

**Descendants of the *Anusim* (Crypto-Jews)  
in Contemporary Mexico**

**Slightly updated version of a  
Thesis for the degree of  
“Doctor of Philosophy”  
by  
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2009**

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*To my beloved Berthas  
In Memoriam*

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The state of Nuevo León (henceforth, “NL”) in modern Northern Mexico is a small part of what used to be El Nuevo Reino de León, a huge land grant that spread from the southern parts of what is now the U.S.A. through the Mexican state of Coahuila, and its major city of Saltillo, down to what is now NL. It was given to the Portuguese New Christian, Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva, by the Spanish King Felipe II in 1578. As has been well documented, many other “New Christians” settled the region along with Carvajal. It has been demonstrated that 177 individuals, who constituted 68% of the initial *pobladores* (founders), were of Portuguese Jewish background.<sup>1</sup>

It is also common knowledge in the area that the families of the *pobladores* practice endogamy.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the regional Church possesses two large volumes of *dispensas matrimoniales*, containing applications for ecclesiastical dispensation by relatives to marry each other, contrary to Catholic norm, which have been granted over the past few hundred years.<sup>3</sup> Until today, people are recognized as belonging to one family or another by their facial features.

The Carvajal family has become legendary for its martyrdom (see Section 1.3 below). Many others suffered at the hands of the Inquisition, charged with Judaizing. How much Sephardic heritage remained in the region until today was a question that begged to be answered.

## 1.1 THE PROBLEM

The presence of *anusim*, descendants of peninsular Jews who were forcibly converted to Catholicism in the 14th and 15th centuries, all over the New World is well documented, and many suffered at the hands of the Inquisition.<sup>4</sup> Spanish Mexico figures prominently in this regard.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eugenio del Hoyo, “¿Sefarditas en el Nuevo Reino de León?”, *Humanitas* 12 (1971): 247-254.

<sup>2</sup> Ricardo Elizondo Elizondo, *Los sefarditas en Nuevo León* (Monterrey: Archivo General del Estado de Nuevo León, 1987) 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Raúl J. Guerra, Nadine M. Vásquez, and Vela Baldomero, eds., *Index to the Marriage Investigations of the Diocese of Guadalajara Pertaining to the Former Provinces of Coahuila, Nuevo León, Nuevo Santander and Texas*, Volume One: 1653-1750; Volume Two: 1751-1779 (Edinburg, TX: Pan American University, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: José Toribio Medina, *Historia de la Inquisición de Lima, 1569-1820* (Santiago, Chile: Fondo Histórico y Bibliográfico, 1887); José Toribio Medina, *Historia del Tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición en Chile* (Santiago, Chile: Fondo Histórico y Bibliográfico, 1890); Henry C. Lea, *The Inquisition in the Spanish Dependencies* (New York: Macmillan, 1908); Boleslao Lewin, *El Judío en la Época Colonial* (Buenos Aires: Colegio Libre de Estudios Superiores, 1939); Arnold Wiznitzer, *Jews in Colonial Brazil* (Morningside Heights, NY: Columbia University Press, 1960); Elias Lipiner, *Breve história dos judeus no Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Biblos, 1962); Isaac Izecksohn, *Os marranos Brasileiros* (Rio de

Indeed, Church officials often complained that Mexico is inundated with Jews.<sup>6</sup> The Mexican Inquisition, established in 1571, attempted to rid the Spanish colony of all remnants of Judaism among these people. The first Mexican *auto de fe* was held in 1526, before a tribunal was established, and the last in 1815. (See Section 1.4.)

The Inquisition was finally abolished only with Mexico's independence in 1821, at which time the last person imprisoned for Judaizing was released.<sup>7</sup> Wiznitzer asserts that crypto-Judaism dwindled with the success of the Inquisition: "By the end of the seventeenth century the whole crypto-Jewish community in Mexico had been destroyed."<sup>8</sup> Naturally, many New Christians in many parts of Mexico assimilated and intermarried with Old Christians and Amerindians. Liebman claims that crypto-Judaism disappeared completely with the disappearance of the Inquisition.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, indications of the survival of an awareness of Jewish descent among some Mexicans were reported throughout the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> For example, in 1978, Carlos Larralde spoke of oral

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Janeiro: Livraria Freitas Bastos, 1967); Lipiner, *Os judaizantes nas capitãncias de cima; estudos sobre os cristãos-novos do Brasil nos séculos XVI e XVII* (São Paulo: Editora Brasiliense, 1969); Jacob R. Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew, 1492-1776* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 35-84; Novinsky, Anita, *Cristãos Novos na Bahia, Perspectiva* (São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo, 1972); Cecil Roth, *History of the Marranos*, 4th ed. (New York: Hermon Press, 1974): 271-295; Seymour B. Liebman, *The Inquisitors and the Jews in the New World* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1975); Liebman, *New World Jewry, 1493-1825* (New York: Ktav, 1982); Boleslao Lewin, *Los CriptoJudíos* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Milá, 1987); Clara E. Cohan, *Los Marranos en el Paraguay Colonial* (Asunción, Paraguay: Intercontinental Editora, 1992); Alberto Dines, *Vínculos do Fogo* (São Paulo: Editora Schwarcz, 1992); Lipiner, *Terror e Linguagem* (Lisboa: Contexto, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> See, among others: David Alberto Cossío, *Historia de Nuevo León*, vol. 1 (Monterrey: J. Cantú Leal, 1925); Alfonso Toro, ed., *Los judíos en la Nueva España* (Mexico City: Archivo General de la Nación, 1932); Arnold Wiznitzer, "Crypto-Jews in Mexico During the Sixteenth Century", *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (1961): 168-214; Wiznitzer, "Crypto-Jews in Mexico during the Seventeenth Century", *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1961): 222-268; Richard E. Greenleaf, *Zumárraga and the Mexican Inquisition 1536-1543* (Washington, DC: Academy of American Franciscan History, 1961) 89-99; Seymour B. Liebman, *The Jews in New Spain* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970); Mathias de Bocanegra, *Jews and the Inquisition of Mexico* (Seymour B. Liebman, trans., Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1974); Liebman (1975) 37-156; Richard E. Greenleaf, *Inquisición y Sociedad en el México colonial* (Madrid: Ediciones Jose Porrú a Turanzas, 1985); Alicia Gojman de Backal, *Los Conversos en el México colonial* (Mexico City: Multibanco Mercantil, 1987) 19-29; Baruch Megged, *Darkam Hayhudit shel Anusei "Sefarad Hehadashah" (Mexico) Bameah Hashesh Esreh* (Masters diss., Hebrew University, April 1987; in Hebrew); Solange Alberro, *Inquisición y sociedad en México 1571-1700* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Liebman (1975) 18; Liebman (1970) 47, 185.

<sup>7</sup> Liebman (1970) 296.

<sup>8</sup> Wiznitzer (1961): 268.

<sup>9</sup> Liebman (1970) 303-304.

<sup>10</sup> Isaac E. Marcuson, ed., *Proceedings of Thirty-Fourth Annual Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis xxxiii* (1923): 431-432; Jacob Beller, *Jews in Latin America*. (New York: Jonathan David, 1969) 274-279; Jacob R. Marcus,

traditions among some Chicanos in Texas, and wrote: “Chicanos of Jewish descent do not practice Judaism, they do observe circumcision, koshering meat, certain prayers, and other Judaic traditions.”<sup>11</sup>

Many anecdotal stories about individual “Hispanic Jews” appeared in local and national media in Mexico and in the American Southwest.<sup>12</sup> In addition, rabbis in Mexico and New Mexico have been approached over the past decades by numerous Spanish-speaking men and women who said they had reason to suspect they are descendents of Sephardim.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding NL, one of the earliest published suggestions of continuing crypto-Judaism was made in 1938 by the anti-Semitic journalist, Vito Allesio Robles.<sup>14</sup> (See Section 1.6.2.) Rabbi Moisès (Moishe) Kaiman, who arrived in the region in the 1930s, also reported to me that he had been approached by countless Novolenses (residents of NL), claiming Jewish heritage.

These claims of crypto-Judaism have emerged against a backdrop of similar phenomena throughout the Latin world. In Portugal, in 1807, some 20,000 people identified themselves as Jews to the invading French.<sup>15</sup> In 1903, M. Cardoso de Bethencourt published a second-hand

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*The Colonial American Jew, 1492-1776* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970) 35-84; Joachim Prinz, *The Secret Jews*, New York: Random House, 1973) 193-194; Richard G. Santos, “Chicanos of Jewish Descent in Texas”, *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1983): 327-333; David S. Nidel, “Modern Descendents of Conversos in New Mexico”, *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (1984): 249-262. See also Section 1.6.

<sup>11</sup> Carlos M. Larralde, *Chicano Jews in South Texas* (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Media stories include: *Avotaynu*, July 1985; *National Catholic Reporter*, Feb. 20, 1987; *National Public Radio*, 1988; *Avotaynu*, Winter 1989; *El Paso Times*, Mar. 5, 1990; *The New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1990; *Lillith*, Winter 1991; *Time Magazine*, Mar. 4, 1991; *Greater Phoenix Jewish News*, Mar. 8, 1991; *San Jose Mercury News*, May 11, 1991; *New Mexico Magazine*, June 1991; *Echoes of Sepharad*, Oct. 1991; *Jewish Monthly*, Oct. 1991; *Hadassah Magazine*, Jan. 1992; *D, The Magazine of Dallas*, Jan. 1992; *Fort Worth Star Telegraph*, Apr. 5, 1992; *Quantum*, Summer 1992; *Melton J.*, Autumn 1992; *The New York Times*, Nov. 29, 1992; *New York Newsday*, Nov. 29, 1992; *National Public Radio*, Dec. 1992; *La Life*, Dec. 19, 1992; *Miami Herald*, Dec. 21, 1992; *Forward*, Jan. 29, 1993; *Jerusalem Report*, Jan. 14, 1993; *Jewish Currents*, Feb. 1993; *Spirit*, Spring/Summer 1993; *Dallas Jewish Life*, June 1993; *El Palacio*, Summer 1993; *Southwest Jewish History*, Fall 1993; *Sephardic House Newsletter*, Winter 1994; *Nuestra Carta*, Apr./May 1994; *The Jerusalem Post*, Aug. 19, 1994; *The Sentinel*, Mar. 16, 1995; *National Public Radio*, Apr. 1995; *The Forward*, Apr. 21, 1995; *Hadassah Magazine*, May 1995; *Aurora*, Oct. 6, 1995; *The Dallas Morning News*, Feb. 12, 1996; *Expulsion and Memory*, 1996 (film); *JUF News*, Apr. 1996; *Chicago Tribune*, May 28, 1996; *Texas Monthly*, November 2001; <http://www.poetserv.org/SRR19/alcala.html>, Sept. 24, 2003; *The Jerusalem Post*, September 25, 2003; *The Forward*, Feb. 20, 2004; *Haaretz English Edition*, Sept. 4, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Personal communications with Isaac H. Celnik (Albuquerque, New Mexico), Paul J. Citrin (Albuquerque), L. Gottlieb, and N. Ward (California), David D. Shor (Albuquerque).

<sup>14</sup> Vito Alessio Robles, “La Juderia de Monterrey”, *Bosquejos históricos*, (Mexico City: Editorial Polis, 1938) 94-107. An earlier reference to post-Inquisition crypto-Judaism was in David Alberto Cossío, *Historia de Nuevo León*, vol. 2 (Monterrey: J. Cantú Leal, 1925) 275; see Section 1.6.3.

<sup>15</sup> Nahum Slouschz, *Ha-Anusim be-Portugal* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1932) 85-86.

account of contemporary secret Jews.<sup>16</sup> The press reported the discovery in 1917 of several villages of crypto-Jews by Samuel Schwarz in the mountains of Portugal.<sup>17</sup> This was followed by a re-emergence under the leadership of Captain Artur Barros Basto in Portugal.<sup>18</sup> In 1919, a group of Sabbath-keeping Chilean descendents of Conversos approached the South American Zionist Congress.<sup>19</sup> In Spain, rabbis, Israeli consular officials, and others reported numerous inquiries, dating back to the 1950s.<sup>20</sup> There was also a recent group conversion of people who identify as Jews in Barcelona by Rabbi Mariner.<sup>21</sup> Prominent Jews, Israeli officials, and journalists in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Columbia, and Peru have described encounters with remnants of a lost Sephardic Diaspora.<sup>22</sup> In Brazil, the struggle of such people for acceptance is evident in many letters to the Israeli Embassy and to scholars.<sup>23</sup>

Before attempting to address the question whether crypto-Judaism has survived until the present in northern Mexico, a definition of “crypto-Judaism” is in order. The term *crypto-Jew* applies to anyone of Jewish descent who publicly professes another religion and either practices Jewish rituals in private, such as Friday-night candle lighting (even if unaware that family traditions are of Jewish origin), or who possesses a private, transmitted Jewish identity (even if unaccompanied by specifically Jewish practice). *Marrano* is often used in the same sense, but carries a pejorative connotation. The Hebrew appellation *anusim* is more general and applies to Jews who adopted another religion under duress and to their descendants who continue to belong to another faith, whether or not they maintain any Jewish traditions. In particular, it applies to those Iberian New Christians who were converted – not out of conviction – between 1391 and 1497.<sup>24</sup>

Crypto-Judaism is not a uniquely Sephardic phenomenon. In addition to short-lived instances of secrecy in Europe during the Nazi era, crypto-Judaism persisted into this century among New-Moslems whose ancestors were forcibly converted in Persia in 1839, for instance.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>16</sup> See Lucien Wolf, “The Secret Jews of Portugal”, *The Reform Advocate*, May 1926, 531-534.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Schwarz, *Os Cristaos-novos em Portugal no Século XX* (Lisbon: Empresa Portuguesa de Livros, 1925); *Jewish Chronicle*, Feb. 13, 1925.

<sup>18</sup> Slouschz (1932) 111-121; Artur C. de Barros Basto, *Judeus & Prosélitos* (Porto: Instituto Teológico Israelita, 1946); Elvira de Azevedo Mea and Inácio Steinhard, *Ben-Rosh* (Porto: Edições Afrontamento, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> David Landman, “Chile”, in *The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York, 1941) 154-155.

<sup>20</sup> Barcelona consular official (personal communications, Aug. 1995); Assumpcio Hosta i Rebes, director of the Centro Bonastruc ça Porta in Girona (personal communication, Aug. 1995).

<sup>21</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, Oct. 27, 1995; Nov. 24, 1995.

<sup>22</sup> Beller (1969) 273-274; Prinz (1973) 3-5; *Hatzofe*, Apr. 1, 1991; Kathleen Teltsch (personal communication, Nov. 1992); Mordechai Arbel (personal communication, Nov. 1995).

<sup>23</sup> Sonia Bloomfield-Ramagem (personal communication, Nov. 1995); Anita Novinsky (personal communication, May 1996).

<sup>24</sup> Elijah Mizrahi, *Responsa Mayim Amukim* (publ. Berlin, 1778), no. 32, says: “These *anusim*, ... even many generations, until the end of time, they are considered Jews.”

<sup>25</sup> Raphael Patai, *On Jewish Folklore*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit (1983) 197-275; Benzion D. Yehoshua-Raz, *Mi-nidhei Yisrael be-Afganistan le-*

Accordingly, the main goal of this investigation is to determine whether in fact some families of Jewish extraction in NL continued to maintain a separate identity that they attempted to preserve and/or whether some families, knowingly or unknowingly, transmitted a cluster of specifically Jewish practices.

Additionally, an effort has been made to properly understand this subculture, its attitude towards the dominant religion, and the attitudes of others towards them, which Sephardic customs have been preserved and the manner of their transmission. Also of interest are the reasons for remaining secretive after the granting of religious freedom, how anusim interact with normative Judaism, and the ways in which some now blend their Jewish heritage into a new multifaceted identity.

Research is hampered by the secretiveness and reclusiveness of the families in question. Crypto-Jews, themselves, have great difficulty in identifying what may be Jewish among customs remembered from home. Some suffer from a proclivity to attach folk Jewish meanings to customs or foods. Unfortunately, few scholars investigating such phenomena (in New Mexico, for example) have sufficient background in Jewish law and Sephardic customs to identify practices not specifically mentioned in Inquisitorial documents. The mixture of fact and fantasy in reports remains a serious problem.

## 1.2 NUEVO LEÓN

It was while I was in Chicago that I first began to hear reports about the Northern-Mexican clan of “very powerful” families of Jewish extraction, living in Chicago, with their own clubs and their own cemeteries. These Novolense expatriots contributed money to the synagogue in Mexico, anonymously, I was told. I was given names, but was never invited into any of the “clubs”. All the same, some of their members did see me.

Parts of El Nuevo Reino de León are situated today within the United States, and were therefore somewhat more open to outsiders; witness the media interest in New Mexico.<sup>26</sup> I found the public interview given by Tony Sanchez in 2001 when he was running for governor of Texas, volunteering his Jewish origins, astonishing.<sup>27</sup> This, combined with the fact that it is already known that the entire area was initially settled largely by New Christians, some of whom were later burned at the

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*anusei Mashhad* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1992) 99-139; Hilda Nissimi, *The Crypto-Jewish Mashhadis: The shaping of religious and communal identity in their journey from Iran to New York* (Brighton, England: Sussex Academic Press, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> For example, Kathleen Telsch, *The New York Times*, November 29, 1992.

<sup>27</sup> “In about 1690, from a small town near Gibraltar, his forebears struck out for the New World to escape religious oppression. But they found the Inquisition even harsher in the vicinity of Mexico City, and so they kept pushing as far away from the capital as they could—to a remote, rough wilderness at the edge of occupied Spanish dominion.” See Jan Reid, “Tony Sanchez's New Deal”, *Texas Monthly*, November 2001, and other contemporary reports.



stake or in effigy for Judaizing. I had been approached already by a number of members of this group, which gave me added impetus to investigate the region in greater depth. Another aspect of interest was the apparent endogamy in the region.

I first arrived in Northern Mexico as part of a movie documentary project on anusim. It was then that I became more familiar with the unique history of the locality. I found a nervous region suffering from fear and from archives that are more or less sealed for the visiting researcher, a phenomenon lamented about by many scholars who preceded me. It was not, however, a region whose residents refused to build trust in me for long.

Monterrey, the capital of northern Mexico, maintains an image of an industrious, industrial city. Although a significant portion of its prosperity lies in the beer industry, it is sober and hard working. People rise early for work, and appointments are kept on time; this, in contradistinction to the center and south of the country. The “Tech”, as the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey is referred to, is the most highly ranked university in Mexico, and was established by local families. There is a noticeable lack of deep Catholic devotion as compared, for example, to nearby Zacatecas even, let alone the south of the country.

One of my more knowledgeable informants divided Mexico in the following manner: Northern Mexico is characterized by industrious activity; the central part, by traditionalism; and the south, by imagination.

It was also on this trip that I realized how ignorant the descendants of the anusim were of their real history, and how false the history as told by the local *cronistas* (local lay historian) was. What a tremendous gap there was between the oral histories told at home, and the empty libraries and the closed archives. There was a desperate need for serious work to provide both a context and an explanation for members of the younger generation who were going out to seek confirmation for what they had heard from their elders but finding none.

### **1.2.1 The Original Settlement**

For the above reasons, I have concentrated in the research reported in the chapters that follow on the region originally granted to Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva, and entitled El Nuevo Reino de León. This huge parcel of land, which was granted to this New Christian man, measured some 200 leagues (over 1000 kilometers) squared. (See Figure 1.1.) The place is often called the *cuadrada tragica* (“the tragic square”) by the locals. Luis de Carvajal was to subdue the local, hostile indigenous people and make the place Catholic.<sup>28</sup>

This was the time of a standard requirement of purity of blood, *limpieza de sangre*, before anyone would be allowed to settle in the New World. This means that the land grant should never have been given to Carvajal, whose mother had been burned at the stake. Instead, however,

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<sup>28</sup> For the beginning of the Carvajal saga, see Eugenio del Hoyo, *Historia del Nuevo Reino de León (1571-1723)* (Mexico City: Fondo Editorial de Nuevo León, 1972) 23-136.

those travelling with Carvajal were exempted by the crown from the need for a family investigation.<sup>29</sup>



**Figure 1.1. El Nuevo Reino de León.**

The settlement in Monterrey in the 1620s has been described as follows:<sup>30</sup>

There were in Monterrey twenty-seven houses, without counting the convent, twelve of which were on the north side of the river. In them lived forty-eight persons, without counting children, and young boys and girls. We noted 31 Spaniards; even if we have some well founded doubts that some of them might have been mestizos or mulattos, we do it this way because the document does not clarify it. Of these, ten married couples, seven of them with children, six bachelors, three widowers and two widows; four free mulattos married to Indian women and besides, one Indian woman married to a Spaniard; one male mestizo and one female one and, finally, three married soldiers of the company of Captain Hernando de Ugarte y la Concha. The ranches, which they had, were at the borders of the city, in a radius of less than eight leagues, were seven and in them lived 42 persons, without counting the minors; the Spaniards were 5 couples of married people, three of them with children; 15 unmarried males and four widowers; working in them, without counting the Indians of the

<sup>29</sup> Martin Cohen, *The Martyr* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973) 55-56.

<sup>30</sup> Del Hoyo (1972) 95.

hamlet, were five mulattos, three mestizos and five field working Indians, all males. Which gives us for Monterrey and the ranches in its jurisdiction, a total of 90 persons, without counting the minors nor the Chichimeco Indians.

After Carvajal was tried by the Inquisition (see Section 1.3), people fled Santa Lucia (what Monterrey was then called). A few years later, Diego de Montemayor re-established it with much the same families. The town of Saltillo existed before Luis de Carvajal received his land grant. Villa de Garcia was founded before Monterrey.

### 1.2.2 A Sephardic Presence

A Jewish presence and contribution to the local culture is often taken for granted in El Nuevo Reino de León,<sup>31</sup> and extends even to the Penitente<sup>32</sup> (a group of self-flagellating Catholic men) in New Mexico.<sup>33</sup> As we will see, this is often a blend of fact and fiction.

Beneath the surface runs a current of fantasy and mythology that are entirely incongruous with the appearance, and, indeed, the functioning of NL. While it came as no surprise that in Monterrey, as in many cities in the world, many of the inhabitants live with beliefs in the supernatural, it seemed to me at the time that what I encountered here beneath the surface ran in direct contradistinction with the outward image the city projected.

When I first heard about *Sefardismo*, as the local Spanish heritage has come to be called, and the mythology or fantasy attached to it, I was dumbstruck and was left with the impression that very intelligent people were suffering from delusions or some imbalance. I heard a version of the Jewish heritage present in Northern Mexico that included a myth to the effect that the founder of the city – Diego de Montemayor, vice regent to Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva, came with twelve families to represent the twelve tribes of Israel, and was going to establish the new Land of the Jews here. Hence, the name “El Nuevo Reino de León”, after the lion of Judah – rather than the León region of Spain. Montemayor, I was told, had even set apart a plot of land for building the Temple, and it still remains unbuilt! I did not know at the time that my informants had done nothing more than consult local “experts” who taught these dramatic “facts”, facts that had never been told at home.

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<sup>31</sup> From Vito Alessio Robles, “La Juderia de Monterrey”, in *Bosquejos históricos* (México: Editorial Polis, 1938) 94-107, to Tomas Atencio “Crypto-Jewish Remnants in Manito Society and Culture”, *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 18, nos. 1&2 (1996): 59-67.

<sup>32</sup> Los Hermanos de la Fraternidad Piadosa de Nuestro Padre Jesús Nazareno (“The Brothers of the Pious Fraternity of Our Father Jesus the Nazarene”) was founded in the 19th century.

<sup>33</sup> Bill Tate, *The Penitentes of the Sangre de Cristos* (Tate Gallery, 1968) 34; Frances Hernández, “The Secret Jews of the Southwest”, in *Sephardim in the Americas*, ed. M. A. Cohen and A. J. Peck (Tuscaloosa, AL: American Jewish Archives, 1993) 411-454; Felipe Ortega, forward to *En Divina Luz: The Penitente Moradas of New Mexico*, Craig Varjabedian and Michael Wallis (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994) xv.

It took several more visits to the city for me to learn that myth and reality are intimately enmeshed, not only or specifically in the worldview of some anusim, or of those who believe they are anusim, but are virtually the norm.

Fray Angélico Chávez, in his remarkably beautiful book, *My Penitente Land*,<sup>34</sup> on New Mexico, blends history with love and with very fine crypto-Jewish literary strategy. Here, one finds Abraham mentioned more frequently than Jesus. The Hebrew value of *hesed* is considered untranslatable, and the world is viewed with an Old Testamental longing of a Sephardic man to his ancestral roots.

### **1.2.3 Local Archives**

The archives of the city of Monterrey make for a long and problematic story. The head archivists are understood to be entrusted with the job of blocking access to individuals as well as to scholars – not providing it. Materials are hidden, and their existence is denied. Many scholars coming from abroad have complained about this problem.

I was informed by scholars whom I interviewed personally about a particular visitation by the Inquisition regarding a Treviño in Villa de Garcia. I was told where I could find the documentation, and went to the archive. The archivist never let me in. Instead, he became an interesting informant.

As it turns out, the only readily available documentation about the region is generously available at the state archives of Coahuila, thanks to the dedicated work and help of Miguel Angel Muñoz Borrego, who not only gladly makes his archives available, but is hard at work digitizing them and all other archives he can access.

It is also possible to get access to some archives in nearby states, such as Zacatecas, and, of course the Archivos de la Nación in Mexico City, and the ones in Spain, most of which are also online by now. Portugal is also working toward the same goal, which will do much good, since the Torre do Tombo was not easy to work with, not for lack of good will, but for its cumbersome system. As will become clear, the use of all these archives and of secondary sources was necessary for understanding the context and background of the location. With their help, a vivid picture of life in Mexico under the rule of the Inquisition becomes possible. At times, such sources give evidence of otherwise inexplicable customs I have encountered.

## **1.3 THE CARVAJAL TRAGEDY**

Luis de Carvajal was arrested by the Inquisition on a variety of charges, none of which included suspicion of Jewish practice, but,

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<sup>34</sup> Fray Angélico Chávez, *My Penitente Land: Reflections on Spanish New Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1974).

rather, the failure to denounce to the Inquisition many of his relatives who were indeed *judaizantes*. The first denunciation came from the husband of Carolina de Matos, who was living in Mexico City. Eventually the entire family was destroyed by the Inquisition.<sup>35</sup> Some theorize that the denunciation had to do with a conflict over parts of Zacatecas, which were fought over by two governors, and which was very profitable. Luis's place was taken by Diego de Montemayor, claimed to also have been a New Christian, who was among those who came on the mission to Mexico with Luis.

Luis de Carvajal el Mozo (the younger), the Governor's nephew and heir designate, was burned at the stake and became a folk hero. When Carvajal el Mozo learned that he was a Jew, the impact on him was tremendous. A man of culture, of letters and verse, who knew how to play the harp and sing, knew several languages and possessed a great spirit, he was unable or unwilling to conceal his faith. He went about convincing anyone he could to observe the "Law of Moses". Prayers that he composed were recited to inquisitors a century after his death by subsequent victims.<sup>36</sup>

Carvajal el Mozo was arrested, and in the cells of the Inquisition converted his cellmate, a monk, to Judaism. There he also changed his name to Joseph Lumbroso: Joseph after the biblical dreamer, since Luis also had inspired dreams, and *Lumbroso*, meaning "the Enlightened". After his first arrest, torture and incarceration – knowing full well that a second arrest meant the stake – he did not relent. Joseph-Luis was denounced again by a would-be proselyte. His second arrest was marked with religious pride and steadfastness that left its mark even on his tormentors. He attempted suicide, hoping thus to escape denouncing others under torture. He debated those sent to convert him with eloquence, knowledge and spirit. He is said to have been garroted before being burned at the stake, a "privilege" that would normally imply the accused embraced Christianity in the end. But many scholars question this, suggesting that it was done by the Church to save face and hide its failure to win him – as they tried to do with all their victims – and in order to demoralize the Jewish community, which looked up to him.<sup>37</sup>

Seymour Liebman, in his seminal book, *The Jews in New Spain*, translated the words of Padre Contreras who walked Luis to his fate:<sup>38</sup>

He was always such a good Jew and he reconciled his understanding, which was very profound and sensitive, with his highly inspired Divine determination to defend the Law of God – the Mosaic – and to fight for it. I have no doubt that if he had lived before the Incarnation of our Redeemer, he would have been a heroic Hebrew and his name would have

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<sup>35</sup> See Margaret Mott, "Leonor de Cáceres and the Mexican Inquisition", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62(1) (Jan. 2001): 81-98.

<sup>36</sup> On Carvajal, the younger, see: Alfonso Toro, *La familia Carvajal* (Mexico City: Editorial Patria, 1944); Cohen (1973); Seymour B. Liebman, *The Enlightened* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1967); Miriam Bodian, *Dying in the Law of Moses* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 47-78.

<sup>37</sup> See Liebman (1970) 181.

<sup>38</sup> Liebman (1970) 182.

been as famous in the Bible, as are the names of those who died in the defense of their law when it was necessary.

## 1.4 THE MEXICAN INQUISITION

The story of the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, bringing the Golden Age of Iberian Jewry to a tragic end, is well known.<sup>39</sup> Less well known are the details of the so-called “expulsion” from Portugal in 1496. In fact, Portugal forcibly converted its Jewish residents without providing an option to depart.

The Inquisition spread from the Old World to the new. It operated in Mexico as early as 1528 and had a tribunal in Mexico City from 1571 until 1821. With respect to Mexico, in general, and NL, in particular, the books by José Toribio Medina, Alfonso Toro and Seymour Liebman are indispensable.<sup>40</sup> Several Mexican *procesos* have been published; among them are those of Tomas Treviño, Gabriel de Granada (a teenager), and Padre Hidalgo.<sup>41</sup> In addition, there remain archives of the Inquisition in Mexico City.

In the subsections that follow, I provide brief descriptions of some published works on the subject of the Mexican Inquisition.

### 1.4.1 José Toribio Medina and Alfonso Toro

Long before it was undertaken by scholars in Mexico, José Toribio Medina wrote about the Mexican Inquisition. Albeit, he conflated Carvajal senior with his nephew, the sum of his work is admirable, and stamps with his image are still cherished in Mexico and Spain. He wrote on the literature of Latin American writers, several volumes on the Inquisition in Latin America, and a variety of other topics. His book on Mexico, *Tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición en México*, was first published in Santiago, Chile, in 1905, and was recently republished as well, and sold out within weeks of publication. It was recently made available on the Internet by the Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León.

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<sup>39</sup> Roth (1974); Yom Tov Assis, *The Jews of Spain* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organisation, 1988); Norman Roth, *Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); Haim Beinart, *Chapters in Judeo-Spanish History* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1998); Yom Tov Assis and Yosef Kaplan, eds., *Dor Geirush Sefarad* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1999); Haim Beinart, *The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain* (Portland, OR: Oxford, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Medina (1905); Toro (1935); Liebman (1975).

<sup>41</sup> Luis Gonzalez Obregon, *Los Procesos Militar e Inquisitorial del Padre Hidalgo y otros caudillis insurgents* (Mexico City: Ediciones Fuente Cultural, 1887); David Fergusson, *Trial of Gabriel de Granada by the Inquisition in Mexico, 1642 to 1645* (American Jewish Historical Society, 1899); Toro (1932); *Procesos de Luis de Carvajal (el Mozo)*, Mexico: Publicaciones del Archivo General de la Nación, 1935; *Trial of Tomas Treviño, 1649*, American Jewish Historical Society Archives, vol. 1495.

Alfonso Toro was the second to publish the *proceso* of Luis de Carvajal el Mozo, after it had gained so much attention the first time. He also published various other important pieces from the Archivo General de la Nación, in order to bring to the public eye some of what was done in Mexico by the Inquisition. There is no question that his work was of great importance and generated much interest and research. His books have been republished several times.

#### **1.4.2 Seymour Liebman**

Arguably the most important researcher of the Mexican Inquisition, Seymour Liebman, wrote profusely and eloquently about the history of the anusim in Mexico and their persecution at the hands of the Inquisition. He completely devoted himself to the commemoration of these people. He studied them with deep involvement, and brought to the reader a clear, detailed, annotated and moving picture of the life of the secret Jews in Mexico. I would venture to say that Liebman did for them, in the sum of his work, what amounts to what S. D. Goitien did for the Jews of Egypt in his volumes on, *A Mediterranean Society*. He brought them back to life.

Interestingly, before Liebman completed his book, *The Jews in New Spain*, he consulted with Don Israel Cavazos Garza, the historian of Monterrey, and asked him whether there still was any crypto-Judaism in the region. Cavazos flatly denied any remnant.<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, Liebman concluded his book by noting that nothing was left in Mexico of the heroic Jewish presence that had once been there, and that with the disappearance of the Inquisition so did secret Judaism dissipate.

Together with Rabbi Shlomo Goren, Liebman visited Venta Prieta, where a Mexican-Indian group claimed descent from the Carvajals. Goren concluded that the group was not of predominantly Jewish descent.<sup>43</sup>

### **1.5 CRYPTO-JUDAISM**

#### **1.5.1 Rabbinic Sources**

The many rabbinic responsa on the subject of anusim have been collected by Hinsch J. Zimmels and supplemented by Simhah Assaf.<sup>44</sup> These sources do not, however, deal with the New World.

Benzion Netanyahu sought support for his minority opinion – that the Inquisition persecuted New Christians for a non-existent crypto-

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<sup>42</sup> This was reported to me by someone who heard it directly from Cavazos.

<sup>43</sup> Beller (1969) 278.

<sup>44</sup> Hinsch Jacob Zimmels, *Die Marranen in Rabbinische Literature* (Berlin: Rubin Mass, 1932); Simhah Assaf, “Anusey Sefarad u-Portuga'l be-safrut ha-teshubot”, in *Be-ohaley Ya'aqob* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1943) 145-180.

Judaism – in a perceived change in attitudes by rabbis, as reflected in the responsa literature.<sup>45</sup>

With the discovery of the crypto-Jewish community of Belmonte, Portugal, at the beginning of the twentieth century and of descendants of New Christians in the New World more recently, there have been a few brief responsa and letters by rabbis on the subject of modern-day anusim.<sup>46</sup>

### 1.5.2 Megged and Gitlitz

Baruch Megged, in his Master's thesis,<sup>47</sup> describes many aspects of crypto-Jewish life in Mexico based on 16th century *procesos*, including those of Pedro Enriquez, and others by that surname, as well as those of Licenciado Manuel de Morales and other members of his extended family, plus a few others.

David Gitlitz, in his *Secrecy and Deceit*,<sup>48</sup> has collected a comprehensive and convenient list of crypto-Jewish practices, based mainly on Inquisition sources, including those from Mexico.

## 1.6 MODERN TIMES

Santiago Roel's books are what schoolchildren learn history from. His book, *Nuevo León: Apuntes históricos*,<sup>49</sup> has seen countless editions and is the standard basic textbook on the history of the region. It does not, however, deal with the Sephardic origins of the founding families.

In addition to the popular reports cited earlier,<sup>50</sup> there have been several other works addressing the subject of modern crypto-Judaism.

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<sup>45</sup> Benzion Netanyahu, *The Marranos of Spain*, 2nd ed. (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1966); Netanyahu, *Toward the Inquisition* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997).

<sup>46</sup> Jacob Meir (to Moses Bensabat Amzalak), 1928; Yehudah Leib Tirelson, *Maarhei Leiv* (Kishenov, 1932) 130-131; Aaron Soloveichik (to Schulamith Halevy), Abraham Isaac Kook, *Iggerot ha Re'ayah*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1962 (1962), nos. 272 and 291; Mordechai Eliahu (to Joseph Sabbag), 15 Shevat 5751 (January 17, 1991); 1 Nisan 5754 (March 13, 1994), <http://www.cs.tau.ac.il/~nachum/sch/sch/solo.gif>; Ovadia Yossef (to Daniel Raccah), 1 Av 5755 (July 28, 1995); Mordechai Eliahu (to Schulamith Halevy), 1 Elul 5755 (August 14, 1995), <http://www.cs.tau.ac.il/~nachum/sch/sch/eliahu.jpg>.

<sup>47</sup> Baruch Megged, *Darkam Hayhudit shel Anusei "Sefarad Hehadashah" (Mexico) Bameah Hashesh Esreh*, Masters thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem (1987).

<sup>48</sup> David M. Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996).

<sup>49</sup> Santiago Roel Melo, *Nuevo León: Apuntes Históricas* (Monterrey, 1938).

<sup>50</sup> See n. 12.



### 1.6.1 El Sabado Secreto

One of the earliest suggestions of post-Inquisition crypto-Judaism is also one of the most interesting. In the late nineteenth century, there appeared a “secret” newspaper, called originally *El Sábado secreto*, with subtitle, *Periódico judaizante, órgano de los Sefardíes de América* (February 9, 1889). Its name changed to *La luz del Sabado* (five issues, February 23 to March 23) and finally to *El Sabado* (April 27 to August 1).<sup>51</sup> See Figure 4.1. The paper included the pronouncement: “This periodical will be circulated only among Israelites”.<sup>52</sup>

### 1.6.2 Vito Alessio Robles

Vito Alessio Robles became a historian at the end of his years, first experimenting successfully with journalism. A career officer and later a politician from Saltillo, a large city in Coahuila, also an important part of what we call NL, the Nuevo Reino de León, and a city established by the *pobladores* in the first days of the region.

As a politician, he fought against Plutarco Elias Calles and Alvaro Obregon. He is the one who authored the anti-Semitic piece against the “Juderia” of Monterrey,<sup>53</sup> ignoring entirely, that Saltillo is part of the same region, as Eugenio del Hoyo was quick to remind him. As a historian, he was not actually considered of grand quality, and this article was his claim to fame.

### 1.6.3 Eugenio del Hoyo

In 1972, Eugenio del Hoyo published an indispensable two-volume work on the history of NL. In addition, he published journal articles before and after the book. It is thanks to his research that we know that over two thirds of the founders of El Nuevo Reino de León were of Sephardic extraction.<sup>54</sup>

On my last visit to Zacatecas, I sat with Bernardo del Hoyo, Eugenio’s nephew. He recounted to me the details that caused his uncle to arrive in Monterrey. This heretofore untold story deserves retelling.

Eugenio del Hoyo was born in Jerez, Zacatecas, and formally studied topographic engineering. He also became expert on his own in

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<sup>51</sup> These were published by Francisco Rivas in Mexico City. See Martin Zielonka, “A Spanish-American Jewish Periodical”, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 23 (1915): 129-135; Zielonka, “Francisco Rivas”, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 35 (1939): 219-225; Corinne A. Krause, *Los judíos en México* (Mexico City: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1987) 83-92; and Julius Silversmith, “Mexico’s Literary Curiosity”, unpublished typed essay.

<sup>52</sup> *El Sábado secreto*, February 9, 1889, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Vito Alessio Robles, “La Juderia de Monterrey”, in *Bosquejos históricos* (México: Editorial Polis, 1938) 94-107.

<sup>54</sup> Eugenio del Hoyo, *Historia del Nuevo Reino de León (1571-1723)* (México: ITESM, 1972) 268.

chemical engineering, but he taught history for his father, who was an influential man, and fell in love with this subject. Del Hoyo arrived back in Zacatecas after his studies in Mexico City. His great-grandfather, Arcadio Cabrera had one of the greatest libraries in the country in Macia, but in 1918, many of the books burned in a fire. Many generations preserved whatever was possible, and Eugenio del Hoyo kept stamps with postal marks in books with signatures, and thus began his great interest in history. He had the book of the great poet of Lope de Velarde, gathered a group of historians and literary personas, and established “La Peña Literaria de Zacatecas” in the Forties. In 1948, they organized an important and very successful conference, which included among its attendees Francisco de la Masa and many other important figures.

But in 1950, del Hoyo was among those who established a local branch of PAN<sup>55</sup> in Zacatecas. The governor, Lombardo Reinoso, heard about it and began persecuting him and his brother. And his father was not voting for the governor. He began receiving threats regarding the security of his work and that of his relatives. They still believed that this was a democratic country, and did as they pleased. But as it turned out, del Hoyo was soon out of work.

In Jeres, his uncle Zalvado, who was married to Herminia Cabrera Cabrera, fell ill and was on his deathbed. Del Hoyo went to visit him. His aunt found out that he was already without work; another cousin came – Guillermo Macuna Felíz, who was married to a cousin of Eugenio Garza Sada. There they arranged a job at the Tecnológico de Monterrey for Eugenio, on a stipend courtesy of Don Eugenio Sada, and so he arrived in Monterrey and became involved in the whole matter of the origin of the city.

Del Hoyo wrote the following in his *Historia del Nuevo Reino de León*:<sup>56</sup>

[T]he only thing that we have been able to document is the presence – in the northeast of Mexico in the XVI century – of numerous persons of Sephardic origin, but not necessarily Judaizers. Another factor that we should keep in mind is the degree of distancing of each one of these Sephardics from the origin of the group: there are those born in Portugal, in el Reino de León or in Extremadura; there are those that are natives of Seville, of Granada, or of some other place of Andalucía; there are those born in Mexico, in la Puebla de los Angeles or in some other place of la Nueva España, there are those that are children of father and mother “converts” and there can be those – rare exception – in which one of his progenitors might be “old Christian;” and there are those that are Mestizos and Mulattos. Through our knowledge of the inquisitorial processes, we know that there were among them many religious mixtures, from the sage rabbi to the ignorant soldier or peon, from the

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<sup>55</sup> *Partido Acción Nacional* (National Action Party), a conservative Christian-democratic political party.

<sup>56</sup> Translation of del Hoyo (1972) by Edna G. Brown, <http://www.library.ci.corpus-christi.tx.us/newkingdom/reinotitlepage.htm> (2003) 77.

passionate fanatic to the sincere convert, passing through the bashful ones, the cowards, the timid ones, the pretenders, the lukewarm ones, the indifferent ones, the compliant ones, etc.... Thus multiple questions will always be left open: How many of those Sephardics still were Judaizers upon entering el Nuevo Reino de León and to what degree would they continue believing and practicing "the old law of Moses?" The practicing families, how long did they continue it and which were the steps of the Judeo-Christian syncretism? Since when, how and why did the tradition of Moses come to disappear in this region? Is there any part of it remaining? Questions that, with the exception of the last one, never came to be answered and documented.

The problem that is planted in them is of the greatest interest, suggestive and passionate, since we know how, in these regions of the world, the Sephardic groups have been characterized by their constant and firm fidelity to the law of Moses, by their eminently conserved spirit and by their profound closeness to the traditions and customs of their race, to the degree that the families, who descent from those Jews expelled from Spain in the XV century, continue speaking Spanish, singing romances and, some, jealously keeping the key to the house that their remote ancestors inhabited in Spain. Moreover, in spite of expulsions, inquisitorial persecutions and even of pogrom, the Sephardics continue living faithful to their tradition and as minority groups, still within the Hispanic world, such is the case of the "*chuetas*" of Palma de Mayorca, secluded in "the street," which conserves all the characteristics of the ancient synagogue or medieval ghetto; or the Crypto-Jews of the lands of Braganza, Traz-os-Montes or la Beira in Portugal, - region from which came the Sephardic settlers of el Nuevo Reino de León - who have come up to today faithful in their tradition.... We have vague reports of persistence of a Jewish community that ... it purports to descend from the novo-Hispanic Crypto-Jews and they keep the tradition of Moses in a part of the region of Tehuantepec. Here arises another question: why did the Sephardic group of the northeast of la Nueva España lose that vitality that has made it possible that other groups continue up to these days? Why did it not leave any perceptible tracts? Did it really not leave them? We believe that the only one who could arrive at revealing something of this impassioned unknown would be the folkloric investigation, a discipline that is outside of our camp and of our possibilities, but that we suspect [to be] very promising, since, accidentally, in simple readings of information or by our scarce communication with people of the region in study, we have come to observe some curiosities and some significant resemblances in the folklore of Nuevo León and Coahuila with the Sephardic folklore of the novo-Hispanic Crypto-Jews of the XVII century, as it appears in the inquisitorial processes; but understand well, it only has to do with

resemblances which we have not been able to deepen, of which we even would not be able to say with any certainty if they are only found in this region or if they also arise in other places.; or if they are typically Sephardics or if they belong to the common *transfondo* of the Hispanic towns or to the Mediterranean tradition. We believe that, before arriving at any conclusion, it would be necessary to investigate carefully many things: is there a true relationship between these folkloric phenomena or does it treat simply of a curious and fortuitous resemblance? How old is the folkloric phenomenon registered in the northeast of Mexico? - for example, the custom of circumcising the newborn males is very extensive in the city of Monterrey, but we have been able to make clear that it is only an influence of the North American hygienic preoccupation and an imitation of its clinical techniques -. Is it or is it not exclusive of the region in study and, on another hand, does it actually pertain to the Sephardic tradition? It is obvious that, in order to give a serious and trustworthy answer to these questions, one must share a detailed and profound knowledge of the two folklores that are compared, a knowledge that we are very far from possessing.

This work already printed, we found in the HISTORIA DE NUEVO LEON of David Alberto Cossío, Vol. II, p. 275, this curious and surprising paragraph: "The Judaizers, although very persecuted from the times of Don Luis de Carvajal, did not stop working surreptitiously in this territory. With the best secrecy, but with tireless effort, they continued their propaganda among the inhabitants and soldiers; but the inveterate Christianity of the settlers (?) and the tireless spiritual work of the friars and priests (?) placed a continuous obstacle to those workers. In the greatest of secrecy the Judaic rituals were celebrated with fasting and lavation; Psalms were recited and other ceremonies of the old law were performed, all of them awaiting the arrival of the Messiah." Unfortunately Cossío does not mention the source in which he is supported in such an interesting affirmation.

Del Hoyo's nephew, Bernardo, also told me, in his father's name, that del Hoyo had once given a lecture in which he determined the original location of Monterrey (originally named Santa Lucia). After the lecture, some important local individuals took him out to eat, and asked him how much money he wanted in order to agree to change the location. (Bernardo supplied the names.) Del Hoyo eventually published an article stating that the real location is the one claimed by the official historian of Monterrey, Israel de Cavazos Garza, rather than the one he had determined himself.

#### 1.6.4 Ricardo Elizondo Elizondo

Ricardo Elizondo Elizondo was the star student of Eugenio del Hoyo. In 1987, he wrote a small book entitled, *Los Sefarditas en Nuevo León, Reminiscencias en el Folklore*.<sup>57</sup> Essentially, this is the study that his teacher and master had suggested in his own work, where the latter had dealt with the attack of Vito Alessio Robles on the “Juderia of Monterrey”. (See Chapter 7.)

Elizondo Elizondo lists an abundance of Jewish customs that the author says survived in the region until recently, first among them the separation of meat and milk. He portrays all of them as surviving folklore, not as religion. The author was very virulently attacked by the Novolense community, and his work was more or less made “unavailable” in the city, although it had been published by the archive.

The book was written with care and with disclaimers from the start. In our conversation, the author referred to this work of his as “*pecados de juventud*” (sins of youth), and indeed it does contain errors.<sup>58</sup> All the same, this is an important work, for it is the very first serious attempt by a local individual to address the issue of surviving practices in the region.

#### 1.6.5 Richard Santos

Richard Santos is open about his descent from North Mexican anusim. In what is one of the earliest attempts to grapple with the possibility of crypto-Judaism in the American Southwest,<sup>59</sup> he combined personal memories of foods and customs together with some historical background, in an attempt to demonstrate a likelihood of Jewish heritage among Texan Latinos. He concluded with an emotional lament over the loss of crypto-Jewish tradition.

Santos published his book, *Silent Heritage: The Sephardim and the Colonization of the Spanish North American Frontier*, in 2000.<sup>60</sup> The historical part is based on del Hoyo and others. The personal part of the book is touching, but, alas, childhood memories are reported without the benefit of adult hindsight, comparison or corroboration.

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<sup>57</sup> Ricardo Elizondo Elizondo, *Los sefarditas en Nuevo León: reminiscencias en el folklore* (Monterrey: Archivo General del Estado de Nuevo León, 1987). The book includes an introduction by Ariela Katz de Gugenheim, an Orthodox Jew living in Mexico City.

<sup>58</sup> For example, Elizondo Elizondo states that Jews fled directly from Spain to Amsterdam, among other refuges, in 1492 (p. 9). He rightfully points out, as is the case in Northern Mexico and elsewhere, that anusim avoid blood and viscera (see Section 4.4.6), but erroneously translates the word *helev* in the Torah to include organ meats (p. 15).

<sup>59</sup> Richard G. Santos, “Chicanos of Jewish Descent in Texas”, *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (July 1983): 327-333.

<sup>60</sup> Richard G. Santos, *Silent Heritage* (San Antonio, TX: New Sepharad Press, 2000).

### 1.6.6 David Raphael

David Raphael did not originally divulge his crypto-Jewish origins. Living as an Orthodox Jew in the United States, working as a medical doctor, he began by writing fiction about the subject of the Sephardic exile, and finally, after years of secrecy, took the horrid horse by the head, and went back to his original hometown, Marin, in NL, to investigate. He too was denied access to the archives, and suffered from disappearance of documents he already got. All this caused him great suffering. His book, *The Conquistadores and Crypto-Jews of Monterrey*, though devoid of notes and index, has the value of first-hand experience.<sup>61</sup>

### 1.6.7 Israel Cavazos Garza

Israel Cavazos Garza is the “official” historian of Nuevo León. He has published profusely and has zealously denied the existence of anusim in the region to any outsiders. Thus, none of his books contain any reference to such. I had the pleasure of meeting him many times. In our first encounter, I started by describing to him all of my findings in other regions in the world, from the United states to Brazil to Costa Rica and Puerto Rico, Spain, Portugal etcetera. When I finished, he simply replied that there were no more anusim in the Nuevo León region than in the other regions I had been to.

I gave a lecture soon after, which he attended, and he pleaded with me to help undo some of the terrible nasty mythology that is going around, which I promised I would. Don Israel Cavazos was often quoted to me by my many friends in the region. Thus, I have also learned of those opinions of his that are kept for the “inner circle”.

### 1.6.8 Raphael Patai

Raphael Patai was Israel’s foremost folklorist. He went to Mexico in order to study the “Indian Jews” in the wake of a swarm of articles in Jewish publications about new communities of Mexican individuals who proclaimed, or were proclaimed by the authors of the articles to be descended of anusim.<sup>62</sup>

Patai’s “On the Peripheries”<sup>63</sup> is devoted to a couple of newly formed organized communities of “Indian Jews” in Mexico who claimed descent from anusim, with an emphasis on that of Venta Prieta, and to the New-Christians (“*chuetas*”) of Majorca. Patai did not consider the latter to be crypto-Jews, because they preserved no traces of Jewish

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<sup>61</sup> David Raphael, *The Conquistadores and Crypto-Jews of Monterrey* (Valley Village, CA, 2001).

<sup>62</sup> One article was by Meir Berger, “The ‘Red Jews’ of Mexico”, *Idisher Kurir*, January 15, 16 and 18, 1939.

<sup>63</sup> Raphael Patai, *On Jewish Folklore* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983) 447-503.

heritage that he could identify, and although they may believe their Jewish ancestry to be secret, Christians around them identify them as Jews based on their names and areas of residence.

Patai's chapters,<sup>64</sup> "The Jewish Indians of Mexico" and "Venta Prieta Revisited" are based on field trips conducted in 1948 and 1964, during which he gathered oral testimony as to their ethnohistory, mainly from community leaders, and observed their practices. He distinguished between Adventist Protestants and crypto-Jewish Indians, but suspected a propensity of anusim to join Bible-reading and, later, Bible-observing Christian sects, once those options became available.

Ultimately, Patai left open the question of origin of these communities (was it a "reawakening of the old faith which for many centuries had remained dormant" or merely "a pious fairy tale"), his main argument against their authenticity being the ultimate willingness of some to accept his advice and officially convert to Judaism in order to be recognized by the State of Israel.

Unfortunately, Patai was hampered by insufficient familiarity with the history of the New-Christian presence in Mexico and the beliefs and traditions preserved, as reflected in Inquisition *procesos*. Patai's research did not take into account any of the history or creed of the anusim.

I had the opportunity to discuss with Patai his research in Mexico before his passing. Chapter 9 in this thesis is dedicated to one of his Mexico City informants. The Venta Prieta group is not, on the other hand, relevant to this work.

### **1.6.9 Cronistas**

*Cronistas* are local village or town historians. Some are better than others. Others are really entirely untrained. The goal of all of them is to give the town about which they write as much importance as possible. Every town, of course is very important, according to the *cronista* of the town, and attached to the *pobladores*. Sometimes this involves *Sefardismo* as well, including all kinds of never heard of before rituals. See Section 2.3.2.

## **1.7 OTHER REGIONS**

### **1.7.1 Portugal**

In 1917, Samuel Schwarz, while working as an engineer in Portugal, was introduced to New-Christians in the Northern mountains of Portugal. In his as yet unsurpassed book, *Os Cristãos-Novos em Portugal no Século XX*,<sup>65</sup> and in several essays,<sup>66</sup> he retells the story of his making

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<sup>64</sup> Patai (1983) 447-492.

<sup>65</sup> *Os Cristãos-Novos em Portugal no Século XX* (Lisbon: Empresa Portuguesa de Livros, 1925).

acquaintance with crypto-Jewish families in and around Belmonte. He describes the self-perception of these Jews as well as how they are perceived by others, makes clear the fact that numerous similar communities existed at the time, and notes that women were the torch-bearers of tradition. Schwarz collected and published many of the secret prayers of the anusim in the entire region.<sup>67</sup> His work was instrumental in generating support for the emerging Jewish community of Oporto, headed by Barros-Basto.

A more recent description of the crypto-Jews of Belmonte by David Augusto Canelo, a schoolteacher who teaches in that town, is also available.<sup>68</sup> The author's descriptions along with his personal observations afford the reader insight not only into the ritual life of Portuguese anusim, but also regarding how they are still perceived by their Catholic neighbors.

I have visited the region a number of times and lived with members of the community. I had the opportunity to pray the ancient prayers both with members of the modern, reconverted Jews, and women who maintain the old ways, and did not venture out into the open. I was asked many times if I would translate the ancient prayers into Hebrew, and, as it turned out, the opportunity fell into my hands and I was able to contribute in a very significant way to their translation.<sup>69</sup>

### 1.7.2 Brazil

Little has been written about contemporary crypto-Judaism in Brazil, though it appears to be widespread. Sonia Bloomfield Ramagem, a professor of geography who, in her former capacity as an employee of the Israeli embassy in Brasilia, carried out extensive correspondence with anusim, wrote a Masters thesis on the subject.<sup>70</sup> She also studied one group from Northern Brazil, their claim of transmitted Jewish identity, evidence they offer of their Sephardic roots, and reactions by scholars and by representatives of Jewry and Israel.<sup>71</sup> Her dispassionate examination gives the reader a glimpse into the problems inherent in the disparity between the self-perception of a group, with the folk etymologies and historical theories it resorts to in its modern efforts to convince outsiders of its validity, and the tools used by those outsiders who seek to verify its existence.

I made several trips to Brazil myself. I met families of informants who wanted me to get to know their origins, and from there, a flow of new

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<sup>66</sup> "The Crypto-Jews of Portugal", *Menorah J.* 12 (1926): 138-149, 283-297, 325.

<sup>67</sup> See Samuel Schwarz, *The New-Christians in Portugal in the 20th Century*, Claude B. Stuczynski, trans. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2005).

<sup>68</sup> David Augusto Canelo, *Os Últimos Criptojudéus em Portugal* (Belmonte, Portugal: Câmara Municipal de Belmonte, 2001).

<sup>69</sup> See n. 67.

<sup>70</sup> Sonia Bloomfield Ramagem, *A fênix de Abraão* (Brasília: Cultura Gráfica e Editora, 1994).

<sup>71</sup> Sonia Bloomfield Ramagen, "The Seridó: Refuge of the Anussim?", in *Land and Community*, ed. H. Brodsky (Bethesda, MD: University of Maryland Press, 1997) 399-411.



individuals came to meet me. I learned a tremendous amount, and have reported on some of my findings.<sup>72</sup>

### 1.7.3 Southwest USA

Stanley Hordes came to work in New Mexico for a year as a state historian. He says that people began to approach him telling him about other people's Jewishness and about their own. He is the one who brought the media's attention to New Mexico. In a report on the initiation of a research project on remnants of a Sephardic legacy in the Southwest, Hordes<sup>73</sup> listed seven practices suggestive of crypto-Judaism: Friday-night candle-lighting, refraining from eating pork, observing a Saturday Sabbath, covering mirrors during mourning, circumcision, playing with a four-sided top, and leaving pebbles on graves. Of these, Sabbath observance, circumcision, and refraining from pork are of Biblical origin and, though they are mentioned in Inquisition edicts and dossiers as Jewish practices, could also be attributed to more recent fundamentalist Christian influence in the area. Lighting candles on Friday evening is rabbinic, appears frequently in Inquisition records, is symptomatic of crypto-Judaism in Portugal today, and is the most commonly cited indication of Jewish heritage. Covering mirrors and leaving pebbles are well-known in New Mexico, as well as among Jews, do not appear to be mentioned in Inquisition records, and are not uniquely Jewish. Tops are extremely popular in Portugal, where they are made traditionally of wood and are in no way unique to New Christians, and, though popular among Jews on Hanukkah, are not of Jewish origin. (See Chapter 4.)

Hordes became a popular speaker. He published a few articles and then a book, *To the End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico*,<sup>74</sup> in which he begins with the settlement of Mexico, the mission of Juan de Oñate to conquer New Mexico, and the trouble involved, and the history of the state of New Mexico since. When it comes to the survival of Jewish heritage there, Hordes was careful to quote others, not really asserting any claims of his own.

Frances Hernández, a professor of English at the University of Texas, compiled an extensive and eclectic list of all the elements believed in New Mexico to be of crypto-Jewish significance, based upon articles in the popular press and on interviews with Father C. Carmona, L.

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<sup>72</sup> Schulamith C. Halevy, invited talk at Santangel 1998, Dominican University, Chicago, Illinois, 1998, and "They Buried my Grandmother in a Wedding Gown": Vestiges of Crypto-Judaism in Contemporary Northeast Brazil", presented at IX Congreso de la Federación Internacional de Estudios sobre América Latina y el Caribe (FIEALC), Tel-Aviv, Apr. 1999.

<sup>73</sup> Stanley M. Hordes, "Report: 'The Sephardic legacy in the Southwest: The Crypto-Jews of New Mexico', Historical Research Project Sponsored by the Latin American Institute, University of New Mexico", *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 15, no. 2 (1993): 137-138.

<sup>74</sup> Stanley M. Hordes, *To the End of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

Carrasco, Hordes, and the latter's contacts.<sup>75</sup> Spanning the gamut from significant indications of Jewish origin through tantalizing suggestions to fanciful signs, she discusses the history of the settlement of New Mexico, transmission of culture and the Penitente movement, lists "Jewish" names and surnames, artifacts, Sabbath and holiday customs, life-cycle rituals, and "Sephardic" foods, and mentions Jewish-seeming symbols on headstones, non-Christian prayers, Ladino-sounding language and Sephardic-sounding music. This is the most comprehensive and vivid representation of crypto-Jewish self-perception as it has developed among a generation that has been influenced by external and often poorly informed Jewish sources.

Despite persistent reports that some descendants of the forced converts preserved their Jewish identity as well as various Jewish practices, Judith Neulander questioned the notion that crypto-Judaism survived in New Mexico into the twentieth century.<sup>76</sup> The main challenge is the argument that people who come forward today more likely derived any apparent Jewish practices from fundamentalist Christians who observe various biblical laws and/or are motivated by a desire to climb the social ladder.<sup>77</sup> Claiming that of Hordes' seven practices the four-sided top is the ethnic marker "that seemed most compelling", the author goes on to demonstrate the unlikelihood of its being associated with Judaism among Hispanics in New Mexico. Having set up and torn down a straw man, in the form of the obviously weakest indication, the teetotum *dreydl*, the author jumps to the unfounded conclusion that crypto-Jews of the Southwest are "an imagined community". In response, D. M. Gradwohl<sup>78</sup> succinctly raised the question of exceptionality: Considering the numerous past and present groups of Hispanic anusim throughout the world, why should their presence in the Southwest be so vehemently disputed?

Such customs as I will describe in Chapter 4, many of which apply to anusim in the Southwest as well, bear strong evidence of Jewish origin.<sup>79</sup> The more obscure the practice, the more firmly it attests to the existence of a crypto-Judaic subculture. Many would not even be recognized by Jews or Gentiles today as Jewish, and there would have been no impetus for any non-Jew to adopt them. These rabbinic and medieval customs could not have been derived from a reading of the Bible and are not shared by non-Jews, nor could they have been learned from Jews in the region. Though it is known that people learned from the Edicts themselves how to act Jewish, it would greatly challenge one's credulity to imagine that it was masochistic Old Christians who did so

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<sup>75</sup> Frances Hernández, "The Secret Jews of the Southwest", in *Sephardim in the Americas*, ed. M. A. Cohen and A. J. Peck (Tuscaloosa, AL: American Jewish Archives, 1993) 411-454.

<sup>76</sup> Judith S. Neulander, "Crypto-Jews of the Southwest: An Imagined Community", *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 16, no. 1 (1994): 64-68; and "The New-Mexican Crypto-Jewish Canon", *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 18, nos. 1&2 (1996): 19-58.

<sup>77</sup> Neulander (1994): 64-67.

<sup>78</sup> David M. Gradwohl. "On Vestiges and Identities: Some Thoughts on the Controversy Concerning 'Crypto-Jews' in the American Southwest", *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 18, nos. 1&2 (1996): 83-84.

<sup>79</sup> Schulamith C. Halevy, "Manifestations of Crypto-Judaism in the American Southwest", *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 18, nos. 1&2 (1996): 68-76.

and were later tried for such practices, rather than secretly devoted Jews. Accordingly, the practices uncovered in this research are best explained as the product of an unbroken tradition harking back to the Iberian Peninsula.

## **1.8 SUMMARY OF FOLLOWING CHAPTERS**

This thesis describes results culled from many hundreds of interviews. Informants included individuals, families, local officials, and clergymen. The hidden nature of the phenomenon under investigation required an uncommon, unstructured style of interview, described in the next chapter.

The Treviños are one far-flung family many of whose members I interviewed. In Chapter 3, I report on those discussions. We will see how trust grew over time, as did my understanding of the lives of New Christians in modern Nuevo León.

The unusual customs and practices described by the Treviños and very many other individuals in Northern Mexico are summarized in Chapter 4. These are compared with normative Christianity and crypto-Jewish practice elsewhere. As we will see, they leave no doubt that crypto-Jewish practice has survived in the region until today.

Having established the continued existence of Mexican crypto-Judaism, an important question is how identity and practice were transmitted over the many generation since the founding Spanish families established themselves in the region. This issue is explored at length in Chapter 5.

Among the most fascinating of the numerous people I spoke with were a number of priests from the region. In Chapter 6, I report on those discussions, and on the range of awareness by “men of cloth” of the phenomenon of crypto-Judaism in Mexico.

Chapter 7 contains a discussion of how attitudes of and towards the New Christians of Nuevo León have changed in the course of the twentieth century. This is followed by a brief look at various myths; only against this backdrop can one understand local perceptions.

One of the most emotional encounters was my meeting the family of Roberto Mercado Manzanares, whom Patai had interviewed in the 1940s, via his children. Their story is told in Chapter 9.

A final chapter summarizes the main results of this investigation.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

This thesis describes results culled from many hundreds of interviews, phone conversations, and written or electronic correspondence, conducted over a period of fifteen years. My informants included both individuals and families living in Northern Mexico or who had originated there. They came from all walks of life: servants, ranchers, housewives, powerful business-people, professionals, artists, socialites, low and high officials, politicians, academics, and clergymen.

I made seven trips to Mexico in the years 1995-2007. I interviewed informants in Nuevo León on several extended occasions: July-August 2000; November 2001 - February 2002; December 2002; Summer 2004; Winter 2006-2007. I visited Monterrey, San Pedro de Garza Garcia, Sabinas Hidalgo, Villaldama, Parás, Cerralvo, China, Doctor Coss, Mina, Higuera, Villa de Santiago, Salinas Victoria, General Zuazua, Marin, Doctor González, Linares, among other places. I also interviewed people in the states of Baja California (in Mexicali), Coahuila (in Monclova, Saltillo, Múzquiz, Ramos Arizpe, Granja El Carmen), Federal District (Mexico City), Hidalgo (in Pachuca de Soto), Morelos (in Cuernavaca), and Zacatecas (in Zacatecas, Fresnillo, Guadalupe, Jerez, Valparaiso, Concepción del Oro). In addition, I conducted face-to-face interviews with Mexicans (from these and other states) now living in the United States (in California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New Mexico, New York, Texas, and Washington), Canada, and Israel, since 1992. And throughout the years, I spoke often on the telephone and/or was in touch via electronic mail with people from all over Mexico and the southern U.S.

The upper class of Mexican society in southern Texas has been described as small in number, yet extremely influential.<sup>80</sup> Their authority is earned by descent from “land grant” families, not necessarily by current wealth. Members of this elite (addressed by the non-elite in Texas by the title “Don”) are clannish, maintain a high culture and preserve contacts with branches of their families across the border. They look down on the boorish poorly-educated, uncultured, nouveau-riche Americans.<sup>81</sup> All this is true of the Mexican anusim I have met. In Texas:<sup>82</sup>

Most pioneers... were quite adept at drawing the distinction between the landed ‘Castilian’ elite and the landless Mexican.... [I]t did not protect them from the racial opinion of many Americans. One descendent of this upper class described [Anglos’] reaction as follows: “Now that a new country has been established south of the Rio Grande they call our people *Mexicans*. They are the same people who were called Spaniards only a short time ago.”

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<sup>80</sup> William Madsen, *The Mexican Americans of South Texas* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964) 41.

<sup>81</sup> Madsen (1964) 41-43.

<sup>82</sup> David Montejano, *Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1987) 84. See also pp. 10, 315 regarding class distinctions.

At the start, though I could understand spoken Spanish, my facility with the language was inadequate to allow me to conduct full interviews. So, I had to communicate in English, sometimes with the help of a friend or a family member who understood English well enough. But for many years now, I have been completely fluent in, and comfortable with, Spanish, and have no problem at all communicating with anyone. Likewise, in the beginning I would respond in English to letters or email written in Spanish, but now I write back in Spanish without difficulty. I also gave public lectures in Mexico in Spanish, and spoke on the radio several times. These forms of public contact created much appreciation and trust, and, on occasion, earned me invitations to important homes.

I also collected newspaper stories, which provided interesting context for personal stories both about the supernatural and about the bizarre, not to mention the general style of reportage and the attitude to *Sefardismo* and to Israel and Judaism. Chapters 7 and 9 include some of this material.

## 2.1 APPROACH

The hidden nature of the phenomenon under investigation in this work required an uncommon, unstructured style of interview, described in this chapter. In this secret culture, so much has been lost, and so much remains hidden. Though the younger generation may seek me out, the older generation is loath to speak to strangers. In many places, including most of Mexico, only selected youngsters, if any, are handed down any oral history pointing to a Jewish identity. Often, the rare young ones 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. However, in NL, as we will see in Chapters 3 and 5, transmission of family origins is often more explicit.

Some Mexicans, especially from elitist 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 conquistadors. 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 of Jewish origin. If such customs are combined with a sense of separate cultural identity, then that could buttress a claim of Sephardic 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 Sephardic custom, and which are not shared by normative Catholics. To this end, Biblical practices are of less significance on their own, since they could perhaps be attributed to fundamentalist Christian sects that were active in the area.<sup>83</sup> Practices that appear as evidence of Judaizing in “Edicts of Faith” and Inquisition

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<sup>83</sup> Vernon M. McCombs, *From Over the Border* (New York: Council of Women for Home Missions and Missionary Education Movement, 1925), 129-139, 154.

dossiers – especially those from Mexico – were deemed particularly important. The customs and practices that I found are discussed in Chapter 4.

When approaching people, I had to be careful not to say anything about my interest in Judaism, or my informant would be certain to clam up. I needed to attempt to elicit information about things that the individuals themselves might not identify as anything unusual at all, and take them 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.<sup>84</sup>

## 2.2 SECRECY AND TRUST

It is important to remember that we are dealing with a secret culture, which, until today, remains very private. The more valuable informants, namely, the elders, are extremely timid, and fear remains very strong. The reasons for this fear will be discussed in Chapter 7, but – be they justified or not in the eyes of the reader – the fear is quite vivid.

