

A Description of America, 1785

CECIL ROTH

The letter published below associates the names of two of eighteenth-century Anglo-Jewry's most remarkable personalities, both of them important also in the life of the general community. The recipient was Emanuel Mendes da Costa (1717-1791), a scion of one of the oldest and most distinguished families of London's Spanish and Portuguese synagogue. Breaking with the hardheaded business tradition of his family and forebears, Emanuel made his reputation as a scientist and scholar. One of the most eminent British naturalists of his generation, specializing in conchology and mineralogy, he was at the same time intelligently interested in archaeology and became an antiquary of some distinction. A number of works which he published on his chosen subjects were regarded as fundamental in his day, and some of them were translated, moreover, into foreign languages. He was a candidate for the Librarianship of the newly-founded British Museum in 1754, and a member of several learned societies in England and abroad. In 1747, he was a Fellow and subsequently, in 1763, Clerk of the Royal Society, the oldest and greatest of English associations of the type. But his moral fibre was weak; his passion for collecting — coupled, it was said, with his wife's personal extravagance — overwhelmed his slender inherited resources, and ultimately he was dismissed from his office, and from the Society, for dishonesty.

Nevertheless, he continued to be in touch with scholars throughout Europe — though, of course, especially in England — and he had the habit, of inestimable importance to posterity, of keeping all the letters that he received. These are now preserved in a series of impressive volumes in the British Museum (Add. Mss. 28534-28544). A number of them were used to good effect by the early nineteenth-century literary historian, John Nichols, former owner of the collection, in his *Literary Anecdotes* and other works, and I

Dr. Cecil Roth, from 1939 until recently Reader in Jewish Studies at England's Oxford University, is among the most distinguished of Jewish scholars. His most recent work, *Essays and Portraits in Anglo-Jewish History*, appeared in March, 1963. In 1964 he settled in Israel.

myself published one or two *in extenso* in my *Anglo-Jewish Letters* (London, 1938). It may be said, however, that the collection as a whole, so valuable for social, literary, scientific, and, if to a lesser extent, Anglo-Jewish history, has remained largely unexploited.

Comprised in the collection, besides the scientific correspondence, is some of a more domestic nature. It was natural that acquaintances of this enquiring, omnivorous scholar should have informed him of anything coming their way that might have been of interest to him, or reported to him any experience of theirs which could have some scientific importance or implications. Everyone knew of his universal inquisitiveness. It was certainly not unnatural that Joseph Salvador (1716-1786) bore this in mind when he emigrated to America in 1784, towards the close of his life. There is certainly no need to introduce this magnate to American readers, for he was the father-in-law and uncle of Francis Salvador (1747-1776), the earliest of American Jewry's patriot heroes, a man who, according to Emanuel Mendes da Costa's manuscript note among his papers in the British Museum (Add. MS. 29867 f. 23b), "was scalp'd in Carolina" at the beginning of the War of Independence. Joseph Salvador himself, known in the synagogue as Joseph Jessurun Rodrigues, was one of the most active workers in London's Spanish and Portuguese Jewish community and at the same time a financial magnate of first importance. His letters to Charles Jenkins, the first Lord Liverpool, recently published among the latter's correspondence, vividly illustrate his relations with, and importance to, the English treasury during the mid-1700's. Salvador lost a great deal of property in 1755 as a result of the Lisbon earthquake, which he had incidentally described in an earlier letter to Emanuel (MS. Add. 28542 f. 89). The catastrophic failure of the Dutch East India Company a few years later, which overwhelmed so many affluent Sephardic families and spelled the end of Sephardic domination in the communities of the North Atlantic, struck a further blow to his fortunes as well.

In the end he decided to emigrate to the New World, where, in South Carolina, not far from Charleston, he still owned the residue of a considerable estate, once amounting to 100,000 acres, which he had purchased some thirty years before. Himself interested in scientific matters — he was indeed himself a Fellow of the Royal

Society and had even sent a communication to its famous Philosophical Transactions — he had without doubt promised before leaving to send a report on the memorabilia of his new home to his learned cousin, Emanuel Mendes da Costa.

It was not, however, until the following year — at the beginning of January, 1785 — that he did so. His letter is informative and interesting from every point of view — for its sidelights on social life as well as for the scientific outlook and experiments of a cultured English gentleman, now transplanted to this transatlantic environment.

