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# Franco Gives Temporary Sanctuary to Jews

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In 1964, I was a congregant of Shearith Israel, popularly known as Manhattan's Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue. At the time, the distinguished English Rabbi or *Hakham*, Solomon Gaon, of the Sephardic Congregations of the British Commonwealth, also spent several months a year at Shearith Israel as a visiting rabbi.

One day, when I was in his office on some business, he told me the following astonishing story:

When the Suez war ended in 1956, which involved Israel, England and France against Egypt, the Arab governments of North Africa decided to expel their Jews. A few of the Jews had French, Italian and Turkish citizenship: but most of them had no place to go but Israel. It was a real crisis, because the Arabs would not allow expelled Jews to travel directly to Israel. To do so would have meant issuing visas and transit documents to the Jewish state. They refused to do that since they would be considered a recognition of the State of Israel.

We needed to establish a neutral place where they could go with proper travel documents and stay for a short time, like a staging area, until they could be transported to Israel. We asked Italy, Portugal and Yugoslavia for help. They said "no." So did the Greeks. It was suggested we go to Spain for help and that I act as spokesman. An appointment was arranged for me to meet the Spanish Officer for Government Protocol in Madrid prior to a scheduled audience with Francisco Franco, the Caudillo of Spain.

All the people around Franco called him "The Boss." He was not well thought of in Jewish circles because of his friendship with Hitler and Mussolini during World War II.

I thought for a long time about how I should address this problem when I appeared before Franco. Meeting with the Protocol Officer, the day before my audience with Franco, I told him I was going to say that these refugees on whose behalf I was petitioning the government of Spain, were descendants of Jews exiled from his country almost 500 years earlier; that they still continued to speak Judeo-Spanish or Ladino, the same language their ancestors spoke so many centuries earlier. It would be good for Spain to help them at this, their most difficult hour, as they were being expelled once again just because they were Jews. This was an opportunity for Spain to make up for an historic injustice done to their ancestors so long ago.

The Protocol Officer liked this approach and then advised me that I had only a few minutes to present my petition. "Perhaps," he suggested, "you might open your presentation in Ladino since it will be a reminder to the Boss of the time when Jews were living in Spain. Then you should conclude in modern Spanish."

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The next day I did just as he suggested as I appeared before Franco. After leaving Franco's chamber the Protocol Officer met me in the hall. He said: "The Boss is granting your petition." Franco felt a strong empathy for the foreigners (the Jews) because the origin of his name means foreigner. Franco was not only true to his word; he also provided soldiers to protect the refugees as they mounted vessels sailing out of North African ports.

As we continued walking, the Protocol Officer asked me if I had seen the tears in Franco's eyes. Frankly I had not. He asked the question in such a way that implied Franco had Jewish roots.