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## The long road home

More than 500 years after their ancestors were forced to convert to Christianity, thousands of descendants of Marranos living in South America are returning to their Jewish roots. But they are running into obstacles on the way back to Judaism.

By Coby Ben-Simhon | Mar. 24, 2005 | 12:00 AM

It seems like they can still hear the rolling laughter of the Inquisitor. Tens of thousands of descendants of the Marranos - the Jews of Spain and Portugal who were forced to convert to Christianity more than 500 years ago - continue to carry the lost identity of their forebears, despite the passage of centuries.

The Internet is buzzing with forums of the descendants of the Marranos, also called anusim, forced converts in Hebrew. On a forum called "Saudades" (Longings; [www.saudades.org](http://www.saudades.org)), more than 1,000 people are engaged in an intensive process of clarifying and crystallizing their identity. They write about Hebrew accents, Israeli Nobel Prize laureates, Torah precepts, Talmudic sages, the Jerusalem prayer book and even about the quality award that went to the olive oil of Kibbutz Revivim in the northern Negev, in a worldwide competition.

One of the participants in the forum styles himself "The 7 Noachian Laws." Another, Mordechai Lopes, from Recife, Brazil, writes about Shabbat observance, and a woman contributes an article that was published in a local American paper about descendants of Marranos who live in the United States, urging people to read it. Anabela from the village of Soago in Portugal writes about a DNA test she recently had done. She says she knows she is of Portuguese descent and asks any forum participants who have also had DNA tests to check whether there is any compatibility with her results (which she includes in the message).

Besides Saudades, an English-language site, there are many sites serving virtual communities of Spanish-speaking Marranos - Mexicans, Peruvians and Colombians. Here, too, at the heart of their discourse lies their great trap: their past. The Marranos' descendants, who are formally Christians in every respect, deal with questions such as "who is a Jew" and how Jewish history has ignored them. They talk about various archives that document the Spanish Inquisition and their personal genealogies, whose roots extend all the way back to that dark period in Spain.

"All the signs indicate that there is an awakening of Marranos who are looking for their Jewish roots," says Prof. Avi Gross, an expert on Spanish and Portuguese Jewry and on the Marranos from the Department of Jewish History at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Be'er Sheva. Gross returned last month from a visit to the Marrano communities in Brazil as part of his activity in Ezra La'anusim (Help for the Marranos), an association which became operative this year. On the screen of his laptop is a photograph of a family of Marranos: the husband took a picture of his wife and two children as they lit the Shabbat candles.

"More and more people nowadays are discovering their Jewish past," Prof. Gross notes. "That is quite clear to anyone who is engaged in the history of Brazil and Portugal. It is a very broad phenomenon - thousands of Marranos who want to return to the tradition of their forebears, to the life their ancestors were deprived of by Catholic fanaticism. The potential for a return to the Jewish religion is of numbers that I am not willing to cite, because I just cannot. The possibilities are tremendous. I am not interested in citing a number."

### Apersonal,authenticfeeling

A new study by Prof. Gross deals with the wave of religious awakening among the descendants of the Portuguese Marranos who immigrated to Brazil. "Jewish blood flows in the veins of a very high proportion of Christian Brazilians of Portuguese origin," he says. "The fact that vestiges of Judaism exist in astounding quantities is clear; it is a statistical matter. Historians say that 15 percent of the Portuguese emigrants who settled in Brazil in the 16th and 17th centuries were of Marrano - that is, Jewish - descent. A simple arithmetical calculation will give you seven-digit figures today. In my opinion, the numbers are far smaller. We are talking about unconscious Judaism which was totally assimilated. Most of them assimilated a thousand times since then."

On the other hand, he describes a conversation he had in Sao Paulo with Prof. Anita Novinsky, a world expert on the Inquisition. "She denies the persistence of Judaism among the Marranos, yet she admits, as she told me, that 'Brazil is seething with Judaism below the surface.' I will not forget what she said about one of the descendants of the Marranos I met - that he 'carries history in his flesh and blood.' From my point of view as a historian, that is a definitive statement. After all, she is highly critical of the way historical research has idealized the Marranos' preservation of Judaism, and when she says something like this she apparently knows whereof she speaks."

