CHAPTER 12

Spanish Readings of Amsterdam’s Seventeenth-Century Sephardim*

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The Languages of the Western Sephardim

Edward Browne, the son of the physician and author, Sir Thomas Browne, visited the city of Amsterdam in the 1660s during his tour of various countries of Europe, and like other English travellers who arrived there, he was deeply impressed by the wealth of the Sephardic Jews and the splendour that enveloped them: ‘The Jews live more handsomly and splendidly here, than in any other place.’ Browne met several members of the community and made a point of mentioning their knowledge of various languages: ‘Some of them understand divers Languages. I saw one Moses di Pas, a Learned young Man, and Orobio, a Physician of Note.’ He also expressed an opinion about the conversion to Judaism of several of the people whom he met:

And I was sorry to see divers here to profess themselves publickly Jews, who had lived at least reputed Christians, for a long time in other places. One who had been a Franciscan Frier thirty years, and another who had been Professour some years at Tholouze, and before that Physician to the King of Spain.¹

What Browne did not know (at least one may infer this from his writings) is that not just a few of the Jews in Amsterdam but in fact most of the members of this Sephardic community had previously been Christians and openly adopted the Jewish religion after emigrating from Spain and Portugal. This is also true of most of the Sephardic Jews who settled in Italy and northwest Europe during the seventeenth century: that is to say, they had been Iberian New Christians, descendants of Jews who had been baptized (either forcibly

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¹ Edward Browne[e], An Account of Several Travels through a Great Part of Germany (London, 1677), pp. 17–8.
or voluntarily) in Spain and Portugal in the late Middle Ages, and they reverted to Judaism after being separated from the religion of their ancestors for generations.² There was a clear connection between their origins and their linguistic education, to which Browne refers.

These New Jews mastered Spanish and spoke Portuguese, and the educated ones had learned Latin in Iberian seminaries and universities, where quite a few of them had qualified as physicians and had acquired a respectable philosophical background, including considerable mastery of the ins and outs of Christian theology. For instance, Vicente de Rocamora had been a Dominican friar before becoming a preacher in the Amsterdam Jewish community.³ Paulo de Pina left Lisbon for Rome in 1599, with the intention of entering a religious order, but in Livorno he was convinced by the former Marrano Dr Elijah Montalto to embrace Judaism. Under his new name, Reuel Yeshurun, he was among the founders of the Ets Haim Society for Torah Study in the Dutch metropolis.⁴ And these are only a few examples. Balthazar Orobio de Castro, whom Browne met and called ‘a Physician of Note’, had acquired reasonable knowledge of French while serving as a professor at the university of Toulouse.⁵ Many other New Christian emigrants also spent time in the French centres of the merchants of the ‘Nation Portugaise’ in Bayonne, Bordeaux,


³ Cecil Roth, *A Life of Menasseh ben Israel: Rabbi, Printer, and Diplomat* (Philadelphia, 1945), p. 120.
