

Hidden Heritage

The Legacy of the Crypto-Jews

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS
Berkeley • Los Angeles • London

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Crypto-Jewish Descent

*An Ethnographic Study
in Historical Perspective*

The year 1992 marked the five-hundred-year anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. With the commemoration of this critical juncture in European Jewish life, the memory of the Inquisition and its abuses became the subject of scholarly publications, conferences, symposia, and reports in the popular press.¹ Through the acknowledgment of this painful period in the history of Spanish Jewry, the significance of the Sephardic (Spanish Jewish)² diaspora was brought to public consciousness in the United States, providing a historical lens through which to consider the origins of antisemitism in medieval Europe. Central to the 1992 commemoration discourse was the role that crypto-Judaism (the secret practice of the Jewish religion) played in preserving Jewish rites and beliefs both before and after the Sephardic diaspora. In the scholarly proceedings as well as the media coverage, crypto-Judaism was remembered as one means by which medieval Jews coped with the demands of forced conversion: outwardly they became Christian while secretly they concealed their Jewish practices and beliefs.

During the 1992 commemoration, the history of the crypto-Jews was frequently highlighted in public presentations. The unique place that the crypto-Jews assumed in the remembrance dialogue can in part be explained by the discovery in the twentieth century of a surviving crypto-Jewish culture in areas of the United States and Latin America where crypto-Jews had settled during the Spanish and Portuguese colonial period. Commemoration ceremonies, lectures, and media programming

frequently featured firsthand accounts of modern descendants of the Spanish and Portuguese crypto-Jews whose Christian families had maintained some semblance of Jewish rituals since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1992 and then again in 1996, when the expulsion of the Jews from Portugal was memorialized, descendants of the colonial crypto-Jews found themselves at the center of a Sephardic revivalism in the United States, as reports of secret prayers and hidden Sabbath customs were circulated in both the secular and religious press.³ More often than not, these reports spoke of mothers and grandmothers who, concealed behind curtained windows and closed doors, performed hidden rituals that had been in their families for centuries. As the images of surviving medieval practices captured the public's imagination, a new body of scholarship on both the historical and modern aspects of crypto-Jewish culture began to appear in the literature on Sephardic Jews.

Intrigued by the reports of surviving crypto-Judaism, I began my research into contemporary crypto-Jewish culture in 1993. Initially, my goal was to investigate the role of women in the preservation of Jewish culture. Living in close proximity to the regions where many crypto-Jewish descendants resided, I became interested in the survival of remnant forms of crypto-Judaism and especially in the maintenance of Jewish-based customs by women within the Latina/o Catholic household.⁴ As I pursued this study of gender and cultural persistence, I was flooded with my own memories of childhood stories of the secret Jews of Spain. In my 1950s Sunday school education, this medieval phenomenon had been briefly and somewhat dramatically presented as tales of Christian converts who secretly lit Sabbath candles and privately prayed in the darkest caverns of their homes. The name by which these secret Jews were then known was "Marrano," a word that in my childhood recollections carried with it its own distinct imagery of danger in the face of religious constancy. By 1993, however, the term was no longer in common use, its meaning attributed to the word for swine or pig.⁵ Even so, it was the 1950s image of the medieval Marranos that framed my childhood reminiscences of the secret Spanish Jews.

As I recalled the stories of the mysterious Marrano culture, I also remembered that my father had once told me that his mother was a Spanish Jew. Yet when I tried to reconstruct this information, I realized that everything I knew about my Jewish heritage was linked to the Ashkenazic (Austrian and Eastern European) culture of my maternal grandparents and paternal grandfather. Although I became increasingly convinced of my own "secret" Sephardic ancestry, I received little

confirmation for this belief until a few months before my father's death. It was the fall of 1995. Preparations for the Portuguese quincentenary (five-hundred-year anniversary of the expulsion) were already under way. I was visiting with my father, who, although quite ill, suddenly began to talk about the Golden Age of Sephardic Judaism, when Spanish Jewish thinkers proliferated in Muslim Spain.⁶ I thought that my father must have seen the stories on the Portuguese quincentenary in the Jewish press, and I assumed that these reports had rekindled his sudden interest in Sephardic history. Abruptly, however, his conversation shifted from Sephardic art and culture to the loss of his mother in childhood. Quite unexpectedly, he explained, as if for the first time, that his mother was a Spanish Jew and that there were Marranos in her family. "You know," he said, "the Marranos, the secret Jews, they're our ancestors too."

