



Girona, Spain, bore witness to both the centuries of success and violent exile of Jews.

A deeper look at Spanish Jews

New DVD examines exiled Catalonian Jewry

By Daniel M. Kimmel

Ashkenazi Jews, those who trace their ancestry back to Eastern Europe, may know that Jews lived in Spain until the 1492 expulsion by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, but most probably couldn't tell you much more. "Girona,

Movie Maven

The Mother of Israel: The Jews of Catalonia" is a 1989 documentary recently released on DVD that provides a half hour history lesson from the perspective of one city there.

No one is sure when Jews first arrived in Spain. Some theorize it could have been as early as under the Romans, but certainly by the 5th century C.E. there was a small but growing Jewish community in Girona. The region of Catalonia had once been independent of Spain and was under Christian as opposed to Moorish (i.e., Islamic) rule. During several centuries Jews thrived there, producing not only success in business but also some of the great minds of Jewish mysticism. The great Jewish scholar Nachmanides resided there as

well and was involved in a famous – or infamous – public debate with a Jewish convert to Catholicism. Even the king was impressed with Nachmanides, noting that he had never heard the "wrong" arguments presented so well.

However, by the late 1300s things were different. Jews became convenient scapegoats for the outbreak of illness and poor economic times. Where once Jews were declared the "property of the king" – they were exempt from local taxes and paid directly into the royal treasury – now that protection was no longer extended. Riots, burnings, killings and, for those who survived, forced conversions were the order of the day. A

through research or preservation of historic sites, while others are exploring clues to the Jewish ancestry of their own families.

The film itself has the virtue of being brief as it consists of talking heads (mostly Spanish historians with subtitles) mixed with pictures and footage of old buildings along with English narration. You watch it for the subject matter, not the inherent entertainment value of the presentation. If, in the end, it doesn't quite live up to its billing of making this community "The Mother of Israel," it does make the case that the centuries in Spain – and Catalonia in particular – are an important chapter of Jewish history.

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hundred years later Jews were finally told to convert or leave, having to pay an "exit tax" on their own exile.

The film takes the story into the 20th century, with small Jewish communities being re-established, and full equality finally realized with the passing of the fascist regime of Francisco Franco in the 1970s. Today many Spaniards are reclaiming the Jewish heritage of their country

"Girona, The Mother of Israel: The Jews of Catalonia" is available through the National Center for Jewish Film for \$36. Public performance rights separately available. Call (781) 736-8600 or go to www.jewishfilm.org.

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