

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

REFLECTIONS ON THE CURRENT STATE OF LATINO-JEWISH HERITAGE RESEARCH

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Anusim are present today in Spain and Portugal and anywhere those countries maintained colonies. This includes all of Latin America, Goa, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, parts of Africa, and many islands in the Atlantic and the Pacific. Additionally, anusim can be found in areas where they escaped to, such as France, Italy, Holland, and the like, not to mention Provence, which was open to Jews for the entire period following the Expulsion. Furthermore, communities can be found in large cities in the United States, such as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, several cities in Texas, and other cities in the southern US. Then there is Boston, which houses a large Portuguese community, and Canada, where there seem to be large communities as well. I have personally had contact with individuals from all of the aforementioned places, with the exception of Goa.

Over the years, I have been faced with the many complex issues involved in researching this mysterious culture, which, in the first place, is secretive, and in the second, is unravelling rapidly.

On account of the secrecy, many early scholars presumed that once the Inquisition was legally abolished, the heretofore secret Judaism evaporated. Although this is contrary to any logic, it was accepted fairly unanimously. But a fluke combination of anti-Semitism and a few attentive Jews changed all that.

In the early twentieth century, Samuel Schwarz discovered the Belmonte, Portugal anusim community because of a warning he was given by an anti-Semitic merchant.¹

¹ See Samuel Schwarz, *The New Christians in Portugal in the 20th Century* [*Os Cristãos-Novos em Portugal no século XX*] (Lisbon: Empresa Portuguesa de livros, 1925).

In Mexico, on the other hand, when historian Seymour Liebman asked Don Israel Cavazos Garza, the official historian of northern Mexico, if any anusim remained, he was answered in the negative. Cavazos was protecting his community.² However, Liebman, taking Cavazos at face value, wrote in his book *The Jews in New Spain* that with the disappearance of the Inquisition, and with the passing of time, the anusim themselves disappeared.³ (He deserves credit for asking. Little did he know about the trouble scholars would be facing in northern Mexico getting into archives and discovering the truth.)

Secrecy remains an issue for two reasons. The first is embedded in the tradition, as a lingering consequence of the horrors of the Inquisition, and is inseparable from it. The second is fear. Growing anti-Semitism in Europe was an obvious cause for fear of being seen as Jews. Even in the twentieth century, communities that had felt safe and integrated suffered harassment and discrimination. In Mexico, for example, there were anti-anusim articles that were published in the media throughout the country in the 1920s and 30s.⁴ What transpired in Mexico is but one example of the rationale for the fear that anusim still carry. Another is the anti-Semitism that was directed towards the Belmonte anusim, which engendered a fear of exposure among other secret Jews.

How does a scholar approach a secret culture? How does he or she arm themselves with prior knowledge with which to begin their research?

In the case of the anusim, the main source of information has always been the Inquisition. However, whether papal bulls posted on church doors or *procesos* of interrogations, these are poor representations of reality. For example, I have demonstrated elsewhere that Hernando Alonso, one of the first victims of the Mexican Inquisition, was actually an old Christian, falsely accused.⁵ Likewise, countless others suffered at the hands of the Inquisition for observing such ancient Catholic practices as not attending church during menstruation and staying away during the *cuarentena* (postpartum quarantine), as practiced by Catholics throughout the world,

² I learned this fact from a medical doctor who spoke to Cavazos and reported it to me. Cavazos did not deny it. See Liebman, below.

³ Seymour B. Liebman, *The Jews in New Spain* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970), 303-304.

⁴ See my Ph.D. thesis, *Descendants of the Anusim (Crypto-Jews) in Contemporary Mexico*, Department of the History of the Jewish People, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2009, pp. 175-178. Available at <http://anusim.org/AnusimMexico.pdf>.

⁵ Schulamith C. Halevy, "Blood in the Church: The Inquisition against Hernando Alonso," *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 8:39-55 (2011), http://www.hum.huji.ac.il/upload/_FILE_1378106184.pdf.

throughout the centuries, including in Spain today.⁶ The Inquisition made so many unfounded accusations, and such a minute portion of the *procesos* has been studied, that they remain a poor, if indispensable, resource.

