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Abstract:

Luis de Carvajal was the first and only governor of the State of Nuevo Laredo to be burned in an Auto da Fé. This paper looks at Portuguese Jewish experience in the 17th century Mexican Diaspora. The paper seeks to understand where the historical lacunae exist and seeks to examine how historians study a phenomenon of a people (Portuguese Crypto-Jews) who did not wish to be either studied or known. The paper is a voyage of historical discovery to a place that seeks to remain in hiding.

A scholarly review of the literature surrounding Crypto-Jewish life leads to the rapid realization that in a historical study as complicated as that of the Crypto-Jews of New Spain we are dealing with the phenomenon of the Russian doll or what many in the Jewish world would call a Purim Schpil. That is to say that within each kernel of truth there lays another. Crypto-Jewish history, like so much of history itself, is a journey down multilayered paths with each one leading to a previous unknown path. As we unravel these onionskins of history we are forced to agree with Karl Popper when he stated: "There is no history of mankind, there is only an indefinite number of histories of all kinds of aspects of human life." To deal with such a great number of historical documents is then no easy task. This paper suggests that we may never have enough facts to truly understand the life of the Portuguese Jewish refugee and governor of the state of Nuevo León, Luis de Carvajal or his motives for becoming a martyr. Was his missionary work on behalf of Judaism an act of faith or a desire for martyrdom? Did the Inquisitional authorities seek his destruction for political, religious, or economic reasons? Is there an underlying history that contradicts all that has been written about his community, his family or Luis de Carvajal himself?

Almost every history teacher reminds his/her students of George Santayana's famous saying "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it." Yet few remember to also quote Max Beerbohm saying: "History does not repeat itself. The historians repeat one another" or Roy P. Bassler's statement "To know the truth of history is to realize its ultimate myth and its inevitable ambiguity." Of course both sets of quotes offer at least a modicum of truth. The problem with history is not that it is a

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lie agreed upon, but rather history is so complicated, so multi-layered and so intertwined with the zeitgeist of the times that the question is not remembering history but rather working with parallel histories existing side by side and at the same time. History may well be less a retelling of a story than an understanding of probabilities. Perhaps Nissam Nicholas Taleb's work on probability logic serves to illustrate this point.

In 2007 Nissim Nicholas Taleb wrote about what he called "Black Swans." Black Swans are events that have three precise characteristics: they are totally unexpected and rare, they often have extreme impacts, and they are retrospectively predictable. From Taleb's perspective, history does not repeat itself and its study is a waste of time. He presents his readers with the proposition that the remembering of the past only provokes misjudgments in the present and hardships or crises in the future. Taleb states that "what you do not know (regarding history is) more relevant than what you do know." (Taleb: xix). Taleb also postulates that: "The inability to predict outliers implies the inability to predict the course of history, given the share of these events in the dynamic of events. But we act as though we are able to predict historic events, or, even worse, as if we are able to change the course of history (Taleb, p. xx)

Assuming that Taleb is correct, then certainly there are few historical subjects about which we know less than that of the history of the New World's Portuguese Crypto-Jews. Even the academic name given to this group of people who lived in the Hispanic lands implies that for them ignorance of who they were and how they lived was their salvation.

These were people who chose to hide who they were from their peers and neighbors, and who knew that the sunlight of the historical record was counter productive to their very existence.

Because Crypto-Jews needed to live below society's venire we may never fully understand their lives nor be sure that what we believe we know is what truly was or still may be. Historians must rely on either oral or written records. Furthermore, historians too are human beings and often see data from a specific or even from multiple sociological perspectives. Thus, the same data yield different interpretations for the functionalist and for the Marxist, for the person viewing the data from the perspective of the symbolic interactionist and for the Freudian psychologist. Might the Italian writer Umberto Eco be correct when Taleb writes of him that: "Read books are far less valuable

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than unread ones. The library should contain as much of what you do not know as your financial means allow you to put there.” (Taleb. p.1)?

Historians of Crypto-Jews are further challenged due to the fact that they must live with the assumption that what is written or reported to them is true. If the data are not true then what we have is merely the story rather than the history. Although historians can corroborate the historical record through the use of multiple sources, this corroboration becomes much more difficult when an entire class of people may choose to collaborate for the sake of the hidden rather than revealing reality.

