

Jews of Cervera:

Example of the Rich Genealogical Resources in Spain

by Jeffrey S. Malka, based on the research of Maria-Jose Surribas Camps

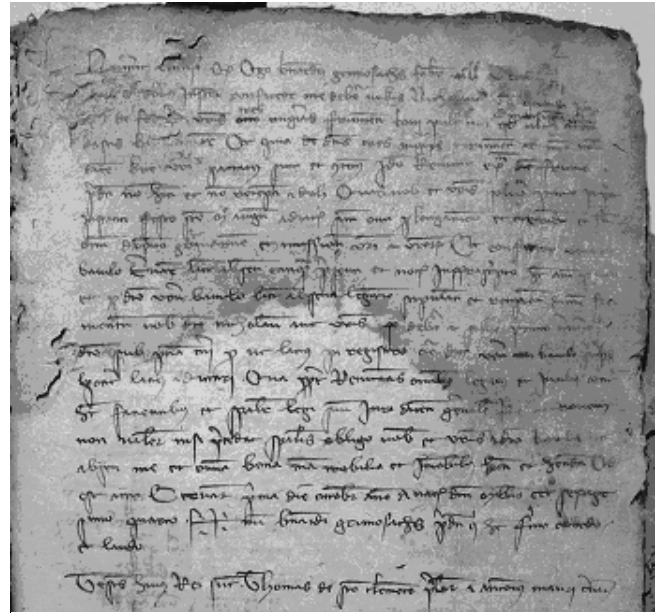
Most people outside Spain have never heard of Cervera and for good reason. It is just a small town in the province of Lleida in Catalonia and that is the point, i.e., the notarial archives of even such small towns in Spain can have so much valuable data of use to genealogists. Cervera's value to Jewish historians and genealogists arises from its location along one of the main routes between Provence and Aragon. Jewish scholars have visited many of Spain's archives, including the Cervera archive, but a full inventory of Cervera's Jewish genealogical holdings had not been conducted. So when Maria-Jose Surribas Camps applied to the International Institute for Jewish Genealogy (IJG) in Jerusalem for a one-year grant to research the records in this town's archive, she had a dual objective. The first was to create an inventory of its Jewish contents, and the second was to demonstrate the vast riches of Spanish archives for Jewish genealogists and historians. She succeeded well beyond expectations on both counts.

The volume of records of significant Jewish value in the *Arxiu Comarcal de la Segarra* (ACSG—Archives of the Segarra district) in Cervera is so vast that Surribas' actual work extended beyond the original one year supported by the grant and resulted in a 100-page final report with an additional 650 pages of translated documents!¹ Surribas painstakingly combed the difficult-to-read notary books and municipal documents housed in the ACSG, translated thousands of handwritten documents in old Catalan or Latin script, and analyzed her findings.

Surribas' monumental work identified and translated 3,006 documents mentioning Jews dating from July 1328 to December 1499. The documents included three previously described *ketubot*² (Jewish marriage contracts), inventories of Jewish estates, lists of Jewish individuals and their occupations, synagogue seat owners and much more. The translated documents were carefully categorized by sequential dates, and 695 Jewish individuals were identified in several family groups resulting in the construction of a number of multi-generational family trees.

Cervera's Jews worked as merchants, physicians, shoemakers, money lenders, silversmiths, wood workers, skinners, tanners and weavers. Several Jewish *fisicus* (physicians) were identified, as well as the treatments they administered. Surribas notes that it often was difficult to differentiate between physicians and rabbis other than through context, because both were referred to as *mestre* in the documents. The *responsa* literature—which would have shed light on this issue—was beyond the scope of this study. Indeed, in some cases the individuals may have been both rabbis and physicians.

Royal orders were issued in the 13th century requiring an



Notarial record from Cervera

examination to practice medicine or surgery. Despite this requirement, some medical practitioners continued to practice without passing any examination. An important Jewish medical school where Jewish physicians were examined for their expertise by Christian physicians was located in the nearby city of Lleida. Documents show that, in about 1315, David Abrahe, a Jew of Cervera, was examined by Mestre Pere Gavet, a physician of Barcelona, and was qualified as *ydoneum sufficientem* (good enough). Yet, 20 years later, on October 25, 1334, Vidal de Castellfolliot, a medical practitioner in Cervera and its surroundings, was exempted from taking the examination.

Among the archival documents are lists of Jews who lived in the *call* (Jewish quarter) and those who lived outside it. When, in 1384, the Jewish community requested permission to build a synagogue in Cervera, we learn that Sullam Deuslogar, a physician of Cervera and at the time the secretary of the Jewish *aljama* (community), was appointed to sell the synagogue seats. We even have the list of seat owners, as well as their locations by the wall or in the center of the synagogue. The Jewish cemetery (*Fossar dels Juheus*) in Cervera is long lost, but its existence and details of its location are well documented in the archival documents, which also include names of owners of Jewish property referred to as being near the cemetery.

