

CHAPTER THREE

That Valley in Spain Called Jarama (1936-38)

Returning to England in the summer of 1936, after seven years in the United States, I faced the contradiction between my communist convictions and my filial duty to help support my family. But I had no doubts about joining the Communist Party. Right away, I marched into Party headquarters, near Covent Garden. After a few not too probing questions about my past, I was issued a membership card.

Earning a living was not so simple. At Columbia I had read the "World's Best Books". These were no help in getting a job. My brother Maurice, was. He was a travelling salesman for Wardour Street film distributors, driving round the Home Counties all the week, signing contracts with local cinemas. The usual deal was one smash hit with two bits of trash. It was a crooked game and a dog's life, four nights on the road, talking fast and standing drinks. Maurice hated it almost as much as I did. But he made a living. I never could, despite all his patient coaching. We were worlds apart but he was a good brother, often lending me money which we knew I could never repay. He also introduced me to girls, and even subscribed to the "Daily Worker".

I quit and took two part-time, poor paying but politically satisfying jobs, doing secretarial work for the left-labour M.P. John Parker and working for a left-wing student magazine, "University Forward". This took me in the summer of 1936 to an international student conference at Oxford, where a young Spanish delegate delivered a fiery speech, phlegmatically translated by a placid British blonde. The Spaniard told of the fascist uprising against Spain's democratically-elected Popular Front republican government. The whole audience rose, clapping, shouting, and cheering. That got my mind, if not my body, moving towards Spain.

In October I was reading proof in the magazine "office", a corner shared with the Labour M.P. and the New Fabian Research Society. In strode John Cornford, a curly-headed giant with a white bandage round his black hair. Cornford was Communist poet who had been a student organizer at Cambridge. He had gone to Spain in August, "to see what it was all about", fought for the Republic, been wounded in the head, returned to

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England to report and to recruit more British volunteers. This heroic figure, five years younger than myself, set me one step further on the road to Spain. He had already fought fascism on the barricades while I was working in a Bloomsbury office.

The inspiration I derived from this one man was soon intensified by hundreds of thousands, in a mass demonstration which came to be known as the Battle of Cable Street.

Sir Oswald Mosley and his fascist Blackshirts had sunk to the level of making anti-Semitism a key plank in their program. They planned a provocative march through London's largely Jewish East End, on Sunday, October 5, 1936. I was there. Colin Cross described what happened in his book, The Fascists in Britain.

The Jews feared that the march would be the prelude to a real pogrom. The left saw it in terms of fascist aggression. The Spanish Civil War had just broken out...

Using the Spanish Republican motto 'They Shall Not Pass', the Communists rallied their supporters physically to stop British Union...

Game (Sir Phillip Game, Commissioner of Police) made preparations as if for battle. Into the East End he drafted 6,000 constables....together with the whole mounted division...with wireless and an autogiro flying overhead...

The Blackshirts, expecting the battle of their lives, paraded in threes... near the Tower of London with a strong force of police to protect them from the crowd..

Farther in the East End...thousands of demonstrators jammed the streets, the sheer physical pressure of human bodies smashing shop windows. The center of the trouble was Cable Street, where crowds attempted to erect barricades... The police strategy was to try to clear a passage for traffic - including the Mosley procession - to pass. Again and again the foot and mounted police charged with drawn batons but failed to make headway against the surging demonstrators... Some of the policemen were hitting out indiscriminately with their truncheons...

Game....ordered Mosley...to disperse his Blackshirts... Cheering rose in the air as the news spread through the crowd..

I shared the joy of this mass of anti-fascists. The more they crowded me - and at times the pressure was so great I could hardly breathe - the more strength I drew from them.

What finally fixed my determination to go to Spain was an article in the co-operative paper Reynolds News, about the middle of November. It was by the socialist journalist H.N.Brailsford, and described the entry into Madrid of a formation of German anti-nazis, armed, marching like guardsmen and bringing with them the discipline and military training which the Spaniards, with their blend of quixotism and anarchism, lacked. There

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in my furnished room in Paddington I could hear them singing the same stirring songs we students had sung on demonstrations in the States and could see them marching in Madrid. I had to go and join them.

There was only one obstacle. After joining the Communist Party I had reported to the Paddington branch which instructed me to join the Labour Party and keep my C.P. membership secret. But it was the C.P. which was recruiting British members of the International Brigades. Without consulting either party, with none of the discipline which I admired in the Germans, I rushed to 16 King Street, Covent Garden. There, bounding up the rickety stairs of the warrenlike building I found my way into the office of "Robbie" Robson, in charge of recruiting for the I.B. Robbie was a proletarian and I, for all my reading of Marx, was not. It stood out a mile. He fired questions at me.

"Why have you come here like this without permission from your branch? Why do you want to go to Spain? Have you had any military experience?" The Party was trying hard - and with reasonable success - to keep out adventurers, spies, saboteurs. I played my trump card: I had been in the Officers' Training Corps at Cheltenham College many of whose graduates went to Woolwich or Sandhurst. Robbie must have groaned inwardly. But I was young, keen and knew French, the lingua franca of the Brigades. He gave in. Go home for Christmas, he said, perhaps thinking that the comforts of home and the Yorkshire climate would cool my ardour. It did not.

I returned after Christmas. As instructed by Robbie I bought a New Years week-end excursion ticket to Paris. I sold the monogrammed gold cufflinks, given to me for my barmitzvah² at a shop on Lower Regent Street for eighteen shillings, and went to the Regent's Palace. There in the gaudy, raucous lounge, on the hotel stationery, I wrote to my dotting mother where I was going and why. It was a hard letter to write, harder than the one I wrote a month later from Spain to a friend in U.S. saying: "I came here because life in England was too useless to be living at such a time as this. If I'm to be among those who don't get back, I'll have concentrated so much into the last short space that it will be as good as having lasted for a normal span."³ My letter to mother was less morbid, more light-hearted. And in a light-hearted mood I went to see a Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers

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film. To kill time I saw it round twice. Then, to Victoria Station where there were 160 of us young, able-bodied holiday makers off for a spree in Gay Paree - with strict instructions not to talk to each other.⁴

Once in Paris, instead of heading for the night spots of Montmartre, we assembled on an empty lot cordoned off by the then powerful French Communist Party. Here our British ranks - on speaking terms with each other at last - were swelled by 14 Americans and half a dozen East Europeans. Now my command of French was put to use, with the absurd result that I was elected "Political Delegate" of the whole contingent. There must have been dozens of members politically far better qualified for the job, but their not knowing French would have made it harder for them to cope in the tricky situation of "non-interventionist" France. I was sensibly relieved of my inflated responsibilities later.

