

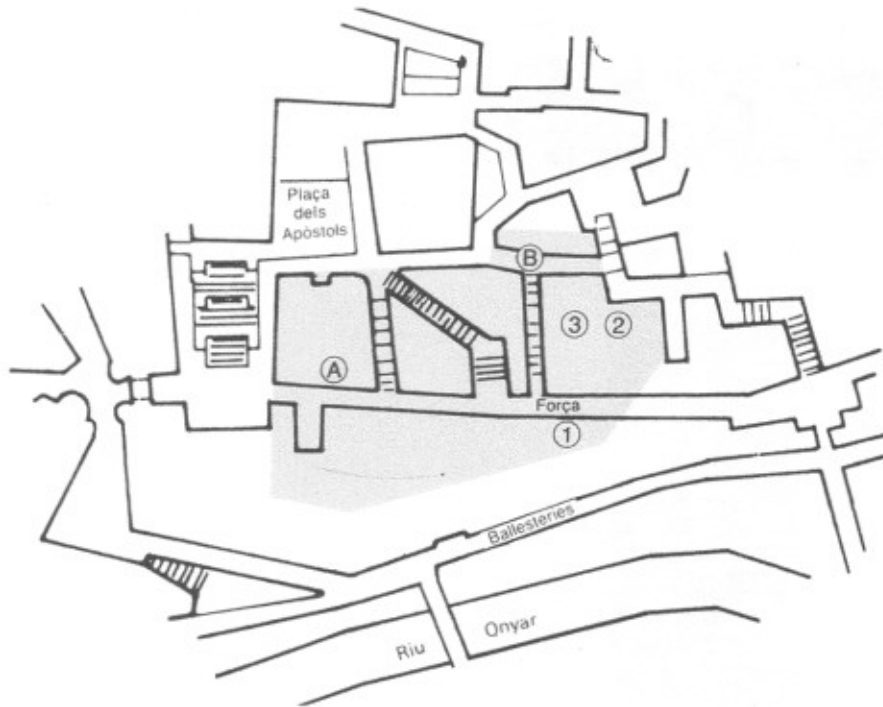
# THE JEWS OF GIRONA

Ajuntament  de Girona

## THE JEWS OF GIRONA

Gerona's Jewish heritage results from the continuous six hundred year presence of an established community which left a very deep mark on the city's culture and economy, on the customs of its inhabitants, and on its very urban design. From 890 to

1492 the Jewish people lived through painful episodes of their collective history in the *Call*, the old section of the city of Girona, and wrote from within their precinct some very significant chapters in the history of human thought.



## THE CALL

The history of the earliest Jews of Girona is lost in the mist of time. From the very beginning, many survivors of destruction of Jerusalem came to Catalonia and settled here. There were Jewish people in Girona before the Saracen invasion, but the first mention of a closeknit settlement dates from the years 889 and 890, when twenty-five families from the surrounding environs took over the former houses of the clergy which had been built alongside the

Cathedral. From these dwellings, located where the *Plaça dels Apòstols* now extends, they spread out gradually into the areas below the city until they had formed, bit by bit, the *Call*, a district which already carried that name in a document dating from 1160. During the most glorious period of the *Aljama*, or Jewish quarter, the population of the *Call* reached more than three hundred.

The *carrer de la Força*, the ancient urban stretch

of the Roman *Via Augusta*, was the main artery of the *Call* and the axis around which the whole quarter formed itself. This street, narrow and dim, rose from beside the river Onyar to the terrace where the *Pia Almoina* stands. To the left, towering darkened façades opened up into short cul-de-sacs which abutted the wall running parallel. To the right ran streets even darker still, but quite lengthy, and extraordinarily steep, which lead abruptly to the upper part of town.

Today one can still see the web of streets and alleys of the ancient *Call* crouched in stony sleep at the feet of the lofty sights which compose historic Girona. The present buildings do not correspond to the originals: the lanes to the left have disappeared, and some of those on the right remain sealed off or, like the *carrer d'Hernández*, await their being reopened to public use as foreseen by the city planners. But the footsteps of the Jews still seem to echo along the *carrer de la Força*, up the steep steps of *carrer de Sant Llorenç* and *carrer Cúndaro*, and inside the houses, the courtyards and the hidden gardens that proliferate and merge in this urban maze. From these phantasmagoric nooks and crannies, which seem to have crystalized in their own glistening dankness, the Jews exerted tremendous influence and broadcast their teachings to the farthest horizons.

