

*Along with empire building and dreams of gold,
the Inquisition's ejection of thousands of Jews
drove Spain's conquest of New Mexico.*

The Exile Factor

*At an unprecedented exhibition,
a hidden diaspora finally gets its due.*

— By Ron D. Hart —



AS I APPROACHED the entrance to the *Fractured Faiths* exhibition in the New Mexico History Museum, I found myself in a forest of Moorish-style pillars connected by arches, the museum's homage to Europe's oldest synagogue building, in Toledo, Spain. That synagogue, built in 1180, was originally called the Ibn Shushan Synagogue before it was taken over by the Catholic Church in 1411, used as a monastery, and renamed Santa María la Blanca. It was abandoned, then restored in 1856 as a national memorial site. Today, it is a Sephardic museum, open to the public.

In many ways, the synagogue's life story parallels that of Jews in Spain. It's a fitting introduction to this exhibition, the first of its kind, which explores the lives of Spanish Jews before and after their expulsion from that country.

Jews had lived in Spain for more than 1,500 years, but in 1492 King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella ruled that only Catholics could continue to live there. Jews were confronted with a choice between leaving the country and abandoning centuries-old religious traditions to convert.

The next thing that caught my attention at the History Museum was a rare, 500-year-old Torah scroll from Spain. Most Torahs were taken by their owners when they were expelled from the country, but this one was successfully hidden away, likely used by crypto-, or hidden Jews. Today, the parchment of the scroll is brown and wrinkled with age. It's displayed with a Christian Bible and a Koran, also dating from that time period. Together, they reflect the three religious cultures of Spain.

Above: The oldest still-standing synagogue building in Europe spent time as the Santa María la Blanca Catholic monastery before being returned to Jewish use as a Sephardic museum.

Photo by Roger L. Martínez-Dávila. **Opposite:** Pre-Expulsion Torah scroll from the Museo Sefardi in Toledo. Photo by David Blázquez.

Son fernando e dona ysauel por la gracia de dios reyes
 de castilla de leon de aragon de sicilia de cerdeña
 de valencia de galizia de mallorca de
 sevilla de cerdeña de cordova de corcega de murcia de jaen
 de algarve de algezira de gibraltar e de las yslas de canaria
 conde de barcelona e mores de bizcaya e de melun
 duques de gona e de nepatia condes de fforellon
 de caraxya marqués de oruffun e de guano alpringaz
 don xuan mi muy fero e mi muy amado hijo e alos ynfantel
 de la cor de que es marqués conde de mores e de las cor
 de nes priores e de los omes comendadores alcaides e de los
 caudillos e de las casae fuertes de los nros reynos e de mores
 e de los concejos corregidores aldes alcaziles merinos abades
 e de los coades e de los cofrades e omes buenos de la muy noble e
 muy leal cibdad de burgos e de las otras ciudades e villas
 e lugares de nro reyno e de los otros arcobispos e de los bispados
 e de los deos nros reynos e de mores e de las aljamas
 de los judios e de las otras cibdades e burgos e de todas las de
 las cibdades e villas e lugares de nro reyno e de mores
 e de todas las personas singulares e de los ari barones
 como de nros e de qual quer fecho que sean e de todas las
 e de todas las personas e de qual quer ley e de las dignas pre
 minencia e con dicion que sean a quien lo oyo e de nro
 me carta e de nro Atene e de nro taner que se en qual to
 manera salud e gracia bien saberes e de los deos nros
 que nos fuimos e ynfamados que en nros reynos
 e de algunos malos e de algunos que yzayaban e apofortaban
 de nra san ffe catolica e de qual ser nra causa la

At a set of manuscripts describing Jewish life at that distant time, the *ketubot*, or marriage contracts, especially caught my eye. The *ketuba* (singular) is written in Hebrew and decorated with drawings around the text itself, in the style of Spanish Jews, who used colorful illumination in religious books, from Bibles to prayer books. The *ketuba* was a statement of a husband's commitments to his wife in marriage, and the Castilian *ketuba*, from the Kingdom of Castile in central Spain, was considered to be the most advanced of its time of women's rights: it customarily guaranteed the woman an agreed-upon level of financial support and agreed-upon rights in case of a divorce. It is still used in Sephardic marriages today, and it is one of the documents accepted by the Spanish government as proof of Spanish Jewish heritage if you want to reclaim citizenship under the 2015 law permitting the return of Jews.

