



# Chai Vekayam

## The Neve Shalom Synagogue Chai Members Newsletter

April 2012

### Happy Passover to You and your Family!!

Dear Chai members;

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Neve Shalom Synagogue and the Jewish community in Suriname, I wish you and your families a Happy and kosher Passover!! Your kindness and generosity is highly appreciated by all the members of the community.

Lots of positive things have happened in the last six months and we hope that the rest of the year will be even better for our friends in the Jewish community of Suriname.

### Finding Mozes Meyer de Hart

This absolutely fascinating story was written by Marie-Chantal Laurens Klausner. You will find out who she is, read and enjoy.

My great great grandmother Eliza was born in Paramaribo in 1840. Her father, Mozes Meyer de Hart, had left Amsterdam as a young man to escape conscription in Napoleon's army and seek his fortune in the Dutch colony of Suriname. Her mother Carolina was a former slave, the daughter of an African woman and a European man. Presumably Mozes acquired Carolina with the purchase of his plantation, he made her a free woman in 1827, and eventually they married and had thirteen children.

Since the seventeenth century Sephardic and later Ashkenazy Jews had immigrated to Suriname attracted by the promise of emancipation, freedom of religion and the opportunity to become landowners. The Jews of Suriname had enjoyed extraordinary privileges in the alternating British and Dutch colony, their earliest settlement in the Jewish Savannah was also known as Jerusalem on

the River and they had been granted the right to self-government and even to maintain a private defense army. When Mozes arrived in Paramaribo he found a flourishing Jewish community with one quarter of all plantations owned by Jews.



Mozes Meyer de Hart (1793-1844)

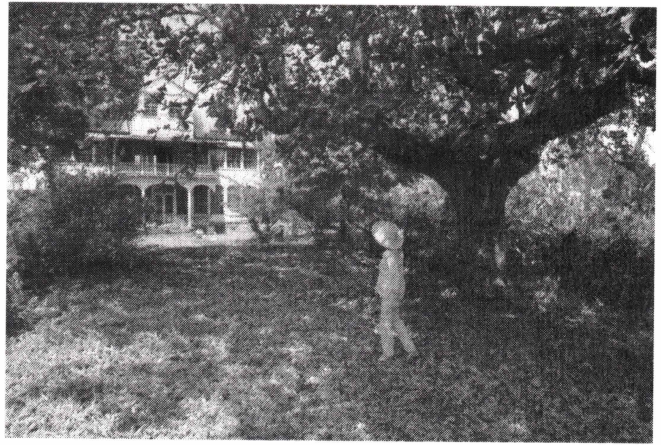
In August 2004 in Switzerland, I was speaking with my hand surgeon Dr. Picard of my interest in his religion (Judaism) and my efforts to teach myself to read and write in Hebrew, telling him I followed the torah lessons of Rav Sitruk, chief Rabbi of France, on television every Sunday morning. Dr Picard asked: are you sure you have no Jewish ancestry? I thought I only wish it were so, and replied: no, absolutely nothing.

After being drawn to Judaism for decades, that summer I had decided that even if conversions were not exactly encouraged, I would learn as much as I could by myself, and probably seek conversion regardless. That spring I had told a friend who had

asked me to be a godmother to her son that I would love to but that I was this close from conversion to Judaism, spacing my index and thumb about an inch apart to illustrate, and that her son might have a Jewish rather than Catholic godmother someday.

Reflecting on the conversation I had had with my surgeon, I wondered if perhaps my grandmother's grandmother wasn't just Spanish, as we had been told, but rather a Sephardic girl, one of the many Spanish and Portuguese Jews who in the 1490's had sought refuge in the Netherlands from the evils of the inquisition. I had never even dreamt of such a possibility, it had been entirely set off by the doctor's comments, when he had explicitly expressed his perplexity, finding my fervour and commitment to learn Hebrew and the prayer book quite peculiar, something he thought might be explained by some Jewish ancestry perhaps dating back as far as the inquisition. Later that night I googled: "Sephardic immigration Netherlands". A map appeared on my screen illustrating Sephardic immigration from Portugal and Spain to the Netherlands and from there on to Brazil and Suriname.

