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# The Case of the Part-Time Jew: A Unique Incident in Nineteenth- Century America

*Ralph G. Bennett*

The work of a genealogical researcher is often similar to that of an archaeologist. Each fresh discovery reveals another stratum of data which leads, in turn, to still another layer of facts. Nothing illustrates this point more than the strange life story I happened upon while researching the history of the Jews in Δ104

, a remote enclave of the old Dutch colonial empire located on the northeastern coast of South America, and formerly called Dutch Guiana.

Abraham Gabay Crasto was a Sephardic Jew born on April 14, 1797 in Surinam. He later emigrated to the United States, and converted to Christianity when he was married at the age of seventeen, in a Methodist Episcopal church in Greenbough, New York, on July 9, 1814. His bride, Rebecca Lynch Purdy, was the granddaughter of a noted minister. Soon after their marriage the young couple journeyed to Surinam, where they were married a second time in the Jewish faith, after Rebecca formally converted to Judaism. The couple, with their two young children, lived as part of Dutch Guiana's Sephardic Jewish community for several years. Then they returned to New York, where they reassumed their identity as Christians; ultimately, they were buried in a Protestant cemetery. Subsequent descendants were unaware that their family had ever had any connection to Judaism.

Who was this man who had been born a Jew, converted to Christianity, converted back to Judaism, and finally spent the rest of his days as a Christian? I was curious to learn the motives behind his unusual behavior. I believe, with anthropologist Franz Boas, that "The passion for seeking the truth only for truth's sake . . . can be kept alive only if we continue to seek the truth for truth's sake."

## *The Jews of Surinam*

First, a few words about Surinam itself and the Jews who settled there. My interest in the history of this obscure country began in

1978, when I started to trace out my family tree and that of my wife. Most people are not even aware of Surinam's existence; if asked, they might place it somewhere in Asia, near Vietnam. Yet a number of people of "European" descent who now reside in the United States have found that some of their ancestors can be traced back to Surinam. For Dutch-American Jews especially, Surinam often provides the "missing link." My wife Shelley, for example, had always assumed that her father was from the Netherlands because he came to the United States from Amsterdam in 1939, as war clouds gathered over Europe. However, I soon discovered through genealogical research that her father was not born in Holland, but in that remote South American outpost, Surinam. In fact, we learned from Dutch genealogical records that Shelley's ancestors were among the original Sephardic Jewish settlers who colonized the Americas in the 1600s.

Surinam became a Dutch colony under the treaty of Breda in 1667, when the British swapped it to the Dutch for New Amsterdam (now New York). At first it proved to be a good bar-



*Engraving of galleons sailing into Paramaribo, Surinam harbor (1774).*

gain for Holland. The Dutch turned a nice profit for a great number of years on the plantation-based economy they built in Surinam. With its riches of sugar cane, coffee, and chocolate, Surinam became the leading community of the Americas by 1730, far surpassing the wealth of better-known places such as Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. By the 1600s, many Marranos from Spain and Portugal had fled to Amsterdam to escape the Inquisition and resume their lives as Jews. From there they ventured out to take advantage of the financial opportunities in the Dutch New World colonies. One of the most popular destinations was Surinam, where, with few restrictions on their hard-won financial talents, Jews soon owned about half the plantations in the colony. But the plantation economy failed when slavery ended in the 1800s, and the great majority of white Surinamese, Jews included, abandoned their plantations in hopes of a more secure future in the United States.

#### *Research Resources*

I began a correspondence with a number of libraries and researchers in pursuit of more information about the Hebrew nation in Surinam. Three categories of genealogical and historical records exist. Those that are available for general view have been preserved on microfilm in various archives in the Netherlands and in Mormon family-research centers. The birth, marriage, and death registries for the Sephardic communities in Surinam, for example, extend all the way back to the 1600s.

The second category of documents are those that are too fragile to be photographed or handled and are only accessible to a few leading scholars. In the year 1912, the Dutch government decided that all the records that existed in Surinam properly belonged to the Dutch central government, and it decreed, therefore, that all records from before 1816 were to be sent off to the mother country. Unfortunately, the ship carrying the records experienced a rough voyage and many of the trunks full of fragile old documents were substantially damaged by sea water; hence their restricted accessibility now.

The third category of documents are those that were even more severely damaged during that disastrous voyage; they are kept permanently sealed for fear that exposure to the air will destroy

them totally. These remaining documents now reside in the National Archives in the Hague, and are unavailable for viewing by even the most qualified scholars and researchers. The Dutch are awaiting the development of some new restoration technology which will make it safe to open these records so they can be viewed by scholars and the public. In short, some big gaps exist in the information available not only to the public but to specially privileged researchers as well.

In addition to the birth, marriage, and death records of Surinam proper, there are other extant old documents that have a bearing on the history of the Jews of Surinam. For example, the municipal archives of Amsterdam (the Gemeentelijke Archiefdienst) has in its files over three miles of shelves of historical notarial records of the Amsterdam community, many of them related to business transactions between the mother country and its colony in Dutch Guiana.

Another source of information is the Royal Archives in the Hague (Algemeen Rijksarchief). This institution has records of the Dutch colonies because it has preserved the books and papers of the old Dutch East and West India companies.

