

PEDRO RIERA VIDAL

ENGLISH TRANSLATION BY

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THE JEWS IN TOLEDO
AND THEIR SYNAGOGUES

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THE JEWS IN TOLEDO
AND THEIR SYNAGOGUES

Some historians have said that the Hebrews came to Toledo when they were dispersed through the world after Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem. They are said to have given the city the name TOLEDOTH, meaning "City of the Generations", since it was peopled by members of the twelve tribes of Israel. Similarly, a number of towns in the Toledo district took their names from places in Israel; for example, ACECA, which in Hebrew means "Strong house"; ESCALONA, from Askelon, of the tribe of Simeon; MAQUEDA, from Maceda, of the tribe of Judah; YEPES, from Joppa, of the tribe of Dan; LAYOS from Lachish, of Judah; and NOVÉS, from Nové, of Benjamin.

In later times, one tradition states that the Jews of Toledo were consulted as to whether the sentence of death pronounced against Jesus was right, and, that they sent a firm reply in the negative.

What can be asserted on a strictly historical basis is that they were in Toledo during the first centu-

ries of Christianity, for some minutes of the famous Councils of Toledo speak of them, and even assign them a special quarter to dwell in, which is still known as the **Judería**. This quarter, redolent with romantic legends, with the murmur of the Tagus at its feet, was bounded from north to south by the Cambron Gate and the height of Montichel (where the celebrated massacre of the "Toledan Night" took place), now known as the Paseo de San Cristóbal; and from east to west by what is still called the Arquillo del Judío, almost at the end of the Calle del Angel which starts from Santo Tomé. This Arabic archway gives its name to the Travesía del Arquillo, not far from the house in the cellars of which it is still possible to see wellmarked remains of the Jewish baths. These are the houses marked with the numbers 11, 13 and 15, facing the Cuesta del Bis-Bis, and a few yards from Santa María la Blanca.

On this side the Judería or Jewish Quarter extended to the edge of the cliff over the river, and took in everything today covered by the Palace of the Count of Fuensalida, where the Empress Isabel died, the House of El Greco, Calle de los Descalzos, Calle del Calvario, the former Convent of the Gilitos, San Cipriano and the Carreras de San Sebastián.

In this quarter, less than four centuries ago still known as the Judería, are the Cambron Gate, so called from the large number of bramble bushes (**cambroneras**) which grew there; the so-called Palace of Count Julián, which in the last days of the Visigothic period is said to have housed the unhappy Florinda, ill-named "La Cava", the victim of her own beauty and of the illicit desires of the last Visigothic king. A few yards from this stands the magnificent Franciscan friary of San Juan de los Reyes, the richest jewel the Catholic Sovereigns Ferdinand and Isabella left to the imperial city. It is believed to be built over the ruins of a Jewish mansion.

Moving southwards, in the direction contrary to the river's course, we soon come to the fine synagogues of which we are about to speak. The word synagogue, as is well known, was applied to Israelite houses of worship built after their kingdom had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, since formerly they had no places exclusively set aside for prayer. The word **Temple** had been reserved solely for that of Jerusalem.

Contribution of the Jews to Toledo

We must now pass over the influence the Jews exerted on Toledo in different spheres of industry and commerce, as well as culturally, spiritually and socially, as well as on the appearance of the city. Both they and the Saracens contributed greatly to progress in all fields of public activity.

From Cordova, fleeing from the upheavals and struggles of Arabic Spain, they brought the famous School of Translators, a brilliant centre of encyclopaedic culture which radiated its light, not only upon Toledo, but to the whole of the country.

In the square called the Plaza de la Judería they had one of their celebrated *alcázar*s, a busy market which sold Persian carpets, silks from Damascus, Indian pearls, Arabian perfumes, cloths from Kashmir and spices from Ceylon. If we shut our eyes to the humdrum realities of the present day, we can perhaps visualize this market, near Santa María la Blanca and extending into the alleys round about, a clamour of voices of buyers and sellers, haggling over every kind of surprising

merchandise; awning-covered stalls beneath the mediaeval sun, canvas fluttering in breezes from the Sahara like sails of ships upon the **Mare Nostrum...** and skins still tanned by the suns of biblical lands. And women with faces the shape of a hazel-nut, with dead-white skin and deep bright eyes and mysterious gaze, with rhythmical walk and willowy waist, women of whom we seem to have a faithful copy in Dominico Theotocopuli's "Lady in Ermine". She was probably Jerónima de las Cuevas, the Cretan painter's only love, amid the arduous hours of his glorious work. Such types, both male and female, we can still encounter if we walk about the Judería a little and keep our eyes open as we peer into the petty patios of its morrow alleys, where the Hebrew women, beneath the cool shade of awnings, used to weave linen with their white hands.

When the Jews were finally expelled from Spain by the Catholic Soveigns, they carried with them to countries in the south-east of Europe (where the sweet Old Castillian speech can still be heard) the keys of their houses, as a token of the ownership which their descendants have for centuries dreafed of recovering some future day.

The Toledo Jews, in various ages, experienced

periods of privilege and of persecution. If they obtained advantages in the reigns of some sovereigns —such as Alfonso the Seventh, the Eighth and the Tenth—, they also felt the weight of implacable persecutions, especially at the hands of the common people, who always regarded them with aversion and handed down fearful legends in which the Jew was the cruel protagonist.

As our present object is not to record in detail the vicissitudes of the Jews in Toledo, we will now describe the two synagogues which still stand in the city.

Synagogue of Santa María la Blanca

Historical note

Many historians agree that this synagogue —the Chief Synagogue— was built during the reign of Alfonso VIII, in the last quarter of the 12th century, at which period the Jews were enjoying unprecedented favour from the king. Many attribute that favour to the love affair between Raquel, the Hebrew beauty whose name “sounds like silver and tastes like honey” and the king who was proclaimed sovereign of Castile by Don Esteban Illán from the **mudéjar** tower of San Román, the highest pinnacle of the city.

At all events, it was built near the **Alcana**.

To this synagogue the Jews resorted to perform their religious duties, to hear the reading of Sacred Books and the Rabbi's monotone commentary on the texts of the Law. This continued during the 13th and 14th centuries, until we come to the date of 1405, and the strictly historical event we are about to describe.

At that time the Valencian Saint Vincent Ferrer was preaching in Toledo. He was a bitter enemy of Judaism, intolerant and vehement, a man of stirring and stormy oratory and matchless eloquence. Thus it was no wonder that he kindled the spirit of the multitudes of Christians, including thousands of converts from Judaism, who heard his vibrant sermons in the **mudéjar** church of Santiago del Arrabal. That church still preserves the pulpit he preached from; it is pure Arabic in style, with filigree carving in white stone, and in it is a statue of the saint, holding up, it is believed, the selfsame cross that he bore when leading the impassioned multitude in a march up to the Chief Synagogue.

While the unconverted Jews listened in fervent silence to the reading of the Sacred Books, that multitude burst violently into the synagogue avid for slaughter. Swayed by age-old hatreds of race and religion, they threw their enemies down the rocky slope to the river bank, sowing anguish and bloodshed throughout the flourishing quarter of the Judería (1). It is stated that this event caused such a shock to Kings Henry III, nicknamed "the

(1) **Note of the translator:** This is attributed by some historians to the ardour of the new converts rather than to the old christians who had lived with the Jews for centuries without any such violence.

Invalid", that he died as a result of it soon afterwards, here in Toledo, on Christmas Day 1407; he is buried in the Chapel of the New Kings in the Cathedral.

After that, the building became a Catholic church under the title of Santa María la Blanca, as it is still known.

For about a century and a half it continued as a Christian chapel of ease, until in 1550 Cardinal Silíceo had three chapels built at its east end, in the part where the sanctuary for the Sacred Books must have been, and the pulpit from which they were read to the people with suitable commentaries.

The chapel was then made into a convent of refuge for fallen women, who entered a community to atone for their sins by meditation and penance. In this capacity it continued for a bare half-century, afterwards reverting to its previous status.

About 1790 it was taken over as an infantry barracks; ten years later it was transferred to the Royal Exchequet for a similar period.

