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# The Search for the Elusive Caribbean Jews

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## *Introduction*

Despite the existence of an extensive body of research, including the classic work of Jacob Rader Marcus, many questions remain unanswered concerning the origins, communities, lives, migrations, and history of the Caribbean Jews.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the reasons why these questions persist.

The first Jews in the Caribbean were Marranos fleeing the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal and their possessions.<sup>2</sup> Luis de Torres, Columbus' interpreter, is credited with being not only the first Jew in the area but the first member of one of Columbus' crews to disembark there. Other crewmen were likely secret Jews, and word of the discovery of the New World was quickly communicated (for those days) to other Marranos in Europe. This is not to imply that large numbers of Marranos undertook the voyage to the New World. In fact, it has been estimated that the early Jewish population of the Caribbean islands never exceeded 500 extended families.<sup>3</sup>

There were two major reasons why Jewish migration to the Caribbean did not assume larger numbers. First, for a number of years following Columbus, Spain held a near-monopoly in the region. Although the Inquisition did not immediately manifest itself in the New World, some individuals nevertheless were arrested there and taken back to Spain for the usual grisly proceedings and outcome: unrestrained and lengthy torture followed by burning at the stake. Marranos who had already found safe havens in Amsterdam, Italy, Turkey, or some other place were not likely to endanger their families and themselves by deliberately returning to Spanish-controlled territory.

Second, travel in those days was extremely difficult, and danger lurked from exotic diseases, conscienceless pirates, Indian attacks, colonial warfare, and the unpredictability of violent weather and other natural calamities. The prospect of becoming a settler in the hard life of a new colony appealed only to the most fanatic, courageous, or desperate. Consequently, only small numbers of Marranos initially followed Luis de Torres, who had become the first Jewish settler in the New World. Most appropriately, there is a Luis de Torres Synagogue in Freeport, Bahamas.

It is in this early period, the remainder of the fifteenth century and much of the sixteenth, that the history of the Caribbean Jews is most obscure. There are at least four reasons for this: (1) secretiveness, (2) name changes, (3) deterioration and destruction of artifacts, and (4) assimilation and migration. These factors are commonplace in many fields of historical research, but the aggregation of all four of them is unique. The intensity and severity of their occurrence over a long period of time is what makes early Caribbean Jewry so elusive.

### *Secretiveness*

The first Jews to travel to the New World were, of necessity, Marranos. Many Spanish Jews had publicly converted to Catholicism in the 150 years before the 1492 expulsion, some willingly, some by force, and still others in fear of the threat of force. Their New Christian descendants in the era when America was discovered often continued to practice Judaism in secret. Moreover, in 1492, just before the expulsion deadline, many other Jews converted in order to avoid exile. A few years later, the number of New Christians further increased when the Jews of Portugal, together with the Spanish Jews who had fled there in 1492, were also confronted with the cruel choice between conversion and exile. Consequently, a large number of New Christians existed in Spain and Portugal.

Whether Marranos or sincere Catholics, New Christians were able to rise to positions of authority and prestige previously unavailable to them as Jews. The covert practice of Jewish cere-

monies and customs by some, sometimes not very well hidden, led to great indignation among Old Christians who resented their success. Consequently, in seeking to ferret out heretics, the Inquisition especially concentrated on lapsed New Christians.

Cecil Roth has described the proceedings of the Inquisition in gruesome detail.<sup>4</sup> The merest suspicion or flimsy accusation could result in the arrest, torture, confiscation of property, and execution of the accused. It was not unusual for victims to be accused of Judaizing for refusing to eat pork, lighting candles on Friday evening, using clean linen or wearing clean clothes on the Jewish Sabbath, or simply engaging in habits that piqued Old Christians.

Once someone was arrested, all of his or her family and friends were immediately suspect. Torture was often applied to elicit not only confessions but the names of additional prospective victims. Because of the importance and centrality of blood to Christian theology, the ecclesiastical torturers devised tortures that would not cause bleeding to their victims. However, near-strangulation, broken bones caused by the rack and by being dropped from heights with one's arms tied behind, extraction of fingernails, burning of feet, puncturing of eardrums, and other ingenious tortures that would not result in bleeding were all employed against the hapless victims. Being held prisoner and tortured for years on end was not unusual. Men, women, and even children were the victims.

In all probability, large numbers of sincere converts and their families were accused, tortured, and executed, as well as many descendants of converts who had but the vaguest notion of their Jewish ancestry. Since confiscation of property also took place, affluent New Christians were especially at risk, for the Inquisition grew increasingly avaricious and acquisitive as the years went by.

