Introduction

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The present issue is devoted to the study of New Christians of Portuguese origin (Port.: *cristãos-novos*, also known in Castilian as *judeoconversos* and *conversos*). As scholarship has amply documented, that population, as well as contending cultural images of it, were often at the center of the social, political, and economic life of the early modern Iberian Peninsula. This was especially true during the period 1580–1640, when the Habsburg dynasty controlled the Spanish and Portuguese crowns and their vast colonial spaces. Despite inquisitorial persecution, as well as social and legal segregation based on “purity of blood” and ethnicity in general, New Christian businessmen from Portugal became prominent creditors and contractors of the Habsburgs’ composite Iberian monarchies. Being “simultaneously agents and victims” of Iberian empire,¹ Portuguese conversos were very active, famously so, in trans-oceanic trade throughout the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in what scholars have characterized as the first modern global world-system.² Outside of Portugal they formed part of a diverse and highly adaptable trading “nation,” known mostly, and somewhat inaccurately, as “*a nação portuguesa*”—the “Portuguese Nation.” Inside the kingdom, they were socio-economically stereotyped as “Men of Commerce” or “businessmen” (*hómens de negócios*), though they were also identified by “ethnic” denominations, such as “Men of the Hebrew Nation” (*hómens da nação hebreia*), and most commonly, “Men of the Nation” (*hómens da nação*). What is perhaps more crucial for readers of this journal, *cristãos-novos* who adopted normative Judaism in exile—people whom Yosef Kaplan has dubbed “New Jews”—protagonized the formation of the Western Sephardi Diaspora in the seventeenth century.³ Many of these selfsame Jews were part of the Portuguese trading nation. Following a decades-long but still powerful fascination among the humanist disciplines with the fluidity of identity, the five essays collected here grapple with the complex lives of Portuguese *conversos*, dynamic early modern actors who, together with Spanish New Christians, comprised what was perhaps the most notorious group in pre-modern Jewish history for which identity was always in question.⁴

Nowadays it is commonplace for historians to acknowledge that identity is constructed, multivalent, and unstable. For students of *conversos*, however, that particular insight is, in many respects, nothing entirely new. Neither is it purely an outgrowth of post-modern thought or anything of the kind. These scholars have been aware for decades of the peculiar position New Christians occupied between Iberian Catholicism and normative Judaism, traditionalist fideism and humanist rationalism, provincialism and cosmopolitanism, and so on. Hence, for example, in 1950 Jakob Van Praag's characterized converso intellectuals in Amsterdam as "*almas en litigio*" ("contested souls" or "souls in dispute").⁵ We also recall Carl Gebhardt's oft-quoted conclusion from 1922 that a New Christian was by definition "a Catholic without belief and a Jew without knowledge, but in will, a Jew."⁶ I.S. Révah's well-known assertion in a seminal article from 1959 is also noteworthy: The "Judaism" of the *conversos*, he wrote, "was in essence a potential Judaism which the entrance into a Jewish community most frequently transformed into real Judaism."⁷ Gebhardt's and Révah's assessments may, of course, be understood as votes (so to speak) for what they and many others still consider to have been the deep-seated "Jewishness" of New Christians. These and like-minded scholars tended to view Iberian Catholicism, which their writing sometimes reified, as an alien and inauthentic but still fundamental component of *conversos*' lives.

Much less essentialist views concerning *converso* identities were proposed, for example, by the French Hispanist Marcel Bataillon. In his *Erasme et l'Espagne* (first edition, 1937), Bataillon argued that *conversos*' enthusiasm for new forms of Christianity, mainly for the writings of Erasmus of Rotterdam, as well as for interpretations and adaptations of Erasmian thought, were a consequence of a common emphasis that the Dutch humanist and Iberian *converso* readers placed on St. Paul's life and teachings.⁸ However, due in part to the persistence of a disciplinary gap that existed until very recently (and sometimes resurfaces) between Iberian and Judaic studies, Bataillon's assumptions were limited to the study of Spanish *converso* humanists, theologians and churchmen,⁹ leaving historiography on Portuguese *conversos* to the binary analysis of Gebhardt, Révah, and their opponents, chief among them António José Saraiva, who argued in similarly categorical, though non-essentialist, terms about who and what *conversos* were or were not.¹⁰ Despite their essentialism and teleological leanings, however, Gebhardt's and Révah's assessments must be read as tacit admissions that the identities of *conversos* were actually far from settled. We may thus view these admissions as paving the way for the more flexible perceptions of New Christian phenomena that are at the center of scholarship on *conversos* today. At the same time, we believe that engaging the historiographical legacy to which we have referred, which combines progressive views of *converso* identities and the use of conservative cultural and religious categories of analysis, may