Finally, about 1808, in the great patriotic revival of the Peninsular War or War of Independence,

this profanation came to an end, since when nothing worthy of record has occurred to this National Monument (1).

Artistic survey

From outside, no building could be more modest: this accords well with the style of Arab houses which it shares, and in which sumptuous inward beauty is cloaked in a humble exterior. No-one could guess that behind a commonplace door, approached by five steps of badly-wrought granite, there was one of the most beautiful art treasures in the imperial city, or suspect what a thrill awaited the visitor within.

The outer gate, always open during visiting hours, leads to a pleasant garden planted with irises and roses and shaded by scented acacias, with purple bells twining capriciously around their trunks, while a corner contains a babbling spring which gives delicious coolness in hours of hot sunshine. A row of spruces on either side line the

(1) See the inscription on the west wall.

Arab pathway of bricks set on edge which lead us to the building.

As soon as we are inside, we are met by a feast of snow-white beauty and glorious architecture of the second Moorish-Arabic period, erected by the Hebrew spirit.

It is worth meditating a moment on this association, which says much for the tolerance between the two peoples in those day so different from the present, when, despite the progress of civilization which should have brought men closer to one another, a death-struggle between Arabs and Jews is in existence.

Thirty-two columns —24 in the open and 8 attached to the walls, and suitably distributed in a rectangle of 72 feet by 55— form five naves rising in steps to the central which is 52 feet in height.

The octagonal pillars are built of brick and sheathed in *ataurique*, an exceptionally strong stucco, which is also the material of the large and sumptuous Corinthian capitals that surmount them. These capitals, in which oriental pine-cones and filigree bows are charmingly combined, are all different from one another.

The capitals sustain large, perfect horseshoe arches, thoroughly typical of the Arab style. On the spandres formed by these arches, there are delightful rosettes or medallions of delicate, typically Moslem geometrical work, harmoniously combined with wellwrought loops in circular form which run beneath a simple frieze, with decorations at intervals, resembling a stylized palm, very pleasing to the eye. Higher up there is another and truly magnificent frieze. Its basic decoration is a sort of double polygon, framing very pretty traceries; from these, it is said, is derived the embroidery which enhances Spanish female beauty in the graceful mantilla, and assuredly the same must be true of the Jewish women.

Among the delicate **ataurique** work we can distinguish other decorative motifs such as the stylized fleur-de-lis and the seal of Salomon, the two interlaced triangles. Probably the first was intended to symbolize the purity of the Hebrew woman, especially after the obligatory monthly ablution, and the latter the primitive sign of the Jewish religion.

This marvellous frieze runs all the way along the north and south sides of the synagogue, in the central nave.

Above it there is another very narrow one, sepa-

rated by a series of 22 small stalactitic arches of five lobulations, resting on pairs of small columns, and the latter in turn on small bases carved with a spiral design. These arches are at present "blind", but it is to be supposed that they were originally open to let the light through.

The panelled ceiling is made of larch, which is very strong and will stand up to the inclemency of weather and to human neglect; it is the same material as was used for the main reredos in the Cathedral.

North and South Walls

If we examine the outside of these walls, it is clear that there were originally two entrance doors. The one on the south gave access to a narthex adjoining the minor nave. The door, now bricked-up, is composed of two striated Corinthian columns, with a small cornice on which the inscription can still be read: "Sancta María, succurre miseris". It opens onto the Callejón de los Jacintos. The other, in the north wall, now open again has no particular features.

East and West Walls

In the east wall, some chapels have been added; they will be discussed in a moment.

The west wall has nothing special about it: some commonplace windows admit light; some carved wooden support beams and the entrance door, under a double roof. The large leaves of this door are markedly Moorish in character, and may well be the original ones.

The outside of the east wall preserves almost

intact the ornamental brickwork with large windows of many lobulations, now bricked-up, and two rectangular ones, also closed. The baths previously mentioned are only a few yard from this façade.

Such is the description, with as much detail as possible, of the synagogue in its purely Arabic part in its second period, that is, when the transition period to the Mauritanian Arabic was worked out upon the Byzantine theory, to lead to the Andalusian Arabic which can be seen in all its glory in the Synagogue of Samuel Leví (the **Tránsito**), the Salón de Mesa in the house of Esteban Illán (beneath the **mudéjar** tower of San Román) and in the Chapel of San Eugenio and the Chapterhouse of the Cathedral.

It may be observed that the whole building does not contain a single Hebrew inscription, in contrast to the Tránsito where they are abundant. The reason is that the custom of putting inscriptions on the walls was introduced by the Jews in their synagogues about the year 1300, whereas this building was erected a century and a half earlier.

Conversion into a Catholic Church

The visitor will at once have been struck by some chapels at the east end, where there had probably been a closet for the keeping of the Sacred Books, and the platform from which the Rabbi read them to the people and commented on the Law.

These chapels hide the Moorish work on the ceiling of that side, and also the hollows of the **mudéjar** horseshoe arches in the side walls, through which light must have been admitted to this essential part of the synagogue.

As was said before, the synagogue was taken over in 1405 by St. Vincent Ferrer at the head of a multitude from the Arrabal or suburb within the walls; from that moment, Jewish worship in the synagogue ceased and was never renewed.

In 1550, and after the necessary preliminary repairs after a century and a half of almost total abandon, Cardinal Juan Martínez Silíceo ordered the construction of the three chapels in question, and after some nearby houses had been added to the building, he founded a religious community

with the title of "Refuge of Penance", which received fallen women who wished to expiate their sins by prayer and penance. To this community there was later added another which existed in the parish of Santiago del Arrabal entitled the community of Jesus and Mary, and the two together practised penance under the common invocation of Nuestra Señora de la Piedad. The community, however, lasted for only about 50 years, till the year 1600.

Thus the building again reverted to being the chapel of Santa María la Blanca for about two centuries. In 1791 it was profaned by being taken over as an infantry barracks, and in 1798 it became a military storehouse. These vicissitudes caused considerable damage, but it was finally repaired and declared a National Monument in 1875.

It is worth describing the above-mentioned chapels at the eastend. They are evidently examples of the plateresque style and finely wrought; so much so that despite the difference between this style and the Arabic, there is no real clash between them, but rather they complement one another in a remarkable piece of artistic "tolerance", a phenomenon not commonly found in the field of human social relationships.

It is clear that the chapels, and the reredos still existing in the central one, were built in the middle of the 15th century, when the Renaissance was at its peak, and two famous artists, Borgoña and Berruguete, left some of their finest work in the choir of the Cathedral. To Berruguete or one of his chief pupils this reredos is attributed.

The central chapel, which served as a chancel, has a handsome and elegant dome. It rests on four squinches in the form of gilded scallop shells, in between which there are other pretty gilded shells and wellwrought coats of arms of the Cardinal who founded the chapel. The coat of arms consists of the ciphered name of Jesus in the centre, surrounded by flames apparently coming out of the letters, and depicted as engraved on a flint pedestal allusive to the Cardinal's surname (Silíceo, **sit~~ec~~em**, flint) and to the fact that fire is struck from flint by steel.

These coats of arms are surmounted by the Cardinal's hat and supported by children. The ring on which the dome rests is adorned with pretty flowers in stucco.

The reredos consists of two sections framed within double columns running up to the cornice.

The plinth bears two reliefs: the lefthand one represents the Magdalene, and the right-and one a Sibyl with the inscription: SIYORD-ANEN-TRAN; her right hand rests on a book bearing the words: ECCE MULIER QUE AMAVIT DEUM.

On the Gospel side there are two medallions or squares; the lower one represents the Annunciation, and the upper the Adoration of the Magi. On the Epistle side there are two more: the Nativity and the Flight into Egypt. The central part has only two empty spaces, one of which contained Nuestra Señora de la Blanca. This beautiful reredos is surmounted by a circular medallion representing the sacred body of the dead Jesus in the arms of the Eternal Father. It is surrounded by angels with the instruments of the Passion: the lance of Longinus, the sponge soaked in vinegar, the ladder, etc. At the apex of all, there are two children holding a tablet with the legend. "O death, how bitter is thy memory!" At either side are two children with the Cardinal's arms.

