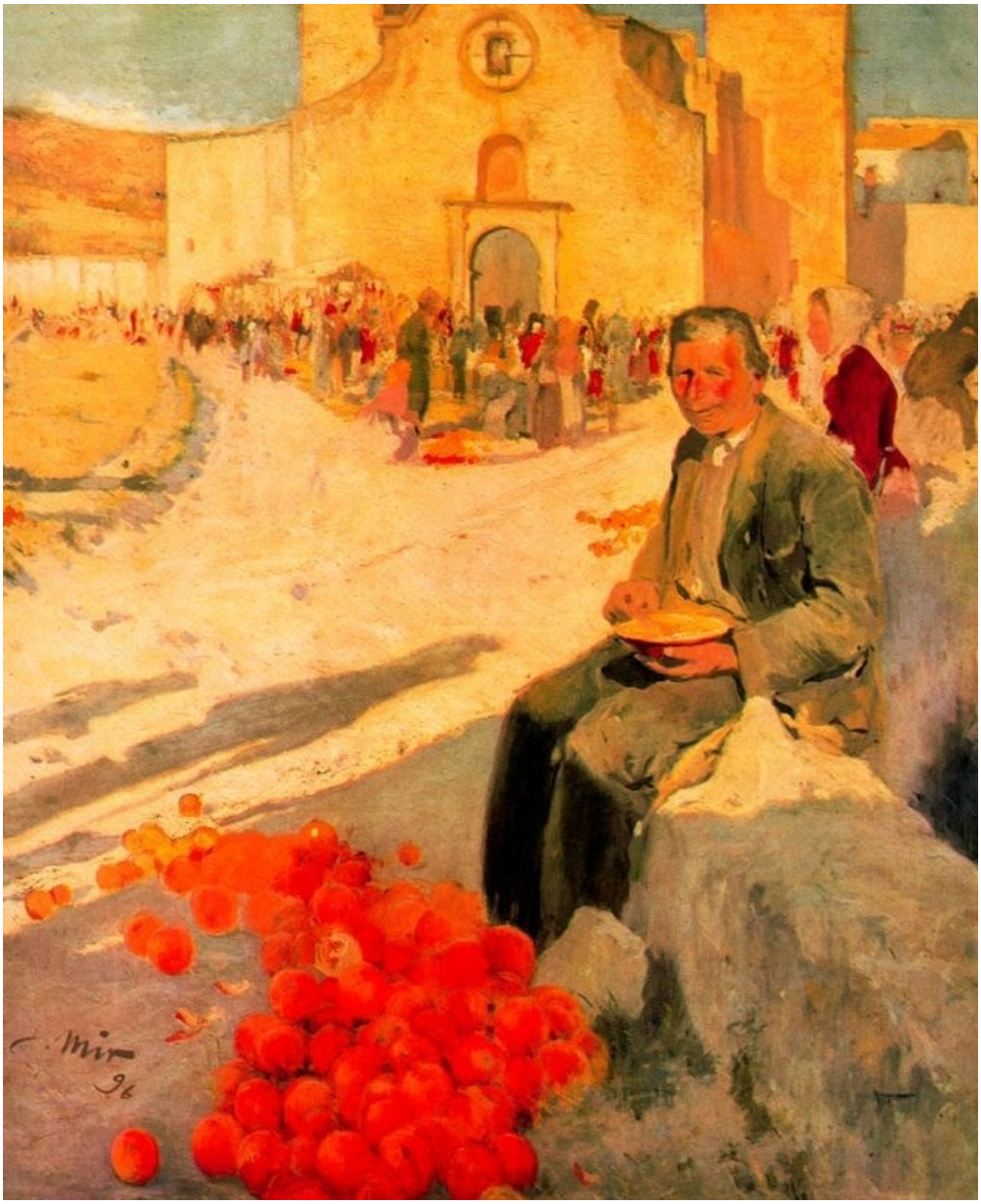
On Jewish Mallorca

by Samuel Hux (May 2018)



