From "Jewish Blood" to Transnational Ties: The Portuguese Marrano-Anusim Revival Movement in Global Context

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"Today the Portuguese accept, with a relaxed shrug of the shoulders and a wry smile, that somewhere along the line, we all have a drop of Jewish blood running in our veins." So states the introduction to the catalog for a recent Portuguese museum exhibition, *Signs of Judaism in Portugal (Testemunhos do Judaísmo em Portugal*, Lisbon, 1999). While perhaps surprising to those living outside the country, within Portugal this is hardly a revolutionary claim. On the contrary, it is generally considered common knowledge that many, if not most, Portuguese people have some Jewish ancestry. Indeed, during my field research certain Portuguese cultural practices, family names, and physical features were repeatedly pointed out to me as the legacy of "lost" Jewish origins.

The logic behind this widespread belief lies in the demographic history of fifteenthcentury Iberia. Unlike Spain, Portugal never expelled its Jews. In fact, it absorbed a significant percentage of those expelled from Spain in 1492, who joined the country's already substantial Jewish community; as a result, by the mid-1490s as much as 20% of the Portuguese population may have been Jewish. In 1496 Portugal's King Manuel ordered a series of mass forced conversions, ridding his country of Jews not by expulsion, but by religious transformation. By 1497 Iberia's once-vibrant Jewish population had vanished, replaced by tens of thousands of forced converts known henceforth as Cristãos-Novos ("New Christians") or, if they secretly persisted in maintaining Jewish practices, as Marranos. Although some managed to escape to other countries and resume an openly Jewish identity, historians believe that most remained in Portugal. Under continual threat of persecution by the Inquisition, over the ensuing generations the vast majority of New Christians blended into the Catholic mainstream and ultimately ceased to be considered a distinct social category. In a handful of isolated rural communities, such as Belmonte, descendants of the forced converts managed to maintain a Jewish identity, secretly preserving fragmentary Jewish practices into the twentieth century. However, these were rare exceptions.

Ironically, then, King Manuel's forced conversions, followed by centuries of intermarriage, have produced a Portuguese nation in which virtually anyone could be of Jewish descent. Of course, while many believe this to be true, not everyone responds to it in the same way. For most it is simply a piece of historical trivia, another strand in the complex ancestral tapestry of the Portuguese people. But for others, particularly those whose families passed down a memory of having once been Jewish, the possibility of such lost ancestry provides the explanatory context for avid historical, genealogical, and even spiritual exploration. Both in Portugal and throughout the Portuguese diaspora, thousands of people have become involved in efforts to revive Portuguese Jewish heritage. Those who identify most strongly with having

Jewish ancestors often call themselves *Marranos* or *Anusim*, a Hebrew term from the rabbinic literature meaning "forced ones." ¹

My research focuses on the latter group, primarily in urban Portugal but also throughout the Portuguese diaspora, together with their Jewish interlocutors. I have been particularly interested in how these individuals construct a uniquely modern Marrano identity and in their collective struggle for recognition and acceptance as forgotten members of the Jewish "family"—in some cases in a primarily ethnic sense, in others as practitioners of the Jewish religion. Understanding this process has required intensive study of the institutions and networks that have sprung up as a result of their efforts, both in Portugal and on an international scale. For what began for most as a solitary genealogical or spiritual search has over the past decade become a global movement, structured and sustained by internet discussion groups, international conferences, and even package tours of "Jewish Portugal," in which participants from throughout the Portuguese diaspora visit medieval Jewish sites and meet others seeking connection with the same "lost heritage," both on and off the tour bus. At the same time, there have emerged parallel international networks of people working in support of the movement, including Jewish educators, rabbis, scholars, and outreach activists who encourage such "lost tribes" in their efforts to reclaim a Jewish identity. These individuals, too, participate in the internet groups, conferences, and tours that sustain the global Marrano-Anusim revival movement.

