

## Rediscovering Tucacas

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The settlement of Jews in Tucacas, on the northern coast of Venezuela, is one of the most enigmatic chapters of Jewish history in the Caribbean basin. There are so few sources on this settlement that until very recently, historians who relied only on Jewish sources were not even certain that a Jewish settlement there had ever existed.

Tucacas is situated in a mountainous region and is a key surrounded by two rivers, making access from the interior of Venezuela quite difficult. From the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Venezuelan coast was raided by Dutch ships seeking locally produced salt (a much-needed commodity in this period) and fish. The Spanish authorities had few ships or troops. Given these conditions, cruel battles were part of life on the Venezuelan coast. In 1622 the Dutch were defeated on the coast at Araya, and in 1623 driven from the island of Margarita<sup>1</sup>. The Dutch attacked several times up the Orinoco River, wreaking great havoc in 1624 on towns and Catholic churches. As a report written in 1637 described the situation: "the settlers are weeping ... and so all Christianity. ... all the images and temples were burned, and the ornaments looted."<sup>2</sup>

With the occupation of Curaçao in 1634, and then of the islands of Bonaire and Aruba, the Dutch obtained bases very near the Venezuelan coast. This made Spanish defensive efforts much more difficult. It also made the Venezuelan coast the center of the so-called illicit or contraband trade between Curaçao and the Spanish colonies on the South American mainland.

The illicit trade was not actually very illegal. Mostly it was carried out with the knowledge of the local authorities. The Spanish settlers needed foodstuffs and European goods. Since Spain could not provide these, permits were given locally to trade with the Curaçao merchants. At the same time Spanish warships continually attacked Dutch vessels, disrupting this trade. The Dutch historian Goslinga tells us that "although Curaçao Jews were carrying on ac-

tive trade with the nearest English and French colonies, the principal market was the Spanish mainland: the coast of Venezuela and Colombia.”<sup>3</sup>

Sometimes, on their own initiative, Spanish captains captured Dutch ships coming from Curaçao and made prisoners of the Jews and Protestants on board. The prisoners, terrified lest they be handed over to the Inquisition, paid high ransoms for their release, and their goods were confiscated. For the Spanish entrepreneurs, it was good business. The Dutch, for their part, saw the need to have a base on the Venezuelan coast to which merchant ships could be escorted from Curaçao. This base was Tucacas.

According to Cantor Corcos of the Curaçao Jewish congregation:

In the year 1693 a party of Hebrews, about ninety, left Curaçao and set sail for America. These families established themselves in Newport.... In that same year another number of Israelites left Curaçao for Venezuela. The majority of these, however, were Italians ... emigrated from Leghorn, ... [who] came to Curaçao, from where they went to Tucacas, where they established and formed themselves into a congregation<sup>4</sup>

Corcos writes that this group was made up of Jews who had originally settled in Cayenne. However, as most of the Cayenne Jews went to Surinam, it is more reasonable to believe that they were Jews from Leghorn who had settled in Tobago or Pomeroun and had then gone to Curaçao. Other groups must also have left Curaçao for Tucacas. From the documents of the island's Sadaca society, which helped Jews in transit, we know that it provided assistance, beginning in 1715, to Jews settling in Tucacas<sup>5</sup>

The Spanish governor of Caracas, José Francisco de Canas, states in his reports to the king:

In the first years of the eighteenth century the Dutch established themselves on the key of Tucacas. This place became a major center of smuggling to the people in the valleys of Barquisimeto, Barinas, Turiamo, Coro, and even including Santa Fe [Bogota, Colombia] and Quito [Ecuador].<sup>6</sup> The Jews participate actively

in this settlement, where they have built houses, raise cattle, have constructed a fortress and even a synagogue.... At the same time they inform Curaçao about the activities of the Spanish authorities?

