

Simon Sebag Montefiore: How I found out my ancestors were BURNED at the stake by the Spanish Inquisition

- The author, 50, thought he knew everything about his family
- But he made a terrifying discovery while researching a TV show
- He found himself 'deeply moved' by tragic discovery
- Distant relatives were burned for having 'impure' Jewish blood

By [SIMON SEBAG MONTEFIORE](#)

PUBLISHED: 09:01 EST, 28 November 2015 | UPDATED: 11:30 EST, 28 November 2015

When I set off to Spain to make a TV documentary about that country's dramatic history from ancient times to today, the last thing I expected was to discover the horrifying truth about the origins of my own family. I did not even know I'd had relatives in Spain – yet they turned out to be my direct ancestors...

I'm still reeling from what I learned, even though it dates back five centuries and at least 12 generations. As the story unfolded I found myself deeply moved.

Having always been a critic of the sobbing revelations of reality TV, I found myself in what would have made a particularly enthralling episode of *Who Do You Think You Are?*

My distant family were called Carvajal. Two of them, Leonore and Luis, were burned at the stake by the Spanish Inquisition in 1596 simply for having 'impure' Jewish blood and secretly practising Judaism.

But Leonore's young son Joseph somehow escaped to freedom. He sailed to Italy where he settled in a Tuscan village called Montefiore – and took its name. A new family, the Montefiores, arose like a phoenix out of the ashes. Joseph and his son, Judah Leone Montefiore, are my grandfathers many times removed; Leonore was my 12-times grandmother.

I thought I knew the history of my family well. The Montefiores were Italian Jews who in the 1790s emigrated from Tuscany to London where they flourished. One son, Moses Montefiore, joined the Stock Exchange in the early 19th century and started to make a fortune.

Moses bought an estate in Ramsgate, Kent, and let the young Princess Victoria, on holiday at the seaside with her mother, the Duchess of Kent, play in his gardens. When she became Queen, Victoria wrote in her diary that Moses impressed her as a noble and decent 'Hebrew' and soon after her accession she knighted him and later he received a baronetcy.

But like every Victorian magnate he had a secret life with mistresses and illegitimate children, and at the age of 81 he fathered a son with a 16-year-old housemaid.

When he died aged 100 Sir Moses left no legitimate sons and the baronetcy went to his great-nephew Sir Francis Montefiore while his fortune went to a Moroccan nephew, Sir Joseph Sebag-Montefiore, son of his sister, from whom I am descended.

The family's origins were mysterious and there are several versions, but this one unfolded earlier this year when I started filming my series on Spain.

For 700 years Spain was Islamic and Arab. At its zenith Muslim Spain, known as Al-Andalus, was a caliphate, an Islamic kingdom with divine blessing. The caliph's capital Cordoba, in southern Spain, was also the home of a huge Jewish population. The Muslims tolerated the Jews and even appointed Jewish prime ministers. But Andalus was in decline and when the Christian kings of Castile in the north began their Reconquest in the 13th century, the vicious struggle with the Islamic princes became a savage crusade.

During anti-semitic violence many Jews converted to Christianity, but in 1492 Ferdinand and Isabella, the Catholic king and queen of the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile that made up the new monarchy, conquered the last Muslim emirate of Granada and ordered the expulsion of all the Jews – unless they converted.

Thousands did, but somewhere between 50,000 and 200,000 Jews left. Many of the Jews who remained in Spain had become real Christians, but some still practised Judaism in secret and became known as crypto-Jews.

Their prayerbooks were Latin on the outside but Hebrew on the inside. Ferdinand and Isabella felt their success was fragile, and created the Holy Office of the Inquisition to find traitors and destroy them: their main targets were secret Jews or those possessing Impure Blood of Jewishness.

The Inquisition was big business and the Crown grew rich from destroying secret Jews and seizing their fortunes. Many were arrested and tortured. If found guilty, they were formally condemned in spectacular public rituals, the auto-da-fé, often attended by the king in which they wore sinister hooded robes, were publicly tortured and then garrotted or burned.

