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Sorensen, Victor; Martínez-Ariño, Julia

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CASE STUDY

Chapter 9

Interreligious Tours as Bottom-Up Heritage Practice: The Routes of Dialogue in Barcelona

VICTOR SORENSEN AND JULIA MARTÍNEZ-ARIÑO

Introduction

Interreligious dialogue is often seen as the cure to many contemporary problems in increasingly diverse European societies (Admirand 2019). Politicians frequently consider interreligious dialogue an useful tool to handle “wicked policy problems” (Poppelaars and Scholten 2008: 338), such as those linked to terrorism and radicalization, immigrant integration, and poverty. This is particularly the case in urban centers, where most of these issues emerge and become politicized. Interreligious initiatives, such as dialogue groups and interreligious events, are becoming popular in many European cities as instruments of governance (Fahy and Bock 2019; Griera and Nagel 2018; Martínez-Ariño 2019).

Similarly, heritage is invested with multiple political objectives, particularly in highly diverse cities. These range from reaffirming national identity and establishing particular readings of the past to recognizing certain cultural or religious minorities to incorporate them in a majority narrative (Weiss 2007). As such, heritage is often used politically as a source to promote contact between groups and generate social cohesion. Moreover, heritage tends to be understood as an enterprise that looks backward, where the past is brought forward in an attempt to preserve certain historical elements. However, following the work of scholars in critical heritage studies, we understand heritage as first and foremost a present- and future-making endeavor. The consideration, and often reconstruction, of certain elements of the past as worth being kept as heritage of a particular society, group, or culture is more revealing of the contemporary interests, anxieties, and values than it is of the time those historical elements supposedly come from. Moreover, heritage is often used to foster certain ideas, views, and desires about how future society should look like and what it should value and promote. For Rodney Harrison, a heritage scholar interested in heritage as future-making practices, “heritage actually has very little to do with the past, but instead emerges out of the relationship between past and present as a reflection on the future” (2013: 228). Linked to this idea is the fact that heritage is usually a practice of making new things, of transforming existing things rather than preserving them

(Zetterstrom-Sharp 2015). Following this line of thinking, we understand heritage as an ongoing process, as something that is in the making rather than something that is a finished product.

It is precisely at the complex intersection of these two key developments—the promotion of interreligious dialogue and the use of heritage as tools for social cohesion—that this chapter is located. In it, we examine the making of an interreligious heritage project in the city of Barcelona as it is developed and implemented on the ground, to later become more institutionalized. However, rather than focusing on state-led interreligious heritage projects, we analyze a community heritage project. Similar to heritage projects led by state institutions, community heritage works are “a means to mould and communicate histories, understandings of identity, and definitions of culture and cultural relevance within groups and to others” (Crooke 2010: 28). Drawing on the concept of “bottom-up heritage practices” (Brandellero and Janssen 2014: 232), understood as practices that have the potential to enhance new interactions and produce novel narratives across cultural and religious groups, we discuss a project of intercultural and interreligious heritage routes in Barcelona. Born out of grassroots Jewish and Muslim associations in 2018, this initiative aims to generate mutual knowledge and recognition of these two traditions.

The way this chapter is written might appear quite unusual. It is a collaboration between a Jewish heritage practitioner (Victor Sorensen) and a non-Jewish scholar (Julia Martínez-Ariño). Although such collaborations have become more common over the years, it is still quite uncommon to produce publications together. This aspect is particularly important because it has shaped the way we have written our contribution as well as the style we have used. While the introduction and the conclusion follow a more standard approach to academic writing, the main empirical section, where the heritage project is described (how the idea came into being, who the actors involved were, how the project has evolved, etc.) is kept in first person. This is so because we wanted to reflect how Victor Sorensen, one of the main creators and promoters of the project, experienced heritage-making firsthand. Where appropriate, we have added analytical reflections that help us either to contextualize this experience in its larger context or to connect this case study with broader theoretical debates in the fields of religious studies and heritage studies.

