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GABRIEL MILAN, THE JEWISH GOVERNOR OF
ST. THOMAS.

BY LEE M. FRIEDMAN, A. B., LL. B.

As early as 1622 Christian IV, King of Denmark, wrote the Jewish council of Amsterdam asking them to encourage Jews to settle in his state, promising both freedom of worship and other privileges.¹ Evidently the invitation was accepted, for when the Danish policy changed Frederick II complained in 1651 that

Jews have stolen into Denmark contrary to long-standing custom and have dared to traffic with jewels and the like,

and enacted a law that Jews should not enter Denmark without a special passport and that those already settled there should leave within fourteen days.² This continued as the law of Denmark well into the eighteenth century.³ Either licenses must have been liberally granted or the anti-Jewish laws must have been more formidable on paper than in practice, because the Jewish cemetery in Copenhagen was

¹ Graetz, "History of the Jews," English translation, vol. iv, p. 675.

² *De Mosaiske Troesbekenderes Stilling i Danmark*, Odense, 1837; M. L. Nathanson, *Historisk Freustilling af Jodernes Forhold og Stilling i Danmark*, Copenhagen, 1860; "The Jewish Encyclopedia," vol. iv, p. 522.

³ "The Danish Laws or the Code of Christian V," English translation, London, 1756, book iii, ch. xx: "Of Jews & Tatars." Article 1: "No Jew shall be permitted to enter this kingdom, or reside therein, without special license from the King, under Penalty of a thousand dollars." Article 2: "Whoever informs the King's Lieutenant of a Jew shall receive a reward of Fifty dollars."

established in 1670, while the Copenhagen synagogue dates from 1684, and Jews evidently continued to hold positions of commercial importance. Thus Moses Joshua Henriques in 1686 was factor in Glückstadt for ships sailing to Guinea, and later seemed to have a royal license to trade with the West Indies as well.⁴ At any rate he petitioned the king in 1695 for permission to transfer his rights to Jacob Cohen and his fellow investors.⁵

It is, therefore, not surprising to find that Jews were amongst the earliest settlers when St. Thomas became a Danish colony.⁶ It has already been noted in the *Publications* of this Society that, even before Danish control, St. Thomas figured in the Jewish history of Portugal when in 1493 King John II conferred the seignory of the island upon Don Alvaro de Caminha and ordered that the sons and daughters of tender age of the Jews be taken away, baptised and carried as settlers to St. Thomas.⁷

From Jewish sources we know of the martyrdom of many of these children, separated from their parents, banished to

⁴Casper Peter Rothe, *Kong Christian den Fenteskrevne Balainger og Anordninger, eller Oescupter for Norge, Island, Ferroerne og de Indiske Besiddelser fra 9 de Februar 1670 til 25 Augusti 1699*, Copenhagen, 1777, excerpt 2.

⁵Danish State Archives (*Rigsarkiv*): *Copie Bogholden ved Compagniets Contoir i Kiøbenhavn fra den 13 Feb., 1690 til A[nn]o 1713, over hvad der er passeret ved det vestindiska, comp. soerlig vedr. St. Thomas.*

⁶Waldemar Westergaard, "The Danish West Indies 1671-1917," New York, 1917, p. 38: "Indeed the Jewish settlers were of sufficient importance that in 1685 when negotiations were carried on by the Brandenburgers who controlled a river trading company to the Danish at St. Thomas, looking to an amalgamation, one of the proposed articles was to provide that Jews were tolerated in St. Thomas and allowed to hold private services provided they permitted no scandals."

⁷*Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, No. 2, p. 132 n.

this distant island, perishing from starvation and hardship.⁸ Although the known history of the Jewish settlers in the Danish West Indies is as yet fragmentary, here and there we see traces that indicate its importance. In 1771 the Congregation Shearith Israel of New York spent £4. 12. 1, charges "for sending away Moses Mial a poor lad to St. Croix,"⁹ while in 1782 the Jews of Philadelphia begged the help of the Jews of St. Croix and St. Thomas to enable them to build a synagogue in Philadelphia.¹⁰ We also know that Benjamin Frank, a Jew, was a shipowner at St. Thomas in 1696, and the seizure of one of his vessels at that harbor by a French privateer was one of the grounds of protest by the Danes against their French neighbors.¹¹ The well-known New York Jewish merchant, Joseph Bueno, was interested in trading with St. Thomas as early as 1694,¹² and still later Emanuel Vass, who figured in the census of St. Thomas in 1733 as a Jew, was also engaged in shipping and trading.¹³

