

JEWISH HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT IN



SEPHARDIC SYNAGOGUE, ST. THOMAS

# The VIRGIN ISLANDS

1665-1959

SAINT THOMAS

1959

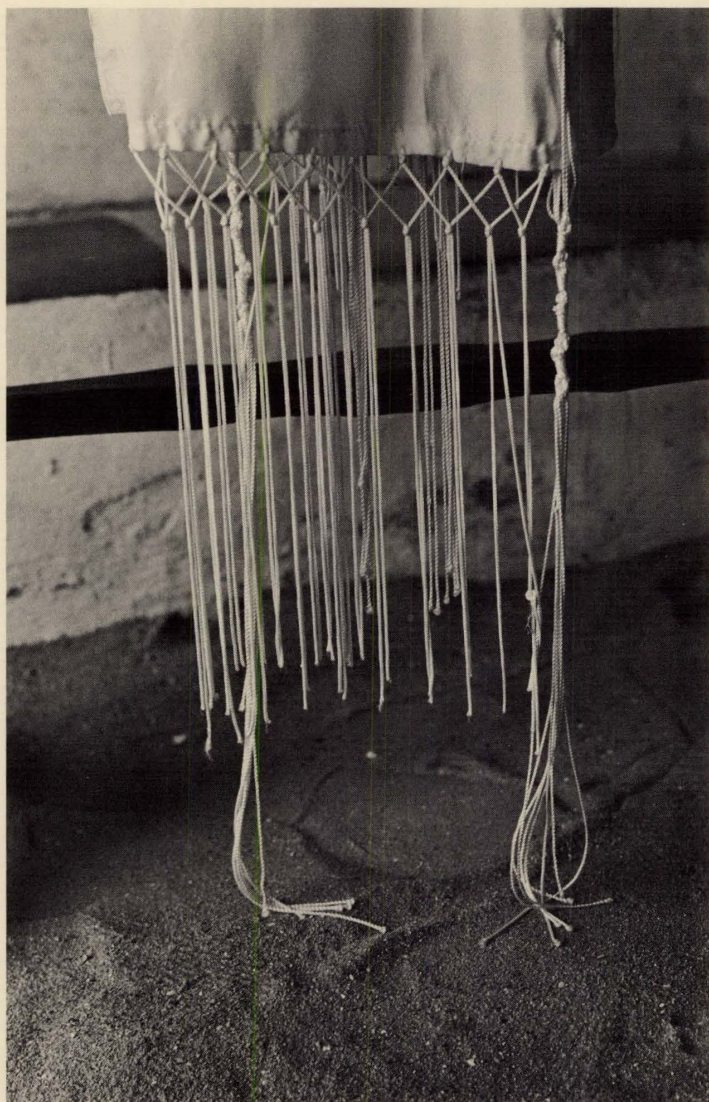


**JEWISH HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT IN**

**The  
VIRGIN ISLANDS**

**1665-1959**

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Isidor Paiewonsky**



*This brief history of the Jews of St. Thomas  
is dedicated to my parents*

*Isaac and Rebecca Paiewonsky*

*who were married in St. Thomas, November 20,  
1904, and who celebrated their Golden Wedding,  
November 20, 1954, in the Synagogue at St.  
Thomas.*

*I. P.*

Photographs courtesy of  
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## PREFACE

