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SEFARDITAS



2º SEMESTRE 2018

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Design da capa: João Vicente

Paginação: Rodrigo Lucas

Tiragem: 100 exemplares

Impressão: LouresGráfica

Data de impressão: Dezembro de 2018

Depósito legal: 426885/17

ISSN: 1645-1910

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The inescapable ancestry of Eli d'Oliveira. A Dutch Sephardic rescue operation based upon the myth of Sephardic superiority, 1941-1944¹

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ABSTRACT

During World War II, the Sephardic psychological counsellor Eli d'Oliveira from Amsterdam undertook great efforts to evade deportation in a legal way. He tried to prove to the Nazi occupier that he descended from Christian families in the Iberian Peninsula and hence did not belong to the Jewish 'race'. D'Oliveira was not the only one who did so. He took part in the so-called *Action Portuguesia*, a rather large-scale rescue operation in which a group of Dutch Sephardim tried to evade deportation collectively by implementing parts of the pseudo-scientific racial discourse, which stood at the centre of National Socialist ideology. Their theory was based upon the myth of Sephardic superiority. In this article, the author describes and analyses the *Action Portuguesia* through the eyes of Eli d'Oliveira. By taking this biographical approach, both the rational and emotional arguments behind a highly controversial episode in Sephardic WW II historiography come to light.

KEYWORDS: *Action Portuguesia*, Sephardim, World War II, Myth of Sephardic Superiority, Amsterdam

RESUMO

Durante a Segunda Guerra Mundial, Eli d'Oliveira, de Amsterdão, empenhou-se em evitar a deportação de uma forma legal. Ele tentou provar ao ocupante nazi que descendia de famílias cristãs da Península Ibérica e que não pertencia à "raça" judaica. D'Oliveira não foi o único a tentar fazê-lo. Integrou a chamada *Action Portuguesia*, uma operação de resgate a larga escala na qual um grupo de sefarditas holandeses se uniram para tentar evitar a deportação através a apropriação de

* *Texto submetido a 14 de Agosto de 2018. Aceite para publicação a 20 de Setembro de 2018.*

¹ This article is based on the research for my dissertation, which has been published in Dutch. Jaap Cohen, *The onontkoombare afkomst van Eli d'Oliveira. Een Portugees-Joodse familiegeschiedenis*, Amsterdam, Querido, 2015. I would like to dedicate it to the late Prof. Evelien Gans (1951-2018), who co-supervised my dissertation with great wisdom.

parte do discurso pseudo-científico racial no qual residia o cerne da ideologia nacional-socialista. A sua teoria alicerçava-se no mito da superioridade sefardita. Neste artigo, descreve-se e analisa-se a *Action Portuguesia* através do olhar de Eli d'Oliveira. Partindo de uma abordagem biográfica, emergem tanto os argumentos racionais como emocionais que se encontram por detrás de um episódio altamente controverso da historiografia sefardita da Segunda Guerra Mundial.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Action Portuguesia*, Sefarditas, Segunda Guerra Mundial, Mito da Superioridade Sefardita, Amsterdão.

In the spring and summer of 1942, the 56-year-old psychological counsellor Eli Jessurun d'Oliveira¹ commenced a new daily routine. In the morning, he took a 45-minute stroll from his house on the south side of Amsterdam straight to the eastern part of the city, where the Amsterdam municipal archives were located. Upon arriving at the Archives, he did not go to the main reading room: there was a special, separate room established for people like him – “in order to prevent any scenes”, as the director of the Archives explained after the war.² Employees of the Archives referred to this room ironically as “the Star Watch / *Stargazers Room*”. It was a special room for Jews, who at that time were all obliged to wear stars of David on their coats.³ In the spring and summer of 1942, this particular room at the Archives was packed every day, mainly by people from Sephardic descent, like Eli d'Oliveira. They were there to sort out their genealogies. Birth certificates, marriage documents, occasional baptism records – everything that was needed to build up a large and detailed family tree. After a long day of work, Eli walked 45 minutes back home. As a Jew, he was not allowed to ride the tram anymore.

During his life, the extremely versatile and talented Eli d'Oliveira had never shown any particular interest in the history of his family. He was born in 1886 in Amsterdam to a poor Sephardic (or: Portuguese Jewish) family of diamond workers and street artists. Not uncommonly among boys in the Jewish diamond workers' environment, he became attracted to socialism at a young age. He was able to emancipate himself, to move up in the world. He became one of the best stenographers in the country. At the age of 21, he published his first novel and, when he was 25, he wrote a biography of Goethe, whom he admired

¹ His last name was usually shortened to simply “d'Oliveira”.

² W.S. Unger, “De Nederlandse archieven en de oorlog”, *Nederlands Archievenblad*, 3/53, 1949, pp. 101-134 (118).

³ W.J. van Hoboken, “Het archief en de Joden 1940-'45”, *Maandblad Amstelodamum*, 3/72, 1985, pp. 57-61 (57).

tremendously.⁴ Later, he changed careers, becoming a successful psychiatrist. Although he married a Portuguese Jewish woman named Simcha Lopes Cardozo, he became gradually more and more disconnected from his Jewish background: he was secularising rapidly, being the first in seven generations of the D'Oliveira family to withdraw from membership of the Portuguese Jewish Community in Amsterdam. He moved to a non-Jewish neighbourhood, frequented non-Jewish circles and provided his 2 children, Jaap and Elsa, with a non-Jewish upbringing.

