The earthquake in Haiti and the unbelievable devastation it caused have focused world attention on this island country. Most Haitians lived under substandard conditions before this tragedy, and, sadly, they are now even worse off than before. No one is sure precisely how many have perished, the Haitian government recently reported about 230,000 deaths. Many of the survivors have been seriously injured, and perhaps as many as a million Haitians were left homeless due to this cataclysmic event. It will certainly take years before any sort of normalcy returns to this island nation.

When reading and hearing about the tragedy in Haiti, one may wonder about the early history of this Caribbean country. This article gives some of the general historical background of Haiti and traces what is known about the early history of Haiti’s Jews.

Haitian (Saint-Domingue) History

Haiti, formerly known as Saint-Domingue, shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. Hispaniola is more or less in the center of the Caribbean Islands, with the Turks, Caicos and Bahamas Islands to the north; Cuba and Jamaica to its west; Puerto Rico and the Leeward Islands to the east; and South America to the south.

“Ayiti” (land of high mountains) was the indigenous Taíno American name for the mountainous western side of the island. The country’s highest point is Pic la Selle, at 8,793 ft (2,675 square kilometers), and its capital is Port-au-Prince. Haitian Creole and French are the official languages.

On December 5, 1492, Christopher Columbus reported to his sponsors that he had reached a large island in the region of the western Atlantic Oceans, later to be known as the Caribbean Sea. The island was inhabited by an Arawakan people known as the Taínos. They referred to their island by three names, Ayiti, Bohio, and X犍ewa. Columbus claimed the island for the Spanish Crown and gave it the Spanish name La Isla Española (“the Spanish Island”). Others called this island Hispaniola, and this name was later Anglicized to Haiti.

Some members of Columbus’s crew opted to settle on this fertile island. However, when Columbus returned in 1493, there was no trace of those whom he had left behind a year earlier. He again claimed the entire island for Spain, leaving his brother Bartholomew Columbus to establish a second settlement, which took root at Cap Haitien.

“Following the arrival of Europeans, the Taíno population suffered near extinction, in possibly the worst case of depopulation in the Americas. A commonly accepted hypothesis attributes the high mortality of this colony in part to Old World diseases to which the natives had no immunity.”

Some Taínos were able to survive by setting up villages in areas not controlled by the Spanish. With the discovery of lucrative gold and silver deposits in the 1520s in Mexico and South America, Spanish interest in Hispaniola began to wane.

Beginning in 1625, French buccaneers became active in this region of the Caribbean. They survived by pirating Spanish ships and hunting wild cattle. Although the Spanish destroyed the buccaneers’ bases of operations several times, they were unable to rid the area of the French. In 1659, an official French settlement was established at Tortuga, an island off the coast of Hispaniola. This was the beginning of the spread of French influence in and around Hispaniola.

“In 1664, the newly established French West India Company took control over the colony, which it named Saint-Domingue, and France formally claimed control of the western portion of the island of Hispaniola. In 1670, they established the first permanent French settlement on the mainland of Hispaniola, Cap Français (later Cap Français, now Cap-Haïtien). Under the 1697 Treaty of Ryswick, Spain officially ceded the western third of Hispaniola to France. By that time, planters outnumbered buccaneers and, with the encouragement of [French King] Louis XIV, they had begun to grow tobacco, indigo, cotton and cacao (the bean from which chocolate is made) on the fertile northern plain, thus prompting the importation of African slaves.”

The economy of Saint-Domingue gradually expanded, sugar and coffee became important export crops. In 1676, the colony exported 72 million pounds of raw sugar, 51 million pounds of refined sugar, one million pounds of indigo and two million pounds of cotton. Saint-Domingue became known as the “Pearl of the Antilles” — one of the richest colonies that was part of the 18th century French empire. By the 1780s, Saint-Domingue produced about 49 percent of all the sugar and 60 percent of all the coffee consumed in Europe.

Thousands of slaves were used on the plantations that produced these crops. These slaves were so badly overworked and mistreated that thousands died every year, making it necessary to constantly import replacements from Africa. It is estimated that over the years, about 790,000 slaves were imported from Africa. At one time, Saint-Domingue was receiving a third of the entire Atlantic slave trade!

By 1790, the slave population on the island totalled about 500,000 and was controlled by approximately 12,000 whites.

“At all times, a majority of slaves in the colony were African born, as the brutal conditions of slavery prevented the population from experiencing growth through natural increase. African culture thus remained strong among slaves to the end of French rule, in particular the folk-religion of Voodoo, which commingled Catholic liturgy and ritual with the beliefs and practices of Guinean, Congo and Dahomey. Slave traders scoured the Atlantic coast of Africa, and the slaves who arrived came from hundreds of different tribes, their languages often mutually incomprehensible.”

