

**Nathan Wachtel.** *The Faith of Remembrance: Marrano Labyrinths.* Trans. Nikki Halpern. Jewish Culture and Contexts Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Illustrations. 408 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4455-7.



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The translation of Nathan Wachtel's exploration of crypto-Jewish personalities, *The Faith of Remembrance: Marrano Labyrinths*, is a welcome addition to the growing literature on this complex and multifaceted topic. Wachtel's earlier work on indigenous narratives of the Spanish conquest of Peru, *La Vision des Vaincus—Les Indiens du Pérou devant la Conquête Espagnole (1530-1570)* (1971), is a foundational text for any study of the early colonial period. In the last two decades, he began to turn his attention toward Jewish subjects from the same time period and geographic space, in particular the life stories of *conversos* in the Iberian world. Originally published as *La Foi du Souvenir—Labyrinthes Marranes* (2001), *The Faith of Remembrance* offers eight portraits of *conversos* from Spain, Portugal, and the Americas who were caught by the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions and tried for the crime of *Judaizing*—of maintaining Jewish beliefs and practices while being Catholic.

Inquisitorial records invite the scholar to listen to voices from the past. Generally speaking

the subjects questioned by the inquisitors came from a wide swath of society. They were accused of a diverse range of heretical crimes ranging from Judaizing and “Lutheranism” to witchcraft and a slew of heretical errors included under the category of “mocking of the sacraments.” Women, the poor and uneducated, African slaves, gender-bending vagabonds, and would-be prophets all have a version of their life story recorded within the records of the Holy Offices' proceedings. Scholars interested in the lives of nonelites have been particularly drawn to these sources for obvious reasons. The veracity of these documents has been famously debated, with some scholars rejecting them as completely unreliable—the product of false confessions proffered by the accused in order to receive a lighter sentence and avoid torture.[1] Other scholars, while rejecting a facile acceptance of the veracity of inquisitorial testimony, energetically mine this material with great care, aware of the hermeneutical challenges implicit in testimonies given under duress.

Inquisitorial archives have expanded and deepened our understanding of sociocultural issues, such as the makeup of early modern families, gender roles, race relations, reading habits, the circulation of elite and popular cultures, the tension between orthodox doctrine and practice, and the lifestyles and beliefs of individuals.[2] Scholars of early modern Jewish history have been particularly drawn to inquisitorial material because of the connection between the persecution of the New Christians of the Iberian world and the establishment of the communities of the Western Sephardic diaspora by former *conversos*, many of whom suffered at the hand of the Inquisition before moving to the “lands of liberty,” such as Amsterdam, London, and Curaçao. Not only were these communities founded by former New Christians but their members also maintained contact with family members and business associates still in the Iberian world.[3] To fully appreciate the nature of these dynamic and proud Jewish communities that enjoyed unprecedented economic and social freedoms, it is essential to study the world of the Iberian Inquisition.

The experience of the Marranos, however, is the theme that has sparked almost mythic fascination in the popular and the scholarly imagination. [4] They are commonly portrayed as “souls in conflict,” torn between multiple commitments, shape-shifting their identity in order to survive in a world caught between medieval orthodoxies and the dawning of a modern age. They display tendencies toward relativism, skepticism, and even a postmodern spirit of play and pastiche.[5] For other scholars whose commitments to Jewish peoplehood are more overt and programmatic, the Marranos represent the tenacity of the national Jewish spirit under pressure. For others, the persecution of the Marranos was proof of the depth of gentile hatred toward Jewish people.[6] And for some, their globe-trotting, transnational economic activities and cultural sophistication signaled the

dawning of a cosmopolitan “New Jew.” In short, we can find Marranos for all seasons and tastes!

Wachtel is keenly aware of the contemporary significance of the Marranos for understanding the experience of the modern Jew. He makes this explicit in his lucid and suggestive first chapter, “Marranism and Modernity,” where he opens by making an analogy between the experience of late medieval Iberian Jewry and nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German Jewry. The book’s thesis is linked to this connection between Marranism and the modern Jewish condition. Wachtel makes clear that crypto-Judaism in the early modern period was extremely eclectic and varied. However, what all these very different men and women shared was a basic belief in the centrality of remembrance at the center of their religious life. He traces this idea throughout the lives he includes in his “portrait gallery.” Despite different views of beliefs or practices, they all shared a commitment to “remember” one’s Jewish commitment.

Wachtel brings a deep empathy and curiosity to his reading of these individual stories. Although he argues for a unified theory linking these characters, and by extension all Judaizing *conversos*, he does not reduce the individual cases to this schema. Each portrait points to the complexities of the crypto-Jewish experience and the diversity of the individuals caught in the inquisitor’s net. He alternates between individuals of extreme wealth and those who are barely getting by; there is also a striking diversity of religious knowledge. There are some individuals like Francisco Maldonado da Silva who used his medical education and his father’s extensive library to develop an idiosyncratic yet sophisticated Judaism alongside other individuals for whom Judaism consisted of purely tribal practices, such as marrying endogamously, or syncretic practices, such as praying to Saint Moses and Saint Esther along with the Virgin.

