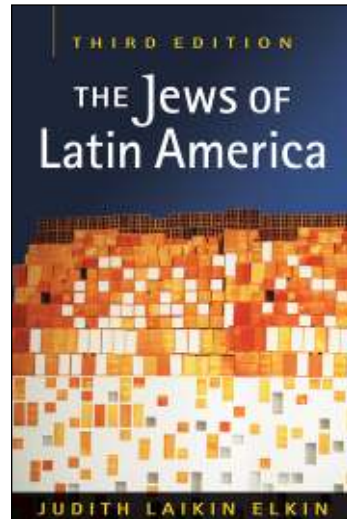


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# The Jews of Latin America

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Judith Laikin Elkin



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# The Jews of Latin America: The Historical Context

*Eden is located in the center of South America in a circle  
nine degrees in diameter, which amount to 160 leagues  
and a circumference of 460 leagues.*

—Antonio de Leon Pinelo, *El paraíso en el Nuevo Mundo*

Jews were not present at the creation of the Latin American republics. Nor were they a legal presence during the 300 years of colonial rule by Iberian powers that preceded the birth of independent states. Even after independence had been achieved, and despite the urgent need to find new homes, few Jews headed for Latin American destinations. Those who did, arrived into a conflictive environment where nationalists opposed immigrants generally, and non-Catholics specifically. Medieval stereotypes about Jews circulated freely, creating uncertainty about how to regard contemporary Jews. For their part, Jewish immigrants had to overcome a centuries-long alienation from Spain and Portugal, whose expulsion of Iberian Jews (the Sephardim) still rankled half a millennium later. In order for a Jewish Latin American experience to develop, Jews would have to be willing to acculturate, and societies would have to be willing to accommodate. The potential for this process, and limitations to the symbiosis that could be achieved, created tension and, ultimately, parameters around the Jewish experience in Latin America.

Spanish-Portuguese-Jewish history is four centuries longer and deeper than the 150-year presence of organized Jewish life in contemporary Latin America. This is why, despite the elusive nature of the theme, it is necessary to begin a narrative of modern times with a review of the historical context within which Jewish life in Latin America began.

## **Iberia**

Jews lived in the Iberian peninsula when it was a remote province of the Roman Empire. Before 1492, they functioned as a separate caste under Visigoths, Chris-

tians, and Moors, alternately integrated into general society and marginalized from it, subjected to periodic pogroms, but also serving as an incubator for talented individuals who then were tapped for high public office. Characteristically, special legislation ordained and circumscribed the Jews' participation in public life, protected them from excessive religious violence, and kept intact their communities in ghettos that were important sources of revenue for contending princes and princelings.

In 1391, the inflammatory preaching of religious zealots, unrestrained by the church, aroused popular zeal for the extermination of Judaism and the total Christianization of Spanish society. Pogroms erupted in Seville and, proceeding northward, forced the conversion of thousands of Jews. In 1412–1415, laws requiring Jews to leave their houses and quit their professions forced a wave of “voluntary” conversions, bringing into existence a new class of person: the *converso*, or New Christian.<sup>1</sup> Mass conversion created its own momentum, leading to voluntary conversions of a considerable number of Jews, probably because conversos were able to integrate themselves into Spanish life, whereas Jews suffered heavy legal disabilities. For the rich and well educated, conversion was an “open sesame” to lives of influence and public service. At a time when rationalism was challenging the religious beliefs of intellectuals, it may have seemed less important to retain one’s allegiance to “the dead law of Moses,” as the church called Judaism, than to collaborate with the dominant society in the creation of tolerable living conditions. Inter-marriage with the best families of the land became common, and by the sixteenth century there was scarcely a noble family in Spain without a converso connection.

Thousands of Spanish Jews, however, continued to adhere to their ancestral faith, and so the original body of Jewry divided into two groups living side by side: conversos and Jews. Related to each other by blood and marriage ties, the two groups found themselves cast into very different roles by society; yet their fates remained intertwined, for the church alleged that the Jews presented a threat to the adoptive faith of the conversos. In 1480, the Inquisition was formally installed in the peninsula for the purpose of inquiring into the faith of the recently converted. Riding the crest of authority accrued through their defeat of the Moors and the unification of Christian Spain, the Catholic Kings, Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon, wrested authority over the Inquisition, turning it into an instrument of the crown, not, as it was elsewhere, an instrument of the pope.

As the eight-hundred-year civil war of the Reconquest drew to its close, a thirst for religious as well as national unification gripped the victorious Catholics. Within weeks of the fall of Granada, last Moorish bastion on the peninsula, the process of sieving Jews out of Spanish life culminated in the Edict of Expulsion. The edict, issued on March 30, 1492, forced Spain’s remaining Jews to choose between conversion to Catholicism and exile from

Spain. Thousands of professing Jews now fled Spain for North Africa, Portugal, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire.<sup>2</sup>

Converts were allowed to stay on in Spain, and these now swelled the existing converso population. But the quality of the conversos' faith now became a matter for official inquiry. The Holy Office of the Inquisition, the institution charged with defending the Catholic religion and Spanish culture against heresy, operated on the assumption that many New Christians were not true Catholics, but rather Judaizers, practitioners of Jewish rites in secret: in short, heretics. Motivated by religious zeal and by greed—for the property of those arrested fell forfeit to the Holy Office and to those who denounced the alleged miscreants—the Inquisition moved against the conversos with all the combined power of church and state. Arrest without a right of habeas corpus; the application of judicial torture; bounty payments to informers; interminable periods of imprisonment without an opportunity to learn what charge had been brought, and by whom; all were standard operating procedure, and all were duly recorded in the *procesos* (court records) of trials. Every conceivable method for extracting confessions from prisoners was brought into play, and yet the *procesos* fail to answer the fundamental question of the true nature of converso belief. In fact, if it has been impossible to determine how many Jews became Christians, the number of New Christians who remained secret Jews can only be a subject for speculation.

Historians of the Jewish people who have memorialized the conversos imprisoned and tormented by the Inquisition have tended to operate on the same assumption as the Catholic establishment: these were secret (crypto-) Jews who had converted to save their lives and property, but they continued to practice their old religion in secret. Just who first called the conversos *Marranos* (swine) is uncertain, but the name stuck as a badge of honor. The name Marrano, intended to be pejorative, took on overtones of undying loyalty to the Jewish people, which, of course, was the essence of the Inquisition charge against them.<sup>3</sup> Conversos, however, were not at any time a cohesive group. There were, beyond doubt, genuine converts to Catholicism among them. Indeed, as early as 1499, the rabbis to whom such questions were addressed ruled that the Spanish conversos were voluntary converts and renegades and wrote them off as lost to Judaism.<sup>4</sup> The closing of Jewish religious academies, the flight of Jewish scholars abroad, the destruction of Hebrew books, all prevented conversos, whatever their inclination, from experiencing a genuine Jewish religious life. Their chief source of information about the Jewish religion came from the Bible in its Catholic version and the Edict of Faith, which the Inquisition issued periodically in order to exhort the Catholic faithful to detect and denounce Judaizers in their midst. Some stigmata noted in the Edict were bathing on Fridays and stripping the vein from the leg of an animal before cooking it. Consideration of such habits as heresy gives point to Benzion Netanyahu's remark that "the aim of

the Inquisition . . . was not to eradicate a Jewish heresy from the midst of the Marrano group, but to eradicate the Marrano group from the midst of the Spanish people."<sup>5</sup>

Following this line of thought can lead one to the conclusion that Mar-  
ranism in its origin was a myth that satisfied the very different longings of the  
Jews and of their tormentors: the Jews for heroes they could idealize, the Inqui-  
sition for grounds to arrest conversos and enjoy their property. Netanyahu's  
work on the subject opens with the question, "Who were the Marranos?" and  
quickly confronts the reader with the challenging response, "They were Chris-  
tians."

