

## The Unusual Testimony of Charles Lemaître about a Street Brawl in Amsterdam in 1681

YOSEF KAPLAN

The Dutch Jews in the Early Modern Period left behind scores of documents that shed light on various aspects of their history. In addition, much testimony about their lives was left by outside observers, Jewish and non-Jewish, who were in contact of some kind with them. At present we will focus on the testimony of a Catholic traveller who visited Amsterdam at the end of the seventeenth century and on the words he wrote in the description of his voyage to the Netherlands, in which he devoted a few lines to a chance encounter with Jews, writing incidentally and opening a small window onto the fabric of relations between the Jews and the Christian majority in the Dutch metropolis.

The Jansenist Charles Lemaître arrived in the Netherlands in 1681 and stayed in Amsterdam from July 12 to July 17.<sup>1</sup> Throughout his trip he naturally showed special interest in the situation of the Catholics in the places that he visited. He was surprised to find Carmelites in the Calvinist republic along with Capuchins and even Jesuits, at a time when Catholics were forced to hold their ceremonies with maximal discretion, and sometimes even this restricted form of worship was denied to them.<sup>2</sup> Occasionally Lemaître was able to identify Catholics by their gestures and expressions. In contrast to the religious and cultural closeness he felt

---

1. Ch. Lemaître, *Relation de Mon Voiage de Flandre, de Hollande et de Zélande fait en Mil Six Cent Quatre Vint et Un*. Texte établi et annoté par Gilbert Van de Louw. Préface de René Tave-neaux (Paris 1978). The one who identified Lemaître as the author of the manuscript was Ch. Fierville, 'Voyage anonyme et inédit d'un janséniste en Flandre et en Hollande', *Revue de Géographie* (1888), p. 212-220, 293-302, 364-373, 449-457; (1889), p. 40-53, 129-142.

2. On this subject, see Ch. Kooi, 'Paying off the Sheriff: Strategies of Catholic Toleration in Golden Age Holland', in R. Po-Chia Hsia and H.F.K. van Nierop (eds), *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge 2002), p. 87-101.

in the Catholic southern Netherlands, he felt alien from the northern Netherlands, where he concealed his status as a clergyman by wearing a wig, although his grey costume betrayed his identity. In Amsterdam he was not interested in the Jews, nor did he seek out synagogues, unlike other foreign tourists. But in the street where he was rooming, though not in the inn itself, he encountered a large number of Jews, who immediately aroused his repugnance: 'I have no idea what street we lodged in, and I know it in no way other than by the dwelling there of such a great quantity of Jews, for aside from the house where we were and perhaps one or two others at the most, those miserable Jews occupied it entirely.'<sup>3</sup>

The French traveller did not see fit to indicate the name or the street or the neighbourhood where he stayed, but, in contrast, he expressed his negative impression of the Jews at length: 'as it appeared to me every time I passed by and passed by again, where I saw only those types of people who are the most recognizable in the world by something inexpressibly horrible that they all bear, from the smallest to the largest, in the eyes and in the face.'<sup>4</sup> Indeed, he did not visit the Jewish sites in Amsterdam, whose fame had already spread far and wide. Although in his own country he could not have seen public synagogues, not even in places like Bayonne and Bordeaux, where there were centres of merchants from 'the Portuguese Nation', who observed Jewish rituals only in the private sphere,<sup>5</sup> he was not curious to see synagogues. His prejudices against the Jews were sufficient to him, and he was not drawn to the Jewish centres in the city, nor did he seek any contact with them.

Thus he was one of the few foreign visitors who wrote accounts of their stay in Amsterdam without mentioning the Jews of the city. Another was the British traveller, Ellis Veryard, for example, who visited the Netherlands between 1682 and 1695 and also ignored the Jewish sites of the city.

---

3. 'Je ne sçais point quelle estoit la rue ou nous logions et je ne la connois autrement sinon par la demeure qu'y font une si grande quantité des Juifs, qu'à la reserve de la maison ou nous étions, et peustre une ou deux autres tout au plus, ces miserables Juifs l'occupoiënt tout entière.' Lemaître, *Relation de Mon Voiage*, p. 289.

