

A Look Into the Early History of the Sephardic Masonic Heritage

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The fraternity known as the Free & Accepted Masons (or Freemasonry) remarkably contributed to the social and political integration of the Sephardic exiles throughout their host countries since the early 1700's. As this article will point out, Freemasonry's belief in universal brotherhood and tolerance significantly paved the way for the emancipation of the Sephardim as equal citizens in European society. Throughout the following pages I shall discuss how the Masonic fraternity became a catalyst for leveling the playing field for the *Gente da Nação*. I disclose, however, that due to the complexity of the subject, this article can only serve as a first introduction to the history of the Sephardim within Freemasonry. I shall primarily focus on the scholarly opinions of authors whose research encompasses the study of Sephardic Freemasonry within England and the Caribbean. Besides being the birthplace of organized Freemasonry, England is also where an unique scenario unfolded which allowed the Sephardim to thrive through a symbiotic relationship with Freemasonry, based on each other's internationalism, liberalism, and eagerness to bring about a more open society.

When dealing with the history of Freemasonry, it behooves one to inquire: who exactly were these Sephardim who arrived in Enlightenment Era England? The inquiry can only be answered by briefly reviewing the modern history of the Sephardic individual. It is thus equally relevant to study the circumstances which led to the forced conversions of fifteenth century Spain and Portugal, and to understand the various post-conversion aspects that arouse among the Sephardim, such as the full assimilations, the

resilience of the crypto-Jews, the migrations into Latin America, and those fortunate cases of exiles who went into non-Iberian territories, such as Great Britain, the Netherlands, the non-Iberian Caribbean, and the United States of America. Wherever they went, Freemasonry was likely to already be there or to follow.

In *Pilgrim People*, Lebeson (p. 2) raises important questions about the Sephardim: “Who were these travelers who were like needles in the haystacks of Europe and Asia? Intrepid of spirit they must have been... Was it curiosity, boredom, the search for utopia? Each single traveler was in his way the advance emissary of others. Did he then go out to seek a possible haven for his oppressed co-religionists? Were new markets and more liberal laws the magnets? Perhaps all these factors were at work.”

Lebeson raises truly relevant questions about the Sephardic profile, some of which must be answered before diving more deeply into the Sephardic-Masonic interaction. History shows that in the Iberian Peninsula, whether under the Caliphate or the pre-Inquisitional Roman Catholic rulers, the Spanish and Portuguese Jews had been known for their cosmopolitanism, inter-national connections, and religious moderation. They had an extensive knowledge of linguistics, navigation, and cartography. Not only were they master traders who carried goods from Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East, but they were also inexhaustible explorers, adventurers, and faithful pilgrims. And due to their always perilous political standing, Iberian Jews learned to maneuver and held key positions in the affairs of various nations, as Lebeson illustrates: “Did Charlemagne wish to communicate with the fabulous Harun-al-Rashid, a Jew named Isaac was of the diplomatic party. The Caliph of Cordoba sent a deputation to Germany toward the close of the tenth century. One of the members of the Caliph's party, Ibrahim ibn Yakub (a

Jew), reported this journey” (p. 2).

This intrepid curiosity was personified in the historic figure of Fernão Mendes Pinto, a major author whose Jewish heritage has just recently been recognized by the Portuguese; “His book of travels, *Peregrinação*, is a classic which the Portuguese are proud to claim as their own....In twenty-one years of 'peregrinations,' he saw many... unknown places. He was one of the first Europeans to visit Japan. It was he who introduced those islanders to the musket. Captured thirteen times, sold into slavery seventeen times, he managed to survive his vicissitudes, because of the innate, incurable optimism, an indomitable opportunism and a belief in himself and his destiny.” (Lebeson, p. 3).

