OLDEST SYNAGOGUE IN THE NEW WORLD



PICTURES FACTS * FIGURES

MTA KÖNYVTÁRA SCHEIBER GYÜJTEMÉNY

THREE CENTURIES
OF JEWISH LIFE
IN CURAÇAO

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AND THE WAY OF WATERING TO THE TOTAL

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THREE CENTURIES OF JEWISH LIFE...



Mikve Israel's synagogue in Curação N.A. (consecrated 1732) the oldest of the Americas.

Edited by

Rabbi Is. Jessurun Cardozo

1

The island of Curação

Curaçao, for the geographically minded, is in the Caribbean Sea at 12 degrees North Latitude and 68 degrees East Longtitude. It is 38 miles off the coast of Venezuela between its sister islands, Aruba and Bonaire. Aruba lies about 50 miles to the west, and Bonaire 30 miles east. The trio are often known as the ABC islands because of the first letters of their names.

Originally, this group and St. Martin, St. Eustatius, and Saba were known as the territory of Curaçao, but the last revision of the Netherlands Constitution changed the title to "Nederlandse Antillen".

Curação covers an area of about 173 square miles and has a population of over 100.000 persons.

The name of the island, Curaçao, is the subject of much debate and speculation. Alonzo de Ojeda, when he arrived there, was told by the Carib Indians living there, that the island was called Curassi, which would form a logical basis for assuming that the present name is a corruption of the original Indian nomenclature.

Another theory, which finds considerable support, is that the name Curação is from the Spanish "corazon", meaning h e a r t. To the early settlers it seemed that the

Jewish Relief Committee of Curação N.A.





Some of the 18 beautiful Sefarim (Scrolls of the Law) in the Mikve Israel Synagogue, of which five are rolled upon cylinders made of solid silver. Many of these scrolls are older than the synagogue building itself and have been used almost three centuries ago.

shape of the island was that of a heart — an assumption which, of course, later exploration proved untrue. This theory is backed by those who take it for granted that the present name was chosen after the Spanish were driven out by the Dutch expedition which took possession and after the Portuguese language assumed importance on the island.

There are scores of words in Portuguese which differ from Spanish in the endings, although the meanings are identical. This linguistic difference makes the Spanish "on" ending "ao" in Portuguese. This is also true in examples of Sephardic Jewish family names, which are spelled differently depending upon whether the name originated in Spain or Portugal. Jews from Spain, for example, with such names as Moron, de Leon, Brandon, to mention just a few, find parallels in the Portuguese background names of Morao, de Leao and Brandao.

A summary of important dates in the history of Curação and its Jewish community you will find on the pages 27—30 in this booklet.

2

Oldest Congregation in the New World

The Curação Congregation "Mikvé Israël" (Hope of Israel) is the oldest still existing Jewish congregation in the New World. Since 1654 it has served as the center of religious and social life for its members. Descendants of the same Portuguese families that founded the organization almost three centuries ago, still worship

there, still keep their old cemetery intact, and still constitute one of the most important elements of the present Jewish population of the island.

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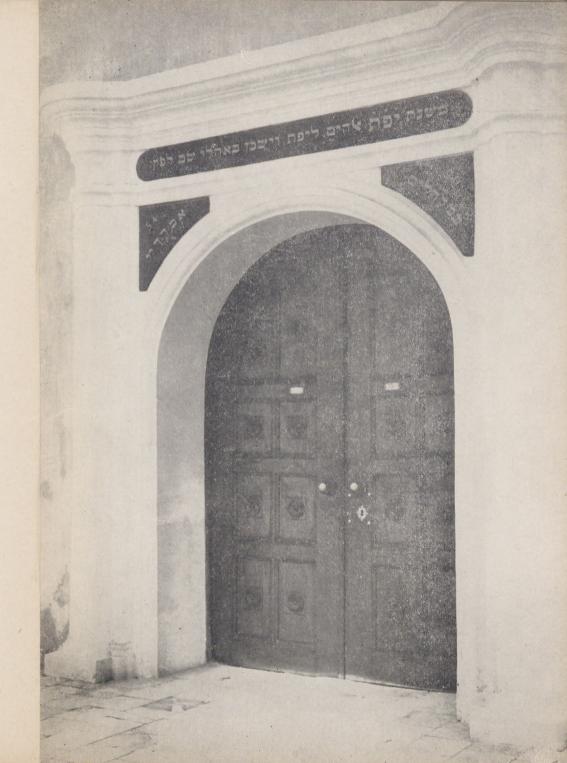
Oldest Synagogue of the Americas

