

CULTURE & ARTS

TRAVELING WITH JEWISH TASTE

Portugal – Hidden Treasures in a Country with a Rich Jewish History

By Carol Goodman Kaufman / Special to the BJV



My good friend Rhonda and I recently had the opportunity to tag along with our spouses as they embarked on a lecture tour through Spain and Portugal. While there, we took the opportunity to visit Jewish sites and learn about our people's history in both countries.

Although there's little physical evidence today of Jewish presence in Portugal, it turns out that it was a very rich one. Legend maintains that the first Jews came to Portugal during the time of King Solomon. But we have documented evidence that for 500 years, until the middle of the 13th century, the Jews there enjoyed peaceful and quite prosperous lives under

Moorish rule. Many famous Jews lived in Portugal during this period, serving the government as royal treasurers, tax collectors, advisors, and physicians to the kings. The cartographer Abraham Zacuto designed the charts that supported Portuguese navigators, and Abraham de Beja was himself a Jewish explorer sent by the king to find and bring back treasures.

The Jews were also successful in business. Perhaps the most well-known is statesman, philosopher, Bible commentator, and financier Isaac Abravanel, a member of one of the most influential Jewish families in Portugal, so famous that streets in Israel carry his name. (I actually lived on *Rehov Abravanel* in Jerusalem!)

All that changed with the *Reconquista*, the Christian reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula. Next door in Spain, the rulers Ferdinand and Isabella had expelled, forcibly baptized, or murdered the Jews who refused baptism. Of the original 300,000 Jews in Spain, over two-thirds converted to Catholicism.

Conversion, of course, didn't cause the royals and the Church to stop harassing them. In fact, they called these converts *marrano*, or swine. Then, in 1478 the Church established the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition for the alleged purpose of "educating" the *conversos*. In reality they conducted trials of those they suspected of heresy. The process often involved incarceration and torture.

Things continued to get worse in Spain. The year 1492 didn't just see Columbus sail the ocean blue. On March 31st – Tisha B'av, the day of mourning for the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem – Ferdinand and Isabella issued their infamous Alhambra Decree. That edict forced all practicing Jews to flee the country.

And that's how almost 100,000 Jews came to Portugal. Unfortunately, the move didn't work out too well for our Sephardi cousins because in 1496, the new Portuguese King Manoel I married Isabella, daughter of – you guessed it – the notorious Ferdinand and Isabella. As a condition of marriage imposed by the Spanish monarchs, Manoel had to order the newly arrived Jews to become Catholic or leave the country – without their children. Many of those forcibly converted, the so-called New Christians, continued to practice the faith of their ancestors in secret. Why would they risk discovery? Scholars believe that because most of the Jews who fled Spain had already expressed their commitment to their faith by refusing to undergo baptism.

As an interesting side note, today's Jews in Portugal do not call themselves

Sephardi. After all, Spain threw them out. Why would they want to keep the name, the Hebrew word for Spain being *Spharad*? No, they call themselves Portuguese Jews.

But even before the "holy" office came to town in 1536, signs of bad things to come appeared. Three days before Easter 1506, a full three decades before the Inquisition was officially established in Portugal, Dominican friars incited their congregants into a frenzy. The ensuing riot resulted in the slaughter of up to four thousand New Christians suspected of secretly practicing Judaism. The massacre began in the square right in front of the church. Those souls not murdered were deported.

But never forgotten. In the early 2000s, our guide Patricia's husband Joseph was the impetus behind the construction of the Memorial to the Victims of the 1506 Massacre. Located in the square right where the killing began, right in front of the St. Dominic Church, it was installed as part of the 500th anniversary of the pogrom. A bronze Star of David is embedded on the flat surface of a round travertine stone. The plaque reads, "In memory of the thousands of Jews who were victimized by intolerance and religious fanaticism, killed in the massacre that started on 19 April 1506, on this square." A verse from the Book of Job is etched into the base. "O earth, cover not thou my blood, and let my cry have no place."

Over the next 250 years, the Church and its inquisitors decimated what had once been a vibrant community and important component of Portuguese culture, scattering the remnants to ports across Europe, Asia, Africa, and as far as South America.