Vendador de Neranjas, Joaquim Mir, 1901

Dr. and Mrs. Jacob Geissler (an approximation of their name) moved to Mallorca perhaps 25 to 30 years ago from the English Midlands. I saw them not long after that. “Yes, yes. Pleasant to see you. How are you?” the doctor said, clearly not recognizing me. “He’s not been well for months,”

his wife whispered as he turned to others present; “his memory fades; it’s very difficult for him.” But I had the impression she could not place me, exactly, either, but was too proud or delicate to admit it. And also, since we were in a synagogue, I suppose the question “Who *are* you?” would not have been appropriate and warm. We had met the Geisslers a year or two before: retired general practitioner, stock-English in manner, vague plummy voice, somewhat fussy, and his wife, round, diminutive, and kindly, Slavic accent for all that she had been in Britain since a girl. My fiancé had wished to attend services and we had asked about, which led us to a boutique in Palma and its proprietor, a British national, president of the English-speaking (and in effect the foreign, and the only) congregation on Mallorca. That Friday we were at the synagogue and, as newcomers, were warmly welcomed. “Have you by chance moved here permanently? There are a respectable number of us, you’ll find. Ah, you return to New York. But when you’re here you must . . .” The Geisslers briefly adopted us: Such a nice “younger” couple. We saw them home, saw them a couple more times during the next few days: shopping trip, tea in their flat. “I hope you don’t mind the question—we know few Americans,” said the doctor, “but my wife and I have wondered if *you* are Jewish.” “Well, not really,” I said, which is the way you say “No” in North Carolina. Mrs. Geissler touched my knee; I caught the only twinkle I’ve ever been sure I’ve seen in an eye: “Ah, you shouldn’t let it worry you my dear.”

We had returned here now because I wanted to ask the synagogue president a couple of questions. The first, given his long residence on the island, how does he judge the present Mallorcan attitude toward the *“xuetes*,” those Mallorcan Christians of recognized Jewish ancestry? Unfortunately, he was in England on business. But my second question was answered nonetheless: there were no Spaniards present at the services. Or, there might have been one—a young man (in a

gathering of the middle-aged to aged) whose features could conceivably answer, and then again might not have; but he disappeared immediately the services were over, and I hardly thought it proper to dash down the aisle in pursuit, knocking over the Geisslers in the process.

Actually, the Mallorca "synagogue" was a fair-sized room off the lobby of a modern seaside hotel in the Palma suburb Cala Mayor, the proper Christian name of Hotel Santa Ana. One can let the irony overwhelm, given the history of the Jews of Mallorca, and given the fact that in the middle of the oldest part of Palma near the ancient walls stands a church whose name, *Montesión,* is oddly suggestive. Spain in miniature.

¿Limpieza de Sangre? (A common historical Spanish concern.) Purity of blood? What blood exactly would that be? The Spanish are no more uni-ethnic than that other proud race, the French—indeed less so. Observe the faces in Spain and you'll see some that strike you as oh-so Spanish. But if one looks and discriminates more closely one begins to refine the observations. One cannot *see* an ancient Iberian face, for who *were* they? It *may* be possible to see a Cro-Magnon face (as odd as that sounds), since some scholars think the Basques are direct descendants. But certainly, one can see a Celtic face reminiscent of a hôtelier in Cardiff, Dublin, or Brest. A Roman face reminding us of where Castilian, Catalan, and Portuguese come from. A Greek face reminding us of one of the more precious archaeological finds of modern Spain: *La Dama de Elche*, near Valencia. A Germanic face that could be found on any street in Berlin, legacy of the Visigothic kingdom that succeeded the Romans and preceded the Moorish invasion. A Moorish face, of course, for not all of the converted Arabs, *moriscos*, could have been expelled in 1609, many of them disappearing before that into the Spanish-speaking population.

And Jewish faces from . . . Spain.