The Synagogue of the Congregation "Mikvé Israël" in Curaçao, consecrated in the year 1732, is not only the oldest place of worship in Curaçao itself, but is the oldest synagogue anywhere in the Western Hemisphere that is still in active use.

The Bible text in Hebrew (Genesis 9:27) which runs across the top of the entrance, reads: "God enlarge Japheth and He shall dwell in the tents of Shem".

In the old Hebrew language the identical characters are used to express both the letters and the numerals. Consequently, above the word "Japheth" three stars are placed by the proper characters to indicate the year in which the cornerstone was laid. Converted to numerals, they indicate 490, representing the Hebrew calendar year 5490. The "5" is not symbolized in any way, but omission of the millenia in this way of mentioning dates, is not unusual.

Entrance of the Mikve Israel Synagogue. The door is of a heavy mahogany above which is placed an ornament of bright blue. This serves as the background for the Bible text, which runs across the top of the entrance in bold cupper letters. (See above and picture on next page)

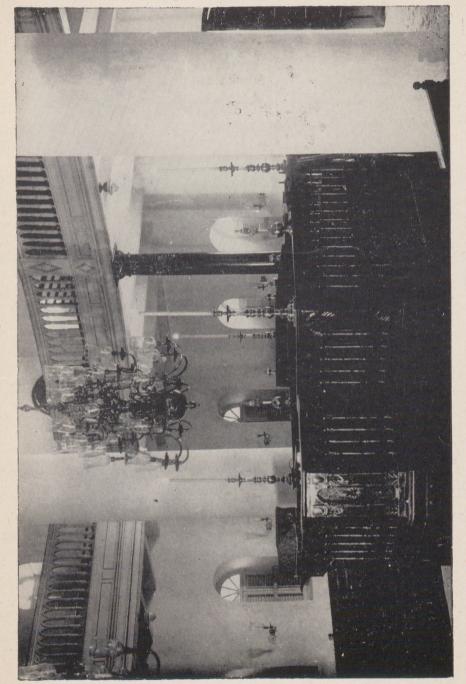


Within the Synagogue itself four massive 24-candle chandeliers are suspended from the ceiling. Made of solid brass, they are copies of similar ones that adorn the famous synagogue of the Portuguese Jewish Congregation at Amsterdam.

On the mahogany balustrade of the Hechal (Holy Ark) and Theba, or reader's platform, stand eight huge candlesticks, also of brass. These too are exact replicas of those in Amsterdam. The unique design of these candlesticks are such as to make a member of the Amsterdam congregation quite at home if he should visit the synagogue in Curaçao. In a remarkable bit of art work, the original designers of the candle-sticks have shaped their products so, that an observer will discover the representation of a complete Habdala-set, consisting of a candle-holder, a wine-cup and a besamim-box.

Some portions of the interior actually surpass in age that of the building itself. For thirty years before the present synagogue was constructed they had been used in the former building which stood on the same location. Among such features are the huge brass chandeliers and the candlesticks, just mentioned.

The Hechal (Holy Ark) with its eighteen Sefarim, or Scrolls of the Law, is a masterpiece of art work, made of a heavy and richly carved mahagany, standing seventeen feet high and fifteen feet wide. At its top are the two Tablets, also of mahagany, on which are hammered solid silver letters of the Ten Commandments in relief. Several of the Sefarim and the oldest of the Scroll



gowns served in former synagogues. The silver scroll ornaments likewise are actually older than the present building.

