On the Eve, in France

In the decades preceding the revolution the three communities on French soil pursued their separate existence, but to a diminishing extent. The major change was the disappearance of the earlier status quo as between the Sephardim of the south-west and the Jews of the Comtat, the Avignonnais, in favour of parity of esteem. As late as 1752, according to the intendant de Tourny, ‘The enmity between the Portuguese and the Avignonnais is greater than between the Catholics and the Portuguese.’ However, by the mid-1760s a small group of six families from Avignon had secured the right to establish their own community in Bordeaux. They were authorized to exercise self-government to the extent that an arrêt permitted them to elect their own syndic and deputies and to impose their own taxes. In 1775 three more Avignon families were admitted to the privileges enjoyed by the original six. At least by 1777, the Avignon Jews had their own synagogue in Bordeaux.

This success followed the increasing economic enterprise of the Provençal Jewish traders. Christian complaints make it easy to follow their tracks throughout Provence and Languedoc – they come from Montpellier, Toulouse, Nîmes, Narbonne, Aix and Marseilles; from many lesser centres as well as further afield; from Brittany, Normandy, Poitou, Burgundy and the Dauphiné. In Paris, Israël Bernard de Vallabrègue became ‘secrétaire interprète du roi pour les langues orientales’.

The traders from the Comtat had to overcome or circumvent the rivalry of the Christians. In Languedoc in 1738 this rivalry took the form of not only a ban on the sale of their animals but sometimes also the actual seizure of the mules the Jews were trading in. In 1775–6 and 1784 the Parlement at Aix issued expulsion orders against the Jews and tried to ban their trade (except at fairs) at Grasse, Draguignan, Lorgues and Fréjus.

These Jews were trading in draperies, silks, cattle, horses, hides, jewellery, olive oil and grapes. On the 33rd day of the ‘Omer’ 5512 (= 2 May 1752) David de Milhaud the younger wrote to a certain Asher of Prague, then
living in Turin:

Last year at the fair in Beaucaire I met some Jews from Turin. If your Honour could make it your business to find out if they are returning this year to the fair they could bring some goods that I have asked for... If I had contacts at Turin we could perhaps join together in the future for the sale of woollen goods which I am engaged in. Every year in fact I sell them in large quantities at Aix, Nice, Lyons and elsewhere. These goods include thick winter blankets, heavy clothing for prisoners of war and soldiers, and thick, coarse canvas to wrap up packages loaded on to mules and carts, as well as woollen decorations hung on the necks of pack horses.4

There was also a certain amount of moneylending, sometimes in large sums, for example in 1772–3 the young Mirabeau was indebted to Daniel de Beaucaire of l’Isle-sur-Sorgue in the sum of 40,000 livres.5

In the concessions forced on the Sephardim in Bordeaux two factors stand out: the demographic and the religious. A certain degree of demographic stagnation began to show itself from about mid-century, and also assimilation. Between 1752 and 1787 at Saint-Esprit there were more deaths than births – 1032 against 992; in Bordeaux between 1758 and 1802 the comparable figures were 1870 as against 1878. The population was ageing and the number of marriages declining – at Saint-Esprit, for example, from 100 (1751–65) to 75 (1771–85). The size of families also dropped; in Bordeaux, couples with five children or more which accounted in 1751 for 22.5 per cent of all couples were 19.59 per cent in 1808. In Bordeaux also there was a distinct decline in the number of individuals born between 1768 and 1783. This is probably to be attributed to voluntary birth restriction and/or to a slowdown in immigration. From the mid-eighteenth century the birth-rate at Bordeaux was no more than 16.66 per 100.6

As for the religious factor, much contemporary evidence points to a synagogue-centred kahal, on the Amsterdam model, that certainly extended to the observance of the Sabbath. Not only did major communities purchase exemption from certain security commitments on the Sabbath (for example guard duty), but well-attested sources confirm the refusal of individuals (for example David Grady) to sign contracts on the Sabbath.7 For all that, it would not seem unfair to say of the Sephardim – of their leaders particularly – that they wore their Judaism lightly: rationalism and the values of the Enlightenment had seemingly coloured the views of such communal leaders as Abraham Grady, Salomon Lopez, Abraham Furtado, Lopez-Dubec and Jacob Robles. Never had he ‘believed in any other religion than that which nature has engraved in their conscience’, Jacob Robles declared in his will. This antinomianism and internalized source of value was by no means unusual. Salomon Lopez was another leading Sephardi who did not believe in the Oral Law of the rabbis and, according to R. Hayyim David Azulay,