



# **Journey to Judaism**

*“A Secret Lineage”*

by  
Mark Moloney

# *Chapter 1*

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# St Louis

By Mark Stephen Moloney

In 1967 I was almost sixteen years old. Together with my parents I visited my father's oldest sister. My father had told me that she possessed a sharp mind and that when they were growing up she had enjoyed solving calculus problems with which their father tested them across the kitchen table in the family home on Raymond Avenue in Saint Louis. I went on this visit with the objective of asking this very intelligent aunt about our family history.

She was born in 1900 and appeared to me to be frail with diminished eyesight and the cumulative effects of smoking unfiltered cigarettes. She and her husband lived on an upper floor of a modern apartment building in the Central West End. I don't remember Uncle Ollie being present. After pleasantries were exchanged and

hospitality had been offered, I sat on the sofa in the sunlit room facing my aunt and seized the first opening to ask her,

*There's not much known about the Moloneys  
—just a handful of sketchy details, really; so, what  
do you remember?*

Directing her magnified gaze at me through stylish oval bifocals, she said with typical candor,

*I've always heard that the Moloneys were  
descended from Spanish Jews.*

Her response took me by surprise and stunned me into silence. For her part, she offered no further explanation before turning to recollections of her mother's people who were from St. Paul, Missouri and had, by contrast, had a much richer collection of anecdotes.

After we left, my father sought to dissuade me from further questions about his father's family. In his words,

*It might turn up a couple of horse thieves.*

But, the warning came too late. The seed of curiosity had been sown.

During the year following the visit with my aunt, I searched for clues of a non-Irish origin of the family name. I found a sequence of different spellings of the family name:

- Crossing the Mississippi river into St Louis around 1883, it was Moloney
- From 1858 to 1882 passing briefly through Cincinnati and settling in Jerseyville, Illinois it had been Maloney.
- On a September 4, 1862 marriage certificate of my great grandfather in Bordentown, New Jersey it was Joseph Melone,
- In the 1860 New Jersey Census there is a Joseph Melone, occupation of coachman, who resided in Trenton and was born in Massachusetts about or before 1847.

- Consulting the 1850 census in Massachusetts I found no entry for Melone, but close by on the same page by coincidence there were several persons with a similar surname, Melon, and with given names such as Moses, Israel, and Benjamin. A librarian genealogist and I both found it interesting and perhaps suspicious that just one vowel could distinguish a non-Jewish surname from a Jewish one.

Skeptics will say this proves nothing except that there are sloppy spellers and easily confused homophones.

I also read and researched about the Edict of Expulsion of 1492 of the Jews from Spain and began to speculate what my Jewish ancestors might have done or where they might have fled. I consulted an atlas of Spain and with my finger traced the closeness of the southern tip of the Iberian Peninsula to the coast of Morocco. Yes, Morocco, not northern Europe, was the logical refuge for those having to leave Spain and Portugal so abruptly. But, I wondered what sort of reception the exiled Jews of Iberia would have received in a Muslim country.

# Morocco

The year 2011 brought the coldest May in memory to central Morocco. The rains and winds in Fez rendered even the sturdiest umbrellas useless. After full days of touring, my clothes became quite damp and they never dried out completely back in the hotel room. Double pneumonia would become a steep price to pay for my Moroccan adventures.

My daily guide, Abdellali, knew every step of the old town of Medina—like the back of his hand. He showed me the perimeters of the Karaouine Mosque whose interior was off-limits to non-Muslims. I learned that this central mosque in Fez had been the largest and most important in North Africa until the construction of the immense mosque of Hassan II in the mid to late 1990's just outside Casablanca. Ali pointed out Fez's University,

founded in the year 850 CE as well as museums, souks, public fountains for ablutions, and several caravansaries or inns with large courtyards which accommodated traveling caravans.

I read in my guidebook that Fez had once been the capital of Morocco, taking turns with Meknes, Marrakech, and the present-day one of Rabat. Two facts surprised me: the existence in a Muslim country of a National Center of Studies of Moroccan Judaism in a southern suburb of Casablanca, which I visited, and that the Magen David (Star of David) was even depicted on Morocco's first post-colonial flag following independence from the French. Such, at one time had been Morocco's legacy of Jewish and Muslim inter-reliance.

The Medina of Fez is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It conveys with endearing precision an unforgettable brush with history in sights, sounds, and smells as only a few other places in the world can still deliver. At the start of every workday, the old town began to bustle and its arteries would come to life as the first donkey hooves clattered through the tight lanes making morning

deliveries of wares and supplies to merchants. It occurred to me that I was witnessing a page from history and that this picture of transporting of goods may have been unchanged for centuries. I also remember how a whistled alert would suddenly rise above the hubbub behooving the unwary to yield to a heavily burdened convoy of pack animals on the quick trot.

Of course I had mentioned to my guide, Ali, about my quest for family ties in Morocco and how hopeless it seemed, particularly for one who knew no Arabic. I thought my stay in Fez had come to an end since I was unable to research Arabic history in the University Library. I prepared to travel on to Marrakesh the following morning. However, a national bus strike changed my plans and I found myself having to remain in Fez another handful of days.

