

Our own banana republic

Three hundred years ago in the jungles of South America, exiled Sephardim established the first Jewish, "state" since the destruction of the Temple. MANFRED LEHMANN visits Surinam and looks into the "Joden Savanne," as the enclave was called.

TO A New Yorker visiting Surinam, history is an important guide. For had it not been for the Treaty of Breda in 1667, New Amsterdam would today still be part of the Netherlands and I would perhaps be carrying a Dutch passport.

When England and Holland swapped colonies, the Dutch may have earned their reputation as sharp traders, because Surinam, with its successful and well organized sugar plantations - mostly Jewish-owned - was surely a greater bargain than the Indian camps which occupied most of Manhattan at the time.

Hindsight has no place in history, so we must not compare today's New York skyline with the small-town colonial panorama which Paramaribo, Surinam's capital, offers today. Once the Dutch took possession of Surinam they spent the first 10 years chasing out the English settlers, while making sure that the Jewish colonists remained. However, the Jews of Surinam had by that time already been there for a generation and there was perhaps no need to fear that they would leave. The first contingent arrived in 1639, and their number rose suddenly and sharply in 1654 when "Nova Holanda", the north-east of Brazil, fell again - after only 30 years of Dutch rule - to the Portuguese.

It was in 1497 - five years after the expulsion from Spain and Columbus's first expedition to the New World - that Portugal forced its 200,000 Jews to choose between baptism or emigration. Those Jews who agreed to settle in recently discovered Brazil were promised that they would be left alone by the Holy Office of the Inquisition for 100 years.

As long as hardly anyone in his right mind was ready to venture into the inhospitable jungles of the New World, the Portuguese reasoned, why not use the gentle persuasion of the Church to encourage the use of the brain and brawn of Jews to open up the new territories?

Many Jewish merchants, planters,

scientists and explorers took the bait. Their main target was Pernambuco, with its capital of Recife. They also made their way to Bahia and Rio de Janeiro. And they opened up Brazil.

A century later, however, after their initial Job was done, the Jews became the prey of the Inquisition again. The first "visitation" of the Santo Officio is recorded in 1593, beginning with Pernambuco. The usual list of "Judaizing" practices were posted on church doors for all squealers and denouncers to see. Who was seen putting on a clean shirt on Saturday? Who was observed fasting on September 10? Who was heard swearing by his father's "world to come?" Who was known to be pouring out all water from the house in case of a death? Who refrained from eating pork? These and other tell-tale signs were enough for the Church's informers to bring in an ever growing number of victims. Many ended up at the stake in Lisbon at auto-da-fé which continued almost into the 19th century.

HOLLAND captured Pernambuco in 1624. For the first time, the Novos Cristaos or Marranos could surface from religious hiding and confess Judaism publicly. The synagogue records from Recife's Tzur Israel congregation now found in Amsterdam - give evidence of a very active communal life with a thoroughly organized congregational

structure for the thousands of proudly practising Jews. But their freedom was short-lived. Mauritz de Nassau, Pernambuco's last butch governor, surrendered to the Portuguese in 1054, and signed a bilingual peace agreement. The Dutch version contained a rider, suppressed in the Portuguese text: the Jews had 90 days in which to evacuate Brazil without being molested by the Church. Although a very short time, it was enough for most of them, who set sail for Amsterdam, Surinam, Jamaica, Curacao, Barbados, Martinique, and New Amsterdam.

SURINAM, being closest to Brazil, got the largest influx of Jewish New World settlers. These were seasoned plantation owners and merchants, with relatives in all major trading centres of the world.

Surinam was neither a cramped little island like Barbados, nor an urban centre like London or Amsterdam. Surinam had vast tranquil stretches of tropical forest, gentle rivers and good farm land open for large-scale agricultural expansion.

Here the Jews could calmly plan for the future. They could peacefully build up a sugar economy, based on African slaves, and establish international trade links with their relatives abroad. For instance, Menaase ben Israel, the writer-philosopher-rabbi-statesman who convinced Oliver Cromwell to re-admit Jews into England, was an active member of the East India Company in which Surinam's Jews owned a 25 per cent share.