4. 'comme il m'a paru toutes les fois que j'y passé et repassé ou Je ne voyois que ces sortes de gens qui sont les plus connoissables du monde par Je ne sçais quoy d'horrible qu'ils portent tous depuis le plus petit jusqu'au plus grand dans les yeux et dans le visage.' Ibid.

5. G. Nahon, *Métropoles et périphéries sefarades d'occident: Kairouan, Amsterdam, Bayonne, Bordeaux, Jérusalem* (Paris 1993), p. 235-259; idem, *Juifs et judaïsme à Bordeaux* ([Bordeaux] 2003), p. 39-60.

From his hostile comments about the Jews whom he encountered in other places one may conclude that he probably preferred to ignore them in a place where their image was inconsistent with the negative stereotype that he harboured.<sup>6</sup> However, in contrast to these exceptions, the vast majority of tourists and foreign visitors to Amsterdam during the seventeenth century showed special interest in the synagogues, and this is especially true of the English travellers, who seized the opportunity, since they had never been able to visit a Jewish house of worship in their own country. John Evelyn, for example, wrote in his diary on August 21, 1641: 'About 7 in the Morning, I came to Amsterdam, where being provided of a Lodging, I procur'd to be brought to a Synagogue of the Jewes (it being then Saturday) whose Ceremonies, Ornaments, Lamps, Law, and Scholes afforded matter for my wonder and enquiry.'<sup>7</sup> We find that the very first place to which Evelyn was drawn was the synagogue of the Sephardic Talmud Torah congregation, and his words indicate that the visit there had been planned in advance, for it especially aroused his curiosity. Seven years earlier, when Sir William Brereton was staying the city, he visited one of the three synagogues of the Sephardic Jews during Sabbath morning services, and his account shows that he was well aware of the existence of all three of the city's synagogues: 'This day, being Saturday, Junii 4, is observed as the Jews' Sabbath, who are about three hundred families seated in this town, most Portugals. A street they have called the Jews' street: they have three synagogues here. I was this day at their synagogue, from nine to half twelve, then they concluded; return at three, continue until evening.'<sup>8</sup> Brereton apparently spent a whole Sabbath in the synagogue, just as Evelyn was to do several years later, and he also travelled to visit the Jewish cemetery in 'Ouderkerk, a peculiar burial-place, a field on the water side, some three or four English miles from the town, wherein are erected their sepulchers.'<sup>9</sup>

---

6. Y. Kaplan, 'Ellis Veyard sobre judíos y judaísmo: impresiones de un turista inglés del siglo XVII', in E. Romero (ed.), *Judaísmo Hispano. Estudios en memoria de José Luis Lacave Riaño* (Madrid 2002), vol. ii, p. 809-817.

7. J. Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, edited by E.S. de Beer (Oxford 1955), vol. iii, p. 157.

8. W. Brereton, *Travels in Holland, The United Provinces, England, Scotland and Ireland, M.DC.XXXIV-M.DC.XXXV.*, edited by E. Hawkins (Chetham Society 1844), p. 60.

9. *Ibid.* Evelyn went to that cemetery on the same Sabbath when he visited the synagogue, and he was very impressed by the monuments: 'Some of them very stately, of cost.' So great was his curiosity that he peeked 'through a narrow crevice, where the stones were disjointed,' and there he noticed 'divers books to lye, about a Corps (for it seems [they use] when any learned Rabby dies, to bury some of his Bookes with him, as I afterwards learn'd.' See Evelyn, *The Diary*, p. 42-43.

