

Restoration efforts for the “speaking stones” of the Beth Haim cemetery

Introduction

The oldest cemetery of the Caribbean region, Beth Haim, “*the House (abode) of the Living*” located in Curaçao, anno 2013, sits there, rather disconsolate. The gravestones show many cracks and the concrete substrate upon which they are based is also heavily affected. What is even worse is that the images that often portray Biblical scenes have faded in such a way that they are barely distinguishable. Also the inscriptions on almost all the gravestones are mostly illegible. These religious scenes and inscriptions are of great cultural and historical importance, not to mention the very antiquity of the cemetery.

In the past the Jewish Community in Curaçao undertook countless attempts to save the gravestones, with their images and inscriptions, from destruction. Unfortunately to no avail. Today the opinion has become that no measure will succeed in preventing the further loss of the gravestones.

This dissertation is about the attempts which have been undertaken during the period 1930-2013 to preserve this unique heritage. The role played by heritage managing institutions will be disclosed in addition to that played by the Jewish Community in Curaçao.

Location of the cemetery Beth Haim, House of the Living

A look at the map clarifies a lot. Much more is revealed by a visit to the cemetery. Beth Haim dates from the 17th century. It is a small piece of land, surrounded by the immense field of the oil refinery that was established there in 1915 and has slowly enclosed the “House of the Living.” You see, smell, feel and hear the overwhelming presence of the refinery when visiting Beth Haim.

The cemetery covers a more or less rectangular area, about 5 acres, and in the present situation is enclosed on the east, south as well as on the west by the refinery and on the north side by Schottegatweg West. In the 17th century it must have been a rustic and desolate place, with a view of the Schottegat, the inland port of Curaçao and the core of the centre of commerce. Most probably there was an entry at the south side, the water side, where in former times the deceased were brought in by boat to their last resting place. The subsequent and present entrance is located on the north side, on Schottegatweg West. Directly behind the fencing at the south side, at the old entrance, there are two buildings: the “Rodeamentoshuis” or “House of Rodeos” (House of Procession), where the bereaved would walk seven times around the casket of a male deceased, and the “Cazinha dos Cohanim”, the small building, from where the Cohanim, who were not allowed to come in contact with the deceased, could nevertheless witness the funerals.

Early interest in the graveyards of Beth Haim

The Royal Institute for Language, Country and Ethnology (Koninklijk Instituut voor de Taal-, Land, en Volkenkunde) of the Netherlands showed an interest in Beth Haim already in August 1888. They asked if there were “*some gravestones of which the inscriptions could shed some light on the history of previous times in this region*”¹.

Amazingly, the Board of the Congregation reported that no noteworthy details, or inscriptions, could be found!

From this we can deduce that at that time the gravestones were still in good condition, but that the Board of the Synagogue was not aware of the cultural and historical value of the inscriptions.

¹ Letter from Object Files 29-9. National Archives Curaçao.

The gravestones were laid originally according to universal Western Jewish custom, flat and flush with the ground. This can also be seen in the famous Jewish cemeteries in Ouderkerk aan de Amstel, near Amsterdam, on St. Eustatius, on the Savaan in Surinam and in the even older cemetery in Bayonne, France.

In the course of time these gravestones were covered by soil and loose stones and overgrown by shrubbery. Maintenance fell into decline with the departure of many members of the old Jewish families and the establishment of new cemeteries at Berg Altena in 1864 and in 1880. Most of the gravestones at long last disappeared completely under the soil and shrubbery.

The Board of the Synagogue was called to account for the poor condition of the Beth Haim Cemetery by the Director of Public Health Services. In a letter dated 27th of May 1930, he wrote that the Congregation had to comply with its maintenance obligation.

