



TRAVEL | NYT NOW

In Spain, a Family Reunion, Centuries Later

By DOREEN CARVAJAL APRIL 4, 2014

At twilight, I roamed a honey-colored labyrinth of brick houses in Segovia's medieval Jewish quarter, walking a cobblestone path in the footsteps of my distant ancestor from 16 generations ago.

In the shadows, I reminded myself that every element in his story is true: a Vatican power struggle; an Inquisition trial that confused our family's religious identity for generations; and a neighborhood infested with spies, from the queen's minions to the leather maker and butcher.

I was hunting for documents, landmarks and even medieval recipes that could bring to life the family history of Diego Arias Dávila, a wealthy 15th-century royal treasurer to King Enrique IV who was loved and loathed for the taxes he extracted. Call it ancestral tourism, a quest for roots, branches and a family reunion across centuries.

My quest was inspired, in part, by the ancient Spanish custom of Holy Week religious processions: brotherhoods of penitents in robes and peaked hoods that for centuries marched through the narrow lanes in different regions in cities like Seville, Málaga and Segovia. The first time I saw them was in the south of Spain, passing an old Jewish quarter of whitewashed houses where the images plunged me into a medieval era when inquisitors in anonymous hoods confronted suspected heretics, including my own ancestors.

During Easter week, the brotherhoods in Segovia, in central northern Spain, parade with lifelike wooden sculptures of Jesus and Mary past the Gothic cathedral in the center of town and the illuminated Alcázar, the towering castle of the kings of Castile and León.

I feel shivers of the past each time I walk the path along the limestone ramparts — facing the dusky blue Guadarrama mountain range. Perhaps in some ways I know the Arias Dávila family better than my own generation.

When I learned their fate, I felt my own identity shatter and shift, changing who I am.

Their dramas are preserved in Inquisition folder 1,413, No. 7, in handwritten script and housed in the Madrid national archives. Almost 200 pages are devoted to their daily habits, gleaned from neighbors turned spies — wedding rituals, burial clothes, prayers and frequently the adafina lamb stew of chick peas and cinnamon they savored, slow cooked on hot embers overnight and served on the Sabbath.

For these rituals, Diego Arias Dávila — and other Jewish ancestors who were Christian converts — were investigated by the Spanish Inquisition in 1486 for heresy. Their religious crime: maintaining a double Jewish life in secret.

On this journey to Segovia, perhaps I could find their missing tomb — their remains whisked away to evade the reach of inquisitors looking for telltale signs of Jewish burial rituals. Or maybe I could reclaim the shards of the identity of my family who converted to Christianity centuries ago to survive but guarded a Jewish legacy in secret for generations from Spain to Costa Rica to California.

Not many people come to explore the roots of a family tree in this rocky crag of about 55,000 people, nestled between two river valleys 55 miles north of Madrid. But there are plenty of tourists who arrive in Segovia by bus and train, bound for the granite Roman aqueducts that loom over the entrance to the historic quarter and the taverns serving the Segovian specialty of baby suckling pig. Most vanish before sunset.

Then the rhythm of the city shifts to a meditative, unhurried one. For me, it's a contemplative time to savor Segovia's historical charm by its Gothic 16th-century cathedral and a leafy plaza of outdoor cafes where Queen Isabella was crowned — power used in 1492 to expel thousands of Jews who faced the choice of fleeing, converting to Christianity or preserving their religion in secret.

Ana Sundri Herrero, of the city's tourism center, told me during one of my visits last spring and summer that there isn't much demand for genealogy information although Spain has a vast diaspora of emigrants that dates back centuries.

Other countries with a more recent history of mass migration, such as Ireland and Scotland, are aggressively promoting genealogical records on government-sponsored websites to increase tourism. And Irish and Scottish businesses have seized it as an attraction. The Shelbourne Hotel in Dublin offers a special genealogy butler to guide guests. The Four Seasons hotel in

Prague also offers a genealogy service to fashion tours to track the neighborhoods of grandparents.

