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**Sephardi Jewish converts in Early Modern Amsterdam: The
Quest for Zion In The Dutch Republic
Pelham, Lipika**

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PhD BY PUBLISHED WORK

Lipika Pelham

University of Westminster, London

Supervisors: Dr Ludivine Broch

Dr Rachael Attwood

Sephardi Jewish converts in Early Modern Amsterdam: The Quest for Zion In The Dutch Republic

A Commentary on *Jerusalem on the Amstel: The Quest for Zion In The Dutch Republic*

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Abstract

Jerusalem on the Amstel: The Quest for Zion in the Dutch Republic tells the story of the Iberian New Christians or *conversos* – Jews forcibly converted to Catholicism – who arrived in Amsterdam in the early 1600s. In post-Reformation Netherlands, they encountered something new, Freedom of Conscience, a fundamental tenet inscribed in law by the new Dutch Republic's *Treaty of Utrecht* (1579). This freedom enabled the Iberian community to rediscover its ancestral faith, granted the title of 'The Portuguese Nation of the Hebrews', a contractual status that guaranteed them legal autonomy.

The first part of my book explores the choices and dilemmas faced in the formation of this new Jewish community in Amsterdam. I demonstrate the extent to which the *conversos* drew on the memory of Judaism of their ancestors to invent this new identity. In Amsterdam the new Jews nurtured the 'Hope of Israel', a Messianic chain of desire to return to Zion, while

creating in Amsterdam their Dutch Jerusalem, a proto-Zionist enclave. The second part of my book turns to today's Dutch Portuguese Jews and traces the echoes of this once prosperous past on the current declining, dwindling community. Through interviews and research in Amsterdam, including with Holocaust survivors, it addresses the theme of memory creation and its relevance in the formation of community. By weaving past and present histories, the two distinct parts of the book make clear the importance of generational memory in the invention of identity and how it resonates in our time. The doctoral commentary gives the book its academic framework, showing clearly the contributions it makes to existing literature and outlining the methods and approaches I used in my research.

Introduction

In early 2017, I was making a documentary for the BBC World Service on 500 years of the Reformation, from a Jewish angle. The research I embarked upon would consume me over the next two years, during which I found myself renting a place close to the former Jodenbuurt – Jewish Quarter – in Amsterdam. I became fascinated with the incredible epoch of the birth of Sephardi Judaism in the city on the Amstel river. I spent those months researching at Ets Haim, the oldest still-functioning Jewish library in the world. Founded by the father of the philosopher Spinoza, it dates back to the seventeenth century, when Iberian New Christians arrived in Amsterdam—from 1593 onwards—fleeing the Inquisition.

The Judaism of the Sephardim has been close to my own personal experience. A member of my family has distant links to the Iberian Sephardim, who were part of the first exodus out of the Peninsula to the Levant. She could not trace back to the forced departure in the aftermath of the Inquisition, but the legend goes that after having first found refuge in the old Ottoman Empire the family then moved on to North Africa, before settling in Cairo and Alexandria. In the family mausoleum that I visited in 2010, my eyes hovered over the last names of the deceased, their Iberian history flickered amidst the mildewed Alexandrian stones and the scent of the sea, from near and far. The sea imagery lingered in my mental notes and leapt up while writing about the ‘tempest-tossed’¹ people finding refuge on another shore, a safe haven in the post-Reformation Europe. Some of the family names that I had memorised in the Egyptian mausoleum had their namesakes memorialised on the marble gravestones in Amsterdam’s Ouderkerk cemetery—‘a haunting reminder of the New Christians’ story of survival under the Inquisition’.² Very soon, I was able to put together a storyboard—or rather the genealogy of a book on the Reformation and the Jews born of the New Christian religious immigrants from the Iberian Peninsula.

¹ Rehuel Jessurun, *Dialogo Dos Montes*: the controversy of the mountains, a dramatic action composed in the Portuguese tongue, 1624, trans. Philip Polack, (London: Tamesis Books, 1975), p. 13

² Lipika Pelham, *Jerusalem on the Amstel*, (London: Hurst Publishers, 2019), p. 323

New Christians or Spanish *Cristianos Nuevos* or Portuguese *Cristãos-Novos*, were a socio-religious-legal group who descended from Sephardi Jews and Iberian Muslims having undergone forced baptism after the Reconquista in 1492.³ The group also came to be known as ‘conversos’ – converts to Christianity, or ‘descendants of baptised Jews’ as they dispersed across the world.⁴ The New Christians—among whom many secret Jews or Marranos—took advantage of the hegemonic Christian confessions to make a giant leap toward permanent freedom, from the anti-Jewish persecution that had been prevalent in Europe for at least the previous five centuries.⁵ In this city on the banks of the Amstel river, they reclaimed their Jewish culture.

Their admission to the northern European city had been a revolutionary by-product of the Protestant Reformation, when a visceral inter-clan warfare unfolded within Christianity.⁶ The Reformation period, which lasted from 1517 to 1648, rendered a sea change to northern Europe, which for the first time opened its doors to a *carnival of nations*.⁷ Repressed by the predominant Catholicism of the southern Spanish Empire, religious refugees found themselves on different, distant homelands. In their dispersed settlements, a new idea of national identity, separate from religious territorialism, was forming fast. The old Christians, other clandestine and open religious groups, were faced with questions about their selfhood in this period of religious mobility that thrived in the most promising city in northern Europe. From 1590 to 1650 in Amsterdam, and in some other northern European nations recently pronounced as Protestant, it was possible to convert from Christianity to other religions—something that had not been possible before. In sixteenth-century Europe, when the Pope was no longer universally the supreme authority in the life of an old Christian, everyone was forced to reconsider their religious affiliation. The Lutheran Reformation that kicked off in 1517 with the publication of the *Ninety-five Theses* posed a difficult question to every European Christian: ‘*Am I a Catholic or a Protestant?*’⁸

³ The Reconquista imposed the ‘Edict of Expulsio’ or *Alhambra Decree* of the Catholic monarchs whereby Iberian Jews and Muslims were required to convert to Christianity (and become *New Christians*) or leave the peninsula.

⁴ As described by Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

⁵ It was distinctively anti-Jewish as opposed to what we understand today as anti-Semitism. According to Kenneth Austin: ‘..anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism are often treated as if they are synonymous. Here [in his book], however, preference will be given to ‘anti-Judaism’ on the grounds that it is anachronistic (again) to use ‘anti-Semitism for the early modern period: the latter term was only coined in the late nineteenth century...’.

Kenneth Austin, *Jews and the Reformation* (Yale University Press, 2020), p. xiv.

Jews were evicted from England in 1290 and from France in 1306. Although they lived comparatively harmoniously in Muslim Spain, there had been sporadic pogroms, the worst recorded one being the Seville Massacre of 1391.

⁶ If the converso phenomenon was a ‘by product’ of early modern Europe (in order to avoid anachronistic inaccuracies), how can we then study its historiography in which the community ‘was integrated into early modern Jewish historical narratives?’ asks historian Claude B. Stuczynski, in *From Potential and Fuzzy Jews*, Francesca Bregoli, David B. Ruderman eds., *Connecting Histories: Jews and Their Others in Early Modern Europe*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), P. 200.

⁷ The Protestant Reformation began in 1517 with the publication of Martin Luther’s ‘Ninety-Five Theses’. Historians place its end anywhere from the 1555 Peace of Augsburg, which allowed for the coexistence of Catholicism and Lutheranism in Germany, to the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years’ War.

⁸ Interview with Bart Wallet, Professor of Jewish Studies, University of Amsterdam, August, 2018.

The historian and professor of Dutch Jewish History, Benjamin Kaplan, questioned earlier historiography of tolerance of the post-Reformation period, which seemed to have accommodated religious diversity. Rather, he argued that tolerance in early modern Europe in fact reflected ‘situations of stable coexistence where conflict was being successfully *contained*⁹ and physical violence avoided’.¹⁰ The Dutch Republic fitted this description. Already an anomalous republic in an imperial Europe, Amsterdam was gripped by Confessionalisation, which represented ‘the defeat of efforts to rebuild the unified Latin Church’.¹¹

The Iberian New Christians who sought refuge in Amsterdam’s liberal atmosphere found themselves at a historic junction when identities were being redrawn according to cultural, historical and religious necessity. They were faced with unprecedented choices: to remain Catholic, become Protestant or, and totally unexpectedly, return to Judaism. It was a very short window in post-Reformation European history, but the Marranos who had secretly adhered to a form of Judaism, and the more ambivalent New Christians, decided to make the most of this previously unimaginable opportunity. Having suffered mass conversions under the Inquisition, the Marranos had already been taking advantage of their apparent or feigned Catholic identities to prosper in other European commercial centres, in Antwerp for example, long before Amsterdam opened its doors. The historian Jonathan I. Israel argues that the western Sephardi diaspora along with their converso relatives and associates in the Hispanic world contrived for two centuries to span, in structurally crucial ways, all the western maritime empires across all the continents, and all the great religious blocs with exclusive claims to Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodoxy, and Islam.¹² And in the auspices of the northern European mercantilism, the negative course of the history of the Jews had undergone a positive process of permutation, in which the Iberian New Christians were both victims and agents of European maritime, commercial and colonial expansions.¹³

My research into the formation of the community from their departure from the Iberian Peninsula to their arrival in Amsterdam, demonstrated a crucial, timeless immigrant reality: that no matter what, immigrants seek inspiration and patterns from their old life to build a new one in their latest settlement. But in Amsterdam, they faced a major challenge that was to do with their psycho-cultural allegiance: here, they had to adopt rejudaisation, and grow with it alongside the ‘old Jews’. This created internal conflict and would continue to do so in centuries to come, until the Second World War, when their Jewish identity was questioned by both the Sephardi Jews themselves, but also their Nazi persecutors. The subject of the split identity as Jews and the reidentifying attempt as a Mediterranean stock with no Jewish blood

⁹ My *italics*.

