

## 12. RICHARD POPKIN'S MARRANO PROBLEM

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"In 1958 my intellectual life took a new turn," wrote Richard Popkin in the first part of his *Intellectual Autobiography: Warts and All*, a revealing and moving account of his intense life and his impressive and indefatigable academic activity. Because of the psychological pressure that he was under at that time in his work in the Philosophy Department of the University of Iowa, he suffered a severe breakdown, which affected him profoundly. He added: "When this reached a critical point, I suddenly had an overpowering religious experience."<sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to imagine that he suffered this breakdown, and a previous one in March 1957, just while he was immersed in the task of completing his book *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes*, which was first published in 1960. Both personal crises resulted in an intensified identification with Judaism, but Popkin seems to have remembered only the one in the fall of 1958 when he wrote his autobiographical essay.<sup>2</sup> In the difficult period when he was finishing his monumental study on the history of skepticism Popkin began to reflect increasingly on the Jewish origins of several of the first important skeptics of the early modern period: "I began to explore and consider [...] why four early skeptics, Montaigne his cousin Francisco Sanchez, the Jesuit priest Juan Maldonado, and Pedro Valencia, all of Spanish background, and all descended from Jewish forced converts to Christianity, were the ones who made scepticism a living issue in the late sixteenth century."<sup>3</sup>

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\* I am grateful to Jeremy D. Popkin for his comments and for the additional information that he provided from the Popkin family archive.

<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Popkin, "Intellectual Autobiography: Warts and All," in *The Sceptical Mode in Modern Philosophy: Essays in Honor of Richard H. Popkin*, eds. Richard A. Watson and James Force (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1988), 116–117.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy D. Popkin, "Richard Popkin and his *History of Scepticism*" (paper presented at a conference on Richard Popkin's intellectual legacy, Brazil 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Popkin, "Intellectual Autobiography," 117.

Indeed, the reader of Popkin's fascinating book on the history of skepticism will find, in its first version, several brief, factual references to the Jewish parents of Sanchez, "who had become Christians," and to Michel de Montaigne's mother "a Jewess turned Protestant."<sup>4</sup> But in the revised edition of 1964 Popkin wrote about Montaigne's mother that she was a "Jewish New Christian," and in a footnote on Sanchez he saw fit to hint that in the "boxes of papers of Henri Cazac," located in the Institut Catholique de Toulouse, one might find documents that would "provide many biographical clues, plus suggestions about the sceptical influence amongst the Portuguese New Christians at the Collège de Guyenne that may have affected both Sanchez and Montaigne."<sup>5</sup>

However, the "overpowering religious experience" that Popkin underwent had consequences reaching far beyond the search for the Jewish roots of a few of the forefathers of early modern skepticism. Popkin began to show great interest in Jewish history. He read the works of Solomon Grayzel and Cecil

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<sup>4</sup> Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (Assen: Van Gorcum & Comp. N.V. – Dr. H.J. Prakke and H.M.G. Prakke, 1960), 39, 45.

<sup>5</sup> See the revised edition, published under the same title by the same publishers, 39, n. 1, 45. From a series of letters that he wrote in 1960–1 to his close friend Elisabeth Labrousse, the great expert in Pierre Bayle, one notes the increasing interest that he felt at that time in the Marrano background of several of the French skeptics of the sixteenth century. In a letter that he sent to her from Claremont, California on 21 September 1960, he writes:

"Have you read Carvalho's edition of Francisco Sanchez? There is a lot of interesting material plus conjecture, but it is surprising to me that so little 'hard' data seems to have been uncovered about the intellectual milieu in the 16th century at the Universities of Toulouse and Montpellier, and about the career of Sanchez, and his relations with Montaigne. Do you know of any detailed study of the relationships between the Spanish Jewish refugees of the period and the early Reformers? Carvalho quotes a student's report from the late 16th century to the effect that the Marranos were especially numerous in the Reformed Church at Montpellier. I have seen several mentions of the claim that Montaigne's mother was a member of the Reformed Church, but no one gives any specific documentation. It would seem plausible that if the Marranos were forced to maintain a Christian façade in southern France, that they would have preferred to join with the enemies of Catholicism than remain in the Portuguese Catholic churches."

In a letter from 11 October of that year he writes:

"I would like to discuss several points with you about the Marranos in Southern France at the time of Montaigne and Sanchez, and about early Spanish Protestantism."

On April 1961 he writes to her:

"Having worked out my case, I am now beginning to have doubts as to the result of my recherches espagnoles. Many of the forced converts were certainly insincere Christians. Was Spinoza actually the first to doubt not only the religion his family was forced into, but also any and all religious belief?"