“Routes of Dialogue”: The Origins

“Routes of Dialogue” is a project for intercultural and interreligious dialogue that originated in Barcelona in 2019. However, to get a better glimpse of the context in which this initiative developed, we go back to 2017, the year in which *Salam Shalom Barcelona* was created. This brief historical excursion will enable a better understanding of the conceptualization of this activity as well as offer some relevant brushstrokes on the attempts to translate the wills and objectives of this interreligious group into a practical activity.

It was thanks to a friend of mine and member of the youth group of *Audir* (the UNESCO Association for Interreligious Dialogue), Verónica Sartore, that the idea of *Salam Shalom Barcelona* began to take shape. Verónica, the daughter of an Italian man and a German woman, brought from her time in Berlin a particular type of activism, closely linked to breaking down social walls in our city that are, at first sight, invisible. Verónica was active in two interreligious engagements in Barcelona. On the one hand, she proposed the celebration of the *Night of Religions*, inspired by the *Lange Nacht der Religionen* in Berlin (Burchardt and Griera 2020). On the other hand, and similarly inspired by Berlin’s *Salam Shalom Initiative*—a civil-society

organization aiming to oppose racializing and stigmatizing discourses that perpetuate distrust and favor the social and institutional exclusion of minorities in society—Verónica fostered the creation of *Salam Shalom Barcelona*. She invited me to have coffee with Zouahir Haissan, a member of the Barcelona association *EuroArab: Uniting Europe and the Arab World from Barcelona*. At that time, I was working professionally as the director of the *Comunidad Israelita de Barcelona* (CIB), the central institution of Judaism in Barcelona. Simultaneously, together with other colleagues, I was trying to get the Jewish cultural platform *Mozaika* off the ground, the main objective of which was the promotion of Jewish culture and history in Barcelona. Especially oriented to a non-Jewish audience, the *Mozaika* platform sought to actively participate in the social and cultural fabric of our city, without any complex and in an inclusive way.

My experience in the field of interfaith dialogue was certainly limited. Despite having participated actively in the Jewish community framework from an early age, I had only experienced interreligious dialogue in its most institutional facet, as director of the CIB, in the *Stable Working Group of Religions* (GTER). This interreligious platform, which brings together the leaders and representatives of the “historically relevant” religions, as the group defines itself, constitutes a key institutional actor in the field of interreligious dialogue in Catalonia (Griera and Forteza 2011). The meetings within the framework of the GTER were formal, with a very specific agenda, with the participation of senior officials of the institutions represented there. Meetings were organized, representatives participated in colloquiums, the group published communiqués, and it became a pioneer in Spain in the dissemination of dialogue and coexistence. The group even received several awards, including the Sant Jordi Cross, one of the highest recognitions that an organization can receive from the *Generalitat de Catalunya*, the Catalan government. While the development of this group was key for the creation of a broad strategic alliance among the city’s religious institutions, its representativeness of, and social impact within, the religious communities themselves is rather limited, something that is not exclusive to the case of Barcelona (Chapman and Lowndes 2009). From the perspective of the Barcelona Jewish community, belonging to this group did not represent the development of initiatives where the coreligionists could have direct contact with the social, cultural, and political realities of the other religious communities. Although the GTER has managed to project to society an image of union, fellowship, and celebration of religious plurality, this has not translated into a broad awareness of the need for dialogue in the participating communities.

These are some of the reasons that I gladly accepted to join Zouhair and Verónica for a coffee. For me, this meeting with them represented a unique opportunity to turn around the perspective of interreligious dialogue that I had experienced thus far and imagine and dream of creating a different, more participatory, and horizontal framework without the weight of institutional representation. For this reason, I decided to go to the meeting wearing the *Mozaika* hat, and not the CIB hat. I was very curious and I had the feeling that the three of us would understand each other. I confess that I was excited about the meeting. A bit vain perhaps, I felt like a diplomat on my way to close the great deal that would bring peace and harmony to our society. And the meeting was one of those that you keep in your memory, but also in your heart.

