

THE SPANISH-JEWISH CONNECTION

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The very existence of this conference is testament to the uniqueness of the Spanish-Jewish connection. Of all the Diasporic experiences, none seems to have the lasting power and majesty of the medieval Jewish presence in Spain. More than five hundred years may have passed, but the Jews have never forgotten Spain, and Spain has never forgotten the Jews. That Spanish culture lives on among Sephardim is born out by such well known examples as the continued use of Ladino, but by lesser known examples as well.

Dona Jimena Artesania Suprema is a small company which produces traditional Spanish confections. We happened upon it a while back on the road from Cordoba to Granada. Stopping off for a little tour and to sample the delicious confections, we met its export manager who told us that from the time they began attending international food fairs, their biggest account has been Mizrachi Foods of Jerusalem.

Apparently, the Jews retain the taste of Spain. At the same time, Spain retains elements of the one-time Jewish presence. Some are long buried and only recently rediscovered like the *mikveh* or ritual bath beneath an 11th century building in the Catalanian town of Besalu. Others have always been there, out in the open for all to see like a couple of streets in Sagunto, a small town just north of Valencia, where the Street of the Old Blood runs into the Street of the New Blood which ends at the Church of the New Blood. Any passerby can tell you what they mean.

As oral/cultural historians and Ashkenazi Jews, we became involved in the Spanish-Jewish connection almost by accident. In the late 1980s, we were doing some travel writing with a Jewish slant where our interest in the subject was awakened by visits to Curacao, Barbados, and Greece -- all of which have very different but compelling Sephardic heritages. And so, beginning in 1993, we began a series of trips to Spain, six in all, searching the dimensions of the contemporary Spanish-Jewish experience. We discovered an ongoing two-fold process: the recovery of a past that never died on the one hand, and a dramatic resurgence of Jewish life and culture on the other.

Wherever we went we found a fascination with possible Jewish roots. The late Carlos Benarroch, who had been the leader of Barcelona's Jewish community, told us he is besieged by Spaniards who want him to help them discover if they are descended from Jews. Some of them have converted. "It is nothing short of a phenomenon," he said.

A variety of factors can be said to have contributed to this phenomenon. There was all the attention given to the 500th anniversary of the Conversion/Expulsion edict in 1992. But beyond that, there are the liberalizing effects of a democratic government in the wake of Franco's death in 1975. One senses a *joie de vivre* in the streets of Barcelona and Madrid. In the evenings, people stroll along the boulevards, have their dinners at 10 o'clock, and stay up till all hours. Restaurants and nightclubs are full. Shop windows showcase beautiful goods. The Spaniards are open and friendly and obviously enjoying the fresh air of political freedom. The church has become much less powerful, people have become much more curious about their past, and this curiosity has manifested itself in a growing interest in whether there is a Jewish branch in the family tree.

During our first trip, we struck up a conversation with a young salesman in the gift shop of the Palace Hotel in Madrid who is imbued with the idea that he is descended from Jews. "My name is Antonio Cruz," he told us, "and the name Cruz (cross) is typical of the conversos. They selected the most Catholic-sounding names." Then he added: "Cut any Spaniard and you'll find Jewish blood." We put this encounter into our first article, and the next time we were in Madrid, stopped off to see him.

"You made me famous," he said. "All these Jewish ladies from America keep coming into the shop and telling me, 'You know, you do look Jewish.'"

The attitude of the monarchy has done much to raise the collective consciousness about Spain's Jewish heritage. King Juan Carlos has publicly apologized for the Conversion/Expulsion edict and the Inquisition. He has attended services in Spanish synagogues; Queen Sophia has studied with a rabbi. And Spanish citizenship is there for the asking for any descendant of Jews exiled in 1492 -- which has contributed to the population of 20,000 affiliated and as many as 30,000 unaffiliated Jews who live in Spain today. The most recent arrivals are from Bosnia and Argentina, but the major influx began more than thirty years ago with Jews from North Africa. There is a sizable Ashkenazi population as well, stemming from refugees who received sanctuary or visas from Franco's Spain during the Second World War, a bizarre irony in a story where ironies abound.

