

From Ave Bruzzichesi

January 31, 1940

Dear Dr. [Leo] Eloesser<sup>1</sup>,

In this letter I shall really try to finish my story of the evacuation from Barcelona.

I did not dream it would take so long and still there are so many things that one would like to talk over with you. If I can only write well.

As the refugees entered French territory their troubles and sufferings did not end there. Those who came in first had to continue another thirty kilometers or so to the camps that were to be their homes. They were considered "prisoners of war" and treated as such. Their valuables were taken from them and the army equipment guns ambulances etc were also taken over by the Daladier<sup>2</sup> government and not allowed to go to Valencia as the Spanish leaders desired.

I choose to call the camps where all the refugees were put Concentration camps because they were in my estimation even worse than the camps I had imagined the camps in Germany to be. They were nothing more than stretches of bare land, sectioned off by barbed wire and guarded by Senegalese guards. There was no shelter at all at least for the first month in France. It was February. The camps extended from Perpignan<sup>3</sup> to the Pyrenees near the Mediterranean. It was bitterly cold and the wind from the mountains blew over the camps almost continuously as did sand from the beaches. There was of course no sanitation. Herded together like so many animals these fine people had to eat, sleep, and defecate on the same little piece of land which was their home. In order to keep warm they dug holes in the ground & covered themselves with what blankets, twigs, tin or anything they might get to protect themselves from the cold wind. Four thousand refugees and the majority in the camps such as these. What an outrage!

It did not take long for typhoid epidemic to spread throughout these camps. Diphtheria pneumonia, typhus, scabies too were very common and these poor refugees who were not killed by diseases often died from hunger and exposure to the cold.

Margaret Powell the Welsh nurse, having foolishly left her passport in Barcelona had to remain in one of the camps until we found her (and took her away unauthoritatively) as we visited the camps with Mission Britanica ambulance. (It took Rosita over a week to obtain this permission). She told us of a Catalan soldier who had a few francs and wanted to leave the camp to buy some food. They only got a dark liquid in the morning supposed to be coffee and soup in the evening for which they had to stand in line. This Catalonian boy could not make the Senegalese understand what he wanted and he innocently left the camp. The guard bayoneted him thru the abdomen. He died instantly.

Thousands of such shameful incidents happened which would take days to recount.

As I was working with the British mission then I can tell you of what happened to some of our friends. Do you remember the husky German doctor who became director of the hospital in Valencia after you left? His wife took charge of the nurses. I've forgotten his name (Glaser).

He had suffered from typhoid fever and like the rest of the Internationals without a country he too was put in the Argelese Camp. Women that we were (thank heavens) the French guards did not question our entrance and exits to the camp once seeing our permission from the camp. That is how we got the Welsh nurse out and Rosita with another friend got these doctors out. I did not recognize him when I saw him. He looked like a living skeleton. Once out, these refugees could make attempts to go to another country— but to get out was most difficult [...].

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Leo Eloesser was a cardiothoracic surgeon who worked with Medical Aid for Spanish Refugees in San Francisco. He brought an entire medical group to serve in the Spanish Republican Army in 1937-38. Ave Bruzzichesi was one of nurses in this unit.

<sup>2</sup> Edouard Daladier was the conservative Prime Minister of France, 1938 - 1939.

<sup>3</sup> Cerbere and Perpignan were towns in southern France where the French government established detention camps for Spanish refugees.

All this happened after attempts to get to Valencia were squelched. The hospital train # 21 came into Cerbere filled with all the "enchufados" of the Sanidadad their family and furniture. In the entire train there were not more than 20 patients.

We stayed in the Perpignan for almost a month and were sick at seeing food again which could not be shared. It took me over three months to learn to eat a small full meal.

Fund raising for the refugees still goes on. Many have found new homes as you know.

Please write and tell me if I can write more in detail about anything.

Sincerely,

Ave