The historian of Venezuela, Arausz Monfante, says that despite the many efforts by Venezuela's governors to dislodge the intruders, Tucacas remained, until the middle of the eighteenth century, a kind of lawless island, a highly preferred locale for illegal transactions.<sup>8</sup>

As for the difficulty of capturing Tucacas, the Spanish commander in Coro wrote the governor in Caracas:

Tucacas [is] a place in the hands of the Dutch, and luckily for them, they know the entry and exit, as they have built by hand, by closing some of the keys with very notable capacity.<sup>9</sup>

The economic situation in Venezuela resulting from the illicit trade in Tucacas was described by a newly appointed governor of Caracas soon after he took up his post:

I found this province very poor and deteriorated because of the continuing trade with the Dutch that takes away money and fruit in exchange for their products ... the enemies of Your Majesty become rich taking away whole fleets, exploiting the infidelity of some Spaniards.... The Dutch have settled on our coast called Tucacas, where they have homes and cattle.<sup>10</sup>

He also describes the volume of commerce: "The Dutch and the Jews cannot do business so freely in Amsterdam as they do here in the valleys, ports, coasts of Caracas [province]."

The Dutch enclave was under the command of Jorge Christian, who called himself the "Marquis of Tucacas." He was in charge of the commerce and defense.

The mayor of Coro, Juan Jacobo Montero de Espinos, who saw Tucacas as a foreign intrusion, described its commerce in 1711.

Twelve thousand bales of cacao grown in the Venezuelan valleys, tobacco, and the most important: silver, gold, and emeralds from Quito, Popayan [Colombia], and Santa Fe [Bogota], and the exporters come themselves to Tucacas to purchase what they need.

In 1710, with the aid of 150 Indians armed with bows and arrows, Montero had attacked the "houses of the Jews on the mainland and killed their cattle." He had failed, however, to reach the houses and depots on the key, which was defended by four armed ships, with heavily armed crews. On his way back to Coro, he had seized several mule trains carrying cacao beans to Tucacas.<sup>11</sup>

To Montero's surprise, his actions were received coolly by Governor Rojas. Moreover, Lieutenant Governor Nicolas Sanchez attacked the villages of the Indians who had participated in the attack on Tucacas and dispersed them.

Governor Canas took more effective steps to stop the illegal trade. In 1712, frustrated by the impossibility of capturing Tucacas, he prohibited the transportation of merchandise on the road from Coro to Tucacas. Soon after a train of sixty mules was stopped and its leaders arrested; they were condemned to death and executed.<sup>12</sup> Canas hoped that terror tactics of this kind would stop the commerce with Tucacas.

When Canas closed the three navigable canals giving access to Tucacas, part of the populace began to abandon it. Tucacas was repopulated after Canas was replaced.

In 1717, the new governor of Caracas, Marcos Francisco de Betancourt, decided to lead a punitive expedition "against the Jews and Dutch in Tucacas, invading it by land and sea, but could not proceed for lack of soldiers and because the inhabitants of Tucacas were alerted to the coming invasion by their Spanish friends."<sup>13</sup>

In this second stage in the settlement of Tucacas, a permanent synagogue was built. Samuel Hebreo was elected head of the Jewish community and had the title of "senor de las Tucacas."<sup>14</sup> This indicates the influence the Jews had there.

During this period of renewed prosperity, the congregation of the Jews of Tucacas, Santa Irmandad ("The Holy Brotherhood"), sent a

letter to Mikve Israel in Curaçao, dated September 2, 1720 and signed by Samuel Gradis Gabay.<sup>15</sup> Enclosed were 340 pesos as a gift for the purpose of purchasing a Torah scroll with ornaments for the use of the Curaçao congregation—a gesture of appreciation for the help the Tucacas community had received from the Curaçao congregation.<sup>16</sup>

