

Historical Notes

Jews in the Grand'Anse Colony of Saint-Domingue*

Zvi Loker

The Grand'Anse, on the northwestern tip of the southern peninsula of the island of Hispaniola, in present-day Haiti, is a cove formed by the Grand and Voldroque rivers. The surrounding region, which bears the same name as the cove, is covered by dense tropical vegetation. Its capital, the ancient port-city of Jérémie,¹ was once the focal point of life in the island's southwestern part, which in the colonial era was variously known as Santo Domingo (Spanish) and Saint-Domingue (French).

In revolutionary times, the Grand'Anse area served as a stronghold, first for white settlers, and later for the mulatto insurgents whose rebellion in 1792 sparked an uprising of black slaves. Though it caused much damage to the plantations, this first revolutionary episode was of but brief duration. The French settlers soon gained the upper hand, and fearing a new assault by mulattos and black slaves, they called in the British. The British army obligingly took over the whole region on September 19, 1793; it remained in control for almost five years.

The town of Jérémie (Jeremy) was constructed in 1756 around an earlier burg or embarcation point called Trou Jérémie after a brave and honest fisherman of that name. It suffered from hurricanes in 1772 and 1781, but was always rebuilt. The town is almost inaccessible by road even today, and due to its geographical isolation was relatively quiet at the outset of the Haitian Revolution. During the years of British occupation it served as a peaceful haven where white settlers could continue to trade. A lively commerce took place in the harbor, some of it with merchants from American ports like Charleston,² Norfolk,³ Baltimore,⁴ unidentified sites in New England,⁵ and most likely other cities on the eastern seaboard as well. All this made Jérémie attractive to white refugees fleeing from other areas.

Jews and *Conversos*, living at the Grand'Anse, Saint-Domingue, 1775–1800

Name	Occupation	Site of Residence	Time of Certifiable Activity	Remarks
ALVARES Jean-Baptiste		Jérémie, later Léogane	1796–1797	Free mulatto
CARDOZE Jean	Planter	Les Abricots, near Jérémie	1779–1785	Died in the Catholic faith
DALMEYDA Salomon	Planter and shipping agent	Tiburon and Jérémie	1777–1794	Son of Abraham and Rebecca of Bordeaux
DA SILVA fils (Louis François)	Merchant	Caïemittes (island opposite Jérémie)	1775–1795	Came to the colony from Bordeaux or Bayonne
LONGE Mardochée	Merchant	Grande Rivière (Jérémie)	1784–1799	Lange père and fils were known in Cap Français, 1765
LONGE I., JR. (Israel or Joseph?)	Merchant	Jérémie	1793–1799	Son of Mardochée
LOPEZ-DEPAZ Catherine	Merchant	La Seringue, N.D. du Cap, Dame-Marie	1781–1790	
LOPEZ-DEPAZ Jean-Philippe	Merchant	N.D. du Cap, Dame-Marie	1781–1790	Father of Catherine
LYMA Louis David	Merchant and shipping agent	Rochelois, Fonds des Nègres, Jérémie, Miragoâne, Port-au-Prince	1793–1799	Representing Lyma Frères of Bordeaux
MADURO Jacob		Jérémie	1800	
MARDOCAI (Mardoch)	Planter (coffee, cacao)	Cap, Dame-Marie, Cavaillon	till the end of the colony	
MENDÈS-FRANCE David	Planter	New Orleans, then Les Abricots, near Jérémie, and Port-au-Prince	1763–1785 (1791)	From Bordeaux

MENDES-FRANCE Isaac	Planter	Petit-Goáve	1764-1775 (date of return journey to France)	Son of David
MIRANDA Isaac Rodrigues	Merchant and planter	Jérémie	1786-1787	
MIRANDA Eliahu-Elijah ("Eliou" or "cadet")	Merchant and planter	Jérémie	1787-1792	Son of Isaac
MIRANDA Miss Rodrigues	Merchant and planter	Jérémie	1794	Probably sister of Eliaou
MOLINE (A?) Isaac Israel	Planter (coffee)	Plymouth, near Jérémie	1796	
MONTÈS Abraham	Merchant	Jérémie	1793-1797	
MORON Simon Isaac Henriques	Merchant and planter (coffee)	Jérémie	1778-1799	Came from Curaçao
PENHA I. (P.S.)	Merchant and shipping agent	Islet-à-Pierre Joseph, Cap Dame-Marie	1793	
PETIT David	Merchant	Grande Rivière, Jérémie	1792-1798	From Bordeaux
PETIT Charles	Merchant	Grande Rivière, Jérémie	1781-1782	From Bordeaux, brother of David
RODRIGUE David	Merchant	Grande Rivière, Jérémie	1790	
SEIXAS Isaac Mendes	Planter (coffee)	Grand Rivière, Jérémie, Les Cayes, Coteaux	till the end of the colony	
VIDAL Joseph	Administrator of plantations	Les Cayes, then Jérémie	1796	Refugee from mulatto rule at Les Cayes
VIDAL Raymond		Les Cayes, then Jérémie	1796	Brother of Joseph

