

THE MARTYRDOM OF THE PROSELYTE JOSEPH SARALVO

by ABRAHAM DAVID

In 1531, many Marranos living in Portugal migrated to various countries in Western and Central Europe, fleeing the newly-established state-controlled Inquisition that actively sought to uproot heresy among the New Christians.¹ A major Marrano center already existed in Antwerp; among those who arrived there was the Mendes family, headed by Dona Gracia and her son-in-law, Joseph Nasi, who introduced their extensive banking enterprise into this city.² Another flourishing Marrano center was located in Ferrara, Italy, where the Marranos were granted autonomy in religious affairs. Many Marranos took advantage of this situation to formally return to Judaism. In his book *Shalsholet ha-Qabbalah*,³ Rabbi Gedaliah ibn Yahya depicted the state of affairs in Ferrara in 1535.

In that year Ercole, the Duke of Ferrara, allowed the Marranos fleeing Portugal due to persecution by the Inquisition, and who had been inspired by God to return to His Torah

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אברהם דויד, "לפרשת מוחו של הגר יוסף סרלבו על קידוש השם," *קריית ספר* נ"ט (תשמ"ד), 243–246.

1. See M. Kayserling, *Geschichte der Juden in Portugal* (Leipzig, 1867), pp. 185 ff.; C. Roth, *A History of the Marranos* (Philadelphia, 1947), pp. 69–73; A. Herculano, *History of the Origin and Establishment of the Inquisition in Portugal* (New York, 1972) [reissue of the 1926 translation from the Portugese, with an introduction by H.Y. Yerushalmi].

2. See Cecil Roth, *Dona Gracia of the House of Nasi* (Philadelphia, 1977²), pp. 21–49.

3. On this work, see A. David, "R. Gedalya Ibn Yahya's *Shalsholet haKabbalah*: A Chapter in Medieval Jewish Historiography," *Immanuel* 12 (1981), pp. 60–76.

[i.e., to return to Judaism], to settle in Ferrara, and to perform circumcisions as well. Marrano immigration to Ferrara continued each year, and [a community] exists to this day. However, an outbreak of the plague in 5311 [i.e., 1551] was attributed to [the Marrano community] by the populace. Therefore, the Duke was compelled to expel the Marranos, to their sorrow and detriment, and they were scattered; however, some returned [to Ferrara].⁴

Our knowledge of the Marrano center in Ferrara and its central figures is unsystematic and limited to a few random facts. Our information encompasses Dona Gracia and her son-in-law Don Joseph Nasi,⁵ who transferred their financial activities from Antwerp to Ferrara, and openly returned to Judaism. Ferrara also served as a haven for the Usque family, including Samuel Usque, the author of *Consoloçam as Tribulaçoens de Israel*, which work aspired to strengthen the hearts and faith of the Marranos who had just recently cast off the veil of Christianity.⁶ His relative, Abraham Usque, published various Jewish works in Portugese at Ferrara, including a translation of the Bible.⁷

The intensive drive in Ferrara to return the New Christians to Judaism aroused the wrath of the Portugese Inquisition. Attempts were made, at its instigation, to apprehend those New Christian who had returned to Judaism. Many were arrested; moreover, three individuals were remanded to Rome to undergo examination by the Ecclesiastical Inquisition for their role in this campaign. One of the three was a proselyte named Joseph Saralvo (also known by his former name, Gabriel Henriques), a goldsmith by profession, who had circumcised some eight hundred Marranos. He underwent the auto-de-fe in Rome on February 19, 1583 (27 Shevat, 5343). The manner of his execution and the steps preceding it are known from Portugese and Italian sources,⁸ which indicate that Saralvo's arrest came about as the result of his denunciation by a Marrano he had circumcised, as per this Marrano's testimony to an Inquisition court in Lisbon.⁹

4. Moscow MS., Ginsburg Collection, 652, p. 210a. On the outbreak of the plague in 1551 and the subsequent expulsion, see Roth, *Dona Gracia*, pp. 78–79. See also Joseph ha-Kohen, *Emek ha-Bakhah*, ed. K. Almbad (Uppsala, 1981), p. 73.