What, then, is one to make of the unrefuted record of murderous activity  
directed against the Marranos by the Inquisition? Why was the Catholic Church  
engaged in the business of killing Catholics? One explanation is that this was  
a result of class warfare against the rising middle class, many of whose mem-  
bers were conversos.<sup>6</sup> As with any political movement, the motives of those  
who harassed conversos may have varied between the ideological and the com-  
mercial. It is as incorrect to assume that all New Christians were crypto-Jews  
as it is to affirm that there were no Judaizers at all among them and that the en-  
tire case against them was conceived in paranoia and dedicated to greed.<sup>7</sup> Leav-  
ing this argument behind, Netanyahu suggests that rivalry with New Christians  
for preferment by the crown created an anti-Marrano bias that was undergirded  
by racism.

Looking for a quality common to all conversos, and at the same time so neg-  
ative as to support the issuance of harsh restrictive laws against them, the racial  
theorists believed that such a quality should be sought not in what the Marra-  
nos did or believed, but in what they were as human beings. This did not seem  
to be a difficult task. For what they were was determined by their ethnic ori-  
gin—or rather, as they put it, by their race. Since race, they maintained, formed  
man's qualities and indeed his entire mental constitution, the Marranos, who  
were all offspring of Jews, retained the racial makeup of their forebears. Hence  
ethnically they were what they (or their ancestors) had been before their con-  
version to Christianity; in other words, they were Jews.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever may have been the belief system of individuals who experienced  
conversion in their own flesh, any putative Judaism must have been very atten-  
uated among their descendants of the third, fourth, fifth, or sixth generations.  
Indeed, we know that the beliefs of individuals who admitted to Judaizing under  
torture were far different from the beliefs of normative Jews. Yet the definition  
of Jewishness has never been wholly confined within the limits of rabbinic law.  
While many descendants of converts embraced their new religion wholeheart-  
edly, some who lived as Catholics retained their loyalty to Judaism for genera-  
tions. Eventually, some of these crypto-Jews made their way to Holland or Italy,  
where they reverted openly to Judaism; such was the case with the family of the

philosopher Baruch Spinoza; the rabbi, politician, and seer Menasseh ben Israel; and the mercantile community of Amsterdam, from which Rembrandt drew so many of his subjects. Persons who consider themselves Jews, who act upon this conviction, and who suffer punishment for it cannot be defined out of the Jewish people by legal rulings. The texture of converso religious life, like the song the sirens sang, may be beyond conjecture. The operative fact for our present history is that the ambiguity of Marrano mentality in Spain obscures the history of “Jews” in the Spanish possessions overseas because we do not really know who they were.

The case was somewhat different in Portugal. Here there was no long drawn-out period of forced conversion alternating with voluntary conversion. In Portugal, Jews had lived in relative peace, and consequently, many of the Spanish refugees of 1492 crossed over into that country. Pressures soon began to be exercised against them, however. When the Jews resisted conversion, hundreds of their children were kidnapped, forcibly baptized, and sent to the island of São Tomé in the Gulf of Guinea to be raised as Christians.<sup>9</sup> With the accession to the throne of Emanuel III (1495–1521) and his engagement to a daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella, Portugal was pressured by the Catholic monarchs to rid itself of Jews as Spain had done. But Emanuel viewed “his” Jews as an economic asset and did not wish to lose them. Instead, he had them all forcibly baptized. Thus, on one night in 1497, one-fifth of the Portuguese population became New Christians, *cristãos novos*. By the end of the sixteenth century, the line between Old Christian and New was so unclear that in both Europe and Latin America the names “Portuguese” and “Jew” became synonymous.

It is a peculiar paradox of history that in the century leading up to these events, the Spanish prepared for themselves a set of rules to live by that ensured the survival of the old distinction between Jew and Christian long after there were no Jews left in the kingdom. This they did by developing and elaborating the concept of *limpieza de sangre*, cleanliness of blood, according to which all Jews, descendants of Jews, and persons penanced by the Inquisition, as well as all their descendants, carried a taint of impurity in their blood and were to be excluded from public life.<sup>10</sup> Thus a caste of persons came into existence—the conversos—who were no longer Jews, but who were not accepted as Catholics either.

The preoccupation with *limpieza de sangre* emerged among different population sectors in the Iberian peninsula in the fifteenth century. It became official policy during the reign of Philip II (1556–1598), by which time the standard of “clean blood” was being applied by the crown, the Church, the military orders, the universities, and all social strata according to their circumstances to the end of excluding the descendants of Jews and Moors from public life. New Christians were barred from holding office in any corporation, public or private. They were prohibited from entering an ecclesiastical career or joining a military order; they were barred from the university and from careers in medi-

cine or pharmacy. They could not negotiate on the stock exchange, and measures were under consideration to prevent their marrying Old Christians.

When Philip II brought Portugal under his rule, the policy of *limpieza* was extended to that kingdom as well as to all its dependencies overseas. By the end of the sixteenth century, it was popularly believed that neither the sacrament of baptism nor the practice of Christian virtue could change the fact of a person's Jewish origin. The ineradicable stain was in the blood, and there it stayed.<sup>11</sup>

Considering the pressures exerted on New Christians continually to prove and re-prove their religious orthodoxy and the increasing barriers placed in the way of their integration into national life, it would not be surprising had some of them looked abroad for new homes. As the age of exploration dawned, the newly united Spain was ready to play a role in competition with Portugal. A vision of redemption in far-off lands, of "lost tribes settling in New Canaans," can be drawn from certain apocryphal writings, particularly the Book of Esdras. Jews who continued to live within the Judaic tradition viewed messianism with suspicion, but it would not be surprising if New Christians, who had opted out of Jewish life but who were denied access to the messianic promise of Christ, picked up on quite a different vision of messianic deliverance. The age of exploration now dawning offered a surrogate religious experience by presenting the possibility of the founding of new societies that would prefigure the nobility and innocence of paradise. In such a vision, Catholic, Protestant, and Jew could share and share alike.<sup>12</sup>

The money that financed Columbus's first voyage of discovery was lent to Queen Isabella by conversos who were closely associated with the court of Aragon, after the Catholic monarchs had turned down the would-be explorer "for the last time." Columbus's first letter home was written, not to the king and queen, but to two of these patrons, Luis de Santangel, secretary of the exchequer to Ferdinand of Aragon, and Gabriel Sanchez, Ferdinand's treasurer general. Both were New Christians: Santangel's cousin had been burned at the stake, and he himself was saved from the Inquisition only by the intervention of Ferdinand.

Several historians and many history buffs have tried to draw from these and other circumstances the inference that Spanish conversos were actively looking for a new land where they could live in peace, even that the alleged converso Christopher Columbus was their agent in such a search; a torrent of speculation on this subject was let loose during the Columbus Quincentenary Year.<sup>13</sup> Conversos had chosen Spain and exile from Judaism in preference to Judaism in exile from Spain. Now that Spain was rejecting them, some emigrated to other Mediterranean lands, while others may have looked even further abroad for a resolution to the intolerable contradictions of their lives. The theory that the discovery of the New World had a converso (even a crypto-Jewish) hidden agenda is enticing. But proof, if proof there be, has been concealed with



all the cunning the conversos mustered in order to protect their identity and their lives.

### **The Spanish Indies**

If the conversos hoped that the age of discovery would open up new lands for settlement, the crown was equally intent that the new lands should remain free of any Jewish or converso taint. From the start, the monarchs attempted to apply the policy of *limpieza* to the Indies. As early as 1501, Queen Isabella instructed Nicolas de Ovando, governor of Hispaniola, to bar Jews, Moors, heretics, New Christians, and persons penanced by the Inquisition, and their children or grandchildren, from settling in the Indies.<sup>14</sup> Charles V repeated the order in 1522, singling out “recent Jewish converts.” The instructions were included in the comprehensive Laws of the Indies and were repeated frequently over the next three centuries, illustrating both the continued hostility of the crown to settlers of Jewish descent and the persistence of New Christians in their efforts to share in the destiny of their homeland. Those who arrived in the New World were technically illegal immigrants who were committing a crime merely by virtue of being there, and they were subject to action by the state and by the Inquisition if they were caught. Nevertheless, the intense pressures exerted in Spain and Portugal against persons of Jewish descent resulted in the flight of numerous conversos and crypto-Jews to the New World, where the opportunity for anonymity was considerably greater than at home. Those who managed to elude the authorities in their quest for survival sought only to disappear, and consequently left no written trace. What is known of them comes from the dossiers of the Inquisition.

