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Ghetto Theatre by David Bomberg (Ben Uri Collection)

The Spanish Inquisition

David Bomberg

The Salamons in Barbados

***A Bar Mitzvah* in New York**

The Hidden Jews of Mallorca - A Story of Discovery and Renewal

What does a few days in Mallorca conjure up for you? Relaxing by the pool, walks along the beach, lazy lunches and afternoon siestas for sure, but discovering a little known and fascinating history of a Jewish community that is enjoying a revival? Probably not. This is the story of how my family connected with a lovely and inspiring New Jersey man who has made Mallorca his home and the Jews of Mallorca his passion.

It all started when my sister Caroline and I booked an AirBnB for a few days away over half term with our families. I spotted an advertisement for a tour of Jewish Mallorca. Of course, I knew about the illustrious history of the Jewish community in places like Toledo, Seville and Cordoba. But I had never heard of a Jewish community in Mallorca. Intrigued, we got in touch with our guide and reserved our places.

The day dawned bright and sunny and we headed from our poolside retreat to Palma. We were greeted by a smiling American guy, Dani Rotstein. How did a man from New Jersey come to find himself giving tours of a Jewish community on a small island off the coast of Spain? He explained how his love of Spain had started with a Junior Year Abroad. After years in the rat race of New York City, he decided to return to Spain in search of life at a slower pace. He landed an interview with a TV production facility in Mallorca. He had never visited the island before the day of his interview. Armed with a job offer, he relocated. He learned of a tiny Jewish community of other expats and then discovered to his amazement the story of native Mallorquins who can trace their roots to the medieval Jews of Mallorca. He fell in love with his new surroundings and with the people of the Jewish community that had a very particular and little-known story to tell.



Jafuda ben Cresques

Our very first stop brought to life both Mallorca's important historical role and the way in which the Jewish community had played a central part in this history. Dani brought us to the statue of Jafuda ben Cresques. Jafuda came from a family of cartographers. Together with his father, Cresques ben Abraham, they probably produced one of the most famous medieval maps, the Catalan Atlas. At the time, Mallorca was a major stopping point on the trading routes, dating back to Roman and Phoenician times, so a skilled cartographer would have been much in demand.

The history of Jews in Mallorca dates back a thousand years. Indeed, in its early days, Mallorca was seen as a place of refuge from the persecutions on mainland Spain in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The thirteenth century Spanish rulers actually protected the Jewish Community, who were allowed to follow their own customs and to work as usurers without fear of retribution either from the King or from attacks by other communities. At the time, Christians were not allowed to lend money and charge interest to other Christians. Therefore, the King allowed the Jews to become the Crown's money lenders and this was one of the many reasons that they were protected.

This all started to change towards the end of the thirteenth century when two German Christians who had been refused the possibility of converting to Judaism elsewhere, were accepted for conversion by the Mallorcan community. The local Bishop was furious and fined the Jewish community heavily and confiscated some of their goods.

Things settled down for a while, but the mounting indebtedness of the Christian

community to the Jewish community due to usury, caused tensions to rise again. On 2nd August 1391, 300 Jews were massacred and even Christians who were sheltering Jews were killed. Despite that calamity, things settled for another generation as the community settled back into a comfortable life, well integrated with the local people. But persecution came back with a vengeance. In 1435, a rumour was spread that Jews had crucified a Saracen during Holy Week. This was used as the catalyst for attacks and forced conversions that saw the Jewish community effectively wiped out.

Faced with forced conversion or death, the Jews were gathered together by the Rabbi who led them to be converted as a group. This mass conversion took place at the Church of Santa Eulalia which we saw on the tour. As a result of the conversions, in the year 1435, Mallorca was the first place in all of Spain to abolish the practice of Judaism. In 1492, when the Catholic Monarchs decreed that all Jews had to leave Spain, there were no more Jews living in Mallorca.

Since the community had converted principally for survival reasons rather than due to a change in religious belief, these new converts continued to follow the 'Law of Moses', as it was called then, in secret at great personal risk. Dani showed us courtyards hidden behind big gates that allowed them to carry on some of their practices. However, they were constantly being watched by the Mallorquin Inquisition, set up in 1488, whose headquarters sat in the same place as the current Plaza Mayor until 1823. For example, the authorities used to walk through the neighbourhood on *Shabbat* looking for chimneys that hadn't been lit – a sign of a Jewish family observing this day of rest. Just next to the Plaza, where the Black House used to stand, one can see a very small sign that says 'Slope of the Inquisition' in Spanish, alluding to the stairs which the condemned used in the processions leading to their public executions.

