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Settlement

ON MARCH 30, 1492, Spain committed one of those acts of great self-destructive folly to which superpowers are prone: it expelled its Jews. For centuries, the Jews had been a rich and thriving presence in Iberia. Not incidentally, they were also a great economic benefit to their Muslim and, later, Catholic hosts. To be sure, the land they knew as *Sepharad* was no Utopia for the children of Israel. They suffered harassment, slander, and, on occasion, physical attack. And the Catholic Church took a particularly keen interest when Jews were accused of encouraging *conversos* – onetime Jews who had converted to Christianity – to return to Judaism. Moreover, Jewish political and legal rights had always been severely circumscribed. But the Jews of Spain nonetheless enjoyed favor at a high level. Though some of the monarchs who protected them may have been moved by humanitarian feelings, most were thinking mainly of their own political and material self-interest. The king of Aragon, for one, recognized the practical benefits of having an economically active Jewish community within his realm. They were skilled merchants, and they controlled a far-flung commercial network. Up to the end of the fourteenth century, the Jews were able to carry on in their communities with a tolerable amount of peace and security. Some of the scholars among them even occupied posts at the royal courts.

All of this changed in 1391. Beginning in Castile, the largest kingdom in medieval Spain, unruly crowds – usually from the lower classes and incited by demagogic preachers – began burning synagogues or converting them into churches. Jews were either killed outright, forced to convert to Christianity, or sold to Muslims as slaves. Anti-Jewish riots soon spread to Catalonia and Valencia. In the face of such popular and widespread reaction, the Spanish rulers could do nothing but look

on helplessly. Eventually, some semblance of order was restored and a few Jewish communities were partially rebuilt. But those who had been forcibly converted in mass baptisms were held to their new religion. Any attempt to return openly to Judaism or to continue Jewish practices in secret was considered heresy.

During the early decades of the fifteenth century, there was renewed anti-Jewish activity, now more systematically inspired by the yearning to compel the Jews to admit the truth of the Christian faith. In 1414, there was a particularly large number of mass conversions. Once an individual converted, he fell within the domain of Christian ecclesiastical authority. Conversos were under the constant scrutiny of the church, whose officers were always concerned with the spiritual condition of the members of their flock (regardless of the circumstances under which those members joined up). The lack of organized Jewish resistance only incited further violence, as one community after another fell to the onslaught. This time the kings, who were desperately seeking to save the backbone of their economies, tried to intervene and put an end to the persecutions. But the damage had been done. By the middle of the century, Spain's Jewish population was decimated, its remnants demoralized. The vibrant life and culture – not to mention the productivity – of the Jewish community was gone; its "Golden Age" was over.

The Jews called the conversos *anusim* ("forced ones") or *meshummadim* ("converted ones"). A more derogatory term, used primarily by Christians to refer to those whom they suspected of being secret Judaizers, was *marranos*, or "swine." Many conversos undoubtedly became true and sincere Christians. Some, on the other hand, probably did continue to observe some form of Judaism in secret.[1] These Judaizing "New Christians" grew adept at hiding their practices, and it became difficult for observers (or spies) to grasp the reality behind the appearance of conversion. Consequently, "Old Christians" always suspected conversos of insincerity in the faith. Conversos were constantly being harassed by the general populace; soon, they would also find themselves cruelly persecuted by the Inquisition.

The situation for Jews and conversos continued to deteriorate after the marriage of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon in 1469 and

[1] In *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth Century Spain*, Netanyahu argues that almost all conversos were full-fledged Christians and that Judaizers were few and far between.

the union of their two kingdoms in 1479. The royal couple passionately pursued religious unity and orthodoxy in Spain, and thus kept a watchful eye on their converso population. Hoping to isolate conversos from the pernicious influence of Jews who might attempt to persuade them to return to Judaism, they adopted a policy of segregating Jews from Christian communities. In 1478, Pope Sixtus IV granted Ferdinand and Isabella the power to appoint Inquisitors in Castile. Over the next twelve years, the Spanish Inquisition claimed to have discovered – invariably through violent and irresistible means – over 13,000 Judaizing conversos. (Naturally, the Inquisition tended to leave professed Jews alone, as its concern extended only to heretics and not to infidels.)

