

Digging Portugal's Jewish Past: Samuel Schwarz (1880- 1953)

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[fig. 1] “Pro Israel” was the title given by the Portuguese intellectual and physician, Ricardo Jorge, to the introduction he wrote for Samuel Schwarz’s book: “The New Christians in Portugal in the 20th Century” (“Os Cristãos-Novos em Portugal no século XX”, Lisbon 1925). In it, Jorge depicted the author as a dynamic Polish-Jew mining engineer, who successfully digs (“*minerar*”) Portugal’s Jewish past.¹ By employing the verb “*minerar*” (to mine, to exploit a mine, to work in mines) Jorge made an explicit parallelism between Schwarz’s professional activities in the mines of tungsten and tin near Belmonte, and his extraordinary discovery of 20th century Marranism in the same region. Jorge also related Schwarz’s far-reaching ethnological findings to the effervescence of the Hebrew language, the city of Tel-Aviv and the foundation of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.² He firmly believed that the discovery of Portugal’s “hidden Jews” and the achievements made by the Zionist movement, were both signs of an all-encompassing Jewish renaissance. *The Lion of Judah is roaring again*, he said.³

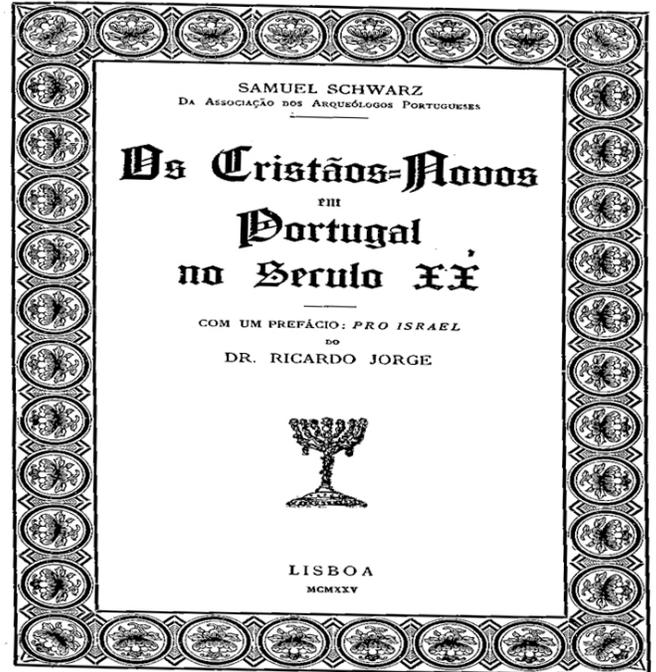


Figure 1

¹¹ “O sr. Samuel Schwarz é um engenheiro de minas que veio ha dez anos exercer a sua actividade no nosso país; tem com a sua inteligencia empreendedora e o seu trabalho perseverante concorrido para a exploração das riquezas do nosso solo. Israeli polaco, é huma hebraizante acerrimo, trilhando as pisadas do mestre hebraista que é seu pai; como tal, **deu tambem em minerar o passado dos coirmãos na judiaria portuguesa, berço e mais nobre e remontado de sua raça**” (Ricardo Jorge, “Pro Israel”, in: Samuel Schwarz, *Os Cristãos-Novos em Portugal no Século XX*, Lisbon: Empresa Portuguesa de Livros Lda., 1925, p. XVII).

² Idem, pp. XI-XIII.

³ “Vão os tempos de feição para o hebraismo. Nunca o Leão de Judá alçou tanto as falcadas garras e sacudiu com tanta altivez a juba ...” (idem p. IX).

Samuel Schwarz, the son of a committed Zionist, intellectual autodidact and modern orthodox Jew (Issucher Schwarz), came to Portugal in 1915 as a mining engineer from the “École des Mines” of Paris. Ten years afterwards, he was touched by Jorge’s words.⁴ For beyond the public recognition of his skills, both men shared common ideas on Jews and New Christians. In

⁴ Letter of Samuel Schwarz to his brother-in-law Yehiel Frankel, Lisbon, August 25th, 1925 quoted in my introduction to: Samuel Schwarz, *The New-Christians in Portugal in the 20th Century*, Translated, Introduced and Annotated by Claude B. Stuczynski, Editor: Ruth Toeg, Jerusalem: The Dinur center for Research in Jewish History & The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2005, (in Hebrew), pp. 39-40 (hereafter: Stuczynski, “Introduction”).

