

The Spanish Inquisition

By Yosef Eisen

[« Previous](#)
[The Beginning of the End](#)

[Next »](#)
[The Spanish Expulsion](#)

The Inquisition Comes to Spain

The Inquisition did not originate in Spain and did not originally target Jews. In the 1200s, the Pope established the Holy Inquisition Against Depraved Heresy to deal with breakaway Christian sects. It remained relatively powerless, as secular rulers, suspicious of Papal meddling in their own internal affairs, did not allow it access to their countries. In a period of more than 200 years, very few heretics were burned at the stake. In 1481, however, after extracting a promise from the Pope that the Inquisition would remain under the Crown's control, thus ensuring that confiscated assets of heretics would revert to the throne, Ferdinand and Isabella established the Inquisition in Seville. While it is commonly assumed that the Inquisition was brought to Spain out of a concern that Jews were trying to influence *conversos* to leave the Christian fold, one prominent historian is of the opinion that by 1481 Jewish consciousness was virtually nonexistent among the *conversos*, and that Jews did not attempt any such outreach. Rather, he believes, the Inquisition was an outgrowth of the attitudes of Spain's Old Christian population. In the words of one Spanish historian, "The Inquisition was a genuine expression of the soul of the Spanish people."

Defense counsel was allowed, but was virtually impossible to obtain

Procedure of the Inquisition

Once the court was set up, a 30-day grace period was granted in which voluntary confessions of wrongdoing received light sentences, such as small fines. However, a confessor had to agree to spy on his friends and relatives, and if he did not produce evidence, he would be under suspicion as a heretic and could receive the death penalty. Naturally, this system encouraged great corruption, for people fabricated false evidence against others either out of fear, jealousy, and hatred, or to receive a reward. To make matters worse, any accused person was not permitted to know the identity of his accusers, or even the evidence, and thus had no way to refute the

charges, which were always believed by the court. Defense counsel was allowed, but was virtually impossible to obtain, because defending heresy was also considered heretical, and punishable by death, thus discouraging any potential advocates.

The Inquisition publicized signs of heretical behavior for faithful Christians to watch for and report, including changing linens on Friday, buying vegetables before *Pesach*, blessing children without making the sign of the cross, fasting on Yom Kippur, and refraining from work on the Sabbath. Interestingly enough, Jews who never converted to Christianity were not under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition, and could practice their religion freely and openly. It was only *conversos* who were considered heretics for forsaking the Christian creed and practicing Judaism.

Tortures

If the Inquisitors could not obtain a confession from a suspected heretic, they employed torture to extract one. Interestingly, as gruesome as these tortures were, they were designed not to spill blood, a practice forbidden under Christian law. In the rope torture, for example, the victim's hands were tied behind him, and the rope was connected to a pulley. Weights were attached to the victim's legs, and he was raised to the ceiling. When he was suddenly lowered, his arms and legs were painfully dislocating. The water torture consisted of laying a wet cloth over the prisoner's mouth and nostrils and running a small stream down his throat. As the victim gagged and pulled the cloth into his throat, it was yanked away, causing excruciating pain. Torture by fire was also employed, in which the victim's feet were smeared with a flammable material and held near a fire, causing a slow, painful burning. If the accused fainted during interrogation, a physician standing nearby revived him; if the official administering the torture caused the victim to die, he was not held responsible. Overall, no person was safe from the clutches of the Inquisition — even children and pregnant women underwent these horrific tortures.

Punishments

The penalties imposed by the Inquisition included monetary fines, confiscation of all property, public humiliation, and flogging. Most severe of all punishments were the death sentences. Since the Church did not spill blood, but only saved souls, the victims were handed over to the secular authorities for execution. Bloodless deaths were preferred, such as strangling and burning alive. Periodically, an *auto-de-fe* (act of faith) was held, in which all the victims of an area were punished

together. These became great public spectacles, taking on a holiday atmosphere, as people brought their families to watch the proceedings and jeer the victims. Condemned people wore yellow *sanbenitos*, cloaks, with red crosses and the letter X painted on them. Those given the death penalty wore tunics with paintings of flames and devils. The procession marched through the town to the burning area where the judges sat. The cases involving lesser penalties were judged first, then those receiving strangulation before burning, and finally those condemned to be burned alive.

Most severe of all punishments were the death sentences

The first *auto-de-fe* was held in 1481, and the last in 1731, an old woman who was accused of "being influenced by the Devil, after which she laid eggs with prophecies written on them." In 1680, the most spectacular of all *autos-de-fe* was held to celebrate the wedding of King Carlos and his bride. At that time, the Inquisition spread to Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the New and Old Worlds, with victims burned in Havana, Cuba; Mexico City, Mexico; Buenos Aires, Argentina; and Goa, India. After 350 years, the Inquisition was finally abolished in 1834. In all, more than 400,000 people were accused of heresy, with 30,000 of those put to death.

