

## CHAPTER I

*The Life of Spinoza***1.1 The Jewish Community in Amsterdam and Spinoza's  
Life Within It**

Baruch (also called Bento) de Spinoza was born in the city of Amsterdam on November 24, 1632.<sup>1</sup> His parents (Michael and Hanna) were members of the community of Jewish immigrants from Portugal, who had been living in the Netherlands since 1593. This community was composed largely of descendants of the Marranos, also called “New Christians” or “crypto-Jews,” which were the names given to the originally Spanish Jews who had been forcibly converted to Christianity by the Inquisition in the late fifteenth century. After their “conversion,” which was usually, but not always, merely nominal, many of these Jews had risen to positions of great prominence in the intellectual, economic, political, and even ecclesiastical life of Spain. But precisely because of their success they were again persecuted by the Inquisition and expelled from the country. The first stop in this new diaspora was nearby Portugal, where, even from the beginning, life was far from pleasant. Moreover, when the Inquisition officially arrived in that country in the late sixteenth century, the Marranos were once again subjected to wholesale persecution and were forced to flee.

The logical place to seek refuge was the Republic of the Netherlands, which had recently declared its independence from Spain and was engaged in war with that country. Not only did it share with the Marranos a hatred of Spain and the Inquisition; it was also the most enlightened country in

<sup>1</sup> My earlier versions of this sketch of Spinoza's life were based largely on the contemporary account *The Life of the Late Mr. de Spinoza*, generally attributed to J. M. Lucas, translated and edited by A. Wolf as *The Oldest Biography of Spinoza*; John Colerus, *The Life of Benedict de Spinoza*, reprinted as an appendix to Sir Frederick Pollock, *Spinoza: His Life and Philosophy*; Pollock's own account in the above-mentioned work; J. Freudenthal, *Spinoza Leben und Lehre*; A. Wolf, “The Life of Spinoza,” in the introduction to his edition and translation of *Spinoza's Short Treatise*; and Lewis Samuel Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*. For the present version I have consulted the masterful biography by Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, and W. N. A. Klever's “Spinoza's Life and Works.”

Europe at the time and allowed some measure of religious toleration. Furthermore, this was the time of the formation of the East India and West India Companies and the emergence of the Republic as a great commercial power. For this reason, both the capital and the commercial abilities of the Marranos were welcome, and because of these they were allowed to settle in Amsterdam, which, with their help, soon became the commercial center of Europe. It should be noted, however, that even in the Republic, religious toleration was far from complete. The political strength of the Calvinist clergy was far too great to allow that. Thus, although the first of the Marrano settlers arrived in Amsterdam in 1593, it was not until 1619 that they received official permission to hold public worship, and not until 1657 that they were granted citizenship.<sup>2</sup>

As a direct result of this experience, many of the leaders of the community were highly cultivated men, though their culture was more Iberian and broadly European than Jewish. Their native languages were Spanish and Portuguese, and they had been educated in Spanish universities. Moreover, their commercial adventures had brought them into contact with a wide variety of people, which further tended to inculcate a cosmopolitan rather than ghetto outlook. And while their knowledge of the Hebrew language and traditional Jewish law was evidently quite limited,<sup>3</sup> the commitment of most members of the community to Judaism was sincere; perhaps reinforced, as we shall see Spinoza himself claimed in his *Theological-Political Treatise* (henceforth TTP), by their persecution. In addition to this religious factor, economic interests also served as a powerful unifying force in the community and as a source of shared values. In fact, it has been claimed that the Amsterdam Jewish community was not only a religious group, but also “a virtually autonomous socio-economic entity, which negotiated with other nations, cities and Jewish communities.”<sup>4</sup> Although this may be something of an overstatement, the fact remains that the community was a tightly knit economic unit; that, as a result of the capital and expertise of some of its members, the community as a whole was fairly prosperous; and that commercial success was a focal point of community concern.

Not surprisingly, these factors led to a basically conservative political stance. Externally, the Jewish community was a strong supporter of the

<sup>2</sup> This material is based on the account in Graetz, *Popular History of the Jews*, 48–75, and Freudenthal, *Spinoza Leben und Lehre*, 3–16.

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting analysis of both the broad culture and the Jewish commitment of these men, see Popkin, “The Historical Significance of Sephardic Judaism in 17th Century Amsterdam.”

<sup>4</sup> Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, 5.

