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## A JEW RETURNS TO SPAIN

Segovia is an old town, built on the top of a hill. Two millenia ago the Romans saw strategic value in this spot. They built an awesome aqueduct to bridge the valley surrounding Segovia, bringing water to the top of the hill. The Romans knew how to build. The aqueduct still stands, the water still flows. Today, a traffic cop stands near its base, directing motor cars and large buses through its solid, time-tested arches. I climb the footpath near the aqueduct and, slightly out of breath, reach the heights of Segovia. At the top I am greeted by a labyrinth of narrow cobblestone streets. Old houses stand right at the curb on either side of the road. I am happy for the cool shade these narrow streets provide on a brilliantly hot July day.

I do not walk far, dodging an occasional car that comes clattering down the ill-paved roadway, when I stop short. In front of me, placed in the outer wall of the corner house on a narrow street, is a sign I had not expected to see. It says, "Calle de Judea", Street of the Jews.

To my knowledge, there are no Jews in Segovia. Seeing the street sign leaves me with an eerie feeling--almost as if I have found in this foreign city a familiar piece of furniture or wall hanging from a childhood home. I do something strange. I begin searching the facades of the old buildings on the street for some sign of the Jewish past, something I know I will not find: a Jewish star, a Hebrew letter, maybe two little holes located in the right spot on a doorpost would tell me that a mezzuzah had once been affixed here. I feel a little like a man returning to the town of his childhood after a lengthy absence, looking for a familiar sign, a familiar face, someone who knows me. Only Segovia is far from the town of my childhood. Of course, I find nothing, not a trace. Odd, isn't it? The people

of this town had expelled a sizeable Jewish community, wiped out all traces of Jewish life, and yet for five hundred years people who had never even seen a single Jew preserved the name of the street, "Calle de Judea", the Street of the Jews.

Convinced that I will find no trace, I hurry off to the Tourist Office to ask some questions: Had there been a synagogue, a mikvah, a cemetery? Was anything left standing? The man in the Tourist Office speaks only Spanish and French, but he manages to tell me that there had been many synagogues and one was left standing on "Calle de Judea", the Street of the Jews. I am surprised. How could I have missed it? "How will I know the building?", I asked him. "That is easy," he says, "for it is now a Church, the Church of Corpus Christi."

I am now in Madrid, sitting in the study of the Rabbi of this great city. It is no small thing to be the Rabbi of Madrid. Until twenty-two years ago, one was forbidden to practice Judaism in Spain. The Edicts of the Inquisition remained in force as the law of the land. The few Jews in Spain practiced in secret, a time-worn practice for Jews in this part of the world. Spanish officials chose to look the other way. But twenty-two years ago Franco abolished the Edicts of the Inquisition and proclaimed freedom of religion throughout Spain. After this decree, like new grass following a rain, Jewish life began to come to the surface and thrive in Spain. Within a year, there was a synagogue in Madrid. A rabbi was sent from Morocco; a day school was founded. Kosher butchers, mikvah, Jewish life.

The Rabbi speaks no English, so I have a chance to speak a little Hebrew in Spain. That feels very good. The Rabbi is telling me that most of the Jews in Spain live in Madrid or Barcelona, and by and large, they came from Morocco during the past twenty years. "Why did they come to



Spain?", I asked. "Most Moroccans go to the former mother country, to France. The French economy is far stronger than the Spanish. There are so few Jews in Spain, why come here?" "There are reasons", the Rabbi tells me, and says no more.

I learn one of the reasons the following night. I dine in the home of the headmaster of the Jewish day school, a young woman whose family had come from the Italian island of Sardinia. Her family had later moved to Egypt, where she was born, and then to South American where they had lived until Franco lifted the Edicts of the Inquisition. "Why did your father bring the family here?", I asked her. "My father always looked upon Spain as home," she says. "He considers himself a Spanish Jew. Even before Franco's Edict, he had a Spanish passport of which he was very proud." "How could this be?", I ask. "Your family had lived on the island of Sardinia for generations. No one from your family had been to Spain for five hundred years. How could your father look upon himself as a Spanish Jew?"

Spain can be a strange place for a Jew to live. Somehow five centuries melt away, like an overnight journey, a bad dream. One hears strange stories from Jews in Spain. The Rabbi in Madrid tells me that occasionally he receives letters from good Catholics who tell him that in their family they light candles on Friday night, or their family builds a little hut, a Sukkah, in the Fall. One fellow came to the Rabbi and told him that his family had always preserved the memory that their ancestors had been Jews, secrets whispered between parents and children. Now that Judaism was permitted, he wanted to be a Jew.