Carlos Schorr, president of the Spanish-Jewish Federation, the parent body of Spain's fourteen Jewish communities, is the son of a Polish Ashkenazi father who came to Spain after World War I to study medicine because Jewish quotas kept him out of

medical school in his native land. After he became a doctor, he sent for his Polish sweetheart back home; they settled and raised their family in Barcelona.

Today Carlos Schorr continues to live in Barcelona with his three children and his wife Luna Benarroch. A Sephardic woman with two ground-breaking distinctions, Luna is the first female and the first Jewish psychiatrist in Barcelona. The Benarroches are one of the oldest Spanish Jewish families. Only Luna's ancestors never left Spain. Their home was Melilla, Spanish Morocco, where Jews have been living since 1497 free from the directive to choose between exile and conversion. They were so prominent in this small, exotic city -- a combination of Europe and Africa -- that until after World War II when many left Melilla for Israel, Barcelona, Caracas, and the United States, each extended family had its own synagogue.

A civil engineer by profession, Carlos Schorr is an Ashkenzai Jew heading a congress that resonates with Sephardic history and culture during a historic period when the government is making public gestures of reconciliation and descendants of exiled Jews are welcomed back. His activities run the gamut of Jewish organizational life. On the one hand, he is meeting with the Justice Minister in Madrid arguing that the Jewish community should receive economic support from the government just as the Catholic Church does. On the other hand, he is involved with disputes within the Jewish community -- why should Spain be different from Israel or America in this regard? -- the most recent being over the establishment of Spain's first Reform Synagogue in Barcelona, a battle Schorr fought against and lost to Luis Bassat, the founder and president of the advertising agency that handled the Barcelona Olympics.

But once again, the renewal of Jewish life in Spain is just half of the story; the other half is the re-discovery and reclamation of a Jewish past ignored or buried for centuries. Let us share some of these stories with you focusing on three areas: the province of Catalonia -- in particular Gerona, Segovia, and Mallorca. The first deals with a successful attempt to reunite the past with the present; the second deals with an earnest attempt to uncover a Jewish past marred by anti-Semitic myths that continue to have currency; the third is a story of an ambivalent yet persistent Jewish identity that ironically is about to end. Each, we think, forms a distinctive chapter in this on-going saga of a remarkable linkage between a people and its adopted land.

Catalonia, the northeast province of Spain, stands apart from the rest of the nation. Catalonians were fierce resisters of Franco who brutally suppressed them to the extent of

outlawing the use of their native language. Understandably, they are very assertive about their identity. It was interesting how often we were told “I am not Spanish; I am Catalan.” The nickname for Catalonians is Poles -- but Poles is a code-name for Jews and suggests ambition and a strong work ethic, a comparison that seems to please them. Carlos Schorr estimates about half the Catalonians believe they are descended from Jews.

Barcelona, the capital of Catalonia, is home to Spain’s second largest Jewish community, the first being Madrid. Most of them live in the Ensanche section, a modern affluent area of broad boulevards lined with sidewalk cafes, spacious parks, two synagogues (counting the new Reform), even a kosher butcher. This is the new Jewish neighborhood. There are two old ones, still intact, within and just outside the walls of the Gothic quarter just a ten minute drive away, but no Jews live there today.

But perhaps the most interesting of the Jewish related stories in Catalonia, if not in all of Spain, lies in Gerona, a small city about an hour’s drive north of Barcelona where a process of collective remembering has brought a long buried past to the surface both physically and metaphorically.

Gerona is bisected by the River Onyar into an old and new section. The new is a modern metropolis of apartment houses, banks, schools, and stores. The old is a hillside of Romanesque towers and Gothic spires, narrow cobblestone lanes that climb into darkened cul de sacs, and stone houses that are huddled one against the other. It was in one of those houses that we met Assumpcio Hosta, a young historian, who directs the Bonastruc ca Porta project named for the medieval scholar Nachmanides. She related the following story to us:

Starting in the sixteenth century, when people inherited houses in the old section, the fashion was to build new apartments over the old ones. Each generation added another layer creating the jumbled look one sees today. Then the new section began developing. People abandoned their old homes, and the area fell into neglect and decline.

