

Adiós, Catalonia! In the Aftermath of the Spanish Civil War

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In 1939, 350,000 Spaniards went into exile. Many Anarchists took refuge in Latin America — in Mexico, Argentina and Chile. Here is a personal memoir of an Anarchist family escaping Franco's fascists and the horrors to come.

Part I. Catalonia!

At last we were ready to embark. We would leave Catalonia, Europe. We had been notified by the Greek Shipping Company that our ship “Artemiss” would be sailing out of Marseille in the next 12 hours. My father called Anselmo Palau and they agreed to mobilize our people in three hours. Probably the Basque were already boarding. Then he called our friends in the Jewish Emigration Agency and gave them precise instructions to get the children onto the pier and keep them together until they boarded the ship. We were very careful of our arrangements for fear of Nazi spies, or that Franco’s agents would prepare a trap as we passed the coast of Spain on our way out of the Mediterranean.

My mother was worried about our luggage. It contained our new French clothing, our only possessions. She had found a silk Russian peasant shirt for me; my father had dressed me in it and taken me to a professional photographer for a commemorative photo before we left Paris. Now when I see that photo, in sepia, 45 years later, I notice how old and tired I looked for my age.

We embraced Otilia and Josep Marinet. During our wait in Marseille we had been staying in their house. Otilia cried as she gave me a little bundle with sweet rolls. “I will see you again, Otilia. I will always come to see you!” I promised as she kissed me. My mother and Otilia hugged each other. The men shook hands. “Good luck, Commander.” “Thank you for everything,” my father responded.

It was about two in the morning. A taxi, driven by a Spaniard, arrived silently. Inside, the car smelled of garlic, tobacco, and oil. Fog hid the houses. The streets were wet. I saw last the lights of the Zoco.

Sudden blasts of the fog horns told me we were near the docks. A grey, cold, damp mass of mist enveloped the pier and the warehouse where, already, many of the refugees waited to board. We could not see beyond the pier, but the lights of the “Artemiss” cast soft, white beams across its structure. The ship looked small, but tough. Its white funnel had two blue lines, and on the bridge we could make out the Captain supervising the embarkation.

Gusts of wind pushed heavy salty balls of fog. We were shivering, but we had to wait until the French authorities approved our papers. Several men, still in bandages, came walking slowly, supported on the arms of their families. All the children looked pale and were trying to keep warm under layers of woolen sweaters and gloves. We were alarmed by two approaching trucks. A band of fierce and extremely young-looking men and women got out. They saluted with military precision and shook hands with my father and the Basque leadership. Then in clear Spanish one of them said, “Salud, comrades.” I was struck that they all had pistols in their belts. Then I realized they were the escort to the contingent of refugee Jewish children. Now the children were coming down. They formed a column. A young girl, no older than 14, carried a white and blue banner; the first time I saw what was to become the flag of the State of Israel. Stark in the odd light they marched, each with a knapsack. At the end of the column several youngsters carried the smallest of their warrior platoon on their shoulders. A French officer came down from the ship.

Saluting everyone, he started checking his passenger list. A line formed. I saw Coco and his parents. We both looked for Pilar. She was with her mother. Pilar waved to us. We blew back big spectacular kisses and jumped up and down like clowns to make her laugh. People started climbing the metal ladder onto the ship. A rare excitement came over me when it was our turn to board the “Artemiss.” There were over 200 persons, and they filled the two decks and even the cargo compartment. Food supplies were already aboard.

From the top deck I kept track of my friends. They moved fast and soon we were together looking down at the Jewish children saying farewell to their armed escort. No military precision. Now there were tears. We heard painful exclamations in an unfamiliar Eastern European language. The girl with the banner dropped it and embraced and kissed with passion one of the boys in their guard. Aboard they tried to resume their resolute formation, but it was impossible. We realized then how alone these children were. Their only family, perhaps for months, had been the young soldiers of a secret army of antifascists. The Spaniard men and women rushed to embrace the Jewish children. Following what was probably their last instructions, the youngsters drew together and sang a slow, deeply stirring hymn in Hebrew. It was not a farewell, but an expression of hope, of victory. The Greek sailors closed the rails. The ship was moving. Down on the pier the young men and women of the Hagganah raised their fists. Spontaneously from the ship we began singing the International, in Euzkadi, in Spanish, Coco, Pilar and me in Catalan. The ship's horn blew several times. We were still singing as we disappeared into the fog, the pier a flickering of lights. Then it was dark.

We were too excited to go to sleep. While our parents made arrangements in the cabins, we went looking for the Jewish children. They had been given one of the largest rooms, formerly a recreation, social area when the ship cruised tourists between the Greek Islands. Cots and partitions were efficiently distributed. The older girls were accommodated on the upper deck, practically in the open. Some of the supervisors of the mission were American Quakers. I was surprised to see these religious workers aboard. We were used to the indifference of the western world to the plight of the victims of Fascism all over Europe.

It was not difficult to communicate with the Jewish children, Most of them spoke French or English, and soon we were all exchanging names and misadventures. I shared my sweet rolls with Chris, a Czech boy. Rapidly we discovered something in common; we liked books. My heavily accented French made him laugh. Coco introduced me to a blonde girl from Silesia. She told us, to our surprise, that her father had been in the Thaelman Battalion that fought in Spain with the International Brigades. By now he was probably in Palestine, the final destination of all the Jewish children.

It was about five in the morning, still dark and foggy, that we felt heavy and sleepy. There were people all over the ship. We separated, looking for our cabins. Finally, I found my parents. They were having coffee in what had been the bar, now an improvised food station for everyone.