The letter — British Museum Add. MS. 28542 f. 98 — is reproduced below. It bears, in Emanuel Mendes da Costa's hand, the endorsement:

“Answered London 30 January, 1786, and forwarded by Mrs. Judith Mendes da Costa.”

My dear friend and Cousin,

Sir,

I have long since desired to write to you, but have been so distressed and ill that I could not do it.

I have suffer[e]d every want and, having no one till within this month to write for me, have been forc[e]d to write too much myself; my eyes and hands are very much impair[e]d, and I am entirely depriv[e]d of doing anything by night as candles are not in use in this country, nor does anyone know how to make a pen; few write or read.

I am now in a wild country, have but one servant, and, tho they speak English, we frequently don[']t understand each other. The inhabitants are descendants of the wild Irish and their ignorance [is] amazing; they have all the bad Spanish customs but none of that nation[']s good qualities. They are as poor as rats, proud as dons. They will not work nor permit their families to serve; They are naked and famish[e]d and immensely lazy. They have no religion or morals, the few that have any adopt the patriarchal sistem. They have no belief in Christ, little in Judaism or a future state. Their minds are wholly bent on their horses whom they prize more

than their wives and families. They hate society and pass their days in the woods or, loitering about, they drink hard. Rum is their deity; they ruin their healths and are short livers, always happy when they can do any ill natur[e]d thing and molest their neighbours. The better sort of people are here very docile and tractable and don[']t want [for] good sense, but [are] totally unimproved. They wish good government, but dare not oppose the others. In short there is no power in government; all goes by chance and time must bring amendment. They now are like a set of Tartars; there are above 50,000 whites in the district. Scarce fifty houses, the rest are cabins or huts. They are daily extending backwards in the country and always moving; not a village and scarce two houses together.

As to the face of the country, it is all woods with brooks and some fine rivers, but, strange to tell, you have woods without shade, brooks without water or fish, few birds but some beautiful, as the red nightingale and a green and gold small bird. The wild beasts are wolves, panthers, a wild cat, foxes, the hideous pole cats, deer and some buffaloes. We have oxen, sheep and goats, sufficient tame fowl, wild turkeys, partridge and doves and larks and black-birds which are good, few hares or other game, very bad roads. Our swamps are something particular: with distance they form in winter a most beautiful view, being form[e]d [framed?] by the most elegant evergreens. In the bogs, cedars, cypress, firs of all kinds, form the tops; the bottoms are full of myrtle, evergreen, privets, the sensitive plant, magnolias and a variety that would adorn the most curious garden of exoticks in Europe; but beware, enter with care; in them they are full of dangerous serpents, the wild beasts harbour in the bogs, and holes are dangerous and uncertain, and all travellers are glad to be safe thro them. Something peculiar is a sort of oaks called black jacks; a dark filament hangs over these and down them, and owing to the moisture, they look like pallbearers, even when green in summer time, and remind you of death. These range along the roads in low lands and are sure tokens of a bad air; indeed anyone going thro them is happy if he escape the country fever and must be cautious and guard the most he can. The whole country is unhealthy; the heat, cold is immoderate;

last June I felt the hottest day in my life, the air was above blood warm or a feverish heat; in eight days after it was very cold. The winters I have felt are much sharper than common winter in London, everything in my room froze, and water even by the fire.

The soil is excellent and would produce anything, but the inhabitants will cultivate nothing. They have all fruits, but bad — peaches, pears, mulberryes, plums, grapes, but none good, they being ungrafted, bad strawberries, some water melons, gourds and pumpkins, and middling melons, some other southern fruits, and greens, pineapples, oranges, and limes from abroad, but not good; they have apples from the north, but no cherries or currants. They are very scarce of greens, mostly kidney beans, cabbage and lettuce, some pease, but rare and bad; small greens in general are all wanting, some bad asparagus and artichokes. Their wheat is good and Indian corn plenty. I hope to get some hops and beer; we have deer skins and bear skins. Tobacco and indigo maintain this country, the first is grown common and is as good as Virginia, the indigo is ordinary but will mend. In the low land vast quantities of fine rice is made. There is little or no credit or money in the country. I would continue my narrative, but have no time. The waggons are upon departure and there is no other conveyance. I will beg you to wait on the president of our society, wishing my compliments. Tell him I have met with nothing worthy his attention in my passage, and have been very ill, but hope to be soon able to communicate some matters of these inland countries which are little known in Europe; that about this date last year, being ill att Cross Creek, I saw a small bearded comet.[†] Having no instrument in the place, all I could do was to observe her course with the eye. She seem[e]d to me to be about eighteen degrees to the southward of Capricorn; I don[']t know the name of the constellation, knowing little astronomy and particularly of the southern heavens. Her course seem[e]d to me near W. S. W., going to the sun. The [comet] every day gain[e]d that way, set sooner, and about the thirty was not visible to the eye, setting nearly with the sun, but more to the southward. Perhaps