¹⁰ Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 11.

¹¹ 2009, Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, (London: Penguin 2010), p. 639.

¹² Jonathan I. Israel, *Diasporas Within a Diaspora: Jews, Crypto-Jews and the World of Maritime Empires 1540-1740*, (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 4.

¹³ Jonathan I Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilisation, 1998), p.19 (reference to ‘positive process of permutation’; and Jonathan I. Israel, *Diasporas Within a Diaspora*.... p. 1 (... ‘agents of European maritime, commercial and colonial expansions’).

at all to escape the Holocaust—has been analysed in my work with a deep emphasis on ‘identity’ of Western Sephardi Jews.

My studies show that the questions of identity that the floating nations were faced with in Early Modern Period, were different from those of earlier identities, which were chosen in accordance with the religious adherence of their rulers.¹⁴ How to relate to people of different faiths—this became one of the most urgent concerns of the age. ‘Tolerance’ and ‘intolerance’ became major topics of European thought and an issue in the daily life of millions.¹⁵ Kaplan underlines that co-existence was a matter of *necessity* in early modern Europe as ‘a remarkable social and institutional phenomenon,’¹⁶ more than anything else. It was an institutional arrangement by the Protestants, by various treaties and laws.¹⁷

But the events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries would go on to demonstrate that when this ‘necessity’ wore off, the historical animosity of the Middle Ages, leapt up. And Christians who grudgingly accepted the previous centuries’ social practices and institutional arrangements of toleration, no longer felt compelled to adhere to them. The antisemitism in Europe exploded with the Holocaust, but it was very much active in the nineteenth century. This is one of the arguments by which we could perhaps understand what came to be known as the Dutch Paradox,¹⁸ in the context of the Second World War.

This research led me onto the path of what would become an engrossing study into Jewish history stretched from the early modern to the contemporary period over the following two years. However, this was not my originally intended work as a documentary maker for the BBC. This was more than that; in fact I never made that documentary. Instead, I was now writing a book: *Jerusalem on the Amstel: The Quest for Zion in the Dutch Republic*.

¹⁴ See Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*... p 3, ‘Protestantism itself splintered into rival denominations, or “confessions”, Lutheran, Reformed (known colloquially as Calvinist), Anabaptist, and others.’

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 4.

¹⁶ Gregory, Brad S., University of Notre Dame, Book review of *Divided by Faith* by Kaplan in *The Historian*, 2009, p. 905, https://www.academia.edu/29741857/Divided_By_Faith, ‘Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe’.

¹⁷ The principal one being the *Treaty of Utrecht*, where ‘Freedom of Conscience’ was codified as an institutionally accepted and enforced law.

¹⁸ ‘The persecution and destruction of the Jews during World War II is part of European history, yet in most historical accounts of these events, a national perspective predominates. Seen from this perspective, it becomes clear that the attack on the Jews in the Netherlands revealed a paradox: while the Netherlands had the reputation of being traditionally a tolerant country, offering a safe haven to Jews as well as to other religious minorities, the number of victims was much higher than in other western European countries. In recent years, the “Dutch paradox” has sparked much debate, yet little of it has reached a wider international audience.’ *The Holocaust in the Netherlands*, Ido de Haan, Last Reviewed, 10 June, 2024.

<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199840731/obo-9780199840731-0050.xml#:~:text=Seen%20from%20this%20perspective%2C%20it,much%20higher%20than%20in%20other>

1. Research Questions, Driving Aims

At the start of the project in 2017, I wanted to better understand the connection between the Jews and their ‘others’—the mixed populations of Christians they encountered in new cultural, legal and political settings in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation.¹⁹ But more importantly, I wanted to find out a chronology of the formation of a recognised Jewish community in early modern (1600s) Western Europe after having been evicted in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries from England and France.²⁰ How did the community, who would be known as the Western Sephardim, come into existence and even thrive amidst a Christian nation? How had the cultural reconstruction been achieved? Why did they want to become Jewish rather than conform to the predominant Protestant faith? Surely it would have been easier to remain who they came as—since Catholicism was but another Christian confession? Was the early 1600s an epoch-making moment in the emergence of a Jewish cultural identity as their community—the Portuguese Nation—soon came to be recognised as a Sephardi powerhouse in its new setting in northern Europe? What role if any did the Dutch oceanic dominance play in the establishment of this particular nationhood, in successfully shaping the Iberian cultural outreach?

Amsterdam, with its inland sea, resembled a safe enough shore for refugees in the sixteenth century to land. Their arrival was welcomed by the Dutch Republic that ruled the oceans. With Amsterdam at the heart of an emerging economic hub, the migrants quickly created a crucial link between the New World and commerce.²¹ On the one hand I was asking myself by now familiar questions regarding the fast-paced community formation of the Spanish-Portuguese Jews at the heart of a prosperous western European city: Was it the Reformation that facilitated the acceptance of the people who would be known as the Western Sephardim? Did they find refuge because there was a deliberate attempt by the Dutch Republic’s new religious milieu to celebrate pluralism? Was it a chance escape, a loophole in European Christian history, where other religious adherences had been overlooked as the predominant religious confessions struggled to assert their positions? Historian Kenneth Austin argues that the religious divisions triggered by the Reformation meant that Jews were no longer the only, nor even necessarily the most dangerous, religious ‘other’.²² Austin goes on to say that if the Protestant clergy were reluctant to accommodate the refugees from Iberia, the Protestant political power considered that Jews might contribute to the economies of cash-strapped states reeling from the thirty-year religious war, ‘through their trade or as financiers.’²³ To better understand their arrival in Amsterdam, historian Miriam Bodian suggested I visit the rich Amsterdam archives which revealed the city’s pivotal role in the early modern period. Amsterdam’s ‘printing presses, merchants, and freedom of action made it a nerve centre for a

¹⁹ As suggested in *Connecting Histories: Jews and Their Others in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Francesca Bregoli and David B. Ruderman (Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

²⁰ In 1290, the entire Jewish population of around 3000 in England was expelled on the orders of Edward I. Jews were formally expelled from France in 1306.

²¹ Amsterdam—a haven & economic hub, as illustrated by Jonathan I Israel, *Sephardi Immigration into the Dutch Republic (1595-1672)*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41481727>, p. 45.

²² Kenneth Austin, *Jews and the Reformation*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020) p. xix.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. xix.

commercial, ethnic, and religious network of considerable complexity.’²⁴ The Iberians would arrive here to make the most of this network of opportunities.

Many historians, I was soon to discover, overwhelmingly point to this socio-economic explanation of the Jewish incarnation in early modern Europe. But that does not say much about how the religious rebirth began and established the community as the founders and followers of Sephardi Judaism in Western Europe and the New World—far beyond the Dutch milieu. A return to perceived roots needs a chronology of memory—remembered or invented.²⁵ But the Iberian New Christians lived without any tangible connection to their ancestral culture, customs or stories. The past had long been mythologised. While the existing scholarship helped me understand the issues of identity and religious reincarnation, the obvious questions remained: to what extent did historical memory play a part in their collective return to Judaism? What methods did they use to reconstruct identity and reinvent memory? Who were the founding rabbis, religious elites, cultural representatives who led this process of community building and integration? Did all members of the community agree to mass conversion? Who were the heretics and how were they treated? Finally, what archives and historical records are available to categorise the complexity of community formation which goes beyond the idealistic converso studies laced with Jewish steadfastness? This celebration of Jewish national greatness despite dispersion and dissolution, is a much romanticised conception of Jewish history. I wanted to break out of the conventional line of research into the history of the Jews and conversos of Iberia.

During the months that I spent in Amsterdam, I met and interviewed the descendants of the Iberian Jews, which propelled my research 400 years into the twentieth century. I arrived at new questions that I wanted to find answers to. What does the community’s reverting to its ancestral faith tell us about modern day identity performance? What is the link between the community’s ‘Hope of Israel’ and the latter day phenomenon of Zionism—the Jewish longing to return to Jerusalem? The community called Amsterdam their ‘Dutch Jerusalem’, so I asked: was there a (Sephardi) Zion (in seventeenth century Amsterdam) before political Zionism was born in the nineteenth century—something that is seen to be a product of the Ashkenazi Jewish aspiration for a homeland? How do we understand their pre-modern roots since the Portuguese Nation of Amsterdam came to be known by later historians as First Modern Jews? To what extent did the community integrate into the mainstream Dutch society then and now?

Questions about the twentieth century were also now emerging: how did the survivors of the Holocaust reflect upon this past? How did they re-build after the Second World War which saw a majority of the Dutch Jews perish? And how do the handful of descendants who

²⁴ Bodian, Miriam, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation, Conversos and Community in Early Modern Amsterdam*. Preface, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

²⁵ Kunin, Seth D., *Juggling Identities: Identity and Authenticity Among Crypto-Jews*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 214. Kunin (and others such as Claude Lévi-Strauss) employs the term, *juggling identities*, which ‘suggests that as individuals and groups move among different constructions of identity and within a specific identity, they differently select, emphasise, and de-emphasise elements of structure.’

remain in Amsterdam reminisce their Portuguese lineage? This final part of my research raised a very important dynamic: what the descendants, today's Dutch Jews, understand as 'the Dutch Paradox', whereby the story of Dutch tolerance was seriously challenged by the reality of Dutch collaboration in the Holocaust.²⁶

My aim was to try to answer all these questions. I wanted to do that by first portraying an extensive picture of the community, drawing a colourful cultural-religious-historical as well as modern-day map of their arrival, integration, destruction during the Second World War and re-reconstruction by the survivors of the Holocaust. By shedding light on the community formation, I wanted to bridge the gap between the two sections of my book: the first of which deals with the seventeenth century Dutch Republic and the second with the present-day descendants.

