

ART & DESIGN

A Jewish Exodus to a New Nation

By JOSEPH BERGER OCT. 27, 2016

IF such events can be said to have an upside, the Inquisition had one for Spanish and Portuguese Jews: It propelled them to the Americas, where they largely found the tolerance and opportunities denied them in Europe.

The story of the havens Jews established in the New World is the focus of an exhibition opening on Friday at the New-York Historical Society. With rare manuscripts, Bibles, prayer books, paintings, maps and ritual objects, “**The First Jewish Americans: Freedom and Culture in the New World**,” chronicles how Jews, expelled from Spain and Portugal after being driven out in earlier centuries from England and France, established thriving communities in New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, Newport and, even earlier, on Caribbean islands and in South America.

In the United States, they, like their fellow Americans, were tossed about in history’s currents, finding themselves on both sides during the American Revolution, the movement to abolish slavery and the Civil War. And their welcome was sometimes short-lived or illusory.

The exhibition’s most arresting artifact is a threadbare 4-inch-by-3-inch, 180-page memoir and prayer book handwritten by Luis de Carvajal the Younger in colonial Mexico in 1595, where the Inquisition had extended its sinister reach of torture and execution.

De Carvajal was a converso, forced to adopt Catholicism but suspected of clandestinely practicing Jewish rituals. At trial, he was pressured to denounce 120 Jews who secretly followed their faith, including his relatives. Then he was burned at the stake.

“They broke him down,” said Debra Schmidt Bach, a curator of the show.

The de Carvajal book mysteriously disappeared from Mexico’s national archives in the 1930s. Not long ago, however, Leonard L. Milberg, an American businessman with a major Judaica collection, learned that the document was for sale at Swann Auction Galleries in Manhattan, and he arranged to have it returned to Mexico. It is on loan for the show.

The exhibition features documents chronicling the vagaries of early Jewish settlements: an edict expelling Jews from France’s American colonies; a rabbinical paper certifying as kosher food shipped to Barbados; an 18th-century service for the biblically mandated circumcision of slaves and a list of circumcisers in Curaçao and Suriname; and a Christian missionary’s treatise speculating that Native Americans were the Lost Tribes of Israel. There are two nostalgic paintings of Caribbean scenes by Camille Pissarro, the French Impressionist who was born on St. Thomas to a Jewish mother. Seventy-two of the 170 items in the show are from Mr. Milberg’s collection.

Though the Dutch colony in New Amsterdam, now New York, became a significant haven, its embrace of Jews was stinting. The outpost’s flinty governor, Peter Stuyvesant, recoiled when 23 refugees from Portuguese-ruled Brazil arrived in 1654. But the Dutch West Indies Company told Stuyvesant that business was business and Jews should remain as long as they could contribute to the outpost’s commercial well-being.

Those Jews established the first North American congregation, Shearith Israel — Remnant of Israel — and built a synagogue in 1730 on what is now South William Street in Lower Manhattan. The congregation endures on Central Park West, where it moved in 1897.

Shearith Israel lent the exhibition a charred Torah scroll rescued from a fire set by British soldiers in 1776 and a pair of exquisitely crafted silver rimonim — belled ornaments for a Torah scroll — fashioned by the esteemed silversmith Myer Myers. There is also a ketubah — a marriage contract — illustrated with a bride and groom under a chuppah.

Abigaill Levy Franks, a prominent woman of old New York, is saluted with a portrait. Her letters, the exhibition text informs visitors, confided her upset at her daughter's marriage to a Christian, Oliver Delancey. Interestingly, he was a scion of the family for whom Delancey Street was named; the street later became the spine of the Lower East Side's Jewish quarter.

Like other colonists, Jews were conflicted about ending British rule. Haym Salomon, a Polish immigrant, helped finance the Revolution. But Abraham Gomez and 15 other Jews were among 932 signers of allegiance to King George III.

Other documents chronicle the tug of war over slavery. Account books record the purchase of five slaves by Matthias Lopez in 1787, while Jacob Levy Jr. is mentioned in an abolitionist society's papers as having freed four slaves in 1817.

There are also sections of the exhibition devoted to the communities in Philadelphia; New Orleans; Charleston, S.C.; and Newport, R.I. The show does not have George Washington's famous letter to the Newport congregation expressing the hope that everyone "shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig-tree." But it has letters from congregations in Newport and Savannah, Ga., thanking the new president for being so welcoming.

Alexander Hamilton, the lionized founding father of today's Broadway, makes an appearance too. The show tells us that his mother had been married to a Jew and that he was fluent in Hebrew and maintained close professional ties with Jews.

Several documents establish that it was at Congregation Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim in Charleston where the American version of Reform Judaism took root in 1824 through young mavericks who "wanted to modernize Judaism so it wouldn't die," said Dale Rosengarten, director of the Center for Southern Jewish Culture at

the College of Charleston. Ms. Rosengarten was a curator of a similar exhibition at Princeton.

“It didn’t spring out of whole cloth but sprang out of our native soil,” she said.

Jews made important contributions to 19th-century science and culture, along with other fields, but as the exhibition says, “despite the nation’s ostensible commitment to religious tolerance, stereotypes of Jews persisted on the American stage.” One gallery has a portrait and the sword and scabbard of Commodore Uriah Phillips Levy, a naval hero of the War of 1812, and paintings by Solomon Nunes Carvalho, who accompanied John C. Frémont, the explorer, on a cross-country expedition.

Inevitably, said Louise Mirrer, the New-York Historical Society’s president, the story of the New World’s Jews has resonance for immigrants, refugees and religious minorities today. “Seeds had been planted early on for a place where you could practice your religion,” Ms. Mirrer said, because the New World had drawn Europeans like the Puritans seeking religious freedom.

But at times, she added, there were anomalies: “In the exhibit, we see the kind of religious fervor that promotes a kind of violence against certain groups.”

“The First Jewish Americans” runs through Feb. 26 at the New-York Historical Society, 170 Central Park West, at 77th Street; 212-873-3400, nyhistory.org.

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