

The Earliest Footprint of a Messianic Queen: Sarah the Ashkenazi in Amsterdam

Abstract

A record from 1 November 1655 of a donation to a certain Sarah from Poland is probably the first documented historical appearance of Sarah the Ashkenazi, future wife of messiah Sabbatai Tsevi. Individually recorded donations by the Sephardic community to Polish refugees were quite unusual in these years, but, according to later biographical sources, the future messianic bride Sarah displayed a great talent for persuading others, and this explains why Amsterdam's Portuguese *mahamad* would give her money. Arriving as a Polish refugee around the time of this record, Sarah the Ashkenazi told a fantastic autobiographical tale that made her stand out among the other refugees and moreover forged a bond of kinship with an earlier refugee. Moreover, she might have claimed clairvoyant abilities.

Keywords

Jewish history – Sabbatianism – Sarah the Ashkenazi – Welfare – Refugees – Amsterdam

Escaping war and persecution, a large number of *polacos*, Jews from Poland and Lithuania, arrived in the mid-1650s in Amsterdam. In June 1656 for instance, the month before Spinoza's excommunication, the *Hollandtze Mercurius* reported the arrival of three ships with:

300 Jews who had fled from Poland, in a miserable state: the Jews of Amsterdam first brought them to two warehouses where they were freshened and cleaned up.

Afterward some were given housing and other means, while others went elsewhere, some of whom to England, in the hope to be able to settle there.¹

The support for the refugees on these ships is an example of how Amsterdam's wealthy Portuguese Sephardi community *Kahal Kados Talmud Tora* aided not only their own in need, but also Jews in distress outside of the Dutch Republic.² Its *Manual*, a financial register that listed collective and individual donations and recipients, reflects this generosity. In the year of these three ships' arrivals for instance, which was the Jewish year of 5416 (1655/1656), a number of legacies stipulated donations to the *misva de cativos*, a fund that was used for Jews in distress abroad.³ Moreover, in that same year Talmud Tora's members generously donated to the Polish poor: the three ships and the reception of the Polish refugees in Amsterdam were probably funded by a collection for the "poor of Poland" among individual members of Talmud Tora in the month of *sivan* that year, amounting together to 3,375 guilders.⁴

The *Manual*, however, also illustrates how Amsterdam's Portuguese Jews distinguished between their own poor and refugees, and had reservations about absorbing refugees in Amsterdam's Jewish community – consisting of Portuguese, German and Polish Jews belonging either to the Portuguese or Ashkenazi congregations.⁵ Yosef Kaplan and in particular Tirtsa Levie Bernfeld in her exhaustive study of early modern Amsterdam's Portuguese welfare, have already shown that charity funds were also used for removing

¹ Cited in Dutch in T. Levie Bernfeld, *Poverty and Welfare Among the Portuguese Jews in Early Modern Amsterdam* (Oxford/Portland 2012) 423 n. 159. Translations from non-English sources, unless noted otherwise, are the author's.

² The Ashkenazi community, though far less affluent, was reputedly more generous to the poor and to strangers than their Iberian brethren: Levie Bernfeld, *Poverty and Welfare* 181–182. Of this period, however, no charity records of the Ashkenazi congregation have survived.

³ Stadsarchief Amsterdam 334 (Amsterdam Portuguese Community) 174 (Manual 5413–5436). Several examples of individual legacies that were to be used for the *cativos* fund can be found on 139.

⁴ Stadsarchief Amsterdam 334 (Amsterdam Portuguese Community) 174 (Manual 5413–5436). The list of donors in this particular collection: 173–175. For additional examples see 175 and 176.

⁵ See on the Portuguese priority to support Iberian Jews: Levie Bernfeld, *Poverty and Welfare* 85. On contemporary arguments that the rich Portuguese Jews were less inclined to aid those in need than their much poorer Ashkenazi brethren see: *Ibid.* 181–182.

refugees from Amsterdam, such as the Jews sent on to England reported by the *Hollandtze Mercurius*.⁶ In the *Manual*, this reservation towards absorbing non-Iberian refugees in Amsterdam's Jewish community is also reflected in the absence of Polish Jews from the lists of individual recipients of support. While it lists every cent given to individual poor Portuguese and Spanish Jews, and also records regular support for individual Ashkenazi Jews and proselytes, Polish Jews are almost entirely absent from these lists.

