FLEEING THE HOLOCAUST

Catalonia and the Jewish refugees in the Second World War

Museum of Jewish History, from 29 October 2015 to 17 January 2016

An exhibition by the Museum of History of Catalonia and the Diputació de Barcelona, presented in Girona with the collaboration of the Museum of Jewish History



Museu d'Història de Catalunya

Diputació Barcelona

PATRONAT CALL DE GIRONA

Ajuntament de Girona

Diputació de Girona

Generalitat de Catalunya
Departament de Cultura

INTRODUCTION

Six of the nine million Jews living in Europe died in the pogrom instigated by the Nazi regime in both Germany and the territories occupied by the army during the Second World War (1939-1945). It was the greatest genocide in human history. A few thousand managed to escape from the barbarity by crossing the Pyrenees, first officially through the border controls and later clandestinely over the mountains in epic escapes. From the life stories of some of those people, this exhibition investigates that little known episode of our recent past, in which Catalonia played a leading part.

MAPS

- Escape routes of the Jewish refugees fleeing from occupied France, and places where they had stayed and where they had been arrested on the Iberian Peninsula.
- Main concentration and extermination camps in Europe during the Second World War.

OBJECTES

Records of the men and children attended at the Hospici de Girona, 1927-1948
General Archives of Diputació de Girona, reg. 3088.

Hand-drawn maps (1943)
Historical Archives of Girona, Govern Civil de Girona collection, reports from the frontier and investigations #46 and #500.

File cards of Jewish refugees in prison
Alt Empordà Regional Archives, Centre Penitenciari de Figueres, reports #908582-Ernest Simons and #908447-Marcus Leon Sylvio Weyser.

1* EDUARD HEILBRUNER AND LINA LEVI

Eduard Heilbruner (Sulzburg, 1876) and Lina Levi (Freiburg, 1883) came from the Black Forest region of Germany. In October 1940 they were deported to France with thousands of German Jews. The French government, which was collaborating with the German army of occupation, had them interned in Gurs concentration camp, where they spent weeks in inhuman conditions. Later they were transferred to Récébédou camp, south of Toulouse, and lastly to Des Milles camp near Marseille.

Their arrest in France alerted their daughter Rosl who had taken refuge in Barcelona in the early 1930s. She was married to Kurt Sontheimer, who managed the branch of the Lehmann porcelain and toy company which his parents ran in Nuremberg. Rosl and Kurt went through all kinds of formalities to obtain the authorisation that would allow Eduard and Lina to travel to Spain.

However, in October 1941 the Spanish consul in Marseille, Valentín Via Ventalló, turned down the applications and, on 30 August 1942, Eduard and Lina sent a last letter to their daughter, well aware that they would be deported to Poland. The couple died in Auschwitz extermination camp.

THE PERSECUTION OF THE JEWS IN EUROPE

When Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933 he institutionalised the persecution of the Jewish people. In 1938 it spread to Austria and the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia. With the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, the harassment continued in the occupied countries in different forms: concentration, ghettoes, murders by mobile commandos, concentration camps and extermination camps.

THE FIRST JEWISH REFUGEES IN BARCELONA

The first anti-Semitic measures in Germany brought about the exodus of thousands of Jews. Many of them settled in Barcelona, taking advantage of a warm welcome from the authorities and the work opportunities provided by the city.

THE CONCENTRATION AND EXTERMINATION CAMPS

The Nazi regime created a vast universe of concentration in the territory under its control (Germany, Austria, Holland, Hungary, Poland, etc.) to intern both the political opposition and the Jews. Within the boundaries of what is now Poland six extermination camps equipped with gas chambers were built: Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor and Treblinka. As well as the six million Jews, in the camps thousands of Spanish Republicans, Gypsies, homosexuals and political opponents of the Nazis were also murdered.

