



# Rediscovering Sephardic Catalonia: Heritage and the Museum of Jewish History in Girona

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# Rediscovering Sephardic Catalonia: Heritage and the Museum of Jewish History in Girona

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The Museum of Jewish History in Girona,<sup>1</sup> Spain is occupied by living ghosts. Upon entering the museum's first exhibit room, the visitor gets a glimpse of a preserved section of the former Jewish quarter, "the Call." The spot has lain empty since the city's Sephardic population was officially and completely expelled from Spain in 1492. Now, it consists of moss-covered stones and overgrown ivy. Yet, the entire wall opposite the window that looks out onto this site holds a description (in Catalan) that describes what is not visible to the naked eye:

In the heart of the *call*, or Jewish Quarter, in Girona courtyards like this one maintain the Jewish breath of life of past centuries, in space overflowing with familiar odors, with silence that one can be grateful for, with an inner life. It is a place shared with the Law and tradition, with ancestors, with remembrances.... A place called the call [is]...made from the refuge of ancestral rites and eternal traditions.<sup>2</sup>

This description fills the Call with invisible, yet imaginable, specters: "law," "tradition," "ancestors," "remembrances," "breath," "inner life," "silence." The museum's curators encourage the visitor to imagine the Call as filled with the actions and thoughts of the people who once lived there. With this suggestion, the museum seeks to provide its visitors a weighty experience that calls to mind centuries of past activity. Joaquim Nadal, the long-time mayor of Girona, called attention to this experience when the museum officially opened saying that the Call was "a window to history" and "the best history lesson—a living museum" (Nadal 2003a). Moreover, when presenting to the European Association of Jewish Studies in 1995, the director of the museum, Silvia Planes, referred to the museum as a "living memorial to the Jewish past of the country" (Planes 1995: 3). Although the Call is empty, it is overflowing with life.



Figure 1: A facsimile Torah and wall-sized representation of a medieval synagogue and rabbi (Courtesy of Patronat de Call)



Of course, speaking of Sephardic Jews as “living” in modern-day Girona—and in all of Spain for that matter—inevitably sounds hollow. Other than international tourists, the only Sephardim left in the city are on the walls of the museum, which are decorated with life-sized enlargements of medieval paintings and manuscripts. In the same opening room, an image on the wall opposite a case of ceremonial dishes for the Shabbat dinner shows a Sephardic family sitting for the same meal. Similarly, liturgical items used by Jewish communities around the world – including the Torah – are complemented by the image of a medieval synagogue and rabbi (Figure 1). These life-size representations of Sephardim accompany museum visitors throughout their visit.

No Sephardic Jews reside in Girona, but the museum evokes their lives and their presence—through depictions, the evocative description of the Call and other techniques discussed later in this paper. Medieval Sephardim remain in the city, despite their absence. The recreation of the past in the present—what Sharon Macdonald (2013: 1) has called “past-presencing”—seeks to remind museum visitors of “histories that might otherwise be lost” in the face of such absence.

As Macdonald argues, these evocative techniques have come to dominate many landscapes in Europe, turning the continent into a series of “Memorylands” (Macdonald 2013: 15). This trend results from what Rodney Harrison has recently labeled a “crisis of accumulation” or the “heritagisation of society.” In his *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (2013), Harrison tracks the exponential increase in the number of demarcated heritage sites over the last 45 years. He proposes that societies have responded to the disruptive factors of the late 20th and early 21st centuries—namely globalization and neoliberal economic policies— by feverishly salvaging all historical items deemed important and at risk. Once these objects and sites were added to lists of world or national heritage, they were promised perpetual protection from the rapid alterations of modern settings. Breaking with heritage studies convention, Harrison argues that this expansion has actually undermined “the role of heritage in the production of collective memory” (Harrison 2013: 166). Heritage would play a much more “integral role” in contemporary society, he contends, if citizens and officials “actively” considered which sites were valuable to them and which could be “forgotten.” Inactivity threatens to disassociate heritage from the lives of the people and citizens that protect it. Put simply, Harrison advocates that societies should “prune” their heritage lists to better understand themselves, and to consciously “generate the individual and collective memories that will bind us together in [the] future” (Harrison 2013: 231).

In some ways, Girona perfectly fits Harrison’s description of the heritage boomtown. In the early 1980s, Girona’s government started to conserve structures from the city’s past. The heritage sites restored were various and numerous enough to appear as an indiscriminate accumulation, encompassing everything from the medieval city walls to a 1930s bomb shelter to the Museum of Jewish History itself. That said, the city government, with Nadal at the helm, developed a considered and ideology-driven program of conservation with a specific goal: to rediscover and promote a regional Catalan and local Gironan identity after their repression under the 40-year dictatorship of General Francisco Franco. I will argue here that the Museum of Jewish History was instituted to serve this same central purpose of re-cementing the local identity of the city.