My goals were threefold. First, to popularise the history of the Iberian Catholic migrants emerging as a self-governing Orthodox Jewish entity in a northern European Protestant nation. As well as being academic, I wanted my research to be accessible to a less specialised audience. This was an extension from my background in journalism and narrative storytelling, having published three popular histories beforehand.²⁷ Second, to understand the past through known and unknown primary sources as well as the existing historiography. I dived deep into the historiography of the Reformation period and Jewish histories in early modern and modern Europe; used primary sources in archives, libraries and museums; and interviewed the current descendants in Amsterdam before linking them to their ancestors. Finally, to address briefly the scope of proto-Zionism in the Sephardi context, characterised by anachronism in the fields of Zionist studies. As the subtitle of the book indicates, I wanted to explore 'the quest for Zion in the Dutch Republic', as it was pursued by Amsterdam's Iberian immigrants. My study into the historiography of Zionism *before* Zionism was also to examine whether we run into the danger of mistaking Jewish sovereignty as a pre-cursor to Zionism that developed as a political thought in the nineteenth century—in the Ashkenazi Jewish milieu.

2. Methods and Approaches

Primary Sources: Published sources, archives, and oral history

For a comprehensive understanding of the Sephardi community in Amsterdam, I initially wanted to start by engaging with the existing scholarship. I wrote to the curator of Ets Haim library which is part of the Esnoga – as the Portuguese Synagogue is still called by the

²⁶ For a general history of Dutch collaboration see Gerhard Hirschfeld, *Nazi Rule and Dutch Collaboration: the Netherlands under German Occupation, 1940–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

²⁷ *The Unlikely Settler*, Jerusalem memoir, (New York: Other Press, 2014).

Jerusalem on the Amstel: The Quest for Zion in the Dutch Republic, (London: Hurst Publishers, 2019).
Passing: An Alternative History of Identity (London: Hurst, 2021).

community in the traditional Judaeo-Spanish language of Sephardi Jews. I heard almost immediately from Heide Warncke. She invited me to use the library and promised to allow me to go through the handwritten manuscripts in Portuguese. She also put me in contact with some of the descendants of the Dutch Portuguese Jewish community, including the head of the Ma'amad.²⁸ Thus, it would be the second part of the book which would be written first. And rather than start exclusively with the scholarship, I began to interview the descendants of the historical actors I was reading about. As well as offering personal insights into community dynamics, their testimonies opened reflections on collective memory and its impact on the continuity of the community in today's Amsterdam.

I thus began my venture into oral history in August, 2017. Over two years, I carried out around fifteen individual and eight group interviews. The people involved were part of the Dutch Portuguese community living there at the time. They include Michael Minco, the head of Ma'amad; members of the Paraira family who were between the ages of twenty-eight to men in their sixties; various members of the Palache family, with the key interviewee being Abraham Palache, in his mid-fifties; Curiel family members in their forties and the teenage son of another important participant, Harrie Curiel.

The Curiels in particular, and the Palaches, were the so called 'seed members' in my oral history research.²⁹ Harrie put in me touch with not only members of his own family including his niece, Miriam Curiel, but also at least three key archivists. They are: Historian Okke Ten Hove, 'without whose work on Mozes de Mozez Curiel's immigration to Surinam and the family's role as advocates of manumission of slavery in the Dutch colony, my own research would not have been complete'³⁰, Harmen Snel of Amsterdam archives and Historian Ton Ten Hove. Harrie Curiel's generosity to share with me his own simultaneous research to discover the lost lineage of his Sephardi ancestors was pivotal in linking the vast network of Iberians or the *Nação* then and now. A curious twist in Harrie Curiel's tale was that he was brought up in the Protestant tradition, as his ancestors had reverted, once again, to Christianity. His meticulous research into his Iberian family records in municipal archives in Amsterdam and The Hague, synagogue and genealogical registers in Amsterdam, provided the stepping stones for my own archival search.³¹ Spreading the research across two years and meeting the same family members also helped build trust, which led to exclusive access into a closed community. I was able to collect data from a broad section of the group, without infringing on their privacy. The process – or snowball sampling, which is integral in oral

²⁸ The Council of Elders of the communities of Spanish-Portuguese Jews.

²⁹ Livne, S., Bejarano, M. 'It's Important to hear a Human Voice', Jews under COVID-19: An Oral History Project. *Cont Jewry* 41, 185–206 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12397-021-09374-2>.

³⁰ Harrie Curiel's email to me on 10 May, 2018.

³¹ They set off what's known as 'snowball sampling' in oral history research, when each participant may lead the researcher to other potential participants. For more on 'snowball' method, see Paricia Leavy, *Oral History: Understanding Qualitative Research* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

history research to understand the experiences and cultures of the past – made my findings rich and distinctive.³²

The connections between the people I was interviewing and the first Jews in seventeenth-century Amsterdam offered a unique way to approach the history of the New Christians. One of the interviewees, Maurice Cohen Paraira, is the son of David Cohen Paraira, who can trace their family lineage all the way back to the 1670s, the decade when the great Esnoga was built. They were part of the wealthy merchant families who travelled back and forth Portugal and the Dutch Republic, some had typically Portuguese optional first names which they changed to Hebrew ones when they returned to the Dutch Republic after business and diplomatic assignments.

Group interviews usually took place in family and synagogue settings, whereby three generations of Portuguese Jews since the Holocaust would tell me how important the generational recounting of the 400 years of Dutch Jewish history was to them. They described the stories of arrival, and internal cohesion despite minor and major catastrophes, and laid out how the events still imbued the community with an authentic Portuguese Jewish identity in their *mokum*, or the ‘place’ in Hebrew, as they call the city of Amsterdam. In the Paraira family setting, I learnt that the family lineage was instrumental in rebuilding the Esnoga and instilling a revived shared history among the few thousands who survived the Holocaust. David is part of today’s Ma’amad. Maurice is one the very few young Dutch Jews who chose to stay in Amsterdam rather than emigrate to Jerusalem.

The group interviews also included conversations during the Yom Kippur service of 2018 in the Portuguese Synagogue when a traditional candle-lit service was held, with parts of the prayers recited in Portuguese as they had been in the seventeenth century. The service was attended by the members of the wider Portuguese Jewish diaspora who no longer lived in the Netherlands, but who cherished their Dutch Sephardi origins and the sense of belonging to the old Nação.

I attended the service – which remains to be gender segregated in accordance with Orthodox Jewish tradition – from the women’s gallery that surrounds the main hall of the Esnoga. There I met among other women Olivia and her family, who now lived out of the country, but returned for High Holiday services such as Yom Kippur and Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana. Some of the things that Olivia pointed out included the sawdust covered floor of the main hall – to dampen the noise of the worshippers’ feet as they enter the synagogue and take their seats.

‘The tradition continues till today, as do *we*, as a collective Nação, whether or not one is religious’, Olivia told me as we sat together in the gallery, lit by a thousand candles – another

³² A leading expert in this field of collecting data that enhances history research incorporating interviewees’ feelings, expressions and nuances of language, is Donald A Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

tradition that traces back to the inauguration of the Esnoga in 1675. When we arrived at the point of the service where a prayer to the king of the Netherlands was recited by the rabbi in Portuguese, I couldn't help thinking that the Iberian descendants today, as in the height of the Christian-Jewish engagement in the second half of the seventeenth century when this majestic synagogue was built – were mindful of what their Christian neighbours thought of their presence amongst them.³³

The individual interviews were more structured and involved sets of questions that the participants answered. They included: a. How they liked to identify themselves – Dutch, Portuguese, Dutch Portuguese Sephardi Jew; b. How they defined 'Dutch Paradox' and what that left them with in terms of how they defined their Dutch identity; c. Why they still called Amsterdam their 'mokum' – another name for Jerusalem – despite the Dutch holocaust, which saw the second largest number of Jews sent to death camps after Poland, and how this 'place' was different from that of their ancestors; d. To what extent the generational memory impacted the renewal of the community after WWII among the ruins of what was left of the Portuguese Jews and their Dutch Jerusalem. The individual interviewees came with strikingly similar answers to the questions. The cadence of their Iberian identity came out as a united, inspiring force. A common peninsular identity that is still strong and diasporic as it had been since the forced conversion of Sephardi Jews in the 1400s and their subsequent dispersion in the following two centuries.

The interviews, whether individual or group, were mostly informal. However, I made both written and recorded notes of them, in line with oral history tradition.³⁴ It was important to engage in the literature on oral history practices which helped to shape my approach to these interviews. There are no false oral sources, as Alessandro Portelli explains, because wrong or faulty recollections are 'an active process of creation of meanings'.³⁵ I thus treated oral testimonies as narrative references. My interviewees' vivid and sometimes dreamlike accounts were important to the research not for their ability to preserve a specific version of the past, but rather for the sheer effort they made to make sense of the past and to give form to their lives now, as they rebuilt their community after the Holocaust. This process set the interviews and the narrative in their seamless historical context.

I transcribed all my recorded interviews and organised them alongside typed up hand-written minutes. This helped with how I dealt with the information I gathered on the interviewees as I catalogued and filed them under clearly marked titles. As a result, I could afford to intersperse more references to an argument.

³³ See extensive research on this by Yaacov Deutsch, *Judaism in Christian Eyes: Ethnographic Descriptions of Jews and Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)

³⁴ Alessandro Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 12, Issue 1, AUTUMN 1981, pp. 96–107.

³⁵ Alessandro Portelli, *The Oral History Reader*, Ch 4, 'What Makes Oral History Different', p. 54, (London: Routledge, 1997)

The interviews directed me to the next step: the community's collective inquiry of the past and the subsequent 'invention' of a history of the Portuguese Jews. This was not done entirely through an empirical method, but through the careful selection of particular types of literature and oral history, memoirs of individuals, and a generous amount of imagination, to give shape to the making of the community. Combining the oral histories with historiographical research deepened my understanding of the community's evolution in Amsterdam. Together, they contributed to telling an original, engaging, and critical study of the community formation and Jewish memory creation in Western Europe.