In 1492, after the elimination of Muslim control in Granada, the Christian reconquest of Spanish soil was complete. With the "Muslim problem" well in hand, the monarchs and their ecclesiastic allies were free to turn all their attention to the Jews. This would be the final stage in their project of national religious uniformity. On March 31, 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella signed an expulsion order covering all the territories under the crowns of Castile and Aragon, "to prevent Jews from influencing conversos and to purify the Christian faith."

> We have been informed that within our kingdom there are evil Christians who have converted to Judaism and who have thereby betrayed our holy Catholic faith. This most unfortunate development has been brought about as a result of the contact between Jews and Christians . . . We have decided that no further opportunities should be given for additional damage to our holy faith . . . Thus, we hereby order the expulsion of all Jews, both male and female, and of all ages, who live in our kingdom and in all the areas in our possession, whether such Jews have been born here or not . . . These Jews are to depart from our kingdoms and from all the areas in our possession by the end of July, together with their Jewish sons and daughters, their Jewish servants and their Jewish relatives . . . Nor shall Jews be permitted to pass through our kingdoms and through all the areas in our possession en route to any destination. Jews shall not be permitted in any manner whatsoever to be present in any of our kingdoms and in any of the areas in our possession.

The Jews were, in fact, given a choice: conversion or exile. Within months there were, officially, no more Jews in Spain.

The majority of the exiles (about 120,000) went to Portugal. Others left for North Africa, Italy, and Turkey. The Jews who remained behind in Spain converted to Christianity, as the law required. But their life as conversos was no easier than their life as Jews. They continued to suffer

at the hands of their incredulous Old Christian neighbors, and were now harassed by the Inquisition as well. Many must have regretted not having joined the exodus.

For those who did choose exile, Portugal proved to be a safe haven of brief duration. On December 5, 1496, Mancel, the ruler of Portugal, issued a royal decree banishing Jews and Muslims from his realm. His motive ostensibly was to expedite his marriage to Isabella, the daughter of the Spanish monarchs. But Mancel was less short-sighted than his future in-laws. He recognized that whatever immediate gain would result from expulsion (including the confiscation of Jewish wealth) would be offset by a greater long-term loss. Thus, to make sure that the financiers and traders remained a part of his economy, he decided that forced conversion was to be the only option offered the Jews. On March 4, 1497, he ordered all Jewish children to be presented for baptism. There was as yet no Inquisition in Portugal, and many of these new conversos – their numbers increasing due to continued converso flight from the Spanish Inquisition – were able to Judaize in secret with minimal difficulty. For a while, the marranos of Portugal enjoyed a degree of toleration (although they were officially forbidden to leave the country), and this fostered a rather strong crypto-Jewish tradition.

The reprieve did not last long. In 1547, a "free and unimpeded Inquisition" was fully established in Portugal by papal order. By the 1550s, persecution of conversos suspected of Judaizing – and what converso escaped such suspicion? – was in full force, paralleling the situation in Spain. The Portuguese Inquisition, in fact, proved to be even harsher than its Spanish counterpart, particularly after the union of the two nations under one crown in 1580. Many conversos started emigrating back to Spain, where they hoped to blend in with some anonymity and, perhaps, recapture their former prosperity. Conversos returning from Portugal, however, were under an especially strong suspicion of being Judaizers, and this inspired the Spanish Inquisition to pursue its task with even greater zeal.

Throughout the second half of the sixteenth century, as the Inquisitions in Portugal and then Spain grew increasingly more ruthless, there was a marked increase in converso flight from the Iberian peninsula altogether. A good number of refugees went to northern Europe. Some headed there directly from Portugal, while others went north only after a temporary sojourn in Spain or France. Still other emigrants came from those families which had never left Spain in the first place. Among these

sixteenth-century exiles there must have been many Judaizers, remnants or descendants of those who were so committed to the Jewish faith that they chose exile over conversion in 1492 and then surreptitiously continued to practice their religion in Portugal. They now trekked to the outer reaches of the Spanish Empire in the hope that there the power and influence of the Inquisition would be weaker. Having refused to become sincere and inwardly conforming Christians in either Portugal or Spain, they sought a more tolerant environment where, even if they could not live openly as Jews, they could nonetheless practice their religion in secret without the constant harassment they faced in Iberia.[2]

Portuguese conversos started settling in the Low Countries as early as 1512, when they were all still under Habsburg control. Most of them went to Antwerp, a bustling commercial center that afforded the New Christians great economic opportunities and whose citizens perceived the financial advantage of admitting these well-connected merchants. In 1537, the Holy Roman emperor Charles V (also Charles I of Spain and ruler of the Netherlands) officially gave his permission for this immigration to continue as long as the New Christians did not revert openly to Judaism or even Judaize in secret. Although he was later forced to issue an edict banning New Christians from settling in his northern domains, it was never strongly enforced. By the 1570s, Antwerp had a converso community numbering around five hundred. Most of the Portuguese in Antwerp were probably not Judaizers, but many undoubtedly were.

