

REVEALED: Dr. Jessica Roitman, Part II

[Stone] Welcome to Flames of Freedom Revealed, brought to you by Lance Toland Entertainment. I'm Richard Stone, your host and co-creator of the historical drama Flames of Freedom. In these bonus episodes accompanying our dramatic stories, we explore the historical roots of the Jewish quest for liberty with world renowned scholars, authors, and historians.

We'll delve into the background of the characters in our story who were escaping from the cruel inequities of the Portuguese Inquisition, murderous pogroms in Eastern Europe, and virulent anti-Semitism. Why were they willing to risk their lives to sail across the Atlantic Ocean to settle in the untamed wilderness of the new American colony of Georgia, founded by James Oglethorpe, but with no assurances?

Today on Flames of Freedom Revealed, we're talking with Dr. Jessica Roitman, a professor of Jewish studies at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. She is a historian of early modern and modern Jewish history. And her research focuses on Jews and Jewish communities in the Dutch Caribbean. Dr. Roitman is interested in issues of race, ethnicity, minoritization, slavery, and colonialism, and has published extensively on Caribbean history, marronage, enslavement, and Jews and colonialism.

In today's episode, Dr. Roitman delves into the growing role of Jews in trade in Europe and the Caribbean. Welcome back, Dr. Roitman. Thank you. I'm really happy to be here talking to you today. One of the things in our research, Mark has been doing a ton of research on this, is there is a growing trade in diamonds in Amsterdam and traditionally, Jews have been very involved in the diamond trade up to this day, not only in Europe, but New York.

What was occurring with the dynamics of that economically and politically, and how is it that the Jews became so associated with this one trade of precious stones?

[Dr. Roitman] The diamond trade is really only emerging in the 17th century. It doesn't really take off until the 19th century in Amsterdam, but Jews start to become involved in indeed, as you say, in the 17th century.

And that has to do with this overseas trade. I was talking about this relationship with Portugal, that these New Christians, people in the Portuguese mind or the Iberian mind, quote, tainted Jewish blood with Jewish blood. New Christians are limited in what, as I said, with what they can do economically. So they get very involved in this overseas trade and it's often forgotten because I think in the U.S. We're, we're taught very much that English oversees history, so we

REVEALED: Dr. Jessica Roitman, Part II

forget that indeed it's the Portuguese under Henry the Navigator and who start inching their way by sea around Africa and into so called the Orient, the East. So it's really the Portuguese who first set up trading posts in India, and at the time India was the place for, for precious stones.

Um, including diamonds. Now it's still a really small by comparison to what it is now, but you know, gems are easily transported. No one, other people aren't really involved in it. Um, so you have these Portuguese new Christian merchants who start buying these diamonds and other precious stones in India at the time and start.

Trading in them, but by the 18th century, so I've left ahead a little bit by the 18th century, diamonds are discovered in Minas Gerais, which actually means in Portuguese general mines in Brazil. And it's the first diamond boom and Jews had, as I said, our new Christians have been very involved to speak Portuguese, are very involved in Portuguese trade networks.

The Portuguese have colonized Brazil and we shouldn't forget that in the mid 17th century, part of Brazil was actually under Dutch control. It's a brief period, but the Dutch actually controlled part of Brazil for a while. And so you also have a interesting, and that's possibly another story, openly, you have the first synagogue in the Americas is in Dutch Brazil, in northeastern Brazil.

So you have basically all this stuff. Jewish, new Christian connection with places where you can get diamonds and this boom in the 18th century in Brazil really cements this Jewish involvement because they already have a little bit of expertise from this experience in India, they've already, you know, trade them a bit and then by the 18th century, they start really being involved.

But also keep in mind that cutting diamonds is a difficult. skilled task and the kind of cutting that we think of now was very hard to do at the time. It's actually only with industrialization and steam motors and these kind of drills that you're able to get the sort of facets and cuts that we see now.

It's really started getting involved in the 18th century. And by the 19th century, it's almost 80 percent Jewish run in Amsterdam. Fascinating. Fascinating. So we have in the 18th century, our story begins really at the beginning of the 18th century and the late 17th century. So some Jews are making their way from Amsterdam to England.

And, and we know that some of them were very successful within English society and rose to the pinnacle of English society economically and socially,

REVEALED: Dr. Jessica Roitman, Part II

but there's an influx of people or an outflux of people leaving Portugal escaping because they were actually prohibited as conversos. So they had to engineer their escape.