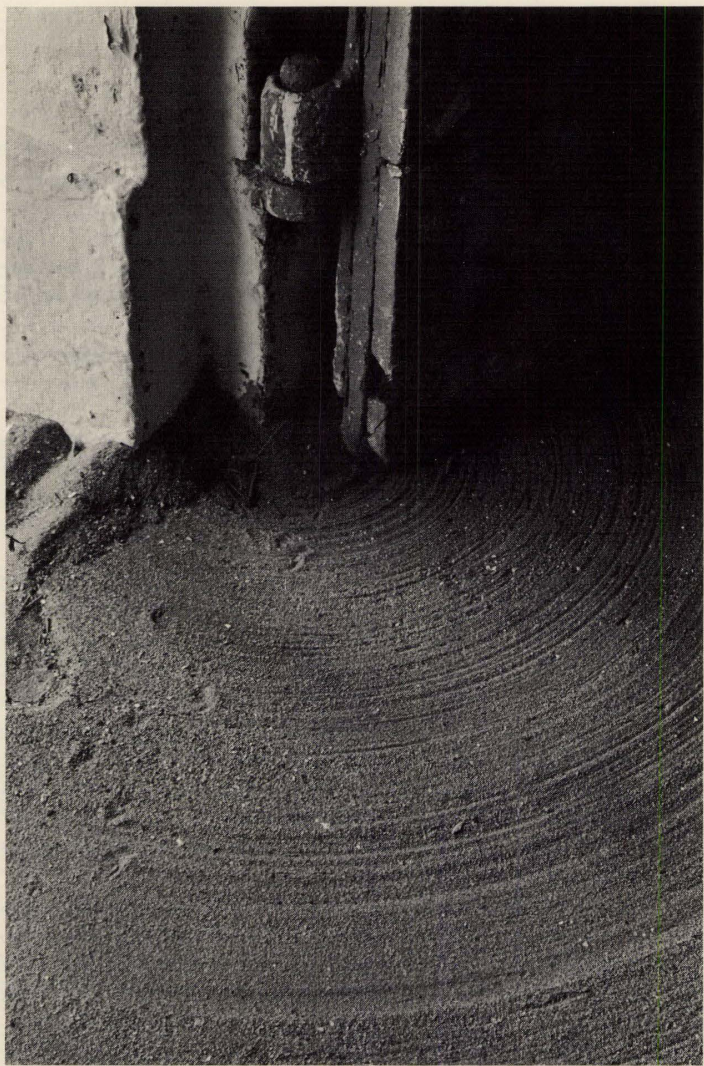
THE SYNAGOGUE of St. Thomas, rebuilt in 1833 after fire destroyed an older structure, is today one of the most charming sights of the Island, and an important architectural monument of the Jewish people in the New World. Visitors of all faiths experience a moment of awe at the sight of the austere Sephardic interior, the heavy hurricane-proof walls, the vaulted windows, and the sand-covered floor.

This brief history of the Jews of St. Thomas has been written in response to hundreds of requests by visitors to the famous Synagogue. The author is by day a prosperous St. Thomian merchant, Mr. Isidor Paiewonsky. By night and in his spare time he is a skilled and passionate antiquarian. Here in his tale we find the Jews of the West Indies supporting the American Revolution so effectively that a special British naval expedition had to be sent to wipe out their center on St. Eustatius; we see them combatting pirates, involved with Captain Kidd, supporting new synagogues in the American colonies, recovering from fire and hurricane. We learn with surprise of great statesmen and artists who came from the tiny bands of Jews on these small islands. It is a glimpse into an adventurous and colorful world that is gone.

In the great surge to the Caribbean following World War II, the Jewish community has come strongly to life on St. Thomas. The voices of children studying Hebrew are heard once more on Synagogue Hill. Here, as everywhere else, there is a revival of Jewish spirit and learning; and here, as elsewhere, the revival is only beginning.

Mr. Paiewonsky's history tells the whole story sparsely, authoritatively, and well. The proceeds of the sale of his book go to keep up the Jewish cemeteries as well as the Synagogue of St. Thomas. It is a uniquely original souvenir of our Island, well worth keeping.

Herman Wouk.



SAND PATTERNS AND OLD HINGE,  
SYNAGOGUE, ST. THOMAS

THE ISLAND of St. Thomas was officially settled in 1665 and from the beginning there is documentary evidence that Jews lived here. They came to St. Thomas as ships' owners, chandlers and brokers, as participants in the lively slave trade between Guinea and the Danish West Indies; as entrepreneurs in the sugar, rum, molasses and general trade with Europe and the American colonies. Evidence is available, too, that from the beginning, Jews lived in St. Thomas as small shop-keepers and peddlars. Evidently these small groups of Jews worshipped privately for there are no records of a Synagogue in St. Thomas during this early period (1665-1795). Lose's list of church buildings in 1784 indicates one Jewish Synagogue in St. Croix and no Synagogue in St. Thomas.<sup>1</sup>

The real growth of the Jewish population in St. Thomas came after 1781 and as a direct result of the destruction of the nearby Dutch West Indian Island of St. Eustatius. St. Eustatius, or Statia as it was often called, is a small rocky island lying southeast of St. Thomas. Its total area is not more than seven square miles. During the period of the American Revolution, it was of tremendous importance to the American colonies. As a strategic free port, St. Eustatius had attracted a large population of Jewish traders, mostly of Sephardic origin. The war between

<sup>1</sup>Brief Outline Danish Lutheran Mission History, St. Croix, St. Thomas, St. John. Emile Valdemar Lose, Copenhagen (1890-91).