For my own quest, I cobbled together a strategy with a right and left-brain approach that started with an emotional immersion in Andalusia and then a methodical genealogical search to track family lines that led north to Segovia.

For one summer, my husband, Omer, and daughter, Claire, and I moved to the south of Spain, to Arcos de la Frontera. We settled in one of the white houses, an ex-bordello clinging on the side of a limestone cliff and a short walk from the remains of a Jewish quarter and a synagogue transformed into an orphanage during the Inquisition.

I moved there to learn the history and geography of the country and to understand why ancestors left or stayed and submerged their identity. I traveled to Arcos frequently, fascinated that food, art, music and culture could help me travel back in time — especially the brotherhoods that in some cases played historic roles as enforcers during the Inquisition.

I felt chills at the sharp notes of saeta music — distinctive to the region and sung a cappella in the streets during Holy Week. The music echoes the rising and falling chant of the Jewish Kol Nidre, a Yom Kippur prayer. And some flamenco experts believe that converts sang the saetas to passing Holy Week images of Jesus and Mary to demonstrate loyalty, but with a double meaning for insiders.

For the left brain side of my hunt, I started researching all the family branches. My search dated back to 2001, after a move from New York to Europe, a moment in middle age that strikes most of us when we think about roots and what we can pass on to our children.

In my work as a journalist, people had long inquired about my byline, Carvajal, a Sephardic Jewish name that in some spelling variations means lost place, rejected. But I knew nothing about the past. My father, Arnoldo Carvajal, had grown up in Costa Rica and emigrated to San Francisco with his mother and sister while a teenager. He married, and with my mother raised six children. We were Catholic, attended weekly Sunday Mass, ate fish on Fridays and wore it all: Catholic school uniforms of green plaid skirts and medieval-style scapulars tucked around our necks.

After I started my search, I found many clues to our submerged Jewish identity from relatives, but I hit brick walls on the Carvajal line. A 19th-century Costa Rican ancestor had not registered a husband, giving her Carvajal name to

a newborn, registered as a "natural son," the polite Spanish term for illegitimate.

I had made a critical error by not looking at other family lines, ignoring an ancestral habit of intermarriage among Costa Rican cousins. I realized later it was a sign that they were marrying one another to protect secrets and preserve rituals like the menorah that my cousin said he found in my great-aunt's bedroom after she died in 1998.

My grandmother's line on the Chacón side led to Spaniards who abandoned prosperous lives in Andalusia in the 16th century. One was a judge who died of a heart attack on the way to the Spanish colony of Costa Rica, and another, his young son, who drowned on the same journey in the Río Negro in Honduras. Each new generation fit together in a crossword puzzle of wives and husbands — a search for birth and death certificates that emerged in fits and starts, aided by sites like familysearch.org or ancestry.com.

Segovia startled me when it surfaced in my puzzle. I knew of no family tie to the city. But my grandmother's line leapt a new generation in the 16th century, to Isabel Arias Dávila, the wife of the first governor of Costa Rica, who emigrated from Segovia during the Inquisition.

With that name, I rapidly learned about the Inquisition trial that tangled the family's identity for generations and forced others to lead new lives as conquistadores in Spanish colonies. The patriarch was Diego Arias Dávila, whose family converted when he was a boy and whose son Juan was the bishop of Segovia for 30 years.

The bishop's internal political struggle with the inquisitor Tomás de Torquemada turned into an epic legal clash that reached all the way to the Vatican. The Grand Inquisitor battled the bishop by probing his family for evidence of their double life. His parents and grandmother were investigated posthumously, among them Diego Arias Dávila.

I knew the contours of their story the first time I arrived last spring in Segovia's Jewish quarter, which dates back to the 13th century. Today it still gives the eerie sense at some moments that little has changed among the three-story houses where inhabitants once worshiped at one of five synagogues, some still intact.

The mansion of Abraham Seneor — a contemporary of Diego Arias Dávila and a royal financial adviser who converted in 1492 — has been meticulously restored by the city and was transformed into a museum for the Jewish quarter

in 2004. There conversos like the Arias Dávila family worshiped in secret in a private synagogue, according to accounts of the time.

