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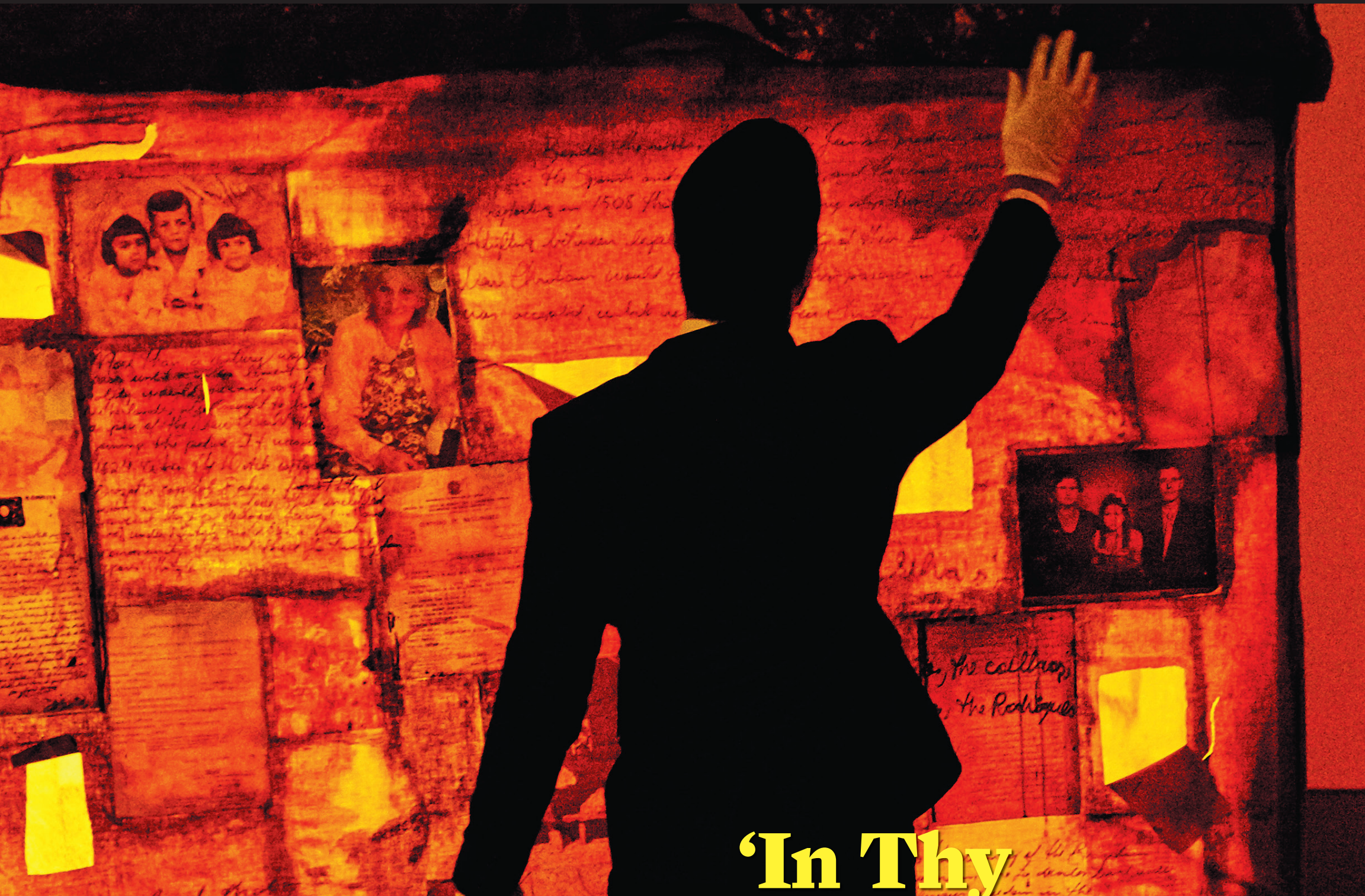
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'In Thy Tent I Dwell'

