

JOAN SALES

Letters from the Spanish Civil War

Translated by Peter Bush

This is a selection of letters from the collection published by Joan Sales in 1976 that he wrote from February 1936 to his exile in Mexico in 1941. They reveal his reactions to the May events in Barcelona when the anarchist CNT, FAI and Marxist POUM attacked the Telefónica building held by forces of the Catalan government, the Generalitat., his thoughts on Catalan independence and give a unique view of life at the front in Aragon and in . It is the perspective of a republican, middle-class Catholic suddenly posted as officer to the extreme revolutionary Durruti column at a time when the anarchist militia were being "militarised" into a regular army. This experience, always lived with great humanity of feeling and the letters' vivid record of daily life were the raw material Sales transformed into fiction in Uncertain Glory. The letters here were written to his close friend, Màrius Torres, the poet, Nuria (Nuri) his wife and Esperança, a friend recovering from tuberculosis in a sanatorium.

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Barcelona, Saturday 8 May 1937

Dear Màrius:

The postman just delivered your letter of Monday 3rd; a week – an abyss — of chaos has since opened up between then and now. One more 'tragic week' to add to the many hapless Barcelona has experienced. Anarchism was dealt its first mortal blow; at least that is the only undeniable fact that has registered in the heads of its wary inhabitants. There were a number of losses that, in the service of a nobler struggle, might have sufficed to take Huéscar, as a first step to establishing contact with Basque Spain that is now fighting so heroically, yet so desperately.

My other "technical companions and I have finally solved the mystery of why the "column" came in strength to Barcelona when we should have gone to Pina d'Ebre to reinforce the front there. Rather than doing that, whole battalions of anarchists and Trotskyists (as we ordinarily call people in the POUM) came to participate in this sinister upheaval in the rearguard. Before it hoisted the flag of rebellion against the government of Catalonia, the Durruti column was summoned to a general assembly in order to agree to take this step; we "technical companions" were also summoned though we hadn't a clue why the assembly had been convened.

The column's assembly was held in the building on the Via Laietana that once was the Employment Office and now belongs to the CNT; we thought it was to get a majority of votes to go to Pina d'Ebre. Horror of horrors: the column's chief, Ricardo Sanz, a former bricklayer, made a fiery speech and declared that the government of the Generalitat had provoked the CNT 'like a poodle that barks at a lion' by urging

it to abandon the Telefónica building, that had been occupied by the anarchists from the start of the cataclysm. This was the pretext for the rebellion that was decided by an overwhelming, almost unanimous, vote. We "technical companions" stayed in a group apart, thus indicating we wanted nothing to do with such madness; once the vote was counted, Ricardo Sanz came over to us to say: "Naturally, though you're 'technical experts' in the column, you're not obliged to follow the accord that's just been voted; stay at home as long as it lasts. I'll only ask for your word of honour not to take up arms against us."

What could we reply? His was a gentlemanly gesture and that was enough to commit us. So we have been completely sidelined during this disgraceful neighbourhood brawl that shed a river of blood. If it hadn't been for Ricardo Sanz's gentlemanly behaviour, if he hadn't insisted on counting us out in his capacity as the column's leader, we'd have been in the absurd situation of taking up arms against the government of Catalonia by virtue of an order from that very same government that posted us to the Durruti column in the first place, something I spoke out against so pointlessly at the time.

Ricardo Sanz's affable gambit was perfectly understood by all the militiamen, who thought it was quite natural that we — non-anarchists — wouldn't take part in the inevitable conflicts. These people are so full of contradictions but excellent, even magnificent fellows, all jumbled up with murderers and arsonists. There are all kinds. I've been biting my fingernails over the last few days imagining some of these militiamen, from Xàtiva or the Empordà, especially the thirty-five in my brand-new 'fusilier-grenadiers section', who I was beginning to become good friends or at least feel decent camaraderie with, shooting over the barricades against their country's legitimate government, no less than if the fascists had been attacking. Over three hundred anarchists and perhaps as many Trotskyists who were forced to leave the front must have

died ingloriously on the Rambla, the Via Laietana and all around Barcelona. A telling detail: the people who've moaned so much all these months and tried to convince us that if they were hostile to the government of the Generalitat it was because they were frightened by the anarchists, now gleefully rubbed their hands at the carnage, not hiding the fact they wanted the FAI to win. Just as they used to exaggerate enemy victories they now exaggerate those of the anarchists! I sometimes think that ideally the fascists and anarchists should be dispatched to a desert island and left to scrap it out there.

Meanwhile, the enemy, who could have advanced through the gap left at the front by the desertion of anarchists and Trotskyists, have preferred to watch *los toros* from the ringside: they must be thinking: why do we need to fight these people, if they themselves do the job for us so well?