Spain's self-imposed tragedy gave a richness to the rest of the world: those Jews who left before the Inquisition, especially after the pogroms of 1391, and those who left with the expulsion decree enforced in 1492. One can provide one's own favored examples of the close or distant offspring of this long exodus. Baruch Spinoza, for instance: Spanish or Portuguese Jew? —it hardly matters, Portugal being now a county, now a kingdom, and not fully independent of Spain until the 17th century. Or, had not a Sephardic *López* left Spain to become a French *de Louppe,* Montaigne would have had no mother, and I would be without one hero. Or one can choose one's own examples of the *conversos*, or of the close or distant offspring of those Jews who accepted conversion, and they are legion: from Luis de Santángel, chancellor to King Fernando and champion of Columbus, to Tomás de Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor himself, or to the rumored because of name, Generalissimo Francisco Franco y Bahamonde. But if one went by the names of the Sephardim, half of Spain would be ethnically Jewish to some degree.

If one knows much Spanish history one is not prepared for the Spaniards' interest in, concern for, and sometimes obsession with things Jewish. I speak from experience: in Spain I'm sometimes taken to be Jewish because of my first name and stateless surname. I usually admit that I'm not, preferring to tell the truth. A fisherman asks me if I've read a book by another Samuel, or perhaps it was Soloman, about the Jews of Russia. One meets (or I occasionally have) a Spaniard who says in an offhand manner to explain something or other, "We're all really Jewish, you know." One need not trust this as a deep sentiment in every case, for intellectuals speaking of racial or ethnic matters tend sometimes to affect a fashionable

retrospective ambiguity; but the first who said it to me was a manager of a cafeteria, of scant schooling. In any case, you never hear “really German” (Visigothic) and seldom “really Celtic” unless you’re in Galicia.

I thought the following story was a common apocryphal anecdote, until a trusted and traveled Spanish friend told me of his experience of meeting a Salonikan Jew. After almost five centuries in Greece, the key to the lost family house in Toledo still passed between generations, that story told to my friend in Renaissance Castilian. (There is a poem by Jorge Luis Borges, “*Una llave en Salonica*.” Had my friend read it? No. Perhaps the Salonikan had, I thought. But why be so suspicious when life rhymes with art?) The Castilian: “Older than Cervantes would have spoken! Wouldn’t you feel a newcomer if you heard someone speaking, naturally, Shakespearean?”

I recalled then the story of Franco and the Jews of Salonika, which will never be explained adequately, since there are so many explanations. In a 1940 broadcast Franco had spoken in extenuation of the persecution of “certain races” elsewhere in Europe and praised the foresight of Isabel and Fernando for their 15th-century expulsion decree. But when his erstwhile ally invaded Greece, Franco sent word to Hitler that if he valued Spain’s friendship and (crabbily) promised aid, the Salonikan Jews were not to be touched, were to be considered Spanish citizens. It did not work, as Raoul Hilberg’s figures show in *The Destruction of European Jewry.* But efficient or not, it was not a one-shot gesture. During the war, Franco not only opened the Spanish border for safe passage through Spain to more than 35,000 Jews (although one must emphasize the “*through* Spain”); he sent agents into several Axis-occupied countries with a renewal of a 1924 Spanish law which offered Spanish citizenship to Sephardim who would request it. And

Spanish diplomatic officials worked with the tragic Swedish emissary Raoul Wallenberg in his heroic effort to save Hungarian Jews.

The easiest explanation is that Franco had such a De Gaulle-like notion of Spanish honor that he could not bear to see it tampered with by any stretch of the historical imagination. But, if Franco had not noticed, would the world have noticed that he hadn't? I am not speaking of Franco the rumored descendent of *conversos*, but a Franco with a Spanish sense that someone in the national family was missing. One thing one learns about Spain—is to trust the ironic and avoid the super-clear.