Such a reputation did not always come without a price. Unfortunately for the Sephardim, whenever a crisis came about they were among the first to become scapegoats. Consequently, pogroms were constant in Christian Spain “Fueled by both economic conditions and ecclesiastical antisemitism, violence against the Jews began in 1391 in Seville and quickly spread to Ciudad Real and Burgos before reaching Valencia” (Jacobs, p. 4). It was only months after those initial attacks that the “Jewish communities in Toledo, Barcelona, Gerona, and Aragon bore the effects of mob-incited violence as homes were burned, businesses looted, synagogues destroyed, and Jews murdered.”

The xenophobia driven murders only became more common along the next century, until one of the darkest periods of Western history culminated in Spain, as forced conversions were imposed on those who decided not to burn at the stake or to face expulsion, as most families with elderly or infant members could not endure the journey by foot. To the faithful Jews who were now entrapped within Catholic lands, a new

modus vivendi was the answer: “a strategy of resistance that came to be known as crypto-Judaism. This practice, which was adopted by a portion of the Jewish converts, involved the clandestine observance of Judaism among individuals and families who had undergone conversion but who secretly remained faithful to Jewish beliefs and traditions” (Jacobs, p. 4).

Although at first an arduous but apparently sustainable way of life, signs of crypto-Judaism became too visible among New-Christians, and thus, to the dismay of the Sephardim, an infamous religious investigative institution was brought to Spain: “in 1478, at the request of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the pope granted the Spanish monarchy the authority to appoint inquisitors in Castile, a papal decision that initiated the centuries-long Spanish Inquisition. From the outset, the Inquisition was intended to eliminate the heresy of crypto-Judaism.” Among those Judaizers, as crypto-Jews were known, between 1481 and 1488, 750 men and women in Seville were burned at the stake....and at least five thousand others were punished for acts of Jewish heresy” (Jacobs, p. 5).

By this time the psychological climate of Spain proved unbearable to many, as implementations by the Church broke the trust among neighbors, co-religionists, and even family members. Through a highly successful system of deletion, thousands of Spanish Jews perished at the hands of the Inquisitors, as “to facilitate the prosecution and punishment of Jewish heretics, the Church developed a systematic approach to the identification of crypto-Jews by creating the Edicts of Grace, documents so named because they offered a grace period to anyone who willingly confessed their heretical practices” (Jacobs 6). This system was effective due to the fact that individuals knowl-

edgeable of others practicing Judaism in secret, felt that they were sinning against the Church, as they were taught that their “own souls were at stake if they failed to report the sins of the Judaizers with whom they interacted” (Jacobs, p 7).

As persecutions continued rampantly, many Spanish Jews chose to seek exile in Portugal, and “the Spanish exiles in Portugal were, for the most part, observant Jews... [who] in return for payment, King John II of Portugal offered asylum and religious freedom....Soon after they arrived in Portugal, however, he enacted a series of repressive measures that gave the Jews a choice between conversion and slavery, while forcibly taking Jewish children from their parents” (Jacobs, p. 8). The root of this surprising change of mind by the Monarch stemmed from the fact that Manuel I wished to marry the daughter of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, and to get their permission he had to meet their demand to expel the Jews from Portugal. So, Manuel issued an expulsion order in 1496. “Fearing the loss of a productive and economically viable Jewish population, he replaced this order with a demand for conversion that prohibited Jewish emigration” (Jacobs, p. 8).

These conditions of entrapment, forced conversions, and de-nunciations trained the crypto-Jewish community to develop a close-knit society where they trusted only each other. To worsen matters, in the mid-1500's the establishment of the Inquisition took place in Portugal, “where crypto-Judaism had taken a more fervent character than now existed in Spain” (Jacobs, p. 8). By then, crypto-Jews had also been caught practicing Judaism in the Latin American colonies of Portugal and Spain, and so “some thirty years after the Inquisition initiated in Portugal, tribunals were established in the colonies..., first in Peru and then in Mexico City” (Jacobs, p. 8).”