Great Britain and her colonies gave St. Eustatius a great opportunity. The hard pressed American revolutionists were after military supplies, and the Jewish and other merchants of St. Eustatius had them in abundance. The flow of contraband to the rebellious Americans was a constant source of friction between England and Holland. Finally Great Britain could tolerate the situation no longer and on December 20, 1780, declared war against the Dutch. Admiral Rodney was ordered to attack St. Eustatius with his fleet. Rodney caught St. Eustatius completely off guard. On February 3, 1781, he struck and captured the island and destroyed it as a trading center. "A nest of vipers," he called the island. "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 declared: "This rock has done England more harm than all the arms of her most potent enemies." Rodney acted with great severity. The Jewish merchants fled from his wrath. Many of them came to St. Thomas, bringing their families with them and whatever they could salvage of their fortunes.

In the year 1852, John P. Knox, Pastor of the Reformed Dutch Church of St. Thomas, published a history of the Danish West Indies. The author gave the following account of the Jews of St. Thomas: "After the sacking of St. Eustatius by Rodney in 1781, the greater part of the Jews established there came to this island. They held their private hours of prayer after their arrival until 1796 when they formed a congregation and built a Synagogue under the appellation of "Blessing and Peace". In 1801, according to a statement furnished to Mr. Nissen<sup>2</sup> by the leader of the congregation, the Jews numbered nine families only. In 1803 they increased to twenty-two families by arrivals from England, St. Eustatius and Curacao. In 1804 their Synagogue was destroyed by fire. It was replaced by another small building erected in 1812. After this, the congregation increased yet more and it became necessary in 1823 to take down the building and erect one larger in size. The name given to this Synagogue was

<sup>2</sup>Nissen, "Reminiscences", 1792-1837.

«Blessing & Peace and Acts of Piety». In 1824, the congregation numbered sixty-four families. Again their Synagogue was laid in ashes by a fire which occurred in 1831. Not disheartened by these repeated calamitous events, in 1833 the present edifice in which they worship as their Synagogue was erected, the Congregation being assisted by the generous contributions of the entire community of the island and by donation from abroad. In 1850 his present Majesty sanctioned an entire code of laws for the government of the congregation which is well adapted to its wants. The entire body of the Jews now number between four hundred and fifty and five hundred persons. They live, as they have always done in the island, under the same protection as is extended to their fellow citizens. Many hold offices of trust and honor and the most kindly feelings exist between them and the rest of the community. The congregation has no minister at present, the last incumbent having resigned his situation more than two years ago; services are, however, conducted by a reader. The Synagogue is supported by a system of taxation, which is adjusted yearly. The government of the congregation is vested in five members who are elected by the members taxed \$12.00 or above. Only those are eligible to this government who are taxed \$32.00. Two of their number retire yearly...»<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Historical account of St. Thomas, West Indies. John P. Knox. Charles Scribner Publisher, 1852.

### Chronological Events

- 1684 On May 7, 1684, first Jewish Governor, Gabriel Milan received his commission from Christian V. King of Denmark. Fifty-three years old and an international soldier of fortune, Milan came of a reputable Jewish family which had connections in Portugal, Flanders and Hamburg. His family was related by marriage to the well known Portuguese-Jewish houses of da Costa and de Castro. Milan arrived in St. Thomas October 13, 1684, aboard the Danish warship *Fortuna*, 40 guns, accompanied by his wife, a grown son Felix, 4 younger children and a faithful valet, Moses Caille. Gabriel Milan served as Governor of St. Thomas until 1686...»<sup>4</sup>
- 1685 Commercial arrangements negotiated between the Danish West India Co. and the Prussian Brandenburg Co. to promote the slave trade between Guinea and St. Thomas. The proposed union provided for control of military, economic and civil affairs in the areas affected. Regulations governing religious matters are particularly interesting: "Calvinists and Lutherans were to have free exercitium religionis on St. Thomas and Catholics and Jews were to be tolerated and allowed to hold private services provided they permitted no scandala..."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup>Personal Historisk Tidskrift. F. Krarup. Chief Secretary State Archives, Copenhagen 1882.

<sup>5</sup>Schuck, Richard. *Kolonial Politik. 1647-1721*. Leipzig.