The life of the *Aljama* revolved around the Synagogue, which had various locations over the course of the years.

The one which was sold in 1492 as a result of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, included, in addition to a hospital, and some ritual baths. The Synagogue took in all of the community's activities and was the meetingplace of the Council as well, but it was dedicated above all else to the practice of religion. A stone plaque, now preserved in Girona's Archeological Museum, which must have surmounted the entrance to the precinct, speaks eloquently of the Synagogues's significance: «The House of Jacob: come along and follow the light of Yahweh. God is our refuge; open the gates that a

righteous people who keep the faith might enter. Would that we could fill ourselves with the goodness of our dwelling, with the sanctity of our temple».

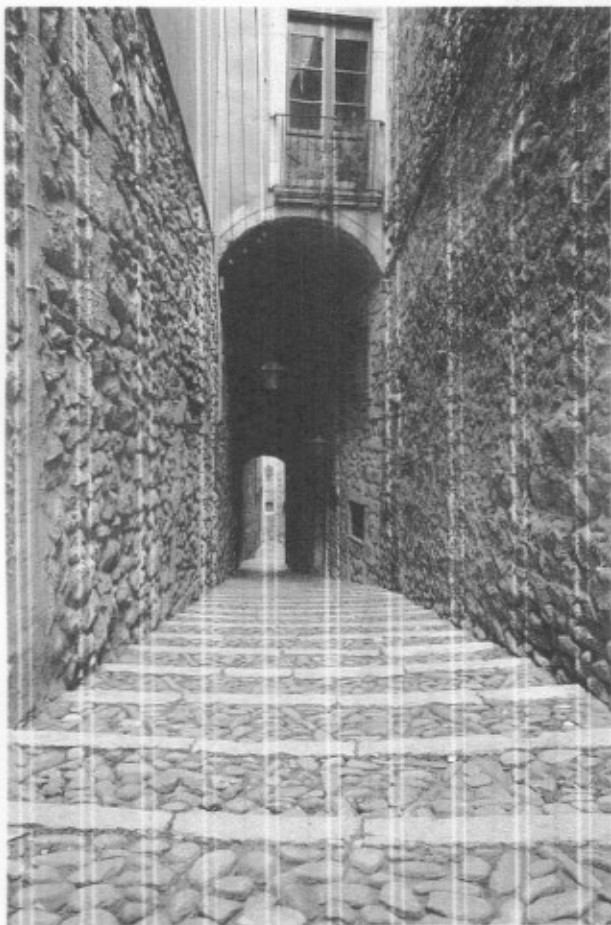
## A CITY WITHIN THE CITY

The *Aljama* of Girona, like all of the other Jewish communities pertaining to the Crown of Catalonia and Aragon, was protected by the King in return for



LA FORÇA street is the main artery in the old CALL and the axis around which the whole Jewish Quarter was erected.

financial tribute. It came under the direct authority of the Sovereign, who appointed the mayor of the *Aljama* the King's representative, who governed with the help of a varying number of aldermen. The mayor acted with complete autonomy from the city government, and was accountable only to the King. Thus the *Aljama* was a tiny independent government within the heart of Girona, replete with its complex civil, social, cultural and religious organization, and the City Fathers of Girona, the *Jurats*, had not the least jurisdiction over it. Inevitably, this system led to conflicts. The King did not wish to



Narrow and highly unlevelled streets such as C/ONDARO suddenly lead you from LA FORÇA up to the highest part of the city.

relinquish the slightest bit of his authority for, as the system stood, he could intervene in municipal affairs. The city, on the other hand, tended to extend its control over this entity which found itself geographically enclosed within the city limits. The *Jurats* were obligated to protect the Jews from any harassment, but since they could also adopt measures to guarantee the peace and quiet of the Christians, they often took advantage of these measures to turn them into means of controlling the Jews.

Thus one can see that their very form of government would complicate the relations between the Jews and the other citizens of Girona, relations which experienced quite a variety of modifications during six centuries of coexistence. It seems that good neighbourliness predominated up to the eleventh century with the spread of mutual contacts and frequent intermarriage between Christians and Jews.