There is a considerable break in the available information of the intervening history. An anonymous English author, writing from St. Thomas in 1843, said that

the flock of Israel's fold is thick and fares well at this place, however, one or two houses of eminence are of this class, as also a large portion of the second rate traders, those who keep stores for hardware, glass, porcelain and the dispensers of spirit and friperie.¹⁴

⁸ Joseph ha-Kohen, *Emek ha-Baka*; Gedellah ibn Yahia, *Shal-shelet ha-Kabbalah*. For both of these references I am indebted to Albert M. Friedenberg.

⁹ *Publications, supra*, No. 21, p. 109.

¹⁰ A. S. W. Rosenbach, "Historical Sketch of the Congregation Mikve Israel," Philadelphia, 1909, p. 9; *Publications, supra*, No. 1, p. 16.

¹¹ See Note 5, *supra*.

¹² Westergaard, *supra*, p. 210 n.

¹³ *Publications, supra*, No. 2, p. 81.

¹⁴ "Letters from the Virgin Islands," London, 1843, p. 99.

In an account of St. Thomas published in 1852, John P. Knox,¹⁵ pastor of the Reform Dutch Church, wrote that there was then a Jewish Community of between 450 and 500 persons who had a synagogue and burying ground of their own. The early records of the synagogue had been lost; and he added that the greater part of these Jews had come to St. Thomas after the sacking of St. Eustatius by Rodney in 1781, although he called attention to a record as early as 1757 showing births to a Jewish family on the island. The synagogue which he described had been built in 1833 and the congregation dated from 1796. He quoted a statement that in 1801 the congregation had dwindled to only nine families, and had increased in 1803 to twenty-two families by arrivals from England, St. Eustatius and Curaçao.

Professor Waldemar Westergaard in his recently published history of the Danish West Indies described the fourth governor, that arrived in St. Thomas in 1684, as a Jew who had led an eventful life as soldier under Cardinal Mazarin, merchant in Amsterdam, financier for Prince George of Denmark, Danish factor and factor general in Amsterdam, acquainted with the Spanish, French, Portuguese, German and Dutch languages, and considerable of a politician in Danish court circles. In a word, Gabriel Milan was a soldier of fortune who, at the age of fifty-three through the favor of a king, had thrust into his hands the chance to become a ruler of men only to misuse his opportunity, fail and die in misery.¹⁶

Through the kindness of Professor Westergaard there has been made available a translation from the Danish of a biographical sketch of Gabriel Milan prepared by James Frederick Krarup,¹⁷ who was at one time employed in the state archives at Copenhagen.

¹⁵ "A Historical Account of St. Thomas, W. I.," New York, 1852.

¹⁶ Westergaard, *supra*, p. 58 *et seq.*

¹⁷ *Gabriel Milan og Somme af hans Samtid*, in *Personalthistorisk Tidsskrift*, Copenhagen, 1893, pp. 102-130; 1894, pp. 1-51.

SUMMARY OF THE PAPER BY KRARUP.

The article is divided into two parts, the first dealing with Milan's career up to his appointment as governor of St. Thomas and the second dealing with his governorship and career thereafter. The article is written in a somewhat gossipy vein, and, while discursive, manages after all to convey a rather distinct impression both of the deeds of Milan and his problems. It begins by an incident in Milan's career when in 1670 he was the royal Danish factor in Amsterdam. He had helped Gjõe, the Danish minister or envoy extraordinary at The Hague, by advancing him money. When the loan was not repaid as agreed Milan pressed his debtor and a secretary of the legation wrote in behalf of the minister branding Milan as "a shameless Jew." Milan, in answer to this, expressed his utmost astonishment over the indignities with which he had been overwhelmed. "Born of a family that has occupied, and still occupies, responsible positions in Spain, Flanders and Italy, brought up in the highest circles and in a refined environment, he never in all his previous life had such an experience. 'Shameless' he certainly is not and never has been. 'Jew.' Yes, that he is; but that he counts as an honor, for no people has shown itself so well able as the Jewish to serve faithfully lords and princes, and indeed to place strength, life and property at their disposal. As for himself, he serves the king, but is not for that reason the servant of Gjõe and subject to abuse from him at his pleasure."