- 1686 A Spanish-Portuguese Jew, Moses Joshua Henriques, appointed factor in Gluckstadt for ships sailing in the slave trade from Gluckstadt to Guinea and St. Thomas.<sup>6</sup>
- 1695 Moses Joshua Henriques, factor at Gluckstadt, petitioned the Danish King for permission to have his special rights to trade with Guinea and St. Thomas transferred to one Jacob Cohen and his fellow investors.<sup>7</sup> The Directors of the West India Co., to whom the petition was first referred, advised against the project on the grounds that it would bring in "outside capital."<sup>8</sup>
- 1696 Piracy in the waters around St. Thomas reached a height in 1696. French Captains holding commissions from Governor Du Casse of Petit Goave (French West Indies) swarmed like birds of prey around the mouth of St. Thomas harbor, seizing not only enemies' ships but vessels belonging to St. Thomas inhabitants. Governor John Lorentz in a letter to the Directors of the Danish West India Company dated September 6, 1696, mentioned the fact that one Benjamin Franks, a Jew and Danish subject, had his ship detained and his skipper maltreated and robbed. With the solid support of Governor Lorentz, Benjamin Franks issued a vigorous protest to France for the seizure of his ship and the confiscation of its cargo. The French Government disclaimed any responsibility for the capture of the Jew's cargo and advised Governor Lorentz of St. Thomas to hang any French pirate or rascal caught pirating in or about St. Thomas harbor.<sup>9</sup>
- 1697 Benjamin Franks, Jew and merchant of St. Thomas, sailed for India to join relatives and settle there as a "trader

<sup>6</sup>Rothe, Caspar P. Historian. State Archives Copenhagen Volume II.

<sup>7</sup>Jacob Cohen and his fellow investors mentioned were powerful financiers of the period with large holdings in the American Colonies. I. P.

<sup>8</sup>State Archives Copenhagen. Correspondence Directors West India Co. to King. King to Directors. 1695.

<sup>9</sup>State Archives Copenhagen. Letters of Governor John Lorentz 1696.



INTERIOR OF SY



JE. ST. THOMAS

in jewels". He booked passage out of New York on the Adventure Galley, Captain William Kidd, Master. It was on this historic voyage that Kidd turned pirate and became notorious. Benjamin Franks, not wanting to be an accomplice, jumped ship in India, reported to the British authorities at Bombay and swore a lengthy Deposition describing the trip in detail and Kidd's actions. Franks' deposition was one of the weapons used by the Crown in the famous London trial and condemnation of Captain Kidd for piracy.<sup>10</sup>

- 1734 In accordance with the terms of the treaty concluded at Copenhagen on June 15, 1733, and ratified by Louis XV of France 13 days later, the island of St. Croix was purchased from France for the Danish West India and Guinea 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 XV. The bark which sailed June 23, 1734, from St. Thomas was in charge of skipper Patrick Laughlin and the business in the hands of Mr. Emmanuel Vass, a Jew of St. Thomas.<sup>11</sup>
- 1777 A traveller, writing in 1777 noted "a number of Jews in the Danish Islands, especially in St. Croix..."<sup>12</sup>
- 1782 The Jews of Philadelphia on the occasion of the erection of the first Synagogue building in that city appealed to the Jews of the West Indies for financial help. Identical

<sup>10</sup>L. Franklin Jameson: Privateering and Piracy in the Colonial Period.

<sup>11</sup>Gardelin Manuscript. Letter book containing correspondence with officials in St. Thomas, April 22, 1733 - August 21, 1734. State Archives Copenhagen.

<sup>12</sup>Oldendorp, C. G. A. Geschichte der Mission der evangelischen Brueder (Leipzig, 1777) p. 233.

letters, written in English, were sent to St. Thomas and St. Croix. The letters stated: "A small number of our brethren, who during this calamitous war (American Revolution) fled here from different Parts for refuge, in conjunction with those in this City undertook to build a place of Worship that we might meet to offer up our Prayers to the Holy God of Israel, having hitherto substituted a room for that purpose from which we were compelled to move by the owner. Our ability to compleat the building is not equal to our wishes, from many recent losses, we are under the necessity to ask assistance of our absent Brethren amongst them, we look up to YOU, and the rest of our Brethren with you, not doubting but you'll readily contribute to so laudable an undertaking. We pray the Almighty Father of the Universe, the Lord God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to take you all under his Holy Protection and grant you Long Life, Health and Happiness.." <sup>13</sup>

- 1799 In his Dairy covering the year 1799, Nissen comments on an incident that occurred in St. Thomas: "There lived an old Dutch Jew here who kept a small shop. Whenever any Frenchmen came to him to buy any of his commodities, he invariably used to quarrel with them for he hated the French nation because they had killed their King. It happened once that several French sailors came to him who all wore red caps, as it was then their custom. The old Jew immediately commenced making sport of their caps. The Frenchmen did not like this and a great dispute arose between them. The sailors brought the Jew out of his shop into the street and the noise assembled a great mob, but fortunately the old man was rescued alive out of the hands of the Frenchmen..." <sup>14</sup>

- 1804 Synagogue completely destroyed by fire. Many valuable relics, books and records lost. This was a most disastrous fire. In the course of 10 hours more than 1200 buildings were burned down in St. Thomas. Losses were estimated at eleven million dollars. <sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup>History of the Jews of Philadelphia. Wolf and Whiteman. Jewish Publication Society of America.