We agreed to explore new avenues for interreligious dialogue and to jointly combat Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. Moreover, we identified the need to make the local Jewish community known to the local Muslim community and vice versa. For us, it was important that the two would get to know each other, their stories, traditions, and concerns. We also agreed

on adopting a bottom-up approach. The *Salam Shalom Initiative* in Berlin would become our reference and we articulated our own group through the two nonprofit associations we represented, *EuroArab* and *Mozaika*. *Salam Shalom Barcelona* was thus born to dismantle prejudices, fight hate speech, and work against structural, cultural, and direct violence between our communities and toward our communities from a starting point of inclusivity, visibility, and solidarity. These were ambitious goals that would require tireless work by the volunteers of the two associations to be implemented.

The members of the *Mozaika* team celebrated this initiative and many responded to the call to join *Salam Shalom*. The same thing happened when Zouhair communicated our decision to the *EuroArab* members. With Veronica's help, the first activities of *Salam Shalom Barcelona* began to take place. Their main focus was to make youngsters familiar with what it means to be Jewish and Muslim in Barcelona today. Once *Salam Shalom Barcelona* was founded, a first working team was created to coordinate the initiative, that is, (1) to define its scope of action, strategy, and communication; (2) to discuss its presentation in Jewish and Muslim institutions in the city; and (3) to look for funding to cover the costs of the proposed activities. *Salam Shalom*'s first public activity was the joint celebration of the New Year (Rosh Hashanah/Ra's As-Sanah), which in 2017 coincided in date. The two religious calendars provided us with a unique opportunity to organize a first festive event, full of music and flavors, which reaffirmed our conviction that we needed to work together. Next to this event, *Salam Shalom* organized other activities, such as workshops where members from both the Jewish and the Muslim communities would share their experiences in order to find common ground (El-Hairan and Martinez-Cuadros 2019).

In the mid of this process, a terrible event shook Catalan society. On August 17, 2017, a terrorist cell drove a van into pedestrians in La Rambla in Barcelona, killing 13 people and injuring at least 130 others, one of whom died ten days later. Hours later, the Islamic State claimed responsibility for the attack. Social reactions to the attacks ranged from shock to incomprehension, and Islamophobic discourses gained prominence. The people of Barcelona took to the streets to protest the attacks and the *Salam Shalom* group decided that this would be the first time we would march together, with a clear message: "Jews and Muslims stand together, we refuse to be rivals." This was a message for society at large, but we addressed it particularly to our communities. This was important for us in a context where trust between communities had to be restored after this event.

However, an unexpected reaction occurred within the CIB. One day after the terrorist attacks, in an inopportune interview with the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, an international Jewish media outlet, the rabbi of the community affirmed that the Jewish community of Barcelona was doomed and that the police authorities were not facing the Islamist threat. This is a dangerous and decontextualized narrative, as one can read from the article in which the interview was presented:

I tell my congregants: "Don't think we're here for good. And I encourage them to buy property in Israel. This place is lost. Don't repeat the mistake of Algerian Jews, of Venezuelan Jews. Better [get out] early than late." (Liphshiz 2017)

I do not doubt that the press magnified and exaggerated the rabbi's words. They had made a great headline, and it didn't take long for it to reach the main international and Israeli Jewish media.

The local press also echoed the news. The CIB, even though I was no longer working there, asked me to act as a spokesperson to counter the interview. I felt I could not reject that request. The rabbi's message was running out of control. It was damaging the Jewish communities. For the board of directors of the CIB, the message circulated through the media was not the image the community wanted to give at that delicate moment. In fact, this Jewish community was working in a completely opposite direction: to encourage Jews to build their lives in Barcelona. I published an article shortly after the interview with the rabbi, where I directly contradicted his postulates and his invitation for the Jewish people to leave Barcelona (Staff and JTA 2017). This article also circulated quickly; it was very controversial that the rabbi and the spokesman of the Jewish community publicly confronted each other.

