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Resettlement in London

The re-creation of a *kahal* (or *kehilla*) in the London of the mid-seventeenth century forms part of the turbulence that assailed the economy of the Dutch Sephardim. From the Americas to the Mediterranean, a complex interplay of disparate factors created a serious threat to its wellbeing. In Brazil the successful revolt of the Portuguese planters against Dutch rule, in 1645–54, put an end to the prosperity of the Sephardi colonies in Recife and Mauricia. During this decade c.200 families from Brazil, many impoverished, had to find refuge in the Dutch Republic. In 1645 the outbreak of prolonged warfare (until 1669), between Venice and the Ottoman Empire, undermined Venetian Sephardi commerce with the Levant, both by sea and overland to Constantinople and Salonika. In a different sense the intensified persecution of the New Christians in Spain and the financial collapse in Madrid – both events of the 1640s – led to further mass emigration from the Iberian peninsula. This not only increased the population pressure on existing Sephardi settlements in the west (Amsterdam, Livorno, Hamburg), but also strengthened these settlements, for the newcomers included men of financial stature and outstanding intellect.

This context accounts in part for the ‘more enlargement’ that the Mahamad in Amsterdam sought; in particular for the establishment of a bridgehead in London through the foundation of an entirely new *kahal*. This is the ‘push’ factor. But why London, and whence the ‘pull’? This derives from the particular position of privilege that England took in relation to trade with Portugal and the Caribbean, especially the plantation colony of Barbados, pre-eminent for the production and export of sugar to Europe. But if the Dutch were to participate in this trade they would have to circumvent the obstacle erected by the Navigation Act of 1651. This Act aimed to ensure that trade between Britain and the colonies be conducted in British ships or in vessels belonging to the country where the goods originated, that is, to secure for English traders a monopoly of colonial trade and squeeze out the Dutch, including of course the Dutch Sephardim. Only the establishment of a Dutch bridgehead in London could overcome this obstacle.¹

L. Kochan, *The Making of Western Jewry, 1600–1819*
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In what sort of world, ‘Jewishly’ speaking, were the Dutch Sephardim proposing to venture? Tiny groups of Jews in London and elsewhere survived the general expulsion in 1290. Newcomers were few in the following centuries and appeared in various guises, virtually never as professing Jews; for example a troupe of visiting musicians from Italy at the court of Henry VIII; converted Jews engaged in various branches of Hebrew studies at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Two crypto-Jews took minor public roles: Dr Hector Nunes worked with Sir Francis Walsingham, secretary of state 1573–90, as intermediary in peace negotiations with Spain and provided intelligence from Portugal; Dr Rodrigo Lopez, a graduate of the University of Coimbra, came to England c.1559, worked at St Bartholemew’s Hospital and in 1586 was appointed physician to Queen Elizabeth’s household. His enemies at court exploited Lopez’s Iberian connection, his quasi-political activities and his expertise in poisons to secure his execution on a charge of conspiring with Philip II of Spain to poison the Queen (1594). In 1605 some seven people celebrated the Passover festival in London, at the home of the (?) unrelated Jeronimo Lopes. A small group of overseas traders lived a clandestine life in the guise of Catholics (see below, p. 77).

Curiously at odds with the crypto-Jews and the conversos are the fictional creations – Marlowe’s Barabas and Shakespeare’s Shylock – who flaunt their Jewishness. The former does so as a caricature, revelling in his villainy; the second is a far more ambiguous figure who lends himself to a wide variety of interpretations. Both share a readiness to reject the taunts of their Christian enemies. To the knight’s charge that the ‘first curse’ of Barabas ‘falls heavy’ on his head and is born of his ‘inherent sin’, Barabas retorts:

What, bring you Scripture to confirm your wrongs?
Preach me not out of my possessions.
Some Jews are wicked as all Christians are;
But say the tribe that I descended of
Were all in general cast away for sin,
Shall I be tried for their transgression?4

That this image of the unregenerate Jew should overlap with a certain philosemitism that had accumulated in England since about the turn of the century is also curious. It is plausibly conjectured that this turn towards philosemitism is exemplified in Bacon’s choice of a Jew for the original of Joabin, the merchant who is a spokesman for Solomon’s House in the New Atlantis (1627) and an exponent of the general good; this original was Joachim Gaunse, from Prague, possibly related to R. David Gans (see above, p. 7). As a mining engineer and industrial chemist Gaunse had come to England in 1581 to advise on the smelting of copper. This ‘economic’ argument accorded with renewed Christian appreciation, in the seventeenth century, for the purported commercial acumen of the Jews. By the time of