<sup>14</sup>Nissen, "Reminiscences", 1792-1837.

<sup>15</sup>Nissen, "Reminiscences," 1792-1837.

- 1810 David Levi Yulee born in St. Thomas, June 12, 1810. His father, Moses Elias, made a fortune in St. Thomas in the lumber business and obtained large tracts of land in Central and East Florida. David moved to Florida at an early age. He studied law in St. Augustine. In 1841, he was chosen territorial delegate to Congress from Florida and Senator when Florida was admitted to the Union in 1845. He served in Congress from July 1, 1845, to March 3, 1851. Later he was again elected Senator and served from March 4, 1855, until his resignation on January 21, 1861, following the secession of Florida from the Union. His most important work in the Senate was done as Chairman of Committee on Naval Affairs. He advanced the building of iron ships and the adoption of cheap ocean postal rates. David Levi Yulee died October 10, 1886.<sup>16</sup>
- 1811 Judah P. Benjamin born in St. Croix August 6, 1811, son of Philip and Rebecca Benjamin. Was Attorney General, Secretary of War and State successively in the cabinet of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. After the Civil War, Benjamin went to Europe and gained prominence in France and England in law. He received honors and praise from Disraeli, Gladstone and other distinguished leaders of his time. His treatises on law have been published in many editions and were translated into several languages.<sup>17</sup>
- 1812 Jewish cemetery in St. Thomas became too small for the growing Jewish community. A new one was opened.<sup>18</sup>
- 1814 By historic royal ordinance, March 29, 1814, Denmark became the first modern nation to pass laws for the protection and liberation of the Jews.<sup>19</sup>
- 1830 Camille Pissarro, world-renowned painter and "father of French Impressionism" was born July 10, 1830, in St. Thomas to Abraham and Rachel Manzano Pomier Petit Pizarro. Camille was an offspring of a "cause célèbre".

<sup>16</sup>Records, Public Library, St. Thomas.

<sup>17</sup>Records, Public Library, St. Thomas.

<sup>18</sup>Jens Larsen. "Virgin Islands Story". Muhlenberg Press Pa. 1950.

<sup>19</sup>Jens Larsen. "Virgin Islands Story". Muhlenberg Press Pa. 1950.

His mother had been widowed in 1824. Husband Isaac Petit died leaving her pregnant. His child was delivered in 1825. The baby was no more than six months old when Rachel Manzano Pomier Petit married Abraham Gabriel Pizarro, her dead husband's nephew. The Hebrew Congregation in St. Thomas refused to recognize and sanction the union. Notwithstanding, a son, Joseph Gabriel, was born to the Pizarros in 1826; another son, Moses in 1829; and Jacob (Camille) in 1830. Meanwhile, controversy raged. The officers of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas, President Sarguy, Vice-President Wolff, and Treasurer Pretto, sought support for their rejection by submitting petition after petition to the Chief Rabbi of Copenhagen,<sup>20</sup> to the Danish Court, to the Chief Rabbi of Paris. By the time a fourth son, Aaron was born in 1833, a decision was reached and the marriage of Rachel Manzano Pomier Petit to Pizarro was declared legal and binding. Jacob (Camille) spent some of his early years in St. Thomas. Later he moved to Paris. He changed his name from Jacob Pizarro to Camille Pissarro. He dedicated himself to art and became one of the great artists of his time. He died on November 12, 1903, at the age of 74.<sup>21</sup>

1831 A clear indication of the growth and strength of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas are the birth records for 1831. Seventy-six children were born into the Congregation during that year, 74 males, 2 females.<sup>22</sup>

1833 Jacob Mendes da Costa, outstanding American physician and author, was born in St. Thomas on January 7, 1833, to Jonathan and Rama Mendes da Costa, and died in Villanova, Pennsylvania, 1900. He was the author of five titles on medicine, of which *Medical Diagnosis*, Philadelphia and London (1900), went through nine editions and was translated into several languages.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Archives Jewish Community Copenhagen, Register No. "BN790".

<sup>21</sup>Records. Private collection Miss Enid Baa, Chief Librarian, St. Thomas.

<sup>22</sup>Nissen, "Reminiscences", 1792-1837.

<sup>23</sup>Records, Public Library, St. Thomas.