This presented a possible connection: my grandmother had told us of relatives, I was under the impression they were great-uncles, who had owned plantations in Suriname. Unfortunately my grandmother had died in 1976 and I could not ask her for any more details. I googled my grandmother's maiden name together with the word Suriname, and there I found my first hint: her grandfather Johannes Mattheus Eyken Sluyters had owned a mahogany plantation in Suriname: La Prosperite'. His wife would have been my Spanish ancestor. Every day I found new links and more exotic names of plantations that had been owned by the Eyken Sluyters family: Geyersvlijt, Ornamibo, Meindertshoop. Within three weeks I had found my great grandmother's maiden name and it matched one of the names on a list I had found of Jewish families in Suriname: **de Hart**. It didn't seem like a particularly Jewish name, but it was on this list.



██████████ at the plantation house Geyersvlijt, which had been owned by her grandmothers' family



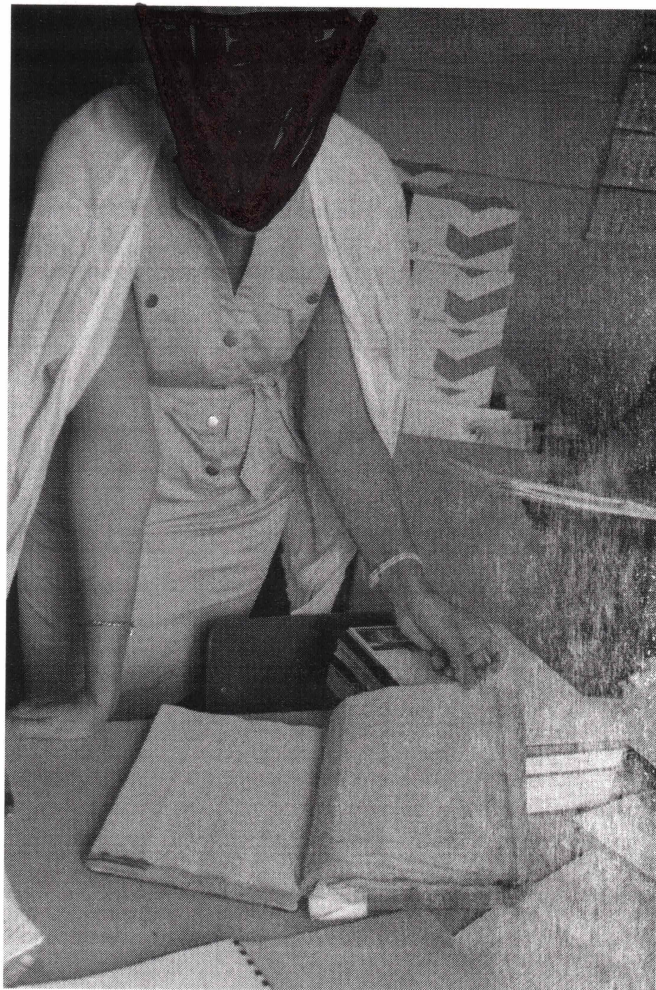
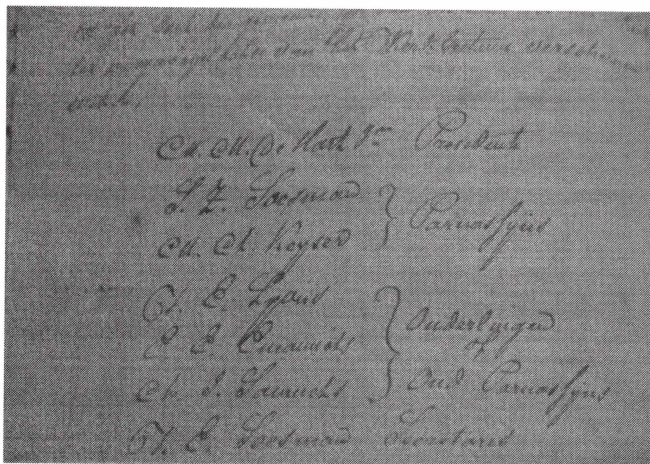
Little by little, searching through the Internet, I found other clues. A certain **Mozes Meyer de Hart** was buried in the Paramaribo Ashkenazi cemetery, but I didn't know if he was related to my de Hart, until I came across a brief history of Mozes Meyer de Hart's plantation, a 1619 acre sugar plantation called Sardam on the Upper Commewijne river, it listed the heirs of Mozes upon his death in 1844. My great great grandmother Helena Eliza de Hart was his 12th child. I was absolutely euphoric, I felt as if I had won the lottery. To think that what I had thought was a purely personal intellectual and spiritual fascination with Judaism was actually something ancient in my heritage that had come forward so forcefully after generations. For several weeks I hardly slept, scouring the Internet for more clues. I found a young researcher in Paramaribo, who for five euro per document would go to the city archives to search and scan birth and death certificates for me.

