

Life in Revolutionary Barcelona

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Contents

Part One: The libertarian idea in a modern city	3
The death of Durruti	3
Sons and daughters of the people	4
Libertarian education	5
A time for freedom	6
Defending the social revolution	7
The Politics of Betrayal: Part Two of Life in Revolutionary Barcelona	9
The Collective Economy	10
A Valley in Spain called Jarama	11
Repression and Counterrevolution	13
Into Exile	14

Part One: The libertarian idea in a modern city

Our house in Barcelona, in the Ramblas, conveniently close to the Rialto Cinema, was an ancient, respectable building. It was reconstructed in the late 1800s, on the site of a dwelling that we like to believe was originally from the time of the Romans. It was purchased by my grandfather Mariano on the eve of his wedding to my grandmother Hortencia. Before that his family had rented the house and a small piece of land used as a tannery. For all I know we had lived always in this house. I had a large room near a patio where I kept potted plants. A small fountain adorned the little open area; the birds used it as a drinking fountain and a place to refresh themselves in the hot summer days.

In 1934 our house was raided by the Republican police in the aftermath of the insurrection in Casas Viejas. My father went to jail with many other Catalonian anarchists. It was all part of our family tradition; my grandfather Mariano was a 'freethinker', a code word for an atheist, libertarian and a proponent of "propaganda by the deed." During the great workers strike in 1915 he went to jail. His fierce nationalism, his adamant attitude about the independence of Catalonia, and even Aragon impressed me like a sacred fire that I should keep alive forever. He always talked about bombs, weapons, 'tools', as the group of Pestana and others called pistols and daggers. But I don't think my grandfather actually ever shot anyone. He was busy with his business, the importation of seeds for the farmers of Andalusia, Catalonia and Aragon. He specialized in obtaining seeds from the American Shakers. "They are like us," he explained to me.

The Civil War in Spain seemed to me to have been going on forever. My father left for the Madrid front in 1936. He was incorporated into the Durruti Column, organized in the desperate days of late October when it seemed as though Madrid might fall to the fascists.

The death of Durruti

The first time I felt directly, personally touched by the war was when I heard Radio Catalonia announcing the death of Buenaventura Durruti. It was the 21st of

November 1936. Durruti was an old friend of my family. He often came to dinner and always carried an oversized Parabellum pistol. A large, extravagant weapon, better for field operations than city protection. “Well, it has 21 bullets and it is my way to tell everybody to keep away from me,” he used to explain to my parents in his hard Castillian that was difficult for me to understand. Durruti was from Leon. I spoke Castillian with difficulty. Catalan was my first language.

A few days after Durruti’s death my father came back to Barcelona. He needed instructions from the FAI-CNT [*the Iberian Anarchist Federation in alliance with the anarcho-syndicalist National Confederation of Workers*], and the Generalitat of Catalonia now that Durruti was dead. “We were in the new University City, near one of the battalions of the International Brigades,” my father told us. “The English and Canadians were holding the Science Library building. Durruti was with four friends, when one bullet killed him instantly. His chauffeur thought it was an accident.” But Baltazar Porcel in his book *La Revnelta Pemianente* published in 1975 insinuates that Durruti was assassinated by Communists. There always will be controversy about Durruti’s death.

The funeral of Durruti was attended by almost 250,000 men and women from all over Catalonia and Aragon. After that, Barcelona changed. The civil war became a cruel, confusing episode. There was the enemy we knew: the fascists, Franco, Hitler, Mussolini. And then there was the enemy we could not always identify, the authoritarian marxists, the ‘Cheka’ and his Russian commissars, feared because they lived among us.

Sons and daughters of the people

My father returned to the front. My mother was called to the women’s militia, whose assignment was to guard the buildings that the FAI-CNT needed secured to avoid control of Barcelona by the military and political machine of the Communists.

At the time I was called Talitos’ (Matchstick) and together with other children was supervised in a collective childcare center, organized by families involved in the mobilization for the war. It was staffed by people opposed to violence, including a British Quaker, and several ex-nuns who embraced libertarian principles with great talent. The anarchists’ children distributed among ourselves duties, like cooking, kitchen cleaning, recreation and self-defense with chaotic inefficiency: but it was we who decided! We changed duties almost every day. The socialists and communists tried a vertical organization with pint-sized commissars, salutes with clenched fists and even a minuscule bureaucracy with a secretary general and a treasurer. They tried a trumpet call to announce meals. When the communists ap-

peared with a big portrait of Stalin we hooted them down, we laughed at them. “We are free, you scum.” The little reds caught by surprise complained to the party. An adult showed up. He harangued us, “To win the war we need discipline and order.” We went into direct action. First a strike. Dirty dishes everywhere. The reds had to stop their military duties and clean up. Then we started to cook only for free children. The reds gave up; we all became Hijos del Pueblo. Equality and libertarian communism.