A number of Portuguese Jews were among the settlers and refugees who came to Jérémie from 1786 to 1800.⁶ During this brief period, notarial records document the presence of some nineteen Sephardi-Portuguese families whose Jewish origins appear certain.⁷ At least one of these families migrated from Curaçao, the site of one of the earliest Caribbean congregations. Though most of the Curaçao Jews established themselves farther north at Cap Français (modern Cap Haïtien),⁸ Simon Isaac Henriquez Moron and his wife came to Jérémie. Several plantation slaves were also of Curaçaoan origin.⁹ Other families came to Saint-Domingue from the "Communities of the Pope" in Avignon, France, and from the Avignon section of the "Portuguese Nation" in Bordeaux. The names Lange (in the German pronunciation) and Petit reflect these origins.¹⁰ Still other families came directly from the southwestern (Atlantic) coast of France, especially from Bordeaux and Bayonne.

Some of Saint-Domingue's Jewish families engaged in businesses spanning the Old and New Worlds, a phenomenon common among those of Portuguese descent. Louis David Lyma, for example, was a very active agent who represented the Bordeaux firm of Lyma Frères.¹¹ Other businesses were partnerships of brothers, like the Petits,¹² or were passed on from father to son, as in the cases of the Mirandas¹³ and the Mendès-Frances.¹⁴

Portuguese Jews worked as both merchants and planters. It is impossible to ascertain whether those who pursued these occupations formed two distinctly separate classes, as in some other West Indian islands, but both areas of endeavor were certainly "normal" trade activities, characteristic of slave-owning and dominant whites. A few Jews had an interest in shipping, a new and somewhat less usual field for their commercial transactions. They were prominent as investors, insurers, and even as captains of vessels in the Dutch Caribbean possessions,¹⁵ though only a very few Jews in Saint-Domingue bought or sold ships. From the documents so far consulted, it would appear that this activity guaranteed them a supplementary sort of income, as their livelihood was earned mainly by managing plantations (sugar, coffee, cacao, and indigo) and by retail trade. The maritime trade was an accessory branch for some of them;¹⁶ it apparently provided them with another link to their brethren in Holland, the West Indies,¹⁷ and the United States.

In addition to their family businesses, Jewish merchants frequently entered into trading relationships and partnerships with their non-Jewish neighbors and colleagues. There is evidence of conflicts, litigations, and even dissolutions of existing partnerships; on the other hand, there were also very close relationships, as evidenced by powers-of-attorney left by aging, departing, or dying Portuguese to their non-Jewish friends and partners. Some went so far as to name these partners to be executors of their wills. The Portuguese-Jewish community was too small to maintain a completely independent economic activity. Besides, after two generations in Saint-Domingue, the process of acculturation to the mores and way of life of the white planter class had made great strides among the Portuguese Jews. Even racial mixing had occurred. Among the documents we have come across is that of a certain Jean-Baptiste Alvares, mulatto. The patronymic Alvares being typically Spanish, he was either a liberated slave whose former master, an Alvares, had allowed him to adopt the family name, or a descendant of a mixed or interracial marriage. The second hypothesis seems more likely, as the social circle of Portuguese Jews was rather small, and it is unlikely that an outsider would have had such a name.¹⁸

We can obtain a better picture of acculturation by observing name changes. In this period, many Hebrew-biblical names were transformed into Christian-modern ones. Roman Catholic formulae also appeared in some Jewish wills.¹⁹ Thus there seems little doubt that at the close of the eighteenth century, Portuguese Jews and/or *conversos* were rapidly melting into the surrounding French Catholic ambience. Jewish identity was declining and approaching its nadir even before the end came to white domination of Saint-Domingue. In addition, some Jews—how many we do not know—emigrated or were killed during the slave uprisings.²⁰

