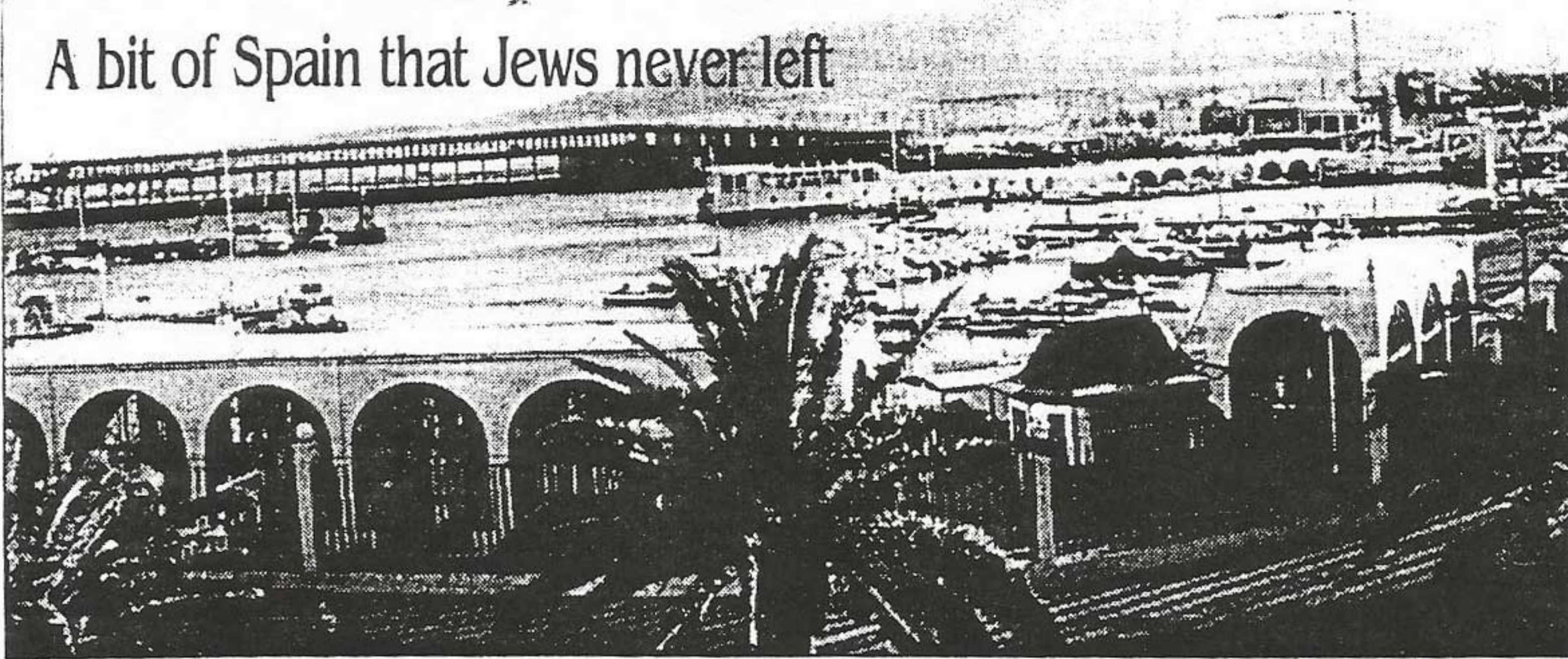


Melilla

A bit of Spain that Jews never left



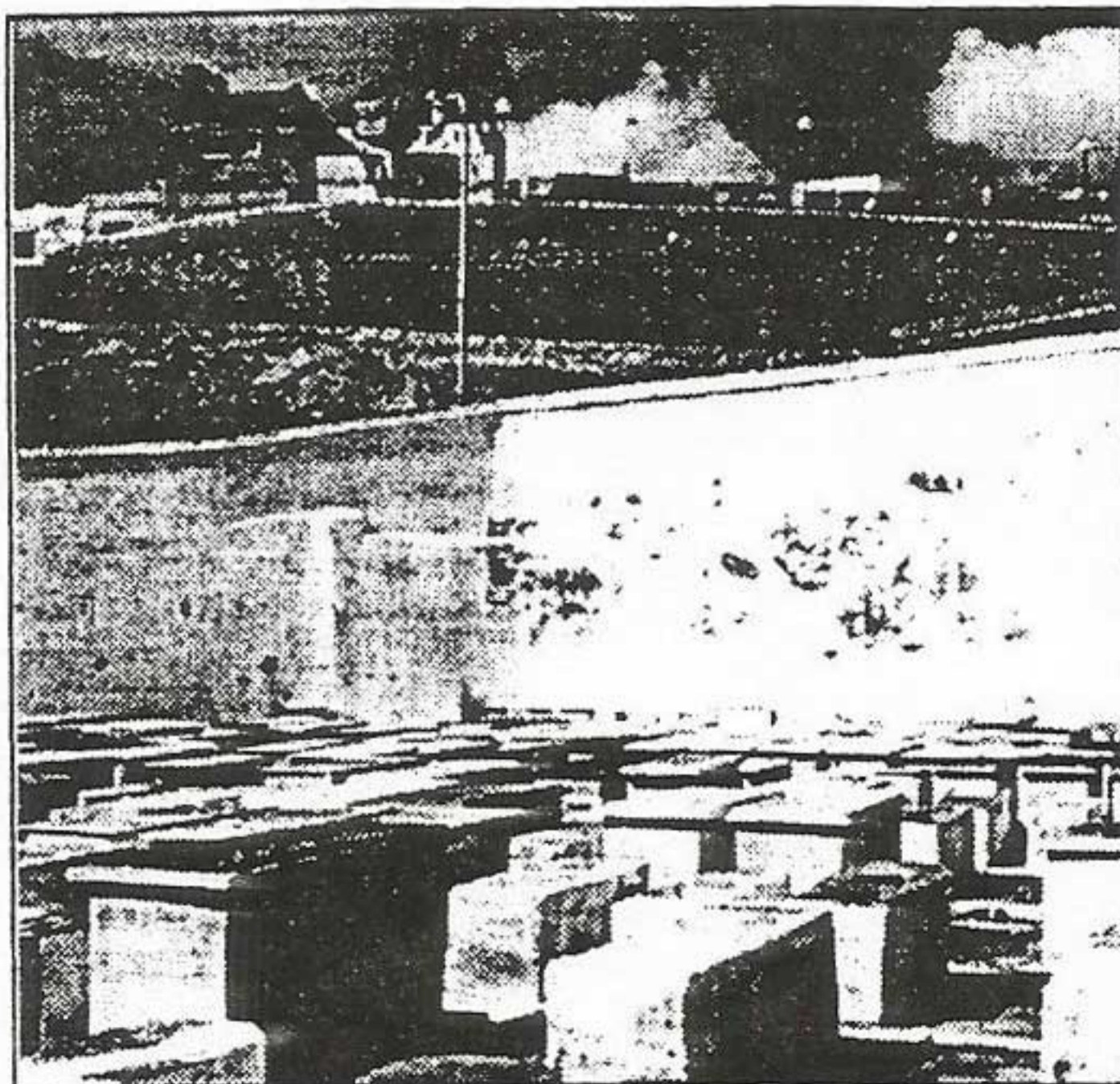
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and HARVEY FROMMER
Special to the Jewish Exponent

A modest placard beside a storefront door announces the existence of the Beth Minzi Synagogue in Torremolinos on Spain's Costa del Sol.

It is a Friday night in late February, and some 20 men — a few fathers with young sons — and three women assemble in the small sanctuary while the Moroccan-born rabbi/cantor — natty in a trim black beard, long gray coat and black homburg — begins the Sephardic service.

During the next two hours, men in the congregation ascend the *bimah* one at a time to sing a portion in Arabic-sounding melodies until a spirited rendition of *Leha Dodi* (Welcome the Bride of Shabbat) concludes the service.



Melilla's Jewish cemetery is an orderly arrangement of above-ground tombs, each with a box at the foot for *vahrzeit* candles.

"You should come tomorrow morning when we get a much bigger crowd. Ashkenazim as well," says Victor Alberto Pinto, a youthful businessman, as we exit onto the quiet, darkened street.

"There is so much opportunity with the tourist industry that Jews keep moving here. The situation is fantastic. It's hard to believe that 500 years ago, the Spaniards threw out the Jews."

He pauses for a moment, then adds: "But do you know there is a part of Spain where the Jews were never thrown out, where my ancestors have lived for centuries? I have an apartment here in Torremolinos because of my business, but my home is still there."

Pinto gestures southward where, a block away, the Mediterranean tide is just beginning to recede. His birthplace, the city of Melilla, lies directly across the sea on the African coast. A refuge for Jews fleeing the expulsion and subsequent Inquisition, Melilla is a little known yet unique part of the Spanish-Jewish story that continues to unfold.

It is a strange place — a small port city in the arc of a deep harbor edged with wide, white beaches; a modern marina; and steep, seemingly impenetrable cliffs. Ramparts on the heights of the old city overlook the sea to the north and the new city to the south, where a neat arrangement of Art Moderne buildings, typical Spanish plazas and two shimmering municipal parks in the compact downtown give way to a sprawling urbanity.