- 1834 A traveller to the West Indies in 1834 describes his landing at St. Thomas: «We had scarce reached the landing place when we were accosted by a singular looking character in the person of 'Mosquito'<sup>24</sup> the Benevolent Jew'. We were told to regard him as a «character». He might have been taken for a being of another century who had walked out of the catacombs; his reputed age, indeed, considerably above a hundred years... « This singular character had been long known as an itinerant peddler among the islands but chiefly in the Dutch and Danish colonies... and he was admitted as a privileged person into the houses of the most respectable inhabitants.<sup>25</sup>
- 1836 Moses De Pinna killed by the kick of a horse on the Sabbath Day, June 1836.<sup>26</sup>
- 1837 A census showed 400 Jewish inhabitants in St. Thomas. There were 4 marriages, 19 births and 6 deaths in the Hebrew Congregation for that year.<sup>27</sup>
- 1843 An anonymous English author, writing from St. Thomas in 1843, said: «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 of hardware, glass, porcelain and the dispensers of spirit and friperie...<sup>28</sup>

<sup>24</sup>Mosquito was undoubtedly a West Indian twist of the name Musqueto (Sephardic origin).

Author's note: One wonders if by some trick of time and chance, this centenarian could possibly have been Jacob Musqueto. More than a half century before, there had come to Philadelphia\* one Jacob Musqueto with a letter from the President of Sheareth Israel in New York. He had arrived there from the Dutch West Indian Island of St. Eustatius and had thrown himself upon the mercies of the Synagogue Charity Fund asking that he be sent back to the West Indies.\*\*

\*History of the Jews of Philadelphia. Edwip Wolf-Maxwell Whitman.

\*\*Minute Book of Congregation Shearith Israel May 16, 1768, Lyons Collection.

<sup>25</sup>Trelawney Wentworth, West India Sketch Book Volume I, 1834.

<sup>26</sup>Synagogue records. St. Thomas.

<sup>27</sup>Nissen, «Reminiscences», 1792-1837.

<sup>28</sup>Letters from the Virgin Islands. London 1843 pg. 99. American Jewish

- 1844 A segment of the Congregation led by Judah Sasso and Mashed Mara refused to attend Synagogue services. "Immediately after the return of the Sefer Torah to the Hechal," they charged, "Rabbi Carillon proceeded with the wrong prayers and the Musaph was completely omitted." J. Fidanque Act. President, Jacob Haim Osorio, J. Levy Maduro, Moses Piza, and Jeudah Piza formed a committee to investigate. They reported that the charges were well founded. Ritual was rearranged and harmony was restored to the Congregation.<sup>29</sup> Rabbi Carillon left St. Thomas shortly afterwards for Jamaica.\* In 1845, he dedicated a temporary Synagogue in Montego Bay.\*\*
- 1851 Membership of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas numbered 372 persons.<sup>30</sup>
- 1852 "Jews, Gentiles and sects of various names are very amicable in St. Thomas. Great good feeling prevails. Thousands of dollars can be readily raised for any object of general charity..."<sup>31</sup>
- 1863 M. N. Nathan appointed Rabbi, Hebrew Congregation, St. Thomas.<sup>32</sup>
- 1867 This was a year of calamity for St. Thomas and the Jewish congregation. On the 29th. of October, a terrific hurricane passed over the island, which, in magnitude and destructiveness, surpassed anything ever known or recorded in the island's history.<sup>33</sup> Disaster and its consequences caused

Historical Society Volume No. 28, 1922.

<sup>29</sup>Records. Private collection Miss Enid Baa, Chief Librarian. St. Thomas.

\*Records. Institute of Jamaica, Kingston.

\*\*Private collection personal papers. Rev. Henry P. Silverman, Kingston, Jamaica.

<sup>30</sup>Jens Larsen. "Virgin Islands Story". From the Lutheran Church records.

<sup>31</sup>Letter appearing in biography, Charles Porterfield Krauth, renowned Lutheran Scholar and Professor Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. A. Spaeth.

<sup>32</sup>Archives Jewish Community, Copenhagen.

<sup>33</sup>Virgin Islands of the United States. Luther K. Zabriskie. G. P. Putnam's Sons. Knickerbocker Press 1918.

the Jews of St. Thomas to look with interest and hope on negotiations being conducted between the United States and Denmark for acquisition of St. Thomas as a Naval Base and coaling station. Negotiations failed because of the havoc and distress left by the disasters of 1867, hurricane and tidal wave...<sup>34</sup>

