

Mistaken Identity? The Case of New Mexico's "Hidden Jews"

Imagine descendants of Jews pursued by the Spanish Inquisition, still tending the dying embers of their faith among peasant Latinos in the American Southwest. The story has obvious resonance, and it has garnered considerable publicity. The truth of the matter may turn out to be vastly different, and nearly as improbable.

BARBARA FERRY AND DEBBIE NATHAN DECEMBER 2000 ISSUE

THE telling has become almost stylized through repetition. In the mid-1980s a number of people with Spanish surnames began stealing into an office in Santa Fe, peering over their shoulders, shutting the door behind them, and whispering that their neighbors were engaging in strange customs that were decidedly out of place in the region's overwhelmingly Catholic culture. Soon those reports would lead to proud testimonials from southwesterners of Iberian descent claiming kinship with Jewish victims of the Inquisition in Spain and

Portugal. And not just genetic descent: some of these people would say that though outwardly they were raised as Christians, their parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents were secretly observant Jews. Such stories are now so common in the Southwest that almost everyone takes them at face value.

The phenomenon's first elaborations can be traced to Stanley Hordes, who in the early 1980s was New Mexico's state historian. New Mexico is a state in which history matters more visibly than in most. Santa Fe was for generations the northernmost seat of rule for Nueva España -- the New Kingdom of Spain, Madrid's colonial holdings in the Americas. Today, of course, Santa Fe is the nexus of a tourist industry that has gained international cachet by aggressively marketing the old conquistadors and the peoples they vanquished. City laws require, among other things, that the downtown buildings be made of adobe -- or at least something that looks like it, even if the effect is achieved with dun-colored stucco.

Amid these real and faux constructions Santa Fe's entrepreneurs -- who mostly come from the East and West Coasts, and from the ethnic group that New Mexicans call Anglo -- market expensive silver-and-turquoise jewelry, moccasins made from luxurious dyed and fringed leathers, and quaint wooden figures of saints.

Just under this layer of consumerism Santa Fe and its environs harbor a population whose forefathers were the victorious Spaniards, and who have

experienced steady impoverishment at the hands of newcomers to the region. These beleaguered New Mexicans call themselves Hispanos -- not Chicanos, because that word signifies Mexicans, which in turn implies an admixture of Indian blood, and not Hispanics or Latinos, broad terms that also leave open the possibility of descent from Native Americans, whether from Mexico or the United States. Although many Hispanos have the high cheekbones and dark complexions associated with mestizos -- people of mixed Spanish and Native American ancestry -- their heritage, as they see it, has nothing to do with the Aztecs or Mayas, let alone with the Pueblos, Apaches, and other northern tribes that the conquistadors thought fit only for peonage. Moreover, most Mexicans in the Santa Fe area arrived only recently, bringing their urban Spanish, their immigrant status, and their readiness to take tourist-driven dishwashing and construction jobs, and thereby, reportedly, depressing wages for Hispanos. It is painful enough that such lowly employment must be coveted. Once, Hispanos labored on their own land. In the past generation, under pressure from an influx of Anglos and from rising land prices, thousands of them have quit their farms and villages for cities.

On the Gray Line tour New Mexico may be the Land of Enchantment, with a charming mixture of piñon smoke and three cultures -- Native American, Anglo, and Hispano. Off the tourist track the last group stews in nostalgia and resentment. Elderly and middle-aged men and women yearn for their villages with imagery that evokes the lovely paintings and coffee-table books for sale in Santa Fe. Few remember in the haze of recollection that the villages also had a

mean, dark side, typical of many peasant enclaves. There were quaint hand-carved *santos*, but there were also priests who monitored their parishioners' reading matter and behavior, snooping for signs of heterodoxy.

Such vigilance was perfused with a paranoid anti-Protestantism. Often it also cloaked anti-Semitism. In the seventeenth century New Mexicans came to the attention of the Holy Office of the Inquisition. In the late 1600s the governor of New Mexico and his wife were accused of practicing Judaism; soon thereafter the same charge was leveled against a soldier and bureaucrat named Francisco Gómez Robledo, who was also said to have a tail -- supposedly the mark of a Jew. All were examined by the Holy Office. All were acquitted.

IN 1981 New Mexico was seeking someone for the post of state historian, and to his delight, Stanley Hordes was awarded the job. These days Hordes is an ample, bearded man whose tweed jackets and Dockers slacks hint at his solidifying status as a professional historian. Twenty years ago he was thirty-one and had just defended his doctoral dissertation, which was written at Tulane University, in New Orleans, and dealt with the Jews of colonial Mexico. More specifically, it dealt with what are known as the crypto-Jews -- a people whose ranks swelled in 1492, when King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain ordered all Jews to convert to Christianity or be banished from the kingdom. Up to 50,000 of Spain's 125,000 to 200,000 Jews were baptized, joining 225,000 descendants of the converts of previous generations. The others would not give up their religion. Some fled to North Africa, Italy, and Navarre (then a kingdom on the border between Spain and France). Many more

went to Portugal, though Portugal itself would soon demand conversion, and thousands of Jews there also underwent baptism. In both Spain and Portugal many *conversos* sincerely embraced the Church and intermarried with so-called Old Christians. A smaller number, however, continued secretly in their old beliefs, under cover of Catholicism. These were the crypto-Jews.