"There you are," my mother exclaimed, while urging my father to get to our cabin. I had no sense of location. Everything was grey, and only the vibration of the ship's engines gave any indication we were moving. Our very small cabin had only two bunk beds and a cot for me. The porthole was wet, big drops of condensed humidity hung everywhere. I was tired and cold. Fortunately, the cot was warm with an extra blanket my parents had gotten for me.

I awoke in a pale yellowish light that illuminated the cabin. I found a note, "Come to lunch. Kisses, Your Mother." She always left me kisses. What time was it anyway...?

I felt somewhat dizzy; my stomach grumbled. I wanted to drink something cool and refreshing. I found my pants — still short and stupid — my white shirt and, just in case, my blue pullover. Now was the time to wear my tennis shoes. Well, I was ready, but as I opened the door I was taken aback to see nothing but the greenish ocean and a pale sun struggling to pass through the mist. The air was damp, warm, and, in a few moments, I felt all sticky. The moving sea made me rather cautious. I walked close to the wall and held on to every available piece of support, pipes,

rails, a chair. A large number of people had gathered at the stern of the ship, just sitting, perhaps enjoying the open air, the freedom, the mystery of the sea.

The mess hall was full of men and women in animated conversation. Laughter and the clatter of dishes and silver dominated the place. The vibrations of the engines were very noticeable here, but everybody was happy to be on the move. We were aiming to cross the Mediterranean and, hugging the coast of North Africa, rush into the open Atlantic. The Fascist Navy had a blockade, including Spanish and Italian war ships, but the intense traffic of all kinds of merchant vessels made it possible to escape detection. The British, implementing their doctrine of “freedom of the sea,” managed to keep the hostilities close to Spanish ports.

I could not tell what time of the day it was. The “Artemiss” was still in a cocoon of fog, and the sun was weak and pale. Only the fresh, pungent, biting breeze gave me a notion of reality. This was the open sea! We were actually escaping Europe.

In one of the little rooms next to the mess hall I found two huge marmites with coffee and tea. I chose tea, using a metal cup, and a strange looking bread roll with poppy seeds, tasting of anise. I came upon a lively group of the Jewish youngsters. At least four chess games were in progress. Onlookers were waiting patiently for their turn to play, all in profound contemplation, observing the moves in ritual silence. Two of the competitors were girls, looking happy and playing with zest. Obviously winners. When someone noticed me, I was silently admonished to be quiet. The etiquette was to be impartial, immobile, detached. The enjoyment of the confrontations was to be experienced only in an inner, secret realm; the observations to be accumulated preparatory of future encounters.

I moved away from this enclave of cerebral titans and went looking for Chris or the blonde girl I had met the night before. The first friendly face I found was Anselmo. He was on top of one of the bulkheads with a group of men and women I was sure was already a Committee, reviewing passports and compiling a list of all the passengers. I asked him for Pilar. “She’s still sleeping,” he responded busily. “That’s it,” I thought. Coco was sleeping, too. He had always had the same habits as Pilar. It had always been most mysterious to me. They went to sleep at the same time, woke up at the same hour, and they certainly got hungry at unusual hours, but always simultaneously. Sometime I intended to discuss this with them.

It was fun to explore the ship; people looked more content. Only once in a while would the fear of encountering a Fascist raider flare up, when we would see the distant smoke of passing ships.

“Hello! There you are. I’ve been looking for you all over the ship.”

I turned around. It was the blonde girl. I was pleased to meet her all by myself.

“Well,...it’s you. Tell me your name again, please.”

“Annelise. Want to lunch with me?” she asked.

“Lunch? is it that late? I haven’t had breakfast, but lunch is all right. Where?”

“Not at the mess hall. I saw and smelled the food. It’s abominable! Let’s get some kosher sausages, cheese, black bread and pickles, and a beer, all right?” It took me by surprise. I knew of religious diets. After all, in Barcelona even we during Holy Week ate dry cod with garbanzos as an expiatory food. But this was bold, exotic.

“Well, all right,” I responded, “but where are we going to get all that? Not on this ship, are we?”

“Of course, on the ship. One of the agreements the Refugee Agency made with the Navigation Company was to stock kosher food for us. Toby — you know, that lanky chap — he is the food commissar for us. He sees that all the Jewish children get a strict kosher diet.”

It was an education for me. I was fascinated. Kosher food. What a revelation. Annelise started to walk. "Coming?"

"Yes, of course," I said eagerly, following after her.

We went to a corner room next to the kitchen, below the main deck. There it was, installed with a sign in Hebrew, German and Czech: "Refectory." Toby was there, with a young girl as a helper.

"You're late," he told Annelise, smiling, "but who can refuse anything to lovely Annelise, the Rabbi's daughter!" Annelise laughed.

"Oh now, stop that. I have a guest, Palitos, one of the Barcelona kids."

"Is he a Communist?" asked Toby suspiciously.

"No, I'm with F.A.I. (International Anarchist Federation)," I said, fast and proud of my political affiliation. I was somebody among these warriors, chess champions and religious gourmets.

"Welcome, comrade," said Toby, extending his arm. We shook hands with vigor and total commitment to our common struggle.

"Well, well, it's back to the International Brigades," Toby was a talker, just like me. He could go on and on.

"Toby...Toby, we are hungry," interrupted Annelise.

The young man organized our lunch in a small cardboard box with the business logo of "Davy's," a well known delicatessen in Marseille.

"See you later, Toby," I said. He raised his fist and responded with a friendly, "Later, comrade."

