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An olive branch for their wounds

As Spain basks in the world spotlight next year, the publication of a symbolic Bible will act as a peace gesture to the country's Jews, James Woodall writes

Fiesta 1992: the celebratory allure of 1492 for Spain is irresistible. Five hundred years on, the country that discovered the Americas is shaping up for a party of gigantic proportions. Not since the heady days of its vast, treasure-plundering empire has Spain exhibited such strident self-confidence. In 1992, that hot, colourful, reluctantly European southern peninsula is back on the world stage, with Barcelona hosting the Olympics, Seville bringing us Expo 92 and Madrid taking on the title of European Capital of Culture.

An advance fillip for all this festive Hispanism came with Madrid's recent hosting of the Arab-Israeli peace talks. The event itself was remarkable enough. The fact that it was in Madrid had a vibrant historical resonance that went curiously unnoticed at the time: Spain was the last country in the world where Jews and Arabs lived together in peace, mutual harmony and creative accord. They did so from 711AD, for almost 800 years, under the aegis of the Moors, whose caliphates and kingdoms waxed and waned in al-Andalus, the area of Spain which became Andalusia. In the last flowering of a pre-renaissance Semitic civilisation, Islam, Judaism and Christianity all flourished side by side in a spirit of tolerance that seems unimaginable in today's Middle Eastern climate.

For the Jews and the Moors, 1492 was a bad year. The warrior kings of the Spanish Reconquest had for centuries before been in hot pursuit of the recovery of the country for their rule and their (Christian) church. Ferdinand and Isabella, the "Catholic monarchs", fulfilled that aim with the capture of Moorish Granada in January 1492. They also wanted the Jews and, to a lesser extent, the Muslims (there were fewer of them) out. Within two months of their victory, and just before signing a contract of discovery with Columbus, they issued their first lethal, racist decree: the expulsion of all Jews from Spain, or the option of conversion. The exact date was March 31, 1492. Columbus set sail four months later.

The Inquisition was already in full swing. This formidably successful institution, endorsed by the Vatican as early as 1483, was to hold sway over Spanish religious life for three centuries — and even as late as the 19th century it had not quite burnt itself out. The result of the violent anti-Semitism that had first flared across Spain in 1391, and again in the mid-15th century, the Inquisition was in its opening decades the single most powerful effective weapon of persecution of Jews until the nazi death camps.

In an uncomfortable irony for

20th-century Jewry, neutral Spain was the one place in Hitler's Europe where Jews from all over the Continent could seek refuge from the Holocaust. General Franco, the dictator whom Hitler had vainly wooed in 1940, and who was fond of harking back to the Catholic monarchs as peerless, even saintly, exemplars of the essence of Spanish order, let quite a number in. What he never did, however, was reverse the fateful edict of his hero and heroine, Ferdinand and Isabella. That has been left to Spain's present ruler, King Juan Carlos, the Catholic monarchs' descendant.

On March 31 next year, 500 years to the day after the decree expelling the Jews from Spain, Juan Carlos will visit the Madrid synagogue in calle Balmés, inaugurated in 1968, and publicly revoke the anti-Jewish laws laid down by his ancestors. It will be one of the most significant acts undertaken by a post-war European monarch, a symbolic offering of the olive branch to the race which was integral to Spain's medieval cultural and mercantile buoyancy.

For Spanish Jews everywhere — the Sephardim, as they are called — it will be seen as an open royal apology for the mistakes of the king's forefathers. For a century after the Inquisition was abolished in 1834, some attempts were made to accommodate Sephardim if they wished to live in Spain. In 1978, when the post-Franco Spanish constitution enshrined religious freedom as an inalienable right for its citizens in a newly democratic, secular state, Jews were as welcome to be themselves in Spain as Muslims, Protestants, Mormons or Hindus. Juan Carlos's visit to the Madrid synagogue, however, will be the first official revocation of a thoroughly nasty piece of medieval race discrimination, and will be a sober reminder amid the 1992 festivities that 1492 was not such a stupendous year for Spain after all.