Near the end of World War I some descendants of these Jewish remnants were discovered in isolated villages in Portugal. But historians have traditionally considered their survival an exception. Outside Portugal the religious practice of crypto-Jews decayed within a few generations to fragments of prayers and other elements of ancient observance -- a refusal to eat pork, for example. According to the historian David Gitlitz, the phenomenon had for the most part died out by the end of the 1700s. Before it did so, however, the Inquisition had become expert at ferreting out what it called Judaizers, or practitioners of "*La Ley de Moisés*" -- The Law of Moses. The story of these rebel faithful has continued to haunt scholars and others.

For his dissertation Hordes had received a Fulbright-Hays fellowship to examine the Inquisition in Mexico. Poring over archives there and in Spain, he found the surnames of accused crypto-Jewish families, and the alleged details of their Mosaic rites. Gitlitz, in his book (1996), provides a list of crypto-Judaic customs, based on Inquisition records. According to prisoners' indictments and confessions, these customs included bathing on Fridays and afterward donning clean clothes; ritually disposing of the blood drained from slaughtered fowl; fasting on Yom Kippur; eating tortillas (which are unleavened) during Passover;

burning hair and nail clippings; circumcising sons (or merely nicking the penile shaft); and, in one instance, excising a chunk of flesh from the shoulder of a daughter. The Inquisition's punishments for such transgressions ranged from the forced public wearing, for months or even years, of the humiliating *sanbenito* -- a knee-length yellow-sackcloth gown -- and headgear resembling a dunce cap to years of imprisonment in a monastery to garroting and burning at the stake. By the time the Inquisition was abolished in Mexico, in 1821, it had put to death about a hundred accused crypto-Jews, and many suspected Judaizers still languished behind bars.

Hordes had not expected to deal with any of this history when he took the job in Santa Fe. As he tells it, his main reasons for coming to the Southwest were the weather and the hiking. He grew up in the Washington, D.C., area, and after a childhood on the muggy East Coast and doctoral studies in New Orleans, he was fed up with humidity. He had earned his master's degree at the University of New Mexico, in Albuquerque, and loved the desert and the mountains. After receiving his Ph.D., he worked as a historian, first in Louisiana, where he was a curator at the state museum, and then with the National Park Service, where he advised on issues of historic preservation. Academia held no attraction for Hordes: he disliked what he saw as its political atmosphere. When the Santa Fe job came up, it seemed perfect, both professionally and geographically. His office -- several blocks from the venerable Palace of the Governors, with its Spanish coats of arms on the outer adobe walls -- was lodged in the state archives building, an adobe-less concrete-block structure.

The drab location did not discourage people from seeking Hordes out. Many came for assistance in finding old family records. The archives are a trove of baptismal, burial, and marriage documents, gleaned from centuries of paperwork by Church scribes throughout the area; in addition, they contain judicial records and documents pertaining to the Inquisition. Hordes also helped Hispano and Native American visitors find land-grant records to assist in the endless litigation filed by those seeking to regain holdings from real-estate developers and the federal government. Doing this work, the young historian became acquainted with certain contours of life in the New Mexico countryside. After five o'clock, though, the contours of his own life resembled those of any young Anglo professional in Santa Fe. He lived in a faux adobe house. He spent his spare time hiking and developed a taste for southwestern cuisine.

In Santa Fe such pleasures often are shared by Hispano and Anglo professionals. The latter, however, rarely seek more than a tourist's view of the homes and churches of poor Hispanos. The divide can be even more pronounced when the Anglos are -- as Hordes is -- Jewish. To make a distinction that will later prove germane, he is an Ashkenazi. Ashkenazic Jews trace their ancestry to Northern and Eastern Europe, whereas Sephardic Jews trace theirs to Iberia. Almost all Jews in North America today are Ashkenazim. Before the late nineteenth century the Jews in Latin America were overwhelmingly Sephardim. Throughout the Diaspora, Sephardic Jews have eaten food made with olive oil, chickpeas, and other Mediterranean

ingredients; Ashkenazic foods such as bagels, lox, kugel, and borscht are not traditionally part of their diet. Yiddish, with its German and Slavic components, has nothing to do with Sephardic Ladino, which mixes Hebrew with medieval Spanish, Turkish, and Moroccan. Today Sephardic Jews make up only 10 percent of the Jewish population worldwide.

The particularities of Jewish demography seemed entirely irrelevant as Hordes began his work. Nor were they on anyone's mind when his gossipy visitors began showing up. Hordes has recounted the story in many interviews with various reporters. As he told a magazine produced by the University of New Mexico, "They would come into my office, close the door behind them and whisper over my desk, 'So-and-so ... lights candles on Friday nights.' ... 'So-and-so ... doesn't eat pork.'" At first Hordes was mystified by these tales of seemingly Jewish practices among Hispano peasants, and simply dismissed them. Little by little, though, he started wondering, What if the stories involved the same phenomenon he had described in his dissertation? What if crypto-Jews had fled north from colonial Mexico in the seventeenth century to escape the Inquisition? And what if, almost 400 years later, Jews in New Mexico's isolated Hispano villages still secretly managed the feat of preserving their forefathers' faith?

