatements, incomplete truths and factual omissions tending to present a perverted opinion of an innocent people. There are many good books out there which are accurate. Unfortunately this is not one of them. Written by an outsider of the community, it is biased, but does give a good example of the Sephardic community.”

In my view, there is still some fascinating history here. You decide. 🍷



Sharing Sephardic Heritage Around the Globe

BY SCHELLY TALALAY DARDASHTI



Centro Sefarad New Mexico, the new Sephardic Heritage program of the Jewish Federation of New Mexico, is quickly becoming a resource for information, reaching thousands worldwide.

Centro's weekly Thursday Facebook Live! sessions have been viewed thousands of times by people in many countries, through live participation or watching the recorded programs.

The past two months have featured "Sephardic Medieval Archival Research in Spain," with genealogist Maria Jose Surribas of Barcelona; "The Jewish Presence in Mexico," Rabbi Jordi Gendra Molina; "The 1391 Destruction of the Mallorca Community," Hazzan Neil Manel Frau-Cortes; the personal story of *Sangre Judia* author Pere Bonnin; The Journey of Ytzjak Lopez de Oliveira of Belmonte, Portugal; "The Indies Passage," Rabbi Gendra; Maria Apodaca's personal story; "On the Roads of Sepharad," Rabbi Gendra; and "A Taste of Centro Sefarad NM" with author Genie Milgrom, Hazzan Frau-Cortes, Maria Apodaca, Rabbi Gendra, and others. The first series of interviews, including "Our Stories/Nuestras Historias," has ended, and plans for the second series are now underway.

The program has just added once-monthly bilingual Spanish/English programs, led by Rabbi Gendra and focused on Sephardic customs and traditions, with holiday themes, Torah readings, and guest speakers. Dates include September 26 (Forgiveness), October 31 (Torah and annual cycle), November 27 (Chanukah), December 18 (Chanukah), January 29 (Tu B'Shvat), February 26 (Purim), and March 26 (Passover).

In addition, Shelly Talalay Dardashti and Maria Apodaca have presented team programs online for the Memphis Jewish Historical Society, the Jewish Genealogical Society (JGS) of Greater Boston, and Temple Emanuel, JGS of San Diego, JGS of Broward County (Florida), and more. Maria shares her "It Only Took 500 Years" personal journey, while Shelly presents "Jewish Ethnicity: Migration, History and DNA" or "Sephardic Resources."

In early March, Rabbi Gendra, Maria and Shelly attended the



Shelly Talalay Dardashti



Rabbi Jordi Gendra Molina

huge RootsTech conference in Salt Lake City, with 20,000+ in-person attendees. Shelly presented "Sephardic Resources," while Maria staffed the busy booth, answering questions from many attendees, providing information packets (including SCIS), and desk-only copies of *HaLapid* and books to peruse.

Schelly spoke at the virtual Hispanic "We Are Cousins" conference on September 23-25, presenting "Did Your Abuelita..." (a compilation of customs and traditions often observed in Hispanic families of Jewish ancestry) and "Sephardic Resources: An Introduction."

The annual Resiliencia! Sephardic Festival - virtual this year, November 7-11 - with Instituto de Cervantes Albuquerque and Centro Sefarad NM, included 10 film, history, music and literature events.

To learn more, we invite you to visit www.CentroSefaradNM.org, email CentroSefaradNM@gmail.com, or go to Centro Sefarad NM on Facebook.

Classes, Outreach and Awards

Past SCIS President Genie Milgrom continues to take her story of crypto-Jewish identity to the world. She recently won the coveted "Best Gift Book Award" at the International Latino Literacy Awards in Los Angeles for *Recipes of My 15 Grandmothers*, a huge coup considering how many hundreds of entries there were. A total of 11,000 people from all over the world tuned in to watch the awards in September.



Genie Milgrom



In 2020, Genie began working with *b'nai anusim* in Latin America. She helped organize food deliveries during the most difficult times of the pandemic, making arrangements with wholesalers to prepare food packages containing essentials and organizing deliveries on small boats during the flood season. She worked with Kulanu, an outreach organization, in funding this project.

Further, she organized a full education curriculum in Spanish with language classes for Hebrew, as well as teaching Jewish texts and history to adults and children. These classes are viewed online by a group of around 250 people with the help of volunteers and are being taught for free in Spanish, French and Hebrew by Genie, husband Michael Milgrom, and SCIS member Rifka Cook. Genie is further helping to organize an umbrella organization to enable isolated communities in Central America and Brazil to meet and together, have a stronger voice.



