

THE JEWS OF

JAMAICA

BY JOANNA NEWMAN

Crest One of the EXODUS series of giclée prints by Anna Ruth Henriques. See page??

TIMELINE

Jews arrive in Jamaica from the 16th century when it is settled by Spain. With the coming of British rule and freedom to practice their religion, Jewish numbers grow and they prosper, despite extra taxation resulting from their success in trade. With emancipation in 1931 Jews start to take a notable role in Jamaican politics. It was only after the Second World War that numbers of the community went into sharp decline with emigration to the Americas and Europe. Today, there is still an active but small Jewish community.

1492 Christopher Columbus makes his first voyage to discover the Indies. King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castille decree that all Jews in Spain must convert or be expelled.

1494 On his second voyage to the New World Christopher Columbus ‘discovers’ Jamaica. His crew includes interpreter Luis de Torres and Maestro Bernal, the ship physician, both conversos (the name for those who chose to convert).

1509 The island is settled by the Spanish. The local population of Arawaks is decimated due to ill

treatment, enslavement and disease brought with the settlers.

1525 An alliance between Columbus’s descendent Isabella Colon and a Portuguese nobleman from the Braganza family brings Portuguese settlers, including conversos, to settle in Jamaica.

1655 Under orders from Oliver Cromwell, Admiral William Penn and General Richard Venables capture Jamaica. Most of the Spanish settlers escape to neighbouring Spanish colonies, but the Portuguese *conversos* welcome the opportunity to return to their Jewish roots. It is said that Portuguese Crypto-Jews in London and Jamaica help the British plan the invasion.

Under Cromwell and after the Restoration, Jewish settlers suffer civil disabilities but are allowed to openly practice their religion.

1660s Jamaica becomes an important trading post between the New World and the Europe. Sephardic merchants settle in Port Royal, Spanish Town, Kingston and smaller trading posts. Jews are privateers, trade in gold, silver and money changing, in vanilla, pepper, cocoa, pimento and sugar.

1660s West Indian settlements are seen as staging posts for the sacking of the Spanish Empire. Pirates and privateers play an important role.

1670 Port Royal, an open city, once described as ‘the wickedest in the world’ becomes a pirate stronghold and centre of economic activity.

1672 The earliest decipherable tombstone is in Jewish cemetery of Hunts Bay, across the harbour from Port Royal. Tombstone inscriptions are in Hebrew and Portuguese and some in English.

1676 Earliest reference to a Jewish house in Port Royal, almost certainly a synagogue.

1686 Jews Tribute, a special tax on the Jewish community, established following complaints by white merchants that Jewish merchants had an unfair advantage in trade on account of their connections throughout the Sephardic world.

“Remarkably healthy and long-lived”

“The Jews here are remarkably healthy and long lived. Notwithstanding, their diet is frequently of such kind of aliment not generally esteemed very wholesome, and that great deal of them deal in damaged salt-butter, herrings, beef, and in train-oil (marine oil); a congregation of stinking commodities, which is enough to poison the air of their habitations. Their shops can be scented at a great distance, and in what is called Jew market in this town, a whole street of their houses reeks incessantly with these abominable odours. But these people are abstemious and so temperate that a drunken Jew is rarely seen. They are particularly wise in drinking the purest water, which most of them use unmixed, and others make only a very small addition of rum. They are exceedingly fond of garlic, which generally has a place in their sauces, and is known to be a great antiseptic, and they indulge in chocolate. The most luxurious among them gormandize chiefly on fish, and no doubt their religious fasts, of which they are very rigid observers... assist in freeing them from noxious redundancies. I think they may be supposed to owe their good health and longevity, as well as their fertility, to a very sparing use of strong liquors, their early rising, their indulgence in garlic and fish, Mosaic laws, sugar, chocolate and fast”.

Edward Long, Secretary to Governor Henry Moore, History of Jamaica, London 1774, Vol. II, pp.27-29



Above: Hunts Bay Cemetery
Below: Tombstone of David Barugh Alvares, 5452 (1692)
Photos: Douglas Reid

1692 Earthquake in Port Royal submerges most of the city, killing thousands. The synagogue is destroyed and most of the surviving Jewish community moves to Spanish Town and Kingston, which quickly establishes itself as the new commercial hub of the Island.

1700 Eighty Jewish families live in Jamaica, approximately 400 souls. Five plantations are owned by Jews but the majority make their living as shopkeepers or in marine insurance, privateering, as money lenders, goldsmiths, bullion importers and exporters.