Hordes was not the first person to engage in such speculation. At the University of New Mexico the sociologist Tomás Atencio had been mulling over his Hispano family's history. Atencio's father was converted at age twelve to Presbyterianism, and went on to become one of New Mexico's first Hispano

Presbyterian ministers. Tomás was thus born into an anomaly: a Hispano Protestant family. That identity became painful in the 1960s, when, prompted in part by the black civil-rights movement, many young Hispanos developed a jaded view of their white heritage and embraced Chicano politics. Many in the Chicano movement espoused the idea that Latinos were "*La Raza Cósmica*" -- the Cosmic Race, a concept that arose in Mexico in the 1920s in response to racist Anglo claims that Latin Americans were morally and intellectually inferior because of their mixed ancestry. *Raza Cósmica* theory -- itself a racist formulation -- holds that miscegenation, among as many races as possible, creates a superior people. It instilled pride in many Chicanos and also fueled their anger at institutions they viewed as Anglo colonial impositions -- for example, the Protestant Church.

Atencio could not understand how his father could have gone along with such colonialism and become a Protestant minister. When he asked, his father retorted that Protestantism wasn't just for Anglos. The answer was not satisfying. Tomás also remembered a time in the early 1950s when a distant relative had laughed about being able to take land from the Atencios because the relative's family were "*mejores judíos que ustedes*" -- "better Jews than all of you." Tomás asked his father about his cousins. "Yes," the minister said, "there's been talk that they're Jewish."

Such references to a Jewish past may have been factual, or they may have been the usual anti-Semitic village rumor-mongering. In any event, by the time Hordes heard his first stories, southwestern Latinos already had several

sources to help them identify relatives or neighbors as Iberian crypto-Jews. In Texas the amateur historian Richard Santos had for years been publishing articles suggesting that the diet and customs of some border dwellers were influenced by the habits of colonial-era converted settlers. Another Texan, Carlos Larralde, had written a doctoral dissertation at the University of California at Los Angeles contending that the south of Texas was filled with crypto-Jews who had long been subjected to a "holocaust" at the hands of racists (whose ranks, in Larralde's view, included the Texas Rangers). The evidence compiled by Larralde that these people were secretly Jewish consisted of certain border customs, including the preference of Spanish-speakers for goat meat over pork and, among some, the keeping of the sabbath on Saturday. Emilio and Trudi Coca, an elderly couple who lived in New Mexico, had for some years visited Latino graveyards, where they found and photographed headstones inscribed with surprising first names -- for example, Adonay (*Adonai* is the Hebrew word for "Lord"). The cemeteries contained both headstones with crosses and ones with six-pointed stars similar to the Star of David.

In 1985 Hordes, having grown frustrated with the paper-pushing life of a state bureaucrat, quit his job and started a private consulting business, taking on investigations for the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies and individuals embroiled in land disputes with the local populace. He also began spending more and more time promoting his growing belief that Sephardic crypto-Judaism had survived four centuries of secrecy in the Southwest. The proposition, if true, was astonishing. And it held enormous appeal for Jews elsewhere in the United States, still grappling with the legacy of the Holocaust and eager for stories about Jewish survival against all odds. Soon a freelance radio producer in Albuquerque named Benjamin Shapiro heard about Hordes and the crypto-Jews and, along with a Denver producer named Nan Rubin, interviewed people Hordes and others put them in touch with. Their documentary aired in 1987 on National Public Radio. During the next few years hundreds of people called to buy tapes of the show. Stories about the crypto-Jews proliferated in the domestic and international press. Stanley Hordes was interviewed by *The New York Times*, CNN, and the *Jerusalem Post*.

BY the early 1990s Latinos by the dozens from New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, and Arizona were coming forward with tales of a Jewish past. At conferences and in Internet forums they recalled playing with toys resembling dreidels (the four-sided tops associated with Hanukkah) as children. They reported that their parents had baked a flat, unleavened bread in the spring. They

remembered mothers and grandmothers calling out on their deathbeds, "Children, we are really Israelites."

Isabelle Medina Sandoval had such memories. She spent her childhood, during the 1950s and 1960s, in Laramie, Wyoming, but her parents, grandparents, and cousins hailed from a village in the Mora Valley, between Taos and Santa Fe. Sandoval's mother and father left New Mexico after World War II to find work. As Sandoval wrote in one of many autobiographical essays, the family wanted to live in Denver but was unable to find an apartment, because landlords wouldn't rent to "Mexicans." In Laramie the Sandovals settled in a modest neighborhood of Anglos and fellow Hispanos who had likewise migrated north.

