



**The Jewish Cemetery of Altona Königstrasse
Justification of outstanding universal value**



Hamburg
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NAME OF PROPERTY: Jüdischer Friedhof Altona Königstraße

State, Province or Region: Hamburg/Germany

Latitude and Longitude, or UTM coordinates: 562950, 5933880 (ETRS 1989, UTM Zone 32 N)

DESCRIPTION

Today it is called “The Jewish Cemetery of Altona Königstrasse” in Hamburg. The site covers an area of almost 1.9 hectares and is the amalgamation of two adjacent but separate cemeteries, namely the southwestern part laid out by Sephardic Jews in 1611, which extends over one fourth of the cemetery, and the other section to the north and east, a cemetery laid out by the Ashkenazi Jews in 1616. This makes it not only the oldest *Jewish* cemetery, but the oldest of all cemeteries in Hamburg. In fact, its Sephardic part is the oldest preserved cemetery of the Sephardim who emigrated from Portugal to northern Europe.

Sephardim is the name which those Iberian Jews gave themselves who lived in Spain until 1492 and then emigrated in large numbers to North Africa, the Ottoman Empire or Italy where they founded their own Jewish congregations or joined existing ones. Then there are the descendants of Jews who were baptized against their will in Portugal in 1497. They call themselves “Portuguese”, or, more rarely, Sephardim. At the time they were mostly known as crypto-Jews, New Christians or Marranos. They started to leave Portugal in 1531 and settled in northern Europe at the end of the 16th century. Their preferred destinations were the seaport cities of the Netherlands (Antwerp and Amsterdam), of northern Germany (Hamburg, Glückstadt, Emden, Stade), and, from the middle of the 17th century, also the New World (Curaçao, Barbados, Jamaica, Surinam, Nevis, St. Eustatius, St. Thomas, New York etc.).

During the last third of the 16th century, Hamburg was not only much in demand as a trading location among English and Dutch merchants, but also as a place of refuge for the Jews who fled Portugal for reasons of faith. These crypto-Jews were the first Jews to be given permission to permanently settle in the Protestant port city of Hamburg. The records indicate that in 1595 there were seven Portuguese families in Hamburg. There is evidence to show that there were as many as 98 persons of Portuguese Jewish descent in Hamburg as early as 1609. When the armistice between Spain and the Netherlands expired in 1621, even more Portuguese Jews left Amsterdam for Hamburg and Glückstadt. As a result, there were some 1,200 “Portuguese” in Hamburg around 1650. Many of them were civil servants, rabbis, cantors, teachers, sextons or ritual slaughterers (*shohetim*), but there were also medical doctors, pharmacists, stone masons, meat merchants, stock brokers, tobacco traders and strippers, sugar cane processors, successful Portuguese bankers, wealthy wholesale merchants and transatlantic dealers, sea freight insurers, trade brokers and jewellers. It was the latter who laid the economic foundations for the Jewish-Portuguese congregations of Hamburg and Altona. These amalgamated on September 3, 1652 to form the unified Sephardic congregation of Kahal Kadosh Bet Israel. They also made Hamburg a showpiece of Sephardic Judaism in the West in the 17th century.

The congregation continued to grow and needed a burial ground. Non-Lutherans were not allowed to own cemeteries in the city, which is why on May 31st, 1611, three Portuguese Jews bought a piece of land on behalf of the three synagogue congregations of Talmud Tora, Keter Tora und Neve Salom. They bought the land, which was situated on Heuberg along what is today Königstrasse, from Count Ernest III of Holstein-Schauenburg und Sterneberg. On it they laid out a cemetery; it was later enlarged several times, namely in 1641, 1642, 1672, 1674,

1711, 1733. The first burial on this Sephardic cemetery took place in 1611. That is also the year engraved on the oldest tombstone which has been preserved.

Right next to it, the Altona Israelites (Hochdeutsche Israeliten-Gemeinde Judengemeinde = HIG) bought another burial ground between 1612 and 1616 which was then enlarged in 1668, 1710, 1745, 1806 and 1817. On this Ashkenazi cemetery, the first burial took place in 1616, its oldest preserved tombstone dates back to 1621.

