

Suriname

The first Jews came between 1635 and 1639. Spanish and Portuguese Jews came from Amsterdam with the Dutch occupation of Suriname in 1668. By the first half of The 1700's, they were joined by Ashkenazic Jews from Rotterdam, raising the Jewish population to 2,000, half of the white population of the territory. They settled in Jodensavanne, or The Jewish Savannah under privileges they received from the British and later Dutch authorities. There they owned 115 sugar growing and refining plantations. Jodensavanne was autonomous. They named sites after Hebrew Biblical names.

The Netherlands Antilles

The first Jews to arrive from Amsterdam in 1651. They were later joined by Jews fleeing from Brazil which The Portuguese had captured from The Dutch. The Jewish community was founded in 1659 and the first synagogue in 1732. When The Jews were expelled from the French islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe the number of Jews in Curacao increased and by 1780 reached 2,000, more than half of the white population. The Curacao community became the "mother community" of The Americas and assisted other communities in the area, mainly in Suriname and St. Eustatius. It also financed the construction of the first synagogues in New York and Newport. By 1946, Jews in Aruba were sufficiently numerous to organize for worship and to plan Hebrew classes, a social center, and in 1962 a synagogue. In The 20th Century a number of Ashkenazic Jews settled in The Antilles and today they account for a majority of the Jewish population. However, by The Mid 20th Century the number of Jews started to decline, primarily due to emigration and intermarriage.

Haiti

Columbus's Converso interpreter, Luis de Torres, was the first Jew to set foot in Haiti. The first Jewish immigrants came from Brazil in The 17th Century, after Haiti was conquered by The French. In the beginning of The 20th Century, Jews from Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt settled in Haiti, followed by Jews from Eastern Europe in The 1930's. There has been steady emigration during the second half of the century. Most of the remaining Jews live in Port-au-Prince. The Jews of Haiti have never been able to establish a communal organization. Religious services are organized in a private home.

Martinique

The first Jews settled in Martinique at the start of The 17th Century, establishing themselves in Dutch commercial outposts. In 1667 a synagogue was founded. However, the Jesuit opposition to Jewish settlement produced an order by King Louis XIV expelling The Jews from the French islands in 1685. Most of the 96 remaining Jews in

Martinique left for Curacao. In The 1960s and 1970s, Jews from North Africa and France settled in Fort de France.

Jamaica

Jamaica was a Spanish colony from 1494 to 1655. During that period, there was a constant stream of Conversos from The Iberian Peninsula, mainly from Portugal. During British occupation, these Conversos returned to Judaism. In The 17th and 18th Centuries, The Jews controlled the sugar and vanilla industries and played a leading role in foreign trade and shipping. In The 19th Century, they were prominent in the political, social, and cultural life of the country. In 1849, for example, 8 of the 47 members of The House of Assembly were Jews, and the House adjourned for Yom Kippur. In 1881, the Jewish population reached 2,535 out of 13,800 white citizens. In The 20th Century, Jews from Syria and Germany joined the community. However, the Jewish population diminished due to economic decline, emigration, and intermarriage.

The Bahamas

When The Bahamas were first settled by the British in 1620, relatively few Jews came to the islands. Still, a Jew, Moses Franks, served as Attorney-General and Chief Justice of the islands in The 18th Century. After World War I, a few Jewish families from Poland, Russia, and The United Kingdom settled in Nassau, the capital. Later Jews came to Freeport on Grand Bahamas Island. In Nassau there is a synagogue named for Luis de Torres, the Converso who served as Columbus's interpreter and who was the first person on Columbus's ship to set foot on the soil of The New World. There is another synagogue in Freeport. The two congregations are joined together in The United Bahamas Hebrew Congregation. There are also some ancient Jewish graves in Nassau.

Bermuda

Some Jews have lived on the island since The 17th Century, but the first synagogue was only formed in The 20th Century. The permanent Jewish population is often outnumbered by many Jewish tourists from The United Kingdom, The United States, and Canada, and Jewish personnel attached to the American military base on the island. Religious services, conducted by a lay reader, are held once or twice a month and also on the High Holidays, in different locations.

Barbados

Spanish and Portuguese Jews from Dutch Brazil, Cayenne, Suriname, England, Hamburg, and Leghorn came to Barbados a year after its settlement by the British in 1627. In 1654 the Jewish community of Bridgetown, the capital, was formed and a

synagogue established. 30 Jewish families of Eastern European origin escaping The Nazis, settled in Barbados, and these were joined by Jews from Trinidad.

