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Hebrews on the High Seas

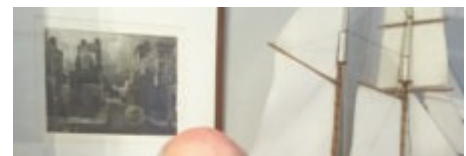
Tales of Jewish mapmakers, pirates, privateers and islanders

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BY DANIEL NOZICK



History and tradition are rife with tales of seafaring Jews, from the story of Jonah and his travails at sea to the tribe of Dan, known for their



nautical nature. Members of the tribe have had a significant impact on shaping the modern world as a result of their involvement with maps and shipping.

To understand the impact of Jews on modern maritime history, it is important to address the skills and innovations of Jews during the early modern era. According to local experts, long before Christopher Columbus set out on his quest to reach Asia by traveling west, the best mapmakers in the world were Jews.

Based largely in the Spanish island Mallorca, Jews made maps of Europe that were treasured for their accuracy. The two main mapmaking families, known as the Map Jews, were the Ribas and the Cresques. Even beyond maps, these families made compasses and a device called an astrolabe. The forerunner of the sextant, the astrolabe was an important device for sailors that allowed them to measure latitude (but not longitude) by the sun as a means to navigate the open ocean.



A PORTRAIT OF ABRAHAM ZACUTO (PHOTO FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS)

Perhaps the most influential Jew of the time period is virtually unknown today — his name is Zacuto, from the Hebrew word *zechut*, which means merit.

“He was brilliant,” said Harry Ezratty, a Baltimore resident and expert in maritime and admiralty law. “He was a rabbi, mathematician, astronomer, astrologer and cosmographer — one of the very few Jews permitted to teach at the University of Salamanca, one of the great medieval schools.”

Zacuto’s impact on history is immeasurable. When Columbus appeared before Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand of Spain with his plan to reach Asia, Zacuto was sitting on the advisory board and encouraged the mission. Additionally, Zacuto was responsible for one of the major innovations of the



HARRY EZRATTY HOLDS A COPY OF HIS BOOK, “500 YEARS IN THE JEWISH CARIBBEAN.” (PHOTO BY DANIEL NOZICK)

time, the brass astrolabe.

Before his suggestion to make the device out of brass, it was made of wood. The wood would expand with water while at sea and would shrink when it dried out, making the brass device fashioned by Zacuto far more accurate.

Another of Zacuto's crowning accomplishments is the Tables of Zacuto. Written before Columbus' first voyage in 1492, it is one of the earliest tables depicting the phases of the sun and moon. The printing press had not yet been invented, so each copy was painstakingly drawn by hand. Every famous explorer of the time used Zacuto's maps, astrolabe and table, from Bartolomeu Dias, the first man to circumnavigate Africa, to Magellan, to Vasco de Gama and Christopher Columbus.

In 1503, during his fourth voyage, Columbus was shipwrecked in Jamaica for a year.

“He is trying to convince the natives that they are gods because they are white and come with a ship and have armor and guns,” said Ezratty. “After a few months, the natives are getting wise and stopped bringing them food and water. They had been bringing food and drinking water to the beach because the Europeans were scared what would happen if they went into the jungle. Columbus takes the Tables of Zacuto and sees that there is going to be a lunar eclipse. He tells the natives that his gods are angry and, as a result, are going to take away their night light if they don't continue to bring food and water. It happens just as he says and the natives continue to bring them supplies.”

The catalyst that caused these old world Jews to scatter throughout the globe was the Spanish Inquisition in 1492. Jews were either forced to convert or were thrown out of Spain, resulting in many such as

Zacuto fleeing to Portugal while many more sought shelter in the New World.

The Jews who landed in the Caribbean while it was first being colonized were Sephardim. Columbus claimed land in the name of Spain and the Spanish Armada, the most powerful navy in the world at the time and ensured that nobody else was able to start settling colonies until the British defeated them in 1588.

“Until that time, Jews came over as what they call ‘crypto- Jews,’ or anusim in

Hebrew,” said Ezratty. The terms refer to Jews who maintain Jewish traditions, but adhere to another faith in public — Catholicism, in this instance.

