

The Vintage Voice

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Semana Santa at Seventy

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In April 2010 my seventieth birthday fell on Easter Day. To celebrate it I proposed going to Seville for Holy Week to see the penitential processions. My indulgent husband agreed. What matter that hotel rates double for the week, and that we would have to make reservations almost a year in advance? Seventy years deserves a bit of penitence.

Processions take place throughout Southern Europe, and in all parts of Spain. But Seville has a reputation for one of the largest and most colorful Holy Week observations, with nine days of processions organized by fifty-two distinctly clad brotherhoods. On Holy Thursday alone, the marchers number 14,500. Add the scent of orange blossoms and gorgeous Moorish style architecture, and the week attracts thousands of visitors joining residents along the routes.

We arrived in the city in comfort and style on Wednesday in Holy Week via a high-speed train down from Madrid. We didn't have to look far to immerse ourselves in the Holy Week experience. Our cab driver stopped about three blocks from our hotel. "Can't go any further. Boom Boom, you understand?" We could hear drum beats, as he pointed in the direction we were to walk with our luggage. As we turned into the Barrio Santa Cruz, we saw a procession of black pointy hoods marching slowly down the street. We ducked into the hotel, put down our luggage, and I dug out the camera.

Back in the street we watched from the crowded sidewalk as hooded and robed figures, carrying four-foot unlit candles, walked slowly by, interspersed with altar boys in red and gold vestments, carrying tall silver candlesticks.

Then came one of the great *pasos* (floats). Its upper portion — Christ on the cross, surrounded by elaborate gilt candelabra and decorated with crimson flowers — rose to the level of the street's balconies, which were draped in crimson cloth and crowded with spectators; its street-level lower portion was a sturdy wooden superstructure curtained in crimson velvet. The whole thing seemed to move by magic. It stopped, and I could see it being lowered onto legs like table legs. The velvet curtain was lifted to reveal the float's machinery: men's legs, arms, shoulders and necks. It was time for the *costaleros* (porters who carry the metric-ton floats), sweaty but joyful, to be relieved for the next lap. A wooden clicker, or *llamador*, signaled that the float was ready to be raised again. Hoisted onto new shoulders, the *paso* went on its way. It was followed by more robed figures in pointy hoods, and then by a float of the Virgin, surrounded by silver candlesticks and white flowers, and clothed in exquisitely embroidered cloth.

The crowd watched reverently. From a balcony, a man's voice started singing a haunting lament with the Arabic tones of flamenco. It was a *saeta*, or an arrow, a prayer offered to the Virgin. No one clapped. The man crossed himself and stepped inside.

We watched as more penitents followed behind. We noticed that some, as indicated by the hands holding the candles, were women, and some, by their height, were children. Somewhat incongruously the procession was completed by vendors of large balloon bouquets of children's figures like Sponge Bob and Hello Kitty.

This procession, like others, began at the parish church that houses the floats throughout the year. It followed a precisely plotted route through the streets to the cathedral. There it entered the cathedral by the front porch, and left by the back gate, emerging into the square where it was greeted with band music. Then the procession retraced its steps back to the neighborhood, walking all through the night.

Throughout the rest of the week I was moved by the Holy Week processions, their arduous physical effort, the artistry of the *pasos*, the sheer number of marchers, and the watching crowds of soberly and elegantly clad women in *mantillas* and high combs, and men in dark suits. But I could not help thinking, as we left our hotel, Las Casas de la Juderia, that Jews once had walked in these streets. Moslems had built the Giralda, the great cathedral's tower. Churches had been built over mosques. Was this a Christian triumphalist march celebrating Ferdinand and Isabella's expulsion of Jews and Moslems in 1492? Or was it perhaps derived from the pre-Christian practice, common through the Mediterranean, of parading the gods out of their temples and into the streets once every year?

I did not repent of my visit to Seville for Holy Week. One of the joys of being seventy is that one realizes that there doesn't have to be one answer or explanation. There can be many reasons for a communal celebration, some of which may seem contradictory. Take the pointy hoods or *capirotas* — perhaps the most iconic aspect of the processions in Seville. To Americans, they can be quite alarming, especially the white ones, which look like the hoods worn by the Ku Klux Klan. To historians, the *capirotas* evoke the Spanish Inquisition — a garment worn by heretics condemned to death. But to me and, I think, most participants, they represent the symbolic march of citizens of Nazareth (or *nazarenos*, as penitents are called in Seville), united in their walk with Jesus and Mary until Easter.

On Easter, my birthday, we rose early hoping to be at the cathedral in time to get a seat for the service. It was not too difficult. In fact, the cathedral — one of the largest in the world — had seats to spare. The Easter service began, strangely enough, with matins, sung in the enclosed choir by elderly priests, like bees in a hive. Prelates and acolytes wandered around after that preparing for the mass in a desultory fashion. But Easter actually seemed an anticlimax. The rituals of the priests could not compete with the solemn witness of thousands of *nazarenos* marching day and night through the streets of Seville alongside Jesus on his journey to the cross.



Sally Hayman, a freelance writer, lives in Seattle with her husband, Bob. Before retirement, Bob was rector of a Church of Ireland parish in Drumcliffe, County Sligo, where W. B. Yeats is buried. Sally was a member of the board of the Yeats Summer School in Sligo. For several years in Seattle, she was art critic for the now defunct *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, and continues to write on art subjects including the essay and commentary for *Thomas T. Wilson, Painter* (University of Washington Press).