The significance of the Museum of Jewish History emerges from the distinction between a haphazard gathering of traces from the past and a selective curation of local identity through heritage preservation. Harrison states that the key to “active memory” is a “regular revision and review to see if it [heritage] continues to meet the needs of contemporary society” (Harrison 2013: 198). Why and in what ways might Gironan citizens and officials have found the heritage of a historical community such as the medieval Sephardim valuable? The museum’s objective, according to Article 4 of its constitution, written by the local government of Girona in 1992, was to promote “cultural activities related to the city of Girona, the Girona region of Catalonia and the cultural contributions of the Jewish community throughout its history” (Patronat 1992: 2). This constitution gave and continues to give the museum a local prerogative, as the museum concentrates not on the Jews throughout medieval Spain, but rather those who lived in Catalonia. In this paper, I consider the motivations—expressed by city officials and others involved in the creation of the museum—for conserving Sephardic heritage in a city with no Sephardim.

I first argue that the recovery of the medieval Sephardic culture of Girona was just one variation on the larger goal of rediscovering Catalan and Gironan identity. I will begin by discussing the general movement to recapture cultural heritage and “place identity” in Girona after the fall of Franco. Next, I examine the promotional material produced from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s by the museum’s parent organization, the *Bonastruc ça Porta*. Finally, I conduct a museological analysis of some of the exhibit rooms in the museum itself, based on my field research in Girona and interviews with officials. The museum, in part, is dedicated to the story of the Sephardim who lived in Girona during the Middle Ages,





including their arrival to Girona, their cultural production, and their eventual expulsion. Throughout this analysis, I will enumerate and explain the ways in which that history is also used to discuss the identity of those actually living in Girona today and argue that Girona's Museum of Jewish History equates the preservation of the symbols and stories that constitute Sephardic heritage with the protection and proliferation of Catalan existence.

## Heritage and Local Identity in Girona

Starting in the 1950s, the Franco regime prioritized Spain's tourism industry, hoping to attract European profits and to imbue the country with a more sympathetic, appealing image in the eyes of its neighbors. As Daniela Flesler and Adrian Pérez-Melgosa have noted, the result was a campaign promising that a trip to Spain would include exotic experiences that could not occur elsewhere in Europe: "religious festivals, bullfighting and flamenco," for instance (Flesler and Pérez Melgosa 2008: 66). Folk traditions such as these defined a saccharine, kitsch form of Spanish national identity that attempted to meet European expectations of Spain as a quaint and "backward" part of the world. "Spain is different!" read the slogan for Spanish tourism, cementing these anticipations of "otherness" in the minds of European tourists. At the cost of local cultures and histories, and perhaps even fueled by a motivation to suppress them, the national government emphasized symbolic indicators of national Spanishness.

Many Spanish city economies transitioned to the service industry in order to accommodate the millions of tourists flooding into the country. The official policy of *desarrollismo* (development) encouraged rampant and unregulated construction projects that disregarded urban and environmental sustainability. Nowhere was this tokenization and development more present than in Catalonia—particularly the beach towns of the *Costa Brava* where many Europeans spent their summers enjoying the fantasy of "slumming" it (Martin 2008: 220). New hotels and nightclubs pushed out historic buildings significant to Catalan history and culture.

When the Franco dictatorship collapsed in 1975 and Catalan autonomy became a key goal of democratic Spain, control over the tourism industry fell under the authority of regional governments, part of a wider trend of political devolution. Concurrent with devolution, the autonomous government of Catalonia emphasized Catalan culture and history. Catalan was reinstated as the official language of the autonomous region and 1977 saw the first official celebration of the National Day of Catalonia (*Diada Nacional de Catalunya*; Dowling 2013: 110). In this atmosphere, concerns over Catalan tourism were invested with conno-

tations of cultural revitalization. Regulation and restriction of the over-expansion experienced during the 1960s was tantamount to re-asserting Catalan identity. The 1977 constitution of the *Congrés de Cultura Catalana*, an organization of several Catalan culture societies, noted the connection between tourism and Francoist domination: "the term tourism has been converted into a synonym for destruction" (Pi-Sunyer 1996: 242-243). Franco's tourism policies were thus viewed as part and parcel of the more general repression and elimination of Catalan culture experienced throughout the dictatorship years. However, the *Congrés* felt confident that, with the return of authority to the local and regional governments, they could "counteract decades of forced unification throughout the state" (Pi-Sunyer 1996: 242-243).