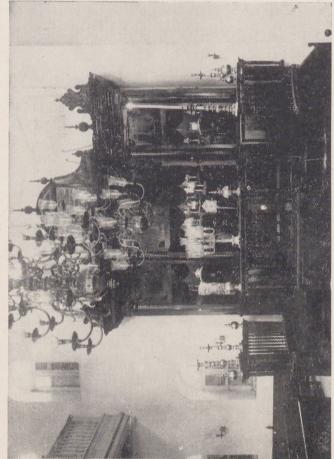
All the wooden furniture of the building, the seats for the members and the women's gallery are of a heavy, dark mahogany. The ceiling also is of the same wood, but during the passage of the years, the ceiling and the gallery were painted white so as to brighten the interior of the synagogue, which, due to the large quantity of the dark wood used, attained a sombre appearance at one time.

On the north side of the building, which would be the left wall as one faces the Ark, there is an elegant baldaquin with five seats. These are for the Parnassim (members of the executive board) or, in Spanish: Directiva.

Why there is sand on the floor? There is considerable difficulty in tracing the reason for the presence in the synagogue of this sand, which has covered the floors of the building for centuries.

One attempt at an explanation is that the sand has a symbolic meaning. It is there as a reminder of the Ohel Moëd, the Tabernacle built by the Israelites when they were wandering through the desert before they reached the Promised Land.

Another interpretation is that the sand originated simply as a practical measure to silence footsteps and to minimize sound.



Services and ceremonies

The services in the synagogue are held every Fridaynight, Sabbathmorning, Saturdaynight and, of course, on all Jewish festivals and memorial days. The High Holidays are widely observed by virtually the entire Jewish community. At "Mikvé Israël" the attendance is usually high.

All these services are held according to the Sephardic Portuguese rite as that of the old Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam, which would make it an orthodox rite.

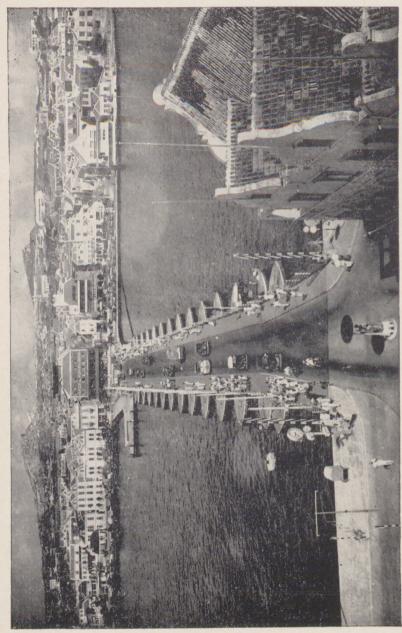
The women attending services sit in the galleries upstairs.

On the first night of Pesach (Passover), immediately following the services, a community seder is held in the patio (court-yard) of the synagogue, attended by a large group including many non-members and other visitors.

Wedding ceremonies generally take place at night, and, in addition to the usual electric light illumination, every candle in the historic chandeliers and candelabras are lighted, causing the synagogue to stand out in an blaze of lights, much like the fairy story visions......

It is likely that both explanations of the origin of the sand on the floor are correct. Such a characteristic is not exclusively that of the Curação Synagogue, but is typical of Portuguese synagogues in general, and will be found in such buildings that have been erected more or less according to the features and design of the one in Amsterdam.

Generally, however, the sand is spread over the floor in a somewhat thin veneer. Nowhere, but in Curaçao, does it appear in so thick and soft a layer as to give the appearance and feeling of a fine carpet.



the year 1888. On Otrabanda" (the

The entire wedding ceremony as it is performed at Mikvé Israël has about it a certain aura of loftiness and what might be described as a "Thousand-And-One-Nights" atmosphere such as makes it easily understandable why it is considered at least equal to the most solemn and impressive church weddings on the island.

On the first night of Succoth, immediately following the services in the synagogue, everyone meets in the "Cabana" (Sukka), where an informal address is given to explain the significance of the holiday. A festival Kiddush is sung: "h a m o t s e e", the blessing of the bread is recited, and a collation of cakes and sweets is served. At the end of the repast, as an introduction to the "Birkath Hamazon" (Grace after meals) the entire gathering sings "Bendigamos", a traditional hymn in Spanish. A similar ceremonial meal is held again in the "Cabana" following the morning services of the next day.