Attempts at restoration and preservation

As a result of the remarks of the Director of Public Health Services, the Board of the Synagogue decided² to carry out the necessary improvements at the cemetery. Twenty-five hundred and sixty-eight tombstones were lifted from the ground and placed on concrete platforms of approximately a half meter (two feet). This delicate and arduous task was carefully carried out at a cost of approximately NAf 16.000 (today, NAf. 200.000) by the contractor, Giovanni Pizziolo. This operation was completely financed by donations of the members of the Synagogue and by the Board of the Synagogue itself³.

With regard to the gravestones, the Board thought that these would be protected and visible for ever. Progressive knowledge has subsequently shown that, from a preservation point of view, it is to be doubted if the well-intended action was wise. After the rescue mission, these gravestones became intensively exposed to disintegration factors, amongst others the sulphuric acid contained in the emissions from the many chimneys of the oil refinery. Thanks to this rescue operation, Dr. Rabbi Dr. Isaac S. Emmanuel could, during the forties and fifties, have the gravestones photographed, an inventory made, documented and eventually described in his valuable book "*Precious Stones of the Jews of Curaçao. Curaçaoan Jewry, 1656-1957.*" On a map in this book, which was published in 1957, he catalogued and localized all visible gravestones of Beth Haim. The photographs showed clear and easily readable inscriptions on the three-centuries-old tombstones.

In the early nineties by accident five more gravestones were discovered under the soil by Charles Gomes Casseres. At the time of discovery, these gravestones from the second half of the 18th century were in excellent condition, certainly when compared with the tombstones which had been exposed in the thirties. Obviously the layer of soil had protected these against the disintegration factors.

The role of the refinery in the decay of the cemetery

Since the end of the nineteen-forties it has been observed by the Board of the Jewish Community that the gravestones had significantly deteriorated. It sought the cause for this, especially in the sulphuric acid contained emissions from the oil refinery, which had been expanding increasingly and had almost enclosed the cemetery.

² Meeting of 23rd July 1930.

³ (Copiador de cartas van het Nederlandsch Portugeesch Israëlitische Gemeente Mikvé Israel. Cartas desde 26 de Octubre 1923 hasta 1936. MMB.) – Letter copier of the Dutch Portuguese Jewish Community Mikvé Israel. Letters from 26th October 1923 until 1936. MMB)

From the beginning of the fifties until the mid-sixties there was regular correspondence between the Board of the Synagogue and the management of the refinery about the causes of the decay. The most important question was that the causal connection between the decay of the gravestones and the sulphuric acid contained in the emissions from the oil refinery must be proven. The refinery denied that there was a causal connection but was willing to provide donations in the interest of preservation of culture. The Jewish Community in turn was not able to finance the extremely expensive research which could prove the causal connection.

During the period mentioned, several attempts at rescue were undertaken to try to protect the gravestones from the harmful emissions of the refinery. One of the first attempts took place in 1954, when in consultation with the Board of the Synagogue, the N.V. Curaçaosche Petroleum Industrie Maatschappij (CPIM) – Limited Liability Curaçao Petroleum Industry Company instructed the paint company H.K. Heyer to clean and preserve, under the supervision of the Refinery, the 300 gravestones designated by the Board of the Community. It was agreed that the costs of this treatment and follow-up treatments would be shared.

Early in 1957 the Board of the Synagogue indicated, in a meeting with the Foundation for Monument Preservation (Stichting voor Monumentenzorg), that the rescue attempts until then had had “very little result”. It stated that it would like to team up with the Foundation for Monument Preservation to save the gravestones from total loss.

The replicas by the architect Alexeenko

In 1959 the architect Alexeenko, the Russian architect/renovator/sculptor, was asked by the Foundation for Monument Preservation to explore how further decay of the images and inscriptions on the gravestones could be prevented. Alexeenko was the first person to succeed in making casts of three of the most beautiful gravestones of the old Jewish cemetery. Thus arose the plan to make exact replicas of a few selected gravestones in their original state. The Foundation collected from private individuals a sum of money to finance the experiment. Due to lack of funds, the original plan to make replicas of the twenty most important gravestones was reduced to the replication of only eight stones. These stones were first stored in ‘landhuis’ (country house) Brievengat and later exhibited on the patio of the Jewish Cultural-Historical Museum, which opened its doors on November 15, 1970. These moldings are still on display on the patio of the Museum at the Mikvé Israel-Emanuel Synagogue.

