

# Rediscovering the Jewish Heritage of *Cape Verde*

By Larry Luxner

PRAIA, Cape Verde — After a treacherous mountain drive, Olimpio Varela, 74, parked his SUV in an alley on the edge of the town of Santa Catarina and walked down the side of a hill where there was once a coffee plantation.

Under the shade of a tree, he found what he had come for: the tombstone of his great-grandfather, Hillel Ben-Shimol, inscribed in Hebrew.

“My mother told me that every day in his house, he put on a *kippah* and *tallit* and prayed in Hebrew,” says Varela, taking a faded photograph from his pocket, dated 1895, that shows Ben-Shimol holding the baby, Lula, who was to become Varela’s mother. “Ben-Shimol never married. He just lived with his woman because he didn’t want to marry in the Catholic church, and he didn’t want to be buried in a Catholic cemetery.”

The Jewish patriarch, who had come from Morocco, died in 1902, in the midst of a famine. “He told the people, ‘If you can’t bring me to the Jewish cemetery in Praia, bury me on my own land,’” Varela says. “So they did.”

Varela, one of seven children, speaks Portuguese and his native *criolo* in addition to English. He’s one of hundreds—perhaps thousands—of people with Jewish ancestry in Cape Verde, a tropical archipelago of 10 islands located in the Atlantic Ocean, roughly 300 miles west of Senegal.

Last summer, *B’nai B’rith Magazine* visited five of those islands—Santiago, São Vicente, Santo Antão, Sal, and Boa Vista—and discovered a mixed-race, predominantly Catholic nation fiercely proud of its Jewish heritage, even though today there is not a single practicing Jew among its 500,000 inhabitants.

Ruins of the Chapel of Fatima, a Catholic shrine built by Jewish pioneer David Benoliel for his wife, overlooks the beach in Boa Vista.

Photos by Larry Luxner



The descendants of those early Sephardim, along with the Washington-based nonprofit Cape Verde Jewish Heritage Project Inc. (CVJHP), are fighting to save the country's few remaining Jewish tombstones from encroaching development while encouraging Jewish "heritage tourism" to the West African nation.

"Even though I don't have a Jewish name, I have Jewish blood and I know the history," says Antonio Jorge Delgado, 57, an architect and politician in Mindelo, the main urban center of São Vicente and the country's second-largest city after Praia, the capital. "I have a deep admiration for the Jewish people, to the point that my first son is named Zacarias Isaac."

Delgado's library is filled with books on the history of Cape Verde, which was a Portuguese colony from its discovery in 1460 until 1975, when it declared independence. Today, more Cape Verdeans reside outside their country than in it, including some 260,000 in the United States—most of them in Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

"The Cape Verdean people also have a diaspora, just like the Jews," he says. "Our people left the country because of poverty, and the Jews because of persecution."

A specialist in historic sites, Delgado is a former minister of culture who's taken a keen interest in the preservation of Cape Verde's four Jewish cemeteries.

Two of those cemeteries are located on the island of Santo Antão, the third-largest island in the archipelago. Another can be found on the desert island of Boa Vista, which is being developed for

tourism; and the fourth occupies a tiny spot within the vast Várzea municipal cemetery in Praia, on the southern coast of the island of Santiago. To the best of anyone's knowledge, the grave of Ben-Shimol, in the center of Santiago, is the only one of at least 30 known Jewish graves in Cape Verde that's not in a cemetery.

These crumbling tombstones—some etched in Portuguese, some in Hebrew, some in both languages, and some not readable at all—are the only remnants of a once-thriving community that dates back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

"The Hebrew tombstones were all made in Portugal and brought here. The Catholics did the same with their tombstones," says Abrão Levy, 76, who, along with his son José Levy, helped establish the Cape Verde-Israel Friendship Society (AMICAEL) in 1994.

## A JEWISH INFUX

In the five centuries following their colonization, the islands received thousands of

Jews fleeing religious persecution in both Spain and Portugal. Later on, in the 1800s, economic pressures brought many young men from Moroccan cities like Tangier and Tetouan, seeking opportunities abroad. Once in Cape Verde, they married local Catholic women, meaning their offspring were no longer Jews despite their Jewish-sounding names.

Vera Duarte is the country's 56-year-old minister of education. A prominent writer, former Supreme Court judge, and president of the National Commission on Human Rights and Citizenship, Duarte comes from an interesting mix of ancestries.

