

OLIVE TREES AND PEASANT COMRADES:  
SPAIN AS REFUGE AND RESIDENCE FOR THE ABRAHAM LINCOLN BRIGADE

2023 Watt Essay Prize Submission, Undergraduate Award

Word count: 10,440

Sam Bisno

History Department, Princeton University

**Contextual note**

Dear ALBA Executive Committee,

I wrote a slightly modified version of this essay in fall 2022 in fulfillment of my junior-year independent work requirement for the History Department at Princeton University. I hoped to build on the solid historical and documentary foundation laid by Peter N. Carroll and others by asking how Spain itself—its environment, culture, language, and people—shaped the Lincolns’ understandings of the Spanish Civil War. After encountering the correspondence of a handful of volunteers in the ALBA Digital Library, I was inspired to visit ALBA in person and perform more thorough readings of the letters of Paul Wendorf, Harry Malofsky, and Paul Sigel. I attempt to reconstruct their stories, which for the most part have yet to be told, and argue that they came to view their host country as a refuge and a residence before they laid down their lives in the struggle against fascism.

Thank you for your consideration and for your important and inspiring work.

Sam Bisno

“The men in that fortress, the mere presence of them, was one of the greatest experiences of my life.” These were among the first words Paul Wendorf wrote home to his wife, Leona Grossman, upon arriving in Spain.<sup>1</sup> It was February 19, 1937, and the Spanish Civil War had been raging for more than half a year.<sup>2</sup> The couple had just married when Wendorf packed his bags and set sail across the Atlantic to fight on behalf of Spain’s democratically elected Popular Front government. Wendorf was one of roughly 3,000 volunteers from the United States to do so, a group remembered as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. The men whose presence constituted one of the “greatest experiences” of Wendorf’s life were fellow volunteers from countries across the globe, collectively known as the International Brigades (IB).<sup>3</sup> Yet Wendorf’s note did not stop there. For him, “an even greater experience” was the sense of camaraderie he felt with the Spanish children who “ran up to the train when we got in and walked along shaking hands,” with “every peasant working in the fields” who saluted as the men passed, and with the “old, wrinkled peasant women” who “would walk down to the train when we stopped and raise their fists in greeting.”<sup>4</sup> From his very first moments in Spain, then, Wendorf took note of his Spanish surroundings and his new “countrymen.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, February 19, 1937, box 1, folder 1, Paul Wendorf Papers, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University (hereafter cited as Paul Wendorf Papers); Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, March 12, 1938, box 1, folder 9, Paul Wendorf Papers; Paul Wendorf marriage certificate, February 3, 1937, in New York City Department of Records, *Index to New York City Marriages, 1866–1937* (Provo, Utah: Ancestry, 2014), certificate no. 445.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 73.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, February 6, 1937, box 1, folder 1, Paul Wendorf Papers; Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, December 24, 1937, box 1, folder 6, Paul Wendorf Papers; Daniel Pastor García and Antonio R. Celada, “The Victors Write History, the Vanquished Literature: Myth, Distortion and Truth in the XV Brigade,” *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 89, no. 7–8 (November 1, 2012): 311–312, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2012.731576>; Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*, 66. The exact number of volunteers from America is uncertain. I have opted for Pastor García and Celada’s figure because of their explicit attention to such questions, but as those authors have acknowledged, estimates range from 2,600 to 3,300.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, February 19, 1937, box 1, folder 1, Paul Wendorf Papers.

Histories of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade have generally not emphasized the relationship between the “Lincolns” and the country they served in. This is understandable given the geopolitical significance of the Spanish Civil War, especially when considered retrospectively, as well as the heroic place in the story of anti-fascism that the volunteers came to occupy. When Nationalist general Francisco Franco helped launch a coup against the Second Spanish Republic in July 1936, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, hoping to install an ally in western Europe, independently decided to support the insurrection. German and Italian planes airlifted Franco’s army from its base in colonial Morocco onto the mainland, and the fascist leaders supplied tens of thousands of troops in addition to hundreds of planes, thousands of machine guns, and many more tons of materiel throughout the war.<sup>5</sup> Thus from its earliest days, the Spanish Civil War had far-reaching implications. When Wendorf described his foe, as he did in his second letter from Spain, he wrote not of the Nationalists, but of “the fascists” more broadly.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the European democracies and the U.S. adopted a policy of non-intervention, disinclined to support the Popular Front coalition of Spanish communists, socialists, and other progressives who had campaigned on a platform of land reform and amnesty for persecuted leftist radicals.<sup>7</sup> It was in response to the lack of aid the Republican Army received from the rest of the world that in September 1936 the Soviet-led Communist International (Comintern) organized the IB, which would grow to include 35,000 volunteers from more than fifty countries.<sup>8</sup> Despite their efforts,

---

<sup>5</sup> Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*, 82–83.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, March 3, 1937, box 1, folder 1, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961), 90–92; Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*, 91–92, 131–148. Hitler and Mussolini signed the non-intervention pact but flouted it. The Spanish Popular Front was part of a broader effort by communists during the 1930s to build coalitions with leftists of other stripes.

<sup>8</sup> Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*, 152–154; Robert A. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), 29. Here I have used Rosenstone’s moderate figure for the total number of IB enlistees, but again estimates diverge significantly, ranging from 32,000 to 41,000. The exact number of countries is also unclear. Pastor García and Celada, “The Victors Write History,” 311.

the Republic fell to Franco and his fascist backers in April 1939, contributing to the outbreak of World War II and ushering in a thirty-six-year dictatorship under the *Generalissimo*.<sup>9</sup>

Against the backdrop of these “titanic ideological conflicts,” historians have typically seen the Lincolns as both “premature anti-fascists” and, because they defied the wishes of the U.S. government to join a Soviet organization, early Cold Warriors.<sup>10</sup> Peter N. Carroll, whose *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* is regarded by many as the best work on the subject, has helpfully identified three “generations” of scholarship. First-generation accounts were autobiographical, written by veterans immediately after their return; the second generation, emerging roughly in the 1960s, was academic but suffered from a limited source base and was inextricably entangled with the politics of the Cold War. Drawing on sources only available after the fall of the Soviet Union and assessing more fully the post-war lives of the Lincolns, the third generation, which Carroll inaugurated with *The Odyssey* in 1994, brought nuance to central questions in the scholarly debate on the Brigade, notably the extent to which volunteers, most of them communists, were ciphers of the Comintern and the Communist Party USA (CPUSA).<sup>11</sup> Still, Carroll continued to view the Brigade primarily in the context of a grand “ideological struggle,” maintaining that “the Lincoln volunteers . . . had no doubts about their ideological

---

<sup>9</sup> Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*, 244–249.

<sup>10</sup> Peter N. Carroll, *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 12. “Premature anti-fascists” is a widely used term, including as the name of a major work of oral history on the Lincolns: John Gerassi, *The Premature Antifascists: North American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39: An Oral History* (New York: Praeger, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> Carroll, *The Odyssey*, vii–x. To Carroll’s generational list one might add two recent strains: attempts to dispel “myths” surrounding the Brigade through statistical analyses and narrative histories intended for general audiences. For the former, see Michael Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1994); and Pastor García and Celada, “The Victors Write History.” For the latter, see Adam Hochschild, *Spain in Our Hearts: Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016). While each of these new historical approaches is illuminating in its own right, neither addresses head-on the role of Spain in the experiences of the volunteers.



motivations” and crediting “political persuasion” as their impetus not just for deciding to go but for staying in the fight.<sup>12</sup>

Certainly, the Lincolns understood the stakes of their struggle. In one of his first letters from Spain, volunteer Harry Malofsky, whose experiences are considered in detail below, wrote that the country “deserves all the support it can get from us, in order to defeat the curse of bloody International Fascism.”<sup>13</sup> Ernest Hemingway, who covered the Brigade closely, famously predicted in February 1937 that “this is the dress rehearsal for the inevitable European war.”<sup>14</sup> And yet Wendorf’s assertion that interactions with Spaniards were an “even greater experience” than those among his IB comrades suggests that, in addition to their commitment to halting the spread of global fascism, the particularities of Spain influenced the volunteers. Indeed, the country was more than an empty stage for the confrontation between democracy, communist anti-fascism, and fascism. Wendorf’s letters to his wife between February 1937 and August 1938 make clear that if his Spanish surroundings began as an unexpected but meaningful aspect of his experience, they became a defining characteristic as he was exposed to the reality that war, beyond being a clash of ideologies, is characterized by brutal violence and attrition. A careful reading of Wendorf’s correspondence alongside that of Malofsky—each housed at the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives at New York University—illuminates the turbulent emotional waters the Lincolns navigated. The war meant horror and frustration, loneliness and boredom, longing and desire.

---

<sup>12</sup> Carroll, *The Odyssey*, 105, 111, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Harry Malofsky to Julius Blickstein, April 1, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University (hereafter cited as Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers).

<sup>14</sup> Ernest Hemingway to the Pfeiffer Family, February 9, 1937, in *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters, 1917–1961*, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1981), 458.

The people, environment, and culture of Spain provided Wendorf and Malofsky a necessary contrast to the harsh battlefield. In the first half of this essay, I argue that Spain was a source of imaginative refuge for the Lincolns, helping to sustain the volunteers' commitment to the war effort when their ideologies were tested by prolonged distress. Wendorf's story also transcends the battlefield: in his extended time away from the front, Spain and the Spanish became an even greater focus in his writing. Thus in the second half, I set his letters in conversation with those of a third volunteer, Paul Sigel, to show how the Lincolns became genuine residents of their host nation. I argue that contacts with civilian life provided a sense of belonging, and, crucially, a reason to invest in the preservation of the Spanish Republic and its inhabitants beyond the defeat of international fascism. If the war meant suffering and despair, the country around the war came to mean hope, relief, joy, inspiration, and deep attachment. Spain, as refuge and residence, gave the Lincolns a reason to keep up the fight.