It is therefore remarkable that on the first of *hesvan* 5416 (1 November 1655), *gabay* Ishac Israel Faro notes in the *Manual* that he had been ordered by the Mahamad to reserve 10 guilders from the *cativos* for a certain Sarah from Poland: "A misva de cativos deue A o Gabay Ishac Israel faro f 10: p tantos que de ordem dos senores do Mahamad sederad a sara de Polonia."⁷ How did this Sarah, in contrast to her fellow Poles, make her way into the hearts and pockets of Amsterdam's wealthy Portuguese Jewish leaders? What, to the leaders of the Portuguese community, distinguished her from others escaping war and destruction in the East?

Although there is a possibility that this Sara of Polonia was from a Sephardic family, as was another Polish recipient of charity in the same year whose name, Vargas, suggests he was a Sephardic Jew, I will in this essay propose a different explanation.⁸ This entry in the *Manual* from 1 November 1655, I suggest here, is the first documented historical appearance of a famous Polish refugee with a great gift of persuasion: Sarah the Ashkenazi, who eight and a half years after this entry in the *Manual* would marry the Turkish Jew Sabbatai Tsevi,

⁶ Ibid. 41-46. Y. Kaplan, 'Amsterdam and Ashkenazic Migration in the Seventeenth Century.' *Studia Rosenthaliana* 23 no. 2. Special Issue Containing the Proceedings of the Fifth International Symposium on the History of the Jews in the Netherlands (Fall 1989) 22-44, there 28, 39-44; Kaplan, 'The Portuguese Community in 17th-Century Amsterdam and the Ashkenazi World.' *Dutch Jewish History: Proceedings of the Fourth Symposium on the History of the Jews in the Netherlands (7-10 December 1986, Tel Aviv-Jerusalem)*, ed. J. Michman (Jerusalem: Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Institute for Dutch Jewry, 1989) 23-45, there 38.

⁷ Stadsarchief Amsterdam 334: 174 page 132. There the *gabay* also mentions a second donation, made on the same day, of 25 guilders to "H: de polonia sadock a coen."

⁸ Vargas of Poland received that year frequent donations: Ibid. 130, 134, 137, 141, 145, 166, 167, 172.

after which, at the side of one of the most successful messiahs of Jewish history, she would occupy a leading position in the Sabbatian movement until her death in 1674.⁹

A later source places Sarah the Askenazi as a Polish refugee in Amsterdam in the very year that Talmud Tora's *Mahamad* ordered its *gabay* to give Sarah from Poland 10 guilders. This source is from the end of the 1660s, when the Sabbatian movement had collapsed as a mass messianic movement after Sabbatai Tsevi and Sarah had converted to Islam in Constantinople. In this period, when the Sabbatian movement was beginning to transition into an underground antinomian transgressive movement, Jacob Sasportas, one of the Sabbatian movement's inveterate enemies, described his memory of the newly arrived Sarah the Ashkenazi in Amsterdam in 1655.¹⁰ She was, so he wrote, "a girl devoid of intelligence, who in her madness said that she would marry the messianic king. Everybody laughed at her, and she betook herself to Leghorn."¹¹

General ridicule is not a condition for being singled out from hundreds of Polish refugees for individual financial support. Yet, Sasportas' hostility towards the movement seemed to have colored his perception of the general impression Sarah made in Amsterdam. A very different image emerges from the *Story of Shabbetai Zevi* by Amsterdam's Ashkenazi community's beadle Leyb ben Oyzer, which recorded the memories of those who had met Sarah years ago.¹² According to these accounts, Sarah had told them that as a child she had

⁹ For the argument that Sarah the Ashkenazi played a prominent role in the Sabbatian movement, in particular in its antinomian aspects, see: A. van der Haven, *From Lowly Metaphor to Divine Flesh: Sarah the Ashkenazi, Sabbatai Tsevi's Messianic Queen and the Sabbatian Movement* (Amsterdam 2012), as well as its revised and augmented Hebrew translation *Sarah ha-ashkenaziah: malkat ha-shabtaim* (Tel-Aviv 2018). See on Sarah also G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The mystical Messiah, 1626–1676*. (Princeton, N.J 1973) 192–198; M. Goldish, *The Sabbatean prophets*. (Cambridge, Mass. 2004) 89–97; A. Rapoport-Albert, *Women and the Messianic Heresy of Sabbatai Zevi: 1666-1816* (Oxford/Portland 2011) 30–31, 175–77.

