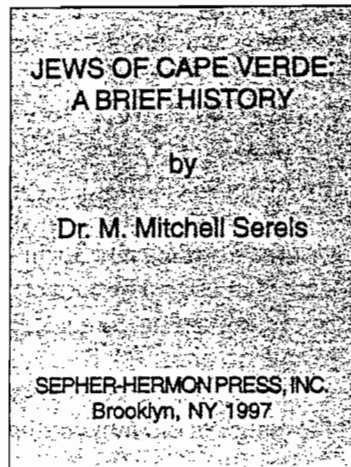


# The Jews of Cape Verde: A Brief History

Israel Benotiel

Scholars writing on the Jewish experience have virtually mapped out the movement of the Jewish people throughout the world and within various civilizations. Scholars such as George Brooks and Richard Lobban, among others, have written extensively about the Jewish experience in Africa. Rabbi M. Mitchell Serels recently added to the literature by publishing a slim volume on a heretofore under-documented chapter of Jewish-African history. In The Jews of Cape Verde: A Brief History, Serels sheds some light on the Jews who lived in the former Portuguese colony of Cape Verde, an archipelago of ten islands about 300 miles off the coast of Senegal.

The 123 page monograph published in 1997 by Sepher-Hermon Press of Brooklyn, New York, contains seven short chapters which attempt to summarize the history of the Jewish presence in Cape Verde from the mid-fifteenth to the twentieth century. In his first chapter, Serels points out that "the populating of the apparently barren islands began under King Alfonso V in 1462, 34 years before the edict of expulsion for Portuguese Jews (1496). Although he asserts that "the



King purposely included Jews in the settlement," Serels claims that so little is known about them that "they are now lost in history." Another group of settlers who had been forcibly converted to Christianity accompanied the Portuguese who went to the colony after 1496. Some of these New Christians, many of whom secretly practiced their Jewish faith, sought new lands to escape the stifling atmosphere of religious intolerance in Portugal. To them, Serels notes, "the new Portuguese possessions, in Africa particularly, offered comfort, adventure, fortune and anonymity."

However, the more original segment of the book deals with the rationale behind the "second wave" of Jewish emigration to Cape Verde: the arrival of several dozens of Sephardic Jews from Morocco (primarily from Tangier and Tetuan)

during the mid- and late- 1800's. Serels claims that these Moroccans ventured to Cape Verde via Gibraltar, a British possession, or Portugal, in search of greater economic stability. The cordial diplomatic and commercial relationship between Britain and Portugal during the 19<sup>th</sup> century facilitated the movement of Jews from Tangier to neighboring Gibraltar, from whence they proceeded to Portugal and Cape Verde.

Serels suggests that the exodus to Cape Verde may have been prompted, in part, by the Spanish-Moroccan war of 1859-60 which caused many Jews from Tangier and Tetuan to seek safe haven in Gibraltar and the Portuguese territories. Another possible impetus cited for Jewish emigration to Cape Verde was the depression of 1873. Hence, Serels asserts that economic pressures in northern Morocco spurred many young Jewish men to seek opportunities in the Cape Verde Islands and elsewhere, namely Brazil and Argentina. In those days, to facilitate the voyage, the "Junta", a democratically elected body representing the Jewish community in Tangier, established a special

emigration fund for eligible applicants which covered the cost of passage to these distant lands.

In subsequent chapters, the author describes the several small Jewish cemeteries that dot the islands of Santo Antao, Sao Tiago and Boa Vista, the only tangible vestiges of the former Jewish community in Cape Verde. In addition, a village in Santo Antao called "Sinagoga," remains a symbol of the past Jewish presence in that island. The author provides a useful inventory of the graves as well as English translations of the Portuguese and Hebrew inscriptions etched on the dozens of marble headstones which reflect typical Sephardic names such as Seruya, Benros, Benoliel, Benathar, Cohen, Maman, Pinto etc... The marble tombstones are typical of those found in Jewish cemeteries throughout Morocco.