There are large concentrations of Marranos (the word, used derogatively of the converts, means "pigs" or "the accursed") in Brazil, especially in the country's northeast. It is in these arid areas, deep in the interior of the continent, that Gross found huge families that maintain a Jewish way of life, at least as far as they are able. The area borders four states: Pernambuco, Ceara, Rio Grande do Norte and Paraiba.

"These are vast extended families that have remained in marriage ties and have hardly assimilated with the surroundings," says Gross. "They lived in social separation and did not even know why. It's amazing, but they preserved a Marrano framework of life into the 20th century. I met one person there whose family numbers 9,000 members. Their whole life is conducted under what they call the 'family laws.' It is a huge family in which the members are bound to each other by marriage. I could not find an explanation of why they went so far into the interior, into the arid region, apart from the fact that they wanted to maintain quiet, to follow a different community life, by conscious choice. Those who sought money and better sources for a livelihood went further south. There is no reason for people to go so far into desert regions like these."

The Marranos' descendants are far from being a monolithic bloc, Prof. Gross relates. Because the Marrano reality was concealed until now, it became an individual matter, so there are some Marranos who are more Zionist and others who are more religious. There are also some who consider themselves pure Sephardim [from the Hebrew word for Spain] and therefore decided to follow in the footsteps of Maimonides and express powerful opposition to mysticism and kabbala. In general, they all feel Jewish and Israeli, even if they are totally cut off from that way of life.

"They do not meet much, mainly because of the large distances. This is an imagined community," Prof. Gross says. "A community where they all cry together on the Internet. It is together, in the common troubles, in their shared pain, that they find warmth. They are religious people, with religious feelings, who are unable to find themselves within the Christian framework. In some cases the return to Judaism begins with the rejection of the Church - people who from a young age were unwilling to accept Catholic dogma. They arrived at this place by way of their own searching. It is not a herd phenomenon and not a matter of fashion. It is a very personal and authentic feeling."

### Rootoftheevil

The Marrano phenomenon came into being in Spain and Portugal in the wake of several separate periods of conversion. The first occurred in the summer of 1391, in Seville, as part of a tidal wave of anti-Jewish riots that swept the country. Thousands of Jews were murdered that summer, and about a third of the Jews - approximately 100,000, according to one estimate - were forced to undergo Christian baptism. Additional conversion actions followed, with another one occurring in 1492, during the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, when they were given the choice of becoming Christians or leaving the country. Again the number of converts was in the tens of thousands. By this time, the well-oiled machinery of the Inquisition was operating, systematically persecuting the Marranos in Spain, with the aim of interrogating those among the "new Christians" who continued to observe Judaism in secret and punish the impostors mercilessly.

In 1497, the Jewish community in Portugal was also obliged to convert to Christianity. A royal edict ordered all the Jews to come to Lisbon, where they were forced to convert. Here, too, estimates speak of 10,000 or 20,000 converts. In 1540, the Inquisition was established in Portugal, and the Portuguese version was considered more brutal than that of neighboring Spain. Hebrew parchment scrolls that were hidden in caves and later found, and thousands of interrogation files that document accusations of observing the Mosaic laws in secret show that the Marranos maintained

a Jewish way of life of some kind in secret for many years.

After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and the general conversion in Portugal, most Marranos were cut off from the Jewish world. A paradoxical situation emerged in which the Church succeeded in turning the Jews into "new Christians," but Christian society rejected them. The entry of the new Christians into the social system was perceived as a threat by former Jews, certainly in the first generation. By the 16th century a view gained credence in Spain and Portugal that there was a stubborn core of heresy in the Jews, who were Christians on the outside but remained Jews in their homes. This outlook was manifested in the form of the "blood purity" laws, which were not necessarily promulgated by the state but were adopted in various areas by certain institutions, such as universities and monasteries, in order to exclude anyone with Jewish origins.

The source of the evil in these laws lay in their timelessness. As soon as the Jewish past of new Christians was discovered, even 200 years later, their entire social and economic infrastructure was destroyed and they could expect to be persecuted and suspected of observing Judaism. It was to escape a life of unbearable fear that they fled to the Islamic countries, to Amsterdam and to the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Americas.

