

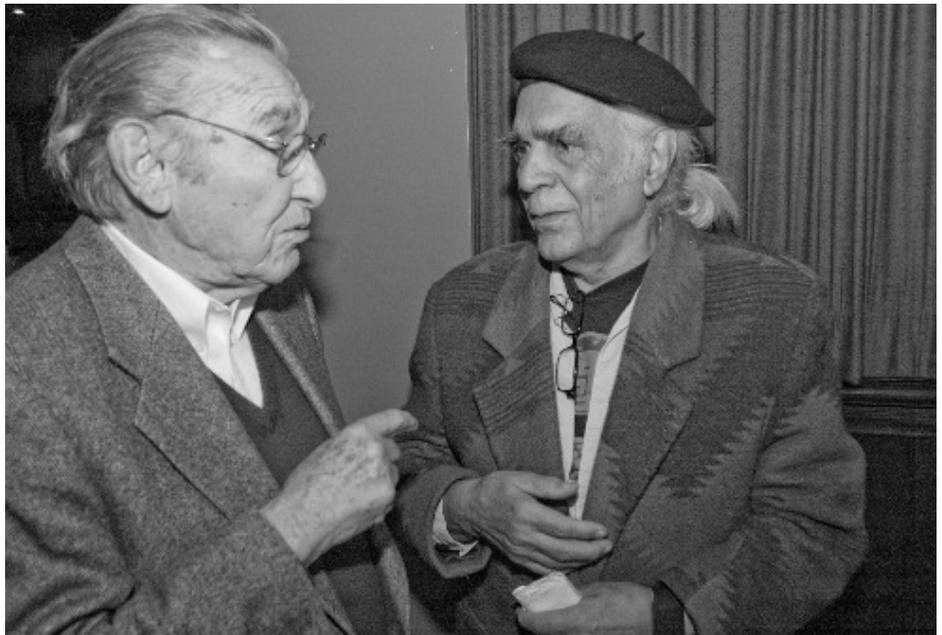
# On the Spanish Exile of 1939:

By Carlos Blanco Aguinaga

**B**etween the fall of 1937, when Franco's troops occupied the Basque Country, and February/March 1939, when they occupied the Mediterranean coast and, finally, Madrid, over 500,000 people left Spain. Some ended up in the Soviet Union and a few in England, but most of us ended up in France, while many of those who had been defending Madrid managed almost miraculously to reach the North African coast from Alicante.

Of the 500,000 refugees, about one third ended up going back to Spain, hoping for the best. But Franco was merciless, and a large number of those who went back, as well as those who had not been able to escape his armies, were jailed and/or shot. As Count Ciano, Italy's ambassador to Franco's Spain, cheerfully reported to Mussolini, by June 1939 tens of thousands had been executed. And in December 1939 there were over a quarter of a million political prisoners in jails and concentration camps all over Spain, while the rest of the population suffered very serious deprivations and persecutions. So by comparison, to be in exile was to be lucky.

Except, of course, that innumerable children were separated from their mothers and their mothers from their husbands, while some 250,000 men who had taken refuge in France or in North Africa were put in concentration camps and soon became so-called "compulsory workers" for the French army and then for the Nazis, who sent many of them to German labor camps, and 7,200 of them were sent to Mauthausen's concentration camp, where about 5,000 of them died.



Carlos Blanco (left) speaking with fellow Spanish exile Ramon Sender at SF reunion. Photo by Richard Bermack.

But several thousands of them joined the French underground or De Gaulles' army, for which they fought in France, in Italy, and even in Norway. And in North Africa, they famously fought in General Leclerc's Second Armored Division, which was later moved to France on D-Day and which, disobeying General Patton's order, directly attacked Paris. And, in fact, it was the Spaniards of Leclerc's 9th Company (popularly called "La Nueve," "The Ninth," commanded by Amado Granell) that first entered Paris on August 25, 1944, waving the Spanish republican flag atop their light tanks named "Brunete," "Guadalajara," "Guernica," "Teruel," "Madrid," or "Don Quijote." And it was members of "La Nueve" who, at the insistence of General Leclerc, led the victory parade along the Champs Elisées.

