



**The Origin of the Curaçao Sephardim and
The Bond which Held the Diaspora Together**

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Abstract

The Origin of the Curaçao Sephardim and the Bond Which Held the Diaspora Together explores two main questions regarding the Jewish Diaspora of Curaçao, "Where did the Jews of Curaçao originate from?" and "How did this diaspora, although scattered over time and space, remain unbroken for over five centuries? I trace the diaspora's origin to the Sephardic Jews of the Iberian Peninsula and examine how they came to the New World and Curaçao. I first analyze the Sephardim in the Americas from a historical perspective, tracking the Sephardic Jewish origin from Spain and follow their exile to Portugal in the late 1400s, then to the Netherlands exploring their travels to South America, and ultimately to the island of Curaçao in the 1600s. The journey begins by studying the Spanish Inquisition and how it served as the point of transformation which led to the first significant exodus of the Sephardic Jewish population out of Spain. I analyze how Christopher Columbus' first transatlantic journey may have been responsible for the initial introduction of the Sephardim to the New World. Following the expulsion and migration of the Sephardim from Spain and Portugal to the Netherlands, I explore how the Amsterdam Jews influenced the growth of a derivative Jewish Diaspora in the New World and Curaçao, exploring the Sephardim's expansive mercantile and business networks. I also analyze the sociological profile and cultural practices of the Curaçao Sephardic Diaspora in order to understand how the group avoided cultural and religious assimilation. One significant question is how did the Diaspora maintain its religious identity during a time of intense anti-Semitism? Ideological clashes and disputes of Curacao's Jewish community and congregation are examined as they faced religious reform. In addition, central ties and influential figures among Curacao's Jews, for example prominent Hahams and Rabbis, are studied to see how they shaped Curacao's Jewish community. As I trace the history of these Caribbean Sephardic Jews, I examine how the diaspora remained loyal to Jerusalem through monetary donations and other gestures. This project reveals how the Sephardim faced and overcame both the Spanish and

Portuguese Inquisitions, cultural and religious intolerance, and how they remained connected through time and distance and ultimately built one of the most successful Jewish Diasporas in the New World.

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Introduction

Throughout history Jewish people were often the target of oppression and discrimination. Many Jews spent their lives fleeing from one place to another in search of safety and security. This appeared to be the nature of Jewish existence for over 2000 years until the establishment of Israel in 1948 which served as a national home and refuge for the Jewish people. Nevertheless, the nomadic lifestyle which developed among the Jews created diasporas in almost every region of the world, even regions which most people would never expect. Such is the case of the Sephardic Jewish Diaspora in Curacao. Historical and anthropological studies about the Jews of Curacao is sparse in comparison to other Jewish studies and for those who do not know the beginnings of Curacao's Jews, they might assume the group originated with the arrival of Jews who fleeing the Holocaust. However, this Jewish Diaspora existed long before the Holocaust and arose from another tragic era in Jewish history, The Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, otherwise known as the Spanish Inquisition. This Inquisition first began in 1478 and ultimately spread throughout the entire Iberian Peninsula and the New World. It caused mass expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, the renowned year that Christopher Columbus sailed to the New World. Spanish Jews, also known as Sephardic Jews, disguised as Christians may have boarded Columbus' ship marking the first Sephardim to voyage to the New World. The generations that followed would establish the most prosperous and well established Jewish Diasporas in the New World on the tiny island of Curacao.

Chapter One: Christopher Columbus and The Spanish Inquisition

The arrival of the first Jews in the Caribbean Islands may be traced back to the late fifteenth century and the transatlantic voyages of Christopher Columbus. There is speculation that Christopher Columbus may have been a Converso, a Jew who had converted to Christianity. Jewish Conversos were also known as Marranos which is a Spanish word that was quite derogatory. Marrano meant dirty, filthy, or damned. During the 15th century, the word slightly changed to mean "dirty pig" or "filthy swine." The Jewish faith places strong religious restrictions on the consumption of pork or even touching the dead body of a pig. So, this other connotation of Marrano added an extra degree of disdain and insult to the word, but some Jews bore the name as a badge of honor for all that they endured and their pride in being Jewish. Due to the Inquisition and growing antipathy against the Jews, many converted to Christianity out of force or fear of persecution. In spite of this, large groups continued to practice their Jewish faith in secrecy which may have been the case with Christopher Columbus.

Columbus was born in 1451 in Genoa, Italy. His family moved from Catalonia, Spain to Genoa several years before his birth. But, there is doubt as to whether he was really from Italy. When he first arrived in Spain he referred to himself as "un extranjero" or "foreigner." According to Dr. Jane S. Gerber, a scholar and professor at the Center of Jewish Studies and the Director of the Institute for Sephardic Studies at the City University of New York, Christopher Columbus was not from Italy. Historians and scholars have even speculated that perhaps Columbus' lineage was linked to the Portuguese Converso. However, there is no assured evidence to prove or disprove this theory. Exploring history, it is evident that there was a

strong Jewish influence which surrounded Columbus' life on all levels. Even the crew on his ships included Conversos. Columbus could have had a personal connection with these Jews or Conversos or he simply was drawn to the group due to their connections, money, and many talents as noted by their superior knowledge in astronomy and map making which Columbus most definitely made use of.

Christopher Columbus met with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain in 1486 to request funding for an expedition which originally began as the search for an eastern passage and shorter route to India and the Far East. His request was denied because Spain was currently at war with the Moors and Spain's funds were primarily dedicated for ongoing war efforts. On January 12, 1492, Columbus again requested the support of the King and Queen presenting his expedition on maps and charts created by a Jewish astronomer named Abraham Zacuto. As part of his proposal, Columbus also requested "hereditary rule over lands he might discover" (Kritzler, 14). Unfortunately, even with a sound proposal, King Ferdinand told Columbus that he could spare no money for the expedition because Spain's funds had become exhausted during the war. In addition, Ferdinand was not particularly fond of Columbus' request for "hereditary rule" or "governor for life" over the lands he may discover (Kayserling, 59). Columbus' expedition was denied. Columbus left disappointed and frustrated over his rejected request.

As Columbus departed the premises he informed the King's advisor Luis de Santangel, possibly the King's treasurer, that he would stop at nothing to fund his expedition. Santangel came from a family of wealthy Conversos. His uncle, or possibly a cousin, had been burned at the stake in the city of Saragossa in Aragon, Spain in the late 1400s. However, Santangel's

father was the royal tax collector or tax farmer of Valencia, a position which Luis de Santangel would succeed to. King Ferdinand trusted Santangel's integrity and administrative talents. There was no doubt that Santangel was a Converso but Ferdinand maintained high regards towards him. As Kayserling describes, "the King held him in high esteem for his fidelity, his sagacity, his extraordinary industry and administrative talent, his sterling integrity and his complete devotion to the crown; whenever Ferdinand wrote to him, he called him "the good Aragonese, excellent, well-beloved councilor" in his letters (Kayserling, 70). He eventually made Santangel his trusted *escribano de racion*, chancellor of the royal household at Argon and then his *contador mayor*, comptroller-general. Likewise, Santangel owed his and his immediate family's safety to the King as they remained enveloped in Ferdinand's protection in the midst of the ever-scrutinizing eye of the Inquisition (Kayserling, 71).

Upon denial of his expedition, Columbus planned to seek funding from any King who would grant it. His next request would be with the King of France and, if denied, he planned to present his expedition to, and seek funding from, the King of England. When Santangel learned of Columbus' plan to seek sponsorship from these other countries, he was described by the Royal Chronicler of Spain as being "distressed as if a great misfortune had befallen him personally" (Kritzler, 15). He rushed to meet with Queen Isabella hoping to change her and the King's decision. Since he was privy to the royal court and information unknown to the public, it was almost certain that Santangel knew of the developing plan to expel the Jews from Spain. Columbus' voyage would then serve as an the opportunity to find new land where Jews could settle after expulsion from Spain. Santangel pleaded with Queen Isabella informing her that if she let this opportunity pass, another nation would reap the rewards of Columbus' discoveries.

He further stated that, “[it] would be a great damage to Her Crown and grave reproach to Her Highness if any other prince should undertake what Columbus offered Her Highness.” (Kritzler, 15). Santangal even stated that he would be willing to use his own money to finance Columbus’ voyage if Spain’s funds were exhausted.

Columbus had only reached seven miles from the premises before he was called back and granted funding for his voyage. It is interesting that the contemporary Christopher Columbus Day celebration paints the picture of an Italian-born explorer who, funded by Spain, embarked on a journey and discovered the New World in a story marked by Spanish explorers, Native Americans, and Conquistadors. However, quite possibly, this was the story of a group of insightful Jews or Conversos who forecasted a detrimental fate and, therefore, created a plan to secure refuge and security in a possible new world should they become the targets of persecution.

On March 31, 1492, approximately three months after Columbus’ voyage was approved, The Alhambra Decree also known as the Edit of Expulsion was signed by the King and Queen of Spain. The Jews were ordered to convert unequivocally to Christianity or leave Spain. Those who resisted full conversion had approximately four months to sell off their possessions and evacuate the country. They



The Alhambra Decree. Courtesy: Wikimedia.

The Alhambra Decree. Courtesy: Wikimedia.

were, however, allowed to take some possessions with them but were prohibited to take gold, silver, or any minted money of Spain. Any Jew, including insincere Conversos, who remained in Spain after the deadline which was extended to August 2, 1492 would be punished by confiscation of all of their belongings and death (Benjamin, 88). Even legitimate Conversos who remained in Spain were subjected to persecution. Many were arrested by the authorities on sheer speculation that they were "Secret Jews." The Holy Office of the Inquisition spread suspicion throughout the county. Spanish authorities were "Motivated by religious zeal and by greed—for the property of those arrested fell forfeit to the Holy Office and to those who denounced the alleged miscreants—the Inquisition moved against the Conversos with all the combined power of church and state" (Elkin, 3). Interestingly, Columbus and his crew boarded their ships before midnight on August 2, 1492. They set sail the next morning on August 3, 1492, one day after the deadline for evacuation of all Jews from Spain.