Seven years after Cortes landed in Mexico, the first two persons fell victim to the policy of *limpieza* in the New World. One of these was Hernando Alonso, a blacksmith and ship’s carpenter who helped build the brigantines on which Cortes’s army embarked for the siege of Tenochtitlan (the site of present-day Mexico City, which at that date was situated in the middle of a lake). In the ensuing years, Alonso became a rancher and purveyor of meat to the Spanish army. Denounced for having rebaptized a child in wine and for having told his wife to stay away from church while menstruating, Alonso was convicted of Judaizing and burned at the stake in 1528.<sup>15</sup> The actions Alonso was accused of are not Jewish customs, nor is there evidence that he embraced any Jewish beliefs. On balance, his prosecution was probably more a political than a religious ploy, an attempt by the Dominican order to tame the power of the conquistadors, bearing out the judgment of historians that “the Inquisition was the instrument for [societal] control. To be sure, the Inquisition possessed a religious function . . . but, and this is the critical element, in both the Spanish and Portuguese empires, the Inquisition was subordinated from its start to a nonreligious political agenda.”<sup>16</sup> Characteristically, of the first supposed Judaizer executed in the New

World, we do not even know that he considered himself a Jew. The ambiguity of the Jewish presence within Spanish history was transferred to the New World intact.

The crown was committed to restricting immigration to the pure of blood, but like everything else that lay within the royal power to grant or withhold, permits of exemption could be bought. Exclusion was difficult enough to enforce, and exemption from the law provided a ready source of cash to the perennially empty royal treasury.<sup>17</sup> In 1509, the exclusion was partially lifted in consideration of a tax of 20,000 ducats. This benefit, extended for reasons of avarice, was periodically suspended for reasons of bigotry. Sometimes the effect of tightening the regulations was simply to drive up the price of the necessary certificate of *limpieza*. Also, because soldiers, sailors, and servants were not required to obtain a certificate, some conversos entered New Spain in these roles. Thus, despite the hazards, numerous persons of Jewish descent did in fact settle in New Spain (Mexico) by the mid-sixteenth century, but they lacked assurance that they could live out their lives there. What proportion of these were faithful Catholics, which ones were Judaizers, and how many remained in a state of syncretic transition is impossible to determine.

The occupations of conversos who came to the attention of the Inquisition in New Spain (a skewed sample, because not all conversos were denounced) indicate that they had come to the New World for the same reasons as everyone else: to earn a living and perhaps to strike it rich. Occupations of suspected Judaizers (*judaizantes*) included merchant, mine owner, ship's carpenter, purveyor of meat, monk, mortician, fencing master, clog maker, peddler, carpenter, miner, tailor, seamstress, innkeeper, breeder of pigs, pharmacist, clergyman, public scribe, confectioner, merchant to China, Dominican priest, buyer and seller of African slaves, mayor of Tecali, secretary, owner of a sugar mill, doctor, army captain, vicar general of Michoacan, dealer in cattle, farmer, silversmith, handyman, shopkeeper, juggler, weaver, jeweler, the owner of a hacienda, and the chief constable of Cuazualco.<sup>18</sup> The gamut of occupations reflected the conversos' earlier integration into the economy of their homeland and their subsequent integration into the economy of their adopted society, structured as it was by the Catholic Church and a system of agriculture based on slavery, which was condoned by the church and licensed by the state. It was considered less important to utilize the skills conversos brought to the new colony than to confine or expel the persons who practiced these skills. Women prisoners were listed by family relationship rather than by occupation. There is record of one who was the sister of a Jesuit priest and mother of a Dominican monk. Having been raised in a Catholic household and having raised her own children as Catholics was not a sufficient warranty that a conversa would be allowed to take her place in society.

The chief prize of the Holy Office of the Inquisition in New Spain was Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva, conquistador, pacifier of the northern frontier,

first governor of the province of Nuevo Leon, and faithful Catholic. He had been awarded a contract for the conquest and pacification of a vast territory stretching northwest of Mexico City; this contract, unlike most, did not specify that settlers going out with him had to produce certificates of *limpieza*. The governor recruited over a hundred of his relatives and friends to settle in Nuevo Leon, evidently ignorant of the fact that some of them were Judaizing, or perhaps calculating that, if they were, he was well advised to have them near, where he could keep an eye on them. These accompanied him, whether in the hope of improving their fortunes or in the hope that in that distant waste they could revert to their ancestral religion. Eventually, the Inquisition arrested, tortured, penanced, and executed most of the Carvajal family, including the governor's nephew and namesake, Luis de Carvajal the younger, who became a martyr to his Jewish faith. Another nephew, Gaspar, a Dominican monk and authentic Catholic, was convicted of abetting and protecting Judaizers but was allowed to repent in the privacy of his monastery. The governor, stripped of office, honor, and property, died in jail.<sup>19</sup>

Better known to Mexican history are conversos who succeeded in making their contributions in a Catholic mode. These may include Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz (1651–1695), author of lyric and mystical poetry, who was known in Mexico as the “Tenth Muse,” and the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagun, who compiled an encyclopedic work on Aztec culture that remains our primary source of information on that civilization.

The Inquisition was introduced into Peru in 1570, but found few Judaizers in its early years. During the period 1580–1640 (the so-called Babylonian Captivity, when Portugal came under the rule of Spain), numerous Portuguese entered the viceroyalty, among them conversos. According to Inquisition records, persons with the following occupations—some conversos, others not—were tried for Judaizing: merchants, peddlers, store owners, vendors, monks, doctors, writers, scribes, lawyers, candy makers, shoemakers, silversmiths, a swordsmith, brokers of African slaves, carters, sailors, soldiers, grocers, a bailiff, a judge, a mayor, and two professional card sharks.<sup>20</sup>

The largest group (twenty-two) identified in Inquisition records were merchants, the next largest (thirteen), commercial travelers. In the course of time, converso merchants came to control much of the trade of South America, buying and selling in international trade and in trade among the colonies—much of which was prohibited by the mercantilist policies of the mother country. Their wealth and conspicuous lifestyle proved their undoing, for eventually their Old Christian competitors moved against them by impugning their faith. In August 1635, eighty-one persons were arrested by the Inquisition, sixty-four of these for Judaizing. All those arrested as Judaizers who survived torture appeared at the great *auto-da-fe* four years later, when eleven of the prisoners were burned at the stake as impenitent heretics and the rest sentenced to varying terms of imprisonment, forms of penance, or service in the galleys.<sup>21</sup>

This event went down in Peruvian history as *la gran complicida* (the great conspiracy), but curiously, at the sermon delivered on the great square in Lima while the impenitents awaited their immolation, no mention was made of a conspiracy. Nor were the prisoners questioned in their cells about a conspiracy, as determined from proceso records. As all of the prisoners' considerable property fell forfeit to the Inquisition, any conspiracy that existed must have sprung from the minds of those who stood to benefit from the accusation.<sup>22</sup>

The destruction of the converso merchant community of Lima caused financial panic as creditors rushed to recover their debts before the Inquisition could sequester the property of those arrested, and conversos who had not been arrested fled the country. The Lima office of the Inquisition emerged as the wealthiest in the empire, but the viceroyalty was thrown into economic chaos. This was the climax of Inquisitorial activity against conversos in Peru. An office of the Inquisition was also opened in Cartagena in 1610, but it did a brisker business in witches than in Judaizers.

