

JEWISH BARCELONA – REBORN

Robert W. Case

Jewish roots in Barcelona began somewhere before the 5th century. Headstones found in the ancient cemetery have proved this. The old Jewish quarter, “El Call” (*Catalan for “narrow passage”*) is literally in the backyard of the Placa Sant Juame, and directly behind the Sant Domenic Cathedral, recently revealed the remains of a fifth-century Synagogue, on which the medieval synagogue of the fourteenth century was built. (During this time, it was common that the Jewish quarters were nestled in the shadow of a Cathedral, in order to be under the watchful eye of the Church.) Archaeological evidence confirms the easterly portal faces Jerusalem, alongside of which is an underground spring that provided water for the *mikvah*. The location of the medieval synagogue was confirmed in 1987, and in January of 2002 it was opened to the public. The Synagogue is in the sub-basement of a four- story building built on top of the medieval synagogue in the 17th century.



Ancient Synagogue today (restored)

5TH Century Synagogue below glass floor

Photographs by

Robert W. Case

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History shows that a prosperous settlement existed in these narrow, dark Alleys until the *pogrom* of 1391 forced the conversions of many Jews to Catholicism, with the eventual total exile in 1492. The decree of expulsion promulgated by Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand on March 31, 1492

forced the Spanish Jews with the choice of converting to Catholicism or leaving Spain forever, with the penalty for remaining being death.

Most of the Jewish buildings were torn down and the material used for construction elsewhere in the city. In fact, the *Generalitat* itself was constructed on the ruins of expropriated Jewish houses. (*Upon careful inspection of the walls, you can visualize Hebraic writing on many of the concrete blocks-see illustration below*)



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Today, the ancient Synagogue is primarily a tourist site, and does not really function as a Synagogue. In fact, there are virtually no Jews living in *The Call*. One would hardly recognize the exterior of the building as that of a synagogue. Only the sign would indicate the location.



Sign on Synagogue



Hebrew sign on Synagogue-*Note Graffiti*

Exterior of Synagogue
(entrance is at doorway)



There are many reminders of the history of Jews in Barcelona. On **Montjuic** (*Jewish Mountain*) there is a Jewish cemetery, and the castle on Montjuic displays about 30 ancient tombstones. The **Barcelona Haggadah** (An original copy is in the British Library) depicts the rituals of the vibrant Jewish community during the 14th century, and conveys many details of daily life (*ed.note: I was going to order a reproduction copy, but they wanted \$1900.00!*) Of interest is a picture of a Jewish bagpipe player!

Also, there is a **Holocaust Memorial** dedicated in 1995, as well as a park In memory of Ann Frank.

Today, approximately 5,000 Jews live in greater Barcelona. Barcelona has two active Sephardim congregations, the population coming mainly with the mass immigration of the Moroccan Jews In the 1950's as well as the influx of the Argentinean Jews in the 1970's and 1980's. There is, also, an active Chabad Lubavitch congregation, JaBad Lubavitch. In 1997, another group, **Comunitat Juev Catalunya** (ATID) was formed as an egalitarian open environment of about 70 families and 50 singles to study and participate in Jewish ritual and intellectual values. It is open to both Jews and non-Jews. There is also an annual Jewish film festival, and in October 2002, the 1st annual congress for Jewish Catalan was held in Barcelona.

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