

## TRAVEL

## Cape Verde hosted Jews

by Carol S. Castiel  
Special to WJW

Who would have imagined that there are Jewish cemeteries in Cape Verde, an archipelago of 10 small islands 300 miles off the coast of west Africa? How else to explain the existence of surnames like Cohen, Levy and Beniel in this former Portuguese colony of approximately 400,000. From the period of the Spanish Inquisition to the more recent 19th century emigration of Moroccan Jewry, Cape Verde has been a haven for Diaspora Jews either fleeing religious persecution or searching for greater economic opportunities.

A resurgence of interest in Jewish roots has led a group of descendants to seek more information about their forebears and is spearheading a drive for the rehabilitation of the dilapidated cemeteries.

On a recent trip to Cape Verde, I spoke to many Jewish descendants who graciously shared stories and photographs of ancestors. I also visited several cemeteries, the only tangible remnants of the all-but-forgotten Jewish community. The tombstones, inscribed in both Hebrew and Portuguese, recount the births and deaths of Jews who came to Cape Verde in the mid-1800s from the Moroccan cities of Tangiers, Rabat or Mogador (now Essaouira) to trade in pelts or hides or to engage in related commercial activities. Family members claim that the ancestors were buried in white linen shrouds in accordance with Jewish tradition.

Not far from the cemeteries, in the island of Santo Antao, is a village called Sinagoga where it is said the Jews gathered to pray even if no vestige remains of an actual synagogue. Since the majority of the immigrants were single men from Morocco and Gibraltar, intermarriage with the predominantly Catholic population became widespread. As a result, most descendants of such unions were baptized as Catholics, diluting the already tenuous affiliation to Jewish customs and traditions.

Dr. Anibel Silva, a prominent physician, revealed the fascinating story of his grandfather, David Jacob Cohen, who came to Cape Verde from Mogador around 1860. Cohen was married to a Dona Luna but had no children with her by the time he left Morocco. Cohen traveled alone to Cape Verde where he eventually sired 11 children.

Although most Jewish rituals and customs departed along with the settlers, the names, memories and reverence for the past endure. During my interviews, I was struck by the pride with

which descendants affirmed their Jewish ancestry, no matter how remote the lineage.

One young journalist, Pedro Beniel Chantre, the great-great grandson of Isaac Beniel (a fur trader who emigrated to the island of Boa Vista from Rabat, Morocco), believes that the impact of Jews in commerce and other important sectors in Cape Verde has yet to be fully investigated. He asserts that Jews played a much

print, to the Jewish Heritage Council of the World Monuments Fund in New York.

Today, descendants of the Jewish settlers play pivotal roles in Cape Verdean government, business and cultural affairs. A chief example is Carlos Alberto Wahnon de Carvalho Veiga, the first-freely elected prime minister of Cape Verde. Veiga is the great-grandson of Isaac and Rachel Wahnon, Jews who emigrated to Cape Verde from Gibraltar in the mid



FAMILIAR NAME — The village of Sinagoga in Cape Verde.

Photo by Carol Castiel

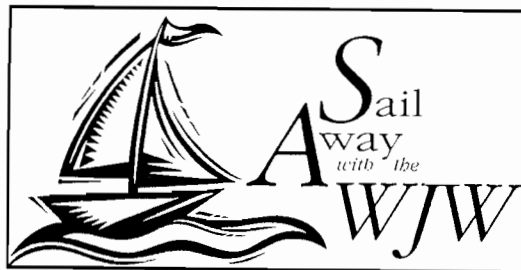
larger role in the economic development of the country than the former Portuguese colonial rulers acknowledged.

A group of Jewish descendants recently formed a committee to press for the restoration of the cemeteries that have fallen into neglect. They also intend to commission research into the history of their ancestors and create a permanent archive. (Local records that could have shed light on this period were destroyed in fires in the early 1900's.) Under the auspices of a local non-governmental organization, Association for the Defense of the Environment and Development, the Jewish group has submitted a proposal for the rehabilitation of cemeteries, complete with an architectural blue-

print.

Although few descendants practice Judaism as we know it, Daniel Brigham, a prominent businessman based in Praia, the capital, described his feelings this way: "When I was 10 years old, I witnessed my grandfather's traditional Jewish burial. Although I am not religious, I try to follow the Ten Commandments. I'd like to think that I conform to the basic tenets of the Jewish faith. I am very proud of the fact that I have a Jewish rib."

Castiel is a free-lance writer and consultant based in the Washington area. She is in the process of arranging a Jewish heritage tour of Cape Verde. For further information, call Castiel at 202-454-8283.



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