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Amsterdam was one of the most flourishing centres of European Jewry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries¹. The Low Countries, liberated from Spanish rule and constituting the United Provinces with Calvinism as the state religion, became from the end of the sixteenth century onwards a favourite refuge for the Marranos of the Iberian Peninsula, especially Portugal, who wished to return to overt Judaism. These immigrants, attracted by an earlier nucleus of Portuguese Marranos who had come to Amsterdam in the latter part of the sixteenth century², rapidly organized their communal life. After a formative period, the three congregations of *bêt ya^caqov* (founded in 1597), *neweh šalôm* (founded in 1608) and *bêt yisra'el* (founded in 1618) merged in 1639 into one unified community, under the name of *talmûd tôrâh*. Although Amsterdam also experienced an increasing influx of Ashkenazic Jews from Germany and Eastern Europe during the seventeenth century, the Sephardic community was to retain its economic and cultural, if not numerical, predominance.

Since they had no knowledge of Hebrew writing these Marranos, in returning to the religious practices of their ancestors, were at first obliged to have recourse to prayer books where the Hebrew prayers were transcribed in Latin characters. Consequently particular attention was given to education. Schools were set up - which Spinoza was to frequent in his youth - where the programme, graded with exemplary pedagogical method, included, apart from the topics normally encountered in Jewish schools of this period (the books of the Bible and exegetical talmudic and rabbinical works) also Hebrew grammar and modern Hebrew poetry³. Encouraged by the setting-up of a Hebrew printing works - Amsterdam became in the seventeenth and especially in the eighteenth century one of the most important centres of Hebrew typography - Jewish studies developed and expanded in this city which was soon called "the Jerusalem of the North". Its cultural life was distin-