

6-2014

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Marrano Labyrinths*

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Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Warshawsky, Matthew, "Nathan Wachtel, *The Faith of Remembrance: Marrano Labyrinths*" (2014). *International Languages and Culture Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 7.

http://pilotscholars.up.edu/ilc_facpubs/7

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20 December 2013
Review for *Partial Answers*

Nathan Wachtel, *The Faith of Remembrance: Marrano Labyrinths* (trans. Nikki Halpern). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. vi + 390 pp.

A historical anthropologist at the Collège de France (now emeritus), Nathan Wachtel has spent much of his professional life bringing to light what he calls the “‘underground history’ of the Americas, between memory and forgetting” (15). The most recent edition to this initiative is *The Faith of Remembrance: Marrano Labyrinths*, originally published in 2001 as *La foi du souvenir: Labyrinthes marranes* (Éditions du Seuil), and recently translated by Nikki Halpern. This vast work guides the reader through a hall of mirrors emblematic of the complex and contradictory world of New Christians of Spanish and Portuguese origin throughout Iberian America from the end of the 1500s to the first half of the 1700s. Various called Marranos and conversos, New Christians were baptized Catholics converted from Judaism, often forcibly; significantly, this designation also applied to their descendants. Thoroughly familiar with both the historical context in which eight such individuals lived as well as their respective Inquisition trial records, Wachtel weaves together their actions, beliefs, words, and even sighs and screams in order to save from oblivion the conflicted worldview of New Christians accused of Judaizing heresy.

In his preface to the book, Yosef Kaplan, the eminent historian of post-1492 Iberian Jewry, outlines the themes that Wachtel subsequently develops: the geographic mobility and religious syncretism of New Christians in their global diaspora during the early modern period, and the “cult of remembrance” by which these baptized Catholics expressed varying degrees of crypto-Jewish identity (xiii). Indeed, Kaplan notes that, thanks to Wachtel’s knowledge of Inquisition testimony and his ability to make the reader feel a witness to the trials of the victims, “these Marrano characters become three-dimensional . . . revealed to us in their full humanity, with their passions and their intrigues, their hopes and despair, their daring and their weakness” (xiv). Wachtel states in his introduction that the cross-section of men and women whose cases he meticulously analyzes is a “portrait gallery” pieced together using often disparate biographical information that shows how these secret Jews “each in his or her own way inescapably expresses something collective” (15, 16). The subsequent “portraits” adhere to this claim, thanks to the dissimilarity in background and knowledge of normative Judaism of these individuals, and to the recurrent features of a shared identity that unify them.

Reflecting the themes suggested by the book’s title, the introduction leads the reader into the labyrinthine world of Marrano existence and explains how a small number of people whose families had not openly practiced Judaism for multiple generations adhered to remnants of this faith in ways that sometimes cost them their lives. Clarifying several misconceptions regarding Iberian crypto-Jews, Wachtel shows that most New Christians prosecuted by tribunals of the Spanish Inquisition in the Americas were in fact Portuguese, and also that crypto-Jewish was not necessarily a correlative term for Jewish. In contrast to his focus in subsequent chapters on the lives of inquisitorial victims, here Wachtel contextualizes the place of New Christians in the era of exploration and argues for their modernity. Comparing former Jews in Iberia of the fifteenth

and sixteenth centuries with Jews in other parts of Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth, he argues convincingly that both played important roles in their respective societies and that both were persecuted because of an “irrationality supposedly justified by a blood logic” (1). His argument makes clear how popular resentment and fear of New Christians occasioned by their relative commercial prominence during the two centuries after the forced conversions in Iberia at the end of the 1400s motivated this “irrationality.”

Given that many Jews who left Spain in 1492 were those who refused to convert, crypto-Judaism there never developed to the extent it did subsequently in Portugal, where approximately half the exiles went. Despite their forcible conversion in that country four years later, its rulers generally left the converts alone until the arrival of the Inquisition in the late 1530s, creating the conditions for a distinct religious and ethnic identity. In light of this background, Wachtel claims that the worldwide commercial networks rooted in family connections typical of the converso diaspora helped create “the tentacular process known today as globalization” (2). The geographic mobility of his subjects explains their labyrinthine character; for example, the same individual, perhaps born in a small mountain town in Portugal, might have had relatives in Seville, Amsterdam, Livorno, Salonika, Curaçao, Peru, and Mexico, and perhaps have traveled to several of these places himself. Wachtel describes the origins and significance of the Portuguese identity of many victims of Inquisitorial tribunals in Spanish lands, showing the process by which Portuguese converts and their descendants identified themselves as a “nation” connected by ethnicity, if not uniform religious practice.

The labyrinthine nature of the Marrano condition applied to shifting religious identities as much as to geographic mobility. Painstakingly assembling the pieces of these identities and the circumstances in which they developed, Wachtel recreates the precarious world of conversos whose variable commitment to Judaism led to their bifurcated existence both in and out of the surrounding society. For example, chapter 1, “Juan Vicente’s Sanbenito,” narrates the peripatetic life of this New Christian, who between 1582 and 1626 endured trials as an accused and then “relapsed” Judaizer in Evora (Portugal), Lima, and Cartagena de Indias (Colombia).¹ Vicente denounced himself before his first trial, probably hoping to gain leniency from the court. After his reconciliation, at which the tribunal ordered him to wear penitential sackcloth (the *sambenito*), the youth and his wife, Isabel Vaez, embarked for the Americas, where their wanderings took them to Bahia (Brazil), Buenos Aires, Córdoba and Santiago del Estero (Argentina), the great mining city of Potosí (Bolivia), Cuzco, and Lima (where Isabel died). First denying backsliding to Jewish practices and then admitting to having done so, Vicente won the rarity of a second reconciliation at his trial in Lima. Yet in a cruel twist of fate, the *alguacil* (royal police officer) deported him and other confessed Portuguese Judaizers to Panama and then Cartagena, where he was executed 44 years after his first arrest, despite the possibility that by then he had ceased to live as a secret Jew. Wachtel uses much nuance reconstructing these details; his emphasis on their complexity and contradictions renders an honest depiction of his subject that recognizes Vicente’s resilience and fallibility.

