

The Jewish Community of Curacao

Names mentioned in the article:-(in order of appearance)

Samuel Cohen-Joao de Illan(Jeojada /Jeudah de Illan)-David Nassi(Joseph Nunes de Fonseca/Christovao de Tavora)-Isaac de Acosta- Philippe Henriquez (Jacob Senior)- Dr. Joseph Capriles(El Doctor de la Espada)- Benjamin Henriquez-Juan (Isaac) de Sola-Mordechay Ricardo-Isaac de Marchena- Josiau Pardo-Eliau Lopez-Raphael Jesurun-Samuel Mendes de Sola-Isaac Henriquez Farro-Isaac Carigal-Jacob Lopez da Fonseca-Hisquiau de Cordova-Salomo Nunes Redondo-Moises Penso-David Aboab-Mordechay Alvares Correa-Jeisuah Pinto-Aron Mendes Chumaceiro-Jacob Mendes de Sola-Isaac S.Emmanuel-Is.Jessurun Cardozo-David Cardozo-Moshe ben Amine-Simeon J.Maslin-Leo M.Abrami-Menachem M.Fitterman-Moses Salomo Levy Maduro-Benjamin Mordechay Henriquez- Benjamin Suares-Luis Joseph de Jongh-David Capriles-Abraham Jesurun Dz.

Family names mentioned in the article:-(in order of appearance)

Alvares Correa- Henriquez- Jessurun- Levy Maduro- Marchena- Henriquez Moron- Namias de Crasto-Pardo-De Meza-Pinto-Cohen Henriquez.

Arrival of Sephardic Jews.

In 1634 Johannes van Walbeeck and Pierre le Grand of the Dutch West Indian Company (WIC) captured Curacao from Spain. Their interpreter was a Jew by the name of Samuel Cohen. The migration of Jews to the island began a few years later. In 1651 the WIC granted permission to Joao de Illan (also known as Jeojada or Jeudah de Illan) to lead fifty Jewish colonists to Curacao. Many had recently arrived in Holland after fleeing from Portugal or Spain. Some obtained passports with the help of the Jewish Congregation in Amsterdam. Under leadership of de Illan, the Jewish Community was founded on the island. It was named Mikve Israel (Hope of Israel).

Due to hostilities between Holland and England, a charter granted to David Nassi (also known as Joseph Nunes da Fonseca or Christovao de Tavora) did not result in additional Jewish settlers from Holland. Between 1654 and 1656, however, several Jews from Brazil arrived in Curacao. In 1659 the WIC issued a grant to Isaac de Acosta of Amsterdam for the purpose of transporting Jewish colonists to Curacao. He was able to organize a group of a few families consisting of about 70 persons. Among the Sephardim arriving on the island between 1654 and 1675 are the families Alvares Correa, Henriquez, Jessurun, Levy Maduro, Marchena, Henriquez Moron, Namias de Crasto and Pardo. Descendants of these early families still live in Curacao.

The Early Colonists.

Having been charged to work in agriculture, the first Jewish colonists initially lived outside of town -- in the Jewish Quarter where they built a synagogue and where the old cemetery Beth Haim is located. However, soon there were Jews living in town as well. There they built a synagogue that needed to be enlarged as early as 1674.

In spite of the many problems presented by the climate and soil of the island, the Jews have always diligently cultivated their plantations and gardens. Due to the recurring periods of

drought, they soon turned to commerce, as early as the time of de Illan.

Commerce.

The Jews imported finished goods from Holland and traded colonial wares in neighboring countries. Very soon these merchants possessed their own sailing ships, more than 1200 vessels between the years 1670 and 1900. The Jesurun firm owned more than 100 ships in the 19th century. Many sailed to New York, some even as far as Holland. During this era there were at least 200 Jewish captains in command of these ships.

Although slave trade was definitely not a Jewish specialty, Jewish merchants bought sizeable numbers of slaves from the WIC depot, usually to be sold in neighboring countries. Philippe Henriquez (Jacob Senior), a noted 17th century slave trader, was even authorized by the Admiralty to purchase slaves directly in Africa.

The Eighteenth Century.

In the 18th century there were serious economic depressions, leading the Parnassim to propose a fanta (synagogue tax) in 1769. Twelve of the wealthiest Curacao Jews resisted so strenuously that the plan was postponed until the period when the island found itself occupied by England. The American war of independence (1775 – 1883) brought some economic relief for Jewish merchants; they supplied the American insurgents with weapons and provisions, usually via other Caribbean islands.

