

History of the Maduro Family

By Emita Fidanque Levy - Curacao Reunion February 1999

My mother, known as "Aunt Inez" to some of you, used to tell me that in St. Thomas, in the old days, there were Maduros who lived "on top of the hill" where the Synagogue is located, and there were Maduros who lived at the "bottom of the hill." I'm sure you get the picture ... but what I never learned was: which of the Maduros we knew (and there were many) came from the top and which ones were down below!

As you know, people were much more polite in her day than we are ... and so she never named them! Well, as some of you have already found out, the Maduro story doesn't really start in St. Thomas. From what we know it started in TRANCOSO, PORTUGAL, where we learned that Antonio (Rodriguez Maduro) known as Roiz, and his wife, Leonor, lived and died circa 1612. There is the great possibility that they had, in fact, moved there from some region in Spain. After consulting with Sita, who consulted with Morris, reading Isaac Emmanuel's marriage records and some of the late Jossy Levy Maduro's history of the family, I have come to realize that every Maduro we know about is descended from Antonio and Leonor. So the great ones, and the not-so-great, the good ones and the bad, the rich and the poor, the leaders and the followers all have the same heritage (mas o menos) and I think we should all consider ourselves equal. What follows is a little background history so you will know and understand how and why it is that we find ourselves together on this wonderful occasion.

Now the time has come to talk about this name, LEVY MADURO, Where did it come from and does it have a meaning? Generally, Jews who had converted as early as the 10th and through the 13th century, in Spain, had already taken new names. This continued through the time of the Spanish Inquisition. In Portugal, after the forced conversion in 1496, native Portuguese Jews and the Spanish Jews who had escaped by crossing the border took new names. They were permitted to take any name from the Catholic community. Here are a few of those names:

ALVARES ... BRANDAO ... CARDOSO ... GOMES ... HENRIQUES ... MONSANTO ... OSORIO ... PECHIOTTO ... PEIREIRA ... ALVARES ... CORREA...

These are names many of us carry even today. Some took the names of aristocratic Christians such as LOPES SUASSO ... NUNES BELMONTE ... HIMENES. Some even took names with specific Christian connotation like ESPIRITO SANTO or SALVADOR. Some took names of places. Now the interesting part is that when the Conversos moved on to Western Europe they often took back their original Jewish name OR in many cases, combined the two such as:

ACOHEN BELMONTE ... ATTIAS BUENO De MESQUITA ... JESSURUN CARDOZO ... LEVI MONSANTO ... SENIOR CORONEL.

One evening not so long ago, I took my magnifying glass and searched the map of Spain and Portugal, convinced that I would find a city, a mountain, ... some place called MADURO. I failed, although I found MORON DE LA FRONTERA ... MARCHENA ... CASAR DE CACERAS ... LEON... and a town in Portugal named MOGADURA. Well, it's a possibility but a bit far-fetched, I think you'll agree. I've received copies of conversations some of you have had on the Internet but so far, I believe that some ancestor in a moment of great stress just picked the name, as we say, out of a hat, or, in this case, off a tree!

I think that in order to understand some of the extensive movement from one city to another, and one country to another we need to know something about the status of Jews in the Iberian Peninsula. As early as 1390, the Jews of Spain suffered a series of attacks by the clergy. Some were forced to convert and some converted by choice, among them, many who rose to prominence in the courts of the various regions of Spain.

In 1477, Ferdinand (whose great-grandmother was Jewish) and Isabella petitioned the Pope for the right to establish an Inquisition. The idea was to punish those who were practicing their Judaism while calling themselves Catholic. Once that began the rulers passed an Edict ordering ALL Jews to convert or leave the Kingdom. That was 1492. Within four months every Jew had left. The majority crossed the border and went to Portugal. Some went to Italy, and some to the Turkish Empire. Not many years later, King Juan of Portugal issued a proclamation ordering a mass conversion in Lisbon 30,000 Jews became new Christians ... Now, many took advantage of the law which had prohibited Jews to LEAVE the country to actually leave, as Christians!

The Portuguese Inquisition began in 1536; it became much more ruthless than the Spanish with the "AUTO DA-FE" becoming the punishment of choice for the crime JUDAISING. One person, called to the court and under

torture, would expose others, even those no longer in the country. Together these Inquisitions lasted three centuries. I have given only the bare bones of the Inquisitions. Needless to say it was all about power and politics, a study in itself. Nevertheless, the movement of our ancestors from one region to another and from one country to another is based in great part to these events, as we shall see.

Antonio (Rodriguez Maduro) known as Roiz, and his wife Leanor lived in Trancoso, Portugal. One son of our Antonio and Leonor was Diogo Roiz Maduro who married Clara Lopez. The third generation ancestor was Antonio Roiz (o Maduro) [Roiz the Elder], who married Isabel Fernandez. They had the misfortune of living in Coimbra, Portugal, a seat of the Inquisition. Antonio, in the words of a document, was burned by public Auto Da Fe. Somehow, his wife escaped to St. Jean de Luz, France, with their children. St. Jean de Luz is near Biarritz in France, a considerable distance from Coimbra. If only we knew how that was managed! One of their children, born in 1600, was Clara who changed her name to Rachel when she arrived in Holland. At age 19, she married Moseh Levy who adopted the name Maduro and they became Jews, once again. BEHOLD, THE LEVY MADURO FAMILY. The mystery has not been cleared up but it is a fact.

So here we have Rachel and Moseh Levy Maduro living in Amsterdam. Although we only know about two sons, Salomon and David, I would venture to guess that those are the two who survived since Salomon was born ten years after his parents' marriage.