Barcelona’s city hall sent food. Excellent fruit, lentils, rice, milk and poultry. A doctor visited every Monday. The Generalitat of Catalonia had decreed free education for all. That included many adults. Men and women after finishing their jobs attended the different illiteracy night programs. Culture for the people was one of the ardent demands of the FAI-CNT.

Libertarian education

The collective childcare was run as an elementary school. Teachers that had worked in the Ferrer schools were freed from duties in the militia, and given positions in Catalonian schools. Even the *burguesitos* attended. In our school the children organized the curriculum. We hated militarism and religion; art and culture, as Our parents had taught us, were our most intense passions. We sang, we wrote reports on the classics, we acted revolutionary plays and demanded films. Chaplin, American westerns and French melodramas. We wanted history. The Carlistas war, the Napoleonic wars and especially the organizing of the American federation. We were all federalists!

From July 1936 in Catalonia and parts of Aragon the collectivization of the means of production gathered momentum. Years of planning, discussions and dreams came to be tested on the farms, in the industries and especially in running one of the most modern European cities, certainly the most advanced technical capitol of the Iberic Peninsula. Catalonia was an autonomous society ready to try cooperation and mutual aid.

We traveled all around Barcelona. Transportation was free, so we went to factories to be near the workers and learn how to run machines. We went to farms to see the land reform. We visited museums. Gaudi’s *Sagrada Familia* we disdained. In those excursions we carried vouchers that were honored in many restaurants that were part of the collectivized food industry. After we went to see “Swan Lake,” I demanded dance classes. My friend Libertad, who loved Jean Gabin, organized a petition for sex education. The socialists and the communists were opposed. Some parents came to protest, “It will encourage promiscuity,” and they talked about “family values.” The reds quoted Stalin about the sanctity of the Family and in

strange alliance with the Catholics denounced our interest as pornography in the schools. It was part of the Communist policy to be nice to the middle classes. A boy, Carlos Lizarraga, son of a Communist politician, piously, requested morning prayers, “for our heroes at the front.” He was embarrassed. Still blushing, he was given an education in war strategy, weapons, and tactics. “Who wins does not depend on God, or the Virgin, you ass.” We were scathing. When Carlos tried to explain: “My father told me I could go to the workers’ paradise, to the Soviet Union,” we enlightened him about the dictatorship, the trials in Moscow and the murders of the old Bolsheviks. He never came back to our school. I saw him in the May 1st parade, in his uniform as a Pioneer. I was dressed as an American Indian. My face and chest painted in red, white and black, my tribal colors. I had an “eagle feathers” war bonnet and brandished a ‘tomahawk’. My friend Libertad was dressed as a French revolutionary, with a pike and a black flag.

Finally it was decided that sex education would be a course with voluntary attendance. All the children attended! They even brought their friends from other schools.

Sex education turned out to be classes in sexual ethics, birth control, sexual violence with specific condemnation of rape and incest. To the delight of the ex-nuns there was a romantic defense of free love. “No state, no church can rule in our hearts and bodies.” Some enthusiastic girls designed a big poster, “Menstruation is freedom and a privilege of women.” Federica Montseny, an anarchist proponent of freedom for women, visited the school. She gave us chocolate bars, a gift from the French syndicalists; we gave her songs and flowers.

In Catalonia, as in the rest of Spain, syphilis and other venereal diseases were a curse on the working class. Women of all classes joined the clubs of the FAI-CNT to be educated about this horror that destroyed the lives of so many of the people, especially the poor. The church had a heavy blame for ignoring the plight of women infected by husbands and boyfriends.

A time for freedom

When not in school I was confined to the house. The neighbors were alert to any attack by the fascist “fifth column.” There was fear that the Communists, too, might kidnap members of the POUM [*the Workers Party of Marxist Unification, allied with the revolutionary anarchists*], or anarchists.