At its highest point, Melilla's luxurious parador (government-sponsored hotel) provides a panoramic view of the coastline, the metropolis and the Moroccan expanse beyond, which runs into a rim of mountains across the horizon. The ambience is modern, cosmopolitan. Yet an aura of intrigue hovers around sudden corners and down narrow, walled lanes. Casablanca, Nador and Marrakech are short

Melilla is a mini-metropolis wedged between the sea and the wilderness, with one foot in Europe and the other in Africa — a place almost entirely devoted to commerce. Except for the siesta hours, its shop-lined streets bustle with pedestrian traffic. Though the city can easily be traversed by foot, its thoroughfares are crowded with Mercedes-Benzes.

Melilla is a free port. With no tax, luxury cars are an irresistible bargain — even if there is no place to go.

In 1492, when the Jews of Spain were looking for a place to go, some crossed the Mediterranean to North Africa, where the first stop was Melilla. It had been a strategic site since ancient times, a terminal station for desert caravans traveling up the timeless roads from the south. It was also a place abundant in salt and honey. (In Arabic, *melilla* means sweet. It is believed that the city was named for the many bees in the region.)

In modern times, Melilla became a haven for Jewish refugees from Nazi aggression. Although still recovering from the Spanish Civil War, which began in Melilla, it provided a Spanish passport and safe passage to those Jews who crossed the border from France into Spain and made their way down the coast and across the Mediterranean to North Africa.

An irony of history

"The Jews owe Franco a big thank-you," says Leon Benjuim, head of the cultural and education department of Melilla's Jewish community. "Hitler planned to move from Alexandria across North Africa, destroying the Jews in all the coastal cities. But Franco would not allow it. It is one of history's ironies that this Fascist dictator is responsible for saving so many Jewish lives."

A soft-spoken scholar, rabbi and scribe in early middle age, Benjuim traces his family's roots in North Africa to a century before the expulsion.

"According to our oral traditions, our ancestors left Seville in 1391," he says. "They lived in Debdou for many generations until early in this century, when my grandparents moved to Melilla."

"There is no other place in Spain like Melilla. There was no Inquisition here. It has always been like a free zone. People were left alone to live as Jews, and not Conversos. As a result, there has been a continuous Jewish presence here for more than 500 years."

Benjuim is rabbi of the synagogue that serves the Benarroch family, one of the oldest and most distinguished in Melilla. It is housed in a small apartment building across from the Parque de Melilla, a verti-

cal swath of greenery and porticos, shaded by towering palms and crisscrossed with paths of intricately designed stonework.

The sanctuary, on the second floor, is a high-ceilinged room with walls of pale pink, ceramic-tiled floors of gold and green and wooden benches that face a central *bimah*. A little alcove behind a latticed *mechitza* forms the women's section. Despite its modest size, the Benarroch synagogue has six Torahs.

Our translator and guide, Rachid Chilali, a bright, enthusiastic young man, the son of a Moroccan mother with Egyptian, Arabic and Italian roots and a Berber father, accompanies us and Benjuim on a tour of the Jewish cemetery.

Like many places in Melilla, and throughout Spain, the cemetery lies beyond a closed door on a busy commercial street. The wooden portal bearing the number 10 opens to a narrow alley.

Above-ground tombs

Directly ahead, the alley opens up to one of Melilla's newer residential neighborhoods. An avenue bordered with brick walkways and small apartment houses climbs a hill that ends in a great clearing.

Accessed through a small building with a sacramental washstand, the Jewish cemetery is an orderly arrangement of above-ground tombs, each with a box at the foot for *yahrzeit* candles. Benjuim pauses meditatively before the grave of his grand-uncle, who had been the chief rabbi of Morocco.

He then gestures to a white stone wall some 10 feet from his grand-uncle's grave.

"That is where the Jewish cemetery ends," he says. "On the other side are Catholic graves. We have another, older cemetery just outside the old city's walls. That was from the time the Jews lived within the old city. The dead had to be buried outside the city wall."

The cemetery is high enough to provide a vista of the Moroccan wilderness, where, in the distance, the faint outlines of a road can be made out.

The Melilla of old, an oasis of a well-to-do Jewish subculture largely isolated from the outside society, no longer exists. The Jews have moved into the mainstream of a city that prides itself on tolerance and the easy interaction among its four ethnic groups: Catholic, Hindu, Muslim and Jewish.

At the same time, the open society of the post-Franco years, new commercial and educational opportunities, and a welcoming environment throughout Spain have lured many of Melilla's Jews to large cities. Others have immigrated to Israel, the United States and Venezuela.

Benjuim is concerned about the future of the Jewish community, though he understands the pull of the outside world. He and his family are among those who resist that pull. They treasure their collective memory of sanctuary; they are committed to perpetuating a presence now more than 500 years old. ■