But my original research question remained, why did the Iberians decide to settle as a community in the Dutch Republic and Amsterdam? How did an exilic nation find permanent home in Amsterdam's Jodenbuurt?³⁶ The literature pointed towards the role of mercantilism and the available economic prospects in Amsterdam, and a foray into archival records provided insights into the community's decision-making process. I sought to uncover the specific factors within the mercantile context that attracted the Iberians to Amsterdam and contextualise their choice to settle and integrate within the city. Ets Haim library's extensive digitised versions online as well as hand-written manuscripts by rabbis and in-house historians in the library's collection in Amsterdam, helped to carry out a systematic profile of the community's life and settlement, travel and diplomacy during the 400 years. Family trees, circumcision registers and various individual's dispersion from Iberia to Europe to the New World were found well-recorded including on genealogie.nl, dutchjewry.org websites and Amsterdam archives.³⁷

Likewise, recent literature also challenged the impact of the revolution within the Roman Catholic Church. Daniel Swetschinski points out in his work that it is often tempting 'to exaggerate the impact of the Reformation on the Jews.'³⁸ This view was reiterated and expanded in an increasing number of works by contemporary early modern historians. Kenneth Austin's *Jews and the Reformation* goes on to elaborate that we often read early modern history with a modern mindset, so the past is seen through a prism of perception influenced by the present. In fact, Austin argues that 'the acceptance of Jews in the Netherlands was, to an extent, achieved *despite* the Reformed presence, rather than because of it.'³⁹ Of course, the large-scale shift of the Iberians to northern Europe would not have been possible without the Reformation, but this alone did not contribute to the rapid growth of the Western Sephardim. As the lives of the famous Sephardi Jewish converts such as Uriel Da Costa and Baruch Spinoza have shown, their families had led a moderately privileged life in Iberia – albeit maintaining some form of crypto Jewish practice. This was possible because as present-day historians have argued, 'Iberian attitudes toward the Jews in practice were more mixed' than the simplistic Inquisitorial persecution.⁴⁰ The latter reached a mythical

³⁶ The informal Jewish quarter, not unlike the ghettos in Venice or North Africa.

³⁷ <https://www.dutchjewry.org/>; <https://www.amsterdam.nl/stadsarchief/amsterdam-city-archives/>;
<https://www.genealogieonline.nl/stamboom-abas/I2630.php>.

³⁸ Daniel Swetschinski, 'The Toleration Debate', from *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands*, eds. Blom, Fuks-Mansfield and Schoffer. p. 59-60.

³⁹ Kenneth Austin, *Jews and the Reformation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020) P. 170.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.170.

status and deconstructing it has been a major task for researchers of what became known as early modern Jewish history.

My research led me to see this as part of broader global history. In 1926, historian Lynn Thorndike introduced the term, ‘early modern’ in his *A Short History of Civilization* (1926).⁴¹ Social and political historians picked up the term and started using it from the 1970s and 1980s. Used in university publications and journals, ‘early modern’ referred to a period which saw ‘increased global interactions and connections as the defining characteristics of the era.’⁴² Following in the footsteps of historians such as Swetschinski, Kaplan, and Austin, I relied on how the descendants of the Dutch Portuguese Jews wanted their history to be written and presented. This made clear that their early modern ancestors’ Jewish revival in Amsterdam was a product of the ‘increased global interaction’ of the period. The Nação was born of the dispersion of the Peninsular *conversos* that set off the second Sephardi diaspora. Their arrival and settlement in the Netherlands proceeded with more dispersion and saw the community’s interaction spread into the New World.

One of my interviewees, Harrie Curiel found out about the history of his own family from the records of circumcision, marriage and immigration both at municipal archives and the synagogue register.⁴³ His ancestor, Moses Curiel was one of the most influential members in the Dutch-Jewish political milieu. Searching through the extensive and well-preserved records, he established a family tree from the sixteenth century all the way to the Second World War. He also found out when a branch of the Moses Curiel’s family emigrated to the Caribbean and fathered non-Jewish children with a slave woman. ‘My grandfather was the grandson of Mozes de Mozes Curiel born in 1802 in Amsterdam. Mozes de Mozes Curiel who [sic] married a black woman. So the father of my grandfather was no longer Jewish. But Mozes de Mozes was a Jew, because he was circumcised [according to synagogue records].’⁴⁴ I would soon learn that the Curiels were one of the most dispersed Iberian families who settled across the Levant, North Africa, New World, and back again in Iberia, as diplomats and tradesmen, sent by the Dutch Republic.

In trying to understand how this community established itself in Amsterdam, I began to explore early modern records which offered insights into private and collective cultural

⁴¹ Lynn Thorndike, *A Short history of civilization*. (London: John Murray, 1927. Published online by Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴² Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, ‘What is Early Modern History?’ Part of *What is History?* (A series of 18 books, Cambridge: Politybooks, 2021).

⁴³ Harrie Curiel’s immediate family tree: <https://www.dutchjewry.org/genealogy/abas/1975.shtml>; he also shared with me numerous email exchanges with the Dutch genealogy expert, Harmen Snel, with his ancestry dating back to Nunes Da Costa (<https://www.genealogieonline.nl/stamboom-abas/12630.php>) – an influential Iberian merchant family in the 16th-17th century, and also the 17th century diplomat merchant brothers David and Jacob Curiels. ‘David is the uncle of Mosheh [Moses as pronounced in Hebrew] Curiel,’ said Harrie in his email to me (May 1, 2018). Harrie continued: ‘There are two “experts” that helped me – Christiaan van Vuure and Wim Abas.’ This is exactly what ‘snowball’ method does, I started researching van Vuure and Abas’ work on the Curiels, with the help of Harrie, who was as I’ve mentioned earlier in the commentary, a ‘seed member’ in my oral history research.

⁴⁴ My interview with Harrie Curiel, Amsterdam, October, 2017.

practices. The Portuguese synagogue's handwritten register for birth, death, marriage and circumcision, also helped me to gather the geographical genealogy of the community.⁴⁵

Religious writings of the time were extremely valuable. The Old Testament, early historical accounts of the members of the community, and especially the sermons of the founding rabbis also allowed me to collect powerful aspects of the *ex-converso* experience – the ambivalence, tribulations, felt by the new Jews. In Ets Haim Library in Amsterdam, among the literature by Amsterdam's first rabbis, I found original hand-written sermons and polemical essays against Christianity in the original Portuguese, including by the longest serving rabbi of the community, Saul Levi Morteira (1596-1660).⁴⁶ This showed how the community actively cooperated to be purged of the recollected past, to experience the rebirth, to renew *Sephardi Jewish* memories. The officiation of a Yom Kippur service in 1603—or arguably in 1595—by the first rabbi Uri Halevi had been documented as the earliest Jewish service in Amsterdam, by a Marrano poet and historian, Miguel (Daniel Levi) de Barrios in the second half of the seventeenth century (1683).⁴⁷ By that time the community had grown in strength and numbers, and therefore the depiction might have been embellished with heroic attributes. The inhouse historian de Barrios' text, and the original sermons of Saul Levi Morteira, helped the Marrano to fathom this 'puzzle' of their identity. These sermons and officiations were passed down through memory and oral history to recreate the community. They were the base on which a sense of community in Amsterdam was born. I read some of these documents in Portuguese in the early rabbis' handwritten manuscripts.⁴⁸ A very small selection of the sermons is available in print, in English translation.

There was a curious twist to this process which propelled the former Catholic community into their collective incarnation as New Jews. In a way returning to Judaism was more like returning to the old Iberia, before they had been forcibly baptised. They had to put together a jigsaw puzzle of an identity envisioned from memory and oral history. The Marrano was, as the German scholar Carl Gebhardt described, 'a Catholic without faith and a Jew without knowledge'.⁴⁹

Autobiographies of some of the early converts to Judaism were extremely useful in uncovering the challenges to belonging to the Dutch Iberian community that had overnight changed its religious identity, and its historical adherence to Catholic Spain. These sources were used in some of the strongest chapters in my book, particularly the life sketch of Uriel da Costa, the young philosopher who battled a conflicted soul. To illustrate his life and unsuccessful journey to Judaism, I studied his own short autobiography – *Exemplar Humanae Vitae*, Example of a Human Life (1687) – available in English translation at Ets

⁴⁵ In-person research with the help of Heide Warncke, curator of Ets Haim library, Amsterdam, 2017-2018.

⁴⁶ A Sephardi rabbi brought over to Amsterdam from Venice

⁴⁷ De Barrios, 'Casa de Jacob' in 'Triumpho del Gobierno popular', Amsterdam (1683-84), Ets Haim collection 9E43 (Pagination by hand 404-408).

⁴⁸ https://www.etsheimmanuscripts.nl/phpviewer/index.php?path=EH_49_B_03

⁴⁹ H.A. Krop, 'Spinozism and Dutch Jewry between 1880 and 1940,' in *Dutch Jewry in a Cultural Maelstrom: 1880-1940*, Judith Frishman, ed. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008), p. 108.

Haim.⁵⁰ Da Costa's book shows that in his own mind and in the minds of his contemporaries, the old religion had been mythologised in the absence of written literature on rituals, and of prayer books. Indeed, for those who settled in Amsterdam and reverted to Judaism, the old religion had also been spiritualised by the community's avowal of loyalty inspired by their collective memory of persecution.