Along these same lines, several city governments in Catalonia, including Barcelona, Montblanc, Tarragona, Girona and Lledia, implemented conservation plans aimed at protecting their cities' old quarter, considered the nucleus of Catalan heritage (Fuses 1985: 160). New projects of tourism promotion, heritage recovery and anti-Franco politics melded together. Emphasizing these historic cities allowed Catalan city governments to express their own specific and local identities for the first time since the end of the Spanish Civil War.

In Girona, the process of historical reconstruction began with the 1979 election of Nadal as mayor (a position he would be re-elected to every five years until 2002). Trained as a historian (he initially wrote about Girona and Catalonia in the modern era) and a native of Girona, Nadal demonstrated a steadfast dedication to emphasizing the history of his hometown during his more than twenty year tenure as mayor. Most notably, in 1982, Nadal unveiled the "Special Plan of Interior Reform of the Old City" (*Plan Especial de Reforma Interior del Barri Vell*, also known as PERI), which laid out goals for restoring the medieval section of the city for the use of both local citizens and foreign tourists. In addition to the eventual creation of the Museum of Jewish History, the results of this project include the refurbished Archeological Museum of Catalonia, the Museum of the City of Girona, the Museum of Art of Girona (held in the former Episcopal Palace next to the Cathedral of Girona), a city "Cultural Center" located in the medieval Convent of Mercy, the installation and growth of the University of Girona, the restoration of the iconic houses on the Onyar River, and the conversion of the medieval city walls into a high-rise walkway (Espelt 2004: 120). In part, Nadal hoped that these cultural offerings would transform Girona's Old City into more than just a place for tourists to stay in between visits to the beach. A combination of housing projects, local business subsidies and historic conservation was meant to economi-



cally revitalize the Old City and make *it* the attraction.

The rehabilitation of the Old City had, according to Nadal and other officials, yet another driving motivation: the rediscovery of a local identity. In this way, the restoration efforts were tied to the legacy of the dictatorship and could not be promoted without allusion to repression under Franco. In 2003, Nadal published an essay called “Twenty Years of the Special Plan, a Surgical Plan, Not a Cosmetic One” which emphasized the ties between historical conservation and local identity politics. He highlighted the urgency behind the plan to protect the Old City: the sense that it was necessary to restore the stories of Girona’s past after the fall of Franco. Despite the many issues that faced the new municipal democracy in its early years, Nadal and his government chose to prioritize the Barri Vell in this “real crossroads, a decisive moment” (Nadal 2003b: 51). He declared that “recuperating the history had become almost as important as rebuilding the city” (Nadal 2003b: 51) and went on to emphasize the necessity of historical reclamation by asking:

How could the city throw overboard the legacy of 20 centuries, sediments of cultural heritage of all the generations that preceded us? How could we renounce the most essential part... of our history?... Could we allow its ruin, its degradation, its marginalization, its devaluation? On the contrary. We had to recuperate the references, the dignity, the sense of the history, redefine everything and face the future, break the momentary contradiction between history and modernity and make the recovery of history into the essence of modernity. (Nadal 2003b: 51-52)

He would repeat these ideas again when again explaining the PERI in a book actually about the city’s Sephardic past, writing that Gironan citizens would need “to grasp the essential aspects which define the city, in order to define its future” (Nadal 1990: 74). Nadal’s government thus presented the restoration of the Old City and the emphasis on local history as a means for Girona to become a collective unit that could express its own distinct identity and move beyond the Franco regime. The definition of the new, democratic Girona would be its history and its traditions—those very qualities that had been denied by the Franco government and neglected in order to encourage the expansion of tourism.

Not only does this assertion reflect Harrison’s language regarding active memory, it also highlights the role that heritage plays in the construction of “place identity.” As G.J. Ashworth, Brian Graham and J.E. Tunbridge (2007: 4) have observed, “people call upon an affinity with places... which, in turn, are used to legitimate claims to territory.” If

the memorialization of heritage is one “affinity” between a community (Gironans) and a place (Girona), then Nadal’s policies sought to constitute a greater degree of ownership of Girona by Gironans. Locals could use a strong “place identity,” supported by physical heritage, to resist narratives of national cohesion. Regionalism, as an ideology that emphasizes local belonging, arises from a specific place identity that cannot be replicated by others in the country or in the world. In this way, heritage is a type of knowledge that distinguishes the in-group from the others (Ashworth et al. 2007: 56). Officials, like those in the Girona local government, employ heritage in order to reclaim the “place” that is integral to their local identity.

