

Santa Cruz de la Sierra and its Jewish Colonial Legacy

Francisco Roig; David Reichsfeld

This paper will be published in Spanish in the *Revista de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales*, Vol. 15, N° 1-2 (June – December 2009). ISSN 1819-0545. Francisco Roig holds a BA in International Affairs from The George Washington University and a MBA from American University (e-mail: francroig@hotmail.com). David Reichsfeld holds a BA in Economics from the University of Maryland and a MA in International Economics and Finance from Brandeis University (e-mail: david_drm@hotmail.com). Translated by Dr. Inés Azar.

SUMMARY

Santa Cruz de la Sierra is Bolivia's economic hub and its most populated city; it is also one of Latin America's fastest growing urban areas, with more than 70 per cent of its population living above poverty level. Its modern architecture and broad avenues make home to approximately two million people, from very diverse backgrounds, who have built a very unique society in the heart of South America. This vibrant and ethnically diverse city was, only fifty years ago, an impoverished, isolated frontier town of approximately 40,000 inhabitants who carried, often unknowingly, the legacy of many of the city's founders, who were of Jewish origin. This article intends to unveil some facts of this interesting legacy, and encourage further research on the subject.

Spain, the Homeland of the Sephardic Jews

Spain was home to the World's largest Jewish population during the Middle Ages (Bell, p. 36). It was during the Roman Empire that Jews started to settle in the Iberian Peninsula. As centuries passed, the number of Jews grew throughout Spain, giving birth not only to large Jewish quarters (*juderías*) in major cities like Barcelona, Toledo, Gerona, Sevilla, Segovia, Cádiz, Valencia, Trujillo, Córdoba and Granada, but also to Jewish communities in small cities like Béjar, Hervás, Talavera de la Reina and Castrojeriz, and even in rural areas.¹ Spanish Jews and their descendants are also known as Sephardim, word derived from "Sepharad," which in Hebrew means "Spain."

¹ Sachar, p. 59; Pérez, pp. 56-59, 139, 182; Hervás, pp. 277-291; De Los Ríos, pp. 596-602.

During the periods of Muslim domination and of wars between Christian and Moorish kingdoms, Jews lived in both Christian and Muslim cities. Many of them stood out as writers, physicians, philosophers, merchants, architects, engineers, artisans, musicians, etc. They became increasingly integrated into Spanish society, to the point of adopting its language and customs. Towards the end of the Middle Ages, Spain's Christian kingdoms pressured Jews, with increasing force and violence, to convert to Catholicism. This was a sad period in the history of Spain that ended in 1492 with the expulsion of all Jews who had not converted to Catholicism (Sachar, p. 73).

Throughout the 15th Century, the Sephardim were persecuted, and most of them converted to Catholicism voluntarily or by force, which allowed them to remain in Spain. Nevertheless, for these New Christians, persecution did not stop after conversion. As many of them and their families started accumulating wealth and gaining influence in Spain's Catholic society, the Inquisition began to question the truthfulness of their conversion and subjected them to unfair investigations, cruel torture and in many cases sentenced them to life in prison or even to death. The New Christians were called *conversos* (Spanish for "convert") or, as an insult, *Marranos* (Spanish for "swine"), as they were often suspected of having converted only to avoid persecution and thus of secretly maintaining their Jewish faith.

The *Converso* Diaspora

During those difficult times, thousands of *conversos* found themselves forced to leave their native Spain to settle in Portugal, Flanders (today Belgium), the Netherlands, North Africa, and some French, British and Italian ports. Others were able to bypass a number of discriminatory requirements, such as those of "*Limpieza de Sangre*," ("Purity of Blood"), and embarked into the ships going to the Spanish and Portuguese new colonies in the Americas.² The most common way to bypass detection was to get on the boats as sailors, or to go to the New World as servants of an Old Christian, because lower posts such as these did not require proof of Purity of Blood. A few influential *conversos* were able to bypass this requirement through their connections with the nobility. Such was the case of Pedro Arias Dávila, governor of Castilla del Oro and Nicaragua (today Panamá, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and part of Colombia) and founder of the City of Panamá. Arias Dávila belonged to one of Spain's most influential *converso* families, and was married to the granddaughter of the Marquise of Moya and Peñalosa, an intimate friend of the queen Isabella the Catholic.³

