

## **Jewish Pepper Traders of the Malabar Coast: The Rahabis**

by Brian Weinstein

The great success of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) on the southwest coast of India from the mid-seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century depended in part on the Rahabi family, Jews who arrived from Aleppo in the mid-seventeenth century. Three generations of Rahabis were employed by the VOC as chief company merchants, charged with the primary task of purchasing pepper.

The demise of the VOC and the loss of Dutch territorial claims in 1795 marked the end of the Rahabis' economic prominence. They are well remembered for their economic role and even their political role as intermediaries between Dutch and Indian rulers. In addition, they strengthened the Jewish community in south India and the Bombay area and provided an important link between Jews in India, Yemen, and Europe. Because of their prominence, many scholars have written about them, and we know what Ezekiel II looked like because a Dutch portrait of him has survived.

However, sources about this extraordinary family are far from exhausted. Their descendants have archives and Christian sources such as the Syrian Church have not been fully examined. The archives of the King of Travancore, which are located at Kowdiar Palace in Trivandrum, must shed some light on the Rahabis' negotiating skills, and the family also appears in the Tamil Nadu archives, the Kerala archives, and the Jewish archives in Amsterdam. However, the most important resource is the VOC collection at the Algemeen Rijksarchief located in The Hague. In this paper, I want to examine a few documents from the VOC papers, and from the Tamil Nadu State and Kerala State Archives, after explaining the historical background of the Rahabi family.

### **Why did the Dutch Need the Rahabis?**

After the opening of sea routes to Asia at the very end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century, the Dutch, newly freed from Spanish control, saw trade opportunities in Indian spices and textiles. To compete with the Portuguese, British and French, and to deal with Indian traders and political leaders, they needed trustworthy, well informed, permanent local representatives to negotiate the delicate annual contracts for pepper and other spices with a multitude of Indian intermediaries. The Dutch met members of the Rahabi family, observant Jews living among their co-religionists in Jew Town, Cochin, and hired them, eventually giving them very important responsibilities for the Company's welfare.

Although some individuals harbored anti-Jewish feelings, on the whole, the Dutch were open and free of prejudice. They had little time or inclination for religious dogmatism, and Jews were welcome in Dutch territory. The Dutch merchants' and traders' motto must have been "business is business," and they lived under a 1579 law guaranteeing freedom of worship.

According to Jonathan Israel, as Dutch trade expanded in the early 17th century, the Dutch realized that they needed more capital, a better credit system, improved exchange facilities and a better method of gathering information about overseas markets. This meant that their commercial institutions had to be open to everyone: "By 1612, there were three hundred licensed brokers at Amsterdam, ten of whom were Sephardi Jews specializing in levant silks and Ibero-American colonial products, especially sugars."<sup>1</sup> New Christians, who had fled the Iberian Peninsula, were welcomed, and some of them rejoined the Jewish community. Jewish influence in The Netherlands (even though the name of the country changed according to its political status, I shall use this term throughout the paper, for convenience) itself facilitated contact with Jews in India, the Caribbean, and the Americas. The Dutch East Indies Company or VOC, chartered in 1602, accepted Jewish investors, who took advantage of the opportunity. One hundred years later, twenty-five percent of VOC shareholders were Jewish.<sup>2</sup>

Jews also purchased a higher percentage of VOC shipments to the Chamber of Amsterdam than their representation in the population would suggest. They were three percent of the total population at the beginning of the eighteenth century, according to Bloom (p. 122). Between 1700 and 1704, "Jews bought 6.97 percent of the total sales of the Chamber of Amsterdam."<sup>3</sup> They were, by far, the largest buyers of diamonds and other jewels, which other Jews cut and fashioned, but their interest in pepper was small. Early in the eighteenth century, Jews purchased only 1.9 percent of pepper imports.<sup>4</sup>