* The numbering corresponds to the different exhibition modules

2* VICTOR PAPO

Victor Papo (Milan, 1927) was a member of a family of Sephardic Jews who had settled in Paris, where they had migrated from Italy and Turkey. The couple and their two sons, Alfredo and Victor, acquired Spanish nationality under the Royal Decree issued by Primo de Rivera in 1924. In 1940 the German forces occupied the hotel they managed and, when the Vichy government applied the first racial laws, the Spanish consul, Bernardo Rolland, advised Victor's father not to register as a Jew with the Germans and supplied him with a protection document.
After they were denounced by an employee of the hotel, Rolland advised them to flee immediately since they were in danger of being arrested and interned in Drancy camp. They took a night train to Hendaye and from there entered Spain to settle in Barcelona, where they started a new life. Alfredo was called up for military service, whilst Victor began his studies at the Industrial School, continued them in Toulouse and embarked on his professional career as an engineer.

PORTBOU CUSTOMS AND RAILWAY STATION

Until 1941, the refugees used to arrive, with the documents required by the Spanish authorities, at the customs posts in Les, Puigcerdà and La Jonquera and then headed on to a Spanish or Portuguese port. Others arrived by train at the international station in Portbou, where there were a number of travel agencies to organise the journey to America.

THE SPANISH EMBASSIES AND CONSULATES

The Spanish embassies and consulates in Europe, especially the ones in France, issued the entry visas to Spain. From the middle of 1940, despite pressure from the Germans and the avalanche of applications, the authorisations were issued punctually, often on the personal initiative of the Spanish diplomats.

THE ISRAELITE COMMUNITY OF BARCELONA

The early years of the Franco regime were characterised by its hostility to the Jews who lived in Spain. For that reason some families left Barcelona and others chose to convert to Catholicism. The members of the Israelite Community of Barcelona, founded in 1918, lived in hiding. After an incident early in 1939 when a group of Falangists sacked the synagogue in a house on the corner of Provença Street and Balmes Street, services were held in private apartments until 1954, when the new synagogue was inaugurated in Avenir Street.

4* JENNY KEHR

Jenny Kehr (Appenheim, 1895) had been deported from Germany to Gurs camp in France, from where she managed to escape. In October 1942 she crossed the Pyrenees with the aim of emigrating to the United States, where her daughters lived. She was arrested in Coll de Nargó, in a state of exhaustion, and the civil governor of Lleida ordered her transfer to Miranda de Ebro concentration camp, where she was rejected because she was a woman. Ten days later the same governor decreed that she should be taken to Figueres to be deported to France as a Jew. On the way there she was interned in the women's prison in Barcelona, where she decided to commit suicide rather than return to the scenes of her persecution. She was buried in a common grave near Montjuïc cemetery on 17 December 1942.

THE PYRENEES, ROADS OF FEAR AND HOPE

The impossibility of obtaining the permits to enter Spain legally meant that the setting for the journeys of the Jewish refugees moved to the mountain passes, where they were made in secret. All in all, it was a risky decision given the strict vigilance on both sides, the climate, the escapees' lack of preparation and the nature of the terrain. As a result there were many accidents and some of the people fleeing reached Catalonia frozen and exhausted.

DEPORTATIONS TO OCCUPIED FRANCE

An unknown number of Jewish refugees were forced to return to France and handed over to the French police and, from November 1942, to Germany. Some of them are known to have been deported to the extermination camps. Among the escapees the Spanish government wanted to expel was the Jewish philosopher and intellectual Walter Benjamin (Berlin, 1892). Benjamin had made a lengthy escape from Paris which brought him to Portbou after he had walked the last stretch over Rumpissa pass. The knowledge that he would be returned to his country is assumed to be one of the factors that triggered his suicide on 26 September 1940.

THE WOMEN'S PRISONS

The provincial women's prisons, in Girona in the Adoratrius building and in Barcelona in the old Bon Consell home in the Corts district of the city, housed a large number of Jews who were arrested on arrival in Catalonia. In some cases they were transferred to the Ventas prison in Madrid.