Meanwhile with the help of the French railway workers we boarded a train to Perpignan, in the south of France, a dozen miles from the Spanish border. I slept on the overhead luggage rack. In Perpignan we were eyed suspiciously by French officials and hospitably looked after by the local comrades, who taught us, among more important lessons, how to drink wine from a porrón.⁵ On the night of January 2, 1937, we crossed the border into Spain in the relative comfort of crowded busses, which the border-guards waved past either out of friendship or with well-greased palms. We were in Spain !

Another few miles drive and we reached Figueras, a small town with a big stone 18th century fortress-prison. There we were billeted for a couple of nights. And there, I squim at the memory, I addressed the assembled contingent in the courtyard.

The British volunteers were overwhelmingly working-class, used to drinking tea and beer, not wine. To celebrate their arrival they had descended on the little town for a couple of drinks, knocking back the wine as if it were beer. A couple of them rolled back to the fortress blind drunk and were bundled into the dungeons for the night, to sober up. The unit was assembled and I, taking my election as Political Representative seriously (instead of realising that I was just a jumped up interpreter) delivered a lecture on our glorious mission, which called for sobriety and exemplary behaviour. This was no doubt true but the sermon should have been more in a

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racy, earthy style than my blend of Columbia University and Cheltenham College. The blokes took it well enough. So well that I made a similar mistake next day.

We were on the ramshackle train, clattering along at snail's pace towards Barcelona, 100 miles to the south-west. Everyone was in high spirits, singing and whistling revolutionary songs, including the Internationale, even in the toilet. This struck me as out of place and I made it clear. Finally we pulled into Barcelona. A brass band was on the station platform and as we bundled out of the train it struck up the Internationale. This, of course, was the time to sing. Not a voice was raised. The volatile Spaniards must have found these Ingleses even more phlegmatic than the joke books portrayed them. But British phlegm, strengthened by my political puritanism, could not quell a Spanish brass band. They put themselves at our head and paraded us triumphantly through the streets of Barcelona to the barracks where we lunched on lentils swimming in olive oil and laced with garlic. The streets were peaceful but the atmosphere was electric, with right fists raised and clenched in the popular front salute. As we passed the Martini-Rossi Vermouth winery the women workers cheered and smiled. Enough to put Piccadilly cocktail sippers off their drink, I thought.

After a brief stop in Barcelona we boarded a more solid looking train for Valencia and then to Albacete, the base of the International Brigades, 250 miles to the south-west.

Albacete, was a town of 50,000, capital of the province of the same name, known to this day for its fine knives and daggers, dating back to medieval times when Spanish steel was the finest in the Western world. Our stay there was brief. First we marched to the bull-ring⁶ where we British, together with a few Cypriots and others who knew English, lined up beside groups of French and German speakers and were given a political pep talk. It was delivered in a crisp Scottish accent by Peter Kerrigan, a big, burly leading British Communist, who had come to Spain straight from leading the 1936 Hunger Marches. After that we were issued kit and uniforms, not too fancy but the best the besieged republic could muster. Soon we were off in trucks to the village of Madrigueras, an hour or so's drive to the north, across the plain of Murcia.

Madrigueras was a poor place with a population of 6,000, mainly families of hired labourers of absentee

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landlords. It was dominated by a large stone church, as much a fortress as a place of worship, with a few narrow slits of windows high above the ground, a massive, iron-studded wooden door and a tall tower overlooking the village square. There was the village's main water supply, a long trough filled from flowing spouts in the wall behind it. When we arrived, around the first week of 1937, the wall was pitted with holes. What were these? I asked. "Bullet holes," I was told. (My French and schoolboy Latin, aided by a Spanish phrase book, a pocket dictionary and sign language soon enabled me to communicate). The story gradually came out. Before the army revolt of July 18, 1936, with the connivance of the priest, local landlords had hidden machine guns in the church. The night of the revolt the heavy doors were locked from the inside. Next morning as people flocked to the village square, mostly women carrying earthenware pitchers to fill at the trough, they were fired at from the church tower. How many casualties there were, how the doors were forced and the gunners dealt with I never found out. But the story was plausible. The bullet holes were there and the Church was hated in Madrigueras as in many parts of Spain, being seen as an agent of the landlords and an enemy of the people. It did, without doubt, call on the peasants to submit to their pitiful plight on earth with promises of paradise and threats of hell in the life after death. It also seized land for non-payment of tithes. The parish priest was not in the village while we were there (I was for a time among those billeted in his house, the most comfortable in the village) and the church was used as our battalion dining hall on rainy days.

On fine days we were issued a hunk of bread and a tin of bully beef or its French equivalent - singe - meaning monkey meat. Our battalion legend had it that the singe was part of the spoils of the battle of Waterloo and there were scientific discussions as to how long the contents of a well-sealed tin could last. It was not bad stuff and monkey or not it was meat. There was precious little of this in the diet of the villagers; they lived largely on bread, beans, potatoes and garlic washed down with wine.

The unbalanced diet of both the villagers and ourselves helped to bring us together. We would pal up with a family, helping the women carry their crocks of water from the bullet-marked trough, and they would wash our clothes. Carrying water in exchange for washing clothes led to swopping food. We would contribute our

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meat and the women would cook it with their veg into a tasty stew. Then we would sit down with the family in their modest home and dig in. This was far pleasanter than squatting outside on the kerb or squeezing into pews in the gloomy church. And it brought us closer to the people and gave us a glimpse of the poverty they lived in. At meal times the family, in which we were now included, crouched on low stools round an open fire. Only one spoon was used - not to put in the mouth but to spread the stew on hunks of bread which served as plates. Each family made its own wine, using bare feet as a press, the vintage being stored in vats the height of a man.