Another valuable source was the religious play, *Diálogo Dos Montes*, performed in the first Beth Jacob congregation two decades after the first Yom Kippur service. The 1624 performance of *Diálogo Dos Montes*,⁵¹ written by a former monk from Lisbon, Rehuel Jessurun, specifically to be performed in Beth Jacob, is pivotal in showing the role of theatre in the birth of the Jewish community in Amsterdam.⁵² The performance included verses of disputations of seven humanised biblical mountains, each vying to prove themselves the greatest of them all. Crucially, the verses were interspersed with the sermons of who would become the most orthodox teacher and guide of the community, Saul Levi Morteira (1596-1660). The Venetian rabbi arrived in Amsterdam in 1614 and unified what by then were three separate congregations representing the community. He named it *Kahal Kadosh of Talmud Torah(1639)*, the United Congregation of Talmud Torah, which would be documented as the first 'purpose-built Jewish House of Worship in the Atlantic world'.⁵³ I studied an original copy of the play in Portuguese in Ets Haim—and another at the British Library. The play provided the internal cohesion of the community's birth, rabbinical instruction, evolution and settlement as a Sephardi powerhouse. A later edition translated and foreworded by Philip Polack highlighted the early rabbis' persistent struggle with a group of converts to Judaism with conflicted souls.

Diálogo Dos Montes incorporates some 300 of Morteira's sermons – most of which are only available in Portuguese. To understand the old Portuguese during my research, I took six months' intensive lessons at the University of Westminster in 2017. The sermons played an unequivocal role in the genesis of the community that had soaked up, brought with them, and continue to carry many aspects of Catholic Spain. As the biographical chapters on da Costa and on Baruch Spinoza make clear, many early converts were eaten by doubts, 'inclined towards philosophical currents that were Catholic in character'.⁵⁴ Morteira's biography written by Marc Saperstein shows that the Portuguese Nation of the Hebrews was a nation willing to be guided by orthodoxy.⁵⁵ The sermons directed Iberian converts to find answers to their troubles. The rabbi spent a great part of his life trying to exorcise his congregation of old Catholic tendencies, and his contribution appeared all the more fascinating to later historians as it exemplified a modern aspect of identity performance among the Iberians. Their history resonates with the quest for selfhood among other refugees in the time to come. Swetschintski described the Iberian settlers in Amsterdam as the First Modern Jews, 'which

⁵⁰ English translation in London by John Whiston, 1740.

⁵² Rehuel Jessurun, *Diálogo Dos Montes*, ed. and trans. Phillip Polack, (London: Tamesis Books, 1975).

⁵³ Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*, p. 49

⁵⁴ Joseph Kaplan, 'Rabbi Sail Levi Moetira's Treatise "Arguments Against The Christian Religion"', http://www.etrfi.info/immanuel/11/Immanuel_11_095.pdf, p. 112

⁵⁵ Marc Saperstein, *Exile in Amsterdam*, (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2005).

hints at the paradox of ‘converts’ to Judaism embodying some of the quintessential features of modern Jewish existence’.⁵⁶

Soon enough, what would become the first part of my book, appeared in a chronological order: the play, Rabbi Morteira’s sermons and his polemical essays reveal the renewal of Jewish faith among Amsterdam’s first-generation Iberian converts, ‘a tract for its time’.⁵⁷ They changed the old idea of the Wandering Jew and engendered a whole new type of Jewish community in Amsterdam. Within the Protestant city, in their self-governed ‘Dutch Jerusalem’, they experienced a phenomenon that conveyed a collective aspiration for a safe home, which as my research unveiled, would be laid out in the twentieth century by a political ideology called Zionism: the normalisation of the Jews in all spheres of society.⁵⁸

Indeed within my sources the idea of Zion emerged more clearly. The seventeenth century pamphlet *Esperança de Israel*, or ‘The Hope of Israel’, took a theoretical approach to the question of Zionism in the early modern period.⁵⁹ The pamphlet was written and distributed in 1650 to the Judeo-Christian world, by the visionary rabbi of the community, Menasseh ben Israel (1604-1657). It was written in response to a 1648 letter from a Scottish Calvinist minister, John Dury, who heard from ben Israel an account of a Marrano called Antonio de Montezinos, of the discovery of the Ten Lost Tribes in South America.

Ben Israel’s pamphlet addressed the Christian world’s millenarian dream, with the Jewish proof of the viability of the advent of the Messiah: the sighting of the Lost Ten Tribes in South America. This crucial aspect in the Jewish journey toward salvation is an integral part of Zionist historiography, and which I have used to put forward my own synthesis. I have demonstrated that the sighting of the Lost Tribes, coinciding with the belief in the Restoration of the Jews among the Puritans, eventually led to the readmission of Jews to England—mediated by who else but Rabbi ben Israel. Historians Henry Méchoulan and Gérard Nahon have traced the dawning of Zionism through the mass distribution in Europe of Rabbi ben Israel’s pamphlet. This reinforces historian Nahum Sokolow’s argument that the origin and development of the Zionist idea and in the past centuries, the meaning of the term ‘Zionism’, could not be restricted ‘to the Zionist Movement and Organisation of the present day’.⁶⁰ The ‘beginning of this idea’, he argues, allows us to extend the scope of Zionism. I have followed the historiography of Zionism along the line that it goes back to the Christian religious idea of the ‘Restoration of Israel’, which shaped Christian public opinion in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries.⁶¹ The work and interfaith networking of ben Israel in the Netherlands and England in the mid-seventeenth century incorporated the creative forces underlying what would be recognised as the spirit of Zionism in later centuries.

⁵⁶ ‘Tempest-tossed’, coined by Rehuel Jessurun in *Diálogo Dos Montes*, p.,13, Trans. Philip Polack. And ‘First Modern Jews’, Swetschintski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitan*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Phillip Pollack, ‘Introduction’, *Diálogo Dos Montes*, p. 25.

⁵⁸ ‘Dutch Jerusalem’ – as the Iberian converts called their adopted city, Amsterdam.

⁵⁹ Menasseh ben Israel, *Hope of Israel*, translated by Henri Méchoulan and Gérard Nahon, (Liverpool: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, New edition, June, 2004).

⁶⁰ Nahum Sokolow, *History of Zionism* in two volumes, 1600-1918, (London: Longman Green and Co, 1919).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. vii

I approached the tragic, abrupt end of their glorious chapter at a theatre. The testimonies of the survivors transported my research to the sombre coda in 1942, when the Nazis herded the community into Hollandsche Schouwburg theatre, for deportation to the camps. The old Jewish theatre is a memorial to the 107,000 Sephardi and Ashkenazi inmates who were taken to camps, of whom only 5,500 returned after the war, with 20,000 who had survived in hiding. The Amsterdam Jews, once 10 per cent of the city's population, have now been reduced to a community of 1,000. Scholars have navigated various aspects of this paradox: 'How have the Dutch been able to keep their tolerant reputation for such a long time, despite indications to the contrary?'⁶² Historians, like the descendants, often grappled with this question.⁶³

Listening to the recital of their past as David Cohen Paraira walked me through the Jewish Museum adjacent to the Portuguese synagogue, it appeared to me that he was matching the 'collective memory' of the community with the artefacts before us: the muslin that his ancestors had brought with them in the seventeenth century, the first Torah scrolls the community had been given following their collective return to Judaism. As I catalogued the tangible objects from their seventeenth century Iberian history, my research delved into the art of memory creation through objects of the past. Historians have long explored how possessions and memories are related, and how objects acquire meaning through personal stories.⁶⁴ According to Maurice Rheims, a further phenomenon the collectors of objects show, is 'the lack of awareness of the present... They become detached from contemporary life to exist in a dreamlife of the past.'⁶⁵ Applying this method, my study sought the missing link between the established and imagined communities of Iberians in the Netherlands. I have searched references from the historians who have used the model of Dutch Protestant memories of the sixteenth-century Reformation to describe groups who would form a distinct identity in Amsterdam then and in the ensuing centuries. They too emulated or basked in and enriched their identity with that 'memory culture'.⁶⁶ Crucially, my research made it clear that Jews in the early modern and contemporary periods had been attracted to this phenomenon,

⁶² Ido de Haan, *The Holocaust in the Netherlands*, Last accessed 20/09/23

<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199840731/obo-9780199840731-0050.xml>

⁶³ Ibid., 'Much of the literature and almost all of the primary sources on the Holocaust in the Netherlands are in Dutch, which requires that scholars learn the language before entering this field of research.'— *The Holocaust in the Netherlands*, Ido de Haan.

⁶⁴ See Arjun Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 'Why We Need Things', *History From Things: Essays on Material Culture*, eds. Steven Lubar and David Kingery (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993, 20-29); Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, transl. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1996), 95.

⁶⁵ Maurice Rheims, *The Strange Life of Objects*, transl. David Pryce-Jones (New York: Atheneum, 1961), 34.

⁶⁶ BT Wallet and HJ Paul, *A Sun that Lost its Shine: The Reformation in Dutch Protestant Memory Culture, 1817-1917*. The historians argue that 'Memory cultures were not the exclusive property of nineteenth-century nation-states. Although the production and circulation of collective memories have so far been studied most thoroughly in the context of European nationalism, students of women and working-class memories have convincingly argued that such appeals to memory also helped establish other groups than nineteenth-century nation-states.' P. 35.

https://www.academia.edu/6624323/A_Sun_that_Lost_its_Shine_The_Reformation_in_Dutch_Protestant_Memory_Culture_1817_1917?email_work_card=title

which they fed with a zeal for community formation in all the places they lived, fleeing persecution or other existential threats.

3. Contribution to the Literature

My book did not engage in lengthy historiographical debates, as this was a book aimed at a popular audience. But the interviews with the descendants and their references to archival and notarial records propelled my work into a wider research field. This commentary gives me the opportunity to explain in more depth the historiographical discussions which shape my study, and to show more precisely how my book contributes to them. Historians have long been interested in the Jewish community in the Netherlands, not least because the ‘success story’ of Jews in seventeenth-century Amsterdam contrasts so sharply with dark story of the Holocaust, whereby the Dutch turned against their Jewish neighbours. My research adds to both of these bodies of literature but also bridges the two periods together to look not so much for a ‘paradox’ but for a new understanding of memory and identity formation. Within that, it also exposes the rich cultural life of Jews in Amsterdam in the early modern and contemporary periods.

