



3/25/2009 8:59:00 PM

## **Preserving a Jewish niche Group seeks to honor the ghosts of Cape Verde**

by Richard Greenberg, Associate Editor

John Wahnnon at first seems an unlikely advocate for a Jewish cultural reclamation project, particularly one that most Jews have never heard of.

The Silver Spring resident, 67, is not himself Jewish. But he has Jewish roots. And he is fighting to prevent them from being severed.

Which is why he found himself at a makeshift podium in Bethesda on Wednesday of last week, pitching about 120 listeners at the palatial residence of Moroccan Ambassador Aziz Mekouar.

Wahnnon, among others, hopes to raise enough money to rescue a tiny and obscure slice of Jewish heritage from oblivion.

The real estate in question is located in Wahnnon's boyhood home, the former Portuguese colony of Cape Verde, a string of islands off the coast of West Africa, where Sephardic Jews from Morocco and Gibraltar migrated in the 19th century for economic reasons.

Due to widespread assimilation, however, no practicing Jewish community now exists in that predominately Catholic nation of about 500,000 inhabitants. The only remnants of that remote outpost of Jewish civilization are a handful of small, dilapidated cemeteries in Cape Verde populated by headstones with Sephardic surnames, such as Benros, Pinto, Rabat, Seruya -- and Wahnnon.

If those burial places are not restored -- at a projected cost of roughly \$300,000 -- the legacy of the Jews of Cape Verde runs the risk of vanishing forever, perhaps closing a little-known chapter in the history of Diaspora Jewry, according to organizers of a recently resurrected fund-raising campaign aimed at preventing that from happening.

Spearheading the effort is District resident Carol Castiel, a broadcast journalist with the Voice of America -- and an Ashkenazic Jew, who, during an interview following last week's program, confided: "In my heart, I feel Sephardic."

A former attendee at Adas Israel Congregation in the District, Castiel now frequents Magen David Sephardic Congregation in Rockville.

She stumbled on the Cape Verde story about 13 years ago while she was managing a scholarship program there funded by the United States Agency for International Development. She was surprised that some of the program participants had Jewish surnames. Through them, she discovered the cemeteries.

"It was very emotional," she recalled, "in a very small Catholic country to see this vestige of Jewish presence ... it really moved me."

Castiel promptly joined forces with locals who were trying to restore the grave sites and ultimately transform them into "cultural monuments," as she put it, but the effort languished over the years for a variety of reasons.

"Life intervened," Castiel explained, adding that the campaign also lacked a legal entity through which to raise money. That impediment was removed in 2007 when a local attorney, working for free, created the Cape Verde Jewish Heritage Project, Inc., a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization, of which Castiel is president.

In addition to restoring the cemeteries, Castiel said CVJHP hopes to conduct archival research based on testimony from descendants of the Cape Verde community, publish a book on the topic and encourage Jewish-heritage tourism to the island nation.

In his remarks, which kicked off the program, Mekouar endorsed the CVJHP undertaking, explaining that in Morocco (which is nearly 100 percent Muslim and does not have diplomatic relations with Israel), "Muslims and Jews have lived side-by-side for centuries, and each has respected the religious identity of the other." He also noted proudly that the legendary 12th-century Torah scholar Maimonides resided for a period in his hometown of Fez.

Conceding that the Cape Verde project is small and obscure, subsequent speaker Dan Mariaschin, executive vice president of B'nai B'rith International, said it is worth pursuing, in part, precisely because it is off the Jewish radar screen, lacking the natural constituencies of Jewish restoration efforts set in Eastern and Central Europe. "Carol [Castiel] has brought it back on the radar screen," he said.

Wahnon, who has no religious affiliation of any kind, said he has only a vague recollection of his Jewish grandfather, who owned a grocery store in Cape Verde and died when Wahnon was a young child.

He told the listeners that the restoration effort is laudable because having a tangible connection with one's roots "makes you stronger. If you don't have that, you're kind of lost. By knowing where I come from, I know where I am now, and I know where I can head in the future. I don't feel like a bird in the air, without any support, without any background."