There is not much reliable information on the founding and earliest development of a truly Jewish community in Amsterdam.[3] The dates usually given by historians for the initial settlement of Amsterdam's Jews range between 1593 and 1610. What makes this question especially difficult to resolve with any certainty is the number of myths that

[2] Some of the best general accounts of the history of the Jews in medieval Spain and of the events leading up to the Expulsion are found in Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*; Roth, *A History of the Marranos*; Gerber, *The Jews of Spain*; and Leroy, *Les juifs dans l'Espagne chrétienne*.

[3] Some reliable accounts (although not mutually consistent) are in Da Silva Rosa, *Geschiedenis der Portugeesche Joden te Amsterdam*; D'Ancona, "Komst der Marranen in Noord-Nederland: De Portugese Gemeenten te Amsterdam tot de Vereniging"; Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 15 (chap. 63: "Dutch Jerusalem"); Michman, Beem, and Michman, *PINKAS: Geschiedenis de joodse gemeenschap in Nederland*; Fuks-Mansfield, *De Sefardim in Amsterdam tot 1795*; and Vlessing, "Portugese Joden in de Gouden Eeuw."

surround the arrival of the first Portuguese New Christian immigrants in Holland.

Two stories in particular stand out. According to one account, whose events are variously dated between 1593 and 1597, the English, who were then at war with Spain, intercepted a ship carrying a number of New Christian refugees fleeing Portugal. Among the passengers was the "strikingly beautiful Maria Nuñes" and some of her relatives. The ship and its cargo were seized and brought back to England. The duke who was commanding the British fleet immediately fell in love with Maria. After they reached port, he asked for her hand in marriage, but she refused. Queen Elizabeth heard about the affair and ordered the young woman to be brought into her presence. She, too, was struck by Maria's beauty and grace, and promenaded her about London high society. Despite generous promises and amorous entreaties, all designed to entice her to stay in England, the brave and steadfast Maria insisted on continuing her journey to the Low Countries, where she intended to convert back to Judaism. The queen finally relented and gave her and her companions safe passage to Holland. In 1598, after the arrival from Portugal of her mother, her sister, Justa, and two older brothers, Maria married her cousin, Manuel Lopes, in Amsterdam. Thus the establishment of the first converso (and possibly Jewish) household in Amsterdam.[4]

A second tale more explicitly involves the introduction of Jewish observance into Amsterdam. Around 1602, the story runs, two ships arrived in Emden in East Friesland bearing a number of Portuguese marranos conversos and their possessions. The refugees disembarked and, after walking through the town, came upon a house with a Hebrew motto (which they could not read) written above the door: *'emet veshalom yesod ha 'olam* ("Truth and peace are the foundation of the world"). After

[4] The Nuñes story is first told by Daniel Levi de Barrios (1635–1701), poet-historian of the Portuguese-Jewish community of the Netherlands, in his *Triumpho del govierno popular* (Amsterdam, *c.*1683–4). For an attempt to separate fact from fiction in de Barrios's history, see Pieterse, *Daniel Levi de Barrios als Geschiedschrijver van de Portugees-Israelietische Gemeente te Amsterdam in zijn Triumpho del Govierno Popular*. The banns of the Nuñes wedding were published November 28, 1598; see Amsterdam Municipal Archives, "Baptism, Marriage, and Burial Registers," no. 665, fol. 54. Recent scholars have discovered, however, that neither Maria nor her husband ever openly reverted to Judaism, and that in fact they eventually returned to Spain; see Salomon, "Myth or Anti-Myth: The Oldest Account Concerning the Origin of Portuguese Judaism at Amsterdam," and Cohen, "*Memoria para os siglos futuros*: Myth and Memory on the Beginnings of the Amsterdam Sephardi Community."

some inquiring, they learned that this was the home of a Jew, Moses Uri Halevi. They went back to Halevi's house and tried to communicate with him in Spanish, which he did not understand. Halevi called in his son Aaron, who knew the language. The visitors told him that they were recently arrived from Portugal and wished to be circumcised because "they were children of Israel." Aaron responded that he could not perform the ceremony in a Reformed city such as Emden. He directed them to go to Amsterdam, where they were to rent a particular house in the Jonkerstraat. He said that he and his father would soon follow them there. Several weeks later, Moses and Aaron Halevi found the group in Amsterdam, circumcised the men, and led them in regular Jewish services.