The Sephardim, however, still felt that they had better chances of surviving in Latin America, so “during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, crypto-Jewish immigration to the colonies appears to have been fairly extensive. In addition to Peru and New Spain, areas of Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay were settled by crypto-Jewish converts” (Jacobs, p. 8).” As New-Christians were knowledgeable of certain sciences, they eventually acquired some colonizing rights, and “they were invited to go on journeys to facilitate map-reading, the taking of bearings, the measuring of distances from the Equator, and the making of mathematical calculations. And last of all there was an inexhaustible supply of convicts, degradados, relapsed Jews and suspect Marranos who were available to man the ships when the voyage was hazardous... with monsters and griffins, for storms and cataclysms, for cannibals and jungles” (Lebeson, p. 6). Such was the chaotic situation in the Iberian Peninsula and the Latin American World. As a final remark, the Western Sephardim would still face persecutions for centuries to come, as the Holy Inquisition was officially extinguished only by the 1830's.

This summary of Sephardic crypto-Jewish history has given a necessary backdrop to understand how greatly beneficial the Enlightenment Movement would become to the Sephardim.

Leaving Spain and Portugal

As we leave Spain and Portugal and move to the non-Hispanic world of Sephardim and crypto Jews (or descendants of crypto Jews), let's look at what the Jews in Spain and Portugal were taking with them into exile. Although Spain and Portugal

would largely stay apart from enlightenment-driven social reforms, many Sephardim and crypto-Jews would eventually make their way to England, the Caribbean, and other places where Enlightenment values were at least beginning to lead to less persecution, They were physically leaving Iberia, but the values they had would usually go with them.

Although Jews had lived in Spain even before the time of Jesus, life had become bad only under the Visigoths and later under Christian rule from the 400s leading up to 711. For about five hundred years, from 711 CE when Muslims took control of Spain, to the early 1200s when the Muslim-Christian conflict for control of Spain gave the Christians the upper hand, Jews had lived in a country under relatively good Muslim Arabic-Berber control. Things were not perfect; individual Muslims rulers varied, and things became less positive for both Jews (and many Muslims) after fundamentalist Muslims took charge in 1172. But, compared to what life had been like under the Christians before the Muslim conquest in 711, and what life would become like after the Christian reconquest, overall it was much better than the treatment Jews received from the Christians. Starting in 1397 with Christian persecutions (including the murder of four thousand Jews in Seville), things got terrible for Jews, culminating with the expulsion of all Jews in 1492.¹

Because of much better treatment by Muslims, Jews had become involved in Arab culture, and both contributed to and benefited from Arab values. Historically, as Alfassa writes:

Sephardic Jews have been more integrated into the local non-Jewish (secular) world than Ashkenazic Jews. This is because among Christian lands where Ashkenazic Judaism flourished, tension between Christian and Jews was great,

resulting in being isolated from non-Jewish neighbors, either voluntarily or non-voluntarily. Whereas the Sephardic Jews, living under toleration in Muslim lands, were never walled off from the larger world. Sephardic Jews living among Muslims faced less segregation and generally less oppression. Sephardic Jewish thought and culture has been strongly influenced by Arabic and Greek philosophy and science. In addition, Sephardic Jews have long seen themselves as “people of the Torah and people of the world” (p. 161).

The late scholar Daniel Elazar emphasized the religious perspective, showing the unique Sephardic approach:

One of the greatest, if not the greatest, contribution of Sephardic Jewry was its approach to the theory and practice of Judaism...[it offered] a balanced theory and practice, not given to excess, seriously Jewish, yet worldly and cosmopolitan. Classic Sephardic Judaism was designed by men who lived in the larger world and were active in its affairs, most of whom wanted a Judaism no less rigorous than their Ashkenazi brethren in its essentials, but flexible in its interpretations and applications...[and] play an isolating function only where critically necessary and not prevent Jews from playing their role in what had been in Spain prior to 1391 a multi-religious society.

