

## Rethinking the History of the Portuguese Jews in Hamburg in the Light of Congregational Records

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Martins, Hugo (2021), *Os Judeus Portugueses de Hamburgo: A História de uma Comunidade Mercantil no Século XVII*. Firenze: Firenze University Press.

In the seventeenth century, Amsterdam's position as the great metropolis of the Western Sephardic diaspora was consolidated by the size of the Portuguese-Jewish community established there and the influence of its members on Atlantic trade networks, but also by the model role played by the Talmud Torah congregation, whose structures and regulations were replicated by other Sephardic congregations. However, the seventeenth century also saw the emergence of other mercantile communities of Portuguese Jews in Europe, which consolidated their position in the Western Sephardic diaspora by attracting a growing number of Iberian *conversos* and Jews from other places. The city of Hamburg is one such case. Throughout the second half of the century, this port city slowly established itself as a "Diasporic Metropolis" (Monge and Muchnik 2022: 82–103). Why and how are the two questions that Hugo Martins tries to answer in his new book *Os Portugueses de Hamburgo*, which results from his PhD thesis presented to the Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa.

This book brings an important contribution to the knowledge of a Sephardic diaspora community somewhat neglected by historiography, especially if compared with Amsterdam or even London. Nevertheless, the Hamburg community has been the topic of a few sporadic studies since the mid-nineteenth century. More recently, Michael Studemund-Halévy (2000), Studemund-Halévy and Peter Koj (1994–97), Jorun Poettering (2019), and Florbela Veiga Frade (2011 & 2013) have undertaken new approaches essentially focused on the cultural, social, and economic history of the Portuguese Jews in Hamburg. Hugo Martins presents here a new perspective by addressing the history of this community under an institutional and legal view primarily supported in sources produced by the Sephardic congregation itself (in particular, the *Jüdische Gemeinden* fonds of the State Archives of Hamburg). The language barrier (the congregational records are written in Portuguese) has

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probably discouraged scholars from deepening the analysis of this archival fonds, but Martins aims to fill this gap with this book.

Only one seventeenth-century volume of the *Livros da Nação* (literally, books of the nation) or protocol books (*Protokoll Büchen*, as they are named in the State Archives catalogue) of the Hamburg congregation remains, which covers the period from 1652 to 1682. The protocol books contain the record of the decisions made by the congregation's governing committee, the *Mahamad*. This committee was elected annually and exercised a regulatory function over the various dimensions of the community's daily life. Thus, the protocol books offer a comprehensive overview of the community's institutional structures, religious life, solidarities and mutual aid, social relations, and ways of monitoring behaviors and deviations from orthodoxy, as well as elements relating to the members' economic activities and private lives. The special attention Martins gives to this source determines the structure and methodological approach of his work.

The singularities of the establishment of the Portuguese-Jewish community in Hamburg in the seventeenth century had an indelible influence on the way the congregation was organized and, above all, on the strong disciplinary and controlling action exercised by the communal authorities—this is the central idea advocated by Hugo Martins in *Os Judeus Portugueses* and the question that gives cohesion to the three parts of the book: “Contexto Histórico” (historical framework), “O Kahal e a sua organização” (the congregation and its organization) and “Ortodoxia e Moralidade” (orthodoxy and morality). The first part, therefore, proves especially enlightening for the reader unfamiliar with the topic, particularly the second chapter, in which the author presents an overview of the history of the Portuguese settlement in Hamburg in the seventeenth century. Martins demonstrates that although the first residence contract signed between the Senate and the Portuguese community dates to 1612, restrictions on practicing the Jewish religion outside the private domain remained throughout the century. Although the Portuguese community started to organize itself in clandestine congregations quite early, it was not until 1650 that a new contract officially authorized Jewish worship in private houses. Portuguese Jews were then allowed private religious gatherings, though with a limited number of people. The establishment of synagogues was still forbidden. Thus, even at the zenith of the community's economic and cultural development during the 1650s and 1670s, the successive attempts to build a synagogue failed when faced with the fierce opposition of the Lutheran Church and its influence on the Senate.

Therefore, the *Livro da Nação* (1652–1682) reflect the institutional organization and daily life of a congregation with no official synagogue, subject to the constant opposition of the local Lutheran church, whose functioning was confined to the private domain while its survival was permanently threatened by the precariousness of a status that depended on time-limited residence contracts. As Martins (2021: 110) notes, this unique situation created “an obstacle to the process of re-Judaization” and “severely hampered the development of Jewish institutions and way of life” in Hamburg.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the author explains how the pre-1650 regime of clandestinity determined the late unification of the community (divided into three congregations before 1652) and was subsequently reflected in the persistence of internal tensions.