Isabelle Sandoval's skin has a vaguely olive cast, and her eyelids are slightly hooded. Today she reads a lot into these features. She says that when she was a child people used to comment on her appearance. One person told her she looked Sephardic, before she knew what that word meant. In Laramie, Sandoval always felt different, not just from the Anglo kids but from Hispanos as well. Like many introspective children, she wondered about her true origins. Once, on a visit to the family village, she proclaimed to her grandfather that their family was mestizo. He grew agitated and vehemently denied having Native American blood: "We are Spaniards!" he proclaimed. It was the only



time she ever saw him get angry. Years later Sandoval began to feel that she understood his protestations after she attended a talk by Stanley Hordes.

As Sandoval listened to Hordes describe unusual customs and gravestone markings, she began rethinking her past. Her family had avoided Catholic mass and shown no interest in the Catholic saints. This made some sense -- although her father was Catholic, her mother was Protestant -- but in addition, the family hardly celebrated Christmas. Sandoval recalled her parents' drinking wine whose label showed people sitting around a table in "funny little hats" -- that is, yarmulkes. She asked why they were drinking Jewish wine. Because it was "clean," she was told. After hearing about the New Mexico crypto-Jews, Sandoval concluded that "clean" meant "kosher."

Juan Sandoval is apparently no relation to Isabelle, but his family, too, comes from the Mora Valley -- in his case, from the village of Mora. Like Isabelle, Juan had Protestants in his family, and he, too, wondered about his roots. He made his living as a folk artist: along with his wife and children, he fashioned Christmas wreaths and ceramics with Native American motifs. The family led a gypsy existence, moving frequently throughout the Southwest and in and out of Mexico. In the late 1980s they were in Mora again, on a small ranch inherited from Juan's father. That is when Juan first heard of the crypto-Jews of New Mexico. For reasons that remain unclear, he became convinced that he was a Jew. His wife started buying him kosher chickens from Colorado, even though the Sandovals were already raising chickens on their ranch. She bought him

Jewish ritual items, such as the white prayer shawl called a tallith and candles to be lit on Friday night, the sabbath eve.

Stanley Hordes met Isabelle Sandoval and Juan Sandoval on separate occasions in the early 1990s. By then he was helping to organize a new group, the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies, which facilitated connections among people who suspected that they were descended from crypto-Jews. Isabelle found out about Juan. She also found out about Loggie Carrasco, an elderly woman who claimed to belong to a clan that has practiced crypto-Judaism for generations in an old neighborhood in Albuquerque. Carrasco said the clan was descended from Manuel Carrasco, who had been prosecuted in Mexico in the seventeenth century after the Inquisition discovered that he carried bits of matzoh under his hat. Loggie Carrasco displayed a family heirloom she said dated from colonial times: a rosary with its cross removed. Some of her relatives recited ancient prayers and folk rhymes that Carrasco said were Sephardic. Other people with ancestors from the neighborhood remembered the practice of hanging goats upside down after slaughter in order to make the meat kosher by draining the blood. Hordes interviewed some of these people and brought reporters to meet them. The reporters wrote their stories. The stories attracted more stories.

Soon, however, Carrasco and others grew reluctant to speak with outsiders. They complained that Ashkenazic Jews looked down on Spanish-speaking Sephardim. Synagogue congregations, the crypto-Jews said, were often suspicious and unfriendly. So were many reporters, who seemed skeptical about the claims. Researchers, too, seemed insensitive to these *anusim* -- an

ancient Hebrew word meaning "people who have been forced," used for Jews made to abandon their religion. The word soon became the term of choice for the Southwest's crypto-Jews.

Some of these self-styled *anusim* came to conferences of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies, and to presentations that Hordes gave at Haddassah socials, Hillel meetings, Jewish historical-society lectures, and Lion's Club luncheons. Among the other attendees at these events were elderly Ashkenazim whose East Coast, vaguely Yiddish-edged voices clashed with the remnant-Spanish accents of the *anusim*. Many of the attendees were retirees who had moved to the anti-allergenic deserts of Albuquerque and Phoenix. Some were on Elderhostel-style vacations from New York, New Jersey, and Florida. A few were members of Kulanu, a Jewish group dedicated to finding "lost" co-religionists in exotic places.

When Hordes gave talks at conferences or sat for media interviews, he refused to reveal the identities or whereabouts of his crypto-Jewish informants, citing the New Mexicans' discomfort. In his slide shows of gravestones with Stars of David, the names of the dead were blocked out, and Hordes would not say where the burial sites were located. Secrecy was necessary, he said, because *anusim* had been hurt by meddling outsiders. They also needed privacy to deal with family members who could not or would not admit their Judaism. Reporters and researchers accepted that they would not be doing their own fact-checking. Hordes and a handful of vocal and prickly *anusim* thus became the primary sources of information about southwestern crypto-Judaism.

