

***The Portuguese Jews of Hamburg:
The History of a Merchant Community in the Seventeenth Century***

Hugo Martins
(Leiden: Brill, 2024)
[ISBN 9789004685796]

MATT GOLDISH
The Ohio State University

Hugo Martins has written an important new study of Hamburg's Portuguese Jewish community in the second half of the seventeenth century, based heavily on the community's own protocol books. Martins focuses on the period from 1652 to 1682, which he considers to be the most important period of the group's existence. While this community was born around 1600, 1652 marks the year that the disparate congregations agreed to unite and for which detailed communal records are extant. After the 1680s the number of Portuguese in the city shrank considerably and the significance of the remaining community dwindled, though it certainly did not disappear.

The scholarship on the Hamburg Sephardim has grown tremendously over the past generation with the appearance of works by Yosef Kaplan, Jutta Braden, and other scholars, and especially the landmark studies of Michael Studemund-Halévy. Martins nevertheless shows us how much can still be derived from a careful and systematic exposition of the community records.

The book is divided into three sections: historical context, community organisation, and orthodoxy and morality. In the first section we learn about many of the elements which made Hamburg different from the other communities of the Western Sephardi Diaspora, such as Amsterdam, London, and Livorno—elements which reverberated throughout the rest of the century. While the Senate of Hamburg encouraged the arrival of wealthy Portuguese merchants, the populace and especially the Lutheran clergy did all they could to discourage this development. The nascent congregation was repeatedly stymied by these opponents in its attempts to build a synagogue which would help unite the fragmented smaller congregations. The process of unification, begun in 1652, was thus never able to overcome inner divisions and create a genuinely viable, consolidated structure for the long term. Despite Hamburg's

much vaunted toleration described by Joachim Whaley, the burghers and ministers largely succeeded in stunting Jewish repose in the city.¹

The second section, on community organisation, accounts for about half the length of the book. Martins explains in great detail the communal leadership, finances, salaried officials, education, and justice systems of the group. He deftly exploits the record books to reveal the many and powerful challenges faced by the leaders from almost every conceivable direction. There was a deep controversy over the method for electing the Mahamad, the governing board, which Martins describes repeatedly as a struggle between oligarchic and democratic impulses. It appears to me that it is in fact about whether it should be a small oligarchy or a very slightly wider oligarchy. In this section again Martins constantly points out how the communal divisions were exacerbated by the community's inability to unite physically with a united synagogue. Multiple plans and attempts were squelched, particularly by the power of Lutheran clergy. This enforced division left festering rifts between families and between the earlier congregations, which continued to function. The outside pressure also led the Mahamad to tighten its control over numerous aspects of religious and social life which were normally the province of the individual or home. Ceremonies and celebrations held in public could (in theory) be better controlled to prevent 'scandal' before the ever-vigilant Christian neighbours. This atmosphere, explains Martins, created many of the conditions which made Hamburg's Portuguese community different than those of the other Western Sephardim. There is a great deal more in this long section that is worthy of note, including, for me, the general lack of friction between the Mahamad and the rabbis over the many matters in which their jurisdictions might have overlapped.

The third section, on orthodoxy and morality, is particularly interesting. Here Martins reiterates something he mentions repeatedly throughout the book: that the failure of the Sabbatai Zevi episode of 1665-1666, about which the Hamburg Portuguese may have been as enthusiastic as any Jewish community in the world, caused a crisis in the community. It is never quite evident why or how this occurred, so more clarity would have been helpful, but Martins marks this as the inception of a significant downturn in the community's fortunes and discipline. It appears to me that fiscal and political factors in this decline—noted by Martins various places—might have been equally significant if not more so. From a religious and cultural perspective, though, the Sabbatean enthusiasm in the city is fascinating and somewhat unexpected. Another matter of great interest derived from the records by Martins is the extreme litigiousness of the Hamburg Portuguese, particularly in the 1660s and 1670s. A shockingly high percentage of the group of 600 to 800 persons was involved in lawsuits or claims adjudicated either within the community or by one of several German courts. The Mahamad also fined, excommunicated, punished or expelled an extraordinary number of congregants, for reasons Martins discusses in detail. These aspects of the

¹ JOACHIM WHALEY, *Religious Toleration and Social Change in Hamburg, 1529-1819* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Hamburg Sephardim and their challenges could hardly have been noted or explained without the painstaking study of these communal records carried out by the author.

Martins rounds out the book with several appendices, consisting of transcripts from the community protocols about the unification of the congregations, the founding statutes of the elementary school, tax burdens, and (most interesting for me) records concerning the Sabbatai Zevi news.

It is all too easy to critique a book like this for what it misses or lacks, since its mandate is clearly defined and limited. I will nevertheless mention a few issues. The footnotes are presented in a bibliography rather than a standard footnote style. While the English is generally appropriate and readable, the author has a tendency to pick the wrong English word to describe something on many occasions, which can obscure his meaning. He also translates the communal protocols, which are often already oddly worded, in a manner which is so literal as to make them even more difficult to understand. Here is an example, which, though not typical, illustrates the problem. The topic is a communal decree against shaving with a blade. 'Having arrived news to the Mahamad that some people of our nation illicitly send themselves shaving in goim houses, consenting that the razor is passed through their face...' (288).

Aside from these technical issues, I had a few thoughts on content. The wealth of the Texeira family is discussed throughout the book, but in the tax registers (329–334) we learn that they paid around three times the tax paid by the next wealthiest family, the Seneor, who themselves paid around three times as much as the next wealthiest. While Martins discusses the international significance of several community members, including the Texeira (42–44), the significance of this remarkable wealth and influence seems worthy of closer attention. In most communities, for example, if one or two families are so much wealthier than the rest, they tend to completely overwhelm the leadership with their power, at least *de facto*, which did not occur in Hamburg. In addition to the prodigious temporal wealth and power concentrated in this tiny group, there were also a number of fascinating intellectuals. Martins discusses several of them briefly as well (43–46), but he misses some significant rabbinic works written in Hamburg, and does not develop the striking significance of so much intellectual and religious creativity emanating from such a small group. Finally, while there is only so much comparison with other Western Sephardic communities that is possible, there are many cases in which Martins either fails to point out important parallels, or lists the relevant bibliography but does not explain its significance. He is, however, very good at explaining differences which distinguish Hamburg from other Western Sephardi communities.

Despite these quibbles, I am delighted that Hugo Martins undertook this impressive project, which required a very broad background in several fields, and fluency in at least four languages, as well as insightful analysis. His exposition is extremely enlightening, and this work will certainly be a standard for the bookshelf of every scholar interested in the Western Sephardi Diaspora.