also help to avoid what one might call an “over-hybridization,” depolitization, and therefore dissolution of the Portuguese *converso* phenomenon into generic concerns about the indeterminacy and plurality of identity. This issue of *Jewish History*, dedicated to the analysis of Portuguese *converso* identities during the Habsburg period, may be seen as a dialogue between past historiographies and contemporary ones. It is a dialogue that insists on the value of approaching Portuguese *conversos* as historically specific and unique—and on doing so without engendering anachronisms that would contemporize the phenomena of *conversos*’ identity-construction.

Gebhardt’s and Révah’s sweeping conclusions are a reminder that historians of theirs and earlier generations, in particular those who attempted to grapple with the often controversial theme of crypto-Judaism, were concerned with portentous questions of the “essence,” “character” and “destiny” of New Christians. The authors whose works we present here belong to a much more cautious, anti-essentialist trend in humanist scholarship that has been building momentum since the 1980s. At the same time, the dialectical old/new character of this collection of articles explains the fact that in presenting their analyses some of the contributors rely on notions of the *conversos*’ collective “condition,” a concept that is reminiscent of an earlier, more sweeping historiography.¹¹ All the same, the lenses through which the contributors approach problems of mentality, and the conclusions that these scholars draw even when they employ conceptual instruments of classic vintage, are rather distinct from the totalizing visions of their professional forbears in the field of Jewish History.

Two aspects are noteworthy in this respect. First, all but one of the authors are specialists in early modern Iberian history, not Jewish history *per se*. Therefore it is hardly surprising that their works shift primary attention away from the central nodes of “New Jewish” life, namely Venice and, of course, Amsterdam, to which scholars of Judaica have devoted a multitude of fascinating works. Instead, the contributors focus on *conversos* who were practicing Catholics (though in many cases alleged and/or actual crypto-Jews) in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain, Portugal, and Brazil (see the articles by Pulido, Muchnik, Feitler, and Stuczynski). Some of the authors focus also on *conversos* who maintained Jewish and non-Jewish identities simultaneously, and/or oscillated between them, in Brazil (Feitler), Turkey, and Morocco (Tavim). These articles demonstrate, among other things, that the immensity and sheer variety of geographical spaces available to Portuguese *conversos* from Habsburg Iberia, so propitious to simulation, adaptation, and acculturation, were important factors in these subjects’ multiple identity-negotiations, owing partly to the inherent tensions that existed at the time between the centripetal tendencies of confessionalization and mercantilism. Furthermore, the shift that all the contributors accomplish away from

the Western Sephardi metropolises and from the themes of communal life and intellectual currents among the “Hebrews of the Portuguese and Spanish Nation,” allows for a comparatively wide-ranging view of what it meant to juggle the possibilities of being Jewish and being Catholic, being of the “Hebrew Nation,” and of the “Portuguese Nation.” This broad view does not treat crypto-Jews and “New Jews” as emblematic of New Christians in general, as so many works on *conversos* published in English and in Hebrew have tended to do. Rather, four of the articles collected here contextualize those New Christians who opted for a secret and/or open Judaism by locating these subjects within a much larger world in which many more *conversos* did not become “New Jews,” at least not definitively. This complicating view, and the unheroic image of *conversos* that it may produce, also render the choice of becoming Jewish as contingent and merely one of several that were available to New Christians both inside and outside the Iberian mainland.

While showing that during their lives *conversos* made many contingent or precarious choices of identity, the essays we present here approach those choices respectfully through careful analysis and contextualization. To be sure, if the present issue were to merely present of a gallery of multifaceted portraits of Portuguese *conversos*, one that simply rehearsed contingencies, the collection would easily amount to a very colorful appeal to postmodern sensibilities. Yet this would deprive the *converso* phenomenon of any real historical significance. The articles collected here focus precisely on that significance.