This reredos is well worth close attention; the work is truly worthy of a goldsmith; and betrays the hand of an exceptional artist. Not for nothing is it attributed to the great Berruguete.

The side chapels are smaller, but also worth

close inspection; their ceilings are in the form of handsome scallop shells.

A number of Arab paving tiles are distributed in the floor.

We will now bid farewell to this synagogue in which history and art, matter and spirit, have together produced a symphony in white, a sovereign beauty which leaves an unforgettable impression on the beholder's mind. And once more, amid the roses and lilies, and beneath the shade of the acacias dominated by a lofty cypress, we slowly make our way to the gate, and then, leaving the Plaza de la Judería on our left, and on our right the "Tarpeian Rock" (1) above the river, we proceed to the other synagogue, namely that of Samuel Leví, today known as the Synagogue of the Tránsito.

(1) Today studio and museum of the eminent sculptor Victorio Macho.

The Synagogue of Samuel Leví or Synagogue of «the Tránsito»

*«Dost thou see that I dwelt in u
house of cedar, and the ark of
God is lodged within skins?»*

DAVID (II Samuel VII, 2)

The wealthy Jew Samuel Leví, treasurer and personal friend of King Peter the First of Castile, known as Peter the Cruel, wished to imitate David, founder of the Temple at Jerusalem, and erected this superb building at his own expense. He desired a palace worthy of the God of Israel, and paid no regard to difficulty or cost in building this synagogue, which he might well have wished to call by the name of “**temple**”, had not that title been reserved solely for the Temple of Jerusalem which was completed by Solomon.

A few paces from the synagogue is the building known as the “House of El Greco”. Today they are separated by a narrow lane, paved in bricks set on edge in the Arab style; but in the 14th centu-

ry was close connection between the religious edifice and Samuel Levi's palace. The latter covered much of the site occupied by the houses behind the one which was the home, two centuries later, of the great Cretan painter, and took in the latter and most of the promenade on the cliff overlooking the gorge in which the Tagus runs.

This "**paseo**", whose trees and flowers sweeten the air around the handsome synagogue and provide pleasant shade in summer for residents and visitors, also bears the name of the "**Tránsito**". The synagogue was certainly built in the reign of Peter I, about the year 1366.

Exterior of the synagogue

The basis of the structure is brickwork, as usual in Arabic edifices. In the outer walls, it is easy to observe the way that broad bands of rubble masonry alternate with narrow courses of brickwork, a peculiar feature of Moslem architecture, which was adopted in both civil and religious buildings of the period.

In the western side, which faces onto the Calle

de Comuneros de Castilla, three rows of window-openings can be seen. The upper row consists of eight (the two at either end being bricked-in), having **mudéjar** lobulated arches with handsome lattices which can be appreciated better when seen against the light from inside. Below, three even better windows in the same style are also provided with beautiful lattices; and still lower down, broad quadrangular windows flood the interior with golden light at sunset.

The entrance is in the south façade, and here we can see pure brick, fine yet robust, which has stood up to the ravages of the weather and to man's neglect for six centuries.

This wall displays several mullioned windows and cornices typical of Arab architecture, and is surmounted by the Cross of Calatrava. The bells have slumbered in silence since they ceased to call the faithful to prayer.

In modern times, a porter's lodge has been built in this façade, a feature which certainly adds nothing to its beauty, while noticeably reducing the width of the vestibule or entrance.

Interior of the synagogue

As was said before, Samuel Leví wished to adopt the words of Davis which head this account. His object was to construct, for his own use and that of other wealthy Jews, a temple fit to compare with the one in Jerusalem that had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. It should communicate with his own palace, and should be worthy of the Majesty of the God of Israel. While the fantastic richness and luxury of his palace called forth admiration, astonishment, and even envy and dissimulated censure, it was not fitting that the Lord should be adored in a humbler abode...

Thus it was that money without stint, time without imitation, unflagging faith and unvacillating art, gradually preceeded to construct this architectural marvel, which fills the beholder with astounded delight as soon as he has crossed its threshold.

Right well did the Rabbi Meyr Abdelfí succeed in carrying out the Hebrew potentate's desires: the power of money and of art went hand in hand in creating an edifice which after-ages were to wonder at. Not in vain can we read, among the praises of Peter I of Castile, of Samuel Leví, and above

all, those of Israel's Lord Himself, which are carved on panels and in friezes, frequent eulogies of the artificer who achieved this splendour: Mayr Abdelí.

But here there is no forest of columns with lovely capitals, upholding fine Arab arches, and all in gleaming white, as in the Chief Synagogue, today known as Santa María la Blanca. This synagogue is completely different. What we see here is an unobstructed rectangle of 78 feet by 32, surrounded by four walls literally covered with unbelievable filigree work, like some bridal embroidery done by the fingers of fairies. Only such work as embroidery can be compared with the designs left on the white page of the stucco by the magical hands of the **mudéjar** (1) artists. When we leave the building, gratitude should call forth in our hearts a tribute of posthumous homage to those artists who came from Granada, here to repeat, with even greater perfection were it possible, the marvels of the immortal Alhambra.

It is well worth while to let the eye travel slowly over every detail of this matchless art. (2). Our

(1) **Mudéjar** is the for Moslem craftsmen working in Christian Spain.

(2) The use of opera-glasses or binoculars is highly recommended.

gaze, moving from wonder to wonder, hardly knows where to seek a moment's pause for meditation. Lapped in this atmosphere of inexhaustible beauty, it follows ecstatically the magic of this art. which, as if touched by the fingers of Midas, is able to turn everything into solid gold.

At the east end, where there are three tall narrow arches, as if the beauty of the Arab palaces of Granada had sought still further stylization in Toledo, large expanses of wall have submitted their stone-hard stucco to the sublime touch of the artist. Oriental pines, vine-leaves, palmettos, escutcheons of Castile and León, lilies of the valley, twisted vine-shoots, the star of David, hemispherical reliefs, the Hebrew letter **Zain** which signifies strength, delicate bows, a frieze packed white lines which turn dry geometry into poetry; lines interwoven into a gorgeous dreamland labyrinth in which the imagination wanders lost in delight.

Let us begin by contemplating the feast of art on the western wall, perhaps the most sumptuous because this was the place of honour where the reading and commentating of the Books of the Old Law took place.

It is divided vertically into three rectangular

sections, all three beneath the very slightly projecting canopy of the stalactitic **almocárabe** freize, similar to the one on the ceiling of the chapel which serves as Treasury in the Cathedral.

It is finely wrought, after the manner of a large reredos, on a background of still more delicate work; the colours of red and green, painted six centuries ago, are only slightly faded with the relentless passage of time.

This marvellous retable is an astonishing piece of Moorish filigree embroidery, and in square panels and on the arches there are Hebrew inscriptions, quoted below. Three beautiful arches, whose curves form lobulations alternately round and pointed, rest on pairs of marble columns with original capitals. On that side there enters the light which, six centuries ago, silhouetted the chief Rabbi when, aloft in the "Wooden Tower", he used to read and comment on the Old Testament, and remind the Jews of their duties under the Law

The above-mentioned inscriptions read approximately thus in translation:

On the left side as we face it:

"Behold the sanctuary that was sanctified

in Israel, and the house that Samuel built, and the wooden Tower for reading the written Law and the laws ordained by God for the enlightenment of the understanding of those who seek perfection."

On the right (remembering the letter **Zain**):

"This in the stronghold of perfect letters, the house of God; and the words and deeds that they wrought before God to call together the peoples who come before the doors to hear the Law of God in this house."

Below these, and in the square panels already mentioned, we read the following. On the Epistle (right-hand) side:

"The mercies that God was pleased to do with us, by raising up amongst us Judges and Princes to deliver us from our enemies and oppressors. There being no king of Israel that could deliver us from the last captivity of God which for the third time was raised by God Israel, dispersing us some to this land and others to diverse parts, where they are desirous for their land and we for ours. And

we, the men of this land, built this house with a strong and mighty arm. That day when it was made was great and well-pleasing to the Jews, who through the fame of this came from the ends of the earth to see if there were any remedy that some Lord should rise up over us, who should be unto us as a tower of strength with perfection of understanding to rule our State. There was not found such a Lord among us who were in this part; but there rose up among us for our succour Samuel who was Godwith-him and with us. And he found grace and mercy for us. He was a man of war and peace; mighty among all peoples and a great builder. This came to pass in the time of the King Don Pedro; and may God be his help, and enlarge his estates, and prosper him and exalt him and set his seat above all Princes. May God be with him and with all his house; and may all men bow down to him, and may the great ones that be in the land know him and may all those that shall hear his name rejoice to hear it in all his Realms, and be it declared that he is become a helper and defender unto Israel".