When the Netherlands were invaded by the Nazis in 1940, Eli d'Oliveira's life changed quickly. He lost many non-Jewish patients, who were no longer allowed to go to Jewish doctors or psychiatrists. This did not mean he was not busy: it was his dream to receive a Ph.D. from the University of Amsterdam, and he was hard pressed to pass his required academic exams. Over the course of 1942, however, his attention was drawn away from his normal studies. The circumstances led him to study the history of his own family: Eli d'Oliveira and his fellow genealogists at the Star Watch were all taking part in the so-called *Action Portuguesia*, a large-scale operation to rescue the Portuguese Jews in the Netherlands.⁵

The *Action Portuguesia* is a particular yet stunning example of constructing family and family histories in a very direct sense. This construction served a clear purpose: convincing the Nazi occupier that hundreds of Dutch Sephardic families should be seen as racially different from Ashkenazi Jews. As a result, the anti-Jewish measures of the Nazis should not be applied to them. However, underneath this straightforward effort, subtle notions of “belonging” and “connectedness” within Dutch Sephardic families came to light: even before their

⁴ E. d'Oliveira jr., *Quasi-socialisten. Hollanders te Antwerpen*, Amsterdam, Vennootschap Letteren en Kunst, 1907; E. d'Oliveira, *Goethe. Een levensbeschrijving*, Amsterdam, Wereldbibliotheek, 1911.

⁵ I have elaborated on the Action Portuguesia before, although from a different perspective. Jaap Cohen, “The Action Portuguesia. Legitimizing National Socialist Racial Ideology as a Dutch Sephardic Strategy for Safety, 1941-1944”, *The Jew as Legitimation. Jewish-Gentile Relations Beyond Antisemitism and Philosemitism*. Ed. David J. Wertheim, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 153-171. About this campaign see also Ruth van Galen-Herrmann, *Calmeyer, dader of mensenedder? Visies op Calmeyers rol in de jodenwerving*, Soesterberg, Aspekt, 2009, pp. 98-105; Garaldien von Frijtag Drabbe Künzel, *Het geval Calmeyer*, Amsterdam, Mets&Schilt, 2008, pp. 12-141; Mathias Middelberg, *Judenrecht, Judenpolitik und der Jurist Hans Calmeyer in den besetzten Niederlanden 1940-1945*, Göttingen, V&R Unipress, 2005, pp. 310-324; Bob Moore, *Victims and Survivors: the Nazi Persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands, 1940-1945*, London, Arnold, 1997, pp. 122-123; Salomon Louis Vaz Dias, “‘Talmoad Tora keneged koelam’. Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis der Portugees-Israëlitische Gemeente te Amsterdam in de Tweede Wereldoorlog”, *Studia Rosenthaliana*, 1/29, 1995, pp. 29-70 (33-43); Y.H.M. Nijgh, “Genealogie gedurende de bezetting”, *Liber amicorum Jhr.mr. C.C. van Valkenburg*, The Hague, Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie, 1985, pp. 219-234; J. Presser, *Ashes in the Wind: The Destruction of Dutch Jewry*, trans. Arnold Pomerans, London, Souvenir Press, 1968, pp. 305-311.

arrival in the Netherlands at the end of the 16th century, the “myth of Sephardic superiority” appeared in their circles. In this article, I will explore the *Action Portuguesia* and the underlying concept of Sephardic superiority through the eyes of the d’Oliveira family.

To answer the question of why during the summer of 1942 the Star Watch was packed with people, one has to go back more than a year in time. In February 1941, the German occupiers issued the decree 6/1941, which stated that every person with at least one Jewish grandparent – that is, a grandparent with at least three “full-Jewish” grandparents, or a grandparent with at least two full-Jewish grandparents who either belonged to a Jewish congregation or were married to Jewish partners⁶ – had to register themselves at their municipality “as a person of full or partial Jewish blood”. Disobedience risked a 5-year-prison sentence. This is one of the main reasons why almost everyone with Jewish grandparents registered: Eli d’Oliveira did, almost all of his family members did, and so did nearly all of the 140.000 Jews in the Netherlands. Having 3 or 4 Jewish grandparents, like Eli, whose four grandparents had been members of the Portuguese Jewish Community in Amsterdam, meant that you received the letter “J” in your identity papers as a proof that you were officially considered a Jew.

In the months after the registration of February 1941, a few protests were lodged by people claiming that they were being wrongly considered as Jews – they should be considered non-Jews. One of these people was the civil engineer and conservative publicist Louis Frederik Teixeira de Mattos (1872-1945) of The Hague. He was a descendant of one of the three aristocratic Sephardic families in the Netherlands. He did live the life of a noble man: he was well-to-do, had a large estate in the rural, eastern part of the country, and he was a member of various exclusive leisure clubs. Since he had converted to the chic Walloon-Reformed Church, married a Christian woman and – this is important – traced his ancestry back to a noble Christian family in medieval Portugal, he considered himself neither religiously nor racially Jewish.⁷ Still, because his four grandparents

⁶ This definition of a Jew was stated by the German leadership in the Netherlands in the decree 189/1940. See *Verordeningenblad voor het bezette Nederlandsche gebied 1940*, The Hague, Rijksuitgeverij, 1941, p. 548.

⁷ L.F. Teixeira de Mattos descended from Diego Teixeira de Sampayo, who possibly descended from the noble Sampayo family of Portugal. On this claim, see Daniel M. Swetschinski, *Orphan Objects: Facets of the Textiles Collection of the Joods Historisch Museum*, Amsterdam, Zwolle, Waanders, 1997, pp. 137-147.

had belonged to the Sephardic communities of Amsterdam and The Hague, he had been forced to register himself as a Jew in February 1941.