On my first visit to Monterrey, I was summoned to the home of one of the more powerful families where I was grilled for a while as to my intentions, but by now I have proven that I do not “denounce” (still the term in use from Inquisitorial days) the details of anyone. At the end of that visit, the patriarch of the family informed me that I look like a Treviño, a regional family believed to be of Jewish origin (see Chapter 3).

Fortunately, it appears that many people find me very local-looking, and therefore, they are easily comfortable around me. I was able to develop long-lasting relationships, and made many dear friends in the region. I never stayed at a hotel; I enjoyed hospitality, so was able to observe family life as it was going on, even in small villages. I earned the trust of priests and rabbis alike, and scholars (historians, ethnologists, genealogists and others), too, saw in me the expert they were looking for to ask questions they dared not ask a closer colleague. The longer I knew a family, the closer I got to them. In one case, after about ten years of communication and meetings, I was finally invited to spend Christmas back in the old village with their parents.

With virtually no exceptions, I did not tell anyone with whom else I was 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.

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<sup>84</sup> For the judicial use of questions about specifics, see Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, H. M. Wright, trans. (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1965) 29-30, and James W. Wilkie, “Alternative Views in History: Historical Statistics and Oral History”, in *Research in Mexican History*, ed. Richard E. Greenleaf and Michael C. Meyer, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1973) 52-53.

All my informants were guaranteed that nothing that passed between us would ever be divulged in any way that could help identify its source. Not betraying the identity of my informants, however, is very difficult, because society in northern Mexico is so intricately woven together. It will, therefore, be necessary for me to omit many potentially identifying details, in addition to names and locations, which are for the most part not given.

In the next chapter, I will report on one particular extended family that is generally considered to be of Jewish origin. Their members mentioned here explicitly permitted me to be public about our conversations. Thus, this family can serve as an example of the many others who must remain anonymous, and should satisfy the reader's curiosity, lest anyone desire to go out and seek those who wish to be left alone.

### **2.2.1 *La Gravadora***

At the outset, I would tape record all of my encounters. It turned out that the consequent loss was far greater than the gain. In several cases, people would simply never speak to the microphone, though they had repeatedly promised they would. When I became more confident of my language skills and more aware of this problem, I abandoned my tape recorder and video camera, and came with nothing but a notepad. One of the priests I had become close with by then saw me without the machines and actually exclaimed with relief, "*Ah, no gravadora!*" Our meeting was much more fruitful. No promise of privacy removes the intimidation of gadgets, it seems.

I have in my possession many videotapes and audiotapes, and in them there is information aplenty. But as it turned out, many fascinating, even earthshaking, accounts were said just after the recorder was turned off. I used to think that was an accident!

## **2.3 INFORMANTS**

After, by a chance invitation, I spoke on Sephardic heritage at the First Annual Conference of the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society, Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1992, and an article about me appeared in the Sunday *New York Times*,<sup>85</sup> people began turning to me. They came with questions, hoping my expertise in matters Jewish would enable me to respond knowledgeably, and were almost invariably ingenuous. I would try my best to answer their questions, and would attempt to elicit as much information about their homes and families, so that I could learn more about their lifestyles and heritage. I kept notes of all phone conversations and of many face-to-face meetings. Sometimes, I would arrange to meet or speak with other members of their families.

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<sup>85</sup> Kathleen Telsch, *The New York Times*, November 29, 1992.

Later, on my visits to Mexico, I met with people I had been in correspondence with, and with relatives or friends of people I had met. In the cities, I would ask friends and colleagues to put me into contact with friends or acquaintances of theirs. In addition, I arranged meetings with historians, rabbis and archivists. In many cases, I conducted multiple interviews with individuals and families, often over a period of years.

In Mexico, I found myself approaching individuals, not only in order to cover specific regions, but also to provide me with a control group of local individuals who were clearly not of New Christian descent. I would go to the village square, approach elderly women, and begin to chat about the old lifestyle and lifecycle, mentioning weddings and births. Sometimes I was told that “an entire village” was of “Jewish” origin, and would have no choice but to randomly sample individuals there. In all these situations, I approached anyone I could. I tried to present myself as an anthropologist interested in life-cycle customs, origins, etc. (Were I to say I was a “folklorist”, they would start dancing for me.) I would ask the same questions, taking recipes for local dishes, and so on.

Also, in Mexico, many people would seek me out after a lecture, or in response to a radio or newspaper interview (these invariably generated a lot of attention), or by way of word of mouth.

### **2.3.1 Priests**

After listening to informants of both Old and New Christian background, and after speaking to the local rabbi, it became obvious to me that I had to also try and speak to the clergy. Accordingly, this dissertation includes a chapter dedicated to interviews with clergymen from several states all over northern Mexico, some themselves descended from the anusim. I take great pride in the fact that some of these individuals were willing to give me of their time, their attention and their trust, and in the fact that I had the foresight and the nerve to approach them. The result is a chapter that presents a unique aspect of the phenomenon, and which sheds extra light on the entire research project.

### **2.3.2 Cronistas**

The *cronistas* are a fascinating breed of local “experts” in Nuevo León and the entire region. They are by and large an untrained or poorly trained, but highly regarded, group of quasi-historians, who write books about the towns whence they come, and whose design is to augment the local history. I spoke to a large number of such individuals. The most auspicious history is to have been part of the local founders, and the best known of those are the *Sefarditas*. Thus, without knowing a thing about *Sefarditas*, these chronologers often include them in their “history”, adding whatever “practices” their imagination or their local priest might have mentioned. This literature, unfortunately, is what some descendants of anusim find when they seek outside confirmation for what their elders tell them about their Jewish ancestry.



## 2.4 INTERVIEWING

### 2.4.1 Listening and Questioning

People who seek me out usually come with a story to tell to which I listened without any intervention. I would also listen for indications that details were picked up from reading or from Internet.<sup>86</sup> I would try to place what they told me in the context of other stories I had heard from the some locale or clan. Their account usually would give me points of departure, as well as ideas for further in-depth questioning.

If the informant came with a genealogical tree in hand, I would investigate to see who made it, if the informant knew some relatives from the first three layers of the tree, if he or she knew where they lived, who or what the sources of information were. If there were still elders alive, I would inquire if any would agree to speak to me. If the source of the genealogy was external, such as an Internet database, I would ask for other personal data. I would try to determine from a genealogy whether an individual might be related to other informants I already knew.

Informants often gave me the name of the place in Mexico their family originated from, and the relationship they bore to famous individuals and to founders of NL. I asked about the age and the manner of the informant having been told by elders in the family of their origins, in the cases where they were indeed informed, and tried to find a pattern in the language, the manner, or the attitude of the disclosure.

Usually, however, 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 they arrived where they lived, and where the family had originated. It is also very interesting to find out if there is mention of Spain or of Portugal, of nobility. Depending on circumstances, at some stage I might ask about attitudes towards Jews or to *Sefarditas*. I would invariably inquire about attitudes towards the church and clergy.

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?<sup>87</sup> 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 about the *fritada*,<sup>88</sup> in full detail. I would ask about

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<sup>86</sup> In an extreme case, at a conference in 1999 at Tel Aviv University, a speaker reported that in his family the dirt was swept to the middle of the room “out of respect for the *mezuzah*”, an object which, of course, did not exist in his home. After discussing matters with him, it became obvious that he learned of the custom from my web page, and quoted my source.

<sup>87</sup> This is what the terms *desayuno* and *almuerzo* mean locally.

<sup>88</sup> *Fritada* is a typical dish for Nuevo León, made of a goat stewed in its own blood, and served with a reduced blood sauce. As we will see in Chapter 3 and Section 4.4.14, it comes in many, significant variations.

hunting and about the use of pork, its frequency, and the type of occasion it was served at, if I was told that it was used infrequently.

I asked questions about birth-related customs, about midwives, about circumcision. Nearly all informants were familiar with the *cuarentena* (postpartum confinement). However, these customs, related to separating and guarding the woman after childbirth, varied somewhat from family to family. I next asked about what is called the “Sephardic stain” or “Mongolian stain” (the *tablilla*, or *mancha*, or *marca de la familia*), since countless informants were preoccupied with this birthmark. I asked if something was checked for on the baby, and what it represented. I asked a local pediatrician about this as well.

I inquired about marriage, how it 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.

Death and burial, which are among the last customs to be forgotten in any culture, have been taken over by the *funerarias* – the official burial homes. 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 for today.

When I was invited into someone’s home, I would look for *santos*, crucifixes, and other outwardly Christian symbols. In any case, I would ask about such items. 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.

I would ask about weekends (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 and other special days on the calendar.

I always looked for sayings, *dichos*, related to ethics, religion, food, marriage, or any other lifecycle matters. I collected many such. I asked about home prayers, but found little.

I tried to get my contacts to talk at the end as freely as they did at the beginning, raising memories talking about peculiar relatives, describing their childhood and more. Conversations often ended with a deep sense of intimacy, since so much had been shared.

#### **2.4.2 Villages**

I was told many a time that “an entire village” was of “Jewish” origin. Accordingly, I would go to that village 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 killed, and, often the very copper pot in which the blood was gathered would be shown to me. 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.

In such villages, especially, I would interview the local town “historian” or *cronista*, who almost invariably had written a book on the history of the village. Typically (for those villages I was sent to), these works would mention some *sefardita* history, often including many fantastic tales.

I went to many such places, including Higuera and Marin. Another location – less interesting today – but possessing a rich history, is Villa de Garcia, near Monterrey, now being transformed into a weekend location for the well-to-do.

## 2.5 CERRALVO

Cerralvo, one of many villages I visited, is located in the northeast of modern NL. It was founded in the year 1582 by Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva, under the name *Ciudad de León*, after he had discovered (or rediscovered<sup>89</sup>) minerals there. Carvajal wrote to Spain the following account:<sup>90</sup>

I discovered, by myself, many silver mines and I populated in its regions the city of León and the town of la Cueva, where I placed skilled people and much silver was extracted and in its surroundings I pacified more than four thousand Indians and I built, by myself, the church of the town of la Cueva in which the said vicar [Diego Ramírez Zamorano] administered the holy sacraments, and I bound myself to pay, from my account, two thousand pesos for his salary for the aforesaid; because the residents could not pay and they are to be paid from it; and from there, by my commission, the provinces called Nuevo Mexico were discovered.

The town was re-established by Martin de Zavala in his quest to exploit mining resources, and renamed *Villa de San Gregorio*. It was officially declared a village in 1629, and received the name *Cerralvo* in honor of the viceroy, Rodrigo Pacheco Osorio, Marqués de Cerralvo. It became a city in 1984.

The founding families were about one-third Spanish and two-thirds Portuguese and Sephardic. In 1821, there were about 95% Spanish and Portuguese, and 5% Tlaxcaltecas natives, plus a few Africans.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Eugenio del Hoyo, *Historia del Nuevo Reino de León (1571-1723)*, 2d ed. (Mexico City: Ediciones Al Voleo, 1979) 119.

<sup>90</sup> Quoted in del Hoyo (1979) 118.

<sup>91</sup> Ricardo M. Cerda Flores, Victor A. Bautista Peña, María de los Angeles Rojas-Alvarado, and Raúl Garza Chapa, “Polimorfismo genético en la población de Cerralvo, Nuevo, León”, in vol. 5 of *Estudios de Antropología Biológica*, ed. Rosa María Ramos Rodríguez and Sergio López Alonso, (Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1995) 245.

Researchers recently conducted some genetic studies in this town.<sup>92</sup> Based on the distribution of blood factors, they concluded that the townspeople have a larger Iberian makeup, and smaller indigenous component, than people from outside the general region – in accord with what is known from the historical record. They also attribute the relatively large numbers of inhabitants with blue eyes and fair features to Continental contributions.

Cerralvo still has a lovely old center, and a pleasant ambience. Perhaps had Carvajal y de la Cueva remained governor longer, this place would have become a great city. But with his demise, it was doomed to remain small and quaint, thus leaving the visitor a glimpse of the past. Monica Montemayor's family (whom we will encounter in the next chapter) had land near there. According to Monica's sister, when the family escaped during the Revolution, their lands were squatted on. So they could not reclaim them, as was similarly the case with many other old families.

## 2.6 A CAVEAT

At times, even authentic informants lose their authenticity over time. This happens as they read and desire to adopt more customs, or naturally adopt them, including ones that I know from prior communications did not exist in their family.

In one incident an informant pointed out to me that in Monterrey I would not find restaurants that serve meat with cheese. All I had to do was look around me to see that he was wrong. He was living in the city, but somehow he either remembered another era, or had been "brainwashed" in childhood.

False memories occur for many reasons.<sup>93</sup> In the case of *anusim*, the secrecy, the confusion of identity, and a desire for acceptance, all conspire to promote embellishment.

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<sup>92</sup> Flores, et al. (1995) 243-255.

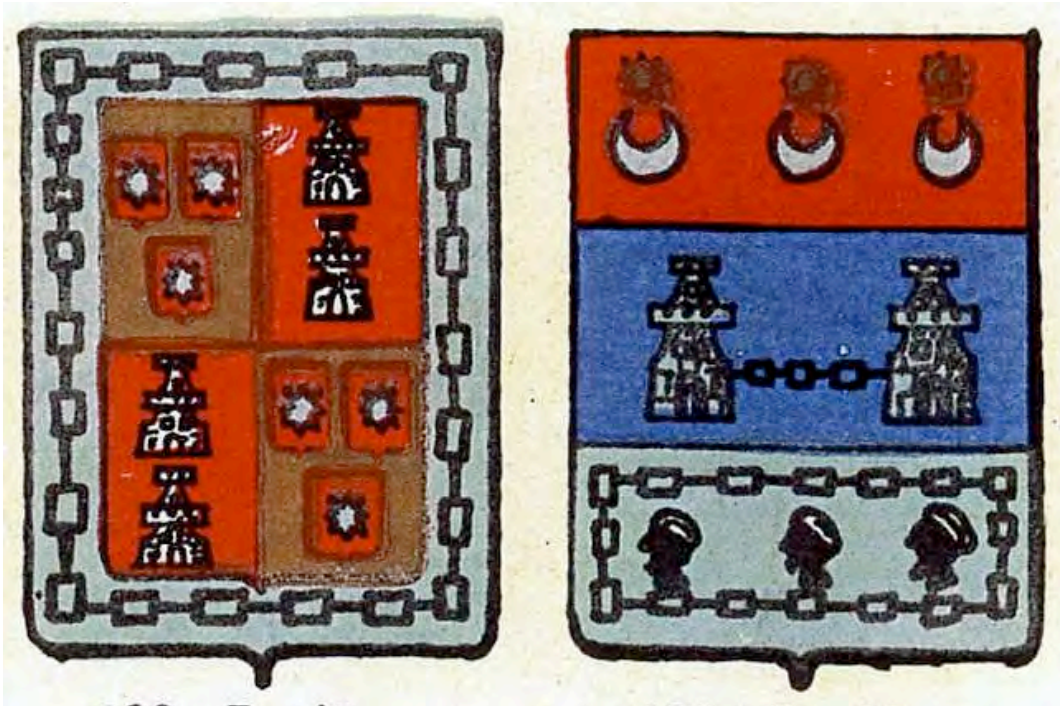
<sup>93</sup> Robert L. Greene, *Human memory: Paradigms and paradoxes* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1992).

### 3 LOS TREVIÑO

*Padre de hijos lozanos  
El Rabi de Boticario,  
De puesto de Castellanos,  
Gallo expuesto en Comanario  
De Treviño Frayle y Conde.<sup>94</sup>*

Treviño is a relatively common surname in Nuevo León, and is widely considered to be indicative of Jewish origin.<sup>95</sup> Over the years, I have met many people with this name and I will describe a number of those meetings in this chapter. Following the methodology outlined in Chapter 2, the actual interviews were of a much more associative nature than the summaries in what follows. Note that most of the names given here are real, since these informants were comfortable with that. (In other chapters, however, most names and identifying details are omitted so as to protect informants.)

Note that surnames in Mexico, as in most Spanish speaking countries, normally comprise a paternal family name and a maternal one, in that order. For example, the father of Monica Montemayor Treviño is from the Montemayor family, while her mother's father was named "Treviño".



<sup>94</sup> Alonso de Palencia, *El Provincial* (1668) copla 17.

<sup>95</sup> I used the singular Treviño in the chapter title, rather than the plural form, to indicate that this chapter is about members of the original Treviño family in the region, not about anyone bearing that surname.

### Figure 3.1. Treviño family coats of arms.<sup>96</sup>

When two people from the same general region meet each other, a delicate but insistent “question and answer” session takes place, in an attempt to identify the family and place of origin of each party. Trust is earned slowly and reluctantly in the clannish Noreste, I will learn as time goes on. One must bear in mind that names are of only limited significance in determining family origin. It was common, for example, to adopt names of sponsors and employers, and to change names for convenience or other purposes.<sup>97</sup> Thus, people, upon encountering another person bearing their same surname, checked to make sure the person was indeed a member of the clan before counting him or her in.

### 3.1 THE FAMILY

Most Treviños consider themselves to be descendants of Spanish nobility; some, however, suggest an Italian origin. A number of people of that name are known to have sailed to the New World. Among the earliest were two Treviños who arrived in the Yucatan from Ciudad Real in 1527: Alonso Treviño, whose parents were Alonso Treviño and Maria Lopez Canizares, and Lope de Treviño, son of Alonso de Treviño and Maria Sanchez.<sup>98</sup>

What follows is a compilation of information provided by various Treviños on the Internet. I have left some of the dramatic details in, not that they are factual, but for the sake of understanding the psyche of the bearers of the appellation.

Treviño, Triviño, Tremino, etc., is an old surname from the region of Castilla la Vieja. The surname is considered a toponymic – derived most probably from the village and county of Treviño, in the judicial district of “Miranda de Ebro” in Burgos. Another smaller village of Treviño exists in the neighboring province of Santander. The actual origin is uncertain. Branches of the surname Treviño spread from Burgos to the region of Aragon and to the provinces of Navarra and Ciudad Real. By far the most extensive branch, dating back to the middle ages, appears to be that of the city of Ciudad Real in the province of the same name. In northern Mexico most Treviños and Garzas consider their progenitors to be Marcos Alonso Garza y del Arcon and his wife Juana de Treviño.<sup>99</sup>

According to a curious legend, the name is attributed to one Rodrigo Fernandez de Unda, a valiant captain in King don

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<sup>96</sup> Alberto Garcia Caraffa, *Enciclopedia heraldico y genealogica Hispano-Americana*, vol. LXXXV (Madrid: Marzo, 1919-1963) plate 4a.

<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Eugenio del Hoyo, *Historia del Nuevo Reino de León (1571-1723)*, 2d ed. (Mexico City: Ediciones Al Voleo, 1979) 203.

<sup>98</sup> Del Hoyo (1979) 374.

<sup>99</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/heartland/Park/5876/trevinocrest.htm>.

Pelayo's army during the early part of the *reconquista* of Spain from the Moors. He was purported to have presented to his monarch, as trophies, the heads of three Moors he defeated in battle, for which he was amply rewarded with a knighthood and ordered to take a much needed rest and drink "Tres Vinos" (three wines), one for each head. Henceforth, legend has it that he and his descendants were known through its corrupted forms, "Treviño", "Triviño" and the compound forms "Fernandez de Treviño", and "Fernandez de Triviño".<sup>100</sup>

Most Treviños able to trace their ancestry back to Spain would find Diego Temino de Velasco as their ancestor. He arrived in Guadalajara, Jalisco in 1543/1544 with his wife Francisca de Alcozer and children Francisca de Velasco, Baltazar Temino, Diego de Treviño and Maria Banuelos. Each child had at least one child that was either a Termino or Treviño. Some stayed in Guadalajara; others went on to Zacatecas and Northern Mexico.<sup>101</sup>

This noble appellation is of Castilian origin, which saw its first light of day in the mountains of Burgos, Castile-Spain. Its nobility is proven in the Orders of Santiago in 1777, in that of Calatrava in 1791, in that of Alcántara in 1786, in that of San Juan of Jerusalem in 1579, 1732, 1733, 1735, and 1763 and in the Royal Chancellery of Valladolid in 1548 and 1584. One branch passed to Cuba, and from the island to New Spain, Mexico, with the third expedition of Hernan Cortes, and in 1790 another, with Don Francisco Treviño y Davila, [who] was created Marquis of the Treviño Gator house on December 7, 1787, by royal decree; the first branch fell without leaving descendants. Don Francisco Treviño y Davila married Dona Manuela Camacho, Marquise of Noble Bridge, both born in Burgos and residents of Nuevo León, Mexico.<sup>102</sup>

As a matter of fact, as the nasty little *copla* above indicates, in *Condado de Treviño* in Spain, there was reason for burlesque about Jews even before the Expulsion. This county is still today in dispute between the Basques and Castile. In the well preserved, very small town by the same name, the official tourist guide (written both in Basque and in Spanish) indicates that one can still find the "Cross of David" in the lintels [sic!] of some homes.<sup>103</sup> None of my informants, however, claimed to have originated in that place in Spain.

A fair number of Treviños attained positions of importance. In 1880, the widowed General Geronimo Treviño, Commander of the Northern Division of the Mexican Army, and one of the most distinguished chieftains of Mexico, as the *New York Times*<sup>104</sup> put it, and

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<sup>100</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/heartland/Park/5876/trevinocrest.htm>.

<sup>101</sup> <http://members.tripod.com/~GaryFelix/index12.htm>.

<sup>102</sup> Dan Ridge, quoted in <http://home.earthlink.net/~hogardedallas/id43.html>.

<sup>103</sup> *En los dinteles de algunas de estas casas de conservan grabados de la Cruz de David, testimonio de la presencia judia en la villa.*

<sup>104</sup> July 25, 1880.

rumored to be a Jew,<sup>105</sup> married Miss Roberta (Bertie) Ord, daughter of the commander on the U.S. side, thus ending hostilities. The stories of the event differ on the two sides of the border, but the essence is that the young lady complimented the general on a ruby ring he was wearing, which he at once offered to her, at which point she exclaimed, “Daddy, the general has proposed to me!”

It has been claimed that the NL families of Garza and Treviño are actually one and the same, since at one point some siblings took one surname, while others took the second.<sup>106</sup> Nonetheless, the Garzas have done considerably better at blending in, suffering much less “notoriety” (as being of Jewish descent) than the other side of the family, though the name Garza was often mentioned to me by informants in Chicago as a Northern Mexican name of descendants of anusim.

### 3.2 TOMAS TREVIÑO

The two most dramatic and most legendary figures in the history of the Mexican Inquisition are Luis de Carvajal el Mozo, nephew and intended successor of the first governor of El Nuevo Reino de León (see Section 1.3), and Tomas Treviño (or Tremino) de Sobremonte, who was burned at the stake alive, despite letters from Spain, instructing the Tribunal of the Inquisition not to execute him.<sup>107</sup> Both remain legendary until today.<sup>108</sup>

Born in 1592 in Spain, Tomas Treviño de Sobremonte began his adventurous life by escaping Spain under an assumed name, before his mother was martyred. Though intending to reach Peru, he first became a shepherd, then a merchant, in Oaxaca. Known for his charity,

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<sup>105</sup> Many contacts indicated this to me. I have not found this anywhere in writing.

<sup>106</sup> These were the children of the marriage in 1585 of Marcos Alonzo Garza and Juana de Treviño Quintanilla, who were among the founders of Monterrey. See Tomás Mendirichaga Cueva, *Origin of the Surnames Garza and Treviño in Nuevo León*, trans. Edna G. Brown (Corpus Christi, 1989). Cf., e.g., <http://www.geocities.com/athens/acropolis/7016/Garza.htm>.

<sup>107</sup> The histories of both personages are well documented in Seymour B. Liebman’s book, *The Jews in New Spain* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970). Both their moving and tragic procesos have been translated into English, Carvajal’s by Liebman. The proceso of Tomas Treviño de Sobremonte exists in various archives, including that of the National Library in Jerusalem. See also Liebman, “Tomas Treviño de Sobremonte: A Jewish Mexican Martyr”, *Jewish Social Studies* XLII (1980): 63-74.

<sup>108</sup> Interestingly, a school named Tomas Treviño stands nowadays in the middle of Monterrey. A student who was schooled there told me that they had never been told who the hero was after whom the school was named, nor what exploits his life involved. This student later put me in touch with a relative of a local politician, Tomas Treviño, after whom the school was actually named. This gentleman had originally told her that their family was descended of Tomas Treviño de Sobremonte, but when I spoke to him myself, he denied knowing who Sobremonte was. Be that as it may, many individuals have come to believe that Treviño de Sobremonte in fact has descendants living in the region.



flamboyance and passion for women, Tomas was a regular churchgoer. At the same time, he became the leader of one of three large Jewish communities of his time (mid-seventeenth century) in the Mexico area.

Tomas was arrested by the Inquisition in 1624. When asked by the inquisitors to give the reason for his arrest, Tomas inquired about one woman after another, until he mentioned the Marquis' wife who was six months pregnant with his child. Tomas got away with a light sentence, and in 1629 married Maria Gomez, a devout secret Jewess. Although now a devoted family man, Tomas's flamboyance had not left him. A cross was placed under the threshold of his store and all Jews who stepped on it received a discount; he was also ready to physically intimidate a soldier he caught abusing a Jew.

Tomas was denounced to the Inquisition again by a spurned Jewish woman, who reported, based on having had sex with him, that he was circumcised. He continued to deny any "guilt" until the pronouncement of his death sentence after which he declared his religion openly and proudly. Details of his religious observances, prayers, fasts and ambiance, recording in the *procesos*, include, among many others, careful observance of the dietary laws, the Sabbath and ritual purity, and feeding the poor, as well as knowledge of Hebrew.

In the *auto de fe* of 1649, Tomas was burned alive, despite a letter from Spain instructing the Mexican Tribunal to act with mercy, since his family was friendly with the royal court. Tomas is said to have shouted even as the flames were scorching his flesh: "Throw some more wood in, I am paying enough for this". Maria, his wife, her saintly mother, his brother-in-law and sister-in-law all perished as well.<sup>109</sup>

### 3.3 EVERARDO

#### 3.3.1 Our First Meeting

My first encounter with Everardo Treviño Garza was at the Latin American Jewish Conference, (LAJSA), held in 1995 in Mexico City. At the reception, I noticed his nametag, and noted both *apellidos* (surnames), Treviño and Garza. I introduced myself, and inquired as to his interest in the conference. He told me that when he was about seventeen years old his father had told him that they were Jews, and that at this point in his life (he was now in his forties,) he wished to further investigate this matter. He was from the northern part of Mexico, and the Israeli office of cultural affairs had pointed him towards this conference. He was looking forward to hearing my lecture the following morning, in the opening session.

Everardo is a typical Norteño gentleman: restrained, extremely well mannered, very Spanish looking, of slight build. His language is very fine. I had already spoken to many informants from this "diaspora" of Northeast Mexico, but Everardo was my first local informant with

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<sup>109</sup> Liebman (1970) 247.

whom I developed a face-to-face relationship. As it turned out, he was careful, honest, wise, and as authentic as I could have hoped for. He taught me more than words can express about the culture, the impossible bind, the genuine love, and the quiet but dear toll all these necessary shrouds continue to exact from people, as the highways, drug traffickers, and centuries race by what once were their small, isolated haciendas.

Everardo had never heard of Tomas Treviño de Sobremonte, the great hero of Mexican Inquisition, nor had he heard any of the rumors as to the Jewish origins of either of his last names, which I had already been told numerous times by expatriates of Nuevo León living in Chicago, and by other contacts from this region.

Everardo and I continued to talk, and at some point along our conversation I asked him if by any chance his family's self-identification as Jews was connected to any Jewish practices. His reply was a firm negative. I then followed up with specific questions of customs I knew from experience could be related to local secret Jewish practice. To my astonishment the answers were all affirmative, contrary to his earlier declaration. He simply never identified the practices that I knew to be of Jewish origin as anything more than family customs.

In response to my question how animals were killed, Everardo used the term *sacrificar* consistently.<sup>110</sup> His father had kept a special knife; he sharpened it, and tested it on the nail of his finger. Then he apologized to the animal for killing it. The text of the apology was to the effect that God created the animal and designated it to serve as food for mankind, and now this person, about to kill it, was thanking it for giving its life for his sustenance. Only then, did he slit the animal's throat. The blood was gathered and buried. They never used the blood nor made such foods as the typical blood sausage – the *morcilla*. These were very unclean foods according to his elders. Mixing dairy and meat is not considered healthy and was not done in their home.

When I asked if they ate pork, he explained that it was not eaten except on very rare occasions. When asked to further specify, he said that at very public events they did serve pork, but that then it was really “bleached”.<sup>111</sup> Meat and milk products were not eaten during the same meal.

Everardo simply never saw any of these practices and prohibitions as having anything to do with his background. He was astonished to realize that these were in any way shared with Jews or anusim.

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<sup>110</sup> This term is very common to the region, and is explained as the more respectful way to refer to the animal, which, after all gives you its life for your use. Not all individuals can verbalize their use of this term, and not everyone uses it. This explanation is congruent with the “prayer” or apology that some anusim still say before slaughtering an animal.

<sup>111</sup> It is very common among anusim to find that they avoided pork, but in truly compromising situations, they would eat or at least serve it. See Section 4.4.2.

### 3.3.2 Our Second Meeting

Everardo and I maintained loose contact over the years, until the opportunity arose for me to meet him again in 2000. I was working on a documentary that sent me to do research in Monterrey. Everardo came down from Valle Hermoso, and we conducted our interview at the synagogue. This was the first time he was invited into the synagogue in Monterrey, a moving experience for him. I came with a woman whose family harks from Northern Mexico to serve as translator and liaison. She and Everardo found a common language immediately; their mannerisms and style were perfectly compatible.

We were reviewing our conversation from our first meeting and I said that I remembered that he had told me that he had first learned from his father about his Jewish origins, along with all his siblings, when he was seventeen years old. Everardo was quick to correct me. No, this was not when he *first* learned of his Jewish origins; this was when he was first told so *directly* by his parents. The first time he had learned of his origins was much earlier, when eleven of his mother's cousins were around on the occasion of a funeral. After the funeral, as was the custom, they ate at the home of his aunts, whom he had only met three times in his life. Women and men sat in separate rooms, as is customary, and were talking. Since he was the youngest child and only around five years old, he was with the women in their room. They began to talk about the Jewish past of the family. One cousin, whose mother was Everardo's grandmother's only (elder) sister, discussed the oral history that had come down from her parents. Everyone acknowledged that she was the one who knew more than anyone else about the family, and therefore her daughters understood more than Everardo did. (One of her knowledgeable daughters had just died a year earlier, which is why Everardo began to feel uncomfortable, fearing that he is losing his heritage and feeling a desperate need to do something about it.) They were talking among themselves and with Everardo's mother, mentioning events from the past. He, himself, was not addressed. Containing his emotions, Everardo went on to say that it is dangerous to get into "psychology". (This was the first time I encountered this unusual manner of indirect exposure of youngsters. As we shall see, this will not be the last time in this clan.)

Everardo was born in 1952, the youngest of his siblings, many members of which had fought in World War II. When he was around five or six years old, no older than seven – in other words, not long after his "incidental" discovery of his Jewish identity – his considerably older sister took him to see his first movie. They would show newsreels before the movies, as was customary at the time. However, at this movie, a very much outdated newsreel was shown from the time of the war, but which Everardo imagined to be happening in real time. What mesmerized him was the part about the concentration camps and the Jews; this impacted him deeply. He asked his sister if it was true, and she, unaware of its significance to Everardo, told him it was. He was in shock. This became engraved in his memory, which by now already preserved in his tender mind the knowledge of his Jewish roots. The trauma of seeing these things and experiencing all alone the knowledge and identification, the pain along with the fear, led him to what he described to me as his *inquietude*, which he continues to carry with him.

Some three or four years passed. A cousin married in New York, and it was customary for the family to give time to give its consent, especially the grandparents, and especially from the mother's side. The moment the announcement arrived, and the grandfather got confirmation that the groom was indeed from a Jewish family (normative, in this case), he gladly accepted. Grandpa's children, cousins, and more distant relatives, who were present at the time, did not know what to expect of the grandfather. At that time, Everardo interpreted the immediate approval as just some idiosyncrasy of his grandfather. Soon he was to learn that the important consideration always is that the groom be from a family of "*Judíos*".

A few days passed, and Everardo accompanied his grandfather out to a coffee shop and on some errands. It was there that his grandfather began to talk to him about the Jewish past of the family, but he added that there is no documentation; that his maternal grandmother passed down the oral history to him, since they were orphans and were raised from a young age by grandparents and uncles and aunts.

To Everardo, Grandpa described his own grandfather and his uncles as individuals who lived in the region, but dressed and appeared distinct. Beyond their unusual dress, the older ones had beards. Those bearded ones were those to whom Grandma had referred when she spoke of a Jewish past. They had "their" customs. It was not customary in those days to sport a beard, and, in addition, they had very different customs from those of the communities in which they lived. The family was close-knit and closed to the outside.

There were two tragic incidents of death, I was told, two cases of murder of family members who were wealthy, but not very deeply integrated into society (the family, as mentioned was keeping to itself). The murders might have been interpreted as having been committed for the sake of robbery, but that was never proven to have been the motive. What was clear is that the murders were cruel and malicious. They think today that those who committed the crimes were individuals who knew them well, who were not from the family, and who knew their customs well. Those who died are considered now by the family to have died (been martyred) for their Judaism. Being super-careful not to over-claim anything, Everardo re-rephrased and said, "their Jewish past". One of them lived in the beginning of the 19th century, and the other, in the beginning of the 20th.

Later, when he was seventeen, his father had told him more details. All this, together with the statements from the aunt and the grandfather, were the information that eventually drove Everardo to investigate further now.

In the beginning, the family only had the oral traditions, but then one of them, an elder aunt, began to collect them, like Everardo is doing now. He spoke to her a bit before she passed away. Her health was delicate, but she was very clear minded. She promised to give him objects that belonged to her mother and carried memories from these aspects of a Jewish past. This was in a conversation at another funeral of a brother of theirs, not in their home. Everardo's eldest son was with him. A year later she passed away, and he was unable to receive the objects she had promised him. All her brothers and sisters had passed away, but her children, who are all very old (in their seventies), are alive. He hopes to rescue some information from them at some point. He feels

there is some sense of solidarity, which makes people hold on to their family treasures, not fear.

Everardo's siblings are considerably older than he. Those just above him in age are brothers, and older than they are sisters. They were married already by the time he was eleven years old, and out of the house. The older brothers participated in the support of the family with his father, while he, the little one, had more opportunity to be with the elders and communicate with them. It was his role to accompany his grandfather wherever he went. His brothers never discussed the matter of the Jewish origins of the family with him. He believes they too had heard about this over the years, but apparently under less dramatic circumstances than he, so were not as impacted by it as he was.

The brother closest to him in age is also close to him in other ways, and even resembles him. What most characterizes them – he thinks – is their humanity, their sensitivity to the pain of others. A person who has had to hide his past, when he returns to Judaism, will not be able to return completely. “We are an exile within an exile.” (Everardo interjects this coming out of nowhere. He is fighting tears as he speaks.)

Everardo's grandfather was a wise man, and very special, he tells me. He gave each grandchild the opportunity to feel special. Perhaps Grandpa thought that he, Everardo, could understand more about the family history than his brothers would, and therefore designated him for this task. His brothers think that their grandfather gave each grandson an aspect of knowledge, and, that Everardo was elected for the Jewish one. One brother was given the economic know-how, so they think he was best suited for business. This is how the grandfather operated. Everardo believes that the goal was that he investigate and pass down the information that relates to their family history.

Everardo feels that the pain and sorrow he carried in silence throughout his childhood and adolescent years did not cause him permanent damage, but rather affected his attitude to others and his path in life. Perhaps he could say that he tries to live in the light of those experiences.

### **3.3.3 Valle Hermoso**

Everardo did his very best, and gave me an excellent education along the route to his hometown, Valle Hermoso. He told me about the history of the region as we drove through it. He told me more about his family, about his experience coming to Monterrey as a student, about his father arranging for him to be legally adopted by a Jewish friend.

Everardo's home looks modern, but conditions are very difficult, and they live humbly. Although the plumbing in the house is just fine, the U.S. has taken over most of the water resources, and the Mexican government has done nothing to remedy the water shortage. Thus, they must wait for rain to fill buckets. There are many buckets around, and when it rains, the water runs through the pipes and all the buckets are quickly filled. Electricity is likewise limited to several hours a day. The hallways are filled with books and dossiers filled with Everardo's research. His office is in a separate building in the yard; he is a well sought after accountant.

The summer heat is excruciatingly inhospitable, and we were left to the mercies of the elements. The portable fans move from room to room. Everardo and his wife, Mirna, insisted that I take their bedroom and I was left without a choice. No amount of protest helped.

Valle Hermoso is a lovely, quiet place. Everardo's father became Presbyterian and opened a public school there. But now it is no longer a safe place, he says; there is drug trafficking and a lot of trouble in the place – many transient, untrustworthy people around. The family used to own a hacienda, but in the days of President Cárdenas, who re-divided all the land, it was taken, like all haciendas, and divided up.

They were very jealous as to which families they married into, but liberal about other matters. He is not proud about it, but when it came to marriage they were extremely selective. But it was typical. Mirna's family was the same. He felt honored that his father- and mother-in-law liked him. He did not discuss the Jewish heritage with Mirna before they married. He was in Valle Hermoso and she in Monterrey. They met four to six hours per month, with a chaperon.

Mirna's maternal last name is also Treviño. Everardo's mother had said to him that he should look for a girl from a family with similar customs. Mirna and Everardo each have several relatives – four couples – who are married to the other side of the family. In his genealogical investigations, Everardo found that Mirna's family is intertwined with his. Their customs are very similar. The only difference, perhaps, is that his father's family is Presbyterian, while hers is Catholic. Still, Mirna's parents respected him.

Like some other informants elsewhere, Everardo believes that his father brought in the Presbyterian Church in order to get away from Catholicism. He also built a Presbyterian school to counter the Catholic school.

Mirna supports Everardo, but she has not investigated things herself. In this family, it is clear that the woman follows the man. He respects her, and she follows him, and likewise in the families of their brothers and sisters.

We discussed their family practices. Hair was always shorn at home. Mirna did not remember customs regarding hair cutting. In his family, Everardo recalled a strong superstition that his mother emphasized, although he does not adhere to it, never to clip hair or nails on the day of rest, on Sunday. If it were to be done on the rest day they would find themselves in compromising situations. The trimmings were probably thrown into the trash-bin.

Regarding the way trash was handled: it was never placed behind the door, never taken out of the front door. In his generation still, when they were cleaning, it was considered wrong to take trash out through the front door. It appears to Everardo that in the *ranchitos* the kitchen was always apart from the home. Thus, he thinks it was easier to clean the rest of the house. He learned that the Sephardim in North Africa believed that ghosts come at night to partake the food, and this is why the kitchen was kept separate from the rest of the home.

Things that could not be eaten without specific permission included lard, especially so if a person suffered any health problem. Meat and dairy were not served in the same meal; coffee at lunch – the main meal, was taken black. Never did anyone say that food was avoided for religious reasons; the explanation was always health related. They were very strict, even though the cause was not officially religious. But

the rule was raised to such a level that, as a child, he felt it to be of religious importance.

They were very strict about killing animals. Everardo witnessed the slaughter of chickens most clearly. There was a tremendous amount of attention given to selecting the animal suitable for slaughter and eating, to removing the blood in a technique that guaranteed results. There was a specific point where the knife slit the vein in the throat (he is pointing his finger to his jugular), even for pigs. At a later time he informed me of a special set of knives kept for the specific purpose of animal killing, which, at some point, his father very ceremoniously gave his mother. He hopes to send me a photograph.

Today they just twist the neck of chicken to kill them. Mirna nodded her head in consent. But usually, when they slaughtered a pig at home, it was not someone from the family who did it. Everardo thinks it was someone more expert. Pigs were more complicated than goats, and even more than calves.

Afterwards they skinned the animals and removed their organs. He was present when his great uncles selected meat; it was a family thing – it took forever. They would be discussing it; they had quality requirements. Everardo thought it was exaggerated. In the beginning all this took place on the farm. They would select the animal. Then every part of the animal was examined carefully. It was a tedious process. Later, when they no longer had the farm, in the market, it was still a tedious, embarrassing process. He felt so shy when they went. Everyone else would just buy and leave, yet his uncles were so exacting and strange. They stood there for hours, examining every piece of meat with their exacting eyes....

During the war, so Everardo hears, when there was shortage of food, they had to resort to hunting. The region is plentiful in game animals. From these animals many parts were removed. He does not remember which parts. But these were animals not normally eaten, such as rabbits, and they were eaten out of hunger.

When Everardo was growing up, he remembers that the blood of baby goats was not very prohibited, but it was not common to consume it. There was a special plate specific for it. The recommendation was that only the blood of *cabritos* that were uniquely milk-fed be eaten. The reason given was taste – not a religious reason. *Morcilla* was eaten at occasions where many people attended, and a large selection of food had to be offered to suit many palates. Individuals from outside the family came to prepare the *morcilla* in a special area of the kitchen. Usually they were workers from the farm who knew how to prepare it. Because of the large quantities and the number of guests, special pots were brought in from the outside, but sometimes those were supplemented with utensils from inside the home.

*Cabrito* in blood (*fritada*) was only served in mass public events. Part of the *cabrito* to be served was prepared as *fritada*, and the rest, *al pastor* (roasted on a fire).<sup>112</sup> Everardo thinks that because of the festivities anything was considered legitimate to offer, for the sake of variety, for economical reasons.

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<sup>112</sup> The dish is called *al pastor*, shepherd-style, since that was the style done in the mountains by the shepherds.

Pork was served at the Treviños only when they had to make *tamales*, on Christmas. They “bleached” it in lots of water.<sup>113</sup> It was rare that they ate pork, and the reason given again was always that of health.

They made cheese from goat rennet and cows’ milk. They salted the cheese and placed it in water. They also used the whey.

It appears to Everardo that his parents, since they were not so healthy, chose carefully, and therefore he never saw them eat any of these foods, such as pork or blood. Perhaps his grandparents were more open about it, but this may only be his impression; he has no specific memory (of them eating any of these foods).

Conversation turned to a documentary series on the anusim I had recommended his participation in, and to my goal in the work that I do. I told him that I had always wanted him to be the representative of the in-depth quest for truth. He was deeply moved when I spoke about the matter of loss of self-sovereignty. He said there is the problem with the absence of a documented past, that he is afraid to express himself, because he is worried about being “bunched up” with individuals who indeed are careless and have adopted nonsense and mythology as part of the secret Jewish identity. What is important to him is that he is concerned that such a film might be well received in other places, but fail in Mexico, because people are close-minded, due to the power of the Church.

### 3.3.4 Everardo’s Parents

Throughout my stay with Everardo and Mirna, I was never invited to meet his mother, though she lived nearby. Everardo would go over and get answers to my questions, but she was not ready to speak to a stranger, and was not happy about his doing it himself.

Everardo’s mother is a non-practicing Catholic. He tells me that she hates the power displays of the Church, and the confessions, among other things.<sup>114</sup> She used to say: “*No brincas sin huarache*”. She was careful to the extreme. Very reserved. She never placed neither the life nor the security of family members at risk. She listened and observed family and learned. But she was very afraid that their behavior (customs) would place them at risk.

She was a slave to cleanliness. The bed was the cleanest piece of furniture. The beds were changed more than once a week. Her mother lit candles on Fridays; she did not. They have special dishes for Friday night.

She had sayings, which he now identifies as Jewish sayings. When someone is wrong, the common saying is “*Meter la cuchara*”, but in their family they say, “*Meter la cuchara en viernes*”, and some family members say, “*Del viernes*”. Rogelio, his brother, thinks the word is “*berrer*”. Everardo thinks it was especially serious to err on Friday.

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<sup>113</sup> My assistant’s grandmother made *tamales* with chicken and milk, avoiding pork. It was made in lots of sauce, mainly. They were very distinct from regular *tamales*.

<sup>114</sup> Everardo is not aware that being a non-practicing Catholic is a common trait of anusim, as are the reasons given by his mother.



She often sang the last song on the compact disc, “*La cruz de olvido*”, which he gave me.

His mother knew when she would die, Everardo told me. When she passed away, he wrote urgently pleading for the proper Jewish prayers, in Spanish translation, which I sent him (with the help of another descendant of the anusim). She had selected a white dress with a bit of black trim in which to be dressed for burial. She requested a wooden coffin for her burial, but they could not comply with her request out of respect for relatives who wished to have her buried in a fancier, metal coffin. About his father, Everardo told me that he had also requested to be buried without a coffin, but the family decided that it was not respectful, and he had to yield to the family decision. Thus, it was the family – not the father’s wish – that determined the form of burial.

After the funeral, they – mainly the women – sat at home for one week, not nine days, as do the Catholics. For a month they remained relatively reclusive, and they did not participate in public functions until a year had passed.

Regarding burial, many changes have taken place over the last generations, from grandparents to parents and uncles. Today the style is similar to the rest of Mexico and also to the U.S., because of the proximity to it. Even when it comes to his parents, the formality attached to it belongs to centuries earlier. Although he personally did not attend the ceremonies, he took part in conversations with grandparents who handed down the traditions to the entire family vis-à-vis the rituals and their nature. He is trying to recall one that was told him by his paternal great-grandfather.

First the body of the deceased was prepared at home by the family. From what he heard, the person was always cleaned a bit before dying and then more after death. Like other men, from what he heard, his father shaved off his beard and cut his hair to a normal length. Women, usually the elder and closer relatives, were in charge of the cleaning and preparation of the body. Everardo does not know if they cleaned with water only, or if they also used soap. Next, they would begin to wrap the body. He described a motion of wrapping around the arms, but the method was not described to him. What impressed him is that in the old days they did not dress the corpse; they wrapped. It was a special cloth for this purpose. There are stories about elders who had already prepared burial shrouds in advance – long in advance.<sup>115</sup> What he did not know until recently is that they did not use coffins. He learned this from his “uncle” (really a more distant relative), Don Ernesto Garza Saenz, and others confirmed this. As for the burial shrouds, he assumes them to have been white. They are *lienzo sabana* (linen sheets).

The cemeteries in the region belong to families, not for religious reasons, simply each family had its own cemetery. He observes that the elders guard the cemeteries very well and feel great sorrow if someone is not interred in the family plot. He plans to take me to the family cemetery.

When the family property (which was large and belonged to them for centuries, with papers from the Spanish throne) was divided during the Cárdenas tenure,<sup>116</sup> the family cemetery was given away along with

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<sup>115</sup> Cf. Section 3.3.5.

<sup>116</sup> In 1934 President Lázaro Cárdenas passed an Agrarian Code; see, for ex

the rest of the land, and they could no longer use it. His elders mourned this much more than the lost lands. This one acre was cause for so much more grieving than all the other hundred that were lost. Now, the new family cemetery houses two generations. His grandfather was transferred to the new one, and the others were left behind. Perhaps they remain with only stones....

He tried to get to the old cemetery with his father a short time before he died, since he asked to visit, knowing he was nearing the end of his life. But they could not get to the cemetery, since it was surrounded by agricultural fields, and the irrigation prevented access. It was very painful for his father.

Alfredo, his maternal grandfather, used to say, "*Somos Judíos*", as did his great-uncle Jesús, another great uncle, José, and a great aunt Maria, as well as his father's cousin, Maria Luisa. Everardo knew all of these, except for José. Among the men, when someone spoke about Judaism, he did so openly. They were not Catholic – they did not go to church. They all saw themselves as Jewish. He does not know if they were circumcised.

When his son, Everardo, was born, they requested that he be circumcised in the hospital for a mixture of health and Jewish reasons. The doctor said it was not necessary. Meanwhile he got sick and they moved. The hospitals were Catholic. They had risked Mirna's life for religious reasons, he said, so, perhaps the Catholicism of the hospital has to do with its refusal to perform the circumcision.

### **3.3.5 Don Ernesto**

We drove to see the illustrious Don Ernesto Garza Saenz, the relative about whom Everardo spoke so much, and about whom Daniel, the director of the documentary I was involved in, said he was a colorful person for the movie, because he was a moneychanger. The day was hot and arid; the road had not been tended to in many years. We were going through parched and empty lands. Empty barren hills, as far as the eye could see. Everardo stretched his hand out with a desperate gesture. "You see?", he said, "all this great area, there is no documentation. It does not exist in any book. Not the land, not the people scattered around it. It is as if we do not exist. No documents, nothing. I search and search, and it is as if we don't exist...."

I was sitting in the back seat, windswept and choked with sorrow for this gentle man. For many centuries his ancestors tried not to be documented. No material evidence; no documents; no proof. But the fact is that there are documents out there – and they are being withheld. I am sure the church has some, and so does the state. When I went to the state archive in Monterrey, the archivist, Don Artemio Benavides, who – I was told by a reliable source – has documents about the visitation of the Inquisition regarding a certain Treviño from Villa de Garcia, was very polite. He politely explained that there is nothing there. And he told me that all the Jews (meaning individuals of Jewish origin, who still preserved any heritage) "left for the north" (meaning the United

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ample, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agrarian\\_land\\_reform\\_in\\_Mexico](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agrarian_land_reform_in_Mexico).

States). They all crossed the border, he explained, saying at the same time that he was a *Sefardita* himself, and sported a *tablilla*<sup>117</sup> on his behind. This is what his son who converted back to Judaism<sup>118</sup> had done, and this is what all those who wanted anything to do with their Sephardic past did. I came to the wrong place, said Don Artemio Benavides sweetly. But he adamantly refused to let me in to search the archives myself for details about that Treviño from the 1700s who had tried to confirm his *limpieza de sangre* so as to join the priesthood, and who received a visitation by the Inquisition in that regard.

Don Ernesto was delighted with his new audience. He began immediately to tell me about the savage Indians who surrounded their villages. They would come to attack and rob. Sometimes they would leave behind a baby or two, and the merciful white people took them in and raised them.<sup>119</sup> Most of his tales were along these lines.

When I finally asked him if he was of Jewish origin, he replied that yes, he was. I asked if he was told so, and he said no. I asked how then did he know, and he said that he was a money-changer, “just like the Jews”, that he had a large nose, “just like the Jews”, and was industrious and miserly, again, “just like the Jews”. Eventually, he added that he knew from reading. His wife also said she was not told that they were of Jewish origin. I took more to her, though, and on the way out, as we were chatting she mentioned, incidentally, that, in her childhood home there lived an aunt, a spinster, and already when she turned fifty she prepared her clothes for burial. Those included a finely embroidered white linen gown, with long stitches down its length, matching pants, and socks. She had no idea that this would be of particular interest to me.

Only after Don Ernesto learned about who I was did he repent from his games, which had worked so well with the movie producer. He actually knew much more than he had told me. He taught Everardo many things about the family traditions, but he had not understood who I was, so he did not wish to share things so private with me. This is what Everardo reported to me later.

### **3.3.6 The Future**

Everardo does not recall anti-Semitism as much as the ignorance that sometimes brought it on. But today, when he touches upon these topics among his community members who are highly educated, and among the elders of the community, he discovers that there is considerable anti-Semitism, and it is accepted without much examination of prejudices against Judaism. These are generally open-minded individuals, so he does not believe that it would reach action. But these people are blocked from growing and understanding.

Everardo always had a hard time talking about anti-Semitism. While he considers his mother’s fear exaggerated, and is open about

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<sup>117</sup> A Sephardic or Mongolian stain. See Section 4.2.6.

<sup>118</sup> He has since become a messianic rabbi.

<sup>119</sup> A wonderful explanation, needless to say, for anyone not purely white living among them. See Section 8.5.

himself, he cannot ignore some of what he sees and feels around him, and rationalizes a lot.

Many people are uncomfortable with being described as a “Spaniard”. On the one hand, there is the Opus Dei<sup>120</sup> organization that is very strong in Monterrey, and on the other hand, there is fear of dealing with a double identity.<sup>121</sup>

He thinks Monterrey is in need of a major shakeup. It has been locked up by politics. The Garza line (his mother’s side) has been the renegade; they have been struggling with the church, and the Church took their land. He also thinks that all that can be saved now is the heritage of the past. The next generations are not going to preserve anything; all we can do is record what we had and why, and we need to untangle the very tangled history of the conquistadors of the region in order to get to the bottom of things. Why, for example, did Diego Montemayor’s wife get murdered (likely by him, adds Everardo)? Who were the more mystical of the conquistadors, and did that have to do with crypto-Judaism?<sup>122</sup> He adds that all these individuals have descendants in the regions, and that the *cronista* of Matamoros may know some.

Everardo tells me that Francisco Madero,<sup>123</sup> the former president was, according to Eugenio del Hoyo, likely of Sephardic origin. He was “spiritual”; he was a “Portuguese Spaniard”. He is reported to have had particular practices on Friday nights, that he lit candles.

He shared a dream with me in which he is arriving in the Ben-Gurion airport and is asked to stay because he is needed here. His heart is torn, as he thinks about the family he left behind, and his desire to fill his duty to his people. A family saying: “*Finalmente estamos hablando del mismo Dios*”. Even if I cannot return to my ancestral faith, in the final analysis, we are worshiping the same god.

One Sunday in July, Everardo took me to some pizza place, and brought me coffee from Sta. Clara (the kosher place), and asked, “*Que terrano estoy pisando?*” referring to his position vis-à-vis the Jewish community. He wanted to know how the Jewish community is reacting to the anusim, and says he tries to put himself in our shoes (*ustedes*).

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<sup>120</sup> The “Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei” is a secretive, hierarchical, Catholic movement, founded in 1928.

<sup>121</sup> Some anusim emphasize that they are Spanish and not Mexican. There are others who say they came from Spain but are not Spanish, and then, there are those who say they are Portuguese, but this is almost like saying outright and publicly that they are of Jewish origin. After the Revolution, almost all states were given indigenous names to replace their Spanish names. The state of Nuevo León is an exception.

<sup>122</sup> I am refining his questions a bit.

<sup>123</sup> Francisco I. Madero was born in Parras, Coahuila on October 30, 1873. Son of a wealthy landowner, he studied commerce and economics in France and agriculture in the U.S. His family was devoted to ranching, farming and commerce. When he saw the need to improve conditions in Mexico, he ran for president of Mexico against Díaz. Madero was arrested and then released, on bail, after Díaz won. He jumped bail and fled to the U.S. In 1910, he led a revolt against the Díaz administration, and was successful in forcing Díaz into exile. After being elected President in 1911, many groups became disenchanted with his handling of Mexico's problems and in 1913, revolted against him. He was overthrown and killed.

Everardo is frustrated and therefore returns to his theorizing. He sees Mexico as a nation, and believes that the Mexicans have a serious problem of identity, which has only been getting worse from one generation to the next. People erroneously think that the root of the problem is the openness among the various parts of the country (e.g. Texas and California), where people think that the absence of identity is equal to openness and flexibility. But this in fact expresses a problem. People do not see themselves as racist, but there is a huge amount of racism and it, in part, is behind the identity crisis.

Anti-Semitism is more hidden than the “glass ceiling” placed on the advancement of indigenous people, but it runs much deeper. His mother’s generation did not think return to Judaism was an option. The absence of freedom of religion in Mexico goes on, and only changed on paper.<sup>124</sup> In the Rotary Club or professional organizations, the climate for discussion of Judaism is non-existent. He would not be considered a balanced person, even if he speaks in the most professional manner; he would be deemed eccentric, drifting. In the Rotary Club, he was the “Benjamin” – the youngest. Now, twenty years later, he is among the senior members. With the elders the subject was more approachable.

Everardo feels that he is doing his best to preserve the chain of tradition given the circumstances. But it appears to him that there were generations that did not contribute their share, causing his role to be tighter than it should have been. Were he to add velocity, he fears the rope (*cadena*) will rend, and he will end up having been counter-productive.

He never forces his children, but believes that he has planted the seed in all of them. When the circumstances make it opportune, they will do their part. Once he said in jest to his kids, perhaps we should go to Israel one day. But for now they do not wish to go; they are not against Israel, but they want to be close to the world they know.

Everardo, on his part, wrote articles for *Kesher*, a Jewish publication in Mexico City, wrote poetry and continued to research books and inquire among family members and friends.

By now, he identified deeply with the *proceso* of Tomas Treviño de Sobremonte, more so than with that of Luis de Carvajal el Mozo. In an addendum to the *proceso*, there is a statement that 100 years after his martyrdom, using the name “Treviño” was equivalent to calling someone valiant or stubborn (*torco*). Everardo sometimes refers to the *proceso* to introduce the subject to people who are entirely ignorant and understand nothing, but share that name.

When it comes to proofs for the world, he remains with theories, but not in his heart. In his heart, he knows who he is.

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<sup>124</sup> In 1996, the Mormon Church purchased land in San Pedro de Garza Garcia, the wealthy suburb near Monterrey, and prepared to build a temple there. Immediately an incessant number of articles and letters appeared in the newspapers saying the Jews knew their place, and built their synagogue in another neighborhood, and eventually the Mormons withdrew and built their church on the highway.

### 3.3.7 Family Sayings

Over time, I learned many sayings (*dichos*) from Everardo and his family. These included the following:

1. *No digas todo lo que sabes, ni juzgues todo lo que vez, ni creas todo lo que oyes.*
2. *No hay peor cuña que la de la misma madera.*
3. *Ni sábado sin sol, ni joven sin amor.*
4. *Nunca digas de esta agua no beberé.*
5. *No todo lo que brilla es oro.*
6. *Meter la cuchara en viernes.*
7. *No hay mal que por bien no venga.*
8. *Mas vale malo por conocido, que bueno por conocer.*
9. *Mas vale prevenir que lamentar.*
10. *Las penas con pan son menos.*
11. *Zapatero, a tus zapatos.*
12. *En la carcel y en la cama, se conocen los amigos.*
13. *El habito no hace al monje.*
14. *Meses sin erre, ni pescado ni mujeres.*
15. *Donde una puerta se cierra, otra se abre.*
16. *Del plato a la boca, se cae la sopa.*
17. *El casado, casa quiere.*
18. *Cada oveja con su pareja.*
19. *Arrieros somos y en el camino andamos.*
20. *A cuchillo que no corta, ponerle el dedo.*
21. *A donde va el buey que no are.*

Some of these are very telling (for example, numbers 6, 12, and 13), while others (in particular, 5, 7, and 15) are quite common. “*Meter la cuchara*”, sans Friday, is the common version of number 6.

### 3.3.8 Everardo’s Poetry

Everardo has written poems about his journey, a selection of which follow. They express, in his inner voice, his feelings regarding his situation. He apologized to me in these words: *Te pido disculpas si no hice buen uso de las palabras. Espero que me indiques las correcciones de los posibles errores en el significado.*

#### 3.3.8.1 “HERMANO JUDÍO”

Aunque el tiempo nos separa  
te he llevado en mi interior,  
tus penas las siento mías,  
tu alegría y tu fervor.

Tus aciertos, tus errores,  
tu natura y condición,

tu presencia, tus temores,  
tu memoria y tu elección.

Cada vez que sobrevives  
refuerzo mi convicción,  
y en cada agresión que sufres  
se me nubla la razón.

Y por este amor filial  
te expreso hoy mi sentir,  
el que viene desde siglos  
cuando me viste partir.

Desde entonces hubo sombras  
y transito otro camino,  
mas siendo hermanos Judíos  
sabemos nuestro destino.

No sabemos cuanto tiempo?  
tardaremos en llegar,  
en reunir nuestros andares  
hacia la patria ancestral.

Mientras tanto, no estas solo,  
yo me uno a tu dolor,  
y enjugandonos los ojos  
te ofrezco hoy lo que soy.

Huyendo como Jonas,  
mis pasos he apresurado  
a los confines del mundo,  
a los rincones vedados.

Y fui a Tarsis la de Iberia,  
hasta que la tempestad me urgió,  
cruzando luego el oceano  
donde otro altar se erigió.

Desde acá oigo tu llanto  
pues de ti no me he alejado,  
desde acá siento tu encanto  
pues jamas yo te he olvidado.

Sigo mirando al oriente  
desde entonces hasta hoy,  
con la esperanza de verte  
convencido de quien soy.

Por tu valor, yo te admiro,  
por tu dolor, va mi amor:  
por tu razón, yo me ofrezco,  
SOY TU HERMANO, ESO SOY.

### 3.3.8.2 “ESPERANZAS”

Alma judía,  
vida y memoria,  
tierra de origen,  
tiempo e historia.

Formula magica  
de eterna gloria  
que liba un pueblo  
dandose euforia.

Alma judía  
parte al oriente,  
volando a diario  
alla es presente.

Alma con vida  
signo vital,  
dio me esperanza  
siendo mortal.

Alma y memoria  
mi humanidad,  
alma e historia,  
mi libertad.

Alma y origen  
arraigo da,  
por mis ancestros  
los de Judá.

Con alma y tiempo  
vivo mi historia,  
grata esperanza  
cruel la memoria.

Alma judía  
latiendo va,  
y a Sion añora  
milenios ha.....

Hoy que te veo  
libre en tus tierras,  
alma judía  
¿Que es lo que esperas?

Espero a un pueblo  
que aun no esta,  
el del silencio.....  
venid acá.

Pisad mi tierra



es tu heredad,  
y en ella aferra  
tu libertad.

Que Sion reclama  
que Sion te llora,  
no habrá mas llamas  
en buena hora.

Ven a mis brazos  
ya no mas pena,  
no mas extraño  
en tierra ajena.

Y si no vienes  
cual tu deseas,  
solo te pido  
JUDÍO SEAS.

### **3.3.8.3 “A MIS ANCESTROS”**

Al cielo por sinagoga,  
y por midrash una cueva,  
un sarape por talet,  
y por shema, tehilim.

La memoria por Teva  
y por Kipot, paliacate.  
Hakol en ves de shofar,  
y minian en soledad.

Amida sin rezo alterno  
y al corazón por jazan,  
el tanaj por viejo libro  
y también por tefila.

El tebila con romero  
y shajrit sin tefilim,  
perasha en primer lectura  
y la pasion en pesaj.

Sin mohel, incircuncisos,  
fiestas patrias en tishrei,  
el Kipur en año nuevo  
y el descuido por keria.

Selijot en la penumbra,  
mas clandestino el minja,  
el Arbit entre otros rezos,  
y a escondidas el Shabat.

Alia final en la hoguera  
para el anusim relapso,

jazak ubaruj dicho en silencio  
con avelut y sin tahara.

Como lavar las cenizas?  
Como enterrar lo disperso?  
Sin bet hajaim, sin avelim,  
sin mishmara, sin jebra.

Hashem te hara tahara,  
y alla tendras bet hajaim,  
tu mishmara en estas lineas,  
y eterno Kadish serán.

#### **3.3.8.4 A Terrorist Attack**

Espero estés bien tanto tu como todos los tuyos, pues hemos leído con tristeza sobre el ultimo atentado terrorista en Tel-Aviv. Deseamos que hayan estado a salvo de esas desgracias.

En estos días he terminado de leer un libro de Juana Salabert, novelista española, llamado "Velodromo de Invierno", y he aprendido parte de la historia judía francesa durante la ocupación alemana en el país galo.

No dejan de asombrarme los datos, a pesar de saber muchas de las atrocidades de la época, pero cada lectura me hace reconsiderar y redimensionar el tamaño de la tragedia.

Y sin embargo todo parece indicar que seguimos sin aprender la lección. En ratos me resulta difícil aceptar la testarudez de la que hacemos a menudo gala, tanto hombres con poder político y militar, como la sociedad civil en general.

Me gustaría anexarte tres párrafos más de la versificación final a la que titule "A mis ancestros", los que en el momento que te los envíe, no pude incluir, y que finalmente encuentre en otras hojas.

Espero que sean aun oportunos:

Por yeshiva el sufrimiento,  
olam haba sin hogueras,  
javod póstumo lo tienen,  
Baruj Hashem fue tu rezo.

Shofar jamas escuchaste,  
en su lugar gran lamento,  
a la Eja por referencia,  
yehudi en la conciencia.

Del hebreo y del ladino  
solo anécdotas de viejos,  
quedando de aquellas voces,  
la memoria de sus rezos.

### 3.4 MONICA



**Figure 3.2. Monica Montemayor Treviño.**

#### 3.4.1 Summer 2000

Monica Montemayor Treviño (Figure 3.2) and I had already been in long-term electronic correspondence when I mentioned that I was planning a trip to the region. We were both excited about the prospect of finally meeting face to face. Monica told me that she had just been planning to invite me to come to Monterrey and speak there. Our discussions until this juncture had not included anything much about her own background.

Monica picked me up at the airport and volunteered to show me around during my stay, so I could see for myself how “Jewish” the region really is. I had an assistant, whom I took along for help and for the purpose of opening other doors in the area. She was from the North and had the right habits and language to gain acceptance with the suspicious, closed families, and was herself of similar origins.<sup>125</sup> Monica brought her friend Gerardo along, whom she chose to call by his middle

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<sup>125</sup> At the time I was working on a documentary film series, and the assistant came as part of that project. She originated in Northern Mexico from a family that owned a hacienda, and was working and living in Mexico City. She too was interested in exploring her heritage.

name, David. Later, I learned that the two were regular partners in their crypto-Jewish quest.

Monica was very surprising in every way. She was persistent, insistent and very self-assured. She did in fact arrange a public lecture for me at the museum.

Monica took me to the local rabbi's home, where I was to stay for the duration of my visit.<sup>126</sup> The rabbi's wife prepared a large meal, with many guests, during which Monica described with great certainty various local customs that she considered to be indicative of Jewish origins. Some of these I did recognize as such; others clearly were not. She also asked me about additional customs that she thought might be of Jewish origin.

After the meal, Monica and Gerardo took me to the office of his father to get organized. There, Monica began to educate me on the history of Nuevo León, in which she was well versed. As I would later learn, she had a fine library of classic history books about the region and was active in a group of local *cronistas*. She told me about her family and the Treviños and showed me a book about the common origin of the Treviño and Garza families.

Montemayor is one of the founding families of Monterrey.<sup>127</sup> Monica's maternal ancestor, Diego de Montemayor, was vice regent to Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva, who had received the land grant from the Spanish throne.<sup>128</sup>

Monica was extremely energetic and very generous. Our next visit was to the local history museum. She had the director show me a painting, a gift from some "Rabbi" Domb, who arrived some years earlier and donated it to the museum, having commissioned it from Benito Salinas, one of the local artisans sitting around the museum. This man, dressed in Hassidic garb, and accompanied by what looked like a native young man, had claimed to descend from Luis de Carvajal. Domb had also left a volume of the Mishnah (Warsaw, 1884) and a set of phylacteries, as well as a mezuzah (in Ashkenazi script). See Section 8.7.

Monica showed me the symbol of the Inquisition displayed there, and pointed out what appeared to her to be a *lulav* and *hadas* (the palm and myrtles of the four species) in it.<sup>129</sup> Eager to get me into the local milieu, she mentioned all the *cronistas*, including one from Salinas Victoria, Ambrosio Guajardo Morales, who claims to be descended from a "Rabbi Morales",<sup>130</sup> and was scheduled soon to finally publish his book, *Salinas Victoria entre la Leyenda y la Historia*.

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<sup>126</sup> Aliza Gulman, the rabbi's wife, was incredibly hospitable and kind, interested and devoted. This visit was the beginning of what would turn out to be a lasting and fruitful relationship, which also brought about some of my most moving discoveries.

<sup>127</sup> The genealogy of the Montemayors is detailed by Santiago Roel, *Nuevo León* (Apuntes Historicos, 1938).

<sup>128</sup> Diego de Montemayor arrived at the Port of Tampico on August 8, 1580, aboard the ship *La Santa Catalina*. See Mariano García Somonte, *Don Diego de Montemayor* (México: Edimex, 1971).

<sup>129</sup> As it turns out, Mr. Amado Barrera, who founded the museum and was its curator for many years, told me that he had purchased the emblem from outside the region altogether.

<sup>130</sup> Manuel de Morales, a somewhat legendary medical doctor and learned Jew, came to Tampico and is reported to have left and returned to normative

When Monica and I finally sat down to talk in orderly detail about unusual practices, it turned out that they were quite similar to those of my assistant. When Monica described wedding customs in her family, she astonished me, saying that on the day a gentleman proposed to a lady, he would come with an offering of a basket of what she referred to as *matzah*. This was something I had not encountered before. In answer to my question what it was called locally, she said *pan fino*.<sup>131</sup> This was only done among the “old families”, she said, and was also served when a baby was born.

