

The Jewish Quarter

In 2021 it will be three hundred and seventy years ago that the very first Jews settled on Curaçao. For their settlement they were allocated a strip of land which would later become part of plantation De Hoop, not far from the old Jewish cemetery Bleinheim. The name of this plantation is often associated with another "hope" of those seventeenth-century Jewish settlers, namely the Hope of Israel or Mikvé Israel, the Hebrew name of the historic Jewish congregation founded in 1651.

Plantation De Hoop became part of the refinery properties and no longer exists, but historians and publications regarding plantations on Curaçao describe a number of plantations, including De Hoop, as being part of a *Jewish Quarter*. Where was the *Jewish Quarter* located and were there real Jewish interests, as the term *Jewish Quarter* indicated? And who were the Jewish owners of these plantations?

The *Jewish Quarter* on a contemporary map

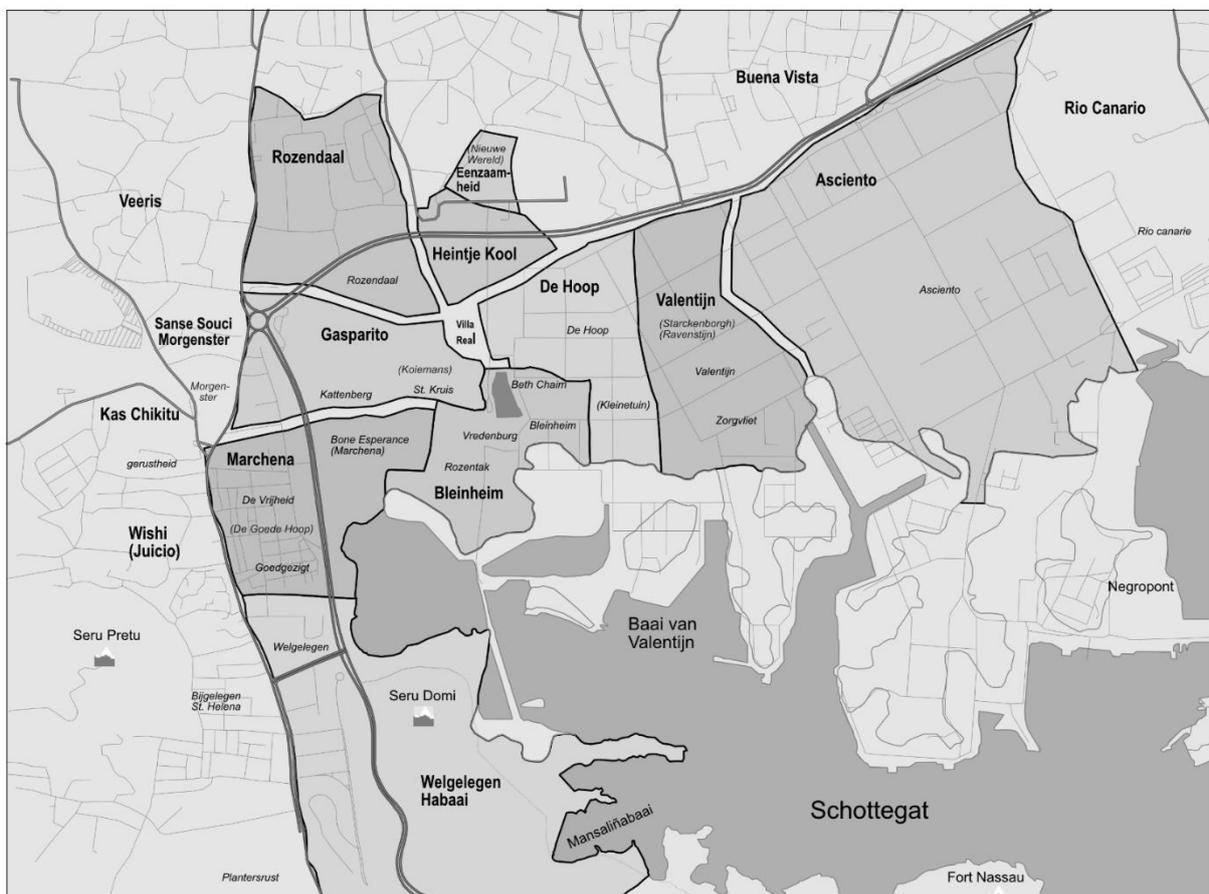
Joseph Moses Corcos, hazzan (cantor) of Mikvé Israel, was the first to describe the history of the Curaçao Jewish community in a 48-page booklet in 1897. Corcos wrote that upon the arrival of the first group of Jewish settlers in 1651, the West India Company (WIC) made available to them a strip of land outside the city that was just over three kilometers from the walled Willemstad. Emmanuel cites an official document granting a number of privileges to the second group of settlers by the WIC on March 31, 1659, including a strip of land on the northwestern bank of the Schottegat. There the settlers could freely practice their religion, build houses, and farm and raise livestock. Although not documented, it is believed that the first group of settlers led by Juao d'Yllan had been allocated a portion of the same site for settlement in 1651. In that area the Jewish settlers also had their synagogue until 1682 and a cemetery nearby, the old Beth Haim Bleinheim cemetery, immediately west of the refinery.

