

Portugal's Attempts at Jewish Reparations and the Fig Leaf of Lusotropicalism

by Norman Berdichevsky (April 2015)



Over the past one hundred years, Portugal has made sudden, somewhat fitful, unplanned, and as it turned out, cynical proposals accompanied by dramatic announcements of its intention to carry out “historic justice” and make reparations to the descendants of its Jewish population expelled in 1497.

Following a previous example set by Spain in 2013 guaranteeing a “Jewish right of return” by descendants of those expelled in 1492, observers have struggled to understand what if anything is at stake other than a cosmetic attempt to assuage a conscience that had not previously been troubled or cash in on a lucrative source of Jewish tourism.

The co-sponsor of a bill promising Portuguese citizenship to Jews of authentic Portuguese origin, and Portuguese Socialist Party spokesperson, Maria de Belem Roseira, poetically proclaimed that *“this law tells them their homeland is still there and reserved ... for those who may keep the key to the house of their ancestors.”* A Christian Democrat member of parliament Joao Rebelo explained the reasons behind unanimous support from all parties, *“Call it apology or reparation, the new act is trying to erase a black mark on our nation, something terrible and unfair.”*

The Portuguese Inquisition established in 1536, witnessed show trials, public executions, mass killings and the forced separation of children shipped off to Portugal's colonies. Many Jews remained as “new Christians” in both Portugal and in Spain but the majority fled to what is now modern day Greece, Turkey, the Netherlands, Morocco, Italy and even Denmark, Northern Germany as well as Brazil from which the first European Jewish settlers of New York City arrived. There are estimated to be only 600 Jews in Portugal today.

Despite the stirring rhetoric, most Portuguese lawmakers admit it may take *“another year to establish procedures for implementing the edict,”* there is little likelihood that the offer will result in rebuilding one of the most glorious examples of creativity in the long history

of the diaspora. Many of the common names the exiled Portuguese Jews adopted can indeed be traced and verified so the pessimistic outlook is not due to any great difficulty of research and precedent.

To be fair, one has to examine the repeated previous and failed attempts to do the same thing in the past. The claim that Portugal's existence as a modern multicultural and multiracial nation through a love of a common language and culture extending across the Americas, Europe, Asia and Africa, known as "Lusotropicalism" also had a noble ring but it too was originally introduced as a self-serving ploy to prevent the independence of Portugal's many colonies.

The Jews as Pawns in Modern Opportunistic Portuguese and Spanish Schemes

Due to the defeat of Spain in the 1898 War with the United States and the loss of its last vestiges of empire, a number of well-intentioned Spanish intellectuals, writers and philosophers began to argue and agitate that the reactionary policies and expulsion of the Jews crippled Spain. Foremost among them was a physician, Dr. Angel Pulido who launched a campaign to restore Spain's dignity, prosperity and conscience by readmitting the Jews and apologizing for their mistreatment in the past. Pulido's work was also recognized in Portugal, where a republican revolution ended the monarchy as well as its close links with the Catholic Church in 1910 and reconsidered the possible utility of encouraging relations with the Sephardi communities around the world.

The Portuguese Republic and its Opportunistic Scheme to Settle Jews in Angola and "Kill Two Birds with One Stone"

The Portuguese broke with the past overnight in their overthrow of the monarchy in 1910, introducing a new flag and a national anthem, separating church and state, and adopting a new constitution as well as ending the monarchy – all anathema to the ruling circles in Spain. Portugal's republican leaders also toyed with the idea of offering parts of their African colonies, particularly in Angola for Jewish colonization as both a practical solution to dramatically increase the white population and to win support from liberal circles in Britain highly critical of the treatment of the native African population.

By June, 1912 the Portuguese Chamber of Deputies passed the final version of a bill to authorize concessions to Jewish settlers. Its articles clearly indicate the republic's desire to use Jewish immigration to consolidate its hold over Angola. Colonists wishing to settle the Benguela Plateau would immediately become naturalized Portuguese citizens at their port of entry upon payment of a "nominal fee." The Jewish settlements would be required not to have any "religious character" and Portuguese was to be the exclusive language of instruction in

any schools the Jewish colonists might build. No practical financial support was enlisted and by the end of 1913, many officials of the Jewish Territorial Organization in London that had entertained the proposal had begun to turn against it in response to the steady progress being made in Palestine under the direction of the Zionist movement.

