

# Once We Were Slaves: The Extraordinary Journey of a Multi-Racial Jewish Family

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## Review

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Although in some respects a very private person, wealthy New Yorker Blanche Moses (1859-1946) wanted the achievements of her forebears recognized. Inheriting a remarkable collection of portraits (many of them skillfully “unpacked” by author Laura Arnold Leibman), Moses spent much of her adult life tracing her “roots.” When she found the name “Lopez” in her tree she wondered if she might be related to Aaron Lopez of Newport, Rhode Island. A fugitive from religious persecution in his native Portugal, a philanthropist, a supporter of American independence, and a champion of Jewish rights, Lopez (1731-1782) amassed a fortune dealing in many different “commodities,” including human beings. In reconstructing her family’s story, it never occurred to Moses that she might be descended not from a slave-trader but from a slave, and not from someone *born* a Lopez but from someone *owned* by a Lopez.

Jemima Lopez, Blanche’s great-great grandmother, was the “property” of a Jewish widow, Hannah Esther Lopez, in Bridgetown, Barbados. Her children were fathered by Englishman George Gill (1745-1801), who eventually purchased her from Lopez, and left her the money to free herself. Her freedom did not make her children free, however. They remained enslaved because Jemima’s legal status at the time each of them was born determined their own.

While still owned by the Widow Lopez, Jemima’s daughter, (Sarah) Esther Lopez Gill—Leibman explains on page seven why she identifies her thus—gave birth to a son, Isaac, and a daughter, Sarah. Their father was an ambitious and resourceful Jewish merchant, Abraham Rodrigues Brandon.

In 1801, momentous changes occurred in the lives of Jemima, (Sarah) Esther, and Sarah (Esther’s) children. In a deathbed will George Gill not only bequeathed Jemima the money to emancipate herself but recognized (Sarah) Esther as his daughter and left her handsomely provided for. Then Brandon stepped in to help secure the freedom of Isaac and Sarah. It obviously mattered deeply to him that his children (although evidently not their mother) shared

his faith, but arranging for their conversion and their acceptance into the Jewish community of Barbados posed what he saw as insuperable problems. Instead, in 1812 he sent the siblings—Isaac was nineteen at that point and Sarah thirteen—to Suriname. As Leibman explains, Jews of African descent had called Suriname home for several generations, and it was in some respects a more welcoming setting than Barbados. The Brandon children were received, though, not as “colored” Jews but as *nação*—Jews of the Portuguese “nation.” It was important that they became Jews, but Leibman explains why it was equally important in terms of their futures what kind of Jews they became. One question Leibman does not specifically address—no doubt because the evidence simply does not exist—is how well Sarah and Isaac were prepared for their conversion, but they were clearly well enough prepared to satisfy the Sephardic congregation into which they were welcomed.

At this point, the Jews of Barbados were less accepting of racial diversity than their coreligionists in Suriname. Once back in Bridgetown, now legally free and with a father committed to him emotionally and financially, Isaac Lopez Brandon was ostracized because he dared to join in petitioning for political rights for his fellow Jews—and the ostracism came from elements within the Jewish community. Isaac was a Jew and a man of color, with the two identities inseparable in his own mind and that of his father, but not for other Jews he lived among—or at least not yet.

As for Sarah Rodrigues Brandon, in 1815 her father took her to London and enrolled her in what was essentially a finishing school for young Sephardic ladies. Her transformation, not to mention her £10,000 dowry, made her an attractive match for American expatriate merchant Joshua Moses. What Moses knew of Sarah’s background is anyone’s guess, but Leibman writes movingly of the depth of their mutual affection. They married in 1817, settled in New York City, where Joshua had grown up, and began raising a family, with Sarah’s identity as a Jew unquestioned by her husband’s kinfolk and their congregation.

In 1820, Isaac Lopez Brandon and his mother made *their* way to the United States. How Jewish (Sarah) Esther Lopez Gill was, if at all, is open to question, but she was buried as a Jew when she died in New York in 1823. One year later, Isaac wed Joshua Moses’s sister Lavinia. Tragically, in one dreadful week in the spring of 1828, both Sarah Moses and Lavinia Brandon died, each leaving a widower with young children to raise.

As for Abraham Rodrigues Brandon, over the years he maintained his ties to his family in New York—to (Sarah) Esther, to her children, and to *their* children—but he had another family back in Barbados with a white woman, Sarah Simpson Wood. Wood (Brandon never married her) and her children left Barbados for London soon after Abraham’s death in 1831. In London, Wood did marry and bear more children, but in regards to her children with Abraham, she respected his last wishes and raised them as Jews. She did so with help and encouragement from their half-brother, Isaac.

When Joshua Moses died in 1837, he intended to leave his and Sarah’s children well provided for, but a combination of factors meant they actually inherited very little. Their struggles to make their way in the world, and the completeness with which they left issues of race behind them, form an important backdrop to the family story. Admittedly, the premature deaths of both of their parents meant that in some respects they knew little about their backgrounds, although they were well acquainted with their uncle Isaac.

Surprisingly, given the shoddy treatment he had received in the late 1810s, Isaac Brandon entrusted his and Lavinia’s one surviving child to her family and returned to Barbados. He lived on the island for years—as a Jew, a man of color, and a very successful businessman who was influential in civic life and the life of the congregation which had once held his “African” ancestry against him. Isaac died while in New York in 1855—a rich man, a generous one, and without question a good Jew. That was not the case with his son, who married a Gentile and raised their children as Protestants. The Moses family remained Jews. Blanche, whose quest to uncover her ancestry led her to make the wrong connection (as many a genealogist has done before and since), was the daughter of Lionel Moses, Sarah and Joshua’s seventh child.

If the sheer complexity of Blanche Moses’s genealogy seems overwhelming at times, that is a core strength of Leibman’s book rather than a weakness. *Once We Were Slaves* most definitely “works.” It is a book one needs to dive into, step back from, and then reread as the story of this far-flung multiracial family begins to emerge. *Once We Were Slaves* resembles a huge mosaic. Each piece is beautifully crafted. Leibman has done a remarkable job of evoking time and place in a vast Atlantic world in which identities were made and remade. She has also shown us how tension-filled that world could be, whether it was a question of squabbles and cultural differences within and among Jewish congregations, between Jews and non-Jews, within

families, or between neighbors. Her discussion of pandemics has an eerily contemporary ring as she reminds us that they are nothing new—and neither are our responses to them.

There are points on which Leibman might have said more. For example, her scene-setting in colonial New York City as regards the 1741 conspiracy would have been enriched by the inclusion of the story Jill Lepore brings to light in *New York Burning* (New York, 2005). Lepore's superb study validates Leibman's own arguments about class, race, ethnicity, religion, and the deep-seated fears of white middle-class and elite New Yorkers. As for the early U.S. censuses, Leibman is correct that enumerators in 1820 and 1830 were given few "landmarks" when it came to assigning people to a particular racial category. It is worth noting, though, that the assistant marshals charged with taking the census seldom insisted on seeing every member of a household. They generally went by what the head of household told them.

One question that runs through the book is who knew what about whom. Another closely related question is what mattered to whom. Racial identity, cultural affinity, faith and family ties counted for so much (and so little) in different settings and to different people. Blanche Moses's story, the story she thought she had uncovered and the story Leibman has told for her, reveals so much about her world, the world of her ancestors—and (in light of the findings about race and diversity in the 2020 census) our own.

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