

# A SWEDISH NOTICE FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE 18TH CENTURY ON THE JEWS OF NEW YORK

Nils Martola

Åbo

Recently when reading Jacob R. Marcus' still useful source book on *The Jew in the medieval world*, I came across an extract from Pehr Kalm's<sup>1</sup> *Travels into North America*. The extract contained a notice on the Jews of New York. It caught my attention because Kalm was one of the renowned historical persons from the region in which I grew up. Here follows a short article on the notice, preceded by some basic information on his journey to North America, the publication of his report, the English translations, and the travel log (the source of the report). Some of the material might be well known, some probably is not, because the original travel log has been published only recently. The background material for this article is brought together from biographical sketches in Swedish encyclopedias, and, above all, from the introductions to modern editions of Kalm's works.

Pehr Kalm was born in 1716 in Ångermanland, Sweden, the son of a family of Lutheran clergymen from the province of Ostrobothnia. He began his studies in natural sciences at Åbo Akademi in 1735, moved to Uppsala University in 1740, and soon became one of Carl Gustaf Linné's foremost disciples. Under the patronage of the powerful Baron Sten Carl Bielke he already as a student travelled a lot in the eastern parts of the Swedish empire, as well as in Russia. In 1747 he was offered a chair in 'natural-history and economics' at Åbo Akademi, but did not accept it until he had completed the journey to North America. He died in 1779. Pehr Kalm is considered as one of the purest exponents of 18th century Enlightenment and rationalism in Sweden/Finland.

In October 1747 he commenced his journey to America, and returned to Stockholm in June 1751. Due to bad weather and other difficulties he did not set foot on American soil (Philadelphia) until the middle of September 1748. His primary objective was to collect seeds of plants and trees considered to be economically useful for Sweden. This meant that Kalm's travels were restricted to regions with a climate somewhat comparable to that of Sweden. It turned out, however, that the plants did not thrive in the Swedish climate after all. During the journey Kalm kept a detailed diary in which he wrote observations on the weather, on plants and agricultural matters, on sundry customs among ethnic groups he met (much on native Americans), reported on discussions with different people, and made extracts from sources he deemed interesting.

After his return Kalm got a one year's leave in order to edit his diary for printing. The first part appeared in 1753 (*En resa till norra Amerika på Kongl. Swenska Wetenskaps Academiens befallning och publici kostnad*), the second and third parts in 1756 and 1761, respectively. The book aroused international interest. Within a short time (1754) there appeared two German translations of the first part; Vandenhoeck in Göttingen also published

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<sup>1</sup> In English literature he is often called Peter Kalm. Here I retain the original Pehr.

the second and third parts (1757 and 1764), while the publisher of the second translation did not see fit to continue with the rest of the book. Soon (1770-1771) there appeared also a translation into English, formally made by John Reinhold Forster, in reality done largely by his sixteen year old son George. This translation was not made from the original Swedish but from the German translation (apparently the Göttingen edition); it is also much shorter than the original because Forster omitted the journey to and his stay in England, which comprises the first volume and the beginning of the second. The section on Kalm's stay in England was later translated into English by Joseph Lucas but was not published until 1892.

In the first decades of this century (1904-1915) there appeared a new edition of Kalm's original version, under the editorship of Fredrik Elfving and Georg Schauman, and published by *Svenska Litteratursällskapet i Finland* (the Swedish Literary Society of Finland). The impetus to this edition was the discovery by Schauman of Kalm's original diary, which was believed to have been lost during a conflagration that destroyed almost the whole city of Åbo in 1827. In this fire the manuscript of the fourth part of Kalm's book - never published - was destroyed. In the new edition the rest of the diary - as far as it is preserved - was published as a supplement by Fredrik Elfving (Helsingfors 1929). Elfving published the diary as it is, with the exception that he left out those portions which were already incorporated in the earlier parts. In 1937 there appeared a new English edition in two volumes: *Peter Kalm's Travels in North America : the English version of 1770 : revised from the original Swedish and ed. by Adolph B. Benson, with a translation of new material from Kalm's diary notes*. This edition thus contains a translation (made by the editor and Edith M.L. Carlborg of the Brown University Library) also of the material published in the above mentioned supplement volume. Recently the 'Svenska Litteratursällskapet i Finland' took upon itself to publish the diary notes in full for the first time. The project was completed in 1988; the first volume was edited by Martti Kerkkonen (1966), the second by Martti Kerkkonen and John E. Roos (1970), the third and fourth by John E. Roos and Harry Krogerus (1985, 1988). The last part is thus almost identical with the earlier supplement.

Kalm's note on the Jews of New York is not unknown to the historiographers of American Jewry. Grinstein, for instance, quotes a part of it in his book on the *Rise of the Jewish community of New York* (1947, 333), though he does not bother to use the original but takes the quote from Daly's *Settlement of the Jews in North America* (1893). He is apparently unaware of Benson's new edition. Surprisingly, Marcus in his great work *The colonial American Jew* (1970) also appears unaware of the new edition. To be sure he uses Kalm's notice several times, but he refers to Forster's English translation from 1770.