¹ Judaizer (*judaizante* in Spanish and Portuguese) was a term the Inquisition used to describe a converso accused of practicing Jewish rites. A *relapso* was a penanced Judaizer who violated his or her reconciliation to the Church by reverting to the behaviors deemed heretical by the tribunal. Usually the penalty for this recidivism was death at the stake.

While Wachtel restricts himself to eight “portraits,” the canvas these depictions cover is vast, illustrating the variance in each individual’s knowledge of Judaism and motives for practicing it. Particularly illustrative of this variance are the cases of Francisco Maldonado de Silva and Manuel Bautista Perez, the two most famous victims of the “Great Conspiracy” trials of the 1630s in Lima (chapters 2 and 3). Wachtel contrasts the openly proclaimed Jewish faith of Maldonado, atypical in the annals of crypto-Judaism, with the distinct possibility of Perez’s “dual sincerity expressed in different registers” (68). Maldonado personified the characteristics of what Miriam Bodian has called a “dogmatist martyr”: circumcision, the taking of a Hebrew name (Heli Nazareo), and an open embrace of Judaism rather than the dissembling and denial characteristic of the defense strategies of most crypto-Jews.² The inclusion of his case in the book is particularly important, not only for its demonstration of Maldonado’s unwavering commitment to Judaism, but also for shedding light on some of the only extant writing by crypto-Jews in the Americas during the early modern period.³ In opposition to the reclusive physician and religious scholar Maldonado, Perez amassed one of the largest fortunes in Peru as a merchant of African slaves and lived in a large house in Lima where, as the “Great Captain,” he supposedly became a leader of other crypto-Jews in the city. With eloquence and restraint, Wachtel resists glorifying the martyrdom of these individuals, instead explaining Maldonado’s rejection of the divinity and Messiahship of Jesus, and claiming that, to a certain extent, Perez “prefigur[ed] . . . an almost secular Jewish consciousness” by creating a Jewish identity based more on words and memory than action (68). Similarly, just as individuals such as Perez expressed an ambiguous “dual sincerity,” other crypto-Jews were downright contradictory, for example, the “half New Christian” Theresa Paes de Jesus, whose journey took her from Brazil to eventual condemnation by an Inquisition court in Lisbon during the first part of the 1700s (chapter 7). This unsophisticated woman believed in an equivalency between the Laws of Moses and Jesus, claiming ingenuously that Judaism consisted of saying the Pater Noster and Ave Maria and that Jesus was Moses, son of Queen Esther (192, 193)! Perhaps the clearest proof of her blended worldview was her response to the inquisitors’ question of which belief system was the truth: “Each of them is true” (196).

Ultimately, *The Faith of Remembrance: Marrano Labyrinths* is concerned with the memory of crypto-Judaism and its gradual eclipse. While acknowledging the syncretism and in many cases disappearance of the Jewish practices of crypto-Jews in Iberian America, Wachtel shows that, “despite the theological interactions and *bricolages*, despite the temptations of relativism and skepticism,” the transmission of these practices occurred at least until the eighteenth century (247). His epilogue demonstrates that this transmission continues to this day amongst a small group of people in northern Brazil, some of whom only recently have learned

² See *Dying in the Law of Moses: Crypto-Jewish Martyrdom in the Iberian World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 23-46.

³ The other is by Luis de Carvajal the Younger, a Spanish *converso* of Portuguese descent martyred with his mother and three of his sisters after the *auto de fe* of 1595 in Mexico. For English translations of his spiritual autobiography and the letters Carvajal wrote to other family members in the Inquisition dungeon, see Seymour B. Liebman, *The Enlightened: The Writings of Luis de Carvajal, el Mozo* (Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1967).

the Jewish origin of many of their beliefs.⁴ In this final section of the book, Wachtel brings to bear his skills as an anthropologist to chronicle the customs of individuals who are not normative Jews, but whose families have practiced Jewish rites for generations. The people interviewed here express many aspects of the worldview described in the cases from the 1500s-1700s, testifying eloquently to the legitimacy and longevity of that worldview. Surely the words of one of these interviewees, Paulo Valadares, “Through our blood, we are not like the others. There’s us and them. Our identity is not religion, it’s blood,” perpetuate the Marrano labyrinth in which descendants of crypto-Jews of the colonial era maintain a “faith of remembrance” based on tight familial networks and “oral tradition”—the same features with which their forbearers resisted the Inquisition (267, 269).

⁴ Likewise, during the past several decades historians and anthropologists have brought to light the survival of crypto-Jewish communities in the southwest United States. See, for example, Stanley M. Hordes, *To the End of the Earth: A History of the Crypto-Jews of New Mexico* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); and Seth D. Kunin, *Juggling Identities: Identity and Authenticity among the Crypto-Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).