

**"Men of the Nation": The Shaping of Converso Identity in Early Modern Europe**



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## “MEN OF THE NATION”: THE SHAPING OF CONVERSO IDENTITY IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

In 1762 Isaac de Pinto, a Dutch Jewish banker and economic theorist of *converso* origin, composed a letter to Voltaire to protest against the latter's hostile depiction of the Jews in his article "Juifs". What offended him was not so much Voltaire's low opinion of the Jews as his failure to draw a distinction between the Ashkenazic Jews, an ethnic subgroup with roots in medieval Germany, and the Sephardic Jews of Iberian origin, of whom de Pinto was one. "A Portuguese Jew from Bordeaux and a German Jew from Metz", wrote de Pinto, "appear to be two entirely different beings". One reason for the difference, he asserted, lay in separate descent. The Sephardic Jews were descended from the tribe of Judah and had always lived apart from other Jews, marrying among themselves and maintaining separate synagogues. De Pinto suggested that the distinct lineage of the Sephardim had perpetuated qualities of cultural superiority which were altogether compatible with the Europeans', and which distinguished the Sephardic Jew from the Ashkenazic Jew.<sup>1</sup>

Such a line of argument stood in sharp contrast to traditional Jewish apologetics, which eschewed such distinctions in the face of Gentile hostility. It was also far removed from an emerging egalitarian mode of thinking which would eventually bring emancipation to Ashkenazim and Sephardim alike. It was not, however, merely a misguided effort at practical politics. De Pinto's attitudes reflect complex patterns of identity which had been vitally functional only a few generations earlier among the Portuguese Jews of north-western Europe. Among these Jews, collective and individual self-perception entailed the balancing of two separate clusters of ideas, one associated with Jewish religion and peoplehood, the other with "the Nation". The cultivation of this dual identity represented a conspicuous deviation from traditional Jewish

<sup>1</sup> [Isaac de Pinto], *Apologie pour la nation juive, ou réflexions critiques sur le premier chapitre du VIIe tome des oeuvres de M. de Voltaire au sujet des juifs* (Amsterdam, 1762). For a discussion of de Pinto's pamphlet, see Arthur Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews* (New York, 1968), pp. 180-3.

notions, and had a long history of development. It is this history that the present article seeks to examine.

The "Men of the Nation" of north-western Europe were a group with origins in the population of *conversos* (descendants of baptized Jews) in the Iberian Peninsula. After generations of living as Catholics in Spain or Portugal, they had been impelled to emigrate to the emerging Atlantic states of north-western Europe, either out of fear of the Inquisition or for economic reasons. Outside the Peninsula they established their own communal life wherever they settled. In some respects the communities they founded were like other merchant colonies in European commercial centres. But these communities were unique in one respect. They were established as Jewish communities by *conversos* seeking to re-attach themselves to the world of rabbinic Judaism. One of the crucial functions of such communities after their foundation was the re-Judaization of new émigrés from the Peninsula. As such, they reflected a concrete, conscious programme of collective self-transformation, something rarely found in the pre-modern world.

The impulse for this transformation grew out of a long history of problematic self-definition. While in the Peninsula, the *conversos* had necessarily lived as Catholics, at least publicly. Some of them had sought to cultivate a "Jewish" existence which they shared secretly with an intimate circle of friends and family members. Others accommodated themselves to a Catholic way of life without apparent difficulty. Still others fit neither of these patterns, having become alienated from traditional religious life of any kind. But all *conversos* shared a common fate: the experience of enmeshment in, and rejection by, Iberian society. Thus, underlying the diversity of belief and practice among *conversos* were common psychological issues that played a key role in identity formation.

Scholars have not ignored the issue of *converso* (or *marrano*) identity.<sup>2</sup> But there has been a tendency to isolate and examine what appears to be the "religious sphere". This focus is evident in Cecil Roth's popular but pioneering work, *A History of the Marranos* (1932). Roth's work devotes a single chapter to the inner life of the *conversos*, and it is titled, significantly, "The

<sup>2</sup> Until recent years when *converso* has become the preferred expression, the term *marrano* — a pejorative term from the medieval period, discussed below (p. 52) — was routinely used by scholars to refer to *conversos* or to crypto-Jews.

Religion of the Marranos".<sup>3</sup> This narrowly defined notion of identity persisted throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Research on "diaspora" *conversos* has likewise focused on religious identity. Typically, for example, Carl Gebhardt defined the *converso* as a "Catholic without belief and a Jew without knowledge, but in will, a Jew".<sup>4</sup> I. S. Révah, too, in his influential article "Les marranes" (1959), regarded *converso* identity as a function of religious loyalties (or lack thereof).<sup>5</sup> In recent years a more three-dimensional picture has emerged, with the proliferation of *converso* and Inquisition studies. Scholars such as Antonio Domínguez Ortiz in the area of Spanish social life, Y. H. Yerushalmi in the realm of *converso* apologetics, and Jonathan Israel in the sphere of international commerce have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of *converso* experience and motivations.<sup>6</sup> These studies provide striking evidence of the complexity of *converso* self-perception and loyalties. No attempt has been made, however, to make *converso* identity and ethnicity the focus of a historical study. Recent scholarly interest in the historical foundations and dynamics of ethnic identity would seem to point the way to such an enquiry.<sup>7</sup> The present article is an attempt to address the problem of *converso* identity and ethnicity on the premise that patterns of *converso* behaviour did not simply emerge from some primordial Jewish stratum of consciousness, but rather reflect the mobilization of general human strategies in dealing with conflict, stigma and survival. It will view *converso*

<sup>3</sup> This is essentially a popularized version of Roth's article, "The Religion of the Marranos", *Jewish Quart. Rev.*, new ser., xxii (1931-2), pp. 1-33.

<sup>4</sup> Carl Gebhardt, *Die Schriften des Uriel da Costa* (Amsterdam, 1922), p. xix. In the same vein is Van Praag's discussion of the "split souls" among the re-Judaized *conversos*: see J. A. Van Praag, "Almas en litigio", *Clavileño*, i (1950), pp. 14-26.

<sup>5</sup> I. S. Révah, "Les marranes", *Revue des études juives*, cviii (1959-60), p. 53.

<sup>6</sup> Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, *La clase social de los conversos en Castilla en la edad moderna* (Madrid, 1955); Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, *Los judeoconversos en la España moderna* (Madrid, 1992); Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto. Isaac Cardoso: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Marranism and Jewish Apologetics*, 2nd edn (Seattle, 1981); Jonathan Israel, *Empires and Entrepôts: The Dutch, the Spanish Monarchy and the Jews, 1585-1713* (London, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Of a large and expanding literature, a few particularly suggestive studies are Fredrik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Boston, 1969); John Armstrong, "Mobilized and Proletarian Diasporas", *Amer. Polit. Science Rev.*, lxx (1976), pp. 393-408; John Armstrong, *Nations before Nationalism* (Chapel Hill, 1982); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983); Anthony Smith, "Ethnic Myths and Ethnic Revivals", *European J. Sociology*, xxv (1984), pp. 283-305; Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford, 1986).

identity as a changing cultural construction, evolving over many generations and answering a variety of needs. This approach requires an examination of how *conversos* defined themselves over time *vis-à-vis* other groups ("Old Christians", the Protestant world, "the Jewish people", and so on), and how a distinct conception of "the Nation" crystallized among the *ex-conversos* of north-western Europe as a response to their specific historical experience and given predicament.

## I

The problem of *converso* identity from a collective point of view begins with the popular anti-Jewish riots that spread through Spain in the summer of 1391. These riots were not unprecedented in medieval Europe, but they were unique in their long-term consequences. The many Jews who accepted baptism during the riots in order to escape violence became the nucleus of a permanent subgroup of *conversos* in Spanish society.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, earlier anti-Jewish disturbances had also left in their wake large numbers of forced converts to Christianity. But this time the new converts were not destined to be absorbed into Christian society. On the contrary, they in time emerged as a distinct factor in Spanish life, recognized as such by all strata of Spanish society. Moreover the group was self-perpetuating, since descendants continued to be regarded as *conversos*, or converts, for many generations. And the ranks of this group grew. Fresh converts joined the group periodically as a result of economic and psychological pressures, as well as outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence. These combined pressures peaked in the period from 1391 to 1415, but violence and conversionist pressure persisted up to the time of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.<sup>9</sup>

The terms by which Castilians referred to the converts and their descendants in the fifteenth century reveal some important features of attitudes to *conversos* in this period. Numerous terms

<sup>8</sup> On the riots of 1391, see Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain* [Eng. trans. from Hebrew], 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1961-6), ii, pp. 95-134; Philippe Wolff, "The 1391 Pogrom in Spain: Social Crisis or Not?", *Past and Present*, no. 50 (Feb. 1971), pp. 4-18.