The first thing this legend shows is the nostalgia of the Hebrew people for their beloved land of Palestine, a longing that was to accompany them throughout the centuries, never losing hope that one day their descendants might be able to return to their country just as those who were expelled from Spain by the Catholic Sovereigns stayed firm in the faith that those who are still living in south-eastern Europe might eventually return and live in their old homes.

Secondly, it shows their unshakable faith in the God of Israel, their respect and gratitude towards King Peter I, and the elevation of Samuel Leví to the rank of a demigod. The inscriptions bounding the friezes on all the walls, on the mouldings of the ornamentation, are from Psalms 83 and 99, and will be quoted later.

We now continue the above translation, which was made with great care by a learned Jew about a century ago. That on the lefthand side of the main wall runs:

“With (his) protection and leave we determined to build this temple, peace be with him and all his generation and relief in all labour. Now God hath delivered us out of

the power of our enemy: and since the day of our captivity there hath not come to us any other such refuge. We made this building with the counsel of our wise men. Mercy was great upon us. Don Rabbi Meyr enlightened us. May blessing be upon his memory. He was born that he might be unto our people as a treasure: for before this our people had war at their gates every day. This Holy man gave such ease and relief to the poor as never was done in the first times nor the ancient times. This Prophet was verily from the hand of God: a just man, who walked in perfection. He was one of them that feared the Lord and cared for his holy name. Besides all this he added that he wished to build this house and his dwelling, and finished it in a very good year for Israel. God increased a thousand and a hundred of his people after this house was built for him: who were men and mighty ones that this house might be upheld with a strong hand and great power. No people was found in the four corners of the world that was of less avail before this: but hail, O Lord Our God, thy name being powerful and mighty, thou didst ordain that we should happily conclude this house in

good days and fair years: that thy name should prevail therein and that the fame of the builders should resound in all the world and that men should say: "This is the house of prayer which thy servants made, to invoke therein the name of God their redeemer."

It is worth reading these inscriptions carefully, to get an idea of how the Israelite people caught the artistic manifestations of the artificers with a clear intuition and a detailed perception of the marvellous tracings on the extremely hard stucco, which nevertheless turned soft beneath the inspired chisel which carved filigree as it pleased. And how it burst into eulogies of those extraordinary artists!

While not forgetting the munificence of Leví or the protection of the Castilian king, they did not fail to remember Meyr Abdelí, the hero of this bloodless battle between an artresisting material and an art which beautified it.

It will be observed that the only decorative elements used are drawn from vegetation, specially oriental flora, and from geometry. The reason is that Koran forbids Moslem artists to make representations of the human form or of any kind of animals.

Pursuing our survey of the interior, we now come to the truly magnificent frieze which runs along the north and south walls. It is bounded all the way along by moulding bearing Hebrew inscriptions, and deserves the cosiest attention.

As was said before, it appears traced by magical fingers endowed with the power of Midas to turn all they touched into gold. The artist seems to have exhausted all human possibilities of art and to have called in the very angels to help him. In this frieze, green vine-clusters and twisted vine-shoots, silky bows filled with allusive inscriptions, palmettos, pine-caneg, the arms of Castile, the symbolic fleur-de-lis on the heraldic tower, in other words the flora of the east and the escutcheons of León and Castile, all stylized in such a way with such perfect combination and exquisite taste that the beholder's eye and mind remain in suspense, unwilling to leave this paradise of art and desiring, as it were, to carry it away, fixed in the soul for ever.

Higher up, we have a narrow frieze, running along the same walls, and inscribed as follows.

On the north wall, Psalm 83, 1-5:

“For the winepresses, a psalm for the sons

of Core.—How lovely are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts: my soul longeth and fainteth for the courts of the Lord. My heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God. For the sparrow hath found herself a house, and the turtle a nest for herself where she may lay her young ones: thy altars, O Lord of hosts: my king and my God. Blessed are they that dwell in thy house, O Lord: they shall praise thee for ever and ever.”

On the south, Psalm 99:

“A psalm of praise.—Sing joyfully to God, all the earth: serve ye the Lord with gladness. Come in before his presence with exceeding great joy. Know ye that the Lord he is God: he made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture. Go ye into his gates with praise, into his courts with hymns: and give glory to him. Praise ye his name, for the Lord is sweet: his mercy endureth for ever, and his truth to generation and generation.”

We have mentioned the presence of the arms of Castile and León, with the fleur-de-lis, in diffe-

rent parts of the decoration. It is said that the use of this flower may have been a posthumous tribute by King Peter to his wife Blanche of Bourbon, the fleur-de-lis being the emblem of France. In such a tribute, maybe, sorrow and remorse may have played a part. If King Peter was true to his sobriquet of "the Cruel" in his treatment of Blanche, he may also have obeyed his other sobriquet of "the Just" in making posthumous reparation. These friezes should also be studied with a good glass, if their full beauty is to be appreciated, and especially that of the background, as delicate as the finest lace.

On the south wall, below the frieze which serves as a sort of canopy, there is a gallery with Moorish lattice, straight lintel, and delicately carved plinths, all in the same **mudéjar** style. The gallery is broad and luxurious for its day and was reserved for women. Access to it was given by a door handsomely decorated with plaster work, perhaps in imitation of the "Beautiful" Gate of the Temple at Jerusalem by which the "Court of the Women" was entered. It takes little imagination to see the row of their dark-eyed faces, above the parapet, gazing down intently at the Rabbi who was commenting on the passages read from the sacred Law. A similar gallery once ran along the front

wall as well, but insurmountable difficulties prevented its restoration.

If we now look above the superb frieze we shall be struck by a set of 54 arches, distributed around the four walls. They are most beautiful and elegant and rest on pretty pairs of alabaster columns, wrought in the most varied manner. These arches have many lobulations above the Corinthia capitals, and serve to frame windows—some open, some bricked up—with really enchanting lattices of stone in geometrical designs. Each lattice is different, and each is carved from a single piece.

These windows let in the light, which can never be too bright to illuminate the gems of art in the building, and is ideed insufficient for a full admiration of the superb carved ceiling. This is in fact made of cedar-wood, from the famous cedars of Lebanon with which the Temple of Jerusalem was built. The Jews brought over this wood especially, so that the perfume of their lost fatherland might mitigate their homesickness.

The use of binoculars is really needed to appreciate this superb ceiling, worthy of the priceless treasure it covers. It is 40 feet from the floor and is composed of a vast number of pieces. Wood

mother-of-pearl have been combined in it to produce a peerless gem of beauty; but remorseless time has gradually stripped off most of the mother-of-pearl. Yet we can still admire its lovely geometrical designs, so typical of the Arab style. The triangular squinches at the corners are somewhat easier to see, and at a suitable hour of day even a casual glance is enough to show with what mastery thy were wrought by these incomparable **mudéjar** craftsmen-these Moslems who seem to have wished to repay with the gold of their art the tolerance of Alfonso VI in allowing them to remain in Toledo after its reconquest in May 1085.

The altars

It may seem strange that there should be Christian altars in a Jewish synagogue. But after the Jews were expelled from Spain in the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella (1492), this building was handed over to the Knights of Calatrava, one of the four Military Orders in Spain; in return, the Order ceded to the Comendadoras de Santiago the Priory they possessed at what is now the Convent of Santa Fe, on the esplanade known as the Miradero; this site had been that of the palace which in 1221 was the birth of Alfonso the Wise (son of

St. Ferdinand III), in whose reign the present Cathedral was begun.

