

# The Time Elevator

By Shelley Werner

For our summer vacation we crafted a “Time Elevator” experience for our family. This kind of simulator ride, which can be found in some European cities, involves watching a movie with scenes from the local history, while jostling your chair so you feel like a participant. In our version we wanted to experience the story of the Jewish people, and take a small step toward understanding our place in the world, and in the history of Israel. We embarked on a journey that would include a snapshot of recent history, reach back into biblical days, and touch on the Middle Ages, when the turmoil of emerging nations affected the Jewish story too.

For our “Time Elevator” we paused to consider what it would be like for us as Jews in each stop along the way. We were travelers without community, without a tour group, without a Jewish context. This resulted in an interesting phenomenon: as we encountered the people and places that told the stories, we learned the script as told by others. Our guides were not Jewish, and their interpretation of Jewish past shed light on how our ancient story has been codified and filed by others.

So to the beginning, which impacts upon the end. We started in Amsterdam and continued to Israel, eventually ending our trip in the south of Spain.

We went to Amsterdam to see Anne Frank’s house, but we began at the Jewish Museum where the second floor gallery houses the history of the Jews of Holland. And it is the history of the Jews from Spain. Here we saw the story of a displaced group of immigrants, dating from around 1500, seeking a new home to invest their toil and reignite their culture. They were desperately poor but established a Kosher way of life. They were tolerated more than accepted by the Dutch, and allowed gradually to integrate and

grow. The community thrived not so much from a warm embrace, but rather a benign neglect on the part of Dutch society. Here was the birthplace of Baruch Spinoza, the first really modern Jew, who from Sephardic roots proclaimed a Jewish identity separate from an observant life of the synagogue. This was radical at the time, although commonplace now, and he was shunned by the presiding Jewish leadership of his time.

Over the years, with a series of edicts, coupled with the growth in stature of some illustrious Jewish advisors, the community became endowed with more and more privileges and rights, to ultimately join the citizenry as equals under the law.

Under the Nazi occupation, old divisions, as with a concrete foundation that has been cemented over separate pieces, began to crack in the very places where the old and new sections were once seamed.

There is a photograph in the Jewish museum that I found particularly chilling. It’s taken with a camera discreetly held between slightly parted curtains. The shot reveals the street below, showing a group of Jews as they huddle together waiting to be deported. The people stand together, looking around bewildered, as if wondering how they came to be “others.” They didn’t think of

themselves as Jews first; it was a big surprise for them to find out that anyone else did. This civilized Dutch interior, with its flowered curtains on the inside, the same interiors as painted in still life by Vermeer, reveals itself to be only civilized on the surface.

From Holland 107,000 Jews were deported to the camps during the Nazi occupation, representing 85% of its Jewish population, the largest proportion of any country outside Poland. Anne Frank’s house has been turned into an extensive museum about human rights, where audiovisual presentations feature debates over current issues: free speech, hate literature, the right to demonstrate. The one thing I found rather lacking was the sense of Anne herself.

The rooms in the secret annex are kept empty, and dark, the way they were found at the end of the war, and the dim interior a reminder of the way the family



The most famous view in Cordoba—the Street of Flowers and the Mezquita beyond.

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lived, with the curtains closed. The contrast is extreme, between the quaint pretty Dutch canals, and the stark emptiness of those rooms.

In The Hague we visited with friends Peter Kramer and Ruth Bettina Birn. Peter is with the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, and Ruth Bettina, formerly Canada's Chief Historian, is doing research on a little-known Nazi war criminal for future publication. Both of them have spent years investigating the trail and legacy of crimes against humanity. As a prosecutor, Peter is able to bring an action response to the uncovering of heinous acts on the part of the accused. Ruth Bettina is a sleuth of sorts, delving through boxes and dusty piles of records to expose a perpetrator of atrocities during the war.

I asked these two accomplished researchers the simplest of questions: Why? Why do people do horrible things to others, commit atrocious personal crimes against each other?

