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### A Jewish Response to French Antisemitism in Revolutionary Times

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## *Research Note*



# A Jewish Response to French Antisemitism in Revolutionary Times

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### Abstract

In the same years in which Jews were elected to the Dutch national assembly (the Batavian Convention), Jews on Curaçao were characterized in a letter received on the island in an unmistakably anti-Semitic way. The author was the prominent French official Victor Hugues, based in Guadeloupe. Two elders of the local Jewish community responded with a letter that shows a remarkable assertiveness, probably facilitated by the emancipation of Jews in the Dutch metropole. They reminded him of the principles of the French revolution, of which he was a servant. The letter, in the possession today of a private collector, is transcribed and translated here and provided with a context.

### Keywords

Jews – agency – revolution – Curaçao

A recently surfaced letter sent in 1798 by two Jews from Curaçao to a high-ranking Frenchman provides an interesting example of Jewish assertiveness

in the age of emancipation.<sup>1</sup> After the French invasion of the Dutch Republic in 1795 and the subsequent establishment of the Batavian Republic, the authorities imposed new commercial restrictions on the merchants of Curaçao. They were forbidden, for example, from importing goods manufactured in England. The island's Jews made it clear that they remained loyal to the House of Orange and thereby opposed to both the French and the Batavian Republic. This prompted an angry reaction from Victor Hugues, the representative of the Convention—as the French National Assembly was called at the time—in the Caribbean. Born in Marseille, Hugues had earned a living as a sailor in Saint-Domingue prior to the outbreak of the French Revolution. He made a name for himself in 1794 by leading the successful effort to restore French rule in the island of Guadeloupe, after its conquest by British troops earlier that year. In June 1798, the Directory that ruled France recalled Hugues, but he would not leave Guadeloupe until December of that year (Rodigneaux 2017:283–89).

In the intervening months, Hugues wrote a letter to a French merchant residing in Curaçao, which contained this sentence: “We shall then see if those who conquered Europe and merit universal trust shall be insulted by that vile Jewish rabble, the scum of the entire people and universally despised.”<sup>2</sup> This letter circulated in Curaçao, prompting the *parnassim* (elders) of the Jewish congregation, David Cohen Henriquez, Jacob de Castro, and Salomon Cohen Henriquez, to send a letter to the island's governor, Johann Rudolf Lauffer, on August 28. The three men confessed to him that they were extremely incensed at the unseemly language Hugues had used, that they had hardly checked their first impulses and had almost written to Hugues to demand satisfaction. They asked the governor, in case the slander continued, for a certificate of good behavior of the Jewish nation. Finally, the *parnassim* pointed out that by using a threatening tone, Hugues stepped into the governor's shoes, adding that if the Jewish nation had been guilty of insulting the allied French nation, the governor would surely have noticed and taken action.<sup>3</sup>

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- 1 A collector of Judaica recently emailed me about acquiring this letter, requesting information about the context in which it was written. Upon reading the high-quality images he sent me, it was clear to me that the letter merited publication. With the collector's permission, the transcribed text and its translation appear here.
  - 2 The addressee was Jean Baptiste Tierce Cadet. See on him Jordaan 2011.
  - 3 The Nationaal Archief, The Hague [hereafter NA], Oud Archief Curaçao [OAC] 140, fols. 350–1: David Cohen Henriquez, Jacob de Castro, and Salomon Cohen Henriquez to Governor Lauffer, Curaçao, August 28, 1798. See for a brief discussion Emmanuel & Emmanuel 1970:283–84. Their dates don't exactly line up with those found in the archives.

The governor and council responded the same day with a statement that said that following the introduction in 1796 of a regime friendly to France, the Jews had conducted themselves well, having contributed to all taxes and services.<sup>4</sup> Still, it must have seemed to the *parnassim* that Hugues had to be confronted about his letter. One month later, on September 28, two of the three *parnassim* penned a letter to the Frenchman. The letter is significant in that it shows the leaders of Curaçao's Jews asserting themselves vis-à-vis the main regional representative of the mighty French. Rarely did Jews express themselves so emphatically to worldly authorities in the early modern world, although the spirited self-defense on display is reminiscent of the book by the famous Surinamese Jew David Cohen Nassy, published one decade before.<sup>5</sup> That work criticized Voltaire for taking "unfortunate pleasure in crushing the Jewish community and making it hideous in the eyes of the universe" (Marcus & Chyet 1974:15). Nassy's rebuttal came in the form of an essay on the history of the Jews of Suriname in which he aimed to show "that the Jews can become generally as good citizens as the Christians as soon as they are permitted to do so" (Marcus & Chyet 1974:18).

