

Article

Jewish Presences in Portugal: Between History and Memory[†]

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[†] In memory of my beloved friend Roberto Bachmann (1932–2023).

Abstract: The history of the Jews in Portugal is often divided into three distinct periods: what I call the “time of the Jews”, the “time of the Inquisition” and the “time of return”. In this article, I will argue that the particular role played by the personal and collective multiple memories in each of these historical periods (by analyzing an array of primary and secondary sources, including medieval chronicles, inquisitorial sources and historiographical works), paradoxically blurs their chronological contours (namely, before 1497, between 1536 and 1821 and afterwards), and transforms the Jewish presence in Portugal into a challenging issue, from both a Jewish and a non-Jewish perspective, with far reaching biopolitical implications.

Keywords: New Christians; Jews; Portugal; memory; historiography; identity; Inquisition; biopolitics

1. Competing Memories of the “Time of the Jews”

The history of the Jews in Portugal is often divided into three distinct periods: what I call the “time of the Jews”, the “time of the Inquisition” and the “time of return”.¹

The term “time of the Jews” (*O tempo dos Judeus*) dates back to the forced mass conversion of the Jews to Christianity in 1497 by order of King Manuel I. It was employed mainly by New Christians to nostalgically denote a bygone era, one in which the open practice of Judaism was tolerated and flourished. The examples provided by Elias Lipiner, mostly from the first generations of Conversos, and by my own findings related to the New Christians of the city of Bragança at the end of the sixteenth century, reveal an almost mythical and utopian perception of the “time of the Jews”, because the New Christians associated freedom to practice Judaism in medieval Portugal with the times of the Old Testament, when the people of Israel were in constant interaction with a loving God through the “Old Law” (“*Lei Velha*”) (Lipiner 1998b, pp. 242–43; Stuczynski 2005).

Stricto sensu, the “time of the Jews” began with the creation of the kingdom of Portugal in the twelfth century and lasted until the mass conversion of 1497. Yet, despite scholars’ insistence on compartmentalized narratives of Jewish *Sepharad*, after the political contours of modern Spain and Portugal (e.g., Kayserling 1867; Baer 1961–1966), this historical period also bears resonance for the rest of the Iberian peninsula. Jonathan Ray has argued that the Jews in medieval Portugal, like Jews in other Iberian communities, were instrumental in the expansion of the Christian–Iberian kingdoms towards the Muslim south during the *Reconquista* (Ray 2006). Moreover, Portuguese and Castilian Jews were mutually reliant in matters of rabbinic learning, migration, and culture (e.g., Gross 1993).² Javier Castaño has shown the existence of a trans-regional, cultural and social Jewish continuum in the border regions of Spain and Portugal (Castaño 2016; Castaño 2018). In light of these findings, what seems to be specific to Portugal’s “time of the Jews” is that the Jewish minority enjoyed an enduring tradition of royal protection and relative political stability until the end of the fifteenth century. This, despite the animosity mostly fueled by the mendicant orders, and by a growing popular reaction against the immigration of Spanish Jews and Conversos after the pogroms of 1391 and the general expulsion from Castile and Aragon in 1492 (Tavares 1970, Tavares 1982–1984; Gomes 2008). The nineteenth-century Portuguese historian Alexandre Herculano (1810–1877) depicts the Jewish–royal alliance thus:



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Perhaps in no other part of Europe in the Middle Ages did the government, whether in its laws or in its administrative acts, so highly favor the Hebrew race as in Portugal, although there were always maintained in those laws and acts, with more or less rigor, the distinctions which pointed to their inferiority as followers of a religion which, however genuine it might be, was deemed to have been rendered obsolete by Christianity. The very favor, however, which in so many ways repressed the aversion of the Christians, gradually helped to deepen that aversion into a sentiment of profound hatred. This repugnance, moreover, was kept alive by fanaticism, by envy, and by the conduct of the Jews themselves, who managed to exercise part of the governmental authority, either directly or indirectly, as fiscal agents or farmers of taxes. (Herculano 1972, p. 104; Herculano 1979, vol. 1, p. 90)

Herculano here refers to a longstanding convergence of interests between Portugal's kings and the kingdom's local Jewish elites that was epitomized in the office of the *Arrabi-Môr*: the court-Jew or crown-rabbi. This important figure served as the political representative of the Jews to the king, enforcing the royal laws and policies among "his" Jews, and as the administrator and tax collector on behalf of the kingdom for both the Jewish and the Christian communities (Ray 2004). It was specifically the Ibn Yahya/Negro family that traditionally filled this central political role (Steinhardt 2012, pp. 131–34). A sixteenth-century Italian scion of this family, the historian R. Gedalya Ibn Yahya, in his book: "Shalshelet ha-Kabbalah" (Chain of Tradition, first published in Venice in 1587), celebrated the leading role of crown-rabbi, played by the legendary head of the family, Yahya Ibn Yaish, at the very beginning of Portugal's monarchy:

... there was a wise, powerful, and very wealthy man, one of the noblemen Jews, whom the king of Portugal favored very much. Because he held him in such high esteem, he appointed him master and as a lord like governor over three locations in the kingdom of Portugal, namely Unhos, Frielas and Aldeia dos Negros. The man's name was the master, the great sage don Yahya ... But in his lifetime, he was the highest authority in the kingdom, surpassed only by the throne of King [Afonso] Henriques. He bestowed many benefits on all the Jews, especially on the contemporary sages in his kingdom. (David, forthcoming)