Other comparisons, pointing out Muslim-Christian societal influences, are explained by Rubenstein:

While Europe was just emerging from centuries of poverty and social strife, Muslim Spain – al Andalus, as the Arabs called it – was a land long enriched by international trade, brilliant artisanship, and a highly productive agriculture. The

kingdom's rulers were literate men ...and generous patrons of scholarship and the arts...Its intellectuals were admired for their achievements in law, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and the natural sciences, as well as chemistry, metallurgy, and the practical arts...the scholars of al Andalus taught in publicly supported universities and did research in well-stocked libraries. In an era when most Christian healers were still brewing herbs and casting spells, Muslim and Jewish physicians practiced something akin to scientific medicine (pp. 13-14).

And then, when the Sephardim and crypto Jews or their descendants entered this more open world in England, the non-Iberian Caribbean, and other places, they found an organization that represented most of the values they had previously practiced in Spain and Portugal before the restrictive mentality that had led to their expulsion. It was an organization that emphasized religious tolerance and openly respected different religions, strongly encouraged education, enjoyed multiculturalism, and fought for freedom and democracy. For the many Sephardim who followed Kabbalah and Jewish mysticism, there probably was an added pleasant surprise in seeing the emphasis that Freemasonry put on the Temple of Solomon (Levenda, p. 13-15). Jewish Kabbalists "had brought Jewish mysteries from the Middle East and Muslim Jerusalem, including from the Temple of Solomon (Hagger, p. 86).

As new defenders of these social changes, the Sephardim would then help spread those ideals throughout the New World, where they established trade routes and residence, as we shall later see. Margaret C. Jacob explains that "the English Revolution of the 1640s and 1650s left a legacy of political thought and experience that nurtured republican thought throughout the eighteenth century" (29). This made possible for the

“late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries [to establish] the intellectual context for the....Enlightenment (Jacob, p. 29).” The Scientific Revolution also may be credited with certain socio-religious reforms because it brought about more moderation into a number of academic and religious circles in European society. Jews, Protestants, and Muslims would therefore gradually benefit from the Enlightenment Movement, as it “fired the imagination of the educated elite and....presented reformers and critics of the established order in church and state with the philosophical and methodological foundations for an assault upon established authority” (Jacob, p. 30). In sum, rational thinking was the starting point for the banishing of superstition and ethnic-religious prejudice. It also provided a healthy dosage of skepticism against “spiritual agencies, inherent tendencies, and *anima* from the universe, [as in] their place were put explanations based upon those natural properties capable of mathematical calculation (Jacob 30).”

The exact date of the start of Freemasonry is an ever-contestable matter, with tangible proof dating as early as the 1300's. However, the outset of its organized existence dates to 1717, at the height of the Enlightenment Movement, when four London lodges came together to form the United Grand Lodge of England. There is however, a more esoteric and equally relevant explanation of the beginnings of Freemasonry, as Shaftesley expounds on while offering an introduction to Masonic lore and its relationship with Hebraisms: “The founding figures of Masonry, according to legend, and with some references [pointing] back to Enoch and Noah, are Abraham, Moses, and King Solomon—the first ‘Grand Masters’, in fact. Solomon is particularly notable because of the building of the Temple, the central object of Masonic interest, and with him are combined the names of King Hiram of Tyre, who helped the Temple with materials, and

a certain highly ex-pert craftsman, sent by King Hiram and appointed the overseer, Hiram Abif.... As Masonic lore revolves around the Temple, it necessarily follows that much of it involves familiar Biblical figures and situations, and these in turn include the introduction of some Hebrew words and phrases...The opening of the Bible to common knowledge and the examination and study of Hebrew, no doubt helped considerably to activate the enthusiasm and excitement that greeted the exhibition in the seven-teenth century and later of the model of the Temple made by Rabbi Judah Jacob Leon Templo... (Shaftesley, p. 152).”