While Amsterdam remained their spiritual and commercial centre, they were, however, intent on establishing their own "Jerusalem aan de rivier" (Jerusalem on the river). And so the first independent Jewish state since the destruction of the Temple came into being: in the heart of the Americas.

WHEN I VISITED Surinam for the first



Stamps: (left) Joden Savanne Synagogue built in 1658; (right) map showing early Jewish Plantations on Surinam river

time in 1959, the then Prime Minister, Mr. Emanuels nominally a "Bush Negro" but actually of Jewish descent decided to invest money on clearing the Jungle in what had been the Joden Savanne. (During World War II, imprisoned Dutch Nazis stationed in the area had been charged with beginning this task. but after the war the Jungle again won the battle and closed in on the ruins and cemeteries of the Joden Savanne.) Emanuels got the Dutch army, stationed in Surinam, to complete the job.

News of the "rediscovery" of the Jewish state was first announced to the world through a unique method: a set of three commemorative stamps, which caused an immediate sensation among philatelists.

They were the first non-Israeli stamps to bear Hebrew inscriptions, quoting the Bible and carrying illustrations of the old synagogue, the cemetery and a map of Jewish plantations.

Surinam's independence in 1975, far from creating strife among the six major racial groups in the country (Amerindians, Negroes, Chinese, Indians, Indonesians and Europeans), has apparently brought tranquillity and harmony, with a strong coalition government in charge. Many Surinamese are returning from Holland.

THE statue of Queen Wilhelmina was predictably replaced with one showing the heavy frame of the late Prime Minister Pengel, who had helped to move the country towards independence. And the mansion which once housed the Dutch governor has been turned into the home of the native president of the Republic.

There is an ultra-modern Torarica Hotel (named after the 17th century capital; its name means "the rich Tora" and bespeaks the influence and piety of the early Jewish settlers). Traffic in Paramaribo is heavy, and traffic control has become a problem. The suburbs are sprouting with comfortable one family villas. Bauxite and aluminium, gold mining, shrimp fishing, banana and rice production and timber have contributed to the country's prosperity. The two old synagogues, Neve Shalom for the Ashkenazim (built in 1835), and Zedekve Shalom for the Sephardim (built in 1730), stand serene and a bit out of place in the bustle of downtown Paramaribo. In the 1950s, these had been the oldest monuments of Jewish colonization in South America. But during my last visit in August, 1977, I discovered that these two synagogues were the "young" children of an even older community that of the Berakha Veshalom (Blessing and Peace) of the Joden Savanne, whose

second synagogue was inaugurated December 12, 1685. That date brings us to within 200 years of the expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula.

MY GUIDES to the Joden Savanne were the Da Costa family in Paramaribo, among the oldest Dutch-Portuguese families in the world. David Da Costa - director of Surinam's government-owned banana and rice industry - is a direct descendant of Uriel Da Costa, the controversial Portuguese Jewish philosopher who was excommunicated twice for heresy by the Jewish community of Amsterdam. (Had it not been for his example, Baruch Spinoza, who followed him by a few years, may never have suffered that fate.)

Mrs. Da Costa is the self-appointed town historian for the Joden Savanne and is accumulating an archive of memorabilia of the ancient community.

An hour-long car ride southwards from Paramaribo brought us to a huge aluminium smelter, and Indian villages with straw huts, which haven't changed in design since the beginning of time. We reached the gentle shores of the Surinam River and a sleepy village called Carolina.

As the moment of crossing the river by ferry approached, Mrs. Da Costa grew more and more excited, knowing that finally she had a visitor with her who would be able to read the Hebrew on the tombstones of the ancient cemetery.

She told me that one tombstone after the other has begun to disappear. The lone "policeman" who lives at the site pretends to know nothing of this. However, telltale tools left behind by local Indians at the cemetery indicate brisk activity.