Jews would have had to operate as Catholics in order to reach the New World. Ezratty cited Columbus’ journals, explaining that the crews would do a Hail Mary every morning and vespers every evening. It would have been impossible for someone to operate as a Jew for fear of being locked up.

It is important to realize the impetus of the Inquisition on Jews. Many were imprisoned or killed, even more were converted and those that managed to escape were forced to flee land that their family might have occupied for centuries. Revenge against the Spanish was a driving force that resulted in these crypto-Jews becoming pirates or privateers, the difference being that privateers are authorized by a government with a letter of mark, rather than operating outside of any law.

“If you go to Curaçao, there is a very famous cemetery that has about 3,000 Jewish graves from when it was first founded as a Dutch colony up until today,” said Ezratty. “If you were a mohel, on your gravestone they had the implements of circumcision. If you were a rabbi or a Levi, you would have the birchat kohanim. If you were a scribe, you would have a hand with a quill, and if you were a ship owner, you would have a ship.”

Two Baltimoreans, Peggy Israel and her son, Russ, can trace their lineage back to Caribbean Jewry. Their ancestors, Abraham Israel and his son, Isaac, left Spain for Jamaica as crypto-Jews in the 1600s. In an effort to protect the Jewish population of Jamaica, Abraham and another Jew by the name of Moses Cohen convinced England to take over Jamaica on the grounds that they could reveal a local gold mine if they were free from Spain. However, Cohen misled the British for personal gain and the Israel family was forced to flee to New York for their safety.

The Israel family genealogy originates from Solomon Israel, whom they believe to be the



PEGGY AND RUSS ISRAEL POSE WITH A BOOK OF ISRAEL FAMILY GENEALOGY. (PHOTO BY DANIEL NOZICK)

grandson of Isaac. According to family history, Solomon Israel was very wealthy and bought up large amounts of land. He married a Christian woman in New York before moving to Albemarle County, Va., in the early 1700s, where he is believed to be the first Hebrew settler. There are locations such as Israel Mountain in Albemarle that bear his namesake, and if the family is correct, Solomon is the forefather to nearly every non-Jew in the United States with the last name Israel.

Isaac Rodriguez Marques was a Danish citizen, ship owner and, according to his family, a pirate. Presumably spurred by seeing friends hung as pirates, Isaac came to New York in 1695 while it was still a Dutch colony. Bernard Baruch, who served under seven American presidents, starting with Woodrow Wilson in 1916 and ending with Harry Truman in 1947, was one of his descendants.

“If you wanted to make money in the early Caribbean, there were two ways to do it,” said Ezratty. “You did it in the shipping business or you did it with sugar because sugar was like petroleum at the time — Jews made fantastic fortunes in sugar in Jamaica and Barbados and Antigua.”

In Newport, R.I., the largest seaport in New England in terms of trading before the Revolutionary War, which began in 1775, a family of crypto-Jews known as the Rivera family was the largest of the ship owners at the time, having cornered the markets for oil and soap with the whale trade. Up until the Revolutionary War, the Rivera family was the leading maritime family in what would become the United States. Other wealthy families of crypto-Jews existed in Charleston, S.C., and Savannah, Ga.

Perhaps the most well-known Jew in early American history is Uriah Phillips Levy, the first Jewish commodore in the U.S. Navy and the highest ranking officer at the inception of the Civil War in 1861.

Levy was notorious for getting into fights over being called a “dirty Jew” while he was in the Navy. He was court-martialed at least eight or nine times and famously killed a man in a duel in Philadelphia after being slandered for his Judaism.

“This was the days before Annapolis,” said Ezratty. “If you wanted to be an officer, you had to go on a ship as an apprentice. The people that did this were often from upper class families, and here is this Jew who had a higher rank than all of them.” It is no wonder that Levy’s subordinates felt the need to attack him.

According to Ezratty, Levy first worked on a ship as the attendant to a Quaker ship owner when he was 11 years old. He told the Quaker that he had to get off of the ship to be a bar mitzvah when he turned 13. However, following his bar mitzvah, he went back to sea, attended a naval academy, got commissioned, was assigned his own ship, and his first act was to put a mezuzah on the door of his cabin. “He was always a Jew,” Ezratty said.

