

To whom does Jewish history belong?



Plaque honoring Samuel HaSardi
Marlet street, Barcelona. S. XIII

In January 16, 2004, newspaper AVUI, Catalunya, published a letter titled: "We have been robbed", were *Michael Freund* (Communications Director for prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu) claims back those properties expropriated to Jews in Mallorca (and all of Spain) during the process that led to the Expulsion in 1492.

The following article was published 18 January 2004, in the newsletter of Comunitat Jueva ATID de Catalunya, as a response Mr. Freund's note.

It had to be an outsider from the local Jewish community who would open the door so that we start addressing this issue. As a Jewish woman of Barcelona, I have been thinking about these ideas for quite some time. What began as an inspiration to design and conduct visits in the Call (Jewish quarter), has progressively turned into a much more complex and deep matter.

I would prefer to talk about something other than real estate (which is how Michael Freund puts it), about the appropriation of our story, our culture. This has been happening since the beginning of the Red de Juderías (*national association for the protection of sephardi heritage*), the Girona project, and will very soon be done in Barcelona. Museums set up around gravestones and objects from private collections or from other museums, behind glass display cases with very pleasant background music. We know what happens when the tradition and legacy of a minority people is "exploited" with a "cultural interest," without the real, authentic participation of its local representatives.

These initiatives should serve to invite diverse people to dialogue and debate over issues that are both pending and current. Instead, however, the material presented and the message conveyed are manipulated and controlled, reducing everything to a commercial offering. Not only is there a complete lack of information about the continuity of our people and our traditions – although at times this may not be expressed (or sometimes even disguised) – but the responsible authorities deal with these vestiges of an "extinct" culture, as they do with Roman antiquities. Archaeologists refer to these "star findings" as if they were trophies.

What will happen with all those other objects, such as *sifrei torah*, books, religious and household utensils and implements which have been found and collected over time? Although we speak of a scarce volume of objects, it all represents what the Jews had to abandon when leaving these lands. To whom does this heritage belong? To whom is it more meaningful? Who should explain what these objects represent and who is to decide about their use and fate? More importantly, what happens when we are dealing with burials and with bones? Must they also become museum pieces?

The Jews living here have an answer. But as long as we are a minority, how can we make sure that the authorities and society understand that it is now time for this issue to be handled with proper sensibility and dignity? Without a doubt, it is our responsibility to rebuild our past and its value to our identity. No one else can do it for us.

Barcelona will be the first city with a Jewish population to be admitted as a member of the Red de Juderías. This could be a real opportunity to do things in a different way. I ask: Do we have valid interlocutors? On 7 September 2003, the European Day of Jewish Culture, the city government announced its strong interest in renovating the Call (the medieval Jewish quarter). This ambitious proposal was proclaimed without even informing the Jews who live and work in this city, and without the Jewish community's involvement. During the presentation, there was no mention of a way in which we, the Jews of Barcelona, can identify with this project.

In conclusion, can we entrust the management of this concept to an administration that less than a year ago commissioned the excavation of a large part of the old Jewish cemetery in Montjuïc, where 557 burials were discovered? This was carried out in secret with total impunity, excavating the consecrated ground where our ancestors rest, some of them murdered in repeated attacks suffered during their long residence in this city.

In Judaism – as in the majority of cultures – respect and dignity for the dead is a fundamental precept. The Jewish communities in Barcelona have not been informed with total clarity about the excavation process, when each step should have been explained and the Jewish point of view should have been respected.

As of today, we can only say: Barcelona, this is not right.

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