These *conversos* ended up settling in the burgeoning, most promising towns of the New World, in a quest for freedom and a better life. In *Farewell España*, Howard Sachar provides two illustrated maps showing the main destinations of Sephardic Jews during

² *Limpieza de Sangre* were statutes, established in Spain in the 15th Century, which banned *conversos* and their descendants from occupying any post in the most powerful institutions in the realm: the Church, the military, and government (Sicroff's book is dedicated to this subject). Furthermore, a number of orders were periodically issued forbidding descendants of Jews to live in the New World (Finkelstein, p.19).

³ Cf. Norman Roth, pp 120-124; Cantera Burgos (the book is fully dedicated to the subject).

the 15th, 16th and 17th Centuries. Starting on the second half of the 16th Century, one of these destinations was Santa Cruz de la Sierra in what is today Bolivia (Sachar, p. 387).

The Founders

Santa Cruz de la Sierra was founded in 1561 by the Spanish conquistador Ñuflo de Chaves, who had left Asunción del Paraguay and crossed the Chaco plains to establish the northernmost settlement in the Spanish conquest of the Río de la Plata region. Chaves named the city in honor of his Spanish native town near Trujillo in Extremadura. Many *conversos* were among the pioneers who, together with Ñuflo de Chaves, crossed the dry pampas and shrub lands of El Chaco and moved 1,000 kilometers north of Asunción del Paraguay to Santa Cruz de la Sierra (Mangan, p. 99).

The small city of Santa Cruz was the most isolated outpost of the Spanish colonial frontier in South America. In its nearest surroundings there were no mines to exploit silver or gold, nor highly developed indigenous civilizations as in Peru or Mexico. Moreover, the fierce indigenous Guarani tribes and the neighboring Bandeirantes from São Paulo constantly attacked the small settlement. Nevertheless, the village strived, moving to three different locations further west until settling in its current location on the pampas, east of the Piráí River.

Many of the *converso* founders of Santa Cruz de la Sierra came from Spanish cities such as Toledo, Ávila, Béjar, Trujillo and Cádiz. These cities were known for having sizable Jewish communities and for hosting numerous mass conversions both before and after the establishment of the Inquisition.⁴ Most, if not all, of these *converso* settlers were well-educated, or at least literate, and used last names different from those of their ancestral families. Their new last names were, in many cases, the names of cities and towns in Spain and Portugal, regardless of whether they were or not their places of birth (Terceros Banzer, pp. 14-107).

Strikingly interesting is also the fact that several of the first settlers and explorers of Santa Cruz de la Sierra and its vicinities were actually born in Portugal and Flanders (mainly Antwerp), and a few others came from Italian, French and English ports (Terceros Banzer, pp. 14-107). Evidence of their *converso* origin comes from the fact that most of them had Spanish last names, as opposed to Flemish, Italian, French or English. This was a typical feature of Jews of Spanish origin who converted to Catholicism and escaped Spain to settle in the areas mentioned above, which during some periods were more tolerant to their religion and customs (Cecil Roth, pp. 236-251).

Exiles and Fugitives from the Inquisition

In January of 1570, the Court of the Spanish Inquisition was established in Lima, and began the persecution of *conversos* suspected of being Judaizers (Gitlitz, p. 59). This was

⁴ Cf. Norman Roth, pp 174-175; Hervás, pp. 277-291; Pérez, p. 182.

a severe, devastating attack on the families of *conversos* who had gained wealth and social standing as businessmen in mining, trade, and manufacturing in the booming cities of the Viceroyalty of Peru, mainly Lima and Potosí. One of the most notable *conversos* to become a victim of the newly established Inquisition Tribunal was Manuel Bautista Pérez, also known as *El Gran Capitán*, who during the early 17th Century was considered to be the wealthiest man in Lima. In 1639, the tribunal found him guilty of secretly practicing Judaism, seized all his possessions, and burnt him at the stake (Cohen, pp. XLVI-XLVII).