**The art and life of
Jônatas Chimen Dias
DaSilva-Benayon
on display in Teaneck**

page 32

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Jewish Standard
1086 Teaneck Road
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COVER STORY

The long road home

Brazilian-American artist's crypto-Jewish heritage to be on display in Teaneck

JOANNE PALMER

What is Jewish identity? That's an old question, hackneyed even, hard to answer, at times politically fraught. It's got so many answers, depending on what the question means. Is it religious? Ethnic? Halachic? Tribal? Genetic? Does it have to be accepted? Can it be rejected? How far back does it go? How far forward does it stretch? Is it elastic?

What is it?

It's complicated.

Jônatas Chimen Dias DaSilva-Benayon, as his name might signify, is a particularly complicated person. He's an artist, an

academic, a man in his mid-30s with a history that stretches back centuries, a Brazilian-American, a born Jew who had no idea that he was Jewish, much less what being Jewish meant, until he dug out that truth, someone who could have represented a historic dead end but instead has become a vibrant beginning. His story is both fascinating and ongoing.

He will present some of that story, in the form of an art installation called "In Thy Tent I Dwell," as well as other stories and more artwork, at Temple Emeth from March 9 to March 11. (See box.)

Jônatas's part of his story begins in Brasilia, Brazil, in 1981. He grew up in what struck him as an unusually strict

family – he couldn't eat in other people's houses, he didn't go to church ever, he knew that he, like his parents and aunt and uncles and cousins, eventually would be expected to marry someone who came from his huge extended family. He knew that his family was different, somehow. He didn't know how or why – he just knew that his family had odd customs and an expectation of separation.

He is an immigrant to the United States – he, his sister, and his parents moved to Miami when he was 16 – and so are his parents. And so were his grandparents. "This story is all about immigration," he said.

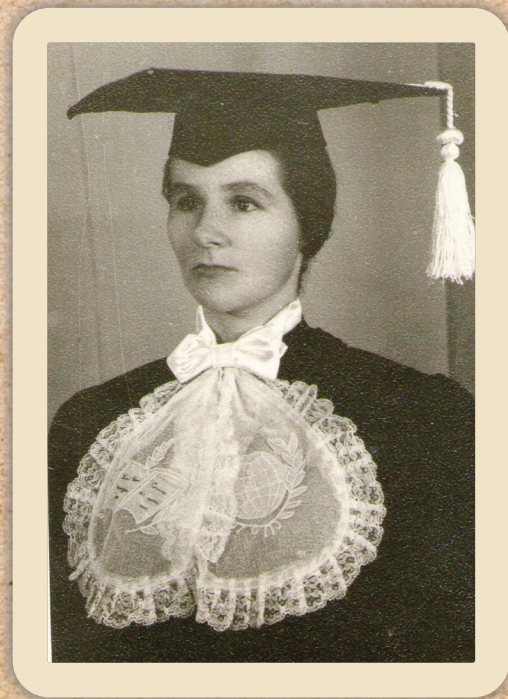
His father's mother's family arrived in Brazil from Spain "not that long ago in

historical terms," he said. "In 1909. And that branch of the family always emphasized what it is to be an immigrant, so I grew up with them always telling us that we are not from Brazil. That we have to live as people who belong somewhere else."

Where it was that they belonged, however, was not clear.

"I grew up with stories of the challenges of immigration – language, culture, tradition, different values. There always was the idea that we should not blend in, because we come from somewhere else. Not necessarily somewhere better, but somewhere different."