Isabelle Sandoval and Juan Sandoval were among this handful. By the mid-1990s both had undergone a ceremony called the rite of return, performed for Jews who come back to Judaism after having been forced to give it up. (The rabbi who performed the ritual later officiated at the funeral of Barry Goldwater, another ancestral Jew whose family abandoned the faith -- though in this case by choice.) Isabelle Sandoval helped to found a support group for people who considered themselves crypto-Jews. She began appearing at conferences, where she would read poems she had written, in a high, didactic voice. The poems had confrontational titles ("Contemporary Inquisition" was one, "Trial" was another) and tortured, angry verses:

On the border I
ponder
bound by jaded
Jews judging my

Judaism juggling
their own justice....

On the outside
looking in

on the inside
looking out.

Juan Sandoval reconceived his folk-art offerings. He scrapped his Native American and Christmas inventory and replaced it with hardened-clay menorahs and "chia" rabbis whose beards contained seeds that sprouted when watered. The new line sold well in Judaica gift shops, and Sandoval began supplementing his earnings with honoraria for lectures about his hidden past. In 1996 he spoke at the annual meeting of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies, in Albuquerque, and was introduced by his new name: Yehoshuah ben Avraham. The audience listened raptly as he described how his father, a Catholic, had kidnapped him after learning that his grandmother was a secret Jew, and how, years later, when he discovered his roots, neighbors shot at his family and forced him to sell his property, which he said was worth \$1 million, for only \$65,000. Juan illustrated his story with a photograph of the family cemetery in Mora. In the center was a gravestone with a Star of David.

Inside and outside these conferences tales about crypto-Jews in the Southwest became commonplace. Most were prosaic and full of stereotypes: speculation, for instance, that one's parents or grandparents were Jewish because they were successful merchants, or were tight with money, or liked to read books. Some were more intriguing. Frances Hernández, an English professor at the University of Texas at El Paso, wrote that Catholics in New Mexico were venerating "Saint Esther" -- named after the heroine of the Jewish Purim story. Stanley Hordes talked of diagnoses in Latinos of a rare skin disease, pemphigus vulgaris, which he said was prevalent among Jews. And covert rabbis, Hordes said, may still be hiding in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

The stories fueled more reporting, including another National Public Radio segment, and brought more work for Hordes. In 1994 he was a member of the "faculty" for a package tour that advertised a chance to meet "descendants of the 'Hidden Jews' of the Southwest." Tour members could chat with Hispanics claiming blood kinship with Gómez Robledo, the sixteenth-century New Mexican soldier accused of having a tail. Meanwhile, Simcha Jacobovici, a Jewish documentary filmmaker from Canada, came to New Mexico to make a movie that was later released under the title *For His Film Interview Stanley Hordes Traded His Usual Professor's Garb for a Work Shirt, Open at the Throat, and an Indiana Jones Hat. Isabelle Sandoval Donned a Fuzzy Vest with Santa Fe-Style Indian Geometrics.*

EVEN as Hordes and the Sandovals were riding a wave of celebrity, an undercurrent of trouble was gathering force. The problems had started in 1992, when an Indiana University graduate student named Judith Neulander arrived in New Mexico with notebooks, cassette tapes, and hopes of pursuing her own research in crypto-Jewish studies.

Judith Neulander was already a middle-aged woman when she entered Indiana University, in 1989, to work on a doctorate in folklore. Before that, she had earned master's degrees in folklore and Jewish studies. She had been married and divorced. She had grown up in more-than-comfortable circumstances; her Ashkenazic parents were American, but her father worked as an economist with a European cartel that owned Mexico's electric-power industry before it

was nationalized. The family lived in a heavily Jewish neighborhood in Mexico City. Neulander had hung around with the servants, spoken Spanish with them, and gone to mass at their churches.

In the late 1980s, when Neulander had just started work on her folklore doctorate, she heard the first of the NPR programs about the crypto-Jews. She was intrigued by the tales of dreidel spinning and kosher slaughter. She was also intrigued by the fact that none of these stories had been verified by a professional folklorist. Until some of them were, the accounts were doomed to remain in the realm of rumor, popular media, and pseudo-academic journals that lack peer review or scholarly cachet. Neulander wanted to be the first folklorist to dignify the claims with ethnographic research. As she derisively puts it now, she wanted to be "Queen of the Crypto-Jews."

As soon as she arrived in the Southwest, she visited Stanley Hordes. He showed her slides of gravestones and gave her names and phone numbers of people in

the crypto-Jewish coterie. During ensuing months of fieldwork Neulander started to suspect that something was wrong with the claims she was investigating. The Star of David gravestones were one example. When Hordes and others showed pictures of the stones, they obscured certain features, such as last names, that would help a researcher to locate the graves independently. Neulander saw one slide that she found especially interesting: it showed a star that was recessed, as though someone had tried to minimize it. When she asked where the grave was, she was given inaccurate information. She started visiting cemeteries on her own, and one day chanced upon the stone that she had seen in the slide. The graveyard was in a small town south of Albuquerque. She quickly located the family of the deceased, a young woman who had died not long before. The woman's parents were a Catholic couple who were thoroughly cordial to Neulander but puzzled that anyone would think they were Jews. As for the six-pointed star, they said their priest had chosen the design for them. Lest anyone suspect that the priest himself was a crypto-Jew, the couple assured Neulander he was Irish.

