



Suddenly, we discovered we're Jews

2012-09-19

Maria Fernanada Almeida, 50: Resident of Senhora de Oura, Portugal; descendant of a family of Marranos

Carolina's mother was afraid to disclose her roots, Maria Fernanada found out she was a Marrano descendant, and Xue Fei always knew he was offspring of distinct Kaifeng community. How does it feel to learn that you're Jewish in the middle of life?

'I would love to hear the sound of a shofar'

Maria Fernanada Almeida, 50: Resident of Senhora de Oura, Portugal; descendant of a family of Marranos

I will never forget that night – Christmas Eve. I was five years old, and the entire family gathered for "the holiday". During the celebration, my father revealed that his father's family was of Jewish decent. My grandmother – his mother – became silent. I never got over it.

Despite the Christmas discovery, the family had always acted as a Christian non-religious family. We didn't enter churches, and it seemed to me – as a child – like a normal thing.

But when I grew up, I was married in a church as part of the Portuguese tradition. I got married – and felt emptiness during the ceremony. Something was missing.

Several years ago, I suddenly felt a spiritual longing, a need to develop, to become a better person. I needed answers.

I visited the Sistine Chapel in Italy and discovered that all the amazing paintings there are related to the Bible. Something erupted in me. I realized that the truth was in the Bible, and that this was the people I belonged to.

I knew there was a Jewish community in Porto, but I never had the courage to go there.

I began buying books of Judaism, the first one - Chumash (one of the five books of the Pentateuch). When I received it, I felt that the cord had been cut a long time ago – and that

now I was holding both its ends. I felt huge joy mixed with deep sadness, and I broke into tears.

Two years ago, I discovered a cousin who is also a Marrano descendant. We discussed the ignorance in our family, and she suggested that we try to investigate our roots outside Portugal.

I was amazed by this idea, as I didn't know we had a past beyond the place where generations of my family were born. She explained to me that we were Jews who assimilated in Portugal.

I began contacting Marrano descendants on Facebook and realized I wasn't alone. I contacted Shavei Israel and Rabbi Elisha Salad, who answered my many questions with endless patience and a great deal of understanding. In the process I went through, my family understood my spiritual need to pursue this way.

In November 2011, I entered the Porto synagogue with other members of the Shavei Israel group. For the first time in my life, I took part in a prayer and felt like I had always belonged there.

This is the first time I'll be celebrating

Nonetheless, I am preparing for the holiday with all my might, engaging in self-examination and trying to cleanse my soul in order to be written in the Book of Life.

I'll go to the sea to do the "Tashlich" practice with my husband and daughter. It will be a special moment. On my table I'll have the head of a fish, apples with honey, dates, pumpkin, leek and especially pomegranate...

I hope that this Rosh Hashana will be the first of many, alongside my people. Next year in Jerusalem! And I pray for the ingathering of the exiles and for the salvation of the Jewish people.

'My deep Jewish soul was elevated'

Xue Fei, 24: Immigrated to Israel from Kaifeng, China; lives in the settlement of Efrata; offspring of the extinct Kaifeng community

I was born into a regular Chinese family: A father, a mother and a child – me. My mother is from a Jewish family and her last name is Li.

It should be noted that Kaifeng Jews have seven last names from 1,000 years ago, which were given to them by the then-king of China, who was the first one to permit Jews to live in Kaifeng.

'All I can think about these days is that I want to be Jewish.' Xue Fei

Then, 1,000 years ago, there was an active Beit Midrash (place of Torah study) here and a rabbi who kept the Jewish life, customs and kashrut for centuries.

A natural disaster led to the end of the Jewish community in its historic form: The Beit Midrash was completely destroyed, the rabbi died and tradition was slowly lost. That was when the assimilation into the Chinese people began.

But there were families who continued keeping tradition, like my mother's family: They only ate kosher animals, kept Shabbat, and marked Passover, Sukkot and Hanukkah in their own way.

The Shavei Israel organization sent a teacher to Kaifeng to teach us about Jewish life. We marked our first Rosh Hashana with the Kaifeng community: We heard the sound of the shofar, we ate the holiday meal together, we sang Rosh Hashana songs and studied a Torah lesson together.



With members of Chinese Jewish community

My grandmother risked her life during World War II by helping Jews at the Krakow Ghetto: She delivered letters and hid Jews in her house. I learned that she met my grandfather after the war only after her death, when my mother decided to break the wall of silence. She admitted that she preferred to keep silent all those years because she was afraid of anti-Semitism.

Grandfather Sholem came from a wealthy family which engaged in horse trading. During the war, almost the entire family was murdered.

My grandfather left for Krakow before the war broke out, and was transferred to the ghetto with all the Jews of the city. Later he arrived in Plashov. From there he was transferred to Auschwitz – and from there to Mauthausen.

He survived the selection thanks to his strong body and underwent experiments conducted by Dr. Mengele, which chronically damaged his health till the end of his life.

After the war he started a family, changed his name – but not his religion. Although my grandparents raised their children far away from Judaism, he maintained a number of customs until his death.

Now that the truth is out, we found a treasure in my grandparents' home: Photos, a death

certificate, a document stating that he was circumcised, an original identity card, a Kiddush cup, a Bible, and much more.

For a long time, I wasn't sure whether I had any part in this heritage, but many good people helped me make the decision. I was afraid that the new community would reject me, but fortunately I was wrong.

I soon became an inseparable part of Krakow's Jewish community. I began studying Hebrew, visited Israel, and was introduced to the Shabbat welcoming ceremonies and Jewish holidays step by step.

I studied in Shavei Israel's "Ner La Elef" project, and although I never met my grandfather (he died in 1972, before I was born), I felt his presence beside me.

I spent my first Rosh Hashana with the rabbi of the Krakow community. I took part in the prayers in the local synagogue, and I felt the moving sounds of the shofar for the first time.

I participated in the holiday meal with all its symbols and in the "Tashlich" on the Vistula River. It was a beautiful and magical adventure, and a self-revelation. I have similar plans for this holiday too.

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4282213,00.html>