### *Genealogical Networking*

Because I wanted to gather as much information as possible about Surinam, I placed ads in some of the world's genealogical journals offering to share knowledge with others interested in the Jewish history of Dutch Guiana. Among the scholars whose acquaintance I made by mail was the delightful Rabbi Malcolm Stern, author of *First American Jewish Families: 600 Genealogies from 1654 to 1977*, an expanded version of his earlier book, *Americans of Jewish Descent*. Stern, who died this year, was regarded as the foremost Jewish genealogist in America. As a result of his books, he received queries from many people tracing their early Jewish ancestors not only in the United States but throughout the New World. Stern wrote me to ask permission to give my address to two of them, Virginia Fremon of Hackenstown, New Jersey, and Larry Dunham of Rye, New York, who had questions about their Surinamese ancestors.

I began corresponding with Larry Dunham in January of 1979. Dunham, a Christian, had discovered that his great-grandmother

Rachel Crasto Munsen was the daughter of one Abraham George Crasto and his wife, Rebecca Lynch Purdy. He had concluded, from sleuthing in the birth records, that "George" was an assumed middle name, and that Abraham's true identity was Abraham Gabay Crasto, the son of David Gabay Crasto and his wife Rachel, both of whom had emigrated to New York from Surinam in approximately 1800. I informed Larry that the name Gabay Crasto was an old Sephardic Jewish name and probably indicated that his ancestors had been Jews.<sup>1</sup> Dunham was very surprised to discover that he had a Jewish ancestor and wanted to know as much as I could tell him about the couple's background.

Stern's other correspondent, Virginia Fremon, also wrote to me in early 1979 to tell me that her great-grandfather was one Moses Gabay Crasto. It was soon obvious to me that Moses was another child of Abraham and Rebecca's, which made Virginia Fremon and Larry Dunham third cousins, although they had no idea of each other's existence. Virginia, too, was a Christian and was intrigued to learn that she had Jewish ancestors.

I was able to help Virginia and Larry extend their family trees back even further with the help of my various research sources, including an article by Reverend P. A. Hilfman.<sup>2</sup> This article included a fragment of the Surinam marriage registry from roughly 1693 to 1744. Over the next several months I traded information back and forth with Larry and Virginia.

*Rebecca Lynch Pindy*

It was not until nearly ten years later, however, that I discovered a footnote in a book about Surinamese Jews which alerted me to the fact that there might be more to relate to Virginia and Larry about their ancestors than I had originally supposed. The book, *Jews in Another Environment*, was by Robert Cohen, an historical researcher at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He too had answered one of the original ads I had placed in a genealogical journal, and over the years was extraordinarily helpful in going to the original sources sequestered in the archives in Holland in order to research questions I had whose answers were available nowhere else. We had corresponded off and on for over ten years.<sup>3</sup>

Robert's information had been obtained from the shreds of the documents that had survived in the records stored in Holland. The footnote in his book that caught my attention was a commentary on his description of the outrageous behavior of a young Jewish man named Abraham Moses Bueno de Mesquite, who had been forcibly deported from Dutch Guiana in 1786 as a teenager. Exactly what Abraham had done to offend the Parnassim (elders of the Jewish community) so much was not mentioned in the original sources. Robert's footnote was in reference to Abraham's further flaunting his disdain of the power of the Jewish elders:

Abraham Bueno de Mesquita . . . eventually returned to Surinam after having served as a soldier on the warship Admiral Piet Heijn. Bueno de Mesquita shocked the community years later once again, by marrying a young Christian girl, Rebecca Lynch Pindy, already the mother of two of his children. . . . Bueno de Mesquite's marriage was a final statement of defiance towards the Parnassim.<sup>4</sup>

The name Rebecca Lynch Pindy caught my attention. It was, of course, very similar to the name of the woman who was Virginia Fremon and Larry Dunham's great-great-grandmother, Rebecca Lynch Purdy. She had been married to Abraham Gabay Crasto, not Abraham Bueno de Mesquite, but her name was so close to Pindy that I decided to investigate more thoroughly. It is not uncommon in genealogical literature to find mistranscribed names, especially when dealing with the old script handwriting of nearly illegible documents. I wrote a letter mentioning the Pindy vs. Purdy question to Robert Cohen and received his reply on January 8, 1992; he informed me that "Pindy" had indeed been a mistake and "Purdy" was the correct name. He also wrote:

There is no doubt whatsoever that Rebecca Lynch Purdy married Abraham de Mosseh Bueno de Mesquite. That happened on 2 April 1820. On that date she took the name Ester Ribca and the entry in the official register reads: "Ester Ribca Purdy (Goya, previously known as Rebekah Lynch Purdy) has—as a convert—undergone the ritual bath at the age of 23 years and 13 days and is as such entered in the ritual bath register of the community."

Robert went on to add:

This is my translation of the original and *Goya* is the Hebrew word for non-Jewess. To become Jewish, a woman has to undergo a ceremony in a ritual bath (*Mikve*),

which is what she did. At the same date their daughter Abigail Rahel was also accepted in the Jewish community, as was their son Moses who was born on 1 December 1819.

### *A Mystery—and Some Clues*

My mind began to race. Could the great-great-grandmother of Larry Dunham and Virginia Fremon be the same as the young woman in Robert Cohen's footnote?

