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A credible account of Jamaican Jewish history

By SHELDON KIRSHNER

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To Canadians seeking a respite from the arctic blasts of winter, the lush Caribbean island of Jamaica offers immediate relief in the form of sand, surf, sun and exquisite vistas.

But Jamaica is also an extremely interesting, though little known, outpost in the Diaspora, a fact that becomes clear in *The Island of One People* (Ian Randle Publishers) by Marilyn Delevante and Anthony Alberga.

As Delevante and Alberga inform us in this engaging book, Jews have lived in Jamaica since the dawn of European colonization in the 16th century. And although Jews have never accounted for more than about five per cent of the island's population, their contributions, particularly in the realm of business, have been keenly felt.

In this amply illustrated volume, the authors cover a great deal of ground, touching on the migration of Jews to the island, the battle for civil liberties, Jewish life over the centuries and the community's high profile families. But their claim that "this fascinating story has remained untold" is contradicted by the books on Jamaican Jews they cite in their bibliography.

As *The Island of One People* states, Jews began reaching Jamaica in the late 1500s as Conversos – newly converted Christians – fled the wrath of the Inquisition. With the British conquest in 1655, Jews could live openly as Jews, yet they were subjected to discrimination. Once these obstacles were removed in the 1830s, still more Jews settled in Jamaica. They, in turn, were followed by Sephardi Jews from the Middle East and Ashkenazi Jews fleeing Nazi Germany.

Delevante and Alberga, both born and raised in Jamaica, speculate that the Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus, who may have been a Converso himself, employed several Conversos as crewmen when he paid a brief visit to Jamaica in 1494.

During the Spanish occupation (1509-1655), Jews arriving in Jamaica passed themselves off as Catholics. But when Spain, in 1577, repealed an edict prohibiting Conversos to emigrate to the colonies, the way was open for them to live and trade freely in Jamaica.

With the end of the Spanish occupation, Jews could practise their faith openly and build synagogues. The new British colonial administrators encouraged Jewish immigration, recognizing that Jews could bring expertise in trading, banking and shipping. Many of the Jewish families settling in Jamaica in the 17th and 18th centuries arrived through Amsterdam.

Yet Jews were definitely second-class citizens during this period.

In 1681, the Jamaican House of Assembly enacted a law excluding Roman Catholics, Jews and Jamaicans of African ancestry from exercising their civil rights. In 1695, the legislature passed an act forcing Jews, representing five per cent of the white population, to pay more than their fair share of taxes.

Fiercely anti-Semitic and jealous of the success Jews enjoyed in commerce, British settlers filed a petition to the House of Assembly in 1698 requesting that they be forced to leave Jamaica. The request was denied on the grounds that they were too economically useful to be expelled.

The Plantation Act of 1740, granting Jews various "privileges and advantages," marked an improvement in their status. But it was not until 1826 that a bill was passed giving Jews full equality. Even so, Jews had to wait another five years before the bill was finally promulgated.

Interestingly enough, Delevante and Alberga observe that Jews in Canada were not granted the same political rights as Christians until 1832.

The emancipation of Jamaica Jewry had an impact. By 1849, eight of the 47 members of the House of Assembly were Jewish. It was in that year, too, that the legislature adjourned for Yom Kippur for the first time.

The acceptance of Jews in Anglo-Jamaican society was such that some of the earliest Jewish settlers intermarried and were

The deCordovas founded The Gleaner, Jamaica's leading daily newspaper, in 1834. Lewis Ashenheim, the scion of a prominent Jewish family, was chairman of its board from 1909 to 1941. His son, Neville, was Jamaica's first ambassador to the United States.

Apart from the Ashenheims, the most notable Jewish Jamaican families have been the Lindos, who made their fortune as banana planters and then branched into the wine and rum business; the deLissers, who own luxury hotels in Montego Bay; the Myers, who bottle Captain Morgan Rum; the Henriques, who head a construction conglomerate; and the Matalons, who trade in cocoa products, foodstuffs, pharmaceuticals and knitted goods. During the 16th and 17th centuries, a small proportion of Jamaican Jews were in the slave trade.

Jews have also been active in the professions and the arts. Marvin Goodman is a past president of the Jamaican Institute of Architects. Basil Anthony Lindo was appointed general manager and chief executive officer of the Bank of Nova Scotia's Jamaican branches. Maurice Stoppi was chairman of the National Dance Theatre.

Four Jews – Philip Stern, Altamont de Costa, George Seymour-Seymour and Eli Matalon – have served as mayor of Kingston, the island's capital. Matalon was later minister of education and minister of justice in Michael Manley's government.

As of 2002, Jamaica had 250 Jewish inhabitants, comprising 0.0094 per cent of its population. At its peak in the 1880s, the Jewish community had 2,535 members. In 1720, however, 18 per cent of Kingston's white population was Jewish.

The authors ascribe the decline to two factors: assimilation and emigration. Mixed marriages from the 16th century onward had a discernible effect, as did the migration of some families – the Torres', the Gomez's and the Pintos – to Britain, Canada and Panama. One co-author of the book, Alberga, is a resident of Toronto.

As a counterpoint to assimilation, many Jews have preserved their traditions. But during the 20th century, Orthodox Judaism faded away and was replaced by a more progressive and Conservative form of observance.

The Island of One People charts the rise and development of a historic Jewish community, and although Delevante and Alberga are not professional historians, they have written a credible account of Jamaican Jewry.

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