Nathan Wachtel


One of the ironies of history is that our knowledge of ordinary people in the past so often results from their having experienced terrible misfortunes during their own lifetimes. Personal disasters can generate rich archives. Nathan Wachtel's magnificent book is a moving example of how powerful history can be born of tragedy. Using records from the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions, he tells the stories of dozens of individuals arrested on suspicion of practicing Judaism. The Inquisition's method of investigation combined potentially prolonged incarceration with periods of intensive questioning and, at times, torture of the suspect, together with the collecting of witness statements and testimonials. Every aspect of this process was documented. The Inquisition's Lisbon prison contained special observation cells, where officials who kept detailed notes on the prisoner's daily activities could scrutinize prisoners, unbeknownst to them, round-the-clock. Transcripts of torture sessions record not only the victim's answers to interrogation, but also their cries, groans, and pleas for mercy. The questioning that followed the initial arrest required the suspect to narrate their life story, producing an involuntary autobiography, and subsequent interrogation sessions focused particularly on their innermost beliefs and self-narratives. Indeed, inquisitors displayed a level of interest in the prisoner's mental universe comparable to that of the modern psychoanalyst, or, as the fine introduction by Yosef Kaplan reminds us, the anthropologist, although of course Inquisitors were motivated by quite different concerns. All this documentation provides the historian with a wealth of material with which to construct the miserable experiences of men and women detained by the Holy Office.

In eight gripping chapters _The Faith of Remembrance_ recounts the lives of suspected Judaizers in Mexico, Peru, Portugal, and Spain between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. We learn about the humble Theresa Paes de Jesus, born in Rio de Janeiro and burned at age fifty-five in Lisbon, who told her scandalized inquisitors that, as far as she understood, “Jesus Christ was the same person as Moses, son of Queen Esther” (193). We encounter Fernando de Montesinos, whose knowledge of Jewish culture seems to have derived in significant measure from an against-the-grain reading of anti-Semitic tracts, who proclaimed before perishing at the stake that the sudden gust of wind that ripped away the scaffold’s canvas roof had been arranged by the God of Israel so that He could “see me from Heaven face to face” (49). We learn about the anxious dreams of suspects languishing in the Inquisition’s prisons, about
the detainees in Mexico City who sought to elude the eavesdropping of informants by speaking to each other in Nahuatl, and about the surprising difficulty of coming to a clear decision on whether a suspect had been circumcised. (It appears that in the Indies circumcision sometimes consisted solely of a series of slits or cuts in the foreskin, rather than its complete removal.) We also hear the humiliated outrage of prisoners subjected to the intimate personal inspection that such investigations required. “They put me before five surgeons to see if I was circumcised,” complained Tomas Trevino de Sobremonte to a fellow prisoner. When his interlocutor failed to understand what he meant, he responded: “Imbecile! Cretin! They came to see if it is cut! . . . One after the other, each one took it in his hand, rubbed it, examined it” (108-9). We follow the despair and mental collapse of prisoners detained for years on end and the desperate attempts by family members to avoid implicating close relatives, especially those already “reconciled” to the church, for whom a second conviction would mean death.

Wachtel insists that the historian’s role, when confronted with such pathetic stories, cannot be simple empathy. The historian should also place these lives in context, which for Wachtel entails, in part, understanding the fluid, modern world that gave birth to his protagonists. He argues that the marrano condition in fundamental ways reflects the experience of modernity, especially in its shifting allegiances, restless movement, emphasis on self-fashioning, and, ultimately, skepticism. “He says that he will be what it suits him to be, Catholic, Jew, Moor, English,” reads the interrogation record of one prisoner in seventeenth-century Mexico City (181).

Marrano religiosity rarely reflected a close familiarity with Jewish doctrine. As Wachtel notes, it instead consisted of an often-fragmentary mosaic of practices and beliefs whose central feature was the memorialization of Jewish identity rather than any specific doctrine. Certain features served as particular sites of memory. Fasting, often several times a week, seems to have played a central role in marrano practice, for example. While in prison detainees went to great lengths both to fast and also to obscure their fasting from guards, who would doubtless interpret their behavior as suspicious. Beyond this, as one chapter explains in fascinating detail, the terms used to describe fasting, such as “cro,” also meant “to make love.” Women recalled to Inquisition officials the happy days when they “performed cro” with their handsome partners, in a heady mix of the ascetic and the erotic.

Our marrano protagonists operated not only in the covert world of crypto-Jews and their extended networks, but also in the broader social context of early modern Iberia and its colonies, many of whose central features they embraced. The Iberian emphasis on race and lineage, for instance, recurs in the marrano