



The ceremony of baking the matza, illustrated here, occurred on the second day of Pessah.

## The ark and the flowerpot

*Baking matza in terra-cotta pots and lighting candles behind closed curtains, Portugal's anussim communities have survived centuries of secrecy*

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Jewish artifacts in Portugal? The two would seem to be mutually exclusive. After all, there has not been an active Jewish community in Portugal for half a millennium. But we were determined to find whatever we could.

The term we've coined for our journeys over the years is "halachic adventures," as we like to combine travels to exotic locations with digging up Jewish history and artifacts as well as uncovering local Jewish law and custom. Our destination this time was Portugal via Italy in an attempt to trace the roots of the ancient marrano community that has managed to cling tenaciously to some small semblance of Jewish custom, despite close to 500 years of isolation and persecution by the Catholic Church.

Our primary goal on this trip was to see if we could track down any hidden crypto-Jews in Portugal and find out how they had secretly baked their matza for the hundreds of years they practiced their rites clandestinely.

Jews lived in Portugal, flourishing at times, for centuries. When Spain expelled its Jews in 1492 it looked like things would only improve for the Jews in Portugal. Many Spanish Jews fled to North Africa, which held much promise and ultimately

yielded great communities and much Jewish scholarship. Others accepted the King of Portugal's offer of safety and promise of security.

It is estimated that 60,000-100,000 Jews crossed the border in those dark days of 1492. The hospitable King Joao II was soon succeeded by his first cousin and brother-in-law, Manoel the Fortunate, under whom conditions initially remained good. That is, until he expressed a desire to marry the daughter of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabelle of Spain.

The Spanish monarch's condition: rid Portugal of its Jews. He agreed and married their daughter, who died a year later in childbirth. In order to fulfill his end of the deal, on December 5, 1496, Manoel announced that all Jews (and Muslims) had to leave the country by the end of October 1497.

When the deadline arrived, he closed the gates. No Jews were permitted to leave, and all but the few who were martyred were forcibly baptized. This forcible conversion was followed in 1579 by the establishment of the inquisition. Thus, unlike Spain, where the marranos (who prefer to be known as *Judeaos*, *anussim* or *conversos*) were the "weaker" layer of Jewish society not willing to hazard the dangers of expulsion, those in Portugal included all Jews, and thus, for a long time, they heroically fought the imposition of Christianity and

the suppression of their Judaism.

For hundreds of years those hidden Jews lived their lives in the mountains of Portugal and secretly passed on their customs from generation to generation. Often times, those traditions ended up being nothing more than the lighting of two candles on Friday night or washing hands in the morning with no knowledge or explanation as to why these rituals were performed.

On the other hand, the vibrant Spanish-Portuguese communities in Amsterdam, London and New York were made up of those conversos who were able to escape and practice their religion openly again. By the end of the 18th century the emigration petered out, and it seemed that the last of the courageous marranos had assimilated into Portuguese society. This notion was dramatically shattered at the end of the 19th century, when large pockets of marranos were discovered in dozens of villages all over northern Portugal.

OUR FIRST goal was to make contact with whatever organized community existed in the big city. To our surprise, we heard that an Israeli-based, Chilean-born rabbi was trying to help the fledgling community of Porto reestablish itself.

For a number of years, the energetic and enthusiastic Rabbi Elisha Salas has lived both in a mountain village among anus-

sim and in a big city, where he provided for the ever-growing number of anussim that continually come forward. Salas, with his perpetual smile, sees anussim lurking everywhere.

Our trip north with him to the town of Belmonte, the well-known close-knit community of former anussim – today full-fledged Jews – was full of stories and intrigue. One man who owned many hotels once put the rabbi up with a group of *mashgichim* [kashrut inspectors] while they gave the certification on the first kosher Portuguese wine in half a millennium. When the time came to pay, the owner refused to accept the money and, with tears streaming down his face, told the rabbi, "This is the least I can do for you."

Despite the inquisition, the anussim persevered and maintained certain customs. One of the holidays that they continued to observe was Pessah. The message of slavery and redemption was clearly a theme that spoke to their hearts.

The central mitzva of the holiday was the eating of matza. However, anybody baking at home would be suspect of Judaizing. The description provided by the inquisitional records and recorded by Cecil Roth over 70 years ago is as follows: Pessah was calculated as occurring on the full moon in March. So as not to attract attention, they observed it two days late.

A month prior they would begin acquiring new flour, tablecloths, bowls, knives, water pitchers, etc. to be used in the baking. On the second day of the holiday they went to the Zezre River to wash off the little stoves.