The community members' efforts to hide their Jewish activities were not enough and in 1688 they were discovered and denounced. About forty members of the

crypto-Jewish community led by their honorary rabbi at the time, Rafael Valls, tried to escape with an English captain and his boat. A terrible storm came up that evening making it impossible for them to set sail. Upon re-entering the city they were caught and forced to implicate the rest of their community members who had decided to stay behind. For three years the group that had tried to escape were tortured in the secret prisons of the Inquisition until 1691 when they were all burned at the stake outside the city underneath the Bellver Castle in a place called Plaza Gomila.

This past August, the City Hall finally erected a small but poignant memorial in their memory. Three martyrs on that fateful day of 6th May, 1691 decided not to renounce their faith and kiss the cross offered to them and were subsequently burned alive in front of 30,000 people. Their names were Rafael Valls, Caterina Tarongi, and her brother Rafael Tarongi. In May 2018, a street was named in Caterina's honour in what Dani described as a moving ceremony by the City Hall.



Unveiling the name of Caterina Tarongi Street

After their execution, the last names of those murdered were hung in the Santo Domingo Church for generations of families to come and remember them. These fifteen families were identified - fifteen last names that are still associated with these 'fake Catholics' - and to this day are known and singled out for particular attention.

Once they had been discovered, the remaining crypto-Jews recommitted to the Catholic faith and went out of their way to demonstrate their commitment to Christianity. They became known as the *Chuetas* or *Xuetas* - a word that means pork eaters - to mark their commitment to sever all ties with their Jewish roots. Dani



An Ensaimada

showed us a culinary example of this commitment - *ensaimades*. These were originally a Jewish cake, made with olive oil, but they switched to using pork fat or *saim* to signal that in all aspects of their lives, they were renouncing their heritage. To this day, it is almost impossible to find *ensaimades* made without pork fat. But Dani told us that, with a few days' notice, he could get one for us. As another signal of their determination to move away from their Jewish faith, the *Chuetas* would make a point of working during *Shabbat*. To this day, 'doing Sabbath' is local slang for having to do chores. Despite their determination to demonstrate their commitment to the Catholic faith, these fifteen *Chueta* families, were not accepted by the Christian Community. They were ostracised and marked out to the extent that they could only marry within their own community of approximately 20,000 people. Dani told the story of a leading member of the *Chueta* community who married a non-*Chueta*. His non-*Chueta* wife's family came to the Church service dressed entirely in black.

These native Mallorquins were always treated as 'the other' for not having pure blood. In fact a list was produced during the Holocaust and the entire group was almost sent to Germany even though they were some of the most devout and practising Catholics. Luckily, the Mallorquin clergy intercepted the request. They massively inflated the number of *Chuetas* to the extent that one third of the community was linked to them - at which point the threat of deportation was dropped.

Around thirty years ago, some of these *Chuetas* started to reconnect with their Jewish heritage. Some of them reconverted back to Judaism formally, but others felt that there was no need to convert as they were direct descendants of Jewish forebears. This sentiment was reinforced by part, but not all of the orthodox Jewish community.

Dani told us all these stories and many more on a magical three-hour walking tour of the quiet streets in a beautiful area of Mallorca. He showed us where the synagogues had been - including one hidden behind a bakery, with two exits for safety, and another now converted into a beautiful church. We ended the tour at a small and very poorly sign-posted museum. Along the way, Dani regaled us with tales that wove together centuries of history and the minutiae of day-to-day life



The Museum

Dani is now at the heart of this Jewish revival in Mallorca. He sits on the Board of the Synagogue and has helped launch *Limmud Mallorca* which has now celebrated its second successful year of events. His love for the local community and his passion to tell their story shines through on these tours. For Dani, this isn't just a tourist experience, this is his life and a commitment to reconnecting with our history, ensuring that it is a living and vibrant community to honour the past and celebrate our future.



Dani Rotstein

Julia Levy