But in the 1970s, the life of the city started to change. Suddenly, it became fashionable for rich people to move to the hills surrounding the old town, and from there, some began moving into the old town itself, buying up and remodeling medieval houses. One of these was a restaurateur Jose Tarres, “a sort of poet” in Ms. Hosta’s words. He acquired a group of 11th century buildings near the cathedral with the idea of opening a restaurant. But as he dug down through the accumulated layers of construction, he came upon the remains of some kind of medieval school which he subsequently learned had

been the 13th century yeshiva founded by the Talmudist and Kabbalist Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, commonly known as Nachmanides. This was the renowned rabbi who had taken the part of the Jews in the famous Barcelona Dispute of 1263, the one who is credited with writing down the oral tradition of the Kabbalah.

Tarres became taken with the idea that a Jewish aljama had once existed in his city, and his property was at its center. He remodeled the structure; into the floor of its patio, he set a great Star of David, and he began talking to anyone who would listen about Gerona's glorious Jewish past.

At first his ideas were met with disbelief, Ms. Hostos says. "Why are you talking about a Jewish heritage we never heard of before?" people would ask. For while the outside world may have known Gerona was once a great center of Jewish learning and mysticism, the people of Gerona knew nothing about it. "My generation had been educated during Franco's time," Ms. Hostos explains. "The history of Catalonia was not taught. . . As far as we knew, the expulsion of the Jews was something that happened elsewhere; in Seville, Granada, Toledo. We had no idea there was ever a Jewish community here."

Interestingly enough, during the 19th century, a construction company had come across more than 20 Jewish tombstones while laying the tracks for a railroad. But this evidence of a medieval Jewish presence failed to awaken a public consciousness. It was only with Mr. Tarres' discovery that Gerona began shaking off its collective amnesia.

Further excavation in the old part of the city revealed a labyrinth of byways and cul de sacs that had been sealed off for centuries. Ms. Hostos speculates that when the Jews left their homes in 1492, they blocked their property in the hopes of returning one day. At the same time, the church discouraged Christians from moving into former Jewish homes and people feared if they did, they would be suspected of being secret Jews. Thus the Call, unoccupied, sealed off, and buried under successive layers of construction lay in a Sleeping Beauty kind of spell until a process we call "gentrification" brought it to life once again.

Ms. Hostos explains how initial public skepticism gradually gave way to curiosity. Local historians and archaeologists began researching and writing about the Call, and people became intrigued. Ultimately curiosity turned to commitment. In the mid 1980s, the project *Bonastruc ca Porta* (Nachmanides in Catalan) was born, spearheaded by the mayor of Gerona. It is a visionary effort to restore the Call and

establish a Kabbalah study center and Museum of Catalan Jewish history that involves purchasing property, excavating through layers of construction, and learning from Jewish scholars and 1200 medieval manuscripts which had languished in the city hall for centuries about Gerona's Sephardic past. Hidden in the binding of one book were 100 Hebrew parchments intact which were translated at Yeshiva University in New York and provided a wealth of information about domestic and sacred life in the Call. Links have been established with the American Sephardic community and the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv. In 1993, Gerona hosted a Shabbat service, the first in 500 years.

A document listing the names of those Jews who converted in 1492 was discovered, and citizens are studying the origins of their names to see if they have a Jewish past. Familiarity with Jewish customs is growing. A passerby noticed us stop to examine an indentation in a doorway. "That was for the mezzuzah," he said to us and explained what a mezzuzah is. A librarian showed us a facsimile of a 14th-century Haggadah from Barcelona and described the conflict between the Jews of southern and northern Spain. "Cordoba was more materialistic and pragmatic," she said. "But Gerona was mystical; we had the Kabbalah."