5* LEA LAZEGA

Lea Lazega (Lodz, Poland, 1911), her husband Jacob and their daughters Faye (1931) and Eva (1934), lived in Belgium, which they left after the German occupation. They travelled to Paris and then to Marseille, where they tried to obtain the documents to emigrate to the United States. Meanwhile, in December 1941, their third child, Max, was born. Jacob was interned in Des Milles camp, from which he managed to escape and remained in hiding in France until the end of the war. In November 1942 Lea and her children moved to Amélie-les-Bains, from where they entered Spain clandestinely. They were arrested in Espolla and immediately separated. Lea and her small son went to prison in Figueres, whilst Faye and Eva were put in the provincial hospice. Later they were reunited in Caldes de Malavella. Once in Barcelona, Lea could only obtain emigration visas for Faye, Eva and Max, who left for the United States. It was not until 2 June 1944, four years after leaving Belgium, that Lea Lazega reached Port Richmond (Pennsylvania). Her odyssey was over and she was reunited with her children.

THE CALDES DE MALAVELLA SPAS

At different times the thermal baths and hotels of Caldes de Malavella housed hundreds of the refugees concentrated in and around Girona. Among them were many Jewish women and their children once they had been released from the women's prison and the provincial hospice, respectively. There they enjoyed a more peaceful stay while awaiting their move to Barcelona.

THE ALLIED CONSULATES IN BARCELONA

As long as no effective organisation was set up, the Allied consulates in Barcelona took care of the protection of the Jewish refugees. The British consulate helped all those who asked with no distinction of nationality. An outstanding task was also carried out by the Dutch consulate, the Belgian consulate through its employee Alicia Reyes and the honorary consulate of Poland, with the consul Eduardo Rodón, his wife Ana Klemensiewicz and the chancellor Wanda Morbitzer.

THE BARCELONA HOTELS. THE "PARRILLA" OF THE RITZ HOTEL

About 10,000 Jews passed through Barcelona between 1939 and 1944, most of them lodging in hotels and boarding houses. On the ground floor of the Ritz Hotel, in December 1942 an orchestra conducted by one of those refugees, the French Jewish musician Bernard Hilda, gave its first performance. Hilda's music was a reference point in the life of the city in those dark years.

7* FRED AROM

Fred Arom (Düsseldorf, 1930) left Germany with his parents and his brother David after the shock of the Night of Broken Glass. They settled in Antwerp (Belgium), from where they fled to France in May 1940. They were interned in the Brens and Rivesaltes concentration camps. Fred and David managed to escape, but their parents were sent to Drancy and deported to Auschwitz, where they were murdered. David took refuge in Switzerland, whilst Fred was hidden by the Œuvre de Secours aux Enfants (OSE) until he crossed the Pyrenees in June 1944. After a brief stay in Lleida, he was taken to Barcelona and, on 26 October, he set sail from the port of Cadiz for Palestine, where he adopted the name Simha Arom. In 1951 he returned to France to finish his ethnomusicology studies, specialising in the music of Central Africa.

THE ANTI-SEMITIC LAWS AND THE NIGHT OF BROKEN GLASS

From 1933, Nazi Germany decreed sweeping anti-Semitic regulations, perfectly planned and legally backed, in order to bar the Jews from all spheres of activity, including the civil service, the liberal professions, industry, trade and culture. The Nuremberg laws of 1935 relegated them to an inferior legal condition and the attacks of the Night of Broken Glass in November 1938 convinced many families that they had to flee the territories under Nazi control.

THE VICHY ROUND-UPS AND DRANCY INTERNMENT CAMP

After the German occupation the French government led by Pétain collaborated closely with the Nazis and arrested thousands of Jews. Especially important were the round-ups of 1942, one at the Vélodrome d'Hiver in Paris and another that affected the residents in the south of the country. The detainees were sent to Drancy internment camp. Nine out of every ten Jews deported to the extermination camps of Eastern Europe passed through there.

THE ŒUVRE DE SECOURS AUX ENFANTS (OSE) AND THE CHILDREN'S SHELTERS

The first priority of the Jewish aid organisations, among them the OSE, was to rescue the children who had been left in the internment camps with their parents. For that purpose the organisation had shelters, where they were hidden until being moved to Spain for emigration to the United States or Palestine.