This study builds on previous historians' development of the political and military aspects of the Brigade through its intense focus on the human, the emotional, and the local. Throughout the essay I choose to refer to Wendorf, Malofsky, and Sigel as people "from America" rather than "Americans," rejecting a static notion of identity in favor of a dynamic one able to accommodate the unexpected and transformative nature of their experiences in Spain. In doing so, I draw on recent works by historians such as Fraser Raeburn. Raeburn, himself influenced by the innovative scholar of anti-fascism Hugo García, has observed that "relations between the foreign volunteers and their Spanish hosts have received little attention, even though these relationships were fundamental to the everyday experience of volunteering" and has advocated a "transnational turn" in thinking about the Lincoln Brigade.<sup>15</sup> For Raeburn, such a

---

<sup>15</sup> Fraser Raeburn, "'The Surest of All Morale Barometers': Transnational Encounters in the XV International Brigade," *Contemporary European History* 31, no. 1 (February 2022): 85, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777321000217>; Hugo García, "Transnational History: A New Paradigm for

turn consisted of focusing on the relationships between soldiers from America and their Spanish counterparts. I broaden the lens to include relationships with civilians as well as the environment, culture, and language of Spain.

### A Brief Note on Method

Letters have their shortcomings. They are highly personal, reflecting intimate relationships between senders and recipients. In the context of war, there is no doubt that letters offer selective accounts. One measure of this is the overwhelmingly positive tone that Wendorf, Malofsky, and Sigel maintained regarding the Republican Army's prospects and their own safety even as Franco's gains mounted. The biases inherent in epistolary sources limit their usefulness in constructing generalizations. Still, the men whose correspondence guide this essay are, at least in a demographic sense, representative of the Brigade as a whole. Wendorf, twenty-six years old when he left for Spain, was a recent graduate from Columbia University in New York City.<sup>16</sup> Malofsky, twenty-one, was involved in a theater troupe affiliated with the International Workers Order in the city and was a former member of the Youth Communist League.<sup>17</sup> Sigel, also twenty-one and a friend of Malofsky, hailed from Pittsburgh and was a CPUSA member and

---

Anti-Fascist Studies?," *Contemporary European History* 25, no. 4 (November 2016): 563, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777316000382>.

<sup>16</sup> New York City Department of Health, *Births Reported in the Year 1911*, in New York City Department of Health, *New York, New York, U.S., Birth Index, 1910–1965*, (Lehi, Utah: Ancestry, 2017), certificate 58825; "53 Columbia Freshmen Receive Class Numerals: Athletes Are Honored for Their Work in Spring Sports," *New York Herald Tribune*, November 19, 1930, 27.

<sup>17</sup> New York City Department of Health, *Births Reported in 1915—Borough of Manhattan*, in New York City Department of Health, *New York, New York, U.S., Birth Index, 1910–1965*, (Lehi, Utah: Ancestry, 2017), certificate no. 31541; Elizabeth Compa and James D. Fernández, "Profiles of Loss," ed. Peter N. Carroll, *The Volunteer: Journal of the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* 27, no. 3 (September 2005), 15; Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, June 19, 1937, in *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks (London: Routledge, 1996).

student at New York University.<sup>18</sup> Thus they fit the description of historian Robert A. Rosenstone's "average volunteer": "a man between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-seven who lived in an industrial, urban center where labor unions and radical political parties were most active. . . . He might very well be a seaman, struggling to organize a union, or a college student."<sup>19</sup>

These three volunteers captured one other common feature of the Brigade experience: each died in action.<sup>20</sup> Used primarily as shock troops, somewhere between 22.5 and 30 percent of the soldiers from America perished on the battlefield, significantly higher than the average rates for both Republican and Nationalist combatants.<sup>21</sup> Most histories written in the second half of the twentieth century drew on oral testimony from veterans, which, with the benefit of hindsight, tended to emphasize the political and military outcomes of the war. This essay turns to contemporaneous sources with the aim of capturing the quotidian priorities of the soldiers. It operates on the assumption that it is historically meaningful—indeed, quite telling—if, for example, a soldier chose not to write about battle and instead spun rich depictions of the Spanish countryside. Finally, a happy consequence of the epistolary approach is the recovery of

---

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*, sheet 6A; Paul Sigel to Miriam Sigel, June 27, 1937, box 1, folder 6, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Paul Sigel to family, September 19, 1937, box 1, folder 10, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Paul Sigel to Hannah Sigel, June 16, 1937, box 1, folder 7, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>19</sup> Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, 98.

<sup>20</sup> Arthur H. Landis, *Death in the Olive Groves: American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939* (New York: Paragon House, 1989), 215; "Belchite 1937 Killed in Action: Harry Meloff," broadside, box 1, folder 12, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Chris Brooks, "Commoners in Spain: Students, Faculty, and Alumni of Commonwealth College in the Spanish Civil War," Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, November 12, 2018, <https://albavolunteer.org/2018/11/commoners-in-spain-students-faculty-and-alumni/>.

<sup>21</sup> Jackson, *Fallen Sparrows*, 3; Pastor García and Celada, "The Victors Write History," 312; Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*, 157. Pastor García and Celada placed the Lincolns' death rate at 22.5 percent, while Payne opted for the higher figure. The overall death rate for both the Republican and Nationalist armies was around 5 percent.

Wendorf's, Malofsky's, and Sigel's stories from the ash heap of history: none of the three men has yet received more than a passing mention in any major scholarly work.<sup>22</sup>

### **Spain as Refuge**

"The boys already are singing of Franco's doom," wrote Harry Malofsky in his first letter from Spain. "We know damn well that not a single bullet will be wasted, only death can put a stop to it. And that's not even thought of."<sup>23</sup> He could not have known that his own death would come less than halfway through a war lasting nearly three years. But any visions of quickly obliterating fascism that the Lincolns carried with them across the Atlantic soon vanished. As Paul Wendorf would write after months in the trenches, the war was anything but an "interesting game with a certainty of odds in our favor. For many of the Americans here there was a rude awakening. I count myself among that number, even though I had thought I knew what to expect."<sup>24</sup> The letters of Wendorf and Malofsky illuminate the range of emotions soldiers experienced at the front, including horror and shock and, with time, ennui and disillusionment. In response, the men latched onto aspects of their host country that appeared to exist outside of combat and even the confrontation with fascism. Paradoxically, Wendorf and Malofsky needed to take mental refuge in their Spanish surroundings if they were to continue their mortal project.

*Paul Wendorf, Jarama, February–June 1937*

---

<sup>22</sup> Wendorf and Malofsky appeared fleetingly in Carroll's work, and Wendorf again in that of Arthur H. Landis. Historians have remained silent on Sigel. Carroll, *The Odyssey*, 144, 186–187; Landis, *Death in the Olive Groves*, 215.

<sup>23</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, March 22, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Wendorf to Sherry, December 13, 1937, box 1, folder 6, Paul Wendorf Papers.

Paul Wendorf was thrown into action practically as soon as he reached Spain on February 14, 1937. The Battle of Jarama had just begun outside of Madrid, and the earliest arrivals from America rushed to stave off the Nationalist onslaught.<sup>25</sup> “Last night, I got my introduction to the enemy,” Wendorf wrote in his first letter as a member of the newly formed Lincoln Battalion, the outfit after which the collective identity of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade would later be named.<sup>26</sup> “A number of bombers came over at night.”<sup>27</sup> Unlike other IB members who had fought in World War I, most of the soldiers from the U.S., Wendorf included, had no prior military knowledge.<sup>28</sup> The hastily organized battalion sustained massive casualties: over the course of 120 days in the trenches, hundreds died or were injured.<sup>29</sup> Wendorf, a machine gunner, survived unscathed, but the episode was nonetheless traumatic for him.<sup>30</sup> He wrote to Grossman in April, after nearly two months in combat, that “I have found out that an army, among other things, is the loneliest place in the world. One does not wish to form close friendships here, because the loss of one who is a friend as well as comrade is more depressing.”<sup>31</sup> During this period, when Wendorf mentioned other volunteers, he did so only in general terms, writing of “some new Americans,” or, as

---

<sup>25</sup> Landis, *Death in the Olive Groves*, 8–13.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, February 19, 1937, box 1, folder 1, Paul Wendorf Papers; Paul Wendorf to Harold, March 6, 1937, box 1, folder 1, Paul Wendorf Papers; “On the Abraham Lincoln Battalion in the International Brigades,” Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archive, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://alba-valb.org/who-we-are/faqs/>. Some historians such as Cecil Eby have insisted that “Abraham Lincoln Brigade” and “Lincolns,” referring to the volunteers from America as a collective, are misnomers. For my purposes, I will use these terms, specifying when I refer to the Abraham Lincoln Battalion. I am less interested in the soldiers’ military classifications, which anyway became increasingly muddled as the war progressed, than on how the soldiers interacted with their surroundings. Cecil D. Eby, *Comrades and Commissars: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007), xi–xii.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, February 19, 1937, box 1, folder 1, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>28</sup> Carroll, *The Odyssey*, 65; Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, April 22, 1937, box 1, folder 2, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>29</sup> Carroll, *The Odyssey*, 91–106.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Wendorf, “A Pair of Pants,” *The Volunteer for Liberty* (Barcelona, Spain), August 26, 1938, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, April 22, 1937, box 1, folder 2, Paul Wendorf Papers.

commonly, the “untrained workers and peasants” who made up the Spanish units. He did not dwell on specific relationships.<sup>32</sup>

In the absence of substantive connections with his trench-mates, Wendorf found life increasingly tedious. In late February, the Madrid front shifted into a more static war of attrition, or what historian Michael Seidman has termed a “quiet front,” where “tranquility usually dominated.”<sup>33</sup> On April 4, Wendorf described his daily routine: “I’m still in the same place as I have been since February 25th. Life has become rather routine. 4 hours watch in the trench, 8 hours off, 4 on, 8 off. . . . The steady daily grind is a bit wearing on the nerves.”<sup>34</sup> In early June, he recounted to Grossman a letter he had received from friends in New York calling him a “hero” and joked, “I wonder if I should let them in on the secret that I fire my gun only to find out if it’s still working.”<sup>35</sup>

Lonely and bored, Wendorf sought refuge in Spain’s natural beauty. The Iberian countryside presented a dramatic contrast with the urban cityscapes he had known for most of his life, and nearly every letter featured lengthy commentaries on the landscapes that provided the setting for Wendorf’s deployment. “Back of us is a beautiful valley,” he wrote in one of his first dispatches from the front. “And behind that rise endless miles of rolling mountains, with olive groves on the slopes. The country is at the same time wild and carefully cultivated.”<sup>36</sup> For Wendorf, the environment of Spain provided indispensable relief from the anxieties and tedium of battle. More than once he expressed his wish that his wife would join him in Spain. “Mug, dear,” he scribbled on May 12, using his favorite pet name for Grossman, “right now I wish you

---

<sup>32</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, April 22, 1937, box 1, folder 2, Paul Wendorf Papers; Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, April 4, 1937, box 1, folder 2, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>33</sup> Carroll, *The Odyssey*, 105–106; Michael Seidman, *Republic of Egos: A Social History of the Spanish Civil War* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, April 4, 1937, box 1, folder 2, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, June 7, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, March 11, 1937, box 1, folder 1, Paul Wendorf Papers.

could be with me on top of this 1500 foot hill, to enjoy the view.” Remarkably, Wendorf penned this line directly after one of his most detailed accounts of combat at Jarama. The previous night the two armies had traded fire, and even as he wrote, shots rang out overhead.<sup>37</sup> Yet the idea of his wife joining him in Spain remained appealing, perhaps because “Mug” and the bucolic scenery of Spain alike represented departures—or refuge—from his simultaneously dreary and distressing reality. Wendorf’s association of Grossman and the countryside as refuge even became tactile when he began pressing roses into his letters before sending them to her.<sup>38</sup> Without veering into psychoanalysis, it seems safe to suggest that Wendorf relied on his Spanish environs to soften the harshness of the front, and that he was capable of viewing them as removed from the war taking place within them. They helped mitigate his isolation and increasing detachment by supplying him with emotional grounding and even a sense of purpose during lulls in combat, when the fascists he had made it his mission to vanquish were nowhere to be seen.

