

Barcelona's Jews

The Jewish community here is thriving for the first time in 600 years.

By Roi Ben-yehuda. Photos by Lorenzo Vecchia.

A Jewish visitor to Barcelona could be forgiven for feeling a little ill at ease in the Catalan capital. After all, the graffiti culture in Barcelona readily uses the symbol of the swastika, the city is home to one of Europe's most infamous neo-Nazi bookstores, and Israel is not viewed with favour among the public at large. Yet far from being a no-go zone for Jews, Barcelona is home to a small but active Jewish community. A community that is both diverse and feisty—fighting for rights and recognition as an equal minority in the land.

The history of Jews in Barcelona is one of dignity and disaster. It is the story of a flourishing Jewish community that numbered around 15 percent of the total population during the Middle Ages. Being a polyglot people and working in a variety of professions, the Jews were able to significantly contribute to the status of Barcelona as a major mercantile and cultural centre of the Mediterranean world. Unfortunately, beginning in the 14th century, Jews all over the Iberian peninsula became targets of religious and political persecution. In the mid-1300s, the Jews were accused of precipitating the disaster of the Black Plague and in 1391, popular large-scale pogroms left thousands of Jews either dead or coerced into Christianity and 'cleansed' Barcelona of its Jewish population. This was a full century before 1492 when Spain's Jews and Muslims were all given the 'choice' of conversion, exile or death.

For nearly 500 years after the edict of expulsion, Spain remained without a Jewish presence. In 1924, Primo de Rivera announced that all descendants of the Seferad, as the Spanish Jews forced into exile were called, were eligible for Spanish citizenship. At first, their numbers were a trickle, but during the second half of the 20th century, a significant number of Jews settled in Barcelona. Today, they number over 4,000, and include North Africans, Latin Americans and Middle Eastern Jews.

This regional diversity has also birthed a number of different congregations (a Jewish saying holds: "Two Jews, three opinions")—the modern orthodox Comunidad Israelita de Barcelona, the Jabad House and the less traditional Comunitat Jueva Atid de Catalunya. Despite some minor ideological differences, these congregations offer the community a number of ways in which they can practise and explore their Judaism, including religious services, film festivals, lectures, cooking classes and music concerts.

▲ Section of the Torah found at Barcelona's historic synagogue

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▲ Sefer Torah scrolls that are used for various religious ceremonies at the restored 14th-century synagogue

Of course, putting down roots in a country that once expelled their ancestors has not been an easy task for Jews here. A case in point: in an effort to confront its past and boast tourism, the Spanish government initiated a project of restoring old Jewish neighbourhoods all over the country. While most of the old neighbourhoods are located in places without a modern Jewish community, Barcelona is an exception to the rule. Despite this fact, the government insisted on pursuing the renovation project without the participation of the resurrected Jewish community.

Naturally, this irked the people who represent that community. As Tobi Burdman, president of the Orthodox Israelite Community of Barcelona, reported to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency: "We very much appreciate that City Hall is finally getting involved in restoring its Jewish past. What we don't want to see is a Jewish quarter without Jews, in the style of Girona. Here, there's a living Jewry, one that should be listened to and consulted with, and not just called up to appear in the photo."

Another issue on which the community and the local government

clashed has been the Jewish cemetery in Montjuïc (Catalan for 'Mountain of the Jews'). The hill is the site of the city's most important Christian cemetery, as well as various key installations that housed parts of the 1992 Olympics. It is also the hallowed ground of a medieval Jewish cemetery—one of the oldest and largest in Europe. In 2001, in the midst

of a construction project, around 500 tombs were unearthed. But despite this significant archaeological find, the municipal government did not recognise the cemetery as an official landmark.

In an effort to gain acknowledgement, the Jewish community united and petitioned to have the Generalitat officially recognise the cemetery, and prevent future construction on the site. Due to their efforts, in 2007 Catalunya recognised the cemetery as an official landmark.

