

## JEWISH PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN

Edward Kritzler (www.edkritzler.com)  
Anchor Books/Random House, New York, 2008.

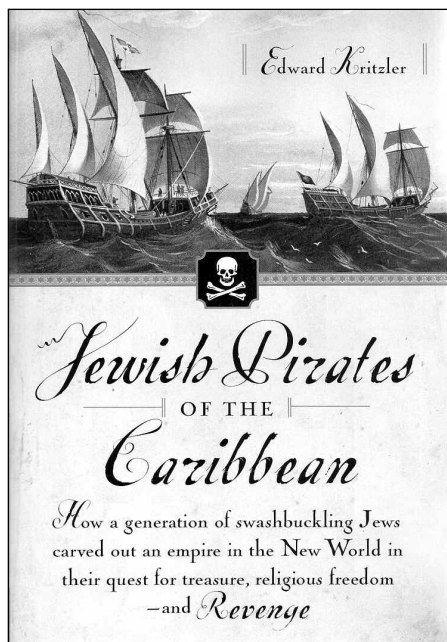
Reviewed by Stephen Aberle

**W**hy does everyone laugh when they see this title? Nu, what's so ridiculous about Jewish pirates? (It so happens that we in Vancouver's Jewish Folk Choir presented *Di Yam Gazlonim*, a Yiddish translation of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*, for our spring concert this year.) Sounds silly? Sounds fun? A bit of both? Read on.

Most of the people to whom I've mentioned it have assumed that *Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean* must be a work of whimsical fiction, along the lines of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* or, well, *Di Yam Gazlonim*, or some such. The publishers clearly hope to boost sales by feeding into this amusedly derisive response, and the cover carries boffo review quotes like "Yo ho ho and a bottle of Manischewitz" and "What's 'Aarrgh' in Yiddish, anyway?" Avast, oy vey'z mir, me hearties. The idea of swashbuckling Jewish seafarers is preposterous, apparently, which says something about common assumptions and myths surrounding diaspora history.

Fortunately, the air of mockery doesn't infiltrate the book. Author Edward Kritzler is a New York journalist and historian who has spent much of the last 10 years in Jamaica, and his work isn't a fiction, or a spoof, or a movie sequel starring Adam Sandler taking over from Johnny Depp as Cap'n Jack Sparrow (a.k.a. Yaacov Spiro—whups, see? seems I can't resist swinging onto the comedy gangway myself). It's a history, and an intriguing one. Who knew how crucially important Jews, crypto-Jews, conversos and "relapsos" were in the colonization of the

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Caribbean and the rest of the New World, and before that in trade (and piracy) in the Mediterranean? Not me, although it shouldn't come as that much of a surprise: after the expulsion from Spain (which you will recall neatly coincided, in fourteen hundred and ninety-two, with Columbus sailing the ocean blue), many Jews and conversos (including some who sailed with Columbus on that first voyage) fled to the New World seeking escape, opportunity, and revenge against their Spanish persecutors. Their struggles were tangled up with the independence of the Netherlands from Spanish domination, the readmittance of Jews into England, the conquest of northern Brazil by the Dutch and of Jamaica by the British, the growth of the sugar and slave trades, the spread of colonialism and imperialism, the opening of New Amsterdam (later New York) to Jewish immigration, the establishment of Jewish civil and religious rights, and much else besides.

The title is thus a bit misleading: *Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean* is about a good deal more than "Jewish pirates of the Caribbean". Good thing too,

because otherwise the material would be a bit thin. There's lots here about Jews, pirates and the Caribbean, to be sure, including plenty about Jews who weren't pirates, pirates who weren't Jews, Jewish pirates who weren't in the Caribbean, Jews who weren't exactly Jews, pirates who weren't entirely pirates, and quite a few folks (Oliver Cromwell and the other rulers of England, Spain, and the Netherlands, for example) who were, as far as I can discern, none of the above. That the narrative hangs together as coherently as it does is a testament to Kritzler's skill as a storyteller; that it weaves so many social, political, economic and ideological threads so successfully is evidence of his abilities as a researcher and a historian. The whole project of compiling material on this particular aspect of history is, as far as I know, unprecedented; in at least a couple of places, the author breaks entirely new historical ground, uncovering material that until now had lain hidden in archives for centuries.

The book examines the period from 1492 through to the late 1600s, a complicated time in the history of Europe and the beginnings of its colonial enterprises in the "New World." It can be hard to get and keep our bearings, and it's made more complicated by the uncertain and shifting identities of the main groups under consideration. There are Jewish exiles from Spain and Portugal, Jewish residents of countries or colonies where they were—sometimes more or less permanently, sometimes only temporarily—allowed, hidden Jews masquerading as Christians, sincere converts, "relapsed" or "Judaizing" converts who returned to their or their parents' Jewish faith, and "Portugals" who may or may not have had Jewish heritage. It's hard to tell who's playing for which team, and there's no programme. Similarly, there aren't clear lines between explorers, conquerors, merchants, smugglers, soldiers, privateers (who had a commission from one or another ruler) and pirates (who operated outside the law but were often ignored, allowed or even encour-

aged by local authorities for various pragmatic, political and/or privately venal reasons).

