

Jewish Treasures of the Caribbean



essays by Stanley Mirvis

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about the photographer



Wyatt Gallery (b.1975), *a person not a place*, is a Philadelphia native and past adjunct-professor at the University of Pennsylvania. He received his BFA from NYU Tisch School of The Arts, and is the recipient of various awards including a Fulbright Fellowship to Trinidad, PDN magazines top 30, PDN Rising Star, and the International Center of Photography's 2017 Infinity Award. He has published four books and is in numerous public and private collections including the Museum of The City of New York, the Worcester Art Museum, Comcast, Twitter, and American Express.

This project focuses on the remaining historical Jewish sites of the Caribbean that relate to the Sephardic experience. The photographs were taken from 2009 to 2015. He writes:

In January 2009, while in Trinidad and Tobago, I was assigned by the New York Times to photograph in Aruba. On a stop-over in the neighboring Dutch island of Curaçao, I came upon the impressive Mikvé Israel-Emanuel synagogue... the oldest synagogue in the Western Hemisphere still offering regular religious services. Little did I know that the oldest synagogues and Jewish communities in the Western Hemisphere are located in the Caribbean! Being of Jewish descent, I found this very surprising, exciting, and fascinating... [and] began to research this little known history.

After I photographed the remnants of the grand Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption in Port au Prince, Haiti—destroyed by the devastating earthquake in January 2010—I realized this tragic fate could easily occur to the handful of remaining historic synagogues in the Caribbean. I felt it was my calling to photographically document these modern day treasures of the Jewish experience to ensure that all future generations will be able to visually experience this exceptional story of Jewish survival and the birth of Judaism in the new world.

learn more about this project and other work at wyattgallery.com

Wyatt lives between New York City and Trinidad & Tobago and is represented by Foley Gallery and Redux Pictures in New York City

The Origins of Caribbean Jewry

In 1391, one-third of Spain's Jews converted to Christianity as a result of mass riots. These *conversos*—Christians with Jewish ancestry—lived side by side with openly identified Jews until the 1492 expulsion. Most of the estimated 200,000 Jews who refused to convert in 1492 crossed into Portugal. There, the Portuguese Crown converted them *en mass* in 1497. This mass conversion along with a negotiated 40-year amnesty from Inquisitorial investigation created the conditions for crypto-Judaism (Marranism) to flourish in Portugal.

During the 16th and 17th centuries the Portuguese sometimes punished those suspected of secretly practicing Judaism by exiling them to Brazil. By 1630, thousands of *conversos* were living in Portuguese Brazil. In that year, the Dutch conquered the sugar rich province of Pernambuco, where they tolerated Judaism. The port city Recife became home to the first Jewish community of the Americas. In Dutch Brazil there was a rapid “rejudaization” movement as hundreds of *conversos* fled from Portuguese territory to adopt Judaism in Recife. In 1654, the Portuguese reclaimed Pernambuco resulting in the expulsion of Recife's, already significantly diminished, Jewish community.

The Brazilian Jewish exiles of 1654 went on to establish Jewish communities throughout the Caribbean. While many returned to Holland or further eastward toward Livorno in Tuscany, some later participated in settlement schemes in the Dutch, English, and French Caribbean as well as the Caribbean Sea's “Wild Coast” of South America. Each of the earliest settlements in the Caribbean included Jews that had earlier been involved in the Brazilian venture: Curaçao (1659), Barbados (1664), Jamaica (1667), Martinique (1667), Suriname (1682), Nevis (1688), St. Eustatius (1722), and St. Thomas (1796).

The French Caribbean was perhaps the most attractive initial destination for Brazilian Jewish refugees where they took part in the burgeoning sugar revolution. But, Jewish settlement in French Martinique and Guadeloupe came to an abrupt end with the implementation of the *Code Noir* in 1685, a law code meant to regulate slavery in French territories. However, the very first article called for the expulsion of Jews from French colonies. Jewish expellees from the French Caribbean found new homes in the English and Dutch Caribbean or returned to Western Europe.