Cuba

During the Spanish colonial rule that lasted until 1898, very few Jews lived in Cuba, and nearly all of them were apostates or Jews from the Dutch Antilles holding.

Cuba was a popular transit point for Eastern European immigrants awaiting admission to The United States. Some of these Jews remained in Cuba. In The 1930's, a central Jewish committee was created to represent all Jewish groups. The plight of the Havana-bound passengers stranded on the German liner St. Louis dramatized the tragedy of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany, yet they were also denied admission to Cuba. In 1952 there were more than 12,000 Jews in Cuba. 75% lived in Havana and the rest in the rural provinces. At that time, Ashkenazim accounted for some three fourths of the community. Cuban Jews participated in an active communal life, and they published a number of newspapers in Yiddish and Spanish. Although the Cuban revolution was not directed against Jews, it destroyed the economic stability of Cuban Jewry, which was primarily middle class. The great majority of Cuban Jews, together with many of their Non-Jewish countrymen, found sanctuary in Miami, Florida. In 1999, it was discovered that Fidel Castro let Jews imigrate to Israel by way of Canada. Most of the remaining Jews in Cuba live in Havana.

The Dominican Republic

The majority of Jews in the Dominican Republic live in Santo Domingo, the capital. There is also a community in Sosua. The great majority are of Central European origin. Jews from Curacao settled in Hispaniola in The 19th Century but did not form a community.

The Dominican Republic was one of the very few countries prepared to accept mass Jewish immigration in The 1930's when Jews were imperiled by the rise of Nazism. At The Evian Conference, it offered to accept up to 100,000 Jewish refugees. In 1943 the number of Jews in the republic peaked at 1,000. Since that time, it has been in constant decline due to emigration and assimilation.

French Guyana

In 1659 the Dutch West India Company nominated a refugee from Brazil, David Nassy, as a patron of an exclusive Jewish settlement on the island of Cayenne named Remire. The Portuguese Jewish refugees from Brazil were joined by Sfardic Jews from Leghorn, Italy. In 1992 a group of about 20 Jewish families from North Africa and Suriname

refounded a community in Cayenne. Jews are aided in maintaining Jewish life by the Chabad organization.

Guadeloupe

The first Jewish group to settle the island consisted of three shiploads of refugees from Brazil in 1654 who were cordially received by the French owner of the island. The Jews initiated sugarcane plantations, and refineries accounted for the island's main exports. "The Black Code" of Louis XIV in 1685 ordered the expulsion of Jews. In the second half of The 20th Century, Jews from North Africa and France settled on the island. In 1988 the synagogue Or Sameah was founded together with a community center, Talmud Torah, kosher store, and cemetery.

Trinidad

The Jewish presence in Trinidad is at once constant and invisible. There have been several waves of Jewish immigration to this most Southern island of the Caribbean archipelago, yet each one has largely been forgotten by the populace, and few reminders exist in the society of their past and continuing presence.

The first major Jewish immigration to Trinidad was in The Late 1700's and today many last names on the island are living testaments to their presence. However, today none of the descendants of these early immigrants are currently Jewish, and the vast majority are not even aware of their Jewish heritage, a testimony to the high degree of intermarriage between the Jews and the Catholic French of Trinidad in the last two centuries.

In The Late 1800's, another group of Jews made their way to Trinidad, mostly Portuguese in origin although a few also came from Curacao. Many of these also assimilated and/or intermarried. Official records show that at the turn of The 20th Century, the number of Jews on the island numbered just 31 and all were English in origin. They worked mostly as civil servants and as merchants. One of these, Sir Nathaniel Nathan, served as Associate Justice of The Trinidad Supreme Court from 1893 to 1900 and Chief Justice from 1900 to 1903.

However, The 20th Century would see a rapid rise and equally rapid fall in the numbers of the Jewish population in Trinidad.

Of the thousands of Jews who fled Nazism, many found a haven in The Caribbean. From 1936 to 1939, Trinidad was the most welcoming beacon as it had no visa requirement, only a £50 landing deposit. New arrivals were quickly settled in houses rented by a Jewish aid society in the capital, Port of Spain.

Most of the refugees knew very little about The Caribbean before their arrival. As a result, the adjustment was often quite challenging. But it did not take long for the new

arrivals to establish small businesses. In the island's two main towns, Port of Spain and San Fernando, new cafes, factories, and shops started to appear.