Jacob de Castro and David Cohen Henriquez start out by juxtaposing Hugues' statement to the principles of liberty and equality that the French Revolution has established. The expression he used was therefore an offense to the French people. They also remind him of the legally enshrined religious toleration by rhetorically asking "Is one really ... worthier of consideration for having a particular belief?" The two *parnassim* demand satisfaction for the Jewish nation, ultimately abandoning their direct confrontation of Hugues, and instead asking the Frenchman to reveal the name of the man who had advised him so poorly. In other words: Hugues must have leaned on the opinion of someone else when he wrote the outrageous sentence.

The letter amounts to an unambiguous defense of the track record of Jews everywhere: far from being the riff-raff of all nations, Jews have always contributed to public welfare. Some, de Castro and Henriquez argue, have earned public confidence, as shown by two Dutch Jews who both have a seat in the Batavian Convention, the national assembly of the Netherlands. The authors of the letter refer here to Bromet and Lémon. Herman Bromet (1725–1813) had spent twenty years in Suriname as a coffee merchant before taking a seat in the Batavian assembly in 1797 (Michman 1995: 54, n. 1. Oddens 2012:289). His fellow

4 NA, OAC 140, fol. 352, meeting of Governor and Council of Curaçao, August 28, 1798.

5 Although the book was officially written by a circle of men, historians agree that Nassy was the main author.

rookie parliamentarian was the physician Hartog de Hartog Lémon (1755–1823), an active member of the Batavian assemblies in 1797 and 1798. In 1813, he would be arrested for his involvement in an Orangist conspiracy (Bloemgarten 2007). The election of these two men on August 1, 1797 to the Second National Assembly made them the first Jews to be elected to a representative body anywhere in Europe (Michman 1995:27, 77–78). It was not until 1845 that the United States welcomed its first Jewish member of Congress.

Here are the original letter from the parnassim, written in French, and its English translation.



Les Syndics de la Communauté des Citoyens Batave [sic] Professant La Loy  
Mosaïque

Au

Citoyen Victor Hugues Agent Particulier du Directoire Executif aux Isle [sic]  
du Vent

Citoyen!

C'est a regret que nous nous voyons obliges de vous adresser la presente au nom des juifs répandus sur l'univers pour vous témoigner notre juste ressentiment sur l'épithete scandaleuse que vous vous êtes cru autorisé a leur donner par une lettre que circule ici sous votre nom, et qu'a peine nous pouvons reconnoitre émanée de vous par les sentiments anti-Républicains qu'a ce sujet elle renferme. Vous traiter [sic] les juifs comme le rebut de toutes les nations, sentiments très contraire aux principes d'une nation dont vous avez l'honneur d'être le representant, conquerante amie de la liberté et de l'égalité qu'elle a établie partout ou ses armes invincibles triomphent et qui a si sagement detruit le fanatisme, fléau de l'univers et l'apanage des intolerants.

Avez-vous bien consideré citoyen que par une expression si générale vous avez offensé votre souverain le peuple français? et pouvez vous ignorer que des assemblées respectables détruisant tout les prejuges n'ont point dédaigné d'admettre dans leur sein des membres de ces juifs si injustement vilipendé; si vous nous attaque comme nation sans considerer que toute separation a cessée depuis la sainte revolution, quel motif avez vous de suposer que nous vous insultons? et qui est le vil delateur qui nous a noirci a vos yeux? N'est-il

pas de l'intérêt des juifs de s'adonner a une nation que se fait une gloire de rendre les hommes égaux sans distinction de culte. Car en réalité en est-on plus homme, plus citoyen, plus digne de consideration pour avoir quel qu' autre croyance? N'est-il donc bien plus de nôtre intérêt disons-nous, d'aimer et cherir une nation qui nous promets la fine de nos souffrances, et une abolition des vexations injustement souffertes? mais non, vous êtes trop érudit pour en vouloir a un peuple sans énergie a pouvoir se deffendre, vous en voulez donc à ceux qui tolèrent ce rebut des nations, qui selon vôtre maxime, vous leur reproché [sic] presque leur trop grande indulgence, pour des citoyens qui ne peuvent être que nuisibles partout. Graces aux grands hommes! Graces aux esprits élevés! qui nous ont vû d'autres yeux que vous et ont scu recompenser et reconnaître un peuple qui loin d'être le rebut des toutes le nations, a toujours par tout ou il fut admis contribué au salut public, quoi-que sans oser lever la tête sous le faix du despotisme, n'a pas moins produit des grands patriotes, digne la confiance publique, et qu'elle est preuve plus grande de cette verité que les places éminentes qu' occupent dans la Convention Batave les citoyens Lemon & Bromet, membres de cette nation que vous dénigres [sic].