Caribbean Jews maintained important social and trade contacts with the smaller Jewish communities of North America. Jews in the Caribbean imported much of their food from North America and shared ritual items. This nexus was strengthened by increasing flows of Jewish migrants from the Caribbean to North American port cities. Famously—though the community would prove short lived—23 Jewish refugees set sail (indirectly) from Brazil to New Amsterdam (New York) in 1654. Though also a brief settlement, migrants from Barbados made up the first Jewish settlement in Newport, Rhode Island during the 1680s, as well as a later community in Charleston, South Carolina. During the 19th century as the centrality of European authority diminished, Caribbean Jewish communities instead looked to North America for patronage. In the 20th century Spanish-Portuguese communal leaders in New York such as the Rabbi of *Shearith Israel*, Henry Pereira Mendes (d. 1937), forged partnerships with Caribbean communities in hopes of stalling or even reversing what he perceived to be the inevitable decline of Caribbean Jewry. In reality, this decline was far from inevitable. In the colonial period, the Caribbean was the principal site of Jewish settlement in the Americas.

Curaçao

Curaçao is an arid island off the coast of Venezuela. In the 1640s it became one of the most important trading ports in the Western Hemisphere. In the 18th century Curaçao was the most populous Jewish community in the Caribbean as well as the patron community for other Caribbean Jewish settlements. Most of the Amsterdam-trained rabbis that served in the Caribbean first arrived in Curaçao. And, every island, whether English, French, or Danish, included Jewish migrants from Curaçao.

Jewish pioneers, such as the intrepid João de Yllan (d. c. 1670), attempted to secure charters for Jewish settlement in Curaçao as early as 1651. Eight years later, Dutch Jews, augmented by the influx of expellees from Brazil, succeeded in establishing a permanent settlement. The small group of around 70 individuals purchased land in Willemstad for a burial ground, *Beit Haim Blenheim* (1659)—now the oldest Jewish cemetery in the New World—and laid the foundations for what would become the *Mikve Israel* community. Most of the tombstones that remain in the cemetery today are illegible due to fumes from a nearby oil refinery. A synagogue was erected in Willemstad around 1674 and underwent several subsequent renovations. The 1732 expansion of the synagogue, modeled on Amsterdam's Esnoga (1675), stands to this day. It is the oldest synagogue in the Americas and is now part of the UNESCO world heritage site of colonial Willemstad.

Curaçao's proximity to Spanish South America and the consistency of rabbinic leadership on the island, facilitated the "rejudaization" of hundreds of *conversos*. Meanwhile, Amsterdam's shrinking community no longer had the resources to support Jewish social welfare recipients and sent hundreds of *despachados* (dispatched welfare recipients) to Curaçao over the course of the 18th century. By 1730, Jews made up nearly half of the free population of Curaçao.

In the early 19th century, Curaçao's Jews played a minor role in the South American Wars of Independence in support of Simon Bolivar. During the 1920s, Ashkenazim became the largest Jewish group on the Island who founded their own synagogue, *Sha'arei Zedek* (1959). In 1964, facing leadership and financial crises, the Reform congregation *Temple Emanuel* and the Portuguese congregation *Mikve Israel* merged. Under the banner of the United Netherlands Portuguese Congregation, the new *Mikve Israel-Emanuel* community adopted a Reform rite while preserving much of its Portuguese heritage.

Curaçao has a proud and active community today that regularly holds services blending reform liturgy with Sephardic customs on *Temple Emanuel's* sand floor. According to representatives of the community, the island is today home to around 200 Jews.



Suriname

Suriname, located on the Caribbean coast of South America, was home to the best-documented colonial Caribbean Jewish community. It was not long after the expulsion from Brazil that the Dutch West India Company granted a charter encouraging Jews to settle in the under-populated territory of Dutch Guyana (Essequibo). During the 1660s some of these Jews moved into neighboring Suriname that was then under the control of the English who actively encouraged Jewish settlement. Suriname came into Dutch hands in 1667.

In the 1680s, Surinamese Jews established an autonomous plantation village called Jodensavanne. Jewish life in the riverfront village was concentrated in the *Berakha ve Salom* synagogue (1685). This imposing building—the first Jewish structure of architectural significance in the Caribbean—was erected from red bricks imported from Italy. Jodensavanne was a plantation community whereupon Jewish planters enslaved thousands of Africans. The near ceaseless skirmishes between autonomous black communities (Maroons) and the Jewish militia, coupled with other economic crises, ultimately led to the demise of the Jodensavanne community by 1770s. In the 1780s, most of Jodensavanne's Jews relocated to Paramaribo, the mercantile and political capital of Suriname. In 1832 a fire decimated the already defunct synagogue of Jodensavanne. All that remains today is the red brick foundation of the once great synagogue and nearby Jewish cemeteries.

