

## Outside Spain

**W**hen Charles Dickens went to America, adoring crowds lined up outside his hotel hoping for an autograph. He was so energized by this mass display of love that during the day, as his coach proceeded from town to town, he would leap out and walk with the horses for hours at a time, dragging them along and exhausting all those around him.

When Byron visited Venice he swam from the Lido across the lagoon and up the Grand Canal. This took four hours and the two companions he'd started out with had to be fished from the water by a rescue gondola.

When in Spain I performed no athletic feats, signed no autographs, and was completely unsuccessful at writing anything Byron or Dickens would have wanted to find on their desks. Such are the limitations of travel.

My trip to Spain began on Vancouver Island. It was, as they say, a dark and rainy night. I had just finished the nth draft of a novel about rural Ontario, had spent the evening celebrating with friends, and decided that before I drove home I should take their dog for a walk.

During that walk I began to think about Spain. There was no particular reason for this—I had never studied Spanish in university, had a particular affection for *paella* or Spanish music, and the one Lorca play I'd read had totally passed me by, despite the fact it had been loaned to me by a woman I wished to admire.

By the end of the walk I'd come up with the idea of writing a historical novel set mostly in Spain about a Jewish doctor at the beginning of the Renaissance trying to make some sense of the struggle between reason and faith.

Why Spain? Because I at least knew that in Spain the Renaissance arrived late and that when the doctor fled Spain he would meet an advanced historical future. I had also by then remembered my previous—though forgotten—fling with wanting to know about Spain: about a decade earlier, when starting to write short stories, I'd become obsessed with Christopher Columbus and that had entailed a spate of reading about medieval Spain and Portugal.

A few months later I was on an airplane bound for Madrid. The idea for the novel had found much favour with my publisher and I had spent a bit of time looking at Spanish grammar books—but without much result except to notice that Spanish seemed to resemble Latin, a subject I'd taken without much enthusiasm while in high school.

Why was I even on this trip? One reason was that I love to travel. Another, more practical, was that though the historical novel idea seemed absurd, I was sure I would get something contemporary out of it—and had already written one story (*The Sins of Tomas Benares*) just thinking about that. Also my travelling companion, who was also my living companion, was from Guatemala and had promised to act as my interpreter, speak Spanish to me every day for at least an hour, and show me the northern region of Spain from which her father's family had originally come. But finally, and most importantly, having a novel arrive whole in my mind while out for a walk—even on a dark and rainy night—was not a usual experience for me. I felt I should pay attention.

It was late August and when we arrived, the airport was predictably hot and dusty. We went to our hotel, then walked out onto the streets of Madrid.

My first shock: looking around I saw everyone looked exactly like me! Slightly shorter than they were supposed to be, sallow skin, horn-rimmed glasses, clothes that didn't match—but it was more than that—it was something in the combination of being both extrovert and furtive, timorous and over-confident, night creatures at large during the day. Suddenly I knew, with a conviction that has never left me, that I was in the land of my ancestors.

Although I'd already noticed that I wasn't Dickens or Byron, it's also true that in our century writers may be unread but are seldom untravelled. I'd visited many countries, always enjoyed them, sometimes learned something about them as a result, but always felt, naturally, like an outsider, even if well tolerated. Just like being in Canada, I would say to myself, which had been my explanation of why I found travelling so easy.

But this was different. Even though I knew nothing about Spain I felt inside right away.

This sensation continued when we went to visit the Prado. Of course I had seen illustrations of many of the paintings on display there—perhaps that was why it seemed so eerily familiar.

After a couple of days in Madrid we went south to Toledo. This was to be the first physical locale for my novel. Originally, I'd thought of setting it at the time of Columbus's first voyage to America—the irony of modern Spain's first two great historically significant acts being sending Columbus in one direction and its Jews in another was very tempting.

But as I read about the subject I discovered that the expulsion of the Jews from Spain was only the final step in a process which had been going on since the first great wave of the Black Death in 1348. The Jews, predictably, were blamed for this plague. But not—at least officially—in Castile, of which Toledo was the capital. In Castile there were as many as 300 separate Jewish communities. They lived under the protection of the King and supported—as did cities throughout Aragon, Portugal and Navarre—numerous universities and centres of study. For Jewish civilization in Europe these were the last moments of a not-to-be-repeated golden era, a period during which Spanish Jews lived in harmony with Arabs and Christians.