Ceci pourrait nous suffire & nous convaincre que des nations entieres desavouent vos sentiments; mais desirant connaître celui qui a abuse si indigne-ment de son influence sur vous, nous souhaitons voir demasquer ce monstre inquiet perturbateur du repos public. Car s'il aimait le vrai, s'il étoit doué des sentiments patriotiques républicains, il n'auroit jamais fait attaquer en masse un peuple qui surtout dans cette île, comme la declaration ci-joint de notre gouvernement rend manifeste, et nous croyons être persuadé partout où il s'est trouvé depuis la Revolution, n'a donné que des preuves non-équivoques de ses sentiments pacifiques & combien il desirait aux depens de ses besoins [?] le maintien de son gouvernement.

Nous ne ménagerons rien pour connaître ce calomniateur & avons le droit d'exiger de vous que vous le nommiez pour qu'en cas qu'il soit digne de notre attention, nous puissions en avoir la satisfaction dûe a un peuple entier qu'assurement il n'a pas le droit de connaître pour le faire noircir si scandaleusement.

Salut

Curaçao ce 28 septembre 1798

Jb d Castro

David Cohen Henriq.



The Syndics of the Community of Batavian Citizens Professing the Mosaic  
Law

To

Citizen Victor Hugues Special Agent of the Executive Directory on the  
Windward Islands

Citizen!

With regret, we see ourselves obliged to send you this letter in name of the Jews spread around the universe to show our rightful resentment about the scandalous epithet that you have believed authorized to apply to them in a letter that circulates here under your name, and we can hardly recognize it as coming from you because of the ant-Republican feelings that it contains on this subject. You treat the Jews as the scum of all nations, feelings very much contrary to the principles of a nation of which you have the honor to be the representative, the conquering friend of liberty and equality which it has established everywhere its invincible arms triumphed and that has so wisely destroyed fanaticism, the scourge of the universe and preserve of the intolerant.

Have you considered, citizen, that by using an expression so general you have offended your sovereign, the French people? And could you not know that respectable assemblies destroying all prejudices have not scornfully refused to receive into its bosom these so unjustly vilified Jews; if you attack us as a nation without considering that all separation has ended since the holy revolution, which motive do you have to assume that we insult you? And who is the vile informer who has defamed us in front of you? Is it not in the interest of the Jews to devote themselves to a nation that prides itself on rendering men equal without distinguishing between religions? Because is one really more man, more citizen, worthier of consideration for having a particular belief? Isn't it more in our interest, we say, to love and cherish a nation that promises us the end of our sufferings, and to abolish vexations unjustly born? But no, you are too erudite to blame a people without energy to defend itself, and therefore you blame those who tolerate the scum of nations, who according to your maxim, you almost reproach for their excessive indulgence towards citizens who can only be harmful everywhere. Thanks to great men! Thanks to high spirits! whom we have viewed differently from you as we reward and recognize a people which far from being the riff-raff of all nations has always, wherever it was admitted, contributed to public welfare,

although without daring to raise their head under the yoke of despotism, has nonetheless produced great patriots, worthy of public confidence, and evidence of that fact are the eminent places that the citizens Lemon & Bromet occupy in the Batavian Convention, members of the nation that you denigrate.

That could have sufficed for us and convinced us that entire nations renounce your feelings, but desiring to know who has so disgracefully abused his influence on you, we wish to see revealed that troubled man who disturbs the peace. Because if he loved the truth, if he were endowed with republican patriotic sentiments, he would never have let a people being collectively attacked which, above all on this island, as the attached declaration of our government makes clear,<sup>6</sup> and we imagine, wherever it has found itself since the Revolution has only given unequivocal proof of its peaceful sentiments and has shown how much it has wished, at the expense of it needs, to maintain its government.

We make every effort to find out who the slanderer is & we have to right to demand from you that you tell his name so that in case it is worthy of our attention, we may receive the satisfaction that is due an entire people which he assuredly has no right to know, having defamed it so scandalously.

Greetings

Curaçao, 28 September 1798

Jb d Castro

David Cohen Henriq.