Those Jews who already resided in southern India, and who knew about Dutch openness in contrast with Portugal's oppressive and cruel policies toward non-Christians, helped the Dutch before they had political control, as seen by individual examples and by examples from the community as a whole. On the west coast, a man referred to in the literature as "the Jew Azzelan/Assalan" introduced the Dutch to the Indian merchants of the great port of Masulipatam in about 1605, so that the Dutch could purchase the cotton goods they needed for their commercial interests in the southeast Asian spice islands. In other words, the Dutch traded Indian textiles, so highly valued in the islands of present-day Indonesia, for spices such as pepper which they sold elsewhere in Asia for other products, eventually trading Chinese silk for Japanese silver. Azzelan/Assalan must have had good relations with the government of Golconda, which used the port of Masulipatam: in 1606, a Dutch trader saw him on board a ship that belonged to the king of Golconda accompanying a consignment of iron to the port.<sup>5</sup> Encouraged by its

successes, the VOC set up its headquarters at Pulicat on the Coromandel Coast in 1627 and aggressively sent its agents north to Bengal.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, VOC's Portuguese competitors were well ensconced on the west coast of India and doing their best to exclude other countries and monopolize all trade, particularly in black pepper. The Portuguese built a fort at Cochin right in the middle of the black pepper producing area in 1503, only five years after Vasco da Gama landed on the coast. However, they weakened their position by permanently antagonizing the local Jewish residents, who became enthusiastic allies of the Dutch. The latter were already in Ceylon and were trading with Calicut, north of Cochin. In 1661, the Dutch seized Cranganore and, two years later, they took control of Cochin. Then, with their near monopoly of the spice trade, their profits soared 520 percent from 1661 to 1670, and from "1688 to 1698 it went up to...820 percent; other items yielded about 60 percent profit."<sup>7</sup> In 1795, the Dutch lost their Indian possessions to the British East India Company.

### **Jews on the Malabar Coast**

We know that trade with India has occupied a place in rabbinical consciousness at least since the beginning of the Common Era. The Babylonian Talmud, codified during the fifth century C.E., has forty-five specific references to one Indian product, pepper, plus references to Indian ginger and other items of trade. Pepper was so valuable that the Talmud says that if pepper is part of a deceased man's possessions, it must be divided equally among his sons (*Baba Bathra* 126b). Jews living in the Roman Empire benefited from the Roman demand for pepper and other Indian spices by the first century BCE, when Rome conquered Egypt and took over its trade routes with the east. Upper class Romans "began to spend fortunes for dinners," because these Indian products were so expensive. Roman coins found in India testify to the high prices they paid.<sup>8</sup> According to Federico De Romanis, because of the attractiveness of pepper and pearls from southern India, "it is not by chance that the finds of Roman coins in the Indian subcontinent have preponderantly come from southern India, nor that the most vivid memories of this trade are preserved in Tamil poetry."<sup>9</sup>

Indian sources confirm Roman testimonies. De Romanis cites ancient Tamil documents that tell of trade with the Yavarar, traders from the Roman Empire, bringing gold in exchange for pepper.<sup>10</sup> Romila Thapar speculates about the identity of these Yavarar or Yavanas: "On the Roman side, the trade was in the hands of the Greek and Jewish merchants of Egypt..."<sup>11</sup> Tenth century Jewish scholar Sa'adia Gaon referred to India as an attractive destination for Jewish traders, but he made no reference to any Jewish community permanently established there.

However, according to the Jewish traditions of settlement on the southwest coast of India, actual Jewish settlement dates back about 2,000 years to Roman times. No independent evidence supports this testimony. Evidence shows that

Jews have been present for about 1,000 years, and that the Hindu kingdoms never oppressed Jews.<sup>12</sup> The famous copper plates granting certain rights to Cochin Jewish leader Joseph Rabban probably date from the eleventh century. Benjamin of Tudela reported seeing dark-skinned Jews in southwest India in the twelfth century. Documents from the Cairo Genizah tell us that Jewish traders went to Malabar from Egypt via Yemen from the ninth to the eleventh centuries; a Jewish tomb dating from 1269 has been found; and the Paradesi Synagogue of Cochin was built in 1568.<sup>13</sup> More importantly, a vibrant Jewish community composed mainly of "black" or "Malabari" Jews and of Sephardic "white" or "Paradesi" Jews originally from Yemen, Baghdad and the Ottoman Empire existed on the southwest coast of India by the time the Rahabis settled there. The Rahabis would worship in the Paradesi synagogue, the "foreigner" or "white" synagogue, and live among the Paradesi in Jew Town, Mattancheri, Cochin.

