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# CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

*Secret Jew*

*“By prevailing over all obstacles and distractions,  
one may unflinchingly arrive at his chosen goal or destination.”*

— CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

THREE SHIPS lay at anchor in the calm waters off the port of Palos in southwest Spain. They were outfitted with provisions sufficient for a several-months-long voyage of discovery. Standing on the shore gazing at the lamps that lit the darkened caravels was a Genoese explorer who had planned to set sail on Tuesday, August 2, 1492. The departure date had been postponed until the following day, but the captain, Christopher Columbus, had insisted that his crews be on board by 11:00 p.m. that evening. Why? Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella had issued an expulsion order that would have made it illegal after midnight for any Jew to remain on Spanish soil. The Jews had already been expelled from the Andalusia region in 1483, a prelude to this later move.

There were Jews (conversos) on the three sailing ships whose

lives would have been affected by the decree—who would have faced exile or worse had it not been for their mentor and leader. It is commonly thought by historians that discovering the Americas and adjacent islands and the ejection of the Jews were two measures that had the most sweeping significance for the future of Spain.

In order to understand this, we must go back in time to the morning hours of a fall day in 1451, when the cries of a baby boy could be heard reverberating through a neighborhood in the Republic of Genoa. Christopher was Genoese in every respect—his birth and ethnicity—a true child of the Italian Renaissance.

The exact date of his birth was governed by the feast day of the child's patron saint, not by the date the baby emerged from the womb. The lusty wails of the newborn heralded the birth of Cristoforo Colombo, or in Spanish, Cristóbal Colón. Of course, in the Western Hemisphere, he is known as Christopher Columbus, discoverer of the New World. Although perhaps one of the best known in history, it is not his name that is important in the telling of this story; rather, it is his life, his ancestry, his achievements, and his legacy that echo through the chronicle of days.

According to author Mosco Galimir:

In Tortosa, Salonica and Amsterdam, the name of Colón is found; all bearers of this name are Sephardic Jews." Galimar continues: "Colombo is a Spanish name. The change of name was a custom amongst Jews. Palumbus, Palombo, Columbus, Colombo. Thus the evolution to Colombo, Colón. The Colombos were Jews from Catalonia. Colón is a common Jewish name found on the Mayorcas.<sup>4</sup>

The name *Christopher* means “Christ-bearer.” He bears the same name as St. Christopher, who according to legend carried the baby Jesus across a treacherous river. In his book, *Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*, his son Ferdinand posited that the surname meant “dove” and was fitting because his father had carried the Gospel of Christ across the Atlantic Ocean to heathens in the New World.<sup>5</sup>

Little is known of Christopher’s childhood, which creates questions with few answers: Was he a dedicated religionist, one sent forth at the bidding of Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand to circumnavigate the globe and bring back to Spain untold treasures? Was he a secret Jew who had sailed under the guise of discovery but whose real purpose was to find a safe haven for persecuted Christians and Jews alike? Was his main purpose greed; or was it a deep desire to reclaim the city of Jerusalem from its Muslim captors?

Born to Susanna Fontanarossa and Domenico Colombo, and the eldest of their five children, Christopher would ultimately choose not to follow in his father’s footsteps as a wool weaver and owner of a cheese stand. It is likely that his father was a well-known businessman and artisan among the middle class of his day. He held the position of keeper of the Olivella Gate in Genoa—an appointment which paid 85 Genoese pounds per year, or the equivalent of about \$160 in gold. It is highly likely that their eldest son would have been born in a house near the gate.

According to author and chronicler Samuel Eliot Morison’s description of Domenico Colombohe was

... always making promises he was unable to fulfill,  
buying goods for which he was unable to pay, starting

sidelines like cheese and wine instead of sticking to his loom . . . He was the kind of father who would shut up shop when trade was poor and take the boys fishing; and the sort of wine-seller who was his own best customer.<sup>6</sup>

Two facets of Columbus' youth were meaningful in guiding his career: schooling and family life. Domenico's aspiration to provide schooling for his children transported him from the highland village of Moconesi to Genoa. The instruction accessible to Christopher would take him even farther—from the streets of Genoa to the far vistas of the Atlantic Ocean and beyond.

As a child, Columbus attended the school established by the local wool guild on Pavia Street. There he was taught to read, write and do the most basic arithmetic. His son, Ferdinand, mistakenly thought his father had achieved a higher education at the University of Pavia. Christopher would have learned Latin by memorizing passages from the Bible to assure that he would be able to conduct business in the language. He then moved to more advanced mathematics in order to allow him to master the art of international commerce—which included navigation. It would prove to be invaluable to Columbus the sailor and discoverer.<sup>7</sup> From an early age Christopher chose to follow the outgoing tide as a sailor. One of his brothers, Giovanni, died as a young man, but his brothers Bartholomew and Giacomo (known as Diego) worked alongside Christopher during the first and second quests to the New World.