How could we not suspect that this uprising against Catalonia's legitimate government — all the more criminal because Catalonia is at war — wasn't in some way provoked by the enemy? Very able agents must have infiltrated the FAI and instigated the arson, robberies and murders that brought dishonour to last year's July 19 victory. Then as now; people asked the classic question: *cui prodest*? At that time, when the Generalitat's forces of order put down the insurrection, the war had been nipped in the bud or at the very least wouldn't have been civil war for us, would have been a war between nations. That was what the enemy wanted to prevent above all; I even suspect it was the enemy, in defeat that armed the anarchists or let them seize arms, and that would be the most obvious answer to the question that's been asked so often: who armed the anarchists? That won't be cleared up until the manoeuvres of the secret fascist agents in Barcelona are revealed; however, it remains undeniably true that the anarchists couldn't seize any arms until the insurgent regiments had surrendered to the forces of order. All eyewitnesses agree that at the start, when dawn

broke on Sunday 19 July and insurgent regiments were leaving their barracks to occupy strategic points in Barcelona, they were only confronted by the Assault Guards; it wasn't until hours later, when they'd been virtually defeated, though some fighting did go on for longer, that any civilians appeared. If there were dead and wounded (and not all from the FAI) it's because that was inevitable when an unruly rabble of civilians meddled with two armed forces locked in combat; stray bullets alone would account for that.

An acquaintance of ours, by the name of Munné, happened to be in the plaça de la Universitat just before dawn on 19 July and he told us what he saw, events he recalls with remarkable precision. He is a great hiker and was planning to catch a train in the plaça de Catalunya to go walking somewhere; simple mortals like him or ourselves never suspected what was in the offing. It must have been 4 am when he walked into the square and was surprised to see an infantry company lined up opposite the university. His amazement only increased when he noticed a section of Assault Guards approaching down carrer Aribau. Their officer stood to attention and saluted the commander of the soldiers, who in turn stood to attention and shouted: *¡Viva la República!* Reassured by that cry, the Assault Guards continued marching towards carrer Pelayo when the soldiers shot them in the back. Some fell, others replied with their shotguns, and that's how battle began. Our friend didn't see much more because he took the hint and prudently slipped away: it wasn't a day to go for a country walk. All the other testimonies support his: initially only the Assault Guards opposed the insurgents, to be joined later by other forces of public order (Security, Police and Civil Guard) and that was how the government portrayed it until, apparently to win over the anarchists to its side, it decided to let the story circulate that *they* had defeated the insurgents "with chests bared". It is scandalous that they should steal the glory

of an armed corps that fought heroically to deserve it; and scandal never prospers. If our brilliant leaders believed they'd won the FAI over by such a tactic, they must now realise how wrong they were.

As soon as we could re-establish contact, we lieutenants in the column asked for an interview with the new Captain-General so we could seek new postings: all that nonsense could have at least been of some use and put an end to our torture! However, in the meantime, the Army of Catalonia had disappeared, at least as an autonomous army, and even the forces of public order that, according to the Statute depended on the Generalitat, were now placed under central government control. All in all it makes one immensely sad because it seems the Catalan authorities is acknowledging they have failed; one can only hope that better days will come and Catalonia will recover. Integrated within the Army of the Republic we now fight for Catalonia in that hope.

I happened to be on the Rambla yesterday when the Assault Guards sent by central government to help Catalonia disembarked in the Porta de la Pau; when they saw them marching in uniform at the top of the Rambla, the crowd broke out into enthusiastic applause. I simply regretted that the sight of disciplined, uniformed troops we'd longed for month after month to protect the life and goods of the citizenry, had been what we had enjoyed after 19 July because the leftwing government decided to dissolve the republican regiments. We'd have been spared so much bloodshed and could have concentrated all our efforts on establishing contact with the Basques and occupying Majorca. Conversely, was it necessary to send for these outsiders? The anarchist revolt had already been squashed by the Catalan Assault Guards, as they'd put down the fascist revolt in the previous July. Doesn't it just seem like one more manoeuvre to snatch the glory from our loyal, selfless guards?

For the moment, and however incredible it seems, the anarchist columns still survive, though now under the name of divisions: the Republican government prefers to turn a blind eye to what happened. The anarchist leaders, for their part, are now hypocritically avoiding all blame by claiming that the rebels were a handful of "irresponsible" elements; one who has the cheek to say that is Ricardo Sanz. They led their men to the barricades only to abandon them at the first whiff of defeat. Nearly 70% of the casualties were rebels, and that says a lot for their courage though nothing much for their combat skills. Catalans fought on both sides: what a waste of blood!

A committee chaired by Ricardo Sanz took the decision to come to Barcelona with the whole column on 10 April, if I remember correctly, when we ought to have gone to the front and not to Barcelona – if we had any shame – as there was nothing for us to do in Barcelona; how will they ever convince me that these events were the *spontaneous* reaction of the "uncontrolled masses" in response to the seizure of the Telefónica building by the Republican government? The chiefs of the FAI had been furtively cooking this up for almost a month; it was a stew concocted not by "irresponsible elements", but by the main leaders of this criminal sect, who wanted to plunge Barcelona and the whole of Catalonia into another wave of assassinations and arson attacks like the ones last July now the autonomous government had started to re-establish order in the rearguard: things could have turned out so differently if the government had only done that in that horrendous July!

As then, the Catalan Assault Guards endured the fiercest and the foulest part of the battle; as soon as it was over, it should have belied forever the myth that the anarchists defeated the insurgent regiments. If they weren't able to win now, even though they possessed cannon, mortars and machine-guns (brought from the front), how could they have possibly done so on 19 July "with chests bared" as the myth has it?

The men of the Estat Català and Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia fought by the side of our Assault Guards and both parties were strengthened as a result. The four stripes, the frenzied anarchists would have replaced everywhere with their red and black flag – the same as the Falange's – are once more waving in the wind on all official buildings by the side of the Republic's and the is a comforting sight amid the general gloom.