The Knights of Calatrava established in the former synagogue the Priory of San Benito (St. Benedict) for their spiritual needs; however, in exceptional cases other crusaders of the Faith—the Knights of the Orders of Santiago, Alcántara and Montesa— were also entitled to use it, though without the right of burial there.

Three altars were then erected in the hall. A large main reredos was put up in front of the eastern wall, covering the arches through which the first rays of the rising sun now enter, which formerly silhouetted the Chief Rabbi as he read and commentated the Old Testament. The reredos disappeared some years ago, but some of its panels went to the Mozarabic Chapel in the Cathedral.

As was said, the Knights of Calatrava were entitled to be buried here, as we can see from the 19 tombs in the floor, the three in the central part being outstanding.

The first, the one nearest the east wall, is decorated in the gothic style, and bears no epitaph. The second has renaissance decoration and states that it contains the remains of "Freire Don Pedro de

Silva, Comendador of Ojos, son of the Most Magnificent Lords of Ribera, who died on the last day of January 1500..."

The third in the centre, which like all the remaining ones is in renaissance style, is that of "Freire Don Grandi... Knight", but the inscription is so worn that it can hardly be read properly.

The gravestone on the left of the first mentioned states that it contains the body of the "Comendador of la Fuente who died on 8 March 1524". That on the other side reads thus: "F. Tello Ramírez de Guzmán, Comendador of Moratalaz, son of Ramiro Núñez de Guzmán and Doña Juana Carrillo, died 7 August 1588, aged 83 years".

The rest of the 19 tombstones are completely illegible. All bear coats of arms, among which we frequently find those of the Guzmán family with its famous cauldrons, and the crescent moon of the descendants of Don Alvaro de Luna.

Chapel of «Nuestra Señora del Tránsito»

When the decline of the Military Orders set in with the falling off of their revenues, the church of St. Benedict became that of "Nuestra Señora del Tránsito" (the Transitus of Our Lady), a title it still bears, though only the title, since worship ceased there many years ago.

All that remains of its period and that of the Knights of Calatrava are the more or less clear traces of some altars and of the doorway of the former sacristy.

On the altar on the north side there is still the hollow and the frontispiece with the arms of the cardinal who turned the synagogue into a Christian church: Cardinal Cisneros. The one on the opposite wall is in renaissance style—plateresque—and quite well preserved. The columns are entirely covered with very fine carving in the plateresque style, so-called because its reliefs imitate the work of silversmiths (**plateros**).

Above the arch, flatter than a semicircle like the first renaissance one, runs a pretty frieze with Calatrava crosses, human figures, fabulous ani-

mals, etc.; above, two handsome urns with supporters.

Looking to the left, we can see the doorway of the former sacristy, also finely carved with plate-resque work, which was much in vogue at the time that it and these altars were made.

Both bear the well-known arms of the Guzmans, and on the lintel is the inscription "Xpoval me fecit", which tells us that the artist's name was Christopher (Cristóbal: the **Xp** is the Greek for **Chr**, and **V** is written for **B**, the two letters being commonly confused in Spanish; the artist would thus have spelt his name Christoval). This plate-resque style, here shown at its finest, is also to be admired in the Cathedral choir, the Hospital of Santa Cruz and elsewhere.

We should not leave the building without a further visit to the east wall, where we can get an idea of the pavement that existed when the synagogue was at the height of its splendour. It is a small rectangle, roped off so that the tread of visitors may not wear it out; here we see the green and white paving tiles which in distant days were trodden by the silent, solemn steps of the Rabbi as he proceeded to the "Wooden Tower" perhaps by the light of the seven-branched candelabrum,

to call the Children of Israel to prayer. On the north wall there is a long seat of Arab glazed tiles. The west wall and part of the south are occupied by choirstalls from some Toledo church which no longer exists.

Near the exit door, on the right, there is a room which was once the documentary archive of Military Orders of Alcantara and Calatrava.

We leave, not without regret, this magnificent synagogue, whose beauties cannot but remain permanently impressed on our minds.

Back again in the street, if it is spring, our senses will be delighted with the scent of the roses and acacias in flower; if it is summer, the green leaves will give us welcome shade, and if it is winter, the sun of Castile will still flood us with gentle warmth. At all seasons we shall find pleasant benches from which to gaze across the river gorge to the famous "**cigarrales**", the country huses with orchards praised by Tirso de Molina, dotting with their whiteness the hillsides from which the Cretan painter took his greys—those hillsides, where the body takes its ease and the mind gives itself over to poetical musings, while contemplating Toledo, like a jewel encrusted on a rock around which the Tagus swirls.

Later, we can continue our poetical journey through this quarter where everything speaks of olden times, of Jewish memories and of romantic legends, while above us towers the hill of San Cristóbal, the site of the Moorish **alcazaba**, scene of the celebrated **Noche Toledana** which has passed into history as a byword for a night of horror.

On arriving at the bend in the ascending road, we may take the stairway on the right up to the esplanade of San Cristóbal, now a broad belvedere from which the panorama is well worth while contemplating.

P A N O R A M A

In the background to the left are the “Cigarrales”; next we see the synagogue we have just left, beside the garden of the House of El Greco. Further off, we see the florid gothic of San Juan de los Reyes; nearer at hand, to the right, the mass of the convent of San Antonio; next, the palace of the Count of Fuensalida, where the ill-fated Empress Isabel, queen of Charles V, died in spring 1539. Through its doorway, emblazoned with the arms of Ayala, emerged the funeral cortege which was to bear the body of the lovely queen to Granada, and to cause the conversion of the Marquess of Lombay into St. Francis Borgia. All this is topped by the splendid **mudéjar** tower of Santo Tomé, the permanent home of El Greco’s masterpiece, “The Burial of Count Orgaz”.

* * *

With this we conclude our short tour through the so-called “Jewish Quarter”, wherein history,

art, tradition and legend have gathered together such enchantements and treasures.

From the height of San Cristóbal, we wave our farewell to this quarter of Toledo, so packed with stirring memories. But we shall never lose our desire to return and see it all again.

Toledo, autumm 1958.

and various and again have gathered together
such enchantments and magic.

From the height of San Cristóbal we were on
knowing to this quarter of Toledo so packed with
many a corner. But we shall never lose our
desire to return and see it all again.

Toledo, January 1938

P A R A P E D I D O S

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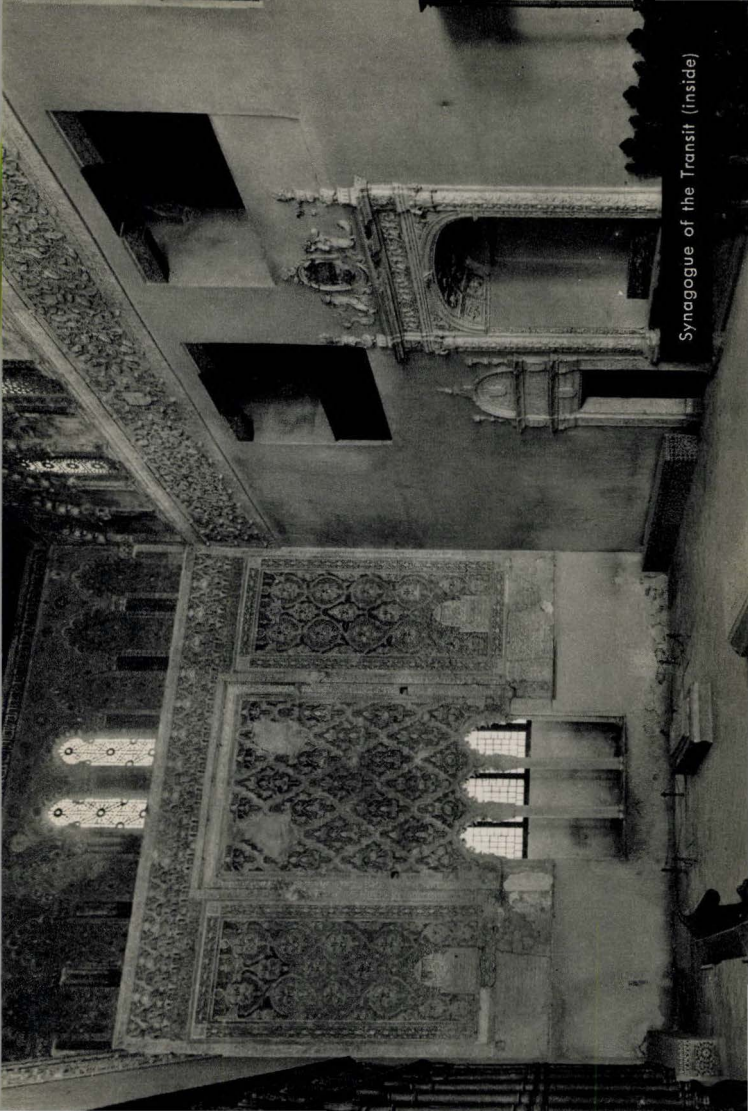
LUIS ARRIBAS