<sup>9</sup> A discussion of the pattern of violent outbreaks can be found in Angus MacKay, "Popular Movements and Pogroms in Fifteenth-Century Castile", *Past and Present*, no. 55 (May 1972), pp. 33-44. For a more detailed and descriptive account, see Baer, *History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, ii, pp. 170-232, 244-51.

were current well before the expulsion. In official documents, Catholics of Jewish lineage were referred to as *conversos*, *confesos* or *cristianos nuevos*. These are concise and reasonably appropriate terms for Jews who had undergone baptism. Had their usage been limited to this sense, the terms would soon have disappeared, since there were no Jews to be converted in Spain after 1492. But in fact the terms showed a surprising resilience. In the century between the riots of 1391 and the expulsion of 1492, they were just as often applied to persons who had never undergone conversion — that is, to *offspring* of baptized Jews who had been raised as Catholics from birth. And after the expulsion, when there was no one left to convert, the terms *converso*, *confeso* and *cristiano nuevo* were never used in their literal sense. The status of *converso* became, curiously, an *inherited* status — a fateful development. Clearly the terms had assumed certain connotations that justified their continued use.

The primary connotation was “insincere Christian”. This assumption about Christians of Jewish origin was expressed quite openly in street parlance, where *conversos* became known pejoratively as *tornadizos* (renegades) or *marranos* (a term probably alluding to pork).<sup>10</sup> The fact that the use of these terms was prohibited by Castilian legislation of the fourteenth century indicates that they were considered insulting in the extreme by *conversos*, some of whom had obviously complained.<sup>11</sup>

Spanish hostility towards the converts to some degree represented a perpetuation of old anti-Jewish sentiments. It was also a response to revelations of crypto-Judaizing among the converts. Both of these issues had sociological as well as religious aspects. The awareness that the New Christians had only recently worshipped in synagogues, and continued to socialize with their Jewish friends and relatives, aroused uneasiness about their place in Spanish society. In a society where group boundaries were clearly drawn, the *converso* violated boundaries in an unprecedented way. An anonymous satirist of the fifteenth century presented the issue aptly and colourfully from his point of view. In his *Libro del Alborayque*, a Castilian work written around 1460, the

<sup>10</sup> On the term *marrano*, see Révah, “Marranes”, p. 30.

<sup>11</sup> On this legislation, see José María Monsalvo Antón, *Teoría y evolución de un conflicto social: el antisemitismo en la corona de Castilla en la baja Edad Media* (Madrid, 1985), pp. 150, 251.

author described the forced converts — in contradistinction to the sincere ones — as follows:

They perform the ceremony of circumcision like the Moors, and observe the sabbath like the Jews, and bear merely the name of Christians. But they are neither Moors, nor Jews, nor Christians, even if secretly they wish to be Jews. For they do not observe the [laws of the] Talmud or perform Jewish ceremonies; neither, certainly, do they adhere to the Christian faith. Therefore they have been given a derisive appellation, namely *alborayques*, collectively, or *alborayque* for an individual . . . For Mohammed . . . claimed that Allah sent forth the angel Gabriel from heaven to summon him, and in order to transport him [to heaven] provided him with a beast called Alborayque. This beast is less a horse than a mule . . . And just as this beast is not to be found in either the Old or New Testament, so one should understand that these [persons] are neither Jews nor Christians nor Moors.<sup>12</sup>

As far as we know, the use of the term *alborayque* in reference to *conversos* was a literary invention of this unknown author. What is important to note is that the author's conceptualization of the problem is solely along religious lines.<sup>13</sup> He makes a clear distinction between sincere and insincere converts, directing his ridicule only at the religiously confused or cynical. In the period when he composed the treatise the Inquisition had not yet been established and Judaizing among *conversos* was relatively open and identifiable. Generalized paranoia had not yet set in.

The comparatively relaxed attitudes of this period are also reflected in socio-economic developments. Whatever hostile attitudes existed, they did not prevent converts and their descendants from penetrating the social and economic élites of the major cities of the Spanish realms. New Christians negotiated marriage alliances with Old Christian families, including families of the high nobility. They were able to fan out occupationally from their base in traditional Jewish administrative and financial functions. This facilitated entry into hitherto unattainable offices in municipal government, and these offices, frequently obtained by royal officials as a reward for services, could be transformed into an

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Isidore Loeb, "Polémistes chrétiens et juifs en France et en Espagne", *Revue des études juives*, xviii (1889), pp. 238-40. The entire text of the *Libro del Alborayque* has been published in Nicolás López Martínez, *Los judaizantes castellanos y la Inquisición en tiempo de Isabel la Católica* (Burgos, 1954), pp. 391-404. But Loeb and López Martínez have used different manuscripts of the work, and there appear to be significant discrepancies between them.

<sup>13</sup> For other expressions of the same theme, see *El cancionero de Juan Alfonso de Baena* (Madrid, 1851), nos. 140-2; R. Foulché-Delbosc, *Cancionero castellano del siglo XV*, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1912-15), ii, pp. 384-5, nos. 702-4. Cf. Baer, *History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, ii, pp. 275-6.

inherited family asset. The rapid accumulation of social prestige, wealth and political power among the *converso* élite continued without significant hindrance until the mid-fifteenth century. This phenomenon may well have reflected an effort on the part of *conversos* to offset religious stigmatization. Inevitably, it stirred new fears and resentments.

These new fears contributed in 1449 to the first outbreak of violence against *conversos*. A popular uprising in Toledo, led by a noble disaffected with the crown, culminated in rioting against the local *conversos* and legislation aimed at excluding them from public life.<sup>14</sup> The Toledo "purity of blood" statute (revoked after the revolt was quelled) is important as an early statement of the idea that *conversos* in general posed a danger with non-religious dimensions: the *conversos* had accumulated power "in order to destroy the holy Catholic faith as well as the Old Christians who believe in it".<sup>15</sup> This idea reflected a deeply significant shift in thinking.

From this time until about 1474, anti-*converso* violence was a common event. Bands formed, as *conversos* took up arms and defended themselves. Religious suspicions helped fuel the unrest, but no less powerful a role was played by strong popular resentment at the success of *conversos* in obtaining lucrative municipal offices.<sup>16</sup> Growing hostility created a new basis for *converso* solidarity, and intensified *converso* wariness towards "Old Christians". Some trace of this distancing can be found in a contemporary chronicle by Alfonso de Palencia. Describing the hostilities in Segovia in 1464, the author explains that the *conversos* were accused not of heresy, but of being separatists, "like a nation apart which everywhere refuses social contact with Old

<sup>14</sup> The riots and their aftermath have been studied in detail by Eloy Benito Ruano, *Toledo en el siglo XV: vida política* (Madrid, 1961), pp. 33-81; Eloy Benito Ruano, "La 'Sentencia-Estatuto' de Pero Sarmiento contra los conversos toledanos", *Revista de la Universidad de Madrid*, vi (1957), pp. 277-306. See also Nicholas Round, "La rebelión toledana de 1449: aspectos ideológicos", *Archivum*, xvi (1966), pp. 385-446; Baer, *History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, ii, pp. 277-83.

<sup>15</sup> Benito Ruano, *Toledo en el siglo XV*, p. 194.

<sup>16</sup> Baer's view of the anti-*converso* violence reflects his general conviction that religious factors were paramount: Baer, *History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, ii, pp. 277-83, 300-12. More recent research, however, has tended to emphasize the role of powerful socio-economic conflicts. See especially the analysis of Francisco Márquez Villanueva, "Conversos y cargos consejiles en el siglo XV", *Revista de archivos, bibliotecas y museos*, lxxiii (1957), pp. 503-40; and, more recently, Francisco Márquez Villanueva, "El problema de los conversos: cuatro puntos cardinales", in Josep Solà-Solà *et al.* (eds.), *Hispania judaica*, 3 vols. (Barcelona, (1980)), i, pp. 52-6.