One book on the British Battalion in Spain describes the people of Madrigueras as "silent and taciturn people who looked as if they had given up hope...they did not approve or disapprove of our presence in the village. They were always civil in a rather grave and solemn way..."⁷ My impressions were different, as recorded in my diary:⁸

January, 12th? (i.e. about a week after our arrival in the village). "After lunch ...I strolled through the streets...looking for someone to sew belt-slots on my trousers. Finally an old whitehaired woman volunteered after some sign language. Soon I was the centre of an enormous crowd ... the usual bunch of kids about 12, women from 14 to 70, an old man and one young one (the young men left in the village are here to organize local defence or administration.) The old woman was sitting on a low cane chair in the middle of the street and another one was brought for me and the whole operation performed in the brilliant sunshine with the whole crowd watching, laughing and chattering. After it was over I was given a Spanish lesson. Someone went and brought some grapes. Then another decided that these were not good enough and insisted on changing them for another two big bunches."

February 3rd: I was invited out by Rojo, a little kid in the village. His father is a ... skilled craftsman who makes knives and balances... The mother insisted on painting my chest with iodine...(To cure a cough, no doubt.) The family I knew best had a slender, sloe-eyed, teen-aged daughter, named Antonia who helped me learn Spanish.⁹ Her mother, aged 35, Maria, was lean and worn with work, with a sad and stoical face, her father gnarled and weather-beaten to the tawny colour of the family's rickety wooden stools. The one pretentious piece of furniture was the canopied bed, a room within a room, which Antonia was to inherit, as her mother had before her."

Such relationships between volunteers and villagers were common during our training time in Madrigueras. Ten years later in the Liberated Areas of China I recalled them when I learned Mao Zedong's phrase "the fish and water relationship between the people and the guerillas".

At first our military training was delayed by lack of arms. Meanwhile we organized the battalion into

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companies and platoons, drilled, went on route marches, studied Spanish and attended political and military lectures. One I recall, by Tom Wintingham,¹⁰ touched on Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade". "Theirs not to reason why..." But we were different, he said. To reason why was precisely our job, and doing it had brought us to Spain.

Wintingham was an Oxford man who had served in World War I. He had been in Spain as correspondent for the Daily Worker when the fascists staged their rebellion and he was among those who had urged the Communist Party early on to form a British battalion. At this time he was second in command, being one of its few members with any military experience. He also managed somehow to dress in a rather more dashing fashion than the rest of us with our far from elegant uniforms. He was deservedly respected and for a while was battalion commander. (He was later twice wounded and eventually invalided home.) But we were a democratic bunch and off duty no respecters of persons. One evening some of us were in the club room straining our ears to hear the news coming over the radio. Wintingham strode in, asking in a loud voice for Comrade So-and-so. We all immediately shushed him; he was interfering with the precious news. He apologised and crept out.

At last our arms arrived - Soviet rifles. They were light, and had peep-sights, but for accurate fire had to be used with their triangular bayonets fixed. They were joyfully distributed. The Soviet Union saw through and rejected the hypocritical "non-intervention" policy of the French and British governments. She was sending not only foodships but signals technicians, aircraft and aviators, tanks and tankists, and now these rifles. Far from enough, nowhere near as many as the fascists were receiving from Hitler and Mussolini. But at least, the Spanish Republic was not alone. Our presence showed that. These rifles, which we held so admiringly in our hands were further proof

But I did not receive one. Nor did my closest friend Sam Wild, a quick-witted, devil-may-care Manchester Irish merchant seaman who later became battalion commander. We and fourteen others were assigned to the Lewis gun battery.

Lewis guns had been used in World War I and the four we received had a history. They were originally

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intended for use by the imperialist armies in their war of intervention against the young Soviet Republic following the October Revolution. (The British and French governments did not then uphold non-intervention.) These four guns had been sent to Archangel and the ammunition drums to Odessa. The twain never met until now. Fortunately the battalion boasted an expert Lewis gunner, Fred Copeman, trained in the British Navy - and kicked out of it for his part in the Invergordon Mutiny of 1931. Under his instruction the sixteen of us, four men to a gun, learnt to handle our weapons pretty well, stripping, cleaning, re-assembling, inserting new spare parts in case of stoppages - all in double-quick time. Every second would count in the face of the enemy. We were billeted cosily together in the priest's house. Nothing was too good for our precious guns and while stripping them we strove to keep the dozens of parts free of grit and dust. In a cupboard we found a fine, hand-embroidered, lace-trimmed altar cloth. This we spread on the ground and on it laid out the parts of the gun, where they remained immaculate. This vandalism must have been against Party policy, for the Spanish Communists were urging the anarchists to stop burning churches and to save the petrol for transporting troops to the front. But at the time we considered our action as one of poetic justice against the oppressors of the people of Madrigueras. After getting to know our guns we took them out for practice on the range, a red earth cliff bordering a field outside the village. We used blanks. Live bullets were precious as diamonds in the beleaguered Republic. I must have been a pretty good shot - and have shown I was pleased with myself. For I recall once after I'd had my turn at firing, Copeman said, "Alright, you're fuckin' 'ot." Or perhaps his remark was a proletarian reaction to my intellectual airs.

At the same time as we were training, the whole battalion was being alerted against the danger of aerial attack and also being told that infantry, with concentrated volleys of rifle fire, stood a chance of bringing down low-flying enemy aircraft within a range of 800 yards. This gave Copeman an idea. In the Royal Navy he had been trained to use the Lewis gun against aircraft and he thought that we might do the same. So he applied for and was granted permission to form our squad into an anti-aircraft battery. First he tracked down the village carpenter and using sketches to overcome the language difficulty got him to make the stands necessary for

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mounting the gun, swivelling it round and rapidly changing its elevation. These wooden stands were doubtless clumsy compared with those of the Royal Navy, but they served their purpose. The next things needed were special aerial sights; those used for a ground target would have been useless against aircraft. These were harder to make, as they had to be of metal. Fortunately metal work was what the region excelled in and soon a craftsman was found who turned out a presentable job. All we needed now was a target! For this we had to fall back on our imagination, and to draw a bead on an occasional bird. Lack of targets did not upset us. We'd have them at the front. We were delighted to be the British Battalion Anti-aircraft Battery.

