

Suriname's Jewish



Legacy:

A Palpable Presence

By Shai Fierst

Experiencing the layers of the Jewish community in Suriname, on the Caribbean-Atlantic coast of South America, is not only a visit to a little-known ethnic and environmental gem, it is also to a place unimaginable.

The former Dutch colony's dwindling Jewish community of 300 individuals welcomes visitors to the lone surviving synagogue on Shabbat with handshakes and smiles. Jews have been here since shortly after the Dutch handed over New Amsterdam (New York) to the British in return for what in pre-independence days was known as Dutch Guiana.

Jews played a leading role in the economic, social, and cultural life of the colony. And though their numbers have shrunk, their imprint remains among many descendants who claim Jewish ancestry. Among them is Cynthia McLeod, the country's most famous contemporary author and daughter of independent Suriname's first president, Johan Ferrier. She shares with visitors a popular Surinamese saying: "If a Surinamer shakes his or her family tree, a Jew falls out."

The center of Jewish life today is the Neve Shalom Synagogue, founded in 1719, though the current building dates to 1835. It sits beside Mosque Keizerstraat in downtown Paramaribo, the country's capital, and is one of Suriname's leading tourist attractions. Surinamers see the neighboring houses of prayer as a symbol of diversity and tolerance, and a source of pride that their country retains an uncommon harmony.

Neve Shalom's smooth sand floors are trod upon several times a month. Jack van Niel is the cantor, and during services he chants mostly Sephardic tunes among a congregation of both Sephardic and Ashkenazic Surinamers of Portuguese, Eastern European, Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, and African heritage.

"A very old agreement was made in the 18th century," said synagogue president Jules Donk. "The Sephardic Jews for a symbolic amount sold the [Neve Shalom] Synagogue to the Ashkenazic Jews, but there was a clause. The clause was that they would hold to the Sephardic customs. They [the Ashkenazic community] accepted that, and from that day on they performed the Sephardic customs. There were two separate communities, but both of them did the services with Sephardic customs."

"There was a rule that the tunes should be Sephardic," van Niel related, yet "the Ashkenazim had influence, and today we use some Ashkenazic tunes."

After they sold Neve Shalom to the Ashkenazim, the Sephardic Jews built Zedek V'Shalom Synagogue in the 1730s a few blocks away. By the mid 20th century, the two were essentially one community before merging officially in 1999.

"We are a small community, and we don't have the money to keep two synagogues," said Donk, whose family came to Suriname in 1741. "We had to make money in some way to keep the community running. We shipped what was in the

The Neve Shalom Synagogue in Paramaribo, Suriname, has a sand floor and traditional furnishings.

Photo by Shai Fierst



Neve Shalom Synagogue (above), built in the late 1830s and still in use, is located next to Mosque Keizerstraat. The two side-by-side houses of worship are a major source of pride for Suriname.

Photo by Mark Attemann

[Zedek V'Shalom] synagogue to Israel for a permanent exhibition [at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem]. The building itself became an office building. We get rent, and with that rent we help run the community events and keep other buildings intact. It's not enough, but it helps a lot."

Lilly Duym, whose family came to Suriname around 1700, is the vice president of the synagogue. In addition to the merger, she added, "We became liberal so that the children that only had a Jewish father were raised as Jews and could participate. That brought us from 75 members [families] to about 150 members," comprising 300 people.

Suriname was founded by the British in 1650, and in the mid-1660s David Cohen Nassy led the first large group of Jews. They arrived in enough numbers and strength to be granted privileges allowing them to establish themselves as planters on the upper reaches of the Suriname River at Jodensavanne, or Jewish Savannah, about 50 miles from what would soon become the capital city of Paramaribo.

These Jews were Sephardim whose ancestors were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula during the Inquisitions, and who themselves were expelled from Dutch Brazil in 1654 following Portuguese takeover of the region. They fled to the Netherlands, where they resided for several years until they tried to reestablish themselves in Cayenne, in what would become French Guiana. The settlement was short-lived, and in 1664, when the French took control of Cayenne, they settled in nearby Suriname.

Jodensavanne's Jews were granted many privileges, including the right to worship



freely, write their own wills, have traditional Jewish marriage ceremonies, and even, to a certain extent, conduct their own trials. They maintained an unprecedented level of autonomy, which continued after the Dutch began ruling Suriname as a result of the Treaty of Breda in 1667, which ended the Second Anglo-Dutch War.

Jodensavanne was the spiritual center for the Suriname Jews, who came from neighboring plantations to attend services and events at the Bracha V'Shalom Synagogue, inaugurated in 1685. By the early 18th century, 2,000 Jews, or about one-third of the white population, lived on 115 of 401 total plantations. Jewish plantations played a major role in the world sugar market, but the hard labor was the domain of slaves, with sources indicating that as early as 1683 Jews owned 1,298 slaves.

Jews were involved in many aspects of society, including the military and the arts. In Paramaribo they established a theater, principally because they were barred from the Dutch theater. David de Isaac Cohen Nassy, a dynamic leader of the Jewish com-

munity in the latter half of the 18th century, helped establish the Jewish literary society in Paramaribo. He is believed to be the author of "Essai Historique Sur La Colonie De Surinam, 1788," a history of Suriname and Jewish influence on the colony written in French and distributed throughout Europe.

