

London's Portuguese Jewish community

Edgar Samuel

The background in Portugal

When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, half went to Turkey, Morocco and Italy and half moved to Portugal.¹ By 1495 the Jewish population of Portugal had risen from three thousand to some thirty-five thousand in a total population of one million.² This heavy immigration occasioned much tension and resentment, but the Jews brought many useful trades with them, including silk weaving, tanning, metalworking and printing. The first books printed in Portugal were in Hebrew!

King Manuel I wished to marry the Infanta Isabel of Castile, who was heiress to the crowns of Castile and Aragon, but her parents, Ferdinand and Isabel, insisted that Manuel must first expel the Jews from Portugal. In 1497, Manuel decreed their expulsion and made the practice of Judaism punishable by death. He then prevented them from leaving and enforced their compulsory baptism, at the same time promising them not to establish an Inquisition in Portugal for twenty years. Any Spanish Jews willing to become Christians had stayed in Spain. Those who left Spain for religion's sake were determined to remain Jews. They saw the forced baptism as the divine punishment foreseen in Deuteronomy 28:

If thou wilt not observe all the words of this Law that are written in this book ... then the Lord will make thy plagues wonderful and the plagues of thy seed ... of long continuance ... And the Lord shall scatter thee among all peoples from one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth and there thou shalt serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou or thy fathers, even wood and stone. And among the nations thou shalt have no repose ...³

Since this punishment came from Heaven, it must be endured and life lived with as much Jewish observance as practicable. Under Manuel, the baptised rabbis set about adapting Portuguese Judaism to survive as a secret religion.

Secret Judaism in Portugal

Circumcision was banned, because saving life is more important than keeping a positive commandment. Public ceremonies were scrapped. Purim and Succoth could no longer be celebrated. People were urged to wear clean shirts and blouses on Saturdays and to avoid eating pork, rabbit and shellfish. The Monday-Thursday-Monday Fast was introduced, probably to atone for receiving the compulsory communion before Easter. People were taught that Pesach commenced on the fourteenth day after the new moon of March and the Yom Kippur fast should be observed ten days after the new moon of September. The secret Jews of Portugal remembered these dates down to the present day. The Portuguese Jewish Fast of Queen Esther on three successive Wednesdays was probably introduced during the 1530s when King João III was campaigning in Rome to have an Inquisition set up in Portugal.

The 1506 massacre

In 1506 two Dominican friars in Lisbon preached up a riot and urged the people to kill the baptised Jews, who were now called New Christians. In the course of two days, two thousand people were killed. The magistrates of Lisbon did nothing to stop the attack. Manuel was furious. He sent his army into Lisbon, cancelled Lisbon's autonomy and its proud motto *Sempre Leal* [Always Loyal]. The friars were executed. Manuel allowed the New Christians to emigrate⁴ and two Lisbon synagogues were founded in Salonica.

During the sixteenth century, Portugal established a world-wide trading empire, securing territories in Goa, Colombo and Macao, as well as Brazil, Angola and Mozambique. Portuguese New Christians prospered as major international merchants and they dominated the Portuguese merchant group in Antwerp, which was the main market for the King of Portugal's exports of spices, salt, sugar, pearls and rough diamonds.

In 1535, the papacy allowed Manoel's son João III to establish an Inquisition in Portugal. In Spain, property confiscated by the Inquisition went to the Crown. In Portugal, when João III's brother Cardinal Henrique became first Inquisitor General and then king, he arranged that the Inquisition should keep the property they seized. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this gave it an extra incentive to accuse any rich New Christians of apostasy to Judaism. Persecution by the Inquisitions caused Portuguese New Christians to emigrate from both Spain and Portugal.

Migration to England

Although there were small Portuguese crypto-Jewish communities in London in the Tudor and Early Stuart periods, the history of the modern Jewish community starts with the opening of the Creechurch Lane Synagogue in 1656. It was founded by Portuguese refugees from religious persecution in Spain, but before long bursts of persecution followed in Portugal. By 1695 there were 500 Portuguese and 200 German Jews, mostly from Hamburg,⁶ in London – each with their own synagogue.