On his father's father's side, the family "had been in Brazil for many generations



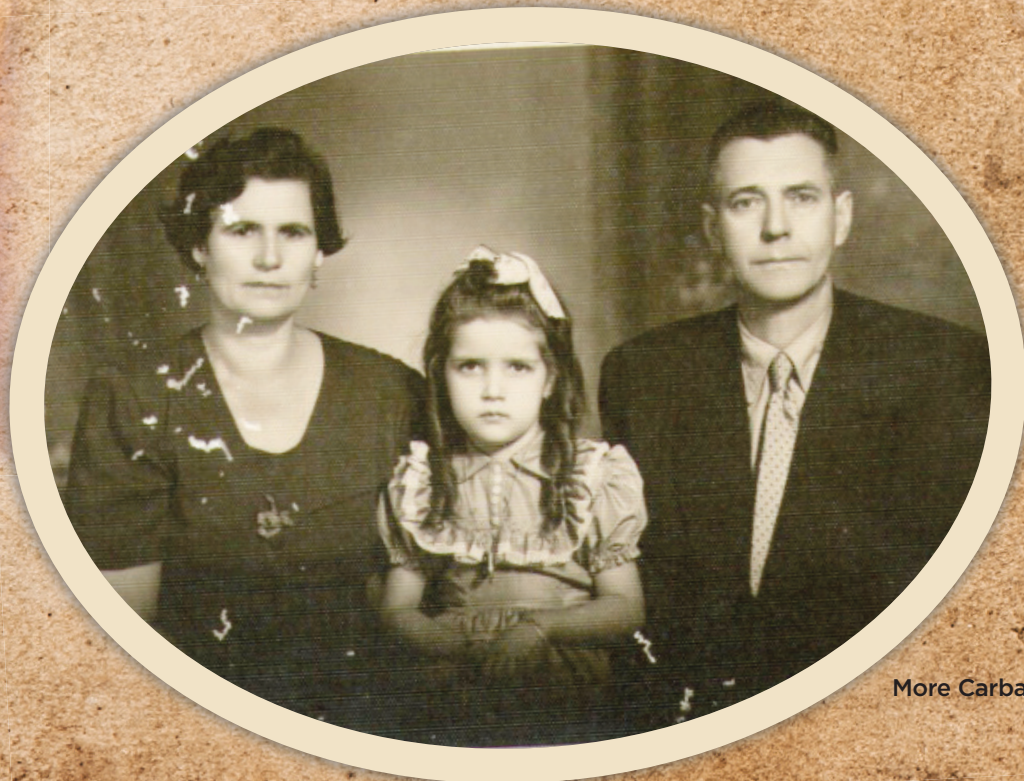
Grandmother Juraci Esther Chimenes at her graduation in the 1960s.



Great-grandfather Jose Dias da Silva, in the 1940s.



Representing the Carballar family, Jônatas's great-grandmother and grand-aunt in 1909.



More Carballars, in the 1940s.

– since the 1600s – yet they never really adapted,” Jônatas said. “They never really became part of the whole. They were always self-marginalized and self-separated. They had this idea that they could not mingle with anyone else. They kept to themselves. They only married each other.

“They were very aware of their own history.”

Their heritage, he said, went back to the Netherlands.

His grandfather broke with his family's tradition by marrying outside the family – but he married someone with her own family traditions, which seemed oddly similar.

“Once my grandfather married my grandmother, his family did not accept

her,” Jônatas said. “My grandfather was ostracized. He did not receive any inheritance from his father, because he did not marry within the family.” Still, his grandfather and then his father remained close to the family.

He grew up in a Catholic culture, but “I was not brought up Catholic,” he said.

“We believed in God – we very strongly believed in God – but we did not have a religion. I can't even say that I was a default Catholic, because I wasn't baptized. My family was incredibly spiritual, but we did not have a religion.

“I have relatives who became Protestants or spiritualists or practicing

Catholics, but I grew up with the idea that there is one God, and our religion was being anti-Catholic. Any time that there was a Catholic holiday, we would boycott it. We didn't even celebrate Mother's Day or Father's Day, because in Brazil those are not secular holidays. Mother's Day is about the ultimate mother – the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus.