the abovementioned book, Schwarz narrated how his profession led him to encounter descendants of New Christians in Belmonte and that the Jewish education he received in his natal Zgierz and Lodz enabled him to gain the confidence of Crypto-Jewish leaders: the elderly women called “*sacerdotisas*”.⁵ He also identified in some contemporary Marranos who excelled in agriculture and in the Portuguese army counterparts to those “new Jews” merging in modern Zion.⁶ Like Jorge, he also employed a biblical metaphor to denote these expressions of Jewish endurance: the burning bush. Schwarz’s study on 20th Century Portuguese Conversos was certainly a major achievement in ethnology - due to the quantity and quality of prayers, traditions and beliefs he managed to gather and analyze -, but it was also an engaged manifesto on behalf of the right of New Christian descendants to overtly live as proud Jews.

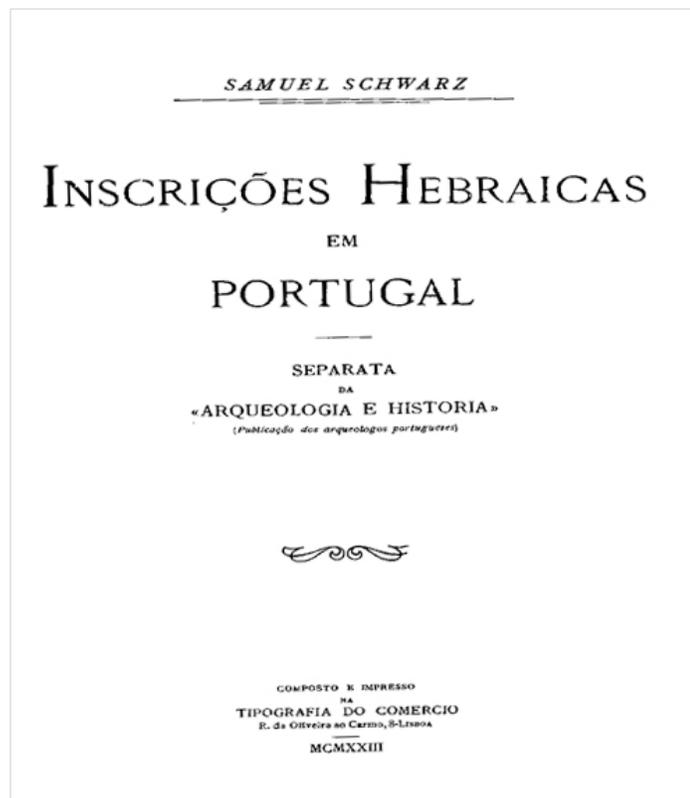


Figure 2

In different occasions I showed how intertwined were the scholarly and the apologetic dimensions of that book.⁷ Today, I will focus on the meaning and the implications of the verb “*minerar*” employed by Jorge, to characterize Schwarz’s intellectual work. I will argue that this verb encapsulates much of his methodological and teleological approaches on Portugal’s Jewish human and material past and sheds light to contemporary analogous initiatives.

If “*minerar*” means “to excavate”, we will rapidly notice how close Schwarz was to the discipline of archeology. Being a member of the “Association of Portuguese Archeologists”, his abovementioned book appeared as its fourth volume, [fig. 2] while his first Portuguese published study, “The Hebrew Inscriptions in Portugal” (“*Inscrições Hebraicas em Portugal*”, Lisbon, 1923) was the first issue. He claimed that interest to decipher medieval Hebrew inscriptions began when he visited the Carmo archeological museum of Lisbon, just after his arrival to the country.⁸ The director of the museum, Colonel Francisco A. Garcez Teixeira, became his friend and was the person who helped Schwarz to restore an old building found in the city of Tomar: the ancient medieval synagogue.⁹ However, the publication of that book occurred only after Schwarz discovered the Marrano phenomenon: when his ethnological enquiries in the Beiras led him to find additional items. Precisely, it was from a page of “The Hebrew Inscriptions in Portugal” where for first time he announced the existence of contemporary Marranos to the Portuguese public.¹⁰ The preface he wrote to that book could be seen as a justification to include living people along with material remnants of a bygone era: “[f]or during three centuries of Inquisition dominance in Portugal, the Holy Office was not satisfied to burn Jews and New Christians, but also systematically destroyed Hebrew books and documents ...”.¹¹ Thus, a deep sense of historical justice came along with his intellectual curiosity for Portugal’s Jewish heritage. The question is if this archeological vindictive attitude did influence on his views on living Conversos? The answer is complex. On the one hand, Schwarz indeed endorsed a monumental perception of New Christian crypto-Judaism. He minimized Christian and Portuguese popular elements in the Marrano lore,

