

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SEPHARDIM OF CURAÇAO

Charles Gomes Casseres

That first settlement was not a great success. The island's arid climate, the prevailing strong trade winds, and the harsh sun all contributed in making the practice of agriculture well-nigh impossible. Moreover, Joao d'Yllan must have been a harsh patron. A few year after their arrival some of the colonists were already petitioning the West India Company to permit to return to Holland, or otherwise release them from the patronage of d'Yllan. Then, in 1659, a second and much larger group of Sephardic families, totaling about 70 souls arrived on the island. This second wave of colonists was under the leadership of Isaac da Costa, a member in good standing of the Portuguese Congregation of Amsterdam, from where all the members of the group originated. On their departure from Holland, the Mahamad of said congregation gave the group a Sefer Torah with all its appurtenances for use in the synagogue on Curaçao. It was the first Sefer Torah to arrive on the island, and, according to tradition, it still constitutes one of the 18 Sifrei Torah currently in regular use by Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. The Charter they were given provided them with extensive grants of land along the bay, freedom from taxation, a guarantee of protection by the authorities, exemption of doing guard duty on Shabbat in time of war, and freedom to openly practice their religion. This Charter is possibly the first document guaranteeing religious liberty in the New World.

In 1659, Da Costa's group also consecrated the first Jewish cemetery on the island. Its oldest tombstone bearing an inscription is that of Judith Lopes da Fonseca, who died in 1668. Like the Congregation, this walled-in cemetery is presumably the oldest in the Americas, even though some scattered tombs of somewhat older date can be found elsewhere. This Beth Haim, as it is popularly called, contains about 5.000 graves, of which one half bear tombstones with inscriptions. Some of these are embellished with beautifully sculptured biblical scenes, usually bearing a relationship to the name of the deceased. For instance, that of a Solomon. Bears a sculpture of King Solomon giving his famous verdict; that of Jacob, shows Jacob's dream of a ladder extending to heaven. By far the greatest majority of the inscription are in Portuguese, to wit, 1688, while 3361 are in Spanish, 40 in Hebrew, 72 in Spanish and Hebrew, 89, in English, 32 in Dutch, 3 in French and only one, of the recent date, in Yiddish. A half-sister of the philosopher Baruch de Spinoza also lies buried there. Nowadays, this historic graveyard is considered a national monument and is one of the tourist attraction on the island. It is lamentable that in this century a huge oil refinery was built to the east of it. Its sulfur laden smoke, vapors and soot have already made illegible close to one third of the inscriptions of these historic grave stones.

Sepahardi immigration

According to one historian writing in 1897, the names of the first settlers were among others: de Meza, Aboab, Pereira, de Leon, Chavez, Oliveira, and Henriquez Coutinho. Three of these family names are represented to this day in the membership of K./K. Mikvé Israel-Emanuel. A typical case of Sephardi immigration to Curaçao is that of the island's first civilian doctor, Dr. Ysaac

Gomes Casseres. He was practicing medicine as a marrano in Lisbon around the year 1690. After several of his family were jailed by the Inquisition for Judaizing, the doctor fled to Amsterdam with his wife Sarah. Once there he had himself ritually circumcised, then remarried in the Amsterdam Portuguese Synagogue. Only then did he take a ship to Curaçao, where he died only three years later while treating patients during an epidemic. Before he died he brought over his brother Manuel from Lisbon and another brother, Antonio, from Bayonne, France. The present Curaçao family of this name are straight line descendants of Antonio.