Roth and examined more specialized studies of the Jewish past, and especially that of the Iberian Marranos. This was not simply an intellectual experience: "I plunged into the world of the Marranos, and literally felt myself growing roots that connected me to this tradition of secret Jews, forced converts, who had to function in an alien world, always threatened by it." He was fascinated by the Marrano experience, by the fact that the forced converts and their descendants in Spain were forced to live a double life, "outwardly conforming to the culture around them, but internally guarding the true faith."<sup>6</sup>

In addition, Popkin was enthralled by the mysticism of Santa Teresa and of Juan de la Cruz, who seemed to him "closest to what I had experienced." However, above all, the encounter with the history of the Iberian Marranos caused a great shock to Popkin's identity: "The immediate result of all this was that for the first time in my life I became Jewish."<sup>7</sup> This way of putting it might seem extreme, seeing that Popkin grew up in Jewish surroundings, which, although they were secular, were very sensitive to Jewish issues. Nevertheless, despite the interest that he had previously shown in subjects connected to Judaism, it was only after that "overpowering religious experience" that Judaism began to play a central role for him in an existential manner.

The encounter with the history of the Marrano thinkers of the fifteenth and sixteenth century and with the works of philosophers, theologians, and mystics who stemmed from forced convert families inspired him to consolidate his identity as a modern, assimilated Jew, a Jew who had no direct contact with Hebrew sources or with the basic texts of the Talmudic and rabbinical tradition. Popkin never learned Hebrew, and this fact created a barrier between him and the sources of Jewish culture. The efforts of his friend, Judah Goldin, to persuade him to study Hebrew were in vain. Goldin even sent him a Hebrew grammar book in 1957, and implored him to learn Biblical Hebrew, "to be able to do several chapters of Scripture when the time comes."<sup>8</sup>

Both the Marranos and Popkin were cut off from the Jewish tradition, and their connection with Judaism was paradoxical. Popkin's new Jewish identity then appeared to him in religious terms:

I felt the Marrano experience showed that there was an important contact with divinity in preserving the faith and not assimilating. I became Jewish in spirit, but was not interested in learning Hebrew, in adopting the rules and regulations I had never observed. I made a token compromise – I adopted

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<sup>6</sup>Popkin, "Intellectual Autobiography," 117.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Letter from Goldin to Popkin, 10 July 1957. This letter, like the others cited in this article, are in the Popkin family archive, copies now at the Clark Memorial Library, Los Angeles, CA.

the practices of the Marranos. I did not voluntarily eat pork, and I began observing the Jewish holidays.<sup>9</sup>

The “minimalistic” Judaism that the Marranos in Spain and Portugal were compelled to adopt as a result of mass conversion, which was imposed on them by force, and in consequence of the totalitarian regime and the supervision of the Inquisition, became a voluntary choice for Popkin. His family life also changed, and his children began attending a Jewish Sunday school. In 1964 Popkin was one of the founders of the La Jolla Jewish Community, many of whose members were on the university staff, and most of whom were indifferent, sometimes even antagonistic to Jewish religious customs. Many of them had been living in La Jolla for a number of years, but, like the Iberian Marranos in their day, they hid the fact that they were Jewish. Only after the University of California and the Salk Institute were established, and only after the initiative of Popkin and some of his friends in organizing a Jewish group, did those Jews feel secure enough to “come out of the closet” and identify openly with Judaism. Popkin began to fast on Yom Kippur, because of a feeling of solidarity with the clandestine Judaism of the Marranos, and in 1964, with his wife Julie and some of their friends, he held a Passover Seder at the La Jolla Community Center for more than 90 people who had responded to an advertisement in the local newspaper, the *La Jolla Light*.<sup>10</sup> Although in 1957 he had written a letter to his mother, saying that the family had celebrated its first Passover Seder in Iowa,<sup>11</sup> the large group Seder in La Jolla apparently played a decisive role in Popkin’s life. Popkin was the first president of the Jewish community of La Jolla and became the guiding spirit of that organization. He devoted himself to that activity with great energy and utmost seriousness: “Despite my utter lack of Jewish training – others knew more – we created a homemade Judaism. We met in each other’s homes, started a Hebrew school and conducted a barmitzvah.”<sup>12</sup> His secular mother responded with more than a hint of irony to his active involvement in the establishment of a Jewish community: “The news that you’re starting a shul in La Jolla amuses and intrigues me and in my spare moments I speculate on whether you are beginning to run true to Harry Feinberg’s [Richard Popkin’s grandfather, Y.K.] genes. Your grandfather, remember, was a kind of Jewish Johnny Appleseed, scattering new synagogues and Jewish centers wherever he set foot.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Popkin, “Intellectual Autobiography,” 117.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>11</sup> Letter of 16 April 1957, mentioned in the article by Jeremy D. Popkin in this volume.

<sup>12</sup> Popkin, “Intellectual Autobiography,” 125.

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Zelda Popkin to her son Richard, 16 March [1964].