Note that before the ascension of the dynasty of Avis to the Crown in 1385, the Ibn Yahyas lost much of the royal favor as crown-rabbi to other families, such as the Navarros. Moreover, during the reign of Afonso V (1438–1481), a small group of prosperous Jews formed a sort of oligarchy that interacted with the king and the high nobility, benefiting from the opportunities created by Portugal's incipient overseas expansion and by the development of a rich and intense court society (Gomes 2003).³ One of these figures was the philosopher and Bible commentator, D. Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508), from a family of court-Jews in Seville. In 1483, Abravanel was accused by John II of conspiracy in connivance with the Duke of Braganza (Lipiner 1997) and fled to Castile. Abravanel's political experience in Portugal would prove pivotal for him as a court-Jew in Castile and as the self-proclaimed leader of the Sephardic Jews in exile. In this respect, it is worth quoting from his commentary on the Prophets, posthumously published in Pesaro in 1511–1512, in which he sketched an autobiographical self-portrait as a model Jewish nobleman and political leader ("I am the man Isaac, son of a valiant man who has done mighty deeds, his name is great in Israel, Sir Judah son of Samuel son of Joseph son of Judah of the Abravanel family, all of them were leaders of the children of Israel, from the seed of Jesse the Bethlehemite, from the house of Prince David"), who lived in Portugal's "time of the Jews" under King Afonso V, and was depicted as the embodiment of the perfect prince:

I lived peacefully in my home ... a house full of God's blessings in the famous Lisbon, a city and a mother in the kingdom of Portugal. The Lord commanded there the blessing in my barns and all earthly bliss ... I built myself houses and wide porches. My home was a meeting place for the wise, there were thrones of

judgment, going out from there, through books and authors, good discernment and knowledge and fear of God. In my house and within my walls there were enduring riches and righteousness, a memorial and a name, science and greatness, as between noble men of ancient stock. I was happy in the court of the king Dom Afonso, a mighty king whose domain spread out and reached from sea to sea, prospering in whatsoever he did ... The Jews enjoyed relief and deliverance [during his reign]. Under his shadow I delighted to sit, and I was next to him. He leaned on my hand, and as long as he lived, I walked freely in the royal palace of Babylon [after Daniel 4:1]. (Cohen-Skalli 2021, pp. 87–88)

Leaving aside its idealized depiction, this passage evinces a brief peak moment in the Jewish–royal alliance, before it was interrupted by Afonso V's successor, John II, who gave the majority of the Spanish–Jewish refugees the juridical status of slaves and forcibly baptized some of their children and sent them to the Portuguese island colony of São Tomé in 1493.⁴ According to Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, that longstanding political tradition of a Jewish–royal alliance explains why Solomon ibn Verga's, in his "Shevet Yehudah" (Staff of Judah, first printed in Istanbul by 1550), saluted John II's cousin and successor, King Manuel, as a merciful, just and pious monarch. This king, who initially annulled the harsh measures of his predecessor, ultimately expelled and converted the Jews of his kingdom in 1496–1497, but he nonetheless stopped the massacre of Lisbon's New Christians in 1506. This is also why ibn Verga's archetypal-fictional character of the good Christian king was named "Alfonso", probably inspired by Afonso V. The Jews who experienced Portugal's "royal alliance" had great difficulty abandoning that political memory in the face of new events and unprecedented political configurations (Yerushalmi 1976).⁵

To summarize: two main memories concerning Portugal's "time of the Jews" concurred. The first was a political myth of a Jewish–royal alliance that seemed to be particularly widespread among elite Jewish families and also among professing Jews who lived in the Sephardic diaspora. This specific historical memory mirrored analogous perceptions by medieval Portuguese Christian authors (Gomes 2009), and has been endorsed by most modern and contemporary historians of Portuguese Jews, although with varying degrees of nuance and criticism (e.g., Herculano 1972; Kayserling 1867; Amador de los Ríos 1875; dos Remédios 1895–1928; Azevedo 1989; Tavares 1992; Wilke 2007; Martins 2021).⁶ The second memory involved the overemphasis by Converso judaizers on the religious splendor that their ancestors enjoyed during the "time of the Jews", perceived as a nostalgic Golden Age and as a source of pride, consolation and inspiration. In many respects, this was a mythical projection of an historical reality: Portugal's Jews continued to practice their religious and community lives until the "general conversion" of 1497 (Mea and Paulo 1980). Thus, a half-century later, the wife of the New Christian Manuel Álvares allegedly told the popular prophet, Gonçalo Anes Bandarra, also known as "the shoemaker of Trancoso" (1500–1556): "that in the time of the Jews it was said that the Messiah would come". In late 16th century Brazil, a Converso woman named Leonor da Rosa posed a query to the New Christian poet Bento Teixeira (1561–1618): "if the said niece of his had married the said Gaspar de Almeida formerly, in the time of the Jews, would the children of such a marriage be legitimate?" (Lipiner 1997, p. 24).

2. The "Time of the Inquisition" as Absent-Presences

Contemporary historians have explained the geo-political reasons that led Manuel I to put to an end the "time of the Jews" by declaring the expulsion of the Jews in December 1496, but then to enforce their baptism in 1497. That said, some stages of these dramatic events (e.g., the publication of the edict of expulsion, the limitation of the number of embarkation points, the confiscation and redistribution of Jewish communal property, the confiscation of Hebrew books and parchments, the seizure of the children and the forced conversion of the adults, expressions of resistance and martyrdom, and the final expulsion of a few recalcitrant Jews) are still a matter of conjecture (Tavares 1987, pp. 15–66; Lipiner 1998a, pp. 13–52; Soyer 2007, pp. 182–40). At the same time, there was a consensus

among Old Christian witnesses, baptized New Christians and Jewish exiles, that these measures, which Maria José Ferro Tavares has called “religiocide”, entailed the systematic eradication of every single aspect of open Judaism (Tavares 1997). In his commentary to the Pentateuch, “Zeror ha-Mor” (Bundle of Myrrh, first edition, Venice 1523), Rabbi Abraham Saba lamented that a few years after he came to Portugal, expelled from Castile, his two sons were forcibly taken from him to be baptized, and that he also had to abandon his cherished library in Porto in order to flee the country from the port of Lisbon. Before he entered the city, he was even compelled to hide his own manuscripts and phylacteries under an olive tree, never to find them again (Gross 1995; Lipiner 1998a, pp. 145–227). For his part, the abovementioned poet-courtier Garcia de Resende observed that, unlike the Jewish case, King Manuel’s edict of expulsion was enforced upon the Muslim minority. Nevertheless, the fate of the material culture of both religious groups was the same:

The Jews here I saw converted
all made Christians in a single stroke
the Muslims were then expelled
they have left the kingdom
and the realm is free of heathens;
we saw synagogues and mosques
in which were always uttered
and preached heresies
turned these days into
holy and blessed churches (de Resende 1994, p. 54; Soyer 2007, p. 251).

