

Archival Practices: The Creation of a Portuguese Jewish Identity Aviva Ben-Ur

Communal archives can be oceanic in their expanse. French historian Arlette Farge likens national archives to an avalanche or a flood. They are “excessive and overwhelming,” and delving into them is like “a dive, a submersion, perhaps even a drowning,” she writes.¹ But for Portuguese Jews in the Dutch Caribbean, the archives they created and carefully preserved for 175 years—until the Emancipation of the Jews in 1825—were the very oxygen of their community. Since their first official arrival in the 1650s, Portuguese Jewish leaders consciously preserved their communal archives because they were legal documents. And legal documents have an afterlife. From a legal standpoint, the most important of these documents were those granting Jews communal autonomy: the right to practice Judaism, live their lives according to their religious and secular laws, build their own schools, form their own militia, and, above all, run their own court of justice. These special concessions surpassed any privileges granted other groups, whether Lutherans, Catholics, or Moravians, Indigenous Peoples, manumitted people of African origin, or Maroons, runaway slaves who formed autonomous communities in the rainforest of Suriname.

Most of the archives pertaining to Jews of Curaçao and Suriname, the focus of this article, were created and preserved thanks to a strong centralized Jewish government known as the Mahamad, the ruling authority of the Jewish community that held jurisdiction over its members and recorded, often weekly, cases that came to their attention. There are many reasons to compare Curaçao to Suriname. These communities were the “twin towers” of American Jewry. Both peaked at around 1,200 members by the late eighteenth century, comprising the two largest Jewish communities of the Americas. Both communities shared a common Portuguese Jewish culture. Both self-identified as “members of the nation of Spanish and Portuguese Jews.” The Jews of Curaçao, even though their homeland was surrounded by Spanish-speaking islands and bordered the largely Spanish-speaking mainland to the south, preserved Portuguese as their daily language, alongside Papiamentu, well into the 1800s. Suriname’s Jewish community also maintained Portuguese as a living language through the early 1800s, alongside its own Caribbean Creole language, Sranan Tongo, the sister of Papiamentu. For the most part, both communities recorded their court cases and corresponded not in the local Creole vernaculars, but in Portuguese.

The links between the communities were strengthened by regular population exchanges between the two regions, particularly among the indigent who requested dispatches, small amounts of money, to pay for their transportation out of the colony in order to seek their fortunes in another Jewish community. Portuguese Jewish communities, throughout Europe and the colonies, passed around their impoverished members like hot potatoes. The Surinamese records refer to a request from Aharon Lopes Fonseca, who had been granted dispatch in 1787 to his country (*sua patria*) in Curaçao, where his father was then cantor of the *kehila* (Jewish community). The Mahamad granted the money on condition that Fonseca never return to Suriname again, or at least not fall on the charge of its Jewish charity.

Curaçao and Suriname were also directly linked through the estate of an affluent Jew by the name of David Baruh Louzada, who had noble roots, lived for a time in Suriname, and died in Barbados in 1728. In his last will and testament of 1705, he left a large sum of money for the perpetual benefit of his indigent relatives. In 1769, 40 years after his death, one Abraham Baruh Louzada of Curaçao wrote a letter of appeal to the Surinamese Jewish charity chest for some of these earmarked funds. He described himself as a man of advanced age and very needy (“homen de cresida idade e muy nessitado”). The Surinamese Mahamad remitted to him 300 guilders. They sent the funds not directly to Curaçao, but rather via Amsterdam, underscoring how that mother city was, practically speaking, closer than Curaçao. Female family members also appealed to Louzada’s charitable request. One Clara Baruh Louzada, living in Curaçao in 1779, half a century after the death of her benefactor, wrote the Surinamese Mahamad of her misery. The Mahamad immediately dispatched her 100 guilders from the Louzada family fund. Again, the money was dispatched via Holland.²

Another sign of the close links between the colonies is a plantation lying on the Suriname River. It appears in the mid-eighteenth century as Klijn Curaçao. Most intriguingly, the Surinamese records also preserve the 1755 bylaws, or *askamot*, of Curaçao’s Jewish community. The very first bylaw shows strong parallels with Suriname’s Jewish community. It stipulates that “there may not be more than one *kehila* on the island. That *kehila* is known as Mikve Israel, in Willemstad, and Neve Salom, at the port, both united under the governing directorship of the Mahamad of Mikve Israel. No one may form another congregation on the entire island, nor may they gather or separate themselves into another congregation to pray with a minjam,” a quorum of ten adult men. Thus, we know that like Suriname’s Jewish community, the sister congregation of Curaçao was highly centralized and its Mahamad mightily powerful over its constituents.

