



Chai Vekayam

The Neve Shalom Synagogue Chai Members Newsletter

April 2013

Happy Passover to You and your Family!!

Dear Chai members;

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Neve Shalom Synagogue and the Jewish community in Suriname, I wish you and your families a Happy and kosher Passover!! Your kindness and generosity is highly appreciated by all the members of the community.

Many exciting things have happened in the last few months and we will report on them in our next newsletter. I hope that the rest of the year will be even better for our friends in the Jewish community of Suriname.

The Miracle of Passover

The cost of importing Kosher wine and matzot for Pesach to Suriname is extremely high as it has to be sent via air – none of it can be purchased locally. In order to be able to provide Kosher wine and matzot for every family in our small and dwindling community, we relied over the years on the financial support of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (“JDC”). Unfortunately, this year the JDC did not contribute any money. Without this money, we faced with a major financial crisis.

Thanks to the initiative of Rabbi Michael Alony who contacted Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein (the founder and Chairman of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews – www.ifcj.org), two weeks ago we received a very generous donation. This donation will enable us to provide all our members with the wine and matzot for Pesach.

In his letter to Rabbi Eckstein, our President, Jules (Shul) Donk summed up our feeling: “The donation

is truly a gift from Ha Shem that has been sent to us through your organization”.

We’d like to thank Rabbi Michael and Rabbi Eckstein and his organization for their wonderful and generous gift. This will make it possible for us to have a very special Seder this year. Thank you!

Chai Membership Update

In the last big storm that hit Paramaribo, substantial damage to our synagogue roof resulted.

Unfortunately, the roof tiles are unique and can not be found in Suriname. In order to repair the synagogue’s roof we had to remove and use some of the tiles from our small community centre roof. We hope this type of damage to the synagogue roof will not occur again for some time, as these unique tiles will be difficult to find.



Roof repair - another challenge overcome!

About "Surinamers" who are not from Suriname

In February 2008 I received an email from a South African lawyer, Mr. Owen Blumberg, whose grandmother had the family name Zurnamer which is a transliteration of Surinamer. In our correspondence, he shared with me a fascinating article about the origin of the family name Surinamer. It all revolves around one Jewish man from Lithuania, and spans the globe, as well as courtrooms. It is better than any reality show plot – I hope you enjoy it.

In 1955 Frederik Oudschans Dentz¹ published an article in the "West-Indische Gids" (volume 36, p. 65-71) about the use of the name of the country Suriname as a family surname. Oudschans Dentz, at that time living in South Africa, serendipitously discovered, that a number of families (four in Cape town, one in Stellenbosch) bore the family name "Zurnamer." His interest was aroused. Searching further, he found that there happened to be six more families with the name "Surnamer" in America and also he received the addresses of two families in England with the name "Surinamer" (thus spelled in the right way!). After contacts with these persons and much searching Oudschans Dentz came to the conclusion that those three groups of families were descendants of one and the same person. It is with this person that the article in the "West-Indische Gids" deals.

It concerns the biography of a poor, adventurous, young Jewish man, named Naphtaly bar Isaac haCohen, who, at the end of the 17th century leaves his native country Lithuania (at that time still a part of Russia, like amongst others Courland and Latvia) in search of a better life elsewhere. Probably his first important stop is Amsterdam. Here he starts trading and adopts a not so Jewish sounding name – Gerrit Jacobs – probably because this suited him better in the business world of that time. After a certain period, in about 1703, he looks for more and starts off for Suriname.

There he did very well. In the colony he became an influential person and rose to great prosperity. He was the owner of the plantation

Nieuw-Meerzorg alongside the Matapica River, with the plantation called "Jacopoe" (Surinamese for Jacob) in popular speech. In the meantime, probably at his advice, several members of his family from Lithuania had arrived in Suriname by way of Amsterdam, including his half-brother Gerzon Isaacs and his brother-in-law Zadok van Coerland, his only sister Esther's husband. On December 7, 1750, aboard the ship "De Adrichem," also arrived his niece, Esther's youngest daughter Haya, together with her husband Josef Jacob van Coerland and their little son Abraham van Coerland. Shortly after their arrival in Suriname Haya becomes a widow and in 1752 remarries her very aged Uncle Gerrit in Paramaribo.