The revolution in his identity brought with it a shift in his intellectual and academic activity: "The Jewish interest was to dominate my intellectual concerns from then on."<sup>14</sup> However, for Popkin, Marranism represented the only sort of Judaism that he wanted to identify with, and which he was at ease with accepting. This was a kind of Judaism in spirit, which retained the substance of belief, demanded the observance of only a few commandments, and was not subject to rabbinical authority. Because of the special historical circumstances in the Iberian peninsula, the Marranos had been forced to maintain their separate identity without official leadership and without a religious establishment standing above them. They were also forced to overcome their lack of knowledge of Hebrew sources and create their own "homemade Judaism," despite their "lack of Jewish training."<sup>15</sup>

With the intellectual curiosity and the investigative instincts that had always been characteristic of him, Popkin began to investigate the Jewish origins of central figures in the intellectual life of Spain and Portugal: "I bored everyone with endless details about who was Jewish in Spain and Portugal, and as refugees in the rest of the world."<sup>16</sup> However, as a scholar of the history of philosophy and a historian of ideas, the encounter with Marranism was not just an intellectual turning point for him but also gave him a clear feeling that here was a new element, one which was central for understanding the development of modern European thought: "I felt that once I could master what the Marrano experience involved, I would have another key to understanding modern intellectual history."<sup>17</sup>

His enthusiasm grew when he realized that in addition to the rich literary material that Marrano thinkers and authors had left behind in Iberia, there were also scores of documents by Marranos who had reverted to Judaism in Amsterdam and in libraries all over Europe. This precious material, very little of which had been studied thoroughly hitherto, attracted him, and in it he hoped to find the Jewish field in which he could establish himself without knowledge of Hebrew, since most of these authors wrote in Spanish and Portuguese and in other European languages, which were accessible to him.

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<sup>14</sup> Popkin, "Intellectual Autobiography," 117.

<sup>15</sup> Scores of studies have been written on the Marranos, dealing with a wide variety of subjects revolving around their complex religious identity, their Jewish education, and the crypto-Jewish way of life that many of them led. For a broad and comprehensive survey of their history and the various approaches in historiography toward their religious identity, as well as many examples drawn from primary sources regarding the religious customs of the Marranos, see David M. Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit: the Religion of the Crypto-Jews* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> Popkin, "Intellectual Autobiography," 118.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

In the early 1960s he set out on his first expedition in search of manuscripts and documents in Toulouse, Paris, and Amsterdam, in hopes that this field would occupy a central place in his scholarship in the coming years. He gained the impression that the Toulouse archives contained much evidence to show that the Spanish and Portuguese exiles who had taken refuge in that region from the end of the fifteenth century on “had created a great ferment there.”<sup>18</sup> However, he quickly retreated when it became clear to him that he lacked the patience for detailed archival research of this kind. When he turned toward Paris, with excited expectations at the prospect of examining the Inquisition documents that were preserved in various collections there, he met with disappointment because he lacked sufficient paleographic skill to decipher the sixteenth century Spanish documents. In contrast, the encounter with the manuscripts in Amsterdam excited and gratified him. Here he discovered the treasures preserved in the Ets Haim Library of the rabbinical seminary of the Sephardic community, at a time when the manuscripts and archival material were still preserved together.<sup>19</sup> Dr. Leo Fuks was then the librarian of that rare collection and with great generosity he made its treasures available to Popkin.<sup>20</sup> Few scholars had made use of it until then, and those who had consulted it were not aware of all the riches it contained. For a long time, the Sephardic community had been reluctant to open the gates of their library to scholars and visitors, and several rumors circulated as to the reason for that. It seems to me that the most convincing one was the fear of revealing the anti-Christian literature that had been written by Sephardic Jews, including some members of the community. A few years after the Second World War, the Dutch government declared the library a national treasure. It was customary to open it on Sunday mornings, mainly to satisfy the curiosity of Jewish tourists. Popkin was one of the first to get a look at the collection, and he intuitively grasped its value and importance. Not even the leading scholars of the Marranos and of the Sephardic Diaspora were familiar with the treasures it contained. Cecil Roth expressed vehement resentment because he had been

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 119

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 119–120. On the manuscripts in the Ets Haim library, see the catalogue by L.Fuks and R.Fuks-Mansfeld, *Hebrew and Judaic Manuscripts in Amsterdam Public Collections. II Catalogue of the Manuscripts of Ets Haim/Livraria Montezinos Sephardic Community of Amsterdam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975).