Chapter Two: The Shift to Portugal

The grand majority of the Spanish Jews who were exiled from Spain found new homes in Portugal. The remainder eventually fled to locations like Italy, Morocco, and North Africa. At this time some Jews gravitated to Muslim territories because religious sanctuary was more prevalent among Muslims than with Christians. Portugal, who at first was not willing to receive Jews into its borders, allowed several prominent Jews into the country including the chief Rabbi of Spain, Isaac Aboab. Eventually, Jews were allowed to enter the country, but for a price. The more prominent or well-to-do

were charged 100 cruzados (gold coin distinguished with a cross) for passage into Portugal. The less well-to-do Jews were charged eight golden cruzados for a short



Golden Cruzado of Portugal. Courtesy: Wikimedia.

eight-month stay (Finkelstein, 46). It is estimated that between 80,000 and 100,000 Spanish Jews entered Portugal during this time (Arbell, 10). However, some sources report that the year 1492 brought in approximately 120,000 Spanish Jews to Portugal (Swetschinski, 216).

Unfortunately, the newly found safe haven in Portugal would not last long. Once their eight-month stay expired, Jews had to leave Portugal. But, they faced difficulties finding countries to flee to. In addition, ships out of the Portugal were insufficient in number to transport all of them. As a result, these Jews were proclaimed “illegals” after expiration of the eight months and became slaves of the King of Portugal, Joao II (John II in English). Atrocities against these

Jews were terrible. At one point approximately 2,000 Jewish children were taken from their families in Portugal and sent to the islands of São Tomé and Príncipe off the western coast of Africa (along with Portuguese convicts) to help inhabit the islands and cultivate the land for Portugal's economic growth (Jewish Virtual Library). The Portuguese Governor of São Tomé preferred children because he wanted "to ensure future population growth" on the island and guarantee an enduring population (Swetschinski, 216). Conditions during the approximately 4,000 mile sea journey from Portugal to São Tomé as well as daily life on the islands were dreadful and death tolls were high. Many Jewish families resorted to killing their own children rather than subject them to this horrific existence.

During this time we will see that the rulers of both Spain and Portugal played an important role in the fate of the Jewish people of the Iberian Peninsula. King Joao II had only one son, Alfonso, heir to the throne, who was married to the eldest daughter of the King and Queen of Spain, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. This marriage was the result of an agreement in the Treaty of Alcáçovas. The treaty was drawn at the end of the War of the Castilian Succession in 1479. Within this conflict was the dispute between Spain and Portugal over island territories in the eastern Atlantic as well as in Africa, specifically Guinea which was rich in gold. Also in dispute was the succession of rule over Spain between the daughter, Joanna or Juanna, and the half-sister, Isabella, of King Henry IV who was King of Spain prior to Ferdinand and Isabella. Historians confirm there was strong evidence that Henry IV was impotent, therefore Joanna may not have been his daughter. In any case, in 1474 following King Henry's death, Isabella was named Queen of Spain with her husband King Ferdinand. But, the very next year the King of Portugal, Alfonso V, married Henry's daughter Joanna who was also

Alfonso V's own niece. This sparked a major feud over the crown of Spain and two countries went to war in the Battle of Toro in 1476. The end result of the war was both sides claimed victory, Isabella and Ferdinand remained in power and the unity of their eldest daughter (also named Isabella) with Alfonso V's grandson (also named Alfonso) would be locked into a contractual marriage per the Treaty of Alcáçovas with a hefty dowry paid to Portugal.

The young Alfonso and the young Isabella's marriage was seen as a potential threat to Spain, since Ferdinand and Isabella had several daughters and only one son, John, to inherit the Spanish throne. But, John would never live to inherit the throne, he became ill and died at the age of nineteen leaving no heir behind. Coincidentally, the King of Portugal's son, Alfonso, had also died, killed when he fell off his horse. Because Alfonso was a skilled rider, thoughts of conspiracy radiated throughout Portugal that somehow Spain was behind his death. However, this was all speculation and never proven. After Alfonso's death, King Joao II sought to make his illegitimate son heir to the throne. However, his wife, Queen Eleanor, opposed of this. After Joao II's death in 1495, Manuel the Fortunate, Eleanor's brother and Joao's cousin, took over the throne.

Under Manuel's rule Jews were given short-term relief from enslavement and persecution. Manuel was more tolerant towards the Jews than his predecessors and understood the advantages the group brought to the economy of Portugal. However, Manuel wanted to marry Alfonso's widow, Isabella who was still grieving for her dead husband. There were rumors that the young Isabella believed her husband's death was the result of retribution from God because Portugal had allowed the Jews into its lands (Downey). Moreover, the Spanish Catholic Monarchs would not have allow the marriage of their daughter under a crown

that did not support Catholic orthodoxy in its kingdom. Manuel did not want to lose these prosperous Jews because he knew how valuable they were to Portugal's economy. As part of the agreement to marry Isabella, Manuel issued an ultimatum to all Jews in Portugal that they convert or suffer the consequences. His tactics were harsh and in one instance he had them lured to Lisbon by telling them that they would be granted passage out of Portugal. Instead, they were rounded up and held captive and deprived of food and water until they agreed to convert and many were dragged to the church to be baptized. For those who still resisted, they were killed or suffered a gruesome death by burning at the stake and many devout Jews even committed suicide (Soyer, 226). Those who remained finally chose conversion to Christianity over death and were allowed to stay in Portugal. Converted Jews in Portugal were called "New Christians." Manuel married Isabella in 1496 and by 1497 all Jews were forced to convert to Christianity (Yerushalmi, 173). A twenty-year grace period was granted (Royal Decree of 1507) in which no inquiries into the legitimacy of their Christian conversions would occur. This grace period allowed Manuel to keep the Jews in Portugal. Had inquiries been issued, many secret Jews would have been exposed and expelled. In any case, this margin of flexibility facilitated the Portuguese Jews to continue as secret Jews also called crypto-Jews also for some time without persecution or expulsion.

There was stability for a time, but an old bias soon resurfaced. The concept of *limpieza de sangre* or cleanliness of blood which originated in Spain around 1449 became a popular concept once again and found its way into Spanish policy as well as Portuguese. This policy stated that all Jews and descendants of Jews would be banned to a new social stratification or caste. The caste included all Conversos and New Christians even if their

devotion to the church was absolute. The policy was more of a racial prejudice than religious intolerance. According to the policy of *limpieza*, New Christians carried tainted blood from their Jewish ancestors. In Spain, Queen Isabella had already begun resurrecting this policy as early as 1501 and even sent an order to Nicolas de Ovando, the first appointed governor of Hispaniola, to ban all those who did not meet the standard of the policy of *limpieza* from entering the New World (Elkin, 5&7).

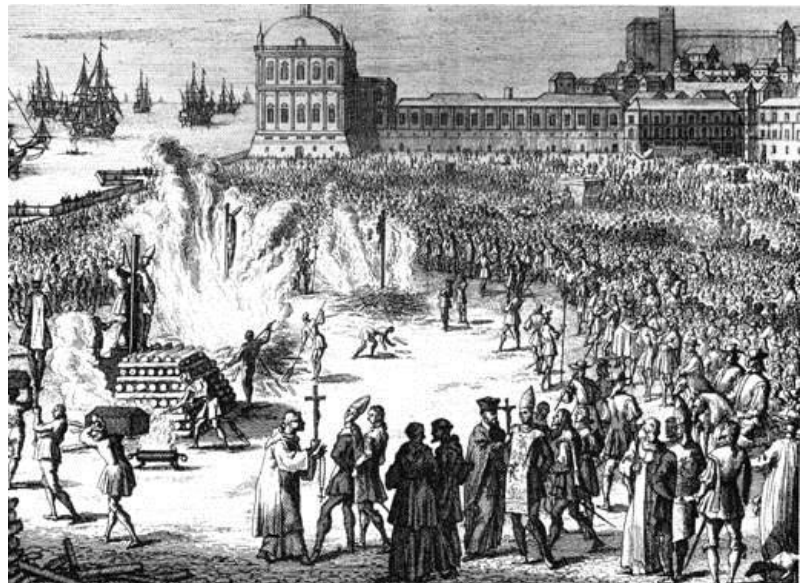
In 1499, a decree was published in Portugal which prohibited New Christians from leaving the country without a special license (a similar decree was also published in Spain at the same time). The decree also prohibited the general population from directly or indirectly assisting the New Christians in departing the country. Regardless of the decree, there were many Conversos who were successful in fleeing Portugal and finding sanctuary in order to return to Judaism. They either acquired or purchased the required license to leave the country or they simply moved quietly through inadequately guarded ports. In addition, passage networks were created with the help of the successful New Christians who were already traveling freely as merchants throughout the trade networks in surrounding countries (Roth, 78). The decree was imposed for about eight years until the Massacre of Lisbon in 1507 during which crowds rioted against and killed over 2,000 New Christians and Portuguese Christians who were accidentally mistaken for New Christians. The massacre was so brutal that not even women and infants were spared. Portugal briefly lifted the 1499 decree following the riots with the Royal Decree of 1507, under King Manuel, which granted New Christians passage out of Portugal.

The decree of 1507 also allowed the New Christians to enter into the world of entrepreneurship in Portugal. It granted them free passage to depart Portugal on a permanent or temporary basis and also allowed those who had departed reentry into the country without punishment. Under this decree New Christians could buy, sell, and trade merchandise as well as export from Portugal as long as Portuguese ships were being used and business was conducted only with other Christians countries. But most reassuring to the New Christians, the decree granted them twenty years of freedom from inquiry into the legitimacy of their Christianity (Rivkin, 172). So, whether these New Christians were truly faithful Christians or secret Jews, for the moment they could rest easy and ignore scrutinizing eyes.

