

## Glimpses Into American Jewish History Part 30

### The Jews of Martinique and Guadeloupe

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Note: This article is based on **The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean**, by Mordechai Arbelle, Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem, 2002, **The Jews of Martinique and Guadeloupe**, pages 36 – 44. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from this source.

Martinique and Guadeloupe are two small islands located between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean. Martinique is north of Trinidad and Tobago, whereas Guadeloupe is southeast of Puerto Rico.

“The Jewish history of Martinique and Guadeloupe is relatively short, spanning only about 60 years. It began with the first arrivals from Amsterdam in the 1620s who came to manage Dutch interests in Dutch commercial outposts established on the island and continued until the expulsion of the Jews in 1685.”

In 1635 the French conquered and occupied these islands. Upon their arrival in Martinique they found a number of Jews who had arrived earlier from Amsterdam and who served as agents and managers for various Dutch enterprises. “The French did not disturb the resident Dutch Jews, whose number was not significant. They were dispersed among the warehouses, plantations, and stores all over the island and, as far as is known, did not form a community. The Jews were able to work and prosper under twenty years of French rule, tolerated and protected by the French governors, who needed their commercial and financial acumen and whose services they used.”

However, the successes of the Jews gradually aroused the jealousy of the French settlers and merchants. “At the same time, the growing number of Catholic monks and priests arriving in the colony could not bear to see Jews residing in French-ruled territory.” Things changed dramatically for the Jews after the recapture of Recife, Brazil by the Portuguese in 1654. Hundreds, if not thousands, of Jews left Brazil in fear of what might happen to them under the Inquisition. Ships loaded with Jews roamed the Caribbean looking for places for these refugees to resettle.

When a ship carrying Jews anchored not far from Martinique, Governor M. du Parquet was inclined to grant their request to settle on the island. The Jesuit fathers residing on Martinique would not hear of it.

However, the governor of Guadeloupe, M. Houel, learning of the refusal to allow the refugees to settle in Martinique, welcomed them to settle on his island. Many former

Jewish inhabitants of Tamarica (Itamarica), Brazil [an island not far from Recife] were allowed to settle on Guadeloupe. They were granted the same privileges as the other residents of the island.

Under the terms of surrender between the Dutch and Portuguese in Brazil, the Dutch and the Jews were allowed to leave Brazil with their movable property and their money. Thus, the Jews who came to the Caribbean seeking places to resettle came with means. The residents of Guadeloupe naturally anticipated that the new arrivals would spend lots of silver and gold as they established themselves in their new home. There were not disappointed.

When Governor du Parquet of Martinique saw that he was losing a rare opportunity, he expressed his anger to the Jesuit fathers. The result was that the Father Superior went to Guadeloupe and tried to convince Governor Houel to expel the Jews. Houel told the Father Superior “to mind his own business,” and the Jews were allowed to stay. Shortly after this another ship carrying a number of Jewish refugees arrived in Martinique. This time Governor du Parquet received them with open arms!

The permission given to the Jews to settle in Martinique and Guadeloupe attracted some French Jews of Spanish-Portuguese origin from Bayonne and Bordeaux, most often related to those who had come from Brazil, increasing the number of Jews in the French islands.

It is difficult to evaluate the exact number of Jews in Martinique and Guadeloupe in 1658. A conservative estimate might be about 300 among a population of about 5,000 whites.

The Jesuit fathers, who saw the settlement of Jews as a battle they had lost, did not rest and continued with incessant efforts to rid the island of Jews.

The Jews, immediately after settling, began to establish commercial houses, sugar cane plantations, and sugar plants on a large scale. This brought a period of prosperity to the impoverished islands and profits to their owners, Houel and de Parquet.

On 2 April, 1658, the Sovereign Council of Martinique issued a decree ‘prohibiting the Jews from dealing with commerce on the islands,’ but due to the intervention of the governor — Seigneur du Parquet — a new decree several months later ‘reestablished the privileges given to the Jews to deal with commerce,’ canceling the previous decree.

The main Jewish contribution to Martinique and Guadeloupe was in agro-industry. The French islands were relatively late in developing sugar production. It was only after the settlement of the Jews from Brazil, who were experienced sugar refiners and merchants, that the sugar industry started picking up. In 1661 there were 71 sugar plants in Guadeloupe with Martinique lagging behind.

However, Martinique in 1671 had 111 sugar plants with 6,582 workers and slaves working in them and by 1685 reached 172 plants.

One of the most prominent sugar producers was Benjamin d'Acosta de Andrade, a Jew born as a converso in Portugal, who had settled in Dutch Brazil and had reached Martinique in 1654. He was the owner of two of the largest sugar plants in Martinique (the site is still shown to tourists visiting the Island). D'Acosta de Andrade is known and remembered as establishing the first cacao processing plant in French territory. Cacao processing was started in Spanish colonies in America, but the processing in Martinique was advanced, modernized, and transformed into chocolate.

### **Discrimination and Expulsion**

Jewish prosperity was the object of envy by a large section of the French planters in Martinique and Guadeloupe. The Brazilian Jews did not only have the expertise, but also were able to finance their sugar plants, which needed a considerable initial investment. The majority of the French planters continued planting tobacco and gradually became more and more impoverished. Their need for cash indebted them to Jewish moneylenders. The Jews were also accused of investing their profits outside Martinique, therefore depriving the islands of their cash liquidity. Thus, a coalition formed by the Jesuit fathers and the French planters and merchants went into action to limit Jewish life and bring about the expulsion of the Jews.

The coalition managed to force the hand of Governor Prouville de Tracy to issue, in 1664, an act in which a paragraph is included saying that 'those of the Jewish Nation must purchase and sell on the day of Sabbath, unless otherwise ordered by his Majesty....' The unhappy de Tracy wanted clearer instructions from France. He received ambiguous ones, namely 'The King does not want to alter what has been practiced till now towards the Huguenots and the Jews ...' De Tracy's only recourse was to close his eyes to the transgressions of his own act. The Jews continued keeping the Sabbath.

The only religion officially permitted on Martinique was Catholicism. As a result, Judaism was not practiced openly. In 1676 the community acquired a Torah from the Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam.

Theories have been put forward that a synagogue existed in Martinique, and several possible sites have been indicated. However, the prayers were supposedly conducted in a private house, transformed into a prayer-house, which gradually became an improvised synagogue.

The happy and quiet Jewish existence of the Martinique Jews continued until the death of Governor de Baas in 1677. His replacement, Count de Blenac, a devotee

of the Jesuits, had served as confessor of [King] Louis XIV. His main aim was the expulsion of the Jews from Martinique.

As conditions deteriorated for the Jews of Martinique, they began to leave the island. There were many political upheavals on Guadeloupe, and, here too, the Jews left in considerable numbers. In 1685 Louis XIV issued an order expelling all Jews from the Caribbean islands under French control.

Most of the Jews who left Martinique went to Curacao, taking their Torah and the other religious objects that were used in their improvised synagogue. A few Jews managed to circumvent the Black Code (Edict of Expulsion) as a result of their special connections with the authorities. Indeed, in 1732 there were still as least 10 Jews residing on Martinique. However, “by the time of the French Revolution there was, for all practical purposes, no serious Jewish presence in Martinique or Guadeloupe.”