Annelise and I climbed back to the fore of the ship, and, among ropes, vents and chains, found a spot where we could eat. The sun was now high over us. The delicious breeze played with our hair and Annelise's skirt. She tucked it firmly between her legs, and we sat munching our lunch.

Under the sun, Annelise's blonde hair shone. Cut short, it revealed her neck so that she resembled a Medieval angel or a page in a fairy tale about a remote Nordic kingdom. Her arms were golden white with a tinge of pink around the elbows. She was observing me, too. Her blue eyes were wide, attentive, alert to every expression on my face. She laughed at my faulty French, and we decided to use English to avoid embarrassing mistakes.

We had placed the bottle of beer under the shadow of a funnel vent so that it wouldn't get warm. We were silent, just eating and smiling at each other. Annelise asked, "How are we going to open the beer?"

"Don't worry, I have a Swiss Army knife," I responded.

With a little flair I removed the metal cap. A small piece of ice was still stuck to the neck. It wet my hand. Annelise took a long sip and invited me to drink. The beer was a Pilsener, with a colorful, elaborate label showing a robust peasant girl offering a large stein of beer. It flowed bitter and harsh down my throat. If it had not been so very cold I would have thrown-up from the abominable taste.

"I'm sorry, Annelise, I'm not used to beer. We drink mild red wines mixed with a little water." Immediately, I recalled my friends, the good times we had in Marseille and, with unexpected intensity, I remembered Sara Ponty.

"Wine, eh, like the Hungarians. My dad wrote me about the wine in Spain. He said it was sweet and generous...and made you drunk with less than a bottle. You can drink a lot of beer and not get drunk!" pronounced Annelise in her worldly-wise way.

Happily she did not insist that I drink more of the obnoxious beer. I was just about ready to throw overboard all the leftover boxes, bottles and napkins, when Annelise stopped me.

“No, wait, wait,” she cried in alarm. “We should put our trash in the container at the end of the kitchen.”

“But it will end up going into the sea just the same!” I protested.

“It doesn’t matter. That’s the way they want us to do it, okay?”

“All right,” I agreed meekly. Annelise wanted to talk. She was interested in something about me, just as I was fascinated by her.

“Do you know where you are going in Chile?” I asked as we walked toward the deck.

“Yes, we’re going to get visas to Palestine, through a deal with the British.”

“Oh no, not the British!” I exclaimed. “Those fellows never keep their agreements. Look what happened to Czechoslovakia!”

“Well, it so happens that England wants our trained pilots. Many of them are Jews. So the deal is us, for the cooperation of what remains of the Czech air force!”

“I see. Clever...just right!” We laughed. We were mature, realistic. We understood adults.

As we walked along the deck, I noticed that few passengers were around, only sailors on duty. Most of the Spaniards were in their cabins or in the compartments below deck.

It was time for siesta. To my great embarrassment I, too, felt sleepy. I wanted to take my “nap” and, perhaps later in the afternoon, after tea, to see a movie.

“Annelise, would you believe that I must take a nap? Will you excuse me?” I felt childish, like a kindergarten pupil, although I knew that Coco and Pilar were already tucked away in some cool corner of the ship, sleeping, close together. I was jealous.

“Oh, go ahead, don’t worry. I’ll visit Toby, and maybe see you later.”

I went looking for my cabin. My parents were sleeping. The room was cool and silent. Only the vibrations of the ship’s engines could be noticed, no human noises. As the breeze crossed the rails it produced a small humming sound. My mother’s clothes were draped over a chair. I touched her silky underwear and lay down on my cot.

After a few days of cautious navigation we approached the coast of Africa. The ship’s captain, Demetriopoulos – we called him just Demetrio – advised us he wanted to take on more provisions and spare parts and was radioing for permission to dock in Oran.

Algeria was, at that time, one of the most valuable colonial possessions of France and of great strategic importance in the struggles of the next 15 years. One of the generators was failing. The problem became evident the night the lights dimmed all over the ship and then kept going on and off. I was just a little annoyed, because it interrupted the after-dinner movie in the dining room, but many feared the blinking would attract the attention of Fascist vessels in these essentially-enemy waters. Now there was open alarm that the Captain would risk the radio, in addition to the lights, and bring the enemy directly to us.

Actually, it was more than that. Captain Demetrio had an exuberant social interest in both women and men. He favored the handsomest young men and the loveliest of the girls with invitations to his table where food and wine were exceptional and generous, as were his appreciative touches and caresses. Our cavalier captain had aroused the fiercest distrust latent in our group. After all, our people were not all cosmopolitan radicals, but a mix of different cultural backgrounds. All of us had just disengaged from desperate warfare and were still in jeopardy a common cause and certainly a common enemy, there were the conservative and less worldly among us. A few believed they had put their lives and children in the hands of a corrupt predator. So, at first, the leadership of our group had its hands full coping with both this Greek and the effect he was having on our group. Coco and Pilar’s attempts to enlighten me were not reassuring. My new

friend's casual observation, "Well, classical Greece is still alive!" only served to surround the captain in my mind with an aura of historical significance and special dispensation. Finally, though, it was his very exuberance that manifested itself in his sure handling of every aspect of running the ship in these waters, together with the cool heads of our leaders, who focused attention in this way, that overcame the terrible anxiety of those most fearful.

We noticed the weather changing. No more heavy fog, just a morning mist, and, after a little while, the sun shone. It turned hot in the afternoons. We were on the ocean. We saw no other ships except at a great distance but encountered many North African fishing trawlers with juvenile crews who jumped up and down when we passed close to them. Some screamed for cigarettes, and once we managed to float a bundle of "Gauloises" in an empty cookie tin to a fast swimmer.