Economic development

With the development of agriculture doomed to fail because of climatic conditions the colonists shifted their efforts to trading with the nearby Spanish colonies of Columbia and Venezuela. They would import manufactured goods like woolen cloth, utensils, arms, tools, and foodstuffs from Europe, which they bought mostly from their relatives in Amsterdam. They would then sell them to the Spanish Main in exchange for cane sugar, cocoa beans, tobacco hides, and campeche wood. These they would re-export to Amsterdam to pay for further purchases. Inasmuch as this trade could be better handled from the walled city of Willemstad, situated as it was at the entrance of the island" strategic harbor, the colonist gradually moved into town. As was also the case in Amsterdam, but contrary to practice in most European cities of that era, no restrictions for Jews to settle within the city had ever been decreed by the West India Company. Once settled in town they constructed sometimes impressive buildings of three or four stories; their warehouses would be situated on the ground floor and their homes in the upper stories. The architectural styles were reminiscent of Amsterdam but with a decided tropical flourish. The first recorded settlement in town was that of Jeosuah Henriquez buying a town property in 1660.

The synagogue in town

A few years later the Jewish population residing in town must have grown so much that a synagogue had to be built there. This took place in 1674 with the conversion of a dwelling house into a house of worship. By 1690 it had to be replaced by a larger one. This third synagogue remained in use until 1703, when a proper synagogue building was erected. Thirty years later this one also proved to be too small for the burgeoning Sephardic population. In 1730 construction was started on a much larger synagogue building to be erected on the exact same site where the one of 1703 had stood. This imposing synagogue building was consecrated on the eve of Passover in 1732, and has been in continuous use ever since. The building was modeled after that of the famed Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam but at two thirds of its size. Its architecture and interior have been preserved in practically unaltered condition since it was built 265 years ago. This makes Synagogue Mikvé Israel-Emanuel undisputedly the oldest synagogue in existence in the New World.

The Sephardi population

By the end of the 18th century the Jewish population, practically all Sephardim, reached its zenith as to size. It then numbered 2000 souls and constituted just over one half of the entire white population of the colony. The walled city of Willemstad soon had street names evidencing the importance of the Jewish population. There was a Jews' Street, a Jewish Church Street, and a Bath

Street (where the Mikvah, the Jewish ritual, was located). To this day four monumental eighteenth century buildings in town still bear the Hebrew year of their construction on their gables, while one displays the Hebrew inscription «Beth Levi» House of Levi.

As living space within the walled city became scarce and consequently rents high, the less affluent Jews began to move to the other side of the harbor, named Otrobanda, literally, Other side». Soon a problem arose? In order to attend Shabbat and Holiday services in the Synagogue on town one had to cross the harbor in row boats. This constituted a breach of the commandment prohibiting work on Shabbat. So, in 1746 a synagogue was built in Otrobanda but it was placed under the supervision of the mother synagogue in town. It was name NEVE SHALOM, Peaceful Habitation. Its fate, however, did not live up to its name. In time, the members of the Otrobanda synagogue started to chafe under the paternalistic tutelage of the mother synagogue and they demanded complete administrative independence. This led to a serious conflict within the Jewish community. There were street brawls and fights whenever the militants of each faction met each other. Local commerce was paralyzed because opponents would not speak nor deal with each other. The effect on the total economy and life of the colony was such that the Dutch Governor had to request the intervention of the States General of Holland to try to bring peace to the island. This culminated in a personal proclamation issued in Dutch and Portuguese by the Stadtholder of Holland, Prince William the Fourth. He decreed an immediate end to the conflict and re- establishment of peaceful relations between the feuding factions. While this event was of strictly local significance, the fact that the States General and the Prince of Holland found it necessary to intervene underlines the vital position that the Jewish population occupied in the life of the island in that era.

International Status of the Community

By the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century of the Jewish community of Curaçao was the largest, the wealthiest and the most vibrant of all the Jewish settlements in the New World. It was giving financial, of times also moral, support to budding congregation in the region. It sent donations to help build the synagogues in Newport, Rhodes Island, the famed Touro Synagogue, oldest in the United States', in New York City the no longer existing Mille Street Synagogue of Shearith Israel; in Kingston Jamaica and in Philadelphia, Pa. It sent donations to St. Thomas, Virgin Island, Surinam and Colon, Panama. It sent a contribution to the congregation in Charleston S.C. to help it pay off the mortgage on its new Temple; it helped the Jewish communities in Caracas, Venezuela, and Riohacha, Columbia, to establish Jewish cemeteries. To this day every year on Yom Kippur, the Sephardic congregations of Newport, Rhode Island, and New York City pronounce a prayer of thanksgiving to the Jewish community of Curaçao for the help received over two centuries ago. The congregation also made periodic donations to various Yeshivot in the Holy Land. It was that period that the Sephardic congregation of Curaçao came to earn the honorific title of «Mother Congregation of the Americas».