It is little wonder the expeditive, uncanonical and forced character of the conversions of 1497, whose neophytes were referred to as “[those] baptized while standing” (“*batizados em pé*”) (Lipiner 1998b, pp. 41–43), were remembered as a single act of “general conversion” (“*conversão geral*”) (Soyer 2007, p. 230; Marcocci 2019), and that the ensuing time that preceded the establishment of Portugal’s Holy Office in 1536, was retroactively remembered by later generations of New Christians as part of the “time of the Inquisition” (Stuczynski 2005). I will argue that the fundamental weight of memory prevented the disappearance of “Judaism” during the subsequent lengthy period that I term the “time of the Inquisition”. To support my argument, I bring an example from the inquisitorial proceedings of the tribunal of Coimbra against the New Christians of the city of Bragança at the end of the sixteenth century.

In an effort to reject accusations of Judaism by local Conversos, the “half” New Christian Brites Pires explained to the inquisitors why Bragança’s New Christians hated her and her entourage, to the point of perjury. Accordingly, when her brother and her Old Christian brother-in-law visited the house of the New Christian Gonçalo Aires de Sá, “They said that this house was formerly the mosque of the Jews (*mesquita dos Judeus*) and that on the doors of these houses were mirrors in which were seen Jews going to the mosques” (Stuczynski 2019a, p. 127). One might speculate that this description, which confuses Jewish and Muslim places of worship, was intended to annoy the Converso owner of the house. In any case, it is clear that the group to which Brites Pires belonged (mostly comprising “half” and “quarter” New Christians married to Old Christian partners) sought to bolster their aspiration to be full-fledged members of Bragança’s Old Christian majority by publicly declaring their hostility toward the local New Christian minority. Curiously, however, Gonçalo Aires de Sá’s home was part of a building that almost 100 years earlier had served as a synagogue. Borrowing Pierre Nora’s notion of “*lieu de mémoire*” (realm of memory), a physical place that acted as container of memory (Nora 1984–1992), I suggest that de Sá’s home served for Brites Pires and her relatives as a Jewish–Converso “realm of memory”. While it remains an open question as to whether Sá’s house was in fact a “*lieu de mémoire*” for the local New Christians, inquisitorial evidence indicates that the ancient Jewish cemetery of Bragança, which after the conversions of 1497 was transformed into a vineyard, served as a place of gathering and prayer for New Christians who aimed to remember their Jewish ancestors and religious heritage (Stuczynski 2019a, p. 126).

I propose that the aforementioned cases exemplify the paradoxical character of New Christian memory during “the time of the Inquisition” as an “absent–presence” phenomenon. Whereas Jewish religion, culture and ethnic belonging were supposed to disappear after the conversions of 1497, these were constantly reclaimed by New Christian judaizers and by many Old Christians until the reforms of the Marquis of Pombal in the 1770s and even beyond.

Following the “general conversion” of 1497 Jewish religiosity went underground. Especially after the establishment of the Inquisition in 1536, it was dangerous to possess any material evidence related to that “heresy”; oral traditions and shared memories took center stage in an otherwise textual religious culture.⁷ Yerushalmi has highlighted the preponderance of memory among pre-Enlightenment Jews (Yerushalmi 1982). That said, whereas official Jewish community institutions, recognized leaders and authoritative traditions often channeled memories, the informal, clandestine and much more variegated ways of being a New Christian judaizer, propelled the inherently protean character of collective memories depicted by Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs 1992). As Converso crypto-Judaism tended to be more minimalistic and versatile than rabbinic Judaism, including the version practiced in the Sephardic diaspora (Kaplan 1994), Nathan Wachtel has suggested that the New Christian attachment to the “law of Moses” was loose, being grounded on what he called “*foi du souvenir*” (“the faith of remembrance”, Wachtel 2001, 2013). According to Jacques Revel, Wachtel’s:

faith of remembrance requires less that we transmit, from generation to generation, beliefs or prescriptions conforming to tradition, than it requires us to remember that the memory of this tradition is imperative. Many of these distant Marranos [i.e., New Christians or Conversos], and many of their current descendants, know little about Judaism, and they often know it approximately. On the other hand, everyone wants to bear witness to the requirement of memory in which they recognize themselves. It doesn’t matter that the knowledge it transmits is uncertain, because that is not the essential thing. The faith of remembrance refers, fundamentally, to nothing other than itself because it is up to it to ensure, through the generations, between the dispersed members of a hidden community, an imprescriptible continuity even though it is more precarious. (Revel 2002, p. 345)