I was also assigned to edit the battalion wall-newspaper. My own first contribution was well-received. It was entitled: "A Day in the Life of a Column-dodger" and satirised heavy drinking and absenteeism from parades and lectures, which were common enough before the arrival of our weapons. Success went to my head and I started a satirical column like "Advice to the Lovelorn" columns in the Western press. It was entitled "Letters to Auntie Springie", after our genial Political Commissar, Springhall. This was not well-received by battalion command, who regarded such jocularities as undermining respect for the leadership. So I scouted around for more discreet contributors.

"There's a bloke billeted down that alley off Church Street," I was told. "Name of Caudwell. He does a bit of writing now and then." I hunted him up. He was a quiet-spoken chap. Said he lived in Stepney, in the East End of London. But he didn't sound like it. Seemed more like Oxford to me. Anyway, he agreed to write for the wall-newspaper. He turned out to be Christopher Caudwell, author of Illusion and Reality, Studies in a Dying Culture, The Crisis in Physics and other scholarly Marxist works.¹¹

Fighting was not far ahead for the now 600-strong British Battalion training in Madrigueras. A few, the earliest volunteers, had already been into action in Spain, a few had just arrived and had only a day or two of training. I was among the more fortunate majority who had had almost a month.

I described our departure from Madrigueras in my diary:

8 February: We left Madrigueras suddenly yesterday. On Saturday afternoon I was working in

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Aitken's¹² office on material for the wall-newspaper. On leaving the office I saw Paddy Rowe and others running about excitedly shouting: "Fall-in in full marching order. We leave to-night!" We had been in this quiet Spanish village a month. It had been so quiet and peaceful that despite daily manoeuvres and playing with guns, the war seemed a long way off. Even now I felt that it was only another part of the routine... there was not that feeling in the pit of the stomach which accompanies excitement - above all fear. I sprinted up to Maria's house for my laundry, left the presents of lace and pictures¹³ and dashed off. They were very upset as they were in the middle of preparing a meal for me. At 5 p.m. I dashed up to parade ground - full marching kit: haversack, blankets, pack, overcoat and Lewis gun - streaming with sweat. Finally it was given out that we were not to leave till 9.30 so I got my kit more shipshape and dined with Maria and her family. A whopping great meal and a lot to take with me, which came in very useful. All Antonia's girl-friends came in and gave me a great send-off, especially the little 7 year-old Innocenzia. The lorries after all did not arrive and we couldn't leave till the next morning."

Here I must inset something I recall quite clearly now, but left out of my diary for security reasons:

That night we were ordered to sleep with our boots on and with our weapons beside us. I cuddled my Lewis gun. About 3 a.m. our squad was woken up. Orders had come down from Brigade that our beloved Lewis guns were to be handed over to the French battalion. Why? Some cursed the French. Others said that's just what the fascists want, disunity in our ranks. Some whispered there must be some saboteur up there in Brigade H.Q. who wants it, too. Whatever the case, the guns were grudgingly handed over and we received Soviet rifles in their stead. Then we turned in again for another couple of hours of troubled sleep in the straw.

My diary continues:

"We spent the morning hanging about the square: speeches, photographs, farewells. The villagers loaded down their special friends with eggs and sandwiches, goats'milk. We marched or staggered down to the 20 or 30 lorries in the main street. The whole town was out, terrifically wrought up, lined up by the lorries, shouting, saluting, laughing and crying. Maria wept bitterly, which worried and puzzled me... I thought that perhaps they had expected me to become engaged to Antonia, though this is unlikely (she's only 15), a beautiful kid...Finally we left amidst a really terrific demonstration. It was the first time in Spain that I had the feeling of coming here for war. The previous weeks had been a holiday."

I puzzled over Maria's tears for years. Finally I concluded that for all my education and her lack of it, she knew more about life and death than I did. She foresaw what I did not: that many of us would not come back. So she wept and I smiled and we went on our way. Of course I was not quite blind to the possibility that I

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myself might not come back. On January 17 I had written in my diary:

"Tried some rifle practice this morning. Pretty fair. One hasn't time to consider the purpose of the gun, being too intent on mastering its technicalities. In fact I doubt if the likelihood of death is greatly thought of - certainly it's not much or deeply in my own mind. Perhaps the old soldiers have a different sensation from the others. Yesterday I lay for a few minutes in a field out in the sun and for the first time had the opportunity and frame of mind to think - the first time, I believe, since leaving home. Oddly enough I felt that in the event of death my greatest regret would be in not having derived sufficient pleasure out of women. I went over a mental list (of girls)."

And ten days later, January 27, I wrote:

"Generally speaking the fact that soon we shall be in a life and death struggle seems hardly to prevail. I myself have not yet felt especially anxious about my life and no one seems to feel that time should be used preciously so as to gain knowledge and skill which soon may save or lose our lives. - One lives more for the moment, all the same. Food figures largely. Sometimes I feel that reading, or gaining knowledge, or this diary may be of little use. There may be little time left."

Methinks the soldier doth protest too much. My repeated protestations of unconcern suggest that thoughts of death were often in my mind.

My memories of our journey by truck, train and on foot, from Madrigueras to the front, are hazy and disjointed. My diary entry on February 9 describes a only a convivial meal. Truly an army marches on its stomach:

"In the evening Summers (an older IB'er, a worker from the north of England who took a fatherly interest in me) and I ate with some new-found "up-homers". We supplied tinned meat and bread and money for vegetables and wine. We had a grand blow-out with about three families. They were all refugees from a village 20 kilometres from Toledo and had taken 5 days to get here by donkey-cart when the fascists advanced. One girl of about 18 was very attractive. These people were all fairly advanced politically; the women were members of the Agricultural Workers' Union and the Socialist Party. The husband of one had been killed and all were anti-fascist. Summers goes through the most amazing contortions and clucking noises trying to make himself understood; he has an especially soft spot for the kids. The mother fed her baby at the breast in front of the assembly."

For the rest my diary for the journey reads like a left-wing guidebook or the travel notes of any

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politicized hiker, with occasional references to aircraft flying over and now and then a philosophical observation such as: "Political development (is) in inverse proportion to material comfort." Crude economic determinism!

Such was the journey to the most dramatic event of my 26 years, the battle in "that valley in Spain called Jarama".