I don't want to say another word on the subject.

I write to you seated at a table strewn with books. I went on a spree buying them thinking they'd distract me while the dismal jamboree proceeded – for I was shut indoors by dint of our "word of honour" – but I'll tell you the truth: I've not read a single one. I really wasn't in the mood. I amused myself by writing a *Moonlight Sonata* that I'm also sending you; better to seek refuge in Beethoven. I have just started Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, and find it gripping; I'm living in Saint Petersburg in 1812 rather than in Barcelona in 1937. As far as Barcelona in 1937 or 1936 are concerned, I suspect we won't understand a thing until some brilliant historian invents a new theory: "historic son-of-a-bitchism". I am ever more convinced of the role played in many of these otherwise incomprehensible episodes, by double agents, provocateurs, the most sordid, devious people, and, in a word, true sons of a bitch.

Monegrillo, Monday 17 May 1937

Dear Màrius:

I managed to find some sheets of sky blue, pink and yellow paper and so can write to you once again. The second day of my stay in this village in Els Monegres has begun and I'm writing to you from a barn where we've set up camp: a captain (from the militia), three lieutenants (two from the militia and one – myself – from the War School) and a militiaman who acts as batman to all four. We're surrounded by the familiar sounds of rural life, sparrows chirping, hens clucking, pigs grunting, goats bleating and donkeys braying.

We drove through Lleida on Friday in a convoy of lorries. In Alcarràs and Fraga the planted fields are now tall and full of poppies; so many the fields look a mass of red under the blue sky over the plains. We crossed the Cinca over the bridge in Fraga: for the second time in my life I left Catalonia, though why do I say that? Why shouldn't Els Monegres be Catalonia as well? Why shouldn't the whole of Aragon? This country that I'm seeing for the first time in my life is strangely familiar; I don't feel "far from my country" at all.

For many, many kilometres after Fraga, a town as Catalan as Lleida, there are no towns at all. We passed Candanos and Bujaraloz, by now in Aragon. Today all these districts are occupied by Catalan troops that until recently formed part of the Army of Catalonia; it would have been easy enough for our government to issue a decree legalizing an annexation that already existed *de facto*. The harsh realities of war have underlined the fact that our strategic, and consequently natural, frontier is many kilometres beyond the administrative frontier;

it's the one that was instinctively established by our columns (from the Principality and Valencia) when they cemented their positions on a front that ran through Aragon from north to south alongside – though not including – Huéscar, Saragossa and Teruel. These thirty thousand or so kilometres occupied by Catalan-Valencians (a territory as extensive as that controlled by the Generalitat) is the only considerable gain – perhaps even the only gain *tout court* – made by Republican forces in the whole war so far, and includes a large number of Catalan-speaking inhabitants, and towns with Catalan names like Fraga, Mequinensa, Tamarit de Llitera or Vall-de-Roures. Why has our government done nothing to legalize the annexation, at least in respect of the areas which speak our language? It can't be because of diplomacy that is hardly its strong point; even less so because of scruples about the constitution, since we've seen few signs of those in the governors they've tolerated and still tolerate lording it over Catalonia as if they were the masters and all from parties and sects without a member of parliament between them while the Lliga, voted for by half the country, has been reduced to silence when not persecuted to death as if it were "fascist". Was there ever a plebiscite in the Aragon occupied by Catalan forces? Has the will of its people ever been taken into consideration? What's true enough is that an orderly Catalan occupation, carried out under the flag with four stripes that is also Aragon's, would have been greeted in these parts with more enthusiasm than the anarchist invasion some have suffered. An Aragonese Generalitat, in a federation with Catalonia's, could have been the legal framework for the *faits accomplis*. Perhaps our governors are geniuses that see things we ordinary mortals don't see; perhaps if Ramon Berenguer el Sant, rather than conquering New Catalonia and annexing Aragon through marriage, had proclaimed the emancipation of prostitutes and above all the collectivising of

barbershops, he'd be much more famous and "universal" than he is.

I feel increasingly out of step with the "separatists" in the Principality and that should help you understand how my place wasn't in Estat Català rather than the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia. "Separatism" is a mean idea; without leaving the Republic to which we belong, we have a long task ahead if we can only grasp what that is. We can triple our self-governing territory without leaving the framework of Spain: wasn't Hungary a large enough kingdom within the Austrian empire and Finland a prestigious dukedom under the Tsars? Isn't Canada, a "dominion" of the British Crown, a thousand times more enviable than Panama, an independent republic? Separation is within the reach of any South American "banana" republic: what we must do is make ourselves large and strong. Only surface thinkers can scorn the importance that size of territory has in the lives of nations; a minimum of space and variety is necessary if one doesn't want to choke to death. It's wearisome if it's always the same, always the Empordà and the *sardana*; that is simply much ado about nothing.

Used to the cacophony in Madrid, I can't come to terms with the silence in this sector; a silence interrupted not by cannons, but by the thunder resounding in the Sierra as a most romantic storm brews. A low, leaden sky covers the majestic desolation of the boundless steppe; if I had a horse I would gallop in the Sierra de Alcubierre, as they say Goethe liked to do on days like this. I haven't a horse, and alas, I'm no Goethe.

