



Connecting with ancestors, reclaiming faith. Against all odds.

a documentary by award-winning director Gabriela Böhm

A small group of South Americans long to affirm their faith. Their ancestors — European Jews — were forced to convert during the Spanish Inquisition. Isolated in Catholic countries, rejected by local Jewish communities, they battle to become Jews regardless of the consequences.

The Longing, set in Ecuador, tells the story of their attempt to regain their birthright. The group includes three women who travel 36 hours, one-way, by bus, from Colombia and a couple from a small Ecuadorian town. On the Internet, they have found an American rabbi committed to helping “lost Jews” reclaim their identities. He meets them in Guayaquil, where he has difficulty getting the local Jewish community’s support in facilitating their conversions. Ultimately, he convinces several local Jews to participate. The film provides a rare glimpse into the conversion process, including the ritual mikva (submersion) and Beit Din (rabbinical court).

Lost no more, the new converts’ dreams are fulfilled. Yet they face an uncertain future.

***A universal story of faith and conversion against all odds;
the triumph of the human spirit.***

Rabbi Michael Perlmutter
University educator, Santa Monica, CA

Producer/Director Gabriela Böhm’s film, *The Longing: The Forgotten Jews of South America* was honored with the “Best Documentary” Award, Long Island Latino International Film Festival, “Best Latino Film” Award, Santa Fe Film Festival, “Telly Award” for Religion & Spirituality and “Honorable Mention”, Orlando Hispanic Film Festival. She produced and directed *Passages*, which won “Best Documentary” at the Woodstock and “Jury Award”, Tambay Film Festivals. This personal film was a search into her family’s history in an attempt to pass on its legacy to her unborn son. She produced, directed, wrote and edited her first film, *Voice-less*, which screened at film festivals throughout the U.S. She also produced *The Wild Side*, a short documentary on the war on drugs in Brazil. A native of Argentina, she studied art and photography in Israel, prior to coming to the United States, where she received a BFA at NYU Tisch School of the Arts.

Film Notes:

- Documentary feature
- Video/color
- Spanish & English with English subtitles
- 75 minutes

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***What they created in America was...secret societies...
They practiced Judaism secretly in clandestine ways, and they kept what
they could remember, what remained from one generation to another.***

Anita Novinsky
Author, Professor of History, University of São Paulo

The Film

A small group of South Americans long to affirm their faith. Their ancestors— European Jews—were forced to convert to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition. Isolated in Catholic countries, rejected by local Jewish communities, they battle to become Jews regardless of the consequences.

The Longing, set in Ecuador, tells the story of their attempt to regain their birthright. The group is comprised of a doctor and his wife from a small town in Ecuador and three women from Ibagué, Colombia (including a mother and daughter), who make the 36-hour, one-way trip by bus. The film begins with their yearning, explaining their connection to Judaism and why their desire to convert is so strong.

Frustrated in their attempts to become Jews, they locate Jacques Cukierkorn, a Brazilian-American rabbi from Kansas City, Missouri on the Internet. The rabbi travels around the world helping “lost Jews” reclaim their identities. Through Internet study and individual research, the rabbi has given them an immersion course in Judaism—a two-year process. Now, the group is meeting in Guayaquil, where they hope their conversions will become a reality.

But, first, Rabbi Cukierkorn must get the local Jewish community’s support in facilitating the process. Two Jews besides Cukierkon must be part of the rabbinical court (Beit Din), an essential element of Jewish conversion. Initially, he meets strong resistance, but he is able to get several local Jews to reluctantly participate.

The film follows the group through the conversion process — anticipation, preparation, water purification (mikva) in the river (as curious bystanders look on) and interviews before the Beit Din. Tension runs high when one of the council members does not arrive. But, ultimately, the process proceeds; all become Jews.

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The History

Jews first came to the Iberian Peninsula in the sixth century. In the 15th and 16th centuries, Spanish Jews (Sephardim) were the victims of the Spanish Inquisition, a concerted campaign to obliterate the Jewish religion and culture forever. Persecuted Sephardim were forced to convert to Catholicism, becoming “conversos,” New Christians. If they did not, they were forced to flee their homes and the lives they had built.

Those who would not renounce their faith fled to Muslim lands of the Ottoman Empire or other parts of Europe. Others took their chances in the New World. They hid their ancestry, even changing their names. The only way they could avoid imprisonment or death was if they masqueraded as converted Catholics.

***They had to keep a double life... that is very complex,
...very difficult for the individual, it is a constant tension
between what you learned in your childhood, family tension
and the family in relation to society.***

Mario Cohen
Director, Sephardic Culture Research and Dissemination Center, Buenos Aires

In today's South America, descendants of Sephardim still exist. They live in heavily Catholic countries, largely isolated in rural areas. Often, they are unaware of their ancestry. Families who practiced Judaism were alone; their hidden identities expressed through private Jewish ritual, such as lighting candles on Friday night and not eating pork.

