View of Split from the Jewish cemetery

Split's Jewish Community

Tucked away down a small back street, called Zidovski Prolaz, or the Jewish Passage, and up a set of dim stairs, only just around the corner from the building guidebooks trumpet as being the oldest building in the world used as a Christian Church, is hidden the second oldest continuously used Sephardic Synagogue in the world.

Its more famous neighbour, the Cathedral of Saint Dominus, was completed at the beginning of the 4th Century AD as a mausoleum for the Roman Emperor Diocletian, who had constructed his retirement palace around it, and was converted into a church during the 8th Century. Today it anchors the city both visually and spiritually - Croatia being one of the most staunchly Catholic societies.

Split's Synagogue was built during the middle of the 16th Century into the western wall of Diocletian's palace, by Jews escaping the purges in Spain and Portugal.

It's amazing that the small city of Split, Croatia, with a population of less than a quarter of a million, contains both these religious relics. However, the two communities, Christian and Jewish, have lived together in a complicated relationship for much longer than 500 years.

Jews in Roman Dalmatia

Jews arrived in Dalmatia, the region of Croatia of which Split is the main city, in the early centuries of the Christian era, with the conquering Roman armies. The Romans established the city of Salona just behind Split, in the 1st Century, and there Jewish traders and craftsmen settled. Archaeological excavations have discovered artefacts of Jewish origin dating from this period. Jewish fortunes varied depending on the political whims of the emperor of the time; Emperor Diocletian had a good relationship with Jews while feeding many early Christians to the lions, while later Emperors weren't always as friendly.

The Pre-Sephardic Community in Split

When Salona was overrun by Avars in the 7th Century, the Jewish community escaped with the other inhabitants to nearby islands before finally settling inside the walls of Diocletian's Palace. The adapted palace became the seed for today's town of Split.

Within the last 50 years, archaeologists have discovered numerous menorahs carved on the limestone blocks of the basement walls in the southwest quarter of the palace. These, combined with several historical texts, lead them to believe that the pre-Sephardic Split Jews inhabited this section of the old town.

Sephardic Influx

The Spanish and Portuguese pogroms against their Jewish communities at the end of the 15th Century were a disguised blessing for Split. The fleeing Sephardim were quick to grasp the possibilities Split's location between the Orient and Western Europe provided.

The large number of refugees, or Ponentini, banned from living in many other Adriatic ports, transformed the local Split Jewish community. They built the still-used synagogue attached to the northwest wall of the Palace (the torah actually sits inside the Roman wall), in the early-16th Century, and settled in that quarter, shifting the Jewish focus of Split. This area later became the Jewish Ghetto in the late-18th Century and is still today called the Get.

On arcadian Marjan Hill, with its commanding view of the town, permission was given to create a Jewish cemetery in 1573. It is one of the oldest and largest in Europe. The Sephardim constructed the gravestones in their tradition, with them lying horizontal instead of standing vertical, many with Sephardic double-curved Hebraic text.

The tolerant attitude of the Splicani to Jews became further genial after the completion of the lazaretto, a building complex constructed on the waterfront, by Ponentino Daniel Rodriga, in 1572. The lazaretto's role was two-fold - to facilitate trade as well as to quarantine goods and people. It was the second such quarantine constructed after Dubrovnik in the world.

Rodriga convinced eastern traders that it was safer to caravan their products from the Ottoman Empire overland to Split rather than using pirate-vulnerable maritime routes. As a result of the increase in economic traffic, Split boomed. Jews became a vital link in the trade

Interior of the synagogue

chain between their coreligionists in the east and those in Venice.

Within a short time the lazaretto was extremely important to Venetian commerce. So much so that when, during the 17th Century, Turks threatened the city, and military engineers recommended transferring Split's population and demolishing the town because its poor defensive position, Venetian authorities ignored them and instead constructed new fortifications to protect the town and its important asset.

Split's Jewish community helped save the city more than once. Another time, with the Turks attacking Split's walls, Jews defended the northwest tower of Diocletian's Palace. Locals have called it the Zidovska Kula, the Jewish Tower, ever since.

World War Two until Today

Like the rest of Europe, Jews in Split suffered during World War Two. The Italian Fascists, who controlled the city from 1941 until 1943 destroyed the Synagogue and burnt records and artefacts in the main square. But there were no deportations until the German Nazis and their Croatian nationalist cronies, the Ustashe, arrived in 1943. Over sixty percent of the 300 person pre-war Jewish population died during World War Two, either in concentration camps or fighting

with the Partisans.

After the war, Yugoslavia became a socialist republic but it was never as authoritarian as the Warsaw Pact countries and it was possible to hold a passport which allowed Jews to travel to Israel or other countries easily.