My father then went on to describe a family genealogy that traced my grandmother's Spanish ancestors to a prominent sixteenth-century Marrano family whose exile from Spain took them first to Portugal and then to the Ottoman Empire.⁷ Once in Turkey, where Jews were welcomed, my ancestors apparently returned to Judaism, a religion they maintained with orthodoxy through later immigrations to Eastern Europe and the United States. As I listened to my father's account of this somewhat hidden ancestral history, I could not help but recall the deathbed revelations described by the crypto-Jewish descendants with whom I had spoken. As the descendants' parents or elderly family members neared death, they would frequently reveal for the first time a family history that linked their heritage to crypto-Jewish origins. My father's sudden willingness to talk about his Spanish ancestry provided an almost eerie parallel to the deathbed disclosures described by these descendants.

The knowledge of my Sephardic ancestry created a more personal connection to the descendant community, and, as a result, I found myself rethinking the goals of the research. In addition to the study of gender and cultural preservation, I expanded my project to include an investigation into the effects of hidden ancestry on the construction of religious and ethnic identity. In particular, I sought to explore how the descendants of medieval crypto-Jews responded to the discovery of their Jewish heritage and to the secrecy that surrounds this ancestral history. I therefore began my inquiry with a study of the history of the Iberian crypto-Jews. To help contextualize the more contemporary phenomenon, a brief historical overview of the development of crypto-Judaism is presented below.

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS TO THE CONTEMPORARY CRYPTO-JEWISH PHENOMENON

The beginnings of Sephardic crypto-Judaism are found in fourteenth-century Spain when, as a result of political and social changes, attacks against the centuries-old Spanish Jewish community became pervasive. Fueled both by economic conditions and ecclesiastical antisemitism, violence against the Jews began in 1391 in Seville and quickly spread to Ciudad Real and Burgos before reaching Valencia.⁸ Within the year, Jewish communities in Toledo, Barcelona, Gerona, and Aragon bore the effects of mob-incited violence as homes were burned, businesses looted, synagogues destroyed, and Jews murdered. As the religious persecution escalated, large numbers of Jews acquiesced to the demands of forced conversion, while others voluntarily chose to become Christian. The result of these events was the creation of a disparate and varied convert population whose differing approaches to Christian assimilation transformed the religious culture of medieval Spain. Amid the diverse reactions to the widespread policies of forced conversion was a strategy of resistance that came to be known as crypto-Judaism. This practice, which was adopted by a portion of the Jewish converts, involved the clandestine observance of Judaism among individuals and families who had undergone conversion but who secretly remained faithful to Jewish beliefs and traditions.⁹

The historical scholarship on this period of Sephardic history suggests that crypto-Judaism was one of a number of conversion responses adopted by the besieged Jews of Spain. The historians David Gitlitz and José Faur identify at least four types of converts that emerged from the anti-Jewish pogroms. According to these scholars, the convert population included true converts who became faithful to Christianity; partial converts who vacillated between Judaism and Christianity or attempted a syncretic accommodation of the two religions; crypto-Jewish converts who, to the extent possible, remained faithful to Judaism; and atheistic converts who rejected both Christianity and Judaism in light of the continued religious persecution and violence. While all these categories of converts were classified as New Christians (*crisianos nuevos*) by Church authorities, it was the crypto-Jews who came under the greatest scrutiny, since their continued adherence to Judaism was viewed as heresy by the medieval church.¹⁰

After this period of intensified conversions, the tensions between competing Jewish and Christian belief systems grew more fervent as rabbis

sought to defend the principles of Judaism in the face of the Church's escalating attempts to obtain and sustain converts. During this time of religious upheaval, the Church held religious debates that focused on the Messiah and the acceptance of Jesus as the son of God. In these debates, the most ardent proponents of the Christian viewpoint were frequently theologians who had previously converted to Christianity. As these religious polemics further demoralized the Spanish Jews, the Church grew more emphatic about the dangers that Judaism posed for Christian society. Fears about the continued proliferation of crypto-Judaism led to a campaign to establish an Inquisition in Spain that, according to Church officials, would at last rid the country of the Jewish "plague of heresy."¹¹ In 1478, at the request of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the pope granted the Spanish monarchy the authority to appoint inquisitors in Castile, a papal decision that initiated the centuries-long Spanish Inquisition. From the outset, the Inquisition was intended to eliminate the heresy of crypto-Judaism. The Holy Office thus took as its mission the discovery and punishment of those converts who continued to engage in the practices of Judaism and who were therefore guilty of the crime of "Judaizing."¹²

Between 1481 and 1488, 750 men and women in Seville were burned at the stake for Judaizing, and at least five thousand others were punished for acts of Jewish heresy.¹³ In support of the extreme measures taken by the Church, the sixteenth-century historian and priest Andres Bernaldez reported that the harsh actions of the Inquisition had been necessitated by the rapid spread of crypto-Judaism among the converts of Seville, Cordova, Toledo, and Segovia. The following passage from his writings served to justify the actions of the Holy Office:

All of them were Jews, and clung to their hope, like the Israelites in Egypt, who suffered many blows at the hands of the Egyptians and yet believed that God would lead them out from the midst of them, as He did with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. So, too, the *conversos* looked upon the Christians as Egyptians or worse, and believed that God had them in His keeping and preserved them as by a miracle. They held steadfastly to their faith that God would guide and remember them and bring them out from the midst of the Christians and lead them to the Holy and Promised Land. The Inquisition proposed to destroy their belief and the believers. "The fire has been kindled, and it will burn until not one of them is left alive."¹⁴

To facilitate the prosecution and punishment of Jewish heretics, the Church developed a systematic approach to the identification of crypto-

Jews by creating the Edicts of Grace, documents so named because they offered a grace period to anyone who willingly confessed their heretical practices. In an early-twentieth-century history of the Inquisition, Henry Charles Lea highlights the dramatic and often fearful conditions under which the Edicts of Grace (later called the Edicts of Faith) were disseminated at public meetings and at church services. Lea's characterization of these proceedings captures the gravity of the Edict ceremonies and the frightening sermons that would sometimes accompany a grace period during which few had confessed to the sin of Judaizing:

The clergy marched in procession; the cross was covered with black and two flaming torches were on the altar, where the priests stood in profound silence during the reading of the curse:—"We excommunicate and anathematize, in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Ghost, in form of law, all apostate heretics from our holy Catholic faith, their fautors and concealers who do not reveal them, and we curse them that they may be accursed as members of the devil and separated from the bosom and Unity of the holy Mother Church. . . . May all the curses and plagues of Egypt which befell King Pharaoh come upon them because they disobey the commandments of God."¹⁵

With the widespread dissemination of the Edicts, the responsibility for identifying and reporting heresy fell to neighbors, friends, servants, and other family members whose own souls were at stake if they failed to report the sins of the Judaizers with whom they interacted. By describing in detail the blasphemous rites, beliefs, and practices of the unfaithful, the Edicts emphasized the special importance that rituals played in the observance of hidden Judaism. A Church document dating from the seventeenth century thus included the following criteria for the identification of crypto-Jewish heresy:

To wit: if any of you has seen or heard say that any person or persons have kept any Sabbaths in honor or observance of the Law of Moses, putting on clean personal linen and their best or festival clothing, placing clean linen on their tables and throwing clean sheets on their beds in honor of the Sabbath, not kindling a fire or doing any work on those days, beginning on Friday afternoon. Or who have purged or deveined the meat they are preparing to eat, soaking it in water to remove the blood, or who have removed the sciatic vein from a leg of mutton or any other animal. . . . Or who have fasted on the Great Fast which is called the Fast of Pardon, going barefoot on that day . . . or who fast the Fast of Queen Esther, or the fast of Rebeaso, which they call the Loss of the Holy Temple, or other Jewish fasts during the week, such as Mondays or Thursdays. . . . Or who celebrate the Festival of unleavened bread, beginning by eating lettuce, celery or other bitter herbs on those days. Or who observe the

Festival of Booths, putting up huts of green branches, eating there and hosting their friends and exchanging food. Or the Festival of the Little Lights, lighting them one by one until there are ten, and then putting them out again, praying Jewish prayers on those occasions.¹⁶

At the same time that the Edicts were intended to alert the citizenry to the nature and type of heresy committed by the crypto-Jews, the detailed documents also cataloged a wide range of Jewish customs and religious practices. Thus, as Gitlitz points out, they offered an incomparable source of information that, ironically, may have been of great value to the crypto-Jewish communities whose knowledge of Judaism lessened with each succeeding generation of converts. In this regard, the Edicts would have been of particular importance after the Jews were expelled from Spain. Until that time, the crypto-Jewish adherents had access to the knowledge, books, and artifacts that were maintained by observant Spanish Jews, a population of the Sephardim who throughout the fifteenth century had resisted pressure to convert.¹⁷ With the expulsion of this religious minority, access to Jewish sources became harder to obtain. Under these conditions, the Edicts were especially informative, as their codification of Jewish rites and beliefs filled the void left by the destruction of traditional Sephardic culture. Gitlitz therefore convincingly argues that over time the pronouncements of the Inquisition helped to sustain a set of rituals, beliefs, and customs that contributed to the ongoing development of crypto-Jewish culture.¹⁸

Although the exact number of crypto-Jewish adherents is unknown, the statistics on the accused Judaizers tried by the Inquisition vary greatly, with estimates ranging from twenty-five thousand to fifty thousand.¹⁹ Within this broad range of accused heretics, it is difficult to determine who in fact actually practiced crypto-Judaism and who became faithful Christian converts. Because of the extreme conditions under which confessions were obtained by the Inquisition, historians disagree on both the scope of the crypto-Jewish phenomenon and on the nature of the religious culture that came to be associated with the observance of hidden Judaism. Scholars such as Gitlitz and Yosef Yerushalmi, for example, argue that a distinct crypto-Jewish culture developed during the medieval and premodern periods, while others such as Benzion Netanyahu maintain that most forced converts and their immediate descendants assimilated to Christianity, leaving all aspects of their Jewish faith behind.²⁰ Within this somewhat contentious field of study, a strong case has been made for the existence of a crypto-Jewish subculture that not only proliferated in Spain but also spread to other parts of the Ibe-

rian peninsula with the emigration of Spanish Jews into Portugal at the end of the fifteenth century.