### **Rahabis Arrive**

Author Walter Fischel wrote that he believes the family name, Rahabi, is derived from Rahaba, a city along the Tigris, where the family originated. This probably makes them descendants of Babylonian Jews rather than of Spanish and Portuguese Jewish refugees who arrived in this area only during the early sixteenth century. The Rahabis moved to Aleppo, where they must have learned a lot about trade with eastern countries including India. Aleppo was already an important trading center. It had been the western terminus of the famous silk route between west Asia and China, and it was part of a dynamic overland network that included India. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, in 1517 to be exact, Aleppo came under Ottoman rule, which opened more markets in Anatolia and into Europe. "In Aleppo, four major long-distance routes came together." In the first, Aleppo was the intermediary from Istanbul to Damascus to Medina and Mecca. The second linked Aleppo east to Baghdad "by a well-traveled caravan route, which followed the course of the Euphrates" and on to India. The third connected Aleppo "with Mediterranean Sea routes by way of Iskenderun and Payas." And the fourth encompassed Aleppo's Mediterranean trade with Tripoli.<sup>14</sup>

The Rahabis had to be aware of trade with India while they were in Aleppo, and they may have participated directly or indirectly in trade with India long before they actually settled there. It is even possible that they were spice traders whose business was thwarted when the Portuguese and Dutch arrived on the coast of India and effectively ended the overland trade in spices from India through the Ottoman Empire to Europe.<sup>15</sup> Despite European efforts to monopolize the Indian Ocean trade, this vast expanse of water was a relatively free area and attracted foreigners. Even the Ottoman naval fleet briefly made its presence felt. In short, in Aleppo, a lot of information was available about India.

Why would Jews want to leave Aleppo during the mid-seventeenth century?

For many reasons. In Avigdor Levy's masterful *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, he explains that all the traders in the Ottoman empire — Jewish, Christian, and Muslim — were losing business to the European maritime powers such as the Portuguese who had found a route to India. In addition, Jews were beginning to suffer certain disadvantages as Jews. Increasing trade with Europe and the increasing involvement of Christians, such as Greeks and Armenians from the Ottoman Empire, worked to the disadvantage of Jews because Europeans tended to prefer to trade with Ottoman Christians when they were available.<sup>16</sup> Textile production, in which Jews were a significant presence, declined in the face of European competition.<sup>17</sup>

As a whole, the Ottoman Empire had been weakened by wars with the Iranians in the 1620s through the 1630s. Off and on from 1623 through 1656, the Ottoman administration was shaken by internal conflicts. The Jewish community suffered a major crisis as a result of Shabbetai Tzevi's declaration in 1648-49 in Izmir, western Anatolia, that he was the Messiah. He traveled to Aleppo, where he caused great excitement, in about 1665. After Shabbetai Tzevi's arrest and conversion to Islam in 1666, his most important supporter, Nathan of Gaza, settled for a time in Aleppo, the Rahabis' hometown.<sup>18</sup> The economic and political decline of the Ottoman Empire and effervescence within the empire's Jewish community encouraged Jewish entrepreneurs to depart for lands where they sensed new opportunities.

According to the family history, as written in 1939 by Naphtali Roby (who changed his name from Rahabi), Ezekiel Rahabi left his family in Aleppo and went to Cochin in 1646. He seems to have been a small trader in local merchandise. In 1664, his 18-year-old son David came from Aleppo, arriving too late to see his father who had died.<sup>19</sup>

In Cochin, David married into the Ashkenazi family. His daughter, Esther, married into the Hallegua family and, after his first wife died, David also married into the Hallegua family. The Halleguas traced their ancestry to Spain where the family name was Halioua; they migrated to the Ottoman Empire (Libya and Syria) in the fifteenth century and moved to India in 1586.<sup>20</sup> The alliance between the Rahabi and Hallegua families, which expanded with the later addition of the Koder family from Baghdad, formed the core of the Paradesi community in the twentieth century.

