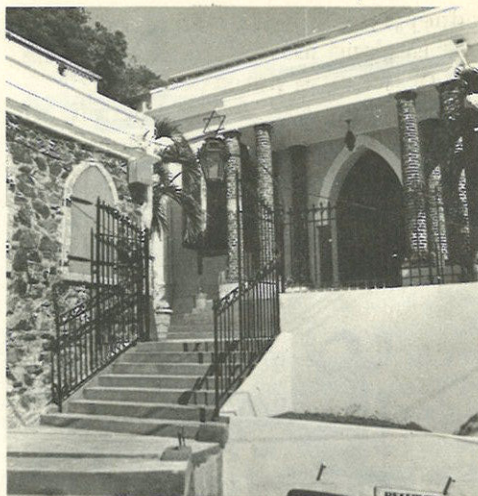


300 Years Of Jewish Culture

The following is the text of an address by Isidor Paiewonsky to the Congregation of the Jewish Synagogue in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, on the occasion of the 300th Anniversary of a Jewish presence and culture in the Islands. Mr. Paiewonsky is the President of A.H. Riise Co., established in the Virgin Islands since 1838.



ST. THOMAS SYNAGOGUE

Mr. Stahl, members of the Congregation, friends and friendly visitors.

I have been asked to speak about local Jewish History which covers a period of almost exactly 300 years. 1672-73 thru 1972-73. How does one capsule any aspect of this colorful history into 30 or 40 minutes? I will try!

I came to this platform with 3 possible approaches considering the time limitation: (1) to discuss the Uniqueness and Meaning of the overall Jewish experience in St. Thomas (2) to select one of the many great and colorful Jewish characters of Virgin Islands origin and world renown and to tell you about him in detail.

Here are some of the people I could have spoken about tonight. I merely mention them. Details could fill volumes. CAMILLE PISSARO, world renowned painter and father of French Impressionism. Born in St. Thomas, July 10, 1830. JUDAH P. BENJAMIN, born in St. Croix, August 6, 1811. He was Attorney General, Secretary of War and State in the cabinet of Confederate President, Jefferson Davis. DAVID LEVI YULEE, born in St. Thomas, June 12,

1810. He served in the Congress of the United States from July 1, 1845 to March 3, 1851, from the State of Florida. Yulee's most important work in the U.S. Senate was done as Chairman of the Committee on Naval affairs. JACOB MENDES DA COSTA, born in St. Thomas, January 7, 1833. He won national and international fame as a great physician. DAVID NAAR, born in St. Thomas, November 10, 1800. Later he moved to the United States and became a brilliant and controversial editor. He was the motivating force behind the creation of the State University of New Jersey.

Recently the chief and talented archivist of St. Thomas, Enid Baa, received this very interesting note from one of Naar's descendents. Quote: "From 1845 to 1848, David Naar was U.S. Consul at St. Thomas. It was during those years that my grandmother, Grace Naar was born on St. Thomas." To continue the quote: "David Naar's progenitors left Spain to avoid persecution, sailed on the 1st expedition for South America after Columbus' discovery. They were shipwrecked on Curacao where they remained for 12 generations before going to St. Thomas..."

There are many other colorful Jewish characters who came here and left strong historical imprints. To name a few. GABRIEL MILAN, 1st Jewish Governor of St. Thomas, 1684. From a well known Sephardic family with ties to the Danish Court, he came here as Governor like a Sultan with the trimmings. He left here a tortured man, broken by personal tragedy, wracked by tropical fevers. In his worst periods of delirium, he defied the Royal establishment. He was taken back to Denmark from St. Thomas as a prisoner and beheaded in the Public Square of Copenhagen.

Finally, I will touch on that remarkable Jewish merchant, BENJAMIN FRANKS, who came to

St. Thomas from Port Royal, Jamaica, when that infamous city sunk below the waters of the harbor during the shattering earthquake of 1692. FRANKS set himself up in business here and saw his ship and cargo seized by French pirates at the mouth of the harbor. Frustrated, he left here to go and join relatives in India. He joined up in New York as a passenger on Capt. Kidd's vessel on that famous expedition to the Red Sea where Kidd turned pirate. FRANKS left a record of the voyage, a copy of which we have in our files.