A special problem arose under the British military occupation: the new authorities sequestered the property of absentee landlords and plantation owners. Land and property ownership thus became insecure. In order to carry on with business during these “troubles of the colony”—the euphemism often employed in legal papers of settlers and notaries—some businessmen departed the country, leaving behind powers-of-attorney with relatives or friends. A few left before the British military occupation; others fled under its protection. As a result, many saw their property seized. Later, a number of people requested

the return of their property (desequestration), notably Isaac Israel Molina. Though already in Philadelphia in 1796, he had confided his affairs to Messrs. Villemont and Montès-*ainé* (the elder), probably his earlier business associates.²¹ We did not find the decision in this particular case, but quite a number of similar requests to the governor-general of Saint-Domingue, Sir Adam Williamson, K.B., met with positive responses. At least one official, James Ester, was specifically empowered to deal with these requests.²² His name recurs a great many times in notarial minutes.

For all practical purposes, the evacuation of British troops ended the colonial period. It sounded the death knell to white domination, and with it to the Jewish presence in the region. While it existed, however, the "Jeremy group," whose history we have briefly recounted, seems to have been the second-largest Jewish group in colonial Haiti, after Cap Français. The commercial activities of both groups, if only of an ancillary nature, nevertheless contributed to the welfare of the colony, and more particularly to its international trade. A quantitative evaluation is at this stage impossible, but it is undeniable that the Jewish presence—before the rise of the first black republic in the New World—was both dynamic and economically useful: Indeed, Jews attained top financial and social positions.²³

So far, we lack indications in Jérémie of any autonomous Jewish religious life of the kind found in the northern part of Haiti.²⁴ We know of no cemeteries and no congregations. The members of the "Portuguese Nation" in and around Jérémie apparently maintained an ambiguous existence on the fringes of both Judaism and Christendom. In larger, more established communities, opportunities for religious and spiritual manifestations of Judaism were probably better.

Saint-Domingue was merely a peripheral and loosely knit unit within the chain of Caribbean Jewish communities. But its existence and persistence is nevertheless important. Even peripheral groups are part and parcel of the worldwide Jewish experience.

Zvi Loker has been the Israeli ambassador to the nations of Haiti and Madagascar and Mauritius. He has served in several other diplomatic posts, including consular positions in Paris, Bucharest, and Rome. He has written a number of scholarly articles in both French and English.

Notes

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1. For details about this place-name, see my article "Jewish Toponymies in Haiti," *Jewish Social Studies* 40, nos. 3–4 (Summer–Fall 1978): 287–292. A similar essay was published earlier in French in *Conjonction: Revue Franco-Haitienne* (Port-au-Prince), 135 (November 1977): 89–98.

2. Cf. the minutes of the Charleston notary public John Cripps, an official transcription of which, dated July 14, 1793, was consulted and copied from the collection of Dr. Kurt Fischer in Port-au-Prince. It is a power-of-attorney given to Cripps by a resident of Jérémie, I. Lange jeune (junior), on behalf of the enterprise "Rabbah Frères, Marchands à Bordeaux," concerning some funds and merchandise, unfortunately unspecified, at his disposal. The name Lange is also mentioned in B. W. Korn, *The Early Jews of New Orleans* (Waltham, Mass.: American Jewish Historical Society, 1969), among the "many non-Jewish merchants and customers" of Asher Moses Nathan (p. 140). Korn (pp. 307–308, n. 88) presents details about this family, which he claims "may have been converts to Catholicism in Saint-Domingue or in Cuba." A Lange family was in fact active at Jérémie in Saint-Domingue at the end of the eighteenth century, but so far we have found no evidence of a conversion. While the family may have arrived in the colony as *conversos*, it is more likely that they had remained Jewish. Some members of the Lange family living in Haiti in this period are known to have been practicing Jews. Joseph Lange, for instance, who had business dealings in New Orleans in 1812, is perhaps identical with our I. Lange, junior, the son of Mordekhay (Mardochee) Lange. The latter left an estate officially estimated at £16,870 to his widow, Esther, born Rodrigues, and to their seven children: Abraham, Sarah, Rachel, Esther, Joseph, Judaïque, and Abraham-Joseph. See *Etat Détaillé des Liquidations* (Paris: Ministry of Finance, 1834), 6:526–527.