1.1 *The Jewish Community in Amsterdam*

3

reigning House of Orange, the Stadtholders or chief magistrates of which had served as its protectors. Power within the community was concentrated in the hands of the wealthy commercial leaders. The synagogue was the real seat of this power, however, and its ruling council functioned as a virtual dictatorship, exercising almost absolute control over all aspects of communal life. Dissent was prohibited and the publication of allegedly libelous writings or the expression of disrespect for the presiding authority was punished by excommunication.<sup>5</sup> Such control was rendered necessary not only by the desire of the commercial oligarchy to remain in power, but also by the precarious position of the community within the Republic. Having only recently escaped from the clutches of the Inquisition and keenly aware of the far-from-liberal attitude of the Reformed clergy, the community was understandably anxious to keep its own house in order. Moreover, the danger to the community was exacerbated by the activities of notorious heretics such as Uriel da Costa, who was excommunicated in 1640. In many ways a precursor of Spinoza, da Costa not only aroused the wrath of the leaders of the community by ridiculing their religious practices and materialistic values, but he also openly denied personal immortality, an act that was guaranteed to arouse the attention of the Reformed clergy.<sup>6</sup>

Both Spinoza's fraternal grandfather, Abraham Espinoza, and his father, Michael Espinoza, were among the leaders of the community. The latter in particular was a prosperous, though not wealthy, merchant and held several honorary positions in this community. Thus, Spinoza was by birth part of the commercial establishment and was undoubtedly instilled with its values as a child. Apart from the fact that the Espinoza family suffered a number of domestic sorrows, with Michael outliving all three of his wives and all but two of his six children (Baruch and Rebecca, an older half-sister), not much is known about the philosopher's early home life. Nevertheless, we do have considerable information concerning his early education. This was essentially religious in nature, and it took place at the Jewish boys' school, Talmud Torah, in Amsterdam, of which Spinoza's father was a warden, and which all the boys in the community attended as a matter of course. This school consisted of seven grades with a precisely prescribed curriculum. In the early grades, the students began to learn prayers in Hebrew and were introduced to the study and translation of the Hebrew Bible. In the higher grades, they studied Hebrew grammar and

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the views and life of da Costa and their bearing on the young Spinoza, see Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 66–74.

selections from the Talmud and the later codes. At the final stage, they were introduced to some of the great medieval Jewish philosophers, such as Maimonides and Gersonides.<sup>7</sup> It was, therefore, within this purely religious context (secular subjects being taught at home) that Spinoza received his first introduction to philosophical thought. Although he soon repudiated much of what he learned, we shall see that some of it exerted a considerable influence on his intellectual development and became integrated into his final philosophical position.

Not even the briefest account of Spinoza's Jewish education would be complete, however, without some mention of his teachers. Foremost among them were the rabbis Saul Levi Mortera and Menasseh ben Israel, two classical representatives of Marrano culture. At the time, Mortera was the senior rabbi in Amsterdam.<sup>8</sup> Born in Venice around 1596, he had studied medicine under Elias Rodriguez Montalto, the Marrano court physician of Marie de Medici. Upon Montalto's sudden death in 1616 he had gone to Amsterdam in search of a Jewish cemetery for his teacher. While there, he had accepted a call to the rabbinate of the older of the two synagogues in existence at that time. A third synagogue was established two years later, and when all three were amalgamated in 1638, Mortera was appointed senior rabbi, a post in which he served until his death in 1660. Although his orientation was basically medieval and orthodox, he had had some training in philosophy, and as a result of his experience at the Medici court, he obviously knew something of the world. It is reported that when Spinoza was only fifteen years old, the rabbi had marveled at the boy's intelligence and predicted a great future for him. It must, therefore, have been with a heavy heart that he presided over the court of rabbis that excommunicated Spinoza in 1656.

Menasseh ben Israel, a major figure in seventeenth-century Judaism, was a far more positive influence on Spinoza.<sup>9</sup> Born in Lisbon in 1604, he had been brought as an infant to Amsterdam, where he lived almost all his life. He became rabbi of the second Amsterdam synagogue in 1622, started a Hebrew printing house in 1627, and in 1640, when about to emigrate to Brazil, received an appointment to the senior department of the Amsterdam Jewish school. It was in that capacity that he taught the young Spinoza. In 1655 he went to England on a special mission to

<sup>7</sup> For an account of the educational program at Talmud Torah and the level of Spinoza's participation in it, see Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 61–79 and 89–93.

<sup>8</sup> For an account of Rabbi Mortera and his relation to Spinoza, see Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 90–93.

<sup>9</sup> For an account of Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel and his relation to Spinoza, see Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 93–100.

