

David Shaltiel – an Israeli with roots in Hamburg

The history of Jews in Hamburg started about 400 years ago. In the 90s of the 16th century Jews mainly from Spain and Portugal, the Sephardim, immigrated to Hamburg. When the Christian kings conquered the Iberian Peninsula in 1492 they not only expelled the Muslims, but also the Jews, who either had to leave the kingdom or become Christians. Many of them were forced to convert to Christianity. So the Jews, who came to Hamburg often still practised their original confession, but came to the protestant city as proper Catholics.

Because of their useful business links to their former homelands and especially to the new colonies in Middle- and South America they were pretty welcome in the Hanseatic city of Hamburg. Because of its geographical position at the river Elbe, which has access to the international seaways, the city had just become one of the most important business metropolises in northern Europe. Especially since the discovery of America, Hamburg benefited from a strong economical rise. That is the reason why it also became interesting for merchants operating on an international basis and financiers, like the Teixeiras, who in their time were global players.

But most of them no longer stayed in Hamburg than a hundred years, because the living conditions changed within the century. During the 17th century the city government raised the taxes especially for Jews dramatically. Also, the Lutheran priests agitated against the Jewish minority. Even though the majority of them had moved to Altona by the end of the 17th century, which back then was a city of its own right next to Hamburg and is one of the cities districts today, and to Amsterdam. A couple of families with Sephardic roots permanently remained in Hamburg. The last Sephardic synagogue existed until 1937, in the quarter of Hamburg called Neustadt. The family Sealtiel belonged to this community. The father, Binjamin Sealtiel, an export merchant, was chairman of the Sephardic community of Hamburg. He was known as a very religious person.

The historical figure of David Shaltiel, who changed his name from Sealtiel into Shaltiel later on, was topic of one of our work groups. He became interesting, because his biography is a link between Hamburg and Israel. Even though Shaltiel was born in Berlin, his family originated from Hamburg, where he spent his youth and became member of a Zionist organisation. In 1934 he went to Palestine and worked for the Haganah. Later, he was known in Israel for being the defender of Jerusalem during the war of independence and after that he became the Ambassador of the state of Israel in the Netherlands.

Not his whole biography was subject of our research, but especially the places, where he spent most of his time while he was living Hamburg. The group-work focused on the time Shaltiel spent in Hamburg, but further examinations on his biography will be the task of the Israeli group members in Israel.

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