I don't wish to exaggerate: perhaps "obsession" with things Jewish is too strong. But I am certainly not the only one to observe an intense concern—which sometimes takes the form of an odd mixture of philo- and anti-Semitic notions. Read José Yglesias's *The Franco Years* for instance, his somewhat ambiguously entitled chapter "The Anti-Semite," whose protagonist is absolutely delighted with the thought that Saint John of the Cross might have been Jewish. (San Juan de la Cruz was in fact descended from *conversos*.)

And then a different quality of impression, even less documentable. I have a Spanish friend, patriarch of a large family. Without fortunate birth and with no formal education beyond the required, he became a successful man in his village: restauranteur, builder, orchard owner, an occasional fisherman. His family provided for, children educated, he spends more time now in his chosen avocation of polymath. I listen to him intently, and I know he enjoys lecturing me. He is, in truth, something of a talker, which not all his

neighbors appreciate. I watch his face as he talks. He is very intense, has a deep inner life, no doubt about it; joyful this day, somewhat doomful the week before. I note his speech: it is deliberate, grammatically exact, sonorous. He is patient with my "*más dispacio, por favor*" (slower, please). He tells me about the village, recalls this learned man or that, remembers some relevant political event from years ago, discourses on the radical change of flora seen barely fifteen kilometers away, traverses a dialectic of *nacionalismo* and *localismo*, pronounces upon Cervantes, explains the reasons for the Civil War.

My mind slips sideways for a moment. I could be somewhere else; he could be someone else, unique but familiar. Conversation with an elderly Lithuanian Jew in a Horn and Hardart cafeteria many years ago. But we're in his restaurant actually. A son enters, smiles respectfully to his father, beams knowingly at me; he is proud of his father, and somewhat in awe; he appreciates the attention I pay the patriarch, that I come by even when not to eat.

Or *el señor* becomes more personal, in a distinctly philosophical style. Two offspring are married and live abroad as does another who is not. Two live here in the village: one will probably settle here, the other . . . he's too young for one to say. But say he doesn't: it will make no more difference, from a singular perspective, than the probable settler's settling, which itself makes no more difference than the geographical distance of the first three. The family is not so puny a thing that it can be destroyed by where people are. Nor can it be circumscribed in time. My eldest son is the image of my father in appearance and habit, and my youngest son . . . of my grandfather. They bear their names. There is less, somehow, of this generational similarity among the

females. If there is more than less, I do not see it; but there is sufficient. “Isn’t there something *macho* about that?” I timidly propose. No, no. You do not understand; *machismo* is another thing, *es otra cosa*. I will explain that to you some time. Nor can the family be circumscribed in space. Being more than biology, mere proximity did not create it; nor can distance affect it. There is a metaphysical principle here . . .

Does it matter that the conversations with the patriarch took place on Mallorca? (By the way, I insist, as the patriarch surely would, on the Castilian and Catalan spelling, the English-language habit of “Majorca” an absurdity, with the J pronounced as a Y, as J definitely is not in English, and as LL definitely is by Mallorcans.) Mallorca: “Spain in miniature” I called it earlier. But that’s not quite true, for the history of the Jews of Mallorca is an exceptional story. Yet in its exceptionality it dramatizes some of the ironies of Spanish history. Mainland Spain is in some way Mallorca writ large.

Unlike the case of the mainland, the Jewish stock arrived on Mallorca even before the Hispanic stock. (The sense of my diction will become apparent shortly.) And unlike the case of the mainland, the Jewish identity of the *conversos* never quite became obscured: but that gets us ahead of the story.