What’s more is that several of the preservation projects themselves represented this ideology of reclamation. For instance, the medieval Convent de Sant Domènec, which was occupied by the military government during the final decades of the Franco regime, was restored under the Special Plan and then was chosen to house the Faculty of Arts of the University of Girona. Nadal explained that the “withdrawal of the military” allowed for the resurrection of the original, medieval concept of the convent, as a place dedicated to contemplation and thought. The link created between medieval and contemporary Girona buttressed Nadal’s assertion that Girona’s future would necessitate a return to the past. Similarly, Nadal interpreted the restoration of the medieval city walls as a return (*devolució*) to a time when Gironan identity was clearly delineated from the rest of the world. Once again behind the safety of this clearly stated boundary, Gironan citizens would be free to discover and employ their own local culture. Nadal thus referred to the recreation of the city walls as a “peak of liberation” (2003: 51), a phrase that resonated with the freedom that Catalonia had won with the end of the dictatorship.

Historic restoration projects in Girona acquired connotations of local cultural revitalization, anti-Franco rhetoric and the re-acquisition of Gironan territory. This engagement with the heritage of Girona raises the question: how would the government of the city approach the city’s medieval Sephardic past? Would citizens of Girona label the Sephardic past as their own, alongside Girona’s other monuments? Examining the case of the Museum of Jewish History in Girona reveals that the government of Girona, regardless of its officials’ and citizens’ non-Jewish ethnic and religious background, sought to recuperate Sephardic history and culture as a specific iteration of local Gironan identity.



## The Bonastruc ça Porta Center

The Patronat Municipal Call de Girona (Municipal Board of the Call of Girona) was officially formed at the beginning of 1992 in order to oversee the city's new center for Jewish cultural and historical studies (Albrech i Fugueras, 2003: 127). This public space, called the Bonastruc ça Porta, includes a museum dedicated to Jewish life in Catalonia as well as a library and research center for scholars of Judaica. Its name commemorates the most prolific kabbalist rabbi from Catalonia, Mosses Ben Nahman (known also as Nahmanides, as well as Bonastruc ça Porta in Catalan), best known for his participation in the royally sponsored Barcelona Disputation of 1263, in which he argued (against the Christian convert Dominican Friar Pablo Christiani and in front of King James I of Aragon) that Jesus was not the messiah. The museum occupies what some historians suggest was a medieval synagogue, which stood in the city's former Call. An architectural addition on top of the synagogue's patio holds the Nahmanides library.

The establishment of the Patronat organization culminated a project, authorized by the city government's Special Plan, to acquire the buildings of the former Call and turn them into a publicly accessible learning center. Girona's Call had been modified and reshaped many times since the Middle Ages, leaving some medieval Jewish structures in the basements of modern residences and businesses. In fact, the main building of the medieval synagogue that now holds the Center was owned by local entrepreneur Josep Tarrés i Fontan, who had used it since the late 1970s as a bar and restaurant named after a provincial kabbalist named Isaac the Blind (Isaac el Cec in Catalan). In addition to the food services, Tarrés i Fontan hosted expositions and celebrations of Sephardic culture in the building. A document written by the city government in the early 1990s credited Tarrés i Fontan for awakening people (particularly local citizens) to the Jewish history of Girona (Ajuntament de Girona 1991: 7). The large Star of David that decorated the patio floor of his restaurant remains a focal point of the current museum and is often used by the Patronat as a symbol for their project in official pamphlets.

However, as the Isaac el Cec restaurant became more popular locally and gained attention from scholars of Sephardic history, officials in the city government noted some concerns about the business that they felt deserved further attention. Furthermore, with the PERI in place, the government had a mission to make Girona's heritage sites more publicly accessible. Although vaguely defined in several of the museum's documents, the government (Nadal in particular) determined that the restaurant, while promoting topics of Jewish culture, focused too heavily

on making a profit and lacked a "dimension of historical rigor" that consequently offended people "related to the Jewish world" (Ajuntament de Girona 1991: 7). Also, the government feared that the private institution, subject to the busts of the economic market, could easily go out of business, leaving a valued piece of the city's "public patrimony" vulnerable to sale and further development. Rather than allow this to happen, the city government began purchasing the buildings of the former Call in September 1987 with the intention of creating an exclusively "cultural institution," as the government called the Center in a funding application to the World Monuments Fund (Hosta 1993: 1). By 1990, the government had acquired all of the buildings and their restoration commenced, continuing in several phases until 2003. During this time, the Center managed to put on several exhibitions about Jewish topics, including their inaugural exposition "The Jews of Catalonia," which opened on June 5, 1988 and traveled to Barcelona, Jerusalem, New York City, Paris and Buenos Aires in the early 1990s.