The contribution of the oil refinery

At the same time the Board of the Mikvé Israel Community kept corresponding with the management of the Shell Refinery about a more permanent solution for the cemetery. In 1960 the possibility was briefly raised to swap the terrain of the Beth Haim with another property of Shell, for instance at Brievengat. The cemetery then would have to be moved. Even though this was not a serious option for either party, the Board of the Community probably wanted Shell to recognize its responsibility and to put a certain amount available to the Community for the maintenance of the graves, which still were suffering seriously from the sulphur smoke from the refinery.

In a letter dated May 9, 1962 Shell replied as follows on the above:

“Since 1957 we have laboured intensively to relieve the inconvenience to people and buildings, caused by the smoke, by building higher chimneys, better functioning stoves etc. Scientific experiments done continuously since that time clearly show that

the air pollution has improved significantly since 1957. Therefore there is now no longer reason to assume that the atmosphere in the environment of the cemetery, though concerning some odour which is still not pure, have a negative effect on buildings and walls, as well as on the cover plates of the graves. Besides, our air-improvement program is still ongoing, and therefore it does not seem fair to expect that in the future we will have to continue to contribute for the maintenance of the graves."

The Board of the Synagogue was rightly pleased with this implicit admission of liability for the period before 1957. It stated such in the following:

With respect to the maintenance of the graves, we have learned with pleasure that the air pollution has improved since 1957. (...) Inasmuch as the pollution as observed by us mainly dates from the last decades and certainly is due entirely to the contaminated air of those days, it seems to us entirely reasonable that you currently will still contribute to the imperative repair of this damage. Your contribution, along with the significant resources from our own funds, would enable us to once more give this ancient and beautiful monument a dignified aspect.

Shell, however, refused to contribute more money because, as it explained in the letter dated May 9, 1962, *"since a relatively long time effective measures have been taken to counteract the inconvenience to people and buildings caused by smoke spread"*.

Deeply disappointed with the reply of the Shell Management, the Board of the Synagogue decided to approach a lawyer. The lawyer, mr. P. P. C. H. van de Voort from Aruba, in brief, was asked to convince Shell to have, at its own expense, a special coating applied every two years on the graves. The costs thereof would amount every two years to 7.500 guilders.

Mr. van de Voort negotiated for two years with mr. C.W.J. Jonckheer of Shell about the above mentioned proposition. Shell appeared to be willing to finance the treatment partially, while not acknowledging liability. It stated that the conservation (preservation) of the cemetery Beth Haim, as cultural heritage, was a responsibility of the community as a whole, and that for this reason the community also should contribute to this. Shell limited its contribution to a maximum of 2.500 guilders every 2 years.

The Lewin-action

About 1965/1966 contact was made for the first time with professor Seymour Z. Lewin of the New York University. Ivan Moreno Sr. had read in the New York Times that Lewin had invented a formula whereby all *"limestone sculptures and building components"* could be treated to make them more resistant to the effects of contaminated air. The President of the community in those days, Charles Gomes Casseres, paid a visit to professor Lewin in New York and found him willing to come and try out his formula, free of charge, on the gravestones of Beth Haim.

The Antillean Paint Factory (Antilliaanse Verffabriek) was willing to create the formula locally, under the supervision of Professor Lewin, and the community received the collaboration of Shell to provide the manpower for the application and the keeping wet (by covering with large tarps) of the treated stones. This chemical treatment in particular had to protect the graves against the weathering influence of the smoke from the refinery. Unfortunately, this treatment was no more effective than previous attempts.

