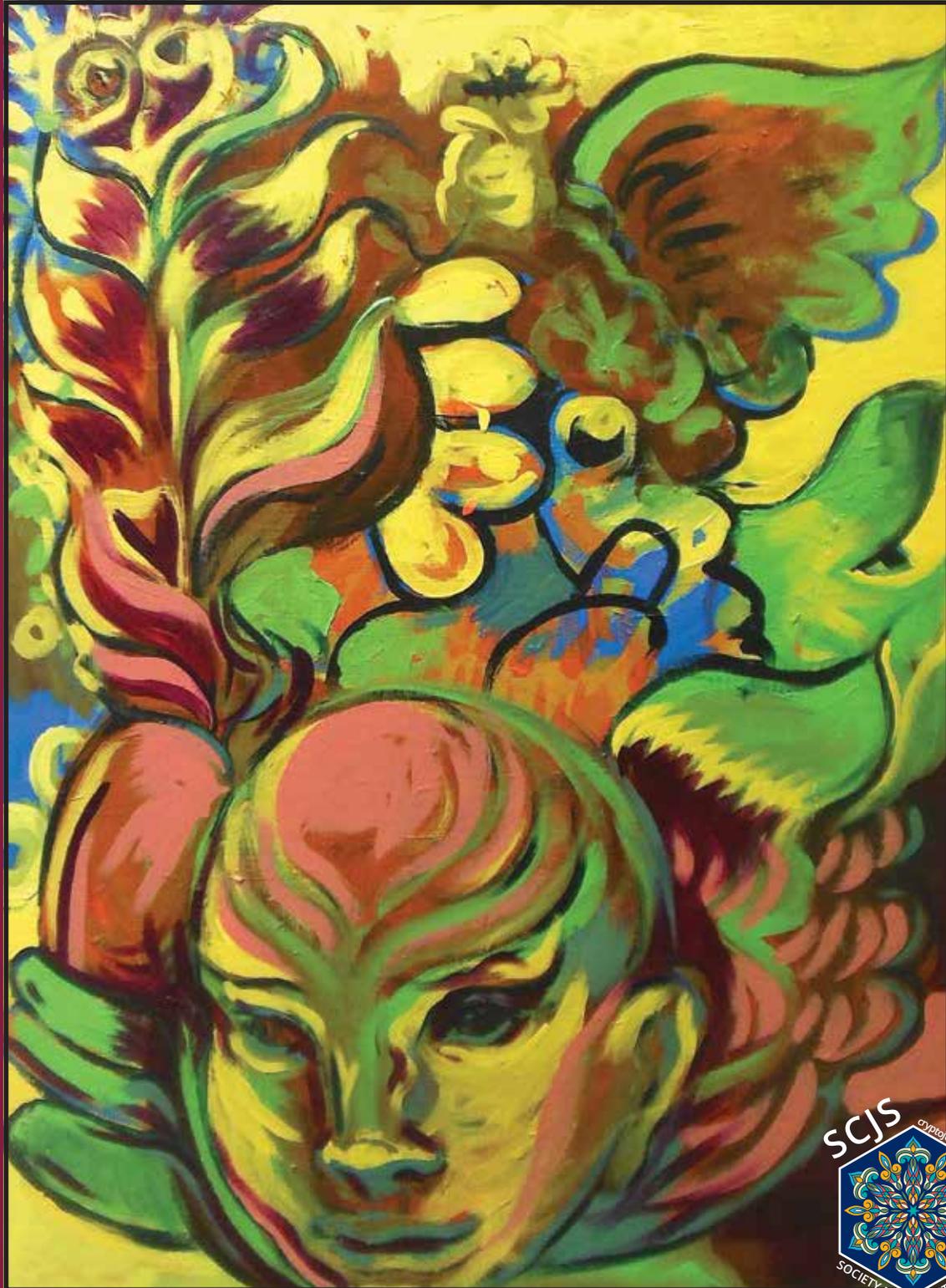


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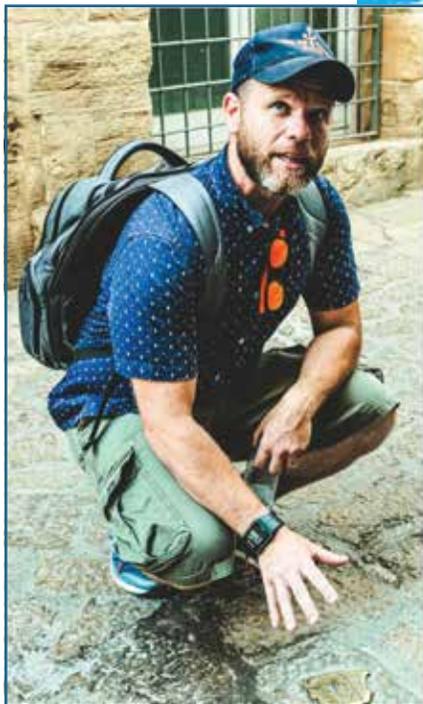
No Matter How You Spell It – Finding Jewish Life in

