

Letter from James Lardner to his mother, Ellis Lardner (May 1938)

James Lardner was born on May 18, 1914 in Chicago, Illinois. He was the second of four sons born to Ringgold (Ring) Wilmer Lardner, journalist and humorist, and Ellis Abbott Lardner, a Smith College graduate from a prominent Michigan family. In 1919, the Lardner family moved East and James, with his brothers, was raised in the affluent enclaves of Greenwich, Connecticut and Great Neck, Long Island. The boys came of age in the rich literary milieu formed by the writers and journalists the senior Lardners counted among their friends, including F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Dorothy Parker, Heywood Broun, and H. L. Mencken.

Lardner attended Andover and Harvard and, following his education, was hired as reporter for the New York Herald Tribune. According to his brother, Ring Lardner, Jr., James' early journalism experiences were a "monotonous round of funerals, banquets, strikes, accidents and minor crimes ..." After three years in New York City, Lardner transferred to the Herald Tribune's Paris bureau in 1938. While there he began writing articles on the participation of American volunteers in the Spanish Civil War. In March 1938 Lardner traveled to Barcelona in the company of fellow journalists Ernest Hemingway and Vincent Sheean to observe the conflict first hand. After witnessing an aerial battle that destroyed a bridge on the Ebro River and the dire state of the Loyalist forces, Lardner resolved to join the International Brigades.

His initial attempt to enlist found him in a ragged battalion in Badalona far from the field of action. Eager to participate in the conflict he left Badalona, made his way to Mora-la-Nueva, and enlisted in the Third Company of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade early in May. In July he sustained shrapnel injuries during his first battle. After a month of hospitalization he was returned to active duty in the Sierra Pandols region near the Ebro.

On September 23, 1938, on what was to be last day of fighting for the International Brigades, Lardner with two other men in his command were sent out to patrol a hill to the rear of his battalion. They encountered heavy enemy fire and Lardner did not return to camp. His death was confirmed several weeks later when a Nationalist correspondent reported that a body with foreign press credentials had been found in the location where Lardner was last seen. His body, which was discovered in fascist-controlled territory, was never recovered. According to Sheean, "Lardner, the last American to enlist, had been the last to be killed."

- Biography courtesy of Tamiment Library, NYU



Barcelona, May 3, 1938.

Mother, darling,

This is a letter which I started to write on April 10. At that time I thought I was going to have to break the news to you gently, but you seem to have heard it before I had the chance. I have kept putting off writing you because each day it seemed as if on the next I would know what I was going to do and where I would be stationed. I still don't know exactly what the situation is, but I am leaving in half an hour for Badalona, about seven miles up the coast, where I will learn the rudiments of artillery in company with a new mixed international unit. It looks as if French will be the medium of instruction. I shall let you know more as soon as I can.

This is a most exclusive army. It has taken me twelve days of going in from persons to person and office to office to get where I am. I have listened to advice of all varieties, a large part of it against my enlisting at all. The decision has been very much my own, and I took it after a great deal of consideration. My closest friend and principal adviser here has been Vincent (Jimmy) Sheean, who told me not to join, which shows you how stubborn I am, if you didn't know. Ernest Hemingway's advice was that it was a very fine thing if I wanted to fight against fascism, but that it was a personal matter that could only be decided by me.

I don't know how closely you have followed the war, but I imagine you must have an exaggerated idea of the danger of our position. On the map it looks as if Catalonia were a small fragment of territory about to be pushed into the Mediterranean, but in reality it is a lot of country, and I don't think it will ever be conquered. There are too many people here who are fighting for things they believe in, and too few on the other side.

My views on the whole question are too complicated for me to try to explain here. I hope you are on our side and will try to convince your friends that I am not just being foolish. Not that I mind being thought foolish, but American opinion is a very important factor.

I have made up a list of reasons why I am enlisting in the International Brigade, which is fairly accurate, as I did it for my own information. I am copying it here so that you may see for yourself which are the real ones. Some of them are picayune and most of them would have been insufficient in themselves, but all have something to do with it.

Because I believe that fascism is wrong and must be exterminated, and that liberal democracy or more probably communism is right.

Because my joining the I. P. might have an effect on the amendment of the neutrality act in the United States.

Because after the war is over I shall be a more effective anti-fascist.

Because in my ambitious quest for knowledge in all fields, I cannot afford in this age to overlook war.

Because I shall come into contact with a lot of communists, who are very good company and from whom I expect to learn things.

Because I am mentally lazy and should like to do some physical work for a change.

Because I need something remarkable in my background to make up for my unfortunate self-consciousness in social relations.

Because I am tired of working for the Herald Tribune in particular and newspapers in general.

Because I think it will be good for my soul.

Because there is a girl in Paris who will have to learn that ~~if~~ my presence is not necessary to her existence.

Because I want to impress various people, Bill for one.

Because I hope to find material for some writing, probably a play.

Because I want to improve my Spanish as well as my French.

Because I want to know what it is like to be afraid of something and I want to see how other people react to danger.

Because there may be a chance to do some reading and I won't have to wear a necktie.

Because I should like once more to get in good physical condition.

The first four reasons and the ninth, especially the first, are the most important ones in my opinion, but you may decide for yourself. I have also considered a few reasons why I should not join the army, such as that I might get seriously wounded or killed and that I shall cause you many weeks of worry. I am sorry for your sake that they are not enough to dissuade me. If it is any comfort to you at all, I still hate violence and cruelty and suffering and if I survive this war do not expect to take any dangerous part in the next.

If you still consider me one of your sons, you can send me an occasional letter and possibly a package now and then. My address here, I think, will be in care of the Brigadas Internacionales, but for a while I think it will be simpler to communicate through the Sheeans. Anything edible would be appreciated, milk chocolate or raisins, or anything in cans that does not require preparation.

Love,

Jim