8* DEPARTURE FOR FREEDOM. AMERICA AND ERETZ ISRAEL

Departure from Spain was usually delayed owing to the difficulty of obtaining an entry visa for a third country. Initially the families left the Iberian Peninsula aboard ships of the regular lines sailing for America (Venezuela, Mexico, the Netherlands Antilles or the United States) from Spanish (Vigo and Bilbao) or Portuguese ports (Lisbon). In 1944 the Joint chartered ships to evacuate the contingent of Jews left in Spain, made up basically of children and young people who would travel to Haifa –Palestine at that time– on their way to the land of Israel.

ELIAS ZOMERPLAAG. FROM VIGO TO CURAÇAO

Elias Zomerplaag (Antwerp, 1923-2013) took refuge in France with his family. The Vichy government put them under house arrest in Aulus-les-Bains (Ariège). In December 1942 he managed to cross into Spain. He was arrested in Tavascan and taken to Sort prison and Miranda de Ebro concentration camp. When he was released in June 1943, he sailed from Vigo to Curaçao on the steamer Marqués de Comillas. When the Second World War ended, he returned to Belgium and was reunited with his family, who had remained in France.

FRED MANASSE. BARCELONA - LISBON - UNITED STATES

The Manasse brothers, Gustave (1931) and Manfred (1935), came from Frankfurt am Main (Germany). The events of the Night of Broken Glass alerted the family to their danger. Gustave and Fred fled to a shelter in France, whilst their mother and sister remained in Germany and their father made a return journey to America on the ship St. Louis. In 1944 they managed to reach Barcelona, from where they were sent to an orphanage in Lisbon. At the end of the year they left for the United States. Meanwhile, their father had died in Auschwitz and their mother and sister in Sobibor.

BETSY WIJNBERG AND DAN EHRLICH. LOVE FROM THE PYRENEES TO PALESTINE

Betsy Wijnberg (Groningen, 1919) managed to escape from Netherlands and got Toulouse (France) with the help of the Jewish resistance. There met Dan Ehrlich (Strasbourg, 1917), with whom they joined the group which, in May 1944, travelled from Ariège to the Val d'Aran. Thanks the help of Dan, Betsy could overpass the troubles of the journey. Arrested, they have been token to Barcelona and, at the end of October, came out on board of the Guiné towards Palestine. At last, they got married, completing and emotive love story which has started in the Catalan Pyrenees.

INTERACTIVE PANEL

FLEEING THE HOLOCAUST IN THE GIRONA REGION

This interactive panel is a production of the Museum of Jewish History (Patronat Call de Girona) based on the documentation compiled by Martine Berthelot at the Historical Archives of Girona (Border Records). The management of data has been handled by Lídia Donat and Cristina Taberner (Museum of Jewish History). The interactive panel is a design by Victor Oliva.

CHRONOLOGY 1933 - 1946

1933

30 January	Hitler is appointed chancellor of Germany after his party (NSDAP, German Workers National Socialist Party) wins the parliamentary elections in July 1932.
27 February	Reichstag fire (seat of the German Parliament). State of emergency that confers special powers on Hitler to persecute his political opponents.
22 March	Opening of the first concentration camp, at Dachau, where German political dissidents are interned.
1 April	First day of the boycott of Jewish businesses. Later it will affect doctors, lawyers and other liberal professions.
10 May	Beginning of the Nazi regime's intellectual censorship. Burning of books written by Jews and members of the opposition to Nazism in Bebelplatz, Berlin.
14 July	Prohibition of forming new parties in Germany. Previously, on 5 July, all existing parties except the Nazi party had been banned (NSDAP). Passing of the law that forbids granting foreigners and Jews German nationality and the law of sterilisation of the physically and mentally handicapped.

1934

2 August	After the death of President Von Hindenburg, Hitler combines the posts of president and chancellor and becomes the sole leader (führer) of Germany.

1935

1 April	Harassment of Jehovah's witnesses begins.
15 September	Nuremberg Laws, which isolate the Jewish community from other Germans. Other countries which are allies of Germany pass similar legislations.