“This was our practice at home. We never celebrated Christmas, but New Year's Eve was a big deal. I grew up with my family saying that it is a big problem because we don't want to be like the Catholics, but we were nothing at all. We weren't even atheists.

“I would ask a lot of questions. I'd ask,

My grandfather was ostracized.
He did not receive any inheritance from his father, because he did not marry within the family.



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Cover Story

"Why do we have so many issues with the Catholic church? Why?" But no answers were forthcoming. That just was the way it was.

That's all Jônatas knew until his family moved to Miami. "I started asking a lot of questions," he said. "I started asking about our roots, and that's when I found out that my great grandmother on my mother's side had roots in Germany."

He became fascinated – perhaps it's fair to say obsessed – with researching his family history. He learned many of his family's last names. They all were Portuguese. Why would that be, if his family's various roots were in Germany and Amsterdam? What was going on?

"When I turned 18, my parents decided to talk to me. They said, 'Look, you are asking a lot of questions, so we will tell you what we know.' And then they told me that all our families were Jewish.

"I had no idea.

"I grew up in Brazil. I looked like a regular Brazilian person." And everything he knew about Jews was about Ashkenazi Jews, not Sephardim. "I just knew about the Holocaust," he said.

"My father explained that Jews in Portugal had different traditions," Jônatas said. "He said that his grandfather was incredibly proud of his heritage. That's why he behaved the way he behaved, why he never went to church."

His father's father's family had been in Brazil since before the country was

created; they were among the original settlers and landowners, and they had a great deal of power and money, and the respect that goes along with it. "They were deeply embedded in Brazil," he said. "There are some organizations that are very much part of Brazil's revolutionary past, like the Freemasons. My family was very deep in Freemasonry.

"It's very much like the founding fathers of this country," he said parenthetically.

Eventually, as seems to happen often in large, wealthy families, the patriarch – Jônatas's great-grandfather – died, and many relationships and financial arrangements began to unravel. Before then, the family had lived off its own landholdings and investments, but eventually "people needed to get jobs," Jônatas said. That's why his parents went to Brasilia.

"My great grandfather was a very austere man," Jônatas said. "He didn't talk much. And he didn't teach his children the business very well. When they needed to get jobs, there was prejudice against them, because the community thought they were bad Catholics."

What about his mother's family? They left Spain, he learned eventually; "one branch went to Portugal and one to Brazil, and another one stayed in Spain."

His great-grandmother on his mother's side, who lived in a remote Brazilian city, "had 22 kids," he said. Twenty-two?



The Pardo family, shown in the late 1930s; Jônatas's paternal great-grandmother is flanked by his grandmother and grand uncle.

Really? Yes, Jônatas said. "I believe there were at least four sets of twins."

That was not the only remarkable fact about his great-grandmother. Another was that "this woman kept the most authentic fragments of rabbinical 15th-century Judaism in the family, although I didn't know that at first. No one did."

She came from the Teixeira de Mattos family. "She said that her family came from Germany. Originally I thought that she had lost her mind. How could someone with that name come from Germany?" But she was right.

As he researched, the darkness of the past started to loom.

In the 1600s, his family had become rich, exporting "dry meats, spices, and unfortunately probably even human beings. I don't doubt that they were involved in the slave trade." And then they owned land. "That's how people made an enormous amount of money. The New World was entirely open."

But his family also were victims of the Inquisition in Portugal, which unfolded differently than it did in Spain. In Spain, people were given the choice of conversion or expulsion. In Portugal, they had to convert.

Jônatas learned that an ancestor, Manuel Dias Da Silva, "had been arrested by the Inquisition as a Judaizer, a New Christian who was caught practicing Judaism after the conversion." He was arrested

and executed. He was not alone. "There was a playwright from Rio de Janeiro, Antonio Jose Da Silva, who was caught as a Judaizer and burned to death, and so were hundreds of members of his family," Jônatas said. "Including babies. It didn't matter how high your status, the more money you had, the easier you could get off the hook, but it didn't always work."