This perception of New Christian memories has much merit. However, it fails to recognize that the crypto-Jewish “law of Moses” (*lei de Moisés*) was more than a mere “faith of remembrance”. On the one hand, it was constructed as a bricolage of available sources and concepts from different origins and character (ancient Jewish, from the Sephardic diaspora, part of a crypto-Jewish lore, taken from the Iberian popular culture, or adapted from Christian theology and liturgy), without losing its theological coherence. As crypto-Judaism required a conscious refusal of hegemonic Christianity in order to affirm its alterity (Révah 1968), what Cecil Roth called “the religion of the Marranos” (Roth 1931) was more a counterculture than a religious syncretic phenomenon (Stuczynski 2015). Moreover, the adaptation of Christian concepts and prayers for crypto-Jewish needs, such as the “Pater Noster” without the Christological ending, the “Gloria Patri”,⁸ shows that a crypto-Jewish memory was accompanied by a “counter-memory” (Stuczynski 2010). Put differently, religious self-consciousness and theological awareness were required to temper the eroding tendency of the subaltern memories.⁹

Our depiction of the New Christian “law of Moses” as counter-cultural memory and counter-memory should also consider the role played by family, profession and ethnicity in perpetuating New Christian identities. The abovementioned examples of the house of Gonçalo Aires de Sá and the ancient Jewish cemetery of Bragança reveal the supplementary function played by the remnants of the medieval Jewish material past, such as ancient synagogues, cemeteries, neighborhoods and streets (Tavares 2014). In her study of the Algarve region, Carla Vieira identified clear patterns of New Christian urban settlement,

well after the Jewish neighborhoods ceased to exist (Vieira 2018, pp. 170–76). Notably, the main street of the once-biggest Jewish neighborhood of medieval Lisbon (the *Judiaria Grande*), which after 1497 was renamed “*Rua Nova*” (“New Street”), was popularly perceived as a hub for New Christian merchants and artisans. The following story, written in the sixteenth century, was set in a contiguous street:

One day he [Diogo Sobrinho] was walking down Rua dos Ferros, where he had a crazy idea which he carried on for several days. He would say that, if the king authorized a certain number of men to turn New Christians into Old Christians by breathing on them, so long as the New Christians paid a certain sum of money as well, they would accept this willingly and it would be a good business. The men who had this job would be called the breathers. One day he was in the barber’s shop, and the barber asked him what he thought of a surgeon in whose shop Diogo Sobrinho often sat and talked. Diogo Sobrinho replied: ‘He is a good man, but he needs breathing’. (Jordan-Gschwend and Lowe 2015, p. 242)

In this passage, we see three intertwined factors that triggered New Christian memories: ethnicity, exclusion and political agency. On the one hand, Portugal’s New Christians were also called “men of the Hebrew nation” (*homens da nação hebreia*), or simply “men of the nation” (*homens da nação*). This was a polysemy that simultaneously recalled the ethnic and corporative character of the group (Bodian 1994). Thus, against an initial policy of integration led by King Manuel (Tavares 1997), the New Christians became an absent–present juridical social group as a *de facto* ethno-economic corporation. They were absent, because they were not recognized *de iure* as one of Portugal’s early modern corporations (cf. Hespanha 1994). They were nonetheless present, because they had lived under specific laws of exclusion since the second half of the 16th century: circumstantial (e.g., that limited their freedom of movement), or grounded on “purity of blood” criteria (Olival 2004; Rêgo 2011).

This absent–presence situation led the Spanish *licenciado* Martín González de Cellorigo to claim in his “A Plea Founded on Justice and Mercy that Some People in the Portuguese Kingdom, Living within and without Spanish Borders, are Asking and Begging His Catholic Majesty, Our Master King Don Phillip the Third, to Grant and Concede to Them” (Madrid 1619), that the Converso group became a *de facto* socio-political class or estate (*estado*): “And after members of this nation converted to Christianity, despite the fact that King don Manuel regarded them as Old Christians, the people created another estate and called it ‘that of the New Christians’” (Révah 1963, p. 369). According to Yerushalmi, Cellorigo’s tract influenced the philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), when he discussed the different politics of memory purportedly adopted in Spain and in Portugal vis-à-vis the Converso group:

When the king of Spain at one time compelled the Jews to accept the religion of his kingdom or go into exile, a large number of Jews converted to the Catholic faith. All those who accepted it were granted the privileges of native Spaniards and were considered worthy of all positions of dignity. Hence they immediately integrated with the Spanish, so that in a short time there were no remnants of them left and no memory of them. But quite the opposite happened to those whom the king of Portugal compelled to convert to the religion of his kingdom. For though they submitted to this faith, they continued to live apart from all men, doubtless because he declared them unworthy of all higher positions. (Spinoza 2007, p. 55; Yerushalmi 2014)

Furthermore, although the Inquisition was established to eradicate Jewish heresy (Bethencourt 2009; Paiva 2011; Marcocci and Paiva 2013), it was often perceived as an institution that persecuted the New Christians on a collective basis. This perception was poignantly described by the ex-Converso writer Samuel Usque in his “Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel” (first published in Ferrara, in 1553):

These ill-baptized people [i.e., the New Christians] are filled with such fear of this beast [i.e., the Inquisition] that they glance furtively in all directions in the

streets to see if it is nearby, and walk and stop in fear, their hearts tremulous and fluttering like the leaves of a tree, afraid that it will attack them. Whenever this animal strikes a blow, no matter how far away it is, all feel it as a blow in the pit of their stomachs, for in this calamity they are all members of one body in their suffering. (Usque 1965, p. 206, 1989, vol. 2, fol. 207v)

For Usque, “it avails them [i.e., the New Christians] not to show by external signs that they are Christians” since the Inquisition “must examine their hearts with fire”. Hence, the Holy Office paradoxically awakened an already forgotten sense of Jewish belonging among the first generations of New Christians: “while hidden in the garb of a Christian, I thought that I could thus save my life, although it was just the reverse” (Usque 1965, p. 207, 1989, vol. 2, fol. 208v).