The various promotional and organizational documents created by the Patronat over this initial 13 year period of the project reveal a focused goal: the restoration of the lost pieces of Girona's local identity through an engagement with its Sephardic history. Officials in Girona took the city's Sephardic history as another opportunity to present and assert a local/regional identity that the Franco regime had systematically denied for four decades. As a result, the goal of creating a memorial museum dedicated to Girona's Sephardim intertwined with and took on resonances of a specific Catalan identity.

Consider the original name for the complex. As stated on the cover of a 1991 description sent to English-speaking potential donors, the entire institution initially went by the cumbersome title, "Bonastruc ça Porta Center: Catalan Museum of Jewish Culture and Nahmanides Institute of Sephardic and Kabbalistic Studies in the Restored Jewish Quarter of Girona, Spain" (Hosta 1991). Using the Catalan name for Nahmanides as the Center's main label demonstrates an attempt to emphasize the regional part of the kabbalist's identity. The name stressed the idea that Nahmanides was not only a Jew, but rather a Sephardic Catalan.

Moreover, the use of "Catalan" as an adjective for the museum separated this investigation of Jewish history from the parallel ones occurring in the Castilian part of Spain at the same time. In fact, when I told the museum's director, Silvia Planes, that I was interested in writing about Sephardic history, she emphasized that the first thing I would have to understand was the great difference between Jewish history in Spain and Jewish history in



Catalonia. She then drew me a small map, with a large line separating the two regions, marking Toledo with a small menorah and Girona with a Star of David. Similarly, when I spoke with Assumpció Hosta (the Director of the entire Center) she told me that part of the reason for creating the new museum in Girona was to “escape Spain” and the engagement with Sephardic heritage that had until that point been dominated by cities like Toledo and Madrid. In addition, on a Heritage Funds Program questionnaire from 1994, Hosta answered the question to whom did the “heritage element” belong by checking boxes for “the Region or County” and “the town,” but not “the Nation.” Elsewhere, Hosta stated that the people of Catalonia had their own specific reason for discussing Jewish history and culture, namely their shared experience of maintaining and protecting a culture and language. “I believe we understand better than the rest of Spain the problems of the Jews. We too have nationalistic urges, plus we have tried to preserve our own language” (quoted in *Washington Jewish Week*, 1992).

Indeed, Nadal stated in a speech to the Spanish Institute in New York in March 1993, “how much we in Girona do admire what the Jewish people have achieved throughout the whole of its history” that is, “the transmitting of the culture, religion, the language and many languages throughout the generations far away from their homeland...they have our full admiration” (Nadal 1993b). Catalans could recognize in Jewish history their own struggle for cultural and ethnic independence.

This emphasis on the relationship between Sephardic history and modern Catalan identity showed through in the 1989 promotional video, “Girona: The Mother of Israel, the Jews of Catalonia,” created by the Patronat and directed by Patricia Snyder (a board member of the Friends of Girona funding organization in the United States). The 30-minute video consisted of images of the Girona Call interspersed with interviews with historians, artists and citizens. Not surprisingly, it told a brief medieval history of Sephardic life in Catalonia, highlighted by the works of the Kabbalistic School under Nahmanides as well as the pogroms of 1391 and the Expulsion of 1492. More striking was the video’s focus on the meaning of Sephardic culture in Catalonia during and at the end of the twentieth century. It was this (in the opening words of the video) “desire to explore Catalonia’s Jewish past clearly felt in Girona,” that motivated the Call’s restoration and museum project. While the video showed some interviews with people of Sephardic descent, it ended with a meditation on the idea that, in Catalonia, “Jews and non-Jews alike are celebrating *their* Judaic past” (emphasis mine).

The final scene of the video showed Rosa Zaragosa, a non-Jewish singer who performs medieval Sephardic lyrics (written in Catalan with Hebraic characters) to which she writes traditional music. As her music played behind her, Zaragosa declares, “I, as a Catalan, recognize the importance of these songs, which were sung here.... It is important that they are sung here again, in this country.” Not only did Zaragosa refer to Catalonia as its own “country” with its own history and culture, but she predicated the significance of maintaining a Jewish past on identifying as an ethnic Catalan. As the final sentence of the video, her statement left the viewer with the impression that the Sephardic history of Girona was integral to the establishment of Catalan identity. The museum, as envisioned in this video, thus presented its goal as demonstrating that the Sephardic history and culture of Girona should be examined by Catalans in order to better understand what it means to be a Catalan, or more specifically a citizen of Girona, in the late modern era, regardless of religious affiliation.