Pilar, Coco, Annelise and I often found ourselves together. Then a young man, Eric Topf, joined us. He was Austrian. His father was in prison in Vienna for participating in the 1934 attempt to stop the Nazis. Eric's mother had managed to escape Austria and was now waiting for him in Haifa. Eric was a very handsome fellow with dark curly hair, a full face, piercing eyes and impeccable European manners. He spoke a crisp, clear English and a diplomatic French. His father had been an art dealer; his mother an illustrator of children's books. Eric was very well-educated, and, unlike some of us, he was as comfortable talking about sports as discussing art, politics, and religion. Mystical, with a fine memory, he recited Old Testament passages, Baudelaire, Donne and Whitman, the words accompanied by delicate gestures of his pale, marvelous hands. We were mesmerized by him. He was the favorite young man among the Spaniard girls.

My most vivid memory of him brings back a Saturday afternoon dancing party. My friends and I were eager to attend. Pilar loved dancing, and I considered myself a master of the fox-trot. Coco was an expert in rhumbas, and we all had a passion for the exotic art of tango. The loudspeakers of the ship were connected to the radio which could pick up a famous dance music program from Marseille. When we arrived about 30 or 40 young people were already dancing. Some of the Jewish and Spaniard girls were dancing with each other, waiting for the timid young men to summon the courage to ask them to dance. When Annelise saw me, she just said, "Dance with me," and we were away. But it was not easy to dance with her. She had the heavy style of Eastern Europeans, sliding her feet and making turns to the right with difficulty. She held me too tightly and tended to bend her legs at the most unexpected moments. It was not like dancing with Pilar.

When the music finished, Annelise kissed me on the cheek and walked around holding me by the hand. I was embarrassed. She was too beautiful, too blonde, and about two inches too tall.

"Annelise, ask Toby to dance. He looks lonely," I told her. She saw him in a corner, talking with one of the Basque girls.

"You think so?" she asked, incredulous.

"Just look at him," I insisted, "He's talking with one of those boring intellectual Basques."

In spite of her doubts, Annelise went over to talk with Toby.

I sidled closer to one of the doors, just in case. Then I saw Pilar with Eric. He has holding her hand, looking into her eyes with total absorption. She was close to him, waiting for the music to start again. When the announcer's mellifluous voice told his listeners the next number was "pour nous amis, les Anglais, 'The Lambeth Walk,'" couples lined up, eager to trot the silly novelty steps. I looked for a partner and almost bumped into a refined Catalonian girl. I knew her name was Julia and that, for a reason unknown to me, everyone called her Moncha. She smiled and said, "It's me or Annelise." The last words of an advertisement for Coty perfumes were fading away, so I just nodded and we got into position. We strutted around the room together with an

enthusiastic bunch of other boys and girls. I liked the way this girl danced. She was fast, light and let herself go, moving her body away from me, then closer to me. In the midst of all the kicking and shouting I saw Pilar and Eric at the head of the columns. She was wearing a light green blouse and a white skirt. Eric in his pioneer white shirt and khaki military shorts looked so romantic, so heroic. They matched each other's beauty. Pilar was happy, playful, and followed Eric in every comic movement. They pantomimed a pair of raggedy dolls. The music became sillier, a little hysterical, and we shouted with tremendous joy, "Doing the Lambeth Walk, Yeah!" The raucous noise attracted the attention of many adults, and some, peering through the doors and portholes, shook their heads, incredulous at the antics of the younger generation.

We finished dancing in a frantic burst of energy. My partner held my fingers and, with infinite grace, gyrated around me with a flair of her skirt, ending in my arms. Pilar and Eric ran into each other's arms and embraced. He kissed her on the forehead, and she reclined her head on his chest. For a few seconds they stood together with their eyes closed. As the radio blared a litany of advertisements, we reassembled. My partner was going to leave me, but I begged her, "Please stay. Let's talk. Would you dance some more with me?"

"Oh, all right. Why not? After all, we Catalonians must stick together." I could no longer see Pilar and Eric. Then I noticed that Coco was not around either.

"Moncha, have you seen my friend Coco? You know, the fellow I'm often with."

"Yes, he's playing chess, on the lower deck." she answered, waiting for the next song.

"What do you mean?" I asked her impatiently.

"I mean chess. You know, rook takes horse; bishop kills horse; checkmate!" she responded, annoyed by my slow mental process.

The music started again. This time it was a French waltz with lots of soulful accordions, painful violin solos and a dark feminine voice proclaiming her loyalty to a man who betrays her, abuses her and demands more money. I immersed myself in the dance. I liked Moncha. She had a natural way of accommodating her body with my movements. Once again I caught sight of Pilar and Eric. The four of us were moving closer, but we did not acknowledge each other's presence. Pilar, just as I had seen my mother dancing in Marseille, had her arms around Eric's neck, and he had his hands on her waist. Moncha rested her head on my chest. Her hair smelled clean, with a vague aroma of roses. I felt warm and tender towards her. I dared to bring her slightly closer to me, and she responded by dancing just a little slower and resting her nails on my hand, without hurting me. It felt delicious, intimate, a little wicked.

Then Moncha was asked to dance by someone else, taller than I. He was one of those rather aristocratic Basque, who smoked and smelled of English tobacco. Moncha asked me with her eyes if it was all right. I winked at her. I felt magnanimous, adult. Pilar and Eric were ready to dance again, but this time they saw me.

"Palitos, where you been?" Pilar asked. "Where's Coco?"

"He's playing chess," I told her.