By the time Christopher settled in Spain, he could speak and correspond fluently in Spanish although his letters were sprinkled with Portuguese, a nod to the years he spent sailing with Portuguese navigators. He also read a smattering of Latin due to his early

training; while he spoke Ligurian, a dialect, he never wrote in his native Genoese language.

Following years of research, Estelle Irizarry, a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University, has a different theory regarding the secrecy surrounding the birthplace of Columbus:

Irizarry says her research clears up the big mystery surrounding Columbus' place of birth, which he never revealed but which different historians have claimed was Genoa, Italy; the French Mediterranean island of Corsica; Portugal; and Greece, as well as Spain. "The people who hid (their origins) more and had reason to do so were the Jews," Irizarry said, referring to the forced conversions and mass expulsions of Jews in late medieval Spain. A scientific project launched three years ago to discover his true origins using DNA comparisons between his family and possible descendants has so far failed to provide conclusive results.<sup>8</sup>

From various accounts, he was "tall, had a long face, a long nose, with clear eyes, and with either blond, red, or white hair."<sup>9</sup> In later years, his hair turned totally white as was befitting a man of his rank and reputation.

Angelo Trivigiano, who was acquainted with the famous seaman, wrote of "Christopher Columbus, a Genoese, a man of tall and lofty stature, of ruddy complexion, of great intelligence and with a long face."<sup>10</sup>

Morison quoted Spanish historian Bartolomé de Las Casas:

He [Columbus] was more than middling tall; face

long and giving an air of authority; aquiline nose, blue eyes, complexion light and tending to bright red; beard and hair red when young but very soon turned gray from his labors.<sup>11</sup>

Yet another writer labeled the discoverer “irascible when annoyed.” Christopher’s son Ferdinand said his father’s contempt for profanity was so strong that he “never heard him utter any other oath than ‘by St. Ferdinand!’”<sup>12</sup> This proclivity can help one to understand Christopher’s outlook toward religion. Morison again wrote:

In matters of the Christian religion, without doubt he was a Catholic and of great devotion. . . . He observed the fasts of the Church most faithfully, confessed and made communion often, read the canonical offices like a churchman or member of a religious order, hated blasphemy and profane swearing.<sup>13</sup>

Bartolomé de Las Casas, a priest who was known as “the Apostle of the Indies” was personally acquainted with Columbus; his father and an uncle sailed with the discoverer. Las Casas offers this further descriptive information:

He [Columbus] was extraordinarily zealous for the divine service; he desired and was eager for the conversion of these people [Native Americans], and that in every region the faith of Jesus Christ be planted and enhanced. And he was especially affected and devoted to the idea that God should deem him worthy of aiding somewhat in recovering the Holy Sepulchre . . . He was

a gentleman of great force of spirit, of lofty thoughts, naturally inclined to undertake worthy deeds and signal enterprises; patient and long-suffering, and a for-giver of injuries, and wished nothing more than that those who offended against him should recognize their errors, and that the delinquents be reconciled with him; most constant and endowed with forbearance in the hardships and adversities which were always occurring and which were incredible and infinite; ever holding great confidence in divine Providence.<sup>14</sup>

Although little is actually known about the early naval career of Columbus it is widely accepted that he was drawn to the sea because of the location of Genoa's busy harbor. Given that his father was a tradesman and importer of fine wool, it is likely that he spent a great deal of time watching for the arrival and departure of ships from other lands. The busy seaport was on the trade route that led from Italy and France, and it was probably in the midst of just such hustle and bustle that the young sailor developed a love for the sea-farer's life. Antonio Gallo, a historian from Genoa, intimated that the Columbus brothers set sail as teenagers.<sup>15</sup>

To further substantiate his early sailing experience, Columbus wrote in a missive to Ferdinand and Isabella:

I have passed more than forty years in this business and have traveled to every place where there is navigation up to the present time.<sup>16</sup>

Calculations would actually place this initiation to sea life at about the age of ten years. There are other writers who concur and place



his introduction to sailing at around 1461. (This was the same year King Enrique IV petitioned Pope Pius II to approve the creation of an Inquisition in Castile to punish suspected heretics in the kingdom. The request was approved on March 15, 1462, with his papal bull *Dum Fidei Catholicae* (or *While the Catholic Faith*).

Christopher penned in his private journal in 1492: “I have been at sea 23 years without leaving it for any time worth telling.” That would place the launch of his career at about the age of eighteen years.<sup>17</sup> Regardless of when he first set sail, it is apparent that it was a vocation he loved as he followed the tides for the remainder of his life.

The future self-proclaimed Admiral’s trips took him to ports in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas before he set sail on his momentous voyage of discovery. It was excellent experience for the fruitful journeys that would follow.