I soon began to feel sure that this was indeed the case. Although it was possible that there had been two women by the name of Rebecca Lynch Purdy, both of them alive at the same time, one practicing Christianity in New York and another a convert to Judaism in Surinam, the coincidence was not very probable. In the first place, they were exactly the same age. According to the Sephardic marriage records from Surinam, Rebecca Lynch Purdy was twenty-three at the time of her marriage, having been born on March 20, 1797. The Rebecca Lynch Purdy of New York was also born on March 20, 1797, according to both Virginia's family history and Rebecca's New York marriage records, which stated that she was seventeen in 1814. Rebecca's New York bridegroom, Abraham Gabay Crasto, was the son of David Gabay Crasto, originally from Surinam. In addition, Virginia had written me in 1980 about the existence of a letter in the possession of her aunt, dated June 1818. It was written by Elisha Purdy, Rebecca's father, to his in-law, David Gabay Crasto, requesting information on how to send a package to Rebecca and Abraham in Surinam. Finally, Abraham Gabay Crasto's name appears in the New York city directory of 1827, but not before (though, interestingly, he does not appear in the 1830 census). Therefore, I could be totally certain that Abraham Gabay Crasto and Rebecca Lynch Purdy had been in Surinam sometime between 1814 (after their marriage in New York) and 1827. I was almost positive that they had been in Surinam around 1820, when the "other" Rebecca had been married in the Jewish faith.

There was also the evidence offered by the birth dates of their children. According to a transcription of the Sephardic Jewish birth registry that I was able to examine, the Surinam Rebecca Lynch

Purdy and Abraham Bueno de Mesquita had two children: Rahel Abigail and Mosseh Bueno de Mesquite. Mosseh was recorded as born on December 1, 1819 in Surinam, and Rahel Abigail was recorded as born on April 2, 1820 (the very day on which Rebecca and Abraham Bueno de Mesquite were married). It is possible that Rahel Abigail was born earlier and her "birth date" was in reality the date she was formally accepted into the Jewish community, as Robert mentioned in his letter. Rahel and Mosseh are the Hebrew forms of the names Rachel and Moses, which were also the names of the children of the New York Rebecca Lynch Purdy and Abraham Gabay Crasto.<sup>5</sup>

Virginia Fremon was unable to find the exact birth locations and birth dates of the children in any of the registries that she had researched. Her knowledge of the children's birth dates was derived from other documents later in their lives, such as marriage and death records, tombstones, etc. She knew, however, that Moses Gabay Crasto had been born on December 1, 1819—the same date as Mosseh Bueno de Mesquita in Surinam. (Virginia's family legend had it that her great-grandpa Moses had been born at sea, which must have been either on the outward voyage to Surinam or the return voyage. However, the Surinam Sephardic birth registries disproved this theory.) Her records also showed that Rachel Ann (Rahel Abigail) Crasto had been born on September 5, 1815. Even given this discrepancy in the birth dates of Rachel/Rahel, however, I still felt there was overwhelming evidence that the two Rebeccas were the same person.

#### *Two Men—or One?*

The fact remained, however, that Rebecca Lynch Purdy was married to an Abraham Gabay Crasto, not Abraham Bueno de Mesquite. Was it possible that she had been married twice, to two different men? And could it be that both husbands derived from Surinamese Sephardic Jewish families? How unusual for a Protestant minister's granddaughter in the early nineteenth century!

More determined than ever to find out the truth behind the matter, I renewed my correspondence with Virginia Fremon in 1991, asking her to send me all the information in her possession per-

taining to her great-great-grandparents. (Unfortunately, Larry Dunham had died in the intervening ten years.) Virginia wrote me that over the years she had been conducting extensive research in the censuses and old city directories from New York, and she knew for a fact that her great-great-grandparents, Rebecca and Abraham Gabay Crasto, had lived to ripe old ages as Protestants in New York. She was quite incredulous that Rebecca could ever have had more than one husband. She wrote me on November 14, 1991:

About Rebecca Lynch Purdy, back in 1981 I found a framed certificate of marriage among my late aunt's effects. It says:

"This is to certify that Abraham G. Crasto and Rebecca L. Purdy were joined together in Holy Matrimony, on the 9 day of July in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and fourteen by me. Signed E. Smith, Minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church within Greenbough Westchester County, State of New York."

It seems unlikely to me that Rebecca . . . could be the same person who married another Sephardic Jew in South America. My great-great-grandparents Rebecca and Abraham were 17 years old when they were married in New York and had 3 children in the following five years. Could it have been that Abraham had a name other than Crasto that he used in the Surinam area?

I wrote to Robert Cohen in Jerusalem to ask about the possibility of Abraham Gabay Crasto using an alias when in South America. In his January 8, 1992 letter, Robert replied,

In the circumcision register of the Surinam community, there is *no* entry for Abraham, son of David Gabay Crasto. In fact there is no entry for a Gabay Castro at all in the 1790s. This may mean that Abraham Gabay Crasto was born elsewhere or that it was an alias, which in turn may mean that Abraham Gabay Crasto and Abraham Moses Bueno de Mesquita were one and the same person.

I was beginning to believe it was true. Yet I still had my doubts. The Abraham Bueno de Mesquita in Robert's footnote was mentioned as having served on a Dutch warship. He had offended the Jewish authorities not once but twice in his life, the first time as a very young man. The Abraham Bueno de Mesquita who at age seventeen had married Rebecca Lynch Purdy was not old enough to have done all these things.

