

Spain: Bones of Contention

ANDREA WEISS

"In Spain, the dead are more alive than the dead of any other country in the world."
— Federico García Lorca

FROM WHERE I SIT on my terrace in the Barcelona neighborhood of Poble Sec, once made up of working-class Catalans but now primarily immigrants, I gaze over the roofs of the apartment buildings to the lush green mountaintop of Montjuic. So little is lush in Barcelona this spring after an extremely dry winter—global warming is pushing the North Africa desert climate slowly upwards into Iberia—but Montjuic is still a bright green oasis, its acres of parks and forests making it the largest green zone in the city, made even more so by the monk parrots building their nests in the palm trees.

After six months in Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War, George Orwell warned (in 1938's *Homage to Catalonia*): "It is difficult to be certain about anything except what you have seen with your own eyes." But if you're a foreigner in Spain, it's tricky to know if you truly understand, or only think you understand, what you're seeing with your own eyes. I used to sit and watch these beautiful birds with awe from an outdoor café until I learned that they're an aggressive, invasive species, doing damage to the local ecosystem.

Montjuic means "Jewish mountain" in medieval Catalan. A sizeable Jewish community once lived peacefully in the *Call* ghetto until the 14th century, when rising anti-Semitism culminated in the riots of 1391. That year the Jews of Barcelona were murdered, forcibly converted, or driven out of the city by mobs egged on by the Catholic Church, a full century before the Spanish Inquisition. An ancient Jewish cemetery dating from before their expulsion is hiding somewhere on the mountain, so disguised by time that I have never found it, despite my wanderings on Sunday afternoons. As with so much of Spain's elusive past, it seems to have been swallowed up by the dry earth.

Historical memory demands a certain prior knowledge. You can't remember what you never knew, especially when access to that knowledge has been actively suppressed. We know that countless people were imprisoned and tortured in Montjuic Castle less than 75 years ago. But for the most part we have no idea who the victims or their torturers were. In fact, we really don't know the scale of persecution throughout the country, both during and after the Civil War, but it's safe to say that every basic human right that the U.N. would one day cram into its exhaus-

tive Declaration of Human Rights was trampled on with deliberate cruelty.

And then there is the everyday terror, so ordinary that it rarely gets written down in any kind of ledger. Gay men were sent directly to prison where they were raped and tortured or, later—as homosexuality changed from a crime to a mental illness—to "correction camps," where they received shock therapy and were still raped and tortured.* Straight women were sentenced to another kind of prison: they were totally subjugated by their husbands and denied any avenue of escape, whether divorce or access to birth control. And lesbians? What was it like for them, independent women swimming powerfully against the tide of the 1930s? The ledger book goes blank.

After the prison on Montjuic was closed in 1960, it reopened as a military museum in 1963, and Franco himself presided over its inauguration, giving poignant irony to the maxim that "history is written by the victors." Franco's victory in 1939 ensured a conspiracy of silence regarding the crimes of his regime,

which settled like a thick fog that lifted only slowly after his death in 1977. King Juan Carlos, appointed by Franco to be his successor, presided over Spain's transition to democracy, and both the Right and Left colluded in an unwritten *Pacto de Olvido* ("pact of forgetting"). Many Spaniards, euphoric over their newfound freedom, were under-

standably disinclined to see their nation stumble backward into a rehashing of its painful past. But the *Pacto de Olvido* may well have been a *Pacto con el Diablo* instead, because, as we know from Freud, that which is repressed does not just slip quietly away.

After so many years of compulsory silence, the catchphrase "historical memory" is sprouting up like *rovellós* in autumn, the local wild mushroom Catalonia goes crazy over for a few weeks each year. A noisy protest march through the Barri Gothic recently was clamoring, not against tuition hikes or bank bail-outs (though certainly Barcelona has its share of those demonstrations as well), but for *la memoria histórica*. There are still estimated to be over 100,000 missing people buried in unmarked mass graves all along the roads of Spain. The graves are an all too apt metaphor for the historical memory conundrum: how does a country excavate its buried memories?

In 2000, the journalist Emilio Silva established the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory after he managed

Lorca has become a cult figure who has generated attention throughout the Western world, especially after a judge ordered the exhumation of his remains in 2008.

* In 2007 the Spanish government began paying monthly compensation to a small number of elderly gay men who had survived torture and imprisonment during the Franco years. The compensation was awarded because these men's "criminal record" prevented them from earning the salary needed to accumulate a pension.