1.1 *The Jewish Community in Amsterdam*

5

Oliver Cromwell for the purpose of securing the readmission of the Jews to England. He remained there for two years and was thus absent from Amsterdam at the time of Spinoza's excommunication. He died soon after his return in 1657.

Evidently well educated in secular subjects, Menasseh ben Israel was the author of numerous, albeit not particularly original, philosophical and theological writings. These are replete with references not only to traditional Jewish writers but also to figures such as Euripides, Virgil, Plato, Aristotle, Duns Scotus, and Albertus Magnus. He also had many Gentile friends, corresponded with people of the stature of Queen Christina of Sweden and Hugo Grotius, and even sat for a portrait by Rembrandt. His great legacy to Spinoza was to introduce him to this rich secular culture. It was in all probability Menasseh ben Israel who first induced him to undertake the study of Latin, non-Jewish philosophy, modern languages, mathematics, and physics.

Contrary to Menasseh ben Israel's intentions, however, Spinoza's study of these secular subjects led him to abandon completely all Jewish beliefs and practices. Spinoza's secular studies were begun under the tutelage of Francis Van Den Enden. An ex-Jesuit, bookseller, diplomat, and classicist, Van Den Enden had opened a school in Amsterdam in 1652 to instruct the sons of the merchants of the city in Latin and the sciences. As his background suggests, he was a highly unorthodox figure and acquired considerable notoriety as a freethinker, atheist, and political radical. As a result of this notoriety, he was eventually forced to close his school in 1671. After moving to France, he was involved in a revolutionary project to found a republic in which all men would be equal. The project backfired, and its leaders, including Van Den Enden, were imprisoned and later executed.

Under Van Den Enden's tutelage, Spinoza not only studied Latin and the sciences but was also introduced to the philosophy of Descartes, as well as to the underground world of free thought and radical politics. More than that, he and Van Den Enden became intimate friends, and after the death of Spinoza's father in 1654, Van Den Enden took him into his own house, asking in return only that Spinoza help with the instruction of his pupils in the rudiments of the Hebrew language. Spinoza is reported to have said years later that he had wished to marry Van Den Enden's daughter, Clara. He apparently lost out to a wealthier suitor, however, and so the only reported romantic episode in Spinoza's life ended in disappointment.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For an account of the life and views of Francis Van Den Enden and his relationship with Spinoza, see Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 103–115. The story of Spinoza's affection for Van Den Enden's daughter, which stems from Colerus, is noted by Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 108–109.

Although he continued to appear occasionally at the synagogue, by living at the home of Van Den Enden, Spinoza had, in effect, already removed himself from the Jewish community. This removal reflected his growing alienation from Jewish beliefs and practices, as well as from the materialistic, commercial values of the community. For Spinoza the philosopher, this alienation was both a spiritual and an intellectual affair, which was grounded in his recognition of the inadequacy of the rational foundations of biblical religion and the rabbinic tradition, and the emptiness of a life devoted to the pursuit of wealth. Moreover, his alienation was accelerated by his contact with Van Den Enden and his circle, as well as by his study of philosophers such as Descartes and possibly Giordano Bruno; but its roots undoubtedly lie in his childhood experience and his first encounter with Jewish thought.

Spinoza's official break with Judaism was forced upon him, however, by the actions of the leaders of the Jewish community. Both the motives of the rabbis and the actual course of events are the subject of some dispute. Strict doctrinal orthodoxy had never been a central concern in Judaism, and it certainly would not have been in the Amsterdam community. Likewise, as men of the world, the rabbis would not have been upset by the mere fact of Spinoza's association with Gentiles. But because of all they had suffered for the right to practice their faith, they would have been deeply offended by any aspersions cast on the uniqueness and significance of the Jewish people and their way of life. In addition, they would have been concerned by any reports that Spinoza was adversely influencing the youth of the community, or that his heretical views, which were fairly close to those of Da Costa, might become public knowledge. It has also been suggested that the rabbis' concern might have been aroused not by Spinoza's theological beliefs but by his alleged revolutionary activities and associations.<sup>11</sup>

In any event, an investigation was launched. This led first to the charge that Spinoza had been contemptuous of the Mosaic Law, and sometime in June 1656 he was called before the council of rabbis to answer this charge. He promptly denied it, only to find new charges brought forth concerning his views on the authority of the Bible and the doctrine that the Jews were the chosen people. This time Spinoza could not deny the charges, and instead he submitted a written defense of his beliefs. Unfortunately, this document has been lost, but it is generally believed that many of its arguments reappear in the TTP, which Spinoza published some fourteen years later. Needless to say, this defense did not satisfy the rabbis, and he

<sup>11</sup> Feuer, *Spinoza and the Rise of Liberalism*, 4–9, 24–37.