Jacob explains that Freemasonry indeed was a product of the liberalism that was spreading throughout England, emphasizing that Freemasonry has a “... significant debt to the New-tonian Enlightenment as well as [to] its early infiltration by pantheists and republicans” (Jacob, p. 109). In addition, unlike other European organizations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Free & Accepted Masons “provided ceremonies and rituals...which were open to a variety of religious inter-pretations...[And] its essentially social nature, reinforced by the trappings of secrecy, gave an extraordinary sense of community to men...(Jacob, p. 109).” These factors combined, provided an ideal environment for the once ostracized Sephardim.

Nevertheless, Sephardic Freemasons could never let their guard down while traveling abroad, Especially when in Iberian lands. For as it happened at the height of the Enlightenment Movement, some Sephardic Freemasons were once again hunted down by the Holy Inquisition. Such was the case of Hyppolito Joseph da Costa, who was “initiated in Philadelphia but detained for Masonic activities by the Inquisition in Portu-gal for over three years, when he escaped to England.” Another careless Sephardic Freemason was

John Coustos, “a diamond cutter, son of Isaac Coustos.” It is said that “John Coustos was initiated a Freemason about 1728 or 1729 in London, but in about 1740 he settled in his trade in Lisbon, where he soon helped to found a lodge. He was really on his way to Brazil, but was prevented from going by the Portuguese. He was imprisoned and tortured by the Inquisition for practicing Freemasonry but was ultimately rescued by English warships in the River Tagus under Admiral Matthews. (English Freemasons p. 159).”

The problem was that Pope Clement XII had issued a Bull against the Freemasons on April 28, 1738. It was immediately enforced in Portugal. For example, A Lodge of Irish Catholic refugees had been formed in Lisbon. As soon as they heard about the Pope’s Bull, they dissolved their lodge, and informed the Inquisition of what they had done” (Ridley, p. 50). The Inquisition investigated the situation, but forgave the Lodge members without punishment because they had immediately dissolved the lodge. Spain was slower to act, but in 1740 Spain banned Freemasonry. Pope Benedict XIV issued another Bull in 1751 It reiterated the 1738 Bull and added more conditions. The Portuguese again enforced the Bull vigorously.

Still, for those who managed to stay away from the Iberian Peninsula, Freemasonry could provide unequalled benefits, such as a much needed “stability under a strong, but constitutional monarchy, social mobility under aristocratic patronage, religious toleration, Baconian experimentalism, and of course, dedication to the cult of the new science (Jacob, p. 109)”. This last aspect was of enormous importance to the Sephardic Jews, who commonly defended a more rational practice of Judaism; as “the practitioners of the 'royal art'...worshiped...the Grand Architect....a powerful symbol of

the order, regularity and stability (Jacob, p. 109).” In addition, as *Katz* mentions, lodges in countries such as “Holland, England, France, and even the United States of America... never acquiesced in any restriction based on religion. In fact...we find that the principle of reli-gious toleration was already incorporated in the very first constitution compiled in England in the 1720's. ...” (Katz, p. 2). It also is important to note that “Even in the most fervently Catholic countries the papal action (anti-Masonic Bulls) was recognized as being largely political in purpose and Free-masonry, which was seen as a supporter of religion, was not only tolerated but often actively encouraged” (Hamill and Gilbert, p. 50). One exception was post-Revolution France where “the Catholic Church routinely identified its enemies with the dyad ‘Freemasons and Jews’” (Carroll, p. 149).³

Besides not finding resistance from Freemasonry on relig-i-ous grounds, Shaftesley explains that the Sephardim (when in non-Iberian lands) were mostly seen as valuable members of society. They often managed to become an essential part of the Bourgeois, and usually exhibited an unequaled finesse in comparison to other European Jews. By the 1700's, they could not “have been [anything] other than Western in style and upbringing for a *few* hundred years, differing from the repressed East European Jews who followed them. (Shaftesley, p. 160). To entice additional respect, many Sephardim took full ad-vantage of the fact that “they bore....noble Spanish and Por-tuguese names which retained the Christian rather than Jewish impression and made them more acceptable socially....” Records show that those Sephardim were sought after as com-modities, as they “were encouraged to come by English rulers and Governments for commercial and political reasons in rivalry to their former countries and those countries' friends who were England's enemies, and they did bring valuable trade and foreign information to England,

besides being wealthy themselves.” (Shaftesley, p. 159).” The chief reason for such trust is that England was absolutely certain that those Sephardim would be faithful to their new homeland under all circumstances, thus justifying the privileges conferred to them.

