IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE RAMBAN

SPAIN IS A COUNTRY RICH IN JEWISH HISTORY. YET THERE IS ONLY ONE REGION THAT HAD THE DISTINCTION OF HAVING WITHIN ITS BORDERS A CITY CROWNED WITH THE TITLE "A MOTHER CITY IN ISRAEL." IN THIS FOUR-PART SERIES WE TAKE YOU TO CATALONIA, WHERE WE REDISCOVER THE PAST GLORY OF GIRONA, BARCELONA, AND OTHER JEWELS IN THE JEWISH-CATALAN CROWN.

by Libi Astaire

The Catalans call it *rauxa*. Normally a down-to-earth, hard-working people who take pride in their *seny*, common sense, every once in a while they get what's called a *cop de rauxa*, a spontaneous burst of creative inspiration that hurtles them out of their ordinary lives and into the unexpected and the unknown.

I don't think that *rauxa* is on the world's list of highly contagious diseases, but perhaps it should be. For how else can I explain what happened this summer? I was looking for a simple, no-nonsense, round-trip flight from Tel Aviv to Kansas City, Missouri that had decent connections and a reasonable price, and instead found myself mesmerized by an itinerary that offered a free stopover in what is the heart of *rauxa* country: Barcelona.

I think I can say with full honesty that until that moment it had never, ever occurred to me to go to Barcelona. Yet once I saw the word, something clicked in my mind, and wouldn't stop clicking.

Barcelona is the capital of Catalonia, an autonomous region located in the northeastern corner of Spain. Thanks to my love of old maps of the Holy Land, I knew that Catalonia was the home of the famous Jewish mapmaker Abraham Cresques, whose fourteenth-century masterpiece, the *Catalan Atlas*, is one of the Middle Ages' most spectacular maps of the world. However, Catalonia has another and greater distinction, for it is home to a city that was once so full of Torah learning and so steeped with holiness that it was crowned "A Mother City in Israel," the highest praise that the Jewish people can bestow upon a place outside of the Land of Israel. In short, Catalonia is the home of Girona.

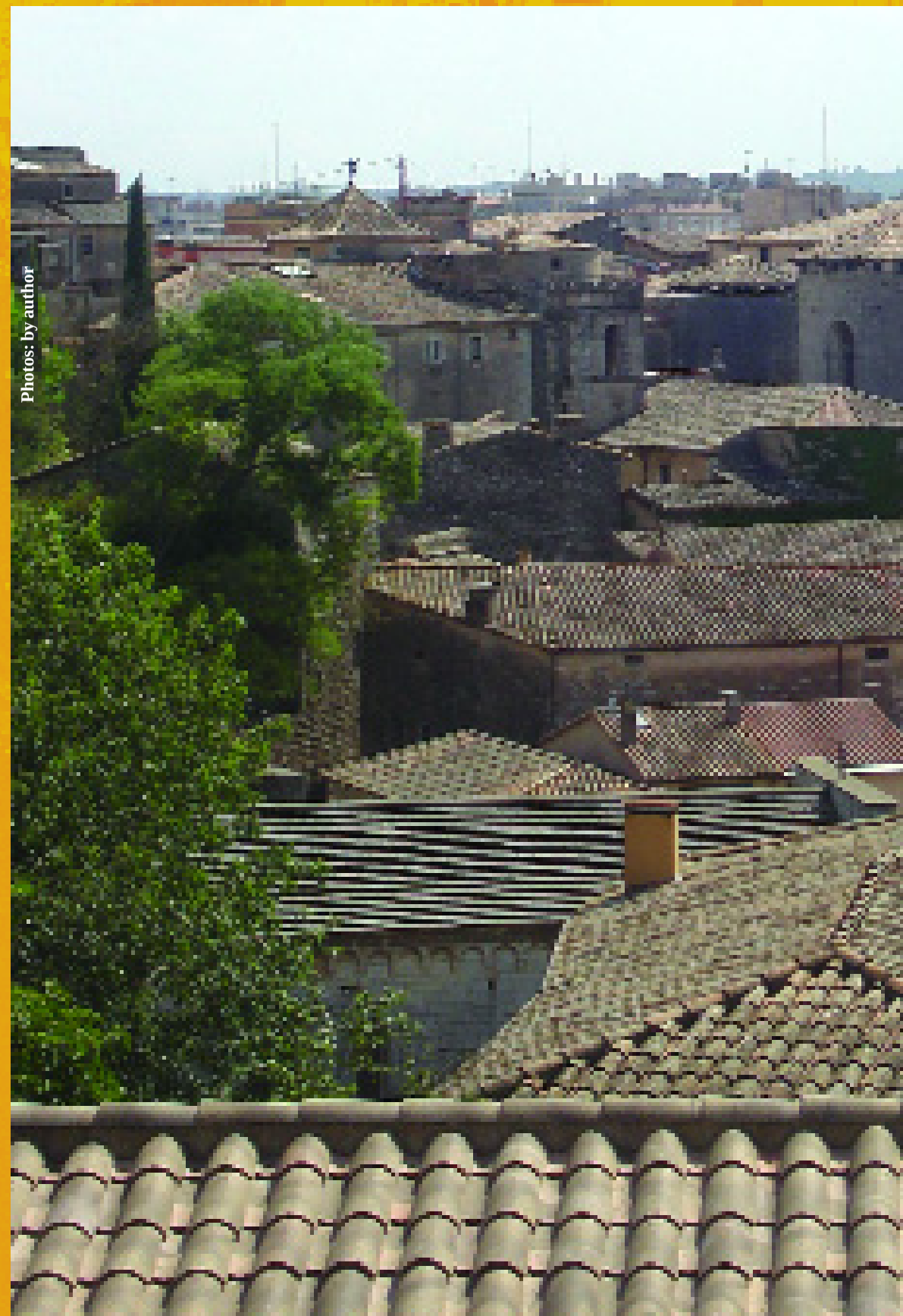
Girona.