"He was an important playwright. The king of Portugal pleaded in his favor, but the Inquisition officers said to the king, 'There is nothing that you can do.'"

"The Inquisition officially ended in Brazil in the 1830s. By that time they were no longer burning people, but you could still be charged and be marginalized for not having purity of blood."

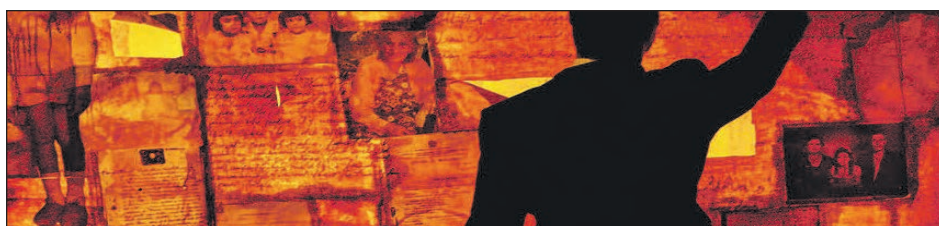
"They were not asking for certificates of purity, but if you came from a known crypto-Jewish background – what they would call a New Christian background – you could be denied certain jobs or opportunities. That is why most of us relied on family businesses, not on jobs. It was not a choice."

The more he delved into his family history, the more bleak it seemed, the more terror and death he discovered. "You only find your Jewishness through the anti-Semites' death sentences against your family," he said. "It is hard to be a happy crypto-Jew."

He also discovered some of the customs common to crypto-Jewish families. "I came to find that there



In the 1950s, four Dias da Silva children glare at the camera.



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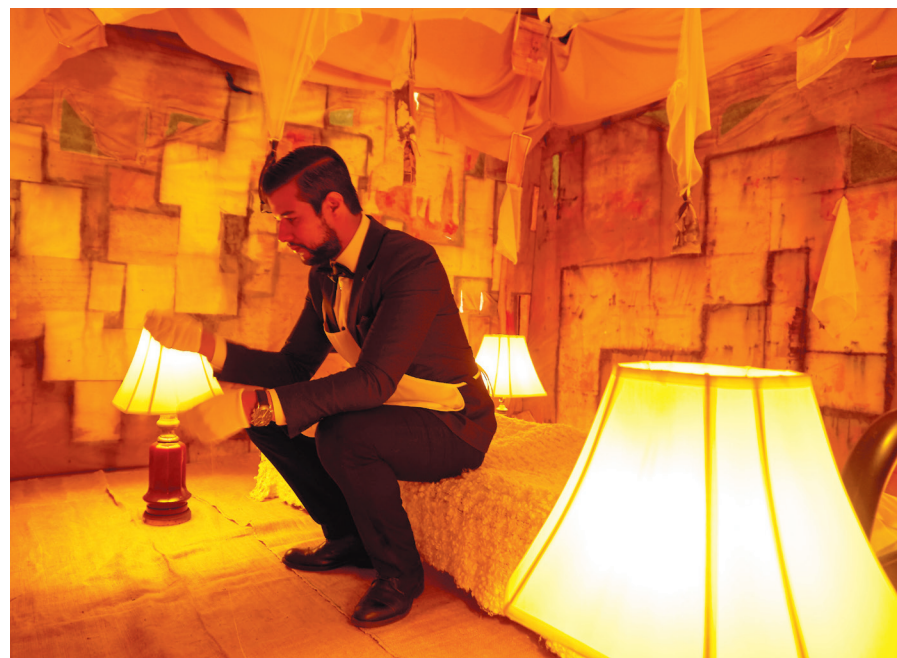
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Cover Story



Jónatas Chimen inside his installation, "In Thy Tent I Dwell," which will be on display at Temple Emeth in Teaneck.

were traditions that had come from fragmented practices," he said. The Inquisition would arrest people as Judaizers if they "swept the floor toward the center of the room instead of out the door."

