

HISTORY OF THE JEWS IN ST.EUSTATIUS

Excerpts from the following Writers:

History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles. By: Isaac S. and Suzanne. The Jews and St.Eustatius by: Dr. J. Hartog. Archaeology of the Jewish Synagogue Honen Dalim. By: Dr. Norman F. Barka.

PART - 1

SEARCH AND SETTLEMENT

1660 marks the beginning of the history of the Jews in Statia which ended in 1864 with the death of the last Jewish inhabitant. Unfortunately we do not know much of their lives since only limited records have survived. What little is known is summarized here. In 1660 two Jewish men, Abraham Israel Henriquez and David Seraiva, visited Statia looking for places and opportunities for their communities. They were part of the Sephardic Jewish community that had been forced to flee Brazil after the Spanish conquest of the country. Many of these Jews had settled in Curacao and Amsterdam but were searching for other places where they could live and work without fear of persecution.

In the early 1700's Jews began to arrive in Statia to live in 1703. Daniel and Aron Cohen Henriquez; in 1705 Mozes Lopes Henriquez and Isaac Pinheiro; and in 1711, Juda Obediente and Salomo Nunes Netto. For these early Jews life was not that easy. They were forced to leave in 1709 when French pirates captured the island and again in 1713 when French Captain Jacques Cassard ransacked Statia. But each time they returned when the Dutch were once more in control. By 1720 Isaac Naftali of New York was actively engaged in business here.

The Statia Jewish community in 1722 had four families with a total of 21 people – six adult men, four women, six girls and five boys. They possessed among them 16 slaves. These early Jews were Sephardic and spoke Portuguese as well as English and Hebrew. The Jewish community continued to grow with more Jewish settlers of Sephardic (Iberian ancestry and Ashkenazic (from eastern and central Europe) heritage arriving each year. In September of 1730 the Jews of Statia were granted the same rights enjoyed by gentiles, including the rights to vote and engage in commerce. The Jews were exempted from military service since the Civil Guard met on Saturday, the Jewish Holy day. The Jews also established their own cemetery in 1730. In 1737 their request for permission to build a synagogue was granted with the stipulation that it be erected in such a place as not to interfere with the practice of Christian religions on the island. The synagogue was finished in 1739 and was called Honen Dalim, “she who is charitable to the poor.” But all was not well among the Jewish community. The two Jewish groups, the Sephardic and Ashkenazic, were very different in religious beliefs and life style. They continually squabbled and fought among themselves. Frequently the militia had to be called to settle disputes.

PART - II

PROSPERITY AND EXILE

In 1740 we find the Jews in Statia engaged in commerce and accepted as citizens with the right to vote and hold public office. They were not a rich lot as attested to by frequent requests to the Jewish community in Curacao for aid, but they were free to practice their religion and live in relative peace. In 1742 during the "War of the Austrian Succession," they were once again forced to flee to Curacao but returned in 1744. They continued to fight among themselves to such a great extent that the militia had to be frequently called out. These fights were caused by differences in beliefs and life-styles of the Sephardic and Ashkenazic factions. This social tension was finally put to rest by the intervention, in 1760, by Commander Jan de Windt. Commander de Windt, by all accounts a very wise and dedicated individual, set up a commission to draw up communal regulations called a "hascamoth." This commission seemed to have worked very well as we have no further accounts of the militia having to be dispatched.

The period after 1760 until 1780 is one we know little about, but it appears to have been one of growth, peace and prosperity in the Jewish community. On August 31 1772, a hurricane supposedly levelled the synagogue and a number of homes in the community. The parnassim, composed of Salomon de Leon, David R Furtado, Samuel Hoheb Jr., Judah Benjamin, Jeosuch de Mosch Levy, Maduro Peixotto, and Samson Mears appealed to the Jewish communities of Amsterdam, New York, and Curacao for support and assistance to rebuild the synagogue. On November 16, 1772, they reported to Curacao that the repairs were almost finished. The Jews during this time seemed to have enjoyed an elevated status in the community in Statia; one of them, Daniel Nunez Henriquez, served as clerk to the Government Secretary and translator. They were a charitable lot, taking in refugees from the Inquisition.