The relentless Jesuit defender of the New Christian group, António Vieira (1608–1697), accused the Inquisition of making Jews out of sincere Catholics (Novinsky 1992). Accordingly, the inquisitors’ premise that “Jewish blood” predisposes New Christians towards Jewish heresy generated a fatalistic despair among them, with counterproductive consequences:

When a Catholic New Christian will ruminate that another one is a Jew, because his blood compels him to Judaize, and that there is no possible emendation from a blood that was infected by the guilt of the death of the Savior, he will say to himself: “I am of the same blood, and therefore it is natural to Judaize”. What kind of effect will this produce, your Eminencies, if not the temptation and damage of corrupting an important part of them. (Vieira 2014, p. 301)

Throughout the eighteenth century, similar criticisms were made by Portuguese men of science and letters, such as the Ambassador Luís da Cunha (1662–1749), the Knight of Oliveira (1702–1783), and the exiled New Christian physician, António Nunes Ribeiro Sanches (1699–1783). According to Ribeiro Sanches, a life of religious suspicion, popular vexation, social segregation, ethnic profiling and biased interrogation explains why so many New Christians who were repulsed by Inquisitorial injustice and the contempt and hatred of their Old Christian neighbors, find their own way into the “Mosaic error” (Saraiva 2001, pp. 127–28). Like other Converso apologists, Vieira and Ribeiro Sanches called on Portugal’s monarchs to implement a policy of ethnic oblivion through miscegenation and social inclusion, in order to solve the enduring New Christian problem:

For experience shows that the most effective means to attain this goal [i.e., to suppress Judaism among the New Christians], is to mingle them with Old Christians through marriages. In this way, due to the family bonds that tie them to unquestionable Catholics, they will anchor in the faith in few years (even those who are not so already), with the purest and cleanest, and by this token, it will also disappear the insulting name of New Christian and the existing division and dissension between them and the Old Christians . . . (Vieira 2014, p. 105)

According to Ribeiro Sanches, the proposed policy also necessitated reconsidering the Holy Office, since it was “the origin of all Judaism in Portugal” (Sanches 2003, p. 12). In other words, “had there not been an Inquisition, the memory of Jews and Judaism would have disappeared from Portugal within three or four generations after the General Conversion” (Saraiva 2001, p.124).¹⁰

At this juncture, it is easy to understand the intensive efforts made by New Christians and their supporters to prevent, abrogate, postpone or reform Portugal’s Holy Office (Herculano 1972; Mattos 2014). However, such efforts required leadership, lobbying and propaganda (Stuczynski 2007; Pulido Serrano 2007). At least from the 1520s to the 1680s, New Christian representatives and pro-Converso advocates (e.g., Father Vieira) periodically led “pardon” negotiations with kings and popes, in order to obtain a “general pardon” (*perdão geral*) to the “men of the nation”, inquisitorial amnesties, indults and procedural reforms of the Holy Office, as well as the relief from the exclusionary laws. Oftentimes, large sums of money were levied among members of “the nation” as “pardon taxes” (*fontas*

do perdão), in exchange for a “general pardon” (e.g., the “general pardon” of 1605 [López-Salazar Codes 2010]). Whereas the success of such political negotiations was ephemeral, the lists of pardon taxpayers ultimately became a data bank of New Christian family names and were employed to further avoid Converso integration and social climbing (dos Remédios 1895–1928; Guerra and Barros 2003). The case of the wealthy New Christian spice merchant, Heitor Mendes de Brito, is illuminating. Despite the fact that he and his descendants had been honored by kings with titles of nobility, and one of Heitor’s scions managed to intermarry with a member of an Old Christian noble family, the Mendes de Brito had serious difficulties being accepted as full-fledged nobles until the end of the seventeenth century, mainly because Heitor, the head of the family, was remembered for taking part in the initial stages of the “pardon negotiations” of 1605 as a political leader (Olival 1998; Stuczynski 2019b). Thus, until the top-down juridical reforms implemented by the Marquis of Pombal, the available means to obtain a desired integration was a sustained policy of ethnic oblivion, by combining irreproachable Catholicism, miscegenation, adoption of professions less associated with the Converso group, forging genealogies, obtaining the support of kings, popes and even inquisitors (e.g., the General Inquisitor Fernão Martins Mascarenhas [1616–1628]), and opting to alienate themselves from the rest of the Hebrew *nação*. In this sense, the example of the wealthy New Christian family, the Ximenes de Aragão, was emblematic, because they punctiliously followed those strategies (Stuczynski 2016; López-Salazar Codes 2016; Pulido Serrano 2018).¹¹ It is no wonder that, before the law of 25 May 1773, which abrogated all distinctions between the New and the Old Christians, the Marquis of Pombal was compelled to issue preparatory measures, such as the order to destroy the lists of pardon tax payers (decree of 22 May 1768), and the transformation of the Holy Office into a royal tribunal no longer obsessed with Jewish memories, practices and beliefs (decrees of 30 May and 20 June 1769). Jorge M. Pedreira has suggested that Pombal was mainly motivated by internal division among Portugal’s elites. Because many in the mercantile class and nobility mingled with New Christian families (despite the manifold measures of exclusion), and had merged with an aristocratic sub-group called the *Puritanos*, who reclaimed political and social hegemony on grounds that they were the only noble families to have been never “polluted” by New Christian–Jewish blood, Pombal’s measures of integration were primarily a means to solve the inner erosion and implosion of a society built on the “purity of blood” exclusion (Pedreira 2016). In the early 1920s, João Lúcio de Azevedo (1855–1933), retrospectively summarized the final outcome of Pombal’s 1773 law on the identity of the New Christians thus:

With Pombal’s decision, the Jews were forgotten, and they forgot themselves. Some, rare ones, still maintained an unshakable fidelity to the beliefs of their ancestors, and within their souls burned the flame of a violent faith, eager to declare itself, which was more tormented by the hovering indifference than, in times past, by persecution. (Azevedo 1989, p. 358)

As we shall see, Azevedo was partially right.