This decree was not solely designed to appease the New Christians. Portugal had a personal stake in it as well. With this twenty-year freedom from inquiry into New Christian religious legitimacy, the King intended for New and Old Christians to unite with the hope that the New Christians would assimilate and become absorbed in Portuguese society, that older Jewish Conversos would die out, and their offspring be raised as true and absolute Christians (Saraiva, 18). In addition, at the time Portugal did not have a feasible entrepreneurial population. Portuguese society looked down upon the mercantile vocation. In Portugal there were seven "mechanical arts" (peasant, hunter, soldier, sailor, surgeon, weaver, blacksmith). The Portuguese, Old Christians, considered the profession of merchant to be ranked at the very bottom of these professions, but Conversos, New Christians, had no concern working in this field. These New Christians brought with them their already existing talents and quickly began honing their mercantile skills upon arrival in Portugal in the late fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century they worked the Portuguese trade routes along the African coast and helped

to produce the sugar industries on the island of Maderia and of course the dreadful São Tomé. Sometime after 1510 they were even engaged in the spice and jewel trades of India. Whether these Jews were truly disconnected from Judaism or were practicing their Jewish faith in secrecy with the ever existing anti-Semitism surrounding them, life seemed to regain an sense of normalcy. A viable livelihood and financial success seemed to be on the horizon again. New Christians soon made up about 65%-75% of the entire Portuguese mercantile work force by the seventeenth century. This was quite a large number given the fact that New Christians only represented about 10% of the Portuguese population at the time (Swetschinski, 217).

Manuel the Fortunate's reign came to an end with his death in 1521 and his grandson, Joao III (or John III) assumed the throne. King Joao III was a devoted Catholic and sought to purify Portugal of the non-Catholics. Any secret Jews became victims of hate and persecution



The Portuguese Auto-da-Fé. Courtesy: Wikimedia.

once again. In 1536, the Portuguese Inquisition began and some sources theorize that this inquisition was a "political choice" by Joao III, fearing that the New Christian mercantile class was becoming too successful, too fast. Some historians conclude that there was no logical reason for this inquisition. There was no formidable evidence that mass Judaizing was occurring in Portugal at the time. (Saraiva, 29-30).

The Portuguese Inquisition has been reported as more merciless than the Spanish Inquisition. But several historical documents were lost regarding Portuguese autos-da-fé (translated "act of faith") so evidence is somewhat skewed. The autos-da-fé was the last step in the inquisition process and involved a public procession of penance or repentance of sins for accused heretics and the reading of their punishment. Beginning in 1536, the Portuguese Inquisition spanned almost three centuries. It did not officially end until the abolition of the Holy Office by the "General Extraordinary and Constituent Courts of the Portuguese Nation" in 1821. According to Henry Charles Lea, an American Historian and authority on the Spanish Inquisition, tribunals in Portugal between 1540 and 1794 resulted in the burning of 1,175 people, the burning of an additional 633 in effigy, and the punishment of 29,590. But as previously mentioned, several autos-da-fé documents have been lost, so many more may have suffered.

In these years and the years that followed, many of the Portuguese Conversos began to migrate. However, not all departed as evidenced by the enduring Cristaos-novos (neo-Christians) that still resided in the northern provinces of Portugal well into the twentieth century. This group married within their own group and maintained their Jewish faith and traditions in secrecy as noted by Samuel Schwarz, a Polish-Jewish mining engineer whose profession had brought him to Portugal in 1917. Schwarz arrived in a town called Belmonte where he knew a Marrano community existed but had not yet met any of its members. Interestingly, he encountered a Christian merchant who was anxious for his business and warned him not to make purchases from another merchant in town stating, "It is enough for me to tell you he is a Jew." Schwarz later met this Jewish merchant, Marrano de Sousa, and

convinced him to accompany him to synagogue. From there he earned de Sousa's trust and friendship and was able to enter the still secret lives of the Marrano community of Belmonte, a community which had endured years of discrimination through the centuries but remained devoted to their Jewish heritage and faith. Schwarz described the encounter with the secret Marrano community, "When he [de Sousa] presented me to his people he whispered mysteriously in their ear, "He is one of us." This statement alone was enough to express the ever-guarded existence of these hidden Marranos. In an interesting conversation between Schwarz and de Sousa, Schwarz shared with him the news of the recent signing of the Balfour Declaration and plans to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine. De Sousa's response was, "I'd willingly give half my fortune to help establish our people in the Holy Land." (Schwarz, 44).

Chapter Three: Out of Iberia - The Sephardic Jew



Migration of the Iberian Sephardim from the 15th to the 18th Centuries. Courtesy: Judeo-Spanish at Auschwitz

It is from this Iberian origin that we begin our understanding of the Sephardic Jew. The name itself "Sephardim" is Hebrew for "of Spain" (Karnen, 5). This scattered Sephardic Diaspora, whether Western Sephardim (of Portugal) or Eastern Sephardim (of Spain) migrated to various locations around the globe. Regardless of where they landed, whether the Netherlands and other parts of Europe, North Africa, various parts of the Ottoman Empire, or the New World, all Sephardic Jews can trace their roots back to the Iberian Peninsula. Iberia was a place where these Jews lived for over 500 years prior to the Inquisitions as prosperous

and gifted people with great accomplishments in business, commerce and trade, the arts, medicine and multiple fields of all kinds. With their success came a sense of pride within the Sephardic community. Whether Sephardic diasporas were formed from New Christians or Secret Jews or both, they had like goals in mind to resettle, ensure safety of the group, be prosperous, and maintain strong ties with each other.

In particular, the Secret Jews, sometimes called Crypto-Jews, are widely credited with laying the foundation in new settlements for the establishment of Sephardic diasporas around the world. Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, the Professor of Jewish History, Culture and Society at Columbia University from 1980 - 2008, described these secret Jews as "the wedge that first pierced the barriers. Outwardly Christian, they could penetrate into areas from which professing Jews were excluded." Therefore, they paved the way for the Sephardim who followed behind. Their bond was strong and unlike many other diasporas, each fragment not only maintained a bond with their "homeland" (Jerusalem), they maintained bonds with each other. In describing these linked fragments, Professor Yerushalmi stated that the Sephardic and Marrano diasporas from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries "constituted, in both a metaphoric and an actual sense, a huge extended family. Acutely conscious of sharing a common origin, historic fate, and collective identity, geographical distance alone could not loosen the close and intricate web of relationships that bound them together." This intricate web was able to break through and cross international boundaries and is credited as one of the significant elements in the success, particularly in trade and commerce, of the Sephardim around the globe. Professor Yerushalmi described this connective phenomenon, "The links among them transcended all the religious and geopolitical boundaries that divided the Christian

and Muslim worlds, or Protestant from Catholic countries. In this international solidarity lay at least one of the major sources of Sephardic mercantile success." (Yerushalmi, 177-178).

With the outcast of the Jews in the late 1400s and early 1500s from the Iberian peninsula, many of the surrounding European territories also rejected them. But a strange shift evolved with the passing of time. As odd as it may seem, given the acts of the Inquisition, expulsions and forced conversions, and widespread rejection of Jews, certain parts of Western Europe began extending invitations to the Jews. In 1553, Pope Paul III invited Jewish merchants exiled from the Iberian Peninsula to settle at the port of Ancona in Italy to trade and conduct business. The same year, Jews were invited to Savoy in France, in 1589 Venice invited Turkish and Italian Jews, most of which were originally Portuguese Sephardim, and in 1593 Livorno extended invitations as well. But for many, these invitations were short lived with twenty-four of these Sephardic Jews burned at the stake in Ancona and a failed settlement in Savoy due to pressure from those who did not want the Jews there. Surprisingly though, Venice was able to establish a solid Jewish diaspora and grew into one of the most thriving Jewish communities in Europe over time. The obvious question here is, why the sudden change in attitude toward the Jews and invitations to settle in these areas? Many countries knew that the center of the merchant class in the Iberian Peninsula was primarily made up of these Jews. They were the heartbeat of commerce and trade and the foundation of the economy. Following their expulsion from Iberia "they had carried into exile an experience in business and finance that now found a wider arena for expression than ever before" (Yerushalmi, 175). In the quest for survival, these exiled Jews were in search of the niche where they could find success, so many of these invitations were graciously accepted.

Jews also sought refuge in the neighboring Muslim lands of the Ottoman Empire and established commerce and trading networks in these areas as well. Several Christian territories, such as Italy, wished to conduct business with Muslim regions and in some cases, enhancement of their economic success depended greatly on the ability to do so. In the search to find a bridge between primarily Christian Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire, the Iberian Sephardim and their far-reaching business and family networks in these areas seemed to be the obvious intermediary. The Jews again strengthened their reputation in the world of commerce and trade. In 1714, an Englishman John Toland made reference of the Jewish success in Livorno in his argument to naturalize Jews in England. He wrote, "What a paltry fishing town was Leghorn [British term for Livorno] before the admission of the Jews; what a loser is Lisbon, since they have been lost to it!" (Yerushalmi, 177). It is here that many historians say myth and reality become blurred. It is assumed that mercantile talents were inherent in the genes of Jews and that Jewish business and commerce networks from country to country were far more extensive than they really were. Whatever the reality, the Iberian Jews were credited with known traits, which served them well.

Chapter Four: Migration of the Sephardim to the Netherlands and New World

In the early sixteenth century , Charles V (the grandson of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella and the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I and Mary the Dutchess of Burgundy, became the Holy Roman Emperor (1519-1556) and heir to three dynasties in Europe: the House of Habsburg of the Habsburg Monarchy, the House of Valois-Burgundy of the Burgundian Netherlands, and the House of Trastámara of the Crowns of Castile and Aragon (1516-1556). These three dynasties brought together countries and territories which spanned from Spain to the Netherlands, and included Bohemia, Hungary, Naples, Sicily and Sardinia as well a the New World. Charles wished to see Europe united into one expansive Christian Empire and the focus of his reign was to fight the Protestant Reformation. Charles passed his Spanish Empire including the Spanish Netherlands down to his son Philip II in 1556. Several significant events occurred which led to a large Converso migration during Philip's 42-year reign, two of which were the Eighty Years War (1568-1648) otherwise known as the Dutch War of Independence (from Spain) and the union of the Portuguese crown under Spanish rule in 1580.