Despite the most complicated issues of nationalism, political betrayal and economic uncertainty, the fundamental mystery remains: What primal instinct pushes people to violate a fundamental code of community, that is, to commit or endorse state-sanctioned murder?

Ruth Bettina summed it up simply: Fear. At its heart, the motivation for extraordinary crime is the core belief that you must "get them before they get you." The imaginary menace that lurks in the "others" is the central motivator for the unremorseful action of the perpetrators. If your neighbors are demonized, expunging them is not only appropriate, it's imperative for the safety of your family.

At its heart, that's what complicity is all about.

In Spain, there is no equivalent to the Anne Frank House to be found. Looking for a memorial to the vanquished Jewish community was like a treasure hunt, without a treasure at the end. We arrived in Toledo ready to explore the glory days of the Sephardim. We met our guide Luis at the train station and we walked up to the fortress walls under the blazing sun. The city has a storied past, was a stronghold for Franco, and the capital of the Catholic Church in Spain, which it still is today. When we told Luis we were interested in the Jews of Toledo, and their history, he looked at us blankly.

Luis was very proud of the massive basilica and his Catholic traditions. He showed us the glittering golden display holder for the host that is paraded on Corpus Christi. He explained the intricate carvings in the choir loft that showed all the heroes of the Old Testament leading up to Jesus, which proved, as he

said, that He was the Messiah.

We walked through the winding alleys of the *Juderia*, the Jewish Quarter, and saw the complexity and grand extent of what must have been a bustling and vibrant culture. Luis took us to one of the two synagogues that remain there. It's a large empty space, with Moorish architecture, due, he said, to the prevalent workmanship of the time. In the synagogue was an art display, featuring paintings that integrate Hebrew writing and images of Jesus nestled within the walls of Hebrew Jerusalem. The monks and nuns who tend the *sinagoga* wear crosses with Jewish stars on them.

The expulsion of the Jews in 1492 by Isabella—"La Catolica"—was as much about forced conversion and the Inquisition as it was about evacuation. And one feels that those sentiments are still present. The Jews have gone, and better yet, have been made to see the light of Christianity in Spain, and that's really all you need to know. From Luis we got the sense that the Catholics own the Jewish past. He also told us there is another synagogue in Toledo, and perhaps we should go there. It was rather mysterious the way he said

it—those were his parting words to us.

I'm glad we did look for it on our own. We followed the circuitous streets of the *Juderia* to emerge into a square, and saw the sign: *Sinagoga*. Darn, I thought, it's Saturday. We won't be able to go in. No problem. The people running it aren't Jewish. We entered the large main space and sat against the walls on benches. The intricate wooden carving on the Ladies' Gallery and geometric Moorish arches informed us as to the scale of the former community, and its wealth.

As we continued into the Museum area we struggled to understand what was being depicted, as most of the explanations were not in English. It soon became apparent that this was not the story of the Jews of Spain, but rather a Museum about Jews. "The Jewish people circumcise their male children after eight days, they celebrate Passover in the Spring, eat Kosher food, etc."

There is a scene in the movie *Planet of the Apes* where the human hero walks into an exhibit and realizes that he's in a museum about the human race. That's how it felt to us. There we were, and we felt like notifying the other strolling visitors, "Hey, we do those things. We're actual Jews, and we're still here."

In Cordoba is the large *Mezquita*, a massive Moorish monument converted to a Catholic basilica. The



The Juderia remembered—in name only.

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Catholic Church was also big on architectural conversion, and believed every building to be a building block that could be recycled into its own use, much as it viewed people. We went to view the ancient *sinagoga*, the oldest one in Spain. The one in Toledo was open on Shabbat. We were dismayed to find this one closed... because it was Monday; devoid of meaning as a place of worship, it is now just another civic museum.

We were able to enter The Jewish Museum, however, which is right across the street. Also owned and operated as a business by non-Jews, it was filled with artifacts collected by the proprietors. Again, not a museum of Spanish Jewish history *per se*, but of the Jewish people themselves. There was a framed document with elaborate Hebrew writing that I explained to them was a *Ketubah* (Jewish marriage contract).