Influence on the local scene

On the local scene there is no doubt that this large Portuguese speaking sector of the population significantly influenced the information of the local language, Papiamentu. It is a Creole language composed of Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese and Indian words superimposed on an African grammar.

The many words of Portuguese origin in its vocabulary were derived from the vernacular of these Sephardim, as were also a few words and expressions of unmistakable Hebrew origin. In fact, the oldest extant document written in Papiamento is a love letter written in 1775 by a Sephardic Jew to his beloved. These Sephardim, whose ancestors had lived as marranos for three generations in Portugal, attending Portuguese schools and universities, had adopted Portuguese as their daily language. They wrote their letters and the minutes of their congregation in Portuguese, and had their rabbis preach in that same language. The last sermon in Portuguese was delivered as late as 1875 by Chief Rabbi Haham Aaron Mendes Chumaceiro. They also knew Spanish, which they used in their business dealing with the Spanish colonies, and many had learned Dutch to be able to deal with the authorities. The more erudite among them also knew French and English. As is the case with the Portuguese Congregation of Amsterdam, Ladino or Judeo-Espagnol, was never spoken or written here. At the congregational religious school the children were taught to read Hebrew also.

The prosperity of the Jewish Community was the result of the intense commercial activity in the region. Through their family ties with traders in Amsterdam, London, Hamburg, Bordeaux and Seville they were able to attract much of the commerce between these metropolitan trading centers and the Caribbean. They were predominant in inter-island trade and regional shipping, and in the export of colonial produce to the market on Europe. Reports by Governors of various British colonies to the Colonial Office in London complaining about this supremacy attest to the commanding role that Jews of Curaçao played in the economy of the area in those days.

Social Standing

Historically, the Sephardim together with the Protestant administrators and land owners, constituted the elite of the island. The Protestants were the direct descendants of the Dutch officers and employees of the Dutch West India Company, who had settled here in the course of time. The mass of the population was made up of the slaves imported from Africa and their descendants, some of which freemen, all having been baptized into the Roman Catholic faith by missionaries from the Spanish Main and from Holland.

However, not all Jews were wealthy. In fact, the Amsterdam congregation often got rid of its poor by giving them free passage to Curaçao. It got to the point where in 1736 Governor Juan Pedro van Collen had to write to the West India Company asking them not to give more passports to poor Jews because they would become a burden to the State/. As had been the case in every Jewish community in the world, it never got that far, for a number of charitable institutions and Hermandades (Brotherhoods) set up by the Congregation always saw to it that its poor received proper relief and that they got the assistance needed to become self-supporting. In the late 20th century class and social distinctions have largely eroded and, thanks to their retaining steadily higher educational levels, representative of the majority sector of the population, all of whom are of African descent, have gradually become integrated in all levels of society.

Even so, it is only in 1825 that the Jews were legally emancipated. They then became eligible to hold functions in government. For more than a century, however, Sephardim had often been appointed to official committees and, especially, diplomatic missions to neighboring countries because of their knowledge of foreign languages and their negotiating skills.

One of the sources of economic prosperity of this 18th century Dutch colony had been derived from the trade in African slaves. This, however, had been a jealously guarded monopoly of the West India Company. There were only two instances on record where Curaçaoan Jews sold some slaves out of the Company's depot on Curaçao to firms in Columbia. Nevertheless, like all the other affluent sectors of the populations they naturally owned slaves, which they needed for work in their business enterprises and, especially also as domestic help.

