

# THE ANCIENT JEWISH COMMUNITY OF DUBROVNIK

**Robert W. Case**

When traveling to Dubrovnik, one cannot help but admire the beauty of this city on the Adriatic Sea, sitting on a fine natural harbor. The old city, on top of a mountain surrounded by high walls and protective towers, is virtually impenetrable. The population of Dubrovnik is approximately 60,000, and has survived many wars, the latest in 1991 when Serbs and Montenegrins attempted to completely destroy the city. The city was encircled for 8 months, bombarded many times, and brutally destroyed. Since that time, the city has come to life. From the new roads, to a beautiful new suspension bridge, which opened in the spring of 2003, to the complete restoration of the old city, Dubrovnik is on its way back to the glory days of the past.

The old synagogue of Dubrovnik is the oldest Sephardic synagogue in the world. The synagogue was built in Baroque style in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It is located on the second floor, on a steep, narrow alley named **Zudiska Ulica** (Jews Street). At one time, there was an iron gate at both ends of the street, which controlled the ghetto traffic. The synagogue is very small, but was probably more than adequate, since the Jewish population never exceeded 250 people from the 15<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. During WWII, the torahs, the ark, and the silver were hidden. Some of the torahs and the silver were sent to New York City, and many of the artifacts were given to Croats for “safekeeping”. In 1992, most of the artifacts were sent to Yeshiva University in New York for an exhibition. A year later, the Dubrovnik synagogue officials wanted them returned, and a bitter lawsuit ended up in the courts. The NYS Supreme Court ruled in favor of the synagogue for the return of the scrolls and the artifacts.

*On the next page, there is a picture of “Jews Street”. The synagogue is half way up the hill, on the left.*

Synagogue entrance is under awning in center of Picture.

Photo by Robert W. Case



Meanwhile, back at the synagogue, funds were badly needed to make major repairs to the structure following the 1991 war. A foundation was formed in 1992, the ***Rebuild Dubrovnik Foundation***, based in Washington, D.C., and funded by ASTA (The American Society of Travel Agents) and the ATLAS travel agency of Dubrovnik, to start the process. In 1996, two Catholic philanthropic tourists, ***Otto and Jeanne Reusch***, were so impressed by the beauty and the effort to preserve this synagogue, returned to Washington and through their efforts, raised \$35,000 to help with the restoration. The synagogue re-opened for Rosh Hashanah services in 1997, and the Reusches Were present for the dedication.

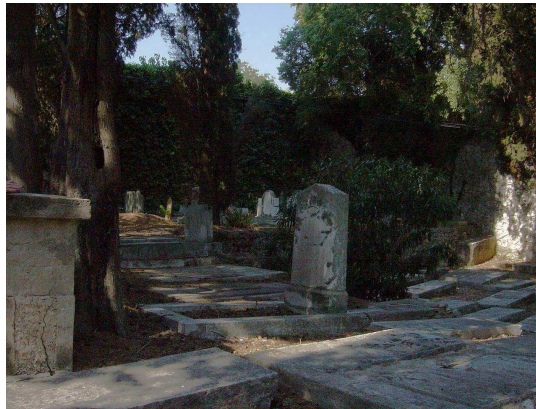
Although there are only about 40 Jews in Dubrovnik today, the Croatian Government is eager to revive international tourism, and there are now weekly charter flights from Israel to Dubrovnik, bringing 250 tourists weekly throughout the tourist season. We accidentally met *Yedidya Fraiman*, in Dubrovnik who heads many of these tours both here and at other Jewish sites. (If anyone is interested in more information, go to his website: [www.koshertreks.com](http://www.koshertreks.com).) In addition, there are many cruise ships that make Dubrovnik a port of call.

Interior of Ancient Synagogue showing ark.

Photo by Robert Case



In another part of the city, far removed from the old city, there is an old Jewish cemetery dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, and is still currently in use, although rarely. There is very little information on this cemetery.



**Ancient Cemetery in Dubrovnik**



**Ancient Headstone in Dubrovnik**

Photographs by  
Robert W. Case

In conclusion, although the Jewish population has virtually disappeared from Croatia, due to the efforts of the Croatian government and a few dedicated people, Jewish history will be preserved in this most beautiful city of Dubrovnik.

Robert W. Case  
[bobcele@yahoo.com](mailto:bobcele@yahoo.com)

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