- 1868 Reverend David Cardoze began service in the St. Thomas Synagogue as assistant to Rabbi Nathan in 1864. A few years later, he became leader of the Congregation. He served with distinction for fifty years until his death in 1914 at the age of 90. Reverend Cardoze was known and revered throughout the West Indies. It was his lot to serve during a difficult period that saw a marked decline in the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas. St. Thomas had grown to greatness in an era of sailing ships. A transshipment center, free port and port of repair, Jews had played a prominent part in all of these activities. Decline began with the advent of steam. Neighboring islands found it more convenient to meet their requirements direct from Europe and America. There remained a profitable coaling industry in which the Jews of St. Thomas played a prominent part for another 20 or 30 years. "A typical coaling wharf at the time was that operated by Messrs. Bronsted & Co. From 8 to 10,000 tons of coal could be found piled up in huge stacks. This firm serviced from fifteen to sixteen large steamers monthly and was agent for no less than seven lines of steamers."<sup>35</sup> Mr. Eduardo Moron, a Sepharic Jew, was in charge.<sup>36</sup> But one by one the steamship companies with coaling headquarters in St. Thomas withdrew. A particularly heavy blow occurred in

<sup>34</sup>Danish Islands. James Parton. Fields Osgood & Co. 1869

Author's note: American newspapers 1868-1869 were full of damaging attacks aimed at Secretary of State Seward for his propensity to acquire new territory. Bret Harte, famous American author and grandson of the New York Jewish merchant, Bernard Harte\* wrote a satirical poem called "St. Thomas" which ridiculed Seward's attempt to purchase the islands. I.P.

\*American Jewish Archives. June 1954 pg. 148

<sup>35</sup>Dr. Charles Edwin Taylor, Leaflets from the Danish West Indies. Wm. Dawson & Sons, Publishers, London.

<sup>36</sup>E. Moron was one of the prominent mercantile figures of his time. He lived in a magnificent residence overlooking the town, the site now occupied by Bluebeard's Castle Hotel. Parts of the original home are incorporated into the Hotel. I. P.

1885 with the removal of the Royal Mail Steamship headquarters to Barbados. A short time later the French Line, Compagnie Generale Transatlantique, removed its headquarters to Martinique. Many prominent Jewish families connected with shipping departed from St. Thomas. Another factor that lured Jews away was the opening and development of the Panama Canal. Numerous descendants of the St. Thomas Jews are now living there. In 1890 a census revealed the presence of 141 Jews in St. Thomas. This number continued to dwindle and up to the time of his death in 1914, Reverend Cardoze struggled courageously to keep the Synagogue of St. Thomas alive.

**1914** Moses D. Sasso became reader of the Synagogue at the age of 20. Born in St. Thomas, he had been taken to Panama as a baby during that period of relocation when many Jewish families left St. Thomas. In 1914, he returned to St. Thomas to see his aged mother. Rabbi Cardoze, from his sick bed, pleaded with him to stay. No other person was available to head up the Jewish Synagogue which was so poor at the time that the Congregation could not afford to import a Rabbi. Young Moses D., who had been trained by his grandfather and who had always been very religious youngster, answered the call. Three years later the Islands were transferred from Denmark to the United States. Rabbi Sasso is the only living authorized minister in St. Thomas who witnessed the transfer. Reverend Sasso was ordained Rabbi July 1, 1949. In 1959, the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas conferred upon Rabbi Sasso the title "Negnim Zemiroth Israel" (Sweet Singer of Israel) in observance of his 45th anniversary as head of the Congregation.<sup>37</sup>

**1942** "Today about 50 Jews live on the island of St. Thomas..."<sup>38</sup>

**1950** Morris Fidanque De Castro became Governor of the Virgin Islands. Mr. De Castro was born on February 5, 1902, to David and Adah De Castro in Panama but registered in St. Thomas, which was the established residence of his

<sup>37</sup>Profile. The Home Journal, St. Thomas, November 5, 1959.

<sup>38</sup>Notes on the Jewish Community of St. Thomas. A. A. Campbell. Jewish Social Studies, April 1942. Volume IV, No. 2.

parents. He served well and received the Distinguished Service Medal and award (gold) from the Department of Interior in December 1952. Again in April 1954, he received the Silver Meritorious Service Medal. His many years of service in the Government of the United States encompassed all assignments from Junior Clerk to Governor. During a short period away from Government, Mr. De Castro served as President of the West Indies Bank and Trust Company. Mr. De Castro reentered Government service January 12, 1959 as Budget Director for the Virgin Islands in the cabinet of Governor John D. Merwin. Mr. De Castro is now serving his second term as President of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas.