Of course, the distinction between Spain as battlefield and Spain as arcadia was largely contrived. As historian Dorothee Brantz highlighted in her essay on the trenches of World War I, “the first characteristic of an environment of war is that it has ceased to be merely a landscape through which soldiers move but has turned into a space where soldiers engage in combat.”<sup>39</sup> Wendorf often indicated his dismay at the destruction the fighting wrought on the Jarama Valley. For example, in March, he wrote to a correspondent named Harold, likely a friend in the CPUSA, while “sitting in an olive grove, which would be a beautiful place if there were not

---

<sup>37</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, May 12, 1937, box 1, folder 2, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, May 14, 1937, box 1, folder 2, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>39</sup> Dorothee Brantz, “Environments of Death: Trench Warfare on the Western Front, 1914–19,” in *War and the Environment: Military Destruction in the Modern Age*, ed. Charles E. Closmann (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2009), 69.



trenches dug through it in various directions.”<sup>40</sup> Observations such as this indicate a limit to the escape Spain offered to the volunteers. If the Spanish landscapes were Wendorf’s chosen refuge, he was consistently reminded that those landscapes were as war-weathered as he was.

Nonetheless, the dismay Wendorf felt at the ruin of the countryside underscores his attachment to his surroundings, which he perceived as novel and pristine, and the tension he felt between them and the unwelcome omnipresence of the war. His letters bemoaning the destruction of the olive groves, just as much as those inviting his wife to share in the views, point to an emotional need to find something in Spain beyond—and despite—deadly struggle. The natural scenes of Jarama, then, were more than just an attractive but insignificant backdrop for the battle that took place there. They empowered Wendorf to endure the fight.

### *Harry Malofsky, March–August 1937*

Harry Malofsky, whose first letters were written amid Spanish civilian life as opposed to the slog of battle, recorded a vastly different set of first impressions than did Wendorf. Malofsky arrived in “Sunny Spain” in March 1937, roughly a month after Wendorf, and was assigned to a second outfit of volunteers from America, later named the George Washington Battalion.<sup>41</sup> After Jarama, the IB ensured that the Washingtons received adequate training: as Malofsky himself wrote, “the first comrades that came here didn’t even have a day’s drilling or uniforms. They went to the front in plain overalls. Now, of course, things are different.”<sup>42</sup> Thus he spent the first two and a half months of his time in Spain in a number of unidentified towns—probably including Tarazona, located outside of the IB headquarters in Albacete—where he studied

---

<sup>40</sup> Paul Wendorf to Harold, March 6, 1937, box 1, folder 1, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>41</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, March 22, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Harry Malofsky to Julius Blickstein, April 1, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, June 8, 1938, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>42</sup> Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, 146; Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, April 11, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

military maneuvers and weapon handling, conditioned his body, and attended lectures.<sup>43</sup> For him, then, there was no war yet to escape. Still, his time in training would shape his notions of what Spain was and, more importantly, what it could be—notions that would eventually provide their own sort of refuge.

Malofsky found much to enjoy in the “little Spanish town.” In his letters to Miriam Sigel (the sister of Paul Sigel, discussed later), he recounted spending his “plenty of money and plenty of free time” buying food, attempting to learn Spanish, putting on theatrical performances for the IB’s hosts, and even developing a friendship with a village goat whom he affectionately dubbed Esmeralda, or “Esmy.”<sup>44</sup> Such interactions, made possible by Malofsky’s proximity to Spanish civilians, were pleasant enough for him to remark, “What a war! So far it has been more like a vacation at Kinderland!”<sup>45</sup> Eventually, however, he indeed grew anxious to put his training to use. Beginning in late April, his letters frequently conveyed his expectation that he would depart soon.<sup>46</sup> By early June, he was impatient. After receiving word that an acquaintance had died in a bombing, he wrote to Sigel, “It’s like almighty hell, when things like that pop up. You swear, and stomp your feet, and shout ‘When the hell are we gonna get outa here? Did we come here to eat

---

<sup>43</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, March 22, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, May 6, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, April 11, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, June 8, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers. Malofsky’s earliest letters mentioned Albacete, but due to the IB censors, he quickly switched to signing his letters with the nebulous “in a little Spanish town” and indicated at least once that he had changed locations. Tarazona was the major training base developed during the first half of 1937, was nearby Albacete, and was where most of the Washingtons trained. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, 146.

<sup>44</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, May 6, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, April 11, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, May 16, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers. The IB disbursed a regular stipend to the volunteers. Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, 140.

<sup>45</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, May 16, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>46</sup> Harry Malofsky to Julius Blickstein, April 27, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, May 2, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Harry Malofsky to Julius Blickstein, May 26, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

and drink, or to fight?”<sup>47</sup> Malofsky’s eagerness for the front lends credence to Robert Rosenstone’s assertion that when deployed, volunteers “usually considered themselves lucky. They had come to fight a war and now they were going to do so.”<sup>48</sup>

In addition to a desire to fight, one reason for Malofsky’s dissatisfaction with town life was a lack of opportunities for sex. Whereas Wendorf, writing to his wife, avoided the topic of Spanish women except to assure Grossman that he was uninterested, the “beautiful señoritas” were a constant subject of Malofsky’s letters.<sup>49</sup> But the señoritas did not reciprocate. On May 6, Malofsky spent several paragraphs protesting the fact that in “small town ‘backward’ Spain . . . approaching a girl is like going near dynamite. Marriage is the only solution.”<sup>50</sup> On May 26, punning on the anti-fascist mantra “*No pasarán*” (“They will not pass”), he suggested the slogan “No Fuckaron.”<sup>51</sup> Any expectation of sex he brought with him from home was thwarted in the cultural context of rural, Catholic Spain. He held out hope, however, that things might change “in a big city like Valencia or Barcelona,” where the volunteers could “find out if we still are men or not.”<sup>52</sup> When Malofsky was finally deployed during the Battle of Brunete in July, the promise of the city would stick with him, ultimately providing him an imaginative alternative to war as the landscapes of Jarama had Wendorf.

The Brunete offensive, intended to divert Nationalist forces from their unrelenting siege of Madrid and stop their inroads in the north, proved even more disastrous for the IB than

---

<sup>47</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, June 4, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>48</sup> Rosenstone, *Crusade of the Left*, 141.

<sup>49</sup> Harry Malofsky to Julius Blickstein, April 1, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers. “Didn’t I tell you that I am sleeping alone until we are together again,” wrote Wendorf in June 1937. Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, October 13, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>50</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, May 6, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>51</sup> Harry Malofsky to Julius Blickstein, May 26, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>52</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, May 6, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers. This letter also featured a striking implication of homosexual relationships between the volunteers, replicated nowhere else in the letters of Malofsky, Wendorf, or Sigel: “The major problem though is how to keep from going ‘fruit’ altogether. Already the boys are beginning to ogle eyes at each other.”

Jarama. Gone were the static trenches: Brunete was open warfare. The Washingtons, tasked with taking Villanueva de la Canada twenty miles outside of the capital city, “found themselves pinned down by machine-gun fire in stifling hundred-degree heat.”<sup>53</sup> By the end of the three-week ordeal, 300 members of the Lincoln and Washington Battalions were dead, forcing the merger of the two contingents.<sup>54</sup> Malofsky wrote just once while in action; as he put it, “you just can’t sit down in the face of a hail of machine gun bullets to answer mail.”<sup>55</sup> His July 16 letter to Sigel represented a dramatic shift in his thinking about the war. The abstract and somewhat idealistic tone of his earlier correspondence—“It’s great! I’ve suddenly become greater than I had ever hoped to be”—melted away.<sup>56</sup> Now Malofsky knew the concrete horror of war:

Remember those many war books we used to read, and how it used to turn our stomachs, due to the hand of a skilled craftsman? Well, multiply their descriptions a hundred fold, and you still can’t capture it. Who can describe that feeling, when you’re lying flat on your belly and black fascist planes drop eggs all around you; when artillery shells explode so close, that dirt and rocks fall all over your clothes, and you run but 10 yards before the next bomb explodes, because the gunner has an exact range on you.<sup>57</sup>

Malofsky’s juxtaposition of narrative depictions of war with its still more horrific reality suggests a certain disillusionment. This was not, as he had indicated previously (albeit somewhat disingenuously), a simple matter of saying, “Bye, Bye, Franco!”<sup>58</sup> Though he remained committed to the project of the Brigade, insisting that “our victory means too much,” his appetite for the front had vanished, and he was eager to be done: “Nothing but dead muscles can get me out of this fight now.”<sup>59</sup> Nor was this dejection purely the product of the heat of battle. Two

---

<sup>53</sup> Carroll, *The Odyssey*, 141.

<sup>54</sup> Carroll, *The Odyssey*, 142.