Teixeira de Mattos fought the ordinance. His lawyer wrote a lengthy letter to the Nazi rulers of the Netherlands, in which he stated that Teixeira de Mattos belonged to an illustrious family of “centuries-long culture bearers who were as utterly Aryans part of our people.” Registering them as Jews would mean that this famous family “would get lost to the *European Kulturkreis*” – apparently, in February 1941 the lawyer already had a clear vision of the disastrous fate of European Jewry.⁸

A few weeks later, the German authorities received a second letter, written by the brothers Frank and Charles Mendes de Leon. Although they were not ennobled, they were surely well-to-do and also converted to Christianity. Furthermore, they were closely affiliated to the Teixeira de Mattos family. Because of their partly similar genealogy, the Mendes de Leon-brothers claimed to be descendants of Christian, Iberian aristocracy as well.⁹ To support their argument, they added a historical essay to their letter, about the origin of the Dutch Sephardim. In this seven-page document, the authors described how after the Expulsion Edict of 1492, the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula were forced to either flee Iberia or convert to Christianity. The ones who stayed lived for over a century as “*conversos*” or “New Christians” in Spain and Portugal, where they obtained respectable positions in society and mixed with the Old Christian elites. However, in the eyes of the Inquisition, they were still suspected of Judaizing activities (which in some cases was in fact true). From about 1600, the *conversos* emigrated to the relatively tolerant city of Amsterdam, where they reconverted to Judaism. The Mendes de Leon brothers pointed out that these “fine civilized people” were almost indistinguishable from Spanish and Portuguese Christians. On the other hand, the distinction between them and the Ashkenazim was “very large in culture, lifestyle and rite.”¹⁰

It is important to note that the claims of the Teixeira de Mattos- and Mendes de Leon-branches did not come out of the blue. They were inspired by the so-called “myth of Sephardic supremacy” (or superiority) – a term coined by the

⁸ E.H. Th. Kwast to *Reichskommissar* Seyß-Inquart, 22 February 1941. The Hague, Central Bureau for Genealogy (CBG), Calmeyer Archives, dossier Teixeira de Mattos (180).

⁹ Frank and Charles Mendes de Leon to *Generalkommissar* Wimmer, 28 March 1941. The Hague, CBG, Calmeyer Archives, dossier Mendes de Leon (117).

¹⁰ Frank and Charles Mendes de Leon, “Historischer Ueberblick,” addendum to their letter of 28 March 1941, The Hague, CBG, coll. Calmeyer Archives, file Mendes de Leon (117).

historian Ismar Schorsch in a classic article from 1989.¹¹ This myth had already emerged on the Iberian Peninsula during the 11th and 12th centuries, and had been transformed and extended in the West-Sephardic diaspora in the subsequent centuries. Based on genealogical, physical-anthropological, cultural, political, psychological and linguistic claims, some Sephardim felt themselves superior to Ashkenazim: the Sephardim were supposed to be of noble descent, to have a distinctive appearance, to keep high cultural standards and to show dignified behaviour – all of which the Ashkenazim, in their eyes, lacked. This exact kind of claims were to be found in the argumentation by Teixeira de Mattos and the Mendes de Leon-brothers.¹²

It was the task of the German Director for the Interior Administration, Hans Georg Calmeyer, to decide upon “racially ambiguous” Jewish cases.¹³ Not a stringent Nazi, he was receptive to the claims of both converted Sephardic family-branches. He ordered the protesters to hand over their family trees, which were needed to prove the link with their Christian ancestors. For aristocratic families like Teixeira de Mattos, it was easy to hand over such a family tree – their lineage was part of their identity, the family tree was easily accessible. And so it came to pass that in the fall of 1941, Calmeyer changed the legal status of those concerned from “J4” (a person with four Jewish grandparents, or ‘full-Jew’) to “A” (Aryan).¹⁴ They did not have to obey the humiliating anti-Jewish measures of the occupier anymore.

As a matter of course, it did not take long before the outcome of the cases of the two converted family-branches became known in Sephardic circles. Between the registration of February 1941 and Calmeyer’s decision to “Aryanise” the two family-branches, the occupier had issued many anti-Jewish measures in rapid sequence. When Eli d’Oliveira heard about the Teixeira de Mattos and Mendes

¹¹ Ismar Schorsch, “The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, 34, 1989, pp. 47-66. Other authors, like John Efron and Todd M. Endelman, use instead the term “Sephardic superiority,” without altering the meaning of the concept. John M. Efron, “Scientific Racism and the Mystique of Sephardic Racial Superiority,” *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, 38, 1993, pp. 75-96; Todd M. Endelman, “Benjamin Disraeli and the Myth of Sephardi Superiority,” *Jewish History*, 10, 1996, pp. 21-35. See on this subject also John M. Efron, *German Jewry and the Allure of the Sephardic*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016.

¹² I have elaborated more thoroughly on the relation between this myth and the *Action Portuguesia*. See Cohen, *op. cit.*

¹³ Much has been publicized about the controversial figure of Calmeyer. Recent studies are Middelberg, *op. cit.*; Von Frijtag Drabbe Künzel, *op. cit.*; Van Galen-Hermann, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ The Hague, CBG, coll. Calmeyer Archives, file Teixeira de Mattos (180).

de Leon cases, he understood that there was an opportunity to evade the anti-Jewish legislation. That is, if he also could prove that he was originally of Christian descent, that his family was cultivated and had links with the aristocracy, and that his genealogy was not mixed with Ashkenazim. In contrast to the aristocratic families, however, he did not have a family tree ready. This is why in the spring of 1942, he left every day for the Municipal Archives, where he tirelessly worked to sort out his own family tree.

After months of hard work, Eli d'Oliveira indeed managed to come up with a family tree which "proved" that his ancestors had been Christians in the Iberian Peninsula.¹⁵ According to Eli, his ancestors had lived for centuries in the Portuguese village of Vila Real, where they had lived as Christians before they emigrated to Amsterdam in 1646. We know now that this assumption was not true: exhaustive research in the archives of the Amsterdam Portuguese-Jewish Community has shown that the first member of the Jessurun d'Oliveira family in Amsterdam actually came from the ghetto of Venice, where he had had a strictly Jewish upbringing.¹⁶ But Eli surely did not know this at the time. And his assumption about certain ancestors from Vila Real was not really that far-fetched: there actually had been a member of another family called "D'Oliveira" who had come to Amsterdam from Vila Real. Only a genealogical expert would be able to shoot holes in his claim.