Known as “crypto-Jews,” many have decided to embrace their religious heritage at considerable personal cost. Their alienation, living in Catholic homelands, is exacerbated by local Conservative Jewish communities that claim to have a monopoly on faith and reject the legitimacy of their conversions.

These individuals' longing to be Jews and their ensuing struggle illuminates the Inquisition's consequences centuries after the fact.



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The Rabbi

Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn was born in São Paulo, Brazil. He grew up hearing stories of Portuguese and Spanish Jews who continued to secretly practice Judaism even after being forced to choose between their lives and converting to Christianity. When he was ordained a rabbi in 1994, he wrote his dissertation on crypto-Judaism in northern Brazil.

Cukierkorn has traveled to Brazil, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador and parts of the United States helping descendants of the "conversos" return to the faith. He is rabbi at the New Reform Temple in Kansas City, Missouri — a congregation made up of 300 families.

***These people who are surely Jewish spiritually,
whose souls long to be Jewish,
are willing to do whatever they have to...***

Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn



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The Conversos

Borys and Maritza Valverde are from Babahoyo, Ecuador, where he is a doctor. The Valverdes' previous attempts at conversion have met with rejections from their local Jewish community. Fueled by Rabbi Cukierkorn's willingness to convert them, they will be the only Jews in their home town but plan to practice regardless.

Flor and Daniela Cortés are mother and daughter from a small town in Colombia. Flor's ex-husband is Catholic. Neither has told him about their decision to convert. Their desire to be Jews is so strong that they travel 36 hours, each way, by bus to Guayaquil.

Laily Saltarén is a professor of microbiology from Ibagué, Colombia. She has extensively researched her past and practiced Jewish rituals, on her own, for four years. She hopes her conversion will result in acceptance by her local Jewish community in Colombia for herself and her young daughter.

Eduardo Alvarado is a previously converted Jew from Guayaquil, Ecuador, who has been frustrated in his attempt to join the local Jewish community. Although he has provided proof that he was converted by an American Orthodox rabbi, he is still denied access and support. His advice to the others is not to proceed with their conversions.

Ortiz Luna is a doctor who heads a mental health facility in Guayaquil. Aware of the lack of support from local Jews, he is reluctant to go through the conversion process and has kept his longing for his faith to himself.



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Directors Statement

I began this project because of my interest in addressing issues of religious identification among possible descendants of Sephardim living in South America. I wanted to unearth how bits of information about their Jewish identify set into motion a quest to unravel threads of their long-buried history and struggle for religious inclusion.

Their story is unique in the history of colonization of the Americas, and so I wanted to detail their journey as their pursued legitimization of their faith. At the same time, I hoped to make a film that showed how there are still consequences of the Inquisition — even these many centuries later.

During shooting, I was exposed to new issues and had to re-evaluate the film's presentation. *The Longing* was not just about people discovering and pursuing their legacy. Nor was it only about their transformation as they went through the process of becoming Jews.

In order to be complete, the story had to show the relationship between Jewish communities and those trying to reclaim their faith. Instead of receiving support and acceptance from already-established Jews, these conversos were shunned — as was the American rabbi who came to convert them. Although the rabbi is able to get the participation of enough members of the community to perform the conversions, the local Jewish congregation thinks little of him and of the religious value of his conversions.

We all want to belong. The longing, faith and will of the people in the film will touch hearts of viewers regardless of their religion or spiritual beliefs.

But the story does not have a totally happy ending. When the rabbi leaves and the converted go home, they are not accepted by their Jewish neighbors. Nor do they receive support from Jewish agencies in their country or in Israel.

I hope that by telling their stories, the film will promote tolerance among Jews in South America, as well as among people of all faiths.

Gabriela Böhm



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Producer/Director/Co-editor

Gabriela Böhm produced, directed and co-edited *The Longing: The Forgotten Jews of South America*, which premiered at the 2007 New York Jewish Film Festival, presented by the Jewish Museum and Film Society of Lincoln Center. It was honored with "Best Feature Documentary" Award, Long Island Latino Film Festival and "Best Latino Film" Award, Santa Fe Film Festival, "Honorable Mention/Documentary" Orlando Hispanic Film Festival and "Bronze Film/Video" (Religion & Spirituality) Award, 29th Annual Telly Awards.

Her first feature was *Passages*, a personal documentary chronicling her search to unlock family's myths and secrets. By exposing the consequences of the Holocaust and other family traumas, she discovers her legacy, which she can pass on to her unborn son. The film won Best Documentary/Woodstock Film Festival and Juror's Best Documentary/Tambay Film Festival.