As Spain had in its possession the Spanish Netherlands also known as the Low Countries or Seventeen Provinces, many Sephardic Jews began to migrate to these areas during the reign of Charles V. Charles V first began allowed them into the Spanish Netherlands to contribute to the economic growth of the region. They were drawn to Antwerp (Belgium was part of the Seventeen Provinces) mostly for its vast role in European commerce. Following the reign of Charles V, in the 1570s, a community of approximately 500 secret Jews in Antwerp emerged under the disapproving eye of the then King of Spain, Philip II. The Eighty Years War was

already underway (beginning in 1568) and the Dutch were in the midst of their fight for independence from Spain and its quest for a Catholic empire. In 1579 Holland won its independence from Spain but Antwerp was still under Spanish rule and oppressed by ill-treatment of not only the Jews but Protestants as well. Large numbers of Jews and Protestants seeking religious freedom, fled to Holland but many of the Portuguese New Christians stayed behind in Antwerp and by 1595 they were credited with controlling the entire distribution of Portuguese East Indians spices as well as sugar from Portuguese territories from Brazil to Northern Europe (Klooster, 131). Meanwhile, Amsterdam saw its first Jewish congregation, Beth Ya'acob (House of Jacob) established in 1597 as Holland broke away from Spanish rule and religious tolerance emerged in the Netherlands (Benjamin, 93).

The Portuguese crown fell under Spanish rule in 1580 following the death of the Portuguese King, who did not have an heir to inherit the throne at time of his death. This period became very significant in the migration of Portuguese New Christian businessmen to Spain, and Seville in particular. It is from here that New Christians as well as secret Jews became highly engaged in the trading networks of Spanish America. The success of these networks lay greatly in the close lineage and connections between the Iberian Sephardim and their many diasporas spread throughout Europe as well as parts of Asia and the Ottoman Empire. By the mid-1500s the term "Portuguese merchant" had become synonymous with "Converso or New Christian" in a fundamental acknowledgement that these merchants were of Jewish decent.

Around the same time, in 1657 following Dutch independence in 1648, Jews were granted the title of *ingezetene* or "subject" in Holland, Zeeland, and West Friesland. This

declaration was not considered full citizen status, it only enabled Jews to trade with Spain, which still refused to conduct business with openly-declared Jews. The title of "subject" was "designed to remedy the problem [Spain's refusal to trade with Dutch Jews] by announcing explicitly that the Jews of the Netherlands were indeed Dutch subjects and were to be treated as such in their foreign dealings or while traveling abroad" (Yerushalmi, 190). The Sephardim were drawn to Dutch territories not only for this reason but also because the Netherlands had just completed its fight for independence against Spain and the right to practice their Protestant faith freely. As a result, religious tolerance was prevalent in various territories throughout the Netherlands, although some sources cite that Jews were able to practice their Jewish faith openly in Amsterdam as early as 1603 (Benjamin, 93). Because of this religious tolerance and the ability to establish lucrative mercantile businesses, Jews and Conversos alike flocked to these areas and the Dutch Sephardim grew to approximately one thousand in 1620. By 1672 the Sephardic population of Amsterdam reached about 7,500 which equaled about 3.75 percent of the entire population at the time (Gorsky, 357). It was during the seventeenth century that Amsterdam came to be known as "the Dutch Jerusalem" (Jewish Virtual Library).

During the 1500s, as Spanish and Portuguese colonies in South America and the Caribbean evolved, The Sephardim, whether they were Conversos or stealthy Crypto-Jews, found their way to the New World, regardless of the policy of *limpieza*. In the face of persecution from the Inquisition on the Iberian Peninsula, they took their chances. Unfortunately, due to the tremendous influx of Conversos and Crypto-Jews to the colonies, the Inquisition soon followed them to the New World. King Philip II feared Jewish "contamination" in the colonies and in 1571, he ordered an Inquisition tribunal in Lima, Peru to control the Jews

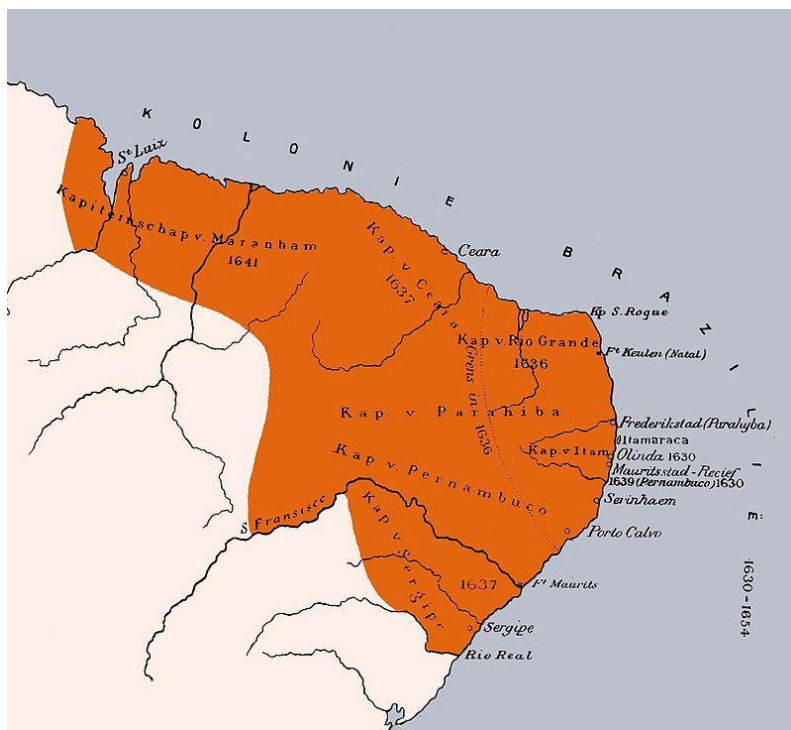
and the practice of Judaism. Additional Inquisition tribunals soon followed with Mexico in 1571 and then in Columbia in 1610. As a result, Inquisition tribunals had jurisdiction in almost every part of Spanish/Portuguese South and Central America.

Although the Jews were not widely accepted in Spanish/Portuguese South and Central America, they were tolerated because they could contribute greatly to the growth of the economy in the colonies. Jewish skills in business and trade ultimately resulted in wealth for Spain, Portugal, and colony owners. Many Jews were highly skilled in shipping, trade, textiles, the insurance business, and many other areas. Jews were the first to market vanilla (Loker, 46). There were even Jewish doctors in practice during this time. Of the many successful Conversos and secret Jews, two Portuguese merchants in particular, established very lucrative trading networks in the early 1600s. Garcia de Yllan Barraza operated trade networks with his brothers in Columbia and other Conversos and Crypto-Jews in Amsterdam, Antwerp, London, and Hamburg. Another Portuguese merchant, Manuel Bautista Perez who had migrated from Portugal to Seville and then moved to Lima, Peru was very successful in trade between Spain and the New World. Bautista Perez dealt in commodities such as indigo, textiles, pearls, and jewelry. He was even involved in the slave trade. His trade networks reached across several cities throughout South America as well as Spain, Portugal and Asia (Klooster, 131). Yllan Barraza and Bautista Perez are just two examples of the many Conversos who were greatly successful in linking Jewish trade networks across the Atlantic and throughout the New World. With the success of the Sephardic Diaspora in the New World, they now began to carve a niche for themselves in the Americas.

But it was the Jews' expertise in the sugar industry which made them an extra valuable asset. Sugarcane farming and refinement was a skill mastered by the Jews during their time in Maderia an island off the coast of Spain where they had fled in order to avoid the Portuguese Inquisition in the 16th century. The Inquisition caught up with them in Madeira and they fled again and many landed in Brazil where they continued their skills in sugar refinery. Also, several Jews migrated from São Tomé to Brazil as well with the Portuguese. Jewish knowledge of sugar cane farming and sugar refinery was one of the main reasons for the dissemination of Jews throughout the Caribbean to islands such as Curaçao, Martinique, Barbados, and several others. Not only did the Spanish and Portuguese recognize Jewish talents, their skills later became welcomed by wealth-seeking British and Dutch colonists as well as the French. The ability to prosper in sugar refinement and export amplified their financial gain.

Chapter Five: The Sephardim in Brazil

Brazil was colonized by the Portuguese in 1500 by Don Pedro Alvares Cabral who was believed to be a converted Jew. This theory should not surprise us as Portugal now had a large population of New Christians. As stated earlier, Conversos or Crypto-Jews were barred from entering the New World under *limpieza de sangre* and those who were caught in or en route to the New World, were sent back to the Iberian Peninsula to face the Inquisition. Nevertheless, many Jews and Conversos arrived in the Americas. By now, given the high numbers of New Christians as well as Crypto-Jews posing as New Christians, it would not be impossible for them to land overseas undiscovered. Interestingly, the Holy Office actually exiled convicted Jews to Brazil in earlier days of the colony's discovery. They later retracted this action and punished the exiled group in Brazil under the hand of the Inquisition (Simms, 423). Nevertheless, the



Dutch colony in Brazil. Courtesy: Wikipedia.

ability to keep all secret Jews at bay was not as effective in the New World as in Iberia. This alone caused large numbers of Sephardic secret Jews to find passage overseas. In addition, Sephardic New Christians seeking to escape scrutiny also found the New World a desirable place.