This was also true for other specifics in his family tree, which in the main consisted of Iberian double names. There were only three women – all from the 19th and 20th centuries – who did not have Mediterranean names. We know that they were of Ashkenazi descent. This is no surprise, because from the nineteenth century on, people from both Jewish groups in the Netherlands started intermarrying. However, Eli wrote next to the women's names that their religious affiliation was "unknown." He focused his attention rather on the connections in his ancestry with aristocratic families. Also he stipulated that there had been members in the past who had converted to Christianity, although most of the seven generations before him had been devout members of the Portuguese Jewish Community. Finally, Eli indicated that there had been some doctors and philosophical thinkers in his family history. He had to dig deep into the archives to prove that statement, because just like the majority of Sephardim since the end of the eighteenth century, the Jessurun d'Oliveira family had been a poor family,

¹⁵ Family tree of Abraham Elia Jessurun d'Oliveira. The Hague, CBG, coll. Nijgh, file Jessurun d'Oliveira.

¹⁶ This was Moseh d'Oliveira. See about him Cohen, *De onontkoombare afkomst, op. cit.*, pp. 38-49.

often living on social welfare. The men with the prestigious jobs did not carry the name “d’Oliveira”, but actually were only connected to the d’Oliveira’s via multiple degrees of relatedness.

By covering up some elements which were not useful to his claims, and by stipulating some of the “stronger” features of his family tree, Eli d’Oliveira eventually came up with a genealogy that had the right characteristics for his purposes. He had constructed his own family on paper – acknowledging the people he wanted to be connected to and mostly ignoring the ones he wanted to stay far away from. The family tree wasn’t nearly as impressive, however, as the aristocratic Sephardic genealogies, like that of the Teixeira de Mattos family. Additionally, also because there had been a flood of Sephardic family trees coming out of the Star Watch, other means must necessarily be employed to build a file extensive enough to impress Hans Calmeyer. To do so, Eli d’Oliveira turned to another aspect of the myth of Sephardic superiority: the fact that Sephardim were supposed to have different, “better” looks than Ashkenazim, and hence that there was a racial difference between the two groups. He went to visit two physical anthropologists, who measured his body features extensively. They each calculated his skull index, which was considered extremely important in racial studies – Sephardim were supposed to have longer heads than Ashkenazim. One of the anthropologists, named Dr. Arie de Froe, also measured 63 other variables, for instance the width, length, depth and shape of his nose. In their conclusions, both anthropologists concluded that Eli d’Oliveira did not look Jewish at all. “He is long-headed [...], just like to the Dutch average; he possesses a normal nose, thin lips, and a normal developed chin. Characteristic Jewish facial features do not occur: his look, speech and behavior are non-Jewish. [...] He must be regarded as fully Aryan.” To “prove” these statements, four “anthropologically approved” pictures were added to his file.¹⁷

As said before, the actions Eli d’Oliveira undertook during the years 1942 and 1943 were no exception to the rule. After Calmeyer granted a status change to members of the Teixeira de Mattos and Mendes de Leon families, and after the criminal character of the occupying regime really came to light, many Portuguese Jews did similar things in order to escape deportation to the extermination camps.

¹⁷ H.J.T. Bijlmer, “Antropologische Untersuchung von Herrn Abraham Elia Jessurun d’Oliveyra”, 7 June 1943. Cambridge, Collection P. Lopes Cardozo (private collection). With many thanks to Lida Cardozo-Kindersley.

Because of the large number of Portuguese Jews who were fighting their registration as Jewish, one of the leaders of the Sephardic community, Mr. Nochem de Beneditty came up with a plan to rescue the Portuguese Jews collectively: the *Action Portuguesia*. He figured that the arguments of individuals like Eli d'Oliveira, or the members of the Teixeira de Mattos and Mendes de Leon families, could also be valid for the entire group of about 4300 Portuguese Jews in the Netherlands. They might have stayed true to the Jewish religion, but they could make the same racial argument, and since the Nazi ideology was based on race rather than religion, there was an opportunity here. De Beneditty formed a committee, which, assisted by lawyers specialized in so-called "Aryanization-cases", took on some experts who were supposed to be able to support the argument of racial difference in a series of extensive reports and statements.

First, a historical report was produced. Based on a wide variety of sources, it argued once more that the 16th century *conversos* who had come to Amsterdam had been fully mixed with Christian noble families on the Iberian Peninsula. According to the report, it had been the Inquisition that had forced them to escape the Peninsula, "turning Christians into Jews". The report pointed out that because of the mixing with Christians, the *conversos* were "racially" no longer Jews upon their arrival in the Netherlands.¹⁸

To prove that this racial, or so-called anthropological claim was also valid three centuries later, the committee and lawyers went to the internationally acclaimed professor Ubbo Ariëns Kappers. Before the War, in 1934, he had published a study on the anthropology of the Near East. In this book, a graphic showed that there was a notable difference in skull index between Ashkenazim and Sephardim (coincidentally measured in Amsterdam by Eli's daughter Elsa d'Oliveira).¹⁹ Ariëns Kappers wrote a statement which confirmed his research.²⁰

Moreover, a young, ambitious colleague of Ariëns Kappers, dr. Arie de Froe, the physical anthropologist who had measured Eli d'Oliveira so thoroughly, understood that in the case of the Sephardim, there was an opportunity to

¹⁸ The author's name remained unmentioned in the report. However, several letters from the collection Nijgh show that the Antillean Sephardic engineer Percy Cohen Henriquez had written the report. The Hague, Municipal Archives (MATH), coll. 780, box '4183 alg', file 'correspondentie'.