"Well, let's go find him."

"My goodness, chess!" exclaimed Eric in disbelief.

As we left the improvised dance hall, we found that most of the adults were either in the prow of the ship or down on the lower decks, possibly out of discreet respect for the young, but probably just to escape the irritating mating rituals of adolescence.

The air was nice, balmy, and the afternoon sun was still hanging above the horizon. In the tiny library a group of bridge players had taken refuge, oblivious to the tumultuous party on the upper deck. My parents were among them.

Going down one of the metal stairs, we found the chess players. They, too, had escaped from the noisy crowd and were engaged in silent combat. Coco was playing one of the Basque girls and was in trouble. He was folded into himself, his knees high on his chair, his arms knotted around them, ferocious concentration in his eyes. Two of the Greek sailors from the ship's crew had taken on a pair of young opponents. The smoke of their big Turkish cigars was just the right thing for the occasion. Suddenly, Coco moved one of his pieces. The girl responded quickly and confidently. Then Coco roared like a tiger. The Basque girl looked again in disbelief. She had lost. We could not actually see the final positions, but the young woman, flustered, extracted from her blouse a wad of money and gave Coco a 100 Franc bill. He said, "Thanks, your game is great." One by one, the other games ended. The losers complimented their triumphant opponents. One of the Greek sailors, with some embarrassment, was playing for his defeat. The winner was a very young boy with glasses. They shook hands. It was an agreement to meet again.

In some way, though, we were disappointed. Was this like gambling?

"Not really," explained Coco. "You see, we agreed to play only among equal ranking players. That way the rather weak chaps don't get taken." We smiled politely, unconvinced.

"I'm hungry," exclaimed Coco.

"How much did you win?" asked Pilar.

"Oh, about 500 Francs."

"Well, it pays to have brains," commented Eric.

"I lost two games, though. But now I have the money for my project," Coco told us happily, pushing ahead towards the kitchen to get sandwiches and strawberry sodas for all of us.

From that day on, we were a group. Intimidated by Annelise, I wooed Moncha to be our pal. The attraction was Eric who gave dimension and magic to our friendship.

Part II. North Africa, freedom and much more

The “Artemiss” was now navigating in front of the coast of North Africa, directly across from Spain. War ships of different nationalities crisscrossed our path. We exchanged radio signals, identifying ourselves under the protection of the League of Nations and the agreements signed by most civilized countries.

As we slowly approached Algeria, fast French Corvettes drew close to inspect our ship. From the rapid exchanges we could tell that the documentation provided by France was accepted, and we were reassured we would make it to the next port in the territory under French control.

Oran had a small port, just a few cranes and buildings around a semi-military installation. The menace of war, of conflict that could break out at any moment, kept everybody in a state of alert. As we passed the quay leaving behind the jetty of open sea waves, we noticed a couple of French frigates, with all the sailors on board eyeing every part of our ship. From the vantage of the “Artemiss,” we saw the city, its well-defined avenues and wealth of palm trees. The cupolas of several mosques were distinctive landmarks, as were the minarets, located so that the call to prayer for the faithful could be heard all over the city.

Captain Demetrio was on the upper deck keeping an eye on his crew. A small boat, armed with a heavy machine gun, came close to us, and some French officers, policemen and Navy personnel climbed aboard our ship. My father, the Basque leadership and two of the Quaker women in charge of the Jewish children formed some sort of parliamentary group to deal with the French. The anxious refugees crowded around to hear what the authorities had to say. There was fear of an ambush, of dangerous deals with Franco or, perhaps, even a decision to inter us in a concentration camp.

We could hear the French, in pure Bureaucratese, asking for health certificates and visas to port of final destination, but, finally, they arrived at their real objective, a “landing fee” that would make it possible for all of us to “enjoy” Oran during the repair of our ship.

“Well, it seems that all is in order. We also have instructions for special care of the Jewish children,” said a man in a pristine uniform, with a loud authoritarian voice. This produced a reaction of alarm among the Quaker women, but eventually it became clear that there was a powerful local Jewish organization, and it had prepared a welcome for the children.

“It will take several hours to consult with all our fellow passengers about the landing fee, but we are confident a happy solution can be attained. After all, we are men of the world. We understand each other very well,” declared one of the Basque in eloquent French. Although we were the exploited, he managed to make us masters of the situation, sophisticates, dispelling the image of undesirable troublemakers.

“Of course, gentlemen, take your time. We see no need to delay your docking any longer. I will meet with you tomorrow in my office. A car will pick up your representatives. We wish you a pleasant stay.” The officer, his white uniform brilliant in the sunlight under its magnificent gold epaulets, saluted elegantly, and all the French functionaries marched after him, smiling and chatting, relieved to be living in a world of real gentlemen, simple, full of courtesy, and so profitable.

That night my parents and I had our dinner in the prow of the ship, where we could contemplate the lights of Oran and listen to the sounds of urban traffic and Middle Eastern music. But the powerful searchlights of the French warships played constantly against the sky above the port and the city, an insistent reminder that war was imminent.

The next morning, some of the Basque, the two Quaker women and Anselmo Palau were waiting for the automobile to take them to meet with the French authorities to pay the “landing fee.”

Most people, after contributing to the pool of money, left the ship looking for the pleasures of Oran, especially its big open markets, in search of second-hand clothing.

Pilar, Coco, Moncha and Eric knocked at my door. My father shouted in English “Cut it out, you spoiled anarchist brats!” Then he pointed to me, “Out, out. See you later.”

