

CURAÇAO:

An island of the Dutch West Indies, captured from Spain in 1634. It is probable that Jews from Holland were among the first settlers in the island under the Dutch government. But they did not arrive there in considerable numbers until 1650, when twelve Jewish families—De Meza, Aboab, Pereira, De Leon, La Parra, Touro, Cardoze, Jesurun, Marchena, Chaviz, Oleveira, Henriquez Cutinho—were granted permission by Prince Maurice of Orange to settle there. The governor of the island, Matthias Beck, was directed to grant them land, and supply them with slaves, horses, cattle, and agricultural implements, in order to further the cultivation and develop the natural resources of the island, the earlier settlers being chiefly concerned in the more lucrative contraband trade with the Spanish Main. The land assigned to these immigrants was situated on the northern outskirts of the present district of Willemstad. This district is still known as the "Jodenwyk" (Jewish quarter; Corcos, "History of the Jews of Curaçao," pp. 7-8).

In those early years, despite the favorable auspices under which the Jews arrived, severe restrictions were put upon their movements, and they labored under all the disadvantages to which aliens were generally subject. They were even prohibited in 1653 from purchasing additional negro slaves, much needed for their farms.

In March, 1651, the directors of the Dutch West India Company (in which Jews were large stockholders) wrote to Peter Stuyvesant, the governor of New Netherlands, that they were seriously considering the abandonment of Curaçao, since the island was not proving a source of revenue. They decided, however, to make one more experiment, and entered into a contract with Joseph Nuñez de Fonseca (also known as David Nassi), who undertook to emigrate, taking with him a large number of people, under one Jan de Illan, also a Jew, as patroon.

"He intends," they write, "to bring a considerable number of people there to settle and cultivate the land, but we begin to suspect that he and his associates have quite another object in view; namely, to trade from there to the West Indies and the Main. Be that as it may, we are willing to make the experiment, and you must, therefore, charge Director Rodenborch to accommodate him within proper limits and in conformity with the conditions of the contract".

Settlement of Illan.

By Dec., 1652, Illan and his followers had made considerable progress, and had begun a trade in logwood with the neighboring islands. As this trade was not permitted by the terms of the contract, and as it was also contrary to the interests of New Netherlands, attempts were made by the directors to stop it. The grant of privileges to Nassi, bearing the date of Feb. 22, 1652, provided that he was to have two leagues of land along the coast for every fifty families, and four leagues for every one hundred families, that he should bring over. The colonists were further granted exemption from taxes for ten years, and the privilege of selecting the lands on which they desired to settle. They were also accorded religious liberty and toleration, though they were restrained from compelling Christians, should any be among them, to work on Sunday, "nor were any others to labor on that day."

This is the earliest known charter of privileges, specifically conceding religious liberty and toleration to Jews in the New World. Its favorable terms, as well as other attempts at settling Jews in Curaçao made at this time, were unquestionably due to the prominence of Jews on the directorate of the Dutch West India Company, and in Dutch affairs generally ([See Manasseh ben Israel](#)). On April 4, 1652, the directors wrote again to Stuyvesant, speaking of Nassi as "preparing to go there with a large number of people." Yet they had decided misgivings respecting the success of the enterprise, and no confidence in the people or in their leader (Corcos, *l.c.*). Their fears appear to have been justified, for all accounts tend to show that the plan was not carried out on any extensive scale (Corcos, *ib.* pp. 9, 17, 18; Daly, "The Settlement of the Jews in North America," p. 9).

Jews Prominent in Trade.

The history of the effective settlement of Jews in Curaçao begins, however, in 1654, when the conquest of Brazil by the Portuguese resulted in the expulsion of the Jews and their dispersion to the West Indies and to the mainland of North America, particularly to New Netherlands and to Newport, Rhode Island. Large numbers came from Brazil to Curaçao during that and succeeding years, bringing with them considerable wealth. During this period they laid the foundations of that prominence in the commercial development of the island which they have since retained (Corcos, *ib.* pp. 9-10). Shortly after this (1657), regular communication for purposes of trade was established between New Amsterdam and Curaçao. This was

principally in the hands of the Jews, and contributed to the commercial development of both colonies. An original Spanish bill of lading and an invoice of goods shipped from Curaçao to New Netherlands in 1658, and directed to Joshua Mordeky En-Riquez, included Venetian pearls and pendants; thimbles, scissors, knives, and bells, thus showing the variety of the trade carried on by the Jews at this time ("Archives of the State of New York, Translation of Dutch Records," xii. 99).

In contravention of their instructions the local authorities connived at the trade carried on with Isaac de Fonseca of Barbados, which began in 1656, and which tended to undermine the trade monopoly enjoyed by the Dutch West India Company. The Curaçao authorities were kept from interfering with it by Fonseca's threat to turn his trade toward Jamaica and abandon Curaçao.

In 1659 Stuyvesant complained to the directors that Jews in Curaçao were allowed to hold negro slaves, and were granted other privileges not enjoyed by the colonists of New Netherlands, and he demanded for his own people "if not more, at least the same, privileges" as were enjoyed by the "usurious and covetous Jews," as he termed them (Albany MSS.).

The life of the Jews as a community begins definitely in the year 1656, when they established the Congregation Mikveh Israel under the direction of the Spanish and Portuguese community of Amsterdam. In the same year the land originally granted to the first twelve immigrant families was appropriated for a "bet-haim" (burial ground), and was enclosed with a brick wall and consecrated to its purpose. It is not likely, however, that this year witnessed the first services held by the new colonists. Probably they had gathered, as was the case elsewhere, in a room provided by one of their number. When, in 1656, they had outgrown the limitations of a private room, they rented a small wooden building, in which regular daily services were held.

Early Tombstones.