Another curious visitor, Philip Skippon, wandered about in the area near the synagogues in 1663, observing the Jews whom he encountered with great interest. He also noticed them when he visited the Bourse, and he made various comments about their rites and prayers.<sup>10</sup> The English physician, Edward Brown, who visited Holland in 1668, spent Rosh Hashana in the Sephardic synagogue, writing: ‘Their chief Synagogue is large, adorned with Lamps of Brass and Silver. We happened to be there at the Feast of their New-Year; so that their blowing of Horns, shouting and singing was not omitted.’<sup>11</sup> He was impressed that some of those Jews spoke several languages, and he mentioned several of them by name, implying that he conversed with them, and he shared his feelings with his readers regarding the fact that some of them had been Christians in the past: ‘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.’<sup>12</sup> He also described the model of the Temple constructed by Jacob Judah Leon Templo, and he gives every sign of having visited Templo’s home, where the model was exhibited to visitors on a permanent basis.<sup>13</sup> Thanks to the connections he managed to make with the Jews, he was invited to be present at a circumcision ceremony, and, as befits a physician, he described the performance of the operation in detail, without forgetting to make the ironic comment, that ‘the Relations and Acquaintance [were] singing all the while, whereby the cries of the Infant are less heard’.<sup>14</sup> After the dedication of the Ashkenazic and Sephardic synagogues in 1670 and 1675, they became true tourist attractions, and in quite a few travel books we find echoes of the visitors’ impressions, especially from the impressive edifice of the Esnoga of the Sephardic community.<sup>15</sup> Some of the visitors were also invited to the

---

10. Ph. Skippon, *An Account of a Journey Made Thro’ Part of the Low Countries, Germany, Italy, and France (1663)*, in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol. VI (London 1732), p. 405-406.

11. E. Brown, *An Account of Several Travels Through a Great part of Germany in Four Journeys* (London 1677), p. 17.

12. *Ibid.*

13. 13 A.K. Offenbergh, ‘Jacob Jehuda Leon (1602-1675) and his Model of the Temple’, in J. van den Berg and E.G. van der Wall (eds), *Jewish Christian Relations in the Seventeenth Century. Studies and Documents* (Dordrecht/Boston/London 1988), p. 95-115.

14. Brown, *An Account*, p. 17. When he left the city he made a point of passing ‘by a peculiar Burial place of the Jews (...) Overskerk (sic).’

15. Y. Kaplan, *An Alternative Path to Modernity. The Sephardi Diaspora in Western Europe* (Leiden 2000), p. 29-50.

private homes of wealthy Sephardic Jews, and several of them recorded their impressions.<sup>16</sup>

In all of these respects, Lemaître is decidedly exceptional. Although he apparently did not stay in Amsterdam longer than five days, visitors before and after him, who stayed in the city for an even shorter time, did not ignore the Esnoga building of the Sephardic community, which was regarded as the largest and most beautiful building of its kind in Europe. William Montague, and he is not the only one, specifically stated that one of the two synagogues in the city was ‘the largest in Europe (if not in the World) being superior to those we our selves saw in many other Parts, where the Jews are most numerous’.<sup>17</sup>

As noted, the Jewish sites were not high in the Jansenist visitor’s priorities. Nevertheless, though he did not intend to write about the Jews in his account of his journey, farther on he provides exceptional testimony about them, testimony that is unparalleled in the accounts given by other foreign visitors. Lemaître provides a long description of a street brawl in which Jews were involved, doubtless a band of boys, who did battle with a rival band of Christian boys for more than four hours. With curiosity and astonishment, the French observer watched the events that took place in the street, a few paces away from the windows of his lodgings, through which he was looking: ‘The first day when we were staying in that house, which was a Sunday, from our windows we saw a tenacious battle of thrown stones, which lasted more than four hours, between Christians and Jews, on a bridge that crossed the canal that passed at the foot of our house; this bridge was no more than twenty paces from us.’<sup>18</sup> Lemaître watched the strange spectacle as though hypnotized, while a group of Jews struggled against a group of Christians for

---

16. Th. Bowrey, ‘Diary of a Six Weeks Tour in 1698 in Holland and Flanders’, in R. Carnac Temple (ed.), *The Papers of Thomas Bowrey 1669-1713* (London 1927), p. 34: ‘See Mr. Granada, a Jews house which has fine painting on the Ceiling and was Courteously received by him.’ See also: J.I. Israel, *Diasporas Within a Diaspora. Jews, Crypto-Jews and the World Maritime Empires (1540-1740)* (Leiden 2002), p. 495-507.

17. W. Mountague, *The Delights of Holland, or a Three Months Travel about that and the other Provinces with Observations and Reflections on their Trade, Wealth, Strength, Beauty, Policy, etc.* (London 1696), p. 146.