The prosperous Portuguese Jewish community in Paramaribo built a beautiful synagogue, *Zedek ve Salom* in 1736. Paramaribo was likewise home to a substantial community of Ashkenazim who asserted their independence as early as 1719. Paramaribo was unique in the Caribbean for the strength and size of its Ashkenazi population. The presence of so many Ashkenazim in the Portuguese-dominated colony led to inter-Jewish hostility. Additionally, the “Mulatto Jews” of Suriname formed a confraternity in Paramaribo called

Darche Jessarim that fought against the marginalized status of people of color within the community.

Suriname was perhaps the most literate of all Jewish communities in the Caribbean. David Cohen Nassy (d. 1806), an amateur philosopher and planter, was the leading Jewish intellectual in Suriname, who oversaw a virtual Jewish Republic of Letters in the colony. Portuguese Jewish communal records are also intact from 18th-century Suriname.

There is no longer an active Jewish community in Suriname. The interior of the Portuguese synagogue of Paramaribo, *Zedek ve Salom*, has been removed and reconstructed in Jerusalem's Israel Museum while the exterior has lost all signs that it once served as a Jewish building. Starting in 1971, an advocacy group was formed to protect the remnants of Jodensavanne and nearby Cassipora Creek Cemetery. By the 1990s they succeeded in restoring and documenting the remains of Cassipora Creek and also succeeded in registering the site with the World Monuments Watch List of 100 most endangered sites, helping to raise awareness of this lost Jewish village on the banks of the Suriname River.



Jamaica

Jamaica, part of the Greater Antilles, was the largest English Caribbean possession during the colonial period and one of the largest Caribbean slave societies. At its height in the early 20th century, Jamaica was home to over 2,000 Jews. England's capture of Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655 coincided with the dispersion of Jews from Brazil in 1654 and the informal readmission of Jews to England in 1655. A formal Jewish community in Jamaica first emerged during the 1670s.

The first Jamaican Jewish community was in Port Royal, a town renowned as a pirate haven. Port Royal's Jews buried their dead across Kingston Harbor in Hunt's Bay Cemetery as early as 1672, a site now recognized by the Jamaican National Heritage Trust as a national monument. In June of 1692, a massive earthquake, followed by a tsunami, destroyed the city. Among the estimated 2,000 dead were a reported 22 Jews. By 1704 they built a synagogue in Spanish Town (*Neve Shalom*) followed soon after by a synagogue in Kingston (*Sha'are Shamayim*). Smaller west-coast communities also developed in Lucea, Savanna-la-Mar, Black River, and Montego Bay. By 1790, Ashkenazi communities were also established in Spanish Town and Kingston.

White Jamaican colonists often perceived Jews as Iberian interlopers. Jamaica's Jews were subject to some of the most hostile discrimination anywhere in the Atlantic World including a prejudicial Jewish surtax between 1692 and 1740. Jews frequently defended themselves against petitions from merchants seeking to curtail their civil liberties. Jewish cultural life, however, flourished in the 18th century under the leadership of the longest serving Caribbean rabbi in a single location, Joshua Hezekiah Decordova (d. 1797).

After years of expensive lobbying, Parliament emancipated the Jews of Jamaica in 1831 by granting them voting rights. In the 1840s Jews

participated in Jamaican government winning seats in the House of Assembly. During the 19th century, Jews were also among the most prominent Jamaican cultural figures. Now recognized as the national artist of Jamaica, Isaac Mendes Belisario (d. 1849) championed the cause of abolition through his lithographs celebrating Black Creole culture in Jamaica.

In 1882 a fire destroyed the city of Kingston. At that time there was a semi-successful attempt to amalgamate the Ashkenazi and Portuguese communities of Kingston into a single congregation. A devastating earthquake in January of 1907 toppled the Portuguese synagogue in Kingston providing the final impetus for Jamaican Jewish unity. In 1912, a new synagogue was built uniting the Portuguese and Ashkenazim under the new banner of the “The United Congregation of Israelites.”