Beyond the specific reactions this affair provoked, it revealed the need to lose the fear of expressing positions publicly. It was time to seek alliances between communities, it was time for responsibility and social and political commitment. Therefore, more than ever, we reaffirmed our commitment to carry *Salam Shalom* forward. The next challenge was the public presentation of the initiative in January 2018.

The First “Routes of Dialogue”

For the public presentation of *Salam Shalom Barcelona*, we prepared a series of activities that took place in different areas of the city, including the urban space itself. We wanted to do the public presentation somewhere outside our institutional spaces to show others that contact between Muslims and Jews was a living reality in the streets of Barcelona. This is how the idea of the first “Route of Dialogue” was born. We promoted it in our social media as follows:

Salam Shalom Tour:

In this tour we want to emphasize the importance of our histories (Jewish and Muslim) in the urban space. Knowing our realities is the first step to fight prejudice.

We invite you to two guided walks through the center of Barcelona to live and understand the history and reality of the Jewish *call* [medieval Jewish neighborhood] of Barcelona and the Muslim communities of the Raval neighborhood.

Through our media campaign, we presented our mission; we wanted to show that dialogue had no boundaries and that the Muslim and Jewish presence, both socially and historically, are more deeply rooted in the city than one might think. Planning the tours was not an easy task. The Raval neighborhood in Barcelona has a significant Muslim presence, visible through the existence of multiple Islamic oratories, bakeries, and halal butcher shops, but the Gothic quarter, where the old Jewish quarter of Barcelona is located, has no Jewish families living there, and the Jewish presence is limited to some Jewish heritage initiatives (Martínez-Ariño, 2020) that try to complement the insufficient work of Jewish heritage preservation done by public institutions. Therefore, our approach was twofold: in the Raval, we would seek to make known a tangible social reality, while in the *call* (the medieval Jewish quarter), we would work on the non-tangible heritage of the neighborhood, taking the opportunity to introduce the contemporary history of the Jewish community of Barcelona. It was no coincidence that the Muslim guide for the “Salam”

part of the tour was a social activist and journalist, while the guide for the “Shalom” part was an activist and medievalist historian.

The first “Route of Dialogue” was conceived of as the sum of two already existing tours rather than as a tour with a predefined narrative structure created through the joint work of the two guides. We hoped that a good understanding between the two would guarantee the correct implementation of the activity and facilitate dialogue between them and with the public. Despite the lack of planning and the limitations of adding the two already existing tours, the result and its public reception were very positive. The fact that the tour was free may have helped to have the tickets sold out days before the event took place. The public of the first tour was largely a local, non-Jewish, and non-Muslim audience interested in learning about other perspectives and histories of their city. Some members of the Jewish and Muslim communities also participated.

Some of the first conclusions we extracted from this first experience revolved around the opportunities that this type of initiative offered us and the participants. First, our tour offered a specific narrative of our city concerning its Jewish and Muslim realities, which are not represented in other city tours organized for both locals and tourists. In this sense, our tour offered an alternative narrative about the city’s past and present that challenges the “authorised heritage discourse” (Smith 2006: 11) presented by official touring agencies and private companies. Second, a guided tour is a cultural experience with a high potential to explain the history and reality of our communities, allowing the public to dive in an open and pleasant way into complex historical, social, and religious contents. This creates a more direct and dynamic interaction with the participants in comparison to a conference, for instance. Third, the development of such guided visits, once framed in a structured program, would serve to reinforce the promotion and valorization of the tangible and non-tangible heritage of our communities. Moreover, these tours would allow participants to not only access content about our two communities but to be able to construct their own interpretation. In this sense, the tours could serve as a sort of laboratory, where organizers and participants together could explore certain historical elements and their representation, as well as reflect upon its present and future meanings. In this way, the routes would allow space for discussion, different perspectives, and disagreement to emerge. Finally, the development of this type of activity had the potential to become a source of income to ensure the sustainability of the *Salam Shalom Barcelona* project.