The southern cone of South America did not escape notice, despite its considerable distance from the metropole. Its economy may have been neglected by the Spanish crown, but the faith of its inhabitants nonetheless came under the scrutiny of the Inquisition, operating through its agents in Buenos Aires and elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> The most famous of its prisoners was the surgeon Francisco Maldonado de Silva of Tucuman, who was a crypto-Jew. Denounced by his pious Catholic sister, Maldonado de Silva became the most stiff-necked Jew in the dungeon of the Inquisition, writing religious tracts on scraps of paper and passing them along to other prisoners to encourage them in their resistance. Maldonado de Silva left no doubt as to his religious loyalties, for he circumcised himself, renamed himself Eli Nazareno, and fasted and prayed continually in his cell. After twelve years of imprisonment during which the Inquisitors alternately inquired into the tenets of his faith and forgot about him for long periods of time, he was taken out and incinerated along with participants in the so-called grand conspiracy of Lima.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Portuguese in Brazil**

Most New Christians who came to the New World were Portuguese rather than Spanish. In Spain, conversions forced and voluntary had been going on for a century prior to the advent of America on the European consciousness, and the descendants of Jews had largely assimilated by 1580. Jews who wanted above all to retain their religious faith had already left Spain when America appeared miraculously from out of the ocean. The Jews of Portugal (who included the Jewish faithful exiled from Spain) were forcibly converted in one blow in 1497; they were assisted in this by the fact that their children were converted first and they did not want to be separated from them. Under

the circumstances, the proportion who continued to practice Judaism secretly must have been large.

Confusion over identity occurred during the Babylonian Captivity, when Portuguese could freely enter Spain and the Spanish possessions. During this period, large numbers of Portuguese conversos crossed over La Plata from Brazil into present-day Argentina. From there, many worked their way northward up the smugglers' trail to Potosí (in present-day Bolivia), where rose the silver mountain that was the treasure-house of Spain and the tomb of countless Native American miners. Portuguese Jews who fled Brazil in the wake of Inquisitorial visitations built up the illegal commerce of Buenos Aires, importing West African slaves and exporting the silver of Potosí.<sup>25</sup> Everywhere the unwelcome commercial competition of the Portuguese won for them the contemptuous appellation *judeu* or Jew; consequently, it is unclear just how many of these merchants were in fact of Jewish or converso origin.

Considering Portugal's small population (perhaps one million at the time that colonization of Brazil began), it was sometimes deemed more expedient to banish heretics to Brazil than to forbid their going there. At various times, New Christians were prohibited or encouraged to emigrate from Portugal, each change in law being accompanied by a demand for a heavy fine on "the descendants of the New Christians of the Hebrew Nation of Portugal." The Portuguese were, after all, simultaneously trying to hold down Goa, Macao, Ceylon, and Angola. The result of this colonial policy, compounded of equal parts venality, valor, and vacillation, was that quite a few *cristãos novos* were enlisted in the cause of empire. These included Fernão de Noronha, who was a knight of the royal household and probably a voluntary convert and who brought an entire company of conversos to settle the land granted him by the crown; João Ramalho, notorious fifteenth-century castaway who, together with his multitudinous half-breed offspring, eased Portuguese penetration of the continent; Gaspar da Gama, a Polish Jew captured by Muslim traders and converted to Islam, who became a counselor to the Arab ruler of Goa, was subsequently shanghaied and baptized a Christian by Vasco da Gama, and later served with Pedro Cabral on the expedition that discovered Brazil;<sup>26</sup> and Tiradentes, the Toothpuller, who was a precursor of Brazilian independence and who was hanged for treason in 1789.

A large proportion of the white population of Pernambuco in the sixteenth century were probably Judaizers. They practiced a wide range of occupations, including owners and managers of sugar plantations and sugar mills, farmers, owners of boardinghouses. They had a synagogue (but probably no scrolls of the law) at Camaragibe. Apparently, many officials of the Catholic Church were conversos, as we know from the royal order prohibiting their assignment to Brazil.<sup>27</sup> Lay conversos were not barred from Brazil, but they remained subject to the Inquisition if they reverted to Judaism. Perhaps as a result of mixed motives, Brazil never had an autonomous office of the Inquisition; instead, inspec-

tors were sent out to Brazil periodically, and suspects were remanded to Lisbon for trial. A nuanced study of converso intellectuals such as Bento Teixeira (1561–1600), author of the epic poem *Prosopopeia*, who wound up in an Inquisition prison, and Ambrosio Fernandes Brandao, author in 1618 of the *Dialogos das grandezas do Brasil*, provides a novel insight into their mentality. Long dismissed as a poor imitation of Camões' *Os Lusíadas*, the *Prosopopeia* may be read as a call to fellow cristãos novos to resist Portuguese oppression.<sup>28</sup>

Records of the Inquisition's visitation to Brazil in 1618–1619 show that many Brazilian conversos were Judaizing and were in touch with the openly professing Jews of Amsterdam. That city was then a world trade center, and the relative tolerance of Calvinism had attracted Spanish and Portuguese exiles to Holland. Some families had branches in both Holland and Brazil, a factor that fostered trade between the two countries and kept the crypto-Jews of Brazil in touch with the living body of Judaism.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, it must be said that Brazilian conversos made the voluntary decision to stay where they were and to continue living as Catholics, giving point to Martin Cohen's observation that for some Sephardim, the choice of religion was situational.

A variety of adjustments were made by cristãos novos in Brazil. Perhaps none fitted into society as smoothly as those who lived in Bahia in the mid-seventeenth century. They comprised 20 percent of the white population of eight to ten thousand and attained positions of wealth and prestige at the core of society.<sup>30</sup> Twenty percent of conversos who were brought before the Inquisition were owners of sugar mills (*senhores de engenhos*) or merchants in the lucrative international sugar trade. Although the same laws of purity of blood that excluded conversos from public life in Portugal were supposed to prevail in Brazil as well, in fact cristãos novos served on the governing Camara and held posts in government and administration.<sup>31</sup> A full 32 percent of cristãos novos who were haled before the Inquisition were practicing a profession—lawyer, solicitor, scribe, judge, treasurer, tax collector—all occupations forbidden to conversos. Ownership of land and slaves conferred status, and apparently anyone who could acquire the means to live like a lord (*fidalgo*) was allowed to become one—though again, conversos were not legally allowed to become fidalgos. Intermarriage with Old Christians followed as a matter of course.

The cristãos novos were aided in their effort to assimilate by the desperate need for European manpower in the face of Native Americans who fled into the interior when threatened with regimented labor, and African slaves who died of too much regimented labor—at that time, the mill owners found it cheaper to replace slaves every seven years than to feed them adequately. The distance from the homeland and the size of the territory to be subdued placed a premium on European skills, which the Portuguese were loath to see go to waste. The converso who was despised at home automatically qualified on arrival in Brazil for a higher social status owing to his white skin and European upbringing. Why be a heretic, if one could be a lord?

The conversos, of course, were neither Jews nor foreigners, but baptized Portuguese. Having been brought up in the Catholic faith, neither they nor their parents had had contact with the living Jewish tradition. After the lapse of 150 years, they differed decisively from the Jewish people from whom they originated, even though some vestiges of "Jewish" behavior may have been retained.<sup>32</sup> Such a vestige might amount to no more than a futile gesture of protest, such as that of the *senhor de engenho* who caused to be placed in a shrine a statue of St. Teresa bearing the features of his own daughter who had been burned at the stake.

About 12 percent of *cristãos novos* in seventeenth-century Bahia were proletarian, including shoemakers, barbers, musicians, bakers, and sailors.<sup>33</sup> These tended to marry into the mixed castes and disappear from the record. The people most likely to run afoul of the Inquisition were the merchants and commercial travelers, who together made up 36 percent of the converso working population. Traveling between Brazil, Portugal, Holland, and the city of Hamburg (at the time a center for the international sugar trade), they might well have chosen to remain abroad beyond the clutches of the Inquisition. But even some of those who had been penanced preferred to return to their homes in Brazil rather than exile themselves in order to live as Jews.