As is only natural, in the course of time, a gradual erosion occurred in the Jewish way of life of the Marranos. Within two or three generations, most of them were assimilated into Christian society, and the Jewish religion among them was relegated to cellars and unseen places - to an oral tradition. After hundreds of years only vague signs remained of a Jewish heritage.

### **Born and dying as Jews**

On Shabbat, he relates, he takes his children to the far end of the lake. Standing on a broad wooden bridge, they scour the skies together for three stars, indicating the end of the Sabbath. Fabio (Ariel) Fonseca, 32, the spokesman of the Federal Police in the state of Alagoas, Brazil, understood from a young age that he was a Jew. "At the age of 15 I started to read about Judaism," he says in an interview conducted by e-mail. "The first time I encountered the fact that my family had a Jewish past it seemed like total nonsense. I thought the Jews were from Israel."

He left the church at the age of 20. "It was hard to be outside. After I was married, my mother helped me get to relatives and talk to them." His path into the Jewish world was forged through his grandfather's sister; it continued on the Internet and led him to a school in the coastal city of Natal, where descendants of the Marranos learn about Judaism. Fonseca now presents himself as a Jew - last summer he underwent circumcision. He is learning Hebrew from poems an Israeli friend sends him and reads the Jerusalem Post and the English-language edition of Haaretz on the Internet every day. His two children kiss the mezuzah affixed to the door of their home and can recite the Shema prayer.

Dr. Luciano Oliveira, a 27-year-old family doctor from the state of Paraiba, has bigger plans. He intends to establish a Marrano community in Brazil, like the model of the famous Marrano community in Belmonte, Portugal, where forced converts managed to preserve Jewish religious observance in secret from the time of the Inquisition until the 1970s, and train people to carry out religious tasks in the community. He himself has already learned the burial ritual from the Orthodox burial society of Sao Paulo. "In all the generations of my family," he writes by e-mail, "the women preserved the customs and transmitted the tradition. For example, the burial tradition - my mother was responsible in the family for purifying the dead and for the interment."

Dr. Oliveira views himself as a public emissary with deep responsibility. But the more he tries to resolve the tangled problem of the Marrano society around him, the angrier he becomes. Despite his tremendous efforts to return to the fold of Judaism, he feels that the Jewish institutions are rejecting him outright. "The rabbinate is today succeeding in doing to us what the Inquisition did not succeed in doing for hundreds of years. I am not ready to go back to Judaism as a convert," he says in frustration. "I cannot do that to my family; that would be to betray them. Officially I am still a Catholic, but the family laws are what decide. My mother says, 'I was born into these family laws and I will die in them.'"

The bitter irony is that statements in this spirit can be found in the files of the Inquisition, when Marranos who were caught observing Jewish customs declared defiantly before they were murdered that they "were born and will die in Judaism."

### **The Orthodox barrier**

Families like the FONSECAS and the OLIVEIRAS are trapped in a cruel process that is the lot of many Marrano families who are aware of their Jewish past. The Marranos' journey back to Judaism runs into the insensitivity of the religious institutions, even though the Marranos have undergone a profound process of self-discovery. In general, the Orthodox Jewish religious institutions in Israel and abroad view the descendants of the Marranos as gentiles and demand that they undergo a full conversion. The Marranos, for their part, say they want to return to Judaism under the status of people "returning to the religion of their forebears," not as converts.

From their point of view, the difference is critical. Only a very few religious courts in South America might restore the Marranos to Judaism in this way, but even if an Orthodox court in Brazil does so, there is no guarantee that its ruling will be honored in Israel, still less if a court of Reform Judaism was involved.

Sisa Shlomovitz, 33, understood this and thought she would find an answer in Israel. Four years ago, she immigrated to Israel with her Jewish husband, Asher Ben Shlomo, who established the Federation of Israeli Marranos. "We realized that there was no point in undergoing any conversion or return process abroad, because it simply would not be honored in Israel," Ben Shlomo says. "When we arrived in Israel, my wife was made to undergo a conversion process. But to this day, I have not found a court that is willing to restore her to Judaism and whose ruling will be honored. Today she is not considered Jewish according to law. The truth is that she has not even been granted citizenship - she is still going through the procedures, even though I am Jewish."

