

WORKING PAPER

The Girls They Left Behind
Curaçao's Jewish Women in the Nineteenth Century

by

Josette Capriles Goldish

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Once there was an island where hundreds of Jews lived together in a close-knit and vibrant community. From the splendor of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services to the carnival atmosphere of Purim, celebrated for several days and topped off by fireworks at night, there was a sense of vitality among the Sephardic Jews on this remote island. Weddings often occurred at an average rate of once a month in those years and were cause for great rejoicing. (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970, pp. 841-1007) Continuity seemed assured with the birth of twenty children or more each year (Mikve Israel - Emanuel Archives, Birth Registers) and the regular arrival of additional Jewish immigrants.

But then things started to change. Opportunity and adventure beckoned elsewhere and the young Jewish men began to leave the island. The girls they left behind did not have the same degree of mobility and freedom as their male counterparts. While some of the men believed at the time that they might come back to live in this place where they had been born, they very often did not. Not only did the men's departure cause the overall Jewish population of the island to decrease, but the young Jewish girls in this changing society were suddenly faced with diminished choices they had not anticipated.

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Purpose and Methodology

This paper analyzes the gender differences among Curaçao's nineteenth century Sephardic Jews during and after the outmigration that occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. It seeks to gain a better understanding of the effects of the departure of a large number of

young Jewish men, which created a Jewish gender imbalance on that Caribbean island that was once the home of the largest Jewish community in the Americas.

Two methods are used to determine the degree to which the emigration of Curaçao's Sephardic men diminished the Jewish population of the island as well as the Sephardic presence in the Caribbean region as a whole. First, the author presents five short case studies based on extensive, unpublished genealogical data bases, to illustrate both the rate of intermarriage of Curaçao's Jewish men in certain Caribbean locations as well as the comparatively lower marriage rate of the Jewish women who remained in Curaçao. Secondly, an analysis of the marital status of Curaçaoan Jews at the time of their death, using the archival death registers of Congregation Mikve Israel – Emanuel is provided to verify the nineteenth century marital rate differentials on a macro level as well. In closing the author reviews changes that occurred at the end of the nineteenth century, which marked the beginning of Jewish female leadership in Curaçao and set the tone for subsequent participation of women in Curaçao's socio-political development in the twentieth century.

Background

At the end of the eighteenth century, Curaçao, a small Dutch island in the Caribbean, had the largest Jewish community in the New World. Less than a hundred miles from the Spanish-occupied colonies in South America, where the laws of the Inquisition were still in force, these Curaçaoan Sephardic Jews lived surrounded by a comprehensive infrastructure of all the necessities for Jewish life.

They had religious freedom, religious leadership in the person of Rabbi Jacob Lopez da Fonseca, a beautiful new synagogue erected in 1732, with seating for 400 men and a women's

gallery for 200 women, facilities for kosher slaughtering, and wealth disproportionate to their numbers. It was an exuberant existence where religious and social life intertwined to form a cohesive – although not always pacific -- community. (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970)

How had these Jews arrived in Curaçao? Theirs is the story of the continuous uprooting of Spain's Sephardic Jews. After religious persecution, forced conversions, and years of hidden observance as so-called Marranos, the Jews of Spain were finally expelled in toto in 1492. At first many of these Jews moved a relatively short distance to nearby Portugal, but soon the long arm of the Inquisition caught up with them in that country as well. And so they moved on to many places across the European continent, including cities in Italy, Greece, Turkey, Belgium and Holland.

By the mid-seventeenth century, the Dutch city of Amsterdam had become an important center for these Sephardic Jews, and by the year 1700 the Jewish community in that city had become the largest in Western Europe, numbering about a thousand Jewish souls. Even though the Jews enjoyed some freedoms in Holland, they were forbidden from becoming storekeepers or from practicing crafts at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It was not until the emergence of colonial trade with its attendant opportunities that the Sephardic Jews achieved some prosperity in Holland. (Huisman 1986, pp. 59-60)

The subjugation of northeast Brazil in 1630 by the Dutch West India Company, the entity in charge of colonizing and exploiting the resources of the Americas, represented one of Holland's early New World conquests. Active trading with this part of the South American continent ensued. The Sephardic Jews, referred to as Portuguese Jews in Holland because of their Spanish-Portuguese origins, were active participants in the settlement of the Pernambuco region of Brazil. This area had previously been under Portuguese rule. Making use of their network of connections and their language abilities, the Dutch Sephardic Jews soon became active traders in that region of South

America, marking the beginning of Jewish life in the New World. With the wealth accumulated through these endeavors, a number of these Jews invested heavily in the East and West India Companies (Huisman 1986, p. 66), thereby obtaining some influence in the subsequent colonization of the Caribbean. In 1654 the Dutch surrendered the Brazilian territories to Portugal and the Jews left as fast as they could. Some returned to Holland and others went to the Guyanas, Barbados, Jamaica, and New Amsterdam.

