

R. SHMUEL ABOAB'S LETTERS
TO THE PALESTINIAN SAGES
HELD CAPTIVE IN MALTA AND MESSINA

by MEIR BENAYHU

A DETAILED study of the Society for 'the Redemption of Captives' founded in Venice by the Sephardi and Levantine communities has been made by Cecil Roth,* based mainly on the Society's minute-books, which contain over five hundred documents of the years from 1671 to 1710. The rich material brought into Professor Roth's study makes evident the wide range of the Society's activities; it was undoubtedly one of the most important institutions set up by Italian Jewry.

In the diaries and letters of R. Shmuel Aboab (Manuscript No. 257/258,¹ Montefiore Library in Jews College, London) there are seven letters* that give important information about the work of the Society and about his own activities in securing release of the captives, information that helps considerably in completing our knowledge of the subject.

The letters were addressed to four sages from Palestine who were held captive in Malta and one in Messina between the years 1647 and 1666, that is, from the Society's foundation to close on the time of the letters in its minute-books. All of them, except the last, belong to a period when the Society was deeply engaged with the problem and faced with heavy expenditure in connection with the saving of Jews from the Polish expulsions and pogroms of 1648/49.²

Apart from these sages of whose existence in Malta we know only from

* The Jews of Malta, in *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society*, Vol. XII, 1931, pp. 218-242. See also Roth's article on the history of Jewish captives in Malta (in Hebrew), *Zion (Measef)*, Vol. 3, 1939, pp. 164-171; S. Assaf. On the History of the Jews in Malta (in Hebrew), *B'Abole Yaakov*, Jerusalem, 1943, pp. 107-115.

¹ For description see article by M. Benayahu on the Letters of R. Shmuel Aboab and R. Moshe Zacut and their Circle relating to Palestine (in Hebrew), *Yerushalaim*, Vol. 2/5, 1955, p. 137.

^{1*} A further letter (No. 6) is from the manuscript *Etz Haim*, Amsterdam.

² On R. Shmuel Aboab's part in this see id., pp. 142, 163-4 and also Roth, id., p. 218. Roth believes that the Society was founded in the year 1648, following on the Chmielnicki massacres. It is however clear from Letter No. 1 that it was already in existence in 1647.

the letters, there were other Palestinian captives. R. Shmuel Aboab notes in other missives that R. Shmuel David Nantawa, a learned Ashkenazi from Jerusalem, had after the year 1640 been taken from a ship on the voyage from Trieste to Palestine, probably by pirates from Malta, after he had had to return to Italy when his property had been stolen.³ In the year 1647 R. Haim Nabarro of Safed is to be found in Malta. The first three letters were addressed to him. Two years later R. Shmuel Garmisan, one of the greatest of the Jerusalem sages, was taken captive. Three of R. Shmuel Aboab's letters were to him, one of them to Jerusalem. The captive who fell into the hands of the Messina pirates was R. Shlomo Aliman Ashkenazi, taken in the year 1651. The last letter was sent some time later, in 1666, to R. Yehuda Sharaf of Egypt and to R. Israel Benjamin, a Jerusalem sage. The letter-diary of R. Shmuel Aboab contains no missives after the year 1667. However, we know from the Society's minute-book of other Palestinian captives shortly after this time. In the year 1672 the Maltese pirates took an emissary from Safed together with nine others from a Venetian vessel out from Alexandria.⁴ Much other information has come down to us about captives in Malta taken while on their way to settle in Palestine.⁵

The 'Redemption of Captives' Society extended aid to all the captives in Malta. Its funds, derived from contributions from the communities in Italy and elsewhere, were used not only to buy their freedom but also to ease their lot while held in captivity, to provide necessities for them and to make them feel that they were not forgotten and abandoned.

At first the Society concerned itself also with captives held in places other than Malta, but after the pogroms of 1648/49 relief organizations were formed in other Italian cities, making it possible for the Venetian Society to concentrate mainly on those in Malta, though it continued to answer calls from others. 'Previously', wrote the Society in 1676, 'funds came to us from Poland, Flanders and England... but now this has ceased, partly because of other needs and partly because a special fund has been created in some of the Ligurian coastal cities, leaving it to us to look after the captives in Malta, apart from a number saved by our help from the far corners of the earth, from Persia and Medea, from the North and West, from all the provinces, for they are many, and from the Greek islands.'⁶

The Society maintained a permanent agent in Malta, responsible for the

³ Benayahu, id. pp. 140, 161, 175.