Fear of the Inquisition, understandably, was very great. Most Marranos would not reveal their true faith until well beyond its reach. Holland, Turkey, certain city-states in Italy, and other locales provided them with the security and freedom to abandon their outward practice of Christianity and openly embrace Judaism. It was from among these people that the first Jewish immigrants to the Caribbean were drawn. Returning to Spanish- or Portuguese-controlled land carried with it the possibility of falling into the

hands of the dreaded Inquisition. Even living in colonies controlled by more tolerant nations was dangerous, for there was always the possibility of military conquest by Spain or Portugal and subsequent capture by the Inquisition. Consequently, Caribbean Jews were most cautious about where they went and to whom they revealed their true religious affiliations.

The intense fear evoked by the Inquisition was so compelling that many descendants of New Christians continued—in some instances even to the present day—to conceal their Jewish origins (and practices).<sup>5</sup> “Generation after generation passed on orally whatever they could remember,” according to Stan Hordes, former New Mexico state historian and presently co-director of a research project about crypto-Judaism at the University of New Mexico. “Most crypto-Jews had no access to prayer books, Torahs and other ritual objects, for if Jewish artifacts were found by the Inquisition, they would be instantly arrested and possibly put to death.”<sup>6</sup>

Considering that some families hid their Jewishness for 500 years (and thus for over a century after the elimination of the Inquisition by the Roman Catholic Church), the fear inflicted on New Christians must have been extraordinary. In fact, the 1492 expulsion order was not officially withdrawn by Spain until December 16, 1968!<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is easily understandable why Marranos and their descendants continued to conceal their Judaism for so long.

### *Name Changes*

For thousands of years, Jews have had a given name and a patronymic. Commonly, the given name was that of a biblical hero or personage. It is only within the past few hundred years that most Jews have employed family surnames. Their surnames were generally chosen according to occupation, hometown, place of residence, or some other identifiable characteristic. Those from the tribe of Levi would often have the surname of Levi or Levy. Those who were direct descendants of Aaron the high priest identified themselves with the surname Cohen, Cohn, Kohn, Kohen, Kohan, Kaplan, or Katz.

Most of the early Jewish settlers in the Caribbean had Spanish and Portuguese names. However, fear of the Inquisition caused some of them to change their names to avoid detection. Names were probably changed for other reasons as well. Immigrants to any country often change their names to conform to the predominant patterns in their new place of residence. Hence, in an English colony, an Abraham Rodriguez might become an Arnold Rogers. Besides the social pressure to integrate (not necessarily assimilate), escaping the past might have been an additional incentive for changing one's name. Even if a name was not changed, its spelling might be altered in accordance with the orthography of the local colonial language.

While the Caribbean Jews had good and substantial reasons to change their names, their having done so causes problems for researchers attempting to construct networks of family relationships or migrations. There was extensive interaction among the colonists of the Caribbean islands, and despite the incessant warfare, travel and trade continued to take place rather extensively. Jews, who were mostly traders and merchants both by legal decree and probably by choice, would establish trading relationships with businessmen in other colonies. In an effort to conform to local practice in such locales, they sometimes employed variant forms of their names or different names altogether.

Another difficulty for historians is caused by the fact that many of the same names recur. Thus, for instance, researchers may find an Abraham Lopez living on Barbados at a certain time and another Abraham Lopez who later died on St. Eustatius. One is described as a trader, the other as a merchant. Were they the same person? If not, were they father and son, grandfather and grandson, uncle and nephew, or not related at all? Because of the secretiveness of the Caribbean Jews and their tendency to change their names, information is often unavailable to either confirm or deny relationships and to accurately trace migrations.

#### *Destruction and Deterioration of Artifacts*

Unfortunately, the Caribbean Jews, like most people of past eras, were not always diligent in preserving records for future scholars.

The extant documents include synagogue ledgerbooks and burial records, newspaper accounts, wills, colonial proceedings and records, and commercial records; in addition, buildings, ruins, cemeteries, and other artifacts are an important source of information.<sup>8</sup> The surviving documents and artifacts provide, at best, an incomplete picture of Caribbean Jewry.

Life in the Caribbean over the past five centuries has never been easy. Far from the cosmopolitan centers of Europe and the American mainland, the Caribbean islands, while exhibiting a certain urbanity of their own, were remote frontiers often lacking what would have been considered minimal comforts even in past eras. Furthermore, the unceasing colonial warfare that took place for much of those five centuries, the ruthless piracy, the callous privateers, disastrous fires, violent earthquakes and volcanoes, catastrophic hurricanes, and the warm humid weather in that part of the world all contributed to the destruction of many records that may have once existed.