For those who know and love medieval Jewish history, the name Girona sends shivers down the spine. This is the city where Rabbeinu Yonah, author of *Shaarei Teshuvah*, *The Gates of Repentance*, lived and taught Torah. It is the city where such luminaries as Rabbi Azriel, Rabbi Ezra ben Shlomo, and Rabbi Yaakov ben Sheshet established one of Spain's most important schools of Kabbalah. And last, but certainly not least, it is the city of the Ramban, who lived there almost all his life, serving as the leader of Girona's Jewish community, as well as all of Spanish Jewry, until he was forced to flee, at an advanced age, from his beloved birthplace.

What was it about the city of Girona that it merited all this glory, and would it still be possible to catch a glimpse of its former greatness? Would it be possible, I wondered, to walk in the footsteps of the Ramban, Rabbeinu Yonah, and all the other illustrious *rabbanim* who had called Girona home, or had everything been destroyed after the Inquisition and the Expulsion in 1492?

After a little research, it seemed that it was possible. According to most sources, Girona, only about an hour's drive north of Barcelona, has one of the best preserved Jewish Quarters in Spain. Yet still I resisted. Common sense told me that Catalonia, a region where kosher food is scarce and English is barely spoken, is not exactly a first-choice destination for the Torah-observant traveler.It was a photograph of a narrow passageway in Girona's Jewish Quarter that proved to be the nemesis of my saner self. Its steep, stone steps winding upward seemed to beckon me to follow them back to a purer time: the time of the great Rishonim of Sfarad. Before I knew it, the deed had been done. I had come down with a bad case of *cop de rauxa* and I knew there was only one thing that could cure me.

views of Girona and the Onyar River



Photos: by author

streets of the medieval Jewish Call

"Book me on the flight," I told my travel agent, "that has the stopover in Barcelona."

GLIMPSES OF A GOLDEN AGE

Legend has it that Jews established trading posts in Spain as early as the time of Shlomo HaMelech (King Solomon), but solid data about Jewish communities only begins to appear in the third century. By the tenth century, Jews were actively engaged in economic and political life throughout the Iberian Peninsula, including Catalonia.

Whereas other parts of Spain experienced Golden Ages as early as the eleventh and twelfth centuries — and Catalonia and neighboring Aragon became united during this period — Catalonia's moment of glory reached its zenith during the thirteenth century. It was during the long reign of King Jaume (James) I, known as "the Conqueror," that Barcelona was transformed into a major port city and Catalan ships ruled the profitable waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

The fortunes of Catalan's Jews rose along with the fortunes of their fellow countrymen. Jaume I highly valued his Jewish merchants, who set up lucrative trading networks both in the Muslim countries of northern Africa and the Christian countries of southern Europe, filling the king's coffers in the process. Jews could also be found at the king's court, where they served as financial advisors, court secretaries, and doctors.