Christians".<sup>17</sup> A great deal more needs to be understood about relations between *conversos* and Old Christians in this period. It seems evident, however, that it was a time when *converso* accommodation to Catholic life was proceeding, while at the same time tensions along socio-economic lines between *conversos* and Old Christians were heightened.

With the firm central control established by Ferdinand and Isabella and the establishment of the Inquisition in the late fifteenth century, the civil strife between *conversos* and Old Christians subsided. But the process of isolation and stigmatization of *conversos* continued. Indeed it was given considerable impetus by the activity of the Inquisition. By the time it was established, a great many *conversos* in Castile had accommodated to Spanish Catholic life, and, while not necessarily pious Catholics, neither were they intentional Judaizers. However, the highly public activity of the Inquisition fed the popular conviction that all *conversos* were religiously suspect. Officially, the Inquisition sought to prosecute only active heretics, but in fact all *conversos* came under scrutiny and suspicion. The inevitable result was that cases of "Judaizing" — often but not always a conscious effort to maintain Jewish practice — were uncovered among them, and hostile public attitudes were reinforced.<sup>18</sup> And as the Inquisition forced crypto-Judaizing underground, fears about *conversos* intensified.

Two royal measures towards the end of the fifteenth century led to a great increase in the number of *conversos*: first, the edict of expulsion issued by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492, which triggered a wave of conversions among Jews reluctant to face the hardships of exile, and secondly, the forced baptism *en masse* of Portugal's Jews in 1497.<sup>19</sup> These measures not only added to the

<sup>17</sup> Alonso de Palencia, *Cronica de Enrique IV*, 3 vols. (Biblioteca de autores españoles, clviii, Madrid, 1973-5), II, pp. 93-4.

<sup>18</sup> Almost any non-conformist religious act, if performed by a *converso*, might be associated with "Judaizing". How unclear the boundary was, in the minds of Spaniards, between "Judaizing" and non-conformist (i.e., blasphemous or sceptical) speech has been demonstrated by John Edwards, "Religious Faith and Doubt in Late Medieval Spain: Soria circa 1450-1500", *Past and Present*, no. 120 (Aug. 1988), pp. 3-25. See also the debate between C. John Sommerville and John Edwards in *Past and Present*, no. 128 (Aug. 1990), pp. 152-61.

<sup>19</sup> The issue of approximate numbers is a thorny one. Before the 1391 riots there were perhaps 250,000 Jews in the Spanish kingdoms. See Isidore Loeb, "Le nombre des juifs de Castille et d'Espagne au moyen âge", *Revue des études juives*, xiv (1887), pp. 161-83. For a recent discussion of the difficulties in estimating figures, see Henry

ranks of the *conversos*; they also eliminated officially tolerated Jewish life from the Peninsula. From this point onwards *converso* life in the Peninsula evolved in almost complete isolation from normative Jewish life. This is not to say that no contact whatsoever was maintained between *conversos* in the Peninsula and Jewish communities elsewhere. Evidence indicates that a number of Jews did make their way to the Peninsula, generally in disguise, to conduct business or proselytize among *conversos*.<sup>20</sup> But effective ongoing contact with Jewish life elsewhere ceased. In the absence of institutionalized Jewish life, ideas and attitudes about Judaism among the *conversos* assumed a folkloristic and relatively primitive character.

In the period following the expulsion, as *converso* society underwent change, Old Christian attitudes about *conversos* also altered. This is reflected in certain shifts in terminology in the sixteenth century. The terms that had been common at the time of the expulsion referred to the converts and their descendants as individuals with a certain religious history. By the mid-sixteenth century, when in Castile, at least, crypto-Judaism had nearly disappeared, there was an increasing use of such collective terms as *gente del linaje*, *esta gente*, *esta generación*, *esta raza* ("people of this lineage", "this people", "this lineage", "this race"), and so on. These terms reflected an emerging view which emphasized the *conversos'* purported ethnic or racial traits rather than sus-

(n. 19 cont.)

Kamen, "The Mediterranean and the Expulsion of Spanish Jews in 1492", *Past and Present*, no. 119 (May 1988), pp. 30-55. Estimates of the number of Jews who converted during the 1391 riots and in their aftermath vary greatly, from Baer's tens of thousands to Netanyahu's exaggerated two hundred thousand: Baer, *History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, ii, p. 246; B. Netanyahu, *The Marranos of Spain from the Late XIVth to the Early XVth Century according to Hebrew Sources* (New York, 1966), pp. 235-40. By the time of the expulsion, the number of *conversos* had grown significantly, the standard estimate being three hundred thousand. To this number were later added the Jews in Portugal who were baptized in 1497; the latter perhaps numbered some tens of thousands.

<sup>20</sup> On Jewish visitors to post-expulsion Spain, see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, "Professing Jews in Post-Expulsion Spain and Portugal", in Saul Lieberman (ed.), *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem, 1974), ii, pp. 1023-58; Haim Beinart, "A Jew of Salonica in Spain in the Seventeenth Century" [in Hebrew], *Sefunot*, xii (1971-8), pp. 189-97; Haim Beinart, "Ties between Jews and Conversos of Italy and Spain", in Haim Beinart (ed.), *Jews in Italy: Studies Dedicated to the Memory of U. Cassuto* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 275-88; Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 2nd edn, 18 vols. (New York, 1952-83), xv, pp. 162, 481 n. 71; Julio Caro Baroja, *Los judíos en la España moderna y contemporánea*, 3rd edn, 3 vols. (Madrid, 1986), iii, p. 361 (Appendix 29).

pected religious tendencies.<sup>21</sup> The ethnic definition served, among other things, to provide an explanation for the rapid socio-economic rise of a *converso* élite. According to this view, Jewish blood had endowed the *conversos* with certain traits — cunning, a lust for wealth and power, arrogance, and a readiness to exploit the vulnerable — that had facilitated their rise to power. Even if the *conversos* were no longer identifiably Jewish, they were a branch of the Jewish people which had been grafted unsuccessfully on to Christian society, and which was unable, as it were, to produce good fruit.

The evolving ethnic view of the *converso* also served to explain the failure of the church's mission, and fuelled the rhetoric of "purification". Many in Spanish society, including concerned ecclesiastics, came to believe that even the propensity to Judaize was an inherent racial characteristic. The New Christian *could not* be a "good Christian". The Franciscan author of *Centinela contra judíos* (1673) articulated this idea vividly:

To be enemies of Christians, of Christ and of his divine law, it is not necessary that both the father and mother be Jews. One is enough. The father need not be Jewish: enough that the mother is. And even she need not be entirely so; half is enough, and not even that; a quarter is enough, or even an eighth. In our day the Holy Inquisition has discovered that even at a distance of twenty-one degrees [of consanguinity] a person has been known to Judaize.<sup>22</sup>

Religious fears, then, did not disappear. In fact they became increasingly generalized and paranoiac. What the shift to a racial view meant was that religious suspicions were relegated to a more marginal position in the general configuration of anti-*converso* thinking, which pointed to the *conversos*' tainted blood as the source of a multiplicity of evils.

This shift in perception was greatly stimulated by the gradual spread in Spanish society of statutes discriminating against *conversos* on racial grounds (the *estatutos de limpieza de sangre*, or "purity of blood" statutes). In sixteenth-century Castile these statutes became ubiquitous. In effect they established a separate and

<sup>21</sup> For two quite different discussions of racial views about the *conversos*, see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Assimilation and Racial Anti-Semitism: The Iberian and the German Models* (Leo Baeck Memorial Lecture, xxvi, New York, 1982); Diego Gracia Guillén, "Judaísmo, medicina y 'mentalidad inquisitorial' en la España del siglo XVI", in A. Alcalá et al. (eds.), *Inquisición española y mentalidad inquisitorial* (Barcelona, 1984), pp. 330-9. Yerushalmi analyses these views in the context of the history of anti-Semitism, Gracia Guillén in that of sixteenth-century anthropological thinking.