In the meantime the Dutch had conquered the island of Curaçao, ousting the Spanish in 1634 and starting the process of colonization. It was not long before the Sephardic Jews joined other non-Jewish Dutch settlers on that island. A few Sephardic Jews arrived in the early 1650s, but the first big influx of Jews came in 1659, when about seventy Jews got permission to settle in this relatively new Dutch colony. Among them were several Jews who had only recently returned to Amsterdam, having fled from Brazil. They arrived in Curaçao with the intent to till a two-mile strip of land along the coast, which had been granted to them by the Dutch West India Company. These early Jewish settlers formed a religious community called Mikve Israel – Hope of Israel. Although originally they had hoped to make a living by farming the land, agriculture in Curaçao turned out to be a very difficult endeavor. Within a generation the Jews in Curaçao returned to trading and shipping. (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970, p.68)

This switch was fortuitous and allowed the community to flourish in the eighteenth century. By 1785 there were 1,200 Jews on the island. According to the Jewish historian, Isaac Emmanuel, Curaçao's total population at that time was estimated at 8,500 of which 3,000 to 3,200 were white. In other words, close to forty percent of the white population was Jewish. (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970, p. 277) The Dutch historian, Johan Hartog, indicates that in 1789 there were 3,964 whites on the island of which 1,495 were Jewish and the remainder Christian – mostly protestant.

(Hartog 1961, pp 568-569) In that same year, Hartog lists 2,776 freed slaves (black and mulatto) and 12,804 slaves, bringing the total island population to almost 20,000. While there is quite a discrepancy in these population statistics for dates which are only four years apart, both sources agree that the Sephardic Jews represented a very large percentage of Curaçao's white population in the 1780s.

A time of change

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century many major changes occurred on the Dutch island and in the surrounding region. Politically there was significant upheaval, with the English occupying Curaçao during two periods at the beginning of the century and the Dutch not regaining control until 1816. Economically the island was in a deep recession, partially as a result of the wars of independence being fought on the South American continent. And socially and religiously, the Mikve Israel community of Curaçao had gone from its period of glory to one of infighting and lack of leadership after the demise of Rabbi Da Fonseca. (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970, pp. 301-325)

When the Dutch regained the island once more in 1816, the Jewish population had diminished by 15 percent over a 31-year period to 1,021 Jews. Of the adult population 57% were women and 43% were men; the women outnumbered the men by a ratio of almost 4 to 3. Ten years later the Jewish population stood at 937. The percentage of women among the adult population had risen to 60%, meaning that for every three Jewish women there were two Jewish men in the community. (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970, p. 302) A summary of this gender imbalance is shown below:

	Curaçao's Jewish Population				
	Women	Men	Girls	Boys	Total
1816	410	312	163	136	1021
1826	387	263	159	128	937

What was happening? The men born in Curaçao in the late eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth century were suddenly faced with the fact that the island economy could no longer support them. Even those born to wealthy Jewish families had difficulties making a living in their fathers' businesses, considering the number of children in each family. In the meantime on the island of St. Thomas, a free port since 1764, the economy was on an upswing. Since the end of the eighteenth century, Curaçaoan Jews and the Jews displaced from the nearby island of St. Eustatius had started to migrate to this Danish colony. With a Jewish population of a couple of hundred Jews at the turn of the century, St. Thomas represented a very attractive alternative to a life of under-employment in Curaçao. As the nineteenth century progressed, the rate of immigration into St. Thomas accelerated and by the early 1850s the Jewish population of that island had doubled to about 450 souls. (Knox 1852, pp. 162-163)

Simultaneously the Spanish colonies of the South American continent were gaining independence in the early nineteenth century, and in many of these countries the Inquisition laws were repealed. To Curaçaoan Jews, who often spoke Spanish among themselves and had been trading with the mainland for more than a century, life in these new republics appealed even more than the opportunities on other small islands of the Caribbean.

Few had chosen to live in Spanish-occupied America while the Inquisition was still in force. Now, however, it was a different story. The Sephardim of Curaçao were eager for new challenges and larger markets, and the newly independent countries were generally open to people with the networks and reputation of business acumen that the migrating Curaçaoans possessed. Economic

necessity dictated the move by Curaçao's young Jewish men to greener pastures, but their departure left behind their female peers, who were not allowed to travel without a husband or their parents to the wilds of the Venezuelan and Colombian coasts.