Nadal repeated this idea in 1993 in several speeches he made in the United States and Israel as he sought to raise funds for the center, stating numerous times and in various ways that Gironan identity could not be complete without considering the city’s medieval Sephardic presence. At a dinner in New York sponsored by the American Sephardí Federation, Nadal lamented that the people of Girona had “only been explaining part of our true history,” referring to the Sephardic history of Girona as a “blank space” in the collective memory of the city (Nadal 1993a). He hoped that with the Nahmanides library, “the walls of Girona” would once again ring with the discussion of Jewish mysticism, and even declared that Girona contained an “intangible, spiritual resonance that cannot be denied.”

Nadal squarely placed the scope of the heritage project within the physical confines of Girona. Uncovering the Sephardic history of Girona served to better acquaint the people of Girona with the “density of culture” in which they lived. In understanding the Sephardic history of the city, its citizens could more completely develop their local and regional identity. To further stress the existence of a Sephardic identity within his city, Nadal ended each of these speeches with a Hebraic phrase repeated by Jews worldwide each Passover, but refashioned to fit this purpose. “Next Year in Jerusalem” became the dramatic send-off, “Next Year in Girona!” (Nadal, 1993a, 1993b).

Nadal had so emphasized the local significance of the Call project that it actually negatively affected his funding trip. According to a faxed letter from David Finn (head of the





Friends of Girona Board) to Nadal, American Jews who were approached by the museum for funds felt that the project was “too limited to command serious interest.” When the Friends organization met with Karl Katz, the former director of the Museum of Diaspora in Tel Aviv, to discuss a new strategy, he suggested a movement away from the “provincial” focus and towards a “full history of the Jewish experience in Spain” (David Finn to Joaquim Nadal, 1994). Though he had intended a different outcome, Nadal’s regional emphasis had clearly made an impression on his audience. As I elaborate below, his focus on Sephardic history and culture within the scope of regional and local heritage also shaped the design of the Museum of Jewish History within the Bonastruc ça Porta.

### The Museum of Jewish History in Girona

The Museum of Jewish History in Girona consists of three floors and eleven permanent exhibits, all within the structure of a medieval synagogue. The exhibit rooms cover a broad swath of Catalan-Jewish history and culture, ranging from early diaspora history to the works of Nahmanides himself. The museum seeks to evoke for its visitors the setting of Sephardic life in medieval Catalonia. It takes advantage of three-dimensional displays, audio-visual materials and replica objects to place the visitor in a recreated environment. In fact, besides the synagogue itself, the museum displays few “authentic” medieval artifacts, and instead fills its halls with facsimiles of artifacts from other institutions. Ramon Albrech i Fugueras, a history professor at the University of Girona and the eventual author of the guidebook for the Girona Call who served as a consultant to the museum, stated that the “absence of material remains sufficient in number and quality...the museum will be more technological” (Albrech i Fugueras 1991). Even the seal of Nahmanides, used as the Center’s main logo on official reports, is a copy of the real piece kept in Jerusalem.

Through its use of descriptive language and the life-sized pictures to complement the museum’s small collection of medieval artifacts, the Museum seeks to attract tourists from places other than Girona. However, Catalans have made up the majority of visitors to the museum. In 2007, for instance, Catalans accounted for 56.6% of all visitors (“Memoria,” 2007: 35). The second room of the museum even covers the basic aspects of Jewish life – including holidays and festivals like Hannukah and the Shabbat dinner. As Flesler and Pérez Melgosa (2008: 72) point out in their discussion of Sephardic museums elsewhere in Spain, this orienting technique indicates that a significant section of the museum’s visitors are not Jewish (and are therefore unfamiliar with these traditions).

The first exhibit room that the museum opened to the public permanently is “the cemetery room.” It holds the museum’s main medieval artifacts (other than the synagogue structure itself): the several 12th–15th century tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions on them, which were found in the middle of the 19th century during a railroad development project in the northern part of the city. These tombs were initially added to the collection of the Museum of Archeology in Girona, and were moved to the new Museum of Jewish History in 2000, when Nadal featured them as the central attraction of the museum’s official inauguration. Nadal intoned the importance of this event, saying that in this ceremony “the Jews symbolically return to home, closing the diaspora in this local environment” (quoted in *Diari de Girona*, 2000).

To reflect this “local environment,” the tombstones lie on top of floor panels decorated to look like fields of grass and daffodils, like those on the hill where they were found. The floor is lit from below, giving the room the impression of constant daylight (see Figure 2). The design of the exhibit itself emphasizes the physicality of Girona as a complement to the Sephardic artefacts displayed. Both Nadal and the museum design tie the tombstones and, moreover, the souls of the Sephardim that they represent, to Girona and thus encourage visitors to think of them as part of the city itself. Furthermore, by referring to Girona as the “home” of these deceased Jews, Nadal allows Catalans and Gironan citizens to think of their region and locality as once again inhabited by Sephardim, if only in the form of this symbolic gesture.