<sup>20</sup> He describes the excitement that gripped him when, in the company of his friend, the scholar Paul Dibon, under the guidance of L. Fuks, he first visited it, in a letter to his mother dated 27 June 1961, which is quoted in this volume in the article by Jeremy Popkin.

denied access to the manuscripts and documents of the community when he was writing his book about Menasseh Ben Israel, published in 1934.<sup>21</sup>

Not even Israel S. Révah, the major scholar of Portuguese Marranism, made use of documents from the Amsterdam collection in writing his well known book on Spinoza and Prado, published in 1959. Although it contained various documents about the excommunications of Spinoza and Prado, as well as three works that Isaac Orobio de Castro wrote against Prado (one fragmentary and the other two complete), Révah published these sources on the basis of later copies located in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and in fact he was not at all aware of what he could gain from the Ets Haim Library. In his book, he did indeed quote a few fragments of the manuscript of a work by Mosseh Raphael de Aguilar, which is found in the Ets Haim Library.<sup>22</sup> However, the citation was on the basis of quotations found in the book by J. Mendes dos Remedios on the Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam.<sup>23</sup> It appears that Révah also quoted the writs of excommunication against Spinoza and Prado from what was published by C. Gebhardt, J. Freudenthal, A.M. Vaz Dias, and J. Meijer rather than from the original documents in the archives of the Amsterdam community.<sup>24</sup>

As I will explain later, Révah discovered the importance of the Ets Haim Library through Popkin, for whom the encounter with these manuscripts was a formative event:

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<sup>21</sup> C. Roth, *A Life of Menasseh Ben Israel. Rabbi, Printer, and Diplomat* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 5705–1945). See the preface, xi: “This work would inevitably have been more comprehensive had use been made in it of the records of the Spanish and Portuguese community of Amsterdam. In 1927, I went to Holland expressly for the purpose of doing research in the Archives of that famous and ancient body. Like many others before me, I found the doors closed, though the Secretary assured me that he would give me any information which I might require. I explained that I had come to make inquiries into the career of Menasseh ben Israel and his contemporaries. ‘We have nothing in our Archives relating to Menasseh ben Israel,’ the custodian blandly informed me, intimating at the same time that the interview was closed.”

<sup>22</sup> Israel S. Révah, *Spinoza et le Dr. Juan de Prado* (Paris and La Haye: Mouton, 1959), 19.

<sup>23</sup> Joaquim Mendes dos Remedios, *Os Judeus portugueses em Amsterdam* (Coimbra: F. França Amado, 1911), 65.

<sup>24</sup> Révah, *Spinoza et le Dr. Juan de Prado*, 57–60. Cf. Carl Gebhardt, “Juan de Prado,” *Chronicon Spinozanum* 3 (1923), 273–279; Jacob Freudenthal, *Die Lebensgeschichte Spinoza's in Quellenschriften, Urkunden und Nichtamtlichen Nachrichten* (Leipzig: Verlag von Veit, 1989), 114–116; A.M. Vaz Dias and W.G. Van der Tak, *Spinoza mercator et autodidactus: Oorkonden en andere authentieke documenten betreffende des wijsgeers jeugd en diens betrekkingen* (The Hague, 1932), 33–34; Jaap Meijer, *Encyclopaedia Sefardica Neerlandica*, 2nd part (Amsterdam: Portugees-Israëlietische Gemeente, 5710 [1949–1950]), 62.

For a couple of weeks I had an orgy as I found the courses given in Spinoza's day in ethics, logic, etc., as I found the writings of Orobio, Morteira, Montalto and Isaac Troki against Christianity, and saw that these anti-Christian works used much Spanish scholastic and French Protestant source material and fairly little Jewish material.<sup>25</sup>

Once again he had a strong feeling that those Jews were intellectually, culturally, and existentially very close to him. Their background was a general European one, their education was philosophical, and their reference to Jewish sources was, as it were, rather limited. Popkin thought that he had found Jews after his own heart and values in the Sephardic Jewish intellectuals of Amsterdam: "The Amsterdam Jewish intellectuals obviously were not locked in a ghetto studying the Talmud. They were European trained philosophers, scientists, and theologians, who were defending Judaism in terms of seventeenth and eighteenth century ideas."<sup>26</sup>

While examining the manuscripts in Amsterdam, Popkin was surprised to discover that these Jewish writers referred more frequently to Iberian scholastic thinkers or to the writings of Calvin than to the works of Maimonides and other rabbinical authorities. He managed to infect Professor Paul Dibon with his enthusiasm. At that time the latter was serving in Holland as the cultural attaché to the French embassy there. After Popkin showed him some of the material, he concluded with great astonishment that here was proof that there was "un courant juif" in seventeenth century European thought.<sup>27</sup>

As strange as this may seem, it was Popkin who, shortly afterward, told Révah about the collection of manuscripts in the Ets Haim Library. Révah was a fellow of the Collège de France, but his scholarship was known until then to a small circle of historians concerned with Portuguese culture and the crypto-Jews of Portugal. Révah, who had by then investigated scores of Inquisition files in the Torre do Tombo archives in Lisbon, became a good friend of Popkin's. Their meeting immediately made a mark on Révah's work, for he quickly went to Amsterdam to get a sense of the type of material to be found there. In the following years Révah published his most important study of "la rupture spinozienne" in the Sephardic community of Amsterdam, a work that shed new light on the intellectual ferment among the Marranos of the seventeenth century.<sup>28</sup> Few people know that the encounter with Popkin lay behind

