

SURVIVORS OF THE SPANISH EXILE: THE UNDERGROUND JEWS OF IBIZA

Gloria Mound

The Pitiuses Islands / Long Tradition of Tolerance / An Openly Secret Community / A Synagogue Under a Convent / Meetings with Secret Jews / The Spanish Civil War Destroys the Community / A Revival of Jewish Life

[Editor's Note: The amazing persistence of secret Jews in Spain and Portugal is one of the most humanly compelling Jewish stories of the 20th century. As those two countries undergo liberalization, more evidence of a continued secret Jewish presence over the past 500 years comes to the fore. Today, only four years away from the 500th anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, we are witnessing the rebirth of a community of semi-secret Jews in Ibiza, one of the Balearic Islands. Its story is that of a community that remained openly Jewish for all those long years, maintaining synagogues and schools, engaging in international commerce as Jews, and accepted as Jews by their non-Jewish neighbors. The Jerusalem Letter is happy to present part of the story of that community written by Gloria Mound who, with her husband, Leslie, has made it her life's work to assist these Jews to rebuild their community openly and rejoin the Jewish world.]

The Pitiuses Islands

The Pitiuses Islands are strategically located at the southwestern tip of the Balearic Archipelago, in the western Mediterranean off the coast of Spain. The Jewish history of the Pitiuses Islands spans twenty-seven centuries, with the first recorded Jews coming as traders with the Phoenicians. The commercially-minded Phoenicians were the first developers of the two main islands -- Ibiza and Formentera -- in 654 B.C.E., just 160 years after the building of Carthage. The Romans were the succeeding conquerors, but whereas they destroyed Carthage, the islanders made a treaty with the new occupiers, preserving for posterity the finest Phoenician archaeological remains of the 20th century.

The Pitiuses have great scenic beauty. The island of Ibiza is approximately 25 miles long and 8 miles wide, with 200 miles of coastline. The city of Ibiza is still enclosed within the impressive walls and fortifications built by the Italian engineer Calvil in 1554 by order of King Charles V. Formentera is considerably smaller and flatter, 3 miles by 8.

A Long Tradition of Tolerance

After the surge of mass tourism to the islands in the 1960s, it has frequently been wrongfully concluded that their exceptionally carefree atmosphere was brought by the holiday-makers. Yet the inhabitants (Ibicencos) own unique style of tolerance is no tourist attracting gimmick, but reflects the history of an area of tremendous human insularity, which in turn had been crucial to Jewish survival in the Pitiuses Islands during and after the Spanish Inquisition and which allowed the preservation of a Jewish community until the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936. For 2,000 years the Ibicencos have been a perfect example of a multi-communal society, living together in peace. Descended from Phoenicians, Romans, Greeks, Carthaginians and many others, the islanders collectively protected their Jews from all comers.

For generations, historians have assumed that the Jews at the southern end of the Balearics had suffered a fate similar to that of those on the larger island of Majorca, just 80 miles away, which for so long was the scene of terrible anti-Jewish outrages. Yet the Jews of Ibiza and Formentera survived the Inquisition and remained on these two small islands until modern times. It is a further facet of the special attitude of minding one's own business pervading in the area that it is only in recent years that the facts began to come to light of how the Jews lived, traded and were protected on these islands.

The history of the Jews of Majorca has been well documented and there is also some written Jewish history about the Jews of Minorca, some 25 miles away, the most northerly of the Balearics and, itself, with considerable separate Jewish historical value.(1) Yet it only became apparent in the last decade that owing to the past custom of labelling all the islands in the Balearics as Majorca, (Mallorca in Catalan), the history of the centuries of positive Jewish life on the islands of Ibiza and Formentera had never been researched.

An additional reason for this oversight could be that the islands were known by different names within the same historical era, or even the same year, depending on who was reporting on events. For example, Ibiza was called Eivissa (Catalan), Ivica,(2) Ebisos (Greek), Ebuses (Latin), and Yebisah (Arabic). On maps Ibiza was called Yabsa, Ybica, Eresos, and Juisa, while Formentera was called Ofiusa Serpentaria (Greek) and Frumentaria (Latin).