Travelling further into the museum, the visitor encounters a section labeled “Cultural Heritage” (which mainly covers the work of Nahmanides), a room dedicated to the co-existence of Christians and Sephardim during the Middle Ages, and a room chronicling the Barcelona Debate and the Expulsion. A short hallway separates the Debate and Expulsion gallery from the penultimate exhibit, which examines the exiled Sephardim after 1492. This is no ordinary hallway, however. A glossy, black and white image of clouds decorates its left wall and ceiling. A slender tree branch appears in this image as well; slightly blurry as though it is being pushed back and forth by the storm that rages around it. The inscription on the wall reads “In the Summer of 1492, around 1500 Jewish people exited from Catalonia, into exile.” A blown-up facsimile of a medieval painting showing Sephardim, bags in hand, leaving Catalonia graces the opposite wall. The image mirrors a large picture of the Arch of Titus, the image of diaspora that starts the museum’s journey a floor below. The metaphorical connection is implicit, but clear; storm clouds

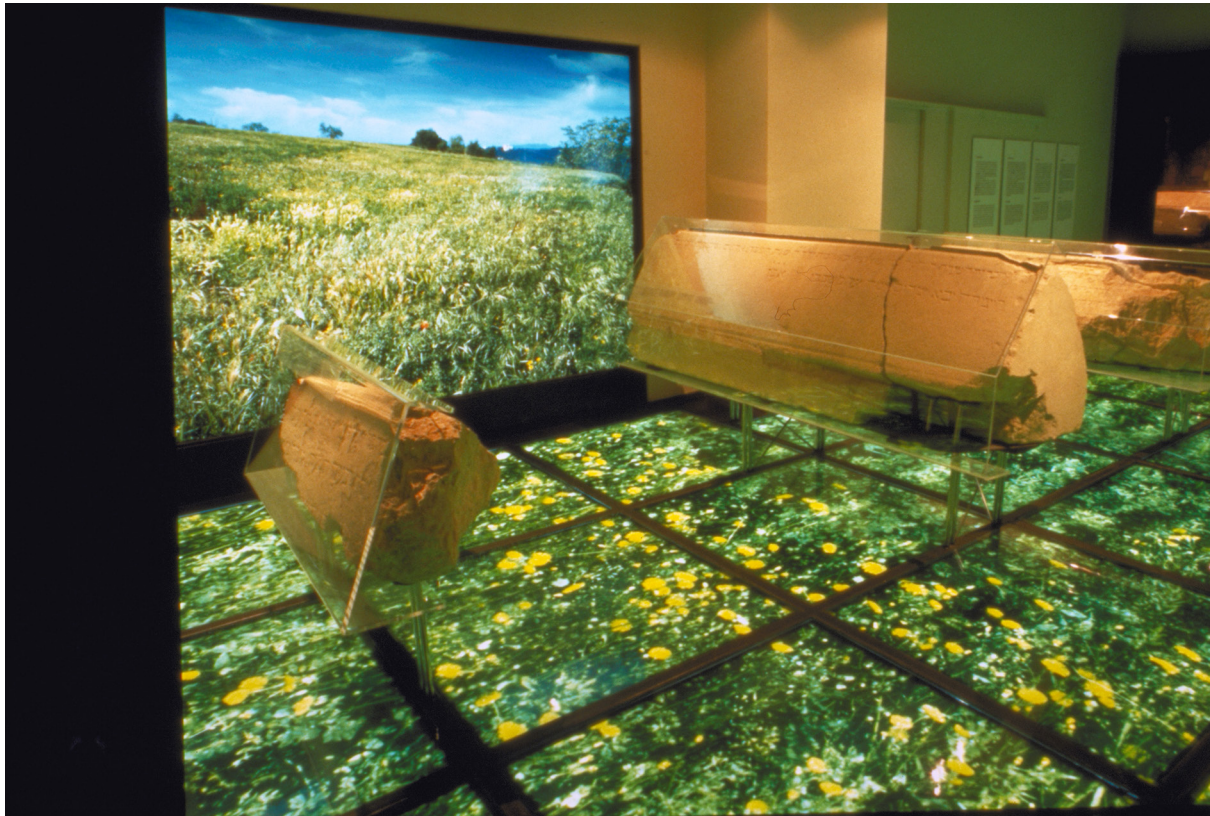


Figure 2: The Cemetery Room (courtesy of Patronat de Call)

gather as the Sephardim leave their homes for an uncertain future, just as they have been forced to do so by those in control throughout their history.

