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Lorca museum opens in city that inspired and killed him

By Gideon Long

GRANADA, Spain, Feb 20 (Reuters) - As dusk fell on August 9 1936, Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca said farewell to his parents and fled their farmhouse on the outskirts of Granada.

A military uprising by General Francisco Franco had plunged Spain into civil war and Lorca, one of the country's leading writers and an outspoken liberal, was in danger.

Ten days later fascist troops hunted him down at a house in the heart of the southern Spanish city, dragged him to a nearby olive grove and shot him dead.

Lorca's killers were never charged, his corpse has never been identified, but his relatives say his spirit lives on at the farmhouse where he last saw his parents, which on February 28 opens as a museum to his memory.

There he passed a decade of summers before his violent death, and there, in Spain's turbulent 1930's, he worked on his best-known plays and poems, "Blood Wedding", "The House of Bernarda Alba" and "Gypsy Romances".

"I'm now at the San Vicente farmhouse," Lorca wrote in one of a series of exuberant letters to friends in the late 1920's. "There's so much jasmine and nightshade in the garden that we all wake up with poetical headaches."

"(I spend) all day here eating exquisite fruit and singing on the swing in the garden with my sisters," he wrote in 1927.

"The farmhouse is a gem of trees and clear water, with Granada spread out in front of my balcony in all its unrivalled beauty," he told another friend in 1928.

These days, the scent of jasmine has faded, the nightshade has withered and the swing has gone.

But Lorca's one surviving sister Isabel clearly remembers the poet's fondness for his family home.

"He loved the place," Isabel Garcia Lorca told Reuters. "I remember him working at his desk upstairs, or tending the plants in the garden. He was always very contemplative.

"You could see the whole city from the balcony, right up to the towers of the Alhambra," said Isabel, now in her 80's and co-director of the Garcia Lorca Foundation with the poet's nephew Manuel Fernandez-Montesinos.

"It was like living in a romance," Fernandez-Montesinos said. "He always felt very much at home there."

But while Lorca loved his oasis on the edge of Granada, his feelings for the city, its people and the provincialism of small-town Spain were mixed.

As the deep-seated ideological divides running through the country began to surface in the years before the war, his tenderness for his native province turned to bitterness.

"(Granada is) a wasteland populated by the worst bourgeoisie in Spain today," he said in the last interview to be published before his murder.

"I express Spain in my work and feel her in the very marrow of my bones, but before this I am a cosmopolitan and a brother to all.

"We must love Granada but in a European context," he said. "Only in this way will we be able to discover our best hidden and most splendid treasures."

Those treasures shine in Lorca's writing, and for many he embodies Spain more profoundly than any other Spanish writer.

Andalucia's landscape, its strict social codes and its traditional music inform his work at every turn. Orange blossom, olive groves, blood-red roses and the sound of guitars recur like talismans throughout his drama and poetry.

"Granada was an source of inspiration for Federico, for its beauty, its history, its architecture, its music, its art and its folklore," explained Fernandez-Montesinos.

"But yes, there was always some antagonism between poet and city. It still exists, but only among a small minority...Granada has always had a reactionary element."

The family has fought to re-establish Lorca's reputation in the city which loves and despises its most famous literary son.

In Granada, the poet was labelled as homosexual as well as a communist sympathiser and while Spanish intellectuals hailed him as their leading light, many people in the city shunned him.

The Lorca Foundation wanted to put a plaque on the site of a house where the writer spent his adolescence but the owners refused, not wishing to be associated with his memory.

Lorca's family sold the modest whitewashed San Vicente farmhouse to the city council a decade ago so they could open it as a museum in 1986 on the 50th anniversary of the writer's death, and they donated manuscripts and memorabilia with it.

But the council showed little enthusiasm for the project, ripping up Lorca's beloved jasmine and planning a grandiose park around the house despite the family's objections.

"It was a mistake to sell the house to the council, but worse than that, we felt we had been tricked...the mayor made promises that the council had no intention of keeping," Fernandez-Montesinos said.

It was not until 1991 that local elections forced a change of mayor and a change of heart. Since then Granada's authorities have worked hand-in-hand with Lorca's relatives towards this month's opening.

The poet's niece Laura Garcia Lorca will direct the museum, which contains manuscripts and drawings by Lorca and fellow poet Rafael Alberti. It also features a sketch by surrealist painter Salvador Dali, a close friend and rumoured lover of the author.

Posters from Lorca's travelling theatre group and the writer's guitar, piano and gramophone are exhibited.

"We want it to be part house and part museum," Fernandez-Montesinos said.
"The house was so like Federico himself. Handsome, tranquil, well-proportioned and yet at the same time not at all pretentious."

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