Prayers for the Queen, for the Government of the Netherlands and for the local administration are recited partly in Portuguese. So is the announcement of the new moon on the Saturdays before Rosh Hodesh. After the Hebrew reading, the Minister may say: "Mañan es Rosh Hodesh" (to-morrow is Rosh Hodesh) or "Quarta feira es Rosh Hodesh" (Wednesday is Rosh Hodesh) etc. etc.

Oldest Cemetery

The old, walled cemetery, known to the Jewish Community as the "Beth Haim" (House of the Living) is situated about two and a half miles out of "Punda" — the business center of Willemstad — along the main road, the Schottegatweg.

Consecrated in 1659, it is the oldest on the island of Curaçao, undoubtedly is the oldest Jewish burial ground still in use in the Western Hemisphere, and some statements have been made to the effect that it is the oldest Caucasian cemetery in the New World.

The old cemetery itself covers an area of about three acres. More than twenty-five hundred of the graves are still in good condition, and the epitaphs — in Portuguese, Hebrew, Dutch, Spanish and English — tell a fascinating tale.....

The oldest legible inscription is the one on the stone of Judith Nunes da Fonseca, whose death took place in January 1668.

From its consecration in 1659 until 1880 the old cemetery was the only one used by the Jewish community of Curaçao. In the latter year another one was consecrated, but the old burial place is still in use today.



One grave at the Curação cemetery which should be of more than just passing interest to American visitors is that of Eliao Hiskiao Touro, who died 3 Ab 5434 (1674). He was the uncle of Ishac de Abraham Touro, whose family came to Newport, Rhode Island, and founded the Touro Synagogue there. This synagogue is the oldest still standing in the United States and is one of the country's national historic shrines.

6

Jewish life to-day

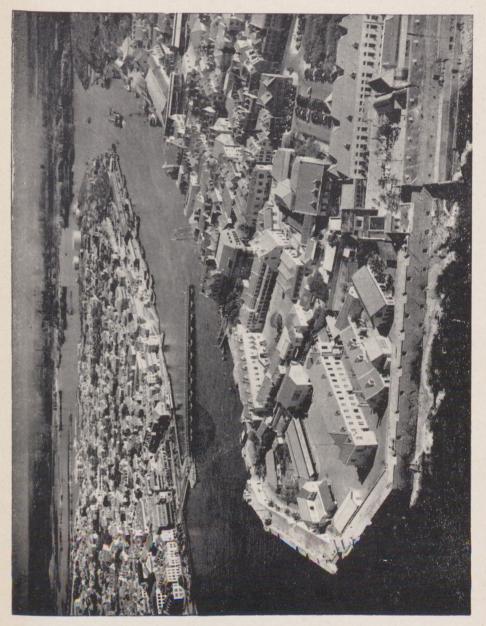
The Jewish population on Curação — according to our own most recent census — now stands at almost 200 families, totalling 665 persons.

The old Congregation "Mikvé Israël" counts 48 local Sephardic families, totalling 235 persons and 16 European families, totalling 53 persons, being altogether: 288 souls.

The Club "Union" (Ashkenazic community) has 70 families, totalling 248 persons.

The reminder either are members of the reform congregation, Emanu-El, or have no affiliation with any group.

Religious instruction is conducted by Rabbi Is. Jessurun Cardozo at the public school and, on work-days, every afternoon at the Hebrew School "Moria".



Curaçao's capital, Willemstad, is divided into two distinct parts by St. Anna Bay, a water passage which forms the entrance to the famous natural harbor of Curaçao. Both sections are joined by a unique pontoon bridge which floats on fourteen boats and which is opened and closed electrically.