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<sup>25</sup> Popkin, "Intellectual Autobiography," 120.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Israel S. Révah, "Aux origines de la rupture Spinozienne: nouveaux documents sur l'incroyance dans la communauté judéo-portugaise à Amsterdam à l'époque de l'excommunication de Spinoza," *Revue des études juives* 123 (1964), 359–431.



the shift in Révah's research regarding the Spinoza and Prado incident and the controversy with Orobio de Castro.

Significantly, scholarship on the Marranos at that time was mainly parochial, genealogical, and still enveloped in large part in the romantic halo that historians had imbued it with, when they invoked the memory of those crypto-Jewish martyrs who had been burned at the stake by the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions because of their desire to preserve their Judaism. Some scholarship concentrated on examining the genealogy of prominent people in Spanish and Portuguese history, with an apologetic desire to demonstrate their Jewish origin. Other scholars went out of their way to collect every detail or hint about the "Jewish behavior" of the Marranos, about their Jewish customs and the commandments they observed. The best hispanists, especially Marcel Bataillon and the students and followers of Américo Castro, took note of the literary and intellectual traits of the authors, theologians, philosophers, poets, and playwrights who were central to Castilian literature from the mid-fifteenth until at least the mid-seventeenth century and who were of Jewish origin. Their origin and the discriminatory policy of the decrees regarding *limpiezas de sangre*, which were enforced in Iberia, marginalized them and gave their works particular, subversive critical dimensions. However, their approach to the Marranos was restricted to the Iberian context. Indeed, the lion's share of the historiography of the Marranos dealt with the controversy as to how Jewish or Christian the *Judeoconversos* were. Some historians made every effort to prove their loyalty to the Jewish faith, while others sought to refute that claim and prove that it was baseless, that all the evidence of the Inquisition was fabricated, and that the overwhelming majority of the New Christians identified completely with the Christian religion and sought to assimilate into the old Christian majority.<sup>29</sup>

Popkin's intellectual curiosity and his philosophical training brought a refreshing breeze into the study of the phenomenon of the Marranos. He transferred the focus of discussion from the particularist niche of Iberia and the history of the Jews of Iberia to the crisis of the European mind in the early modern period. In his eyes the Marranos became central protagonists in the intellectual drama that took place in the Old World.

Popkin's enthusiasm for the intellectual encounter with the world of the Marranos did not dwindle in the years when he was entirely immersed in his energetic and obsessive detective work regarding the Kennedy assassination. However, even before recovering from the emotional effort that he invested to solve the mystery of the president's murder, and a short time after

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<sup>29</sup> A rather exhaustive summary of the differences of opinion among the historians on this topic can be found in Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit*, 73–96.

the publication of his book, *The Second Oswald* in 1966, Popkin was already directing his full energy and investigative talent toward study of the Marrano phenomenon. As early as 1967 his articles on Menasseh ben Israel and Isaac Orobio de Castro were published in the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, while at that very time he was invited by the editors of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* to write a series of articles on Marrano thinkers. The fact that they turned to him on this subject shows that by the late 1960s Popkin had already gained a reputation among scholars in Jewish studies as an authority about the Marranos, although he had not yet published even a single article on them. This is no small achievement, especially if one recalls that the chief editor of that encyclopedia was none other than Cecil Roth, one of the best known scholars of the history of the Marranos.

By dint of intensive reading and incessant searches in many libraries throughout Europe, Popkin managed to gain astonishing expertise on this subject. At the start of this path, he was captivated by several fixed ideas. Columbus's "Jewishness" was one of them, and in fact until the end of his life he dealt with the question of whether Columbus was "secretly Jewish." Popkin collected every scrap of information printed on that subject and read Columbus's letters eagerly until he reached a firm conclusion on the matter: "Reading Columbus's letters, one is struck by the many Jewish themes and ideas."<sup>30</sup> More than that, however: Columbus's Jewishness became clear to him against the background of the deep connection that he thought he had found between Jewish messianism and Christian millenarianism in Spain in the late Middle Ages. He wanted to solve the mystery of the connection that had been revealed to him in an intuitive way between the millenarian frenzy of Saint Vincent Ferrer's attempt to convert the Jews so that world history would be transformed, and the messianic hopes that were stirred among both Marranos and Jews between the expulsion from Spain in 1492 and the conversion to Islam of the false messiah Shabbetai Zevi. He was deeply convinced that there was a connection in ideas and even a personal connection between Columbus and Don Isaac Abarbanel, "the father of modern Jewish messianism." Popkin's fertile imagination created a link between the messianic activities of the two men: "Columbus and Abarbanel were colleagues in the Portuguese royal court, then had to flee at the same time, and joined the Spanish royal court. Then in 1492, on the day the unconverted Jews were expelled from Spain, Columbus sailed west and Abarbanel east, to become the treasurer of the kingdom of Naples."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Popkin, "Intellectual Autobiography," 117, 119.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