One of the main commodities in the trade with Tucacas was cacao. Interestingly, the cacao beans were purchased in Venezuela but processed in Curaçao by Jewish experts who, like many Jews elsewhere in the Caribbean, specialized in cacao and vanilla processing. Afterwards, the cacao was exported to Europe, one of the destinations being Spain itself.<sup>17</sup> This shows the extent to which Spain was disconnected from its colonies. It has been calculated that there was a 45 percent gap between the prices of legal Spanish imports and the clandestine imports through Tucacas and Curaçao.<sup>18</sup>

The Spanish Caracas Company wanted a monopoly on foreign trade, but its possibilities and facilities were limited. Creole planters had to wait months for available shipping space to export their products. They preferred Tucacas because cargoes could be shipped there more rapidly and imported goods could be obtained from the local merchants. The Caracas Company dispatched armed ships to stop the illicit trade and pressured the governors to act against Tucacas. The creoles, in turn, kept up constant pressure on the government to ignore the trade through Tucacas. Some Spanish officials took action against Tucacas, others did not. As already mentioned, for example, the mayor of Coro who attacked Tucacas in 1710 was reprimanded by the governor in Caracas, who saw the Tucacas trade as beneficial. As for the slave trade, it remained strictly forbidden to anyone except the West India Company, and the Tucacas Jews refrained from participating in it.

At the end of 1717, the province of Venezuela became part of the viceroyalty of Nueva Granada, extending from Guiana to Quito. The viceroy, Jorge de Villalonga, after receiving complaints from the Capuchin prefect of the missionaries, Fray Gabriel of Barcelona, that many of his officials and some of the clergy were involved in the contraband trade, punished the president and staff of the Audiencia of Panama, and removed some of the officials of Cartagena (Colombia). In January 1718 he nominated a judge with the rank of

visitador, Pedro José de Olavarriaga, as commissioner against the contraband trade.

Olavarriaga compiled a series of accusations against the governor of Caracas, Marcos Francisco de Betancourt, and imprisoned him. Assembling army units to interdict the trade with Tucacas, and with forty ships at his disposal to patrol the coast, he attacked Tucacas in November 1720. In his report to the king, the viceroy wrote that "The synagogue which the Jews had erected on the mainland was destroyed, together with the other houses, and the intruders retreated to the key of Paiclas."<sup>19</sup>

The viceroy's report was disputed when witnesses offered different accounts of the attack on Tucacas during the investigation of Olavarriaga, who was imprisoned in 1721 for administrative fraud and other excesses:

- Witness Juan José de Varríos: "The Dutch burned their own houses in Tucacas and left for Curaçao."
- Witness Andres Fernandes: "The Dutch residents of Tucacas set it on fire and left for Curaçao when they learned that Olavarriaga had invaded the coast and they would be unable to do business."
- Captain Juan de Olivares: "All the foreign vessels anchored in the port left, some for Barlovento, and the others, after burning Tucacas, for Curaçao."
- Witness Juan Salgado: "The Dutch in the port of Tucacas burned houses, and twelve to fourteen ships left for Curaçao."
- Witness Captain Bacilio Antonio de Cuebas: "On the coast between Coro and San Juan there were more than forty ships, which left with the arrival of Olavarriaga and burned the houses they had built in Tucacas."<sup>20</sup>

Governor Betancourt was released from prison by the new governor, Diego Portales. Olavarriaga remained in prison for six months.

The synagogue and organized Jewish community of Tucacas may have been destroyed in 1720, but Jewish merchants continued to be active there. When the Dutch returned to Tucacas in 1722, Governor Portales feared that they might occupy the whole province of Venezuela.<sup>21</sup>

More and more ships anchored in Tucacas, a number of them as large as 300 tons. Some of the ships sailed directly to Europe and back, bypassing Curaçao entirely.