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TOLEDO



Synagogue of the Transit (outside)



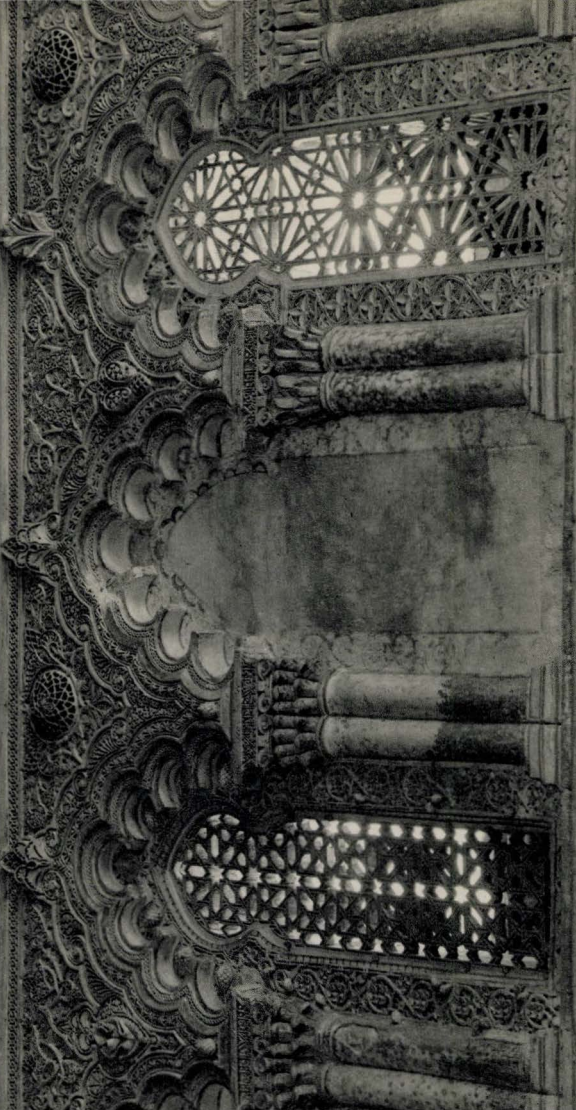
Synagogue of the Transit (inside)





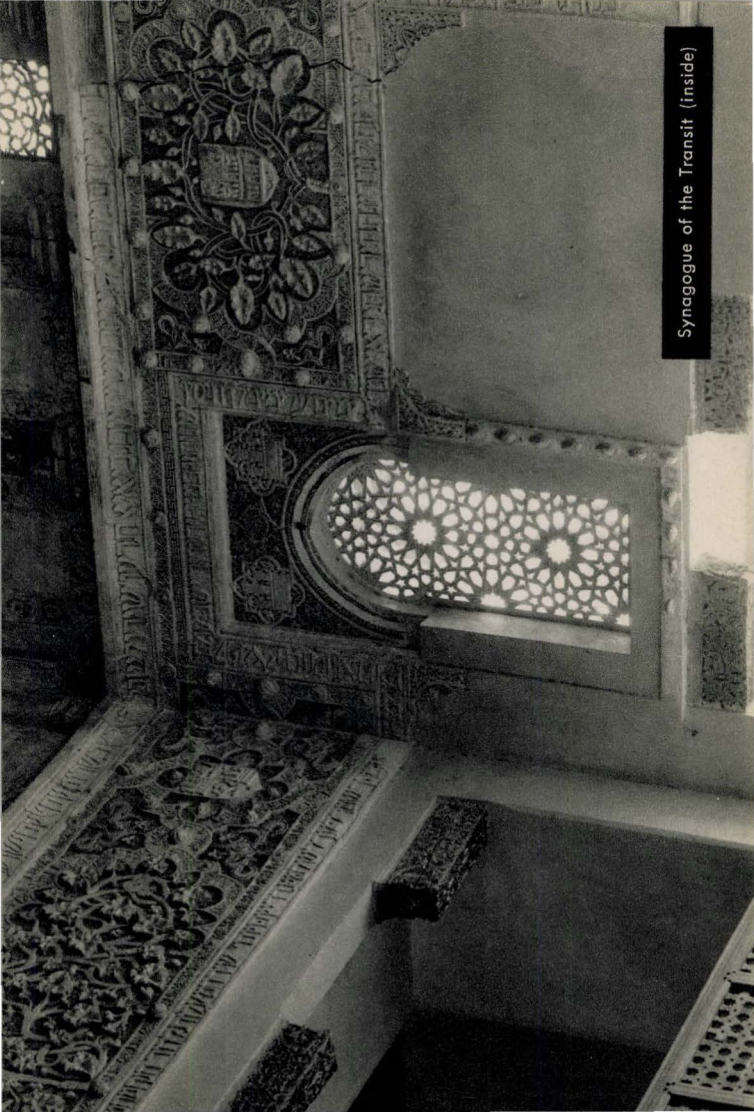
Saint Mary The White. Detail

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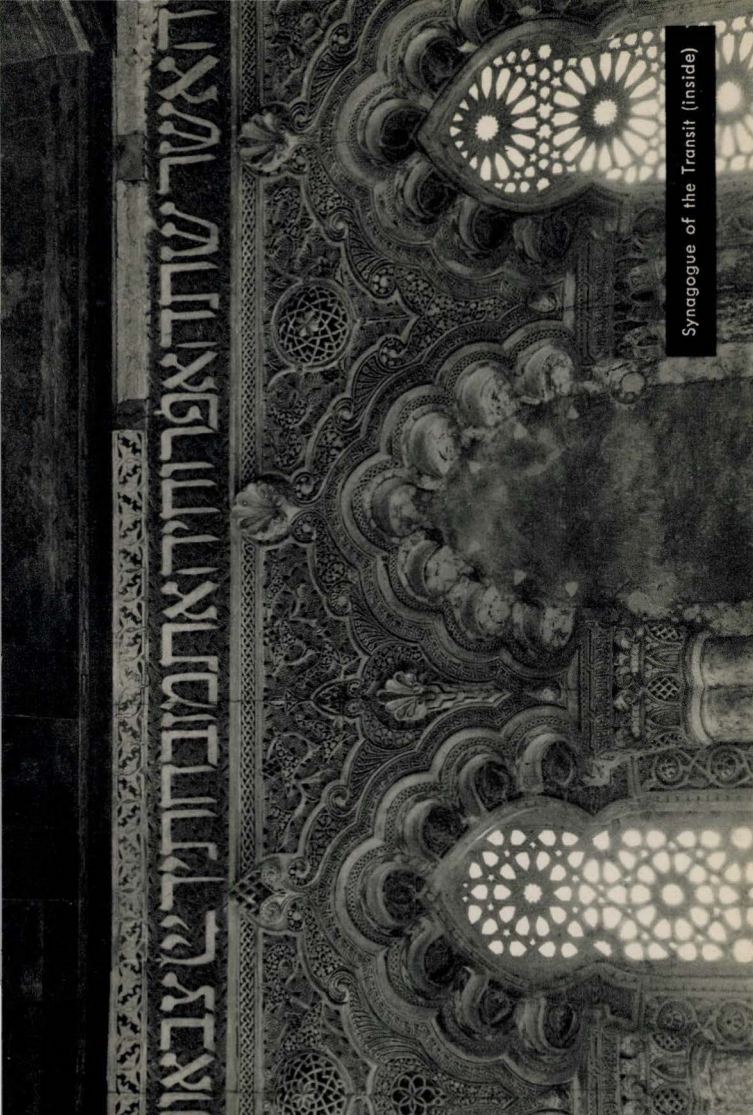
Synagogue of the Transit (inside)

