

The Story of a Child, and of the Lingerin Tale of Blood Libel

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LA GUARDIA, Spain

The cavernous church is packed with Spaniards dressed in their finest. In front, six young women wear white bridal gowns with sashes, and mantilla veils propped up in the Spanish royal style.

They're Spain's equivalent of prom queens. And the scene at the church in La Guardia evokes the tableaux in countless Spanish towns and villages where annual fiestas are celebrated in honor of the local patron saint.



Hermitage of the Holy Child in La Guardia, Spain

Until the priest gives the sermon.

It's about el Santo Nino de la Guardia -- the Holy Child of La Guardia -- a 5-year-old Christian boy who, according to local legend, died a martyr's death in La Guardia in 1491.

"We are all called upon to live like he did," says the priest. He makes no mention of who killed the boy. But a woman sitting up front, holding a white flag with golden tassels, has no doubt who the culprits were.

"It was the Jews," the woman says with a stern look after Mass. "They abducted him and brought him here to La Guardia, and did to him what they had done to Jesus: They crucified him."

Support for Expulsion

Historians say the story is not only a myth; it derives from one of the most vile anti-Semitic slanders of medieval Europe -- the blood libel.

In its current form, it's based on a verdict handed down by the Spanish Inquisition on Nov. 16, 1491. In the ruling, the Inquisition condemned seven "heretic judaizers" to be burned at the stake for murdering a Christian boy. An eighth person was convicted later.

The two Jews and six conversos -- Jews who had converted to Christianity in an atmosphere of anti-Jewish hysteria -- issued partial confessions under torture about having abducted the boy in Toledo and brought him to La Guardia to crucify him.

According to the legend, they whipped him, made him bear a cross and subjected him to the same sufferings that the New Testament describes as having been inflicted on Jesus.

In La Guardia, the accused allegedly removed the child's heart and performed a ritual with a communion wafer stolen from a church in order to poison the Christian population's water supply.

The blood libel had been used against Jews in Europe well before La Guardia, but this version is believed to have been instrumental in stirring up support for the expulsion, a year later, of a people who had lived in Spain for centuries.

As was clear at the most recent celebration of the annual festival in late September, many people in this town of about 2,000 consider the legend literal truth. A plaque on the whitewashed wall of the Hermitage of the Holy Child, on the side of a mountain next to La Guardia, illustrates the legend, and carries a dedication at the bottom that reads, "The holy innocent child from Toledo, patron saint of this town, was crucified by various Jews out of hatred for our savior Jesus Christ." The plaque is dated Sept. 1, 2004.

An estimated 30,000 Jews live in Spain today. For its leadership, it's shocking that the legend survives.

"We are in the 21st century, and they're still saying that the Jews killed Christ," says Jacques Laredo, secretary of the Jewish community of Madrid. "We've tried to do something about it. We've had meetings with the Church, but they've been fruitless."

The efforts date back to the early 1990s, when former Israeli President Yitzhak Navon -- who is of Sephardi origin -- brought attention to the La Guardia celebrations in his Israeli TV documentary "Out of Spain."

Laredo says the problem is not the Vatican. He notes that the former papal nuncio in Spain -- the pope's ambassador -- encouraged the Jewish community to take the matter up with the Spanish bishops' conference.



A plaque on the wall of the Hermitage of the Holy Child in La Guardia, Spain, depicts a local legend based on an anti-Semitic blood libel.

But in Spain, he says, "the church is very reactionary."

Still, he adds that most Jews in Spain today don't feel threatened by what goes on in La Guardia. "These are backward traditions, like bullfights and the running of the bulls in Pamplona. We'd like them to get rid of it. We just hope that someday, they'll open their eyes."

But a tradition that's seen as offensive to Islam is being adapted. The Festivals of the Moors and the Christians, which commemorate the defeat of the Muslim armies in 1492, are celebrated in a number of towns, mainly near the eastern city of Valencia. In some versions, the high point of the festival has been the burning of a turbaned effigy referred to as La Mahoma, the Spanish name for Mohammed.

Earlier this year, the National Union of Festive Associations of Moors and Christians took action after Muslims rioted in Europe and the Middle East in response to cartoon depictions of Mohammed in a Danish newspaper.

"If you have to omit something so that an extremist somewhere in the world doesn't have a pretext, all the better," association president Francisco Lopez Perez said at the time. "Because the extremists are looking for pretexts. So the rest of us, we should avoid providing them, even unintentionally."

The Spanish government has pledged to fight all forms of discrimination, including anti-Semitism. Last year, it sponsored the 55-nation Conference on Anti-Semitism and Other Forms of Intolerance in Cordoba.

But there's no sign of any change in La Guardia. The regional government of Castilla La Mancha likes to attract Jewish tourists from abroad to its capital, Toledo, where medieval synagogues have been restored. But Soledad Ruiz Perez, a regional government spokeswoman, scoffed at the idea of revising the festival in La Guardia. Despite the villagers' own statements saying they take the story literally, Ruiz Perez claimed that "they don't even talk about the legend in the town."