<sup>55</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, July 16, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>56</sup> Harry Malofsky to Julius Blickstein, April 1, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>57</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, July 16, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>58</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, April 11, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>59</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, July 16, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

weeks later, finally resting, he doubled down, writing to his friends Julius and Rose Blickstein, “comrades, don’t for a minute think that this war is ‘glorious.’ Every inch of the way is blood and sweat.”<sup>60</sup> This was Malofsky sobered, asserting even, despite the insouciant tone of much of his earlier correspondence, that “I never tried to be silly romantic about the heroic fight we were going into and I’m glad of that.” Indeed, the trials of combat altered his memory of his first months in Spain. For example, the “Sunny Spain” of his first correspondence became unwelcome, “the goddamn gosh awful Spanish sun that burns and burns for hours and hours, that pours the sweat into your eyes and burns them so that you can’t see but five feet in front of you.”<sup>61</sup> No longer was life as a recruit in training akin to a “vacation at Kinderland”; in Malofsky’s mind it transformed into “four months of training under strict military obedience.”<sup>62</sup> While it would be an exaggeration to suggest that Malofsky no longer wished to fight or lost sight of his reasons for joining the IB, it is clear that his confidence and eagerness faltered as a result of ongoing bodily insecurity and dampening spirits.

As Malofsky’s first taste of battle exposed to him the terror of the war and recast his military experiences in an unfavorable light, he, like Wendorf, began to seek refuge. Malofsky ended his letter from Brunete with the hope that he would soon be granted leave to Madrid: “Boy, have I been waiting for that.”<sup>63</sup> He reiterated this sentiment in each of his subsequent notes, once even detailing a dream he had of a Madrid hotel.<sup>64</sup> For him, Madrid offered material pleasures, a chance to spend his stipend and “to do it in royal fashion.”<sup>65</sup> But more than that, it represented an emotional and psychological respite, a means to “put us again in the perfect frame

---

<sup>60</sup> Harry Malofsky to Julius and Rose Blickstein, July 30, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>61</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, July 16, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>62</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, August 16, 1936, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>63</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, July 16, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>64</sup> Harry Malofsky to Julius and Rose Blickstein, July 30, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, August 4, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>65</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, August 4, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

of mind to go back to the lines.”<sup>66</sup> Finally, in mid-August, Malofsky got his wish, a forty-eight-hour leave in the capital. “While I’m out of the lines, I’m not going to write about the lines,” he had promised Sigel a few days earlier. “Let’s get back into the swing of the old time jocular Meloffian letters and see if we can bring back the smiles again.”<sup>67</sup> He made good on his word. His letter to her on August 16 detailing the brief but eventful excursion was ecstatic. He was “pie eyed and dizzy with the sense of bawdiness, with the feeling of freedom, richness, relaxation and forgetfulness.”<sup>68</sup> This latter descriptor especially reveals the extent to which Malofsky used the city as a refuge. Madrid, though always under threat, remained well-defended and thus offered a physical and mental alternative, however fleeting, to the war. It was a piece of Spain that “Franco could never take.”<sup>69</sup>

While in the capital Malofsky took advantage of his renewed proximity to Spanish civilian life to do what he could not at the front. “Street cars, subways, theatres, Broadway, cafés, bars, whores, shops, life, gaiety,” he wrote. “Millions of people of all shapes and sizes; men, women, kids, soldiers and officers—too many officers.” Malofsky’s agitation at seeing officers underscores his perception of Madrid as an escape: their presence punctured the illusion. His reference to Broadway, too, is noteworthy for the linkage it drew between Spain and New York. Elsewhere Malofsky made this connection explicit: “I was in my Madrid. It was New York once more.” This comparison exemplifies how Malofsky assigned meaning to the city beyond that which was obvious. After just two days, he claimed ownership over “my Madrid”; as a lifelong New Yorker, he was comfortable in its urban craze. Madrid also delivered on his enduring expectation that “a big city” would mean sexual indulgence, and Malofsky was not shy about his

---

<sup>66</sup> Harry Malofsky to Julius and Rose Blickstein, July 30, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>67</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, August 4, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers. “Meloffian” apparently refers to Malofsky’s last name.

<sup>68</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, August 16, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>69</sup> Harry Malofsky to Julius and Rose Blickstein, August 29, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

“whoring around.” In fact, sex was seemingly his priority while on leave: according to the schedule he outlined for Sigel, he mostly occupied the daytime hours with shopping and drinking, “waiting for Dolores to complete her heavy morning’s business.” He spent his nights at a hotel separate from the rest of his company, for it was “the only place Dolores would consent to go.”<sup>70</sup> Malofsky later confirmed that Dolores was a prostitute, and that one night he “got drunk and vicious, and beat up the whore. She deserved it, the bitch; charging me 150 pasetas!”<sup>71</sup> The misogyny and violence of this outburst are startling, suggesting that even as Malofsky reveled in Madrid, he held a reductive view of its inhabitants. Certainly, for some volunteers more than others, relationships with Spaniards remained shallow and transactional; unlike the men explored later in this study, Malofsky was no “resident.” Nonetheless, it is notable that he committed, albeit begrudgingly, over a quarter of his 500-peseta budget to Dolores’s services.<sup>72</sup> This fact reinforces the centrality of sexual relief to Malofsky’s conception of Madrid as the antithesis of military life.

The excitement for action that Malofsky had expressed less than two months prior was nowhere to be found when he was called back to duty from leave. Rather, he wanted only “to get the next battle over with” and was increasingly anxious to return home.<sup>73</sup> He was deployed to the Aragon front in late August, helping the Republican Army to capture Quinto before perishing during the unsuccessful Battle of Belchite in September.<sup>74</sup> In his final letter, he presented himself as a seasoned, desensitized soldier. “What a difference this is from the first time under fire,” he wrote. “The planes no longer bother me, I don’t mind the sun so much . . . I’m a veteran.”

---

<sup>70</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, August 16, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>71</sup> Harry Malofsky to Julius and Rose Blickstein, August 29, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers. Malofsky meant pesetas, the currency of Spain.

<sup>72</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, August 16, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>73</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, August 16, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>74</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, August 28, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; “Belchite 1937 Killed in Action: Harry Meloff,” broadside, box 1, folder 12, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

Nonetheless, he clung to his impressions of Madrid. Even if Aragon was easier psychologically than Brunete, it was still a “difference from my two days in Madrid.” The end of the letter was yet another extended reflection on the city; Malofsky’s last sentence before signing off informed the Blicksteins that he was sending them a picture he took there.<sup>75</sup> To highlight the profound imprint Madrid left on Malofsky is not to downplay the importance of his bravery on the battlefield or the strength of his ideology. On the contrary, he stressed that the anti-fascist spirit of the capital, “despite my drunkenness [sic], left its lasting impression on my heart.”<sup>76</sup> But urban Spain, both in anticipation and actuality, was a fundamental part of Malofsky’s broader experience precisely because it stood in contrast to the front lines. His idealized notion of the city was first a tantalizing prospect and then a nostalgic anchor that enabled him to weather the war.

*Paul Wendorf, Ebro River, July–August 1938*

As Malofsky fired his last rounds at Belchite, Wendorf was recuperating from the front. His correspondence over the next six months, during which the war was a distant reality, is explored in the second half of this essay for the light it sheds on how some Lincolns came to understand Spain as something beyond a source of refuge. But in the spring of 1938, the Nationalists reignited their campaign in Aragon. By mid-April, they had captured territory stretching westward all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, isolating the Republican positions in Catalonia from those to the south.<sup>77</sup> The situation increasingly dire, Wendorf reported to an unidentified artillery training base to receive, for the first time, proper military instruction.<sup>78</sup> Then, in May, he officially rejoined the Lincoln Battalion and was redeployed.<sup>79</sup> One of the

---

<sup>75</sup> Harry Malofsky to Julius and Rose Blickstein, box 1, folder 3, August 29, 1937.

<sup>76</sup> Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, August 28, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 519–521, 533.

<sup>78</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, March 28, 1938, box 1, folder 9, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>79</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, May 5, 1938, box 1, folder 10, Paul Wendorf Papers.



longest-tenured volunteers remaining in Spain, he commented on how circumstances had changed since his arrival over a year earlier. Most obviously, so many Lincolns had died, defected, or been sent home after their initial service that the battalion was now predominantly Spanish. Wendorf was not alarmed by this development; in fact, he was excited because “I read Spanish pretty well now, but am not yet accustomed to speaking it, so I now have an opportunity for really learning it.”<sup>80</sup> Moreover, in his observations of Spain’s natural elements, Wendorf was now able to draw multi-year comparisons, writing on July 16 that “the sun is hot, but there is just enough breeze from off the Pyrenees to keep the weather bearable—it’s not the overwhelming furnace heat of last summer near Madrid.”<sup>81</sup> Wendorf’s letters from this period recall Malofsky’s description of himself as a “veteran.” The front was nothing new to him. Yet Wendorf could not have anticipated just what the coming weeks had in store, an ambitious military effort against which not “any of the previous campaigns of this war, or of any other, could compete.”<sup>82</sup>

Between July 24 and 25, the Lincolns, along with nearly 80,000 other Republican soldiers, crossed the Ebro River in Catalonia via rowboats and pontoon bridges.<sup>83</sup> The Battle of the Ebro would spell the end of the Republic: by November, 7,150 Republican soldiers would die, 60,000 would suffer injury, and 20,000 would be taken prisoner, sealing the outcome of the war.<sup>84</sup> Historians generally hold, however, that the crossing itself accomplished its objective of temporarily drawing Nationalist forces away from Valencia.<sup>85</sup> Still, for the soldiers paddling and marching for their lives across the open water without artillery cover, effectively bait for Franco,

---

<sup>80</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, May 12, 1938, box 1, folder 10, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>81</sup> Paul Wendorf to Sophie, July 16, 1938, box 1, folder 12, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>82</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, August 8, 1938, box 1, folder 13, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>83</sup> Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2007), 289.

<sup>84</sup> Preston, *The Spanish Civil War*, 291; Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*, 201.

<sup>85</sup> Preston, *The Spanish Civil War*, 287–292; Payne, *The Spanish Civil War*, 199–202; Giles Tremlett, *The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 477.

the success of the maneuver seemed far from a guarantee.<sup>86</sup> By now, Wendorf longed to return to his wife; he consented to risk dying in a river more than 3,000 miles away purely because “the critical situation at present overrules all individual problems.”<sup>87</sup> For him, the Ebro was the culmination of 18 months of service, the “strange combination of the epic and idiotic, the base and sublime, this exalting and horrible thing. . . . It cannot be characterized by any word, or phrase, or sentence, because it is a thing that has in it everything that has ever happened or can happen.”<sup>88</sup> Lacking an adequate word, phrase, or sentence, he authored a dozen pages. His August 8 letter to Grossman, his longest—and last—stands as the single strongest testament to Spain’s role as refuge to be found in his correspondence.