Thus, to study this secret and surprising group, one must also have deep knowledge of actual medieval Jewish practices, especially ones that have ceased to be practiced in modern Jewish communities.

It is also very helpful to approach descendants of survivors of the Inquisitorial holocaust as a Jew, appealing to their shared Jewish roots. In my case, being Sephardi, female, and educated was a good mix. The anusim early on formed a matricentric culture. Indeed, this is the only branch of Judaism we know to have been led by women. Even the Responsa (rabbinic literature) give them credit for it.⁷ So, it was easy for anusim to approach me. I was almost one of them.

Studying a secret culture requires building trust, much more so than is the case with normal qualitative research involving personal interviews. It also demands that the scholar come armed with knowledge that can build bonds. In my case, knowledge of Jewish practices in medieval Spain and having studied the relevant rabbinic literature helped me guess at practices preserved by anusim, despite the fact that most or all normative Jews have abandoned many of them. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of such knowledge.

Although I was fortunate enough to have been well received by the entire community of anusim in the regions I studied, I never neglected to interview related groups, be they priests, individuals who clearly didn't belong to the group, funeral home managers, rabbis, anyone who might shed light on my studies. My efforts rewarded me with a great breadth and depth of information.

I was the first to extract the truth out of the Mexican historian, Cavazos; I left him no choice. At our initial meeting, rather than give him the opportunity to speak first, I reported to him about my discoveries of anusim all over Latin America. When I was done, all he could say was that in Monterrey there were no more than in those other regions I had just reported to him about. Although in fact there are many more in his region,

⁶ See Halevy.

⁷ See Responsum 107 of Yom Tov ben Moshe Zahalon (1559-1638): “This [woman] is kosher and maintains her kosher status. Since she came to dwell under the wings of the *Shekhinah* [i.e. returned to Judaism], she already returned to her kosher status.... And, furthermore, the kosher Portuguese women, who have the faith of Israel planted in their hearts – it is they who teach the men and bring them close to the Jewish faith. This is what we have heard and seen” (author’s translation).

this was his first admission that any at all existed in northern Mexico, and this in itself was a major triumph.

After several long stays, during which fast friendships were built (to the point that “nobles” from northern Mexico were present at our son's wedding in Jerusalem), I had a complete picture of the region that included the observance of all Jewish dietary laws, many holidays, details about the history of the earlier, failed attempts of local anusim to return to Judaism, and countless more important facts.⁸

Information-gathering methods today— Eliciting clues from the clueless

Let's discuss methodology, and how and why it has changed as we have moved into the twenty-first century.

From the onset, transmission of the secret anusim heritage has been inconsistent, making it difficult to identify informants:

- In some families, all children were informed of their Jewish identity in a clear and orderly fashion, while in others, one child, almost invariably a female, received all the transmission, while none of the rest were informed at all.
- Deathbed confessions: those present heard, but often it was difficult to find context.
- Oblique messages, strange comments given to children without context: “Today you are a bad little Jew”; “Today you are a good little Jew.” This, in a place where the child never, ever saw a Jew, and yet no explanation is given.
- And finally, many offspring never hear anything at all.

Though the younger generation may seek me out, the older generation is often loath to speak to strangers. As just mentioned, in many places, including most of Mexico, only selected youngsters, if any, are handed down any oral history pointing to a Jewish identity. In Nuevo León, however, transmission of family origins was often more explicit.

So, I took advantage of numerous opportunities to stay in the homes of informants—noble families and humble ones. Thus, I was able to observe, not just hear about, the practices preserved in these homes. When invited

⁸ For some failed attempts, see Halevy, 177; for dietary laws and holidays, see Halevy, chapter 4, “Crypto-Jewish Praxis,” 81-137.

into someone's home, I would look for *santos*—crucifixes and other outwardly Christian symbols. On account of their possible Jewish aspects, I was interested in the direction of the beds, in how rooms were swept, and in how nail and hair trimmings were disposed of.