1936

6 June	Harsher restrictions against the Gypsies.
17 June	Heinrich Himmler is appointed Reichsführer SS, leader of the Nazi Germany elite combat group (SS).
12 July	Sachsenhausen camp, near Berlin, set up.
17-19 July	Coup d'état by part of the Spanish army led by General Franco against the Second Republic. Outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Hitler and Mussolini provide aid to the rebels.
1 August	The Summer Olympic Games are held in Berlin.
10 October	The SS create the Central Office for the struggle against homosexuality and abortion. About 15,000 German homosexuals die in the concentration camps.

1937

The "Arianisation" of the German economy begins. The Jews are forced, on baseless legal grounds, to sell their businesses, in most cases at prices well below their real value.

26 April	The Condor Legion of German aviation bombs Guernica.
15 July	Buchenwald camp in Germany set up.

1938

11-13 March	Germany annexes Austria (Anschluss) to the Third Reich.
6-15 July	Évian Conference (France). Delegates of 32 countries and representatives of refugee aid organisations deal with the immigration quotas for refugees fleeing Germany. The United States and other countries refuse to soften restrictions on immigration.

1938

25 July	Beginning of the Battle of the Ebro, the longest and bloodiest of the Spanish Civil War, which will drag on until November.
8 August	Mauthausen camp set up in Austria.
17 August	Decree by which German Jews have to add Israel and Sara to their first names.
1 October	Occupation and annexation by Germany of the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia.
28 October	Expulsion of the Polish Jews living in Germany.
9 November	Night of Broken Glass in Germany. Thousands of Jewish businesses and synagogues are attacked and burned. About 30,000 Jews are sent to concentration camps. About 10,000 die there. In the following months about 115,000 Jews leave the country.
12 November	The decree for the exclusion of Jews from the economic life of Germany closes all the companies that belong to Jews.

1939

15 March	German occupation of Czechoslovakia.
1 April	End of the Spanish Civil War. About 500,000 Republican refugees flee to France.
15 May	Ravensbrück women's camp set up (Germany).
23 August	The governments of Germany and the Soviet Union sign the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact, in which they undertake to share Eastern Europe.
1 September	Germany invades Poland. Outbreak of the Second World War. Start of the extermination programme of 70,000 German mental defectives.
3 September	Great Britain, France, India, Australia and New Zealand declare war on Germany. Internment of about 20,000 German and Austrian Jews.

1940

9 April	German invasion of Denmark and Norway.

1940

10 May	German invasion of Denmark and Norway.
20 May	Auschwitz I concentration camp (Poland) set up.
10 June	Italy enters the war on Germany's side.
22 June	Signing of the armistice between Germany and France. The north of the country is occupied by the German army, the regions of Alsace and Lorraine are annexed to the Third Reich and the south remains unoccupied under the leadership of Marshal Pétain. The capital moves to Vichy. Vichy's France collaborates actively with the Germans.
6 August	Arrival of the first 398 Spanish Republicans at Mauthausen.
13 August	Start of the Battle of Britain. The German bombings do not achieve a British surrender.
13 September	Meeting in Berlin between the Spanish foreign minister Ramón Serrano Súñer and Adolf Hitler.
27 September	Germany, Italy and Japan sign the Tripartite Pact in Berlin constituting the Axis army.
12 October	The Warsaw Ghetto with a population of about 350,000 people, 30% of the inhabitants of the city, is set up.
23 October	Hitler and Franco meet in Hendaye. The head of the SS Himmler visits Barcelona.

1941

6 April	German invasion of Greece and Yugoslavia.
22 June	German invasion of the Soviet Union. During this year and the next hundreds of thousands of Soviet Jews are shot and dumped in common graves by the SS.
31 July	Reinhard Heydrich, head of the German security forces, starts preparations for Reinhard Operation, the code name the Nazis gave to the plan to murder the Polish Jews and responsible for the extermination of 1,700,000 of them.
18 August	Drancy becomes the internment camp for the Jews arrested in France.