The Sephardic women of Curaçao

From census data in some of the towns most attractive to the Jewish immigrants and from less formal family histories, we know that few women accompanied the migrating Curaçaoan Jews. Thus, for example, an 1831 census of Coro, Venezuela lists 21 Dutch citizens in Coro, all male, all merchants, all Curaçaoan Jews, and all single. (Aizenberg 1983, p.39) Similarly, a family narrative of the first De Marchena brothers to migrate from Curaçao to Santo Domingo in 1835, describes three brothers, traveling without female companions. The two single brothers remained in Santo Domingo and eventually married there and the married brother returned to his wife in Curaçao. (De Marchena y de Marchena 2001) Stories handed down to the descendants of the Capriles family that populated Venezuela in the nineteenth century also indicate that most of the Capriles males arrived in that country unmarried. (Alvarez Ortiz 2000)

Curaçao's Jewish women in the nineteenth century were a sheltered group, although probably not more so than most elite white women in South America and the Caribbean. In social customs the Curaçaoan Jews were quite similar to the Spanish and creole elite societies of Latin America, and as such they had very specific roles that centered around the family. As the historian Marysa Navarro explains, "the mission of [...] elite married women [in Latin America] was to be faithful and obedient wives, appearing pious and virtuous, and to bear legitimate children, so that the lineage could be properly perpetuated." (Navarro 1999, p. 49) While in other countries there are cases of more active involvement in community life by elite Latin American women of the

nineteenth century (Arrom 1985, p176) (de la Luz Parceró 1992, pp. 22-23), this behavior was not evident among Curaçao's Jewish elite in much of the period of concern.

Bearing children kept the Jewish women of that era quite busy indeed in Curaçao. Curaçaoan Sephardic families supposedly averaged nine or ten children in those days and girls were married off at such an early age, that grandmothers who were thirty-five years old were not uncommon. (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970, p. 261) The men tended to be in their late twenties or older when they married. Although there were servants, and until 1863 also house slaves, these large households consumed the married women's time. In their leisure time they may have embroidered, read, played music or attended a special theater performance, but they rarely became involved in formal business ventures or politics. (Rupert 1999, p. 55)

Many of Curaçao's Jewish women of the early nineteenth century could not read or write. A mark would often suffice to indicate their acquiescence to some contract or letter. In many cases where signatures appear on archival documents, they seem wobbly and very carefully traced, a sign of the writers' lack of familiarity with the written word. Illiteracy was extremely high on the island, though less so among the Sephardim than among the overall population. Schooling statistics show that a mere 260 children attended school in 1816 out of a total population of about 12,000 and by the mid-nineteenth century this number had barely reached 1,000, while the population had grown to 16,000. (Hartog 1961, pp. 866-868) More girls than boys are listed among the students, reflecting perhaps the larger number of girls in the general population.

The description provided below of the women in a nineteenth century, Catholic, elite extended family in Mexico is probably most similar to the life of Curaçao's Jewish women of that period.

Organizing and attending family rituals represents a demanding occupation for Gómez women. A Gómez wife's desire to work for a living is not merely discouraged for traditional

reasons: it is impractical, if the woman truly cares for the prestige of her nuclear family among the kinship network at large. In addition, she has to reckon with the social obligations to personal friends and business associates outside the family, as well as her in-laws' grandfamily and kinship network obligations. (Lomnitz and Perez-Lizaur 1987)

In Curaçao too there was little incentive or time for married women to do anything beyond tending their homes and cultivating the kinship network. Most of their time outside the home was spent visiting other Sephardic families or participating in birthday or holiday celebrations. (Karner 1969, p. 20) Some of this socializing is thought to have been a significant component of their husbands' powerful business networks. (Rupert 1999, p.56) A secondary glory at best. Social roles, nevertheless, provided these married women an informal information-gathering and networking status in the business world. Sometimes, when Jewish merchants were away on business, powers of attorney were given to their wives to act in their stead during their absences. Usually, however, these women had to be assisted by a male member of the family, e.g. a father or brother. (Romer-Kenepa 1992, pp. 28-29)

Migration, Jewish Demography, and Gender Differences

The sustained outmigration of young Jewish men in the nineteenth century resulted not only in a reduced overall Jewish population on the island, but it changed the demographic components. This was true of the overall population in Curaçao and other small Caribbean islands as well. (Shepherd 1999, p. 147) While in many other situations the absence of men in the labor force may have opened up economic opportunities among the lower and middle class women on those islands, this was not the case among the Jewish women in Curaçao. The elite Sephardic Jewish community had very rigid social rituals that continued to control both males and females who remained on the island, although the Jewish men who left appeared to have been released to some extent from these traditions. A very large percentage of these migrating men eventually married non-Jews in their

new places of residence. A few did come back to Curaçao to find Jewish brides with whom they returned to the Dominican Republic, Venezuela or Colombia after the wedding ceremony. They were more the exception than the rule.