In 1869, the Schleswig-Holstein Ministry of the Interior ordered both parts of the cemetery to be closed as active burying grounds. Special permission was given for a single burial on the Ashkenazi part of the cemetery in 1871 and for three more on the Sephardic part in 1871, 1872 and 1877. In the following years, members of the Jewish community repeatedly complained that the old burial grounds were in a state of neglect. As suggested by the Altona Beautification Association (Altonaer Verschönerungsverein), they were planted with low undergrowth and somewhat higher shrubs and trees; however, at the behest of the Chief Rabbi, these were not allowed to develop deep roots touching the graves. A “tasteful fence” was erected on Königstrasse. In 1864 and again in 1902, the Jewish community had to cede a narrow strip of their land situated at the southern edge of the two cemeteries to the city authorities so that Königstrasse could be widened.

As was the case with all Jewish cemeteries in Germany, the Jewish Cemetery of Altona Königstrasse was expropriated at the end of 1942. While attempts to clear it were foiled, the cemetery suffered considerable damage during the Third Reich, as a result of WW II and the air raids by the Allied Forces, through racially motivated vandalism, the building of sports grounds, the clearance of parts of it. Despite all the destruction caused, of the more than 9000 tombstones, some 8100 remain a number only as fragments.

It is particularly the Sephardic part of the cemetery which constitutes a historical, art and cultural monument. On it there are some 1,600 tombstones dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries, many of them featuring artistic and playful decorative motifs. In accordance with Sephardic tradition, the tombstones on this part of the cemetery are designed to be laid out horizontally and are often tent-shaped. They were manufactured from Obernkirchen or Cotta sandstone, from limestone, gabbro, basalt or, in some cases, from marble from Carrara. The poems and other inscriptions engraved on these tombstones are in Hebrew, Portuguese, Spanish, and, in some cases, in French and English. As of 1810, engravings were also made in German. The inscriptions are framed by ornamental or architectural reliefs, featuring curtains or Salomonic columns, for example. The top edge of the memorial slabs is either horizontal or rounded and some have columns. Floral vines, bouquets of flowers, cartouches and pilasters serve to artistically subdivide the surface of the slabs and create separate boxes for images. Much like on Jewish sarcophagi from antiquity, the outer edges of the tombstones feature protruding rosettes, often in the geometrical ornamental shape of the “Eternal Wheel” and rounded, rosette-like embellishments at the corners. This type of décor can be traced to contemporary Catholic models on the Iberian Peninsula, but it is also reminiscent of Protestant models from northern Europe.

Apart from rosettes, the most common decorative elements are broad grapevines, bead and reel motifs, palm branches, volutes and draperies. The preferred motifs are allegorical memento-mori-symbols such as skulls, angels’ or bat wings and the hour glass which adorn many tombstones either on their own or in combination with a series of images. Frequently, tombstones abound with richly worked relief ornamentation such as plant life décor, putti, erotes, coats of arms, trees of life, a hand protruding from a cloud which cuts a tree or a rose, as well as representations of animals (butterflies, pelicans, phoenixes, lambs) and biblical scenes which illustrate the Christian names of the deceased .

The majority of Jews who emigrated from Portugal during the 16th century had for generations been prevented from practicing their religion and the cultural activities connected with it. They were therefore no longer familiar with Jewish habits and Jewish sepulchral art and culture. They did not have their own stone masons either, who could have based their craft on personal experience with Jewish culture and Jewish motifs. It is thus safe to assume that, at least initially, Christian stone masons were likely commissioned to chisel Jewish tombstones on the basis of detailed Christian text and image examples, e.g. from the Lutheran Bible. But in addition to the tombstones on Christian churchyards which were used as input, there were other original sources such as Christian prints and books. The one-page prints so popular in the 17th century and *littérature à la mode* were also used as archetypes. Jewish printed products from Amsterdam and richly ornamented Italian marriage contracts (*ketubbot*) were further sources.