But even that significant participation in one of the most joyful moments in French history was not enough to

alleviate the plight of the Spanish refugees in France. To be sure, they were now free to move in liberated France, but they lived pretty miserable lives for many years. My maternal uncle Segundo Aguinaga, for instance, survived by collecting trash and selling whatever was salvageable in it until he died in Paris in 1958.

## The more fortunate exiles

Some Spanish refugees were fortunate, in particular the 30,000 or so who ended up in Latin America, and very especially the over 20,000 of us who went to Mexico between 1939 and 1942. No government in the world was ever so friendly and generous to Spanish refugees as the Mexican government (led then by General Lázaro Cárdenas) was with us. But let me remind you of part of the context to this generosity.

During the Civil War only two countries had openly supported the

# Remarks at the S.F. Reunion

Spanish Republic: the Soviet Union and Mexico. And Mexico not only sent food to Spain, but even some war material. This was done mostly by very complicated smuggling procedures in order to fool the Non-Intervention powers (Great Britain and France) that all along were allowing Germany and Italy to directly arm Franco. Of course, when we consider the military help Franco received from the Nazis and the Fascists, or the help the Republic received from the Soviet Union, the Mexican help may seem insignificant; but it had considerable symbolic value, and it foretold Mexico's later generosity towards us.

It must be understood that the relationship between Spain and Mexico has historically been more than very complex since Hernán Cortés defeated the Aztecs and conquered Mexico in the early 16th century. And although that happened a long time ago and there are no "Aztecs" left, the Mexican people tend to resent Spaniards. But General Cárdenas was, in his peculiar way, a socialist, and for him, Republican Spain was not the country of Cortés, but a nation where the people were fighting Fascism. And so, after the war, after our defeat, he opened the door to us. This was done, first, by helping the Spanish Republic get ships to take us to Mexico, and then by allowing agencies of the Spanish Government in exile to help us in a variety of ways: finding jobs for our elders, opening schools for us, and even allowing us to become Mexican citizens if we so wanted.

Let us not underestimate this last point, especially these days when there is so much conflict concerning

so-called "illegal immigrants." Bertolt Brecht, whose cynical realism is still crucial for an understanding of the 1920s and 1930s put it simply and bluntly: A passport is the essence of a person's dignity. A passport, that is, as against those pieces of paper common in France (and in other parts of Europe) at the time that simply said: *Laissez passer*, "allow to pass" (or to move about); pieces of paper that through the years became wrinkled and torn and dirty and almost unreadable.

And so my parents, my sister, and I became Mexican, which, for instance, allowed me to obtain a passport and to come to the United States as a scholarship student at the age of 16.

But I cannot only emphasize Mexico here. The Soviet Union was also generous towards Spanish exiles. Except, of course, that when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, many of the Spanish exiles fought (and died) against the Nazis, while all of them had to bear the same suffering as the rest of the Soviet population. By comparison, Mexico was paradise: we were welcomed, there was no war, and no Nazis were attacking us.

Yet exile is exile, and our elders suffered their condition from day one to the day of their death, a death that for the greatest majority came there, in Mexico. Very few went back to reside in Spain. By the late 1960s some of those who had good jobs, and therefore some money, would go to visit Spain; but, as I say, very few returned permanently.

But what about the children and the adolescents who arrived in Mexico with them, the refugees of my generation?

