



The famous manuscripts of the Ets Haim Library

Livraria Montezinos in Amsterdam

On microfiche



MMF Publications

History of Ets Haim



*David Montezinos,
librarian Ets Haim 1866-1916.*

The unique manuscripts of the Ets Haim Library - Livraria Montezinos in Amsterdam are published on 2200 microfiche. Approximately 500 manuscripts (from 1282 to the 20th century) of the collection are therefore now easily and readily available worldwide for consultation and research. The Ets Haim collections are important for the study of 17th and 18th century Jewry in general and especially

for the history of Sephardic Jewry. The library not only comprises the manuscripts, but also circa 30.000 printed books (from 1484 to the present). About 2000 unique, rare and precious printed works will be microfilmed during 2005 (www.ets-haim.org).

The microfiche caters to a worldwide and growing interest for Jewish studies. Mrs. Rivka Plesser, Head of the Department of Manuscripts and Archives at the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem worked in Amsterdam for some time and researched the collection for many years. "The manuscripts are of great importance for Jewish historiography, in particular concerning the Portuguese and Spanish exiles, the history of the Hebrew book and the Jewish history of Amsterdam, England and Germany. Also the illustrations, most of them in black and white, are beautiful, showing their splendor even on microfiche. The books also well depict Jewish community-life through the ages." Mrs. Rivka Plesser has stated: "The collection on microfiche will be a major asset to the University Library in Jerusalem".

*Interior library
after restoration, 2000.*





Interior library approx. 1910.

History of Ets Haim

The collections of Ets Haim are protected by the Dutch Act for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage and are since 2003 included in UNESCO's Memory of the World Register. Founded in 1616, Ets Haim is the oldest Jewish library in the world that is still in use.

The collections almost without interruption have been preserved in the monumental complex of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam since its construction was finished in 1675.

The Sephardic Jews who fled to the Dutch Republic since about 1600 have been called by some 'Catholics without belief or Jews without knowledge'. At first they were compelled to convert to Catholicism, but when their descendants were threatened with death by the Inquisition, they escaped Sefarad (the Hebrew name for the Iberian Peninsula). These Sephardim often lacked knowledge of the Jewish faith and tradition. On arrival these so-called Marranos started to settle in a relatively tolerant Amsterdam

and started eagerly the search for their 'Jewish roots'. They were influenced by Christianity and often well educated; the present library collections provides us with evidence of their culture and studies: Spanish and Portuguese translations from the Hebrew, grammars, the fine arts or philosophical books, sometimes influenced by Christianity, e.g. *Imperio de Dios en la Harmonia del Mundo* by Daniel Levi (Miguel) de Barrios (1635-1701). Among the showpieces is the Spanish translation of the Koran, written in Avila in 1553.

The library was a part of the Academia e Yesiba (Talmudic College) Ets Haim. As the name implicates, the curriculum of this educational centre included religious and secular studies, enabling the often rich Portuguese immigrants, to integrate into the Dutch environment and at the same time to retain their Jewish tradition. A good example is David Franco Mendes (1713-1792), a talented Ets Haim graduate, who copied many works. He was a member of a poetic society,

Classification of the manuscripts

Ilan Aroch. Cabbala texts on
parchment. 18th century.
(HS. EH 47 E 53).



composing Hebrew poetry, and was appointed as a teacher and a librarian at Ets Haim.

He invited the Italian scholar and cabbalist Moses Haim Luzatto to live in Amsterdam. Among the many manuscripts in Ets Haim, written and copied by Franco Mendes, is his lavishly illustrated dictionary of the terminology of shipbuilding in four languages (1790). His legacy comprises poetry, historical works and rabbinical legal discourses; his numerous manuscripts in the collection documents the continuity of 17th century scholarly traditions, maintained in Ets Haim's activities.

Many of the Sephardic belonged to the international world of culture and learning, known as the 'Literary Republic'. Their

education and cultural outlook were rooted in the ideals of the *homo universalis*, one of the main ideals of the Renaissance. They often nursed close relations with Christian scholars, and mostly remained faithful to their own tradition which often differs from that of Ashkenazi Jewry that lived in complete segregation from Christian society in which they were a minority. Portuguese until circa 1830 remained the language of the official documents of the community and of the homilies in the Ets Haim, the Great Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam. Spanish was the literary language for these "learned merchants" with all their international commercial relations. By integration without assimilation they were far ahead of time, which is also demonstrated by the Ets Haim collection of manuscripts.

Classification of the manuscripts

The greatest part of the collection comprises manuscripts on classical Jewish subjects (Bible, Midrash, Talmud, halachah, Cabbala), prayers, philosophy, belles-lettres, linguistics, medicine, Jewish history, music, drama and poetry.

In the first subject area we find Ets Haim's oldest manuscript, the *Mishneh Torah* of Moses Maimonides' (1135 – 1204), the first Jewish legal codex, copied in Narbonne in 1282, 78 years after the author's passing away.