3. Cf. the procuration issued to Louis David Lyma in Norfolk, Virginia, on January 18, 1793. No. 12 in the minutes of Notary Dobignies of Jérémie.

4. From document no. 37 of Notary Lafuge, dated April 27, 1794, we learn that the "negotiant William Edwards, resident of Baltimore, at present in Jérémie, on the basis of a power-of-attorney by John Carrera [reading not quite certain; possibly Casseres], merchant of Baltimore," sold a ketch named *L'Aigle* of 50 tons for 2,000 gourds, equivalent to 16,000 *livres tournois*, to our Mr. Lyma. It is rather exceptional that the text is made out in English, but it was obviously written by a Frenchman (see "negotiant" = *negociant*, above).

5. A similar procuration, given in February 1794, to L. D. Lyma, no. 16, concerned (ownership of?) a ship, the *Bienheureux* of 350 tons, "de présent à la Nouvelle Angleterre." The name of the ship's captain, Guillon, is also given, but we do not know anything about its cargo, destination, etc.

6. For example, Joseph Vidal, who fled "from the mulatto rule" at Les Cayes on the south-eastern part of the peninsula. His declarations, made on February 24, 1796, are contained in the notarial minutes of Cernon, Box XVI of the Jeremy Papers, Manuscript Section of the University Library of Gainesville, Florida, documents nos. 76, 77, 78, and 80.

7. They are listed alphabetically, with basic references, in the table on pp. 90–91. We possess supplementary data on the same families allowing for genealogical research.

8. I. S. Emmanuel, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles* (Cincinnati, 1970), pp. 828–830.

9. Cf. Act no. 5, Notary Layné, dated July 19, 1794, by which a certain François Lafargue ceded a "negresse Curaçolienne nommée Marie, âgée de 22 ans." By Act no. 34, Notary Momal, dated July 4, Catherine Françoise Gion, herself of Curaçao, confirmed having received payment from Isaac Henriquez Moron for "Th(er)èse Désirée et Jeannette toutes deux mulatresses âgées de sept ans." Regarding this person, see our articles: "Un Juif Portugais—fondateur de Moron?", *Conjonction* 139 (July 1978): 85–91; and "Simon Isaac Henriquez Moron—Homme d'Affaires de la Grand'Anse (Esquisse)," *Revue Hatienne d'Histoire, de Géographie et de Géologie* 37, no. 125 (December 1979): 56–69.

10. These two families kept their typically Jewish first names throughout the colony and they also intermarried (Lea Lange married Jacob Petit). Cf. Jeremy Papers, no. 161, Notary Billard, February 20, 1798.

11. In the document cited in note 5 above, he is described as representing "sa maison de commerce et Lyma frères de Bordeaux."

12. Charles and David. Another brother, Benjamin, remained at Bordeaux. David, son of Jacob and Lea Lange, also had a commercial association with Abraham Montès, another Portuguese, and Duverger Bourignon de Lormont, obviously a Frenchman. See notarial minutes of Billard, especially no. 114 of October 21, 1797.

13. Isaac Rodrigues Miranda and his son Eliaou (a common misspelling of Elijah or Eliahu). Cf. Jeremy Papers, Notary Lépine, Act no. 101 of June 18, 1787, by which the father transfers his assets, valued at £67,015, a considerable amount for that time, to his heir.

14. The first Mendès-France known in Saint-Domingue, David, lived at first in Jérémie, where he had a partnership with Jean Cardoze (1779–1785) and also with Mardochée Lange (1785); then he moved to Port-au-Prince. His son and heir, Isaac Mendès-France, was a great *planteur* at Petit-Goâve. The first two statements are borne out in documents of the Fischer Collection in Port-au-Prince (unnumbered).

15. See Appendix 3 (Navigation) in Emmanuel, *Jews of the Netherlands Antilles*, pp. 681–746.

16. In addition to Louis David Lyma, referred to above, other local Portuguese were engaged in shipping transactions. For example, Salomon Almeyda bought a ship in Tiburon on April 27, 1794 (Act no. 172 of Notary Lépine). So did P. S. Penha (Act no. 51, July 29, 1793, of Notary Huë).