There were Jews on Mallorca during the Roman period, but we know little of their presence in the intervening years before the Arab conquest in the eighth century. Under Arab rule things were fair for the Jews for a while, then not so fair: by the 13th century Mallorca was under fanatical Almohad rule, so that the Jews welcomed the conquest of the island by Jaime I of Aragón-Catalunya in 1229. From 1229 to 1391: the

tarnished Golden Age of Mallorcan Jewry. The Jews' Mediterranean trade connections and technological expertise were needed by the Christian masters, and the Jews were rewarded with assurances of cultural autonomy, full citizenship, and some comfort of position—for which they were, naturally, to pay later on. In 1391 the *mallorquín* peasantry rose against the island aristocracy; when the gentry attained the safety of Bellver Castle the peasants, with medieval Spanish populist logic, sacked the ghetto, killing 300 Jews. The rebellion lasted a few weeks, but its effects much longer. From that point (the year of immense pogroms across all of Spain) until mid-15th century, just read Spanish history and ignore local details . . . except for one detail.

For in 1435, a curious historical phenomenon occurred which pre-dated by half a century the enforced Conversion-or-Expulsion-or-Else on the mainland. Before that year there had been sporadic conversions. But in 1435 the chief rabbi was accused of crucifying a Moor in desecration and mockery of Good Friday and condemned to death; and the entire Judaic community, to save his life, appealed for acceptance into the church and was baptized en masse. There's no need, however, to speculate on the sincerity of this "conversion": the newly converted were *marranos,* Judaizers (*judaizantes*), secret Jews.

Between 1435 and 1691, the history of the "New Christians" attained a harsh, tragic, dissonant rhythm. Some retained a kind of Jewish identity through membership in trade guilds exclusively New Christian; some simply disappeared into the general population (along with the Moors) never to be heard from, as Jews, again; and some, guildists or not, were suspected of "Judaizing" and were subjected to numbing sequences of Inquisitorial trials. Most were "reconciled" (with varying degrees of effectiveness); maybe a third were

“relaxed” (*relejados*), which means turned over to the civil authority for punishment since the Office of the Inquisition was not itself supposed to let blood. The total number called before the tribunal? The *mallorquín* scholar Lorenzo Pérez (more about him later on) counts roughly 1600 by name (67 pages), and many of that number were subject to more than one *proceso*. In any case, it took 256 years for the giant “conversion” finally to take.

That is, after the infamous *autos* of 1691 punishing the “relapsed” from the *autos* of 1679, and in which—as multitudes watched from the surrounding slopes—four were burned in effigy, having fled, four were burned “in their bones” (*en sus huesos*), having died in prison, 34 were burned after garroting, and three were burned alive (Catalina Tarongí, Rafael Benito Tarongí, and Rafael Valls “the rabbi”—their names should last), Mallorca Jewry was a matter of history. But, then, it became a most curious matter of heroic cultural persistence. I speak of the *xuetes:* Mallorcan Catalan word, often rendered in Castilian orthography as *chuetas,* which approximates the Catalan pronunciation.

The scholarly authority in English on the *xuetes* is Notre Dame sociologist Kenneth Moore, whose *Those of the Street: The Catholic Jews of Mallorca* (1976) simply must be read by anyone seriously interested in the subject. (There is also Baruch Braunstein’s 1936 Columbia University monograph *The Chuetas of Majorca: Conversos and the Inquisition of Majorca,* and, in Spanish, Angela Selke’s *Los Chuetas y la Inquisición,* Madrid, 1972.)

Els xuetes (los chuetas) refers to the descendants not of all the Mallorcan *conversos* but only those assumed descended from

Jews “reconciled” or “relaxed” in 1679 and 1691; those, that is, who bear the names traditionally thought to be those of the actors-victims of those *autos*. Consequently, there are fifteen names thought of on Mallorca as *xueta: Aquiló, Bonnin, Cortés, Forteza, Fuster, Martí, Miró, Picó, Piña, Pomar, Segura, Tarongí, Valentí, Valleriola, Valls*. These common Castilian or Catalan names, then, are considered on Mallorca “Jewish,” while *Salom*, having no real or imagined connection with 1679 or 1691, is simply *mallorquín.*

