



From the Collection Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana in Amsterdam.

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by Hilde Pach

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# Keeping current in Amsterdam

DAVID MONTEZINOS, book collector and librarian of Ets Haim, the library of the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam, was always looking for rare books. One day sometime in the 1880s, while standing in the street watching a fire consume an Amsterdam theater, he was approached by a peddler. The peddler showed him something extraordinary: a book containing about 100 issues of an old Yiddish newspaper, the *Dinstagishe un Fraytagishe Kuranten* – the *Tuesday and Friday Newspapers* (literally “currents,” as in *Hartford Courant*) – published between August 1686 and December 1687. Without hesitation, Montezinos bought the book, and so became the owner of the oldest Yiddish newspaper in the world.

Leafing through the volume Montezinos noticed that though the *Kuranten* had had two different publishers, both used the same compositor, referred to in Hebrew – as Hebrew was pronounced in Amsterdam in those days – as *horav rebbe Moushe bar Avrom Ovinu*. Let’s call him Reb Moushe.

The first surviving issue of the *Dinstagishe un Fraytagishe Kuranten* (which may not be the first produced) probably dates from August 9, 1686. The first page and the date are missing, but it reports news up to August 7. Reb Moushe had come to Amsterdam not long before, probably from his hometown of Nikolsburg in Moravia (now Mikulov in the Czech Republic), a mainly German-speaking city that was the center of the

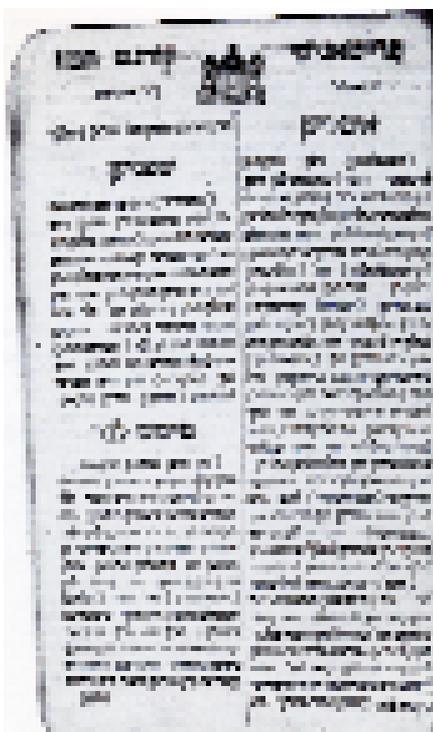
*Reb  
Moushe  
and the  
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world*



Detail from *Jews in the Synagogue*, 1647, Rembrandt's etching. Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum.



The *Gazeta de Amsterdam*, above, was printed in Spanish. The *Dinstagishe un Fraytagishe Kuranten*, right, was printed in Yiddish for the Ashkenazi community. From the Collection Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana in Amsterdam.



8,000 Jews lived in the Netherlands, about 6,000 in Amsterdam. Three thousand were Ashkenazim.

The Sephardim were more prosperous than the Ashkenazim, but the few wealthy Ashkenazi merchants needed to know what was going on in the world. Average people were also interested in international news because of their relatives or coreligionists in other regions. As most Jews were unable to read the local Dutch newspapers – the leading papers were the *Amsterdamse Courant* and the *Oprechte Haarlemse Courant* – a Yiddish newspaper was required. The *Dinstagishe un Fraytagishe Kuranten*, published by Uri Faybesh Halevi, filled the need.

Moravian Jewish community. As his name, bar Avrom Ovinu, indicates, he was a *ger*, a convert to Judaism. In 1680, apparently after he converted, he married a Jewish woman.

In 1686 Reb Moushe worked as a compositor for the Ashkenazi printer and publisher Uri Faybesh Halevi (1627-1715), whose family came from Emden. His grandfather was among the first Ashkenazi Jews in Amsterdam and is believed to be the first to have taught Jewish rules and traditions to Sephardi Jews who had escaped from Spain and Portugal. Uri Faybesh Halevi worked as a printer from 1658 onwards and became one of the leading Jewish printers in Amsterdam – and in the entire world, as Amsterdam in those years was the center of Hebrew and Yiddish book printing. He published Hebrew and Yiddish books, mainly but not exclusively religious texts.

