

# El Santo Niño de La Guardia, A Blood Libel that Persists to this Day

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**Rabbi Baruch Garzon called to me, “Arturo, ven aqui.”** He was standing at the side door of the great Cathedral of Toledo Spain. He wanted to show me something. It was 1992; we were part of the group from the American Sephardi Federation who had come to Spain at the invitation of King Juan Carlos to commemorate the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews. We had been traveling through the country visiting Jewish sites and meeting with local dignitaries. On this day we had been to a reception with the Alcalde of Toledo. Leaving the reception we walked through a small plaza next to a side door of the Cathedral. Rabbi Garzon, who was at that time Chief Rabbi of Spain, called me over to the small door. He explained that the big, ornately carved doors at the front of the building were for the nobility only. The common people entered through this small, unimpressive side door. “Look at the paintings around the inside of the door, it’s the last thing that the commoners see as they exit the cathedral.”

The frescos were fading and parts of them were missing, but one could easily see a villainous looking man abducting a young child. The child is painted in a beatific manner, like that of the many martyrs that can be seen in Catholic churches in Europe. On the other side of the door the child is hanging, Christ-like, from a cross while the evil man looks on.

This is the Santo Niño de La Guardia, a blood libel that occurred only one year before the expulsion of the Jews. Some of the details of the case are sketchy sources differ slightly, but this is the story as best as I can reconstruct it:

In 1490, a New Christian named Benito García who worked as a wool comber was traveling from town to town selling his wares (one source says that he was returning from a pilgrimage.) He stopped at an inn where a party of drunken men broke into his knapsack. While going through his goods, they found a wafer, like those consecrated ones used in communion. Laymen could not legally be in possession of these wafers and the thieves realized this was a major crime. Turning García in to the authorities would bring a bigger prize than that which they could obtain from selling his stolen possessions. They turned García over to the law.

The magistrate who heard the case was Dr. Pedro de Villada who had worked closely with the Inquisition in the past and had hopes of being elevated to a judgeship in the Inquisition. De Villada insisted that García admit to judaizing and that he had stolen the consecrated host for use in a conjuration in which the host and a human heart would be used to cast a spell causing all Christians to die raving mad so the Jews would obtain their wealth.

García refused to admit guilt and he was subjected to two hundred lashes followed by the dreaded water torture and the “garrote,” sharp cords twisted tightly around arms and legs. He finally broke down and admitted he had been a good Christian for thirty years but that for the last five years he practiced Judaism whenever he found it safe to do so. This was not enough for Pedro de Villada, García must name his co-conspirators. García implicated Juan de Ocaña, the brothers Mosé and Yucé Franco and their father Ça Franco, and several others, a total of six *conversos* and five Jews, including three who were deceased. All who were still alive were arrested and tortured.

Yucé Franco fell ill in prison and, fearing that he was near death, he asked for a physician and a rabbi. A physician was sent, but the “rabbi” was actually a priest in disguise. Yucé, in his delirium, told the priest/rabbi that he and his friends were accused of planning the ritual murder of a Christian child.

The subsequent trials lasted sixteen months and only the trial record of Yucé is available today. The others have disappeared but Yucé’s trial makes reference to the others. It is interesting that the charge of the crucifixion of a child was not added to the other charges until October of 1491. The trial transcript shows that Yucé at first called the charges “The greatest falsehoods in the world.”<sup>2</sup> Later he admits to having been taken to a cave where he was shown a wooden box containing a wafer and the heart of a child. Later still he says that he took part in the sacrifice of a Christian child. There is conflicting testimony as to when the sacrifice took place and even how many hosts and children were involved. Witnesses claim one, two or three sacrifices. Torture was employed to try to obtain consistent stories from the defendants. There is even inconsistency as to the identification of the child and how and where the kidnapping took place. The Inquisition even admitted its inability to identify the child and in the final sentence he is identified simply as *un niño cristiano*. Years later, the Relation of the Three Secretaries claims that the child was Juan, the son of Alonso de Pasamontes and Juana de la Guindera. In 1544, Damiàn de Vegas says that the child was Christóbal, son of a blind woman. Neither gives a source for the child’s name.

On November 16, 1491, the defendants were “relaxed” to the secular arm and burned at the stake. The deceased Jews were burned in effigy. All but Yucé and Ça confessed and were strangled before being burned. Yucé and Ça wanted to die as Jews. They were first burned with red-hot pincers, and then the coals under them were dampened so as to burn more slowly and prolong the suffering.

The blood libel soon spread among superstitious Spaniards. Within a few days, an unlucky Hebrew was stoned to death by a maddened mob. Torquemada issued a statement to be read from pulpits around Spain. He now had more ammunition for his plan to expel the Jews. The town of La Guardia instituted an annual pageant honoring the Santo Niño and the story entered the mythology of the Catholic Church of Spain. Someone claimed to know where the body had been buried, but nothing was found there. As no body had been found, it was said that the child’s body had been taken directly up to heaven. It was claimed that the blind mother had her sight miraculously restored at the moment that the child died.

**In 1992, Israeli Television broadcast a series entitled “Out of Spain 1492” featuring Yitzhak Navon, the Sephardic former president of Israel. In one segment of the series, he goes to La Guardia and interviews people on the street. Navon asks if they believe that the story of the Santo Niño is true. Everyone interviewed claimed that the story was true or could have been true. A statue of the Santo Niño still stands in a plaza there.**

In 1994, SCJS held its conference in Belmonte. It included a tour of Spain and Portugal. As we passed Toledo’s cathedral, I called to the others to follow me through the small door at the side of the building. I showed them the mural around the door and was about to repeat Rabbi Garzon’s story. Our Spanish guide interrupted, “Oh, that’s nothing, ignore it, its nothing.” He was obviously embarrassed by the mural. I told it anyway.

#### REFERENCES:

1. Plaidy, Jean. *The Spanish Inquisition*. London: Robert Hale , 1978, 172-180
2. Lea, Henry Charles. *A History of the Inquisition of Spain*, 1889, “El Santo Niño de La Guardia.” The Library of Iberian Resources online (<http://libro.uca.edu/lea2/opening.htm>), 229-250
3. Navon, Yitzhak. “Out of Spain 1492.” Israel Broadcasting Authority-Israel Television, 1992