At home, in our little patio I cultivated geraniums and had a cat, Rataplan, a real anarchist. He accepted his food in exchange for chasing mice. When I had finished my school assignments we could play. We would play cat and mouse. I was always the mouse. The cat was a fearless enemy of mice and planes. When the

air raids started, Rataplan would stalk about menacingly in the patio, watching for the planes. I was so proud of my Rataplan, heroic and elegant in the face of death.

My mother, after twelve hours of militia duty in the Telefonica, came home, put away here rifle, pistol and ammunition in the kitchen. Then after she took a long bath we could go out. To visit friends and to hear news from the Madrid front, where my father was still on duty.

Food was adequate and kept inexpensive by the cooperatives of farmers that were encouraged to open markets all over Barcelona. We could go shopping and get our basic supplies. Still I craved sweets, and my mother wanted meat for soups and stews. But we had music, the radio and the workers classical orchestra, organized by Pablo Casals. Popular theater was offered in open parks, especially the Spanish classics. Air raids were still sporadic, but the press warned to be careful about cinemas. The Nazis and Italian bombers had maps of Barcelona, with details about theaters and cinemas.

Defending the social revolution

We were very much aware of the intentions of the politicians in Madrid to stop the collectivization of the economy of Catalonia and Aragon. My father was angry with a tendency of the CNT to compromise and turn all our attention to the war. “We will lose both the war and revolution. The middle classes won’t fight for a libertarian society.” So it was better to create a strong people’s control and make of Catalonia a nation that could resist the fascists, until the oncoming European war started, and we could make alliances with France and England.

The dispute came to a confrontation. The government in Madrid and the Communists decided to have a showdown. Hundreds of ‘Chequistas’ descended on Catalonia. Murders of POUM members and anarchists started. Clandestine jails and cemeteries were controlled by the Communists.

On May 3rd of 1937 things exploded in street clashes. Our militia was mobilized. I was told to report to a column of children to help with messages, carry ammunition and serve as look-outs. My friend Coco Puig was in charge of passing orders from the FAI-CNT command post to the combat units. Pilar Palou, my classmate, was with her father, guarding with a machine-gun the offices of the CNT newspaper *Solidaridad Obrera*. Later in exile in France Pilar became a classical pianist.

I was given a whistle and sent to the belfry of a half burned church tower. I could hear heavy machine-gun fire in nearby areas but nothing moving against the building of the Telefonica, where my mother was. The night was cold. I had a military blanket and a wool sailor’s hat. A girl came with ham and bread and bottles of French strawberry soda. She had a revolver. “You need a gun?” she asked me.

“Yes, better a machine-gun. From here I can wipe out a regiment,” I responded. She smiled, “Let me see what I can do,” and she went down by the blackened stones of the old church.

About three in the morning I was munching my ham and bread when I saw some metallic reflections under the weak light of a lamp post. “The *Guardia de Asalto*,” I thought. Covering my face I looked again. Now I could see civilians with Russian machine-guns. Those funny looking things on wheels. I reacted like a madman. I blew my whistle, rushed down the tower, screaming, “They are coming...to arms...to arms!” Desperately I looked for a weapon, but I was told to shut up and cover my ass. Men and women started to shoot at the shadows. A young woman, with a canvas apron full of hand grenades slipped out from the church in the direction of the attacker; soon we heard and saw her efficient work. She blew up a machine-gun and terrorized the civilians. She came back smiling. We roared with pride. My voice was drowned in the confusion, but still I was screaming, “death to the fascists.” A burly man pushed me behind a wall. To calm me down he gave me a revolver-without bullets. But I kept on mouthing and shouting. “Bang...bang. Boom. There, you bastard, I got you!” Across the street, from the Telefonica came out a methodical professional gunfire. Rifle shots, machine-gun barrage. Grenades poured down like a metal rain over the attacker. All this lasted a couple of days. Several floors of the Telefonica were occupied by troops on orders from Eusebio Rodriguez Salas of the PSUC [*the Communist-controlled United Socialist Party of Catalonia*]. A few FAI-CNT battalions rushed from the Aragon front to help us. The Libertarian Youth was all over Barcelona in lorries distributing arms and food.

Barricades in the streets were erected in a few hours. George Orwell would comment: “The building of these barricades was a strange and wonderful sight.” In the Plaza de Catalunya, near the Hotel Colon there was heavy combat. Orwell would write about it too. We had repelled temporarily the attempt to undermine the collectivization in Catalonia and Aragon. Madrid sent emissaries. We sent Premier Tarradellas. Azana was angry and disappointed. The Communist newspaper called the May events a plot. The ‘Cheka’ continued its macabre task on the POUM.

