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Forum

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The “Jews” of New Mexico

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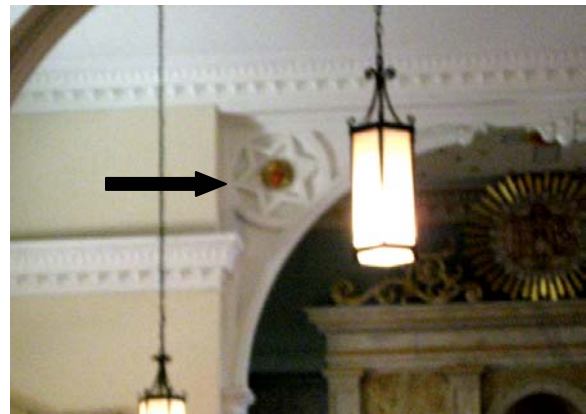
In September, my wife and I attended an Elderhostel course based in Albuquerque and Sante Fe, New Mexico that dealt with the Crypto-Jews of the southwestern United States. Since we had never been to New Mexico and were fascinated by the topic, off we went. What follows is a summary of what I learned while in New Mexico and from the research of others, in particular, Stanley M Hordes, Ph.D.

Spain ruled much of the Southwestern United States from the late 1400's until the mid 1800's. This region, along with Mexico, was known as New Spain. There is a touch of irony in that the people, mostly from Mexico, currently migrating, legally and otherwise, into the United States are considered intruders by many of us 'Anglos.' What makes this current historic human event almost bizarre is that many of these people are descendants of Jews from Spain and Portugal. Many of them continued Jewish practices and traditions until the present day. Most, but not all, are ignorant of their origins

Conversos were Jews who converted to Catholicism voluntarily or otherwise. Some, but not all, were Crypto-Jews. A Crypto-Jew is a Converso who converted or whose ancestors converted to Christianity, yet still secretly practices Judaism. In Europe more than in Islamic countries, Jews were not given the choice of conversion and were frequently subjected to pogroms. In Spain, Jews generally flourished, except for the occasional pogrom, and by 1490 were about 25% of the 4 million people in

Spain. In 1492, after King Fernando and Queen Isabel conquered the last of the Moors in Granada, the King, a sometime friend to the Jews, at the urging of Queen Isabel, officially expelled the Jews from Spain. Those that remained in Spain were required to convert to Catholicism. Many were forced to convert, and those showing any resistance were tortured and killed.¹

Many fled to Portugal, where they too were forced to convert. Burning at the stake was their common fate. There are reliable reports of bones being dug up from Jewish cemeteries and burned. These atrocities continued as the Spanish Inquisition persecuted many of these New Christians as apostates and heretics. Survivors were accused of going back to their old religion; and some did so in secret. In order to avoid prosecution many Conversos fled to the New World. The Inquisition followed the Conversos to New Spain and many fled to the north, They escaped the



Star of David set high on a Catholic Church wall

authority of the monarchy and the Catholic Church by fleeing to the most remote arable valleys of New Spain. This put them in most of New Mexico and the southern tier counties in Colorado by the mid 1500's. These Conversos were practicing Catholics whom the church deemed inadequate. While fleeing, they still attempted to show their loyalty to the church, so

¹ Another bit of historic irony is that the first Synagogue in central Europe was built around 100 CE, in the Rhine River Valley, then the boundary of the Roman Empire. This synagogue predated the first Church by almost 1000 years. The Jews were brought there by the Romans after the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem around 70 CE to fight the barbarians. Yiddish, a form of High German, had its origins with these people. It is not a derivative of modern German but linguistically developed along side it. The treatment of the Jews in Spain, by the Church and the Monarchy, was analogous to the treatment of the Jews by the Nazis in Germany and then in other countries. In both cases Jews were a productive and vital segment of the population.

many became Priests and Penitantes. When settled in communities, they had their church and priest and, as the years passed, things seemed normal. However, everyone one in every village knew which families were 'new' Christians. Many of these Conversos, Crypto-Jews, maintained Judaic customs by integrating them with church practices and festivals. A common practice was to place 6 petaled flowers, representing the Star of David, on grave stones. We were told that this region is unique in its celebration of Saint Esther. Esther was an Old Testament Jewish woman who became, by marriage to Xerxes, Queen of Persia. She then was able to convince the King from massacring all the Jews in the kingdom. The festival of Saint Esther almost always coincided with Purim which celebrate these events. In some villages families light candles, farolitos, each day for seven days preceding Christmas (Channukah – the feast of lights), while in some families candles were lit every Friday night, a Jewish practice welcoming the Sabbath.

It is important to note that these traditions were always passed from generation to generation by the women in the family.

Id like to finish this 'tome' by showing some photos I took of Churches in Santa Fe and in rural New Mexico and with a poem, *Something*, by a talented New Mexico poet, Joan Logghe,

Oh, and by the way, look at the guy mowing your lawn. He may be wearing a yarmulke under his baseball cap.

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Hebrew characters on an arch in Catholic Church

Something

Sophia had a secret even Sophia didn't know, Something about candles at night, no taste of pork in her grandmother's house. Something.

Shadowed memory of her grandmother in her dark bedroom, her voice nearly a whisper, "It passes down through the women." That and "Tell your daughter."

Something about the farolitos lined up, a top to spin. "Our family came from Spain, not Mexico, hundreds of years ago, you know. This is your great-grandfather, Israel.

See how handsome he was. " Sophia recalls it all, but mixed with other recollections, the smell of pine at Christmas, candles at mass, the sight of blood at butchering each fall.

Something about candles to Saint Esther. It didn't make sense. " We came here from Spain. Look hard at this photograph." Her mother's voice in the kitchen light, flour in the air

She'd tell her daughters something soon. She's been meaning to. For hundreds of years. She'll tell them soon. She will.

- Joan Logghe