

The rise and demise of the Jewish Community of St. Eustatius

BY DR. YITZCHOK LEVINE

(Note: Most of the quotes are from "The Honen Dalim Congregation of St. Eustatius" by J. Hartog, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, 1967.)

Though there is no Jewish community left in St. Eustatius today, during the years of the American Revolution, however, the island was the home of a flourishing Jewish congregation named Honen Dalim (The One who is merciful to the poor). It is not known precisely when Jews first settled on this island. However, we do know that many of the Jews who left Recife in 1654 as a result of the Portuguese reconquest of Brazil went to Amsterdam and then later came to the Caribbean.

Some probably settled on St. Eustatius, and there are records which indicate that the Amsterdam Jew Jacob Loew had relatives on the island. Later, in 1711, two Jewish merchants, Juda Obediente and Salomon Nunez Netto, visited Statia, though they did not live there. The registrar's lists and the parish registers suggest that in 1722 St. Eustatius had 1,204 inhabitants, of which four families – twenty-two persons – were Jewish. Six of the Jews were adult men, five were adult women, and there were five boys and six girls.

There were several periods of immigration after 1730. Most Jews came from Amsterdam, and many were descended from distinguished Sephardic families. In 1737 the Jews of Statia



Dr. Yitzchok Levine

sought permission to build a synagogue, but it was not until two years later that their petition was granted. Even so, the Dutch authorities saw to it that the synagogue was situated so that "the divine service of the Jews would not hinder the one of the Christians."

THE SYNAGOGUE was constructed on the site where present-day visitors still find the ruins of the house of prayer in the centre of Oranjestad. Built of yellow bricks, the building measures 12.75 meters by 8.50 meters and is situated on a street known to this day as "Synagogue Pad." The walls of the synagogue are about 60 cm thick and some 7 meters high; the floor and roof have disappeared, but a flight of stairs leads one to conclude that the synagogue was a two-storied building. Elsewhere on the island is the Jewish cemetery, in which sixteen beautifully carved tombstones have been preserved.

We do not know the exact year the synagogue was built. However, the archives of Curaçao's Congregation

Mikvé Israel indicate that in 1738 a certain Salomon de Leon, acting in the name of the Statian congregation, appealed to Curaçao for help in building the synagogue. A collection was held in the Curaçao community for that purpose, and money was sent to St. Eustatius. The Jews of Statia were not particularly well off, and there still exists several letters showing that the Jews of Curaçao financially assisted the Statia Jews.

The Jews of St. Eustatius were primarily Sephardim, but there were also a goodly number of Ashkenazim. "Indeed, there were enough Ashkenazim for conflicts to trouble the relations between the two groups. The friction between Sephardim and Ashkenazim came repeatedly to a boiling point, and it happened more than once that the government had to be called in to help settle disputes. The social status of the Statian Jews was, it appears, not on a par with that of their Curaçao coreligionists. On Curaçao, the Jews formed a separate corps of the Civil Guard, whereas on

St. Eustatius, they were not allowed to be members of the Guard. On the other hand, they did take part in elections for members of the Council."

Barbaric Treatment

Obtaining and maintaining a flow of military equipment and supplies were crucial to the success of the American Revolution. Many times the victorious conclusion of a battle hung precariously on the availability of munitions and ordnance. From the outset of American resistance to British rule, St. Eustatius played a pivotal role in providing the means by which the American patriots ultimately won victory. Indeed, the success of the Revolution can largely be attributed to the activity of the traders of this tiny island.

The British already harboured a seething resentment toward the Dutch, because Statia had given recognition to the fledgling American flag in 1776. Added to this was the fact that in 1781 Britain realized that the only way to win the war against the revolutionaries was by severing the supply lifeline from St. Eustatius to America.

TWO OF Britain's most redoubtable military figures, Admiral Sir George Brydges Rodney and Major-General Sir John Vaughan, were dispatched with a formidable fleet to raid and occupy the island. The lone Dutch frigate defending Statia could not even consider taking on the fifteen great British warships. Nor could a token garrison of sixty soldiers consider resisting the massive British force that debarked onto Statia. Rodney confiscated all the merchandise stuffing the warehouses, valued at three to four million pounds sterling. Vaughan wrote that "150 Sail of Ships and Vessels of all Sorts" in the harbour were likewise seized along with their cargos.

The Jews were isolated, brutally beaten, and robbed of everything they had. "Rodney singled out the Jews... and ordered them stripped for cash or precious stones or whatever might be secreted in their clothing. Acting out a common antipathy with unnecessary zeal, he ordered the Jews expelled on one day's notice, without notice to their families or access to their homes." Thirty Jewish men were deported to St. Kitts. "The rest were locked in a weighing house for three days when they were released just in time to witness the auction of their properties."

Rodney's behaviour indicates he was an anti-Semite.



Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands visited the Honen Dalim synagogue in St. Eustatius in January 2001. The Queen visited the synagogue, when it was still under renovation, as part of a walk through the Historic Chore. Photo by Suzanne Koelega.

In Jamaica he had lashed out against the Jews who conducted a "Pernicious and Contraband Trade." At Kingston he insisted that "particularly the Jews" traded illegally with the Spaniards. His hatred for Jews found expression in his letters. So heinous was Rodney's treatment of the Jews that he came under fire in Britain's Parliament by the most prestigious voice of the Opposition, Edmund Burke. After denouncing his plundering of Statia's citizens of various nationalities, Burke focused on the egregious manner in which Jews were separated and brutalized.

The End of the Jewish Community

The congregation had no qualified rabbi and was served by a chazzan, Jacob Robles. It is not known who succeeded Robles or even if he had a successor. Starting in 1795, Statia underwent a period of utter confusion due to French and English occupation. The situation on the island deteriorated to such an extent that

most of the Statian Jews left. A census taken in 1818 showed there were only five Jews left on St. Eustatius. Anna Vieira de Molina, a widow of Surinamese birth, was the last Jew to live there. Her death in 1846 marked the end of Jewish history on the island.

This article first appeared in the Jewish Press on August 3, 2007, as Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 29). See www.jewishpress.com.

Dr. Yitzchok Levine, a frequent contributor to The Jewish Press, is a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey. "Glimpses Into American Jewish History" appears the first week of each month. Dr. Levine has written other articles about the (former) Jewish communities in the region in past editions of The Jewish Press.



The outside of the Honen Dalim synagogue after it was consolidated in 2002. The structure was strengthened some four years ago as part of the Historic Chore Project. Photo by Siem Dijkshoorn.



The interior of the Honen Dalim synagogue. Island archaeologist Grant Gilmore about a year ago uncovered the ritual bath of the synagogue on the side of the structure. Photo by Siem Dijkshoorn.