3. The “Time of Return” as Anamnesis

My designation of the “time of return” denotes the resurgence of Jewish and New Christian open presences in Portugal’s religious, social and cultural spheres. This period began well before the Portuguese Inquisition was abolished in 1821, when individuals and small groups of mostly Sephardi immigrants from Morocco and Gibraltar settled in continental Portugal and its islands (Bethencourt 1903; Dias 2007; Coutinho 2020). However, as attested to by the number of small synagogues that ephemerally functioned in Lisbon’s private houses throughout the nineteenth century, and the 1904 construction of the elegant synagogue “Shaaré Tikvah” that was also hidden from the public, the path towards visibility was slow and serpentine. This process was accompanied by political debates, historical essays and literary works that dealt with the place of the Jews and New Christians in Portuguese society, history and memory (Parnes 2002; Martins 2021, pp. 33–38). At the same time, the renewed Jewish presence rapidly reclaimed the bygone

memories of the “time of the Jews” and the “time of the Inquisition” as constitutive of its own identity. An early example of this mnemonic appropriation is an article published in 1866 in the French periodical “L’Univers Israélite”, in which the mainly immigrant Jewish community of Lisbon was linked “to the souls of our heroic martyrs, the victims of the Inquisition” (Schwarz 2005, p. 28). The establishment of a secular republican regime in 1910 encouraged the modern Jewish presence in Portugal (Martins 2010) and the development of an historical Lusitanian–Jewish identity (e.g., Amzalak 1928; Pignatelli 2000; Schwarz 2022). These propitious political circumstances favored the “discovery” of groups of descendants of New Christians in the northeastern regions of Trás-os-Montes, by the Catholic priest and scholar, Francisco Manuel Alves, the “Abade of Baçal” (Alves 1925), and then in the Beiras, by the Jewish Polish mining engineer, Samuel Schwarz (Schwarz 1925). From the 1920s to the early 1930s, the “Marrano” Captain Artur Carlos de Barros Basto/ Abraham Ben-Rosh (1887–1961) led what he called the *Obra do Resgate*, with the intention of “rescuing back” New Christian individuals, families and communities to open Judaism (Mea and Steinhardt 1997). This was a formidable goal, as many of those New Christian descendants continued to behave in accordance with the absent–presence pattern of their ancestors who lived in the “time of the Inquisition”. Schwarz presented this phenomenon when, in 1917, he visited Belmonte and other adjacent populations. As he puts it, although the twentieth-century descendants of New Christian judaizers lived “in a free and democratic country”,

they persist... in surrounding their Jewish ceremonies and prayers with the utmost secrecy. Such secrecy, however, must no longer be considered as a means of hiding their religious profession or Jewish origin from their neighbors; for their identity is as well-known to their fellow-citizens as Jews are known in Poland or Rumania, and in the public schools Marano [sic] children are already treated as *judeus* by their little Christian comrades. Inexplicable at first, this secrecy becomes clearer as one penetrates into Marano psychology. Their knowledge of Judaism has been transmitted throughout generations orally and secretly; and secrecy has come to be endowed with the same sanction and sanctity as any other details of their rites and ceremonies. Consequently, they consider it now as an essential element in the Jewish faith, and they are astounded to learn of Jews who make no profession of hiding their faith from their non-Jewish neighbors. (Schwarz 1999, pp. 50–51; cf. Schwarz 1925, p. 20)

Barros Basto sought to put to end to these remnants of the bygone “time of the Inquisition” by establishing open “Marrano” communities across the country, publishing books and founding the journal “Ha-Lapid- O Facho” (The Torch), as well as building a synagogue in the city of Porto (the “Kadoorie Mekor Haim Synagogue”) as a “cathedral” for the Marranos. At the same time, he developed a twofold narrative of belonging. Accordingly, Barros Basto linked the New Christians to Portugal’s medieval Jews, displaying his own imagined genealogy (Barros Basto 1920). Additionally, he tied “Marrano” historical lore to early modern Sephardic communities, as well as to the past and the present of the Jewish world (Parnes 1994). Barros Basto’s audacious plans were curtailed in the 1930s by Jewish opposition, by civil and military trials that aimed to delegitimize him, and by the ascension of the authoritarian and hostile regime of António de Oliveira Salazar, who served as Prime Minister of Portugal from 1932 to 1968. Although during the Second World War, Portugal *de facto* allowed thousands of Jewish refugees to escape Nazi-occupied Europe, with the help of non-governmental initiatives, such as the heroic help provided by the Portuguese diplomat, Aristides de Sousa Mendes (1885–1954) (Afonso 1995; Milgram 2011; Pimentel and Ninhos 2013), both the real and the imagined Jewish presences in the public sphere lost much of the ground they had gained, in historical narratives, educational programs and films (Martins 2021, pp. 71–87; Salah 2017), and most of Barros Basto’s “Marranos” returned to secrecy (Novinsky and Paulo 1967). Only after Portugal returned to democracy in 1974, and was subsequently integrated into European countries and institutions, did some descendants of the Belmonte “Marranos” re-embrace their Jewish identities. In 1989

several local families adopted rabbinic Judaism (Canelo 1987; Brenner and Yerushalmi 1992; Garcia 1993).

