

ON THE JEWISH COLONY AT REMIRE, FRENCH GUIANA

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The age of exploration initiated by the discoveries of Cristobal Colón, Pizarro, Vespucci, and others continued throughout the sixteenth century, with Portugal and Spain assuming the leading role in the New World. The greatest achievement of the Portuguese was the discovery and eventual colonization of Brazil, while the Spaniards reached many South American lands, including the Caribbean chain of islands. During the first half of the sixteenth century, parts of the huge Guianan territories came under Spanish control, but by the latter half of the century, other European powers had entered the area. Of special significance for the topic of this paper is the rivalry between French and Dutch traders and adventurers for control of Guiana. Although the Dutch must be credited with the establishment of the first Guianan settlement, located on the Pomeroon River, both the British and the French sent expeditions to the area in the 1590s and early 1600s, headed by Raleigh for the British, and by Postel of Dieppe and Jean Moques for the French.

Franco-Dutch rivalry for control of the area continued into the seventeenth century. A French attempt at settlement in Cayenne, in 1613, involving some one hundred and sixty families, failed; two years later, the Dutch Zealanders introduced colonists into the area, also with no lasting results. With the capture of Bahia in northeastern Brazil in 1624, the Dutch initiated their colonizing endeavors in the Caribbean area, but these lasted barely a generation. Although Jews were involved in these early endeavors, it is mainly the conclusion of this period that concerns us. As a result of the Portuguese reconquest of Brazil in 1654, a number of repatriated Jewish citizens of the Netherlands remained or settled in the Dutch possessions north of Brazil, namely Guiana (Surinam), and some of the Caribbean islands, like Curaçao.

The history of the Guianas strongly reflects the involvement of the various great powers in the region. Starting in 1624, the French actively colonized, establishing a *Comptoir* (trading post) on the river Sinnamary, the Compagnie de Rouen in the thirties, and the town of Cayenne in 1643. However, these colonizing efforts did not last. Concurrently, there was Dutch activity as well, with Dutch colonists, under the patronship of Gerrit Spranger, establishing Nova Zeelandia nearby. This brings us to our specific topic of interest — the Jewish settlement in Guiana.

Some eighty years have elapsed since the completion of Samuel Oppenheim's pioneering study of the Jewish settlement in Western Guiana (ex-British and French Guiana).¹ Since that time, a number of studies, both on the subject in general and on the Jewish settlement on the so-called "Isle de Cayenne" in particular, have appeared.² In French Guiana itself, historical research has recently been given new impetus by the preparation of a *History of Guiana*, initiated by a group of local

historians including Vincent Huyghes-Belrose and Philippe Guéritault. A summary of my research on the Jewish community of Cayenne is included in this collection.³

Further clarification of our state of knowledge regarding Jewish settlement in this colonial area is called for. In particular, it is necessary to uproot an oft-repeated misconception associated with the French conquest of Cayenne in 1664, as well as with the British raid in the fall of 1667.⁴ The two noteworthy points are: (1) The French did not expel the Jews, nor did they disturb their *habitations* or their agricultural enterprises; (2) The British raiders, under the command of John Harman, deported the Jewish settlers to Barbados and Surinam respectively, and not to La Rochelle in France.

The first Jewish settlers arrived in Cayenne in the 1650s under the leadership of David Nassy, and by the 1660s there were established Jewish planters in the Cayenne area of the Wild Coast, later known as Guiana, on the Spanish Main between Venezuela and Brazil. Nassy had obtained an *Octroy* (grant) under the Dutch system of *Patroon der Patronen*, and on this basis he recruited two or even three groups of Jews, including more than one hundred refugees from the Italian port city of Leghorn (Livorno), who sailed to Cayenne via the island of Tobago in the leewards of the Caribbean Sea. Following some initial difficulties with the local Dutch *Commandeur* Langendijk,⁵ the new settlers commenced building their homes and establishing plantations. Their undertakings included the installation of a sugar mill, production of rocou and indigo (raw materials for dyes), and cultivation of tobacco. It may be that some of the new settlers were repatriated Dutch colonists from Brazil (where Dutch rule lasted from 1630-1654),⁶ as well as early settlers from the then Dutch territories of Berbice and Essequibo. However, unless a list of settlers is brought to light, this assumption must remain hypothetical.