Starting in the eleventh century the first outbreaks of intolerance occurred, culminating in attacks on the Jews, their goods, their homes, their lands and their tombs. There after, periods of peaceful coexistence alternated with times of persecution to such an extent that the documents evidence attacks on the *Call* for the years 1276, 1278, 1285, 1331, 1348, 1391, 1413, and 1418.

At root these attacks were motivated by the revenge sought by some residents who felt they had been cheated by Jewish moneylenders or pawnbrokers, by the envy the Jews' privileges and economic power aroused, and by the heightened religious fanaticism of the clergy, who were the main ringleaders of some of these disturbances. Frequently these riots amounted to no more than throwing stones at the houses of the *Call* and wrecking the vineyards and garden plots their inhabitants maintained outside the walls of the city. Nevertheless, there were others that were bloodier, like the attack which occurred on the tenth of August in 1391, when a mob looted the *Call* and slaughtered forty of its residents before the *Jurats* took the appropriate steps to protect the neighbour-

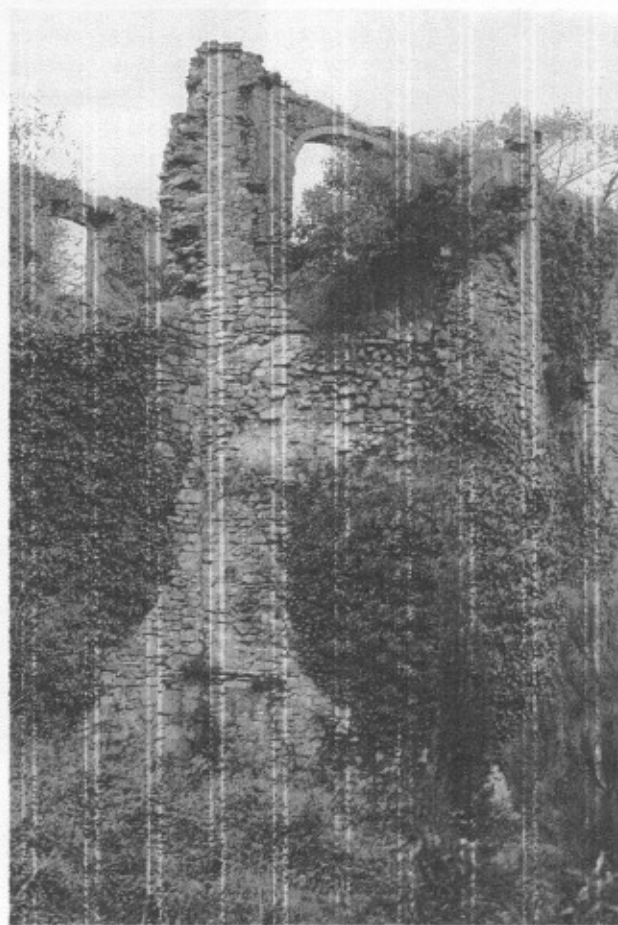


hood and confined the Jews in the *Torre Gironella*, a Roman fortress standing on the highest point of the summit overlooking Girona, and kept them imprisoned there for a goodly number of days.

Such episodes shattered ordinary life in the *Call* and caused a considerable reduction of the Jewish population. To the losses caused by death must be added those of the people who fled the city and those who, abandoning the *Call*, blended in with the other city-dwellers by means of a religious conversion of questionable sincerity. As the enmity increased the *Call* gradually turned into a ghetto. Purporting to protect them, the *Jurats* prohibited the Jews's having doors or windows which opened onto the *carrer de la Força*. Since this was the obligatory route for processions and funerals, the entrances were sealed off —with the King's permission— under the pretext that the Jews who looked on were mocking the Christian ceremonies. Just one entrance remained open, providing the only access to the Jewish quarter.

The Jews spent long periods of time without stirring from the enclosure of their quarter. If these stringent measures eased with the passage of time, still other restrictions appeared on the scene. In 1409, Jews who wanted to listen to Friar Vicent Ferrer's preaching were lead to the Dominicas' esplanade by a bailiff and fenced in there under the pretext of protecting them from any possible attack. In 1442 new measures aimed at sealing off the *Call* were announced, and in 1445 residents of the city were prohibited from renting the Jews houses, booths, or market stalls in the streets adjacent to their quarter. In the same year the Jews were forbidden to leave the *Call* without wearing traditional Jewish clothing in order to guarantee at all times their easy identification. Under penalty of a fine one hundred times their income, Jews were obliged to wear cloaks and robes topped off by a hood or a skullcap (yarmulke), and this «habit» became the visible sign of their exclusion from ordinary society. Still not satisfied with this, the *Jurats* concluded by ordering the closure of the last remaining entrance,