Economic activities

The regional trading and commodities and manufactures in which the Sephardim occupied a dominant position, required shipping and the Jews of Curaçao were soon engaged in ship building ship owning, and ship chandelling, As early as 1674, Sephardic Jews were sailing in regional waters. The first names encountered are those of Manuel Namias de Crasto and Manuel David Levy Mendes, both as ship owners and captain. In the early 19th century, they had about 200 sailing ship navigating between the major Caribbean ports. Between 1699 and 1881, two hundred and thirteen Sephardim appear in the official registers as ship's captains an occupation not usually associated with the Jewish people. A report from non-Jewish sources written in 1728 states that «The lion's share of shipping is in Curaçao Jewish hands» A century later, the large Jewish firm of J.A. Jesurun alone owned 100 sailing ships plying the routes between the Caribbean islands and between these and Savannah, Georgia, Charleston, South Carolina and New Orleans, Louisiana. Trade and shipping necessitated marine insurance, particularly because of the high risk incurred in sailing the pirate and corsair infested waters of the Caribbean. This gave rise to insurance brokerage, whereby brokers, the majority of whom were Jewish, would cover the risks for departing ships and their cargo by spreading the coverage among the principal commercial firms on the island. These large firms would also carry out banking transactions on behalf of local importers and exporters and their contacts in Europe and the United States. In the early twentieth century these financial operations gave rise to the creation of three Sephardic commercial banks: Maduro's Bank, Curiel's Bank and Edwards Henriquez & Co.'s Bank. The first two merged in 1932 into what is currently the oldest and also the most extensive bank in the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba, the Maduro & Curiel's Bank. The third bank was sold in 1968 to the Curaçao an branch of the large Dutch ABN Bank, now ABN AMRO.

Cultural life

Once they had secured their economic position through commerce, finance, shipping and some small scale industry, more and more Sephardim began to figure in the professions and the arts. Dr. Yssac Gomes Casseres was the first of the twenty-six Jewish civilian doctors the community produced in its existence. Dr. Joseph Capriles and his great grandson David Ricardo Capriles, Dr. Benjamin de Benjamin de Sola, and Dr. Haim Abraham de Casseres are particularly remembered, mostly for having written medical treatises. There were also several Jewish pharmacists, one of them, Isaac Haim A. Mendes Chumaceiro, who was also the founder of the Curaçao chapter of the International Red Cross. Of the lawyers, the best known are Mordechay Ricardo and Abraham Mendes Chumaceiro, who was also the founder of the Curaçao chapter of the International Red Cross. The former was a personal friend, protector, and counsel for Simon Bolivar, during the time the liberator of half of South America had to seek refuge on Curaçao. The latte pleaded a century ago for the introduction of popular vote to elect the colony's legislative body, which up till then

was totally appointed by the Dutch Governor. Other jurist were Dr. Solomon Cohen Henriquez, who in the last decade of the nineteenth century was the Colony's Attorney General and Deputy Governor, and Isaac de Castro Yohai, who occupied the position of Attorney General in the middle of this century. Some of the jurist had been entrusted by the government with the responsible positions of Public Notaries, like Edward S. Lansberg, and Prof. Dr. Ernest Cohen Henriquez. Fourteen Sephardic Jews have been educators, most of whom running their own private school, before the advent of a good public school system for the colony. The language of instruction at those schools was usually Spanish, although at a few English was used. The Sephardim produced a great many journalists and editors, many of them part time, who in the preceding 100 years or so published 46 newspapers and periodicals. Of the 18 or so writers and poets, mention should be made of : J.J. Naar, who in the mid nineteenth century founded the first theater, Teatro Naar, and brought many theatrical companies to the island ; others were Abraham Lopez Penha, Haim Abraham Senior, Mauricio Namias de Castro, David Dario Salas, David Chumaceiro, Lelia Capriles, and, in our days, May Henriquez, nee Alvarez Correa, who is both author of many books and plays in Papiamento and a gifted sculptress. The language most used by these authors was Spanish, in which, judging from their published works, they were fluent. This choice of language was more the result of the influence and proximity of the Spanish speaking republics of South America and the Caribbean than a preservation of the language their ancestors had spoken four centuries ago in Spain. That, as we have seen, had been supplanted by Portuguese through their sojourn of one full century in Portugal. Still, by the end of the nineteenth century, Portuguese had completely disappeared as the literary medium of the Curaçao Sephardim.