Publication of Yiddish books was a growing business. At the beginning of the seventeenth century there were only a few Ashkenazi Jews in Amsterdam, but after the Thirty Years' War broke out in 1618, greater numbers of Ashkenazi Jews from Germany arrived in the city. In general they were poor and unsophisticated people, especially compared with the Portuguese Jews who fled the Inquisition in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Pogroms inflicted by Chmielnicki's Cossacks (1648 to 1650) caused an additional stream of Ashkenazi refugees from Poland, and in 1655 Polish and Lithuanian Jews began fleeing from the Swedish invasion. By 1690 an estimated

The *Kuranten* printed mainly international news, which was organized geographically. The paper appeared on Tuesdays and Fridays, except for the period between December 6, 1686, and February 14, 1687, during which it was published only on Fridays.

We do not know whose idea it was to publish the *Kuranten*. From the earliest issue of the 101 papers left, only the last two pages survived, lacking any statement of purpose or introduction. But it is by no means sure that this issue was the very first. Probably Uri Faybesh Halevi himself initiated the *Kuranten*, while Reb Moushe may have played an important role. Although he was initially referred to as *hamesader* – the compositor – it is likely that he also served as editor.

The job of an editor was, in the first place, to assemble and select news items. He had to know the Roman alphabet and be able to read Dutch and other languages. Although most Ashkenazi Jews understood Dutch quite well, only a few were able to read it. Since Reb Moushe was a former Christian from Nikolsburg, his mother tongue was most probably German, which would have made it comparatively easy for him to read Dutch. In order to convert to Judaism he had to learn Hebrew. And through his contact with Jews, first in Nikolsburg, which had a large Jewish community, and later in Amsterdam, he learned Yiddish. Reb Moushe was clearly able to translate into Yiddish at the time the *Kuranten* appeared, as demonstrated by his Yiddish translation of *Yeven Metsula*, a famous report of the Chmielnicki massacres, originally

written in Hebrew by Natan Nata Hannover (Venice, 1653) and printed by Uri Faybesh Halevi in 1686.

Despite the demand for news among Ashkenazi Jews, publishing a Yiddish newspaper was a risky business. As far as we know, no one had tried it before. To be sure, there was another Jewish newspaper, the *Gazeta de Amsterdam*, printed in Spanish and intended for a Sephardic readership. The oldest known issue dates from 1672, and it existed at least until 1702. The economic potential for the *Gazeta* was much greater because of the wealth of the Sephardic community and, since the *Gazeta* appeared in Spanish, it could also be read by non-Jews. In contrast, most Ashkenazi Jews could not afford to buy newspapers and may have read the *Kuranten* in the synagogue or borrowed copies from others. Uri Faybesh Halevi may have thought this wouldn't pay in the end; in any event, he stopped publishing the paper on June 6, 1687. His financial position had become far from sound after he published a Yiddish Bible translation, a project that took him three years (1676 to 1679).

The printer of the *Gazeta*, David de Castro Tartas, took over the publication of the *Kuranten*. His parents were "New Christians" who escaped from Portugal to the city of Tartas in southern France. Later they came to Amsterdam, where they once again started living as Jews. David de Castro Tartas began his career in the oldest Jewish printing house in Amsterdam, that of Menasseh Ben Israel. In 1662 he founded his own business and in his first years published prayer books in Hebrew and Spanish. These were followed by popular Yiddish books, including an adaptation of Arthurian legends. He became known especially as a printer of newspapers, not only of the Spanish *Gazeta* but also of Italian and French papers which were apparently not intended for Jewish readers.

Reb Moushe was part of the deal. In the *Kuranten* published by De Castro Tartas his name is still mentioned at the end of every issue, but without the title *hamesader*. Though De Castro Tartas made some changes in the layout – the heading became larger, the Amsterdam city arms were added – the style stayed the same, another sign that Reb Moushe was responsible for editing.

De Castro Tartas initially maintained the publication on Tuesdays and Fridays, but on August 5, 1687, it was announced that the paper would appear only on Fridays until 1 Nisan (March), "because the Tuesday edition sells poorly." As the last known issue dates from December 5, we do not know whether the paper was published twice a week again after 1 Nisan, as promised. Or, for that matter, if it appeared at all.

The leading Dutch newspapers, the *Amsterdamse Courant* and the *Oprechte Haarlemse Courant*, collected their own news and used correspondents to gather news



Jews Walking in the Streets – Willem Drost (1633–1659)

The Teylers Museum, Haarlem, The Netherlands.

News about Jewish community life in Amsterdam is completely absent: as the community was still small, the Amsterdam Jews

probably didn't need a paper to know what was going on.

from abroad. Neither Uri Faybesh Halevi nor David de Castro Tartas had the means to hire reporters, so Reb Moushe had to resort to these Dutch newspapers for his main – and probably only – sources of information.

