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

BY DR. YITZCHOK LEVINE

(Not: 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 1634 as a result of the Portuguese reconquest of Brazil went to Amsterdam and then later came to the Caribbean.

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ome 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 Stataia, though they did not live there. The register’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 Stataia

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-story 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 Curacao’s Congregation Mikveh Israel indicate that in 1738 a certain Salomon de Leon, acting in the name of the Statian congregation, appealed to Curacao for help in building the synagogue. A collection was held in the Curacao 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 Curacao financially assisted the Stataia 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 Jews of St. Eustatius was, it appears, not on a par with that of their Curacao coreligionists. On Curacao, the Jews formed a separate corps of their own.”

TWO OF Britain’s most respectable 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 Staia could not even consider taking the fleet or any of the British warships. Nor could a token garrison of sixty, sixty soldiers consider resisting the massive British force that embarked on Stataia. Rodney confiscated all the merchandise storing 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 seized along with their cargos. The Jews were isolated, brutally beaten, and robbed of everything they had. “Rodney aimed at the Jews... and ordered them stripped for cash or precious stones or whatever might be secreted in their clothing.” Acting out a common anti-semitic 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.

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 Spanish. His hatred for Jews was the basis of the British policy against Stataia.

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 Stataia 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 lines from St. Eustatius to America.

In 1780, the Statia Jews appealed to Curacao for help. The Jews of Curacao financially assisted the Stataia Jews. The French invasion in 1793 and the war against the revolutionaries brought the Statian congregation, along with their cargos, along with the massive British force that landed on St. Eustatius.

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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 Chuch. Photo by Suzanne Koetg.

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.

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 Chuch Project. Photo by Siem Dijkshoorn.

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