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By Anna Gawel
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Anna Gawel is on vacation. Her column will return in April.

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Cape Verde's Jewish Roots

Special to the Diplomatic Pouch contributed by Larry Luxner

On March 18, more than 100 prominent local Jews crowded into the Potomac, Md., home of an Arab ambassador whose Muslim country has no diplomatic relations with Israel — to celebrate the Judaic roots of a Catholic West African nation that has no Jews.

The eclectic event, held at the residence of Moroccan Ambassador Aziz Mekouar, was spearheaded by Carol Castiel, president of the Cape Verde Jewish Heritage Project Inc., a tax-exempt, nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization founded in 2007.

The project's goal is to raise \$250,000 over the next three years. Priorities include restoring some 30 tombstones in four crumbling but historically significant Sephardic Jewish cemeteries dating from the mid-1800s; publishing books, articles, pamphlets and videos that document the community's enduring legacy; and finally, promoting Jewish "heritage tourism" to Cape Verde.

In addition to Morocco's Mekouar, two other ambassadors were present for the event, which featured a photo exhibit and traditional Moroccan Jewish cuisine: Cape Verde's Fatima Veiga and Portugal's João de Vallera, along with Ambassador Herman Cohen, former U.S. assistant secretary of state for African affairs, as well as Daniel Mariaschin, executive vice president of B'nai B'rith International.



"I have never lost sight of my goal to honor the Jews of Cape Verde," said Castiel, a Voice of America staffer who's made the forgotten community her life's passion. Castiel became fascinated with the subject 13 years ago while working with Portuguese-speaking students at the New York-based Africa-America Institute.

That job introduced her to mixed-race Cape Verdeans with surnames like Levy, Cohen and Benchimol — and left her wondering how Sephardic Jews from Morocco and Gibraltar ended up in the remote island archipelago located 300 miles off the coast of West Africa.

"We know so little about these Jews and their exodus to Cape Verde, which was primarily for economic reasons," said Castiel, a Pennsylvania native who jokes that she's "Sephardic in her heart" despite her European Jewish background. "In talking with their descendants, many of whom still bear the distinctive Sephardic names of their paternal forebears, I encountered a sense of pride and identity with their Jewish heritage."

Throughout the 500 years that Cape Verde was a Portuguese colony, the islands received thousands of Jews fleeing religious persecution in Spain and Portugal. But only after 1821 — the year the Portuguese crown officially abolished the Inquisition — were Jews free to practice their religion throughout Portugal and its many colonies (including Cape Verde, Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and São Tomé e Príncipe). They quickly became an integral part of local society, exerting a strong, enduring influence on Cape Verde that continues to this day.

Later on, economic pressures forced many young men from Moroccan cities like Tangier and Tetouan to seek opportunities abroad. Once in Cape Verde, they married local Catholic women, meaning their offspring were no longer Jews despite their Jewish-sounding names.

In the early 20th century, Jewish businessman and philanthropist David Benoliel, whose parents came from Rabat, Morocco, literally fueled the economy of the tiny island of Boa Vista. And in 1991, Cape Verde inaugurated its first democratically elected prime minister, Carlos Alberto Wahnnon de Carvalho Veiga — a descendant of Moroccan Jews who came to Cape Verde via Gibraltar in the mid-1800s.

Yet today, not a single practicing Jew is left in Cape Verde, even though their cemeteries bear witness to the once-thriving presence. "The Jews of Morocco and

Gibraltar became entirely absorbed into Cape Verde,” said Castiel. “It was hard to know where their Jewishness left off and their Cape Verdeanness began.”

Ambassador Mekouar became involved in the project in 1997, after a meeting with Castiel. “I thought Carol’s idea of restoring these cemeteries was wonderful,” said the envoy, pointing out that his birthplace, Fez, was also where the great medieval Jewish philosopher, physician and Torah scholar Maimonides studied and wrote his most important works.

“Those who know Morocco, Portugal and Cape Verde know how these three countries have been interlinked for centuries,” Mekouar told his guests. “You cannot understand Moroccan culture if you don’t know there is a Jewish component in it, and today we have a huge Jewish Diaspora all around the world — in Israel, in the United States and in Canada. They are Morocco’s best ambassadors. That’s why this project is so important for all of us.”

Adds John Wahnou, a descendant of Cape Verdean Jews who lives in Silver Spring, Md.: “When my generation passes, those who come after will not have any way to learn about their Jewish legacy. This project will give youngsters in Cape Verde a chance to learn where they came from.”

There’s also a deeply spiritual component to the project, says Rabbi Joshua Maroof of Magen David Sephardic Congregation in Rockville, Md. “Long after the memory of a particular person may have been forgotten, their influence will still be felt. So when we preserve burial grounds, we’re not doing something morbid or negative,” said Maroof, many of whose congregants are of Moroccan origin.

“Every individual, Jewish or not, has a share in eternity. Only if we take the initiative to respect our predecessors can we be sure the same respect and honor will be accorded to us,” said the rabbi. “Together, we can make a statement not only about those buried in Cape Verde, but about the sanctity and significance of every human life.”

For more information on the Cape Verde Jewish Heritage Project, please call (202) 841-9925 or visit www.capeverdejewishheritage.org.

Inside Photo: From left, Carol Castiel, president of the Cape Verde Jewish Heritage Project Inc., and two of her diplomatic supporters, Ambassadors Aziz Mekouar of Morocco and Maria Fátima Lima da Veiga of Cape Verde, hosted a reception in honor of the Cape Verde Jewish Heritage Project.

Photo: Larry Luxner

Front Page: Carol Castiel, president of the Washington-based Cape Verde Jewish Heritage Project Inc., left, poses with Salamith Spencer, a descendant of Hillel Benchimol, whose 19th-century tombstone on the island of Santiago in Cape Verde remains a testament to the African country’s enduring Jewish influence.

Photo: Larry Luxner