<sup>22</sup> Francisco de Torrejoncillo, *Centinela contra judíos* (Madrid, 1676), p. 62.

inferior social status for anyone who could be shown to have Jewish blood, of whatever degree. A *converso* with a profoundly Catholic outlook might now find himself excluded from the organized life of various institutions, among them military orders, religious orders, municipal councils, and confraternities. The statutes were not adopted in all such bodies, nor were they always strictly enforced even when adopted. But the implicit social inferiority of *conversos* was affirmed by the enacting of this legislation, and the right of exclusion was acknowledged by the authorities. The stigma of being a *converso* had become a racial one, related primarily to values of honour and social prestige.

## II

The institutionalized attitudes to *conversos* which evolved in Castile were in some ways unique to that kingdom. But they reverberated throughout the Iberian Peninsula and had important consequences for the *conversos* of Portugal, a group central to this study. It was in response to pressure from the Spanish crown that the Portuguese monarch carried out the forced baptism of Portugal's Jews in 1497. And it was in imitation of Spanish patterns that Portugal dealt with its "*converso* problem". In Portugal, too, "purity of blood" statutes were adopted. *Conversos* there came to be identified by terms which were the Portuguese equivalents of the Castilian ones: *cristãos novos* ("New Christians"), *gente da nação* and *homens da nação* ("Men of the Nation") — with or without the identifying adjective *hebraea*. But the terms coined for *conversos*, in so far as they suggested a group with genuine collective traits, were more justified in Portugal than in Castile. In Portugal the perceived "Jewishness" of *converso* society was not so unequivocally a product of the imagination. Here the "Men of the Nation" tended to cling tenaciously to Jewish identity, and actual Judaizing among them was not unusual.

The reasons for this difference are clear. The *conversos* who remained in post-expulsion Spain were the product of a century-long psychological assault which had ended at some point, for each of them, in conversion. In Portugal, by contrast, Jewish life had been allowed to proceed without serious interference until the sudden forced baptisms of 1497. Among the new converts were many exiles from Spain, that is, Jews who had had the

strength to resist pressures to convert and, ultimately, to flee Spain.<sup>23</sup> As a result, crypto-Jewish life in Portugal retained a surprising vitality for generations, whereas in Castile it became increasingly enfeebled. But towards the end of the sixteenth century the neat bifurcation of development on opposite sides of the border was upset by political events. In 1580 Portugal was annexed to the Spanish crown, and the Spanish border was opened to the Portuguese New Christians. This was virtually an invitation to the latter to migrate to the large commercial centres of Castile, especially to Seville and Madrid — either to escape the Inquisition (in Spain one could not be tried for crimes committed in Portugal) or to seek out economic opportunities. The migration reached major proportions after 1621, due to increased inquisitorial activity in Portugal which coincided with particularly favourable conditions for *conversos* in Spain.<sup>24</sup>

The immigration of thousands of Portuguese New Christians to the great commercial and political centres of Spanish life was laden with consequences. A relatively quiet Spain became a refuge for significant numbers of Judaizers, among them prominent royal financiers. Spanish society was not slow to respond. The Inquisition began to expose what it claimed, not always on strong evidence, to be episodes of Judaizing among the Portuguese newcomers.<sup>25</sup> These revelations aroused growing hostility among the public. As a result, the "Men of the Nation" who had migrated from Portugal were perceived as a distinct and increasingly suspect element in Castilian society.

The appearance of this new group on the Castilian scene gave rise to a new term. The need to distinguish these *conversos* from native Spanish *conversos* was obvious, and was soon satisfied by the use of the terms *portugueses de la nación hebrea*, or, simply, *portugueses de la nación*. Significantly, by the seventeenth century, the term "Portuguese" was applied even to Castilian-born *conver-*

<sup>23</sup> See Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto*, pp. 4-5; Révah, "Marranes", pp. 36-9.

<sup>24</sup> For the migration of the Portuguese *conversos* to Castile and their subsequent activity there, see Julio Caro Baroja, *La sociedad criptojudía en la corte de Felipe IV* (Madrid, 1963), pp. 35-128; Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, *Política y hacienda de Felipe IV* (Madrid, 1983), pp. 121-33; James C. Boyajian, *Portuguese Bankers at the Court of Spain, 1626-1650* (New Brunswick, 1983).

<sup>25</sup> For discussion of this development, see Henry Kamen, *Inquisition and Society in Spain in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Bloomington, 1985), pp. 225-31; Boyajian, *Portuguese Bankers*, pp. 116-21.

*sos* whose parents or grandparents had Portuguese origins.<sup>26</sup> Since the Judaizing tendencies of the families who crossed the border from Portugal to Spain were notorious, the term "Portuguese" became virtually synonymous with "Judaizer". Collectively, the Portuguese *conversos* were known as *la nación portuguesa* or *la gente portuguesa*. These terms were adopted in European countries outside the Peninsula as well. The Portuguese Jesuit theologian Antonio Vieira wrote that "in popular parlance, among most of the European nations, 'Portuguese' is confused with 'Jew'".<sup>27</sup>

When in the late sixteenth century areas of north-western Europe opened up for Jewish settlement, the response in the Peninsula was one that seemed to vindicate the distinction between Castilian and Portuguese *conversos*. The émigrés from the Peninsula — whether they left from Portugal or Castile — were overwhelmingly of Portuguese origin.<sup>28</sup> It was these *conversos* who had sufficient motivation to make the leap.

### III

How did the Portuguese *conversos* react to the image of them in Iberian society? In the absence of direct evidence, we must rely on circumstantial. An important source of information about the *conversos'* attitudes in Spain and Portugal is, paradoxically, the behaviour of those who fled the Peninsula. There is little to be learned from the fact that *conversos* in Lisbon or Seville routinely used the terms "Portuguese" or "Men of the Nation" among themselves. Certainly, to coin special terms among themselves would have been foolhardy, given the trivial sort of evidence often used to convict "Judaizers". But those who had fled the Peninsula and joined Jewish communities elsewhere were free to shed Iberian labels. It is significant that they did not. The émigrés retained in their new places of settlement the familiar ethnic labels "Men of the Nation" and "Portuguese". This was not a mere matter of convenience or a demonstration of solidarity towards their fellows in the Peninsula. They used these terms

<sup>26</sup> Caro Baroja, *Judíos*, i, p. 221.

<sup>27</sup> Antonio Vieira, *Obras escolhidas*, 12 vols. (Lisbon, 1951-4), iv, p. 182; see further, Caro Baroja, *Judíos*, i, p. 361.

<sup>28</sup> This emerges clearly from the study of migration from the Peninsula to Amsterdam by Daniel Swetschinski, "The Portuguese Jewish Merchants of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam: A Social Profile" (Brandeis Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1979), pp. 78-121.

with obvious pride and in a way that showed their basic acceptance of Iberian ethnic concepts. The basis of this pride was complex, often involving both the internalization of Iberian values and the rejection of negative judgements associated with these same values.

The "Men of the Nation" regarded themselves, for example, as possessing attributes of nobility. It may be that even generations after the expulsion *conversos* retained vestiges of the aristocratic pride of medieval Spanish Jewry in its heyday.<sup>29</sup> But it is also true that, by the end of the fifteenth century, the blood of the Spanish aristocracy had become mixed with no little Jewish blood. Literary works of the period reveal that contemporaries were often bewildered by this state of affairs. One of the ways to resolve the apparent contradiction (a person with Jewish blood could scarcely be descended from the noble warrior class) was to make a distinction between different components of honour. We find, for example, the following analysis, in an early sixteenth-century letter by a certain Josef Luyando, protesting against a proposal to limit the "purity of blood" statutes:

In Spain there are two types of nobility. The principal one is based on noble lineage (*hidalguia*), the other is based on purity of blood (*limpieza*), [found in those] whom we call Old Christians. Even if the first type — nobility of lineage — is more honourable to achieve, yet it is far more degrading to be without the second; for in Spain we esteem a common person who is *limpio* much more than a hidalgo who is not *limpio*.<sup>30</sup>

This, to be sure, is a somewhat disingenuous statement.<sup>31</sup> Certain *conversos* might be despised for their lack of *limpieza*, but they might well be envied by the "common and *limpio*" for their ties to the aristocracy or for their wealth. As is well known, there was a dense concentration of *conversos* in the fields of commerce and banking — so much so, in fact, that one of the terms used to identify them was "men of affairs" (*homens de negocios*). Not only as merchants and bankers, but also as physicians and men of letters, *conversos* occupied a disproportionate place in the social élite. True, most *conversos* did not enjoy great wealth or social

<sup>29</sup> For a characterization of the particular ethos of medieval Spanish Jewry, see H. H. Ben-Sasson, "The Generation of Spanish Exiles on Itself" [in Hebrew], *Zion*, xxvi (1961), pp. 23-64.