Around the middle of the century Dr. Joseph Capriles arrived on the island. Dubbed El Doctor de la Espada because of the beautiful sword that he usually wore, Dr. Capriles was the progenitor of the noted family that bears his name.

Relations between Curacao authorities and the "Jewish Nation" remained cordial during this century as well: Jews were frequently charged with official missions to countries in the surrounding area. In turn, they contributed toward the maintenance of the forts, the insane asylum, the leprosy hospital as well as the military hospital.

French Interim Rule.

Neither the French interim rule on Curacao (1796 – 1800) nor the English occupation was a favorable period for the Jewish population. They loaned large sums of money to the government of Curacao, as did other island inhabitants. The island was isolated from Holland. Jews supported the activities of Simon Bolivar, some in actual combat: Benjamin Henriquez as captain and Juan (Isaac) de Sola as colonel. Others extended their hospitality to 'El Libertador' following his defeat (De Meza), and to Bolivar's sisters (Mordechay Ricardo).

The Nineteenth Century.

Through the years, particularly in the economically unfavorable 19th century, many Jews left Curacao for other regions (St. Thomas, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Jamaica, Central America, Venezuela, Colombia, the United States).

However, those remaining were able to maintain their eminent social and economic position in Curacao's society. In part because of their excellent education -- many attended German universities -- they were able, about 20 years after the "Jewish emancipation" (1825), to attain high government positions.

The Twentieth Century.

In the 20th century, Portuguese Jews have maintained their position of leadership in banking and commerce; many are active as well in the political, intellectual and social life of the island. Over the years there has been a considerable decline in the population, however. In the year 1750 there were 1500 members in the Jewish community; in 1968 there were no more than 375 Sephardic Jews in Curacao.

Religious Life and Organization.

The organization of the Jewish community in Curacao was closely modeled after the Portugeesch-Israelitisch mother-community in Amsterdam. Governance was according to the body of regulations termed the Hascamoth.

Among the early colonizers, there were circumcisers, ritual slaughterers, readers, etc. Isaac de Marchena, who arrived with his family in 1659, was one of the first readers.

A brief summary of synagogue construction in the 17th and 18th century gives an impression of the blossoming of the Jewish community.

De Illan's synagogue (1651) outside of town; The second synagogue outside of town; The town synagogue, enlarged in 1674, later leveled to make room for the new synagogue of 1703 which was in turn replaced by the beautiful building now considered to be the oldest still-standing synagogue in the western hemisphere.

In 1746 the Neve Salom synagogue in Otrabanda was built.

The Rabbis.

Josiau Pardo, head of the Yeshiva (Jewish school) in Rotterdam and Amsterdam (financed by the family Pinto) was the first Chacham (Rabbi) of Curacao. Having arrived in 1674, Pardo left for Jamaica in 1683.

There was no rabbi on the island till 1696, when Eliau Lopez arrived. Formerly the Chacham of Barbados, Lopez worked in Curacao until his death in 1713.

Raphael Jesurun, who had been a brilliant student at Ets Chaim, the Amsterdam seminary, served on the island from 1717 to 1748.

Samuel Mendes de Sola, formerly a rabbi in the Amsterdam synagogue, arrived as Jesurun's assistant in 1744. He remained as Chacham till his death in 1761.

De Sola's successor, the Amsterdam rabbi Isaac Henriquez Farro, died a few days after setting foot

on Curacao (July, 1762).

Two months after Farro's death, rabbi Isaac Carigal, an envoy from Hebron in the Holy Land, arrived. He was persuaded to remain on the island and serve as rabbi during the interim period until Jacob Lopez da Fonseca (brother-in-law of Chacham de Sola) had graduated from the Amsterdam seminary Ets Chaim.

Da Fonseca who arrived in 1764 functioned as rabbi till his death in 1815. He was the only Curacao-born Chacham.