In the second and third decades of the seventeenth century, the Dutch West India Company conquered the rich northeast coast of Brazil. It held onto Bahia for one year only, but retained Pernambuco, Recife, and Olinda for a quarter century. In each locale, the Dutch Reform Church was established, leading to a sometimes grudging grant of toleration to other religions. Thus it became possible for Brazilian crypto-Jews to move to Pernambuco or Recife and openly revert to Judaism. An unknown number, but not all, New Christians did exactly this (the Dutch destroyed their records before leaving Brazil). Those who were subsequently captured by the Portuguese were either hanged as traitors or sent to Lisbon for trial as heretics.<sup>34</sup> When the Portuguese reoccupied their coastal cities, Inquisitorial activity was renewed with a vengeance. Brazilian "heretics" (Jews who had been baptized but subsequently reverted to Judaism) were the staple participants in Portuguese *autos-da-fe* until 1769. During this period, probably four hundred conversos were tried and penanced; of these, eighteen were executed but only one was burned alive.

That one was Isaac de Castro Tartas, who went from Amsterdam to Dutch Brazil and then moved on to Portuguese Bahia. An enigmatic character, de Castro had a reputation as a brilliant scholar. A secret Jew, he adopted a Catholic lifestyle in Bahia but was arrested as a heretic and sent to Lisbon for trial. His defense was that he had never been baptized. (An unbaptized Jew was not a heretic, but a Jew, and beyond the jurisdiction of the Inquisition.) His inquisitors determined to their own satisfaction that he had been baptized, and he was burned alive for it on December 14, 1647.<sup>35</sup> The question of why a believing Jew would move from Dutch to Portuguese jurisdiction cannot be answered satis-



factorily. Perhaps he was eluding the forces of justice in Holland; perhaps, as claimed by witnesses at his trial, he wished to spread Judaism among the New Christians of Bahia. If the latter claim was true, there is no record that he made any converts.

A great loss to Portuguese literature was sustained through the execution of Antonio Jose da Silva, a young law student who was on his way to becoming a major playwright. Author of fables, humorous poetry, and raunchy comedies, da Silva was burned at the stake on October 19, 1739, while one of his plays was being performed at a local theater.<sup>36</sup>

It was left to the clever Marquis de Pombal to suggest to King Jose I that the distinction between Old Christian and New be officially wiped out. The destruction of records in 1773 ended the ability of government or church to discriminate, made it impossible for historians to trace the descendants of Portuguese conversos, and achieved what the Inquisition had claimed it wanted to achieve all along: the disappearance of the Jews and their descendants from Portugal and from Brazil.

### **Overt Jewish Communities**

Identifiable Jewish life appeared during the mid-seventeenth century in regions that were captured from the Spanish or Portuguese by non-Iberian powers. When the Dutch West India Company set its sights on the northeast coast of Brazil, Jews of Holland (some of them Portuguese by birth) participated as stockholders in planning the raids, went out with the expeditions as soldiers, and settled in the conquered areas.<sup>37</sup> How this invasion was viewed by New Christians living on the Brazilian coast became a tortured political question; at the time, the story was put about that the capture of Bahia was caused by New Christian treachery. To some, it seemed plausible that a Dutch invasion, bringing with it the promise of religious toleration, would be welcomed by the *cristãos novos*; the canard was enshrined in a play by Lope de Vega. But the charge was demolished three centuries later by the Brazilian historian Anita Novinsky, who has shown that *cristãos novos* living in Bahia participated in the defense of their own city and of Pernambuco against the marauding heretics (the Dutch Protestants) and their Jewish allies. Their contributions in money, manpower, and leadership were in rough proportion to their weight in the population and the economy. Furthermore, of twenty-two persons denounced by contemporaries as Dutch collaborators, just six were *cristãos novos*. A decade later, an inquest aimed at identifying clergy who had crossed sides during the war turned up eight Catholic priests, forty-eight Old Christians, and twenty-four New Christians.<sup>38</sup> Evidently, people acted according to what they conceived to be their own best interests, not some preconceived notion of what was required of them as a Catholic, a Jew, or a converso. This includes the bishop of Bahia, whose premature flight from the city triggered the panic that led to



Bahia's fall. Internal criticism of the bishop by those who knew what had happened "was smothered under a blanket of more public praise for his actions and simultaneous condemnation of New Christian treason."<sup>39</sup>

Once the Dutch established a foothold on the Brazilian coast, this New Holland attracted settlers from the homeland, including Jews. One group of two hundred Jewish settlers came out from Amsterdam in 1642 under the leadership of Rabbi Isaac Aboab. Shortly thereafter, they were able to gain official permission to establish a synagogue in Recife. A synagogue opened in Mauricia, probably another in Paraíba, and services were conducted in private homes as well.<sup>40</sup>

A census of Dutch Brazil taken in 1645 showed a total population of 12,703, of whom 2,899 were free white civilians. Perhaps half of these were Jews.<sup>41</sup> Hostility toward them began to develop as commercial competition in the little outposts became keener. Also, as Portuguese and Dutch learned each other's language, middlemen were no longer so important. Calvinist preachers who had opposed toleration from the start repeatedly urged the governor to close the synagogues. But successive Dutch administrations, intent on maximizing profitable trade, safeguarded the religious rights of their Jewish subjects—subject to the hazards of war and diplomacy. When the Dutch were driven from the Brazilian coast by the Portuguese Brazilians in 1654, the Jews had to evacuate with them. One hundred fifty Jewish families now returned to Amsterdam; others went elsewhere in the Caribbean; and twenty-three stragglers wound up in the port of New Amsterdam, where Governor Peter Stuyvesant reluctantly admitted them on orders from his stockholders back home. The congregation they formed, appropriately named Shearith Israel (Remnant of Israel), was the first Jewish congregation on Manhattan Island.<sup>42</sup>

The Dutch also captured Curaçao in 1634, and some Jewish refugees from Brazil headed for that island after a brief return to Amsterdam had confirmed their preference for tropical climes. Another contingent of twelve families tried to establish a farming colony on Curaçao. Failing, they turned to commerce.<sup>43</sup> Jews from Italy, Guadeloupe, Suriname, and Portugal also settled on this island, located conveniently offshore of Caracas, entrepôt for the introduction of contraband into the prohibited Spanish American market.<sup>44</sup> Thus, the first Jews to settle openly in the Western Hemisphere were Portuguese and Spanish-speaking Sephardim.<sup>45</sup> In 1715 they probably accounted for 36 percent of the white population of Curaçao. Working as sailors, navigators, merchants, slavers, and pirates, they dominated the island's shipping.<sup>46</sup>

This was a tightly organized community, determined to retain its religious heritage and cultural identity intact. Endogamous marriage was strongly encouraged; aloofness between different segments of society guaranteed that Jewish weddings would take place in a synagogue and that the children would be raised as Jews.<sup>47</sup> Cousin marriage was a continuous feature of these matches, as it was for the Portuguese of Brazil and the Sephardim of New York.<sup>48</sup> Despite

their economic integration, Jews were still being referred to by the Dutch government as “the Portuguese Nation” 150 years after their settlement on Curaçao. It was only after the Napoleonic emancipation that the Jews, now newly eligible for appointment to government positions, switched from the Portuguese language to Dutch in their synagogue.<sup>49</sup>

From Amsterdam, Curaçao, and other Dutch-protected areas, Sephardic merchants fanned out to other Caribbean islands and contiguous areas of the mainland, especially Suriname, which in the eighteenth century was the premier Jewish settlement in the Americas and arguably the most privileged Jewish community in the world.<sup>50</sup> Some settled in the British Antilles, notably Jamaica, which came under British rule in Oliver Cromwell’s time and thus is not usually included in the polymorphous term “Latin America.” Other groups established themselves, at least for brief periods, on Barbados, St. Croix, Nevis, St. Thomas, and St. Kitts; in Panama and Costa Rica; in New York City and Charleston, South Carolina.<sup>51</sup> By actions of July 17, 1657 and September 24, 1658, the States General of Holland recognized the Jews as Dutch citizens and defended them as such when any were captured at sea by Spaniards.<sup>52</sup> This became an important factor in the ability of Jews to engage freely in trade and shipping in the Caribbean area. The French monarchy granted Jews the privilege of settling in lands under French dominion in a series of *lettres patentes* issued from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century. Consequently, there were Curaçaoan Jews to be found in Guadeloupe and Martinique (where Brazilian exiles gave a stimulus to sugar manufacture), the Mississippi territory, French Santo Domingo (Haiti), and the Dominican Republic, which latter territory Spain ceded to France in 1795.<sup>53</sup>