I did learn, however, that the name Bueno de Mesquita was a popular one in Surinam in the late eighteenth century. In October

1992, Dr. John de Bye, a Surinamese Christian with Sephardic ancestors, sent me information he had compiled on the old Jewish families of Surinam from the combined files of Surinam and Holland. John had created a computerized database of all the Bueno de Mesquitas from the 1600s up to the present time and sorted it in alphabetical order by first name. There were no fewer than 184 people on the list, and eighteen were Abraham Bueno de Mesquitas! Virginia's husband, Dick Fremon, volunteered to input the information into his own computer and eventually he came up with a family tree. Using the birthdates and other clues from Dr. De Bye's data I supplemented this information with some of my own.

I postulated that several contemporaneous members of the Bueno de Mesquita family in Surinam had been named Abraham. I suspected that Robert might have mixed up several of these namesakes. After thoroughly studying the Bueno de Mesquita family tree, I evolved a theory that there were at least two other Abraham Bueno de Mesquitas who could have been mistaken for "our Abraham": the Abraham who was deported from the colony in 1786 for defying the Jewish elders (Parnassim), and another Abraham who at that time was actually one of the Parnassim!

Further bolstering my theory was the postscript Robert Cohen had added in his same January 8, 1992 letter: "It is of course perfectly possible that the young couple married twice—once for the Methodist Episcopal Church in Greenbough and—six years later—in Surinam for the Jewish community. It would mean an intriguing 'double life.' "

I concluded that Abraham Gabay Castro and Abraham Bueno de Mesquita must have been the same man. For some reason, he had decided to change his name while living in Surinam. He had also, not just incidentally, returned to his original faith and remarried his wife in the Jewish religion after she had formally converted. But why would Abraham, after throwing over the Hebraic tradition his ancestors had died for and marrying a Methodist, then cross the ocean, expose his children to ridicule (since they were considered to be illegitimate by the Jewish authorities), and force his wife, the daughter of generations of Protestants, to take on an alien religion? And why, after this drastic life change, would he

then go back to New York, reaffirm Protestantism, and eventually be buried in a Protestant cemetery?

*Jew, Christian, or Both?*

To be able to answer all of these questions, it was necessary for me to begin to understand the religious, social, and economic conditions prevailing in the United States and Surinam at the beginning of the nineteenth century. I found it easy enough to comprehend Abraham Gabay Crasto's conversion to Christianity when living in New York with his parents, David and Rachel Gabay Crasto. It was hardly uncommon for Jews to live as Christians in the United States then. In an article in the *New York Tribune* in 1905, for instance, a reporter tells of meeting a Jewish student who complained that

not more than 40 percent of American-born Jews observed the dietary laws and religious ceremonies prescribed by the Mosaic law. Convenience . . . and the customs of the society about him—write that down as the explanation of the irreligion of the American-born Jew. . . . The public school; the business world, adjusted to the observation of the Christian, not the Jewish Sabbath; the Saturday night dance; and the complete ignoring of all Jewish holidays by the mass of people surrounding him. . . . The Jew of the second generation . . . finds that to live in a business world adjusted to a Christian calendar is hopelessly inconvenient, if not practically impossible, if he clings to his racial religious observances. . . . He finds that to keep his job he must work on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath, and rest on Sunday, the Christian holiday. Similarly, he learns to surrender his celebration of other religious days for business reasons.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Stephen Birmingham, in his *The Grandees*, cites Rabbi Stern's book:

. . . through the long corridor of years, the Sephardic Jewish community in America—from the tight-knit, proud entity it once was—has steadily lost members as Sephardim have turned from Judaism to Christianity. . . . prior to 1840 more than 15 percent of the marriages recorded were between Jews and Christians, and . . . of the total number of mixed marriages only 8 percent involved the conversion of the non-Jew to Judaism; members of only another 5 percent showed any indication of wishing to remain identified as Jews, or as members of the Jewish community.<sup>7</sup>

Abraham's parents, David and Rachel Gabay Crasto, continued to practice Judaism—at least for a while. Larry Dunham had sent me a page from *Portraits Etched in Stone*, a book about the old Jewish

graves in New York City, written by Rabbi David de Sola Pool. Rabbi Pool had become interested in the Chatham Square cemetery, located in what is now New York City's Chinatown. It was the original cemetery of the Shearith Israel congregation, New York's earliest Sephardic synagogue, which was founded in colonial times and continues to flourish today.<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Pool discusses the "broken illegible tombstone" of Rachel Crasto, who died in 1819:

There are social distinctions even in burial. When David G[abay?] Crasto of Surinam was bereaved by the death of his wife on the festival of Purim, Thursday, March 11, 1819, the trustees of the congregation, considering the lack of space in the old cemetery on Chatham Street, decided to allot her burial room in their new and spacious ground on Milligan Street in Greenwich (now West Eleventh Street). Whereupon he wrote to the trustees the following letter:

"Having been informed that you have resolved my wife should be buried in the Beth Haim in Greenwich, in which decision I find myself aggrieved I therefore request that you will reconsider the subject of permit my wife to be buried in the Beth Haim in Chatham St. The expenses attending the same will be paid . . ."

Pool says that the trustees eventually changed their minds, not wanting David Crasto to feel slighted and misconstrue the board's decision in denying his wife burial in the established cemetery in Chatham Square. David Crasto was, therefore, committed to Judaism to the extent that he requested burial in a Jewish cemetery for his wife; and furthermore he wanted her interred in the "prestigious" older established graveyard. This was five years after his son Abraham's marriage in a church ceremony to Rebecca. Moreover, a notation in the Surinam almanac of 1793 indicated that David Gabay Crasto was a regent (elder) of the Portuguese synagogue there. At one time, then, David had been intensely involved with Judaism, much more so than an ordinary congregation member. But at his death in 1849, he was buried in the White Plains Rural Cemetery, in the Methodist Burial Ground.