The Spanish exiles in Portugal were, for the most part, observant Jews who were expelled from Spain on the premise that they perpetuated heresy through their influence on the convert communities. In return for payment, King John II of Portugal offered asylum and religious freedom to the practicing Spanish Jews. Soon after they arrived in Portugal, however, he enacted a series of repressive measures that gave the Jews a choice between conversion and slavery, while forcibly taking Jewish children from their parents. King John's successor, Manuel I, at first appeared to be more tolerant of the Jewish exiles but later changed his position after his betrothal to the daughter of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. In compliance with the Spanish royalty's demand for the expulsion of the Jews from Portugal, Manuel issued an expulsion order in 1496. Fearing the loss of a productive and economically viable Jewish population, he replaced this order with a demand for conversion that prohibited Jewish emigration and that once again led to the seizure of Jewish children for the purpose of forced baptism. Faced with these extreme conditions of religious coercion, the Jews in Portugal resisted Christian assimilation by forming an extensive crypto-Jewish network. The persistence of crypto-Judaism in Portugal led in 1540 to the establishment of the Inquisition in Portugal, where crypto-Judaism had taken on a more fervent character than now existed in Spain.²¹

Some thirty years after the Inquisition was initiated in Portugal, tribunals were established in the colonies of the Americas, first in Peru and then in Mexico City (New Spain), two colonial territories to which the crypto-Jews had begun to emigrate. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, crypto-Jewish immigration to the colonies appears to have been fairly extensive.²² In addition to Peru and New Spain, areas of Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay were settled by crypto-Jewish converts.²³ In accordance with the objectives of the European Holy Office, the Inquisitional investigations in the colonized regions were intended to rout out and punish heresy, particularly among crypto-Jews who had emigrated to the colonies.²⁴ The effect of the Inquisition on the sixteenth-century Mexican crypto-Jewish community was especially devastating, since many prominent crypto-Jews were imprisoned and persecuted, including members of the renowned and powerful Carvajal family.²⁵ Following the trials of the 1580s and 1590s, which led to the imprisonment and death of many of those who had been accused of Judaizing, the crypto-Jewish community

ceased to exist as an identifiable culture in Mexico City. Consequently, the Holy Office reduced its activities dramatically during the next fifty years.²⁶

By 1640, however, crypto-Judaism had once again resurfaced in the Mexican territories, as crypto-Jewish colonists from Spain and Portugal began arriving in New Spain in the early seventeenth century. These colonists brought with them knowledge of Judaism that they had obtained from their commercial travels in Holland, Italy, and Greece, countries where the practice of traditional Judaism had not been prohibited. Through their exposure to Jewish life and custom, the seventeenth-century crypto-Jewish settlers helped to reestablish a crypto-Jewish culture in Mexico City that contributed to a revitalization of crypto-Judaism among the preexisting sixteenth-century convert populations. Stanley Hordes's research on this period of crypto-Jewish revitalization suggests that an identifiable crypto-Jewish community re-emerged in Mexico City, establishing itself in a section of the city that was curiously close to the headquarters of the Holy Office. In his account of this burgeoning crypto-Jewish culture, Hordes describes a somewhat insular community that primarily married and traded among themselves. Within this community, religious observance appears to have been an important source of shared culture, especially among women, as rituals of fasting, mourning, and the Sabbath were practiced together.²⁷

With the rise in crypto-Jewish activity in the seventeenth century and the simultaneous development of tensions between Spain and Portugal, the Church resumed its effort to eradicate Jewish heresy in Mexico. Between 1640 and 1650 an increased number of tribunals were held in which those accused of Judaizing were imprisoned and sentenced to death. After this reintensification of the Inquisition in Mexico City, the history of crypto-Judaism in New Spain becomes less clear, since the decline in the Holy Office's activities after 1650 led to a decrease in the documentation of crypto-Jewish observance. One school of thought suggests that, with the resurgence of the Inquisition, surviving crypto-Jewish populations sought refuge in the frontier region of Nuevo Leon and the borderlands that today comprise the Southwest of the United States, areas that may have been settled by earlier generations of crypto-Jews who were in search of a "secure haven."²⁸ Other scholars maintain that economic opportunities rather than religious persecution led to emigration into these territories by converts who may or may not have been practicing crypto-Jews.²⁹ Current research on twentieth-century rem-

nant populations suggests that, in the aftermath of the seventeenth-century persecutions, crypto-Judaism in New Spain, including the frontier regions, persisted in fragmentary forms among families who retained at least some remnant customs and beliefs that were Jewish in origin. Within this family-centered realm of cultural persistence, women in particular continued to reproduce the ritual life of their forebears as they had in earlier centuries in Spain and Portugal.