Brazil became quite significant in the diasporic evolution of Conversos in the New World. The Eighty Years War (1568-1648) not only affected the Netherlands and the establishment of a Sephardic Jewish Diaspora there, it played an important role in the establishment of the Jewish Diaspora in Brazil. In 1609, the Spanish and the Dutch called for a Twelve Years' Truce at the mid-way point of the Eighty Years War. During this truce Spain allowed the Dutch to trade with its colonies abroad, particularly Portuguese Brazil. By this time, Portugal had fallen under the Spanish crown. The economy of Brazil was flourishing with the introduction of the sugar industry. There was no doubt that Conversos, who had previously settled in Brazil from Iberia, were the masters of this industry and contributed greatly to its success. Conversos were recognized as the catalyst in Brazil's booming sugar production. Once the Twelve Years' Truce was over, Spain and the Netherlands resumed war. The Dutch invaded the port towns of Recife and Olinda in Brazil. Portuguese Jews did not hesitate to assist the Dutch in this endeavor and those who were not in the fight either served as guides or translated Portuguese for the Dutch. A soldier in the Dutch army, describing Jewish fighters said, "The Jews were above all the rest in a desperate condition and therefore resolved rather to die with sword in hand, than be burned alive, which is their doom in Portugal." (Arbell, 17). In 1630, the Dutch captured Recife, Olinda, and Pernambuco from Portugal (Benjamin, 94). To the Sephardim's extreme delight, this prosperous territory as well as several others conquered later were now in the hands of the Dutch. Surprisingly though, several Portuguese New Christians with businesses in Brazil remained loyal to Portugal and fought to maintain Brazil as a Portuguese territory (Levy, 321).

As noted previously, approximately six years prior to the takeover of Brazil, in 1624, the Dutch declared religious tolerance which included the Jewish faith (Arbell, 13). So it is no surprise why secret Jews as well as Conversos in Brazil did not waste any time in assisting the Dutch in taking over Brazil. This act alone had confirmed the symbiotic relationship which had developed between the Dutch and the Jews. Jews were drawn to the Dutch for religious freedom and economic success, as the Dutch were drawn to the Jews for benefits from their economic success. Many Jews from the Netherlands now migrated to Brazil to partake in the economic opportunities and growth that the new territory had to offer.

Not only did their skills in commerce and trade lend to their success, but the Sephardim in the Netherlands had one extreme advantage over everyone in the colonies. Those who already existed as well as those newly arriving had the advantage of speaking multiple languages. Sephardim living in the Netherlands spoke Dutch but many never forgot their "native" languages of Spanish and Portuguese. Likewise, Conversos living in Brazil prior to the Dutch takeover spoke Portuguese and were knowledgeable in Spanish as well. This allowed Sephardic Jews an overwhelming advantage to conduct business across Spanish and Portuguese territories in the New World. As we have already explored, the Dutch Sephardim were also a fragmented diaspora of the Portuguese Sephardim and the Portuguese Sephardim contained a diaspora from the Spanish Sephardim. The intertwined relationship among these three regions (Brazil, the Netherlands, and the Iberian Peninsula) created unlimited advantages in business and trade for the Sephardim. This advantage and the tremendous success of the Sephardim in Brazil sometimes caused bitterness from the Catholic and Protestant Brazilian Dutch merchants. The bitterness usually appeared in the form of anti-Semitic hostility. So even though the Dutch

policy supported religious tolerance, not all Dutch in the New World expressed it. On the religious front, some Dutch Protestant authorities prohibited the display of public Jewish practices and religious services. To prevent the possibility of resurfacing discrimination, the Dutch States General issued “the famous ‘Patenta Onrossa’ in 1645 which ordered the government of Dutch Brazil to protect and help the Jews without differentiating between them and other inhabitants.” The ordering of this document was a significant historical event

because this was the first time in the western world that a protective order was put in place for Jews and the safeguarding of their rights (Arbell, 15). In these years many Conversos voluntarily reconverted to their Jewish faith (Karner,



Kahal Zur Israel Synagogue in Brazil. Courtesy: Wikipedia.

7). There was, however, a large population of New Christians who remained devoted to their Catholic faith and did not reconvert to Judaism as many would assume. Nevertheless, the first organized Jewish congregation in the Americas was born and *Kahal Zur Israel* Synagogue was established in Recife in 1637 with two rabbis from Amsterdam. It is from this congregation that the Brazilian Jews petitioned the Amsterdam Jewish Parnassim during the times of ill-treatment from non-Jews in Dutch Brazil. In turn, the Amsterdam Parnassim petitioned the States General which led to the issuing of the Patenta Onrossa in 1645 (Yerushalmi, 183). The synagogue still

stands today. In addition to the synagogue, under Dutch rule the Jews in Brazil also established the Talmud Torah and Etz Hayim religious schools as well as a cemetery.

Unfortunately, Dutch Brazil would only last approximately twenty-five years. In 1654, the Portuguese recaptured the Dutch territory in northeastern Brazil. As a result, many Jews returned to Holland in fear of persecution under the Portuguese. Approximately twenty-three Brazilian Jews found their way to another Dutch colony, New Amsterdam (New York) and this would "mark the beginning of Jewish life in North America" (Yerushalmi, 184). Peter Stuyvesant, the Dutch Governor of New Amsterdam, tried to keep them out although Amsterdam Jews were already residing in the colony. The Brazilian Jews were eventually allowed to remain in the American colony as Amsterdam itself and the Dutch West Indies Company, in which Amsterdam Jews held stock, pushed Stuyvesant to accept them. Other Brazilian Jews disseminated to non-Dutch colonies throughout the Caribbean islands searching for safety and quality of life. Although Jews did settle in various colonies throughout the Americas and Caribbean, non-Dutch colonies did not have the established Jewish communities that the Dutch Sephardim were used to. Therefore, safety and the ability to sustain a secure livelihood similar to what they had under Dutch rule was unobtainable in these other territories.

Chapter Six: Early Jewish Settlement of Curaçao

One noteworthy Dutch island was Curaçao. Curaçao is a small 171 square mile island just 43 miles north of the coast of Venezuela and south of the Dominican Republic. Today, it is part of the Leeward Islands also called the "ABC" Islands, as it is inclusive of Aruba and Bonaire. The island was originally discovered by Alonso de Ojeda, one of Christopher Columbus' captains. Spain ruled Curaçao until the Dutch sent Joannes Van Walbeek and a crew of approximately four hundred men to conquer the island in 1634, three years after the Dutch conquered Brazil from Portugal. The Dutch thought that Curaçao's multiple deep water ports and its close location to the South American mainland would make it an excellent naval base or ship-stop. Samuel Cohen, originally from Portugal, was part of the Van Walbeek conquest and



Curaçao. Courtesy: graphicmaps.com (World Atlas)

the first Dutch Jew to set foot on the island (Benjamin, 101). Cohen was a translator who had also participated in the Dutch conquest of Brazil three years earlier. Van Walbeeck gave Cohen the title of Chief Steward of the Indian population on Curaçao. Originally Curaçao was mostly of no significant value to the Dutch except to use as a naval base and ship stop and to harvest some natural resources such as salt and wood. The island did, however, have an abundance of cattle, approximately 750 horses, and thousands of goats and sheep according to Van Walbeeck's reports (Rupert, 37). Upon conquest, there were just under three dozen Spanish inhabitants and approximately five hundred Caquetios, natives of northwestern Venezuela and the ABC Islands, who were ready to defend their island. Though negotiations with the Spanish, both the Spanish inhabitants and Caquetios were removed from the island and shipped to the mainland at Coro, Venezuela to be specific (Arbell, 126). The Spanish tried to take the island back three times in between the years 1636 to 1642 and frequently sent spies into Curaçao as well (Rupert, 37). But they did not have any luck regaining control of Curaçao and the island remained under Dutch rule. In the years that followed, Peter Stuyvesant, the same governor who had tried to keep the Jews out of New Amsterdam, turned the island into a slave trading depot. Stuyvesant was not only Governor of New Amsterdam he was also Governor of the New Netherlands with jurisdiction over Curaçao. Slave trade on the island was facilitated further with the recent Dutch capture of São Paulo de Luanda from Portugal in Angola, Africa and the island São Tomé off the coast of Africa, two areas significant in the slave market. Curaçao generated large profits supplying slaves to the French, English and Spanish.

Just three years prior to the Portuguese recapture of Brazil in 1651, the Dutch decided to experiment with Curaçao. Governor Stuyvesant wanted to implement a more stable

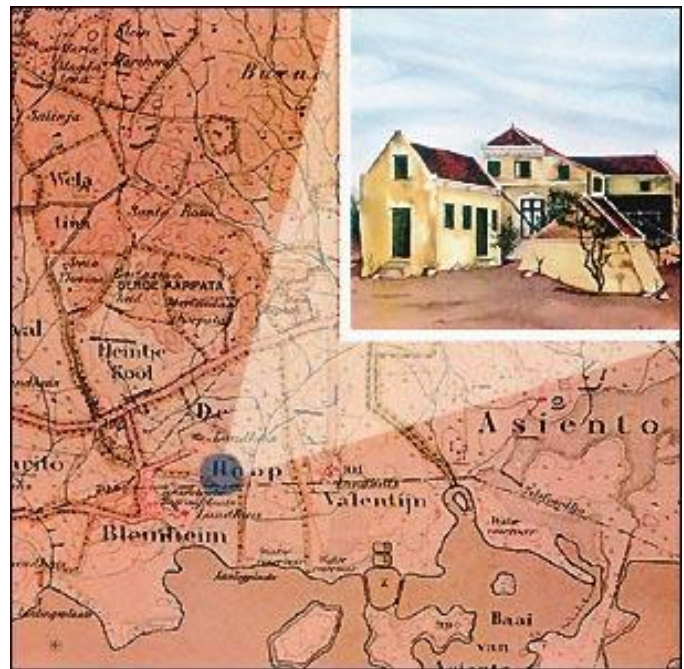
economy on the island which generated the need to place people on Curaçao. The West India Company decided to chart plans for a second undertaking on the island, sugar cane plantations, and sought out Jews to establish these plantations (Benjamin, 101). Unfortunately, this plan would not prove prosperous for two reasons: Curaçao just did not have the climate for sugar cane plantations and manpower was not adequate on the island (Karner, 9). At one point the Dutch considered abandonment of Curaçao because people did not want to settle there and the island was slowly coming to be viewed as a waste.