Virginia Fremon had written in a letter to me dated February 21, 1979: "I get the feeling the Sephardic leaders were less than pleased with his conversion and his admission to Chatham Square was either not requested or refused. . . . Evidently the marriage of [his son] A. G. Crasto to Rebecca Lynch Purdy was the beginning of [the family's] transition to the Christian community. Everything

from this point on, points to their being very strong Protestants." She noted in another letter (January 12, 1992) that Abraham and Rebecca's son Moses "was a prominent Methodist layman." Furthermore, Moses was so patriotic an American that he was "subsequently unhappy that his parents hadn't arranged for him to be born in the U. S. A."

While it was conceivable that Abraham Gabay Crasto lived as a Christian in the United States in order to be accepted into polite society as well as the community of commerce, some questions remained: Why did he return to Judaism in South America? And why had he gone back to Surinam in the first place? Virginia's opinion was (December 7, 1991) that "they went to Surinam to work in the family business there, perhaps right after their marriage in 1814."

Although she had no documents to prove this, it is nevertheless a good working hypothesis. Many Jews at that time were involved in the import-export trade. Wood, sugar cane, and cacao were regularly shipped out of Surinam, while goods such as china and essential oils were imported. Abraham and David Gabay Crasto may have been the "New York branch" of a Surinamese shipping business, trading with relatives or friends in Dutch Guiana. Or Abraham may have been joining another family business that beckoned him in Surinam. In any case, commerce in the early nineteenth century was a lucrative field for many Jews.

Unfortunately, it proved impossible to pinpoint Abraham and Rebecca's exact departure date for Surinam, or the date they returned. Passenger lists and ship's logs from Surinam from after 1791 no longer exist,<sup>10</sup> and similar lists from New York City are available only from 1881 onward. There is about a hundred-year period, therefore, in which it is difficult to trace the comings and goings of passengers between Surinam and New York. I was disappointed; I had hoped that by discovering the exact date of Abraham and Rebecca's departure for Surinam, I would have some clue as to why they went there. I think it is safe to surmise, however, that the young couple were present in Surinam at least as early as 1818, the date Rebecca's father Elisha Purdy requested advice from his in-law on how to send his daughter a package.

*Why Two Surnames?*

If business dealings were not the reason for Abraham's journey, family issues were another possibility. Did the name Bueno de Mesquita have a special meaning for Abraham? If so, did this have anything to do with his return to Surinam? I speculated that perhaps Bueno de Mesquita had been his mother Rachel Gabay Crasto's maiden name. (It may also have been her first married name, if we assume that she had been married before—a fact which could not be documented.) Perhaps Abraham used Bueno de Mesquita in Surinam to distinguish himself from another relative there with the same last name, Gabay Crasto.

Following this lead, I asked Virginia if she could give me any information about Rachel Gabay Crasto's maiden name and family history. Virginia told me that Rachel was purported to have been born in Jamaica in 1771, but a search of the Jamaican records had proved fruitless, and the Surinam records, as well, had failed to establish her maiden name. We had plenty of information on the Bueno de Mesquita family but nothing conclusive on Rachel's connection with it. It looked like a dead end.

Then, on January 20, 1992, I received another letter from Robert Cohen informing me about a discovery he had made on his recent visit to the archives in Holland. He had uncovered a crucial piece of the puzzle in records at the Hague that were inaccessible to laymen:

The Surinam Marriage register lists the marriage of David Gabay Crasto, aged 29 years, born and raised in Surinam, with Rachel Lopes Telles, also 29 years old, also born and raised in Surinam. . . . Virginia has a different . . . birthplace, but that is not uncommon in 18th century records. The couple may not have wanted to draw attention to a foreign birthplace.

Even more surprising, Robert continued:

. . . 6 years later (on 15 January 1797) an Abigail Abraham Lopes Telles, 21 or 22 years old (illegible in the manuscript) married Moses Abraham Bueno de Mesquite, who was 36 years old at the time. She was also pregnant. On 14 April 1797 she gave birth to a son called Abraham.

Robert concluded that "it was Abraham Moses Bueno de Mesquita who later married Rebecca Lynch Purdy."

*An Adoption Compounds the Mystery*

Neither Virginia nor I had ever considered that David Gabay Crasto and Rachel Gabay Crasto were not Abraham's true parents! This information from Robert firmly established Abraham's true parentage: Rachel was Abraham's maternal aunt, not his mother. She and her husband, David Gabay Crasto, obviously brought their young nephew to America, where he assumed his uncle's surname.

I could be fairly sure of the year the Crastos had come from Surinam to New York; David is not mentioned in the 1800 New York County census, but does appear in the 1804 New York directory, listed as having a dry goods store at 31 Fair Street—so he and his wife must have arrived between those two dates. In the 1810 census, the Crasto family appears to have two children, a boy and a girl, both between the ages of ten and sixteen years of age. Abraham was born in 1797, so in 1810 he would have been thirteen years old. Abraham may have traveled with his adoptive parents (really his aunt and uncle) when they first arrived in New York; or he may have been "fetched" or sent to them later.

Virginia Fremon had at first suggested (February 19, 1992): "... maybe Abraham decided for himself, at age circa 13, to seek his fortune in The Big Apple, for which purpose he went for an extended visit with his Aunt Rachel and Uncle David." However, I was more inclined to believe that Abraham had been brought to New York as a very young child. The date he joined the Crastos may have been in 1806, when David Gabay Crasto is known to have been in Surinam attending to his aging mother's affairs at a time when his stepfather prepared to leave Dutch Guiana on a business trip.