The following is a brief summary of the relevant data available regarding the Jewish presence in the two above-mentioned Dutch territories. As early as 1658, at least two Jews, Pinto and Philipp de Fuentes, are known to have been owners of plantations in Berbice (also known as Nova Zealandia). One plantation bore the name Oudekerk, after a township near Amsterdam, also the site of the oldest Dutch Jewish cemetery. Apparently, this was an isolated case of Jewish presence, as maintained by ex-governor and chronicler P. M. Netscher,⁷ and corroborated by the *Berbice Inventory* (I,171, p. x) in the Dutch National Archive (A. R. A.), which confirms that Jews were not accepted in the colony without special authorization. However, in the second half of the eighteenth century, Joseph de la Peña and members of the Pardo family were on record as part-owners of plantations in Berbice, one of which was named Zion. In the spring of 1658, twenty-five Jewish families arrived at the settlement on the Pomeroon River in New Middleburgh, but this venture was abandoned in 1666. Applications by Jews to enter the Essequibo Colony were rejected three times during the eighteenth century (in 1722, 1759, and 1762), before the Amsterdam *parnassim* (Jewish communal officials) obtained permission for Jews

to settle there in 1775. However, the sole evidence for a Jewish presence in Essequibo is a letter from Jacob Suzarte to his aunt in Amsterdam, dated 14 September 1779.⁸

In general, the entire complex of ex-British Guiana, that is, Berbice, Esequibo, and Demerary, merits re-examination, from both its British and Dutch aspects. However, the results of future research notwithstanding, it is likely that experienced “Brazilian” and “Guianan” tropical planters, anxious to continue living under similar conditions, participated in ventures in these areas. The successful plantations previously established at Remire also contributed to this trend. Founded in 1659, this settlement continued undisturbed under Dutch rule until the French conquest in May 1664. The document of surrender, dated 15 May 1664, signed by the Dutch governor Quirinius, or Gerrit (Guérin, in French) Spranger, and countersigned by Antoine Lefebvre de la Barre for the French, contained two paragraphs guaranteeing the Jewish inhabitants freedom of trade and faith.⁹ There is reason to believe that this Jewish colony continued to function between May 1664 and September 1667, when the British raided Cayenne. After a brief siege, which concluded with the destruction of the local fortifications, the British raiding force abandoned the territory in October, at the same time evacuating the white colonists, including *all* the Jews, sailing first for Barbados and then continuing to Surinam. The expatriated Jews from Remire joined the Jewish community of Surinam, settling in the newly formed Jewish village, Jooden Savanna, located near Paramaribo, the capital of the colony.

In reporting the evacuation of the Jews from Remire, most chroniclers have relied on an unsigned report printed by the *Hollandtse Mercurius* in the July 1664 issue of *Haarlem* (pp. 127-128). According to this report the Jews were transported by the French fleet to La Rochelle on the French Atlantic coast. The original reads: “Zy voerden de Joden en Christenen / van hun welvaren berooft en seer pover gestelt na Rochel / om van daer te mogen voeteren hun Vaderlant” which freely rendered means, “They have led the Jews and Christians away / plundered their belongings and taken them penniless to Rochel / that from there they might proceed to their Fatherland.”¹⁰

This report is unsubstantiated conjecture, probably based on the fact that the French expedition originally embarked from La Rochelle. Moreover, we have positive evidence that the Remire Jews remained on their plantations until the British raid. In any case, the assumption that they were shipped across the Atlantic to France is totally erroneous, for several reasons. First, the French naval and military expedition did not end in Cayenne; de la Barre sailed to other Caribbean destinations. Second, a returning French naval fleet would hardly have transported known and declared Jews to France, where Jews were barely tolerated, and were restricted to peripheral areas. Shipping space was much too precious for such a purpose, being largely reserved for official personnel.

