

need only ask what the world would be like today if Khrushchev or Mao Zedong had been the one with overwhelming nuclear force at his disposal in those days, and Kennedy the one who was bluffing. However much we may now recoil from the terrors of the nuclear age, that is one thought experiment I am grateful was never played out.

### Old & New Christians

THE ORIGINS OF THE INQUISITION IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY SPAIN. By B. NETANYAHU. *Random House*. 1,384 pp. \$50.00.

Reviewed by DAVID BERGER

IN 1391, the prosperous, confident, acculturated Jewish community in Christian Spain was rocked by a series of pogroms; this was inaugurated a century of travails that culminated in the expulsion of 1492. Intense missionary efforts on the part of Christian authorities—including a seemingly endless public disputation between representatives of the two faiths in 1413-14 at Tortosa—combined with episodes of violence to produce a situation unprecedented in Jewish history: an officially tolerated community living side by side with a large community of newly baptized Jews.

It is hardly surprising that "Old Christians" did not embrace these *conversos*—or Marranos, or "New Christians"—with unambivalent fervor. Mass conversion poses a psychological dilemma quite different from the conversion of individuals; the majority's attitude toward an entire group cannot be expected to undergo a radical transformation virtually overnight. Although significant segments of Spanish society did welcome the newcomers, in many circles hostility to Jews in general was extended to the New Christians, and by the middle of the 15th century, massive anti-*converso* rioting began to erupt. For several decades, it was safer to be an overt Jew in Spain than a

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recent convert to Christianity. Finally, in the last quarter of the century, the accusation that the *conversos* were still practicing Judaism in secret served as the basis for establishing a formal Inquisition, designed to ferret out "judaizers."

MODERN historians of the Inquisition, whatever they may think of it morally, have generally accepted the factual assumption upon which it rested—namely, that a majority of New Christians in 15th-century Spain were, in truth, crypto-Jews. Thirty years ago, however, the Israeli scholar B. Netanyahu, then a professor at Cornell University, initiated a challenge to this prevailing view. His 1966 study, *The Marranos of Spain From the Late XIVth to the Early XVIIth Century According to Contemporary Hebrew Sources*, argued that attitudes toward *conversos* expressed by Jewish authorities in legal, philosophical, polemical, homiletical, and exegetical works became more skeptical as the 15th century wore on; indeed,

the closer a writer was to the existing social reality, the more negative his assessment was likely to be. By the end of the century, the dominant assertion was that in virtually every respect, Jewish law should treat the *conversos* not as secret Jews but as Gentiles pure and simple.

In a foreword to the first edition of *The Marranos of Spain*, Netanyahu informed his readers that he was conducting a parallel study of the non-Hebrew documents, and that it was "in an advanced stage of preparation"; in a 1971 preface to the second edition, he indicated that completion of this study was "already in sight." Twenty-five years later, and two decades after a shattering personal tragedy, we have the massive result of this research in a work "dedicated with unrelieved grief to the memory of my beloved son Jonathan who fell while leading the rescue force at Entebbe on July 4, 1976."

Netanyahu's new book is the product of an acute intellect and

"Nicholas Kittrie understands that it is legitimacy that civilizes power, elicits loyalty, underpins a stable order, and distinguishes law from mere force."—JEANE J. KIRKPATRICK, FORMER U. S. AMBASSADOR TO THE UNITED NATIONS

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enormous learning. It provides a detailed account of the attacks on Jews and *conversos*; mini-biographies of the key personalities; analyses of court intrigues; close, often illuminating readings of pro- and anti-*converso* polemics; and a vigorous presentation of the author's key theses.

At the risk of oversimplification, Netanyahu's essential argument can be summarized as follows. Sources in Spanish and Latin reinforce the conclusion that by the middle of the 15th century, the overwhelming majority of Marranos were genuine Christians. This means that the Inquisition could not have been motivated by real concern about *converso* judaizing. What, then? Social and economic factors played an important role in the developing hostility, particularly in the wake of *converso* penetration of government and Church, but even this does not tell the entire story. Instead, what mainly fueled the physical attacks, the legal efforts to exclude New Christians from influential positions, and, finally, the Inquisition itself was a racial theory, enhanced by a sense of national separatism, which regarded the Marranos' Jewishness as an ineradicable contaminant.

READERS skeptical about any portion of Netanyahu's thesis will find themselves buffeted by wave after wave of argument by a master polemicist. The overall impact is strengthened by the striking observations in this book about matters peripheral to the thesis itself but central to the history of Spanish Jewry. Netanyahu, for example, addresses the old question of why Crusade-era Jews in Northern Europe resisted conversion more steadfastly than did late medieval Spanish Jewry; he points out that Spanish Christians were *trying* to convert Jews, while the Crusaders were interested primarily in murder. This is not the whole answer, but it is an insight of the first importance.

And yet—skepticism is warranted.

First of all, Netanyahu's book needs to be placed in its own chronological context. As it turns out,

his assertion in 1971 that the work was virtually complete appears to have been essentially correct. Fewer than fifteen items in the new book's 25-page bibliography (aside from citations of the author's own work) bear publication dates later than 1980, and only three later than 1984. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that an entire generation of recent scholarship goes unrepresented here. Some of this scholarship addresses issues of social history which are highly relevant to intergroup relations or to the attitudes of different classes within the various religious communities in Spain; some of it confronts Netanyahu's concerns directly.

As for the argument itself, the question of the extent of Marrano judaizing raises fascinating issues of historical method. Critics of Netanyahu's earlier work on the Hebrew sources noted that the author of a 15th-century rabbinic ruling may have had one set of criteria for determining Jewishness, while the modern historian may have another, more latitudinarian one. Thus, a Marrano who refrained from leaving Spain on an available ship yesterday but attended a Passover seder today may have been a willing Christian to the rabbi, but to the historian he must be counted as a crypto-Jew.