¹⁹ C.U. Ariëns Kappers, *An Introduction to the Anthropology of the Near East in Ancient and Recent Times. With a Chapter on Near Eastern Bloodgroups by Leland W. Parr*, Amsterdam, North-Holland Publishing Company, 1934, p. 63.

²⁰ Statement C.U. Ariëns Kappers, s.d. Amsterdam, NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (NIOD), coll. 20, file 1525.

fight the Germans with the very racial theories which stood at the center of their National-Socialist ideology. In the summer of 1943, he decided to repeat Ariëns Kappers' research, but on a far more extended basis. In total, de Froe examined no fewer than 375 Amsterdam Sephardim, in the same way as he had scrutinized Eli d'Oliveira. De Froe compared this primary source material with the research on Ashkenazim by anthropologists of high acclaim in the Third Reich. The result was a report in the German language, called *Die Anthropologie der sogenannten portugiesischen Juden in den Niederlanden* ["The anthropology of the so-called Portuguese Jews in the Netherlands"].²¹ It contained 96 pages full of graphics and tables which led to one irrefutable conclusion: with regard to basically all researched body-features, the Sephardic Jews differed significantly from Ashkenazi Jews – even more than for instance non-Jewish Dutchmen did. According to de Froe, the Sephardic Jews clearly belonged to the Mediterranean race, whereas the Ashkenazi Jews consisted of a mix of Nordic and Alpine race-types.

To support his calculations, dr. de Froe asked a photographer to produce portraits of Sephardic Jews from Amsterdam. This photographer was Eli d'Oliveira's son Jaap d'Oliveira. His 92 photos were added to the report, in order to "provide an image which could not be obtained by any measure or rate."²² Next to all these pictures of the Sephardim, who were all wearing nice clothes, de Froe mentioned notable facial features: often, the photographed had a substantial forehead, an oval face and a "telling, intelligent look,"²³ or an extremely narrow face. Contrastingly, 44 photos of Eastern Sephardic Jews, originally used as illustrations in a nearly twenty-year-old physical anthropological journal article, were added to the file.²⁴ The persons in these pictures were descendants of Jews who in the 13th and 14th centuries had not converted to Christianity, but had fled to the Balkans. Consequently, they were not racially mixed with Mediterranean people – with their beards, big noses and simple clothing, they were similar to the stereotypical images that existed of Ashkenazi Jews.

²¹ A. de Froe, "Die Anthropologie der sogenannten portugiesischen Juden in den Niederlanden", Amsterdam 1943. Amsterdam, NIOD, coll. 20, file 1532.

²² De Froe stated this in a separate booklet in which he summarized the results of his research. A. de Froe, *De anthropologie van de zogenaamde Portugeesche Joden in Nederland*, Amsterdam, n.p., 1943, p. 7. Amsterdam, NIOD library.

²³ See, for instance, the caption of the photos of Professor J.L. Palache, who was the chairman of the Amsterdam Sephardic Community, De Froe, "Die Anthropologie", pictures 45 and 46.

²⁴ F. Wagenseil, "Beiträge zur physischen Anthropologie der spaniolischen Juden und zur jüdischen Rassenfrage", *Zeitschrift für Morphologie und Anthropologie*, XXIII, 1925, pp. 33-151.

Besides the racial argument, the *Action Portuguesia* also made use of cultural, political, psychological and linguistic claims, belonging to the myth of Sephardic superiority. The cultural claims regarding the Sephardim came together in a photo album.²⁵ It was created by the well-known, non-Jewish ceramist Bert Nienhuis – who was married to a woman of Portuguese-Jewish descent. He made the album in cooperation with Eli d'Oliveira and his son, who took a series of new photos for it. Together they collected and arranged 78 pictures in a highly interesting way.

The first section showed some of the most famous Christian aristocrats and intellectuals in the history of Portugal, like nobleman Álvaro de Abranches da Câmara (-1660), legal writer Agostinho Barbosa (1589-1649) and poet Guerra Junqueiro (1850-1923). The second section consisted of pictures of the most important families in the history of the Sephardic community of Amsterdam, for example the aristocratic Lopes Suasso family.²⁶ All of those depicted were wearing elegant, sometimes even spectacular clothes. The third section showed pictures of the contemporary community leaders, like the former judge Nochem de Beneditty, the leader of the *Action Portuguesia*. He seems to be writing a verdict, as the photographer indicated the respected professions or the intellectual pastimes of the depicted. Eventually, the fourth and last section was dedicated to one family, the d'Oliveira family: Eli, his second wife Louise Lopes Cardozo – who was of Portuguese descent as well –, his son Jaap, and his daughter Elsa. The book gave the impression that there was a straight line to be drawn from the historical Christian-Portuguese diplomats and nobility, via the grandees of the Dutch Sephardic community in the past and present times, to completely secular Sephardic families like the d'Oliveiras.

Besides the cultural claim, there was the political claim. The Sephardim in the Netherlands were supposed to be fully integrated in Dutch society. To prove this point, the committee asked scholars and politicians who were sympathetic to the German occupying regime, to endorse the Sephardic arguments. One of the respondents, the Hegelian professor of philosophy J. Hessing hailed the Sephardim because of their “scientific and philosophical mind, their good taste and artistry, their civilized culture, which meant that they belonged to the best

²⁵ *Abbildungen von Personen Portugiesischer Abstammung in den Niederlanden*, 1943. Amsterdam NIOD, coll. 20, file 1529.

²⁶ The original paintings of the Lopes Suasso family belong to the collection of the Jewish Historical Museum, Amsterdam.