In 1651, the Dutch West India Company even offered free land in Curaçao to any Jews who would settle on the island. The same year the company sent Governor Stuyvesant a letter stating, "if we should have no revenue whatever from there [Curaçao] it might be advisable to abandon it, instead of holding it any longer in hope of unexpected returns... the enclosed contract made with a Jew, Jan de Illan, will prove to you the contrary. He intends to bring a considerable number of people there to settle and cultivate, as he pretends, the land, but we begin to suspect that he and his associates have quite another object in view, to trade from there to the West Indies and the main. But be that as it may, we are willing to make the experiment and you must therefore, charge Director Rodenburch to accommodate them within proper limits, and in conformity of the condition of the contract." (Arbell, 127). This letter alone proves that there was still distrust for the Jews among some of the Dutch but for the sake of turning Curaçao into a prosperous colony, they were willing to accept any risk.

Unfortunately for de Illan, he was never able to convince enough Jewish settlers to come to Curaçao. In addition, they did not have the manpower required to run the plantations and Jews were not allowed to own slaves at the time. The few early Jews on the island (approximately 10

to 11 families) resorted to selling horses from Curaçao to neighboring islands and exporting wood. By 1654, Vice Director Rodenburch sent a letter to the West India Company reminding them that de Illan promised he would bring fifty settlers to Curaçao and by this point he was unable to reach the desired number. Rodenburch warned that de Illan was in jeopardy of forfeiting his contract and the farming colony of ten to twelve families in Curaçao were expressing interest in becoming independent of de Illan. But of significance, this first small group of settler families were responsible for founding the first Jewish congregation in Curaçao, *Mikeve Israel* which dates back to their first year on the island, 1651. The congregation is not to be confused with the "community" founded in 1659 which will be discussed further on.

Around the same time another Jew, Joseph Nunes de Fonseca, also known as, David Nassi, managed to negotiate a contract in 1652 with the West India Company to bring settlers to Curaçao and was given land on Curaçao to begin the plantation settlement. But he too faced the same problem, he was unable to convince adequate numbers of Jews to settle on the island plantation (Arbell,



First Jewish Plantation De Hoop (The Hope) and Manor House. Courtesy: snoa.com

130-131). The inability of de Illan and Nassi to successfully set up a large-scale Jewish settlement in Curaçao might have been related to the poor yield of the plantation project or, it could have been influenced by the already successful Jewish settlement in Brazil. In other words, Brazil was the desirable settlement for Jews in the New World. It was already founded

and more importantly, the Jewish community was well established with the peace of mind of knowing that their safety and freedom of religion was protected under the governing institution of Dutch-Brazil. Therefore, for the time being, the Jews did not place high priority in settling a new territory when they had Brazil.

Then in 1659, the Dutch drew up a charter with Isaac da Costa who was a well-known settler from Brazil residing in Amsterdam, to settle Curaçao. Da Costa managed to recruit approximately 70 Jews in Amsterdam to travel to Curaçao. By this time, the Portuguese had reconquered Brazil and most of the Brazilian Jews fled to the Netherlands, Amsterdam in particular. Some sources say that these Sephardic Jews longed to return to the New World for financial reasons and their already established networks or simply because they missed the climate. Eventually, they slowly began to arrive on the island. Da Costa brought with him a Torah scroll, the holiest book within the Jewish faith, given to him by the Parnassim of the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam. This Torah scroll is still located on the island today and serves as a reminder of the Sephardic origin of the Jews of Curaçao. As we will see, Curaçao grew into the largest Jewish settlement in the New World. However, there were other attempted Jewish-Dutch settlements before Curaçao.

Chapter Seven: Other Dutch-Jewish Settlements

The first successful Jewish-Dutch settlement as we mentioned was Brazil, which was invaded and lost to the Portuguese in 1654. This loss sparked the Dutch West Indies Company to pursue and regain territory in the New World and escalated competition with other colonizing nations to establish new and prosperous settlements. In 1656, the Dutch West Indies Company, specifically the Zeeland chapter, advertised settlement on the "Wild Coast" of Guyana in the Essequibo coastal region. Unfortunately, they did not receive much response to this call. The following year, Amsterdam took interest in this region and began negotiating for a Jewish settlement in Essequibo with the West India Company. Within this negotiation, the Amsterdam Jews ensured their rights and privileges were spelled out in the charter. They were guaranteed that Jews would be treated "as their own burghers" in the settlement. Jews were granted communal self-government and representation by two members of their community in all meetings involving community and governmental affairs in Essequibo. The first group of Jewish colonist departed for Essequibo in 1658. Interestingly, Sephardim from Livorno even took interest and arrived in the Colony. This only proved that there was still a strong Sephardic network in which information and opportunities in the colonies were shared with those in other diasporas (Yerushalmi, 187).

The settlement expanded and became prosperous and the sugar industry flourishing under Jewish management. Unfortunately, in 1666 Essequibo was invaded and taken over by the British who "destroyed the plantations and scattered the [Jewish] colonists." (Yerushalmi, 187). Another area, Cayenne located in today's French Guiana, was owned by the

Dutch but unsettled. David Nassi, mentioned previously for his role in attempted settlement of Curaçao, was given a grant by the Amsterdam chapter of the West India Company and the title of patroon over the Jewish colony to settle there. In the Cayenne charter, Jews were given a series of rights. The charter stipulated that they "shall enjoy all Liberties and Exemptions of our other colonists as long as they remain there." These liberties were inclusive of open worship in public, and the freedom to set up a synagogue and school as they had in Brazil. Unfortunately, this settlement only survived five years before it was invaded and taken over by the French in 1664. The French captured and forcibly transported the Jews of Cayenne to La Rochelle, France and then ordered them to find their way to Amsterdam. However, not all were captured and some were able to escape to the surrounding areas (Yerushalmi, 188).

There was, however, one Dutch-Jewish settlement which did stay in existence for some time and that was Suriname. This settlement began with Jews who already resided there under the previously ruling British, followed by those fleeing Cayenne in 1664. Interestingly, under British rule in Suriname, Jews were granted similar rights and privileges of the Dutch Jewish settlements of the time. When Suriname fell under the Dutch in 1667, new arrivals from Amsterdam and other Dutch areas expanded the numbers of Jews in this colony. The existing rights to Jews under British rule transitioned over to the Jewish community as a whole under Dutch rule. Upon Dutch takeover and examination of the British charter previously governing the rights and privileges of the Jews, the charter was found to mirror that of the Dutch charter for the Essequibo settlement (Yerushalmi, 189).

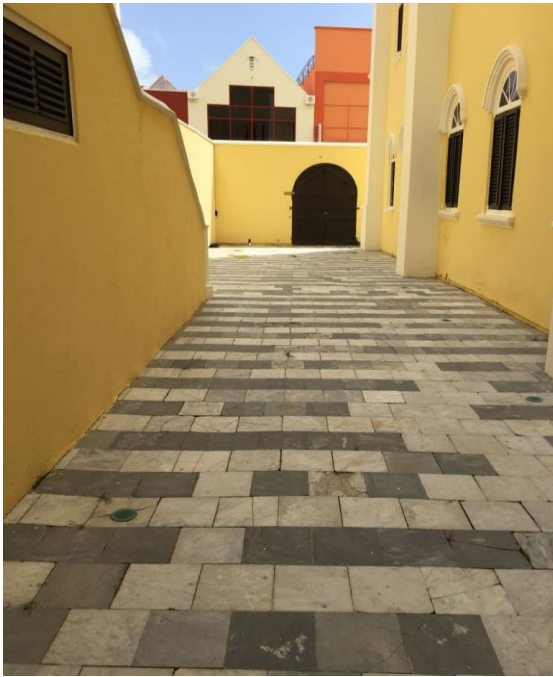
When the various Jewish-Dutch settlements in South America and the Caribbean are compared, Curaçao and Suriname were the largest and most prosperous. The majority



Neve Shalom Synagogue, Paramaribo, Suriname.
Courtesy: Jewishvirtuallibrary.

perished due to invasions by other colonizing nations or they were unable to achieve the level of wealth which developed in Curaçao and Suriname. Upon colonizing Suriname in 1667, the Dutch found themselves in a nine-year guerrilla war with the local Amerindians. This conflict finally resolved in 1686. Eventually Suriname flourished economically primarily because of wealth generated from plantations run by Jews as well as trade with the Amerindians. By the end of the seventeenth century, one-third of the white population was comprised of Jews. They owned forty sugar plantations and approximately 9,000 slaves. In contrast, even though Jews in Curaçao owned some plantations, they earned the bulk of their wealth in international trade which also included the slave trade (Lampe, 33). Eventually, the Suriname economy weakened and the abolition of slavery facilitated the decay. Once the slaves were emancipated, there was no longer a viable and inexpensive work force on the plantations and this highly profitable colony began to decline. The case in Curaçao, however, was much different.

