**Carl Geiser**

Carl Frederick Geiser was born in Orrville, Ohio on December 10, 1910. He was the oldest of six children; his father, a farmer, died in the influenza epidemic at the end of World War I, and his mother a year later of tuberculosis. His maternal grandparents, Swiss immigrants who spoke little English, raised Geiser and his siblings. The young Geiser received his primary education in a one-room schoolhouse while helping to tend the family's sixteen-acre farm. Upon his graduation from Orrville High School in 1928, he enrolled in the YMCA School of Technology (later Fenn College) in Cleveland, where he majored in electrical engineering.

In 1932, following the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, Geiser was part of the first National Student Federation mission to travel to the newly recognized country. This visit had a decisive influence on shaping Geiser's political thinking. Impressed by the Soviet system and the tenets of socialist ideology, Geiser joined the Young Communist League upon his return to Ohio. He became an active force in the American Student Union in Cleveland and served as a delegate to the First Student Congress Against War and Fascism held in Chicago. It was there that Geiser met his future wife Sylvia, a teacher and organizer who shared his political fervor. The couple moved to New York where they were absorbed into a dynamic culture of political activism and organizing. Geiser wrote press releases and edited International Labor Defense bulletins, organized for the League against War and Fascism, and in 1936 was elected to the National Committee of the Young Communist League.

On April 13, 1937 Geiser boarded the *S.S. Georgic*to join the International Brigades massing in defense of the Spanish Republic. He served as an ammunition carrier at the Battle of Brunete, saw action at Quinto, and advanced to the rank of Lieutenant. Following the Battle of Belchite in September 1937, Geiser was promoted to Political Commissar and charged with the organization of a training school for commissars at Tarazona. Wounded at the conflict at Fuentes de Ebro, Geiser was hospitalized for three months. Returned to the front as Commissar of the Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion in January 1938, he was captured by fascist forces on April 1, 1938. For the next year, he was interned at San Pedro de Cardeña, along with over 650 International Brigades prisoners. Through the efforts of the Friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the U.S. State Department, Geiser and a group of 71 Americans were released in April 1939.

Geiser returned to New York and secured an engineering position with Liquidometer, a manufacturer of aeronautic equipment. Working with the company in various capacities for the next 40 years, Geiser filed numerous patents and, as a research director, supervised the testing of a component used in the first lunar mission. He also served briefly as president of Local 1227 of the United Electrical Radio and Machine Workers of America. He and Sylvia had two boys, Jim and Pete, before divorcing in 1946. With his second wife Doris he had a son and a daughter, David and Linda. In 1956 Geiser enrolled at Columbia University's School of General Studies as a psychology major, and graduated with a B.S. degree cum laude in 1963.

By the early 1970s, Geiser turned his attention once more to Spain. At the promptings of his wife, Geiser enrolled in a memoir-writing class. The essay he wrote on a Christmas concert held in San Pedro de Cardeña found publication in *The New York Times*, and its positive reception provided the impetus for Geiser to produce a more extensive treatment of his concentration camp experience. Upon retirement at age 71, Geiser began to write a comprehensive history of American volunteers captured during the Spanish Civil War. With the assistance of fellow prisoner Robert Steck, Geiser amassed biographical information on the 120 Americans incarcerated in Spanish prisons. He also corresponded with over 150 veterans worldwide to solicit their reminiscences, and traveled to archives in the United States and Europe to conduct research. Ring Lardner, Jr., (whose brother James was killed in action while fighting with the International Brigades) and members of Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, eager to see the project to fruition, provided financial support. Five years of research and writing culminated in the production of a 900-page manuscript. *Prisoners of the Good Fight*, a shortened version of his account, was published in 1986.

**Carl Geiser**

May 9, 1937

Albacete, Spain

Dear Brother Bennet & Grace:[[1]](#footnote-1)

Probably you are a bit surprised to hear I am in Spain fighting with the army of the Spanish Republic. And so I suppose you want to know why I am here.

But before I do this, I’ll let you know I am well, busy and happy, and quite safe for the time being.

The reasons I am here is because I want to do my part to prevent a second world war, which would without doubt, draw in the United States and seriously set back our civilization. And secondly, because all of our democratic and liberty-loving training makes me anxious to fight fascism, and to help the Spanish people drive out the fascist invaders sent in by Hitler & Mussolini.