Following custom, David named his first son, who was born in 1694, after his father, Ezekiel. This alternation of names from grandfather to grandson can be a source of some confusion. As a result, the custom has been to give each one a number. So, David's son Ezekiel is called Ezekiel II to distinguish him from the first Rahabi in India, Ezekiel I. (Ezekiel II is also sometimes called "Hagadol" [the great], to distinguish him from his grandfather.)

David firmly established the family business by winning the trust of both the

Indians and the Dutch. From 1680, he was the chief agent of the VOC. He befriended a very rich Indian merchant and promoted the latter's interests with the Dutch: "In 1695, David Rahabi appeared before the Malabar Council as the attorney of the great Babba Prabhu to settle Babba's outstanding accounts with the Dutch."<sup>21</sup> David also intervened in a dispute within the ruling family by giving money to one side and promoting their claims with the Dutch. VOC archives show the extent of Rahabi's involvement, noting that his actions strengthened the Rahabi family's commercial position. Both the Dutch and the Rajah of Cochin seemed to have had complete confidence in David in anything concerned with the buying and selling of spices. The Rahabis' intimacy with, and dependence upon, Indian rulers had immense advantages, but it also carried disadvantages that contributed to their downfall.

David and his descendants had broader interests, too. They were devoted to the Paradesi Jewish community and made contract with the Sephardic Jews of Amsterdam to obtain Torah scrolls, prayer books, the Talmud, commentaries and other holy items from them. Although the Paradesi prayers generally follow the Sephardic custom, the Paradesis have many prayers and melodies that are particular to them. According to historian J. B. Segal, "the *minhag* of Cochin is generally Sephardi. But...Cochin Jewry has preserved an ancient stratum that reaches back to...its probable origins in Mesopotamia....the pronunciation of Hebrew resembles that of Gaonic Babylonia in Yemen."<sup>22</sup>

David I died in 1726 and his son Ezekiel II (1694 - 1771) led the family and the Jews to new heights during the most successful period of Dutch commerce. Succeeding his father as chief merchant of the VOC, Ezekiel II was the VOC's most important intermediary for almost half a century. He, too, married a member of the Hallegua family, Abraham Hallegua's daughter Rahma, who was born in 1694.

### VOC and Pepper

As the Chief Merchant of the VOC at Cochin, the "Joods Koopman" (Jewish merchant), one of Ezekiel II's most important jobs was the purchase of black pepper. The Dutch were already obtaining lower quality pepper and other spices in Sumatra, but with control of Malabar production they would have a monopoly and could, therefore, set the price to suit themselves. Furthermore, shipping costs from Malabar to Europe were obviously lower than shipping costs from Sumatra to Europe.<sup>23</sup> Controlling Malabar had the additional advantage of protecting Dutch interests (e.g. cinnamon) in Ceylon, where the Dutch feared attacks from the Portuguese and English.

Even with a powerful Dutch presence on the Malabar Coast, the effort to monopolize the pepper trade required great skill because of the fractious political systems (four major kingdoms and dozens of smaller autonomous entities) and because of the pepper producers' ability to evade control by secretly shipping



pepper overland to the western Coromandel Coast if the Dutch prices did not suit them. The Malayalam-speaking Indians logically preferred free trade; the Dutch noticed that individual pepper traders would resist even their kings' efforts to abide by the purchase prices set in negotiations with Rahabi. In addition to the possibility of circumventing the Dutch and Rahabi by going to the east coast, individual small traders could go to Calicut where the English were buying spices. The Indian traders from Gujarat and the expanding power of the Raja of Travancore, Martanda Varma, made matters worse because they threatened the Dutch monopolies in the 1730s and 1740s.<sup>24</sup> Stiff competition from all sides made the Dutch very dependent on Rahabi's skills. The Dutch were not privy to Rahabi's sources and ways of negotiating but, particularly from the 1750s, "the rajas of Cochin and the VOC were thrown into one another's arms as traders, and both depended for their procurement of pepper in quantity upon the Rehavis [sic], the Jewish merchants of the city, who apparently obtained it either from the same hidden sources of supply the Dutch had long tried to stop, or else from the lands of the Zamorin [King of Calicut] (which, as always, remained a free-trade zone)."<sup>25</sup>

