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01.17.07

The Searchers**Seven South Americans uncover their converso roots**

BY ROBIN CEMBALEST

In *The Longing*, which premieres at the New York Jewish Film Festival on January 22, filmmaker Gabriela Böhm documents the journeys of a group of South Americans, raised as Catholics, as they reconnect with tenuous Jewish roots. Two of Böhm's subjects are doctors in Ecuador; another is a professor of microbiology in Colombia; a fourth is a homemaker, also from Colombia, who travels 36 hours by bus with her daughter to Guayaquil, Ecuador. There, all the subjects converge to meet with a rabbi and undergo a ritual immersion and conversion. But, given their variously hidden histories, is the process actually one of reconversion? How will they sustain their faith in communities where they are minorities of one? Is this a heartwarming quest, or heartbreaking?

***The Longing* takes up the story of the crypto-Jews, or conversos, the remnants of Spanish Jewry who continued to practice in secret after they were forcibly converted to Catholicism. How did you get the idea to make this film?**

When I was in New York University film school I heard an NPR show about the [crypto-Jews of New Mexico](#). I went to Santa Fe, but the subject wasn't right for me at the time.

Instead, you made *Passages*, a very personal documentary about your own heritage.

My parents are both Holocaust survivors from Eastern Europe: My mom was from Budapest, my father was from Stanislav, which at the time was Transylvania. They ended up meeting in Israel, married in Italy, and emigrated to Argentina, where I was born. In *Passages*, I go back to my parents' places of birth and retrace their experiences.

I was pregnant when I was making the film, so it's about how I transfer this to the next generation. After *Passages* the trigger that led me to *The Longing* was the sense of dual identity.

The most famous example of a clandestine Jewish community that lived publicly as Catholics is the group in Belmonte, Portugal that was discovered about a century ago. Since then, many people have looked for other communities of hidden Jews in Iberia, South America, and elsewhere. Yet how many crypto-Jews have survived into the modern era, and exactly who decides what makes a crypto-Jew Jewish, remain matters of strong dispute.



Gabriela Böhm

When I started this, I was still trying to find a secret community. As I went along with the film I realized that that was very hard to find. In my opinion it doesn't necessarily exist any more. What we have are remnants of a past. Some of them with knowledge, some of them without.

The five people you profile live in isolated towns in Ecuador and Colombia, far from centers of Jewish culture. In some cases their parents told them the family had been Jewish. In others, it was an ineffable feeling, a sense that some Jewish fiber remained despite historical and cultural obstacles.

Some had histories of their own families. Some began research on the Internet because they felt something. Borys, a doctor from Babahoyo, Ecuador, believes he descends from Portuguese refugees. He can trace back his family history. Laily, a professor of microbiology, recalls her father telling her when she was 15 that her great-grandfather was a Portuguese emigrant of Sephardic origin. She began searching for her family's history, and found out that her great-grandfather was a Portuguese Jew who arrived in Colombia through Venezuela and settled in the Guajira in the 1850s along with his brother and wife. Catholicism was very strong in Colombia till about 20 years ago. There was no freedom of religion and all children had to be baptized. From that point on the family lost all contact with Jewish ritual but never adopted mainstream Catholic behaviors. What was passed on were a few ethical principles and their Hebrew names.

Why do people search for another identity? Probably they feel something is missing, that something is not glued together well. Maybe that glue is Judaism.

I have memories of my own family, my own history. I connect to that. For these people, somewhere in them there is a smell or a touch or a long-distance memory that is triggering this connection back, this sense of belonging to something that was lost. I don't have hard evidence. I tried to stay away from the genetic evidence that some people go for. I don't believe in that, I believe there is something inexplicable, that doesn't have words. I think it's that sense that they are going back home.

The people in the film felt strongly enough about Judaism not only to research it but to track down and reach out to Jacques Cukierkorn, a Brazil-born rabbi with a congregation in Kansas City who, under the auspices of the organization Kulanu, has worked to identify, instruct, and sometimes convert lost and dispersed remnants of the Jewish people. And then in the course of your research, you tracked him down, too, and he led you to the subjects in the film.

He said, "I'm going down to Ecuador, I'm going to be converting these people—why don't you come?"

There came a point when you realized the film was not going to be as uplifting as you had originally thought, when you realized the Jewish community of Ecuador was literally not letting new converts in the door. What happened?

I was interviewing Eduardo Alvarado. His story was very powerful. He had all the elements to be accepted: He converted with Chabad in Massachusetts, had himself circumcised, made aliyah. But he was not allowed to be part of the community. There was something about his being let down that was so profound, so meaningful. At that moment I realized that there is another story here: What happens when the forces who are saying "no" are the Jews rather than the Catholic Church?

These people probably are far worse off in converting back. Not only are they alone in their struggle to go back to Judaism, they have no community to support them. Why would anyone want to do that if they didn't feel it was their true faith?

