

RETORNANDO -- COMING BACK

A Description and Historical Perspective of the
Crypto-Jewish Community of Rio Grande do Norte, Brazil.

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DIGEST

This thesis is a study about the history and Jewish vestigial practices of some Marrano communities of Rio Grande do Norte in Brazil. It begins with a brief historical analysis of the Marrano phenomenon in the Iberian Peninsula. The first chapter also deals with the transplant of the New Christians to the New World, particularly to the interior of Rio Grande do Norte. The second chapter is a description of my findings during a field trip to the remote areas of Rio Grande do Norte that are inhabited by the descendants of the New Christians. It describes the places as well as a large array of vestigial Jewish practices that have been kept for more than four hundred years. The third chapter deals with the unique Jewish community of Natal, the capital of Rio Grande do Norte. It starts with a brief history of the small Jewish settlement in that city and moves on to describe the first Marrano community that returned to Judaism. That last chapter deals with the Marranos' motivations and the problems they have encountered.

The principal conclusion of this work is that the main reason for the perpetuation of the Marrano practices among certain populations in Rio Grande do Norte is not only the state of isolation they have been living in which cut them off from other communities, but the virtually absence of any significant changes in the culture and society at large requiring radical readjustment. In spite of that, there is the need to answer in some way the desire of those descendants of Marranos who want to return to Judaism.

This work has been arranged in a way that leads to a climax, since I wanted to convey the idea of a cycle. It starts with Jews being forced to become Christians and ends with Christians choosing to be Jewish.

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"Acharon, acharon chaviv" says the Hebrew saying. Dr. Ellis Rivkin, the master par excellence, has been not only an advisor but above all an example to be emulated. As a messenger of the truth, his ideas have enlarged my mental horizons and changed my life. I pray that I may become, like him, a beacon of light and truth to those around me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	page
DIGEST	01
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	03
TABLE OF CONTENTS	07
DEFINITION OF "MARRANOS"	08
INTRODUCTION	10
SECTION I. HISTORICAL ORIGINS	17
SECTION II. THE SECRET JEWS IN THE INTERIOR	34
SECTION III. THE OVERT "HIDDEN" JEWS OF NATAL	65
CONCLUSION	87
BIBLIOGRAPHY	90

WHO WERE THE MARRANOS?

According to Ellis Rivkin, the Marranos in Spain "were either Jews who had converted to Christianity or the descendants of these converts. They had first appeared in Spain when large numbers of Jews converted to Christianity following the pogroms of 1391 and the restrictive economic legislation of 1412-15. Until 1449, the "Conversos" or New Christians were deemed to be faithful Christians; they freely intermarried with the nobility, occupied high and respected positions in the state, found their way to the upper reaches of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. During those years they were rarely, if ever, called by the opprobrious epithet "Marrano" (pig). After 1449, however, their decline was so precipitous that by 1480 the Inquisition was brought in to regularize and legalize their exclusion from positions of leadership and to confiscate their property. The justification for these steps was the charge that, though professing Christians, the Conversos were Crypto-Jews. The term "Marrano" was meant to convey this infidelity. So long as the New Christians had enjoyed a respected status, they were not identified with the Jews; indeed, they hated the Jews, and the Jews

hated them. Once the inquisition branded them as secret Jews, however, they became identifiable with Jews and Judaism, even when the charges may have been unfounded. The Marranos were forced into this identification, not by choice, but by Inquisitional fiat. A Converso might be loyal to Christianity, but as far as the Christian world was concerned, he was a secret Jew."¹

¹Rivkin, Ellis. The shaping of Jewish History: A Radical New Interpretation. pp. 141-2.

INTRODUCTION

New Christians from Portugal were the first individuals of Jewish origin to settle in Brazil, after the country was discovered by Portugal in 1500 and became its colony. During the Dutch occupation (1630 - 1654) of part the country (the present northeastern state of Pernambuco), a small community of Sephardic Jews existed in Recife². After The Dutch were expelled, some of these Jews fled Brazil, but many remained as New Christians. From the time when the Portuguese introduced the Inquisition in Brazil^{3,4} until after independence the Jewish presence in Brazil was almost inexistant.

The current Brazilian Jewish Community is overwhelmingly of Eastern European origin. Immigration to Brazil began after its independence in 1822 in small

²Wolff, Egon e Frida. Quantos Judeus Estiveram no Brasil Holandês. pg. 94.

³Bethencourt, Francisco. "Cronologia da Inquisição". Article in A Inquisição em Portugal, Biblioteca Nacional, Lisboa, 1987, pp. 29.

⁴The first visitation of the General Inquisitor was in 1591

numbers, but it was only after the First World War that the big waves of European Jews started arriving. In most States, Ashkenazim comprise 75% or more, with the exception of the two States located in the Amazon Forest, Amazonas and Pará, where the current population of 330 families descend from Sepharadic Moroccan Jews, who settled there during the rubber cycle, over a hundred years ago⁵.

In Brazil there are around 175,000 Jews, concentrated in few metropolitan areas. The majority (about 85,000) are located in São Paulo, the most developed state in Brazil. About 65,000 reside in the state of Rio de Janeiro, primarily in the capital. The other 25,000 live in the states of Rio Grande do Sul, Paraná, Santa Catarina, Minas Gerais, Distrito Federal, Bahia, Pernambuco, Pará and Amazonas⁶. Almost all of the Brazilian Jews are secular or non-practicing; among the religious ones, the majority identify themselves as Orthodox. There are only 6 so called Liberal congregations (2 in São Paulo, 2 in Rio de Janeiro, 1 in

⁵in Comunidades Judias en Latino America, pg. 67-68.

⁶in Jewish Travel Guide pp. 189-192.

Rio Grande do Sul, and 1 in Minas Gerais), and among these only one is Reform.

The northeastern state of Rio Grande do Norte has never been a major center of Jewish life in Brazil. In 1900 there were only five known Jews living there. It had its peak in the years between the 1940's and 1960's, however never reaching more than 140 individuals⁷. Today only four Jewish families are left in Natal, the state's capital.

Currently this community is experiencing a very interesting phenomenon. A group of approximately 12 Marrano families has joined them informally and expressed their desire to return to Jewish mainstream life. This phenomena only finds paralel in modern times in the Portuguese community of Belmonte in Portugal⁸. They claim to be members of very large Marrano communities in the interior areas of the state. This has created a schism in the small Natal community, since not everyone accepts them as Jews. Because of that, these

⁷Wollf, Egon e Frida. Natal, uma comunidade singular pp. 25-27.

⁸See Paulo, Amilcar in Os Judeus Secretos em Portugal Editorial Labirinto, Oporto, 1985

Marranos have tried to reach other Jewish communities in the South, with the hope of receiving some form of official recognition. Since the orthodox community rejects them, due to their lack of halachic proof of Jewish identity, they have been almost totally ignored in Brazil, with the exception (one Liberal congregation in São Paulo and a few individuals in the Brazilian Jewish Federation.

The Natal phenomenon is not an isolated one in Brazil. After centuries of indifference, the Marrano community in Brazil has been showing lately a great interest in their Jewish origins. Several individuals have already converted to Judaism and even an association called SHEMA (Sociedade Hebráica para o Estudo do Marranismo - Hebrew Society for the Study of Marranismo) was created in São Paulo by Hélio Daniel Cordeiro, a Marrano who returned to Judaism by way of conversion⁹. Natal remains, however, the only place where the Marranos have joined into an organization and constituted a sⁿagogue.

⁹Article in "O Hebreu" number 234 March/April 1991 p. 10.

A Marrano scholar¹⁰ claims that up to 10% of Brazil's population of 150,000,000 people could be of Jewish ancestry. Since this group is 100 times bigger than the current Jewish community, it is understandable that the Brazilian Jews should be fearful of what the future holds.

The objective of my research was to evaluate whether the claim of the Natal Marranos' to Jewish origins has any historical truth, and if they do, to find out how the Marrano traditions and behaviors were transplanted from Portugal into the Brazilian northeast and kept alive through generations.

The Marranos who are seeking to understand and rediscover their roots and are trying to return to Judaism are perceived by the Jewish community as outsiders wanting to break into a group where they do not belong. Better knowledge and understanding of the claims to Jewish identity of the Rio Grande do Norte Marranos would therefore be helpful to the Brazilian Jewish community and make for a dialogue with all

¹⁰ Helio Daniel Cordeiro in "Jews rewriting Brazil's history in own image" in Los Angeles Times date unknown (1993?)

Marranos which might eventuate in a solution that would be acceptable for all parts concerned.

This work is divided in three major sections. In the first chapter I will attempt to provide a historical background that accounts for the presence of descendants of Portuguese New Christians in the Interior areas of Rio Grande do Norte. In the Second section I will provide a description of Marrano communities living in remote areas of Rio Grande do Norte. In that section I shall describe their way of life and traditions, especially those that point to their Crypto Jewish origins. In the Third and final section, I shall describe the Marrano community of Natal, their traditions, way of life, and mainly their desire to return to Judaism. I shall discuss their relationship with the small local Jewish community and with the Brazilian Jewish community as a whole.

