

# Jews, SUGAR, & Black Slavery

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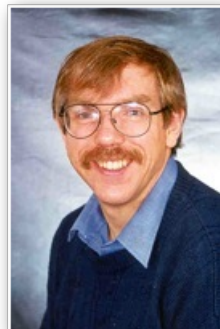
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Ass. Prof. **David W. Leinweber**, of Emory University, some time ago advanced a standard propagandistic "refutation" of the book *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews*. It is almost devoid of any useful points for debate (on the issue of Jews and the slave trade, that is), except for a sentence which the author uses as a fulcrum, ostensibly to pivot the piece from its "deconstruction" of the book to his sagacious "correction" of the historical record. Speaking of the "terrible" slave trade, Leinweber concludes simply, and with the shortest sentence in the piece: "AT ITS HEART WAS SUGAR."



The following excerpt is the first two paragraphs from an entry in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 15, pp. 487-88 under the heading, **SUGAR INDUSTRY AND TRADE:**

*In the Middle Ages sugar was a luxury article, and sugar for European consumption was produced in Syria, Palestine, Crete, Egypt, Sicily, and southern Spain. The Cairo Genizah records reveal that making and selling sugar from sugarcane was one of the most common occupations of Jews in the Middle Ages; Sukkari was a common family appellation from the beginning of the 11th until the end of the 13th centuries in Egypt and in North Africa. Sugar refineries were often in Jewish hands. Jews are mentioned as exporters of sugar from Crete in the 15th century. When sugar began to be used for everyday consumption (15th century), Marranos [secret Jews] played a leading role in introducing sugarcane cultivation to the Atlantic islands of Madeira, the Azores, the Cape Verde Islands, and Sao Tome and Principe in the Gulf of Guinea, and in the 16th century to the Caribbean Islands. They also brought the cultivation of sugarcane from Madeira to America, and the first great proprietor of plantations and sugar mills, Duarte Coelho Pereira, allowed numerous Jewish experts on sugar processing to come to Brazil. Among them was one of the first important Jewish proprietors of sugar mills, Diogo Fernandes.*

*In Europe Marranos who were active in international commerce, such as the merchant family of \*Ximenes, played an important role in the import of sugar to Lisbon and thence to northwestern Europe, especially Antwerp. During the 16th and the beginning of the 17th centuries there were many Jews among the merchants of Antwerp, the Portuguese colony, which was central to the sugar trade in the port and played a vital part in the development of Antwerp as the central European sugar market, where many refineries were established. They made Brazil, where several Portuguese Jews had established sugar plantations and mills, the most important area of sugar production in the world. From around the 1620s Amsterdam took the place of Antwerp in the sugar*

trade and many Marranos left Brazil and Portugal to settle in Amsterdam. Some Jews (e.g., Abraham and Isaac \*Pereire and David de Aguiar) owned refineries in Amsterdam. In 1639 ten of the 166 “engenhos” in Dutch Brazil belonged to declared Jews, while others belonged to Marranos who kept their Jewishness secret. The Jews of Brazil were not important as proprietors of mills but rather as financial agents, brokers, and export merchants. When Brazil came again under Portuguese rule in the second half of the 17th century many Jews emigrated to Surinam, Barbados, Curacao, and Jamaica, where they acquired large sugarcane plantations and became the leading entrepreneurs in the sugar trade. Benjamin d’Acosta introduced sugarcane to Martinique in 1655, bringing with him 900 Jews (who were expelled in 1683). Sugar production was introduced into South Africa in the 1840s by Aaron de Pass of Natal. From the beginning of the 17th century Hamburg played a growing role in the European sugar trade--to a considerable extent thanks to the activities of the Marranos who had settled there. Early in the 18th century Portuguese Jews lost their leading position in the sugar trade, in Hamburg because of the growth of competition, and in Brazil because of persecutions of the Marranos and the general decline of the trade in that country. In the first half of the 18th century, London gradually ousted Amsterdam as the center of the sugar trade; at the same time the role of the Jews became less important.



Jews also played a leading role in the development of the sugar-beet industry in Poland, Russia, the Ukraine, Hungary, and Bohemia. In Eastern Europe Jews were the traditional buyers of agricultural produce from the estates and often leased the local refinery and mill from the landowners. Requests by Polish Jews to erect sugar refineries were turned down by the authorities in 1816, 1827, 1834, and 1837. Finally, Hermann Epstein built his first refinery in 1838 and by 1852 his was the largest and most modern in Poland. He was joined by L. Kronenberg and other leading Polish

Jewish industrialists and financiers. In the Ukraine Israel Brodsky first helped finance Count Bobrinski, pioneer of Russian sugar-beet, and later he and his sons established numerous refineries. Other Jews entered this field (such as M. Halperin and M. Sachs) until by 1872 one-quarter of the total sugar production in Russia was in Jewish hands. In 1914, 86 refineries in Russia (32% of the total) were owned by Jews; 42.7% of the administrators of the joint-stock sugar companies were Jewish, and two-thirds of the sugar trade was in Jewish hands. The percentage of Jewish workers, managers, technicians, and scientists employed in the field was correspondingly high. Between the two world wars, Jews in Poland were squeezed out of the sugar trade through the anti-Semitic economic policy. In Hungary a pioneering role in the development of the sugar-beet industry was played by Ignac Deutsch; his grandson Sandor de Hatvany Deutsch (1852- 1913; see Hatvany-Deutsch family) enlarged the firm and represented Hungary at international sugar conferences.

**In Israel.** In the early 1950s two sugar-beet refineries were established in Atula and Kiryat Gat, both for economic reasons and for social considerations such as providing employment in

development areas. Sugar-beet production grew from 21,000 tons in 1955 to a peak of 295,000 in 1965 (when 37,000 tons of sugar were produced). In 1969 only 22,500 tons of sugar were produced (18% of consumption) because low international prices led to decreased profits for growers and benefits for the economy. [emphasis ours]

Bibliography: S. D. Goitein, *Mediterranean Society, I* (1967), index; H. Landau, in: *ShriJtenfar Ekonomik un Statistik, I* (1928), 98-104 (Yid.), 16-17 (Ger.); E. o. von Lippmann, *Geschichte des Zuckers* (19292); D. D. Weinryb, *Neueste Wirtschaftsgeschichte der Juden in Russland und Polen* (1934), index s.v. Zucker; P. Friedman, in: *Jewish Studies in Memory of G. A. Kohut* (1935), 231-2, 241 (Ger.); H. J. Bloom, *Economic Activities of the Jews of Amsterdam* (1937), index; N. Deerr, *History of Sugar*, 2 vols. (1949-50); H. Kellenbenz, *Sephardim an der unteren Elbe* (1958); N. Shapira, in: *Gesher*, 4 (1958), no. 3, 101\_12; Roth, Marranos,

Leinweber has made a useful point in this discussion on Jews and the slave trade. "AT [the slave trade's] HEART WAS SUGAR," he emphatically reminds us. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* supplements the Leinweber thesis by emphatically stating that AT THE HEART OF SUGAR, WERE JEWS.

[Note: There are no Black Muslims at the *Encyclopedia Judaica*]

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