Synagogue of the Transit (inside)



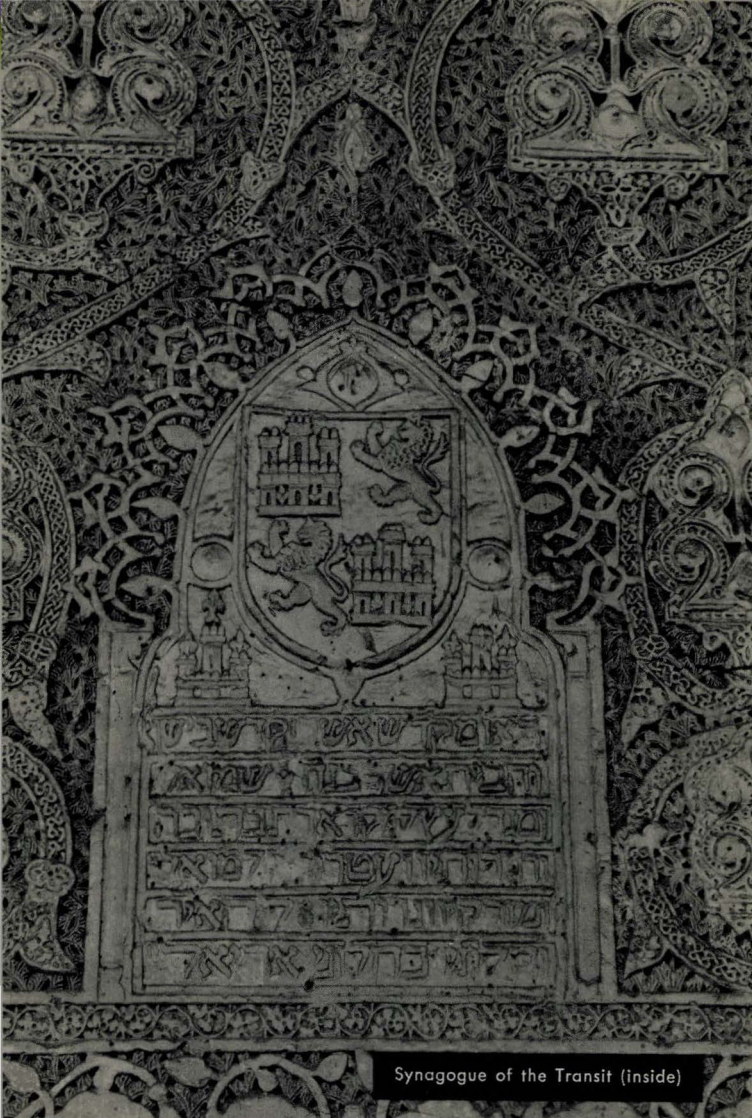
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Synagogue of the Transit (inside)





Synagogue of the Transit (inside)

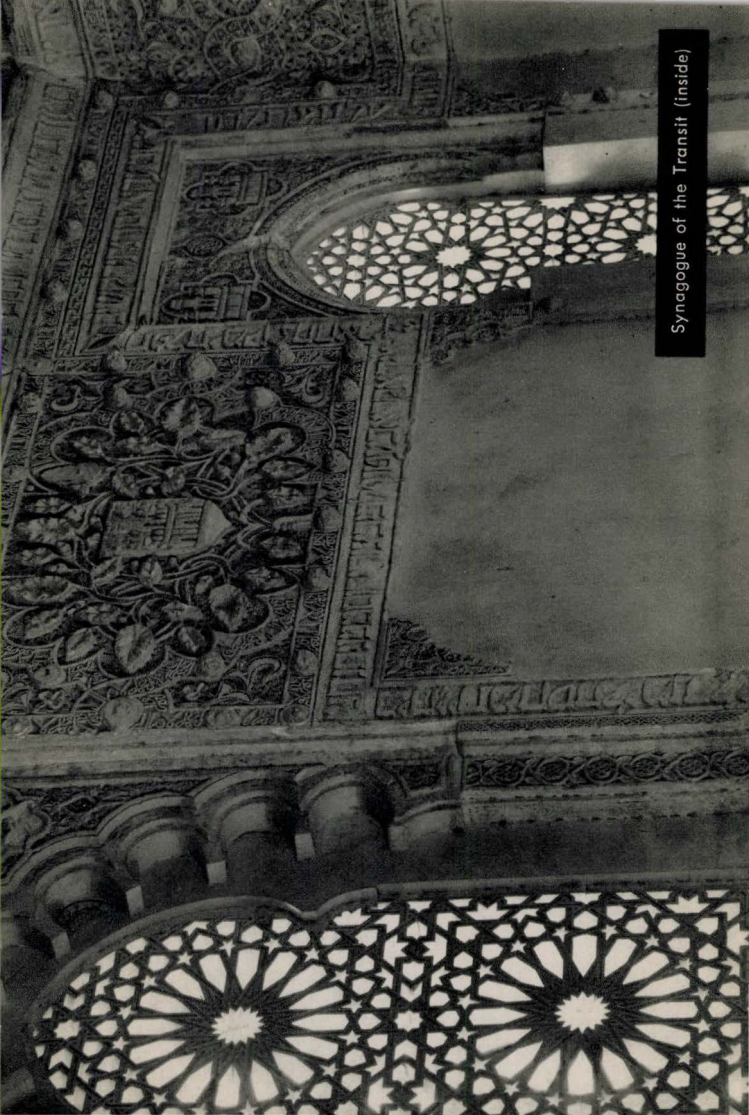


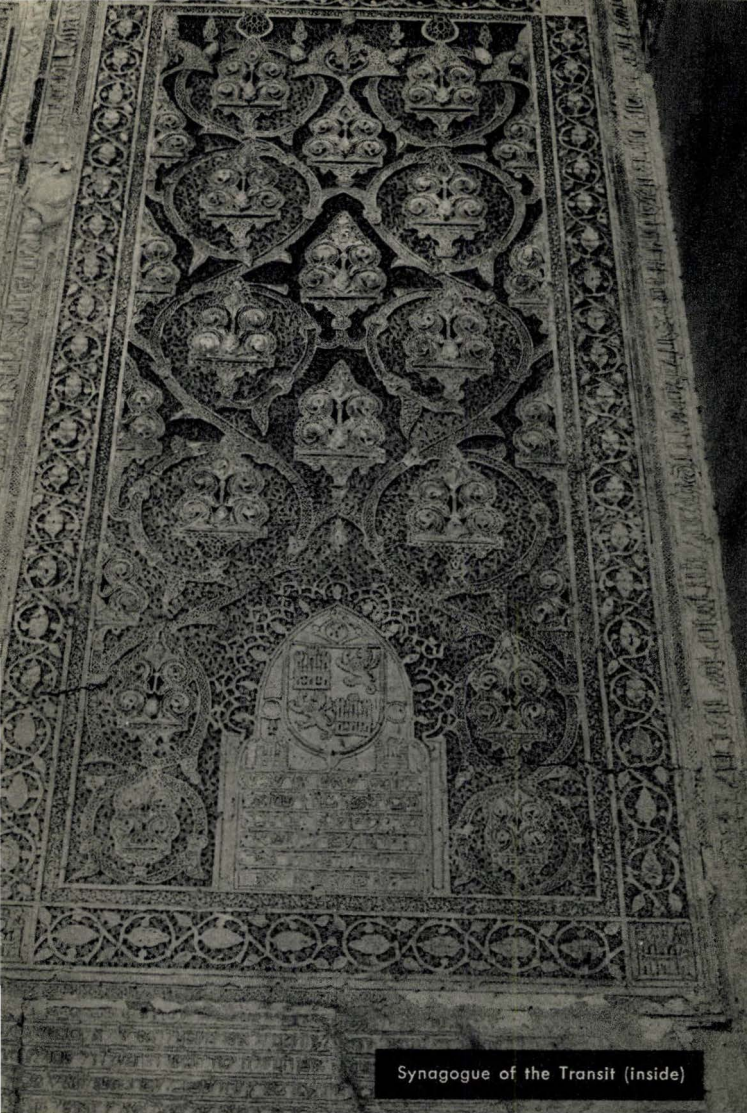
Synagogue of the Transit (inside)