Second, this special issue brings to the Anglophone reader historiographical perspectives that have hitherto circulated mostly in highly specialized circles in Western Europe, Brazil, and Israel. All of the contributors are relatively young, dyed-in-the-wool archival historians (though Pulido and Muchnik have opted here for an approach that is more meta-historical than traditionally diachronic) whose chief works have been published in Castilian, Portuguese, French, and Hebrew. All five contributors represent different strands in the current disciplinary configuration of what one may dub “converso studies,” a field which exists at the crossroads of Jewish History, Spanish History, Portuguese History, and the History of the Early Modern Atlantic. Such variety has allowed philosophical and methodological divergences to come to the foreground. Having said that, what probably unites these five and rather diverse contributions is the attention they pay to specific Iberian historical contexts, in contradistinction to contemporary Anglophone historiography, which is overwhelmingly focused on the Atlantic world as the quintessential *milieu* for the negotiation of Portuguese *converso* identities.

Ignacio Pulido and Natalia Muchnik open the compilation with essays that may be considered exercises in cultural history, yet written in very different keys. Pulido argues against what he considers to be simplistic, overly

positivistic conceptions of identity that vitiate scholars' approaches to *conversos*—especially the too-often-unquestioned category of “religion.” So too, Pulido decries the facile conflation of crypto-Jewish and Catholic New Christians, criticizes scholars' common misuse of terminology that partly leads to that conflation, and questions the use of inquisitorial “confessions” as evidence of what *conversos* thought about themselves. In particular, he establishes that there was no such thing as a singular, unitary identity for Portuguese New Christians. These subjects, he argues, “made countless individual, reasoned choices in relation to the way they prioritized their multiple affiliations with the diverse communities to which they simultaneously belonged”. A supposedly integral “Identity,” therefore, has been “foisted” upon them by powerful early modern authorities and by modern scholars alike. Muchnik too rejects the notion of a unitary identity among *conversos*. Yet, in sharp contrast to Pulido, she embraces the controversial term “marrano,” as is more common among French academics, and bases her analysis on the assumption that the existence of a Portuguese crypto-Jewish cohort in Spain is certain, albeit a group whose identity was negotiated and not essential. The essay conveys that, besides plurality, members of the crypto-Jewish cohort exhibited more or less consistent mental-existential patterns across the early modern centuries, and that one may fully discern those patterns in and through inquisitorial narratives—for instance, in tales of crypto-Jewish initiation found in the legal dossiers. Muchnik's aim, then, is to explore two relatively patterned discursive phenomena—one of identification with the “marrano” group, another of differentiation from the non-Jewish “other”—that the author perceives as characteristic of *converso* subjects and as indicative of a basic duality of the “*marrano* condition.”

The articles exhibit important convergences in analytical approach as well. For instance, Tavim and Feitler pay special attention to the documented economic and social behavior of Portuguese *conversos* both in and beyond the inquisitorial ken as a lens through which to contemplate the imaginary dimension of New Christians' highly variable self-construction. Both authors explain culture chiefly by reference to the shaping influence of its material and social environments, and are acutely aware that in the diverse environments in which Portuguese New Christians moved, religion and ethnicity were but two competing elements among many other determinants of these subjects' actions.

Tavim constructs an elaborate series of sociological-historical vignettes. In the aggregate, these portraits depict the sheer divergence between *conversos*' historical experiences on one hand and any stereotypical notion of Jewish national and religious continuity on the other. Tavim opens the main body of his article with microscopic studies of the famous Joseph Nasi and of the former Jew and grandson of Portuguese *conversos*, João Baptista D'Este.

As the author shows, these men were complex actors with multiple and intertwining loyalties: Nasi vacillated between the Ottoman-Jewish and Ibero-Catholic worlds to the very end of his life. One may say that as a geopolitical schemer, this supposed Jewish hero lived with and made strategic use of his affinity with and unique insight into both worlds. In similar fashion, D'Este used his Sephardi pedigree, and hence his Jewish ethnic identity, as a means of carving a personal niche within his adopted, Catholic *milieu*. Indeed, D'Este deployed his *yihus* as a sort of exotic job qualification in attempts to garner the support of Catholic notables for his career as an anti-Jewish religious missionary. Adding further texture and complexity to the panorama, Tavim proceeds to illustrate that the New Jews of Morocco and their business partners in the Netherlands perfected the role of cultural and economic intermediaries between their Muslim hosts and the wider European and Jewish worlds that these New Jews partly represented, but into which they purposely did not blend, and whose messianic currents they both absorbed and refracted in unique ways.