When these men ventured out of their community and often out of their religious practices, the young Jewish women were left behind on the island, faced with fewer and fewer eligible Jewish bachelors who could be acceptable marriage partners. Unless their parents decided to migrate with the entire family to a place with more Jewish men, these women were stuck. Leaving on their own was not condoned, and while the option of marrying outside the Jewish faith existed for their off-island male counterparts, parental supervision and community pressure would not allow these women even to think about marrying non-Jews.¹

And so it happened that in the first half of the nineteenth century the Jewish community in Curaçao diminished in two ways. First because of the migration and assimilation of the Jewish men in Latin America, and second as a result of their abandonment of the Jewish women in Curaçao, who were left with a skimpier pool of partners to pick from and often remained single as a consequence. In addition, this smaller population pool led many to marry close relatives, cousins or cousins once-removed (Karner 1969, p. 12).

Over time single dependent women with limited household responsibilities became the norm among the Sephardic households in Curaçao. By the mid to late nineteenth century, some of these women had to rely on synagogue charity to survive. (Mikve Israel - Emanuel Archives, manuscripts) Others who did not have financial worries still required outlets for their energies, and for many decades these were simply not available.

¹ No detailed information about Jewish women marrying non-Jews in Curaçao in the nineteenth century is available to the author, but at least one such marriage did occur between a Jewish woman called Julia Pardo and a non-Jew called Louis Oduber. Their daughter, Sila, later married a Jew, Isidor van Lier. (see Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970, p. 926)

Five Case Studies

Using Sandra de Marchena's genealogical data of the Sephardic Jews of Curaçao and their descendants (De Marchena 2001), some case studies are presented on the following pages in an attempt to illustrate the consequences of the migration of Curaçao's nineteenth century Sephardic young men. De Marchena indicates that the synagogue birth registers were the source for most of the male and some of the female birth dates in this genealogical data base. It is interesting to note that female births in the nineteenth century were recorded only sporadically, even by the synagogue. Since cemetery plots had to be bought for females as well as males, death information tends to be more complete, aided considerably by the inventory of the tombstones in the old Jewish cemetery compiled by the historian Isaac Emmanuel. (Emmanuel 1957) Marriage dates for all Jewish marriages through 1967 are recorded in the appendix of Emmanuel's valuable History of the Jews of the Netherlands Antilles. (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970, pp. 841-1007)

CASE 1

David Delvalle Henriquez (1808-1881) and Abigail Penso Alvares Correa (1812-1892)

David and Abigail were both born in Curaçao, married there on August 24, 1831, and died on the island. They had fourteen children, six males and eight females. All the children were born in Curaçao, and thirteen of the fourteen died there. Only one son, Moises Delvalle, died in Panama City. This family did not migrate in the nineteenth century, but remained on the island as it went through its economic and religious turmoil.

Of the six males, three married Jewish women with the names of Delvalle, Penso, and Alvares Correa, which would indicate that they were relatives. The other three males did not marry.

Of the eight females, three married Jews and five remained single. One of the spouses of these women was related, a Penso, and the other two girls married two Curiel brothers.

To summarize, of this couple's fourteen children, three of the men (50%) and five of the women (62.5%) remained single. Those who did marry often chose partners related on either their mother's or father's side.

CASE 2

Samuel Jr. Levy Maduro (1798-1867) and Judith Sasso (1810-1876)

Samuel was born in Curaçao, and Judith was born in St. Thomas, Danish Virgin Islands to parents who had also been born there. When Samuel and Judith got married, St. Thomas offered greater economic opportunity than Curaçao. It is therefore not surprising that Samuel Maduro remained in St. Thomas, where his wife's relatives had already established themselves, instead of returning to Curaçao. This couple had ten children, seven males and three females, all born in St. Thomas.

By the 1850s, when most of these children were of marriageable age, the St. Thomas Jewish community had grown significantly, with new migrants (mostly male) continuously enlarging the Jewish population. (Paiewonsky 1959) Only one male and one female of these Maduro-Sasso children did not marry. All of Samuel and Judith's other children married Sephardic Jews.

Among the names of the spouses of these eight married children we find Fidanque, Lindo, Osorio, Piza, Bravo, and Sasso, Sephardic names also found in the Mikve Israel annals. Contrary to the marriages discussed under Case 1, the St. Thomas partners were generally not related to one another.

The marriages of Samuel and Judith's children took place in St. Thomas, but some of the children died in Panama City, reflecting a second migration from St. Thomas to Panama at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth.