The unprecedented prosperity of Amsterdam’s Portuguese Jews in the early modern period has attracted many scholars. Unlike other minority groups who arrived in this period, they seemed to successfully integrate into Dutch society. In his extensive research on Dutch history, the British historian Jonathan Israel explained that this was in large part due to their economic activity as merchants, which made them invaluable to the Dutch Republic’s Oceanic aspirations.⁶⁷ As mentioned before, the Iberian New Christians have already been involved in mercantile activities in the Low Countries, in particular in Antwerp, before the settlement in Amsterdam of their compatriots as Jews. Did the unified experience as a business community living amongst diverse societies in Western Europe make them unique? Israel answers this in his work by saying that the Jews’ re-entry in early modern period (from 1570 onwards) into Western Europe, having been removed from most of it in medieval times, was achieved – while maintaining a social and cultural cohesion (as New Christians, Jews or Marranos) – by their collective socio-economic status.⁶⁸

Other historians have deepened our understanding of the economic life of this emerging community. In his important book *Reluctant Cosmopolitans*, the historian Daniel Swetschinski offered a nuanced picture of these economic activities of the Jewish community in seventeenth-century Amsterdam. He argued that the particular economic endeavours the Jews specialised in had little to do with their specific function as a community.⁶⁹ Swetschinski’s work showed that Portuguese Jews were involved in commerce not because

⁶⁷ Johnathan Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism 1550 - 1750* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

⁶⁸ For more on this approach, see M Meyer, *Where does the Modern Period of Jewish History begin?* *Judaism* 25 (1975), pp. 329-38.

⁶⁹ Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans*, p.16.

they were Jewish, but rather because they had already been involved in commerce in Southern Europe as New Christians. Their economic activity in Amsterdam was therefore more about continuity rather than Jewishness. Regardless, this made them indispensable to the Dutch visions of empire. Historian Avinoam Yuval-Naeh, in *An Economy of Strangers*, deconstructs the myth of medieval Jewish usurpers to early modern port-Jew (due to their oceanic connection) and court-Jew (arising from their advisory and diplomatic positions). He historicises this link by focusing on another late seventeenth century Jewish entrepreneurial re-emergence in England, by proposing that the financial revolution in the English Isle coincided with the re-entry and recognition of the Jews there.⁷⁰

Faced with these multi-pronged observations, my study draws on the historians who questioned the rosy picture of the early modern phenomena that were later named ‘Sephardi success story’ and ‘Protestant tolerance’. It leans toward the argument that the story of Jewish integration did not automatically mean mutual acceptance or embrace of diversity as the term conveys in our time.⁷¹ In other words, the concept of ‘co-existence’ that prevailed then, was a kind of confessional cohabitation, which remained ‘a precarious achievement’.⁷² It required an elaborate set of arrangements and accommodation of different nations and strict laws needed to be in place to make sure some kind of social cohesion was maintained for the sake of peace.

My book builds on not least the idea of ‘reluctant cosmopolitans’ developed by Swetschinski, and agrees that their success in Amsterdam was more about circumstance and environment, and of a Dutch desire to include Jews in the city’s cosmopolitan nature because of what they could bring. In addition, I especially reinforce the cultural life of this community, Spanish cultural life as well as new Jewish traditions. It shows that the history of Jews’ mythical intertwinement with finance and economy often overlooks the rich cultural association with their ancestral Iberia, with one aspect being their fascination for plays and performances in the Spanish tradition. The staging of Rehuel Jessurun’s *Diálogo Dos Montes* as early as in 1624 demonstrates that rich cultural import into Dutch society.⁷³ Once the predominant social anxieties as a persecuted minority and their association with usurpers faded away with the modernising of Western European Christian finance, their cultural life flourished. My work illustrates that by performing a play during the festival of *Shavuot* to celebrate the Giving of the Torah, the New Jews skillfully and poetically incorporated their Spanish culture with Jewish themes. In that sense, my book expounds, the rebirth of the Western Sephardim in the seventeenth century was a unique cultural evolution of the Old Jews of Southern Europe.

⁷⁰Avinoam Yuval-Naeh, *An Economy of Strangers, Jews and Finance in England, 1750-1830*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2025).

⁷¹ Eric R Wolf, *Europe and the People without History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, 2nd ed. 2010), and W. K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, 4 vols, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1932-40).

⁷² Benjamin J Kaplan, *Divided by Faith*, p. 10.

⁷³ Performed by Amsterdam’s first Beth Jacob congregation of newly converted Jews, during Shavuot festival to celebrate the giving of the Torah to the Hebrews.

It also extensively examines the link between the past and the present, the descendants with the ancestors, in a seamless narrative. After the horror of the holocaust which decimated Europe's Jews, the returnees evolved further, braiding tradition with religion that are hinged on a national identity, which is Dutch and Jewish.⁷⁴ The process revealed the community's deep cultural sense of authenticity—which is what individual groups cling to within a chosen identity, without omitting the structuring force of tradition. In this sense, my research found among the community – then and now – a group of 'reluctant cosmopolitans' – the title of Daniel Swetschinski's book. They 'derived their main impetus from the internal evolution of the community and its response to the evolution of basic commercial realities.'⁷⁵

Histories of the specific relationship between Jews and the Dutch over time reveal the complexity of their relationship. In 2007, Dutch historians gathered to publish an invaluable collected edition on Jews in the Netherlands which has become a reference point for all interested in this topic.⁷⁶ Within this collection, J.C.H. Blom and J.J. Cahen contributed a fascinating chapter on the interconnections of being both/either Dutch and/or Jewish.⁷⁷ Over the centuries, they explain, the most important hallmarks of the internal evolution of Dutch Jewry included both a desire for assimilation and the simultaneous preservation of a 'recognizable Jewish community'.⁷⁸ My own research confirms Dutch Jewry's sincere attempts at the integration process in the early modern period. However, by drawing on the testimonies of the descendants and comparing them against the internal differences of the community during the Dutch Golden Age, I also showed that it was impossible for the community to escape its Jewish origin. Blom and Cahen examine a later period, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but they also show that the Christian Dutch society continued to look upon the Jews as a separate entity with distinct characteristics. So even in the wake of secularisation of Dutch society, some forces were working in another direction – which prevented them from becoming swallowed up by the integration process. In the end, 'most Jews kept their sense of being Jewish', and in the 1930s, 'this attitude became more strongly articulated than before.'⁷⁹

This attitude is what Abraham Palache, who I interviewed in 2017-18, said prevented many Jews from giving up their unreserved identification with a separate Jewish nation. It preserved the idea of Jewish nationalism, which is very different from 'an exaggerated racial self-consciousness'.⁸⁰ In the case of the descendants in Amsterdam today, the idea of Jewish national character is evoked as a recognition of the Jews 'in so far as they are an ethnic, historic and cultural unit in the Diaspora'.⁸¹ At this point my research arrived at questions of

⁷⁴ Abraham Palache, during conversations in Amsterdam, August, 2017.

⁷⁵ Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans*, p. 163.

⁷⁶ Blom, Fuks-Mansfeld, I. Schoffer, eds., *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands*, (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007). This important volume was recently re-edited in 2021.

⁷⁷ J.C.H. Blom and J.J. Cahen, 'Jewish Netherlanders, Netherlands Jews and Jews in the Netherlands, 1870-1940', *The History of the Jews in the Netherlands*, eds., Blom, Fuks-Mansfeld, I. Schoffer (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), ch. 7, p. 293.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 293-294.

⁸⁰ Sokolow, *History of Zionism*, p. xi.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

the evolution of cultural nationhood to cultural inclination to ‘Zion’ from a Western Sephardi angle, which is different from its political precedent that came to be known as Zionism—and its execution in modern day Israel.⁸² I have highlighted that in the 400 years of Dutch Jewish history, in the face of alienation by Christian confessions, the Iberians reinvented a Jewish life that reflected ‘some of the quintessential features of modern Jewish existence’.⁸³

It is important to acknowledge that this was very different from the normative Jewish existence. Many Portuguese Jews continued to be influenced by their old Iberian cultural and intellectual pursuits. Historians Tirtsah Levie Bernfeld and Bart Wallet have argued that some never even embraced Judaism, including the grandfather of the philosopher and his namesake, Baruch (Henrich) Spinoza.⁸⁴ Others, wrote historian Ben Kaplan, adopted modes of belonging to the nation, and attached to it ‘an importance that had no basis in *halakhic*⁸⁵ law’.⁸⁶ They were the architects of what we know today as ‘invented’ identity prevalent among immigrants and settlers alike. This is precisely what Daniel Swetschinski powerfully described as a new ethnicity, a ‘modern concoction, for which there existed no antecedents in Jewish history’.⁸⁷

Claude B. Stuczynski also firmly believed in the community’s ‘early modern dimension’, because the New Christians were ‘interwoven’ with ‘early modern confessionalism, sociopolitical corporatism...’ and other phenomena that would have contemporary reverberations. Inspired by Stuczynski, I also demonstrated that a study of the Iberian community helps navigate the genealogy of our time. The reader understands the narratives of Jewish studies which paint a ‘consensual image of the conversos as heralds of cultural hybridism and progressive Jewish cosmopolitanism’, even though, argued Stuczynski, it often endorsed ‘wishful thinking, oversimplification, and stereotype’.⁸⁸

But even if we resist (over)modernising the community’s complex historiography, it is undeniable as my research has shown, that in Amsterdam, the concept of a sovereign (Jewish) nation germinated in their collective ‘Hope of Israel’. Historian Kenneth Austin remains rightfully wary of the danger of reading later historical developments into earlier periods, and challenges the notion of ‘Christian tolerance’ in early modern period, reminding us ‘the often harsh treatment of Jews, and the vitriolic comments of some of the leading protestant reformers’. These accounts, argues Austin, ‘didn’t sit easily’ with the historiographical tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ‘which held up

⁸² Sephardi Judaism as evolved from converted New Christians in Western Europe, as opposed to the old Sephardi Jews who fled the Inquisition for the Levant and the Ottoman Empire and escaped forced Baptism.