The case of Belmonte triggered a paradigm shift of Portugal's Jewish and New Christian memories that reverberates to the present day. On the one hand, the abovementioned "Marrano" "return" of Belmonte coincided with an outburst of public exhibitions, centers of study, conferences, publications, monuments and films showcasing Portugal's Jewish and Converso heritage. In 1990, Frédéric Brenner and Stan Neumann released the acclaimed documentary film "Les derniers marranes" ("The Last Marranos", Brenner and Yerushalmi 1992). In 1994, an exhibition entitled, "Portuguese Jews: Between the Discoveries and the Diaspora" was shown at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon (Ribeiro and dos Santos 1994); in the same year, the "Portuguese Association of Jewish Studies" (APEJ) was founded by Roberto Bachmann (1932–2023). In 1996, the "Cátedra de Estudos Sefarditas Alberto Benveniste" was created at the University of Lisbon. This was the first of many research centers in these fields (<http://www.catedra-alberto-benveniste.org>, (accessed on 22 October 2023)). In 2006, a monument in memory of the 1506 massacre of the New Christians of Lisbon was created by architect Graça Bachmann on behalf of the Jewish community, at the site where the pogrom began, five hundred years ago.¹² The year 2011 saw the founding of the "Portuguese Network of Jewish Quarters" (*Rede de Judiarias de Portugal*), which combines patrimonial recovery with Jewish tourism (<https://www.redejudiariasportugal.com>, 22 October 2023). In those years, the Portuguese government and parliament issued a series of declarations that recognized the need to retroactively repair the violence suffered by the Jews at the "general conversion" of 1497 and during the persecutions of the New Christian and Sephardic exiles in the "time of the Inquisition" (e.g., by President Mário Soares in 1987). In a kind of culmination of these trends, in January 2015 Portugal's parliament ratified a bill, introduced in 2013, allowing descendants of Sephardic Jews to apply for Portuguese citizenship (Kandiyoti and Benmayor 2023).

As a consequence of these momentous developments, historical research has become increasingly challenged by collective memories, which are now coupled with tourism-related interests and biopolitical concerns. The boundaries between Jewish and New Christian histories and memories are often blurred and strained in these public events, publications and juridical resolutions. In some cases, it is difficult to ascertain whether a specific Jewish or New Christian "realm of memory" is historically grounded, or rather, imagined or invented (cf. Castaño 2014). Moreover, both Jewish and New Christian memories were influenced by such changes. Asher Salah's analysis of the descendants of the New Christians in documentary films shows that after Brenner and Neumann's "The Last Marranos" (Brenner and Yerushalmi 1992), Marrano–Jewish witnesses were willing to discuss on camera their previously concealed traditions. (Salah 2019). Indeed, the Marrano lore of Belmonte's Jews is now considered a heritage that should be exhibited and shared with the public. Naomi Leite has identified another novel social phenomenon that she refers to as "urban Marranos": persons who claim different degrees of Marrano and/or Jewish memories, and whose variegated and hybrid identities propel them to be part of virtual communities via internet sites, rather than becoming members of real-life Jewish communities, which are less versatile and inclusive (Leite 2017). In some extreme cases, instead of merely observing this burgeoning process of Jewish and New Christian anamnesis (Mea 2020; Mucznik 2021),¹³ along with a resurgence of the New Christian absent–presence memories (as shown by the 5000 Portuguese citizens who voluntarily affirmed themselves as Jewish in the 2001 population census and the estimated 8000 Jews in the 2008 mid-census, despite the fact that only a few hundred were then affiliated with official Jewish communities), we are also witnessing a "present–absence" phenomenon. This paradoxical outcome of hyper memory is the result of an over-patrimonialization of the Jewish and New Christian heritage, the recent genetic surveys that put emphasis on biological concerns (Nogueiro 2019), mass culture and globalization (Kandiyoti 2020) and the fact that many among the newly designated Portuguese–Jewish citizens have not yet developed their own Luso-Sephardic memories.

4. History, Memory and “Presentism”: Concluding Remarks

In this article, I have argued that the multifaceted Jewish presences in Portugal were strongly structured by a tripartite historical periodization, in which historical contexts and memories synergistically interplayed. The medieval “time of the Jews”, the early modern “time of the Inquisition” and the modern and contemporary “time of return” resulted from an interaction between the changing conditions related to the freedom of the Jewish religion and cultures, the political and juridical state of Portugal’s Jews and New Christians, and the evolving perceptions of identities by themselves and their non-Jewish environment. Contrary to an overly subjectivist perception of Portugal’s Jewish and New Christian variegated identities, my approach emphasized external factors, such as politics and society. At the same time, it showed that the manifold uses of social and historical memories related to Portugal’s Jews and New Christians blurred much of the abovementioned historical periodization, because memory created a certain sense of continuity. Moreover, this phenomenon entailed the sedimentation of the various Jewish and New Christian memories that have accumulated over time (i.e., whereas the “time of the Inquisition” inherited and elaborated its own ideas of the “time of the Jews”, the “time of return” was built upon both a real and a mythical “time of the Jews” and “time of the Inquisition”). It is no wonder that this process ultimately led to an implosion of Jewish memory. Being part of a long-lasting Jewish tradition of remembrance, contemporary Jewish anamnesis is now shared for different reasons (whether identitarian, touristic, or biopolitical) by Jews, by real and purported descendants of New Christians, and by non-Jews (cf. [Flesler and Pérez Melgosa 2020](#)). Moreover, if these multi-directional Sephardic memories came along with a growing interest for studying the history of Portugal’s Jews and New Christians ([Tavim 2014](#)), oftentimes the latter is subsumed to the requirements of the former. In this way, contemporary Jewish and New Christian historical memories in Portugal paradoxically join a widespread phenomenon of “presentism” (i.e., when the present turns to the past and the future to valorize the immediate), which according to François Hartog, characterizes much of our contemporary perceptions of time or “regimes of historicity” ([Hartog 2015](#)).