"request GJ handtekening" is Gerrit Jacobs' signature. It has the legend:
"Gerrit Jacobs' signature under a request to be allowed to marry his niece"

Gerrit dies in Paramaribo, December 12, 1754, and is buried in the old Beth Haim of the High-German Congregation at the Kwattaweg. On his tombstone it was mentioned in Hebrew that Jacobs was born in 1674 in the region of Besjimasjneear in the Mark and Spot of Pelgna and that he was the son of Isaac. Six months before his death in 1754 the childless Gerrit Jacobs had made his will. This will², as would become evident later on, contained many obscurities which would cause many juridical problems, as high up as the "Hooge Raad" in the Netherlands (the highest Dutch juridical court) and the Minister for Colonial Affairs. For in this will he directed that the plantation Nieuw-Meerzorg should never be sold and that its proceeds had to be divided between all his relatives over the course

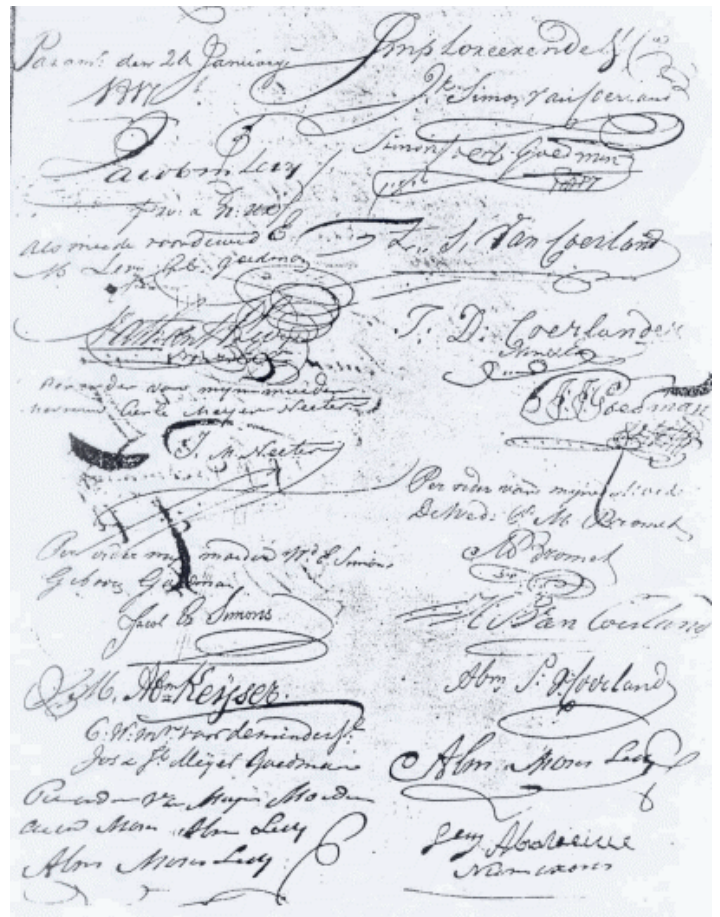
of time. With a compassion which graces him, he also laid down, that — within the discretion of the executors of the will — the wealthier relatives had to hand over "a part of their share according to their proportion to the less bestowed ones (namely in such a way, that the ones most in need and the poorest friends would receive and enjoy a double portion as compared with the wealthy one(s)."

Many of these relatives still lived in Lithuania and surroundings and received — as Nieuw-Meerzorg was a prosperous plantation — regularly, according to their situation, large amounts of money from the far away Suriname. Thus these originally very poor relatives therefore became wealthy and were nicknamed "Suriname millionaires" in their locality of residence. When in 1812 the Russian authorities issued a law in Lithuania that everyone who did not yet have an official family name had to adopt one, out of gratitude to their benefactor many of his relatives chose the name "Surinamer", from which later on originated several variants such as: Surnamer, Surnam, Zurnam, Zurne, Zurnamer, Szurinamer, Shurman, Sherman, Zeram, Zurnamowicz.

These payments continued until the first decade of the 20th century. But to which persons exactly? From archival research we now know that not all of his relatives — as was Gerrit Jacobs' intention and as it was inscribed in the will — were recipients of his usufructual largesse. History shows that it was probably only the descendants of Gerrit Jacobs' sister, the family's "Esther branch," who profited from this will.