Some came to Amsterdam, some went to England, and we know that there is then an outflow of people who are making their way to the Americas and especially the Caribbean.

[Stone] Tell us a little more about that dynamic and how Jews ended up becoming important players in the Caribbean culture and economies.

[Dr. Roitman] So we tend to think of the Sephardim and I've been telling the story of international trade and all this stuff. So, and the self image, of course, of being very elite and wealthy, and some few Sephardim were actually the majority. We're not, and my friend and colleague Tirtza Levy Birnfeld has written a wonderful book on poverty in the Sephardic Jewish community in Amsterdam. Because we forget how many people were poor.

Not that, that Bom Judaism I was talking about, but actually a lot of Sephardim were poor. There's an uptick in Inquisitorial persecution by the latter part of the 17th century. What you're talking about beginning of the 18th, uh, you would have thought the inquisition would have run its course by then, but it doesn't.

So you have more people fleeing with, without much money, you know, economic cycles come and go. So you actually have a. Fairly large group of poor Sephardim. And the community sets up kind of a novel idea, although it's still happening to this day, of basically giving poor members of their community money to go somewhere else.

Because we shouldn't forget that in this period, there there's not really any municipal charity or there's very little. So the Jewish community is responsible for providing charity for its own members. So the charitable coffers start running dry and they decide, Hey, we've got to get rid of these poor people because we can't keep supporting them.

They're giving us a bad image. And so they come up with a solution, sending them away and that's called them dispatcher. Which in Portuguese is to dispatch. And the people who are sent away are called despachados. And actually most of the Western Sephardic communities, because it's not just to Amsterdam, you start getting a community being set up in Hamburg, also a trade center, uh, slowly, but it grows, as you said, Richard in London, so they start setting up ways to get rid of their poor.

REVEALED: Dr. Jessica Roitman, Part II

Now, first they're sending them. Basically to each other, also to Venice, to other places, and you get these really grumpy letters being sent back and forth between congregations saying you gave so and so money to come here to Hamburg. But we can't support him, so we're giving him money and we're sending them back to you.

So there's this sort of circulation for people amongst the communities. So as settlement, um, particularly by the Dutch and the Caribbean, but also the English, really starts to take hold. They start sending these people, giving them money and sending them overseas. Keep in mind, it's It's harder to get back from the Caribbean back to Amsterdam than from Hamburg or London or Venice.

So that they start sending them overseas. And there's a great list in the archives which have now been digitized, where you can see how much money was given, where they're sending the people. This money is often given with a stipulation that they not return for a certain number of years. Usually it's seven years, of course, some people still return, but it is harder if you're sent off to the colonies.

So they start sending these people off, but that's not the only reason Jews go to the colonies. There's a lot of economic prospects there, particularly in the burgeoning sugar trade. There's also, particularly the Dutch and the British are in desperate need of people to go settle there. A lot of people want to just go and make their fortunes.

You want to go off to the colonies and make a lot of money and come back. Um, but the Dutch and the British want to counter Spanish and Portuguese control in the Americas. So they want people who come and settle, people who stay there. And that's hard. Particularly for the Dutch, it's a small country.

There aren't that many people. If you want to get rich, you go to the Dutch East Indies, which is now Indonesia. They just don't have enough people to what we now call settler colonialism. The English have more, but still not enough. Um, you know, you go to these places, you die, or at least you get very sick.

It's really hard to get settlers, particularly in the Caribbean and what we now call the wild coast, what's now British Guiana, French Guiana. You really can't get people to go. So both the British and the Dutch get this idea that, hey, we could get the Jews to go there. These are people who've. Have trade networks already in the area.

REVEALED: Dr. Jessica Roitman, Part II

They speak Spanish and Portuguese and they might be willing to go. So both the English and the Dutch give the Jews what they call liberties. They give them more rights basically to settle in these spaces. So more rights than they have in Europe, even in very tolerant Amsterdam. So Jews can serve in the militia, which doesn't sound like something that you would want to do.

But if you look at Rembrandt's Nightwatch, um, the famous painting of the civil militia, it's also, it's almost like being part of the Kiwanis club or something. It's a social status. It's being part of the society. So. In the colonies, Jewish men can join the militia. They can, don't have to swear an oath on a Bible.

