

Sephardic Genealogy Resources

Indiana Jones

meets Tangier Moshe

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Moroccan Jews in the Amazon

Living in Jewish communities deep in the **Amazon jungle**, in places with names like *Cameta*, *Obidos*, *Itacoatiara*, *Manaos* and *Tefe* in Brazil or *Tarapoto*, *Yurimaguas*, *Pucallpa*, and *Iquitos* in Peru, 20 year old Moshe Levy brushes the bugs away from his suntanned face and thinks of his family in Morocco as he drifts down the river. His boat is laden with the supply of rubber he bartered for and accumulated from his jungle contacts. Further down river he will meet his old childhood pal Shlomo Menashe who used to sit in the bench next to him in school in Tetuan. As he had done repeatedly before, he will hand his rubber supplies to Shlomo and load up more pots and pans and other utensils to use for bartering up-river.

A script for a new Indiana Jones movie? Not at all. The part played by **Moroccan Jewish immigrants** in the development of the **Amazon rubber trade** is a little known facet of Moroccan Jewish history that needs to be told.

Moroccan Jews, like many North African Jewries, tended to interest themselves primarily in various forms of **trading and commerce** and disdained the building trades, farming and other similar forms of labor. Other than a few wealth businesses most were **small traders or peddlers** whose activities varied from **selling trinkets** in the souks to financing **caravans to subsaharan Africa** in search of gold, ivory, ostrich feathers and the like usually controlled by branches of their families along the caravan routes in southern Morocco. Others were **tailors, cobblers, silversmiths** and the like.

Migration

Because of the precariousness of life at the time Moroccan Jews were accustomed to packing up and moving about from town to town or even out of the country. Sometimes these migrations were to **avoid plagues and disease** (cholera mostly) or **escape a sultan or a war zone** (like the 1844 migration of 1/3 to 1/2 the Jewish population of Tangier to Cadiz and Gibraltar in anticipation of a French attack) or because of **marriages between families in distant towns** in or out of Morocco. The **mass migration of Moroccan Jews to Israel** in recent times was thus not an anomaly except for its size. In pre-expulsion Spain, back and forth migrations and marriages between Morocco and Spain and other north African Jewries were **not out of the ordinary**. The **"back and forth" nature** of these migrations was also a characteristic as we shall see. After the expulsion from Spain, we find in the XVIII century CE well established **communities of Moroccan Jews in Gibraltar, London, Manchester, etc.**

In the XIX century the **Alliance Israelite Universelle** set up schools in Morocco which **encouraged the learning of building trades** as a remedy to the prevailing poverty while bemoaning that these were not the interests of their young men, particularly in northern Morocco. They dreamed of **adventures and trading in the New World** and many left mostly to where they saw the chances for riches were best: to **Rio de Janiero, Caracas and Belem at the mouth of the Amazon** where a **synagogue was established in 1824**.

The Amazon

Depressing economic climate in Morocco, **influx of Spaniards** into northern Morocco competing for scarce jobs, migrations of **Jews from southern Morocco** fleeing draughts and disease conditions caused a mass migration in the mid-nineteenth century of **Jewish teenagers**, mostly from the overcrowded northern towns, to seek their fortunes in South America's **Amazon basin**. They went with the intention to **send money back to their impoverished families**, which they faithfully did, and to return when they could, which they also did - part of the **"back and forth" migratory tradition**.

At first they come on long **3 month voyages** aboard slow sailing ships. With the advent of **steamships** to Brazil, the trip only took **3 weeks** and the emigration volume increased dramatically and frequent return trips to Morocco with the accumulated wealth became practical. The **wealth of the returning sons** contrasted sharply with the abject poverty at home and spurred even more sons to seek the Amazonian Eldorado and incidentally leaving largely female Jewish populations behind. Records of the Alliance Israelite Universelle show that many families survived largely on the money sent home by their sons in the Amazon.

