

Searching for signs of Spain's Jewish past

By Alison Bass
Special to the Advocate

Although I have visited Europe on several occasions, Spain has never been on my itinerary. What kept me away was a vague resentment over that country's treatment of my people (the Jews) more than 500 years ago. This was, I admit, an irrational stance, since other European countries that I visited, namely Italy, England and France, have also persecuted, murdered and expelled their Jews with some regularity. Yet the Spanish Inquisition, which started in 1478 and didn't end until the early 19th century, seemed especially horrific. So it wasn't until this spring, after my son decided to do his junior semester in Granada, that my husband and I finally booked a trip to Spain.

Our first stop, after flying into Madrid and renting a car, was Toledo. We found the old walled city delightful – the people reserved but polite, the tapas mouth-watering and the views of the countryside and the city strikingly similar to the way they must have appeared in the 16th century, when El Greco painted his famous "View of Toledo." The day we strolled through the city's magnificent gothic cathedral, a visiting cardinal right out of "Angels and Demons" with a bright mauve cap and long black robe was greeted like a rock star, press cameras flashing in his face. An adoring public followed in his wake. There were no signs of protests of the ilk that have engulfed other European countries over the priest abuse scandals.

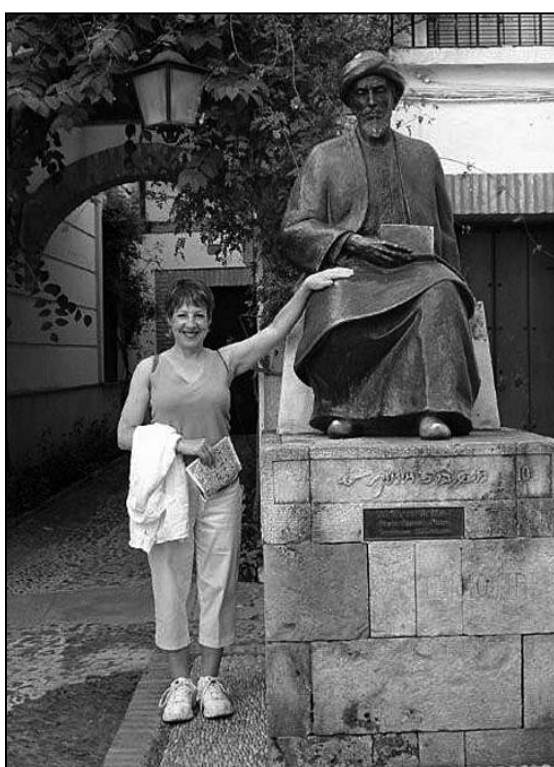
In Toledo, reverent Catholics worship every day in one of the myriad churches found on almost every corner. Some even join processional masses like the one we bumped into on our way back to the hotel one evening, replete with chanting parishioners of all ages and white-robed priests swinging canisters of smoky incense.

There are, however, no working synagogues in Toledo and few, if any, Jews. One of the two ancient synagogues still standing was converted into a church even before the Jews were expelled in 1492. The other, a fortress-like structure known as the la Sinagoga del Trancista, is now a museum. Since none of its exhibits were in English, I paid an extra three euros (on top of the eight-euro entrance fee) for an audio tape. But the audio said nothing about the history of the Jews in Toledo. Instead, it focused solely on religious rituals and customs, somehow making it sound as if the Jews were some species from outer space.

At one point, there was even a reference to "the Jew with the big nose," which so startled me that I missed an entire room of the exhibit. Even the mounted plaques in Spanish were cursory, making only vague reference to some "up-heavals" in 1391. My husband, who is proficient in Spanish, said there was no mention of the fact that that was the year that thousands of Jews in Toledo and southern Spain (Granada, Cordoba and many smaller towns) were massacred



The Great Mosque of Cordoba was turned into a cathedral.



Above: The writer, Alison Bass, by the statue of Maimonides in Cordoba. Below: All that remains of the Jewish cemetery outside the walls of Segovia are broken stones and openings like this indicating the presence of tombs and graves plundered years ago.



after Catholic clergy stirred the populace against them.

From Toledo, we drove three hours south to Granada. There, on a late-night walking tour of the Albaicin, the walled city that dates back to the time when the Arabs ruled southern Spain, I asked our guide where the Jews had lived. I knew they had a rich cultural presence in Granada under the Muslim rulers, but I couldn't find any sign of it. The guide (a student at the University of Granada who spoke multiple languages) explained to me that "because the Jews brought

the Moors to Spain," after Ferdinand and Isabella conquered the last remaining stronghold of the Muslims in Granada in 1492, they had everything related to the Jews burned. I was too shocked by what the guide said to correct her: While welcoming the Moors – who were more tolerant than the Catholic monarchs of other religions – the Jews did not bring them to Spain.

Cordoba was a different story. In the center of the old city, there are numerous signs pointing to La Juderia, the Jewish quarter, and down one cobblestoned street we stumbled upon a statue of Maimonides, the 12th-century Jewish scholar who was born there and had to flee for his life to Egypt. There is even a Hotel Maimonides right across from Cordoba's main tourist attraction: its magnificent mosque (which now houses an incongruous-looking cathedral).

Cordoba also boasts an ancient synagogue, which survived only because it was built within the walls of a private home and no one knew it existed until 1899. Nearby we found a museum devoted to Sephardic Jewish culture. Yet, as in Toledo, the museum focused mostly on Jewish rituals of the time. Most of the exhibits were translated into English as well as Spanish, but the one exhibit that mentioned the Inquisition was not. Translating the Spanish for me, my husband said it made no mention of the central role the Catholic Church played in the Inquisition, only an opaque reference to Christian Kings.

By the time we got to Segovia, a beautiful city nestled on the foothills of the Guadarrama mountains north of Madrid, I was wondering just how much Spain had really changed. We were told



This synagogue in Cordoba survived because it was built behind the walls of a private home and then converted into a church.

that there are Jews now living in the country's major cities, but it seemed to me as if this sun-dried land, at least in the face it presents to tourists, was having trouble coming to terms with its past.

As it turned out, the old Jewish quarter in Segovia was only two blocks from our hotel, and like Cordoba, it has several restaurants that tout Sephardic dishes. One of them, called La Juderia, is run by a friendly young Moroccan who serves the best shawarma tapas in town. His presence in a city known as the center of the Castilian monarchy (where Isabella first met Ferdinand) meant that Spain's religious and ethnic quilt hid a greater pattern of complexity than I suspected.

That evening, we stumbled upon a concert going full blast in the Plaza de San Martin, right outside our hotel. The music sounded strangely familiar, so my husband and I joined the happy crowd on the stone steps that flank the San Martin church. The band, I soon realized, was playing

klezmer music – the same kind of jazzy, fast-paced yet melancholic music we had recently heard at the Jewish Music Festival in Boston. And dozens of young Spanish men and women were clapping and moving in time to the music; some were dancing wildly in front of the band's platform. Indeed, one young man, beer in hand, was doing what looked like the hora. I couldn't believe it. In front of my eyes the descendants of the people who had thrown the Jews out of Spain were rocking with abandon to Jewish music. I soon joined the dancing throng under the moon-lit sky. It was the apogee of my trip to Spain, and it confirmed something for me: that this country's past, at least among the younger generation, is no longer its present.

Alison Bass is author of "Side Effects: A Prosecutor, a Whistleblower and a Bestselling Antidepressant on Trial" and a senior lecturer in journalism at Mount Holyoke College.



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