But by no means did he copy all reports. He had to choose strictly, because he had less space at his disposal – four octavo pages, where the Dutch papers used two quarto pages – and he used a larger typeface. He selected text not just by shortening, but also by his choice of subject. He included, for instance, all reports about wars. First and foremost, he ran news of the war between the Habsburg Empire and the Ottoman Empire, and like the Dutch newspapers he sympathized with the Habsburg side. The only difference was that he did not write about a victory of "the Christians," or "our side," but simply spoke of "the imperials."

Another popular subject was the plight of the Huguenots, for whom Reb Moushe showed at least as much sympathy as did the Dutch papers. To the extent that the Dutch reported on Jews, Reb Moushe followed

them, his tone usually as detached as theirs. In one case, however, he added a “Jewish accent,” when he wrote about three Portuguese Jews who were burned at the stake in Lisbon after refusing to renounce their faith. While the Dutch papers stressed the cruelty of the punishment, the *Kuranten* emphasized the fact that the three men decided to die as Jews, adding a prayer about the divine punishment awaiting those who carried out the sentence.

The *Kuranten* also had room for shipping news, items about pirates, and reports about natural disasters and epidemics. It featured sensational stories: for instance, a detailed description of the birth of what we now would call Siamese twins, or the story of a woman whose breast was struck by lightning while she was feeding her baby (mother and child survive, but the woman loses her breast).

Equally interesting are the subjects Reb Moushe left out. Elements that were not Jewish or were considered uninteresting to Jews were not included – news about Western European royal families, for example, of which the Dutch papers were quite fond. (The adventures of the king of Poland, however, were given some attention, since King Jan III Sobieski was popular among Jews.) On the other hand, no attempt was made to carry news from other sources on Jewish subjects. News about Jewish community life in Amsterdam is completely absent, which may be understandable: as the community was still small, the Amsterdam Jews probably didn’t need a paper to know what was going on. But some international reports had interesting Jewish aspects that were not mentioned, simply because the Dutch papers left them out.

For instance, the *Kuranten* wrote extensively about a fleet of river barges that supplied the Habsburg forces during the siege of Budapest in 1686, but failed to mention that this operation was entirely organized by Samuel Oppenheimer, a Jew of the German court. Oppenheimer obtained his goods from, among others, the well-known Amsterdam businessman Cosman Gompertz, a member of the only really influential Ashkenazi family in Amsterdam and a son-in-law of memoirist Glikl Hamel (Glückel of Hameln). The Gompertz family traded in jewels and army supplies, and had ties with German court Jews and the Elector of Brandenburg. Clearly, while adapting Dutch reports of international news for Jewish readers, Reb Moushe did not aim to create a “Jewish newspaper.”

There are no indications in the December 5, 1687, installment of the *Kuranten* that this was the last issue, but of later issues any trace is missing. Not so of Reb Moushe. In 1688 he started working for Cosman Gompertz, who was a printer as well. In 1690 Moushe took over

Gompertz’s printing house, but he went bankrupt within a year and the business reverted to its former owner. Reb Moushe didn’t give in easily and in 1694 gave it a second try; shortly afterwards, though, he left for Germany.

By way of Berlin, Frankfurt an der Oder, and Dessau, Reb Moushe ended up in Halle, where he became the university printer and (with the help of his ten children) set up his own printing house. While still in Berlin, he published a Hebrew translation of the New Testament. His *magnum opus* was *Telaot Moshe* (or *Teloos Moushe*, 1711), which is considered the oldest book on geography in Yiddish. The text was taken from two sources, the Hebrew *Igeret arkhos olam* by Avraham Farissol (Venice, 1587) and the German translation (1612) of the Latin *Tabularum Geographicarum Contractarum* (1600), by the Dutch Christian geographer Petrus Bertius. The way Reb Moushe adapted the non-Jewish source for a Jewish readership has much in common with the way he adapted Dutch news for the *Kuranten*. He shortened the text and

## THE YIDDISH BOOK CENTER GOES DUTCH

**W**INTER CAN SEEM ETERNAL in New England. But this year, as winter days begin to lengthen into spring, we are eagerly looking forward to a flowering of art and culture in our corner of western Massachusetts. That welcome flowering – called Go Dutch! – is the inaugural celebration of Museums 10, a new regional museum consortium of which the Book Center is a member. Besides us, the participants in the consortium include all the Five College art museums (Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, Smith, and UMass) the Emily Dickinson Museum, Historic Deerfield, Amherst College’s Natural History Museum, and the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art.

