

The Cradle of Judaism in the Americas

350 years of Jewish Life in Curaçao

It is a little known fact that the people of Curaçao, a rather small Caribbean island, played important roles in the success of Allied efforts during the Second World War. After the War, a monument was erected to commemorate the Antilleans who gave their lives for the War efforts, both locally, at sea and abroad. A plaque lists 162 names, amongst them George Maduro.

As a reserve-officer in the Dutch army, George fought heroically during the War in the Netherlands. After the Dutch capitulated, he joined the resistance to help downed Allied pilots to escape via Spain. He was finally arrested by the Germans and perished in February 1945 in the camp at Dachau. George Maduro was a descendant of one of the first Jewish families to settle in Curaçao in the 1650's and 60's.

The first Jew to arrive in Curaçao was Samuel Cohen. He served as an interpreter on board the Dutch fleet under the command of Johan van Walbeeck, which conquered the island from the Spanish in 1634. A few years later, in 1651, Joao d'Ylan brought 10 to 12 Jewish families from the Amsterdam Portuguese community to Curaçao and established Congregation Mikvé Israel in that same year; they lived on Plantations 'De Hoop' ('The Hope') and Bleinheyne where they tended the land. A second group of settlers followed in 1659 under the patronage of Isaac da Costa and brought with them on loan from the Amsterdam Synagogue: one of our first Torahs, still used today in the Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Synagogue. These settlers were originally from Spain and Portugal, they had fled the Inquisition and found refuge first in Holland, then in Northern Brazil and later on in Curaçao.

Agriculture, they soon realized, was not an economically viable activity. The Jews of Curaçao recognized opportunity in trade. The Spanish colonizers were not providing well for their territories on the South American coast, and the Jews started a continuous trade between the region and the European continent. They came to live inside the walled city of Willemstad as early as 1660. Soon thereafter, Jews opened up shops in Willemstad where they traded the goods from both continents.

The first settlers had consecrated a house of worship on Plantation De Hoop, as well as the historic Beth Haim cemetery. But when the Jews moved to town they consecrated a first synagogue in town (1674). This original synagogue was replaced three times with larger buildings and in 1703 they built their first synagogue, on the same site where our current synagogue stands today. When this house of worship became too small again to house the flourishing Jewish community of Curaçao, they tore that one down to construct the current building. The architecture of the new synagogue, which was inaugurated in 1732, was modeled after the 'Esnoga', the Portuguese Sephardic synagogue in Amsterdam.

Still in use today, our congregation's 'Snoa' is the oldest synagogue in continuous use in the Americas and stands proudly in the middle of Punda, in Willemstad, Curaçao's capital city, a UNESCO World Heritage City. Its remarkable architecture, solid mahogany interior, 18th century copper chandeliers, and sand covered floor have made it one of the most cherished monuments and the number one tourist attraction in Curaçao.

In this (then) underdeveloped region, the Jewish community managed to excel with their knowledge of international trade, shipping and maritime insurance, and transportation. Their family and ethnic connections with Jewish businessmen, financiers and industrialists in the world centers of the time, such as Amsterdam, Hamburg, London, Bordeaux, Lisbon, Madrid and New York, allowed them to capture most of the trade in the Caribbean. It should be noted, however, that very few Curaçao Jews were involved with the slave trade, which was in essence the domain of the Dutch.

Shipping became a mostly Jewish domain, as did the business of insurance and insurance brokering. During the first half of the nineteenth century, several Jewish firms were incorporated providing a combination of commercial, maritime, industrial and financial services internationally. Three commercial banking institutions evolved out of these early

commercial firms. Today, Jewish firms and commercial shops continue to be forerunners in our island's economy, albeit that the number of Jewish commercial entities has diminished over the years.

At the end of the eighteenth century the Jews constituted more than half of the white population in Curaçao; and while their principal language had been Portuguese, many Jews spoke Papiamentu amongst themselves. Without a doubt, the Jewish community in Curaçao enriched Papiamentu, the native language of the island, with Portuguese and Hebrew words. Members of the congregation became involved in practically all facets of life, not only pioneering efforts in commerce, industry and tourism, but also becoming actively involved with social causes, community service, politics, academics and the arts.

Without a doubt, at the turn of the nineteenth century, the Jewish Community in Curaçao was the largest, most important and wealthiest congregation in the New World. The congregation gave financial contributions to build synagogues and consecrate cemeteries in new communities in the hemisphere such as in Newport (Rhode Island), New York (New York), Kingston (Jamaica), St. Eustatius (Netherlands Antilles), Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), Charleston (South Carolina), Caracas (Venezuela), Rio Hacha (Colombia), St. Thomas (Virgin Islands), Paramaribo (Surinam) and Colon (Panama). Still today, the congregations in Newport and New York still offer a special prayer for the Curaçao community every year on Yom Kippur.

The Jews who arrived in Curaçao centuries ago were of Sephardic descent and followed conservative religious rituals and customs. Years of living in fear of persecution and migrating in search of a new home undoubtedly had its effects on the customs and rituals which the newly formed Congregation Mikvé Israel developed in the early days.

In the middle of the nineteenth century the ensuing rituals were being questioned by a portion of the community. They wanted to introduce some liberal and more modern rituals. Finally, fueled by commercial ill-blood, a third of the congregation started its own congregation in 1864 which followed principles based on the philosophy of the Reform Jewish Movement which was making a great impact on the Jewish community in the United States and Germany. They built the magnificent Tempel Emanuel, and consecrated their own cemetery at Berg Altena. Exactly 100 years later the congregations united and formed Mikvé Israel-Emanuel.

The United Congregation chose to follow the rituals of the Reconstructionist Federation of America. It allowed us to preserve some of the historical and traditional customs of both Congregations. In 2000, Mikvé Israel-Emanuel adapted its rituals once again, becoming egalitarian in religious services.

In many ways the history of Jewish congregation in Curaçao offers a unique window into Jewish and world history. Often referred to as the 'Mother Congregation of the Americas', United Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel in Curaçao, Netherlands Antilles, is the oldest active Jewish congregation in the Americas. Unlike many other early Jewish communities in the region, the congregation in Curaçao has remained active throughout the centuries. The history of our people is testimony to our deep roots in Curaçao and continued commitment to our Jewish heritage.

In 2001, the congregation thus commemorates 350 years of its founding. Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel will be marking this important milestone in history with activities celebrating its rich past and dedication to the future. Many international Jewish organizations will be attending the Commemoration Week activities in April 2001 recognizing that Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel, its synagogue and the Beth Haim cemetery together truly constitute a heritage for all Jews in the Americas.

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