JHA continues to expand the gathering of like-minded organizations under its umbrella, having recently welcomed Fundación Hispanoludía of Madrid and its CEO David Hatchwell, Foundation for Jewish Heritage based in London, and Dani Rotstein and Jewish Mallorca in Spain, all committed to the story of Sefarad.

On the home front, founder Michael Steinberger has hosted a number of successful Zoom talks reaching audiences worldwide. Over the summer, Michael, along with past SCIS president Genie Milgrom and Israel's Ashly Perry, addressed the Israeli Parliament of Miami, a 90-minute lecture attended by 300 people. Following that event, a talk in June on behalf of JNF enlightened listeners in Florida. Again, Genie and Michael helped explain the importance of recognizing the Jewish Iberian Diaspora and its world impact.

A series of short, powerful presentations featuring an impressive array of speakers are accessible anytime on the Jewish Heritage Alliance Facebook page. They include SCIS member and New Mexico descendant Lorenzo Trujillo, Rabbi Gilberto Ventura of Brazil, film maker Joe Lovett (Lovett Films and Stories), Rabbi Peter Tarlow of Texas, and Michael Steinberger's interview by Nathan Benamoz from Hope Network. Further, the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv, an institution that partnered with Steinberger in expanding their exhibits on Sefarad, will soon be accessible online.

An organization on the move, IHA is fulfilling its mission. To learn more go to www.JewishHeritageAlliance.com

A Remembrance Ceremony

A new tradition seems to have taken root in Denver. An annual ceremony remembering שורף שורף, the Expulsion of Jews from Spain, and the Spanish Inquisition. Held on Sunday, July 19, 2020, this event marks the third year for this gathering.



This year participants attended via Zoom. The ceremony was previously held at Babi Yar Park in Denver, an open air memorial to martyrs of any persecution. The event reminds us that the Alhambra Decree, promulgated at the end of March 1492, gave Jews until July 31 of that year (7 Av 5252) to convert or leave Spain. The ceremony is timed each year to take place close to this date — the date of *Tisha B'Av*, a day of so many tragedies for the Jewish people.

The program remembers vanished Jewish communities, the Expulsion, and the Spanish Inquisition, active for about a dozen years before the Expulsion, which made it dangerous for persons of Jewish heritage to “Judaize” — to retain any active Jewish practices as many had done since mass conversions to Christianity started in 1391. The event is the realization of Denverite Sarah Ruth Marquez who believes no one should forget this momentous time. SCIS board member and University of Wyoming professor Dr. Seth Ward offered the address, “The Spanish Inquisition: History, Heritage, Misconceptions, and Modern Legacies.” Rabbis David Zucker and Shim'on Moch also participated in the ceremony. The event also honored the memories of the late William A. Berg and Dr. Bernice Dinner. — **CJB** >>>

Tisha B'Av – A Jewish Memorial Day

T*isha B'Av* is a day of Jewish mourning. It falls on the 9th day in the Hebrew month of Av which in 2020, began at sundown on Wednesday, July 29 and continued through Thursday, July 30.

There are mourning customs associated with observing *Tisha B'Av*; that include fasting, reading and sharing poetry, short stories and historical passages, and studying the Book of Eicha (Lamentations) and the Book of Job.

Tisha B'Av recalls the tragedies that have befallen the Jewish people, among them the destruction of the Temples and the murder of the Jews in the biblical city of Beitar all of which occurred on *Tisha B'Av*. In recent years Jewish mourning has expanded to include additional events, such as the expulsion of the Jews of Europe, in particular the Jews of Spain who were forced to leave their homeland on July 31, 1492 and signaled the era of the Inquisition, one of the darkest periods in Jewish history. For those of us who have Jewish roots as *b'nai anusim* (descendants of Jews who were forced, under threat of torture and death, into Christian conversion), *Tisha B'Av* holds a special place in our hearts since the emotional persecution of *b'nai anusim* continues to this day.



Could Columbus Have Been Jewish? And Should We Care?



The Jewish community has often wondered whether Columbus was Jewish. We will probably never know the answer. But now new questions begin to surface. Considering our current understanding of some of Columbus' misdeeds, do we even want to claim him?