<sup>30</sup> Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, MS. 13043, fo. 117<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> Maravall persuasively argues that there was in fact only one system of social prestige in baroque Spain: see José Antonio Maravall, *Poder, honor y élites en el siglo XVII*, 3rd edn (Madrid, 1989), pp. 116-34.

prestige. But, given Iberian attitudes, it is not surprising that many of them energetically aspired to attain them.

Even without a title, wealthy *conversos* belonged to a sort of pseudo-nobility. Wealth permitted them to imitate the life-style of the aristocracy. It was even possible to create the illusion of noble background by adopting an aristocratic family name — an occurrence sufficiently common among *conversos* to annoy some Old Christians.<sup>32</sup> And there were other means to compensate for the stigma of Jewish blood: political influence, ties with illustrious personages, and membership of prestigious confraternities or military orders.

But, for many *conversos*, no title was weighty enough to eliminate the shame of Jewish blood. There were those who, having internalized Spanish attitudes, attempted to obtain spurious certificates of *limpieza*. Others, however, showed a certain daring ingenuity. They adopted the standard of lineage and turned it on its head. Jewish blood, despised by the majority, became the ultimate lineage. A fine example of such inversion is the tradition of a *converso* family of Brazil, according to which one of its members possessed a deed of nobility proving that he was descended from the Maccabees.<sup>33</sup> A similar claim existed in the family of Joseph Salvador, a nineteenth-century French proto-Zionist of *converso* origin.<sup>34</sup> An early example can be found in a fifteenth-century work of Juan de Lucena, who attributes the following fictional words to the *converso* churchman Alonso de Cartagena:

Don't imagine that you injure me when you call my fathers Hebrews. Of course they were, and thus I want them to be. For if nobility lies in antiquity, who goes back further [than the Jew]? And if [nobility lies in] virtue, who is closer to it [than the Jew]? And if — by the standards of Spain — wealth is nobility, who is more wealthy in his day?<sup>35</sup>

As this passage hints, the internalization and inversion of Iberian values concerning lineage and ethnicity permitted *conversos* to cultivate a sense of adequacy, even superiority, *vis-à-vis* Old Christians.

For some *conversos*, Judaizing served a similar purpose. If Old

<sup>32</sup> Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto*, p. 62 n.

<sup>33</sup> Arnold Wiznitzer, *The Jews in Colonial Brazil* (New York, 1960), p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> See H. Reinhold, "Joseph Salvador — His Life and Ideas" [in Hebrew], *Zion*, ix (1944), p. 115.

<sup>35</sup> Juan de Lucena, *Tratado de Vita Beata* (Burgos, 1502), fo. 11, quoted in Domínguez Ortiz, *Clase social*, p. 159.



Christian society refused to permit them to feel secure in the knowledge that they were good Catholics, and if their enemies insulted them by calling them *judíos*, how better to regain self-respect than by cultivating (secretly, of course) their Jewishness? Since the Judaizers of later *converso* generations, having been baptized in infancy, had not themselves betrayed Judaism through conversion, and since in any case they took daily risks and made enormous sacrifices to maintain a Jewish identity, they did not usually feel that their level of Jewish knowledge and observance — however rudimentary and folkloristic — was less than admirable. What their Jewishness lacked in organic connection to historic Judaism, it made up for in its steadfastness in the face of systematic persecution. This conviction was expressed in various ways. *Conversos* sometimes idealized their condition by identifying with the Jews in Egypt, oppressed and surrounded by idolatry.<sup>36</sup> Others identified with the story of Esther, with its strong elements of identity concealment, systematic religious persecution, and ultimate victory.<sup>37</sup> These idealized interpretations of *converso* experience allowed *conversos* to situate themselves in the mainstream of Jewish history and tradition. It was their severe isolation from normative Jewish life that provided the psychological stimulus for such ideas. In certain ways it was also this very isolation that allowed such a self-conception to go unchallenged.

Such strategies as extolling Jewish lineage and cultivating Judaism reflect a deep ambivalence towards Spanish life, not a rejection of it. In an everyday, concrete way all *conversos* were deeply engaged in Spanish life and culture. Both in their outward habits — speech, dress, culinary preferences, and so on — and in the deeper aspects of their social and mental life, such as child-rearing, attitudes towards death, views about wealth, and leisure habits, they were a product of their Iberian environment. The entire array of their specific, concrete cultural experiences tied them to the Peninsula. Such profound links were not easily broken

<sup>36</sup> H. P. Salomon, "The 'De Pinto' Manuscript: A Seventeenth-Century Marrano Family History", *Studia Rosenthaliana*, ix (1975), p. 46 (Eng. trans., p. 13); Elvira Cunha de Azevedo Mea, "Orações judaicas na Inquisição portuguesa — século XVI", in Yosef Kaplan (ed.), *Jews and Conversos: Studies in Society and the Inquisition* (Jerusalem, 1985), p. 168; Yosef Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism: The Story of Isaac Orobio de Castro* (Oxford, 1989), p. 312.

<sup>37</sup> See Roth, "Religion of the Marranos", pp. 26-7; Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto*, p. 38 n.

even long after a *converso* left his or her native Spain or Portugal.<sup>38</sup> Despite being stigmatized and intimidated by the society in whose midst they lived, many *conversos* continued to be conspicuous and eager participants in the cultural and political life of the society that refused to accept them fully.

Among the émigrés, certainly, there were relatively high numbers of men and women who felt a genuine impulse to uproot themselves and “return” to Judaism on foreign soil. But even within this partially self-selected group, there were different attitudes and degrees of commitment to this goal. For some, the primary motivation for emigration was economic. After 1595, when the Dutch imposed a general maritime blockade on the Spanish Netherlands, there were compelling reasons for Iberian *converso* merchants involved in the Portuguese colonial trade to establish themselves in northern European commercial centres (other than Antwerp).<sup>39</sup> But the imposition of a full blockade was only one critical moment in a continuing shift in conditions. In general, political and economic conditions in northern Europe were improving for *converso* émigrés, while in the Peninsula — certainly after the fall of Olivares in 1643 — they deteriorated seriously.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the practical motivations for banking families like the Pintos to flee Spain or Antwerp were so strong that some scholars have denied that Jewish loyalties played any role at all in the decision to do so.<sup>41</sup>

Sometimes the motivation for flight was nothing more than word that a baseless rumour had been passed on to the Inquisition. A charge against one member of a family would lead inevitably to an investigation of other members, who might choose to flee even if they did not wish to do so. Then, too, in the patriarchal

<sup>38</sup> On the longing among *converso* émigrés for their native land, see Yosef Kaplan, “The Travels of Portuguese Jews from Amsterdam to the ‘Lands of Idolatry’ (1644-1724)”, in Kaplan (ed.), *Jews and Conversos*, pp. 197-8.

<sup>39</sup> For a concise discussion of the impact of the Dutch blockade on *converso* demographics, see Israel, *Empires and Entrepreneurs*, p. 420.

<sup>40</sup> For an analysis of changing conditions in the crucial centres, see Jonathan Israel, “A Conflict of Empires: Spain and the Netherlands, 1618-1648”, *Past and Present*, no. 76 (Aug. 1977), pp. 34-74.