1941

3 September	First experimental gassing with Zyklon B at Auschwitz. The victims are Soviet prisoners of war.
October	Building of the first extermination camp at Belzec (Poland), which comes into definitive operation on 17 March 1942. Majdanec camp set up for Polish prisoners of war. It is turned into a concentration camp in February 1943. Start of the building of Auschwitz II (Auschwitz-Birkenau) extermination camp.
24 November	Theresienstadt concentration camp (Czechoslovakia) set up.
6 December	Soviet counteroffensive in the Battle of Moscow. The Nazis' expansion plans are halted.
7 December	Japanese attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor (Hawaii). The United States enter the war on the side of the Allies.
8 December	Start of extermination operations using gas at Chelmno camp (Poland).
11 December	Germany declares war on the United States.

1942

20 January	Wansee Conference (Germany), at which various German ministries and agencies coordinate to implement the "Final Solution" to the Jewish question in Europe.
1 March	The Auschwitz gas chambers come into operation.
7 March	First mass deportation of Jews to Belzec camp, the largest of the whole Operation Reinhard. About 435,000 Jews were gassed between 17 March and 31 December that year.
27 March	Departure of the first convoy from Drancy to Auschwitz.
April	Sobibor extermination camp (Poland) comes into operation.
4 June	American victory at Midway. The avalanche of Japanese victories is halted.
11 June	Auschwitz III (Auschwitz-Monowitz) set up. The IG Farben company is installed.

1942

28 June	German summer offensive against the Caucasus and Stalingrad.
4 July	Start of mass gassing of Jews at Auschwitz II.
16 July	Round-up at the Vélodrome d'Hiver in Paris, which ends in 12,884 arrests.
22 July	Mass deportation of 260,000 Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto to Treblinka II, where the mass gassing operations begins the next day.
4 November	End of the Battle of El Alamein. Germans and Italians are expelled from Egypt by the British and retreat to Tunisia.
8 November	Anglo-American landing in North Africa.
11 November	The German army invades the unoccupied zone of France and seals off the Pyrenees.
19 November	Beginning of the Soviet winter counteroffensive at Stalingrad. The German Sixth Army is surrounded.

1943

2 February	The German Sixth Army surrenders at Stalingrad.
13 May	The German and Italian forces surrender in Tunisia.
19 April	Warsaw Ghetto uprising. The last 70,000 Jews of the city are exterminated.
16 July	End of the Battle of Kursk, the last major German offensive on the Eastern Front.
3 September	Allied invasion of Italy.
8 September	Official surrender of Italy to the Allies. The Germans deport the Italian Jews.

1944

19 March	German occupation of Hungary.
15 May	Mass deportation of Hungarian Jews begins.
6 June	Allied landing in Normandy (France).

1944

22 June	Start of a major Soviet summer offensive that expels the Germans from the Soviet Union and reaches the gates of Warsaw. Forced evacuations of the camps, known as the "Death Marches", begin.
23 August	Liberation of Drancy internment camp.
25 August	Liberation of Paris.
2 October	Warsaw uprising against the Germans. 250,000 Poles die and the city is razed to the ground.
19 October	Attempted invasion of the Val d'Aran by a group of communist guerrillas with the aim, as part of the so-called "Reconquest Operation", of advancing south and overthrowing the Franco regime. The operation fails and the Maquis have to return to France.

1945

27 January	Liberation of Auschwitz by Soviet forces.
29 April	The Americans liberate Dachau.
30 April	Adolf Hitler commits suicide in his bunker in Berlin. Soviet troops liberate Ravensbrück.
5 May	Liberation of Mauthausen by American forces.
8 May	Official surrender of Germany.
2 September	Official surrender of Japan. Officially, that is the end of the Second World War.
20 November	The International Military Tribunal, made up of judges from the United States, England, France and Russia, is set up. The trial of 22 high-ranking Nazis begins in the city of Nuremberg.

1946

28 and 29 January	The photographer Francesc Boix makes a statement at the Nuremberg trials. Photographs stolen by the Republicans deported to Mauthausen are submitted as proof against some of the Nazi officials, who are condemned for crimes against humanity and sentenced to death.

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