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 considerably. 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 the Jews who left Brazil returned to Amsterdam, including Isaac Aboab de Fonseca, the first American rabbi, and Moses de Aguilar, the first American cantor. The rest of the Jews who left Brazil settled on the nearby islands of the Caribbean; one boatload even made it as far as New Amsterdam (New York). The large numbers of Jews arriving from Brazil marked the beginning of definite Jewish communities in the Caribbean. Jewish settlements rose up in Dutch colonies in the Caribbean like Surinam and Curacao, British colonies like Jamaica and Barbados, and French colonies such as Martinique.”

This article focuses on the Jewish Community of Suriname. Suriname or Surinam (The name was originally spelled “Surinam” without the “e.”) was formerly known as Dutch Guiana. It is located in northern South America, bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, between French Guiana on the east and Guyana on the west. On the south Suriname shares a border with Brazil, whereas the western border of Guyana is adjacent to Venezuela. “First colonized by the British, the region was ceded to the Dutch in 1667 and became an autonomous territory of the Netherlands in 1954. Full independence was achieved in 1975. Paramaribo is the capital and the largest city.”

“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. This group, under the leadership of David Nassy, fled to Suriname and joined the others at Jodensavanne. The Jews from Thorarica also moved southwards to Jodensavanne.”³

There exists a copy of the Kesuva of what is believed to have been the first marriage celebrated in the colony of Suriname. It is dated “b'shlishi b'Shabbos 14 Elul 5403 (1643).”⁴ [This date is incorrect, since in 5403 14 Elul came out on Shabbos, not on Tuesday. The Kesuva should have been dated 5702.] The Chatan, Yitzchak Meatob, is referred to as Chacham, so he most likely was the first Chacham in the colony. His Kallah may have been a cousin, since her name is given in the Kesuva as “Yehudit bas haG'vir Yechiel Meatob.”

“On August 17 1665, the British colonial government granted several very important privileges to the Jewish community in Suriname, including freedom of religion, a private civic guard and the permission to build their own churches and 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 Abraham Crijnsen captured Suriname for the Dutch province of Zeeland in 1667, it looked for some time as if the peace of the inhabitants of Jodensavanne would be disturbed again. But the Dutch Commander left the privileges given to them by the English untouched.

“In this period, Jodensavanne developed rapidly. It became a small community by its own. Their knowledge of planting and the wealth of the Jews were also beneficial for the country as a whole. Suriname became a flourishing agricultural colony with an important export of sugar and timber. In 1674, the Jews shipped the first 8,000 pounds of sugar to Amsterdam, destined to serve as the dowry for the daughters of a certain J. Brandon there.

“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. They had their own jurisdiction for minor civil cases, which gave them the opportunity to deal with cases that involved up to an amount of 10,000 pounds of sugar.”⁵

“Subsequent to the erection of the synagogue, Rabbi David Pardo came from London to Surinam, and died there in 1713 [according to others in 1717⁶]. 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, several editions of which were afterwards printed."7

“In the days of prosperity nobody could have foreseen that Jodensavanne would not continue to be a permanent settlement for the Jews in Suriname. During the invasion of the French Admiral Cassard in 1712, who wanted to safeguard the plantations from plundering, he demanded an enormous levy instead. The prosperous Jews had to pay the greater part of it. Enormous quantities of sugar, hard cash, entire sugar mills and many slaves formed the loot with which this pirate disappeared. The country never recovered completely from the resulting total disorganization.

“The bankruptcy of the Amsterdam business house Dietz in 1773 can partly be considered as one of the causes for the decline of the Jews in Suriname. Moreover, the decrease in value of sugarcane by the introduction of beet sugar in Europe also played an important part in this matter.

“With the development of Paramaribo, many inhabitants of Jodensavanne left to settle in the new capital. At first, the well-to-do villagers left Jodensavanne in order to live on their means in Paramaribo. Some of them went into business in the capital. The reason for this migration most probably was the isolated location of Jodensavanne. After some time, therefore, no more than twenty – mostly poor families – lived at Jodensavanne, who supported themselves mainly by doing small business with the officers and men who occupied the Cordonpad. Many homes where uninhabited and became ramshackle by lack of upkeep.

“Only on their festive days, the Jews returned from Paramaribo to Jodensavanne. Especially the elders felt strongly attached to Jodensavanne, even if it were only for the sacred ground in which their ancestors were buried. Not without reason it was called ‘Jerusalem by the river-side’. In spite of the fact that Jodensavanne itself fell more and more in decay, the synagogue, which was already more than a century old by then, was kept up regularly. There are, for instance, rather detailed documents from the years 1824-25 in which extensive repair jobs on the roof are mentioned, as well as a couple of new windows, which had to be placed on the western facade. Proper attention was also given to the interior, as witness the order to make a new ‘Book Moses locker’ and a new seat for the governors.

“The number of Jews in Suriname is now small, only about 70 families – less than one per thousand of the total population of Suriname. However, the influence of the Jews is still noticeable in the community, for instance in the many Jewish family names (Eliazer, Emanuels), in the names of streets and squares (Jodenbreeistraat, Sivaplein), in the food (pom), in the customs, and in the language (tref, dyufisi).”8

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1 http://www.sefarad.org/publication/im/011/jewcar.html
2 http://www.answers.com/topic/suriname

3 http://www.ujcl.org/surinam.html


5 http://www.ujcl.org/surinam.html


8 http://www.ujcl.org/surinam.html