Governor Portales made a special tour of the Venezuelan coast in January 1722 to observe the situation. He reported that

Dutch ships practically block every port. Worse than that, Jews and Dutch are not only doing business on the coast, but are present at the fairs in January and July, when cacao beans are collected, sleeping in farms and valleys, and local women sleep with them. The population has to trade with them as there is a lack of textiles and other merchandise, which is not received from the [Iberian] peninsula, and it is recommended that the crown send one galleon, four ships, and fifteen to twenty smaller vessels every six months in order to supply the province.<sup>22</sup>

In summing up the situation, the viceroy revealed how difficult it would be to put an end to the illicit commerce. The issue, he said, caused scandals and quarrels even in his office, and local officials participated in or at least tolerated the illicit trade, which “prejudiced the public administration, local administration, and the royal finances. It also caused a weakening of the local customs and religion, by the influence of heretics and Jews on the inhabitants.”<sup>23</sup>

Based upon the evidence cited, it is quite certain that there was a Jewish congregation in Tucacas between 1693 and 1720, and a synagogue until at least 1720.

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## Notes

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1. Carlos Felice Cardot, "Aiguinas acciones de los Holandeses en la region del oriente de Venezuela (Primera mitad del siglo XVII)," *Boletin de la Academia Nacional de la Historia* 65, no. 170 (July–September 1962): 354.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

3. Cornelius Ch. Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and in the Guianas, 1680–1791* (Assen, 1985), p. 239.

4. Joseph Corcos, *A Synopsis of the History of the Jews of Curaçao* (Curaçao, 1897), pp. 16–18.

5. Isaac Emmanuel and Suzanne Emmanuel, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles* (Cincinnati, 1970), p. 125.

6. Archivo General de Indias, Seville (Santo Domingo), December 9, 1714, document 715.

7. Archivo General de Indias, Testimony on the Letters Captured from different Dutch and Jews from Curaçao (Santo Domingo), document 759 of September, October, November 1720.

8. Celestino Andres Arausz Monfante, *El Contrabando Hollandes en el Caribe durante la primera mitad del siglo XVIII* (Caracas, 1984), vol. 1, pp. 65–66.

9. Archivo General de Indias, Seville (Santo Domingo), document 759, February 3, 1722; copy in the National Academy of History of Venezuela.

10. Archivo General de Indias, Don Jose Francisco de Cuinas to his Majesty, August 11, 1711, no. 108.

11. Juan Jacobo Montero de Espinos to the King, April 9, 1711, Archivo General de Indias (Santo Domingo), document 697.

12. Jose de Canas to the King, Archivo General de Indias, Seville (Santo Domingo), May 28, 1712, document 751.

13. Marcos Francisco de Betancourt to the King, Caracas, August 23, 1717, Archivo General de Indias, (Santo Domingo), document 697.

14. Arausz Monfante, *El Contrabando Hollandes*, p. 199.

15. Since Jews usually used their Hebrew names in the synagogue and their Portuguese names when dealing with non-Jews, it may be that this Samuel is identical to the Samuel Hebreo mentioned previously.

16. Corcos, *Synopsis of the History*, p. 18.

17. Goslinga, *Dutch in the Caribbean*, p. 97.

18. Antonio Arellano Morego, *Relaciones geograficas de Venezuela* (Caracas, 1964), p. 430.

19. Jorge de Villalonga to the King, Cartagena de Indias, March 7, 1721, Archivo General de Indias (Santo Domingo), document 761, cited in Arausz Monfante, *El Contrabando Hollandes*, p. 194. I was told by Venezuelan historians of the region

that a special Catholic mass was celebrated on the ruins of the synagogue. (As yet, I have uncovered no document in proof of this.)

20. Archivo General de Indias (Santo Domingo), document 759, October 8, 1727, pp. 656–668.

21. Portales to the King, Caracas, October 1, 1722, Archivo General de Indias (Santo Domingo), document 699.

22. Diego Portales to the King, Coro, January 29, 1722, Archivo General de Indias (Santo Domingo), document 759, cited in Arausz Monfante, *El Contrabando Hollandes*, p. 197.

23. Jorge de Villalonga to the King, Santa Fe, January 1722, Archivo General de Indias (Santa Fe), document 286.