

The Beginning

by Jerry Klinger

Jewish American communities will mark the 350th anniversary of Jewish life in America in 2004. The anniversary is accurate and yet it is inaccurate.

Jews were part of the voyages of discovery even with Columbus's maiden voyage. Sometimes Jews came as crew members willingly as *conversos*, hidden Jews who chose to convert superficially to Christianity because they feared the horrors of the Catholic Church's Inquisition. Sometimes Jews were kidnapped, forcibly baptized and became members of exploring crews, such as Gaspar da Gama a Sephardic Jew who sailed with Portuguese admiral Pedro Alvares Cabral to present day Brazil in 1500.

Conversos were participants in the early Conquistador and Spanish colonial efforts in Latin America; But, the Auto-da-Fe of the Inquisition followed. The Inquisitors were active in trying and executing hidden Jews early into the 15th century in present day Mexico City.

Ironically, the execution fires of the Auto-da-Fe were carried out in the same central plaza where the great Aztec Temples had offered the beating bloody hearts of human sacrifices to their fierce gods.

Successful English colonization in North America did not come until the early 17th century. Individual Jews were participants in the failed or "Lost Colony" of Roanoke Island, N.C., a failed effort of Sir Walter Raleigh in 1587. Individual Jews were pioneer colonists in early Jamestown, Virginia and on the very next boat after the Pilgrims landed in Plymouth, Mass. in 1620. However, permanent communities of Jews in the Americas trace back to Recife, Brazil.

Recife, a Portuguese colony, was founded in the early 1500s. Within a century the successful agricultural and business center and environs of Recife had a population of 10,000 and a estimated hidden Jewish population of over 1,000.

In 1630, the Dutch captured the city and proclaimed religious toleration. Many hidden Jews emerged and for the first time affirmed their Jewishness openly.

The Jewish community of Recife grew and prospered, Jewish immigration was openly encouraged. When two ships carrying 200 hopeful Jews, led by Manoel Mendes de Castro arrived in Recife in 1638, they came to a community where a synagogue had already been established in 1636. In short order the communal needs of Congregations Tsur Israel and Magen Abraham in nearby Mauritsstad (Mauricia) reached out for religious leadership.

Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonesca and the renowned scholar Raphael d'Aguilar were invited to settle, help build and lead a new Jewish life in the New World. They arrived from Amsterdam in 1642.

Sadly, open Jewish life in Dutch Brazil was not to endure. Twenty four years from when the Dutch first took Recife (1630) and despite a valiant defense where Jews stood, fighting, side by side with their Christian neighbors, Recife was retaken by the Portuguese in 1654. To the credit of the Protestant commander, a condition of surrender was that the Jews were not to be harmed.

The Jewish and Protestant communities had two choices, stay and face the Inquisition or leave. A flotilla of Jewish refugees chose to leave for the Dutch Islands of the Caribbean, the community of Curacao traces its origin to 1651, or to return to Holland.

All ships arrived safely in Dutch harbors except one, the St. Catherine, which was savaged by storms and then ransacked by Spanish pirates. Twenty three Jewish souls on board the St. Catherine were left virtually naked, but alive, when the ship finally limped into the tiny, rapidly growing Dutch community of New Amsterdam, (present day New York) September, 1654.

Destitute, the Jews had no way to pay the Captain of the St. Catherine. He filed a legal complaint against the Jews with the Dutch Director General (Governor) of the colony - Peter Stuyvesant. Stuyvesant, a hard practical man running a struggling colonial enterprise had no use for Jews "blasphemers of Jesus Christ".

Immediately writing to his superiors in the Dutch West India Company in Amsterdam, the governor asked for permission to banish the Jews from the colony.

The Company's startling answer changed the course of American Jewish history forever. The Dutch West India Company was a public stock company in Holland. Many Jews were significant shareholders in the company. Rather than offend the Jewish shareholders and risk damaging the company the decision was that the Jews could remain so long as they did not become public burdens on the colony.

One phase of the Jewish struggle to live in America had ended. Within a span of only a few decades Jews would earn, demand and win the rights to be treated as equals with Christians in matters of common interest such as defense, land ownership, economic opportunity and religious toleration.

The intimidating dark and forbidding American frontier, was to become the doorway to Freedom.

A later Jewish poetess, Emma Lazarus, was to write these words inscribed near the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor, "Give me your tired your poor your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore send these the homeless tempest tossed to me. I lift my lamp by the golden door."

The story, of American Jewry, had begun.