It is not only the ornamental décor, but also the inscriptions that are of great interest. It was up to rabbis with a poetic gift to formulate tombstone inscriptions. Their epitaphs in Hebrew drew on the Torah and the Talmud and were designed to hold the deceased in high esteem by preserving their lasting and beautiful memory. The main intention was to depict the deceased as a God-fearing person, but the decorative and image-laden tombstones also bore witness to the desire to express the pride of the deceased and his family in bereavement. They were always a display of pride of the fact that if they had not been born as Jews they had at least died as Jews. The tombstone inscriptions were conceived as creative literary texts. This means we can today legitimately consider them part of the Hebrew, Portuguese and Spanish literature of the period. The significant Sephardic libraries accumulated by the rabbis of the 17th century contained – in addition to Talmudica and Hebraica – numerous poems, novels and plays in Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and French, suggesting that some of the poetic and artistic sources can be found in the countries mentioned. There are also numerous collections of poems assembled by rabbis in Hamburg stored in the *Ets Haim* and *Rosenthaliana* libraries in Amsterdam. There are many tombstone inscriptions which indicate that the Portuguese were not only familiar with the Baroque literature of the Iberian Peninsula and the intellectual and political ideas and societal values contained therein, but also with Judeo-Spanish and Jewish-Arab literature.

Originally, the stelae in the neighbouring Ashkenazi part of the cemetery were all in an upright position. Some 6,500 of them have been preserved, but today many of them are in a horizontal position. Until approximately 1810, they were made from Oberkirchen sandstone, later mostly from Elbe sandstone. In addition to the Hebrew inscription on the front, from 1835 onwards there sometimes were inscriptions in German on the back. From the second half of the 17th century onward, the text blocks of these tombstones were often framed by three-centered or round arches and featured relief ornaments, the décor displaying in the main plant motifs, and sometimes animals such as doves, geese, lambs, stags or lions; these illustrated the Christian name of the deceased.

The tombstones of the Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews have numerous symbols and emblems in common, such as the jar with or without the bowl in the case of the Levites, the blessing hands for the Kohanim, occasionally in an escutcheon held by lions or under a crown, as well as many crowns with inscriptions which refer to the merits of the deceased.

The Ashkenazi part of the cemetery harbors a particularly important treasure, namely many tombs of rabbis with highly ambitious and long texts. Their literary quality and ornamental exterior are remarkable (in 69 cases, it has been proven that the inscriptions were written by/dedicated to rabbis. There is no other Jewish cemetery in the whole of Germany that offers a similar number of tomb inscriptions of equal importance. These inscriptions remind us of the fact that in its heyday during the 18th century, the Chief Rabbinate of Altona was among the most renowned rabbinates in the whole of Europe. Even today, for many Jewish visitors, the outstanding importance of this *House of Life* (“Haus des Lebens”) is closely associated with its succession of rabbis.

Justification of “Outstanding Universal Value” Criteria met:

(ii) (for a period of time or in a cultural area, a significant point of intersection of human values in respect to the development of architecture, large sculpture or landscaping)

The tombstones on the Sephardic part of the Jewish Cemetery of Altona Königstrasse belong to the most important cultural heritage left behind by the descendants of the Jews who had been baptized against their will and fled Portugal and the Inquisition. As a result of their exodus, they developed a sepulchral culture of their own. In terms of its sepulchral language and art, it differs from the Judeo-Spanish sepulchral culture and the one that was practiced by the Jews who emigrated from Spain to North Africa, to the Ottoman Empire or Italy. It was also different from the Ashkenazi sepulchral culture which developed at the same time and often in its immediate vicinity.

This sepulchral culture, which at first glance does not appear to be very Jewish, points to an intensive cultural exchange between assimilated Jews and Catholic Christians on the Iberian Peninsula and between Jews who had only just reverted to normative Judaism and Protestant Christians in northern Europe. Thus, the Sephardic sepulchral culture of the 17th century is above all the expression of Jewish art which reflects the Jewish Diaspora and the experience of alternating between religions.

There is evidence of the very specific sepulchral culture described above in Amsterdam (Ouderkerk), London, on Curaçao, Barbados, Jamaica, in Surinam and on some other Caribbean Islands.