Monica was the first of what would turn out to be many to tell me (with variations) about specific plants that marked the homes of the people of Jewish origin. In her home, it was myrtle (or a myrtle-like plant) in front, and in back, fig trees, pomegranates, orange trees and grapevines. She asked me about the custom of lifting the body of the dead seven times; she had seen that in a will from the 17th or 18th century.

She told me that “here in the Northeast” shorn hair was always “rolled into a ball and buried”. Sometimes it was thrown into the hearth, or placed in the hidden places of the adobe floor, she said. But people never just let it fly away. People said they were afraid of witchcraft. She was not speaking of her family, and, as usual, was trying to phrase herself in generalities. She asked me if rolling an egg over the skin to remove the evil eye was a Sephardic custom. She mentioned that when she or anyone was about to say something that would challenge or provoke an authority she would be told to be silent, or they would throw salt at her. My assistant added that she always knew that salt was bad luck. Monica found in a *proceso* in Portugal that a home of a Judaizer that was destroyed also had salt scattered over its remains.

Monica told me about some local words of potential interest: *musumado* was used to refer to indigenous people who could not be trusted; she thinks its origin is *meshumad*. *Huerco* or *guerco* used in the north for “little devils” or naughty kids. I also heard that the term *malsin* used in Spain and in Mexico during Inquisition time was in use by very few against household help who cannot be trusted. This word comes from Latin and she says is related to Ladino. *Jolino* – irregular or not right. She was also suggesting *muchiguas*. I switched the subject, saying I am really no expert on these matters and that the last word has nothing at all to do with Ladino anyway. All the same, I remained doubtful, and could not help but think that this lady was entirely confused, and it was at that stage impossible for me to determine whence she obtained her information.

In her great desire to convince me of the Jewish history of Nuevo León, Monica took me around from one small old town to another, along with Gerardo. She would show me churches that faced east, cemeteries that faced east, and occasional tombstones that had pebbles placed upon them. She asked old ladies how they killed their *cabrito* (the meat Nuevo León is known for), and they would describe how they slit the throat of

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Judaism. Some of his relatives were victims of the Inquisition; see del Hoyo (1979) 228-229.

<sup>131</sup> This is the term used by Ricardo Elizondo Elizondo, *Los sefarditas en Nuevo León* (Monterrey: Archivo General del Estado de Nuevo León, 1987) 16, who says that it was served at baptisms, marriages, and wakes.

the animal. Monica would smile at me triumphantly. Then I would ask how they cooked it, and the answer would be that they made the traditional *fritada*. I asked for the recipe. I was invited in, shown the large copper basin in which the blood was collected, in order to be cooked with onion and herbs (the recipe was dictated then) for a sauce for the goat meat. But these visits provided me great opportunities to interview many individuals, and learn from their answers a lot about possible Jewish origins. Old ladies in villages were in general happy to share their memories, their recipes and their sayings with me. In places where Monica had expected to find families of only one type – either those holding some Jewish traditions or else those knowing nothing of any such traditions – we actually found families of both types.

Monica had a hard time keeping quiet, not jumping into conversations with informants; not leading the informants on. But she was extremely helpful, and I learned a lot from her, and through her. Eventually she learned more about methodology.

I went with her to interview many *cronistas* (Guajardo Morales, for example, who videotaped his interview with me). After these interviews, I would explain to her why it was not possible, for example, that a temple could be built in Monterrey – or even planned – by Luis de Carvajal, and how long it is since Jews actually offered sacrifices. This myth turns up everywhere, and Monica picked it up innocently from the *cronistas* writing about the “history” of NL.

As mentioned above, true to her word, Monica arranged a public talk at the Museo Metropolitano de Monterrey. It was packed with attendees of all sorts, and reported in the media. Individuals of high and low visibility were in attendance, including historians, like Don Israel Cavazos, whom I had already met by then. At the end of my talk, many people desperately asked if their last name might be of Jewish origin, a question that I do not tend to answer. Monica served “Sephardic” cookies, common to the region, to everyone.

Monica was deeply disappointed when she found her theories frustrated. Little did I understand at that time that she was depending on the writings of *cronistas* and others in her attempt to confirm her family’s own oral history. Monica turned out to be the antithesis of Everardo in attitude, but they come from the same origin, bore the same tradition, and their *inquietude* was the same, if not similarly expressed. While Monica wholeheartedly adopted any outside source she could lay her hands on, trusting it to be scholarship for want of a better context, Everardo was extremely cautious. He told me that, when he gave a talk at a university in Texas, having been invited after someone read his articles, he was told that it was okay to display a bit of emotion, to be more forceful, have more passion, but replied that he could never do that, lest it impinge on the credibility of his research, and his case would be compromised by the display of personal feelings.

Monica felt that I did not like her, she told me long after. On the contrary, I liked her very much; she fascinated me. At the time, however, I had no idea how much I would learn from her about the tragedy of the *anusim* who try to replace the reliable oral history they receive with unreliable “history”, because the real history is denied them. I went along with Monica, who generously, together with Gerardo, gave me of her time and experience, as I shared mine with her. Monica opened my eyes to the reality of her quest and introduced me to individuals I might never have met otherwise. When I took her with me to interviews I had

arranged, she could look at family photos I asked to look at, and whisper to me that the hairdo of this grandma was indigenous, something I would not have guessed, or find out from the features of the person that they belong to this family or that – she nearly never erred. Monica persevered, despite her mistaken belief in my dislike of her, and I am deeply thankful to her for her lasting friendship and generosity.

### 3.4.2 Autumn 2004

I maintained my contact with Monica after this trip. We were in electronic contact, and when I returned to Monterrey in 2004, she again was at my disposal, taking me everywhere.

She took me first to her home, filled with both very Jewish and very Catholic symbols. She said she was comfortable with both, and is not looking for any change in her life. She showed me a gold Jewish (six-pointed) star that came to her from her family. The other side had an “M” for “Monica” (She received it from her great aunt).

Monica was getting to know me better, and got a better idea of what I was after. She began to understand that it was her methodology I was debunking, not herself, and she was a fast student.

This time she took a chance, and surprised her aunt with me. Her aunt was definitely not pleased to be surprised by a stranger unannounced. Needless to say, Monica had to run the conversation, and the aunt was claiming “Alzheimer,” of which she does not at all suffer. We did manage to get a fair amount in between her “forgetful” episodes, and eventually I wormed my way into her heart enough so that she told me that I was a “*Sefardita muy bonita*”, this, after she had no memory what the term meant a few moments prior.

Monica and I left and quickly, still at her doorstep, noted everything we were able to extract from the event that we just walked out from. It was a special moment of closeness for us, which is not to say that Monica did not get a good dressing down from her *tía* for having brought me uninvited.

We were talking more about her family, rather than about regional customs she had read about. She told me that her grandfather always announced that all his children and grandchildren were born circumcised, for example.<sup>132</sup> One must wonder whether these stories are a cover up for the doings of the midwife or some other expert.

While we were together in Monica’s home, a friend sent her a kosher *challah* (these have to be ordered in advance from the person in the Jewish community who bakes them), as she did with her chauffeur every Friday. This friend, too, appears elsewhere in this work, unnamed.

This trip was followed by a visit to a sister, whom we shall call “Sis”. Sis, who lives in Monterrey, does not share Monica’s interest in the subject of their Jewish background. It could be safely said that Monica is the one with this “bug”. All members of the family are professional and

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<sup>132</sup> In another case, near Vera Cruz, another very different family seeking to become Jewish, came to a *mohel* who happened to come to town for another family, asking to be circumcised. He examined them all, and said that they were all already circumcised, perhaps they were born this way.

intelligent; some live in the United States. Later, Sis, Monica, and I got together at Monica's home to discuss her family and the memories they shared.

Great Grandpa was born around 1886. He used to say: "*Tienes que saber de donde vienes para que sepas a donde vas, nosotros venimos de los Montemayor de Zuazua.*"<sup>133</sup> Zuazua is not far from Monterrey, and the family could not only trace itself to the original Diego de Montemayor,<sup>134</sup> but it was important to him to relate to Monica that the branch they belonged to was living in Zuazua. During the Revolution, the "whole" family fled to San Antonio, Texas, and lost their estate near Cerralvo, NL. They did not return to reclaim it. Monica said that Grandpa Montemayor always told her that she (Monica) looked like his aunt Monica, who was beautiful, had blue eyes, was sweet, and was the most wonderful woman he had known.

Great Grandma was very selective, very formal. You could never arrive unannounced. She wore a hat and gloves. They were not millionaires, but she was very elegant. She was the mother of the great aunt who gave Monica the *Magen David* with the "M" on the other side masking the star.

Grandpa Treviño and Grandpa Montemayor were relatives. Grandma never had crosses or saints in the house; she wanted to be elegant, and would have none of that.

Sis heard both directly and indirectly about being of Jewish origin: *Nosotros venimos de Judíos*. She has heard it since childhood, in the village where she grew up, Múzquiz. They heard it from the grandfather and from the great uncles. They said they were *Judíos*, but not *Espanoles*. Monica added "*pero no Espanoles*", as continuation to "*venimos de Judíos*". Monica added "*pero eran sucios*". According to the sister, they did say they were "*de la otra tierra*", but refused to say Spanish. Monica had said similar things. Another branch of the family did say they were Spanish. But according to Sis, they did not say they were Jews; Monica says that she did hear them say they were Jews. Sis always thought that they were different because they came from NL and were living in Coahuila.

Grandpa gave a blessing before travel. Sis said he mumbled something and placed his hand over the forehead (fingers in hair and palm over forehead). Monica remembers two hands, but not the sister. Then Monica began reciting the text, "*El señor, te da su merced, te proteja y te libre de todo mal*". Sis remembered now and filled in, "*de todo peligro de todo mal amen*" and Monica agreed. When he would be leaving the house he would say the blessing once and touch every head. Then he would take his leave.

After a woman gave birth, she had the *cuarentena* at her mother's home. After forty days, she was given a special bath with herbs, then sent to her husband.

Grandpa did say that it was his father who taught him how to kill *cabritos*. They did eat *fritada* sometimes (this is the sister), but the rest of the time they ate it with salt on the fire. Monica says: Even those who said they did not eat pork, ate it. Those who said they only gave it to

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<sup>133</sup> You must know where you come from in order to know where you are going. We came from the Montemayor of Zuazua.

<sup>134</sup> Two Diego de Montemayors arrived in the region.



friends read it in the book, *Entre la Cruz y la Hoguera*.<sup>135</sup> Sis abandoned the tabu of pork, but in the home it was definitely forbidden. The Montemayors ate blood, but the Treviños did not. They hunted for food, but not for fun. They had *venado* (game), even snakes, but for “medicinal purposes only”, protested Monica. They beheaded the chicken.

Both sisters confirmed that the entire family had a *mortaja* prepared. Both describe it as always having a bibbing to better preserve. They washed and changed Grandpa before handing him over to the *funeraria*. Grandma was already prepared for burial entirely in the *funeraria*. Maria de Jesus Benavides, who married a Treviño, is the relative with the shoes and gloves in the coffin, as the aunt with the “Alzheimer” had already told us. Maria had embroidered a beautiful *mortaja*. (In Músquis they still have some of her clothes.)

I asked again about that aunt who had been reticent. They said she is afraid that people outside might learn about what takes place in the house.

Sis said: “*Me di cuenta que los Judíos*” paid a lot of attention to the dishes, the tableware and tablecloths....” It took me a moment to realize that she was referring to her own family. They had special sets for guests, very formal. Monica pointed out that when a guest left the home, they immediately washed all the sheets and other things.

I asked about washing: Sis: *nos tenía enfiergas*, with the washing, that is. He would have them wash up to the elbow, then the face into the hair.

Monica’s grandma gave her a *medallia* of San Expeditus Martír, a saint about whom no one had ever heard. She looked it up in Lourdes, France, where there is information about all saints. It turned out that he was a roman soldier who warned the Jews that they were about to be killed. The Jews were killed, and so was he, for warning them. The image is of a soldier with a spear in his hand.

Monica asked me about an unusual custom they had in the family. When they built a new home, they placed some *medallias* or a cross in the *cimientos* of the house. Everyone in her Treviño family did this. Did I know anyone else who did this? I checked around, and nothing came up other than the story with the famed hero of the Inquisition, Tomas Treviño de Sobremonte, who placed a crucifix under the doorstep of his shop, and gave discounts to those who stepped on it.<sup>136</sup>

When I eventually asked Monica when and how she learned about her Jewish heritage, I was again astonished. She was a small child playing, while her aunts, talking among themselves, were speaking about their Jewish origins. This was exactly as had been the case with Everardo, who grew up in an entirely different region and had never had any contact with Monica (until I later introduced them to each other).

But again, to the rest of the world the name Treviño seems to be no mystery. Monica was sitting at a lecture of a *cronista* group when another person was asking her about a Jewish custom. Monica replied,

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<sup>135</sup> By Manuel Hernández Gomez, Reg. no. 21906-92. Inside the cover, they advertise two Messianic publications, *¿Mesias o Farsanet?* And *Aborto ¿homicidio of derecho?*

<sup>136</sup> Liebman (1970) chapter 11.

“How should I know?” and the lady replied, but you are a Treviño, you must be Jewish!

Everardo was in town and was scheduled to come to see me at Monica’s house. He arrived at last, just as we were leaving. He brought me a disc he burned with old local music that he considers to reflect some connection to Judaism. At his daughter, Mari-Bene’s wedding, he introduced her to the Ladino tune, “*Abre tu puerta serrada*”.

Monica was passive-aggressive with Everardo, and seemed not to like him. She told me, “He does not look like us,” but agreed with me eventually that, although he does not look like her family, he does look like many other anusim we both know.

### **3.4.3 The Installation**

On November 3, 2005, I received the following electronic mail from Monica:

*Queríamos comentarte que David y yo hicimos una instalación (arte objeto) en plena Calzada San Pedro y calzada Del Valle en San Pedro. Nos invitaron a participar en la exposición de día de muertos y como David ya tenía la idea de hacer un homenaje a Luis de Carvajal, pues nos aventamos. Hicimos una instalación increíble. Era la representación de un panteón entre Sefaradi y norestense. Una mezcla muy interesante. Los elementos del conjunto fueron una enorme tumba tipo sarcófago con cabezal y piecera dirigida hacia el este y 11 pequeñas tumbas con los nombres de los familiares de Luis de Carvajal. Además incluimos un candelabro de 7 velas, un señalador de rumbo y una cruz verde con un crespón (tela) negra sobre de ella (En las procesiones de los autos de fe se montaba una cruz verde con un crespón negro encabezando la procesión. Una forma sutil de decir que por la intolerancia murieron). El nombre de la obra fue “in memoriam” Luis de Carvajal de la Cueva.*

*“Toma una piedra eleva una plegaria y ponla sobre la tumba”. Fue todo un éxito.*

*La gente se emocionó mucho, participaron y se involucraron en el concepto. Tanto que se terminaron las piedras y hubo que reponerlas. Se repartieron 150 hojas con la información del significado de la obra y una breve reseña de quién fue Luis.*

*Además se puso una pequeña estrella de David delante de una lámpara de luz para que se proyectara su sombra sobre el cabezal de la tumba. Se veía muy bien en plena calzada todos esos elementos que fueron empleados muy artísticamente y que lograron muy bien el propósito de hacer voltear los ojos a esa parte de nuestra cultura. Todo de una manera sutil pero muy bien presentado por la investigación, la estructura y la manifestación artística. Increíble. Se que no está bien que lo diga yo, por falta de modestia, pero lo hicimos súper bien. Te mandaré fotos luego.*

*Ahora solo espero los comentarios de la prensa ya que fueron muchos periodistas y fotógrafos y la televisión.*

This exciting project engendered a lot of interest. (See Figures 3.3 and 3.4.) Many individuals placed pebbles on the “tombs” – not including the first day, when she provided pebbles herself. Monica counted 770 stones, besides the ones she provided. She used to come and light the “menorah” every night, but one night she was late, and found another person lighting them. It was extremely emotional. What more, the Jewish community cooperated, and, in an unusual move, invited her to speak to the Jewish schoolchildren, and also brought some of them to see the installation. Then it was decided to move the symbolic tombs to the *Obispado*. Needless to say, Monica and Gerardo were delighted, but then a whole series of “yes” and “no” and “maybe” ensued. In the end it was not moved.

All the media were at the grand opening: television channels, all the newspapers, etc. But, in the end, there was zero reportage, save a small note in an inside page of an unimportant paper.<sup>137</sup> We must remember that what Monica and her friend did was to emphasize the Jewish aspect not only of Luis de Carvajal el Mozo, nephew of the first governor of NL, but also of the governor himself and their entire family.



**Figure 3.3. The installation.**

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<sup>137</sup> The same had happened when Alice Backal gave her talk about the Secret Jews of Neuvo Leon at the Tech del Monterrey in honor of the celebrations of the Jerusalem 3000. The halls were filled one after the other, with close-circuit television, thousands were in attendance, but thousands were turned away. The tiny news article also left out the surnames that Backal mentioned, which belonged to the more powerful families in the city.



**Figure 3.4. The installation with the candles.**

#### **3.4.4 Winter 2006**

I visited Monica again in December 2006. When I arrived at 1 a.m., she was at the airport, waiting with her 28-year old daughter. We went to her home in San Pedro, where I would stay when we were not traveling. Our stay together in the same home added very much to our closeness, friendship and trust.

The next day I contacted many individuals, letting them know I was in town. We went over to the home of a very noble, very ill, friend of hers who was very eager to provide a DNA sample, in order to see if that might confirm her family tradition that she is of Jewish origin, and convince her more skeptical husband.<sup>138</sup> They were both swabbing their cheeks when her husband realized that the tests would go to a lab in the U.S., not in Israel, and that there was a permission slip he thought he needed to sign. Mid-test he begged out. He would trust the Israelis, but never the Americans. He gets enough mail inviting him to get his DNA for this amount of money or that. How can he be sure they will not blackmail him later?<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> I did bring along a few DNA kits from Israel, at the request of my informants, to be analyzed anonymously. This was not for research purposes, but for the sake of those individuals who so desperately sought to have them, and to spare them the publicity that might occur otherwise.

<sup>139</sup> I wrote immediately to my geneticist colleague, who replied that the subjects should keep the slips, and that no personal data reaches to the lab. By now it was too late for this couple, who were off to the U.S. for more medical treatment, for an illness that our friend had been fighting like a tiger, but, alas, conquered him.

The next day we took off to Múzquiz, the pueblo where Monica grew up, and where her parents, who are in their nineties, are alive and well. I already had a video interview of them that Monica made for me. I had also already interviewed Monica's maternal aunt, originally from Múzquiz, who blamed her "poor memory" on the Alzheimer's she thankfully did not actually suffer from. Still, many details of life in the pueblo had crept through, and I will cherish forever the sense of closeness we shared.

This was to be the first Christmas with all children home in a long time, and everybody was very excited. Monica and I arrived first, on Friday. Her parents proved to be charming individuals, warm and sweet, very accepting. Still deeply in love, eager to share their photo albums with me, they felt I looked very much like one of the great aunts. I gave her mother a shawl from Cambodia, which she really liked.

On the other hand, Monica's parents' home is filled with Christian images. Not only is her mother very Catholic, but they had put up an old priest in their home who had been rejected by the Church on account of his "strictness". After his death, they inherited his "Baby Jesus" in a cradle, his favorite saint in a big glass case, and some old books. All the same, when Monica's sister would just kick Baby Jesus around for fun, no one objected or seemed in the least bit disturbed.

I videotaped Monica's mother, along with a few minutes of her father.<sup>140</sup> Some important points are that, in addition to her four living daughters, she had a son who perished in his 30's from an illness despite heroic efforts to save his life. She spoke in deep sorrow of this deceased son's illness, and all the futile efforts made to save him, and of his many talents. Only later did Monica tell me in secret that he was actually an adopted child. A man on the ranch had lost his wife, and came to consult with them what to do. She offered to take the baby into her care, and raise him as though he was her own, and so she did, never saying a word to anyone. I cannot know this baby's origins, but very likely he would have received the same *herencia* as his sisters, although perhaps, his adoptive parents might avoid telling him their origin.

While Monica's mother, a Treviño, was constantly told by her parents that, although they had come from Spain, they were not Spanish but rather Jewish, Monica's father (a Montemayor) informed me that he was not told so. Yet he was raised with many home customs, and was glad to share those with me.

When I asked about killing animals, he explained that they always killed them by cutting the throat, hanging them to let the blood drain out and then salting the meat. He opened his safe to get the special knife he kept for the purpose, took it out with reverence, took out the whetting stone that was packed alongside it, and demonstrated how he sharpened it, then checked it on the palm of his hand, the finger, then the nail. (Cf. Chapter 4.4.5.)

His wife told me that on Easter (*Pascua*) they did not slaughter a goat (the most common meat in the region), but a lamb. She did not remember more details and asked me to ask her husband. He said something about no salt; they ate *pan ázimo*. Before I had time to stop her, Monica jumped in and asked him "*sin levadura?*" He either got

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<sup>140</sup> Not all the highlights are recorded on tape, since much was told over Shabbat.

confused, or felt attacked, or felt he had said too much. In any event, at that point, he could not, or would not remember more. I was truly amazed. Never before have I heard the term *pan ázimo* mentioned in this region, and Monica had not heard it either. When Monica had earlier told me of the basket of unleavened bread the groom offered the bride, when he came to propose to her, she used the Hebrew term *matzah*, which of course she learned in the big city. I suspect a second visit with this gentleman would yield much more; we struck up a great friendship, and I left with a gift from him – a piece of purple fluoride he found in his own yard. This semi-precious stone is collected nearby. It was “to remember him by”. As if I could ever forget him.

Preparations for dinner were a group effort, with me preparing kosher meat-stuffed grape leaves. Monica was swift and efficient, having something ready for every sister as she got in. A vast meal, devoid of all the standard staples as I know them both in Mexican and American tradition, was ready in plenty of time.

Christmas dinner was not traditional in any way at all. There was no specific religious content. There was no real tree, but there was a true feeling of family.

During our stay in Músquiz, Monica also took me around. We hobbled around in the mud looking for a leather artisan; we had a lot of fun. We passed by the cemetery. We saw her great grandparents' tombs and other family tombs. Unlike all the others near them, these had absolutely no Christian symbols on them of any kind at all. No cross, no saint, nada.

After our return from her parents, Monica and I joined Gerardo David and his *camioneta*, and set out for Zacatecas. I was eager to talk again to some colleagues of mine, some “*primos*” and some priests, and Monica wanted to meet my colleagues too. And both these friends were happy to tour together. The city was cold, as it normally is in this season, and the less expensive hotels have no heating. But the place warms the heart. We did meet our friends and colleagues, we toured the place, found places of interest for research.<sup>141</sup>

Monica took me to a very dear friend for an interview, someone whose mother had shocked her when she was about twelve years old by saying, just as they were leaving for Mass one Sunday, that she always prayed to the Father and believed only that Jesus was a prophet. After I finished videotaping this upper class lady, I mentioned God's Hebrew name, *Adonai*, as it is pronounced in Jewish prayers. She indicated immediately that she recognized it. I tried to ask where from, but she could not for the life of her remember. I asked what it meant and her nine-year old granddaughter said “powerful God”. I asked where she learned that and she said in catechism classes, but then she retracted and said that she only learned about the powerful God in class, but did not learn the name there, nor could she remember where or why she knew it. Grandma seemed to rake her brain and said only that she remembered it was said, twice (*Adonai, Adonai, ....*) I opened her Bible to Exodus 34, but there the *Thirteen Attributes* begin with *El Señor, el Señor!* It is clear both that the older and younger woman heard it, but they could not, or would not, tell me where. The doubling may possibly indicate that it is from a prayer.

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<sup>141</sup> Relevant ones are reported in their proper places.

### 3.5 ALONSO AND HIS AUNT

I met Alonso (not his real name) Treviño for the first time on my first visit to Monterrey in 2000. He sought me out, after we had corresponded by email for a while.

He told me that his wife too is a Treviño, and that they would all be willing to cooperate. His father had told him that names related to flowers are Jewish. He also pointed out that Flores should actually be spelled Florez, like Perez.

When Alonso was young, his father told him that that the Treviños came from a county by that name in Spain, and that they moved from Spain to Portugal. In the Canary Islands, there are also a few Treviños who are aware of their past (again, this is oral history, as related by his father). Five years prior to our meeting, when he was in Madrid, he had asked somebody why there are no Treviños in the city, after looking up the name in the phone book.<sup>142</sup> She answered that it was a Jewish name and therefore did not exist there. He also heard a tradition about the name deriving from three vintners, but he did not put much stock in this etymology.

Neither he nor his brothers are attached to Christianity. In response to my question, he answered that there used to be more anti-Semitic padres. The priests are “making their stroll”; they don’t want to lose their people. He also was very upset with the strong presence of the Opus Dei in the area.

During a later email communication, I asked Alonso if he thought there were still anti-Semitic priests around, in addition to the Opus Dei he had told me about. Here is his reply:<sup>143</sup>

As a matter of fact, there were several anti-Semite Catholic fathers years ago, mainly from Spain, but the only one I remember that is still practicing is Aureliano Tapia Méndez, a Catholic father that is especially known for his “conservative ways”.

Since my family and I don’t go to church any more, since several years before, I don’t know exactly the state of this particular matter.

My whole family feels uncomfortable with any anti-Jewish/anti-Semite commentaries since very long time, and [you] as may know, my *tía* has several friends in the Jewish community.

Alonso said that there are many unusual customs in his father’s family. His father told him that one of his aunts, “they say”, followed some strange rituals in Villaldama, where their family homestead is still located. In another conversation, he mentioned that his family had a custom to salt at least some parts of the meat, he was not sure if all of them. In the village, his grandmother slaughtered the meat. She slit the

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<sup>142</sup> I do not know which of the many local telephone books he examined, but there were 251 residents with that name in the Madrid region in 2006, according to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística.

<sup>143</sup> Email communication, Sept. 2000.

throat of the animals always. She died sometime in the Seventies, he could not ask her what she did with the blood. He has a cousin named Everardo Treviño.

At some point, Alonso said that actually if I look around, I will see that restaurants in this region do not tend to serve meat with cheese, as they do in other parts of Mexico. This may have been the case in the past, but it surely no longer is. Restaurants serving typical Mexican meat dishes topped with cheese are now commonplace. Meat, says Alonso, has many toxins if it is mixed with milk; this accelerates damage to the body. He tries to keep kosher. He got the address of the kosher butcher shop and the list of kosher products, as well as a *kashrut* guide.

Alonso would like to find out what transpired in his past. He is keenly interested in learning about Judaism. His mother's sister, who had adopted him, says that she is a Jew, although she is very Catholic. He went to Israel with her, visited the Wailing Wall, and felt something there, felt like he belonged. They went to Bethlehem, to Nazareth, etc. They were there during Succoth on a tour. He doesn't know why, but they were invited to enter a *succah* where Orthodox people were praying. Now, he wants to convert and make *aliyah*. (He has a successful business and comes from affluent family.) He does not want to drag life along. He asked about classes on Judaism with the rabbis (which I arranged).

Alonso and I went several times to visit this aunt, "Tia". She lives in an opulent apartment, and is rather Bohemian. She knows both from family and from her dear friend, the historian Cavazos, that *they* (Cavazos and she, as she put it) are "*Sefarditas*".

Tia is a Treviño who married an elderly wealthy member of one of the strong local families, and has been widowed now for long. She had a drinking problem, and has no children of her own. She has been much taken advantage of by the Opus Dei.

The entry room would put any local church to shame, with its dramatic display of religious regalia. One walks into a room filled with crucifixes of every style, a huge Virgen de Guadalupe, and a prayer-stand decorated with lovely rosaries on either side.

Tia was quick to inform me, tequila in hand, that she loved seafood and pork, though these were not part of the diet of "those days". She served us ham and cheese. Alonso was astounded by this display, but, then, Tia is a very dramatic lady, and her memory is a matter of choice.

She said that her elders did not eat pork, because it is harmful, and that they did not eat blood, except *fritada*. But when I asked about salt, she said that would dry the meat, and when I asked about milk, she said they marinated the meat in it to tenderize it. (Alonso was convinced she just made this up for me.)

She knew the saying, "*Luego, luego, se ve la cabra que da leche, y la mula que da patada*". (Not many people do; it is a very rare *dicho* encouraging one to marry within the group.) She likes to read the Old Testament; she has always been attracted to it. This she volunteered casually. Tia reported that Guadalupe, the maid who has been with her for years, lights candles every Friday night. The maid is from General Cepeda, near Saltillo.

They called the birthmark, the famous stain, "*el lunar Rodriguez*". She said that they buried their dead with a *sabana* like the Jews, and made a winding motion around her arm. Tia knew about the famous



local underground tunnels and the imaginary women buried there, and so on.<sup>144</sup> I did not ask what she thought of these tales.

Asked about fear, she said there was none, and immediately added that the Jewish community used to be very closed, and that now it is better, more open. They did not even go to each others' weddings. Jane Berner, the expert on the Jewish community in NL, denied this outright. Of course, they went all the time.

Tía has a *dicho* that her friend, the expert, Maria del Carmen Villareal, completed for her:

*El que se sienta de sentón  
y se levanta de pujido  
es que esta de condición  
bien jodido.*

Tía suggested that I go to Mina; she thinks they came from Soto la Marina and not from Matamoros, as suggested by other family members.

Alonso's parents also wanted to meet me, and Tia says that they (and Alonso's father, especially) know more than she does. Alonso seemed ambivalent about taking me to them. I do not know whether it is their lower socio-economic status, or indeed the constant illness of one or the other. Sadly, both expired before any meeting transpired.

In the end, I had to visit Villaldama on my own. I did go with Alonso to Gil de Leyva to meet other relatives, but eventually, it turned out that his wife was not as ready for exposure as he thought she was, and, perhaps, neither was he.

In our first conversation, I remember that Alonso suddenly became very emotional, as he told me that Israel has many, many hidden friends. Many feel like him. He has an Israeli soccer shirt; he loves Israel. When I told him that many, like himself, made a journey to Israel via Spain or Portugal, he fell silent for a little while, as we were sitting in his car; then he said, "I am not alone, then."

We keep in touch. He keeps up his lifestyle, and he remains my secret friend forever.

### 3.6 THE COFFEE SHOP

In July 2004, Everardo and Mirna were in town, and I decided to try and arrange a "family encounter" with some Treviños who had not met one another. We met one Saturday night at a café, Monica, Alonso, Everardo, Mirna and myself.

Alonso Treviño mentioned that his grandfather is from Gil de Leyva. Monica took over the conversation, discussing the problematics of the quest and the discoveries she had encountered in her genealogical search. Suddenly she confronted Everardo and asked him what's left. (In fact, she was rather confrontational with him throughout the evening.)

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<sup>144</sup> See Section 3.7 for more about these tunnels.

In Everardo's family the Mongolian mark, called in his home "*la mancha*", represents a *cruza de sangre* between *Espanoles* and *Judíos*. His uncle, Don Ernesto, knew the difference between *Judíos* and *Moros*, but the two were used interchangeably, and are contrasted with Spaniard.

I asked if they heard anti-Semitic talk in the church. Monica replied that, yes, there was someone close to her friend's mother whom the priest told that while the friend will get to heaven fast, because she truly believed, the Jews, who did not truly believe, would not. Alonso replied that he heard nothing direct, only indirectly; he did not specify.<sup>145</sup> Everardo said: only when the subject came up. Mirna said she almost never goes to mass.

I asked about the issue of fear: Everardo mentioned the Vatican II's cancellation of the accusation of deicide against the Jews. But he sees with sorrow that the younger generation is more anti-Semitic than ours. Monica (still involved with the previous subject of discussion) quoted her son who said: "But Mom, we are not even nationalistic, how can we be anti-Semitic?" Alonso said he was told with pride that they were Portuguese and that they were Jews, but they did not announce it to the world (*no lo gritaban en toda la ciudad*). Everardo is not certain that it is veritable fear, rather than something that can compromise (*prejudicar*) a person in public.

To put things in context, Everardo did not seem personally to have fear, but his mother certainly did, as we saw. Here, he is talking about his region today versus Monterrey today. He added that Magda, a friend from the U.S. with whom I had once put him in touch, had told him, "*Y llego la loca de la familia*", meaning that the family considered her mad for being public about her Judaism. She had asked him, had not the same happened to him.

Monica said that Gorge Delgado's brother put everything (i.e., a large genealogical tree) on the Internet. A female cousin saw this and was furious for having been listed. She demanded that she be removed from the site.

I asked about material evidence – a *mortaja* or something. Monica said sadly that although her aunts were not buried in their *mortajas*, they were buried alongside them in the coffin.

### 3.7 AQUILES

In late 2000, I was contacted via electronic mail by a folklorist, Marie Theresa Hernández, who was studying the same region as I. She wanted to know about the nature and value of an old Bible that an informant of hers held in his possession and wanted to sell. Theresa told me that the owner, Aquiles Sepúlveda Gonzales, whose grandparents were Treviños, had shown it to the local rabbi who had said that this book (the Vulgate, as it turned out) was "truly a great thing".<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> We had other communications on this subject that were reported above.

<sup>146</sup> For more on Aquiles and his Bible, see Section 8.6.

Aquiles was an artist, but he would not sell his paintings, because he believed that they were underappreciated. Now the family needed money. They were interested in selling the Bible, and, maybe, the paintings.

Theresa and I met eventually, and spoke a lot about our area of research. She kindly offered that I meet with her informants, and so I did. Aquiles had already died, but I went to see his sister. I went to my first meeting with her along with Alicia Said, the wife of the then rabbi in Monterrey. She accepted us into her home downtown, and her first words were, "We know where we come from and who our people are". The rabbi's wife, having no experience and not remembering to be "as quiet as the furniture", started mentioning the word Jewish, and the lady became frightened and mum.

Memo Sepulveda Treviño (whom we will meet presently) pointed me in the direction of a close friend of Aquiles, so I went to interview him, too. This friend said many things about Aquiles, the most interesting was his surprise at my question if I thought Aquiles was a *Sefardita*. "Sefardita?", he exclaimed, but Aquiles said that he was an Ashkenazi Jew!

My second visit to the sister was with Monica. I figured she could get a stone to talk. We went and charmed our way past her lock and bolt. We chatted a lot, looked at picture books. She was talking about the fact that she was the *morenita*, and how her sisters were much more *blancas*. This is a major issue in the region. As it turns out, most of what she knew about the family past, she knew from her brother. We looked at her brother's paintings and admired them. And we offered to come back; she seemed very lonely, but her home was not inviting.

As soon as we were far enough from earshot, Monica, exclaimed "*Indios!*". What? I asked, and she said, did I not see in the picture the grandmother with the braids? No Spanish woman wears braids, ever! These people are hiding Indian blood, that's all!<sup>147</sup>

Eventually, I decided to go with Memo, who owns a gallery dedicated to local art, and visit the sister. I thought it would be great for the poor lady to make some money, but somehow she again had a bad day, the lock never opened....

### 3.8 MEMO

Guillermo (Memo) Sepulveda Treviño is a passionate, aesthetic and warm person, who was told by his mother many years ago that he is Jewish. He was delighted for the opportunity to tell me about his family and try to find confirmation for what he had heard. We had many long conversations. He has a very profound and spiritual soul.

Memo was married to – and later divorced from – a woman belonging to one of the more important Catholic families in town. But he remains on good terms with his ex-family. He bought a home in Villa de Garcia, where his family once owned a home. He is an art dealer and

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<sup>147</sup> See Section 8.5.

owns and runs an important gallery, championing Mexican art, in San Pedro de Garza Garcia. We spoke about art, and about Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera, about whose lives he was well informed.

Memo offered to show me the stalactite caves in Villa de Garcia, and take me to the museum of *artesanias* (crafts), but we did not have the time. Villa de Garcia is undergoing massive gentrification; people of means from the city buy old homes and renovate them. I heard many local stories, stories that continue to circulate. One is that some thirty-five years ago, a husband burned his wife alive because he believed her to be an adulteress. The woman ran out of her home aflame, but was not helped by the neighbors, who, apparently concurred with her husband. The husband was never taken to task for this murder.

There are also many stories about families of *anusim* in Villa de Garcia, people who remember their hidden Jewish identity. What Memo told me confirmed what many others had also reported.

An extremely charming and sophisticated man, Memo took me to his house in Villa de Garcia. As we walked through his lovely home, filled with period pieces he had collected over the years, he told stories about life there in the old days, and about customs of his childhood. They cleaned the house on Fridays, avoided eating outside the home, did not eat eggs that had blood in them, and several other such practices, much like other Treviños.

He told me of a local custom that when a family slaughtered a pig, they would hang a red string in the window, as a signal for neighbors to come and share the meat. He also remembered, as did other informants, that many homes had biblical verses (from the Old Testament, said he) carved over the lintel.

Later, we continued to a famed local restaurant, where his friend, Luis, the chef (also an artist), turned out to have many customs of Jewish origin that actually stunned us all.<sup>148</sup>

Memo's mother, the Treviño, was in her nineties and clear-headed. Memo took me to see her, but, alas, I took my *gravadora*, and so she clammed up. Sadly, Memo was quite desperate to find confirmation for his oral history, and did not know what to do. He was very sure, but needed, like so many others, outside confirmation. Now, he is looking for a family *mortaja*, and planning a DNA test for himself and his mother.

### 3.9 ROGELIO

Rogelio is a Treviño from his father's side, and is otherwise related to various informants of mine. He bears physical resemblance to other Treviños. I met Rogelio with his mother. She is from the south; her surnames are Nieto Mosqueda.

Rogelio heard that he was a Jew when he was around 12 or 13 years old, from his paternal aunts, Ofelia and Sabina Sepúlveda, who were talking among themselves, and from the above-mentioned Aquiles. Learning that he was Jewish did not cause any emotional reaction in

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<sup>148</sup> He is not a Treviño, so his customs will be incorporated in other chapters.

him, he said. He grew up in Vista Hermosa, the neighborhood where the modern Jews live and where the synagogue is located, and saw many Jews. He had male and female Jewish friends, but not girlfriends.

The family is “very Catholic”, and attended Mass regularly. His father went to church, but “certainly never confessed”. (In the last four generations no masses have been held at the *Obispado*.) Rogelio said that he knows that the Treviños are of Jewish origin (“*Yo se que aquellos*”). The first Sepúlvedas (a local family to which he is related) who came to this region stayed for a time, but then went on to Argentina.

Rogelio’s mother also said that she believes she is of Jewish origin (but compare the details of her account below). But her husband never told her that he was. Her father, Nieto Tovar, was from Guanajuato, and used to say he was not Mexican. He was fair and tall. He liked milk with honey. Her grandfather, Tovar, was “Indian”, dark, and so on, but his wife was tall and fair.

Neither Rogelio nor his mother seemed to know whence their families originally came. No region in Spain, no Portuguese origins, no familial identity that I could detect. She describes her family origin as completely Mexican, harking from the more-indigenous South.

Rogelio’s mother-in-law owns land in Texas. He says that she never heard anything about Jewish origins – nothing about Judaism.

Regarding meals, this is what he told me. Breakfast is early. They had eggs with *tortillas de harina*. For breakfast and supper: *frijol*, coffee, milk, cheese with fruit. For supper: *quesadilla*, *huevos revueltos* with *frijoles*, or *migas*.

For lunch, there were *huevos montados* – eggs over rice; casseroles of beef, carrots, corn, squash, marrow bones, cilantro, *membrillo*, squash, but no cheese. (Cheese was served only at night.) Sometimes they made a barbeque, or made *cortadillo* in a pan, meat chopped with tomatoes, onion, garlic, potatoes. They ate avocado. *Cabrillo* was generally made in the oven, but they also ate *fritada*. They had chicken with *mole* or *caldo*, but almost never ate lamb. Fish was eaten only during the *cuaresma* (Lent). They almost never ate *camarones*, but sometimes *seviche* – very little. This, more often on his mother’s side than his father’s, who never ate it, because it is made from an “unclean animal”. They did not have *morcilla*; he does not remember it from large family gatherings either. For dessert, they had gelatin, rice with milk, cheese with fruit, *dulce de leche* with *tortilla*.

Rogelio’s mother described her childhood *almuerzo* (early breakfast) as typical Mexican, consisting of a dish of eggs with meat, chorizo, all kinds of things, *frijoles*, milk, *atole* of white flour, *tortilla de mais*. They did not drink coffee; they considered it *sólido*. For lunch: *sopa*, *caldo* of beef, vegetables, *frijoles*, *tortilla de mais*. They might have cheese (I asked), salsa with cheese, also cheese in the meat. They had chicken, pork (*marrano*), *cabrito*, *pavo*. They did not hunt, not in her family. But her husband used to hunt rabbits and duck (*patos*). Her husband really likes lamb.

Rogelio has one brother with a birthmark on the leg in the shape of the state of NL; it is the color of light coffee. Rogelio’s mother never heard of anyone looking for such signs on newborns. For forty days they put the new mother in some kind of bed that she did not leave. She does not know about sexual relations in this period, but thinks it was not customary to do so. Anyway, she did not. They buried the *ombligo* and the placenta under the porch or behind the home. She has not heard of

circumcision.

Regarding rituals that have to do with the dead in the family, as far back as Rojelio can recall, there were *funerarias*. He was not allowed to approach the dead. They applied the sacred oils, since they were very Catholic. When someone died, his mother explained, they cleared a place close to the door, and placed candles. Preparation of the corpse did not involve washing. They selected some special outfit, something the deceased liked especially much. If a woman died close to (but before) her wedding, they buried her in her wedding gown. If she was approaching her *quince* (fifteenth birthday) celebration, she would be buried in the dress that she would have worn for her party, plus a rosary and a *Cristo*. In the city of General Cepeda, they placed a cross of ashes under the deceased. They did not cover mirrors. They placed a *moño negro* in front of the door to announce that someone had died. She does not know anything about *mortaja*. Rojelio added that those who did not even have money for a coffin wrapped the corpse in a sheet and put their dead directly into the earth. Then he added a joke of his father's: "*Cuando me entierren, que me amortajen con una sábana. Y cuando me echen al pozo, que tiren de la sábana para que no se desperdicie.*"

She explains to me how couples get married. Arranged marriages are "like in the movies": we marry them because we have money and they have money. What really happens is that a boy "kidnaps" his sweetheart and hides her. Then he approaches her parents, and they go to the judge to arrange the marriage details. On the other hand, for the Indians in the south, the father of the groom asks for the hand of the bride. The bride asks for this or that type of *enramada* (canopy of branches), for so many animals (to be slaughtered) for the party. On the wedding day the couple is put in a room with a bed, and some elders accompany them. If she turns out to be a virgin, the elders go out of the room with a platter of white petals; if she is not, the petals are red, and everyone abandons the party. The groom no longer wants the bride, nor does her own family. In the North, too, people use *enramadas*, ranging from a simple arch up to the size of a room. It is wooden and decked with flowers.

Rojelio saw the same ghost twice. Once, between falling sleep and awakening, he saw a female spirit close to the armoire. After he got married, he saw the same woman in a room in an entirely different house. She was dressed in a large white dress, says his mother, who also saw her. He is not sure of the color; maybe it was a light cream. It was a very broad dress. When he woke up, she was gone, but the chair she was sitting on continued to rock.

Once, he went on horseback with an employee of his and they saw a bus coming down the mountain where there was no road at all. They just saw the lights of the bus. At dawn, with the sun behind them, they saw the lights separate, circle around the two of them and disappear upward into tiny balls.

### 3.10 J G

J. G. Garza Treviño is an academic. He is one of those Norteño gentlemen, knowledgeable and very fine. His grandfather was orphaned

of his father at a young age, and they lived humbly, selling the bread the mother baked in a village near Villa de Garcia. But his grandfather was intelligent, and became wealthy. He was modest, and although he had very limited formal schooling, he was a fine businessman. He and another great uncle related to another informant mentioned here, invested in real estate, one in Villa de Garcia, and the other in Monterrey.

He answered my question regarding endogamy saying that the matrimones were not all that close. For example, his great grandparents had the same last name, but they did not know just exactly how they were related. Perhaps they married one another because they lived in a small village and did not travel far, so the community was closed.

He knows of no relatives in Villaldama or near the northern border, only in Monclova, Coahuila, and in Saltillo. His grandfather used to pray. After each meal he said: "*Gracias a Dios que nos dio un pan de comer sin merecerlo amen.*" He prayed three times a day. There was also a custom of contemplation in the evenings. At 8 or 9 in the evening they would go outside, sometimes converse a little, but would always find time to look at the sky and contemplate with nature.

Mariana Treviño Fernandez used to say: "*Dios te castiga sin latigo ni quarta*". Another saying of hers was: "*La fe te valga aun que la cruz sea de palo.*" There was constant giving of thanks. When they went to bed it was typical to say, "*Hasta mañana si Dios quiere*" (as is common all over the region), or "*Hasta mañana si es servido*".

Before the meal they blessed the table, but the main blessing was after the meal. Washing of the hands before the meals was strictly observed; it was obligatory. One could not sit without washing their hands. Grandpa, and only Grandpa, got *lavamanos* as well (a pitcher, a bowl and a towel served to him at the table) at the end of the meal. This ceremony indicated the termination of the meal.

A typical breakfast included fried eggs with salsa, but without sausage or meat. Eggs with a blood spot in them were thrown out. After some thought, he says perhaps they threw out the blood and used the eggs.<sup>149</sup>

There were three dishes at the main meal: *sopa*, or rice (which, surprisingly, was always served with plantains) or pasta. After this, *guiza* (cooked chicken or meat) and a bit of dessert. No cheeses were eaten at lunch; only at breakfast. They had coffee after lunch, with milk. He has recipes more than 300 years old.

On Sundays the special meals included *cabrito*. Grandpa had a special knife, and a sharpening stone that are still in his possession. Grandpa used to test it by gently passing it over the tip of his thumb; if it was not sharp enough he would sharpen it more. He remembered all this, because I asked if he tested the knife for sharpness, and he became emotional when the memories came back to him. Today, he added, there are sharpening utensils from metal.

The blood was saved for the *fritada*, which they ate nearly every Sunday. They did eat *morcilla*. There were two ways to eat *fritada*, the one with the sauce made with the blood, and *fritada blanca*, without blood, which was prepared for the children, since the regular *fritada* was spicy. Today, he says, children have "no problem" eating the spicy version just like the adults.

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<sup>149</sup> This is the only such report I ever received.

The most common meats were beef and chicken. To kill the chicken they usually twisted its neck – Grandma did it. (He demonstrated the act with his hand.) He used the term *matar*, not *sacrificar* (like the vast majority of people here). I pointed this out, asking if the latter term had something to do with an indigenous language or with anything else in particular. He replied that the term is something mystical, that since the human is “forced” to take the life of the animal to survive, it is therefore sacrificed for the survival of the human.

They slaughtered the cows in the slaughterhouse. They raised pigs, and killed them at home, turning them on their back and stabbing them in the heart. It was typical to include neighbors and friends in partaking of the meat. They would hang a red string from a window to inform everyone there was pork meat and fat available for all. (Compare Memo’s story earlier.) They hunted. It was common to hunt vipers, doves, and sixty years ago they also hunted wild boar (*puerco espina*).

Animal fat was used a lot. Nothing much was thrown away from animals. Only chicken heads and feet, and maybe the necks too. Coarse salt was used specifically in the preparation of meat – nothing else.

House cleaning was done usually in the beginning of the week. Hair and nail clippings were wrapped together and thrown away.

They are not circumcised. When I mentioned that many Treviños are, he replied that that is really very Jewish.

Regarding mourning: The ancient custom used to be that people mourned at home. They emptied the room, marked a shape of cross from quicklime on the floor, and upon it lay the dead, wrapped in a sheet, with only the face exposed. The head too was bandaged, so the jaw was held shut. The individual was mourned for twenty hours almost. Never did they bury a person before twenty hours had passed, and never did they allow for twenty-four hours to pass before the burial. All the windows and doors were shut, the house was darkened, mirrors were covered with dark cloth, and voices were muffled. There were prayers for the soul of the departed. They said the *Ave Maria*, *Padre Nuestro*, and many of the psalms, but he cannot remember which.

There were also interesting wills. All started with the words: “*En el nombre de Dios, todo poderoso.*”

I am told by him that in many of the homes of the Villa de Garcia there are verses from the New Testament.<sup>150</sup> He went looking for an example and did not find any.

Another interesting thing about Villa de Garcia is that there was a visitation of the Inquisition there around the year 1700. It was an investigation of *limpieza de sangre*, and testimonies exist of Treviños, and above all of the Fernándezes, who were summoned and asked about the origins of their families and their religion. The people all testified that they were always Catholic. In the Church they were baptized, and in it they wish to die.<sup>151</sup>

My informant has “always” heard in his family, as a tradition, that they are of Sephardic origin. For example, his grandmother’s brother mentioned that *pan de semita*, the sheep, the goats, and having a pomegranate and a lemon tree in the garden, are all signs of Jewishness

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<sup>150</sup> Cf. Memo above with Old Testament verses.

<sup>151</sup> All my efforts to see the documents for myself were thwarted by the director of the archive.



that run in the family. The adults were speaking among themselves; he was present but not a partner to the conversation. He was about ten years old at the time.

### 3.11 NANCY

Nancy (not her real name), a well-known socialite, is also a Treviño. She spoke up during the question period at a public lecture I gave, and commented regarding the *cabrito*, saying that I omitted an important piece of data. In her family, she said, that they always let the “first blood” gush out, and only the remaining blood of the baby goat would be used for the sauce of the local (Nuevo Leónese) *fritada*. I was astounded.

Nancy came to meet with me later and described many more childhood customs that are of Jewish origin. She also recalled first hearing of the family’s Jewish origins in an offhand manner, much like the majority of the Treviño clan. Although finding private time to get away and meet with me was no small matter, she promised me she had much more to teach me by way of Jewish custom and practices of the region. We have maintained contact electronically.

### 3.12 DISCUSSION

The bringing together here of a number of stories of several people from a family generally considered to be of Jewish origin provides us with a number of results. In particular, we get an idea of what it means to be an extended family with a secret Jewish heritage in the region we are concentrating on. There are more such families, but none other could I present with informants who were willing to come forward with their names.

One of the most fascinating aspects for this writer was the discovery that despite the great distance and lack of any contact at all between informants I met from this very widely dispersed clan, I found that they all had very much in common. Their build and other physical features were generally similar, so much so that they would guess which stranger is a member of the clan.<sup>152</sup> Their mannerisms, practices at home, the way things were explained, all bore great similarities.

But most astonishingly, the transmission of identity within the home virtually always followed the same unusual pattern: a young child heard elders speaking among themselves, seemingly ignoring his or her presence completely. Only at a later date would an “official” confession or indoctrination come. To hear this so widely, so often and from so many informants, only a few of whom could be quoted in this chapter, is

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<sup>152</sup> I thank Monica for teaching me what features to look for.

truly an amazing sign of preservation, not only of tradition, but of clandestine strategy. Chapter 5 is devoted to transmission methods.

This chapter also demonstrates how important a long-term relationship with informants is for the full understanding of their psyche, and for better getting to the true nature of their origins, their motives, and their full identity. Without their patience and hospitality, I could never have begun to gain this much insight.

The Everardo and Monica whom I first met are very different from the individuals I later came to know so well. Getting to know Monica's family, her parents, her aunt and her friends, and being invited to spend Christmas in her very small hometown, spending time in the home of Everardo and Mirna, sleeping, eating and traveling with them to visit Everardo's uncle, all these wonderful things allowed me endless hours of deep togetherness. Taking Everardo on his first visit to a synagogue, seeing the impact it had on him, witnessing the transformation that reading the *proceso* of Tomas Treviño de Sobremonte brought on, watching the torment that anti-Semitism causes him, and his endless rationalizing around it, getting to understand his mother's fear, and its fluctuating with the changing politics – all brought us close to a degree where we could both understand one another, and formalities were no longer necessary.

Monica's sister's comment about "the Jews", where she was actually referring to her own group, was most enlightening. This sister did not get involved in family history, stopped keeping the traditions, yet still, when she spoke about her own family and their customs, she unconsciously used the term "Jew". Even Monica took no note.

I spoke to informants whose spouse would be very upset if he or she learned that they spoke to me. I witnessed anguish. And then, I saw many individuals who seemed completely comfortable with their divided identity, but would blurt out suddenly that if it were really doable, they would return to their ancestral religion. This, after years of presenting complete indifference to the notion of return. So, time served as a great teacher for me.

Some of the practices described in this chapter were clearly of Jewish origin; others are entirely or mostly indigenous, as in the case of Rogelio's mother. The practices themselves are examined in the next chapter.

It appears that customs were not taught as part of the Jewish identity, but as a family heritage. This may have been necessary because of the secrecy, and possible because of the isolation. People lived on their own ranch, killed their own animals, trained their own servants, and taught them that this is how clean and noble people practice. My question as to practical traditions that came with oral heritage was generally met with a blank face unless the informant was well read. On the other hand, if I asked about the life cycle, about the *tablilla*, about death, about meals, recipes, etc., many practices related to a secret Jewish culture turned up.

It is also noteworthy that being of New Christian origin is far less harmful in this region than being the keeper of "Jewish" practices. This alone would encourage elders to couch practices in terms of health, cleanliness or any other manner.

The fact that the rest of the world considered the Treviños to be "Jews" comes as no surprise. Jews have always been the last to be aware of how obviously they stand out to the rest of the world. There is,

of course, the famous *proceso* of Tomás Treviño de Sobremonte, one of the two most famous in Mexico, whose his house still stands. This and more, the famous General Treviño was always rumored in the north to have been a “Jew”.

### 3.13 A FINAL WORD

I have learned of my informants’ dreams; dreams that haunted them repeatedly at night, and one-time dreams that impacted them for one time or for a long time. And I learned of dreams of future that they knew were impossible due to circumstances.

Everardo has dreams. In his dreams, he comes to Israel and is asked to stay because he is needed. His poems are of longing. When his mother died, he asked for Jewish prayers in Spanish, and he gave his daughter away in marriage in the Catholic Church to the tune of a Ladino song. But he can no longer control with whom she will marry, nor could he make a future for himself and his family in Israel. While members of some Jewish communities will publish his essays or listen to him, none will accept him as a member.

Alejandro movingly told me at our very first meeting that Israel has no idea how many secret friends it has. He said he wanted to convert and live in Israel, but his wife (or his wealthy *tía*), it seems, has other plans.

The story of Monica, like that of Everardo and all my close and regular contacts, does not end, which makes writing this chapter so difficult. There are main actors and supporting actors, but some of the actors are live and active movers and goers whose exploits continue to change this “chapter”, and about each of whom I not only could, but would like to write an entire book, for they are worthy of one.

Let me conclude this discussion by mentioning a dream Monica once had. She was locked in a house, running from room to room. She could not find her way out.

## 4 CRYPTO-JEWISH PRAXIS<sup>153</sup>

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Inquisition dossiers, spanning centuries and from around the world, reflect the fact that some of the Jews of Spain and Portugal who were forced to convert to Christianity, as well as their descendants, continued to maintain selected Jewish practices, while living outwardly as Christians in the New World.<sup>154</sup> Over the course of the many interviews I conducted in Mexico proper and with Mexicans living elsewhere, I found a large variety of these practices still practiced, or remembered.

In this chapter, I collect the many such traditions that I encountered among Mexicans, ranging from clear indications of Jewish origin to fanciful interpretations.<sup>155</sup> These practices are divided into five categories: life cycle events; calendrical events; diet; hygiene; and beliefs and worship. Most are known from Inquisition records as crypto-Jewish. Some appear to be unrecorded. (Of course, only a tiny fraction of Inquisition dossiers have been examined or published.) Whereas some informants knew the Jewish origin of their customs, most received and transmitted them unknowingly. Of course, not all anusim in NL practice all the traditions listed here. A few presumably non-Jewish practices are also included, only because they are erroneously believed by some

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<sup>153</sup> I described some modern crypto-Jewish practices in “Anusim in North America: The Ingathering”, *Tradition* 30, no. 1 (1995): 85-102, in “Jewish Practices among Contemporary Anusim”, *Shofar* 18:1 (1999): 80-99, and in Schulamith C. Halevy and Nachum Dershowitz, “Prácticas ocultas de los ‘Anusim’ del Nuevo Mundo”, in *Encuentro y Alteridad: Vida y cultura judía en América Latina*, ed. J. B. Liwerant and A. G. de Backal (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1999) 35-46.

<sup>154</sup> See David M. Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996). For Old World crypto-Jewish lifestyle, see Haim Beinart, *Conversos on Trial* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1981) 237-285. For the New World, see Seymour B. Liebman, *New World Jewry, 1493-1825* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982) 100-130. For Mexico, see Baruch Megged, *Darkam Hayhudit shel Anusei “Sefarad Hehadashah” (Mexico) Bameah Hashesh Esreh*, Masters thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem (1987). A wealth of reports of Jewish customs may be found in David Fergusson, “Trial of Gabriel de Granada by the Inquisition in Mexico 1642-1645”, *American Jewish Historical Society* 7 (1899), cited below as Gabriel (1899).

<sup>155</sup> A partial list of practices found among descendants of anusim today was first compiled by me and distributed in 1993 at the Annual Conference of the Society of Crypto-Judaic Studies in San Antonio, TX. I also included such a list in a Solomon Goldman lecture at Spertus College in Chicago, IL in May 1995 (see <http://www.cs.huji.ac.il/~schalevy/papers/Goldman.txt>). It was placed on the Internet, along with additions, by Eduardo Mayone Dias, of the University of California, Los Angeles, CA (see <http://www.saudades.org/rituals.html>). Frances Hernández lists some in her, “The Secret Jews of the Southwest”, in *Sephardim in the Americas*, ed. M. A. Cohen and A. J. Peck (Tuscaloosa, AL: American Jewish Archives, 1993) 411-454.

anusim to be of Jewish origin. Some have become typical of anusim, and were recognized as such by the Inquisition, although in other parts of the world they may be found practiced by entirely different cultures. I have found many additional items elsewhere in the New World that are not included here.

Among the more common Jewish practices still found among descendants of Conversos in NL are avoiding pork, draining blood from slaughtered animals, circumcision, and fasting for Yom Kippur. These are examples of literal application of biblical precepts. The modern observance of rabbinic laws, including separating meat and dairy foods, ritual slaughter, salting meat, fasting on Mondays and Thursdays as penance, refraining from conjugal relations for forty days after birth, and burying the dead in linen shrouds, is more surprising. Moreover, I found widespread evidence of a few relatively obscure practices of rabbinic Judaism, practices unknown to the vast majority of Western Jews, including orienting beds north-south, sweeping towards the center of the room, and burning or burying nail clippings.

## 4.2 LIFE CYCLE

### 4.2.1 Courting

Until recently, marriages were invariably proposed by parents and grandparents, only after which would the couple court, under escort. Marriage between relatives was the rule, and endogamy was widespread in NL.<sup>156</sup> For this reason, there were countless *dispensas matrimoniales* (church dispensations for marriage between relatives) in the region over the centuries.<sup>157</sup> A large fraction of the local population have isonymous surnames (e.g. Elisondo Elisondo, Garza Garza, Treviño Treviño).<sup>158</sup>

In recent generations, children were often told that they must marry people with customs like their own. We have seen such examples in Chapter 3. “You should only marry the clean ones”, a mother told my friend. When she asked her mother who are the “clean” ones, she was told, “Those who have our ways – they are the clean ones.” Her mother also warned her to not marry into a family that had “imperfections” (illnesses, or handicaps, or the like). In other cases, too, I was told by

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<sup>156</sup> See, for example, Ricardo Elizondo Elizondo, *Los sefarditas en Nuevo León* (Monterrey: Archivo General del Estado de Nuevo León, 1987) 7-8.

<sup>157</sup> Raúl J. Guerra, Nadine M. Vásquez, and Vela Baldomero, eds., *Index to the Marriage Investigations of the Diocese of Guadalajara Pertaining to the Former Provinces of Coahuila, Nuevo León, Nuevo Santander and T́exas*, Volume One: 1653-1750; Volume Two: 1751-1779 (Edinburg, TX: Pan American University, 1989).

<sup>158</sup> Maria de Los Angeles Rojas-Alvarado and Raul Garza-Chapa, “Relationships by Isonymy Between Persons with Monophyletic and Polyphyletic Surnames from the Monterrey Metropolitan Area, Mexico”, *Human Biology* 66 (1994): 1021-1036.

informants that their families were very strict about which families they could marry into.

An informant from an old family that was fully aware of its Jewish origins (not Treviño), but consider themselves to be very Catholic, repeatedly heard the following saying warning against mixed marriage: “*Luego, luego se ve la cabra que da leche, y la mula que da patada*” (in the long run, one sees that the goat gives milk, but the mule [of mixed breed] gives a kick).

Not mixing blood remains very important until today, though it has become more difficult for parents to control matters. Many parents suggest appropriate dates for their young adult offspring. Many families will not allow young couples to date without a chaperon. They will not approve a marriage without a grandfather’s or a grandmother’s consent.

As we have seen examples of in Chapter 3, I have heard a fair number of times of young men and women, who considered their family to be Catholic, bringing home a Jewish date, only to be astonished that their parents and grandparents, who had always stressed marrying only “one of us”, raised no objection to what for them were clearly outsiders.

Marrying fellow Jews is biblical (*Deuteronomy* 7:3). An early seventeenth century rabbi wrote regarding the anusim: “The Portuguese in particular are careful not to marry Gentiles, and the Gentiles are careful not to marry them.”<sup>159</sup>

#### 4.2.2 Marriage

Marriage ceremonies normally began on Saturday. Celebrations went on the entire day and all night. Then on Sunday morning the couple would go to church for the religious ceremony.

Many people reported that the young couple would stand under an *enramada*, in the shape of an arch usually, but sometimes under something more substantial and spacious, made of greens and flowers. (See Section 3.9.) They often asked me if this might have something to do with Jewish tradition. I inquired as to what plants were used to make the *enramada*, thinking of the myrtle branches mentioned by Yehuda Halevi<sup>160</sup> and others, but my informants did not mention this particular plant at all.

Others described a *techo* or *palio*, a gazebo-like structure that used to be built in front of churches in the more remote parts of NL, and were used for weddings. I am told that these had been claimed in a news article long ago to be derived from *huppot* of Jewish origin.

A custom existed of passing around very fine unleavened crackers in connection with the wedding ceremony.

Jewish marriages are never performed on Saturday.<sup>161</sup> The Talmud speaks of plants adorning the entrance to the new home.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> Yom-Tov ben Moshe Zahalon, *New Responsa*, no. 107.

<sup>160</sup> As in his *Letomaei Zviah*: “*melunat hadasim v’eres besamim*”.

<sup>161</sup> *MT Marriage*, 10:14.

<sup>162</sup> See *Talmud El Am*, *Qiddushin* 5a.

### 4.2.3 Conjugal Relations

No one volunteered, and I did not prod regarding relations during menstruation. One man, however, volunteered that he was aware of such abstinence in a particular small village. He was well informed, and explained the practice well. He said that in the previous generation, women immersed in a natural body of water, but that these days members of the same families resort to a bathtub.

### 4.2.4 Birth

Some informants from Mexico reported that the placenta is buried on the homestead. In Brazil, it was often buried by the entrance gate.

In various other cultures the afterbirth is buried, sometimes in a ritually significant place.<sup>163</sup>

### 4.2.5 Circumcision

There appears to have been a strong tradition of circumcision among anusim in parts of Mexico, as in other former Spanish colonies, especially in more rural areas. Very many informants from northern Mexico and the Southwest told me that their fathers and/or grandfathers were circumcised.<sup>164</sup> Though I met many Mexican men who said that they themselves had been circumcised as infants, I did not have the opportunity to meet anyone who said that he or she performed the rite on children. In northern Mexico (and elsewhere), I was told of traveling experts who performed circumcisions.

One private hospital in NL has been circumcising newborn males, as a matter of course, for at least a hundred years. In other regions (e.g. Vera Cruz, Texas, and Arizona), grandmothers – serving as midwives – are said to have circumcised their own grandsons. Members of one family from Vera Cruz were astonished to discover in adulthood, upon visiting a Jewish *mohel*, that they all lacked foreskins.<sup>165</sup> I have heard of many cases (e.g. Mexico, Columbia, and Puerto Rico) where circumcision was performed in time of illness or danger, or in preparation for death.

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<sup>163</sup> James G. Frazer, *The New Golden Bough* (New York: Criterion Books, 1959) 33, and Geri-Ann Galanti, *Caring for Patients from Different Cultures: Case Studies from American Hospitals*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 132-133. There is a possible Jewish source for such a practice: “Both [the rich and the poor] bury the afterbirth in the ground to give a pledge to the earth” (*Jerusalem Talmud, Shabbat*, 18:3). But such has not been normative Jewish custom.

<sup>164</sup> See also Stanley M. Hordes, *To the End of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 230-231.

<sup>165</sup> The *mohel* told them that they were all circumcised, and then, that perhaps they were born that way. However, any experienced *mohel* would know the difference. Possibly, the midwife did it without consulting with the family.

Circumcision is of course biblical, and is also practiced by Moslems and – in some, usually distinctive, form – by several Indian tribes.<sup>166</sup> In Inquisition records, Tomas Treviño was reported to have circumcised his son, as were fairly many other Mexicans.<sup>167</sup>

In Texas and elsewhere, I was told that, in Mexican Protestant churches, baby boys would be *consecrated* on the eighth day of their lives, but not circumcised. The explanation was that circumcising would bind the child to the Law of Moses, which he would be hard-put to observe fully. Interestingly, this belief, derived from the Paul's Letter to the Galicians (2:3-9), is recorded in the seventeenth-century memoirs of Samuel Aboab.<sup>168</sup>

#### 4.2.6 *La Tablilla*

The first time I heard about *la tablilla* (the tablet) in NL was when a young man, who believed his family to be of Jewish origin but had not been told anything, took me to interview his relatives in Higuera, a place where many *Sefarditas* were known to have settled. On the way, he told me with some embarrassment that there was this “racist thing” in his family. As soon as a baby was born, the old women would check his hind side for a bluish stain, and that when they identified one, they would say there was a “*cruza de sangre*” – a crossing of blood, which he explained as admixture with African blood. His relatives, who had a few Jewish traditions in their practices, shyly admitted to this custom, but could not explain its reason beyond a certain norm.

Over time, I found out that in northern Mexico, this birthmark is also known in the region as *el lunar* (the crescent), *la mancha* (the stain), and other terms. Only individuals with Western features look for this mark. When I asked indigenous people about it, they were usually very surprised by the question, and, on some rare occasions, I found myself having to apologize and explain, or switch subject, if I could fast enough. Among my informants, some were indeed born with the mark on their *rebadilla* (hind-side). The marking represents different things to different informants.

Once I started questioning people about this, there was no end to the answers I heard:

- “But of course”, said Monica, “we call it the *tablilla*”.
- In one family that was very clear about its Sephardic origins the birthmark was called “*el lunar de los Rodriguez*” (the crescent of the Rodriguezes). In this family, it was identified as a symbol of the family, something that indicated the preservation of its endogamic purity.

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<sup>166</sup> Richard Andree, *Ethnographische Parallelen und Vergleiche* (Leipzig: Metzger & Witt, 1889) 201. See Liebman (1970) 76.

<sup>167</sup> Liebman (1970) 76-77, 173; Gitlitz (1996) 204-206.

<sup>168</sup> *Sefer ha-Zikhronot*, Prague, circa 1640, fol. 75b, cited in Simhah Assaf, “Anusey Sefarad u-Portuga'l be-safrut ha-teshubot”, in *Be-ohaley Ya'aqob* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1943) 152.



- Others who called it *el lunar de los X* (where X is their own family name) also explained the mark to signify that both parents belong to their ethnic group.
- One woman from Villa de Santiago and living in the U.S. told me that she had “not very nice” young female friends from Honduras who checked her son Jesus for the stain when he was born, but did not find it. She thinks it has to do with indigenous blood, since it is called “Mongolian”.
- A man of high government position told me that the *tablilla* was something everyone in his family looked for. It was a “*mancha oscura en el glúteo [que] indicaba sangre indígena*” (dark stain on the buttocks indicating indigenous blood).
- On the same occasion, another man told me that it was a sign of Jewish blood.
- Artemio Benavides, the director of the state archives, wrote the term *tablilla* in my notebook, making sure I knew how to spell it, proudly noting that all his family members sported one. This, at a grand dinner at a table full of dignitaries.

These birthmarks (congenital dermal melanocytosis) are known in English as “Mongolian spots” or “Semitic stains”. They are the norm among Asians and Amerindians, but are relatively uncommon among Caucasians.<sup>169</sup> They usually fade over the years and disappear by adolescence.