By the late 16th century, *conversos* suffered continued discrimination in Lima, Potosi, and other cities of importance such as Charcas (today Sucre) and La Paz. As a result, they flocked to Santa Cruz de la Sierra because it was the city farthest away from the reach of the overzealous authorities (Mangan, p. 99). This was the second wave of *conversos* who settled in Santa Cruz de la Sierra and its growing frontier.

During this period, several settlements were established in the jurisdiction of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, most of them with this flow of families coming from the rich mining cities to the poorest and most isolated frontier. In 1590, San Lorenzo de la Frontera was founded on the right shore of the Guapay River; in 1595 it was moved to the Punta de San Bartolomé on the eastern shore of the Piraí River. Finally, in 1621, both Santa Cruz and San Lorenzo merged together into one city (Peña Hasbún, pp. 21-22), now known as Santa Cruz de la Sierra. In 1612, the city of Vallegrande was founded on the route from Potosí to Santa Cruz, and was immediately settled by several families coming from Lima, La Paz, Potosí and Charcas. Many families of Jewish origin settled in Vallegrande, and many others continued their way to Santa Cruz and its surrounding villages (Hubsch Neumann, p. 13). From these three towns, several families moved further into the valleys and open plains of what today is the department of Santa Cruz, establishing towns such as Samaipata, Chilón, Pampa Grande, Postrevilla, Pucará, Cotoca, Portachuelo, Paurito, Comarapa, Terebinto, and others, which date from colonial times. And as these towns grew larger, many families went on to populate most of the departments of Santa Cruz, Beni, Pando and parts of Tarija, where they founded new settlements or established themselves in former Catholic missionary settlements.

There are written testimonies and evidence, dating from the colonial period, which demonstrate that Santa Cruz was not only the destination of *conversos*, who out of prudence abandoned the rich mining cities of Alto Perú, but also of fugitives from the Inquisition and convicts that the Inquisition had condemned to exile. Many who were persecuted in the Andean cities looked for refuge in the places that were farthest away from the Spanish authorities, which according to the Viceroy Francisco de Toledo were Santa Cruz and Tucumán (García Recio, p. 422).

But it is even more striking the fact that the Inquisition, so strict with those *conversos* who maintained in secret their Jewish faith, would sentence convicted Judaizers to serve as soldiers in Santa Cruz. This was the case of a man from Seville, who lived in Cuzco and was condemned to serve in the frontier of Santa Cruz in 1599, a few years after the foundation of San Lorenzo (Medina, pp. 288-291). The euphoria caused by the legendary

wealth of the mines of Potosí made it undesirable to migrate to a place as poor, isolated and dangerous as Santa Cruz. The Spanish authorities had to resort even to Inquisition convicts to populate the new settlements, commuting on occasion their forced labor in the galleys or death sentence (typical punishment for Judaizing *conversos*) in exchange for serving as soldiers in the frontier of Santa Cruz (García Recio, p. 422). Whether they came alone, with their families, by their own will, as fugitives, or to lessen their sentences, these *conversos* of the second migration found a new home in Santa Cruz.

The Pioneer Woman and Marriage in the Frontier of Santa Cruz

It is worth noting that, although there were Spanish women (some of them probably *conversas*) among the first inhabitants of Santa Cruz, they were few. The colonizers were mainly men. This must have also been the case of *converso* men, who probably built their families, for the most part, with *Mestizo* (mixed European and Native) and Native women. The *Mestizo* population of Santa Cruz grew rapidly in the first years of the colony. The *Cruceño* woman (“woman from Santa Cruz), who combined together the knowledge of both Native and Spanish women, was the source of ethnic and cultural mixing. The survival of the incipient towns depended on women, for they were in charge of everything during the long periods when men were engaged in warring and discovering activities (Peña Hasbún, pp. 41-42).

The leading role of the *Cruceño* woman has been apparent since the birth of Santa Cruz: Elvira de Mendoza, a famous *Cruceño* woman from colonial times, is considered as equal in bravery as the Conquistadores. From the very beginning, women took charge of the family finances, children’s education, religious practices, and the transfer of knowledge within the family (Peña Hasbún, pp. 41-42).