Through this work I shall demonstrate that the Natal Marranos' claim to a Jewish origin is a feasible one. Since the Natal Marranos' came, in their majority, from the interior areas of the state I saw the need for researching these communities "in loco", as a way of

getting in contact with individuals who live in the same way their ancestors did three hundred years ago. I stayed in the interior areas of Rio Grande do Norte, living among individuals of New Christian origin for a period of two weeks. I conducted and videotaped several interviews with these individuals. I also interviewed other inhabitants of the area as a way of contrasting the Marranos practices with those of the general population. I also visited cemeteries as part of my research efforts. By describing Crypto Jewish practices that still subsist in the interior areas of Rio Grande do Norte, I will attempt to prove that not only do these individuals descend from the early New Christian settlers, but that they feel attached in some way attached to their ancestrals roots.

SECTION I

HISTORICAL ORIGINS

Jews in the Iberian Peninsula

In the beginning of the Christian Era, Jews already lived in the Iberian Peninsula. Before the triumph of Christianity, Jews lived peacefully, side by side with their Christian neighbors. As soon as Christianity became the predominant religion, Jews started to suffer all kinds of restrictions and persecutions, and were victims of expulsion and slaughtering.

In 414 in the city of Mahon, in the isle of Minorca, the Jews were forcibly converted to Christianity. By contrast, during the five centuries of Moslem rule the Jewish community experienced growth and prosperity beyond anything they had known before. That was the Golden Age of Spain in which Jewish culture flourished.

During the Christian reconquest of the peninsula the Jewish community suffered greatly. By the end of

the 14th century only the small kingdom of Granada at the southern tip of Spain was left under Muslim rule. During the Black Plague epidemic Jews were transformed into scapegoats by the Christian masses. In 1391 the Massacre of Seville occurred. This was followed by massacres in several other cities. As a consequence, thousands of Spanish Jews converted forcefully to Christianity¹¹.

In 1480 the Inquisition was introduced in Spain. The Marranos were accused of keeping Judaism despite their conversion to Christianity. That was called "*judaizar*", to "practice Judaism". The expressed goal of the Inquisition in Spain was to stop this practice.

The Inquisitorial forces, after attacking the Marranos, extended its action to the Spanish Jews as well. They were persecuted, tortured and massacred in several Spanish cities. The final oppression inflicted upon Spanish Jewry was expulsion.

The "Catholic Sovereigns", Fernando and Isabella, issued a proclamation on March 31, 1492, that, within four months, the Spanish Jews were to leave every

¹¹ **Izecksohn**, Isaac. Os Marranos Brasileiros. pp. 13-30.

portion of Castile, Aragon, Sicily and Sardinia under pain of death. If found in Spanish ground after that time a Jew would suffer death¹². The main reason claimed for the expulsion was that the backsliding of the New Christians into "Jewish unbelief", caused by their intercourse with the Jews. The proclamation stated that no Christian, on pain of confiscation of his possessions, should after the expiration of a certain term, give succor or shelter to Jews¹³.

About 300,000 Spanish Jews left Spain bound to any place that would receive them: Africa, Italy, Turkey, etc. However, the majority, approximately 200,000 souls made their way to Portugal, joining the already large Portuguese Jewish community living there^{14, 15}.

¹²Cohen, Martin A.. "The Sephardic Phenomenon; A Reappraisal" p.1.

¹³Graetz, Heinrich. History of the Jews, Vol. IV pp. 347-352.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 366.

¹⁵This is also confirmed by Lindo, E. H. The History of The Jews of Spain and Portugal. p. 321.

Bernaldez¹⁶ stated that "upwards of 3,000 souls went from Benevente to Braganza; 30,000 from Zamora to Miranda; 35,000 from Ciudad Rodrigo to Villar; 15,000 from Mirandade Alcantara to Marbao; 10,000 from Badajoz to Yelves. Those from Merida also went to Portugal, so that upwards of 100,000 entered that kingdom..."

The emergence of New Christians in Portugal

In Portugal at the end of the XV century the Jews comprised a quarter of the Portuguese population. With the arrival of the expelled Spanish Jews, the percentage of Jews increased to one third. Portugal had a great economical interest in bringing in these Jews. Very high taxes were required to enter the country, which contributed badly needed capital to the booming Atlantic trade. Besides that, among the Jews there were many very skilled cartographers, astronomers and sailors, who

¹⁶Bernaldez, MS. Chron. de los Reyes Cathol. quoted in Lindo, E. H. The History of The Jews of Spain and Portugal. p.287.

provided qualified labor for the new enterprise of exploration^{17, 18}.

In December of 1496 the Portuguese king Don Manuel I gave the Jews 10 months to either convert to Christianity or leave the country. Any Jew left after the deadline would be executed. The king made any exit very difficult, restricting the number of ships available for the trip. As a consequence, most Jews were forcefully converted to Christianity. By the end of 1497 there were officially no Jews left in the kingdom of Portugal.

¹⁷Abraham Zacuto created the *Almanach Perpetuum* to help the sailors in using the sextant. José Vizinho established Guine's latitude. In **Saraiva**, Antonio José. Inquisição e Cristãos Novos, p. 35.

¹⁸ See also O Papel dos Judeus nos Grandes Descobrimentos. in "América Americas". São Paulo: Editora Marco Zero - Revista Brasileira de Historia, 1991

New Christians presence in Brazil

The Neo-Christians were very active in the colonization of the new world, due to their entrepreneurial outreach¹⁹. They not only worked for the state, but financed private enterprises. Among the first settlers in Brazil were many Neo-Christians. Worthy of mention is Fernando de Noronha, who was given by the king one of the "Capitanias Hereditárias", large tracts of land to be developed and settled. These Capitanias were given only to people very close to the king. The trustee had all authority over the land and its population, and these rights were hereditary. He could only lose them if the land was not settled and developed.

The political atmosphere in Brazil was much more conducive to the well-being of the Neo-Christians than that in Portugal. Not only were there great economic opportunities²⁰, but also the danger of being accused of

¹⁹**Lipiner**, Elias. Os Judaizantes nas Capitanias de Cima. pp. 15-18.

²⁰Those economical opportunities attracted as much as 50,000 Iberians to the New World colonies, according **Cohen**, Martin A.. in "The Sephardic Phenomenon; A Reappraisal". p.69.

practicing Judaism was much smaller, since the colony was distant and its population too small and too valuable. This led to a great immigration, that in 1567 Portugal prohibited settlement of Neo-Christians without prior authorization. Starting in 1540, Portugal used Brazil as a place to exile Portuguese Neo-Christians accused of practicing Judaism, the so called Marranos²¹.

Lindo describes the situation the New Christians encountered in Brazil as follows: "The New Christians found in Brazil kind relations and old friends; others known as men of probity and intelligence, obtained advances from merchants of other countries with whom they had formerly been in correspondence. By the assistance of some enterprising men, they began to cultivate sugar cane, which in 1531 they had procured from Madeira."²²

All major cities founded in Brazil (Olinda, Recife, Salvador, São Vicente, Rio de Janeiro) had a very significant percentage of Neo-Christians in the population. The New-Christians were very wealthy and

²¹Lindo, E. H. The History of The Jews of Spain and Portugal. p. 374.

²²Ibid.

influential²³, a fact that attracted the attention of the ecclesiastical authorities. In 1591 the first inquisitor was sent to Brazil to deal with the perceived growing problem of "hidden Jewish practice". It's not a coincidence that the Inquisition always followed economic prosperity and tended to concentrate only in major cities, where there were a large number of potential victims with a large amount of money and property.

During the XVII century the Inquisitors' visitations were more common and frequent in the upper part of the colony, namely in the Northeastern provinces of Bahia and Pernanbuco. Most of the people as well as the wealth and economic activity, namely the production of sugar, were taking place there²⁴. In the Southern part, the Santo Oficio's activity would have found the indians an obstacle²⁵. There even existed cases of New

²³An example of this is that by 1600 many of the 120 *engenhos* (sugar plantation and mill) in Brazil were owned and run by New Christians. According to **Metz**, Allan in "'Those of the Hebrew Nation...'" *The Sephardic Experience in Colonial Latin America*". p. 211.

²⁴**Novinsky**, Anita. A Inquisição. p.15.

²⁵**Lipiner**, Elias. Os Judaizantes nas Capitãncias de Cima. p.26.

Christians who fled the Northern part of the country for the less oppressive atmosphere of the South²⁶.

Even though the Inquisition began in the South, it never had the strength and fervor that it displayed in the Northeast. The Inquisitorial activities in the South, that were more frequent around the XVIII century²⁷, were concentrated in the big economic centers of Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais²⁸. Thus, the South became a place of intense immigration and shelter for those of Jewish origin.

Since the Inquisitorial activity was concentrated in the most settled and wealthy areas, there was little preoccupation with what is now the state of Rio Grande do Norte. Indeed there were only four cases of denunciations to the Santo Ofício of the Inquisition and they were not related to Crypto-Jewish practices²⁹.

²⁶ Ibid. pp. 26-28.

²⁷ **Novinsky**, Anita. A Inquisição. p.15.

²⁸ **Bromberg**, Rachel Mizrahi. A Inquisição no Brasil: Um Capitão-Mor Judaizante. pp.12-13.

²⁹ **Mott**, Luiz. "A Inquisição no Rio Grande do Norte."