These examples emphasize the multi-communal origins of the Ibicencos as well as indicating the basis of the islanders' attitude towards individual freedom, where each family was a law unto itself. Even today, to pry into the affairs of another can leave one ostracized. Such attitudes in the past were crucial to the successful conduct of smuggling and piracy, in which nearly all the islanders seemed to have been in some way involved, and also provided the ideal situation for those hiding from the Inquisition.

After 500 years of almost total Moorish domination, it can certainly be appreciated that the inhabitants of the Pitiuses had an affinity to religions other than Catholicism. Then in 1235, Jaime the 'Conquistador' arrived from Spain, incidentally bringing with him numerous Jewish administrators. Prior to their expulsion from Spain in 1492, Jews had

always been administrators in the Pitiuses, and they were certainly preferred to the more cruel and extortionist officials of Majorca or mainland Spain.

Even to those Ibicencos who adhered to Catholicism, there was never the fanaticism of elsewhere in Spain. Most villages had one little-used church and no resident priest until the mid-19th century. Even up to the present day, men only go to church for weddings and funerals, while if out in the country on such important Christian holidays as Easter or a Sunday, you will see peasants tilling the land. Significantly, many to this day do not do so on Saturday. Like their forebears wary of strangers, if you ask they will respond that "it is not lucky to work on Saturday."

An Openly Secret Community

After the establishment of the Inquisition in 1410, the Vicars General of the Inquisition who came to the islands on inspection tours were given comfortable country homes and all who came left highly satisfied that within the islands until the final suppression of the dreaded Inquisition on July 15, 1834, "no one practiced the Laws of Moses or Mohomet." Yet searching in the archives of Ibiza, I found a number of transfers of Jewish properties to other Jews of the community during the years 1394-1423, and again in 1577 and 1685. All the sites were located along the "Street of the Jews" and the documents clearly state that the obligatory religious oath was a Jewish oath. The hoodwinking of the Inquisitors therefore permitted the residents of the islands to continue with the business that interested them most -- piracy and smuggling within the 'no-man's-seas' between the Barbary Coast and the routes of the European merchants.(3)

For hundreds of years the Pitiuses were almost unknown to the outside world. The notion that it was a dangerous place to visit was not without foundation and at times was fostered by the local inhabitants as well. Yet the Ibicencos, and in particular its Jewish citizens, had regular means of contact with communities elsewhere when they so desired. This was done in conjunction with the Pitiuses's main industry (until the advent of tourism), the production of salt. In the days before refrigeration, salt was a vital commodity and the salt for the whole of Europe was manufactured in Spain and the southern Balearic Islands. Even when the local salt pans were a royal preserve, the tax collectors were local Jews and salt exports were carried in Jewish-owned ships. In transporting this salt all over Europe, the Jews of Ibiza and Formentera were able to keep their lines of communication open with Jewish communities elsewhere.

According to my research, those Jews from elsewhere captured by Ibicenco pirates were usually excused from ransom, hidden from the Inquisition, and helped on numerous occasions to reach a safe haven.(4) In The Chuetas of Majorca, Dr. Baruch Braunstein has chronicled how in 1718 Jacob Carlos Nunez and his two cousins, Samuel and Solomon Nahon were taken captive by Ibicenco privateers. These family names were well-known to the Inquisition and the Palma section demanded that they be turned over to them. Eventually the three Jews were able to prove that they were not

Spanish born and were released. After three and a half years, they reached safety in Leghorn.

In the archives of Ibiza I found a fascinating sequel to this story in a short business letter with a long postscript. It seems that in addition to the three cousins there were two other Jews on the captured boat, two young boys whose name was also Nunez. For four years they were hidden from the authorities by the islanders. When word came that their family was safe, they were sent home in the care of a trusted sea captain. The letter was signed by Jacinto Rimbaud, Royal Tax Collector for the area. But to the Ibicencos, the Rimbauds were known for generations not only as the administrators of the islands, but as leaders of the Jewish community.