18. ‘Le premier jour que nous nous trouvasmes dans cette maison qui étoit un dimanche, nous vismes de nos fenestres un combat opiniatre a coups de pierre qui dura plus de quatre heures entre les Chretiens et entre les Juifs, sur un pont qui traversoit le canal qui passoit au pié de nostre maison; ce pont n’étoit pas a plus de vint pas de nous.’ Lemaître, *Relation de Mon Voiage*, p. 289.

control of one of the bridges that crossed a nearby city canal. The combatants constantly threw half bricks at each other, and the battle continued without pause, growing fiercer as time passed: 'These Christians and these Jews fought during the whole time that I have just mentioned with inconceivable fury; they were throwing half bricks at each other with so much violence that the quantity of them that fell onto the bridge or hit the railings, which are of wrought iron, made a sound like that of artillery.'<sup>19</sup> The French observer was surprised by the intensity of the violence and fury shown by the Jews and the Christians alike. The spectacle reminded Lemaître of a real battle. The goal of the two groups was to gain control of the bridge, and during the long hours when the battle was raging, control of the disputed place passed from one side to another. Those who seized the bridge could remain in control of it as long as they had enough stones to throw at the rival side, but the moment they ran out of ammunition, they had to withdraw, and this scene was repeated countless times: 'The glory of this beautiful combat consisted in seizing the bridge, over which first one then the other side successfully became the masters; so that those who had won it lost it as soon as they had no more stones to throw: but they regained it as soon afterward as they had the time to provide themselves with stones while on solid ground, from which they returned as soon as they found the victors exhausted and without arms; they repulsed them at once, driving them off the bridge, whence the defeated returned similarly, performing the same military exploit.'<sup>20</sup>

Lemaître, who followed the combat until it ended, was amazed that, despite the unbridled violence, no one was hurt, neither among those who took part in the brawl nor among the passers-by, who related to the following stones as though they were hail and continued to cross the

---

19. 'Ces Chrétiens et ces Juifs s'y battirent pendant tout le temps que je viens de dire avec une fureur inconcevable; les uns et les autres jetoient des moieties de briques avec une violence si grande que la quantité qui en tomboit sur le point ou qui donnoit contre les garde-fous qui sont de gros fer, faisoit comme un bruit d'artillerie.' Ibid.

20. 'La gloire de ce beau combat consistoit à gagner le pont dont les uns et les autres devoient successivement les maîtres: en sorte que ceux qui l'avoient gagné le perdoient aussi tost qu'ils n'avoient plus de pierres à jeter: mais ils le regaignoient aussi peu après qu'ils avoient eü le temps d'en faire provision en terre ferme d'ou ils n'étoient pas plutost retournez que trouvant les victorieux épuisez et sans armes, ils les repousoient en mesme temps hors du pont d'ou ces vaincus retournoient pareillement et faisoient le mesme exploit de guerre.' Ibid.

bridge as if nothing untoward was happening. They did not give the impression that they were surprised by the event, and from their behaviour it was possible to infer that they were used to seeing brawls of that kind, and apparently on that very bridge: 'What I admire in this combat of three or four hours was that, despite the violence, no one was wounded, even though many people had the courage to cross the bridge where the stones were falling like hail.'<sup>21</sup>

Indeed this was a strange sight: a violent event in Amsterdam involving a group of Jewish boys toward the end of the seventeenth century. Does this violent confrontation contradict the prevalent opinion that during the early modern period Amsterdam provided the Jewish population with a refuge, where they did not feel threatened? True, Skippon noted that the Jews of the city 'often times meet with affronts in the streets';<sup>22</sup> however, one cannot assume that he was referring to violence against them. For he himself emphasized at the end of his remarks that 'Amsterdam allows them great freedom'.<sup>23</sup>

From what is known to us, it appears that the Jews of Amsterdam were not afraid for their physical safety, and we have no record of acts of violence against them, although apprehension that something serious might happen did occasionally arise. At the end of 1616 malicious pamphlets were circulated in central places in the city, accusing the Jews of proselytizing for their faith, of having relations with Christian women, and of insulting the Christian religion.<sup>24</sup> The tense atmosphere that pervaded the streets of the city greatly worried the Sephardic Jewish leadership, but this incident took place at the beginning of the community's path, before its legal status in the city was defined, and in the end tempers subsided without any outburst of violence. Similarly, from time to time the leaders of the community got wind of harsh sermons given by Calvinist ministers in the churches of the city, condemning the impertinent behaviour of the Jews, who, in the excessive

---

21. 'Ce que j'admire dans ce combat de trois ou quatre heures fut qu'avec quelque violence qu'il se fit, il n'y eut personne de blessé, quoy que mesme beaucoup de gens eussent assez de témérité de passer sur le pont ou les pierres tombaient comme la grese.' Ibid.

