

Exotic Exploits (continued)

Portuguese convoy of vessels in the Cape Verde Islands off West Africa. The newly-dispatched expedition was en route to Brazil to expand the discoveries there. One of the ships' captains was Amerigo Vespucci, the Florentine explorer for whom America is named. Vespucci had heard of Gaspar and sought him out. The Italian seafarer was deeply impressed with Gaspar's maritime expertise and knowledge of foreign lands. Vespucci wrote in a letter to the Medici family, dated 4th June 1501, describing Gaspar as "a trustworthy man who speaks many languages and knows the names of many cities and provinces, who made

two voyages from Portugal to the Indian Ocean, and Journeyed from Cairo to Malacca, a province on the east of that ocean. He also visited the island of Sumatra, and he told me that he knew of a great kingdom in the interior of India which was rich in gold, pearls, and other precious stones.

Within a year Gaspar's destination was India again. He enlisted in a new expedition commanded by his godfather, who now held the title "Admiral of India." The fleet of twenty ships sailed to avenge the earlier massacre at Calicut and to establish Portuguese authority in the Indian ocean. Colonies were founded in Mozambique and Portuguese sovereignty was

accepted by a number of Arab potentates in east African coastal territories. Gaspar played a key role in these negotiations.

After vengefully bombarding the port of Calicut and leaving a trail of sunken Arab ships along the Malabar coast, da Gama's armada called in at Cochin. This time Gaspar found his wife, and the family was reunited, if only temporarily. A woman noted for her devotion to Judaism, his wife refused to accompany him back to Portugal. But their relationship remained an amicable one, and on several subsequent Journeys to Cochin Gaspar visited her.

King Manuel awarded Gaspar the honor of Cavallheiro de Sua Casa (Cavalier of the Royal

Household) and he continued as a favorite at the royal court.

Eventually restless and bored with the dullness of palace life, the adventuresome Gaspar signed on to accompany Francisco D'Almeida on his mission in 1505 as the first Viceroy of Portuguese India. D'Almeida was to establish a chain of fortified trading posts to insure domination of Indian commerce. This time Gaspar stayed on in the sub-continent for five years. When Afonso de Albuquerque, the great empire builder, arrived in India as the successor viceroy, the aging Gaspar, was still there. In January, 1510, Gaspar took part in yet another assault on Calicut. This time it was a disastrous attempt to storm

the Zamorin's palace. Gaspar was said to have led the attack and presumably was killed in that bloody battle as no further references to him appeared anywhere after this episode.

Thus ended the career of a spirited son of the shtetl, who literally became a man of the wide world. He was a man who gave seafaring advice to the greatest navigators of his day - Vasco da Gama, Amerigo Vespucci, Pedro Cabral. He was a Jew who became the trusted friend of an Arab prince and a Christian king. Adaptable and resourceful, Gaspar da Gama found his own way to survive in the turbulent times of the fifteenth century,