You know, there's all sorts of rights and liberties that Jews receive that are more than they would have in Europe if they go settle in these places. So it's not just poor people. It's also Jews who want to make their fortune or Jews who want more rights than they have in Europe.

[Stone] What's interesting is that that's probably the story of Diogo Nunes and the 42 Jews who come to Georgia. They were despachados. They were poor and, uh, the Beavis Mark Synagogue in London, you know, they, what are we going to do with all these immigrants who are coming in? And that was seen as a solution.

[Dr. Roitman] Yeah. And so there was a little of both, probably opportunity for those going. And at the same time, it was a solution for the community's back in London to kind of clear, clear the decks a little bit.

[Stone] Interesting. So there's a phenomena that, that you write about that is so interesting because we have a notion about Jewish families and Jewish men, that they are good husbands. And yet. We find many Jewish men departing, often abandoning their wives and children in Amsterdam, partly to seek their fortunes and perhaps to solve other kinds of issues. Can you speak a little bit about that phenomena, which is fascinating to me?

[Dr. Roitman] Sure. And what I do want to say is that as historians, as for all your listeners, we're dependent on, on what has come down to us through the ages in terms of records and what ends up in records often has to do with conflict. I mean, think about today, if things go well with your IRS payments or whatever, there's not much of a record, but if you get in a court case with your neighbor or with the IRS, Or there's some sort of conflict, there's a lot more records about it.

REVEALED: Dr. Jessica Roitman, Part II

And that was the same in the 17th or 18th century. So it can skew our view of things. And in terms of the men abandoning their families, we tend to know about that because the women and children left behind are indeed asking for money from the charitable funds of their congregation or their community.

Or they're filing something in court, or in the case of Jewish families, and I can talk more about this, trying to declare that the husband is dead so that they can remarry. Um, so, so we know more about that and, and because of all these records that are coming from. What happens when a man leaves his family, so it would be hard to say if it's disproportionate or not.

Because of course, if a man stays with his family and supports them and everything goes like it should, we just don't get those records. But what we do know is, or we can make a pretty fair guess about is that. There are in the 17th and 18th century, a lot more cases of men abandoning their families than there had been before.

And we can guess that by comparing records, but also by seeing that how much more mobility there was in this period. You can go off to the colonies. And just never come back in the past. Yes. The world was a big place, but the Jewish world was a pretty small place. And we, we know that we have records between communities, even quite distant communities.

There were envoys from Eretz Yisrael. So the Holy land, um, basically begging for money for the Jews who were there traveling amongst communities, sending word about what was happening in the communities. So it's a big world, but it's a small world. But with. The beginning of settlements in the Americas and really overseas.

It's still a small world, but it's not as small as it was. So it is possible to just go off, disappear, not come back. Claim that you never got any letters asking for money, et cetera. So we do know there are more Jewish men who are going off and for whatever reason, not. Returning, and it becomes a problem for the communities in terms of support of these families.

And then you have all sorts of things like illegitimate children. In Jewish law, the man's the only one who's allowed to ask for a divorce. So if he's just gone, but no one can prove he's dead, the woman's still considered legally, religiously married under Jewish law. It's called being an agona. So basically, in Hebrew, an anchored wife.

REVEALED: Dr. Jessica Roitman, Part II

If it's actually, by the way, still an issue in some Jewish communities, uh, where the man won't give a divorce. But, um, at this point in time, if you don't know that the man's dead, you can't get a divorce. And that's also part of Jewish law because what if he's really not dead and you've allowed the woman to remarry and have children and they would be called momsers, bastards, which is a legal [00:17:00] term at the time.

It's not legal. In Judaism now, now it's used as sort of a, a curse word, but it was a real definition that a child would be considered a moms or so a bastard and a moms are in Jewish law can only marry another moms or so it's, it becomes this whole Jewish problem. So you have these women who. Their husbands may be dead, but no one knows because no one saw the husband die.

So they're not allowed to legally remarry, but they still have a relationship as one could expect. And then they have this child who's considered illegitimate. So it becomes a real problem. There's all sorts of discussions about it. And we do know in one case I wrote about, the man just went off to Suriname.