In the meantime, in 1755 a massive earthquake caused a tsunami that wiped out the lower parts of the city, including the Alfama, the Jewish neighborhood along the Tagus River. Little of the ghetto endures, but we did manage to see a few tiny reminders of our history by passing under the *Arco de Rosario* into the Judiaria, a warren of narrow, twisting passageways. A few windows near the top of one building are all that remain of the quarter's synagogue. And inside a gift shop stands the sole surviving segment of the ghetto wall. While we sauntered along the alleys, we encountered a group of students seeking Jewish sites as part of a scavenger hunt. There wasn't much beyond historical plaques to find.

Although the last public auto de fé took place in Portugal in 1765, the Inquisition itself was only abolished in 1821. The government officially permitted

Jews back into the country in 1800. Among the returnees were some wealthy Jewish families from Morocco and Gibraltar.

Flash forward to the mid-20th century. Although Portugal had betrayed the Jews back in the 15th and 16th centuries, when World War II came around, the country declared itself neutral and open its doors to the those fleeing the Nazis. But the government imposed one condition on the refugees: They must start a business so as not to be a burden on the state. Patricia brought us to a lush green park at which the Portuguese Jews welcomed their coreligionists and provided them with assistance to tide them over until they could support themselves.

The Jews ended up not just contributing to the economy but also to the nation's culture, including its culinary heritage. We sampled *bolas de Berlim*, decadent cream-filled pastries, at one of the ubiquitous neighborhood coffee houses.



The Memorial to the Victims of the 1506 Massacre

The story goes that the Davidsohn family, fleeing northern Germany arrived in Lisbon before the outbreak of the war. Knowing that they needed to start a business quickly, their daughter Ruth convinced them to prepare and sell cakes to Germans living in the country. Their *bolas* evolved from the traditional German jam-filled doughnut to what is now the popular custard-filled ball.

According to the World Jewish Congress, the Jewish population of the entire country stands at only 3,100 today, but like that old joke about the desert island, two synagogues as well as a Chabad operate in the city. In 1871, fifty years after the end of the Inquisition, the government gave permission to the Jews to build the first synagogue since the late 15th century. Because Portuguese law prohibited a synagogue to either face the street or display Jewish symbols on its exterior, Lisbon's Synagogue Shaaré Tikvah, a Roman and Byzantine beauty, is hidden on a side street behind a fence and wall.



Lisbon's Synagogue Shaaré Tikvah

While the 15th century Jews in Portugal were refugees fleeing the Spanish Inquisition, the vast majority of the Jewish population today descend from Eastern European refugees. They are served by the Reform Sinagoga Ohel Jacob, built by Ashkenazi Jews in 1934.



Arroz Doce (Portuguese Rice Pudding)

It shouldn't be too surprising that much of Portuguese cuisine was influenced by the Muslim Moors, since the two peoples lived side-by-side for centuries and shared similar food constraints. When they conquered the Iberian Peninsula in the 8th century, the Moors brought rice from Asia. That grain became a staple in Portuguese cuisine. The arrival of cane sugar in the 13th century replaced molasses to make the pudding that is a favorite dessert among the Portuguese until today.

INGREDIENTS:

2¼ cups water
½ teaspoon salt
Peel of one lemon
1 cup arborio rice

2 cups whole milk, heated
1 cinnamon stick
Ground cinnamon, for garnish

DIRECTIONS:

Place the water, salt, and lemon rind into a medium pan and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low and allow the water to simmer, covered, for 15 minutes. Remove the lemon peel from the water with a slotted spoon and discard. Add the rice to the water and bring it back up to a boil. Then reduce it to a simmer and allow the rice to absorb all of the water, about 10 minutes. Make sure to check that it doesn't burn. Next, slowly add the hot milk, about a half cup at a time, to the rice mixture. After each addition, allow the liquid to absorb before adding the next batch of milk. Stir frequently and keep the heat low, so as not to burn the rice. This should take about 25 to 30 minutes. Remove the cinnamon stick and pour the rice into individual dessert bowls. Sprinkle the top with cinnamon. Chill the rice for several hours before serving.

Under the name Carolinda Goodman, **Carol Goodman Kaufman** has just published her third picture book for young children. Detective Bears and Friends introduces readers to the whimsical names that various animal groups are called. In addition to her work for children, Kaufman also writes under her "real" name about food history (including for the *Berkshire Jewish Voice*). Her first novel, *The First Murder*, is set in the Berkshires. It will be released April 2 by TouchPoint Press.