The *xuetes* lived and worked, partly by choice and mostly by social enforcement, in a kind of ghetto around the *Calle de Platería* (street of the silver trade), keeping more or less to themselves over the centuries, and more than less having to, worshipping in a church recognized as “theirs,” Santa Eulalia (not Montesión), and although usually social pariahs, practicing an adamant Catholicism, their somewhat ostentatious faith thought for decades to be a protective coloration of secret Judaic practices, while the ostentation was more probably a socially acute protective exaggeration of what they had indeed come to believe in, the tenets of the Roman Catholic Church. Until recent decades in the last century they seldom married outside the fold (hard to do unless one married a mainlander) or moved away from the vicinity of Calle de Platería, where they were “those of the street,” *los de la calle* (which has a further auditory suggestion since the *mallorquín* word for ghetto is *call*).

But while Catholic, they were, in ways both difficult to document with scientific precision and hard to ignore, culturally “Jewish,” perceived as such by the rest of Mallorca *and by themselves.* Admittedly some of the ways—for instance, a tradition of having internal disputes settled by a recognized man of honor and respect; an atypically high value placed upon

education—might not seem so distinctive did not one already know "who" the *xuetes* were. In any case, they insisted on a proud recognition of themselves, which brought them no love but contempt instead and, in some cases, legal ostracism, as Catholics of Jewish ethnicity.

The coherence of all this has relaxed in recent decades, as people *have* moved and *have* intermarried and, of course , . . time passes. But it's not disappeared altogether: the "street" remains the center of the largely *xueta* silver and gold jewelry trade, many still live there, and many return regularly to visit the old neighborhood, to chat, or to pray at Santa Eulalia. I invite one to read Moore. Or I recommend one visit the Calle de Platería.

I have been on Mallorca off and on over the last few decades, lived there for an extended period of time, not enough for real expertise (not enough, that is, to be a *meyvn*, nice Yiddish word) but enough to pick up some notions. I thought I knew some things, about which now I'm no longer so sure. One thing one knows for instance is that in the long process of the *xuetes* moving out into *mallorquín* society they have tended to high representation among the island's professional classes and intelligentsia; and that's true. (I'm not sure what that does to our notions about inbreeding. Maybe they were simply more intelligent to begin with than European royalty.) Another thing one knows is that in spite of the "assimilation" of recent years, *xueta* remains a term of opprobrium. One "knows" it because one is told it by people like myself who are fascinated by Mallorca's curious history; because one can find painted on walls in Palma—as the rump remains of fascist groups seek a way to express their miserable selves—a Star of David followed by "No!" with a Swastika followed by "Viva!"; and because the irrationalities of antisemitism are so

persistent and this is Spain and, given its history. . . well, why not believe it? I don't necessarily disbelieve it—but I have a hard time making it square with my own experience.

When I first began visiting Mallorca, I was surprised more than once by natives with whom I became acquainted asking me if I were Jewish—*judío*. At first, I was suspicious: *still*, after all these years, these centuries? Gradually I realized that it was slight disappointment, not polite relief, that met my answer. How to explain this experience, I did not know, still don't know exactly. At the time of these early encounters I had not heard the word *xueta*. When, gradually, it became a part of my cultural vocabulary and I became interested and began to read around in some of the relevant English and Spanish texts and some of the Catalan a page an hour, I realized that, except from *myself* and some of my non-Mallorcan friends, I had in fact *never* heard it. I think I was supposed to have—something like "That ~~damned~~ *xueta* has cheated me" or "So-and-So acts just like a *xueta*"—but I had not.

I was, then, not looking to speak with scholars and intellectuals. I have a *mallorquín* acquaintance, a novelist, who's written a popular study of the *xuetes* in Catalan, but it wasn't his cultural assumptions I was interested in. I spoke very briefly, just an exchange of amenities, with Lorenzo Pérez, whom I've mentioned already. I was visiting the Biblioteca Bartolomé March Servera in Palma and glancing at the cover of a book on display, *Anales Judaicos de Mallorca,* when the young librarian came over and whispered "*El autor está aquí.*" I had him, Pérez, pointed out and walked over. "Sir, I understand you are the author of this book." "No. no," amusement cut by a trace of annoyance; "it was written well over a century ago. I have written the introduction and notes." When I got around to reading the book I understood the

flicker of irritation. Hardly “annals,” the anonymous *Anales,* 1847, is half sketchy history of Mallorcan Jewry and half anti-*xueta* polemic leavened with just enough human sympathy to suggest that the author might probably think Julius Streicher no gentleman. “Can the book be purchased?” “Easily, any bookstore here in Palma.”