Neulander was also puzzled by the gravestones bearing the first name Adonay: Jewish law forbids attaching a term for God to a human being. And why were some of Hordes's informants telling him that their parents prayed to "Yahweh"? That name, as observant Jews know, is a direct transliteration of the Hebrew designation for God and, as



such, may never be uttered. Yet the crypto-Jews of New Mexico were saying it aloud.

Or were they? Neulander wasn't sure after she watched Hordes interview a woman from the same neighborhood as Loggie Carrasco, the member of the clan in Albuquerque. A few years earlier Hordes had sent a *New York Times* reporter to the woman, whose name is Nora Garcia Herrera. The article that appeared had Garcia Herrera describing her father's dislike of Catholic saints and his circumcision by an old man in the neighborhood. Afterward Hordes continued visiting the woman and recovering more memories -- for instance, about her father's praying when he slaughtered sheep.

But on the visit to Garcia Herrera that Neulander made with Hordes, she was shocked by how leading his questions were. When Garcia Herrera said that she didn't recognize the language her father used when he prayed, Hordes started reciting the Kaddish -- the Jewish mourners' prayer -- in Hebrew. Then he suggested that "Yahweh" might have been what the old man called God. "Yahweh, yeah!" Garcia Herrera answered. "He used to call him Yahweh." "Because it's the Hebrew name for God," Hordes chimed in, in Spanish.

Neulander also researched the origins of alleged crypto-Jewish customs, such as celebrating Saint Esther's Day, burying or burning hair and nail clippings, and playing with a dreidel. To Hordes, these practices were dramatically Jewish. But as Neulander dug into historical and folklore archives, she learned that Esther is a Spanish folk saint and has been for hundreds of years. As for

burning hair and nails, the practice is found in folk cultures throughout the Western world, and was widespread even when the Inquisition was attributing it only to Jews. Neulander also found that the dreidel does not exist in Sephardic culture -- it is an Ashkenazic object that postdates the Inquisition. What does exist, throughout Latin America, is the *trompita*, a wooden top that children play with regardless of their religion. Other matters also troubled Neulander. For instance, when she looked into Loggie Carrasco's "colonial-era" rosary, she found that it was identical to items that could be bought in virtually any Catholic gift shop -- and that were approved by the Church only in 1911. As for pemphigus vulgaris, the disease that Hordes had said was common among Jews, it predominantly afflicts Ashkenazic, not Sephardic, Jews, and in fact occurs in Mediterranean peoples of several ethnicities.

Still, there were customs that really did seem Jewish. Nora Garcia Herrera's father wouldn't eat meat with blood in it. Families consumed unleavened bread in springtime. Old people mumbled deathbed declarations about being *judío* or *israelita*. After Neulander finished her fieldwork and left New Mexico, she started looking for similar practices in other Latino and in Mediterranean cultures. It wasn't long before she ran across the work of the anthropologist Raphael Patai.

IN the 1940s Patai had visited Venta Prieta, a dusty town near Mexico City, where people have been calling themselves Jews at least since the 1930s. When Patai arrived, on the heels of World War II, the Venta Prietans actually had a synagogue. Their prayers sometimes included a few sentences in halting

Hebrew. In the spring they celebrated Passover, with a seder and flatbread. With their short stature, black hair, and dark skin, the Venta Prietans were indistinguishable from the mestizo Catholic population that dominates Mexico. Yet they claimed descent from one of the country's Inquisition-era Sephardic families, the Carvajals, and said that their religion was handed down over the centuries from them.

As Patai poked through Venta Prieta's history, he accumulated persuasive evidence that its people were not descended from Jews at all. Instead they were the inheritors of what might be called crypto-Protestantism. In the early decades of this century, it seems, a fundamentalist splinter group called the Church of God Israelite left Mexico City to proselytize elsewhere; some settled in Venta Prieta. The group was a branch of the Church of God (Seventh Day) -- a sect originally located in Iowa, and now headquartered in Colorado. As the name suggests, Church of God (Seventh Day) members observe the sabbath as Jews do, on the last day of the week -- Saturday. They ignore Christmas and Easter, believing these holidays to be "pagan." Branches in the Southwest celebrate their own versions of Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkoth, along with Passover, which they mark with a ceremony that includes unleavened bread. They refuse to eat blood sausage or blood pudding, although both are Mexican delicacies.

At a recent Church of God (Seventh Day) service, at a church on the U.S.-Mexico border, many members of the congregation wore small Stars of David on necklaces. The walls of the church were graced with Stars of David. Years

ago the building contained more Stars of David, and also Hebrew writing. One day some American Jews walked in. They were convinced that the place was a synagogue, and were overjoyed at this discovery. The congregation was deeply embarrassed, and removed the Hebrew and some of the stars. Yet a number of Stars of David remain visible, and old people still want them on their gravestones. Although the stars are important symbolically and doctrinally, the church is firmly Christian: the congregation's prayers and songs are all dedicated to Jesus.

