

A Visit to Barcelona

Jews in the City of the Catalans

By

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THE streets of Barcelona are full of Jews who are afraid to say that they are Jews. Spaniards smile. Three of them at a café table tease a Sephardic boy who hopes to sell them a cheap necktie. His shoulders slope, his hat is pushed down on his ears, his face is unmistakable. He insists he is Greek. "Well, but," say the Spaniards, "how is it you speak Spanish, then?" The boy says that many Greeks speak Spanish. "Yes, Jewish Greeks," the Spaniards say. The boy confesses that he lived in a Jewish neighbourhood in Greece and learned Spanish from the Jews. He can't be trapped, or persuaded or forced to say he is a Jew. If he did the confession would be like the secret the Jew in the old story entrusted to his friend the hunchback. When the Jew whispered, "I am a Jew, my friend," the hunchback solemnly whispered back, "I am a hunchback."

The Sephardic Jews in Barcelona — there must be hundreds — drift in from Morocco and the rest of the Mediterranean circle. In Morocco being Jewish is no secret, and since most Spaniards around thirty have served in Moroccan campaigns, they are familiar with eastern Jews. They are amused they say, in the broad light of the twentieth century, and in a lay Republic, to find the shadow of the Inquisition still dark on the mind of a boy selling ten-cent ties, and still fearful to a grown man peddling cheap fountain pens and paste jewellery. And especially in Barcelona, a cosmopolis which all the world, or at least all Spain, knows is inhabited by people much more interested in prosperity and comfort and individual liberties, than in theology and tradition.

BARCELONA is a city of liberals. It has no love for Madrid nor for any of the things Madrid has represented. It is the backbone of the Republic as it was of the first Spanish Republic in 1873-74. Its people have engaged in a long struggle with intolerance and tyranny, for Castile has never been able to allow Catalana to be Catalana's institutions, tried to suppress its language, told the Catalans harshly to "Talk like Christians," and forbidden them even to dance their traditional dances and sing their own strong songs. Its writers and poets and leaders have been jailed for little more. Its

people are therefore stirred by injustice, and sworn against persecution.

What friendliness and sympathy there is in Spain for Jews, they will find in Barcelona. The suspicion and fear of the word "Jew" is part of many folk-tales, many rites, much instruction and lore wherever a cathedral dominates the view. But the ghost of the Inquisition is more at home in Castile than it is in Catalana. Catalans are hard-working, matter-of-fact, blunt people who like to be let alone to make life pleasant for themselves. They are more interested in their neighbour's children than they are in his religion. They have a joke about a Jew who came to Barcelona and saw the people dancing *sardanas* hand in hand, in utter silence, and when he asked why they were so solemn and he was told that they were counting, he said: "No use! How can I compete with people who count even when they dance!" And the Catalan telling the joke adds: "Well, why not? Look at me! Isn't my face a synagogue?"

THERE is a good deal of Jewish blood in Catalana. One sees three types of face: Roman, Celtic and Jewish. Catalana has always been the busiest and uniformly richest region in Spain. It was the imperial zone under the Romans, because one of its ports, Tarragona, was the Roman capital in Spain. The palace occupied by Augustus is still whole. It is used as a jail. Pontius Pilate is said to have lived in it after he left Palestine. What was a magnificent circus provides the back walls for a street from end to end of Tarragona, and the dungeons and animal cages serve as basements. Jewish gravestones turn up not far from the Roman-Christian cemetery in the plebian section outside the walls. A few miles from Tarragona there is a town—Brafim—that was called Ibrahim, and is said to have been an all-Jewish town. But the Inquisition complained that Tarragona itself was "the capital of the Jews."

Spain has the theatre in its blood. So the Republic relished its gesture—and appreciated the irony as much as did the Jews—of balancing the sixteenth century with the twentieth by welcoming them back again. They have nothing to fear from Republican Spain. Yet in Barcelona one sees the Nazi swastika on newspapers and hears of it in conversations. There is a

large and prosperous German colony in Barcelona. München beer is to be held in Münchener beer-halls. Two Nazi papers, published locally, can be bought at any newsstand, and are bought by at least three thousand members of the Barcelona *Sturm Abteilung*. Nazi money filters anti-Jewish, anti-French, anti-Marxist editorials into the local press. There is a paper in Madrid, a picture-weekly called *El Duende*, which carries on a fierce anti-Jewish, anti-French, and anti-Catalan campaign. Anti-Republican too, of course.

NOT very many Jews have taken the Spanish welcome literally. Spain is full of difficulties for German refugees. First the language. Then, what can a German Jewish lawyer do even in Barcelona? Doctors must learn Spanish and have their examinations over again. Workmen, who cannot go far and must go somewhere, take a chance. Still there are more Nazis in Barcelona than Jews in all of Spain. Why the campaign? Hear the answer: Preventive. To warn Spain against the invasion, so that the Jews will be hunted out as fast as they come in. But it is an academic question to most Spaniards, and besides, they are unsympathetic to the Nazis, and Barcelona is definitely hostile. Spanish papers devote a great deal of space to German news, which they criticise and condemn. One or two of the editors found suspiciously sympathetic—and proved to have been paid for it—have been censured and fired. Next to the Nazi papers on the news-stands in Barcelona there is another sheet called *The Anti-Fascist*. It is a small, struggling sheet, but it is read by the newspapermen at least, and used. Of course the Government is unfriendly, since it is largely Socialist and Left-Republican. One of the favourite warnings in public oratory is "Look at Germany!"

THE German Jews who struggle into Spain drift to Barcelona. There is a relief-station, organised by the local Jewish residents, and somehow not more than three hundred Jews manage to feed, shelter, orient and aid a quota of about two or three hundred refugees a month. The welfare committee is perennially hard-pressed, of course. Paris pays its secretary — also a refugee. The committee itself spends, heroically! (for not all the residents can contribute) from five hundred to a thousand dollars a month. Its headquarters are free—a room in the synagogue, which is camouflaged as a school. Refugees walk in and out all day long. A musician, humming a song that may be bought by a local musical-comedy company. A legal student who is now peddling eggs. A couple who both have small jobs and don't know what to do with their three-year-old child. Two refugees who are not Jews but merely needy Germans. Communists. The secretary shrugs. Maybe Social Democrats. He doesn't ask what their politics are.