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DINING GUIDE

IN THIS WEEK'S EDITION

- News**
- Front Page**
- Editorial/Letters**
- Torah**
- OP-ED**
- Media Monitor**
- Columns**
- Features**
- Magazine**
- Web Exclusives**
- Food**
- Jewish Community**
- Contests/Games**

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JEWS SETTLE IN NEW YORK

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
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In 1654 the Portuguese recaptured the city of Recife, Brazil from the Dutch. This marked the end of the vibrant Jewish community that had flourished under the Dutch beginning in 1630. Those residents of Recife who were originally Marranos (Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity) fled for their lives, fearing the re-establishment of the Inquisition. The Jews of Recife who were not Marranos also chose to leave rather than live under a Portuguese government that would be anti-Jewish.

Arnold Wiznitzer writes, "Jews who had never been Christians before had the possibility of remaining in Brazil in 1654, but chose not to do so and all openly professing Jews left Brazil before April 26, 1654." [1]

A total of 16 ships transported the Jewish and Dutch colonists from Recife. Some claim as many as 5,000 Jews left Recife at this time. Most of these Jews returned to Holland; some relocated to colonies in the Caribbean.

Twenty-three of the Jews aboard one of these ships eventually arrived in Nieuw Amsterdam (New Netherland/New York) on September 7, 1654. There are at least two versions of the story of how these Jews came to settle in Nieuw Amsterdam. One version is that the original ship was captured by pirates at one point. The Jews were subsequently taken aboard the French ship the St. Charles, and this ship brought them to Nieuw Amsterdam. According to Wiznitzer, there was no capture by pirates. Instead, the Jews were driven by adverse winds to Spanish-held Jamaica. From there they boarded the small French frigate, Sainte Catherine, which took them to New Amsterdam. [2]

No matter what the true tale of their journey is, the problems of these Jews were far from over when their ship docked. This band of twenty-three probably "consisted of four adult men, six adult women and thirteen young people and children." [3] They had to have been exhausted from more than four months of arduous travel. In addition, they were penniless and could not pay the exorbitant passage fee that they had been forced to agree to. Indeed, shortly after they arrived, their personal possessions were put up for auction to satisfy the demands of the frigate's captain. This auction did not raise sufficient funds to cover their fare. The captain, seeing that he would not collect all the money he demanded, finally gave up and sailed from Nieuw Amsterdam.

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The troubles of this forlorn group were still not over, because Peter Stuyvesant, the dictatorial director-general of the colony, did not want them to stay. Since none of the group had passports, Stuyvesant, left to his own devices, might well have been successful in forcing them to leave.

When the Jews arrived, Stuyvesant sought permission from Amsterdam to keep them out altogether. The Jews, he explained, were "deceitful," "very repugnant," and "hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ." He asked the directors of the Dutch West India Company to "require them in a friendly way to

depart" lest they "infect and trouble this new colony." He warned in a subsequent letter that "giving them liberty we cannot refuse the Lutherans and Papists." Decisions made concerning the Jews, he understood, would serve as precedents and determine the colony's religious character forever after.

Forced to choose between their economic interests and their religious sensibilities, the directors of the Dutch West India Company back in Amsterdam voted with their pocketbooks. They had received a carefully worded petition from the "merchants of the Portuguese [Jewish] Nation" in Amsterdam that listed a number of reasons why Jews in New Netherland should be permitted to stay there. One argument doubtless stood out among all the others: the fact that "many of the Jewish nation are principal shareholders." Responding to Stuyvesant, the directors noted this fact and referred as well to the "considerable loss" that Jews had sustained in Brazil. They ordered Stuyvesant to permit Jews to "travel," "trade," "live," and

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"remain" in New Netherland, "provided the poor among them shall not become a burden to the company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation." After several more petitions, Jews secured the right to trade throughout the colony, serve guard duty, and own real estate. They also won the right to worship in the privacy of their own homes.[4]

All was not total gloom for this small band of Jewish refugees when they arrived, since they actually found other Jews who had already settled in the colony.

In so far as their names have come down to us in the court records, four men: Abraham and David Israel, Moses Ambrosius (Lumbrozo), and Asser Levy; and two women, Judica de Mereda and Rycke Nounes, and others making up the twenty-three, found in Nieuw Amsterdam two other Jews. One of these was Solomon Pietersen, of whom we seem to know no fact other than that he was designated to act as counsel for the new arrivals. The other was one Jacob bar Simson. He had come from Holland some two weeks before the arrival of those who came from Brazil. He bore with him a passport issued by the Dutch West India Company in July. Isolated Jews had preceded them in coming to what is now the United States. These scattered individuals left no mark on the American Jewish story. But Solomon Pietersen, Jacob bar Simson, and the twenty-three other Jews who came to Manhattan in 1654 may truly be called the "Jewish Pilgrim Fathers," for their settlement on the North American continent became the nucleus of a congregation and of a community with historic continuity.[5]

It appears that the authors of the above quote regarding Solomon Pietersen are wrong, because according to Jonathan Sarna, we do know one more sad fact about him:

The most difficult challenge facing New Amsterdam's nascent Jewish community - one that American Jews would confront time and again through the centuries - was how to preserve and maintain Judaism, particularly with their numbers being so small and Protestant pressure to conform so great. From the earliest years of Jewish settlement, a range of responses to this challenge developed. At one extreme stood Solomon Pietersen, a merchant from Amsterdam who came to town in 1654, just prior to the refugees from Recife, to seek his fortune. In 1656 he became the first known Jew on American soil to marry a Christian. While it is not clear that he personally converted, the daughter that resulted from the marriage, named Anna, was baptized in childhood.[6]

One of the first orders of business that the new arrivals attended to was the fulfillment of their religious obligations. Arnold Wiznitzer tells us:

The twenty-three were not ex-Marranos but in part Ashkenazic Jews from Germany and Italy, and in part, Sephardim born as Jews. Together with the boys above the age of thirteen among them, the Ashkenazim, Jacob Barsimson and Salomon Pietersen and probably with some others already present, they could have congregated as a minyan to conduct divine services on Rosh Hashanah, 5415 (Sept. 12, 1654), the first to be held on the island of Manhattan. Sephardim and Ashkenazim together formed Congregation Shearith Israel, the first Jewish congregation and the first Jewish community in New Amsterdam which, for valid reasons as we have shown above, included from its very foundation Ashkenazic and Sephardic members of the earlier Congregation Zur Israel of Recife.[7]

So began the first chapter of Jewish Jewry in what was to become the United States.

[1] The Exodus from Brazil and Arrival in New Amsterdam of the Jewish Pilgrim Fathers, 1654, Arnold Wiznitzer, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society 44, 1-4 (Available online at www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm). Reprinted in The Jewish Experience in America I: The Colonial Period, Ktav Publishing House, Inc, New York, 1969, page 32.

[2] An Old Faith in the New World, David and Tamar de Sola Pool, Columbia University Press, New York, 1955, page 8.

[3] The Jewish Experience in America I: The Colonial Period, Ktav Publishing House, Inc, New York, 1969, page 31.

[4] American Judaism: A History, Jonathan D. Sarna, Yale University Press 2004, pages 2 & 3.

[5] An Old Faith in the New World, David and Tamar de Sola Pool, Columbia University Press, New York, 1955, page 12.

[6] American Judaism: A History, Jonathan D. Sarna, Yale University Press 2004, page 8.

[7] The Jewish Experience in America I: The Colonial Period, Ktav Publishing House, Inc, New York, 1969, page 32.

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