- 1957 Publication in Copenhagen of 299 Epitaphs from the Jewish Cemetery in St. Thomas, W. I., 1837 - 1916. With an index compiled from Records in the Archives of the Jewish Community in Copenhagen, By Julius Margolinsky. «Recently the Librarian of the Copenhagen Jewish Community, Julius Margolinsky, discovered a handwritten index of 299 epitaphs from St. Thomas. An unknown traveller to the island seemed to have arranged this index in a ten page notebook some decades ago and had forwarded it to the Copenhagen Community Archives. The writer obviously was unable to read and to copy the Hebrew inscriptions. Mr. Margolinsky's edition covers only the English and French texts of gravestones from 1837 to 1916. This well done publication sheds light upon the St. Thomas branches of about eighty known Sephardic families and a dozen Ashkenazic ones who belonged to the St. Thomas community. We meet such names, for example, as Abendana, Athias, D'Azevado, Benjamin, Cardoze, De Castro, Da Costa, Delvalle, Fidanque, Fonseca, Henriques, Lindo, Maduro, Moron, Pereira, Petit, Pissaro, Piza, Sasso, Tole-dano and Valencia. Some tombstones mention the birth-places of the deceased: St. Thomas, Curacao, Barbados, Jamaica, as well as Amsterdam, London and New York. Ashkenazic families hail from Hamburg and other cities and towns in Germany. A certain Judith Valencia passed away in Barcelona, 1856, and was interred in St. Thomas two years later. Among the epitaphs we meet that of Samuel Levy Maduro who was Reader of the Congregation for a period of thirty years... Mr. Margolinsky's modest and scholarly publication -- its index indicates both persons

named upon the tombstones and relatives of the deceased -- can be obtained from the author and should meet the attention of those interested in Jewish genealogical research. It reveals source material for the history of the Jews in the West Indies...»<sup>39</sup>

**1959** The Third Legislature of the Virgin Islands, First Special Session 1959, presented a citation to Bernard Paiewonsky, member of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas, "who already in his 26th year has achieved outstanding scholarship and international recognition that has reflected great credit on his native land..." Bernard Paiewonsky was born in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, March 3, 1933, son of Ralph<sup>40</sup> and Ethel Paiewonsky. Bernard acquired a B.S. degree in Mathematics, M.I.T. (1953); M.A. in Mathematics, Indiana University (1954); M.S.E. in Aeronautical Engineering, Princeton (1959). From June 1955 to June 1957, he served as Lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force assigned to the Flight Control Laboratory, Wright Air Development Center. He was a Legendre Fellow at Princeton (1957-58) and visiting lecturer in the Aeronautical Engineering Department (1958-59). Presently he is attached to the Aero Research Associates while completing his candidacy for the degree of Ph. D., also at Princeton. In the summer of 1959, Bernard Paiewonsky was selected by the Rocket Society of America to present his scientific paper on the Guidance and Control System of Space Vehicles before the International Aeronautical Congress in London.

**1959** The trend of the Hebrew Congregation, today is one of growth. A recent census showed more than 125 Jews living in St. Thomas, and the number is growing. Hotels, guest houses, tourist shops, rum distilleries, bottling plants, small industries have come into being and Jews are active in all of them. Sephardic names that dominated the past are yielding to an influx of second generation American

<sup>39</sup>Review by Dr. Kurt Wilhelm, Stockholm, Sweden, for the American Jewish Historical Society, Publication Vol. XLVIII, No. 2 (December 1958).

<sup>40</sup>Ralph Paiewonsky, father of Bernard and prominent businessman, served in the Legislature of the Virgin Islands from 1936-46 as Chairman of the Finance Committee, Chairman of the St. Thomas Municipal Council, and Chairman of the Legislative Assembly.

and European Ashkenazim. Today's roll call includes such names as: Bayne, Bernstein, Birch, Block, Bonzole, Dries, Brauer, Fishman, Gross, Hoffman, Hoffstater, Katzin, Kessler, Kimmelman, Kruger, Lilienfelt, Machover, Nath, Morgenstern, Paiewonsky, Puritz, Rosenbloom, Schptner, Saul, Schwartz, Solomon. With the development of additional tourist facilities in the offing, with St. Thomas a mere matter of hours away from metropolitan centers, the prospects are for more and more Jews to settle here. With growth comes a revival of activity. A Sisterhood was formed recently that is making its weight felt in the community. And there are signs of cultural stirrings, too. Among the Jews settling here is the family of the distinguished author, Herman Wouk. Through the efforts of Mr. Wouk, a Hebrew teacher was brought to St. Thomas. Already classes in Hebrew and Jewish history for the children and adults have been started. It would gladden the heart of the venerable and courageous Reverend David Cardoze were he able to look down from his former pulpit upon this reactivation; to see on Friday evenings, during the season, his beautiful little Synagogue filled with Congregation members and Jewish visitors to the island.

Isidor Paiewonsky



END OF THE SERVICE  
SYNAGOGUE, ST. THOMAS