Dutch civilians, at any rate opposed to political intrigue and social-democratic and communist movements.”²⁷

To elaborate on the psychological claim, the leaders of the *Action Portuguesia* employed the psychiatrist Coen van Emde Boas who, although being of Ashkenazi descent, was relatively safe because of his marriage to a non-Jewish woman.²⁸ Van Emde Boas conducted a large study into the conduct and psychological character of Sephardim, aiming to prove that anti-Semitic stereotypes regarding Jewish behavior did not apply to this specific group.²⁹ 147 Sephardim filled in a survey about their characteristics. Also, van Emde Boas found 30 Sephardim, 30 Ashkenazim and 30 non-Jews to do a Rorschach test. In a draft-version of his report, he wrote about the Sephardim: “In general, their behavior is calm and collected, the male character being dignified, the female’s gracious or noble. They usually refrain from gesticulating, but persevere for a notable long time in the same position.” Also character- and temper-wise, they were supposed to be different from the “lively, waving, jovial, extravert, gabby, emotional, primarily, practical-intelligent Ashkenazim.”³⁰

However, the results of van Emde Boas’ research did not match his hypothesis. Some of the examined Sephardim indeed showed calm behavior, but the opposite was true as well. For instance, Eli’s son Jaap d’Oliveira, who was one of the 30 Sephardim who did the Rorschach test, clearly had an emotional and edgy personality.³¹ It is likely that this unwanted – and perhaps unexpected – outcome was the reason why van Emde Boas never wrote a final version of his manuscript, and why the research was not added to the other documents to serve as proof of Sephardic superiority.

Finally, a relatively small research was conducted into the language and speech of Sephardim. The Amsterdam phonetician dr. Louise Kaiser scrutinized 10 Sephardim, all belonging to the highest circles of the community. They were

²⁷ J. Hessing to N. de Beneditty, 24 October 1943. Amsterdam, NIOD, coll. 20, file 1526.

²⁸ Magdalena van Emde Boas – Starkenstein was actually of Jewish descent, but she was ‘aryanised’ with the help of Prof. Ariëns Kappers and Dr. de Froe, who wrote hundreds of personal, physical anthropological attests to ‘prove’ that someone did not belong to the Jewish ‘race’. Amsterdam, Municipal Archives, coll. 30265, file 650.

²⁹ Amsterdam, van Emde Boas collection (private collection). With many thanks to Walter van Emde Boas, who generously gave me access to his father’s documents.

³⁰ These quotes from his draft were published by de Froe in a summary of his own research. A. de Froe, *De psychologie van de zoogenaamde Portugeesche Joden in Nederland*, Amsterdam, n.p., 1943, p. 8. Amsterdam, NIOD library.

³¹ Rorschach test Jaap d’Oliveira, 9 October 1943. Amsterdam, van Emde Boas collection.

asked to describe a painting in their own words, and to produce certain vowels and consonants. Although her report on the research was rather small – only two pages – her conclusion was very clear: she concluded that “the speech of the so-called Portuguese Jews does not contain any Jewish elements at all.”³²

After pointing out all of these family trees, statements, and scientific reports, the following question naturally comes up: did it work? Did the Portuguese Jews in the Netherlands succeed in convincing Calmeyer, and did they as a result succeed in evading deportation? When taking into account some successful attempts by other European, (quasi-)Jewish groups, the *Action Portuguesia* was not necessarily a dead end.³³ Also, Calmeyer certainly was receptive to the arguments of the Dutch Sephardim. However, he did not have the authority to “Aryanise” a group of no fewer than 4300 people. After receiving the first load of family trees, most of them made in the Star Watch, he already had already asked in October 1941 the Reich Kinship Office (*Reichssippenamt*) in Berlin to provide an answer for the “Sephardic question”.³⁴ This Office was specialized in providing “certainty” on the genealogical boundaries of Judaism.³⁵ However, like in most racially ambiguous cases, the Sephardic question involved also non-genealogical factors. Hence, the *Reichssippenamt* forwarded the question to the State Institute for the History of the New Germany (*Reichsinstitut für Geschichte des neuen Deutschlands*), but it took almost two years until an answer was received.³⁶

In the meantime, Calmeyer granted the “pure” Dutch Sephardim – that is, the ones who could prove that they had at least three Sephardic grandparents and who were not married to Ashkenazim – more or less the same kind of protection that he gave to other specific Jewish groups, like the ones who were married to Christians, or those who were of “special merit”.³⁷ He put their names on a list – in this case the so-called “List of Persons Without East-Jewish Admixture and Not

³² Report L. Kaiser, 7 June 1943. Amsterdam, NIOD, coll. 20, file 1526.

³³ For instance the group of Iranian Jews in Paris, or the Karaites of Crimea. See Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 165-166.

³⁴ According to a letter of the head of the *Reichssippenamt* Kurt Mayer to *Befehlshaber der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD* Wilhelm Harster of 27 August 1943, Mayer had received Calmeyer’s question on 31 October 1941. Amsterdam, NIOD, coll. 77, file 1262.

³⁵ See on the *Reichssippenamt*: Thomas Pegelow, “Determining “people of German blood”, “Jews” and “Mischlinge”. The Reich Kinship Office and the competing discourses and powers of Nazism, 1941-1943”, *Contemporary European History*, 15, 2006, pp. 43-65; Eric Ehrenreich, *The Nazi Ancestral Proof: Genealogy, Racial Science, and the Final Solution*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2007, pp. 78-120.

³⁶ K. Mayer to W. Harster, 27 August 1943. Amsterdam, NIOD, coll. 77, file 1262.

³⁷ See especially on the case of the mixed-married Jews in the Netherlands: Coen Stuldreher, *De legale rest. Gemengd gehuwde Joden onder de Duitse bezetting*, Amsterdam, Boom, 2007.