The spiritual leaders were assisted by a considerable number of cantors, ritual slaughterers and instructors. Hisquiau de Cordova from Amsterdam was one of the most brilliant instructors. Because the Parnassim (de ruling committee of the community) did not approve of one of his sermons, de Cordova was discharged but restored to his position shortly thereafter. At the first opportunity, however, he departed and became Chacham of the Jamaica community. The Chachamim created schools that prepared cantors and teachers for other communities in North and Central America. They encouraged community members to contribute to charitable organizations, locally as well as in Jewish communities abroad, particularly in the Holy Land. Through the efforts of the Chachamin, the Jewish community in Curacao blossomed to the point that in the 18th century it became known as the "American mother community."

Conflicts.

There were occasional conflicts in the Jewish community. Between the years 1732 - 1746, the Jewish families in Otrabanda, had increased their membership to about 35. A larger synagogue was required; the private home that they called Nive Salom (House of Peace) was no longer adequate. Furthermore there were religious objections against crossing the harbor to Punda on the Shabat. Salomo Nunes Redondo and Moises Penso vied for the honor of financing a new synagogue. Declining the offers of these wealthy men, the college of Parnassim built their own synagogue in Otrabanda, (1746) with contributions from the entire Jewish community. These developments caused great discord among the Jews, even after the arrival and eventual banishment of David Aboab, a Talmudist who had been hired as teacher-rabbi by a brotherhood founded by Penso and his Otrabanda supporters. The Chachamim Jesurun and De Sola expelled Penso as well. Chacham de Sola continued to speak ill of the opponents of the Parnassim's authority, including the very wealthy Mordechay Alvares Correa.

Penso and his supporters petitioned island director Faesch to instruct De Sola to either cease his offensive remarks or to grant them permission to build their own synagogue. The college of Parnassim collected signatures of 235 persons urging the director to deny Penso's petition. There were scuffles in Punda (Heerenstraat) and in Otrabanda. An appeal to the Staten Generaal (Dutch Parliament) was decided in favor of the opposition.

De Sola and the college of Parnassim continued their objections against ritual burial of banished members -- or even their relatives. The presence of director Faesch's soldiers was required at every internment. The opposition purchased, for their own use, a parcel of land adjoining the cemetery. After the death of Mordechay Alvares Correa, the Parnassim refused to make the cemetery keys available to the next of kin. Penso and Correa's son-in-law hired ship personnel to help them gain access to the cemetery. Thus, at last, Alvares Correa was buried alongside his wife in the community cemetery.

With the cooperation of the Amsterdam Parnassim, chief of police Jan van Schagen was able to restore the peace decreed by stadholder (head of state) Willem IV of Holland. The years 1785 through 1796 saw renewed demands for absolute autonomy of the Otrabanda synagogue. However, the Parnassim was forced to close the synagogue in 1818, as there were very few Jews left in Otrabanda.

In that same year (1818) a new controversy erupted in the Jewish community, this time around the figure of Jeisuah Pinto, a cantor from Amsterdam who had been appointed in 1815. Discharged on request of the majority of the community members, Pinto was promptly reinstated by the Parnassim. Governor Kikkert supported Pinto and the Parnassim. The opposition -- the majority of the community members! -- seceded from the synagogue. They had their own cantor and purchased a piece of land adjoining the community cemetery. However, Governor Cantz'laar did not allow them to bury their dead according to religious ritual. They were forced, on occasion, to bury a child on plantation grounds.

This, too, led to forceful objections on the part of Cantz'laar: In his opinion, those who left the Jewish community no longer belonged to the "Jewish Nation." Cantz'laar exerted his considerable influence to force the separated members to either obey the Parnassim or renounce their religion. Eighty-two members signed a declaration of severance. The dissidents subsequently appealed to the sovereign of Holland, King William I of Orange. Cantz'laar grudgingly advised the Parnassim to make some concessions.

Peace was restored in 1821.

The Reform Community.

In 1856 the community finally obtained its next rabbi. Aron Mendes Chumaceiro, from Holland, reorganized the religious school and worked tirelessly for the well-being of Jews and as well as gentiles on the island.

A conflict arising during Chumaceiro's tenure was not based on fundamental religious issues. Instead, it arose from the rivalry between two leading families: the Levy Maduros and the Cohen Henriquez family. Along with their relatives and friends (24 persons), the latter family seceded from the Mikve Israel community and in 1864 founded the Nederlandsch Hervormde Israelitische Gemeente (Dutch Reform Israelitic Community) modeled on North American Reform communities. They consecrated their own cemetery and built their own synagogue (Temple Emanu-El) from contributions by Jews and gentiles, locally as well as abroad. Jacob Mendes de Sola (1876 - 1881) was their most noted rabbi.