(iii) (a unique or at least exceptional example of a cultural tradition or an existing or vanished culture)

The Jewish Cemetery of Altona Königstrasse is an outstanding example of Sephardic sepulchral culture as practiced by the Jews who were baptized against their will and forced to emigrate from Portugal in the 16th century. Particularly the richly ornamented and playfully inscribed tombstones from the 17th and 18th centuries, with their texts in Hebrew, Portuguese, Spanish, French, English and German, are to this day what render the Jewish Cemetery of Altona Königstrasse an exemplary historical monument of art and culture: It bears witness to the Jews and their history of migration, to the history of their religion and mentality, to the history of their literature (epigraphs), their art history (tombstone/sepulchral art) and to the regional history of northern Germany. It is therefore justified to consider the Jewish Cemetery of Altona Königstrasse the most important single memorial complex of the history of the Jews in the Hamburg region. In fact, it is one of the outstanding examples of Jewish cultural heritage in the whole of Europe. Its richly ornamented tombstones are a reflection of the life stories of the dead buried there and of the historical development – often fraught with tensions – of the Jewish congregations in Hamburg, Altona, in Europe as a whole and in the New World. Thus, the cemetery sheds light on the lives and deaths of Jews between the early 17th and the 20th centuries. Conversely, the way the Christian majority related to and dealt with this burial ground used by the Sephardic and Ashkenazi minorities who lived in their midst can be seen as a yardstick of their tolerance and respect for those minorities.

(iv) (an outstanding example of a type of building, architectonic or technical ensembles or landscapes that symbolize one or several significant eras in human history)

Jewish cemeteries are designed for eternity. They are often the only physical evidence of the history of Judaism through the ages. The Jewish Cemetery of Altona Königstraße, laid out between 1611 and 1616 on the northern edge of what was then the old city of Altona, is an excellent case in point. This large Jewish cemetery extends over an area of almost two hectares. Some 8,100 of its tombstones or fragments thereof have been preserved and make it an outstanding European monument of art and culture going back to the 17th and 18th centuries.

The Sephardic part of the cemetery in particular is unique as a historical monument of art and culture. It is home to some 1,600 artistically ornamented and creatively inscribed tombstones, primarily from the 17th and 18th centuries, the likes of which can now only be found in Amsterdam (Ouderkerk), London, on Curaçao, Barbados, Jamaica, Surinam and on some other Caribbean islands.

The Ashkenazi part of the cemetery features some 6,500 tombstones of exceptional value: Particularly the tombs of rabbis excel in the sheer text volume of their inscriptions, their literary quality and external ornaments (in 69 cases, it has been proven that the inscriptions were dedicated to rabbis). There is no other Jewish cemetery in the whole of Germany that has a similar number of rabbis' tombstones of equal importance. These inscriptions remind us of the fact that in its heyday during the 18th century, the Chief Rabbinate of Altona was among the most renowned rabbinates in the whole of Europe. Down to the present, for many Jewish visitors, the outstanding importance of this *House of Life* ("Haus des Lebens") is closely associated with its succession of rabbis.

(vi) (connected directly or in a recognizable way with events or traditions forms of life, with ideas or religions or with artistic or literary works of exceptional universal significance.);

It is the Portuguese Cemetery in Hamburg where many well-known Jews were laid to rest: these included important rabbis and cantors, outstanding medical doctors and scholars, writers as well as influential traders and patrons. Major historical events that over the centuries have stirred the Judeo-European congregations also outside Germany are associated with these well-known Jews: (a) the Messiah movement of the "false" Messiah Shabtai Zvi who came from Smyrna. One of his followers was the Hamburg rabbi Moses Abudiente who, in 1666, wrote the only remaining collection of Messianic sermons; (b) the struggle by rabbis and traditionalists against the "heretic" Uriel da Costa, who lived in Hamburg for some years. He published his book about the immortality of the soul in Hamburg, an act for which he was severely criticized by his opponent, the Hamburg-based medical doctor Semuel da Silva. Da Costa was eventually expelled from the Jewish congregation and committed suicide.

Rabbis such as Jonathan Eibeschutz, Jacob Emden, Raphael Cohen, Jacob Ettlinger and Jecheskel Katzenellenbogen lie buried on the Ashkenazi part of the cemetery. They were known also outside Germany and were very important for the development of Jewish theology in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The aforesaid makes the Jewish Cemetery of Altona Königstraße a unique cemetery in regard to the exceptional number of important Jewish personalities buried there. They illustrate the significance that Hamburg and Altona had for the Judeo-European and the New World.