The French philosopher and criminologist, Dr. Gilly Thomas, notes that: “the history of Crypto-Jews is a history of the hidden which is per definition an anti-history in that history lives from that which is not hidden event.” (Private correspondence: March 2008). Ironically this hidden history, developed on the Iberian Peninsula, parallels the principles of Kabbalistic thought (the classical Jewish mysticism) called in Hebrew “Torah ha’Nistarah” and loosely translated as: “the truths of the hidden”. Like Kabala, Crypto-Jewish history may be then seen as a mosaic of stories, each hiding the other, each interrelated with the other, and each adding a kernel of truth while at the same time forcing us to confront structural rather than narrative history. If we link this structural historical challenge with Popper’s proposition that history is multi-structural, the study of even one Crypto-Jewish family becomes a patchwork of suppositions and assumptions sewn together by what may appear to be no more than random facts and assumed data. To find meaning where there may be multiple meanings beckons us to a quixotic journey that may frustrate and enlighten, clarify and confuse. To complicate matters further, the results of history (or anti-history) pursue us throughout time in an existential manner that is reminiscent of the pages of *Les Mouches* (Sartre 1943) presented during another dark time, the Nazi occupation of France.

If clear historical facts can be interpreted in multiple manners, then the history of the Crypto-Jews presents even greater problems. Thus, while the historian Martin Cohen has done a masterful job in reporting to us what the documents say, we may never know what truly occurred within the hidden world of Crypto-Jewry or what was in the mind and private family meetings of the Carvajals. This paper, and indeed this conference, is about a people who were “outliers” or “Black Swans of history.” Certainly most “nuevos cristianos” adapted to their new culture. Most people lived with the reality of the situation

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and soon sank into the abyss of history. A few of them, however, chose to become Black Swans of history.

The history of Crypto-Judaism is both a testament to the tenacity of faith, the power of ideology and the questions that perplex both the historian and social - psychologist. In fact there is a continual flow of new information about this group of people that never ceases to surprise us. For example, in Deanne Stillman's new book on Mustangs in the American West, we learn that the earliest cowboys were really Crypto-Jews. Stillman writes: "Within a century (16th) some of these Jews became the first cowboys in the New World. – yes the original high plains drifter was not Clint Eastwood but a son of Moses who had been kicked out of Spain (Stillman: 9).

While Stillman's work is about horses rather than Crypto-Jews we cannot fail to note the relationship between these Jews who fled Spain in search of the freedom they perhaps hoped to find in New Spain and the Mustangs about which she writes. For example, Stillman notes in reference to Cortés' mission that "Hernando Alonso, the Hebrew blacksmith who was fleeing the Inquisition as a secret Jew, one of the many converses on board, also said a prayer as he checked the shoes of the horses and perhaps fitted some with new ones for the tough days ahead." (Stillman: 12)

Stillman's study of horses acts as an example of the great laconic gaps that plague our study of Crypto-Jews. We cannot study their history without asking, why would people such as the Carvajals risk all? How much do we really know about them? How true are the diaries and written records left behind? Was it merely ideology or was there a political or economic component? Were they Jewish by choice or was their Judaism imposed on them? Were the Carvajals representatives or a specific class of people or did they manifest dysfunctional or abnormal behavior? Did they expect to win their war for the right to be Jewish? If so, how would they have defined winning? Are they typical of martyrs, political protesters or merely people who might have been called the religious hippies of their generation?

To make matters even more difficult the Portuguese Crypto-Jewish community in Mexico did not live in isolation. Martin Cohen notes in his major work on Luis de Carvajal, *The Martyr*, the many times that members of the Carvajal family (and we may assume that they were typical of others) communicated with their fellow Crypto-Jews in Spain and with "free" Jews in such places as Italy. Today many citizens of the twenty-first century

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assume that the voyage from Europe to New Spain was one-directional. That is to say, those who came to New Spain or fled New Spain never returned to Europe. Cohen, however, teaches us that not only was there communication between the two communities but that there was a flow of people between them. This inter-community interaction means that it is impossible to study one community in isolation. Instead there appear to be multiple crypto-Jewish communities using different names and perhaps having different goals.

Among these sub-Crypto-Jewish communities we may find:

- Jews who fled the Inquisition and chose to practice secret Judaism
- Jews who fled the Inquisition and desired to assimilate into Catholic society but were unable to assimilate
- People who may have been denounced as Judaizers who may or may not have been such
- People who were convicted (declared) Judaizers due to charges against them of conspiracy
- People who may have become (or declared) Judaizers due to the actions/beliefs of their family members, that is to say, guilt by association.
- People who may have fled to Portugal or had relatives who fled to Portugal and were thus classified as “portugueses” which became a code word for crypto-Jew.