Standard agreements — negotiated by Rahabi — between the Dutch and the Indian rulers provided for Dutch purchase of "all pepper at a fixed price, except one-third which the native chiefs or their merchants should keep for their own trade."<sup>26</sup> The Dutch could not be sure if they were, in fact, receiving two-thirds. The VOC was much better off dealing with Rahabi, an employee of the VOC, than with local rulers directly. For example, he was able to procure pepper for 95 Rupees per candy (a weight measure for black pepper equal to 500 lbs. in 1743),<sup>27</sup> a price "very much below the market value,"<sup>28</sup> so the profits were enormous. In Malabar, "the equivalent of 12,000 to 18,000 sterling would buy...a million pounds of pepper, which would be sold in Europe for the equivalent of 50,000 to 80,000 after deducting wastage."<sup>29</sup> Working for the VOC, Ezekiel Rahabi also purchased cloth, which was very popular in the spice islands of southeast Asia.

Adriaan Moens, Governor of the Malabar Coast, wrote a report for his successor in 1781. It is worth quoting to gain an understanding of the Dutch appreciation for Rahabi: "Ezechiel Rabbi [sic] was formerly almost the only merchant here, at least he alone had the title of Company's merchant, and if anyone, Jew, Canarin or Benyan, took goods from the Company in order to sell them to the dealers, it was done through the channel of Ezechiel or with his consent, so that this old man was almost master of the trade here, which, to tell the plain truth, was not to the Company's interest." He separately noted, "This Jew is at bottom an honest and upright character and had much influence over the native princes and the notables of their kingdoms. It must also be acknowledged that this Ezechiel was often and in various circumstances of service to the Company."<sup>30</sup>

During a visit to the archives in The Netherlands, in Tamil Nadu and in Karala, I found several documents that show Ezekiel II's key role as an intermediary and

an advisor to the VOC. He had special contracts to meet new or temporarily increased demands for pepper. Here is an example of the latter from 1733:

"I, the undersigned, Ezechiel Rhaby [sic: the name is spelled different ways], merchant living in Cochin, declare and I and His Honour Adriaan Maten, Commodore and chief of the coast of Malabar, Canar and Vingural, as well as the political board of the Company, have determined and contracted today to deliver to Fort Wilhelmus...and her servant, from today onwards until August of the next financial year a quantity of 500 candies...good and dry pepper at a price of 13 golden European ducats for each candie of 500 pounds without infringing the yearly delivery. Also promising that everything from Cranganoor and further north will be delivered...to fulfill the contract...[to be] paid under condition that no pepper will be sold to foreign nations, neither English, French nor whatever. If this happens, the Company will confiscate the pepper. The undersigned declares that he understands the contents of this contract, which he has ratified with his usual signature. Contracted and determined at police station in the city of Cochin, the 12th October 1733."

The clerk who copied the contract for the records noted that Rahabi signed "with some Hebrew characters [and] ...that they stand for the name Ezekiel Rhaby. J. Steenhuizen signed for the board [Company]."<sup>31</sup>

In a letter dated 3 February 1737, Ezekiel wrote to the Dutch governor of the Coast of Malabar, Julius Valenthijn Stein van Collenesse, that he had met with the Indian leader of a small community. The latter explained current problems with the pepper trade and depended on Rahabi to solve the problems with Dutch backing. The Indian, referred to in Dutch as Aijnicoettij, said that he had fought to maintain his independence from the Zamorin of Calicut.

The Indian lost his position, but with the help of the Rajah of Cochin and the Dutch, he regained his territories. "This was in the time of His Honor Governor Keetel. He posted guards, yes even up to the river Poccaijda, in order to protect the pepper and to bring all the area from Malpapooiu under the power of the Company so that Pepper could be transported...In return for [Dutch] support Aijnicoettij had always given his support as a sign of appreciation.

