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"Back from Spain".

**Mann, Klaus
Mann, Erika**

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"BACK FROM SPAIN"

by Erika and Klaus Mann

~~Revised edition of the original~~
~~published in 1938~~

There is a world of difference between knowledge and experience, between being aware of facts and having lived through them; one fortnight of seeing things for one's self is worth years of reading about them.

We had read, heard and learned much about the defensive fight waged by the Spanish republic against Fascist invaders. We had formed a mental picture which we had every reason to ~~believe~~ believe was fairly accurate since it was based on the news that reached us daily, and had been enlivened by all the local colour gleaned from review and newspaper articles, from descriptions ~~of~~ and photographs. Alas, how weak is one's fancy, how inadequate one's imagination! Our conception of the achievements of the Spanish people, of its greatness of soul was far indeed from the reality. That mental picture we had devised fell far short in two respects: we did not realise how awful how inhuman, how depressing, how truly terrible conditions were in Spain; nor on the other hand how much of beauty and gentleness, of things hopeful and praiseworthy there ~~was~~ was in Spain.

To judge one must have breathed the air of the country, rubbed shoulders with its people, heard the sound of their voices, penetrated into their homes, shared their meager meals; only then can one realise, instead of

The very existence of Madrid as it stands today, as it works and lives and fights, is just such a wonder. We went around the ~~Spanish university~~ university quarters of the city where the homeric ~~hottest~~ battl

of the autumn of 1936 were fought; another wonder No man, even if he be utterly insensible to the heroic side of a fight for freedom, can see this place and realise that an overpowering enemy force tried to smash its way to victory through these gates, and still lies in ambush just outside, and not confess : this is indeed a miracle.

We had opportunity to see and to speak ~~for some~~ at some length with a man whom history will reckon among the ~~heroes~~ saviours of Madrid . His name is Ortega and he now commands an army corps. In the sector held by his corps, there appeared also one day the leader of the Army of the Center, general Casado, of whom even the Fascists say that he is a great man. He was the teacher of many of them ; Mola was among his pupils, though it was not there Mola learned to massacre women and children. This cultured, sympathetic and sensitive man is ashamed of his former pupils ; but is thrilled with pride at the thought of young men who, two years ago hardly knew what a rifle looked like, had never seen a staff map, never constructed a trench, but who today stand by and defend their country. He is proud and justly so, of the volunteers of the International Brigades who, in those early days, were the deciding element and in the open field, on the Jarama river, fought the enemy's army to a standstill/ after a long period of alarmingly quick advance. On a hill overlooking the river there stands a monument. We reached it after an hour's drive along a wretched dusty country road ; Casado wanted to see it. It is just a simple grave, but unforgettable : a fist of stone held up against the sky. You can see it from afar. It bears an inscription : " The

18th Brigade to the international Comrades and Heroes who fell in defending the Republic . February 1937. " A small wooden cross further down on the hillside reads : " Here lies buried the 16th battalion. " We stood there , heads bent : for it is all that remains of 700 young Britishers who died here ; 700 volunteers of whom not one survived. But they held the pass and now they lie here and beyond the little cross that marks their resting place a huge fist of stone rises to heaven.

As we write our hearts are full of the thousand episodes of this heroic reality we have seen ; pictures that time will never efface from our memories. We would like to relate all we have seen, but the impressions we have received are too many and too vast, and ~~that~~ it is all too close to us still ; the details are all merged and blurred ; terrible details mingled with others that are almost funny, touching details dovetailing into atrocities.

One may ask : has life become sad in the great cities of Spain ? German and Italian bombs have destroyed houses ; but beside their wreckage children are at play. At night the streets are dark and dead ; but of an afternoon ^{pretty girls} ~~women~~ wander through them, laughing and talking and flirting. And the girls are smartly dressed. A band is playing a merry dancing tune for a Tea Party cheek by jowl beside ruins whence but shortly terribly mangled bodies were dug out from beneath the wreckage. These things we have heard and seen. And so we can bear witness that in the capital cities of Republican Spain, in Madrid, in Barcelona, in Valencia, life goes on, neither lethargic nor hyper-nervous, but calm on the whole and at times

lit up with a certain grim gaiety that is not devoid of defiance.

We were greatly afraid the first time we heard the air-alarm sirens in Barcelona. They told us it meant that hostile planes were over the city. The Fascists were on the hunt after the lives of men and women, their favourite kind of sport. The searchlights stretched out their rays over the dark heavens looking ~~xxx~~ for the murderous death-birds. We heard the dull bark of the anti-aircraft guns. And a while later we learned to distinguish other sounds : the whistle and hiss of the bomb as it cuts the air, the loud, piercing crash of the explosion, the dry roar of a crumbling ~~X~~ building. There is no sign of panic among the civil population. All are of one mind : that these air attacks on open cities are an infamous form of brutality but one which, far from weakening the morale or combativeness of the people, ^gstrengthens and stiffens them in their spirit of resistance. ^hTough there are places, ~~xxxxx~~ exposed for too long a time to the ferocity of the Fascist bombers, where the only answer is the stillness of death.