Jewish settlers in the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries quickly became owners of several plantations on the northwestern bank of the Schottegat. Han Jordaan wrote that "the development of the plantation was initially difficult due to climatic and geological conditions. However, this changed with the arrival of the Jewish settlers in 1659." And that is when the story of the plantations which together formed the *Jewish Quarter* on the northwestern bank of the Schottegat begins.

In an article in the *Ñapa* of May 16, 2020, as part of the series "The barrios of Curaçao," the author, Mylène Luisa, also discusses the *Jewish Quarter*. Her interesting article contains the list of plantations that formed the *Jewish Quarter* in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To a large extent, mention of these plantations can also be found in a number of other publications, including the books by Isaac and Suzanne Emmanuel on the Jewish history on our islands; in the extensive inventory of plantations by Els Langenfeld (ca. 2005); "Plantations on Curaçao and their Owners" by Drs. T. van der Lee (1989); Wim E. Renkema's "The

Curaçao Plantation Company in the Nineteenth Century” (1981); an article in the West India Guide of 1956-1957 by Johanna Felhoen Kraal; and in other articles and books about plantations in Curaçao.

Since the mid-seventeenth century, estates, plantations, gardens and *kunukus*¹ have often changed ownership, as well as name and size. Standing on the shoulders of those who have described and mapped the history of the plantations of Curaçao, with some old maps and especially the help of Michèle van Veldhoven and Fred Chumaceiro, we managed to draw up a contemporary map of what was meant by *Jewish Quarter*. However, due to a number of uncertainties that will be discussed further on, the placement of seventeenth and eighteenth century plantations on a map of the twenty-first century will not be exact.



The darker gray plantations were all part of the Jewish Quarter. The white properties consist of peninsulas and land reclaimed by the refinery. Map by Fred M. Chumaceiro. Plantation borders from Werbata 1911. New coastal lines from Registry Office 1993. Plantation names Wed. Hulst van Keulen 1836; Renkema C77 northern coast Schottegat; and Els Langenfeld Plantages, tuinen en ‘kanoekjes’ met hun eigenaren tussen 1780 en 1885. Road map from OpenStreetMap

¹ Papiamentu for a cultivated field

The plantations of the *Jewish Quarter*

As can be deduced from this map, the *Jewish Quarter* was in fact a chain of adjacent plantations on the northwestern bank of the Schottegat. On the east side it seems to be bordered by the Asiento plantation, to the north by the present-day Rozendal and Heintje Kool, and to the west by Marchena and Habaai. Van Grol wrote that the aforementioned strip of land "came into the Jewish sphere of interest to such an extent that it was referred to as '*Jewish quarter*'." In the following descriptions of several plantations and their owners, an attempt is made to confirm whether Jewish interests indeed existed in the *Jewish Quarter*, as indicated by Van Grol.