When Pedro of Castile (also known as Pedro the Cruel) was challenged in 1369, the Jews sided with him because he had been their patron. When he was overthrown, things began to go downhill. In 1391, beginning with a massacre in Seville, Jewish settlements and ghettos were attacked all over the Iberian Peninsula, from the Pyrenees to the Straits of Gibraltar. Tens of thousands of Jews died and tens of thousands more converted. These converts—eventually known as *conversos* or *marranos*—eventually became common targets for the Inquisition.

The destruction of Spanish Jewry—through the Inquisition and the expulsion—was to be the most tragic event in Jewish history until the Second World War. It seemed to me essential to set the novel in Toledo at the very moment it became apparent that this destruction became inevitable.

Another advantage of Toledo was its fame as a historically preserved city. I—and the tens of thousands of tourists who visited it daily—could expect to find a reasonably authentic version of what Toledo looked like in the fourteenth century. We arranged to stay in a hotel that had once been a Cardinal's palace. This seemed appropriate since such a Cardinal would obviously have an important although villainous role to play in my hypothetical novel. Also, I could be reasonably certain that there would no be

hotels based in residences that had once belonged to rich or famous Jews. (In fact, curiously enough, Toledo is not the only city I've visited which does not have this kind of hotel—but that would be a different travel story—.)

The Cardinal's palace was suitably opulent, as well as being provided with a restaurant splendid in every respect save that my companion got violently ill both times we ate there. As advertised the city was a well-kept version of what—for all I knew—it had been in the middle ages. A small, densely populated walled city set on a series of cliffs and divided into various districts that could be separated by iron gates, Toledo has an undeniable beauty and magic—even the strange emptiness and sterility that it radiates—despite the throngs of tourists—invite the visitor to fill that emptiness with his or her own imagination.

The former Jewish presence in Toledo was duly recorded in various guidebooks, and there was even a very attractive and ancient synagogue—which had later been converted into a church—to be seen. The day I went to see it happened to be Yom Kippur, and the synagogue was closed. When I asked why, I was told a German film crew was inside, setting up for a television special on the historic past of Spain's Jews. This led to a vigorous discussion during which my companion said many words I hadn't noticed in dictionaries, and we were allowed in. Afterwards I asked if the Jews of Toledo ever worshipped here and I was told that although the city did have some Jewish families, regrettably very few, they didn't use the synagogue.

There was a restaurant up the hill from the hotel, a modest place with a terrific view down to the plains where the medieval fairs would set up and towards which the Jews of Toledo tried to flee—mostly unsuccessfully—when their *barrio* was invaded and set on fire in 1391.

One night at this friendly and affordable restaurant, one which specialized in lunches because most of the tourist buses left in the late afternoon for Madrid—only two hours away—I realized my project was ridiculous. I felt as though I were in a sort of medieval Disneyland, dutifully making the rounds of churches, synagogues, old Roman arenas, paintings, houses of former illustrious citizens, etc. I proposed that we cut our losses, set out for the north, take advantage of being in Spain to see as much as possible.

That night I dreamed the first section of my novel: *The Spanish Doctor*. When I woke up in the morning and went outside, I saw not the prettily restored buildings, but the dry stony soil, the bushes that would have torn at your skin as you slid to escape, the claustrophobic architecture of a city designed to be ruled by fear.

We spent ten days driving around Spain, then returned to Toledo. Everything we saw in the present seemed a thin contemporary transparency laid upon a landscape from which, hour by hour, I was learning to subtract the centuries.

By the time we left Toledo a second time and went to spend a last night in Madrid before going to the airport, I had filled pages with notes, could speak rudimentary Spanish, and had bought the books I would need for my research. But now when I looked at the people on the streets of Madrid they were utter strangers. I was no longer inside them—instead I was in the nightmare their ancestors and mine had shared—the nightmare that for some had ended in death and exile, for others in the beginnings of a new and dazzling empire.

