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Jewish heritage in the Atlantic



Blackboard with information about a Jewish cemetery

Photo: Kevin Zdiara

The islands discover the influence of their Sephardic immigrants

by [Kevin Zdiara](#)

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The Cape Verde Islands are a picturesque tourist destination. Almost 600 kilometers north-west of the African continent in the Atlantic, they captivate above all with their white sandy beaches. Historically, the archipelago has been shaped by more than 500 years of Portuguese colonial rule, which only ended in 1975. Subsequently, the country was caught in the bloody turmoil of post-colonialism until the democratic change in 1991. Since then, Cape Verde has been on a good and largely conflict-free path.

SCHOLARSHIP As a place of Jewish history they were not previously known. There is a lot to discover, as the American journalist Carol Castiel discovered a long time ago. She works full-time for the state foreign broadcaster "Voice of America" and was previously the director of the scholarship program at New York's Africa-America Institute, responsible for lusophone Africa. In this role she also came across the Jewish history of the islands.

“Some of my Cape Verde students had Sephardic surnames like Benchimol, Wahnnon, and Anahory. I asked them about their origins and learned a lot about their Jewish origins, ” recalls Castiel.

Jews came from Spain and Morocco in the 16th and 19th centuries.

For this reason I founded the non-profit organization Cape Verde Jewish Heritage Project around ten years ago, ”she explains. Your commitment has been and is received very positively by Cape Verdean society and politics. This can be seen, among other things, in the fact that in 2017 the central government declared all Jewish cemeteries and other places of Jewish memory to be national cultural heritage. Jews came from Spain and Morocco in the 16th and 19th centuries.

It is not certain when the first Jews came to Cape Verde. It is believed that some Portuguese Jews immigrated there as converted Christians as early as the 16th century. However, there is no evidence of this.

TRADING CENTER In the 19th century, Moroccan Jews increasingly emigrated to the archipelago because the economic situation in their home country deteriorated and Cape Verde was an important trading center. Portugal also officially abolished the Inquisition in 1821, which made it possible for Jews to officially settle there.

However, the majority of Jewish immigrants were male and often married Cape Verdean women who were Catholic. This led to a steady assimilation and to the fact that today there are no more practicing Jews on Cape Verde.

But the Cohens, Benros, Wahnons, Pintos and Levys were well-known traders and businessmen, and their descendants still play important and

HONOR Some of these descendants recently met in the town of Ribeira Grande on the second largest island of Santo Antão to attend an inauguration ceremony for two recently restored cemeteries. Under the leadership of Carol Castiel and her organization, several graves have been restored and bronze plaques have been put up with information about the history and the burial sites. The boards are in Portuguese and English.

For this work Castiel was able to obtain financial support from the Moroccan royal family. In addition to well-known descendants of Jewish immigrants, the mayor of Ribeira Grande, Orlando Delgado, the President of the National Assembly, Jorge Santos, the rabbi of the Lisbon community, Natan Peres, and envoys from the American and Israeli embassies attended the celebration.

RESPECT Santos paid tribute in his speech to the legacy and legacy of the Cape Verdean Jews, which continues to affect their descendants. Rabbi Peres, who said the prayer for the 14 dead, was enthusiastic about the work: "It was an honor for me to take part in this event and to experience the pride and respect of the local people and officials for the Jewish heritage of the island . "

The celebration was also a special highlight for Carol Castiel: "It was a very moving ceremony that once again underlined the importance of the Jewish heritage for Cape Verde."

But their work is far from over. Next, she and her organization plan to publish a book by historian Angela Sofia Benoliel Coutinho on the history of North African Jews in Cape Verde and to set up a small museum on Santo Antão, where most of the Jews once settled.