Plantation 't Joden-Quartier, later De Hoop

Yeosua Henriquez arrived in Curaçao in 1659 with the second group of Jewish settlers. According to Van Grol, "Jeosuah Henriquez acquired ownership of a plantation called 't Joden-Quartier in 1660," this name probably indicating that Jews (of the first group of settlers in 1651 under the leadership of D'Yllan?) had already settled there. Van Grol continued that "this bordered to the East on the plantation" Kleine Thuyn "which came into Jewish hands in 1744 and was later united with 't Joden-Quartier." And it was only after these two plantations, 't Joden-Quartier and Kleine Thuyn, were united in 1744 that the new combined estate was given the name "De Hoop", alias Judio or Hoedio. Plantation 't Joden-Quartier, later De Hoop, was located south of Heintje Kool, bounded to the west by Bleinheim and Gasparito, to the east by Valentijn, and adjacent to the north coast of Schottegat.

Yeosuah Henriquez was an energetic man who also owned two houses in Willemstad. Henriquez was well known in the Jewish community. In the period 1691 to 1696 he had been the president of the board of the Mikvé Israel community for three years. After his death in 1704 the plantation remained in his family, first in the hands of his son Mordechay and after 1715 by the widow of Mordechay and his children. Like his father, Mordechay was also a very active and welcome member of the Jewish congregation where he held various positions in the period 1682 - 1714. It was during the period that the plantation was owned by the widow of Mordechay (Rachel Naar) that, as described, 't Joden-Quartier was merged with Kleine Thuyn and from then on carried the name De Hoop. After 140 years in Jewish hands, it was sold in 1800 to the non-Jewish family Joh. Martijn.

Plantation Beraha Veshalom

It is unclear where this plantation was located. Beraha Veshalom was in any case owned by Balthazar (Abraham) de Leon when he died in 1694. De Leon had fled Portugal and the Inquisition and ended up in Curaçao via Amsterdam. Balthazar de Leon was an active member of Mikvé Israel from 1687 to 1692. He is also one of the first Jewish traders in Curaçao and mainly traded with or for coreligionists in Amsterdam. Balthazar de Leon was married to Isabel Gomes Casseres, also known

as Sarah de Leon, a sister of the first Gomes Casseres to settle in Curaçao, Dr. Yshack Gomes Casseres. The latter was the first civilian physician on the island. There has been a lot of controversy about Balthasar de Leon's will but in the end his daughter and later a grandson of Dr. Yshack Gomes Casseres inherited the plantation. It is unknown who owned this plantation after 1760 - it was not, however, one of the present-day Gomes Cassereses or their direct ancestors!

This clearly Jewish plantation draws attention due to its Hebrew name Beraha Veshalom, which means "Blessing and Peace." Like the names De Hoop and Mikvé Israel (Hope of Israel), Beraha Veshalom also exudes a messianic hope. Two Sephardic Jewish synagogues in the region expressed similar hopes with their names: the 1833-built Beracha Veshalom in St. Thomas, USVI, and Beracha Ve Shalom, built in 1685 in the Jodensavanne in Suriname. In contrast to Suriname, where plantations in the Jodensavanne often had Biblical names, this was only sporadically the case in Curaçao. In addition to Beraha Veshalom, there were in the *Jewish Quarter* the plantations of Mount Sinai and Najot Barama, the latter a Biblical city in the time of Samuel and David. It is interesting that ships owned by Curaçao Jews in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often carried Biblical names, including De (Goed) Hoop, Prophet Moses, Queen Esther and also Beraha Ve Salom.

Bleinheim Cemetery and Roose Tak Plantation

As described above, the old Jewish cemetery in Bleinheim - also written "Blij en Heijm" or "Blynheim" - was located in the *Jewish Quarter*. In 1942, the oldest and probably first gravestone, made of clay and meanwhile completely eroded away, was still legible, reading 5428 of the Hebrew calendar, or 1668 of the Gregorian calendar. The places of worship or synagogues of those first Jewish settlers were close to their homes, and so were their burial grounds. Corcos wrote that in 1656, with the approval of the authorities, the first settlers designated part of the site previously allocated to the twelve settlers as Beth Haim Cemetery, consecrated it and surrounded it with a thick stone wall. This cemetery, greatly expanded a number of times, is now known as the Jewish cemetery Beth Haim Bleinheim.