Below I translate those passages in Kalm's diary and the earlier published book which mention Jews.<sup>2</sup> Of these the diary passages have never before - to the best of my knowledge - been translated into English, while Benson's translation from 1937 is a fairly accurate rendering of the earlier text, correcting some mistakes and omissions in Forster's text. I tried to follow Benson closely, but found that I had no choice but to recast the text almost completely. I begin with the diary entries, and the last long entry represents the one in the published book.

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<sup>2</sup> There are a couple of events that I haven't translated, because I thought them inconsequential. The first mentions Livornese Jews trading in coffee (Kalm 1966, 31.33; 1904-15 1, 43f [November 16 and 20, 1747]); the second appears in the end of a note on the Dutch of Albany, where Kalm reports that the English accuse the Dutch of being great cheaters »worse than Jews« (1988, 157 [November 3, 1749]).

October 21 = November 1<sup>3</sup>

**Jews.** Besides adherents of many other religions<sup>4</sup> there is here in New York also a large group of Jews, who have their synagogue here; I was there for the first time this evening and then in the morning the following day.<sup>5</sup> a young rabbi conducted the service, partly in Hebrew, partly in Rabbinic [Hebrew].<sup>6</sup> The Jews were dressed in the same manner as the English; all had their hats on in the synagogue and did never raise them: the women were in the galleries, dressed as the English; during the service the men threw over themselves a white cloth, which undoubtedly<sup>7</sup> was a representation of a sack. Many of the men had Hebrew books, from which they sang and recited; the rabbi stood in the middle of the church,<sup>8</sup> turning his face towards east. (1970, 220)

October 31=November 11 [1749]

**The Jews** had great privileges in this town; they had a synaga [sic!] here, owned themselves the houses they lived in, had bought large estates in the countryside, had opened shops here in the town, had several ships, owned entirely by themselves, and which they sent out for themselves loaded with their own wares. In short, they had the same advantages as other or Christian inhabitants of this town and province. A

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<sup>3</sup> Year 1748; when leaving England Kalm commenced entering two dates in his diary, the first one in the old style (according to the Julian calendar), the second in the new style (according to the Gregorian calendar). Sweden waited until the middle of the eighteenth century (1753) before she changed calendar officially.

<sup>4</sup> In earlier language usage Christian denominations were often designated as religions; thus Catholicism was a religion different from Lutheranism, and Anglicanism, as well as Calvinism were still other religions. There is thus some justification in Benson's translation »Besides the different sects of Christians ...«; in this part the published book follows the diary entry closely.

<sup>5</sup> Note the formulation: »this day« is inconsistent with »the following day« in the same entry. Apparently »this day« refers to the date of the entry. In the published book Kalm collects all entries concerning Jews into one passage, which he puts into the entry for November 2nd 1748, that is the following day. There he also changes the timeframe from which he observes the activities: »yesterday evening I was in their synagogue for the first time, and today morning also I put in an appearance in it«.

<sup>6</sup> Earlier 'Hebrew' denoted only the Hebrew of the Hebrew Bible, while later Hebrew - above all the Hebrew of the Talmud and the law codes - was called 'Rabbinic'. The 'rabbi' in question was probably the hazzan Benjamin Pereira, cf Marcus 1970 2, 866.

<sup>7</sup> In the published book Kalm is not so sure; there it »perhaps« represents a sack. I do not know why Kalm thinks that the tallit represents a sack; perhaps the source is his vivid imagination, though, he usually does not dream up things like this.

<sup>8</sup> Sic! In the published book Kalm noted the mistake and used the word 'synagogue'.

daughter of a rich Jew had married a Christian, after having renounced the Jewish religion. Her sister went to London this year; she has not been willing to marry any Jew, but said that she would have a Christian to husband, whether her parents wanted it or not. (1988, 166)

November 3rd=November 14th [1749]

**To prevent cracking of punch bowls by warm water.** Often when warm punch was poured into a porcelain bowl, even though the latter felt warm, it would crack. A Jew, who also was a passenger on the vessel from New York, said that if a new porcelain bowl is boiled for a time in water in which there are some husks («brains« i.e. bran, hulls or chaff) the bowl will not be so apt to crack when a warm liquid is poured into it.

**Jews.** The Jew just mentioned was a rather good natured and polite man and it would scarcely have been possible to take him for a Jew from his appearance.<sup>9</sup> During the evening of this day which ushered in his Sabbath he was rather quiet, though he conversed with me about all kinds of things, and he himself often began the discourse. He told me that the Jews never cook any food for themselves on Saturday, but that it is done on the day before. Yet, he said, they keep fire in their houses on Saturdays during the winter. Furthermore, he said, that the majority of the Jews do not eat pork, but that this custom does not trouble the conscience of the young people when on their journeys, for then they eat whatever they can get, and that even together with the Christians. (1988, 170)

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<sup>9</sup> Although he probably never had met a Jew before he went to America Kalm expected Jews to 'look like Jews' in some unspecified general way. Apparently they did not, or rather, they were not perceptibly different from average English people. This seems to be Kalm's observation, since the only reflections he made on the outer appearance of the Jews he met were that they did not differ from the English.

