



## Key Documents of German-Jewish History

A Digital Source Edition

Jorun Poettering

# The Portuguese-Jewish Community in Hamburg through the Lens of the Inquisition

## SOURCE DESCRIPTION

In 1639, Diogo de Lima denounced Duarte Esteves de Pina, a Portuguese Jew living in Hamburg, to the Portuguese Inquisition. The present source is comprised of the charge (seven handwritten pages) as well as the testimonies of two witnesses (each four handwritten pages). An official of the Inquisition questioned the informants under oath and produced a brief report for each. Subsequently, several priests testified to the credibility of the informants and the authenticity of the reports. Such protocols formed the basis for the total of approximately 32,000 court cases carried out by the Inquisition in its almost 300-year existence in Portugal. Upon the Liberal Revolution of 1821, the Portuguese Inquisition came to its official conclusion. The archive of the Lisbon Tribunal, from which this source originates, was given to the Lisbon Public Library. Just four years later, however, it was again withdrawn from public view and placed in the royal archive (Torre do Tombo, today, the National Archive). Only in 1901, was this archive opened to regular scholarly research. Following the turn of the 20th century, a comprehensive digitalization of its holdings was carried out. At present, a majority of the documents of the Inquisition are freely accessible on the Internet.

## The Portuguese Inquisition

In the year 1492, their Catholic Majesties, King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile, faced the Jews in Spain with a choice: either accept Christianity or leave the country. In 1497, King Manuel of Portugal, too, banned Judaism from his kingdom and forced all the Jews living in Portugal into conversion. Only a few of them escaped by taking flight. His successor, King João III, introduced the Inquisition (the "Holy Office") into Portugal in 1536, in order to watch over adherence to the Catholic faith. Quite soon, the Inquisition concentrated on the persecution of New Christians, that is, on baptized Jews and their descendants. The Inquisitors proceeded from the supposition that converted Jews, as well as their children and children's children, remained prone to backsliding into the Jewish faith and that the "taint of Jewish blood" lived on, independently of their religious practice.

It is unclear just how many New Christians in Portugal actually held firm to the religion of their forebears and how many became more or less true believers in Christianity. There is no doubt, however, that because of their Jewish origins, the New Christians were socially and legally discriminated against, and continually threatened by the Inquisition. The consequences for suspected heretics ranged from imprisonment and confiscation of property to public execution at the stake. Therefore, many New Christians left the country. However, even when they settled abroad, they could be informed against in Portugal. Such a case is the

subject of this source. Even though the reliability of the corresponding denunciations and eyewitness testimonies should be read with the utmost caution, they afford important insights into the beginning of Jewish life in Hamburg.

## The Portuguese-Jewish Community in Hamburg

From the end of the 16th century, Hamburg was one of the most important settlement locations for the New Christians of Portugal. A few of the émigrés moved there directly; others lived for a few years in southern France, the Low Countries, Italy, or other locales, before reaching Hamburg. At first, they lived as Catholics as they had in their homeland. Gradually, however, more and more of them professed Judaism and thus returned to the religion of their forefathers. With the successful acquisition of their own cemetery in 1611 in neighboring Altona, the founding of the Jewish congregation can be deemed as completed. At the time of origin of this source, in 1639, there were approximately 60 Portuguese-Jewish families in Hamburg. Most of the men were merchants, although there were also brokers and a few physicians among them.

## Information about Community Life in Hamburg

The source refers to the denunciation of the Portuguese merchant Duarte Esteves de Pina. He had, according to testimony, come to Hamburg in 1621 at the age of 37, had had himself circumcised, and taken the Jewish name Isaac Milano. From this point on, he was said to have “openly practiced the Mosaic law.” As corroboration the informer cited a series of behavioral patterns, which repeatedly emerge in such kind of denunciations and which represented, for the Inquisitors, characteristic signs of the Jewish faith: regular attendance at synagogues, prayers, the use of the tefillin and tallit, fasting, and the observance of holy days. In addition, Esteves de Pina married in Hamburg according to the Jewish rite and had his two sons circumcised. Finally, declared the informer, Esteves de Pina maintained a synagogue in his home at the Dreckwall [literally rubbish embankment, today the street is called: Alter Wall (Old Embankment)]. In fact, Portuguese Jews were restricted to private synagogues, because the building of public synagogues was prohibited in the city. Even though the label of Dreckwall appears less than flattering, the house of Esteves de Pina was located in the commercial center of the city; unlike many other German cities, the Jews of Hamburg did not live in specially designated, walled-off quarters.

More interesting yet than the contents of the denunciation are the circumstances which led to it. The informer, Diogo de Lima, was himself born in Hamburg, the child of Portuguese-Jewish parents and raised Jewish. As he reported to the Inquisitors in another denunciation, at the age of 18, he had decided to go to Lisbon in order to be baptized as a Catholic. Five years after his arrival in Portugal, he denounced his parents and his two older brothers, as well as eight other Portuguese individuals living as Jews in Hamburg. Four years later, there followed the denunciation documented in this source against Duarte Esteves de Pina, as well as against another Portuguese Jew who lived in Venice. In 1644, he appeared for a last time before the Inquisitors to inform against a member of the Hamburg community.

Informers shared in the confiscated property of persons condemned by the Inquisition and thus could materially profit from denunciation. In the case of Duarte Esteves de Pina this would have been trade goods which the merchant had sent from Hamburg to Portugal. However, Lima explicitly denied that his own

material advantage had motivated him. Nor did he harbor “hatred” or “ill-will” against Esteves de Pina, but rather acted solely out of “religious zeal and because everything corresponded to the truth.” Nevertheless, the claim of religious zeal may scarcely be believed, if one knows his further history.