Torquemada

In 1483, Queen Isabella's personal confessor, the Dominican priest Tomas de Torquemada, was appointed head of the Inquisition. Of *converso* origin, Torquemada was a fanatic Jew-hater who was wholly incorruptible. Unlike other monks, he kept his vows of poverty, never eating meat, not wearing linen near his body, or sleeping on anything softer than a board. It was precisely his complete zeal to the cause of Christianity that made Torquemada such an implacable foe. He personally turned the Inquisition into the terrifying institution it would become. Under his administration, the Inquisition amassed enormous assets confiscated from its victims, much of it used to finance the war to conquer the last Muslim stronghold of Granada.

Quickly, Torquemada began taking steps to weaken the unconverted Jewish community and eventually expel it from Spain. In 1485, he forced all rabbis, under pain of death, to report *conversos* who were practicing Judaism, and to pronounce a rabbinic curse on any Jew who failed to notify the Inquisition of such behavior. This cruel edict badly split the Jews of Spain. Alarmed by the greatly increasing power of the Inquisition, that year a group of *conversos* plotted to kill the inquisitor of Saragossa, Pedro de Arbues, hoping to begin a popular uprising against the

Inquisition. However, the assassination had the opposite effect. The townspeople were enraged, rampaging through the streets, killing many *conversos*. All the conspirators were caught and executed, and the Inquisition grew even stronger.

The Holy Child of La Guardia

In 1486, Torquemada petitioned Ferdinand and Isabella to expel the Jews from Spain, but they refused. Therefore, Torquemada needed to create a sensation in order to poison the atmosphere, stir public wrath against the Jews, and force their expulsion. In 1490, the Inquisition fabricated the tale of the Holy Child of La Guardia. Several Jews and *conversos* were accused of kidnapping a seven-year-old boy in the town of La Guardia and taking him to a cave, cutting out the child's heart, and using it in magical rites designed to overthrow Christian Spain and turn it into a Jewish country. Although no body was ever found, under torture all the defendants admitted to the charges. In late 1491, for the first time unconverted Jews were burned at the stake in a spectacular *auto-de-fe*, which people traveled many days to witness. (Before being killed, the Jews were punished spiritually by being excommunicated from the Catholic Church, to which they had never belonged.) Torquemada wasted no time in sending reports of the episode all over Spain, whipping the populace into an even greater anti-Jewish frenzy.

Under torture all the defendants admitted to the charges

The Myth Today

The myth of the Holy Child of La Guardia entered the history of Spain, where it helped keep anti-Semitism alive for centuries. Missing details of the "Holy Child's" name, age, birthplace, and place of murder were obligingly provided by willing contributors. (The embarrassing lack of a corpse was attributed to the child's body ascending to heaven, along with his soul.) In 1989, a book on the history of Spain quoted the story as justification for the expulsion of the Jews. In 1993, the author Erna Paris visited La Guardia and described what she saw:

“The church stands in glorious tribute to the Holy Child, patron saint of La Guardia, whose feast day has just passed. A statue of the child graces an alcove, and votive candles burn brightly at his feet. A priest approaches, eager to talk about his church's claim to fame. The child, I learn, was five years old and his name was Juan. He was kidnapped by the Jews and crucified. This act,

says the priest, was the ultimate reason for the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. The cave where he was martyred is not far from here. I may see it if I wish, he says, smiling. 'Is the story true?' I ask the priest.

"Well," he replies slowly, "the Jews did admit to taking the child into the cave. I suppose that is all we can know," he concludes, turning his head away."

[« Previous](#)
[The Beginning of the End](#)

[Next »](#)
[The Spanish Expulsion](#)

[By Yosef Eisen](#)

Excerpt from *Miraculous Journey* by Yosef Eisen. For thousands of years the Jewish people have survived and flourished, against all odds. *Miraculous Journey* takes you on a 700-page tour of Jewish history, all in one volume, from Creation to President Obama. Yosef Eisen, a noted historian and lecturer, tells the miraculous story and history of an eternal nation. Books may be ordered directly from the author. Email him or write to Yosef Eisen, 2337 Sherbrook St., Pittsburgh PA, 15217. Books cost \$37, plus \$6 shipping - total \$43.

© Copyright, all rights reserved. If you enjoyed this article, we encourage you to distribute it further, provided that you comply with Chabad.org's copyright policy.