The ceremony, known as *pão santo*, or baking the matza, called "azymous bread," holy bread, or *pan cenzeno*, occurred in the evening of that day. Dressed in white and barefoot they gathered in small groups in cleaned houses and recited special prayers as they kneaded the small, flat cakes. They separated a small piece, the *halla*, and as the matza baked on the tiles they dropped that small piece of dough on the coals. They hoped that it would burst with a slight flare, as this was regarded as a good omen.

After the baking they took the matza wrapped in towels to be eaten during the holiday, except for one piece that, together with remnants of previous years, was not eaten and rather kept for posterity. Some marranos had a custom, obviously borrowed from their Christian neighbors, of feeding their children the piece of matza without the child touching it.

THIS DESCRIPTION intrigued us and we were determined to learn more about it, maybe even observe it. Salas took us to Belmonte, where we found a well-organized community that officially converted to Judaism in order to be accepted by the Israeli Rabbinat. A donated synagogue, mikve and a small but well kept Jewish museum adorn this small country town.

We had a friend of the rabbi walking with us who enabled us to visit in the homes of this usually closed society. We met an older woman in her 70s who vividly recounted customs of her youth such as crossing the local stream during Pessah time as a way of recounting the exodus from Egypt. When pressed about the matza, she eventually took us to her son's house, where they produced her great grandmother's matza oven. The contraption was a terra-cotta pot,

much like a planter. Nobody would find it unusual. The evening when they were to bake, they would fill it with coals and heat it up behind closed shutters. Then they would flip terra-cotta roof tiles over on the coals and bake their matzot, quickly and secretly.

This town, possibly the last remaining one in the world with practicing anussim, still has a few of these ovens hidden about. For the past 25 years, their matza has come from Israel, and when we asked the young adolescent granddaughter of this woman if she knew how to bake, she answered no. This evoked in us mixed feelings.

On the one hand, they are finally coming out of hiding, proudly admitting their roots and joining the rest of world Jewry. On the other hand, globalization is slowly eating away at the rich customs and traditions of this and other small Jewish communities flung far across the globe. From here we started our trip back to Porto to meet with some of the rabbi's community.

PORTO, AN Atlantic port city, is Portugal's second largest city and home to its largest university. The synagogue in Porto is a large, imposing structure, with spacious offices and apartments way upstairs. This magnificent building, the Mekor Chaim Synagogue, was inaugurated in 1929 through the strenuous efforts of a captain in the Portuguese army who was an anuss, and was funded by the Kadoorie family of Shanghai.

This man, Captain Arthur Carlos de Barros Basto, actively and publicly declared his Jewish roots. Born in 1887 near Porto, he was active politically and participated in the 1910 revolution. Reaching the rank of captain, he was repeatedly decorated for heroism. Interested in the faith of his fathers, he traveled to Tangiers to officially convert, married a Jewess from Lisbon and then returned to Porto to build a Jewish community.

The granddaughter of Barros Basto was present at our Judaism talk that we gave late into the night. So was a most interesting and eclectic group of strongly attached anussim. Almost all of them are professionals; lawyers, teachers and the like. The day before we arrived, two young teenage boys had been circumcised. In their honor the rabbi made a toast and announced that because of them, there was a minyan of circumcised Jewish males in Porto for the first time in recent memory.

They are proud of their heritage and come to the classes and Shabbat prayers and meals that the rabbi runs. They spoke with awe and respect of Barros Basto, almost as the patron saint of their fledgling community. He had established a yeshiva in Porto, called Rosh Pina, which ran for nine years educating more than 90 students from many northern towns, and published a monthly journal called *Ha-Lapid*.

These activities did not go unnoticed by the government, especially after an esti-

mated 10,000 families across Portugal admitted to practicing Judaism in secret. Trumped up charges were brought against the captain, known as the "Portuguese Dreyfus," and he was courtmartialled, stripped of his rank, defamed and accused of being a Communist. He was also forced to close the yeshiva and died a broken man. Thus, the marrano renaissance was (temporarily) brought to an end.

Arrangements were made for us to meet with an older Catholic priest, who came just short of admitting to us his anuss roots. He discussed the closeness he feels to Judaism.

A priest, an anuss, is it possible? It turned out not to be so unusual. While on this same trip, in a 12th-century synagogue in Taini,

Italy, we met another Jew who recounted that as a child he remembered the anussim of his town going to the church (which had been a synagogue before the inquisition) and receiving a special blessing from the priest on the 30th day after a firstborn male child was born.