When I came back home, a “veteran of war,” I explained to Rataplan, “I did my duty with honor. I served the people.” The cat, seated with his front paws very close together, looking arrogant and critical, probably confirmed his opinion of me. I was some kind of madman, like the others.

The Politics of Betrayal: Part Two of Life in Revolutionary Barcelona

Although the events in May had rattled the nerves of the FAI-CNT,¹ the movement toward the collectivization of the economy of Catalonia and Aragon continued to develop in 1937. It was the result of many years of study, indoctrination and the power of the people in arms. The Republic since 1931 had done very little to transform Spain into a modern society. The Communists' most immediate concern was to uphold the interests of the Soviet Union. The Comintern line of the Popular Front had some electoral successes in Spain, France, Chile and, in a minor role, in the U.S.A. But as a force for social and political change it was obvious: the Comintern was nothing more than an extension of the foreign policy of the USSR. A shocking revelation was Stalin's support for the hoodlums of Chiang Kaishek and his mafia in the Kuomintang, although there were among the International Brigades several Chinese volunteers, recruited in France. As fate would have it, at this same moment in history Mao and his Liberation Army were in the middle of the Long March.

At my age, though, I was more interested in the military operations in Spain than in world politics and economic dynamics. I hung two maps on the wall of my room. One of Spain and another of Catalonia-Aragon. Pins with miniature red and black flags covered "our territory." The fascists were yellow arrows. All the south of Spain was yellow.

My mother was still grieving the murder of Federico Garcia Lorca in Granada. During the early years of "La Carreta," the roving theater company organized by Lorca, she had worked as a stage hand and a puppeteer.

My father visited us whenever he had a furlough, or when called back into Barcelona by the FAI-CNT. "Ah! it is so good to be here," he used to exclaim. "There is still the joy of an equalitarian society, and optimistic vision of the future. In Madrid all is salutes, militarism, intrigues and politics. Goddamned politicians! Even some anarchists who should know better are in the Cabinet now!" He was referring to the inclusion in the Catalonian government of a CNT trio, Francisco

¹ The FAI-CNT was the Iberian Anarchist Federation in alliance with the anarcho-syndicalist National Confederation of Workers.

Isgleas, Diego Santillan, and Pedro Herrera. The participation of the CNT people was severely criticized among the FAI cadres. The POUM² was excluded from any position in the government.

Of course my father's indignation was rather disingenuous. The CNT had compromised its integrity by participating in the Republican government of Premier Largo Caballero, the so-called "Lenin of Spain." Juan Lopez, Juan Peiro, Federica Montseny and Juan Garcia Oliver, people of long libertarian tradition, succumbed to the imperatives of the civil war. They got a bitter disappointment when they realized that Largo Caballero's inclusion of the CNT in his cabinet was a ploy to cover up the cowardly and precipitous escape of the Republican government from Madrid to Valencia. The Republicans, experts in political ambushes and chicanery, used the presence of the CNT to prevent the creation of a federalist libertarian republic they though might be installed in retaliation for their embarrassing galloping. Later the Communists manipulated the resignation of the CNT. And of course they kicked out Largo Caballero and brought in Negrin.

The Collective Economy

My father's feelings about the climate of solidarity and the temporary abolition of class animosity was due to the energetic implementation of the anarchists' program for the collective economy. Many industrialists decided to stay in their enterprises and continue production under the workers' control. Many years later, historians like Hugh Thomas and Ronald Frazer would note that the industrial output of Catalonia lost very few hours of production under the collectivized system.

But where the collectivization was most successful and created a true climate for social justice was in the agriculture of Catalonia and Aragon. Ironically, to the later chagrin of the Communists the decree of October 7 of 1936 issued by Communist Minister of Agriculture Vicente Uribe gave legal basis for the peasant unions of the CNT and UGT³ to expropriate the land. Literally hundreds of years of exploitation and misery were erased by the insurgency of the peasants in arms. Dozens of small towns *and* villages were in control of committees of share-croppers and itinerant farm workers. Once the priests and the landowners were expelled or executed all kind of experiments started, blueprints for a new society. Marriages were recorded by the husbands and wives themselves. The mayor and civil register clerk as representative of the State were eliminated. Money was abolished and in many

² The POUM was the Workers Party of Marxist Unification, a small revolutionary anti-Bolshevik party allied with the revolutionary anarchists.