It did not take the Amsterdam authorities long, however, to become suspicious of this secret, unfamiliar activity taking place in their Protestant city. One Friday evening, neighbors reported the sounds of a strange language emanating from the house in which the Jews were praying during a Shabbat service. The sheriff's deputies, Calvinists one and all, and convinced that the unfamiliar sounds must be Latin, burst into the house expecting to find a Catholic mass surreptitiously being celebrated. The gathering was broken up, and Moses and Aaron Halevi were arrested. They were soon released, however, when the matter was cleared up by a fellow Portuguese resident, Jacob Tirado (alias Jaimes Lopes da Costa). Tirado explained that they were in fact Jews, not Catholics, and that the strange sounds were Hebrew, not Latin. Tirado also pointed out to the authorities the economic benefits to Amsterdam of having a Jewish community established there. The appeal succeeded, and Tirado was granted permission to set up a congregation, with Moses Halevi as its rabbi.[5]

Each of these stories has a kernel of historical truth. All the main characters were real people living in Amsterdam in the first decade of the seventeenth century. There is a record of Maria Nuñes's marriage in 1598, for example, as well as the report of a Dutch envoy in London to the States General of the Netherlands in April of 1597 regarding a ship captured with Portuguese merchants and a woman dressed as a man on board. Jacob Tirado was in Amsterdam from 1598 to 1612, along with his wife, Rachel, and their children, and he is identified in notary

[5] This story was first told by Moses Halevi's grandson, Aaron's son, Uri ben Aaron Halevi, in his *Narraçao da vinda dos judeos espanhoes a Amsterdam*, available in print as early as 1674. According to de Barrios, these events took place around 1595–7; according to Halevi, around 1603–4.

documents as a "merchant of the Portuguese Nation of Amsterdam." Between 1598 and 1608, ships from Emden regularly sailed between Iberia and Amsterdam, often with Portuguese New Christians on board. Finally, there was a man named Moses Halevi working as a *shoḥet*, or kosher butcher, in Amsterdam as early as 1603.[6]

But the truth behind the establishment of the Portuguese-Jewish community in Amsterdam is, for the most part, more mundane than these inspirational stories suggest. In the final years of the sixteenth century, there were a number of Portuguese individuals residing in Amsterdam, most of them apparently New Christians. The first official text pertaining to these immigrants as a group is a decision taken on September 14, 1598, by the board of burgemeesters (or mayors) regarding citizenship for "Portuguese merchants." It was decreed that they were allowed to take the *poorterseed* ("citizen's oath"), but the board added a warning that public worship outside of the officially recognized churches was forbidden.[7] In the minds of Amsterdam's municipal governors, this was clearly not a question of allowing Jews (or even crypto-Jews) to settle in the city, for they explicitly note in their resolution that the Portuguese "are Christians and will live an honest life as good burghers." From where did these earliest New Christian residents emigrate? Most of them journeyed to the banks of the Amstel directly from Portugal and Spain, especially before 1600, but a substantial number also came up from Antwerp.

Antwerp was the hub of trade for Portuguese and Spanish firms dealing in spices from the East Indies and Brazilian sugar. The local agents for these firms were, almost exclusively, Portuguese New Christians living there. From Antwerp, the colonial goods would be distributed to Hamburg, Amsterdam, London, Emden, and Rouen. This arrangement operated relatively smoothly for a while. But the economic health of Antwerp began to take a turn for the worse after the signing of the rebellious Union of Utrecht in 1579. When the seven "United Provinces" of the Dutch-speaking northern Low Countries (Holland, Zeeland, Utrecht, Gelderland, Overijssel, Friesland, and Groningen) officially declared their independence from Spanish dominion – Philip II of Spain had inherited the Netherlands from his father, Charles V, in 1555 – they

[6] See Salomon, "Myth or Anti-Myth," and Cohen, "Memoria para os siglos futuros."