An important part of the collection – both in size and quality – is formed by philosophical works about the fundamentals of Judaism, especially compared to Christian beliefs (called *Polemics* in the catalogue of Fuks). Since the Sephardic immigrants were steeped in the dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church, the answers of the rabbis of the congregation became often refutations of Christianity. Important in this respect the book *The Truth of the Divine Law* by Rabbi Saul Levi Morteira (ca. 1596-1660) is an important work of philosophy and refocusing on Jewish tradition; the text, various copies of which are in the collection,

was only published in print in a doctoral thesis in 1988. Isaac Orobio de Castro (1620-1687), earlier professor in philosophy in Salamanca as well as a professor in pharmacy in Toulouse, wrote several works in Amsterdam where he compared Jewish tradition with the philosophy of Antiquity and Christianity. A leading intellectual among the Spanish and Portuguese refugees, he also wrote polemics against the heterodox ideas of Baruch Spinoza en Uriël da Costa, two members of the Amsterdam Portuguese Jewish Community who were banned from its rank.

Ets Haim trained many members of the Community to become leaders and officials. This is apparent in the library-collections. A central position in Jewish life is taken by the dietary laws, necessitating clear instructions and professional training on kosher slaughtering and examination of the carcasses. The collection contains various manuscripts on the subject, often with fine anatomical illustrations, to instruct and examine ritual slaughterers, inspectors and rabbis who have to decide in case of doubt.



Librarians of Ets Haim
approx. 1910:
David Montezinos and
Jacob da Silva Rosa.



Of great historical interest are two congratulatory letters to the false messiah Shabtai Zvi in 1666 on the occasion of his manifestation. The sufferings of the persecution and the expulsion from Spain and the forced conversions in Portugal, created an excellent condition for messianistic expectations. When the cabbalist Shabtai Zvi presented himself as the Messiah, many Sephardim interpreted this as a sign of the forthcoming redemption, generating fervent emotional reactions in Amsterdam. Shortly after these letters were written, it became known that Shabtai Zvi was converted to Islam. It is most remarkable that the letters were not destroyed but preserved in Ets Haim.

Amsterdam allowed a free press and was a centre of the international book-production and book-trade. After the establishment of the first Hebrew press in Amsterdam by Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel in 1627, Amsterdam quickly became *the* centre of Hebrew printing. Jews from all over the world came to the city to print and publish their work. To make a living during their stay, as they had to be available for the proofreading of their books, they often served as visiting professors at Ets Haim. Traces of their life and work are easily found in the library's manuscript collection.

The special position of music in the liturgy and culture of the Portuguese Jews in Amsterdam, as in Venice, is documented by the collection of musical scores in Ets Haim. In addition, the library owns several manuscript libretti for oratorios, mostly in Hebrew, e.g. Handel's *Messiah* and *Esther*,

translated by David Franco Mendes who also wrote the text of an oratorio *Judith*. The library owns also two copies – written by David Franco Mendes - of the Hebrew text of an oratorio *Esther*, written by Rabbi Jacob Raphael Caravel; its musical scores were discovered in a British library.

The most prominent spiritual leaders of the Community educated many pupils who often were appointed to leading positions in the Sephardic communities in the New World. Important for Jewish historiography are manuscripts by Isaac Aboab (the founder of the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam, de Etsnoga), Moses Gideon Abudiente, Moses Rafael d'Aguilar, Salomon Ailyon, Isaac Cohen Belinfante, Jacob Ferrares, Abraham Gomes Silveyra, Menasseh ben Israel, David Cohen de Lara, Saul Levi Morteira and Isaac Orobio de Castro.



Left: Chikree Lev.

Written by
David Franco Mendes.
Amsterdam,
approx. 1730.
(HS. EH 47 C 3).

Right: Interior library after
restoration. 2000.

Fine leather bound book
in French style from
the collection.
Amsterdam, mid-17th century.

Quality and price

Cover front:

Sefer hadrachat hajeled.
Fürth, 1816. Booklet
Hebrew and Yiddish.
(not in the present
micropublication 13H45/6).

*Interior library after
restoration. 2000.*

*Librarians of Ets Haim
approx. 1910:
David Montezinos and
Jacob da Silva Rosa.*

*Fragment title page.
(HS. EH 47 C 3).*

Cover back:

Ilan Aroch. (HS. EH 47 E 53).

*Chikree Lev. Written by
David Franco Mendes.
Amsterdam, approx. 1730.
(HS. EH 47 C 3).*

*Peri Ets Hadar. Liturgy for
15th sabbath. (not in the
present micropublication
5G98).*

Quality and price

Microfilming by MicroFormat Systems at Lisse,
in the Netherlands, followed the standard of the
National Program for Preservation of Library
Materials in the Netherlands (Metamorfoze).
www.metamorfoze.nl

Quality and completeness of the microfiches were
managed by the Royal Library in The Hague and
Ets Haim.

The prices of the complete collection
(including as long as available: L. Fuks and
R.G. Fuks- Mansfeld, *Catalogue of the Manuscripts
of Ets Haim - Livraria Montezinos Sephardic
Community of Amsterdam*, Leiden, Brill, 1975)
and partial collections by subject can be found
on the website www.mmfpublishations.nl



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*Koran in Spanish translation.
Avila 1553. (HS. EH 48 D 20).*

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