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MADRID REVISITED

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THE first time I was in Madrid was before the Spanish Civil War in 1933. I was very young then but my visit to Spain and to Madrid in particular made an indelible impression on my mind for a variety of reasons. First of all, life in the evening began between eleven and midnight and ended in the early hours of the morning. Hours, which Pablo Neruda, the Chilean Nobel prize-winner has rightly suggested ought to be called the late hours of night since it is still dark. What was so striking about the night life of Madrid in those days was that the streets were full of people going to cafes, theatres and other places of pleasure, chatting gaily and, in the case of the better off, admirably dressed and driven by chauffeurs in glittering cars. But to me, brought up in Paris which had no such glittering night life but much less poverty, what was immensely striking was the number of beggars, entire families with women and suckling babes and infants lying on the sidewalk near the exit of theatres and restaurants, covered in rags. Mothers would pinch their infants at the sight of some possible patron so that the begging would be more effective. Spain in those pre-Civil War days was a country of immense inequality. The inequality was somehow more striking, although it must have been far less than what exists in India between rich and poor, because the Indian rich somehow manage to look not all that affluent. What I mean is, for example, that in India even the rich do not drive in huge Cadillacs. On the whole they run around in rather dilapidated cars which may be chauffeur driven but which, to a Western eye, are not a symbol of affluence. They may live in luxurious mansions or flats but in India not only beggars sleep on the streets. Terrible as it may be in places like Calcutta, or even the Bombay I saw on my last visit, not all street sleepers are homeless, some of them may have a "kind" of home, perhaps so inadequate that they feel the street cooler. Moreover, in India the extreme rigours of climate which operate in a city like Madrid do not exist so that sleeping out of doors is practised even by the rich, though of course the rich sleep on a terrace, on a verandah or in their garden if for some reason they do not wish to sleep in an air-conditioned room. In Madrid by contrast only beggars slept on the streets and they were many, especially young children. My memory of the highlights of Madrid's night life which, for a young girl going out late at night for the first time must have dazzling, remain marred by the ghastly sight of all those beggars.

I went back to Madrid in 1973 and found that things had greatly

changed and for the better. The night life had not changed but I saw no beggars and people moved about quite freely, the standard of living had risen considerably in the forty years which separated my first and my second visit to Madrid. Evidence of this rise in the standard of living had become visual. Huge areas which must have been countryside before had become urban and suburban blocks of flats, there were lots of cars — in great contrast to 1933 — and when I visited the new University which has a very large student population I was struck by the fact that there were quite a number of girls and that the girls not only at the university but also in the town went about even in the evening without a chaperone. On the campus the girls tended to keep to themselves somewhat apart from the boys, as used to be the case in, say, Kerala at about the same time. In 1933, however, there may have been some girls at the university but in the three months I spent in Spain I did not meet a single woman university student and girls never went out alone without some suitably aged and repellent chaperone. They even went to the cinema with a chaperone, it was not considered sufficient protection to go in a group. However, when it came to "pasarse", which means walking up and down on the promenade, girls did walk up and down in giggling clusters, but they walked up and down on one side of the pavement while the young men, the 'machos' walked in goggling clusters on the other side, and the promenade was dotted at strategic points with mothers or chaperones who kept a hawk's eye to see that nothing untoward happened. My own experience of the Spain of 1933 was exceedingly traumatic since I had no chaperone (although I was with my parents) and behaved much as I used to in Paris. The result was a considerable number of pinch marks on the more protuberant parts of my anatomy and in sheer desperation I resorted to carrying with me a very long hat pin which I put to good and frequent use. In 1973 hat pins were no longer necessary. However, in 1973 on the university campus where girls did go unchaperoned they still tended to go in clusters and a young and pretty girl on her own, a thing which happened only seldom, automatically made the men's heads turn but no more.

This time Madrid was totally different. In some ways the differences were very much for the better. On the university campus there were almost as many girls as there were boys and there was no sex segregation. Indeed I saw many young couples walking hand in hand, some of them embracing and, what I consider to be more significant, I noticed a number of pretty girls walking on their own without attracting male attention in any way. Also very striking was the universal adoption of blue jeans and the universal sloppiness of youth. In the past Spanish girls used to be exceedingly well-groomed, now they go about with or without make-up, with or without grooming their hair, usually in blue jeans which look as if they are third hand. The only thing Spanish girls have gone in for which makes them look somewhat different from their sisters the world over is that they tend to wear very high stiletto heeled shoes with their jeans and their windcheaters, whereas their equivalent would be more likely to be wearing boots or bumpers.