However, Popkin did not restrict his interest in the Marranos to a defined and limited chronological framework or to a specific geographical or cultural area. He believed that the special encounter that took place between the Iberian Jews who had been baptized during the fifteenth century (and not always against their will!) had fascinating and wide-ranging intellectual and religious significance, and this encounter indeed gave rise to what Paul Dibon called “un courant juif,” with many branches and a variety of undercurrents.

Popkin did not regard the concept Marrano “as equivalent to ‘converso’ or to ‘New Christian’ because there obviously were thousands of converts who became Christians in the full sense of the term.”<sup>32</sup> He also did not use that concept as synonym for “secret Jew,” that is to say an apostate or the descendant of apostates from Judaism whose interior was belied by his exterior and whose official Christianity was merely a disguise for his inner and unshakable bond with Judaism. With his well-known intellectual discernment, even in the first stages of his interest, he noted “that there was a broad range of views among the unconvinced converts, ranging from partial Christianity to secret Judaism.”<sup>33</sup> From that perspective, he regarded the Marrano as someone who adopted a non-conformist attitude, sometimes even a subversive one, with respect to Christianity, “without necessarily being accompanied by any actual secret Jewish activity.”<sup>34</sup>

Following the research of Marcel Bataillon, who emphasized that most of the Erasmians in Spain and Portugal were of Jewish origin, Popkin sought to prove that one could find among some of them “a Marrano rejection of Trinitarianism,” the purpose of which was, among other things, “the presentation of a Christianity more acceptable to Marranos,” or, if you will, a drive toward the “spiritualization of Christianity,” in order to remove the dogmatic and symbolic elements that most deterred some of the converted Jews. For Marranos such as Juan de Valdés, it was important to remove the dogma of the trinity from Christian faith in order to show that “there could be Christianity without the Trinity; there could be Jewish Christianity.”<sup>35</sup>

In 1979, with the publication of the revised and expanded edition of his book on skepticism, now entitled *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, one could sense quite clearly the influence of Popkin's intense interest in Marranism on the subjects of research that had been central to his earlier

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<sup>32</sup> Richard H. Popkin, “Marranos, New Christians and the Beginnings of Modern Anti-Trinitarianism,” in *Jews and Conversos at the Time of the Expulsion*, eds. Yom Tov Assis and Yosef Kaplan (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1999), 152\*–153\*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 153\*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 169\*.

activity from the beginning of his career. In the third chapter, on Michel de Montaigne, he added a note that explicitly sharpened the issue of the connection between Montaigne and Sanchez and their Jewish origins. However, Popkin was constrained to be content with making comments without reaching a conclusion: “Recent researches lead me to believe that it will not be possible to assess the actual religious beliefs of either Montaigne or Sanchez until much more is known about the religious views and practices of the refugee New Christian families of Bordeaux and Toulouse. Were these families crypto-Jews, genuine Christians, nominal Christians, or what?” Although the state of research did not yet permit him to reach a decision, his tendency, in the light of “some of the data” that had come into his hands, was nonetheless to see them as crypto-Jews of one type or another: “Since Montaigne and Sanchez grew up and lived among Spanish and Portuguese New Christians in southern France, their ‘real’ beliefs were probably related to those of the people around them.” In southern France during the sixteenth century, especially in Bordeaux, “almost all New Christian families were suspected of secretly Judaizing.”<sup>36</sup>

However, the main innovation in this new edition of his earlier history of skepticism in the early modern period was the addition of two new chapters on Isaac La Peyrère and on Spinoza.<sup>37</sup> By adding these two chapters, Popkin explicitly, though without declaring it, brought Jews and Marranos to the center of the drama that took place, in his view, in seventeenth century European thought. Although in the chapter on La Peyrère he refrained for some reason from mentioning his well-known conjecture regarding the Marrano origins of the author of the *Preadamitae* (Men before Adam), he briefly presented what he had previously defined in a separate article as “The Marrano Theology of Isaac La Peyrère.”<sup>38</sup> He returned to that subject at length and in detail in the fascinating monograph that he published in 1989 on Isaac La Peyrère. There he held “that the most likely explanation of La Peyrère’s outlook was that he was of Jewish origins.”<sup>39</sup> However, more than he sought to link La Peyrère’s origins to the Spanish or Portuguese Jewish origins of many of the Calvinists of Bordeaux, where La Peyrère was born, he sought to bring out the Marrano character of his thought: “Whether he was or was not a Marrano, his theory, I believe, is best explained as a vision of the world for the Marranos [...] in La Peyrère’s vision, the Marranos (that is, Jews converted to Christianity while

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<sup>36</sup>Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1979), 263, n. 48.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 214–248, 292–299; Chapter XI: “Isaac La Peyrère and the Beginning of Religious Scepticism”; Chapter XII: “Spinoza’s Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism.”