This positive assessment of the first tour required a work plan for the dialogue tours to become a more stable reality. However, as the Yiddish saying goes, “Der mentsh trakht un g.t lakht” (humans plan and G[o]d laughs). This work plan was never developed, due principally to the lack of operational capacity and funding of the *Salam Shalom* initiative, which continues to be based on volunteer work. Thus, the “Routes of Dialogue” was limited to the January 2018 experience and it was not until September of the following year that a second opportunity opened up for the strengthening of the interreligious tours: the *Night of Religions*.

The *Night of Religions* is a yearly interreligious initiative of *Audir*, supported by the City Council of Barcelona and the social work foundation of Catalan bank “La Caixa.” It consists of a multi-sited event in which a variety of places of worship in Barcelona open their doors to teach the general public about their religions. This allows citizens to get a first-hand experience with religious traditions they might have never been in contact with. This event offered a favorable context for the organization of the tours. Interestingly, next to the guided tour led by *Salam Shalom*, the program of the 2019 edition of the *Night of Religions* included three other tours

that had been proposed previously but they differed from ours in that they consisted of visiting places of worship. Two of them were interreligious tours, and the third one was connected to Hinduism, yoga, and meditation. However, the fact that they involved places of different religious denominations and were presented as visits that promoted interreligious dialogue showed us the potential of this type of methodology and encouraged us to explore its further implementation in the future. It was in 2020, this time in the framework of a European project, that a new opportunity opened up for the “Routes of Dialogue” to develop and consolidate.

The European Days of Jewish Culture Festival: Toward the Expansion of the Routes

The *European Association for the Promotion of Jewish Heritage and Culture* (AEPJ), where I have the pleasure of working as director at present, is located in the same working space as the cultural platform *Mozaika*, along with other institutions in the city that also promote Jewish cultural projects. *Casa Adret*, where all these institutions are located, serves as a kind of “hub” of Jewish culture and heritage in Barcelona. Being in touch with each other on a regular basis made it possible for us to seek synergies between the various institutions and join forces to develop projects together. One among such projects was the decision to collaborate jointly within the framework of the *European Days of Jewish Culture Festival* (EDJC), a yearly initiative coordinated by the AEPJ. The 2021 festival is part of the *European NOA (Networks Overcoming Antisemitism) Project*,¹ funded by the *European Union’s Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme* (2014–20).

The AEPJ proposed that the 2021 edition of the *European Days of Jewish Culture* be carried out around the central theme of “Dialogue.” The intention was to invite different cultural groups to become aware of the richness of the existing diversity, represented by their own religious, national, and ethnic identities. The ultimate aim was to achieve positive and nonviolent coexistence, and to open a door to work thoroughly on antisemitism issues through the diversity of events that took place simultaneously in almost thirty countries. By September 2021, the more than 250 cities participating in the festival carried out activities revolving around dialogue, in collaboration with institutions as varied as city councils, cultural centers, Jewish communities, museums, and foundations.

In the summer of 2020, the AEPJ began to design the working plan in order to coordinate the 2021 *European Days of Jewish Culture Festival*. The “Routes of Dialogue” were presented as one of the main activities of the event. In collaboration with Anna Szczesniak and Pawel Lukaszewicz (Taube Foundation, Poland) and Michael Schreiber (Burgenland Society Research, Austria), the idea was to benefit from the experience of *Salam Shalom Barcelona* with the two “Routes of Dialogue” that we had organized previously in Barcelona. Given that, historically, guided tours have been the main activity of the EDJC, this framework offered a good opportunity to develop the “Routes of Dialogue” as a key activity for the 2021 edition. To explore their full potential and ensure that they could be designed successfully in the different cities, clear guidelines were established that could serve as a working tool for those coordinators interested in implementing this initiative.

As part of the institutionalization of this initiative, born out of the grassroots work done in previous years in Barcelona, it was proposed that the two guides who would carry out the activity

within the festival in each city would coordinate the content instead of simply putting the two routes next to each other. Therefore, it was the task of the guides in each city to define the itinerary, content, and scope of the route. This would include decisions about the different stops, and the historical, religious, and cultural aspects that they would like to pay special attention to. Moreover, these visits were planned in such a way that they would encourage the active participation of the public attending them. Through the production of support material to be distributed among participants beforehand, the objective was to encourage conversation between them. The proposal of the “Routes of Dialogue” was presented at the meeting of the EDJC coordinators (150 of them attended this meeting), where it was received with enthusiasm. In June 2021, there were already several institutions working to implement the tours within the framework of the festival in September 2021. *Salam Shalom Barcelona* offered a “Route of Dialogue,” this time following the new recommendations set out by the AEPJ.