So much for a brief taste of the colorful Jews in our colorful past!

* * *

I mentioned a 3rd approach. To trace the development of Jewish history in Saint Thomas from the beginning and lead up to a climax, the building of this beautiful Synagogue which encloses us tonight. I believe that by selecting this third approach and by moving quickly thru the centuries, I can give you some idea of just what happened here.

Let us start from the beginning and the official beginning of this original Danish colony dates with (a) the completion of Fort Christian, 1671, (b) the appointment of Jorgen Iversen, 1st Governor of St. Thomas who took possession of the island, May 25, 1672.

Jews were here from the beginning. How do we know? From the official population census of the time. It was not difficult to count and describe individuals when the population amounted to a mere few hundred.

What were the few Jews doing here? Evidently they were pedlars, shopkeepers, small land owners. In the Danish archives we found an early and very primitive taxpayers list covering the period 1697-98. A Jewish family, Jacob Elias, his wife Diana and two children, owners of a small plantation, paid 16 Rix dollars and 42 Stayvers in taxes.



A Symbol of Peace, A Blessing, A Refuge. . .

Next question? What was a nice Jewish family doing here amidst the flotsam and jetsam of the Caribbean backwaters of the 17th Century, a Jewish family amidst a tiny motley population made up of shipwrecked sailors, runaway slaves, convicts, soldiers and a few Govt. officials who spent most of their time in a daze from a witches' brew called Kill Devil Rum?

Jacob and Diana Elias were evidently trying to eke out a living from the soil. Our instinct tells us that the Elias family did not drink Kill Devil Rum, that they were religious Sephardic Jews, that they lit candles on Friday night, that they kept the Sabbath.

So much for that flash of light in the early historic darkness!

Then history closes the door again tightly until June 15, 1733. On that

day a treaty was concluded at Copenhagen and ratified by Louis 15th of France whereby the island of St. Croix was purchased from France for the Danish West India Co. The company ship Unity, bearing the instructions and order of the French King did not arrive at St. Thomas until June 11, 1734, almost an entire year after the conclusion of the treaty. She had been obliged to put in for repairs at a Norwegian port on her outward journey. The Danish Governor at St. Thomas immediately dispatched a bark to Martinique to deliver to the General and intendant there a copy of the orders of Louis 15th.

Here is where we come in! The Danish Governor selected a Jew of St. Thomas, one Mr. Emmanuel Vass, to go to Martinique to negotiate and handle the difficult and complex transfer of St. Croix from French to

Danish sovereignty. EMMANUEL VASS, a Henry Kissinger of his time!

Now we move rapidly thru the middle seventeen hundreds. Island documented history was more concerned during this period with events than personalities. Records are full of plantation measurements, trade statistics, or detailed accounts written by Moravian missionaries dealing with their own activities and problems.

The door of Jewish history almost opened during the period from 1740 to 1765. A student researcher writing to us from Paris reported finding in the Archives there, a six page letter from a French Jew in St. Thomas to a friend in Paris telling about the French Jewish families in St. Thomas. Our young researcher said that he would review the letter, translate it and send it to us shortly.

You can imagine our excitement! Finally we received the letter. It began something like this. "You ask me to tell you of the French Jews who live here in St. Thomas. I can tell you that they have done well in business. They are prosperous. They have the best and largest houses here. They send their children to the best schools in France . . ." And then the letter stopped abruptly!

It is continued one day later with an apology. The writer declared that he had been called suddenly to his waterfront warehouse where a great commotion was taking place. He, the writer, had received a very large shipment of bananas a few days before. In some manner, a large snake had come in concealed in the shipment. A fight had broken out between a warehouse cat and the snake which had caused the commotion, and the battle was something to witness. Whereas, our Jew of St. Thomas used the next five pages of his letter to describe the exciting battle of cat and snake and forgot all about the French Jewish

families.

Of such are the frustrations of historians made!

Now we come to 1781. A memorable year. Then things really began to happen to the Jewish population of St. Thomas.

At this point, we have to shift you quickly to the island of St. Eustatius, a small Dutch colony, 7½ square miles in size, located in the Caribbean a few hundred miles away from us. From 1740 to 1781, this tiny island was the great Free Port of the West Indies. The Golden Rock, they called it, and in the middle of the action, a group of brilliant Sephardic Jews lived and worked, practically running the show.

