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Introducing Jewishness, creolization and the colonial domain

Memories of bygone days

I was born in 1936. My mother came from an orthodox family. She was Portuguese. As a little boy, her father still lived at Jodensavanne. He visited the city [Paramaribo] only during the [Jewish] holidays. At home, we lived quite kosher and made our own salted beef. My brothers had to attend the synagogue services on Sabbath. My mother was very strict about this. And if there was no minyan, poor Jews were paid for their presence.

In the synagogue we had to wear felt hats. I hated it. Not so much in the synagogue, where everybody wore a hat, but on the street. We looked like a troupe of Amish! When I walked behind my mother, I always tried to take off my hat secretly. But my mother – that woman had eyes at the back of her head. ‘Put on your hat,’ she would say without even looking backwards. That hat is perhaps the worst memory of my youth. [laughing] We wore felt hats and dresses with long sleeves, and stockings.

This was in the 1960s. In those years, there was still a vibrant community. On the day before the Day of Atonement, we went to sit in the synagogue at four o’clock in the morning. It was so beautiful, all dark outside, with the candles burning. You could smell the scent of the morning, especially if it was raining. Then you really felt: I am a Jew. […]

We had a foster sister and brother in our house. The foster sister was Lutheran; the foster brother was with the EBG. But they knew the Hagadah⁶ front to back. We wished them a Happy Christmas, but their upbringing in our home was orthodox.

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1 Jodensavanne was the centre of the Portuguese Jewish community until the late eighteenth century, after which it deteriorated. Throughout the nineteenth century, only a few impoverished families remained in Jodensavanne. Today, only a cemetery and some remnants of an old synagogue remain.

2 The term minyan refers to a quorum of ten adult men, required to perform certain rituals during a synagogue service, like reading from the Torah scrolls.

3 Note that according to Jewish law only married women are required to cover their heads. Therefore, this custom of young girls covering their heads in the synagogue must reflect some family or social convention.

4 Yom Kippur, one of the main Jewish holidays.

5 EBG, Evangelische Broeder Gemeente; also referred to as the Moravian Brethren or Herrnhutters.

6 This is the book used at the Jewish Passover Seder meal to recount the story of the first Passover and the escape of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt in the time of Moses.
Jewish. [...] There was also Zionism. As a child, I found that very threatening. I was afraid that as Zionists we would have to leave Suriname. I did not want to go to Israel; I wanted to stay in Suriname. Then people started to move away. Younger people left for Holland for their education, for a job and a future. Older people moved away to receive their pension, to collect their AOW7 as we said. In 1970, I left Suriname. In Holland, the Jewish feeling disappeared. I had married a non-Jewish man. The orthodox community in Holland did not accept him; they did not welcome him. I never really felt at home in Holland. Especially Christmas time was an annual disaster. Everybody asked, ‘Why don’t you have a tree?’ Oh, it is very cozy indeed, a candlestick on the windowsill, but I do not want it. Christmas in Suriname is much more pleasant. Here in Suriname I do not have to justify myself. In Holland, I did not feel accepted. People kept asking ‘Why don’t you go back?’ That hurts. When I returned to Suriname, the Jewish feeling returned. It is partly nostalgia. Musing on the ancestors, who once sat on those same wooden benches in that beautiful synagogue. Daydreaming where grandpa may have sat, being part of that rich and beautiful history. Especially the Heerenstraat8 is full of memories of youth and bygone days. […] I feel Surinamese. I am Surinamese. It was my schoolteacher, Uncle Wim, who awakened this feeling in me. That man sowed a seed in my heart. During school hours, we, the whole class, had to march down the street and around the block. And we yelled: ‘We want self-government. We want self-government.’ I am a Surinamese and a Jew. I don’t want to be a Jew in Jerusalem. I want to be a Jew in Suriname. At home, I try to keep a kosher household. Well, we do not eat meat with butter. That much of Judaism I want to hold on to: watching my food. So we buy halal meat.9 I make it kosher by soaking it in salted water. It is difficult, to live kosher in Suriname. […] Today the community is small and pitiful. But it is still alive. During the holidays, when everybody is strongly encouraged to attend, about 40 people visit the synagogue. The total membership is 150. When I came back to Suriname, I was shocked. The community had become liberal. Men and women were all sitting together. You have to accept it. You cannot come from outside and then want to change everything. If you want to be orthodox, you should go to Israel. […] Let us hope that also in future there will be persons who will put some effort into preserving the community, [who will] cherish the memory of the community. I have that hope. There is no choice. The circumstances determine the possibilities, what may or may not be. [silence] Sometimes I feel like impoverished nobility. The only thing that remains is my coat of arms.10

The memories of this elderly woman describe a feeling of loss that is shared by many older Surinamese Jews. The Jewish community she remembers from her childhood, although small at the time, no longer exists. The old Portuguese synagogue in the Heerenstraat serves as the physical anchor of memories of

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7 AOW (Algemene Ouderdoms Wet), Dutch state pension.
8 The Heerenstraat was one of the old colonial streets of Paramaribo where the Portuguese synagogue was located and many Jews lived.
9 Meat slaughtered according to Islamic dietary laws.
10 Interview recorded in Paramaribo, 19-6-2006.