Many of the Jews were actively engaged in commerce with the rebellious colonies to the north, dealing directly with the agents of the individual states. Others were loyal still to their Tory beliefs and refused to deal with the American rebels. Among this latter group were the Pollack brothers, formerly of Rhode Island. These brothers had served the King of England so well as tea merchants that they had been granted land from him on Long Island. As the tension of war increased, they found it necessary to move their business and families to Statia for safety. By all records they seemed to have continued to refuse to do business with the rebels, as did other Jewish merchants.

After the outbreak of hostilities, business in Statia was booming and all the merchants seemed to have been prosperous, including our Jewish friends. This abruptly came to an end on Saturday February 3, 1781, when Admiral George Bridges Rodney and General John Vaughan seized Statia with a squadron of fifteen ships of the line, three frigates, and three bomb-ketches with 3000 soldiers on board. St.Eustatius offered no resistance. Admiral Rodney was determined to wipe out and put to an end the "nest of Vipers."

Two days later Rodney asked for an inventory of all merchants and their nationality. A week later he ordered all male Jews to report at the weigh house for deportation, where they were promptly and roughly searched for valuables, Rodney extorted a total of 8000 pounds in cash from some 250 males. This gives us a rough idea of the size of the Jewish community in Statia. (Dr.Hartog figures the community to have been about 350 or a tenth of the population of Statia.) Thirty of the Jews were taken aboard the Schrewsbury and banished to St. Kitts and the rest were thrown in jail for three days without food or water.

PART – III PERSECUTION AND DECLINE

With Admiral George Rodney's capture of St.Eustatius on February 3, 1781, the Jewish history begins to come to an end. Actually, Rodney had confiscated 175 seagoing vessels. Thirty four of these, laden with treasure, he shipped to England. In addition he realized some \$15,000,000 on merchandise of the islanders sold on public auction. Just before his arrival a fleet of some thirty large ships, richly laden, sailed from St.Eustatius to Holland. Rodney dispatched two warships after them. The convoy was taken after a bitter combat. The damage done to the island, besides the total destruction of the Government archives is estimated at 48,000,000 florins.

Burke asked that a motion be taken to condemn Rodney for his deed. In spite of all this, Parliament rejected Burke's plea with 160 votes in favour and only 86 against Rodney. Rodney, was especially hard on the Jews who tried to hide money in their clothing at the same time of capture. This included Samuel Hoheb, the pillar of the Jewish community, and the Jewish tea merchant Pollack, who had served the English crown so loyally in Rhode Island. The 30 men who were sent to St .Kitts were received kindly by the merchants there, as most of the population in that island were trading through Statia. Unfortunately, the families of these men were thrown into abject poverty and all of Statia suffered the loss of land rights and all possessions of value.

Appeals to Admiral Rodney and General Vaughan fell on deaf ears. The people beseeched Parliament for help but few considered their plea. Lord Edmund Burke defended their cause with a moving speech that stated in part: "The persecution was begun with the people, whom of all others it ought to be the care and the wish of human nations to protect, the Jews...the link of communication in the mercantile chain...the conductors by which credit was transmitted through the world... a resolution was taken (by the British conquerors) to banish this unhappy people from the island." Rodney lost Statia on November 26th, 1781, to the French when the island was recaptured by Marquis de Bouille. The French restored to each man his property as much as they could and the Jews slowly returned. The situation on Statia improved little by little and Statia was officially restored to the Dutch in 1784.

In 1790, Statia was once more a thriving trade centre with 170 Jews on the registry. Over 600 warehouses existed on the waterfront and business reached its peak. Jacob Robles, the cantor, died in 1791 and requests to replace him by Eliau de Pinna to the Curacao parnassim (elders of the congregation) were not fulfilled. In 1795 the French once more captured the island and placed heavy taxes on its merchants. The number of Jews then steadily declined so that by 1800 there were only a few left on Statia. The Dutch finally took control of Statia in 1816 and the census taken in 1818 shows only 5 Jews on the island. The last of these, Mrs Anna Viera de Molina, died in 1846, bringing an end to our Jewish history.

All that we now have left is an old cemetery and the beautiful ruins of Honen Dalim Synagogue. The ruins have in recent years been used for a Bar Mitzvah in 1981, and for a Sabbat celebration in 1993 by Jewish visitors from neighbouring islands. In 2001, restoration of the walls and the surroundings of the synagogue was completed, with the exception of the roof. Many of these congregations in St.Thomas, St.Croix, Puerto Rico, Barbados, and Curacao have ties to our Jews of the 1700's.