He told us that the priest was an anuss as well, and the anussim parents had a tradition of the redemption of the firstborn male child, as mentioned in the Torah. This crypto-Jew priest was the vehicle of this tradition. Jewish families would make one of their children into a priest as a way of throwing off the trail of the inquisitors.

AS DARKNESS came upon us, a car arrived to take us to the Juderia, the old Jewish ghetto that housed the great and wealthy émigrés from Spain in 1492. Portugal was home to many famous Jews before and during this period.

Recently, the Church was renovating a recently acquired four-story house for use as an old-age home. While doing the work they uncovered a false wall and behind it a hidden, beautifully carved stone niche that could have been an *aron kodesh*, an ark to hold the Torah scroll in a secret synagogue. Only two other arks from that period, the 16th century, have been found in Portugal.

They told us that this house not only had a front door but a very rare and unusual rear exit, opening from the room with the ark. Could this have been an escape route if the inquisition's soldiers knocked at the front door?

The priest in whose parish it was found, Father Agostinho Jardim Moreira, is to be commended for sharing it with the public, because he could have just as easily hidden its existence and gone on working. He, together with several of his workers, met us at the site to show us around and explain the findings.

With only flashlights to see by, we explored the room and the ark. While one of us spoke to the group that joined us, the other furtively dug his fingers into the crumbling seams and wall around this ark, imagining finding a hidden note, a Jewish manuscript, or

some lost token of Jewish suffering in this distant land. Alas, no vestige was sifted out of the dust settled in this long forgotten prayer hall.

HALACHIC ADVENTURES usually include propitious twists and this one was no exception. We flew from Portugal to London to do some research in the archives of the Jewish community there. Our primary areas of interest were *etrogim*, kosher fish and matza, and it was those files we requested to be brought up from the basement of the London City Archives; files having nothing to do with our Portuguese experience.

Evidently they or we made a mistake, because we received a nondescript envelope with an old red ribbon tied around it. It looked like it probably had not been opened for 70 years. Unwinding the ribbon, we found minutes of the Portuguese Marranos Committee of London. To our amazement the first document, dated November 1927, was a four-page report of the committee, which had been founded the previous year.

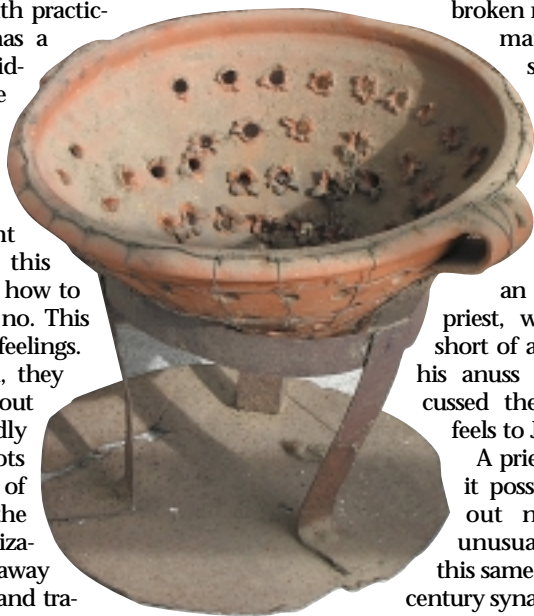
They describe their decision to financial-

ly assist in the establishment of a fledgling community in Oporto, being the nearest large city to the "marrano settlements in Northern Portugal." They revealed that the Spanish-Portuguese synagogue in London donated two Torah scrolls to the Porto community and the Gibraltar community gave a Torah to the marrano congregation at Braganca.

Subsequent pages were letters from Barros Basto himself, describing his journeys on horseback through the mountains and villages of Portugal where he met hidden Jews, who for centuries had practiced in secret. The numbers were staggering: he talks about 700-800 in Braganca, 500 in Vilarinho, over 500 in Moncorvo, a village full in Lagoaca, etc.

What became of these anussim and their ritual objects will have to wait for our next trip.

But the astounding serendipity, if you will, of this unasked for folder, seemed like a pre-ordained event. For to read letters from the good captain one day after meeting his granddaughter and spiritual heirs in a shul in Portugal, just reinforced for us the closeness and interconnectedness of a very special people.



The Mekor Chaim Synagogue, located in Porto, was inaugurated in 1929 through the efforts of Captain Arthur Carlos de Barros Basto, an anuss.