Probably the most frustrating and disturbing deterioration of artifacts has been caused by twentieth-century industrial pollution in the environment. Cemetery tombstone inscriptions, often invaluable assets to historical researchers, have lost their sharpness, sometimes to the point of being undecipherable. In addition, irreplaceable historical artifacts have often been destroyed by the unrestricted building and construction that has taken place in the past fifty years to accommodate the tourism industry. The apparent disregard for their own history by the governments of some of the Caribbean islands is baffling.

Every other social science discipline increases its knowledge with the passage of time. Original findings, fresh experimentation, new avenues of thought, pioneering survey research, and creative theory building all contribute to the advance of knowledge. Historical research, however, has its own built-in limitations. For as time goes on, especially in the rapidly changing Caribbean region, the material upon which the discipline is founded tends to decrease rather than increase. Creative interpretation within the boundaries of established historical scholarship perseveres, of course, but the base material continues to deteriorate. In the case

of Caribbean Jewry, the base material was limited from the beginning.

*Assimilation and Migration*

Starting with the very earliest Jewish settlers, assimilation has taken a steady toll on Caribbean Jewry. As most early Jews in the region were of New Christian stock, their bonds with Judaism were not as strong as those of their coreligionists living in European ghettos or as dhimmis in Muslim countries. The experience of living as both Jews and Christians at the same time must have left them theologically confused and psychologically perplexed. Although established Jewish communities in the Caribbean employed rabbis and other functionaries from Europe, Jews living on the more remote islands were isolated from Jewish life. Moreover, the attractions of assimilation, once available, must have appealed to many, just as they did to their brethren in Europe during the Enlightenment.

In colonies governed by tolerant administrators, Jews took the opportunity to benefit themselves economically and socially. If a separation from the Jewish community was required, many made that choice without much hesitation. With the passage of time, the assimilated Jews of the Caribbean took full advantage of whatever opportunities presented themselves. As legal and social prohibitions against intermarriage decreased, a wider selection of prospective marriage partners outside the faith became available, and many young people chose that route for both social and personal reasons. Others left their island homes to pursue economic and educational opportunities elsewhere, primarily in Holland, England, and the North American colonies.

Once slavery was abolished in the Caribbean, the economic basis for many island enterprises disappeared. As the economies of the islands became more and more depressed during the late nineteenth century, more Jews gradually left. Although Jewish communities survived in some places, the size and viability of most of them continued to dwindle.

Just before and during World War II, Jewish refugees from Nazi oppression found their way to a number of Caribbean islands. The

mixing of Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews sometimes resulted in conflict; in other places the hybrid mix resuscitated dying Jewish communities. However, shortly after the war, greater opportunities presented themselves in other locations and the refugees as well as some of the established Jewish families emigrated.

With the advent of self-government and/or independent statehood for many of the former Caribbean colonies during the latter half of the twentieth century, some island Jews feared that socialism or anti-white bias would limit their livelihoods and future. Consequently, still another exodus took place, the destinations of choice being other islands, England, Holland, Israel, and North and South America. While small Jewish communities continue to survive in the Caribbean, they are often but a shadow of their former size and prominence.

### *Summary and Conclusions*

Over the past five centuries, the islands of the Caribbean provided a remote sanctuary not readily available to Jews elsewhere. While the region's first Jews were Marranos attempting to escape the Inquisition, others seeking adventure and fortune soon followed. Especially in the Dutch colonies and shortly thereafter in the English islands, unique opportunities for entrepreneurship were presented to those willing to risk the uncertainties of life in a Caribbean colony. In later years, Jewish refugees from other persecutions found havens in the Caribbean, but most of the communities they founded were short-lived.

While a broad general outline of the life of Caribbean Jewry can be discerned from available evidence and research, vast gaps persist. There are four main reasons for this.

First, the earliest Jews in the area, Marranos seeking to escape the Inquisition, were intensely secretive. Subterfuge became a part of their lifestyle as time went on. While they were aware of their Jewish identity, the lack of formal Jewish education and minimal contact with the mainstream of Jewish life led to a general weakening of religious faith and ritual observances. In addition, their latent fears about discovery by their enemies further discouraged the development of a strong Jewish consciousness. Only after

experiencing safety and security for several generations were the Caribbean Jewish communities secure enough to construct synagogues and establish communal relations with their brethren overseas. Nevertheless, the intense secretiveness that was a necessity during the early colonial years continued to permeate Caribbean Jewish life for many years thereafter.

Second, as with most groups that migrate, name changes were common among the early Jewish settlers in the Caribbean. The changes were made for a variety of reasons: (1) to facilitate assimilation; (2) to facilitate commercial interaction with merchants of other nationalities on other islands; (3) to hide their Jewishness as a protection against persecution; and (4) to continue the established custom of having a name in the language of the country of residence as well as a Hebrew name. While all these considerations were certainly reasonable, considering the times, their legacy was the construction of an all-but-insurmountable barrier against thorough research of family relationships and migratory patterns.