The Sephardim were people of great diligence, making excellent financiers at the courts of the conquering Christian kings, and



taking prominent roles in all walks of life: as poets, philosophers, astronomers, teachers, artisans, and particularly as translators.

It was the latter talent that caught the attention of Don Luis de Guzmán, a high-ranking churchman, in 1422. He commissioned Moses Arragel de Guadalajara, a rabbi, to translate the Hebrew Bible — the Old Testament — into Castilian. The volume was to be inscribed and illuminated by Christian draughtsmen. Arragel was to supply the Jewish annotations for a text aimed at Christian readership. Guzmán's motives were simple: to foster, in an environment of increasingly virulent anti-Semitism, understanding and tolerance between the

Jewish and Christian communities.

The result was one of the most beautiful illuminated manuscripts to survive from medieval Spain. After centuries of safe obscurity in a monastery, during the Inquisition, the Bible passed into the hands of the powerful Spanish family, the Dukes of Alba. Its originator's enlightened hopes had been cruelly dashed: Guzmán died before its completion, and 70 years after he commissioned it the Jews were hounded out of Spain. Today, it is being reproduced in facsimile form as the Alba Bible, in an edition of (coincidentally enough) 500. The first copy will be presented to Juan Carlos on the occasion of his abrogation of the expulsion edict.

For a race that has for millennia expressed itself in symbols, the king's gesture will be much admired by Jews the world over: the Alba Bible is a symbol of this historical wound-healing. Mauricio Hatchwell Toledano, a Spanish industrialist, is doing more than anyone to herald its significance. A Jew of Sephardic descent, he has commissioned and financed the Bible's production by Facsimile Editions, a London-based publisher specialising in Hebrew illuminated texts. His involvement is underscored by his position as president of Sepharad 92, a world organisation of Jews that aims to draw international attention to the Jew-

ish heritage in Spanish culture. "Sepharad has two messages," he says with almost missionary zeal. "One is educational, to point out the Jewish contribution to western civilisation, which was at its most developed in Spain before 1492. The second is to try to cast the light of unity and tolerance on the three great religions. The Alba Bible is one example of the spirit of reconciliation Sepharad believes in."

An issue that Sepharad has had to face is Catholic calls for the beatification of Isabella. Hatchwell is unequivocal on this. "Saintliness and cruelty don't go together," he says. "She may have been a great statesperson, but there is no rational basis for making her a saint." He says that the matter of beatification, although supported at one time by the Vatican, was one engaged in by "certain Latin American churchmen" of Spanish origin rather than by any vocal lobby inside Spain. It must be added that the Pope, on a recent visit to Spain, stated that as far as the Inquisition was concerned, "we made a mistake". Isabella's prospective sainthood is now off the agenda, which drains Juan Carlos's duty next March of any potential embarrassment.

The Alba Bible is a unique document; it weighs 12kg and costs £13,500. Jeremy Schonfield, editor of a companion volume that will analyse the significance of the translation and illuminations, calls it "a laboratory specimen". He admits that the original Alba Bible (now in the palace of the Dukes of Alba in Madrid) failed in its basic intentions — to get Jews and Christians to understand each other better — but maintains that its "ecumenical character", and the fact that it was the first and last book to attempt to cross the religious barrier at a crisis point in history, make it of special relevance to current trends towards reconciliation.

For the 10,000 or so Jews living in Spain today, the Alba Bible might come to represent a kind of Magna Carta, a symbolic enshrinement of their place in the peninsula's turbulent history. When in 1992 Juan Carlos announces that they and all other Sephardim are welcome in Spain, perhaps the Alba Bible, which will provide the backdrop for his dramatic revocation, should contain a small footnote: that the man who has sparked off all this 1992 business, and whom the Catholic kings packed off to America, Columbus himself, was quite likely a Jew. ●



Illuminations: from the Alba Bible, the Tabernacle (above), with Aaron the High Priest officiating; and (left) the story of Jonah



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