As a significant cultural phenomenon, the history of crypto-Judaism and its survival into the twentieth century suggests a pattern of ethnic masking and cultural persistence that in varying degrees can be found throughout the history of European Jewry. For centuries and in diverse geographic and nationalist settings, Jews were considered outsiders, living on the periphery of the “other’s” culture while struggling with the tensions of religious compromise, cultural adaptation, and ethnic pretense. Because Jews could often “pass” as members of the dominant culture, the strategy of blending became one of many means by which Jews sought to protect themselves in host cultures throughout the world. The crypto-Jews of medieval Spain represent one of the earliest and most drastic examples of this form of extreme Jewish assimilation. Using secrecy and subterfuge as weapons against cultural annihilation, they survived by acquiescing to the uncompromising demands of religious conversion. Such behaviors cannot be understood apart from the larger issues surrounding antisemitism, religious persecution, and the dangers associated with Jewish ethnicity, issues that remain salient for the twentieth-century descendants of the medieval and early-modern converts.

CRYPTO-JEWISH STUDIES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND THE CURRENT RESEARCH PROJECT

As the historical overview suggests, knowledge of medieval and pre-modern crypto-Jews is primarily derived from the examination of Inquisition records and the testimony of those accused of Judaizing. As a database for the study of historical crypto-Judaism, these documents, which were scrupulously maintained by the Church, have proven to be a rich source of information on the religious practices and inner lives of the crypto-Jewish adherents. From the early work of Lea to the more contemporary research of Gitlitz and Levine Melammed, the trial records of the Inquisition have served as a starting point from which to begin the investigation into crypto-Judaism as it existed in earlier centuries. For scholars of twentieth-century remnant culture, however, the

task of documenting and verifying crypto-Jewish survival has been more difficult, especially because the end of the Inquisition brought an end to the detailed record keeping on hidden religious practices. As a result, scholars in the field of twentieth-century crypto-Jewish studies have had to rely on sources other than Church records to substantiate the continued existence of crypto-Jewish culture in contemporary society.

For historians, the Church material helped to reveal the plethora of Jewish rites that formed the body of crypto-Jewish observance.³⁰ By comparison, investigations into the twentieth-century phenomenon have been less systematized and more anecdotal. The first published account of the twentieth-century phenomenon was, in fact, a report written by a Polish Jewish engineer, Samuel Schwarz, who, in his travels through Portugal, had come across a community of crypto-Jewish descendants in the hill town of Belmonte.³¹ In the 1920s, Schwarz wrote up his observations of Jewish-based rituals and prayers as they were still being practiced in this remote community. Schwarz's report, while not that of a traditional scholar, was nonetheless accepted as the first real evidence of the survival of remnant crypto-Jewish culture in twentieth-century Europe.

It would be many years later before similar claims would be made for descendant populations living in Latin America and the Southwest of the United States, most notably in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. Since the 1980s, data on remnant crypto-Jewish culture in the Americas have been primarily gathered through contemporary ethnographies (and a few historical accounts) focusing on the survival of modern crypto-Jewish practices and beliefs.³² As distinguished from the archival research on historical crypto-Jews, contemporary studies for the most part rely on participant observation, oral histories, and family narratives that attest to the presence and survival of Jewish-based rituals and customs that, in some regions of the Americas, may have been sustained through intermarriage among Latina/o Christian families with Jewish ancestry.³³ Descendant narratives and ethnographic accounts have thus replaced Inquisition documents as the primary source of scholarship on the survival of crypto-Jewish culture.

