

# Society for Crypto Judaic Studies

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## Conference 2009 - Denver

### Report from the Conference Chair

Seth Kunin

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This summer the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies held its 19th annual conference in Denver . The conference was a great success, and covered a wider range of areas than many those in the past few years. We had a broad range of creative papers and presentations, academic papers on history and anthropology, and individual descriptions of family history and experience.

The tone of the conference was set by a beautiful and moving film and presentation. Gabriela Böhm's film *The Longing* encapsulated many of the issues and experiences of crypto-Jews. The film, a documentary, depicted the experiences of crypto-Jews in Ecuador and Columbia as the journey through the process of returning to Judaism. It highlighted the inner tensions and joys of this process and their experiences of both rejection and acceptance by other Jews. The film also highlighted the complexity and fluid nature of identity, themes that were the leit motif of the conference as a whole.

The creative theme, sponsored by the Sosin-Stratton-Petit Foundation, ran throughout the conference. Three highlights for me were the poetry of Miriam Herrera, the music of Consuelo Luz and the artistic creations of Sonya Loya, Gail Gutierrez-McDermid, and Peter Svarzbein. All of these presented moving artistic responses to crypto-Jewish past and present.

This year, more than any other time in the past, heralded the publication of a wide range of books on crypto-Judaism. These ranged from the historical text by Dolly Sloan *Sehardic Jews of Spain and Portugal* , the beautiful discussion of family traditions in *Guardians of Hidden Traditions* by Isabelle Medina-Sandoval, and the poetry of Miriam Herrera. The authors both spoke about and read from their works. The range and significance of these publications indicates the vibrancy of research and thinking about crypto-Judaism in the society and beyond.

This year's conference also saw the launch of a new and significant journal. The *Journal of Spanish, Portuguese and Italian Crypto Jews*. This journal, edited by our former president Abraham Lavender, is published by Florida International University and sponsored by the society. It includes a fascinating set of articles on crypto-Judaism world-wide. It is already an essential resource for anyone interested in the academic study of crypto-Judaism.

The conference also included a number of academic papers. The first panel focused on the issues of identity. All three papers addressed the question of the fluidity of identity and the complex nature of crypto-Jewish understandings of self. Ron Duncan Hart's paper was particularly interesting, focusing on how coercion played an essential role in shaping and defining crypto-Judaism. Some of the highlights of the academic papers included a long awaited return of David Gitliz, author of the groundbreaking book *Secrecy and Deceit*. His paper explored issues surrounding the use of names as a method of identifying crypto-Jews. He presented an important caution, illustrating that particular names were very rarely specifically associated with conversos. His work emphasizes the need to introduce a range of documentary evidence rather than relying on the use of one surname or another. Barry Stiefel presented an illustrated talk on the sand floors of synagogues in the Caribbean . It raised interesting questions about the origins of this type of floor and the potential connection with crypto-Jewish past. One additional highlight was the paper presented by Gerald González on Teresa Aguilera y Roche. This was both a fascinating insight into historical questions and the significant role of women in the perpetuation of crypto-Jewish identity and tradition.

In a short article it is impossible to mention every paper or to do justice to those mentioned. The conference was both lively, aesthetically stimulating and intellectually informative. I think that everyone who attended could find something to challenge them and equally to enlighten and inspire them.