After more than 100 years of settlement, Jodensavanne began to decline due to changes in the sugar markets, overzealous investment, and slave rebellions. By 1832 it was abandoned after a fire ravaged the village, reducing the synagogue to ashes. Many Sephardic Jews had already begun moving to the capital by the end of the 18th century, while Ashkenazim immigrated to Suriname in larger numbers. Jews continued to contribute to politics, culture, and business, but over time they assimilated more into the Surinamese population and, especially during the second half of the 20th century, emigrated for economic, educational, and political reasons.

Jodensavanne is now a national monument comprised of the mostly brick remains of the Bracha V'Shalom Synagogue and three historic cemeteries. A book about Jodensavanne entitled "Remnant Stones: The Jewish Cemeteries of Suriname: Epitaphs," was recently written by scholars Aviva Ben-Ur and Rachel Frankel. To manage and maintain the site, the Jodensavanne Foundation was established in 1971. "Until 1980, the foundation kept Jodensavanne in very good condition," said Guido Robles, foundation chairman when the book was published. "Jodensavanne seemed to have a bright future.

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Plans were developed (but not executed) to completely rebuild the Jodensavanne village for use as a tourist facility.

“In 1980, political turmoil troubled the country, eventually leading to a small-scale guerrilla war from 1983 to 1987. The Jodensavanne was in the middle of the war zone and could no longer be maintained. All museum facilities were destroyed, but the synagogue and the cemeteries were left undisturbed. However, the jungle quickly covered them.”

Frankel and Ben-Ur’s work during the 1990s has been instrumental in bringing back enthusiasm for the site both in Suriname and abroad. Jodensavanne is now well cared for and regularly visited by tourists. Harrold Sijlbing is the current chairman of the Jodensavanne Foundation and formerly ran one of Suriname’s main conservation and ecotourism foundations, called STINASU. Though raised Christian, his mother had Sephardic ancestry and taught him respect for and understanding of Jewish culture.

One of Sijlbing’s initiatives has been to work with the neighboring Amerindian community Redi Doti. “It became clear that only with a clearly developed agreement with Redi Doti, in which their benefits would be assured, the sustainable management of the monuments could be guaranteed,” he said. “Mutually, the respect and trust has increased, and two Redi Doti representatives are also part of the Jodensavanne board. As such, Jodensavanne is also unique, as it is the only Jewish heritage site in the world which is being co-managed by indigenous people.”

Apart from efforts to promote historical sites, efforts are also being made to revitalize the community. Reform Rabbi Haim Beliak, for many years university chaplain at Claremont Colleges in California, spent several months in Suriname in late 2009 and early 2010 for just that purpose.

Beliak, who was born in a displaced persons camp outside of Munich after World War II, has joined with community members to promote Jewish life. He, Donk, and others teach Jewish history and customs to youth. Beliak also teaches adult Jewish education classes.

Cathrin Jüdel has consistently attended the classes for adults. Her mother was a non-Jewish Surinamer, whereas her Jewish father fled from the Netherlands to Suriname during

World War II and effectively stopped practicing Judaism. Many Jews came to Suriname to escape the Holocaust. However, a much larger effort to settle some 30,000 displaced persons and refugees in what was called the Saramacca Project, named after the proposed district of settlement, never materialized.

and a lot of people are fixed in the orthodox thinking. Beliak is a liberal rabbi and not everyone was happy with his thoughts and his teachings. But that was mainly the older generation that is still thinking orthodox. He was great with the younger generations. It was a blessing having him here. He lifted the



Photo by Jacob Steinhilber

After every Friday night service, Suriname’s Jewish community gathers for Kiddish and a traditional meal in the Mahamad, or small community hall, near the synagogue. Above, one of the children learns how to recite the blessing over bread at the Neve Shalom Synagogue.

Jüdel’s family went to the Netherlands in 1982 as a result of the military coup and what is referred to in Suriname as the December Murders, in which 15 officials and intellectuals against military rule were executed in the historic Zeelandia Fort in Paramaribo. Jüdel finally returned to Suriname in 2000. “I passed the synagogue and I felt that it was beautiful,” she said. “He [my father] brought us up with a lot of Jewish traditions and history, and for me it was very familiar.”

On March 1, 2010, Jüdel converted to Judaism when she was immersed in the water of the mikvah, located on the grounds of Neve Shalom. She is one of several Surinamers to convert to Judaism under Beliak’s guidance. “My daughter and I were both converted together. She is seven now. It was a big decision, but my daughter seems interested in the synagogue and the lessons. She knows the songs very well and sings loudly.”

But Beliak was not always met with open arms. As Donk explains, “We are still struggling with orthodox and liberal thinking. We have not had a rabbi for a long time,

community to a higher level. He had a good influence on people.”

Even with increased efforts to promote Jewish life in Suriname, van Niel believes that “it is a race against time. I think youth will begin leading services, maybe in three years. They will help with some parts, especially during holidays. It will change.”

While many Surinamese Jews welcome initiatives to enhance Jewish life, they have no intention of forgetting their past. Synagogue vice president Duym reflects that sentiment: “We have a lot of very old and unique *minhagim* [customs] that we want to keep. These *minhagim* make us strong. If we don’t do those things anymore, we will lose them.”

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