a measure specifically rescinded by royal decree. The Crown had to intervene forcefully in 1453 as well, when the Inquisitor General of the diocese of Girona tried to expel the Jewish Patriarch, Benevist Samuel, from the *Aljama*. The *Jurats* were advised that, neither by order of the Inquisition, nor by any other authority, were they to allow the harassment of the Patriarch or of any other Jewish person, since they fell under royal jurisdiction. But this protection could not prevent the constant problems they faced: civil suits for debts, forced sale of property



When an attack of the Christians took place the Hebrews were confined within the TORRE GIRONELLA —a Roman fortress today demolished—.

under duress, municipal restrictions of the Jews' privileges, and an evangelical campaign which exacted religious conversions that were often based on financial motives or were matters of convenience.

As a counterpoint to such uncompromising hostility, the annals preserve the commendable gesture of Josep Astruc, a prominent Jew who in 1417 renounced his religion in order to save a Christian who had murdered a Jew from suffering the death penalty. In fact, Guillem Serratós, convicted of killing Vidal Petit, was standing at the foot of the gallows when Astruc appeared before the governor to plead for a pardon for the criminal in exchange for his own conversion to Christianity. The execution was stayed and Astruc was baptized the same day. The bishop and the abbess of the convent of Santa Clara, moved by his charity and amazed by his open-mindedness, acted as his godparents.

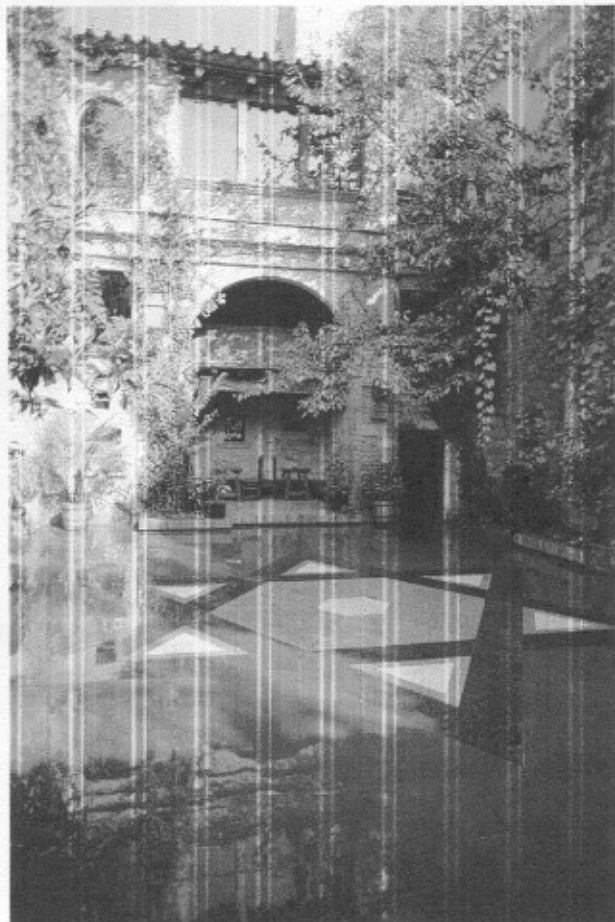
## WORLDWIDE: RENOWN

Despite their almost constant segregation, the Jews never stopped working and influencing the economic life of the city. From time to time the names of the most important Jewish families appear in the documents of the period: *Haleví, Desmestre, Ravalla, Cresques, Bonjorn, Sabarra* (notably wealthy merchants), *Caravita* (expert dealers), and *Falcó* (active and energetic businessmen).

Besides dedicating themselves to commerce and light industry, the Jews stood out in particular as business agents and promoters, dealers in stocks and bonds and securities, moneylenders and pawnbrokers, tax and rent collectors and agents for third parties, and speculators in leases, annuities and real estate. Documents show that they started buying houses and land from the Christians from the time of the eleventh century, or obtaining them as creditors, repossessing them when the debt-ridden owner could not repay the loan. But these were reciprocal transactions, because during this period the practice of Christians extending credit to Jews also

flourished, and this double bind could not help but fan the flames of their mutual enmity.