It was Ali's habit to arrive fifteen minutes early for our usual nine o'clock tour appointment. He would sit down at my table in the central courtyard of the Riad, the nineteenth century urban palace turned lodging, and



wordlessly watch me eat my breakfast. It is a civilized custom to take the day's first nourishment in silence.

On one of those extra mornings while dodging the convoys of pack animals and clutching my shoulder bag in which I had my guidebook, camera, and spare roll of toilet paper, I kept pace with Ali's brisk footsteps through the warren-like thoroughfares. We arrived at the already familiar, dim, back-alley shortcut. Ali made his obligatory jest about investigating Americans being led into darkened passageways only to be set upon by waiting brigands. Then we came to rest in front of an antiques shop. Ali called into the shop and out popped Mr. Benjamin an employee who happened to also be a local student of the Sephardic diaspora in Morocco. He had studied exactly where the exiled Spanish Jews had settled in Morocco. He offered me a stool in front of the shop doorway and then, by way of hospitality, a small cylindrical glass of piping hot sugary mint tea.

Mr. Benjamin was blond, blue-eyed and of medium stature. I noticed that we shared not only a fair complexion but a gentleness of manner. Tipped off by Ali,

Mr. Benjamin wasted no time in informing me that my surname, Moloney, bore resemblance to a local Sephardic one, Melouni, which he said hailed from Seville. Some members of this clan had been musicians at the court of the Christian queen Leonora and took their surname from a melud, a particular rhythm which lives today in the playing of flamenco guitar.

Following the anti-semitic sermons of the Queen's Dominican confessor, Ferrand Martinez in the cathedral of Seville on Ash Wednesday, March 15, 1391, riots erupted and spread throughout Andalusia and the rest of Spain. Four thousand Jews lost their lives in the ensuing pandemonium. After emigrating from Seville, some members of the family became metal-smiths. These Melounis settled in Fez for nearly two centuries before moving to Rabat and then on to Marseille and in the early nineteenth century to Livorno, Italy. I also learned that the surname Melouni was related to a local variant, Mellulli which was easier for Moorish citizens to pronounce.

The following morning, Ali took me to the former Jewish quarter of Fez called the Mellah where a former synagogue was being conserved. Upon entering, I noticed that a mikvah or ritual bath had been uncovered in the main hall. I descended its steps down to the basin platform, unsure of what—beside the brackish water in the pool—I would discover. A great sadness swept over me—something akin to a character in an E. M. Forster novel—and I began to sob.

It seemed as though the years of hiding, fear, and shame experienced by my paternal ancestors were washed away as the Moloneys of St. Louis were reconnected with their exiled ancestors.

I sought to compose myself, dabbing at both eyes and nose. I remember kissing the index and middle fingers of my right hand and with these steadying myself against the passageway's wall as I climbed back up to the level of the sanctuary. A group of friendly high school students from Israel was entering the building. Their silhouettes glowed, being backlit from the light outside. One of them asked me where I was from and what had brought me to

this former synagogue. At that moment, I felt it important to share my story with someone, to make it real. I gave him a short version of the amazing events of the previous days beginning with the bus strike. I told him that everything seemed to unfold in a magically, mysterious fashion. The young man listened and smiled with understanding, not showing any surprise at all.

When I emerged, Ali was waiting for me. He silently noticed how moved I had become and, shepherding me by my elbow told me that there was one more stop to make that morning. We were met at the entrance gate to the Jewish cemetery by the custodian who spoke no French. He led us down the graveled, sloping terraces on the outskirts of the Meulah quarter.

We walked past rows of white-washed tombs in the shape of treasure chests. Some were inscribed in Hebrew and others in French and Hebrew. At one end, the tombs had recessed niches into which candles could be placed. The custodian stopped in front of two tombs, side by side, which bore my ancestral name. One belonged to a Moisé and the other to a Reuben, both of whom had died in the

1940's, about a decade before the beginning of the Moroccan aliyot to Israel in 1955. I paid the custodian to light two candles for Moisé and Reuben on the next shabbath.

On the following morning, I returned to the antique shop. Mr. Benjamin suddenly appeared before me. He took a golden chain from around his neck and pressed it into my hand. On it was a small hamsa, an amulet in the stylized shape of a hand. I wished him continued good luck with his studies and that he might be able to publish his important findings soon. Imagine how many people there must be who seek a shred of knowledge about their displaced ancestors. What a blessing it is that someone did not forget, in spite of confusing moments of history, to keep the names and stories of the faithful alive for curious strangers like me.

In the days before my return trip home, my chest cold deteriorated and Ali took me into his home and cared for me. When I returned to St Louis, I remember trying to assess all that had happened to me during the trip to Morocco. At first, it seemed impossible that I had

stumbled upon my lost family. Of course, I wanted to believe that I had. I noticed that there was something oddly familiar about the first meeting with Mr. Benjamin. I was led from a place of darkness to a place of light. I received hospitality just like I had years ago in my aunt's bright living room. Then came the thunderbolt of information and in both cases, the revelation was over almost before I realized it.