"Sometimes I think that all I've been able to accomplish in my life is thanks to my Jewish origins and education," she says. "I was the first woman magistrate in Cape Verde. My mother came from a family where the women had some power."

Duarte's ancestors on her mother's side were Jews from Gibraltar and Portuguese from the island of Madeira; her grandfather was Isaac Benros, and her father is black. All settled on Santo Antão, which today is an island of 70,000 inhabitants, famous for its green valleys and its mountain cliffs that drop almost vertically into the sea.

This 300-square-mile island, about one-fourth the size of Rhode Island, is known locally as the cradle of Jewish settlement in Cape Verde.

A concrete marker along the oceanfront mountain road announces the town of Sinagoga, but there's no synagogue here and hasn't been for more than a century.

In the nearby little fishing

port of Ponta do Sol, high on a ridge overlooking the beach known as Praia de Lisboa, is a Catholic cemetery with more than a thousand crosses.

What most visitors don't notice in the midst of all the crosses is a small walled enclosure, locked for security. Inside are seven Jewish tombstones, hidden from the world. The enclosure was once isolated but has now been enveloped by the expanding cemetery around it, as more and more Catholics are laid to rest there.

"As they integrated with everybody else, the Jews were buried in regular cemeteries," says Delgado, the architect from Mindelo. "Then in 1961, there was a mudslide that destroyed many Jewish graves. So the people pushed them aside to bury other people."

Four kilometers away—along a gravelly road carved into the side of the mountains—is the seaside town of Penha de França, home to yet another Jewish burial site.

To find the cemetery requires walking through a maze of back alleys and staircases. A small plaque on a wall above says the restored cemetery was inaugurated by AMICAEL on June 19, 1999.

Some of the names on the tombstones—Joseph de Abraham Brigham de Mogador, Isaac Benros, Fortunato Maman, Shlomo Aharonai—are easy to make out; others are harder to see, thanks to the ravages of time and weather.

A surprise awaits visitors who stop in the village of Coculi, a few kilometers inland from the coast. Sulamita Pinto is the town's only resident with Jewish roots, and the entrance to her house in the exact center of town proudly sports a *mezuzah*—the only one seen in 11 days of traveling around Cape Verde.



Photo above: Inocência Fernandes Xavier Moniz, wearing a Brockton Hospital School of Nursing cap from Massachusetts, cleans the Hebrew letters of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish tombstone in Praia's predominantly Catholic cemetery of Várzea.

Tombstone of Moyses Auday, who died in 1886, is one of seven inscribed in Hebrew and Portuguese in the Jewish section of the Várzea cemetery in Praia.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Cape Verde Jewish Heritage Project, Inc.:  
[www.capeverdejewishheritage.org](http://www.capeverdejewishheritage.org)



The 87-year-old grandmother is a descendant of Isaac Pinto, who was born in Gibraltar. She lived in Lisbon for 24 years, and has been to Israel.

“I feel Jewish, but I practice a spiritual Christianity,” she says.

Januário Nascimento is president of the Associação para a Defesa do Ambiente e Desenvolvimento, a local environmental group. In 1995, he also helped set up AMICAEL, following a visit to Israel by the then-minister of foreign affairs, José Tomás Wahnnon de Carvalho Veiga, who also has Jewish roots.

“There was always an interest in preserving the names and Jewish customs, but with time, it disappeared,” says Nascimento, 53, whose great-grandfather, Salomão Auday, came from Tangier in 1836 and settled in Santo Antão. “In my case, for example, my ancestors never converted to Christianity. They kept all their Jewish traditions, though because of persecution by the Portuguese authorities, some Jews changed their names.”

The physical evidence of that heritage is slowly crumbling away as the few Hebrew gravestones that remain are threatened by

erosion and increasing development.

Perhaps the most endangered of Cape Verde’s four Jewish cemeteries is the one on Boa Vista, about two kilometers down the road from the island’s chief town, Sal-Rei.

Sitting practically at the entrance to the luxurious Hotel Marine Club, it’s a stone’s throw away from a new apartment-hotel complex being built to cater to the ever-growing hordes of European tourists on package holidays.

One of the seven graves here occupies a special enclosure all by itself: that of Isaac Anahory. The other six are arranged in a neat row, the oldest being that of D. Bidy Auday Benchimol, who passed in 1887, and the newest, that of David Benoliel, who died in 1950. Barely anyone knows the cemetery even exists; even most locals are unaware of it.