CASE 3

Joseph Capriles Dovale (1797-1885) and Batsheba Ricardo Frois (1808-1866)²

Joseph and Batsheba were born in Curaçao and married there on November 2, 1825. All seventeen of the Capriles-Ricardo offspring were born in Curaçao, but only two are buried in the old Jewish cemetery of that island. The remaining fifteen died and were buried in various Venezuelan towns, including Puerto Cabello, Coro, Valencia, Barcelona, and several more obscure places.

Most of the sons of this union left for Venezuela when they were still single. Much later, the parents and some of the single daughters followed, settling down in and around Puerto Cabello, where the by-now-married sons lived.

Of the twelve males produced by this couple, eight married non-Jews in Venezuela, two married Jewish women, and two did not marry at all (i.e. 12.5% of the males did not marry). Of the five daughters, three remained unmarried (i.e. 60% of the females) and two married Sephardic men. What was acceptable for the male members of the family living in Venezuela, i.e. marrying outside the faith, was not acceptable for the Jewish women of Curaçaoan descent in the nineteenth century. The three unmarried women were born in 1826, 1828, and 1832, and most likely lived in Curaçao at least until 1855, when their youngest brother was born on that Dutch island. Therefore, while of an age when Jewish women of this community would marry – late teens and early twenties, they were

² Information for this family unit was taken from genealogical data collected by José Luis Álvares of Caracas, Venezuela

still in Curaçao and faced the reduced pool of Jewish men that also caused their contemporaries, discussed under Case 1, to remain single.

The potential for growth of the Jewish community that normally would have resulted from this large family unit was not fulfilled. The eight sons that married non-Jews, however, produced 58 legitimate, non-Jewish children. Anecdotal evidence leads us to believe that many additional children were procreated by some of the Capriles sons of Joseph and Batsheba. One of these sons was known as “el padre de Coro” – the father of Coro – in view of the many children he fathered with various women in the town of Coro. These children born out of wedlock to Catholic mothers were, of course, not Jewish either.

CASE 4

Daniel Cohen Henriquez (1804-1871) and Esther Monsanto (1809-1880)

Daniel and Esther were both born in Curaçao and married there on September 9, 1829. The couple had eight children, seven girls and one boy. No migration occurred in this family unit. The son and five of the seven daughters married. Two sets of daughters married two sets of brothers in respectively the Abinun de Lima family and the Henriquez family. The fifth daughter married Jeosuah de Sola. The only son, Salomon, married his brothers-in-law’s sister, Esther Henriquez. It is obvious that the marriages in this family took place among a very close kinship group, as was described by Karner. (Karner 1969, p.12)

This case is quite similar to Case 1, but the children of this union had a higher marriage rate than those of the Case 1 union. In spite of the higher marriage rate among these Curaçao-based descendants of Daniel and Esther, two of the daughters (29%) remained single.

CASE 5

Haim Daniel Lopez Penha (1820-1897) and Rachel Levy Maduro (no dates available)

This couple was married on November 19, 1842 and had ten children of which three males died before adulthood. Of the seven remaining children four were male and three were female. While Haim Daniel and Rachel were married in Curaçao, they must have spent some time in the Dominican Republic, which became independent of Haiti and Spain in 1844. Several of their children were born in that country.

Of the four sons, two remained single, living out their adult lives in Barranquilla, Colombia, and the other two married Catholic women in the Dominican Republic. One of these Catholic women was a De Marchena of Curaçaoan Jewish descent, but the Jewish line had ended with her paternal grandfather. Of the three female offspring of Haim Daniel and Rachel Levy Maduro, two married Curaçaoan Jews in Curaçao and one did not marry.

Haim Daniel Lopez Penha was widowed and was married for a second time to a Curaçaoan Jewish woman, Rachel Curiel, in 1876. Although he was already 56 years old when they wed, he had two more children from this marriage, a male and a female, neither of whom married.

In summary, of the twelve children of Haim Daniel Lopez Penha, three males died young, two of the daughters married Curaçaoan Jews and two daughters remained single; three of the men remained single, and two married Catholic women. In essence, the males of this family unit did not produce any Jewish descendants.

In this particular case the daughters actually had a higher marriage rate than their brothers, but we present the case to show how a family unit with five males, descending from forefathers who had been members of the Beth Din (Jewish court) in Curaçao, failed to perpetuate the family name with Jewish descendants.