[7] Amsterdam Municipal Archives, no. 5059, sub. 24–40 (H. Bontemantel collection), 34. See Huussen, "The Legal Position of Sephardi Jews in Holland, circa 1600."

initiated a new stage in their already decade-old armed revolt. Various military strategies by the northern provinces in the 1580s and 1590s undermined the control that Antwerp (which, after Flanders' brief spell within the Dutch revolt, was now once again part of the still loyal southern Low Countries[8]) exercised over the distribution of northern European trade and helped foster the rapid economic growth of Amsterdam. But it was the imposition in 1595 of a full-scale maritime blockade of the south – effectively cutting off Flemish seaports from Dutch and neutral shipping and not lifted until 1608 – that ultimately forced the Lisbon dealers to send their Antwerp agents to alternative northern distribution points. Initially the middlemen went to Cologne and other northern German cities, as well as to Bordeaux, Rouen, and London. But many eventually ended up in Amsterdam.

Thus, a good number of the Portuguese who were in Amsterdam at the close of the sixteenth century were New Christian merchants who had come north from Antwerp for economic reasons. These immigrants, regardless of their ancestral (Jewish) or present (ostensibly Catholic) religious persuasions, were usually welcomed by Dutch cities, which were always on the lookout for their material advantage.[9] Many of Amsterdam's Portuguese settlers were also, no doubt, motivated by fear of the Inquisition. This would be particularly true of those conversos who arrived directly from Portugal or Spain, or who came from Antwerp just after that city fell to the Duke of Parma in 1585. Some may even have been seeking the opportunity to return to Judaism. They would have been attracted by the promise of religious toleration offered explicitly in article 13 of the Union of Utrecht: "Every individual should remain free in his religion, and no man should be molested or questioned on the subject of divine worship." With this proclamation, extraordinary for its time, the signatories to the treaty stipulated that no one could be persecuted for his religious beliefs, although the public practice of any religion outside of the Reformed Church was forbidden.

[8] The southern provinces of Flanders and Brabant joined the Union of Utrecht shortly after its initial signing, but by 1585 were reconquered by Spanish troops.

[9] See Israel, "Sephardic Immigration into the Dutch Republic": "The rise of Dutch Sephardic Jewry was based on its functions in international commerce . . . Sephardic immigrants were allowed to settle in those Dutch cities that accepted them, above all Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Middelburg, essentially because they were regarded as economically useful" (45).

There is no evidence that there was any organized Jewish observance among the "Portuguese" – and this term is used generally to describe even those with a Spanish background – who were of Jewish descent living in Amsterdam in the last years of the sixteenth century.[10] There were, however, a number of individuals who, just a few years later, played an important role in initiating an active, if still rather private, Jewish community. Of particular interest in this regard are Emanuel Rodriquez Vega and Jacob Tirado, who were employed as agents for exporters in Portugal.

Rodriguez Vega came to Amsterdam from Antwerp around 1590. He is identified in notarial records in 1595 as a "merchant of Amsterdam," and two years later he was able to buy his citizenship. He was, by the early 1600s, a major figure in the Portuguese-Jewish community's economic life, trading in sugar, wood, cloth, grain, salt, spices, metals, and fruit, with business in Brazil, England, Portugal, Morocco, and various cities and principalities in the German lands. He even had some business dealings with the Spinoza family. In 1596, he authorized Emanuel Rodriguez de Spinoza (alias Abraham de Spinoza, the great-uncle of Baruch), then living in Nantes, France, to reclaim a cargo of textile goods that had been seized by Spanish soldiers.[11] It was the wealth and international connections of men like Rodriguez Vega that made possible the establishment and rapid growth of the Portuguese community.

Tirado, on the other hand, is often credited with being one of the prime movers of Jewish worship in Amsterdam (where he lived until 1612, when he emigrated to Palestine). There is no reason to believe that any of the marranos in the United Provinces showed their true Jewish colors until around 1603, and then they did so slowly and cautiously. That is the year Halevi and his son are supposed to have arrived in Amsterdam to perform circumcisions and, according to records, to serve as ritual slaughterers. Tirado seems to have been in contact with Halevi, and not just for business purposes. He may, around this time, have been organizing Jewish services in his house and actively (but quietly) encouraging others to join in.[12]

[10] It has been suggested that most, in fact, were practicing Catholics; see Salomon, "Myth or Anti-Myth?," 302–3.

[11] See Amsterdam Municipal Archives, Notarial Archives, no. 76, fol. 3–4.

[12] It is usually assumed that Moses Halevi played the role of spiritual leader to this early group (and later to the Beth Jacob congregation) and that he served as their first rabbi. But Vlessing