The Dutch colony in Northern Brazil

Between 1630 and 1654 the Dutch occupied a small part of Northeastern Brazil, where the current state of Pernambuco is located. Some Sepharadic Jews came with the Dutch to settle in the capital city of Recife. They were joined by Portuguese Neo-Christians who were willing to return to open practice of their Jewish tradition. It was an important group in the community, having their own synagogues³⁰ and the first rabbi in the Americas. Their numbers, however, were small³¹. There is some controversy about the actual size of the Jewish community of Recife, with some claims that it reached thousands, but the historical records do not support these claims³². After the Dutch were expelled the Jews

³⁰There were two congregations, Zur Israel in the island city of Recife, and Maguen Abraham on the mainland at Mauricia, according to **Stern**, Malcolm H. "Portuguese Sephardim in the Americas". p. 141.

³¹**Mello**, José Antônio Gonsalves de. Tempo dos Flamengos; Influência da Ocupação Holandesa na Vida e na Cultura do Norte do Brasil. pp. 247-255.

³²**Wolff**, Egon and Frieda. Quantos Judeus Estiveram no Brasil Holandês. pp. 93-94.

left³³, some returning to Amsterdam and others spreading in the Caribbean and through the jungles of Brazil.

The settlement of Rio Grande do Norte

The area currently called Seridó was settled in the early 1720's³⁴. Before that time that area was inhabited by the Cariri and Tapuia Indians, who were conquered in 1697. The area was suited for cattle raising which became the major economic activity³⁵, and remains so until today. Its dry climate and frequent draughts make the region unsuitable for agricultural activity. The natural conditions of the region are a cause of its poor economic status. Today it is still one of the poorest and least developed areas in Brazil.

Genealogical records show that the population originally come from the North of Portugal (Minho, Douro,

³³ Lindo, E. H. The History of The Jews of Spain and Portugal. p. 346.

³⁴ Medeiros Filho, Olavo de. Velhas Famílias do Seridó. p.3.

³⁵ Medeiros Filho, Olavo de. Velhos Inventários do Seridó. pp. 9-11.

Estremadura and Trás-os-Montes) and the Açorean Islands³⁶.

It is relevant to point out that the Serido was settled exactly around the time of the most intense Inquisitorial activities in the Brazilian Northeastern. The Inquisitorial persecution or the fear of being persecuted by the Inquisition might have been one of the leading reasons for those individuals of New Christian origin to colonize that arid and Indian infested part of the country. The serido was such a remote area and so difficult to reach that it was never visited by Inquisitorial authorities.

There is no question that another major motivation of the New Christian entrepreneurs was the establishment of cattle ranches. Cattle raising is even now one of the main staples of the local economy.

**Especculation about the origins of the Marrano
Communities of Rio Grande do Norte**

³⁶Medeiros Filho, Olavo de. Velhas Famílias do Seridó. p. 4.

The interesting aspect about Rio Grande do Norte Marrano communities is that they kept their traditions throughout all these years. Unlike other possible Marrano descendants in the South and Southeastern areas of the country, such as the big urban centers in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, in Rio Grande do Norte the Marrano way of life was kept and transmitted through the centuries.

Given the relevance of this question, comes the need to discuss how and why this preservation happened. I will attempt to make speculations about the historical events that led to this phenomena. I shall try to offer the possible scenario that might have developed and that resulted into the current reality.

The whole history of the New Christians is involved in a cloud of mystery and controversy. In Spain the Jews ascended to prominence in the 12th and 13th centuries, they were later cast down on the 14th century; they were victims of the pogroms of 1391, after which many Jews converted to Christianity; they also suffer the restrictive legislation of 1412-15, that degraded and impoverished them; in 1449 the New

Christians loyalty started to be questioned, which led to the establishment of the Inquisition in 1480; and in 1492 they were finally expelled³⁷ .

In Portugal the Jews, both the Portuguese ones and the refugee from Spain, were compelled to convert in 1497; the New Christians suffered restrictive legislation in 1499, that later were alleviated by the royal decree of 1507; in the 1507 decree, restrictions for New Christians were lifted, so they were allowed to leave Portugal, to trade. That decree also made common law applicable to New Christians and gave them twenty years of protection against any inquiry about their religious practices. Nonetheless, in 1536 the Inquisition was introduced in Portugal³⁸ .

In spite of the wealth of historical data about the New Christians saga, there is tremendous controversy among the scholars about how the events really unfolded. The development of theory about the origins of the Rio Grande do Norte New Christian descendants is even more difficult and mysterious because the available historical data about the period between the XVIII

³⁷ Graetz, Heinrich. History of the Jews. vol. IV

³⁸ idem

century and the beginning of the XX century is very small, virtually non existent.

The only hard facts available are that there is currently in certain areas of the Brazilian Northeast populations that keep a large array of practices that appear to be vestigial from traditional Jewish practices. Members of these populations affirm that they descend from Portuguese Marranos, New Christians, that kept their Jewish practices secretly, who settled the area in the beginning of the XVIII century. The Marranos' belief that they might descend from Dutch Jews, a theory I discussed previously, is proven not to be viable.

There is still another intriguing aspect about the Rio Grande do Norte Marranos claim to Jewish ancestry: the lack of any remnant of the usage of Hebrew with the exception of the word "chaver". Even though there are many practices that appear to be vestiges of Judaism, as I shall describe in the next section, the usage of Hebrew seems to have been completely forgotten. I was unable to detect any sign of the usage of Hebrew with the exception of the word "chaver", which is used solely

as a code word to define another individual of Marrano origin. That word is not universally used by Marranos either. This fact is rather curious, since one would expect that language, exactly like other signs and practices of Judaism would have been preserved in a vestigial way.

The Marranos who settled the interior areas of Rio Grande do Norte come mainly from the Northern Portuguese provinces of D'ouro and Minho. There are two possible ways they might have arrived there. Either they came from Portugal to the Brazilian coast during the XVI century and later moved inland or they might have come directly from Portugal to the interior of Rio Grande do Norte during the beginning of the XVIII century. In either case they might have encountered Inquisitorial forces prior to their arrival in the interior of Rio Grande do Norte, but they did not suffer any subsequent Inquisitorial persecution afterwards since the Inquisition never was active in that part of Brazil.

To what then can be attributed the preservation of this "Marrano identity" for almost five hundred years? I believe that it was an attachment to their ancestral

ways and to the fact that they never were exposed to other cultural influences because their migration to Rio Grande do Norte was not followed by other waves of immigration. Unlike other descendants of Portuguese Marranos in the South who were exposed to other waves of immigration, such as the Italians and the Germans in Southern Brazil, they were frozen in the XVII century. So too the habits, traditions and way of life brought from Portugal by the ancestors are still preserved.

Another aspect that might have led to the perpetuation of the "Marrano Identity" by these New Christian descendants might have been their interaction with their Gentile neighbors who, by according them a pariah status, never allowed them to forget their origins. Until today, the Gentile neighbors keep them segregated and look down on them. The Gentile neighbors probably are also replicating patterns inherited from Inquisitorial times when *Limpieza*, purity of blood, required absolute separation.

SECTION II

THE SECRET JEWS IN THE INTERIOR AREAS OF RIO GRANDE DO NORTE

Introduction

The map of Rio Grande do Norte resembles the drawing of an elephant. The area known as Chapada do Apodi is the "elephant's trunk," and the Sertão do Seridó the "elephant's foot." I spend two weeks visiting villages in these two parts of the state, and interviewed several individuals about their traditions and way of life. Not everyone was willing to talk to a stranger about their ancestry or their way of life. Many of the members of the new generation are neither aware nor interested in the "ways of the old."

In different places I met different practices and traditions. They were never exclusive to a single place; some aspects were observed in some localities but not in others. The village of the Venhaver is the place in which I came across most practices that might have a

Crypto-Jewish origin. Even though my research took me to other villages, I shall dwell mainly upon the Venhaver.

São Miguel and the Village of Venhaver

The village of the Venhaver is a sub-district of the town of São Miguel. The area was founded by Jose Antônio de Carvalho in the 29 of September 1750, a day consecrated to São Miguel according to the Catholic Church.

The town is localized in the mountain area known as Chapada do Apodi, in the southwest part of the State 369 kilometers or 230 miles (in a straight line) away from the Capital. Even though it is quite close to Natal, the Chapada do Apodi area is very primitive. It lacks running water and a sewer system, and has only the most basic health and education services. The roads are very primitive as well, the main roads are two lane roads maintained by the state government. However, most roads are non-paved dirt paths, that are used by cars, bicycles, horses and cattle alike.

São Miguel's area is 408 square kilometers, which makes it one of the smallest towns in Rio Grande do Norte. The climate is dry and quite pleasant in Summer and cold in Winter. The temperature oscillates between 68° and 86° degrees Fahrenheit.

Venhaver is a small village up in the mountains, in an area that is very difficult to access, but not very far from the urban area of São Miguel. To get to the Venhaver one has to travel 18 miles on a one way dirt road that is also used by cattle. The ride from São Miguel to Venhaver takes at least an hour and a quarter and can only be done by horse, truck or a very powerful car as the road conditions are very primitive. It is full of curves, bumps, and sometimes the road simply does not exist so one has to go through vegetation or into a small river. The ride can only be done in the dry season, which is most of the year, since during rain the road can not be traveled.