This “particular trajectory” (Martins 2021: 109) of the Hamburg community indelibly influenced the organization of the *Kahal* (congregation), whose various dimensions are analyzed in detail in the second part of the book: hierarchical structure; financial administration; officers and ministers; justice; and religious, educational, and charitable structures. In all these dimensions, the parallels with other congregations of the Western Sephardic diaspora are evident—for example, in the draconian control exercised by the *Mahamad* over the daily life of the community and its members; in the types of taxes (*finta*, *promessas*, *imposta*) that financially supported the congregation; or in some educational and charitable institutions, whose purposes and designations replicated those formed in other Sephardic communities (e.g., Talmud Torah, Bikur Holim Hebra, Guemillut Hassadim, or Ets Haim). These parallels prove the influence that the organizational model of the Amsterdam congregation, as the main hub of the seventeenth-century Western Sephardic diaspora, had on the institutions and hierarchical structures of the Hamburg community. The assumption of this influence is, in fact, identified by Martins in the chapter he dedicates to the community’s charities. However, it would be worth extending this comparison to other dimensions of the *Kahal* organization analyzed in this section and correlating them with other cases within the Western Sephardic diaspora area. This kind of analysis would balance out the overly descriptive nature of this section and enhance a more refined assessment of the singularities of the Hamburg community.

Communal justice is the topic to which the author devotes a more in-depth analytical exercise. Like in other early modern Jewish communities, Hamburg communal justice had jurisdiction over disputes involving community members. Thus, Martins (2021: 196) justifies this special attention paid to litigiousness by stating that it was “through the plea system and

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

more generally, through communal justice, that the community defined in pragmatic terms its ideas, norms and opinions.” Indeed, based on the analysis of litigation processes, Martins draws some interesting conclusions about the profile and evolution of the Hamburg community. Firstly, the upward trend in the number of pleadings in the 1670s reflects a period of economic crisis marked by the decline of Atlantic trade, which forced numerous Sephardic merchants to shift their commercial activity towards local and regional markets. This situation resulted in the growth of trade relations between members of the community, and thus an increase in internal disputes. Secondly, the high litigiousness was also “a reflection of a greater evil” (Martins 2021: 213)—the intense conflict within the community and the growing social disintegration.

Another evidence of disintegration in the Portuguese Jewish community of Hamburg is addressed in the third part of the book, namely the extensive application of the *herem* (expulsion and excommunication of offenders), a disciplinary measure that aimed to “define the cultural, religious and social boundaries of the community and preserve its Jewish character vis-à-vis the surrounding Christian society” (Martins 2021: 272). In a community facing serious problems of internal consistency, precariousness and external opposition, a more extensive application of the maximum penalty of *herem* would be expected. In fact, Martins proves it with numbers: from 1652 to 1682, the protocol books record 67 cases of expulsions and excommunications, a particularly high number compared with the 70 cases found by Yosef Kaplan in Amsterdam between 1622 and 1789. According to Martins, this high number reflected, on the one hand, the surrounding political and social tensions and, on the other hand, the severity of the disciplinary action of the community authorities in response to growing social turmoil. Such disciplinary action went beyond community life and also extended to the domestic sphere. The chapters dedicated to disciplinary action related to women and family life show this octopus-like control exercised by the *Mahamad* and also the constant vigilance from the host society and the Lutheran clergy, which ended up being reflected in restrictions on religious life imposed by the community authorities themselves. Martins identifies here another singularity of the Portuguese Jewish community of Hamburg resulting from its “particular trajectory.”

In sum, *Os Judeus Portugueses de Hamburgo* offers a comprehensive insight into the institutional organization, the administration of justice, and the religious and behavioral surveillance of the Portuguese Jewish community of Hamburg in the seventeenth century. The text is accompanied by a set of appendices that include transcriptions of excerpts from the *Livro da Nação* (protocol book), namely the decision on the unification of the three

congregations in 1652, the first *ascamot* of the congregation and bylaws of other institutions (Talmud Torah and Guemillut Hassadim), lists of taxpayers, and extracts regarding Sabbatai Zevi and the case of the quarrel involving the Lima family. These appendices are of particular interest given the difficult access to the protocol books which, unfortunately, are not yet available online in digital format. However, other dimensions of the Hamburg community deserve more attention from the author, especially considering the book's subtitle, which suggests an approach to the "history of a merchant community." Indeed, the commercial dimension of this community, predominantly formed by "Port Jews," following the concept coined by Louis Dubin (1999), is little explored by Martins. This fact is probably due to the documentary corpus that supports his research, which invariably leads to a more institutional and legal perspective than an economic one. Notwithstanding, I advise that the reading of this book be complemented by Jorun Poettering's *Migrating Merchants: Trade, Nation, and Religion in Seventeenth-Century Hamburg and Portugal* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2019). The two works complete each other and offer the reader two different but worthwhile perspectives on the Portuguese Jewish community of Hamburg.

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