We shift you again quickly, this time to the rebellion that was taking place in the American colonies. Thru 1775 and 1776, Britain did not take the Colonial revolt too seriously. An uprising of farmers! Where would they get the guns and war material to defy the British war machine? The British felt that their army in America would take care of the local problem.

By 1777, the British realized that it was no local problem. Where were the colonists getting the guns and war supplies? Late in 1777, a British warship stopped a privateer off the coast of Maryland. A search revealed a ship jammed tight with war material. What was more, the ship's log revealed the sources, the names of the suppliers. In almost every case the supplier was a Sephardic Jew in St. Eustatius.

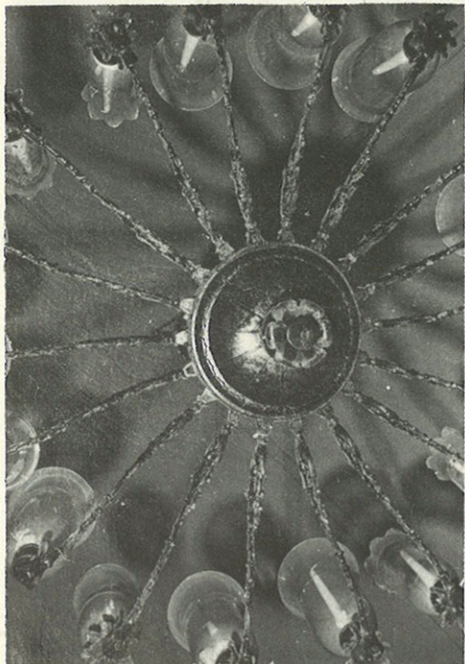
Communications were slow in those days. Time elapsed between the angry protests of the British and the responses from the Dutch.

The British Government was made more bitter when it learned of a secret treaty of September 1778 between Holland and the rebellious American colonies where . . . "in the West Indies, particularly at St. Eustatius, every protection and assistance

would be given by the Dutch to the rebellious Americans . . ." The British warned that "unless this assistance be stopped, his Majesty's Government would take appropriate action to stop it . . ."

In August 1780, the Dutch protested against the seizure by British warships of American privateers which had anchored for protection under the guns of the Fort at the Dutch West Indian Island of St. Martin. The Dutch complained of other insults to their flag. Slowly but surely the two nations drifted into war which was formally declared, December 20, 1780.

At the end of January, 1781, Admiral Sir George Rodney, commander of the British West Indian squadron, received orders to take St. Eustatius and to stop the flow of supplies to the rebellious American colonies. On February 3, 1781, Rodney's fleet with troops under the command of Lt. General Sir John Vaughan, arrived at St. Eustatius.



Central Chandelier, 1833.

The Dutch Governor offered no resistance. He surrendered the island to the overwhelming force against him. Rodney found the roadside of St. Eustatius jammed with merchant ships, loading and unloading. On the shore, in warehouses and in the open fields, were millions of dollars worth of war materials. Admiralty laws in those days awarded part of the prize to the captors.

Rodney and Vaughan stayed for three months at St. Eustatius, capturing more and more booty as the unwarned and heavily laden merchant ships arrived. Rodney and Vaughan filled an armada of ships and sent it back to England. On the way, the entire convoy was captured by a French fleet.

Rodney set fire to St. Eustatius and burned it flat, destroying at the same time all the precious records of that golden epoch. A historical catastrophe! That is when the Sephardic Jews of St. Eustatius raised themselves from the great disaster and moved to St. Thomas.

Our cemeteries tell the story. Graves of Sephardic Jews and kin. Names like Azevedo, Benjamin, Cardose, De Castro, Da Costa, Devalle, Fidanque, Fonseca, Henriques, Lindo, Maduro, Moron, Pereira, Pissarro, Piza, Robles, Sasso, Toiedano, Valencia and others.

Rodney's papers in the British Museum in London reveal an angry and frustrated man. Nowhere did we find blatant or lesser traces of anti-semitism. Instead, we found pure anger!

