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Kritzler, Edward, *Jewish Pirates of the Carribean: How a generation of swashbuckling Jews carved out an emire in the New World in their quest for treasure, religious freedom,—and Revenge*

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Kritzler, Edward, *Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean: How a generation of swashbuckling Jews carved out an empire in the New World in their quest for treasure, religious freedom,—and Revenge.* New York: Doubleday, 2008.

A book that turns one's lifelong notions on their ear and makes one rethink history is a find indeed. I have always thought that the unrelenting persecution of the Jews, particularly by the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions, left Jews fleeing for their lives, converting under duress, and altogether demoralized and helpless. However, Edward Kritzler's new book, funded by a Jewish citizen of Jamaica, opened up an enormous trove of documentation, squirreled away in Jamaica, that until now has been neglected.

The book tells the surprising yet convincing story of Spanish "*Conversos*," Jews who had lived in Spain for 1500 years, who in 1492 were given a few weeks to either convert to the "true faith" or leave their homes and country for parts unknown. Many left—and were welcomed by the Ottoman Emperor, who said he was surprised that Spain threw out such talented and useful citizens. This exodus produced the Jewish community known as "Sephardic," with language and culture from Spain.

Those who converted to Christianity and remained in Spain quickly rose to positions of importance in the church and society, but they were always "*Nuevos Cristianos*" (New Christians), which made them suspect. Although the royal court needed their talent, particularly their mercantile talent, which Spain lacked, the peasants and poor envied them and the church suspected them of "insincerity." As the Inquisition became more dangerous—an uncorroborated accusation of a greedy neighbor or a disgruntled servant could be enough to pull a *Converso* into the Inquisition's dungeons and ultimate death by fire, and the Inquisition itself was greedy because

their victims' fortunes were confiscated by them—*Conversos* tried to get out of Spain.

New Christians were forbidden by law to leave Spain, but bribery does wonders. Many had mercantile and seagoing experience since Roman times, so their talents were particularly needed in the rush to establish New World empire. There is considerable speculation that Christopher Columbus himself came from a Jewish family, and certainly his ships were manned by mostly *Conversos*—a speculation that Kritzler now documents. As New World settlers, they never planned to return to Spain, unlike other conquistadors who did.

Without wanting to spoil the enormous fun of reading this book, let me share some of the fascinating surprises that I learned.

- Jamaica was deeded to the Columbus family and was largely peopled by *Conversos* who made it a rich trading island. By charter, the Inquisition was forbidden to set foot there. It was the only safe haven in the Spanish and Portuguese New World.
- Some of the most famous pirates of the Caribbean were Jews—either masquerading as Christians or openly acknowledging their beliefs. Their major efforts were to capture Spanish ships loaded with looted treasure from the New World—and hand the treasures over to the Dutch and British. These were not pirates in the sense of today's Somalis, but "privateers" licensed by Spain's enemies.
- *Conversos* and Jews were explorers, and one of them, Juan Cabrillo, discovered California.
- Pirate Jean Lafitte, the hero of the battle of New Orleans, wrote about his family: "My grandmother was of Spanish-Israelite... My mother's father had been an alchemist with good practice and patronage in Spain. He was a freethinking Jew with neither Catholic faith nor traditional adherence to the Jewish synagogue. But this did not prevent him

from dying of starvation in prison for refusing to divulge the technical details which the Inquisition demanded from all Jews...Grandmother's teachings...inspired in me a hatred of the Spanish crown and all the persecutions for which it was responsible—not only against Jews.”

- By helping the Dutch, *Conversos* won a place in Amsterdam where they experienced religious freedom for the first time in 1,500 years.
- Under Cromwell in England, they served as important secret agents, helped enrich the country, and were eventually permitted to return openly as Jews to the country that had expelled them centuries before.

This book is not a whitewash of Jews; there were enough rogues and rascals to go around. But Kritzler puts the times in perspective. Every country in Western Europe was engaged in the horrible slave trade (a major element in colonial wealth), including Jewish merchants. Kritzler notes that nobody at that time—including the Arabs and Africans who sold their own people—thought that there was anything wrong with this.

Also—pirates are always awful, even when they claim political justification. It is one more form of terrorism—but was a big business at the time. The thieves were stealing from the looters.

The most heartening upshot of this story is that Jews who would otherwise have been murdered thrived, enriched the countries that let them come, and eventually attained the religious toleration from which we all benefit today. The first group that sought refuge in New Amsterdam set the tone for all Americans who followed.

This is quite a tale. Survival in spite of the odds.

Laina Farhat-Holzman