1.1 *The Jewish Community in Amsterdam*

7

was initially excommunicated for a period of thirty days. This action was probably taken in the hope that he might still repent. He declined to do so, however, and on July 27, 1656 the final and permanent ban or *cherem*, which was apparently exceedingly harsh compared with others issued at the time, was pronounced against him publicly in the synagogue.<sup>12</sup> In response to this news, Spinoza is reported to have remarked:

All the better; they do not force me to do anything that I would not have done of my own accord if I did not dread scandal; but, since they want it that way, I gladly enter on that path that is opened to me, with the consolation that my departure will be more innocent than was the exodus of the early Hebrews from Egypt. Although my subsistence is no better secured than was theirs, I take away nothing from anybody, and whatever injustice may be done to me, I can boast that people have nothing to reproach me with.<sup>13</sup>

This led to Spinoza's permanent isolation from the Jewish community, which included members of his own family. One of his first acts was to replace his Hebrew name, Baruch, with its Latin equivalent, Benedict (both of which mean "blessed"). He also left Amsterdam for a time to stay with friends at Ouwerkerk, a small village just south of the city. He soon returned, however, and seems to have spent much of the next four years in Amsterdam. As the above quote suggests, Spinoza was very much concerned at the time with the question of earning a living. With his father deceased and the estate willed to his half-sister, Rebecca, he was totally without financial resources. Moreover, with a commercial career now out of the question, he was forced to learn a trade. The trade he chose for himself was the highly skilled one of making and polishing lenses for spectacles, microscopes, and telescopes. Spinoza was engaged in this activity for the rest of his life, and it was his reputation in this field that first attracted the attention of leading figures such as Christian Huygens, the mathematician and physicist, and the young Leibniz.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, the unhealthy nature of the work, which made the inhalation of glass dust unavoidable, greatly weakened his already frail constitution and probably contributed significantly to his early death by consumption.

During this period Spinoza acquired for the first time a circle of admirers, which consisted largely of followers of the Cartesian philosophy

<sup>12</sup> On the nature and circumstances of Spinoza's *cherem*, see Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 116–154.

<sup>13</sup> Lucas, *Oldest Biography*, 52.

<sup>14</sup> The significance of Spinoza's scientific work, both in terms of its recognition by contemporaries and his own philosophical views, is emphasized by Klever, "Spinoza's Life and Works."

and members of the Collegiant community. In contrast to the rigid orthodoxy of the Reformed church, the Collegiants, who were disaffected members of various Reformed sects, affirmed an ethically oriented, non-dogmatic form of Christianity, which emphasized the role of reason and the necessity for toleration in religious affairs. Although Spinoza obviously did not share in their Christian commitment, he must certainly have found much in common with them. It is believed that he joined in study clubs with members of this community, in which they discussed Spinoza's own emerging philosophy, as well as the dominant Cartesian system. Moreover, it was to these men that he initially communicated his own revolutionary philosophical doctrines, which he did not dare to make public.

Within this group were some who figured prominently in Spinoza's subsequent career and what we have of his philosophical correspondence. They include Peter Balling, a merchant who translated Spinoza's *Descartes' Principles of Philosophy* (henceforth DPP) into Dutch in 1664; Jarig Jelles, another merchant, who abandoned his business career and wrote a book showing that Cartesianism was compatible with Christianity; Lodewijk Meyer, a physician, scientist, and humanistic scholar, who wrote the preface to the above-mentioned work of Spinoza;<sup>15</sup> Simon Joosten De Vries, still another Amsterdam merchant, who became a disciple of Spinoza and who, just before his own premature death, tried to make the philosopher his heir; and Jan Rieuwerts, a bookseller in Amsterdam, who published the writings of Spinoza, as well as of many other heterodox authors.

### 1.2 The Years at Rijnsburg, 1660–1663

Sometime early in 1660, Spinoza left Amsterdam for the village of Rijnsburg, which is located about six miles northwest of Leiden. The move was probably made at the suggestion of his Collegiant friends, since the village contained the main headquarters of the group. Its purpose was no doubt to give Spinoza time and repose to pursue his philosophical reflections, something he was not always able to do in the bustling city with its many distractions. This change of environment proved to be highly beneficial, for it was during this period that Spinoza not only produced his

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the importance of Meyer, see Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life*, 171–173. In addition to being a friend and supporter of Spinoza, who not only urged him to publish and then contributed a preface to DPP, in which he notes important differences between Spinoza's views and those of Descartes (see later), Meyer was a significant figure in his own right, who, prior to Spinoza, developed a radically rationalistic theory of biblical interpretation.



first philosophical writings but actually worked out the main lines of his mature system.