"Things changed after the last war. The pepper trade declined. Two years ago Aija Pattare had come to Aijnicoettij to collect pepper in the name of the Company...but the pepper was stolen."

The Indian then asked for protection. Rahabi explained that, according to the Indian, "The Company's trade could not be continued unless the merchants could



get protection by keeping the roads guarded and under surveillance. He promised to do everything that is in his power, and that is why he ordered two St. Thomas Christian merchants living in his territory to speak with [Rahabi] about the pepper trade."

Rahabi went to investigate and spoke with the Christian merchants who told him that they could obtain pepper for the Company, but for the Company to maintain its monopoly, which meant it would be paying less than other buyers, the Company needed to exert its power: "They need the power to control so that no other pepper is imported; otherwise the Company would have to raise the price to 16 ducats and to protect the merchants." The merchants want to "do their best for the Company."

The Indians asked the Company to build a storehouse and to supply guards while the Indian leader also would supply some of his own men. He also promised to build a market. He requested more protection at his own home, to staff a guard post on the road used to transport pepper and "to continue the watchmen at other places." The local leader promised to supply some of the materials necessary to build guard posts. Rahabi assured the Indians that the Dutch would do all they could to satisfy their requests. Rahabi signed his report to the Dutch in Hebrew.

Attached to this document is a later intelligence report to the Dutch on pepper production. Rahabi obviously had people all over the area collecting information for him. On 12 March 1736, he sent the VOC a report on pepper that was being transported against the will of the Dutch, to the east or Coromandel Coast where the Dutch had no control. "The whole of Peritalij is like a pepper garden which yearly produces 3,300 candies." He explained the sources of 13,795 candies of pepper.<sup>32</sup> Rahabi also advised the Dutch to begin paying the Indians with gold pagoda coins instead of with fanums, which they are obliged to change into pagodas to purchase items from others. They lose money every time they change or purchase goods from others.<sup>33</sup>

Like his father, Ezekiel II intervened in royal family quarrels by supporting one side or the other, by explaining what was going on to the Dutch and by supplying money to one of the parties.<sup>34</sup> It was no secret that the Rahabis prepared intelligence reports about the King for the VOC. On the first of October 1771, the Governor General of India, residing in Batavia, wrote to the Raja of Cochin complaining about the latter's lack of cooperation: "It was not proper on Your Highness' part to have increased the customs duty; perhaps Your Highness may not be aware that the merchants, especially the Jew Ezechiel, have given us better information about the new tariff of duty."<sup>35</sup>

Another document shows that the Rahabis' relationship with the Dutch was not always perfect. In 1732, only six years after Ezekiel II succeeded his father, one Mr. De Roode accused him of shipping opium and other goods on his own account. Ezekiel II was interrogated: "The Jewish merchant Ezechiel Rabbij has answered that he, directly or indirectly, had not the slightest information about

the sending and shipping of the mentioned opium or other contraband goods..." He challenged his accusers to "try to prove this."<sup>36</sup>

The Dutch depended on the Rahabis and other Jews, such as Isaac Sargun, for various diplomatic assignments. For example, the King of Travancore, who was gradually expanding his control, presented a serious threat to Dutch pepper purchases. He demanded much higher prices than the Dutch were accustomed to paying. In the early 1740s, the VOC sent Ezekiel II to negotiate with him, but Ezekiel was not successful.<sup>37</sup> Indians also wrote their complaints to Ezekiel II. In 1763, for example, the king or Zamorin of Calicut, a very powerful person, wrote complaining that the Dutch seized the revenues of territories belonging to him because he owed the VOC some money: "We request Your Honour [Ezekiel Rahabi] to speak with Your Honour [the Dutch governor] to stop the seizure in order to maintain our mutual alliance. The debt we have to the Company will be paid soon... Your Honour is a good person with an intimate knowledge of our affairs. Therefore we request you to do your best by His Honour [the governor] for the continuation of our friendship...and let us know the result."<sup>38</sup>

