

Joshua Piza

1772-1850

The Dutch Island of Curaçao had a considerable Jewish settlement, but no minister. Holland was a paternal government, and when the Hebrew colonists requested that a minister of their faith be sent to guide the congregation, Holland appointed Joshua Piza. He arrived accompanied by his wife Bienvenida Zucato, her sister Esther, and his two sons, Moses and Judah.

Bienvenida did not live to know much of Curaçao. According to the story, her death was due to shock. On their arrival they were given a right royal reception. Gifts were showered on them by all the members of the new minister's flock. Baskets of fruit, native viands, flowers – all arrived borne on the heads of powerful black servants. Never before had the bewildered Dutchwoman imagined anything like it – never had she seen a Negro, or heard of one, and these tall ebony creatures, with their gleaming white teeth, arms akimbo and heads erect under staggering weights, were more than Bienvenida, worn out with weeks of discomfort on a sailing-vessel, could stand. She gave one cry: "Ach der Duyvil!" and fainted. She never recovered from the demonic apparition, and her death resulted shortly after.

Joshua assumed his duties, and all went well until the congregation took exception to his living in the house with his unmarried sister-in-law, Esther Zacuto, who had quite naturally taken charge of his household and children. Such a position was equivocal and unbecoming their minister, they said. So he dutifully married this sister-in-law. Esther's married life was brief. In little more than a year she died giving birth to twins, which did not survive her.

Joshua Piza busied himself with his bretheren. But they too busied themselves with Joshua Piza. It would not do, they said, for him to live alone. Their minister must be a married man.

But whom shall I marry? asked the harassed man.

Hanna Sasso, aged sixteen, the daughter of the Assistant-Reader of the synagogue was indicated. "What!" said Joshua who was at least twenty years older, "that young girl! She'll fill me up with children!" But very obliging, he did as suggested. His intuition proved correct, for of their union which took place in 1816, nine children were born.

Perhaps this intuition was based on an understanding of hereditary tendencies. For Hannah had an uncle who was the father of twenty-four sons. He lived in Curaçao with the fertile wife that had so blessed him, but the fame of this unusual family extended even to the mother country. The Governor of Curaçao

was instructed by the Crown to verify the report. The prolific pair had a great feast prepared, and the twenty-seven people who sat down to enjoy it were the parents, the twenty-four sons and the astonished Governor. But alas! Immediately after the official counting the line began to die out.

It could hardly be expected that April & November could live together in perfect harmony, until they had at least had time to adapt themselves to each other. Joshua the Dutchman, scholar, astronomer, linguist – versed in Hebrew and Spanish, as well as Dutch – could not abide the jargon that was spoken by the natives of the island: "*Papiemento*" it was called, and was a singsong mixture of mispronunciations from these same languages. He would not allow it to be spoken in his home, and demanded that his wife learn to speak good Spanish. There may have been other differences too, for two weeks after their marriage, young Hannah became so exasperated with him that she vowed she would not be his wife any longer, and to prove it, threw her bright new wedding ring out of the window into the garden. When she got over her fit of temper, there was much searching for the ring, first secretly, and then with the aid of servants, but it was never found, so Joshua bought her a new one.

For about ten years he remained in Curaçao. He must have arrived at the Dutch island about 1815 and departed thence in

1825. The cause of his exodus was a lamentable schism among his flock over the exact pronunciation of certain Hebrew words. The Mikve Israel congregation, living up to the reputation for factiousness that it had earned in the one-hundred-and-sixty-seven-years of its existence finally split into two parties: those who said "*A-gay-fin*" and those who held for "*A-gah-fin*". The minister resolutely – or stubbornly – refused to change his pronunciation, and the quarrel over the word became so bitter that, gathering his family together, he set sail for the island of St. Thomas.

In St. Thomas

In St. Thomas, Joshua served as minister for many years, but pettiness and faction seemed as much a part of the congregational life in this thriving Danish colony as it had been in the island they had left because of these vexations. At last there was so much dissention that Hannah, though twenty-eight years her husband's junior, was impelled to adopt a motherly attitude toward the worried man, insisting that he resign his position and spend the rest of his life at peace.

"Resign! With all these daughters on my hands!" exclaimed the minister.

However, Hannah was determined, and immediately put into execution a plan she had: to open a store, and alone to support the family.

St Thomas was in the heyday of its glory then, the chief coaling port for the whole Spanish Main. In its wonderful harbors, trading vessels from all over the world paused, unloading there freight of one sort, and taking on cargoes of another. The main streets of the town of Charlotte-Amalie were always thronged. It was in a very busy city that the children, Judith & Benvanida grew up, and Jacob (1824), Samuel (1827), Sarah (1829), Esther (1831), Rebecca (1833), Leah (1835) and Rachel (1837) were born and raised. Hanna's business thrived – she seemed to have a genius for it. Her husband was not allowed inside the store: she declared she could not sell so much as a spool of thread when he was present. Though he was genial and amusing, he was most unbusinesslike. A negress once came into the shop to buy some mourning apparel when the old man was trespassing. "What", said the former pastor facetiously, "you don't need mourning – you're all black already!"

Not only did the energetic woman bring up the children decently, but she also managed to lay aside two thousand dollars to start her sons, Jacob and Samuel, in business. One day she called the boys, now grown to manhood, into the store.

"Now Coco and Sampi", she said, "I have worked hard, as you well know; and I have succeeded in saving all this money for you boys to give you a start in life. Now you go off to some new place and don't come back until you have made a fortune."

The lads invested their money in European goods, and set sail for Panama to market them. This was at the time of the Gold-Rush to California, and Panama was extremely important – right on the highway of the adventurers – as well as being the link for trade between Europe and the busy western coast of South America. But the journey was not without danger, and its worst stage was the crossing of the isthmus by a route that was part jungle, part swamp, and part lake. About a quarter of the way to the Pacific, they came to the roaring Chagres River, which was even more unruly than usual. The barge, on which the two young men were making the passage of the stream, was upset and all their goods were lost or ruined. The brothers reached Panama almost penniless. Their charm and amiability, however, won them friends, and they obtained from the local business houses credit that enabled them to enter in a commercial enterprise that soon prospered. Yet in their better fortune – for they both did become rich men – a deadly quarrel parted the brothers, they discontinued both business and social relations, and never spoke to each other to the end of their days.

When the second daughter, "Benvanida", was married to "Handsome Jack" Lindo, poor but charming, Hannah had saved another thousand dollars to give the young couple. She had strongly disapproved of the match on account of the young man's financial status, had done her best to persuade "Bem" to accept a well-to-do suitor from Hamburg who was her husband's

cousin, but the young people were so in love, and persisted in the attachment for so many years, that in 1844 she consented to the match and generously endowed them. A thousand dollars was a very unusual dowry for that time: when her step-son Moses, was married in 1835, his bride, Rebecca Lopez-Fonseca, and brought with her only two hundred dollars, and Judah's brother, the gentle "Loche" Lopez-Fonseca whom he married the year after Benvenida's wedding, had a similar *dot*.

Joshua Piza died in 1850, at the age of seventy-two. His wife outlived him by twenty-nine years.

Jeoshuah Moseh Piza

Died

St. Thomas, Danish West Indies

5610

1850

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