The doctrinal roots of the Church of God (Seventh Day) go back to the Reformation, to an obsession among some Protestants with the Second Coming and the Millennium. One scenario, which is repeated these days by many televangelists, has it that Jesus will not return to earth until all the world's Jews are gathered together to welcome him back. If present-day Jews are uninterested in doing so, then perhaps they can be replaced by worthier ones, by Jews who accept Christ as the Messiah. These more promising Jews, in the view of some fundamentalist Protestants, disappeared with the ten lost tribes of Israel. Now they must be found, so that the Savior can return.

This logic has engendered a centuries-old preoccupation with identifying certain gentiles as long-lost Jews. During the Reformation some thought the English were one of the tribes. (This belief survived in the twentieth-century theology of Herbert Armstrong, the father of the radio evangelist Garner Ted Armstrong, who used to point out that *brit* is Hebrew for "covenant," and *ish* means "man"; ergo the British were "the true covenant people.") During the

age of European colonialism nonwhites were often venerated as Jews even as they were defined as racially inferior and marketed as slaves. Africans were a favored group for lost tribes. In the New World, Cotton Mather and William Penn focused on Native Americans. At the turn of the century in the Southwest, Church of God proselytizers looked to Latinos. Mormons, the Church of Holiness, and Seventh-day Adventists also went searching in the Southwest for the lost tribes. Even mainstream New Mexico churches adopted Old Testament motifs: Presbyterians, for instance, held "last suppers" emphasizing the fact that Jesus' last meal was a Passover seder. Indeed, it seems that in the early twentieth century the hamlets around Santa Fe and Albuquerque were roiling with Hebraic Protestantism, just as Venta Prieta was.

One would never know this if one read only the Santa Fe tourist-store books that depict non-Anglo New Mexicans as either kachina dancers or carvers of wooden saints. One might not even know if one's own parents had once experimented with a fundamentalist sect and then abandoned it because Catholic neighbors were getting vicious or because the church leaders decided that Hispanos were not a lost tribe after all.

This seems to be what happened two generations ago, when the Church of God (Seventh Day) pulled its ministers out of New Mexico. Fifty years later, Neulander believes, the children and grandchildren of former members are recalling their elders' Old Testament customs and misinterpreting their last words about being Jews. These recollections, Neulander says, have been skewed by Stanley Hordes and others who are ignorant of the Southwest's true

recent history. It is a history that includes both fundamentalist Protestants and other groups whose behavior could be wrongly construed as crypto-Judaism. Muslims, too, fled the Inquisition, settled in New Spain, eschewed pork, and ignored priests. Sephardic immigrants also came to Mexico and the Southwest from countries such as Morocco and Turkey, where they had practiced Judaism openly for centuries. Jews from Germany and Eastern Europe have been in Mexico and the Southwest for 150 years. They have intermarried with Latinos, and many have even embraced the Catholic Church. They might have kept dreidels in the house, but that is no sign of the Inquisition.

IN 1996 Judith Neulander published her findings in an obscure periodical, the *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review*. Word quickly spread among the self-described *anusim* that the ethnographer who had approached them so enthusiastically a few years earlier was now attacking the very basis of their identity. Since then conferences of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies have often included presentations in which a speaker criticizes the work of the ungrateful scholar from Indiana. When asked about Neulander, society members often sneer, sometimes without having looked at any of her work. Even those who have done the reading find it easy to despise her. For when Neulander makes her arguments, she presents more than just dry scholarship on Protestantism. She also speculates about the reasons Hispanos might be inventing what she calls an "imaginary crypto-Jewish identity."

Neulander thinks they are doing it because they are, in effect, racists. Colonial Spaniards were obsessed with proving they had "pure" blood, untainted by that

of what they regarded as inferior peoples. The same has been true for many New Mexicans, and Neulander believes that the concern for purity -- *limpieza de sangre* -- is intensifying, now that Hispanos are being boxed in by Anglo newcomers and Mexican immigrants. As noted, Hispanos have always been loath to be called Mexicans. But that is how Anglos in the region have identified anyone who speaks Spanish. So, Neulander theorizes, some Hispanos are using crypto-Jewish identity as a postmodern marker for ethnic purity. What better way to be a noble Spaniard than to be Sephardic, since Sephardim almost never marry outside their own narrow ethnic group -- and would certainly not intermarry with Native Americans? Neulander also comes at the racism issue from another, not quite compatible angle. She stresses that Protestant lost-tribes logic is deeply anti-Semitic. Below its Judeophilic veneer lies the belief that because they reject Jesus, most of today's ethnic Jews will in fact go up in flames at the Apocalypse.

Such talk frightens and offends those who call themselves *anusim*. True, some of them are fixated on finding a noble Spanish past. But some from Hispano families are politically liberal, involved in civil-rights work, and proud of their mestizo complexions and ancestry. They are eager to stir into their *Raza Cósmica* mixture what they see as the ultimate outsider blood -- that of Jews. Neulander's theories don't take account of someone like Tomás Atencio, the sociologist son of the Presbyterian minister, who has for many years done community organizing in Texas and New Mexico. By speculating that the Hispano Presbyterian church was really a secret synagogue for crypto-Jews

who wanted to read the Bible, Atencio reconciles his modern, Chicano identity with what he thinks of as his traditional, shamefully Anglo persona.