The Edict of Expulsion

THROUGH ANOTHER SET of archways, I came to an original copy of the Edict of Expulsion, which the country of Spain contributed to this exhibition—a hand-written document signed by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella notifying Jews that they had to leave the country. Standing in front of the edict, I imagined Jews loading their families into wagons with the little they could carry with them, leaving their homes to make new lives in other countries.

Ferdinand and Isabella signed the Edict of Expulsion on March 31, 1492: "Therefore, we, with the counsel and advice of prelates, great noblemen of our kingdoms, and other persons of learning and wisdom of our Council, having taken deliberation about this matter, resolve to order the said Jews and Jewesses of our kingdoms to depart and never to return or come back to them or to any of them."

After July 31, 1492, practicing Judaism was illegal. It was also illegal not to report someone known to be practicing Judaism. People could be jailed or tortured, have all their possessions confiscated, and even be burned at the stake for such crimes. One-third to one-half of the Jews living in Spain at the time stayed and converted; the others left to live openly as Jews in other parts of the world. Those who chose to stay in

Opposite: The Alhambra Decree, known as the Edict of Expulsion. Issued March 31, 1492, in Granada by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, it expelled Jews from Spain. Courtesy of the Archivo General de Simancas.

Spain became *conversos*, the converted ones, though a portion of them continued to practice Judaism as crypto-Jews.

The Spanish Inquisition

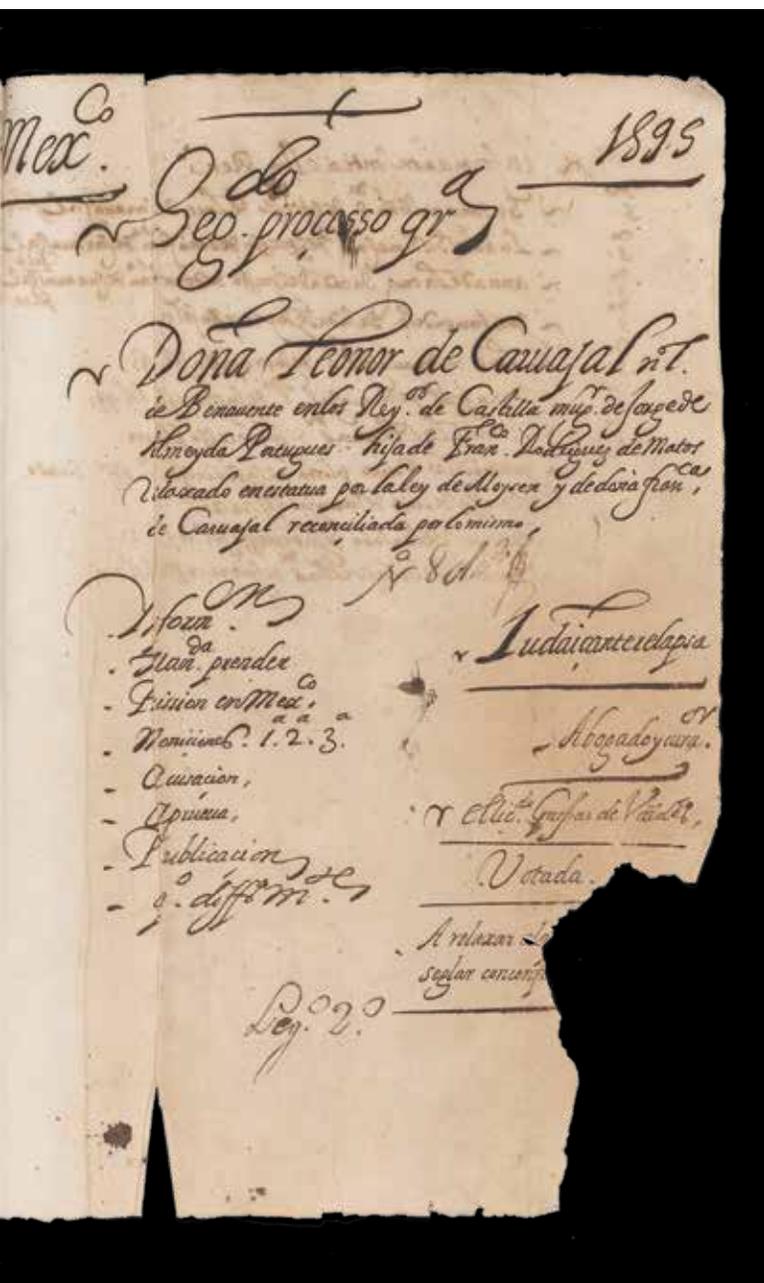
WHAT WAS BEHIND this drastic decision to order 150,000 people to leave Spain? The answer is multidimensional. Alongside deeply rooted anti-Semitism, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella aimed to unite the various kingdoms of Spain into one country, and felt it would be strongest united by one religion.