Anchoring the first-ever Museums 10 exhibition is the Eric Carle Museum, our nearest neighbor in the apple orchard. A stunning exhibition of the work of 13 Dutch artists, “Dutch Treats: Contemporary Illustration from the Netherlands,” will open at the Eric Carle on March 28. Throughout the spring and into late summer, each member institution will highlight Dutch or Dutch-related holdings in its collections. These include exhibitions of fine arts, botanical shows, lectures, and musical events. In keeping with our mission, the Book Center has planned a series of lively programs and exhibitions celebrating the culture and history of Dutch Jewry.

Our own Go Dutch! sneak preview begins on page 8 in this issue of *Pakn Treger*. It is the story of *Kuranten*, a twice-weekly newspaper published in the cosmopolitan Dutch capital, Amsterdam, in the late seventeenth century. *Kuranten* was the first Yiddish newspaper in the world and thus it is a cultural milestone for Jews everywhere.

removed strikingly Christian elements, but maintained the essentially Christian point of view and refrained from adding specifically Jewish elements.

In 1714 Reb Moushe printed a collection of homilies said to contain anti-Christian slander. He was arrested by the authorities, and though he was released soon afterwards his printing house was confiscated. Once more he became a university printer. There are no known publications of his after 1714, but his name is mentioned occasionally in the publications of his children, who produced mainly religious books. He appears to have died in 1733 or 1734.

The first printer of the *Kuranten*, Uri Faybesh Halevi, left Amsterdam in 1691 and started a firm in Zotkiew, Poland, where as an experienced printer from Amsterdam he was received with open arms. In 1705 he returned to Amsterdam and left the printing house to his grandchildren, whose descendants stayed in the business until the twentieth century. In 1710 Halevi wrote a history of the Sephardim; he died in 1715 and was buried in the

Portuguese-Jewish cemetery in Ouderkerk.

David de Castro Tartas, Halevi's successor, stayed in the business until 1697. Then he sold his printing tools and left Amsterdam for an unknown destination.

David Montezinos donated his collection, including the volume containing the *Kuranten*, to Ets Haim in 1889. After his death in 1916 the book stayed in the library and survived World War II, but sometime in the 1970s, when it was being transferred with many other books from Ets Haim to the National and University Library in Jerusalem, it disappeared without a trace. What remain are photos, microfilms, and photocopies. PT

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Our program series begins on March 26 with the film "In Search of Jewish Amsterdam," which depicts the city as an oasis of harmony for Jews and Gentiles as late as 1930. Also in the series will be the award-winning documentary, *The Saved* (1998), the story of 700 Dutch Jews who survived the war in a chateau in Barneveld.

"Music from the Time of Anne Frank," the first of several concerts, will feature the music of Jewish composers living in pre-war Amsterdam. It will be performed on April 23 by Dutch musicians Eleonore Pameijer on flute and Marcel Worms on piano.

Other Book Center events include an author's talk on June 11 with Edith van Hessen Velmans who, like her contemporary Anne Frank, was a teenager in Amsterdam when the Germans occupied Holland. Her memoir, *Edith's Story*, weaves together her diary entries and smuggled family letters during the period of the Nazi occupation. On June 25 Steven Nadler will discuss his new book *Rembrandt's Jews*, which explores the ways in which Jews, Jewish sites, and Jewish traditions were portrayed in seventeenth-century Dutch art.

Nora Gerard, director of programs at the Book Center, notes that in mounting an exhibition about Dutch Jews, "We inevitably encounter the Holocaust. For this exhibition, we have found Dutch artists and writers who, like Edith Velmans, celebrate the achievements of those who came before the Holocaust, and of those who survived."

Gerard notes that for Go Dutch! the Book Center has collaborated with the Hatikvah Holocaust Education Center in Springfield for a Yom Hashoa commemoration on April 24. Through live music and commentary, the Greater Springfield community's annual program will focus on Leo Smit, the ambitious Dutch Jewish composer who would surely have been a major force in Dutch classical music had he not been killed at Sobibor in 1943.

Supported by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, the Greater Springfield Convention and Visitors Bureau, and the Dutch General Consulate in New York, Go Dutch! marks the first time these very different neighboring institutions have collaborated on an ambitious program of public art and culture. As Gerard observes, "We can offer visitors to the upper Pioneer Valley a wide range of terrific programs, all within a concentrated geographical space. As small museums, our outreach will be greater, our impact stronger, when we work collectively as we have with Go Dutch!." We promise that *Pakn Treger* readers will be given ample notice of future Museums 10 collaborations that are now in the planning stage.

For a full schedule of events at the Book Center and other local museums and institutions participating in Go Dutch!, see our calendar on page 7. And remember, you don't have to be Dutch to enjoy it! —Terry Y. Allen



Engraving of the Great Synagogue of the Ashkenazic community, Amsterdam, 1671.