⁸³ Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans*, p. 6.

⁸⁴ Tirtsah Levie Bernfeld & Bart Wallet, *Jews in the Netherlands, A Short History*, trans. Liz Waters, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024).

⁸⁵ Talmudic law.

⁸⁶ Kaplan, *Divided by...* p. 324.

⁸⁷ Daniel Swetschinski, *Reluctant Cosmopolitans*, p. 323.

⁸⁸ Claude B. Stuczynski, ‘From Potential and Fuzzy Jews.....’, eds., Francesca Bregoli and David B. Ruderman, *Connecting Histories, Jews and Their Others in Early Modern Europe* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019). P. 199-200.

the Reformation as a harbinger of modernity’ and emergence of tolerance.⁸⁹ Whilst this is true, my book shows that Amsterdam in the seventeenth century nonetheless offered an influential realisation, however limited, of what a Jewish nation could look like in reality, notwithstanding the historical transformations of ‘nationalism’ in the intervening centuries. An important essay by Jewish scholar Miriam Bodian, was here particularly useful. Bodian in her long article, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation: The Ambiguous Boundaries of Self-Definition*, argues that the efforts of the leaders of the new Jewish communities made of the Portuguese ex-conversos to reconnect with their wider Sephardi world, left ‘a serious symbolic and strategic’ legacy. Bodian goes on to deconstruct the ex-converso experience of the new Jews as a distinct feature that maintained their ‘core sense of collective self’.⁹⁰

Through her work, it is possible to synthesise a concept of ‘nation’ among the Iberians in Protestant Europe—a product of their historical experience in that specific time and city. My book expands Bodian’s argument that despite what might have been initially a ‘cultivated’ Sephardi traditionalism instilled by old Sephardi rabbis brought over from North Africa and Italy, the community ‘at an emotional level’, belonged to their own Nação, nation.⁹¹

Jerusalem on the Amstel contends the existence of a ‘Jewish homeland’ in Amsterdam. It argues how the city’s Sephardi community became a model for *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment. The Enlightenment that was in itself one of the primary sources of the later Zionist inspiration. My book deconstructs the concept of ‘Jerusalem’ as it was used at the time figuratively in European thought by Jews and non-Jews – so extensively that it almost became transhistorical.⁹²

The terminal point of the first part of the book is 1675, when the Dutch Sephardi Jews, following the end of the Sabbatian messianic fervour of the 1660s,⁹³ built the Great Esnoga. It was designed after the model of the Jerusalem Temple of Solomon by Rabbi Leon Judah Templo (1603-1675), based on the descriptions in the Hebrew Bible, the writings of the first century Roman-Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus (37-100 AD) and rabbinic literature. It became a model for synagogues of Western Sephardi diaspora from Surinam to London.⁹⁴ It made sense, for the first part of my book to end at this significant juncture for the community’s continuation in their Dutch Jerusalem. This section demonstrates that with the ‘spiritual Jewish homeland’ no longer in the horizon and the Christian millenarian dream in

⁸⁹ Kenneth Austin, *The Jews and the Reformation*, (Yale University Press, 2019), p. xvi.

⁹⁰ Miriam Bodian, *Jewish Social Studies*, (Indiana University Press, New Series, Vol. 15, No. 1, Sephardi Identities, Fall 2008), pp. 66-80.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² William Blake’s soteriological poem, *Jerusalem* (1804–20), defines the notion as a mythical utopia.

⁹³ The exposure of the ‘False Messiah’ Shabtai Zvi of Izmir, ended the dream of Jewish return to their geographical homeland. Twelve influential members of the Esnoga signed this letter to Zvi in 1666 – who converted to Islam in the same year – expressing their willingness to join him to Jerusalem: <https://etshaimmanuscripts.nl/items/eh-49-a-20/>.

⁹⁴ ‘Templo’ became the Portuguese-born rabbi’s nickname after exhibitions of his drawings of the Temple became hugely popular in the Judeo-Christian world. He died the same year as the completion of the Esnoga in 1675, having exhibited his models in London shortly before his death. In the Ouderkerk cemetery in Amsterdam, his tombstone bears a Hebrew epitaph mentioning Rabbi Leon’s models.

doubt following Shabtai Zvi's conversion to Islam, the Iberian Jews in Holland embraced their Dutch identity whole heartedly, with the grand inauguration of their new Temple in Amsterdam in the presence of Christian royalties and dignitaries.

It was while living in the attic of the Esnoga, the majestic Portuguese synagogue, that I was interviewing the descendants, trying to find answers how past communities could be studied in today's context. I spent the second summer of my research as a guest of the warden,⁹⁵ who is of Moroccan Sephardi origin. I got to know closely the community who still carried on reliving the history and telling the tales of their Iberian ancestors, always holding 1675 as a turning point in their emergence as one of the largest and richest Jewish communities in Europe during the Dutch Golden Age. Their views and directions had profound impacts on some of the arguments and interpretations offered in the book, including how this 'glorious' memory of the most extravagant marker of their Dutch success story was being used as a fixative to rescue the post-WWII community from oblivion.

Histories of Jews in the Netherlands have also fascinated scholars because of recent events, not least the Holocaust during the Second World War.⁹⁶ Bob Moore and Dan Michman tried to piece together – from post-WWII testimonies of survivors and the historical memory of asylum and assimilation – the Dutch Paradox.⁹⁷ Bart Van der Boom in his online article explains how both Gentiles and Jews misjudged the relative dangers of deportation versus hiding, which helps understand Dutch behaviour during WWII.⁹⁸ Jan Burzlaff's essay, *Silence and Small Gestures: Jews and non-Jews in the Netherlands (1940–1945)*, is a crucial addition to this important study. His systematic analysis of 500 Jewish testimonies 'invite further perspectives on the broader landscape of Jews' perceptions and memories of non-Jews, acts of disobedience and the effects of polarisation across Nazi-occupied Western Europe.'⁹⁹

My book does not claim to contribute to the specific debates around persecution, rescue, and the Dutch paradox which has dominated a lot of this recent historiography; rather, it bridges the early modern and contemporary periods to make a more subtle contribution about memory and identity formation. *Jerusalem on the Amstel* is not a book about the Holocaust, but it inevitably raises the question of the genocide of the Jews in twentieth-century Europe, and offers insights into how communities used a longer past in order to rebuild their lives in

⁹⁵ Yossi Babila.

⁹⁶ For the historiography on this topic, see Hermann v.d. Dunk, 'Jews and the rescue of the Jews in the Netherlands in Historical Writings' in Yisrael Gutman and Gideon Grief (eds.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust Period* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1988).

⁹⁷ Bob Moore, *Victims and Survivors: The Nazi Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands 1940-1945*, (Hodder Education publishers, 1997) and Dan Michman, *The Emergence of Jewish Ghettos during the Holocaust*, (Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Dan Michman (ed.) *Belgium and the Holocaust: Jews, Belgians, Germans* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1998). These works re-examines the paradoxes around the Dutch Holocaust.

⁹⁸ Bart Van der Boom, 'The Auschwitz reservation: Dutch Victims and Bystanders and Their Knowledge of the Holocaust', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, Volume 31, Issue 3, Winter 2017, pp. 385–407, <https://academic.oup.com/hgs/article/31/3/385/4750687>, Vol 31, issue 3, published 2017.

⁹⁹ Jan Burzlaff, 'Silence and Small Gestures: Jews and non-Jews in the Netherlands (1940–1945)', *Contemporary European History*, Volume 32, Issue 3 (2023), pp. 401-415.

Amsterdam. I refer here the concept of ‘juggling’ identity, to show that time and time again the community within its specific identity—rejudaisation in the 1600s and re-establishment of its Jewish soul in Amsterdam after the Holocaust—needed a structuring force of tradition. This tradition, my book showed, goes back to their Iberian life. It argues that the collective, intergenerational memories of the interviewees allow us to develop the theory that the Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish community might have been the first autonomous and free Jewish political space prior to the State of Israel. I have drawn substantially on their attempts to curate their Iberian continuity and the memory of their ancestors who were members of *Kahal Kadosh de Talmud Torah*¹⁰⁰—both religious and secular.

By delving into the processes of memory formation and the transmission of oral narratives, the book uncovered the ways in which the community drew upon its past to shape its collective identity. *Jerusalem on the Amstel* attempted to discuss the historical foundation and genealogy of that identity, which has been a changing cultural construction that evolved over generations up until the Second World War. I have referred to the past institutions within the Iberian community run by the Jews for the Jews, such as the Dotar Society for unmarried destitute Iberian girls, *Santa Companhia de Dotar Orfas e Donzelas*. There is then the inseparable site of cultural memory, the 1675 Esnoga, where the members performatively engage in their shared knowledge and consciousness: the mythologised past as well as what remains of the community post WWII. The communal services give them a sense of unity and with new meanings which transmit and affirm their Dutch Sephardi identity. These institutions helped make the Iberian social bond stronger. They contributed to the maintenance of shared memory and common interests. This is aligned with the popular twentieth century Zionist aspiration as spearheaded by its pioneer, Theodor Herzl, in *Der Judenstaat*, ‘The Jewish State’: The Jews must consider themselves not just a religious body, but also a nation capable of developing its own political institutions in a land of their own. Seventeenth-century Amsterdam birthed that nation of Jews with their own judicial and religious institutions.

Building on the literature I’ve mentioned, my study implies that it is possible to write a history of memory, combining micro and macro histories. Digital revolution led to new forms of curation of individual cultural memory, which, my work has shown, can be treated as a memory theory – template that would guide future historians. This would lead to a new, hybrid, historical awareness, drawing on the earlier, equally important, linear studies of memory.¹⁰¹

My book is one of the first popular history works to bridge the early modern period with the post-Holocaust decades. My study attaches a rich cultural dimension to the seventeenth century Jewish experience, which goes beyond their economic integration. It highlights how the Iberian descendants reinvented themselves through rituals, memories, and also objects –

¹⁰⁰ The first united synagogue in Amsterdam, established in 1639.