1704 Spanish Town Jews establish their own synagogue, K.K Neveh Shalom, which appears to be a replica of Bevis Marks synagogue in London .

1720 Jews are 18 percent of the population of Kingston.

1720 Daniel Israel Lopez Laguna publishes his most famous work of poetry, The True Mirror of Life.

1731 and 1738 Jews of Jamaica are accused of selling gunpowder to rebellious slaves. It was said they did business on Sundays when the white

merchants were in Church.

1740 Plantation Act removed alien disabilities throughout British colonies enabling Jews to become citizens.

1796 Jews start to arrive from northern/central Europe. Ashkenazic Synagogue built on Young Street, Spanish Town.

1799 Ashkenazic Synagogue erected in Kingston. Many families had begun to relocate here as that town grew in economic and political importance.

Isaac Yeshurun Sasportas sentenced to death and publicly hanged on 23 December. A Portuguese Sephardi living in the French controlled island of Hispaniola, he was involved in a plan to invade Jamaica and incite a slave uprising.

1831 Jamaica becomes first British territory to abolish political disabilities against Jews, including the right to swear a non-Christian oath. Jewish voters now join forces with the recently emancipated coloureds and blacks to play an important role in the new 'town party'. Anglo-Jewry use the West-Indian Act as a cudgel to spur on political emancipation in Britain.

1834 *The Daily Gleaner*, Jamaica's only national newspaper, founded by Jacob and Joshua DeCordova, the grandsons of the Haham Jeoshua Hisquiau de Cordova, who came to Jamaica in 1755 as the chief rabbi of the Spanish and Portuguese community.

1830s German-speaking Jews start to arrive.

1843 Beil Timud (House of Learning) established for elementary Hebrew and English education.

1844 Ashkenazi and Sephardim merge to form one congregation in Kingston.

1847 Two Jewish Free Schools of Kingston amalgamate

1849 Eight of the 47 members of the House of Assembly are Jewish and that year, out of respect for Jewish members,

the House adjourned for Yom Kippur by a vote of 19 to nine.

1881 The Jewish congregation numbers 2,535 of a white population of 14,432.

1884 Progressive Judaism, a combination of Reform and Conservative rituals is adopted by the United Congregation of Israelites, as strict observance of Jewish laws and practices begins to decline.

1907 The Great Kingston Earthquake destroys many buildings and all the synagogues.

1911 The community numbers 1,487.

1913 Prayer book includes transliteration of Hebrew in English, demonstrating decline in teaching Hebrew.

1939 Jewish Institute for Secondary Education established.

With the outbreak of war, alien Jews in the colony are interned alongside German and Italian nationals.

1940 A camp is built to house evacuees from Gibraltar. About 1,700 arrive.

1942 The Serpa Pinto arrives carrying 180 Jewish refugees from Portugal.

1949 1,300 Jews in Jamaica. Families like the Henriques, Matalon, Ashenheim, Albergas, Myers and deLisser continue to make a significant contribution to all walks of Jamaican life including learning, industry and the economy.

1962 Jamaica becomes independent

1968/69 'The Rabbi Speaks': series of broadcasts over Radio Jamaica and Rediffusion by Rabbi Bernard Hooker that deal with life, its problems and challenges from the Jewish religious point of view.

1969 Hillel School founded by the Matalon family as a secular private preparatory and secondary school. Its first chairman was Rabbi Bernard Hooker.

1970s Political unrest in Jamaica – many Jews leave for Miami and Canada

Your Money or Your Life – Already!

In the 17th century, battles for supremacy at sea and for the spoils of colonial trade were fought by privateers on behalf of governments or companies. In 1613, privateering returned huge profits and brought in 15% of British imports. Jewish pirates (a term generally used to describe those who went beyond their letters of commission in robbing at sea or who were working on their own behalf) caught by Spanish officials faced imprisonment or death unless they were able to purchase their freedom. In June 1699 Phillipe Henriquez, a Dutch Jewish merchant trading in the Caribbean for 12 years, was seized and brought to trial by the Inquisition court. In 1723, Jeudah Cohen was executed by the Spanish in Puerto Rico.

Between 1738 and 1742 the British seized five Jewish smugglers. In 1731 Jacob Nunes of Jamaica outfitted the Judith and Sarah with 16 guns and 12 men to prey on merchant shipping. In a new book due out next year, Ed Kritzler writes about Moses Cohen Henriques, who in 1628 sacked Spanish ships off the coast of Cuba. Later, he set up his own pirate island off the coast of Brazil.