Norma Libman
(Photo by Mary E. Carter)

On August 17, 2020, The New Mexico Jewish Historical Society welcomed author Norma Libman to address that question. She presented (via Zoom) the details of what we know and what we do not know about the explorer's life and in particular, his place in the story of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. SCJS hopes to hear this lecture again at one of our gatherings.



New Mexico ESTABLISHED 1985
Jewish Historical Society
www.nmjhs.org



Spain in the New World

Corinne dishes out the history



Corinne Brown

Corinne Brown has been busy logging into Zoom lectures at the invitation of Rocky Mountain chapters of Hadassah, and two local synagogue *chavurot*. The interest in the story of crypto-Jews is high and she

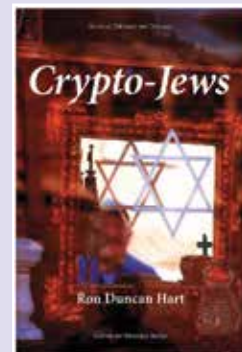
has developed an effective 45-minute talk complete with images and even time for questions and answers. The public cannot seem to get enough of the saga of our hidden heritage. Of course, at the end of the presentation, Corinne always invites the attendees to join SCJS and learn more!



Luminarias — courtesy of Art Benveniste

From award-winning author and former editor of *HaLapid*
Ron Duncan Hart

A Global History of Hidden Jews from Spain to the Americas



Years in the making and now Rated #1 New Release by Amazon

Companion book to the NMPBS/Cinewest documentary

A Long Journey:

The Hidden Jews of the Southwest
airing nationally November 2020

"an indispensable book"
— Dr. Seth Kunin

\$22.95 at Amazon.com & other sellers



Interest in SCJS continues to grow!

As of Summer 2020, our email list hit an all-time high with over **2,000** individuals who want to receive *La Granada*, our online newsletter. Now, let's turn them into SCJS members!

(Your suggestions are welcome.)

Please Join Today!



Sephardic Cuisine Through the Ages

Congratulations to SCIS member in France, Sephardic culinary expert, chef and scholar Hélène Jawhara-Piñer. Beginning last August and continuing through September 2021, she will conduct a series of cooking episodes for the American Sephardi Federation in New York. “Sephardi Culinary History” combines Hélène’s fascination with food studies and her flair for creating delicious cuisine. Proceeds from the series help support her ongoing publications and the ASF’s Institute of Jewish Experience. **For more information visit** www.AmericanSephardi.org.

ASF Broome & Allen Fellow Hélène Jawhara-Piñer earned her PhD in history, medieval history, and the history of food from the University of Tours, France. Her primary research interest is the medieval culinary history of Spain through interculturality with a special focus on Sephardic culinary heritage written in Arabic.

A member of the IEHCA (Institute of European History and Cultures of Food), the CESR (Centre for Advanced Studies in the Renaissance), and the CoReMa Project (Cooking Recipes of the Middle Ages), Chef Hélène has lectured at Bar-Ilan University, in collaboration with the Stali Institute and the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC); her topic: *El patrimonio culinario judío de la Península Ibérica a través de un manuscrito del siglo XIII. Ejemplos de la pervivencia de recetas en la cocina de los sefardíes de España y de Marruecos* (2018). She lectured as well at conference of the Association Diwan (“Reflections on the Jewish Heritage According to the *Kitāb al-ṭabīḥ*,” 2015), IEHCA of Tours (“Jews and Muslims at the Table: Between Coexistence and Differentiation: State of Affairs and Reflections on the Culinary Practices of Jews and Muslims in the Iberian Peninsula and in Sicily from the 12th to 15th Century.”) In 2017 she presented at the Philadelphia conference of Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies, “The Hidden Jewish Culinary Heritage of the Iberian Peninsula Through a Manuscript of the 13th Century.



Kitāb al-ṭabīḥ
(The Book of Dishes),
medieval Arab
cookbook,
c. 10th century.



Hélène Jawhara-Piñer

Examples of the Provenance of Some Recipes in Venezuelan and Colombian Cuisine.”

Her recipes have appeared in *Sephardi World Weekly*, *Tablet Magazine*, *The Forward*, and the S&P Central newsletter. She was also selected to serve as one of the judges for the ASF 2020 “Great Sephardic Chef Competition,” deadline December 15, 2020. Chef Hélène is currently writing a scholarly book on the Jewish culinary history of Spain to be published in Spring 2021. The accompanying cookbook, *Sephardi: Cooking the History. Recipes of the Jews of Spain and the Diaspora*, is available now at www.AcademicStudiesPress.com/cherry-orchard-books/sephardi-cooking-the-history.

