At the end of the sixteenth century, two Adriatic seaports, Venice and Ragusa, proved to be strongholds against the Papal policy to extend the influence of the Inquisition in the Catholic states over Jews with a Christian past who were openly practising Judaism. Soon after issuing the bull *Cum nimis absurdum* in 1555, the growing power of the Holy Office was shown in the condemnation of 26 New Christians to be burned at the stake for Judaizing in Ancona.¹ The specific background and lifestyle of Spanish and Portuguese New Christians in Italy gave rise to scandal in the eyes of the Church, for “the Marranos were worse than Jews, because they were neither Christians nor Jews who lived together in the ghetto separated from Christians, but rather living all over the city.”²

The problem of the ambiguous existence of so-called “Marranos” has been widely discussed in modern scholarship, focusing alternatively on their economic, social or religious significance.³ However, within single families the different identities of their members appeared either to be useful for trading purposes or dangerous experiments casting suspicion on the religious affiliation, or even causing division within the family itself.⁴ A very good example for such a way of life on the borderline between Christianity and Judaism and facing all the difficulties of changing identities is reflected in the person of

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⁴ See, for instance, the case of the Ribeiro family, Pulan, *The Jews of Europe*, 231ff.
Abraham Cohen, alias Alonso Nuñez de Herrera and his relatives. As fate would have it, even Herrera’s books had their history of being translated from Spanish into Hebrew and Latin, thus making their career in Jewish as well as Christian settings.5

Famous for his Spanish treatises on Lurianic Kabbala in a neo-Platonic garb, Abraham Cohen de Herrera’s work has recently experienced a renaissance in the field of early modern studies.6 Unfortunately, it has not yet been possible to adequately identify his family relations. Despite some information available about the various stages of his at times adventurous life, many details are missing. All that is known about his family hitherto is his father’s Jewish name David, his famous uncle Juan de Marchena, commercial agent of the sultan of Morocco, and a somewhat obscure notice from the Jewish renegade Hector Mendes Bravo about an alleged “cousin” named Rodrigo de Marchena. Beside this, only Abraham’s marriage with Sarah, apparently related to a family named Delgado, is documented in the Amsterdam Municipal Archive.7 Their tombstone can still be found in the Jewish cemetery in Ouderkerk aan de Amstel.

Herrera’s writings include a reference to his father, who at the beginning of Puerta del cielo is called the “prudent and honourable elder, Rabbi David Cohen de Herrera.”8 In Book Two, however, Herrera added: “Rabbi David Cohen de Herrera of good memory, who came from Cordoba.”9 It may be possible that Herrera wrote

7 See Nissim Yosha, Myth and Metaphor: Abraham Cohen Herrera’s Philosophic Interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1984), 46f. [Hebr.]; Abraham and Sara married after Herrera’s return from English captivity around the year 1600, as N. Yosha proved from a notarial document, ibid. pp. 26f. However, the witnesses in this short record are not, as Yosha writes, Hendrik Hudde and Class Pieterse, whose names appear at the end of the entry, but Francisco Casseres and Louis Vaz, who are also named as witnesses in the preceding entry (Yosha wrongly read “getuigen etc.” instead of “getuigen ut supra”), see Gemeente Archief Amsterdam, Dopen, Trowen, Begrafenissen, no. 1008, p. 101. (I would like to thank Odette Vlessing for her kind help during my work at the archive.)
8 Kenneth Krabbenhoft, Abraham Cohen de Herrera Gate of Heaven (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 1; Krabbenhoft translated the MS The Hague, Royal Library, 131 C 10, here fol. 1v.