Previously, she produced, directed, wrote and edited a short experimental film, *Voice-less*, which screened at film festivals throughout the U.S. She also produced *The Wild Side*, a short documentary on the war on drugs in Brazil.

Gabriela Böhm is tri-cultural. A native of Argentina, she studied film, photography, painting, sculpture and art history in Israel before coming to the United States. She is now a U.S. citizen. Böhm speaks Spanish, English and Hebrew.

Böhm graduated from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts/Film and Television and is studying for her MFA in Documentary Film at Maine Media Workshops.

Böhm Productions

Böhm Productions was founded by filmmaker Gabriela Böhm to explore cultural identity and the human spirit through inspirational stories. Its mission is to produce creative, thought-provoking work that challenges audiences to think critically and sensitively about contemporary issues. Its first feature was the award-winning documentary, *Passages*. Its current film is the award-winning *The Longing: The Forgotten Jews of South America*.



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The Creative Team

Guillermo Zappino, Director of Photography

Guillermo Zappino works for POL-KA Productions as director of photography in television, film and commercials. He has worked extensively for Argentinean Television (Canal 13), as well as in independent production. He won the Carlos Gardel Best Video Award in 2002.

Jonathan Brock, Co-editor

Jonathan Brock has edited documentaries and nonfiction projects for film, television and DVD. His credits range from IMAX trailers to *E! The True Hollywood Story* to Discovery Channel programs to Robert Greenwald's *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*.

Miriam Cutler, Composer

Miriam Cutler has been writing, producing and performing music for over 20 years. She has underscored more than 20 feature films and TV series, as well as numerous documentaries including *Lost in La Mancha*, *Licensed to Kill*, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS*, *Positively Naked* and *Scout's Honor*. Cutler has served on documentary film festival juries and as a mentor for the Sundance Institute's Documentary Film Composer Lab.



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The Advisors

Mitchell Block

Founder
Direct Cinema Limited Distribution Company

Professor Mario Cohen

Author, *Jewish Colonial America*
Director, Sephardic Culture Research and
Dissemination Center, Buenos Aires

Professor Anita Novinsky

Associate Professor, Department of History,
University of São Paulo, Brazil
Author, *The Inquisition: Prisoners of Brazil, 16th to
19th Century; Anti-Semitism in Portugal and Brazil*

Dr. Ellis Rivkin

Professor Emeritus of Jewish History
Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio
Author, *The Shaping of Jewish History*



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Credits

Director/Producer/Co-Editor/Researcher
Directory of Photography
Co-editor
Composer

Gabriela Böhm
Guillermo Zappino
Jonathan Brock
Miriam Cutler

Awards

Best Documentary, Long Island Latino International Film Festival
29th Annual Telly Award (Religion & Spirituality)
Best Latino Film, Santa Fe Film Festival
Honorable Mention/Documentary, Orlando Hispanic Film Festival



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Festivals & Special Screenings

New York Jewish Film Festival (World premiere) *Presented by Jewish Museum; Film Society of Lincoln Center*
Show-Me Missouri International Film Festival
Vancouver Jewish Film Festival (Canada)
Kansas City Jewish Film Festival
Cine Las Americas International Film Festival
Los Angeles Jewish Film Festival
Feria Artistica at Makor/92stY
Toronto Jewish Film Festival (Canada)
St. Louis Jewish Film Festival
San Francisco Jewish Film Festival
Sun Valley Spiritual Film Festival
Palm Desert Jewish Film Festival
Jewish Eye World Film Festival (Israel)
Dusseldorf Jewish Film Festival (Germany)
Santa Fe Film Festival
Tucson Jewish Film Festival
Festival de Cine Judio de Punta del Este (Uruguay)
Contra Costa Jewish Film Festival
Pioneer Valley Jewish Film Festival
12th São Paulo Jewish Film Festival (Brazil)
Washougal International Film Festival
IV Festival de Cinema Judaico do Rio de Janeiro (Brazil)
Porto Alegre Jewish Film Festival (Brazil)
Festival de Cine Judio (Quito, Ecuador)
Long Island Latino International Film Festival
Festival de Cine (Bogotá, Colombia)
Orlando Hispanic Film Festival
Jewish Women in Global Perspective Film Festival (University of Indiana/Bloomington)
Documental (Quito, Ecuador)
Los Angeles Sephardic Jewish Film Festival
Festival Internacional de Cine Judio (Buenos Aires, Argentina)
Reel Docs (San Miguel de Allende, Mexico)
Maine Jewish Film Festival
Society for Crypto Judaic Studies Conference (Denver)
International Conference on Jewish Genealogy (Philadelphia)
Centro Cultural Midrash (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)
Women of Reform Judaism Conference (Canada)
We Speak, Here (online festival)