No practical steps were taken by the Portuguese government which let the idea drop into obscurity particularly when, as a result of World War I, the German threat against territory from Portugal's African colonies no longer existed.

The Brave but Futile Efforts of Artur Barros Basta

A second attempt at rapprochement centered around the career of Colonel Artur Carlos de Barros Basto. He was a military figure and writer, born in 1887 who carried out a long campaign to win recognition for those Portuguese who wished to return to their ancestral Jewish identity and faith and create a vibrant modern community in their homeland. When the Republic was established in 1910, Barros Bastos was the one who raised the Republican flag in the city of Porto. He thus enjoyed some favor in liberal republican circles who felt that a renewed Jewish community might be a cause to win sympathy abroad.

Barros Basto became the leading light in establishing a Jewish Community in Porto, the country's second largest city and was instrumental in the successful construction of the magnificent Kadoorie Synagogue. He helped the return of Crypto-Jews and, during World War II, helped Jewish refugees escape the Holocaust. All of these achievements nevertheless were made at an immense cost to his health and reputation as a result of the determined opposition of the Portuguese army, the Catholic church and government that slandered him throughout the 1930s and ended his career.

During the First World War, as a lieutenant of the army he had commanded a battalion of the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps on the Flanders front. For his acts of bravery and honor on the battlefield, he received distinguished service medals and was promoted to captain. He learned Hebrew he lived for a while in Morocco where he began a formal process of conversion to Judaism (known in Hebrew as Geirus). This process completed when he was circumcised in Tangier and later subjected to a rabbinical court. After which he changed his name to Abraham Israel Ben-Rosh.

Back in Lisbon, he married Lea Israel Montero Azancot, of the Jewish Community of Lisbon, with whom he had a son and a daughter. He also had several grandchildren and great-grandchildren. His granddaughter Isabel Ferreira Lopes, is the current vice president of the Jewish Community of Porto.

Barros Basto raised funds that enabled him to buy the plot of land for the future synagogue that immediately put him in the category of a “perverse eccentric” who threatened the established social order and Catholic faith, accusations that steadily mounted as Portugal drifted from a liberal republic in the 1920s to an authoritarian and ultra-conservative regime under the autocratic rule of Professor Antonio Salazar.

The Campaign Against Barros Basta

Under the new authoritarian regime of conservative economist Antonio Salazar beginning in 1932, Barros Basto became associated with the opposition. The new government was committed to traditional and conservative rural values and a reconciliation with the Catholic Church. This made him doubly suspect and resulted in reassignments to locations farther away from Porto in order to alienate him from the project of encouraging a return to Judaism and creating a Jewish community around the new synagogue, Salazar’s government had pledged to renew Catholic influence in Portugal and promote the pilgrimage to Fatima, scene of a supposed miracle in 1917 when three children claimed to have witnessed the Virgin Mary. Nothing could be simpler than to gain their support by a return to the old hard line position against “nefarious Jewish influences.”

In 1937, Barros Basto was called before the Disciplinary Board of the Army and dismissed for allegedly participating in circumcision ceremonies of the students of the Israelite Theological Institute of Porto, considered an “immoral” act. During World War II, having already been dismissed from the army, Barros Basto nevertheless helped hundreds of Jews escape the war and the Holocaust. The Jewish Community of Porto recently signed a protocol with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, providing it with thousands of documents and individual refugee records of those who were helped to rebuild their lives from a starting point in Porto.