¹⁰ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi* 192 n. 239.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 192.

¹² Z. Shazar, S. Zucker, R. Plessner (eds.), *Sipur maase shabtai tsevi (beshraybung fon shabtai tsevi) me-et leib bar oyzer* (Jerusalem 1978). On Leyb ben Oyzer's account see L. Fuks, 'Sabatianisme in Amsterdam in het begin van de 18e eeuw: Enkele beschouwingen over Reb Leib Oizers en zijn werk.' *Studia Rosenthaliana* 14

become separated from her father, “R. Meir who was rabbi in Poland,” during the gruesome Khmelnytsky massacres in 1648–9. She was brought up in a Catholic convent until at the age of fifteen, the ghost of her father:

came to her at night and said to her: “Come, my daughter, you need to come with me away from this convent. He grabbed the girl in the middle of her body, took her through the window to a [Jewish] community (but I do not know which community this was), and put her down in its cemetery, telling her: “My daughter, stand here in this cemetery. Tomorrow morning people will come here to bury somebody, and then they will find you. They will give you clothes and send you from here. For you need to travel to Jerusalem. There is a man with the name Sabbatai Tsevi, and he will take you as his wife. He is the Messiah. And in the congregation of Amsterdam you have a brother and his name is Samuel. He will help you.”¹³

The next day, so the story was remembered, visitors to the cemetery found her with “five blue finger marks on both two sides of her body” left by her father’s grip. They “dressed her and sent her from community to community until she arrived in Amsterdam, where she stayed with her brother Samuel.”¹⁴

Leyb’s account shows that Sarah’s story was appealing enough to become part of Amsterdam’s Jewish folklore. Indeed, if – apart from Sabbatai Tsevi’s name, which certainly entered the story only after the messianic marriage – the main components of Sarah’s own story were passed on by Leyb’s informants, this is not the rambling of a madwoman as Sasportas saw it, but a remarkably effective story. Sarah gave herself respectable heritage,

(1980) 1, 20-28; Paul Ira Radensky, ‘Leyb ben Ozer’s “Bashraybung Fun Shabsai Tsvi:” An Ashkenazic Appropriation of Sabbatianism.’ *Jewish Quarterly Review* 88 (1997) 1/2, 43-56.

¹³ Shazar, *Story of Shabbetai Zevi* 13–14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 14, 15.

since she claimed that her father was a rabbi, and an even more important future, with her prophetic promise of the highest social status possible for a Jewish woman, namely that of the messiah's wife. Her messianic claim raises also the suspicion that she had concocted the story of her years in a convent, which has a time frame that associates her with the Khmelnytsky uprising whose horrors were well-known to Amsterdam's Jews and were associated with the birth pangs of the messianic age.¹⁵ Instead, she very well might have, like most other refugees arriving in Amsterdam in the mid-1650s, escaped the recent 'lesser' Moscovite pogroms in Lithuania and embellished her connection to the Khmelnytsky uprising with its messianic association.

A second element that must have appealed to a community of ex-conversos was that she was not a mere refugee escaping violence but also, through supernatural events, a *conversa* who had escaped Christianity to return to Judaism. Moreover, she did not just arrive in Amsterdam as a random place willing to harbor her but came to the city that her dead father's spirit had explicitly commanded her to travel to, and where he had indicated she had a brother whose name he revealed to her. Not surprisingly, Amsterdam and her brother are absent in autobiographical versions from other places.¹⁶

And indeed, although Sasportas undoubtedly was not the only one in Amsterdam who dismissed Sarah's story as one of deception or madness, many others fell for her story. These included, if we believe Leyb ben Oyzer, several of Amsterdam's rabbis. In his chronicle, with its fascinating ambivalence to the fallen Turkish messiah, Leyb took her story very seriously, writing: "And now I need to write the truth that you are permitted to believe, which is