Chapter Eight: Curaçao's First Jewish Community and Congregation

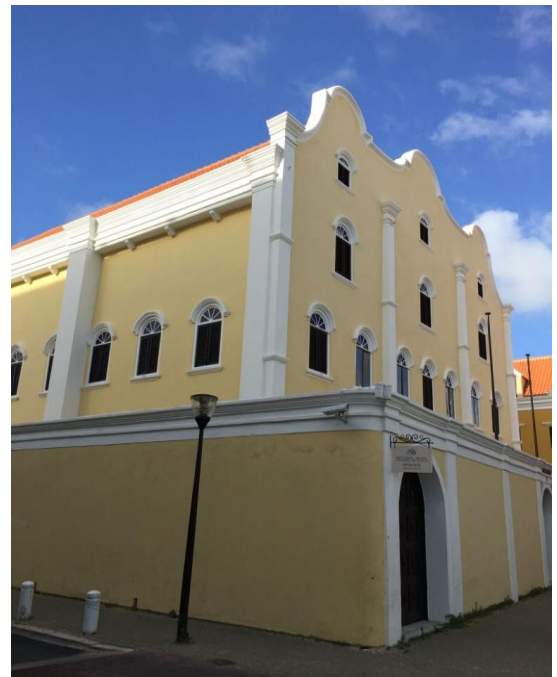


*Courtyard of the Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Synagogue.
Courtesy: Gerald Oppenheimer*

As previously mentioned, da Costa arrived in Curaçao with 70 Amsterdam Jews. Together they founded the first Jewish community in Curaçao in 1659. At the same time, there were some Sephardic Jews in Amsterdam who had grown quite wealthy. Amsterdam Jews sponsored many more Jews to Curaçao, most of whom entered the trade and agricultural markets on the island. Several of these

sponsored Jews who went to Curaçao acted as representatives for Jews who remained in Amsterdam and conducted business on the island either for them or in partnership with them. As the Curaçaoan Jewish population grew, so did the need for a Jewish Synagogue. In 1674, the first synagogue was built. However, there is reference to a "synagogue" in 1656 (Herbert, 10) but most likely this was an already existing structure used as a synagogue, but not intentionally built to be a synagogue. The new synagogue would be rebuilt several more times due to the population growth on the island in 1679, 1692, and 1703 becoming a 280-seat synagogue. But as the Sephardim continued to grow in Curaçao, an even bigger synagogue was needed. In 1732, collections were taken up and the magnificent new Mikve Israel synagogue was built. The name was later altered to the Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue and this beautiful structure still stands on the island today (Arbell, 134).

The Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue is oldest synagogue in the western world located in Willemstad, the capital of Curaçao. The name of this synagogue is connected with a Rabbi and Dutch Scholar named Haham (Rabbi) Menasseh ben Israel. Ben Israel argued that there was a correlation between the New World and the Bible according to two theories of thought. The first was that the American Indians may have been descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. The second



*Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Synagogue.
Courtesy: Gerald Oppenheimer*

was pulled from passages in the Bible, specifically the book of Daniel (Kaplan, 196). In the Jewish faith, the book of Daniel is found in the Ketuvim. The Ketuvim is a section of the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. Ben Israel referenced Daniel, Chapter 12 particularly verse seven, "and when the scattering of the holy people shall have an end, all those things shall be fulfilled." Another



*Ben Israel's Book, Esperanza de Israel.
Courtesy: brown.edu, John Carter Brown Library*

translation of the same verse is, "and when he shall have accomplished scattering the power of the holy people, all these things shall be finished." One interpretation of this verse is when the dispersion of Israel or the scattering of the Holy people, the Jews, has stopped, a regrouping or regathering will begin.

In his book, Ben Israel expressed the relationship between these theories and the discovery of the New World, the discovery of the

Native people, and the migration of the Jewish people to the New World with establishments of Synagogues and congregations. Ben Israel's book, written in 1650, was titled *Esperanza de Israel*, Spanish for "Hope of Israel." The Hebrew translation is *Mikve Israel* which was the name of the first Jewish congregation of Curaçao and part of the name of the synagogue still standing on the island today, the Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue (Benjamin, 95). The name Mikve Israel may have deliberately been chosen by the Curaçao congregation as a result of Ben Israel's work and those who shared his same theory of thought.

The floors of the Mikev Israel synagogue in Curaçao were covered in sand which was symbolic of the times when Sephardic Jews had to practice their Jewish faith in secrecy in Spain and Portugal. They would cover the floors of their makeshift prayer



Sand floors of the Mikve Israel Synagogue. Courtesy: Angelic Travels.

houses with sand to muffle footsteps and noise to avoid being discovered. This close adherence to old tradition is an example of the cultural practices of the Curaçao Sephardim which held the community together for centuries on the island.

The early founding of the Jewish community on Curaçao required a Hascamoth, a Hebrew term for a congregation's bylaws or regulations, and in 1670 the first Hascamoth was

published. However it was not ratified until 1688 because at the time there was no Haham or Rabbi on the island. In 1674, Curaçao received its first Haham from Amsterdam, Haham Joshiau Pardo. Upon Haham Pardo's arrival, his first duty was to revise and approve the Hascamoth. Some of the rules laid out in this Hascamoth included the institution of taxes and the prohibition of any other synagogue in Curaçao. Mikve Israel was to be the only one, which in turn would be the glue that held the community together in one solid congregation on the island.

By the late 1700s, the congregation had a circumciser, a ritual bather, and a system in place to care for the poor and sick. There were twenty-nine charities formed to help those in need not just in Curaçao, but all over the world. Curaçao also continued to receive Conversos from various countries and many reconversions to Judaism took place on the island. As the community grew, the Jewish faith remained strong. The Mikve Israel Synagogue conducted three services a day. Interestingly, a satellite synagogue, Neve Shalom, Abode of Peace, was opened on the island in 1746. However, this synagogue is not to be confused as a completely separate congregation, it still

remained under Mikve Israel. Neve Shalom was established in Otrobanda quarter in the town of Willemstad across the harbor from Punda, also a quarter in Willemstad. A large population of Jews lived in Punda, but due to the high housing costs many



Willemstad: Otrobanda on the left and Punda on the right.
 Courtesy: www.Curaçao-visitor.com

moved across the harbor to Otrabanda. Housing costs were far less expensive in Otrabanda and with the establishment of Neve Shalom, many low income Jewish families had a synagogue nearby. Also, Shabbat, the Jewish day of rest, restricted allowable walking distances and crossing the harbor by row boat to get from Otrabanda across the harbor to attend the Mikve Israel Synagogue in Punda. So, having the Neve Shalom Synagogue close by ensured that all could attend Shabbat services and stay within the guidelines Shabbat laws (Arbell, 153).

At this time the current Haham, Haham Jesurun was growing old and the congregation nominated a Portuguese-born Haham named Samuel Mendes de Sola, who had been educated in Amsterdam, to take his place. Haham Jesurun took up a "Quasi Chief Rabbi" position as Haham de Sola took over. Haham de Sola was said to be a difficult, volatile tempered man. Upon his arrival, discrepancies broke out over Bible interpretations, ways of handling disputes, and marriage contracts to the point that Haham de Sola refused to perform marriages. The congregation was in a state of disarray. Haham de Sola was heavy handed in excommunicating members who did not follow rules and would then refuse ritual burials for the excommunicated and even their relatives upon a death. His disputes with leaders in the Neve Shalom Synagogue even caused the synagogue to close down temporarily. Several fights broke out over his sermons between his supporters and adversaries outside the synagogue and even a few in the cemetery (Arbell, 154). Eventually things became so combative that the matter was put under arbitration with the States General of Holland. The result was the issuing of a royal edict in 1750 signed by the Prince of Orange-Nassau which mandated nine articles to establish peace throughout the Mikve Israel community. The Edict put an end to the dispute. Eventually Neve Shalom closed its doors in 1817 because Otrabanda's Jewish residents had declined in number

(Benjamin, 106). However, the ability of the community to stay together within two separate locations of worship, as well as profuse disputes, exemplified the significance of the Sephardim's bond.

Through the years on the island, life continuously revolved around the synagogue. Even in the absence of Rabbis from 1816 to 1855, and conflicts that arose, the community stayed close to the synagogue and their Jewish faith even though demands for reform were slowly emerging. Through these thirty-nine years without a Rabbi, cantors and other religious officials stepped in to hold religious services. In 1856, Mikve Israel finally received a Rabbi from Amsterdam, Haham Aron Mendes Chumaceiro. Haham Chumaceiro was an orthodox Jew, however, he was willing to consider reforms.

In 1863, a group of reformist on the island broke away from Mikve Israel formed a society called *El Porvenir* (The Future). The group published an article in which they spoke out against Orthodox Judaism citing, "the abuses and extravagant practices, the ignoramuses, the superstition and fanaticism of our holy religion." In 1864, this group founded the *Nederlandsch Hervormde Israelitische Gemeente* (Dutch Jewish Reform Community) and built the Temple Emanu-El which was inaugurated in 1867. *Emanu-El*, which when broken down, *Eem* translates as "with", *anu* translates as "us" and "El" is the ancient word for "God" in Hebrew. Combined,



Edict of Prince William of Orange-Nassau.
 Courtesy: www.kestenbaum.net.



Willemstad: Mikve Israel-Emanuel Synagogue and Temple Emanu-El.
 Courtesy: www.snoa.com

Emanu-El means "the lord is with us."

This Reform Congregation was modeled itself after European and North American Ashkenazi Jews (Benjamin, 106). They also established their own cemetery separate from the Beit Hayim, Hebrew for *The House of Living*, Cemetery of Mikve Israel which was consecrated in 1659 (the oldest tombstone in the cemetery is dated

1668). Unlike Neve Shalom, Emanu-El was a completely separate congregation and did not have to adhere to the authority of Mikve Israel (Benjamin, 107). Interestingly, Haham Chumaceiro and the Mikve Israel congregation did not threaten excommunication to the group.

Emanu-El congregants were allowed to attend the Mikve Israel Synagogue as well as be buried in the old Beit Hayim cemetery. Their children were even allowed to continue their Jewish studies under Mikve Israel. Both communities lived side by side. Around 1932, several Ashkenazi Jews arrived in Curaçao. As their community grew, the Ashkenazis formed the "Shaarei Tzedek" or Gates of Justice congregation



Temple Emanu-El. Courtesy: Organization of World Heritage Cities.

which was founded in 1969 and built their own synagogue. However, in 1963, the Sephardim of Mikve Israel and Temple Emanu-el finally decided to unite to form one grand congregation called, "United Netherlands Portuguese Congregation Mikve Israel-Emmanuel" (Arbell, 158).

Chapter Nine: Curaçao's Economy

The economy in Curaçao thrived as a direct result of the Sephardic Jewish Diaspora on the island. Agriculture but mostly commerce flourished. Jews were successful at almost everything from farming to breeding and trading cattle. In addition, one of the main reasons for their success in trade and commerce was their extensive connections with other Jews around the world: Amsterdam, Bordeaux, London, Leghorn, New Amsterdam (New York), Newport and of course Jews and Conversos in South America. Interestingly, many of their connections were relatives or distant relatives. As mentioned previously, many Jews were fluent in Spanish, Portuguese, and English which only added to their success and diversity.