In 1910 low cost rubber from the **plantations in southeast Asia** caused the **price of rubber to plummet** world-wide and with it the **Amazon rubber industry crashed**. The Amazon Jews moved on to greener pastures **elsewhere in the Americas** or **returned to Morocco** and the Indiana Jones chapter of Moroccan Jewry ended. It was however for many Moroccan Jews the first step in their emigration to the New World and must have been the origin of many fascinating

tales.

Further Reading

The interested reader is encouraged to seek out **Susan Gilson Miller's** excellent and perceptive article entitled "*Kippur on the Amazon*" which has much more fascinating information and quotes about this not well known topic and which first introduced me to the subject. It can be found in *Harvey E. Goldberg's "Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries: History and Culture"* (Jewish Theological Seminary, 1996). Its title arises from her eloquent description of these intrepid Jewish explorers, almost all of whom came from Morocco, coming together for Yom Kippour services in huts built in the jungle, surrounded by fires to keep off the wild animals. In her article she quotes from the Abraham Pinto's personal diary:

Lest we forget the religion of our fathers so far away, each of us left Tangier carrying with us the book of Kippur in order to celebrate this day as it should be. Before leaving Tefe for whatever part, we fixed the date of the Holy Day to celebrate it wherever we might be and planned to meet two or three days beforehand to celebrate together. [On meeting], our oarsmen built us a little hut in a place cut out of the jungle. We lit a bonfire and fed it through the night to keep away the wild animals and snakes that might come near one night of Kippur our peons killed a tiger near our little hut; but even for that we did not interrupt our prayers.

Also, the following provide more information:

Rosenzweig's "*Judios en la Amazonia Peruana, 1870-1949*" (Majshavot: Pensiamentos 4, # 1-2, 1967)

Abraham Ramiro Bentes "*Das Ruinas de Jerusalem a Verdajante Amazonia*" (Rio de Janeiro; Edicoes Bloch, 1987) and "*Primeiros imigrantes hebreus na Amazonia*" (Rio de Janeiro; 1987)

Barbara Weinstein's "*The Amazon Rubber Boom, 1850-1920*" (Stanford University Press 1983).

Mathilde Tagger's "*Juifs Marocains au Bresil*" (Revue du Cercle Genealogie Juive, No 38, summer 1994).

R. Ricard's "*Notes sur l'immigration des Israelites marocains en Amerique espagnole et au Bresil*" (Revue Africaine, 1944).

E & F Wolff's "*Sepulturas de Israelitas*" (Sao Paulo, 1976 & 1983).

Family Names

Robert Ricard lists the following **Tangier and Tetouan family names** that went to Brazil or Peru:

Abecassis, Abejdid, Benamor, Benelbaz, Bentes, Delmar, Farache, Gabbai, Levy, Marquez, Perez, Salgado, Serruya.

There were other families from **Mogador, Rabat, Casablanca and elsewhere** that also participated in the move to the Amazon. Among these are:

Attias, Benayon, Benchimon, Bendelek, Nahmias, Pinto, Sarraf, Serfaty, etc.

Jacques Cukierkorn, a Sao Paulo Brazilian rabbinical student at the Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati says in 1993 that "an estimated **10%** of the Brazilian population is of **marrano origin**" and describes attempts by some of them to re-discover their past history.

Today, **Belem** has about 1000 Jewish families and **Manaus** about 140 Jewish families, almost all descended from the original Moroccan emigrants. Jewish tombstones carry such names as:

Assayag, Athias, Auday, Azancot, Azulay, Barcessat, Becheton, Benarroch, Benayon, Becheton, Benchimol, Bendelak, Benjo, Benoliel, Bensimon, Benzaquon, Benzecry, Cohen, Dabela, Dahan, Elaluf, Foinquins, Franco, Gabbay, Hassan, Israel, Lancry, Laredo, Levy, Melal, Murcian, Obadia, Roffe, Sabba, Scares, Serfaty, Sicsu, Sorrulha, Sorruya, Tobelom, Zagury.

(See also *Abisror* in [Family pages](#))

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