Saving An Endangered Language



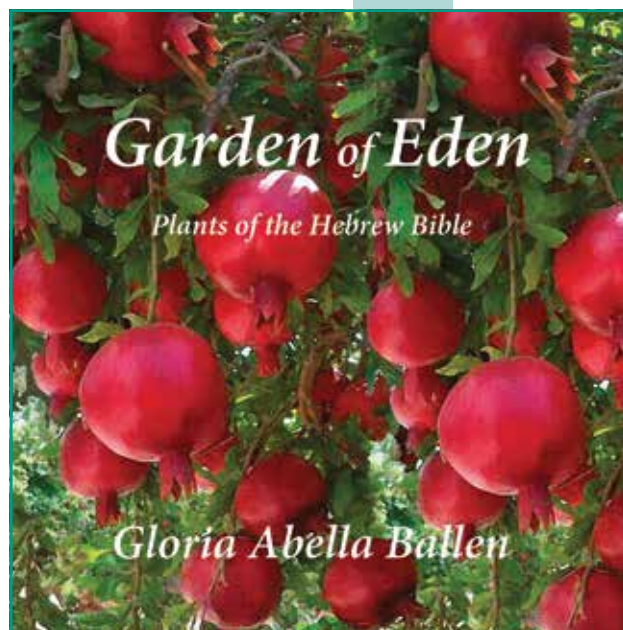
Bryan Kirschen, SCJS advisory council member
Photo by Jonathan Cohen, Birmingham University

SCIS advisory council member Bryan Kirschen and Prof. Dina Danon (Sephardic History) recently launched the Ladino Lab at Binghamton University. They are working with students, faculty and the community to research, teach and celebrate Sephardic language, culture and history. For Bryan, assistant professor of Spanish and linguistics, Ladino is more than a language he researches — it is a living entity with a history.

“This language represents a culture, a world that is fading little by little,” says Kirschen. “While many speakers feel that it is too late to foster new generations of fluent speakers of the language, preservation can continue to pass down sayings, songs, folklore and traditions from one generation to the next. As long as there are speakers with us today, their voices can — and will — still be heard.”

A New Look at Biblical Botany

Kudos to Gloria Abella Ballen for her beautiful new book, *Garden of Eden: Plants of the Hebrew Bible*. Starting with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad, she explains the intriguing story of how it was mistakenly translated as an apple tree when it was more likely a fig, the first plant mentioned in the Bible. From there she takes all references to plants from the *Tanakh* and explains how each plant was used and its meaning. Diane Joy Schmidt says, "... like a flash of lights in this season of darkness. *Garden of Eden* contains page after page of bright, colorful paintings of each of the trees and plants in the Bible... a wondrous introduction to the Bible itself." (*The New Mexico Jewish Link*). Gaon Books. Available at Amazon.



Special Film Event for Temple Aaron



Temple Aaron,
Trinidad, Colorado
(above).

Joseph Lovett
(right)



Temple Aaron of Trinidad, Colorado held an online screening and discussion of *Children of the Inquisition* on October 24, 2020. Kudos to Ron Rubin and Sherry Knecht for organizing a successful fundraiser attended by viewers nationwide. The Temple is the oldest synagogue in Colorado, located near the New Mexico border. The Zoom panel discussion included Peabody Award-winning producer Joe Lovett, Carlos de Madeiros, a contemporary descendant featured in the film, and SCJS member Corinne Brown. 



Tree of Life
mezuzah.
Wooden texture
design crafted
in brass,
4-inches. From
Creative
Judaica on
Amazon.



Dr. Samuel “Skip” M. Feinstein, D.O.

Dr. Samuel “Skip” M. Feinstein, D.O. died on June 24, 2020 in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Skip was a member of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies and attended meetings for many years. He enjoyed accompanying his wife, author/speaker Marcia Fine, to SCIS meetings as a publisher. He also held a great passion for the study of Sephardic history, traveling the world with Marcia to learn more.

A native of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, born in 1942, he received a Bachelor of Arts degree from Temple University and a degree from the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine. After graduation, he received

further training to become a general surgeon, serving families in the Scottsdale/East Valley for 30 years. He was on staff at Mesa General, Mesa Lutheran, Tempe St. Luke’s, and Chandler Regional Hospital. He mentored and taught hundreds of medical students from four medical schools as they pursued their degrees. He was also a Professor at A.T. Still Medical School.