Two reports from experts

By the end of the eighties the decay of the characteristic Jewish portraits and inscriptions on the graves greatly increased. For the Jewish community it was obvious that this decay was caused by the air pollution caused by the refinery, especially when the condition of the gravestones around 1990 was compared to the condition of the gravestones in 1950 (the pictures of Rabbi Emmanuel from the fifties spoke volumes). The causal connection between the air pollution and the decay of the graves was, however, still not fully proven. However, it was noted that there was a remarkable difference from the several cemeteries which had built gravestones of the same type of material as that used in the Beth Haim in Curaçao. After all, the images and inscriptions on gravestones in other old cemeteries, such as Ouderkerk, St. Eustatius, Surinam and Barbados, as well as the gravestones which were placed in the nineteenth century in the new cemetery at Berg Altena, are still very clearly legible and do not exhibit the degree of decay apparent on the gravestones of Beth Haim.

In 1990 and 1991 two experts in the field of heritage (monument) conservation from the Netherlands conducted research on Beth Haim. The two experts were Mr. J. Querido of the Heritage Conservation the Netherlands and Mr. De Waal of the enterprise De Waal Photogrammetry + Non-destructive Research. Through a contribution of the KABNA, the Dutch Ministry for Antillean Affairs, the two expert were contracted.

Recommendation of Mr. Querido of the Heritage Conservation from the Netherlands

Querido drafted his report in May 1990. The report was entitled: *'Recommendation for the possibilities and techniques for the purpose of the conservation of the gravestones of the Portuguese-Jewish Cemetery Beth Haim in Willemstad, Curaçao'*.

To the disappointment of the Jewish Community, Querido concluded that *"There (is) no direct connection proven between the emission of flue gas and the degree of aging"*⁴.

Charles Gomes Casseres then asked Querido to do further research to specifically search for chemical traces which could explain the damage to the tombstones; after all, the stones at the Berg Altena cemetery, not under the smoke from the refinery, did not exhibit the same rapid disintegration.

On the recommendation of Querido, the Board of the Synagogue had asked the company Grabowsky & Poort, International N.V., Consulting Engineers in Curaçao, to conduct a closer investigation of the causal link between the emission of smoke containing sulphuric acid from the refinery and the damage to the stones. That research would amount to NAf 180.000. Because the Board could not gather the finances for this, the firm De Waal was asked to make a recommendation.

Findings of De Waal

The report from the enterprise De Waal Photogrammetry + Non-Destructive Research entitled *"Cemetery 'Beth Haim' in Willemstad, Curaçao. Located under the smoke at the bay. Inventorization of the problems"* was made in February 1991.

De Waal gave a list of preventive measures to minimize further decay and made recommendations for conservation. With regard to the connection between the air pollution of the refinery and the detected damage, De Waal did not draw any conclusions. The report recommended carrying out laboratory tests over an extended period of time. For those follow-up investigations, however, there was no money available.

Visit from the Dutch Minister of Environment, Margreet de Boer

⁴ Report 'Querido' page 10

In 1996 the Dutch Minister of Environment, Margreet de Boer, visited Curaçao and, according to Charles Gomes Casseres, the Minister recognized that the damage to the gravestones was a direct result of the emissions from the refinery. The minister promised to discuss the matter with Shell and assured the community that she would represent the interests of Beth Haim. In the end this did not lead to any result.

To still do something to preserve this heritage, the Jewish Community in Curaçao went looking for financing. A good opportunity to this end would occur in 2001, the celebration of 350 years of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel.

