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Cape Verde heritage project launched

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WASHINGTON (JTA) -- An effort to preserve the Jewish heritage in Cape Verde was formally launched in Washington.

Carol Castiel, who has been promoting the preservation of the archipelago's Jewish history since the mid 1990s, unveiled the "Cape Verde Jewish Heritage Project" at an event hosted Wednesday evening by the Moroccan ambassador to Washington, Aziz Mekouar.

The project involves restoring cemeteries in the former Portuguese colony about 300 miles off Africa's west coast, and compiling histories of the community through interviews with its descendants and through archival research.

There were two waves of Jewish immigration; the first was of secret Jews who came with Portuguese colonization in the 15th century. That immigration is difficult to track because of the Jews' secrecy, and this project focuses more on a wave of immigrants from Morocco in the mid-19th century.

In addition to the Moroccan ambassador, Washington envoys from Cape Verde and Portugal attended the event, along with representatives of B'nai B'rith International, which guided Castiel in setting up the project.

Castiel, a Voice of America staffer, said that even though Cape Verde no longer has a Jewish community to speak of, its citizens – many with Jewish ancestry – are proud of the heritage. She discovered the heritage in the mid-1990s when she was responsible for scholarships for Portuguese speaking Africa while working at the African-American Institute.

"The pride is so strong," she said. "They are very, very attached to their Jewish identity."

Present at the event were a number of Cape Verdean immigrants to the United States who are descended from Jews. John Wahnnon, of Silver Spring, Md. displayed a set of slides chronicling his Moroccan Jewish ancestors inexorable assimilation into Cape Verde life.

"It makes me stronger if I know where I came from," said the U.S. Air Force veteran.