The Pirate Captain Toledano

Arnon Shorr is a Jewish filmmaker who found his passion for Jewish narrative upon moving to Baltimore with his wife. “I was raised modern Orthodox, went to Jewish school, but I wasn’t drawn to Jewish narrative,” he said. “In Baltimore though, telling Jewish stories seemed more urgent and necessary. I started making exclusively Jewish films and content while I was there. The challenge of telling Jewish stories is to tell them in a way that is relevant to a mainstream audience — there is a lot in the Jewish narrative tradition that can be of value to the world.”

A few months ago, Shorr was inspired to explore creating another Jewish film after attending a meeting about Jewcer, a Jewish crowdfunding platform “with a lot of quirks that make it stand out, especially for Jewish-themed projects,” he said. The whole concept is simple, and he wrote a short, five-page script entitled, “The Pirate Captain Toledano.”



(©ISTOCKPHOTO.COM/NASTCO)

“The story really resonated with me, but as soon as I was done writing it, I realized that I had done something foolish,” he said. “I was looking to raise a small amount of money for a short film and ended up with a period piece on a boat. One rule of low budget shooting is to never shoot anything on the water, and another is never shoot anything with period props and costumes.”

The story itself is straightforward — a ship of pirates catch a stowaway who is a

Jewish refugee from the Inquisition. He wants to become a pirate to attack the Spanish. The captain must decide whether to toss him off or let him join the crew.

“This motivation goes beyond greed and thirst for adventure,” said Shorr. “There is a sense of almost a noble purpose, not just to survive but to strike back. ... My purpose was not to educate about the historical facts, but rather to bring a historical ordeal to light.

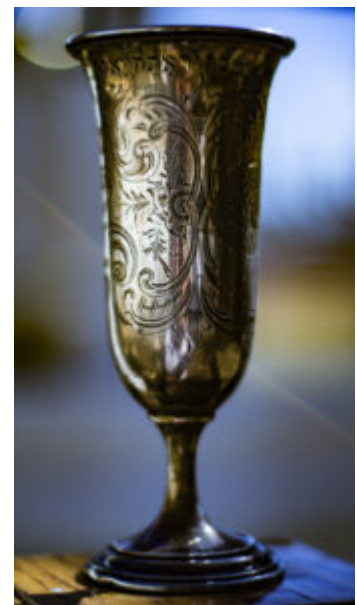
“To me, the idea of Jews taking to the high seas to escape the Inquisition is very powerful, especially that some of these people took to piracy to enact revenge. The fact that they could have existed, the idea that some of these characters are an actual part of maritime and Jewish history is enough for me to want to tell their story.”

Stephen DeCordova, who previously collaborated with Shorr on a web series called “Mad Mensch,” has been cast as the lead in this new film and has an interesting personal connection to the story.

“My parents are Jewish,” said DeCordova. “My mother was born in Kingston, Jamaica. My grandmother had a very big family, I have many aunts and uncles, all from Jamaica, and at the time, the notion of a Jamaican Jew was unheard of. It was a big conversation piece.”

For DeCordova, the prospect of making this film is appealing because he feels that the Jewish diaspora is far more varied than the cliché views that the general public may have. More importantly, for both DeCordova and Shorr, it is important to tell this story because it is an unheard Jewish narrative, they feel.

“If you Google the history or narrative of Jewish piracy, it is something that anti-Semites have started picking up on,” said Shorr. “Not everything that you find is flattering or nice. If we don’t engage in this history and define it as our own and claim it, we will lose the ability to do so to the anti-Semites who are already beginning to capitalize on this particular piece of history. People are nervous about this idea of connecting Jews and piracy, but what we are afraid of is the anti-Semitic usurpation of this narra- tive,



THE DECORDOVA FAMILY'S
ANCIENT KIDDUSH CUP
BELONGED TO THEIR CARIBBEAN
ANCESTORS. (PHOTO COURTESY
OF STEPHEN DECORDOVA)

so we need to make it our own.”