The Spanish Inquisition (1478–1834) was used by the Spanish Crown to enforce the Expulsion, and it was also charged with identifying and accusing crypto-Jews. The Inquisition was both a political and religious organization. While the religious arm could condemn people to death, officials of the Spanish Crown were responsible for carrying out the death sentence. The Inquisition identified a list of sins to be eradicated from Spain, and in the beginning it focused on Judaizing (practicing Judaism). Although the Church had pressured Jews to convert to Christianity or leave Spain, the existing infrastructure needed to teach many thousands of *conversos* about Christian beliefs and practices was vastly insufficient.

With time, as crypto-Jews left the country, reconciled with the Church, or were put to death, the inquisitors focused more on other forbidden religions (Islam, Protestantism) as well as practices (polygamy, sodomy, sorcery) deemed unchristian.

Tens of thousands of *conversos* became true converts, and were rewarded accordingly. As Christians, they held high positions and married into socially prominent families—things they could not do as Jews. *Conversos* became priests, bishops, and other high-ranking officials in the Church.

But crypto-Jews lived in fear of being discovered and killed. The most terrifying period of the Inquisition was 1480 to 1530, when it turned its judgment on some 10,000 *conversos*. Ten thousand were arrested, and two thousand were burned at the stake. *Conversos* began to realize that converting and remaining in Spain would no longer protect them. The fear created during those first decades of the Inquisition led to a massive exodus of *conversos* from Spain and Portugal. Tens of thousands abandoned their homeland to live openly as Jews in the countries that had become new centers of Sephardic life: Morocco, Algeria, Holland, and the Ottoman Empire. Thousands of others chose to migrate to culturally familiar Spanish territories in the Americas.



The Inquisition document from Mexico in 1595 against Doña Leonor de Carvajal as a relapsed Jew. It indicates that her husband was Portuguese (synonymous with being Jewish) and both of her parents had been convicted of following the Law of Moses. Leonor and her mother, sister, and brother were burned at the stake in the same auto-da-fé in December 1596. Courtesy of the Bancroft Library.

Conversos and Crypto-Jews in the Americas

THE VICEROYALTY OF New Spain in Mexico was the destination of choice for Jews who wanted to remain Spanish. Although the Inquisition had also surfaced there, it was known to be less active than in Spain. Unfortunately, as waves of conversos arrived, the Inquisition became more active in Mexico, and social station did not provide any protection. The arrest of the governor of the state of Nuevo León, Luis de Carvajal, and several members of his family in the 1590s made it impossible to ignore the dangers crypto-Jews faced in Mexico.

The document that most moved me in the Mexico section of the exhibition was a page from the original Inquisition files about the fate of Governor Carvajal's sister Leonor. Her mother and father had been arrested by the Inquisition, and her husband was "Portuguese," a code word suggesting that he was probably a crypto-Jew. The evidence against her was overwhelming; she was condemned and burned at the stake in 1596 along with her mother, sister, and brother. Although the governor was not directly implicated, the Inquisition arrested him and convicted him of the crime of not reporting that his sister's family was crypto-Jewish. He died in the Inquisition prison.

In 1595, the same year the Carvajals were arrested, King Philip II of Spain authorized the conquistador Juan de Oñate to colonize the northern frontier of New Spain, what is now New Mexico. Oñate was a descendant of a converso family, and many of the people in his expedition seem to have been conversos. Moving 1,200 miles away from Mexico City, where the Office of the Inquisition was located, must have seemed like a safer choice, even given the significant hazards that faced Oñate's expedition on El Camino Real.

Doña Teresa and the Inquisition

THE INQUISITION FOLLOWED the conversos deeper into territory claimed by Spain, and once again, prominent citizens were the prey. The most notable arrests for Judaizing in Santa Fe were those of the ex-governor, Bernardo López de Mendizábal, and his wife, Doña Teresa Aguilera y Roche. In 1662 they were arrested and taken to Mexico City to stand trial before the Holy Office of the Inquisition.

