

Toledo: El Secreto Oculto DVD, 2008, 70 mins., directed by Jack Matitiah, in Spanish with English subtitles, produced by Casa Sefarad Israel/Sefarad Caminos y Vida, available from Ruth Diskin, Marketing and Distribution, Jerusalem, Israel, www.ruthfilms.com

Reviewed by Judith Roumani

This film is a fascinating journey “from the present to the past, and from the past to the present,” describing the Jewish community in Toledo, which dates at least from the fourth century, probably from earlier Roman times, or even, as the film suggests, from the time of the first Babylonian exile. The film alludes to the persecution and suffering of Jews, but emphasizes *convivencia* between Jews and Christians while noting, as one scholar puts it, that *convivencia* also meant separation of the religions. The term ‘perdida’ [loss] also recognizes that if one discusses *convivencia* one should also discuss the ending of it, the expulsion of Jews from Spain. The film tells us that Queen Isabel, besides expelling the Jews, also decreed the uprooting of the Jewish cemetery in Toledo, and one can still see Jewish tombstones with their faint inscriptions incorporated into the houses in the city. An impressive number of Spanish scholars are interviewed and provide their insights and knowledge throughout the film.

It tells the story of Samuel Halevi Abulafia and his king, Pedro I, known to history (although the film does not say this) as Pedro the Cruel. The film does tell us that he eventually turned against his Jewish adviser and financier and had Samuel executed. A Spanish scholar in the film quotes a proverb to the effect that whoever opens his heart to you will chop off your head. Samuel Halevi had built the main synagogue of Toledo, later turned into the Church of El Tránsito for five hundred years, and now the Jewish Museum. Samuel Halevi’s house was later taken over by the painter El Greco. An ironical reference concerns the ‘gran hombre’ [great man] Vicente Ferrer, the notorious persecutor of the Spanish Jews who provoked the riots and pogroms of 1391 which, in turn, began a century of persecution, culminating in the expulsion of 1492. Vicente Ferrer is still officially regarded as a saint by the Catholic Church. It was he who seized the other existing synagogue of Toledo from the Jews; subsequently, it was a storehouse for many years before becoming the Church of Santa María la Blanca. The researcher who mentions this is a medievalist, Margarita Torres, who makes extraordinary efforts to show the importance of the Jewish contribution to Spain. She tells us, elsewhere in the film, that if it had not been for Maimonides, Europe would not have produced a Thomas Aquinas. She, and others, also emphasize the essential Jewish participation in the Toledo school of translators, whose role was to transmit science and philosophy to Europe.

The film describes how the Jews of Toledo created safe rooms in their cellars during times of persecution and how *conversos* managed to continue Jewish practices underground. It emphasizes that the Inquisition itself did not persecute all Jews, only those who had been

converted to Christianity. From 1492 on, only Jews who had converted to Christianity were allowed to be legally in Spain. The film describes the fascinating discovery in Toledo of an underground *mikva* [ritual bath] when the modern owner hypothesizes that there must be more to the basement of his house, and discovers a secret cellar that had once served as a *mikva*, unopened for five hundred years.

We also hear about the call of a Jungian type of Jewish collective unconscious. The last part of the film movingly describes the awakening among some modern Spaniards who have found they have Jewish blood. A few of them have felt a spiritual need for Judaism, and there is an interview with a brother and sister who, after researching their ancestry, are trying to celebrate Shabbat and the Jewish holidays, difficult though it is for them. They experience a sort of rebirth in returning to the Jewish aspect of their roots.

Intriguing as this is, perhaps one of the most enjoyable parts of the film, after all the discussion about *convivencia* and persecution, treats us to a wonderfully eclectic Jewish-Muslim-Christian musical composition by Eva Medina and the Grupo Musical Safar. In another piece they are joined by the Israeli singer, Suzy. And the beautiful photography showing Toledo in various lights, interspersed with El Greco's unearthly paintings of the city, is likewise something to savor.

Thus the film emphasizes that Jews were faced with a terrible choice: to give up their Iberian homeland or to give up their religion. The expulsion was a 'lose-lose' situation. Those who converted and stayed in Spain might, according to the Spanish view, the opposite of the Jewish one, be understood as patriots. The loss that occurred when the expulsion took place was a loss not only to the Jewish people but, and perhaps just as much, also to Spain itself.