Plantation Roose Tak was owned by Isaaq Aboab who was responsible for the burial site of the Jewish community. Aboab sold Roose Tak to Jacob Senior, son of David Senior, in 1739. This Senior had been president of the congregation several times and had also been a board member of the Amsterdam Talmud Torah Jewish congregation, the parent of Curaçao's congregation. Through the amalgamation of a number of *kunukus* and gardens, we come across plantation "Blij en Heijm" with a Jewish owner for the first time in 1763, that owner being Mordechay, son of Jacob Henriquez. Henriquez sold it a few years later, in 1766, to Jacob van Elias Pereira. As was the case with other owners in the *Jewish Quarter*, Senior, Henriquez and Pereira all were prominent members of Mikvé Israel and their plantations thus part of Van Grol's "Jewish sphere of interest."

Marchena

Anyone who dives into the world of Curaçao plantations comes across relationships that are difficult to explain. In the context of the *Jewish Quarter* this mainly concerns owners in the period from 1651 to about 1715. Bleinheim is an example of this. As described above, the plantation does not come into Jewish hands until 1763, but that area had served as a Jewish cemetery since 1668. Another example: Plantage Asiento is considered by historians and researchers as part of the *Jewish Quarter* but its Jewish owners are unknown.

The name of the contemporary Marchena neighborhood, which lies within the *Jewish Quarter*, is also unexplainable.. Marchena is clearly a Jewish family name which comes from Spain. A non-Jew, Jan Lixraven, became owner of the Marchena plantation in 1792, which at that time already bore that name. The foregoing indicates ownership prior to 1792 by a Marchena family, which is, however, not confirmed. From 1792 to 1866 it is known that the Marchena plantation did not have any owners with the family name Marchena or who were Jewish. The owners of the Marchena plantation in this period were of the family names Ogenius and Rijke.

Ishac de Marchena, a highly regarded member of Jewish society, lived on Curaçao from 1685 to 1730. He held numerous positions within and around Mikvé Israel and was among those responsible for the construction of the current synagogue in 1730. Sadly, he died two months after construction work had started. Emmanuel wrote that his family owned the Marchena plantation, which subsequently became the Marchena residential area, but this possession by the Marchena family has not yet been substantiated. From the 1740s to 1798 Isaac and Abraham, children and descendants of the aforementioned Ishac de Marchena, were the owners of the Groot Sint Joris plantation, which is located in a completely different area of the island and far from the Marchena neighborhood.

The current Marchena neighborhood also included other plantations. In this neighborhood were, for example, the plantations Goed Gezigt, Vrijheijt, Goede Hoop and Buena Esperanza (Bonne Esperance). All these plantations have had Jewish owners and are located in the *Jewish Quarter*. Goed Gezigt, Buena Esperanza and Goede Hoop had Jewish owners from 1729 to 1732 and then again from 1775 to 1782, but there were no Marchenas there either. Whoever gave the name Marchena to the now well-known neighborhood thus remains shrouded in uncertainty.

Some other plantations in the Jewish Quarter

The above mentioned (owners of the) plantations 't Joden-Quartier, De Hoop, Beraha Veshalom, Berg Sinai, Najot Barama, Bleinheim and Roose Tak, all located on the northwestern bank of the Schottegat, clearly indicate “the Jewish sphere of interest” mentioned by Van Grol. The aforementioned books by the Emmanuels, Langenfeld, Renkema and Van Grol also mention other plantations on the northwestern bank of the Schottegat. Some of these are Cattenberg (also called Ma

Retriate and Kattenberg, today Gasparito) which had Jewish owners from 1700 to 1745, and New World (also called Eensamheid) north of Heintje Kool which had Jewish owners from 1750 to 1806. That was also the case with Savaan or Kanga in the period from 1763 to 1900 and Vrijheijt which became part of Marchena. It was this chain of adjoining plantations on the northwestern bank of the Schottegat that formed the *Jewish Quarter*.

The boundary to the east and west

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the *Jewish Quarter* was bordered on the north by Rozendaal and Heintje Kool, on the west by Gasparito and Marchena and on the southeast by the banks of the Schottegat and the plantations Bleinheim, De Hoop and Valentijn. The (possible) boundary to the east and southwest requires further description.

Various researchers, including Van Grol, Emmanuel, and Langenfeld, consider the Asiento estate to be part of the *Jewish Quarter* and its most eastern plantation. Van Grol says that the *Jewish Quarter* stretched on the eastern side from the "Company's plantation Rooi – Canarie." Immediately west of Rooi – Canarie or Rio Canario was plantation Asiento. Els Langenfeld lists in her inventory of plantations, gardens and *kunukus* the owners of Asiento from 1717 to 1871, and there are no Jewish-sounding family names among them. Therefore it cannot (yet?) be substantiated that Asiento would have been in the Jewish sphere of interest in that period or of belonging to the *Jewish Quarter*.