We can see even through these few examples that the Jewish communities of both Suriname and Curaçao carefully preserved their paper archives. But why? And how did they relate to them? It may be useful to compare these archival collections to a *genizah*. The word *genizah* is derived from a word of Persian origin. It occurs in the Hebrew Bible, where it refers to the storage of valuable items. In Hebrew, Aramaic, and other Semitic languages, *genizah* has the meaning of “to hide,” “to cover,” “to bury.” In practice, *genizot* (plural of *genizah*) were depositories of items from a Jewish community that were removed from circulation because they were tattered and torn, and thus no longer usable. But, since they were regarded as sacred, these documents could not be destroyed. Rather than burn or dispose of them, Jewish communities developed the custom of storing them in three main ways. The first method was by ritual burial in cemeteries, probably the most common form of storage because it was the easiest. We know about this method in part from Elkan Nathan Adler, the great British Jewish bibliophile and antiquarian who visited what is today Turkey in 1898. Adler was especially interested in manuscripts. He visited the local Jewish cemeteries, which he described as ancient, and noted in his book *Jews From Many Lands* that “though we dug there for some hours we were unable to find any Genizoth.”³

The second method of storage was placing documents in tombs or in urns, as did the Jewish ascetics of the ancient Land of Israel. The stash that they deposited two thousand years ago along the Galilee Sea was finally discovered in 1947 by a Bedouin shepherd, who followed a stray sheep of his into an isolated cave. That stash is today known as the Dead Sea scrolls.

The third most common form of storage was the deposit of documents in spaces within the synagogue. The most famous case of synagogue storage is the Cairo Genizah. Located in the attic of the Ben-Ezra synagogue in Fostat, what is today a suburb of Cairo, Egypt, the Cairo Genizah contained 210,000 fragmentary texts when it was surveyed by Solomon Schechter in the late nineteenth century. These documents represented nearly a thousand years of history—from the tenth to nineteenth centuries—and were recorded primarily in Hebrew; Arabic and Judeo-Arabic, and Aramaic. Ladino and Yiddish also make their appearance. In the words of historian Marina Rustow, “it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the modern study of medieval Jewish history is inconceivable without the [Cairo] Genizah.”⁴ We would know almost nothing about the Jews of Golden Age Spain without the Cairo genizah, and much less than we otherwise would know about the Muslim Mediterranean. Some Jewish communities combined the two of the above methods. The aforementioned Adler, who visited Aleppo in 1898, commented “The [synagogue] Genizah is periodically emptied, and its contents are taken solemnly to the Jewish cemetery. Their burial is supposed to induce a downfall of rain.”⁵

Can we classify the Jewish archives of Curaçao and Suriname as *genizot*? Jews in Suriname were aware of the concept of the *genizah*. In their synagogue, located in the Jewish township of Jodensavanne, Jews referred to a drawer in the ark, where the Torah or Hebrew Bible scrolls were stored, as a *geniza*.⁶ Similarly, the Portuguese Jews of London regularly buried their Hebrew leaves and books, which they retrieved from what they called a “gueniza” in their synagogue.⁷ But there is an important distinction between all of the aforementioned *genizot* and the Jewish archives of Suriname and Curaçao. The Caribbean archives, unlike the *genizot* of Europe and the Middle East heretofore described, were living archives. That is, as I’ve mentioned earlier, they had an afterlife. Jewish leaders through the generations were hyper aware of the *genizah* and its importance to Jewish life, and tapped into those archives to regulate and even justify their existence. Isaac Emmanuel notes that in “their petitions or letters to the Dutch authorities, the Jews of Curaçao often referred” to the arrival of Isaac da Costa and his colleagues, founders of the first permanent Jewish community of Curaçao in 1659, together with a series of privileges accorded that year. In 1825, when the Jews of the Dutch colonies were emancipated, the *parnassim* (Jewish leaders) provided Governor Cantz’laar a detailed list of those historic privileges. The first cited privilege reads as follows: “Concession given by the Directors of the West India Company, at Amsterdam, under date of March 31, 1659, to Isaak da Costa and Company concerning the free exercise of their religion here, protection [by the authorities], [and] the privilege of building houses.” The *parnassim* specified that they were quoting from the original documents.⁸

These archives had yet another use: the creation of communal history. In Suriname, the Jewish physician and diplomat David Nassy made liberal and careful

use of his community's archives to write the very first history of Suriname. This work is known as the *Historical Essay* (or, in its original French, as the *Essai Historique*). It was published in 1788 and so widely disseminated that it came to the attention of Europe's enlightened Christian leaders. In fact, it was one of those European leaders who stimulated Nassy to undertake a history of Suriname when he contacted Nassy and expressed amazement at the existence of a Jewish township in the faraway colonies. The *Historical Essay* still stands as an example of early historical consciousness and the fine execution of history-writing skills. Nassy had direct access to the archives because he was a *parnas*, a leader of the *Mahamad*. But lay members of the Jewish communities were barred from the archives. They had to rely on the good will of the *parnassim* to access documents pertaining to their moment of need.