At the Ebro, Wendorf felt the violence of the war more directly than he ever had before. The letter, written in rapid, present-tense fragments, made palpable the immense stress of the crossing:

Near the river, a huge, swift fascist bomber comes down low, drops its load, misses us, machine guns us, misses. More fascist bombers. In between bombers we move. Suddenly on the shore, bedlam. . . . A couple of rowboats were hit by machine gun bullets from the airplanes, full of water. We get in a boat; I grab the oars which are tied to the gunwales by rope. A rope comes untied and we drift in the river for a quarter of a minute while it is being retied, and we wonder if the next bomber will find us in the center of the river. A 100 yards of river [sic], and we are on the other bank.<sup>89</sup>

Wendorf continued by describing the days after the crossing, during which the army drove beyond the river in an attempt to take the provincial capital of Gandesa: “We ate canned food, had diarrhea; the smell of the dead was everywhere; no sleep for a week.”<sup>90</sup> So arresting was this account that partial versions of it were published in *The Manchester Guardian* and *The Volunteer*

---

<sup>86</sup> Carroll, *The Odyssey*, 198.

<sup>87</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, July 1, 1938, box 1, folder 12, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>88</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, August 8, 1938, box 1, folder 13, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>89</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, August 8, 1938, box 1, folder 13, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>90</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, August 8, 1938, box 1, folder 13, Paul Wendorf Papers; Tremlett, *The International Brigades*, 471.

for *Liberty*, the publication of the IB.<sup>91</sup> But after eight pages, Wendorf cut his narration short. “I can’t go on forever,” he wrote. “Just a couple of more things.” In the closing passages of his letter, he turned his attention away from the battle and toward the “Miracle of the Grape”:

Up to 2 or 3 days ago the grapes were green and sour—I would chew them when I had no water, or was sleepy, the acid was a temporary stimulant. But now the grapes are beginning to ripen—the “Miracle of the Grape”—I think I’ve heard the phrase before, but I thought it referred to wine. Now, I know what the miracle is. You see, grapes dont [sic] ripen little by little. They ripen suddenly; overnight the acid turns into sugar. . . . You pick one blue, sweet grape out of the bunch; a few hours later there will be more ripe ones on the same bunch, the next day still more. . . . The “Miracle” is achieved—we swallow hundreds of the beautiful fruit, grateful for the sugar, which our worn-out bodies cry for, the new fresh life which has suddenly come to us.<sup>92</sup>

Amid the most dramatic episode of the war, Wendorf documented grapes. Initially surprising, this choice becomes understandable in the context of Spain as a refuge. During the Ebro offensive, Wendorf relied more than ever on small outlets for escape. The grapes provided obvious energy, hydration, and a change of pace from packaged food. But they also brought psychological relief. He had written in anticipation of the ripening less than a week prior; when the “miracle” finally occurred, it was all the more remarkable in that it contrasted starkly with the brutality and futility of a losing fight.<sup>93</sup> As tensions mounted, so did the need for their release. The August 8 letter fits into a larger pattern of paying closest attention to Spain’s natural elements at moments of intensity or trauma, evident from Wendorf’s earliest correspondence. Spain could deliver joy at what would appear to be the unlikeliest of junctures.

Wendorf died shortly after sending his August 8 letter, likely while defending so-called “Hill 666” in the Serra de Pàndols from Italian and German aerial bombardment.<sup>94</sup> This was the

---

<sup>91</sup> “Letters to the Editor: The Fighting on the Ebro Front,” *The Manchester Guardian* (Manchester, United Kingdom), August 23, 1938, 18; Paul Wendorf, “A Pair of Pants,” 3.

<sup>92</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, August 8, 1938, box 1, folder 13, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>93</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, August 2, 1938, box 1, folder 13, Paul Wendorf Papers. It is possible that this letter was written on August 3; Wendorf himself was unsure of the exact date.

<sup>94</sup> Landis, *Death in the Olive Groves*, 215; Tremlett, *The International Brigades*, 489–491.

final military action of the Brigade; as it took place, Spanish Prime Minister Juan Negrín, in an attempt to win favor from the non-interventionist governments, announced that the IB would be disbanded.<sup>95</sup> Like that of Malofsky, Wendorf's final correspondence illustrates the extent to which Spain provided vital mental shelter from its own civil war. Both men came to Spain expecting to rout the fascists; instead, they encountered a protracted, profoundly violent, and emotionally crushing war of attrition. Historians have noted the turmoil this turn of events caused the Lincolns. Carroll, for example, observed the puzzling "complexity of human responses to the hazards and opportunities of war. Heroes of one day might appear irresolute the next, in a curious cycle of emotional intensity."<sup>96</sup> While he highlighted the desertion of many volunteers after each battle, he marveled at the fact that some chose to stay even if their ideological resolve was thoroughly shaken.<sup>97</sup> Attachments to Spanish landscapes and cities, of course, were not solely responsible for Wendorf's and Malofsky's decisions to keep up the fight as many of their comrades fled. But their letters, by documenting Spain's role as a source of refuge, help clarify the "curious" nature of the soldiers' psychological states while at the front, their ideological fuel dwindling. Though they were drawn to different elements of their host country, both men used Spain to alleviate their discomfort, boredom, and trauma. In this sense, Spain was more than just a battlefield; it was also a way to move beyond the battle.

### **Spain as Residence**

While historians have traditionally focused on the military dimensions of the Lincolns' experiences, these men and women did much more than fight. Few IB soldiers, for example, participated in the pivotal Battle of Teruel between December 1937 and February 1938, which

---

<sup>95</sup> Tremlett, *The International Brigades*, 502.

<sup>96</sup> Carroll, *The Odyssey*, 164.

<sup>97</sup> Carroll, *The Odyssey*, 164–165.

resulted in a decisive blow to the Republican Army.<sup>98</sup> During this period, many volunteers worked outside of military service.<sup>99</sup> Wendorf became a historian of the Brigade. He spent the autumn and winter of 1937–38 in Spanish towns, including in Albacete, where the IB was based. In these months, when the front was not his immediate reality, Wendorf could appreciate the richness of Spanish civilian life, even coming to view Spain as something of a second home. Meanwhile, not all of the volunteers who arrived to reinforce the Lincoln Battalion were as impatient for action as Malofsky. Paul Sigel, Malofsky's friend, valued his time in training for the connections it allowed him to build with the people of Tarazona. These connections ultimately upended the reductive preconceptions he held about Spaniards. For Wendorf and Sigel, Spain was a community, a legitimate residence. Consequently, the men developed a deep appreciation of the society, culture, and above all, human beings for which they fought—an appreciation that bolstered their ideological motives.

*Paul Wendorf, Albares and Albacete, August 1937–March 1938*

Paul Wendorf's long-awaited relief in August 1937 brought a dramatic shift in his surroundings. Between then and March 1938, he traveled to several towns, some of which he named in his letters.<sup>100</sup> The bulk of his time was split between the village Albares outside of Madrid, where he rested for his first month away from battle, and Albacete.<sup>101</sup> Upon settling in the latter in September, he took a job with the newly founded IB Historical Commission interviewing returning soldiers, writing pamphlets on topics such as the "Life of the Americans

---

<sup>98</sup> Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, 504–516; Tremlett, *The International Brigades*, 409.

<sup>99</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, September 29, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>100</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, September 11, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Paul Wendorf Papers; Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, March 12, 1938, box 1, folder 9, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>101</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, August 5, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Paul Wendorf Papers; Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, September 29, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Paul Wendorf Papers.

in Spain,” and producing a radio show.<sup>102</sup> His knowledge of the fortunes of the Republican Army was no longer firsthand but instead was filtered through word of mouth and newspaper reports. His general impressions of the war stuck with him: he complained about the “childish” accounts of foreign correspondents covering the conflict, “as if it were a great big picnic with the fascists running as soon as we showed our noses” rather than “the hell and the dirt I’ve lived through.”<sup>103</sup> However, life as an inactive volunteer, Wendorf assured Grossman, was mostly safe. “I have been loafing around all this time taking life easy and eating the best food I’ve had so far in Spain,” he wrote on August 28 from a hospital in Albares where he was recovering from jaundice. “I have also become pretty soft from the month of inactivity . . . after those strenuous 3 weeks in July, when we could never get more than a few hours sleep at a time.”<sup>104</sup> The war engulfed the entire country, but neither Albares nor Albacete was the site of active hostilities. The front became distant both physically and psychologically.

As he began to enjoy relative peace, Wendorf in turn viewed Spain as more than a mere escape from war. He continued to write about nature, as when he traveled along a coastal highway and “saw really beautiful scenery—mountainous country, with the most fertile valleys of Spain in between.”<sup>105</sup> But such observations were fewer and further between now that he was immersed in civilian life. It is unsurprising that Wendorf previously sought refuge primarily in the rich visuals of the environment: the trenches were characterized by periods of intense quiet and, especially as supply lines deteriorated late in the war, bland food.<sup>106</sup> The towns, meanwhile,

---

<sup>102</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, September 29, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Paul Wendorf Papers; Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, October 13, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Paul Wendorf Papers; Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, December 5, 1937, box 1, folder 6, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>103</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, October 13, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>104</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, August 28, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>105</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, September 11, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>106</sup> Paul Wendorf to Sherry, June 8, 1937, box 1, folder 3, Paul Wendorf Papers; Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, June 24, 1938, box 1, folder 11, Paul Wendorf Papers.

offered no shortage of sounds and tastes. Wendorf found flamenco music, for example, to be “a lot of fun.” While in Albacete, he frequented performances, reveling particularly in the “pauses every now and then for the audience to yell ‘Ola! Olé!’”<sup>107</sup> Spanish cuisine, too, was the subject of many letters. On August 15, he described his encounter with the food of Albares: “Muggie, try this—an omelet containing fried onions and boiled potatoes cut into small pieces, the onions and potatoes being prepared beforehand. . . . It’s a TORTILLA, and I have one every few days in a private home in this little town, for a few pesetas.”<sup>108</sup>