My mother added, “Tell Moncha I’ll be calling on her mother to go into town.” I splashed my face and hands and washed my teeth in the saline water of our basin. The heat was already extreme, and all the metal parts of the ship were burning hot. Pilar had a cup of tea and a sweet roll for me. The roll had an acrid flavor of cinnamon and molasses.

“Moncha! My mom says she’ll pick up your mother to go into town.” “Yes, she knows,” responded my friend. It was then that I noticed two trucks waiting to pick up the Jewish children. The American Quaker ladies were imparting last moment instructions to a group of serious-looking, well-dressed men and women, who had come to escort the children to a reception by the large Jewish community of Oran. Eric was going with us. He wanted to be with Pilar. But other Jewish boys were staying behind. Six of them walked over to meet some young men in British uniforms. Eric pointed them out to us, “Our future army, the Hagganah. As soon as I get to Tel Aviv, I’ll join.” He was very proud.

“All right, all right. Come on, let’s go. Come on, Palitos.” It was Coco, already on the pier, waving the 1935 Baedeker of Oran he had found in the ship’s library. Terra firma, immovable and solid under our feet, surprised us. We were all a little wobbly, but, after a bit of duck-walking to keep up with our guide, we left behind the piers, the custom house and the heavy metal fence that separated the port from the city of Oran. Suddenly the sights and sounds of North Africa were all about us.

“Now, listen. Let’s agree on what we are going to do.” Coco knew when to take charge. We were attentive but apprehensive, especially me. I did not want to visit museums or, worse, end up wandering in dusty old markets looking for ancient coins or “rare” books.

“First, we’ll go to a public bath house...”

“What!?” we all exclaimed, hooting in astonishment at this suggestion. Except for Eric, who just said, “We all need it.” That settled it, and the girls agreed. “Then,” continued Coco, “we separate. Eric and I have some business. Pilar and Moncha can go with Palitos wherever they want. But at one o’clock we meet for lunch. Afterwards, delights for all, music, cinema, flamenco!” He pulled out a big wad of French money, his winnings at chess. “We are rich!” shouted Pilar. We were ready to follow Coco to the end of Morocco.

Several carriages pulled by diminutive horses were waiting for sightseers. All the horses wore straw hats, while the drivers wore red fez and multicolor Arabian tunics. Moncha ran toward one of the coaches. “Come, let’s go, my treat,” she shouted full of excitement. Groups of passengers from our ship could be seen here and there along the avenues. Our ride took us to the central area of the city. Big palm trees and impeccably clean gardens had the unmistakable look of European colonialism. As we moved further into the city the European look disappeared. The native population used its distinctive ethnic garb. Women covered their faces. Markets, coffee shops, open-air food stands, donkeys, dozens of idle children in wait for some opportunity, gloomy-looking adults skirting the mendicants. I liked Oran.

Our driver knew just the bath house. The proprietor received us at the door. There was a large pool of warm water, individual showers, a steam chamber. We chose the pool. We were given big white towels and gigantic bars of rose soap. A woman offered to wash and iron our clothing while we took our bath. “Sure, why not?” said Coco, “After all we can’t go back to dirty pants.”

We were the only customers. Awkwardly, we boys set aside our clothing and jumped into the pool. The girls giggled nervously, but followed our example. The sun streamed down through the high glass roof. All around the sides of the pool, set in mosaic, were strange written characters, azulejos, Arabian calligraphy. Coco informed us they were admonitions from the Koran regarding the importance of cleanliness. Suddenly, Coco was swimming and splashing and screaming like Tarzan. In an inexplicable burst of energy, I had a furious water battle with Moncha, and Eric and Pilar moved away, laughing and talking.

“Ah-ha, my friends! Soap. Remember soap?” Coco brandished his bar above his head. I began to lather my arms and hair. With embarrassment and disbelief, we all realized how grimy we had become and proceeded to wash ourselves with great vigor. The manager came in and, moving two big levers, unleashed jets of clean water down upon us, all the while laughing at us. “Ah, Spaniards. Dirty, dirty.” And I had thought he was referring to our sharing the bath with the girls.

“Palitos, wash my back,” asked Moncha, “then I’ll wash yours, all right?”

“Sure, turn around,” and, with utmost care, I lathered my friend’s soft shoulders, gently soaped her neck and, with my little finger, worked around her ears. She submerged and came back up like a dolphin, spitting water and shouting, “More, more! Come on, Palitos. I promise to wash you, too.”

Pilar, Coco and Eric were playing a complicated mathematical game based on assigning numbers to the letters of the alphabet and trying to figure out their “lucky” number. “Mine is nine,” said Eric. “Me too!” shouted Pilar. Coco said. “You’re cheating. I know better!” Then the three of them jumped out of the pool, wrapped their towels about them and went to rest in a corner.

The manager came in again. “Perhaps the young ladies and gentlemen would care for some pomegranate juice, eh, and some figs?”

“Yes,” clapped Pilar.

Moncha and I were alone in the water. She said, “It’s your turn.” She grabbed my arms and began to soap my back, my neck, my shoulders. Then my chest. She was very close to me. I shut my eyes but could not manage to withhold a deep sound.

In a husky voice Moncha said, “Don’t turn around.” All other noises faded away. I was totally absorbed in this feeling, the touch of Moncha’s hands, aware of her breasts close to my back.

She pushed me down, gently shampooing the soap out of my hair.

“Are you going to see the blonde?” Moncha asked me.

I was confused. “Who...what blonde?” I sputtered.

The manager returned, followed by a young girl in a white tunic, carrying a tray with glasses of red juice, ice and a mountain of big black figs.