Thus, the study of even one family becomes entangled not only with their possible desire to regain at least a part of their Judaism, but also with the politics of the day, the role of internal conflicts between the state and the church and the fact that not all Crypto-Jews even within one family necessarily practiced the exact same form of Judaism or in the case of the Carvajals even desired to be Jewish.

Just as in all historical biographic studies, the historian must decide from which perspective s/he desires to write, which data are to be included and which data are left out, and the trustworthiness of the sources with which s/he is working. This multi-layered world means that the story of the Crypto-Jews and the conflicts of Luis de Carvajal and his family must be studied against the background of Spanish-Portuguese Jewry.

Certainly there is no dearth of writers who have tried to fill in these lacunae. For example, B. Natanyahu’s mammoth book *The Origins of the Inquisition* (1995) provides a rich source of materials concerning the fate of Sephardic Jewry preceding and

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following the introduction of the Spanish Inquisition. While Netanyahu does not address the situation of Jews in New Spain, he provides a rich social background for Crypto-Jewish life in New Spain. It may be said that New Spain was during the period of the Carvajals even more stringent in its lack of tolerance than the mother country itself. For example, Netanyahu raises a provocative point when he speaks of nationally. He states: "If the nations of the (Iberian) peninsula were divided from each other not only by their shifting dynasties and rulers (which were often imposed upon them from the outside), but also by inherent natural differences (such as their stock, language etc) and if converses too, were viewed (by themselves, as well as by their friends and foes) as an entity with special national characteristics, may we not assume that the conflict between them and the other national entities of Spain stemmed primarily from *national* differences rather than from any other source?" (Netanyahu: 998, italics in original). Netanyahu raises a very different set of propositions. If he is correct then the regional/national conflicts of Spain somehow not only "leaped-frogged" across the Atlantic, but also might indicate that returnees to Judaism such as the Carvajal family viewed their "conversion" as much from a nationalistic perspective as from a religious one. If such an analysis is correct then we must ask ourselves the reason(s) behind this renaissance of nationalism and if this conflict was less about ideology then about nationalistic and economic position.

If Netanyahu is correct, then we must ask ourselves why would these people choose to enter into a lost battle. Is the Spain of the 16th century different from New Spain of the 17th century? In the case of the former, the New Christians would still have had a national collective memory and therefore have been prepared for conflict. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that the Carvajals sought to "convert" people to Judaism so that they would become part of the Jewish nation. Supporting this latter analysis the historian Boleslao Lewin notes that "the American (New World) inquisitional tribunals demonstrated a greater zeal in the pursuit of heretics and a greater cruelty in their sentencing than even the Spanish Inquisitors, while not always being the best example of high Catholic morality" (Lewin: 36: original text in Spanish, translated by author). From Lewin's perspective we would have to assume that the desire to practice any form Judaism in New Spain was either "crazy", or "foolish". On the other hand, social theory teaches us that most rational people make rational decisions. If the latter is true then we may question if the declaring of someone to be a "Judaizer" may have been a proscribed status rather than an acquired one. That is to say, that a Judaizer may have been found guilty of Judaic practices not because of his/her actions but rather due to his/her social

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position. To add to this confusion, Meyer Kayserling in his seminal work *Geschechte Der Juden In Portugal*, notes that many of the inquisition's functionaries were themselves Crypto-Jews.

Kayserling writes: "It was not rare for there to have been friendships and correspondences between Inquisitional functionaries these very people were crypto-Jews, and had relatives abroad who openly lived as Jews" (Kayserling: 283, translation by author from the Portuguese version).

Certainly we know that the Crypto-Jews of New Spain communicated with each other, even when in the Inquisitional jail. In Silvia Hamui Sutton's work on some of the secret codes of Crypto-Jews (HaLapid, Winter, 2008) she notes that: "For New Spain Crypto-Jews, group recognition was essential to foster their beliefs and ritual practices associated with Moses' law. There were several double meaning actions and expressions seemingly carrying a straightforward message that in the eyes of the converts revealed a hidden *truth*." (Sutton, HaLapid, 4) Sutton's insights into Crypto-Jewish code words mean that we can never be sure that we understand a manuscript or text. Once again the historian is faced with the reality that what s/he believes to be true may or may not be true. Sutton reminds us that: "Each coded expression summarized customs, values, beliefs, orientation etc., that revealed a particular way of looking at the world but in turn provides a space for language diversity and mobility Thus, code words and acts functioned as a subterfuge from the oppressive reality." (Sutton: 6) Cannot it not be argued that history too is a series of codes and that the complexity of the human being means that what is said and meant may be two different things?