It’s an easy walk from the Biblioteca March to Calle Platería. In one shop I observe pomegranate-style ear-rings shaped however like the Star of David. In another I find ear-rings suggestive of the *rimmonim,* the structure atop the case which holds the Jewish Torah scroll. The likenesses are unmistakable—but are, now, apparently no more than traditional Mallorcan designs, faded into *xueta* cultural memory. In one shop I even mention the likenesses; the owner’s response is a total lack of response.

I enter a shop that I have not entered before. The lady is both amiable and business-like. Perhaps she could be the sister of the man who sells “pomegranate” earrings. She shows me this, that. We chat. I buy. We chat. Friendly. Her child peaks from behind a curtain; I say the appropriate things. My actions say: see how nice and trustworthy I am. And then, package in hand, bill paid, I hesitate, look reflective, puzzled. “*Señora*. May I ask a question? There is something I do not understand.” “Yes, of course.” “I have been reading a book about your island.” I switch to English (“You speak it? Good”) in order to seem, let’s say, more naïve, an awkward foreigner in need of instruction. “The author speaks of *xuetes,* who I gather were Jews converted to Christianity. We are just off Calle Platería. Is this the . . . ?” She is shaking her head already, not in denial, but in dismissal of the subject. Her husband has come in midway the conversation. “Oh, we are all Christians on Mallorca,” she is saying. She is

appealing to him with gestures. “*Ha pasado*,” he says, and repeats—it has passed. And that’s it. I get his message. We recover our aplomb; we shake hands; I take their card.

And what does it all mean? Whatever the world, non-*xueta* Mallorca included, thinks of *els xuetes,* those of the street are still wary. Leave it alone unless you are absolutely sure about the person you are talking to.

I take the bus from Palma to the village in which I live. I begin to read the anonymous author of *Anales Judaicos de Mallorca*, which I have picked up on the way. “Gold is the only idol to which they render worship and to its altars they sacrifice at each moment, if it be needed, the tables of the Law which the Lord gave to them by hand of Moses on the peak of Sinai.” I begin a conversation with the bus driver, a familiar face. I am still “naïve,” an agent provocateur in effect. “I’ve been to the Calle Platería,” I tell him. “There are some nice pieces there, but . . . some of them are extremely expensive.” “I doubt more so than elsewhere,” he says; “everything has become so dear; the inflation consumes my wages.”

Back in the village I assemble my notes, live the daily routine of shopping, checking mail. Casual conversations with grocer, butcher, the mason who is my neighbor: “I’ve been to the Calle Platería . . .” Everyone agrees that prices are *demasiados caros*—too dear. I shall speak with Pedro, proprietor of a local bar, an ex-policeman of indefinite political sympathies. I shall change my approach to one slightly more honest. “Pedro. Explain something to me, please. What does *xueta* mean? I thought the word was *judío* [Castilian] or *jueu* [Catalan].” He explains: descendants of the *conversos,*

the silver trade, etc.; things have not always been easy for them; you know how people are. “Why?” I ask. “Is there something wrong with the *xuetes*?” Not at all! *Buena gente.* Good people. And *muy apprendidos*—very learned. They suffered unjustly. I hope all that has passed.

He does not explain, however, the strange word *xueta*, which is not in my Catalan dictionary, nor *chueta* in my Castilian. It is “just a *mallorquín* word.” Actually, there is some uncertainty about its etymology. Some scholars say it’s a corruption of a diminutive of *jueu*, perhaps *juetó*