Commemoration 350th anniversary of Congregation Mikvé Israel-Emanuel

In 1999 the Commemoration Committee for the celebration of 350th Anniversary of Mikvé Israel-Emanuel requested the company TEADCO Caribbean N.V. to conduct an investigation into the decay of the gravestones and to give recommendations for the conservation of the natural stone gravestones. This attempt also came to nothing. TEADCO proposed installation of a high, 120 meter long wind-hedge on the eastern side of the cemetery, which would cost a huge sum of money

The Commemoration sub-committee for Beth Haim, consisting of Henry van der Kwast, Ron Gomes Casseres and Ivan Moreno Jr., devised a four-pronged approach for the cemetery, with the increase of public access as a starting point. This approach included the following:

- First, with the technical and financial collaboration of the Foundation for Heritage Preservation in Curaçao, the “Casa de Rodeos” (House of Procession) and the “Cazinha dos Cohanim” would be totally renovated.
- Second, an exhibition would be placed in the “Casa de Rodeos” and on the patio between the two buildings. This exhibition would provide information about the establishment of the Jewish Community of Curaçao and of Beth Haim, Jewish burial customs in Curaçao and the function of “Casa de Rodeos”, the graves, their shapes, art on the gravestones and those buried there. Also the decay and the future of Beth Haim were topics of the exhibition.
- Third, a unique exposition would be set up outside. Visitors would be encouraged by a written guidebook to follow a stipulated route, which would lead along a number (25) of gravestones. Using photographs of these gravestones which had been taken for use in Emmanuel’s book “Precious Stones of the Jews of Curaçao”, the accompanying guidebook would tell the story of those buried and would explain the artwork on the gravestones as seen in the photographs.
- Last, the walkways and decayed graves in the whole cemetery would be mended and a 120 meter long hedge of trees would be planted as a boundary between the refinery and the cemetery. This hedge would primarily beautify the place, but in addition it would help filter (purify) the smoke of the refinery.

The plans mentioned above fell within the framework of the commemoration of the 350th Anniversary of the Jewish Community here in Curaçao, and were all accomplished in 2001.

In addition, the Jewish Community ordered replicas of some gravestones to be made of the strong synthetic material “Corian”. This material, however, within a short period of 5 to 7 years, also fell into disrepair, probably because of acid rain as sulphuric vapors from the refinery mixed with rain showers.

In the meanwhile the original gravestones deteriorated such that the images and inscriptions of most graves are no longer readable. At present no further attempts are being made to stop the further decline of the gravestones

The Revival of the House of the Living

The House of the Living can, however, rise again by making publicly available documentation of the cemetery using photographs of the gravestones with their images and inscriptions. These pictures of the tombstones are especially useful because, as previously stated, they yield an extra source, in addition to the written sources from the various archives, for the study of the history of the Jews in Curaçao. The photography of these tombstones is also of great significance because of the increasing interest in genealogy (the study of ancestors). The photographed inscriptions and images also give information about migration and social mobility in Curaçao.

In fact, based on the cultural and historical value of the gravestones of Beth Haim, the Jewish Community Mikvé Israel-Emanuel could strive to get the cemetery classified as a monument, according to the criteria of the Law on Monuments. The Jewish Community might also strive to get Beth Haim placed on the list of protected monuments with the collaboration of the Foundation for Monument Preservation.

The research of Isaac S. Emmanuel, the photographs from the forties and fifties, the castings made by Alexeenko and the photographs made around 2001, now demonstrate the measure of the decline of the gravestones over the course of time from 1930 to 2001. These photographs and descriptions will make up the most important sources for the documentation of the cemetery. Through this, the cemetery Beth Haim will be kept alive and the documentation will be one of the sources for the study of the rich history of the Jews in Curaçao.

The Beth Haim website, developed in 2012 and 2013, <http://www.bethhaimcuracao.com>, therefore not only wishes to preserve for posterity the importance of the “speaking stones” of the Beth Haim cemetery of Curaçao, but also pays tribute to all those who through the past decades have attempted in so many ways to preserve this historical and cultural legacy of the Jews of Curaçao.

The above article was written by Drs. F. E. Gibbes, who was also responsible for the archival research. It was translated from the original Dutch text by Vivian LeBlanc and edited by Jane Gomes Casseres.

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