Serels concludes the monograph by describing the formation of the *Cape Verde-Israel Friendship Society*, an association of descendants of the Moroccan Jewish settlers created in 1995. Today, most of the descendants are not practicing Jews due to the high degree of intermarriage between their Jewish forebears and the local Catholic population. Nonetheless, proud of their Jewish roots, they wish to honor their ancestors' memory by restoring their dilapidated cemeteries and creating an archive to highlight the significant contributions made by the Jewish settlers to Cape Verdean

society. For example, the current prime minister of Cape Verde, Carlos Wahnnon de Carvalho Veiga, is a descendant of Moroccan Jews, as are many other distinguished citizens spanning a range of professions in the public and private sectors.

Nonetheless, despite the obvious contribution to the literature that this monograph constitutes, there are substantial shortcomings. The work contains many basic historical, copyediting and analytical errors which undermine the author's credibility and detract from the book's validity. For example, from an historical perspective, the author mistakenly asserts that the joint kingdom of Portugal and Spain was established in 1601. The correct date is 1580. In explaining the context for the expulsion order for Portuguese Jews, the author erroneously states that the daughter of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabel is named Juanita. Her name was Isabel. In the chapter on "Arrival of Moroccan Jews," the author paints a biased portrayal of Moslem maltreatment of Jews in Tangier. While Jews were not given equal treatment, the author exaggerates to the point of distortion the negative aspects of Moslem rule while ignoring the largely benevolent side. These are but a few of the factual, historical flaws which warrant correction.

In addition, there are numerous misspellings of names of African ethnic groups such as Wolog for Wolof or Balonta for Balante.

Portuguese place and family names are also consistently misspelled throughout the text. For example, the author substitutes Viega for Veiga, and Ribiera for Ribeira. Unfortunately, these errors could have been avoided if the author had consulted colleagues in African studies familiar with the ethnic and place names of the region.

Finally, the next to the last chapter entitled "Families of Cape Verde Jews," is full of serious errors particularly regarding the Benoliel and Wahnnon families. For instance, the author confuses the relationships between individuals in the above genealogical trees. This leads one to believe that similar mistakes may also have been committed with respect to the other family names listed.

Despite its shortcomings, *The Jews of Cape Verde: A Brief History*, is nonetheless a welcome first step to illuminate this important period in Jewish/African history. In the coming years, others may be spurred to refine and build upon this important research on the legacy of the Jews of Cape Verde.

#### About the author:

Israel Benoliel is an Engineering Graduate from Universidade do Porto, Portugal in the fields of mechanics and electronics. American citizen since 1964, he is a scientist specialized in satellites and other telecommunication systems. Benoliel was born in Cape Verde and is the grandson of Abraham Benoliel and Esther Benathar Benoliel. Presently, the author is working on a study about the history of the Portuguese Jews and New Christians, where he intends to dissipate some myths and underline some deserved credits

#### Resumo

Segundo o autor, o livro "Judeus de Cabo Verde: uma breve história" constitui uma tentativa de resumir a história da presença judaica em Cabo Verde. O autor descreve duas ondas de emigração: a primeira após as inquisições portuguesa e espanhola do século quinze e a segunda no fim do século dezanove. Vestígios de imigrantes da segunda onda, na sua maioria oriundos do Marrocos ou Gibraltar por razões económicas, ainda permanecem na forma de pequenos cemitérios tipicamente sefarditas espalhados pelas ilhas. Apesar de reconhecer o grande esforço feito, o autor aponta erros de conteúdo e de ordem tipográfica e histórica.

## THE JEWS OF CAPE VERDE PROJECT:

PRESERVATION OF MEMORY

The Republic of Cape Verde is an archipelago of ten islands about 300 miles off the coast of Senegal, West Africa. As a result of over 500 years of Portuguese colonial rule, Cape Verde is predominantly Catholic. However, evidence shows that from the period of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition through the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Cape Verde hosted Jews fleeing religious persecution or seeking greater economic stability.