Ed Kritzler's book on Jewish pirates will be published by Doubleday in Spring 2007

2006 The Jewish community celebrates its 350th anniversary at the 100-year-old Sha'are Shalom synagogue on Duke Street in Kingston and a Jamaican Jewish Heritage centre is inaugurated. While the site of the Sephardic Synagogue and its adjacent cemetery replete with gravestones featuring names such as Henriques, De Souza, de Pass, Melhado and Nunes, lie largely in ruins, the Neveh Shalom Institute, a foundation that exists to preserve Jewish remains in Colonial Jamaica, has plans for its restoration. Archival work is already under way.



After the fire of 1882 in Kingston from a print in the *Illustrated London News*, 20 January 1883
Left: German Synagogue, Orange Street

THE SLAVE TRADE

During the 18th century, the Jamaican economy changes from small holdings to a plantation economy where large areas of land are needed to grow sugar cane. With the rise of sugar, the population grows dramatically in Jamaica as thousands of slaves are brought to work the plantations. By 1807 when slavery was made illegal in Britain, Jamaica had 324,000 slaves. Existing slaves did not gain their freedom until 1838. Jews were involved in the slave trade as traders and though few owned plantations, those who worked as merchants and traders owned slaves to work in their households. It is said that Jewish emancipation was recommended at a time when the anti-slavery movement was increasing in power and white slave owners wanted the Jewish vote. But after gaining emancipation in 1831, many Jews voted with free coloureds against the ruling plantocracy.

CULTURAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Daniel Lopez Laguna

The Spanish-Portuguese poet Daniel Lopez Laguna (1635 - 1730) was born in Portugal of converso parents and moved to Southern France as a child. He went to University in Spain to study classics and was arrested by the Inquisition and for several years suffered torture in prison. He managed to escape to Jamaica where he openly confessed his Jewish faith. While in prison, he had begun to translate the book of Psalms from Hebrew into Spanish. Arriving in Jamaica, circa 1680, he spent 23 years completing the work and in 1720 became the first Jamaican to publish a book under British rule. His monumental work of Jewish

Spanish literature, *Espejo Fiel de Vidas*, The True Mirror of Life, turned the Psalms of David into song.

The introduction to the Psalms is translated in Mordechai Arbell's *The Portuguese Jews of Jamaica*:

I was devoted to the Muses from my childhood
 My youth in France
 I studied in pious schools
 In Spain they diminished the acts of my Youth
 This opened my eyes
 I escaped from the Inquisition
 And in Jamaica I sang the Psalms of my joy
 In my prison was the desire to do this work.



Isaac Mendes Belisario

Isaac Mendes Belisario (1794-1849) is a renowned painter in Jamaica and the government have recently issued a series of seven postage stamps to celebrate his work. He was born in Jamaica of Italian Jewish parents and went to London as a young boy. His 1817 etching of the Bevis Marks synagogue of London is world famous. He exhibited at the Royal Academy in London between 1815 and 1831, returning to Jamaica in 1834. He set up a studio in Kingston and started a series of sketches depicting Jamaicans at work and play. One set of lithographs depicts the Jamaican 'Jonkonnu Masquerade', performed by slaves at Christmas time when they were given time off work. He remains popular because, unusually for an artist in a colonial slave society, he depicted black Jamaicans with affection and honesty. In 2007 the Yale Center for British Art will mount an exhibition of Belisario's work depicting the Jamaican landscape and people when they were liberated from slavery in 1838. It will be coming to Bristol at the end of 2007.

WHAT'S IN A NAME

There are in Jamaica many families with Jewish names, who no longer have any association with Judaism. While there are still active branches of the Ashenheim, Delevante, Henriques and Matalon families, names such as the Brandon, deCordova, Hart, Levy, Mendez, Silvera, Pereira, Bravo and Solomon are no longer Jewish, evidence of integration over the years. Famous Jamaicans with Jewish ancestry include Bob Marley, whose father was a Syrian Jew, Louis Farrakahn's father, Percival Clarke, whose grandfather was a Portuguese Jew, and the award winning novelist Andrea Levy. For some black Jamaicans, this link to a Jewish past has reawakened an interest in Jewish identity.