Considering that organized Freemasonry was established in 1717, the following remarks by Levy provides us evidence of how contextualized the Sephardim were in English society, seen by how early they joined the Masonic Fraternity: “...the first instance of a Jew being admitted to a Masonic lodge was Edward Rose, in London in 1732 (actually, Levy wrote that this was 'said to be the first definite record' of admission, but what he really meant was the first *public* report of an initiation of a Jew).” Further investigations suggest an even earlier indication of the Sephardic presence within the said Lodge, as Katz points out that “Edward Rose's initiation “was 'in the presence of Jews and non-Jews.' This addition in itself vitiates the claim for Edward Rose, because no Mason can be initiated other than by fellow-Masons, and if other Jews were present, then...they *must* have been Freemasons, *previously* initiated. As a matter of fact, Edward Rose, a tavern-keeper, was initiated by [the Jew] Daniel Delvalle...then already Master of the lodge, among both Jewish and Christian members—and journalistic criticism at the time turned on the propriety of Jews holding the meeting on a Sun-day. The meeting had been reported in the *Daily Post* of 22 September 1732 and the *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1732, ii, p. 966.” (Shaftesley, p. 159).

Indeed, even earlier records of the Sephardic presence with-in Freemasonry is mentioned in a review of Professor Katz's book, the *Israelitisches Wochenblatt* (Zurich, Switzerland, 11 April 1969), where Sephardim appear as “initiates in the Lodge of Antiquity, one of the original four [lodges] forming the Grand Lodge, in 1721....The

Register of 1725 includes the names of Israel Segalas and Nicholas Abraham, and of 1730-32 Solomon Mountford, Solomon Méndez, Abraham Ximenes, Jacob Alva-res, Isaac Baruch, Abraham de Medina, Abraham Cortissos, etc. A coveted high rank was that of Grand Steward, and the list includes Solomon Méndez, 1732, Dr. Meyer Schomberg, 1734, Dr. Isaac Schomberg, 1735, Benjamin da Costa, 1736, and Isaac Barrett, Joseph Harris, Samuel Lowman, and Moses Méndez, all in 1738.(Shaftesley, p. 166).”

Additional mentions include that of the first Jewish name of an Officer of the Ancient Grand Lodge; “David Lyon, appointed Grand Tyler for 1760-1763 and promoted to Grand Pursuivant for 1764-1765. In the Moderns Grand Lodge the first is Moses Isaac Levi (his name otherwise is Ximenes), appointed both Junior and Senior Grand Warden in the same year, 1785. That year also, John Paiba was appointed Grand Sword Bearer, (...) he had held high office since 1779. Hyppolito Joseph da Costa, the Inquisition victim, held several high offices in Masonry from 1810 onwards. Isaac Lindo was successively Junior Grand Warden and Senior Grand Warden in 1813 and 1814. (...) Sir Michael Costa, the musician, was Grand Organist from 1851 to 1853. Dr. Isaac Sequeira held Grand office in 1777, as did Ephraim Franco in 1789. The Masonic certificate of Jacob de Pinna, 1767, is a prized possession in the Grand Lodge collection....Among the founders of the Lodge of Nine Muses in 1777 were Raphael Franco, Abraham Teixeira, Dr. Isaac Sequeira, and Francis Franco, with some Italians; Hyppolito da Costa joined this lodge, as did Abraham Nunes, 1783, Isaac Lindo, 1784, Samuel Vita Montefiore, 1789, and many more. (Shaftesley, p. 166).”

