

Curaçaoan Connections in Nineteenth Century New York
by
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... just like a daughter who leaves her paternal home to create a new family may feel profoundly moved and may lament the hard necessity of separation, so too is our parting from you. Yes, our hearts are oppressed, our lips tremble, and our eyes are swollen with tears as we look at you one last time and bid you our final farewell.

But a great consolation is ours: we have planted in you the seed for improvement and progress: that seed cannot be lost and, in spite of everything, it has to grow and produce abundant fruit.

Holy synagogue, beloved temple, alma mater, farewell!
Once more, farewell!
God be with you, with us, with all! Amen.¹

These dramatic words were written on the occasion of the split that occurred in the Mikvé Israel community and which resulted in the formation of Temple Emanuel in 1864. It is of interest to examine this quote, because it is connected to today's lecture series for three reasons.

First, is the fact that we are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the reunification of Temple Emanuel and the Mikvé Israel congregation after a split among the Sephardim of Curaçao that lasted one hundred years. The quotation reminds us that the departure of so many Mikvé Israel members to form the liberal congregation Temple Emanuel a century and a half ago should never be considered merely as a willful event of angry people wanting things to be done differently. For many, it was really a sad parting of friends of many generations. So it is appropriate today to give due honor to those who one hundred years later reunited the two groups. People like Otto Senior, Charlie Gomes Casseres, Abram Salas, Ivan Moreno, Sha Capriles, and many others worked diligently under the leadership of Rabbi Simeon Maslin to bring about the reunited Mikvé Israel – Emanuel community in 1964.

The second reason for introducing this particular passage is because I found it in the collection of the Mongui Maduro Library, whose fortieth anniversary we are celebrating this year. For those who have never been to this fabulous library, I think you should check it out. It is a true jewel. Kudos to Ena Dankmijer and her board and Esther van Haaren and her staff for their vision and hard work.

The third reason for the quote gets us finally to the topic of my talk today: Curaçaoan connections in Nineteenth Century New York. I would like to introduce you to two Curaçaoans and some of their descendants who ended up in New York City in the nineteenth century: David Abinun de Lima and Daniel de Leon, both of whom were among the separatists whose families joined Temple Emanuel. In fact, the piece from which the above quotation was taken was most likely written by David de Lima, so I'll start with him.

David de Lima was born in Curaçao in 1837² to a Sephardic family that had been living on this island since the early eighteenth century.³ David's Curaçaoan ancestors were merchants, traders, and landowners and were considered upper middle class and learned. As a young man, David appeared to be following in their footsteps and had a managerial position at one of the most prestigious trading companies on the island, S.E.L. Maduro & Sons, where he was held in high regard by the founder, Mr. S.E.L. Maduro.⁴ He was thought of as one of the young leaders on the island, and had he chosen to stay, it is likely that he would have been a figure of considerable influence. But in 1870, David, his wife Sarah, and his three children, Esther, Elias and Edward, moved to New York City. He left behind a large extended family, although some of these relatives would, over time, follow him to New York.⁵ In New York, David and Sarah had two more children, Charles and Lylia.

Less than two months after settling in the United States, the new immigrant established an import and export business of his own. And shortly thereafter, a credit report prepared by R. G. Dun (the credit reports company known today as Dun & Bradstreet) made it quite clear that David de Lima had come to the United States with sufficient funds and ample backing to embark on this new enterprise. Dun stated that De Lima claimed to have access to a capital of \$12,000 gold of his own, a \$5,000 loan collateralized by his business, and a credit line of 5,000 pounds sterling.⁶ In 1870, \$12,000 would be the equivalent of at least half a million dollars today and possibly much more, depending on how we choose to calculate that.* So it is clear that David was already a wealthy man when he left Curaçao. Dun also indicated that De Lima arrived in New York with excellent letters of recommendation, which referred to him as “an honorable and straightforward businessman, not likely to go beyond his means and believed to be worthy of confidence and credit.”⁷

David’s company imported sugar from Demarara, salt, goat skins, hats, divi divi, aloe, and coffee from Curaçao and Coro, Venezuela, and many other items from various parts of the Caribbean. By 1876 his business assets had grown almost fifteen fold, an amazing accomplishment for any firm to report over a period of six years. At this point, David’s youngest brother Jeudah also decided to leave Curaçao with his family to join him in the business in New York.⁸

Both David and Jeudah moved to uptown locations once they became established and lived in very swanky apartment buildings where, today, a moderately sized 1,500 square foot apartment (about 150 square meters) goes for \$3 million or more. The De Limas summered away from the

* The price of gold in 1870 was fixed at \$18.93/oz. Today it fluctuates around \$1200-1300/oz.

city in places where the rich and famous summered, including in Newport, Rhode Island, where the super wealthy like the Berwinds, the Biltmores and other scions of American industry owned their summer mansions.