Probably was a despachado. He never comes back, um, but he doesn't divorce his wife. She has mental illness. She's accused of having an affair with someone. And then he actually demands the children be sent to him in Suriname. So you do see that there's some connections. We were talking about, uh, Simha Salome, correct? So the children then are sent to Suriname. They are, and it's been one of my, I'm going to do that someday when I have more time, projects to try to hunt them down. I found some of the graves or records of the children, but I'd like to try to trace it more. So a lot of women just get abandoned, men go off.

And I did some research, which. Didn't show up in that article in the 19th and into the 20th century. I'm sure you're familiar with the forwards, the Yiddish language newspaper. I think now it's published in English, but the Jewish newspaper in the United States and still in late 19th, early 20th century, there's advertisements for missing men.

Like, has anyone seen Shlomo Berger? His wife and family are waiting for him. Like, it's really a bit sad and we can laugh at it now, but, but yeah, it was still going on in the 19th century. Yeah.

[Stone] Well, we have just a few minutes remaining and I thought maybe you could finish by telling this really interesting story of Sarah Pardo in Abraham da Costa Andrade.

REVEALED: Dr. Jessica Roitman, Part II

And in Curacao, they were part of the Portuguese Jewish community there. And they have an affair apparently, and that becomes quite a do. And tell us a little bit about that story. Yeah, there, uh, the Sephardic Jewish community or Portuguese Jewish community in, uh, Curacao has been there since the mid 17th century.

They're a well-established community. They're a close-knit community. They make up about a third to a half of the white population in the island, so they're very prominent. And these two people, they're married to other people. Actually, Sarah's married to her half uncle, which sounds really horrible to us, but it was quite normal at the time in the Sephardic families.

Uncle niece marriage. And he's much older than she is. And she had never been pregnant. They've been married ten years. And they have an affair, or they're considered to, viewed by everyone as having an affair. They were seen all over town, and this is a small walled town. Uh, and the architecture at the time, very colonial architecture.

There's always these overhanging balconies to let air in. But, you know, people are hanging out on their balconies. In fact, they were observed by someone. Making obscene gestures with bananas at each other. Or so it was reported and yeah, they're, they're seen walking around together. We later get testimony that supposedly Sarah was pregnant and sought to end the pregnancy, which was illegal at the time.

So they apparently have this affair. Then Sarah is not able to terminate the pregnancy. So she's pregnant. No one believes that it's her husband's. Then the community, the, the, the synagogue, the Mahama, the people, the board of directors of the synagogue wants to kick them both out. It does, it does this excommunication, like I talked about, it, it ends up going to not only the colonial government, the island, but ultimately to the states general, because they keep appealing and saying, no, not only should they not have been kicked out or fined, but eventually Sarah has a son.

She wants him recognized as the legal heir of her husband, who's, uh, died by them. So it goes on. Um, he's not allowed to be circumcised as, um, according to Jewish law, it usually happens with boys, baby boys, you know, right after they're born the eighth day, but it doesn't happen until he's four because the synagogue doesn't recognize his parentage. So it's a great case. There's witnesses from testimony from non Jews hearsay. It's also the first written record we have of the language of Papiamentu. Papiamentu is a Creole Language spoken on the Dutch islands of Bonaire, Curaçao, and Aruba. It's

REVEALED: Dr. Jessica Roitman, Part II

heavily influenced by Portuguese, Spanish, a little bit of Dutch, some English, and it's the first record we have of it being written because they wrote to each other in Papiamentu, which also shows how integrated the Sephardic, or the, Portuguese community was that they spoke this Creole language.

It was what was spoken by everybody. Enslaved people, free people of color, Sephardic Jews on the island. So their love letters to each other were found and became part of the testimony. So you feel that's for historians. We love when we get letters, because that's where we finally get an idea of what people felt for each other or what they felt themselves and, you know, they're, they're pretty erotic love letters.

So it's fun. Um, very tragic in the end, both of them leave the island. And it's again, one of my goals to trace what happened to them afterwards.

[Stone] Well, thank you for that story. And we're really pleased to have you on the show. And hopefully we can have another session because there's more to be discussed.

[Dr. Roitman] So thank you so much.

[Stone] Thank you for listening to Flames of Freedom revealed. Hosted by Richard Stone and produced and directed by Mark Simon. Our executive producer is Lance Toland. Original music by Dave Wilson at Q Tone Productions. Special thanks to Rabbi Saul Rubin, whose assistance throughout the development of this series was invaluable.

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On behalf of our entire creative and production team, this is Richard Stone. Thank you for listening until next time.