⁷ Stuczynski, “Introduction”, esp., pp. 39-69; idem, “Um Ensaio de Bio-Ideologia”, *Revista de Estudos Judaicos*, vol. VII (2004), pp. 58-63; idem, “Samuel Schwarz e o jogo de cartas”, *Revista de Estudos Judaicos*, vol. IX (2006), pp. 91-98; idem, “Schwarz, Samuel (1880-1953)”, in: *Dicionário do Judaísmo Português*, Lúcia Liba Mucznick, José Alberto Rodrigues da Silva Tavim, Esther Mucznick & Elvira de Azevedo Mea (eds.), Lisbon: Editorial Presença, 2009, pp. 496-497.

⁸ Stuczynski, “Introduction”, p. 18.

⁹ Samuel Schwarz, *Inscrições Hebraicas em Portugal*, Lisbon: Tipografia do Comercio, 1923, p. 31.

¹⁰ Idem, p. 27.

¹¹ Idem, p.6

⁵ Schwarz, *Os Cristãos-Novos em Portugal no Século XX*, pp. 11-12.

⁶ Idem, pp. 23-24.

ascribing its Jewish elements to a pristine era before the forced mass conversion of 1497: as if crypto-Judaism wasn't enough receptive to acculturation and to the integration of Jewish prayers and customs smuggled from the Western Sephardi Diaspora.¹² And yet he didn't describe Marranism as mere fossilized Judaism. Quite the contrary; in order to avoid betrayal before the Holy Office, he explained, Converso secrecy modified much of Jewish rites and customs, provoking the evanescence of circumcision and of other dangerous explicit signs.¹³ But in the long run, that circumstantial policy of religious deceit turned to be “almost a principle of faith”.¹⁴ That is why for the New Christians he first met in 1917, to conceal the Law of Moses before strangers was a quintessential expression of being Jewish. Was thus crypto-Judaism an impoverished version of Judaism? Not necessarily so, claimed Schwarz, since besides its heroic character it produced an *a posteriori* purified or distilled sort of it. For instance, from all the liturgical apparatus related to the ceremony of marriage, the descendants of the New Christians preserved a single blessing: “In the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob I unite you; and may his benediction be upon you. Amen”.¹⁵ According to Schwarz this short prayer encapsulates Judaism at its best.¹⁶ We can ask whether this portrait of crypto-Jewish religiosity couldn't give lessons of simplicity to the official established religions. What it is certain is that the verb “*minerar*” meant much more than mere archeological “excavations”. It also denoted the idea according to which the miner extracts brute metals and stones from the bottom of earth to be employed as useful and beautiful artifacts. This more teleological connotation of digging was an old metaphor that Jorge could have read in St.

Augustine's famous justification of the use of pagan wisdom.¹⁷ I will end my talk by showing how this sense of “*minerar*” was apparent in Schwarz's approach to the synagogue of Tomar and what can we learn from that.

