

- **Review by writer and researcher Elyjah Byrzdett**

My name is Elyjah Byrzdett, and I am a humanities teacher, a graduate of the *Universidad Católica Santa María la Antigua*, with technical studies in School Administration, Assistance to the Director, and a specialization in Senior Management. For several years, I worked for the Judicial Branch of Panama, where I acquired a deep knowledge of legal document management as a public servant—knowledge that would later prove invaluable when processing files related to nationalities based on Sephardic origin.

Later, I decided to pursue my true vocation: teaching. For years, I worked as an educator in Panama's educational system. However, my passion for history has always been present. Since childhood, my father encouraged my reading, and during my adolescence, I was often immersed in thick history books. My grandmother, in turn, fed my curiosity with fascinating stories, which led me to verify her accounts in the National Library of Panama. What was most interesting was discovering that her stories, though brief and anecdotal, essentially aligned with historical records.

This mix of family stories and research culminated in my first book, "*Ducado de Veragua*," published in 2018. It was a book about Panama's history that I initially thought would have little impact, but its reception far exceeded all my expectations.

In 2019, when Panama City celebrated the 500th anniversary of its founding, a casual conversation with my rabbi marked a new direction in my career. I asked him what activities the Jewish community had planned to commemorate the occasion, given that the city's founder had Jewish ancestry. Upon learning that there were no plans, I decided to take the initiative. With the support of my friend Haim Pinedo, I published "*Crypto-Jews in the Isthmus of Panama: 16th-17th centuries*". This book, which addresses the tragedy and contribution of Sephardic Jews, marked a turning point in my career.

It was because of this work that I met my mentor, Professor Alberto Osorio Osorio, a pioneer in the study of crypto-Judaism in Panama. Inspired by his work, I delved deeper into the subject, researching families and individuals related to it, which allowed me to manage my own European nationality. Later, I advised individuals interested in obtaining Portuguese nationality for Sephardim.

As a result of this research, I published "*Cardoze: la ascendencia sefardí de ...*" in 2020, a brief study on a fascinating discovery in the history of a well-known family from Curacao: the Cardoze family. What was interesting about the research was uncovering an undocumented lineage of a Jewish man married to a Jewish woman, but with a wide extramarital descent from a black woman. Today, many of their descendants reside in Panama. Two of them are awaiting approval for Portuguese nationality through the Sephardic route. With this I can say, not everything is documented in the big history books, these small research add to the genealogy.

With my Portuguese nationality approved and amidst the chaos of the pandemic, I decided to move to Portugal, thus realizing a plan I had set for some time. Although I already knew the country, I wanted to travel across it, visiting every small town. This trip was inspired by the book *Os judeus secretos em Portugal* by Amílcar Paulo, whose anecdotal stories fascinated me so much that I decided to translate it into Spanish in 2021, aiming to bring this knowledge to the Spanish-speaking world.

A year later, after a trip to Israel, I decided to move to Galicia. There, I participated in three consecutive editions of the European Jewish Culture Days in Tui, where I gave lectures on crypto-Judaism and Jewish traditions.

I was invited to collaborate in the new exhibition at the Plaza Mayor Museum, dedicated to the Judaizers (crypto-Jews) of Old Panama. Later, I also received an invitation to attend the inauguration, but on neither occasion was I able to participate because I was studying in Spain.



After five years of research, I published "*Panamá Judía*" in 2022, a book that synthesizes 500 years of Hebrew presence in Panama, including a list of documented surnames in the country. The work was well received, and at the request of Librería Panamá Viejo, it was translated into English as "Journeys of Faith: Five Centuries of Jewish Life in Panama," a shorter edition aimed at tourists.

As part of my genealogical studies, I published "*Los Pisa: Una familia judeoconversa*" in 2023, with its English translation, "The Pisa Family: A Converso Lineage." An analysis that examines their connections to the Chancery and nobility, their pursuit of social and political recognition, and details their genealogy from the 15th and 16th centuries. This family is especially relevant because many of its members emigrated to Hispanic America during the colonial period. One branch even maintained its Jewish faith, adapting the surname to Piza, from which many Jews in Curacao and other communities descend.

This year, 2024, I published my first historical novel, "*El manuscrito de Isabel*." The work is inspired by the stories of crypto-Jewish families persecuted by the Inquisition and an attempt to conquer a Panamanian territory led by Felipe Gutiérrez y Toledo, a military officer and the second governor of Veragua. Felipe, son of Alonso Gutiérrez de Madrid, the royal treasurer of Emperor Charles V, descends from the Caballeria family on his father's side and from the Pisa family on his mother's side.

- **Research on Crypto-Judaism:**

Researching the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries has never been an easy task for a researcher, and even less so when it comes to the topic of Judaizers or crypto-Jews. Initially, my work was based on previous studies, known as secondary sources, but I soon discovered discrepancies and gaps that led me to conduct my own research using primary sources.

The study of crypto-Judaism is particularly complicated because, in many cases, these are events that occurred more than 400 years ago. Although the Inquisition archives allow us to trace certain lineages, their scope is limited: not everyone was processed, and the records do not tell the whole story. This is partly due to the ability of crypto-Jews to conceal their true identity. We can consider them masters of disguise, both figuratively and literally. Just like the Jews during World War II, who managed to save themselves with forged documents, the crypto-Jews of 16th-century Sefarad already resorted to similar strategies.

