



A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF MELILLA (SPAIN)



Melilla has been a Spanish city since 1497, located in North Africa on the border with Morocco. It is connected to various Spanish cities by sea (Málaga, Almería, Motril) and by air (Madrid, Málaga, etc.). Melilla's main hallmark is its multiculturalism: Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Roma people, along with other minority groups, coexist in peace, respect, and harmony.

In 1862 its borders were defined in an unusual way—through cannon fire. Three shots fired from the cannon *El Caminante* expanded the city's limits; they were launched from the Victoria Grande fortress, giving the city a new perimeter of 12.5 km².

In 1863 Melilla, along with Ceuta, the Chafarinas Islands, and Alhucemas, was declared a *Free Port*. However, in Melilla there was no civilian population to handle the trade that benefited from different tax advantages.

Two years later, in 1864, a Royal Decree allowed the entry of Jewish and Muslim traders of Moroccan origin.

The first to arrive were Jews from the city of Tétouan, followed by some who came from Tangier, Casablanca, and Gibraltar. Later, others came from the Rif region.

The first Jewish residents placed their trust in a city that was beginning to take off economically and invested their capital in it, establishing various businesses. Among these were essential goods stores, the first privately funded funeral home, and the first theater company. They also invested in real estate and introduced a new sport—tennis. They lived in the fortified city until the late 19th century.

The first neighborhood was *El Polígono*, but their true real estate investment was in the city center, making Melilla the second Spanish city with the most Art Nouveau buildings, after Barcelona. It came to be known as *Little Jerusalem*, *Tsion*, or the *Golden Triangle*.

But there is much more. Melilla is the bridge of return for Jews to Sepharad (Spain), despite there being no documentary evidence of Jews before the expulsion of 1492. We can confirm that there were burials and populations in other Spanish cities after the expulsion, such as in Madrid, Ceuta, and Seville, around the 18th century. But it is in Melilla where they settled as an authentic community and reached 16 milestones before the rest of Spain.

In the 19th century:

- First synagogue, in 1866, belonging to the Salama family (a total of 26 have existed).
- Rabbi Halfón Hachuel, brother-in-law of Jacob Salama.
- San Carlos Cemetery (1870–1892), today included in the Route.
- Mikveh or ritual bath.
- Jebrá Kadishá (charitable burial society).

In the 20th century:

- The Jewish Quarter (1905), with streets named Tel-Aviv, Tsion, Haifa.
- First organized Jewish Community, created May 24, 1908.
- Dayan Abraham Hacohén Z.L. (rabbinical judge).
- Yeshivá (religious study center).

- Talmud-Torah School (today the only private Jewish school in Spain, since 2006).
- Shojet (kosher butcher).
- Sofer (Torah scribe).
- Mohel (person who performs circumcisions).
- Matzah oven.
- Monument to a Jew, Mr. Yamín Benarroch (2004).
- The only *Eruv* in Spain (religious boundary allowing certain actions on the Sabbath, such as carrying).

By 2025, there are 6 synagogues, 1 Kolel (Talmudic study center), a private school with regulated education supplemented by religious education and Jewish history, and its own synagogue. There are also 2 shops and a kosher restaurant, a kosher hotel for Shabbat, and the Eruv, continuously supervised by the Rabbinical authority.

The local government provides annual financial support for community activities. In December, on the occasion of Hanukkah, a public event is held with kosher food, a way of demonstrating integration. Jews in Melilla can freely walk the streets wearing a kippah, among other things.

Since the creation of the Mem Guímel Cultural Association, integration has been promoted by serving as an outward face of the Jewish community, introducing Sephardic Jewish culture in all its forms, and participating in events of all cultures. Researching and bringing to light the entire history, heritage, culture, traditions, and legacy has made it a bridge of connection with the vast Melillense Jewish diaspora through the internet and social media.

Another of its projects is the "Ruta de la Melilla Sefardí" (Sephardic Melilla Route), which tells the Jewish history of Melilla. Several places are visited, such as the Sephardic Museum, San Carlos Cemetery, Synagogue, the modernist route of Melilla, and neighborhoods that have had a predominantly Jewish presence, such as the Hebrew Neighborhood and the Poligono.

For all these reasons, we cannot talk about the contemporary history of Melilla without mentioning all that the Jewish community has contributed. They have helped distinguish the city as one of the Spanish cities with the most modernist architectural heritage, with over 500 buildings in this style. Moreover, the arrival of the Jews led to the cultural diversity for which the city is known, and of which its residents are so proud.

Melillense Jews in the diaspora are the best ambassadors of Melilla, maintaining a special relationship with their hometown or their descendants.

For more information:

- www.memguimel.es (website with extensive content about Melilla and its Jewish history).
- www.reenkontro.com (website promoting Jewish tourism in Melilla).
- Social media and WhatsApp +34 658 034 000 (for the Sephardic Melilla Route).
- Travel promotions to the city through www.bonosmelilla.es

Kaminos de Leche i Miel

Shalom Umeboraj