<sup>6</sup> This was probably the abovementioned statement of August 28, 1798.



5. sur no 5

Les Syndics de la Commune des Citoyens de Paris  
 Préfiant La Loi Morigue

Qu.

Citoyen Victor Auguste Agent Intéressé du  
 Directoire Exécutif de la Nation

Supplément Citoyen!

Est regret que nous nous voyons obligés de vous adresser la présente  
 du nom des justes répandus sur l'univers pour vous témoigner notre juste moral  
 ment sur le Conducte scandaleux que vous nous êtes en autoriser à leur  
 donner par une lettre que Courbe sur les vôtres non jet qu'après vous  
 pouvons reconnaître en amie de nous par les sentiments anti République  
 qu'il a été de la République. Les vôtres de la République comme l'admet de  
 toutes les nations, sentiments les vôtres ont été de vous qu'on ne  
 peut vous avoir l'honneur de la République. Conspiration avec la  
 la liberté et de l'égalité qu'elle a été de la République. Conspiration avec la  
 celle triomphant et qui a été de la République. Conspiration avec la  
 de l'univers est l'opinion des tolérants.

Après vous être considéré Citoyen par une expression si générale  
 vous avez offensé l'âme d'un homme qui se propose de vous ignorer  
 qui des assemblées représentatives dérivant ont les vôtres n'ont point  
 dédaigné d'admettre dans leur sein des membres de la République et de la République  
 ment répondre; si vous nous attaquez comme nation sans considérer  
 que toute séparation a été de la République. Conspiration avec la  
 vous de la République que nous vous insultons? et qui est le vol de la République  
 qui nous avertisse avec vous? N'est-il pas de l'intérêt de la République de la République  
 d'être une nation qui se fait une gloire de défendre les hommes qui se font  
 distinction de celle. Car en vérité en est un plus homme d'un plus Citoyen  
 plus digne de considération pour avoir quel qu'autre opinion? n'est il  
 donc bien plus de notre intérêt de nous d'aimer et de chérir une nation  
 qui nous promette la fin de nos souffrances, et une abolition des Nations  
 injustement souffrantes? mais non, vous êtes trop étroit pour convulser  
 un peuple sans énergie pour se défendre, vous enverrez donc

FIGURE 1 The letter that Jacob de Castro and David Cohen Henriquez sent to Victor Hugues

à ceux qui tolèrent le Début des nations, qu'ils en feroient maxima, fond  
 leur reproche, presque leur trop grande indulgence pour des Citoyens qui ne  
 peuvent être que mérités par tout. Graces aux grands hommes, Graces  
 aux Esprits Elevés, qui nous ont fait d'autres yeux que nous, et ont voulu  
 penser et reconnaître un peuple qu'on n'auroit pu le Début des toutes les  
 nations, étrangères par tout on il fut donné l'attention au salut public &  
 qui, que sans ces leur talens, sous le poids de despotisme, n'agard moins  
 l'honneur des grands Patriotes, digne, tels les Français, Polonois, & qui ont  
 prouvé plus grande de cette Nation, quelques places honorables, qu'occupent  
 dans la Convention, Batare les Citoyens Simon, & Armand, mais les  
 de cette Nation que vous Peigniez.

Ces pouvoirs vous Suffire, & nous Convoient, que des Nations  
 entières, desarmant vos Sentiments, mais desirant Connaître, celui  
 qui a abusé si indignement de son influence, sur vous, nous desirant  
 et nous eni demander le ministre inquiet de la Batare du Lepeur public  
 Car si l'aimant l'ormai, si il étoit vous des Sentiments Patriotiques &  
 Républicains, il n'auroit jamais fait, attaquer en masse, un  
 peuple, qui sont tout dans cette île, comme la déclaration le porte  
 de votre Gouvernement, être manifeste, & nous Croions être pour un  
 de par tout, on il se trouve, depuis la Revolution, n'a donné, que  
 de par tout, on il se trouve, depuis la Revolution, n'a donné, que  
 Combien il desirait, aux dépenses, serais bon, le maintien, & de  
 Gouvernement.

Vous ne menagerez, non pour Connaître  
 le Calomnieux & avons le droit, & Exiger, de vous le  
 nommée, pour que en cas, qu'il soit, bigne, de notre attention, nous  
 pourrions, en avoir, la satisfaction, d'un, peu, de, l'inter, qu'  
 assurément, et n'a pas, le droit, de Connaître, pour le faire, servir  
 si scandalusement.

Paris le 17 Mars 1793

Marie Perin

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