This type of story has also played out in Lima, Santa Fe, and other places

Where people, many with Indian or mestizo blood, have sought to rejoin what they consider their historical faith—only to find their motives questioned and their acceptance in the established Jewish community minimal at best. Yet you don't get into the question of whether the rejection has to do with the color of their skin. Why not?

I mention it in other ways. I talk about the distinction between Ashkenazi and Sephardi. I did not want to be judgmental and point the finger. I did not feel I could specifically say without evidence that it was the color of the skin. But I imply it. And Laily Saltarén, the professor from Colombia, doesn't look mestizo—she is white.

Their choice of researching Judaism on the Internet, be it Reform or Conservative, leaves a lot of questions in the minds of the community leaders—already defensive—toward anyone who wants to interfere with their status quo. The community's version of Judaism fills more than just a spiritual role. Kids and grown-ups meet at the "club" to pray and play. As a rabbi from Quito says, "all communities claim the rights to their own admission policy." In that atmosphere of people "alike" it is quite impossible to bring in the "different" and in this case it is probably masked by what they refer to as "not Kosher conversions"—in other words, Reform ones. Of course, that's nonsense since when they are faced with "kosher" ones they don't know what to do, like in the case of Eduardo Alvarado....

So add into that the color of their skin and their lack of disposable income. They never discuss the color of someone's skin and I think they would deny that accusation. But interestingly, the Jewish elite in these countries identify themselves culturally more with Spanish and Portuguese (and later Italian and Eastern European) settlers than with the native Indians.

Remember, also, the Jews have a lot invested in this small, insular community. They feel threatened. I understand because I come from an environment, Buenos Aires, that felt threatened.

Will you screen the film in South America?

At least in Colombia and Ecuador, probably in Argentina.

Do you think it could effect change?

It is about identity and the injustice of these people's experience. That is something everyone can relate to. They may have not been before, but now it's a sad sense of being a stranger in your own land. I have felt that way, even in Argentina.

But there are so many Jews there.

There are, but you are never safe. My family history is one of never being safe. That sense of always looking behind, figuring out how you can run away, it's always there. But we need to consider what the Jewish communities around the world are protecting—basically we're losing Jewish people all the time. In Ecuador, they're assimilating. There's not going to be a community there in a few years. Why not open up and expand—what's wrong with that idea? 🗨️

Robin Cembalest is a writer in New York. She last wrote about the idea of *Jewish art*.

Homepage image courtesy of The Jewish Museum. Filmmaker photo courtesy of Leslie Yerman

COMMENTS

I hope that this film will be made available to Chicago & suburbs. We have dont a

lot of reading about the "Hidden Jews" & would love to see this film.

Posted by Minna Einhorn on 01.17.07

An aunt of a dear friend, living in Tuscon, AZ, had a Mexican maid. The maid saw her lighting candles one Friday evening, and exclaimed 'Isn't that interesting. My mother used to light candles on Friday evenings also, but she went down into the basement to do that, as had her mother and grandmother before her. They did not know why they did that or where the custom came from.' It had been a tradition in the family for many generations.

Apparently the Converso phenomenon is far more wide-spread than is commonly realized.

I think it tragic the stranglehold the zealots of the Jewish establishment have on deciding who is a Jew. E.g. the conversions required of Ethiopian Jews by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel is for me personally devastating. I am embarrassed and full of shame for this basic inhumanity. The spirit of the law is being destroyed in the process of attempting to uphold its tenets and technicalities.

This may also help explain why 50% of the Jewish community is currently unaffiliated.

Posted by Robert Stern on 01.17.07

Please, please bring these films to Los Angeles.

Posted by Rissa Burke on 01.17.07

When I was in Las Vegas, New Mexico on a cattle ranch last fall, I struck up a conversation with one of the wranglers. He was about 5'8", skinny, bowlegged and dark skinned. When I asked about conversos who had fled the Inquisition in Santa Fe and settled there, he told me that his ancestors were among those Jews. He showed me a cemetery with graves with Hebrew lettering from the 18th Century. He told me that he and his family do not eat pork, light candles on Friday night, but in no other ways observe Judaism.

Posted by ron stackler on 01.18.07

Rabbi Cukierkorn's brother Rabbi Celso Cukierkorn Wrote a great Article about the subject in the JPOST <http://www.convertingt Judaism.com/jerusalempost.htm>

Posted by Esther Levy on 01.18.07

Dear Robin,
Great interview with Gabriela. To read more about the New York Jewish Film Festival, check out our Festival blog at www.nyjff.blogspot.com.

Best,
Andy

Posted by Andrew Ingall on 01.19.07

fascinating piece. would love to see the movie.

Posted by yehudah cohn on 01.23.07

Please bring this movie to Seattle! Also, the Society for CryptoJudaic Studies will hold their conference in Santa Fe this summer - it would be a great venue for the movie.

Posted by Kathleen Alcalá on 01.23.07

Will the film be shown in Las Vegas. If so, when? If not, is a DVD available? thanks