

Whose heritage?

Jewish heritage is now a major industry in Spain. Cities have cooperated to form a network of Jewish quarters – Caminos de Sepharad – conservation is taking place and many festivals and lectures are held, often without any Jewish participation and sometimes with doubtful authenticity. JANET LEVIN talks to Barcelona's **DOMINIQUE TOMASOV BLINDER**, who is determined that the Jewish voice should be heard.

"I want to give a Jewish voice to the explanation of the Jewish past – and to connect it with the Jewish present. Many in Spain cannot see any connection. We are considered a species separate from our history. The authorities are not interested in talking to us. They say : "It is our history,

They say "It is our history, not yours"

not yours. It has nothing to do with religion'. This is partly because many of us are Ashkenaz. and they don't understand that Judaism is much more than religion."

Dominique Tomasov Blinder, grand child of Belarussian and Ukranian Jews who emigrated to Argentina, was born in New York and brought up in Buenos Aires. An architect by profession, she has lived in Barcelona for 17 years. She joined a group of families that were founding the city's Liberal congregation ATID, and in the last 9 years she has become a passionate advocate of the preservation of Jewish heritage – but from a Jewish point of view.

Dominique told me that a campaign she had mounted with Israeli architect David Stoleru had born fruit. A medieval Jewish cemetery in the town was to have had a public toilet built over it. "It is hidden from view but there are bones still there." There were petitions and much

pressure from the newly created Heritage Commission of the Jewish Communities of Catalonia, representing the three communities in Barcelona: Orthodox, Liberal and Chabad. Finally the Catalanian government agreed that the site should have the status of a landmark.

Dominique and David created earlier this year the Zakhor Study Centre for the Protection and Transmission of Jewish Heritage, with an office in the heart of the old Jewish quarter. It also has funding from the Rothschild Foundation to research the limits of the cemetery by study of local archives and is planning to publish a book on Jewish funerary customs. "We have to explain that these are different from Christian and Muslim customs. It is not acceptable for bones to be dug up." Now she and David Stoleru are advising on what form the memorial should take.

"Isn't it strange," I asked Dominique, "that it is Ashkenazi Jews that are at the forefront of such a campaign?"

"The Jews who came here before the 70s were mainly Orthodox from Turkey, Greece and North Africa. They kept a low profile, mostly determined by the local political context. Also, monuments are not a first priority when you are shaping up a community. With South American immigration came



along Liberal Judaism which had developed in those countries. We are keen to confront the outside world from a standpoint of Jewish identity."

It was not until she came to Barcelona and got involved in community life that Dominique reconnected with her Jewish roots. Now she conducts tours of Jewish Barcelona and maintains the website: Jewish Spain

SEE FOR VISITORS page 26 for website details

ARCHAEOLOGICAL BATTLES

The activities of Dominique Tomasov and her colleagues on Barcelona's Jewish Heritage Commission have generated a debate in the Catalan press.

Last May an ancient Jewish cemetery was discovered in Tárrega, a small town west of Barcelona. The authorities decided to excavate the site and had planned to send the human remains to the laboratories at the University of Barcelona for tests.

The Jewish Heritage Commission approached the authorities and explained the Jewish tradition that made this unacceptable. They succeeded in

persuading the authorities to rebury the exhumed bodies in the Jewish cemetery of Barcelona.

This resulted in a manifesto from three archaeological associations deploring that respect for a religious tradition had impeded scientific research.

When this appeared in the press letters from the public unanimously supported the Jewish community's position. Dominique repeated to me the comment of a workman on the site: "I may only be a tractor driver but I am far from being simple and I read a lot about Jewish culture. By seeing the way

you handled these dead yesterday, I was able to understand how you survived until today, regardless what you were subject to during all history".

Said Dominique: " Unfortunately exhumation is still continuing at Tárrega and we still have to press for the bodies to be reburied. There is still a lot to do. We have to work to create the legal framework to prevent excavations of Jewish cemeteries, anywhere in Spain."



Tárrega Jewish cemetery