The most lasting impression the Jews made on Girona was cultural to the point that they made the city a religious centre of international renown. Intensive theological studies which developed during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries gave rise to a new trend of theosophical spirituality. Jewish mysticism tried to transcend the ancient Law, and the Jews of Girona did so by means of the Cabala, a collection of theories esoteric in nature which attempted to fathom the mystery of God through intuitive interpretation of the words of the Scriptu-



BONASTRUC ÇA PORTA

res, building up a wholistic worldview from this belief in the infinitude of God. Girona's contribution to the development of cabalistic thinking was fundamental.

The school of the Cabala of the *carrer de la Força* produced the first group of Cabala experts trained in the Iberian peninsula during the first half of the thirteenth century. Despite its continuous contacts with other European schools of thought, Girona's version of the Cabala preserved its own character and originality and achieved universal prestige and acclaim. Over the space of many years, the cabalistic philosophy born in the dim back streets of Girona illuminated the entire Jewish world, and the city was the radiant hub of a spiritual movement destined to reverberate far and wide.

The indisputable Master of the Cabala was Moses Ben Nahman, or Nahmanides, known as Bonastruc de Porta, who was born in Girona in 1194. Rabbi of Girona, and later Grand Rabbi of Catalonia; doctor, philosopher and expert in the Talmud; he wrote the earliest example of cabalistic poetry in the peninsula and various didactic tracts which spread the learning of his time among Christians and Jews everywhere. His home in the *Call* provided the source from which sprang a group of illustrious figures: David Kimhí (author of the Hebrew grammar which would serve as the norm for all those that followed), Jonas Ben Abraham, Jonas Megirondah, Abben Tibon, Isaac Halevi...

## THE EXPULSION AND ITS AFTERMATH

On the thirty-first of March in 1492, Ferdinand and Isabel of Castile and Aragon, known as the Catholic Monarchs, issued the edict expelling the Jews from Spanish territory. This inexorable decision offered no other choice but renunciation of religious belief or compulsory expatriation.

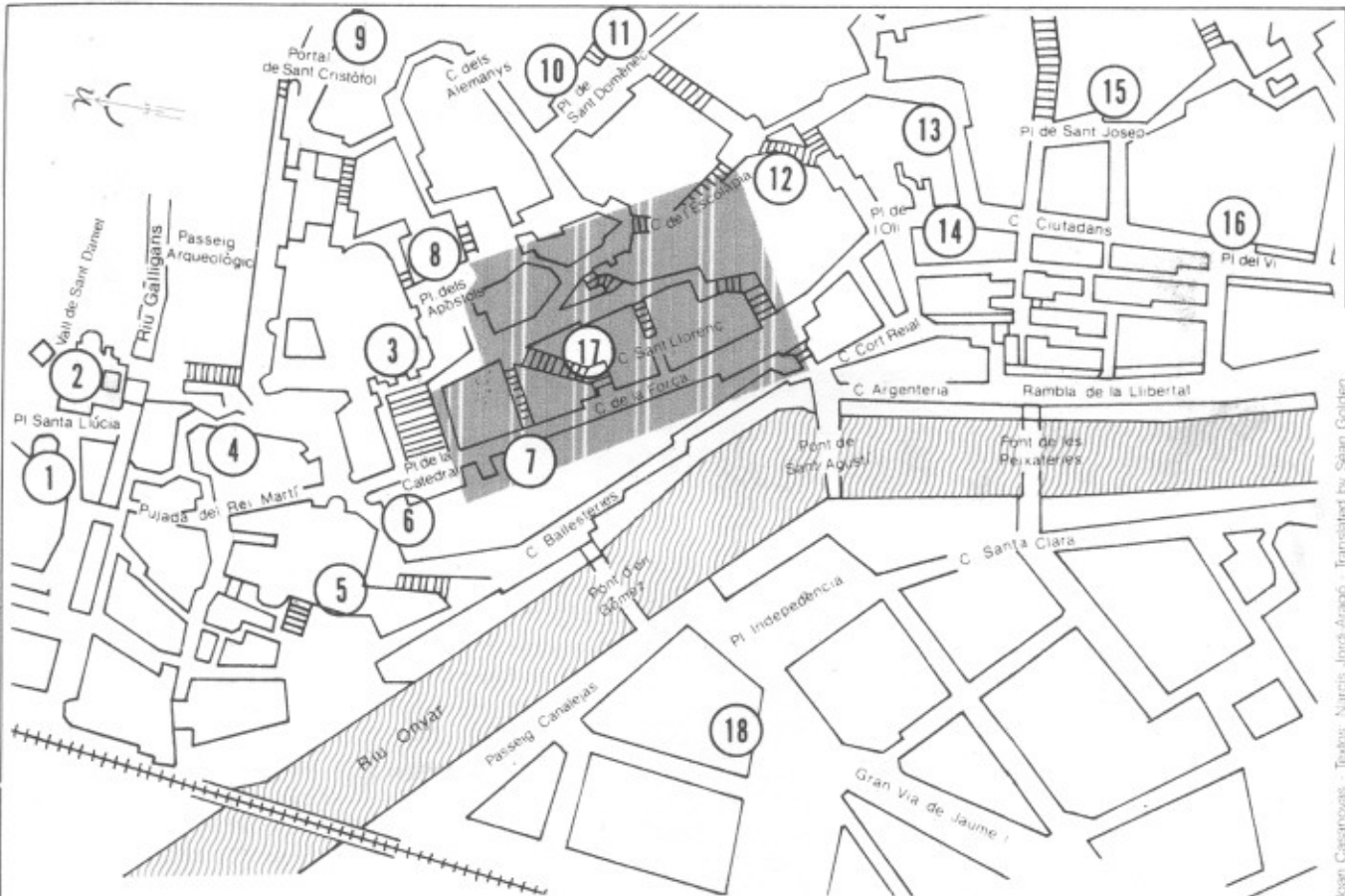
The royal decree arrived at Girona at the end of April, at a time when the *Aljama*, in frank decay, had already seen its human resources considerably depleted. The obligatory exodus of the Jews caused widespread regret among the Christians because the separation of the two communities was not particularly effective during that period and