Subsequent to the founding of the reform community, Chacham Chumaceiro introduced considerable renovations in the religious services of the (orthodox) Mikve Israel synagogue: a mixed choir (but women not sitting directly next to men); religious affirmation by both genders; allowing a non-Jewish organist, etc. In 1868 Chacham Chumaceiro returned to Holland. After the departure of Chumaceiro, it was not until 1936 that the Mikve Israel community again had a graduate rabbi. Educated in Salonika and Breslau, Isaac S. Emmanuel published several books and research articles about the history of the Sephardic Jews. Because of difficulties with the no-longer orthodox-thinking community, he resigned in 1939 and became the government librarian of Curacao. He subsequently became Chacham of Panama and then of Rio de Janeiro. Emmanuel's successor was Is. Jessurun Cardozo who worked tirelessly to assist Jewish refugees who landed in Curacao during World War II years. He was succeeded by his brother, the attorney

David Cardozo (1956 – 1960). After Rabbi Mose ben Amine's tenure (1960 – 1963) the fusion of the two communities came to pass.

Fusion.

As a consequence of the numerous mixed marriages among the Portuguese Jews, they suffered a serious decline in numbers. It became increasingly difficult for each synagogue to obtain a minyan (religious quorum) for conducting services. Mikve Israel agreed to replace their 314-year-old Sephardic rite with one that was a combination of Ashkenazi and liberal-reform (Reconstructionist) elements. Other concessions included: mixed seating in the synagogue; the counting of women for arriving at a minyan (quorum); the burial of non-Jewish spouses and children in the Jewish cemeteries.

It was further agreed that the merged congregations would join the 'Reconstructionist Foundation' and the 'World Union for Progressive Judaism'.

The fusion came about de facto in 1963 and de jure in 1965. Simeon J. Maslin, formerly of the Reform congregation, became the first rabbi of the fused community. He remained in function until 1967. Maslin as well as his successor, Leo M. Abrami, was educated at the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, Ohio (USA).

Arrival of the Ashkenazim.

A few Ashkenazi Jews, mainly soldiers and small merchants, had been arriving in Curacao since early times, but in 1926 a considerable number began to settle in Curacao. By their drive and dedication, these immigrants, many from Rumania, were able to attain an excellent position in the business sector.

In 1932 they organized a Jewish center (Club Union). By 1959 they had their own synagogue, Shaarei Tsedek (Portals of Justice). In the late-twentieth century they number about 400. Since 1967 their rabbi is Menachem M. Fitterman, a biochemist with formal rabbinical training. Fitterman also edits the "Bulletin of the Community Shaarei Tsedek."

Aruba.

Initially, Jews from Curacao visited Aruba primarily for purposes of purchasing goods. After acquiring land on Aruba from the West Indian Company in 1773, Moses Salomo Levy Maduro settled there with his wife and six children. The family Maduro is believed to have remained in Aruba till at least 1816. In that year there were 19 Jews on the island. Most possessed real estate; some owned ships.

In 1816 the Camara de Orfaos (the Jewish Orphan Fund in Curacao) named Benjamin Mordechay Henriquez and Benjamin Soares as its representatives to assist in matters concerning the family estates of Jews who had died in Aruba. Around 1825 the Jews had a small cemetery; there were 32 Jews on the island at that time.

Luis Joseph de Jongh obtained in 1854 a 40-year concession to exploit the gold mines of Aruba.

By 1867 the number of Jews in Aruba had decreased to 23. Among them was the remarkable David Capriles (1799 – 1881). In 1879, about a third of the 113 shares of the Aruba Phosphate

Mine Company were owned by Jews. Abraham Jesurun Dz. was the secretary of this company till 1913.

Jews from Holland, Suriname and Eastern Europe have begun to settle in Aruba since 1924, obtaining excellent positions in business and manufacturing.

In 1942 the new immigrants established a Jewish center named 'Aruba Country Club'. Four years later the Jewish group was organized as an official Jewish community. On November 4th 1962 they inaugurated in Oranjestad their synagogue Beth Israel (House of Israel) -- a small, beautiful orthodox synagogue that boasted a conversation hall.

Many Jewish companies have opened branches in Aruba. Around 1968 there were 35 Jewish families living on the island.

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