Sephardic immigrants to Santo Domingo were well received, and they acculturated quickly. Arriving mostly as commercial travelers for Curaçaoan firms, they became involved in the financing of Dominican political and military ventures, particularly the war of independence from Haiti (1844). In a letter written in 1846, the president of the republic noted that the Jews attended church and made charitable contributions through ecclesiastical authorities while at the same time the church was praying for their conversion. That, concluded the president, would be achieved not by persecution but by sweet persuasion.<sup>54</sup> In the atmosphere of the republic, substantially *afrancesado* due to the period of French occupation, Masonic lodges provided a neutral meeting ground for Christians and Jews. The president and the Jewish merchant in whose defense he wrote his letter of toleration were lodge brothers. Accepted by society and prospering in trade, Jews married local women and raised their children as Catholics. As the president predicted, the conversion of the Jews took place through sweet persuasion, and their descendants are traceable among upper-class Dominican families through the twentieth century.<sup>55</sup>

In these outposts of empire, Jews, as whites, belonged partially to the upper class, separated from blacks by color and by legal status; but nowhere did they

enjoy the same political and social acceptance as other members of white society.<sup>56</sup> Their demographic profile did not differ significantly from the demographics of non-Jews, as Robert Cohen showed for the islands of Barbados, Jamaica, and Martinique. In the seventeenth century, all lives were grimly circumscribed by early death. Jews and non-Jews did differ, however, with respect to their long-term ambitions: wealthy non-Jewish merchants moved on to New England, planters tried their luck in the Carolinas. Wealthy Jews tended to remain permanently on the islands. Those who left “looked to the Old World” and—like the American Confederate Judah Benjamin—retired to London, which was then just becoming the hub of international commerce.<sup>57</sup>

Those who succeeded in establishing themselves under Dutch jurisdiction prospered as traders, middlemen, interpreters, and brokers of slaves. The Dutch West India Company monopolized the import of slaves, but private entrepreneurs, including Jews and conversos, ran the slave auctions and provided the credit that owners of sugar mills needed until the crop was brought in. In assuming the role of broker in the slave trade, Jews and conversos were operating within a system of international trade licensed by governments and sanctioned by the Catholic Church. Following Aristotelian thought, Catholics of the period accepted the division of humankind into superior and inferior races, the latter brought into being in order to serve the former. The Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English governments all sold licenses (*asientos*) allowing entrepreneurs to engage in the transatlantic slave trade. The costly license was eagerly sought by traders, the great majority of whom were Old Christians.

Later generations, repelled by slavery, rightly condemn the system from which European and American wealth was generated. But within the context of their times, New Christians and Jews who participated at the margins of the trade were operating within a system that they had not created and had no power to change. The Catholic Church approved of slavery (indeed, itself owned slaves); governments licensed it and made profits from the trade. Three hundred years later, it is unreasonable to indict particular individuals for moral depravity for operating within a legal system we now deem to be immoral. Rather, it demonstrates the distance humankind has come in the intervening years in recognizing the immorality of trading in human lives.

Many Sephardim who settled on Caribbean islands achieved substantial commercial success. This has been ascribed by Yosef Haim Yerushalmi to two major factors. The first of these was the maintenance of family ties between New Christians and avowed Jews; the second, that these family linkages facilitated access to mutually hostile areas of the colonial world, then being fought over by Spain, Portugal, Holland, and England:

Within world Jewry from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries the Sephardic and Marrano diasporas constituted, in both a metaphoric and an actual sense, a huge extended family. Acutely conscious of sharing a common

origin, historic fate, and collective identity, geographical distance alone could not loosen the close and intricate web of relationships that bound them together. Quite often these were real ties of blood and kinship. Within a given family some members might be living openly as Jews in Turkey and the Balkans, Italy and North Africa, while others were still “New Christians,” whether believing Catholics or crypto-Jews, in the Iberian Peninsula, in the New World, or in Portuguese India. The links among them transcended the religious and geopolitical boundaries that divided the Christian and Muslim worlds, or Protestant from Catholic countries. In this international solidarity lay at least one of the major sources of Sephardic mercantile success.<sup>58</sup>

Scattered as they had been by the hazards of expulsion, inquisition, and toleration, Sephardim grasped the opportunities for trade that were presented to them in the sixteenth century by the hostility between Christian Europe and the Ottoman Empire, and in the seventeenth century by the Dutch challenge to the Spanish-Portuguese hegemony in the New World.<sup>59</sup> The family linkages among Sephardim (of all religions or none) enabled them to navigate treacherous political currents to emerge as successful merchants at a time when international trade was still trammled by the mercantilist policies of the great powers. Naturally, there was from time to time a price to be paid, as when Jews of St. Eustatius were banished and their property confiscated because they forwarded supplies to the American patriots during the War of Independence against Britain.<sup>60</sup>

### **Latin America Achieves Independence**

Jews remained hesitant to enter Spanish America proper, even after the republics attained their independence in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. There existed for some years the real possibility of a Spanish intervention to regain control of the chaotic republics, in which case the Inquisition might have been reinstituted, as had been the case when the Portuguese retook the Brazilian coast from the Dutch. The independent governments moved with more or less deliberation to abolish the office of the Inquisition within their own boundaries, but it was more difficult to abolish the Inquisition mentality, which had had free rein in the dependencies for four centuries. What was abolished was the institutionalization of *limpieza*, the legal qualification for permanent residence and for holding office. Also abolished was the incitement to denunciation that the Inquisition had provided by rewarding informers with a percentage of the property taken from those they denounced. What remained was the stigma, embedded in the very language people spoke. For years, the Spanish word *judio* (Jew) was used to mean a miser, *hebreo* as a synonym for usurer, *Cohen* to mean a sorcerer or a bawd, and *sinagoga* to imply a conspiracy.<sup>61</sup> In similar vein, the *Pequeno dicionario Brasileiro da lingua Portuguesa* defined *Judeu* as “*Homem mau, individuo avarento ou negociista*” (an evil man, avaricious person, one

given to sharp practices). The Portuguese-English Dictionary published by Stanford University Press defines it simply as "Jew."

The Christian legend on which Iberian society had based its drive for purification was that there existed two inexorable enemies of Christ: the devil and the Jews.<sup>62</sup> Inevitably, it was assumed there was an alliance between the two. This ancient legend, transmitted to Latin America by missionaries sent to evangelize the Native Americans, was imposed upon pagans who had no idea what a Jew was, producing a situation where the concepts *judío* and *diablo* came to be synonymous.<sup>63</sup> European-derived peoples may be aware of countervailing, pro-Judaic legends, but in Mexican villages, Easter became an occasion for ritualized warfare between the forces of light and the forces of darkness, the latter personified by nude men painted as devils, who are called, plainly enough, "*judíos*."

It took a century of Jewish presence on the continent for offensive definitions of the Jew to dissolve. The respectable term for "Jew" became *israelita*. That has subsequently been changed to avoid confusion with citizens of the State of Israel, and "*judío*" returned to use.

As the nineteenth century progressed and Inquisition-based legislation was revised, Sephardic merchants moved outward from their homes in Curaçao, Suriname, Jamaica, Barbados, and other portions of the Antilles into other Caribbean islands and the countries of the Spanish Main. Surprisingly, a few individual traders and even some families of Curaçaoan Jews took up residence in two dozen Venezuelan towns. Five Colombian locations can also be documented.<sup>64</sup> Living apart from other Jews, whether by choice or by circumstance, many of these Sephardim intermarried, passing along their characteristic names to their Catholic descendants. Sephardic peregrinations were premodern in the sense that they characterized a mobile merchant class at home anywhere in the Caribbean; they retained their ties to Curaçao, returning there to marry or to die. Due to the number of men who married abroad, a surplus of unmarried Sephardic women remained on the island. This was one factor that kept the size of the mother community small; it numbered no more than a thousand at its height.<sup>65</sup> Folklore identifies Portuguese Sephardim as the founders of the contemporary Latin American Jewish communities. This may be true for lands of the circum-Caribbean and the Amazon region. Their numbers were never sufficient, however, to sustain the omnipresence attributed to them.