My research on the complex relationship between these overlapping international networks and the simultaneously individual and collective construction of Marrano identity proceeded through what is known as "multi-sited ethnography," a growing field of anthropological research that seeks to capture the whole of a large-scale phenomenon by cumulatively tracing its emergence in several geographically distinct sites. It involved two phases, both generously supported with grants from the Portuguese Studies Program.² In the first phase, I mapped the global contours of the Marrano-Anusim revival movement and examined the nature and significance of international collaboration for both Marranos/Anusim and their Jewish supporters. This was accomplished through participant-observation in multiple venues, both physical and virtual: on package tours of "Jewish Portugal," designed by and for Marranos/Anusim and Jewish outreach activists, where I explored participants' experiences and observed the relationships they formed with one another and with their Portuguese counterparts along the way; at international conferences on Marrano-Anusim issues; in planning meetings of U.S.-based international organizations that are working to support Marrano-Anusim revival within Portugal; and in several Marrano-Anusim online discussion groups, each with hundreds of members worldwide. This peripatetic research enabled me to understand the densely interconnected nature of these seemingly disparate venues and to trace out the multilayered interpersonal ties that unite participants around the globe, whether their home might be in Lisbon, Johannesburg, San Diego, Antwerp, São Paulo, or Toronto.

While global, this movement has strongly local manifestations. In Portugal's urban centers, residents who identify as Marranos have created a variety of cultural and religious

¹ Some people object strongly to the word Marrano, originally a Spanish pejorative term for hidden Jews ("swine"), and prefer to call themselves Anusim. However, Marrano does not carry this meaning in Portuguese and has been proudly adopted by most participants in Portugal due to its referent: an Iberian Jew who maintains his or her identity, even after forced conversion and in the face of grave danger.

² Parts of this research were also supported by the National Science Foundation, the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture, the Maurice Amado Research Fund in Sephardic Studies, and the Graduate Division, Institute for European Studies, and Department of Anthropology of the University of California, Berkeley.

organizations which meet on a regular basis. In order to grasp the ongoing interplay of global and local cultural forces in shaping modern Marrano identities, in the second phase of my research I conducted sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in Portugal. My research was based primarily in two local Marrano organizations, one in Lisbon and one in Porto. Here, I was particularly interested to learn the extent to which local participants were also engaged in regional, national, and international networks related to Marrano-Anusim revival, and whether this involvement was a significant factor in their emerging sense of self. I chose these particular organizations because, in addition to holding weekly meetings, both were stops on the "Jewish Portugal" tour circuit, bringing their members face-to-face with visiting Jews and with their Marrano-Anusim "cousins" (primos) from abroad. Throughout my stay, these organizations regularly hosted tour groups, individual travelers, rabbis, outreach workers, and educators for meetings in which I was welcomed as a full participant and often served as a translator. I found that such interactions with foreign visitors, and the transnational ties they produced, were critically important for the organizations' members. Despite the widespread assumption of collective Jewish ancestry, Portugal's tiny established Jewish community, made up largely of descendants of nineteenth and twentieth century immigrants, does not welcome newcomers. Lacking access to local Jewish institutions and with little available frame of reference for how one might construct a living Jewish identity—whether ethnic or religious—Portuguese Marranos find themselves dependent upon the internet and on foreign patronage for educational, spiritual, and moral support. In short, their sense of recognition from and acceptance by the Jewish world rests upon the actions of their interlocutors from abroad.

Having completed this fieldwork, I am now writing my dissertation. Entitled Global Affinities: Memory, Materiality, and Kinship in the Portuguese Marrano-Anusim Revival Movement, it traces the emergence and development of the revival movement, explores the construction of individual and collective Marrano identity, and probes the nature and limits of participants' experiences of cross-cultural affinity and belonging during interactions between Portuguese Marranos and their foreign visitors, whether Marrano-Anusim roots-seekers or Jewish outreach activists. In dialogue with the anthropological literature on globalization, diaspora, and identity, I ask: What novel experiences of kinship and relatedness are made possible by roots/heritage tourism, the internet, and other vehicles of cultural and technological globalization? How real and enduring are the resulting relationships? What kinds of miscommunication occur in participants' cross-cultural interactions, and how does this affect their ability to construct and act upon a common identity? How do they build a sense of common ground? Does global consciousness necessarily lead participants to feel that they are part of a lasting "global community"? What are the consequences for national identity? Ultimately, through this work I hope to enrich ethnographic understanding of contemporary Portuguese social movements and further social scientific research on the relationship between new forms of global interconnection and the creation and propagation of emergent social identities, transnational networks, and experiences of cross-cultural, international affinity.

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