<sup>38</sup>The article was published in *Studi Internazionali di Filosofia* v (1973), 97–126.

<sup>39</sup>Richard H. Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676). His Life, Work, and Influence* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), 22.

remaining Jews) are and will be the most important people in the world when the messiah comes."<sup>40</sup>

Popkin regarded La Peyrère's religious and political program as the most sophisticated, well-formed, and explicit exposition of Marrano theology. Not only were the Christians to cease all social and political mistreatment of the Jews, in order to encourage them to become Jewish Christians, or perhaps Christian Jews, it was also incumbent upon the Christians to make Christianity into a religion whose principles and ceremonies could be accepted by the Jews. By emphasizing this point, Popkin sought to bring out the existence of a distinctive Marrano outlook among the Iberian New Christians, the roots of which he thought he had discovered in Erasmian anti-Trinitarian views in the first half of the sixteenth century, which were, as noted, espoused by Marranos such as Valdés. Like the latter, the "Marrano" La Peyrère sought to purify Christianity of all the dogmas that made it offensive to the Jews, so that they could become Jewish Christians: "In so doing they would be in the same situation as the Marranos in that they would be Jewish converts to Christianity who still retained some essential Jewish beliefs."<sup>41</sup> The message for modern Jews is quite transparent: the Marranos, in their fashion, found a way that permitted them to assimilate into the majority society surrounding them while maintaining their distinctive character.

Popkin, who regarded La Peyrère as the father of modern biblical criticism and the man who marked the beginning of religious skepticism, did not find Marrano traces in his skepticism. In contrast, he located Marrano traces in La Peyrère's theology, which emphasized "the centrality of Jewish history in the world" and proclaimed "the recall of the Jews that is about to occur." When they accept Christianity purified of dogma and superstition, as Jewish Christians (that is to say, Marranos!), they will resume the leading position that had been theirs in antiquity, when they were the chosen people of God.<sup>42</sup>

Popkin's attitude toward Spinoza was always complex and fascinating, but a full account of this topic would demand separate treatment, beyond the limits of the present article.<sup>43</sup> Although Popkin always took into account the particular Jewish environment from which Spinoza arose, that is to say, the community of Marranos in Amsterdam who had returned openly to Judaism, he was not tempted to attribute a decisive or formative role to Spinoza's "Marrano roots" in developing his skeptical positions regarding revealed religion and religious knowledge claims. According to Popkin, the "Marrano" La

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 24–25.

<sup>43</sup> See Sarah Hutton, "Popkin's Spinoza," in this volume.

Peyrère did have a decisive influence on Spinoza's critical attitude toward the Bible, and Spinoza owned a copy of the *Preadamitae* and used it in writing the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.<sup>44</sup> However, in contrast, La Peyrère's "Marrano theology" left no impression on him at all.

Popkin assigned a short Quaker period to Spinoza's life, immediately after his excommunication in 1656, and he identified Spinoza with the "Jew at Amsterdam that by the Jews is cast out," who might have been the one who translated the second conversionist tract by Margaret Fell.<sup>45</sup> It would not be too daring to assume that Popkin believed that the seed of "Marrano messianism" (that is, the desire to attract the Jews to a kind of purified Christianity in order to bring about their redemption) had even been implanted in Spinoza himself; however the flower that grew from that seed was nipped in the bud. In his book about Spinoza, published shortly before his death, Popkin did not abandon the assumption that Spinoza (along with Samuel Fisher) had translated Fell's pamphlet into the Hebrew language, although he hedged the assumption by acknowledging that "this cannot be completely established on present evidence."<sup>46</sup>

Until the end of his life, Popkin remained interested in Marranism and in the connection between the history of the Marranos and the intellectual history of Europe. He took an active part in a series of symposia on these subjects and even was the initiator and guiding spirit of some of them. His interest in Columbus's "Jewishness" and his millenarian-messianic message never waned, and his curiosity regarding the intellectual consequences of La Peyrère's Marranism also remained lively. In the connection of the millenarian

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<sup>44</sup>Richard H. Popkin, *A History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, 227; idem, *Isaac La Peyrère*, 84.