Folklore has it also that Marranos who survived the colonial period were the progenitors of contemporary Jewish communities. However, this is not, in fact, the case. Descendants of those who were not killed may well have survived physically, some even with memories of Jewish tradition, however distorted by the secrecy imposed upon them. But they survived as Catholics. A case in point is the family of Juan Lopez, burned at the stake in Lisbon for Judaizing. His family fled first to Valladolid, Spain, and then to Tucumán in present-day Argentina, where Juan's son, Diego Lopez de Lisboa, became *regidor*

*del cabildo*, or secretary to the town. Diego ultimately became chaplain and majordomo to the archbishop of Lima, Fernando Arias de Ugarte. One of his sons, Diego de Leon Pinelo, became rector of the University of San Marcos in that city. Another son, Antonio de Leon Pinelo, became *procurador* of Buenos Aires in 1621 and later was chosen to compile the official registry of all the laws of the Indies. There is no way the crown or the church would have tolerated in positions of trust these men, who were known to be New Christians, had their Catholic faith been in any doubt whatsoever. In 1650, Antonio completed his masterwork, *El paraíso en el nuevo mundo* (Paradise in the New World), in which he proved from the writings of ancient church fathers that the Garden of Eden is located on the banks of the Marañon, near the region of Iquitos.<sup>66</sup> For the Pinelos at least, the statement was true.

As victims of Spanish bigotry, Jews always attracted the sympathy of anti-Spanish and anticlerical factions. Individuals in revolt against their peninsular heritage, or seeking to escape the subordinate status assigned them because of their Native American heritage, may fashion themselves a new identity by activating their empathy with others who suffered at the hands of their common fatherland. For example, El Inca Garcilaso de la Vega, son of a Spanish conquistador and an Inca princess who was set aside in favor of a Spanish wife, came to terms with his dual heritage by writing the monumental *Royal Commentaries of the Inca*. But Garcilaso's first published work was a translation from Italian into Spanish of the *Dialoghi d'amore*, a book by the platonic philosopher Leon Hebreo, né Judah Abravanel, a Spanish Jew whose family had been expelled from Spain in 1492. The young José Martí, later to become the hero of Cuban independence, wrung from the University of Saragossa the right to offer Hebrew to fulfill his foreign language requirement. Descendants of conversos still living in Spain in the nineteenth century are said to have lent their talents and their fortunes to the achievement of Cuban independence.

The theme of the Jew who is not a Jew, and the Catholic who is not that either, is a familiar trope in Latin American history. At the end of the seventeenth century, one would have been hard put to distinguish New Christian from Old, due to intermarriage, disappearance beyond the frontier, and destruction of records. But even after the Inquisition ceased to function, the possibility that some people possessed a secret dual identity fostered suspicion. Throughout Latin America, aspiration to public office was certain to trigger an inquiry into one's *limpieza*, and not everyone could be sure what a thorough investigation of his lineage might turn up. The charge of racial impurity was viewed as a valid political ploy, and it retained its sting through the twentieth century.<sup>67</sup>

Considerable literature, both romantic and scholarly, has grown up around the effort to unravel the nature of the converso experience in the New World. Contemporary Latin American Jews are not the descendants of conversos, but the product of nineteenth- and twentieth-century migrations from Europe, Asia, and Africa. Consequent on the activities of the Inquisition and relentless pursuit of

the chimera of clean blood, all overt manifestations of a preindependence Jewish presence had been extinguished by the time the immigrants arrived. Intermittent press reports of the retrieval of Jewish ritual articles from forgotten corners of grandparents' homes are not proofs of a continuing existence of crypto-Judaism, but memorabilia carried across the ocean in the packs of nineteenth-century immigrants who discovered on arrival that discretion was the better part of valor, yet hesitated to throw away the candelabra and the ram's horns treasured by their parents.

In the waning years of the twentieth century, handfuls of Hispanics of the American Southwest, abandoning traditional reticence, came forward to confide that, like the conversos of the sixteenth century, they possess a unique mix of Catholic and Jewish identities. That is to say, in religiously wide-open America, they are crypto-Jews. Their claims have been both supported and refuted by researchers in a debate involving oral history, genetics, ritual practice, folklore, and commercial tourism. A picture emerges of a possible twentieth-century crypto-Judaic culture that may or may not be anchored in the sixteenth century.<sup>68</sup> The existence and identity of this culture lies beyond the scope of the present volume. Interested readers may wish to begin their exploration with the titles suggested in the endnote.

By the time independence had been achieved all across the continent, crypto-Jews, conversos, *cristãos novos*, and Portuguese all were passing into the realm of mythology from which historians are only now rescuing them. But the era left a distinctive heritage. No Jew would henceforth enter the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking republics without being aware of what had happened here in the past. The new republics would have to achieve independence, not just from Spain and Portugal, but also from the temporal power of the Catholic Church, before Jewish immigrants would be attracted to their shores.

That independence was not to be achieved for another two centuries or more, leaving a comparable time gap in the history of Jews on the continent. While individual conversos may have succeeded in establishing themselves during that period, Jewish life was interdicted and unable to emerge or to coalesce into a public entity.

### **Emergence of a Jewish Presence in Latin America**

The history of the Jews of Latin America begins in the mid-nineteenth century with the arrival of Jews from Europe, the Near East, and North Africa to the Latin American continent. In the pages that follow, Chapters 2, 3, and 4 take the reader through a century and a half of Jewish immigration, from the independence revolutions of the late nineteenth century to the closing off of immigration in the years surrounding World War II. Chapters 5 through 8 focus on the ways in which Jews made their homes in Latin America. Chapter 5 describes the agricultural experiment that became an important nexus between the immigrants



and their new world; colonies in Argentina, Dominican Republic, and Bolivia are examined. Trade, commerce, artisanal, and factory work in many countries across the continent are described in Chapter 6. The life of Jews in community and in transition to the larger society is the subject of Chapter 7. Jewish demography, a particularly elusive topic, is covered in Chapter 8. Condensed and enriched by new scholarship, these chapters comprise the first half of the book as it has evolved over the years.

Contemporary political and social developments throughout Latin America as these relate to Jews are subjects for the second half of the book. Chapter 9 examines the multiple roles of Israel—ideological, cultural, and political—in the lives of Central and South American Jews. In the closely linked Chapter 10, the alternation between attraction and repulsion to life in Argentina is examined. Cuba is contrasted with Brazil in Chapter 11 as a study in the parameters of success. Venezuela, Chile, and Mexico are grouped for comparison in Chapter 12, in an effort to delineate the conditions that support or limit Jewish life and what those conditions say about the majority society. The final chapter of the book discusses the increase of interest in Judaism as a religion that has accompanied disillusion and alienation from the State of Israel. It closes with an interim assessment of the vitality of emblematic community structures, accompanied by the effort to redefine the meaning of being Jewish in Latin America.

## Notes

1. Ben Zion Netanyahu, in *The Marranos of Spain*, estimated the number of forced conversions in 1391 at two hundred thousand, with an equal number converting voluntarily in the years 1412–1415 (pp. 241–243). He maintains this estimate against the challenges of other historians in *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth Century Spain*, pp. 1095–1102.

2. Historians traditionally estimated the number of Jews who went into exile at this time at from one hundred fifty thousand to four hundred thousand. The numbers were challenged by Henry Kamen, who believes that no more than eighty thousand Jews lived in all Castile and Aragon at that date, of whom possibly forty to fifty thousand actually left Spain in 1492 (“The Mediterranean and the Expulsion of Spanish Jews in 1492”). Some view this minimalization of the numbers exiled from Spain as a threat to Jewish history comparable to contemporary denial of the numbers of Jews killed in the Holocaust of World War II. See, for example, “Subverting Jewish History,” reported in *Latin American Jewish Studies Newsletter* 13:1 (January 1993): 7. However, Martin A. Cohen comes close to agreeing with Kamen: “The number of Jews who left the Peninsula in the wake of the Edict may have exceeded 50,000, although it is possible that only a minority left” (“The Sephardic Phenomenon: A Reappraisal,” in Martin A. Cohen and Abraham J. Peck, eds., *Sephardim in the Americas: Studies in Culture and History*, p. 2).