Synagogue of the Transit (inside)

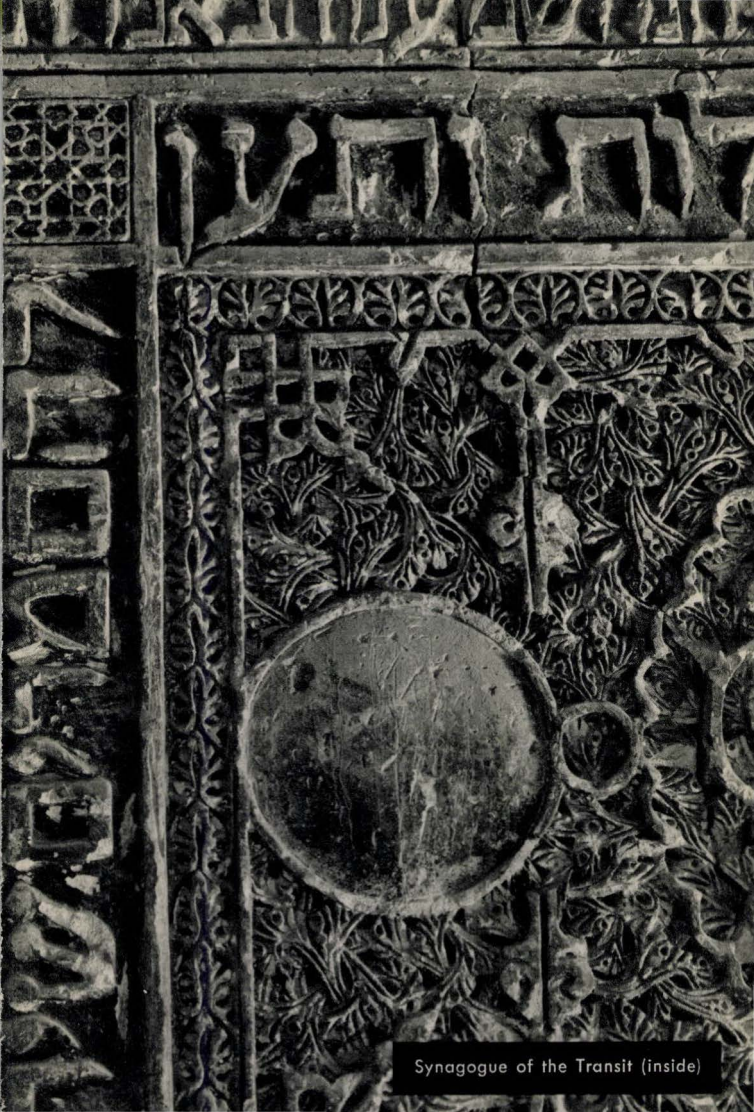


Synagogue of the Transit (inside)



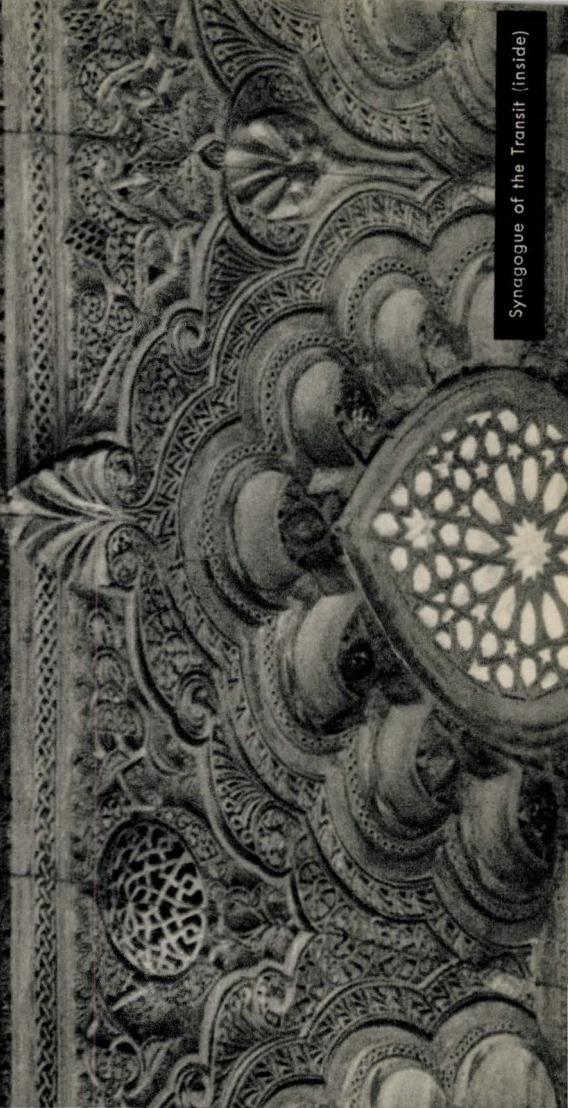


Synagogue of the Transit (inside)

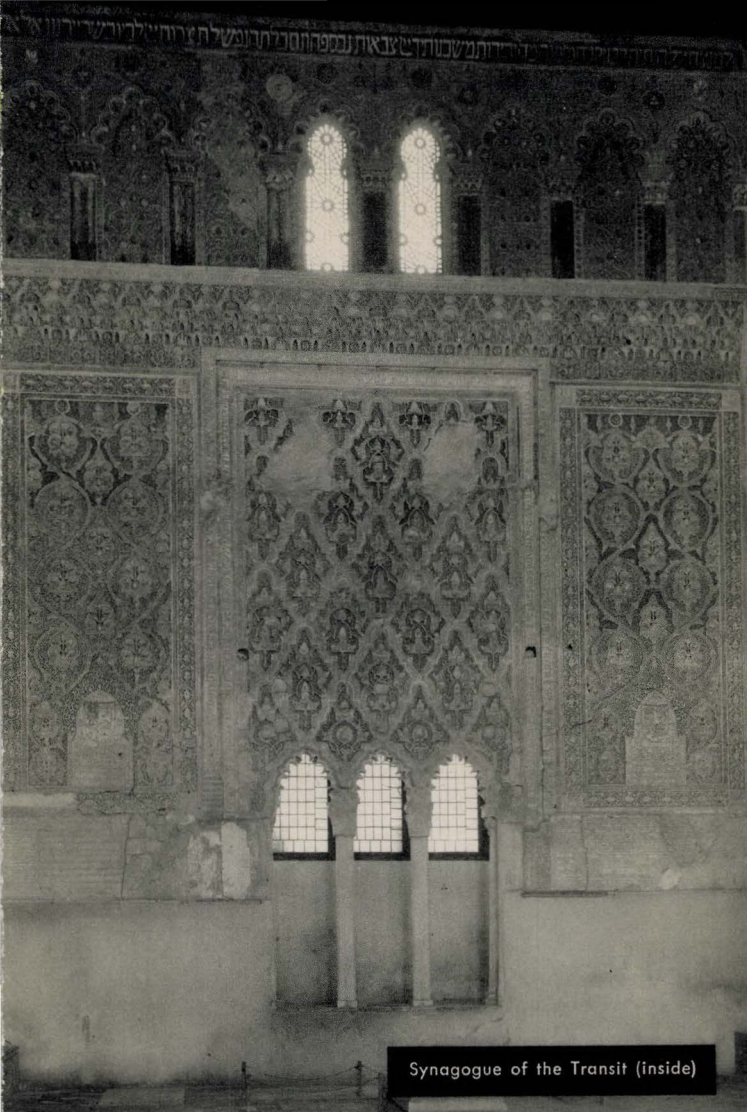


Synagogue of the Transit (inside)

עזרת ישראל



Synagogue of the Transit (inside)



Synagogue of the Transit (inside)

General view and Tagus river