*The Jews of Cape Verde Project: Preservation of Memory* aims to investigate the presence and honor the memory of the numerous Sephardic Jewish families who traveled to Cape Verde for economic reasons in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. We know from the Hebrew and Portuguese etchings on the tombstones in the small Jewish cemeteries which dot the islands that the majority came from the Moroccan cities of Tangier, Rabat, and Mogador (now Essaouira) bearing distinctive Sephardic names such as Cohen, Levy, Benoliel, Benrós, Wahnnon, Benathar, Benchimol, Auday, Anahory, Pinto and Seruya.

These families landed primarily in the islands of Santo Antão, Sao Vicente, Boa Vista and Sao Tiago and engaged in international commerce, shipping, administration and other trades. The Jews lived, worked, and prospered in Cape Verde. However, because their numbers were few relative to the larger non-Jewish community, widespread intermarriage with the predominantly Catholic population diluted their affiliation with Jewish customs and rituals. Resultantly, there are virtually no practicing Jews in Cape Verde today. Nonetheless, the descendants of these families, whether in Cape Verde, the U.S., Canada or South America, speak with pride of their Jewish roots. Many senior Cape Verdean government officials as well as prominent business executives are of Jewish descent.

A group of descendants in Cape Verde has created a committee within the Associação de Amizade Cabo Verde/Israel (AMICAEL) to press for restoration of their dilapidated cemeteries and create a permanent archive documenting the presence of their forebears. The president of AMICAEL is Januario Auday Nascimento. Carol Castiel is AMICAEL's U.S. representative.

## PROJECTO JUDEUS DE CABO VERDE:

PRESERVAÇÃO DA MEMÓRIA

Na República de Cabo Verde, um arquipélago de dez ilhas situado cerca de 300 milhas da costa Ocidental da África, existem pequenos cemitérios Judaicos de famílias que emigraram por razões relacionadas com a Inquisição ou, no século XIX e princípios deste século, tirando vantagem da autorização de retorno dos Judeus a Portugal e seus territórios. Através das inscrições em Português e Hebraico nos túmulos, sabemos que vieram na sua maioria das cidades Marroquinas de Tanger, Rabat, e Mogador (agora Essaouira). A origem peninsular (Sefardita) reconhece-se nos nomes Cohen, Levy, Benoliel, Benrós, Wahnnon, Benathar, Benchimol, Auday, Anahory, Brigham, Pinto, e Seruya. Essas famílias se estabeleceram principalmente nas ilhas de Santo Antão, São Vicente, Boa Vista e São Tiago, dedicando-se ao comércio internacional, transportes marítimos, administração e outras ocupações.

Separados pelo mar e numa sociedade exclusivamente católica, os costumes judaicos e rituais se diluíram por casamentos mistos. Em raros casos, a identidade Judaica através da linhagem da mãe ainda existe. Os descendentes dessas famílias Judaicas são hoje em dia uma fracção significativa da população Cabo-verdiana e participam na vida da Republica em vários níveis sociais e profissionais. O actual primeiro ministro entre outros indivíduos ilustres no sector publico e privado, é de descendência Judaica. Onde quer que estejam, Portugal, EUA, Canada, ou América do Sul, os Cabo-verdianos com raízes Judaicas, mesmo os que já não usam o sobrenome Judaico ou professam a fé Católica, invocam com orgulho essas raízes.

*O Projecto Judeus de Cabo Verde: Preservação da Memória* tem em mira investigar e honrar a memória das famílias Judaicas que viajaram para Cabo Verde principalmente no século XIX. Os cemitérios judaicos que pela sua raridade e simbolismo da extraordinária tolerância dos Cabo-verdianos, fazem parte da história de Cabo Verde, estão em risco de desaparecer pela acção do tempo e necessidades de desenvolvimentos urbanos. Assim que se formou em Cabo Verde uma Associação designada por *Amigos de Cabo Verde e Israel* (AMICAEL), para promover a restauração e protecção dos cemitérios e criar um arquivo permanente sobre a história do seus antepassados Judeus. Em Cabo Verde o presidente da AMICAEL é Januário Auday Nascimento. Carol Castiel é a representante nos Estados Unidos da AMICAEL