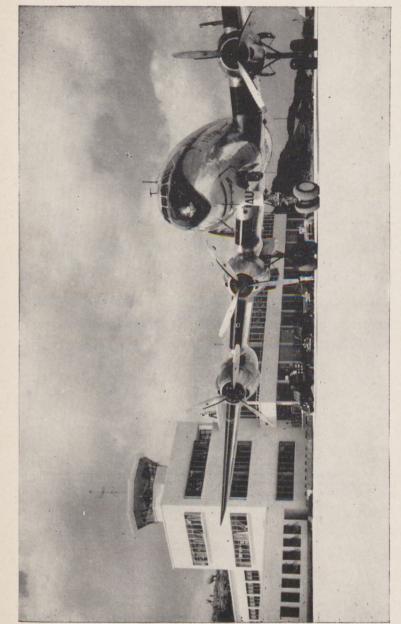
A monthly magazine, entitled "Mikvé Israël", is issued in Dutch by Rabbi Cardozo for the Jewish families in Curaçao and Aruba. This paper enjoys a wide circulation, being sent also to many addresses in Surinam, Holland, the United States and Israel.

Languages spoken. Although the official language in Curaçao is Dutch, Papiamentoe — the native language — is spoken by all Curaçao born people regardless of their origin, religion or race. Papiamentoe is a tongue using in large Portuguese derivation, with Spanish, Dutch, French and English words and phrases added.

While many theories exist as to its origin, the most obvious one is that the Portuguese of the tongue at least comes from the language spoken by the Jews in the early days of the island.

The Jews living in Curação are also quite fluent in Spanish and Dutch and in addition, virtually all of them speak English quite well. In the case of the Ashkenazic Jews on Curação the adults and many youngsters also speak Yiddish. The study of languages is a serious matter in the schools, so that many children, besides Papiamentoe and Dutch, can handle English and Spanish as well.

Jewish organizations in Curaçao, besides those already mentioned such as the congregations themselves, and the Club "Union", are: the Jewish Relief Committee, the Curaçao Ladies Benevolent Society, Alivio del Pobre (Help to the poor), the Montefiore Fund, the Jewish Culture and Sporting Club "Maccabi", the Keren Kaye-



well as for the innumerable by international airlines which island, to the maintaining schedules talso an important aerial beautiful Hato airport. a regular port of call for the United States and Curação is not cruise steamers

met Committee, the Ladies Committee of O.S.E., the Curaçao branch of W.I.Z.O., and a number of others. The "Hias" and the "American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee" also are represented by the Jewish Relief Committee of Curaçao.

7

Relations with other groups

It is usual for visitors to Curação, to inquire as to the relations between the historic Jewish community and other religious groups of the island.

We are happy to report that these relations are of the best.

Inspired by famous leaders of former centuries who distinguished themselves in the field of inter-faith relations, and especially by the pioneering efforts of Chief Rabbi Mendez Chumaceiro, all religious groups cooperate whole-heartedly in serving the entire population of this remarkable lovely island, a stronghold of traditional freedom.

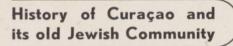
We pray that, with God's Help, we may continue to move in the same spirit of brotherhood. Amen.

SOME IMPORTANT DATES IN THE HISTORY OF CURAÇÃO

On next page:

Remarkable tombstone on the famous old cemetery. On the grave of Abigail Aboab Cardozo, wife of Salomon Nunes Rodondo (died 10 Tammuz 5507 or June 18, 1747) two Biblical scenes are sculptured to make reference both to the departed and to her husband. On one side is the scene of Solomon's famous judgement. On the other is an illustration of the incident in which Abigail honors King David with gifts.





- 1499 The Spanish navigator de Ojeda, a colleague of Columbus during the latter's second voyage, discovers Curação on July 26th. In the party is the Italian geographer, Amerigo Vespucci, after whom the Americas were named.
- 1634 First expedition of the Dutch "West Indische Compagnie" to Curação, led by Commander Johannes van Walbeeck. The island is taken without battle and the Spanish never attempt to recapture it.

