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LETTER FROM VALENCIA

Layers of Civilization

In the 13th century, when Jaime I conquered the Kingdom of Valencia, ending 500 years of Moorish rule, he sent out the word: Jews throughout Christian Spain were invited to settle in the reconquered territory. Inducements of free land and five-year tax-exemptions had the desired effect as Jews flocked to the strategically situated towns along the mountainous routes, to the port cities along the Mediterranean and to the capital city that shared the kingdom's name — blue and gold Valencia, in the midst of the fertile plains where the Tura River flows into the Mediterranean.

Manuel Ruzafa Garcia, professor of medieval history at the University of Valencia, estimates that Jews formed 5% of the city's population in the 13th and 14th centuries. They worked as translators, tax collectors and civic administrators; one, Mr. Ruzafa says, was chief adviser to the king. However, on July 9, 1391, all that ended when, in a climate of nationwide anti-Semitic attacks, a mob stormed the *Juderia*.

Two hundred fifty people were killed; many fled to ships in the port and towns in the surrounding mountains. Some 7,000 saved their lives by converting. All evidence of a Jewish presence was eradicated. Today, not a neighborhood, street or plaza, not a gate or former synagogue, stands as a reminder of its onetime existence. For more than 500 years nothing Jewish existed in Valencia. Then, Samuel Serfaty came along.

Mr. Serfaty was born in Tetuan, then part of Spanish Morocco. "My ancestors came from Spain. My mother tongue is Spanish. The Spanish army was stationed in Tetuan while I was growing up. I always felt I was living in Spain," he says. "So, in the early 1960s when Morocco achieved independence and the political situation seemed unstable, I decided to emigrate to Spain."

Mr. Serfaty initially settled in Barcelona, but when the company he worked for opened a branch in Valencia, he agreed to take over its management. He found life agreeable enough in the city of blue domes and graceful bridges to return to Tetuan, marry the girl he left behind and bring her to Valencia, where their two children were born. Word spread about prospects in this city renowned for its Baroque and Art Nouveau architecture, manufacture of Lladró porcelain, agricultural marketing, textile production, shipyards and breweries. Jews from North Africa followed Mr. Serfaty's lead. Before the decade had ended, Valencia's first Jewish community in more than 500 years had been inaugurated.

Today, its center is housed in an apartment in a neighborhood strangely reminiscent of Rego Park, Queens. One room is the all-purpose meeting place and office, a space bespeaking activity and clut-

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ter whose walls are decorated with children's crayoned drawings of menorahs and Torahs. The other serves as sanctuary; it comes as a surprise. Seating is provided by plain, wooden chairs. However, the richly encased Torahs sit in a massive arc of gleaming mahogany; ornate silver candelabras and filials adorn the *bimah*.

The amiable businessman is both cantor and president of Valencia's Jewish community and conducts services every Friday night and on holidays. "We must make telephone calls every Friday to make sure we have a minyan," says his right-hand man, the community's treasurer, Israel Belloch. Mr. Belloch was raised as a Catholic but converted to Judaism before his marriage to Marilda Adulay, an immigrant from Casablanca.

"I didn't have to convert," says Mr. Belloch, who runs the printing company founded by his grandfather, "but I decided to because I wanted to raise a Jewish family.

Mr. Belloch had to travel to Morocco for his circumcision, but the birth of his son took place in Valencia; the mohel came from Madrid. Although the fledgling community numbers only 125, it has a support group in the nationwide Spanish-Jewish Federation for help in maintaining a Jewish way of life.

For the past three years, Carlos Schorr, a civil engineer, has served as the president of the Federation that represents Spain's 14 Jewish communities and its 20,000 affiliated Jews. (He estimates there are an addi-

tional 20,000-30,000 unaffiliated Jews nationwide.) Born in Barcelona to parents who emigrated from Poland before World War II, Mr.

Schorr is aware of his uniqueness: He is an Ashkenazic Jew heading a congress that resonates with Sephardic history and culture; his tenure is taking place at a historic period in Spanish-Jewish relations, when the Spanish government has welcomed back descendants of the Jews it exiled 500 years before and has made public gestures of reconciliation.