Among Sephardic Jews, this kind of marking is called the “Sephardic stain”. It occurs in Israeli Jews mainly among Mizrahim.<sup>170</sup> All Sephardim I know seem aware of it. It appears in novels, and was mentioned to me by my Sephardic grandmother as well. Some Ashkenazim – and some of my informants – have red spots (*nevus simplex*) near their eyes (“salmon patch”) or on the nape of the neck (“stork bite”), which is more common among the fair-skinned.

I inquired at the local hospital and spoke with an experienced pediatrician, but all he could do is reassure me that the stain is common and harmless. He saw it frequently on indigenous babies. The stains were sometimes very large, he told me, but still harmless. I tried to ask him about the Hispanic population, but got nowhere.

#### 4.2.7 Surnames

One cannot overstate the significance people attribute to their surnames, and, at the same time, the significant inconsistencies within families. I was asked innumerable times about possible Jewish origins by people who had been told that their surname was “Jewish” for one

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<sup>169</sup> Reportedly prevalence is Asian: 95-100%; East African: 90-95%; Native American: 85-90%; Hispanic: 50-70%; and Caucasian: 1-10%; see Alberto Cordova, “The Mongolian Spot: A Study of Ethnic Differences and a Literature Review”, *Clinical Pediatrics* 20, no. 11 (Nov. 1981): 714-719.

<sup>170</sup> Michael Kahana, Michael Feldman, Zamir Abudi and Shmuel Yurman, “The Incidence of Birthmarks in Israeli Neonates”, *International Journal of Dermatology* 34, no. 10 (1995): 704-706.

reason or another. The source for that information might be a Jewish friend, drinking mates at a bar, or a family member.

People in the region, regardless of their own origin, claim that certain surnames are indicative of Sephardic origin. Treviño, as we have seen, figures prominently in this regard. Lists of so-called “Sephardic names” in NL have appeared in various publications.<sup>171</sup> There are many books that list Jewish family names, including ones based on the Inquisition records. There are web sites by Jewish genealogy buffs, as well. Almost every young informant had sought his or her family surnames in such sources, looking for confirmation of Jewish origin. Some found their name in the *Libro verde de Aragón*,<sup>172</sup> a document written in the sixteenth century, detailing the names and progeny of Aragonian New Christian families, which, although officially destroyed, survives to this day. *Inquisición y Criptojudasímo* is another source used for sources of references to names and locations of anusim.<sup>173</sup> The book, *Sangre Judía*, authored by a descendant of anusim from the Balearic Islands, with some 6000 names, is also an important source for such endeavors.<sup>174</sup> Some Messianic groups have very extensive lists of Hispanic names they claim to be of Jewish origin, which they maintain for the purpose of proselytizing.<sup>175</sup>

I also encountered a pre-Expulsion name given to an important New Christian family in one of the states I visited, but which nobody imagines to be of Sephardic origin.

I was told by a Garza in Chicago that this supposedly monophyletic family has an oral tradition that they are kohanim. In Brazil, there are groups of people who consider themselves to be descended of anusim, who have lists of names of families they believe are kohanim or Levites.

A common evasive answer is to claim that a surname is of Basque origin, and, therefore, has nothing to do with Jews. This attempt to deflect my inquiries was applied to the names Treviño, Garza, Sada, and other surnames not mentioned in this work. As a source for the Basque origin of the family, I was even offered the very same expert who had said the opposite according to other informants, namely, that the surname in question is indeed of Sephardic origin. Needless to say, Basque origin is no evidence of the absence of a Jewish heritage.<sup>176</sup> Similarly, I was sometimes told that a name is of Italian origin.

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<sup>171</sup> Eugenio del Hoyo, *Historia del Nuevo Reino de León (1571-1723)*, (Mexico City: ITESM, 1972) 198-268; Jesús Manuel Cantú Frias, “Monterrey: Fundación Judía (III)”, *El Porvenir: El Periodico de la Frontera*, September 9, 1979, B-2.

<sup>172</sup> Reprinted in Monique Combescure Thiry, *El libro verde de Aragón* (Zaragoza, Spain, 2003).

<sup>173</sup> Juan Blázquez Miguel, *Inquisición y criptojudasímo*, Kaydeda Ediciones, 1988.

<sup>174</sup> Pere Bonnín Aguilo, *Sangre judía: Espanoles de ascendencia hebrea y antisemitismo cristiano*, 4th ed. (Barcelona: Flor del Viento Ediciones, 2006).

<sup>175</sup> Two examples are [http://ifmj.org/pdf/sephardic\\_surnames.pdf](http://ifmj.org/pdf/sephardic_surnames.pdf) and <http://www.kad-esh.org/sefarroots/spanstart.htm>.

<sup>176</sup> The following is an example of published testimony from a (self-proclaimed) Basque crypto-Jew, Joaquin Carlos Caragueguie, an attorney in his mid-50s: “There have been Jews in the Basque country all along. They never achieved the prominence Jews enjoyed in other parts of medieval Spain, but they also suffered little direct anti-Semitism. The region was a refuge, a place the Inquisition never reached. Right now, there are about 10,000 Jews. They might

A common belief, not specific to northern Mexico, claims that family names taken from natural objects, like animals, plants, and rivers, are of New Christian origin. Some sources, however, said the opposite. For example, a local historian claimed that only stationary objects, but not animals, were taken by New Christians as surnames.<sup>177</sup>

It is also commonly believed that names that are especially Catholic, such as de Jesus, or de Santa Maria, were adopted by converted Jews. (Santa Maria is also believed to be a name given to abandoned babies, regardless of family origin.)

One must bear in mind that names fluctuate easily. There used to be no rule at all as to the surname given to a child who was born.<sup>178</sup> There are many examples of siblings bearing different last names,<sup>179</sup> of a last name of an illustrious relation taken on,<sup>180</sup> and of a change of name, to avoid the Inquisition or other authorities. As Liebman writes:<sup>181</sup>

It is not uncommon to find brothers who bore different family names. Very often children bore only their mother's maiden name.... [Jews] often had to secret their true identities, especially if other members of the family ... had been pursued by the Inquisition.... We find records of two or more persons simultaneously bearing such names as Hector de Fonseca.... In spite of popular opinion ... names ending in *ez* were not distinctly Jewish.

Furthermore, servants or even employees often took on the names of their employers, workers in a hacienda, the name of the hacienda or of its owner, and so forth. Very commonly, New Christians took the last name of the person who sponsored their conversion at the baptismal font. (Portugal, where mass conversions had taken place at the port of Lisbon, may have been an exception.)

My informants knew that names are not proof enough. They often examined the appearance of others bearing their name to see if he or she looks like the family, "has the family chin", "family nose", or any other mark, in addition to the general family look.

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not publicize the fact, but they know who they are.... That was the tip-off that we were Jewish. But here in the Basque country, they did nothing about it. The attitude was "Okay, move on." My grandfather saw to it that my brother and I were circumcised even though he and my father had to take us to Endorra to find a doctor to do it. He raised us to know that the Old Testament was our Bible and every so often had a traveling rabbi come around to instruct us in Jewish laws and get a free meal.... My grandfather was buried in his *tallit*, which we knew was sacred. But that was it. I didn't know kosher food existed until I saw New York."

<http://sedersforyou.tripod.com/crypto.readings.master.final.pdf>.

<sup>177</sup> Perhaps his motive was to protect specific families.

<sup>178</sup> The convention of forming a last name from the surname of the father followed by the mother's is only a recent legal development.

<sup>179</sup> It is known, for example, that two brothers each took one of the names Treviño and Garza (Tomás Mendirichaga Cueva, *Origen de los apellidos Garza y Treviño en Nuevo León*. México City: Editorial Jus, 1982).

<sup>180</sup> A prime example is Luis de Carvajal el Mozo, who was named after his maternal uncle – not his parents.

<sup>181</sup> Liebman (1970) 23-25.

There is plenty of folk etymology in all cultures, and – if anything – there is even more of it in NL. The following are a few examples of “Jewish” naming conventions that I heard over the years:

- Garza derives from *geirush* (*garza* actually means heron).
- Rabbi Kaiman told me that Coy comes from Cohen.
- Leyva is Levy.<sup>182</sup>
- Names that have *ez* or *es* as their suffix (which does mean “child of”<sup>183</sup>) are derived from the Hebrew *ben*. Thus, Ramirez or Ramires denotes Ben-Avraham, etc.
- Rojas read in reverse is *zakhor*.
- Treviño means “three wines” or “three vines”. I was even told that it represents the three vines in Joseph’s dream.

Were we to seriously consider all these beliefs, few would be the Hispanic names that are not of Jewish origin.

#### 4.2.8 Given Names

Many informants mentioned that “Old Testament names” are common in their family. And, indeed, many families had a number of such, including Eleazar, David, Rut, and even Israel (as in “Israel Cavazos Garza”, the famous historian). The same families usually also had normal Spanish names, like Monica, Jorge, Bertha, and the like. They could also have explicitly Christian names, including Jesus. The name Guadalupe, however, was rare.

It is rather common, not surprisingly, to see the repetition of given names on genealogical trees.

The Inquisition noted this naming tendency.<sup>184</sup> It is also a famous Midrashic compliment.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> There was a Leyva in Peru some centuries back who was accused of being a dogmatist and rabbi. I passed this information to a person who asked about a Leyva in Cuba, but made it clear this was not a proof of anything. I also contacted a colleague in New Mexico and asked if he had heard any contemporary oral traditions regarding the name Leyva. He had not, but in a later publication of his, I found this claim made. I phoned to inquire if he had come across any new evidence, and he replied “no”, that he had learned the “fact” from me. I was (thankfully) not cited as the source for this misinformation in a reference.

<sup>183</sup> Ralph John Penny, *A History of the Spanish Language*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2002) 16.

<sup>184</sup> Liebman (1970) 97.

<sup>185</sup> *Canticles Rabbah* 4: “They did not change their names.... Reuben and Simeon they arrived; Reuben and Simeon they departed. They did not call Reuben, Rufus....”

#### 4.2.9 Cuarentena

The *cuarentena*, or *la dieta de cuarenta dias*, is a quarantine for the postpartum mother for forty days after parturition. It is widespread in the areas I studied. In general, when a woman gives birth, most typically her mother, or else another close female relative, moves in with her for the duration of the period. The mother is confined to her own bed, and sleeps apart from her husband, who may be given his own temporary bedroom. In many cases, a special wrap of herbs is placed around her belly, then supported by a swaddle to help reduce the looseness of the skin (the *emfaja*). She is fed special, milk-producing foods, which exclude most animal products, including pork. She has *atole* (a sweetened cornmeal porridge), chocolate milk, chicken soup, and the like. Only after forty days is she allowed to bathe, leave the house (even for christening), and go to church to give thanks.

To mark the end of the *cuarentena*, many women bathed in a river, lake, cistern, or at home. Conjugal relations are only resumed after the *cuarentena*. One elderly couple told me that they could not afford to observe the *cuarentena* in full (due to their poverty), but that they respected the conjugal separation.

The custom has very many variants, and seems to be common across many layers of today's Mexico's society, where some indigenous people also keep a *cuarentena*, but are not worried about going to church, and always attend the christening, for example. Some Hispanic informants do not know about it from home, and some reported a 15-day *cuarentena* and the like, and displayed ignorance in other manners. They also are less worried about conjugal separation. Although Leviticus 12 speaks of an eighty-day period for female babies, I could not find such a distinction among my informants. Some people thought there was a difference between genders, but I was not given consistent details.<sup>186</sup>

Some women reported full immersion at the end of the quarantine period. A very knowledgeable person reported that his mother did so, and also fully immersed after ritual impurity, and that his sister now satisfies herself with a bath. (See Section 4.2.10 below.)

Abstention from marital relations for a full forty days after birth was the subject of major dispute among medieval rabbis. This interpretation of Leviticus 12:4 was well known in Spain long before the expulsion, and is described by Nahmanides in his commentary on this passage. Regarding its origins, Maimonides writes:<sup>187</sup>

There is a custom which prevails in some places and which is mentioned in the responsa of some of the Geonim, whereby a woman who has given birth to a male child may not have intercourse until the expiration of forty days, and in the case of a female child eighty days, even if she has had a flow for seven days only. This ... is not a well-founded custom, but the result of an erroneous decision in these responsa. It is a

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<sup>186</sup> Cf. the reports from Baeza and Soria in Gitlitz (1996) 209-210.

<sup>187</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah* (MT in the following), Forbidden Intercourse, 11:15. For the evolution of restrictions on postpartum intercourse, see Eric Zimmer, *Olam K'minhago Noheg* (Jerusalem: Mercaz Shazar, 1996) 220-239.

custom in the manner of the *Minim* [heretics] which is prevalent in these localities, and the inhabitants thereof had learned it from the Sadducees [i.e. Karaites].

Leviticus does forbid a woman from entering the entering the Tabernacle during this period, and this was understood to apply to the Temple in Jerusalem, as well. R. Yeruham of fourteenth century Toledo, however, rails against women who avoid going to the synagogue after childbirth, basing themselves on this biblical prohibition. Yet, despite such rabbinical dissent, it appears that this attitude maintained a strong hold on the people.<sup>188</sup>

This forty-day quarantine appears in the edicts as a sign of secret Judaism<sup>189</sup> and was widespread in New Mexico and Portugal.<sup>190</sup> The transference of avoidance of postpartum attendance from the synagogue to the church was frowned upon by the Church, despite the fact that it expressed respect for the place of worship. It was recognized by the Inquisition as of Jewish origin and as an instance of Judaizing.<sup>191</sup>

Similar forty-day periods of postpartum recovery are known from places as diverse as medieval Europe, the Amazon, Somalia and Southeast Asia.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> This attitude seems to be common even today. I have met women from the former Soviet Union who had to fight against their mother's sense of propriety in order to go to the synagogue to attend their son's circumcision. Special attention is given nowadays to call the woman's husband to the Torah at the end of the forty or eighty days, even if she cannot also attend services. See *Magen Avraham, Orach Hayyim* 282, 18: "The husband of a woman who has given birth 40 days prior for a boy and 80 for a girl, but has not yet been able to attend services at the synagogue herself, must be called up to read from the Torah on the Sabbath, since this would be the appropriate time to bring the birth offerings."

<sup>189</sup> Liebman (1970) 97.

<sup>190</sup> Munro S. Edmonson, *Los Manitos: A Study of Institutional Values* (New Orleans: Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, 1957) 24. Tomas Atencio speaks of other aspects of the same "diet" in "Resolana: A Chicano Pathway to Knowledge", Third Annual Ernesto Galarza Commemorative Lecture, Stanford Center for Chicano Research (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1988). For modern Portugal, see the references in Gitzlitz (1996) 210.

<sup>191</sup> See Gitlitz (1996) 209-210. For a European Christian instance, see the Liegeois mystery play cited in Penny Howell Jolly, "Learned Reading, Vernacular Seeing: Jacques Daret's, *Presentation in the Temple*", *The Art Bulletin* 82, no. 3 (Sep. 2000): 443.

<sup>192</sup> For eastern Amazon, see Barbara Ann Piperata, "Forty Days and Forty Nights: A biocultural perspective on postpartum practices", *Amazon Social Science & Medicine* 67, no. 7 (October 2008): 1094-1103; for Somalia, see Mohamed Diriye Abdullahi, *Culture and Customs of Somalia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001) 144; regarding the Hmong from Southeast Asia, see Pranee Liamputtong Rice, *My Forty Days: Childbearing Experiences of Non-English Speaking Background Women: A Cross-Cultural Resource Book for Health Care Professionals in Birthing Services* (Melbourne: The Vietnamese Antenatal/Postnatal Support Project, 1993).

#### 4.2.10 *Mikveh*

It took some time before immersion rituals came to light, because they are not very common to the region. I heard sporadic reports about women bathing in rivers. An important and extremely knowledgeable male informant, whose family harks from a small village where each home had a private water cistern on the rooftop, told me that his mother and grandmother always immersed themselves after menstruation (as well as after the *cuarentena*; see above), but that, to his regret, the women of his generation satisfy themselves with regular bathing. That the women of this village immersed regularly was confirmed to me by another source.

Some other instances of ritual bathing or the need for access to a body of water have been reported to me. In Mexico and Texas, I was told of young women being taken to rivers to bathe after menstruation. A Texan woman, daughter of ministers who are fully aware of their Jewish origins, took young women to the river in groups to encourage them and get them used to the purity ritual. (In her parents' church babies were dedicated on the eighth day, and the river Jordan was painted as a mural on the front of the church.)

Ritual bathing after the menses is Biblical (II Samuel 11:4). Instances in Inquisition records also occur.<sup>193</sup>

One of the first trials by the Inquisition in Mexico, even before the Tribunal was established there, deals with a husband who prohibited his wife from going to church during her period. He was convicted for Judaizing, and relaxed to the stake in 1528.<sup>194</sup>

#### 4.2.11 *Death*

I heard many reports about the dying turning to face the wall. Younger informants also reported with wonderment that their elders knew their time of death in advance and would prepare for it.

Psalms are frequently read in connection with death, before and after burial, but without the usual Christian prayers that surround them. The most commonly recited ones are the beginning of the book and Psalm 91 (*shir shel pegaim*), very often with preceding verses from Psalm 90. Some say rosaries. There may also be special prayers, transmitted orally, which do not mention Jesus.

Generally, two seven-day candles are lit next to the body. Sometimes, it was a 24-hour candle. Water that stood in the house of the dead is sometimes poured out. Draping mirrors is extremely common in NL and also in places like New Mexico.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> A few examples are in Gitlitz (1996) 272-273. See also Janet Jacobs Liebman, *Hidden Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 54.

<sup>194</sup> The victim was Hernando Alonso, who came with Cortes; see Alfonso Toro, ed., *Los Judíos en la Nueva España* (Mexico City: Archivo General de la Nación, 1932) 32.

<sup>195</sup> Aurora Lucero-White, *Los Hispanos* (Denver: Sage Books, 1947) 8; Arthur L. Campa, *Hispanic Culture in the Southwest* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979) 196.

Reciting Psalm 90 and 91 is an old Jewish custom.<sup>196</sup> Omitting *Gloria Patri* was a sign of Judaism in the edicts.<sup>197</sup> Lighting candles and pouring water are ancient Jewish, but non-halakhic, customs.<sup>198</sup> They were significant to the Inquisition.<sup>199</sup> Draping mirrors is not an old custom and is not uniquely Jewish.<sup>200</sup> But both pouring water and covering mirrors seem to be completely absent among the Old Christians in the regions investigated.

#### 4.2.12 Burial

In the past, burial was typically entrusted to women.<sup>201</sup> People buried their dead within one day. Quick burial is also common in rural New Mexico.<sup>202</sup>

The body was washed with warm water, sometimes with a vinegar solution. No Old Christians with whom I spoke ever heard of washing the body. The very question drew a raised brow, generally.

Fingernails and toenails were trimmed. Often hair and beard, if there was one, were groomed. The body was laid on the floor. Some place the corpse on a cross of quicklime, lighting candles at its head and feet. People are buried with objects of their choice. In some cases, people had a life's worth of teeth and hair buried with them. In the past, anusim avoided caskets altogether, or preferred a simple, natural wood one. That is no longer the case. Several informants spoke about burial with feet toward the East, some just about burial toward the East.

Now, times have changed and the *funerarias* (funeral homes) have taken over. Even small villages have a *funeraria*, and families must entrust their loved ones to them. I found myself having to ask my informants about how things were before the advent of the *funerarias*,

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<sup>196</sup> Aaron Ben Jacob ben David Hakohen (Provence and Majorca, 14th c.), *Orhot Hayyim, Laws of Mourning*, 11.

<sup>197</sup> Liebman (1970) 97.

<sup>198</sup> Regarding candles, see Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael: Meqorot ve-Toladot*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1995) 140-155. Regarding the spilling of water, see *Kol Bo*, fol. 86 (to call attention to the death or, as "some say, the reason is because the Angel of Death throws a drop of the blood of death into the water") and *Yoreh Deah*, 339:5 ("It is customary to pour out all drawn water from the vicinity of the corpse"). Irish Catholics spill buckets of water in front of the hearse passes (as seen in the movie *Angela's Ashes* (1999) and mentioned at <http://www.justanswer.com/questions/h8be-throw-2-buckets-water-front> and elsewhere). A local historian also asked me about a local custom of washing out the front stairs every morning, which might have to do with a fear of the spirit of death, which dwells in the house during the night. See Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York: Behrman's Jewish Book House, 1939) 177-179.

<sup>199</sup> Liebman (1970) 97; Gitlitz (1996) 300-301.

<sup>200</sup> James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, part II, vol. 3 (Macmillan, 1935) 94-95. On the other hand, the question about the custom was raised in a radio talk-show in Spain. The expert implied the custom had Jewish origins, and that it could be found in small towns where many New Christians still live.

<sup>201</sup> Cf. *Tractate Semahot*, 12.

<sup>202</sup> See: Lucero-White (1947) 16; Edmonson (1957) 35.



and since. I also went and interviewed *funeraria* owners, from the most exclusive one in Monterrey, to humble ones in small towns. I asked about the early days, about special requests, about open and closed coffins. Do they replace the blood for the purpose of embalment. Has anyone ever asked them to not do so? I insisted they not give me names. How were the early days, before people were used to this? Did some corpses arrive already washed? Did some people ask that the corpse first be clothed in white?

At the most respected and elegant *funeraria* in Monterrey, I was told that indeed some of the corpses came already clean, shaven and smelling good. They are, they say, a respectable place, so do not like to share private details. They “do not remember”, but “maybe a long, long time ago” some of the bodies in closed coffins were not embalmed if so requested. Today, however, embalment is done as a matter of course and of law. The director cannot remember so far back about the type of clothing or other coverings, “maybe people asked for something special”. But he certainly remembers about requests of white linen lining for coffins.

I met an older gentleman who, in his youth some fifty years ago, worked at the same *funeraria*. He told me that in his day, in that particular *funeraria*, bodies were washed as a matter of course, contrary to what I had been told by the director, and that very many were close-casket ceremonies.

In one country *funeraria*, the man I spoke to was much more open. He told me that people ask for many things: some want to be wrapped like mummies, others with white clothes, some bodies get so rigid that he has to break them up with an axe to fit into the *ataúd* (coffin). But no one can see under the clothes, he giggled. It is not a job for a lady, he added. He does whatever they want, and he embalms everyone – it is the law.

In another city in a nearby state, I was told of many strange customs that also included a *mortaja* under a habit of Santa Teresa, even though the Order of Santa Teresa did not have a presence in the region until very recently.<sup>203</sup> Elsewhere, it was implied that in one or two instances there was a request that, despite the embalming, the blood should be kept in an urn and placed in the coffin alongside the corpse. Some elders requested to be buried without a coffin, but that, too, is seldom complied with by the younger generation.

In some instances, the deceased was buried in a coffin together with a clump of earth, in lieu of direct burial in the soil. In one case, I was asked to bring earth from the Holy Land for this purpose.

Immediate burial is regarded as Biblical,<sup>204</sup> and is the law in many Latin American countries. Though halakhah demands burial on the actual day of death, barring extenuating circumstances, my informants usually bury the following morning.

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<sup>203</sup> Cf. Claudio Lomnitz, *Idea de la muerte en México* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2006) 275. Santa Teresa seems to have had a special significance to anusim; see Matias de Bocanegra, *Relacion del auto general de la fee... celebrado 11 de abril 1649*, trans. by Seymour B. Liebman as *Jews and the Inquisition of Mexico* (Lawrence: Coronado Press, 1974) 144.

<sup>204</sup> *MT Sanhedrin*, 15:8.

Washing the body is part of Jewish *taharah*.<sup>205</sup> Embalming is frowned upon nowadays by Jews, but was permitted by some Sephardic rabbis.<sup>206</sup> Washing the body was cause for denunciation (of backsliding Jews and Moslems), as was placing earth in the coffin.<sup>207</sup>

Burying one's teeth is mentioned in Sephardic sources.<sup>208</sup> In 1642, Blanca Enríquez was buried in the cemetery of the Church of the Barefoot Carmelitas, after being tortured by the Inquisition and having divulged nothing. Her teeth were "thrown into the coffin" and she was dressed in a shroud in accordance with Jewish rites.<sup>209</sup>

#### 4.2.13 Burial Shrouds

In the past, white linen or cotton was used for burial shrouds. White was critical. These were often called just *lino*, or, more commonly, *mortaja*, and occasionally *sudario*. Three kinds of shrouds are called *mortaja* in Mexico. The plain white sheet in which the deceased is wrapped entirely is one. In addition, especially for males, there may be a long strip of white cloth in which the body is wrapped mummy style, also called *mortaja*. A white garment, prepared in advance, embroidered finely, and designed to cover the entire body, also called *mortaja*, is more common for women, but used to be made for men, too.<sup>210</sup> It has no pockets. In addition, the corpse may also be dressed in chosen finery. In all such cases, the plain sheet is used as an outer wrap.

Many individuals prepared their own *mortaja* well in advance. Carefully embroidered linen gowns were repeatedly described to me, prepared by women in the middle of their lives, along with matching pants and socks. Other, more simple *mortajas* were also described, ones in which the body is enveloped, with informants making motions of encircling one arm with the other, usually adding the term *momy* (mummy) or a *sabana* (sheet). Men, too, had white gowns made for them.

More recently, linen shrouds have become less popular, so people prefer to bury their cherished ones in the more common, "normal" clothes, leaving the *mortaja* in the coffin next to the corpse (or sold to resale shops).

In a visit to northern Brazil, I was taken to a home of the great uncle and aunt of an informant who was under the impression that she

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<sup>205</sup> *MT Mourning*, 4:1.

<sup>206</sup> See H. Rabinowitz, *A Guide to Life: Jewish Laws and Customs of Mourning* (New York: Ktav, 1967) 25, who quotes *Genesis Rabbah* 100:2: Why did Joseph die before his brethren... Because he embalmed his father." Compare *Responsa Solomon ben Aderet*, vol. 1, no. 369; *Responsa David ben Solomon ibn Abi Zimra*, vol. 1, no. 484.

<sup>207</sup> Liebman (1970) 97; Gitlitz (1996) 281; Pinhas Bibelnik, "The Religion of the Crypto-Jews in Seventeenth-Century Mexico", *Pe'amim* 76 (1998): 90.

<sup>208</sup> Chaim Joseph David Azulai, *Yosef Ometz*, 30:2.

<sup>209</sup> Liebman (1970) 268.

<sup>210</sup> Jewish women from Tétouan used fancily-embroidered white burial shrouds, which otherwise look very similar to their black wedding gowns, but not like the Mexican shrouds described to me. See Yafa Cohen, *Takhrikhin ezel Yehudei Morocco*, unpublished seminar paper, Dec. 31, 2008.

was of Jewish origin from her father's side. Although warned not to inform what the purpose of my visit was, she announced it immediately, and the elders became frightened and silent. Fortunately, a cousin came later, who was raised on the family homestead. When I began to speak of death, she immediately said, "They buried my grandmother in a wedding gown" – the best description a four-year old could have given to the finely embroidered linen *mortalha*, as it was called where she grew up. (After that point, many more details indeed came up, and the uncles joined as well.)

Plain linen shrouds is Talmudic.<sup>211</sup> White was always customary.<sup>212</sup> The Inquisition was fully aware of the Jewish (and Moslem) custom of "clean" linen shrouds.<sup>213</sup> Even socks are mentioned.<sup>214</sup> Some Christian sects (e.g. *Iglesia de Dios Israelita*) have recently also begun burying in white garments. Among the Catholics, only girls prior to communion were buried in their white communion dresses and betrothed women, in their white wedding gowns.

There is a common expression, "*El amor y la mortaja del cielo baja*", meaning "Love and death come down from Heaven". Though virtually everyone I met knew the saying and could finish it, only descendants of anusim knew what the *mortaja* actually is. One physician in Mexico City explained to me that a *mortaja* is the word for a tampon placed in the orifices of the deceased so as to prevent bad odors.

#### 4.2.14 Funerals

As one woman described it: "We avoided going to funerals, but if it was necessary to go, because we had to pay respects to somebody that was very dear to us or close to us, I remember my mother's instructions about how I was not to approach the casket, how I was not to get close to the body. When I came home I had to take off my clothes – she would put them in a separate bag; they had to be washed separately – and we had to take a total bath. It was a complete bath; we did not just wash our hands."

For this woman, ritual cleanliness was part of whole dichotomy between pure, clean things versus the "unclean" and taboo. She explained that her extreme concerns over the unclean did not mean that she was always perfectly neat, just that she was very careful about those certain matters. She catalogued people according to her family standards of "cleanliness": a friend who touched her finger to her nose, or didn't wash her hands before eating, or didn't return borrowed things, was "unclean" and "low class".

Kohanim (the priestly class) are enjoined not to come in contact with the dead (save close relatives) and not to enter cemeteries; ordinary

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<sup>211</sup> For plain linen shrouds, see *Babylonian Talmud* (henceforth, *BT*), *Moed Katan* 27b ("Previously, funerals were more costly to the relatives than the death, so much so that the relatives would leave the corpse and run, until Rabbi Gamliel came and humbled himself and was buried in linen garments, and the populace became accustomed to do likewise"), and *Yoreh Deah* 352:1-2.

<sup>212</sup> *MT Mourning*, 3:1.

<sup>213</sup> Liebman (1970) 97; Gitlitz (1996) 282-283.

<sup>214</sup> Megged (1987) 204.

Jews are not so limited.<sup>215</sup>

#### 4.2.15 Cemeteries

Many families had private cemeteries for their family, where the stones were devoid of any Christian symbols. I have been taken to local public cemeteries where my informant's family members' tombstones clearly did not display any Christian symbols, whereas all other graves did. In New Mexico, some gravestones in private Hispanic cemeteries were photographed with "Jewish Stars" and/or the Ten Commandments in Hebrew on them.<sup>216</sup>

I was told a number of times that people are buried with their feet facing east, so that they can welcome the coming of the Messiah.<sup>217</sup>

Graves of New Christians in cemeteries far and wide across Mexico have small stones that have been placed upon graves, presumably by visitors. In one case, the stones were relatively large.

Some cemeteries in the Southwest and Mexico have spigots for washing one's hands.

Placing dirt or stones on graves is common. Washing hands upon leaving a cemetery is a prevalent Jewish practice, but not originally required.<sup>218</sup> It was cause of suspicion and attacks on medieval European Jews.<sup>219</sup>

#### 4.2.16 Mourning

Among ordinary Catholics in Mexico, a nine-day period of mourning, referred to as the *novenario*, is observed. At the end of that time, there is a ceremony, called *levantar la cruz*, wherein the quicklime cross is removed from the floor. A priest would be present who would choose psalms and prayers for recital.

Many families in NL observe only seven days of intense mourning, which they also call, incongruously, *novenario*.<sup>220</sup> During this week, they sit at home, often on the floor, do not bathe, and are served food prepared by relatives. Meat was not eaten; fish and eggs were common. Only in extremely rare and recent cases did I hear of mourners who had rent their garments as a sign of grief. At the end of the seven days, they

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<sup>215</sup> MT *Mourning*, 3:1.

<sup>216</sup> See for example, Cary Herz, *New Mexico's Crypto-Jews: Image and Memory* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2008).

<sup>217</sup> See Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael: Meqorot ve-Toladot*, vol. 6 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1998) 112-115.

<sup>218</sup> For washing hands upon leaving the cemetery, see *Responsa Isaac Aboab*, no. 7, and *Orhot Hayyim, Laws of Mourning*, 11.

<sup>219</sup> Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943) 88.

<sup>220</sup> Bibelnik (1998): 91, speaks of a nine-day crypto-Jewish *novenario* in Inquisition times.

might also have a *levantar la cruz*, without a priest, during which Psalm 91 may be recited. The low seats are removed and mirrors uncovered.

This is followed by a month of lesser mourning, and then by one year, during which the mourners abstain from festivities, such as wedding ceremonies, and music. Some dress in black, or dark clothing. One year of mourning was also common practice in rural New Mexico.<sup>221</sup> Many variations in the length of times of the varying periods are extant, though the week/month/year ones are the most prevalent in NL.

Rending of garments is a biblical form of mourning (Genesis 37:34). The different periods of mourning and the proscribed activities are rabbinic.<sup>222</sup> Being brought food by neighbors is mentioned in the Bible (II Samuel 3:35; Jeremiah 16:7), is required on the first day of mourning, and was customary for the first week.<sup>223</sup> Not eating meat before the funeral is rabbinic; not eating meat while mourning is a literal, non-rabbinic interpretation of Deuteronomy 26:14; eating eggs is customary.<sup>224</sup>

Seven days of mourning in the home and the supping on fish are mentioned in the *procesos*.<sup>225</sup> Inquisition cases reflect the feeding by others, the eating of eggs, and sitting low.<sup>226</sup> Various periods of mourning were reported.<sup>227</sup>

#### **4.2.17 Levirate Marriage**

I have heard of a number of modern instances of some form of levirate marriage. Elizondo Elizondo found numerous instances of this custom in NL from colonial times until the early twentieth century.<sup>228</sup>

Levirate marriage is biblical (Deuteronomy 25:56), was practiced by various cultures, and is no longer practiced by Jews (except Yemenites).

### **4.3 THE CALENDAR**

Regarding the Jewish calendar year, Shabbat and Yom Kippur were by far the most frequently observed.

Of great interest, and an expression, perhaps, of the importance that the Sabbath held among the anusim, is a “secret” newspaper that appeared among the anusim in the late 1800s, called originally *El*

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<sup>221</sup> See: Lucero-White (1947) 16; Edmonson (1957) 35.

<sup>222</sup> *MT Mourning*, 5 and 6; *Shulhan Arukh*, *Yoreh Deah*, 387:1, 391:2, 393:2.

<sup>223</sup> *MT Mourning*, 4:9; *Orhot Hayyim*, *Laws of Mourning*, 11.

<sup>224</sup> *MT Mourning*, 4:6; *Orhot Hayyim*, *Laws of Mourning*, 11; Liebman (1970) 81-82.

<sup>225</sup> Gabriel (1899) 69.

<sup>226</sup> Liebman (1970) 83; Gitlitz (1996) 293-294.

<sup>227</sup> Gitlitz (1996) 296.

<sup>228</sup> Elizondo Elizondo (1987) 17-18.

*Sabado secreto*, then *El Sabado*, and later *La luz de Sabado*.<sup>229</sup> (See Figure 4.1.) This was not a newspaper specifically about the Sabbath, but its author did choose that day as its title. He wrote that, "This periodical will be circulated only among Israelites".

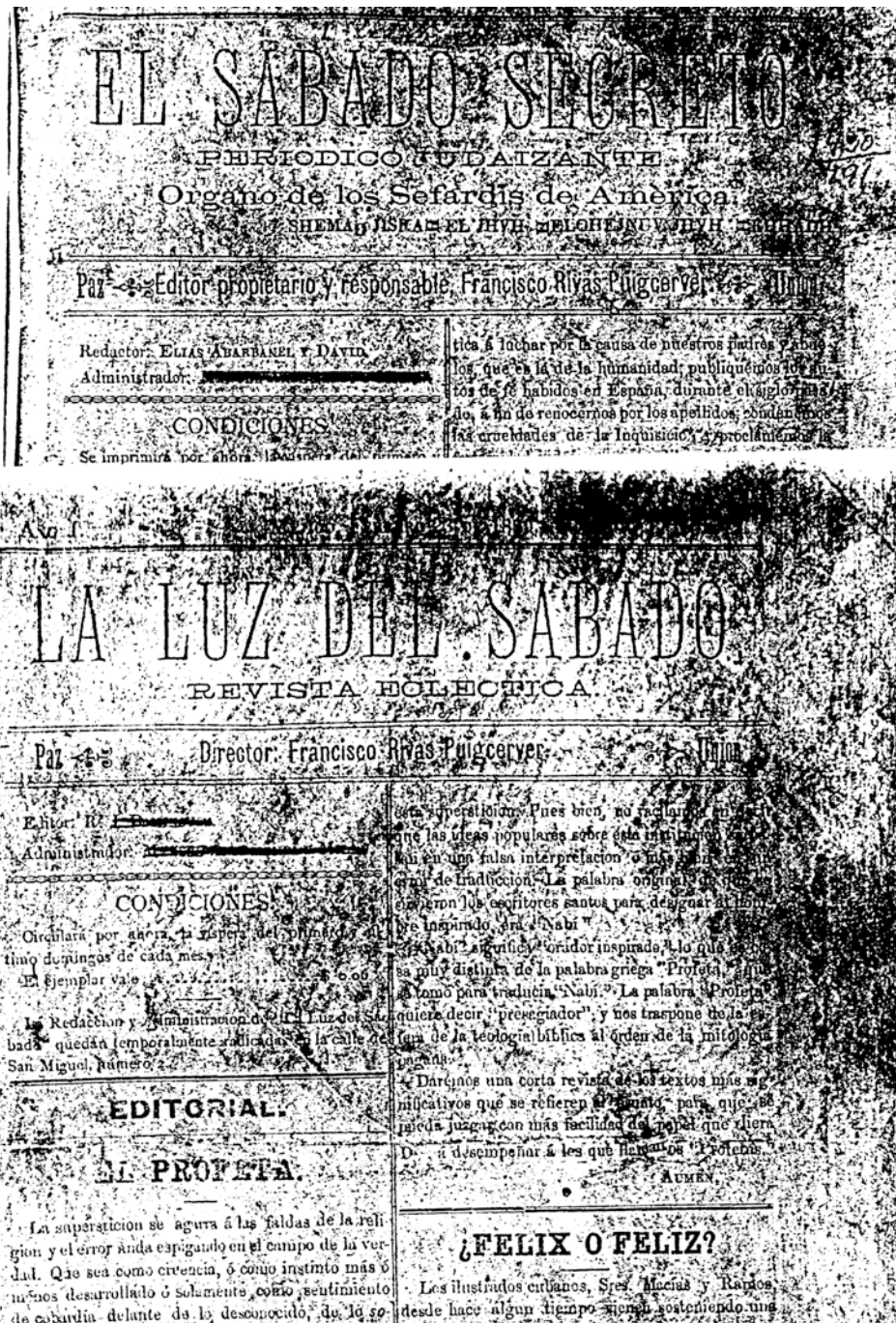


Figure 4.1. *El Sabado secreto*.

<sup>229</sup> These were published by Francisco Rivas in Mexico, including *El Sabado secreto*, February 9, 1889, and *El Sabado*, April 27, 1889. See Martin Zielonka, "A Spanish-American Jewish Periodical", *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 23 (1915): 129-135, and Zielonka, "Francisco Rivas", *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 35 (1939): 219-225, and Julius Silversmith, "Mexico's Literary Curiosity", unpublished typed essay.

### 4.3.1 Sabbath

To a very large extent, Sabbath was observed largely on Friday. Of the Sabbath rituals, intense preparation on Friday for the Sabbath, candle lighting (see below), and the Friday-evening family dinner are still very important. Thoroughly cleaning the house on Friday, in honor of the Sabbath, including washing all the linens and wearing fresh clothes, remains common among anusim everywhere. Some children were not allowed by their parents to do anything Friday night (“not even wash one’s hair”, as one particularly pedantic informant put it).

The festive Friday dinner always included meat or fowl. In rural Mexico (as in Brazil and other South American countries), food is often prepared prior to the onset of Sabbath. In very rare cases, food may not even be reheated on Saturday. Saturday meals were not usually special.

People were obligated to work and go to school on Saturday. Some informants from outside NL report that they or their parents joined the Seventh-Day Adventist church for the purpose of better observing the Sabbath. There are even claims by some Mexicans that anusim brought a branch of Seventh-Day Adventism into the country for that express purpose.<sup>230</sup>

Observing the Sabbath on Saturday is, of course, biblical, including not lighting fires (Exodus 35:3). Friday preparations and Friday evening dinner are ancient.<sup>231</sup> Luis de Carvajal el Mozo observed the Sabbath by wearing his best clothes and refraining from activities.<sup>232</sup> Cleaning on Friday for Shabbat is also well-documented by the Inquisition.<sup>233</sup> Catholics were prohibited from eating meat on Fridays until the Second Vatican Council.



**Figure 4.2. Candlesticks in home in Belmonte, Portugal.**

<sup>230</sup> See Chapter 9. In addition to Roberto, others made similar claims to me.

<sup>231</sup> *MT Sabbath*, 30.

<sup>232</sup> Toro (1932) 246.

<sup>233</sup> Liebman (1970) 96; Gitlitz (1996) 318-322.

### 4.3.2 Candle Lighting

Lighting candles Friday evening has always been widespread among crypto-Jews. Among my informants in northern and central Mexico and in the Southwest, Friday candle lighting was also common, but by no means universal.

They are generally lit in an interior, non-public room or in a closed space. Some still light in a truly hidden room. I also heard of a person whose Latino wife demanded that they purchase a home with a basement, not explaining why. The area, namely, California, simply did not have such homes, and the man did not know what to do.

In many homes, there is a super-private room where only one parent, be it the father or the mother, may enter. It was generally perceived as a prayer room by the children, and they regarded it with awe. Some have snuck in; some have not. Usually, homes with such a room would have the candles lit there.

The details vary from one location to another: olive oil in tin candleholders and homespun linen wick in Portugal; standard wax candles virtually everywhere else. In some homes, both in the Southwest and in Mexico, two seven-day “saint candles” (sometimes with images of saints and sometimes without) are lit every Friday in a prominent place. Oil candles, from Belmonte, Portugal, are shown in Figure 4.2.

Lighting candles is Mishnaic: “Women die during childbirth on account of three transgressions, for not being careful... with the lighting of the [Sabbath] candle.”<sup>234</sup> Certainly, in a place of danger, candle lighting is not obligatory; yet it remains the hallmark of survival of crypto-Jewish ritual. Inquisition records are replete with instances.<sup>235</sup>

Some Adventists have recently adopted candle-lighting. This was certainly not a source for my informants’ grandparents.<sup>236</sup>

### 4.3.3 Rosh Hashanah

In general, in my experience, the Hebrew New Year was unknown in NL. However, in at least one case, an employee from a very small, remote village, asked her Jewish employer to allow her to join her crypto-Jewish family in order to celebrate the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur with them. I was unable to find out whether it was an old tradition in her isolated small village, or, whether, having learned about it from her Jewish boss, she adopted the holiday.

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<sup>234</sup> *Shabbat*, 2:6.

<sup>235</sup> Gitlitz (1996) 323-328.

<sup>236</sup> Judith S. Neulander, “The New-Mexican Crypto-Jewish Canon”, *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 18, nos. 1&2 (1996): 22, attributes all Sabbath observance and candle lighting to Protestant Sabbath-observing Protestant sects. Michael P. Carroll, “The debate over a crypto-Jewish presence in New Mexico: The role of ethnographic allegory and orientalism”, *Sociology of Religion* 63, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 5, says that recent Adventist suggestions in favor of lighting Friday-night candles “raises the possibility that even this ‘Rabbinic’ practice might be of Adventist origin”. But this Christian sectarian practice is a very recent and sporadic development.



Rosh Hashanah is second only to Yom Kippur in prominence on the Jewish calendar and is reflected in Inquisition documents.<sup>237</sup> It was almost unknown in Mexico.<sup>238</sup>

#### 4.3.4 Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur was a very important day in the calendar of the anusim. Many observe a fast day designed to correspond with the biblical Day of Atonement. It is called *El Dia Grande* (as in *yoma raba*, in Aramaic), *Dia Pura*, and other names. This day is far better known to anusim than is Rosh Hashanah.

Fasting takes place privately. The end of the day is marked by the first appearance of a star.

Many appear to fast on the tenth of September, or count to the tenth day after the September new moon. But most today try to get hold of a Jewish calendar, or find the correct date from a Jewish contact, if they have one, or via the Internet, or other means. I heard of elders asking their grandchildren to find out the Jewish date for them. In Monterrey, the rabbi's regular newspaper column has affected many changes in the local customs of the anusim, and the date has become pretty much the same, as far as I could determine.

Fasting on Kippur is biblical (Leviticus 16:29). The name "Great Day" appears in *procesos*.<sup>239</sup> The day was widely kept in Inquisition times, but, traditionally, many anusim in Mexico did not fast on the exact day.<sup>240</sup> Waiting for the appearance of three stars is rabbinic law;<sup>241</sup> it appears in the Mexican edict.<sup>242</sup>

#### 4.3.5 Passover

A fair number of anusim celebrate a non-Christian spring holiday in lieu of Passover, called *Transito*, and *Pascua*, among other names, with special holiday foods. It may be marked with special bread, but is more widely identifiable by extensive use of greens in a meal. Usually these celebrations took place during Easter week.

Luis de Carvajal said that "because he did not have unleavened bread, he ate corn tortillas, since they had no yeast." Juan de León ate "corn tortillas, fish, and vegetables" on Passover.<sup>243</sup>

In Mexico, specifically, during this week, many would depend on corn tortillas. In northern Mexico, the flour tortilla is much more popular than the corn tortilla, but many informants explained that they

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<sup>237</sup> *MT Repentance*, 3:3-4; Gitlitz (1996) 356-357.

<sup>238</sup> Megged (1987) 226.

<sup>239</sup> E.g. Gabriel (1899) 68.

<sup>240</sup> Gitlitz (1996) 358.

<sup>241</sup> *MT Sabbath*, 5:4.

<sup>242</sup> Liebman (1970) 96; Gabriel (1899) 88, speaks of "until night after the evening star came forth".

<sup>243</sup> See Gitlitz (1996) 386.

would not eat flour tortillas during the week of *Pascua*. Some told me they eat no tortillas at all that week.

One informant from a remote area, as told in Chapter 3, actually referred to *pan ázimo*, the Spanish term for matzah. His very well-informed daughter was shocked that her father knew the term; she knew about *pan fino*, another form of unleavened bread, made traditionally for some ceremonies in her circles. The informant's wife remembered eating lamb, rather than goat. There seems to be a fair number of other families that preferred lamb to goat during the Passover period, though the latter is much more prevalent in the north.

I also heard about a beer expert who always took vacation during Passover, because he would never taste beer during that period.

Very many informants told me about how many greens were eaten on the night of *Pascua*. They did not, for the most part, know to explain what the greens represented. No one mentioned the *Mah Nishtanah* or any other part of the Haggadah.

Lamb was used for the Paschal offering; not eating leavened bread on Passover is biblical (Exodus 12:19-24). Not drinking beer is included by the sages; eating several greens is part of the Seder service.<sup>244</sup>

"Lettuce, celery, or other greens" is listed in the edict of the Inquisition.<sup>245</sup> They also figure prominently, as a telltale sign, in a story about anusim in Spain that appears as a postscript to *Omer ha-Shikha*.<sup>246</sup>

#### 4.3.6 Pentecost

One of my most unusual and touching encounters happened in Chicago. A friend brought a gentleman he encountered on the street up to my home. The fellow was from Michoacan, and was in Chicago, wanting to sell cattle from his ranch for kosher meat. The man explained that he comes from a secretly Jewish family, from a small village. All his life, he raised cattle, and was familiar to *shehita* since childhood. Now that the border is open to commerce, he wants to sell his meat to the Jews, his brethren.

He told me many Jewish things he knew, including the Sabbath. He knew, for example, not to light a fire (lighting electric lights was okay). He said there were five other Jewish families like his own in his village, but that they did not dare to speak about their identity to each other.

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<sup>244</sup> *Mishnah Pesahim* 3:1; 10:3.

<sup>245</sup> Liebman (1970) 96.

<sup>246</sup> In Abraham Gavison, *Omer ha-Shikha* (Jerusalem: Kedem, 1973) 137a-138b, the story is related regarding a certain Moshe Ifergani, whose father on his deathbed told him to make an effort to return to open Judaism, for they were anusim. He went from town to town and from one kingdom to another until he chanced upon Tulaytulah (Toledo) upon the morning of the fourteenth of Nissan, knowing no one there. In the marketplace, he noticed a maidservant who was purchasing greens aplenty, and wondered whether God had made his journey fortunate, when she returned to purchase even more. To make a long story short, he forced her to take him to meet her master, who was indeed a secret Jew, and joined them for the Passover.

When they had a funeral, the rest of the neighbors would pelt them with stones, and call them “*Judíos*”.

This man counted fifty days from Passover until Pentecost, which he would observe when it would soon occur. He was the only Mexican who reported observing Pentecost as a Jew.

He was aware of many other unique things of which no one else I met knew. A truly unique man, innocent and sincere, arriving from another planet, almost.

This holiday was virtually unknown in Mexico.<sup>247</sup>

#### **4.3.7 Tabernacles**

A significant number of my informants from the Southwest and northern Mexico, who grew up in remote villages, remember that their family built huts in the autumn around the time that would coincide with Succoth. These *cabanuelitos* were built in the fields, and the family had “picnics” there, as they recall. The informants who reported this to me are Catholic, and their stories hark back some sixty years. No one I met in NL still builds these *cabanuelitos* today.

Like most of the Jewish festivals, this one is mentioned in the edicts.<sup>248</sup> Like the other major festivals, Succoth is also celebrated by many Biblical churches.

#### **4.3.8 Hanukkah**

Hanukkah is unknown to the vast majority of anusim. Still, some believe that a custom of lighting eight candles for Christmas is related to Hanukkah, but this is very difficult to establish. In a small but very old city in the state of Coahuila, I saw an old building with window irons in the shape of an eight-branch candelabrum, along with a higher candle in the middle. See Figure 4.3.

In New Mexico, there is the custom of lighting candles in paper bags with sand outside, and there have been discussions over the number of the candles. I was told that someone wrote to the newspaper stating that people light arbitrary numbers of candles when they “should” really light just eight.

In Monterrey, ever since the rabbi began writing his column on Judaism in the newspaper, I am told that some anusim re-adopted the celebration of Hanukkah. They made or purchased menorahs and candles for the purpose.

Hanukkah is Apocryphal and lighting candles is Mishnaic.<sup>249</sup> The common practice in Spain was to light one candle or lamp the first night,

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<sup>247</sup> Megged (1987) 246.

<sup>248</sup> Liebman (1970) 96-97.

<sup>249</sup> 1 Maccabees 4:57; *Mishnah Bava Qama* 6:6.

increasing until eight on the eighth.<sup>250</sup> It is mentioned in a Mexican Inquisition edict, but is otherwise almost unattested for.<sup>251</sup>



**Figure 4.3. Window grill with nine-branched candelabrum.**

Northern Mexico is very strongly attached to the United States. Some families are divided on both sides of the border, and many individuals own homes on both side of it. Hanukkah in the U.S. has come to serve as a Jewish parallel to Christmas, thus raising its significance for American Jews. Many anusim “south of the border” despised Christmas, and desired a replacement; others looked for a Jewish element to add to their Christmas celebration. For such families, adopting the lighting of Hanukkah candles has become a delightful, private escape.

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<sup>250</sup> *MT Hanukkah*, 4:3.

<sup>251</sup> The edict, Liebman (1970) 97, speaks of one through ten candles (as does the edict from Lima). See Megged (1987) 256.

#### 4.3.9 Teetotum

No one from Mexico described the four-sided top, akin (more or less, as the case might be) to a Hanukkah *dreydl*, as something possibly Jewish. In fact, it is a prevalent toy in Portugal, and, in one form or another, is all over the New World among indigenous people. Though it has been pointed to as possibly indicating crypto-Judaism, there is no basis for such an assertion.<sup>252</sup> The use of this toy on Hanukkah is of Ashkenazi origin.

#### 4.3.10 Esther

Esther, who did not tell anyone of her Jewish origin, and then brought salvation to her people, was a paradigmatic figure for the anusim. I was told many times by informants of her importance in their world of crypto-Jewish symbolism. There are also Santa Esterica figures in some homes.

It is common among descendants of anusim to fast three days in commemoration of the fast by the secretly-Jewish Queen Esther.

Jewish custom is to fast only one day, prior to Purim, though the fasting in the Book of Esther was for three days (Esther 4:16). The fact that some fast for three days is, however, mentioned in the *Tur*.<sup>253</sup> The “Fast of Queen Esther” and its three-day version appear in Inquisition documents,<sup>254</sup> including the Carvajals.<sup>255</sup> Purim, on the other hand, is unknown.<sup>256</sup>

#### 4.3.11 Weekly and Other Fasts

Fasts seem to have been very important to the anusim. Many elders, mostly women, from Mexico and the Southwest fast on Mondays and Thursdays, as penance. These fasts were observed until recent years by older informants in Latin America, and likewise continued until recently in Portugal. They were provoked by the necessity to eat prohibited foods, for example.

I interviewed one such woman whose son kept trying to intervene and deny, but she was adamant, and insisted that yes, it was Monday and Thursday! She was old, but very lucid, while her son was downing beer after beer. Indeed, she could show me where her meat dishes were, and where her milk ones, and many other things. She lived in a remote place in New Mexico.

This custom appears in Jacob ben Asher’s authoritative code, the *Arba’ah Turim*,<sup>257</sup> and as penance in the responsa literature just after the

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<sup>252</sup> Neulander (1996): 22-23.

<sup>253</sup> *Orah Hayyim* 686.

<sup>254</sup> Liebman (1970) 96; Gitzlitz (1996) 378.

<sup>255</sup> Megged (1987) 137, 256-257.

<sup>256</sup> Megged (1987) 259.

<sup>257</sup> *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayim*, 134, based on *Mishnah Ta’anith* 1:4-5 and

Expulsion.<sup>258</sup> It appears in the *Travelogue* of David ha-Reuveni,<sup>259</sup> as well as in Inquisitional edicts<sup>260</sup> and in many a confession in Inquisitorial torture chambers.<sup>261</sup> Moslems also prefer Monday and Thursday, but Catholics prefer Wednesday and Friday.<sup>262</sup>

None of the other obligatory fasts, including Tisha b'Av, was ever mentioned to me, though these four fasts appear in the Bible (*Zechariah* 8:19) and the codes.<sup>263</sup>

Though Tisha b'Av appears in the edicts, it is almost unknown in Mexico.<sup>264</sup>

#### 4.3.12 Sabbatical Year

The man from Michoacan (see Section 4.3.6) said that they left their land fallow during the sabbatical year. His year count corresponded to the current one in Israel.

An agricultural sabbatical is biblical, but is never observed outside Israel, Jordan and Syria.<sup>265</sup> The year count was a matter of dispute; current practice follows Maimonides.<sup>266</sup>

### 4.4 DIET

The observance of food restrictions is privately, but commonly, referred to in Mexico and New Mexico as *la dieta*.<sup>267</sup> Children were often enjoined to follow the ancient customs, including the "special diet". Another key word is *limpia* (clean or pure). Many of the older generation explicitly connected the dietary limitations with Judaism.

Some of my contacts are virtually vegetarian; many avoid red meat in general, substituting chicken. Others slaughter beef, mutton, and

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*Megillat Ta'anith*. That Pharisees fast twice a week appears in Luke 18:12. These fasts are relatively popular among Jews from North Africa (Shalom Sabar, private communication, 2009). This is not the same as the Monday-Thursday fasts after Passover and Tabernacles, though in many places these fasts continued for many weeks. See Sperber, vol. 1 (1990) 192-193.

<sup>258</sup> *Responsa Levi ibn Haviv*, no. 79.

<sup>259</sup> David ha-Reuveni, *Travelogue*, edition Kahane, 72-74; see Assaf (1943) 154-155.

<sup>260</sup> Liebman (1970) 96.

<sup>261</sup> Gitlitz (1996) 396.

<sup>262</sup> Henri Leclercq, "Station Days", *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14, (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912); Thomas Patrick Hughes, *A Dictionary of Islam* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1995) 124. The preference of these days over those of the Pharisees appears in the long-lost *Didache* 8:1.

<sup>263</sup> *MT Fast Days*, 5:1-4.

<sup>264</sup> Liebman (1970) 96; Megged (1987) 181.

<sup>265</sup> *MT Sabbatical* 4:25-28.

<sup>266</sup> *MT Sabbatical* 10:5.

<sup>267</sup> In some circles in Northeast Brazil, *reimoso* is the term used for taboo foods by descendants of Jews, and by others. The list of taboos is what changes.

goats in a manner they considered to be ritually proper. Pork was shunned. Shellfish and shrimp were virtually never eaten by anusim who kept to “the diet”.

Forbidden foods would be eaten only under extreme circumstances, such as at large gatherings or when served and unavoidable, or in circumstances of severe hunger.<sup>268</sup>

A Jewish friend of mine told me how he was approached in a Mexico City supermarket by a “Mexican”, meaning a person with native features, who asked him to point him to the foods that had the (OU or OK) kashruth symbols on them. My friend asked him why he would want them, since they are imported and much more expensive. The Mexican man said that those are much more *limpios* – clean. My friend did not know that this was the term anusim use for foods that they may eat. I heard a similar story about an older woman from Zacatecas (see Section 9.9).

Many families had separate dishes kept especially for non-family members. If somehow such a person ate from their dishes, they might boil or bleach their dishes before reusing them. This they might do to their dishes if they used them for dairy and then again for meat, but I did not hear this as often. Nearly every every family had a special pot for cooking milk, however.

Many children are prohibited from eating food prepared by anyone, except their own mother or, at times, a select few relatives. Families avoided eating out, and – when unavoidable – came late to social events.

#### **4.4.1 Meat**

As already mentioned, avoiding red meat in general (substituting chicken) and a tendency toward vegetarianism are very widespread among anusim. “My family ate a lot of legumes and vegetables, fresh fruit and very little meat.... It was considered bad to eat too much meat in our house”, I was told.

Rabbit and game were hunted, and eaten by some, but avoided by others. Many of those who spoke of hunting attributed the need to famine and poverty. Elizondo Elizondo lists snake, turtle, frog, and fox as eschewed.<sup>269</sup>

The prohibitions of eating rabbit meat, as well as reptiles, amphibians and fox, are biblical (Leviticus 11), while game is a rabbinic interpretation.<sup>270</sup> Limiting consumption of meat is also known from the days of the Inquisition.

It is interesting to note, that while in the United States Seven Day Adventists are strictly vegetarian, in Latin America Adventists eat the flesh of those animals that are permitted in the Bible.<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> This was true in Inquisition times; see Megged (1987) 172.

<sup>269</sup> Elizondo Elizondo (1987) 13, 15.

<sup>270</sup> *MT Shehita*, 1:1.

<sup>271</sup> I learned this first from informants who were both descendants of anusim and Adventists. I then went and confirmed the distinction with church authorities in the US. I was simply told that lamentably, this is the situation.

#### 4.4.2 Pork

Pork is avoided (“pork is *unclean*”), often claiming that it is unhealthful. In northern Mexico (and other regions), pork is commonly called *carne de marrano* by some,<sup>272</sup> and *carne de puerco* by others. One woman’s mother explained the former term, saying, “*Porque me da asco*” (“I am revolted by it”). Those who eat pig’s feet are deemed repugnant by virtually all descendants of Conversos.<sup>273</sup> The parents of a woman from Saltillo would criticize her, saying, “*Eres tan mala como la carne del puerco*”.

However, few are my informants who were able to completely avoid pork all their lives. They explained to me that their parents scrupulously avoided it, but that with the modern loss of privacy, they could not be as strict. Elizondo Elizondo points out that pork is widely considered extremely unhealthy (“*muy mala*”), even though many have come to eat it all the same.<sup>274</sup>

One person told me that his family “bleached the pork” (meaning “cooked to death”) when preparing it for guests; it was cooked by maids not in the family kitchen.

In Chapter 3, we met two informants from Villa de Garcia who spoke about the old custom there of hanging a red string from a window in the front of the house whenever a pig was slaughtered, so that neighbors would come and share in it. They did not, however, do the same for other animals.

Pork is prohibited both in the Pentateuch (Leviticus 11:7) and in the Koran (Al-baqara 173). It features most prominently in the Inquisition documents.<sup>275</sup> Considering pork unhealthy is also mentioned.<sup>276</sup>

#### 4.4.3 Fish

“Fish without scales” or “fish with skin” are interdicted. Shellfish and shrimp are almost never eaten. Ceviche (briefly cured fish) is very popular in the area of my research, but while it can be made of either “kosher” or “non-kosher” fish, my informants knew the difference well, made their ceviche from fish with scales, and described the difference in the above terms.

This very simple guideline is biblical (Leviticus 11:9) and appears many times in *procesos*.<sup>277</sup> Only “scales” are mentioned, not “fins”, in accordance with the *halakhah*.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Fray Angélico Chávez, *My Penitente Land* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1974) 146.

<sup>273</sup> Mexicans ridiculed those north of the border for their avid consumption of pork; see Américo Paredes, *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-American Border* (Austin, TX: University of Texas at Austin, 1993) 34-35.

<sup>274</sup> Elizondo Elizondo (1987) 16. Cf. Megged (1987) 170.

<sup>275</sup> Gitlitz (1996) 534-540.

<sup>276</sup> Gitlitz (1996) 536.

<sup>277</sup> Gitlitz (1996) 534; Gabriel (1899) 16, 122.



#### 4.4.4 Insects

Some informants from Mexico and Texas carefully wash and examine leafy vegetables like lettuce to make sure that all bugs are removed before eating. Though the norm is simply to use a disinfectant, which is done by the household help, insect removal is entrusted only to a family member by those who are careful.

Insects are biblically prohibited (Leviticus 11:20, 42); the Rabbis required inspection of leaves.<sup>279</sup> I have found no mention of this in Inquisition materials.

#### 4.4.5 Slaughter

Throughout the crypto-Jewish diaspora, animals are slaughtered with special knives. In the past, women in NL were more often entrusted with this task than men. Today, I am told that there is a shift to men, although many women still do the job, at least with the smaller animals (including sheep).

Some of my informants swung a fowl to daze it before slaughtering; others wrung the necks of the chicken to decapitate them; others yet, chopped the head off, without any swinging.

The fowl is always hung to drain all the blood; the blood is almost invariably covered with earth.

Sometimes in NL and elsewhere, too, the animal was made to face east. Typically, a formulaic apology was made to the animal before it was killed with special knives.

The knife is always whetted and then tested for sharpness on the fingertip or palm and on a fingernail, and sometimes also on a strand of hair.

I was shown one such knife stored in a safe at the home of a Treviño, along with its sharpening stone, and the process was demonstrated to me, on the palm of the hand and the nail. Another Treviño has his family knife in his possession, but his mother, who did the slaughtering, did not teach him the use of it.

In any event, the lungs and other interior organs were examined, and if they were deemed ill, the entire animal was discarded.

A very dear person in Zacatecas, whose last name is nearly identical to that of my own grandmother, and whose features hauntingly resemble those of that branch of my family, remembered many practices that he had no idea were of Jewish origin. We became very close, and, being a veterinarian, he knew about many individuals in particular *rastros* (slaughter houses) who still were killing animals in the “old” way his father used to. He was going to take me to one or two, but that never

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<sup>278</sup> *MT Forbidden Foods*, 1:24. Megged (1987) 183 could find no reason for the omission of “fins”.

<sup>279</sup> *MT Forbidden Foods*, 2:15.

happened. We made it to one when it was closing, but it was the holiday season and they would not reopen for a few days.<sup>280</sup>

A short time after Rabbi Kaiman arrived in Monterrey, in the early 1930's, he invited a number of Catholic dignitaries and socialites to watch a Jewish slaughter in an attempt to alleviate some of the strong anti-Semitic sentiments he felt surrounding him and his community. Afterwards, several of the people who attended came to tell him that this was exactly how it was done in their homestead.

Slaughter of animals and fowl by cutting the arteries in the neck is practiced by Jews and Moslems. Facing east is a takeoff from Moslem ritual slaughter, practiced by Jews already in Moorish Spain, since there the Jews slaughtered animals for Moslems regularly. Thus, my informants kept the practice of their ancestors, without knowing the reason. Covering blood is biblical (Leviticus 17:13). Examining the lungs and prohibiting animals with organ injuries is rabbinic interpretation.<sup>281</sup>

In Jewish communities today, it is virtually unheard of for a ritual slaughterer to test the knife for nicks on the skin of the fingertip, rather than just on the fingernail, though it is specified in the Talmud and the codes:<sup>282</sup> "Rabbi Papa ruled: [the knife] must be examined with the flesh of the finger and with the fingernail."<sup>283</sup>

Ritual slaughter, decapitating fowl, testing sharpness on the fingernail, entrusting of women with ritual slaughter, pronouncing a blessing, and covering of blood with earth or ashes all appear in the edicts and *procesos*.<sup>284</sup> Women are known to have done the slaughtering.<sup>285</sup> Facing east appears in a Mexican trial.<sup>286</sup> The apologetic blessing is known from the Inquisition, too.<sup>287</sup> Jewish ritual slaughter was practiced among anusim in Belmonte until their "discovery" in 1917.<sup>288</sup>

#### 4.4.6 Suet and Entrails

In general, kidneys and other organ meats were not considered edible by any of my informants and were discarded. The most notable exception in NL is the use of the entrails of milk-fed kid goats (under a month old) for the *fritada*.

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<sup>280</sup> This person did put me in touch with a friend of his in Monterrey, Dr. Ricardo Cerda Flores, who was doing genetic research at the Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social Delegación Regional en Nuevo Leon. We became very friendly, and discussed his research a lot.

<sup>281</sup> *MT Shehita*, 5-11.

<sup>282</sup> *BT Hullin* 17b. See also *Arba'ah Turim* and *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah*, 18:19. Hayyim ben Moses ibn Attar is one of the earliest rabbis to discuss the prevailing laxity in his *Pri Toar* (Amsterdam, 1742) on *Yoreh Deah*, *ad loc*.

<sup>283</sup> Recently some Sephardim began to re-adopt this rule, under the influence of Rabbi Shlomo Mahpud.

<sup>284</sup> See Gitlitz (1996) 542-546. The Mexican edict of 1639, Liebman (1970) 96, mentions the use of the nail only.

<sup>285</sup> Megged (1987) 176.

<sup>286</sup> Liebman (1970) 245.

<sup>287</sup> Megged (1987) 176.

<sup>288</sup> Neulander (1996): 25-26, is wrong on this count.

In NL, the fat layers on the kidneys and elsewhere were discarded along with the entrails. The suet may be used to make soap and other byproducts.

In Mexico and Brazil, some people meticulously removed virtually all the fat from the meat they consumed.

Recently, a member of the anusim from a Latin American country visited me in Israel and asked me to take him out to a typically Israeli restaurant. Without thinking enough, I took him to a Yemenite restaurant, and ordered lungs and other such parts. He looked at me and asked, “You are taking me out to a restaurant in Israel and are feeding me non-kosher food?” I showed him that the place was kosher and tried to explain, but he was unable to eat.

Organ meat is kosher, but many require special treatment (including liver, brain, heart, and utter).<sup>289</sup> And the suet must be removed from the kidney area and may not be eaten (Leviticus 7:23), while fat that marbles meat is permitted.<sup>290</sup> The removal of fat, too, appears in Mexican Inquisition records.<sup>291</sup>

#### 4.4.7 Porging

Porging (removing) the sciatic nerve is fairly widespread. One of my informants, born in New Mexico, told me that her mother always said that porging was the secret to “better tasting” hind meat, and that only a scarce few knew how to do it. In NL, many who grew up on ranches reported that the nerve was invariably removed.

This is biblical (Genesis 32:33), and appears in the edicts.<sup>292</sup>

#### 4.4.8 Blood

Blood was carefully avoided. Again, the *fritada* in NL is an exception. My informants tell me they are only allowed to use the blood of milk-fed *cabritos* younger than thirty days.<sup>293</sup>

One informant said that the first spurts of blood were spilled, as they constitute “bad blood”. Hearing me at a public lecture discussing the common recipe for *fritada* in Nuevo León, where a baby *cabrito* is cooked in its own blood, this informant rose and commented – to my astonishment – that what I do not know is that after slaughtering the baby goat (which has to be under a month old and only milk fed), the “first blood” is left to drain on the ground and is covered with earth, and only then can the rest can be used. In a personal interview, it became clear that in this person’s family a very unusual number of Jewish practices survived.

Those who made blood sausage (*morcilla*) were referred to by many of my informants as “gross”.

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<sup>289</sup> *MT Forbidden Foods*, 6:6-7; 9:12.

<sup>290</sup> *MT Forbidden Foods*, 7.

<sup>291</sup> Gitlitz (1996) 547.

<sup>292</sup> Liebman (1970) 96; Gitlitz (1996) 547-548.

<sup>293</sup> Cf. Elizondo Elizondo (1987) 15.

Many also discarded eggs with blood spots, referring to them as “live” or “bad” eggs. One woman would ask her mother, “Why can’t we just take a little spoon and get the little blood spot out and eat it? The rest of the egg seems fine.” But she said, “No; that’s a bad egg.”