There is therefore no hard indication of the eastern border of the *Jewish Quarter*, but this can be approached with greater certainty on the western side. According to Van Grol, the *Jewish Quarter* stretched as far as "the present-day Veeris, to finally end at the Zwartten Berg." In the past these plantations were located on or near the Welgelegen plantation, where the present-day Landhuis Habaai is also located. The Welgelegen plantation belonged to the Gabay Henriquez family from 1771 to 1792. And although they only briefly owned it, the Gabay name still lives on in the name of Landhuis Habaai. In a Jewish congregation, in Hebrew, the "gabay" is the function of a trustee or treasurer. The Gabay Henriquez family did not live for long in Curaçao - there are just three graves with that name in the old cemetery - but the adulterated name Habaai is still there after more than two hundred years.

The plantations in the *Jewish Quarter* were not the only plantations with Jewish owners. Emmanuel estimates that as of 1660 no less than 80% of all plantations and 20% of all "gardens" have known Jewish owners for short and long periods. This was the case with the plantations Groot St. Michiel (1768-1884), Grote Thuyn (1815-1870), Haneberg (1847-1860), De Hoop incl. Kleine Thuyn (1758-1800), Klein St. Michiel (1736-). 1835) and in particular Rust en Vrede - Rooi Catootje, owned by four generations of the Maduro family. The latter plantation was described in detail in 2004 by Els Langenfeld in a book published by the S.A.L. (Mongui) Maduro Foundation "The Past, a Present for our Future." Plantation Rooi Catootje, located

outside the *Jewish Quarter*, was bought in 1853 by S. E. L. Maduro. Later the same Maduro bought two pieces of estate that formed part of the nearby plantation Vreugdendal - the Damasó estate in 1856 and the Corrie estate in 1860. Today we know these last two estates together as the Damacor neighborhood.

The Disappearance of the *Jewish Quarter*

The described (and not described) plantations changed hands very often, and ended up in both Jewish and non-Jewish hands. Johanna Felhoen Kraal concludes that there has not been a family tradition regarding plantation ownership. The reality is that plantations have rarely been profitable assets in Curaçao. The wealthier owners - including many Jews - regularly bought and sold plantations. Perhaps the best returns were to be obtained with what is now called “flipping” real estate - buying with the intention of selling again after a short period (and perhaps after some investment).

The recurring buying and selling also meant that adjacent plantations were often joined together, forming a larger estate. The neighborhoods Marchena (Goed Gezigt, Buena Esperanza and Goede Hoop), Gasparito (Cattenberg, Ma Retraite) and Zuikerzuijntje (Zuikerthuin, Zuykerthuyntje, Pos Cabai) are examples of such estate merging.

Renkema wrote that "it was not until around 1660 that the actual plantation history of Curaçao began." It can be added that the actual plantation history of Curaçao in reality ended in 1916. That was the year that the Curaçao Petroleum Industrie Maatschappij (C.P.I.M.), later simply "Shell," established itself on the island. In an interesting 2016 article, “From Plantage-ground to Refinery-site” in *De Archiefvriend*, Helma Maduro-Molhuijsen described the plantations that were acquired by the C.P.I.M. and became part of the refinery grounds. With the arrival of the C.P.I.M., De Hoop ('t Joden Quartier, Kleine Thuyn,) Bleinheim, Eensaamheyt, Cattenbergh, Heintje Kool, and Rozentak disappeared as separate estates and stopped being a part of the *Jewish Quarter*. Country houses and other buildings on those plantations were razed to the ground so that they can now only be distinguished on old maps.

With the disappearance of those plantations, the *Jewish Quarter* also disappeared. It is a good thing that there are writings - by Corcos and Van Grol at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, but more recently also by Emmanuel, Felhoen Kraal, Renkema, Maduro Molhuijsen and Luisa - that time and again refer to the *Jewish Quarter*. In this way this part of the heritage of the Curaçao Jewish community has been preserved for the future.