Majorca

BY DANI ROTSTEIN

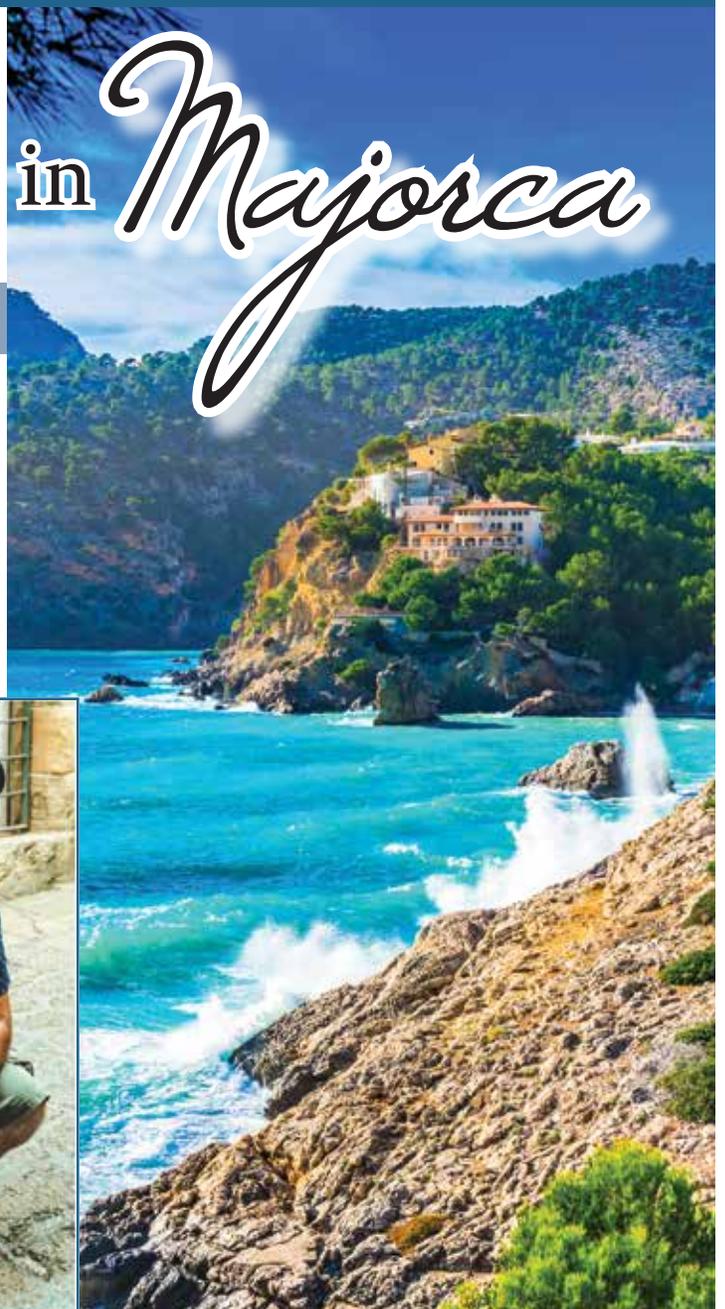
In November 2014, I moved to Majorca (or Mallorca), an island off Spain, thinking I would never meet another Jewish person there. I was quickly proven wrong when I found out about a volunteer-led synagogue with a small group of followers on the island. As I sat at one of the services, I learned that not everyone there was Jewish. In fact, there's a group of people on the island known as Chuetas (spelled Xueta in Catalan, which is spoken on the island), who identify as Catholic yet who quietly preserve the light of a Jewish community nearly forgotten. The Chuetas are descendants of Majorca's once-thriving medieval Jewish community, and some feel connected to their Jewish ancestry to this day. This discovery blew me away as I thought about how powerful Jewish history is: These people are resurrecting a nearly-dissolved Jewish legacy from over 600 years ago!

I was soon invited to attend monthly Shabbat dinners with a small group of Chuetas who had converted and/or returned to Judaism. I looked forward every month to spending time with them, learning from them, hearing their incredible family stories that were untold to the general public. I brought my non-Jewish girlfriend at the time (now my wife and mother of our son) who also began to express an interest in learning about Judaism, as I was expressing an interest to re-learn my Judaism. You see, history and culture and what binds us together as a people with a collectively-shared past – that is what excites me. And who better to learn from than a group of people that are reconnecting to their ancestors' faith from centuries ago? >>>



Above, author Dani Rotstein

Right top, Camp de Mar coastline, Majorca, Spain





Rav Joseph Wallis with volunteers and board members of La Sinagoga Balear: From left, Eliezer Lewinsky, Rav Wallis, Ari Molina, Dani Rotstein. Front, Toni Pinya



Chueta board member and journalist Miquel Segura with wife Margalit at Limud Mallorca's inaugural event, April 2018

This spiritual and cultural revelation reminded me that for millennia, the Jewish people have overcome darkness. We have prevailed against those who sought to destroy us in each generation by carrying forward our beliefs, traditions, culture, and most importantly, our strong sense of peoplehood. Rabbi Hillel reminds us in *Pirkei Avot* 1:14 “If I am not for myself, who is for me?” implying that each one of us can carry the torch and lead our communities out of darkness. And this flame can continue to glow when we are connected and dare to share the beauty of our people with the world around us.