 Samuel Coheno, first known Jew in Curação, arrives with the West Indische Compagnie expedition.
- 1648 Possession of Curação by the Netherlands confirmed by the peace treaty of Munster.
- 1651 Joao Ilhao, a Portuguese Jew, establishes the first Jewish agricultural settlement in Curação.
- 1652 Second Jewish Agricultural settlement on Curação established. The privileges granted to Joseph Nunes da Fonseca (also known as David Nassi) form first charter by which freedom of religion is guaranteed to Jews in the Western Hemisphere.
- Fall of Recife (Pernambuco), Brasil. Arrival of a group Portuguese Jews from Brasil. Congregation "Mikve Israel" is formed.
- Twelve Portuguese Jewish families consisting of 70 persons arrive from Holland.
 Consecration of Old Cemetery.

- 1666 During the second war between Holland and England the English attempt a surprise conquest of Curação but fail.
- 1668 Death of Judith Nunes da Fonseca, whose tombstone carries the oldest legible inscription in the old cemetery.
- 1673 During Holland's war with France, England, Cologne and Munster, the French make unsuccessful attempts to take the island.
- 1674 Josiao Pardo, first Chief Rabbi of Curaçao, arrives with his family from Holland.
 Purchase of a building in Willemstad in the Punda section, and the establishment in it of the first synagogue.
- 1692 Second synagogue consecrated.
- 1703 Under the administration of Governor Nicolaas van Beek, Beekenburg Fortress is built at Caracas Bay. It is the first object visible from the sea in approaching the Bay. Third synagogue consecrated.
- 1713 During Holland's war with France and Spain, the Frenchman Jacques de Cassard appears off Curação with five battleships. He withdraws, however, on payment of 115,000 pesos.
- 1715 Hebrew Benevolent Society of Curação is founded.
- 1729 Support to the oldest Jewish congregation of New York, Shearith Jacob (now called Shearith Israel) enabling the New York group to build its first synagogue.
- 1732 Consecration of the fourth (present) synagogue on the first eve of Pesach (Passover) 5492.
- 1743 Consecration of the synagogue Neve Shalom, in the Otrabanda section of Willemstad.
- 1750 Revolt of slaves at Hato.

 End of the conflict between the Neve Shalom synagogue and the Parnassim of Mikve Israel synagogue.

- 1765 Jacob Lopez da Fonseca becomes Chief Rabbi of Curação. He is the only Chief Rabbi ever born in Curação itself. Financial support given to the congregation, Nephutsay Israel, at Newport, Rhode Island.
- 1795 Netherlands war with England over Dutch-French treaty. The pact would enable France to call on Curação to defend the island against the English and is strongly opposed by the Curação population which fears French domination.
- 1796 Because of the war with England, a National Guard is formed in Curação. Several Portuguese Jews join as officers or members of the Guard.
- 1800 French commander Bresseau, with five battleships, arrives with the intention of occupying the island. Curação authorities, although officially at war with England, ask for English aid rather than be dominated by the French, English Commander Frederick Watkins responds to the call.
- 1802 Peace Treaty of Amiens returns Curação to the Netherlands.
- 1807 An English force commanded by Charles Brisbane takes Curação in a surprise attack.
- 1814 Curação returned to Holland by the Convention of Vienna. Important financial support by the Jews to the Government of Curação.
- 1817 Congregation Mikve Israel adds the word "Netherlands" to its name, and from that time on is officially called "Netherlands Portuguese Israelite Congregation Mikve Israel".
- 1825 Royal decree officially grants equal rights of citizenship to the Jews of Curação.
- 1827 Curação becomes a free port.
- 1856 Chief Rabbi Aharon Mendes Chumaceiro arrives from Holland.
- 1863 Official end of slavery on the island.
 Reformed Congregation Emanu-El, formed on Curação.

- 1877 Island of Curação hit by fierce hurricane.
- 1880 New cemetery consecreted. However, old cemetery continues in use to the present time.
- 1886 Island damaged by a cyclone.
- 1888 World famous Queen Emma Pontoon bridge built in Willemstad.
- 1916 Royat Dutch Shell Company forms its subsidiary, Curaçaose Petroleum Industrie Maatschappij (C.P.I.M.).
- 1917 Maduro's Bank founded.
- 1927 Immigration of Ashkenazic Jews from Europe.
- 1933 Club Union formed by the Ashkenazic Jews.
- 1937 Curação permitted to elect its own legislature.
- 1940 Monthly publication "Mikve Israel" founded.
- 1941 Jewish Relief Committee formed in Curação.
- 1944 Princess (now Queen) Juliana visits Curação.
- 1948 All requirements for voting save 23-year age and citizenship abolished by change in Netherlands constitution.
- 1950 Hebrew school "Moria" founded.



