

Fernando José Pancorbo, *Joseph Penso de Vega. La creación de un perfil cultural y literario entre Amsterdam y Livorno* [Storia dell'Ebraismo in Italia. Studi e testi 31]. Olschki, Florence 2019, xi + 196 pp. ISBN 9788822266651. € 28.

Joseph Penso de Vega was one of the literary stars of the Sephardic community of Amsterdam in the second half of the seventeenth century, but astonishingly little is known about his early life. There is indeed a standard account, according to which he was born in Espejo near Cordoba in 1650. His father Isaac, the story continues, was imprisoned by the Inquisition as a Judaizer and swore that he would openly profess Judaism if he managed to escape. He did escape and fled with his family to the Netherlands, passing through Antwerp and Middelburg where he fulfilled his vow. Joseph was educated in Amsterdam, where his masters included Isaac Aboab de Fonseca and Moseh Raphael de Aguilar who made of him a brilliant man of letters.

According to Fernando José Pancorbo in *Joseph Penso de Vega. La creación de un perfil cultural y literario entre Amsterdam y Livorno*, by far the most exhaustive study of Joseph Penso de Vega to have appeared so far, this information about Joseph's birth, background, and upbringing must be regarded as "a collection of loose ideas and vague theories" which are mainly incorrect and find no confirmation in any archive. Pancorbo's exhaustive research leads to very different conclusions. Of Portuguese origin, Penso de Vega's family seems to have left Spain before 1650—there is no record of Isaac's imprisonment in the relevant archives of the Holy Office—and made for Antwerp, Middelburg, and Hamburg. Joseph was almost certainly born in Hamburg in the early 1650s. From Hamburg the family moved to Amsterdam. Joseph's father Isaac was exceptionally well off as we see from the donations given to the Judaeo-Portuguese community in which he occupied various official posts. It was in Holland that Joseph received an excellent Talmudic education evident in his earliest work, the allegorical play *ʿAsirē ha-Tiqwā, Prisoners of Hope*, written in about 1667, the first theatrical work to be produced in Hebrew in the Sephardic community of Amsterdam. Shortly afterwards he left Holland for Italy together with his elder brother Abraham in order to attend to the family business. Pancorbo has ascertained that Joseph Penso de Vega too occupied certain official posts in the Jewish community of Livorno, where he remained until 1683, and had a hand in drawing up the community laws in 1677. He also continued to pursue his literary career. He was the principal founder of the *Academia de los Sitibundos*, an imitation of the *Accademia degli Incogniti* and other academies so fashionable in Venice at the time. It led to further foundations in Amsterdam such as the *Academia del Temor Divino* (set up by his friend and rival, the poet and historian Miguel de Barrios) and the *Academia de los Floridos*. While he

was in Livorno Penso de Vega published two funeral orations dedicated to his parents as well as a panegyric in praise of the Mosaic Law, and he compiled a collection of three short stories. In 1683 he was again in Amsterdam. He there wrote some more panegyrics—in praise of Jan III Sobieski, the ruler of Poland, of William III of England, and of the marriage between Pedro III of Portugal and Maria Sophia of Neuburg. Apparently beset by financial difficulties—he owed a considerable sum of money to the impoverished Miguel de Barrios—Joseph Penso de Vega wrote what is considered to be his masterpiece, *Confusión de confusiones*, a work composed in the form of a conversation between three characters about the Amsterdam stock exchange, its promises, its temptations, and its dangers. It was published in 1688, four years before Penso died of gout.

The assessment of Joseph Penso de Vega's literary products presents a number of challenges. The Sephardic communities were thoroughly cosmopolitan. Their libraries show that they were reading works in Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, French, Latin, German, and Dutch. Pancorbo argues convincingly for Penso de Vega's originality as a writer adopting a variety of different traditions. The most important influence came from his Talmudic education, and one of his most original traits was, as Pancorbo puts it, "to apply what he learnt in the Talmudic seminars to non-religious contexts and works, such as those of the literary academies." "His texts were not aimed at preaching," Pancorbo continues, "but at literary and artistic entertainment." The effect of the Talmudic schools was particularly evident in Penso de Vega's use of rhetoric as well as in his adaptations of works by Christians. He drew, too, on more mystical traditions such as Kabbalah. But Penso was also indebted to Western classical sources—to Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, and others, whose ideas he may well have encountered in the work of Italian Jews such as Judah Moscato, Leone Modena, or Saul Levi Morteira. Yet, even if Jewish influences can usually be detected in the background, Penso de Vega, who also had his eye on a Christian readership, was influenced by Christian traditions and by his Christian contemporaries. His style was uncompromisingly baroque and he was indebted to some of the main baroque writers of seventeenth-century Italy—above all to Giovanni Francesco Loredano, but also to Ferrante Pallavicino, Giovanni Battista Manzini, Antonio Lupis, and Vincenzo Pasqualigo. His short stories reveal the influence of Cervantes and Castillo Solórzano. He had, finally, a profound admiration for other Spanish writers of the Siglo de Oro, for Lope de Vega and Tirso de Molina, but particularly for Calderón, whose Christian message he adapted to Judaism with considerable skill.

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