During the eighteenth century, Portugal was England's biggest export customer and, under the Methuen Treaty of 1703, all English ships were exempt from arrest or search by the Portuguese Inquisition. This meant that many New

Christian secret Jews could escape from Lisbon on an English ship. This led to a steady migration to London during the early eighteenth century. The Portuguese Jews' Congregation often paid the fares of refugees who could not afford to pay. Further financial help depended on full conversion to open Judaism.

In 1753 there were about 2000 Portuguese Jews in London, with one synagogue, and about 5000 German and Dutch Jews, with three synagogues. It was estimated that there were then about twenty rich men among the London Jews.⁷ Only two or three of them were Ashkenazi.

As in Amsterdam, the congregation always described itself as Portuguese, and sermons and minute books were normally in that language. The merchants' trade was concentrated in areas where they had special advantages of language, kinship or personal experience. They exported English cloth to Spain and Portugal, and imported fine wool and silver coin from Spain, and salt, sugar, gold, and gemstones from Portugal. They traded with Jamaica and Barbados. The import of rough diamonds from India and Brazil was an important trade.

Occupations

Jews were allowed twelve brokers on the Royal Exchange, ten of whom were Sephardi and two Ashkenazi. The community included several physicians, apothecaries and notaries. Street traders sold quill pens and sealing wax, fruit, rhubarb and leather slippers. There were engravers, embroiderers and tailors and one distinguished silversmith, Abraham Lopes de Oliveira. The community had charity schools for boys and girls. The girls were taught to sew and embroider and to read and write in English, Portuguese and Hebrew and to count in English. There were charities for apprenticing boys and girls and for dowering poor girls. *Matsot* were baked every year for free distribution to their poor.

Dr Jacob de Castro Sarmiento MD FRS was physician to the Portuguese Ambassador, Sebastião Carvalho e Melo. In 1740 he procured the ambassador's election as a Fellow of the Royal Society and his friendship with him had important consequences. At Sarmiento's suggestion the community's small hospital, the Beth Holim, was founded in 1748, with an outpatients' dispensary. When Sebastião Carvalho e Melo became ruler of Portugal, as Marquis of Pombal, he stopped the persecution of the New Christians and neutered the Inquisition. After 1765 no more were executed and the flow of Jewish refugees to England from Portugal ceased. In the late eighteenth century, the London Sephardi community adapted well to English life.

It was only after *Haham* [spiritual leader] Raphael Meldola was appointed in 1805 that the Congregation started to describe itself as Spanish and Portuguese. By then it included people from Gibraltar, Morocco and Turkey who spoke Spanish, and people from Italy who spoke Italian, many of whose ancestors never lived in Portugal. In 1819 the Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation decided to keep their minute books in English instead of Portuguese. In 1830 they decided that sermons should be preached in English and no longer in Portuguese.

Tracing Portuguese Jewish ancestors

It is a sound rule that if you are investigating your London Sephardi forebears, you should start by asking the senior members of your family for information about their parents and grandparents and then work backwards using each of the published Bevis Marks Registers (see below). Start with the marriage registers in *Bevis Marks Records II and III*.

If you know the surname of your Portuguese Jewish ancestors, the next step should be to search the Colyer-Fergusson Collection of Jewish genealogies at The Society of Genealogists or University College London. Sir Thomas Colyer-Fergusson Bt. compiled a very thorough study of leading English Jewish families.

Two useful books are Albert Hyamson's *The Sephardim of England* (1951) and *Anglo-Jewish Notabilities* (ed., 1949), which includes a list of Jewish wills at the National Archives, Kew, obituary notices from *The London Magazine* and grants of Coats of Arms. It is always worth searching the name index of *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England*, after volume XXV, and the name index of *Jewish Historical Studies* at the end of volume 36. James C. Boyajian's *Portuguese Bankers at the Court of Spain 1626–1650* (1983) includes some important seventeenth-century New Christian genealogies. Lydia Collins' *The Sephardim of Manchester* gives genealogies of many families from the Middle East, including some of Portuguese descent, such as the Picciotto family.

The published registers

The Spanish & Portuguese Jews' Congregation of London has published a valuable series of registers entitled *Bevis Marks Records*, which can be consulted in many major libraries. These are as follows:

Barnett, Lionel D. *Bevis Marks Records Volume I* deals with the early history of the Congregation from 1656 to 1800.

