

# Traces of Jewish life in Porto, Portugal

As an important maritime port and commercial town, Porto was one of the cities where Jews settled in Portugal. The history of the Jewish community of the capital of the northern region is inseparable from the history of the Hebrew presence in Portugal. In the Douro region there are also villages, cities and small towns where important Jewish communities once lived. The community settled in this country between the 5th and 15th centuries, but according to recent studies there is records of their presence around 600 years BC.

The Sephardic Jews contributed in different ways to the Portuguese culture during that period, and Porto and Douro were not indifferent to such an influence.

Protected by the monarchy, the Jews – philosophers, humanists, scientists and merchants – were decisive in several important moments of Portuguese history, namely for their financial and scientific contributions during the Discoveries.

The Jews worshipped in secret even after the Portuguese kings ordered their deportation from the country, following the events in Spain in 1496 (inquisition). While it is true that some Jews converted to Catholicism, becoming New-Christians and that many left the country, many others stayed and kept their faith in secret (as in Belmonte) during centuries, these communities were discovered a few decades ago.

The Jewish quarter of Porto city was situated deep in the heart of the village, which, in the 12th century, was located near the Cathedral, in the area that is today defined by the ruins of the Convent of Monchique, by the Torre dos Clérigos, Sé, Alfândega do Porto and the square and tunnel of Ribeira – and where some Jewish altars still survive in private estates. During the Second World War, Portugal maintain a neutral position even if there was an authoritarian nationalist government the time, that perdurated until 1974. Around 200.000 Jewish refugees escaped from death and the Nazi persecution with the help of Portuguese diplomats (like Aristides de Sousa) and made their way to America through Lisbon.

Since 2011, there has been a network of Jewish sites (rede de juduarias) inspired by those Jews who were forced to convert and secretly carried out Jewish rituals until they re-emerged after the April revolution of 1974. This initiative has turned into a quest and a vehicle to reclaim the historic identity of the country.

Today there are large centers to study the history of sephardic Jews and the routes they took when they were forced to leave the country during the inquisition. We know now that one of the routes led to Amsterdam, where Portuguese Jews established a flourishing colony. Their descendants became the first Jews to set foot into new Amsterdam, now known as New York, in 1654. They built the first American Synagogue.



CC by SA 3.0 / Wikimedia commons Bricking

The Synagogue Kadoorie Makor Haim is the biggest in the Iberian Peninsula and one of the biggest in Europe. The construction started in 1929 and ended in 1938. The community is oriented by rabi Daniel Litvak, from Argentina.



Jewish quarter Porto



The Jewish community of Belmonte was officially recognized in 1989. The headquarter is localized in Synagogue Beit Eliahu. Their members are descendents of new-Christians, that were able to preserve rites and prayers, marrying each other within a few families.

Right side: In memoriam of the expulsion of the Jews from Porto city, Portugal. Under the royal decree by the king Manuel I of Portugal 1496, all Jews should convert to Catholicism or be expelled from Portugal and colonies. Many flew to the Netherlands and Dutch colonies.