Married to Eastern Jews” (*Liste von Personen portugiesischer Abstammung ohne ostjüdische Beimischung und nicht mit Ostjuden verheiratet*), or, in popular discourse, the “Portuguese List”. This was a *Sperrliste* which provided protection until further notice against deportation to the concentration camps in Eastern Europe. At first, this list consisted of 1014 names.³⁸ After the criteria were extended – people had to prove that they had at least seven Sephardic great-grandparents – only 362 Sephardim were approved on the list.³⁹ Eli d’Oliveira and his family were among them.

In August 1943, the German leadership in the Netherlands finally received a combined answer from the Reich Kinship Office and the State Institute for the History of the New Germany. Although the report by the historical institute was not completely straightforward, its accompanying letter left no room for speculation: “The Dutch Sephardim have always felt like Jews and are born, raised and deceased in Jewish spirit.”⁴⁰

In order to come to a final verdict, the Nazis, on 2 February 1944 – almost two years after the first mass deportations of Jews and ten months after the Netherlands were declared “*Judenrein*” by the Nazis – organized a “*Portuguese razzia*”. All protected Sephardim, among them Eli d’Oliveira, his wife and his daughter Elsa, were collected at their houses and deported to the Dutch transit camp of Westerbork. Several weeks later, they were arranged in lines. Two high-standing SS officers and camp commander Gemmeker inspected the group – like a “pedigree cattle inspection”, as Elsa d’Oliveira wrote in her diary.⁴¹ She did not know at the time that the inspection was a farce. On February 3, one day after the *Portuguese razzia*, the German leadership in the Netherlands received a telegram from SS-general Ernst Kaltenbrunner, who served as Head of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* of the Third Reich. He had heard of the claims of the Dutch Sephardim, which made, in his opinion, no sense at all. Kaltenbrunner considered the Dutch Sephardim without any doubt as Jews; they should be integrated in the “evacuation process” as soon as possible.⁴²

³⁸ The Hague, MATH, coll. 870, box 4183 alg.

³⁹ “Liste von Personen portugiesischer Abstammung ohne ostjüdische Beimischung und nicht mit Ostjuden verheiratet”. The Hague, MATH, coll. 870, box 4183 alg.

⁴⁰ Kurt Mayer to Wilhelm Harster, 27 August 1943. Amsterdam, NIOD, coll. 77, file 1262. Included is a report by Wilfried Euler, researcher of the State Institute for the History of the New Germany: Wilfried Euler, *Zur Frage der genealogischen Einordnung der sogenannten portugiesischen Juden in den Niederlanden*, n.p., 1943. Amsterdam, NIOD, coll. 77, file 1261.

⁴¹ Diary Elsa d’Oliveira, 20 February 1944. Amsterdam, D’Oliveira-Rodrigues Pereira collection (private collection).

⁴² Ernst Kaltenbrunner to Erich Naumann, 3 February 1944. Amsterdam, NIOD, coll. 77, file 1262.

Like Kaltenbrunner had demanded, the inspection had a dramatic outcome. Despite the anthropological reports, in the eyes of the three Nazis, most Sephardim did have Jewish features. According to the inspectors, they did not look like the photos of the reports, which, they said, apparently had been illuminated in a particular way. Moreover, the inspectors made the rather perverse statement that the Sephardim had in fact acknowledged their Jewishness by wearing the obligatory star during the War years. The judgment was clear: Sephardim were racially inferior (“*Rassisches Untermenschentum*”), as one of the SS’ers put it.⁴³ The *Action Portuguesia* had been in vain. On 25 February 1944, a group of 308 Sephardim was deported to Theresienstadt. Among them was Eli d’Oliveira and his wife. In the infamous propaganda documentary from Theresienstadt, made in the summer of 1944, he appears in a 5-second shot, working in the clothes workshop.⁴⁴ Less than two months later, Eli d’Oliveira died – along with most of the deported Portuguese Jews from the list, in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

In post-war historiography, the *Action Portuguesia* has always been referred to as a large-scale scam, a means to convince the Nazis with fictitious arguments. In 1950, Abel Herzberg wrote in his book *Kroniek der Jodenvervolgning* (“Chronicles of the persecution of the Jews”) ironically that when reading about De Froe’s anthropological measurements of the Portuguese Jews, he was especially curious about the measures of their backbones, but, he said, “one is not able to find those.”⁴⁵ One year later, M. Wallenstein wrote in *The Jewish Chronicle* about this “shameful episode”, in which the Dutch Sephardim had renounced their origins.⁴⁶ And in his classic book *Ondergang* (“The Destruction of the Dutch Jews”) of 1965, historian Jacques Presser asked himself rhetorically if the Sephardim had indeed lost everything – “even their honor.”⁴⁷ Clearly, these authors – all of them of Ashkenazi-Jewish descent – felt that by following the racial science and rhetoric of the day, the Dutch Sephardim had implicitly legitimized the anti-Jewish measures of the Nazis.

⁴³ H. Aust to H.A. Rauter, 20 February 1944. Amsterdam, NIOD, coll. 77, file 1262.

⁴⁴ This propaganda documentary was titled *Theresienstadt: Ein Dokumentarfilm aus dem jüdischen Siedlungsgebiet*. On this film, see Karel Margry, ““Theresienstadt” (1944-1945). The nazi propaganda film depicting the concentration camp as paradise”, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 12, 1992, pp. 145-162.

⁴⁵ Abel J. Herzberg, *Kroniek der Jodenvervolgning*, 1940-1945, 5th ed., Amsterdam, Querido, 1985 [1950]), p. 184.

