

The Phoenix by Candlelight 2012-03-25

The Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam



The Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam, also known as the "Esnoga" or "Snoge", is not connected to electricity. Two large brass chandeliers hold a total of 1,000 candles, all of which are lit during worship services, casting a soft light that greets the worshippers. The floor is covered with fine sand in the custom of the Anusim, in remembrance of the days when the crypto-Jews had to hold secret prayers in cellars well hidden from the eyes of the Spanish Inquisition.

Despite the sand and the lack of electrical lighting, the Portuguese Synagogue in Holland is one of the most magnificent synagogues in the world. Its size and grandeur hint at the Dutch religious tolerance which prevailed in 1675, the year it was built. Indeed, over the centuries many synagogue architects have drawn inspiration from the Esnoga. The characteristic interior became the model for the entire western Sephardi world.

The Marranos find a safe haven

As a result of the Inquisition, many Sephardim (Spanish and Portuguese Jews) left the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the 15th century and throughout the 16th century, in search of religious freedom. Pockets of them found their way to the newly independent Dutch provinces: independent from the reign of Spain, Sephardic Jews from the Iberian Peninsula were free to come. Many of the Jews who eventually left for the Dutch provinces were actually Conversos or crypto-Jews, Jews who had outwardly converted to Catholicism but continued to practice Judaism in secret.

The Provinces in the North of The Netherlands declared themselves independent from Spain in 1572. The independence was declared in the "Unie van Utrecht" of 1579, in which the personal freedom of religion for every resident was stated. This was the first time in Europe that a law had been declared granting freedom of

religion. It was this legal arrangement which gave the persecuted Marranos a safe haven, encouraging them to return to their roots, to their Jewish religion and culture. During a substantial migration that took place in the 17th century, many of them openly returned to the Jewish religion after they had settled in the Netherlands. These former Anusim referred to themselves as "Portuguese Jews" to avoid being identified with Spain in light of the ongoing conflict between the Dutch Republic and Spain.

The well-to-do Sephardim brought to Amsterdam wealth, trade and commerce, doctors, rabbis and philosophers of great ability, and families belonging to the Jewish aristocracy. Holland became a colonial world power with the help of Jewish drive and ingenuity. This was mainly the result of the Spanish Jews who had fled Spain, and the Marranos who followed afterward.

Interestingly, in the ancient library next to the Spanish-Portuguese library, in the rotunda, is a membership list from the 1600's. Next to each name is a code noting who was a Marrano and who was not. However, gradually after 50-60 years, the code disappears. After a period of time they all integrated into the community as the Conversos officially resumed their observance and open practice of Judaism.

The Jews were the patrons of the famous Dutch masters. That is why so much of the art of Holland is about Jewish subjects. Rembrandt's portfolio, for instance, includes a surprising amount of works with Jewish subjects. He lived in the Jewish neighborhood and was supported by Jews. Many of his themes included lighting the Sabbath candles, the Jewish bride, the rabbi, biblical "Old Testament" scenes and the prophet Jeremiah. He and a number of other artists were preoccupied with Jewish themes, because Jews backed them.

Although the Protestant country was tolerant towards the Jews, the situation between the Protestants and the Catholics was far from idyllic. In 1603, Rabbi Uri HaLevi came from Germany along with a group of his students, to bring Jewish knowledge to the Anusim. One day, in the midst of their prayers which they were accustomed to holding in secret, they were interrupted by local policemen who proceeded to arrest them with the intention of banishing them from the city. Only after convincing the police that they were Jews, not Catholics, were they allowed to carry on with their mission.

Rising from the ashes

On 15 November 1670 Chacham Isaac Aboab (Da Fonesca) invited the Parnassim, the Sephardic Jewish community leaders, to build a large, new synagogue; a committee set up by the parnassim soon made a recommendation. They advised the purchase of a plot of land 100 feet wide and 125 feet long. Around the site, but not connected to it, a number of low buildings could be built for educational facilities with accommodation for various functionaries. In between, there would be space for adults to stroll and children to play safely 'free of the danger from outside'. Moreover, there was plenty of cheap ground in the area to build inexpensive housing for the congregants.

A model of Solomon's Temple made by Rabbi Jacob Juda Leon (1602-1675), who taught religion at the Portuguese-Jewish community school, inspired the design of the synagogue by architect Elias Bouman. The total cost of the building was 186,000 florins, a princely sum. When completed, the Portuguese Synagogue was the largest in the world.

According to the Jewish Codex, the "Shulchan Aruch", a synagogue that does not contain a dwelling does not need a mezuzah. The Esnoga has therefore never had a mezuzah. The interior follows the Iberian Sephardi plan: the benches all run parallel to the side walls. The fine sand that is scattered on the floor absorbs the dust, moisture and dirt of the congregants' footwear and mutes the sound of their footsteps.

The symbol of the synagogue, which was at one time also the symbol of the entire Sephardic community in Holland, is the phoenix; it decorates the walls of the "Esnoga" and appeared in the official documents and stamps of the community. The symbolism is clear - like the phoenix, the proud Portuguese community rose from the ashes against all odds, despite the persecution and hardships of the Spanish Inquisition.

Jews in Amsterdam today

More than any other European country, Holland has strong Jewish influences. The city of Amsterdam, with its magnificent canals, was built up by Jews, who made it into the largest port in Europe.

The Amsterdam Jewish community has some unique customs. During the "Yizkor" prayer (*A memorial service held by Jews on certain holy days for deceased relatives*), the souls of the brave Jews who were burned in the auto-da-fes of the Inquisition are still mentioned. When saying the "Grace After Meals", prayer books were held under the table, on their laps; this custom was preserved by the descendants of the Anusim - and continued even when they emigrated to Holland and no longer had cause for fear.

Amsterdam had two separate Jewish communities - Sephardim and Ashkenazim. The Ashkenazi Jews who wanted to pray in the Esnoga were relegated to the back pews. As recently as the middle of the 20th century the aristocratic Sephardic families didn't allow their children to marry Ashkenazi Jews; after WWII, given that the Nazis did not distinguish between the various Jews, this gap closed.

Dutch Jewry was founded in tragedy and it encountered tragedy once again in the 20th century. The Community that flourished in the 17th century and produced distinguished rabbis, philosophers and world renowned traders was all but totally destroyed during the Holocaust, when 90% of its Jewish population was murdered by the Nazis. After the war, only 20,000 Jews were left in all of the Netherlands, including just 800 Sephardi.

Miraculously, the Portuguese Synagogue survived the Nazi invasion in 1940 unscathed. It

is still not known why it was left intact when virtually all other synagogues were destroyed.

Amsterdam was once known as the "Jerusalem of the West"; although there is a Jewish presence to this day and the Portuguese Synagogue is still in use today, there remain mainly mementos and memorials of what was once a thriving Jewish community.