I continued my Jewish studies and in 2008 formally converted to the faith of my ancestors, or at least some of my ancestors.

I never stopped searching for more information on Mozes and Helena Eliza de Hart and dreamed of visiting Paramaribo. I wanted to see Mozes' grave, although I had a lot of tangible documentation it all still seemed like a fantastic tale.

Last year I came across the Neve Shalom synagogue web site, and emailed the address listed seeking contact. Jacob Steinberg, Chai membership coordinator, replied to my email and in a short time put me in touch with Lilly Duym the vice President of the congregation. A few months later my husband ~~Juda~~ and I travelled for the first time to Paramaribo.

Lilly, the heart and soul of Neve Shalom, received us at the synagogue office. Lilly knew that we had come to visit the shul and in particular to see the cemetery, I told her in passing that I had read in a book that in 1835 my Mozes had been president of the synagogue, to which she replied offhandedly: "oh we can look it up". I thought perhaps there was a list of all former presidents we could take a look at. A big surprise awaited, Mozes had been president of the synagogue during the planning and construction of Neve Shalom, and in the synagogue archives were carefully preserved hundreds of documents and board meeting minutes signed by Mozes and even letters addressed to him. It was so overwhelming to be so physically close to this great great grandfather who had been erased from my family's history.



Finding first clues in the Synagogue's archives

Lilly and her brother Leendert, who as a young boy had helped his father look after the Ashkenazi cemetery, accompanied us to the cemetery to search for the grave in the sweltering Paramaribo heat.

I had seen photographs and had stared at Google maps of Paramaribo so many times before trying to get a sense of the town, the cemetery a peaceful and lushly verdant lot on a bustling street was recently fenced and gated by the congregation to safeguard the graves from unwelcome intruders.

My husband was the first to find the grave. Lilly explained that traditionally the height of the base was commensurate to the social status or wealth of the deceased.



Looking for the grave in the Paramaribo Cemetery

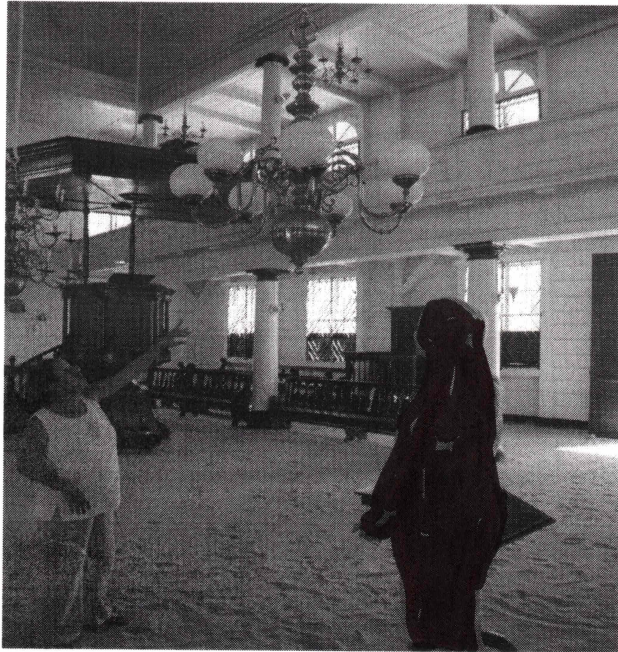
The headstone resting on a four foot base of red bricks was remarkably well preserved and the grey marble boldly engraved: Mozes Meyer de Hart, junior. I thought, it's really true, I have a great great grandfather who really was Jewish. We said Kaddish together.