Wachtel does a masterful job of listening to the life stories as they unspool themselves in the records. Instead of synthesizing the trial records, he quotes long passages and provides the transcriptions in the original Spanish or Portuguese in the endnotes, allowing the reader to engage directly with the primary sources. The plentitude of primary sources is also a boon to those who teach inquisitorial material in English, especially because many of these cases have not appeared before. Moreover, the book has been translated lucidly by Nikki Halperin, allowing both the clarity of Wachtel's prose and the complexity and otherness of the inquisitorial documents to come through to the English reader. This edition also includes an insightful foreword written by Yosef Kaplan who has spent his long career exploring the social context and inner workings of the *conversos'* world.

Wachtel's analyses are sensitive to the humanity of his subjects and curious about the mysteries that the records hint at but leave unresolved. Some of the individuals analyzed have been the subjects of previous research, such as the Lima-based New Christian financier and merchant Bautista Pérez and his contemporary, the Chilean surgeon and religious thinker and "dogmatizing martyr" Maldonado da Silva. By placing these individuals together with lesser-known cases, Wachtel creates a network—or a sort of "imagined community" of individuals who may not have known each other but who shared certain basic beliefs and took part in shared experiences.

While Wachtel's individual readings are of great value and enrich the larger discourse surrounding the experience of crypto-Judaism and *converso* culture, his overarching thesis is less convincing. Stressing a content-free "faith of remembrance" as the common denominator linking these disparate individuals places a modern, secular gloss over the very real religious commitments involved in many of the cases that he analyzes. Maldonado da Silva was not interested in memory

as much as truth, a truth worth dying for. Why else did he approach his devoutly Catholic sister in an attempt at enlightening her with the truth of the law of Moses, knowing full well that she might turn him in to the authorities for his heresy? Was it a faith in memory that drove him to compose countless pamphlets dedicated to diverse religious topics, using ash as his ink and corn husks as his paper? Eli Nazareño as Maldonado da Silva styled himself was driven by a desire to fulfill the word of God. He did so in an idiosyncratic, creative, and largely autonomous fashion. In this mode of religiosity, perhaps we can find the dawning of a modern sensibility whereby authority is questioned and the driving engine of religious meaning is found in the individual's religious experience. Is it accurate to reduce Maldonado da Silva's crypto-Jewish activities, and so many others, to a fidelity only to a memory of a religion that they no longer knew how to keep when in fact they so vigorously tried to maintain a form of Judaism, albeit in a different guise than their coreligionists in Salonika, Venice, or Amsterdam?

The idea of a faith of remembrance as a formative principle of Marranism is more relevant in cases where the Jewish commitments of the accused "Judaizers" are far from clear. Pérez and Antonio José da Silva, the playwright known as "O Judeo," are excellent examples of individuals whose Jewishness had much more to do with ethnic and socioeconomic patterns than with any obvious religious affiliation. The family connections with other *conversos*, the role of financier and transatlantic merchant of Portuguese origin who lived in one of the centers of Spanish commercial activity would combine at a moment of great geopolitical anxiety—the Great Conspiracy of the 1630s—to form the image of Pérez as a nefarious "rabbi," spiritual leader of the *converso* merchants intent on usurping Spanish control of the Americas. The prosecution of Pérez and his circle as part of this "conspiracy" cannot be disassociated from the Spanish fear of a Luso-Dutch alliance,

supported and encouraged by Sephardic merchants in Amsterdam and the wider *converso* network throughout the Americas which gained traction during the 1630s. This geopolitical anxiety influenced the inquisitors to view the *converso* merchants' supposed Judaism as proof of their perfidious and duplicitous connection to this plot to undermine Spanish hegemony. Pérez is a fascinating example of the complexity and mystery surrounding the inner life of many early modern *conversos*. His denial of all accusations of Judaizing ensured his execution at the same auto-da-fé where Maldonado da Silva met his fiery end. As opposed to Maldonado da Silva who proclaimed his Jewishness with all his might, Pérez was condemned for maintaining his innocence. What can we make of his suicidal refusal to admit to the inquisitors' version of his true, inner religious life beyond his pride in his own version of his identity? How is this a part of a "faith of remembrance"? I am skeptical that we can draw any major conclusions about this fascinating individual's inner life.