³ The UGT was the Socialist-controlled General Union of Workers, a non-libertarian and less radical rival of the anarcho-sindicalist CNT.

cases there were a large number of vouchers, local “people’s Pesetas,” that were accepted for all the essentials of everyday life. A friend of mine, a young refugee from Zaragoza, had a handful of “proletarian money.” We decided to try it in a cooperative shop to buy molasses and stalks of sugar cane. To my surprise it was gladly accepted. The shopkeeper had business with the village that issued the revolutionary currency. But we were politely turned down when we offered to pay for our cinema tickets with the symbol of the rural revolution.

Although salaries still were basically the only income of the Catalonian working class, their standard of living went beyond their income. New benefits were implemented like free education, health insurance, and for the first time in Spain a system to compensate for industrial accidents, including death benefits for widows and orphans.

A Valley in Spain called Jarama

On November the 7th of 1936 frontal assault of the fascists to cap Madrid was defeated. I moved my and black flags a few inches away i Madrid. The Republic decided to counterattack to avoid cutting off the capital from the rest of Spain, especially from Valencia where the government moved.

The arrival of arms from the Si Union, the formation of the International Brigades and the highly motivated militias of the UGT and the CNT b up a powerful military force that w be used by the council of defense Madrid. Two professional army i Rojo and Miaja, gave the necessary technical advice to the People’s Army.

Although the fascists had been repelled in the streets of Madrid, capitol was still in danger. Franco’s artillery reached most of the city, and of course the Nazi and Italian planes bombed the civilian population almost daily.

It was decided to attack the fascists in the area near the Valencia highway. Battalions were assigned to specific objectives near Casa de Campo and Jara-ma. At that time the volunteers of many nations were positioned in ways to strengthen the young Spaniard recruits and the rather green workers’ militias. The Europeans had military experience, especially the Austrians, Poles and Germans. But the Americans were still in training. They called themselves the Lincoln Battalion, under the command of Robert Merriman, a young professor from the University of California at Berkeley.

On February 17th Merriman was alerted to be ready to go into battle. He had time only to train his men in the use of their rifles. The weather was miserable; rain pelted the young volunteers. It was freezing cold. The Americans were moved closer to the front in trucks. Slowly they moved near enough to hear the din of combat. The Americans together with the British and Canadians were assigned to the

counterattack of the Loyalists. In charge of planning the operation were General Gal and Colonel Vladimir Copic, a couple of Soviet mercenaries. Merriman was told his attack would be supported by artillery, tanks and the 24th Brigade of the regular Spanish Army. But behind the military plan, was one of those Byzantine plots, probably concocted by Andre Marty, the paranoid head of the International Brigades, a soul brother of Stalin. "Copic disliked Bob," remembered Marion Merriman, wife of the American Commander, "Copic was arrogant, stubborn and politically immature. I disliked him intensely. He was a prima donna of a soldier. He strutted around in high polished boots, wore a pistol on his hip, carried map and binocular cases." Besides the animosity of Marty, and probably Stalin, toward the Americans, Merriman was not a Communist. Commander Bob Merriman would later disappear on the Aragon front, under strange circumstances.

The battle had been going on for ten days when the Americans were ordered to move. The promised support never arrived. Copic insisted on the attack; Merriman was awaiting the support of planes and tanks. He had serious doubts about the military expertise of Gal and Copic, but was pushed by the presence of several British officers with direct instructions to proceed with the attack. Amid contradictory orders the Americans were sent to the battlefield.

Several months later my father related the disaster to a group of Catalonians. I was reading *Catalunya* a newspaper in Catalan. Castillian was still hard for me. "Palitos, come here you have to learn this," said my father while narrating the plot against the Americans. "And to the attack they went. Oh! the gallant boys. They attacked the enemy. They charged with bayonets and grenades. They confronted death singing songs of freedom, and died with their fists high in a last gesture of defiance, certain of the final victory." My father knew the price of all that gallantry. Of about 450 Americans, 160 were killed. Bob Merriman was wounded. Gal and Copic escaped behind the lines. In a final irony, they were recalled to Moscow and shot. After World War Two Marty was expelled from the French Communist party.

A few years later in France I found a collection of songs from the Spanish Civil War. Among them there was a remembrance of Jarama.

