

# The world's other Jewish president

**By Mordechai Arbell**

Ricardo Maduro, who was sworn in last January as president of Honduras, in the wake of democratic elections held in that country, is the second Jewish president in Honduran history. In 1847, Juan Lindo, the son of a Spanish Jew, Joaquin Fernandes Lindo, was elected to this post. He served as president until 1852 and is remembered for his extensive activities in the field of education. He founded an efficient, centralized system of education and set up a school in every village.

Previously, in 1841 and 1842, Juan Lindo was the president of the republic of El Salvador. Here we have a rare historical event, in which the same individual served as president in two different republics. In El Salvador as well, Lindo is remembered as a distinguished educator and as the founder of the national university.

Ricardo Maduro is not the first member of his family to become the president of a country. A distant relative, Eric Arturo Delvalle, was sworn in as president of Panama in 1987. During his presidency, Delvalle brought a Torah scroll from Jerusalem and donated it to the Spanish-Portuguese synagogue in Panama City, Kol Shearith Israel, of which he was a member. His uncle, Max Delvalle, became president of Panama in 1969. In an address he delivered after his election, he said, "Today there are two Jewish presidents in the world - the president of the State of Israel and I." On the day of his inauguration, the British ambassador to Panama told him that Delvalle's inauguration as a Jewish president reminded him of Benjamin Disraeli. To which President Delvalle replied, "Yes, but Disraeli was only a prime minister. I am the president of a country."

The Maduros are one of the most illustrious and highly respected Jewish families in the Caribbean Islands and Central America. The members of this family meticulously recorded its chronicles from one generation to the next. The first recorded event relates to the year 1512. Antonio and Leonora Roiz lived as marranos (crypto-Jews) in Portugal and concealed their Jewish identity from the authorities. Their son, Diego, added to his family name the title Maduro, which means mature or senior. Diego's son, Antonio Roiz Maduro, was sentenced to be burned to death by the Inquisition in Portugal for "crimes against the Catholic faith and for observance of the laws of Moses." He was burned alive at the stake in the central square of the Portuguese city of Coimbra.

His wife managed to escape to France in 1618 and publicly resumed her observance of Jewish law. Her daughter, Clara, changed her name to Rachel and moved to the Netherlands in 1619, where she met Moshe Levy. As a gesture of respect for the Maduro family, Levy added Maduro to the name of his own family, which from that time on became known as Levy Maduro.

Levy's grandson, Moshe Levy Maduro, arrived with his family in the Caribbean island of

Curacao in 1672. He came there to serve as cantor in the local synagogue and subsequently settled on the island, becoming the owner of several farms and an exporter of tropical fruits, which he sent to Europe on his own ships. His siblings settled in Jamaica and on the island of St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands.

## **Commemorative stamps**

The fact that close ties were maintained between the members of the Maduro family was a major factor in their prosperity. The Maduros, who were involved in a wide range of economic activities, were strict observers of the laws of Judaism and served in voluntary capacities in the synagogues in the region. A prominent member of the family, Samuel Levy Maduro, who resided on the island of St. Thomas, was recognized in 1845 as a great scholar in sacred Jewish studies.

Other members of the Maduro family made a name for themselves as writers and historians. Some of them were affluent and contributed generously to Jewish causes.

Shlomo Eliahu Levy Maduro was a prominent member of the family. In 1837, he founded the company that is known today as Maduro Holdings. The company's holdings include a shipping firm, storage facilities for coal and crude oil, airlines, and factories for the manufacture of paints and construction materials. The holdings are located throughout the Caribbean Islands, as well as in South America and the United States. The government of the Netherlands Antilles issued a series of stamps to commemorate the 150th anniversary of Maduro Holdings, which made a major contribution to the prosperity of Dutch colonies in the New World.

The Maduro family's bank, the Maduro Bank, was founded in 1916 and merged with another bank, owned by the Curiel family, in 1932. The new bank was named the Maduro & Curiel Bank. Today, it is the largest bank among the Caribbean Islands and it funds development programs throughout the region. The Maduro & Curiel Bank set up loan funds for Holocaust survivors who settled in the Caribbean Islands and helped them rebuild their lives. The Netherlands Antilles government issued a series of stamps to mark the bank's 75 anniversary.

A prominent intellectual in Curacao was Jossy Maduro, who specialized in the study of the history of Spanish Jewry in the Americas. He established libraries and assisted academic institutions. His work came to an abrupt end when his son, George Levy Maduro, was murdered by the Nazis.

## **Award for bravery**

George Levy Maduro was born in Curacao in 1916 and traveled to Leiden in the Netherlands to study law. When the Nazis invaded the Netherlands in May 1940, he joined the Dutch army as a captain and fought with great courage against the invading German forces. He participated in one of the few counter-offensives against the Wehrmacht. Following the

Netherlands' surrender, he was taken prisoner by the Germans. After being caught in a daring escape attempt, he was turned over to the Germans. He died on February 9, 1945 in the Dachau concentration camp. In his memory, his father donated the funds for the construction of a miniature city, Madurodam, that is located near the Dutch capital, The Hague, and which was created to bring joy to the hearts of children from all over the world. The revenue from the admission fee to the site is transferred to institutions for the care of the infirm and the chronically ill in the Netherlands. The Dutch government posthumously granted George Levy Maduro an award for bravery.

When the Panama Canal was built, the economic center of gravity in the Caribbean region and Central America shifted to the republic of Panama. Members of the Maduro family from Curacao, St. Thomas and Jamaica began to move to Panama, where they soon occupied key positions. Other family members moved to Costa Rica, Honduras and Guatemala. In all these countries, Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin were warmly welcomed and, within a short while, they integrated into public life and the economy, playing an active role in the regime.

According to the testimony of East European Jews who arrived in Central America in the 1930s, the center of Jewish life in Costa Rica and the main synagogue in that country was the home of Moshe Levy Maduro. A member of that branch of the Maduro family, Osmond Levy Maduro, a native of Panama, moved with his children to Honduras. One of his sons, Ricardo, was elected president of Honduras in January 2002.

## **Bibliografía**

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