

COLUMBUS DAY (PART I): A HISTORIC SYMBOL FOR JEWS, LATINOS, NATIVE AMERICANS

El Derecho Del Pueblo

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The People’s Right

A column of social comment [Destiny](#) and legal advice by attorney and teacher Matthew “Mateo” Katz.

The two doctors, Alan and Jorge had worked together as volunteers in the Spanish Civil War and became very close friends, despite a language barrier. As they assisted one another at the operating table, they shared stories of their families, advice and ideas about how to treat patients, and comforted one another about the difficulties of war. After the war’s end, the two doctors kept in touch by sending letters across the ocean, recounting reflections of their experiences and comparing notes on the growth of one another’s families.

Several decades later, the two men reunited in Andalucia, in the south of Spain, at the Spanish doctor’s country home, a beautiful rancho surrounded by orchards and the purple and grey Sierra Nevada mountains in the distance. They laughed as they talked and shared a glass of sherry. At one point in their evening, the American doctor paused and looked at his comrade. He finally posed a question that had been deep within his mind for quite some time: “Listen, Jorge. Over these years I have read somewhat about the Jewish heritage in your country, about the hundreds of thousands of Jews who once populated this entire peninsula, and about the thousands who stayed and converted to Catholicism.

“As I read these stories, I often reflected on just how close of friends we were during the war and continued to be through all of these years. I particularly think about this when I read stories about how many Spaniards and Latin Americans have been joining synagogues, returning to what they have discovered are centuries’ old Jewish roots. Have you ever thought...”.

The Spanish doctor stared towards the evening sunset beyond the mountains. After a minute of thought, he turned back to his friend and responded: “Alan, come with me.” At this point, Jorge guided his old friend through the estate until both men arrived at a basement room beneath a

secluded sector of the ranch.

“Alan,” Jorge softly cautioned, “I am going to share with you a secret that has been with my family for centuries, that only because of the great friendship we have shared will I share with you. But, I of course ask that you honor this secret.”

“Absolutely,” Alan responded, wide-eyed with anticipation.

“My comrade, when I face minor difficult moments in my life, I say a prayer to the Virgin Mary or to God. When I am confronted with bigger issues, I speak to my priest or pray for a while in the church. That usually solves the problem. But, when things get really bad, I come down here.” At this point, Jorge removed a rusty key from a nearby chest, walked to a small safe, built into the wall, opened the door and removed several small objects: a prayer shawl, a skull-cap, a wooden box with leather straps attached, and a small prayer book with leather cover and yellowed pages. Jorge proceeded to place the prayer-cap on his head, strap the leather box to his forehead, place the shawl around his shoulders, hold the book in his hand, and “doven,” or rock back and forth in prayer as he faced the wall.

Alan stood aside in shock, amazed to see his Spanish friend of fifty-years in full Jewish prayer regalia, mimicking what to him was familiar only back home, in the synagogue or at family events. “But... How...”.

“These objects have been in my family for generations. My father taught me how to pray with them, his father taught him, and I will teach my son.”

Stories like this one, recounted in one study of Sephardic (Spanish Jewry) history, are surprising and precious, yet not all that rare. Indeed, thousands of families in Spain and Latin America still maintain the tradition of lighting the candles on Friday evening, the Jewish Sabbath. The only difference between their behavior and that of regularly practicing Jews, is that the Latino families do it in the basement, with the curtains drawn, afraid the inquisition will take notice and hunt them down for interrogation and torture.

On this week of Columbus Day, much of history is shrouded in the leaves of time, hidden behind the curtains of today's propaganda goals. Columbus himself was a descendent of Spanish Jewry, a Sephardi, who wrote his diary in Ladino, the language of the Jewish Ghettos of Granada and Valencia. Indeed, Columbus' 1492 voyage was precipitated by the expulsion, forced conversion and murder of all of Spain's Jews, signed off on by Queen Isabel also in the year 1492. Indeed, this Jewish sailor and conqueror of American lands benefited from the pain of his fellow brethren just as he did from the pain of the millions of Native Americans who his voyage to the New World would massacre. But, this story is as long as was Columbus' voyage, and thus, will be continued next week!