Even though they had become big fish in a much bigger pond than our little island, the New York De Limas and their descendants continued to be in touch with their many relatives from Curaçao, Venezuela, Colombia, and other places in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁹ And the relatives in Curaçao thought of their adventurous and successful New York relations with much affection and admiration. In Curaçao, Jeudah's niece, Rebecca de Lima Salas, named two of her children after Jeudah's children: Estela Salas – later known as Estela Henriquez – was named after Estela de Lima, and Rosalynde Salas – later known as Linda Senior – was named after Rosalynde de Lima.¹⁰ In 1932, when Rosalynde de Lima died in New York City, she bequeathed \$5,000 from her estate to her namesake Linda in Curaçao – a sign that although it had been almost sixty years since her father had chosen to emigrate to the United States, her Curaçaoan relatives remained in her thoughts.¹¹ The family ties were clearly important.

In business too, the Caribbean contacts were highly cherished. D.A. de Lima & Co. had extensive business with his former employer S.E.L. Maduro & Sons in Curaçao and with Curaçaoans elsewhere in the Caribbean, such as Isaac Senior e hijo in Coro, Venezuela, José Moreno in Maracaibo, and the Cortissoz and Alvarez Correas in Colombia. The business correspondence between S.E.L. Maduro & Sons and D.A. de Lima reveal the underlying friendship between the two parties. In a letter dated October 8, 1886, Guigui Maduro, one of the sons of the founder of S.E.L. Maduro & Sons, wrote to David about a business proposition and added:

I assure you, it is a pity to see how we are losing our time here, having all kind[s] of facilities to work in any other place and being so many brothers.* But there is something which I cannot explain, but which binds us to this poor island.

One might read a tinge of jealousy into Maduro's suggestion that he and his brothers might be losing their time in Curaçao. Nevertheless, S.E.L. Maduro and Sons still operates on the island.

In the States, David de Lima's focus, aside from his direct focus on his own private business, was on educating the American public and the U.S. government about international relations and trade. Both David and Jeudah de Lima were members of the New York Board of Trade and Transportation. The purpose of the Board was to promote trade, commerce, and manufacturing in the United States, and especially in the State and City of New York. By the end of the century, the New York Board of Trade and Transportation was the largest body of its kind in the state of New York. When eventually David de Lima was elected to be one of the thirty-six managing Directors of this association, it was considered a prestigious and influential position and a real feather in his cap.¹²

Almost twenty years after David de Lima's arrival, when he was already an important businessman in New York City, he became involved in the preparations for the International American Congress scheduled for October 1889 in Washington, DC. In anticipation of the Congress he sent a long letter to the secretary of the special committee assigned to deal with the issues to be discussed at the October event. In this letter, which was published in the New York Times, David de Lima's brilliance and understanding of foreign trade became quite obvious. He wrote in fluent English, which was at best his third language, and provided detailed

* S.E.L. Maduro had five sons.

recommendations for the adoption of a uniform system of customs regulations and a uniform method of determining the classification and valuation of merchandise in order to improve foreign trade. He was way before his time with these ideas, because it was not until the first decades of the twentieth century that anything approximating what De Lima was suggesting was developed in the United States. The letter did not contain only recommendations. David could not resist ending it by unequivocally chastising the U.S. State Department for sending out unqualified professionals to represent the United States in South America.¹³ People who did not know the history and culture of those countries, who did not understand a thing about foreign trade, and who generally did not speak Spanish and Portuguese and could hardly communicate with the leaders in Latin America. Mr. De Lima was not one to mince words!