5. To the best of my knowledge, a comprehensive study of the Marrano community in Ferrara during the 16th century has yet to be written. See Roth, *A History of the Marranos*, pp. 208–211; *idem.*, *Dona Gracia*, pp. 65–82; Balletti, *Gli ebrei et gli estensi* (Reggio Emilia, 1930), pp. 75 ff.; as well as the brief treatment by R. Bonfil, “New Information on Rabbi Menahem Azariah de Fano and his Age” (Heb.), in *Peraqim be-toldot ha-Hevrah ha-Yehudit...* [Jacob Katz Festschrift] (Jerusalem, 1980), pp. 105–108.

6. Published at Ferrara in 1553. Available in an English translation by M.A. Cohen: Samuel Usque, *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel* (Judaica. Texts and Translations. II. 1. [Philadelphia, 1965]).

7. See C. Roth, “The Marrano press at Ferrara, 1552–1555,” *Modern Language Review* 38 (1943), pp. 307–317.

8. The sources are mentioned in C. Roth, “Joseph Saralvo: A Marrano Martyr at Rome,” *Festschrift zu Simon Dubnows siebzigsten Geburtstag* (Berlin, 1930), pp. 180–186.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

Saralvo's heroism received notable recognition in at least four *qinot* (liturgical elegies) composed after his death. These contain biographical details, particularly relating to Saralvo's attempts to persuade Marranos to return to Judaism. They are extant in several manuscripts, as well as in published form. They are:

1. "This generation shall see the end of the time of wrath."¹⁰
2. "To the tree of healing every mouth will cry."¹¹
3. "Hear me princes, I will cry out."¹²
4. "Sorrow and sighing have I found in my youth."¹³

A detailed account of R. Joseph Saralvo's execution, and the circumstances leading up to it, is found in a chronicle included in a collection of Hebrew correspondence. The author is unknown, but the account was evidently written shortly after the events described. Many details in this account are substantiated by other sources and by the *qinot*; previously unknown facts are revealed as well.

TEXT

(from Los Angeles Ms. 779 bX4, 7 [Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, Jerusalem, #32360], p. 82b)

It happened during the reign of the most honorable Pope Gregory XIII,¹⁴ in the year 5343, the 27th day of Shevat,¹⁵ the 19th of February, which was the Holy Sabbath,¹⁶ that the Holy Name was publicly sanctified by the pious, elderly, eminent R. Joseph Saralvo, a Portugese of non-Jewish birth, who came under the wings of the Shekhinah at the age of twenty-three and was converted to Judaism,¹⁷ and was circumcised (Gen. 17:24) at Ferrara. [He] was a righteous proselyte,¹⁸

ויהי בימי האפיפיור גיורגוריו יר"ה י"ג בשנת חמשת אלפים ושמ"ג כ"ז שבט יט פיבר' ביום שבת קודש, קדש שם שמים ברבים החסיד והוקן והמעולה כ"ר יוסף סיראלבו, אשר נולד גוי בין האומות בפורטוגאל, ובהיותו בין [!] עשרים ושלוש שנים נכנס תחת כנפי השכינה ונתגייר ונמול את בשר ערלתו בפיררה, והיה גר צדק ויהודי כשר וצדיק בכל עניניו, והיה כל ימיו בנקיות באמונתו, וכלכל אשתו ובניו ובנותיו תמיד במלאכת הצרפות ונעשה מוהל בקי מהיר במלאכתו, ועשה בימיו שמנה מאות בריחות של מילה בין גדולים וקטנים. ואח"כ בעת

10. "הדור אתם תראו עת זה ועם עברה". Published by Senior Sachs, *ha-Maggid* 2 (1858), p. 183.

11. "אלה מרפא יצעק כל פה". Published by S. Bernstein, "Qinot 'al serefat Ger ha-Zedeq R. Yosef Saralvo," *Mizrah u-Ma'arav* 4 (1930), pp. 12–13. The meaning of the term *elah* in the title is unclear. See Bernstein's article, p. 16, n. 10.