These villages in the desert possess neither fountains nor wells; next to each there are one or several pools that fill up when it rains and provide all the water they have. By the pools on the outskirts of Monegrillo, now full to the brim with the rain that is falling, we hear moorhens sing, birds of passage; I'm not sure if they are just arriving or preparing to emigrate. The Sierra de Alcubierre is full of foxes; our militiamen catch them

young and try to tame them: all in vain; every cuddle they give is met with a bite in response; it is curious how such buffoonish animals can be so sly and ferocious — but aren't women just like that? Don't we all carry "cruel teeth marks in our mortal heart" and despite all that we keep on trying?

The sky has turned so dark I can't see myself; this barn has only the tiniest window. I should light an oil "light" that I "invented" yesterday with a tin can for a lamp and a piece of string for a wick; I have so little faith in my invention I prefer to stop writing.

Monegrillo, Tuesday 18 May 1937

Dear Mercè:

We've just marched to Farlete, to join the other forces from the battalion already there. As the days pass I feel more at one with these steppes. A completely straight road leading to the horizon is hypnotic; it seems to take you to mathematical infinity. Even more so, if a magnificent desert extends on either side of this lone ribbon. Our duties barely allow us to leave the military base where we are detailed, but in my free time I walk out by myself (none of my comrades from the War School are here; only anarchists). The silence of the steppe is stunning; not a single sound. As evening falls, only the music of crickets.

The land is grey and gently undulating, with the occasional small hill, not one tree disrupts the endless perspective. The bushes of rosemary in the distance look like trees since the general vegetation is so stunted, made as it is from small clumps of thyme (there are so many, its bitter scent predominates) and large expanses of esparto you'd think were cultivated if it weren't for their dark grey colour and the fact they grow untidily like wild herbs. Junipers grow in the Sierra of Alcubierre: there's no other tree in the area. Everything is juniper: the wood they burn, the beams they construct their houses with, the doors and furniture. We have a good stock in our barn; when we cut it to light the fire (nights are cold in these parts), the vermilion heart of the logs gives off a very strong, bitter scent. Our militiamen use medium size juniper branches to make the bludgeons they like to flourish in Barcelona.

The boundaries of Monegrillo are extensive (160 square kilometres) and strictly dry lands: there are some 700

inhabitants, that is, a ratio of four per square kilometre. They produce only wheat. On my walks southwards I have in fact seen some young vines; clearly someone has tried to grow vines recently. These people's diet consisted exclusively of bread and salted pork; the revolution has led to improvements in this area, so generally the atmosphere is favourable. Not all can be bad in this revolution that has been carried out so clumsily.

There's a house next to the barn, it's not much more than a cabin but has a huge fireplace on the ground floor where our cooks prepare our grub. I often sit on a bench and listen to the militiamen chatting - from the Empordà to a man. They've put straw mattresses up in the attic and create a fine racket at night. They are horny and witless and chase the local girls, silent brunettes of the desert, who completely ignore them. Nevertheless, they feel no rancour and someone has scrawled this profound thought in charcoal on the attic wall - "These Monegrillo lasses are lovely".

Being so used to Madrid, I find the silence on this front extraordinary. In all the time I've been here I've only heard three cannon salvos; I expect our batteries are firing so cobwebs don't grow in the souls of their guns.

When I contemplate the great Monegres plain from a high point in the Sierra of Alcubierre, I've sometimes thought that all our troubles derive from the aversion our country folk felt for these great barren wastes, an aversion that's easily understood. If rather than sending our surplus population to Sardinia, Sicily - and to Greece! - and in modern times to Algeria or South America, we'd sent them to these deserts (four inhabitants per square kilometre is paltry and Monegrillo is one inhabited spot in the desert!), we could have transformed this land as we did the plain of Urgell, and Catalonia would have been much the stronger because it could have counted on a much more extensive, defensible territorial base. This could be a fresh

opportunity, but who now is thinking of such things in Barcelona? They are too busy redeeming the entire universe and barbers and prostitutes in particular.

Make sure you write; my only companions are your letters – yours, and those from Màrius and from Nuri. You should use this address:

Joan Sales, Advisory Lieutenant, 3rd Company
Madrid Battalion, Brigade 121, Division 26
(Durruti)
Saragossa Front

As you can see, we're no longer "technical companions" but "advisory lieutenants". The famous "militarisation" has to show its head somewhere; and I can tell you in all confidence that, apart from this and re-naming us "battalion", "brigade" and "division", very little has changed: the militiamen don't want to be called "soldiers" and look askance at their people who have pinned on a lieutenant's or captain's stripes – the famous "tomatoes" that were once so hated. However strange it might seem, they hold us "advisors" from the War School in higher esteem; as if they found it natural enough that we, who aren't anarchists, should wear "tomatoes" and call ourselves "lieutenants". I could write you a whole book about these militiamen from the former Durruti column that's now a division; some of them are not simply fine men, but extraordinarily fine men. But this is no time to write about this very complex matter. As complex as this war, that I can't imagine myself explain it to my great-great grandchildren (in 2010, when I'm ninety-eight, I'll be a great-great grandfather), so they understand something about all this.

Santa Creu de Nogueres, Wednesday 1st December 1937

My dear friend Esperança:

I'm quite embarrassed it's been so long since I wrote. I hope you will understand that if I forget to write it doesn't mean I've forgotten you.