Statements of authenticity and/or integrity

A great number of the tombstones from the 17th and 18th centuries in the Jewish Cemetery of Altona Königstraße have been preserved. The cemetery extends over almost two hectares and was laid out on the northern edge of what was then the old city between 1611 and 1616. It was actively used for burials up to 1869. In 1864, and again in 1902, the southern part of the cemetery was reduced to allow for the widening of Königstrasse. It suffered damage during the Third Reich, as a result of WW II, through racially motivated vandalism, the building of sports grounds, the clearance to make room for a barracks for the Housing Association of the Hamburg-Altona Fish Processing Industry (Heimstättengesellschaft der Fischindustrie Hamburg-Altona) and a soap factory. Despite all the destruction caused, of the more than 9,000 tombstones some 8100 remain, a number of them only as fragments. Of these, 6,500 are located in the Ashkenazi part and 1,600 in the Sephardic part.

Since the cemetery was placed under protection and inscribed in the monument list in 1960, there have been continuous efforts to preserve the whole complex. The tombstones in their entirety have been recorded and documented. The tombstones are constantly being maintained and restored. In 2008, the Eduard Duckesz House was built. The house expresses the joint wish of the Jewish congregation and others to make the cemetery accessible for a larger public again.

Comparison with other similar properties

Iconographic, epigraphic and biographical studies of Sephardic tombstones in the Old and the New World have demonstrated that it is not justified to speak of a regionally specific variety of Sephardic sepulchral culture, at least not for the 17th and 18th centuries. For example, the Portuguese in Hamburg maintained close contacts with other Sephardic congregations from the middle of the 17th century on into the early 20th century, particularly those in the Caribbean. Tombstones for the Jewish cemeteries in Surinam were chiseled in Hamburg and Amsterdam, and it was customary for inscriptions and designs of tombstones to “travel” together with the Jewish settlers, e.g. from Hamburg to Curaçao, from Amsterdam to Surinam or from Amsterdam to Jamaica. As a result, a uniform Sephardic sepulchral iconography and epigraphy developed during the 17th and 18th centuries. This has been confirmed by iconographic, epigraphic and biographical studies and scientific research available today on Sephardic cemeteries.

Of the documented Sephardic cemeteries in northern Europe and the Caribbean, the one laid out in Ouderkerk near Amsterdam in 1614 is by far the largest. It has more than 30,000 tombstones and is still in use. However, it is one of the least researched cemeteries.

There used to be two Sephardic cemeteries in London, namely the “Velho (Old) Cemetery” laid out in 1657 and closed in 1742, and the “Novo Beth Chain Cemetery”, laid out in 1733 and closed in 1899. With its originally more than 9,500 tombstones, the latter was the largest. However, many of the tombs were removed during the 1970s so that only 2,000 tombstones from the 19th and 20th centuries have been preserved. They are concealed and spread over the premises of “Queen Mary’s College”. Many of the tombstones on the older cemetery are still there, but their design is very different from those in the Jewish Cemetery of Altona Königstrasse: the latter feature much richer and more plastic/three-dimensional decorative elements.

Of the Sephardic cemeteries laid out in the Caribbean during the 17th century, the Sephardic Cemetery of Curaçao can be compared to the one in Hamburg in respect to the number of tombs, the iconography and epigraphy. The cemeteries in Surinam, on Barbados, Jamaica etc. are smaller: Most of them have fewer than 1,000 tombstones. The same applies to Glückstadt, where only some 90 tombstones have been preserved.

Some Sephardic cemeteries have not yet been fully documented and researched, but we can conclude nonetheless that the cemeteries used by the Jews who emigrated from Portugal and their descendants during the 17th and 18th centuries form a specific *Jewish cultural space*, and are different in terms of their culture, religion, genealogy, language, artistic history and literature from other Jewish cemeteries around the world.

The Jewish Cemetery of Altona Königstrasse laid out in 1611 is testimony to this *cultural space*. The cemetery in Altona is the second largest Sephardic cemetery in the whole of northern Europe and contains some 1,600 preserved tombstones, which feature artistic and creative inscriptions and decorative motifs mostly from the 17th and 18th centuries. All of this makes it a cemetery of outstanding universal value.