Rafael Benoliel, an architect who lives in Portugal and is a nephew of David Benoliel, is behind the restoration of the tiny Jewish cemetery, which would save it from nearby construction. His plan would avoid the mistakes made on the heavily developed island of Sal, only 15 minutes away by plane.

“On Sal, they overbuilt without concern for the environment or quality of life, and in the end, it didn’t really benefit the island,” Delgado says. “Boa Vista’s advantage

is that it’s the third-largest island in Cape Verde, with beautiful beaches. The cemetery will be one more attraction, and not just for Jewish tourists. The government needs to step up to the plate and approve these kinds of projects.”

The driving force behind this effort is Carol Castiel, president of CVJHP, which was founded in 2007.

Her project’s goal: to raise \$250,000 over the next three years. Priorities include not only restoring the tombstones in all four cemeteries, but also publishing books, articles, pamphlets, and videos that document the community’s enduring legacy, while promoting Jewish “heritage tourism” to Cape Verde.

Castiel, a Voice of America journalist who’s made the forgotten community her life’s passion, became fascinated with the subject more than 15 years ago while working with Portuguese-speaking students at the New York-based African-American Institute. That job introduced her to Cape Verdeans with surnames like Levy and Cohen—and left her wondering how Sephardic Jews from Morocco and Gibraltar ended up in such a remote island archipelago in the middle of the Atlantic.

CVJHP is getting moral and organizational support from the Moroccan

Embassy in Washington as well as from B’nai B’rith International.

“When Carol brought this project to us, we took an immediate interest, because this is one of those very important stories of Jewish communal life in distant places,” says Daniel S. Mariaschin, B’nai B’rith’s executive vice president.

“We have a deep appreciation for Jewish communities large and small, and this is a unique opportunity to better understand the history of this once-vibrant community—in a place where we would hardly think such a community could exist,” he says. “Even though there are relatively few Jews in the world, every person counts, and here’s another example of that.”

Adds José Luís Rocha, director-general for external policy at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Praia and a descendant of the Brigham family, which came to Santo Antão from Mogador, Morocco, “Civil society can lobby the government, because the people of Jewish descent are businessmen and can finance the project.”

Rocha has been to Tel Aviv and Jerusa-

lem and has a keen sense of what must be done. “I think the government could start to create a legal framework to recognize the Jewish cemeteries as part of our national heritage, and to see how far they can take it. But our government cannot do everything. Our budget is limited,” he says.

In Praia lies the municipal cemetery of Várzea, where some 5,000 people are buried. City official Gilberto Silva pointed out a tiny but distinct section comprised of eight clearly marked Jewish gravestones.

“People won’t come to Cape Verde just for this, but it is one more element in our culture. But first we have to restore the whole cemetery,” Silva says. “Some tombs are higher than others; they need to be on the same level. We don’t want people walking on them.”

While Cape Verde isn’t exactly high on the priority list for Jewish travelers, the country already attracts nearly 400,000 tourists every year, making tourism its top source of foreign exchange. This past summer, the ancient port of Cidade Velha was declared a UNESCO World Heritage

Site, and Delta plans to begin flights from Atlanta to Sal—in addition to the twice-weekly flights already being offered by national carrier TACV Cabo Verde Airlines from Boston to Praia.

But 2009 will be remembered by some Cape Verdeans for two other historic events: the Aug. 14 visit of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the end of her seven-nation African tour, and the visit just over a month later by Israel’s ambassador to Senegal, Gideon Behar, who is also responsible for Cape Verde.

Behar conducted Rosh Hashanah services for some 30 locals of Jewish descent, marking the first time in modern history the Jewish New Year was celebrated in this West African republic.

That didn’t come a moment too soon for Sulamith Spencer, a 50-year-old real-estate agent and descendant of Hillel Ben-Shimol who moved back to Cape Verde this summer after three decades in Portugal: “If anyone asks, we say we’re Jews,” she says. “We haven’t practiced Jewish rituals in years, but we’ve always felt Jewish in our hearts.”

Crumbling storefront in Ponta do Sol was once owned by the Cohen family, one of several prominent Jewish merchant families on the island of Santo Antão.



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—Januário Nascimento, president of the Associação para a Defesa do Ambiente e Desenvolvimento, a local environmental group, and an activist in the effort to preserve Cape Verde’s Jewish heritage.