Jamaica's Jewish population radically declined in the 20th century as they found better opportunities for economic and social mobility in North America and in nearby Panama. Political violence further contributed to a Jewish exodus from the island following independence in 1962. According to representatives of the community, today there are fewer than 200 Jews on the island. However, the 1912 synagogue stands as a monument to the Jewish Jamaican past as well as a beacon of hope for the future of Jamaica's Jewish community.



Barbados

Barbados is the easternmost windward island in the Caribbean Sea, inhabited by the English in 1625. By 1664, a Jewish community was founded in Bridgetown (*Nidhe Israel*) and in 1707 a second community was established in Speightstown (*Zemah David*). In 1678, the communal board of *Nidhe Israel* employed an Amsterdam trained rabbi, Eliahu Lopez (d. c. 1750).

Most of the earliest Jewish migrants to Barbados came from proximate Caribbean communities rather than via direct migration from Europe. Among the Brazilian pioneers to settle in Barbados was the wealthy sugar planter and physician David Raphael de Mercado (d. c. 1680) who innovated new method of sugar production. Following the Dutch capture of Suriname from the English in 1667, many of the Jews there sought their fortunes in English Barbados.

Throughout the colonial period, Jews in Barbados struggled against hostilities from non-Jewish merchants who opposed Jewish trading activity. While Jews successfully defended their right to free trade, several laws were passed in Barbados intended to restrict their economic activity. A special Jewish tax (often paid up in the currency of sugar) was intermittently imposed between 1681 and 1756. Barbadian Jews were at one time prohibited from offering testimony in court against non-Jews, and another act, though later repealed, limited their ownership of male slaves. In 1739, Barbados experienced a severe episode of anti-Jewish violence when a mob destroyed the synagogue in Speightstown.

In 1820 the Jews of Barbados became the first beneficiaries of civil liberties in the English-speaking world. In 1831, a hurricane leveled the city of Bridgetown including its synagogue. Though the walls of the synagogue lay in ruins. Two years later, with the aid of the London Jewish community, and funds that the Jews in Barbados had invested

with them, the synagogue was rebuilt upon its original foundation. This is the 1833 synagogue structure that remains today in Barbados.

With few opportunities for social mobility, the Barbadian Jewish community dramatically declined over the course of the 20th century possibly to as few as two individuals. The synagogue and the surrounding courtyard cemetery had been neglected and later sold. In 1983 a major renovation project restored these sites with the support of expat Americans. Not only were the synagogue and courtyard reclaimed and repaired but a *mikveh* (ritual bath) was also discovered on the site. Today, while there is no active Jewish community in Barbados, it is perhaps the most well-preserved historical site in the Caribbean as well as part of the UNESCO world heritage site of colonial Bridgetown.



The U.S. Virgin Islands and Dutch St. Eustatius

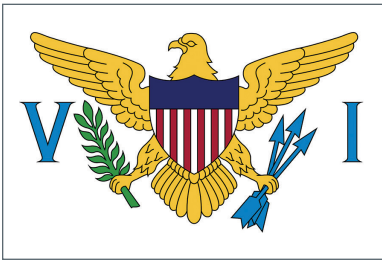
The Danish West India Company colonized St. Thomas in 1672. Soon after, Jews arrived individually or in small groups. During the 18th century, the island of St. Croix, another Danish colony, boasted a more established Jewish community including a synagogue built in 1764 that no longer exists. In 1796, St. Thomas's Jewish community obtained permission from Danish colonial authorities to erect a synagogue, *Beracha veShalom*, in the capital city of Charlotte Amalie. The establishment of an officially recognized Jewish community coincided with an economic and population boom on the island.

The Jewish community of St. Thomas swelled in the 1780s as a result of the American War of Independence when the English occupied the Dutch island of St. Eustatius less than 140 miles to the southeast. St. Eustatius, locally known as Statia, is a small island within the Leeward Islands just north of St. Kitts and Nevis. Captured by the Dutch during the 1630s, a Jewish community was established in the 1720s and in 1739 they built a synagogue in the capital city Oranjestad (*Honen Dalim*). Statia's merchants supplied arms to the Americans during the Revolutionary War. In January of 1781 the island was captured by the British Navy under the command of Admiral George Rodney (d. 1792). The British confiscated the property of the Island's merchants and around 100 Jewish men were imprisoned and subjected to abuse. Following this traumatic event, most of Statia's estimated 350 Jews relocated to nearby St. Thomas in the Danish West Indies.