This is what we find most interesting about the Bonastruc ca Porta project. It is not an exercise in uncovering a historical aberration that existed for a while and then disappeared. Instead it is an ongoing process viewed from within the context of Catalan history. Shaking off centuries of ignorance and indifference, the citizens of Gerona -- by reclaiming their Jewish history-- are reclaiming their own past.

A few years after we visited Gerona, we were invited by the mayor of Segovia to come to his city which is actively promoting its Jewish heritage. Like Gerona, Segovia had once been a great center of medieval Jewish learning. But unlike Gerona, its Jewish quarter was never buried. Jews may no longer live in Segovia, but the two Jewish neighborhoods remain intact. Documentation about where synagogues and other structures once stood has always been available. And now, with the awakened interest in its Jewish past, the city has begun a process of restoration and reclamation.

Segovia, which has been named a UNESCO World Heritage site, sits on a rocky hill in north central Spain, between two river valleys. From a distance you can see its limestone towers rising from behind a medieval wall overlooking the dramatic vistas of Castilla-Leon. The most famous landmark of the city is the aqueduct that was built by the Romans in ancient times. The mayor of Segovia told us "There are two bridges in

Segovia. One is the aqueduct. Everyone knows about it. But the other is the bridge to Segovia's Jewish past. Not everyone knows that Segovia had one of the biggest Juderias in all of Spain. This is the bridge we have yet to cross.”

He provided us with a guide, a young graduate student, Maria, who was fluent in English, very informed about her city, and brimming with enthusiasm over its many treasures and attractions. She took us for a walk along a balustrade overlooking a dry river bed. On the other side was the old walled city. We could see some of the seven brick arches that surround the Jewish quarter. On our side, was the old Jewish cemetery with gravestones that go back to the 11th century. A black iron fence ran the length of the walkway, protecting pedestrians from the steep drop. And set into the fence were a succession of abstract candelabras, *menorahs* that alerted the visitor to the special nature of this place.

In a reverential mood, we accompanied Maria to the other side of the river bed and into the old Jewish quarter. Our first stop was the beautiful Corpus Christi Church, an ethereal Mudejar structure reminiscent of Santa Maria del Blanca in Toledo. Its interior is punctuated with graceful horseshoe arches, its ceiling is carved cedar wood. Even though it was badly damaged by fire in 1899 and never fully restored to its former glory, the Corpus Christi Church is still an impressive structure.

It was once the major synagogue of Segovia, Maria told us. Recently a joint Judeo-Christian service was held here attended by the bishop of Segovia and the leader of Spain's Jewish community.

She called our attention to a huge oil painting on a far wall. “That painting tells the story of this church,” she said. “Some people say it is a myth, but I believe it is true.”

We crossed the church to get a close look. The painting depicted three or four ugly old men with big noses and sinister expressions hovering over a pot of some boiling liquid being heated by a fire. In the upper right-hand corner against a dark background, a glowing disc seemingly floated on its own volition.

Maria related the story behind the painting. “In 1410 a Jew loaned money to a priest,” she said. “The priest could not repay the loan, so instead the Jew took the holy wafer, the Corpus Christi or body of Christ used in the mass. He and a group of rabbis tried to destroy it by throwing it into a pot of boiling oil, but the wafer flew out of his hands and sailed across the city to another church where it fell into the hands of a priest

conducting mass. To punish these men, the Queen took the synagogue and transformed it into the Corpus Christi Church which became part of a nunnery.”

We spent the rest of the day with Maria, who proved, in other respects, an excellent and informed guide -- except for one more piece of startling information. We were observing from a distance a great wall with a convent at its base. “There is a Jewish story to this place too,” she said, and proceeded to tell us there was once a Jewish girl who fell in love with Christ and converted to Christianity. The other Jews condemned her and pushed her off the high wall. Though she fell to her death, her body was totally unblemished. A group of nuns buried her in that place and erected the convent in her memory.

