

Archeology of Memory

by Doreen Carvajal

The following article is based upon a presentation given at the IAJGS conference in Paris in July 2012—Ed.

Majorca, Spain. The Aguiló family tree is dense with branches, filled with 560 names written by hand in tidy black and blue print with dates that span 500 years. When I visited the Spanish island of Majorca, one of the Aguiló relatives led me upstairs from a cramped notions shop named Angela that has been owned by the family since the 17th century. There, propped on an antique sewing machine table, was the vast tree, a testament to all the descendants of Jews forced to convert to Christianity during the Inquisition and who themselves were shunned on the island for generations as *chuetas* (*marranos* from Majorca).¹

It was an impressive sight to behold—especially because it was clear evidence that the descendants of *conversos* had intermarried among the same 15 families of *chuetas* dating back centuries. Invisible on the tree was a major family drama that had affected descendants of most of its branches. A distant ancestor, Catalina Terongi, was burned at the stake in a public *auto-da-fé*, or execution, in the 17th century after investigators for the Spanish Inquisition discovered that she and others had been secretly practicing Judaism despite their conversion. To the end she refused to renounce her faith, urging other victims to ignore the heat of their burning clothes.

That was the story that had the power to bring the tree of names alive and to create an emotional, living connection between descendants and ancestors. Every family has its stories, but how do you transform a collection of birth and death dates into something more to be shared for generations? The formula is pretty basic: act like a reporter and then share personal history in a compelling way.

My family mystery, like the Aguilós, involved the descendants of forced converts. In writing my book, *The Forgetting River*,² I shared the story of the hidden Sephardic Jewish identity of the Catholic Carvajals in a way that could introduce ancestors from Spain and Costa Rica to descendants in California.

I am a journalist, but I made many mistakes while exploring my own family history. The most basic lesson I learned was to start early to interview relatives. By the time I began to investigate our past, relatives with vital information had died. My most crucial error was that I lost my journalistic skepticism when I questioned family members about delicate subjects. I gathered scant information when I asked directly if we were the descendants of *marranos*,

forced Christian converts who maintained a dual identity to escape persecution during the Spanish Inquisition. To probe sensitive family history, I discovered that it's best to work from the fringes. Think. Watch. Observe. I asked benign questions and searched for records that allowed information to seep out about customs, household rituals, job patterns, prayers. I found that the older generation sometimes confided more in their grandchildren and nieces than their own children.

From this strategy, I learned about a hidden menorah kept in a bedroom dresser, of fourth cousins marrying fourth cousins, an almost tribal habit of secret *marrano* families' intermarriages among people they trusted completely, maintaining the appearance of being Catholics.

Other techniques can unlock family memories and ties. One way is to project yourself into the past, immersing yourself in the lives of ancestors and the general history, geography and economy of their times. French psychotherapist Anne Ancelin Schützenberger, now in her 90s and a specialist in the psychology of genealogy, calls it the “ecological niche.” To understand the psychological link

between generations, she urges people to try to establish an emotional connection with ancestors, so distant relatives become something more than sepia-colored photos in a museum. Keep in mind that this is a story that might have profound meaning for other people someday, so it's worth the