[†] Dr. Charles Singer, to whom I owe this transcript, suggests Piggott's Comet, which was visible in November, 1783.

she grew visible att sun rise; I doubt it as she declin[e]d so much to the southward. In June we had the hottest day known here; it is said the thermometer reached 107 in the shadow. I went into the air and felt as if warm water was thrown on me, and all agreed in the coolest places our blood and pulses were above fever heat for three hours; in eight hours after it was cold. There was frost last winter and this has been very cold, frequently freezing all liquids in my room but spirits, and close by large wood fires. Few such days are in Eng[lan]d.

I can [write] no more on these subjects.

Enclosed go three requests, one to the clerk of the Royal Society, another to the [Society of] Antiquaries [in London], another to the Society of Arts and Manufactures, to deliver to you my books and papers which pray send me, and Joshua will pay you the little charge. I shall soon write to you with some.

Pray wait on the president of the [Society of] Antiquaries with my respects. I shall endeavour to give him information. I have a hint of something which may lead to some considerable discovery.

On natural history, I hope soon to write to you; there seems to be less than one would expect.

My love to Jos[hua] and Judy² and communicate this to them, my service to all friends. I am

dear sir

Y[ou]r. cousin and humble servant

Joseph Salvador

Coroneka 22 Jan[uar]y 1785

² Presumably his son-in-law Joshua Mendes da Costa and his daughter Judith.

The marriage had taken place on the eve of Pentecost, 1760, Ephraim Luzzatto celebrating it in the charming epithalamium printed in his *Ele Bene Ha-Neurim*, No. 47. Emanuel Mendes da Costa, the bridegroom's cousin, celebrated the occasion similarly. In a letter of April 5, 1760, to the Reverend W. Huddesford, Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum (J. Nichols, *Illustrations of Literature*, IV, 473), he wrote:

... As the seat of the Muses certainly fosters some poetical geniuses, I want a copy of verses made on occasion of a very fine young lady's marriage which is to be solemnized at the beginning of May. The verses may be about twenty in number, good ideas in them, and the Muses and Graces, etc., etc., all summoned. Have you a

A long time must have elapsed before Salvador's letter reached London, for it was, according to the endorsement, not until January 30, 1786, that Emanuel Mendes da Costa, impassioned correspondent though he was, replied to it. Emanuel entrusted his letter to Salvador's daughter Judith (Mrs. Joshua) Mendes da Costa to forward to Salvador with her own correspondence. The full text of Emanuel's reply follows on ff. 93/5, beginning with various complaints:

I now begin to feel the effect of years. My hands are often paralytical, insomuch that I cannot write freely, my walk is enfeebled and my memory and other faculties are somewhat impaired, so that I cannot study, which as you well know was formerly my sole livelihood and occupation.

He goes on to describe very interestingly the decadent state and the squabbles in the Royal Society and other learned bodies in which they were both interested. It is possible, or even probable, that a reply (not preserved) was received to this letter. At any rate, in February, 1787, Emanuel began a further letter to Joseph Salvador, giving him much detailed advice about conducting scientific investigations and enquiries in South Carolina. It was addressed "At Mr. Da Costa's, Charles Town, South Carolina," which suggests that Salvador had removed thither and had written to his friends in London telling them so. Before this second letter (MS. Add. 28542 ff. 93-4) could be despatched, Emanuel heard bad news from across the Atlantic, and at the foot of this second letter he wrote:

This, which was intended to be sent in February, 1787, I did not finish nor send, as we received advice that my dear friend [Salvador] died at Charles Town [, South] Carolina, 29 December 1786.

poetical friend? Pray get it done; if not, could you not get it done for a small gratuity? Observe, however, let the poet sign the initial letters of his name and date it from Oxford, for I shall only ascribe to myself the presentation of it. The lady's initial[s] are *I*, two syllables, and *S*., three ditto; the bridegroom's *J*, two syllables, *M*, two ditto, *D*, one ditto, and *C*., two ditto. All this for the poet's government. . . .