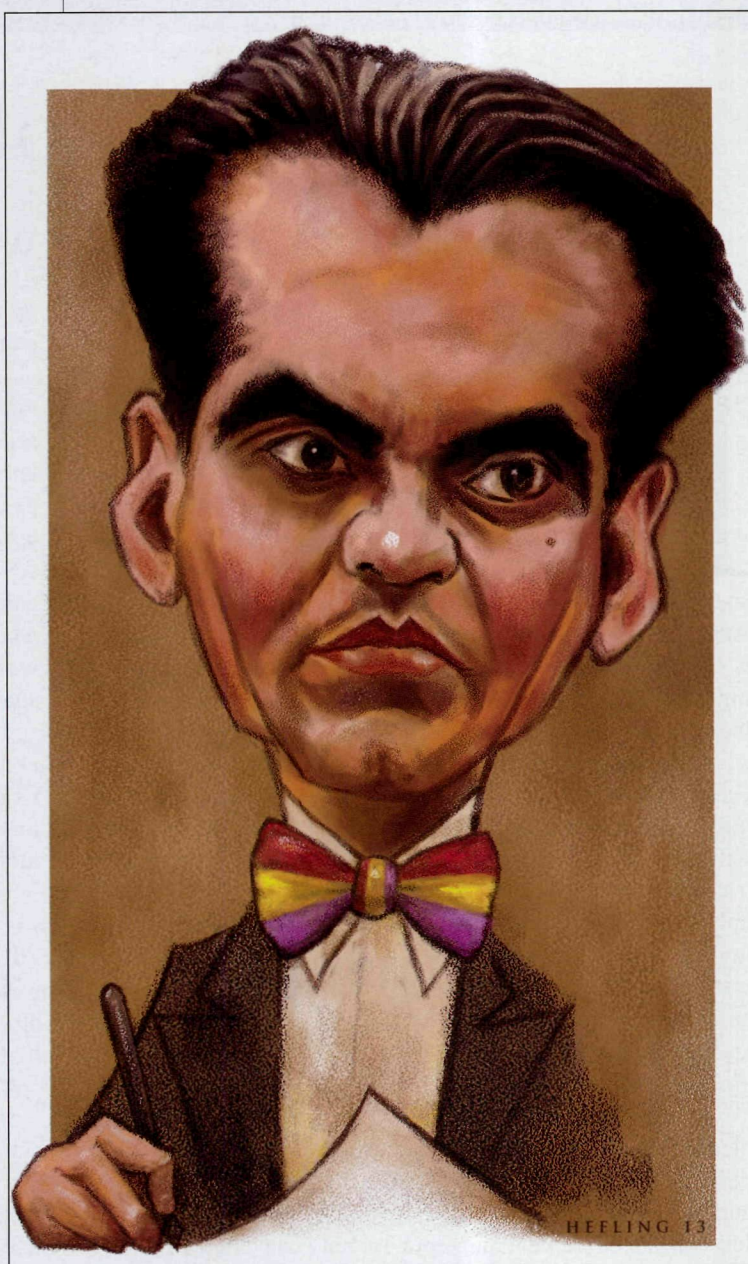
Andrea Weiss, a documentary filmmaker and writer, is the author of *In the Shadow of the Magic Mountain: The Erika and Klaus Mann Story and Paris Was a Woman*.

to locate the remains of twelve people in a roadside ditch, including his own grandfather, a Republican militant murdered by Franco's troops. A rising chorus of demands began calling on the Spanish government and its people to confront the unspoken tragedy of what had become a collective family secret. In 2002, Silva, along with others, presented a draft bill to that effect, which finally became law (*La Ley de Memoria Histórica*) in 2007. If the *Pacto de Olvido* was an order to bury the past, this new law thirty years later was designed to exhume it.

The law for the recovery of historical memory was passed by Zapatero's Socialist government without input from the conservative Popular Party, which refused to participate. Officially, it recognized victims of the war (on both sides), ordered the removal of tributes to Franco throughout the country (with the exception of those on church property), and provided financial assistance for the exhuming of mass graves (but victims' families have to pay compensation to landowners for disruption to private property). Most importantly, it did not reverse an amnesty law that had been enacted during the early days of the new democracy. Law 46/1977 was a first cousin to the *Pacto de Olvido*—conflating the concepts of amnesty and amnesia in the national psyche. This far-reaching amnesty law granted blanket immunity for any crimes committed by anyone acting according to "intentional policy" during the Franco era. To state the obvious, Franco could not have personally executed all the crimes committed on his watch. Those hundred thousand unmarked graves point upward to a vast number of perpetrators and collaborators who were still living in post-Franco Spain with immunity from prosecution.