Which persons did Gerrit mean by "all kinsmen"? Were they also, beside the nearest ones, brother and sister, cousins/nephews and nieces of his father's as well as his mother's side? Whatever his intention may have been, in practice — apart from his wife Haya and his half-brother — it was only descendants of Esther's son Isaac (calling himself "van Coerland") and of her two other daughters, Siessel (living in Lithuania) and Bilha/Bella/Beeltje (married to Jacob Goedman), having arrived in Surinam with husband and children in 1767, to whom the plantation's revenues were paid. Thus these payments went to the descendants of Gerrit Jacobs' sister and not to "all his testator's descendants" as he had

stipulated in his will. Perhaps this may be related to the fact that Haya was one of the first three testators. From the very beginning the will was not executed in the spirit of Gerrit Jacobs: this is evident by the first payment after Gerrit's demise in 1754, which then was made only to his half-brother Gerzon and the four children of his sister Esther who had in the meantime also died. After this half-brother, who was also childless, had died, all further payments are made to the previously mentioned four children of his sister and/or their descendants.



"request plantage handtekeningen" has the legend: "Signatures on a request in 1817 by those heirs of Gerit Jacobs who lived in Suriname"

As far as can be traced to date, the first official protest came in 1778. One of the three testators in charge of the execution, Moses Sanches, who as far as I could trace back was no relative of Gerrit — although the other two were so — applied to Governor Nepveu with a request³,

asking for the interpretation and judgment concerning the grants of the payments, which according to him, "thwart with the testator's disposal, having clearly conveyed as his institutionalized tenants for life all the testator's relatives, being alive after his, the testator's death, and such in equal shares, head by head." But the petitioner (the testator Sanches) also asks to be allowed to proceed in the meantime to make payments, because — there is nothing new under the sun — it will take considerable time before a final settlement about this will be obtained and the lives of the poor relatives are very hard. The answer in the governor's name (already after 12 days!) was that "repartition and commission have to take place in the old way."

And thus it continued in the old, and properly speaking wrong way, probably for decades. In the beginning of the 20th century a number of matters changed however. In the first place the plantation, like so many others in Surinam, went downhill. From a prosperous plantation with some hundreds of slaves in Gerrit Jacobs' time it had turned into a distressed plantation with only some tens of workmen. In the second place the number of Esther's descendants had grown rapidly, with the result that the plantation's diminishing revenues had to be divided among an ever-increasing number of persons. In 1919 there were 217 payments, of which a number only amounted to a 1/13720th part of the inheritance.

In the third place it filtered through in Lithuania what the matter was. From several letters, requests, and even petitions it can be seen that relatives of Gerrit Jacobs, probably not belonging to the Esther-branch and so not receiving anything, were requesting their share.

Finally the administrators were obliged to make advances to keep the plantation running and to be able to meet the will's obligations. However this practice ended at the moment when one of the moneylenders, Dr. Alexander Fernandes from Amsterdam, no longer wanted to stand surety and claimed his advance: 7.748 guilders. As this amount no longer could be raised, he insisted on putting the plantation up for sale, so that his advance might be repaid. But as this was a "fidei commis" will, it was not possible to withdraw from

the stipulations in the will (never being allowed to turn to selling). At this point it turned into a complex juridical case until finally in 1933 the Court of Justice adjudicated that it was allowed to appeal to circumstances beyond one's control and to sell the plantation to be able to pay off the moneylenders. This took place in 1934 during a public sale in the presence of the notary J. A. Drielsma. The plantation was sold for 6.300 guilders and thereafter, of course, the payments to the heirs stopped.

With his article in the "West-Indische Gids" Oudschans Dentz has snatched away from oblivion this interesting piece of Surinam "*petite histoire*" (a little bit of minor historical detail). But from his article it also becomes clear that he was not informed about the fact that it was not direct descendants of Gerrit Jacobs — as he had died childless — but descendants of his only sister Esther who had profited from his will and of whom a part had chosen "Surinamer" as their family surname.