This shift in approach has resulted in the development of controversies and tensions surrounding research into remnant forms of crypto-Judaism. As the research expanded into the late twentieth century, descendants' claims to Jewish origins were often challenged, while their narratives of cultural survival were frequently met with skepticism, particularly as the popular press tended to romanticize the family culture

portrayed in the descendants' recollections. Among scholars, ancestral crypto-Jewish heritage soon became an area of contested identity, sparking debates between those who accepted the plausibility of the survival of remnant crypto-Jewish practices and beliefs and those who challenged the claims of modern descendants. As groups of individuals in Mexico, Brazil, and the United States have continued to identify themselves as descendants with crypto-Jewish ancestry,³⁴ questions of credibility and historical accuracy remain significant for contemporary investigations into the modern-day phenomenon. Within the most recent studies of modern descent, scholars in the fields of anthropology, Jewish studies, and history have focused on the documentation of present-day claims of crypto-Jewish survival, methods of research, and the legitimacy of "true" colonial links.³⁵

Keenly aware of the questions surrounding descendant credibility and the significance of ancestral origins, I carefully considered the criteria that I would use to define the parameters of my own study of this unique and contested cultural phenomenon. Based on the existing research in the field and my preliminary investigations into remnant crypto-Jewish culture, I developed three indicators of crypto-Jewish heritage that guided my research process. These were the existence of Jewish-based rituals in the family of origin, the existence of Inquisition records bearing Jewish family names, and the oral transmission of Jewish ancestry by family members. According to these criteria, I included in the project descendants from diverse cultural and geographic backgrounds whose narratives and life histories revealed the presence of crypto-Jewish ancestry in their family backgrounds. Using the ethnographic methods of in-depth interviews and participant observation, I collected data on twentieth-century crypto-Jewish descendants during a period of five years. In that time, I recorded life-history narratives of fifty individuals—twenty-five women and twenty-five men—the majority of whom reported that they had two or more indicators of crypto-Jewish descent as elaborated above.

Among the participants, eighteen of the respondents' families emigrated to the United States from Mexico and other countries of Latin America where crypto-Jews had settled during the colonial period. These countries include Cuba, Venezuela, and Uruguay. The remaining sample population consists of individuals descended from crypto-Jews whose families settled in what is now the Southwest of the United States in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. I obtained participants for the study primarily through referrals from three organizations: the

Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies, the Hispano Crypto-Jewish Research Center, and the Society of Hispanic Historical and Ancestral Research.

The Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies, which was founded more than a decade ago, is a research network that brings together both scholars and nonacademics working in the field of crypto-Judaism. The society holds annual meetings to discuss recent developments in this area of study and publishes a newsletter, *Halapid*, numerous times a year. The Hispano Crypto-Jewish Research Center is at the University of Denver and was established to provide information on the culture, history, and heritage of crypto-Jews and their descendants. While the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies and the Hispano Crypto-Jewish Research Center focus exclusively on crypto-Judaism, the Society of Hispanic Historical and Ancestral Research is a genealogy organization that sponsors cultural events and annual meetings on Hispanic ancestry and identity in the Americas. In addition to using these three organizations, I also found respondents through individual contacts and “snowball” sampling, whereby descendants provided referrals to other individuals who are of crypto-Jewish background.

Within the population of descendants that comprise this study, the majority of participants were raised as Latina/o Catholics, although in six cases, the respondent’s family had converted from Catholicism to Protestantism. While most of the participants had some Christian background, the level of commitment to Christianity varied greatly among the respondents, with some having been raised in very religious families and others in families in which religion had been relatively unimportant. With regard to current religious affiliation, forty of the respondents identify as Jews. Of these forty, twenty-eight respondents have adopted an exclusively Jewish belief system, while twelve hold both Jewish and Christian beliefs. The remainder of the sample (ten respondents) acknowledge Jewish ancestry but remain religiously identified with Christianity.

Other differences that emerge among the descendants include variations in age, ethnic background, education, and occupation. The ages of the respondents range from thirty-three to seventy-two. Close to half the descendants reported that their ethnic heritage included Native American ancestry, while the remainder of the descendants characterized their ethnic backgrounds as Spanish European. A small portion of the descendants have a high school education and work in fields such as child care, dressmaking, and domestic labor. A larger number have attended college, and, of these, a sizable percentage holds advanced de-

grees in law, medicine, education, administration, and theology. Two participants have studied for the priesthood, and one is now an ordained clergyman.

Overall, the descendants who comprise the sample population represent a diverse group of individuals, including teachers, artists, administrators, and service providers. The participants are of mixed ethnicity and race, and their economic circumstances represent working-, middle-, and, in a few instances, upper-class backgrounds. Some of the descendants are recent immigrants to the United States, while others come from families who have lived in North America for centuries. Despite these vast differences, this varied group of individuals has in common a belief in a shared history of Spanish Jewish persecution and a desire to recover an ancestral past that is spiritually and ethnically rooted in Jewish tradition and culture. Thus, the participants represent a specific population of modern descendants for whom Sephardic ancestry has great meaning and for whom the recovery of Sephardic roots has transformed their understanding of themselves as members of a multiethnic and multireligious culture.