November the 2nd

**The Jews.** Besides adherents of other religions there are also Jews in New York, who possess great privileges here in this town. They had a synagogue here,<sup>10</sup> owned themselves the houses they lived in, had bought large estates in the countryside, had opened shops here in the town, had several ships, owned entirely by themselves, and which they sent out for themselves loaded with their own wares. In short, they had the same advantages as other or Christian inhabitants of this town and province. A daughter of one of the richest Jews had married a Christian after she had renounced the Jewish religion. Her sister did not wish either to marry a Jew, so went to London to get a Christian husband.<sup>11</sup>

During my residence in New York, both at this time and for the next two years, I was frequently in company with Jews.<sup>12</sup> They<sup>13</sup> said that they never boiled any meat for themselves on Saturday, but that they always did it the day before, and that in winter they kept a fire during the whole Saturday. The Jews commonly eat no pork; yet I have been told by several trustworthy Englishmen<sup>14</sup> that they when travelling often have seen Jews, especially the younger ones, not hesitating the least about eating pork or any other meat that was put before them, even though they were in company with Christians.

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<sup>10</sup> Note the change in tense. In the previous sentence Kalm combines the beginning of two diary entries (November 1st 1748 [1970,220] and November 11th 1749 [1988,166]), but continues almost verbatim with the latter, and keeps its tense (imperfect). In spite of the awkwardness of the English I retain the formulations, because the original Swedish is also awkward, and also in order to emphasize the transition.

<sup>11</sup> Cf above November 11th 1749; the earlier formulation exposes more clearly than here the tensions within the family concerned. For some reason Forster omitted this detail from his translation. That cases like this were fairly common is well known, cf Marcus 1970 3, 1225ff; Grinstein 1947, 372ff.

<sup>12</sup> An editorial note. There is ground to doubt this claim, because Kalm supplies so little information on the Jews. Compare this with the wealth of information about the Indians, with whom he hardly had any direct contact.

<sup>13</sup> This note is taken almost verbatim from the diary entry of November 14th 1749, and Kalm's informant is his travelling companion - a Jew, probably from New York.

<sup>14</sup> This note is also an almost verbatim quote from the entry of November 14th 1749, and originates from the same informant as the previous note. The information may have been corroborated by other people, of course. It is of some importance to stress that the original reads »Englishmen«, because neither Forster nor Benson translates so. Thus one might get the impression that the informants were a lot of trustworthy Jews; at least Marcus treats the statement as if they were (1970 2, 996). That Jews do not eat pork has always been common knowledge, but the laxity evidenced in the note doesn't seem to have been so common. According to Grinstein the notice supplies »the first evidence of religious laxity on the part of the Jews of New York City« (1947, 333f); for an additional evidence cf Marcus 1970 3, 1188.

I was in their synagogue last evening for the first time, and today in the morning<sup>15</sup> I visited it again. There was a certain room in the synagogue where foreigners or Christians had freedom to sit.<sup>16</sup> A young rabbi conducted the service, partly in Hebrew, partly in Rabbinic [Hebrew]. The Jews of both sexes were dressed in the same manner, as the English. The men had their hats on, and did not once take them off during the service. The women were on galleries. During the service the men threw over themselves a white cloth, which probably was a representation of a sack. But I observed that the wealthier sort of people had a much richer cloth than the poorer ones. Many of the men had Hebrew books, from which they sang and recited. The rabbi stood in the middle of the synagogue and read with his face turned towards the east. All his reading and praying was delivered very fast and with a speed as if he were afraid that the enemy soon came over him, so that it was pretty well almost impossible for anyone to think a thought on what he rabbled forth.<sup>17</sup> (1904-15 2, 247f)

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<sup>15</sup> Both Forster and Hanson translate wrongly »at noon«, which gives a false impression of the time at which a service was held. In this case Kalm witnessed a normal service at the commencement of the Sabbath (Friday evening), followed by a visit at a Saturday morning service.

<sup>16</sup> This information is not contained in the diary. Not much seems to be known about the architecture of the Mill Street synagogue of Shearith Israel. According to Marcus special seating provisions were »made for honored Christian guests« (1970 2, 891) and then he refers to the extract from Kalm's book. Both Forster and Benson translate that Kalm »was put in a special *seat* which was set apart for strangers or Christians« (my italics); one gets the impression that this seat was situated in the room in which the service took place. The original, though, mentions a 'room' in which the visitor had the liberty to sit wherever he wanted.

<sup>17</sup> The last sentence is an addition to the diary entry - an irritated afterthought?

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