Not drinking blood is biblical (Leviticus 3:17), but its extension to blood spots in eggs is rabbinic:<sup>294</sup> “The fine of spirit eat unfertilized eggs. If a drop is found on it, one discards the blood and eats the rest.... If it is found on the yolk, even the whole egg is prohibited.”

The fact that the gushing blood upon slaughtering an animal is more serious a transgression than blood in the organs or in the meat is in Mishnah and in the codes (“One does not incur extinction except for blood that comes out upon slaughtering, stabbing, or decapitation”).<sup>295</sup>

Luis de Carvajal el Mozo, refused *morcilla*, “because God said that the blood is the soul”.<sup>296</sup> Draining blood is mentioned in the edicts.<sup>297</sup> The Koran also prohibits blood (Koran 5:4). A few indigenous people also abstain from blood.<sup>298</sup>

#### 4.4.9 Salting

Meat and fowl are soaked, salted and then soaked again in hot water. Generally, after butchering an animal, the meat is soaked in warm water and salted to remove remaining blood. But many salted the animal whole. Hand motions, with imagined salt between the hands, rubbing and moving rapidly back and forth over the carcass of the slaughtered animal, were demonstrated to me.

In Brazil, I noted that when roasting meat in the fire (*churrasco*), the meat was not soaked, but coarse salt was applied directly.

Salting and soaking meat in cold (!) water is rabbinic: “Meat cannot be rid of its blood unless it is thoroughly salted and thoroughly rinsed.”<sup>299</sup> The lack of requirement for soaking when roasted is also rabbinic.<sup>300</sup>

In Brazil one often finds a combination step, whereby the meat is placed in a basin of salt-water. This one-step deviation from the halakhic norm is widespread in some regions.

Inquisition edicts mention the salting of meat.<sup>301</sup> The use of warm water also appears.<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> *BT Hulin* 64b; *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah*, 66:3.

<sup>295</sup> *Mishnah Kritot* 5:1; *MT Forbidden Foods* 6:3.

<sup>296</sup> Toro (1932) 246.

<sup>297</sup> Liebman (1970) 96.

<sup>298</sup> This, according to a museum exhibit in Mexico City.

<sup>299</sup> *BT Hulin* 113a.

<sup>300</sup> *MT Forbidden Foods*, 6:12.

<sup>301</sup> Liebman (1970) 96; Gitlitz (1996) 546-547. Megged (1987) thinks salting might have been too expensive, and therefore forgotten.

<sup>302</sup> Liebman (1970) 225.

#### 4.4.10 Scalding

Scalding meat after salting and before cooking is another interesting practice I found among anusim throughout Latin America (Mexico, Honduras, Brazil).

Scalding is required by Maimonides:<sup>303</sup>

How should one proceed? First, he should rinse the meat, and then salt it thoroughly and leave it in the salt for the time it takes to walk a mile. He should then rinse it well again until the water is entirely clear, and immediately thereafter cast it into boiling – not tepid – water, so that it would become bleached, and no more blood would emerge.

This stringency is recommended by Caro.<sup>304</sup> Today, only some Yemenite Jews continue the ancient practice of scalding meat after salting and before cooking, yet many anusim all around the globe seem to have preserved the practice until today.

I do not know if this appears in the *procesos*.

#### 4.4.11 Meat with Dairy

Mixing meat and cheese in a meal is said to cause stomachache.<sup>305</sup> An informant who is a medical doctor in the US told me that he once bought a cheeseburger for a patient. The latter exclaimed: “You are my doctor and you want to kill me? Don’t you know not to mix meat with cheese?” Another explanation is simply that “milk is for morning and evening, and meat is for lunch”. Anyone who is familiar with Mexican diet knows full well that this is not, by any means, the norm. I was even told by a perfectly bright informant that if I looked around me, I would not see restaurants serving meat with milk products around Monterrey. He was living there, and grew up in a small town not far. He was of course wrong, but his eyes were guided by his education, the past, and the at-home norms.

Many informants also told me that in their family they do not like “French style” cooking, with all those cream sauces for meat, which make the food so heavy. This, they said, is most unhealthy and very wrong, like many other French things. Most recently, I was told in all earnest by a Spanish informant living in Madrid, that I should know that in Spain it is actually not customary to eat any meat for breakfast or for supper, ever. This is how it has always been; she does not know why. Lasagna and all such recipes were recently imported from Italy.

Many wait hours between eating meat and drinking milk or eating cheese; some even bleach or boil dishes between meals. Interestingly,

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<sup>303</sup> *MT Forbidden Foods*, 6:10.

<sup>304</sup> *Bet Yosef, Yoreh Deah*, 69.

<sup>305</sup> This explanation is very common. Cf. Elizondo Elizondo (1987) 14. See my forthcoming paper at the conference of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association, Tel Aviv, July 2009.

many of my younger informants, who do not abide by most of their parents' food restrictions, still take their coffee black at the midday meal. A surprisingly large number of anusim who are aware of this separation include fish in the category of meat.

Separating meat from milk products is rabbinic, as is waiting after a meat meal.<sup>306</sup> The extension to fish is a health-related Sephardic custom mentioned in *Bet Yosef*;<sup>307</sup> it is still observed by some Jews from the Maghreb, but is almost unknown among Ashkenazim.

This observance does not appear in the Edicts.<sup>308</sup> It does, however, appear in an Inquisition trial.<sup>309</sup>

#### **4.4.12 Wine**

A rare few drink only "clean", kosher wine (wine that has not been touched by a Gentile). Rare nowadays, but it seems that anusim did make their own wine as recently as a few decades ago. I was offered home-made wine occasionally at the home of informants in NL. A few now buy kosher wine in the supermarket.

Caro writes in his *Shulhan Arukh*.<sup>310</sup>

A Jew who transgressed out of fear for his life is a full-fledged Jew; his slaughtered [animals] are permissible and he does not cause wine he touches to become prohibited. An apostate who in one city [professes] belief in idolatry in front of idolaters and in another city enters the house of a Jew and says that he is a Jew does not make wine [prohibited]. One can trust the ritual slaughter of the *anusim* who remained in their land, if they act properly in private and have not the opportunity to escape to a place where they can worship God, and they do not cause wine to become prohibited by their touch.

This, too, appears in the Mexican edict.<sup>311</sup>

#### **4.4.13 Hallah**

The requirement of removing a pinch from a batch of dough and throwing it into the fire is widespread among Mexican anusim, and is also found in Brazil, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Cuba. An informant living in Chicago, whose grandparents were from Mexico and operated a *taquería* in the south of the city, remembered that her Grandma taking a pinch of the *masa* (dough) every morning and throwing it into the oven

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<sup>306</sup> *Mishnah Hulin* 8:12; *MT Forbidden Foods*, 9; *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah*, 88:1, 93:1

<sup>307</sup> *Yoreh Deah*, 87.

<sup>308</sup> Gitlitz (1996) 540.

<sup>309</sup> Liebman (1970) 248.

<sup>310</sup> *Yoreh Deah*, 119:9-12.

<sup>311</sup> Liebman (1970) 97.

saying, “This is not for food, this is for the fire” (twice). Similar expressions are used in Mexico, as well. Liebman reports on Yucatan bakers doing the same.<sup>312</sup>

The rules for taking from the dough today are rabbinic;<sup>313</sup> the Inquisition identified this practice as Jewish.<sup>314</sup>

#### 4.4.14 **Cabrigo and Fritada**

Nuevo León is famous for its goat meat. There are many restaurants that serve it, and many traditions attached to it. During my first visit, one of the primary “proofs” of Jewish customs in the region, I was told, was the *cabrito*, which is hung from its hind legs and its throat is slit. When I went to some small villages to ask for more details, I found out that indeed the goats were killed in exactly this manner, but the blood was gathered in a special bowl, and then cooked for the famous local *fritada* with spices and herbs.

A typical recipe has the goat cooked in water. The blood is placed in a vat with water, sautéed garlic and chili peppers, and chopped-up interior organs. Oregano is the most common spice. When the blood coagulates, it is removed from the water and mashed in with the rest of the ingredients, then added to meat. The vats for cooking the *fritada* that were shown to me were almost invariably made of copper.

Elizondo Elizondo describes the regional norms as follows:<sup>315</sup>

*En la cocina del norte de México se utiliza muy poco las vísceras y la sangre de los animales sacrificados – excepción hceche del cabrito. No tenemos longanizas, ni chorizo de panza ni de riñón, ni pasta de hígado, tampoco sopa de sesos, a pesar de que en el sur del país toso esto es muy socorrido.*

The chronicler of Parras – I was told by Miguel Angel Muñoz Borrego from the State Archive of Coahuila – is of the theory that all Jews used to ritually slaughter their goats and discard the blood and entrails. When the Tlazcaltecas saw this, they requested the uneaten parts of the animal, which included the interior organs and the blood, and they developed the *fritada* dish.

However, there is also a *fritada blanca*, a recipe of cooked goat without its blood, and there is the *cabrito al pastor*, which is made over a fire.

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<sup>312</sup> Liebman (1970) 81.

<sup>313</sup> *MT First Fruits*, 5:9.

<sup>314</sup> Liebman (1970) 97; Gitlitz (1996) 48-49.

<sup>315</sup> Elizondo Elizondo (1987) 15.

#### 4.4.15 Traditional Breads

I heard many folk explanations about foods prepared at home, especially about breads:

- *Tortilla de harina*: While the common “bread” of Mexico is flat pancakes made of corn flour, in the north, the customary tortilla is made of wheat flour. It looks and tastes just like the ones in Turkey, my informants assure me, and therefore must have its origin in the Sephardic Jews who inhabited the region as New Christian settlers. Any attempt to express doubt as to the accuracy of this observation is met with contempt.
- *Pan de semita*: There is a regional bread in northern Mexico called *pan de semita*, and the general public believes it to mean “Semitic bread”.<sup>316</sup> According to the Internet, “You bake pan de semita by combining two cups of flour, one half to two-thirds cup of water, a few tablespoons of butter or olive oil, mix and bake unleavened. Even among devout Catholic Mexicans pork lard is never used, that’s why it’s called Semitic bread. Pan de semita is really the recipe for secret Jewish Matzoth, and it’s eaten by all Mexicans today in the north Mexican/Texas border area, regardless of religion.”<sup>317</sup> Recipes in fact vary; some include lard and others do not. The bread is allowed to rise. More likely, the name has nothing to do with “Semite”, but it akin to “*cemita* rolls”.
- *Pan de pulque*: This food is not as commonly connected to Sephardic traditions, but rather to the Tlaxcalteca. However, I was taken by an archivist to an old lady who is among the last to still make *pan de pulque*. She only makes it on Fridays, and it has no yeast. The archivist believed it might have to do at one and the same time with the Sabbath and with the Passover. The *pulque*, a popular, cheap alcoholic drink, serves as leavening in this unusual bread, and the day of its production depended entirely on the dates the ingredients were delivered to the lovely old baker’s home. She gave me recipes for two versions. Without lard it could never be the same, she told me.
- Another imaginary Passover food is *capirotada*, a bread pudding popular during Lent. On the Internet, one can read:<sup>318</sup> “These are identical ingredients to those used by secret Spanish Jews in the New Spain of 1640.” “The ingredients and recipes have been recorded by the Holy Office of the Inquisition and saved to this day in the archives”, says *Wikipedia*.<sup>319</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Richard Santos, *Silent Heritage* (San Antonio, TX: New Sepharad Press, 2000) 346. Santos sees many other examples of Sephardic culinary influence.

<sup>317</sup>[http://www.ricopandedulce.com/index2.php?option=com\\_content&do\\_pdf=1&id=32](http://www.ricopandedulce.com/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=32) (accessed December 7, 2008).

<sup>318</sup> <http://www.sefarad.org/publication/lm/011/texas.html>.

<sup>319</sup> “Capirotada” (accessed December 7, 2008).



## 4.5 HYGIENE

### 4.5.1 Hand Washing

Some people wash hands before and after eating (in one case from Puerto Rico, using a cup). Altogether, frequent washing is common among anusim. The patriarch of an important family in Monterrey washes his hands before the meal, and marks the end of it by having a basin brought to him in which he again washes his hands. This is true of many close-knit families in northern Mexico, and can be accompanied with certain blessings. One informant from another circle told me his father washed and rubbed each hand three times before the meal, and many other occasions, including upon rising in the morning.

Until today, when descendants of anusim marry others, they would often point out to me that the others are “unclean”, and complain about their habits, placing their personal affects on the table, which is sacred for food, etc., and again, about being harassed by their partner about their own fastidiousness “washing their hands for this, washing their hands for that”.

Washing hands before and after meals and in the morning is rabbinic.<sup>320</sup> Washing one’s hands was cause for raising suspicion by the Inquisition.<sup>321</sup>

### 4.5.2 Hair and Nails

Many anusim today burn their nails and hair trimmings; others bury them in the earth or in a flowerpot, or wrap them carefully before discarding. When it first occurred to me to ask informants about their nails, the reaction was astonishment on their part: “How did you know!?”<sup>322</sup> they exclaimed in shock, about my guessing out the weird secrets of their family. Some remember grandparents being buried with all their teeth, hair and nails, which they had gathered over a lifetime.

The Talmud states that “one who buries his nail trimmings is righteous; one who burns them is saintly; while one who throws them out is wicked – since a pregnant woman may miscarry as a result”.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>320</sup> Washing hands appears in *Sifra* to Leviticus 15:11 and the use of a utensil in *Mishnah Yadaim* 1:2. See also *Tur, Orach Hayyim*, 4.

<sup>321</sup> For example, Gabriel (1899) 56.

<sup>322</sup> In her book, *Hidden Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 53, Janet Jacobs Liebman quotes an informant whose grandmother burned her hair and nail clippings, but gives no explanation as to the origin of the practice and presumes both to be Jewish. Most likely she spoke to an informant I have been in contact with previously and who presented it therefore as a Jewish custom, though she had no idea that it was before we spoke.

<sup>323</sup> *BT Niddah* 17a and parallels. Compare the *Avesta*: “Which is the most deadly deed? ... It is when a man here below combing his hair or shaving it off, or paring off his nails, drops them in a hole or in a crack” James Darmesteter, trans., *The Zend Avesta, Part I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1880) 186. This superstition is not compiled in the major codes.

Though fear of magical contagion is almost universal, this indicator does appear as Jewish in the edicts.<sup>324</sup>

#### 4.5.3 The Table

One woman from Texas said, “The table, for instance, was regarded as a holy place. You had to have respect for the table because you honored God there. We never placed telephone books or newspapers on the table because that’s where we honored God....”

This may be compared to the Talmudic dictum:<sup>325</sup> “In the time of the temple, the altar atoned for a person; now that there is no temple a person’s table atones for him.”

#### 4.5.4 Sweeping

Most anusim sweep floors towards the center of the room. I first came upon this practice when a friend, descended from Mexican anusim, and I were preparing for shabbat at my home, and she was sweeping to the middle, saying, “Don’t mind me, it is just the way we do it”. At the time I paid little notice; later I began asking my informants, after finding mention of sweeping in an article by Simhah Assaf.<sup>326</sup> The answers, were, needless to say, very awkward at first: “I use the vacuum”, said one, for example. Eventually, I learned how to ask, and the answers made a pretty clear demarcation between homes with a secret Jewish tradition, and homes without. Those with the former, swept for the most part, to the middle.

This very matrilineal practice is described by Moshe Hagiz two hundred years after the Expulsion as something the Portuguese still gave their lives for:<sup>327</sup>

I have heard that it was an ancient custom in Spain to take care not to sweep a room from inside out. Rather, they began from the door and swept the dirt inwards out of respect for the *mezuzah*. For this reason, one of the accusations hurled at anusim by the inquisitorial priests in Portugal today, so as to incriminate them, is that there is testimony that they sweep the house from the entrance inwards. May God avenge the blood of his servants who sanctify his name at all times and in all places.

They no longer had mezuzot, of course.

This custom – which appears not to be mentioned elsewhere in Jewish literature – is confirmed by Portuguese Inquisition records.<sup>328</sup> In

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<sup>324</sup> Liebman (1970) 96.

<sup>325</sup> *BT Menahot* 97a.

<sup>326</sup> “*Anusey Sefarad u-Portuga’l be-safrut ha-teshubot*”, in: *Be-ohaley Ya’aqob* (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1943) 146-147. See quotation from Hagiz below.

<sup>327</sup> Moshe Hagiz, *Mishnat Hakhamim* (Chernovitz, 1863/4) 32b-33a.

an eighteenth century literary work, we are told that “the Jews sweep toward the inside of the house so that they shall not, as they say, throw out their possessions...”.<sup>329</sup>

Mazal Lienberg Navon, late sister of the former Israeli President, told me that they, too, swept to the middle, but she did not know why.

#### 4.5.5 Bed Arrangement

It appears to be fairly common among anusim until today to orient all the beds in the house between north and south. Though they usually have no awareness of any religious significance, they continue to follow the ancient custom.

This practice is of Talmudic origin:<sup>330</sup> “Abba Benjamin says: All my life I exerted myself over two things... that my bed should be placed between north and south. Rabbi Isaac said, whoever places his bed between north and south has male offspring... Rabbi Nahman ben Yosef said, nor does his wife miscarry.” Sephardim have traditionally taken care to have the headboard facing north or south.<sup>331</sup>

I have, however, not found any reference to the arrangement of beds in Inquisition records.

#### 4.5.6 Pointing at Stars

There is a widespread superstitious fear of pointing to stars in Brazil: If you point to the stars, you will grow warts on your fingers. Anusim are said to have avoided pointing at stars, since the Inquisition was on the lookout for crypto-Jews waiting for stars to appear, indicating the end of Sabbath, holiday or fast days. (See Section 4.3.4.) This superstition is far less familiar to my Mexican informants, but some do recognize it.

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<sup>328</sup> E. Glazer, “Invitation to Intolerance”, *Hebrew Union College Annual* (1956) 353-354. In Spain a woman was reported to have swept her house on Fridays in this manner; see F. Siero Malmierca, *Judíos, moriscos e inquisición en Ciudad Rodrigo, Diputación de Salamanca* (Salamanca, 1990) 177. (I am grateful to D. Gitlitz for this reference.) Another case is mentioned in Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto: Isaac Cardoso: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Marranism and Jewish Apologetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971) 7.

<sup>329</sup> Dom Francisco Manoel de Melo, *Apologos Dialogaes* (Lisbon, 1721) 273, cited in Glazer (1956). Both this explanation and that of Hagiz imply that the practice is not related to Friday-cleaning, nor to any fear of prying eyes.

<sup>330</sup> *BT Berakhot*, 5b. It has a parallel among some Hindus.

<sup>331</sup> The orientation of beds is required by the Sephardic codes: *MT Temple*, 7:9; *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim*, 3:6. It is explained by Maimonides as stemming from respect for the Temple site in Jerusalem. Ashkenazic sources, on the other hand, restricted its applicability and some kabbalists interpreted the *Zohar* as mandating an east-west orientation.

## 4.6 BELIEFS AND WORSHIP

### 4.6.1 Jesus

The belief of the anusim regarding Christianity can be divided into two. About half rejected Jesus completely but secretly, the other half took a middle road, wherein Jesus was considered a great philosopher, even a prophet, but never a messiah, nor a son of god. The latter teaching invariably came with the instruction, "The Messiah is yet to come". This, of course, made it much easier to raise children inside the church without too much trouble, and pass on the Jewish aspect of the family tradition bit by bit with less trauma.

Inquisition *procesos* reflect this.<sup>332</sup> See Sections 9.4 and 9.5 in this regard.

### 4.6.2 Priests

Sayings at home imply that the priest need not know what goes on at home. In many cases he is not invited before death to give last confession and oils.

On one occasion, an informant, as a child, stuck her tongue out at the priest as they were leaving church. Her aunt chastised her with, "Don't dear; this we only do at home."

The Inquisition made a big deal of this kind of behavior, but not specifically for Jews.<sup>333</sup>

It was common for families of Jewish origin to send at least one member into the priesthood. The effect of this on Catholicism in Mexico is yet to be understood.

### 4.6.3 Church

Priests and laypersons alike were quick to point out to me that in the NL area, as distinct from the center and south of Mexico, churches are relatively simple and austere, not ornate or otherwise invested in. Religion is *fría*, lacking very much in ardor. This they all see as "proof" of the lack of religious devotion and interest on the part of the population at large.

In NL, I was told by both priests and laymen, that men do not show up, for the most part, and the women who come, are not so devout either.

Churches in the Southwest without icons and with few crosses are often just Biblically based, or proselytizing, but some such may attract a considerable crypto-Jewish membership owing to the greater liberty to practice the "ancient law".

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<sup>332</sup> Gitlitz (1996) 138-139.

<sup>333</sup> "Edictos generales de la fe y de las anatemas", *Documentos del Santo Oficio* (Archivo del Convento de Santo Domingo, 1905) 1.

#### 4.6.4 Denominations

Nowadays, many families of New Christian background have tried to join churches that give them more access and flexibility, such as the Presbyterian, or some Adventist, Sabbath-keeping church. In the city of Monterrey, this is not very common, though it does exist.<sup>334</sup>

Long before my deeper involvement in northern Mexico, I was told by two academics who are sons of clergy, among other individuals, that there are churches in the Southwest that cater to crypto-Jews and are led by clergy from “within the [crypto-Jewish] group.”<sup>335</sup> These may attract a considerable crypto-Jewish membership owing to the greater liberty they afford in access to the entire Bible, and practice of the “ancient law”.

Several of my northern Mexican and Southwest informants told me that their fathers brought a non-Catholic church into the pueblo or town they lived in. Sometimes it was Presbyterian; some churches had few crosses and no other icons; some were Old-Testament-based, or proselytizing. For instance, one of my informants in north Mexico told me that his father, a minister, brought Presbyterianism to his all-Catholic town for the sake of weakening the hold of the Catholic Church and gaining more access to the Bible and to education. The same was told to me by the son of a minister of the same church in northern Mexico who was the first in the region to bring such a ministry to the region, and who also built a school of the same church.

In one Spanish-speaking church in Texas, where the parents of an informant served as ministers, a child was baptized on the eighth day. The minister announced that he could not be circumcised, because that would bind him to the Law of Moses, which he could not keep, and this is why he could only be baptized. The front wall of the church was a fresco of the river Jordan. Every prayer climaxed with a prayer for Israel. On one occasion, when I talked to the minister at his home, for an entire night, he spoke openly and in tears about our common Jewish past, about Sepharad, and his dreams of redemption.<sup>336</sup>

I also met numerous descendants of anusim from Mexico and southern United States, whose parents had joined an Adventist church, but none whose grandparents were members. The individual from Mexico City, who claimed to be of the anusim, suggested that he and other anusim actually brought the *Iglesia de Dios Israelita* into Mexico, for their own purposes. See Chapter 9 for details.

In at least one other case, in Recife, Brazil, a father explained to his son that they joined an Adventist church to be closer to Jewish observance.

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<sup>334</sup> These days, the Christian Messianic movement is very active among anusim, making every effort to convert them into its Church. It has two bases so far in Israel, not to mention many in the US and Latin America. A few anusim who have returned to Judaism informed me that they have been through a Messianic church first, mistaking it initially for a Jewish place of worship.

<sup>335</sup> See Chapter 6.

<sup>336</sup> Several years later, he invited me again, and in a formal session (filmed by his son) tried to proselytize me.

There are a number of offbeat churches in the city itself, most do not last for a long time. These include Messianic, and many other *Cristianos*, the generic term in Mexico for all non-Catholic denominations.

When, in 1996, the Mormons purchased land in San Pedro de Garza Garcia (an elegant suburb outside Monterrey), there was a huge uproar. The Catholic community there (many of whom are of Jewish origin and among my informants) commenced a writing campaign, wherein they wrote that the Jews know their place, and built their synagogue in “their own” neighborhood (Linda Vista),<sup>337</sup> so, too, these Mormons have no business barging into their Catholic territory. Eventually the Mormons built their temple alongside the highway. San Pedro remains *puro católico*.

#### 4.6.5 Saints

In the New World, some Christians venerate non-canonical saints, with celebrations for Santa Esterika (Saint Esther), Santo Moises or Moisen, etc. (Regarding Esther, see also Section 4.3.10.) The day of “Saint Moses” in Cuba is not far from the date (7 Adar) on which he is said to have been born and died in rabbinic tradition,<sup>338</sup> while in the Spanish calendar of saints, Moses appears in December. The origin of such worship remains to be determined; the official church opposed it.

It should be mentioned that in churches in Spain, where *mujeres fuertes*<sup>339</sup> are depicted along with other biblical scenes, Esther is featured among them, along with Yael, Deborah and Judith. In one such church in Spain the *miserecordias*<sup>340</sup> were all grotesque to the point of wonderment.

#### 4.6.6 Mary

In general, my informants felt no attachment to Mary. There were even jokes at her expense. There are exceptions, of course, especially with regard to the *Virgen de Guadalupe*.

In many a home of elderly ladies that I visited, in place of pictures of saints hanging on the walls, I would find medieval paintings of saintly-looking ladies. I never asked about this, so as not to make people

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<sup>337</sup> The Jews had hoped it would become the elegant neighborhood when they selected it as the site of their synagogue, but, possibly because of their presence, it lost its value and stylishness, and San Pedro became the location of choice.

<sup>338</sup> *BT Sotah*, 13b.

<sup>339</sup> Originally made for the *Obispado* of Cuenca, these are now displayed in the Collegiate Church of Belmonte, Spain. There are eight *mujeres fuertes* in the *Real Monasterio de Santa María de Guadalupe*, in Extramadura, where some other Biblical figures are added, such as Miriam, sister of Moses, Sarah, wife of Abraham, etc.

<sup>340</sup> These are small flaps under the seats of the bishops and others that folded up, so that when they had to stand they could lean on them, half-sitting.

uncomfortable. I imagine that they were trying to give the impression that these were rare paintings of Mary or of some saint.

Deprecation of Mary appears in Mexican Inquisition sources.<sup>341</sup>

#### 4.6.7 Icons

In general, the atmosphere in NL is not fanatic. Most homes have some pro forma Christian symbols, but you are not likely to run into big church processions or the like on the streets.

There still is a tendency (as per *Deuteronomy* 12:3) to destroy anything that is perceived as “graven images” among some anusim in New Mexico, Argentina and Honduras, and to undo anything that resembles a cross. Children sometimes (in northern Mexico, for example) received a *broken* saint or crucifix from a significant elder.

A person in New Mexico, who was given a souvenir of the Wailing Wall made of olive wood from Israel, considered it too pagan and broke it to pieces, or so he reported to me.

At the same time, many homes of anusim are filled with images. Some have houses filled with so many relics, a church could be entirely decorated with them. One can walk into a home of individuals who are among those who indeed observe many of the traditions and observances we know to be of Jewish origin, and at the entranceway the entire room would be covered with a vast, artistic collection of crucifixes of every kind, and in the front there would be a prayer stand decorated with tasteful rosaries and all. Or one would walk into a home and the tall, large wall created by the stairwell would sport a huge cross.

Abusing the crucifix was a frequent accusation, already in the very first trial in Mexico.<sup>342</sup> Tomas Treviño is said to have had a cross under the threshold of his store in Guadalajara; Jews who stepped on it received a discount.<sup>343</sup>

#### 4.6.8 Group Prayer

Remote villages in South America had prayer places out in the country, and family gatherings served as prayer “quorums”, especially when people died. And I heard of secret prayer groups in Brazil, for example.

The Inquisition was informed of a secret synagogue in Mexico 1622. The most “observant” such synagogue in Mexico City was led by the famous martyr, Tomas de Treviño de Sobremonte.<sup>344</sup>

I cannot say definitively that nothing survives in any of the tiny remote villages in Mexico, but for the most part, it would appear that public prayer is a thing of the distant past.

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<sup>341</sup> Gitlitz (1996) 142-144.

<sup>342</sup> Toro (1932) 17-46; Gitlitz (1996) 161-163.

<sup>343</sup> Liebman (1970) 247.

<sup>344</sup> Liebman (1970) 216, 226; Pinhas Bibelnik, “The Religion of the Crypto-Jews in Seventeenth Century Mexico”, *Pe’amim* 76 (1998): 69-102.

#### 4.6.9 Prayer Rooms

While rare, there still exist secret prayer rooms, often windowless, in the homes of elder family members in NL, Mexico City, Guadalajara, New Mexico, Texas, Guatemala and Brazil. Though I have been shown a few photographs, I have never been invited into one.

In most cases, the room is designated for use only by the matriarch and/or patriarch. Children are brought up with an aura of mystery and prohibition surrounding the room, and are never allowed in. I often heard that the room contains a “large book” of some sort from informants who “peeked in” as youngsters. Two or three people told me that, after their parents died, they entered the “secret room” but found virtually “nothing”.

#### 4.6.10 Prayer Leaders

Prayer experts, often women, are called *salmistas* (among other terms). They are perceived by some to possess special access to the divine, and are something of a mystical nature.

In remote northern Mexico there are still elder women who hauntingly chant dirges for funerals from memory. They are hired by certain families to follow the coffin, and say them in a manner that is incomprehensible to the vast majority of the listeners. They are very reclusive and are held in awe. I have so far been unable to extract texts from their sealed lips, though several such women were pointed out to me.

#### 4.6.11 Grace

An informant, in whose families – to his surprise – many traditions survived, dictated the following prayer for *after* a meal: “*Gracias te doy Padre Dios que me diste de comer sin merecerlo. Tu se lo des al que no le tenga, y a mi que nunca me falte pan, agua, casa vestido y sustento*” (I give you thanks, Father God, for having given me to eat without deserving. You hand it to those who have it not, and to me, who never lacked bread, water, clothing or sustenance). He wrote the prayer down in his own handwriting in my notebook, introducing it as “*oración después de comer*” prayer after the meal. It is most commonly recited by others *prior* to eating, and without specifically addressing the Father.

One informant in Monterrey also had a prayer for after the meal: “*Gracias a Dios que nos dio un pan de comer sin merecerlo.* (Thanks to the Lord, for having given us bread for eating, without our being deserving of it.) This informant told me that the entire day was filled with expressions of thanksgiving.

Another informant from Monterrey had the following to tell me: In the old time, there were old prayers over meals. He remembered two. The first was, “*La Divina Providencia nos sostenga de su mano, para que nunca nos falte: casa, vestido y sustento*” ([May] the Divine Providence sustain us that we lack for nothing, home, clothing and sustenance).



Another old variant, he said, is: “*Gracias, Señor, por este pan que nos das sin saberlo merecer*”. (Thank you Lord for this bread that you give us without our knowing to deserve it.) This is an unfinished rhyme, which he does not remember fully.

However, in modern times, he explained, the Catholic church has turned matters around by instructing the youngest child to say a blessing before the meal, ending with the sign of the cross:

*Después, hacia los años 60's, surgió una nueva que suele rezar el que preside la mesa o el más joven de la familia. 'Bendice Señor los alimentos que vamos a recibir y a quienes los han preparado, da pan a los que no lo tienen y hambre de Ti a los que tienen pan.' Hacen la señal de la cruz con el brazo derecho tocando la frente, el pecho, el hombro izquierdo y el derecho mientras dicen: 'En el nombre del Padre, del Hijo y del Espíritu Santo, Amén.'*

Here the Trinity is clearly present and the text reflects the fact that this blessing is before the meal, not after. By having a child include the Trinitarian Formula and the Signum Crucis, the Church had been to de-judaize the grace.

#### **4.6.12 Prayers**

Some informants report to me that they feel that a conversation with God is something they prefer to do in the privacy of their homes. Some men from northern Mexico described sitting alone outside in the starlight, contemplating God, reading their favorite psalms or the like, having private conversations, composing their own prayers, and speaking from their heart. They still identify as Catholic, but often said clearly that they prayed to the Father, sometimes explaining they needed no intermediaries, sometimes saying that this is how they were taught to pray.

I was even told by a priest in northern Mexico that he was understanding and allowed his members to pray silently as they pleased, because he understood that many of them preferred to pray to the Father alone. Furthermore, indigenous individuals who had no idea of the background of New Christians and the Inquisition told me that their priest instructed them that it is better to pray to the Father, not to any other part of the Trinity.

Another informant told me that on the way to mass, when she was about twelve years old, her mother blurted out that she never believed in this whole Trinity thing, and always prayed to the Father. Her granddaughter, who entered the room at some point remembered a prayer that began with “*El Señor, El Señor*”, but when I got excited, she became confused as to where she learned it, and said in catechism class. No reliable source would confirm that such a prayer is learned in such a class.

Prayers without reference to the Trinity or Jesus are not uncommon, but ones referring specifically to a Jewish name of God, such as *Adonai* – knowledge of which was a key for identifying a fellow Jew in Portugal – are rare in the New World, even in prayer texts that otherwise

strongly resemble ones from Portugal. Crypto-Jewish prayers mentioning *La Presencia* are fairly common in Mexico. This term is not completely absent from Catholic prayers, but has emphasis in crypto-Jewish prayers as the mystical element of the *Shekhinah*.

It is well known that the *Padre Nuestro* (The Lord's Prayer), the prayer that is attributed in the New Testament to Jesus – and therefore does not actually have the name Jesus in it – is common among anusim.

An informant gave me several prayers. The following one is said in the morning (and, he is told, but does not recall, at night and at mealtime). This prayer is from “times of old”, but many people still do today, there is this following prayer: *Gracias te doy gran Señor y alabo tu gran poder, porque con el alma en el cuerpo nos dejaste amanecer*. This is remarkably similar to the *mode ani* prayer said in recent centuries by normative Jews when they arise in the morning.

Here is another strange prayer:

*Viernes era viernes, viernes de la luz  
cuando Jesucristo se puso en la cruz.  
La cruz tembló, Pilatos le pregunto:  
“¿Señor que tenéis miedo?” “Ni temo ni tengo miedo.”  
Quien esta oración rezare  
tres veces por su intención  
no morirá de mala muerte  
ni tendrá tribulación. Jesucristo nos valga  
y la flor de que nació,  
la santa hostia consagrada  
y la cruz en que murió.  
¿Quien murió por mí en la cruz?:  
Jesús  
¿Quien es la esperanza mía?:  
María.  
¿A quién por patrón tendré?:  
A José.  
Pues muy confiado estaré  
teniendo en mi corazón  
a Jesús José y María.  
Jesús, José y María, el corazón os doy y el alma mía.  
Jesús José y María, asistidme en mi última agonía.*

It was said at Friday night, I was told, and may have been connected to candle lighting. It appears very Catholic, but at the same time, the emphasis seems a bit odd, the trinity here is comprised of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Pontius is more in the picture than normal. On the other hand, Jesus is called Christ, which is not typical of crypto-Jewish creed. And it sounds inconsistent in the matter of Jesus's death.

I was given another, much shorter, version of a Friday-evening candle-lighting prayer by a historian who tried to explain away the entire candle lighting on Friday as being Christian:

*Viernes viernes, santo viernes,  
era viernes de la luz  
Cuando murió mi Jesús.*

Another home prayer for the night that was reported to me, and

which contains Christian elements, seems to merit mention, because in its style it resembles very much other prayers of anusim I have encountered over the years:

*Acto de contrición:*

*Si un corazón contrito y humillado,  
si un pecador perverso arrepentido,  
si un hombre ciego y loco prostituido,  
si un esclavo perpetuo del pecado,  
puede aguardar perdón de un juez airado,  
puede desagaviar a un Dios que ha sido  
su creador, redentor crucificado,  
hoy se postra a sus plantas con temor,  
hoy implora su gracia y su bondad.  
Mirando sus excesos con horror  
el perdón solicita a su bondad.*

In this case, it would not have been hard to insert the Catholic element into the prayer, though I do not wish to imply anything. It was communicated to me by an informant who observes customs of Jewish origin in the family.

Finally, the following prayer was said with the hands placed over the head in times of danger (storms, or any other danger as it was perceived): *Santo Dios, Santo fuerte, Santo inmortal, líbranos Señor de todo mal*. Note the three occurrences of the term “Santo”, as in the *Kedushah* and the Sanctus.

#### **4.6.13 Shema**

The *Shema* was not known by many anusim in NL whom I have encountered so far. However one informant from Guatemala, who was a student of medicine in the U.S., mumbled it next to a Jewish student who overheard him. When asked to repeat it and then to explain it, all he could say was that his mother had taught him to chant this in time of grave danger. After this encounter, he phoned his mother who confessed that she knew that the family was (secretly) Jewish and so was the prayer.

Another informant from Mexico quoted from memory parts from the blessings before the *Shema* in Hebrew, then stopped, but could probably have continued were he pressed.

#### **4.6.14 Names of God**

A few women from New Spain reported an esoteric tradition of seventy-three names of God, as did the Portuguese anusim,<sup>345</sup> and as is found in *Midrash Kohen*.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Nahum Slouschz, *Ha-Anusim be-Portugal* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1932) 167.

#### 4.6.15 Phylacteries

The only instance of *tefillin* was the fellow from Michoacan, who had inherited a pair from his grandfather, who apparently purchased it at a Jewish store somewhere.

Tomas Treviño had a pair.<sup>347</sup>

#### 4.6.16 Head Covering

Various people told me that their father covered his head whenever he ate or prayed. People also reported that ladies of age used to cover their hair, which never was the case when they were young.

Head covering appears in the *procesos* of Tomas Treviño and Gabriel de Granada.<sup>348</sup> Some Sephardic men did behave in this manner.<sup>349</sup> Skullcaps are worn by other groups, too.

#### 4.6.17 Other Religious Objects

In Section 4.6.15, we encountered a singular instance of *tefillin* (phylacteries) in Mexico. There have been other reports of crypto-Jews in possession of a *talit* (shawl with fringes), mezuzah, Torah scrolls, the *Tanakh*, *Siddur*, or other Jewish paraphernalia in various parts of the world. Actually possessing ancient objects of this nature is truly rare (tales far exceed examples), but such objects were featured in the edicts. Sometimes anusim obtained religious objects from “normative” Jews who came to their area (as in the case of the *tefillin*); they would not have been available locally. Whenever I was shown a scroll of Torah or a mezuzah, old as they might be, they were not convincing, insofar as they were not in Sephardic script, and could not have been as old as to have traveled from Spain.

Rabbi Kaiman told me that very many people from the area came to him bearing Jewish objects, which he considered antique and genuine. Unfortunately, he did not take photographs, has no list, nothing to help ascertain the age and provenance of such important objects held in families some sixty years ago.

Rabbi Haim David Halevy reported that on a trip to Latin America he came across a native American woman whose baby was wrapped in a

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<sup>346</sup> In Julius D. Eisenstein, *Ozar Midrashim*, (New York, 1915), 253. Also: “There are seventy three names of God inscribed to the right”, *Sefer Raziel ha-Malakh* (Amsterdam, 1701) 32.

<sup>347</sup> Liebman (1970) 247.

<sup>348</sup> Regarding Treviño, see Liebman (1970) 247; in the *proceso* of Gabriel, it says, “He recited [a] prayer, his head covered with his hat on according to the custom of the Jews” (p. 117). See Gitlitz (1996) 527.

<sup>349</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica*, “Head Covering”, vol. 8, col. 5; Eric Zimmer, *Olam K'minhago Noheg* (Jerusalem: Mercaz Shazar, 1996) 17-42.

garment with *tzitzit* on it, which she explained to him was for protection.<sup>350</sup> These, then, were not mere decorative fringes.

Treviño presumably also wore a prayer shawl.<sup>351</sup>

#### **4.6.18 Hexagrams**

Although the six-pointed star is not by any means a uniquely Jewish symbol, it has been used in recent times as an “insider” sign of Judaism in a number of regions from Mexico to Brazil. Instances on gravestones in New Mexico have been popularized in the media, but there are countless other examples.

A young man asked a cousin at a family gathering if he could confirm what he had heard about Jewish origins in the family and the cousin retorted, “We wear the star!” and repeated it as an answer when the answer was not understood the first time, showing his gold Jewish star that was hidden inside his shirt.

Another friend was at an inn in northern Mexico and thought she saw another woman with a Jewish star. When she approached her, it turned out to be two dancing figures. She began to apologize, but the other woman said, “Ah, you noticed!” and explained that the ambiguous design was meant to call the attention of the “ones like us”, while fooling the rest.

An individual from NL got a beautiful gold one, with many diamonds and rubies embedded in it, from her grandmother. On the other side, it had a letter of her great aunt’s name that matched her own, so that when she wore it, the star was on the inside, touching the body and invisible. An elderly man in southern Brazil was given one from his grandfather, made of gold and studded with diamonds. When I asked about it, he said he did not know why, while his wife answered because his grand father was a (secret) Jew.

A Colombian man on the *Rive Gauche* in Paris noticed me with my husband and asked if we were Jews. When I replied affirmatively, he proudly pulled out a large necklace from under his tee shirt, sporting a large Magen David.

In Portugal, I purchased a handmade one made of cheap material in a second-hand shop where tourists do not show up. The saleslady told me it was from her family. When her boss came she flushed and spoke no more.

What is relevant is not what this symbol meant in Spain at the time of the Expulsion, but what it has come to mean since.

#### **4.6.19 Parental Blessing**

The “Jewish-style” blessing (known to the Portuguese Inquisition as *benção ao modo judaico*),<sup>352</sup> as documented by the Inquisition, uses

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<sup>350</sup> *Hazofe*, April 1, 1991, 4.

<sup>351</sup> Liebman (1970) 247.

the very same text as the Christian blessing – may God bless you – but assumes different gestures. Among anusim, the hand of the elder is placed over the head of the recipient of the blessing, the hand usually going over the head to the forehead and eyes, whereas the Catholics were accustomed to kiss the hand of the elders, without the touching of the head of the youngster by the elder.

This manner of blessing persists. Northern Mexico is only one of many places where I encountered this practice, which is very widespread, and continues to clearly divide between the old and new Christian communities. The minimal and most common text is “*Dios te bendiga*”, or “*Que Dios te bendiga*”. Among my informants in northern Mexico, there are some occasional additions to the simple original text, but the gestures never alter, and no Catholic content is added, not even by some of the Catholic priests I interviewed.

I personally witnessed a father from the Treviño clan naturally blessing his daughters this way, he gave me one as well, since I was leaving along with his daughter and it was a blessing for the road. We must remember that a very large number of the settlers in the region were considered to be Portuguese. The text used by this patriarch is the following:

“*El Señor, te da su merced, te proteja y te libre de todo peligro y de todo mal amen*”.

While the above is within the family, Catholicism did and does have the “imposition of hands” as an act of the religious figure toward his inferior. A priest explained this to me as inspired by Biblical Judaism.<sup>353</sup>

No dossier of the Inquisition studied in Mexico this far seems to have noted it. Its origins are unclear.<sup>354</sup>

#### **4.6.20 Alms Giving**

Giving of alms is important. Charity among some very wealthy families takes on very large proportions, but is done in understated ways. On some occasions, money is passed on to Israel or to a synagogue, anonymously.

#### **4.6.21 Language**

A popular claim is that the local language of the descendants of the Conversos in NL is influenced by pre-expulsion Ladino. Already

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<sup>352</sup> Elias Lipiner, *Santa Inquisição* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Documentário, 1977) 33.

<sup>353</sup> See Patrick Morrisroe, “Imposition of Hands”, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 7 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910).

<sup>354</sup> It is rather surprising to see North African Jews kissing hands of elders today in a manner that is reminiscent of what would have been the Catholic style blessing. However, during the priestly blessing at many synagogues it is common to see fathers taking their children under their prayer shawl and holding their hands over the children’s head and toward the forehead.

introduced by del Hoyo,<sup>355</sup> this theory refuses to go away. The most interesting term for me remains the one given me by Monica, namely *musumado*, which is applied in her home to people one cannot trust. (See Section 3.4.1.)

#### 4.6.22 Racial Traits

Old and New Christians alike are quick to point to what they consider to be Jewish physical traits, including large noses. They also attribute business acumen and other characteristics to the “Jews” in their midst. Anti-Semitic literature abounds on the shelves of libraries and bookstores, and is not missing from the “common speak”.

The old families I interviewed distinguish themselves with the claim that they do not share what they believe to be “indigenous” features. Fair complexion and European looks are important to them.

In NL, New Christian families married among themselves, avoiding intermarriage with Old Christians and indigenous people. They, therefore, consider themselves to be free of any racial mixing. In other parts of Mexico, however, many individuals who claim to be of the anusim are of clearly mixed racial backgrounds.<sup>356</sup> In particular, the Venta Prieta community claimed in the first place that their Jewish ancestors converted their indigenous wives.

All the same, it is clear that at least a few of the original settlers of NL had children with indigenous women. It is also known from the Inquisition that anusim converted some of the local folk. In any event, in many places mixed marriages were virtually unavoidable, and among these mestizos there were also people who considered themselves Jewish.

While some of these actions might have been for the purpose of self-preservation, one should not ignore the possibility that the mythology of the lost Israelite tribes played a role in this context. Not only some Christians, but also Manasseh ben Israel, imagined that the lost tribes were to be found in the Americas.<sup>357</sup> Thus, it would come of no surprise if among anusim, some of whom imported rabbis into Mexico<sup>358</sup> and husbands from Italy for their daughters, there would also be a contest with Christian settlers over who would “bringing back” these lost tribes back to the fold. Add to this the few customs local Mexican Indians shared in common, such as circumcision and distaste for blood, and the picture becomes even more attractive. Jews who performed longitudinal circumcision as practiced by some Indian tribes have also been reported.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Eugenio del Hoyo, “¿Sefarditas en el Nuevo Reino de León?” *Humanitas* 12 (1971): 251-252; see also Elizondo Elizondo (1987) 24-30.

<sup>356</sup> See Chapter 9.

<sup>357</sup> Manasseh’s book, *Mikveh Yisrael* (London, 1652), was followed by many other theories about American Indians and the Lost Tribes of Isreal; see Joseph Jacobs, *Jewish Encyclopedia*, “Tribes, Lost Ten”, vol. 12 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1905) 250.

<sup>358</sup> Liebman (1970) 267-268.

<sup>359</sup> Liebman (1970) 76, 249.

#### **4.6.23 Societies**

I have been copiously told about a club of Monterrey expatriates in a large U.S. city who meet privately and continue their secret upper-class *sefardita* life, including having their own cemetery grounds. In NL, too, the upper class keeps to itself. The society pages reflect only the vanity; the privacy is carefully guarded. In Texas, the Spanish speakers have a saying about the rich of Monterrey being Jewish and stingy. I would say that, in fact, it is the modest lifestyle that they lead that is being commented on.

It is possible that some Masonic lodges and Penitente<sup>360</sup> groups incorporated Jewish elements. Masonic lodges were deeply involved in the Revolution, and in parts of the north – especially in Zacatecas – were primarily made up of indigenous members.

#### **4.6.24 *Medallas en los cimientos***

Some informants, all Treviños, said that when a new home was built, a cross and/or medallions were placed in the foundations, usually under the threshold. The only priest who recognized this tradition with regard to private homes, rather than churches, also said that there were Sephardic ancestors in his family.<sup>361</sup>

This is somewhat reminiscent of the story of Tomas Treviño de Sobremonte placing a cross under his doorstep. See Section 4.6.7.

#### **4.6.25 Gardens**

One of the very first signs of Sephardic origin proffered to me by individuals (of all backgrounds) in northern Mexico stands plainly in the garden of the family home, namely, that all homes had to have *granada, higo y limon* (pomegranate, fig and lemon trees) in the garden. This is how they were said to be able identify one another. Elizondo Elizondo explains that figs represent wisdom, lemons symbolize resignation, and the pomegranate stands for family unity.<sup>362</sup>

Even when they moved to the city, some relative would make sure they had at least a small version on the terrace – for the sake of tradition. The curator of the museum also suggested that the common pomegranate decorative motif may be connected to the Sephardic origin of people. Sometimes, I heard variant versions that included dates or myrtle.

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<sup>360</sup> A Roman Catholic, ascetic brotherhood, active in NM and Colorado since 1821.

<sup>361</sup> See Chapters 3 and 6.

<sup>362</sup> Elizondo Elizondo (1987) 20.



## 4.7 DISCUSSION

### 4.7.1 Sources

In general, Jewish practices such as those described above could conceivably have been adopted by ancestors of my informants in any of the following ways:

- from a reading of the Bible or other available texts;
- from pre-expulsion family traditions;
- from other crypto-Jews, residing in the area or visiting;
- from Inquisition edicts, warning the faithful to be on the lookout;<sup>363</sup>
- from normative Jews, visiting or – more recently – residing in the area;
- from sectarian Christians in modern times.

For example, the singular instance of observance of a sabbatical year was certainly derived from reading of the Bible. Matters of kashruth might have been learned by anusim long ago from Edicts. Rending of garments was learned from normative Jews, and the phylacteries and prayer shawl I encountered was purchased from normative Jews in post-Inquisition times.

In general, customs that have been transmitted under the guise of superstition or health benefits may have spread over the centuries far beyond their original crypto-Jewish circles. So one should be very careful when considering them.

The teetotum is a mistake, which has been taken advantage of by careless naysayers, who threw out the baby with the bathwater.<sup>364</sup>

### 4.7.2 The Typical Case

Let us try and imagine a composite image of a Novolense family of anusim early in the twentieth century who enjoyed enough security, transmission and privacy to practice a fair amount of his or her heritage.

Such a family would be informed of the fact that they are of Jewish origin and consider themselves to be Jews. Both father and mother would almost certainly share at least one of their surnames, and in any event belong to the same “group”. They would know about *Sepharad* and its history. The males would have been circumcised. Marriage would be arranged among families of the same tradition.

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<sup>363</sup> Edict of Faith, Mexico, November 3, 1571 in Henry Charles Lea, *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, Volume 2 (Macmillan, 1906) 92.

<sup>364</sup> Judith S. Neulander, “Crypto-Jews of the Southwest”, *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 16, no. 1 (1994): 64-68. See my response, “Manifestations of Crypto-Judaism in the American Southwest”, *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 18, nos. 1&2 (1996): 68-76.

Regardless of their means, the family would not live ostentatiously, as this is considered very low class. They would live comfortably if they could afford it, but economically.

They would not frequent the Church often, but the wife would get there once in a while, for good measure. They would donate money to the church and give alms to the poor. There might be some sayings about the greedy church, about the hedonistic priests, about faith in general vs. the Church, such as, "*La fe te valga, aun que la cruz sea de palo*" (faith is worthy, even if the cross is nothing but wood).

All members of the family would know not to mention anything about what goes on in the home outside, not to eat at other homes, and not to invite friends without prior consent from the parents. Visitors would be uncommon.

Breakfast would be simple and light, including only dairy products, as was supper. Lunch would be the main meal, except on Friday, and would include meat; coffee would be taken black.

Meals would be preceded and followed with washing hands. Many homes would have a *lavamanos* – a handwashing basin and pitcher delivered to the head of the family. Grace would be said, usually after the meal. Many little prayers and blessings would be said, and the culture would be one of frequent thanksgiving to the Father.

Pork would be avoided, but eaten and also served in large gatherings to avoid suspicion. Dairy and meat would never be eaten together. Shellfish and blood would be taboo. Animals and fowl would be slaughtered by cutting the throat with a sharp knife, and the blood covered. Fat and organs would be discarded; meat, salted and scalded.

On Friday, the home would be entirely and thoroughly cleaned. There would be an important family dinner; candles would be lit in a relatively private place or manner. On Saturday, if it could be done discreetly, the workforce would not go to work. Otherwise, they would go to work. The emphasis is on Friday dinner. Electricity, cars and such modern inventions are used without any concern.

The Grand Day of Kippur would be observed by the entire family. Breaking the fast, the food would not be rich. The day would end with the first star. There would also be a three-day fast for Esterika – Queen Esther. She was much beloved and honored. Passover would be marked by lamb and greens. The women would sometimes undertake fasts for themselves on consecutive Mondays and Thursdays, praying for the health of ill persons, or for forgiveness over some issues.

Floors would be swept to the middle of the room. Many would be careful to collect their hair and nail clippings and either cover them carefully before discarding, or place in a flower pot or in the ground, or save for burial. Fallen teeth would be saved. After giving birth, the mother would be isolated and cared for for forty days, and husband and wife would abstain from physical relations.

Around midlife, women would prepare their *mortaja*, linen gowns for their burial. They would stitch them carefully, with bibbing along from top to bottom, embroider the rims, and, in many cases, have socks and, in some cases, gloves ready as well.

If a loved one passed away, candles would be lit, mirrors draped, and water spilled. They would wash the body of the deceased with warm water or vinegar, shave and trim the hair and nails, but leave them alongside the corpse. They would guard the body overnight, saying various psalms, including the first few, the last verses from 90, 91, and

perhaps 23. They would inter their dead directly in the ground or in as simple a wooden casket as possible. They would have tried to have their own family plot.

#### 4.7.3 Conclusion

While some individual customs can be explained one way or another, there is no precedent for the wealth and variety of customs and observances reported in the above pages, ranging from birth to burial, from waking to sleeping, from Shabbat to Kippur. The strong correlation between current customs and those reported in Inquisition times is unmistakable and remarkable.

Shellfish, a staple in Spain and Mexico, and blood sausage, very popular in all of Mexico, are avoided almost unanimously by anusim. Although blood and crustaceans are biblical interdictions, it should nonetheless be considered a strong indication of the steadfastness of the anusim to dietary laws, especially because of their intrinsic connection to Spanish food, and lifestyle.

The survival of the observance of the fast of Kippur, which encompassed within it the deepest sense of devotion and repentance of the anusim, is likewise extremely significant.

Rabbinic customs, like salting meat and separating meat from milk, are especially significant as they could not have been derived from a reading of the Bible and were not generally shared by non-Jews or sectarian Christians. Consequently, they are compelling evidence of Jewish origin. The more obscure the rabbinic or Sephardic practices observed, the stronger the evidence of an unbroken Jewish tradition among New World descendants of the victims of the Iberian religious persecution, because these could also not have been learned from other practicing American Jews who would have been unfamiliar with them. Those distinctly Jewish practices that were not proscribed in edicts (e.g. sweeping and orientation of beds) evidence direct cultural and religious inheritance.

Though some rituals may have been learned from other crypto-Jews or from Inquisition bulls, non-anusim would have to have been suicidal to undertake their observance. Why fast for Esther if one is not striving to preserve a Jewish identity? Why insist on linen shrouds, when everyone else around uses dark attire for married adults?

Because the vast majority of anusim are unfamiliar with much of Judaism, because they have been raised with these practices from early childhood and find them completely natural, it usually takes them a very long time to sort out and separate the Christian from the Jewish, to get past the various explanations they heard as children – for actions done under the guise of the ancient custom or of superstition – and identify the true source. These habits are “second nature” for descendants of anusim. As Elizondo Elizondo writes, “*La vida diaria de los pueblos del noreste de México, tiene costumbres que son extrañas.... Para nosotros, crecidos entre ellas, pasan desapercibidas....*”<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Elizondo Elizondo (1987) 3.

As was demonstrated in Chapter 3, in my interviews I had to simply question my informants regarding their diet, and go through their quotidian activities, one by one. They would for the most part not know to tell me what was “Jewish” in their diet. Transmission is often so subliminal that some anusim, those who were not given oral identity by their elders, are completely unaware of their Jewish ancestry, yet a few convert to Judaism for intangible reasons. Even after keeping kosher for years, these converts may fail to connect *kashrut* with such facts as their own family never having entered a neighborhood butcher shop, never having been served shellfish, never having eaten pork, rabbit or game, and having avoiding blood and blood products, which many others around them consumed. Modes of transmission are the subject of the next chapter.

According to some interpreters, the *Kol Nidrei* that opens the Yom Kippur services, which is actually nothing more than an annulment of vows, gained its significance in Spain during the first forced conversions by the Visigoths.<sup>366</sup> This rather unimportant prayer (intoned in Aramaic) fills all synagogues to overflow. At the same time, here, in the hidden secret diaspora of descendants of the forced Iberian converts (who are unlikely to gain entrance into a synagogue), members of this secret culture fearfully seclude themselves, keeping the fast, seeking penitence for whatever plagues their souls, none the least for the pretense they continue to maintain.

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<sup>366</sup> This theory was propounded by Joseph S. Bloch in 1917. See “Kol Nidrei”, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 10 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972), col. 1167.

## 5 TRANSMISSION OF IDENTITY<sup>367</sup>

### 5.1 THE QUESTION

The question of transmission was one of the most sorely missing pieces in the crypto-Jewish puzzle. In general, the manner and nature of this transmission, which has kept a Jewish identity kindled for over half a millennium, have remained an enigma.

In this chapter, I address the means of transmission of Jewish roots among anusim, as can be learned from informants today. Much of what I have gleaned about transmission was learned piecemeal, and often only with the benefit of hindsight. I have reconstructed messages and their interpretation, as they have been reported to me. In this endeavor, I have benefited from a familiarity with representatives of anusim from many former Spanish and Portuguese colonies, a familiarity that has greatly helped me obtain an overall perspective.

The need to analyze the intent and meaning of signals developed out of the blatant discrepancy between the way messages that were reported to me by informants were understood by them themselves, and what I myself would have taken the messages to mean. On the one hand, I would be told of what appeared to me to be clear statements about a Jewish identity (e.g. "Our ancestors were Jews"), but which did not have this impact on the informants. On the other hand, the slightest hints, such as a charm in the shape of a hexagram, or some story about certain names having a Jewish origin, could strongly impact an informant.

Only a few of my informants were elders who could tell me both how they received and how they passed on their crypto-Jewish identity. Although specific conditions have changed, and I will attempt to shed light on the changes and their ramifications, some of the methods of passing on heritage in secret appear to be ancient.

In general, it is rare among anusim for a young adult to be told unambiguously that he or she is a Jew or is of Jewish extraction. Rather, many anusim are given only hints by elders – without a context within which to interpret them. But how do the elders expect to be understood? What are their offspring who receive these hints expected to do with them, especially as the family lifestyle usually puts such revelations into serious question? After long periods of noting what informants identified as the hints they were receiving, and adding other details into consideration, which were often mentioned incidentally and over time, a pattern began to emerge, as we will see.

It turns out, however, that in this particular region, in NL, more than elsewhere, oral transmission has been relatively strong. It is safe to say that when it comes to transmission, northern Mexico is an exciting exception to the norm, and a disproportionate fraction of my informants

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<sup>367</sup> I presented some preliminary observations about transmission among anusim, in general, at the *Joint Conference of the Midwest Jewish Studies Association and the Western Jewish Studies Association* (Colorado Springs, CO, Oct. 1999).

from this geographical region were informed clearly and specifically about their Jewish identity. In what follows, I will juxtapose NL with the more common situation I have found in other regions.

The vast majority of persons who discover secret Jewish heritage make no attempt to change their religious identity or lifestyle. But those few who do, and for whom I have witnessed the response of the family to their choices and the impact it had on them, have afforded me a better glimpse into the dynamics of transmission.

It is important to reiterate that the group we are studying is secret. Elders do not ordinarily reveal their secrets to outsiders, and almost never sought any recognition from a normative Jewish community.<sup>368</sup>

## 5.2 TRANSMISSION

In the diaspora of the anusim, almost without exception, explicit transmission is selective, and this is also often the case in Mexico. In general, in all regions, either the elders select one child to be a recipient of family traditions, on the basis of his or her perceived suitability, or they choose the oldest, or youngest, male or female child or grandchild. In the same family, the choice may be made to send another son to be altar boy (and, eventually priest), or a daughter to be educated in a convent. But in NL, it is most common that everyone in the family is afforded the same opportunities to learn of their origins.

In families where transmission is implicit, the hints can vary greatly, and the context in which they are given makes a big difference as to the way in which they are internalized. For the most part, when transmission is intentional, normally hints are dropped and then are developed in response to the child's attention. The result is that seldom will all siblings of a family feel the same, even if the original indications they receive are similar. The reaction and follow-up will vary greatly within each family.

A certain sense of otherness is typical among recipients of such hints, and informants have difficulty describing it. Mostly, they indicate they somehow felt separate from their peers. In many cases they were not allowed to eat at the home of others. Their family did not have guests at home with only few and specific exceptions, usually known to the informant as relatives. An air of secrecy surrounded their childhood memories, which they could not define entirely, although they could often quote *dichos* that had to do with privacy. Inculcating secrecy may be achieved by telling children, "We are different", or "Do not to tell the outside world about what goes on in the house".

In most of the families we are discussing, there is also an observance of crypto-Jewish practices, such as candle lighting, dietary laws, and mourning customs, as described in Chapter 4. Although food regulations akin to Jewish dietary laws are often present, the children

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<sup>368</sup> Rabbi Kaiman's repeated testimony that thousands came to him over sixty years ago, acknowledging a Jewish heritage and seeking to return, and having been rejected by him, needs, however, to be borne in mind. See Chapter 8.

seldom recognize them as such, since they are couched in terms of health and propriety. Moreover, the child, having been raised in crypto-Jewish traditions that are defined to him or her as “proper” Catholicism, has neither the context of traditional, normative Catholicism, nor of observant Jewish families, within which to place an alternative explanation for these food related practices. It is not uncommon for informants to report that, in their childhood, they were taunted by schoolmates with anti-Semitic jeers. This could happen whether they were aware of a Jewish heritage in their family or not.

It is rather clear from speaking to older people that previous generations were aware of the connection between their crypto-Jewish practices and their Jewish origin. In one case, an informant’s grandmother requested a copy of the official kosher-product list in order to prepare *comida limpia* for her husband. Among the younger generations this connection is rare. In fact, my younger informants were entirely unaware of anything very unusual going on in their parents’ homes, beyond a sense of otherness and reclusiveness. Nevertheless, when confronted, elders generally do explain the connection to their offspring.

Anti-clerical talk and behavior, including refusal to frequent the church, are common in such families.<sup>369</sup> The assertion that Jesus was a “good man”, but not God, is a prominent aspect of crypto-Jewish creed, present also in *procesos* of the Inquisition.<sup>370</sup> Although some families (in Belmonte, Portugal, for example) maintained a stronger aversion to Jesus, the majority of cases I have encountered reflect this compromise, respecting Jesus as a prophet or teacher, thus making it less awkward to participate in church rituals, when necessary. Not calling the priest when a person is dying, even when the funeral is ultimately done in the normal Catholic way, is common, especially in the bigger cities, where funeral homes have taken over the process of internment, limiting the choices of burial rites. If this is what one grows up with, it is not so strange, I learned.

### 5.3 LEVELS OF TRANSMISSION

The varying levels of disclosure of identity and heritage within families that I have encountered around the world can be divided into six levels, three in which there is a conscious attempt to volunteer information about one’s Jewish heritage, and three in which there does not appear to be:

1. **Explicit transmission.** Children are told explicitly, and without solicitation, about the Sephardic history and identity of the family. These cases range from families where Jewish heritage is

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<sup>369</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>370</sup> David M. Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996) 138.

discussed openly to instances where individual children are informed in a private setting.

2. **Haphazard transmission.** Jewish origin may be mentioned in the presence of children, in what seem like random or casual statements, which are not followed up. Or the family origin may be mentioned, but in messages that are incompatible or even contradictory with other statements.
3. **Vague messages.** Only vague messages that can easily be ignored are passed on. These include teaching that the family is somehow different from others or that certain family surnames are typical of New Christians. Only those children who are responsive are gradually told more.
4. **Retroactive confirmation.** These are parents who say nothing, but act differently from the norm, and only if and when they are confronted by their children will explain their behavior as being due to Jewish heritage.
5. **Confirmation upon crisis.** Elders say nothing, typically keep their unique practices more hidden, and only tell of the family's origins when they feel they must on account of a crisis situation.
6. **Unacknowledged transmission.** There are those who will never explicitly acknowledge a Jewish heritage, even though they live by crypto-Jewish traditions.

We examine these levels one by one.

### 5.3.1 Explicit Transmission

Clear statements that indicate crypto-Jewish identity vary from family to family. They include strong, clear statements such as: “We are Jews” – “*Somos Judíos*”, or “*Somos Sefarditas/Chrisaos Novos/Gente da Nação*”, etc. The most explicit and open messages include the list of family members who are Jews: We are *Sefarditas* on all four sides (that is, all your grandparents are Jews). These statements are often followed with a warning, “You can only marry our own” (*los nuestros, da Gente*), and virtually always with the instruction to pray only to the Father. Sometimes children are told that not all members of the family are Jews, and get a list of those who are not. (In other words, these individuals no longer observe or respect the traditions, married out, etc.)

The family history may also be transmitted, informing the youngsters when the family arrived at its current location, by what route, and, sometimes, the reasons for getting there are given as well. Sometimes the answer to a child's question *vis-à-vis* some food prohibition or strange practice will be that the family keeps the “Law of Moses”.

Examples of explicit transmission in NL and the region abound. In fact, NL is a very surprising exception in this regard, and the disproportionate number of informants whose siblings all knew of their origins, and were all in fact informed of them, is very significant. As the case may be, different siblings reacted differently, but it was generally within families in this region.

In northeast Mexico, many elders would tell the offspring things such as “*Somos Judíos*”, “*Venimos de Judíos*” or the like. These



statements were not meant to be shared, and the offspring knew not to pass them on. However, they generally had no contact with normative Jews, and therefore this statement did not mean to them the same as it does to a normal Jew reading this now. See for example Everardo's story, or Monica's, in Chapter 3.

In the Treviño family we have an astounding phenomenon. Members far and wide, who had absolutely no knowledge of one another, were introduced to the oral history in the same unusual way: as a small child, each one informed me that he or she was present when women of the family talked among themselves about their secret Judaism. They were told explicitly and directly about the Jewish origins of the family only much later. This transmission strategy was true for individuals living near the US border, in other small villages, and in Monterrey and its affluent suburbs. It was not true of other families in NL whom I interviewed.

In fact, I have so many informants from the greater NL region who were told directly of their Jewish origins, that retelling it here would simply get repetitious. What is interesting overall is that among the informants I know from this area, it was more often the father, rather than the mother or grandmother who was to inform them in adulthood, contrary to most other regions where my experience shows otherwise, despite the examples that follow. Note also that in the Treviño family the youngsters heard women first, but later learned from men.

Another example is from New Mexico. As a child, an informant was told repeatedly by his father that he – the father – was a *marrano*. This informant's mother was an Ashkenazi Jew who had converted to a fundamentalist Christian sect, and was an active Christian missionary. The boy, in whose culture the term *marrano* was regularly used for pork, did not know what his father had meant for years, but he eventually figured it out and moved to Israel. His father, learned the term from Ashkenazi Jews in New Mexico, and used it, not knowing how else to explain his origins to his son. (Many informants from New Mexico told me they went to the first rabbi who came to the area, trying to explain to him about their heritage, and after stammering for a long time, he would say: "Ah, you are a marrano!" which insulted them terribly.) In retrospect, he realized his father had taught him many crypto-Jewish traditions. He compares the ritual slaughter he learned to do in Israel to the method his father had taught him, for example.

In Texas, in a village that was originally inhabited by old families, a woman was raised by her grandmother, who constantly reminded her family that they were Jews. They lived as Catholics, and she herself professes Catholicism, but she lit candles every Friday night, for example. Her cousin, on the other hand, was raised with many Jewish traditions but was told nothing about a connection to Judaism, until confronted by her daughter.

Elsewhere in the New World, there have been similar situations:

- A woman from Argentina was raised Catholic, but when she turned twelve her grandfather told her they were Jews from all four sides (i.e. all grandparents were Jews).
- Among those who were told explicitly and without having asked, is the following example from Costa Rica. A young man was first

told by his grandfather when he was six that they were *Sefarditas*. In his own words:

When I was six years old, in a very casual way my maternal grandfather ... told me that we were “Sefarditas”. I asked what that meant, and he told me that they were Jews from Portugal and Spain who had stopped practicing Judaism, who had been forced to become Catholics, but remain with a notion that they were Jewish.

His grandfather didn't know that there were still *Sefarditas* who practiced Judaism, and to him the term *Sefardita* was equivalent to secret-Jew. He said both his parents were Sephardic, and that he himself married a *Sefardit*.

This young man had been circumcised at birth, baptized and raised as an unobservant Catholic. At a very young age he was told that they are of Jewish origin, but are no longer Jews. And yet they marry only among themselves. Although I could not understand what this casual manner meant, when I visited his home and interviewed his aunt, she reported the transmission in exactly the same “casual” term. The two reacted entirely differently to the transmission. While the aunt went on with her life as her family did, the nephew decided he wanted to become a normative Jew and moved mountains to do so, supported by his mother.

### **5.3.2 Haphazard Transmission**

I heard from two children of a woman living in Mexico City that they had been told once as children that they are Jews. Despite the fact that one child decided to convert to Judaism, she never again said anything on the subject.

A mother from Michoacán spoke of “our Sepharad” and made many longing comments about things Jewish and Sephardic, but never – even after her daughter married a Jew – said anything more explicit.