This stillness of death we encountered at times even in the cities. Tortosa is no more ; nothing but a ghost-filled heap of ruins, and yet it is defended still by the ~~xxxxx~~ tough and watchful army of the Republic. It is literally true to say that of Tortosa there is not left one stone on top of another ; it is an example of what a human ~~xx~~ settlement looks like after it has been touched by the ruthless hand of Fascism. As, on one unforgettable night, we wandered through this city of the dead, we reflected :

" This is what all Spain would look like if Franco and the mighty men who stand behind him had their way if Spain refused to let them rule over it. They accomplish this work of destruction in cold blood and then they dare to put the blame on the " Reds ". The " Reds " ! That is, the army of the regular, legal Government.

In some of the smaller places life is stagnant, but it concentrates all the more colourful, vivid and alive in the big cities. Barcelona, the seat of Government, overflowing with refugees, presents the most busy and exciting aspect ; Valencia, which despite the menace at its gates has kept a great deal of its southern charm, light-heartedness and gaiety, is the most colourful of the three capitals. Madrid is the one where life is sternest and most pathetic ; for it is also the one which gave the example of powerful, successful resistance.

People suffer much in these cities and we were witnesses of many of these sufferings. There are things still worse than the perils of war ; the impoverishment of life, the daily misery. It is a fact that many people put up with the bombardments more easily than with the one trifling circumstance that you cannot get cigarettes. As for the problem of food, it reaches the proportions of a calamity. But these things are borne with patience, and, should it be necessary, will continue to be borne. There are some who are tired and disillusioned and embittered, and we met some of these too ; but they form a minority. There can be no doubt about that, for were they no mere minority, the miracle of resistance that has already lasted two years, would not be conceivable.

In appearance the life of the Spanish Republic has been impoverished ; that is on the surface, for

its inward life has become fuller and richer. Apart altogether from war work, people are working ~~much~~ extraordinarily hard, and in the midst of war many remarkable works of peace are being accomplished.

Just take one instance : the saving, storing and cataloguing of art treasures that lay in museums, convents or private houses exposed to bombardment. That surely is a cultural work of importance. The reactionary press has from the beginning asserted, with its customary ~~xxxxxxx~~ disregard for truth, that Spain was being plundered of its art treasures that were being sent to Moscow as payment for war material. The truth is that these art treasures have been carefully collected together and, as far as possible, placed in security. They have been catalogued and even in part restored. In the National Library and in the Prado (which incidentally has suffered from repeated bombardments) in Madrid, we saw works of art that were treasures of inestimable value. New masterpieces, unknown before, have been discovered, for instance Grecos. The " Red Barbarians " guard jealously the great heritage of the nation.

These same " Red Barbarians " have further undertaken to do away with the slur on the Spanish name that a large proportion of its inhabitants could neither read nor write. In the officers' training schools we had occasion to talk ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ to young men who but a year ago could not read and who now concern themselves not only with questions of strategy, but even of philosophy. The responsible leaders of the Republic are men who have a sort of pedagogical pride. He who has conversed with Senor Alvarez del Vayo for instance feels that this is not merely an able Minister of Foreign Affairs, but a man of intense culture

a man who is truly an intellectual in the best sense of the word. The writers, of whom the best are heart and soul with the Republic have been of great service. Intellectual life is therefore by no means at a standstill, but on the contrary it is developing at a notable rate. We met the publishers of literary reviews (for instance that excellent " Hora de Espana "), and young playwrights who are writing plays for the theaters just at the back of the front. For instance Rafael Alberti, the idol of Spanish youth, a young intellectual who radiates such enthusiasm that it sweeps the masses along with it. All Republican Spain reads his works with avidity and appreciation. The people has felt very deeply that this war will be won not merely with rifles and planes, but with the intellect and with books.

Anti-fascists have to give proofs of their worth in many directions ; not only in the fight that has been forced on them, but also positively, through deeds of humanity, through pedagogic effort, through the spirit.

Since leaving Germany (that is, for over five years), we have lived and toiled in many lands. It was not always an easy life, nor very full of hope. Friends and comrades were disseminated all over the earth. Those who fell or lingered by the wayside in discouragement had no one to show them an example, to ~~maintain the courage and~~ excite them to battle, to point to the chances of victory. Spain has no given them that example.

This journey from which we have just returned has been no pleasure trip, but has left deep marks in our hearts. We learned ^{it} ~~as~~ of hideousness we had not known before. We consorted with misery and devastation. Yet this too is true: for the first time since we were driven into exile we had the

feeling that we could win, that we would win. We have seen the people of Spain ~~fighting~~ battling against the enemy of its liberty. The enemy that is also ours. That is an experience that nothing, not even the lapse of many years can tear out of our hearts. It is the finest thing we have seen and felt in exile.