As far as I go, I'm here in this abandoned village where I've finally fulfilled a lifelong dream: to live in an uninhabited village. At least, that is, without any permanent civilian population, only the military. The military, and those in transit, namely us, are occupying the few houses that are still standing, more or less. If I don't have *Chestnut*, who gave me hours of pure bliss in Esterqüel, I do possess a mule and a cart; the mule won't let anyone ride it though it does pull the cart like a proper mule. Thus I ride on cart tracks through this devastated land where all the villages are as uninhabited as ours. In particular a little road that goes to Nogueres – another ghost town - en route to Villar and Herrera following a very cheerful river, brimming with water that is called Cámaras on the military ordinance map, a very strange name for a river. The local country people, unaware of this name, simply call it "the river" or else the "Nogueres river" if you try to make them be more precise: could it be another Noguera, the one that gave birth to the Pallaresa and Ribagorçana? Or could it be that long ago they called the walnut tree "*noguera*" around here in Catalan instead of the Spanish "*nogal*". These are questions I put before you, not as a lioness of Numidia, but as my colleague in the Catalan teaching department established by the Generalitat of Catalonia. Naturally I'm referring to the folk in Villar and Herrera, not locals from Santa Creu and Nogueres since there's

no trace of them; you'd have to ask the mice what the river is called, the only natives who've stayed on in the ruined houses.

This little road and river run from north to south. To the west are the Herrera mountains, on the highest peak of which, 1,346 metres above sea level on our maps, is a sanctuary dedicated to the Virgin where I lived for several days when I was still in charge of the 4th Company of Grenadier-Fusiliers. It is a very pretty mountain range, with lots of brooks that tinkle like cowbells across small valleys where flocks come to graze from Villar and Herrera. Only thirty or so days ago when we arrived here we picked basketfuls of *lactarius* mushrooms; there were as many as there were dead leaves in the poplar groves. The Aragonese won't eat them because they think they're disgusting and are astonished when they see us doing so. It's too late in the season now; the nights are too harsh; when the early morning sun begins to glimmer, it's sparkling with frost.

When we arrived the saffron was in flower and the country women were up before daybreak collecting it. At that hour the flowers hadn't opened; they are flowers that sleep at night like us, and must be picked when closed. It's such a beautiful crop I'd love to see it introduced into Catalonia, where I think nobody grows it. Meanwhile flocks of storks flew overhead at a great height, across an almost always cloudy sky, following the same, invariable path, to the south-west; we've not seen any for many a day, they must all be in Andalusia or Africa by now. We won't see them again until the end of winter, when they'll take the same route in the opposite direction. Then the war will duly resume and the end will perhaps be in sight, and about time to; however, that doesn't concern the storks. They're not interested in our ridiculous wars, and isn't that most sensible of them?

The fields of saffron are now reduced to tiny stalks, gone are the flowers that were so pretty. Great flocks of starlings are

flying over the olive groves on the plain; they come in their thousands. The olives are big and black and with nobody to pick them, they can crunch them in peace. Days and nights are now clear, apart from the occasional overcast morning; around ten pm we watch the Dog Star twinkle desperately above the horizon reminding us that winter is coming upon us in giant strides.

We spend our evenings by a huge fireplace where we burn whole woods of kermes oaks and pine trunks. We don't have to go to the woods to cut them down; they're simply the half-singed rafters of houses that have collapsed. We find bundles of kermes oak logs stacked in each house; the wood supplies for the poor people the war has scattered far from their lands, heaven knows where. Judging by the number of soot-blackened houses, the village must have been ravaged by fires as well as bombs. What will its inhabitants find when they return in peacetime?

Meanwhile, powerless to do anything about any of this, we are living the good life.; we spend the long evenings smoking our pipes by the fireside; we drink good wine (every house has its stock), eat plenty of partridge, woodpigeon, rabbit and hare, that we hunt easily without grapeshot (with rifle bullets) as they have bred astonishingly now the area is so abandoned. We have a first-rate chef in El Cisco; his stews are a string of poems (and not exactly the ones that get laurels at poetry festivals). His signature dish when he was working at the Hotel Majestic in Barcelona, was jugged hare; we find the necessary strong wine we need, like all other wine, in the abandoned cellars. On the days he cooks hare we shout to a man: if this be war, we never want peace!

Santa Creu de Nogueres, Tuesday 7 December 1937

Dear Mercè:

I've managed to fix all the details in a complicated arrangement that will allow both Nuris to spend Christmas with me in this abandoned village. They'll be accompanied from Barcelona by Captain Gordó's wife, the doctor's and the commander's with their only daughter. To mount this operation we needed three days on the hoof, for which my mule and my cart came in very handy; I should tell you I have a mule in my charge in my capacity as lieutenant "acting captain" of the auxiliary weapons company. This mule, together with another yet to join the ranks, should pull a 0.70 cannon or a 0.85 mortar; these cannon and mortar are still conspicuously absent and so I use the mule to travel around by cart, for it wouldn't be right for a mule in the Army of Catalonia to spend the whole blessed day doing nothing. The mule could claim quite justifiably that it is a civilian, not military animal; indeed we found it all alone in this village, where it had taken to grazing on the proliferating weeds so as not to starve to death. We decided to militarize it and enlist it in my company, where it won't be short of oats: the "machine-gun" mules, that have covered themselves in glory in so many campaigns, share them like good brothers.