The analysis of this case shows how grassroots heritage-making born out of local initiatives can become established heritage practices. This may contribute to generating heritage discourses with which the communities concerned feel more closely connected and better represented. Moreover, by drawing on relationships that emerge organically, as the example of *Salam Shalom Barcelona* illustrates, rather than on state-imposed networks, such as is often the case with state-led interreligious initiatives, bottom-up heritage projects can produce enduring interactions and connections. However, one cannot ignore the broader context in which this initiative takes place, where suspicion and prejudices between Jewish and Muslim communities occupies a prominent position.

Conclusions

The diversification of the religious landscape of Barcelona (Martínez-Ariño 2018), like that of many European cities (Henkel 2014), has raised concerns about the interaction between different religious communities. This is even more so the case since terrorist attacks in various urban areas have exacerbated anxieties around the presence of Muslim communities. While the general approach of states to address these issues has been one of the securitization of Islam (Edmunds 2012), resort to interreligious fora and activities has become quite common at the urban level. In parallel, in the context of the secularization and religious diversification of European societies, heritage has become crucial to dealing with diversity. As Astor and colleagues explain, the heritage discourse has allowed majority religions to reaffirm their privileges by claiming the centrality of their tenets for the nation. Simultaneously, though, this development has opened up opportunities for religious minorities to claim their place in society by generating, in our case, “alternative heritages from Spain’s multicultural past” (Astor, Burchardt, Griera 2017: 140).

The “Routes of Dialogue” that we have presented in this chapter are a clear example of practices of minority groups that produce their own alternative heritage discourses. While drawing on tangible and intangible Jewish and Muslim remnants in the city of Barcelona, the interreligious routes discussed in this chapter produced novel narratives aimed at promoting encounter and knowledge across traditions in the present and enhancing interreligious conviviality in the future. In other words, we have shown the future-making dimension of heritage: thinking of ways to promote awareness, knowledge, and respectful interaction between groups for the present and the future.

Moreover, by discussing how these routes came into being, step by step, we have shown the dynamic nature of heritage and the relevance of considering the actors involved and the broader contextual circumstances. While initially a quite modest initiative, literally born out of a meeting of friends, the production of these heritage tours benefited from the contextual opportunities that allowed for their institutionalization at the European level. The framework provided by the *European Days of Jewish Culture Festival* facilitated the expansion of the routes beyond their original cradle and generated some sort of standardization and professionalization. As such, our example shows how bottom-up heritagization can generate broader practices and discourses that establish links between communities at larger scales. However, the dependence on public funding, volunteer work, and the reliance on personal contacts, as well as suspicion between the local communities and the larger context of Muslim-Jewish mistrust, demonstrate the precarity of this type of events to offer solid and stable alternatives that promote conviviality from below. This, however, does not invalidate the potential of such initiatives to both generate bridges across communities and strengthen the public visibility and recognition of minority identities in the public sphere (El-Hairan and Martinez-Cuadros 2019).

Note

- 1 In 2020, the AEPJ was invited to participate in a project of the European program REC (Rights, Equality, and Citizenship Programme). The NGO CEJI (a Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe), based in Brussels, together with the European Union of Progressive Judaism, B'nai B'rith Europe, World Jewish Congress, European Union of Jewish Students, and the Association for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage, are teaming up on the two-year project called *Networks Overcoming Antisemitism* (NOA). The word “noa” means “in motion” in Hebrew, referring to the constant movement and evolution of ways to combat antisemitism and also to the progress in highlighting Jewish contributions to Europe. Together, the partners represent 756 national affiliates.

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