Early on in life, I was raised with a strong sense of Jewish identity, although I was never very observant. Growing up in New Jersey, USA my parents sent me to a Jewish sleep-away summer camp where I befriended other Jews from around the country and learned the song *Wherever You Go, There's Always Someone Jewish*. At 18, I had a unique opportunity to live and learn in Israel, participating in the Young Judea Year Course program. There I strengthened my relationship with Israel and the Jewish people. From learning Hebrew and being able to communicate with my Israeli grandparents, to training with the Israeli Air Force for a week, to living on a religious kibbutz, it was the best year of my life. As I witnessed Jews from around the world come together in Israel, it opened my eyes to the value of our Jewish family – for myself, my friends, and the global community.

After returning to the United States and graduating college, I worked in film production in Miami and New York but was starting to feel the need for a change. I missed that same sense of fulfillment I experienced in Israel. It wasn't until I moved to Majorca five years ago that I found my purpose in the Jewish community.

So I became more involved, determined to instill the passion for Jewish life around the island. I started by hosting challah-baking



Limud Mallorca's Second Annual Conference in May 2019



workshops and Purim parties, and from there, the excitement spread to others. Our numbers kept increasing, and we became a tighter knit community. In fact, we are now up to 60-70 attendees at our Shabbat dinners.

My wife and I founded Limud Mallorca, a Jewish cultural association intent on bringing Jewish culture and life to disconnected Jews living on the island, families of mixed-marriages, and those non-Jews interested in learning about and connecting with Jewish values and history. We organized multiple learning conferences that are trilingual – in English, Spanish, and Majorcan (a dialect of Catalan that is spoken on the island). We are a volunteer-run organization that is now working with the city to organize cultural activities and social events – documentary screenings, book presentations, choir concerts, lectures, seminars, holiday celebrations and community Shabbat dinners at different vegetarian restaurants around the island. Last year, the Department of Education asked us to visit different public schools, and conduct workshops centered on Holocaust education. >>>



Santa Eulalia Church of the Conversos - site of the 1435 mass conversion



Mediterranean Sea view of Es Malgrat Islands off the northwest coast of Majorca



Our first educational Jewish learning conference was in April 2018 and we expected around 20-30 people, but more than 85 attended from around the world! The following year we had over 150 participants. Soon after our first event, the president of the local synagogue decided to resign and nobody wanted to fill his shoes. I decided to step up to the task and was elected to sit on the synagogue board of directors. With me were three other Jews-by-choice, two of whom were Chuetas. This was the first time in over 600 years that Majorcan natives with Jewish ancestry were once again part of the leadership of the local Jewish community. The synagogue was started in the 1970s by British Ashkenazi Jews who had retired and moved to the island and since then has been lead by Jewish expats or Spanish nationals from outside the Balearic islands.

In August 2018, not only was the new board elected but two Chuetas traveled to Israel to be married under a chuppa – the first wedding in history between two Chuetas to be held there. The other event worth noting was the inauguration of a memorial to the crypto-Jews who were burned at the stake in Plaza Gomila in 1691. A memorial had been under petition for at least 40 years and finally manifested itself in the same month as the other events. We are living through watershed moments within Majorcan Jewish history.

After volunteering with the synagogue and Limud Mallorca, I finally decided to make the final leap of faith – to leave my work as a TV commercial producer and open up an educational tourism company called Jewish Majorca. Our mission is to offer an interactive learning experience that engages both visitors and residents alike and sparks further curiosity. We opened in May 2019 and had a wonderful first summer, and we already had bookings for a 400-person Kosher-for-

Pesach holiday in 2020 along with multiple *b'nai mitzvah* cruise trips and Jewish destination weddings planned. All of this was stopped in its tracks due to the arrival of “Señor COVID.” Instead of shutting down operations and giving up our dream however, we decided to adapt and innovate.

We now offer virtual Zoom tours to different communities around the world and even have a stand-alone video virtual tour that you can purchase and download from our website. The fact that international tourism has been temporarily suspended has actually encouraged us to do what we have always been wanting to do – go online and share the Jewish, *converso*, and Chueta history of Majorca with the global audience.

Throughout my life I have been blessed to witness the beauty of Jewish life and the immense power of a connected community, whether in NYC or in Israel. And now on the tiny island of Majorca, I hope to continue sharing that light with others, showing that anyone can come together and live in harmony. My experience in Majorca shows how the spirit of the Jewish people lives on in each one of us. Together we can help reignite the flames of Majorca’s Jewish community and unite the global Jewish community.

For more info or to learn how to support us – please visit www.JewishMajorca.com or email us at JewishMajorca@gmail.com. 🇮🇸



The Jewish Quarter in Palma



New memorial for the Chueta victims of the Majorcan Inquisition located at the site of the mass burnings in Plaza Gomila. Inaugurated August 2018



Sephardic symbol in pavement, Palma