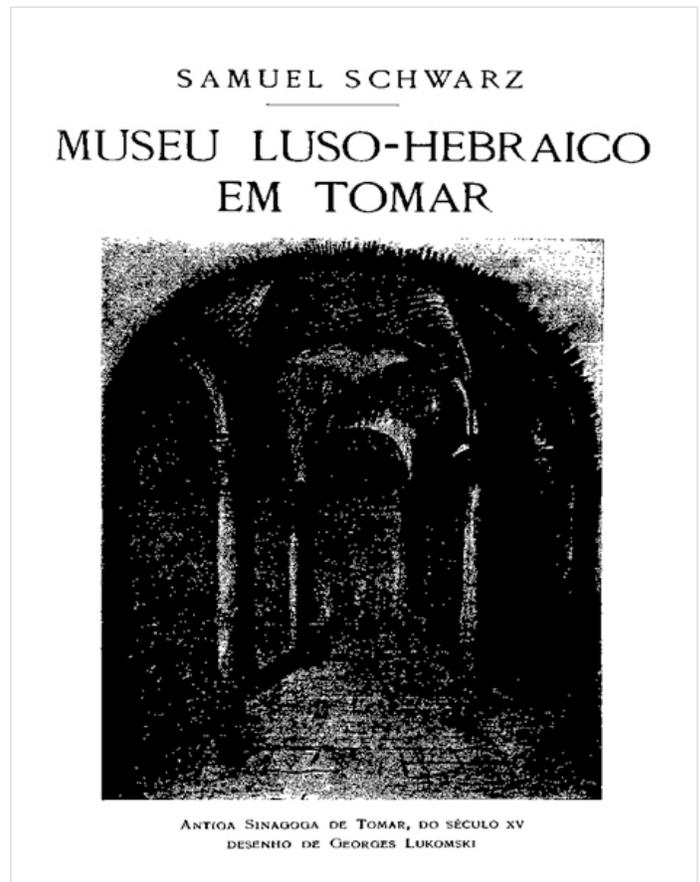


Figure 3

[fig. 3] During an excursion organized by the “Association of Portuguese Archeologists” to the city of Tomar in June 1920, Colonel Garcez Teixeira showed a building located in the old

¹² Cf. Manuel Costa Fontes, “Orações criptojudias na tradição oral portuguesa”, *Hispania*, LXXIV (1991), pp. 511-518; David Augusto Canelo, *Criptojudaismo em Belmonte, orações inéditas depois de Schwarz*, Belmonte, s.e., 1995, Maria Antonieta Garcia, *Os Judeus de Belmonte. Os caminhos da memória*, Lisbon: Instituto de Etnologia das Religiões – Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 2000, passim; Manuel Costa Fontes, “Orações criptojudias na tradição oral portuguesa”, *Hispania*, LXXIV (1991), pp. 511-518; Claude B. Stuczynski, *Between the Implicit and the Explicit: Books and Reading Techniques among Marranos in Portugal during the Sixteenth Century*, in: Yosef Kaplan & Moshe Sluhovskiy (eds.), *Libraries and Book Collections*, Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2006, pp. 161- 200 (in Hebrew).

¹³ Schwarz, *Os Cristãos-Novos em Portugal no Século XX*, p. 15. Cf. Andrea Zanardo, “Il criptogiudaismo portoghese contemporaneo. Un'ipotesi antropologica”, in: Pier Cesare Joly Zorattini (ed.), *L'identità dissimulata. Studi sul marranesimo*, Florence: Leo Olschki, 1999, pp. 347-366.

¹⁴ Schwarz, *Os Cristãos-Novos em Portugal no Século XX*, p. 20.

¹⁵ Quoted from the English abridged version of the book: Samuel Schwarz, “The Crypto-Jews in Portugal”, *The Menorah Journal*, vol. XII (1926), p. 298 (for a new edition of the article, see: idem, “The Crypto-Jews in Portugal”, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*, vol. XVIII (1999), pp. 40-64).

¹⁶ Idem, *Os Cristãos-Novos em Portugal no Século XX*, p. 36, 78.

¹⁷ St. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, book II, chapter 40: “... in the same way all branches of heathen learning have not only false and superstitious fancies and heavy burdens of unnecessary toil ... but they contain also liberal instruction which is better adapted to the use of the truth, and some most excellent precepts of morality; and some truths in regards even to the worship of the One God are found among them. Now these are, so to speak, their gold and silver, which they did not create themselves, but dug out of the mines of God's providence, which are everywhere scattered abroad, and are perversely and unlawfully prostituting to the worship of evils” (St. Augustine, *The Confessions, the City of God, on Christian Doctrine*, William Benton (ed.), Chicago, London & Toronto: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952, p. 655).