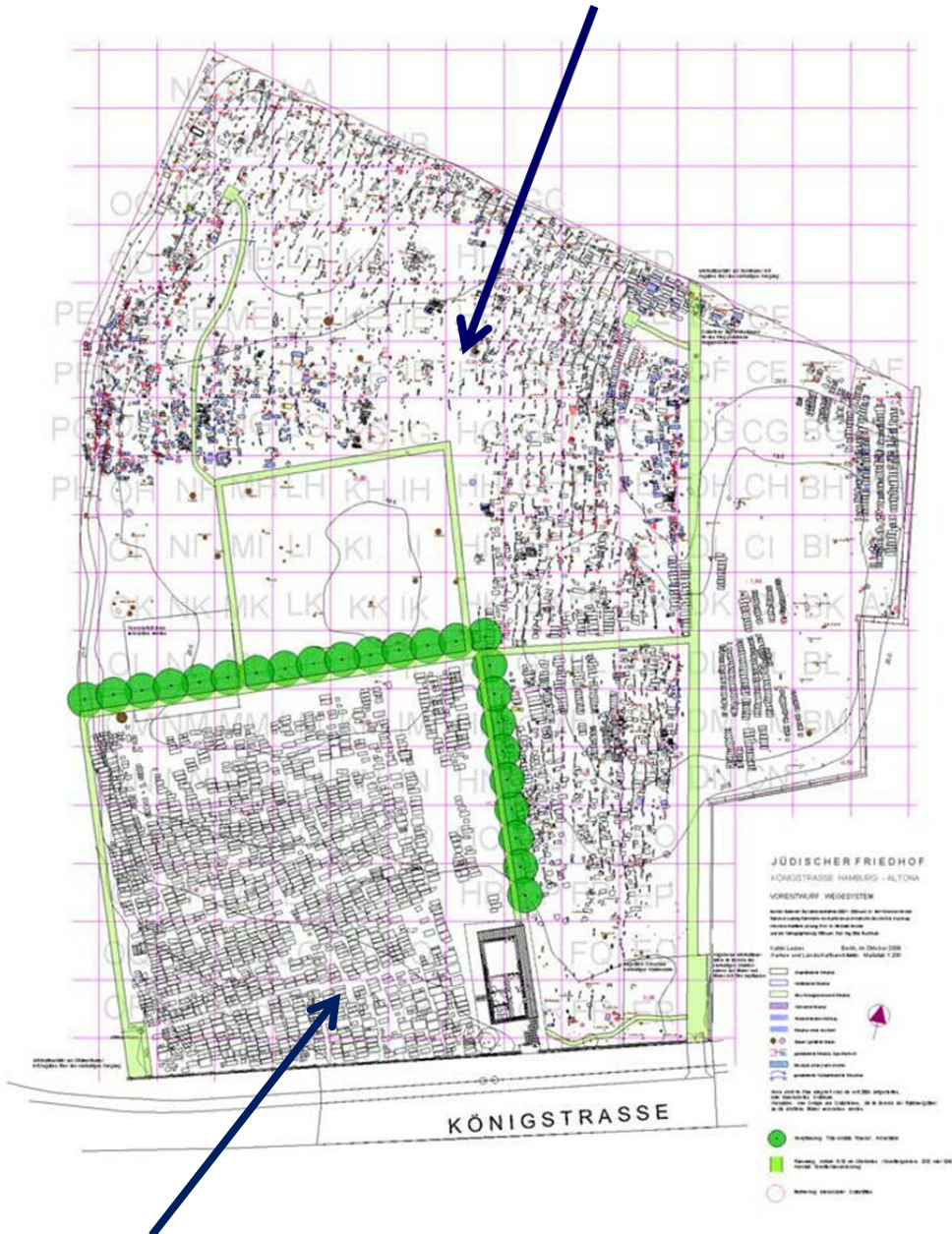
A serial transnational application covering Sephardic cemeteries seems conceivable. Initial contacts with Surinam have been initiated.