That battle was in fact a key event in the war till then; for the fascists were at that time trying to cut the road from besieged Madrid in the centre of Spain to Valencia on the east coast, which had been made the wartime capital. Our British battalion was to play an heroic part in frustrating their attempt.

As so often happens in life, when the curtain rose for the drama I was caught, literally, with my pants down, relieving myself in an olive grove. Suddenly two waves of aircraft appeared and a dog fight started. Then whistles blew and we started to climb the hill in front of us. It was a gentle enough climb but made hard by the weight of our weapons and packs and a roll of two blankets slung across the chest. Some foolishly discarded these, not thinking of the icy nights ahead. Finally we reached an escarpment, took shelter behind rocks and fired at puffs of white smoke. I never got a good view of the enemy firing at us, said to be Moors and Germans. Bullets whizzed and whined past. "Don't mind them," the old sweats said. "It's the ones you don't hear that get you." In any case, I was too young and inexperienced to be afraid. (Fear came later.) It never occurred to me that I might be killed or wounded - not till the end of the day. I felt exhilarated, almost drunk. We were ordered to move. "Get to the top of that bloody hill and don't leave it till you're told to." Luckily I was with my pal Sam Wild. We took up a position at the right brow of the hill, threw ourselves down and I started firing lightheartedly at those puffs of white smoke. Not Sam. First he clawed the soil and reached for stones to build a parapet. Sam had been brought up in an orphanage, served on a merchant navy training ship, been unemployed. He knew how to fight for survival. My life had been softer, more sheltered. Without his example I'd never have survived the murderous fire on what came to be known as Suicide Hill. Very few did. By mid-afternoon we'd lost contact with our command. We looked round. Nothing but corpses beside us, so far as we could see. It was time to get off that bloody hill. Fortunately the order to withdraw came at last. Sam and I retreated under cover of the slope,

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picking up several discarded rifles and a box of ammunition. But with that burden we could never have made it to the shelter of the olive grove in the valley, so we dumped the lot. In fact in the end I even abandoned my haversack containing the last of Maria's tangerines and my leather-bound volume of Shakespeare's Tragedies. Whatever possessed me to take that to Spain and into battle? The heroics and pretensions of youth? I doubt that I ever read a line of Shakespeare in Spain.

At last we got to the grove and took cover behind the mounds of earth which banked up the trees. It was late afternoon. We fired now and then when we thought we saw something move. Then Sam was hit. I helped him move behind a bigger mound of earth. Then I was hit twice in the thigh; another shot landed in the heel of my right boot and one went through my water bottle. The last of the wine drained onto the red earth. Lying on the ground behind the banked up olive tree I wished the bastards would leave us alone. All we could hope for now was that it would get dark before the enemy could reach us. I have never longed so much for night to fall. Meanwhile each promised the other to help him back to our lines when the time came. At last a wisp of a sickle moon rose. All through the past 50 years I've never seen such a moon without thinking of Jarama. It was the tough Sam Wild, though more seriously wounded than I, who staggered back to our lines first and told the stretcher-bearers where to get me, before he collapsed. Meanwhile my right thigh had turned to jelly and I had been inching my way along backwards sitting on my rump and pushing with my two hands and one good leg into the earth. Once back we wounded were laid side by side in a sunken road and the doctors and nursing orderlies worked furiously dressing our wounds. During the night the wounded were sorted out and lighter cases, such as myself were carried to ambulances and driven off I knew not where. I ended up in Madrid. My wound probably saved my life, for in the first two days of the Battle of Jarama the British Battalion lost two-thirds of its men in killed and wounded. But the fascist plan to cut the Madrid-Valencia road had been foiled and we had played our part in that, along with the Dimitrov Battalion of Central and East Europeans and the Franco-Belge. (The American Abraham Lincoln Battalion came up a week later and also suffered heavy losses.)The bulk of the defending force, of course, were heroic but untrained Spaniards, for whom the International Brigade provided an

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essential stiffener.

I recall half clambering, half being hoisted into the ambulance, then the bumpy midnight ride to the sound of gunfire and the groans of fellow passengers. That is all. So I turn to my diary for help. But the next entry is dated February 26, two weeks later. What happened in between? Was I in pain? How were the two bullets dug out? Nothing. Only: "The wound wasn't serious but the right thigh muscle was affected, which made things quite unpleasant for a few days and nights." Was I being heroic? Keeping a British gentlemanly stiff upper lip? Was it a simple statement of fact? I suspect so. For I have a vivid memory of something else - a slim, black-eyed affectionate young nurse, Conchita, who after finishing her rounds at night, lying beside me and teaching me Spanish. Of course she lay chastely outside the covers. But even that identified her with the upsurge of women's emancipation from the feudal puritanism which the Republic brought about. That pleasant memory has blocked out whatever pain I felt.

The hospital in Madrid seemed to have been a ducal mansion. It had a library including books in English, which I hobbled to with the aid of crutches as soon as I could. My diary reads:

February 28: Have read "A Tale of Two Cities"...Dickens writes with magnificent force of the extremes of poverty and wealth of 18th century France, but has the characteristic weakness of the simple humanitarian when faced with the political fact of revolution....

Apparently I tried too soon to give up crutches for a stick; strained my leg and spent two and a half days in bed again. Read Krupskaya's "Memories of Lenin". She is amazingly modest and almost too impersonal, though this does not mean that the book lacks the human touch. Was surprised at a generous estimate of the youthful Trotsky - published in Moscow in 1930! Now I'm reading some short stories by Jack London - fine descriptive writing let down by an incompletely developed political outlook - with a proportion of pure tripe."

Other nationals in the ward of ten men, I noted, were Yugo-Slavs, a Frenchman and two Spaniards - "fine types, young, enthusiastic and cheerful. They never grumble." Despite my Latin and French, I noted, and Conchita's help, "I don't seem to make very rapid progress - partly through lack of grammatical foundation." Partly, I might have added, that Conchita's help was not purely pedagogical. Still, she did buy me a textbook and I was soon able to read the newspaper fairly well.