Among these early writings was the *Short Treatise on God, Man, and His Well-Being* (henceforth KV). Although written originally in Latin, like all of Spinoza's works, only a Dutch translation has survived, and it was not published or generally known until its discovery in the nineteenth century. This rather strange fate for the work of such a major figure as Spinoza is no doubt due to the caution of the philosopher, the loyalty of his friends, and the mistaken assumption of the editors of his posthumous works that it was merely an early, discarded draft of the *Ethics*. Spinoza composed it for the circle of friends with whom he had been discussing philosophical issues rather than for general publication, and his caution is clearly reflected in the note on which it ends:

To bring all this to an end, it only remains for me to say to the friends to whom I write this: do not be surprised at these novelties, for you know very well that it is no obstacle to the truth of a thing that it is not accepted by many.

And as you are also aware of the character of the age in which we live, I would ask you earnestly to be very careful about communicating these things to others. I do not mean that you should keep them altogether to yourselves, but only that if you ever begin to communicate them to anyone, you should have no other aim or motive than the salvation of your fellow man, and make as sure as possible that you will not work in vain.

Finally, if in reading this through you encounter any difficulty regarding what I maintain as certain, I ask you not to hasten, on that account, immediately to refute it before you have given enough time and reflection to mediating upon it. If you do this, I feel you will attain the enjoyments of the fruits you promise yourselves from this tree. (G1 112–113; C1 149–150)

This note of caution was well justified, for among the “novelties” contained in the work are the identification of God with nature, and hence the repudiation of the Judeo-Christian doctrine of the creation of the world; the affirmation of the necessity of God's activity, and thus the denial of any purpose in nature or of any divine providence; and the denial of the freedom of the will. On all these points, which remained central to his mature system, Spinoza had already clearly broken with the more conservative Cartesian position, which attempted to combine an understanding of nature based on the new mathematical physics with a basically theistic worldview. Since Spinoza's friends were Cartesians, as well as Christians, this certainly underlies his admonitions to them not to reject his doctrines without careful consideration.

Although Spinoza had arrived at many of the fundamental tenets of his philosophy, he had not yet determined the manner in which they could best be presented and demonstrated. This led him directly to a consideration of the problem of method, which was a central issue in seventeenth-century thought. Modern thinkers – that is, those who took as their point of departure the new, mathematical science of nature – were united in their repudiation of the essentially syllogistic method of scholastic philosophy and science. They differed profoundly among themselves, however, concerning what was to be put in its place. Since the issues involved are complex and go to the very heart of the intellectual life of the period, it is impossible to do justice to them here, though some of the key questions will be discussed in the next chapter. For present purposes, it suffices to note that the broad line of division was between a basically inductive-empirical approach, advocated by Francis Bacon and his followers, and a more deductive-mathematical approach, which was most forcefully advocated by the Cartesian school. The actual text of the KV shows us a philosopher torn between these two poles, casting about for an appropriate form in which to present his thought. For example, a priori and a posteriori proofs of the existence of God are juxtaposed, and straightforward narrative is combined with dialogue forms. Moreover, it is only in an appendix, evidently written somewhat later than the main text, that we find a crude anticipation of the geometrical form of the *Ethics*.

The decision to side with the Cartesians in the advocacy of a deductive-geometrical method is reflected in the important, but unfortunately unfinished, essay, *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (henceforth TdIE). This work, which probably dates from 1661, was initially intended as a systematic treatise in which the discussion of method was to serve as an introduction to Spinoza's metaphysics. The discussion is preceded, however, by a quasi-autobiographical prologue, which has often been compared with the opening of Descartes' *Discourse on Method*. In it, Spinoza relates the concerns that led him to philosophy in a way that not only brings to mind many classical religious and even mystical writings but also seems to reflect the spiritual or, perhaps better, intellectual crisis he must have undergone after his excommunication. The basic theme is the quest for a true and lasting good. The ordinary objects of desire such as wealth, honor, and sensual enjoyment are dismissed as transient and empty, and the true good is said to lie in "the knowledge of the union that the mind has with the whole of Nature" (G2 8; C1 11). The location of the true good in knowledge leads Spinoza to a consideration of the best method for attaining this knowledge. But the essay breaks off in the middle of the discussion