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Notes

- ¹ Elias Lipiner preferred to speak about the “time of the Jews”, the “New Christian period” and “Modern Portugal” ([Lipiner 1997](#), pp. 9–32), whereas Carsten L. Wilke distinguished between the “medieval Jewish community”, “New Christians and their diaspora”, and “Contemporary Portugal” ([Wilke 2007](#)). Since Maria José Pimenta Ferro Tavares concluded her historical narrative with the reforms of the Marquis de Pombal, she divided her “Los judíos en Portugal” into “Los judíos (1143–1497)” and “Los cristianos nuevos” (1497–1773)” ([Tavares 1992](#)). In his three-volume “Portugal and the Jews” Jorge Martins conceived this differently: volume 1 dealt with medieval Jews and early modern New Christians; volume two focused on Portugal’s first republic and resurgence of the Jewish communities; and volume 3 covered Judaism and antisemitism in the 20th century ([Martins 2006](#); [Martins 2021](#)). In his shorter version, Martins abandoned the tripartite periodization ([Martins 2009](#)).
- ² This also concerns the debate between Gabrielle Sed-Rajna ([Sed-Rajna 1970](#)) and Thérèse Metzger ([Metzger 1977](#)) about whether there existed in late fifteenth-century Lisbon a specific Portuguese school of Hebrew illuminated manuscripts. Regarding the existence of a specific medieval Hebrew–Portuguese language that persisted until the mid-sixteenth century in the Sephardic diaspora, see ([Blasco Orellana and Nom de Dieu 2018](#); [Cohen 2018](#)).
- ³ In his “Cancioneiro Geral”, the poet and courtier Garcia de Resende (c. 1470–1536) referred to this group as “eight great lords” of covetous farmers that included people who were expelled from the kingdom because of treason (i.e. a reference to Isaac Abravanel) ([Garcia de Resende 1516](#), fol. 7v; [Perea-Rodríguez 2022](#)).
- ⁴ Although it was mentioned in both Sephardic and Portuguese Christian sources in the sixteenth century, this episode was largely forgotten by the inhabitants of São Tomé. Only in the 1990s, long after its independence from Portugal in 1975, was the deportation of the Jewish children to the island officially recognized as part of the national history of São Tomé and Príncipe ([Garfield 1990, 2010](#)).
- ⁵ For a critique of Yerushalmi’s approach, see ([Kriegel 2000](#)). For an alternative explanation of Ibn Verga’s views, see ([Cohen 2017](#)).

- ⁶ Lipiner's gloomier perception of the "time of the Jews" probably stemmed from his focus on the juridical status of medieval Jews, thus neglecting both the impact of the royal alliance and actual social life (Lipiner 1982).
- ⁷ This does not mean that there were no texts. Manuscripts, hidden and smuggled books, as well as subversive readings of Christian texts, were widespread among Converso judaizers (Yerushalmi 1998).
- ⁸ i.e., "Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen".
- ⁹ In the ex-Converso Sephardic Western diaspora, different ways of managing New Christian–Iberian memories are to be found, with the purpose of building a religiously homogeneous community of "New Jews" from a religiously heterogeneous one in the Iberian peninsula. On the one hand, there abound expressions of nostalgia for the beloved motherland (Tavim 2013), detailed genealogies of Converso families (Salomon 1975; Orfali Levi 2000) and depictions of places of dwelling (e.g. the city of Porto mentioned by Uriel da Costa (c. 1585–1640) in his autobiography (Costa 1985, pp. 24–25). On the other hand, there is a scarcity of information regarding details of crypto-Jewish practices in the Iberian peninsula, including in the case of da Costa (Révah 1962). Moreover, the fact that a few outstanding cases of martyrs who were burned alive at the stake on behalf of the "Law of Moses" were publicly celebrated, instead of the average figure of the Converso Judaizer (Bodian 2007), confirms a tendency, identified by Carsten L. Wilke in the ex-Converso Sephardic diaspora, to select the religious models of remembrance (Wilke 1996), whereas Daniel M. Swetschinski even spoke of a phenomenon of conscious "collective amnesia" on this thorny issue (Swetschinski 1996).
- ¹⁰ Note that António José Saraiva obscured the fact that, according to Ribeiro Sanches, crypto-Judaism was an autonomous historical reality (Sanches 2003), that was propelled by Inquisitorial persecution and social exclusion.
- ¹¹ That said, a small group of wealthy New Christian families, led by Melchior Gomes Elvas and Rui Dias Angel, applied to the king in order to oppose the "general pardon" of 1605, arguing that they were fervent Catholics who were no longer attached to the rest of the Hebrew "nation". The same phenomenon occurred after the renewal of "pardon" negotiations with the Crown in 1621 (Pulido Serrano 2007, pp. 24–26).
- ¹² It stands close to another monument erected to commemorate that event by Lisbon's Cardinal Patriarch, José Policarpo (<https://informacoeseeservicos.lisboa.pt/contactos/diretorio-da-cidade/memorial-as-vitimas-do-massacre-judaico-de-1506>, (accessed on 22 October 2023)).
- ¹³ On the one hand, the growing Jewish community of Porto has two recent museums: "The Jewish Museum of Porto" (<https://www.mjporto.com/museum-1>, accessed on 22 October 2023) and "The Holocaust Museum of Porto" (<https://mhporto.com>, accessed on 22 October 2023). In cooperation with Porto's Catholic Diocese, four films were released: "The Nun's Kaddish", "Sefarad", "1618" and "The Light of Judah", "covering events that have occurred over the centuries in the Portuguese Jewish community" (<https://www.mjporto.com/films-room>, accessed on 22 October 2023). On the other hand, the Jewish community of Lisbon is erecting its own "Tikvá Museu Judaico Lisboa" (<https://mjlisboa.com>, accessed on 22 October 2023). Note that several museums and similar "realms of memory" were funded by the abovementioned "Portuguese Network of Jewish Quarters" (e.g. the Jewish museum of Belmonte, the "Isaac Cardoso's Jewish Cultural Center" and "Bandarra House" in the city of Trancoso, the "Centro de Interpretação da Cultura Sefardita do Nordeste Transmontano" and the "Memorial e Centro de Documentação—Bragança Sefardita" in Bragança (<https://www.redejudiariasportugal.com>, accessed on 22 October 2023).

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