Between the *Pacto de Olvido* and the subsequent *Ley de Memoria Histórica*, the official position on historical memory in Spain has gone from erasure to mandatory exposure. But historical memory cannot be state-decreed any more than historical amnesia can be; the concept is an oxymoron. Memory is messy and capricious, it fades and resurfaces unexpectedly, it ebbs and flows in individual, familial, and collective consciousness in wanton disregard of such rulings. The 2007 law allows it to break out of the private sphere, but also runs the danger of promoting a public spectacle, what one historian called "the substitution of historical memory by a consumption culture of nostalgia." A nascent tourism campaign is targeting Civil War sites. You can visit, for example, a recently re-opened air-raid shelter in my neighborhood of Poble Sec, dug into the Montjuic mountainside by civilians as bombs rained down on them. Such a consumerist strategy, appealing to a sense of nostalgia for an era long inaccessible and now vanishing, offers the least contentious route: it responds to public demands to commemorate the Civil War but requires little national soul-searching and offends no one.

So Spain is finally willing to admit that there were victims but, illogically, not that there were perpetrators. The state essentially has pardoned itself for its crimes, as if it had the right to do so. No murderers have been brought to trial, nor will they be. No government official has apologized to the victims or their families who, having long given up on justice, now just want the truth. Surely the dead, and the living, are owed that.



POET AND PLAYWRIGHT Federico García Lorca was one of the hundreds of thousands of people executed by Franco's forces during the Spanish Civil War. Today he has grabbed such a powerful hold on Spain's cultural imagination that a photograph of his face is used as the logo for the city of Granada's tourism industry. Killed by Franco's militia only one month into the war and buried somewhere near Granada in an unmarked mass grave, he is Spain's most famous missing person.

In the summer of 1936, Federico García Lorca was 38 years old and already Spain's best-known poet. In his hometown of Granada, where he spent his summers, he was a highly visible, even controversial personality. In that provincial milieu, and in that closeted era, he was as open about his homosexuality as one could be, and he was also open about his Republican sympathies. Soon after Franco had staged his military coup and seized control of Granada, the Nationalist militia arrested him. He met his death by firing squad two days later. One of his mur-

derers proudly announced that he had “fired two bullets into his ass for being a queer.” Lorca’s books were burned in the town’s central square and subsequently banned for over fifteen dark years of fascism in Spain. Although his work slowly started appearing in the mid-1950s, usually in highly censored editions, Lorca himself was virtually a taboo subject until the ’90s.

Since then, Lorca has become a cult figure who has generated considerable attention throughout the Western world, especially after Judge Baltasar Garzón ordered the exhumation of his remains in 2008, setting off a fierce public dispute. It landed Garzón on the opposite side of the judicial bench when the Spanish Supreme Court indicted him for “abuse of power” in investigating crimes carried out by Franco’s dictatorship in defiance of Spain’s 46/1977 Amnesty Law, which is still on the books today. Although Garzón was finally acquitted on the “abuse of power” rap, the Supreme Court recently delivered a guilty verdict in a lesser and unrelated charge, the illegal authorizing of wiretapping, which many view as a politically motivated vendetta. The judge was barred from practicing his profession for eleven years.

Lorca’s biological family issued a press release requesting “that the remains of Federico García Lorca repose forever where they are.” They didn’t state their reasons, and the perplexed general public was quick to fabricate some of their own: perhaps they were ashamed of the poet’s homosexuality, or they knew his whereabouts and had given him a private re-burial years earlier. The excavating of mass graves has become a national project of sorts, so to oppose such an action is automatically suspect. Lorca’s niece, Laura García Lorca, who heads the García Lorca

Foundation in Madrid, later explained that she opposed the exhumation to avoid a spectacle; she didn’t want to see her uncle’s skull turn up on YouTube. Eventually, though, the Lorca family agreed to supply the DNA needed for identification, and the digging commenced. But not one bone was found.

As a national icon, Lorca functions, paradoxically, as both the establishment face of the new democratic Spain and as the ultimate countercultural gay hero. As such, the facts of Lorca’s life are open to wildly varying interpretation according to one’s political agenda. There are those who say he was not definitively pro-Republican and very possibly could have gone over to the Nationalists had he lived. It is known that he had friends among the *Falangistas* who sheltered him in the days before his arrest. Others say he was apolitical, basing this claim on a statement Lorca made a month before his death: “I will never be political. ... I am a revolutionary because there are no true poets who are not revolutionaries.” Some insist that his death was due to his well-known leftist leanings; others blame his open homosexuality; still others see it as the result of a family feud. There are those who claim him as the definitive gay icon and those who deny the homoerotic content of his work.

Lorca’s biographer, Ian Gibson, spent decades piecing together Lorca’s life story with enormous sensitivity to the yawning gaps in the documentary record, some of the absences and erasures resulting from well-meaning friends and family who tried to conceal his homosexuality. Widely suspected at the time, even once alluded to in the press (the offending journalist was banned from Lorca’s stage rehearsals), this aspect of Lorca’s character hovered just outside the frame of public dis-

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Möbius Strip

An unexpected lithe half-turn, his corkscrew torsion back and around to lock gazes, the vibe that jolts us awake just as surprising—so... obstinate? so shaken—where some four or five intruding attitudes competed.