In addition to the enthusiasm Wendorf acquired for Spanish dance and cuisine, these passages evince a sense of stability. At Jarama, Wendorf’s location was always subject to change. Resting in Albares, however, he expressed no urgency to leave, and when he agreed to the job as Brigade historian in September, he knew that it would mean staying in Albacete for a term of four months.<sup>109</sup> For the first time, he felt rooted to his place. The flamenco shows and village meals were regular, dependable parts of Wendorf’s existence rather than momentary escapes from the brutality of war. And they were real rather than imaginative. Unlike the olive trees of no man’s land, the tortillas actually existed outside of the context of combat; they had no trenches dug through them. This return to the freedom of civilian life after harrowing months in action led Wendorf to remark that “I’ve learned that there’s a hell of a lot of fun in just being alive—the experiences out of which I’ve learned that of course weren’t amazing while they lasted.”<sup>110</sup> Moreover, his exhortation that Grossman—“Muggie”—make a tortilla suggests that he to some extent had adopted Spanish culture as his own: he enjoyed the dish so much that he wanted his wife to learn it. The day after he mentioned the tortilla, he wrote excitedly that a woman in the

---

<sup>107</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, November 25, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>108</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, August 15, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>109</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, August 28, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Paul Wendorf Papers; Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, September 29, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>110</sup> Paul Wendorf to Sherry, December 13, 1937, box 1, folder 6, Paul Wendorf Papers.

village was going to cook him a Spanish “*chicken dinner*. It will be the first chicken since leaving New York.”<sup>111</sup> In September, some particularly good ice cream caused him to liken the seaside city of Alicante, where he was for a brief vacation, to “a refined Coney Island.”<sup>112</sup>

Wendorf, then, viewed his new setting through the lens of home. Though Spain was not a perfect replacement for New York, it offered familiarity, permanency, and emotional fulfillment that the trenches could not.

Wendorf did not go so far as to disown his true home: as the months passed, Grossman increasingly agitated for him to return to the U.S., and he expressed his regret that he could not.<sup>113</sup> At the same time, he was invested in his project at Albacete, writing in December that “of course I’ve been here a long time now, but there must also be judged what I am doing here, and the availability of people to take my place. I have learned a great deal. . . . To step out before I have finished certain things would mean that what I have done in the last few months would have to be duplicated in large part.”<sup>114</sup> Wendorf was clearly motivated by a sense of duty to the IB, but equally important were the relationships he had built with Spanish townspeople. Even if they were occasioned, for instance, by a craving for a home-cooked tortilla, such relationships were more than transactional. In his August 16 letter from Albares, Wendorf marveled at how “the whole village turned out to watch” a boxing match put on by the foreign volunteers and to donate to the Socorro Rojo, a communist aid agency that, incidentally, helped coordinate the IB’s mail system.<sup>115</sup> In January, he recounted giving a bar of soap Grossman had mailed him to a

---

<sup>111</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, August 16, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Paul Wendorf Papers. Wendorf underlined “chicken dinner,” rendered here in italics.

<sup>112</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, September 11, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>113</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, November 25, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Paul Wendorf Papers; Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, February 7, 1938, box 1, folder 8, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>114</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, December 5, 1937, box 1, folder 6, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>115</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, August 16, 1937, box 1, folder 4, Paul Wendorf Papers. The Socorro Rojo was listed in letters’ return addresses.



15-year-old named Felix Navarro. “His father was killed on the front a year ago and his brother is an officer in the army,” Wendorf noted.<sup>116</sup> These quotidian interactions with Spanish civilians impressed upon him the active role the Spanish populace played in the preservation of the Republic. Thus although they may have had no direct bearing on his ultimate aim of defeating fascism or even his shorter-term historical work, they shaped his understanding of the conflict. Whereas his letters from the front centered on the ever-present enemy, those from Albares and Albacete focused on the people resisting that enemy by every means short of picking up a gun.

More than a mere shift in emphasis, this growing appreciation for the contributions and struggles of the Spanish people engendered in Wendorf a sense that they were his equals. This was not immediate. On November 7, still early in his time in Albacete, he published a report for the Historical Commission, a copy of which he sent to Grossman. The purpose of the document, produced in commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the Russian Revolution and the first anniversary of the Nationalist siege of Madrid, was to highlight the importance of Comintern organizing to the Republican cause and to situate Spain within a global context of proletarian struggle. It painted a picture of a backward, helpless country “with its 50% illiteracy, its one-handled wooden plows, its mid-nineteenth century railroad equipment, the isolation from the civilized world in which the monarchy kept it.” That Spain had become “proud and confident of its power” since the beginning of the war was due to “the help given by the Soviet Union.” The savior narrative betrayed a lack of consideration for the sacrifices of the Spanish citizenry; Wendorf even included an anecdote about a man he met on the train thanking him profusely for his help.<sup>117</sup> His words conveyed a marked feeling of superiority. But over the course of the winter, as he talked, worked, and ate tortillas with Spaniards, his tone changed. From a training

---

<sup>116</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, January 8, 1938, box 1, folder 7, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>117</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, November 7, 1937, box 1, folder 5, Paul Wendorf Papers.

site on the cusp of redeployment in March 1938, he would articulate admiration rather than condescension. “In the face of a great demonstration of the power of the fascists, the people here are responding in a great surging wave,” he wrote. “The kind of thing that is arising is something that I thought almost crushed by the burdens of hardship the war has brought. . . . I would feel terrible if I were anywhere else but Spain at the time that these things were happening.”<sup>118</sup>

Embedded in the everyday life of Spaniards, then, Wendorf dropped his assumptions of them as a backward and listless people disconnected from their own civil war. He came to enjoy living in Spain, seeing himself as an ally and a member of a community, a resident among neighbors. And he discovered there a second inspiration to fight—one far more immediate than that which had wrested him from home over a year prior. His writings reflected a subtle shift in his thinking: if when he left the U.S. he intended to participate in a war against international fascism that just so happened to take place in Spain, now he understood himself to be fighting a war for and alongside the people of Spain that had obvious implications for the broader anti-fascist agenda.

*Paul Sigel, June–October 1937*

Paul Sigel reached Spain in late June 1937. He was deployed during the Aragon offensive in September and served in the signal corps with the predominantly Canadian Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion.<sup>119</sup> His extant letters, however, mostly document his time in training. Superficially, Sigel’s story was similar to that of his friend Harry Malofsky. The two men, both twenty-one-year-old New Yorkers, went through rigorous instruction and drilling, Malofsky probably and Sigel definitely in Tarazona.<sup>120</sup> Though they did not ever meet in Spain,

---

<sup>118</sup> Paul Wendorf to Leona Grossman Wendorf, March 28, 1938, box 1, folder 9, Paul Wendorf Papers.

<sup>119</sup> Paul Sigel to Hannah Sigel, September 11, 1937, box 1, folder 8, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Paul Sigel to Hannah Sigel, July 3, 1937, box 1, folder 7, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>120</sup> Brooks, “Commoners in Spain.”

they kept up with each other's affairs through mutual acquaintances, and both corresponded with Miriam Sigel, Paul's sister.<sup>121</sup> Relative to Malofsky, however, Sigel expressed less of a desire to rush to the front. Indeed, Sigel's letters written between June and September demonstrate that the Lincolns were capable of forging strong emotional bonds with the people and culture of Spain—of being “residents”—even before they were deployed, and even when their conditions were less stable than Wendorf's were in Albacete.

Sigel's earliest descriptions of life in training echoed Malofsky's motif of a “vacation at Kinderland.” “Just had the usual siesta we have every day,” he wrote to his mother Hannah on June 26. “I'm afraid I'm going to get fat and slothful.”<sup>122</sup> Yet he seemed pleased with life in Tarazona. When Sigel received word that a close friend had perished in battle, he grieved, but the tragedy was not the same galvanizing force that it had been for Malofsky; Sigel finished that letter with, “I really never felt better in my life.”<sup>123</sup> He felt that he had “found the work I like” in Spain, as opposed to his life in the U.S. as a college student with two jobs, when he was “always so unsatisfied.”<sup>124</sup> Indeed, while his early letters, like those of Malofsky and Wendorf, featured a number of comparisons to New York, they became scarcer as time went on.<sup>125</sup> On September 11, he reacted with surprise to Miriam asking if he regretted leaving America: “What? Here I am visiting a swell country with a bunch of swell comrades good food, good smokes + chocolate (much too occasionally)—beautiful women (though it doesn't do us any good)—why I'm having a swell time.”<sup>126</sup>

---

<sup>121</sup> Paul Sigel to Miriam Sigel, June 27, 1937, box 1, folder 6, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers; Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, June 19, 1937, in *Madrid 1937*, 156.

<sup>122</sup> Paul Sigel to Hannah Sigel, June 26, 1937, box 1, folder 7, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>123</sup> Paul Sigel to Miriam Sigel, July 24, 1937, box 1, folder 6, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>124</sup> Paul Sigel to Miriam Sigel, August 19, 1937, box 1, folder 6, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>125</sup> For an example of such a comparison, see Paul Sigel to Hannah Sigel, June 26, 1937, box 1, folder 7, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>126</sup> Paul Sigel to Miriam Sigel, September 11, 1937, box 1, folder 6, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

More than anything else, relationships with locals were the source of Sigel's contentment in Tarazona. His daily routine, outlined in an August letter to Hannah, involved frequent exchanges:

Right after dinner, we visit Maria at the doughnut shop, and Josephine at the cookie and candy shop. . . . The wine in this town is really good if it's gotten in the right place. For instance, I was in the house of one of the townspeople here, and we had some wine, red wine, and really delicious. . . . In the evening the whole town turns out and strolls up and down the main street and thru the town square, and we of course, now a real part of the town life stroll up and down with them.<sup>127</sup>

The intimate interactions Sigel described with Spaniards whom he knew by name are more reminiscent of Wendorf's letters from the autumn and winter than of Malofsky's restless ones from training. Sigel believed himself "a real part of the town," finishing the letter with, "I'll sure be sorry to leave our little Spanish town."<sup>128</sup> Similar to Wendorf, Sigel's sense of belonging was founded on the fact that his relationships with the Spanish people went beyond simple transactions. For example, as he wrote on July 12, "it's been the custom for some time now, for the entire battalion to go out every Sunday morning and assist the local popular front committee and the farmers around here in the fields."<sup>129</sup> Of course, the soldiers benefited from a robust crop, but this dynamic suggests that Wendorf saw himself as a participant in the community interests of Tarazona. Crucially, such informal interactions between the volunteers and the local populace were sites of cultural exchange. Like Wendorf, Sigel often dined in the homes of the townspeople. His most consistent host was Maria, the owner of the doughnut shop, who lived nearby the barracks. "Her father, brother and sweetheart are all at the front, but the work is still continued by the rest of the family—as brave and courageous a family as there has ever been,"

---

<sup>127</sup> Paul Sigel to Hannah Sigel, August 13, 1937, box 1, folder 8, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers. "Dinner" here referred to a midday meal.