*"There's a valley in Spain called Jarama
It's a place we all know" too well
For 'twas there that we wasted our manhood,
And most of our old age as well"*

The music was "Red River," an old "old west" American tune.

In March of 1937 a new offensive on Madrid was initiated by the Italian fascists. They based the attack in Guadalajara, about 25 miles from the Capital. This time the

fascists confronted the 14th division, along with other shock troops of the Republic. Cipriano Mera was the CNT commander of the central forces. A great organizer, disdainful of the military 'experts' and wise to the tricks of the Communists, he announced that his troops would decide the moment of attack, He wanted to avoid another carnage like Jarama. When Mera saw the Russian tanks advancing and Lister and El Campesino launching their attacks, the anarchists in an irresistible charge terrorized the Italians.

Many anti-fascist Italians, anarchists and socialists, fought in Guadalajara, among them Pietro Nenni, future Prime Minister of Italy.

Repression and Counterrevolution

By June of 1937 the NKVD-prede-cessor of the Russian KGB-had moved in force into Barcelona.. June 16 Andres Nin was arrested and moved to a secret jail in Madrid. On instructions of Stalin he was asked to 'confess' crimes and to be a fascist agent. Tortured to death, his body was never found. After Nin most of the leadership of the POUM was jailed, executed or forced into exile.

George Orwell, a member of the POUM militia, barely escaped arrest and had to leave Spain. His book *Homage to Catalonia* was one of the first to denounce the Communists' role in the betrayal of the Spanish revolution.

Among my parents' friends and the FAI-CNT a wave of indignation helped mobilize militias, the press and international public opinion against the crimes in Catalonia. I heard about the murder of Camillo Berneri, an Italian anarchist philosopher; he was arrested in a hotel, taken to the subway near Lacayetana and gunned down. A few days later in the Urquinaoa Square a boy, grandson of the anarchist educator Francisco Ferrer, was murdered. A friend of my father, Domingo Ascaso, brother of Paco, a Commander in the Madrid front, was killed in jail. The most terrible crime of those days was the execution of about thirty members of the Libertarian Youth. They were shot at the Moncada cemetery, and left in an open grave.

The central government in Valencia not only wanted to stop the collectivization, but also to comply with the directives of Stalin to annihilate the Trotskyites. It was part of the price exacted from Spain for the military aid. The gold reserves of the country went to the Soviet Union.

The militias were abolished and many battalions incorporated into the People's Army. Women were not permitted on the battlefield. My mother stayed at home now; she hid her rifle, pistol and ammunition.

The government moved to Barcelona at the end of 1937. In March of 1938, Barcelona was bombed by German and Italian planes.

By the middle of 1938 a negotiated peace agreement, in which the Republic could either save territory or be part of a transition government, was the most we could hope for. The animosity between the central government and autonomous regions of Catalonia and Aragon was deepening, mostly on the issue of a strategy to end the war.

The western democracies, already alarmed by the presence of the Red Army in Spain, were now repelled by the repression and the assassinations of the leaders of the POUM.

Still all during 1937–38 the Republic confronted the superior forces of Franco, the Moroccan mercenaries and its other allies, the Nazis and Italian fascists, in a series of battles: Brunete, Belchite, Teruel in which the flower of the Spanish working class was decimated. All Republican offensives had to stop due to the lack of ammunition, planes and tanks. The Soviet Union doled out its military aid on the exaction of political payment: atrocities against the opposition to Stalin.

The last offensive in the Ebro cost the lives of about 18,000 Loyalists. The battle was fought between July and September 1938. It too failed for lack of war *materiel*.

The trials of the old Bolsheviks had started in Moscow. Hitler and Stalin were soon to seal their friendship in a pact. Negrin decided to appease the western democracies by removing the International Brigades from Spain. He hoped this would pressure the Nazis and Italian fascists to stop their intervention. Barcelona gave an emotional farewell to the Internationalists. On November 15 of 1938, in a last parade through the streets of Barcelona, under the colors of many nations the volunteers left Spain. But not all. About 6,000 Germans, Austrian, Czechs and other men without a country to return to stayed to “die in Barcelona.” I made an entry in my diary. “Went to say good bye to the I.B.’s. Threw geraniums. I went with Libertad.”

Libertad was my friend. We shared a passion for cinema and American jazz. We satisfied our addictions with French movies and the radio transmissions of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Django Reinhardt. We also managed to collect phonograph records. Eventually we accumulated about a hundred 78s. My parents’ tastes were toward Stravinsky and Flamenco, and they frequently demanded I tone down the record player.