Such reasoning is far more complicated than anything Neulander has suggested, and it is thus easy for many to dismiss her. She dismisses them and clings to her principles. What her detractors think nowadays does not count anyhow, Neulander believes, since researchers like Hordes have so muddied the crypto-Jewish field that it is no longer possible to tell history from fantasy. Pessimistic about her chances of landing an academic job, Neulander has been moving around the Midwest, working at whatever comes her way. She currently works in philanthropy at a Jewish organization. Not long ago she was working part-time at a local public-television station, co-producing shows about the gentle folklore of Indiana. One segment she did was about scarecrows.

As for Hordes, he has received generous funding from the estate of a wealthy Jewish woman in New Jersey, and has embarked on an ambitious project: tracing the family trees of self-proclaimed *anusim*. Definitely linking them to converts who quit the Continent for the New World, he believes, would strongly support the historical case for the crypto-Jews. Hordes is undaunted by the concept of powers of two: when lineage is traced back to 1492, each person has (depending on whether a generation is counted as thirty years or as twenty-five) as many as 131,072 to 1,048,576 direct ancestors. Given these numbers, every southwestern Latino is practically guaranteed Iberian Jewish ancestry -- whether he or she wants it or not.

PERHAPS Neulander is right that history can no longer be distinguished from fantasy. But for some the difference no longer seems to matter. A few years ago, after the folk artist Juan Sandoval began touring with his merchandise through Ashkenazic America, his ex-wife and children called in the press and announced that Sandoval was a fake. His tearful stories about being kidnapped as a child and losing his ranch as an adult were, he is said to have told his son, "like show business: I tell them what they want to hear." Sandoval also appears to have manufactured for Jews what they wanted to see. His son showed a reporter a Styrofoam mock-up of a gravestone with a Star of David on it, painted gray on three sides. He said he came across the object after Sandoval had discarded it -- presumably following a photo shoot. After Sandoval was exposed, a number of Jewish women compared notes and discovered that he had been hinting at marriage with each of them and had also bilked some of them of money. At first the women were devastated. Later several formed warm friendships through e-mail. One has credited Sandoval with inadvertently being "a catalyst to the most incredible group of women in Chicago and across the country meeting one another."

Isabelle Medina Sandoval, too, has had her life transformed. Not long ago she was writing bleak memoirs about never fitting in as a child, because her Protestant family taught her to look down on her cousins who worshipped Catholic saints and wore frilly dresses for communion. Today, as a self-styled "crypto-Jewess" writer and teacher, Sandoval has reconstructed a happier past.

Now her girlhood occurred not in a drab neighborhood in Laramie, Wyoming, but in a quaint New Mexico village. Now her mother and grandmother enthusiastically venerated a saint -- Esther -- and clothed little Isabelle for Saint Esther's Day in a lovely pink dress, patent-leather shoes, and dainty flower earrings.

Other self-identified *anusim* still feel Christian, and they constitute fertile soil for messianic Jewish evangelists -- including those known as Jews for Jesus. Like the fundamentalist Protestant groups that once populated New Mexico, today's messianists believe that Jesus will not come again until the Jews have gathered to welcome him. Having spent their formative years in church, crypto-Jews are considered to be especially receptive to this message, and messianic houses of worship are being set up throughout the Southwest, with literature and sermonizing directed at the supposed descendants of the Inquisition. To the dismay of many Ashkenazim who have been following the crypto-Judaism story, some *anusim* wander into these hybrid synagogue-churches and stay there.

Others, though, have visited traditional Jewish congregations, liked what they saw, and undergone full conversions, complete with immersion in the mikvah bath and even circumcision. One, a Latino retiree named Frank Longoria, underwent conversion rites at Beth Shalom, a synagogue in the Dallas suburbs. Longoria's wife and children also converted, and now his grandchildren have had bar mitzvahs. At a time when half this country's Ashkenazim are marrying non-Jews and drifting from their historical roots, Longoria and other Latinos

may represent a small movement in the other direction, exotic and unexpected though it may be.

Their path, perhaps, will turn out to be a northern version of the Venta Prieta story. For years Mexico City's Jews wanted nothing to do with those poor, dark-skinned Protestant villagers who mistakenly called themselves Sephardim. In the 1960s, though, the Venta Prietans met a rabbi from the capital who agreed to perform conversions. With the help of visiting teenagers from a temple in Pennsylvania, the Venta Prietans rehabilitated their primitive synagogue and started studying Hebrew. Their children traveled to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Some fell in love with Israelis and married. Today the Venta Prietans are official: they have cast their lot with contemporary Judaism.

Has it all been a mistake? Historically, perhaps. But faith, of course, is always about more than history. Religions are built on collective wishes and hopes. And with southwestern crypto-Judaism the wishes and hopes may, in the end, prevail.

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.