<sup>45</sup>Richard H. Popkin, Introduction to *Spinoza's Earliest Publication? The Hebrew Translation of Margaret Fell's 'A Loving Salutation to the Seed of Abraham among the Jews, wherever they are scattered up and down upon the Face of the Earth,'* eds. Richard H. Popkin and Michael A. Signer (Assen, Maastricht and Wolfeboro: Van Gorcum, 1987), 1; idem, "Spinoza, the Quakers and the Millenarians 1656–1658", *Manuscripta* vi/1 (1982/3): 113–133; idem, "Spinoza's Relations with the Quakers in Amsterdam", *Quaker History* 73 (1984): 14–28; idem, "Spinoza and Samuel Fisher," *Philosophia* xv/3 (1985): 219–236; cf. Yosef Kaplan, review of *Spinoza's Earliest Publication?*, eds. Richard H. Popkin and Michael A. Signer, *Studia Rosenthaliana* xii/1 (1988): 73–75. On this topic see David S. Katz, "Popkin and the Jews," in this volume.

<sup>46</sup>Richard H. Popkin, *Spinoza* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004), 41. At the same time, still a year earlier, in his new version of the history of skepticism: *The History of Scepticism from Savanarola to Bayle*, Revised and expanded edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 231, he wrote that the task of translating Fell's treatise "was turned over an ex-Jew, who was apparently young Spinoza [...] It is probably Spinoza's earliest publication and the only text we have that indicates the level of his knowledge of Hebrew."

philo-Semitism of Samuel Hartlib and his circle with some of the prominent figures of the Sephardic community of Amsterdam, primarily Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, who was himself a Marrano from Portugal who had returned to Judaism as a youth, Popkin found new extensions of the presence of Marrano messianism in the intellectual history of the early modern period.<sup>47</sup> His intellectual thirst and his desire to uncover more and more information regarding these subjects never declined. As long as his health permitted him to fly to the ends of the earth, he continued to visit libraries and archives and to surprise us all with his discoveries of rare manuscripts and books.

However, at the same time, it was possible to sense the chilling of the enthusiasm that had connected him with the Marranos as an existential experience and an essential part of his Jewish identity during the 1960s. He was vehemently critical of the occupation and the outburst of nationalist messianism that swept Israeli society. These political developments provoked strong reactions with respect to his attitude toward Israel and raised questions regarding his Jewish identity. An echo of his state of mind in his later years can be found in words that he wrote in the late 1990s, at the end of the second part of his memoirs: "I should like to be able to spend some time thinking through my own spiritual beliefs, and my position vis-a-vis Judaism and Israel. In the growing rush to adopt more and more traditional Jewish practices, I think the great values espoused by secular socialist Jews in the period before World War II need to be asserted again as a way of providing hope for a better future."<sup>48</sup>

Marranism ceased to serve for him as the life buoy that he had grasped in the 1960s in order to feel "Jewish in spirit" at a time when he felt a religious need to attach himself to Judaism. This feeling was attenuated and gave way to the secular views and values that had characterized his Jewish environment when he was a youth in the Bronx.

Marranism became more and more a metaphor for him, which reflected a universal condition, the plight of minorities struggling to maintain their special character in the face of the pressure exerted on them by the majority culture, which sets the boundaries of what is regarded as accepted and acceptable views and expressions: "All of us, not just Marranos in Iberia [...] learn only too quickly that we have to do what is acceptable, and must get our points

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<sup>47</sup> Richard H. Popkin, "Some Aspects of Jewish-Christian Theological Interchanges in Holland and England 1640–1700," in *Jewish-Christian Relations in the Seventeenth Century*, eds. J. van den Berg and Ernestine G.E. van der Wall (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988), 3–32.

<sup>48</sup> Richard H. Popkin, "Introduction. Warts and All, Part 2," in *Everything Connects in Conference with Richard H. Popkin. Essays in His Honor*, eds. James E. Force and David S. Katz (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999), lxxvi.

across within these limits. It is in this sense that the Marrano experience has important meaning for us today, even in the ‘free’ atmosphere of the United States [...] Marrano activity is forced upon us all, if we are not completely homogenized members of the dominant culture.”<sup>49</sup>

For Popkin the Marrano became a metaphor for the outsider, who sees things that an “insider would never notice,” and of the tirelessly subversive, nonconformist, critical intellectual who submits to the necessity of adapting in order to express the Marrano outlook “in a form acceptable to the majority.” However, the Marrano does not surrender to the homogenization of the majority culture. In the 1960s Popkin used Marranism to connect with Judaism and become “Jewish in spirit,” but at the end of his life he preferred to see himself as “Marrano in spirit.” He drew encouragement and inspiration from examples of the Marranos of the early modern period, whom he pictured in his imagination as “spokespersons for a different world of uprooted people, partly cut off from their heritage.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Richard H. Popkin, “The Marranos of Amsterdam” in his *The Third Force in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), 170. An abridged version of this paper appeared in *The New Republic*, May, 1990.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 171.