FIELDWORK WITHIN A CULTURE OF SECRECY

My fieldwork with the descendants involved a broad range of experiences that took me to California, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Texas, and Kansas. In each of these areas, descendants welcomed me into their homes, their places of work, and their religious life. I interviewed respondents in suburban housing developments, urban settings, and religious communities. I spent time on Indian reservations and in business and medical offices. Through recording narratives and oral histories, I gathered data on the descendant's upbringing, family history, and his or her discovery and integration of Jewish ancestry. In many cases, I found the interviews to be emotionally charged experiences in which participants would often share photographs of family members to whom they felt deeply attached and through whom they had traced their connection to Spanish Jewish ancestry. The relatives they spoke of included mothers, aunts, grandmothers, and, on a few occasions, fathers and grandfathers. Three of the descendants brought me to cemeteries where they pointed out family gravestones bearing a six-pointed star or a menorah-like candelabra, proof, they said, of their crypto-Jewish origins and of the crypto-Jewish presence in that region of the country. The participants offered me pictures, books, family genealogies, self-

published autobiographies, and copies of Inquisition records that they had painstakingly reproduced in Madrid and Mexico City. These materials not only contributed to the database of the study but also provided evidence of the importance that these descendants place on their crypto-Jewish heritage.

Those participants who had converted to Judaism invited me into their synagogues. I attended Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox congregations that had become home to the crypto-Jewish descendants. I observed the excitement and commitment that these converts brought to their newly found Jewish faith, and I spoke with rabbis both inside and outside these congregations. In addition to this fieldwork, I attended conferences that were held by the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies and the Society of Hispanic Historical and Ancestral Research. Panel presentations at these meetings included first-person accounts by descendants who were currently exploring their Sephardic heritage. Like the respondents whom I interviewed, these descendants frequently spoke of a “missing family piece” that had led them to search for their Jewish ancestry. The conference narratives added to the ethnographic material that the more personalized interviews provided.

The most difficult and poignant moments in my research were those in which descendants revealed that they knew they were Jewish because of the presence of a genetically transmitted disease in the family. In one case, a woman explained that her mother had recently been diagnosed with a rare nervous system disorder that is found primarily among Sephardic Jews. In another interview, a male descendant tearfully recounted the death of two of his children from a Sephardic-linked respiratory disease that had been incorrectly diagnosed in the South American country where he was then living. These two respondents brought an entirely different perspective to the meaning of lost ethnicity and the search for Sephardic roots.

Because of the emotional content of the narratives, I found the literature on feminist ethnography especially helpful as I negotiated the boundaries between the descendants and myself, boundaries that were influenced by our shared history of a “hidden” Sephardic past.³⁶ In reviewing the feminist discourse on empathy in the research setting, I became acutely aware of how the interview process created an openness and intimacy with the descendants that deepened my understanding of the personal transformations that accompany the recovery of Jewish origins.³⁷ Both the men and women who participated in the study were eager to end the silence about their Sephardic heritage, and thus as their

narratives unfolded, they revealed a great deal about themselves and their concerns for the future. In some cases, the interviews served to relieve anxieties and tensions that had developed around issues of self-doubt and family secrecy. For these descendants, participation in the project provided an emotional release as they spoke of both the confusion and sadness that had been engendered by their discovery of hidden Jewish ancestry.

Throughout the interviews, a number of participants expressed concerns about exposure. As my research progressed, it became clear to me that the descendants felt vulnerable to charges of false claims by rabbinic authorities and by other scholars in this field.³⁸ Further, a good many of the participants had risked the antipathy of family members who were far from comfortable with the public disclosure of what had become their family's contested Jewish identity. While some families were in agreement on the acceptance of a Jewish lineage, others were in conflict over the discovery of Jewish ancestry, since siblings and parents had very different responses to the possibility of a Jewish heritage. In a few instances, descendants in the same family converted to Judaism after sharing research findings on their family's Jewish past with one another. This approach differed greatly from other family experiences in which a descendant's siblings, when presented with the genealogical and familial evidence, refused to talk about crypto-Jewish heritage, preferring instead to "let the past be the past." There were also reports of family members who expressed anger and dismay at the sibling or adult child who spoke of these private family matters to outsiders.

On two occasions, a descendant assured me that a relative that he or she knew would be delighted to participate in the project. When I called to set up an interview, however, the relative refused to talk with me, maintaining that he or she knew nothing about Jews in the family. In one memorable case, a descendant openly spoke of her Jewish lineage and offered to talk to her elderly mother, who had frequently spoken of their Jewish ancestry. Within a few weeks of our first meeting, I received two letters from the descendant. One asked that I not use her name in connection with any information that she had already given me. The other letter explained that interviewing her mother would not be useful "after all" because she now denied "ever having said anything to us about having any Jewish ancestors." These experiences convinced me that the secrecy surrounding Sephardic ancestry was not merely a vestige of the past. The vulnerability expressed by the descendants and the conflicts that continued to affect familial relationships were constant re-

mindings of the ongoing tensions that influenced individuals of crypto-Jewish descent.³⁹ Because of these concerns about exposure and family tensions, I conducted the study under conditions of anonymity, which I have maintained throughout the writing of this book.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THEMATIC CONTENT