Another great difference on the credit side between the Madrid of eight years ago and that of today is the emergence of a middle class. My visit to Madrid was so brief that I had no opportunity to corroborate my impresion that there is now for the first time a large and established middle class which will in due course make Spain a European country like any other. My impression was based on the sort of people I saw in the street and in the shops: the way they were dressed, what they were buying during the winter sales and the people I was surrounded by on the few occasions when I left my husband, who was on an official delegation, to go and have a snack in a modest eating place or the kind of restaurant patronised by shop assistants. In 1973 there must obviously have been a middle class but it was much smaller and did not include what one might call the lower middle class; the people who now have become middle class, if my impressions are correct, were then still working class.

So much for the credit side of the change. Against this I was stunned by the change in the pattern of Madrid's night life. I wanted to go to a reading of the poems of Garcia Lorca by a very famous Spanish actress and found to my annoyance that the reading began at 7 p.m., which made it impossible for me to go. Restaurants, specially the smarter ones, did not open until after the theatre even in 1973 so that one began eating at about one or two o'clock at night having of course had a snack at around eleven 'clock before going to the theatre. Now restaurants are full by ten o'clock and by midnight the streets of Madrid are completely deserted even in the centre of town. The reason for this is mugging. On arrival I rang up friends who told me that on no account were we to walk about after dark. When I mentioned that I wanted to go to the reading of Garcia Lorca's poems which, it so happened was not far from the very smart hotel in a very smart part of the town where the Spanish government had booked us, they said it would be all right for me to go out at seven o'clock to the theatre provided I was absolutely sure that I would find a taxi to come back. They themselves have given up going even by taxi to those more 'ethnic' parts of the town which used to be fashionable for their cabarets and their Soho-like atmosphere because of the lawlessness which prevails after dark. I thought that they were exaggerating but they were not. In fact on the two occasions when we found ourselves out after dark the streets were completely empty; by comparison New York's Central Park at night is a little beehive. The explanation I was given for this sudden explosion of lawlessness is the reaction following the departure of Franco. I was not in Madrid long enough to be able to check this explanation but I was told by a number of people that the same lawlessness prevails in other big cities and I did observe for myself that the "lower classes" were making a big show of flaunting their modest origins. For example, the Spanish delegation to whose meetings my husband had been invited consisted of no less than forty delegates and covered all Spanish social classes. At the bottom there were three delegates representing small, impoverished peasants and agricultural labourers. They made a point of attending the meetings and

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receptions unkempt, unshaven and by their aroma I would say unwashed; their clothes were such as to suggest that they had just this moment left some agricultural operation. This, a Spanish friend told me, would have been inconceivable a few years ago because even poor Spaniards possess at least one suit and wear that one suit on formal occasions. Another change which was fairly striking and which I am not sure is for better or worse is that since Franco's death there has been an explosion of mildly pornographic magazines displaying female nudity in the many newspaper kiosks which dot the streets. Why I say that I do not know whether this change is for the better or the worse is that if soft porn has replaced roadside Romeos, a thing I could not check, then give me soft porn any time.

Can you have a real Non-Alignment Conference with nations quite clearly aligned? Is Cuba non-aligned? No, it is a satellite of the Soviet Union, its troops fight in foreign lands at the instructions of the Soviet Union, to serve the purposes of the Soviet Union. Is South Yemen non-aligned? No, it is in effect a colony of the Soviet Union. Is Ethiopia non-aligned? Of course not. But why go further, is Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India, the host country of the current meeting, non-aligned? Of course not. So strongly has she been on the Soviet side that she would not condemn the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia some years ago. Last year she would not condemn the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. Her whole attitude has been ambivalent in the extreme, but by now it is clear she has no objection at all to Afghanistan becoming a part of the Soviet Union, like Turkistan or any other democratic republic, so-called.

To call things by their right names is said the ancients the beginning of understanding. This conference, whatever else it may be, is not and ought not to be termed non-aligned. It may suit these countries or some of these countries to meet together and talk over some problems. Good, let them. But let them not misrepresent themselves as independent, impartial judges of all international problems and mislead their peoples. To busy giddy minds with foreign wars (or conferences) is an old tactic of the politician, but the statesman would far rather solve the domestic problem that occasions the busy mind than take refuge in a hundred such conferences.

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