
Between Van Gogh and the Talmud

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Friday, March 30, 2001 -- But more than that it is the perfect place to explore France's Jewish sights and heritage. It is here that one can find some of the oldest Jewish sights in France.

Historians say this may have been home to Jews since the first century of the Common Era, though evidence is scarce. Archeologists establish more firmly that there were Jews in Arles and Marseilles in the fifth century.

Jewish culture thrived in Provence in the early Middle Ages. Here the Talmud was interpreted by monumental scholars and Jews from all over Europe sought out Provenal scholars on matters of Halacha.

The Jewish culture of Barcelona was added in the 12th century when parts of Provence came under Catalanian rule. The intellectual life of both communities was enriched when science, poetry, philosophy, and the translation of Arabic literature were added to the scholarly repertoire.

Among the noted Provenal scholars were Rabbi Moshe of Arles and his son Rabbi Judah ben Moshe of Arles, whose Talmudic interpretations are cited in some of Rashi's work.

Sadly, Provence was no stranger to anti-Jewish riots, edicts, or forced baptism, and many rulers restricted Jewish life and commerce. The most infamous anti-Jewish riot wiped out almost the entire community of Toulon in 1348 - the height of the Black Death. The loss of life was so high that the Crown lowered the special Jew tax for a period of 10

years.

But there was one area of Provence in which Jews enjoyed relative safety - the Comtat Venaissin, the present Vaucluse Department. Ceded to the Vatican in 1274, it remained in their hands until 1791 when it reverted to France. Jews in the Comtat spoke a Judeo-Provençal dialect and developed their own liturgy, Comtatdin. Under the protection of the Avignon Popes, Jews flourished.

Though all was not trouble free, Jews were permitted to live in the cities of Avignon, Carpentras, Cavillon, and L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, known at the time as the Arba Kehilot - the four holy communities. With the exception of L'Isle-sur-la-Sorgue, those cities contain some fine vestiges of the Jewish quarters of old.

THE JEWISH community of Avignon goes back to the first century after the destruction of the Second Temple, but most documentation of Jewish life here begins in the 12th century. The first Jewish quarter (carrire) faced the Pope's Palace on Rue de Vielle Juiverie. By the early 13th century, the carrire was on Rue Jacob and Place Jerusalem, where the present synagogue stands.

Built in 1846, the synagogue replaced a much older one that had burned the year before. There were many restrictions on Jewish life within the carrire - walls surrounded it and three gates restricted Jewish activity. The Church of St. Peter collected tolls, and it was forbidden to sell kosher meat outside the quarter. This tiny area, barely 100 square yards, was home to over 1,000 people.

Carpentras Jews have lived here on and off since the 12th century, mostly as refugees from various expulsions elsewhere in France. Today's community numbers a few hundred mostly elderly Jews.

The synagogue on Place de la Maire was built from 1741-1743 and contains pieces of a 14th-century synagogue. A French historic landmark, it was partially restored in 1930, 1953, and 1959. Because of a law forbidding exterior decoration the synagogue is quite plain, but it conceals an ornate sanctuary.

The Rococo interior is similar to Italian synagogues of the same period. The raised bimah (podium) at the opposite end of the room from the Ark is characteristic of this style.

In the older synagogue the women sat in the basement, not in the mezzanine. A small window allowed them to hear what was going on, and there was an official known as the rabbi of women.

The basement contains remnants of a matza bakery and a mikva, or ritual bath. But as

restoration is ongoing, you will have to secure an appointment to see them.

Nearby, off Rue Mercire, the south door of the Cathedral of St. Siffrein was known as La Porte Juive. Jews in the Middle Ages were forced to stand there and listen to sermons.

Carpentras' medieval cemetery was destroyed in 1322, and the grave markers were used to build the town's ramparts. The present cemetery was established in 1367, but as papal edict forbade tombstones, the earliest stones are from the 18th century.

In May 1990 this cemetery gained notoriety when it was vandalized. Some antisemitic markings can still be seen.

THE OLD Jewish quarter of Cavaillon is on the rue Hebraique, just off the main street and behind the tourism office. Local Jews were required to live here beginning in the 15th century, although the community dates back to the 13th. The community was quite small and except for a few refugees, there were no Jews here on the eve of World War II. In the 1960s, some Jews from North Africa began to settle here and the community grew.

Above a passageway between the Rue Hebraique and the Rue Chabran, the restored synagogue overlooks the old carrire. It is smaller than the one in Carpentras, but no less elaborate. No longer a working shul, it stands as an historical monument.

The museum in the synagogue's basement (street level) once housed a matza bakery. Today it depicts the community's history and contains Torah scrolls, ritual objects, and historical documents. Though small, it is a fascinating look at French Jewish life in the town and in the region.

MARSEILLE, FRANCE'S second-largest city, is home to the country's second-largest Jewish community. But Jews have called Marseille home since the sixth century when an already existing community provided refuge to Jews fleeing forced conversions in Clermont-Ferrand - though things were not much better on that score in Marseille.

The Jews of Marseille were scholars, merchants, laborers, coral craftsmen, and brokers. Benjamin of Tudela tells us a number of scholars, philosophers, and psalmists lived among the Marseille Jews. The present community dates back to 1760.

Not far from Marseille's old port is the Grand Synagogue (117 Rue de Breteuil). Constructed in 1864, it also contains the offices of the Consistoire of Marseille and other Jewish organizations. The interior is typical of synagogues constructed in France in the early and middle 19th century following Jewish emancipation. There are obvious similarities between them and churches of the same period (i.e. raised pulpits). This was intentional and was designed to make Judaism's outward trappings more consistent with

those of Christianity.

As in the rest of France, Jews have come and gone from Nmes for centuries - probably as far back as the seventh century. The earliest evidence of an established community is in the 10th century, when Nmes had a synagogue.

In the 11th century, Mont Duplan, one of the hills within the city walls, was called Poium Judaicum and was the site of the Jewish cemetery.

The synagogue at 40 Rue Roussy was built in 1793 and also contains a mikva and matza bakery.

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