Searching for the Jews of Ibiza is an arduous task. In the town hall, documents are waist high on the floor and disintegrate as one picks them up because water is coming through the roof. Yet recently there has been a find of astonishing importance -- a fragmented Megillat Esther (scroll of the Book of Esther) has been discovered dating from the 14th century, as verified by Professor Nadav of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The scroll had been cut and used for covers of each end of the property transaction document in the official land registry. So far we have inspected volumes from 1775, 1776 and 1777 and have found the middle of the scroll. The fragments were cut very carefully so as not to cut through any letters, and it was probably done to hide the scroll from inspectors of the Inquisition. The present notary has given me his promise that he will let us go through all the other volumes for each year until we find the remainder of the scroll.

The notary in 1775-77 was Rafael Oliver. Rafael was the patron saint of the Chuetas (secret Jews). The name Rafael in any family persistently, like the girl's name Esparanza, is a sure clue that it is a Jewish family. (There are cases of two sisters named Esparanza because if one was a bit sick and expected to die, they would name the next child Esparanza.) The family of Rafael Oliver were notaries for the island for generations and he was one of the important Jewish administrators.

Prince Luis Salvador of Hapsburg, in Die Balearn, mentions the Jewish community of Ibiza in 1868, indicating that a definite Jewish community continued up through the 19th century (the later Spanish versions of this work completely delete all mention of Jewish life in Ibiza). While alluding to their customs and the important part they played in the commercial life of the islands, the Prince specifically locates their area near the San Christobel Convent. He wrote about the way that they lived on their own as a community, although to the outside world they were Catholic. They were clearly distinctive, only married among themselves and, he noted, the majority among them had red hair, a trait still quite in evidence today.

A Synagogue Under a Convent

The Convent is the site of a secret underground synagogue located beneath the newly-built chapel of San Christobel. The entrance to the underground synagogue can still be

seen from the bolted up "Street of the Jews." The Street, considered unsafe, was closed off some 80 years ago.(5)

The secret synagogue of San Christobel had links with the small Jewish community that existed throughout the period of Spanish persecution on the island of Formentera, eight miles away. In 1933, Laurence George Bowman, former headmaster at the Jews' Free School in London, vacationed in the area with his family. At one point he visited Can Marroig, a property on Formentera connected with the Convent of San Christobel, according to the Ibiza Archives.

Part of Can Marroig dates back to 1620. In the 1930s, this much larger than average house was opened by its owners as a pension which, while not very successful, was possibly done to allay any local suspicion about the considerable numbers of visitors to the house who arrived from outside the Pitiuses. While at first denying to the Bowmans that they were Jews, the owners later admitted it and showed them the secret synagogue beneath their home with Torah scrolls and a shofar. A woman who seemed to be in charge bemoaned the fact that it was becoming hard to arrange a minyan. Bowman reported to the British historian Dr. Cecil Roth what he had seen, but initially was not believed. Then the upheaval of the Spanish Civil War ensued and it was too late to follow up.

Meetings with Secret Jews

In another report a Mr. Hausmann, a Jew from Barcelona, told of visiting

the Island of Ivica, the smallest of the Balearic Islands, where he came into contact with the Chuetas (literally, pork-eaters), as the local descendants of Marranos are called. He was at a pension together with another Jew, and they washed their hands and said grace afterwards. A couple of days later a fellow-guest who had watched them approached Mr. Hausmann and asked him if he was a Jew. Upon being told that he was, the stranger embraced him and said, in a state of deep emotion; "You are my brother!" He was one of the Chuetas. He took Mr. Hausmann to a cafe, where, after seating themselves in a corner, he spoke softly and timorously, turning round repeatedly to make sure that nobody was listening. He told him that there were quite of number of Chuetas on the island, and that a local Catholic priest acted secretly also as a rabbi. They performed the rite of circumcision in the privacy of a cellar. They observed the Sabbath by lighting a couple of candles, which they immediately threw into the fire, thus following the custom of their Marrano ancestors, who used to throw the candles into the fire for fear of being discovered by an informer. On Sabbath afternoon, several leading personalities, including the priest, the Chief of Police, lawyers, doctors, pharmacists, and other professional people and intellectuals usually met for an hour to discuss Jewish matters and then dispersed.(6)