Lilly had vainly searched the synagogue archives for records of Mozes' sons being circumcised, I have since learned that despite their father being president of the shul, all the children of Mozes and Carolina were baptized and raised in the Dutch reformed church. I returned to Judaism after five generations.

The Paramaribo congregation, now led by Jules Donk and organized by Lilly Duym, has against all odds has maintained a constant Jewish presence for nearly four centuries in this remote country on the northeast coast of South America, lovingly and painstakingly maintaining until very recently two synagogues. An awe inspiring example of perseverance and dedication to keep alive and constantly renew the faith and rites of our forefathers and foremothers.



The Neve Shalom Synagogue is magnificent; I had not expected it to be quite so large. A splendid example of colonial architecture fronted by four colossal Doric columns. The black doors open to reveal a soft carpet of fine white sand, a memento of the forty years in the desert or, perhaps more likely, a precaution maintained since the inquisition to mask the sound of voices and footsteps on the floorboards. The sand creates a sense of being removed from the day to day, of entering a serene and purely spiritual space where your soul can be elevated and where even your feet do not touch the ground. Once inside one is struck by the elegant neo-classical Aron Kodesh (Ark) and the unique raised pulpit built for the legendary nineteenth century rabbi who was a bit lacking in stature but fortunately not in spirituality, the deep warm tones of the polished mahogany contrasting the pristine white washed walls.



Visiting the Neve Shalom Synagogue

Four gleaming thirty six-arm Dutch brass chandeliers, recalling those in the Amsterdam Esnoga, hang in a straight row from the ceiling, every bit of brass polished to a high sheen reflecting the sub-equatorial sunlight streaming in through the old mullioned windows. Except for the local precious hardwood, every brick and nail was ordered and shipped from the Netherlands to this remarkable town at the edge of the Amazon rainforest. Absolutely astounding.

Name: Chantal Klausner was born and grew up in a Dutch family in Rome, Italy. She is a food writer and photographer and lives in New York with her husband Eidan, a composer.

### Chai Membership Update

The fundraising for 2012 was targeted towards a very important project:

#### **The building of a fence around the old Ashkenazi cemetery.**

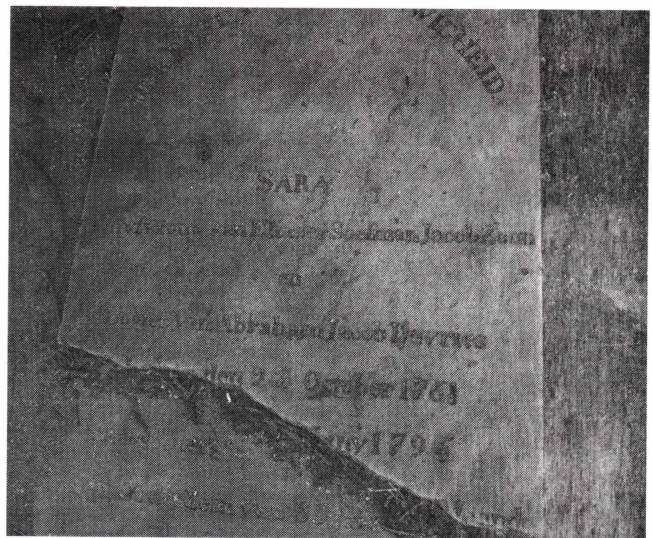
The cemetery was active between 1716 to 1883 and has a total of 358 grave stones in it. As I mentioned in prior newsletters, unfortunately the cemetery became a gathering place for drug addicts and a dumping ground.

Six months ago we estimated that the project would be completed in three to four years. We are very proud to report that the project is almost completed six after short months. At the back of the cemetery, a two meter high brick wall was built with sharp wire on top. In the front, a decorative iron fence has now been constructed and will be completed very soon.



