

BELISARIO OF JAMAICA

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Thanks to seven lovely prints by a Sephardic Jew used on two souvenir sheets issued in 1975 and 1976 in Jamaica at the occasion of Christmas, Judaica collectors are richer by the addition, made quite unintentionally, of stamps celebrating the contributions to civilization by Jews whose families lived in Spain and Portugal more than five hundred years ago. It is sad to tell that none of the topical collectors in our favorite field spotted these issues, including myself, although the name of the artist was very appropriately mentioned by both Minkus and Scott. It just didn't ring a bell, and that is our fault entirely. I found the S/S mentioned in a small booklet published by Mr. Mordchay Arbell in 1988.

When the Jews in Spain were told to leave the country by August 2, 1492, their Catholic Majesties Ferdinand and Isabella did not specify where the Jews who refused conversion might go. Some 120,000 of them crossed the border to Portugal hoping to find the needed exile. Portugal's king then was Joao II, who was not particularly fond of Jews but realized their importance to commerce and the usefulness of their wealth. He decreed that they might reside in the three provinces Traz-os-Montez, Beira, and Douiro e Minho in Northern Portugal. After Joao died in 1495, he was succeeded by his cousin Manoel I, famous in history for he presided over the establishment of the Portuguese colonial empire, but infamous in Jewish history for his harrassment of both the old Portuguese Jewish community and the exiles from Spain. He chose for his wife Isabella, the oldest daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, a beautiful young lady every inch as bigotted and fanatically anti-Jewish as were her parents. On major condition for agreeing to the marriage was that the Jews be expelled from Portugal. Manoel at first demurred, but then agreed. Late in 1496, all Jews in Portugal were advised that they had to accept conversion or had to leave before the wedding day arrived.

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In reality, conversion was enforced brutally by taking the children of Jewish couples from them, baptized them and proceeded to raise them as Christians. Adult Jews, tired and impoverished by their flight from Spain, nearly all eventually

formally accepted Christianity, and officially, there were no more Jews in the land. Isabella died within a year, but the condition of the Jews who were now Marannos did not improve. Yet there were not persecuted, they lived without civil rights, mostly as farmers and small merchants, but some 600, deemed to be the wealthiest of Spanish Jews, bought themselves the right to permanent residence and the privileges of commerce (for 60,000 gold ducats). In 1531, when Portugal introduced the Inquisition, life for these forced Christians became intolerable, since they were soon the main targets of the tribunals which enforced loyalty to and observance of Christianity, the religion to which the former Jews had paid but lip service (while continuing to practice their Jewish ceremonies, worship and customs in secret.

The year 1531 then marks the exodus of the once Spanish Jews and now ~~Portuguese~~ Marannos from their homes in Portugal. It is from these families that all of the Maranno families in the Americas, Western and Central Europe descend: these once Spanish Jews did not move to the other lands on the Mediterranean, but for the most part sailed to Brazil and a few locations in Central America, or else went to Southern France, the Netherlands, England, and later to Germany and Denmark.

Among the families leaving Portugal were one or more by the name of Belisario. When in 1655 the British captured Jamaica, they expelled all Spanish residents but permitted the "Portugals" to remain. Those were the exiles from the Portuguese Jewish community, and among them were one or more Belisarios. In 1773, one Abraham Mendes Belisario was among the subscribers to David Levi's English version of the Sephardic ritual then being published, a clear sign that the family had reverted to Judaism.

This Abraham Mendes Belisario may well have been a brother or cousin of Rabbi Isaac Mendes Belisario of London, the son of Aaron ben Jacob Mendes Belisario, a congregational teacher in 1716, and of Rebecca de Jacob Nunes Nabarro. Rabbi Isaac was born in London (Nov. 13, 1717) and followed his father as a teacher in congregational schools of which he became director in 1760. In 1754, Rabbi Isaac married Sarah Miranda, and after her death Leah de Solomon Ha-Cohen (in 1762). By 1758, Rabbi Isaac was a regular preacher at the Bevis Marks Synagogue, and apparently used Spanish as his main language. He died in 1879.

