

The Dutch Republic and Conversos

The Dutch Republic

Conversos settled in various Dutch cities including Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Middleburg. The settlement to the Netherlands was precarious from a religious standpoint. Judaism was not officially tolerated in the early period of Converso settlement. Escape to other Jewish centers such as Venice, Livorno, North Africa, or east in the Ottoman Empire were more certain in terms of living an openly Jewish life and many Conversos settled in these areas. Conversos and later as Sephardic Jews, were largely tied to business segments connected with sugar, spices, bullion, diamonds, and tobacco.

Converso Settlement in Antwerp

The first area of settlement was the city of Antwerp. By 1571, Antwerp was home to approximately eighty-five Portuguese Converso families. These families represented a total of about 400 people. The key consideration for Portuguese Conversos was economic in nature. Jewish services however were observed clandestinely by some of them and a home synagogue operated from 1564-1594 on an irregular basis. The threat of Inquisitorial prosecution was a real possibility as Philip II of Spain had authorized the Inquisition to operate in the Netherlands in 1565. Its targets were primarily Protestants but Judaizing was still a concern.

Because of the Dutch struggle against Spanish control, the city suffered and Conversos eventually moved to other areas including north-western Germany and Bordeaux, Rouen, and London. Despite the economic challenges present in the Netherlands, several Converso merchants settled in Amsterdam with their families during the middle of the 1590s Other Converso immigrants arrived directly from Portugal beginning in 1597.

Early Converso Settlement in Amsterdam

The Spanish embargo under Philip II lasted from 1585 until 1590. After the lifting of the embargo in 1595, the first evidence of Portuguese Converso settlement in Amsterdam occurred. The first émigré to set up shop in Amsterdam was Manuel Rodrigues Vega. He imported sugar and spices and had been born in Antwerp. His father Luis Fernandes was a crypto Jew. He initially lived in France after leaving Antwerp and finally settled with his wife and eight children in Amsterdam in 1595. In addition to Vega, Garcia Pimental later known as Mordechay Abeniacar journeyed from Venice settled in Amsterdam around 1596.

The Pimentel family was a prominent Sephardic family in Venice and in Constantinople. One of the Garcia brothers was a rabbi in Constantinople. The Pimental family played a key role in the "judaization" of the Conversos arriving in Amsterdam. Garcia Pimental was a key factor in the purchase of the cemetery that would be used by Sephardim in Groet. He was the first person to be buried there.

When Holland joined the Union of Utrecht in 1579, religious persecution was prohibited. The earliest settlement of New Christians in Holland appears to have been in 1593 though some contradictory

evidence exists. Among the earliest arrivals was Manuel Lopez Pereira, his sister Maria Nuñez, and Miguel Lopez. Their voyage highlights the challenges that any family potentially faced when leaving the Peninsula. They were first apprehended by English brigands and taken to London. They were finally released and set sail for Amsterdam. A storm redirected their ship to the coast of East Friesland at Emden. Rabbi Moses Uri Levi helped them reach Amsterdam. He also journeyed there and assisted them with their reintegration into Judaism.

On October 2, 1596, the recent émigrés and Rabbi Levi met together to observe the Day of Atonement in the home of Don Samuel Palache, the ambassador of the ruler of Morocco to the Netherlands. The nascent community comprised only sixteen individuals. A building was eventually secured and named Beth Jacob after one of its founders, Jacob Tirado. The building was consecrated on Rosh Hashanah, 5358. Rabbi Moses Uri Levi served as the rabbi. While he spoke in German, his son Aaron ha-Levi translated into Spanish.

According to Daniel Levi de Barrios, Rabbi Moses Uri Levi first settled in Amsterdam in 1580.

The services conducted by Rabbi Levi were conducted secretly until discovered in 1595. The Yom Kippur service conducted by Levi was in the midst of the closing service known as Neilah when they were interrupted by Amsterdam police. The police first thought they had encountered a group of secret Catholics as Catholic worship was illegal in Amsterdam. As they searched, they found no crucifixes or hosts and finally realized they had discovered a group of Jews. The sheriff then asked that the group of Jews pray to the G-d of Israel for the welfare of the city government. The group represented by Jacob Tirado readily agreed to his request. According to Barrios, the affair was reported to the magistrate who declared the observance of Judaism in Amsterdam legal.

The story is highly romanticized and appears to be creating the image that the community of Amsterdam was specifically formed as a Jewish one from the time of its inception. For Miriam Bodian, Barrios' account eliminates any critique that Conversos who arrived in Amsterdam had delayed in establishing a Jewish community there. The authorities did interrupt the Yom Kippur observance and arrested Rabbi Moses Uri Levi and his son. Both were detained and Rabbi Levi was accused of receiving stolen goods and circumcising adults. Both Rabbi Levi and his son were ultimately released and continued their Jewish activities but challenges remained.

A new era of Converso settlement occurred in the Dutch Republic following the truce struck with Spain which ended the embargo on Dutch goods. This treaty was signed in 1609. The arrival of Converso immigrants from Portugal as well as from other locations now began in earnest. Other communities such as those at London, Rouen, and Emden largely disappeared, while the community in Hamburg stagnated. A number of successful Sephardic traders now arrived. The government of Amsterdam did not sanction the observance of Judaism until 1614. Even then its practice was allowed only implied and not stated explicitly.

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