In any case we can infer that Abraham was in New York at least by 1810, for there appears to have been no other "son" in the family; the New York census of 1820 shows the David G. Crasto (*sic*) family as comprising one male over forty-five years old (i.e., the widowed David, whose wife Rachel had died in 1819) and one female between twenty-six and forty-five, presumably the daughter who was listed on the 1810 census. Since she was in 1810 assigned to the ten- to sixteen-year-old category, we may infer that

she was approximately sixteen years old in 1810 (in order to be about twenty-six in 1820), so she must have been born in 1794.

Assuming that she had really done so, I was curious as to why Abigail Lopes Telles would have given up her young son to her sister Rachel. I had some ideas. In the first place, I knew that she was six months pregnant at the time of her marriage. Even if Abigail and Moses were legally married by the time she gave birth, the fact that she had conceived the child before her marriage in the Jewish faith might have made a difference to the Jewish community. Rachel and David Gabay Crasto may have offered to raise Abraham as their own son to remove him from the stigma of having been conceived out-of-wedlock.

There were other possible explanations for Abigail Lopes Telles's allowing her son to be adopted by her sister. For one thing, the political climate in Surinam at the time may not have been a healthy one in which to raise children. Uprisings of slaves who had escaped from the plantations were common, often putting the lives of white plantation owners in danger. Abigail and Moses may have wanted their child to be raised in a safer environment. Economic factors may also have been a consideration. Perhaps Abigail and Moses had fallen upon financial hard times and could no longer take care of all of their children; Abraham, the eldest, was therefore given to his Uncle David and Aunt Rachel, who were going to America to seek a better life for themselves. Education may also have been a reason; the Bueno de Mesquitas may have desired their child to attend American schools and receive an American rather than a "provincial" upbringing. After all, it was around this time that many Surinamese Jews and other white Surinamese were beginning to emigrate from Dutch Guiana. Abigail and Moses may not have been able to emigrate themselves because of financial reasons or family issues.

Another possible scenario I thought of goes like this: David and Rachel were the parents of a daughter, but the doctors told Rachel that she must not, for some medical reason, ever bear another child. Despairing of ever having a son of their own, the couple appealed to Abigail and Moses to "lend" them one of their many

children to raise as their own. My support for this fanciful notion comes from a notation in Rabbi de Sola Pool's book that seven months after Rachel died in New York in 1819, a child of hers was laid to rest in its mother's grave. This child obviously must have been an infant—certainly not a full-grown person like the twenty-six-year-old daughter listed in the 1820 census the following year! So my theory is that in 1819, Rachel, approaching menopause, must have inadvertently become pregnant, and the doctors' dire prediction came true—she expired after the delivery. The baby lingered for seven months until it too passed on.

All of these reasons are perhaps viable, but none can be proved. Unfortunately, no documents exist that would shed a light on exactly why Abraham was adopted by his aunt and uncle.

I had managed to prove Abraham's parentage, however, and the reason he took the name Bueno de Mesquite when resuming life in the Sephardic Jewish community of Surinam, for that was his real surname. I also discovered, along the way, that Rachel's connection to the Bueno de Mesquita family was not only through her sister Abigail. A review of the extant Surinam almanac of 1820, obtained from the University Library at Leiden, showed the plantations held by the Bueno de Mesquita family in that year. It became obvious that another sister, Ester Lopes Telles, had been married to Moses' brother, Aron Bueno de Mesquite. Also, Agnes Dunselman, a researcher from the Netherlands hired by Virginia, had discovered a document drawn up in May of 1806. At that time David Gabay Crasto had named Aron Bueno De Mesquita as the executor of his stepfather's will. David himself would soon be returning to America and could no longer personally handle his stepfather's business affairs. Now it was obvious that he had named Aron because he was his brother-in-law. Thus, the Lopes Telles and Bueno de Mesquita families were closely intertwined.

### *Was It All About Money?*

Since Abraham had apparently decided to use his father's true name, Bueno de Mesquite, once he had returned to Surinam, I theorized that perhaps he stood to inherit some money from either the

Bueno de Mesquita family or from his mother's relatives, the Lopes Telles family. After all, Rebecca had chosen the name Ester Ribca—perhaps after Ester, Aron's wife—at the time of her conversion. Her daughter Abigail was named after Abraham's true mother, and her son Moses after Abraham's true father. Could this choice of names have been an attempt to solidify family relationships because of an inheritance? Perhaps Abraham wanted to reestablish his presence in Surinam and claim his birthright, so to speak.

Could money really have been the reason he had relocated with his young Christian wife? Surely this hypothesis would explain his change of religion. As Voltaire wrote, "When it is a question of money, everybody is said to be of the same religion." In order to be accepted into the Jewish community of his birth—and to acquire a fortune by doing so—Abraham Gabay Crasto might have been forced to renounce his conversion to Christianity. Perhaps the Sephardic Jews refused to accept his Christian marriage to Rebecca as valid; the notation Robert unearthed and quoted in his footnotes makes it clear that she was considered his mistress by the Jewish elders, who also regarded their two children as illegitimate. The elders seem to have required Rebecca Lynch Purdy to convert to Judaism before she could be remarried to Abraham in a "valid" religious ceremony.