In yet another account, a Mr. Gross, a man of the highest integrity, visited Ibiza and reported:

I was in Ibiza in the year 1930. One day a fellow came to my table, told me he was a Jew, and that the Jews were getting together that night. When night came he took me

through very narrow streets to a secret flight of steps leading underground. There I met all the families. After hours of talking and showing me tefillin, books and other Jewish items, some as old as 800 years or more, they asked me if I knew Hebrew. They asked me if I would go to the church where the nuns lived. In the benches of the church were silver plates with names written in Hebrew, which they wanted me to read for them.

The next day I went to the church, looked everywhere until I found what they wanted, took notes of everything, and was just leaving when I saw a key hanging on a door. There was a notice that no one should dare go in upon danger of death. I asked a keeper permission to get the key, went in and closed the door. The first thing I saw were two tombs. I could read the name on one of them -- Rabbi Samuel Cardozo. In the wall pieces of scrawling were nailed -- Jewish books, pieces of Torah, silver cups and other items and pieces of curtains of the Ark, as well as some very old tefillin. The following day a message came from the bishop if I would care to go and visit him. I did, and before I left he made me promise not to speak of what I had seen in that little room.

We have learned that the priest in Ibiza in the 1930s, Isadoro Macabich, was still trying to conduct a Jewish-style wedding in Marrano fashion because he was the head of the community.

When I first saw Can Marroig in 1981, it was in a ruined condition and with new absentee landlords. It was a number of years before I could return to seek out the original owners and learn, with grudging and at times mistrustful aid from the local residents, of the true history of Can Marroig. Then a relative of the original owners, who is today a leading Spanish official, bought Can Marroig. With the present atmosphere of freedom for Jews, all of the centuries of family secrets were revealed. This once-opulent home had been built at the time of the terrible anti-Jewish outrages of the Inquisition in Majorca. The secret Jews first built the Convent in Ibiza in 1600, followed twenty years later by Can Marroig. It was lived in by families connected with the salt trade in the Balearics.

With the aid of local architects and persons who remember the house in pre-war days, a drawing was made of how the now-roofless ancient part of the building once looked. The struts leading down from the kitchen trap door can still be seen, as can the low ceilinged passageway leading further down to the arched entrance to the synagogue proper (by a short flight of still existent stone steps). In 1936 the Torah scrolls and other religious items were removed to the Barcelona synagogue's custody, where, I believe, they remain today. What is possibly the only synagogue built in Spain during all the centuries of repression should be restored as a memorial to the tenacious Jewish faith of the Ibicencos.

The Spanish Civil War Destroys the Community

A positive, identifiable Jewish, semi-communal life existed in Ibiza and Formentera right up to the Spanish Civil War in 1936. In Ibiza 50 families met regularly, cherished and guarded their few treasured religious artifacts and tried to keep intact the Jewish

precepts handed down to them. This after generations without a rabbi or other qualified teacher.

The Civil War of 1936-39, followed by World War II, saw the almost total breakdown of what remained of the Jewish community. Many young Jews of the Pitiuses died in the Civil War. Many who fought on the socialist side ended their days in Mauthausen concentration camp. During that time the Republicans, the Anarchists, the Italians and the Germans wreaked unbelievable havoc on the island, which until then had never known war on its own shores. To this very day, 50 years later, there are brothers and sisters who do not speak to each other because of what happened in the Civil War.