The royal Danish factor who made this reply was of a Jewish family, Milano or Milan, which at the time belonged to the merchant class in Hamburg and was related by marriage to the well known Portuguese Jewish houses of da Costa and de Castro. Gabriel Milan had married a daughter of the famous physician and learned rabbi, Benjamin (Dionys) Mussaphia, a member of the de Castro family, and at the time physician to Christian IV. He had been a soldier, having served under Cardinal Mazarin. In 1667-70 he was a merchant in Amsterdam and acted as banker for Prince George of Denmark. His letters show that he was familiar with Spanish, French, Portuguese, German and Dutch. In July, 1668, he was appointed Danish factor in Amsterdam and from this time on seems to have established connections with prominent Danes. In 1670 he visited Copenhagen and when there was given the title of "factor-general" with a salary of 400 rixdollars a year. In 1671 the king's mother, Queen Sophie Amalie, appointed him her factor to dispose of the products of

her estate at Nyjööbing Castle. Some time about 1675 he lost his wife and remarried a widow, Juliana Regina, born von Breitenbach. In the meantime, Milan had kept up his connection more or less with the Danish court, and became involved, in the interest of some members of the Royal family, in some of the party intrigues of the time. Finally in 1678 he again came to Copenhagen and attempted to collect the advances that he had made to the king. He was granted the right to coin 300,000 rixdollars from Glückstadt but evidently did not avail himself of this right and when later he was asked to remove the mints to Copenhagen he refused on the ground that the metal would cost him too much there. He did, however, receive a compensation of 4% of an issue of 150,000 rixdollars secured through others, but inasmuch as at the time he had a family of thirteen children who were living with his wife at Copenhagen, while he was spending his time at Glückstadt, he found great difficulty in supporting himself and family, and began to lay his plans to secure a civil office. The one obstacle to achieving that ambition seemed to have been his religion, and, therefore, in 1682 the minister of the Catharine Church of Hamburg, at Milan's request, submitted a statement that "his Excellency," Gabriel Milan, had often discussed with the minister concerning the differences between the Catholic and Protestant doctrines and had thereby become convinced of the truth of the Augsburg Confession, after which he received communion. At the same time his financial affairs were in a desperate condition. His creditors had begun proceedings against him in 1680. In 1682 his wife pawned her silverware and in the same year Milan made the statement that for two days he had not had bread in his house and that suicide is the only way out that he sees. Finally in 1684 he intimated in royal quarters that he was prepared to go to the West Indies and engaged himself, despite his fifty-three years, faithfully and truly to perform his duties, and was thereupon on April 26, 1684, commissioned governor of St. Thomas.

The Danes had heretofore been singularly unfortunate in their attempts to secure a proper head for their West India colony. The first governor had lost his life through a mutiny on board the ship which was bringing him back to St. Thomas. The second governor, Nicholas Esmit, fell from power through the uprising of his subordinates. The third governor, Adolphe Esmit, a brother of Nicholas, had just brought to a close a turbulent administration. He had been removed from office because he had

been using the harbor of St. Thomas and the authority of his office to afford shelter and assistance to the pirates who infested West Indian waters. Adolphe Esmiit had been hurriedly removed in answer to the demands of the English governor of Nevis who threatened to take the matter into his own hands by coming to St. Thomas, imprisoning the authorities and thus bringing piracy to an end. On March 10, 1684, a meeting of the Danish West India Company was held, and Gabriel Milan was elected governor of St. Thomas over all other candidates because he had "the better training in commercial and trading matters, knew his languages, had good common sense and needed the position." The king ratified the choice. Milan was then instructed to seize the reins of power quickly and resolutely, so that the former governor could not get a chance of instigating the inhabitants to revolt. He was to keep the peace with his neighbors, avoid collusion with sea-robbers, do his best to encourage the production of tobacco and sugar cane, and attempt the introduction of the cultivation of grapes. His salary was fixed at 600 rixdollars besides 150 rixdollars for table expenses, free board and lodging at the fort, and he was to have as his council a merchant who was sent out with him, the lieutenant of the island, and, on special occasions, two planters besides. Supplementary instructions were given him on May 14, 1684, to seize the Esmiit property and secure proof of his shortcomings.