Barros Basta died in 1961, and was, according to his wish, buried in his native Amarante wearing the uniform with which always served his country. Justice would only come in 2012, over 50 years after his death. As a result of a petition presented to the Parliament on October 31, 2011 by his granddaughter, Isabel Ferreira Lopes, the name of Barros Basto was rehabilitated. The petition was approved unanimously by all political parties. It states that Barros Basto’s dismissal from the army was a matter of political and religious segregation on account of being Jewish. *“Barros Basto was separated from the Army due to a general climate of animosity against him motivated by the fact of being a Jew.”*

Garcia de Orta – Rehabilitation Four Hundred and Fifty Years too Late

In an even more cynical and hypocritical move, Prime Minister Salazar eventually found it both a convenient and costless policy to resuscitate the memory of Portugal's great Jewish philosophers, cartographers, astronomers and physicians to cast Portugal in the benevolent light of a tolerant civilization. Its real motive was to curry favor with American opinion and win support for retention of its colony, Goa, in India. Salazar had a card to play in the mid-1950s to meet the rising tide of anticolonialism that threatened all of Portugal's remaining possessions in Asia and Africa. The memory of Portugal's great Jewish scientist and linguist Garcia de Orta, was suddenly resuscitated, the man whose very bones had been an affront to Portugal's proclaimed Catholic identity in the 16th century. His humanitarian work in Goa was proclaimed to be the very essence of Portugal's role as a "tolerant civilization" that embraced diverse peoples and geographic regions, all united by the Portuguese language and culture, an ideology that emerged in Brazil and became known as Lusotropicalism.

Garcia de Orta was born in 1501 four years after the expulsion of all the Jews in Portugal – both the native born and the refugees from the expulsion of 1492 from Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella. He was the son of Fernão (Isaac) da Orta, a merchant, and Leonor Gomes. His siblings were three sisters, Violante, Catarina and Isabel. All had been forcibly converted to Christianity in 1497, although the Portuguese monarchs were for a time not anxious to follow the strict requirements of the Inquisition and resented being regarded as under the thumb of Spain.

Nevertheless, they eventually regarded their new Jewish subjects as a despised caste – the Cristãos Novos (New Christians). Many of them secretly maintained their Jewish faith but the Portuguese monarch King Manuel I proclaimed a twenty year "moratorium" on examining the fidelity of the "former Jews" to the Church, less out of real tolerance than simple opportunism.

De Orta studied medicine, arts and philosophy at the Universities of Alcalá de Henares and Salamanca – the two greatest institutions of learning in Spain. Following his father's death, he graduated and returned to Portugal in 1523. He practiced medicine initially in his home town and then in 1526 in Lisbon, where he gained a professorship at the university in 1530. By 1534, he sought to emigrate (normally forbidden to all the "New Christians") to Goa, fearing the increasing power of the Portuguese Inquisition. He sailed for Portuguese India in 1534 as Chief Physician aboard the fleet of Martim Afonso de Sousa, later to be named Governor and who became a close friend and his protector.

In 1549, his mother and two of his sisters, who had been imprisoned as Jews in Lisbon, managed to join him in Goa (probably due to his connections with Governor Sousa). According to a

confession by his brother-in-law after his death, Garcia de Orta privately continued to assert that “the Law of Moses was the true law.” In 1565, the Inquisition was introduced to the Indian Viceroyalty and an inquisitorial court was opened in Goa. Active persecution against Jews, secret Jews, Hindus and New Christians began although he managed to escape its clutches and died in 1568. Nevertheless, his sister Catarina was arrested as a Jew in the same year and burned at the stake for Judaism in Goa in 1569. Garcia de Orta himself was “posthumously convicted of Judaism.” His remains were exhumed and burned in an *auto da fé* in 1580. The fate of his daughters is not known.

His Work in Goa

Garcia de Orta learned all he could about Goa, its tropical environment, the neighboring regions and their culture. He met other physicians, and spice merchants from many parts of southern Asia and the Indian Ocean coasts. His fantastic ability in languages enabled him to work and do research in Portuguese, Spanish, Hebrew, Latin, Greek and Arabic and had some knowledge of Persian, and the local languages – Marathi, Konkani, Sanskrit and Kannada. Correspondents and agents sent him seeds and plants; he also traded in spices, drugs and precious stones. He kept a laboratory and botanical garden and produced the greatest source of knowledge about Eastern spices and drugs.

He was the first European to describe cholera and other Asiatic tropical diseases. He often challenged the traditional dependence on the texts of ancient authorities, Greek, Latin and Arabic. The book includes the first published verses by his friend the poet Luís de Camões, regarded as Portugal’s national poet. Garcia de Orta’s work became recognized across Europe when translations appeared in Latin and other languages. Public gardens in both Lisbon and Goa bear his name today.

