Guests of Spain

Valentine Ackland*


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Abstract


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The Second Congress of the International Association of Writers in Defence of Culture: Madrid, 1937

There has never been a Congress like this before. More than sixty delegates from all countries met together in Madrid – in the front line held by the fighters for freedom and for intellectual liberty.

Gathered there, as honoured guests of the Republican Government of Spain, we discussed the present phase of the world war from our national points of view and unanimously agreed that we must combat Fascism everywhere as Intellectual Enemy Number One.

In Madrid, under artillery fire and air-raids, with the incessant noise of battle and the inexpressible excitement of renewed Government attack and success, we heard speeches from the leading writers of all countries: from philosophers and Catholics like Bergamin, sociologists like Max Hodann, exiles like Kisch and Anna Seghers, novelists like Sylvia Townsend Warner, poets like Octavio Paz and Stephen Spender and the writers in uniform like Ludwig Renn, Jef Last and Andre Malraux. On a platform which they shared with the guard of honour of soldiers in fighting kit and with Trades-Union and Youth Delegates, these representatives of world culture discussed the
immediate problems of literature in the fight against fascism and for
the liberty of peoples.

As guests of the Spanish Government we were treated with such
splendid hospitality and honour that those of us who return to live
under a ‘Civilised Democracy’ feel indeed exiled from civilisation.
Among a hundred happenings here are two which point the contrast
most sharply:

Going by car from Valencia to Madrid we stopped for lunch at
a small village. During the fine meal spread for us we heard a crowd
of children gathering outside the hall. They started to sing, and sang
us the war songs of Spain, ‘Riego’s Hymn’ and then the International.
After exchanging shouted greetings with them, when we embarked
again for our journey we found their mothers waiting to greet us with
handshakes, embraces, tears. These women told us they were refugees
from Badajoz and Madrid, from sacked villages and towns. ‘My husband
was shot in the massacre at Badajoz –’ ‘I am alone here, with my child.
We have no one left – Viva la Republica! Viva los Intellectuales!’ They
thanked us for coming to Spain. They charged us to write about Spain,
for Spain, when we returned home. Always they ended with ‘Viva los
Intellectuales!’

We had experienced our first air-raid in Valencia; we went on to
land and air bombardment in Madrid, but this was our real experience
of this war. And for the rest of the journey, on all the various tours we
made, we were to hear everywhere that extraordinary, that unbeliev-
able greeting from even the smallest village, the most isolated group
of peasants: ‘Viva los Intellectuales!’ To the English delegation at least
it was scarcely credible, and at dinner that night in Madrid the Cuban
and Dutch delegates treated us to some gently ironical remarks about
the contrast between the ‘ignorant Spanish peasants’ and our own
Harrow-and-Oxford, Eton-and-Cambridge Foreign Office, which can
only recognise ‘bona fide business reasons’ as validating travel to Spain!

Casals, who conducted a concert in our honour at Barcelona,
asked the leader of our Delegation whether we could not now return
to England satisfied that Republican Spain was not a country of
barbarians? It was a serious question but if it had been a gibe it would
have been amply justified.

The second happening was personal to the members of the
English delegation but perfectly typical of the spirit of Republican
Spain. Returning to Valencia we went to a very small hotel, a place
where peasants of the neighbouring villages stay when they go to
town. As we were unpacking there came a knock on the door and the
proprietor entered with an interpreter, asking to speak to the leader of our Delegation. He made a speech of welcome, saying that he was immensely proud of being allowed to shelter and entertain delegates to the Writers’ Congress, that he thanked us for coming, that he begged us to have all we wanted while we were there. He had had no notice of our coming and Valencia is overcrowded, but on the next afternoon he gave us a banquet of the best Valencian food, on a table wreathed with roses and sweet-smelling flowers, and that evening, although he lives outside the city, he stayed on with the waiters to look after us, despite the fact that the session of Congress lasted far beyond the usual hours and it was a Saturday – the night, he told us, when Valencia anticipates bombardment.

We enjoyed magnificent hospitality from the Government wherever we went in Spain; concerts, receptions and motor tours were given us whenever the business of the Congress allowed us the time to go. But these two incidents typify the attitude of the working masses of Spain to the intellectual workers of all countries and surely prove conclusively where is the real future of culture and, by sharp and undeniable contrast, where is barbarism and gross intellectual darkness.

Daily Worker (17 July 1937)¹

Note

¹ The text above is taken from Ackland’s three-page typescript in the Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valantine Ackland archive; Dorset History Centre item STW.2012.125.2691. Ackland has entered ‘Daily Worker, 17.7.37’ at the end of the typescript.