After retiring, Skip volunteered in countries all over the world: Pakistan, Tanzania, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Peru. In 2010, he was awarded the Humanitarian Award for his service by the American College of Osteopathic Surgeons. His interests included playing string bass in klezmer and jazz bands, photography, writing and publishing.

The son of Ruth and Joseph Feinstein (deceased), he was married to his wife, Marcia for more than 50 years. They have two children, Jessica Lebos (Mark) and Dr. Ara Feinstein (Iris). He is survived by four grandchildren — Abraham, Liberty, Eli, and Clyde. He will be missed by all for his love of life and sense of adventure.

Skip believed in being of service. He enjoyed classical music, jazz, taking photographs, and playing golf. He was a member of Temple Solel in Phoenix, Arizona. Donations may be sent to: Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies at www.crypojews.com or in care of Mailbox/Treasurer, 333 Washington Blvd., #446, Marina del Rey, CA, 90292. 📧



Skip Feinstein



ABOUT THE BACK COVER

With each passing year, we realize the importance of telling our stories. We can thank Risa Aqua, Denver artist, for making visual the imperative “IT’S UP TO US” that reminds us to remember, to preserve and to share. This beautiful illustration, that initially appeared in 2014 in our first color issue of *HaLapid*, means even more to her. In her own words:

“Our connection to the natural world is deeply embedded in us, in the blessings we say, and the Torah’s commandments to care for all the life with whom we share this planet.”

— Risa Aqua



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Risa Towbin Aqua
Denver, Colorado
www.RisaAqua.com



Painting by Paula Berger. May she be long remembered.

May the Lights of the Season
Illuminate Your Heart

In 2021



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www.cryptojews.com

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Own beautiful back issues of *HaLapid*! If you are a new member and would like to see what you missed, we still have copies of some issues from the past six years (in the current format) and would be happy to send them. Email the editor with your request and address; payment instructions will be sent to you.

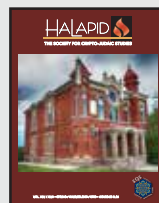
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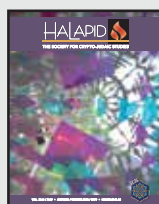
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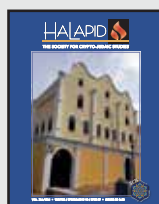
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Spring/Summer 2019



Autumn/Winter 2018



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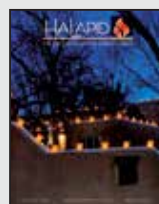
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Spring/Summer 2014



YOU are part of a Mission!



Through your support of our studies of the history, cultures, arts and current status of crypto-Judaism in the United States and throughout the world, we continue our mission of nurturing a global organization for those researching the history of crypto-Judaic and hidden communities around the world.

Our first conference, held near Taos, New Mexico in 1991, was organized by a small, dedicated group of people who established SCIS to foster research and the exchange of information about *conversos* who settled in the outer regions of the Spanish empire. The secret observance of Sephardic customs and traditions by many descendants continue still.

Today SCIS is regarded as the primary body of scholars, artists, crypto-Jewish descendants and interested individuals investigating this phenomenon and inspiring new research directions. Although our roots are in the American Southwest, our horizons extend world-wide, with enriched conferences, exciting new media and affiliations.

Our website, www.cryptojews.com, has archival status because scholars and interested individuals may access hundreds of articles and papers from past issues of *HaLapid*. It also features stories and news of SCIS and related events.

Since 1991, we have attracted members from the United States, Canada, Mexico, Latin America, Spain, Portugal, Scotland, England, France, Italy, Israel, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, the Philippines, Macao, Goa, Central America, the Spanish Caribbean Islands and elsewhere. Your continued membership and donations make it possible for us to continue our mission. We welcome new and renewing members. We are all active participants in this important field of study.

In addition to membership, we welcome donations to our other funds. The Randy Baca/Dennis Duran Fund provides assistance for those researching possible Sephardic ancestry but cannot afford to attend conferences. A donation to our Conference Fund ensures the participation of outstanding keynote speakers and supports special conference programming. In addition, your contribution supports our mailing and publication expenses.

With continuing support, we look forward to a long future of outreach, encouragement and discovery!

Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies

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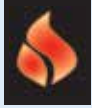
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Tudo se ilumina
para aquele
que busca
a luz



All is
illuminated
for those
who seek the light

- Avram Ben Rosh -