Yet a Jewish presence on the islands still remained. Reports abound of refugees fleeing the Nazi terror being aided by the old Jewish families of Ibiza and Formentera. For example, the locally-born chief of the secret police was a Marrano and frequently ignored orders to deport those without proper papers. He helped to shelter refugees and saw that they were issued vitally-needed baptism papers which were required to obtain food rations.

During the period of greatest danger, when a Gestapo office was located in Palma, whose staff gathered information on local Jewish residents, Ibicenco city officials arranged boats for those who needed to escape. During this period many Jewish Ibicencos converted to Catholicism or felt it prudent for their children to do so.(7)

With the cessation of hostilities in Europe in 1945, the next few years saw a somewhat paradoxical situation. The islands that for centuries had a reputation for providing the perfect hideout received German Nazis who pretended to be refugees. Since they had all the necessary papers supplied by officials in Madrid, it was impossible to oust them. Often they were unmasked only after they had firmly entrenched themselves in commercial enterprises, whereas the majority of islands were impoverished during this period. Some Nazis still remain, living in isolated, heavily-guarded enclaves. Quite a few met death in mysterious accidents.

A Revival of Jewish Life

Beginning in the 1960s, an increasing number of writers, painters, and musicians from all over the world, including many Jews, came to make their home in the islands. They were joined by Americans avoiding the Vietnam War, as well as a huge influx of tourists. While most of the Ibicenco Jewish families still married among their own, all facets of meaningful Jewish life had ceased, although Ibicencos could still recall their grandparents keeping some of the Jewish festivals and customs.

For those who remained, Jewish life dwindled. Children grew up knowing little or nothing of their Jewish heritage. Just when it looked as if this story would be forgotten, a change of attitude took place among the younger generation. Books on Jewish themes became the vogue, radio and TV programs on the Holocaust, Israel and other Jewish subjects generated interest and discussion. From the little local university, the Institut

Eivissenc, came a group of students determined to search for their roots. Parents and grandparents found themselves subjected to interrogation by their searching young descendents.

Initially, the best way to help the remnants of the Ibicenco Jewish families to re-identify may be through cultural events. In 1986 at the Summer University, Israeli Ambassador Samuel Hadas and Senator Toledano, President of the Madrid Jewish community, spoke to unprecedented overflow audiences, reflecting the degree of local interest. Hopefully the resuscitated sparks of Jewish life on these islands will be strengthened by strong support from Israel and other diaspora Jewish communities.

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[Editor's Postscript: Since they came to live in Ibiza, the Mounds' home has become a Jewish focal point, both for natives and Western "drop-outs" who are interested in learning more about their Jewish roots. On their own initiative, the Mounds have organized Sabbath and festival services, cultural events and a small school, all this without outside financial support, a great burden for people of modest means. Their hope is that organized Jewry will step in with a more extensive effort.]

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Notes

1. See Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society, XII 247, XV 21, XX 14-15, 35-37.
2. Jewish Encyclopedia, Royal MSS of 14th/15th Century.
3. See "Illes Pitiuses II" and "Els Llibres D'Entreveniments III, Formentera," both by Juan Mari Cardona, Church Archivist of Ibiza, Eivissa 1983 (Catalan). See also "Historia Ibiza" (Spanish), Palma de Majorca, 1960, 5 volumes, by Isadoro Macabich Llobet, Cardona's predecessor and secret rabbi to the Ibicencos. See also Travels in Jewry by Israel Cohen and "The Chuetas of Majorca" by Baruch Braunstein, (Ktav).
4. See "The Hitherto Unknown Jews of Ibiza," Papers, Fourth International Judeo-Spanish Studies, Glasgow University, March 1984.
5. "Jewish Connections with Prinz Luis Hapsburg and the Convento of San Christobel," Papers, Fifth International Judeo-Spanish Seminar, Westfield College, London, March, 1986. (I have given photographs of the synagogue to the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv.)
6. From Travels in Jewry by Israel Cohen.
7. See Israel Cohen Papers, Zionist Archives, Jerusalem.

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