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Recife Journal; A Brazilian City Resurrects Its Buried Jewish Past

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RECIFE, Brazil, May 14 — The Street of the Benevolent Jesus traverses an area of restaurants and nightclubs just off the docks of this port city of 1.5 million people. And right in the middle of the busiest block, one of the most unusual archaeological projects ever undertaken in Brazil is under way: the excavation and reconstruction of the first synagogue built in the New World.

The synagogue, Kahal Zur Israel, or Rock of Israel, flourished in the mid-1600's when the Dutch briefly controlled this part of northeastern Brazil and the sugar and tobacco plantations that made it rich. With the return of the Portuguese, though, Recife's Jews made their way to Manhattan, where they founded New York City's Jewish community.

Excavation began last September under the direction of Marcos Albuquerque, an archaeologist from the Federal University of Pernambuco who previously uncovered forts, churches, battlefields and sugar mills from the Dutch period. Maps and property records offered a general idea of the location of the temple, but because the Inquisition had done everything possible to obliterate all signs of the Jewish presence, the dig began with some doubts.

"We were pretty certain we were in the right place, but it wasn't until we found a well that we were sure," Dr. Albuquerque said. "In Brazil the well is always placed outside the house, never inside, and so we suspected that what we had come across was a mikvah," the ritual bath used by observant Jews, "and we were very pleased when a rabbinical tribunal confirmed that conclusion."

With the support of the Brazilian government and several foundations, the small Jewish community here plans to turn the site into a museum and Cultural Center of the Jewish Presence in Brazil. Reconstruction of the building's interior is to begin at the end of May, with the goal of finishing by Rosh Hashana, the start of the Jewish new year, in September.

"We cannot talk of restoring the synagogue because we have no evidence what it really looked like," said Boris Berenstein, a doctor who is president of the Israelite Federation of Pernambuco, the main Jewish group here. "But we can rescue the historical memory of this first community, and that is what we intend to do through documents, archives and exhibits."

In addition, Katia Mesel, a documentary filmmaker here, is working on a movie titled "The Rock and the Star" that will examine the early Jewish presence here. Like most of

Recife's modern-day Jews, she is descended from immigrants who came from Eastern Europe over the last century with no awareness that others had preceded them.

"We always were told that a synagogue had once existed here," Ms. Mesel said, "but the documentation was vague, and even when I went to New York to research the subject in 1997, very few people there had any idea what I was talking about."

Brazil's Jewish population today, around 170,000, is barely one-tenth of 1 percent of the country's 170 million people. But as Henry Sobel, senior rabbi of the Congregacao Israelita Paulista, the country's largest Jewish congregation, noted, "There is no doubt that Jews contributed greatly to the construction of Brazil," especially in the crucial early years of Portuguese colonial rule.

The first Portuguese expedition to land in Brazil, 500 years ago last month, included a Polish-born Jew as its chief interpreter, as well as astronomers and mapmakers who are believed to have been of Jewish origin. Early settlers included many so-called marranos, Jews from the Iberian Peninsula who had converted to Christianity under duress but were eager to escape the clutches of the Inquisition to resume openly practicing their faith.

By 1590, however, the Inquisition had installed itself in Brazil and begun persecuting these "new Christians." So when the Dutch seized the colony of Pernambuco in 1630 and announced a policy of religious tolerance, those who moved to Recife included not only a rabbi and cantor from Amsterdam but many Jewish families from territory under Portuguese control.

"At the height of the Dutch period, Recife may have had a larger Jewish presence than Amsterdam itself," said Tania Kaufman, a history professor at the Federal University of Pernambuco. "The most reliable calculations indicate about 1,400 Jews, or more than one-tenth the total population of Recife and nearly half its population of free white civilians."

But in 1654 the Portuguese drove out the Dutch, and fear of reprisals led to the dispersion of the Jews here. A group of 23 returning to Amsterdam were captured by Spanish pirates, but were rescued by a French vessel, which dropped them off at a fledgling Dutch colony called Nieuw Amsterdam.

Their difficulties did not end when they reached what is today New York City. Peter Stuyvesant, governor of the settlement, sent a letter to the Dutch West Indies Company recommending "most seriously that this deceitful race, such hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ, be not allowed further to infest and trouble this new colony."

The response he received ordered that the newcomers be permitted "to live, trade and travel" freely and be given a burial ground of their own, which was established near what is today Chatham Square. It came to be known as the Brazilian Cemetery. But it was only after the English displaced the Dutch that the Jews from Recife were permitted to build a synagogue. The congregation, Shearith Israel, still exists, with its synagogue now at 70th Street and Central Park West.

Some other families, though, were unable to book passage on ships leaving here. They fled to the remote hinterland where they were forced to resume the clandestine practice of their religion and eventually blended in with the local population.

Even today, when Dr. Kaufman lectures in the interior, "I am often approached by people who tell me, 'I think I might be Jewish,' " she said. "When I ask them why, they produce a menorah or a tattered prayer book and tell me it was handed down to their grandparents by their grandparents before them, or they tell me of family customs that fit squarely within the Sephardic tradition."

"The ability of elements of faith to persist for so long in such isolation is truly an amazing thing," she said.

Photos: The first synagogue built in the New World is being excavated and reconstructed at this site on the Street of the Benevolent Jesus in Recife. Inside, Boris Berenstein, in tie, the president of the main Jewish group in Recife, and Isaac Schachnik stood alongside the mikvah, or ritual bath, that has been uncovered. (Photographs by Larry Rohter/The New York Times) Map of Brazil highlighting Recife.

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