Gilberto de Freyre and Lusotropicalism – A fig leaf for Portuguese Colonialism

In order to support his colonial policies, Salazar adopted “Lusotropicalism,” proposed by Gilberto de Freyre, a Brazilian sociologist, anthropologist, historian, writer, painter, politician, journalist and politician. He argued that Portugal together with its former overseas colonies composed a community of nations with a common culture and language. De Freyre fled from the Brazilian dictatorship of President Getulio Vargas in 1930 and sought refuge in Portugal. Although regarded as a leftwing troublemaker in Brazil, he felt comfortable in Portugal and developed the notion pleasing to Salazar that Portuguese colonialism was more tolerant than the racist regimes of the other North European powers Britain, Holland and France.

According to de Freyre, Portugal's warmer climate, and the historical heritage of Celts, Romans, Visigoths, Jews and Moors, the Portuguese were more humane, friendly, and adaptable to other climates and cultures. By combining actual and mythological elements of racial democracy and the Portuguese "civilizing mission" of its empire, Brazil had encouraged a pro-miscegenation attitude, one that was taking place in Portugal's African colonies. Salazar saw the opportunity to declare Portugal itself a multicultural, multiracial nation since the 15th century and that the country would be "dismembered" by losing any of its overseas territories that would in effect "spell the end for Portuguese independence."

Ironically, Salazar had originally opposed de Freyre's ideas throughout the 1930s, partly because of his dislike and fear of miscegenation, and only adopted Lusotropicalism as a means of arguing Portugal's case abroad. In this regard, Garcia de Orta, like the Angolan Jewish Settlement Scheme and the initial welcoming of a renewed Jewish community in Oporto initiated by Artur Barros Basto, all were small pawns in a larger political game. Portugal desperately tried to prevent the Indian seizure of Goa by proclaiming how it violated the noble idea of Portuguese Lusotropicalism.

This is all the more ironic because since the expulsion of the Jews in 1497, Portugal had been the most homogeneous country in Europe with no distinctive cultural, religious or linguistic minority. Nevertheless anti-Semitism was so ingrained that during the Napoleonic wars when the Portuguese with British aid defeated an invading French army, the French troops were derisively called renegade "atheistic Jacobins and cursed Jews not worthy of Christian burial"

The Conflict in Goa and the Collapse of Portuguese Colonies

On August 15, 1955, 3000-5000 unarmed Indian activists attempted to enter Goa at six locations and were violently repulsed by Portuguese police officers, resulting in approximately 25 deaths. Public opinion in India was mobilized and In 1956, Prime Minister Salazar argued in favor of a referendum in Goa to determine its future. India's foreign Minister Nehru stated to the press that "Continuance of Goa under Portuguese rule is an impossibility." Both the U.K. and the U.S. had made it abundantly clear to Salazar that they could not defend any of Portugal's overseas territories under NATO treaty obligations. The Portuguese military was resigned to the fact that defense of Goa was a suicidal mission and surrendered quickly following a full scale Indian invasion in December 1961.

The Final Irony – Garcia de Orta on the 20 Escudo Note

Approval of a new 20 escudo note with its prominent and attractive portrait of Garcia de Orta, and a picture of the main market in Goa on the reverse was introduced into circulation in

1968, the same year Salazar suffered a brain hemorrhage forcing his retirement. He died two years later. History had the last laugh – all of the remaining Portuguese colonial possessions won their independence in quick succession after Goa like a collapsing house of cards. The banknote celebrating the life of Garcia de Orta approved by Salazar as if this tragic Jewish figure symbolized Portugal's record of "tolerance" is an ironic reminder that the honor accorded him came four hundred and fifty years too late. As in the case with Germany, his homeland had for centuries repaid all the Jews including him, his family and descendants with ritual murder, hatred, persecution, humiliation, and contempt. One can only hope that in the light of the past fig leaf-like failures, the most recent parliamentary bill promising citizenship to Jews of Portuguese origin was more seriously and honestly conceived and will be promulgated in the noble spirit it truly deserves as one of the great Sephardi communities.

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