We also found the cart in the village; for sure it had a broken spring, but Captain Gordó, a great do-it-yourself man, repaired it. Harnessed to the cart the mule goes at a terrific gallop, especially when you spur him on with a crack of the whip. I've just returned from this ride to find your letter waiting for me. You'd not written for so long!

Next to it I found several from Nuri (she and I write to each other daily). She says she will arrive the day after tomorrow with our girl, the wives of the captain, doctor and commander and the latter's daughter; everything hinted in veiled words because this is top secret. Wives are banned from the coming to the front; if I'm telling you, it's because the brigadier is turning a blind eye and I trust nobody apart from you will understand my writing..

The idea of bringing them here was no doubt inspired by the Koran: "as the mountain won't come to me, I must go to the mountain". They won't give us leave to go and see our wives, so we must bring them to the front. This *is* a front inasmuch as there is only a no man's land between us and the enemy, though this no man's land is quite extensive, a deep valley with several devastated, deserted villages. We occupy one sierra and the enemy the one opposite, a number of kilometres away as the crow flies. We are out of range, not only of infantry fire, but also of their basic artillery; they'd have to fire 15.5 cannons for their shells to reach us. What's more winter is already upon us, and winter in the mountains of Aragon is severe, so we will have peace and quiet for months. I say this so you don't think it's crazy to bring wives and children here; you know I don't do crazy things and even less so when women are involved (not to say children). Commonsense has always been my strong point, together, as you see, with modesty.

You'll appreciate that the commander, doctor, captain and I speak of nothing else. Nor do I need to tell you that we seem totally ridiculous in other people's eyes. While they gossiped, we got ready the house in Santa Creu that's in the best state of preservation: we had soldiers whitewash it using lime we found in a sack in an abandoned house and we have furnished it as best we can. We've had to rebuild the beds with various bits and pieces, nail wedges to wonky chair legs and replace broken table legs. As we've gradually discovered, this village was set

on fire, not by enemy bombs, as we'd imagined, but by their very own local anarchists; it turns out that wretched Santa Creu first fell into their hands, was then taken by the enemy and finally by our forces. The anarchists had the stupid brainwave to set it alight before leaving. The 30th division should have enforced order as it did in Esterqüel and wherever we camped down but it was too late: the inhabitants had fled, horrified by the upheavals of the war.

Perhaps I didn't mention that the doctor and commander are living in another village, behind ours; so their wives, with the commander's daughter, will travel with ours but won't come to Santa Creu; they will, of course, stay with their men in Villar. The commander, as head of battalion, ordered all single officers to help us in every way possible. You'd see them come from their respective positions with a straw mattress, a spring mattress, a paraffin lamp, pots and plates, all plundered, naturally, from deserted villages, especially those in no man's land. One lieutenant even went to the woods surrounding the sanctuary of the Virgin of Herrera and caught a couple of goldfinch he brought in a cage for the little girl. They do all this while heartily cursing us as they take it for granted that we're preparing some kind of honeymoon night and tell jokes, inspired by the idea, of the kind most likely to offend ears as chaste as ours.

I suspect it will be our loveliest Christmas ever.

Santa Creu de Nogueres, Tuesday, 21 December, 1937

Dear Màrius,

Big Nuri is sitting next to me and is also writing to you. Close-by on her bed little Nuri is amusing herself drawing. They arrived in splendid spirits on the 9th and have now been here for a dozen days. I reckon it's doing them the world of good.

We write to you on an old extendable walnut table, like the one in our study in Barcelona; you are familiar with the rest of the furniture in our room; they are the same that were in the auxiliary weapons office. After polishing the bureau hard to bring up a shine, my wife put mortar bowls and copper hot chocolate jugs on top, and on the table two copper and two ceramic candelabra and a lamp that is no Aladdin's. All these lights are lit in the evening and look really pretty.

Our bedroom is very spacious, has freshly whitewashed walls, and a balcony that looks over the river; it's just a pity the balcony's window panes are missing, and we've been unable to replace a single one because we've found none in the village: most houses had none and the few that did exist were shattered by bombing raids.

There is a line of small mountains beyond the river; faraway, to the right, to the southwest, stand the huge crags of the Cugalón, where we can see the advance lines of the enemy through our binoculars. No need to be afraid: a vast no man's land lies between them and us, an enclosed valley of abandoned villages. Before the wives and children arrived, I went to one of these villages with the sergeant and clerk, all aboard my cart, hunting out and requisitioning furniture and containers that might be useful; an enemy patrol was there doing precisely the

same thing. It's not the first time, but no harm's ever done: we and they act as if we haven't seen each other, they search one end of the village and we the other. I sometimes even wonder whether this war won't end when the two frontlines reach an agreement against the two rearguards – how can we possibly not like one another if we are all soldiers together having a bad time when battle is joined? Monsters and cannibals aren't at the front but in the rearguard; ours and theirs.

Indeed nothing would be easier than to move from one army to the other across no man's land but the fact is that no soldier from either has done so since the fronts stabilised and both sides began conscripting men. When I was serving in the Durruti column, soldiers from the Foreign Legion sometimes came over to our side, not for ideological reasons but because they were Catalans. They are the last soldiers I recall doing so. Once the fronts stabilised, the war took on a much more "territorial" character: in each war zone soldiers join the ranks as they are called up and they don't imagine for one moment that they could leave, much less go over to the opposition. Nuri and I would be delighted if "Borrell the Marxist", if he still exists, would explain this phenomenon, that man who swotted up the *Anti-Dühring* and the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* and wore a truly scary "Marxist" expression on his face: in this "proletarian" war against the "bourgeoisie", when our government calls to arms conscripts it doesn't specify that it only wants the former. *Vice versa*, I imagine the Burgos Junta doesn't exclude them; the "proletarians" join the Francoist army with as much discipline, if not more, as they do ours, so much for that "class-struggle" that "Borrell the Marxist" should explain to us in the bright light from his "dialectical materialism" and with the pertinent harangues from the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* and the *Anti-Dühring*.