Our painter, who bore the same name as the rabbi, was born perhaps a short time after his grandfather's death, as the son of Abraham Mendes Belisario and his wife Esther Lindo, with whom he had six children. Since Isaac the painter exhibited ~~for the first time~~ at the Royal Academy for the first time in 1815, it is reasonable to assume that he was born not much later than 1792/93, thus being but 23 years old at the time when a water-color landscape of his was found of sufficient merit to be shown at the most prestigious art exhibition in England. IMB also exhibited in 1816 and 1818, and then once more, in 1831, when he showed a "portrait of a lady" (name unknown). But his most famous work is an etching of the interior of the Bevis Marks Synagogue, with a view of the beautiful Ark from the isle to the left of the Almemor, part of which can be seen on the picture's right. Belisario followed the etching with a painting of the same view which is still the property of the synagogue (a virtual copy of the great Portuguese synagogue of Amsterdam. Bevis Marks survived the almost total destruction of its neighborhood during the bombings of London in World War II). Belisario's work is described in Anglo-Jewish Portraits (p. 168-69) as

Drawn and etched by I. M. Belisario, aquatinted by D. Havell.
INTERIOR OF THE SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE SYNAGOGUE, LONDON.

It bears a note reading "To the Members of the Congregation this Plate is most respectfully Dedicated by ISAAC MENDES BELISARIO. (1817).

Perhaps one of the last works by Belisario was his painting of the famous actress Ellen Kean, in 1832. Not long after its completion he left London, sailing for Kingston, Jamaica - a place he most likely chose because he had close relatives there. Once settled, he made himself known as a very competent landscape painter, using mostly water-colors, but he also accepted commissions for portraits. There is an interesting newspaper story which appeared in the Jamaica Herald and Commercial Advertiser on July 29, 1835:

"To those who are lovers of the arts, who delight in contemplating miniature resemblances of the "human face divine" we earnestly recommend an early visit to the studio of Mr. Belisario, at the southeast corner of the Parade in this city. We yesterday had the gratification of seeing the likeness of Sir Joshua and Lady Rowe and of Dr. Ferguson, painted by that gentleman. It is but justice to the artist to say that they are not only beautifully drawn but are also what may be strictly termed "first sight" striking likenesses. We scarcely know which to admire most - the elegance and truth exhibited in the full length miniature of her ladyship, the dignified serenity depicted in the countenance of Sir Joshua (who is represented full length sitting and robed in his Judges costume, or the delightful half-length miniature of Dr. Ferguson. . . . the artist has been happiest in the likeness of the Doctor. To say that Mr. Belisario deserves great credit is but faint praise to appreciate his merit properly."

Apparently in the same year, Belisario also painted a portrait of Rabbi Isaac Lopez, and that of the maternal grandmother of Jacob Andrade, the author of a history of the Jews of Jamaica which appeared in 1941. Two years later Belisario gained national attention with a set of twelve lithographs, published with this statement:

"Sketches of Character in illustration of the Habits, Occupations and Costume of the Negro Population in the island of Jamaica. Drawn after nature and in lithography by L. M. Belisario. Published by the artist at his residence, no. 21 King Street, Kingston, Jamaica, 1837."

Seven of the pictures were used for the stamps (and two souvenir sheets) to mark Christmas 1975 and 1976 (Scott 402-05 a (75) and 416-18 a (76)). The series was immensely popular with the Jamaicans, and originals (or copies) are on display in the National Library (formerly the Institute of Jamaica).

Neither Mr. Andrade nor anyone else seems to have been able to find out when Belisario died and where he was buried (presumably in the Jewish cemetery of Kingston). It is more than a pity that so little is known about this gifted Sephardi who made such great contributions to his country. Even if no public records were kept in his days, surely the Jewish community recorded the births, marriages and death of its members. Of course, tombstone inscriptions often fade under the impact of rain and snow, still, one would have expected some information about the death of Belisario.

It is indeed a shame that our contemporaries are so ignorant of the many contributions made by descendants of Marranos who returned to their religion once they reached lands in which they were welcomed, free and respected. Their history and achievements are surely part of those of the Jewish people which we should know and teach, for they are part of the total of our common heritage.

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NOTE: The brief story of the origins of the Marranos follows the short but brilliant account given in a series of lectures by Fritz Heymann (Tod oder Taufe -Death or Conversion - Frankfurt am Main, 1987, which corrects a number of errors by Dubnow Graetz and Roth. I am obliged for some of the information to the National Library of Jamaica. Mr. Andrade's history unfortunately says very little about Belisario.