“Ladies and gentlemen, your refreshments.” He motioned the girl to leave the tray on a portable table. As he turned to go, he wagged his finger at me. The young girl remained and approached Pilar.

“Violets? Sandalwood? Jasmine?” she offered small vials of perfume.

Coco jumped up, “For me, violets, like a Gypsy.”

I laughed and joined in, “Yes, yes. I’ll have Jasmine.”

Pilar chose Jasmine, too.

Eric, somewhat taken aback, asked, “This is acceptable for men?”

“Trust me, old man, go ahead,” encouraged Coco.

“All right, I choose sandalwood.”

Moncha decided on the violets. We applied our perfumes with the greatest delight.

“Ah, it’s so good. Oh, delicious.” we exclaimed over the fragrant drops. At that moment it was ecstasy.

We sipped the pomegranate juice and cracked the ice between our teeth. The chilled figs were fragrant and sweet. We all looked at Coco, and Moncha said, “Thank you, dear friend.”

Coco turned red. Then, breaking the spell, he said, “Oh now, don’t get sentimental. Eric, let’s go, we have much to do.”

The woman arrived with our newly washed clothing. Coco prepared to pay, but she referred him to the manager. Now we turned our backs in self-consciousness and dressed quickly.

The manager returned with the bill. “Let’s see...five Francs each for soap and towels. Juice and figs, five. And laundry, five. 40?”

“Yes, of course,” we all agreed, with a smile and a wink to each other. We were ready to give Coco our share, but he would not accept.

As he paid the bill, he added, “Here’s 10 Francs, for the girl who served us and the woman who washed our clothing. Be sure they get it, all right?”

The manager whistled, and the women – perhaps mother and daughter – appeared. “The gentlemen have a present for you...”

Outside, the morning sun was moving fast. Coco and Eric shook hands with us. “Remember, we meet at one in the Baltic. It’s a restaurant. Anyone can tell you where it is.”

“The Baltic? Here, at the edge of the desert?” I laughed.

Coco just turned, and he and Eric marched away. The image of Eric moving away, tall, handsome, vigorous, the sun highlighting his bronzed arms, always comes back to me as vividly as if it was the present.

Moncha gave me a provocative smile. “Now you’re in charge!”

Pilar suggested, “We could explore a bazaar?”

Moncha agreed, and we set off.

We encountered marvelous bronze objects, praying rugs, incense burners, exotic water pipes and fine silk and cotton shirts.

“Look, look,” exclaimed Moncha, pointing to rows of pearls displayed against black velvet in glass boxes. From the shadows, a woman, with a diminutive gold earring in her left nostril, came toward us. I noticed the red dot on her forehead. An Indian. I knew. I had seen them in the movies.

“Like my pearls, young fellow? Make an offer...100 Francs?”

Although it was Moncha who had expressed interest, the woman had directed her attention to me. We just looked. She moved away silently then and sat in a corner where she could keep an eye on us.

We went back out into the sunlight. Someone waved to us. It was one of the Basque children. They were loaded with packages and eating red peppers, onions and morsels of meat from long wooden sticks. “Hello. Come over, have a bite.” But we were much more interested in our own adventure.

“See you back on the ship,” I shouted, and we kept walking. We strolled into an area full of big white buildings. There was a Mosque, an imposing administrative palace, and, suddenly, we were walking through an elegant portal. We found ourselves staring into a garden where a very correct waiter was offering cold drinks to obviously wealthy French customers seated at many little tables.

“Want a cold drink?” I asked.

“Why not, Palitos, let’s find a seat,” agreed Pilar.

As soon as we opened the elaborate wrought iron gate a severe looking man, with a pistol on his hip, appeared beside us. In the same barking tone I had heard on the train to Marseille he told us, “No trespassing. Out, out!” A woman looked at us amused.

“Those must be the red Spaniard ruffians,” we heard her comment.

We stood there for a few seconds, dumb with embarrassment.

But Moncha, furious and enraged, turned toward me, arched one shoulder and, in a tone that must have made the walls ring, said, “Hey, red ruffian, come here!” and in front of all the onlookers kissed me dramatically on the mouth.

Pilar’s eyes were wide with astonishment.

Then in slow, perfect French, Moncha said to the crowd, “Mon macraux, nez pas...!” (My pimp, you know.)

There were whistles and applause. We turned and walked out.

We retraced our steps in silence until we came upon a large, open cafe with many tables on the sidewalk. There were a number of women seated about. We noticed their elegant European dresses, but then we realized they all had Arabian features. We sat down. A black waitress came over to us and in a low, quiet voice said, “You know, this is not a place for children.”

“What? What do you mean?” I exclaimed in anger.

“Look around you, see the ladies?” She spoke again in the same quiet tone, pronouncing “ladies” very slowly.

“So. They need a drink too!” I heard myself say scornfully. “Besides,” I added in a flash, “I could be a customer for them, you know!”

The waitress threw back her head in laughter. She gave up and asked, “What will you have?”

“That’s better,” I responded. “Three lemonades, plenty of ice, and maraschinos!”

Pilar was smiling faintly, “Palitos! A customer! Come now...” “Why not,” I insisted heatedly.

Under the table Moncha kicked me hard in the shin. “That’s why not,” she hissed.

Then we all three roared in delight and finally relaxed in our chairs.

The passing scene was a busy one. Carts pulled by donkeys, bicycles, a multitude of people continually milling about. We could hear music, cymbals, and the ferocious arguments of nearby merchants. Once in a while a man would approach the “ladies,” and after a brief exchange, they might depart together. We followed them with our eyes, for a clue to the place of their tryst.