Another Jew was more famous as a diplomat for the Dutch. Issac Sargun, an independent merchant not in the employ of the VOC, lived in Calicut, then an independent kingdom. His family, like the Rahabis, may have hailed from Syria, but he was born in Constantinople. He probably arrived in South Asia in the early eighteenth century. A very successful trader at Calicut, Sargun served the VOC as a diplomatic intermediary in their dealings with Haydar Alli Khan and Tipu Sultan from 1756 to 1793.<sup>39</sup>

As Ezekiel II became older, the Dutch began to change their strategy of depending on one person to represent their interests, but because of their respect and even affection for Ezekiel II, they did not want to replace him while he was alive. Adriaan Moens wrote, "So it would have been a hard blow to the old man if in order to put a stop to his monopolizing the trade, we had wished to keep him out of it in his old days and in the last moments of his life, and so I had made up my mind to set to work imperceptibly and by degrees. For this reason, I occasionally discoursed with him on this subject, and showed that the trade should be free, and could not be carried on with propriety any longer as before, and that anyone, who should deserve the title of Company's merchant, ought not to buy the Company's goods in parcels, after first having found buyers, for the Company could do business in this way as well itself; but that a merchant ought to buy up the whole cargo, and that no one could trade without running risks." Thus, Ezekiel agreed to train more than one person to replace him eventually.<sup>40</sup> Moens also warned against putting the monopoly on trade into the hands of one ethnic group or another.

Ezekiel, on his side, realized he could not depend exclusively on his employment with the VOC for his financial welfare. Shipping lists from Nagapatnam, which was controlled by the VOC until 1781, show that a "sloop called 'Johana

Catherina' belonging to the Jewish merchant Elias [sic] Rahaby came to Nagapatnam on June 14, 1769, with areca nuts, indigenous lacquer and rosewater. The "Cochin Ghoerab," belonging to the same merchant, was noted to arrive at Nagapatnam in 1779 with areca nuts, incense...and rosewater."<sup>41</sup>

Inevitably Ezekiel II had some dealings with the British without betraying his commitment to the Dutch. The British East India Company knew that they could depend on Rahabi for accurate information. One document from their archives indicates that when they were looking to purchase sandalwood in 1765, the British at Tellicherry wrote to Bombay: "We are sorry to acquaint your Honours with our ill success in attempting to procure Sandal wood at foreign ports as not a stick can possibly be got at Mangalulore, Callicut or Cochin from which latter place Ezekiel Rabbi has informed the Chief none is procurable and by return of the Person sent to inquire privately for this Article we learn the whole of what that Merchant had which was about four hundred /400/ candies had been contracted for by private traders...."<sup>42</sup>

Ezekiel's relations with other Jews were interesting, but the Dutch were sometimes a bit suspicious. For example, the Dutch were always worried that Malabar pepper would slip through their control and would be sold for higher prices to the British or to buyers outside India. Once they interrogated Rahabi about his relations with Yemen. The police, acting on the authority of the governor or Commodore, asked him about his "correspondence with a certain Jewish favorite of the Imam of Mocha [in Yemen]." The latter has regularly informed Rahabi about the prices for pepper in Mocha, and the Dutch want to have that information. He tells them that the price is more than twice as high in Yemen as in India. He also knows the prices in China and in the Sind region further north in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>43</sup>

The connection between the Jews of Malabar and Yemen is very ancient. There is plenty of documentation in the Cairo Geniza collection about trade between Aden and Malabar during the ninth to eleventh centuries, as S.D. Goitein pointed out in his many, very valuable publications.<sup>44</sup> Ranabir Chakravarti of the University of Calcutta has made extensive use of such Indian sources as copper plates and inscriptions on stones, and has found valuable Indian references in the Goitein publications. For example, a Jewish trader refers to an Indian shipowner named Fatanswami or, in "Arabicisation of Sanskrit *Pattanasvami*...The Jewish trade letter of 1139 clearly demonstrates that the *Pattansvami/Fatanswami* in question owned sea-going vessels, plying on the Malabar-Aden run."<sup>45</sup>