Aharon Mendes Chumaceiro, Chief Rabbi on Curação from 1856 until 1869.

9

Story of Jewish Reliefwork on Curação

When the dark cloud of Hitlerism and the Nazi doctrine began to spread over Europe vast numbers of refugees began moving out of Germany and German-occupied lands, such as Austria, the Sudetenland and other territories in which the Nazis began to wield considerable influence. Many of these terror-stricken persons and families sought passage to the Western hemisphere and some of them succeeded in obtaining transportation.

When the first ships filled with these refugees from the Nazis put in at the harbour of Curaçao, en route to the South and Central American countries, it was a matter of necessity that a Jewish Relief Committee be formed. The hundreds of Jewish emigrants in transit were in need of considerable assistance in a large percentage of the cases — assistance of both a moral and physical nature.

At first the committee formed in Curação was of an informal nature, consisting of a small group of persons who, although not officially organized, nevertheless represented the Jewish groups existing on the island. It was this group of spirited men and women who attempted to see to the needs of the refugees passing through their

territory. They collected and distributed clothing, medicines, foods and fruits even to the extent of baby food. Often they even supplied money to the travellers, many of whom fled Europe with barely enough to obtain space on the vessels which carried them.

When the second World War descended upon Europe, and later, when the Nazis marched into and occupied the Netherlands, Curaçao also was plunged into a state of war. The harbour was placed under military control, and for a while it appeared as though the work carried on by the Committee in visiting the refugee ships would have to come to a halt. The authorities of Curaçao, however, recognized the importance of the work done by the Relief Committee and gave the group special permission to continue to pay calls upon ships carrying refugees.

In November of 1941, the Government of Curação offered shelter to eighty-six hapless and almost desperate refugees, virtually all of whom were Jews, who were aboard the Spanish ship, "Cabo de Hornos". This group had sailed for Argentina but some technical complication at the last moment had led to a revocation of their landing permits.

The sudden influx of so many refugees at one time, most of them penniless, made it imperative to reorganize the Relief Committee on a formal basis. A new group, known as "Joods Hulp Comité" (Jewish Relief Committee) or in Spanish, "Comite pro Ayuda Israelita", was promptly set up. Its immediate task was to raise funds for the support of the refugees to add to those sums provided by the American Joint Distribution Committee.

The latter organization from the very beginning, had taken over the financial responsibility to the Government of Curaçao. The late Milton H. L. Maduro, then the president of the Congregation Mikvé Israël, was named honorary representative of the JDC in Curaçao. It was a far from easy task and certainly a weighty one in terms of the responsibility the position demanded. Not only was it necessary to discuss all the financial matters with the Government, but there were also the matters of the refugees themselves, their personal problems as well as the problems posed by their joining the community.

Some of the refugees had an opportunity to emigrate to the United States. They had to settle their affairs and be assisted in reaching the country. Others could go to several other American countries and they, too, required advice and aid.

In the eyes of the local committee in Curaçao, not all the financial help should be placed upon the shoulders of the JDC. It went into action, too. Beds were provided for the children. Extra fruits, vitamins and similar items were distributed. Education for the youngsters in the public schools was paid for. So were the expenses in obtaining expert medical care and adequate hospitalization for the sick.

From that first incident until the present time, the Jewish Relief Committee has extended its help to many other groups of emigrants. In fact, it has become necessary to open a permanent office in Curação to carry on the work on a full time basis throughout the week.

Nor has the work been confined solely to those only of Jewish faith. Help was extended to many non-Jewish

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itters of gratitude received by the Jewish Relief (ittee of Curaçao from Princess (now Queen) Juliana the Governor of Netherlands West Indies.



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