Beyond their attention to family and business affairs and all issues having to do with foreign trade, the De Limas were also active in charitable and Jewish organizations. With the enormous influx of primarily poor immigrants into New York between 1870 and the turn of the century, tripling the population of that city, the disparities between the newly arrived and the fortunate few became ever more pronounced. The American poet, Emma Lazarus, wrote about these folks, calling them the “tired, poor, and huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Of course, these adjectives could not be applied to the immigrant De Limas. But they used their wealth and social standing to help where they could through their involvement in institutions such as the Young Men’s Hebrew Association (YMHA), orphanages, and other such organizations.¹⁴

To understand how close-knit the family was and remained, it is important to point out that David’s son Elias married Jeudah’s daughter Estela. And David’s daughter Esther married the son of David’s other brother Solomon, a cousin also called Elias. Not only were these two couples first cousins, but the men had the same first and last names: Elias de Lima. They were

the two who essentially took over D.A. de Lima & Co. after David and Jeudah passed away. All four these individuals - Elias and Estela and Elias and Esther - were born in Curaçao.

Eventually D.A. de Lima & Co. was dissolved, and the two Eliases went into the banking industry. Although these two men and others of their generation were interesting in their own right, I am going to skip that generation of business-oriented men and tell you a little bit about some of the women of the third generation, the American-born De Limas.

We shall start with Beatrice de Lima, Elias and Estela's daughter. Beatrice graduated from Vassar College in 1908 and married Walter Meyers that same year. Like so many married women of her class, she became involved in charitable organizations. But eventually she became most well known as an authority on children's books. *Publisher's Weekly*, a book trade journal published by Harper's, indicated that Beatrice

... believed that children had a right to choose their own books in their own shop, a shop in which everything from the furnishings to the promotion and selling of books should be planned for the children.

And so, in spite of the depression, in spite of the skeptical prognostications of well-intentioned friends and critics, the Children's Book Shop was opened in 1933, in one room of one of Rochester's oldest houses."¹⁵

Beatrice ran this Children's Book Shop with great dedication, and her bookstore was an all-encompassing experience for the children who frequented it. As its popularity grew, it expanded from the original one-room facility to comprise the entire house.¹⁶

In 1940, Beatrice wrote an article about her experience with the selection of children's books entitled "On Common Ground with Children's Books."¹⁷ Her fame spread internationally, to the extent that the Russian Government asked her to act as an adviser in the preparation of a list of

American books for Russian schools. In the States her opinion about new books was often solicited.¹⁸

Estela, the youngest of Elias and Estela's children, also attended Vassar just like her older sister. She was there only for a short while and then dropped out. Throughout her life she proudly proclaimed that the only exam she ever got a perfect 100 on was that for an auto-mechanics course that she took during the First World War.¹⁹ To her parents' horror she joined the Farmerettes during that war. The Farmerettes were a group of over 20,000 city and town women who went to work on America's farms when the men were called up to war. Estela mostly drove the workers to their places of work and repaired the automobile fleet that the Farmerettes used. She was the Farmerettes' auto mechanic. She also drove a Red Cross ambulance and did not listen to her parents' pleas to come back to her comfortable home. It is hard to imagine a Jewish woman born in Curaçao in 1898 (the year Estela de Lima was born in New York) behaving similarly in the early twentieth century.

In 1927, the spirited Estela married a German Jew called Frank Luria. He also had Caribbean roots and descended from one of Hazan Piza's daughters, Leah, who was born and grew up in St. Thomas. After the wedding, the couple went off to live in Germany where the Germans who knew them referred to Estela as "die Wilde Amerikane." The dislike was mutual. Estela hated Germany. The Lurias and their two sons were most fortunate to leave Europe just in time in 1938.

Of all these De Lima women the most famous one in the United States was Agnes de Lima. Her mother Esther had died when she was twelve and her father, Elias S.A. de Lima, remarried a few

years later. Agnes entered Vassar College at the age of seventeen and graduated in 1908 just like her cousin Beatrice.²⁰ At Vassar, Agnes was exposed to socialist and feminist thoughts, and upon graduating, she became involved in education reform and liberal journalism.