At that time, many official documents lacked solid mechanisms of verification, and even within the positions of public officials there were Judeo-converts. Given that the evidence was given at the request of the party, usually before a chosen notary who would be paid if the process was successful; and, above all, with a small number of witnesses conveniently chosen by the interested party himself to achieve his goal. This system, far from guaranteeing reliability, gave rise to a sea of ambiguities and falsehoods.

Another fundamental aspect is the use of surnames. In crypto-Jewish families, surnames were not always decisive. Sephardim adopted the practice of surnames to fit into the Christian norms of the Iberian Peninsula. After conversion, they adopted new names and surnames in order to erase any trace of their Hebrew origin. Surnames like Fernández, González, Gutiérrez, Hernández, Martínez, Núñez, Rodríguez, among others, were safe options due to their common nature. These surnames, widely used in the Iberian Peninsula, were also used by people not linked to Judaism. It is crucial to understand that an Iberian surname does not necessarily define a Sephardic identity. In fact, having a surname listed in various online sources does not guarantee Jewish ancestry.

It is wrong to assume that all people with the same surname are direct descendants or relatives. As stated in the *Diccionario Hispanoamericano de Heráldica, Onomástica y Genealogía*, a surname can have multiple independent origins. This reality highlights the need for meticulous genealogical research to understand ancestry connections. It is more appropriate to designate a lineage as a direct descendant of Sephardic Jews, as the Jewish community in Lisbon does, certifying lineages rather than surnames. In the end, it is not the surname that defines Sephardic status, but the lineage. It is imperative not to overlook this aspect.

Another important detail is that surnames ending in "-ez" have a Castilian origin, while those ending in "-es" come from Portugal. Some conversos preferred to adopt names with clear Christian connotations, such as Espíritu Santo, Santa María, Santa Cruz, Santángel, among others. Additionally, there were those who appropriated surnames from old or influential Christian families, claiming distant kinship.

This last practice was not exclusive to crypto-Jews. Many people, including middle or lower-class Christians, used similar strategies to improve their social standing. However, in the case of crypto-Jews, these decisions were a matter of survival, adaptability, or social mobility.

An interesting detail I have observed, without generalizing due to regional variations, is how crypto-Jews managed surnames within their families. In many cases, women preferred to use the maternal surname, while men usually adopted the paternal surname. However, this was not a strict rule, as even among siblings, with the same parents, it was common to find different choices. Some opted for the surnames of the grandparents, creating a nominative diversity that responded both to concealment strategies and practical needs.

Far from being a quaint practice, this phenomenon represents a considerable challenge for researchers. An interesting fact I can share is that wills, although not perfect, are one of the most reliable documentary sources. In them, names and surnames had to

reflect reality more accurately, as any inaccuracies could jeopardize the distribution of assets and cause legal disputes.

- **Crypto-Judaism in Panama**

In the Isthmus of Panama, the converso problem can be divided into two major periods. Between 1501 and 1580, crypto-Jews of Castilian origin played an active role in the colonization of the territory. With the dynastic union of Portugal in 1580, a new period began, that of the Portuguese crypto-Jews. These Judaizers had enough members and resources to found a prayer house on Calafates Street, behind the old Cathedral of Panama la Vieja. However, the Inquisition unleashed a fierce persecution against the Hebrews, culminating in the "great conspiracy" of 1640. Although they did not disappear completely, their presence in historical records was drastically reduced, as the fear of persecution silenced many voices.

Panama presents a unique historical context. As the center of the Spanish Empire, the Isthmus experienced constant population mobility, closely linked with Peru, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Cartagena de Indias. The genealogy of the first colonial families is exceptionally complex. During the conquest, the men of Panama City often left their wives alone for long periods, dedicating themselves to the tasks of conquest, colonization, and the pacification of indigenous peoples. Single men who emigrated rarely returned, while the daughters of these families remained in the territory and married foreigners who settled in the region. This pattern caused the surnames of the first colonizers to disappear, although blood connections continued through maternal lines. As a result, tracing surnames that have remained in the Isthmus for more than four centuries is almost impossible. Except for a few exceptions, most of the surnames in Panama today come from immigrants who arrived after 1700 and married women of colonial lineage. In many cases, marriages were a means of accessing social integration and were arranged for this purpose.

It is common to find in the family trees of foreigners that they only mention the first name, surname and place of birth of the foreign father, while they exhaustively detail the genealogy of their Isthmian wives. This was done to demonstrate that their descendants, even if they carried an unknown surname in that society, were directly descended from the founders or colonizers of towns or cities, legitimizing them as authentic members of this exclusive and closed society.

Geographical mobility further complicated the crypto-Jewish research landscape. Families rarely stayed in the same place for more than three or four generations. Additionally, the absence of parishes in rural areas forced people to travel to celebrate baptisms, marriages, or other religious rites. As a result, documents related to these ceremonies could be found in regions different from those where the families lived. In other cases, the distance and difficulty of traveling could simply mean that certain events had no record at all.

Finally, genealogical reconstruction of crypto-Jews also faces high costs because it requires paleography of many documents. Although I have learned the basics of this art, the variability in spelling of the time forces us to turn to paleography experts who adjust their prices depending on the complexity of the text and the era. There are even experts who have returned incomplete documents due to the complexity of the text, requiring me to seek others who are even more specialized. The truth is, along the way, we learn which professionals to work with when issues arise in our research.