But who would the buyers be? Who but an occasional overseas collector, or museum, would commission half-primitive Indians to rob graves? And how would the huge stone slabs, which would require large crates for overseas shipment, go undetected out of the harbour of Paramaribo?

While her children paid homage to the village's two pet monkeys. Mrs. Da Costa carried on a heated conversation with Carolina's lone policeman, who maintained that he hadn't seen anything resembling tombstones crossing on the ferry.

I contributed the suggestion that the local customs and port authorities in Paramaribo be alerted against the illicit exportation of native antiquities - a crime in every developing country today.

Finally, the ferryman lazily decided to move us across to the other shore. The barge was big enough to hold about three cars and was being pulled by a small

motorized vessel that was attached to it.

THE SURINAM River Is sometimes called the Rhine of South America. It may lack hills and cliffs, but It follows a gently curved river bed to the ocean, and allows pleasant river navigation for tourists who seek a cooling ride away from the stifling heat of the coast.

Mrs. Da Costa pointed out the location of the once flourishing Independent Jewish community, which commanded sugar plantations over the land as far as the eye could see. An old map she showed me carried the names of the plantations mostly biblical names, such as Mahandim, Batseva, Sharon, Mora; and the names of Jewish-Portuguese owners -- Nassy, Pereira, Da Costa, Nunes, De Pina, De Casseres, da Silva.

As the ferry approached the shore of Joden Savanne, I realized that the Jewish state was situated there not only because of the fertility of the land, but also because it was a bulwark against attack by the Indians, or the neighbouring French. A mini-prototype of the Maginot Line had been established here, called the "Cordon path" and the Jewish army of the Joden Savanne was counted upon to defend it. The Cordon was also meant to stop runaway slaves from reaching the bush, and was a defence line against attacks by former slaves. After leaving the ferry we soon saw the wide bridle path which the Jewish settlers had cut through the forest, and which, in the past, held military posts at regular intervals.

We drove on. Only minutes later, we stopped at an open area of the forest where there were rows and rows of tombstones lying flat. The form and style of these stones were unmistakably Sephardi. They were certainly far more impressive than the oldest surviving Spanish Portuguese tombstones in the US, At Mill Street, near New York's Chinatown.

Mrs. Da Costa had predicted that I would get goose pimples, and she was right. The sight of lengthy and expertly engraved Hebrew inscriptions in the middle of a jungle surrounded by Indian villages stunned me.

OUR GROUP was divided into teams: The Da Costa children merrily ran about spotting tombstones with Hebrew texts for me, while our Indian driver followed immediately after them with a strong hand brush to clear the stones. Mrs. Da Costa and I came last: I to do some readings, and to photograph the stones, and Mrs. Da Costa to drink up every piece of information about the Hebrew texts.

Most stones had bilingual texts, with

Hebrew on top of the Portuguese, or Spanish, or - very rarely - Dutch. Some stones bore only one of these languages. Many stones were beautifully illustrated with engraved scenes.

The most remarkable stone, headed by an engraved scene of a ruler on a throne, was that of Rabbi David Hezekiah Baruch Louzada. After some effort I deciphered the lengthy poetic Hebrew text, which read: "The monument of the tomb of a man who was always first in every holy enterprise, the father and head of the descendants of the Patriarchs, a sage with an uplifted face, the Haham, the understanding, the holy of Cod, the honoured elder, who chanted pleasantly the songs of Israel within the congregation named Berakha Ve Shalom in the City of Surinam, the wise and understanding communal leader, the exalted, pious and humble Rabbi David Hezekiah Baruch Louzada, of blessed



Jewish tombstone in Joden Savanne

memory, who in his lifetime also was a Mohel and Rosh Yeshiva, head of the academy, named Gemiluth Hasadim, who departed this life at the will of the Lord of heaven and earth on the second day of the New Moon of Iyyar 1825."

Here was evidence that the Joden Savanne had maintained a Talmudic academy certainly the first one on the shores of the western hemisphere. The name Yeshivat Gemiluth Hasadim (literally: performance of charitable deeds) may seem unlikely for such an Institution. But then again, a contemporary yeshiva in Amsterdam bore exactly the same name.