⁴ Roth in *Zion*, p. 165; *The Jews of Malta*, p. 237. He mentions another Jew from France, named Moshe Joseph, held in Malta in 1691.

⁵ S. Assaf, in *B'Aholei Yaakov* (Hebrew), pp. 111-114. See also Roth in *Zion*, p. 112.

⁶ Roth in *Zion*, p. 170; *The Jews in Malta*, pp. 222-223.

Jewish community there. He attended to the captives from the beginning of their imprisonment, negotiated with the jailers about their ransom price, and passed on to his principals their appeals and letters. On their release he arranged the transport to their destinations. 'And all the prisoners' affairs were in his hands.'⁷

During the period with which we are dealing, the agent was a Christian by the name of Baccio Bandinelli, the first of the Society's agents apparently. A rich man, with international commercial contacts, he had the confidence of the Venetian Society, which gave him wide discretion, even at times entrusting him with sums of money considerably larger than the normal for ransom of the sages from Jerusalem. (Letter No. 4). Bandinelli was agent until the year 1666,⁸ when, to the regret of the Society, old age forced him to relinquish his task. In his last letter R. Shmuel Aboab tells two captives that their release is delayed and the Society 'has been very worried because it has not been able to find a successor to the Minister, Bandinelli, who does not find himself able to respond to their pleas that he continue with his merciful work on behalf of those in distress.' Although the Society was prepared to pay a salary to a suitable new agent, a long time elapsed before they found one.

The spokesman of the Maltese community was R. Moshe Azulai, a Moroccan of some learning. The Society's minute-books contain numerous letters addressed to him. He is mentioned for the first time in the year 1671, though it appears from Letter No. 8 that he was in Malta already in 1666. It seems that his captor treated him better than captors usually did, allowing him to engage in trade. Azulai took on himself responsibility for religious affairs on the Island, even arranging divorces for two captives, in 1673 and in 1685. Letters to him from the Society refer to his requests for books, such as *Midrash Tanbuma*, *Tkikun Yissakbar*, and *Pitron Halomoth*. During all his years in Malta he assisted the agent in the affairs of the captives. Towards the end of the 17th century, when not many captives were being held on the Island, Azulai began arranging his own release. This went slowly, however, and he died in April 1696 just when his efforts were about to succeed. He had been held in captivity for over thirty years.⁹

⁷ Roth in *Zion*, document No. 1, year 1673, p. 167.

⁸ Roth, *The Jews of Malta*, p. 224, supposes that he served from 1648 to 1670. Letter No. 8, however, states specifically that he had already resigned his duties.

⁹ Roth, *id.* pp. 237-240; see also p. 165. In *Responsa* there is also mention of two other divorces in Malta, which, there is no doubt, were carried through by R. Moshe Azylai. See the volume of *Responsa*, *Torat Hesed* of R. Hasdai Hacoheh Perahia, Salonica, 1723, item 107, pp. 71-72, which gives the date 1668; *Responsa Darkhei Noam* of R. Mordekhai Halevi, Venice, 1697, *Eben Haezer* item 3, pp. 51, 72: 'And there was nobody in Malta who knew how to arrange a divorce... the divorce formula was arranged for them from here, Egypt', - These divorce arrangements were

In the year 1666 Azulai was requested by the Society to 'find for them an honest man, acceptable to the Jews, one of means and well known to the authorities' to take over the duties of agent and to work together with him (Azulai). After some time he replied that he had found somebody suitable, but without mentioning the name. The Society sought references about him from Venetian merchants. However, a letter from the Society dated 29th day of the *Omer* (1671) to the community in Alexandria mentions that the Jews of that city had been owing money to their agent already for seven years, from which it may be inferred that the new agent had been appointed already in the year 1666 – though doubtless the writers were not accurate in the number of years mentioned by them. About the new agent, Francisco Garsin, the Society write in the same letter: 'One of the merchants of that country... was sent by them to act for them in connection with the captives and the latter's masters, and he always acted righteously, without material reward, mediating vigorously on their behalf.'¹⁰ Francois Garsin was a French merchant, 'a very righteous Gentile' not only in that he did not accept payment for his trouble but also in that he did not take any commission on the ransom price paid for each captive. This great service he continued for not less than forty years, until his death in 1706. After his death his son, Jean-Baptiste, volunteered to continue the good work, which he carried on without remuneration for thirteen years, until his own death.¹¹ It is not clear from the documents if Bandinelli received any payment for his services, though it is stated that he used to do kindness 'to these poor people', while the Society notes that the new agent would receive payment – from which it may be learned that previously the agent had not been paid.