As I have said, we had schools opened for us by agencies of the government of the Republic in exile in which, together with some Mexican teachers, the very best exiled Spanish teachers taught us. Our math and science classes did not create any problems out of the ordinary for us, but Spanish history or literature classes were somewhat confusing and mystifying. Very few of us really knew anything about Spain, except about the Civil War, and therefore, most of what we were taught in those classes always seemed remote and somewhat foreign. After all, what could we care about the Goths and Visigoths, or about the seven centuries long "Reconquest" of Muslim Spain by the Christians, when outside of school we were surrounded by daily Mexican reality (including the memory of the Aztecs)? And even if our parents (mine, for instance) had little or no money to speak of (our cheap furniture, for instance, was repossessed a couple of times because we could not meet the monthly payments), we were living in an extraordinarily lively city larger than Madrid and Barcelona combined, we read Mexican comics, we sometimes managed to find a few cents to go to the movies, we played soccer with Mexican kids all over the place, we began to speak like Mexicans, we started having girlfriends and boyfriends, and when I was home doing homework, while my parents were listening obsessively to the radio to see how World War II was going in Europe, my mind used to wander. I like to think I understood my parent's anguish and despair, but somehow I was living a life different

Continued on page 10

# Spanish Exile

Continued from page 9

from theirs, a life that, in the end, has made me a Spanish-Mexican, or a Mexican-Spaniard, and probably neither of the two. Add to this that, as I say, at the age of 16 I received a scholarship to come to the USA. At the university here I worked as a waiter five days a week, while in the summers I worked as a lathe operator in a factory in Indiana. But hey! No sweat. I was living my own life, and when I went back to Mexico, I rejoined my friends, my generation's life. So our elders suffered, and for them the pain of exile never ended. But we were living a different reality. Perhaps I was especially superficial and/or carefree, but I think my experience matches quite well with that of my contemporaries.

With time, of course, my generation began to have children. Mexican or French or Chilean or Russian children. And I have to suppose that most of those children know something about Spain and the Civil War. My children certainly do. Although it may well happen, as in my case, that my children's mother is not Spanish, but Mexican.

But the grandchildren are a somewhat different story. And I have known some Mexicans who have proudly told me that their grandfather was a Spaniard, but then could not tell me when he arrived in Mexico. "Some time in the late thirties, I think," they may say. And I am left vaguely wondering whether that person's life has anything fundamental to do with what happened during the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath.

But of course it does. No Spaniards came to Mexico "in the late thirties" who were not refugees from the Civil War. Only that, as I

have come to think, in its generational evolution, exile tends to resemble migration. Your grandparents came here (to the USA or wherever) some time ago and you are what you are here, wherever that "here" is located. To be sure, original roots are a fine thing to remember, and so the Irish-Americans have a parade in New York on Saint Patrick's Day, the Italians have their Columbus Day, and so on.

But those are mythified celebrations of identity having nothing to do with the struggle against fascism, and we are not here today to consider how the pains and sorrows of the past are cured by Time and Distance; that is to say, by changing generations. We are here to remember the "enduring legacy" of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, as the program well indicates. And that, like the Spanish exile of 1939, is a

political legacy that must be remembered, and studied, and taught to the descendents of the men and women who, in the 1930's, fought for Liberty and Democracy against Fascism.

Correspondingly, I believe, we must ultimately distinguish between exile and migration, inasmuch as exile is always a consequence of very specific political conditions. And I think those of us who were children during the Spanish Civil War have an obligation to remember the dangers of fascism and to pass that memory on, among those of our own tribe and for the enlightenment of others.

So I welcome this celebration. And I cannot but say: Long live the International Brigades who fought Fascism in Spain! Long live the memory of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade! ▀

---

## Spanish Citizenship

Continued from page 1

rights and against U.S. wars of aggression. He is featured in the video *Long Shadows—Veterans Paths to Peace*, produced by the Clarence Kailin Chapter of Veterans for Peace.

Hovan also remains on the front lines of social change. When he moved to an assisted-living facility in Providence six years ago, he began agitating among the residents to improve the quality of their food. They no longer have to eat pasta twice a day, Hovan said.

A third vet, Matti Mattson of Brooklyn, NY, has begun the process of applying for Spanish citizenship.

The rites of Spanish citizenship complete the circle promised by Dolores Ibarruri at the farewell parade of the International Brigades



Clarence Kailin signing Spanish citizenship papers.

in 1938. "We shall not forget you," she said, "and when the olive tree of peace puts forth its leaves again... come back!...and all of you will find the love and gratitude of the whole Spanish people." ▀