It felt good to be watching all these exciting people. But eventually Moncha reminded us, “The Baltic...remember?”

With sudden daring, I announced, “Let me ask for directions.” I got up and walked over to one of the women, very beautiful, with deep black eyes.

“Pardon me, Miss, can you direct me to the Baltic restaurant?” Although it was apparent she did not understand every word, her comprehension was perfect, as was her reply in French, “Any coach can take you there.”

We arrived at the Baltic just minutes after one o’clock. Coco and Eric were waiting for us. They had ordered fruits, small pieces of roast lamb, “pita” bread, and yogurt. We enjoyed the meal, but it did not compare to our adventures of the morning. We agreed to cancel the rest of the program. Now we needed nothing more than to return to the ship. It was “siesta” time. Coco and Eric carried several boxes and a couple of long cardboard tubes. “Maps?” I wondered, “What for?”

We returned to the ship along with many of the other passengers, exhilarated. The landing fee had been accepted. The generator was repaired. The ship was ready to sail.

About five in the afternoon, the Jewish children came back. They carried packages of new clothing, new shoes and boxes of cookies and candies. Sailors were hauling up crates of fresh fruits and Kosher food for the duration of the trip to Chile. The generosity of the local Jewish Agency was evident, but the emotional farewell of the Jewish men and women of Oran to these children was for all of us a reminder of the brutality of Christian Europe. Little did we know at the time of the Holocaust to come.

Written in the stars

The “Artemiss” sailed about nine in the evening. Life on the ship returned to routine. People reading here and there, bridge players, romances, and for us, the surprise gift of Coco and Eric.

Our friends marched us toward the top deck. We carried the boxes and tubes, blankets, even a batch of sweet rolls.

“Okay, spread the blankets,” instructed Coco as he proceeded to give us large flashlights and a compass. He brought out a tripod, and low and behold, a telescope, which he and Eric mounted. He opened the tubes and brought out celestial charts. The stars and constellations. He lit his torch and pointed to a star.

“Now, what’s the name of that one?” he asked. We were silent. “Now check our position. Are we north or south of the Equator? In the Atlantic?”

We got busy looking for constellations. Alternately, we lay on our backs to pick out formations in the sky. Then we would pore over the charts to compare and identify what we saw.

“There is Aldebaran! There is Venus!” “Mars!” Moncha shouted.

We were caught up in the magic of the starry night. The universe was open to us. We lay there in wordless wonder. Then Eric started to recite. His voice carried the words of a poem in a simple, direct way, without artifice. It was a sonnet from Shakespeare. Looking at Pilar, he spoke,

If I could write the beauty of your eyes
And in fresh numbers number all your graces,
The ages to come would say, “This poet lies”;
Such heavenly touches ne’er touch’d earthly faces.

I moved close to Moncha.

Eric moved away, pointed to a star, and said very quietly, “That’s David’s, King of Israel.”

This went on for several nights. We could tell we were moving away from Africa, moving closer to the tropics, nearing Central America and, finally, crossing the Panama Canal.

Eventually, I noticed that Eric closed his poetry recital every night in the same way. He would pray,

Do not let the oppressed retreat in disgrace.
May the poor and the needy praise your name.
Rise up, O God, and defend your cause.

Remember how fools mock you all day long.

Do not ignore the clamor of your adversaries.

The uproar of your enemies which rises continually.

Many years later, when we remembered those moments, Coco told me, "It was the 74th Psalm." By then, the Nazis had been destroyed. Eric had joined the Army of Israel in 1948 and died in combat, defending his kibbutz, "Star of Hope."

We kept our eyes on the changing constellations and, with the help of our flashlights, spent every remaining evening in our favorite corners on the deck of the ship. Often our parents would come to hear our careful recitations of the new stars we could identify. Sometimes, we fell asleep at our post, only to be awakened early in the morning by the tropical dew.

One night, as Moncha and I were discussing the fine points of Castor and Pollex and the story of Leda and the Swan, we heard a commotion. There were shouts, people running, voices out of control and somebody screaming, "Kill him! Kill him!" Most of the noise and the running was on the lower deck, so we could not see what was going on. Moncha, frightened but curious, jumped up quickly and ran down one of the metal stairs towards a large group of people. I followed her. We saw a man with his face bloodied, surrounded by a furious mob.

"What happened?" I asked a woman.

"None of your damn business! Get the hell out of here!"

I recoiled from the harshness in her voice. Moncha took me by the hand, "Come on, let's go." We went to the upper deck, and from there we tried to pick up some clue of the incident. We saw captain Demetrio. He held a revolver, and two of his sailors, holding large clubs, were poised behind him.

"That's enough. Come on, move on. I'll handle this." shouted the captain.

"No, Demetrio," said a burly Basque, a political Commissar for the trip. "We agreed that discipline was our business!"

"Yes, but not lynching." responded the captain.

"All right, take him away, and then we'll let you know what we've decided. Agreed?" insisted the Basque.

The culprit, still bleeding from a cut on his head, was taken away by the sailors, while the women taunted him, "You bastard! You'll die, you rapist!"

We walked around the ship, asking here and there what had happened. No one would tell us anything until a young sailor explained, "Oh, that miserable idiot! A real pig! He raped a Basque girl." He was ashamed even to speak of it.

The adults ordered all the children to the mess hall. The Jewish children were with the Quakers. We talked in quiet voices. We knew what had happened. Only Coco, Pilar, Moncha and I knew that the man would be executed.

We heard nothing more. People started to fall asleep. Then suddenly we heard a splash into the water. It was over.

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