"I recently met with the justice minister in Madrid over the issue of our receiving economic support from the government just like the Catholic Church does," Mr. Schorr says. "The king and queen are very open and supportive. And throughout Spain, there is interest in the Jewish past, in the question of possible Jewish roots. I would say that 50% of Catalonians [from the northeast province of Spain] will tell you they think they descend from Jews, and they are very proud of this.

"But Valencia, just south of Catalonia, is different," he adds. "Their questions about a Jewish past are barely heard."

"It is curious," Mr. Belloch says. "One of the largest and most important Jewish settlements in medieval Spain was in this city. But nothing

remains. We hear about excavations and restorations of synagogues, cemeteries and *Juderias* in places like Toledo, Gerona, Segovia, Barcelona. But here these seem to be of no official interest."

Such is not the case, however, in towns and villages throughout the larger Land of Valencia, as the autonomous community is known. The port city Sagunto, an hour's drive north of the capital, comfortably straddles its modernity with accumulated layers of Iberian,

Roman, Moorish and Jewish civilizations. A *Juderia* of gleaming, whitewashed houses descends along steeply inclined byways behind a pair of arches marked "Portal to *Juderia*" uncovered during a demolition project in 1957. There is a "Street of the New Blood," a

"Street of the Old Blood" and at the top of a small lane, "The Church of the New Blood," which any passerby will tell you was once a synagogue.

Further inland, Xativa, called the "city of fountains" for its many fountain-filled plazas designed by Arabs during their half-millennium rule, keeps alive the memory of its Jewish past through oral traditions. A primary school teacher welcomes us into the courtyard of his Moorish style home in the old section of town. "We have always believed this house belonged to a Jewish family," he says, showing off the alcoves and gardens. "It was in this neighborhood, a few blocks from the market, that the Jews moved into after the reconquest."

An elderly couple stops for a chat. "After the reconquest, the Jews lived in the best houses," they tell us. "But after the expulsion, they moved up into caves in the mountains. Then they must have mingled with the population because none of us knows who has Jewish ancestors any more."

In the northernmost part of the province, Morella, the circular walled city with a castle at its

crown, draws local tourists for its historic sites and vistas. Serafim Gamundi, the city's chronicler for the past 45 years, tells us that during the Middle Ages, when it was a strategic connecting point for the kingdoms of Valencia, Catalonia and Castille, Jews were an influential part of the city's population.

A serpentine road travels from the heights of Morella to the valley floor and the village of San Matteu, where scars of the Spanish Civil War are still visible. Here an archaeological dig along the river that bisects the town disclosed old alleyways, artifacts, kitchen ware, a well — all believed to have been part of the town's Jewish settlement. A makeshift museum showcases some of the objects.

If throughout the land of Valencia interest in Jewish history is on the rise, as indeed it is in so many parts of Spain, it is perplexing that in its capital city, where a new Jewish community has taken root, there is scant official attention to the subject. Mr. Belloch tell us that even inadvertent discoveries inspire little reaction.

"A while ago, in preparing the foundations of a new building, graves were uncovered which we were able to determine were those of medieval Jews," he says. "The city administration was indifferent to us, and we turned to Carlos Schorr. He obtained the permission of the Grand Rabbinate of Israel to have the remains moved to the old Jewish cemetery on Montjuic in Barcelona and got the officials of Valencia to cooperate.

"Recently, they were digging to build a new subway station, and more graves were uncovered. The station is across the way from a shopping plaza which we believe was constructed over the site of the old Jewish cemetery and opposite one of the entrances to the Jewish quarter. Every sign in the quarter has disappeared, but we know that once three synagogues were there."

When he talks of such things to his Christian friends, Mr. Belloch finds they are puzzled. "They are not anti-Semitic," he says, "but they are ignorant. They ask me, 'What is a Jew?' They really don't know."

— MYRNA KATZ FROMMER

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