Summary Table for Five Family Units

	MALE OFFSPRING					FEMALE OFFSPRING				
	TOTAL	MARRIED		SINGLE		TOTAL	MARRIED		SINGLE	
		to Jews	to non-Jews	number	%		to Jews	to non-Jews	number	%
CASE 1	6	3	0	3	50	8	3	0	5	63
CASE 2	7	6	0	1	14	3	2	0	1	33
CASE 3	12	2	8	2	17	5	2	0	3	60
CASE 4	1	1	0	0	0	7	5	0	2	29
CASE 5	5	0	2	3	60	4	2	0	2	50
TOTALS	31	12	10	9	29	27	14	0	13	48
TOTALS excl. St. Thomas (case 2)	24	6	10	8	33	24	12	0	12	50

The pattern that can be observed is that while living in Curaçao both males and females in the mid-nineteenth century married within the Jewish community. Migration and youth in a place with an organized Jewish community, such as St. Thomas, also resulted in Jewish marriages. However, migration to Latin American locations that had no organized Jewish community resulted in a large number of mixed marriages among the men, even among the first generation of Jews to migrate to these places. None of the twenty-seven women presented here married outside the Jewish faith, but 48 percent of the women remained single. By contrast, only 29 percent of the men never married. If we exclude the case of the St. Thomas residents (Case 2), the results are equally dramatic.

Mortality and Marital Status

There were certain periods in the second half of the nineteenth century when the Jewish population of Curaçao saw sudden, temporary increases. These occurred, for example, in 1855 when 160 Jewish refugees from Coro, Venezuela were escorted back to Curaçao by two Dutch warships as they escaped what was essentially a South American pogrom. By the early 1860s a

large number of these Jews had returned to Venezuela, but another influx of St. Thomas Jews showed up in Curaçao shortly thereafter. This outmigration from St. Thomas took place after a hurricane devastated businesses on that island in 1867. Again this increase in the Curaçaoan Jewish population was temporary and less pronounced, since many of the St. Thomas families decided to join their friends and relatives in Panama in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

The imbalance between the Jewish male-female population is therefore believed to have been most uninterrupted in the first half of the nineteenth century. Using an alternate approach to illustrate the effect of this imbalance, the author analyzed fifteen years of the death registers of the Mikve Israel Synagogue for the period 1885-1899 (see Appendix). During this period 48 females and 16 males who were born before 1826 passed away. The cutoff date of 1826 was chosen to obtain the cohort that became of marriageable age (by the community standards of those days) during the first half of the nineteenth century. This analysis found that 46% of the females died single and 31% of the males were bachelors at the time of their death. The higher incidence of single females ascertained on this macro level is similar to the results shown in the cumulative summary of the five cases presented earlier. These data provide concrete evidence of the fate of the Jewish girls left behind in the Curaçaoan community while their brothers and uncles widened their horizons and generally neglected to give the same priority to their religion as they did to their financial well-being.³

³ Discussion of the easy assimilation of these Sephardic Jews was presented by the author at a conference sponsored by the Museo Sefardí of Caracas, Venezuela on May 14, 2002 and will be further analyzed in a work in progress about the Jewish Caribbean Diaspora of the nineteenth century

A New Dawn

By 1878 total school enrollment in Curaçao had reached 2,178. (Hartog 1961, p. 868) This represented a remarkable doubling of the number of school-going students on the island over a period of three decades, significantly outpacing the population growth rate. These students attended public as well as private schools. Other than the nuns who taught at the Catholic schools, we only note occasional female teachers from Latin America, Holland or Surinam at Curaçao's educational facilities. Even in this profession, that may have been considered acceptable for women in other countries, there is only one Jewish woman, Ribca Cohen Belinfante, widow of Joseph Mesquita, who taught school in Curaçao in the nineteenth century. (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970, pp. 355-356) (Hartog 1961, pp. 880-884) She had been left destitute when her husband succumbed to yellow fever in 1856 shortly after their arrival from Holland, and Rabbi Chumaceiro had to obtain the island's governor's permission to allow Mrs. Mesquita to teach elementary school.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the Colegio Colonial, directed by Mr. and Mrs. José R. Henriquez, was a very popular school for girls. With agents in several Latin American countries, this school attracted pupils from Venezuela, Colombia, and the Dominican Republic. Although not Jewish himself, Mr. Henriquez was of Jewish descent and a known entity in the Jewish community. Not surprisingly, many Sephardic Jewish girls attended the Colegio Colonial, which was located across from the newly constructed Reform Jewish temple of Curaçao. Classes were held in Spanish. Beyond reading, writing and arithmetic, the courses included etiquette and general religious principals, geography and astronomy, and a choice of either French, English or Dutch. (Mongui Maduro Library, archives)

The large number of Curaçao's Jewish girls who graduated from this school apparently thrived on the knowledge and self-confidence they obtained there. In 1883 a group of women,

almost all alumnae of the Colegio Colonial and listed on the school's 1877 roster, were energized into action. Educated, but with no opportunity to actually have jobs, these women became a driving force in an important project. Determined to brighten their own lives and those of people around them, they followed the lead of Rebecca Cohen Henriquez (1864-1935) and founded the "Club Entre Nous." The founding members included fourteen women, all but one Jewish. They were Angela Baiz, Lelia Capriles, Leonor Capriles, Raquel Capriles, Habita Mendes Chumaceiro, Elmire Cohen Henriquez, Rachel Cohen Henriquez, Rebecca Alvares Correa, Henriette de Leao Laguna, Anna Gravenhorst (Protestant), Rosabelle Penso, Sarah Penso, Julieta Pinedo, and Nettie van Lier. (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970, pp. 478-480)