Wachtel's last section is an epilogue focusing on the phenomenon of twentieth-century Marranos, or *Anusim* as they prefer to be called; it is lyrical and insightful. Wachtel provides a history of the phenomenon of Portuguese and Brazilian Catholics who, beginning in the early twentieth century, began openly declaring that they were not only of Jewish origin but also the bearers of a living tradition of crypto-Jewish belief and practice, passed down from generation to generation. With his living subjects, Wachtel proves again to be a sensitive interlocutor. He presents long sections of personal histories recorded from oral discussions that he had with a variety of these individuals in the 1990s in the Sertão region of north-eastern Brazil.[7] He frames their narratives with enough information to appreciate their situation and provides useful commentary. This chapter is tantalizing and I wish Wachtel would have added more of his own investigative insights and analysis to these evocative life stories. It is in this chap-

ter that Wachtel's thesis of the faith of remembrance is most eloquently illustrated. The individuals discussed in this chapter, for the most part, were connected to Judaism out of a bond of memory. In the majority of the cases, they were deeply committed to practices that they did not understand. It was a part of their identity and self-construction, far from the struggle between the law of Moses and the law of Jesus to assure salvation. In Wachtel's analysis, we encounter a recent phenomenon deeply rooted in the history of the early modern period but transformed into a modern question of identity. Could it be that Wachtel's experiences with these modern Marranos colored his view of the personalities captured in the inquisitorial archive? Did seeing the spiritual and in some cases actual descendants of the Marranos inform his approach to their religious experience?

These reservations notwithstanding, Wachtel does a masterful job at guiding the reader through the "Marrano labyrinths" of the past and present. Wachtel's eloquent and humane study will enrich the conversation regarding crypto-Judaism, the role of the Inquisition in the early modern Iberian Atlantic world, and the multivalent dynamics of identity construction for many years to come.

#### Notes

[1]. See the works of Benzion Netanyahu and José Antônio Saraiva for the clearest iteration of this position. For a clear example of Netanyahu's approach, see his essay, "The Marranos according to the Hebrew Sources of the 15th and Early 16th Centuries," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 31 (1963): 81-164. For Saraiva, see his classic study, *Inquisição e Cristãos-Novos* (Porto: Inova, 1959); and his expanded translated version, *The Marrano Factory: The Portuguese Inquisition and Its New Christians 1536-1765*, trans. and ed. H. P. Salomon and I. S. D. Sassoon (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

[2]. Yosef H. Yerushalmi deals with this question in *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto* (New

York: Columbia University Press, 1971). The list of scholars who carefully but actively engage the inquisitorial archives is long. For some notable examples, see Miriam Bodian, *Dying in the Law of Moses* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); David Graizbord, *Souls in Dispute* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); Jonathan Schorsch, *Swimming the Christian Atlantic: Judeoconvertos, Afroiberians and Amerindians in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); and Stuart Schwartz's *All Can Be Saved* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); as well as the wide-ranging work of Yosef Kaplan, Richard Kagan, and Carlo Ginzburg.

[3]. For examples of the expanse and complex nature of these networks, see Yosef Kaplan, "The Travels of Portuguese Jews from Amsterdam to the 'Lands of Idolatry' (1644-1724)," in *Jews and Conversos*, ed. Yosef Kaplan (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1985), 197-224; and Jonathan I. Israel, *Diasporas within a Diaspora: Jews, Crypto-Jews and the World Maritime Empires (1540-1740)* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

[4]. I use the term "Marrano" to refer to those *conversos* who were committed to maintaining Jewish belief and practices. This term is synonymous with crypto-Jew. Most of the Jews who converted to Catholicism eventually became good Catholics; however, the extensive use of the terms "*converso*" and "New Christian" within popular social settings and legal contexts reflects the extent to which most of the descendants of these converts were perceived as ethnically different than their Iberian neighbors. For a few examples of historical novels channeling the Marrano theme, see David Liss, *The Coffee Trader* (New York: Random House, 2003); Marcos Aguinis's novel based on the life of Maldonado da Silva, *La gesta del marrano* (Buenos Aires: Planeta 1990); and Achy Obejas, *Days of Awe* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001), which brings the Marrano trope into the late twentieth century. The theme has also been taken up in several films from Jom Tob

Azulay's *O Judeu* (New York: First-Run Features, 1996) and Arturo Ripstein's *El Santo Oficio* (Mexico: Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía, 1973). These few examples point to the popularity and attraction of the Marrano theme in diverse cultural contexts. For a recent analysis of the role of literary "marranism" within late twentieth-century Latin American culture, see Erin Graff Zivin, *Figurative Inquisitions: Conversion, Torture, and Truth in the Luso-Hispanic Atlantic* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

[5]. See Yirmeyahu Yovel's *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); and his more recent *The Other Within* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

[6]. Netanyahu is the strongest advocate of this position. See his seminal, *The Marranos of Spain from the Late XIVth to the Early XVIth Century* (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1966), vii, 254.

[7]. Wachtel recently wrote a book dedicated to many of these individual stories entitled, *Mémoires Marranes* (Paris: Seuil, 2011).

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