A newspaper to be proud of

In the 1830s Jamaican newspaper history would be made when the deCordova brothers launched *The Daily Gleaner*. Started at a crucial moment in the island's history, when the era of slavery was coming to an end, the paper grew from an advertising sheet that the deCordova brothers used to publicise goods for sale.

The first *Gleaner*, known as *The Gleaner and Weekly Compendium of News* was printed on Saturdays and sold for a subscription of 10 shillings per quarter in the city and 13 shillings per quarter in rural areas. The first issue included a mission statement of sorts with the editors promising to "please, amuse and to inform while holding domestic life sacred no attacks on private lives would be made".

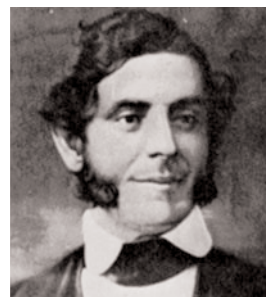
Three months later the paper's name changed to *The Gleaner: A Weekly Family Newspaper devoted to Literature, Morality, the Arts and Sciences and Amusements*. Two years later the paper

expanded to four pages and was being published daily except for Sundays. Advertisement sheets were distributed free of charge and subscribers could get the paper by 6am.

Although the paper became a public company in 1897, Michael deCordova served as managing director until 1948. By that time the *Daily Gleaner* was involved in charitable causes and in book publishing, having started to print the *Gleaner Geography and History of Jamaica* in the 1920s for use in schools islandwide. It also created its own imprint, Pioneer Press, which published books by Claude McKay and Tom Redcam, Jamaica's first Poet Laureate. *The Children's Own* started publication in 1950 and the *Overseas Weekly Gleaner* began in 1951 as did *The Star*.

Known today solely as *The Gleaner*, the Chairman and managing director is the Hon. Oliver Clarke, who assumed both posts in 1976. Whilst there are now many

other newspapers and magazines, The *Gleaner* remains the island's foremost newspaper group, employing close to 500 people in Jamaica, with offices in Kingston, Montego Bay, America, Canada and the United Kingdom. The *Gleaner* Company also continues its long tradition of public service, running an annual Newspaper in Education programme, Spelling Bee and Honours Awards competitions as well as crime prevention and other community support



Jacob deCordova.



Joshua deCordova.

The story of how there came to be a camp called Gibraltar on the island of Jamaica

Gibraltar Camp was built in the summer of 1940, when the British Government decided to evacuate the civilian population of Gibraltar. The Governor of Jamaica received instructions to build a vast camp to house 7,000 at the site of a former sugar plantation just outside Kingston. Its construction was greeted with enthusiasm by local contractors, but the costs to the British Government were high, particularly as the anticipated number of Gibraltarians never arrived, the British only managing to send some 1500 to Jamaica, while the rest were sent to London and Madeira.

Those that did arrive were greeted by lines of excited Jamaicans, many of whom had been enlisted to help prepare the camp for the evacuees. Tany Conquy was 14 when she arrived with her family, one of 34 Jewish Gibraltarians. "I remember my first sight of Jamaica, it was beautiful", she says. "We ate in huge dining halls, and there were separate kitchens for kosher".

In a note explaining costs to the Treasury Department, a Colonial Office official expressed his hope that: "the vacant accommodation will, sooner or later, be turned to practical advantage".

That practical advantage came in December 1941 when a decision to send Polish Jewish refugees from Lisbon to Jamaica was made by the British government, the Polish Government in Exile and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, (the Joint). By the summer of 1940, Lisbon had become the refugee capital of Europe and for the Allies, keeping Spanish and Portuguese borders open was dependent on removing refugees, unable to leave without money or visas. In January 1942 the first group of 152 Polish Jewish refugees arrived in the camp, their maintenance paid for by the Joint.

Miriam Stanton, a Polish Jew, her parents and grandmother were on the first ship, the *Serpa Pinto*, to arrive from Lisbon in January 1942. In her recorded account of her wartime experiences, she speaks movingly her first trip into Kingston, and the feelings of relief she felt to escape the war in Europe. She was also delighted to find a welcome at the ancient Sephardic synagogue in Kingston.

Over the next few years, small groups of Jewish refugees continued to be brought from



WARTIME REFUGEES

Spain and Portugal to the camp. Alongside the Gibraltarians, there was a constantly shifting Jewish population which at its height, numbered about 1400. Conditions in the camp were spartan, and there was little privacy. Inmates could only work inside the camp. There was a strict curfew and visitors needed permits. This meant that communication with the Jamaican Jewish community was limited to occasional visits and support.