The hidden nature of the phenomenon under investigation required an uncommon, unstructured style of interview. In this secret culture, so much has been lost, and so much remains hidden.

Often, the interviewee did not volunteer anything about the family origins. I would need to ask what their and their ancestors' surnames were, if they knew anything about when their family had arrived to that area, and where the family had originated. It was also very interesting to find out if there had been mention of Spain or of Portugal, or of nobility. Depending on circumstances, at some stage I might ask about attitudes toward Jews or toward *Sefarditas*. I would invariably inquire about attitudes towards the church and clergy.

Some Mexicans, especially from elite families, were told that they are different from the others, only because the family touted itself as Old Christian nobility or descendants from Old World *conquistadores*. But such families often turned out to be of New Christian stock. So, I looked in particular for traces of family customs that can only be reasonably explained as being of Jewish origin. If such customs are combined with a sense of separate cultural identity, then that could buttress a claim of Sephardi descent. I concentrated on home practices, since they would be much more likely to have survived the many years of the Mexican Inquisition. I looked especially for practices that are traceable either to rabbinic law or Sephardi custom, and which are not shared by normative Catholics. To this end, biblical practices on their own are of less significance, since they could perhaps be attributed to fundamentalist Christian sects that were active in the area. Practices that appear as evidence of Judaizing in Inquisitorial "Edicts of Faith" and Inquisition trials—especially those from Mexico—were deemed particularly important.

Often, the rare young adults who were actually told of Jewish origins had no idea that the home practices I would ask about had anything to do with this fact. I needed to attempt to elicit information about things that the individuals themselves might not identify as something at all unusual, and lead them there one step at a time. I had to learn not to ask, "Do you?" but rather, "Did your grandparents?" and "Who else does the same?"

I would ask about weekend (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday) activities, about which day of the week or days of the year might have been devoted to cleaning. Occasionally, I would try to learn about unusual observances of holidays, fasts, and other special days on the calendar. I asked about

home prayers wherever I went.

If they would seem to know something about food, I would ask more about that. Then I would ask about the standard daily meals: Did they have *desayuno*—the light breakfast, or *almuerzo*—the heavy one? What exactly was eaten; what was imbibed? Was coffee taken; was it taken with milk? Next, I would inquire about the main meal, repeating the same routine. I would often ask for recipes. Again, I would ask about coffee and about milk. Finally, we would talk about food at suppertime.

If the family had a farm or ranch, I would ask about the manner of killing of farm animals in full detail. I always asked about *morcilla*, a blood sausage, and in Nuevo León, about the *fritada*, the goat's-blood stew, in full detail.⁹ I would ask about hunting (hunting for pleasure is frowned upon in Jewish tradition).

I inquired about marriage, how the wedding was celebrated, was there a particular day, was it an arranged marriage, was there encouragement or coercion to marry relatives or non-relatives, and why.

I asked questions about birth-related customs, about midwives, about circumcision. Nearly all informants were familiar with the *cuarentena*. However, these customs, relating to separating and guarding a woman after childbirth, varied from family to family.

Death and burial, which are among the last customs to be forgotten in any culture, have been taken over by the *funerarias*—the official mortuaries. So, it was not simple to dig up old memories, but once that was done, the stories became very clear. In this regard, I also interviewed owners of *funerarias*, and asked them about the olden days, about special requests that various families may have made, and what the bodies were dressed in underneath their regular clothes, etc. I also asked medical doctors what *mortaja* (the word originally used for burial shrouds) is used today.

I was always looking for sayings, *dichos*, related to ethics, religion, food, marriage, or any other lifecycle matters. I collected many such sayings. For example: *todo lo que corre y vuela, a la cazuela* (“Anything that can run or fly, into the pan it goes”), alluding to a lack of taboos, as opposed to: *eres tan mala como la carne del puerco* (“You’re as bad as pork”).

I tried to get my contacts to talk at the end as freely as they did at the beginning, raising memories by speaking about peculiar relatives, describing

⁹ There is also a *fritada blanca*, which is just goat roasted on a spit. Many liked it better than ordinary *fritada* (which is cooked in blood) for various reasons, including the avoidance of blood.

their childhood, and more. Conversations often ended with a deep sense of intimacy, since so much had been shared.