Accounts of estate holdings are so detailed they permit an intimate look at the lives of these medieval Jews. One estate included “*un anell dor ab empremta de tres torres hi una*



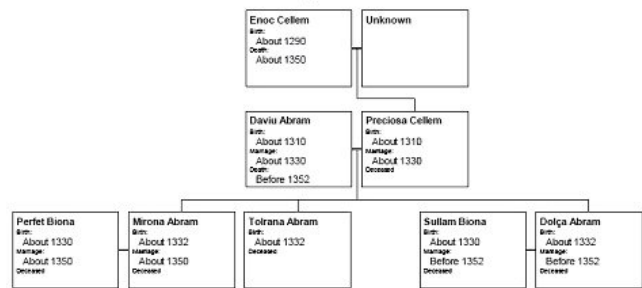
Map showing the town of Cervera near the French border

garza” (a golden ring on which were printed three towers and a magpie) and a *megillaç* (megillah) described as an “old book that had belonged to Reginó’s great-grandfather.” When Bella Xetavi, daughter of Issac Xetavi of Perpignan, entrusted her properties to Mestre Cresques Adret of Cervera for safekeeping, the inventory included “*un mantell blau de Juya forat de terzanell vermell esquinçat*” (a blue Jewess mantle, with red silk lining) and *unes lumeneres de lauto ab quatre poms e vuyt brochs* (an eight-branched candelabrum made of brass). The books she owned were also carefully enumerated, with their titles, whether complete or missing pages, and if written on paper or on parchment. Among many others, they included titles such as

- *la storia de Ster feta en Rolle com acostumen los Jueus*. (story of the feast of Esther with Jewish customs)
- *un libre de paper cubert de posts apellat Rabi Salamo, glosa sobre lo genesi e lexode*. (book of commentaries by Rabbi Solomon on Genesis and Exodus)
- *un libre en pergami scrit apellat Magda, de Moyses de Egipte, ab cubertes de posts velles*. (parchment book titled Magda about Moses of Egypt)
- *un libre de forma menor en pergami scrit apellat libre dels Levi en ebraich e en Caldeu*. (Small parchment book titled Levi written in Hebrew and Aramaic)
- *un libre en pergami ab posts en lo qual es lo libre de Jesue e dels Judges*. (book of Joshua and Judges in parchment)
- *un libre en pergami en que es lo libre de exode quen fall un poch del començ, e les epistoles de aquell libre apellat astaroz e la estoria de Ster* (parchment book containing Exodus and chapters of the book of Astaroz and the story of Esther)—and many others.

The estate of Reginó, wife of the late Davi Bendit, included an eight-branched candelabrum (*unes lumeneres larges de lauto ab vuyt brochs*) kept in a big box. A small box contained the deed to property of their seat in the synagogue, a tefillin, and a *shofar* (defined in the Catalan docu-

Close Family of Enoc Cellem



Family tree created from the records of Cervera

ment as “a horn called *shofar* in Hebrew”: *un corn que se apelle en ebraich çoffar*), pearls, coral and additional jewels.

When the black plague arrived in 1347–48, we see Jews being accused of poisoning the wells, as they were accused elsewhere, and 18 Cervera Jews were killed. Neighboring villages became reluctant to allow Cervera Jews or converts from Judaism to settle among them lest they bring the plague.

The richness of detail in the Cervera findings underlines the wealth of primary Jewish genealogical data waiting to be mined in Spanish archives, even when dealing with small villages. Genealogically, the existence of hereditary surnames among Jews, since at least the 1200s, allows families to be identified and generations followed through the archival documents. Jews are also easily identified in the records, either because of their distinctive Hebrew male first names (women frequently used first names similar to those in the surrounding population) or because their names were almost always followed by the word *judio* in Castilian documents, *juheu* or *jueu* in Catalan, and *judeus* in Latin.

Spanish notarial archives in Spain are extremely voluminous, often extending into thousands of documents per year even for small towns. That, and the fact that they cover many aspects of everyday life, from loans, business agreements and house purchases to property title searches, arrest warrants, political appointments and estate contents, makes them particularly valuable in researching the lives of ordinary medieval Sephardic Jews. Although the *responsa* literature has been studied by rabbis, many notarial and other archival resources remain a poorly tapped treasure trove of genealogical data. Surribas’ research demonstrates the need for more such work, and the IJG is to be commended for providing her a one-year grant. In view of her impressive results, additional research grants should be considered, both in Cervera and elsewhere in Spain. According to Neville Lamdan, director of the IJG:³

Ms. Surribas has overwhelmingly demonstrated that the archives of provincial towns in pre-Expulsion Spain hold vast resources for illumination of the lives and lineages of Jews in the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries—in part of relevance to Sephardic families still living today. She has effectively opened up a rich new area of research for Jewish genealogy.

Notes

1. www.iiig.org/Documents/Surribas.pdf. A full account of the Jewish medieval community of Cervera based on records found there will be available in an upcoming book by Jeff Malka and Maria-Jose Surribas Camps.

2. Lacave, José Luis. *Medieval Ketubot from Sefarad*. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Magnes Press.

3. E-mail message to IIJG members, March 5, 2011.

Jeffrey Malka is the author of the prize-winning book Sephardic Genealogy: Discovering your Sephardic Ancestors and their World.

2nd ed. (Avotaynu, 2009) and creator of *www.SephardicGen.com*. He is descended from a long line of rabbis extending back to 14th-century Sephardic rabbis, cabbalists, authors, and 13th-century Catalan tax collectors, Malka is one of the pioneers of Sephardic genealogy in the United States. He serves as deputy chair of the International Institute of Jewish Genealogy (IIJG) academic committee and also served as advisor and supervisor of the IIJG's Cervera research grant. Maria-Jose Surribas Camps lives in Barcelona. Educated as a lawyer, she is an independent scholar specializing in researching the archives of northern Spain.

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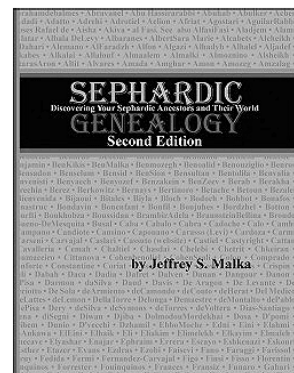
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