The camp had its own shops and entertainment hall, The local Jesuit priests and nuns established a chapel and a group of Polish Jews converted one of the accommodation huts into a synagogue. Tany Conquy was awarded a scholarship to a prestigious local convent school in Kingston. At the school, her religious beliefs were accommodated. At her graduation, worried that she would have to kiss the Bishops ring, like every other girl receiving her certificate, her father spoke to the nuns and she was able to just shake his hand

For many, particularly the younger refugees, camp life was boring and frustrating. This is expressed in a letter written in protest to Winston Churchill in August 1942:

"While a world war rages and hecatombs of victims fall, we young people, wanting to fight and to work and able to be useful ...are here in complete spirit and health-killing inactivity, in Gibraltar Camp. After three years, fleeing from the terrors of the flaming Europe, trying to save ourselves and ours from Nazis and fascist concentration camps we are now on the English territory, where we wish to give all our possible efforts...We would have considered ourselves as parasitical individuals if we were not conscious that we are leading these camp lives absolutely against our own will. But our consciences

do not leave us in peace; others fight and die; others work and help, and we live in uselessness. We feel very very depressed, particularly now as the war seems to reach crisis point and when useful strength is more and more necessary".

By 1942 knowledge of Gibraltar Camp was widespread. Charities were maintaining refugees at the camp and some were using it as a positive story in fundraising campaigns. Questions were repeatedly asked about why it wasn't full, but the Colonial Office prevaricated and obstructed refugee agencies from sending large numbers to the camp. When I visited the site, now part of the University of the West Indies, I saw papers which clearly show that the camp had room for an extra 4,000, between the summer of 1940 and December 1942. Some historians would argue that at that stage rescue was not possible but Gibraltar Camp could have offered a home to those refugees in, or able to reach neutral territory. After all, whenever it was deemed necessary, the British were perfectly prepared to send those it classified as a threat to security to places throughout its colonies and Dominion states.

All the evacuees were able to leave Gibraltar Camp in 1944 to return home, but the Jewish refugees had no homes to go to. Most managed to find new destinations during that year, but a few refugees remained in the camp as late as 1946. Today, there is little memory in Jamaica of this wartime episode. But the locals do remember the mainly Spanish speaking Gibraltarians, the son of the former Camp Commandant recalling their 'noisy quarrels'.

A longer version of this article by Joanna Newman appeared in *The Guardian*, August 11 2001 under the title *Exiled to Paradise*

Joanna Newman's book, *Nearly the New World: Refugees and the British West Indies, 1933 - 1945* will be published by Vallentine Mitchell, London in 2007



THE COMMUNITY TODAY

Celebration of the 350th anniversary of the community at the Shaare Shalom Synagogue, November 9 2006, Photo: Douglas Reid

On 9 November 2006 the Jewish community in Jamaica celebrated its 350th anniversary, delayed by one year in order to mark the opening of a Jamaican Jewish Heritage Centre built adjacent to the Kingston synagogue. An Associated Press Article reported that “Some 150 to 200 Jews live on the Caribbean island of three million. Mostly intermarried and interracial, the community has had no rabbi for 25 years and no kosher butcher for 50”.

Does the opening of a heritage centre signal the end of a living Jewish community? Marilyn Delevante doesn't think so. Marilyn is an active member of the Jamaican Jewish community. With Anthony Alberga, she has just published *The Island of One People*, a richly illustrated publication celebrating the history of the Jewish community of Jamaica. It is a well-researched book that brims with enthusiasm for the contribution that Jews have made to Jamaica.

Marilyn writes: “In 1844, Dr Lewis Ashenheim predicted in the journal *First Fruits of the West* that the Jewish community in Jamaica would be extinct in five years. In 1964, his great-grandson Sir Neville Ashenheim, then Senate Majority Leader and Cabinet appointee, noted, ‘The Jewish Community here seems to have slipped into a decline and seems headed for extinction’. It is now 160 years since the first prediction and almost 40 years since the second, and still there are Jews in Jamaica”.

One reason why the community may have a future is the inclusive nature of its progressive congregation. The rate of

intermarriage in Jamaica is high, but whereas in the past, the children of Jews who married out were brought up as non-Jews, today, more families of mixed marriages are choosing to bring up their children in the Jewish faith.