Salomon married Hana de Crasto in 1648 in Amsterdam and they are responsible for that huge tree we now have and one which I will NOT explain. Sita is the keeper of that information. The question of why the conversos settled in Amsterdam is in part answered by the fact that the Dutch had created the first Protestant Republic in Northern Europe after a bitter conflict with Spain. Amsterdam was becoming a major seaport and the government was eager to welcome foreigners who could help to create a great city. To quote F.J. Kroninburg, "before us is the striking encounter between a Holland in the process of striving ahead and the exiled Sephardim which led to a spiritual impregnation of both people. The Dutch thirsted for culture, the Sephardim brought erudition, artistic sense and skill and the colorful Mediterranean art of living."

By 1615, the Jewish community was legally recognized. They were permitted to live anywhere, to observe the Sabbath and to operate their own printing presses. The authority to control the conduct of the community became the task of leaders in the community. The MA'AMAD was the ruling council. The synagogue was highly organized with the Parnassim in charge of all community activities.

Cecil Roth wrote, " ... Amsterdam in the 1750s was a center of attraction to conversos, an island of Iberian culture." The Dutch West India Company, meanwhile, acted for the Government in establishing colonies in the New World. In 1634, they seized Curacao from the Spanish. On that adventure, after a voyage that lasted two months, they landed in Curacao. The interpreter who spoke Spanish, (of course) was Samuel Cohen, the first Jew to land in Curacao. The first effort to start a Jewish colony failed. Juan de Yllan was not able to recruit enough people under his contract with the Company. In 1659 in another effort, under Issac da Costa with a grant from the Company, did succeed. He headed a group of seventy adults and children. These colonists are considered the founders of this community. It seems that the Parnassim in Amsterdam encouraged these settlers and, in fact, offered them loans. Perhaps one of the reasons is that many of the Jewish leaders in Amsterdam were themselves interested in the ventures of the Dutch West India Company.

The Jewish pioneers arrived with high hopes. The Company had promised them freedom of religion, and, in fact they had brought with them a Sefer Torah on loan from Amsterdam. Although the first group had tried to establish a synagogue and named it MIKVEH ISRAEL, it is really this group who are considered the founders of the present congregation. Among the group were men who were leaders in the Amsterdam synagogue and so they proceeded to establish the Hascamoth, the rules and regulations which would control the behavior of the community. To demonstrate how far-reaching these rules were, consider the following: "Those creating disturbances in the synagogue shall be severely punished ... Arguing or holding forth on the street of the synagogue district is prohibited ... Members having a dispute shall be obliged to submit to arbitration by the Mahamad ... It is absolutely forbidden to establish another synagogue ... Anyone writing verses, sonnets or satires injurious to another shall pay a fine. If he persists, he shall be excommunicated." That's the tip of the iceberg!

Just fifteen years later the first Levy Maduro arrived in Curacao. He was Mosseh, the son of Salomon and Hana. It is possible that he came with two brothers or that they followed soon after. The early settlers were developers of agriculture and owners of plantations, raising cattle and working the land for food and fruit. It was a harsh life due to frequent droughts, and so little by little they moved on to more settled methods of earning a living through trade and shipping. The synagogue hierarchy and structure continued to regulate their lives. Relations with the Company and the Government were mostly cordial. I'm sure that we will learn more about that history as we tour

the Island. The Levy Maduro family, meanwhile, continued to grow, as you can see on our chart, to the point where, I believe, there was not one family residing here who did not have a Levy Maduro on his or her family tree!

To the Jewish settlers on other islands and on the east coast of the United States, this community was known as "The Mother Community." It was the oldest and the most prosperous. Aid was given to help co-religionists from St. Eustatius to New York ... from Caracas to Rhode Island ... from Kingston to Philadelphia. In addition, records show close connections, arranging marriages and close business ties. The phrase, "ES DOS NOSSOS" (He is one of us) used in Portugal among the anusim was a pledge of mutual trust. Now centuries later this trust bound together the Jewish settlers in the new world.

I certainly do not want to insult any of our hosts here ... but it seems that in the 17th and on into the 19th century there were quite a few "bitter conflicts" in the community. Conflicts that divided the congregants and even families. In addition, the early part of the 19th century saw a financial decline due, in part, to severe hurricanes, drought and epidemic. Many heads of families who had lived here for centuries moved on to St. Thomas, then a thriving seaport. Among them was Hazzan Samuel L. Maduro Jr. In time many branches of the family moved to Venezuela, Costa Rica, Panama, Germany, France and England. Of course, many stayed right here.

This gathering is unique in many ways. To me, the most remarkable fact is that most of you are here because you met in Cyberspace, and you have found common bonds talking to each other on the Net. For those of us who use letters (remember letters?) to communicate and those who fairly recently realized that the telephone is not too expensive, Email is a miracle. However we should remember that if you want to leave records for the future ... save your disks and/or remember to print!

Recently someone challenged me by asking why I spend so much time learning about genealogy, the past. He said, "I never look back, I'm only interested in the present." If I were to ask you the same question I'm sure I would get many different answers... For me, it is NOT because I like to speak about a few outstanding ancestors ... It is NOT because I think Spanish-Portuguese Jews are better than those from another background ... It IS because I grew up with a very strong sense of continuity in a small Jewish community where parents, grandparents and even great-grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins were the stability of my life ... It IS because I have learned as the years pass that in a very mysterious way, so many of their personal attributes have become a part of me. It IS because that I believe that in me, there is some spark of life that connects me to all those who came before me ... It IS because I find the search and the knowledge FASCINATING.