A Visit to Barcelona
Jews in the City of the Catalans
By Anita Brenner

The streets of Barcelona are full of Jews who are afraid to say that they are Jews. Any 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," says 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 neighborhood 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 are like hundreds—drift in from Morocco and the rest of the Mediterranean circle. In Morocco being Jewish is a 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 tendrils and salt with a gigolo of a crowd 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 individuality 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 1879-74. Its people have engaged in a long struggle with intolerance and tyranny, for Castile has never been able to allow Catalonia to be Cataluna'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 not so great in this city as in other parts of Spain. There is a good deal of Jewish blood in Cataluna. One sees three types of face: Roman, Celtic and Jewish. Cataluna, however, has 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 town, which was 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 cirrus provides the back walls for a street from end to end of Tarragona, and the dungeons and animal cages serve as basements. Jewish graveyards 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 hearers of it in conversations. There is a large and prosperous German colony in Barcelona. München beer is to be held in Münchner beer halls. Two Nazi papers, published locally, can be bought by any news-stand, and are paid for by the first three thousand members of the Barcelona Sturm Abteilung. Nazi money filters anti-Jewish, anti-French, anti-Spanish edicts into the local press. There is a paper in Madrid, a picture-weekly called El Docende, 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 to German refugees. First the language. Then, what can a German Jewish lawyer do even in Barcelona? Doctors must learn Spanish and have their examination over again. Workmen, who cannot go far and must go somewhere, take a chance. Still there are more Nazis in Bar celona than Jews in all Catalonia. 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 by and large, 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-wing. 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 perennally nard-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 one thousand dollars a month. Its headquarters are free. A room in the synagogue, which carries on a news-paper in the city. It is a small office, with a musican, humming a song that may be bought by a local musical-comedy company. A legal student who plays the organ.

A couple who both have small jobs and don't know what to do with their three-year-old child. Two refugees who have nothing to do but merely needly German Communists. The secretary shushes. Maybe Social Democrats. He doesn't ask what their politics are.