In the present work, Netanyahu resists the suggestion that there could have been *conversos* who violated such religious obligations as the Sabbath but observed others, like Passover; and he minimizes the number of judaizers, to the point of appearing to endorse a mid-15th-century claim that there may have been only ten of them in Toledo (though he goes on to make the minor concession that there may really have been 50 or 100). The descendants of the original converts, he insists, had "no notion whatever of Judaism, either in theory or in practice. . . . They were *unaware* of it." Although evidence of *converso* emigration from Spain and return to Judaism forces him to acknowledge "some Jewish pockets" in the 1460's and 1470's, and to indicate that persecution itself awakened a Jewish spark in a small number of Marranos, so devoid of nuance is the bulk of his presenta-

tion that one wonders how such a spark could have been lit in the first place.

IN GENERAL, despite sporadic expressions of caution, this book is marked by a degree of confidence unjustified by the nature of the sources. Netanyahu declares that his purpose is "to establish, on the basis of clear evidence, the precise borderline between the false and the true in all that was ascribed to the Marranos and their life." But much of what he does here involves the reconstruction of motives and intentions through a series of inferences based on slim evidence. Sometimes the results are persuasive, even compelling; often, they amount to nothing more—and occasionally less—than a plausible hypothesis.

A case in point concerns one of Netanyahu's crucial themes—namely, that it was solely the desire to curry favor with the anti-Semitic masses that induced numerous Spanish authorities, like King Ferdinand himself, who were not personally racist or even particularly hostile, to persecute *conversos*, massacre them, and establish the Inquisition to torment them. The evidentiary foundation for this claim is sparse, and yet the thesis itself is presented with absolute assurance.

In the final chapters, where Netanyahu summarizes his conclusions, he does introduce some important qualifications. Thus, he briefly acknowledges that even if the accusation of *converso* judaizing was false, it was widely believed to be true, and this in itself could have been a major factor in the establishment of the Inquisition as well as in other forms of anti-*converso* behavior. Again, in the midst of a passionate denunciation of the Inquisition as the work of hypocritical, sadistic racists who had to know that the charges they were making were false, there is a remarkable concession, most of it in parentheses: "Apart from religious interests (which no doubt motivated some of [the Inquisition's] leaders). . . ." So one *could* be a leader of the Inquisition and believe that the charges against the *conversos* were

## A Literary Life

EDMUND WILSON: A BIOGRAPHY.  
By JEFFREY MEYERS. *Houghton-Mifflin*. 554 pp. \$35.00.

Reviewed by JOHN GROSS

true, after all. In fact, in an era when most people credited confessions elicited through torture, and when there was, even according to Netanyahu, a small movement of return to Judaism, many Inquisitors surely did believe that they had uncovered genuine judaizing—and occasionally, perhaps often, they were right.

FINALLY, Netanyahu's discussion of racism raises complicated questions of causation. He makes the important point that ingrained hatred toward Jews was not easily uprooted by conversion; and he explains how the formation of racist theory may have served as a solution to the problem faced by those wishing to deny positions of authority to *conversos*. But he goes on to maintain that another "reason why racism arose" was fear of intermarriage between Old and New Christians. Fear of intermarriage, however, would be a problem only for people *already* affected by racist, or quasi-racist, sentiments. Besides, for racists the Inquisition must have been a mixed blessing, predicated as it was on the assumption that *conversos* could be good or bad Christians; not everyone brought up on charges was convicted.

Netanyahu's emphasis on the primacy of racism is undermined, then, by some of his own analysis. And little wonder, for in the evolution of anti-*converso* sentiment there was a complex interweaving of motives. We are not likely to achieve an understanding of "the precise borderline between the false and the true in all that was ascribed to the Marranos," not only because the evidence is obscure but also because there often was no clear line. Partly Jewish and partly Christian, the *conversos* were attacked by Old Christians out of social, political, economic, racial, and, yes, religious motives.

Still, even if we should be inclined to see a murky reality where Netanyahu paints a sharply focused portrait, we must not blur the moral clarity he brings to his denunciation of Inquisitorial evil, or scant the genuine achievements of this impressive, problematic, and penetrating book.

EDMUND WILSON (1895-1972) was a central figure in the literary life of his time. In his journalism of the 1920's and his pioneering study *Axel's Castle* (1932), he did more than anyone else to chart the achievements of modernism for ordinary readers. His later books ranged from psychologically based reassessments of established literary authors, as in *The Wound and the Bow* (1941), to a best-selling account of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, to political history and polemics, to fiction. As a member of the staff of the *New Republic* from 1921 to 1941, and subsequently during his long connection as a critic with the *New Yorker*, he published review-essays and reportage on an extraordinary variety of subjects.

A formidably productive career, then; and also one much gossiped-about. Wilson engaged in some celebrated controversies: with New York State censors over his sexually tinged collection of stories, *Memoirs of Hecate County* (1946); with the Modern Language Association over its publicly funded and (in his view) desperately pedantic editions of American literary classics; with the Internal Revenue Service over his unpaid taxes. He had a stormy marriage to Mary McCarthy (the third of his four wives). His close friends included F. Scott Fitzgerald, a Princeton classmate, and Vladimir Nabokov, whom he originally championed but with whom he subsequently had a spectacular falling-out over Nabokov's translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*.

A BIOGRAPHY of Wilson has been long overdue—he died more than twenty years ago—and Jeffrey Meyers, a seasoned practitioner, has come up with an intelligent, well-

JOHN GROSS is the author of *The Rise and Fall of the Man of Letters and Shylock: A Legend and Its Legacy*, among other books.



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