Among the terrified converted Jews of Cordoba were the Carvajal family, who fled to Portugal – but that kingdom came under the control of Spain during the reign of Philip II, the great-grandson of Ferdinand and Isabella.

Spain also now possessed, thanks to the conquistadors, a vast empire in South and Central America. While most key positions in the civil service now required a certificate of pure blood (ie no hint of Jewishness), Philip wished to encourage educated people to settle in New Spain (now known as Mexico) so he relaxed these requirements for colonists. Luis Carvajal decided such a life would be safe from the Inquisition. Sometime in the late-16th century he and his family sailed for Mexico – with a certificate of pure blood – where he was appointed royal governor of Almaden province.

He had several sons, including one also named Luis, and a number of daughters, including Leonore – who aged 21 was married to a Portuguese, Jorge de Almeida, with whom she had a son Joseph – and the younger Mariana, 14. When we were filming in Cordoba and my producers told me to expect a surprise about my family I rolled my eyes, thinking I knew everything about my heritage, but local historian Alex Teller unrolled a huge family tree and pointed to the Carvajals. 'Who on earth are they?' I asked. 'The Carvajals may be strangers to you,' he said. 'But let me tell you their story...'

I was sceptical until he began to recount their heartrending tale. Governor Luis Carvajal clashed with a rival, the Marques de Villa Manrique, and as so often in Inquisitorial Spain their political feud proved lethal: the Marques knew that Carvajal had failed to report a hint of Jewish behaviour in his niece back in Spain.

He denounced them, launching a hunt for secret Jews in which 120 people were investigated. In 1596, the Carvajals were arrested and horribly tortured. Governor Luis died in prison as did a daughter Isabel. Young Luis confessed to being Jewish. Leonore first denied it then, after she was denounced by witnesses for Jewish praying in prison, she defiantly declared she was proudly Jewish. (Detailed records were kept of this notorious case and published in 1944.)

At this point, the historian stopped and said, 'This is why this story is important for you...' He ran his finger down the tree until I saw the names of the Montefiore family. 'Leonore is your grandmother from 12 generations ago,' he said.

At her trial, wearing the white crossed and hooded habit of an inquisitional victim and knowing she faced a terrible death, she recited a Hebrew poem to her tormenters: 'Let's sing as if we were waiting for the Holy King of the Jews and may God send me a prophet to sing the songs to calm me before I sleep.'

As I listened to this poignant poem, I realised she was asking God to help her die serenely. I was so touched by the story. She was paraded in the central square of Mexico City and sentenced to death. She was stripped naked and burned at the stake along with her brother Luis.

But this was not quite the end of the story, because their sister Mariana was kept in prison for five years until she was 19: fearing the humiliation of nakedness and wishing to die with dignity, she asked if she could die in her clothes and avoid burning if she confessed to everything.

This was agreed so she declared herself a Jewess at her trial but the Inquisition broke its word: Mariana was stripped before the crowds, though to show its Christian mercy the Inquisitor garrotted her and then burned her.

By the end of the tale I was stunned. It is strange how human suffering coupled with a family connection, even five centuries ago, can move one in surprising ways. But there was one more question: 'How is Leonore my many-greated grandmother?' Two Carvajal sons had fled and somehow Leonore's son Joseph also escaped the Spanish empire though we do not know how. But he remained Jewish. Later, using a new name – Leone (Lion) – he settled in Italy where a new branch of the family began under the name of Montefiore. His son was called Judah Leone Montefiore. As the historian told me this, I noticed my signet ring on my finger. It depicts a lion with a flag that reads 'Jerusalem', the crest of the family. Perhaps five centuries later, that is the lion of the Carvajals.

Blood And Gold: The Making Of Spain With Simon Sebag Montefiore starts on Tuesday 8 December at 9pm on BBC4.

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