That night we met the mayor for dinner with Maria as our translator. An intelligent and perceptive man with great respect for the ancient traditions of his city, he was anxious to let the world know about Segovia’s Jewish heritage. After dinner, as Maria took us back to our hotel, we felt the moment had come to speak our minds. “Maria, we want to tell you something frankly,” we said, “and we hope you will not be offended by what we say.”

And we proceeded to attempt to enlighten her about anti-Semitic myths such as the desecration of the host she had described to us earlier in the day, the needless and unjust suffering they had caused, the fact that none were based on evidence of any sort but were lies dreamed up to inflame the passions of the masses and deprive Jews of their liberty and lives. Moreover we told her that if she had any expectation of fulfilling the mayor’s dream of encouraging Jews to come and live and study in Segovia, telling people these ugly fantasies would be counterproductive.

Maria listened attentively and seemed responsive. We went on to discuss stereotypes and prejudice, but it was only when we mentioned how centuries of anti-Semitism had led to the Holocaust that she became truly animated. She had learned nothing about the Holocaust in school, she told us, but she had seen “Schindler’s List” and was very moved by it. We can only hope that Maria will not forget that the myth of the desecration of the host found its ultimate expression in the gas chambers.

Segovia has embarked on an admirable Sephardic restoration program. Perhaps it will bring a new cosmopolitanism to the city and the lies that have sustained anti-Semitism through so many generations will finally be exposed for what they are.

Our last story takes place in what is arguably one of the most beautiful places in the world, the Balearic island of Mallorca. Before our trip, we read George Sand's book Winter in Mallorca which describes the time she spent on the island with her lover, Frederic Chopin, and noted the references, all unflattering, to Mallorcan Jews. She compares them to the Jews of France; she comments disparagingly on their dress, remarks on their ostentatiousness, faults them for manipulative bargaining to buy the valuable possessions of the impoverished aristocracy. Still the references were puzzling. Were there Jews in Mallorca in the middle of the 19th century? A second book, Kenneth Moore's Those of the Street (1976) answered our questions. Sands was referring to descendants of Mallorcan Jews, commonly known as the Xuetas (pig eaters). Still we wanted to get the story first-hand. Here is what happened.

Our first day in Palma, the capital of Mallorca, we were looking in the window of a women's clothing store and noticed a pair of stone slabs with Hebrew lettering- the Ten Commandments. We went inside and found a woman reading the Daily Bulletin, the newspaper which serves Mallorca's sizable community of British transplants. "I'm Jewish," she told us when we asked about the slabs. "It's a symbol of my faith." She went on to relate how she is part of the Mallorcan Jewish community begun in the 1940s by Ashkenazi refugees who found sanctuary on the island. The burgeoning post-war resort economy spurred its growth, and today it is a growing international group with its own synagogue and cemetery.

"But," she added, "ask any native Mallorcan where the Jewish section of Palma is and they will direct you to the old section of town. Go to the Calle de Plateria (Street of Silver Shops) and see if you can meet a Xueta. Everyone still thinks of them as Jews."

Soon after, our guide Bernardo arrived. We asked him to show us the Calle de Plateria and told him we'd like to meet some Xuetas.

He seemed non-plussed. "Xuetas? I don't know what that means. I don't know any." But he drove us to the Gothic section and down the Calle de Plateria -- a narrow by-way lined with small jewelry stores.

As we proceeded, Bernardo, warmed up a bit. And after a while, he confessed that he did know a Xueta, a young woman who works for Mallorcan television. He said he would call her and arrange a meeting.

We stopped for lunch. Bernardo had several glasses of wine. Then he turned confidential. "You know, my wife's sister is married to a Xueta," he said. "And at the

wedding, my father in law said he would rather be at the cemetery than the church.” Immediately afterwards, Bernardo fell silent. There was an uncomfortable pause, and then said he had an appointment he had forgotten about. He would have to take us back to our hotel right away. The meeting with the television personality never came off.