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My Spanish enabled me in time to report to the head doctor in my capacity as "political delegate", on what I thought was wrong in the running of the hospital. My suggestions may have been reasonable but doubtless could not be put into effect by the inexperienced, overworked staff of this makeshift hospital in a city under siege. All things considered we were marvellously treated. Food was strictly rationed in the city and many Madrilenos subsisted largely on a watery concoction of "bread soup." But we wounded were well fed, with plenty of nourishing lentils and chick peas swimming in olive oil. I remember being served hot chocolate for breakfast! I also recall, on the prompting of the wounded Frenchman in the next bed, taking an unsuspecting bite into a pearl of raw garlic, which he highly recommended... An unpleasant experience of a different sort was catching a political official on the point of filching my passport. He was doubtless a Communist fulfilling his duty for the Soviet comrades who, I found out later, doctored dead men's passports for use by their agents.

After two or three weeks I could move around on crutches and got the itch to see Madrid. I was starved, too, for conversation in my native language. One day an English-speaking visitor told me that there was a Hotel Gran Via, where all the English-speaking journalists ate. Somehow I got onto a tram going to the Gran Via. There I made my way as instructed up the safe side of the street to avoid the fascist bombardments, the timing and placing of which the Madrilenos knew well. They kept to such a regular pattern that I thought the gunners must have been German. Down in the basement restaurant was a literary galaxy: Ernest Hemingway and Martha Gelhorn, with the Brooklyn bullfighter Sidney Franklin; Stephen Spender, the Indian writer Mulk Raj Anand, Sefton Delmar of the Daily Express, Herbert Mathews of the New York Times. I never got to know any of these celebrities well, though they were all so affable and interested, that I felt rather a fraud at not being more seriously wounded. I do recall one dramatic evening in Hemingway's hotel room (on the top and most dangerous floor, of course) with philosophical talk of war and love and death to the accompaniment of whining shells, bursting bombs, and plenty of wine. And according to my diary:

March 14: I finally met Spender. He is disappointingly stamped with the marks of the Oxford intellectual, in manner and intonation; or so he struck me at first. Yet he was extraordinarily cordial. Perhaps it is unfair to stress mere form at the expense of content. He seems to have

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guts - and after all I've not read his stuff. It is probably the strong contrast with the far tougher type of intellectual in the American movement. Herbert Kline, for example, (the American journalist and film-maker¹⁴ is very different. Quickly generous in exposing his feelings and attitudes; conscious of having had no more formal education than High School; showing his feelings easily and without embarrassment. He hates the guts of the professional newspapermen's attitude of seeing in all this nothing but news stories. "These (in the I.B.) are my people and when I know they're killed or see them suffering it's not just news' to me." One can't imagine Spender saying that in conversation - in a poem possibly.

Kline took me to a show: Electra - ... It's an anti-clerical play (the appearance of nuns on the stage was greeted with hissing) One actress said she hated playing the part. (It was) written in gaol and previously banned. We paid 3 pesetas - about a shilling - for the best seats...we went backstage and saw the company and director, who was most cordial. One girl had been to Hollywood and spoke English. The audience here, as at the movies, participate keenly, although kids were running up and down the aisles, hissed at by the crowd (for making a noise).

Kline is working here with Ted Allan¹⁵ who is doing some stuff for the "New Masses". Allan has been to the front and described the attitude of the men. The Americans have had very heavy losses. 'So-and-so, yes he's dead - yes dead - yeah, riddled to hell. Too tall' - "As if the guy could help being tall."

There was one writer - not a celebrity - whom I did get to know well: the woman correspondent of a Canadian Communist Party publication. She was around my age and we hit it off. (According to my diary "I fell very hard at first sight.") We quickly succumbed to the fatalistic romanticism of wartime: "Awake my little ones, and fill the cup, before Life's Liquor in its cup be dry...To-morrow? Why to-morrow I may be myself with yesterday's seven thousand years..."

"Jean" lived with other Canadians in the blood transfusion unit headed by Norman Bethune. He made a heroic contribution to the Republican cause¹⁶ through building a blood transfusion bank and through operating close to the front. (Most of the seriously wounded died from loss of blood while being carried to hospital in the rear.) Volumes have been written about this remarkable man, full of drive and energy, a superb and utterly dedicated surgeon. He had an electric and irascible personality and in my diary, writing with the self-assured one-sidedness of youth I presumed to state "he is a colossal egotist...certainly no Communist!" But I was moved by his work, as were the underfed Madrileños - mostly women - who queued up in the street to contribute their blood to the bank.

From the time I met Jean until returning to the front I spent all my evenings at Bethune's headquarters.

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One evening a group of us stayed up late discussing Trotskyism. I knew little about it, but that did not stop me from taking an active part in the talk. As we were breaking up I was drawn aside by Georges Soria, a Frenchman, writing for an international Communist publication. "Would you like to do some special work for the International Movement?" he asked. "For the movement, of course, I'll do anything I'm asked," I replied.

Georges made a note of my name and hospital and arranged a meeting in a large hotel - the Palace. There he introduced me to a couple of "Soviet comrades". We talked - or rather I answered their questions about myself, my ideas, my experience, my Party membership. Another meeting was arranged, this time at the Gaylord Hotel, a smaller but more elegant establishment. I was shown up to the well-furnished room, where light machine-guns were strewn carelessly on the silk counterpane. This time the men were younger and their questions different. Could I introduce them to British comrades accustomed to handling explosives? They evidently wanted people to do sabotage behind the enemy lines. I gave them the names of a couple of coalminers of the British battalion. The third meeting was with the people I'd met at the Palace. By now they had evidently checked up on me and decided I would do. "O.K., return to your battalion and carry on. We shall send for you when we need you."

Walking back to hospital I dropped in at the mail distribution centre for letters. There I found out that our cockney commissar Douglas Springhall had been wounded, a bullet passing clean through his cheek without seriously damaging the jaw-bone. I remember being stupidly surprised that anyone of such high rank could be wounded. "Springy" was the London Communist Party Organiser who issued me my first Party membership card. In Spain he advanced to become Deputy Commissar of the XVth Brigade. He had got his packet while with the American Lincoln Battalion in their costly attack launched a couple of weeks after I left Jarama.

Worse news was in store. I was told that Sam Wild was dead, his wound having become gangrenous. That seemed even more impossible than that Springy had been wounded. Sam was a survivor. He couldn't be dead! During these last two weeks, of seven in hospital in Madrid, I did nightly broadcasts to England. That night I sweated over an obituary of this tough Lancashire seaman who had given his life fighting for the Spanish Republic. Months later I ran into Sam, large as life on the Ramblas in Barcelona.

