

The news out of Spain earlier last month that the terrorists linked to the bombing deaths of nearly 200 people on commuter trains on 3.11 might also have had Jewish targets in their bomb sights struck me with more than just a passing interest, even though the story didn't last longer than 24 hours.

I spent the last two weeks of March in Spain on a guided tour and left the country with the uncomfortable feeling that anti-Semitism lurks just below the surface in Spain. Given that the country is 94 percent Roman Catholic and there are so few Jews living there, the Spanish may not even think about such feelings. But as someone who has spent an editing and teaching career parsing language, I detected anti-Semitic subtexts in several cities and towns.

The clearest one occurred while our group was in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid, which includes Camille Pissarro's "Rue St.-Honoré, Après-Midi, Effet de Pluie." This is a piece of art that was supposedly stolen from its Jewish owner by the Nazis and auctioned off, eventually ending up in the hands of Baron Hans Heinrich Thyssen, a collector whose works are included in the museum. But the family that originally owned the painting never relinquished its ownership, a fact acknowledged by the West German government, which paid the family compensation for its suffering and acknowledged the family's ownership.

That's the short version of a story that appeared in the New York Times nearly 15 months ago, a story I had forgotten until our tour guide launched into a defense of how Pissarro's painting had ended up in the hands of Baron Thyssen. The guide's lengthy take on the possession focused on the fact that Jews could not sell their art because of a depressed market and that the Nazis did the right thing and purchased the art as a way of helping the Jews. There's an anti-Semitic version of chutzpah for you.

Even when a Jewish member of our group suggested that the ownership dispute might have some merit, the guide, a self-proclaimed second-generation atheist, dug in and stuck to her story about what a wonderful thing the Thyssens had done in buying the art.

The first time I caught wind of what I would later conclude to be an anti-Semitic undercurrent throughout Spain was in Barcelona when my wife and I attended an anti-war/anti-terrorism march. Various groups, such as Greenpeace and different unions, carried their slogans in the march, many of them opposed to war and terrorism in general.



The poster that first advised us of the march seemed to be against war in general (“Guerra no!” it said), but then singled out its two areas of concern: Iraq and Palestine. We saw similar posters in the march, but not one mentioned Al Qaeda or Hamas or any other terrorist group. There was no mention of violence in the Philippines, oppression in Tibet or genocide in Africa. And so on. In other words, posters that were specific mentioned 3.11, the war in Iraq and/or Palestine as though suicide bombers never killed civilians in, for example, Israel. The European left, one U.S. citizen living in Barcelona told me, is passionately pro-Palestine and virulently anti-Israel.

At this point, it is worth noting that in the late 1400s, the Christians in Spain executed or drove out most Jews and Muslims in what is known as the Spanish Inquisition or Reconquista. Today, the remnants of those two religions are more evident in the architecture and tourist sites than in the daily lives of Spaniards. That in itself should give pause. Tour guides are not only quick to point out the area of town where Jews once lived, it is shown on maps and designated with signs. The long-ago departed Jews of Spain are a tourist attraction today.

We did get to see an old synagogue in the medieval city of Toledo. Its architecture is Moorish, its floor tile has a Star of David motif, and Christian icons appear on the walls. The tour guide there made the point several times: This is no longer a synagogue; it is a museum. In other words, don’t think Jewish, think museum.

All in all, I don’t have any prima facie evidence that Spaniards are any more or less anti-Semitic than any other people. But I was troubled by what I heard and saw and didn’t see. Whether or not terrorists target Jewish sites, Spaniards may need to look deeper into themselves to make sure that ancient actions and current political passions don’t subtly guide modern responses as we all fight the war on all brands of terrorism.

R. Thomas Berner is a Professor emeritus of journalism and American studies at the Pennsylvania State University. He lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.