The name "Venhaver" is attributed to two different origins. The first is a love story between a young couple. They belonged to rival families of the town of São Miguel. Since they loved one each other very much

but were forbidden to see one another, they used to meet secretly in the mountains in a place called "Morro das Ameixas," that is the present location of the Venhaver village. Since people did not believe him, he said (in Portuguese) "Se não acredita, então venha ver! -- If you do not believe me, so come to see (by yourselves)!" The other origin for the name Venhaver may not be as romantic but is much more interesting. It is known that Secret Jews use key words or expressions to identify one each other, like calling themselves "members of the nation" or calling one another "Chaver" - friend, in Hebrew. A legend says that "Venhaver" is a corrupt Portuguese form of "Vem Chaver -- Come, Chaver." That would signify that the Secret Jews of that area, having found a safe haven, were inviting others to join them. The inhabitants of the village are even today known by the name of their village, Venhaver.

The village has one main street that is the continuation of the dirt road that leads to São Miguel. The whole "downtown" area is the top of one of the mountains. As one goes into the village, a small cemetery is located on the right side. This is a new

cemetery that might be only ten or twenty years old. Before that, the Venhaver people used to take their deceased to be buried in São Miguel. Continuing on the road, around three hundred yards from the cemetery is the police station, then the church, public school, and the only telephone in the village. There are also one or two small stores on the main road. Along the main road runs an energy cable, but only a few of the houses currently have electricity. There is no public illumination nor running water. The sewers run on the street. Everywhere one looks there are dogs and chicken feeding on the garbage piles, as well as naked children walking around. The only difference between this village, and the other villages inhabited by secret Jews, and the normal Brazilian village is that there are no swine present. There are four small alleys that run perpendicularly to the main road and one other path that runs parallel to it.

Currently almost 1400 people live in the village. Approximately fifty per cent of them are descendants of the original settlers. They are a very peculiar group

with extremely interesting habits and practice that I shall detail later.

Until the 1950's, these individuals were the only inhabitants of the Venhaver, but with the coming of progress, many things changed there. Many of the Venhaver people moved to bigger cities and several new people moved into the village. Intermarriage that was a taboo only a few generations ago, brought in its train the formation of several families who no longer observe the traditional practices.

However, this group still preserves its unique identity. They consider themselves as a separate unit from the rest of the population who do not share their ancestry, practices, traditions, and beliefs. They are also considered as separate and distinct by the rest of the population, who refer to them as "*Os Judeus* --the Jews" or as "*Os descendants dos Judeus* -- the descendants of the Jews." Sometimes they are also called "*Os holandeses* -- the Dutch." They call themselves "*Judeus* or *Gente da Nação*," that means "Jews or People of the Nation."

The Venhaver People

The Venhaver is a very close knit community. They live relatively isolated, with little contact with outsiders. They are composed of quite tall people given the area norm, and are very different from the typical Brazilian Northeastern. They are all of Caucasoid race, unlike their neighbors who are mainly *mestiços* -- a mixture of Black and White people. Women are thin with little bust and narrow hips, while men are stronger than average. They all show traces of Caucasoid: very white skin, most of them have blue eyes, aquiline nose, thin lips, straight hair, and some of them are blond. Their physiognomic features might be the reason that the majority of their neighbors believe that they are descendants of Dutch Gentiles or of Dutch Jews that came to Brazil in the 17th Century. However, as I shall attempt to prove in the next chapter, this belief does not hold water. The Venhaver mainly live isolated, going to São Miguel only for shopping on the

market days. They mainly subsist on agriculture, but also raise some cattle.

They marry mostly among themselves, and in the past if someone would marry outside the group he/she would be expelled. They take great pride in resolving their differences among themselves according to their own laws. With the exception of land documents, marriages and baptisms, they do not accept foreign interference in their business.

The Venhaver have a deep religious commitment. They are very superstitious as well. I realized that many of the Crypto-Jewish practices they observe are observed out of respect to the ancestral tradition or out of some kind of superstitious belief. Even though their practices and traditions may have a Jewish content, they are always justified by Christian rationalizations. Their Jewish identity is quite vestigial. Nonetheless they perceived themselves as being a separate group. They carry the tradition of being the descendants of the "*Judeus* -- Jews," and they perceive the noun "*Judeu*" as solely theirs. Thus, they

could not accept that I was a Jew, for I do not belong to the group nor descend from their ancestors.

The Venhaver normally name their children using Portuguese biblical names from both the Old and the New Testaments. They use for boys' names such as Arão, Abel, Abraão, Ananias, Elias, Eliseu, Israel, Jacob, João, José, Pedro, Samuel, Simão, Zacarias, etc. Their girl names are Ana, Maria, Raquel, Ruth, Ester, etc. All these names used to be more common in the past generations and currently are falling in disuse by the new generation. Their family names are mainly inspired in Nature like: Carvalho, Moreira, Oliveira, Pinheiro, etc. These family names are names associated with Marranos in that area. They also use first names as family names. The Jacob family is a good example. The family of Cosme Jacob is the wealthiest family in the Venhaver. There is in São Miguel a small Alley called "Beco do Jacob -- Jacob's alley," but I was unable to verify the origin of the alley's name.

Secret Jewish Behaviors

Among the Venhaver people one can observe a huge array of behavior and practices that are clearly different from those of their neighbors and that would suggest a Crypto-Jewish origin. They are very reticent to talk about their behavior and religious practices. When I first got to the village they refused to talk to me or claimed not to know what I was talking about. Later, however, when they all became aware of the "man who came from abroad to show us in his television" as they called me, they agree to let me into their homes. However, most of them refused to be taped, and some would only agree to let me into their houses provided that I did not bring in my portable camera. In spite of all these difficulties, I was able to collect a tremendous array of customs, practices and behaviors. For the sake of clarity, I have divided them into four categories: (1)Religious beliefs and practices; (2)eating habits; (3)funeral rituals; and (4)daily life practices.

The Religious beliefs and practices of the Venhaver

Even though the Venhaver call themselves "*Judeus, Descendentes dos Judeus, and Gente da Nação*", ("Jews, Descendants of the Jews, and People of the Nation,") they are practicing Catholics. There are, however, some differences between their behavior and those of the people around them.

The Venhaver people refuse to kneel in Church. They are willing to do everything else the other Catholics do, except for kneeling. I asked the priest of São Miguel, who also serves occasionally at the Church in the Venhaver Village, how he felt about these people who have such different customs and refuse to kneel in church. The priest, who is not a very enlightened man, and apparently is not aware of the Marrano origin of some of his parishioners, told me that for him the main thing is that they believe in Jesus and this will grant them eternal salvation.

Upon entering the houses of the Venhaver, one almost invariably sees images of the Catholic Saints. They are very religious people and are very devoted to

these saints. On the other hand, very few of them have crosses, and the few that exist are crosses quite different from those used by their neighbors. The Venhaver cross has the vertical axes inclined, so it is almost diagonal to the horizontal axes. This cross is painted on the walls in some houses and it is used sometimes in the cemetery as well.

Every Friday night, before sundown, the Venhaver woman lights two candles. The candles are lit somewhere inside the house, but are not put on public display. This tradition, like several others of the Venhaver people, is rationalized to give it a Christian meaning. They say they are lighting the candles for the "good spirits." That would be a way of having the "good spirits" always take care of the house.

The Venhaver people prefer reciting the Psalms above all other prayers, but they also make use of the regular prayers of the Church. In their private devotions, however, they only use Psalms and prayers handed down from the ancestors. The issue of prayer seems to be a very sensitive one, because they all refused to tell me the content of their prayers. The

only prayer they agreed to share with me, and only after a great deal of begging, was the prayer for the new moon.

The new moon prayer has very little to do with the traditional Jewish *Kiddush Levanna* except that it is done exactly at the period of the new moon and it has to be done under the open sky. Otherwise there is very little in common. The Venhaver prayer for the New Moon is a rather superstitious plea to the moon, as though it had the power of granting one's wishes. Their prayer says " *Lua nova, lua cheia, lua de quarto crescente; quando fores que vieres trazei-me este presente -- New moon, full moon, half moon, when you go and came back, do bring me back this gift.*" The "gift" is understood as being the fulfillment of a wish. Although these prayers do not resemble the *Kiddush Levanna*, it has the potential of being the vestige of the traditional Jewish practice, since such prayer is absolutely unknown among the Gentiles in the area.

I was told by one member of the community that they have an alternate house of worship besides the local

church. The place, which he called "snoga" is supposed to be a pilgrimage place up in the mountains.

The word "snoga" sounds like a corrupt form of the Portuguese word "sinagoga," that means Synagogue. I noticed that there is a great amount of mystery involving the "snoga" since the same man who told me about the existence of that secret prayer hall refused to tell me about its location. Other members of the community were hesitant to speak about it, many refused to talk about it at all, and some even said that they knew nothing of its existence.