In 1804 a fire ravaged the city of Charlotte Amalie including the synagogue. A second fire, only two years later, halted reconstruction efforts. Despite these initial setbacks, the community grew during a British occupation of the Island (1807–1815) and began construction on a new synagogue in 1813. During these years Philip and Rebecca Benjamin, the parents of Judah P. Benjamin resided on St. Croix. Judah P. Benjamin, born on St. Croix, later went on to serve as a cabinet official for the Confederacy during

the American Civil War. In 1830, the impressionist painter and Caribbean Jewry's most famous son, Camille Pissarro, was born on St. Thomas.

In December of 1831 a fire consumed the recently rededicated synagogue. With the aid of Curaçao's Jewish community, a vibrant fund-raising campaign led to the rededication of *Beracha veShalom* in 1833. It is this building that remains on the island today. In 1915 the United States acquired the Danish Virgin Islands. At that time there were fewer than 50 Jews remaining. By the 1940s, the island, and its synagogue, had become a major tourist destination for Americans as well as a significant point of foreign investment, which contributed to a rebirth of the community. St. Thomas's appeal as a tourist destination helped sustain a Jewish community throughout the 1970s and 1980s. To this day, the Charlotte Amalie community remains active, daily opening its doors to tourists from North America and Europe.



Jewish Slave Ownership

Many Caribbean Jews were international traders but their involvement in the trans-Atlantic slave trade was surprisingly limited. A minority of Caribbean Jews did own slaving vessels and others resold enslaved people. In one case, the Jewish slave trafficker Alexandre Lindo was one of the biggest slave traders in Jamaica during the 1780s. Generally, however, Caribbean Jewish merchants preferred to trade commodities like finished European goods, foodstuffs, and diamonds for which they had preestablished networks.

Although Jews had a comparatively minor role in the slave trade, nearly every Jewish household in the colonial Caribbean possessed slaves and Jewish patterns of slave ownership were indistinguishable from those of their non-Jewish counterparts. The “industrialized” scale of slavery in the colonial Americas had a profound impact on Judaism itself. The Jewish community of Recife, Brazil in 1649 became the first in the world to ban the biblically rooted practice of circumcising slaves upon their purchase. The scale of slavery in Brazil along with the rapidity with which slave were purchased and resold made this practice untenable. In slave societies such as Suriname and Jamaica, Jewish planters and merchants came into daily contact with enslaved Africans. Jews sometimes branded runaway slaves with their initials both as individuals and as communities. And in one case, an English traveler in Suriname described seeing a Jewish woman brutally torture an enslaved woman to death. According to an analysis of wills from Jamaica, slaves were 11 times more likely to be bequeathed by Jews than set free (manumitted) by them.

The close contact between Jews and enslaved Africans enabled many Jewish men to live in non-legally recognized blended families with underclass women of color, both free and enslaved. These relationships, though frowned upon by colonial authorities, were a pervasive social reality throughout the Caribbean. Long-term relationships between women of color and Jewish men were deeply unequal and were often sought after by

Jewish men seeking the companionate benefits of marriage with none of the fiscal responsibilities. These relationships took many forms and included cases of rape, surrogacy, and concubinage. In some cases, Jewish men—at times legally married to Jewish women—supported their concubines and their children of color with voluntary inheritance. Sometimes these Jewish fathers attempted to coerce a Jewish identity for their children of color. However, “mulatto Jews” had a deeply marginalized place within Jewish communities and were summarily denied communal honors. But, over time, as the complexion of Caribbean Jewry changed, it was precisely these “mulatto Jews” who would become the curators of the continuity of Jewishness in the Caribbean.

Jewish Women in the Caribbean

Relatively few European women migrated voluntarily, or arrived alone, to the colonial Caribbean. Those who did were often the wives of military officers, sex workers, or were coerced into migration by a metropolitan government. Jewish women were propelled towards a new life in the Caribbean by different factors than most white Christian women. The experience of poverty in Europe and the prospect of enjoying greater religious freedoms in the Caribbean drove Jewish migration and encouraged extended families to migrate together and maintain strong kinship networks. In contrast to Christian European migrants, Jewish women were among the earliest settlers of the Caribbean, who appear with relative parity to the presence of men in the earliest Caribbean Jewish cemeteries.

