



Jerusalem on the Amstel: The Quest for Zion in the Dutch Republic

Lipika Pelham

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In the seventeenth century, the Netherlands became home to a large diaspora community of Sephardic Jews fleeing persecution. Their community thrived for centuries until its abrupt end under Nazi occupation. Longtime BBC reporter Lipika Pelham chronicles the rise and fall of that Jewish community in her thorough and engaging *Jerusalem on the Amstel*.

This *Nação*, or nation within a nation, had simple beginnings. The Dutch Republic had split from the dominant Catholic Church, and its leaders found a common cause with Jews whom the Church had persecuted in Spain during the Inquisition. Also known as “New Christians” or “Portuguese Jews”—based on their forced conversion or exile from Spain—they were still banned from participation in specific industries. But they built an important mercantile class, a massive temple, and a leading theater, establishing themselves as an important part of Amsterdam society.

This community birthed and later rejected the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, while the Dutch master Rembrandt painted several of its prominent members; Pelham explores controversies involving both. She also discusses Christian attitudes toward Dutch Jews—including fascination with end times prophecies and quests to find the lost tribes of Israel, business relationships forged during the heyday of Dutch trade and colonization, and those of the people who turned on their neighbors after Hitler invaded the Netherlands.

In the book’s final chapters, Pelham shifts from history to reporting, detailing her own conversations in the modern-day Netherlands. She conveys perspectives on Dutch attitudes toward Jews, examines why Dutch Jews died disproportionately during the Holocaust, and considers what it’s like to live in the ruins of a once-thriving community. This additional perspective blends well with the thoughtful history, making *Jerusalem on the Amstel* a rounded and valuable account.

JEFF FLEISCHER (July/August 2019)

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