The only thing I could discover was that it is located in an area that can only be reached by foot, in a very remote area of the mountains that only the Venhaver people know how to reach. The Venhaver go to the "snoga" for private devotions and during certain times throughout the year. There they read Psalms and other prayers (whose content was not disclosed to me) in vigils that last all day and all night. Normally these pilgrimages last one full day, but sometimes they can last longer. These pilgrimages used to be much more popular in the past than they are nowadays. Those young

people who agreed to speak with me about the "snoga" practices expressed only apathy concerning such practices.

The Venhaver perform another practice that only exists in their area: the laying on of hands for a blessing. When a parent blesses a child, they lay their hands on the child's head or shoulders and pronounce the blessing. These habits resembles closely the same Jewish practice.

Eating Habits

The Venhaver differentiate themselves sharply from their neighbors by their eating habits. They keep a rudimentary form of *Kashrut* as they abstain from eating certain foods and do not mix dairy and meat.

The Venhaver never eat at other people's homes nor eat food that contains meat that was prepared by a non-Venhaver.

They slaughter their chickens by cutting the throat with a very sharp knife. Immediately afterwards they pour down the blood on the ground and cover it with

earth. Even though I did not have a chance to see a cow being slaughtered, I was told that the same technique is used for bovines as for fowl.

Before cooking any meat, a Venhaver woman will wash it thoroughly, salt it and wash it again. All this is done to be assured that no blood is left in the meat. They justify their refusal to eat meat with blood with the statement that it is "*carregado* -- charged." No one could explain me exactly what "Charged" means, but it has a spiritual meaning. By eating the blood, one, it seems, taints himself.

The same taboo applies for pig meat, meat of hunted animals, and seafood. Although there is no ocean near the Venhaver village, they are aware of a prohibition against eating mollusks and shell fish, and refrain from it when they move from Venhaver to other places. The Venhaver only eat fish that have scales and fins, refusing to eat fish that do not have both characteristics.

The Venhaver do not eat dairy and meat in the same meal. However, they do not have separate dishes nor are they aware of a period of time that has to elapse

between eating both kinds of food, as is the case in traditional Judaism.

A common way of preparing beef among the Venhaver is "*carne seca*" -- dry meat. This is a way of preserving meat that is very common throughout the Brazilian Northeast. It consists of cutting big pieces of meat, salting it, hanging it on ropes, and allowing it to dry in the Sun. That is a very effective way of getting rid of all the blood present in the meat as well as preserving it. According to Câmara Cascudo this practice has a clear Crypto-Jewish origin.

The last noteworthy dietary practice that was related me by the Venhaver is that they do not eat bread during the first week of April. This practice resembles the Jewish practice of not eating leaven during Passover. They are, however, unaware of the motivation for such practice. Some of them told me that bread becomes "charged" at the first week of April. They do not have, however, any rituals to celebrate Passover.

I could not find any kind of celebration related to the Biblical character of Queen Esther among the

Venhaver. This was quite surprising, for among other Crypto-Jewish groups this is quite a common practice.

The funeral rituals

The Venhaver's funerary practices are clearly a sign of a Jewish element in their identity, for they share many common elements with traditional Jewish practices. The practices I could observe are not at all unique to this population, there are several other groups throughout Brazil that practice similar traditions. Here also, exactly like many other ancestral traditions, the old folk practices concerning death are being neglected by new generations.

All the ritual, practices and behaviors I shall relate came to my knowledge through interviews, for no one died in the Venhaver village while I was visiting with them. I took the precaution of interviewing several people about these matters, and double checked all information.

The Venhaver people start making the arrangements for the funeral as soon as clinical death can be established. They abhor the idea of delaying a funeral for visitation, as it is customary among Catholics. As soon as someone dies, the prescribed rituals are followed. The immediate family of the deceased primarily takes care of the funeral arrangements. Sometimes relatives and close friends will help them.

The first step taken after death is washing the corpse and wrapping it with a shroud. This shroud is made of white linen cloth, and it is prepared by the elderly women of the community. Before wrapping the corpse in the shroud, they anoint the deceased with oil and comb its hair. I was told by the eldest lady in the Venhaver group that in her opinion they use a shroud as a remainder of "*Nosso Senhor Jesus Cristo -- Our Lord, Jesus Christ*" who was also buried with a shroud. This is one of the many signs of religious syncretism that has resulted from the Venhaver's acculturation.

Afterwards they move the body to the main room of the house, where they place it with the feet towards the entrance door. The corpse is placed over a table or on

a hammock, for they do not use caskets. A brief visitation takes place, but nobody gets to see the deceased anymore. This is the opposite of the Catholic practice of making open casket visitation. Candles are lit in the room, and they also burn aromatic herbs. Friends and family come to visit the corpse as well as the family. Some ancestral prayers are said by the elders. An old lady related to me that people are not aware any more of the meaning of the words, but only repeat them mechanically. The content of these prayers is unknown to me, but they are passed down orally from generation to generation.

The Venhaver make a processional from the deceased's house to the cemetery. They always go on foot regardless of the distance. In the past, when there was no cemetery in the village, they would walk carrying the corpse to São Miguel, since it was the closest place that had a cemetery. It is important to remember that the two places are twelve miles apart.

During the interment additional prayers and Psalms are said. The family and friends help to bury the deceased by throwing handfuls of dirt inside the grave.

I heard from a non-Venhaver person who lives in São Miguel that the Venhaver people have a practice of burying their dead with a coin in their mouths, as a way of paying for their entrance in heaven. That man called it "*uma das tradições dos Judeus* -- one of the traditions the Jews (he meant the Venhaver) follow." This tradition was not related to me by any of the Venhaver people. I can raise two hypotheses for such a disparity of information: Either the Venhaver people did not trust me enough to tell me about such a tradition; or it may be that it is one of the many myths built around this group.

After the funeral the immediate family of the deceased gathers at home for seven days. None of them leaves the house either for work or for leisure. They sit on the floor and light a candle that will last for seven days as well. After the mourning period is over, life goes back to normal.

The family will ask the priest to hold a mass in honor of the deceased on the seventh and thirtieth day after the death, according to Christian tradition. On the thirtieth day after the death, the family go to the

grave site for a meal. They call this "*fazer as últimas despesas com o falecido* -- to make the last expenses on the account of the deceased." These eating visitations might happen as well during the annual visits the family will make to the grave on the anniversary of death.

In the cemetery in São Miguel one can easily identify the tombs that belong to the Venhaver people for they normally do not have crosses. If they do have a cross, it is slightly different from the regular cross. The Venhaver cross has a long vertical ax and another one diagonal to it. In the past, the Venhaver would build tombs out of stone. This was done by covering the grave with stones, forming a concave pile. More recently they started building a small wall, approximately five inches high, around the grave.

Currently the Venhaver graves can be found in three sites: in the Venhaver village cemetery; in the new (third) cemetery of São Miguel; and in the second cemetery of São Miguel. There was another cemetery in São Miguel, the "old" (first) cemetery, in which many of the ancient Venhaver graves where to be found. A hospital was built on the central location of the

cemetery site. The tombstones were not preserved along with the valuable historical data that may have been inscribed on them.

The Venhaver people have a tradition of leaving stones as markers of their visitation of ancestors' and friends' graves. Sometimes they leave only one stone, sometimes six of them, in the shape of a Star of David. No one was able to explain the origin of such a tradition. The only explanation I heard was that one is supposed to say a prayer at the graves of one's friends and at the graves of one's family. If one does not pray, he is supposed to leave a stone to "pay the obligation" of saying the prayer.

Daily life practices

The Venhaver have a very close knit family and community life. These are clearly prime values for them. They are also known and appreciated among the Gentiles for their family and community ties.

Education for the Venhaver people revolve around the home and the women. Women are the transmitters of traditions, believes, and practices. Elderly women are specially revered, and constantly looked to for information and advice.

Indeed the Venhaver form a matriarchal society, for women have much higher decision making power there than among other groups in the area. However, matriarchy is pretty much a characteristic of Northeastern Brazilian society as well. It happens that among the Venhaver these tendencies are much more pronounced.

In some of the Venhaver houses one finds vestigial remains of the *mezuzah*. A few houses have a small bag filled with earth nailed at the right doorstep. When people walk in and out of the house, they touch or kiss the amulet. This behavior is very similar to the traditional Jewish relationship to the *mezuzah*. This tradition is not limited to the Venhaver, but can be observed in many other Crypto Jewish groups in the area. Another tradition with similar content is the one of affixing a Psalm or a "*Signo de Salomão* -- Solomon's sign" (the Star of David) on the back of the House's

entrance door. This tradition is much more common than the one mentioned earlier. The motivation for both traditions is to "protect" the house from evil spirits, that otherwise might haunt it.

An interesting thing about the Venhaver is that they are adamant about not cutting their sideburns. This seems very similar to the Jewish prohibition of cutting the hair close to the temples that gave origin to the orthodox practice of having earlocks.

Another important aspect of the Venhaver identity is their dietary restrictions, discussed above

Other curious beliefs and people in the areas of Seridoe Chapada do Apodi

Several other beliefs that permeate the culture of the Venhaver community are attributed to Crypto-Jewish origins. They are for the most part misinterpretations of original Jewish ideas. For instance, many of the individuals of New Christian ancestry use a drawing of a cow with big horns for religious decorative purposes.