12. "שמעו שרים קולי ארים". *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

13. "יגונתי ואנחותי בחרותי מצאוני". *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

14. Gregory XIII reigned as pope from 1572 to 1585.

15. This date is cited by *Qinot* #3 and #4 as well.

16. This date is also cited in a Portugese source. Cf. Roth, "Joseph Saralvo," *op. cit.*, p. 182.

17. Saralvo was approximately 60 years old when executed. See Roth, "Joseph Saralvo," pp. 181, 183. Apparently, he was born in 1523 and came to Ferrara in 1546.

18. His status as a righteous convert is cited in *Qinah* #3. Although Roth was familiar with the *qinot*, he believed (*op. cit.*, p. 181, n. 2) that Saralvo was not a righteous proselyte, but a Marrano, and titled his article accordingly.

and a proper righteous Jew in all his dealings, living his life pure in his faith, supporting his wife, sons and daughters by goldsmithing.¹⁹ He became an expert *mohel*, renowned for his swiftness, and performed eight hundred circumcisions²⁰ on children and adults during his lifetime. Subsequently, in his old age, he was denounced²¹ to the Inquisition²² by sons of Belial (i.e., scoundrels; see, e.g., I K 21:13). As a result, Joseph was taken down (after Gen. 39:1) here to Rome, and imprisoned (Gen. 39:20) and he was there until a full year had passed (Lev. 25:30).²³ They entreated him day after day (Gen. 39:10; Est. 3.4) to return to their faith and to give up his honor, but he remained steadfast (literally: “his bow stayed firm” — Gen. 49:24), and they could not prevail. Therefore they sentenced him to be burned alive on the above-mentioned date, and they removed him from prison, and brought him out to be put to death at the place called Campo dei Fiori.²⁴ He disdained death (Est. 3:6) and, in order to prevent him from strengthening the Jews by example or by speech, a decree forbidding Jews to see him or speak to him was promulgated. Nevertheless, more than one hundred Jews saw him at the moment of his death through the windows and the lattices (Cant. 2:9). They observed him marching to the place of execution fearlessly, without trembling (Isa. 33:14), as one willingly sacrificing himself, nor did his countenance fall upon seeing the fire and the wood.²⁵ Instead, he said to himself, “Here are the fire and the wood, and I am the sheep for

זקנתו קמו אנשי בליעל והלשינוהו אל החקירה, ויוסף הורד פה רומה, ויתנהו הסוהר, ויה שם עד מלאת לו שנה תמימה. ויהי כדברם אליו יום יום להחזירו לדתם ולהמיר כבודו ושבב באיתן קשתו, ולא יכלו לו עד שגורו עליו לשורפו חי ביום הנ"ל, ויוציאוהו מבית הסוהר ויביאוהו להמיתו במקום הנקרא קמפו די פיורי. ויבו בעיניו את המות, וגם כדי שלא יתחוק באמונתו בראיית היהודים ובדברו עמהם גזרו שלא יוכל שום יהודי ללכת לראותו ולדבר עמו, אבל עכ"ז בשעת מיתתו ראוהו מן החלונות ומן החרכים יותר ממאה יהודים, וראוהו שהיה צועד והולך למקום המיתה בלי פחד וכל שום רעדה, רק בלב אמיץ ושמה כאיש הולך לעשות קרבן מעצמו ברצון נעשו, ולא נשתנו פניו מראית האש והעצים, אבל היה אומר בלבו הנה האש והעצים, ואני השה לעולה. וגם בהיותו שם אסור בין העצים הרבו גוים רבי' לדבר אחר דברים טובים להציל ממנו נפשו, ולתת לו מתנות גדולו' אם יחזור מאמונתו, וכדי להסירו מדעתו ולעולם לא יכלו להטותו, אפי' מדבור א', ולא הפסיקוהו מוידויו ומקריאת שמע, עד שהרבו עליו האש והעצים, וכדי להגדיל זכותו וצדקתו העומדת לעד, הראוהו משפט איש אחר שתלאוהו ושרפוהו לעיניו, ויאמרו לו ראה כי כן נעשה עמך עתה אם [לא] תחזור. ועוד הראוהו איש אחר שהיה נגזר והובא שם לשרפה כמוהו, ובשביל שחזר בו בפניו הצלוהו ממנו ופטרוהו לשלום. והוא רואה הדברים, לא הפסיק מלאמר השמע בזמנו עד שה[ר]בו העצים ושרפוהו, ויצא נפשו באחד, כר' עקיבא וחבריו, וקיים בעצמו מקרא שכתוב ואהבת את ק' אלקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך אפי' נוטל אח נפשך, תהי נפשו צרורה בצרור החיים הנצחיים ותהי מתתו נחשבת לקרבן עולה תמימה לרצון מלפני האלקי' חיים ומלך-עולם לכפר עלינו ולקדם את [מישחנן] במהרה בימינו אכיר"א תם.