To answer these questions may be impossible, but if we return to Taleb and combines these questions with a theoretical design some possible or new hypotheses may arise. We know enough to know that we may never be able to answer all of our questions. Another possibility is that we take a completely different position from that of Taleb. That is to say, that instead of viewing Luis de Carvajal as a unique historical event, we choose to see him as a symbol. If we study the life of Luis Carvajal not as an individual but rather as a representative of a sub-group of people, a representative of oppressed minorities and of those who chose to confront power for the sake of an ideal, then a very different picture of the man arises from the depths of history. Viewing Luis Carvajal as not merely a hero of Jewish and Mexican history but as a world symbol and icon of and for those who have fought throughout the world than Luis de Carvajal becomes a

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quixotic figure in human form. Does not his story resonate when we think of the Jews who stood up to the Nazis in the Warsaw Ghetto or of those who currently are fighting against Chinese oppression in Tibet?

We may never know the real reasons behind Luis de Carvajal's "conversion" and chosen martyrdom, there are, however, a number of possible scenarios. Among these are:

Scenario One:

- Certain groups used the charge of Judaizing very much in the same way as McCarthy used the charge of communism. That is to say, that ideology became a tool to destroy those who may have become an individual or collective threat to the establishment.
- The Carvajal family had become too powerful and thus the charge of "judaizing" was a means to destroy the family.
- The family may have had some people who were attracted to Judaism and once it became clear that they were to be found guilty of Judaizing began to explore the faith of which they were accused.
- Once they realized that there was no escape, it may have been better to die as martyrs and thus their judaizing became a product of the Inquisition

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Scenario Two:

- The Carvajal family and Luis de Carvajal in particular sincerely rejected Christianity and turned to Judaism to fill a psychological void in his life.
- Once he began to enter into the world of Judaism, this journey then took on a life of itself and he was prepared to die for his beliefs

Scenario Three:

- All oppressive regimes seek to develop/find martyrs whom they can use to control the population under their control by creating a capricious and unstable political reality in which belief takes precedent over actions.
- The Carvajal family and especially Luis de Carvajal, then became a means by which to frighten the local population (especially the conquered Mexican indigenous peoples) into submitting to Church. These people would have seen the death (murder) of Carvajal as a warning.

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Taleb ends his book on probability reminding his readers that there is almost no probability of their being born. Taleb may be proven to be correct. We may never understand the reality of what made Luis de Carvajal become a martyr. Perhaps he did not fully understand his actions either.

Yet, despite the frustrations of history we may choose to take another path. We may have to conclude that while there is no one true academic history, we may see history as a meta-subject, a representation of the poetry of life. No matter how we were born, each of us was born; each of us is more than merely a black swan.

In these days after Purim when Haman like the Inquisitors tried to destroy the Jewish people and prior to Passover, when the impossible occurred and Israel was liberated from Egypt, Luis de Carvajal's life reminds us that while our birth may be a mere accident of biology, faith and love and determination can turn us into "white swans". We cannot help but be reminded of the "Al Ha'Nissim" prayer for Purim, recited during the Grace after Meals by Jews across the world "In the days of Mordecai and Esther, in Shushan the capital, when the wicked Haman rose up against them, and sought to destroy, slaughter and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, infants and women in one day...But You in Your abounding mercies, foiled his counsel and frustrated his intentions...." (Birchat Ha'Mazon)

Centuries after the birth and death of Haman and his successors, and the torture and horrors brought on by the Inquisitors we meet this week not just to celebrate the life of Luis de Carvajal but to try once again to understand humanity's need for cruelty. Perhaps that understanding is beyond our comprehension, but if this conference can help us to understand that while we may not control the hand that life has dealt us, we do control how we play that hand, then perhaps in the words of the Hagadah (book read at the Passover séder) "dayenu/it is enough for us.". In that manner, Luis de Carvajal is more than a historical figure. His life is a symbol of the fight against tyranny and for human dignity.

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