Already at the start of my genealogical search in the 1970s concerning my father's family de Miranda, in several archives repeatedly I came across the name "Gerrit Jacobs," particularly in connection with this will. The number of letters, requests, apologies, etc. which I found were legion, and thanks to Oudschans Dentz's informative article about this interesting subject, I deepened my knowledge. One time I even discovered the surprising fact, that I also, in this case on my mother's side, as well via Bella Goedman as via Isaac van Coerland, belonged to the "Gerrit Jacobs clan." As was usual for me, I put down as much possible information about this on cards and notepaper, which I collected and put away in shoe boxes, my so called "shoe box archives" since this was before the "personal computer" era!

During the 1990s another of Esther's direct descendants, Judith Shulamith Langer-Surnamer Caplan, a teacher and poetess in New York, started a detailed search over the Internet concerning the Surinamer family tree. Her mother, who was named Gladys Surnamer, was a daughter of Jacob Surnamer, born in Liepaja, Latvia, and a

direct descendant of one of the first bearers of the name "Surinamer." While assiduously searching for persons interested in genealogy who might tell her about the Suriname branch, she made a request to the Suriname Mailing List, of which at that time my son Leo was the manager, and so she came into cyber-contact with me. Due to my "shoe box" I was able to provide her with information about Suriname and the first generations of the Suriname/Dutch members of the family. To her amazement I could tell her about the existence of Gerrit's sister Esther: she was "happily flabbergasted." The fact is, that like Oudschans Dentz, she had not known that Gerrit Jacobs had died childless nor that he had had a sister. According to Judith, this probably is the result of the fact that in the past women were not mentioned in historical works and genealogical lists. Judith is a fervent genealogist who has constructed an impressively widespread genealogical documentation [Another Surinamer Surfaces](#). You can contact her by the Internet.⁴



Jetty visits the tombstones of Gerrit Jacobs and his first wife Judith at the old Beth Chaim Cemetery in Paramaribo

In all, spread over the whole world, there exist hundreds of persons bearing the name "Surinamer" and its variants. According to Judith's latest information as of Aug. 2003, perhaps even in Thailand, there may be a Surinamer family. It is notable that in the beginning of the last century, some "Surinamers" still lived in Suriname; among them Behr Wulf Surinamer, born in Mitau, Russia (now Jelgava, Latvia), who married Blanche Nassy

in Paramaribo in 1901. In 1920 the two orphaned children of this couple left for Batavia in the Dutch East Indies (now renamed Djakarta) with an uncle and aunt and did not return. Since then there do not exist any bearers of this surname in Suriname. But many descendants of Esther are still living in Suriname and the Netherlands. Among them, just to mention a few: all Suriname members of the Goedman family, many members of the Coerland family (and of course their Creole descendants, persons bearing the name Landkoer) and several members of other families including Morpurgo, Samson, Rijk van Ommeren, da Costa, Nassy, Simons, Robles, Donk, Eliazer. And thus, having started with a shoe box, and moving on to electronic data bases and the Internet, for the time being my search into this curious little piece of Suriname history, which started in 1675 with the birth of Naphtaly bar Isaac haCohen in Pelgna, a hamlet in Lithuania, is over.

by Jetty G. de Miranda acb@euronet.nl

Translated by Helga Becker Leeser

Previously published in Dutch in Wi Rutu, December 2003. Wi Rutu is a publication of the SSG (Stichting voor Surinaamse Genealogie), The Netherlands. Copyright SSG

Notes

- 1) K.H.F.C. Oudschans Dentz, having been occupied in many functions in Surinam during the period 1902-1926, among other things as an achivist, has contributed much to Surinam historiography
- 2) NA (National Archives), The Hague, Old-notary Archives Surinam, inv.nr. 25, fol 128. At the moment the will cannot be consulted due to its poor physical condition. Only a copy, made in 1954, can be consulted:NA, Losse Aanwinsten (loose acquisitions) of the First Department, inv.nr. 1847
- 3) NA, Archives of the Police Board Surinam, inv.nr. 419, fol. 250 and following
- 4) <http://www.jewishgen.org/Litvak/research.htm>

Comments

I'd like to thank Lilly Duym, Mr. Owen Blumberg and Norma Steinberg for their contribution to our newsletter.

Please let me know if you have any comments, suggestions or ideas on how to make this newsletter better. Please feel free to contact me at: jks1111@rogers.com

Wishing you a Happy Passover,

Jacob Steinberg