Up until the early 1990s, Segovia did not promote this quarter, which is set off from the rest of the walled city by brick arches that were gated in the 15th century to separate Jews from Christians. But since then the local government and state invested heavily to restore the quarter. Now its streets have an air of calm: clean brick and stone facades, rhythmic detailing of balconies and hanging plants at the windows.

To restore my own family history, I knew I needed a very special kind of guide. On my own, I had failed to find the missing tomb of Diego Arias Dávila, though I had located the family coat of arms in the cathedral of Segovia.

Typically most cities in Spain have a cronista, a historian with a passion for the place and its quirks. I had found one earlier in Arcos de la Frontera, Manuel Pérez Regordán, a retired accountant who was so obsessive that he self-published four volumes of history told through each one of its little streets.

In Segovia, the tourist office led me to a high school teacher named María Eugenia Contreras, who is researching the Arias Dávila family for a doctorate.

It was María Eugenia who guided me through Segovia's tranquil neighborhoods, passing a park with nesting storks where the Mercedes convent once stood. It was the site of the last official tomb of Diego Arias Dávila, and his wife, Elvira, also a Christian convert. But even Maria Eugenia did not know what happened to their remains. They had been moved too many times. She gave me a huge gift, though, when she told me about a Salamanca professor who had painstakingly transcribed the handwritten Inquisition testimonies of 200 witnesses against the family.

I found the title — in pristine condition — through an online used-book store in Spain. It was a window into their lives — the lettuce and unleavened bread they ate at Passover, their donations of oil to the local synagogues and the telling anecdote that as he lay on his deathbed at 86, Diego Arias Dávila thundered at the Franciscan friars who had come to administer last rites to go to the devil.

He lived in an enormous palace on the southern side of the city that is dominated by its fortress tower and plastered in Segovia's unique limestone patterns. Today, a neighboring street is named for the family. A sign also marks the landmark tower, but with no reference to the Inquisition.

The first time I tried to enter the palace, I was turned away because it was closing time. The next morning, the first floor was bustling with people waiting to pay bills. Fittingly, the Arias Dávila palace has been transformed into government tax offices — a perfect legacy for a royal treasurer.

In theory, I should have felt something, but I didn't. I studied the palace's coffered ceilings and the stone carvings of the coat of arms of the Arias Dávila family, but the government office could be anywhere with its counters, red chairs and bureaucrats.

Instead I felt the pangs of yearning for home — añoranza in Spanish — when I sat in a windswept little plaza at sunset near the city's stone walls. It was loud with birdsong. A few neighbors occupied plastic chairs, and tables were cluttered with iced tinto de verano wine cocktails.

The square lies near Calle Martínez Campos, where a vanished synagogue stood that was funded by Diego's wife, Elvira, and her presence, after reading the Inquisition transcripts, was inescapable. I wondered, as I sat in the square, if Segovia had absorbed some of her burdens and if places, like people, can be scarred by history.

Elvira converted as a young girl with her family in the 15th century in the midst of spreading anti-Semitism.

Yet it was clear from the Inquisition testimony that she yearned to maintain family bonds: taking pleasure in Jewish weddings and holidays, leaving explicit instructions before her death about who should be at her bedside. Those family ties remained so strong that she managed to share something precious with us 16 generations later. Perhaps some things are meant to be.

I was startled when I discovered her real name was actually Clara, changed after her conversion. It means clear and bright. By coincidence — or maybe not — we named our daughter the French version, Claire.

As I sat in the little plaza in Segovia, watching the pale stone walls and the blue night deepen, I knew that I could not change what is past. But I can change the story we tell about ourselves, and by doing that I can change our future.

Correction: April 4, 2014

An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misstated the location where the photo was taken. The photo, of the author's grandmother, father and aunt, was taken in Costa Rica, not the Dominican Republic.

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A version of this article appears in print on April 6, 2014, on page TR1 of the New York edition with the headline: Family Reunion, Centuries Later.

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