In an effort to find data to support my theory that Abraham was a fortune-hunter, I attempted to research both the Bueno de Mesquita and the Lopes Telles families thoroughly. I found out that the Bueno de Mesquita family had a history in Surinam going back to 1695.<sup>11</sup> I also had some antique Surinam maps showing the sizes of plantations, a record of donations to the provincial government to finance a hospital in 1645, the 1707 list showing purchases of slaves, etc.—all proving that the Bueno de Mesquita and Gabay Crasto families were wealthy landowners in Surinam in the eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

Our Abraham might certainly have been a beneficiary of one of these wealthy relatives' wills, but I could not be certain. The old records were for the most part destroyed and the antique maps incomplete. Besides, there seemed to be too many surviving sib-

lings of Abraham's father, Moses Bueno de Mesquite, for Abraham himself to be able to inherit anything of real value. Moses, by the way, was still alive in 1838 and was listed as a licensed ferry boat operator in Surinam—certainly not a profession connoting any great wealth or power.

As for the Lopes Telles family, I could find no evidence of property in either Jamaica or Surinam. Using the printout from John de Bye's computerized list, I discovered that Abraham's uncle, Aron Bueno de Mesquite, whom David Gabay Crasto had named executor of his stepfather's will, owned two plantations, Nahamoe and Watervlate. But he did not die until 1828, at which time these plantations were inherited by his widow Ester, none other than Rachel Gabay Crasto's sister, and Abraham Gabay Crasto's aunt. Ester, in turn, may have been heir to some fortune from the Lopes Telles side which she shared with her sisters Rachel and Abigail, but I could find no proof. Rachel Gabay Crasto had died in New York in March 1819; I toyed with the possibility that whatever share of the "fortune" had devolved to her (if in fact there was a fortune) was now inheritable by her adopted son and nephew Abraham. However, I soon dismissed this possibility as being too far-fetched. For one thing, Ester was survived by at least two children who would certainly have inherited her share.

Rachel's last will and testament, written January 4, 1819, shortly before her death, states: "I do hereby give, devise, and bequeath all and singular my estate both real and personal wherever it may be to my dearly beloved husband, David Gabay Crasto." There is no mention of her nephew/adopted son Abraham; furthermore, the will is a simple document without lengthy codicils, which would seem to indicate that she had no substantial fortune to give away. I could only conclude that Abraham had not come into any money from either his father's or his mother's family.

### *Possible Reasons for Converting*

The psychology of a young man who changes his identity so seemingly capriciously is not easily understood. It is tempting to ascribe his motives to a desire to increase his social standing or wealth, or

to ensure his children's future. Unfortunately, I was never able to come up with any definitive evidence of vast family holdings that would have drawn Abraham across the ocean to South America.

Furthermore, when Abraham Gabay Crasto returned to New York sometime around 1827, there was no indication that he had come back a rich man. Both he and his adoptive father, David Gabay Crasto, worked at various occupations. In 1827 the New York City directory listed Abraham as a cartman, in 1833 he was again a carter, and in 1839 he owned a feed store. In 1844 he filed naturalization papers. In 1847 he was working for the post office, in 1850 as a baker, in 1856 as a police lieutenant, and in 1858 as a contractor. He moved to several different addresses, and by the time he died in 1878, finally owned a home. He remained close to David Gabay Crasto throughout his life; in fact, David lived with his adopted son at various times, and his funeral, in 1849, was held in Abraham Gabay Crasto's home.

Max Beerbohm, the English wit, said, "The past is a work of art, free of irrelevancies and loose ends." If that is so, then the genealogist must also be something of an artist, weaving imaginative visions of past worlds. Tying up loose ends and getting rid of irrelevancies is not the genealogist's privilege, of course; he or she must be above all a meticulous and scrupulous researcher. But it is also true that the facts, carefully accumulated, researched, verified, and weighed, are able to take us only so far. To understand as much as possible about the lives of long-dead human beings, an intuitive leap into their minds and hearts is also necessary.

The real "truth" about Abraham Gabay Crasto may have been that he was a victim of not one but two restrictive societies. He could not live as a Jew in New York because it was not possible to practice Judaism and at the same time live comfortably in the community in which he had chosen to make his home. And in Surinam he was not allowed to live as a Christian among his Jewish relatives. In fact, his church marriage in New York was considered invalid; he and his wife were branded as adulterers, and his children as illegitimate. So he took the only route open to him: he changed religions to suit the society in which he found himself at the time. When he was laid to rest in the "rural" cemetery,

assumed by everyone who knew him to have been a Christian, his past was buried along with his remains. Certainly there seem to be no records in New York of his brief return to Judaism while sojourning in South America, and he may even have been ashamed enough to have taken pains to hide it. It was no wonder that Larry and Virginia's families had no idea there had ever been Jews in their history.

To be fair, it is also possible that Abraham Bueno de Mesquita/Gabay Crasto's "conversions" to Christianity were not as cut-and-dried as they seem. He may simply have disguised his Judaism while living in New York, choosing for expediency's sake to marry in a Christian church and live a Christian life. In other words, he may not have undergone a full-blown conversion, as his wife Rebecca was compelled to do when they moved to Surinam. Yet even so, to his Jewish relatives, this indifference to the faith of his forefathers was condemnation enough. To them he may as well have been whole-hearted about Christianity; in their eyes, not living an actively Jewish life amounted to the same thing.