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My wounds were now pretty well healed and the doctor o.k.'d my return to the battalion. My state of mind is set down in my diary:

March 18: "The last few days have been very different from the rest of the time out here on account of Jean. For a time she undoubtedly had a demoralising effect, for the idea was constantly in my mind that I wanted to live and work with her. It was Aitken's remark in an article in the Brigade paper - that some of us apparently thought more about ourselves than of the defeat of fascism - which brought me back to a proper perspective. Convalescence - when one is almost physically well but has too little to occupy one's energies - is in any case a time when one is bound to be in danger of becoming introvert and egotistical...But now that I am almost on the way back to the job, I feel cheerfully composed. In its larger framework or background of the defeat of fascism, the safeguarding of democracy here and in Europe, the ultimate setting up of socialism and so advancing or fulfilling history - against all this, not only is an individual's death no tragedy, it is only in this way that life itself can be attained."

Perhaps this idea had been inspired by a poster I had recently copied into my diary:

"Comrade, if you wish your sons to be free and not live in the slavery that you have lived in, make sacrifices for them."

I had no sons. I had not lived in slavery. I had not gone to Spain in a spirit of self-sacrifice. I had gone there swept along by the hate and the hope of millions of people all over the world provoked by the fascists' rape of the Spanish Republic. My personal response was the climax of a series of profound experiences: seeing the down-and-outs in the flophouses of the Bowery in New York, the violence against the striking coalminers of Harlan, Kentucky, learning of the savage persecution of my fellow Jews in Hitler's Germany, reading Lenin on The State and Revolution. It was this that moved me to copy the poster into my diary. A fortnight later I wrote:

"The last two weeks have been strangely spent in Madrid...owing to the shortage of suitable people I did the English broadcasts each night... This could probably have gone on for another two weeks...but the work was not more than a couple of hours a day and I was beginning to lose my self-respect....I was engrossed in J. to the exclusion - or at least the underestimation - of most other things. This I suppose is decadence. It reminded me of my first reaction to Proust - that it was supremely decadent to allow the world to revolve round oneself, one's woman or one's love affair."

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Other diary entries, however, reveal that I was not so exclusively engrossed as this one suggests. During the month from the time I could get around on crutches until my return to the front I saw four Soviet movies, such as "Sailors from Kronstadt" and "Chapaev" (the legendary Russian peasant who became a Red Army guerrilla leader against the White interventionists). These films, I noted, touched the Spanish audience (and myself) because of their relevance for Spain's own civil war. I also attended a concert of Spanish music, whose Moorish undertones reminded me of Jewish synagogue chants. There was loud applause, two wounded soldiers with only one good arm apiece, joining hands to clap. I went to a reading of the poems of Garcia Lorca, author of "Blood Wedding" and other great works, who had been shot by Franco's soldiers in 1936. Madrid was short of food but not of culture.

My last memories of Madrid: On the way to the outskirts of the city to hitch a ride back to the front, I walked past a grand old 18th century building, another ducal palace no doubt. At the entrance to the spacious cobble-stoned courtyard, just inside the high iron gate, was an armed guard, dressed in the blue denim overalls of the People's Militia. He was not standing stiffly to attention like the guards at Buckingham Palace. He was lolling in a high-backed yellow plush Louis XVI armchair, dandling his ancient rifle on his knees. His whole body said: "Look! Times have changed. Now the world belongs to us!" Maybe, I thought. But still, it's got to be fought for. I must hurry back to the front.

Before doing so I went to the barber's for a shave. When he'd finished the barber slapped on a steaming hot towel and applied some sweet-smelling cream. I thought to myself, what's the use of a smooth skin now. It may soon be blown to bits.

That was at the beginning of April. In a letter the following month I wrote

"Without any mock-heroics it was...a pleasure to return. One had less of a feeling of uselessness and it was good to see old friends. Life becomes a concentrated business when you're not sure just how much of it is left. Friendships built in a month or two become deep."

Things were different back at the front. After the first two or three days of the Battle of Jarama, with

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their terrible losses¹⁷, the situation had stabilised. Deep trenches had been dug and a well-camouflaged Command Post built a short distance further back. First I spent a couple of days and cold nights on the hard ground in the line. There was little activity except for bringing back bodies from no-man's-land. I remember the big body of Ray Bolger, once driver of a London "pirate" bus. He was an amiable gentle fellow, apparently non-political. "How had he come to be lying there on the Spanish earth", I mused in my diary, "with his mouth open and his false teeth protruding in a serious grin?" And I noted: "One of the last remarks Ray made to me was: "At least we shall never again associate olive branches with peace. "But in the very next entry I noted:

"Walking down to the cookhouse on a fine sunny morning George Brown and I discussed what sort of a place Spain would become after the war - with irrigation and roads plus all its natural advantages. (Meanwhile) we could still hear the bullets whistling overhead. - One's scale of values becomes so distorted that this morning I heard a bird and thought how like a bullet it sounded instead of vice-versa. (And) in looking at the scenery one instinctively searches for cover."

Copeman was now Battalion Commander and soon he called me back to the Command Post. On the way there, at night, although sheltered by the slope, I knelt down to piss. Once wounded, that youthful feeling of invulnerability was gone and I was taking no chances with stray, spent bullets. I didn't want to be "too tall". "You stay here," Copeman ordered. Why? Had word already come through, following my interviews with the Russians in Madrid? Or was it something else?

I knew before long. In a couple of days I was back in Albacete with friends old and new, earmarked for an Officers Training School.

A day or so later we were at Pozonubio, halfway between Albacete and Madrigueras. The school consisted of log cabins in a clearing of thin forest and scrub. It was springtime and the war seemed far away. Winttingham, though still not fully recovered from wounds was one of the instructors. I was elected "Political Representative" of the 60 English-speaking trainees, but the only "ideological work" I remember doing was cleaning the filthy latrines. (My close association with skunk skins as a boy in New York had built up my resistance to foul odours.) Another instructor was Arthur Olrenshaw. He had been in the British army but was a

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musician by profession and his gentle, whimsical personality and casual manner were more that of the artist than the soldier. There was no trace of spit and polish about him, but he knew his stuff when it came to infantry tactics. He taught us how to deploy and take cover when advancing over open ground - skills which would have saved lives if we'd known more about them a couple of months sooner. He also trained us in map-reading and giving firing orders according to the figures of the clockface. Elementary stuff, but there had been men in Madrigueras who went to the front before they'd fired a rifle.