From the outset, my research was designed to develop a theory of cultural persistence that addressed the role of women in the preservation of endangered ethnic and religious traditions. Throughout the analysis, this theoretical contribution is brought to bear on the interpretation of data and is elaborated through the principles of feminist theory and ethnic identity formation. In addition, I have included a variety of other theoretical approaches in the study, since the analysis of hidden ethnicity addresses a wide array of experiences relating to the study of secrecy, ethnic anxiety, and the effects of internalized racism on marginalized groups. Here theories of Jewish assimilation are developed that specifically address the interrelationship among gender, antisemitism, and histories of ethnic and religious victimization.

Among the many significant social and political theorists who laid the groundwork for this research are Georg Simmel and Frantz Fanon. Simmel, a nineteenth-century German Jewish sociologist, provided a framework for understanding the role of secrecy in culture and the social isolation of the ethnic stranger. Fanon, a twentieth-century African Caribbean psychiatrist and political theorist, offered a social-psychological context for exploring the impact of racial and ethnic prejudice on individuals who choose assimilation as their defense against the threat of physical as well as psychological violence. Taken together, the theoretical framework for the study includes feminist, social, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial perspectives, since each of these approaches contributes to an interdisciplinary understanding of hidden ancestry and the transformation of religious and ethnic identity.

Throughout this analytic treatment of modern crypto-Jewish experience, certain themes emerge from the narratives and oral histories of the descendants. Among the most important of these themes is the role of women as bearers of culture, a finding that resonates with the experience of other colonized and oppressed groups whose cultural survival relied on the creativity and persistence of women. Thus, the analysis contributes to an understanding of the relationship among gender, colonization, and the maintenance of religious culture. A second theme that

emerges from the data is the effect of marginalization on ethnically diverse individuals who reside in cultural environments that place a high value on religious and ethnic homogeneity. Here, the study of crypto-Judaism helps to illuminate the impact of difference and stigma, illustrating the ways in which the longing for connection becomes a fundamental part of the human condition. Third, this book demonstrates the diverse and complex ways in which the category of “Jew” operates both in contemporary Western thought and in the social relations of Western society. This aspect of the analysis illustrates how the discovery of Jewish ancestry profoundly and deeply transforms a person’s sense of self in a world where Jewishness has meant both difference and danger.

Further, this research reveals the ways in which the construction of ethnic and religious identity transcends time and geographic space. Because of the nature of the crypto-Jewish diaspora and the lingering effects of religious persecution on the consciousness of the descendants, the analysis moves back and forth between the historical reality of crypto-Jewish life and the contemporary manifestations of a Sephardic legacy in Latina/o culture. Accordingly, it traverses the boundary between history and modernity in a reexamination of the meaning of ancestral ties.

Within this interweaving of history and ethnography, the links between the past and present become illuminated in narratives and oral histories that contain traces of cultural and religious memory. Beginning with chapter 1, the book focuses on the persisting fears of antisemitism, situating the contemporary manifestations of crypto-Jewish heritage within a culture of secrecy and fear that continues to inform the adoption of a Jewish identity among Latinas/os in modern society. This perspective on the reproduction of crypto-Judaism over time provides a context for assessing the survival of hidden rituals and practices that is elaborated in chapter 2, in which the analysis of ritual preservation draws particular attention to the role that women play in the maintenance of Jewish-origin beliefs and customs.

The chapters on antisemitism and cultural persistence provide a foreground for the discussion of religious and ethnic identity that comprises the remainder of the book. Using the principles of object relations and psychoanalytic theory, chapter 3 explores the development of the spiritual self-in-relation. This theoretical treatment of identity formation lays the groundwork for the analyses in chapters 4 and 5, which focus on spiritual transformation among modern descendants. In chapter 4 the postcolonial construction of syncretic belief systems is explored

among a small number of individuals who have chosen to blend their preexisting Christian faith with Jewish theology.

Chapter 5 then examines conversion to Judaism among a larger population of descendants who have reconstructed their religious worldview through the adoption of an exclusively Jewish spiritual perspective. Taken together, chapters 3, 4, and 5 provide insight into the transformation of religious consciousness among a group of individuals who are struggling with the challenges and possibilities of a multiethnic heritage. Chapter 6 then extends the discussion on self-transformation into the realm of social identity, and the construction of Jewish ethnicity is considered from the standpoint of ethnic alliances and the desire for ancestral connection. Finally, the conclusion considers the effects of cultural loss on the changing gender dynamics of religious persistence and the future transmission of Jewish heritage among the modern descendant population.