¹⁵ On the association between the violence of the Khmelnytsky uprising and the coming of the messiah see Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi* 92-92. On its importance for Sabbatai Tsevi, see: A. Rapoport-Albert, 'A Reevaluation on the "Khmelnytsky factor:" The Case of the Seventeenth-Century Sabbatian Movement.' Amelia M. Glaser (ed.), *Stories of Khmelnytsky: Competing Literary Legacies of the 1848 Ukrainian Cossack Uprising* (Stanford 2015) 47-59. There, Rapoport-Albert also suggests that Sabbatai Tsevi was attracted to Sarah precisely because of her association with this massacre: 53. Knowledge of the horrors of the Khmelnytsky massacres in Amsterdam came from refugees such as Nathan of Hannover, who, after having left Amsterdam for Venice, composed in 1653 his famous account *Yeven Mezulah*.

¹⁶ Van der Haven, *From Lowly Metaphor* 28-29.

without doubt the absolute truth, because I heard it from the mouth of eminent people, from truthful people, rabbis and also my father, may he rest in peace, who himself saw it and testified to it.”¹⁷

Another element that served to buttress Sarah’s story is revealed by what Leyb’s father “himself saw” in addition to what he heard from Sarah’s mouth. These must have been the marks left behind by the spirit of Sarah’s father, because, so Leyb wrote, “all of my days I have spoken with many people who saw it on the young girl, and the blue marks always stayed in her flesh.”¹⁸ Sarah did thus not only have a story that seduce dAmsterdam’s Portuguese elite in the same way many would fall for the messianic tidings about Sabbatai Tsevi a decade later.¹⁹ The story was also printed in her flesh for all to see, a physical marker of divine favor not unlike those of the stigmatics of the ex-conversos’ former co-religionists.

There is a second indication of Sarah’s extraordinary gift to convince others, namely the case of her brother. Leyb’s tale does not reveal to which extent Sarah’s story was convincing already before her marriage to Sabbatai Tsevi and the subsequent messianic frenzy that grappled Amsterdam’s Jewish community. We do know however that her father’s spirit’s command to find “a brother named Samuel” in Amsterdam delivered its desired results: Although it is not entirely impossible that Samuel, a tobacco sorter in Amsterdam and assumedly a refugee from the Khmelnytsky massacres, truly was Sarah’s long-lost brother, it is likely that their kinship was invented by Sarah, exploiting Samuel’s longing for the kin he must have lost during the pogroms.²⁰

Samuel fell for Sarah’s story. As mentioned above, Sarah moved in in with her brother in Amsterdam. Moreover, according to a later report from Cleves where Samuel on his frequent visits spent the Shabbat with local Jews, Samuel “had convinced himself” that,

¹⁷ Shazar, *Story of Shabbetai Zevi* 13.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 14–15.

¹⁹ Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi* 518–545.

²⁰ Van der Haven, *From Lowly Metaphor* 26–27.

being the messiah's brother-in-law, "Sabbatai Tsevi would certainly make him a great prince, and for that reason he set off to Constantinople," to Sabbatai and Sarah's messianic court.²¹

Although neither Sasportas or Leyb ben Oyzer mention anything of the kind, sources about her stay in Italy, her last station before she shipped to Cairo to wed the messiah, describe her also as claiming to be able to read the previous transmigrations of others' souls, and she "delivered prophecies of the future."²² Reports of her claims also describe how she was successful in convincing others that these gifts were real.²³ If she already displayed these 'gifts' in Amsterdam, it certainly would have helped to ingratiate herself with Amsterdam's Jewish leaders. If her prophetic career began only after she left the Dutch Republic, it shows her gifted personality.

It cannot be ascertained with absolute certainty that the 'Sara de Polonia' who received on the 1st of *hesvan* money is Sarah the Ashkenazi, Sabbatai Tsevi's messianic queen. Yet, when one combines the fact that individual Polish recipients from the *cativos* fund or other charity were a rarity with what is known about Sarah's extraordinary abilities to convince and impress, it is likely that by reporting the 10 guilders given to Sarah from Poland, *gabay* Ishac Israel Faro wrote the first historical testimony of Sarah the Ashkenazi, wife of one of Jewish history's most successful messiahs.

²¹ F. Ragstat de Weile, *תאטרון לודיקום*. *Theatrum Ludicum* (Amsterdam 1671) 59.

²² Van der Haven, *From Lowly Metaphor* 31.

²³ *Ibid.*