From the first generations, when *Cruceños* married, they paid no attention to the rules of the Catholic Church prohibiting marriage between relatives within four or less degrees of consanguinity. Moreover, marriages among relatives were so generalized that in 1684 the Bishop of Santa Cruz wrote a letter to the Spanish King alerting him to the gravity of the situation. But all of Santa Cruz inhabitants were, in one way or another, related, and if they were not allowed to marry each other, concubinage would have probably been rampant. Therefore, the solution was to use a privilege given to the Jesuits—who had arrived in 1587—to allow “neophytes”⁵ to marry among themselves up the second degree of consanguinity and first degree of affinity. Thus, marriage among relatives continued to be common until the middle of the 20th Century⁶. Interestingly, marriage between close relatives was characteristic of *converso* communities of Sephardic origin who secretly practiced Judaism (Caro Baroja, p. 64)

⁵ Term used to refer to individual who had recently converted to the Catholic religion.

⁶ With respect to the incidence of endogamy in Santa Cruz and the Catholic Church response to it during the 16th and 17th Centuries, see García Recio, pp. 429, 458 and 462.

Jenecherú, the Fire that Never Dies

It is interesting to note that some traditions that were maintained in Santa Cruz throughout the centuries are typical of the *conversos* who, during colonial times, secretly practiced the Jewish religion.⁷ For example, many traditional families (especially in the rural areas) still light candles on Friday evenings. In the first half of the 20th Century, travelers report about Santa Cruz homes where seven branched candlesticks were kept as family heirlooms and where some vestiges of kosher food practices were preserved simply as family traditions (Mangan, p. 99).

In Santa Cruz, the traditional way to kill an animal and prepare it for cooking is to slit his throat and jugular vein and to bleed him out. Once the blood has been drained on the soil and the remaining blood has been coagulated, the butchering begins. This way of slaughtering is still practiced in the countryside among some old families of the region who have maintained the tradition for centuries, probably unaware that the Jewish religion requires slaughtering animals in a similar way before preparing them for cooking. Most meat products are salted, completely drained of blood, and stored as “charque” (dry salted meat). The traditional cuisine of Santa Cruz is notorious for the absence of pork dishes,⁸ so abundant in the rest of Bolivia and Latin America. We must remember that the consumption of pork is prohibited in the Jewish religion.

In addition, most *Cruceño* cuisine dishes combine vegetables and grains with either milk or meat products, but never with both of them together. Thus, if rice is to be prepared with milk products, as the traditional “arroz con queso”, it will include milk, butter and cheese, but not meat. In turn, if the rice is meat based, as the traditional “majau”, it should include no milk products.

Historically, it has been assumed that many of the old families of Santa Cruz are of Jewish descent (Montero Hoyos, pp. 77-78), and even today several traditional Catholic families of Santa Cruz and Vallegrande acknowledge with pride their Jewish heritage (Hubsch Neumann, p. 13). Some archeological evidence of this heritage can be found in isolated towns with a historic association to *converso* families, such as Pucar, where we can still admire a number of house street doors, dating from colonial times, with stars of David carved on them (*Naturalia*, Winter 2008, 4-5). Or, as in the case of Postrervalle, where the villagers walk every Saturday to a nearby cave to light candles to the Virgin Mary in a perfectly syncretic practice that blends the Jewish tradition of some of their ancestors and the rituals of their long-standing Catholic faith (Rueda Pea). It is also worth noting that Our Lady of Mercy (September 24th) and Easter, two major religious festivities profusely celebrated in Santa Cruz and its towns since colonial times, often coincide, respectively, with Yom Kippur and Passover.

⁷ For these traditions we researched a number of sources but our main ones are Gitlitz (1996) and Hordes (2005).

⁸ The only exception to this is the cuisine of Vallegrande, which given its easy access to Charcas, was influenced by the Andean cuisine.

Conclusion

It would be erroneous to say that all early inhabitants of Santa Cruz de la Sierra and its surrounding towns were of Jewish origin. In colonial times, this region, known as Bolivia's melting pot, had also Spaniards descended from old Christian families, Guarani, Chiquitano and Chané natives, as well as others, for whom being sent to these remote lands was a form of punishment or a way of keeping them away from major Spanish colonial cities.⁹ Nevertheless, the Jewish heritage brought by the *converso* pioneers of Santa Cruz is an essential component of the city's founding that has set deep roots in the local society.