In Toledo, I hear an interesting story from the owner of the Sinai Restaurant, until recently the only kosher restaurant in Toledo. Now no longer kosher. The owner tells me that he is the only Jew in Toledo, the first Jew to live in Toledo since 1492. Every year for Passover he has a

Seder at this restaurant and invites his Christian friends and several of the local priests. One year, one of the local priests came up to him after the Seder and was moved to tell him something the priest had long kept secret: his ancestors had been Jews who were forced to convert by the Inquisition. The secret had been preserved in the family over the generations.

Cordoba is the town where Maimonides lived until his family fled from Spain when he was still a child. I have looked forward to visiting the town of the great Moses ben Maimon. I am gripped by the idea of walking through the street where he had walked. The great Mosque that he must have passed countless times still stands. Upon arrival, I immediately put down my bag and set out to explore the city and to find the famous statue erected in honor of the man whom the Spaniards claim as one of the greatest of their sons.

Before long I come across the noble statue of a scholar placed in a very dignified spot, in a park astride a major thoroughfare. I am pleased to find the statue of a Jew located in such a prominent spot, only to discover upon closer inspection that the scholar before me is not Maimonides at all. Rather, this man is Avarroes, the greatest of all Medieval Arab philosophers, and a contemporary of Maimonides. Avarroes had re-introduced Aristotle to the world, so he certainly merited this tribute to his memory. But where is Maimonides? I head from the broad thoroughfare and plunge into the narrow, winding streets of the Juderia, the old Jewish Quarter. There, almost hidden away in an unimpressive spot amid the narrow streets, is the great Rambam. Insignificant, lonely, crowded in. At first I am very disappointed. I don't like to think that a tribute to such a monumental man is left to stand in such a place. But upon reflection, I realize that this is truly the appropriate spot for the



Rambam. Jewish life in Spain, for all its brilliance, had not been lived on the broad streets and the great plazas, the center stage of these Spanish cities. The massive cathedrals of these towns opened up on to the wonderful plazas. But the synagogues did not enjoy such an expanse. Even the great ones were found nearby, amid the crowded, narrow streets where the people lived. And there you will find the statue of Maimonides.

Toledo is the Jerusalem of Spain. Built on a hill, the city is lit by the bright Mediterranean sun. The narrow streets of Toledo whisper the secrets of a long and proud history. Little hidden nooks and crannies invite the imagination to enter into another world. Toledo is the holy city of Spain.

The Jews of Toledo played an important role during the great days of the city, and they left behind two magnificent synagogues dating from the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries.

While the two synagogues are very different and distinct structures, both are impressive and beautiful buildings. Punctuated with graceful moorish arches, their walls are covered with intricate designs. I spend hours in these two synagogues, sitting and listening. In one of them I can see where the ark was kept, and up above is the women's section. It doesn't take much imagination to hear the familiar chants or to see the men swaying in their tallisim.

These synagogues testify to important and powerful Jewish communities, places of wealth, intelligence and learning. Jews had lived here, flourished here, prayed and celebrated Jewish life at this spot. And now they are gone, dispersed around the world. Spain's loss!

One cannot visit the narrow winding streets of the old Jewish sections of Segovia, Cordoba, Madrid or Toledo without being struck by a strange mix of emotions. One is both exalted by the awesome glory of what Jews

accomplished here and, at the same time, one is saddened by the knowledge that it is all gone, wiped away by human ignorance, intolerance and hatred. This poignant mingling of brilliant achievement and profound sadness, a motif so evident in Spain, is actually a theme that runs throughout Jewish history. In every corner of the globe, Jews have prospered and they have suffered; they have created and they have seen their creations destroyed.

If we pause to think about it, isn't it true of all human history, only in the case of Jews a little more so? Isn't the history of our species replete with awesome achievement and brutal savagery? Don't we all, at times, wonder at the beauty and the savagery of our kind? In Spain, a Jew cannot escape feeling the tugging and pulling of this dichotomy upon his soul.

And yet, there is something else to witness in Spain, something less bewildering and more assuring. In Spain, one is impressed by the incredible vitality of Jewish life. Jews lived here. Jews thrived here. Under Moslems and Christians, in every town of any importance, Jews found a way to live. They built synagogues and schools, wrote books and celebrated holidays. They created Jewish life. And five hundred years after they were banished, as soon as the Edict was lifted, Jews came back and began again.

There is something miraculous about the continuity and the vitality of Jewish life. Almost like those hardy plants which seem to flourish in the desert wherever there is even the slightest amount of water, our people find a way to flourish over and over, in a bewildering variety of places, all over the world.

One can sense this miraculous vitality of Jewish life in Spain. In Spain, Jewish life goes on.