Jews of Curaçao, to my knowledge, never attempted to write any extensive history of their community before Isaac Emmanuel's stupendous 2-volume work *Jews of the Netherlands Antilles*, published in 1970. But there are some interesting early manifestations of historical consciousness. I am thinking of the "Memorias Senior," and "Memorias Curiel," written by leading members of the community. Unlike the *Essai*, which is written in narrative form, the "Memorias" are composed of a rather staccato and linear presentation of major communal events. The opening line reads: "Memorias de cousas antigas concernente asuntos Israeliticos desta ilha" (An account of ancient Jewish events concerning this island.) We learn that in 1674 a few *jehidim*, or full members of the Jewish community, donated funds for the construction of the island's first synagogue building. In 1690, we read, a Torah scroll was ordered from Amsterdam, for which 259.4 guilders were paid. In 1692, the congregation wrote Haham Isaac Aboab in Amsterdam, asking Ishac Sarucu, Joseph Franco, or Selomoh Templo to serve the congregation with a salary of 600 guilders and the use of a house. These kinds of details are not vague communal lore. Their specific nature, down to guilders and fractions thereof, is a clear indication that the author was directly referencing the community's archives.

The "Memorias Senior," a very similar type of historical account, were composed in 1763 by a member of the Senior family. This document was a living history, for it was continued by successive generations, until the 18 'teens. Its first page of text includes a listing of the various men who served the *kehila* as *hakhamim*, expositors of Jewish law, starting with Haham Pardo in 1674. The list includes the length of each *hakham's* service as well as salaries earned. Again, this type of specific information could only have been extracted from the communal archives, something only *parnassim* and former *parnassim* had direct access to.

The "Memorias Curiel" and "Memorias Senior" are, in the words of Isaac Emmanuel, "indisputably the most precious documents on the island related to the Jews of Curaçao." Emmanuel relies heavily on these *Memorias*, largely because the sources used to compose the *Memorias* were lost by the time Emmanuel began his research. Interestingly, according to Emmanuel, the *Memorias* never formed a part of the community archives.⁹ They were preserved in the hands of leading families and passed down through the generations. But they were never communally archived. This suggests that private families developed a tradition of history writing that they wanted to keep alive as a sort of family heirloom. The memory these

leading families strove to preserve was at once familial and institutional. These documents formed the backbone of the Jewish community's self-conception, and, at the same time, the backbone of the family's self-conception. One can also forcefully argue that these documents form a backbone of Curaçao's national history.

The preservation of these archives is remarkable because it precedes the rise of modern historical consciousness in the late nineteenth century, and the related concern for archival preservation. The *Memorias Curiel and Senior* should be understood within the genre of *memorias* which began to be penned in the late seventeenth century in Amsterdam's Portuguese Jewish community. As Daniel Swetschinski notes, the *memorias* created in Amsterdam praised the "strength of character of the New Christians (who had rejected the luxuries of the Iberian peninsula) and their steadfastness (in returning to their Jewish faith in such cold regions). One of these *memorias* even went so far as to liken the flight from Portugal to the Exodus from Egypt, with Holland as the Promised Land."¹⁰ In the Dutch colonies, by contrast, *memorias* seem to have a tinge of what post-colonial scholars refer to as "talking back," the propensity of Creole people to revise the image of them that was constructed in the fatherland.¹¹ For the Portuguese Jews of Curaçao and Suriname, that self-image seems to have been centered on the deep pride they took in their historic privileges. Their communal archives were the incarnate metaphor of those privileges.

To shed light on the motivations of the Curiel and Senior families, in writing down, periodically expanding on, and preserving their community's history, we now turn back to the eighteenth century David Nassy of Suriname. During his research and writing of the *Essai Historique*, Nassy became evermore aware of his community's loss of memory. He noted that the fragments of the old minutes became less legible each time they were consulted, and took upon himself to copy these old minutes so that they could be authenticated by the Mahamad and its secretary, and thereby preserved. Nassy referred to these archival sources as Surinamese Jewry's "only monument of antiquity." In response to him, the Mahamad agreed that the old minutes were "among the most beautiful ornaments present in the archives."¹²