That night, we walked down to the Calle de Plateria. It was a mild night and storekeepers were standing in the doorways of their small jewelry shops. We stopped in front of one and asked the pleasant-looking man before it if this was the Jewish section of town. He demurred. “We are not Jewish,” he said. “The people in this neighborhood are descended from Jews, but we are Catholic. There is our church, St. Eulalia,” he said, pointing to a big church on the corner of the street.

“Yes,” he added, “we have a Jewish history, and I suppose it is very interesting, but it is from very long ago.”

He invited us into his shop and introduced himself, Joan Bonnin, and his son, a young man in his early 20s, also Joan Bonnin.

We began talking about the profusion of jewelry shops on the street, and the son said, “These shops have always been owned by the Jewish families.” And the father nodded in agreement.

Here lies the paradox of Mallorca, its oxymoron: Jews who are not Jews; Catholic Jews. How can it be? These are people who follow no Jewish rituals, observe no Mosaic law, yet are still perceived as Jews -- even by themselves.

Bonnin, in turns out, is one of fifteen surnames that specifically identify the descendants of Mallorca’s Jews who did not convert until late in the seventeenth century. The Inquisition ran out of steam here early in the sixteenth century, and its Jews were able to make their accommodations with the larger culture while secretly continuing to practice their faith, if not openly, at least with the tacit knowledge and consent of the rest of the population.

The fact that Mallorca was an island, isolated and cut off from the Iberian mainland, enabled its Jews to avoid conversion for 200 years after the Expulsion Edict until an Italian-Jewish trader carelessly alluded to their presence. Then the Inquisition finally came to Mallorca with a vengeance, breaking the will of the last holdout, forcing all to abandon their faith.

But the irony was that although the Jews sincerely converted at this point, the

Old Christians did not allow them to assimilate into the larger society. And so they remained a sub-culture, cut off from social interaction and inter-marriage with the rest, sustained by generations of intra-marriage and powerful ties of kinship.

“When they call us Jews, it’s not meant as a compliment,” the younger Bonnin says. “But we are proud of our accomplishments. Our children do well in school and go to university. We are successful in business. And we take care of one another.

“They call us Jews, yes. But also People of the Street because so many of us live on this street with the jewelry shops.”

“How about Xuetas?” we ask.

“That too,” he says with some embarrassment. “It means bacon-eaters, and it comes from the time of conversion when our forefathers used to eat bacon in the doorways of their shops to prove they had really converted.”

So that is the secret of Mallorca’s Jews -- people who were forced to convert, but who were ostracized and stigmatized by the larger community, an action which ironically enough, resulted in their holding on to their collective identity. They are not Jews spiritually; they are Catholic. Yet culturally, in terms of their values and cohesiveness, they are Jews.

Allusions to this perceived identity surfaced through the centuries.

These are the Jews George Sands refers to and the ones Ann Maria Matutue speaks of in her novel of the Spanish Civil War years “School of the Sun.” In the 1940s, Nazi sympathizers included the Xuetas in their anti-Semitic proclamations. And to this day, the church St. Eulalia is still derisively called the “Synagogue of the Xuetas.”

But things began to change dramatically after the Second World War when massive tourism brought a new cosmopolitanism to the islands and shattered the provincialism that had so long sustained the status quo. Visitors from the Spanish peninsula saw no difference between the Xuetas and other Mallorcans. The common expression became that all Mallorcans are Jews. To which the Mallorcans began to reply, “Maybe we are.”

Under these changed circumstances the Xueta phenomenon became Mallorca’s shameful little secret, dirty laundry, best kept within the family. Which explains the guide Bernardo’s behavior.

The situation is rife with irony. As mentioned before, all over Spain, people are curious to discover whether they have Jewish roots. In Mallorca, there is no doubt. The

descendants of Jews know exactly who they are. Also, as mentioned before, all over Spain there are new communities made up of emigrants who are descendants of exiled Spanish Jews and who have accepted Spain's offer of citizenship. In Mallorca, the descendants of Jews have never left; the community is intact. But there is very little movement to re-assert Jewish identity.