Conflicting messages may be given by one or more members of the family. For example, a woman originally from Tampico, Mexico was told by her both her mother and father that they were descended of Jews. She was taught Jewish values and customs. But when she decided to marry a Jew and lead a formal Jewish life, her family reacted negatively, and turned back on their earlier statements. These were replaced by insistent invitations to Christian family events and denials of the former statements. When I visited her home with her one night, her father, she and I spent the night talking and weeping as he poured out his heart with longing for his ancestral roots and emotions ran so high we actually worried about his health the next day. On my next visit, however, it was daytime. He was ready, with his son filming. He sat there like the minister that he was arguing with me, trying to convert me into his flock. So I got to witness the change first hand. I can only imagine, however, the trauma such vacillation would bring upon a daughter.

I know a woman from northern Brazil who was told by her father that they were Jews, but that she must not tell anyone. At a different time, he said they were Catholic, but have a “Jewish heart”. The family members, including she herself, were active in the Catholic Church. Her father’s sister insisted that they were not Jews, but Catholics, explaining that because the family had been wealthy and had given food to many, including to Jews, they adopted some Jewish customs. This was in response to a question about identity, “Are we Jewish?”, not about any customs. (In fact, there were no poor, openly Jewish families in the region.) There were no icons in her home. Her father wore a six-pointed star, which she did not identify as Jewish until she later met Jews.

The significance of receiving conflicting messages from one person is different from the case where the conflicts are between separate accounts from different individuals. The latter would typically signify an unwillingness on the part of one party to share the information that another chooses to share with a particular offspring, or the fact that one older family member was not informed of the traditions now transmitted to a youngster.

On the other hand, contradictions coming from one and the same source could imply several things. *Prima facie*, a contradictory message cannot be said to transmit any information at all.<sup>371</sup> A primary concern is the uncertainty of the transmitter as to the ability of the offspring to handle the information correctly. What the recipient does with the contradiction depends on his or her attitude towards the possibilities. Sometimes, contradictions arise in an effort to rescind hints given to someone unreceptive, or when other elders oppose the reaction of the recipient of the tradition.

### **5.3.3 Vague Messages**

Vague statements and dropped hints appear to be the overwhelmingly most common strategy of transmission of crypto-Judaism. Since this heritage is secret and shies away from clear statements, the messages that are passed down are very difficult to categorize or interpret. When transmission takes place consciously in this manner, the transmitters can evaluate receptivity and continue and cultivate those who are better suited. The hints are like shining pebbles that are dropped into a well, to be noted by the introspective.

In Mexico, in the state of Michoacán, a woman told me that both she and her brother were informed that their family always took the name of the mother and that the reason was an important secret of the family.

A woman from Mexican origin was told by her grandmother that there are important secrets in the family, but that she could not be told till she was forty years old. This informant told me that by the time she was forty her grandmother was senile, but I went to interview her, and

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<sup>371</sup> “There is probably no better way to hide the truth than to contradict it” – Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) 73.

she was clear and indeed a very observant crypto-Jew, living in New Mexico.

Family names are widely taken as indication of ethnicity. Indeed, the most common form of vaguely expressed hint is telling children that certain names in the family are of New-Christian origin. Almost invariably, informants anxiously inquire of me if their Hispanic names are Jewish. (Such questions surface after public talks, as well.)

In a typical case from Brazil, a father told his daughter that the family name is New-Christian. The statement was said casually, without any sense that she shared this origin. Only the *name* – not the ancestors, let alone the immediate family members – was Jewish. Crypto-Jewish practices were strictly observed in her home, their source unbeknownst to her. Only years after she had married a Jew and converted to Judaism did she reconsider the import of that statement, never connecting the dietary rules of her childhood home, the burial practices, and all the other traces of crypto-Jewish practice, to the modern-Orthodox Judaism she was practicing. Her father did not object to the Jewish groom, nor to her decision to convert to Judaism. Rather, the reaction of her parents was one of support mixed with anxiety. The word “Jew” was never spoken aloud in her parents’ home, and it took more than a decade for her father to explicitly acknowledge the presence of Jewish heritage in his family, by way of retroactive confirmation.

The last two are both examples of vague messages, though in the latter one, the same statement was bolstered by many practices and was eventually understood by the offspring, while in the case from Costa Rica, the daughter never got to the point of asking, although she, too, had converted to normative Judaism.

When a name is used to transmit a stronger message, there can be an interpretation from a Jewish context and genealogy attached. For example, people are told that “Rojas read backward means *zakhor* – remember in Hebrew”; or “The Ximenes are from the tribe of Levi”, or “Garza comes from the Hebrew *gerush* – expulsion”, etc. The historicity of such folk etymologies is doubtful at best, but for the purpose of this study the relevance is their source, not their historic or etymological validity: If the etymology is given by a well-meaning Jewish friend, it is irrelevant. On the other hand, if it comes as a handed-down family tradition, its significance can be great, regardless of its accuracy. The seemingly excessive preoccupation with names by anusim is very likely connected to its use in the strategy of transmission.

An example of a very vague indication is that of a father in South America who insulted his daughter, saying to her that she had “fat legs like a Jewess”. A more perplexing example from South America is that of a child who was told, “We like to marry redheads [who look] like the Jews”.

Children of anusim are normally told biblical stories anchored in the Hebrew Bible, with an emphasis on identification with the people of Israel. These are inculcated from a young age, typically at mealtime and bedtime. It is important to try and understand if the sense of identification that is given is one of substitution, i.e. “we are the spiritual heirs of the people of the Bible”, or one of a more direct and deeper sense.

Other vague messages can be given by way of teaching the children “prayers of the home” that are said only at home, and the priest must not know about them. These are typically oral tradition and it may be

forbidden to write them down. But exceptions exist. A woman from the state of Bahia in northeast Brazil was required by her parents, when she was a child, to sit every Sunday morning and transcribe prayers in a special notebook. She had to decorate it nicely, and then her parents ceremoniously locked it up in a drawer before going to church. I have also seen a notebook in which an elderly woman wrote her prayers because she was beginning to forget them. But as a rule, people who know the oral prayers also know that they are not to be written down. I heard about such private prayers in NL, but do not know whether they may have served as coded messages for youngsters.

Sealed packages are sometimes passed through the generations with injunctions against opening them. I have heard several examples from northern Mexico and the southern US. Hexagrams (Jewish stars, or Stars of David) appear to be a common signal. They are given to offspring, often without a reason, and are used as private identifiers by anusim all over. Mostly they are worn inside the shirt, sometimes with a Christian symbol or Christian-like symbol on the same chain. Objects can be given without explication.

Here are a few examples:

- One informant from Texas received a broken crucifix sealed in plastic for a present by an elder in her youth, without any explanation. She was upset but left to understand the message on her own.
- One young man, who was searching for Jewish roots in his family, was told by a cousin as an answer to his quest, “We wear the Star”. When he did not understand, it was repeated, rather than explained.
- A relative of anusim I know, a Mason in the south of Brazil, said he got his star (with a Hebrew inscription, *Shaddai*) from his grandfather. When I asked if there was any significance attached, he said “no”, though he knew well of his Jewish origins. But his wife answered at the same time, saying, “Yes, his grandfather was a Jew”.

It is clear that in recent generations the hexagram – “the Jewish Star” – has often been used by anusim as symbol of their Jewish identity. However, hexagrams are also popular with the Masons, who call them “stars” or “shields of Solomon”. It is therefore important to understand the intended symbolism in such objects. This task is further complicated by the fact that many anusim are active Masons. Indeed, some Masonic lodges in Latin America may have been meeting places for anusim. See Section 4.6.23.

Parents, for the most part, plant seeds in order to transmit the secret identity. When children are called upon, so to speak, to interpret such hints, these are often bolstered by practices that the family keeps, and which eventually lead to questions by the youngsters. Food restrictions top the list of unusual practices, since children know that others eat foods that the family calls unhealthy or unclean. My informants often report that food brought into the house by outsiders was later discarded. There may also have been talk about being “cleaner” than others are, or about being actually from Spain, or belonging to the nobility.

In general, it takes time, and perhaps outside help, to completely recover the hints and understand them once the proper context is discovered. Sometimes parents think they made a clear statement, but it was not understood as such. My informants might imply that they were not informed, whereas their elders indicate to me that they were, or I may understand that they were from the recounting. For example, I was told by a woman from Costa Rica who had converted to Judaism in her teens that her family – although they were supportive of her decision to convert to Judaism while she was still in her teens – never said anything that could imply the family was of Jewish origin. A couple of hours later, in the course of the same interview, she mentioned that her father had told her in childhood that certain names in the family were New Christian. Not even after telling me this, did she realize that there could have been some message therein as to the origin of her own family.

Admission of a Jewish background on the part of elders when confronted by their offspring takes many forms. If the offspring comes to elders with questions that are the result of conscious secret transmission, and do not seem to be overly traumatized or angry, they will usually get some kind of confirmation, which will get elaborated upon as they progress in the path they have been led on. If the offspring surprises with her or his reaction, or if the elder perceives any other threat, the confirmation will be withheld. While cases where the children challenge their elders on the basis of information and context they encountered after leaving the home may have been the exception in the past, they are symptomatic of turmoil of transition that is affecting contemporary anusim.

In a classic example of late but deliberate confirmation, a woman from Colombia had been interested in Israel and had affection for Judaism since early childhood. She would ask her father to get her books on the subject, which he did, always adding that he did not know why all that interest. While she was attending Catholic high school, she wrote a pro-Israel article in her school paper. After its publication, her senior uncle invited her to his office, something she remembers as very dramatic, and asked her why she did this. She said she did not know; she just always felt this affinity for the Jews and for Israel. Her uncle said she should keep it up, since the first person bearing her last name to come to Colombia was a Jew. The young woman said, “I know, but where is the proof?” What she meant to say was that she always sensed a deep bond with Judaism, but had nothing to base her intuition on. Her uncle responded by telling her that she must interview the elders. Having been raised in the city, most of the customs were gone, and she never consciously connected her affinity to Jews and Judaism to blood ties. When the blood tie was suggested, however, she immediately said she “knew”, indicating that there was a subconscious process alongside the conscious one. The senior uncle chose to confirm what he saw his niece had already sensed on her own, and was embracing in her own way, as her school-paper demonstrated.

Sometimes elders express identification with the Jewish people that can help explain the nature of the bond the family shares with the Jewish people, and border on explicit acknowledgement. One example from the New World is the following: A woman from a tiny village in the Bahia would just say to her children, “This is *our* blood”, when news of Israel appeared in the media. Since it was so out of context, it made little sense, but after many years, one of the sons actually started asking

questions. How come, he asked, if this is out blood, are we Catholic? The mother answered that once upon a time there was a pope who wanted to save all the Jews so he converted them all, and the subject was closed. Already at this point, the vagueness had disappeared. Perhaps more had been said than the mother had intended. Some years later, the boy saw a television program about the Inquisition, and challenged his mother again. At that point she blurted out that it had been terrible, that they had “tortured us, and burned us alive”. (Later she would say that she has no idea why she let that information out.)

This nearly illiterate woman was living in the end of the world, with absolutely no Jews in sight. She simply maintained a sense of belonging through the oral history her family kept, which included the statement, “*Queimado vivo*”, which means that those of the family who were burned had not allowed themselves to be garroted in the last moment by accepting the Cross, something she could probably not explain. Under other circumstances, had this woman been able to provide more context to her children, and not only convey bits of information after having been prodded, these same statements would fall under a more explicit rubric. But both from the reports by her son, and from her answers on the telephone years later, it is clear that the turn of events was a big surprise to her, as well. She knew her origins, and like many other anusim was secretly proud of them. She had said those things in the presence of her children expecting them only to understand that Jewish blood flows in their veins. She had hoped that her first excuse would calm matters down, but the second television program disrupted matters, and broke her façade down. Thus, from vague messages, she found herself confessing involuntarily when pressed.

#### **5.3.4 Retroactive Confirmation**

Late confirmation, as described above, can signify the successful conclusion of the deliberate inculcating of a heritage of crypto-Judaism. It can come after information was withheld or withdrawn for any number of reasons, some of which were alluded to earlier. However, confirmation can sometimes come where there was no intention or preparation on the part of the elder. For example, a child might surprise an elder with questions resulting from deductions that came by way of comparison with other sources, creating a critical situation, possibly leading to confirmation. The distinction here is the matter of intent; we have already dealt with the case when elders intended to pass on some vague knowledge of their origins to the descendants, and were ready to acknowledge it when they deemed the time to be appropriate. Here, we are dealing with cases where the initiative comes from the youngster.

Although difficult to place, the late confirmation, be it deliberate on the part of elders or provoked by the offspring, is of immense value. It comes and dissolves the doubt with which persons seeking to understand their heritage must grapple, and for the scholar it provides the final illumination as she or he explores the crypto-Jewish heritage with informants.

A person of Mexican origin who grew up in a small town in Texas was raised as a “noble” Catholic. This woman never heard anything about a Jewish heritage. But her mother took her obsessively to movies

about the Holocaust, where they would sit and weep uncontrollably, then leave. They had many customs that only “noble” and “clean” people practiced, such as never touching pork, never eating at other people’s home, never eating food brought home as gift from others, never eating food with blood in it. When going to a funeral, they took their clothes off at the door and washed up very carefully, they boiled their dishes between meals, and much more. Coveting was deemed to be such a grave sin that asking for a piece of candy from a friend was truly very low behavior, engaged in by the low-classes. The Germans, of course, were very unclean, so said mother. This person only found out for certain about her true origins upon confronting her mother, after having done a long genealogical research that left her with little doubt.

The most typical situation that might provoke the elders to discuss the family’s Jewish origins, where they would not otherwise, is upon questioning by children though the parents did not mean for them to know fully of their Jewish heritage. Perhaps most commonly the answer to the question will be, “Go ask Aunt so-and-so”, who then transmits the history and genealogy. Several anusim found out in this manner that some of their relatives had returned to their roots in various forms, from full re-conversion to marrying a Jew, to adopting and raising a Jewish child, etc. These relatives served as validation.

A few more examples:

- A Puerto Rican man in his twenties, having learned about anusim from an employer, asked his mother for the first time if they were Jews. She reacted with a day of silence, after which she gave him a list of the Jewish and non-Jewish members of the family and a history of the family's movements since they left Spain.
- An old woman from the Southwest responded to her daughter, herself in her fifties, who asked her if she is Jewish, first by trying to avoid answering, then: “Yes, my aunts told me when I was little”.
- A young Southwestern man’s question to his father, “Are we Jewish?”, was replied to with the words: “Don't ask, think”.

As another example, a boy from a Seventh Day Adventist family in northern Brazil had to write his family history as an assignment in grade school. He asked his father, whose name was entirely Portuguese, where the family was from, and the answer came: “Holland”. They were taught Biblical stories all the time. There was one great aunt who had “her own religion”. Nothing more was said, ever. Only after he came to Israel and after great effort converted to Judaism, did his father tell him, “Now you know what Great Aunt Rufina’s religion was”. The family carried her surname.

### **5.3.5 Confirmation in Crisis Situations**

Many parents never intend to divulge their Jewish origins, but feel compelled when faced with a crisis or when confronted with direct questions they did not anticipate. Signals may have been handed down unconsciously and indications deduced by the younger generation from



lifestyle, customs, and subliminal messages. But the elders did not intend to fully explicate matters to the next generation, or not at the point the question was posited to them. The reactions vary, and depend greatly on the circumstances. For example, if the offspring is deemed reliable or if he or she is unthreatening to the privacy of the rest of the family the elder may be more forthcoming.

A man from Guatemala was taught a special incantation to say only when he was in grave danger. He uttered it in the U.S. before taking an important examination, within the earshot of a Jewish fellow student who identified it as the *Shema*, and when he asked his mother she acknowledged that the family, and the prayer were of Jewish origin. Although the mother had clearly meant to teach some of the Jewish heritage to her son, there is no indication that she meant for him to fully understand the family history. Rather, circumstances led her son to confront her with the direct questions, which she chose, or had no choice but to answer.

A woman from Brazil came as an adult to visit Israel and found that many Jewish traditions seemed familiar. She called her mother and asked whether the customs she remembered from her childhood indicated a Jewish origin, and the mother answered, "Yes, but that was a long time ago". When the younger woman decided that she would convert to Judaism, her great aunt wrote and explained that the time is not yet right, that it was not safe yet (to live openly as a Jew). Nothing was mentioned until she brought up the question, and, likely, nothing would ever have been were it not for the journey and the questions raised.

Sometimes the elders may find themselves compelled to reveal the family origins to offspring as a result of specific development, such as the following:

- a family member is moving away from the homestead;
- a youngster expressing intent to marry out of the group (though it is rare that the person intending to do so is told explicitly);
- a youngster expressing interest in conversion to Judaism.

In a situation where a member of the family leaves the homestead and the sphere of family influence, elders may choose to explain the nature of the family traditions and encourage him/her to seek either other people of crypto-Jewish background or a Jewish community.

Sometimes when a child discusses her or his intention to marry outside the group, the family will threaten with shunning him/her. In rare situations, after the standard "so and so is not one of us" fails, the nature of what "us" represents will be expressed.

In one case, a daughter told her mother that she intended to marry a Jewish man and convert to Judaism and the mother just said, "You do not need to; you already are (Jewish)". In another case, when their son expressed his intention to join a Jewish community in New York, the parents (who came from Puerto Rico and who, for years, had been ordering their meat from the kosher butcher, but never said a thing to the son) answered, "But never let them make you convert; remember you are a Jew".

Informing family members of Jewish heritage on one's deathbed is the most extreme, but classic, example of late confirmation. Instances include:

- A man from Mexico told a Jewish scholar over fifty years ago that he and his parents were Jews, and the scholar did not believe him. He never told this to his children, though he asked his wife and son if they would convert along with him, should he go that route. His daughter asked repeatedly over a period of a decade whether the family was Jewish, but was invariably simply given stares and no answer at all. She was not ready to draw conclusions from the absence of denial or from the pregnant silences. Only on his deathbed, and after he had some guarantee that his children would be welcome within the Jewish community, did he pass this knowledge to them. This case is described in Chapter 8.
- A woman from the Southwest U.S. was told by her mother, on her deathbed, that if she wanted to know who they were she should go to the synagogue.
- A woman from Spain was told by her father, on his deathbed, that they were Jews.

Very late confirmation may preserve echoes of the “deathbed confession” tradition. This ancient venue of transmission sometimes includes instruction to seek return and, other times, does not.

### **5.3.6 Silence**

Finally, there are vague hints and signals that are not intentional on the part of the transmitters. In many cases nowadays, youngsters find context outside the environment over which parents and grandparents have control. Thus, we include here behavior and lifestyle that may not have been intended to betray the background that they do. This is not to say that the elders did not want the child to follow in their path, but that they did not plan to bring it to the open via explicit communication. Included in this category can be siblings of children selected for indoctrination, or families that have lost the means or will to communicate the identity to the offspring.

In several cases, the family never confirmed what the child came to understand as Jewish heritage in the family. The results can be devastating.

One person from Mexico who converted to Judaism after nearly two decades of toying with the idea talked to me at length about practices I had discovered in connection with anusim. He became very involved in the phenomenon, which he only discovered several years *after* his conversion. But eventually, when his parents would not discuss the matter with him, he began to direct the same energy toward denying the very existence of anusim, complaining if others received sympathy from the Jewish community. He spent an enormous amount of time and energy trying to sabotage others, and attempting to obliterate the Jewish meaning in the traditions he had previously considered as such in his

family. The customs he had discussed with me years earlier are clearly not the normative ones for the regions whence he comes.

One Brazilian woman reports that her family never went to church. She described standing outside even at weddings when she was a child. Her mother explained that this was “to get a better view of the bride”. The mother observed many of the dietary laws, and did not allow her children to eat out, etc. But she never confirmed. The daughter converted to Judaism, then married a gentile and moved to China.

In one especially moving case, I was asked to interview a man from Latin America who had converted to Judaism with his siblings and parents. He knew very little, and actually felt a bit defensive. The entire interview was neither at his initiative, nor mine. That same afternoon, a person who knows me well ran into me and told me that this man’s father wanted to meet me. I was astonished, and also very glad. I came, but not many words passed between us. The man was not in good health, and the meeting was one of confirmation for this very fine elderly gentleman. We sat together quietly, and he said: “I always knew”. I said, but you never told anyone, not even the rabbis. (It had taken him many years of efforts to convert.) He replied, there was not a good opportunity. I asked, not even your children? His answer came: “There was no opportunity”. We discussed a few things, only a few customs; I did not, under any circumstances, want this man, who was at last alleviating what had burdened his heart for so many years to feel questioned. Rather, I used the time to mention other figures of the same epoch, and ask him whether in his opinion they belonged to the circle too. This, of course, was precious information that corroborated other investigations into the past. Eventually he went into another room with his nurse for a bit, and I was left with his wife for a while. Then he returned, asking, with a twinkle in his eye: “Well, did you speak to my wife?” Yes, I answered. “And what did you learn?” He asked, and I told him that she came from a Catholic home, and that in her childhood she does not remember eating meat with milk or cheese, or having pork, or fish without scales. He smiled triumphantly. Really stunned this time, I asked him: “And you never even told her?” “There was no opportunity,” came his reply. I truly hope I am not the sole bearer of his secret, that before he passed away, he found that it was finally okay to tell his family, at least.<sup>372</sup>

#### **5.4 NEW OPTIONS: LATERAL TRANSMISSION**

As family resources and transmission are fading, with the passing of elders, many anusim engage in lateral transmission that goes beyond the family circle. Some have organized in support groups. This represents a

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<sup>372</sup> I do not know whether this person ever tried to tell the rabbi of his origins. Be that as it may, he may have felt that his family would be more easily accepted by the Jewish community were they not to mention an anusim background. I know Israeli rabbis, for example, who advise converts from the anusim to not divulge this fact to other Jews.

fascinating development, and relies on both ancient methods and modern ones to gain access to information and recognition. Both examples that follow grew within the traditional crypto-Jewish setting, but finally found the context that led them to full understanding outside the boundaries of their families. The former was raised with vague hints, and confirmation that was withdrawn, then given back at a very late stage. The latter only received retroactive confirmation.

A daughter of two Protestant ministers in Texas, of north-Mexican origin, knew of unusual practices and attitudes within her family. The messages she heard were typical of anusim, and included a profound sense of being different. There was a clear sense of apartness from the people around then, many food related crypto-Jewish traditions and many other indications. In her family, “The elders select one child per generation; to that child they pass on the genealogy, the oral history”. “Somebody just kind of gave you a tip, just a little tip.” “It is not what they tell you; it is what they don't tell you; then you are supposed to figure it out.” Her grandmother would say to her: “If I tell you everything, it will go in one ear, and out the other, so go and research it”.

Having received many hints, and being raised with many practices, nothing really “clicked” as to the Jewish nature of the family secrets until she went to college and learned a new context for some of the biblical stories she had internalized: “When, in 1965, I learned for the first time that Jews are not the ‘ancient people of the Bible’, as I had read all my life, that they live in my generation as Jews, that Israel is a nation; talk about revelation!” Although she had no doubts about the correctness of her conclusions, and did find additional confirmation vis-à-vis the Jewish heritage of her family from sources as remote as cousins growing up in Uruguay, her home remained a place of conflict.

This woman (also an active “Chicana”), like a number of other anusim, became a trigger and a resource to others. She sought out others whom she believed to belong to the group and get them interested. She would approach persons her age, whom she felt were of the same background and talk to them about Jewish heritage.<sup>373</sup>

Another woman understood her Jewish identity relatively late, after an outside party identified her heritage and dietary practices as Jewish. She confronted her mother who admitted the Jewish origin of the family. She became a resource to others, sending information packages and helping with genealogies, and related this story to me: While traveling, she stopped at an inn in northern Mexico when she saw what she thought was a Jewish star on the neck of another woman. When she came close, it turned out to be dancing figures. She asked about it, and the other lady said, “You noticed”, and explained that she wore the ambivalent shape because it got the attention of other anusim, but was

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<sup>373</sup> Words of this informant at a meeting in 1993: “It is such a wonderful reunion to be able to be here with Ms. B. who reminds me: “Twenty years ago, here in San Antonio, you said to me, ‘I think you are one of us’“. You see, we always say, “I think you are one of us”, and that triggers something and you just go and look, go and search, and you start your journey; because it is meant for you to come back. These little coincidences, these little accidents—there are no coincidences, when you meet certain people in certain places, when you run into all these things, it is God saying, “Child, it is time for you to return”. And all it takes is to say, “Here I am!”

not obvious enough for others. Here we have an example of a contemporary mode of signaling, one that goes beyond the immediate family, but remains within a group perceived to be safe.

Both women have spoken in public settings about their heritage, and made constant efforts to gain understanding and recognition. Support groups and societies with various goals have sprung up in the U.S., in Brazil and other places. Thus, transmission today is taking on a new, lateral form, re-creating, after a fashion, a community of anusim.

For example, a group of anusim and some Sephardim, called *Casa Amistad*, has been meeting in Chicago for many years now. I had organized them, but they have been on their own for long, have put on plays in memory of Luis de Carvajal el Mozo, have managed to get the mayor of the city to declare a day as the day of Carvajal – a day of tolerance, and much more. Many other groups have annual meetings, and conferences of many sorts and levels.

New access to context only further complicates matters for parents who still experience deeply the fear of exposure:

- In Mexico, for example, the results of the elections, giving new power and authority to the Church, caused great concern among some of my informants, who were reconsidering any communications at all.
- A man from the state of Ceara in Brazil was not told anything as far as he could remember. However there were hostile activities around his grandparents' home around Easter. He found his connection with Judaism when he went to college in São Paulo and discovered that there were real, live Jews, somehow things "clicked" for him. "Real Jews sitting in the open, in coffee shops, eating and drinking and not being afraid!" He exclaimed to me, unable to explain why this was such a shocking sight to him. He started re-evaluating his past and finding the truth about his heritage. His family was content keeping what it could, yet any exposure – including to me – was terrifying for them. Had he not gone far from home, the experiences and customs from his childhood would never have found a context in which to find any confirmation at all.

## **5.5 THE INTERNET**

For a number of years now, the Internet has been instrumental in the passage of information for and among anusim. It has become a major resource, and electronic mailing lists run by and subscribed to by anusim are thriving. In these forums, anusim express their concerns and ask questions they might be uncomfortable asking persons they know. I have received countless messages, many of which developed into long-term communications and many have led to face-to-face meetings as well.

My web page has been around for many years, and people from the most remote corner of the world have communicated with me through it. For several years, while residing in Chicago, I literally had no day and no

night as a result of the urgent messages I was receiving from the anusim all over seeking advice and, at times, immediate help.

The next step was the establishment of a listserv (centralized email redistributor). Ana Kurland from the Library of Congress, herself a descendant of the anusim, started the first such listserv, which grew to have very many members and to be distributed in two languages, and which she continues to moderate. After her, many other websites and listservs were set up, serving many needs (including many false and dis-informing sites, belonging to missionary groups).

While before I started my work, the term “anusim” simply did not have any presence on the Internet, it has since been warmly adopted by the members of this group. A search for “anusim” or “anousim” on Google (November 2008) returns about 50,000 occurrences. There were and are, of course, many other mentions of “crypto-Jews”, “Marranos”, “Conversos”, etc.

There is no question that the Internet has revolutionized the field. Whereas the contact between elders and the younger generation had been becoming less and less secure with the growing distances and the changing languages among the young, these youngsters are now starting to avail themselves of the new, if mostly invisible, camaraderie offered them via the Internet. What more, some families have created dedicated websites, displaying results of DNA tests, and where the Jewish ancestry often comes up.<sup>374</sup> What remains lacking, and this work is hoping to address in part, are works that understand the background of the anusim, their psyche, and their situation, and can provide them with a bigger picture within which they can securely place themselves, without having to compromise on family heritage or scholarship.

## 5.6 CONCLUSION

I have been able to identify several methods of transmission and the process through which they are interpreted by anusim. The transition of a secret and enclosed culture into the glare of the world further complicates the means, the ends, and the options.

Contrary to what Artemio Benavides told me, the *Judíos* did not all go “north”. In fact, the majority of my informants in the region – by far outnumbering others, including members of their families now living in the U.S. – were given clear indication as to their origins. Seldom can I expect such a phenomenon to cover such a large ground. Most of the informants I mentioned from the region who got conflicting or no transmission live now in the U.S.; but this is not to say that all those now living in the U.S. do not transmit. Large enclaves of the families have enclosed themselves in large cities in the United States where they continue the same life, enclosed and very private. Their strategies are somewhat different, and will not be discussed here.

What is more, to my astonishment I was able to identify a specific strategy of transmission in one family, the Treviños, a strategy that has

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<sup>374</sup> For example, see: <http://mvgdesign.us/Site/Welcome.htm>.

survived throughout the clan, among members far and wide who did not at all know of one another. This is a spectacular indication of the depth of the inculcating of the strategy of transmission in this “clan”.

It is very common today, in contrast to the past, for recipients of vague hints to piece things together as a result of an article they read in the newspaper or magazine, or things they learn in school or from friends, or from the Internet. A man from Colombia kept hearing about his family possessing a secret Jewish ancestry, but he had no context in which to place this fact, and did not know how to interpret this information. It was an article in the *Chicago Tribune* many years later that made him understand more. His immediate family reacted with indifference to the new understanding he had, and his reconnecting to this aspect of his identity, but his well-informed cousin confirmed his interpretations, and identifies herself as a Jew.

Recent decades witnessed many changes in family structure everywhere. These changes did not pass over the anusim, and affect both the nature of transmission, and the way it is internalized by offspring who have new sources of information, and new options available. These new options are adding surprise and turmoil to both generations. Many parents are intimidated and angry when their children choose to do things that will expose their “otherness” to the community in which they live. On the other hand, some parents make a real effort to raise their children in neighborhoods with a strong Jewish presence, in an apparent hope that their children will close the circle and re-enter an open Jewish society. I hear from many elders that they are aware that they themselves cannot make the journey back to their roots, but they hope their children will, be it by way of marriage with a Jew or any other method that leads to acceptance.<sup>375</sup>

The widespread negative reaction, on the part of elders, to new, “unconventional” actions taken by some of their offspring today – when learning of their family’s secret Jewish past – teaches us that, although the parents sought to transmit and preserve their secret identity, they did not intend to effect any behavioral change. This reluctance too has a history that merits discussion.

Were it not for the new, lateral transmission along with the new research that helps the anusim gain context and understanding, and encourages them in constructing their infrastructure of meetings and listservs, it is very doubtful that anything would survive into today. Cultures that had material evidence and written histories have difficulty preserving their history, much more so this delicate one, whose very existence was debated despite so many, if sporadic reports of encounters throughout its troubled history.

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<sup>375</sup> It is important to mention that over the past century there have been various efforts by anusim at organizing as communities. These groups are of great interest, but are entirely outside the scope of this research, since internal transmission can be obliterated and replaced by group practices and teachings.

## 6 MEN OF CLOTH<sup>376</sup>

Among the few individuals who attended a “leadership conference for anusim” that I organized many years ago, was a young New Mexican man who had been informed of his origins by his uncle, the priest. As he told the story: One day, his uncle just told him “out of the blue”, in a private conversation, that their family is of Jewish origin. The astonished young man retorted by asking, why, then, was he a priest! “Well,” he said, “This is just the way things are. But you are a Jew and so is our family.” This young man was very deeply shaken. During the conference, he decided that he really wanted to stay at a yeshiva and devote himself to Judaism. Fearing that he was under too much influence and pressure, I advised him to think more carefully before he makes such a leap. His adventure ended with a devout Catholic marriage, on his knees, in the church, in New Mexico. Not having met his uncle, I cannot say how the latter feels as a priest.

In this chapter, I tell the stories of several other clergymen.

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

The more time I spent in the region and the more I became integrated into the society, the more information I was able to gather from, and garner about, clergymen. Early on, the chief rabbi emeritus in Monterrey, Moisés (Moishe) Kaiman, told me of the deep anti-Semitic sentiments he had experienced when he first arrived in the region during WWII, and how he had to ask priests to stop vilifying Jews in their sermons. There were also many testimonies by informants who told me that, as children, in common playground situations, there would be accusations hurled against them that they were *Judíos*, though they did not always know whether the slurs had to do with race or heritage.<sup>377</sup>

How much did the Church know about her flocks, about who among them was of Jewish origin? Did they ever investigate such questions? Kaiman told me that thousands of individuals had sought him out when he first arrived, and asked him to help them return to Judaism, but that he told them, “I do not do conversions.” How did these people deal with their “stain” of a Jewish past, or with their failed attempt at a return to Judaism? Did the Church know who cared about his or her ancestor’s religion, who had gone to talk to the rabbi, or which families may still have preserved vestiges of Jewish practice or identity?

To answer these and other questions, I went looking all over northern Mexico for priests who would agree to talk to me. I decided to speak to any priest at all, and get as broad a perspective as I could. The

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<sup>376</sup> Parts of this chapter were presented in a paper delivered at the *38th Annual Conference of the Association for Jewish Studies* (San Diego, CA, Dec. 2006).

<sup>377</sup> See Chapter 8 for background on modern anti-Semitism in northern Mexico.



results ranged from anti-Semitic rebuffs, to many very touching and enduring friendships.<sup>378</sup>



**Figure 6.1. La Virgen de Guadalupe**

## **6.2 A FORMER PADRE**

The first person who came to speak to me on my visit to Zacatecas in early 2002 was a former priest. Padre A. had been described to me as one of those few Mexicans who do not believe in the miracle of *Guadalupe* (see Figure 6.1).<sup>379</sup> He studied for the priesthood in his home state of Zacatecas, and studied Philosophy and Theology for several years in the U.S. But he had left the priesthood long ago and married. He was very restrained, yet very emotional, and gave the impression of being very lonely.

The first thing A. told me was about Gregorio Lopez, whom, he explained, was a 17th century Jew.<sup>380</sup> He mentioned a recent periodical article by Enrique Salinas Enriquez, that described the work of Elias Amador, the most important historian of the 19th century, who had written about Lopez.<sup>381</sup> He pointed out to me that the Guadalupe

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<sup>378</sup> To protect the privacy of some of the interviewees, I have omitted their names and other identifying details.

<sup>379</sup> La Virgen de Guadalupe, the most highly venerated icon in Mexico, is the product of a dream by an indigenous farmer, and is accepted by the Church. It has been argued that this was exploited to bring the indigenous people closer to the Church.

<sup>380</sup> See the book by Artemio de Valle-Arizpe, *Gregorio Lopez: hijo de Felipe II* (México: Compañía General de Ediciones, 1957).

<sup>381</sup> He was most likely referring to *Imagen*, January 28, 2002.

Cathedral has a large sculpture of Lopez, and the Museum of Guadalupe, adjacent to the Cathedral, has a whole room dedicated to him.<sup>382</sup>

Lopez's father was King Felipe II, and his mother was a Jewess. He reached Mexico from Spain around the age of twenty. The nearby town of Jerez was the frontier at that time.<sup>383</sup> The hostile Chichimecas<sup>384</sup> were there, and Lopez left the Spanish territory, and went into Indigenous land, ten kilometers south of Jerez. Today, there is a settlement where he had befriended them, called "Hermita de Guadalupe". He served as priest there, and is still revered in that locale. His writings include much about herbal medicine, as well as writings about the Catholic Bible.

Lopez was a hermit. In Villanueva, Lopez founded La Encarnación. He always sought out places where two rivers crossed. This was the case in Valle de Atemajac. The Inquisition started looking for him, so he left for Jalisco.<sup>385</sup> There, too, he found two rivers crossing near Guadalajara, and settled there for a while before returning to Guadalupe. It is told that there was a mountain, Carro de los Cardos, near Jerez, where he went to seclude himself. It is also related that, until today, plants and herbs continue to grow there, which Lopez had planted himself.

Many people had been in contact with Lopez, both Jews<sup>386</sup> and Christians. Bocanegra, the great poet of his time, suffered at the hands of the Inquisition because of his contacts with Lopez. (In fact, Luis de Carvajal el Mozo, in his statements to the inquisitors, claimed to have been influenced by Lopez.) When Lopez died, those who knew him wanted him sainted, but research discovered his Jewish ancestry, and therefore he was not beatified.

A. said that the City of Monterrey was founded by Jews, whereas Zacatecas was founded by Basques. He thinks that not much Jewish tradition survives in Zacatecas. In answer to my question whether some names are believed to be of Jewish origin, he said he did not know, but that he has a partner with a Jewish name who lives in San Luis Potosi, and has a Jewish father, but he does not know, it could be of a modern source. Here, in Zacatecas, names do not really matter, he continued. But people do ask whether the name Zezati might be of Jewish origin.<sup>387</sup> Although he freely called the New Christians who arrived in the area *pobladores* Jews, he had great difficulty making a connection between modern Spanish names and Jewish origins. This transition took him some time, and, in fact was never completed, although his deep identification with Gregorio Lopes, *el hijo de la Judía*, was evident throughout our conversation. His interview with me had the confessional hallmark of the lonely crypto-Jewish priest of man of stature who comes

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<sup>382</sup> Guadalupe is where the cathedral, museum and archive are located.

<sup>383</sup> Jerez is a very small, picturesque town not far from the capital of Zacatecas. There are archives there. The homes are very authentic, looking almost like a movie set. People dress in very real "10 gallon" hats, boots and all. There is a tradition that the inhabitants are of Jewish origins.

<sup>384</sup> The Chichimecas are an indigenous tribe that did not submit to the Spaniards until the 19th century, and about which much was related to me by informants. See Chapter 8.

<sup>385</sup> A region southwest of Zacatecas.

<sup>386</sup> Here he means New Christians who preserved a secret Jewish identity.

<sup>387</sup> In fact, several informants in the area asked me about that name.

once in his lifetime to unburden a secret. His body language, his comportment, the eyes that looked longingly far into a distance. I was there today, gone tomorrow, and, perhaps, I might understand. But nothing was made explicit.

A. told me that he left the priesthood under the influence of Lopez. He did not explain more, but from the wealth of details he provided about this historical figure, and the deep emotion with which he told me of his long-passed decision to renounce his vows, I presume that his decision came as a result of his deep identification with this old hero, and the fact that he had suffered so much persecution at the hand of the Church.

### 6.3 A RETIRED PADRE

Padre B., whom I met in July 2004, is considered very knowledgeable by anyone who is fortunate enough to know him. He is over sixty years old at the time. He was very hard to contact: he did not answer the door and his phone was out of order. Eventually, we met in a cat-filled garden. Initially, he was quite reserved.

Padre B. belongs to a branch of a well-known family about which Israel Cavazos Garza claims that they are certainly New Christians, and about which he maintains genealogical trees. His mother is from a hacienda in the state of Coahuila. He told me that it is known that there were many Portuguese where he comes from, and in Saltillo as well. “Portuguese” is synonymous with “Jews”, he explains. It was prohibited for Portuguese to come, but many did show up, though they are also not on the passenger lists in Sevilla. The family names from Saltillo also do not appear on the list of *pasajeros* to the Indies, so there remains the suspicion that many could be *Sefarditas*. He thinks that Jewish blood runs in *muchiscisimos* (very many) of the Spaniards.

B. stated that Carvajal brought many *Sefarditas* to the entire region. After the annihilation of the Carvajal family, El Nuevo Reino de León became depopulated (“*se despobló*”), and when people came to resettle it, they were again New Christians, but they were careful and took on new names. They gave their children family names different from their own.

After the civil war in 1857, schools became secular and free of charge, and religious education became forbidden. It was the third and toughest new law. When they said “secular”, they meant “non-Catholic”. The rule was directed against the Spanish crown, but also against the Catholic Church. It meant less dogma, more science, and it was from there that the opposition to Jesus as God arose – from *Los Ilustrados*.<sup>388</sup> There was also American influence. People were Catholic because their mothers baptized them and taught the doctrine, but in school they came under the influence of the secular teachers. There they said that Jesus was just a *gran hombre*. He says that also during the French Revolution, the deity of Jesus was put into question. It was typical for the end of the 18th century.

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<sup>388</sup> A 19th century anti-clerical Masonic movement.

Padre B. told me that he is interested in *desarrollo humano*, that is, “human social development”. I asked about possible influence of *anusim* on local Catholicism here. He said he is aware of a prayer that was basically only to the Father, and only in the end had appended to it the words, “*Jesus Cristo, nuestro Señor*”. As for the common folk, they addressed many prayers to Jesus, but this is not original. Sometimes the priests allow the people to pray to whomever of the Trinity they wish to in the popular prayers. It is known, he claimed, that Columbus was more attached to God, the Father, and not the rest of the Trinity.

Our problem, Padre B. said, is that one only hears information about the Spaniards. Animal surnames are considered Spanish. On the other hand, people – he mentioned the state historian Cavazos – say that names derived from objects (such as Puertas, Casas, Caminos, Arroyos, Montes), did not serve as family names in Spain until New Christians adopted them, and that they remain typical of New Christians, as also are names of trees. In fact, he said, many people with such names appear on the two-volume list of the original settlers of the region, kept at San Juan de Ulea in Vera Cruz. He never heard, in a church situation, that anyone said of anyone else that he or she is of Jewish origin.

When he was a child, Padre B. was sent to study catechism on the Sabbath (that is, Saturday), and prepared from Friday evening. On Sunday they went to church; there was no choice. He knows families that lit candles on Friday evening, but his mother did not. He heard that the Sorias washed and changed clothes on Fridays. His mom used to pray at night before going to bed, but he does not know the text of her prayer.

For meat, the family ate pork, and also “beef, lamb, and goat”, listed for me in *increasing* order of frequency. The *cabrito* (goat) was eaten either in *salsa* or in its own blood. They cut the throat of the animal and drained the blood. Before cooking they always salted the meat. In his childhood home, for lunch, they had salad or fruit, often rice or *sopa de pasta*, and meat *gizado* (stew) with *frijoles* (beans). Cheese was much more often served at night than for lunch. There was always some sweet, home made or bought, like *pilonsillo* (a cone made with nuts), flan, or cake.

Since childhood, Padre B. has heard that in the Muguerza Hospital in Monterrey, one of Mexico’s most important medical facilities for the well-to-do, they recommend circumcision – for sanitary reasons. Before the time of the *funerarias* (funeral parlors), when home burials were commonplace, he is certain the body was washed and nails and beard, trimmed. The family took care that the deceased look good. In the past, the body was placed in a horse-drawn hearse and buried without a coffin. He remembers that sometimes the elderly women (but never men) were buried in white clothes – *manta*.

At the end of our very insightful meeting, this kind padre took me to see an acquaintance. She is a very wealthy and influential woman, but and unhappy one, due to some tragedies that befell her. Although her daughter was very excited to talk about her *Sefardita* heritage, she herself was steadfast in her denial. “Nothing doing”, she said; Cavazos told her clearly that she was of Basque origin.

I saw the sorrow, the tall walls. There are other such split families, where one member tells me of their Jewish or *Sefardita* origins, and another claims to be Basque. Basquism has become a standard mask, it seems.

## 6.4 A GENTLE PADRE

This extremely gentle, model priest went to the trouble of coming to a Jewish center in July 2004 to meet me. This was our second meeting. We had had a wonderful meeting the first time, very cordial, wide-ranging, but not very personal. Our third meeting was at his church, and we still pray for one another's health.

In that first meeting, I was told that Padre C.'s surname was of Italian origin, though I knew it was on the list of the *Conquistadores*. When I told him later that its bearer was suspected of *judaizante*, he asked for the reference, but never commented further in that regard. He asked me for examples of crypto-Jewish practices, and when I reluctantly mentioned a couple, such as sweeping to the center of the room, he blurted out – before he was able to stop himself – that his family in fact kept those.

As always, at this second interview, too, he was very sweet, and came bearing a gift of a Mexican weaving. He was very glad and relieved to see me without my *gravadora* (tape recorder), which he admitted had made him very nervous on our first interview, despite my promises that nothing would leak out. And he confessed to me that he suspected he was of Jewish origin. This time I felt unusually deep empathy. I asked why the fear. He claimed to not see any fear, and mentioned a certain Padre D., who said about himself that he had Jewish *ascendencia* (ancestry), and is open about his Jewish past. There are other people, too, who are open, he said, but his answer implied there are also those who are not. He does not think the priests know who in their parish is of Jewish origin. In his parish, he knows only if someone tells him.

Personally, C. feels very close to the Jews. He feels Jewish in his heart. He spoke about “*ponerse en el pellejo*” (he puts himself in their shoes). Kaiman had told him that many anusim had turned to him. To my question, he replied that the Catholic community would react to a wave of conversions to Judaism the same as the Israelis would if someone did the opposite there. He emphasized that here people did not use the term *Sefardita*, but, rather, *Judío*.

I asked about the Inquisition, whether it comes up as a topic. He said that people should be honest, and sit together to see what really happened. There were many legal systems, and all had their cases of injustice. Yet only the Inquisition is attacked. The Pope asked forgiveness for several things, including the fact that some of the people of the cloth or the lay people did injustice or killed in God's name, or could have done things to save the Jews and did not.

I mentioned anti-Semitism and again Padre C. began with parallels and how we all have to confront racist tendencies. When a person approaches the Jewish community, their first suspicion is that the person is after their money. I told him about the old woman in the *Pueblito* who thought she saw the devil when she found out I was a Jew. He, in turn, told me that when he was on an airplane on the way to Israel, a group of Israeli youth interrogated him about who he was. When they found out that he was a priest, they were upset. The description sounded a bit contrived, but the point was that we must all be careful.

At first, Padre C. said that his parents only kissed him, without giving him a blessing. But then he remembered that they said “*Dios te bendiga*”, sometimes with the hand on the head, or a kiss on the cheek.

He does not remember eating pork in his Grandma’s home. She made *tortilla de harina* with potatoes (“delicious”) and meat, but not pork. They did eat chicken. He does not remember how his grandmother or other old-timers killed animals, but his father and he used to slit their throat. His father also killed pigs by the throat (contrary to common practice), and used to make salami. They raised and ate rabbits. They had a grape vine and fig tree (and he believes this to be a sign of Sephardic tradition).

There is a native custom of placing wine and food on the grave of dead people on their anniversary. In his family, they used *mortaja*. His grandmother died when he was in Saltillo. He does not remember if they washed her (I did not suggest this, so it is all the more interesting), they wrapped her in a sheet, not like a mummy, but like a sheet wrap (gestured). He remembers that, as a child, he heard of people who did so. He thinks they wrapped the person with a sheet, then removed it before closing the coffin. (The local custom is burial in a closed coffin.)

Padre C. had my friend and helper, Gerardo, drive all around his parish, showing me the poor and the rich that assemble there. We spoke about his affinity to Joseph and Abraham and mine to Joseph and Moses; we discussed matters of the spirit, all at his home. He told me he was hoping to go on sabbatical to Israel and would like to go to *ulpan* and study Hebrew.

## 6.5 CAN I BE BURIED JEWISH?

One padre put me in contact with another, whom he thought I should meet. We made an appointment for three-quarters of an hour from then at a coffee shop. Although I came early, Padre D. already awaited me at the entrance. He was dressed in white (because of the heat), and was very agreeable to talk about his Jewish heritage – which astonished me. He said that he is open to everyone. He even has a Hindu friend: India is very mystical, but also very poor, he explained.

Padre D. told me that his mother is descended from the *Fundadores*, who, he said, were persecuted Jews of Spain who fled to Nuevo León at the time of Felipe II. (He compared the Carvajal’s sailing to the New World to escape persecution with the Mayflower sailing from Plymouth, England to Boston.)<sup>389</sup> They came as New Christians, but were really secret Jews. He indicated that the family has a key to their “home in Spain”, but he does not know where from exactly. Isabel, niece of founding Governor Carvajal, wanted to establish a synagogue. The settlers founded Monterrey, naming it San Luis de Francia, and – he said – flourished more so than the people in the capital, which is why the Inquisition came after them. Although the accusation was *judaizante*,

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<sup>389</sup> In this regard, he also mentioned the persecution of Catholics in England by Queen Isabel (Elizabeth I) in the 16th century.

the real cause was their success and wealth. Because of the persecutions, the families scattered to small villages.<sup>390</sup>

There are many Carvajals in the Villa de Garcia, a town about an hour's drive from Monterrey, and they look special, with very fair complexion. His mother was also fair, with a blush in her cheeks.<sup>391</sup> His father, he says, is a descendant from the del Canto among the *Fundadores*. He has a cousin who is a "real *judaizante*". Though he baptized his children, he hangs out with the rabbi, and gives him the tithe.

Padre D. said there is a very powerful, rich family here, named Santos (literally "holy"), who are kohanim. There is also a very wealthy, very Catholic, family in Monterrey that very quietly donates money to the Jewish community whenever any misfortune befalls Jews.<sup>392</sup> He added that Padre C. is of Jewish origin and asked if Padre C. had told me so (I did not reply). He spoke about *apellidos* (surnames) specific to the region. He said that *Sada* comes from *Shaddai*, and Benavides from "son of a slave". He added that all names that end with "ez" are of Jewish origin, specifically Martinez (his mother's name).

Padre D. (and many others) suggested that the polka dance<sup>393</sup> is more popular in Nuevo León than the traditional *Matachines*,<sup>394</sup> because of its "Jewish" background. Like many others who look for traces of Ladino in the local language, he mentioned the use of the term *huerco*, as "little devil" in local parlance.

Like other priests and many other informants, this padre pointed out to me that the old churches in the region are relatively simple and unadorned, since they were made *pro forma*, not out religious attachment or deep devoutness.

Catholics place *medaillas* (Christian medallions) in the *cimientos* (foundations) of their homes. Jews placed gold coins in their *cimientos* – for prosperity. Some fifteen or sixteen years ago, the old part of Monterrey was destroyed to build the Plaza Marco. In the process, it was discovered that the ancient homes of the Jews had a Jewish blessing engraved in the *cimientos*. Many were found; he thinks that samples may be in the museum. In ancient homes in Nuevo León, there was always a grapevine, a fig tree and a pomegranate – considered classic symbols of Judaism. Today, he said, all this is replaced with the Fen-Shui, and the

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<sup>390</sup> This historical line is a rather personal view.

<sup>391</sup> Indeed, my companions would commonly point at a passerby and tell me that he or she is a Garza Treviño, or a Montemayor Treviño, or a Garza Sada, etc., by their features. Likewise, they would tell me that someone is an imposter, and is not a member of the family they say they are, based on their physical features. "Perhaps they just lived on their hacienda and took their name, or just plain adopted this name", they would tell me, "They do not bear the features of this family!"

<sup>392</sup> The reputation of this particular family has gone far and wide; I learned of their secret charity already when I was doing research in Chicago in the early 1990's.

<sup>393</sup> Of Eastern European 19th century origin.

<sup>394</sup> Presumably, he is referring to the Danza de los Matachines, an old dance with frightful characters, which is of debated origin. See, for example, Adrian Treviño and Barbara Gilles, "A History of the Matachines Dance", *New Mexico Historical Review* 69 (April 1994): 105-125.

like. (He gestures at the octagonal insert in the ceiling and the column at center of the restaurant.)

Padre D. said that his parents told him of the family origin when he and his siblings were children. They said to him, “*somos Judíos*”. To my question as to how he felt about discovering that he is of Jewish origin, he replied that he was a child and it did not disturb him.

They lit candles Friday evening, or Sabbath day in the morning. He then went on to say that they had a prayer for Shabbat. I begged for the text, but all he could remember was: “*shemo adonai shevaot, no se que*”. They prayed to “*Dios del Universo, el unico dios que existe*”. His parents had a saying: *Al pelado pon la tranca, y al Judío puerta franca*.<sup>395</sup>

I asked about the custom of blessings in his home. His description was that his parents placed one hand on his head, palm over the forehead, and the other hand facing up. Their blessings included: “*Que Dios te bendiga, que seas prospero, que la luz brille en tu camino, que no carezcas de nada y un día duermas al final con tus padres.*” In general, he used the term *bendición* for “prosperity”.

Before his father died, he insisted on blessing the children. Padre D. described the blessing, as follows:

*Gracias que me mi padre dio a Dios antes que morir: “Gracias Dios porque tu mano no se ha apartado de mi camino, gracias por los que yo nací en Monterrey. Gracias por mis padres y mis hermanana, mis hijos y mi mujer y los padres que me diste y – gracias!”*

His father asked for his permission to bless him, even though he is a priest, and said, “*Nosotros los Sefarditas somos descendientes de David, porque era sefardita*”.

When his mother gave birth, she immersed in rainwater after several days (he did not know how many). Women gathered this water and washed or immersed in it. He knows that his brothers’ wives washed their hands forty days after giving birth. He knew nothing whatsoever about the Jewish *mikve*.

Padre D.’s parents died at home. They washed the dead, and gave them an enema to clean. When his mother died she asked for a coffin of simple wood; she wanted a closed coffin, and he complied. She was wrapped in a sheet. The grandparents prepared a *manta* in advance. They did not ask that anything be put in the coffin with them. When they came home from the cemetery, they ate hard-boiled eggs. They were mourned for nine days. Neighbors brought food, there was no rending (*kriah*), but they did not change their clothes or wash for the duration of the *novenario*, except to wash their hands before food. They lit eight or nine candles for nine days. They read Psalms 23 and 91. He recited the verses to me in Spanish (and I recited them to him in Hebrew). He said that Psalm 91 is “for protection”.<sup>396</sup> They prayed the Rosary.

I asked about *sacrificar* of animals, using the local terminology for “slaughter”, but he took me literally, and understood “sacrifice”. He said that they sacrificed whenever they build a new home. He asks God that

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<sup>395</sup> Compare the common phrase: *Al español, puerta franca; al gachupín, pon la tranca*.

<sup>396</sup> Psalm 91, known in Hebrew as *shir shel pegaim*, is very well known among anusim. I found it in all countries of their dispersion. It is said for the sick and the dead, especially, as do Sephardim. See Chapter 4.



He accept the animal and that nothing bad happen in the home. They slit the throat of the animal, drained the blood, and washed and sprinkled coarse sea salt. There was a special knife, and it was sharpened each time. (He did not remember testing for sharpness.) Still today he offers a chicken when he buys a new car.

Padre D. began our discussion with talk about *cabrito* (goat) and *tortilla de harina* (flour tortillas), claiming – as do many of the local *cronistas* – that these are foods of certain Jewish provenance. His parents' family almost never ate pork. They only did so when on very public occasions. They did not eat *fritada*, but rather, *cabrito asado*. They did not mix meat with milk or cheese; that was considered unhealthy. Although in ancient times people did not eat pork, they still used *manteca* (lard), because there was no other oil. About the term *marrano*, he says, the source is the Epistle of Peter, where it says that a person who becomes Christian and then strays is like a dog returning to his vomit, and like a pig (*marrano*) returning to the mire.<sup>397</sup>

When he was young, he was hit by Nazis, who thought he was a Jew. He sported a black beard in those days. He has been to Israel many times. He feels great there, but the Arabs think him a Jew and the Jews think he is an Arab. In his opinion, the Ashkenazim are not really so Jewish.

Padre D. knows the half the Hebrew alphabet, till *nun*, the *Shema* (he skipped the word Israel), and *hine ma tov uma naim shevet ajim gam yajad*. He claims to have learned it from his family in Villa de Garcia (but he has been to Israel many times). He identifies deeply with Israel, and would love to be in Jerusalem. Nowadays, he has trouble with the Trinity; he would like to believe in just one God. As a matter of fact, he is the *adonai elohim el shaddai*; he is the Father! When he was young, he did not know everything, he said, and lacked the context within which to feel troubled.

There is an English priest who converted to Islam and is converting the Indians, paying them \$500 to wear a *niqāb*. There is also an organization called Judios Completos in California. They believe in Jesus (he twists his face derogatorily at that), cover their head, act like Jews – in other words, Messianic.

The padre claimed that there is no anti-Semitism in Monterrey. When I said that Kaiman said there was anti-Semitism when he first came, he replied it that must have been from Germans who came recently. The previous cardinal was awful or he (Padre D.) would have been advanced already. The cardinal asked Padre D. to purchase something for the church. Padre D. complied within one week, but it cost a fortune; in return, he got *patada* (a kick) and was not reimbursed. He survived (*sobrevivió*), and therefore the Church is unhappy with him. The cardinal was not a true friend of the rabbi; he points to his lips to indicate lip service. But the rabbi is no idiot, and his true friend is Padre X. The new cardinal is better.

Padre D. thinks Rabbi Kaiman rejected anusim because he is Orthodox. He did not answer my question as to how would the Church have reacted to mass re-conversion to Judaism by anusim. From his own point of view, returning to Judaism would be like reading the beginning of a book and staying there, without reading the rest. He is

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<sup>397</sup> 2 Peter 2:22.

*acuñado* (literally “minted into”) to the Church. “If you make dough and let it rise the right amount of time, it turns out just right, but if you wait too long, you have to *destruzar* [tear it out of the bowl].” Among Jews, the power of blood, the power of tradition, and the belief in one God, are amazingly strong. Jews are the older brothers of the Church, yet the two fight like cats and dogs, he laments.

Padre D.’s ambivalence persisted throughout our meeting. He cannot deal with the Trinity. He tells me how he had sought out the rabbi, bearing a gift of an ancient silver menorah he had bought at an antique shop to the rabbi, wanting to get close to him. Then he got scared: what if it was stolen from Jews? Still, he decided either way it is better that the rabbi have it. The rabbi was very cool towards him. (He looked very sad about this.) He said he asked the rabbi for his *consejo* (advice), but did not get any. He wanted to discuss numerology with him. He asked me if the rabbinate today acknowledges the Bible codes; he, personally, is a big believer in them.

Padre D. thinks he would like to be buried as a Jew. Could I help arrange that for him?



**Figure 6.2. Shalom Ministries**

## **6.6 I WANT TO MEET YOU**

Abraham Levi Cohen had a very strange tale to tell. He came alone to our meeting, but – says this man who clearly relies greatly on what he considers to be his charisma – there is another person, called Shmuel Kehati, in Mexico City with whom he works.<sup>398</sup> His accent was not from Monterrey. His students, Fernando Robledo Isaac and Itzel Ocegüera Gonzáles, called him their “great teacher”. He tells me that they are establishing an “Orthodox Sephardic Jewish” cultural center,

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<sup>398</sup> I do not know to whom he was referring.

and have been active in Mexico City for three years already. They are just starting in Monterrey; and, no, they are not proselytizing.

Abraham Levi Cohen was very pleased with himself, sitting opposite me. He was unaware that I had already found him on the Internet in a list of Messianic Churches.<sup>399</sup> (See Figure 6.2.)

Levi Cohen's mother, his story goes, Rebecca Cohen Orá, was born in Pakistan. His Grandma came there with one suitcase and did lots of business in garments and fabrics. His father is Abraham Levi Rahaím. They are named "Avraham", fathers and sons, for fourteen generations.<sup>400</sup> (Here he interjects that he attended at a lecture of a Rabbi Pliskin.<sup>401</sup>) His father was a teacher in the states of Coahuila and Chihuahua. In Chihuahua, there were Mennonites, who are similar, he says, to Jews. Twenty-eight Jews married with them.

Levi Cohen met Maya from the synagogue, but she asked too many questions.<sup>402</sup> He claimed to know Meir, the nephew of Rabbi Zalman Libersohn, who lives in Mexico City. Victor Manuel Sigala Serrano (who sports an "unconvincing" beard), from Levi Cohen's congregation, also knows the Libersohns. Levi Cohen showed me Sigala's application for tax-exempt status for their religious organization. He is in touch with some Rabbi Shaul Malaj with a *beth midrash* in Tecamachalco (whose address he supplied).

They are also establishing a "*yahadut olami*" organization, with a Yoser Hayim as honorary president, and a Moshe Levin, and other such names, on the list. He has been to Chicago.

He knows some forty anusim with whom he can put me in touch, many from San Miguel de Allende in Central Mexico.

I had a hard time getting him to leave.

I was told that Levi Cohen changes his name from time to time, having led a Christian ministry from which he was thrown out. So, now he was starting a new religious business. By coincidence, we passed by the market where we found him in his little shop, selling his goods. The name of the store, *Libreria Cristiana Shaloministerios*, speaks for itself. (See photograph above.)

So, Avraham Levi Cohen is at best a rejected minister, and certainly not a Jewish rabbi.

## 6.7 PADRE PANCHITO

I met "Padre Panchito" through the help of a friend, a medical doctor, a poet and a very kind man, who feels he, too, has *Sefardita*

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<sup>399</sup> Messianics commonly claim to be Levites or kohanim. They often take on names like So-and-so ben So-and-so. One of the more interesting names is Avshalom ben David (born Walter Benavides) from Nuevo León and now serves in Texas among Messianics.

<sup>400</sup> He does not feel it necessary to explain the unusual practice of a father and non-orphaned son being named the same.

<sup>401</sup> Presumably, he meant Zelig Pliskin, who writes for ArtScroll Publications.

<sup>402</sup> Maya is the assistant to Rabbi Kaiman and runs the synagogue.

origins. “Panchito” is a name of endearment. He was delighted to meet me, and was extremely kind.

Padre Panchito serves in a humble neighborhood. He is *meztiso*,<sup>403</sup> as is the neighborhood at large. He described his vocation, told me that he entered seminary at the age of fourteen, and spent all his life in the service of the Church, all of it in this parish. He gives two catechism classes a week and visits the sick. Many people in his parish are not regular church-goers; many come only before weddings, or when in mourning, for consultations.

Padre Panchito had absolutely no clue about anything to do with a hidden history of Nuevo León. He was unaware of any Jewish origins of any parishioners; he knew nothing about the Jewish origins of the original settlers; he was completely blank when I approached with questions that had anything to do with any unusual customs or requests. Nothing about *mortajas* at the funerals of anyone; nothing about people who talked about others being *Judíos*. I asked if there might be anti-Semitic feelings around, and he denied that, as well: he never noticed any. All he was, was about love and charity.

We parted with warm feelings; I, being certain he was hiding nothing. He gave me a gift of parting – a desk piece with a pen and paper holder decorated with local symbols and inscribed in Spanish, “From the desk of Padre Panchito”. I cherish it, and remember this kind, uncomplicated loving and sincere padre very fondly.

## 6.8 AN INTELLECTUAL

Padre E. is the most intellectual of the priests whom I met. It was a great pleasure sitting with him. He is doing a Ph.D. and bemoaned the fact that, though they may “study” foreign language and literature in universities in NL, nothing comes of it.

Padre E. was not sure, he told me, that he is the right person for my research. Once, when he was at an airport, security thought he was an Arab – that he looks like a terrorist. In his family, they eat a lot of pork – it is very tasty. He never saw a *mortaja* sheet, but he did hear about the *Momias de Guanajuato*.<sup>404</sup>

To my question as to how the *Sefardismo* might have influenced local religion, he answered that the most typical characteristic that might have to do with it may be that the religiosity is a bit cool, “*La religiosidad es un poco fría*”, by comparison to the country’s center and the south, where it is more fanatic and passionate. Locally, religion is more personal, intimate, he observed. Religion is entirely divorced from private and public life. Another relevant aspect is that the crowd of churchgoers is virtually all female. The fact that men do not participate much has nothing to do with intellectualism, as in Holland or Germany, say, where there are now discussions about marriage for priests, since women remain outside of politics, and outside of the business sector, in Mexico.

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<sup>403</sup> Of mixed Spanish and indigenous parentage.

<sup>404</sup> Naturally mummified bodies near the city of Leon.

Padre E. does not believe anything survives in the sense of crypto-Jewish identity. He heard, for example, that the Villarreals are Jews. There are even priests who say about themselves that they are Jews, he told me.

When it comes to economics, Padre E. does not know if it is connected to the fact that there are *Sefarditas* here, but people are really “after the gold”. He thinks that people are attached to Nuevo León because of a certain sense of mission, a certain desire to mend the world. The problem in Nuevo León, he says, is much more between Catholics and Protestants.<sup>405</sup> The Catholics (“we, that is”) also like gold and secularism, and, therefore, respect the Jews. It is a myth that they are very wealthy. There are those who say that the Jews control the banks here; it is difficult to prove such a thing, but people think that.

I bring up the matter of fear. His reply is that people here feel better than they do elsewhere. Communism threatens the balance in the city. There are some very poor sectors, but also great wealth.

Padre E. said that a relative of his married a Jew, not a very religious one. The family requested a rabbi and they found a young liberal rabbi from the U.S. to participate in the church wedding. He described Kaiman as very Orthodox.

In fact, many of the padres whom I interviewed spoke about Rabbi Kaiman from Monterrey, whom we will encounter at greater length in Chapter 7. When Kaiman first arrived in Monterrey during World War II, he found deeply ingrained anti-Semitic sentiment all around, which he worked hard to mitigate. He also refused to convert the very many anusim who approached him over the years.

## 6.9 CONCLUSION

Of the priests I met, three were of certain Jewish origin, complete with heritage and customs. Three priests hinted at possible Jewish or Semitic origin. One seems to have no knowledge of his origins and to be a regular, normative, priest. One was pretending to be a Jew. And then there are the anti-Semites who would not see me. We do not know what blood runs in their veins, nor does it really matter.

I was even told by a priest in northern Mexico that he was understanding, so he allowed members of his church to pray silently as they pleased, since he understood that many of them preferred to pray to the Father alone. And as mentioned already in Section 4.6.12, not a few individuals around Mexico innocently believe it is better to pray to the Father directly. This is true in many parts of the country, and of many types of Mexicans.

Among the priests with clear Jewish heritage, some preserved rare customs, such as immersion at the end of the *cuarentena*, a custom that nearly no one remembers. This priest, who was from another state,

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<sup>405</sup> For a discussion of the growth of Protestantism in Mexico in contemporary times, see James Dow, “The expansion of Protestantism in Mexico: An anthropological view”, *Anthropological Quarterly* 78(4) (2005): 827-850.

described blessings with authentic gestures, and some remnants of prayers, including some Hebrew words. He remembered in full detail the washing of the body (which is common, but not easily remembered).<sup>406</sup>

Three priests mentioned their “Arab look” to me. I usually replied by telling about my (true!) adventures in European airports, being searched, as though I were a terrorist. I suspect they were hinting at Semitic looking features, and I therefore responded in kind. Were they feeling their way with me? Just dropping hints? Unconsciously passing something on? These priests do have somewhat Semitic features, and are getting a bit harassed for it; this much I am to assume from their testimonies.

All these priests, save one, deny knowing who the Jewish families in their community are, but this cannot be true. As one intelligent informant told me: In Monterrey people will tell me what they want me to know. The families of Jewish origin feel they are recognized. Members of the Opus Dei approach such families and pressure them for money, which they donate in large sums. There seems to be common knowledge regarding many “New Christian” surnames; note, for example, the lists of del Hoyo and Cantú Frias.<sup>407</sup> There is teasing among children, which is also significant. What children know from their homes, priests certainly know from one another and from their lists. What is more, some priests mentioned the names of other priests as either being of Jewish origin – admitted or not – or of anti-Semitic nature.

When, in the early 1930’s, the former Mexican president Plutarco Elias Calles called the people of Monterrey “*Judíos*”, the city was up in arms. Then, again, came the articles in the newspapers by Vito Alessio Robles, with the research and all that followed.<sup>408</sup> But nothing compares to people coming to a rabbi with what were said to be authentic documents, and real requests of returning to their ancestral faith. One priest told me outright that the same rabbi who had told me that thousands had approached him about their Jewish origins, asking him to help them return, had also told him, the priest, the same thing! This indeed is shocking. Kaiman had mentioned names of some families to me, though of course I never repeated them. I cannot imagine what would happen if individuals in the region who had approached the rabbi were to suspect that he had divulged their deep secret to a member of the Christian clergy.

By chance, my interest in meeting with priests coincided with the time Kaiman was having his annual gala dinner for the city “Who’s Who”, to which I was kindly invited. The dinner was interesting on many counts. I was hoping to meet the Arzobispo (the archbishop), but he could not make it. The state governor’s wife, Angela Stelzer de Canales, however, promised she would try and arrange a meeting. But the archbishop, Adolfo Antonio Suárez Rivera,<sup>409</sup> was no more available to see me than he was available to come to his friend, the rabbi’s dinner.

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<sup>406</sup> See Section 4.2.12.

<sup>407</sup> Eugenio del Hoyo, *Historia del Nuevo Reino de León (1571-1723)* (Mexico City: ITESM, 1972) 198-268; Jesús Manuel Cantú Frias, “Monterrey: Fundación Judía (III)”, *El Porvenir: El Periodico de la Frontera*, September 9, 1979, B-2.

<sup>408</sup> See Chapter 8.