The inclusiveness of the Jewish community and its integration into the wider community is stressed by artist Anna Henriques. Anna is the daughter of Ainsley Henriques, for many years synagogue president, and Sheila Mechtildé née Chong, a former Miss Jamaica, who was half Chinese, half Afro-Caribbean and converted to Judaism. Speaking to Janet Levin from New York, she explained: “We are a large family. My father was one of 11 children – we used to have 70 people at our *seders* when I was a child – so I felt connected and integrated into the Jewish community. It isn't an exclusive group, everyone is accepted. We are a very old community that has adapted to new ways.

I went to the Jewish elementary school. When I went on to a Catholic High School a couple of the nuns tried to convert me – but it didn't bother me as by then I was proud of my heritage.

The Jewish community was well-established and there was no sense of being an outsider. We were very settled and very secure, quite insular and protected. We were a minority but not on the bottom rung.”

Services in the Kingston synagogue are a combination of Reform and Conservative. Most of the service is in English or transliterated. Sephardic influences include a sandy floor. This, it is said, is to remember the time when Jews lived under the Spanish Inquisition and had to muffle the sounds of their worship. Hymns are sung in Hebrew but the ‘Bendigamos’ is sung in Spanish. Sung after meals in worldwide Sephardic tradition, in Jamaica the hymn is traditionally sung on the night of Sukkoth, the holiday that marks the expulsion of the Jews from Spain.

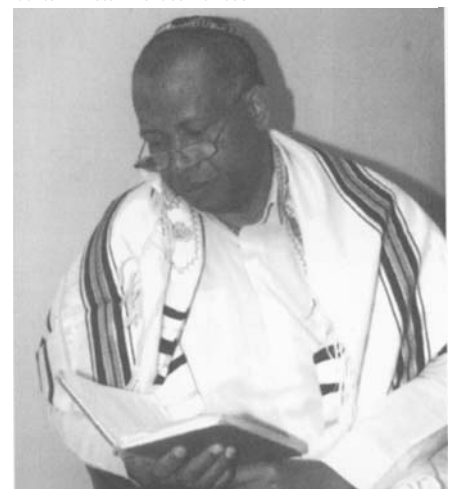
Interviewed recently by Associated Press, Ed Kritzler, a Jamaican resident and author says: “It's all about survival.

In the face of the Inquisition and always on the run from it, we settled in Jamaica and the New World, and we survived. Jamaican Jews have a strong ego that says, ‘We are Jamaican Jews, we have a stake in this country and we were here before the English.’ Ainsley Henriques was also interviewed and asked why those who remained stay Jewish? He replied “Old habits are hard to shed...This is a pluralistic society that respects everyone's religion, and it will be Jamaican economic opportunity and tolerance that will ensure our survival for at least another generation”.

In 2001, I was fortunate to hear the exquisite bass voice of Winston Mendes-Davidson at a Friday night service when I visited Jamaica with the BBC. Born in Kingston in 1946, Dr Mendes-Davidson has had a distinguished career serving in Michael Manley's National Party Government and was President of the Jamaican Medical Association. In his late 40s, curiosity about his name led him to discover that his mother's grandfather was Jewish. His new interest in Judaism, led to his conversion and appointment as the cantor of the congregation.

This year, there is a new element to the Jewish community as Israelis have begun to settle in Jamaica. They bring with them a new mix of Ashkenazi and Israeli culture and in the view of Marilyn Delevante, a new opportunity for continuity. As she told me, when she visits the synagogue, “I see my grandfather sitting in the seat he sat in as a Director of the Synagogue. Today this seat is occupied by his grandson... I also see the beautiful mahogany woodwork of the ark and the *bima*. It never ceases to thrill me when the ark is opened and there is the spectacular sight of 12 torah scrolls Then there is sand on the floor – beautiful white Jamaican sand. And the lovely Sephardic chants that we have been chanting for 350 years. May we continue to chant them for another 350 years.”

Cantor Winston Mendes-Davidson





The art of Anna Ruth Henriques

Anna Ruth Henriques probably encapsulates better than anyone the nature of Jamaican Jewish identity. Her father is from a Jewish family that goes back to 15th century Spain. Her mother represents two other strands of Jamaican ethnicity – Afro-Caribbean and Asian.

Her achievement is to have used all aspects of her background in artworks that have intense Jewish content but have also been acclaimed as having much to say about Jamaican identity as a whole. In the words of the Canadian academic, Diana Cooper-Clark (*Calabash Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters*, Vol 4, No 1), she expresses "the dynamism of displacement and fluidity, found in the many nations, races, sexual orientations and cultures, that constitutes Caribbean identity... Unlike many North Americans and Europeans who narrate Caribbean identity primarily in terms of the African legacy, Henriques foregrounds aboriginal Tainos, Sephardic Jews, and gay men, groups largely invisible in contemporary thought and art".

