

19th-century Jewish graves rededicated in Cape Verde

By *AMELIA NIERENBERG*

DAKAR, Senegal (AP) — After years of careful restoration, two 19th century Jewish cemeteries were rededicated in Cape Verde on Tuesday, part of an effort financed by the Moroccan king to preserve the archipelago's cultural heritage.

On wind-swept Santo Antao island, local dignitaries, international diplomats, and prominent Jewish figures gathered for the ceremony where seven of the graves are located.

The rededication project involved translating the original inscriptions onto bronze plaques which accompany the graves, telling the story of Cape Verde's Jewish community which has now all but disappeared in the former Portuguese colony off the western coast of Africa.

Carol Castiel, president of the Cape Verdean Jewish Heritage Project, consulted with Hebrew and Portuguese linguists, historians, and rabbis to create the new plaques.

"This cemetery is a small antidote to what we're seeing around the world with populism and the rise of anti-Semitism," said Castiel in an interview from Santo Antao, where she traveled for the ceremony. "Here is a little oasis, a place where people take pride in the Jewish history."

Jorge Santos, president of Cape Verde's National Assembly, asked for a moment of silence Tuesday at the ceremony in memory of the 11 people killed at a Pittsburgh synagogue in late October.

The first wave of Jewish immigrants arrived in Cape Verde in the 15th and 16th centuries, fleeing persecution from Christians in Spain and Portugal. However, those interred in the cemetery immigrated later, coming from Morocco in the 1800s to seek economic opportunities.

Many of these Jewish immigrants were men who married local Catholic women and stopped actively practicing their religion.

The burial grounds have been restored through a partnership between the local government and the Cape Verde Jewish Heritage Project, a non-for-profit founded in 2007. King Mohammed VI of Morocco financed the restoration of the cemeteries on Cape Verde, which gained independence in 1975 after more than 500 years of Portuguese rule.

Two other cemeteries, also on Cape Verde, were similarly restored in 2013 using a donation of some \$100,000 from the king, Castiel said.

"This is a project from a Cape Verdean Jewish organization that is supported by a Muslim country, Morocco, in a Christian country, Cape Verde," said Carlos Wahnon

Veiga, Cape Verde's former prime minister and current ambassador to the United States.

Veiga, who is of Jewish descent, added: "It is a very good example of tolerance worldwide."

No synagogue has ever existed on the archipelago. Yet the islands' Jewish history endured, preserved in the distinctly Sephardic surnames etched onto crumbling tombstones, sinking amid weeds and scattered trash.

Januario Nascimento, 63, a descendent of Jewish immigrants whose graves were restored on Santo Antao, is careful to keep Jewish values and stories alive for his own children even though he is not a practicing Jew.

Nascimento, who lives in Cape Verde's capital of Praia, plans to take his relatives to the newly rededicated graves to show them where their ancestors now lie under flat yellow stones, their story protected and celebrated for generations to come.

"Man has to know who he is and who his ancestors were. It's the most important thing. To prepare for the future, you must know the past," he said.