The streets of the *Juderia* are angular, with double story buildings that lean, and cobblestone streets that are like a maze. The streets and walls are sparkling clean and give the appearance of a whitewashed stage set. Many of the streets and plazas have names reminiscent of the former inhabitants, like Shmuel Halevy Plaza... You can buy all sorts of plaques and tiles that say Shalom or Chai but the feeling is, if you want this, we'll sell it to you, just don't ask any questions. No Jews, no problem.

The same vacant emptiness prevails in the *Juderia* as in Anne Frank's house, as though the occupants have just vanished. And so we end at the beginning. A sad realization occurred to me, when I thought about the Sephardim, how they were once an affluent and distinct community, overfilling these dense Jewish quarters, how they were banished and traveled afar, searching for a safe place to put down roots. And in many of those places, 500 years later, they were once again left standing in the street, taken from their homes, having become "others", when Hitler got them in the end.

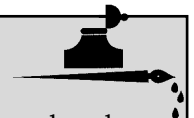
And so we emerged, blinking in

the harsh sunlight, silent in the deserted alleyways of the ghetto. There is nobody left who knows us Jews on these whitewashed streets. To visit the sites of the *Juderia* is to shine a telescope backwards with a tiny light on the end; a long narrow tunnel through which you can sense the colour and texture of a vibrant era, but even the echoes are gone. We had the feeling that the Jews of Spain are not just gone. They have been erased.

We returned to Canada, to our

jobs, to summer camp, to the mundane makings of Winnipeg summer.... Planting a few annuals, going to the lake, but really also changed inside. We have seen how the years can wash over you, leaving your culture and community mute and invisible in some future past. All our icons, our pillars and steadfast rules of existence will be washed away. We all learned that even history "lite" can have an impact on the way we create meaning in the here and now. ♦

## Jottings by Sylvia Friedman



\* No doubt you have noticed that quite a number of our readers have passed away in the past few months, and I have found it most difficult to write about them. I am surprised that I seem to have known almost all of them. But then a thought has struck me about our friends that I must tell you about today: there is a common thread that touches them all: aside from the fact that they and /or their kids are *Outlook* readers, they all lived long, meaningful and fulfilling lives, and they were all very concerned about the world and did what they could to make it a better place for all humanity.

Our condolences go out to the Snider family of Vancouver, Judith and Deborah (Eric Fielder), Jeffrey (Jill) and Phillip and families on the loss of their father MITCHELL SNIDER.

To Sylvia and Don Downton of Richmond, BC and their children and grandchildren go our sympathy on the passing of COLUMBA SMITH.

On the loss of DAVID RANKIN, of Naramata, BC, our condolences go out to his wife Sophie and children, Naomi, Steve and Susan and their families.

To Janice Deutch in Winnipeg, please accept our deepest condolences on the loss of your aunt CLARA ZUKEN.

And on the passing of my very special friend BERNIE ZUKER of Toronto, my heart goes out to his wife Chris, and his children, Jana, Roanna and Jory and his sisters Val, Andrea, Gwen and brother Brian.

Yesterday, as we were getting ready to go to press, we received word that our irreplaceable driving force, GIL LEVINE of Ottawa, just died. Our deepest sympathy goes out to his wife Helen and his daughters Tamara and Karen. Gil played such an important role in continuing the magazine that we are planning a special tribute to him in a forthcoming issue.

\* We are so happy to be able to report that both Winnipeg and Toronto had very successful *Outlook* events this past month. See the report on the Winnipeg Banquet on page 12 in this issue. We will be carrying a feature on the Toronto Luncheon in the next issue.

\* And finally, a very hearty *mazel tov* to our friend, reader and supporter DR. MARTIN SCHECHTER, who has been given the Norman E. Zinberg Award for his work on a unique clinical trial investigating the benefits of mediation-assisted therapy for people suffering from chronic opiate addictions. Marty is the national director of the Canadian HIV Trials Network and was the principal investigator for the NAOMI Project (North American Opiate Medication Initiative), a three-year-long clinical trial.

Till next year,  
Sylvia