

# The Jews of Catalonia

*By Sarina Roffé*

Catalonia is one of the northern provinces of Spain, bounded by the Mediterranean Sea and the Andorra Mountains. Barcelona, Gerona and Besalu are all cities in Catalonia where the Jewish populations that left a deep mark on the region.

The people speak Catalan, a language that combines both French and Spanish. There is little grass in Catalonia, as the mild climate brings little rain. The pavement is made of tiles.

The history of Catalonia is based on some key dates. In 801, the Franks led by Charlemagne took Catalonia away from the Moors. In 1188, Catalonia won its independence from the Franks through the marriage of Sovereign Count Ramon Berenguer IV to Petronella, daughter of King Ramiro II of Aragon. In 1474, the marriage alliance between Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabel of Castille and Leon unites Spain.

In Barcelona, La Boqueria is an open air market off La Rambla that houses fresh food stands including fruit, vegetables, fish, meat and cheeses. The white asparagus was especially delicious. Home to the 1992 Olympics, Barcelona also houses a Spanish Village, illustrating the various provinces in Spain, and has some of the best flamenco dancing.

Today there is an operating synagogue in Barcelona that serves the area's 4,000 or so Jews. The Comunidad de Israelite of Barcelona is a small building that houses a Talmud Torah, synagogue, mikveh, café and recreation area. But there are few remnants of the 'Call' or Jewish area in the old city, except for the name of the narrow street – Calle de Call – a small plaque on the wall alluding to a 1391 synagogue, and now, an excavation of an old synagogue in the same neighborhood.

It is important to note that the Moors ruled over Castile and Aragon and parts of the Iberian Peninsula, but their rule never extended as far north as Catalonia. A few miles from Gerona is Besalu, where visitors can find one of three mikvehs left in Europe.

The best representation of Jewish life in Catalonia is in Gerona, a small town an hour and 15 minutes north of Barcelona. Although no Jews live in Gerona, it is the site of the Nahmanides Foundation and houses a small Jewish museum. Sephardic Jews around the world owe a debt for the preservation of their history to Joaquim Nadal Farreras, mayor of Gerona and historian.

Gerona can be reached by taking the Renfe, the Spanish train line, from Barcelona. The Call, or Juderia, was located in the oldest part of the medieval city until 1492 when Jews left Spain due to the Expulsion.

The Call houses the Museum of the History of the Jews, where there is a permanent exhibition about the Jews of Catalonia in the Centre Bonastruc ca Porta, as well as the Nahmanides Foundation, a document and research center dedicated to Jewish heritage that also houses the Eliezer Eljanan Schalt Library. The Centre Bonastruc is the last known synagogue built in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century in Spain.

Walking through the narrow cobbled streets of the Call, with its high stone wall and stairways, visitors can imagine the hubbub of activity that must have occurred over 6 centuries ago when the Gerona Call was one of the most vibrant districts in Europe. It is the place where the Ramban himself was born and studied.

Jews began moving to Gerona around the time of the destruction of the Second Temple as there is evidence of a Jewish population as early as the Saracen Invasion. But the first mention of the settlement of Jews doesn't come until 890, when 25 Jewish families took over residences alongside the Cathedral.

Gradually they spread out forming the Call stretching from Roman via Augusta – the Call's main street – and along the adjacent side streets. The narrow dim street runs parallel to the River Onyar. Some of the streets are quite steep as they weave in and out of the Call.

The Jewish community – the Aljama – revolved its life around the synagogue, which also housed the mikveh, hospital and rooms for traveling guests. The King of Catalonia protected the Aljama in return for an annual fee. The King appointed a Mayor of the Aljama who governed the Call with the help of a council, which met in the synagogue. The Mayor and Council were autonomous from the Gerona City government and were accountable only to the King of Catalonia. The Aljama had a complex civil, social, cultural and religious organization. The system of Jewish autonomy in the middle of Gerona frequently led to conflicts, especially since one wall of the Call was adjacent to the Cathedral. A cemetery was on the western slope of the Montjuic Mountain.

During their stay in Gerona, the Jews influenced the economic life of the city as money lenders, merchants, craftsmen, bookbinders and businessmen. As a center of religious life where there was intensive study of theology in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Centuries that led a trend toward mysticism, or Cabala. The development of Cabala and its study was fundamental to Gerona, were the first group of Cabalist experts on the Iberian Peninsula was trained in the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century.

Moses ben Nahman, or Nahmanidis, also known as the Ramban, was born in Gerona in 1194. The Ramban is believed to be the Catalan Bonastruc ca Porta. He was Rabbi of Gerona and later Grand Rabbi of Catalonia. Ramban was a doctor, philosopher and an expert on Talmud. As a master of Cabala, he wrote the earliest examples of Cabalistic poetry and various didactic tracts that opened his teaching among Jews and Christians everywhere. From his home in the Call, Nahmanidis held Cabalistic circle. From his circle of students, sprang Jonas ben Abraham, Abben Tibon, and David Kimhi, author of Hebrew grammar.