Feitler's analysis, like Tavim's, is firmly rooted in rich archival research. The author highlights (among other interesting aspects) the external influences that most often catalyzed the formation of crypto-Jewish identities in Northeastern Brazil from the early modern period, when the Dutch presence made the adoption by local *conversos* of normative Judaism a viable option, until the 1970s and 1980s, when several Brazilians from the rural hinterlands claimed to have discovered a long-suppressed crypto-Jewish identity. Skillfully distinguishing between the authenticity of subjects' behavior and beliefs about themselves on one hand, and the historicity of the subjects' interpretations of that behavior and those beliefs on the other, Feitler is able to make a cogent and, despite the paucity and opacity of relevant documentary sources, detailed case against the time-honored thesis that *conversos* by and large inherited their social and religious identities from their Jewish ancestors. Hence, for example, many *conversos* chose to return to Christianity, or simply remained fairly well-integrated Christians, when Portuguese forces defeated and expelled the Dutch from northern Brazil in the late seventeenth century. In this sense, Feitler's contribution is a fascinating and positive illustration of Pulido's observation that incisive scholarship reconstructs New Christians' identities and does not simply ascribe them.

Stuczynski's contribution adopts a rather different socio-historical approach, reframing the central problematique in terms of the *conversos* as both actors within and byproducts of Iberian politics. Here, politics rather than religion, whether professed or imputed, and collective behavior, are the central axes of the analysis and keys to the historicization of communal and self-formation. However, Stuczynski adopts a less circumstantial approach than has been done in previous scholarship. He claims that since the problem of

the social integration of the *conversos* was dependent on the corporative character of Portuguese society, strong structural patterns were major obstacles to the dissolution of that minority into the Old Christian majority. During the Habsburgs' rule in Portugal, attempts were made to integrate the New Christians, employing the then consensual corporative-contractual languages and means of political action. However, the results were limited and deceptive by far. For despite changing circumstances, *conversos* continued to be seen as a de facto separate group in the midst of the Portuguese "mystical body," as a distinct "*nação*," not only because of their supposed religious proclivities or their alleged socio-professional profile. The inherently conservative character of the corporative discourse that was dominant in Portugal at the time was by itself a major factor in the perpetuation of the group. The result was that Portuguese *converso* identities were beyond the question of personal negotiations. Rather, these identities were structured—but not determined—by profound political considerations. According to the author, there is a historiographical need to repoliticize our understanding of the Portuguese *converso* phenomenon, so that the complex myriad of identities of Portuguese *conversos* do not appear as mere byproducts of subjective negotiations, as subjective products of "divided selves."

Notes

1. Jonathan I. Israel, *Diasporas within a Diaspora: Jews, Crypto-Jews and the World Maritime Empires (1540–1740)* (Leiden, 2002), 1.
2. Recent literature on this world-system is vast, but in recent years much of it may be said to have been generated in response to the work of Bernard Baylin. See for example, id., *Atlantic History: Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, 2005). Recent exercises in the history of Jews and *conversos* in the Atlantic include Jonathan I. Israel, *Diasporas with a Diaspora: Jews, Crypto-Jews, and the World Maritime Empires (1540–1740)* (New York and Leiden, 2002), and Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert, *A Nation Upon the Ocean Sea: Portugal's Atlantic Diaspora and the Crisis of the Spanish Empire* (Oxford, 2007).
3. See Yosef Kaplan, *An Alternative Path to Modernity: the Sephardi Diaspora in Western Europe* (Leiden, 2000).
4. Cf. Chapter Five of David B. Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History* (Princeton: Princeton, 2010), 159–190.
5. J.A. Van Praag, "Almas En Litigio," *Clavileño* 1 (1950): 14–26.
6. Carl Gebhardt, *Die Schriften des Uriel da Costa* (Amsterdam, 1922), xix.
7. I.S. Revah, "Les marranes," *Revue des études juives*, 118 (1959–1960), 29–77; here 55.
8. Marcel Bataillon, *Érasme et l'Espagne. Nouvelle édition en trois volumes. Texte établi par Daniel Devoto, édité par les soins de Charles Amiel* (Geneva, 1991).
9. E.g., Stefania Pastore, *Un'Eresia Spagnola. Spiritualità Conversa, Alumbradismo e Inquisizione (1449–1559)* (Florence, 2004).
10. See Antonio Jose Saraiva, *Inquisicao e cristaos-novos*, 5th ed. (Lisbon, 1994).
11. On the debates regarding the existence of a common "marrano condition" generated after Nathan Wachtel's *La foi du souvenir: labyrinthes marranes* (Paris, 2001), see Jacques Revel, "Une condition marrane?" *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, LVII, 2 (2002), 335–345.