Most of the initial members of the "Club Entre Nous" were young, single women and several remained unmarried throughout their lives. Theirs was a benevolent society, which also had as a major goal to convert an area in downtown Willemstad into a park. By presenting theater productions in which they themselves starred with their friends, the "Club Entre Nous" managed to raise sufficient funds to build the Wilhelmina Park in 1899 in Punda - the central area of Curaçao's capital, Willemstad. This park is still in use today. It contains a marble plaque honoring Miss Rebecca Cohen Henriquez, whose initiatives provided the town with a much-needed recreational space and showed the island community that upper-class women could do more than bear children and run a household. In 1932 she became the first woman in Curaçao to be knighted by the Queen of the Netherlands. (Lopez Henriquez 1937, p. 20)

The ladies of the "Club Entre Nous" were the first organized group to break the mold for Curaçao's nineteenth century Jewish women. Among the island's middle and lower classes there had been women in the nineteenth century who were midwives (Schweitz 1992, pp. 174-175). Others also worked as seamstresses, hat makers, basket weavers, and cigar makers. (Hartog 1961,

pp. 820-822) But none of these activities had been options for the elite Jewish women of Curaçao. They had not been on the forefront of any significant action of commercial or civic importance before their efforts with the “Club Entre Nous”.

Nothing stimulates more than success. The ability to conceive of an ambitious project and see it to its completion required creative, altruistic, and managerial dedication. On the eve of the twentieth century, it took the energy and proactive efforts of the “Entre Nous” members to expose the long-suppressed talents of the Jewish girls left behind in Curaçao’s nineteenth century. It started the long road away from the very secondary role played by Curaçao’s elite women and opened doors for many Curaçaoan women who came after them. As the twentieth century unfolded, a considerable number of upper-class women forged to the forefront of charitable, professional, artistic, social, and political action on the island to benefit the Curaçaoan Jewish community and the community at large.

Conclusions

This study has examined the significance of the gender imbalance exhibited in the census data for Curaçao’s Jewish community in the early nineteenth century. (Emmanuel and Emmanuel 1970, p. 302) The demographic changes that resulted from the migration of the island’s Jewish men during this time period profoundly affected the Sephardic community of the Caribbean region. Not only did this migration result in a high rate of intermarriage and assimilation of these men and their descendants in the Spanish speaking countries to which they migrated, but it also had as an important secondary effect a much lower marriage rate among Curaçaoan Jewish women than among the Jewish men of that place and time.

The immediate consequence of the lower marriage rate of the Jewish women was a decline in the number of offspring produced by the pool of Sephardim left behind in Curaçao. This, of course, contributed to the population decline of the island's Jewish community or at the very least resulted in a deceleration of the natural growth rate that had been experienced through the end of the eighteenth century.

An additional consequence was the creation of a fairly large group of unmarried Jewish women, who did not have many of the responsibilities that their married counterparts may have had. The author believes that the untapped energy of these single women coupled with access to better educational opportunities became the driving force for the participation of Jewish women in Curaçao's socio-political development. It took a few generations, however, for such overt action to manifest itself in the rigidly structured Sephardic community of Curaçao. While there may have been other less obvious acts of feminine involvement by individual women of Curaçao's Jewish community in the nineteenth century, it was not until the last two decades of that century that a group of single women organized themselves to participate in a major project of civic significance.

Gender differences often reveal historical aspects that can easily be overlooked when focusing solely on the obvious overall statistics and facts. The gender analysis presented here clearly shows that in addition to the decline of Curaçao's Jewish population resulting from the migratory adventures of its young adults, the Jewish census was further diminished in numbers by the gender imbalance caused by migration. Yet, over time, it was a group of unmarried Jewish women who, in the late nineteenth century, managed to escape the general boredom that had become the lot of Curaçao's numerous elite single ladies. Their civic initiatives provided a creative outlet on a personal level and served to enrich the community at large.