<sup>41</sup> For such a position concerning the Pinto family, see James Boyajian, “The New Christians Reconsidered: Evidence from Lisbon’s Portuguese Bankers, 1497-1647”, *Studia Rosenthaliana*, xiii (1979), pp. 152-6; Salomon, “‘De Pinto’ Manuscript”, p. 21 n. 75, p. 29 n. 96. In my view, neither of these scholars is persuasive on this point. Clearly the Pintos waited for the opportune moment to transfer to the Netherlands. But this says little about their long-term goals. Was the move a reluctant submission to economic conditions, or a long-anticipated step?

society of the Iberian Peninsula, flight would be a matter decided by the head of the household. For women, children, and sometimes servants, there was no choice but to submit to the decision of the family head, regardless of their own inclinations. But even those most highly committed to the task of re-Judaization at the time they left the Peninsula harboured ideas about their Jewishness and their "Iberianness" which had been constructed as a response to the Iberian milieu.

With emigration, these ideas faced considerable upheaval. The transplantation of thousands of "Portuguese" Jews from the Peninsula to towns and cities in the diaspora — Livorno, Tunis, Istanbul, Bordeaux, Rotterdam or London, to name only a few — was accompanied by a deep shock to the sense of self and group which had evolved in the Peninsula. There were three fundamental challenges: the encounter with a non-Iberian cultural sphere, the encounter with Jews of other backgrounds, and the encounter with normative Judaism.

To one degree or another, such a confrontation formed part of the experience of all *converso* émigrés raised in post-expulsion Spain and Portugal. It could be described, documentation permitting, among *conversos* who settled in Cairo, Jerusalem, Salonica or Venice. But the confrontation was sharpest in the settlements of north-western Europe — Amsterdam, Hamburg, south-west France, and London. It was in the "Portuguese" communities of these places that *converso* identity outside the Peninsula achieved its most self-conscious expression.<sup>42</sup> This can be explained by the absence in the communities of north-western Europe of three important mediating factors that were to be found in the Mediterranean communities: a historically continuous Sephardic presence, a high degree of cultural diversity in both Jewish and Gentile society, and a somewhat familiar Mediterranean cultural style. In northern Europe the deeply alien character of both Jewish and Gentile life required the *ex-conversos*, if they were to weather the transition, to attempt a more radical articulation of their collective identity. It was particularly in Amsterdam and its satellite communities in Hamburg, Bordeaux, Bayonne, London and elsewhere in the Atlantic diaspora that a new collective ethos emerged. I will therefore focus on developments in the Atlantic

<sup>42</sup> See Miriam Bodian, "The 'Portuguese' Dowry Societies in Venice and Amsterdam", *Italia*, vi (1987), pp. 55-61.

“Portuguese” diaspora, after its establishment in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

For most of the émigrés who settled in this region, the new environment served to reinforce a basic sense of separate collective identity. In the Peninsula the *conversos* did not constitute a separate social entity, and their identification as “Men of the Nation” had to do mainly with intangible factors. In contrast, the “Portuguese” who settled in north-western Europe became a distinct social group, truly distinguished from their neighbours by speech and other cultural characteristics. They now were “the” Portuguese in their places of settlement.

The important changes in the parameters of identity that accompanied exile were certainly sensed immediately. As mentioned above, the newly arrived members of the Amsterdam community continued to refer to themselves as “Portuguese” or “Men of the Nation”. However, it is interesting that, when they sought to define the boundaries of their group precisely, they revealed their awareness of the misleading character of these commonly used terms. They chose to use expressions with both an Iberian and a Jewish element: either *da nação hebreia, portuguesas e espanholes*, or the converse, *da nação portuguesa e espanhola, hebreos*.<sup>43</sup> This was an early response to the need to define themselves in a new way *vis-à-vis* Gentile and Jewish societies.

It seems that there was virtually no impulse among the *ex-conversos* in their new environments, despite having fled the “lands of idolatry”, to distance themselves from Iberian culture. On the contrary, the cultivation of Iberian cultural habits and aristocratic pretensions became a strong distinguishing feature of their Jewish communities.<sup>44</sup> To be sure, alongside this preservation of Iberian culture there coexisted a drive to cultivate Jewish learning, expressed in communal educational institutions, book printing, and the hiring of rabbis to perform educational functions. But there was apparently little difficulty in maintaining a bicultural

<sup>43</sup> I. S. Révah, “Le premier règlement imprimé de la ‘Santa Companhia de dotar orfãos e donzelas pobres’”, *Boletim internacional de bibliografia luso-brasileira*, iv (1963), pp. 668, 678.

<sup>44</sup> For a detailed description of continuing Iberian cultural activities among the Amsterdam *ex-conversos*, see Daniel Swetschinski, “The Portuguese Jews of Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam: Cultural Continuity and Adaptation”, in Frances Malino and Phyllis Cohen Albert (eds.), *Essays in Modern Jewish History: A Tribute to Ben Halpern* (Rutherford and London, 1982), pp. 62-74; Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism*, pp. 286-302, 308-12.

tural life. The *ex-conversos*' efforts to restore Jewish life, zealous as they might be, did not entail rejecting their Iberian cultural attributes, which were a reassuring expression of one of the most deep-seated aspects of their identity.

The continued pursuit of Iberian culture did, however, exacerbate conflicts of another kind. At first, in their immediate environs, the *conversos* of south-west France, Holland, Hamburg and London were the only Jews. Late medieval persecutions had driven out the Ashkenazic Jews who had settled in western Europe in the medieval period. The *conversos* who settled in these places in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were thus free to shape a Jewish identity that was consistent with their psycho-social needs. Before long, however, when the newly favourable conditions for settlement became known, Ashkenazic Jews began to trickle — and then flood — into these centres (with the exception of south-west France, where they were not permitted to settle). For the *conversos*, the encounter with these "alien" Jews was doubly fraught with difficulty, since the latter were largely poor Ashkenazim who had fled westward from Poland and the German states from the 1620s onwards, most of them from the lower social strata — butchers, pedlars, beggars, and the like. They did not conform to the self-image of the "Portuguese" Jews in any way, and were regarded by the latter with distaste from the start.

However unattractive the local Ashkenazim seemed, they were unquestionably Jews. From the point of view of Jewish law, it was impossible to refrain from establishing ties of solidarity with them. Like other Jews, the "Portuguese" were obligated to relate to the wider Jewish world both conceptually (as reflected in liturgy and rabbinic literature) and in practice (in the areas of welfare and inter-communal co-operation). This posed an acute challenge to self-perception. In the past, as New Christians in the Peninsula, there had been a certain identity between "Men of the Nation" and "Jews". Now this sociological congruence disappeared. The "Men of the Nation" were but a small minority in the larger Jewish world with which they were now in continuous contact.

In practice, the policies of the "Portuguese" communal leaders towards the wider Jewish world were quite logical, given the conflict that was felt. This is best documented for Amsterdam, where communal records have been preserved almost in their

entirety. In matters that had to do with Jews in danger or distress, the "Portuguese" community co-operated with Ashkenazic communities and offered aid to the needy, both in Poland and in the German states. The community also granted aid to poor Ashkenazim who arrived in Amsterdam. However, the "Portuguese" were not interested in encouraging such refugees to settle in the city, an attitude reflected clearly in an episode from 1656. That year, when about three hundred Ashkenazic refugees arrived in Amsterdam from Poland and Lithuania, members of the "Portuguese" community received them, providing them with food, clothing and shelter. But they also took pains to help many of the refugees continue on to destinations outside the Dutch Republic.<sup>45</sup>

The further away the needy Ashkenazim were, the friendlier the attitude to them. When distant Ashkenazic communities suffered in times of war, the *Ma'amad* (ruling council) was willing to offer substantial assistance. It granted a large sum, for example, to the Jews of Kremzier in Moravia in 1643 after that community had been destroyed by the Swedish army.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in 1677 it contributed to the redemption of Polish Jews taken captive and held in Constantinople.<sup>47</sup>

There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of the expressions of solidarity that sometimes accompanied the decisions to grant aid. In 1642 the community contributed a considerable sum to aid Ashkenazim in German lands who suffered from the ravages of the Thirty Years War. More interesting than the decision itself is the entry in the minute-book justifying it:

The natural mercy and compassion of the Jewish people [*povo de Ysrael*], and especially of those belonging to this holy community, have stirred the men of their *Ma'amad* to find a remedy for the great sufferings of the poor of our Hebrew nation, especially the Ashkenazim who have been expelled from Germany . . . and at the same time to bring an end to the great injury which has resulted from the desecration of God's holy name due to violations of his holy Torah, bringing loss of honour upon his people.<sup>48</sup>

Taking action in such a case was without doubt a religious obligation. Indeed the solidarity expressed is couched in religious terms.