You probably have 2 questions, or rather objections to my being here. One, that the fight here is between the “Reds” and the church & democracy, and 2 that my being here tends to draw the U.S.A. into war.

If these things are true then I actually should not be here. And if you think they are true, you have been badly and maybe purposefully deceived. And in the time I have been here, I have been able to ascertain without doubt, that the fight here is between democracy and fascism, and not between communism & fascism or democracy.

Last July 16, an uprising was begun against the democratic legally elected Republican Government of Spain. It was organized and financed by Hitler & Mussolini. Fortunately the leader of the uprising was killed by a plane crash as he was returning from Berlin to Spain. The uprising was supported by few Spaniards, notably the big landowners who have starved the Spanish people for generations, the largest capitalists, the nobility, and the majority of the Army, especially the officers, and certain sections of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church who were rich & powerful & often held large lands.

The uprising would have been squelched within a short time, if Hitler & Mussolini had not sent in tanks, airplanes, weapons, and men, until today they are literally invading Spain.

What would happen if Franco, Hitler, & Mussolini were victorious? It would mean that fascism would be stronger everywhere, & fascism means war. Democratic France would be encircled by fascist states preparing for war. The conquest of Spain is part of the fascist preparation for a new world war.

On which side is the church? The great majority of the Catholics are on the side of the government. How much the fascists love Catholics may be seen from Franco’s wiping out of a village of 10,000 in Basque territory which is completely Catholic. Also you know what Hitler is doing to the Church in Germany.

So you can see, it is a matter of checking fascism and war, of preserving democracy & peace. We ought not think that if the fascists take Spain we are safe, no more than we ought to think our house is safe if the neighbor’s is on fire. Protect yours by helping your neighbor put out his fire. That is why the idea of “neutrality”, of keep out of Spain, is very wrong and harmful. Everyone who wants democracy and peace must help the Spanish government, and right away. Frankly, if the Spanish government is victorious, Germany & Italy will be surrounded by more or less democratic countries, and we shall have an excellent chance of avoiding another world war.

I am a member of a machine gun crew in the American Battalion of the International Brigades. And the members of the International Brigades that had come from 52 countries, (I don’t know if there are any more countries) and are representing the working people of his country, and here to fight fascism & war. And it looks now, with the continued support of the peace & democracy loving people of the world, that the Spanish government will win in time, and that fascism will be greatly weakened. But our powerful democratic Republic of the United States is not doing enough, is not carrying its share of the fight for peace & democracy. The rich & reactionary men of the USA, who too want fascism, have many Americans deceived and inactive. That is something we have to change.

A few words about my life here. At present I am perfecting my knowledge of the operation of the machine gun. Food is plain, not enough of course, it consists mostly of soups, beans, rice, bread, bully beef & wine. Since there is a shortage of water one has to drink wine. Milk, eggs, chocolate, most vegetables, pastries, are not served and can be bought only occasionally. Soap is also lacking, and we feel this more than anything else. But on the whole, the food is good, the weather quite warm & sunny & the exercise very beneficial.

Quite a few of my friends are here both from New York & Cleveland. And our relations with the Spanish people are very cordial.

I wish I could write to all my friends in Orrville, but it is not possible, and I shall have to trust to you to tell them I am here, and why. I hope you will especially tell Marie, Amos, Rose, & Gus.[[2]](#footnote-2) Tell them all I send them my warmest regards.

You can write me here — Carl Geiser

Socorro Rojo Internacional[[3]](#footnote-3)

Place Altozano

20 G.P.

Albacete, Spain

And I hope you write very soon.

& give my regards to Leonard also.

Very sincerely,

Your Brother, Carl

P.S. 12 oranges for 4 cents, so we eat them all day long.

They grow them here and they are plentiful.

By the way, I don’t need any money or anything else. The best way you can help me is by helping the people of Orrville know the truth about what is happening in Spain.

Carl

1. Bennet is Carl’s younger brother by a year, and Grace is Bennet’s wife. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sister, uncle, and an aunt who married Gus back in Ohio. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Socorro Rojo Internacional (SRI), International Red Aid, took the place of the Red Cross in Republican Spain. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)