I wondered if any but a wrestler's waist and neck could helix up to exhibit the blush, the cool resilience of a face still damp from a hot shower, and maintain our stable dovetailed tempo further down.

Espresso ringlets tangled over blue-green eyes bracketed to one side like a film star, jaw clenching, and no routine f-word needed to convey the ache, the angry exultation that can't help being selfish when it feels good.

OK, my chuckle's too much of a gloat, so you lean back for a snog that shuts me up, teamwork teasing the brink until one vaulter arcs and plunges earthward. ... Left behind, all right, but no complaints from this postponer.

As both sides of our bodied Möbius strip become each other, you'll soon be seeing me make my half-turn, trusting to meet your gaze.

ALFRED CORN

course, although it clearly informed his life and work—and, we now know, played a role in his death. If anything has risen to the level of popular awareness today, it is that he was at one time in love with his close friend Salvador Dalí, who claimed that he admired Lorca but did not return his affections. When I recently visited Lorca's childhood home, now a museum, in Huerta de San Vicente, a small village outside of Granada, the documentation of his life through letters, photographs, and even film clips was impressive. But nowhere was even a hint of his homosexuality to be gleaned.

Still, Lorca's considerable fame means that his homosexuality can never be fully suppressed. Occasionally it finds its way to the surface like pentimento in the old masters. As if there were only room in the cultural register for one gay icon at a time, Lorca's renown has eclipsed the stories of once prominent lesbian writers, artists, and poets of the Spanish Republic. Lorca's close friend Margarita Xirgu, the Catalan stage actress who performed his plays *Yerma*, *Blood Wedding*, and *Doña Rosita* countless times, used her star power to help establish his reputation, which in turn has overshadowed her own legacy.

Margarita Xirgu's exile from Spain began in January 1936

when she sailed away for an overseas tour of Lorca's plays in the Americas and never came back. She cabled him with news about the wild success his plays were having in Mexico and begged him to join her there, something he intended to do. Had he departed without delay, it would have saved his life. Revelations about why he didn't go have just come to light through the discovery of his last known letter: he postponed his departure on account of a new lover, nineteen-year-old Juan Ramírez de Lucas, whom he refused to leave behind. Ramírez wasn't old enough to make the trans-Atlantic trip without parental permission, and Lorca, his judgment apparently blinded by love, insisted that his young lover secure his father's blessing first, while securing false travel documents would have been a far surer bet.

Margarita Xirgu's name is all over Ian Gibson's biography of Lorca, but we never learn of Margarita's own love affairs. Gibson only mentions her husband-manager Miguel Ortín. Yet Xirgu was a known lesbian, a leading light, along with Lorca, in the gay demimonde of her day. When right-wing thugs interrupted the premiere of *Yerma* in Madrid, they were scandalized more by the homosexual proclivities and associations of its author and star than by the play's audacious content. They shouted "Lesbian!" and "Queer!" from the upper gallery.

Lorca did not follow Xirgu to Mexico as he promised he would, but it turns out someone else did. A woman famous in her own time but completely forgotten today, Irene Polo was a self-educated Catalan writer who, with her sharp wit, left-wing politics, and defiant nature, developed a new kind of "street journalism." She was well established in her career when, in January 1936, she happened to conduct a newspaper interview with the great actress who was just celebrating a successful run of *Doña Rosita* in the Teatro Principal Palace de Barcelona. Only days later, Irene abandoned her comfortable Catalan lifestyle and her flourishing career as a journalist and joined Xirgu's theater troupe on its sea voyage to the Americas. Those who knew her said she could only have done that for love. She happened to get out of Spain just fifteen days before the elections that would alter her country's destiny forever.

After the curtain came down on the theater tour, Irene went to live with Margarita in Chile, but it seems to have been a great love in one direction only. In 1941, as fascism spread across the globe, the 32-year old Irene Polo committed suicide by jumping out of a window. She left no note.

If I am troubled by the disappearance of Irene Polo and other lesbian writers into the mists of history—women I never knew—how must it be for the millions of people whose blood relatives, parents and grandparents, disappeared? If I am inexplicably comforted by the existence of a Jewish cemetery that I can't find, full of the bones of people I didn't know, as I try to make myself feel at home in a Catholic country, how dis-comforted are the millions for whom this is their home, for whom the vanished are their family? Federico García Lorca's highly contested exhumation yielded nothing, so is that where the story ends? The *desaparecidos* may be lost, missing, or invisible, yet there's no pretending that those unmarked mass graves aren't just below the surface of the increasingly parched Spanish earth.



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