<sup>45</sup> H. L. Bloom, *The Economic Activities of the Jews of Amsterdam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Williamsport, 1937), pp. 25-6.

<sup>46</sup> Gemeente Archief, Amsterdam, PA 334, no. 19, p. 157.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 765.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

The Jewish people are depicted as an ideal religious body, the collectivity of believers and observers of the Torah. The fact that it was felt necessary to justify the decision in this way seems noteworthy, and the justifications themselves are interesting: first, the natural compassion of the "Portuguese" Jews, and secondly, the honour of the Torah, which could not be properly observed by homeless and hungry refugees. In the archival documents I have studied, I have not seen — and would not expect to see — a decision to aid "Portuguese" Jews accompanied by such a justification.

Closer to home, such sentiments were not to be found. In everything that concerned actual social contact, the communal leadership acted to maintain as great a distance as possible between the "Men of the Nation" and Jews of other ethnic backgrounds. It appears that this policy became more harsh and rigid with time. In its essence, however, it was established in the first years of the community's existence. A dowry society founded in 1615 rejected as potential members and applicants persons who were not members of the "Nation".<sup>49</sup> Here, as elsewhere, there can be little doubt that the internalization and adaptation of Iberian concepts of blood contributed to the emergence of "Portuguese" ethnic exclusivity.

This exclusivity had no basis in Jewish law, and some of its expressions were actually contrary to Jewish law. It appears, for example, that the *ex-conversos* were reluctant to accept into the community a convert to Judaism whose father was not "Portuguese".<sup>50</sup> Such a person was unequivocally Jewish; the problem was his or her ethnicity. Likewise, *negros e mulatos judeos* — converted servants or illegitimate children of servants — were denied the full rights of communal membership, though there is no rabbinic justification for such a rule. A regulation of 1614, for example, set aside a separate burial plot for "slaves, servants, and Jewish girls who are not of our Nation".<sup>51</sup> Some modifications were made in 1647, but the principle of segregated burial was maintained.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, in 1644 it was decided that a

<sup>49</sup> Bodian, "Portuguese Dowry Societies", pp. 41-6.

<sup>50</sup> Yosef Kaplan, "Jewish Proselytes from Portugal in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam — The Case of Lorenzo Escudero" [in Hebrew], in *Proceedings of the Seventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 4 vols. (Jerusalem, 1980-1), iv, pp. 99-101.

<sup>51</sup> Wilhelmina C. Pieterse, *Livro de Bet Haim do Kahal Kados de Bet Yahacob* (Assen, 1970), p. 4.

<sup>52</sup> Gemeente Archief, PA 334, no. 19, p. 224.

non-white male could not be called to the Torah or receive other synagogue honours.<sup>53</sup>

There are explicit decisions of the *Ma'amad* of the Amsterdam community which also glaringly contradict basic norms of Jewish communities. In 1657, for example, a decision was adopted prohibiting "Ashkenazim, Italian Jews and mulattos" from using the communal house of study.<sup>54</sup> According to a decision of 1709, members marrying women not of the "Nation" would lose their rights as members.<sup>55</sup> In the dowry society statutes, too, there is evidence of tension between ethnic attitudes and rabbinic norms. One clause stipulates that the illegitimate daughter of a "Portuguese" man born of a non-Jewish woman is eligible to apply for a dowry (which she could receive after undergoing conversion), whereas the illegitimate daughter of a "Portuguese" woman and a Gentile father, although Jewish from birth according to Jewish law, should not be allowed to apply "under any circumstances".<sup>56</sup> This is truly a remarkable deviation from rabbinic notions. It would appear that "Portuguese" lineage was passed on through the father, and that the significance of such lineage was endorsed even by a rabbinically approved institution such as the dowry society. The implication was that one's "Portuguese" character and one's Jewishness had no inherent, essential relationship.

#### IV

The feeling that he or she possessed a distinct Iberian character not only caused the émigré to recoil from Jews of other cultural backgrounds, but also reinforced his or her sense of solidarity with other "Men of the Nation", whether inside or outside the

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173. The issue of attitudes to converted blacks or mulattos among the Portuguese Jews has yet to be explored. Meanwhile, see the illuminating material in Robert Cohen, *Jews in Another Environment: Surinam in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden, 1991), pp. 143-59.

<sup>54</sup> Yosef Kaplan, "Relations between Spanish and Portuguese Jews and Ashkenazim in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam", in Shmuel Almog *et al.* (eds.), *Transition and Change in Modern Jewish History: Essays in Honour of Shmuel Ettinger* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1987), p. 403.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406. And indeed in the nineteenth century the community refused to bury in its cemetery a "Portuguese" Jew who had alienated himself by marrying an Ashkenazic woman. See J. Michman, "Between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in Amsterdam", in I. Ben-Ami (ed.), *The Sephardi and Oriental Jewish Heritage* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1982), p. 136 n. 7.

<sup>56</sup> Révah, "Premier règlement", p. 677.



Peninsula. A certain anxiety about the future of this group had no doubt been stirred by the exile and scattering of so many of its members. The ethnic exclusivity expressed in communal institutions indicates that the need felt to preserve a threatened collective attachment still had a great hold on mental life.

In this there was some conflict with purely Jewish aims. If the *conversos* were to build a Jewish community established firmly on rabbinic norms — and this act was perceived among other things as a fulfilment of expectations cultivated in the Peninsula — there could be no avoiding the painful need to establish a boundary between those "Members of the Nation" who had accepted full Jewish observance and those who remained, in the parlance of community leaders, "outside Judaism" (*fora da judesmo*).

It appears that in the "Portuguese" communities generally in the seventeenth century, and in Amsterdam in particular, the accepted rabbinic status of the *conversos* in Catholic lands was that of "infants taken captive among the Gentiles". That is to say, these persons were not held responsible for their failure to observe Jewish law, and from the point of view of Jewish law were fully Jews. The rationale for this was stated clearly. In the words of Samuel Aboab, a Venetian rabbinic authority of the second half of the seventeenth century, there was reason to regard as apostates:

those particular persons who were forcibly converted and had previously been Jews, who understood the nature of the Jewish tradition . . . But their children and later descendants who did not know and never saw the light of the Torah, what distinguishes them from an infant taken captive among the Gentiles?<sup>57</sup>

Even *conversos* who were practising Catholics were thus regarded as Jews from the point of view of Jewish law. However, it was almost inevitable that there would be a feeling among newly committed Jews towards those who lingered "outside Judaism", as well as towards those who had settled in Jewish communities but resisted circumcision, that the latter were not Jews in the full sense of the word.

Formal reinforcement was given to this feeling by rulings of lay and rabbinic leaders. Indeed such reinforcement appears to have been the motivation behind certain rulings. This is explicit in a decision of a rabbinic court in Livorno from the seventeenth century, prohibiting a Jew who had not been circumcised from

<sup>57</sup> *Devar Shemu'el* (Venice, 1702), no. 45.

holding a Torah scroll, even though according to Jewish law this was ordinarily permissible:

We rule that although the law is thus [i.e., permits this], the times are such as to make this inappropriate. So you must not give them [the uncircumcised] equal status with fully practising Jews (*yisra'elim gemurim*) by allowing them to touch sacred objects . . . This would result in ruin, for they would put off entering the Covenant of Abraham if they saw that although uncircumcised they are denied nothing, and may touch sacred objects just like fully practising Jews. Such an unacceptable situation will not develop if an explicit distinction is made.<sup>58</sup>

The distinction was made in different "Portuguese" communities as the need arose. In Amsterdam a "Member of the Nation" who failed to join a Jewish community and undergo circumcision was denied the right to be buried in a Jewish cemetery, to inherit from Jewish relatives, or to be included in communal prayers for the deceased.<sup>59</sup> Decisions such as these indicate the general concurrence of communal leaders and rabbis concerning the need to draw a line within the *converso* diaspora between fully practising Jews and those whose Jewish commitment was only potential.

