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'The Longing' documents crypto-Jews caught between two worlds

By Naomi Pfefferman

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Would-be converts Maritza and Borys Valverde.

When Gabriela Böhm set out to create her documentary, "The Longing: The Forgotten Jews of South America," several years ago, she hoped to profile an as-yet-undiscovered secret community of Crypto Jews -- descendants of Jews forced to flee the Spanish Inquisition who continued practicing rituals covertly.

Perhaps the best known of such enclaves was found in Belmonte, Portugal in the last century: "But as I traveled, I realized that such secret communities do not exist anymore," said Böhm, whose film will screen Nov. 13 as part of the Los Angeles Sephardic Jewish Film Festival, which runs from Nov. 9 through Nov. 16. "What remains are remnants of a Jewish past, or traditions, among families who may or may not know their origins."

Eventually Böhm connected with Jacques Cukierkorn, a Reform rabbi in Kansas City, Mo., whose mission has been to guide so-called Crypto Jews living in isolated communities. In 2004, he

invited Böhm to accompany him to Guayaquil, Ecuador, where he was to supervise the conversion of five such individuals. The conversos included a microbiologist who learned, at 15, that her great-grandfather was Sephardic, and who traced his lineage back to Portugal in the 1850s; and a mother and daughter who traveled 36 hours from Columbia to meet the rabbi. In Columbia, Böhm learned, all babies were required to be baptized until two decades ago.

Upon traveling to Ecuador, she said, she was disturbed to discover that her interviewees were still spurned by their Catholic neighbors -- and by their Jewish communities as well. Even a Guayaquil resident who had been converted through Chabad of Massachusetts was banned from attending his area synagogue. "He so badly wanted to join the community, but they wanted nothing to do with him," said Böhm, who was herself kicked out of the same shul when she tried to interview the leader of the community. "His level of desire and disappointment, along with the others', became the drama and focus of my film. And this time, the Jewish community was doing the rejecting, like the Catholics before them."

"This type of story has also played out in Lima, Santa Fe and other places, where people, many with Indian or mestizo [mixed] blood, have sought to rejoin what they consider their historical faith -- only to find their motives questioned and their acceptance in the established Jewish community minimal at best," Nextbook noted of the film.

Böhm said that as the daughter of Holocaust survivors, she strongly identified with her subjects' feelings of communal rejection. Her Hungarian father survived Nazi and Russian labor camps, only to suffer from bipolar disorder after relocating to Buenos Aires, where he was unable to learn Spanish and committed suicide in 1981. "As a Jew growing up in Argentina, I absorbed my parents' trauma, and felt I too was embroiled in a struggle to find where I belonged," Böhm, 44, said. "But the sense of dual identity I felt is even more dramatic in the people who live in these isolated little communities in South America."

"The Longing" does not reveal any kind of happy ending for the profiled Crypto Jews. "Rabbi Cukierkorn is a complicated figure," she said. "He sees himself as a kind of savior figure, and of course the people he converted do feel more connected to their Jewish roots. But they are still in limbo. The question remains: Is it right for him to convert them if there is no community in which they can congregate? It's a question I still debate; my hope is that they will be able to create their own community."

"The Longing: The Forgotten Jews of South America" will screen on Nov. 13.

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