Barnett, Lionel D. *El Libro de los Acuerdos* (1931) is an English translation of the earliest surviving Elders' Minute Book.

Barnett, Richard D. "The Burial Register of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews, London 1657 to 1735" in Volume VI of *Miscellanies of The Jewish Historical Society of England*. [1962]. The same volume also contains Extracts, concerning London Jewish households, from the 1695 census lists.

Barnett, Lionel D. *Bevis Marks Records II* lists all marriages from 1687 to 1837.

Whitehill, G. H. *Bevis Marks Records III* lists the Congregation's marriages from 1837 to 1901.

Barnett, Richard D. *Bevis Marks Records Part IV* contains the Circumcision Register of Isaac and Abraham de Paiba (1715–1775).

Rodrigues-Pereira, Miriam. *Bevis Marks Records V* contains the Birth Register of 1767–1881 and also other circumcision registers.

Rodrigues-Pereira, Miriam. *Bevis Marks Records VI* lists all burials in the *Novo* or "New" Cemetery from 1733–1918.

The Marriage Registers of the Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish Community have been published and are a most valuable source:

Verdooner, Dave & Snel, Harmen J. W. *Trouwen in Mokum – Jewish Marriage in Amsterdam 1598–1811* (The Hague, n.d.) 2 vols.

Verdooner, Dave & Snel, Harmen J. W. *Handleiding bij de index op de Ketuboth van de Portugees-Israëlietische Gemeente te Amsterdam van 1650–1911* (Amstelveen, n.d.).

Portuguese Inquisition archives

Portuguese Jewish merchants from Spain founded the Jewish community in England. Almost every family of Portuguese origin has some record in the files of the Portuguese Inquisition. Its archives are a valuable source of social history and genealogical information which, in theory, could make it possible to trace a Sephardi Jewish family back to before the 1492 expulsion from Spain. In practice, I know of only four families which have been traced back in this way, namely: the Aboabs, whose history was recorded by its members⁸; the Queridos, who were traced by the late Dr Luis de Bivar Guerra⁹; the HaLevy Navarros, who were traced back to the thirteenth century by Professor António Vasconcelos de Saldanha¹⁰; and the Curiel family, who were traced by Professor Saldanha and myself.¹¹

The Inquisition archives can be studied, starting with Joy Oakley (ed.) *Lists of the Portuguese Inquisition Volume I LISBON and Volume II EVORA & GOA* (Jewish Historical Society of England, 2008) and Luis De Bivar Guerra *Inventário dos processos da Inquisição de Coimbra (1541–1820)* (Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Paris, 1972), which lists everyone tried by the Coimbra Inquisition. Copies of Inquisition trials can be purchased from the Portuguese National Archive of Torre do Tombo in Lisbon, but you would need the help of a Portuguese genealogist to do research in Portugal.

Edgar Samuel is a former Director and Curator of the Jewish Museum and author of *At the End of the Earth: Essays on the History of the Jews of England and Portugal* (JHSE, 2006).

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2. Maria José Pimenta Ferro Tavares, *Os Judeus em Portugal no Século XV* (Lisbon, 1982), 74.
3. Martin A. Cohen, *Samuel Usque's Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel* (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 204. Dialogue 3 Section 29.
4. Joaquim Veríssimo Serrão, *Historia de Portugal III [1495–1580]* (Lisbon, 1980), pp. 18–19.
5. "Census Lists of 1695", *JHSE Miscellanies VI*, 77.
6. Jonas Hanway, *Letters admonitory and argumentative...* (London, 1753), p. 41.
7. Immanuel Aboab, *Nomologia o discursos legales* (Venice, 1629), Ch. 26, pp. 288–98 and I. S. Révah "Pour l'histoire des Nouveaux-Chrétiens portugais; la relation généalogique d'Isaac de M. Aboab" in *Boletim Internacional de Bibliografia Luso-Brasileira* II No. 2 (Lisbon, 1961), pp. 276–312.
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9. António De Vasconcelos Carvalho Simão, "Algumas Considerações à Propósito de uma Notícia Genealógica" (Coimbra, 1977).
10. Edgar Samuel, "The Curiel family in sixteenth-century Portugal", *At the End of the Earth; Essays on the History of the Jews of England and Portugal* (London, 2004), pp. 43–68.