Customs and Rituals

Nonetheless, there a few traditions that are practiced to this day, that may transcend the period in Portugal and hail all the way back to 15th century Spain. At the close of the Seder on the eve of Pesach a Spanish prayer of thanksgiving is invariably sung. It is the «Bendigamos» which the author heard sung in Gibraltar, London, Amsterdam and Bayonne (in French translation), and is reputedly also sung in Tetuan.

The principal ingredients of the «Harozet» of the Seder are dates, prunes, figs, raisins, peanuts, orange juice. Its consistency is also much firmer to permit the «harozet» to be rolled into balls of about three centimeters in diameter. It is finished off with a sprinkling of cinnamon. In the olden day some families would add a dash of finely ground red brick in remembrance of the slavery in Egypt.

A superstition, widely held by the Curaçao Sephardim is that of preserving (from one year to the next) a small piece of the "simurim" (« a piece of matzah blessed during the Haggadah ritual), carefully wrapped in tissue. It is believed to bring luck to the household and to protect the traveler against misfortunes. Also, there are no restrictions against the use of rice during the Passover week. On Purim the traditional delicacies are «orea di Haman» (Haman's ear). And «frita». The former is a pastry dough fried in oil, sprinkled with sugar and shaped like an ear, and the latter is a slice of white bread soaked in eggs and milk, then fried, and finally covered with cinnamon and syrup. To break the fast on Yom Kippur the very first liquid taken is «hot sangria», a mixture of dry red wine, lime juice, and cinnamon heated to a lukewarm temperature. At the end of the «kibra jujun diner» (breakfast-dinner) a rich mixture of beaten eggs and sugar, called «webu bati» is

pured on hot black coffee and slowly savored. The wedding ceremony in the Synagogue in front of the open Heychal is concluded with the smashing of a crystal goblet by the groom. This he throws from shoulder height into a large silver platter placed at his feet. The goblet is never stepped upon as is the custom everywhere else. At every B'rith Mila, ritual circumcision, hot chocolate and panlevi are served. Panlevi is a light cookie made of flour, egg yolks and sugar. These traditions in foods and customs are held to be of very ancient origin and could possibly have been preserved since the centuries in Spain.

Sephardi Academe

Around the turn of the century a Curaçao Sephardi, Daniel de Leon, who emigrated to New York, was the founder of the Socialist Labor Party of the United States, he was also editor of the New York Daily People, and a professor at Columbia University. In contemporary times at least five Curaçaoan Jews have occupied professorships in well-known universities abroad: Dr. Robert Pinedo, Dr. Ernest Cohen Henriquez, Dr. Benjamin Gomes Casseres, Dr. Michael Pinedo and Roberto C. Henriquez, lic.

Military Heroes

The Sephardim also distinguished themselves militarily. The names of two that joined Simon Bolivar in Venezuela's war of independence have come down to us: Colonel Isaac de Sola and Cavalry Captain Benjamin Henriquez. In the Second World War a Curaçaoan Jew, George L. Maduro, who was studying law in Holland and was a Lieutenant in the Dutch Cavalry reserves, succeeded in taking a German machine gun post that was commanding the access to one of the major Rhine bridges. He held on to it until Dutch army capitulated to the vastly superior Nazi war machine. He was subsequently imprisoned by the Nazi's and was sent to Dachau concentration camp where he died of typhus. He was posthumously decorated by the Queen of the Netherlands with the Militaire Willems Orde. His parents donated a substantial grant to star the famed miniature city at The Hague, named Madurodam in his memory. The net proceeds of this world famous attraction are destined for charitable institutions.