Why? Because "you can't just open a door and sweep the dust out in a crypto-Jewish family. That's because they had a high reverence for doorposts. When they were practicing Jews, they had mezuzot. When they were forced to remove them from their doorposts, then the doorposts themselves became the place of memory and of deep respect for Jewish traditions. The doorpost became a sacred place.

"The doorpost itself became a mezuzah."

Another tradition was that "women had to go to the river after their periods ended, although not seven days after. For women who moved away from the river, they had to take a rain shower in the first rain that falls after your period ends. That's a typical crypto-Jewish tradition.

"Also, you don't point to the stars. That's because in Portugal, Jewish families would take their young children outside to see when Shabbat was over. They'd look for the first three stars.

"So I grew up hearing that if I were to point to the stars, my fingers would fall off."

"There are so many traditions like that, and you start to recognize them if you study 15th century Jewish history."

The question of who in the family knew about being Jewish, like so much of this story, like so much of the reality of crypto-Jewish families, and unlike so much of the mythology that has grown up about it, is nuanced, Jónatas said.

The archives in which he did his research show that the parents "usually would pick the oldest son or daughter to pass on the information that they were Jewish very clearly. They would say, 'We are Jewish. Don't forget it.' They would pass it on at the deathbed of the parent

or grandparents."

They'd do something else too. "Every family also would choose a child to become a priest or a nun." Often it would be the youngest child. "The first child often would have a very Jewish first name, and the last child would have a much more Catholic name. The parents already had made the decision about who would go where."

But, Jónatas cautioned, "these things are not all uniform. There are lots of layers."

Jónatas researched, "both in person and online; there wasn't much online yet but I found a lot of books, and a lot of people of similar heritage who had read the books. I came across people who had been doing this research for a long time, and I found distant cousins."

He also compiled a list of his ancestors who had been put to death for the crime of being Jewish. That list also included children.

Jónatas earned his undergraduate degree, in Latin American, Caribbean, and Iberian studies, from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and he also holds a masters in fine arts from Florida International University. For eight years, he was the co-editor of an academic journal, the *Journal of Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian Crypto-Jews*, and he often lectures in universities and other academic settings.

He also drew closer and closer to the Jewishness at his core, the undiluted and unrecognized Jewishness he inherited from his family.

"What do you do with the information?" he said. "Some people find it interesting, and then they move on. They don't go into it in as much detail as I did. They just move on, knowing that they have Jewish heritage." Sometimes people follow the fragmented traditions of their families while also living as committed Catholics.

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Troy has been widely published and quoted in the American, Canadian, and Israeli media, including writing essays for the *New York Times*' feature "Campaign Stops" in the 2012 and 2016 campaigns. He won the 2015 Simon Rockower Award for Excellence in a Single Commentary from the American Jewish Press Association for an article defending Israel during the 2014 Gaza conflict. Troy is a distinguished Scholar in North American History at McGill University. From 1997 to 1998 he served as chairman of McGill's history department. In March, 1999 he was promoted to full professor. *Maclean's Magazine* has repeatedly identified him as one of McGill's "Popular Profs" and History News Network designated him one of its first "Top Young Historians."



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That wasn't for him.

"Once you go into so much depth, once you see the names of the people in your families who died for being Jewish, I don't see how you can just move on," Jónatas said. "It wasn't that long ago – a century and a half – when you had people who had a clear knowledge of their Jewish heritage. My father said that his grandmother knew, and my mother said that her great-grandmother knew very well.

"I realized that I cannot just live the way I used to live."

He could have married a Brazilian woman from a family of which his parents would approve, he said, but because he spent so many years in the United States, that did not make sense for him either.

He set out to return to the Judaism that was in his blood and bones and heart and head, but his essential Jewishness was not as clear to the outside world.