Joan Bonnin Senior told us the Xueta community is very interested in Israel. They follow all the news; they were enthusiastic after the 1967 victories. But he will go no further. "As far as our becoming Jewish again, it is from too long ago. The possibility no longer interests us."

Joan Bonnin Junior, however, is fascinated by his Jewish heritage. "I don't know much about it except for the stories in the Bible. But I want to learn. I pay attention to the news from Israel. I read about the Holocaust. I have seen 'Schindler's List.'"

Then he adds: "My heart is Jewish. My blood is Jewish. But my religion is Catholic."

A few years ago, this young man married a non-Xueta. Only in this post-war generation has that begun to happen. "I am typical of my generation," Bonnin junior said. "Many of us are inter-marrying. It doesn't matter any more. Also, we are moving out of this old neighborhood to the new sections of Mallorca."

"It is a good thing," he adds. "I am glad the old divisions are disappearing. But I do want to hold on to what I am and where I came from. I'd like my baby son to know something of my history."

We had spent a number of hours with this Catholic-Jewish father and son, who - incidentally -- seemed so very Jewish to us. By the time we left their jewelry shop, it was after 9 o'clock. All the stores were closed. All the shutters were down. As we walked the streets of the old Gothic neighborhood, the terrors of the Inquisition suddenly seemed very close at hand. We could imagine a Joan Bonnin of the 17th century standing in the doorway of his shop, not with the warm smile we saw, but one born of humiliation and fear. How many generations did it take, we wondered, for the pain to ease, for the grief to be erased by collective forgetting?

But by the next morning, such heavy-hearted reflections seemed out of place. The sun was shining brightly. From our hotel window, we could see a new cruise ship had docked in the port. Mallorca is a big vacation place and the atmosphere is up-beat and happy. And there is a new and growing Jewish community here with people from all

over the world who are enjoying its economic opportunity, ideal climate, and beautiful scenery.

Yet a sadness lingered. We could not help but mourn the passing of the People of the Street who put such a curious spin on the enigmatic question: What is a Jew?

It is clear that their eventful story is about to end. No longer apart, they stand on the cusp of history, about to move out into the larger population -- and oblivion.

Thinking back to Mallorca, to Segovia and Gerona -- and all the other places we have visited in Spain -- we marvel at how each was so different yet had some connection to a Jewish past or present. Which brought to mind a young man we met in Valencia last year who converted to Judaism when he married a Jewish woman from Casablanca and today serves as the secretary/treasurer of the fledgling Jewish community century in his city. He shared with us a bit of fanciful hearsay he had come upon: the Jews who were exiled in 1492, he was told, took the keys to their homes along with them, hoping one day to return, and these keys were passed down from generation to generation. Perhaps, he conjectured, someone has returned to Spain with the actual key to his ancestral home.

Whether an actual key has made the journey through half a millennium or not, it is clear that doors are opening throughout Spain on a past long sealed off and a future for new and growing Jewish communities. It seems the perfect metaphor for the Spanish-Jewish experience.

Allow me to close on a personal note: my late father, a Russian Jew, somehow always had this great love for Spain. He loved the Flamenco dancing, the music, the art; he admired the women -- from afar. But when he and my mother finally went to Israel and planned some European stops along the way, he would not allow himself the pleasure of visiting Spain because, he said, he could not set foot in the land of the Inquisition.

What would he say if he knew of what has happened in the ensuing years: how the Spanish government goes out of its way to welcome Jews, uncover Jewish history, encourage new Jewish communities? What would he think of the current King of Spain asking the Jews forgiveness, the Queen of Spain studying with a rabbi? What would he make of the fact that Harvey and I have visited Spain six times, met so many of its people, gotten so many insights into this varied and wonderful land?

I imagine he would be very pleased that we have been able to see first hand the renaissance of Spanish-Jewry and establish for ourselves a very personal and powerful Spanish-Jewish connection.

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