"A nest of vipers," he called the island of St. Eustatius. And of the merchants: "They deserve a scourging, and they shall be scourged!" In a letter to Rear Admiral, Sir Peter Parker, Rodney stated: "Had it not been for this infamous island, the American Rebellion could not possibly have subsisted." And in a letter to Lady

Rodney, he stated: "This rock had done England more harm than all the arms of her most potent enemies."

Let me say this for the benefit of visitors in this historic Synagogue tonight. Had it not been for a group of brilliant Sephardic Jewish traders on the island of St. Eustatius, the entire history of our country might well have been different.

So much for this episode that played such an important part in the Jewish development of St. Thomas.

Now we must move fast. As a direct result of the influx of St. Eustatius Jews into St. Thomas, our first Synagogue was built in 1796. It carried the name Blessing and Peace. This Synagogue was destroyed in the great fire of 1804. A hastily erected second Synagogue was taken down in 1823. It was too small to handle the growing Jewish population. The third Synagogue which was built in 1823, under the name 'Blessing and Peace and Acts of Piety' was destroyed in another diastrous fire of 1831. The Synagogue in which you sit tonight was built in 1833. In a quick conclusion I will tell you something about it.

A prominent Sephardic Jewish merchant, Isaac Lindo by name, spearheaded the drive to raise funds for the present Synagogue. An early St. Thomas newspaper, the *Sanct Thomae Tidende*, in issues dated March 30 and April 6, 1833, tells us that the drive was successful and netted the sum of \$3,476 dollars. Other contributions came in the form of building materials and labor. At this time of dollar devaluation, it is something to contemplate that this magnificent Synagogue was built for a little more than \$5,000, old time dollars.

A French architect came out from Paris to do the job. The marked Spanish Moorish influences show strong Sephardic nostalgia. One of our great historical finds in recent times was the original drawings that the



The original pulpit, mahogany base with Brass candelabras imported in 1833.

architect used. As might be expected of architectural work in the early nineteenth Century, these drawings are like fine engravings. We plan to publish them.

Look up! Behind the domed ceiling is an intricately woven basket of fine cherry wood to hold the plaster of the dome in place. The cherry wood is as good as the day it was put in. Look around at the rest of this Synagogue. Note the stark simplicity of it, the sheer artistry.

The great day for this Synagogue came September 14, 1833, when it was consecrated. Here are some excerpts from the Sanct Thomae Tidende published a few days later.

"We are happy to have it in our power to congratulate our friends of the Hebrew religion on the early completion of the new Synagogue . . .

"About 6 o'clock on Thursday evening, the Congregation assembled in their temporary place of worship and shortly after they proceeded to the new Synagogue in the usual ceremonial order.

"At 7 o'clock, His Excellency the Governor, and many respectable persons entered the building and immediately after the Consecration Service commenced.

"The Lamp for the Perpetual Light borne by the eldest member of the Congregation, followed by six sacred

Rolls of the Pentateuch carried by members, appeared at the entrance, which the elder Priest received. He lighted the Lamp, pronounced the Benediction, and the Lamp was then handed to a younger Priest who placed it on the stand appropriated for it.

"The choir, consisting of young ladies and gentlemen, sang the 24th verse of the 118th Psalm.

"An excellent discourse taken from 1st of Kings, Chapter 8, Verse 13, written expressly for the occasion by Mr. Isaac Lindo, was most emphatically delivered by that Gentleman, which made the Congregation deeply impressed with the most profound feelings of reverence and devotion.

"The Service of the Consecration was terminated by the choir chanting a Hymn for the occasion. In concluding our account of this memorable ceremony it is only doing justice to say the whole of which was conducted in a manner worthy of a people who were the first worshippers of the true and living God!"

So here we are, 140 years later. There is the Lamp for the Perpetual light, where it was placed. There are the benches where Governor Peter Von Scholten and his entourage sat, gold braids, brilliant uniforms, cock-hats, swords and all. This is history, great colorful history!

To members of the Congregation I say: Think of this historic Synagogue with renewed pride. Wear it as a sea creature wears its shell. It is Home. It is Identity. It is Refuge.

To our visitors, I say: In this period of chaotic change and extreme violence, remember this visit tonight to a historic Synagogue that for almost a Century and a half has been a symbol of Joy for the faithful, a symbol of Peace, a Blessing, a Refuge. May you take some of this Joy and Peace with you as you continue your travels.