Trucks loaded with the clean-up junk are leaving the cemetery grounds

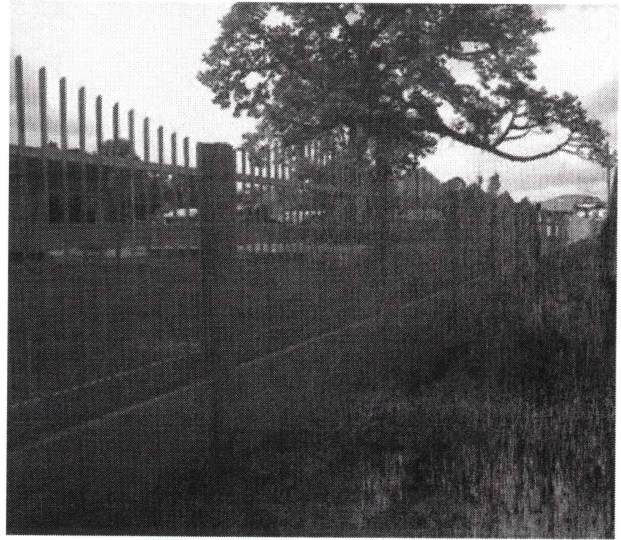
The project was not only a financial challenge (\$100,000 cost) but also a challenge to evict the drug addicts from the cemetery, a massive clean-up of tons of rubbish and mobilizing the support of the Police, the City of Paramaribo Council and members of the neighbourhood that originally opposed the project.



An example of a damaged grave stone (dated from 1796) after the clean up



Building the foundations for the fence



The new iron fence is now under construction

A special **Thank You** to some very special people who helped us to ensure that this historical site regained its overdue respect:

- Thanks to the total dedication and commitment of **Ms. Lilly Duym** (the community Vice President) and the help of **Mr. Jules (Shul) Donk** (the community President) and the **Board of Directors**;
- **Mr. Armand van Alen and his family** who generously supplied us at cost all the construction material (concrete mix, bricks, reinforcing bars, sand and gravel etc.) and allowed us to pay in monthly instalments (interest free). Without their kind support, the project would have been completed about four years from now!
- **Ms. Marie-Chantal Ludemius Klausner** for her very special donation for this project;
- Last but not least, **to all the Chai members** for their enormous contribution, both financially and morally. Thank you for your support, it gives us the strength to know that we are not alone in our struggle to survive!

## The 2011 High Holidays in Suriname

The 5771 Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur were well attended. The services were led by our Chazzan (Cantor) Mr. Jack van Niel and our President, Mr. Jules Donk with the support of Mr. Loeki Robles from Aruba who visited us during the High Holidays.

The Tashlich prayer was said on the first afternoon of Rosh Hashana along the bank of the Suriname River. These prayers are symbolic of the casting away of our mistakes.



The Tashlich prayers along the Suriname River

According to our tradition, family members visit the cemetery before the High Holy Days and read the Kaddish prayer in front of the grace stones of their beloved dead.



Grave visitation and prayer – Paramaribo's Sephardic Cemetery

We are very grateful for **Rose and Eddy Azijnman** from Winnipeg, Canada who visited us for a month and were a great help in cleaning the Synagogue, the Aron Kodesh (the Ark) and made sure that the Torah scrolls were neatly covered in white.

As a very small Jewish community, we have to bake our own Challah breads for the weekly Kiddush and for our holidays, Rose and Eddy conducted a small workshop to a group of ladies on how to prepare and bake Challah bread.



Home made Challah bread

Thank you so much Eddy (who was born and raised in Suriname) and Rose for your on-going help and your wonderful company.

## The 112 New Machzorim Safely Arrived

The 112 Machzorim donated by the Brith Shalom synagogue in Houston Texas to our congregation safely arrived to Suriname after a long journey.

Again, a warm thank you to **Matt Stein** from Brith Shalom congregation in Houston, Texas for organizing the donation, to **Kulanu** for facilitating the donation and to **Tomahawk Outdoor Sports N.V.** for shipping the books to Suriname free of charge.

## Comments

I'd like to thank Lilly Duym, **Adrienne Chantal Eadenius Klausner** and Norma Steinberg for their contribution to our newsletter.

Please let me know if you have any comments, suggestions or ideas on how to make this newsletter better. Please feel free to contact me at: [jks1111@rogers.com](mailto:jks1111@rogers.com)

Wishing you a Happy Passover,

Jacob Steinberg