

I am a Marrano

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As I sit in a synagogue service and pray, often I wonder what it means to be a Marrano.

I know my grandmother, Pauline, told me she was a Marrano. She would sew Catholic medals and crucifix's in the hems of skirts and pillows.

She would light votive candles on Shabbat and go Mass but never take communion.

She would touch her forehead or face or shoulders in various places so that it would look as if she was making the sign of the cross. What she really was doing was whispering Adonai (Lord) and making rapid movements that had some secret meaning.

In church, she would pray in Spanish in her native accent from Gerona, Spain. She also spoke Portuguese and knew a few Hebrew words. Grandma sold cloth to the nuns from which they made their habits.

My mother was raised never to speak to anyone about being Jewish. From her earliest years, she was told that she had the map of Jerusalem printed on her face.

Jewish practices had to be performed in total secrecy. There was a connection between the Marranos of Gerona, Spain, and the Marranos of Belmonte, Portugal.

I had been handed down the same practices. On Friday night, The Sabbath candles were little red or blue glass Catholic votive candle, the perfumed kind which I bought in a candle shop. The candle would always be in the bedroom, so as not to embarrass the non-Jewish members of my family. Today, I go to the synagogue alone, and my non-Jewish husband picks me up outside, but I go.

For generations, being a Marrano meant my family absolutely forbade any member to tell an outsider that he or she was Jewish. Even though the Inquisition had been over since the 1820s, the feeling was that it was never really over in most people's beliefs and under no circumstances was any Jewish practice or mannerism to be shown to strangers.

Everything Jewish was done in the home. The holidays were celebrated by lighting votive candles. Shabbat meals consisted of porridge of cooked whole rye, wheat brown rice, millet, lentils and chickpeas, with celery, carrots and parsley.

Mother would take me to Mass at the church. We would sit while the others took communion. Many times I was told to cross myself and kneel in church while saying Jewish prayers in Spanish. Occasionally, a Hebrew word or two was mixed in. The word baruch (blessed) and Adonai were the only Hebrew words I remember.

In my early teens, my mother told me I was Jewish and to keep quiet about it. Later, I began to search for my roots. Why did my mother tell me I was a Marrano, a secret Jew? I was told that ancestors centuries ago had been tried in the Spanish Inquisition and reconciled to the Catholic Church or sent to the stake, that those who watched the auto de fes and who adjured de vehement went home and practiced Judaism in secret.

For generations the only way they preserved their religion was by an agreed-upon family code. Never take communion. Always say Adonay when you cross yourself and touch your closed eyelids. Light the Sabbath lamps in a room where no one can see light escaping. The unsuspected votive candles lit on Friday night were lit in the bedroom, but never on the dining room table, lest someone say you were a Jew.

Wear big crosses, sometimes five inches in diameter. Share the family secret with adult children over age 13, so they could keep a secret. On Passover, outdoor picnics, no indoor seders or Haggadahs. Eat lentils, honey cakes, and greens, no meat, sometimes fish, vegetable, and grains.

When grandma was young, she left Gerona for Buenos Aires. Later, the family came to the U.S. He had two marriages. On both my mother's and my father's side, cousin marriages had taken place for generations back, for another rule of the code was to stay genetically Jewish by marrying only relatives, such as cousins. My father's brother was my maternal grandmother's second husband. My uncle's youngest brother married my mother.

Outside, no one knew of the Jewishness, the secret religion. Inside the home, we were taught how to conceal our Jewishness and why this had to be done. If anyone finds out you're a Jew, they will bash your face in, I was taught from early childhood. On Friday night, the Shabbat candles were little red or blue glass Catholic votive candle...

People who say there are not more Marranos don't know the real story. There are 500 to 600 Marrano families in Portugal and many in Spain, also. In the New World, some live in South America and some in Mexico. I'm talking about those people who remained genetically Jewish through cousin marriages for the past 300 years, who knew for sure that their families were Jews, who kept preserved relics like a 300-year-old Kiddush cup, tear vials candlesticks etc...

Source: <http://sefarad.org/sefarad/sefarad.php/id/29/>