Third, the unique weather and climate of the Caribbean and the destruction perpetrated by colonial warfare created a process by which evidence about the Caribbean Jews is rapidly being lost. In addition, the governments of some islands fail to appreciate the value of their own early Jewish history and its artifacts. Although several valiant efforts have been and are being made to preserve the region's Jewish history, twentieth-century industrial pollution has added yet another element working to destroy what little remains of the Jewish past.

Fourth, assimilation and out-migration have also taken a toll. All too often, those assimilating into the general culture were oblivious to the Jewish past and almost eager to forget their heritage, and the few who did not forget their lineage rarely did anything to perpetuate its memory. Since migration continues unabated from many of the Caribbean islands as younger members of the Jewish community seek marriage partners, education, and professional opportunities elsewhere, the trends described here will likely continue on most of the islands. Barring some catastrophe that would force Jews once again to seek a haven in the region, it appears that the elusive Jews of the Caribbean will be little more

than a footnote to history, presenting unanswerable questions in the search about their sojourns there.

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## Notes

1. J. A. Andrade, *A Record of the Jews in Jamaica* (Kingston: Jamaica Times, 1941); I. S. Emmanuel, *Curaçao* (New York: Bloch, 1957); idem, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles* (New York: Ktav, 1970); H. Friedenwald, "Material for the History of the Jews in the British West Indies," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 5 (1897): 45-101; G. F. Judah, "Portions of a History of the Jews of Jamaica" (1901), in American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio; A. L. Lebeson, *Jewish Pioneers in America, 1492-1848* (New York: Brentano's, 1931); G. Merrill, "Role of Sephardic Jews in the British Caribbean Area During the 17th Century," *Caribbean Studies* 4, no. 3 (1964): 32-49; Jacob R. Marcus, *Colonial American Jew, 1492-1776* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970).

2. For the purposes of clarification, several terms must be defined at the outset. "Jew" will be used to designate intentional adherents of Judaism and people who were born Jewish. "Marrano" will designate people whose formal identity was Christian (as a result of their own or their ancestors' conversion) but practiced Judaism secretly and/or would have practiced it openly if given the opportunity. "New Christian" will be used as a generic term to designate undifferentiated converts, or conversos, some of whom might have been sincere converts, and others, Marranos. Subjective determinations of the appropriate term have been made in cases where the evidence is ambiguous or uncertain, but in some instances all the designations could be applied to the same individual at different stages of his life. By and large, "Jew" will be used most readily, although at times it is open to dispute.

3. Jacob R. Marcus to Franklin B. Krohn, June 12, 1991.

4. Cecil Roth, *A History of the Marranos* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1932).

5. Floyd S. Fierman, *Roots and Boots* (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav, 1987); N. Plevin, "Secret Legacy from Spanish Inquisition Is Coming to Light in the Southwest," *Buffalo News*, April 28, 1991, p. E-4; H. J. Tobias, *A History of the Jews in New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990).

6. Patricia Giniger Snyder, "The Long Road Back," *Hadassah Magazine* 73, no. 5 (January 1992): 18-20.

7. N. H. Finkelstein, *The Other 1492: Jewish Settlement in the New World* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989).

8. *Synagogue records*: Ledgerbooks and burial records of the Barbados Jewish community, 1696-1887, Microfilm 822 and Box 1280, American Jewish Archives (AJA). *Newspaper accounts*: *Barbados Globe* and *Barbados Mercury*, April 1 and 2, 1835, "Consecration of Synagogue." Photocopies in AJA. *Wills*: D. M. Zielonka, "A Study of the Life of the Jews in Jamaica as Reflected in Their Wills, 1692-1798" (Term paper, 1963), AJA. *Colonial proceedings and records*: Names of Jews residing on the island of Barbados, giving various statistical information regarding them, 1679-1680, AJA. Pages taken from the *Parliamentary History of England* from the Earliest Period to the Year 1803 Dealing with the Debate on the Seizure and Confiscation of Private Property in St. Eustatius, England, 1781, AJA. Pages taken from various volumes of the *Journal of Assembly* for the years 1774, 1760, 1808, 1809, and 1820, AJA, dated May 13, 1963. Petitions and other material regarding Jews in Bermuda and Jamaica, 1678, 1735, 1761, 1769, 1772, and 1776, Microfilm 578, AJA. *Commercial records*: Commercial and legal documents of Barbados, Curaçao, Jamaica, and St. Eustatius, 1680-1796, AJA. Zielonka, "Study of the Life of the Jews in Jamaica."