It was inevitable that such brutal oppression would lead to rebellion. Beginning in 1791, slave uprisings broke out, leading to several years of bloody fighting. Finally, on January 1, 1804, the slaves won their independence, and Saint-Domingue, which was renamed the indigenous Taíno name of Haiti (“Land of Mountains”), became the first black-led republic in the world.

Early Jewish History of Haiti

“The question [of] whether Jewish communities existed during the colonial period in Saint Domingue (Haiti) arises owing to the fragmentary nature of evidence found among Spanish records. The existence of an organized or structured Jewish society on this Caribbean island. At first sight, it is rather surprising that Jews should have come and settled in France-controlled, strictly Catholic possessions at all, the Papal Inquisition and, in some important instances, a national Inquisition, as in Spain, or in Portugal, were at work seeking suspected insinuare conversos (pejoratively known also as ‘Marranos,’ or otherwise, as Crypto-Jews) to be judged and burned at the stake.”

France, despite being a Catholic country, never allowed the Inquisition to operate on her soil or in her overseas possessions. Still, things were not particularly good for Jews in places that were under French control. The order of Jesuit priests, which harbored great dislike for Jews, was very influential at the Versailles court during the second part of the seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century. In 1685, during the reign of Louis XIV, Jesuit priests were instru- mental in the drafting of a document known as Code Noir. Ostensibly it was intended to regulate the hiring of out-of-work slaves. However, Article One prohibited Jews from living in any French colony. Furthermore, those Jews who were already living in the colonies were to be expelled.

Despite the existence of such a discriminatory law, some Jews and/or conversos did manage to reside in Havana, Martinique and Saint Domingue. This was part of a general pattern. “At all times, a majority of Jews were Crypto-Jews or those Jews who had renounced their Jewish faith but were still practicing Judaism in secret.”

Given that Saint Domingue was a French colony, it is not surprising that it held strong appeal for Jewish merchants, who were always on the lookout for places to profit. “From all that is known now, the influx of almost exclusively Sephardic Jews was much larger on this Caribbean island, and possibly even on those among whom they had generally converted and were living as true Catholics.”

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Cap François

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‘Further evidence of a different kind comes from the historian-couple Emmanuel, in their well-documented study of one of the oldest Jewish communities in the Caribbean: the island of Curacao in the Netherlands Antilles. They list some eighty Jewish families, originally from Curacao, who settled in apparently permanent residence at Cap François, and were connected with trade activities in Saint Domingue.’

‘This community must have been religiously active, because a certain Dr. Isaac Cardozo was brought over from Europe to serve as a religious leader and as chazzan. Furthermore, the existence of the Cap François Jewish community was known to Jews living in North America. “The Jews of Philadelphia, seeking funds for the building of their synagogue, wrote a letter, dated 28 August 1782, which was addressed to “our brethren in Cap François.” There is also some evidence suggesting the community established a Jewish cemetery.’

Jeremie and Region

“At the northwestern tip of the peninsula, in a region known as La Grand’Anse, there is a lovely township on a high promontory called, somewhat surprisingly, by the Spanish name, Moron. According to a widespread local tradition of long-standing, this name was attributed to the site owing to the presence thereabouts of a ‘rabbi’ having that patronymic [family name].’

One Simon Isaac Henriquez Moron, a Portuguese Jew from Curacao and a well-known businessman and planter, resided in this part of Saint Domingue during the eighteenth century. There is some evidence suggesting that Moron built a mikvah here.

‘Possibly further evidence of a Jewish presence in this area is the fact that its capital bears the name of the colony appears in contemporary official acts.

‘Contact without permanent settlement during the seventeenth century seems to account for Jewish names given to at least two sites on the southeastern shore of Saint Domingue. Seventeenth century French maps give the toponyms (place names) of Anse-a-Jul (Core of the Jew) and Pointe-a-Juifs (Point of Jews).’

Eighteenth Century Haitian Jewry

Somewhat more is known about Jewish life in Saint Domingue during the eighteenth century. There is evidence of Jews living in several areas — in the north at Cap François and Port-de-Paix; in the southwest at Jeremie and surrounding places; in the southeast at Cayes, St. Louis de Sud, Aquis and Jacmel; and on the western coastal tip of the island at Port-au-Prince, Leogane, and Petit-Goave.

A description of what we know about Jewish life in each of these areas is given below.

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