

Toledo and Its Jewish Past

By Sarina Roffé

For more than two millenium, the city of Toledo has sat on the top of a granite hill surrounded like a horseshoe by the River Tagus, just 40 miles from Madrid. The present day Alcazar stands where there was Roman fortress. Jews were a part of Toledo's history since the last years of the Roman occupation in 192 BCE.

The Jews existed peacefully with the Romans and were always an important part of the city. They became known as money-lenders, merchants of fine cloths and precious metals, and intellectuals and were generally well-respected by the other peoples of Toledo. For centuries, scientists, philosophers, poets and artists of widely differing backgrounds met in Toledo to exchange ideas.

In the 507 CE the Visigoths made Toledo their capital, adopting Catholicism in 589 after the Third Council of Toledo. From then on a series of anti-Jewish laws were enacted until the Muslims conquered the Visigoths in 711. Christians, Jews and Moslems, three ethnically distinct communities, lived together in the city until the conquest of Cordoba in 1085 by Alfonso VI, a Christian ruler. For economic reasons, as well as for their knowledge of Arabic language and customs, Alfonso needed the Jews, who remained in Toledo under the protection of the monarchs.

By the Middle Ages the city had been conquered by the Moors and was a stronghold during the emirate of Cordoba and an imperial city in the times of Carlos V, a melting pot of Christian, Jewish and Moslem cultures. Listed on the World Heritage List in 1986, Toledo was officially granted Heritage of Mankind status by UNESCO in 1987.

Many of us know Toledo as a center of Jewish Spain in the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries. Toledo was the capital of Cordoba and a united Spain before the capital was moved to Madrid in 1561. A trip to Spain is like walking in the footsteps of our favorite Sephardi heros, Moses ibn Ezra, Samuel Nagrella, Jacob ben Aser, Halevi and Maimonides.

In Toledo we find street names such as Calle Juderia, Calle Samuel Ha-Levi among the small narrow streets of the medieval area. Synagogues were built with no special architectural features on the exterior. Under Moorish rule, the Jews adopted the Mudejar style of mosques. Under Christian rule, the synagogues could not exceed a certain height. There are three remaining synagogues in Spain, two of them in Toledo and one in Cordoba. All sit on a city square.

During the 12th and 13th Centuries, Jews and Christians of Toledo were free and equal in the eyes of the courts and they had the benefit of royal favor. The members of the Jewry formed the "**aljama**" headed by a rabbi named by the king. The rabbi was the spritual leader of the community and was in charge of maintaining order and the supervision of judicial affairs according to the Talmud and the Torah. Judges, a chief of police and a bailiff were elected yearly.

In 1391, there were five Talmudic schools and 10 synagogues in Toledo. As Spain works toward reviving its Jewish past, many visitors flock to Toledo to see the two remaining synagogues, the El Transito Synagogue and La Sinagoga de Santa Maria La Blanca along with the Sephardic Museum. Both synagogues were built in the Mudajar style, heavily influenced by Arab aesthetics and were converted into churches after the Expulsion of the Jews in 1492 by Ferdinand and Isabella.

The Juderia, or old Jewish Quarter of Toledo, was the center of rabbinic teachings. Jewish scientists and doctors thrived in the 14th Century as Jews were treated well by the Christian monarchs of the time. But there were persecutions over time, especially at the hands of common Christians who persisted in telling tales in which Jews were the villains.

The Jewish Quarter also housed the famous Escuela de Traductores de Toledo (School of Translators), whereby Jews used their knowledge of Arabic and Hebrew to translate philosophical and scientific works into Latin and Spanish.

Still standing and a popular tourist attraction, La Sinagoga de Santa Maria La Blanca was completed in 1203 by Yosef ibn Sosan under the reign of King Alfonso VIII. Yosef was the king's principal tax collector and prince of the Jews in Castile. The synagogue is a small plain rectangular building measuring 72x55 feet. There are 32 columns inside that support the arches along five parallel aisles. There are no Hebrew inscriptions on the wall, as this custom did not begin until more than a century after the Sinagoga was built.

During the reign of King Alfonso VIII the Jews were enjoying the favor of the king who was in love with a Hebrew woman. The synagogue was the center of Jewish life in Toledo until 1405 when there was a riot against the Jews and it was converted into a church named Santa Maria La Blanca.

El Transito Synagogue was built in 1366 by Samuel Ha-Levi who was financial advisor to King Pedro I of Castile, better known as Peter the Cruel. Ha-Levi built the synagogue at his own expense in an attempt to build a house for the God of Israel comparable to the destroyed Second Temple in Jerusalem. Years after the synagogue was built, Ha-Levi fell out of favor with King Pedro who had him beheaded in Seville.

The outside of the building is brick and there are windows with latticework and cornices that provide a good deal of light for the synagogue. Inside there is a rectangular hall measuring about 78 x 32 feet with walls covered in detailed filigree work. No expense was spared in building a magnificent building replete with art. Magnificent larchwood ceiling beams crown the ceiling. There is a women's gallery upstairs with an outside entrance. Hebrew psalms are inscribed as borders on the walls. Attached to the Transito, is a Museum of Sephardic Jewish history.

A walk through Toledo will generally end at the Cambrón Gate, formerly known as the "Gate of the Jews" due to its proximity to the Jewish Quarter. Other important Jews of Toledo during this period were Abraham ben Alfakhar, a doctor and poet who carried out

diplomatic missions for Alfonso, and Salomin ibn Zadok who was charged by Ferdinand III to collect taxes for the king of Granada.

Sephardic Museum: Tránsito Synagogue, Calle de los Reyes Católicos. Open 10am-1:45pm and 4-5:45pm. Closed Sunday afternoons and Mondays. Tel.925/ 22 36 65

El Greco House-cum-Museum: Calle Samuel Leví, 3. Open 10am-2pm and 4-6pm; closed Sunday afternoons and Mondays. Tel.925/22 40 46

Synagogue of Santa María la Blanca: open 10am-2pm and 3:30-6pm; in summer open until 7pm. Tel. 925/22 72 57

Tránsito Synagogue: Calles de los Reyes Católicos. Open 10am-1:45pm and 4-5:45pm. Closed Sunday afternoons and Mondays. Tel. 925/ 22 36 65.

Sources:

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