Into Exile

I lost all interest in the conflict when I realized we had lost the war and the revolution, just as my father had predicted. I folded my maps and replaced them with photos of jazzmen and Libertad and me in the Ramblas, on the beach and in the May 1st parade.

The childcare center had now become a refuge for many adults who were disgusted by the repression in Barcelona and who wanted to dedicate time and effort to their families. My mother was seriously involved in the theatrical activities of the center. My father was moved to the front of Aragon, a rather quiet area but soon to explode in the final offensive of General Yagüe, the fanatical Catholic ally of Franco. Barcelona, my city, would fall to the fascists at the end of January of 1939. The revenge on Catalonia was horrific. In the first week of occupation the fascists executed over 10,000 men and women. Mostly anarchists.

Quietly my parents decided to go into exile in France and then to Latin America where we had relatives. Other anarchists, writers and intellectuals, already on the death list of Franco and the Communists, agreed to a plan to escape.

But before leaving, the people in the childcare collective decided to offer a program never to be forgotten. For a couple of weeks, while our curiosity reached a rare level of expectation, my mother and other puppeteers were rehearsing, writing and trying voices. A finely handcrafted array of puppets was created out of vats of papier-mache. Collections of miniature weapons, lances and swords were accumulated.

On a certain Saturday a neatly printed program announced the presentation of a four-act production of Hamlet. The program included a summary of the plot, and notes about the lights and stage. The stage was new and the technical accomplishments were an achievement of great pride.

About two in the afternoon people started to arrive. All the puppeteers and voices were already out of sight. We children were given the front rows. We could almost touch the mystery and excitement. After a short musical introduction, performed on two guitars and a drum, the hall was darkened and simultaneously the stage was illuminated, provoking exclamations. Soft white lights, subtle colors and contrasting shadows enhanced the proscenium.

And very slowly, as though moved by a breeze, the curtains opened to reveal the castle of Elsinore. The audience was mesmerized when amid the thinnest of bluish veils the ghost of Hamlet's father appeared above the esplanade. We were caught up in the illusion of the supernatural. Hamlet, that solemn, neurotic Prince of Denmark, revealed himself a revolutionary hero, a defender of the people, a challenger of hedonistic and venal rulers. But this Hamlet too gradually convinced us of his love for Ophelia and we were drawn into the inexorable perfidy of the politicians who would betray both of them.

Gertrude the Queen, sensual of voice, elegant of movement and so fascinatingly ambivalent, so enraging to Hamlet. The King, never a doubt in him, lustful, crude, voracious for wine and food. We children relished his jokes and jeered at Hamlet's brattish ripostes.

Every nuance and sarcasm was enhanced to our intense delight. In Polon-ious, idiotic, sentimental, senile we recognized the delusions of the European middle classes: the same platitudes, the same wisdom of selfish individualism we had been brought up to despise. When *Hamlet* is asked by Polonious “What are you reading, my lord.” He answers: “Words, words, words.” We roared and screamed with pleasure. “My lord” was one of the many nicknames given to the President of the Republic, Azana, an erudite, but pompous and overblown orator. “Words, words, words” was how we ridiculed his speeches. The casual killing of Polonious symbolized our contempt for the bourgeoisie.

The puppets were magically alive. Such ease, such individuality. The soliloquy was recited as the inner metaphysics of anarchism, our contradictions and concerns with moral issues. We children and adults alike were immersed in the anguish of this hero puppet, dressed in black, a fragile reminder of our own pain at the threshold of exile. For all of us in that moment it was our truth: “...to be or not to be?” We all had our answer. I, too. I wanted to be. I wanted to love.

The tension grew unbearable. Then, surprise, there was an intermission. The children ran to get snacks of bread and molasses. I had to look behind the stage. My mother was exhausted. She waved and threw me a kiss.

We rushed back to our seats. This time my friend Libertad was next to me. Now we were back in the conspiracy, the malevolence, the deals. But Hamlet, the good tribune, noble, generous, proclaimed justice and revolution. Horatio cried out the moral conscience of the people. Now we hated the King, he had to die.

When the final duel came, we screamed ferociously for Hamlet. The clash of the swords was real, sparks jumped between the duelists. The voices were excited, full of power.

