

Exploring her hidden converso past

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Haaretz sits down with Doreen Carvajal, the New York Times reporter who traveled to Spain to investigate the truth of her family ancestry.

The Spanish Inquisition may have begun more than half a millennium ago, but its ripples continue to be felt, not only on the most subtle levels in Spanish society, but also in the personal lives of the descendants of Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity at the time. One of them, apparently, is New York Times reporter Doreen Carvajal, who describes the hesitant investigation she undertook into her family's past in her book "The Forgetting River: A Modern Tale of Survival, Identity, and the Inquisition" (Riverhead, 320 pages, \$26.95). Carvajal, 56, was raised in San Francisco, where she attended Catholic schools and grew up with stories of her family's distinguished heritage in Costa Rica. After a long and varied reporting career in the U.S., she moved to the Times' Paris bureau in 2001, and four years ago, after encountering enough clues that she came from a converso family to have her curiosity piqued, decided to spend time in Spain to see what she could learn.

Moving with her husband and daughter to Arcos de la Frontera, in Andalusia, southwest of Seville, she began checking out the town's hidden Jewish past: in the Jewish quarter, many of whose homes still have tunnels that served as escape routes for crypto-Jews being hunted by the Inquisition; in churches with artwork that has been altered over the centuries to convey coded Jewish messages; and in belfries whose aged bells once rang out the rhythm of a march played for Jews being banished from the town for secretly practicing their faith. She corresponded with family members in different countries about their common ancestry and had her DNA tested for "Jewish" markers. Her book is about her search, and about the strange mystical grip that the secretive Arco de la Frontera had on her, and her growing sense of Jewish identity. Haaretz spoke with Doreen Carvajal by Skype from Paris.

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You're a secular Catholic who had never set foot in a synagogue, and then one day, you settled in a history-laden Spanish village and started searching for your Jewish ancestry. What in the world possessed you?

Maybe because I'm a reporter, I think about what's new, and not about the past, so [for a long time,] I wasn't reflective about my family, or even my name, or what it meant.

“Carvajal” is a Sephardic Jewish name which means “lost place,” or “rejected,” in some spelling variations. But it was only through the course of my own reporting career that people would bring it up to me: Do you know that you have a Sephardic Jewish name? One time I got a call from a freelance writer who was working on a book about the Carvajal family in Mexico, whose members were executed and burned at the stake for being heretics and secretly practicing Judaism.

So, there were these casual clues along the way. But I was too busy with my own life. And I didn't pay attention. After September 11, my family and I moved to Europe. We went to the south of Spain, and there was just a moment where I felt what some anusim [the Hebrew word for “conversos”] refer to as the “call of the blood,” a yearning to return. Something inexplicable drew me to Arcos de la Frontera. And that's when I started writing to my relatives in Costa Rica with questions about our origins.

You reveal yourself to be a very mystical being. Were you always spiritual?

Well, I wouldn't say I am deeply spiritual. I was more of a secular Catholic when I went [to Spain]. But there is something about living in a mystical white pueblo, on a towering ridge, overlooking the valley, among these 500-year-old houses, where you live in the past and the present, and the future. It kind of opens you up to mystical experiences. We moved into an ex-bordello on the edge of the village. It's in the quarter where Jews actually settled, and there are other houses there that are honeycombed with tunnels that lead out of the ridge, which were basically escape routes for Jews during the Inquisition.

I was just in Spain myself, where I kept wondering why virtually every single dish includes pork. You explain that, after the Inquisition, converted Jews would eat pork to show they were loyal Christians, and on the other hand, Christians would serve Conversos pig as a test. Is that right?

That's exactly right. And that's why there's the pejorative nickname “Marrano,” which literally means “pig.” Marranos were the one who were suspected of secretly carrying on Jewish rituals and customs. Food was a crime, food was politics, food was a test of your loyalties.

It's remarkable that 500 years later there are so many ways that the Inquisition is still in the blood of the country.

I would talk about a culture of amnesia – it's part of the survival mode. One reason why I was interested in moving to Arcos was because I wanted to understand what it was about my own family that would make them keep that secret [their Jewish heritage] until the 20th century. Why didn't they talk about it? Who would be afraid about it by then? You're going to think I'm being mystical again, but I really do believe that people from different generations pass on these survival skills. And I think this reticence was handed down. In Arcos de la Frontera, with its tiny narrow streets, I could talk to my neighbors across the street from our terraces upstairs. They were so close you could smell what people were cooking, you could hear them fighting, you could spy on each other. If you're using olive oil,

back during the Inquisition period, instead of lard, that could be a crime.