Portuguese Jewish fathers in the Caribbean held different educational expectations for their daughters than for their sons. Girls did not attend the primary Talmud Torah schools found throughout the Dutch and English Caribbean. Curaçao's Jewish communal minutes from the 18th century, which are heavily focused on education, do not mention girls. In a number of wills from the 18th century, Jamaican upper-class Jewish fathers specified that their daughters be instructed in the arts of sociability such as dancing and music. In this regard, Caribbean Jews followed the example of their affluent Dutch and English counterparts.

Some colonial-era Caribbean commentators believed that well-to-do White Creole women were at an educational disadvantage because they grew up surrounded by enslaved attendants who lacked formal education. Caribbean Jewish wills reveal that it was common for wealthy Jewish girls to grow up surrounded by personal slave attendants. And, in slave societies like Suriname it is thought to have been more common for Jewish women to communicate in Creole languages than Jewish men. The lack of female orphanage confraternities in the English Caribbean suggests that parentless Jewish girls likely labored in the homes of relatives or friends for their dowries.

These vulnerable girls were often the victims of physical and emotional abuse, sexual exploitation, and rape. Despite clear educational and social limitations, women, both Jewish and non-Jewish, were inextricable parts of local Caribbean economies as taxpayers, property holders, and slave owners. Indeed, mastery over the enslaved empowered Jewish women in ways that were unavailable to their counterparts in Europe.

Healing and medicine were public practices largely open to women and sometimes provided a path toward social and economic independence. At least 22 women interred in Surinamese Jewish cemeteries are identified on their tombstones as midwives. Jewish women healers throughout the Caribbean also sometimes partnered with their physician husbands and took over their practices when they died.

As Caribbean Jewish communities became more blended over time, women of color became some of the most definitive architects of distinctly Creole Caribbean Jewry.

The Reform Movement in the Caribbean

During the 19th century, a Reform movement developed in Germany that sought to modernize Jewish liturgy and practice. Among the main goals of the German Reformers were the integration of German into the liturgy and sermons, removal of references to Zion and Temple sacrifices, and the abolition of the *kol nidre* service. These changes to Jewish traditional practice echoed throughout the Americas, including in the Caribbean.

In 1819, five years before the first echoes of liturgical reform in North America at the famous Harby Synagogue in Charleston, South Carolina, the Amsterdam trained cantor Jeosuah Piza introduced modernizations into the synagogue services in Curaçao. This enraged a faction of Portuguese traditionalist who threatened to form their own community. With the help of arbitration from Curaçao's colonial authorities in 1821, an agreement was reached whereby the inflammatory Piza would return to Holland and the separatists would regain their former positions in the community.

During the 1840s, St. Thomas led the way among Caribbean communities in progressive liturgical reform. The St. Thomas reform movement was spearheaded by the progressive Amsterdam-trained rabbi Benjamin Cohen Carillon (d. 1860) who arrived on the island in 1841 after earlier serving in Suriname and Jamaica. His appointment sparked controversy on the island. In 1844 Carillon introduced a controversial confirmation ceremony that equalized the role of women and girls in the community. In the end, the St. Thomas community preferred competent lay functionaries and dismissed the services of the provocative Carillon.

In the following decade, the debates over reform liturgy in the Caribbean intensified, particularly in Curaçao. Rabbi Aron Mendes Chumaceiro (d. 1882) arrived in Curaçao in 1854. Chumaceiro was renowned in Amsterdam for delivering powerful sermons in Dutch. Chumaceiro's presence in Curaçao sparked the indignation of the Portuguese traditionalists. However,

Chumaceiro, a golden-tongued mediator masterfully negotiated the difficult channels of communal authority and held his divided community together. Despite Chumaceiro's best efforts at striving toward unity, in 1864 reform separatists founded their own congregation and laid the foundations of what is today one of the most iconic synagogues in the Caribbean *Temple Emmanuel* (1867). In 1963 with the merger of Curaçao's two Jewish communities, the new bylaws stated that women would sit together with men and be counted among a prayer quorum.