Religious Life

In the sphere of religion everything centered on their magnificent synagogue. Here they met each other every Shabbat and Holiday, here their children received religious education, and here they celebrated and observed all the life cycles. The ritual originally the same as that of the mother synagogue of Amsterdam, hence Portuguese Sephardic Orthodox. Gradually, though, some liberalizations were introduced in the ritual. For some members of the congregation these modernizations were not going far enough and as of the 1830's they started to insist on more liberalizations. The majority, backed by the Rabbi, were against this movement. The situation worsened when, in addition, economic disputes arose between the leading families supporting sides of the conflict. Ultimately, in 1864, it came to a schism within the Congregation. The reformists, constituting between one third and one fourth of the membership, split from Mikvé Israel and founded a new Reform congregation, which they named EMANUEL. They built a large temple and consecrated their own separate cemetery. The ritual adopted was that of the American Reform movement. Services were conducted in Hebrew, English and some Spanish. Exactly one

hundred years later the differences in religious outlook and in lifestyle between the members of both congregations had all but disappeared. A great number of intermarriages had also been contracted between their respective members, and the numbers of each congregation separately had shrunk considerably. These factors could not but lead to a reunion of the two, which, under the competent guidance of Rabbi Simeon Maslin and Cantor Norman Swerling, finally took place in 1964. Thus resulted the present United Portuguese Congregation MIKVE ISRAEL-EMANUEL. The ritual the merged congregation adopted was that of the Reconstructionist Movement of America, which offered an acceptable middle ground between the former ritual of each congregation, but care was taken to retain as many elements of the former Sephardic ritual as were compatible in the new situation. The Torah service has been kept largely intact. The Sifrei Torah are draped with wide hanging mantles bearing to inscriptions or decorations. The offerings are announced partly in Portuguese. The prayer for the Royal House and the Government is still pronounced every Shabbat in the same text and Portuguese language of the prayer that originated in Amsterdam around the year 1600, when the newly arrived refugees from the Iberian peninsula were given leave by the burgomasters of the city to free practice their Jewish religion. The rarely used six pointed star, Magen David, is a very recent introduction and was unknown to the preceding Sephardic generations.

Emigration to the Region

During a serious economic depression in the first half of the nineteenth century many Curaçaoan Sephardim emigrated to the Danish island of St. Thomas, a flourishing free port at that time. There were so many that some streets and neighborhoods came to be known by Curaçaoan names. Up until a few decades ago there were still families living in St. Thomas that originated in Curaçao.

In the second half of the same century another sizable emigration of Curaçaoan Jews took place. This time to the Republic of Panama. They were so numerous that in 1876 they were able to found a religious Congregation, KOL SHEARITH ISRAEL.

They then built a synagogue and consecrated a cemetery. Direct descendants of these Sephardic emigres from Curaçao, and bearing the same family names as their Curaçaoan kin, still constitute the majority of the congregation. It is now unique in world Judaism as it is probably the only Iberian Sephardic Reform Congregation in existence. In about the same period many other Sephardim of Curaçao went to seek their fortunes in nearby Venezuela, especially Coro, Columbia, Santo Domingo, and Central America. Today there are hundreds of families in these republics that are straight line descendants of these Curaçaoan Sephardim and that still proudly carry the same surnames, but, with the exception of mere dozen or so of the older generation, none of them are Jewish any longer. Many of them have attained high positions in government, finance, business and publishing.

The Sephardim Today

Because of much smaller families, emigration of the younger generation in search of greater opportunities elsewhere, and some marriage outside the faith in the first half of the present century,

the Jewish population of Curaçao dwindled from its top of 2000 souls in 1790 to no more than 500 in 1991; of which about 350 are direct descendants of the marranos that four centuries ago had to flee the Iberian peninsula in search of freedom.

Despite its greatly reduced size, the United Sephardic Congregation MIKVE ISRAEL-EMANUEL maintains a unique Jewish Cultural Historical Museum situated adjacent to the Synagogue in a historic building dating back to 1728, and together with the smaller Ashkenazi congregation SHAAREI TSEDEK, and afternoon Hebrew School, a B'nai B'rith lodge and an active B'nai B'rith Youth Organization.

Charles Gomes Casseres, written in or about the year 2000

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