The king furnished a ship of war of forty guns and eighty men under Captain Jörgen Meyer to take Milan to the West Indies. Relations between Captain Meyer and Milan soon became seriously strained and before they started the company had to intercede between them. Milan's household consisted of sixteen persons besides himself,—his wife, a grown-up son, Felix, four other children and servants. He also took with him 2800 pounds of bar iron, fire butts of Rhenish wine, eight hogsheads of French wine, and other property. He collected his salary in advance. On October 13, 1684, Milan arrived at St. Thomas. Immediately he began to scheme against Esmiit and possess himself of the latter's property. He also began to play fast and loose with his council and put his son Felix in place of the lieutenant. Moreover, he began to choose first one and then another of the planters in place of designating two for the place and by this rotational office attempted to prevent them from being effective. He assumed the rank of governor-general and the title of Excellency, and maintained an elaborate table service with twelve courses

of food for his family. He caused Esmit and his wife to be imprisoned. Milan fell sick and for months was confined to his bed by a serious fever. His youngest son died. He began a serious quarrel with Captain Meyer, who thereupon began to get into communication with Esmit and to give ear to the latter's complaints against Milan.

A part of Milan's duties seems to have been that of acting as judge. He discharged his judicial functions with great impatience and with little appreciation of the judicial temperament, and made constant enemies by the judgments he pronounced. His relations with Captain Meyer seem steadily to have become worse. There is much to be said on both sides. Milan represents the ship's crew as a vulgar crowd in a continuous debauch. He had an absolute quarrel with Captain Meyer for mistreating "an unfortunate Jew" and he pictures the captain as a fuming anti-Semite. Milan neglected to complete the cargo for the return voyage and at the same time refused his consent to Captain Meyer's departure until, finally, with the vessel half loaded and without any permission at all, Captain Meyer made up his mind to sail for home and did so at last on March 30, 1685.

Instead of sending Esmit back to Denmark as he should have, Milan retained him as a prisoner on the island and subjected him to inexcusable indignities and cruelties. He seized Nicholas Esmit's plantation and, under his skilful management, developed it into the chief source of sustenance for the colony. Milan developed an arbitrary, headstrong will and used his power to oppress those whom he disliked or who opposed him. He also soon fell into the same error as the former governor,—issuing letters of reprisal against the Spaniards and permitting the holders thereof to go forth on voyages for the purpose of seizing Spanish vessels and bringing them in to St. Thomas.

In June, 1685, Captain Meyer returned home and immediately spread complaints against Milan. Milan was defended by his son, Ferdinand, who held the rank of lieutenant. Finally, a compromise was effected by which a commission was to be sent out to the West Indies for the purpose of clearing up the situation, the king again furnishing a vessel for the purpose. The news of what was going on, coming to Milan at St. Thomas, seemed to spur him on to more extreme and outrageous measures than before and he was guilty of forcing some of his subordinates to sign confessions implicating Esmit in a conspiracy with them to murder Milan, and then, after procuring such confessions, of

killing in a most cruel fashion those who had thus admitted their guilt. In February, 1686, the commission arrived in St. Thomas. They were immediately met by resistance on the part of Milan but the inhabitants of the island refused to support Milan so that he was obliged to surrender. In July of the same year Milan, with the commission and all parties in interest, set sail to return to Denmark and reached Copenhagen the following October. Milan, his wife and children, were placed in the castle and Milan's trial was begun. The case against Milan dragged out for a considerable time. Milan was represented by a lawyer who insisted on taking advantage of every technicality. In November, 1687, the court passed judgment against Milan, providing for the loss of his honor, life and property. An appeal was taken to the Supreme Court. The case continued until, finally, in 1689, the eleven judges agreed, on appeal, to condemn Milan to the loss of his honor, life and property. A royal pardon issued exonerated him from having his hand chopped off or being broken on the wheel; but the punishment of death was carried out March 26, 1689. His estate was seized by the West India Company and his plantation confiscated to settle the claim which they had against him, leaving his family in great want. It is suggested that his son, Ferdinand, who was a lieutenant as early as 1683, may have been the father of Gabriel Ferdinand Milan, the painter and court-gilder, who died as vice-mayor of Elsinore.