Shlomovitz first became aware of her Jewishness at the age of 20, from her mother. Her extended family consists of 1,000 people, most of them residing in the state of Alagoas in Brazil. "Generally in my family this information was kept from the children, and they only told us about our Jewish past at a later age," she says. "The military dictatorship in Brazil was in league with the Catholic Church, and that made us afraid. But even before I became aware of my Jewish past, I observed Jewish customs such as waiting for three hours between eating meat and dairy, the prohibition on eating eggs tainted with blood and the tradition of marriage within the family. My family still observes those customs.

"We are in a situation in which the Christians consider us Jews and the Jews consider us gentiles," she sums up. "Today my family has the desire to define itself as Jewish, but they do not take that step because they know that in Israel the return to Judaism is not recognized. In Israel neither I nor my children are considered Jewish. A solution has to be found for us because under no circumstances are we willing to undergo conversion. There are some who want to humiliate us very greatly in the conversion process."

The rabbinate in Israel has not adopted a uniform approach toward the Marranos. There is no coordination between the religious courts on the subject. A halakhic response on the subject written in 1995 by a former chief rabbi, Mordechai Eliahu (after concluding his term as chief rabbi), demonstrates the absurdity involved. According to this ruling, the Marranos do not have to undergo a conversion process, but one of returning to Judaism.

"Those who wish to perform all the precepts of the Torah openly today should be praised," Rabbi Eliahu wrote. "After undergoing all the processes of Torah study, accepting the Torah and the burden of the precepts, circumcision and immersion as stipulated in the Law, they should be given a certificate headed, 'Certificate for one who returns to the ways of his forefathers.'" Halakhically, this ruling puts the Marranos through the same strict process that a convert undergoes, but despite this, the rabbinical courts in Israel do not abide by this ruling.

On Tu B'Shvat (Arbor Day) this year, a rainy day in Jerusalem, a group of people decided to put an end to the humiliating situation. The Ezra La'anusim association was established with the goal of making it possible for the Marranos to return to Judaism and overcome the halakhic obstacle posed by the rabbinate. The organization's members include Prof. Gross; attorney Aryeh Barnea, former principal of Gymnasia Herzliya high school in Tel Aviv, who is the association's legal adviser; and Rabbi Zalman Cohen. The head of the association is Yafa da Costa, a resident of the West Bank city of Ma'aleh Adumim, who is from a Marrano family herself.

Da Costa grew up in a town near Boston, Massachusetts, and attended church every Sunday. "We did what we had to in order to adjust ourselves to the framework," she says about her family. "At the age of 19, I got the feeling that it was not for me, an inner feeling that is hard for me to explain. The family's Jewish past was forgotten in certain parts of the family - my mother, for example, didn't know about it."

Da Costa found her Jewish roots in Israel, following a chance conversation in which someone casually suggested to her that she examine whether her Portuguese past ended in a Jewish home in Portugal. After that, things moved quickly. "I started investigating and I understood, as happens to

many Marranos, that a lot of the customs we followed at home were actually Jewish customs. There were also customs that we did not observe, but which my mother told me had been observed in her house. In the end, I carried out the process of my return to Judaism in New York, in a highly regarded and well-known court, so that the Interior Ministry in Israel accepted my Jewishness."

In this sense, the Da Costa case is a precedent, and she is now trying to get that precedent extended to other Marranos. "My mission in life is to help the Marrano families," she says. "I started in the United States five years ago and I am continuing here in Israel through the association. It is important for me to make it clear that we are legitimate Jews. We must not let the Inquisition win. The Marranos have waited for years for the doors to be opened to them; they are waiting for historical justice. The association has begun to direct Marranos to courts abroad that work with us, and thus resolve their Jewish identity. Whoever goes through the process can decide afterward what he wants to do - remain in his community or immigrate to Israel."

