

Ghent in 1540

Sketch

On scene: narrator (Dirk, standing on the side) and Emperor Charles V (Emilia, sitting in the middle)

Narrator:

Ladies and gentlemen,

The person in front of you is not Emilia Rojo. She represents an historical figure that is very different from Emilia in two ways. First and MOST amazingly, the historical figure never learned to speak Spanish. Secondly and NOT amazingly, his opinions about waging war and about war taxes were very, very different from Emilia's ideas.

I take you back to Ghent in Flanders in the year of our Lord 1500, more precisely February 24, 1500. On that day, a little prince was born in Ghent. There and later during his youth in Mechelen or Malines (between Antwerp and Brussels) he picked up some Flemish-Dutch and even less Latin. His major language became French, the language spoken at the court of his illustrious family. At fourteen, in Brussels, young Charles became Duke of Burgundy, which included most of the Low Countries (i.e. Belgium and the Netherlands). At sixteen, and still in Brussels, he became King of Spain under the name of Charles I. At the age of nineteen his bankers paid for him eight hundred-fifty thousand guilders to the German electors, and on the basis of their financial conscience these electors choose this candidate as Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman German Empire. [electors = Kurfürsten]

His brother-in-law, Francis I of France, did not appreciate that election because he was a candidate himself ... but he did not pay a bribe. Several wars between Charles V and Francis I were the result. This brings us to the year of our Lord 1537 when Francis I attacked the southern area of Artesia in the Low Countries. The governess of the Low Countries, Mary of Hungary, sister of Charles V, asked the States General to collect the sum of 1.200.000 guilders for her brother Charles V to wage war against Francis I. But the City of Ghent

Citizens of Ghent have approached on the scene and declare/shout:

Jan Hellebaut (normally dressed, declaring): The City Council of Ghent has decided that the social problems in the City of Ghent have first priority. Therefore, the City opposes the payment of the war levy.

Mob (poorly dressed, fists high, shouting): No money for war, Kein Geld für Gewalt, Money for the poor, ...

(Citizens of Ghent off)

Narrator:

This bold decision resulted in a series of negotiations, proposals and counterproposals, legal battles, attempts by the governess to seize the money, resistance to those attempts, temporary concessions,

(in the mean time in the background, off scene: shouting, noise of battle, rifle shots, ...) dismissals, arrests, sieges of castles, executions, etc. etc.

(noises are diminishing but not disappearing all together)

Upon the request of the governess, Charles V himself came to Flanders to quell the rebellion. In February 1540 he arrived in Ghent. On his fortieth birthday, on February 24, 1540, he made a strong requisitory against the City of Ghent.

Charles V (sitting, reading a document):

I, Charles, Lord of the Low Countries, Duke of Burgundy, King of Spain, and Emperor of the Holy Roman German Empire;

Confirming the need to defend the country to the invasion of the King of France;

Recalling the levy issued on my behalf by my noble sister Mary of Hungary, governess of the Low Countries;

Taking into account the well-proven disloyalty of the City of Ghent toward its well-loved King;

Having decided and deciding to inflict an appropriate punishment upon the city of Ghent;

Pronounce the following:

- a) the destruction of some of the city-gates and part of the city-walls,
- b) the construction of a Spanish Castle to control the city,
- c) the payment of the war tax plus a fine on top of that,
- d) the execution of twenty-five leaders of the rebellion,
- e) flogging, confiscations, banishments and compulsory pilgrimages to various places in Europe for various individual instigators and accomplices of the rebellion,
- f) the replacement of the democratic election of the City-Council by a system of appointment of citizens loyal to the King,
- g) a procession of repentance through the streets of my beloved City of Ghent.

Narrator:

Among these punishments and humiliations of the city of Ghent, the most famous (or infamous) was the one of that procession of repentance on May 3, 1540.

(Non-speaking parts: noble citizen Jan Hellebaut, normally dressed, is followed by four volunteers in an old white shirt and with a rope around their neck. They walk slowly and humbly on or before the scene.)

The City magistrates, all city employees, thirty notable citizens, the dean of the weavers walked barefooted and dressed in black. Then followed three hundred-eighteen members of small businesses and fifty weavers. The procession was closed by a group of fifty “screamers”, the most clamorous, poorest, and most revolutionary part of the population: they were dressed only in their shirt wearing a hangman’s noose around their neck as symbol that they deserved to be hanged at the gallows. That was the birthday present the famous duke, king and emperor Charles V had demanded from his native City of Ghent.

From that day on till today the inhabitants of Ghent are called “stropdragers”, ‘noose-wearers’. That rebellious nickname made them famous in the Low Countries and stands symbol for the spirit of resistance in our national history.

Dirk Panhuis

(Hirschluch/Berlin, Germany, September 7, 2002)