As shown, the indication that the Sephardim established deep roots in early European Freemasonry is incontestable. But how exactly did the Sephardic presence

become even more prevalent in the Freemasonry of the New-World?

The indication is that Sephardic trade connections were among the chief factors that created the earliest links between the British and the Antillean Islands. Records show that once settlements were established on the Islands, Sephardic families featured among the first European settlers, who established Freemasonry soon thereafter. Thus, for the last remarks of this article, I would like to provide the findings of Josette Capriles Goldish, author of *Once Jews – Stories of Caribbean Sephardim, for it synthesizes wholesomely the beginnings of Sephardic Freemasonry in the region.*

When it comes to the Sephardim of the island of Curacao, Goldish makes an eye-opening observation: “A fascinating and unexpected factor appears over and over again in the Sephardic immigrant stories presented in this book. All the men and most of their descendants were members of the Freemasonry movement.” Understanding that this factor should not be taken lightly, Goldish raises the following questions: “If indeed Freemasonry was so important to the Curacaoan Sephardim, what role did it play in their lives after they had moved away from their existence on the Dutch Island? Did Freemasonry to some extent replace the need for a spiritual center in those places where such a focus did not exist?”

Organized Masonic life began quite early in Curacao, the first lodge being L'Amitié, which was “founded in 1757, followed in 1774 by a second lodge called Unión, and in 1785 by yet a third called De Vergenoeging.” Not long afterwards the Sephardim establish their own lodges, as historian Emmanuel points out: “.... a document of 1774 refers to a Jewish lodge in Curacao and that the Sephardim were the co-founders of both the Igualdad lodge in 1855 and the Acacia lodge in 1874.” It is from these lodges

that the Sephardic Masonic presence grew in the region, gradually spreading into other Caribbean Islands, such as “St. Thomas, Coro, Santo Domingo, and Barranquilla (Goldish, p. 237).”

As for the Sephardic Freemasons of the Island of St. Thomas, many aspects can be noted; For instance, the notion that Jewish Freemasonry only flourished where Jewish communal life was poor does not stand here, as this was the place where “the nineteenth century Jews had a well-functioning religious community, [while] the Harmonic Lodge was an important element in the life of most Sephardim.” A clear sign of their notable devotion to Freemasonry can still be seen in the St. Thomas's Altona Jewish cemetery, where most of the Sephardim “have the Masonic Square and compass symbol engraved on their tombstones” (Goldish, p. 237).

A typical phenomenon, however, occurred in Coro and Barranquilla by the end of the nineteenth century; where the diminishing of Jewish social and religious life dazzlingly juxtaposed the thriving growth of Sephardic Masonic gatherings. The growth and representation of the Sephardim within the region's Masonic lodges was such, that “towards the end of the century [the Sephardim] were among the leaders of Freemasonry in Coro and Barranquilla.” A notable character was David Curiel, who was “one of the founders of the first Masonic lodge of Coro in 1856, and Isaac Senior, his brothers, and his sons [who] were all members of Coro's Unión Fraternal #44 and later [of] the Fraternal #17 lodge.”

Along with Curiel and Senior, Manasés Capriles and his sons were also featured among prominent masons; as “Manasés achieved the high Masonic rank of [the] 33rd degree, [and] was the Grand Master of his lodge in Coro in 1886.” Barranquilla's lodges

also had a prolific Sephardic membership, as there were “the Cortissoz and Alvarez Correa families, who featured prominently among the leaders of the Masonic movement in Barranquilla at the end of the nineteenth century (Goldish, p. 237).”