22. Skippon, *An Account*, p. 405.

23. Ibid., p. 406.

24. A detailed description of this event can be found in the memorandum of Isaac Franco, the original Portuguese version of which was published in: H.P. Salomon, *Portrait of a New Christian: Fernão Alvares Melo (1569-1632)* (Paris 1982), p. 323-325.

freedom of Amsterdam, and also perhaps in the religious enthusiasm that some of them felt upon returning to the bosom of Judaism, were not reluctant to give free reign to the anti-Christian feelings that throbbed within them. Nevertheless, there is no hint of fear of physical violence, of attacks on Jews, or of mob violence against them. On various occasions the Jews expressed apprehension lest, because of irresponsible behaviour on the part of individuals, they might lose the safe haven that the city of Amsterdam afforded them. In a decision of 1631, which representatives of the *ma'amadot* [executive committees] of the coordinating council of the three communities that were then active in Amsterdam, they forbade holding controversies of any kind with Christians as well as any sort of expression against Christianity in public places by anyone, including women and children, 'for thus the lords, the heads of the city, have commanded us. (...) For among all the places where Judaism exists, our Jewish brethren do not enjoy greater freedom than that which we enjoy here. The Lord of the Universe in His mercy has given us such great grace, so that we can live among them in this city. (...) It is worthy for us not to lose this shelter that God has given us'.<sup>25</sup>

In a resolution passed by the Sephardic leaders of on 8 Elul 5399 (7 September 1638), a short time after the establishment of the Talmud Torah community, the *parnassim* reprimanded certain Jews for visiting churches while ceremonies and prayers were being held. The leaders referred to a certain event that had taken place a few days earlier, when the presence of Jews with their heads covered in one of the churches aroused the anger of the Christian congregants, who attacked them, threw their hats to the floor, and pushed them out of the church. Following this incident, the Sephardic leaders absolutely forbade entry into churches, not only during prayers or while the preachers were giving their sermons, but also while the organ was being played, 'to prevent scandal from arising because their heads are covered'.<sup>26</sup> However, it is very doubtful whether sporadic events of this kind change the general picture. On the contrary, they confirm that the Jews felt free enough to

---

25. Livro dos termos da ymposta da nação, Amsterdam Municipal Archives, PA 334. No. 13, fol. 30r.

26. Livro de Ascemoth A, Amsterdam Municipal Archives, PA 334. No. 19, p. 27.

enter churches. The violent response of the Christian congregation evidently derived from the insult they felt in response to the behaviour of the Jews, which they interpreted as coarse provocation and as an intentional profanation of the sanctity of the church. Nevertheless, the Sephardic Jews evidently felt secure enough to display behaviour of this kind. Similarly, the events that took place in Amsterdam in late January of 1696 do not demonstrate the vulnerability of the Jews to violence directed against them. The *aansprekers oproer* (undertakers' riot) took place following a decision made by the city authorities to reduce the expenses of burying the dead by decreasing the number of undertakers. The Jews were not injured by that decision, because their burial expenses were covered by their communities in any event. The undertakers rioted against the decision and attacked, among other targets, and with more violence, the homes of the wealthy merchants, including some of the elite of the Sephardic community. However, the Jews cannot be seen as victims. On the contrary, the authorities gave them arms to defend themselves and even praised them for their courageous behaviour.<sup>27</sup>