The stone also gave the Hebrew name

of the Joden Savanne: "Ir Surinam" - the city of Surinam. As Prof. Hermann Salomon of New York University later pointed out to me, the Spanish Portuguese congregation of New York, Shecrith Israel, twice a year offers special Thanksgiving prayers for those Sephardim communities around the world which helped the New York synagogue after its foundation in 1654. These prayers offered at Kol Nidre services, and on the seventh day of Passover, still refer to Curacao and London, and also to "Ir Surinam," the Joden Savanne, as if the Jews had never moved away from there.

THE CEMETERY stretched far into the bush. On the opposite side of the road we visited a cemetery holding wooden crosses: here the Jews buried their slaves, bearing Christian or African names. Two more cemeteries are very difficult to get to because there isn't a road to them. Perhaps that will save them a little longer from being ravaged.

We drove on, and came upon the major surviving monument of the Joden Savanne: the ruin of the Synagogue Berakha Ve Shalom. This building would be impressive anywhere, being almost 100 ft. long. Only the brick foundation is still intact; the wooden superstructure disappeared in a fire in 1832. The shining white sand, which characteristically covers the floor of many Sephardim synagogues, is still there. The foundations of its many pillars remain, as do the beams which show where the men's section was separated from the women's.

The sun was slowly setting over the western bank of the Surinam River. It was time for the afternoon prayers. When were prayers last said here? I wondered. I sat near the eastern wall, facing Jerusalem, and prayed. I could well see in my mind the grandees of the old days who had gathered here twice or three times a day for their prayers, and for their study periods, as well as for communal meetings in the adjoining rooms inside the synagogue.

The area adjacent to the synagogue holds ruins of other buildings. A few youngsters, equipped with spades and picks, could excavate the area in a few days. Their efforts would be richly rewarded. I myself picked up from the ground broken china and bottles, some bearing Hebrew lettering.

A small wooden building holds a museum. Its main attraction is a scale model of the Berakha Ve Shalom synagogue. But I also discovered two large copper kettles. The lid of one of

them bore the letters *het* and *gimmel*: abbreviation for *gemiluth hasadim*. The students of the yeshiva must have been served tea and coffee out of these kettles.

From surviving drawings it is clear that the synagogue occupied the highest point in the Joden Savanne, and that the houses of its citizens were clustered around it. A cannon facing the river is still there to hint at the military situation at the time.

A CHARMING legend, perhaps one of the earliest Jewish-American legends of its kind, is told of near-disaster in the Savanne. It seems that at one point in the 18th century, runaway slaves living up country were planning an attack on the Jews. Knowing the habits of the Jews well, they decided to mount the attack on Yom Kippur eve, when they knew that the entire community would be gathered in the synagogue and would be unarmed.

But a slave girl, who was devoted to her Jewish mistress, told her of the plan. The Jewish lady immediately informed her husband, who called an emergency meeting of the community council. It was decided that, with the rabbi's permission, guns and machetes could be brought into the synagogue, to be used in the attack.

As the Jews gathered for Kol Nidre, they hid their arms under their pews. The men donned their customary white *Kittels* and prayer shawls, and confidently commenced the service. Outside in darkness, the slaves carefully started to creep towards the synagogue. But as they came near the open windows of the prayer house, they saw a multitude of men shrouded in white. Terrified, they abandoned their arms and fled back into the bush.

WE WERE reminded that the last ferry of the day left at 6 p.m. and we reluctantly made our way back to the river. As we left the Joden Savanne behind, I reflected on its importance for the development of the Jewish community in the US. The hope for tranquillity realized in the Joden Savanne may have inspired many Jews of Spanish-Portuguese extraction to seek similar havens in North America. For practically only Sephardim Jews settled in the 13 colonies up to 1720. Of course, these colonies did not offer the same economic and agricultural opportunities as Surinam, and the immigrants here were not planters or farmers, yet these shores offered an answer to hundreds of years of searching for a new permanent home.

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