¹⁰¹ For more on this theory, see Geoffrey Cubitt, *History and memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

painstakingly curated and displayed in the Jewish Historical Museum. My work explores their reflections on heritage, identity, and the idea of a Jewish homeland, *mokum*, which, despite the Holocaust, still persists.

There are obvious methodological and intellectual challenges in braiding together these long time periods, but focusing on intergenerational memories and identity formation, I have explained the connections between these two crucial periods in Dutch Jewish history, which have marked the community permanently. Today's Jewish life in Amsterdam is not full of the post-Holocaust trauma, but a continuing retelling of the 700-year-old Jewish traditions in Europe, Converso memories, and both past and present political interests. My book shows that the retelling sometimes changes the stories by omitting the gravest strands of trauma and glorifying the milestones of success, but the efforts of these oral historians, the descendants, continue to keep the Dutch Jewish history afloat in their Jerusalem on the Amstel.

4. Academic Recognition and Critical Responses

Immediately after the publication of the book in 2019 by Hurst Publishers, I was invited to give a talk at Jewish Book Week in London. I spoke to a packed audience which included many descendants of the Iberian Jewish diaspora. Later, during book signing, one of the descendants came up to me and gave me a piece of paper with one of the familiar Sephardi names whose ancestors had later established a strong diasporic presence in the Levant. I was honoured to have been asked to investigate their family origins in Amsterdam's register of births and circumcisions.

Soon after the book's launch its American distribution was announced by Oxford University Press, New York. Following which, the US-based 'Jewish History Channel' ran an hour-long interview with me livestreamed on YouTube in 2020. In the UK, the book's semi-online publicity due to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, included a lengthy interview with the celebrity historian, Dan Snow, for his 'History Hit' show. Spiro Ark, a Jewish think tank, organised an event where I spoke, moderated by the Dutch Historian, Professor Ben Kaplan (UCL), to a packed synagogue in north London. Here, again, among the audience, were descendants who wanted me to investigate their lineage among the Amsterdam Sephardim. By the end of the publicity talks in 2019-2020, my desk was covered in post-it notes, with the names of the descendants of the old Iberians: Curiel, Rocha, Abravanel, Belmonte, Paraira, da Costa.

The descendants also reached out to me online. Here's a message from Stephanie Merlin-Curiel:

The genealogist I am working with sent me your chapter, 'The Curious Case of the Curiels', from your Jerusalem on the Amstel book, which I subsequently bought. My grandmother also believed in our connection to the Curiel brothers, Jacob and David, in Amsterdam, and i [sic] have piles of notes and family trees from her.

But as with Hendrik Jacob, whom you describe, I also have a missing link. Everything fits and makes sense but isn't completely traceable. I come from an Italian branch of the Curiel family. I am wondering if you have the family tree that Harrie Curiel¹⁰² put together or if you can put me in touch with him. I would like to see it to check my own work and also to see if it can shed any light on which branch I may be descended from. Thanks so much! Stephanie.

Other critical responses include:

A fascinating study, full of rich stories provoking wonderful, complex questions about belief and identity. Why did 'New Christians' of many generations revert to Judaism in Amsterdam? Why was the Holocaust more devastating in Holland than elsewhere in Western Europe? And what does all this say about Dutch traditions of tolerance?

Giles Tremlett, *The Guardian*.

From new arrivals to magnificence, from tolerance to acceptance, to a tragic end. Lipika Pelham recounts 300 years of Amsterdam's Jewish history, wandering through the cemeteries, and reflecting on the Dutch Holocaust. Was it a lack of acceptance after all? Pelham explores all this with a light touch and a sorrowing heart. Not to be missed.

Rabbi Dame Julia Neuberger DBE.

In the book's final chapters, Pelham shifts from history to reporting, detailing her own conversations in the modern-day Netherlands. She conveys perspectives on Dutch attitudes toward Jews, examines why Dutch Jews died disproportionately during the Holocaust, and considers what it's like to live in the ruins of a once-thriving community. This additional perspective blends well with the thoughtful history, making *Jerusalem on the Amstel* a rounded and valuable account.

From *Foreward*, Reviewed by Jeff Fleischer
July/August 2019, <https://www.forewordreviews.com/reviews/jerusalem-on-the-amstel/>

Conclusion

Jerusalem on the Amstel could have been a documentary, but it expanded into much more. It was most appropriate that I had presented this work as a book. The research process was beyond what a journalistic enquiry would have required as I endeavoured to make sense of

¹⁰² Hendrik Jacob Curiel, one of the descendants who I interviewed in Amsterdam throughout 2018. His story is told in the chapter, 'The Curious Case of the Curiels'. He also came to London with his family to hear my talk at Jewish Book Week, February, 2019, after the publication of *Jerusalem on the Amstel*.

the religious *passing*¹⁰³, the mercantile dream, and the ideological fulfilment of proto-Zionist aspiration of ‘the Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation’.¹⁰⁴

We talked about internal rupture among the seventeenth century Iberian Jews who became Western Sephardim in the ensuing centuries. As I conclude this essay, having highlighted the community’s cycle of rise, demise and regeneration over four centuries, a few last words must be said about the split identity¹⁰⁵ concept. In an important area of Jewish art this rupture is even celebrated. Curiously, nowhere is this celebration of transience more prominent than in the Sephardi funeral art: *vanitas*. Corroborating an internal rupture, *vanitas* display the former New Christians’ nostalgia for a lost home, a lost culture. To recall what Professor Dina Porat of Yad Vashem said about the mass conversion—how under torture and fear of execution the transition from one identity to another can create ruptures in the hearts of the converts. As I finished my book at the Jewish cemetery in Ouderkerk aan de Amstel, Beth Haim, *the House of Life*, conducting a last interview with Tirtzah Levie Bernfeld, a Dutch historian, I saw the ruptures sealed in the artwork on ostentatiously decorated tombstones. Levie Bernfeld said the *Nação* never let go of its flamboyant Iberian past.¹⁰⁶ The name, ‘House of Life’, for a cemetery speaks for itself. Rather than being a domain of the dead with nondescript lists of the years of birth and death, the gravestones in Ouderkerk—nine kilometres south of Amsterdam, were alive with figurative art, an inherent imprint of their former Catholicism. On the exquisite gravestones, an engraved hourglass is the most prevalent theme. As if the community was preoccupied with time, or its transience.

At the height of the seventeenth century—the apogee of the *Nação*’s success—the artworks on the tombstones of rich merchants become more and more dramatic....elaborate biblical figures in action: Abraham with a dagger over Isaac’s small body, about to sacrifice him; Jacob dreaming on a stairway to heaven; Rachel fetching water from the well; a pregnant Rachel dying as she gives birth to Benjamin. Many of the gravestones feature bas-reliefs of the raising of the curtain, with poems or words of eulogy dedicated to the dead. The curtain linked my research to the theatre motif once again.

The Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation¹⁰⁷ never fully forsake their Iberian cultural heritage. Seeing the theatrical need at death to use the curtain imagery to visualise the meaning of death, I wondered if the closing of the curtain from the audience was a way to retreat into backstage where the old life still went on. As if Levie Bernfeld could hear my thoughts, she removed dead leaves from the tombstones of David Rocha, the first grave you’d come across entering the cemetery. ‘Look here,’ she said, ‘the play has begun.’¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³an act of moving from an assigned to assumed identity—as illustrated in historical and present day context in my subsequent book: *Passing: An Alternative History of Identity*, Hurst Publishers, London, 2021

¹⁰⁴ Title of Miriam Bodian’s book, on the birth of the community of Jews out of Iberian New Christian immigrants in Amsterdam.

¹⁰⁵ As argued by historians including Miriam Bodian, *Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation*, (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁰⁶ Levie-Bernfeld during a tour of Ouderkerk cemetery, August, 2018.

¹⁰⁷ Miriam Bodian, Indian University Press, 1999.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Tirtzah Levie-Bernfeld, August, 2018.

The rich merchants even pre-ordered their ornate tombstones, which goes totally against Judaism. I could not help thinking of the former Marranos' quiet transformation to their former identity at death, having lived their lives under the rabbinical orthodoxy including of Saul Levi Morteira, the most conservative of rabbis the community was led by. The Amsterdam Jews prepared the headstones for their future graves for each member of their families before they died. They reflect the European artistic and architectural ideals of their time, from the Renaissance, to Baroque, to early modern. This progression also mirrors the development of Dutch Jewish culture.

Strolling through the cemetery, I stumbled into a mossy flatstone—on which I saw the name of the Venetian Rabbi Morteira. This was one of the simplest designs, with the rabbi's name barely discernible. It seemed in death the community resembled their lived experiences. The *vanitas* were a haunting reminder of the transmogrification of identity—it may go through many lives and at death it may return to its origins—if not the assigned, then the assumed ones. And in the case of the Jews, not just the Sephardim, but also to the Ashkenazim, there were times in their diasporic history where the assigned and assumed frequently alternated; they merged—based on circumstances, persecution, fear, individual and collective choices. They changed nationalities, invented and reinvented ethnicities, converted to other religions under coercion and/or for better opportunities, reverted to the recent or distant 'origins' when the time proved right.

In the invention of identity—one of today's most talked about topics—Jews, among other persecuted peoples, were at the forefront. My driving aims as I embarked on this project, begged for context and historical evidence. I started writing not as a historian, but the search for a methodology for organisation of the book, helped me become one. In various talks since its publication in 2019, the pressing question was how I responded to my own research needs, and more urgently, how they contributed to making sense of contemporary identity questions in relation to the Iberian Dutch community's quest for belonging. I believe this commentary essay demonstrates that I have sufficiently answered them.

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