<sup>409</sup> Suárez Rivera was archbishop of Monterrey from 1983 to 2003; he was proclaimed cardinal in 1994.

This was not long after the PAN party had taken over from the PRI.<sup>410</sup> The Catholic Church became much stronger; and the changes were becoming visible. Instead, the Governor's wife asked that the "historian" of the church would meet with me. She had contacted him already, asking him to do so, and gave me his telephone numbers. When I called this Monseñor Aureliano Tapia Méndez, a prominent priest and prolific writer, he was downright rude. He told me he was too busy to see me and suggested I mail him my questions and if he had time, he would answer them. There was more than unfriendliness in his voice, and the fact that the wife of the Governor personally requested that he meet me did nothing to soften his bad will. Other priests, as well as many other individuals, told me he is an anti-Semite, and no one serious considers him to be a real historian. He is said to plagiarize regularly. I sent no questions.

My interviews took place over several years, and time has passed since. Governments and archbishops changed, and so did a Pope. In all but one interview, there was an unspoken subtext. And in each case I must ask myself what the informant would have said under different circumstances, on a different date, different location, different government, etc. The blood is calling – *la sangre llama*. Even a padre who is publicly identified as of Jewish origin would be harmed by being identified, let alone those who are not.

In sum, we have one swindler, one or more anti-Semites, and a priest who renounced his vows and lives in remote solitude and longing. We have heard from several priests who are fully aware of the Jewish blood that runs in their veins: they hinted to me about it; they allowed me to read between the lines. Others were direct. They are content to various degrees with their reality; they have no other option. How many priests turned to Kaiman years ago, I do not know. Kaiman counted the archbishop among his friends; now, many years later, I have to wonder about the price that was paid. When I asked Kaiman what Monterrey would look like today had he accepted all the individuals who asked him for his help in returning to their Jewish origin, he said, "Oh wow, oh wow! It would be a Jewish place!" He was emotional at the time. In fact, it seems that there were in fact more conversions before he came to Monterrey than after. Still, one should not discount his fear of anti-Semitism.

I hear the plight of the anusim who sought out the rabbi, both from the rabbi and from the anusim themselves. I hear the priests vacillating. I see the same situation repeating itself everywhere: anusim turning to normative Jews, exposing themselves, and finding themselves rejected. In Brazil, for example, a Jesuit priest in an important position stood in line to meet with me, then conversed in Hebrew, describing his Jewish ancestry – in tears – and his terrible sense of helplessness. No local person, Jew or Christian could be made privy to, or comprehend, his predicament. He wept when I gave him a small Hebrew book. Years later I met a student of his. This student has absolutely no idea about this professor's sentiments, and considers him a super-strict Catholic who actually persecutes anusim.

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<sup>410</sup> The conservative PAN (*Partido Acción Nacional* [National Action Party]) took over the reigns after many decades from the PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* [Institutional Revolutionary Party]) in 2000.

## 7 FROM JUDAÍSMO TO SEFARDISMO<sup>411</sup>

### 7.1 PROLOGUE

My first encounter with the modern use of the term *sefarditas* among Hispanics in Latin America took place one Friday afternoon in 1994 at Chicago's O'Hare airport. A Maronite airport employee, whose badge identified him as a Mr. Nissan, exited from the arrivals door alongside an elegant lady who had just arrived on a flight from Mexico and was looking rather uneasy as he shouted, "I found a cousin; I found a cousin!" A lovely Latina airport employee came to the rescue, addressing the woman in Spanish. From where I stood I could make out that she was indicating that she too was a *sefardita*. The Latina then informed Mr. Nissan that the lady in question was no cousin of his. As Rosa Nissan—the Sephardic Ladino writer from Mexico—rushed on out of the airport for the screening of her movie, *Novia que te vea* (which won first place at the Chicago Latino Film Festival), I turned to the Latina and said, "Hey, I too am a *sefardita*!" She hugged me, and we promised to get together the following week. As it turned out, she was a marginal member of the large *novolense*, that is, the Nuevo Leónese, community in Chicago.

### 7.2 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I deal with the evolution in the terminology of self-identification used by descendants of the New Christian settlers and by that of their Old Christian neighbors. As we shall see, a new dialectic of fear has arisen as a result of twentieth-century anti-Semitism, feeding naturally also on the past horrors of the Mexican Inquisition.

The terms *sefardí* and *sefardita* are not new to the Spanish dictionary, although the latter makes its debut only in twentieth-century dictionaries. In the standard *Diccionario María Moliner*, for example, we find:

**Sefardí:** *adj. Se aplica a los Judíos descendientes de judíos españoles que viven en distintas partes del mundo, y los asimilados de ellos, e a sus cosas. 2. Judeoespañol: dialecto hablado por ellos*

**Sefardita:** *adj. Sefardí*

Still, *sefardí* is not in common usage in NL, while the use of *sefardita* is relatively new in the region. More significantly, *sefardita* is not used in

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<sup>411</sup> Parts of this chapter were presented in a lecture at the World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 2005, and have been published in its proceedings.



NL according to its dictionary meaning. The word is used instead in the specific sense of “being of Converso origin.” A *sefardita* in NL is someone who presents him or herself as a practicing Catholic, harking back to the founding families who were of New Christian origin. This is in contradistinction to *Judío*, namely, a person of the Jewish faith—a word possessing strong pejorative connotations.

The earliest written use I could find in NL of this term stems from the early 1970s. The majority of the population still does not understand its semantics; although they may know it has something to do with Judaism, beyond that they know nothing. As Ricardo Elizondo Elizondo, author of a book on *sefarditas* in NL,<sup>412</sup> has recently said with respect to the word: “*El grueso de la población no entiende la palabra, sabe que algo tiene que ver con Judaísmo, pero hasta ahí.*”<sup>413</sup> The term *sefardí* did appear in the subtitle of the Mexico City underground *crypto-Jewish* newspaper, from 1889, namely, *El Sábado secreto: periódico judaizante, órgano de los Sefardíes de América.*<sup>414</sup>

Only one out of literally hundreds of informants in NL told me that, within his or her family, their origin was identified using the term *sefardita* or *sefardismo*.<sup>415</sup> Rather, they were all told that they were of *Jewish* origin, that they carried *Jewish* blood, or that they were *Judíos*, Jews. In most cases, this self-identification was bolstered by such *crypto-Jewish* practices as aversion to pork or praying only to the Father, and the like.<sup>416</sup> The identification as Jews was a private affair, not being discussed in public at all. My informants were typically Catholic. Over the years, some have joined various Protestant groups, such as the Presbyterians. Some were Masons.

In what follows, I strive to provide some insight as to the circumstances and nature of the importation and embracement of this terminology and its mystique in NL. The story begins in the times of Plutarco Elías Calles, whose term as Mexico’s President lasted from 1924 to 1928. Elías Calles was profoundly anti-clerical and initiated the Guerra Cristera, which had little impact in NL itself, however. My informants from this state, including the clergy, virtually never mention anything about this chapter in Mexican history – whereas in neighboring Zacatecas, virtually every informant speaks of the war in traumatic, vivid language, as one speaks of an open wound.

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<sup>412</sup> Ricardo Elizondo Elizondo, *Los sefarditas en Nuevo León: reminiscencias en el folklore* (Monterrey: Archivo General del Estado de Nuevo León, Mar. 1987).

<sup>413</sup> “The masses do not understand the word; they know it has something to do with Judaism, but only that”, personal communication, July 2005.

<sup>414</sup> For a discussion of this fascinating publication, see Martin Zielonka, “A Spanish-American Jewish Periodical,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 23 (1915): 129-135, and Zielonka, “Francisco Rivas,” *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 35 (1939): 219-225.

<sup>415</sup> In Costa Rica and elsewhere in Latin America, on the other hand, I have found that the term *sefardita* has been used for self-identification among anusim for generations.

<sup>416</sup> See Chapter 4.

### 7.3 THE TWENTIES

I learned of the first significant event to rock the crypto-Jewish equilibrium in the remote north from the official state historian of Nuevo León, Don Israel Cavazos Garza,<sup>417</sup> zealous guardian of the theory of the absence of any modern crypto-Jewish presence in the region.<sup>418</sup> Don Israel, with whom I developed a warm relationship, was deeply emotional when he told me how – when a contingent of representatives of businessmen from Monterrey went to discuss some matters with President Calles – Calles “denounced” them as “Jews.”<sup>419</sup>

Cavazos was probably referring to an event that transpired following Plutarco Elías Calles’ Presidential term. What is very strange is that, although always passionately anti-clerical, Elías Calles was apparently pro-Jewish during his term in office, welcoming Jews into the country.<sup>420</sup> According to published sources, however, at a meeting in a hacienda after the conclusion of his presidency the embittered Elías Calles is said to have stated: “*Todo ha sido provocado por los frailes y judíos capitalistas que hay en Monterrey. Son los que han creado la situación de intranquilidad que no tiene significación...*”<sup>421</sup> This statement referred to the people who arrived with the first settlers, now living as quiet Catholics and leading a prosperous and industrious life. This “denunciation” rocked the community out of its imaginary sense of peace. The anti-Semitic demon was now out in the public, not limited to church sermons, and pointed directly at them.

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<sup>417</sup> Cavazos is recognized as the “historian of Nuevo León”. On Cavazos, see *Israel Cavazos Garza: Historiador* (Monterrey: Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 1998). For an example of dissenting views regarding Cavazos and his role as historian, see Marie Theresa Hernández, *Delirio – The Fantastic, the Demonic, and the Real* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000), 181, 207-209, especially. The matter of absent, disappearing, unavailable and inaccessible documents in the Monterrey archives is indeed a serious matter, expressed by many scholars orally, and by some in writing, and raising a serious doubt over the investigative honesty of officials in the region.

<sup>418</sup> Throughout his career, Cavazos publicly denied any remaining Jewish presence in the region. When I first interviewed him in 2000, together with a translator, I reported my findings throughout the Hispanic hemisphere and then asked him about NL. His reply was that northern Mexico possessed no greater numbers than the rest of the hemisphere.

<sup>419</sup> Note how the term “denounced” eerily echoes the frightful days of the Inquisition.

<sup>420</sup> Elías Calles actively recruited European Jews to emigrate to Mexico, beginning with a declaration on August 8, 1924; see Alicia Gojman de Backal, *Camisas, escudos y desfiles militares* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2000) 100-103. Although his father was of Lebanese origin, there has been conjecture as to some possible Jewish roots in his lineage (Gojman de Backal, personal communication, July 2005).

<sup>421</sup> “Everything has been provoked by the friars and the capitalist Jews in Monterrey. It is they who created the situation of ‘intranquility’, which is of no significance.” See Juanita Garza Cavazos, “La oposición regiomontana a la educación socialista”, *XI Reunión de Historiadores Mexicanos, Estadounidenses y Canadienses Las instituciones en la historia de México: formas, continuidades y cambios* (Monterrey, Oct. 2003) 106-113.

## 7.4 THE THIRTIES

The Thirties brought no respite from the *intranquilidad* – ascribed by Plutarco Elías Calles to the *Judíos* of Monterrey – but, as so well expressed by Don Israel, in reality undergone by the local descendants of the *anusim* (Iberian Jews forced to convert to Christianity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries). This disquiet was courtesy of a widely disseminated article by Vito Alessio Robles, a chronicler from Saltillo, Coahuila, who elected to use the new wave of anti-Semitism in Europe as the backdrop to an article published in 1933 and entitled “*La Judería de Monterrey.*” The article opened with the words:

*Con motivo de las persecuciones desencadenadas por Hitler en contra de los judíos de Alemania, resulta interesante exhumar en estos momentos algunos datos relacionados con la judería establecida en el lugar que ahora se llama Monterrey, en la penúltima década del siglo XVI. Esta fue la mas numerosa y la mas bien organizada de la Nueva España....*<sup>422</sup>

The article did not limit itself to the distant past, but invented *Juderías* in the New World, where there had never been, and, towards its conclusion, insinuated a continuity of “Judaizers” (with another reference to Hitler). The article first appeared in newspapers in Mexico City in April 1933, then in NL, with a rebuttal by Santiago Roel and a disclaimer by Alessio Robles.<sup>423</sup> It was republished – again with a vague retraction in a footnote – in Robles’ collected papers.<sup>424</sup> Further publications, reactions, fury, unrest, and disquiet continued into the 1970s, as we shall see.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>422</sup> “Motivated by the persecutions unleashed by Hitler against the Jews of Germany, it would be interesting to exhume in these moments some facts relating to the *Judería* established in the place now called Monterrey, in the penultimate decade of the 16th century. This was the largest, best organized in all of New Spain.” The original article was published in *Excélsior*, 1933, and subsequently reprinted many times; see below.

<sup>423</sup> The Mexico City article appeared on 8 April 1933; the rebuttal, by the historian Santiago Roel, appeared in *El Porvenir* on 2 June 1933; Alessio Robles responded with an article, “Saltillo y los judaizantes (de Monterrey)”, ch. 5 of his *Saltillo en la historia y en la leyenda* (Mexico City: Porrúa, 1934). See Eugenio del Hoyo, *Historia del Nuevo Reino de León (1571-1723)* (Mexico City: ITESM, 1972) 198-203.

<sup>424</sup> Vito Alessio Robles, “La *Judería* de Monterrey”, *Bosquejos históricos* (Mexico City: Editorial Polis, 1938) 94-107.

<sup>425</sup> As recently as August 1979, Cavazos referred disapprovingly of Alessio Robles’ work as “*discutible*” in his lecture at the *IV Encuentro de la Asociación Mexicana de Historia Regional, Con motivo del Centenario del nacimiento de Vito Alessio Robles.*



**Figure 7.1. Rabbino Moishe Kaiman in his home (with the author).**

## 7.5 THE FORTIES

The 1940s brought big news to Monterrey, in the form of a rabbi. World War II was still raging when Moisés (Moishe) Kaiman (Figure 7.1) arrived in the city. I met the venerable rabbi numerous times. He told me that he found a deep anti-Semitic sentiment all around and that when he was performing ritual slaughter he was often told by locals that the same would finally be done to him, along with gestures to reinforce the threat. Eventually, Kaiman invited many dignitaries to see how *shehita* is actually performed in order to demonstrate to them its humane nature, with the hope that such people would help him reduce the tensions. Many of the individuals who attended the demonstration of the ritual slaughter told him in private afterwards that the same practice was being conducted on their own family farms.<sup>426</sup>

Kaiman began negotiating with the priests to persuade them to desist from their anti-Semitic sermons. Soon he was approached by what he described to me as “*miles y miles de gente*” – thousands and thousands of people – from the Catholic community, who came with tales and documents, explaining to him that they were *Judíos*, many of them wishing to return to their roots. His stock answer was that he did not perform conversions. He did, however, begin writing a weekly column for the Tuesday edition of *El Norte*, the second most important paper in

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<sup>426</sup> Interview, August 2000.

Mexico, a column that continues to appear regularly until today, and which many people tell me they read diligently. Numerous informants have modified their own practices using the column as guide. Many have purchased copies of the multi-volume collected essays.<sup>427</sup> Some have been sending me their commentaries on these columns, relating how specific ones might relate to the values their elders had taught them, and so on.

Overall, however, the new normative Jewish presence did not open new doors for anusim. Fear of the Church did not abate, and no new solutions arrived with the new Jewish presence. The vast majority of the anusim chose to maintain their secrecy, both in Mexico and north of the border, although fear is less intense in the U.S.A.

## 7.6 THE SEVENTIES

Meanwhile, the years passed and a new romanticism developed, along with re-hashed mythology, most of it promulgated by village and small town *cronistas* lacking any Jewish heritage of their own.<sup>428</sup> At the same time, *anusim* who were being told by their elders of their Jewish ancestry were looking for outside confirmation and finding none, save for wild tales of mythological nature—adopted by some, since published books possessed greater authority in their eyes than their grandparents' tales. A select few converted to Judaism and left, others became more open, taking pride in their origins but defining them more culturally. The range in between is large and fascinating.

In September 1971, *El Porvenir: el periódico de la frontera* published a three-part series of articles by Jesus Cantú Frias.<sup>429</sup> In Part I, Cantú Frias quoted extensively from Vito Alessio Robles' article on the *Judería* of Monterrey.<sup>430</sup> Part II opens with the following words:

*Desde los tiempos del emperador Adriano, cincuenta mil familias de las tribus de Benjamín y Juda – eminentemente de esta última – fueron transportadas a la península Ibérica. De tal dato queda referido que los primeros pobladores de León (hoy Cerralvo) y Villa de San Luis (hoy Monterrey) pertenecían a dichas dinastías; que conjuntamente con otras diez, formaban las doce casas o tribus de*

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<sup>427</sup> Moishe Kaiman, *Consejos bíblicos para la familia Mexicana* (Monterrey: Ediciones Castillo, 1993); *¿Cuál es el buen camino?* (Monterrey: Ediciones Castillo, Somos Niños Ediciones, 1998); *¡Amaras a tu prójimo como a ti mismo!* (Monterrey: Ediciones Castillo, 2000).

<sup>428</sup> Examples include the following: Carvajal brought along twelve tribes; Carvajal consecrated a place to build a Temple; the Jews imported goats for sacrifices, which is why *cabrito* (the goat) is popular until today in NL.

<sup>429</sup> Jesús Manuel Cantú Frias, "Monterrey: Fundación Judía", *El Porvenir: El Periódico de la Frontera*, part (I): September 5, 1971, B-11; part (II), September 7, 1979, B-9; part (III): September 9, 1979, B-2. The author is a lawyer, one of whose children actually attended the Jewish school for a period of time.

<sup>430</sup> In "La Judería de Monterrey", *Bosquejos históricos* (Mexico City: Editorial Polis, 1938) 94-107.

The author has no trouble making leaps of fact and fiction, nor leaps from Spain to El Nuevo Reino de León. These are natural. As he explained to me in a conversation,<sup>432</sup> Nuevo León is the only state in Mexico that did not lose its Spanish (well, Judaic) name after the revolution, for which there must be a reason.

Cantú Frias's articles appeared in the section on "*Historia y Leyenda*", and were entitled "*Monterrey: Fundación Judía*". In this way, he could write with immunity from attack. But he was preaching to a very large choir. The author told other informants—and confirmed to me – that many people contacted him to ask why he did not mention *their* family name in the list of *sefarditas* included in the third part.<sup>433</sup>

It is thus clear that many people in fact want it known that they have Jewish roots. Yet the masses are never totally devoid of fear, nor have Jewish religious identifications disappeared. A good example of the fear can be seen from the reaction displayed when the PRI<sup>434</sup> political party lost its power and the more conservative Catholic PAN<sup>435</sup> party took over, at which point many of my elderly informants fell silent. A similar example of the religious perspective lies in the continuing requests from many elderly country folk for burial shrouds, although few such requests are actually complied with.<sup>436</sup>

On the academic side, in the same year of 1971, Alessio Robles's allegations of Jewish practices in NL were contested by Eugenio del Hoyo in an article published in *Humanitas*,<sup>437</sup> later modified and included in a book printed in the late 1970s.<sup>438</sup> Del Hoyo – the first author whom I have encountered who imported the term *Sefarditas* into NL – established their historic presence in a large percentage of the founders of the region, at the same time attempting to clear them of any "stain" of active Judaism.

*"Además, lo único que nosotros hemos podido documentar es la presencia – en el noreste de México, en el siglo XVI – de numerosas personas de origen sefardí, pero no necesariamente judaizantes, cosas en*

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<sup>431</sup> "Since the time of the Emperor Hadrian, fifty thousand families from the tribes for Benjamin and Judah – primarily from the latter – were transported to the Iberian Peninsula. From that piece of information remains the reference that León (Cerralvo, today) and Villa de San Luis (Monterrey, today) come from the above mentioned dynasties, which, together with ten others, form the twelve houses or tribes of Jacob, or 'Israel'" (September 7, 1971).

<sup>432</sup> July 20, 2004.

<sup>433</sup> September 9, 1971. During the first talk I gave in Monterrey in 2000, I also received many questions from individuals in the audience concerning their surnames.

<sup>434</sup> *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party), the socialist democratic party.

<sup>435</sup> *Partido Acción Nacional* (National Action Party), the Christian-democratic party.

<sup>436</sup> Based on discussions with members of the Treviño Garza family and many others – including an art dealer who dealt with owners of antique stores who received *mortajas* (white burial shrouds) among estate items.

<sup>437</sup> Eugenio del Hoyo, "*¿Sefarditas en el Nuevo Reino de León?*," *Humanitas* 12 (1971): 247-254.

<sup>438</sup> Del Hoyo (1972).

*el fondo muy diferentes,*” says del Hoyo.<sup>439</sup> In his response to Alessio Robles, del Hoyo makes three points: (1) the choice to single out Monterrey is arbitrary, since the entire Hispanic world is, in fact, equally populated by New Christians; (2) a study of the immigration lists shows that over 60% of Carvajal’s group were in fact Portuguese *sefarditas*; and (3) a large and broad similarity exists with other groups of *sefarditas* and their customs around the world, especially in Turkey. Del Hoyo then goes on to list many customs of possible Sephardic origin in contemporary NL, including circumcision, and the use of terms and some phrases he considers as possibly Ladino (e.g., *huerco*) – all couched in question marks and inviting further study.<sup>440</sup>

Finally, del Hoyo challenged Robles for meddling in the affairs of neighboring Monterrey rather than investigating his own town, Saltillo, both cities being part of the same original region, settled in the same period, by members of the same group: “We shall see farther along how there were as many Portuguese in Saltillo as in Monterrey.”<sup>441</sup>

## 7.7 THE CURRENT SITUATION

In 1987, Ricardo Elizondo Elizondo, director of the *Biblioteca Cervantina* of the *Tech de Monterrey* and one of del Hoyo’s top students, published a small book, *Los Sefarditas en Nuevo León*, in which he attempted to develop the folklore study begun and then abandoned by del Hoyo.<sup>442</sup> While Elizondo listed *novolense* practices he believed to have Jewish origin, and was attacked fiercely by various *cronistas*, the book’s several errors did not lie at the base of the furor. He later described that booklet to me as “*pecados de juventud*” – sins of his youth.<sup>443</sup>

Whether or not the details of del Hoyo and his *alumnos*’ theories were generally accepted, the term *sefardita*, which he seems to have introduced in NL, was warmly embraced as denoting Jewish origin, not religion – if not equally interpreted by all. An interesting example of an exception comes from the *cronista* of Cerralvo, Dr. Leónardo Contreras Lopez. Dr. Lopez indicated to me that Luis de Carvajal el Mozo (nephew of the founding governor of NL), who was burned at the stake for Judaizing, *was a sefardita*, but that his uncle – who died in the Inquisition prison for having failed to denounce his Judaizing family – was *not*.<sup>444</sup> In Contreras Lopez’s lexicon, then, Judaizers and *Sefarditas* were one and the same. But Lopez appears to constitute an exception; most people seem to have accustomed themselves to identify *sefardismo*

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<sup>439</sup> “Furthermore, all we could demonstrate is the presence – in the northeast of Mexico, in the 16th century – of numerous persons of Sephardic origin, but not necessarily ‘judaizers’, things that are fundamentally different” – del Hoyo (1971) 248.

<sup>440</sup> It is indeed instructive to compare this article with his later analysis of *sefardismo* in NL, which appeared in his subsequent “politically corrected” book.

<sup>441</sup> Del Hoyo (1972) 78, n. 9.

<sup>442</sup> Elizondo Elizondo (1987).

<sup>443</sup> Interview, 2001.

<sup>444</sup> Interview, 2001.

with the founding families of the region, and *judaismo* with Judaism, modern or ancient. Northern Mexican descendants of the *anusim* and New Christians have adopted the term *sefardita* in public discourse. It is much more comfortable, and connects them with the *pobladores* without the anti-Semitic tinge that the term *Judío* carries. Thus, even families who amongst themselves secretly define themselves as Jews, normally identify themselves to the outside world as *sefardita*.

A well-known Catholic socialite whom I told that I was a *sefardita* became all excited at finding another member of the group. When I stammered that I was actually a Jewish *sefardita* from Israel, she froze for a moment, then went on to tell me how her non-*sefardita* husband keeps saying that she is a Jew, since her family abhors pork and her great uncle never sat to eat without covering his head. Her brother, who did not know of my contact with his sister, told me unhesitatingly that his family is Basque and has no Jewish origins whatsoever. This, it turns out, is a fashionable substitute for New Christian origin these days on genealogical trees, although not the only one. The preoccupation with *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood) is still sufficiently an issue for a book to have been published on the purity of blood of the families of NL by Lilia Cavazos Villanueva just a few years ago.<sup>445</sup>

## 7.8 CONCLUSION

Over the past dozen years or so, when my many informants from NL described to me the way they were told of their origins, the term their elders employed invariably was *Judío*, with only one exception, as mentioned above. The variations could be “*llevamos sangre judía*,” “*venimos de Judíos*,” or “*somos Judíos*” – but not “*somos sefarditas*.”

But these discussions were conducted in the privacy of the home. The Judaism or Jewish heritage of the family was never intended to become part of a public discourse, and, although in private it was typically carried out with pride, the term *Judío* was always accompanied by a certain fear on the part of the *anusim*, and often by anti-Semitism on the part of the Church and the Old Christians (or those who believed themselves to be so).

Once the topic came out of hiding, anti-Semitic overtones and all, the need presented itself to cut losses from the forced exposure. One of the solutions adopted was resorting to what was a new term for the region – *sefardismo*. Eugenio del Hoyo did not enjoy the support of the local academic community at large because he “exposed” the Jewish origins of a very large percentage of the first settlers of the region. He did succeed, however, in helping these frightened people – many of whom thought that they had put the troubled past behind them – find a term with which they could redefine themselves, taking pride in their ancient origins, while placing an emphasis on its cultural rather than religious aspects.

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<sup>445</sup> Lilia E. Villanueva de Cavazos, *Familias de Nuevo León: su limpieza de sangre* (Monterrey: Ayuntamiento de Monterrey, 1993).



Anti-Semitism refuses to disappear. Instead it evolves, and the term *Judío* continues to carry a pejorative connotation to it. Elizondo Elizondo, in the previously-mentioned communication, went on to say: “*La palabra ‘sefardismo’ no esta asociada a antisemitismo, en cambio, la palabra ‘Judío’, o ‘judaizante’, sí.*”<sup>446</sup> Now that the *anusim* have been dragged out of their privacy, they are happy to resort to the more benign term in public discussion of their origins.<sup>447</sup> Many continue to have tremendous interest in their roots and history and yearn for outside confirmation.<sup>448</sup>

## 7.9 EPILOGUE

Let me end with a story that touches on several of the complexities and sentiments that co-exist in the very same families and close groups. During my first visit to Monterrey, in the year 2000, I was invited to the home of a distinguished, and very Catholic, family. I was interrogated for a long time by the patriarch of the family, several of whose children were in close contact with some of my other informants and others who have since become close informants and friends of mine. He seemed deeply concerned as to my intentions vis-à-vis the secrets in the region. Eventually, after reassuring him in as many ways as I could – but to no avail – that I mean no harm and intended to denounce no one, I finally challenged him about himself: did he think his family origins were Jewish. “Oh no!” he protested, not at all, very Catholic, always. His son sitting next to me said, “But, Father, didn’t Tio A. say that we are?” The man became agitated, and told his son that the uncle in question (a very fine scholar) did not know what he was talking about. He then turned to me and said that I look quite like a *sefardita* myself and could pass for “a Treviño” any day. (All the Treviños are widely believed to be of Jewish origin; see Chapter 3.) In other words, I look Jewish and local – intended as part insult, part plea. At that very moment, Everardo Treviño, my friend, and also a very close friend of Tio A.’s son – who was told that he was a Jew by his father – came to pick me up.

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<sup>446</sup> “The word *sefardismo* is not associated with anti-Semitism, whereas the word *Judío* or *judaizante* is” (personal communication, June 2005).

<sup>447</sup> Whenever I go to Monterrey now and lecture, I use the term *sefardismo*, out of respect for the choice of public definition the majority of the *anusim* have made for themselves. In universities in the Catholic stronghold of San Pedro de Garza Garcia, as well as on Radio Nuevo León, this is the “politically correct” term – one that balances fear against longing, fact against fantasy.

<sup>448</sup> Witness the huge attendance, above and beyond capacity, at a lecture given by Alicia Gojman de Backal on Mexican crypto-Judaism as part of the festivities in honor of 400 years since the founding of Monterrey and 3000 years of Jerusalem’s history. More and more rooms with closed-circuit television had to be added, the lecturer had to be rescued from the crowd’s endless personal questions seeking confirmation as to their own Jewish heritage, and in the end she could only leave by sneaking out of a side exit. Witness also the wonderful reception I enjoy among countless informants who are eager to share information about their heritage with me and anxious that I should find some confirmation of their elders’ oral histories.

I left hearing this old man's *llamada de la sangre* (calling of the blood). I feel for him, for his *inquietude*. His family is large. Some of his children are in contact with Israelis who believe they are of the same family origin; others are undergoing DNA testing, while still others are telling the world about their origins over the Internet.<sup>449</sup> Although his secret is safe with me, it is no longer safe.

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<sup>449</sup> Alexandra Alter, "Secret Jews' of the Spanish Inquisition", *Miami Herald*, August 6, 2005. See, for example, <http://www.familytreedna.com/public/Anusim>. For another example, see the Villarreal family site, "La pajina Web de la Familia Villarreal", at <http://members.aol.com/daniel5822/villarrealindex.html>. Some members of this family live in the U.S.A., others in NL; several Mexican Villarreal had their name removed from the site

## **8 MYTHOLOGY: A HIDDEN PAST THAT HAUNTS THE PRESENT**

As explained in the introduction, the purpose of this chapter is to provide the context within which to understand some of the complexities in which I immersed myself, inasmuch as the prevailing zeitgeist includes belief in mysterious sightings and supernatural occurrences. My informants are respectable upright citizens of a prosperous region. And like other people in the Western world – 48% in the U.S., according to one recent poll<sup>450</sup> – many of them believe in the reality of UFOs and ghosts.

While some individuals tell me such stories with caution, fearful that I might think them odd, most people recount them naturally, taking the reality of the supernatural and the bizarre for granted. An academic, for example, told me, matter of factly, how he – in the company of at least one other witness – encountered ghosts on two separate occasions. (See Section 8.1.)

Large parts of the old town of Monterrey were leveled to make room for a large modern plaza. In the process, a lot of what people believe to have been evidence of a special past was uncovered (or believed to have been uncovered) and then eliminated. Many of my informants were truly traumatized by this action, and feel that this was one of many deliberate efforts aimed at eliminating records of the past.<sup>451</sup> Thus, it is reported that many of the homes of the “old town”, which were destroyed to make way for the new buildings, had Jewish or Hebrew inscriptions, but that these were deliberately obliterated in the process, rather than preserved. At the same time, the story goes, entrances to the famous tunnels under Monterrey were sealed. (See Section 8.3.)

The very same difficulties of separating history from story confront my informants in their efforts to find outside confirmation for their family’s oral traditions, a quest that all intelligent people in their position would undertake. I feel that were NL to enjoy a normal, complete and documented past, none of this alternative history would be created. But the archives are incomplete at best. People are given no access to them, and documents have been squirreled away. And the published books are often more fantasy than fact. It is indeed the hidden past, the burden of its official absence, that has led to a large measure of the fantasy that survives and flourishes in this region. Like the bulldozers that tore down the old town, the lack of documentary evidence causes the descendants of the original settlers to feel obliterated, along with their true history.

It is in this context that we must examine the mythological aspects of the Sephardic heritage in this region.

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<sup>450</sup><http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/10/29/opinion/polls/main994766.shtml>.

<sup>451</sup> See Marie Theresa Hernández, *Delirio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997) 213-215.

## 8.1 GHOSTS

Let me try and sketch an image of my experience during my visit of Summer 2004. At this point, it appeared that I had gained enough trust for people to confide in me very much, and share with me what is not believed by everyone (at least some of them were aware of this). A few examples will provide the right context for the reader.

Early on during this stay, I heard that on January 17, 2004 – about half a year prior to my arrival – there had appeared an article in *El Norte*'s crime section regarding a ghost of a witch seen by a policeman. (See Figure 8.1.) The policeman was found away from his post and his patrol vehicle was crashed. He explained that he escaped his post because he had been pursued by the dark ghost of a frightening witch. The ghost also damaged the car. Now, people continue to go around the neighborhood looking for her.

**Causa 'bruja' desmayo a policía de Guadalupe**

Por **LUIS ANTONIO RIVERA**

En Nuevo León un expediente secreto fue abierto: "La bruja de Guadalupe".

La versión del testigo, un policía municipal, asegura que la mujer descendió de entre los árboles cuando él patrullaba la zona. Que el descenso lo hizo totalmente, como si estuviera flotando.

Ella, describe el testigo, portaba un vestido negro y carecía de párpados en los ojos.

"Era una bruja y la vi volar", asegura Leonardo Samaniego Gallegos, de apenas 21 años de edad y con 8 meses de experiencia.

Eran las 3 y 15 minutos de la madrugada, en la calle Álamo, de la colonia Valles de la Silla, en Guadalupe, y el uniformado emprendió su huida a bordo de la patrulla cuando observó la imagen de la mujer aproximarse a velocidad.

"Cuando me empezó a corretear la bruja, pues ya pedí el apoyo (por la radiofrecuencia), que se vinieran (otras patrullas) de emergencia", contó a los reporteros el uniformado.

"Bajó de entre dos árboles, de una altura de 6 metros... Se detuvo y bajó despacio; la vi cuando se volteó, era un bulto totalmente negro; se giró en todo su entorno, se tapó la luz que le calaba en los ojos y los tenía completamente negros, sin párpados".

La situación, agregó, hizo que perdiera el conocimiento.

"Se venía acercando caminando, meti reversa (a la patrulla)... y ella empezó a trolar y la vi volar", explicó.

"Se impactó en el vidrio, se quedó viendo hacia dentro del carro... levanté las manos y me desmayé".

El coordinador de la Policía en Guadalupe, Jesús García Krestsh, dijo que Samaniego fue sometido a exámenes antidoping y psicológicos, para descartar que sufra de alucinaciones.

Y entonces ¿qué pasó?

**escucha**

El relato del policía

[elnorte.com/monterrey](http://elnorte.com/monterrey)

**Leonardo Samaniego**

**Figure 8.1. Ghost story.**

I was told that people were still going to the area of the sighting in search of the ghost-witch that was described. It occurred to me to ask people's opinion about this story. The results were truly amazing. People jumped at the opportunity I gave them, telling me about the

ghosts, *fantasmas*, they themselves had encountered, challenging me to find an alternative explanation for what they identified as such sightings. When I mentioned such an encounter to a friend with some sense of incredulity, that friend would shrug his/her shoulder and report their own encounters, challenging me again to find a better explanation. “Incidentally, [this] incident about the witch happened on the street of one of my aunts, near her house”, a young informant told me, who also said that there is nothing unusual about witches; half the women in his family are witches.

The following are examples of more stories that I heard:

1. A particularly widely acknowledged ghost story has to do with the monk or friar in the Marco museum. This museum of modern art was built in the new plaza, over what used to be a monastery. It is widely “known” that the ghost of a praying monk hangs out there. When I approached the head of security at the museum, he told me that the guards had observed the friar on a regular basis, and that the phantom was even captured on the security cameras. He pointed out to me the specific staircase where it is always seen. The staff at the museum gift shop and the information desk all confirmed to me that they had also seen the ghost.
2. Another informant, a highly regarded and widely published scholar, told me that both he and his wife had seen a ghost in Parras in Coahuila. They were chatting with some people at breakfast. The ghost appeared – they saw a person on the opposite porch (but they were not sure of the gender) in white, holding its own head. The other people who were with them fled, then his wife, herself a published author, noticed that the figure was drifting, not walking. She called him, and he saw the ghost walk into a wall. All this happened at dawn in a 17th-century building.
3. In 2005, the wife of the same informant was in San Luis Potosí in the Avenida Principal. They walked into a building, noticed a restaurant and sat down for a meal. They were looking at the old paintings on the wall. His wife asked where she could wash up. She was directed behind the bar. There were two huge doors there. She opened them and entered. Inside she found a wall covered with mirrors, and opposite them were the sinks. She heard a person enter, take toilet paper, etc. But there was no one there. Then she saw a shadow leaving through the other door, but it did not reflect in the mirrors, and it walked right through the door without opening it. She asked about this, and was told that others had seen the apparition as well and so had they.

The above is but a sampling of the common sightings and reports by individuals. As already mentioned, this information came to me in the wake of the story in *El Norte*.

The first report of unnatural beings in this region was provided to me by a published author whom I met in Chicago around 1995 and whose family belongs to a well known founding family from Monterrey. He reported seeing human beings with monkey tails and other bizarre creatures.

There is a widespread myth of *el hombre pájaro*, with many variations, but the essence of it has to do with a feathered man who can

fly, and is either good or bad. Generally, the birdman is a victim, but it is often a victimizer as well, or just a bad omen. The *hombre pájaro* was sighted by many, and, although it is not unique to this region, it is common here. I was first told of the birdman by an expatriate from the region living in the U.S., then again from many in the region, once I started alluding to it. In short, many versions, many stories, many sightings.

Often people would also tell me about “O.V.N.I.s” (extraterrestrials) and UFOs that are sighted all over. In short, hardly a person lives in Monterrey who has not seen them, as well as ghosts. Learned professors and brilliant business people have seen some or all of these mysterious beings; visitors to the museum of modern art have seen them, along with the employees of the building. And, as mentioned above, *El Norte*, the most respected regional daily newspaper – and second most important in all of Mexico – regularly reports such sightings.

## 8.2 THE MOUNTAIN

I learned that El Cerro de la Silla, a fascinating mountain looming over the city of Monterrey (see Figure 8.2), is the site of many a sighting of unusual happenings. The treasure of Agapito Treviño<sup>452</sup> is said to be

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<sup>452</sup> Here is an example of a ghost story regarding this treasure, as told on the internet by Artemio Estrella ([http://www.predicado.com/articulo/Cerro de la Silla, el caballo de Agapito Treviño-146070.html](http://www.predicado.com/articulo/Cerro%20de%20la%20Silla,%20el%20caballo%20de%20Agapito%20Trevi%C3%B1o-146070.html)):

Ese día me desperté a la cinco de la mañana en punto, entusiasmado y sin sueño. Un día antes ya nos habíamos puesto de acuerdo para partir a nuestra excursión al Cerro de la Silla y las cinco de la mañana era la hora acordada.

Eramos dos jóvenes de doce y once años – yo era el de doce –, otro joven un poco mayor – tal vez diez y siete años – y un adulto.

Salí a la calle y ya estaban todos esperandome, hacía un poco de frío; pero no era necesario ir muy abrigados, puesto que el clima de Nuevo León, México es muy caliente y ese frío matinal iba a desaparecer en pocas horas.

Tomamos un transporte urbano para llegar al sitio por donde se sube el cerro. El cerro se puede escalar por cualquier parte, pero hay un sendero que llega hasta su cima; el sendero fue hecho para que la gente que se encuentra en la repetidora de televisión pueda llegar en Jeep.

Yo pensé que mi aventura sería subir el Cerro de la Silla por primera vez – de hecho nunca había subido un cerro –, pero no, lo impactante fue ver a un caballo fantasma.

Cuando llegamos a las faldas del cerro y después de avanzar hacia arriba un kilómetro aproximadamente, vi salir de entre los matorrales a un caballo blanco. El caballo que cruzaba el camino no era nada fantasmal, se veía totalmente real y sus pisadas eran firmes.

Yo inmediatamente les dije a mis compañeros sobre el caballo, para mi sorpresa nadie veía al caballo. Yo les seguía insistiendo que allí estaba el caballo, a más o menos 30 metros de distancia; pero nada, ellos no lo conseguían ver.

Algo frustrado, corrí hacia el caballo que ya casi estaba por atravesar el camino y estaba a punto de perderse de mi vista. No lo alcancé, se metió entre los matorrales y cuando llegué al sitio por donde cruzó, otra sorpresa, el lugar estaba tan tupido de matorrales que era imposible que alguien pudiera pasar por allí. Me quedé confundido, sin palabras y mis amigos asustados porque

hidden there, and is still sought after by fortune hunters. The ghost of the witch seen by the policeman was in the neighborhood just below this mountain. Many O.V.N.I.s, as well as other supernatural beings and objects, are spotted there. The city of Guadalupe, which is sprawled right beneath the mountain, is the site of many reports, including the one of the policeman and the ghost (see previous section).



**Figure 8.2. El cerro de la silla.**

The following are some examples of personal sightings around this mountain by my informants:

1. In one such report I was told the following: My older brother died because he saw a UFO [while driving]. It made him go dumb for ten years, and he lost his ability to write as well. Then he died. I did not believe this at first, but my sister in law and nephew confirmed it. They too saw it. The UFO tarried over his car and

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pensaban que algo malo me estaba pasando.

Cuando reaccione y comprendí que nunca hubo un caballo que cruzara el camino, y después de que mis amigos se cansaron de burlarse de mis alusiones – esas burlas fueron un relajante para todos–, el adulto que nos acompañaba dijo que talvez el caballo que vi era el caballo de Agapito Treviño.

Todos nos quedamos con cara de “y quién jodidos es Agapito Treviño”, el señor nos contó que Agapito fue un bandolero que asoleo a Monterrey en la época revolucionaria de México y después de capturado lo fusilaron. Y según cuentan los viejos, hay una leyenda que dice que nunca supieron qué pasó con el botín que Agapito llegó a capitalizar, otros cuentan que lo escondio en algún lugar del Cerro de la Silla. Y muchas personas aseguran haber visto al caballo blanco de Agapito Treviño, presisamente en el Cerro de la Silla.

No sé sabe si alguien ya encontró el tesoro de Agapito Treviño, dicen que el caballo sabe el camino hacia el tesoro. Varias veces mas he subido el cerro, pero ya no he vuelto a ver al corsel blanco de Agapito Treviño.

the engine shut down. Everyone got out of the car, but my brother threw a stone at the UFO and was hit by some beam of light, which brought about all this damage. I myself have since seen a huge house floating overhead, then disappearing from view. It really scared me. There is a man called Jaime Mauzan in Mexico City who studies this phenomenon. He saw Hebrew letters in the clouds, which said that on August 10, *el dragon depretara* (the dragon will awaken). It was written in ancient Hebrew in the clouds. Just recently, on May 26, I saw a ball circling around me.

2. Another very intelligent and practical person told me how she saw UFO's over these mountains surrounding Monterrey, and they were also captured on film. She knew others who confirmed her sighting. She told me also that she saw a ghost in some building belonging to her family. She told me all this in reaction to my apparent disbelief, which, of course, I now regret having displayed.
3. Another informant told me he saw UFO's twice in one day, and between sleep and waking he saw the ghost of a woman near his closet. He saw her in an entirely different place after getting married, dressed in a large dress. His mother says it was a white dress, but he thinks it might have been cream color. In any event, it was a very large dress. She was sitting on the rocking chair. When he woke she was gone, but the chair was still rocking.
4. As for the UFO's, he was riding a horse, together with an employee of his, and they saw a bus going down the steep mountain where there was no road at all. They just saw the lights of what appeared to be the bus. Then at dawn, with the sun behind them, the lights split, and went in separate directions quickly disintegrating into tiny balls and disappearing.

Vito Alessio Robles took advantage of this local sentiment. It is toward this mountain, the *Cerro de la Silla*, which inspires so much awe, mystery and imagination in the minds of the people of the region, that he chose to have the members of his "*Judería*" de Monterrey direct their prayers. "*Allí... entonaban cánticos y alabanzas a Moisés, extendiendo los brazos hacia el oriente, hacia el umbrío y misterioso Cerro de la Silla.*"<sup>453</sup>

### 8.3 THE TUNNELS

One episode in a popular television series on the folklore of the Nuevo León, produced and hosted by Horacio Alvarado Ortiz, concentrated on the network of tunnels that existed under the city. The program implied that they were huge and continued underground for all of the several kilometers' distance from the *Catedral* to the *Obispado*.<sup>454</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> Vito Alessio Robles, "La Juderia de Monterrey", *Bosquejos históricos*, (Mexico City: Editorial Polis, 1938) 106.

<sup>454</sup> See the extensive chapter on this series and its creator in Hernández (1997) 77-105. This same Alvarado told Hernández, "We are all *Sefarditas*."



Tunnels in fact existed, and these were filmed. Tunnels were extremely common in mining towns (Zacatecas, for example), and are still present in the entire region. The common explanation is that they were intended both for storage (the climate of the region is extreme and inhospitable) and for protection from the hostile Chichimecas.<sup>455</sup> But many claim that the tunnels were in fact much bigger than the officials assert, as was demonstrated on the TV show.

Furthermore, the tunnels, however long they are, are host to deepening layers of conspiracy theory. According to some reports,<sup>456</sup> priests and monks kept illegitimate families housed in the tunnel, and whenever they tired of their families, they would simply wall them in – alive! – thus eliminating them. Some informants, one of whom was an altar boy some fifty years ago, claimed to have “gone down and seen” this. The existence of these *mujeres emparedadas*, or women buried alive, built into the walls – so to speak, along with their children, was reported as simple historical facts to me and other investigators by numerous and varied informants.

Besides the aforementioned “eyewitness” report, there are variants. One person said that the woman who was buried alive was buried in the wall of her home in the same old city by a jealous husband, but not in the tunnels. Lilia Cavazos de Villanueva, wife of Israel Cavazos Garza, the official state historian, published a book on the legends of the region in which the *mujer emparedada* story appears.<sup>457</sup> The tale takes place in the old town on Monterrey, and the crime is attributed to a jealous husband who married a lovely young woman whose heart was given to another young man. Although the book is called *Leyendas*, in a personal conversation, Cavazos de Villanueva said to me clearly that this had actually happened and the corpse of the victim was discovered in the house when it was destroyed to make way for the new plaza.

This tendency to present local stories as legends, while actually believing in them as fact, repeated itself in other reports to me, further complicating efforts at evaluation. “Tía Bertha” also knew of the tunnels and the buried women, but was careful not to say anything much negative about the church. A number of individuals who do not consider the story to have any veracity to it told me, nonetheless, that there is indisputable evidence of infants and fetuses having been buried in walls of monasteries elsewhere in Mexico.

Tunnels are really not such a big deal. There are tunnels in every mining town. Zacatecas, which was very rich with valuable mines, has very many tunnels running under it. Tunnels also exist under Villa de Garcia and other places nearby. The mines near Monterrey are few and not very profitable, so it has fewer tunnels.

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<sup>455</sup> The Chichimecas were a hostile, transient, indigenous tribe that roamed the region and resisted the Spaniard invaders until the 19th century. See Section 8.5.

<sup>456</sup> E.g. Aquiles Sepúlveda. This is an extremely common local legend; see Hernández (1997) 216-217.

<sup>457</sup> Lilia E. Villanueva de Cavazos, *Leyendas de Nuevo León* (Monterrey, 1997) 143-146. She also wrote *Familias de Nuevo León; Su limpieza de sangre* (Monterrey: Ayuntamiento de Monterrey, 1993).

It is perhaps the closure of the tunnels that fanned the fantasy. This is a region that lacks much material evidence of its past, so its inhabitants are quick to fill the void with anything at hand. Many of the theories appear to be driven by fears, hopes and despair.

## 8.4 LOST TRIBES

The version of the myth of the lost tribes that was introduced to me by Monica actually comes from a colleague of hers, Jesus Cantú Frías, who published it in the second part of a series of three articles in the newspaper, *El Porvenir: el periódico de la frontera*, on September 5, 7, and 9 of 1971. In Part 1 of the series, he quotes extensively from the article by Vito Alessio Robles on the *Judería* of Monterrey. Then, in Part 2, he opens with the following words:

*Desde los tiempos del emperador Adriano, cincuenta mil familias de las tribus de Benjamin y Juda – eminentemente de esta última – fueron transportadas a la península Ibérica. De tal dato queda referido que los primeros pobladores de León (hoy Cerralvo) y Villa de San Luis (hoy Monterrey) pertenecían a dichas dinastías; que conjuntamente con otras diez, formaban las doce casas o tribus de Jacobo o ‘Israel’....*

The articles appeared under “*Historia y Leyenda*”, and were entitled “*Monterrey: Fundación Judía*”. Cantú Frías told many people, and confirmed to me, that he had been contacted by very many local individuals asking why he did not also mention their family name in the list of *Sefarditas* that he included in the third part.<sup>458</sup>

The myth of lost Hebrew tribes in the New World is nothing new. This was believed in the 17th century by various groups of Christian missionaries and millenarians, by Calvinists in particular. It was also promoted by Menasse ben Israel, who authored a book, entitled, “*Esperanza de Israel, obra con suma curiosidad compuesta por Menasseh ben Israel, teólogo y filósofo hebreo. Trata del admirable esparcimiento de los diez tribus y su infalible reduccion con los demas a la patria, con muchos puntos y historias curiosas y declaracion de varias profecias.*” Since many of the individuals who believed in this theory spent time in the New World, some of their influence is possibly still present under the surface, manifesting itself in this modernized version.

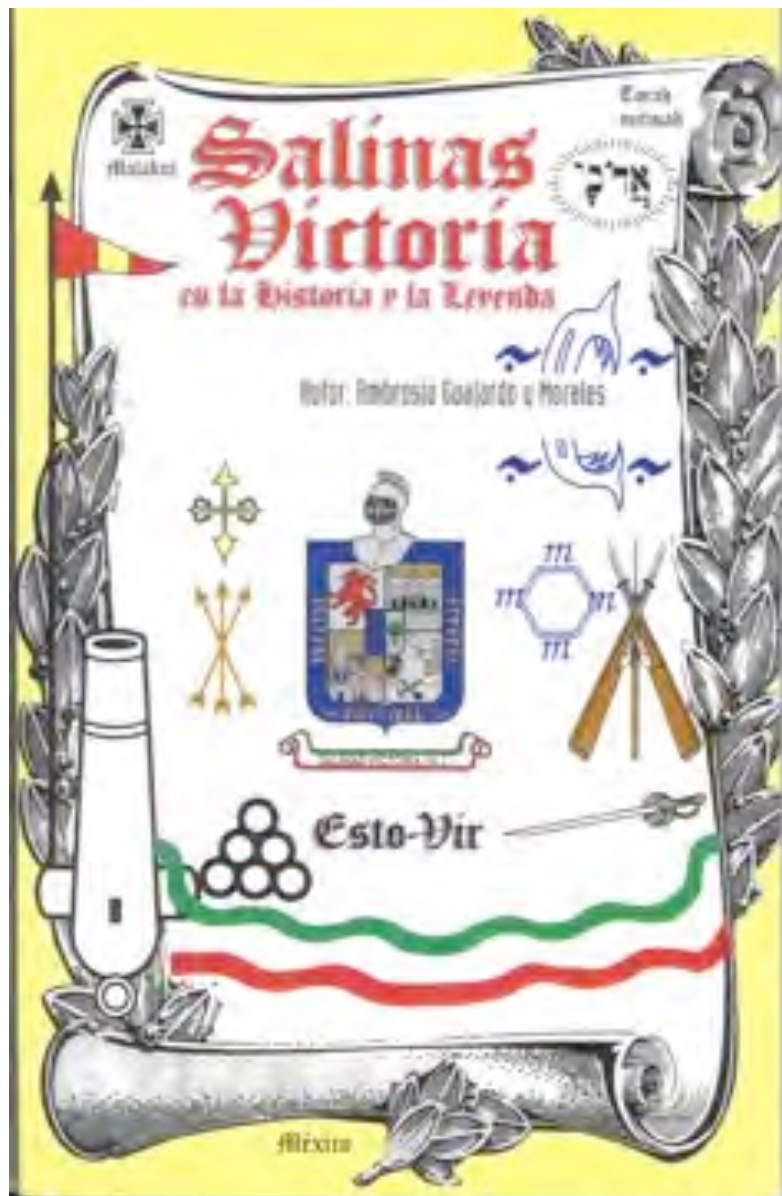
In addition to the myth of the twelve tribes as families brought by Carvajal and the one regarding what was in the old town before it was razed, I was told about a Jewish temple that was planned to be built by Carvajal in the region, and about Jews having brought the *cabrito* with them to sacrifice to their God on altars made of piles of little stones.

All these were not “personal” accounts, but more or less familiar local legends, presented as legitimate history by those who identified

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<sup>458</sup> Cantú Frías also showed me a very large, typed diary of his dreams that he kept in his office, where he works as a lawyer and notary.

themselves as either scholars or bearers of tradition. It turned out, however, that they had learned these legends from books put out by local *cronistas*. Figure 8.3 depicts the cover of the book wherein many of these myths are mentioned. (Note, not only the confusion of symbols, but the subtitle “*en la historia y la leyenda*”.) Monica took me to meet the author (see Chapter 3), who, very well prepared, actually filmed our meeting (camera pointing to himself), as he lectured us on all the details about the temple, the twelve families Carvajal brought with him, the sacrifices, and many other fantasies that made it very clear that he had no clue at all as to what Judaism was really like. (He lived far from the city.) Monica later told me that the author actually believed himself to be of Sephardic origin. But he certainly received nothing by way of oral transmission and knew no customs, nothing. He presented his imagined past as history. After all, he is the only chronicler of his small town. Since he had told Monica that he was of *sefardita* origin, she assumed that he knew what he was talking about.



**Figure 8.3. Salinas Victoria.**

## 8.5 HUERAS Y HUEROS, RUBIOS Y PELIROJOS

Race is an issue, all over Mexico and especially in Nuevo León. I have been told consistently, by countless informants, that this region is distinguished by the non-admixture of local tribespersons and its Spanish residents. Though this alleged racial purity was mostly explained as a consequence of the hostility of the local tribes, this explanation was made with pride and satisfaction. What is more, many informants made a point of telling me that they were the darkest of their family and that all their other siblings were much fairer than they. In other words, even if they appear a bit dark, I should not mistake that to mean that they are of a dark-skinned origin. If they were not dark, they pointed this fact out to me, even as we were sitting together. Indeed, I was more *morenita* than most of my informants.

The fact that many Mexicans and New Mexicans claim origin from “pure blooded” conquistadors, whether or not their ancestors intermarried with the local Native American population, is well known.<sup>459</sup> Mythologizing illustrious ancestry is not a new phenomenon.<sup>460</sup>

Another myth is the tale of Chichimecas (the local indigenous tribe) leaving their babies with the white settlers, or abandoning young ones after failed insurgencies, and these young ones being adopted and integrated into the Hispanic community.<sup>461</sup> But still, he had these storied ready in hand for any stranger. In fact, the Chichimecas were hostile to the newcomers and were not subdued until the 19th century.<sup>462</sup>

Furthermore, when a person wishes to denigrate another one to me, even when it is a scholar wishing to denigrate a colleague, they might

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<sup>459</sup> Arthur L. Campa, *Spanish Folk-Poetry in New Mexico*, Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, New York (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1946) 13; Nancie L. González, *The Spanish-Americans of New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1967) 75; Larissa Adler Lomnitz and Marisol Perez-Lizaur, *A Mexican Elite Family, 1820-1980: Kinship, Class, and Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988) 196. For recent analyses of other attitudes towards racial mixing, *mestizaje*, in Mexico, see Claudio Lomnitz, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) 50-53 and Serge Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 19-22.

<sup>460</sup> Fray Angélico Chávez, *Origins of New Mexico Families in the Spanish Colonial Period* (Santa Fe, NM: The Historical Society of New Mexico, 1954): xv-xvi; Jeffrey Lesser, “Jewish Brazilians or Brazilian Jews: Reflection on Brazil”, *Proceedings of the Conferencia Internacional de Investigación de la Asociación Latinoamericana de Estudios Judaicos*, (Mexico City, November 1995).

<sup>461</sup> Told to me by Don Ernesto Garza Saenz, and others.

<sup>462</sup> However, few individuals mention the possibility of mixing with Tlaxcaltecas, another indigenous tribe that, having been subjugated and abused by the Aztecs, allied itself with the Spanish invading army. They came north with the Spaniards, received protection and land, and were not as removed from the Spaniards as the Chichimecas (although eventually they too gained a reputation for being hostile). I thank Anna Portnoy Berner for pointing this out to me. Interestingly, some of my well informed informants have told me, that in their family, they apply the word *malsin* for individuals who cannot be trusted, such as native household workers who might report on what goes on in the home, or close friends who might be too chatty regarding what should be kept private.

imply that the person in question, though presenting him or herself as pure-bred Spaniard, in fact has indigenous blood running through his or her veins.

Among the original inhabitants of Villa de Santiago, not far from Monterrey, there are many blue-eyed residents. There is a common belief that the origin of this phenomenon is the fact that a French legion came to the region in 1866 and fathered many children there. Of course, this theory is considered malicious by many of the Villa's residents.

## 8.6 A BIBLE

People often make up their own myths to buttress what may be true family origin. Consider the following story.

As previously mentioned (in Section 3.7), my first communications with Marie Theresa Hernández, the folklorist, were over the Internet, and had to do with an antique Bible that she thought might have something to do with crypto-Judaism. She sent me several scanned pages, including some that bore Hebrew words, the opening pages, and a cover page on which appeared the original owner's name in beautiful handwriting, one Mariano Treviño. After examining them, it became clear this was a standard, albeit old, Latin translation of the Bible by Jerome. Since Theresa was attempting to help the family that owned the book sell it, I put her in touch with a librarian who might have interest. It turned out that the Bible belonged to the late Aquiles Sepúlveda Gonzales, who, as it was originally reported to me, bought it from some professor. He showed it to the local rabbi, Moishe Kaiman, who said to him that, "He had never seen anything like it", which led Sepúlveda to think he had an object of significant value. Sepúlveda had informed Hernández that he was from the anusim.<sup>463</sup>

At Hernández's behest, I met Aquila's surviving sister, in whose possession the Bible now was, and then several other of his relatives. The sister said that they knew who they were, that they were Jews, that two religions had come to Mexico from Spain and they were from the "other" religion. But when I asked to record the conversation, she fell silent. She confirmed, in no uncertain terms, that her brother bought the book and a companion Latin-Spanish dictionary from some professor at the Tech de Monterrey. This she repeated many times. (Perhaps to facilitate the sale of the books, Aquiles had told the rabbi that the Bible had come down to him via his family; he had told Theresa that he bought it from the professor.)

Both volumes carried the signature of one Mariano Treviño, but my efforts to track down this Mariano from the 1680's were unsuccessful. The only Treviño I could find in that period whose name came close was a Mariana Treviño. So, the original owner might not have been from El Nuevo Reino de León, or the inscribed name may be inaccurate, or the owner may simply not appear on any available genealogical list.

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<sup>463</sup> See Hernández (1997) 191-193.

I then went to pay a visit to Rabbi Kaiman and asked him if he remembered anything about the man and the book. Indeed he did. He never saw anything like it, he told me. Aquiles had told him it was a family heirloom. Aquiles had been thinking of conversion, but the rabbi did not think him stable, and anyway he “does not do conversions”.

Aquiles told Theresa many stories. As an altar boy, he related, he had gone into the much-discussed tunnels beneath the city, which led from the *Obispado* and all the way to the *Catedral*. He “had been to the tunnels and seen the walled in families” of the women whom the priests had kept.

Aquiles told Theresa and the rabbi that he was of Sephardic origin. On the other hand, he had told another friend, whom I interviewed, that he was an Ashkenazi Jew. Monica thought, based on family photographs, that Aquiles was part-indigenous. (See Section 3.7.) As we saw in the previous section, race is a prevalent issue among families of the Northeast.

## 8.7 MORDECHAI DOMB

As already mentioned, upon my first visit to Monterrey, Monica took me to the historical museum. One of the objects she showed me was displayed in the office of the curator. It was a painting of some bizarre mixture of modern Ashkenazi figures with a historical Sephardic or Colonial scene. (See Figure 8.4.) I was told that some Polish rabbi, named Mordechai Domb, had arrived in the city a number of years ago, along with an assistant who looked a bit indigenous. Domb said that he was a descendant of Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva, but furnished no evidence. He gave this painting as a gift to the museum, as well as a volume of the Mishnah (Warsaw, 1884), a mezuzah (in Ashkenazi script) and phylacteries, and then disappeared after a while. None of these items was on display, but they were all shown to me in private. The story seemed odd. The painting was made by a local street artist commissioned by Domb, and the volume was not very special.

Shortly before my departure in 2004, I got an urgent call from Amado Barrera Canales, who turned out to be a very informative source for this bizarre event. Mr. Barrera was the man who established the museum. As he put it, the need to build a museum became clear, because the northern part of Mexico was of no interest to anyone, and any artifact coming from the north would just make its way to the trash bin when it arrived in the capital. Being the man in the local government in charge of culture, building the museum fell into his hands.

When this “descendant of Carvajal” came to him, while he was still director, and asked to make a public Hanukkah celebration in the museum, Mr. Barrera asked if he had already spoken to the local rabbi. Domb confirmed that he had. But it was a lie. Later, Kaiman called him and gave him a dressing down for having believed the man. This man had lots of money, and was scattering around tips of hundred-dollar bills. Domb requested to build a small synagogue inside the museum, and Barrera agreed, on condition that it be done in the style of the Santa Maria la Blanca from Toledo. Domb agreed and said that he would

supply ancient objects for the synagogue as well. Some of Domb's plans were reported in *El Norte* on December 31, 1997. (See Figure 8.5.)



**Figure 8.4. Ben Carvajal painting.**

At some point, Domb fell down and got injured, but would not allow anyone to treat him. Finally, Domb was taken against his will to the hospital, since the hotel manager saw blood on the sheets. At the Muguerza hospital, when the nurse approached and Domb saw a cross on her, he screamed "Inquisition" and suffered a heart attack. So they sent him by air ambulance to New York. The hotel manager found a huge amount of cash in the hotel safe, all in \$100 bills. They sent it all on, and some time later were contacted from New York and were told that he had died (in Miami) with the name Amado Barrera on his lips, and that he had wanted to keep his promises.

Domb's assistant, one Avraham Baruj (also pictured in the *El Norte* article), returned to Monterrey, asking that Mr. Barrera write a letter to Mr. Benjamin Netanyahu about the entire matter, and arrange to mail a sister painting to Israel. Baruj wanted to write the letter in Hebrew. Mr. Barrera told him he would not sign anything before he knows full well what the letter says, and, besides, that he did not consider himself in position to write to the head of the State of Israel. Accordingly, Barrera approached the honorary consul in Monterrey, Mr. Schwarz. The latter told Barrera that he would check into who Domb really is, and that he would also check what the "Group Gideon" is, to which Domb claimed to belong. (Domb also had said that he was proud to belong to the group, since it was they who had murdered the late Prime Minister Rabin.) Later Mr. Schwarz got back to Barrera, saying,

“Whatever you told me, you dreamt”. Barrera replied, “But I have all the objects with me”.



**Figure 8.5. El Norte on Domb.**

Miguel Schwarz, the honorary consul in question, informed me via his wife, my friend, that he remembers absolutely nothing of this whole exchange.

But even this story has an epilogue. One day, out of the blue, I was contacted by a guy who claimed to be the very assistant who accompanied Mordechai Domb to Mexico. The man’s name had changed from Avraham Baruj to Aaron Cohen. He said that he had been tortured in Tunisia for ten months back in 1992. He still had in his possession the matching painting that was meant to go to Jerusalem, and wanted to sell it for \$250,000. He also made a series of lithographs and posters he



was selling, and offered me a generous cut, if I could find a buyer.<sup>464</sup> In addition, he offered videos of Hanukkah celebrations and interviews Domb had with Monterrey businessmen for astronomical prices. Cohen also asserted that Domb had claimed to have been robbed in Monterrey, and that his money was replaced, but that it was all a ruse, that the money was there all along, and that in this way Domb just doubled his money. None of this was reported to me in Mexico.

## 8.8 CONCLUSION

I respect the people of Monterrey very deeply. The above picture does not come to imply that they are any less intelligent or sober than anyone else I have met elsewhere in the world. On the contrary, overall, they are deep-thinking individuals, who, on their own, managed to turn their city into the most industrious in the country, and built with their own money the very finest university in Mexico. They work hard, live modestly and seek privacy and nobility of the admirable kind, that of leadership in the deep sense of the word. The rich have done much to care for the poor. When I had the opportunity to speak to some of the very wealthy, I would hear not of their dreams for themselves, but of their plans to make improvements for the city; how they would donate funds to make medicine or highways better, and so on. And some make efforts to get involved in ventures in Israel.

Mythology is what preceded science and history. This is what cultures produced before they could write and before they knew their past. In the absence of history, mythology steps in. This is what is happening in the cloud that is shrouding the tormented *cuadrada tragica* of northern Mexico. *La cuadrada tragica todavia tiene su pasada ocultada, en parte quemada llena de tristesa, llena de odio que nunca desaparecio.* This tragic square of land remains with its past obscure, in part burnt (part of the Archivo General de la Nación burned down), part squirreled away or sold, and part just plain inaccessible. It is still filled with sorrow, and with unnecessary hatred that refuses go away. It is no wonder that evil secrets are ascribed to the priests, heirs of the Inquisition. And it is no wonder that the nasty Vito Alessio Robles chose to use a central focal point of local myth as a focus of the bit of anti-Semitism he wrote in the nineteen thirties.

The creators of the local mythology are not the elite, although, as I pointed out before, it is widely believed. It is the common folk, helped, when it comes to the historical myths, by local village chroniclers, who will jump at anything to come up with a publication. The anusim themselves do not, in general adopt the local Sephardic myths, but sometimes, while seeking “published”, “academic” confirmation for what they heard at home or what they suspect when they leave home and learn that what they grew up with is by no means normative Catholicism,

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<sup>464</sup> The oil painting was for sale by a “Rabbi Joseph Sotheby’s” or “Joseph Nissenbaum” at <http://www.geocities.com/tzudaka/sothbeys.html> on the Internet.

can get trapped into this false “scholarship”. Don Ernesto Saenz, Everardo’s relative (see Chapter 3), who told me about the adopting of indigenous babies and the like, expressed great sorrow when he learned after my visit whom I was, since he taught Everardo a lot about their Jewish heritage, and would have spoken to me otherwise had he known where I was coming from.

I listen carefully. I reach for the past history that I know about the Jews of Spain and about their practices, unknown here. I reach for Inquisition records for the customs and beliefs of descendants of New Christians. I try to understand their fears within its context. I try hard not to judge, though I failed at times, especially when it came to the *fantasmas* and the UFO’s and the *brujas*, at least at first, which was a major motive to include this chapter here.

As one of my dearest priests advised me, I try to *poner me en el pelejo* – put myself in the shoes of the people living there, people with whom I was so easily interchanged by my appearance. There but for fortune go they or I, for my ancestors went to the Provence from Spain, and from there to Tlemcen in Algiers and to Safed. Their ancestors went to Portugal, where they were forcibly converted and persecuted.

## 9 “OPEN CLOSED OPEN”: EXPOSURE<sup>465</sup>

### 9.1 INTRODUCTION

In 1999, I interviewed a brother and sister, both in their thirties, at the home of their mother in Mexico City. The two had a strong feeling that they are Jewish, but nothing with which to anchor this sentiment. They informed me that their father's great-grandfather was Aristeo Mercado Salto, governor of the state of Michoacan during the years 1891-1911. Their father, Roberto Mercado Manzanares (portrayed in Figure 9.1), was one of the founders of the *Iglesia de Dios Israelita* and had led religious life at home. As Roberto was in the hospital and presumed to be dying soon, I was not afforded an opportunity to meet with him. Their mother, from the state of Zacatecas, did not wish to be interviewed at that time, but contributed a few bits of information. Only after leaving Mexico, as I was re-reading the articles in *On Jewish Folklore* relating to research in Mexico, did I realize that these two siblings were none other than the children of the “Roberto Manzanares” whom the late Jewish folklorist, Raphael Patai, had interviewed and written about in 1948.<sup>466</sup> In his article – as well as in a telephone conversation with me a few years ago – Patai asserted that the question of the Jewishness of Roberto and of other members of this church requires further study. In this chapter I report on my attempt to do that.

I was fortunate in having been afforded a second opportunity the following year – shortly before Roberto's death – of interviewing his family, and learning the details of his long saga of secret attempts to re-assert his Jewish origins. Before passing away, he revealed to his children for the first time, and in my presence, that he and his wife are Jewish.

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<sup>465</sup> The title of this chapter is borrowed from the book, *Open Closed Open*, by Yehuda Amichai (Harcourt Brace, 2000). Some material in this chapter was presented at the *13th World Congress of Jewish Studies*, Jerusalem, Aug. 2001.