All those things are clues that you might secretly be practicing Judaism. This is a town that whitewashes its buildings. What could be more symbolic than that? Every year, there is a purification that takes place with houses repainted white. And there are symbols of the Inquisition, for example, that have also been covered up. There's an oil painting in one of the churches that was a hub for Inquisition activity. And over the years, someone has come and repainted parts of the painting of the Ascension of Mary so as to remove a cross in a pale green color, the signature color of the Inquisition, and then added a figure of St. Teresa, who was the descendant of converso Jews herself. Below her was a tiny symbol, saying, Listen to the handmaiden of Mary. People had a way of speaking, but it was all coded.

And you think the coded message was a Jewish one?

Maybe. Well, definitely, because the green cross was painted over with a jeweled orb. St. Teresa was added in a later century. She has her own unique history. She believed that religion takes place in the mind, not necessarily in your actions, which is how a lot of converso Jews survived with dual identities – actions in public, and their own personal view.

The records of the Inquisition trials that you quote are dramatic and shocking and appalling. It's as real as reading about the Holocaust.

That's one of the reasons that I think that somehow generations pass on the knowledge of traumas from earlier generations, even hundreds of years earlier. And the reason why I think that is so is because of new research in epigenetics in Sweden. They've looked back three generations, and now they're going back four generations, to see the impact of a traumatic event. In the case of Sweden, it was famine, but it can also be another stressful event. They can see that what happens in the grandfather's life with a traumatic event can end up affecting the longevity of a grandson. And the theory is that there are genetic marks that happen at a stressful time when someone is young. And so I wonder if somehow, going back generations, this reticence is passed on as a survival skill, or if this tendency to keep secrets is an ingrained ability. That's how I explain my family's actions. I just think that this is something that became so engrained that it became part of the DNA.

How has your extended family responded to your quest?

Well, the younger generation all seems to be intrigued and curious. In my family, I found that it was really my father's age group who were less interested, didn't have much information, and you had to push to get something. To my regret, I wasn't curious then, and so didn't question my grandmother's generation, I didn't ask my great aunt, who was typical of women in these anusim groups. It was women who would guard the information and preserve secret rituals. They found a menorah in her bedroom when she died.

Where do you stand now personally vis-a-vis Jewish identity and practice?

Well, shifting religious identity is a little like learning a new language. When you're a child, you just learn a language naturally. It flows, it's easy, you can pronounce the words, you don't make awkward mistakes. And I feel now like I'm learning a new language. For a long time I was a secular Catholic. Letting go is a gradual journey. The nuns kept me connected to the Catholic Church. They taught me to read, they gave me a love of writing; they were the ones working with the poor, for example, in North Philadelphia, when I was working there. I admired them. It wasn't until the church started investigating the nuns recently in the United States – for their preoccupation with social issues instead of traditional doctrine – that I felt that the Church had left me.

I'm now studying "Judaism 101." I have a friend from Canada who used to be a religion teacher, and he's tutoring me. So, I journey forward. When I was in Palma, Mallorca, I encountered a lot of chuetas, or converso descendants, who are interested in returning. But that return can take time.

Were you surprised by your strong emotional response to the narrow streets and bells of Arcos de Frontera?

It's a very mystical place. Christians and Muslims battled over this sandstone ridge. Winds from Africa blow across the summit. When you look over the entire valley, with cliffs and sheer drops, you feel like a bird that could plunge. The place invades the soul. That's why I think there are so many poets living there, including the ex-mayor. All that history ends up affecting you. In the music, in the food. I talk in the book about the Saeta music, which is sung a capella at Easter time. It really called to me. It was communicating in two different ways, although many modern singers don't know the roots it has in the Kol Nidre prayer – that it goes back to a time when converso Jews were trying to demonstrate their loyalty to the Christian faith, but also giving a dual message. One was a public message of devotion to religious images of Mary and Jesus, but internally, also expressing that they were canceling the promise that they were converting to Christianity. That really resonated with me. When I went to the synagogue for the first time, I could hear how close they are to each other – the rising and falling of the voice, the way it comes deep from the chest.

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