Later French records provide a picture of the achievements of the small Jewish colony in Guiana. As a matter of fact, the French made new attempts to attract Jewish

settlers to the area at a later date, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹¹ These attempts must be considered in light of the previous French failure in Guiana during the spring of 1652 involving more than seven thousand persons who had to be repatriated, as recorded by Father Labat.¹² In contrast, the Remire plantations are referred to as the “best and most efficiently run.” Moreover, a century later, in a dispute over land rights, these Jewish farms were favorably mentioned and declared state domains, not liable to property claims by the descendants of those who occupied them following the forcible removal of the first Jewish settlers. Apparently some converted Jews remained on the spot, or perhaps they joined the colony later, since the City Register of Cayenne, which begins with 1677, contains the following notation: “Isaac portugais, juif de naissance, baptisé sous condition.”¹³

A Jewish proposal to return to Cayenne was advanced and rejected in 1725. Another settlement project, in which different religious beliefs were to be tolerated, was launched in 1788. Although I have not seen the relevant data for the latter proposal, it seems obvious that such new challenges were not taken up by Jews already settled in tropical America, nor did they attract the European Jewish community.

Despite the failure to reinstate Jewish settlement in Cayenne, the Remire colony, which lasted nearly a decade, must be considered a successful enterprise in the annals of the Jewish presence in tropical America. It managed to thrive in a frontier society, under conditions completely different from those of either Iberia or northwestern Europe. One result of this brief episode, brought to its end by great power rivalries, was a certain concentration of Jewish settlements in the Dutch zone, with a concomitant limitation in the French. The final abandonment of the colony ended the Jewish presence in French Guiana. Nevertheless, it still represents an illustrious contribution to early colonial history.

Two sources, one British and the other French, bear witness to the success of the Jewish colonial endeavor in Cayenne. The British source reads as follows:

The twelfth Collonie was of Dutch settled by the Zealanders in the Rivers Borowma, Wacopoc and Moroca, having been drawn from Tobago Anno 1650 and yd yoare following a great Collonie of Dutch, and Jewes, drawn from Brazile, by the Portugaize settled there and being experienced Planters; that soone grew a Flourishing Colonie. [Transcript from British Museum 75 Ms. Sloane No. 3662, fol. 40v.]

The following is an English translation of the French source.

Since the disaster of the Paris Company, the island of Cayenne has been completely abandoned by the French. Some Dutchmen expelled by the Portuguese from Brazil took refuge there, together with their slaves, and obtained from the Indians the right to settle there. Their leader, Guérin Spranger, introduced the cultivation of sugar and indigo, which became so prosperous that the Colony's good administration, according to Father Dutertre,

gained a high reputation and attracted a sizeable number of Jews who were recently expelled from Brazil, where they established themselves during the Dutch domination over that country. One of them, named David Nassy, was held in high esteem by the [West India] Company formed in Amsterdam and obtained from it the title of Lord Proprietor of the Cayenne Colony. He went there in 1659 with a great number of his compatriots. The next year, 152 more people of the same religion, having left Livorno by July, joined them and also engaged in working the soil. The prosperity enjoyed by this colony during its brief period of existence serves as proof that, contrary to the generally held view, the Jews are not at all incapable of agricultural work. It is to be regretted that circumstances prevented them from further development; particularly so since the phenomenon of Jews maintaining themselves by physical work, might have exercised a great moral influence on the intellectual development of that nation.¹⁴

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that we still lack the following essential data regarding the story of the Jewish settlement at Remire:

1. The exact dates of settlement of the various groups of immigrants in Remire; some apparently arrived prior to the Nassy-led group.
2. The number, origins, and names of the settlers¹⁵.
3. Data on settlement in Pomeroon, Berbice, and Essequibo.
4. Fuller details on the transmigrants' integration within the Jewish community of Surinam.
5. The functions of David Nassy, the initiator and overseer of the project; the date of his departure from Remire. (He died in Amsterdam in 1685, and very little is known of his life between 1660 and his demise.)

It remains to be seen whether further light can be shed on these as yet unknown aspects of Jewish colonization in the Guianas.

