



Pre-1492 cemetery found in Spain

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The bones of 158 people dating back to the Middle Ages or earlier discovered recently in what once was a Jewish cemetery in a small Spanish town were reburied.

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BARCELONA (JTA) -- Bones dating back to the Middle Ages or earlier that were discovered in what once was a Jewish cemetery in a small Spanish town were reburied in a Barcelona cemetery.

Construction workers had come across the bodies of 158 people as they began work on a residential complex in Tarrega, in the interior of Catalonia.

By the time the Barcelona Jewish community was informed a couple of months ago, most of the bodies had been excavated and were ready to be sent to a lab for research.

Based on the finding of rings with Hebrew names in various tombs, as well as its positioning with respect to the town's old Jewish quarter, it seems clear the bodies were in a Jewish cemetery that had existed before Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492.

The handling of the burial grounds and remains had sparked outrage among Jewish leaders in Spain and abroad as Jewish tradition generally forbids digging up of graves and the analysis of human remains.

Upon learning of the excavation, the Commission for Jewish Heritage in Catalonia, which represents the three synagogue communities in Barcelona, tried to stop the construction over the cemetery and the study of the bodies for scientific research.

While the commission has not stopped the building of the residential complex, Jewish communal leaders prevented the bodies from being sent to labs and managed to have them reburied in Barcelona, which has the only active Jewish cemetery in Catalonia.

The remains were handed over July 30 to the commission -- its creation is considered a significant achievement since it brings together the Orthodox, Reform and Chabad in protecting Jewish heritage in Catalonia -- and reburied the next day.

"We were unable to stop the excavations, but we did succeed in getting the bones buried in a Jewish cemetery to guarantee their eternal rest," said Dominique Tomasov, an architect and prominent community activist. "This is an historic event, and I think it's only the tip of the iceberg in terms of what will be unveiled as urban development progresses."

Community leaders have asked for support from abroad to ensure that the site not be excavated and transformed into another apartment complex.

Local Jewish leaders met recently in Madrid with Spain's justice minister and have been in contact with the European Union headquarters in Brussels, the Knesset in Israel and the U.S. State Department.

In another meeting in July, the president of the Federation of Jewish Communities of Spain, Jacobo Israel Garzon, presented Spanish Justice Minister Mariano Fernandez Bermejo with a protocol outlining procedures to ensure that cemeteries discovered during excavations not be desecrated.

Representatives of the Jewish community say this only the start of a process.

"You can be assured the issue will not stop here," Tomosav said. "We have initiated a line of work with the Spanish government that will hopefully lead to specific legislation which protects Jewish cemeteries in all of Spain. And there are also plans to start serious research in order to identify the location of all the cemeteries left behind in 1492."