As for the island of Santo Domingo, Jewish organized life never grew significantly. The presence of the Sephardim in Freemasonry, however, had a truly blossoming existence, as “Sephardic Jews such as David Leon and Joshua Naar were among the co-founders of a Masonic lodge created in 1846, only a few years after the Dominican Republic became independent. They and other members of the Curacaoan Jewish Diaspora, such as the De Marchenas, Penhas, and Henriquezes and their descendants, continued to be active members of subsequent lodges in Santo Domingo.” Featuring among the less conservative members of society, the Sephardim benefited from their association with “other liberal members of Dominican society who were Freemasons..., and to a great extent these regular get-togethers at the local lodges, based on the spiritual and moral themes of Freemasonry, took the place of the practically non-existent religious rituals and celebrations for the Sephardim of Santo Domingo (Goldish, p. 237).”

Through this brief study of the relationship between the Free & Accepted Masons and the Western Sephardim and descendants of crypto-Jews, we have witnessed how remarkably important the Masonic brotherhood was for the social integration of the exiled Sephardim. For since the early 1700's, English Freemasonry's brotherly embrace incredibly helped shape the early emancipation of the Sephardim as equal citizens of society, by leveling the playing field for the *Homens da Nação*. England became a pivotal gateway through which the Sephardim managed to grow a sizable representation within

the Royal Art, allowing them to build a lasting Sephardic Masonic heri-tage in the Caribbean. An, outstanding individual example of Sephardic Freemasonry in the Caribbean (as well as in England and the United States) was that of Moses Elias Levy. From ancestors who had moved to Morocco to escape the Inquisition in Spain, he was born in Morocco in 1782, and lived in several countries before becoming the first prominent Jew in Florida before his death in 1854. As Monaco writes, his status as an active Freemason in England helped demonstrate his ability to work effectively within the civil realm, he was highly regarded in St. Thomas as a Freemason (among other things), and his “status as a Freemason provided access to a global association of individuals and lodges” (pp. 8, 32,40).

Such heritage would equally become prevalent in Spanish and Portuguese America. While this article does not have space to discuss the situation of descendants of Spanish and Portu-guese Jews in the United States, it is interesting to note that in the 1700s “Jews from Portugal, the Caribbean, and elsewhere formed a large proportion of the lodge set up by the Bostonians in Newport, Rhode Island” (Bullock, p. 59). Also indicating a Sephardic presence in the 1700s, Solomon’s Lodge in Savan-nah, Georgia, had been organized by Governor James Ogle-thorpe, in 1734. Among its members were two brothers, Moses Nunis and Daniel Nunis, the first Jewish-American Masons (Tabbert, p. 34).

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Endnotes

¹For a comparative study of this time period, see Abraham Lavender and Mohamed Aburadi, "Crypto-Jews and Crypto-Muslims in Spain: Cultural, Economic, and Geographical Comparisons of Morranos and Moriscos,"

²Interestingly, in the 1800s, Chile, Argentina, and other parts of South America were liberated from Spain by General Jose de San Martin; Vene-zuela and northern parts of South America were freed from Spain under the leadership of Simon Bolivar. Chile was liberated by Bernardo O'Higgins. All three, San Martin, Bolivar, and O'Higgins, were Masons.

³Undemocratic political regimes, especially Nazism, Fascism, and Commu-nism (including Franco's Spain), have almost always opposed and tried to destroy Freemasonry. As Margaret Jacob has written, "By mid-century hos-tility toward the Jews combined with conspiracy theory to invent the myth of the Jewish-Masonic conspiracy. In the twentieth century that myth became a centerpiece of Fascist and Nazi ideology – with radically horrific conse-quences" (p. 28). Regarding Spain and Franco, Avni wrote that "Various

tracts in the 1930s sought to prove that the establishment of the Second Republic was nothing but a Jewish plot planned well in advance and abetted by the Freemasons and Communists” (p. 38). Cuba is an exception to totalitarian countries and Freemasonry. The first Masonic lodge was established in 1804, and Freemasonry has survived all the tribulations of Cuban history, including the present Castro dictatorship (Hamill and Gilbert, p. 53). Freemasonry has been important in Cuba, and many Cuban lodges are in exile in Miami.