A cry of horror arose when Hamlet was stabbed with the poisoned sword. “Treason – treason,” we shouted. “He’s faking...he has to get up...come on!... fight back, kill the bastards!” Slowly Hamlet died in the arms of Horatio, although he had time to exhort everybody to the barricades and overthrow the monarchy.

Our little puppets. How passionately they had loved. How nobly they had died, even as their little bodies convulsed with pain.

The final scene mobilized the people. Union banners, miniature cannons, signs proclaiming workers’ unity, a contingent of FAI-CNT and, finally, Hamlet, covered by a red and black flag. We children stood up, we raised our arms and clenched our fists high above our heads. It was a furious, solemn homage to the hero of the people.

In December 1937 the childcare closed. The ex-nuns, through the influence of the Quakers, were given asylum in England. Many children were sent to Sweden. Nobody in our center wanted to send their sons and daughters to the Soviet Union.

My parents told me, "We stay together. To the end. We live or die, but we stay together!"

The "fifth column," automobiles with armed fascists, started to roam Barcelona, shooting people, attacking unions and offices of the leftist press. Priests again were seen lurking here and there around Barcelona.

I invited Libertad to tea in my house. She came with a jar of plum jam. My mother made us tea and served some cakes made of rice flour. Then we played records. We sang along to Ellington lyrics and cried to "Solitude." When Armstrong sang "I can't give you anything but love," we held hands and knew much about love. Rataplan, my cat came to play with us, and bestowed his favors with unusual impartiality. We went out to the patio. The weather was already cold. My plants were ready for hibernation. Some swallows, flying low, made passes over our heads. Night was coming and we knew we had only a little while to say good-bye.

Libertad's father arrived to escort her home. The streets were dangerous now. He had a pistol under his arm in a sling like a gangster and a revolver in the pocket of his jacket.

For a last few moments my friend and I were alone together in a corner of the house. "Palitos, don't look so gloomy," she told me. "We are alive, we will survive." Then she kissed me. First on my cheek, then on my lips. I responded the best I could. Her father came to help her with her coat. "See you in France, Palitos," Libertad turned and gave a little wave as she walked out the door.

In the middle of January of 1939 my parents and some other friends managed to capture two G.M. trucks. Everybody carried a weapon. My mother carried her old pistol. We left Barcelona in the dark, at a furious speed. Far away we could hear the rumble of artillery. At every turn of the road we found people moving toward France. The trucks climbed the Pyrenees slowly and with great difficulty. The road was icy, slippery. We walked the final trek to the border with France. The French had stationed Senegalese troops to control the refugees. I liked the guards with their black faces and red colonial kepis. An entry in my diary reads: "January 29. We crossed the border. Cold but sunny. Can't walk much, frostbite." Spain was behind us now.

After W.W.II I came back to France to attend university. I met Libertad again. We had survived.

In July of 1986 I returned to Catalonia. It was the 50th anniversary of the Civil War. Barcelona had changed. The infamous Mayor Josep Maria de Por-cioles, a Franco favorite who probably hated Catalonia, had destroyed the most interesting views in the city and left developers from Madrid free to construct modernistic buildings without character or elegance, just simple greed. Industrial slums, blocks of apartments like the sad, grey projects of Moscow, had been erected in a period of twenty years. Franco had managed to degrade Barcelona. So now a plan to restore

the old neighborhoods was in full swing. Our house was still more or less intact, but the street was full of porno shops and 'American' bars. Cars were parked in chaotic clusters everywhere on the sidewalks.

The veterans of the Lincoln Battalion visited some battlefields. I met Steve Nelson, the Commander of the right wing in the attack on Brunete. We took an air conditioned bus looking for the town. It was a hot, dry summer day. Brunete had a new highway, and automobiles of European tourists speeded through at full blast. Steve guided me to the streets where the battle had been the worst, where hundreds of men fell in hand to hand combat. Steve pointed out a field near an old wall. "There is where Oliver Law died." He was the Captain of the Battalion, the first Afro-American to lead white men into battle.

Seated in an open cafe we had French sodas, bread and chorizos. We talked about America, when suddenly Steve said: "You guys," meaning the anarchists, "were so full of fire, so full of passion. You had such a rare nobility. It took me a couple of years in an American jail, the confessions of Kruschev and a broken heart before I finally left the Communist Party. Ah!, but Spain...Bar-celona...the FAI-CNT...that was life. The romance of my youth. Nothing has ever touched it. I would not have missed it for anything in the world."

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