He also offered protection to all the Jews who settled in his territory, a policy that was continued by his successors, and the map of Catalonia became dotted with dozens of Jewish communities. In practical terms, this protection meant that the Jews were "owned" by the crown. They paid taxes only to the king, and their fellow countrymen were not allowed to physically harm them, since they belonged to the king. However, Catalan towns were not entirely without power and they exercised this power in the end of the thirteenth century by forcing the Jews, whom they often eyed with jealousy and suspicion, to live in their own area of town, which was called a *juderia*.

Yet despite the ghettoization and other restrictions that limited their contact with non-Jews, and the high taxation, the 1200s and early 1300s were relatively good times for Catalan Jews. They were free to practice their religion and they were self-governed by a council called an *aljama*, comprised of distinguished members of their own community. They were able to build synagogues, Talmud Torahs, *mikvaos*, and shelters for the poor. Even the decree issued by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which stated that Jews must wear distinctive dress, was largely ignored in Catalonia — at a price, however, since the Jews had to purchase their exemption.

Although not all of Catalonia's Jews were wealthy merchants — most of them were artisans and simple craftsmen — there must have been more than a few. This is the period, after all, that saw the creation of Catalan illuminated masterpieces such as the Golden Haggadah, the Barcelona Haggadah, and the Sarajevo Haggadah, all of which were probably created in Barcelona in the first half of the fourteenth century.

The Jewish community's riches were not limited only to material goods. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were also the Golden Age of Torah scholarship in Catalonia. It was during this period that the Ramban and Rabbeinu Yonah flourished in Girona, while their student Rabbi Shlomo ben Aderet, known as the Rashba, was a leader in Barcelona.

And what is left of all this life? What could I expect to see in modern-day Catalonia? I knew better than to ask about the whereabouts of the famous Haggados, which left Spain's shores in 1492, if not before. Both the Golden Haggadah and the Barcelona Haggadah are now sitting in the British Museum,

while the Sarajevo Haggadah is in Sarajevo, where it is on display at the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

But what about the buildings? Would it be possible to sit in the yeshivah where the Ramban expounded upon the Torah, and daven in the shul where Rabbeinu Yonah stood before his Maker? Now that I was in Girona, it was time to find out.

EL CALL

By the time I unpacked and dug out my digital camera, it was already early evening, which turned out to be a perfect time for a first visit to Girona's historic district. The heat of the day had passed and the fading sunlight was casting a gentle glow upon the brightly painted houses that stand guard over the banks of the Onyar River. Once, these houses stood flush against the wall that protected the medieval city from invaders, but as the city began to expand and new neighborhoods were built, the wall came down. On this day in early summer, the only "invaders" traversing the river are a mother duck and her ducklings, who lazily paddle through the water. And, of course, the tourists, who cross the bridges connecting the old city to the new, in search of Girona's medieval quarter.

Strategically placed street signs point the way to *El Call*, the name most commonly used today to designate the Jewish Quarters found in Catalan towns. It's the word *call* that provided me with my first encounter with Catalonia's sometimes ambivalent feelings about its Jewish past. Why, I wondered, was this particular word used in Catalonia, and not the more common *juderia*, used throughout the rest of Spain? And what does the word *call* mean, anyway?

Ask a non-Jew in Girona — since there aren't any Jews living in Girona today non-Jews are the only ones you can ask — and they will immediately reply that it comes from the Latin word *callis*, which means a narrow street. A tour guide or guidebook will fill in a little more information. Because the Jews had to live within a contained area, as their population grew they had to find creative ways to house the new members of their community. One solution was to cover sections of the street and build houses on top of the covered passageways. Another solution was to build out into the street as far as possible, which added space to the homes, but turned the streets into cramped alleyways.

If you happen to ask the question while visiting a *call*, this will seem like a plausible explanation. The streets certainly are very narrow, even narrower than you will find in other parts of the town dating from the same period. So the case is closed, you might be tempted to think. *El Call* means the place of narrow and winding lanes.

However, go to Barcelona, where there is a small Jewish community, and ask someone from there about the word's meaning and more likely than not they will roll their eyes and laugh. "The word *call* comes from the Hebrew word *kahal* [community or congregation]," they will reply. "Everyone knows that."