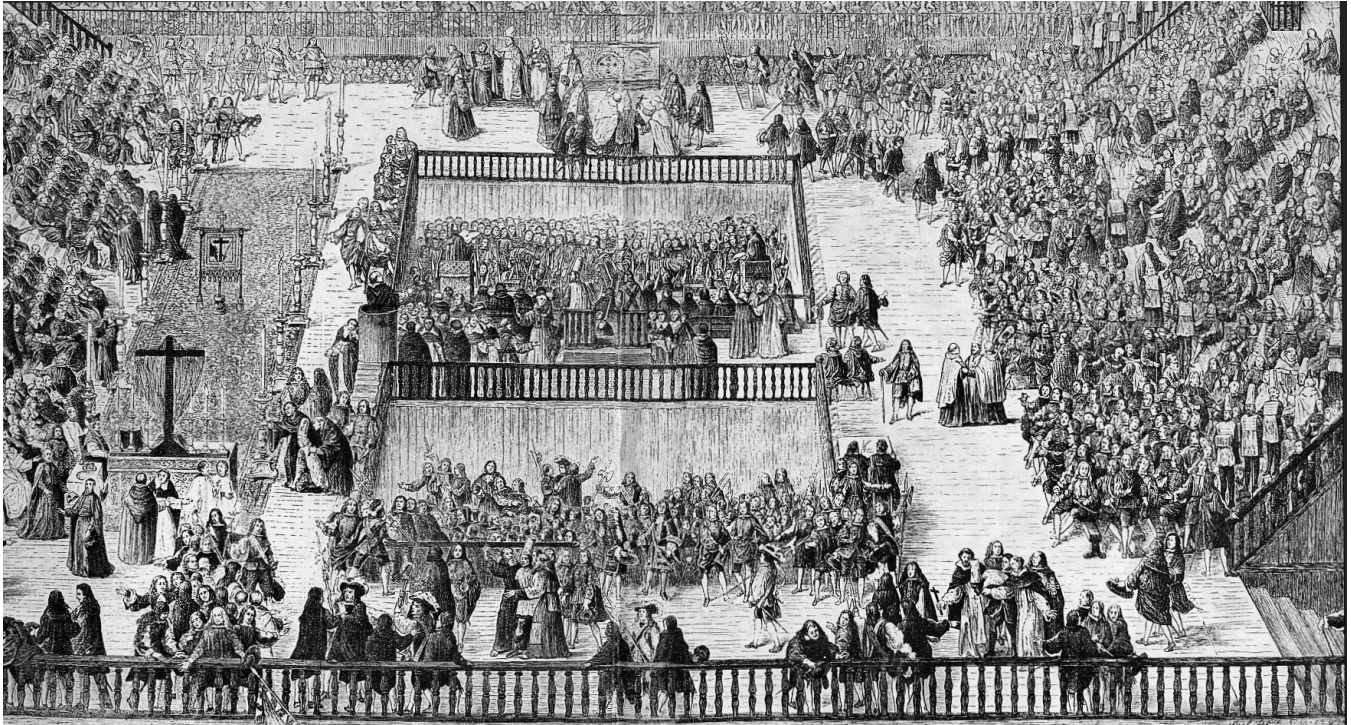
trouble to plunge into the past.

Discovering My Family's Past

In my own case, I moved into a white pueblo in the south of Andalusia, Spain, to try to understand the fears that drove my ancestors from the Inquisition of Spain and led them to guard their secret Sephardic Jewish identity for centuries. To dig in the archeology of memory, I started with a book of the Carvajal and Chacon family trees reaching back to Spain. We moved for a summer into a former bordello, a white house high on a sandstone ridge in Arcos de la Frontera. There was something about southern Spain that moved me, but only later did I find out that my great-aunt Luz in Costa Rica used to talk about her dreams of returning to the Cadiz region where the family originated.

For years I ignored the clues that our family had a secret identity, starting with the most basic hint: our name. Carvajal is an old Sephardic Jewish name that in some spelling variations means “lost place” or “rejected.” The Carvajal family was made up of businessmen and politicians who were raised as Catholics in the tiny Central American coun-

There, propped on an antique sewing machine table, was the vast tree, a testament to all the descendants of Jews forced to convert to Christianity during the Inquisition



Auto-da-fé in the Plaza Major of Madrid in 1680

try of Costa Rica.

When my father made communion as a boy in San Jose, Costa Rica, his father did not attend. Before my grandmother died in her eighties in San Francisco, she gave orders that she did not want a priest at her funeral. My aunt Eugenia did the same with a blunt comment that she would be watching from the heavens.

Who were we? I am embarrassed to admit that I was not curious when numerous people questioned me about my origins—not even when a writer called about a book that she was writing about Carvajals who were tortured and burned at the stake in Mexico by the Inquisition for secretly practicing Judaism.

Then came September 11, 2001, when I was living in New York. We moved to Europe, and suddenly identity was important to me. Eventually, I found that there was a typical pattern for people trying to track down their marrano or *anusim* roots. *Anusim* is the Hebrew word for “forced ones,” a reference to Jews forced to convert to Catholicism in order to avoid death at the hand of the Inquisition.

The Spanish Edict of Expulsion was signed in 1492, and three months after that date no Jews were allowed to live in Spain if they did not convert. Those converts who continued to practice Judaism in secret were called *marranos*, which means “swine” in Spanish. I prefer a more poetic term I read in a French book, “silent Jews.”

By some estimates, as many as 250,000 to 350,000 Jews were living in Spain in 1492. About half were expelled and spread all around the Mediterranean. Some risked their

lives to practice their religion in secret in Spain. A number of families moved to Spain’s colonies to flee as far as they could from the Inquisition established to root out *marranos*. They fled to many places in the New World including New Mexico, Brazil, Costa Rica and Mexico. I didn’t know it when I started my search, but my ancestors were part of the voyages that carried *conquistadores* and *conversos* to Costa Rica. Through the generations, many of these *conversos* preserved unique customs, although the meaning faded. They lit candles in the cellar or brushed dirt away from the door to avoid an imaginary *mezuzah* that they didn’t dare use. Or they fasted on certain days or buried their dead almost immediately.

