How can one not be enamored of the title of this book? It simply inspires wonderful fantasies that bring to mind scenarios from swashbuckling movies. This is, moreover, an easy book to read. Kritzler, a journalist who moved from New York to the island of Jamaica, has spent decades studying the Jewish history of his adopted island. His notes and sources take up 45 pages, and he offers the interested reader a chronology of historic events as well. While a very enjoyable read, for the reader seeking a more serious evaluation of the subject, this book will not fulfill that need. Kritzler’s message throughout the book is the central role that Western Sephardim played in the development of the Caribbean by Europeans. He describes them as, “a global tribe of inside traders, bonded by heritage, language, and a hatred for Spain.” While the book has a historic basis, it is written as an entertaining novel, with the expected sensationalism.

Who were the Western Sephardim? This term denotes the minority of Sephardim who stayed in the Iberian Peninsula after the expulsion from Spain in 1492. Many forcibly converted (the anusim), some of them continuing to practice some form of crypto-Judaism over sometimes several generations. Many of these Jews left Spain and Portugal and found their way to North Africa, Northern Germany, and to what is today Belgium and the Netherlands. Often highly educated and fully assimilated into Christian (Spanish and Portuguese) society, they represented a rather unique community, frequently referring to themselves as the “la Nacão” as opposed to other Jews. It is curious that the Amsterdam Jewish community (as others in the Lowlands and Germany), with the help of rabbis from other Diaspora communities, was actually founded technically by Christians, i.e. more properly Jews who expressed their original faith once it was relatively safe to do so. Many lived in both Christian and Jewish worlds, and this book tells a small part of that intriguing history.

Kritzler introduces us to the political situation at the time around the Jewish expulsion from Spain. Much of the book centers on the exploration of the New World, and the fact that Columbus’ family received hereditary rights to the island of Jamaica. The claim is that Columbus and his family somehow shielded the conversos from the Inquisition, permitting them to come to the island. That conversos came to Jamaica is indisputable, but attributing such an underlying motivation without substantive proof is problematic. The Delevante and Alberga book, The Island of One People, an History of the Jews of Jamaica tells it a bit differently. The early history of Jamaica, because of its backwater status, was lax in government and religious oversight, including the Inquisition. By 1577 the edict prohibiting conversos from entering the colonies was lifted. At about that time, out of a population of 1,500, there were 75 ‘foreigners’, probably Jews (or Conversos). Indeed, the stories recounted refer to very small numbers of individuals, and an even smaller number of ‘pirates’. One such individual who is extensively discussed is Samuel Pallache. A Moroccan Jew from a family originally from the Iberian Peninsula, his adventures brought him back to Spain, and then as the Moroccan Sultan’s representative to the Lowlands, developing a friendship with Prince Maurice of Nassau, the ruler of the Netherlands. He became a corsair, under the protection of the Dutch, attacking Spanish galleons. From a Jewish perspective he was elected the head of the Amsterdam community, participated in the first Jewish service in Amsterdam, and carried the title of rabbi or equivalent. However, Mercedes Garcia-Arenal’s and Gerald Albert Wiegers’ book on Samuel Pallache, entitled A Man of Three Worlds: Samuel Pallache, a Moroccan Jew in Catholic and Protestant Europe, paints a much more complicated figure. Based on a
review of records, he is seen by them as someone who had a far more contentious relationship with the Jewish community, and who was duplicitous. Kritzler quotes the new French ambassador in Madrid, a Monsieur Descartes, as saying that the Pallache family was always “…cheating one side and the other for their own benefit.” A small fact that Kritzler mentioned is Pallache’s having kosher food prepared for himself during his adventures on board ship. One of the other figures described is Sivan, a Jew who was second in command to Barbarosa, the red-bearded commander of the Ottoman navy that wreaked havoc on Spanish interests.

Kritzler describes the interactions of the Sephardim with Cromwell and his decision to permit Jews to officially return to England to enable the second coming of the Messiah. He recounts the wish of Jews to find the putative gold mine of Columbus, which Kritzler continues to search for. There are interesting and important facts of history. One is the glimpse we are given of the troubled nature of many conversos, torn with deep concerns about their new/old faith; Baruch Spinoza is an often-cited example. Another well-documented example is Uriel da Costa, who was completely disappointed by the Judaism he found in Amsterdam. Da Costa, born to a wealthy converso family in Portugal, served as a priest in his local church before moving to Amsterdam with his family in 1615, filled with doubts about the Roman Catholic faith. He found solace and meaning in the Jewish bible, and immediately returned to his family’s old faith upon arrival in the Netherlands. Thinking that he would find a society based on the Torah alone, his disillusionment led him into terrible conflict with the community, leading to his excommunication and shunning. After several years of loneliness, he asked to be reconciled. He confessed his ill ways and was whipped, and finally lay in front of the synagogue entrance while members of the community walked over him. But Kritzler also mentions very important historic moments for the Jewish people, some of which are forgotten by most. Such an example is the “Patenta Omrossa “ (Honorable Charter), issued by the States General of the Netherlands, officially recognizing the equality of the “Hebrew Nation of Brazil” with the other Dutch citizens, the first time such a decree was issued for the Western Hemisphere.

This book will make the time go by fast; it will provide the reader with a story that will fascinate and provide information about an intriguing moment in Jewish history. It is not the academic textbook for the course on the subject.

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