There is no evidence that they were numerous enough at this date to warrant the selection of a rabbi, though the fact that one of the earliest tombstones, bearing the date 22 Menahem (Ab), 5432 = 1671, carries the name of Rev. Abraham Haim Lopez da Fonseca, tends to prove that he officiated as *hazzan* for a time. The earliest tombstone decipherable is that of Isaac Henriquez Cotinho (5431 = 1670). Of those interred during the remaining years of the seventeenth century and the first decade of the eighteenth (1670-1707), the names of twenty-seven can be deciphered, thus affording an indication of the extent of the settlement. Among these may be recognized the names of a number of the first settlers of 1650 (Corcos, *ib.* pp. 10-13). The first regularly appointed *hakam* of the community was Josiah Pardo, who arrived in Curaçao from Amsterdam in 1674, and remained there until 1683, when he left for Jamaica.

Indicative of the close relations between the communities of Amsterdam and Curaçao is the fact that this Pardo was the son of David Pardo, who, with Saul Levi Morteira, Menasseh ben Israel, and Ishac Aboab, constituted the college of rabbis at Amsterdam ("Publications Am. Jew. Hist. Soc." iii. 19).

In 1692 the small wooden building used up to this time having been outgrown, a new synagogue was erected, and consecrated with appropriate ceremonies on the eve of Passover in that year, the services being read by the *hazzan*, David Raphael Lopez de Fonseca (d. 5467 = 1707). This building, enlarged and reconsecrated in 1731, still stands, a monument to the substantial constructive methods of the early builders.

For reasons not yet satisfactorily explained, in 1693 a considerable number of families left the island for the continent of America, many going to Newport, among them being members of the Touro family, afterward famous in the history of that town. During the year 1692 a number of Italian settlers in Curaçao, refugees from David Nassi's dispersed colony at Cayenne (dissolved 1664), departed for Tucacas, Venezuela, where they established a congregation called "Santa Irmandade."

A period of substantial prosperity for the Jews of Curaçao began early in the eighteenth century. In 1715 they established a benevolent society for the care of the sick and needy. Five years later they responded liberally to an appeal for aid from the Shearith Israel congregation of New York, and in 1756 met with equal generosity a similar appeal from the Jews of Newport. By 1750 their numbers had increased to about 2,000 (Chumaceiro). They were prosperous merchants and traders, and held positions of prominence in the commercial and political affairs of the island (Corcos, *ib.* p. 24). By the end of the eighteenth century they owned most of the property in the district of Willemstad. As many as fifty-three vessels are said to have left in one day for Holland, laden with goods which were, for the most part, the property of Jewish merchants (Chumaceiro).

Congregational Disputes.

Two communities had come into existence by 1740, the newer one occupying a tract across the harbor from Willemstad, then as now known as "Otrabanda." In order to avoid crossing the water on the Sabbath to

attend divine services, those who resided in this outlying district formed themselves into the Neveh Shalom (Dwelling of Peace) congregation, and in 1745 (12th Elul, 5505) consecrated their synagogue. For a time this was regarded as merely a branch of the older congregation, and as under its direction. This led to a series of serious disputes, which culminated, in 1749, in an open breach, settled only by the intervention of Prince William Charles of Orange-Nassau, in a decree bearing the date of April 30, 1750, and commanding the disputing communities to terminate their strifes, to submit to the government of the parnasim and board of the original synagogue (Mikveh Israel), and to be subject to the regulations of the Portuguese community in Amsterdam. This arrangement continued until 1870, when the congregation became independent. On Aug. 19, 1750, the governor and council proclaimed a day of thanksgiving and prayer, which was to inaugurate an era of peace. On this occasion Rabbi Raphael Samuel Mendes de Sola preached a sermon, which was afterward published (1757) in Amsterdam (Corcos, *ib.* pp. 31-38; "Publications Am. Jew. Hist. Soc." iii. 17-18, ix. 149-150).

Increasing in prosperity and in numbers during the next century, the community was not without internal disputes. It was due to one of these controversies between the parnasim and the ministers that a society, called the "Porvenir," was founded in 1862. In the next year this developed into a Reform congregation, under the name "Emanu El," which in 1865 laid the corner-stone of its new building in the quarter "Scharlo," the synagogue being completed and dedicated in the following year. In 1863 a moderate change in the direction of Reform was introduced into the liturgy of the Congregation Mikveh Israel. At the present time the older congregation has a membership of about 800, the younger of 250. Each has its religious schools and charitable organizations.

The ministers of Temple Emanu El were Josuah Naar, Jacob de Solla Mezer Solas, and Isaac Lopez de Leao Laguna. Those of the older congregation (Mikveh Israel) were as follows: Abraham Haim Lopez de Fonseca (d. 1671); David Raphael Lopez de Fonseca (1692; d. 1707); Eliaho Lopez (1692-1712); Raphael Jesuran (1715-48); Raphael Samuel Mendes de Sola (1749; d. 1761); Isaac Henriques Farro (1761; d. 1762); Jacob Lopez de Fonseca (1765; d. 1817: he celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of his ministry in July, 1815); Aaron Mendez Chumaceiro (1856-69); Haim Israel Sant Cross (1869-89); (Eleazar Polak (1893; d. 1894); Joseph Corcos (1896-98).

At the present time (1902) the Jews are among the leading citizens of Curaçao. Forty-four out of fifty-two firms on the two principal business thoroughfares, De Heeren Straat and Breeden Straat, are Jewish. The leading lawyers, physicians, editors, and druggists are also Jews. Among the more prominent Jewish citizens and officials are two bank presidents, one member of the executive council, three members of the colonial council, one district judge, one chief clerk, ten consuls, four captains, and eleven lieutenants of the militia.