<sup>128</sup> Paul Sigel to Hannah Sigel, August 13, 1937, box 1, folder 8, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>129</sup> Paul Sigel to Hannah Sigel, July 14, 1937, box 1, folder 7, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

he wrote. “There’s where we learn most of our Spanish with our ‘*Como se llamo*,’ ‘How do you say,’ and then pointing to the thing.”<sup>130</sup>

Sigel prioritized learning the language of his Spanish compatriots more than Malofsky or even Wendorf. What began as something as a joke—“We roam thru the stores with our English-Spanish dictionaries, incoherently mumbling to the storekeeper for awhile, and then, of course, assist each other by pointing”—quickly turned into a passion.<sup>131</sup> A month after his arrival, Sigel wrote that “life goes on pretty much as normal—training hard, trying to study Spanish. . . . I can almost understand a Spanish newspaper now, so I’m getting along.”<sup>132</sup> Sigel persisted, and by the end of August, he had interacted enough with some of the Spanish recruits to report that he was “really getting an excellent chance to learn the language, to understand Spain—to learn from and teach our Spanish comrades.”<sup>133</sup> This account underscores the extent to which Sigel regarded language learning as more than just a pastime, but as a crucial means of building bridges between him and his Spanish hosts. Speaking Spanish helped him shop, but it also helped him trade ideas and information. In one of his first and only surviving letters from the front, he wrote proudly that “with the aid of a dictionary, I can read the Spanish papers sufficiently well to understand what it’s all about. And we get the Spanish *periodicos cada dia* (newspapers every day).”<sup>134</sup> That Sigel consistently endeavored to read Spanish papers was no doubt dictated in part by necessity, but it also reflected a desire to understand the events of the war from perspectives outside of those available in the English IB publications—literally, to be on the same page as the Spaniards.

---

<sup>130</sup> Paul Sigel to Hannah Sigel, August 13, 1937, box 1, folder 8, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers. Sigel of course meant “*Como se llama*.”

<sup>131</sup> Paul Sigel to Hannah Sigel, July 14, 1937, box 1, folder 7, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>132</sup> Paul Sigel to Hannah Sigel, July 28, 1937, box 1, folder 7, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>133</sup> Paul Sigel to Miriam Sigel, August 29, 1937, box 1, folder 6, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>134</sup> Paul Sigel to Hannah Sigel, October 4, 1937, box 1, folder 8, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers. Translation added for clarity.

Ultimately, Sigel's engagement with civilian Spain caused him to rethink many of the minimizing impressions he carried with him to the country. He was more self-aware in this respect than Wendorf, explicitly noting many instances in which his expectations were subverted for the better. Sigel had assumed, for example, that rural Spain would be squalid, but shortly after arriving in Tarazona he expressed surprise that the local children with whom he often played—"the cutest you ever saw"—were actually "very clean, as is practically everything about the town."<sup>135</sup> Not just that, but the locals valued and sacrificed for the good of the Republic: "When one first sees them they seem like very simple people, and the war and world conditions seem very far away. But as we talk to them we discover that they know what it's all about. Every family has at least one member at the front—most of them more than one. The war is very close to them."<sup>136</sup> When in the towns of Spain, then, Sigel and Wendorf both felt at some remove from the war—and indeed from the broader "world conditions" that had motivated them to volunteer in the first place. This is what made them residents, whereas Malofsky, anxious for the front, was content only skimming the surface of civilian life, taking from what it what he needed, an ideal to return to later. But because that remove entailed living in intimate proximity to the Spanish, Sigel and Wendorf were forced to reckon with their presumptions of simplicity and backwardness. The absence of young men and women from their midst and the daily struggle of the families those men and women left behind proved to the volunteers the spuriousness of their assessments. As Sigel wrote to his sister on August 19:

Say, Mim, you'd love the kids here, a lively vivacious energetic bunch—also a serious + intelligent group that realizes very definitely what is going on, what part their families are playing in the struggle and what part they themselves play. For example, every morning at 5:30, these kids, ranging in age from 9–14 (also the older men), pile onto one of the Popular Front trucks and are off for the fields. They realize that the country must eat if the fascists are to be beaten. . . . Of course almost all of the older young fellows are at the

<sup>135</sup> Paul Sigel to Hannah Sigel, July 14, 1937, box 1, folder 7, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>136</sup> Paul Sigel to Miriam Sigel, August 3, 1937, box 1, folder 6, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

front, and the older young women are teaching or nursing, or in some other way helping to win the war. The future will rest on all these young shoulders, + they are bravely taking up the burden now.<sup>137</sup>

While Sigel's tone remained somewhat condescending, it is clear that the populace's support of the war effort transformed his conception of the country. He realized that the Spanish were not passive recipients of the Lincolns' aid. He even gestured to the future, revealing an investment in the country that extended beyond the Civil War, an understanding of Spain as more than just a "dress rehearsal for the inevitable European war." On the eve of his deployment, Sigel would reiterate the sentiment in striking terms: "Our Spanish comrades are . . . the youth of the new Spain that is already being built even with the war going on, and their enthusiasm and vitality augurs well for the results of the war and the future of our country (Spain)."<sup>138</sup> Sigel's use of the word "comrades," typically reserved for fellow IB members, suggests that he, like Wendorf, had come to view the Spaniards as his equals. Indeed, Spain had become Sigel's country, a fact he clarified in the parenthetical addition at the end of the paragraph lest his mother be confused. This startling assertion confirms the deep emotional, almost patriotic attachment he developed to his host nation. He would never return to his original home, dying during the so-called "Great Retreats" from Franco's campaign in Aragon in April 1938.<sup>139</sup> Along with Wendorf, Sigel in his final days was a resident of Spain with a firm understanding of the stakes of the war for those in his immediate proximity. He was committed to stopping fascism before it spread elsewhere, but also to the well-being of his adoptive country.

---

<sup>137</sup> Paul Sigel to Miriam Sigel, August 19, 1937, box 1, folder 6, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>138</sup> Paul Sigel to Hannah Sigel, September 2, 1937, box 1, folder 8, Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers.

<sup>139</sup> Brooks, "Commoners in Spain."

## Conclusion

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade deserves all the original, incisive, and even laudatory historical treatment it has received. The Lincolns, presciently identifying Spain as the first theater of a much larger war against fascism, fought ably and valiantly. They did so as volunteers, in direct defiance of their government. They were remarkable in ways not discussed here, such as being the first American military unit to integrate Black and white soldiers.<sup>140</sup> But ideology alone could not sustain the Lincolns, and Spain was more than just a symbolic or even literal battlefield. Examining contemporaneous sources created by the Lincolns reveals the centrality of the country itself to the volunteers' perspectives. For Wendorf, Malofsky, and Sigel, Spain was not in the least abstract. It was an environment both bucolic and urban; it was a novel, vibrant culture worth preserving; it was flesh and blood.

Contacts with the Spanish countryside, cityscapes, foodways, music, language, and people were much more than ornamental details in a story of heroic military exploits and geopolitical machinations. Rather, they were the basis of historically consequential connections between the soldiers and their setting. Spain was a bulwark against the physical, emotional, and psychological devastation of the war. For the volunteers who became truly embedded there, it was also a space of belonging, a site of cultural and lingual exchange, and above all, a lesson in the strivings, sacrifices, and humanity of the Spaniards, those civilians of the civil war. The relative inattention to ideology and politics in the letters of the three men, especially as the war progressed, is meaningful. It is not that the Lincolns lost sight of the broad significance they correctly assigned to the conflict, or even that the ideological dimension of their project should be minimized in historiography. But when they dug their boots into the Spanish soil, the volunteers found they required more to interpret and indeed survive their circumstances. As

---

<sup>140</sup> Graham, *The Spanish Civil War*, 45.



refuge and residence, Spain provided them comfort and hope that mere belief in a cause could not, and it gave human substance to the ideologies that galvanized them to leave home and, all too frequently, lay down their lives.

Future work building on the foundation laid here could examine the letters of the many hundreds of Lincolns whose voices remain absent from the literature. It would also be fruitful to consider non-epistolary sources. The sketchbooks of Meredith Graham, a volunteer from New York who served from March 1937 until his death in action in July, contain many vivid drawings that depict in an entirely new way the inseparability of the Lincolns' Spanish surroundings from their military undertakings (see Appendix A).<sup>141</sup> Widening the lens, in all conflicts motivated by ideology—which is to say all conflicts—the quotidian motivations, local relationships, and unexpected meanings soldiers encounter are at risk of being subsumed by grander narratives. This is especially true in so-called “proxy wars” in which the venue is assumed to be less important than the international implications of the events that take place there. The Spanish Civil War may qualify as such; certainly, the brutal wars of the 1950s and 1960s that saw the interests of the “Western powers” and the Soviet Union once again pitted against each other do. These, then, could be the focus of analysis to come. Finally, the “transnational turn,” as Hugo García has termed it, would imply that any interaction between a foreign soldier and a civilian occurs on a two-way street. Probing Spanish sources to ascertain the impact the Lincolns had on the residents of Albacete, Tarazona, and Madrid would be a worthy endeavor.

In any of these cases, if our aim is to understand conflict, we would do well to heed engagements between people and their place.

---

<sup>141</sup> Albin Ragner, unpublished memoir, in “Albin Ragner: An Unpublished Memoir,” by Chris Brooks and Lisa Clemmer, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, February 27, 2013, <https://albavolunteer.org/2013/02/albin-ragner-an-unpublished-memoir/>; Meredith Graham, sketchbook drawings, box 1, Meredith Sydnor (Syd) Graham Drawings, Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University (hereafter referred to as Meredith Sydnor (Syd) Graham Drawings).

