

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 16)

The Jewish Community of Suriname

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The discovery of the Western Hemisphere opened new opportunities for Jews. Here was a chance to escape the repressive conditions that most Jews lived under in Europe, and, at the same time, to considerably improve one's economic situation. It is therefore not surprising that by the middle of the seventeenth century several Jewish communities already existed in South America. These communities existed in places controlled by the Dutch, British, and French. On the other hand, areas of Central and South America under Portuguese or Spanish rule were most inhospitable to Jews. Indeed, in such places, more often than not, one also found the Inquisition with its brutal policies of rooting out anything Jewish.

Part 3 of this series dealt with the Jewish Community that existed in Recife, Brazil from 1630 until 1654. (**Recife - the First Jewish Community in the New World, the Jewish Press**, June 3, 2005, page 32) Jews left Recife in 1654 when the Portuguese captured the city from the Dutch. Many of them returned to Amsterdam. However, some settled on the nearby islands of the Caribbean. The relatively large numbers of Jews arriving from Brazil marked the beginning of definite Jewish communities in the Caribbean.

This article focuses on the Jewish Community of Suriname. Suriname (or Surinam) was formerly known as Dutch Guyana. It is located in northern South America, bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, between French Guiana on the east and Guyana on the west.

Various sources give evidence that the first group of Jews already settled in Suriname in 1639. They came from Holland, Portugal, and Italy. These first Jewish colonists lived in the old capital of Suriname, Thorarica, on the left bank of the Suriname River, approximately 40 kilometers south of Paramaribo. They at once started to lay out a number of sugar plantations. In 1652, together with the Englishman Lord Willoughby, a new group of Jews arrived in Suriname, who settled on the savannah, situated near the Cassipoera creek. This area is nowadays known as 'Jodensavanne'. In 1664 a third group of Jews arrived in Suriname, when the French took possession of the Dutch colony Cayenne.¹

On August 17 1665, the Jewish community in Suriname was granted several very important privileges by the British colonial government. These included freedom of religion, a private civic guard, and permission to build synagogues and Jewish schools. A start was made immediately with the building of some schools and a wooden synagogue at Cassipoera. This synagogue was consecrated in 1671 by the 'Joodse Burgerwacht Compagnie' (Jewish Civic Guard). When the Dutch captured Suriname in 1667, the Dutch Commander left the privileges given to the Jews by the English untouched.

During this period, Jodensavanne developed rapidly, becoming a small community of its own. Jewish knowledge of planting and finance were beneficial for the country as a whole. Suriname became a flourishing agricultural colony with important exports of sugar and timber. In 1674 the Jews shipped the first 8,000 pounds of sugar to Amsterdam.

"In 1685, a second synagogue was built at Jodensavanne, this time in bricks. It was called 'Beracha Ve Shalom' and it is the remnants of this synagogue which have presently been uncovered again. The Jews used the lower lying front part of the synagogue as a court of justice."²

Rabbi David Pardo arrived from London to serve as spiritual leader of the new synagogue. He died in Suriname in 1713 [according to others in 1717³]. "He was, without doubt, the most distinguished Rabbi the Surinam congregation has ever had. While he was still in Europe, he published *Sepher Shulchan Tahor* (containing extracts from the first and second part of the *Shulchan Aruch*) [Amsterdam, 1686]."⁴

During the days of its prosperity no one could have foreseen that Jodensavanne would not continue to be a permanent settlement for the Jews in Suriname. However, in 1712 the French Admiral Cassard invaded the country. The residents, fearing that he and his men would plunder their plantations, paid him an enormous levy instead. The responsibility for paying most of this tax fell to the prosperous Jews. As a result, this pirate made off with enormous quantities of sugar, hard cash, and other resources. The country never recovered completely from this debacle and the resulting total disorganization.

Another cause of the decline of the Jewish position in Suriname was the bankruptcy of the Amsterdam business house Dietz in 1773. Moreover, the decrease in value of sugarcane by the introduction of beet sugar in Europe also played an important part in this matter.

The city of Paramaribo began to develop economically, and inhabitants of Jodensavanne left to settle in the new capital. A major attraction was that Paramaribo is more centrally located than the relatively isolated Jodensavanne. At first it was only the well-to-do who left Jodensavanne for Paramaribo. They

took advantage of the excellent business opportunities that the capital afforded that were not available in Jodensavanne.

With the passage of time no more than twenty – mostly poor families – lived at Jodensavanne. They supported themselves mainly by doing small business with the officers and men who occupied the Cordonpad [a wide bridle path with military posts at regular distances that was set up for the protection of the plantations]. “Many homes were uninhabited and became ramshackle by lack of upkeep.”⁵

While the center of Jewish life was now focused in Paramaribo, some Jews did return to Jodensavanne to celebrate the festivals there. They felt strongly attached to Jodensavanne, given its long Jewish history and the fact that their ancestors were buried there. They nostalgically recalled that Jodensavanne was at one time known as the “Jerusalem by the river-side.”

Jodensavanne fell more and more into decay, and the Jewish community dwindled. Nonetheless, there are records showing that the synagogue was regularly maintained more than a century after it was built. There are, for instance, rather detailed documents from the years 1824-25 in which extensive repairs on the roof are mentioned, as well as the installation of new windows on the western facade. Proper attention was also given to the interior. At one point a new Aron was installed as well as new seats for the synagogue’s governors.

Today there are perhaps seventy Jewish families residing in all of Suriname. They constitute less .1% of the total population of the country. However, some Jewish influence is still noticeable in the country. For instance, there are some who bear Jewish sounding family names such as Eliazer and Emanuels. There are street names such as Jodenbreestraat Street and Sivaplein Square that are of Jewish origin. Sadly, these faint echoes are all that is left of what was once a dynamic, vibrant Jewish community.

¹ <http://www.ujcl.org/surinam.html>

² Ibid.

³ **Who Was The First Rabbi of Surinam?**, by George Alexander Kohut, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 1897, 5, page 121. This article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>.

⁴ **The Jewish Congregation of Surinam**, by Dr. B. Felsenthal, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, 1894, 2, pages 29-30. This article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>.

⁵ <http://www.ujcl.org/surinam.html>