Days ago two or three feet of snow covered everything; it's melted now and only patches remain in among the kermes

oaks. As Nuri is writing to you, I won't tell you all about her journey; I imagine she will. Your comments on the Occitans seem a model of good sense: we have enough to do uniting Catalan-speaking lands. I am amazed that you've set about reading Corneille and are already on the third act of *Cinna*; you are a bomb-proof reader. I'm also pleased to hear that, influenced by reading Corneille, you're shaping an idea for a tragedy about Martí the Young.

Santa Creu de Nogueres, Wednesday 22 December 1937

Dear Màrius:

Last night, when we were asleep in bed, the battalion band woke us up with a lively reveille fanfare; the whole crew had come with the band from Villar to Santa Creu to give us a surprise.

We got up cursing the "jokes in bad taste" Commander Domínguez is always thinking up. They'd set up on the ground floor as if they owned the place, some dancing on the table, others singing or drinking the champagne and cognac we'd so zealously put away in the pantry for Christmas. From the greenest bugler to the commander, they were all making a devilish din – need I say that the commander was personally leading the shenanigans?

It took us some time to find out what all the fuss was about; we finally found out headquarters had just received news that Teruel had fallen to the forces of the Republic.

I hardly need to tell you we immediately joined the party when we heard that: you can't imagine the carousing, toasts and heaven knows what we got up to into the early hours, when exhausted they decided to return to Villar to bugle blasts and drum-rolls.

Once silence was restored in Santa Creu, I recalled a day six months ago. I'd been to Martín del Río to meet your brother; it was the beginning of summer. The poplars were a deep green and swifts swooped and mewled back and forth; Víctor took me to the front trenches. From the parapets we caught glimpses of the belfry and houses in Vivel that was in enemy hands. We suddenly heard bells start to peal and military bands, shouts of glee and cannon salvos. We all thought the same thought but

said nothing: "they're celebrating the fall of Bilbao". In effect the morning after we read the news in the dailies which always reach the front late. After mounting desperate resistance that will always bring glory to the Basque nationalists that led it, Bilbao had fallen into enemy hands on the first day of summer and now, on the first day of winter, Catalan and Valencian soldiers had entered Teruel.

Our Christmas will be happier than last year's. After being put so hard to the test, perhaps our country will enjoy a period of peace and splendour. A year this Christmas I was promoted to infantry adjutant in the Army of Catalonia, now, alas, officially, the Eastern Army. I'm pleased this first anniversary coincides with a moment like the taking of Teruel. You can't imagine the euphoria among the troops, especially among volunteers and officers, though it's sad to think how many of theirs and ours must have fallen in the snow during the fighting. A winter battle is a cruel battle; poor anonymous heroes for a cause that's incredibly confused.

Let's pray for both sides.

The military significance of the taking of Teruel is much more important than the rather insignificant character of the city itself; an attack was launched on Huéscar in June, after it had been under siege when we took Chimilla and Alerre; Catalan forces finally had to lift the siege when they suffered huge casualties. After the fall of Belchite an attempt was made to encircle Saragossa by releasing several divisions from the north and east — a surprise move in two simultaneous offensives. That was also a failure. If I remember rightly, in October. So this is the third ambitious offensive undertaken by our forces in Aragon in the last six months, and it has now been crowned by success. The taking of Belchite must have helped considerably; though it was a hard fought contest, it eliminated an enemy position that had immobilised all our forces. Forgive

these military excursions of mine; they're inspired by a bliss I know you will share from your sickbed.

Many regards from Jorzapé, the machine-gunners' commissar. He's from Lleida and is twenty years old; perhaps I've mentioned him before. He knows you but I'm afraid you won't remember him. He says I should tell you he's "the one who worked in Felicià Soler's shop".

(Added in 1948): Enric Usall died in the battle for Teruel, but it was months before we found out.

Santa Creu de Nogueres, Friday 24 December 1937

Dear Mercè,

We're having a wonderful time, feudal style. While it snowed, we stayed by the fireside; now the weather is splendid, we're making the most of it riding in my cart. We often go down to Villar de los Navarros, to battalion headquarters: we go to visit the wives of the commander, doctor and the odd other officer who has also fetched his wife, inspired by our example. We are so pleased to be able to celebrate the greatest day in the year in this peaceful spot, far from the bombing raids and hunger in Barcelona.

Big Nuri has felt so euphoric since she arrived that she's not said a word more about divorce; she says I'm so handsome in my field uniform. As for the little one, who has never said she wanted divorce from her father, I take her to the cinema every night. She sits on one of the friar's chairs in front of a sheet hanging over the entrance to the alcove (perhaps I didn't mention that our bedroom is one with a room and an alcove), while from the other side of the sheet, I project a circle of light onto it with the cart lamp. Then I walk a host of cardboard cut-out dolls past the glass of the lamp that are then projected in magnified Chinese shadows; the children speak, sing and dance. So even they even have their dramas, not that they could ever rival *Cinna*, but it's a good show all the same.