3. Contemporary persons who identify with this tradition and partake of its culture prefer to be known as crypto-Jews. However, where historians cited in the present work used the term *Marrano*, I quote them exactly.

4. Netanyahu, *Marranos of Spain*, pp. 211–215.

5. Ibid., p. 4.
6. Antonio Jose Saraiva, *A Inquisição Portuguesa* (Lisbon, 1956).
7. Martin A. Cohen, "Some Misconceptions about the Crypto-Jews in Colonial Mexico," p. 281.
8. Netanyahu, *Origins of the Inquisition*, p. 982.
9. Martin A. Cohen, *Usque's Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel*, p. 5. In 1995, citizens of the island of São Tome undertook an organized inquiry into their Judaic heritage (*Latin American Jewish Studies Newsletter* 16:1 [January 1996]: 5).
10. Albert Sicroff, *Les contraverses des statuts de "pureté de sang" en Espagne du Xve au XVIIe siècles*, p. 25.
11. Ibid., pp. 296–297.
12. Ronald Sanders, *Lost Tribes and Promised Lands*, p. 16. Sanders's provocative suggestion of a converso agenda to the voyages was probed by J. H. Eliot in his review of this book in the *New York Review of Books* of June 1, 1978.
13. "Jews and the Encounter with the New World, 1492–1992," a yearlong symposium at the University of Michigan directed by Judith Elkin, was among the international conferences held worldwide in 1991–1993 to mark the double quinqucentenary of the expulsion from Spain and Columbus's first voyage of discovery.
14. Charles Gibson, *The Spanish Tradition in America*, pp. 55–57.
15. Richard E. Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 26–40. See also Seymour B. Liebman, "Hernando Alonso," pp. 291–296.
16. Martin A. Cohen, "The Sephardic Phenomenon," pp. 47–48.
17. Henry Charles Lea, *The Inquisition in the Spanish Dependencies*, p. 193.
18. Seymour B. Liebman, *The Inquisition and the Jews in the New World*, pp. 50–54.
19. The literature on the Carvajal family is extensive. For modern renderings and extensive bibliography, see Martin A. Cohen, *The Martyr*; and Seymour B. Liebman, *The Enlightened*.
20. Gunter Friedlander, *Los heroes olvidados*, pp. 24–25.
21. Martin A. Cohen, ed., *The Jewish Experience in Latin America*, I: xlv–xlvi.
22. Judith Laikin Elkin, "Imagining Idolatry: Missionaries, Indians, and Jews," pp. 89–90.
23. Boleslao Lewin, "Esbozo de la historia judía de la Argentina," p. 39.
24. A full-length biography of Maldonado da Silva was written by Günter Böhm under the title, *Historia de los judios en Chile*, vol. 1: *Periodo Colonial: El Bachiller Francisco Maldonado da Silva*.
25. Charles R. Boxer, *Salvador de Sá and the Struggle for Brazil and Angola, 1602–1686*, pp. 80–81.
26. Elias Lipiner, *Gaspar da Gama: Um Converso na Flota de Cabral*, passim.
27. Arnold Wiznitzer, *Jews in Colonial Brazil*, p. 32.
28. "Como letrado, conhecedor dos subterfugios da linguagem, Bento Teixeira utilizou a escrita como forma de protesto," Lucia Helena Costigan, "A experiencia do converso letrado Bento Teixeira," p. 82.
29. Wiznitzer, *Jews in Colonial Brazil*, p. 146.
30. Anita Novinsky, *Cristãos Novos na Bahia*, p. 145.
31. Ibid., pp. 59–60.
32. Novinsky, "A Historical Bias," p. 132.
33. Novinsky, *Cristãos Novos*, p. 201.
34. Martin A. Cohen, *Jewish Experience*, I: lviii.
35. Ibid., I: lviii–lix.
36. George Alexander Kohut wrote about da Silva and other "Jewish Martyrs of the Inquisition in South America" in a now outdated article that was reprinted in Cohen,

*Jewish Experience*, 1:1–87. The article includes bibliographies of works by and about the dramatist.

37. Wiznitzer, *Jews in Colonial Brazil*, pp. 43–62.

38. Novinsky, “A Historical Bias,” pp. 146–153.

39. Stuart Schwartz, “The Voyage of the Vassals: Royal Power, Noble Obligations, and Merchant Capital before the Portuguese Restoration of Independence, 1624–1640,” p. 751.

40. Cohen, *Jewish Experience*, 1:xliv.

41. Wiznitzer, *Jews in Colonial Brazil*, pp. 129–130.

42. Wiznitzer, “The Exodus from Brazil and the Arrival in New Amsterdam of the Jewish Pilgrim Fathers, 1654,” 1:329.

43. Frances P. Karner, *The Sephardics of Curaçao*, p. 9.

44. Isaac S. Emmanuel, *Jewish Education in Curaçao*, p. 1.

45. There are three major groups within the Jewish people: the Sephardim, who are descendants of those expelled from Spain and Portugal and who preserve their ancient homelands in their languages, Portuguese and Ladino (a compound of Hebrew and of fifteenth-century Castilian); Oriental or Arabic-speaking Jews who are often, in the Latin American context, grouped together with the Sephardim; and Ashkenazim, Yiddish-speaking Jews from eastern and central Europe, the majority stock of the Jewish communities of the Americas.

46. Isaac S. Emmanuel and Suzanne A. Emmanuel, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles*, 1:115.

47. Karner, *Sephardics of Curaçao*, p. 12.

48. For Brazil, see Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves*; for Sephardim in New York, see Steven Birmingham, *The Grandees*.

49. Harry Hoetink, *The Two Variants in Caribbean Race Relations*, p. 115. The term “La Nacion” is still sometimes used to denote Caribbean Jewry.

50. And possibly the most intensively studied. A short list of references includes Robert Cohen, *Jews in Another Environment: Surinam in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century*; Robert Cohen, ed., *The Jewish Nation in Surinam*; and Wiele Vink, *Creole Jews: Negotiating Community in Colonial Suriname*.

51. Mordecai Arbell, *The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean: The Spanish-Portuguese Jewish Settlements in the Caribbean and the Guianas*.

52. Emmanuel and Emmanuel, *Netherlands Antilles*, 1:99.

53. *Ibid.*, 1:831.

54. Harry Hoetink, *El Pueblo Dominicano, 1850–1900*, pp. 49–50.

55. Harry Hoetink, “The Dominican Republic in the Nineteenth Century,” p. 101.

56. Robert Cohen, “Early Caribbean Jewry: A Demographic Perspective,” p. 123.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

58. Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, “Between Amsterdam and New Amsterdam: The Place of Curaçao and the Caribbean in Early Modern Jewish History,” p. 178.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

60. Mordecai Arbell, *La Nación: The Spanish and Portuguese Jews in the Caribbean* (unpaginated).

61. Luis Karduner, “La eliminacion de las acepciones peyorativas del diccionario de la lengua espanola,” *Comunidades judias*, 1971–1972, p. 256.

62. For a book-length exposition of this phenomenon, see Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews*.

63. For a representative sample of sixteenth-century sermons against the Jews, see Elkin, “Imagining Idolatry,” *passim*.

64. Emmanuel and Emmanuel, *Netherlands Antilles*, 2:822.

65. Hoetink, *The Two Variants* . . . , p. 114.

66. Antonio de Leon Pinelo, *El paraíso en el nuevo mundo*.

67. This is a game anyone can play. One Jewish savant published a book purporting to prove Jewish ancestry for most of the anti-Semitic politicians and generals in Argentina.

68. Stanley M. Hordes, *To the End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico*; David M. Gitlitz, *Religion of the Crypto-Jews*; Seth D. Kunin, *Juggling Identities: Identity and Authenticity among the Crypto-Jews*.