The Exodus

Perhaps the most relevant story to Baltimore Jews in modern maritime history is that of the Exodus, a catalyst for the birth of Israel known as “the ship that launched a nation.”

The Exodus, originally a luxury steamer named the President Warfield, would transport people back and forth between Baltimore and Norfolk, Va. During World War II, the ship was requisitioned for military service and was involved in the Invasion of Normandy. However, when it returned to the United States, it was derelict and fell into disuse.

Through a ring of local collaborators, the Exodus was bought by a shell corporation that was controlled by the renegade organization Aliyah Bet, which aimed to help Jews illegally immigrate to British-mandated Palestine before the State of Israel was founded.

In order to be made seaworthy, the Exodus was brought to Baltimore to be refitted, where — according to Jerry Klinger, president of the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation — it was an open secret due to its illegality, with many saying, “What ship?” while the Exodus was refitted, crewed and funded entirely by Americans.



THE SHIP EXODUS (PROVIDED)

Rooms on the interior of the ship were torn out and every available inch of space made accessible to carry refugees. The ship, originally designed to carry 600 people, managed to fit 4,500 Jewish refugees.

After loading the passengers, the plan was to use it to escape the British blockade in the Mediterranean’s shallow waters. Ships from the Chesapeake Bay are unique in that they have a shallow, rounded bottom, as opposed to the V-shaped bottom that British ships used to

slice through the waves. This feature enabled the Exodus to travel in waters that were too shallow for British ships to navigate. By going along the Mediterranean where the water was shallow and the British couldn't follow, the crew hoped to offload their passengers quickly in Palestine before the British could stop them.

According to Klinger, “17 miles to sea, the ship was attacked by the British in international waters. They put a destroyer on either side and demanded that she surrender, but started to smash her sides and crush her wooden superstructure when she wouldn't — they were willing to kill these 4,500 Jews unless they surrendered. The British then attacked with boarding parties and killed four Jews, wounded over 100 and gave simple options — surrender or be sunk. The commanders decided to surrender, and the British took the ship into Haifa, where they decided to make an example of the Jews. Prison ships were awaiting them, and these people were forced off of the Exodus and sent back to [refugee] camps. After this incredible journey, German camps under British control.”

This entire debacle would have gone unnoticed if it were not anticipated and witnessed by the press, who knew they had to get the story out, Klinger said. At the time, British officials were meeting to decide what to do about British-mandated Palestine and whether to terminate the mandate and withdraw. Up until this point, the United Nations committee had refused to hear testimony from Jews about why it should designate the territory as a haven for Jews.

“On the Exodus, there was deliberately placed a Christian priest named John Stanley Grauel, a Methodist minister and secret agent of the Haganah. He was let off the ship and put under house arrest because he knew the story,” said Klinger. “When the Exodus put out its distress calls, the voice that came across the airways was his — an American Christian was describing this attack by the British on the Jews. He was very important to the Haganah. They smuggled him to Jerusalem so he could present to the U.N. special committee.”

Grauel did what no Jew could do — he gave testimony to the U.N. special committee. Committee members believed him specifically because he wasn't a Jew, but rather a Christian minister. Before his testimony, the vote was



leaning away from partitioning Israel, but after hearing from Grauel, the committee changed their view and decided to listen to testimony from Jews, which ultimately led to the U.N. vote for partition creating the State of Israel in 1948.



THE EXODUS SCULPTURE IN PROGRESS
(PHOTO BY SAM PHILIPPE)

To this day, the Exodus remains scuttled in Haifa's port. "What has bothered me the whole time is that there are memorials specifically to the Exodus in Germany and in downtown Baltimore, but in Israel itself, there is nothing specific, she was just a ship," said Klinger. As a result, the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation is working with an Israeli artist to create the Exodus Memorial in Haifa, which will be dedicated on July 18.

"It will be the finest [tribute to Exodus] in the world," he said. "The replica of the anchor will be attached where Haifa is. The Memorial will be a symbolic, historical interpretation and educational exhibit that Israel will be very proud of."

dnozick@midatlanticmedia.com

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