Appendix A: Photos and images  
Sketchbooks of Meredith Sydnor “Syd” Graham<sup>142</sup>

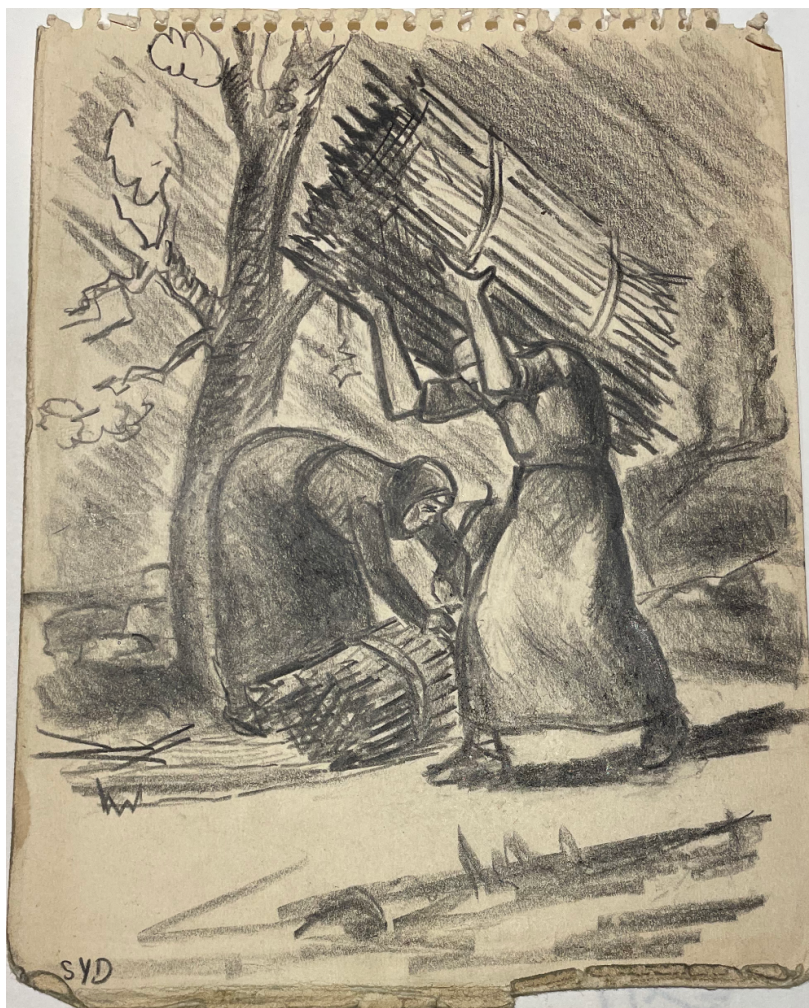


Image 1. Depiction of Spaniards in Catalonia handling hay bales.

---

<sup>142</sup> Meredith Graham, sketchbook drawings, box 1, Meredith Sydnor (Syd) Graham Drawings.



Image 2. Various scenes of Spanish civilian life including an "I.B. Bathroom" with the caption "Feed Franco Here."



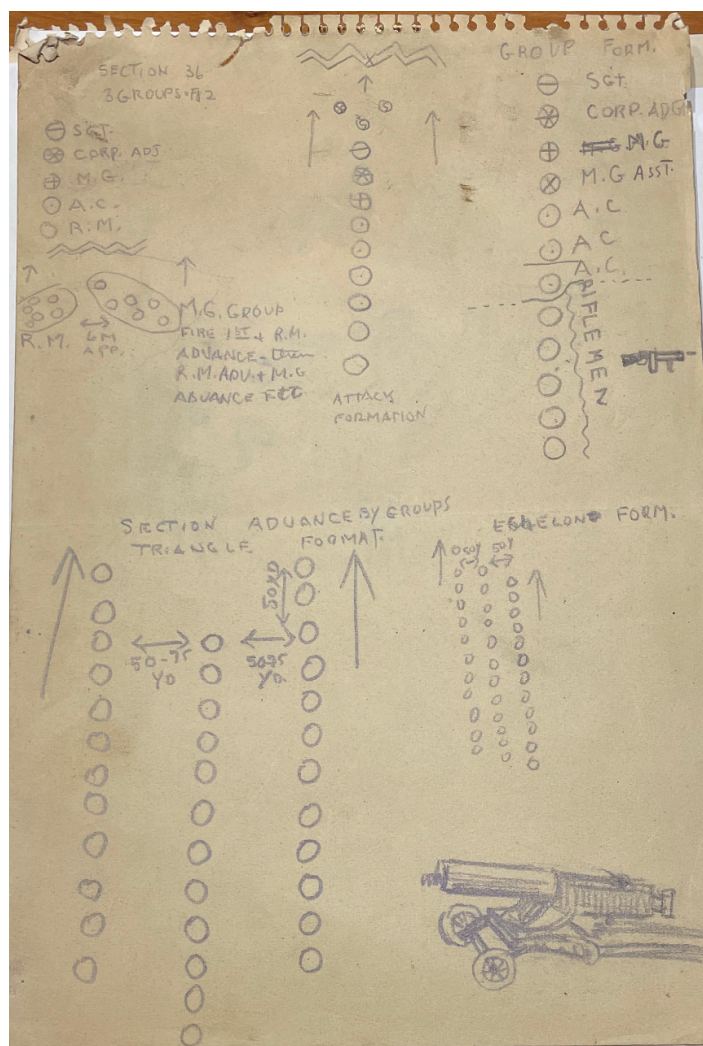


Image 3. Military notes. Graham often sketched scenes of Spain alongside notes such as these.

### Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Professor Joseph Fronczak for his guidance on this work from start to finish. Thanks to Shannon O'Neill and Amna Abdus-Salaam at the Tamiment Library & Wagner Labor Archives as well as Alain St. Pierre and Colleen Burlingham at Princeton University for their assistance locating and accessing sources. Thanks to Katie Rohrbaugh, Sam Harshbarger, Leo Rupp-Coppi, and Drew Hopkins for feedback on my ideas and drafts.

## Bibliography

### Archival Sources

Meredith Sydnor (Syd) Graham Drawings. Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

Miriam Sigel Friedlander Papers. Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

Paul Wendorf Papers. Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University.

### Other Primary Sources

Hemingway, Ernest. Ernest Hemingway to the Pfeiffer Family, 9 February 1937. In *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters, 1917–1961*, edited by Carlos Baker, 457–58. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981.

Malofsky, Harry. Harry Malofsky to Miriam Sigel, 19 June 1937. In *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War*, edited by Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks, 154–56. London: Routledge, 1996.

*The Manchester Guardian*. "Letters to the Editor: The Fighting on the Ebro Front." (Manchester, United Kingdom), August 23, 1938, 18.

New York City Department of Health. *Births Reported in 1915—Borough of Manhattan*. In New York City Department of Health, *New York, New York, U.S., Birth Index, 1910–1965*. Lehi, Utah: Ancestry, 2017.

New York City Department of Health. *Births Reported in the Year 1911*. In New York City Department of Health, *New York, New York, U.S., Birth Index, 1910–1965*. Lehi, Utah: Ancestry, 2017.

*New York Herald Tribune*. "53 Columbia Freshmen Receive Class Numerals: Athletes Are Honored for Their Work in Spring Sports." November 19, 1930, 27.

Paul Wendorf marriage certificate, 3 February 1937. In New York City Department of Records, *Index to New York City Marriages, 1866–1937*, certificate no. 445. Provo, Utah: Ancestry, 2014.

Ragner, Albin. Unpublished memoir. In "Albin Ragner: An Unpublished Memoir," by Chris Brooks and Lisa Clemmer. Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, February 27, 2013. <https://albavolunteer.org/2013/02/albin-ragner-an-unpublished-memoir/>.

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930*: Population schedule, Bronx, New York, enumeration district 0150. Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1930.

Wendorf, Paul. "A Pair of Pants." *The Volunteer for Liberty* (Barcelona, Spain), August 26, 1938, 3.

### Secondary Sources

Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archive. "On the Abraham Lincoln Battalion in the International Brigades." Accessed October 8, 2022. <https://alba-valb.org/who-we-are/faqs/>.

Brantz, Dorothee. "Environments of Death: Trench Warfare on the Western Front, 1914–19." In *War and the Environment: Military Destruction in the Modern Age*, edited by Charles E. Closmann, 68–91. College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2009.

Brooks, Chris. "Commoners in Spain: Students, Faculty, and Alumni of Commonwealth College in the Spanish Civil War." Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives, November 12, 2018. <https://albavolunteer.org/2018/11/commoners-in-spain-students-faculty-and-alumni/>.

Carroll, Peter N. *The Odyssey of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Americans in the Spanish Civil War*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.

Compa, Elizabeth, and James D. Fernández. "Profiles of Loss." Edited by Peter N. Carroll. *The Volunteer: Journal of the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade* 27, no. 3 (September 2005): 14–26.

Eby, Cecil D. *Comrades and Commissars: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War*. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.

García, Hugo. "Transnational History: A New Paradigm for Anti-Fascist Studies?" *Contemporary European History* 25, no. 4 (November 2016): 563–72. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777316000382>.

Gerassi, John. *The Premature Antifascists: North American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-39: An Oral History*. New York: Praeger, 1986.

Hochschild, Adam. *Spain in Our Hearts: Americans in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016.

Jackson, Michael. *Fallen Sparrows: The International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1994.

Landis, Arthur H. *Death in the Olive Groves: American Volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, 1936-1939*. New York: Paragon House, 1989.

Nelson, Cary. Introduction to *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War*, edited by Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks, 1–19. London: Routledge, 1996.

- Pastor García, Daniel, and Antonio R. Celada. "The Victors Write History, the Vanquished Literature: Myth, Distortion and Truth in the XV Brigade." *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 89, no. 7–8 (November 1, 2012): 307–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2012.731576>.
- Payne, Stanley G. *The Spanish Civil War*. Cambridge Essential Histories. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Preston, Paul. *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2007.
- Raeburn, Fraser. "'The Surest of All Morale Barometers': Transnational Encounters in the XV International Brigade." *Contemporary European History* 31, no. 1 (February 2022): 85–99. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777321000217>.
- Rosenstone, Robert A. *Crusade of the Left: The Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War*. New York: Pegasus, 1969.
- Seidman, Michael. *Republic of Egos: A Social History of the Spanish Civil War*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.
- Thomas, Hugh. *The Spanish Civil War*. London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961.
- Tremlett, Giles. *The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.