Does one pity such a man or despise him? Or does one admire his "flexibility" in coping with the challenges presented to him by society's rules? That is a question which will have a different answer for each person who asks it. Until more facts are discovered, nobody can really pass judgment on Abraham Gabay Crasto. I have put together all the bits and pieces of the mystery that I was able to uncover. But the past guards its secrets well, and so we may never really know all the motives that went into making Abraham vacillate between religions, thus living his life as a "part-time Jew."

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## Notes

1. The name Crasto (often spelled Crastow) is a variation of the ancient Spanish and Portuguese Castro. Gabay (also spelled Gabbai) is a Hebrew name meaning "treasurer" or "dues collector." It was borne by a family in fifteenth-century Spain that moved to Italy in the seventeenth century. Sephardic Jews customarily had double surnames, such as Gabay Crasto, indicating that there had been a dynastic marriage between members of two powerful families. However, it is impossible to tell exactly when a specific double name was assumed by any individual Sephardic family.

2. P. A. Hilfman, "Notes on the History of the Jews in Surinam," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 18 (1906): 179—207.

3. To my distress, I received a fax on May 19, 1992 from the Hague stating that Dr. Cohen had passed away of a sudden heart attack. Only forty-five years old at the time of his death, he had been one of the greatest living authorities on Surinam. I dedicate this paper to his memory.

4. Robert Cohen, *Jews in Another Environment: Surinam in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1991), p. 297, fn. 28.

5. A third child, Elizabeth Jane, was reputed to have been born sometime in August 1817. However, she does not appear anywhere in the Surinam records. One possibility may be that she died before Rebecca and Abraham settled in Surinam.

6. "Orthodox Inconvenient," *New York Tribune*, October 15, 1905, quoted in Allon Schoener, ed., *Portal to America: The Lower East Side, 1870—1925* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1967).

7. Stephen Birmingham, *The Grandees: America's Sephardic Elite* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 8.

8. The earliest grave in this cemetery, dating back to 1683, happens to be the resting place of one Benjamin Bueno de Mesquite. Benjamin is the earliest traceable member of the Bueno de Mesquita family, the great-great-great-great-grandfather of "our" Abraham. Benjamin was born 1600 or thereabouts and was a Jewish merchant who settled in the Caribbean. His life illustrates the historical flow of Jews into the New World. It is not known where Benjamin Bueno de Mesquita was born; he referred to himself as a Portuguese merchant, but he may really have been Spanish, as "Portuguese" was often a euphemism for "Jew." A document with his signature, dated December 11, 1654, was discovered in Leghorn, Italy, so it is known that he traveled there. He had settled first in Brazil, and another document with his signature, matching the signature found in Italy, exists in Recife, the colony established in northern Brazil by the Dutch in the 1630s. He left Brazil when the war between the Portuguese and Dutch began, and lived on several Caribbean islands as business and political fortunes waxed and waned in those turbulent times. In 1661 he requested the British government to release him from the provisions of the Navigation Act, which restricted trade with countries at war with Great Britain. He received permission to trade freely and set up a business in Jamaica. Soon, however, Benjamin, his sons, and several other Jews (possibly his partners) were deported when they failed to find a gold mine as they had pledged they were going to do. It is believed that his wife and daughters were not in Jamaica at the time of his deportation. One of his sons, Joseph, had moved from Barbados to New Amsterdam (New York). Benjamin joined him there around 1679; he died in New York in 1683.

9. David de Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone: Early Jewish Settlers, 1682—1831* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), p. 106.

10. Such records from earlier in the eighteenth century are still extant.

11. "Our" Abraham's great-great-grandfather, Moses Bueno de Mesquite, born around 1670, was the first individual in the family who can be definitely identified as having settled in Surinam on plantation #61, Pomibo. The number is derived from a 1740 map by La Vaux, and from another map dated 1737 that is now in the collection of Leiden University in the Netherlands.

Information on subsequent generations of the family is available, but their holdings are not readily discernable until we come down to Moses, father of our Abraham, born around 1770. He is listed in the Surinam almanac of 1793 and 1794 as the "verger" (i.e., deacon) of the Sephardic synagogue in Surinam. And in the 1825 and 1838 almanacs he is listed as a licensed ferry operator. This would seem to indicate that the family fortunes had fallen on rather hard times. The plantation sections of the Surinam almanacs from the early 1800s no longer seem to exist. The only complete one that I was able to locate that had this information still intact was the Surinam almanac from 1840, which I obtained from the Royal Library in the Hague, the Koninklijk Bibliothek.

12. At that time plantation owners were asked to donate money or goods to the Surinamese government in order to finance the building of a hospital. A Moses Bueno de Mesquita gave 200 pounds of sugar, a considerable amount. Some of the other planters gave only 25 or so pounds. This indicates that the Bueno de Mesquitas must have been quite wealthy. In 1707, Moses Bueno de Mesquita bought seven slaves for a total of 1,430 guilders. According to the list given for the slave auction, he was one of the major buyers.

The Pomibo plantation in the Bueno de Mesquita family was a double plot. The size indicates that the family was most probably growing sugar cane. The map drawn by La Vaux in 1740 shows that Pomibo had passed on to a new owner named Henriquez Granada. An Abraham Bueno owned another plantation, #33. This was a small strip of land most likely used for growing coffee, which needed less land than sugar to be profitable. Jacob Gabay Crasto is shown on this map as owner of plantation #37, Jeprens. He is also listed as owner of #43, not shown on the La Vaux map.