Due to the respect he commanded from his knowledge and wisdom, the Ramban was chosen by the crown in 1263 to represent the Jews in the Barcelona dispute, held in the Grand Royal Palace. The Ramban debated Pau Cristia, a Jew who converted to Christianity who knew Torah and had become a Dominican monk. The purpose of the dispute was to try and convert the Jews to Christianity by debating Hebrew religious texts. The dispute took place in five sessions in the presence of the King, the Bishop of Barcelona and a large audience. The Ramban won the dispute but was subject to harassment afterwards from Christians. So in 1266, he moved to Palestine, where he died in 1269.

There were many important Cabalists after the Ramban. Meshullam ben Selomo (d. 1265) was an expert on Torah, Mishnah and Cabala who published over 50 poems. Ezra ben Selomo (1160-1238) was author of a commentary on the Song of Songs. Iona ben Abraham wrote a commentary on the Book of Proverbs as well as commentaries on ethics and penitence.

The self governing Aljama posed a problem for the Christian City government of Gerona, which attempted to impose limits on the Jews, especially related to commerce. For example, in 1359 the health officer ordered the two Jewish bakeries to only sell bread to Jews. In 1396, he forbade Jews from selling meat in the city meat market. The prohibitions were repeated and more imposing in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century when they became broader and more discriminatory. Some laws in Gerona were deigned to protect Jews, such as the prohibition that Jews remain in their homes during Holy Week of Easter. In 1436 a law was passed that forbid the stoning of Jews.

The Gerona town councilors wanted the Jews isolated from the rest of Gerona, and ordered that windows and doors opening on the main street be closed and that the gate to the Call be closed on one side of the town. When the town councilors attempted to inflict rules on the Jews, the Jewish Mayor would go to the King and often the rule would be rescinded or adjusted to keep peace between the Jews and the Christians. The King never gave up his authority over the Jews and often demanded that the Gerona town council protect the Jews from harassment.

Attacks on Jews began in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century and alternated with periods of peace. Attacks were rooted in revenge by the Christians, who felt cheated by Jewish moneylenders, envy of Jews' privileges and were aroused by Christian fanaticism. While there were documented attacks in 1276, 1278, 1285, 1331, 1348, 1391, 1413 and 1418, the most serious clash was in 1391 when a mob looted the Call and killed 40 Jews. In an effort to protect the Jews, the Gerona council confined the Jews to Torre Gironella, a Roman fortress standing on the highest point of Gerona, where the Jews stayed for several days.

Despite the forceful pressure and protection by the King, the Jews often faced constant problems such as the forced sale of property, civil suits, a campaign of conversion, municipal restrictions and other actions. Constant separation did not stop the Jews from working and influencing the economic life of Gerona. They stood out as dealers of stocks, bonds and securities, pawn brokers, tax and rent collectors and landowners.

The Jewish community in Gerona had a first rate collection of books published by scholars. In 1415, Pope Benedict XIII prohibited the listening to, reading or teaching the Talmud. He ordered all books and writings be turned over to the Cathedral. The inventory of Gerona Jews in 1415 and 1416 was impressive. Documents written in Hebrew were later used by Jewish bookbinders as filling in the binding of old church books, where they were found years later.

By 1492, the Christians and Jews of Gerona were living in peace and harmony. Business dealings had been reestablished. When Ferdinand and Isabel married, they united all of Spain, chasing the Moors from the South. By then Castile included all of Catalonia. On March 31, 1492, the crown issued the edict expelling the Jews from Spain unless they renounced their religion in favor of Catholicism.

The Gerona councilors were resentful of their role in carrying out the edict. They issued a proclamation allowing Jews to sell their property and goods and those who bought them had no fear of retribution. By August, the Call was no more and the new property owners received permission to open the doors and windows to allow them access to the street near the Cathedral. Those who converted were subject to the fury of the Inquisition.

Jews leaving the city saw Montjuic, the place where their dead were buried after being carried from the Call, for the last time. The secretaries of the cemetery gave it to the Noble Joan de Sarriera on July 14, 1492, just before exiting the city, in gratitude for some favors he did for them. When the family later built a fortified house in Palau, some of the stones from the Montjuic were used to build the tower.

Many of the tombstones can now be found in the Museum of Jewish History, along with other artifacts from the Gerona Call, such as mezuzot that had been found in wall niches and covered over, only to be found in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

A good deal of information about the Gerona Call can be found written in Catalan and Latin in the Diocesan Chapter House, Notarial and Historical archives of Gerona as well as in the Archives of the Crown of Aragon in Barcelona.

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Sources: *A Guide to the Gerona Jewry*, Ramon alberch Fugueras, 1995.  
*Jews of Gerona, catalog*