An instructor of a very different type was a young Soviet machine gunner, very trim and dapper, who proudly displayed the Dektorov, a weapon of the Lewis gun type, but lighter, faster, neater and newer. The instructor put us through our paces stressing speed to such an extent that besides training us in use of the gun he taught me my first word of Russian (except for borscht, which I'd learn from my grandmother). It was skeri meaning "quick", and it issued from his mouth as fast and frequently as the bullets from his gun.

Initiation into such minor military mysteries made me write to a friend that Spain would soon be "not only a nation in arms, but a nation of trained soldiers...a far cry from the romantic, courageous and none too effective army in overalls which existed before. In this transformation both the military organization and the political structure of the Brigades have been important." And I concluded: "the outcome is not for a moment in doubt." In my mind it was not. Unfortunately history thought otherwise.

That letter was dated April 22, 1937. In a couple of days I was to be whisked away, first to Valencia, where I stopped briefly with the Soviet consul, a genial gent, who introduced me to paella that fabulous Spanish dish - not served in I.B. cookhouses.

Then on to Barcelona, and a new, very different life.

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Notes

1. (p.3) I met Harry over twenty years later in Beijing. Even there, despite the language barrier, he brought his Chinese audience to its feet. I asked him how he prepared his speeches. "Well, lad," he said, "Ah joost jot down a few notes and oondæline everything important. Have a look." I did. Everything was underlined; but I noticed that he never glanced at his notes.
2. (p.4) Neither he nor I could foresee that within a few months we would both be in the British battalion in Spain, he as political commissar, I as one of the "rank and vile," as Springy liked to quip. Still less did either of us dream that we would later become fast friends in China, where this lovable cockney would do his last political work.

Springhall was sentenced to 7 years in prison in Britain in the 1940s on the charge of spying for the Soviet Union. After serving 5 years or so he was released on parole, on condition that he did not engage in political activity in the United Kingdom. At this time (1949) the Chinese Communist Party had requested the British C.P. to send 4 people to "polish" (sub-edit) the English translation of Chinese writings. Springhall was one of them. He died of cancer in Moscow, where he had been sent for treatment, in 1952, and was buried in the "Revolutionary Martyrs Cemetery" in Beijing.
3. (p.5) For Cornford's writings see: John Cornford, Communism was my Waking Time, Foreign Languages Press, Moscow, 1958, and The Penguin Book of Spanish Civil War Verse, Valentine Cunningham (ed.) (1980).
15. (p.19) Another ethnic group highly represented were the Jews. Of the roughly 40,000 volunteers of all nationalities who went to Spain, it is estimated that about 8,000 were Jews. Of the roughly 2,000 British volunteers about 200 were Jews - i.e. 10%, which was 10 times their proportion of the British population.
16. (p.19) From Spanish Trenches, by Marcel Acier (ed.) Modern Age Books, New York, 1937.
17. (p.20) Ryan was eventually captured, imprisoned under vile conditions, tortured because of his unbreakable spirit and finally handed over to the nazis, at whose hands he died in 1940. See Bill Alexander, British Volunteers for Liberty - Spain 1936-39, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1982.
1. Colin Cross, The Fascists in Britain, St Martin's Press, New York, 1963.
2. Jewish confirmation.
3. J.A.Wechsler, The Age of Suspicion, Random House, New York, 1956.
4. The British Government, like that of France, obstructed, in the name of "non-intervention," the flow of men and material to the legally elected government of the Spanish republic. It was well aware of, and turned a blind eye to, the massive supply of aircraft, artillery, tanks and soldiers being sent to Franco by his fellow fascists Hitler and Mussolini.
5. A communal wine pot with a conical spout from which the wine issues in a thin jet into the drinker's

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mouth, which may be from an inch to a foot away, depending on the drinker's skill and sobriety.

6. Bull-fighting continued under the Republic, but with the bull's horns padded so as to do less harm to the matador.
7. Jason Gurney, Crusade in Spain, Faber & Faber, London, 1974. My diary makes clear that the author and I were in Madrigueras at the same time, but our observations and analysis are in sharp contrast. I find some of Gurney's reporting vivid and accurate, but much of it distorted by cynicism resulting from a negative attitude towards the International Brigade.
8. Before being transferred to intelligence work in Spain (see below) I sent my diary, covering the first 4 months of 1937, to a friend in Britain. He kept it in the drawer of a desk which, on his divorce, became the property of his wife, whom I never knew. She eventually came across it and at an historians conference at the Imperial War Museum in 1973, offered to its Publications Department "the diary of an Englishman killed (sic) fighting in the International Brigade in Spain." Her ex-husband, hearing of this exaggeration, informed both the Museum and myself of the misunderstanding and the diary was returned to me.
9. I visited her 41 years later, then a warm, generous and vivacious matron of 56.
10. Wintingham describes his participation in the Spanish Civil War in his book, English Captain, Penguin, 1941.
11. Caudwell, whose real name was Christopher St. John Sprigg, was killed on February 12, in the Battle of Jarama. He was one of several outstanding British Marxist intellectuals who died fighting fascism in Spain, including Ralph Fox, literary critic, historian and biographer and John Cornford the poet.
12. Aitken was the battalion commissar, newly appointed to replace Springhall, who had been appointed vice commissar of the Fifteenth Brigade.
13. I still have no recollection of this but it was recalled by Antonia when I visited her 41 years later, in 1978.
14. Kline's films include one about Dr. Norman Bethune's Blood Transfusion Unit in Spain (see below) and one set in Mexico, based on John Steinbeck's story "The Pearl".
15. Allan is co-author with Sydney Gordon of The Scalpel, the Sword, Little, Brown & Co. Boston, 1952, a biography of Norman Bethune.
16. According to Chaim Herzog, President of Israel, 350 Palestinian Jews went to fight fascism in Spain. See the English language Jewish publication Freiheit, New York, December 7, 1986.
17. About two thirds of the British Battalion were either killed or wounded.