Whatever conservative ideas her banker father had hoped to instill in his daughter, Agnes seems to have been pushed aside once she was on her own in New York. Her articles written for the liberal journals the *New Republic* and the *Nation* focused on Progressive Education, a movement which aimed to develop more flexible and interactive educational programs by encouraging students to learn away from the classroom and its school desks. I imagine that in the early part of the twentieth century the educational system in the USA must have been as strict and rigid as it used to be in Curaçao in the 1940s and 1950s when I went to school on the island. Sit up straight at your desk, cross your arms where the teacher can see them, and “vinger op de mond” to make sure you remembered to stay quiet. This was not at all what Agnes de Lima considered optimal. Some of the articles written by Agnes about a more progressive educational system were collected in a book published in 1924 entitled *Our Enemy the Child*.

In 1926 Agnes de Lima became involved with a lengthy strike by the textile workers of Passaic, New Jersey. In August of that year, after more than six months of striking, the textile workers finally voted to appoint a committee to negotiate a settlement with the mill owners and to work towards unionizing the workers. Agnes attended and spoke at meetings of the committee on behalf of the strikers.²¹ It was quite clear where her sympathies lay.²²

From 1940 to 1960 Agnes de Lima was the director for the New School for Social Research in New York City. She was married briefly twice and had one daughter who went by the name

Sigrid de Lima (and not by her father's name – a habit of these De Limas which made it somewhat easier to find out about them and connect all the dots).²³ By the time of Agnes's death at age 87, Sigrid was also a recognized author and had published five novels.²⁴

I think the De Limas of New York were an unusual group. They did produce the traders and bankers so often mentioned in Sephardic history, but also educators, social activists, authors, people who understood the need of children, and also some who did not fit so well into the society to which they were born, but who ended up doing marvelous volunteer work. Many of them contributed to the rapidly growing city on various levels and often stood out in their respective fields. The first generation also returned to Curaçao with some regularity and on one such occasion, in December of 1886, a “soirée musicale” was held by Salon Capriles in honor of “Monsieur et Madame David A. de Lima” with friends offering classical piano and violin performances as well as operatic arias.²⁵ These social events in Curaçao were often organized for special occasions at the home of Dr. David R. Capriles and drew on the artistic talents residing in Curaçao at the time, including in this case Lelia Capriles, Ephraim S. L. Maduro, Julio Blasini and several others.

We shall now leave these De Limas behind and move on to Daniel de Leon. Daniel de Leon was born in Curaçao in 1852 and was the son of Solomon de Leon and Sarah Jesurun. His father was a respected physician²⁶ and his mother came from the very wealthy Jesurun family. Her dowry consisted of an annual income of six hundred florins, a nice cushion on top of Dr. De Leon's own income.²⁷ Dr. De Leon travelled frequently and for long periods of time, and most of Daniel's care was left to his mother and his uncle Anjel Jesurun. It is fair to say, therefore, that

his Jesurun relatives influenced him most. So I shall take a quick detour and tell you who these Jesuruns were.

Anjel Jesurun was a learned and wealthy lawyer who, among other assets, owned the Rif plantation in Curaçao where he had 69 slaves.²⁸ He was also the son-in-law of Jacob Jesurun, better known as Shon Cochi. If Anjel might have been considered rich, Shon Cochi was super-rich! He was the shipping magnate of Curaçao and around the time of Daniel's youth, the Jesuruns owned one hundred ships, employed more than 1000 people, and their wharves were able to repair ten ships at the same time.²⁹ It is in this environment of learning, wealth and privilege that Daniel de Leon grew up.

When Daniel was twelve years old, his father passed away, and based on De Leon's own account, he was sent to Hildesheim, Germany in 1866 at age fourteen to continue his education.³⁰ After he completed his studies in Germany, he spent a short period in Curaçao and then left for Holland where it is believed that he studied medicine, although he did not complete these studies. Some time between 1872 and 1874, De Leon migrated permanently to the United States.