Her most celebrated work is *The Book of Mechtilde*, a lavishly illuminated manuscript based on *The Book of Job*. Mechtilde is Henriques' mother, Sheila Mechtilde Henriques, née Chong who who died when Anna was 11. She, like Job, lived a virtuous life but was afflicted by pain, suffering and loss. In the book, the historical journey of Jamaica, the Land of Jah (the Rastafarian God) is intertwined with Mechtilde's cancer-ridden body. "It addresses issues of undeserved human suffering and the apparent silence of God on the one hand, and the restoration of freedom, spontaneity and loyalty on the other. These concerns are seminal to the history of Jamaica, Mechtilde, and the Book of Job that is Israel's history up to the Exile." (*Diana Cooper-Clark*)

Her work most directly related to Jewish experience in Jamaica is *The Exodus Series* of giclée prints. Henriques writes:

"In 1992, I travelled to Seville, Spain as Design Coordinator of the Jamaica Pavilion at the Universal Exposition. The Exposition was planned to coincide with the 500-year celebrations of Columbus' departure to the New World. His voyages

commenced the year of the Spanish Inquisition, precipitating the expulsion of Jews from Spain. As Columbus set sail from this city that once was home to thousands of Jews, he took with him numerous Jewish young men at the bequest of their families to ensure them safe passage from Spain, my father's ancestors amongst them.

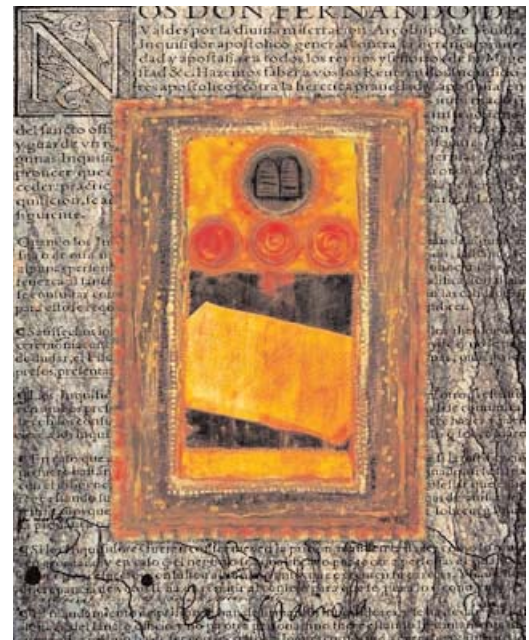
While in Spain, I wandered through the Jewish quarter, poured over maps of Columbus' voyages, read the endless articles that addressed the events of half a millennium ago, and became imbued with the lingering legacy of my paternal ancestry. A new work was brewing. Columbus had set sail in search of new territory and gold, but instead returned with spices, specifically cocoa. Coincidentally, I had taken along with me a dozen Jamaican chocolate bars as sustenance during what was originally meant to be a couple weeks in Seville but what ended up as four months.

I saved the gold wrappers of those chocolate bars. In Spain, I also accumulated a few coins, and a Portuguese tourist brochure. A large branch of my family had fled to Portugal which at least for a short while, had wooed the Jews because of their wealth. I arranged my collections on canvas boards in iconographic forms. As the pieces came together, thus began my memorials to an Old World which had been lost, at the same time a celebration of a New World won.

The Exodus Series comprises 12 works each an ode to one of the 12 scattered tribes, each a visual epitaph to this second Exodus and the impact it had on a people."

Diana Cooper Clark ends her *Calabash* article: "The act of creation in Henriques' art work is a Jewish *matzeva*, an invisible tombstone, erected to those whose voices have been silenced by a history of domination. Her art speaks for those who cannot".

The Book of Mechtilde is in the collection of The Jewish Museum in the City of New York and also available in a facsimile edition (published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).



THE DIASPORA

In the 18th century, the Jewish Community in Jamaica was far larger than in New York. Today, there are far more Jewish Jamaicans living in the diaspora. For Jamaicans, there are simply more opportunities abroad, as the thousands living in the United States demonstrate. But most retain a strong sense of national pride. Simon Alberga was brought up in Jamaica and attended Hillel School. He now lives in leafy Hampstead Garden Suburb with his young family. The nephew of Marilyn Delavante, he feels that there is no chance of the community dying out, "not with people of my generation who care about it". Simon has just bought a family house in Ochos Rios.