⁴⁶ M. Wallenstein, “The Marranos of Holland. A Memory to the Last War”, *The Jewish Chronicle*, 17 August 1951.

⁴⁷ J. Presser, *Ondergang. De vervolging en verdelging van het Nederlandse Jodendom 1940-1945*, The Hague, Staatsuitgeverij, 1965, 2:73.

However, one of the main non-Jewish figures of the *Action Portuguesia*, dr. Arie de Froe, stipulated after the war that the glorification of the Sephardim did not specifically harm Ashkenazi Jews; without the *Action*, their terrible fate would have been the same.⁴⁸ Moreover, in an entry for the Dutch encyclopedia *ENSIE* (1949), de Froe more or less repeated the results of the anthropological research he had conducted during the War, pointing out that Sephardim belonged to an entire different race than Ashkenazim.⁴⁹ He believed that in the case of the Sephardim, there had been no need to falsify data. “In science, so much nonsense has been stated already without anyone to benefit, that for a good cause there surely could have been added some,” de Froe wrote to a colleague in November 1943, “but I can assure you that this wasn’t necessary in the case of the Portuguese [Jews]. Anthropologically they belong to the Mediterranean race.”⁵⁰

What did the Sephardim themselves think of the failed rescue operation? For most of the Portuguese Jews who were put on the Portuguese List, the myth of Sephardic superiority was nothing more than a myth, and the *Action Portuguesia* was only a scam in order to save their lives. Sure, there existed some cultural differences, but most Sephardim and Ashkenazim rather felt connected with each other as both being part of a Jewish community. It is telling that after the economic downfall of the Dutch-Sephardic community in the end of the eighteenth century, the Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities of Amsterdam had mixed to a great extent. Sephardim and Ashkenazim had lived in the same neighborhoods, frequented the same places and often married each other.⁵¹ This is the main reason why only 362 of the almost 5000 people belonging to the Sephardic community had 7 or 8 Sephardic great-grandparents.

But when approaching the *Action Portuguesia* from the individual perspective of Eli d’Oliveira and his family, a more nuanced view comes to light. For Eli d’Oliveira the rescue operation was more than just a deliverance strategy. The myth of Sephardic superiority, to a certain extent, still existed in his circles: it is

⁴⁸ De Froe pointed this out in an interview with Jacques Presser. Amsterdam, NIOD, coll. 249-1005, file a15.

⁴⁹ A. de Froe, “Inleiding tot de anthropologie”, *Eerste Nederlandse Systematisch Ingerichte Encyclopaedie*. Ed. C.J. van der Klauw et al., vol. 6, Amsterdam, E.N.S.I.E., 1946-1960, pp. 237-243 (243).

⁵⁰ A. de Froe to an unknown colleague of the Commission for Physical-Anthropological Research of the Dutch People, 22 November 1943. Amsterdam, Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences Archives 1940-1993, file 376.

⁵¹ J.C.H. Blom and J.J. Cahen, “Joodse Nederlanders, Nederlandse joden en joden in Nederland (1870-1940)”, *Geschiedenis van de joden in Nederland*. Ed. J.C.H. Blom, D.J. Wertheim, H. Berg, B.T. Wallet, Amsterdam, Balans, 2017, pp. 275-359 (301).

telling that he expressed, in an article dating from 1919, that the Sephardim were “the core, the aristocracy and backbone” of Jewry.⁵² He had written this in an attack on the – at that time – famous writer Israel Querido, who, himself being of Sephardic descent, had dared to make fun of Sephardic elites in a parodying play.⁵³ Querido should not have done so, according to d’Oliveira, since he was part of “the family” – that is, the illustrious family of Sephardim in the Netherlands. This telling article – written more than two decades before the beginning of World War II – shows how the secularised Eli d’Oliveira was in a way still proud of his Iberian ancestry.

During the War, Eli d’Oliveira must have believed in the underlying message of the *Action Portuguesia*: that the cultivated Sephardim were not at all comparable to those Ashkenazim who had – according to the Nazis – created the “Jewish Problem”. The same was true for some of the “grandees” of the Portuguese-Jewish community. Their old-Iberian names – like Teixeira de Mattos and Orobio de Castro – provided status and high standing within the community. In their circles, it was still considered “not done” when a family member married an Ashkenazi partner. It is not surprising that they dissociated even more with Ashkenazim in general, and Ashkenazi family members in particular, when there seemed to emerge a possibility to evade the anti-Jewish measures of the Nazis.

However, people like Eli d’Oliveira, the founders of the *Action Portuguesia* and some of the grandees of the community did not only believe in the largely emotion-based arguments, created by the myth of Sephardic superiority. They also believed in reason. Scientists like Ubbo Ariëns Kappers, Arie de Froe and Louise Kaiser worked hard to provide rational arguments for the Action, largely based on what was at the time considered as “normal science”. The *Action Portuguesia* could thus emerge as a legally valid way to evade the anti-Jewish measures, backed by contemporary scientific theories.

The combination of emotional and rational arguments provided Sephardim like Eli d’Oliveira with confidence. Calmeyer’s receptivity, the quality of the concerned scientists and lawyers, and the stunning work-ethos they displayed added to this belief in a good outcome. This is why Eli d’Oliveira did everything in his power to collect as many data as possible, constructing his own family and family history in a way that served him best. And this is also why he – and the

⁵² E. d’Oliveira, “Het boek der fragmenten, anders gezegd: Is. Querido’s ‘Aron Laguna’”, *Het Getij*, 2, 1917, p. 158.

⁵³ Is. Querido, *Aron Laguna [van de familie]. Toneelspel in drie bedrijven*, Amsterdam, Querido, 1917.

people around him – did not go into hiding, although they were given extra time to do so. Instead of responding to the arbitrariness of the Nazi ideology, they responded to its allotted rationality – until the very end.