



**CULTURE COLUMN**  
by John C. Culatto

A project to honour Sephardic and Moroccan Jews that went to Cape Verde via Gibraltar in the mid-19th Century visited us last week to research the project at our local archives.

The high profile group has been exploring the connections with many Jews who migrated not only to the Portuguese colony, but also as far as afield as Lisbon and the Amazon.

“They were mostly male business people working in shipping and trading in the context of a Treaty of Friendship between Britain and Portugal,” said Carol Castiel, President of the Cape Verde Jewish Heritage Project. “Gibraltar was a key stopping off point for these Jews that were from Tetouan, Tangiers, Rabat and Mogador, which is now called Essaouira.”

This mass migration occurred around the 1860s in the midst of a Spanish-Moroccan war, during a time when there were some attacks on Jewish communities that had the desire to make the most of this treaty to establish commercial links with the islands.

“Morocco is so close to Gibraltar so locals welcomed these Jewish merchants and traded with

# Jewish group finds Gibraltar connection

them who they much preferred doing business with than their Spanish neighbours,” said Castiel. “It is no coincidence that the large Jewish community in Gibraltar is primarily of Moroccan descent going way back to when it was captured by the British in the early 1700s.”

## Strong links

The similarity of our own Jewish surnames to those in Cape Verde speaks volumes about the connection we have with this group of people. Seruya, Wahnon, Benatar and Cohen are just some examples of the surnames that can still be found there, with some of the families even having British passports because they were living or born on the Rock.

Historian Angela Sofia Benoliel Coutinho, who is a descendant of the Benoliel family that helped the town of Boavista grow economically was in Gibraltar last week with Castiel on a fact-finding mission. They worked alongside Joshua Marrache, Solomon Cohen and all the local Jewish community to document why those individuals left, what they contributed and how important the Gibraltarian chapter was in the migration.

Castiel described how the Cape Verdians treated them well and looked up

to them, to the point where David Benoliel, Angela's ancestor, was dubbed 'Homem Bondoso' and 'Dono da Ilha' because “he was considered to be even more important than the governor”.

The merchant married into the Carvalho family and even built a chapel on the beach called the Capelo de David which was then given to the Catholic church. The Benoliel family helped the local community through various famines and even gave out credit for other residents to make their own wealth.

“They were probably linked to the 300 families of Jewish merchants who went to the Amazon in 1820 and many others who were born in Gibraltar and settled in Lisbon and the Azores Islands,” said Angela Benoliel. “This year I was consulting the Portuguese National Archives about the travellers that went to Lisbon Port and many of them returned to Gibraltar to continue their commercial connections even when they were living in these far-flung places.”

## Multi-cultural

The research has been supported by King Mohamed VI, who has been very enthusiastic to learn about what he considers an extension of the wider Moroccan diaspora, and an implicit part of na-

tional heritage.

“This project has many positive ramifications for good will, inter-religious, inter-cultural and inter-communal relations,” said Castiel. “It's very inspiring for me to see the local Jewish community to be so vibrant here as it was to have been part of the Souk evening in Gibraltar last week and I am going to tell many people to visit the Rock because of this connection.”

Castiel, who broadcasts a radio programme around the world in her full-time job with the Voice of America, became interested in the Jewish presence on the islands through her work with the USAID (United States Agency for International Development). She founded an NGO called the Cape Verde Jewish Project that helped repair traditional cemeteries and will soon publish a book that could increase cultural tourism to the island chain.

“Because the migrants were mostly male, and Jews are Jewish through the mother, very few could keep the matrimonial line,” added Castiel. “Some embraced the local religion and others converted but more importantly we are documenting a chapter in world history where Jews from a Muslim country were welcomed into a Catholic country.”