<sup>466</sup> Raphael Patai, *On Jewish Folklore* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983) 447-475; originally appeared in parts in *Menorah Journal* 38 (Winter 1950): 54-67, and *Talpioth* 5 (1952): 54-67; reprinted in *Jewish Folklore & Ethnology Review* 18 (1996): 2-12. Page references below are to the *JFER*. Mercado Manzanares is repeatedly referred to as Manzanares, his matronym, in Patai's article.



**Figure 9.1. Roberto Mercado Manzanares.**

Roberto's story illustrates how crypto-Jews hide and, alternately, reveal their identity, and how easy it is to miss nuances of their self-description.

The following sections describe my first interview with Roberto's family in detail, followed by information gleaned from Patai's articles and from other members of the *Iglesia*.<sup>467</sup> Then I report on my second visit, including what the mother told me about her way of life, culminating in my deathbed interview with Roberto. To round out the picture, I describe Zacatecas, the mother's hometown, and other, related church groups. Finally, I elaborate on the ambiguous nature of crypto-Jewish statements and attempt to unravel Roberto's complex identity issues.

## **9.2 MY FIRST VISIT**

I met Roberto's wife, Elvia, and their children, Joel and Elisabet, in October 1999. They described the *Iglesia*, the Saturday-observing church that Roberto had helped found, as originally having no Christian images or icons, displaying only a hexagram and menorah with olive branches. Joel later told me that Roberto had separated from the church for a number of years, rejoining it when he was already twelve or thirteen years old. At that point, there was already a crucifix in the church and, in Joel's words, it was "more Catholic" than before.

Roberto's daughter, Elisabet, who is younger, reported that when she had been a child, her father obtained a scholarship for her to study

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<sup>467</sup> The *Iglesia de Dios Israelita* was originally called *Iglesia de Dios* and is usually referred to as *Iglesia* in what follows.

at the *Colegio Israelita* – a Jewish school, but in the end, because of the great distance from school, she was told, she did not end up attending.

The following practices observed in their childhood home came up at that meeting:

- Friday evening dinner was special, with candles on the table. They dressed nicely for the Sabbath, and preferred to go about on foot rather than use motorized transportation. The reason given was that it was “better.”
- Pork was never eaten in the home, and was considered very contaminated, very unclean.
- They only ate fish with fins and scales.
- They did not hunt.
- Both brother and sister, individually, reported they had no memory connected with injunctions against mixing meat and dairy, but neither could remember ever consuming such a combination.

Elvia’s family, Herrera, had lived in a small farming village. She told me the following:

- They only ate pork once a year.
- She said there was a special knife for killing animals, which was especially sharpened and tested for sharpness on the fingernails before the animals were slaughtered.
- Blood was collected in a bowl; she did not mention what for, or what was done with the collected blood.
- The suet was sold; organ meat was not eaten.
- She did not attend church.

The information I culled from this interview contained primarily biblical practices. Considering that the family belonged to the *Iglesia*, (though the wife did not attend), such practices did not shed much light vis-à-vis their origin. Elvia’s descriptions regarding the slaughter of animals, however, could reflect rabbinic origins. There was nothing explicit regarding not consuming dairy products with meat. As for not driving, but preferring to walk on Saturdays, this is not the norm at the *Iglesia*, but nor is it a typical crypto-Jewish custom. The virtual, but non-total, avoidance of pork – again in Elvia’s family – was consistent with crypto-Jewish practice in Mexico.

### 9.3 PATAI’S VISIT

On my way back from Mexico, while re-reading my notes from the above meeting, I was able to connect the information I had gleaned from the family with details that I had read in two articles on the “The Jewish Indians of Mexico” by Patai.

“Indian Jews”, for the writers who first reported about them, are Mexicans in whose veins at least some Jewish blood flows.<sup>468</sup> Liebman

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<sup>468</sup> “The Mestizo Jews of Mexico”, *American Jewish Archives* (Nov. 1967): 144-

refers to these people as “neither Indians nor Jews, but something else – Mestizos”, as indeed they are – to the extent that they are of mixed ancestry). Applying Orthodox Jewish standards of proven matrilineal Jewish ancestry or conversion, he viewed them as non-Jews.<sup>469</sup>

Roberto Mercado Manzanares was in his early twenties when – in 1948 – he was interviewed by Patai.<sup>470</sup> Patai had come to Mexico to investigate whether there was any truth to reports regarding communities of “Indians Jews”, as was being published in various Jewish periodicals of that time.<sup>471</sup> Patai investigated the *Iglesia* among other groups.<sup>472</sup> He interviewed Roberto and another leader of the branch in Mexico City, as well as a leader of the branch in Puebla. Patai concluded that the church was Christian, not Jewish, while finding contradictions in Roberto’s statements.

The focus of Patai’s research was the nature of the *Iglesia* and its members: Were they Jewish, as had been asserted by the news articles? He was not interested in the individual interviewees, per se. Indeed, whereas his conclusions were well founded vis-à-vis the church’s system of beliefs, he erred when it came to Roberto, the leader and teacher of the group, who – as we will see – was in fact a crypto-Jew, descended from the anusim.

Patai quoted Roberto, as follows:<sup>473</sup>

About himself Manzanares stated that he was Jewish, and that his parents too were Jews. There were, according to him, many Jews named Manzanares in Uruguay, Guatemala, and Argentina. To my question how his Jewishness and that of the church was expressed, he answered that they considered themselves 90 percent Jews and not more. They were all circumcised; they did not eat pork, they did not work on the Sabbath; they observed the Jewish holidays, New Year, the Day of Atonement, Tabernacles and so on.

Unfortunately, it appears that Patai did not request to interview the young man’s parents to learn more about the nature of their Jewish identity. Nor did he try to find out how holidays were celebrated in his parents’ home, from whom Roberto has asserted that he had inherited his Jewish identity, or how he had come to be involved with the *Iglesia*. Patai asked Roberto about his personal religious identity and that of his church in one breath, assuming the two to be one, contrary to the claims

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<sup>469</sup> Patai (1967) 145.

<sup>470</sup> Patai (1996): 2-5.

<sup>471</sup> Meir Berger, “The ‘Red Jews’ of Mexico”, *Idisher Kurir*, Jan. 18, 1939 (in Yiddish); Benjamin Koralski, “Sabbath-Keeping Mexicans”, *Haaretz*, June 10, 1948 (in Hebrew). See also *Proceedings of Thirty-Fourth Annual Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*, vol. 33 (June 1923) 431-432; Morris Clark, *Indian Jews in Mexico, a brief sketch of the history and the survival of the Mexican Marranos* (Thornton, Ark.: American Friends of the Mexican Indian Jews, Jan. 1944); Martin M. Weitz, *Indian Jews of Mexico* (Syosset, NY, 1965).

<sup>472</sup> Patai also visited a group in Venta Prieta; see Patai (1967) 476-492. This group is not within the scope of this thesis.

<sup>473</sup> Patai (1996): 2.

made to him, and which he reported, that a group of descendants of secret Jews established the church with the intention to attract non-Jews and educate them in a philo-Semitic direction. He expected clear and full answers, which would encompass both the public and private world of his informant, despite the fact that what was at issue was presumably what had been a long-secret religious heritage. He did not, apparently, inquire what – if any – was Roberto’s relationship with the modern Jewish community of Mexico City.

When Roberto described his church’s membership as being 90% Jews, did he mean that 10% of the congregants were non-Jews, that 10% of their ancestry was Indian, or that each and every member of the church is 90% Jew and 10% gentile? Was Roberto himself 90% Jew and 10% Gentile? How did the Gentile aspect manifest itself? Did it have to do with practice or bloodline? When saying, “They did not eat pork, they did not work on the Sabbath; they observed the Jewish holidays, New Year, the Day of Atonement, Tabernacles and so on”, did Roberto speak of his own family, about the church, or about his aspirations vis-à-vis the church? Patai’s very question, “About himself and the church”, in one breath, displayed lack of sensitivity, while the continuation of this informant’s words about his church members made a very clear distinction in this regard. They were educated to be “more Jewish” than the Jews themselves, while he was a Jew, born to Jews.

Patai began his report with Roberto’s words, continued with the statements of another member of the same church branch, Carlos Garcia, proceeded to the brother of the latter, Alberto Garcia from the branch in Puebla, and then moved on to Alberto’s views regarding a group, headed by Laureano Ramirez, who had left the *Iglesia* and identified themselves as Jews descended of the anusim.<sup>474</sup> Patai took pains to quote each statement in the name of the individual informant, but the impression one is left with is that Patai did not delineate any clear distinction among his various informants, and was drawing conclusions from one regarding all, at least vis-à-vis their beliefs.<sup>475</sup>

Based on his conversations, Patai reached the following conclusions about Laureano Ramirez’s group:<sup>476</sup>

It is quite probable that [an] aspiration to higher status was one of the factors, and possibly a most important factor, which motivated some of the Christian Indians to attach themselves to the Indian Jewish community and to deny that they were proselytes.... One must not overlook the possibility that a few remnants of Marrano families of Spanish descent actually survived in Mexico until the nineteenth century, or even into the twentieth....

Unfortunately, Patai did not attempt to investigate the reasons for, or nature of, the differences in ritual and practice between the two *Iglesia* branches he studied, one which Roberto was active in and one in Puebla, nor the differences between those and the mother church in the U.S.A. Patai mentioned a leaflet with the creed of the Mexican *Iglesia* that was

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<sup>474</sup> Patai (1996): 2, 4-5.

<sup>475</sup> Patai (1996): 6.

<sup>476</sup> Patai (1996): 7.

published in 1930 – eighteen years prior to his arrival in Mexico, and noted that most of the holidays Roberto mentioned were not listed therein.<sup>477</sup>

#### 9.4 REREADING PATAI

When I had first read Patai's articles, years before meeting the Mercado family, I had observed two details that intimated crypto-Jewish characteristics, without this having been noted. First was the manner in which, according to Patai's description, Roberto identified himself on their first encounter: "About himself Manzanares stated that he was Jewish, and that his parents too were Jews. There were, according to him, many Jews named Manzanares in Uruguay, Guatemala and Argentina."<sup>478</sup> This introduction displays many characteristics of crypto-Jewish identification. Roberto indicated to Patai that not only did he consider himself Jewish, but that his family of origin was Jewish – both mother and father. He then provided further information about his mother's line, saying that there are other Jews named Manzanares in numerous Latin American countries. Had he been trying to say that he counted himself among the heirs to the Children of Israel, as many Christians perceive themselves, none of this emphasis on Jewish lineage would be relevant.

The second point that stood out as a crypto-Jewish characteristic missed by Patai has to do with Roberto's set of beliefs. Patai described the following exchange:<sup>479</sup>

My efforts to elicit information on two other questions relating to the position of the church were more successful. I inquired into their doctrines about the divinity of Jesus and into their traditions concerning the origin of the membership.

The first question was received with a certain unwillingness to be forthcoming. The informants knew that I was Jewish, a scholar from Jerusalem, and therefore they tried at first to give a Jewish coloration to their replies. Here is the literal translation of the first answer Manzanares gave to my question: "I believe that Jesus was a great philosopher, a great prophet, like the other prophets of Israel. He was not the Messiah, the Messiah has still to come in the future."

It is clear that this statement is representative of crypto-Judaism. There are countless *procesos* where this was asserted by victims, while it certainly represents neither Christian nor normative Jewish creed.<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>477</sup> Patai (1996): 4.

<sup>478</sup> Patai (1996): 2.

<sup>479</sup> Patai (1996): 5.

<sup>480</sup> One example is Diego Díaz Nieto, a Mexican crypto-Jew, who said, "Jesus was a learned man but not a son of God"; see Gitlitz (1996) 138.



This classic statement of crypto-Judaism supported Roberto's family's assertion of secret Jewish origins and begged for further data.

## 9.5 THE IGLESIA

On February 27, 2002, I interviewed an elderly gentleman from the *Iglesia*, who had met Roberto already in 1949, only a year after Patai had. This Jenaro Campos grew up in Acapulco, in the church of the pastor Avelino, and had met Roberto when the latter came to teach in Acapulco. Soon thereafter, Campos moved to Mexico City and joined Roberto's church. He did not meet Roberto's parents, but had met two of his sons and a daughter.

This is how Campos described the *Iglesia*: The main church is in Virginia, U.S.A., and is called the Church of God. In 1962, it changed its name to *Iglesia de Dios Israelita*, while the other branches stayed with the other name (*Iglesia de Dios Universal*).

They take the words of Jesus into account. Only through Jesus do they come into contact with the Jews. They are different from the Protestants, are closer to the Jews, but they come by way of Jesus, and therefore their understanding Judaism is according to Jesus. They believe that Jesus is Messiah, but not a god. He is a creature made by God in a natural way. The church symbols are adopted from Jewish sources.

In the *Iglesia*, they believe in a circumcision of the spirit and heart – not the flesh. Another person, Somoza, was in the church, but became Jewish and was circumcised; they say he is a rabbi.<sup>481</sup> This conflicts with Roberto's statement, as reported by Patai, that all male members of the *Iglesia* were circumcised.

They take bread at mass and pass it around. They use no grape juice: that is Catholic.

They observe food injunctions as in Leviticus: fish with scales, no pork, no reptiles, no blood, no special process for bleeding the animal, no salt is used in preparation of meat, and they do eat meat with dairy.

They celebrate Passover on the 14th of Nissan according to the Hebrew calendar – not like the Catholics. It can be any day of the week, not just Sunday. They also celebrate Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles. There are holidays they cannot celebrate today.

It is known that, in 1933, Eziquiel Campos brought this religion to Mexico from the U.S.A.; [Milton] Grotz was also involved. In 1963, when Grotz "took the holidays from them", Eziquiel Campos<sup>482</sup> was active in

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<sup>481</sup> Somoza has been active in various places but is alone now. He has told Jewish people in whose house he had worked as a technician that he was Jewish. His daughter refused to allow me to interview him, and came instead. She threatened me (and others, I learned later) with a curse if I divulge her prophecies, which she had shared with me. Hers was a borderline hallucinatory cross between Christian and pagan end-of-days cults. Her father was also connected to a group in Vera Cruz, which is not part of this study.

<sup>482</sup> According to Jenaro (see below), they are not relatives.

reinstating them, as was Roberto, who helped. The brothers Garcia caused many divisions.

Roberto sinned by laying his eyes on another woman. Because of this, he was not very important in the church after his divorce. While he was still strong, he was very helpful to the church. He held government positions, was secretary of land reform. He gave Jews permission to come in through the port of Vera Cruz.

When I asked if he thinks Roberto might have been a Jew himself he seemed surprised and answered “*era Mexicano*”, referring to his native appearance.

## 9.6 MY SECOND VISIT

When I returned to Mexico in 2000, I learned that Patai’s informant, Roberto, father of the family I had interviewed, was still alive, contrary to the expectations of his doctors, and despite having been very ill for many years. I stayed with his wife, Elvia Herrera Guerrero, and daughter, Elisabet, for a weekend, during which time I tried to observe whether there might be any relevant details that did not come up in the first, filmed interview, and whether Elvia might have information she had not shared with her children or with me. His son, Joel, and Joel’s family also joined us for part of the Sabbath.

Elisabet picked me up from the airport on Thursday, and told me that her father had suffered a severe stroke from which no one expected him to recover some eleven years prior. She believed her father was in need of some kind of closure, and hoped our encounter, which she would arrange, might help him attain it.

I asked if her father might have left any letters that could shed light on his history. She asked her brother who began to cry and said their father only had three years of formal education. He had learned everything on his own. He did not like to write because of his poor penmanship. Elisabet kept consoling him, telling him, *no llores, no llores* (don’t cry). He worked in the offices of a lawyer who appreciated his talents and signed his documents. The father had told Elisabet in her childhood alternately that he was a lawyer or an engineer. She wrote a lot of his correspondence for him.

On Friday we got to her home, in the Linda Vista *barrio*, very late, and quickly prepared for the Sabbath. Over dinner, I mentioned Patai’s article, wherein his interview with her father is reported. They had never seen it, so I took it out and began to read to them what Patai had written. Elisabet became visibly agitated upon hearing that her father had told a stranger (*viz.* Patai) that he was a Jew and a son of Jews. She said to me that she had been asking her father for years this very question and had been met with nothing more than silence. Her father would just fix his eyes on her, offering no reply, or deliberately and obviously distract her from the topic.

When I went on and read Roberto’s words, where he stated that he believed that Jesus was a prophet and philosopher, but not Son of God nor Messiah, and that the messiah was yet to come, I was met with a reaction of surprise and rage, on the part of Elisabet, at her father, for

never having said these things to her. Joel did not display the same reaction upon hearing the same later, for reasons we will see.

## 9.7 ELVIA'S STORY

Elvia, who was Roberto's second wife, began to cry at this point, saying that her husband had asked her to make sure he would be buried in a particular direction, but she could not remember which. She wanted me to tell her which direction he meant. Elisabet witnessed all this, not comprehending that, by asking me these things, her mother was actually acknowledging that Roberto was a Jew, and that she was aware this was behind his burial requests. Burial in white shrouds, with earth, and with feet facing east, are known Jewish customs from Inquisition trials in Mexico.<sup>483</sup>

Regarding her own family, she told me that in Zacatecas the corpse was washed at home in water and vinegar.<sup>484</sup> Burial was done quickly, after dawn if the person passed away at night. She recalled that in her family the body was wrapped in a sheet, *sábana*. While burial within twenty-four hours is the law in Mexico, the Jewish law is more stringent, and, it seems, that in Elvia's village the adherence was to the more stringent laws of Jewish burial. See Section 4.2.

The woman wanted to know if she was permitted, additionally, to dress Roberto in the suit she had set aside for that purpose. She became more and more agitated as we continued discussing these matters, and begged me for more and more details. She asked if she may light candles around the body, and how many would be customary. (She recalled four candles from childhood.)

During our first interview, she had described the deceased as dressed in a suit, with white bandaging supporting the head (keeping the mouth closed – this was standard practice in rural Mexico and elsewhere). She now mentioned nine days of mourning – a *novenario*, but in the first interview she had said mourning lasted seven days. It is not clear whether she contradicted herself, forgot the details, confused between customs of her home and those of the *Iglesia*, or was just calling the seven days of mourning a *novenario*, as anusim sometimes do.<sup>485</sup>

It would appear that Roberto's wife was not really conscious of a Jewish identity. She described her family as Catholic, but mentioned customs that she said set them apart from the other villagers, including the slaughter of animals and not mixing meat and milk. She did not go to the *Iglesia*; she had had an opportunity to check it out, and did not like it, she said. She never returned.

We discussed various family customs she remembered from her childhood in rural Zacatecas. Members of her family were tall and fair,

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<sup>483</sup> Pinhas Bibelnik, "The Religion of the Crypto-Jews in Seventeenth-Century Mexico", *Pe'amim* 76 (1998): 90.

<sup>484</sup> Cf. Bibelnik (1998) n. 140.

<sup>485</sup> During the Colonial period some anusim did call the seven days of mourning a *novenario* – the Catholic term indicated nine days of mourning; cf. Bibelnik (1998) 91.

she said, ranging from redhead to blond, with blue eyes. They did not look like they were from the region. There was no talk about coming from Spain, or whence the family originates. They lived comfortably, with servants, had various animals on their farm, including pigs, but she never ate any. She was the youngest in her family, and attributed her uncertainties to that. Several of her brothers and cousins were called *Judíos*, because they never entered a church. At home they only prayed to *Dios*; Jesus was not mentioned in the prayers.

Elvia informed me that Roberto had visited synagogues and did secret things, but she had never discussed these matters with the children. He had said to her that if things worked out, she too would come with him to the synagogue.

Once, around the time her first son, Joel, was born, Roberto told her that in order to convert to Judaism one must shave all the hair from the body,<sup>486</sup> and her reaction was that she would never do such a thing, under no circumstances. She noted that she wanted to be Jewish, except for the shaving. She knew she would not return to Catholicism. Both Roberto and Joel were circumcised. Later, Joel – who was unaware of this communication that had transpired between his parents – told me that when he was around 13 years old his father said the same to him, and he replied that hair grows back, and it would not be a big deal for him. Joel thought his father might have been testing him.

Chicken and pigs were beheaded. The norm in the region for pork is a knife to the heart of the animal, and, for chicken, a twist of the neck. Pork was eaten only once a year at the home of the Herreras, and then it was pork rinds. Although lamb meat is also popular in Zacatecas, pork is very common, as are all its products. The city streets of Zacatecas are filled with carts selling pork rinds; *gorditos*, the thick tortillas made with *manteca* – lard – are also very common.

On Christmas, while all the neighbors were eating the traditional *tamales* – corn-husks filled with pork – at her home they ate *buñuelos*, a sweet fried dough, sometime a flour tortilla, also common for the season, but it was cooked in vegetable fat at her home.<sup>487</sup> When eating out, they always inquired what the ingredients of food offered them were; if it was cooked in lard, they did not touch it, *jamás*<sup>488</sup> – and it never entered the house.

She described the preparation of meat as follows: There was a special knife, which was sharpened in advance of slaughter. It was checked on the thumbnail for sharpness and absence of nicks. The animal was then hung, and the blood from it was collected in a bowl and then poured into a pit, and covered using a hoe.<sup>489</sup> The animal was then

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<sup>486</sup> This is required by *Tur*, Y. D. 268, but is not common practice today. It was customary for returning apostates (*Bayit Hadash*). I do not know where Roberto got his information.

<sup>487</sup> Many, though not all, recipes for this food call for lard. See, for example, the ingredient for the following recipe, which is provided as a classic on the website, *Mexico Desconocido*: *½ kilo de harina cernida, 125 gramos de manteca de cerdo, ½ cucharadita de anís disuelto en 1 taza de agua, aceite de maíz para freír, 500 gramos de requesón. Para la miel: 1 litro de agua, ½ kilo de piloncillo, 1 raja de canela. Para 8 a 10 personas.* (An Internet search retrieved 675 recipes that include lard.)

<sup>488</sup> *Jamás*, a term of Arabic origin, is an emphatic *never* in Spanish.

<sup>489</sup> Covering blood is biblical; see Section 4.4.5.

skinned, and the meat, in its entirety, was washed with laundry soap in a lot of water drawn from the well. Then a large quantity of coarse salt was sprinkled over the carcass. She demonstrated this by rubbing her hands over the imaginary carcass, in a rapid, back-and-forth motion. After a while the meat was thoroughly washed again, butchered and placed in a basin with more coarse salt till it was time to cook it. Suet was sold, and interior organs were not eaten.

When I inquired about the reason for separation of meat and milk, she replied that milk is for breakfast and supper, while meat is for lunch only. The norm in Mexico is to combine meat and dairy products in traditional dishes, but among the anusim this is one of the two most common ways in which the custom was explained to family members.<sup>490</sup>

The matter of her daughter's attending a Jewish school was now explained. Elisabet had earned a scholarship with which she was entitled to attend *any* school in Mexico City. The parents turned to the Jewish school in order to bring the child closer to Judaism, and were rejected. She described how she and her husband would go to the school offices time and time again, and be turned away on various pretexts, sent here, sent there, told the school could not accept the scholarship, till they gave up. She said they felt humiliated and deeply hurt, and, in the end, they sent Elisabet to another school, the *Colegio Francisco Hidalgo*, which at least did not punish children who did not attend mass. This is also where Joel, her older brother, was schooled. Elisabet never had "to stand in any line." Her father was able to arrange anything for anyone; only Judaism was so difficult.

At a later date, I interviewed Roberto's daughter from his first marriage. She told me how she remembered traveling with her father from church to church, sleeping at night on church benches, all for the sake of the *Iglesia*. This woman and her family are deeply committed to the *Iglesia*, as are her children and children-in-law. She told me that she had studied at the Jewish school, the *Colegio Israelita*. After two years, she stopped attending and, just as in the later case with her half sister with whom she is not in touch, was also told that this was because of difficulties with transportation, although the family had not moved. She could offer no reason at all to the fact that she had attended that school.

## 9.8 DEATHBED CONFESSION

After Sabbath at the home of the Elvia, Roberto's wife, and their daughter Elisabet, I went with Elisabet to see her father, who was staying in a separate apartment nearby with a caretaker. (The relationship between her parents had been strained for a number of years.) I introduced myself to Roberto and mentioned that I had read Patai's articles. He winced. I asked if he was quoted correctly, that he and his father were Jews. Because of a tracheotomy tube, Roberto was unable to speak and communicated by gesture. He looked straight into my eyes

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<sup>490</sup> The other most common reason is that mixing meat and dairy is bad for the stomach. Both these explanations actually can be related to rabbinic sources.

and, with very strong emphasis, nodded his head in the affirmative. I continued and asked if indeed he believes that Jesus is neither the Son of God nor the Messiah, and again he responded strongly in the affirmative. I then asked if his second wife was Jewish. Again he confirmed. I told him that I was sorry for all his years of solitude, and he cried for a long time.

Elisabet, who was deeply shaken from this experience, returned to her mother after midnight and recounted what had transpired. Elvia replied: "*Ya sabia*" – "I've known." When I later asked if Elvia was surprised to hear that her husband was Jewish, she said immediately that she was not, that he had always said he was part of the Jewish people, always identified with them, and kept trying to return. He always said that Judaism was the only true religion.

It is difficult for me to interpret Elvia's *ya sabia*: How long had she known? On a later occasion, she expressed a sentiment of having been betrayed by Roberto's not telling her clearly what the family history was. On the other hand, her reaction to my quoting Roberto about his Judaism, asking about the burial instructions he had given her, would imply that she was aware. It seems to me that, most likely, she understood, having connected the bits of information over time, but apparently had only fully comprehended the situation during the time of my involvement, not from earlier years. But, since hiding and denial are part of the entire culture, the full meaning of her admission may never become clear.

Elvia followed up by visiting her husband, then going out to buy cotton (she "could not find" linen) and preparing burial clothes for him, including a gown, a belt, and a small bag for earth from Israel, which I had brought with me at their request, to be buried with him. None of these details had previously been described by her to me, when she spoke of the *sabana*, the sheet; but she seemed to be acting from memory, and displayed satisfaction at having gotten them ready.<sup>491</sup> However, Roberto's request to be moved back home, which I was promised would be complied with, never took place.

Elisabet talked more about her memories now. She never knew even to think of the possibility that they were of Jewish extraction. They were always different, but she says she does not always know how to answer my questions, since everything was so subtle. She never thought of things this way.

She remembers her father wanted to decorate the church with a Jewish Star and a menorah, and the Ten Commandments. In other churches there were other symbols, paintings of fruit, grapes around the Tablets of the Law, but he objected to all these. He only allowed the tablets and a Jewish star formed from stones.

She says the prayer book they use is specific to their church, and that it was their father who introduced the Israeli national anthem in Hebrew and Spanish. He taught it to his children. Psalm 100,<sup>492</sup> directed to God himself, was preferred. Roberto always told his children that there is only one God. He kept repeating this, so they started asking what about that guy, Jesus. All prayers are directed to God, says Joel.

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<sup>491</sup> Roberto passed away two days after I left.

<sup>492</sup> E.g. verse 3: "Know ye that the Lord is God; He that hath made us, and we are his people, and the flock of His pasture."

Only in the end, because of the regulations of the church, they had to mention Jesus in church.

Joel said there were two currents in the church: The one his father and Campos led, on the one hand, and the others who wished to change, since they came from other evangelical churches, such as the Pentecostal, and they became the majority. In the end, their father lost everything. They do not think it has to do with the retirement of Campos.

In 1984, Joel contacted Rabbi Ritner, writing to him and expressing his desire “with all his heart” to convert. Ritner called him back and invited him to come to his synagogue “Beth El” for a special circle with a private *kiddush*. He told him that if after a few months he wanted to convert, he would have to go to NY. He invited him to speak to the cantor, so that he would give him information about Judaism, and Joel understood from the cantor it would require much more time. He never felt rejected at the synagogue; he was always comfortable, but was ready for uneasy situations, were they to arise, since he had been the only non-Catholic in his school. (He had not attended mass at school, and was left alone.)

Roberto did not approve of his son’s relationship with Rabbi Ritner. He said that it could be exceedingly difficult for him, and that if he stayed at the *Iglesia*, he has the wherewithal to be a leader. Joel replied that he would cause more division, since he would again be pulling toward more Judaism. In fact, a childhood friend of his is leading the church now.

Roberto, Joel recounted, was from Morelia, Michoacan. The family, on both sides, owned haciendas, and, as mentioned above, their great grandfather had been governor of the state of Michoacán. Joel also remembered his father telling him that Judaism is the ideal, but if you cannot attain it, you do what you can by way of crossbreeding, by way of the *Iglesia*.

Joel married a Catholic woman from Zacatecas. They decided to respect one another’s beliefs.<sup>493</sup> They married in 1989, and, in 1991, his wife expressed interest in converting to Judaism. He took her to Beth El and she liked it. Then the first child was born and it became necessary to have a family “plan.” When a son was born, he was circumcised for the purpose of conversion. He had the rabbi’s permission to mention that he was preparing with him for conversion, if anyone inquired. All this on his own, without anyone’s encouragement or support.

Now, at Elisabet’s request, I took her and her son to a rabbi, who wrote her a letter of support. Then I contacted people who accepted her son into a Yeshiva school. I remember the excitement on her part, and even more so, on the part of her twelve-year-old son, who was extremely eager to join Judaism, learn, and develop. He was saying *kiddush* at home and following everything he had known very eagerly. They were being helped along for a while by a family of Sephardic friends Elisabet had. That evening there were many tears and many embraces. Their road back to normative Judaism seemed paved now.

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<sup>493</sup> The wife, too, has some memories of crypto-Jewish customs, but was not very forthcoming. She did say that their family always gathered on Friday nights, and candles were lit.

Soon after, while in the car together, Elvia urged Elisabet to tell me that she knew I was sent to them to bring them consolation and illuminate their path, and that she thanked me. But such is not the happy ending of the Roberto Mercado saga.

I offered to go with Elisabet to Zacatecas, to find out more about the family of her mother. She was very excited, and I made the arrangements to go there upon my return if a few weeks. When I did return, Elisabet was agitated, and explained that she could not come with me, that her mother refused to let her go, that she had to help her attend the store, since it was Christmas, the best season of the year. Elisabet has an independent job – I never before heard of her working in the store. I was not happy with the bind I was in, and explained this to her, but there was no option, she said, and expected me to understand. Her brother (who was unemployed at the time, but also has a separate job in another part of town, just like his sister) had to go with his wife and children. There was no choice. It seems that while Elvia was ready to share family memories with me while she lived in Mexico City, a visit full of questions to her family was more than she had bargained for. This, lamentably, I did not understand in time.

I did, however, follow my itinerary to Zacatecas. I was at a park there, when I suddenly found myself embraced by Joel's children who arrived with their mother and uncle, and were excited and surprised to see me. We played, I spoke a bit with their mother, and although we did exchange addresses, it was clear the adults were apprehensive of a visit, and I made none.

Although a few communications continued after this between Joel and myself, Elisabet fell silent. Her son did not go to the Jewish school, and I cannot know where he is nor how he is doing.

In a very unusual meeting with an elderly Jew who was very private but knew Roberto for many years, he confirmed to me that Roberto was of Jewish origin and acted from this motivation. This man succeeded – at great cost – in returning to Judaism on his own, elsewhere.

While in Zacatecas, I learned about more aspects of the region from which Elvia had come, which I describe next.

## 9.9 ZACATECAS

Zacatecas is a place unto itself, situated at the southwest corner of El Nuevo de León, and shares very little with modern Nuevo León. The quaint state capital is almost entirely crossable by foot. The colonial architecture is charming. During the holidays, the town is filled with *huicholes* who come to sell their beaded handicrafts; there are musicians on the streets; there are hand-made masks in the shops, used originally for ritual purposes. The smell of *gorditas* – thick tortillas cooked in lard, fill the air. Carts overstocked with bags of pork-rinds are all around. “El Norte” does not sell at the local newsstands, but nearly everyone reads “Mi Pueblo”.

The *Guerra Christera* has left its scars on the psyche of the place, and people are still talking about the victims of that war among their



families with great emotion. The people are still divided into Masons, who are very political and secular, and Catholics. The indigenous tribes maintain a strong and independent lifestyle.

At one point, I was deeply impressed with the artistry of a *huichole* from whom I purchased some bead art, and suggested he visit the hotel where I stayed so he could show his wares to the shop owner there, and, maybe have a regular venue to market his beautiful art. We arranged the time and place, but he never showed up. When I ran into hi again, I asked him why, and he replied that he was not like “us”, and when the season was over, he wanted to return to his tribe and till the land with them.

When I said I was a folklorist, I was immediately taken to see indigenous dances and festivals. When I said I was a historian or anthropologist, I was sent to see the ancient tribal excavations.

The Inquisition was mentioned by some. I was shown a building described as the Inquisition’s local offices for visitations being turned into a theater. Others denied this and said that no Inquisitor ever came to the place.

One of my first contacts, a person involved with archeology, pointed out that there is a veterinarian in town who has a name reminiscent of mine. The man met me with great interest, and we were surprised to discover family resemblance in one another. We also found many Jewish customs in his paternal tradition, including traces of prayers. He told me of people working in slaughterhouses who had a special knife, which they sharpened and tested on the palm of their hand and on a fingernail, before slitting the animals’ throat. He was extremely excited and moved to discover all this, and sent me to a friend of his in Monterrey to have my blood taken so we can see if we are actually relatives. I did, but he never kept his half of the bargain.

The only scholar who was eager to share information with me about the history of the region had immigrated to Zacatecas from Europe. Thomas Hillercus, who specializes in the indigenous tribes, suggested to me that the Jesuits, who had come to settle the region and educate the local tribes, actually brought with them Jewish rituals, which they introduced in Zacatecas.

I met another person from a family that originated in Zacatecas, who now lives in Mexico City. This informant first started thinking about Jewish traditions in her home when she was very young, six or seven years old. Her main reasons were that the family was very private; she was told they were Mexican, but different. She was getting contradictory answers from her two grandmothers as to the family origins. Her paternal grandmother told her that “yes,” they were of Jewish origins, “but this was a long time ago, now we are very Catholic”. On the other hand, her maternal grandma would reply that “no,” they had no Jewish origins. Yet her side of the family was also circumcised, did not eat pork and maintained other customs that indicated the opposite.

A relative married an Italian. When they had a baby boy and circumcision was brought up, the Italian said that only Jews do that. Though the relative was very upset, the baby was not circumcised. Her grandmother was in a state of shock, like something was broken. Her mother said that not circumcising is like not baptizing your child. It is not done. The relative tries to rationalize, but is still very upset.

They have a small prayer room. Both her grandparents and her great grandparents also had one. It looks like a closet, but when opened,

it has room for one or two persons. She remembers the rooms as austere – without images, but thinks there was a crucifix.

They always lived in Jewish neighborhoods, where she was allowed to eat at the homes of her Jewish friends, but not at those of non-Jews. She found that the food in her home was similar to that of her Jewish friends' homes. They ate only corn tortillas during Passover, no bread or cake. (Their tortillas were made of maize all year round, too.) Every Friday, they have a dinner together. It was called "*viernes culinario*". Candles were usually lit by the stairway, but not always.

They did not eat *morcilla* (blood sausage), *gusanos de maguey* (worms), or any other "bug" commonly eaten in Mexico. Pork was also absolutely taboo. Even today, one family member who lives in the U.S.A. feels guilty whenever consuming pork. There are no family recipes at her home that include both dairy and meat ingredients. They were very strict about not having lard. Pork was dirty, had lots of disease that could get in your blood, and you'll die on the spot. All pork has white pearly things that give trichinosis. They do not eat shellfish. The explanation is that they are all "allergic" to all seafood, and only some fish can be eaten without fear of food poisoning.

There are very strict rules in my informant's family about eating on separate china during the day. It is forbidden to use breakfast dishes for any other meal. Kitchen pots and utensils are also kept separate for different meals. She did see a plate of cheese served with meat, but did not see her grandmother eating it. Her grandparents never eat outside the home, at restaurants or social events. They never bring, nor receive, gifts of food from others, except for one family friend whom they "knew for a fact" is clean.

Cream is very taboo. Grandma says: "I don't know why people think cream is so good. It is heavy, fat sauces are bad, and mask the flavor." Meat was cooked with tomatoes and onions, and often broiled. Removing all fat from the meat was a big issue, as was the cleanliness of the kitchen. They always had more than one refrigerator; in some places where they had lived one was reserved for meat. Her grandmother asked her to get an official list of the kosher foods supervised by the Jewish community in Mexico. Her explanation was: "I have always tried to give your grandfather clean food (*comida limpia*), and now I will be able to do it better."

## 9.10 OTHER GROUPS

Patai also turned to his two primary contacts, Baltazar Laureano Ramirez<sup>494</sup> and Joel Salazar, leaders of the communities of "Indian Jews" in Mexico City and in Venta Prieta, respectively, asking them about other "Indian Jews" throughout Mexico. Both leaders provided him with lists of families that included their respective communities, as well as other communities or families around Mexico.<sup>495</sup>

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<sup>494</sup> "Ramirez" in Patai's articles.

<sup>495</sup> Patai (1996): 8-9.

Laureano Ramirez was the informant Patai relied on, for the most part, in his assessment of the total number of such Indian Jews. This individual was involved with the *Iglesia*, with the Venta Prieta group, and eventually with his own group in Vallejo. He left the other places on bad terms, and his own community was split up between his sons from two unions. He had many interactions with the normative Jewish community, collected money, and – at least according to his son – was helping Jews gain citizenship in his capacity as a lawyer.

Laureano Ramirez informed Patai of the formative meeting in Saltillo in 1925, and of the separation of his core group of crypto-Jews from the *Iglesia* some years later. Whatever exaggerations and inaccuracies we might ascribe to this man of many ambitions, his statement about “inviting the community to circumcise” is, to some extent, borne out by the complaints Patai quoted from the mouth of Alberto Garcia, who said the Laureano Ramirez group was circumcised, unlike the members of the *Iglesia*, and added that he ordered the group members to circumcise.<sup>496</sup> It is also the case that Campos, my informant, spoke of Mercado and Somoza as exceptions for being circumcised, so it is possible that Patai was not aware that Roberto was telling him that the inside group of crypto-Jews was circumcised – not the entire community.

In addition to Mercado, Somoza was also mentioned, so I went looking for him as well. All I was able to do was to get to his daughter who proclaimed herself prophet, and denied all access to her father. She warned me that if I reported on what she told me, I would be damned, and told me about the end of days and how my soul would be saved only if I obeyed her. She managed to frighten a good number of people and also managed to prevent me from speaking to an important potential informant.

Patai also described how individuals in the group identified themselves:<sup>497</sup>

My interlocutor from the Quiroz family admitted that formerly he had been neither Jewish nor Catholic. Both parents of the other five informants had been, according to their testimony, Jewish. The wives of the seven informants also were asserted to be of Jewish descent, except for Quiroz’s wife.”

In this statement there appears to be a mixture of concepts: On its face, Quiroz’ statement regarding his parents has nothing to do with descent. He indicated to Patai that his parents had not been practicing Judaism or Catholicism. The other five, who indicated that their parents were Jewish probably meant that these parents, in addition to being of Jewish descent, also kept some manner of secret Jewish practice, but the statement was made again vis-à-vis their religious practice. The last quoted sentence is specifically answering the question of descent. The added indication that Quiroz’ wife was an indigenous woman who had

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<sup>496</sup> Patai (1996): 5.

<sup>497</sup> Patai (1996): 8.

converted<sup>498</sup> may indicate that this was in contradistinction with the other members mentioned above.

Among my informants, the identification of the religion of parents as Catholic is very common for those who were told they are Jewish and who also kept secret Jewish rituals. The meaning of such a statement is simply that they were baptized as Catholics, and, sometimes, that they attend a Catholic church. The same is true of other denominations. It is therefore extremely important to try and unravel the issue of outward identity, inward identity and descent.

Laureano Ramirez and Salazar also provided family names for some of the Indian Jewish families. Included were Treviño, Montemayor,<sup>499</sup> and Luna from the state of Nuevo León. The wife of Laureano Ramirez also carried the surname Luna. Benjamin Laureano Luna, son of Laureano Ramirez and Luna, told me that his mother was from Monterrey. He also claimed that her ancestors were among those who accompanied Carvajal when he arrived and that Carvajal founded the city of Monterrey.<sup>500</sup>

It is interesting to note that the two families, Treviño and Montemayor, are well-known local families in Monterrey, and Diego de Montemayor was the founder of the city in one of its incarnations. Although the name Luna is mentioned by del Hoyo<sup>501</sup> as someone who was fighting with Carvajal, Luna is not a common or long-established surname in the region.<sup>502</sup> It is possible that the names from Nuevo León came to Laureano Ramirez by way of news articles about the region that appeared nationwide in the 1930's and "exposed the Jews" of Monterrey.<sup>503</sup>

As it turns out, there is some interesting information regarding the Treviño and Montemayor families. Both well-known Nuevo León families practiced endogamy heavily. Furthermore, both are considered locally to be of the first *Sefarditas*, as they have become known in that region as of the early 1970's. I have many informants from these families with clear oral traditions of being Jews, many of whom still keep many vestiges of Jewish laws and customs. These informants take pride in not being at all "Indian" in their appearance.<sup>504</sup>

As for the surname Luna, I ended up with unfortunate circumstances surrounding the passing of the wife of Mr. Laureano Luna, the son, whose wife he wished to bury in a Jewish cemetery and

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<sup>498</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>499</sup> See Chapter 3 for more about these two families.

<sup>500</sup> Telephone conversation, September 2003. Carvajal did not establish the city of Monterrey; it was Montemayor.

<sup>501</sup> Del Hoyo (1972) 68.

<sup>502</sup> The city of Monterrey was originally named Santa Lucia. My sources vis-à-vis the surnames today include Miguel Angel Muñoz Borrego, archivist of the State of Coahuila, Ricardo Cerda Flores, geneticist at Monterrey's IMMS, who mapped the population in the region by last names, and several informants, including Monica Montemayor Treviño, who has researched her genealogy and the history of her family and its region extensively. See more about Monica in Chapter 3.

<sup>503</sup> These are the works of Vito Alessio Robles that were discussed in Chapter 7.

<sup>504</sup> There are government studies on the endogamy of these families; see Chapter 3. In fact, the racial element of Patai's bias is not fully reflected in the published research. Informants, who were children in Venta Prieta when Patai was there, reported to me that he measured their jaws as part of his investigation.

was denied the right to do so in all Jewish cemeteries in the Capital. Although the wife died of cancer, and preparations could and should have been made in advance, I was appalled, and tried to rectify matters. The wife, a Luna herself, was said originally to have been from Venta Prieta. I phone my contacts there, and was told in no uncertain terms that she was not from there at all. After tiring efforts to find some means of confirming in some way a Jewish origin, we ended up, alas, with nothing more than a fabricated document.

## 9.11 AMBIGUITIES

Anusim, in my experience, often test people with whom they come in contact to determine if the person is friend or foe. They expect an investigator to “read between the lines,” understand hints and not push. If enough trust is built up, a deep and continuous exchange may follow, though its duration depends on many other factors. Misunderstandings, family pressure and fear are the most dominant among those.

The most knowledgeable informants are the elders. Especially among the anusim, whose only source of information regarding their heritage are elders, and whose lines of transmission have begun to break down by the middle of the twentieth century. These elders are very private and sensitive. They will back down from what they said and stop cooperating as soon as they perceive any danger of being misunderstood or exposed. This is inherent to the transmission process. Furthermore, the preservers of the oral traditions are most often women, who are more conservative than the men, and do not tend to participate in modern attempts at organizations into communities, such as those investigated by Patai. Thus, these elder women – the most valuable of informants – escaped the attention of most investigators.

Roberto’s testimony that his parents were Jews, and his further emphasis on the surname of his mother, is, as pointed out before, a classical crypto-Jewish introduction, as would be done among members of their own group. This was overlooked by Patai.

Roberto also asserted that, in the *Iglesia*, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were celebrated. Patai did not provide a description as to the manner in which they were. The Jewish New Year was virtually unknown among anusim in this region and most others, while Yom Kippur has always been at the very core of crypto-Jewish religious life.

On the other hand we are aware of his communications with normative Jews and his visits to synagogues, as well as his considerations to convert to Judaism.

Roberto let me know that he had visited synagogues on various occasions, including on Rosh Hashanah. A member of the Jewish community, whose late father had been in contact with individuals who identified themselves as descendants of the forced converts, recalled that on one Rosh Hashanah in his childhood he had been sent out of the synagogue by his father to escort a man inside. He could not remember the person’s name, but he fits the general description of Roberto.

The *Iglesia* does not celebrate Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur nowadays. Elders from this community, whom I met as they came to

visit the moribund Roberto, knew nothing of such festivals and remembered nothing other than the Feast of Tabernacles, celebrated in their church during the autumn season. The other old-time member of the church who knew Roberto since 1949 did not know of such holidays either. This was also the case with Roberto's daughter from his first marriage. Joel, his son from the second marriage, remembers asking Roberto, while alone with him in church, why they did not celebrate the Jewish High Holidays, but only the three major festivals, and his father answering him that, because of the destruction of the Temple, it was not possible to observe them. He also reported that his father tried to "do what he could," and had in his possession a Jewish calendar, which helped him with the correct dates. Roberto had answered his daughter's identical question, years later, saying that the High Holidays are not (*sic!*) mentioned in the Torah.

Such contradictions, and even more extreme ones, are not atypical of crypto-Jewish education.<sup>505</sup>

## 9.12 CONCLUSION

Patai did not discount the possibility that among the members of the *Iglesia* there were descendants of anusim.<sup>506</sup> There is no question as to the public or outward identity of Roberto: he was a Christian who supported Israel and the Jewish people. But his inner identity – not really studied by Patai – was that of a secret Jew who was struggling to change and reorganize in various manners, and "come out of the closet."

There is actually an earlier model for emerging crypto-Jewish communities, from which one may draw a parallel. Patai had independent confirmation as to the presence of descendants of anusim in the late nineteenth century. According to Laureano Ramirez, Papa Rivas, who was active near the end of the nineteenth century, participated, though in absentia, due to illness, in the establishment of a mixed church of Christians and secret Jews. The aim of that church was to reduce anti-Semitism, creating a deliberate mixture, for the purpose of fighting the anti-Semitism of the Catholic Church.<sup>507</sup> Starting in 1889, Rivas had published a periodical, variously called *El Sabado Secreto*, *La Luz del Sabado*, and other names.<sup>508</sup> Patai concluded, "that in those

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<sup>505</sup> See Chapter 5.

<sup>506</sup> Patai (1996): 7, 12.

<sup>507</sup> Seymour Liebman says in *The Jews in New Spain* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1970) that it was easier to be caught as Lutheran and that some Jews took this guise. Protestant churches were brought by anusim, like Everardo Treviño's father (see Chapter 3) and Tomas Atencio's father. Referring to Patai's articles, among others, Liebman condemned "the... 'instant experts,' many of whom do not speak or understand Spanish and are sometimes more interested in the 'Exotic,' such as the 'Mexican Indian Jews' (who are neither Indians nor Jews) than in the recognized Jewish community."

<sup>508</sup> "Prof. Francisco Rivas is a descendant of a Marano Jew. He was born in Campechy... in 1850. He is probably the last surviving member of a colony of Marano Jews that lived in Yucatan.... This man speaks Hebrew." From Isaac E.

days there were Jews in Mexico who considered themselves natives of the country and believed that they were the descendants of Spanish Marranos who had lived in Mexico for centuries.”

Patai found confirmation of the fact that Papa Rivas was considered to be a Jew in an interview with him conducted and published by Anita Brenner.<sup>509</sup> Yet Patai was skeptical of Laureano Ramirez, and when unable to confirm the oral tradition regarding organizational meetings of “Jewish Indians” in the early 1830’s, due to a fire in the archives, he lamented that this fire “deprived [him] of the opportunity to check whether there was any historical kernel in the story.”<sup>510</sup>

Likewise, Roberto indicated to Patai that his missionaries fight the public’s prejudice against the Jews. He did not say that the parents of these individuals, or the humble folk among whom they sought new members, were Jews. When speaking of keeping the commandments, etc., he said that the people in his group become “more Jewish than any original Jew.” There is no reason to doubt that “original Jew” here means a person born of Jewish parents.

Based on the information Patai gathered, it would be reasonable to assume that in the Mexico City branch of the *Iglesia de Dios Israelita*, there was an active core of descendants of anusim whose double aim was finding or creating an environment more comfortable and better organized for leading its crypto-Jewish life, and combating anti-Semitism. We see that the subject of adherence to the Jewish holidays was a charged and changing issue.<sup>511</sup> And we know there were arguments, and a several-year-long estrangement from the church by Roberto, at the end of which the church displayed more Christian characteristics, such as a cross. Perhaps, then, the influence of non-anusim became stronger, and the comfort of anusim in the place, was lost. This may lay at the background of the talk about conversion, which would be inescapable if one was to enter the Jewish community, and the eventual return to the church when that failed.

It should go without saying that these admittedly newly-organized groups, who in organizing and going public actually separated themselves from the normal hidden lifestyle of the anusim, are hardly a comprehensive source as to the nature and numbers of anusim present in a country where travel and access were still extremely limited.

Patai did suggest that his informants could be anusim,<sup>512</sup> yet it appears that he presumed they would be entirely open and clear with him – a public figure and a writer – about everything. Upon coming to study communities that claimed to be anusim, he sought only normative Jewish markers, and not ones specific to anusim. This indicates that he

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Marcuson, ed., *Proceedings of Thirty-Fourth Annual Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* xxxiii (1923): 431. See Martin Zielonka, “A Spanish-American Jewish Periodical”, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 23 (1915): 129-135; Zielonka, “Francisco Rivas”, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 35 (1939): 219-225.

<sup>509</sup> Brenner, *Menorah J.*, Jan. 1928, 100-103.

<sup>510</sup> Patai (1996): 6.

<sup>511</sup> My investigations have resulted in identifying, within this group, members who were descended of anusim as well as others of non-Jewish origin.

<sup>512</sup> Patai (1996): 7.

may not have been familiar with any such customs to begin with. No process of earning trust with his informants seems to emerge from his reports, as it does, for example, in Schwarz's reports from Belmonte, Portugal over a quarter of a century before Patai arrived in Mexico.<sup>513</sup> To the contrary, by Patai's own account, Roberto eventually gave up and fell silent, and Garcia finished the discussion.<sup>514</sup> Likewise, in Venta Prieta, Patai was surprised when he found out that this community refused his request for a second visit,<sup>515</sup> and after begrudgingly agreeing, they remained mistrustful.<sup>516</sup> Patai mentions the disappearance of the Rorschach tests, but his informants also recall with bitterness his measuring their jaws.<sup>517</sup>

We now possess a large body of information indicating that Roberto was a crypto-Jew. We know that he identified himself as a Jew born to Jews, tried to send his children to a Jewish school, and held serious talks about conversion over a period of thirteen years. It stands to reason that he contemplated this move because of the force of circumstances, in order to earn acceptance by the Jewish community, but gave up eventually.<sup>518</sup> Remnants of crypto-Jewish practices were preserved in Roberto's home. To this we can add the various hints he dropped, which eventually led both his children to seek Judaism. He did not support his children's interest in conversion once they became grownups, until the dramatic encounter with me, which opened for him a window of hope.<sup>519</sup>

Roberto's creed was crypto-Jewish. A careful reading of Patai shows that, when speaking of himself, Roberto denied any belief in the divinity of Jesus, or his being a messiah ("I believe that Jesus was ... not the Messiah."), but admitted that the church did ("We believe that [the Messiah] has already come.<sup>520</sup> He was Jesus."). What Patai saw as "contradictions" were statements to the church or about the church. This should come as no surprise. Patai quotes Alberto Garcia, who complained about Ramirez: "When he finds himself in the company of Christians, he accepts the doctrines of Christianity, but when he is with Jews he denies Jesus."<sup>521</sup>

We cannot discount the theory that Roberto's involvement with the church was indeed an effort of a crypto-Jew, and that his estrangement from the *Iglesia* had to do with conflicts over its Jewish characteristics.

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<sup>513</sup> See Samuel Schwarz, *Os Cristaos-novos em Portugal no S'eculo XX*, reprinted in *Shofar* 18 (Fall 1999): 40-64; see especially 44-45.

<sup>514</sup> Patai (1996): 7.

<sup>515</sup> "You did not treat us as brothers in religion, and even less so in race. We were for you nothing more than a subject for one of your informative articles."

<sup>516</sup> Patai (1996): 3.

<sup>517</sup> Patai (1996): 2.

<sup>518</sup> A very old convert with whom I had spoken told me that he did not know Roberto personally, but that he knew of him, that, like himself he was from the anusim, and that he had tried to convert and failed.

<sup>519</sup> I tried to find some formal evidence of Roberto's application for conversion, but this information is not readily available, and it could be that he was discouraged even before matters reached this point. The normative Jewish community in Mexico was very reluctant to accept converts, and Roberto did not fit into the list of likely exceptions

<sup>520</sup> Patai (1996): 5.

<sup>521</sup> Patai (1996): 5.



Likewise, we should take the following into account: mysterious visits to synagogues, the request to be buried in a Jewish manner, and his deathbed confession. All these and more add up to a clear testimony that Roberto was indeed a descendant from the anusim who led a crypto-Jewish life, and sought in various ways to improve his environment and return to normative Judaism, but in vain.

Many questions remain unanswered: What fraction of church members shared Roberto's origins and beliefs? What really happened in the *Iglesia*? Was there a period during which Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur was celebrated? Did Roberto know of these holidays from his home? Did he adopt their observance from his contacts in the Jewish community who provided him with the Jewish calendar? Was their abandonment part of the cause of the many-year-long schism Roberto had with the church? The answers are not conclusive, but we do know that somehow the children of his second marriage, at least, knew about them and were surprised that they were not celebrated in the *Iglesia*.

Roberto was a brave man who took his chances and exposed himself to the foreign scholar, who addressed him through a veil of translation, as a dear colleague from Mexico put it to me once.<sup>522</sup> He put himself on the line, and it was broken. Had Patai been more sensitive and serious with Roberto Mercado Manzanares, his initial informant, he would likely have discovered classical and authentic crypto-Judaism in Roberto's parents, while from Roberto himself, he would have learned more about the attempts of descendants of anusim to reorganize. Patai's having missed discovering the secret Judaism of Roberto resulted in a personal tragedy for Roberto. On the other hand, Patai's studies led me eventually to meet the man, and uncover layers of his identity that had remained shrouded behind the veil of the *Iglesia de Dios Israelita*, a veil that clouded the character of the practices and traditions of his children.

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<sup>522</sup> I thank Miguel Angel Muñoz Borrego for his words on this, and all his tireless archival help throughout my research in Coahuila.

## 10 DISCUSSION

*“Both freshly picked and long stored/Have I kept, my beloved, for you”* (Song of Songs 7:14) alludes to the generations of forced conversions, for we observe the commandments of the Torah while the edge of the sword is upon us.

— *Ibn ‘Aqnin*

The decision to investigate modern crypto-Judaism in the region of El Nuevo Reino de León was made after serious deliberation. There are many other fascinating regions that might have been chosen in its stead, such as the Serido in Brazil, or certain countries in Latin America that have not at all been studied yet, or almost any other former colony of Spain or Portugal. But the choice was well rewarded, and I feel moreover, that timing was critical and that a great deal of information was obtained. The fact that the Latino population is divided across an arbitrary border made the investigation even more interesting.

This long and deep study and adventure bore a bounty of fruit. Most important, to my mind, was the ascertainment of the fact that, contrary to what has been asserted, a secret Jewish identity among descendants of Conversos living in El Nuevo Reino de León is widespread. It was deeply spiritual and accompanied by Jewish ritual of a wide range until only a few decades ago. Many Jewish rites have been preserved among the very same families in Nuevo León who believe themselves to be descendants of the forced converts.

I did expect to find some traces of Jewish heritage. I had met some former Novolenses before coming to the region, and I was familiar with other manifestations of crypto-Judaism in New Mexico (which had been settled by members of the original Spanish inhabitants of Nuevo León) and in other parts of the Americas before I embarked on this study. I also knew many anusim elsewhere in the world and had no reason to think that I would find less here.

What I actually found was far more than I had dared imagine.

The soft-tread, open-ended, time-invested methodology outlined in Chapter 2 proved itself over and over. It enabled me to earn the trust of informants from all levels and all walks of life, as well as from all sides of this phenomenon, be they anusim, priests, politicians, rabbis, or academicians. My work with the Treviño clan (described at length in Chapter 3) could not have been completed with a lesser investment of time and involvement. Had I just come and gone, I would have been left with the mis-impression that Everardo learned from his family of his Jewish identity in his late teens, as he had told me at the conference where we first met, and would not have known that as a child he had actually overheard older family members speaking. I would also have thought Monica to be a bit weird, not understanding what had led her to tell me all the peculiar things she only read about in books. I never would have learned that she, too, found out about her Jewish identity in the same offhand way. I would not have met and learned from countless more members of the same clan and would not have known which questions to ask, nor what to expect. I would not have shared in their

marriages, deaths, dreams, and family Christmases. I was able to share an intimacy that gave me the gift of depth and friendship unparalleled by what might be achieved in a planned research trip, with individual interviews and a quick exit. Intricate lives can only be understood by being shared intricately and intimately.

Having come into the area already having had contact with informants, and coming with some prior acquaintance with the region, as well as with Mexican culture, was very helpful. I found that the more authentic heritage was preserved among the very rich in the city and also among the very remote, partly because of the relative privacy they enjoy. I encountered anusim who grew up without understanding what it meant to be a Jew, as well as many who had found a context at one point or another in their lives.

Although I already heard that some Jewish practices still existed before I arrived, I found that adherence to Jewish dietary practices (like separation of milk and dairy and handwashing), mourning practices (like washing the corpse and burial shrouds), and holidays (including Yom Kippur) were much stronger than anyone might have expected. Circumcision turned out to be extremely widely spread. Contrary to some apologetic excuses about why circumcision is popular in Nuevo Leon, I found a clear demarcation between circumcised and non-circumcised informants in my study, in the same age group, and in the same area, based on their heritage. The phenomenon does not cover the entire population by any means. Even purity rituals turned out to have been preserved in a much greater number of families than I might have imagined when I came to study the region.

Because of the heated debate surrounding the very veracity of the existence of the anusim in the New World at the onset of my research, I began by placing an emphasis on rare, rabbinic customs – ones that are no longer practiced by normative Jews – in order to strengthen the case for their handed-down tradition. However, I found so much by way of identity and practice, as reported in Chapter 4, and such a good match to Inquisitorial reports, that there is no other possible conclusion but that crypto-Judaism remained strong down to the twentieth century.

I found the degree of awareness among the older generation (as opposed to the younger) of the Jewish origin of their non-Catholic home practices and behavior patterns to be far beyond my expectations. The overwhelming number of informants who received a clear and strong oral transmission as to their Jewish identity stands in direct contradistinction with the universal average I have encountered elsewhere in the world, as explained in Chapter 5. The remarkable fact that Treviños who lived far from one another were using the same unusual “casual” stratagem to transmit family identity to the younger generation indicates that the strategy was well thought out and transmitted.

My ability to converse with priests enabled me to see the world through more than just the eyes of anusim. I interviewed many different clergymen from different Mexican states, and learned much, as described in Chapter 6. Some even became dear friends. Talking with them provided me with important insight as to how anusim are viewed by members of the Church. None admitted knowing who in their parish is of Jewish origin, but all of them certainly do. Some proved to understand the predicament of the anusim and feel sympathetic, while

others did not. Several made oblique references to their own Semitic appearance, mostly saying that they were told that they looked like Arabs. Some were themselves of Jewish origin. One abandoned the priesthood, never telling me why, but letting me guess that it was in identification with the anusim.

Several priests, from many states in Mexico, feel the same longing as do other anusim. Watching them, and other adults who know they cannot make a change that they wish they could have, come to me to help alleviate their burden is not simple.

Anti-Semitism is an issue, of course, but the anti-Semites refused to see me.

My interviews with Old Christian informants provided me with context for an anti-Semitic environment that is still alive and well. Thus, one village woman I interviewed acted like she saw the devil when she learned that I was from Israel and was a Jew. Some informants remembered that as children in the playground, they were yelled at, and called "*Mataron de Dios*" – Christ killer. They could not tell me if it was a personal insult or just a generic curse. Another informant would call a soup that lacked salt "*sopa Judía*", since salt is used in baptism, and, hence, Jewish things lack for salt. Even colleagues who treated me very well had a difficult time understanding when I tried to wean them from the anti-Semitic diatribe they were still hearing regularly in Church.

Anti-Semitism played a major role in the twentieth century, especially in Monterrey, as described in Chapter 7. It disrupted the presumed peace, and brought the ever-present fear back to the foreground. It changed the public language, closed the archives, and, if any of the rumors I was told have any validity to them, erased the old, historic city of Monterrey. I learned about a community that is relatively well aware of its origins and had encountered anti-Semitism when "outed" via a series of anti-Semitic events in the Twenties and Thirties. By now it is clear that any Jew who lived close to places where anusim dwelled, and paid attention, would also become aware of their presence.

When anusim attended church, they had to listen to horrific anti-Semitic sermons. News-articles are still very often anti-Semitic and very anti-Israel. It is, therefore, small wonder that attendance in churches is limited.

Anti-Semitism has impacted the scholarship that has been written. It is my hope that this thesis, delineating the practices that indeed survived until a generation or two ago, will not further disrupt the peace of this tormented region, which deserves its privacy, its freedom of practice, its freedom of expression, and above all these, the freedom to know its past, its present, and its true origins.

Anti-Semitic literature abounds, and even anusim think that Jews have large noses, good business acumen and such nonsense as one reads in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, one of the most popular books on the shelves of the library at the Tech del Monterrey.

What the anusim of this region tend to ignore is their power. Were they to unite and just come forward with whom they are, not looking for anyone else's support, they might be better off in this day and age.

When I arrived in Monterrey, Israel Cavazos Garza, *the* historian of the region, known to have denied the continued existence of crypto-

Judaism, begged me to clear matters up, so that people would not believe all the nonsensical myths. He realized that the reporting of the true story is now inevitable. He kept asking me to, please, remove the veil of fantasy from the truth.

Alongside the winding path of mythology lies the truth. Complex, explicable, and logical, the truth about the culture of the anusim was passed down the generations, guarded via endogamy, along with the preservation of Jewish practices and identity.

In Chapter 8, we saw that, along with the “ghost” in the Museo Marco and the *mujer emparedada*, countless individuals lament the lost old city, claiming it was destroyed deliberately so as to hide its “Jewish” past, its tunnels, and all the secrets that the powers that be wanted erased. This belief is representative of the mistrust and the deep sense of loss and lack of documentation that troubles everyone in the region, and an overall sense of suspicion they all experience vis-à-vis the establishment.

I followed the troubled quest of Novolense anusim for confirmation of their transmitted heritage. Their deep sense of longing did not surprise me. What did was the incredible difficulty everyone had in gaining access to whatever little documentation there was. This complaint also repeated itself by scholars from far and wide. The conspiracy seems to have been supported by all: the State, the Church and some of the more powerful *Sefarditas*. No one wanted the past dug into, except for individuals seeking to anchor themselves in their roots. Documents were not made available, were said not to exist, access was denied. I was told of heads of library caught red-handed taking home documents that belonged to the state. This, from a reliable source who caught the culprit with the police present. How much is permanently lost, I cannot guess. Items that Liebman had seen at one point were nowhere to be found on his subsequent visits. There is a market for anything, and the farther away it ends up, the “quieter” the region becomes. But I lament even more what might have been destroyed.

This dearth of documents led one historian to write a historic novel about the region he was investigating. This was during one of my stays in San Pedro de Garza Garcia, when I met the city’s chronicler, Carlos González Rodríguez. He explained to me that, qua historian, he simply could not tell the entire history as he believed it to have been, because of the paucity of documents. González gave me his last copy of the historical novel, *Un Tiempo, un sueño, una vida*,<sup>523</sup> situated in San Pedro, on the life of Doña Mónica Rodríguez. There was no way, he said, that he could responsibly paint a historical picture of the history of the place based on the written record, but he felt pretty sure he knew how things really were, based on the few documents he did have, together with family oral histories and other material that was not usable in a historical work. He therefore had to resort to this mode of expression in order to fulfill his mission as a historian.

As Everardo so well expressed it with his gesture from the car as we were driving to see Don Ernesto: there are no documents; it is as if

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<sup>523</sup> Carlos González Rodríguez, *Un Tiempo, un sueño, una vida* (San Pedro de Garza García, N.L.: Dirección de Cultura, 1996).

the people do not exist. And if that is not enough, they are persecuted and taunted and haunted.

I also learned about the excruciating difficulty that anusim encounter if they attempt to establish contact with normative Jewish communities, wherever that might be. I learned that not only did descendants of anusim maintain their secret Jewish identity all these centuries, but, that many, when the opportunity seemed to arise with the arrival of a rabbi in Monterrey, had in fact attempted to return to their ancestral faith, only to be rejected. There is nothing surprising or out of the historic ordinary in their rejection. Jews do not seem to feel strong enough vis-à-vis the Church to risk helping their long-lost brethren.

In the archives of the rabbinic court in Mexico there are files, hard to gain access to, that are of relevance. For example, I encountered one about parents asking for their child to be adopted by Jewish parents because, they say, they are of Jewish origin and want their child to grow up as a Jew. This request was not filed where a researcher might find it. The supplicants were not further questioned, and nothing more can be found out.

I found that countless anusim in Nuevo León have for years been carefully reading the weekly column of the rabbi, comparing it to their old heritage, sometimes commenting to me about similarities, and often adopting what they read about to revamp their own traditions. This they also did with new Jewish practices they learned from modern Jews they came in contact with, while at the same time keeping their Jewish identity strictly secret from their Christian neighbors. This recent effort was done out of knowledge of their Jewish origin, and out of their sense of identification with their Jewish origin. They hide out of fear, but in no way out of shame.

A deep sense of longing was true of very many. An informant whom I did not otherwise include, but with whom I spent a tremendous amount of time, had simply lived as a Jew while he had lived in the U.S. He was presumed to be an ordinary member of his Orthodox congregation, and was happy for it, since he had always felt himself to be a Jew. His siblings married Arab wives, but he feels so deeply Jewish. He cannot find the proof he so desperately seeks, and cannot find rest. His family will not give him the information that he needs, no matter how much they love him. Perhaps they have it, perhaps not.

Some specific wrongs were righted, at least in part, in the unexpected encounter I had with Raphael Patai's informant, Roberto Mercado Manzanares. As reported in Chapter 9, Roberto Mercado was able to clarify some of the misunderstandings that would have remained for posterity had this chance meeting not taken place. The facts were always there. No one understood.

A lot of the material in this work will shock descendants of anusim in the region. Their secrecy is dear to very many of them, and many still live with the thought that it has not been compromised. My research, which in and of itself protects the privacy of all informants who wished to remain private, demonstrates that those who desired to know who is of Jewish origin and who is not know. Be they officials of the church, neighbors, or anyone curious at all, theirs is an open secret. This, after over four hundred years of careful efforts on their part to mask their origins and their secret identity and praxis.

The phenomenon of crypto-Judaism in Mexico is disappearing fast in all directions. In not many years there may be no informants left to tell anything at all. The New World, with its new opportunities and new limitations, has created a situation in Nuevo León where I suspect that their long-held way of life is coming to its end.

The fact that many people claim origin from “pure-blooded” conquistadors is known. Being descended of a Jew, however, never carried prestige in Mexico or in the Southwest U.S., not among *hidalgos* and not among *mestizos*. Even if one grants that a person might lay claim to Jewish heritage for ulterior motives, stretching that to claim actual observance by such impostors of Jewish practices long abandoned by most American Jews borders on the ridiculous.

While individual customs might be explainable in one way or another, there is simply no precedent for the wealth and variety of the traditions and observances that were reported to me, from rising to retiring, the Sabbath and holy days, birth and circumcision, death and burial. The resemblance and parallels found between the practices that were preserved in Nuevo León and those that were reported to the inquisitors in the past are very impressive and cannot be ignored. Moreover, that Judaizing behavior is accompanied by ancient rabbinic customs that seem to have managed to elude the dossiers of the Inquisition, yet continued quietly until the beginning of the twentieth century, and remain in some homes to this very day.

They remain Jews until the end of time, wrote Elijah Mizrahi.<sup>524</sup> Indeed, the anusim of Nuevo León have.

The fast of Kippur survived, and, in its wings, a strong sentiment of devotion. The very deep sense of repentance is typical and meaningful to the soul of anusim. It opens a small window of understanding for us, showing how strong was the yearning of these people for God and for the religion that was taken from them by force, by torture, and by the stake.

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<sup>524</sup> See footnote 24.