Another diaspora Jamaican Jew is Tony MacFarlane, a recently retired doctor and *mohel* who is now writing his memoirs. Born in 1937 in Falmouth, Jamaica, his paternal grandmother was Agatha Mendes but it was not until he left Jamaica to study medicine in Canada that he had an opportunity to learn about Judaism. A visit to a reform synagogue led to an interest in theology and his conversion in 1961. He described his discovery to me in a soft Jamaican accent over a skype connection: "My grandmother was a Jewess. In Jamaica there are a lot of family secrets, people don't talk about. She was the illegitimate child of a Jewish man. My great grandfather was David Pereira Mendes".

In 1963 he joined the Jamaican congregation and has remained a loyal congregant ever since, visiting annually from his home in Canada. What was the attraction of Judaism for him? "If you are brought up without knowledge of your background and find the source of knowledge as an adult its very powerful". Earlier, he told Marilyn Delevante, "my heart is in Jamaica, I think about what can be brought home to enrich the lives of my fellow Jews in Jamaica".

At the 350th celebration in Trafalgar Square in London last September, Janet

Levin met another black Jamaican with Jewish ancestry. Jessie Brooks, a lecturer in business studies, born in London, has an infectious laugh and lots of enthusiasm. She was introduced to Judaism five years ago when a friend took her along to the Kabbalah Centre. "I'd never seen a *torah* scroll in my life. I thought it was wonderful, I was so in awe of it, so emotional. I went every Friday night. I loved everything, the people, the food... I decided I wanted to convert. The Kabbalah Centre doesn't have such a good reputation so I went to Streatham Synagogue. They were a bit taken aback at first but they embraced me.

At that time I didn't even know there were Jews in Jamaica. It was only 18 months ago that I found I had Jewish forbears. Rabbi Ginsbury gave me books about the history of the Jews and I discovered there were Jews in Jamaica. 'Are you sure?' I said "Synagogues. Where? 21 cemeteries, where? I've never seen one.' I became so engrossed that I couldn't even sleep. It all started to make sense. There is so much in Jamaica that was influenced by the Jews. The mourning period for instance. We have a "Nine Night" which is quite similar to the *shiva*. And red pea soup, a Jamaican version of cholent, is cooked slowly over the fire on Friday to provide for the rest days over the weekend.

I started to look into my family history. My grandfather on my mother's side, Papa Levy, had a Hebrew book, which no-one was allowed to touch. There is another Jewish Jamaican lady in our congregation and her name is Clarke – and so was my father's: my grandfather was Santander Clarke, so we are looking into that. When the British took over the island from Spain in 1967 and people got naturalised they often took British names.

We keep kosher. My 17 year-old daughter comes along with me to the synagogue. I have found who I am and I am still exploring Jamaican Jewish history."

Thanks are due to all those who contributed to this feature, particularly to Joanna Newman for researching and writing the feature, and to Dr Marilyn Delavante who, as a current active member of the community and expert on its history, was an invaluable source of advice.

Joanna Newman, who completed theses for her BA and PhD degrees on the Jews of Jamaica, was until recently Executive Director of the London Jewish Cultural Centre and is now Manager, Partnerships and Projects at the British Museum.

FIND OUT MORE



The Shaarei Shalom Synagogue, the United Congregation Synagogue, which after the 1907 earthquake was rebuilt on Duke Street in concrete instead of brick by Henriques Brothers in 1912. Now the only functioning synagogue in Jamaica.
Photo: Douglas Reid

Books

The Island of One People: An Account of the History of the Jews of Jamaica, Marilyn Delevante and Anthony Alberga, 2006, Ian Randle Publishers, Jamaica

The Portuguese Jews of Jamaica, Mordechai Arbell, 2000, Canoe Press, Jamaica

Jews, Slaves and the Slave Trade, Eli Faber, 1998, New York University Press, NY

Merchants and Jews: The Struggle for West Indian Commerce 1650 - 1750, Stephen Fortune, 1984, Gainsville Press, USA

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Heritage centre includes: Museum, Exhibitions, Sanctuary, Memorial Garden, Archives, Reference Library and Family History Center

Hunts Bay Jewish Cemetery

The oldest in Jamaica and possibly in the New World

See also A TASTE OF JAMAICA page 46