

# The Crypto-Jews of Portugal

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I recently discovered about the *Crypto-Jews* existence in Portugal from an e-mail I received from a Portuguese coin collector. He went to my website, saw the articles I have written, and asked me if I was aware of a Marrano Jewish community in the village of Belmonte, Portugal! Having never heard of the town, this e-mail got my juices flowing, and I began to research information on this community.

The village of Belmonte is the last surviving crypto-Jewish community, called *Crypto-Jews* because for centuries they followed the rituals of the Catholic Church, while they secretly practiced Judaism and Jewish culture behind closed doors. The Belmonte Jews descend from Sephardim who took refuge in these mountainous borderlands during the century of pogroms that erupted in the 1390's in neighboring Spain. Belmonte is a town in the highest mountains of Portugal, in the Serra da Estrela range, which, at 6,000 ft. high and only about 80 miles from the border of Spain. The population is 3,000 inhabitants, and around 200 Sephardic Jews who are still averse to talking to outsiders, therefore, there is precious little information. In fact, the Jews of Belmonte only married one another to preserve the secret of their faith. Centuries of endogamy (*intermarriage*) have left many of these Belmonte Jews suffering from hereditary diseases. While they are friendly to Jewish visitors, they are zealously secretive when asked about their religious practices. The world did not even know about the existence of this clandestine Jewish community until it was reportedly discovered in 1917 by **Samuel Schwartz**, a Polish mining engineer.

The Jews, living amongst the Christians, had to give the appearance of following the same religion. It is virtually impossible for Judaism to survive under conditions of stealth, deceit, and isolated from the outside world. Imagine the abandonment of such rituals as circumcision, mezuzahs, shofars, Torahs, and talliths! The superficial acceptance of Catholicism included perfunctory church attendance, and saying so-called catholic prayers. An example of one such prayer is one that gives the appearance of making the sign of the cross: "Adonai, my God, in my thoughts (*touching the brow*) Adonai, my God, in my lips (*Touching the lips*), Adonai, my God, in my heart (*touching the chest*) When the gestures were performed rapidly, they gave the appearance of making the sign of the cross!

The Belmonte Jews secretly practiced a hybrid form of Judaism for five centuries, saying Jewish prayers in Portuguese in their homes while celebrating "front" holidays such as Ascension Thursday, to throw off Christian Inquisitors.

The Jewish community dates back to at least 1297. Today, there are approximately 200 Jews in Belmonte. The community has its own synagogue, rabbi, cemetery, and my source informed me that they now have a new holocaust museum! The orthodox rabbi, who is from

Chile, brought new prayer books from Israel, and had to reassure the worshipers that the new *Sidourem* didn't threaten this community's 500 year old traditions ! Synagogues were prohibited in Portugal for over 500 years since King Manuel I married Isabella, the daughter of the Spanish monarchs in 1495. Prior to that time, King Joao II took in about 100,000 Jews from Spain. Rituals were secretly held in private homes, in Portuguese, because Hebrew was gradually lost as a language.



### Picture of the Belmonte Synagogue

Photo courtesy [www.jewishtravelagency.com](http://www.jewishtravelagency.com)

*The foundation stone of this synagogue is dated 1297.*

Judaism in Belmonte was unique, because women played a leading role in the preservation of the faith. The women, essentially, became the repository of Jewish tradition, such as lighting the *Shabbat* candles, baking *matzos*, and separating milk and meat products in the preparation of the meals. This was passed from mother to daughter. Couples, for example, married in the local church would return home where a female *rezadeira*\* would perform what was deemed to be the binding Jewish ceremony. However, when the new synagogue first opened, the rabbi proclaimed that the women couldn't pray in the sanctuary's ground floor, which was reserved for men. Women had to go to the balcony. Many of the women were very upset, and many never returned to the synagogue.

\* rezadeira -prayer, one who prays, one who appeals...

Celebrating customs such as lighting the Sabbath candles, and the Passover Seder, is somewhat unusual to the American or European Jew, probably because of the fact that for 500 years everything that was Jewish was done in secret. It has only been the past 10 years or so that the Crypto-Jews have come 'out of the closet' On Friday night the women lit a little vessel filled with olive oil which was kept in a large clay jug for the Shabbat.



*Lighting the Shabbat candles*

To celebrate Passover, the women secretly baked matzos by mixing the unleavened flour in a large mixing bowl, and pouring the mixture over hot clay slabs.



***Crypto-Jews (Marranos) celebrating Passover in an attic in 1989!***

*I have tried to understand the significance of everyone completely garbed in white, but I have not been able to find an answer. This is also demonstrated in the movie-**The Last Marranos**\**

*\* The movie- **The Last Marranos** was a documentary made by a French TV crew in 1991, and they were allowed to film the ceremony of the matzo preparation, as well as some beautiful scenery of the town of Belmonte. The film is in French with English subtitles and much of the narrative in English.*

In Belmonte's Jewish quarter, plump grapes grow on the vines along the walls of the homes next to the synagogue. *The Abarbanel Wine Co.* produces ***Terras de Belmonte***, the first kosher wine produced in Portugal in more than 500 years, is kosher for Passover, and it has a rating of "86". "It has a brilliant ruby red hue, it is medium bodied, and is fairly reasonable in price. However, to be honest, I have tried to obtain a bottle in Florida, but have been unsuccessful!



In conclusion, Belmonte Jews are still isolated and mistrustful, especially of outsiders. Despite the developments in Belmonte in recent years, many Jews still cling to their centuries-old traditions of secrecy and religious practices.

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