The event described by Lemaître does not show that the Jews of Amsterdam were exposed to violence. The group of Jewish youths that was involved in the brawl did not behave like as though they felt threatened. Rather confronted the rival group of Christians with no feeling of inferiority. The behaviour of the passers-by also shows that the boys' Jewishness aroused no particular reaction. The violent confrontation that surprised the French Jansenist so much apparently made no special impression on the citizens of Amsterdam or on the residents of the neighbourhood, who treated the event as ordinary mischief of the kind that took place from time to time. While it did reflect rivalry or even enmity between the Christians and the Jews who were involved in it, the behaviour of the latter shows that they were not afraid of any grave consequences. Lemaître provided no further details about the identity of the brawlers, so that we cannot know whether the Jews involved were Sephardic or Ashkenazic. I tend to assume that they were young Sephardim, of the kind occasionally mentioned in the registers of the Sephardic

---

27. David Franco Mendes, *Memorias do estabelecimento e progresso dos Judeos portuguezes e espanhoes nesta famosa cidade de Amsterdam*, edited by L. Fuks and R.G. Fuks-Mansfeld, with philological notes by B.N. Teensma, *Studia Rosenthaliana* 9/2 (1975), p. 97-98, 164 n. 189.

community, youths who used to gather near certain bridges, not far from the centre of Jewish life, and, to the dismay of the community leaders, were occasionally accused of unbridled behaviour and malicious mischief. In April 1636, in response to a complaint received from the city police about the wild behaviour of young men from 'the Spanish and Portuguese Nation', the heads of the three Sephardic congregations of that time decided to take firm action against these rebellious youths. The young men were accused of loitering in the city, by day and by night, and of going to taverns and places of ill repute, thus dealing a blow against the honour of the entire community.<sup>28</sup> The leaders expressed their feelings of insecurity in response to the criticism voiced by the Christian residents of the city: 'Although every reasonable person knows that in every nation there are bad people alongside good ones, the [local] people do not yet think so regarding the members of our nation. On the contrary: if an individual among us has committed a transgression, it is customary to proclaim, "they are all that way", and this injures the good name of the honourable people of our nation and the good customs of our state.'<sup>29</sup> The leaders decided to take a number of vigorous steps: they forbade the young men of the Sephardic community to circulate in the city with weapons of any kind and obligated themselves to the police that they would impose the full weight of their authority upon the rebellious youth and deliver anyone who persisted in his action to the legal authorities. They even suggested that the delinquents should be sent to the East Indies to prevent further embarrassing incidents.<sup>30</sup> This case was apparently exceptionally serious, especially since it took place when the Jewish community had not yet fully established itself in the city. However, street gangs of Sephardic youth were still not a rare sight in Amsterdam in the following decades of the seventeenth century. In the mid-1650s the leaders of the Talmud Torah community took a series of steps 'in response to the complaints that have reached us about the gathering of many of the young men of our nation on the Sabbath and on Sundays at the Lions' Bridge and in other places, where they box with Dutch [boys] and attract many Dutch people to the place, which gives rise to

---

28. Livro dos termos da ymposta da nação (supra, n. 25), fol. 60r.

29. Ibid., fol. 60v.

30. Ibid., fols 61r-v.

large brawls, most unseemly and scandalous actions, which are liable to be very harmful to our nation'.<sup>31</sup> This response of the Sephardic leaders confirms the existence of the phenomenon, which had apparently not disappeared in the following years, despite the efforts invested by the Sephardic leadership to suppress it. Sephardic youth, apparently from the poorest families, found release for their boisterous, youthful energy and contended with groups of Dutch youths, coming to blows with them, and sometimes even to stone-throwing brawls. However, unlike the severe descriptions that appear in the registers of the Sephardic community, Lemaître's account gives a sense of routine, of surroundings that were reconciled to this youthful violence, in which Jewish boys were also involved, having become part of the permanent and accepted Amsterdam urban landscape.

---

31. Livro de Ascarnoth A (supra n. 26), fol. 38o: 'Aos S[enho]res do Mahamad hão vindo queixas de que m[ui]tos mossos de nosa nação aos sabatot e domingos se juntão no ponte de os leões e outras partes a jugar punadas com alguns framengos de que resulta ajuntaren m[ui]tos framengos travando grandes peijas cousa muito mal feita e escandalosa e que pode resultar en grande dano da nosa nação.'