For soon after 1644, Diogo de Lima returned to Hamburg. There he joined neither the Catholic nor the Jewish communities. Instead, by 1650 at the latest, he went over to Lutheranism. As a consequence, his brother Duarte de Lima told him that he was no longer considered a member of the family and was excluded from the paternal inheritance. In case he returned to Judaism, however, an annual pension stood in prospect. Diogo de Lima turned to the Hamburg city council, demanding that the Jews of Hamburg ought to be obliged to pay the material claims of former co-religionists who had converted to Christianity. Although he elicited the support of the council and of Hamburg’s clergy, he seems not to have been successful in his request. As late as 1669, when his brother had already been dead for nine years, his claims on the inheritance had not been settled.

The motives for Lima’s behavior are no longer open to detailed reconstruction. The denunciation, however, illustrates the difficult situation in which Portuguese Jews found themselves in the early era of the Hamburg community. Apparently, Lima had not felt comfortable there. This had lead him not only to the turning away from the Jewish faith and the occasional return to the homeland of his parents, but also to the breach with his family. The position of the Portuguese Jews within the Lutheran majority society in Hamburg was precarious. Many inhabitants were inclined to be xenophobic and anti-Jewish; the clergy agitated against the Jews, and the city council reserved the right to revoke permission to settle at any time, with a one year notice of cancellation. The executive board of the Portuguese-Jewish congregation attempted to offset the uncertainty by exercising strict discipline over the congregation’s members. The Portuguese had not only to acquire a new a religion that was almost unknown to them. At the same time, they had to draw the least possible attention to themselves in the city. Not all of them could come to terms with the pressure of this twofold challenge. Yet, as the example of Lima shows, a return to their homeland was not necessarily the answer.

## Consequences for the Commerce of the Portuguese Jews

That individuals among the Portuguese might again fall away from Judaism and return to the Iberian Peninsula was a widespread fear inside the Hamburg community. In the realm of the family, the most important form of pressure applied against such decisions – as in the case of Diogo de Lima – was a casting out of the family and disinheritance. The executive board of the congregation made an effort to prevent a relapse into Catholicism, too. In particular, it interdicted travel to Catholic countries where Judaism was prohibited. However, for maintenance of commercial relations with the Iberian Peninsula, which remained central for the Portuguese-Jewish merchants at least to the mid-17th century, this was problematic. For without the maintenance of personal contacts, relations sooner or later broke off.

A still greater impediment to commercial activities issued from the Inquisition. A native of Portugal, who went over to Judaism in Hamburg, had to be concerned upon returning to Portugal for the long or short term that he would be arrested. That could already happen when passing through ship inspections, which were conducted in the ports by Inquisitors. Also, for the entire duration of his stay, denunciation was a great danger. Even when a Portuguese Jew did not leave Hamburg but only had commercial exchanges with

relatives or other New Christians in Portugal, the Inquisition posed a risk. For himself, because his goods could be confiscated; but above all for his business partners, because the Inquisition suspected all persons who had connections to religious apostates.

In the source, three witnesses were asked to confirm the testimony of Diogo de Lima: João Aique, Rodrigo Pãocome, and João Vanaique. All three were merchants, one was from Hamburg and two from the Low Countries or North Germany, each of whom was called by the Portuguese form of his name. At the point in time of the inquiry, they lived in Portugal; however, previously they had lived in Hamburg. On this basis, they knew Duarte Esteves de Pina. Portuguese Jews living in Hamburg could collaborate with such merchants, when they needed contacts, representatives, or commission agents in Portugal, because they were not as easily threatened by the Inquisition as New Christians. Despite their Protestant backgrounds merchants from Hamburg and the Low Countries enjoyed special protection in Portugal.

As can be seen in their testimonies, the witnesses did not at first disclose their knowledge of Portuguese Jews in Hamburg. Only after seeing the content of Diogo de Lima's denunciation did they confirm him, without, however, providing additional information. In this way they may have sought to protect their business partners in the Portuguese-Jewish community of Hamburg. The Christian merchants of Hamburg and the Low Countries, of course, profited from their collaboration with Portuguese Jews. Over the long term, many of them had far greater success in trade between Hamburg and Portugal than did the Portuguese Jews.

## New Interpretation in Social and Economic History

There existed exiled Portuguese-Jewish or New Christian merchants in almost all the significant port cities inside and beyond Europe in the 17th century. It is generally believed that the members of such ethnically-based trading diasporas drew great advantage from their close cooperation with other members of their group. The German economic historian Hermann Kellenbenz also supports this thesis in his highly regarded monograph, long the standard work, on the Portuguese Jews in Hamburg, "Sephardim an der unteren Elbe" [Sephardim on the Lower Elbe]. On the basis of their supposed special aptitude for commerce, as well as their extraordinary cohesion – and especially their intensive collaboration with the New Christians on the Iberian Peninsula and in the Iberian overseas regions – Portuguese Jews, he argues, formed an extraordinarily successful economic elite in Hamburg and other places in the diaspora.

Yet the Portuguese Jews active in Hamburg did not have greater sales turnovers than other merchants. Rather, the denunciation protocol shows the special difficulties they were confronted with. And, particularly in their trade with Portugal, it becomes obvious how important was their collaboration with merchants of other descent than their own.

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## About the Author

Jorun Poettering, Dr. phil., does research in the field of Atlantic history. Her first book is a comparative study of the merchants who migrated and traded between Hamburg and Portugal in the 17th century. She is currently working on a social history of colonial and imperial Rio de Janeiro, which focuses on the role of its black population in social, political and cultural negotiation processes.

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