By moving to southern Spain, I wanted to understand the fears of converso Jews and *marranos*, and I was looking for a way to decode the messages of people who lived in secret. I also was searching for telling details of small town life that give answers when people cannot or will not reveal information. For example, I was intrigued by ancient symbols such as a constellation of colored stones and a missing eye of God embedded outside one of the main churches in Arcos. Tourist guides told me that it was a place where families brought their newborns after baptism. Later I learned that it was actually where converso Jews submitted to forced baptisms.

Telling ancient symbols have lost their meaning, but they still have the power to communicate. Why, for example, do the town’s ancient brotherhoods wear peaked caps, masks and robes at Easter time or *Semana Santa* (Holy Week)? “We always have,” I was told by a long-time resident. No

one talked about the Inquisitors who once wore this garb when questioning accused heretics blamed for preserving Jewish rituals.

With all the vague answers, ancient symbols were my form of communication with the dead. Arcos, for example, was famous for its distinctive *saeta* singers who sing a *capella* from wrought iron balconies or from the street. They sing as religious images are paraded by robed brotherhoods during Semana Santa. The rising and falling notes of their music connect with the past. Some flamenco scholars believe the music has roots in the Kol Nidre, the prayer Jews sing every year during Yom Kippur to cancel promises. The theory is that *saetas* were a secret form of communication for silent Jews to transmit double messages—publicly showing devotion to images of Jesus and Mary, but also expressing their own inner grief and rebellion.

One legendary *saeta* singer in Arcos grew up in the Inquisition jail, which is now a house. He never could explain his ancient inspirations and ability to sing in a medieval style. Before he died, he often complained that he felt that there was something buried below the Inquisition jail. Bones? Spirits? The family found nothing.

Aside from symbols, another way to tap family memories is through food. One acquaintance organized a family reunion for a large black family on the East Coast with some painful history dating back to slavery. Some relatives were reluctant to remember those times, but they settled on a neutral approach, creating a *griot* cookbook of family recipes with submissions of personal memories evoked by the dishes. Griot is a reference to a traditional West African storyteller.

In Spain, food represents basic history dating back to the Inquisition. Why, for example, is pork so popular there? Why is ham an appetizer given to dinner guests? It was the symbol that separated Christians from Jews during the Inquisition. Dietary choices led to trials and even executions of secretly practicing Jews. Cuisine is history and politics.

To come up with new storytelling ideas, ask other people

about their rituals. A friend in Philadelphia gathers every year in New York with her in-laws to celebrate and share the story of how a rabbi and family patriarch made his way from Eastern Europe to New York in the 1940s.

Once conversation begins, seize the moment. Make a recording. The StoryCorps (www.storycorps.org) is a non-profit organization that offers advice about preserving personal history, down to suggested conversation openers. (What are the most important lessons you've learned in life?) For the finale, create a digital slide show with a soundtrack that mixes music and words. Use iPad applications that allow amateur genealogists to become multimedia producers.

In my own case, I was inspired to push forward by the words of the Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel: "The opposite of history is not myth. The opposite of history is forgetfulness."

Notes

1. According to Wikipedia, the Balearic word *xueta* derives, according to some experts, from *juetó*, diminutive of *jueu* ("Jew") which give *xuetó*, a term that also still survives.

2. Published by Riverhead Books. Available on Amazon.com.

Doreen Carvajal, a veteran journalist of more than 25 years, is a staff writer for the International Herald Tribune and the New York Times and lives outside Paris. She is the author of a memoir, The Forgetting River: A Modern Tale of Survival, Identity, and the Inquisition.

<http://www.avotaynu.com>

We're on the Web! Come visit us as a gateway to the wonderful Web world of Jewish genealogical research.

A Dictionary of Jewish Surnames from Galicia

by Alexander Beider

some 25,000 different surnames used by Jews in Galicia. For each name, the author describes the districts within Galicia where the surname appeared, the origin of the meaning of the name (etymology), and the variants found.

The Introductory portion of the book follows Dr. Beider's scholarly style in analyzing the origin and evolution of Jewish surnames from that region. This includes a history of Jewish names in Galicia, basic etymological analysis, spelling and variation of surnames, and analysis of surnames in various provinces of eastern Europe. An extensive bibliography is provided.

8½" x 11" 624 pp. hardcover \$85.00
\$85.00 + Shipping

To order: Call 1-800-AVOTAYNU (1-800-286-8296); Order on the Internet at <http://avotaynu.com/books/DJSG.htm>