"I told my parents, 'Look, I don't see how we can move on like this,'" he recalled. "I said 'We are part of this people, of the people of Israel.' My parents said that they were too old for it, but that I should do it."

Eventually, Jónatas met Jews – there is a story in that too – and began going to shul. But he ran into problems. Rabbis were willing in practice to accept him as a Jew – his parents and their parents and their parents, back through all their lines, were Jewish, he knew, and his research could prove, so halachically there was no issue. But the rabbis weren't willing to make it official. The documentation Jónatas could provide wasn't straightforward enough. They demanded that he convert, but Jónatas felt strongly that he was Jewish. They would count him for a minyan, but they wouldn't put it in writing.

"But I would say that my relatives died for being Jewish, so how can I convert? They would tell me that they appreciate my courage, but they'd say 'I can't do anything for you.'"

But Jónatas is a fierce researcher, and he knew what he wanted. "I started reading rabbinical literature about how to treat Jews who had left for generations because of genocide or forced conversion," he said.

Eventually – that's a word that comes up often in Jónatas's story – "I came across a comment from a Sephardi chief rabbi, Mordechai Eliyahu, who had been approached on that subject by Shulamit Hal-evi, an Israeli teacher. She had been approached by descendants of crypto-Jews and she went to Chief Rabbi Eliyahu to talk about it.

"She said, 'What do I tell these people, who are indeed Jews, who have lived in this community for hundreds of years, who only marry each other – what do I tell them?'"

Rabbi Eliyahu's answer included a quote from an earlier rabbi, "that the issue should be treated with kindness. They should be praised for coming to observe the commandments of the Torah.

"What is the ritual to re-establish themselves into the Jewish mainstream? They have to perform circumcision on a man" –and if they've been circumcised already, as Jónatas had been a few years earlier, then the ritual called hatafat dam, where a drop of blood is drawn – "the mikvah, and then they get a certificate, saying that he or she has returned to his or her ancestors' ways.

"It is sort of like a conversion, but it recognizes the heritage of the crypto-Jew, and that makes a huge difference. It is about being recognized as a Jew who has returned to his Jewish ways. Someone who has been lost, but is returning."

Armed with this new evidence, along with the fact that Rabbi Eliyahu's predecessor as Sephardi chief

rabbi, Ovadiah Yosef, had endorsed it, Jónatas finally was able to be recognized formally as Jewish.

About a decade later, he reported, his parents did the same thing; "they officially returned to Judaism and then they got remarried in a Jewish wedding." And Jónatas got married to "a French Jewish girl, and we live a normal mainstream Jewish life in Miami.

"We go to shul everywhere, to Ashkenazi, to Sephardi, and we also go to Temple Moses, where the language is Ladino."

He also added Benayon to his already long name, as a symbol of his return.

And he makes art from his experiences. Some of it is dark and heavy, he said. It's about wandering, feeling homeless, feeling unwanted, feeling rootless. It's also about history, and also about the joy of finding himself.

"The Tent in Which I Dwell is made up of all the documents I had to show to the rabbinical court. And within there is a quarantine room, a replica of the one my family stayed in when they went to Brazil from Spain. I recreated it.

There is a bed in the middle of it, and there are five lamps. Each one is a symbol of 100 years in the diaspora.

His family has had 500 years of exile, death, dispersion – and also success, love, and rebirth. It all shows up in the exhibit.

"The tent is powerful," Jónatas Chimen Dias DaSilva-Benayon said.

Who: Artist Jónatas Chimen Dias DaSilva-Benayon

What: Will present stories, artwork, and an experiential installation, "In Thy Tent I Dwell,"

When: From Friday, March 9, through Sunday, March 11.

Where: At Temple Emeth, 1666 Windsor Road, in Teaneck

How much: Lunch on Saturday is \$10, and brunch on Sunday is \$8. Everything else is free.

More information: To learn what will happen, and when, go to Emeth's website, or call (201) 833-1322.



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