Site plan



Site plan

Ashkenazi part



Sephardic part

Sephardic burial ground and visitor center „Eduard-Duckesz-Haus“



Lion Fountain



Sephardic burial ground



Photograph: Regina Schwarzburg

Sephardic tombstones



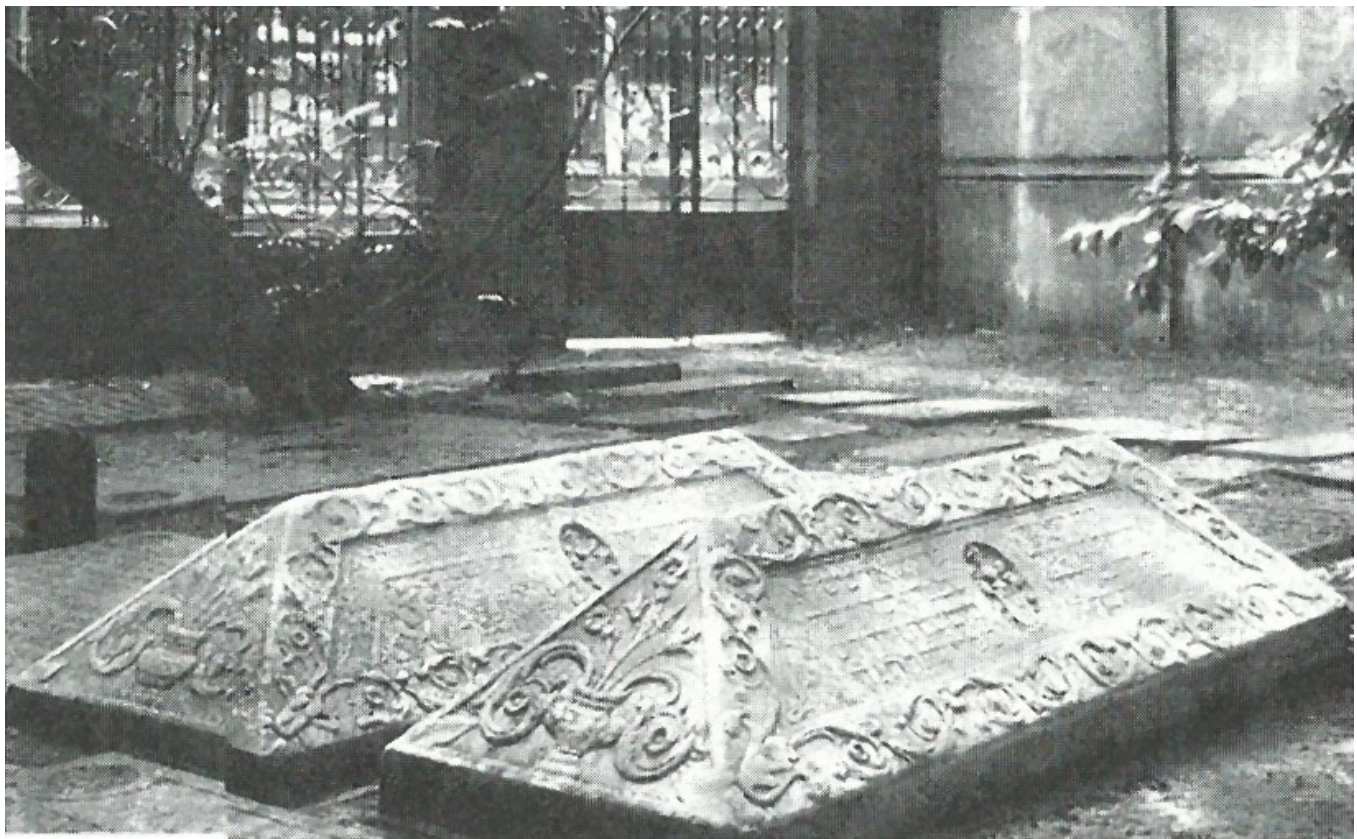
Sephardic tombstone Lobatto



Photograph: Regina Schwarzburg

Sephardic tombstones

Abraham und Sara Teixeira



Sephardic grave stone of the gravedigger Semuel Hizkiau Esteves

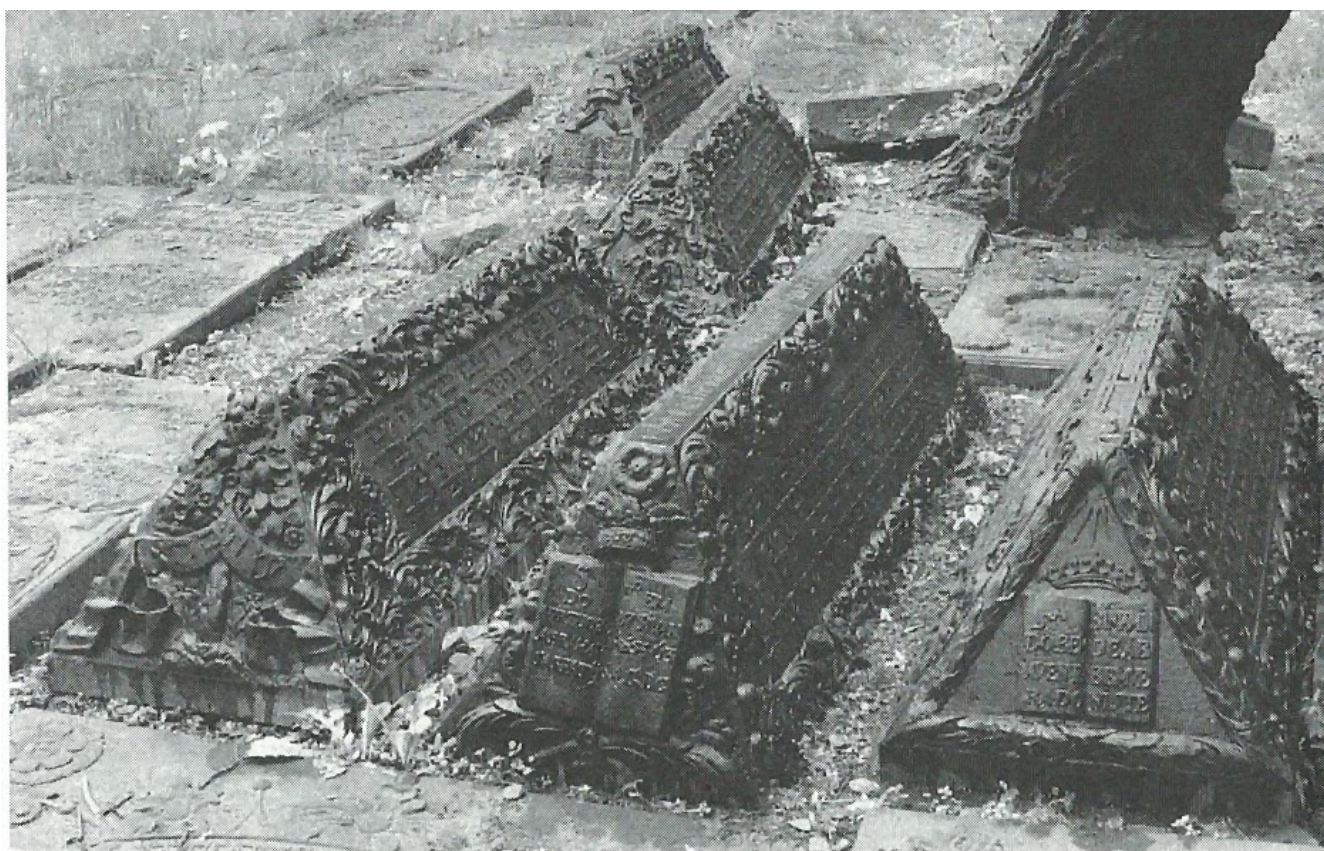


Sephardic tombstones

Ester Benveniste, Hana Castro Mendoza, 1716



Pyramidal tombs on the sephardic part of the cemetery



Biblical scene on Sephardic grave stone



„Jacob's dream of the sky ladder "
on the tomb of Jacob de Mattos Semuel

Sephardic Chief Rabbi Isaac Jessurum



Ashkenazi burial ground



Photograph: Regina Schwarzburg

Ashkenazi burial ground



Photograph: Turgay Ugur

Ashkenazi grave stones



Photograph: Regina Schwarzburg

Ashkenazi Rabbi graves



Ashkenazi Rabbi graves



Grave stones of the Rabbis Jakob Emden, Jonathan Eibeschutz