Jewish quarter as probably the site of the medieval synagogue.¹⁸ To avoid its destruction, in July 1921 he obtained its classification as a national monument.¹⁹ In May 1923 Schwarz purchased the synagogue of Tomar to be studied and restored. Ten years later he created a commission of friends: initially to transform the synagogue into an epigraphic museum and then, into the more ambitious Portuguese-Hebrew Historical Museum, named after the distinguished medieval Jewish astronomer Abraham Zacut (1452-1515). Schwarz's project was inspired by the Jewish museum of the synagogue "El tránsito" of Toledo, founded at the beginning of the 20th century. But due to political incertitude and lack of funds, in March 1939 he donated the building to the Portuguese State. Schwarz hoped that the government will support the full restoration of the synagogue in which the old Hebrew stone inscriptions will be reunited as well as a vast library containing Portuguese Hebrew incunabula and many other related books. Moreover, he suggested that the museum could promote publications on the history of Portuguese Jews and Conversos, eventually hosting conferences on Hebrew language and Portuguese-Jewish culture. In his own words, the synagogue of Tomar could be "... a great center of Portuguese-Jewish culture and a precious work of propaganda on behalf of Portugal".²⁰ However, those were difficult years for Portugal's democracy, for Portuguese Marranos and especially, for European Jews and much of Schwarz's creative initiatives couldn't fully realize [fig. 4] But in a book he wrote on the Jewish Community of Lisbon just before his death but published six years later, he chose to refer to the Portuguese-Hebrew Museum of Tomar, as one of his few still promising projects.²¹

Today, it seems to me that much of Schwarz's "*minerar*" approach is being revived. This very conference held in Tomar organized by an association of friends of the synagogue-museum could be seen as a fulfillment of some of his most cherished dreams. Schwarz's "*minerar*" approach combined scholarship with engagement and entrepreneurship; historical rigor with collective memory and imagination. For those who are now following his path here or elsewhere, willing to offer to a large public a compelling but accessible story of Portugal's Jewish heritage, the task would be to advance Schwarz's love for erudition and restless intellectual curiosity in order to avoid the

rapid transformation of his complex "mining" legacy into easy instrumental over-simplifications.

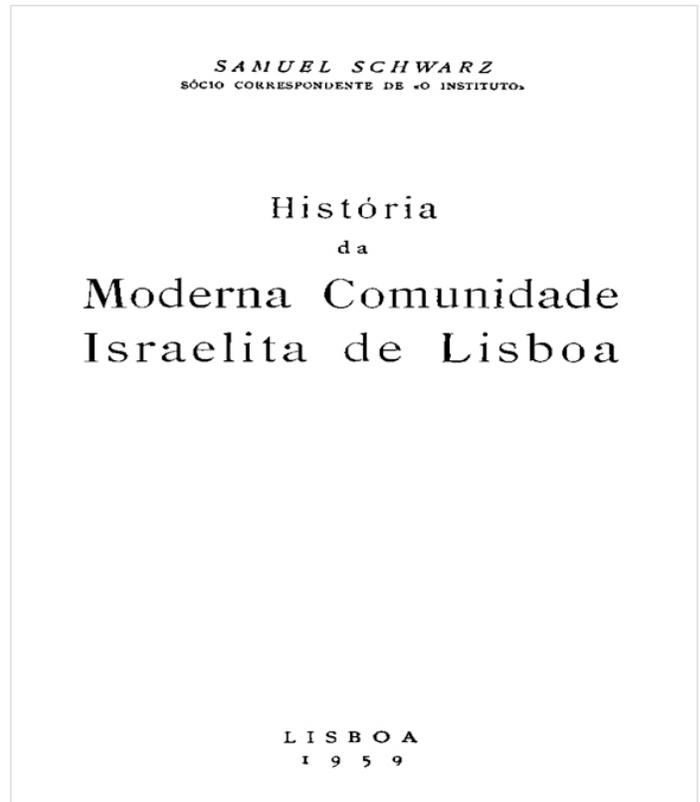


Figure 4

¹⁸ J. M. Santos Simões, *Tomar e a sua Judiaria*, Tomar: Edição do Museu Luso-Hebraico, 1943, p. 19

¹⁹ Schwarz, *Inscrições Hebraicas em Portugal*, pp. 30-31; Francisco Augusto Garces Teixeira, *A antiga sinagoga de Tomar*, Lisbon: Tipografia do Comercio, 1925, p. 7.

²⁰ "O 'Museu Luso-Hebraico de Tomar' constituirá também um grande centro de cultura luso-hebraica e uma valiosa obra de propaganda para Portugal" (Samuel Schwarz, *Projecto de organização de um museu Luso-Hebraico na antiga Sinagoga de Tomar*, Lisbon: Gráfica Santelmo, 1939, p. 26).

²¹ Idem, *História da Moderna Comunidade Israelita de Lisboa*, Lisbon: Coimbra Editora Limitada, 1959, pp. 50-57.