Santa Creu de Nogueres, Monday 27 December 1937

Dear Mercè:

I won't describe our Christmas because it would take for ever. I'll just say that the battalion was brimming with joy and united like one big family around the commander. We are lucky he is Catholic, as many others of us are too, though we're "quite unworthy". On the day that is Christianity's great celebration we missed not having a military chaplain to complete the party with midnight mass. I should underline that the doctor and auxiliary nurse, both good musicians, had prepared a surprise for us in the form of a choir of soldiers who, led by them, sang a whole repertoire of Catalan Christmas carols to everyone's delight; you can imagine little Nuria hit "the log"¹ – that was, alas, a piece of rafter from a ruined house; the success of the event surprised even the organisers: there were sweets, wafers, nougat and chocolate rolls. All aided and abetted by various disguises and the dressing up of our little girl (why are grown ups never so happy than when mocking the innocence of children?), all the elements of the "republic of the pipe" and more than ever by Captain Gordó. The really magnificent weather helped the general euphoria.

¹ Catalan children at Christmas have their own "tió" a small log painted with a cheery face that is placed over small presents (sweets, nougat...) and under a blanket on Christmas Eve. Children beat the blanket with a stick and the log "shits" presents. It is a pre-Christian pagan Mediterranean tradition that celebrates fertility.

Machine-gunners, 524 Battalion, 12 January 1938

Dear Màrius:

As the infantry cannon and 0.85 mortars haven't arrived yet and don't look as if they will for a good long time, the label of "auxiliary weapons company" has been discarded and now I'm simply posted, as a lieutenant "in the mortar section" of the machine-gunners led by Captain Gordò. Jorzapé is our commissar: he's nineteen years old though he claims he's twenty. He's turned into a man fighting in the war: he was seventeen when he volunteered. In peace time he was a shop assistant in the clothes shop run by Sr Felicià Soler in Lleida. You were this gentleman's doctor and Jorzapé remembers seeing you there a lot....

I'd not set foot in my beloved birthplace for six months: perhaps an inspired elegy should come to my pen but I don't feel at all inspired. I'll simply whisper in your ear that I almost died of cold there (there's no anthracite left and people don't remember what coke is) and in the restaurant where we ate out once and still regret it (given the widespread starvation), they charged us a hundred pesetas a head, which I reckon is a fantastic amount. Obviously, it *was* roasted sea bass; we had to make our last meal together a real occasion. So you see, roast sea bass still exists and can still console a disenchanted poet.

Base 7th, n.12, Friday 28 January 1938

Dear Màrius:

You ask me what I preferred, the roast sea bass or the performance of *The King and the Monk*, and add that you're afraid the question implies a lack of "respect for our classics". But isn't roast sea bass a classic too? Your second question is even more misguided: a poet disenchanted by what? We can be disenchanted by so much at the moment.

Why should I hide this from you? Apart from Nuri, you're probably by a long chalk the person in this world who most understands my contradictory feelings. After the month they were with me in Santa Creu, the moment they left I sank into a depression I should probably not even mention to you; the fact is Barcelona really got under my skin

Not simply because it looks so desolate, what with all the rubbish, all the rubble from the bombing raids and all the hunger you see on everybody's face in the street; all that is the wretchedness inherent in war that we must view with resignation. It's the carnival in politics that's more brazen than ever; the poor soldiers at the front have to fight battles like Teruel, where hundreds of feet had to be amputated because they'd developed gangrene from the freezing cold, while the politicians in Barcelona, thousands of politicians of military age, are busy plastering walls with posters that would be laughable if they didn't make you want to vomit, or are delivering long harangues on the radio. These ultra-important politicians who didn't join their respective levy because they are indispensable in the rearguard would make a whole extra division, but who then would stick up those posters, who'd come out with all that nonsense on the radio? They're so

lacking in awareness and so third-rate, they are unable to imagine the contempt and disgust they inspire, as they agitate in the increasingly suffocating vacuum the people creates around them. The men in the Estat Català have attained a mediocrity that goes beyond anything you might have feared; they could have played a role similar to the Basque nationalists but they let others take the initiative. By now it's a party that's lost all its prestige; the anarchists decapitated it when they murdered the Badia brothers who had had a clear view of things before the war: Estat Català could and should finish off the FAI before the FAI finished off Catalonia. And now it turns out that the prestige for doing that has fallen to the Unified Socialist Party as if they were the only ones who'd stood up to them, and in their turn this party, that sprang from the fusion of a number of groups, among others the blessed *Unió Socialista de Catalunya*, is now controlled by the communist minority. If only they were communists with a Catalan sense of dignity, but not content with joining the Third International, a fateful enough step, they are now quickly being transformed into a section of the Spanish Communist Party, a sinister body if ever there was one: by now we even fear that La Pasionaria is more in charge in Catalonia than the Generalitat – a woman who has said that "petty-bourgeois nationalists should be put before a firing squad"! Did you realise this Pasionaria gets her name from her flights of dubious mysticism when she was a fanatical Catholic? She has abandoned Catholicism, but not her dubious, mystical fanaticism that's now at the service of "the dictatorship of the proletariat": her people have turned this neurotic woman into nothing less than an idol...

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