The efforts of the Society's agent in Malta did not always succeed in hastening the freeing of the captives. On one occasion, when a large number were seized and a sum of money so great was demanded for them as to be beyond the Society's means, they remained in captivity for months and even years. This was not a rare occurrence, especially when the Knights of the Order of St. John carried out a great man-hunt. One source, from the first half of the 17th century, speaks of 'groups being taken into captivity by these wicked ones.'¹² The reference, apparently, is to 34 souls. The same source speaks of other 'groups' of captives being added to them. In a letter to the Ancona community of about the year 1651¹³ the Society

made, according to the Jewish practice, in the interest of the wives at home who otherwise might be left for long years or perhaps for ever without a husband.

¹⁰ Roth in *Zion*, Letter No. 1, pp. 166-167.

¹¹ *The Jews of Malta*, pp. 224-225.

¹² S. Assaf, *B'Abole Yaakov*, p. 113.

¹³ The letter mentions sums of money for the captives from Poland already given 'in the two past years.'

mentions that 'there is a group of captives in Malta numbering 24.'¹⁴ When R.Yehuda Sharaf and R.Israel Benjamin were being held, there were many other captives with them (Letter No. 8). In the year 1676 fourteen Jews were being held in Malta who had been taken the year before and whose release it was not possible to secure owing to the increase in the number of prisoners.¹⁵

A difficulty in the rescue work was the very high ransom demanded. More was always asked for a Jew than for a Moslem,¹⁶ even when the former was aged and feeble. The agent's negotiations were protracted. From the exchange of letters with his principals in Venice, extending over lengthy periods, we see that in the meantime the captors were raising the price. Delays also occurred because the latter did not always agree among themselves about their respective shares in the ransoms. R. Shmuel Garmisan and R. Haim Nabarro were thus held for over a year.

The lot of a captive was especially bitter if he was known to be a person of importance, particularly from Palestine. Special efforts noticed on behalf of anyone resulted in the demand being raised, even after a price had already been agreed on. This happened in connection with R. Haim Nabarro, R. Yehuda and Sharaf R. Israel Benjamin. The captives mentioned in our letters were all, as already noted, among the best known of the sages from Palestine, and their letters to R. Shmuel Aboab are full of lament about their condition and compliant about the length of time needed for their release.

The Society made it a principle to fix a definite sum of money for each captive and not to increase it.¹⁷ We know of one instance, however, the only one of its kind, where the Society made an exception in view of the individual's standing and the pressure exercised by R. Shmuel Aboab. For R. Shmuel Garmizan the sum of 200 reales had been allotted; but since he was considered one of the greatest of his generation and it was feared that even this large amount would be refused, the Society instructed its agent in Malta to add to it 'however much he thought necessary.' In other in-

¹⁴ S. Barnstein, *The Letters of Rabbi Mahalalel Halelujah of Ancona*, HUCA, Vol. 7, 1930, p. 521. The original gives ל'ל , but from the sum of money allocated for their ransom it is clear that this is an error; it should be ל'ל .

¹⁵ Roth, in *Zion*, id. p. 170; see also *The Jews of Malta*, p. 227, concerning a ship that was captured, resulting in delay in the ransoming of the captives.

¹⁶ Roth, id. pp. 228-229.