They call it " *A Toura dos Judeus* -- The Toura of the Jews." The similarity in sound between the words "Toura" and "Torah" may suggest the origin of such phenomena.

I heard from Marcos Antonio Filgueira (author of several books and articles on the Marrano origin of some Northeastern families such as "Cristãos-Novos na Gênese de algumas famílias do Nordeste" and others), a scholar in the Mossoró University, in the Northern part of Rio Grande do Norte, that if someone is moving his upper body forward and backward in cyclical moves, this is called in the Northeastern slang "to pray as a Jew." It is curious, however, that there are almost no Jews living there now. So, it is clear that it must be a very ancient expression of Crypto-Jewish origin.

Professor Jose Nunes Cabral de Carvalho, a Marrano from Natal, who among other things did archeological research in this region wrote about the existence of a Crypto-Jewish cemetery in a city called Apodi. He said that he found tombstones that had Stars of David on them. Even though I searched for such tombs, I was unable to find them. However it is noteworthy to

mention such a fact since it is very unlikely that Professor Carvalho made this up³⁹. Another curiosity related in Professor Carvalho's writings is his claim that the main church in Picui, a city in the State of Paraíba on the border with Rio Grande do Norte, is built upon the remnants of a "snoga." A Crypto-Jewish worship place. Again, I was unable to verify his claims.

A very interesting phenomenon I came across was the Venhaver's "fear of Nazis." I noticed that many people were reluctant to tell me of their relationship with the "Judeus." Many of them refused to be taped or photographed as well. I assumed that secrecy is a natural part of their identity. However, to my great surprise, I was told by my best acquaintance among the Venhaver that people were afraid of me. They knew through the television that outside Brazil there are people known as Nazis. They also knew that these "Nazis" hate Jews, and had even killed Jews in the past. Thus, they were afraid of this man, who came from outside, spoke Portuguese with a different accent, and was asking several questions about the "Judeus." Since

they associate themselves with the noun "*Judeu*," they assumed I was a "Nazi" looking to persecute them.

I shall finish this chapter by telling about two more subjects of interest. One is an individual, the "Jewish" priest of Caicó, and the second are the curious inhabitants of Carnaúba do Dantas.

The "Jewish" priest of Caicó

One of the most peculiar characters I met during my field trip to the interior of Rio Grande do Norte was Antenor Salviano de Araújo, the "Jewish priest" of Caicó.

Antenor is the priest at the Sant'ana cathedral. He is a catholic priest, famous for his admiration for the Jewish people and the State of Israel. He expresses this admiration not only through personal conversations with his friends, but also from the pulpit of the cathedral of Sant'ana.

Priest Araújo claims to descend from a certain Araújo, who was burnt at the stake by the Inquisition

because of his alleged practice of Judaism. Some scholars I met in Natal, the state's capital, say this is not so. They claim that priest Araújo's relative never had dealt with the Inquisition; one of them even told me that it was "another delusion of his." However, the fact is that the priest believes in his Jewish "heritage" and is very proud of it. He also claims that a major part of the white population of Brazil's northeast has New-Christian ancestry. According to him, this can be proved by their physical appearance, and by genealogical research of the families' histories. The priest believes that around seventy per cent of the people in his city (Caicó) are within this category.

The priest is a very eccentric man. He built for himself a Summer home outside city's limits. This house is called "Castelo do Engady," and it is built in the shape of a medieval castle. It has a moat, a draw bridge, and almost everything one would expect to find in a castle, even an armory. The castle is such an exotic thing that it is the city's main tourist attraction. It has also been featured in several shows on television.

In the Engady castle, priest Araújo reveals more than anywhere else his Judaic-Christian syncretism. Consider, for example, the name he gave to the place: Engady. Engady is a Portuguese version of a very famous oasis in Israel, close to the Dead sea: Ein Gedi. At the entrance of the castle, there is a huge and imposing Star of David. Dispersed around the house are Jewishly oriented objects such as a five branch menorah in the chapel; and two pictures in the priest's private chambers. The pictures on the wall are those of Theodore Hertz~~el~~, the founder of modern Zionism, and Golda Meir, ex-prime minister of Israel, with whom the priest had corresponded.

Priest Araújo is clearly a fascinating character, but it is crucial that we not be misled. The priest is not a secret Jew. He is clearly a Christian, as evident from his position as a priest. For some reason or other, he has adapted certain aspects of Judaism to his Christian life. He is proud of his Jewish heritage and he makes this heritage public to anyone willing to hear about it. However one could say that his Christian-

Jewishness means that his Christianity encompasses whatever Judaism may there be.

Carnaúba dos Dantas

The city of Carnaúba dos Dantas has a population of more than six thousand people. Around eighty per cent of them descend from the early settlers of the area. Since the city is located in a very remote area, at least twenty miles away of any other city in any direction, they had had very little contact with the outside world. Add to this the fact that New Christians married only among themselves, the results are amazing. In Carnaúba dos Dantas most of the inhabitants look alike. They have prominent chins and ears, round faces, and flat heads. Most of the inhabitants of the town have one of the three family names of the early settlers: Dantas, Araújo, or Nascimento. Almost sixty per cent of them have the family name Dantas that has its origin in Caetano Dantas Correia, who started a

cattle farm in the beginning of the XVII century. That
cattle farm, called "Carnaúba," gave origin to the town.

SECTION III

THE OVERT "HIDDEN" JEWS OF NATAL

Introduction

I first heard about the Marranos in Natal in the Summer of 1991, through friends I have in the Congregação Israelita Paulista in São Paulo, its largest Liberal Congregation. In the Fall of 1991 I started communicating with them and became more knowledgeable about their problem.

The Jewish community in Natal is now composed of five Jewish families and of twelve Marrano families that orbit around them. The Marranos' attempt to be accepted as Jews has been unsuccessful until that point. The most they have achieved is that the Brazilian chapter of the Zionist organization sent an orthodox rabbi, Elyahu Valt of São Paulo, there in 1990 to check their Jewish identity. After staying there for a very short time, during which he even refused to speak with the Marranos, limiting himself to asking a few questions about them to

a single Jew in town, this rabbi left saying that since he could not prove halachically that they were Jewish (namely that they could trace a Jewish lineage maternally), they were not to be considered as Jews. Since his visit to Natal, Rabbi Valt started furnishing the community with kosher Matzah for Passover.

I noticed that the Marranos were very receptive to any suggestion I might offer, and were extremely happy to have someone that they considered to have some religious authority interested in their plea. Since the experience with the orthodox rabbi the community has been faced with an extreme difficult situation. The Marranos refuse to convert since, from their point of view, they and their families had never ceased being Jewish. Therefore to convert would be tantamount to denying their Jewish identity. What they wanted instead was a ceremony reaffirming their commitment to a return to normative Judaism.

In his letters and in telephone conversations, Eder Barosh Nascimento, one of the Marrano community most active members, told me about himself, his family, and other Marrano families in Natal. I heard stories about

Crypto-Jewish practices and traditions being passed from generation to generation, and how the individuals lost their connection to Judaism, until to the present generation which is now willing to "come back".

After more than a year of contacts and correspondence I finally arranged to make a visit to Natal in the Summer of 1992. That first visit was followed by a second one in the Summer of 1993

Natal and a brief history of it's Jewish community

Natal is a port city on the Atlantic coast of northeastern Brazil and is situated near the mouth of the Potengi River. The capital of the state of Rio Grande do Norte, the city has a population (metropolitan area) of 578,487 (1989 est.). Natal was established as a fortified Portuguese settlement in 1599. During World War II it was the site of a major air base along the United States-North Africa supply route. It's two principal industries are salt refining and cotton textile weaving. Natal has an airport and is connected by rail to Recife in the South. Its ocean beaches and pleasant climate attract many visitors and make it the

main tourist focus in the state. The state university is also located in Natal⁴⁰.

The Palatinik brothers (Jacob, Tobias, Adolfo and José) arrived in Natal in 1912 from Podolia in the Ukraine. They were not the first Jewish settlers in Natal, but they were the ones who really started Jewish community life. The community would not have been the same without them. First it was not merely a single individual who came but four brothers later followed by an uncle, Beinish (Bras) Palatinik. When the four brothers married, the community was increased by their wives, as well as the wives' brothers and sisters. The Palatiniks thus came to be the dominating Jewish family, having earned considerable wealth as merchants from a variety of other enterprises. Part of their wealth they used for the benefit of the local Jewish community⁴¹.

Besides the Palatiniks and their relatives, there were other Jewish families living in Natal in the

⁴⁰Information gathered at Prodigy Services Electronic Encyclopedia, article written by James N. Snaden.

⁴¹Wolff, Egon e Frida. Natal, Uma Comunidade Singular, pp. 31-33.

1920's: the Genesi, the Josúa, the Adonis (all them of Sepharadic origin), the Horowitz, the Mandel, the Lipman, the Volfzon, and others⁴².

According to Luís de Câmara Cascudo, 'the Jewish Community of Natal was founded on January 12, 1919. In 1925 the Centro Israelita do Rio Grande do Norte (Israelite Center of Rio Grande do Norte) was established in order to be used as a Synagogue. The Center was registered on August 18th, 1929⁴³. The first religious services however were not held until 1919, as expressed above, because there was no mynian before that. In 1920 Tobias Palatinik brought a Torah Scroll from Palestine. The Palatinik brothers built a hall in the garden of the house where they lived together, to place there the Torah scroll. It was in that hall that the long-wished for religious services were carried out for the first time⁴⁴.