Around 1674, the Dutch finally allowed Jews to purchase and own slaves. In fact, in comparison to the rest of the New World, many Jews had a good reputation for treating their slaves humanely. For example a female slave tasked as a caretaker for Jewish children came to be known as "Yaya." She held an important position in the Jewish household caring for the children throughout all stages of their lives. Sometimes she would move to the children's house after they grew up and married to take care of their children. Upon retirement, many Jewish families would set up their "Yaya" with a retirement home and visit her frequently. Slaves were allowed Saturday and Sunday off in recognition of the Sabbath which was welcomed with much gratitude. There was a saying among many slaves that "whoever enters a Jewish home is blessed by God" (Arbell, 151).

Despite given land and safety, life in Curaçao was not easy and in 1693 a small group of Jews left Curaçao for North America and Venezuela. Then, from 1711-1722, Curaçao was hit

with a series of dry spells. The Jews turned to trade with nearby British and French Colonies. Spanish ill-feelings were still high toward the Jews and they tried to put a stop to Jewish trade. Even with slow-growing prosperity, Curaçao continued to receive Jews from surrounding Caribbean Islands and the Guianas. It was a safe-haven for Jews, a place where they could feel some sense of security and enjoy religious freedom. Even Jews from Amsterdam, Portugal, and Spain arrived in Curaçao. In 1785 the Jewish community reached a population of about 1,200 on the island. They totaled about forty percent of the white population in Curaçao (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970, p. 277).

As Curaçao gained success and wealth it began to serve as a Sephardic Jewish support center for satellite Jewish communities in the Caribbean, South America, as well as North America. In his book, Mordechai Arbell refers to Curacao as "The mother of the Jewish communities in the New World," (Arbell, 125). Prior to Curaçao, the Amsterdam Sephardic community was the primary holder of this position. Professor Yerushalmi stated, "Internally and structurally, Curaçaoan Jewry was a fascinating microcosm of the great Amsterdam community which gave birth to it and to which it remained intimately linked." He also states that, "it [Curaçao] was to blossom forth as the most flourishing Jewish community in this [western] hemisphere, outstripping in size, wealth, and influence, any that existed in North America." (Yerushalmi, 191). In fact, the Sephardic Congregation of New York contacted the Curaçao Congregation requesting aid to build their synagogue. Curaçao generously donated 272 ounces of silver to the K.K. Shearith Israel Congregation in 1730. Curaçao came to be known as "the wealthiest and leading Jewish Community in the Caribbean area" (Loker, 80).

Jews of Curaçao had set up a very comfortable home for themselves on the island but their ties to their homeland in Jerusalem remained resilient. These Sephardic Jews, originally from the Iberian Peninsula, never lived one day in Jerusalem. However, in traveling almost half way around the world, far from Jerusalem, they maintained a pronounced relationship with their homeland. Their bond and support of Jerusalem was so strong that they frequently donated money to the Holy Land. They imported sand from the Holy Land to mix with the sand on the floors of their synagogues and they even placed imported sand on the eyes of their deceased. Donations from Curaçao were sent to Jerusalem in bags labeled “KKTS” meaning Kahal Kadosh Terra Santa or The Holy Land Congregation or Organization (Arbell, 164).

Chapter Ten: Endogamy and Sociocultural practices of Curaçao's Sephardim

What was distinctive about the Curaçao Sephardim was a strong adherence to endogamy and preservation of their Jewish Society. In her study of the Curaçao Sephardim, a group to which she was personally linked by her Curaçaoan Sephardi mother and Dutch non-Jewish father, Karner notes Emile Durkheim's philosophy that Christian hostility towards Jews throughout history basically strengthened Jewish solidarity. As Karner states, "The cohesion of the group [Curaçao Sephardim] hinged on a feeling of belonging; perhaps the members instinctively sensed that unity made their numerically tiny group stronger." (Karner, 13). This feeling may have evolved from insecurity and fear which formed during the times of the inquisition. The Curaçao Sephardim knew that the group was stronger than the individual. In her studies, Karner also discovered that marital and family relationships remained constant throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries in Curaçao. Her study revealed a population that not only preserved its religion and marital patterns, but also its social, cultural, and physical boundaries as well.

Endogamy was a notable way of life for the Sephardic Jews of Curaçao during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The Curaçao Sephardim married into their own religious and cultural groups. A marriage was often arranged based on what benefit it brought to the families being merged by the union. Often families sought to expand businesses, gain or grow wealth, or gain social status from marital unities. Marrying one's first cousin was not uncommon and was considered desirable by many Jews because assets and wealth could then be kept within the same family. In addition, options for selection of spouse

were small, especially with the population limitations and migration constraints commonly found in an island society, which as a result, promoted endogamy as well as cousin marriages.

An interesting aspect of Jewish heritage in Curaçao was that Judaism was primarily linked through the female in the family. In other words, a Jewish mother authenticated the offspring as a Jew. However, exploring history across different eras in time and locations around the world, whether Judaism was matrilineal or patrilineal is inconclusive. According to Eva Abraham-Van Der Mark's *Marriage and the Family in a White Caribbean Elite: The Impact of Descent for the Ethnic Persistence of the Sephardic Jews in Curaçao*, one major role of the Curaçaoan Sephardic woman was that she "preserved the purity of blood lines and the dignity of the male patriarchy." Abraham-Van Der Mark also quotes Ann Pescatello's use of the words "sacred vessels" to describe the woman's purpose in the Curaçaoan Sephardic Society. Abraham-Van Der Mark's view was that "women were not valued in their own right, but rather as objects of genetic, social and economic transmission."

In addition, the ratio of females to males on the island were constantly in flux. Occasionally, females on the island outnumbered males. Many males traveled abroad during times of economic lull which sometimes lead to marriage outside the Curaçao Sephardim. Interestingly, there were cases in which Sephardic men married non-Jewish women while abroad and raised their children in a non-Jewish faith while living overseas. Many of these cases may have simply been survival as the Sephardim knew it and regression to a Converso life once again. However, in cases where the husband brought his non-Jewish wife and children

back to Curaçao, the family conformed Judaism and the culture of the Curaçao Sephardim (Karner, 15).

Not only was marriage a preserving factor of the Curaçao Sephardim, socio-cultural interactions served as group cohesion. Most social events took place in the realm of religion or family events. Birthdays, anniversaries, marriages and deaths all played a fundamental role in the social gatherings of the Curaçao Sephardic community to include all religious events and holidays. In fact, births, deaths and marriages were celebrated with great splendor, a practice believed to be a cultural phenomenon learned and passed on from Portuguese and Brazilian cultural influences (Karner, 20). Social functions remained within the Jewish society and interactions with other groups on the island, i.e. Christians or Protestants, were not valued. The Curaçao Sephardic community had plenty of religious and social functions from within their own group to fill their daily lives. Since families were so tightly woven, the Sephardim as a whole was a highly connected and close-knit group. Births, birthdays, weddings, etc. were celebrated by all members of the family and extended family and every member was expected to partake in these events. As Karner points out, "One's extended kin group totaled in the hundreds." Therefore, events were plentiful within the community and enough to fill one's life without the desire to seek out other socio-cultural groups on the island, an act which would be prohibited in any case by the majority of the Sephardim during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries (Karner, 20).

Physical isolation was also common from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Upon their initial habitation of the island, the Sephardim set up their community on

the western side of Curaçao. They later moved to the eastern side of the island around 1830. Karner notes that she could not find a significant reason for this move. However, whether residing on the west or the east, the Curaçao Sephardic community chose to remain physically separate from the Protestants on the island (Karner, 11). This physical isolation allowed the Curaçao Sephardim the seclusion and security to carry out their daily lives in accordance with their religious and cultural beliefs with little interference from outsiders.

Conclusion

The Sephardim of Curaçao definitely proved to be a resilient diaspora. The bond of the Sephardim remained strong through time, distance, and adversity. Wherever the Sephardim landed, they never forgot these bonds and utilized them to establish new communities in unfamiliar places. In the New World, the Sephardic Diaspora spanned from South America to Mexico and Caribbean Islands such as Aruba, St. Martin, St. Thomas, St. Croix, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Cuba, Trinidad, Barbados, and Jamaica as well as New York, and even New Orleans. But no matter where the Sephardic Jews settled, their tie to their Jewish faith and culture was resolute. Their many talents and ability to speak various languages played a tremendous role in their survival and success. Their broad and intricate family and trade networks set them apart from any other group in their time, giving them tremendous advantages for success. As they prospered and grew, they were not only self sufficient but were able to assist fellow Jewish communities, evolving into a central support center for Jewish diasporas throughout the New World.

Norman Finkelstein quotes Professor Yosef Yerushalmi's vivid description of the strength of the Sephardic Diaspora, "Marranos were a powerful testimony to the Jewish will to survive and to the essential resilience of the Jewish religion... We should ask ourselves how powerful that flame must have been five centuries ago if they are still with us. Even the pathetic numbers that remain are testimony to this resilience of Judaism as a religion." (Finkelstein, 91). Today, Jewish communities are quite small in the Caribbean. Curaçao's Jewish community has diminished to approximately 200 on the island today. However, it is

amazing to explore the origin of their existence on the tiny island and how they fought the odds and survived to established the most resilient and prosperous Jewish Diaspora in the Caribbean. Today, Spain has reached out to all the Sephardic Jewish descendents of exiled Jews to offer them Spanish citizenship in an effort to rectify the injustice committed against their ancestors. The Justice Minister of Spain, Rafael Catala, said, "This says a lot about what we were in the past and what we are today and the Spaniards want to be in the future an open, diverse and tolerant Spain," This legislation, which recently went into effect on the first of October, was a tremendous act of contrition from the Spanish government, which they called "historic rehabilitation." Although history can never be changed, over a half millennium later, the Jewish Sephardim's struggle has not been forgotten.

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