It is not an accident that these parnassim used the imagery of jewelry to describe their written heritage, a throwback to the secondary meaning of *genizah* manifest in the Hebrew Bible: treasury. Their allusion to "beautiful ornaments" instantly brings to mind Isaac Emmanuel's study of Curaçao's cemetery, *Precious Stones of the Jews of Curaçao*. The regard Atlantic Jews displayed for historic cemeteries is unusual in human history and is a very recent way of relating to cities of the dead. Portuguese Jews called their burial sites *batei hayim*, houses of life, and this is not just a euphemism for death, as is often explained. Nor is it merely an expression of the traditional Jewish belief that life continues after death. For the Portuguese Jews of Curaçao, stone markers were both sacred *and* historical. They were a way the local community could demonstrate honor and respect for their family members and ancestors. But they were also a testament to the longevity of Jews in the colony. Cemeteries were a highly visible marker in the landscape that underscored the localism of Jews. Therefore, cemeteries were solid proof against various arguments that arose during the Emancipation period depicting Jews as a

transient, wandering people, who did not really belong. In that sense, cemeteries and papers archives served a similar historical purpose. They both had an afterlife, and for that reason they were both powerful and precious.

To conclude, let us turn to the words of historian Gérard Nahon, who wrote an extensive meditation on the *memorias* genre. Nahon points out that these *memorias* prove that historian Yosef Haim Yerushalmi was wrong. Yerushalmi had argued in his acclaimed book *Zakhor* of 1982 that medieval and early modern Jews had a fundamental lack of interest in history. He further explained that the repository for the Jewish community's memory was not history but rather genres of a religious nature. As examples, Yerushalmi pointed to *selihot* (penitential prayers), the Ashkenazi *Memorbücher* (memory books preserving accounts of the saintly deeds of communal leaders), or the so-called *Purim kattán*, the minor Purims that recast the redemption of European Jews from outbreaks of violence as an a variant of the rescue of Persian Jews from genocide, as told in the Book of Esther. This assessment of an ahistoric mentality, Gérard Nahon argues, does not hold true for Portuguese Jews of the Atlantic world. For these Jews, he argues, "*History*"—not religious genres or Jewish holidays—"served as a vehicle of memory." Portuguese Jewish communities of the Atlantic world did not produce small Purims, *selihot*, or special fast days. But they did produce other vehicles of memory: prayers in honor of illustrious victories, elegies commemorating the martyrs of the Inquisition, sermons with historical content and, of course, the *memorias* that reconstructed the early history of their communities. Nahon points out that these historical accounts represent a break with the mentality of olden days. They express the desire of a community to identify with its recent past.¹³

Borrowing further from Nahon's ideas, we can conclude that in attempting to conserve and exalt their verifiable history, the very history they preserved in their communal archives, Portuguese Jews of Curacao and Suriname were "responding to a powerful, compelling, fundamental aspiration: the creation of a memory to transport [them] from a past with which they could live into a present ...which they could take with them into the future."¹⁴ That is the power of paper.

¹ Arlette Farge (trans. Thomas Scott-Railton), *The Allure of the Archives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013 [1989]), 4.

² Nationaal Archief Nederland, Nederlandse Portugees Israëlitische Gemeente in Suriname, inv. nr. 1, February 20, 1779.

³ Elkan Nathan Adler, *Jews in Many Lands* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1905), 155.

⁴ Marina Rustow, "The Genizah and Jewish Communal History," in Ben Outhwaite and Siam Bhayro, eds., *"From a sacred source": Genizah Studies in Honour of Stefan C. Reif* (Leiden: Brill, 2010): 289-317; 291.

⁵ Adler, *Jews in Many Lands*, 164.

⁶ Insert note.

⁷ London Metropolitan Archives, 4521/A/01/03/008, Minutes of Meetings of the Mahamad, from Tisry 5579-1818 to - - [sic], May 8, 1823, p.299.

⁸ Isaac S. Emmanuel and Suzanne A. Emmanuel, *History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles*, 2 vols. (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1970), 1: 48.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2: 1113

¹⁰ Daniel M. Swetschinski, "From the Middle Ages to the Golden Age, 1516-1621," in J. C. H. Blom, R. G. Fuks-Mansfeld, and I. Schöffner, *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2002), 44-84; 64.

¹¹ I thank Sina Rauschenbach for introducing me to this concept. She is completing an article on the topic of "writing back" in the context of David Nassy.

¹² Nationaal Archief Nederland, Nederlandse Portugees Israëlitische Gemeente in Suriname, inv. nr. 2, December 22, 1788.

¹³ Gérard Nahon, "The Portuguese Jewish Nation of Amsterdam as Reflected in the Memoirs of Abraham Haim Lopes Arias, 1752," in Chaya Brasz and Yosef Kaplan, eds., *Dutch Jews as Perceived by Themselves and by Others: Proceedings of the Eighth International Symposium on the History of the Jews in the Netherlands* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 59-78; 74.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*