One of the highlights of the exhibition is the re-creation of Doña Teresa's room in the Palace of the Governors as it would have been when she lived there, including period furniture and a sewing box. She was taken into custody in that room

in a surreptitious nighttime arrest. I imagine the terror that she must have felt when she was arrested and taken under armed guard for the months-long trip to Mexico City and the Inquisition jail.

Don Bernardo died in the Inquisition jail and was never tried, but Doña Teresa stood trial and defended herself against her accusers. The charges ranged from drinking chocolate on Holy Friday (seen as an indulgence that disregarded the sanctity of that day), bathing and changing to clean clothes on Friday (considered a Jewish practice, as in preparing for Shabbat on Saturday), and reading novels in a foreign language. The Inquisition considered Spanish to be the language of Christians. A colonial expression still used in some areas of the Americas, “Hablo cristiano,” translates literally as “I speak Christian” but means “I speak Spanish.” Thus, reading a book in a foreign language was interpreted to mean that she was reading unchristian material. Unlike so many others, who were condemned to death, eventually the charges against her were dropped, and she was released.

After the tribulations of Don Bernardo and Doña Teresa, the power of the Inquisition went into decline, but that did nothing to diminish the culture of secrecy among converso families. Jews were denounced from the pulpits as the people who had killed Jesus. Although converso families had been separated from active Jewish community life for centuries, some still held the knowledge of having Jewish ancestors. Some even practiced customs such as lighting candles on Friday night without recognizing them as Jewish traditions.

Fractured Faiths Today

CRYPTO-JEWS WHO migrated to the small villages of the highlands of northern New Mexico from Mexico in the 1600s stepped into a unique niche of history. They lived their secret lives in an isolated corner of the Spanish Empire, far from Mexico and Spain and the Inquisition. Unlike crypto-Jews in Spain who emigrated to Holland or Morocco, where they could be openly Jewish, crypto-Jews in northern New Mexico could not connect to an existing Jewish tradition. With their cultural and religious lifelines cut off, people with hidden Jewish identity camouflaged themselves within a Catholic world.

Fifty years ago, the Second Vatican Council altered the official Church position toward Jews and overturned the centuries-old charge of the collective guilt of Jews for the death of Jesus. The document, *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Time), says, “Further-

more, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel’s spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”

This position gave Judaism a new legitimacy and made it more acceptable to embrace the secret memories of Jewish ancestry in Spanish-speaking circles. Today, people are finding their way through the labyrinth of a new identity.

Leaving Doña Teresa’s room in the exhibition, I took in Cary Herz’s photographs, which capture fragments from the lives of Jews in northern New Mexico in recent decades. Her images of tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions and people wrapped in Jewish prayer shawls are ensconced within archways of Santa María la Blanca.

Next to the photographs is a poem, “Semana Santa” (Holy Week), by Isabelle Medina Sandoval, who is from a northern New Mexican converso family. As an author who is helping construct the identity of those returning to Judaism, she expresses the converso experience of having a mixed-faith heritage and being heir to two cultures and two religions:

On the fringe I wander
Boundary of periphery
Wondering just where I belong.

Ron D. Hart, PhD, is a cultural anthropologist and ethnohistorian who did postdoctoral work in Jewish studies at the University of Oxford. His books include *Sephardic Jews* (2016), *Judaism* (2015), and *Islam and Muslims* (2011). He has received awards for his work from the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Ford Foundation, and the Fulbright Program, among others.

Fractured Faiths: Spanish Judaism, the Inquisition, and New World Identities runs through December 31, 2016, at the New Mexico History Museum. It is the first museum exhibition to explore this subject in depth. Josef Díaz and Roger Martínez-Dávila, the curators, have traveled to collections in Mexico and Spain, as well as the United States, identifying the 150 or so objects in the exhibition to tell this intriguing 500-year-old story, from the Jews of Spain to the conversos of New Mexico. These priceless historic objects have been hand carried to New Mexico by couriers from each lending institution. The late Seymour Merrin’s generous initial donation made this exhibition possible. A catalog with the same title as the exhibition, edited by Roger L. Martínez-Dávila and Ron D. Hart (Fresco Press), includes articles by authorities on this subject from the United States, Spain, and Mexico.