Yugoslavia violently exploded during the early 1990s. The newly formed Republic of Croatia quickly found itself in trouble with the Simon Wiesenthal Centre and the Israeli Government because of comments made by its first president, Franjo Tudjman, and the re-naming of streets for former Ustashe war criminals. During the war against the Serbs, Ustashe symbols reappeared, as graffiti on walls or in more official locations. But this was a result of a minority of nationalists seizing power during the tensions of war. These attitudes have disappeared in the 15 years since the fighting finished as Croatia has become more a part of the international community and attempts to join the European Union. Anti-Semitism is now possibly less of a concern in Croatia than most Western European states.

The Split Jewish community is going through a revival and has returned to about 300 worshippers. At the moment no rabbi lives in the city but this doesn't stop regular prayers being held. After over 2000 years Jews are still a strong essential part of life in Split.

For those thinking of visiting Split, groups can ask for permission to pray at the Synagogue. The office can be contacted on +385 (0)21 345 672. There are no specifically kosher restaurants in town, but at the local macrobiotic restaurant food is prepared correctly. Local restaurants will prepare fish on the grill in aluminium foil if requested.

Currently no airline offers direct flights between Split and Tel Aviv but Croatia Airlines offers them between Zagreb or Dubrovnik and Tel Aviv in the summer.

Thanks to Ana Lebl and Drazena Strize at Split's Jewish Community Centre for their time and Snjezana Perojevic for providing her master's thesis on the Lazaretto.

Editor's Note

Many thanks to Shane Braddock who supplied the photograghs and organised the article on the Jewish connection in Split. Shane and his partner Julie run tours from Split specialising in adventures, including kayaking. When I caught up with the young couple late January they mentioned the old Jewish cemetery and shule, and I asked if they would take some photograghs and perhaps write a short article. Shane and Julie don't do things by halves so if you are planning a trip to Croatia you might want to contact them at info@lifejacketadventures.com

Blanka Schaffer

Blanka Schaffer (Klein) was born in Krapina, Croatia, (the former Yugoslavia) in 1919. She lived with her parents and two older brothers in a large home. Krapina was a village about 50 kms. and an hour's train ride from the capital Zagreb. At the age of 8, Blanka moved with her family to Zagreb to attend school there. They lived in the same block of units as Blanka's maternal grandparents, the Bohm's. They were a traditional Jewish family who always celebrated Shabbat with a clean home and white tablecloth, lighting of the candles, chicken soup with noodles, poultry and vegetables.

Her schooling consisted of one year of full time Jewish education, from ages 8-9, followed by middle school and high school where they were taught Hebrew and general Jewish education once a week at school (Shlomo was the name of the teacher) when the other non Jewish students had their religious education.

The Klein's went to shul on the high holidays in Crkivernica, which was nearest to them. There were two Jewish communities in Zagreb. One small community were orthodox, fully observant and the rest were less religious. The Klein's were Ashkenazi and their shul was a neologue, where the men and women sat separately but had a mixed choir and the choir was occasionally augmented by non Jewish singers. When they were on holidays away from Zagreb, they went to the Sephardic shul in Split (which was in the ghetto during the war) and even went to the old shul in Dubrovnik on one occasion. This is a brief picture of Blanka's family life which was lived in a close, warm and happy environment.

Blanka married George in 1940 and moved to Belgrade away from her family.

One year later in 1941 they fled from Belgrade to Split just prior to the German occupation of Croatia. A brief overview of their escape has been published in "Without Regret". None of Blanka's family would leave, believing they would be safe, and they all perished at the hands of the Germans with the exception of one cousin. When the Germans occupied Italy in 1942 Blanka with her husband George, his mother Irene and brother Andrew, walked over the Alps into Switzerland. They were interned until the end of the war when they were repatriated to Italy. In 1949, they immigrated to Perth with their 5 year old daughter Danielle as well as bringing a modern concrete block making machine and started up a company called "The Swan Block Company". The business grew and diversified to become Schaffer Corporation Pty. Ltd., which is run by their son John.

When Blanka arrived in Perth many women helped her to settle in to the community. They became members of Temple David because their friends were members. Blanka was a member of Wizo and donated to the various charities that needed her help. Although many of her friends are no longer living, the memories of the past 57 years living in Perth have been plentiful. There are many of her recent friends who like herself are immigrants (from South Africa) and they share similar values and experiences.

Blanka is 87 years old with the sharpest mind and wit, doted on by her children Danielle and John, five grandchildren and two great grandchildren. Blanka now lives closer to her children and Shabbats are regularly spent with her family.

Debbie Schaffer