19. His work as a goldsmith is mentioned in a Portuguese source. See Roth, “Joseph Saralvo,” p. 181, as well as in *Qinah* #1.

20. *Qinah* #3 supports this statement: ‘*et ziqnato hilshinuhu* (in his old age he was denounced).

22. The word *ḥaḡirah* refers to the Inquisition. Cf. Roth, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

23. The fact that his imprisonment lasted an entire year is mentioned in *Qinah* #3 and in the Portuguese source. Cf. Roth, p. 182.

24. Campo dei Fiori is cited as the place of execution in a Portuguese source and in an Italian source. See Roth, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

25. The procession to the auto-de-fe, and the unsuccessful last-minute attempts to persuade Saralvo to recant, are described in an Italian source. See Roth, “Joseph Saralvo,” *op. cit.*, p. 183. See also *Qinah* #2: “When he arouse to end his life on the day of his death, he saw Hebrews mourning his fate in the corner of the market. He said to them, ‘Why do you mourn? Any wise man would laugh at you.’”

the burnt-offering” (Gen. 22:7–8). Even while he was already fettered by the wood (Jer. 40:1; Cant. 7:6), many of the Gentiles tried to persuade him to save his life, promising him many gifts in lieu of his recantation. But they were unable to sway him from his faith, not even from a single commandment, nor did they succeed in interrupting his recitation of the Confession [before death] and of the *Shema*, until they heaped fire and wood on him. In order to increase his everlasting merit and righteousness, he was shown the example of another [Marrano] who had been hung [first], before being burned in his presence,²⁶ and told that he would be treated similarly were he [not] to recant. Moreover, he was shown [another example] of a man who, like he, had been condemned to die at the stake,²⁷ but, since he recanted in [R. Joseph’s] presence,

was pardoned and released. [R. Joseph] observed these examples, but did not cease his recitation of the *Shema* until they piled up the wood and burned him.²⁸ His soul expired with [the recitation of the word] “One” (thus affirming God’s unity), like R. Akiba and his companions. He fulfilled the biblical injunction, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul” (Deut. 6:5) - i.e., even if God takes your soul.²⁹ May his soul be bound up in the bounds of eternal life (a phrase from the Memorial Prayer for the Dead), and may his death be as acceptable (Isa. 56:7) to the living God as an unblemished burnt-offering. May the Lord of the Universe grant us forgiveness, and hasten the coming of [our Messiah]* speedily in our day. Amen. Thus may it be His will. Amen. Finis.

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26. This person is identified as Diego Lopes, one of the three imprisoned in Rome after having been accused of propagandizing for the return of the Marranos to Judaism. He was put to death by strangulation and his body was then burned. See Roth, *op. cit.*, pp. 182–184.

27. This may refer to the third man arrested with them.

28. Official sources, as well as the *qinot*, indicate that Saralvo was burned alive. However, an Italian source states that he was first hanged, his body burned afterwards. It appears that this source has confused Saralvo with Diego Lopes, who was executed in this manner, as seen above. See Roth, “Joseph Saralvo,” p. 184, end of n. 3.

29. Cf. M. Berakhot 9:5.

* Brackets in Hebrew text.