"We are not interested in vying with the city", explained Dominique Tomasov Blinder, an architect and Jewish heritage advocate. "We want to work together, adding our expertise as consultancy, to acknowledge the importance of this place to the Jews and the city."



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► Despite struggling with issues of visibility, the Jewish community has made efforts to reach out to the public at large. For example, during the past 10 years Daniela Rosenfeld has hosted the annual Jewish film festival, Festival de Cinema Jueu de Barcelona. Sponsored by the Ajuntament, the festival features Jewish-themed films from Israel and elsewhere. Far from being solely aimed at Jews, the festival attracts an audience made up of both Jews and non-Jews. "I try to show the other side of Israel and Jewish life, beyond the headlines," Rosenfeld said.

This year some of the films that she selected included the controversial German comedy, *Mein Fuhrer*, about a Jewish actor who helps Hitler regain his zest for life and speechmaking; and *Beaufort*, the Oscar-nominated Israeli film about a group of disenchanted and frightened Israeli soldiers manning a strategic and historic mountaintop in southern Lebanon days before Israel's 2000 withdrawal.

On the question of anti-Semitism—of living in a city with a neo-Nazi bookstore, swastikas, and widespread anti-Israel sentiment—Barcelona's Jews seem to be indifferent to the phenomenon. Despite the discernible presence of some anti-Semitism, Jews in the city feel that the real problem is something less overt and more nebulous. "There is a sense that we cannot express ourselves publicly as Jews," said Dominique Tomasov Blinder. "The idea is that we ought to be Jews at home, and Europeans in the street."

Daniela Rosenfeld framed the matter a little differently. "A lot of the anti-Semitism here is a consequence of ignorance," she said. "Being a Jew in Barcelona means that I have to explain. I have to explain to people that I am not Israeli. That I am Jewish by birth and that it is my religion. And that while I have a different religion and at times follow different traditions, I am a human being. We are all human beings."

The Barcelona Jewish community was the first post-exile Jewish community to reappear in Spain. Given the history of this minority group in Barcelona, indeed in the Iberian peninsula, there is something majestic about the rebirth of Jewish life here. While the Jewish community in Barcelona has a long way to go before it can recapture the prominence and confidence of its expelled ancestors, its openness, dedication and entrepreneurial spirit suggest a promising future. **M**



Seven-branched menorah created by Mallorcan sculptor Ferran Aguiló

Barcelona is home to the oldest synagogue in Europe—dating from 1306, its exact location was unclear for centuries following the pogroms of 1391 when the Jewish community of Barcelona was destroyed. However, in 1987, the historian Jaume Riera published a book in which he traced the steps of a tax collector from 1400 and from this work, a man called Miguel Iaffa was able to identify the building, located in the old town not far from what is today Plaça Sant Jaume; in the 14th century, this area was the location of the *call*, the Jewish quarter. Iaffa later bought the synagogue and a restoration project was undertaken, lasting until 2002. The address of the synagogue is Marlet 5 and it is open to visitors from Tuesday to Saturday, 11am to 2pm and 4 to 7pm.

For more information about Barcelona's Jewish quarter and the history of Jews here, contact the Associació Call de Barcelona (this organisation also manages the synagogue): www.calldebarcelona.org; Tel. 93 317 0790

In 1966, when Mònica Adrian went to elementary school in Barcelona, her nine-year-old classmates asked her, in all seriousness, why she drank the blood of Christian children at Easter. That is what their priests and their parents had told them Jews did.

"They also wanted to know why I didn't have horns if I was Jewish," said Adrian. "It was all pure ignorance. They had never known a Jew and, to them, Jew was synonymous with bad. This was, of course, not the sort of thing that would make a nine-year-old girl very happy. What matters at that age is what the other kids think of you, and it was hard for me."

From—*Barcelona: Jews, Transvestites, and an Olympic Season* by Richard Schweid (1994).

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