No doubt exists that Adenites settled in Cochin, often as brides. They became part of the tiny white or Paradesi community. Cochin had 40 Paradesi families near the end of Ezekiel II's life compared with about 430 Malabar or Black Jew households. Ezekiel II considered the Black Jews to be inauthentic. Rather, they are "gentiles who wanted God's closeness. They have equal rights with us; we do not marry them but live alongside them."<sup>46</sup> His contributions were, therefore, to

the Paradesi community: a clock tower for their synagogue, Chinese tiles for the floor and the construction of a small synagogue outside Cochin for ten Jewish families. Despite his antagonism to the Malabari Jews, he was paradoxically sympathetic toward the Bene Israel or Marathi-speaking Jews of the area of Bombay. He also helped the Syrian Christian church.<sup>47</sup>

After the death of Ezekiel II in 1771, the company decided to have more than one chief merchant. They had four — of whom two were Jews, David II (born 1721) and Ephraim Cohen, and two were Indians, Tamil-speaking Chettiars.

David expanded contacts with the Bene Israel of Bombay and supplied them with teachers in order to bring them closer to normative Judaism. He continued the intellectual traditions of his family by writing *Ohel David*, "a Hebrew treatise on the correct calculations for the fixing of the Hebrew calendar...and *Debir*, a commentary on the Hebrew prayer book..."<sup>48</sup> He died in 1791, four years before the end of Dutch control of Cochin.

The Rahabi family's fortunes declined. The British were less interested in Cochin than in Calicut, and David II's successor, his nephew Meyer, went bankrupt. Some details about the bankruptcy of the Rahabi family show their precarious position as intermediaries. In 1801, Meyer's creditors complained in a petition to Lord Clive, the Governor of Madras (under whose authority Cochin was placed), that Meyer had not paid his creditors. The Commissioner at Cochin, J. H. Oliphant, did an investigation and reported back to Fort St. George, the company headquarters at Madras, that Meyer had been paying the interest on loans made to him, but he ran into trouble: "Meyer Rabby [sic] and all the white Jews of Muttoncherry equally amenable to the authority of the Cochin Rajah and the Dutch government, were in late years so ill protected by either that he became discouraged in his commercial enterprises and, burdened with the interest of a heavy debt, he stopped payment and delivered in a Schedule of his property in June 1799..." The schedule showed that Meyer could have repaid his debts, but there was one big problem, as stated in Cochin on July 3, 1801: "this property is within the limits of the Cochin Rajah and amongst other outstanding claims due to Meyer Rabby his Inventory contains one on the Raja exceeding Eighty thousand Rupees..." If the Rajah paid the Rahabis, the latter could repay their own debts, "but the Cochin Rajah is not likely to pay the amount...or to allow of the property which consists in Houses and Grounds within his limits to be disposed of without Government's special interference to that end."<sup>49</sup>

In short, the very intimacy with the Indian ruler that helped the Rahabis establish themselves in Malabar was their undoing. When the Rajah could or would support them, they had advantages in trade, but when the Rajah needed their money, they had no choice but to turn it over to him. Then, they had no leverage on him for the return of their money. The Rahabis' relatives, the Halleguas and Koders, ultimately fared better. They invested in land on which they planted co-

conut trees and the Koders, in particular, established shops and stores that carry their name to this day.

### Conclusions

Jewish traders and intermediaries had great advantages over others as long as they monopolized certain skills, such as languages and overseas connections, and as long as they had protection from foreign companies and local rulers. This pattern applied as much to the Rahabis as to the Jewish traders operating out of Egypt in the tenth and eleventh centuries, who were protected by the Fatimid rulers in Egypt and Adenite authorities in Yemen, as Genizah documents show. New rulers and new competition — the Mamluks in Egypt and the British in India — and problems with the local rulers of India — the Maharajah of Travancore and the impecunious Rajah of Cochin — undermined the Jewish advantages.

For a century and a half, the Rahabis shaped the spice trade, particularly pepper. In the end they disappeared, but not without making an important cultural contribution with their profits. These Sephardic Jews will always be an important part of Indian and Dutch history, a key link between Europe and Asia.

### Notes

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