By 1939, the Jewish community numbered 600. Concerned, colonial authorities enacted a temporary ban on immigration from "specified" European countries. There also existed a sense of ambivalence about the Jewish presence amongst the local population. However, these feelings were more rooted in intense competition for scarce economic resources, among the generally impoverished population, than in Anti-Semitism and the new immigrants experienced no real expressions of hostility.

As they created new economic niches for themselves in their "Calypso Shtetl", "The Calypso Jews", as they now saw themselves, began to turn their attentions to creating a cultural and religious life for themselves on the island. A synagogue and community center were founded in a rented house on Duke Street in Port of Spain (Today one of its Torah scrolls can be found at Congregation Dorshei Emet in Montreal.). There were aid societies for the poor and elderly, and even a dramatic and opera society. Although the community was refused a license for kosher slaughter it was granted a separate section (Bet Olam) of Port of Spain's main cemetery, The Mucurapo Cemetery. Today the cemetery is maintained by the island's only remaining member of this 1930's influx, Hans Stecher. He and his family, left Vienna for Trinidad shortly after the Anschluß when Nazi Germany annexed Austria. There is hope to establish a fund that can relieve him of this responsibility and to ensure the section's perpetual upkeep.

Unfortunately, the relative stability and bliss which the refugees had settled into was not to last. With the outbreak of war, all refugees deemed to be "enemy aliens" were interned in camps throughout The Caribbean. Trinidad was no exception. In addition to captured Italian and German merchant seamen and German U-boat crews, Trinidad's new "enemy aliens" now included, ironically, those Jewish families who came from Austria or Germany.

While an internment camp was being constructed outside of the capital, the Jewish families were housed in barracks on tiny islands off the mainland (Hans Stecher still has a shark's fin saved from the shore during his time on the island.). After a few months in the barracks they were moved back to the mainland. The internment camp, which stood on what are now the residential neighborhoods of Federation Park and Ellerslie Park, is documented at Trinidad's Chaguaramas Military Museum and was surrounded by a tall barbed wire fence with sentry towers and search lights. Although children were given special permissions to attend school outside the camp, understandably, many of the refugees felt deeply insulted by this course of events.

In 1943, they were released with certain wartime restrictions. They had to report daily to the nearest police station, were banned from driving cars or riding bicycles, and were under curfew from 8:00 P.M. to 6:00 A.M.. In disgust, some families left. Others stayed and brought back to light the community life they had started before internment. A soccer team was established, the drama club performed plays in Hebrew and Yiddish, they held fund-raisers for Israel, and a schochet was even brought in from The United States. The

community was, in a word, vibrant. As the children grew however, the viability of the community was undermined since there was no local university at the time. Once the children went overseas to study few returned to live. Of those who did, many intermarried or assimilated and the community gradually began to dissolve after it reached its peak of 700 people by The Mid 1900's.

In The 1970's, Trinidad's political and social stability was threatened by a wave of "Black Power" riots. Fearing for their safety, and haunted by bad memories, the majority of the remaining population migrated en masse. Many created new roots in Canada where they remain to this day. Today, pictures and memories are all that remain of "The Calypso Shtetl". It is hard to believe that at one time Passover Seders were so large they were sometimes hosted at The Trinidad Hilton.

Religious artifacts were moved to Barbados in The 1970's to ensure their safety. Currently the Torah scroll resides at Congregation Dorshei Emet in Montreal.

Still, if one looks around, one can find evidence of this brief renaissance of Jewish life in Trinidad. Most notably on every police car, policeman, and police station on the island, is the insignia of the police force which is a hummingbird within a Magen David. A British commander who came to Trinidad from Palestine put a white star against a blue background for the local army symbol, switching the colors of what was to become The Israeli Flag. The hummingbird was later added for local flavor. This makes Trinidad unique in that it is the only police service in The World that does not use its country's Coat of Arms as its official symbol.

Today Bet Olam is still the Jewish section of The Mucurapo Cemetery and there is also a smaller cemetery in San Fernando. There are also places named Albert Einstein Avenue, Theodore Herzl Drive, and Golda Meir Gardens. There are also places that bear the names of local Jews.

Today the community numbers 25-67, depending on who you talk to and who is on the island at any one point, and holds occasional communal observances. Projects are in the works to revitalise the community including the formation of an organizational body.

Nevis

There is a Jewish cemetery in Nevis that is in the process of being restored.

Antigua

Antigua had a small Jewish population.