The stories are pretty colourful. We learn about Sinan, the “famous Jewish pirate” of the Mediterranean, a Jewish refugee from the Spanish expulsion who became Barbarossa’s favoured captain. In 1534, Sinan led a hundred ships into the harbour of Tunis and captured it from Spain on behalf of the Ottoman Emperor Suleiman the Magnificent. The Spanish eventually recaptured Tunis but Sinan, a master commander and navigator, “continued the marauding that would seal Suleiman’s power in the eastern Mediterranean.”

We learn about Samuel Palache, the “Pirate Rabbi.” Raised in the Jewish quarter of Fez, he followed a centuries-old family tradition to become a Rabbi; inspired by Sinan’s exploits he became as well (along with his younger brother Joseph) a successful merchant, pirate and diplomat. Palache worked to forge an alliance against Spain between Morocco and the recently independent Netherlands. He wound up in Amsterdam, attended the first recorded Jewish religious service in Holland there in 1603, and was instrumental in securing early, elementary rights of assembly and religious freedom for Dutch Jews.

And we learn about two of Rabbi Palache’s much younger congregants, the brothers Moses Cohen Henriques and Abraham Cohen (who dropped his Spanish converso surname). If there’s a Jewish Pirate of the Caribbean par excellence, it’s Moses Cohen Henriques. His and his brother’s lengthy and illustrious careers carried them back and forth between Amsterdam and the Spanish Main, Brazil, Jamaica and, in Abraham’s case, New Amsterdam and North Africa. In 1628, at the age of only 25, Moses led the Dutch Armada to capture 9 out of 12 of the ships in that year’s Spanish treasure fleet; in 1630 he was a key leader in the Dutch invasion and conquest of Recife and Pernambuco from the Portuguese. Decades later he end-

## “Long John” Silver’s Descendants Want Reparations

Latest news flash: The descendants of “Long John” Silver and Captain Flint have put in claims for damages done to their great-great-great-grandfathers. As they pointed out, it was the passengers and crew of the ships they had captured who were the real criminals, since it was they who had beaten his men with knives and iron bars, even injuring some of them. This made it necessary for his men to shoot and kill some of the attackers, acting purely in self-defense. In order to determine the facts they were more than willing to submit the matter to a fair commission of experienced and impartial buccaneers.

But wait! Have I been dreaming all this after seeing too many Johnny Depp films, or perhaps watching the news reports?

*Victor Grossman, Berlin  
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ed up in a legal dispute with his brother Abraham over a plot of land in Jamaica which our author believes (spoiler alert!) may have been the site of Columbus’ fabled (or mythical) lost gold mine.

Such personal stories—and there are many more—are compelling, but the book’s chief value lies in its attention to historical context. It would be dangerously easy to slip into ethnic essentialism in describing the important, often central roles Jews and conversos wound up playing in the development of colonialism and trade in the Caribbean and the rest of the Americas. Kritzler avoids this trap, concentrating on the social factors that led so many to positions of prominence in the New World, tracing the political and economic trends that governed the waves of emigration from and within Europe. He brushes up against but (not surprisingly given the specific focus of his work) doesn’t look deeply at the parallel, often symbiotic rises of capitalism, colonialism and the ideology of the “Enlightenment.” A little more

analysis of this broader context, and of the ideological struggles seething in Jewish religious circles throughout this period, would be welcome.

The book isn’t without flaws. There are typos and other elementary errors that proofreading should have caught. Havana is referred to as “only a few hundred miles to the west of Vera Cruz” when it’s actually to the east. Sabbatai Zevi’s name is spelt “Sabbatai Zvei” in both the text and the index. The Jews of Algiers, having escaped conquest by the Spanish, are said to have “instituted a special holiday with three days of fasting and celebration”—which should surely read “feasting,” not “fasting.” The three Jewish congregations in 17th century Mexico City are “...roughly classified as orthodox, conservative, and reformed” [sic] when such classifications wouldn’t exist in Judaism until a couple of centuries later. These and a few others are minor mistakes but they detract from an otherwise pretty high level of credibility. I hope they’ll be corrected in a future edition.

Because the narrative follows the careers of individuals and individual colonies, it’s a bit episodic and can get confusing. As we move from place to place we often find ourselves moving back or forward 40 years, and for innocents like me who don’t have a solid grounding in 17<sup>th</sup> century Iberian history it can be hard to remember important details. Were Portugal and Spain united or separate at this point? Were Jews allowed or not allowed in this colony at this time? Had the Inquisition arrived here yet? Were Holland and Portugal at war or peace? A short timeline in the back of the book helps, but it could be more extensive, and it might help if events were grouped geographically as well as chronologically. Also helpful are the excellent introduction and a short but lucid summary at the end.

All in all, it’s a rollicking good yarn, and a much-needed new look at an important period in history. Shiver me timbers, prepare to board—there’s gold to be had. ♦