⁴²Ibid.,pp. 39-40.

⁴³**Cascudo**, Luís da Câmara, História da Cidade do Natal, 1980, pg. 369. Quoted in **Wollf**, Egon e Frida. Natal, Uma Comunidade Singular.

⁴⁴**Wollf**, Egon e Frida. Natal, Uma Comunidade Singular p. 45

Around 1926, Mrs. Cipora Palatinik, Adolfo's wife, created a Kindergarten called "Herzlia". It was housed in the same hall ^h where religious services were held. In 1927, the Kindergarten paraded, represented by 15 students, during the festivities of Brazilian Independence Day.

Also in 1927 Abraham and Sarah Lipman were hired to take care of Jewish Education. She took care of the Kindergarten, and he taught the children Hebrew and Mathematics, his specialties. Mr. Lipman also taught an evening class for adults.

In 1930 Mr. Brás Palatinik built and donated a building for the C.I.R.N. (Centro Israelita do Rio Grande do Norte). The building, located in downtown Natal, became the headquarters of that organization, as well as of other Zionist organizations that existed in Natal.

Even though the community never had an official rabbi, they were visited by Rabbi Isaias Raffalovich, based in Rio de Janeiro, several times. During the Second World War the American Chaplain, Rabbi Shaftei Baum, officiated at the C.I.R.N.⁴⁵

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 46-53.

The Jewish cemetery was given by the municipality of Natal as a gift to the Jewish community. It is a section of the public cemetery of Alecrim. It was consecrated on January 10, 1931, and all mortal remains of people buried elsewhere were reburied there⁴⁶.

After the war, business dwindled and most Jews left for Israel or for bigger Jewish centers like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. By the year 1967, there were only 2 Jewish families left. In November 1968, the C.I.R.N. ended its activities. Its headquarters were donated to a local hospital. Since the hospital did not care for the building, it collapsed, and nowadays only the shell remains of what once was the heart of the Jewish community in Natal⁴⁷.

The C.I.R.N. wasn't dead however. It was reborn through the efforts of a group of people who were in their majority Marranos. Guided by Prof. José Nunes Cabral de Carvalho, they started to congregate with the

⁴⁶Ibid, p. 70

⁴⁷Ibid, pp. 64 and 77

aims of reviving the religion of their forefathers⁴⁸. This was a phenomenon unique in Brazilian history.

The group, comprising around 30 individuals, congregated in the members' houses, and in 1979 started publishing a bulletin called Boletim Informativo C.I.R.N. The intellectual mentor of the group was Professor José Nunes Cabral de Carvalho, a well-known archaeologist, historian and researcher. Their president was Ivan Pereira Birnbaum, a military officer; the secretary was José Herculano Lopes; Willy Daube was appointed as Chazan; and João Fernandes Medeiros was named spiritual guide.

Mr. Medeiros certainly was qualified for the position because before his "ceremony of Return to Judaism" at which Rabbi Henrique Lemle of Rio de Janeiro officiated, he had been an evangelical minister. Religious services normally were held at the Medeiros home. Mr. Medeiros is active in seeking other Marranos to join their cause.

⁴⁸Valadares, Paulo. Cristãos-novos no Brasil de Hoje.

Article in Leitura, São Paulo, December 10, 1991.

Current Jewish Life of the Marranos

Currently the Jewish community is composed, as mentioned above, of five Jewish families and 12 households of people who claim Marrano origin. As a whole they are a very interesting group indeed. For despite ~~of~~ their ignorance about Jewish traditions and customs and of the difficulties of being Jewish in Natal, they make a great effort to identify with normative Judaism. Among the many difficulties of being Jewish in Natal is that Natal has an active Neo-nazi group and is the headquarters for the "Confederação Palestina para Latino-America e Caribe" the organ that makes and distributes Palestinian propaganda in Latin America and Caribbean.

In the Summer of 1992 Religious services as well as festival celebrations were held at the D'Gabriel's home, since the community did not have a Synagogue. Since March 12, 1993, however, Kabbalat Shabbat services are being held on the ruins of the C.I.R.N. building in downtown Natal⁴⁹. The community took upon itself to

⁴⁹ **Gabbay**, Ana Júlia Barcessat. Article in O Hebreu number 157 p. 43.

rebuild part of the former synagogue of the Centro Israelita do Rio Grande do Norte. The synagogue is a small barrack with only one electric light. It does not have an ark, a Torah scroll, nor a separate area for women, who sit on the left side of the men. They follow a reduced form of the Sepharadic ritual for prayers during their Kabbalat Shabbat services. They do not hold Shabbat morning services, but some members gather on their homes and study the weekly Torah portion.

The Alecrim cemetery is being kept by the Natal municipality, and it is almost full, having only two lots vacant. The last burial there was the one of Prof. Cabral de Carvalho, who died in 1979.

The Jewish families are three of Ashkenazim origin, the D'Gabriel, the Morgenland and the Griner and the other two are Sepharadic originally from Belém, the Queiroz and the Gabbay. All of them are relative newcomers to Natal.

The D'Gabriel family came from Miami, FL seeking a place to retire. Mr. Julio D'Gabriel, a native of Cuba, is the most knowledgeable Jew in Natal and he serves as a teacher to some Marranos that are willing to study

under him. He served C.I.R.N. as president for a long period and is very active in community affairs⁵⁰. His wife, Myra, is very active in the community⁵¹ and an avid writer on Jewish issues to the Editor's column of the local newspapers. Mr. Morgenland is a retiree from Germany divorced with two small children. The Griners are originally from Natal, but they have lived in Israel for several years. Mrs. Griner owns an Elementary school while her husband is a engineer. The Gabbay and Queiroz are originally descendants of Moroccan Jews from Belém. Although more traditional , they have tried to welcome the marranos into their midst. Mr. Gabbay helped introduce the Sepharadic Nussach (tradition) in the community, and normally is their Baal T'fila⁵². There is, however, a small rift between the Sepharadic Jews and some of the marranos.

⁵⁰An exemple was his participation on a public debate through the television with Palestinian representatives about the Gulf War. As reported in article in A Tribuna, January 22, 1991, p. 22.

⁵¹She organized a march for peace, as reported in article in A Tribuna January 27, 1991.

⁵²The one that leads the prayers for the congregation

Among the Marrano families of Natal, there are those who attend events sporadically and there are those who are the soul of the community. The Marranos hold family names such as Oliveira, Lopes, Pereira, Guimarães, Nascimento, Galvão, Fontes, Gonçalves, and others.

Éder "Barosh" Nascimento and Joaquim Fontes Galvão are the most active organizers and promoters of the C.I.R.N.⁵³ Both of them hold government jobs that do not make big demands on their time, so they are in a good position to spread their cause through the newspapers (both local and the national Jewish press), radio and television. They engage in some political action as well. For instance, they arranged that the Chamber of Representatives of Natal pass a proclamation that expressed "the deserved homage to the Jewish community of Natal and of Rio Grande do Norte for the passage of the anniversary of the Independence of the State of Israel."⁵⁴ Among their activities, they hold

⁵³In the Summer of 1993 they disassociated themselves of the Marrano community and created another organization to congregate individuals of Marrano origin.

⁵⁴Article in Resenha Judaica, July 1990 p. 10.

Iom Hashoa celebrations⁵⁵ and publish a small newspaper created to combat racism and anti-Semitism called "Nunca Mais - Never More."⁵⁶ They also keep in contact with some important members of the Jewish community in São Paulo. Not long ago they created an organization aimed to combat racism and anti-Semitism and which they named Fundação Ben Abraham, after one of their contacts in São Paulo who is a Holocaust survivor.

Another active member of the Marrano community is Mr. João Fernandes Medeiros Dias or Iohanan ben Imanuel Diya, (this is the Hebrew name he adopted after his reintroduction into the Jewish people), and his family. I shall describe his life story as a representative example of the life stories I heard from other Marranos in Natal. His story is so interesting that it has already been the subject of an article by Moacir

⁵⁵Article in Resenha Judaica, May 1991 p. 17.

⁵⁶Article in Menorah Magazine, March 1992.

Amâncio, a famous journalist⁵⁷. The Medeiros have also been subjects of academic research in Anthropology⁵⁸.

Mr. Medeiros was born in Cajazeiras in the interior part of Paraíba, a neighboring state to Rio Grande do Norte. He remembers that as a child he was instructed by his parents about their origins, traditions and habits. His father was associated with a civic organization that had many other individuals of Marrano origin as members. That organization was deeply disliked by the local priest, who prohibited the milkmen to sell milk to the Medeiros family, so Mr. Medeiros grew up as a child without drinking milk. This is only one of many persecutions Mr. Medeiros endured growing up. He also remembers several teachings given by his parents and grandparents such as never to pray in a Catholic church but under the open skies 'that are a temple par excellence created by the Creator himself' as

⁵⁷Article in Revista Shalom, February 1981 pp. 10-14.