Santa Cruz de la Sierra has a history of inclusion and admixture of peoples from different cultures, religions and ethnic backgrounds. Its birth as a land of outcasts, adventurers and warring natives, too far away to be under the close scrutiny of the Spanish authorities, produced a society of rather independent and entrepreneurial individuals who adapted to their environment and built a distinct society. The *conversos* and their descendants are an important component of the multiethnic mosaic that constitutes Santa Cruz, and their legacy is still vivid today.

Bibliography

- Bach, Moritz, Letter written from Santa Cruz de la Sierra on January 15, 1842, in *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Erdkunde*, Vol. 2, N° 12, 1842, pp. 542-546.
- Bell, Dean Phillip. *Jews in the Early Modern World*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2008.
- Cantera Burgos, Francisco. *Pedrarias Dávila y Cota, capitán general y gobernador de Castilla del Oro y Nicaragua: sus antecedentes judíos*. Madrid: Universidad de Madrid, Cátedra de Lengua Hebrea e Historia de los judíos, 1971.
- Caro Baroja, Julio. *La sociedad criptojudía en la corte de Felipe IV*. Madrid: Imprenta y Editorial Maestre, 1963.
- Cohen, Martin, ed. *The Jewish Experience in Latin America*. Waltham, MA: American Jewish Historical Society, 1972.
- De Los Ríos, José Amador. *Historia social, política y religiosa de los judíos de España y Portugal. Tomo III*. Madrid: Imprenta de T. Fortanet, 1876.
- Finkelstein, Norman F. *American Jewish History*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2007.
- García Recio, José María. *Análisis de una sociedad de frontera. Santa Cruz de la Sierra en los siglos XVI y XVII*. Sevilla, 1988.

⁹ In a letter dated in 1842, Moritz Bach reports that during the reign of Charles V of Spain several Spanish families had been expelled to Santa Cruz for "political reasons"; moreover, Santa Cruz has a history of been a common destiny for expelled individuals.

- Gitlitz, David M. *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996.
- Hervás, Marciano de. *Judíos y cristianos nuevos en la historia de Trujillo*. Badajoz: Marciano Martín Manuel, 2008.
- Hordes, Stanley M. *To the End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- Hubsch Neumann, Francisco. "Judíos en Bolivia," *El Deber*, Santa Cruz, September 23, 2001.
- Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE): <http://www.ine.gov.bo/default.aspx>.
- Mangan, Sherry. "Storm Clouds Over the Bolivian Refuge: South America's New Pattern of Anti-Semitism," *Commentary*, Boston, August, 1952,
- Medina, José Toribio. *Historia del Tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición de Lima. 1569-1820*. Tomo I. Santiago: Imprenta Gutenberg, 1887.
- Montero Hoyos, Sixto. *La familia ñufleña. Episodios de la vida de Santa Cruz de la Sierra*. Santa Cruz, 1943.
- Naturalia, Journal of the Natura Bolivia Society*, Santa Cruz, 2008.
- Peña Hasbún, Paula. *La permanente construcción de lo cruceño*. Santa Cruz de la Sierra, 2009.
- Pérez, Joseph. *Los judíos en España*. Madrid: Marcial Pons, 2005
- Roth, Cecil. *A History of the Marranos*. New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1932.
- Roth, Norman. *Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.
- Rueda Peña, Mario. "Los judíos de Vallegrande," *El Deber*, Santa Cruz, November 23, 1995.
- Sachar, Howard Morley. *Farewell España, The World of the Sephardim Remembered*. New York: Random House, 1994.
- Sicroff, Albert, *Los estatutos de limpieza de sangre*. Madrid: Taurus, 1985.
- Terceros Banzer, Marcelo. *Al margen de mis lecturas*. Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia: El País, 1998.

Translated by Dr. Inés Azar

Translation from **Revista de Humanidades y Ciencias Sociales**, vol.15, n. 1-2, pp. 103-114, (June – December 2009).