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BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CONVERSOS

*“The Ingathering shall be for the Children of Israel
who are called Jacob, and also for the
Marranos who are of their seed.”*

—Don Yishak Abravanel¹⁰⁵

The destruction of the Sephardic communities in Spain and Portugal did not lend itself to the establishment of one homogenous Sephardic community elsewhere. These Jews scattered widely, settling in various places including England, Holland, the New World, and the Ottoman (Turkish) Empire. While many of these refugees lived in various locations, the greatest number settled in the latter. As years went on, many converted Jews found the Ottoman Empire a safe place to openly return to the religion of their fathers, as there were plenty of established Jewish population centers throughout the land.

New Christians began to flee Spain in 1391 and Portugal in 1497. Jews going underground to practice their religion was not a phenomenon that was new to the 14th or 15th century. Forced converts that took upon themselves the cross, yet continued to practice their Judaism in secret, are most commonly remembered to history as *conversos* or by the negative term, *marranos*. While some Jews accepted Christianity sincerely, others became conversos only out of fear and duress. Yet, another group became conversos only in an attempt to retain their established wealth. As a consequence of this, some conversos aroused the envy and hatred of the non-Jewish populace, whom the clergy soon incited against them as unbelieving Christians and hypocrites. Conversos were seen as false-Christians,

and frauds, a group reviled much more than the professing Jews themselves, and were soon persecuted as bitterly as their former co-religionists had been.

From 1391 to 1449 there were few signs of opposition to the social advancement of the conversos into important positions in royal, urban and ecclesiastical administration and government; conversos were quickly assimilated into Christian society without difficulty.¹⁰⁶ The extent of converso success is hard to measure precisely because conversion and success tended to obscure Jewish origins. Yet the evidence which has been pieced together provides a convincing picture of converso entry into key public offices. The success of the conversos in gaining entry into the urban oligarchies was so marked, that by the mid 15th century, contemporaries were inclined to believe in widespread corruption and deliberate conspiracies. Some aristocratic families of conversos had infiltrated the urban oligarchies even before the pogroms of 1391. In Toledo and Cordoba the conversos were so successful, that their expulsion from office became one of the chief aims of revolutionary movements in these towns.¹⁰⁷

Everything forever changed for the Jews of Spain in 1391. Christian fanaticism led to rivers of Jewish blood in the streets. The fire in 14th century Spain spread throughout the Jewish communities of Barcelona, Gerona, Lerida, and other cities in Catalonia during 1391. In Barcelona, not one Jew remained and by 1392 the Jewish community of Barcelona was dissolved by royal decree. Barcelona, a city that had a continuous Jewish history for at least seven centuries knew the Jew no more. The number of Jews that remained in Catalonia after these massacres and persecutions was very small. In Toledo, the Jews fell victims to the fury of mobs which openly murdered them. It was during this time that thousands upon thousands of Jews openly converted to Christianity to save themselves from death, it was during this tumultuous period that the conversos came into being.

Those Jews that did convert to Christianity were constantly spied upon, and whenever they were discovered practicing Judaism,

were brought before the Inquisition and punished. In a law issued for the guidance of the clergy in their efforts to discover *backsliding* conversos, at least thirty-seven signs were given by which a Jew may be recognized. Some of these include: any converso who changed his linens prior to the sabbath, put on better garments or spread a new tablecloth on Saturday, ate no pork, gave his children Old Testament names, and similar 'crimes,' was to be considered a backslider.¹⁰⁸ Changing bed linens was the 'crime' committed in an account of torture provided by Lea.¹⁰⁹

Conversos were discriminated against. In church they were compelled to sit apart, and in the cemetery their bodies were interred in separate sections. The Catholic Church did its best to discourage and even prohibit unions with *old Christians* and *new Christians*. For centuries the Spanish had an actual obsession for *limpiesa*, or *purity* of blood, and prohibited marriage with anyone who had the fatal *Jewish stain*, setting no limit to the number of generations in which the stain is wiped away. No one in the upper or middle classes was so safe that an investigation might not reveal some unfortunate tincture of Jewish blood in a distant ancestor.¹¹⁰ Prohibitions of intermarriage came rather late, and had small effect to keep Jewish blood out of the non-Jewish Spaniards:

We hear of marriages with *Lunas*, *Mendozas*, *Villahermosas* and others of the proudest houses. As early as 1449 a petition to Lope de Barrientos, Bishop of Cuenca, by the conversos of Toledo, enumerated all the noblest families of Spain as being of Jewish blood, and among others the Henriquez, from whom the future Ferdinand the Catholic descended, through his mother, Juana Henriquez.¹¹¹

As is often the case, rampart discrimination evolved into increased violence against the conversos. A large riot broke out at Toledo in 1449, this rampage was accompanied with burning of homes,

murder, as well as general pillage.¹¹² An attack on the conversos in 1473 spread to other cities. Further disaster fell upon the Jews at Cordoba, similar to the persecutions of 1391, the circumstances were getting worse. An account from Rabbi Yosef ben Yehoshua ben Meir HaSephardi, professed to be from 1553, speaks about how the conversos were treated:

And she [Isabella] set searchers and spies over them to see if they walked in the law of their messiah or not. And they burned by hundreds of them for no cause, and all that they had they plundered daily. And thus they began to flee, and to go into Turkey to serve the Lord our God as at this day....In Portugal also the destructions (baptisms) increased daily....And Jews took their sons and their daughters, and sent them unto the isles of the sea wherein no one dwelled....And many Jews went out from Portugal, and went unto the east country to serve the Lord our God as at the first: and they have dwelled there until this day. And many were left there halting between two opinions; they feared the Lord, yet sware by the image of the uncircumcised and went daily unto their churches. And they have increased and become mighty in riches until this day. And from that day and afterward there was not a man left in all the kingdoms of Sphard, [sic] who was called by the name of Israel. But the king of Navarre did not expel them from his country, and many of the Jews of Arragon [sic] went thither to dwell. And the king of Arragon allowed them to pass, and they came in ships unto Provence, and dwelled in Avignon.¹¹³



Another group of conversos were known as *Chuetas*.¹¹⁴ These Jews lived on the island of Mallorca in the Mediterranean Sea, some 163 miles east of Valencia. According to the chroniclers, there were Jewish