"I think we are obligated to find a way to draw the Marranos' descendants close to us and to draw closer to them," Aryeh Barnea says in a determined tone. "This is a humane story. We have to understand that this means the whole world to these people - to connect with their Jewish roots. There is a matter here that the Israeli establishment is not aware of: the Marranos' descendants are Jews and we must find a way to bring them back into the fold of Judaism and Israel. We have to help them come back home. The estimate is that hundreds of thousands might return, and as I see it this is a demographic issue that constitutes a meaningful contribution to society in Israel. From my point of view, a step in this direction is definitely the realization of Zionism."

There have been attempts in the past to assist Marrano communities, though only on a small scale. An organization called Amishav has been active in recent years in urban centers in Spain and Portugal in an effort to restore descendants of the Marranos to the Jewish fold. (This organization, which was founded by Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, is also active in trying to find descendants of the 10 lost tribes.)

Ezra La'anusim has hopes for a genuine shift of attitude, one that would verge on the historic. "Our primary goal is to find conversion courts with Orthodox authority," Prof. Gross explains. "When that court rules in favor of a Marrano's right to return to the ways of his forefathers, no one will be able to dispute it."

Rabbi Zalman Cohen, the association's halakhic adviser, has already begun to contact rabbinical courts abroad. "The problem was that those who dealt with the subject of the Marranos until now were rarely authorized religious court judges, and they did not have the necessary knowledge of the subject," he says after concluding a Torah class in his home close to midnight. "We have made contact with rabbis of the first rank who will be able to resolve the problem. When a Marrano enters the court, these rabbis begin clarifications to ensure that he preserved a Jewish identity. The rabbis whom we have started to work with are authorized to do this."

Could you elaborate?

"To explain exactly what they are doing is like trying to explain how the atomic bomb works to someone who has no knowledge of physics. What's important is that at the end of the hearing the Marrano leaves with a certificate stating he is Jewish and that there is no one in the world who will dare cast doubt on his Jewishness."

What is happening now is only the beginning. The number of Marranos who have benefited from the system described by Rabbi Cohen is negligible compared with the potential. He has no hesitation in assailing the conversions usually performed in Israel. "In Israel we have what is known as wholesale conversion, loose conversion, so there are many people who are unwilling to trust the conversion process that is done here," says Cohen. "Right-wing political forces have taken over the conversion processes here and this is the result. They want cheap labor for the settlements - that is the approach, regrettably. Three weeks ago a Marrano couple arrived who thought that they would find a way out of the dilemma in Israel, but the problem they came up against is that there is no institution here that will restore them to Judaism. These are people who preserved their Jewish identity with selfless devotion, and are treated as though they were gentiles. What a slap in the face this is for them. It's enough to make one cry."

The Chief Rabbinate states in response: "Recently Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar met with representatives of descendants of forced converts from Portugal who are interested in returning to Judaism. With the aim of facilitating the process of the return of the descendants of the anusim to the fold of the Jewish people, the subject will be examined in depth, because of the fear of assimilation among the descendants of the anusim. To examine the Jewishness of the descendants of the anusim, the chief rabbi sent two representatives who are to submit a conclusive report on the subject very soon."

In the meantime, Ezra La'anusim has begun to operate an educational site for the Marranos on the Internet. Miguel Staroi, a resident of the West Bank settlement of Mitzpeh Yericho, teaches a group of 40 students from Colombia twice a week. "I give them lessons in Jewish religious law," he relates. "The subject that they are now taking an interest in is family purification laws. It is a virtual class, in which they listen and watch and can ask questions. Nearly all of them have a university education, nearly all of them have an M.A. It is very thrilling for me to work with them."

Prof. Gross admits, "If I had not thought in terms of large numbers, I think I would not have become involved in the subject. After my meeting with a number of Marranos in Brazil, and endless hours of correspondence via the Internet, I feel that some of them are holding onto me as an anchor. I felt their need for someone to pull them out of the whirlpool. I try to separate the various emotional elements, but there is no doubt that I feel a sense of belonging at the human, national and religious level with these people. If we succeed in the mission we have set ourselves in the association, I will be able to say that this is the greatest thing I was part of in my life."