17. The Danish possessions of Saint Thomas and Saint Croix, in the Virgin Islands, had Jewish inhabitants. Their interesting story is beyond the scope of this article. Well-established Jewish communities, complete with Portuguese-type synagogues, cemeteries, communal registers, etc., existed in Jamaica (still active) and Barbados (extinct) and in some of the Leeward Islands. The Jamaican story is related in the work of Jacob A. P. M. Andrade, *A Record of the Jews in Jamaica from the English Conquest to the Present Time* (Kingston, 1941), but would merit a fuller and more scholarly presentation.

18. Cf. the documents of Notary Baron. The act dated June 1796 shows Jean-Baptiste, mulatto of Jérémie, selling some real estate. He may have been a descendant of the Jewish merchant named Alvares, resident at Léogane and Nippes in 1765, who was mentioned by Abraham Cohen in *Revue des Etudes Juives*, 1882, p. 245, or of Aaron Alvares, who died in 1789 in Port-au-Prince, or perhaps of Abraham Alvares, shipowner and merchant, who resided at Cap Français (Cap Haïtien) from 1762 to 1763. See Emmanuel, *Jews of the Netherlands Antilles*, pp. 706 and 828. He should not be confused with Jean-Baptiste Jacob Alvares (notarial minute of 1807 by Notary Baron in Port-au-Prince), who participated in the distribution of the estate of Dubigné-Delamothe. The original act is in the Edmond Mangonès Collection, Bibliothèque Haïtienne des Frères de l'Instruction Chrétienne, Port-au-Prince.

19. The absence of the Roman Catholic credo in the preamble of a will is *prima facie* evidence that the testator did not belong to the established church; in other words, that he was either Jewish

or Protestant. When the onomastic form is taken into account, such an omission indicates a Jew. There is no such formula in the will of David Petit, document no. 161 of Notary Billard, dated February 1798, for instance. To use an Inquisition term, there were some "relapses" into Protestantism as well as, earlier, into Judaism.

20. There is some evidence that at least one Jewish family fleeing from the north successfully reached the United States; see Harold Moïse, *The Moïse Family of South Carolina: An Account of the Life and Descendants of Abraham and Sarah Moïse, who settled in Charleston, South Carolina, in the year 1791 A.D.* (Columbia, S.C.: R. L. Bryan Co., 1961). There may also have been some Jews among the French refugees in Jamaica; the names of d'Aguilar (pp. 132, 145), Brandon (p. 138), Mrs. Garcia with two children (pp. 37, 100), and Widow Sara Raban-Henriques (p. 47) are mentioned in the monograph by Ph. Wright and G. Debien, *Les Colons de Saint-Domingue passé à la Jamaïque (1792–1835)*, Extrait of the *Bulletin de la Société d'Histoire de la Guadeloupe* 26, no. 4 (1975), reprinted also in the series "Notes d'Histoire Coloniale," no. 168. The problem of the possible survival and evacuation of some Jews from the strife-torn territory of Saint-Domingue at the turn of the century still calls for research.

21. Cf. document no. 14, Notary Layné, dated February 22, 1796, for a desequestration request addressed to the governor-general, Sir Adam Williamson, K.B. On March 7, 1796, the request was registered in Port-au-Prince, probably for consideration.

22. Ester was appointed to deal with such matters by the officer commanding the British occupation forces. To cite just one complex case, the desequestration demand of Stanislas Foäche, the wealthy French owner of a plantation in the vicinity of the Voldrogue River, involved a number of visits to the sites as well as detailed inventories and other legal acts.

23. Postcolonial property evaluations by the French Ministry of Finance indemnified the heirs of the settlers. It is apparent that some of the Portuguese of the Grand'Anse region had widespread activities and generally belonged to the upper classes of their times. For details consult the six volumes of *Etat de l'Indemnité. Etat détaillé des liquidations opérées par la Commission chargée de répartir l'Indemnité attribuée aux anciens colons de Saint-Domingue, en exécution de la loi du 30 avril 1826* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1828–34).

24. See our "Un cimetière Juif au Cap Haïtien," *Revue des Etudes Juives* 136, fasc. 3–4 (July–December 1977): 425–427.