NOTES

1. See Samuel Oppenheim, "An Early Jewish Colony in Western Guiana, 1658-1666," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society [PAJHS]* 16 (1907): pp. 96-186; idem, "Supplemental Data," *ibid.*, 17 (1909): pp. 53-70. More recently, S. W. Baron noted the Jewish presence in Cayenne during the French conquest of 1664, and their departure to Surinam, without indicating the precise date or reason, implying that they may have left even prior to the Dutch surrender to the French. See *The Jewish Community* (Philadelphia, 1942), vol. 1, p. 265. See also, Z. Loker, "Cayenne - A Chapter in the Jewish Settlement of the New World in the 17th Century" (Hebrew), *Zion* 48, no. 1(1983): pp. 107-115.
2. The settlement was located about 14 km to the south-east of the capital city of Cayenne. Its name was previously spelled "Hermire" (Map no. C 5, D.F.C. dated 21 January 1677) or "Rema" (Map no. C 1, drawn by R. P. Lombard in 1717). These two maps are located in the "Section d'Outre Mer," The French National Archives, Paris.

3. Zvi Loker, "Les Juifs à Cayenne (1660-1667)," *Histoire de la Guyane*, ed. Vincent Huyghes-Belrose, in *Grande Encyclopédie de la Caraïbe* (Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe: Les Editions Caraïbes, 1990), vol. 7, pp. 22-27.
4. Concerning the French conquest and its consequence, see J. B. Labat, *Voyage du chevalier Des Marchais* (Paris, 1730); M. F. Montezon, *Voyages et Travaux des P. Jean Grillet et François Bechamel dans l'intérieur de la Guyane* (Paris, 1674), pp. 261-262. On the British raid, see J. Rodway and Th. Watt, *Chronological History of the Discovery and Settlement of Guiana (1593-1668)* and *Gen. Byam's Journal*, British Museum, Sloane Ms. 3662, fol. 40v. See also P.R.O.'s *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series - America and West Indies, 1661-1668* (London, 1880), pp. 487-489.
5. The grant is dated 12 September 1659, and was first published in *Essai Historique sur la colonie de Surinam* (Paramibo, 1788); English version, "Historical Essay on the Colony of Surinam 1788," trans. Simon Cohen (Cincinnati and New York: American Jewish Archives and Ktav Publishing House, 1974). The conflict with Langendijck is described by Jac. Zwarts, "Een Episode uit de Joodsche Kolonisatie van Guyana (1660)," *West Indische Gid* 9 (1925): pp. 519-530.
6. See I. S. Emmanuel, "New Light on Early American Jewry," *American Jewish Archives [AJA]* 7(1955): pp. 21-22, where he mentions that a Sepher Torah was handed over to David Dias Antunes and Abraham Enrique Flores for delivery to the Remire settlers. See also H. Ternaux-Compans, *Notice Historique sur la Guyana française* (Paris, 1843), p. 66, where, citing R. P. Dutertre, he states that Cayenne was prosperous and "attira un grand nombre de juifs qui venaient d'être expulsés du Brésil et se trouvaient en 1659 sur les lieux." References to the Jewish settlement in Cayenne are found in connection with a dispute over land rights, c. 1753. "Il y avoit alors au bourg à Remire [à l'endroit même où est aujourd'hui l'Eglise paroissiale] habité par une soixante de juifs plus de Nègres." A second reference reads: "...par Concession des (biens) Hollandais à ces Juifs, qui continuèrent de jouir tranquillement sous les François avec l'agrément des chefs pour le Roi, et la Compagnie des Indes occidentales, (dans) des Maisons qu'ils avoient Battie dans le Bourg et des terres qu'ils possedoient dans le voisinage." Only one Jewish landlord is named, "terrain de Drago ou Drague" — obviously one of the Portuguese Jewish settlers (Z. L.). A final comment describes the end of the episode: "et privés du secours d[']es Juifs [furent] emmenez par les Anglais à Surinam..." ("Cayenne et Guyane Française," F 3/21, no. 11r, French National Archives).
7. P. M. Netscher, *Geschiedenis van de vestiging der Nederlanders aldaar tot op onzen tijd* (The Hague, 1888).
8. The letter was addressed to Sara Athias, the widow of Abraham Abenattar. See Amsterdam Municipal Archive, no. 334/95, fol. 349.
9. I published this document, called "Articles and Conditions," in facsimile in *Zion* 48: p. 116. For data on Spranger, who had already arrived in Cayenne in 1656, see van Panhuys, "Gerrit Spranger," *West Indische Gid* 12 (1930-1931): p. 538.
10. This sounds spurious. Note that no French historian has ever accepted this account. The British historians Roadway-Watt and Edmundson copied it from Jan Jakob Hartsinck's generally reliable *Beschrijving van Guiana* (Amsterdam, 1770; reprinted 1974). It is to the credit of the early American Jewish historians that they did not follow this trend. See M. J. Kohler, "Phases of Jewish Life in New York before 1800," *PAJHS* 2 (1894): pp. 95, 99. The Dutch historian G. J. Fabius also provides a correct account of the event. See Fabius, "Het leenstelsel van de west Indische Compagnie," in *Bijdr. kon. Ins. Taal - en Volkenkunde*, dl. 70, jg. 1915, p. 570.
11. See Loker, "Cayenne," *Zion* 48: p. 114 n. 22. The first known attempt at recalling the Jews was made in 1687 by the new minister of the Navy, Marquis de Seignelay, the son of Colbert, in a memorandum addressed to King Louis XIV, which was probably not acted upon. The prospectus for the Kourou project, drafted in 1763, contains a paragraph saying "même les Juifs seraient les bienvenus." See Archives Nationales, Colonies C 14/30, fol. 28.
12. The repatriation was effected in May 1652. See Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau voyage aux Isles de l'Amérique* (Paris, 1738, 1742), p. 92.
13. This entry dates from 1694. Communicated by Vincent Huyghes-Belrose, March 1986.
14. Ternaux-Compans, *Notice Historique*, pp. 65-66. (Translation mine - Z. L.) The original French text follows:

Depuis le désastre de la compagnie de Paris l'île de Cayenne était complètement abandonnée par les Français. Quelques Hollandais expulsés du Brésil par les Portugais s'y réfugièrent avec leurs esclaves, et obtinrent des Indiens la permission de s'y établir. Leur chef, Guérin Spranger, y introduisit la culture du sucre et celle de l'indigo, qui y prospéra tellement, dit la Père Dutertre, que sa bonne administration mit bientôt cette île en [66] haute réputation, et attira d'un grand nombre de juifs qui venaient d'être chassés du Brésil, ou il s'étaient établis pendant la domination de la Hollande dans ce pays. L'un d'eux, nommé David Nassy, en haute faveur auprès de la Compagnie qui s'était formée à Amsterdam en obtint le titre de patron-maître de la colonie de Cayenne et s'y rendit en 1659 avec un grand nombre de ses compatriotes. L'année suivante, 152 invidus de la même religion, qui avaient quitté Livourne au mois de juillet, vinrent les y rejoindre et s'y livrèrent également à la culture des terres. La prospérité dont jouit cet établissement pendant sa courte durée est une preuve que les Israélites ne sont pas aussi impropres qu'on le pense généralement aux entreprises agricoles. Il est fâcheux que les circonstances ne lui aient pas permis de se développer; car le spectacle de juifs subsistant par eux-mêmes eut eu, sans aucun doute, une grande influence morale sur le développement intellectuel de cette nation.

15. Some Jewish names were found in a report by a farm manager, Goupy Desmarets, dated 1694, discovered by the late Gabriel Debien in the Municipal Library of Rouen. This important report is discussed in Document 78 of my forthcoming work, *Jews in the Caribbean - Evidence on the History of the Jews in the Caribbean Zone in Colonial Times* (Hebrew University, Jerusalem: Misgav Yerushalayim - in press). In a recent communication (July 1990) from Cacao, French Guiana, I was informed by Philippe Guéritault of the existence of a notarized document from 1670 signed by two Jews, Padicant (Predikant? - Z. L.) and Lucenne (most likely the French form for Lucena - Z. L.). The document is a land sale contract for their property in Remire.