

NOTAS BIBLIOGRAFICAS

YOSEF KAPLAN, From Christianity to Judaism: The Life and Work of Isaac Orobio de Castro (Hebrew). Jerusalem: The Magnes Press of the Hebrew University, 1982. Pp. XI+463.

The year 1971 seems in many respects to have been an eventful one in recent Spanish Jewish historiography. That year Yosef Hayim Yerushalami published his study "From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto" which told the story of Isaac Cardoso (1604-81), a marrano physician who enjoyed great scientific and social success at the court of Philip IV. Ultimately he left Spain, reverted to Judaism and became a gifted apologist for his old-new religion. In the same year, 1971, Yosef Kaplan, then a graduate student at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, published in Hebrew translation parts of Cardoso's Las excelencias de los hebreos. Fascinated by the world of the "new christians" and the intellectual history of the "marrano diaspora" in western Europe, he decided then to dedicate a special effort to the story of Isaac Orobio de Castro (c. 1617-87) who, like Cardoso, managed to escape Spain. De Castro settled in Amsterdam and played an important role in its history, as has been noted (also around 1971) by I.S. Revah in his study of the "rupture spinozienne".

In his search for biographical and bibliographical evidence, Kaplan left no stone unturned (see especially his appendices pp. 335-408 and the rich bibliography). Like I.S. Revah, he visited Madrid and Cuenca and was able to discover in their archives fascinating data about Orobio's studies in Ossoona and Alcalá de Henares and about his ultimate appointment as professor in Seville in the sections covering universities and inquisitions. Orobio's university career, his social success as physician to the Duke of Medinaceli, as well as his domestic comfort (pp. 67-70) were interrupted by the inquisitors of Sevilla who imprisoned him in 1654 and brought him to trial. Balthazar Alvarez Orobio this -was his name in Spain- managed to escape the peninsula in 1660 and, after a short sojourn in Toulouse, as a professor at the university, went on to establish himself in Amsterdam, the "metropolis of the SEPHARADIM in the sixteenth century", as Gerard Nahon put it.

Amsterdam in that century was not only a great maritime city where those ex-marranos got a chance to display their commercial talents, as shown by the still unpublished doctoral thesis by Daniel M. Swetschinski: The Portuguese Jewish Merchants of Seventeenth Century Amsterdam - a social profile, 2 vols., Brandeis University, 1980. It was also, and more importantly, a fervid cultural centre, a hotbed of scepticism and a capital of disbelief. When Orobio arrived in Amsterdam in 1662, Benedictus Spinoza, the greatest son ever of this community, had been under excommunication for six years, but he was not the only one to cause trouble for the Jewish spiritual leadership. Even in Spain, many of the "secret Jews" must have found refuge from their spiritual agony in scepticism and deism. Individuals like Miguel de Barrios and particularly Dr. Juan Prado, brought their doubts with them to Amsterdam and soon discovered that Judaism offered them no more consolation or tranquility than Catholicism. Prado, who led a heroic marrano struggle in Spain, and who knew Orobio there very well, in Amsterdam in his despair was driven to hedonism, drinking and womanizing. Excommunicated by the Jewish community, poor and frustrated, he even tried to get back to Spain (p. 138).

Orobio de Castro's life was not as tragic. Although exposed to the same doubts by his Spanish education and his vast and intimate knowledge of Christian literature, he did not fall into excesses. Somehow he managed to overcome qualms and spiritual difficulties. In his polemics against Prado and Christian theologians, he managed to defend the major tenets of Judaism and thus become a representative of the silent majority of the exmarranos who found tranquility and peace in their new situation. That is his historical importance. Well integrated into the community (pp. 165-82), like many other ex-marranos, and in Amsterdam notably Miguel de Barrios, Orobio was probably swept away by the messianic movement of Shabbatai Sebi which electrified most of the Sephardic world in 1666. "Probably" is, however, a conditional term one should use in this context. Kaplan, after scrutinizing the evidence carefully, as he did throughout his book, was able to ascertain that after the "Messiah's" apostasy, Orobio expressed himself in negative terms. What happened before that, and whether he was able to resist the frenzy and mass hysteria, still remains anyone's guess (pp. 183-203).

The continued commitment of the ex-marrano community of Amsterdam to Iberian values and Spanish culture is one of its major characteristics in the seventeenth century. It was not only that they continued to cultivate the Castilian language and literature they valued so much in dull, commercial Amsterdam. As D.M. Swetschinski showed in this thesis, their major contribution to the city's economy emanated from the commerce they engaged in, primarily with Portugal, but also with Spain and the colonies all those years. Plutocrats like Jeronimo Nunes da Costa, Manuel Belmonte and Antonio López Suasso, the wealthiest of Amsterdam's merchants, even served as agents and consuls of Portugal and Spain and were awarded Spanish titles of nobility in the Netherlands. Kaplan shows quite convincingly how the spiritual world, intellectual preoccupations and even forms of expression in Amsterdam were moulded according to the Iberian model (pp. 269 ff.). When writing about the "excellencies" of the Jews, they had in mind similar tracts about the "excelencias" of Spain or its monarchy. When they established in 1685 the "Academia de los Floridos" under the patronage of Nunes da Costa and Manuel Belmonte, they founded a literary society that resembled very much in its purpose as well as in its mode of functioning, Spanish academies. Definitely, the sufferings they and their families endured in Spain and Portugal did not estrange them from their old country, its culture and its values. "A Dios Patria, Montilla, a Dios Espagna que me lleva el leon en gran tormenta" wrote Miguel de Barrios in Amsterdam (p. 272).

Yosef Kaplan's successful analysis, and the brilliant results he obtained for Amsterdam in the seventeenth century should perhaps encourage some of us to carry out the same inquiry for the sixteenth century. That century was marked by a revival of interest in Jewish mysticism, a revival that we generally explain as a reaction to the cataclysm of the expulsion from Spain in 1492 and as a rejection of the rationalistic culture that governed Jewish life in the peninsula and that, in the sixteenth century, was held responsible for the disaster. Instead, couldn't we see in the renaissance of the kaballa in that century yet another indication of Jewish commitment to the Iberian spiritual world, a world that in the sixteenth century was marked by its interest in gnosticism and mysticism?

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