¹⁷ See *Mishna Gittin* 4, 6. The prohibition against paying more than the ordinary ransom applied only in connection with the use of public funds. See *Gittin* 45, 1. Roth (p. 228) notes that this law is mentioned in the Society's regulations. He also brings forward some interesting facts, such as that when the captors demanded particularly large sums the Society resolutely refused to add to the amounts allocated. (See pp. 229-230).

stances of especially learned men who had to be ransomed, money contributed by individuals was added, so that the Society's regulation regarding the allocation of its own funds should not be broken. To secure the release of R. Haim Nabarro the sum of 100 reales was donated by R. Shmuel Aboab from an uncle's legacy, ten reales was collected from other individuals, and a further 40 reales from his family. Even this large amount was not enough, and the Society had to add another small sum so as not to cause any further delay in his release. It is to be noted that an order of priorities was established for the ransoming of the captives. The release of R. Haim Nabarro was 'to be secured before anybody else.' (Letter No. 2).

Although 100 reales was the sum fixed by the Society for the ransom of each person and that amount was allotted for R. Shlomo Ashkenazi (Letter No. 7), the Society later instructed that up to 200 reales should be paid if necessary. In the year 1650 R. Shmuel Aboab wrote to R. Shmuel Garmizan (Letter No. 4) that 'it is their custom to allocate only 100 reales for each person, and at the most 200 reales'. It seems that later 200 reales became standard. The letter sent by the Society to Ancona states that 'there are ד'ד captives, for each of whom a ransom of 200 reales has been paid, making the total four thousand eight hundred reales'.¹⁸

From time to time, however, the Society had to modify their financial provision. A document of the first half of the 17th century¹⁹ speaks of 34 souls, for whose ransom the sum of 15,000 grush was demanded, that is, over 400 grush for each one. An amount close to this is mentioned in a letter from the Society of the year 1676: 'The ransom will cost 250 grush and there are also cases of 400 grush'.²⁰

The personality of R. Shmuel Aboab deserves special consideration. His activities in the freeing of captives which began while he was still living in Verona continued after he moved to Venice. All his energies were devoted to this work of mercy, the urgency of which he was always pressing on the leaders of the Society. From Verona he bombarded the Society with his letters, giving them no rest until he was satisfied that everything possible was being done. It was to him especially that the Palestinian sages held captive and the heads of the Jerusalem community appealed to take up their cause with the Society. His deep concern with their unhappy lot and his determination to ameliorate their sufferings and to shorten the term of their imprisonment by even one hour²¹ if possible – all this shines

¹⁸ S. Bernstein, HUCA, Vol. 7, p. 521. Surprisingly, he does not notice that the mnemonic hints at the number of captives. Apparently it should be ד'ד instead of ד'ד .

¹⁹ S. Assaf, *B'Abole Yaakov*, p. 113.

²⁰ Roth in *Zion*, id. p. 170.

²¹ See *Shulhan Aroukh Yore Deah* 252, para. 3: 'And the loss of a single moment in the ransoming of a prisoner is to be regarded as the shedding of blood.'

through his words. When the sums allocated by the Society did not suffice he looked for other sources of funds, and he and his family were always first among the donors.

There is no evidence that R. Shmuel Aboab was one of the officials of the Society. He refers to them in the third person, as if he were not one of them. In addition to his own letters to those who were appealing to him, conveying the replies of the Society, he would also say that the Society was writing direct to the applicants.²² It emerges that the Society's executive committee consisted of merchants and men of financial affairs,²³ and that R. Shmuel Aboab acted as their advisor – an advisor whose influence was considerable.

²²In Letter No. 7 R. Shmuel Aboab writes to the captive, R. Shlomo Ashkenazi: 'The letter that I wrote... concerning his ransom that we arranged through the Society here'. He notifies him of the arrangements made on his behalf in Malta by the leaders of the Society in Venice, and uses the phrases 'We have arranged' and 'We have instructed' the agent in Malta. In the letter of the year 1666 (No. 8) he writes 'We have repeatedly consulted together'. Nevertheless, there is no evidence in this that he was one of the Society's officials. His son, R. Yaakov Aboab, in his biography of R. Shmuel Aboab, writes that 'he concerned himself with the public welfare, with distribution of free loans, with visiting the sick, with ransoming prisoners, with saving the weak from oppression by the strong and the needy from their despoilers'. Introduction to *Responsa Debar Shmuel*, p. 2, 74.

²³On the composition of the committee see Roth, *The Jews of Malta*, p. 221.