# Postscript

It doesn't hurt nowadays to seek scientific assurances, so, in 2012 I sought to have my DNA tested. On my father's family side, the patrilineal test affirmed Jewish genetic material of both Sephardic and Ashkenazic ancestry. Sephardic genetic links were matched to fellow respondents living in the Azores, the Canary Islands, and Bulgaria. Ashkenazic links match those in Germany, the Ukraine, and Russia.

The teenager who once got an earful from his aunt is now in his mid-sixties. On October 11, 2013 he embraced Judaism by choice and writes, "It is good to be home, finally. Once I overcame my doubts and learned to trust in the unbinding of secrets, and once I accepted the slow surfacing of truths, I recognized that I was able to let

go of lifelong fears and insecurities. I resigned from the cover-up of our family narrative.

For some members of the family, the revelations are too preposterous and threatening to entertain, not imagining anything good could come from such honesty. When the facade of deceit finally crumbled, the person I was destined to be continued to explore the world. My aunt and Mr. Benjamin are winking to me their encouragement to go on searching for more clues to my identity.”





Mark Moloney (1951-2017) liked to cook

## Acknowledgements

This memoire has been taken from Mark's handwritten manuscript labeled:

*"penultimate draft, corrections, suggestions added in red by Ted W.\*"*

*\*Ted Wofford, St Louis architect and friend of Mark.*



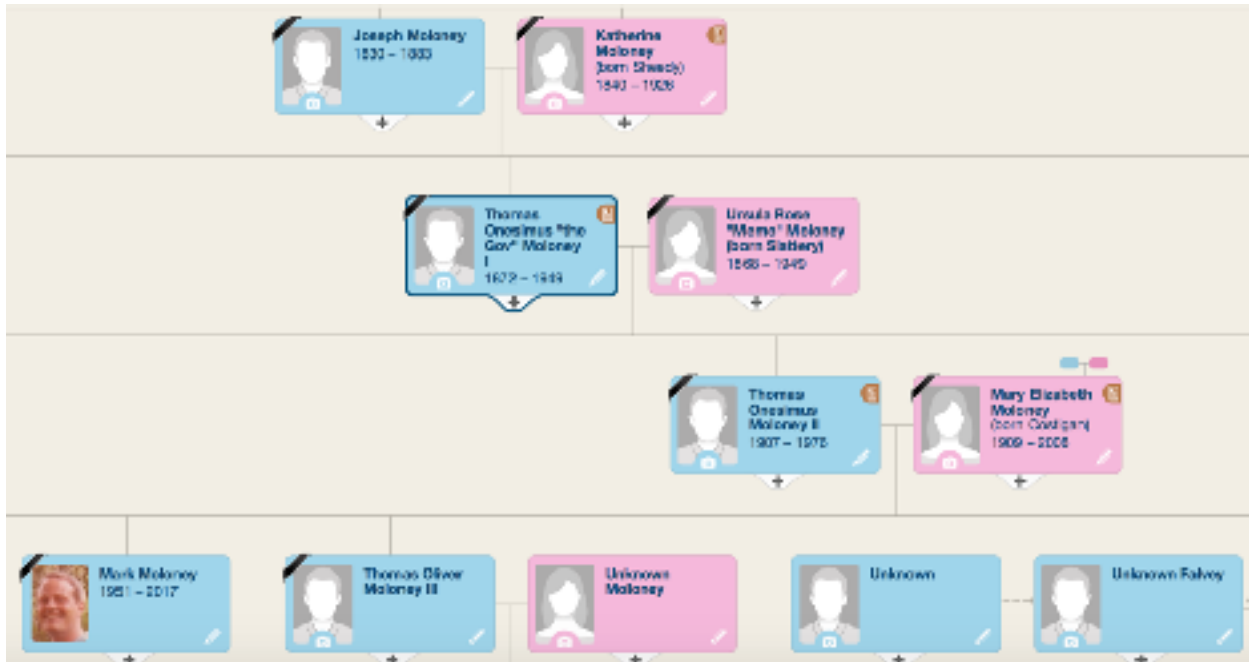
Cousins Joe Corrigan and Mark Moloney  
circa 1985

My friend and neighbor, Joseph Corrigan whose mother was a younger sister to Mark Moloney's mother, received the manuscript from Mark Moloney and Joe gave the manuscript to me for editing and publishing. Joe is unaware of a final draft.

John Martin Ramsay  
St Louis, Missouri  
16 February, 2018

Mark Moloney's **father** was Thomas O. Moloney, (Jr.) born 4/25/07 in St Louis MO whose parents were Thomas Onesimus. Moloney Sr. and Ursula Rose Moloney. Moloney, Sr. co-founded Moloney Electric in 1898.

Mark Moloney's **mother**, Mary Elizabeth Moloney, was born to Edward J. Costigan and Elizabeth Keane Costigan on 6/25/09 in St Louis MO



<https://www.myheritage.com/site-family-tree-322792011/ramsay>