But as has been hinted, this exclusion by no means meant the severing of links with the New Christian world. In fact communal leaders did not hesitate to initiate communal activities which were aimed at maintaining contact with "Members of the Nation", whether circumcised or not. These ties were maintained in various non-institutionalized ways. They were also institutionalized in the form of the dowry society mentioned above, which welcomed *conversos* living outwardly as Catholics both as members and as applicants for dowries.<sup>60</sup>

## V

The policies of the communal leadership thus reveal two somewhat conflicting (though not contradictory) aims: first, building a community belonging fully to the rabbinic-Jewish world, and secondly, preserving a separate identity based on quasi-ethnic foundations alien to rabbinic Judaism. In general, communal leaders seemed unaware of any tension between these aims. The separation they tended to maintain between matters concerning

<sup>58</sup> Rafael Meldola, *Mayim Rabim* (Amsterdam, 1737), pt 2, no. 52.

<sup>59</sup> Pieterse, *Livro de Bet Haim*, p. 45; Y. Sasportas, *Ohel Ya'akov* (Amsterdam, 1737), no. 59; Gemeente Archief, PA 334, no. 19, p. 195.

<sup>60</sup> Révah, "Premier règlement", pp. 674, 678.

the wider Jewish world and matters concerning the "Portuguese Nation" kept the tension minimal. Nevertheless, from time to time attempts were made to resolve apparent contradictions and to define the terms.

Thus, for example, the famous Amsterdam rabbi and publicist Menasseh ben Israel in his work *The Hope of Israel* (1650). The author describes the visionary *converso* Antonio de Montesinos (Aharon Levi) as being "Portuguese in nation, and a Jew in religion".<sup>61</sup> Menasseh appears to subscribe to the tacit distinction made in community affairs between "Jewishness" and "Portugueseness". But perhaps his is only a realistic recognition of the religious diversity within the *converso* diaspora: all have Jewish blood but not all are practising Jews.

A few sources, however, attest to a genuine fragmentation of identity. One of these sources is a letter of 1683 written by Abraham Idaña, an *ex-converso* merchant living in Amsterdam. The letter was addressed, perhaps fictitiously, to an inquisitorial official in Madrid. Idaña writes:

In this city there are . . . two synagogues in which the Jews of the German empire, known as *tudescos* [i.e., Ashkenazim], gather to worship, along with Polish Jews. They observe the same holy Law of Moses with its rituals as the Portuguese, but in political matters (*en la politica*) they are very different, because they are of an alien native character (*estraña naturaleza*), and for this reason, even if today many of them are wealthy, they are held in low esteem, for in fact they are debased in spirit.<sup>62</sup>

Another source indicating a conscious distinction between the two elements of Portuguese-Jewish identity consists of a few words scrawled in a minute-book. It is precisely the casual nature of these remarks that makes them such convincing evidence. The resemblance between their formulation and that of Idaña is strong enough to suggest that they reflect a widely accepted attitude. The source is an entry from 1670 in the minute-book of the "Portuguese" community in Hamburg, recording an embarrassing incident. The communal leadership had investigated a report that a member of the community had taken it upon himself to visit a new pastor in Hamburg. The person in question apparently arrived at the pastor's house without prior notice, for he came at an hour when the pastor was not accustomed to receiving visitors, and was therefore turned away. The following was the interesting

<sup>61</sup> Menasseh ben Israel, *Espança de Israel* (Amsterdam, 1650), p. 41.

<sup>62</sup> B. N. Teensma, "Fragmenten uit het Amsterdamse convoluit van Abraham Idaña, alias Gaspar Mendez del Arroyo (1623-1690)", *Studia Rosenhaliana*, xi (1977), p. 149.

conclusion of the *Ma'amad*, which had failed to uncover the identity of the culprit:

It may very well be that the elders of the Ashkenazim were the ones who did this [i.e., sent the man]; for although they belong to our nation, and the Torah is one, this [unity] does not extend to matters of conduct (*governo*).<sup>63</sup>

Here, too, a distinction is made between two clusters of identity attributes, the "religious" and the "ethnic". This passage may even imply that the unexpected visitor's lack of courtesy was related to his undistinguished lineage.

By way of caution, let me stress that there was neither an intention nor a need at this time, as there would be by the late eighteenth century, to deny the collective ethnic aspect of Judaism. What does seem to emerge from these passages is the idea that the traits and ideas encoded in the term "Portuguese" were different from — or at least not always congruent with — those encoded in the term "Jew". What also emerges is the clear conviction that both clusters of traits, while at times they could be distinguished and separated, were capable of coexisting and even merging.

Coherence, or at least the illusion of it, was provided in the realm of theology and myth. Themes of exile and redemption, a key element of crypto-Jewish theology in the Peninsula,<sup>64</sup> were also themes that assumed unusual potency throughout the Jewish world in the seventeenth century.<sup>65</sup> It was through these themes, elaborated about a uniquely *converso* core, that the Portuguese Jews of north-western Europe were able to anticipate the resolution of the tensions inherent in their condition. It was for them an unfortunate fact that many of their fellow *conversos* tarried in the Peninsula, practising Catholicism out of prudence, conviction or inertia. The divine scenario ensured, however, that they too would one day "return", bringing to an end their condition of alienation.<sup>66</sup> Such expectations had potential for resolving other

<sup>63</sup> Staatsarchiv, Hamburg, Gemeindecarchiv, AHW 993, i, p. 449 (photocopy at the Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem).

<sup>64</sup> See Révah, "Marranes", p. 53.

<sup>65</sup> Among various discussions of this phenomenon, see Gerschom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 3rd edn (New York, 1954), pp. 244-58; Shalom Rosenberg, "Exile and Redemption in Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century: Contending Conceptions", in Bernard Dov Cooperman (ed.), *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), pp. 399-430.

<sup>66</sup> This expectation is discussed in Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism*, pp. 339-43; Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto*, pp. 302-6.

tensions as well. The condition of exile and dispersion had given rise to different Jewish "nations" with little natural affinity among themselves. The *ex-conversos* were all too aware of their separateness. Yet viewed on the wider stage of universal history, their own specific experience was an integral part of the unfolding story of exile and redemption that touched all groups of Jews in all ages.<sup>67</sup>

## VI

A superficial look at the patterns of behaviour that emerged among the *ex-conversos* in north-western Europe might lead to the convenient formula that members of this group were sociologically "Portuguese" and religiously Jewish. This, however, would be a distorted representation of the fluid, situationally determined way in which the *ex-conversos* of north-western Europe actually behaved and thought. True, they stubbornly maintained the system of social ties they had established in the Peninsula, and indeed reinforced it. But the need to be part of the wider Jewish world, even if at a distance, was a real and urgent one; and gaining a recognized, legitimate role in that world was a goal pursued persistently by the merchant-banker communal leadership. Likewise in their religious life and thinking. Communal leaders sought to adopt and enforce rabbinic norms in a way which occasionally brought them into conflict with non-conformist members. Yet even the most orthodox *ex-converso* interpretations of Jewish life were permeated with *converso* overtones.<sup>68</sup>

By the eighteenth century, when de Pinto wrote his letter to Voltaire, the implicit rationale for such a complex set of notions about self and group had largely disappeared. The dramatic period of transformation was over. The waves of *converso* emigration had ceased as the remaining Peninsular *conversos* had, in the end, been absorbed into Spanish-Catholic society. Thus, the Portuguese-Jewish communities no longer had to occupy themselves with the task of re-Judaizing newcomers and proselytizing

<sup>67</sup> For a detailed discussion of this perception see Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism*, pp. 363-77.

<sup>68</sup> The impact of Iberian experience on *ex-converso* Judaism is analysed in Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto*, pp. 370-80; Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism*, pp. 308-77.

those left behind. Within the wider Jewish world, too, the dynamic period had ended. The Portuguese-Jewish communities had enjoyed their heyday of rabbinic achievement, but this was over. The wealth that had distinguished them had also diminished greatly, while among the once-poor Ashkenazim fortunes had climbed. Under these circumstances, the descendants of the émigrés tended to cling to a glorious past, though pride in belonging to "the Nation" frequently deteriorated into sterile exclusivity and arrogance. But this was the eighteenth century. A century and a half before de Pinto's letter, the perpetuation and idealization of "the Nation" among the re-Judaized *conversos* of Europe had been a powerful means of dealing with a wide array of real problems.

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