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APPENDIX

ANALYSIS OF DEATHS BETWEEN 1/1/1885 AND 1/1/1900
AMONG JEWISH MEN AND WOMEN BORN BEFORE 1826

Name	m/f	Born	Died	sgl/ marr
Jeudith Jesurun	f	6/1/1797	3/15/1885	m
Esther Fidanque	f	9/15/1808	7/6/1885	m
Clara Senior	f	8/16/1800	10/19/1885	m
Rachel Alvarez Correa	f	6/3/1807	1/7/1888	m
Johebet Levy Maduro	f	2/17/1819	3/1/1888	m
Ribca Delvalle	f	9/5/1816	9/23/1888	m
Ribca Alvarez Correa	f	1/1/1812	2/23/1889	m
Clara Pinedo	f	11/29/1799	11/24/1889	m
Clara Levy Maduro	f	11/18/1820	4/23/1890	m
Batsebah Fidanque	f	7/26/1799	1/16/1891	m
Jeudith Jesurun Pinto	f	4/1/1811	3/21/1892	m
Jael Curiel	f	12/1/1813	4/6/1892	m
Abigail Penso	f	12/25/1812	12/28/1892	m
Rachel Valencia	f	8/6/1823	12/3/1893	m
Rebecca de Meza	f	2/8/1786	7/17/1894	m
Esther L. Maduro	f	12/27/1813	8/7/1894	m
Rachel Lopez Penha	f	3/2/1815	4/10/1895	m
Esther Pardo	f	4/13/1818	5/4/1895	m
Hannah Jesurun Henriquez	f	3/10/1814	11/19/1895	m
Sarah Henriquez	f	2/14/1815	7/30/1896	m
Clara Da Costa Gomez	f	10/20/1815	1/7/1897	m
Rachel Moreno Henriquez	f	7/14/1825	7/31/1897	m
Leah Senior	f	6/17/1811	7/16/1898	m
Rachel Senior de Polly	f	9/13/1825	8/23/1898	m
Sara Vda. de Samuel L. Maduro Jr.	f	8/30/1813	5/15/1899	m
Gracia Vda. Moises Rois Mendez	f	9/25/1817	6/30/1899	m
Clara Osorio	f	11/21/1805	8/21/1885	s
Abigail Pardo	f	6/12/1807	8/21/1885	s
Clara Dovale	f	1/1/1814	5/20/1886	s
Rachel Jesurun	f	9/22/1808	2/16/1888	s
Grace de Sola	f	11/21/1824	4/14/1888	s
Jeudith Pereira	f	11/29/1810	5/22/1888	s
Leah Senior	f	3/24/1810	8/27/1888	s
Abigail Buenas Vivas	f	10/20/1811	10/16/1888	s
Esther Capriles	f	7/22/1814	11/15/1889	s
Clara Abinun de Lima	f	1/1/1810	3/16/1891	s

Jeudith de Castro	f	2/14/1806	2/15/1892	s
Ribca Pardo	f	8/30/1811	5/9/1892	s
Leah Abinun de Lima	f	6/11/1811	6/3/1892	s
Clara Pardo	f	3/19/1810	7/11/1893	s
Ribca Abinun de Lima	f	9/29/1810	11/23/1893	s
Rachel de Jeosuah de Sola	f	6/13/1820	8/2/1895	s
Silvania Capriles	f	11/30/1826	12/16/1896	s
Lea Henriquez Juliao	f	1/1/1814	3/25/1897	s
Jeudith Pardo	f	9/16/1819	4/13/1897	s
Sarah Hanah de Castro	f	3/11/1811	3/16/1898	s
Amathyste de Sola	f	6/6/1823	12/1/1898	s
Sarah Dovale	f	8/2/1821	11/7/1899	s
Gabriel Pinedo	m	3/30/1807	6/1/1885	m
Abraham Cardozo	m	1/1/1809	9/24/1885	m
Benjamin de Marchena	m	1/22/1811	11/28/1887	m
Moise Pereira	m	9/2/1822	2/25/1888	m
Mordechay Alvarez Correa	m	4/15/1816	2/8/1886	m
Benjamin Jesurun Jr.	m	6/4/1813	7/9/1889	m
Samuel de Casseres	m	11/19/1818	2/27/1891	m
Rafael Polly	m	10/21/1819	9/21/1894	m
David Abraham Jesurun	m	2/12/1812	4/22/1886	m
Jeudah Senior	m	4/8/1817	1/22/1896	m
Haim Daniel Lopez Penha	m	5/11/1820	2/2/1897	m
Jacob Haim Osorio	m	3/9/1810	7/2/1885	s
Mordechay Henriquez	m	5/3/1810	7/10/1886	s
Benjamin Leefmans	m	9/11/1823	7/7/1890	s
Abraham Isaac de Marchena	m	11/10/1825	5/26/1898	s
Samuel Levy Maduro Jr.	m	11/24/1811	12/15/1898	s

Total number of deaths	64	
Total number of women	48	
Total number of women who died single	22	46 % of deceased women
Total number of men	16	
Total number of men who died single	5	31 % of deceased men