It is important to remember that we are dealing with a secret culture, which, until today, remains very private. All my informants were guaranteed that nothing that passed between us would ever be divulged in any way that could help identify its source. During my research in Mexico, I had a strict policy not to tell anyone with whom I was also in contact, even if they were members of the very same family. Thus, sometimes one member of a particularly “noble” family would tell me that they were *Sefarditas*, showing me photos of the family patriarch, telling me of their Jewish customs, and how a non-*Sefardita* spouse would be making jokes about the family’s aversion to pork. At the same time, another sibling, knowing nothing of the previous encounter, would tell me that the origins of their family are Basque, and would quote, as an authority, the famed historian Don Israel Cavazos.

I was told many a time that “an entire village” was of “Jewish” origin. Accordingly, I would go to that village’s square, approach elderly women, and begin to chat about the old lifestyle and lifecycle, mentioning first weddings and births. I would soon be invited in to see where the women would be kept during the *cuarentena*. Recipes for the *fritada* followed, along with demonstrations in gestures as to how the animal was to be killed. I would then ask about how a pig was killed, and a cow, about hunting, etc. We would usually follow with sayings, wedding customs, death and burial.

Visiting cemeteries and seeking tombstones that are not overtly Christian or which have stones left on them can sometimes reveal clues. Small villages that are still hiding anusim remain undiscovered. But they are not only hard to find, they also are very unwelcoming to strangers. By coming with gifts of Jewish objects and being very slow and gentle, I was sometimes led to a contact.

The State of the Anusim throughout the world today

If I were to start my research today, I would not be able to report all this. Even as I began my study of the anusim, I realized that my informants were losing their resources. On the one hand, grandparents were passing away, and on the other, the young often no longer shared a language in common with their *ancianos*. The vertical lines of transmission were breaking down.

It is for this reason that I was the first to set up a website to serve anusim, and the first to encourage a member of the anusim to open an

internally moderated listserv for anusim. In the absence of vertical transmission, the need presented itself for a horizontal alternative. By now, many websites and listservs are out there, as well as some excellent genealogical services such as JewishGen,¹⁰ which is moderated academically.

Having come into contact with anusim from all around the globe and having helped many look into their background, I now have a fairly broad picture of what is preserved where, and how things have been changing over the last few decades:

- Jewish Belmonte is now a disappointing source of information, as the elderly are almost all gone, and the young are moving to Israel.
- Brazil is still full of anusim seeking to return and who need assistance. The *sertaõ* (backlands) in the Northeastern States and Bahia are still full of information, while the rest of the country is still waiting to be discovered. Many customs were preserved there, and elsewhere, in the guise of superstitions.
- Many anusim tried and failed to return in Holland. They returned to a secret Jewish life. They continue until today. There are anusim in many countries still unstudied.
- In Bayonne, France, the community tells me that there are no anusim, but a previous rabbi tells me of the individuals who would come to the synagogue and tell him that they had customs but no proof. He didn't know what to do with them, so he did nothing. It would be very worthwhile to go there and see if life was quieter there, if families stayed together and there is more to learn.

Sadly, the less vigorously I work in the field, the less survives the ravages of time. Almost none of the elders are alive, including the scholars. The parents, the uncles and aunts, let alone the grandparents, are gone. There is no longer anyone to ask. Most of the practices are also vanishing. So how do we find what is left? We have to rely more heavily on memories. We have to rely on neighbors who considered the family Jewish. Genealogies are becoming more and more relevant as they can provide important clues, such as intermarriage between relatives, which point to anusim ancestry.

It is vital that the academic world focus on uncovering these remaining and often remote communities while the opportunity still exists to find and

¹⁰ See <https://www.jewishgen.org>.

document the last vestiges of Judaism that have survived among our brothers and sisters who will soon fade into oblivion, with intermarriage and secularization taking their toll. And it is imperative that the government of Israel open its eyes and recognize them as descendants of persecuted Jews.