He was by now in his twenties, and made his living teaching Latin, Greek, and math at a school in Westchester, New York. After a few years as a teacher, he enrolled in law school at Columbia University in New York City, and when he graduated along with nearly two hundred others in 1878, he received two prizes for excellence: one in constitutional history and constitutional law, and the other in international law.³¹

Unlikely as it may seem, this brilliant lawyer decided to settle in Brownsville, Texas to practice law after he graduated. This was a border town of fewer than 5,000 people at the time, and one wonders what attracted De Leon to this place. In 1882, he returned to Curaçao, married Sarah Lobo and moved to New York with his wife and widowed mother. Shortly after his return to the States, he was appointed a lecturer in the School of Political Science of Columbia College, a post he held from 1883 to 1889.³² His specialty became Latin American diplomacy and jurisprudence. In that regard his interests overlapped those of David de Lima. The two men knew each other, but became estranged in 1883-84 about a personal misunderstanding.³³

While in New York, De Leon became more and more involved in labor issues. In 1886, the workers of the city endorsed a left-leaning politician running for mayor of New York by the name of Henry George. De Leon decided to join his campaign. Daniel de Leon's employers at Columbia College did not appreciate his increased involvement with George's socialist ideas, and after some admonitions and warnings issued by the trustees of the college, he was forced to leave the faculty of Columbia during the spring session of 1889.³⁴

In 1890, Daniel de Leon joined the Socialist Labor Party. As New York continued to grow by leaps and bounds in the 1890s, the contrast between the very wealthy and the poor, the capitalists and the laborers, became ever harder to ignore. De Leon had spent much time reading and translating the writings of Frederick Engels and Karl Marx and espoused the policies of these left-wing political theorists and philosophers. As a consequence, his view about possible ways to deal with the gap between the two classes became ever more radical. In 1891 he was named the editor of the party's mouthpiece, *The People*.³⁵

Because he was a good writer with legal training, a good organizer, and an excellent orator, he was chosen to speak to American workers in many different locations. His speaking tour in 1891 transformed the Socialist party from a New York-based immigrant club of about 1500 members into a national organization with thousands of members.³⁶ But, even though Daniel de Leon remained a member of the Socialist party throughout his life, he was truly more of a Marxist than a Socialist. He argued for the revolutionary overthrow of [capitalism](#), trying to divert the Socialist Labor Party away from its more moderate stand.

A man of strong opinions, he was not loved by everyone who knew him. Many considered him fanatic and intolerant of those who did not agree with his policies. When he died in 1914, his minimal three-line obituary was truly pathetic. He got many more lines from one of his socialist opponents who wrote in the *New Yorker Volkszeitung* (a Socialist newspaper) “He who expired on Monday evening, fared as did so many before him, he died a few decades too late; he outlived himself.” It was a very nasty article. Yet, a non-socialist paper wrote:

When three thousand people gather in a public building to attend a funeral service ... when 50,000 line the streets through which the funeral procession passes and some of them kneel in the streets in prayer, it is evident that someone unusual has died.³⁷

In his private life De Leon experienced many ups and downs as well. His young bride, Sarah Lobo, whom he had married when she was a mere sixteen years old, presented him with a son by the name of Solomon, known as Solon, a year after they were wed. They had a second son the following year, and after this birth, Sarah became pregnant once more, this time with twins. In 1887 she died in childbirth, as did the twin babies. Sarah and Daniel had been married for less than five years. That same year, Daniel de Leon lost his second son as well. Four years later, when Daniel was on a speaking tour, he met his second wife, Bertha Canary, who was a

schoolteacher in Kansas. The following year, they were married in Connecticut and subsequently had five children.

Unlike the De Limas, it does not appear that De Leon returned to Curaçao for parties and such. His focus was political and intellectual, not social. He appears to have had little interest in organized religion or even Jewish charities. His family in Curaçao had belonged to Temple Emanuel, but he was unable (or unwilling) to pay his membership dues of five guilders a year after he married Sarah Lobo.³⁸ It is also not clear that he had any contact of note with the family in Curaçao once he became involved in the U.S. Socialist movement. In the States, however, the Socialist Labor Party continued to remember him, celebrating his birthday in many cities across the United States for years after he had died.³⁹

It is interesting to contrast all these individuals and to realize the many talents that they all had. While their pursuits, professional careers, and private lives were very different, they had, in addition to their Curaçao roots, two things in common: energy and focus! And with those two attributes they made their mark in New York City at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. I often think of these Curaçaoans who left the island with a nostalgic “our loss, their gain.” But to some extent, we too have gained in stature by the accomplishments of our *yiù di Korsou* on foreign shores. We may not agree with their beliefs and actions, but they lived in exciting times and they were exciting people who made a difference in the world.

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