peaceful coexistence and business dealings had been re-established. The *Jurats* showed little enthusiasm in carrying out their orders. On the twentieth of June they issued a proclamation letting it be known that Jews could sell their goods and holdings, and anyone could buy them, without fear of penalty. The sale of real estate flourished until the twenty-ninth of July, and on the thirty-first its last residents left the *Call*. On the fourth of August, since it was completely deserted, the *Jurats* granted the new owners permission to proceed with the demolition of the blocked doors and the walls, and arranged that the quarter should have free access once again like any other public thoroughfare.

Those who chose to convert to Christianity in order to avoid expulsion faced the full fury of the Inquisition, which had already begun to prosecute heretics in Girona in 1490. The evidence shows that from 1491 to 1505 there were trials of eighty-four residents of Girona as a result of fifteen Autos-da-Fe, four of which took place right in Girona. Some Jewish family-lines were virtually wiped out at the hands of the Inquisitors.

As they were leaving the city, obedient to the destiny of their people, the Jews could see for the last time the place where they kept the remains of their ancestors. The community had owned a piece of land between two rushing streams in a lonely spot called *Bou d'Or* («The Golden Calf») on the western slope of the mountain known as Montjuïc. The Hebrew dead were buried there, and most of the funerary steles now preserved in Girona's Archeological Museum came from this cemetery. Others came from the *Palau Sacosta*, where the tombstones had been used as building materials. These notably large stone slabs carry peaceful straightforward incised inscriptions like these:

«He benefitted from the Lord's teachings; pious, filled with learning and the fear of God. He died on that day of infamy, with a pure heart. His name is R. Reuben, son of R. Hanina. May his memory endure for life everlasting. He returned to his eternal home in the month of Av in the year 5013 reckoned from the date of the Creation. May his soul be bound in the sheaves of the living and the faithful».



1. The Church of Sant Nicolau.
2. The Church and museum of Sant Pere de Galligants.
3. The Cathedral.
4. Arab Baths.
5. The Church of Sant Feliu.
6. Casa Pastors (Law Courts).
7. City History Museum.
8. The Art Museum.
9. The Gironella Tower and City Walls.
10. The old University (Les Àligues).
11. The Convent of Sant Domènec.
12. The Palace of the Agullana.
13. Provincial Authority.
14. Fontana d'Or.
15. The Convent of Sant Josep.
16. The Town Hall, Theatre.
17. El Call, the jewish ghetto.
18. Post Office and Telegraph Office.

MATERIAL IMPRES AMB EL SUPORT DE



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**COSTA BRAVA GIRONA**