The origins of the storm metaphor are uncertain. However, it possibly relates to the five-century decline of Sephardic history in the collective memory of Girona's citizens, which Nadal mentioned in each of his speeches about the Call during the 1990s. The hallway stands, physically and metaphorically, between the 1492 expulsion and the modern attempt to restore Sephardic memory in Catalonia. The passage thus represents a period of time when the Sephardic history of Catalonia was ignored and, in a sense, clouded. Even if Nadal's words did not directly inspire the image in the hallway, the visitor still walks alongside the pictured Sephardim and turns his or her back on the "Sephardic Catalonia."

The visitor exits this passageway and enters a small exhibition about life in the Sephardic diaspora, accompanied by a few chairs. This room holds the final text that the visitor will see in the museum: a placard that covers the "The Exile." While the text begins by discussing Sephardic life elsewhere in the world, it ends by focusing on the effect the expulsion had on Catalonia and, ultimately, the main objective of the museum itself:

Today, there are few remains of the Catalan Jewish people who had to leave that which had been their land for so many centuries. Even so, we maintain its memory and its legacy because they comprise part of the essence and essential intrinsic wealth of our past, our history and our memory.

This statement acts as an invocation of the Catalan obligation—the "moral duty" as Nadal has called it—to maintain their history. According to this description, that "past/memory/history" serves as the basis ("essence") upon which Catalans construct Catalan identity. Furthermore, the historical Sephardic culture of Catalonia ceases to belong solely to the Sephardim or people of Sephardic descent. Rather, Catalans act as the custodians of this tradition in their absence and protect it as their own. This statement gives purpose to the whole museum: imploring the Catalan visitor to save his or her cultural heritage and avoid returning to the stormy hallway of collective amnesia. With this imperative declaration in mind, the visitor walks down the final hallway of the museum, and enters onto the Star Patio. Amidst the patio's medieval stone walls and persimmon trees, the visitor completes the living memorial, entering a Sephardic Catalonia, which represents the present and future of Girona and Catalonia.



## Conclusion: Territorialized Heritage

Many new museums and memorial sites in Europe have been dubbed “transcultural heritage.” These sites center on a group or community that differs from the majority cultural group of the country in which the heritage exists. Such spaces, argue their creators, seek to engender tolerance for difference and allow for greater intercultural interaction. This trend causes us to ask, along with Macdonald, “Given that historically heritage has been entangled with attempts to forge and maintain bounded, homogenous identities, especially of the nation-state... is heritage capable of [being]...open?” (Macdonald, 2013: 162).

In Girona, the creation of the Museum of Jewish History, an act that points towards the practices of transcultural heritage, was laden with territorial implications. The process of memorializing Gironan Sephardic history converged with a more general project to reclaim Gironan heritage and to assert the city’s local identity. This was an urgent project that sought to mark the physical spaces of the city as Gironan or Catalan in opposition to the totalizing national identity that had reigned for 40 years. One way to accomplish this goal was by memorializing local heritage, which was meant to bolster the place identity of Gironans. As such, the Museum of Jewish History converted the former Call from what could be considered a Jewish space—a place that once belonged to Sephardic Jews—into an example of local heritage; a Gironan space or even a Catalan space. This explains why much of the language and imagery in the Museum are directly aimed at solidifying Catalan identity.

The labeling of the Girona Call as a part of Catalonia has not gone unchallenged. Indeed, many Israeli Jewish tourists visit The Museum of Jewish History to conduct their own memorial and territorial activities. At least twice a week, Israeli tour groups stand in large circles on the Star Patio, sing the Sh’ma Y’israel and hold Israeli flags. Their banners refer to a nation-state, albeit one outside of Europe. In their own way, these Jewish groups claim the Girona Call for a national ideal, rather than a local one. Can we call this interaction between the local and national a dialogue? Or, instead, is it a case of two ships passing in the night? Fulfilling the goals of multi-culturalism, Jews and Catalans exist next to each other, but not necessarily in conversation; each territorializing the same heritage and history to a separate nation. This is not to say these memorial practices are destructive or inherently harmful for the communities involved. Rather, it is to point out that “transcultural heritage” has not completed the project of disassociating heritage from the idea of the nation-state. Territorial claims still accompany heritagization, regardless of the content of the heritage itself.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The city discussed in this paper is referred to Gerona in Spanish and Girona in Catalan. I have decided to use the Catalan spelling because it is the spelling used by the museum itself.

<sup>2</sup>This translation is on the wall of the museum next to the Catalan original. All other translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

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