⁵⁸**Ramagem**, Sonia Maria Bloomfield , A Fênix da Abraão, Brasilia, August 1983. Dissertation for Master in Antropology Degree.

he pointed out. He was also taught not to bend the knee in front of an image as well as many other Marrano habits, such as dietary and funerary practices.

Since João Medeiros always showed a strong religious inclination, he entered a Protestant seminary. There he had arguments with his colleagues, who claimed that the Sabbath was to be observed on Sunday. Medeiros would show them the Bible and argue that "Saturday is the day of the Lord." After seven years of seminary Mr. Medeiros was ordained a minister and received a B.A. in Theology.

In 1970 Mr. Medeiros was living in Rio de Janeiro where he had a job in the Education Department of the Protestant Churches Council. By living in a city that had a Jewish community, Medeiros could learn more about his ancestors cultural heritage and traditions; he even met Rabbi Henrique Lemle, a Liberal Rabbi with whom he studied. After learning about Judaism, he could not reconcile his religious points of view with those of the Protestant Church, so he severed relations with the church and went to Rabbi Lemle for a "Purification Ceremony" that signified his official reentrance into

the Jewish people. That ceremony was not a conversion but a return to the open practice of Judaism that his ancestors left four centuries ago. It is interesting to point out that even though Mr. Medeiros was reintroduced to Judaism through a Liberal rabbi, he defines himself as orthodox and tells everyone that "the Marrano has to be orthodox, for this is the only way of being accepted by all the Jewish people." I must also point out that his reintroduction to Judaism is not recognized by the orthodox rabbinate of Brazil, so he is not a Jew in their eyes.

After his reintroduction into the Jewish people Mr. Medeiros decided to go back to the Northeast to "bring back" other people, that like him were of Marrano origins. He only looks out for people originally of the Seridó that have moved to the capital. He believes the great majority of white people from that part of the country are descendants of Portuguese Marranos. When Mr. Medeiros came to live in Natal he got in contact with the Marrano group already in existence and due to his training was appointed their "Chacham - spiritual leader." He participated in several ecumenical

ceremonies in Natal as the "Rabbi" of the community. By 1979 Mr. Medeiros had already "reintroduced into Judaism" two men of Natal. He took upon himself the authority of carrying out such ceremonies.

Another sign of his commitment to Judaism is that he raised his two daughters in the Jewish faith. One of these daughters is now living in the State of Israel.

The relations between the Natal Marranos and the Jews in Brazil

Even though the story of the Marranos of Natal has become so widespread as to be told in major Brazilian magazines⁵⁹, they have mainly been faced by the Jewish community at large with indifference. They are basically rejected by the orthodox majority since they are unable to prove a maternal Jewish descent. An example of this is the case earlier mentioned of Rabbi

⁵⁹Rocha, Luiz G. Dourado, Judeus Secretos. Article in Visão number 34, September 22, 1980, pp.35; and Judeus de Novo . Article in Veja number 639; December 03, 1980

Elyahu Valt, who traveled to Natal to check the Marranos claim to Judaism, but refused even to meet with them, limiting himself to an inquire of one local Jew about the Marranos⁶⁰. In spite of these issues, the Marranos of Natal proclaim themselves to be orthodox, "the real thing", unlike the Brazilian Liberal minority who are seen by them as "fake, non legitimate, and a Judaism of convenience" although the Liberal Jewish congregations are their major source of support.

The Liberal congregations in Brazil are very small, but they make efforts to support the Marranos in their religious needs by sending them books, educational material and Matzos during Passover.

The position of the Liberal community can be expressed by Rabbi Henry Sobel, the Senior Rabbi at Congregação Israelita Paulista in São Paulo, whose position is as follows:

"The Jewish Law affirms that a Jew is the child of a Jewish mother. Thus, where there would exist a

⁶⁰Rabbi Valt does, however, keep in contact with the small Jewish community, as can be seen in an article in Resenha Judaica , May 1990, p. 2.

maternal Jewish ascendance, the children will be Jewish through the generations. Thus, when a New Christian or Marrano wishes to return formally to Judaism, it would be improper to require a conversion, for it would imply that without a conversion the individual is not Jewish.

It is difficult to ascertain Jewish ascendance since most Marranos do not have documents that prove their origins. Besides that, almost all of them were raised into Christianity. Thus, even if a formal conversion is not required, it's customary to submit them to some kind of ritual that stresses their "return" to the Jewish community. This is done symbolically through a promise of *chaverut*, loyalty to Judaism and the promise of studying the commandments and following the Jewish tradition."⁶¹

Another support source for the Marrano community of Natal are some members of the Jewish press⁶² and some

⁶¹Letter from Rabbi Henry Sobel, January 07, 1993.

⁶²For instance Trudi Landau's article Cristãos novos descobrem seu Judaísmo in Resenha Judaica, July 1991, p.3; Desireé Nacson's Marranismo: um Dado Importante na Formação do Povo Brasileiro in Resenha Judaica, and Ben Abraham's

Jewish activists from São Paulo. The Marranos get to publish in national Jewish newspaper "Resenha Judaica" and in the Magazines "O Hebreu" and "Shalom" any kind of articles or notes they wish. It is also quite common for columnist or journalists to write news and articles in support of the Marranos.

One of the great supporters of the Marranos is Mr. Ben Abraham, a holocaust survivor from São Paulo, whose main interest is combatting anti-Semitism and Neo-Nazism. Since both are very prominent in Rio Grande do Norte, Ben Abraham found in the Marranos ideal partners for his aims. They joined and created The Fundação Ben Abraham for to combat of racism and anti-Semitism. Besides publishing a small newspaper, they distribute copies of Mr. Ben Abraham's memoirs that deal with his holocaust experiences. Mr. Ben Abraham went to Natal a couple of times to give lectures at the university about

Judeus de Natal Descendem de Marranos in Resenha Judaica,
November 1991, page 12

racism and Nazism, those lectures were arranged by the Marrano community⁶³.

⁶³O Poti, November 24, 1991; Resenha Judaica, October 1991, p.2; Shalom em Revista, October 1991, p.12; Diario de Natal September 19, 1991, p.2

CONCLUSION

The situation of the Marranos in Rio Grande do Norte is a very interesting one. After centuries of indifference to their Crypto-Jewish customs, a group of people "wakes up" and decide to investigate their roots, with some willing to go back to something they think and strongly feel they belong to, but of which they know next to nothing. It can not be called nostalgia because that would require a pre-knowledge of what they were missing. This yearning to go back, to return to a religion, a culture, a community that once their forefathers belonged to is difficult to explain. There are many issues involved: psychological, sociological, religious. A study of this group dealing with these issues would help us understand more about the phenomenon, but this is beyond the goals of this thesis.

The need to know as much as possible about this situation is urgent. This group of Marranos can't be further ignored. They are real, and have very strong and legitimate claims to their Jewish heritage. And

they are not an isolated case, but the tip of the iceberg. This is the oldest and most organized group of Brazilian Marranos trying to return, but others are being formed. They have already developed the awareness that they must achieve a critical mass to be heard and be taken seriously.

My research definitely indicates that the Marranos' claim for their Jewish origin is completely veracious. This group had a very tragic fate through Jewish History. In spite of that they managed to cling to the notion of belonging to the Jewish people. Evidently during the process of transmission much was lost or left aside. However, their Jewish ascendance is beyond any doubt.

It has been shown in my research that the Marranos in Rio Grande do Norte are the descendants of the early Portuguese New Christians who settled that area seeking pastures for raising cattle. The Inquisitorial activities and repression that existed in other parts of the country, but not in Rio Grande do Norte, might have been the main reason for their establishing themselves in that area.

The problem will only grow and the established Jewish community in Brazil must acknowledge its existence and start thinking about an appropriate response. If the Jews have been able to create bridges to Christians after centuries of very bad relations and very deep mistrust, it can't be impossible to reach these people, who are not only very open to Jews but want to join them. If this union is welcome or how it could be implemented is a matter that must be broadly discussed inside the community. The Marranos can't impose themselves upon or "crack into" the Jewish community. But, at the same time, they cannot be ignored and forgotten either. They do have a Jewish heritage that cannot be washed away

The problem with this heritage is that only certain traits of Jewishness were kept by these people, and mostly the external ones. They have their "Jewish" ways, as described in sections I and II, but these are basically mechanical behavior passed on from generation to generation. The cultural tradition, however, is no more. They have not kept the language, the holidays, the traditions, and the behavior that distinguish a Jew from

a Gentile. This heritage helps us only trace them back to common ancestors. One must question if these Crypto-Jewish traditions were kept out of love for Judaism and the desire to keep their Jewish consciousness alive. Whatever may have been the case at the beginning, it was lost along the way.

Today one must acknowledge that these groups only exist in isolated pockets in Brazil. They are non-existent in the major cities. Their survival was due more to isolation than to any commitment to keep their heritage alive.

By this research I intended to attract attention to the problem of Brazilian Marranos and Marranos in general. Marranos are only one of many other Jewish fringe groups that require a response from the established Jewish community. The latter is impossible without a thorough research on the part of the Jewish community. My goal has been to fill but a small part of the gap in the studies in this field. I hope that this work will stimulate an academic interest in the issues raised in this paper.

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