In fact, the *Gran Diccionari de la Llengua Catalana* gives both definitions for the word. However, as I was to find out later, this disagreement about what the word *call* means — narrow streets of stone versus a living Jewish community — is emblematic of a larger disagreement between some members of Barcelona's Jewish community and the non-Jewish public officials responsible for developing and maintaining Catalonia's Jewish Quarters.

At this moment, though, my mind isn't concerned with present-day disagreements. This is my time to do what I set out to do, to follow in the footsteps of the Ramban and try to

La Forca Street:
once a main thoroughfare of the Jewish Call, it's still the heart of Girona's medieval quarter

Above: map of medieval Jewish communities, courtesy of Girona's Museum of the History of the Jewish People, a good place to begin your journey through Jewish Catalonia.

discover what it is about Girona that caused the Ramban to say, "I left my soul and spirit here."

As I make my way down Carrer de la Forca, once one of the *Call*'s main streets and its western boundary, my thoughts are already going back in time. Today, Forca Street is a pleasant pedestrian thoroughfare lined with upscale shops, but it's not the store windows that attract my attention. Spontaneously, my eyes shift to the doorposts, searching for some hint of an indentation on the right side of the shop's door. The indentation, of course, is the telltale sign that a mezuzah once sat within the doorpost and that this was once a Jewish-owned store or home, or perhaps even the portal to the thirteenth-century synagogue that once stood on this street, but whose exact location has since been forgotten.

I am not alone in this endeavor, I discover, when I meet an Israeli couple. Despite the fact that they are secular, they too are searching the doorposts for some signs of Girona's once rich Jewish life. In fact, mezuzah hunting seems to be a favorite activity for just about all Jewish tourists who come to Catalonia, no matter where they're from or what their affiliation may be. However, neither I nor the Israeli couple has had any luck. I will only "hit the jackpot" when I go to nearby Besalu and visit the home that once belonged to the Astruc family, one of medieval Catalonia's wealthiest and most influential families.

I give up my search when I reach the street today called Carrer de Sant Llorence. This is the street I had seen in the photograph. As I step into the covered passageway, dark, colored a gloomy gray at this hour, a shiver once again goes down my spine. At this quiet hour, it is not impossible to imagine a robed and hooded figure rushing down the steep stairs, on his way to shul to catch the last minyan for Minchah. Nor is it impossible to imagine that at any moment the waiting congregation will start to chant, "*Ashrei yoshvei vaytecha*, Praiseworthy are those who dwell within Your house."

But even though I wait silently for a few minutes, no sounds of Jewish prayer greet my ears. Only the creak of a shutter turning in the wind disturbs the evening's silence.

I therefore let my eyes follow the steps upward and I begin the long climb up to the top. The street becomes narrower and narrower, but as I climb, a sliver of light begins to peek through the rooftops. Then the light widens and intensifies, and when I reach the top, which is close to the eastern boundary of the *Call*, I have left the darkness behind.

Perhaps it's trite, and probably I'm 100 percent wrong, but after climbing the sixty-three steps of Carrer de Sant Llorence, I begin to feel that it's obvious why Girona became a home for Jewish mysticism. Spiritual concepts such as "running and returning," "going from darkness to light," or "you're either going up the spiritual ladder or going down it," surely become more concrete and easier to internalize when you have to walk up or down sixty-three steps every time you go to shul or need to buy a little milk.

However, Catalonia, like other parts of Spain, is not all cold, gray stones and dark passageways. About halfway up the steps, there is a wrought-iron gate sitting within the right side of the wall. Through it I can catch a glimpse of the other side of Catalonia, a place of pleasant courtyards and beautifully landscaped gardens, where people can come to meet and share their joys. I have also come to the first place where there is a physical sign of a Jewish presence within the Jewish *Call*. I have reached the Museu d'Historia dels Jueus (Jewish History Museum). There, embedded in the floor tiles of the museum's outdoor courtyard is a large Star of David, proudly displaying its Jewish identity for all passersby to see.

A quick glance at my watch tells me that the museum closed a few minutes ago. I will have to come back to continue my search for some tangible reminder of the past glory of Jewish Girona.

In Part Two: The search for the Ramban's yeshivah and a visit to see Girona's "Hidden Hebrew Documents."