The Jamaican community first began to seriously debate the issue of liturgical reform in 1886 during an attempt to unify the Ashkenazi and Portuguese communities. The constitution of 1886 called for liturgical changes in order to "render the service more. . .intelligible to the congregation, and in particular to the rising generation." These liturgical changes were not formally ratified until 1908 in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake. Still, Jamaica was slow to adopt radical reforms. It was not until the 1970s that the unified Jamaican community instituted significant changes to their liturgy and practices. In 1979, new bylaws were adopted that allowed for the greater participation of women in synagogue services. Today all existent Caribbean communities implement some form of reform liturgy wherein women take prominent leadership roles.

The Holocaust and the Caribbean

Between 1933 and 1945 there were an estimated 350,000 Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria. Only an estimated 85,000 Jews reached the United States and perhaps as many as 100,000 fled to countries later occupied by the Third Reich. Bolivia and China sheltered tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from occupied Europe. The Caribbean was also a destination for many. During the years of the Holocaust, Caribbean Jewry grew dramatically, if only temporarily.

In July of 1938, four months before *Kristallnacht*, representatives of 32 nations gathered in the French resort town of Evian to discuss the refugee crisis. The delegates reached an agreement to pressure Germany to cooperate in facilitating “orderly emigration” but ultimately failed to open the doors of the world to Jewish refugees. The one exception was the Dominican Republic then under the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo who agreed to admit 10,000 Jewish refugees. It has been suggested that Trujillo’s willingness to admit Jewish refugees was an attempt to encourage greater White settlement of the Dominican Republic. At the time, Trujillo had been sponsoring violent purges of the country’s Black inhabitants. A small community of Austrian Jewish refugees developed in the northern farming town of Sosúa where they learned to produce dairy and can tomatoes despite the fact that few had experience farming. The agricultural experiment of Sosúa was short lived and most of the town’s Jews migrated to the United States.

An estimated 2,500 Jewish refugees made their way to Cuba in the 1930s. The ruling elite of Cuba at the time, under the influence of former president Ramon Grau, had articulated vitriolic anti-Jewish sentiments and sought to prevent Jewish immigration. Cuba became a flashpoint in the refugee crisis in May 1939 when the ill-fated ship *St. Louis* arrived on its shores carrying hundreds of Jewish refugees from Hamburg, many with Cuban landing permits. 28 Jews were allowed entry while president Federico Laredo Bru

attempted to extort payments for the remaining passengers from the Joint Distribution Committee. In the end, the *St. Louis* was also turned away from the coast of Florida by the U.S. and forced to return to Europe, which was soon engulfed in war. It is estimated that around 254 of its passengers perished in the Holocaust.

The English Caribbean was likewise a point of destination for dislocated European Jews. The British established displaced persons camps in Trinidad and Jamaica. The influx of Jewish refugees even became the subject of multiple calypsos in Trinidad. In Jamaica, the British established a camp for people who had been evacuated from Gibraltar via Portugal known as “Gibraltar Camp.” Jews who found themselves in Gibraltar Camp were subject to strict discipline and curfews, which resulted in limited contact between Jewish refugees and local Jamaicans. Very few Jewish evacuees remained in Jamaica after the war. The Mona campus of the University of The West Indies in Kingston is built on the site of “Gibraltar Camp.”

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Recognized as a Phoenix Point of Pride, Arizona Jewish Historical Society (AZJHS) is dedicated to preserving and celebrating the rich heritage

of Arizona's Jewish communities, combating anti-Semitism, educating the public about Jewish contributions to Arizona and American life, and promoting awareness of our state's diverse history through arts, culture, and educational programs.

AZJHS is situated on the restored site of the original Temple Beth Israel (built in 1921), now known as the Cutler☆Plotkin Jewish Heritage Center. Open to people of all faiths and cultures—with a long history, strong leadership, a location in the heart of downtown Phoenix's arts and culture district, and over 10,000 visitors each year—AZJHS is an integral part of the city's Jewish and secular community.

AZJHS sponsors public exhibitions, documentary film series, book discussions, educational programs, lectures and seminars, and hosts a series of programs relevant to Jewish history and culture. It also offers genealogy research, has a large community archive, and an event rental space and gardens for private functions.

The Cutler☆Plotkin Jewish Heritage Center is tentatively scheduled to build the Center for Hope, Humanity, and Holocaust Education on the current campus in 2022. It will be an inclusive and collaborative space to inspire new ideas, encourage open dialog, and promote hope, human dignity, and respect.

(602) 241-7870 or lbell@azjhs.org for additional information

