

## Sweet Mabel

By: Kikyo Makino-Siller

Countries torn apart by internal strife rarely recover. It is arguably the most arduous type of strife: international conflicts, though harrowing, often result in the citizens of a country coming together in a valiant effort of patriotism. Internal conflict is an entirely different matter. Ideological discord within a country's citizens can sow deep seeds of mistrust among neighbors, friends, and family. Such was the case in pre-World War II Spain. As is often the case in politics anywhere, conservatives and progressives in Spain were keen to gain power over each other. The progressives, or Republicans, were largely composed of ideological socialists and anarchists who supported the democratically elected Spanish republic of the time. The conservatives, soon to be known as the Nationalists, stood in deep opposition to this left-leaning government. On July 18, 1936, the Nationalists, under the careful guidance of General Francisco Franco, rose up in an insurrection against the Spanish government. Backed by the Spanish military, Catholic Church, and fascist global figures such as Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler, the Nationalists began their attempt to take over Spain by force. The rest of Europe simply watched, as did the United States. Non-intervention was a popular policy among what is known today as the "western powers", and countries dared not endorse sending aid to the struggling Republicans. The only exceptions were the sympathetic Mexico, which was able to provide few resources, and the Soviet Union, in which Joseph Stalin sold arms to the Republic in an attempt to garner support for his own dictatorial regime. However, despite the Republic's scant supplies and manpower, what Franco had hoped would be a swift coup d'etat prolonged into a three-year civil war.

One of the reasons why the Republicans were able to fend off the Nationalists for so long was the influx of support from international volunteers who left behind their home countries to fight against fascism in Spain. The volunteers from America dubbed themselves the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Largely consisting of amateur fighters, nurses, and truck-drivers, the Brigade received brutal training in Spain alongside their international counterparts. Though the international volunteers were lacking in numbers and experience, they boosted the morale of the Spanish Republicans who had felt abandoned by the lack of support from the outside world. Some volunteers, with their lively and cheerful attitudes, were remembered by their Spanish compatriots as the reason they continued to fight on. One such cheery volunteer was Mabel Spiegel.

Mabel Irene Spiegel, originally Mabel Irene Goldin, was born on January 2nd, 1910 in Brooklyn, New York.<sup>1</sup> Her parents, Rose and Isidore Goldin, were two of the two million Russian Jews who escaped the antisemitic violence of the Russian pogroms (riots) that began in the 1880s.<sup>2</sup> They managed to evade the emigration restrictions put in place in imperial Russia during the decades prior and likely made their way to America through the Castle Garden depot or Ellis Island. They settled in 1030 14th Street in Midwood, one of Brooklyn's many Russian ethnic enclaves.<sup>3</sup> At the time, New York City had few well-paying jobs available to third-wave immigrants (those who immigrated to America from 1880 to 1914) such as themselves, but her father managed to become a proficient businessman and open a men's clothing store that lasted even through the Great Depression. However, he was a poker gambler and the Goldins struggled to maintain the guise of a happy family. Spiegel was the youngest of three children and felt that she was sometimes "badly mistreated" by her parents. She bitterly recalls that she was only

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<sup>1</sup> Berlowitz, "Irene Goldin Spiegel", 2022

<sup>2</sup> Library of Congress, "Immigration and Relocation in U.S. History", n.d.

<sup>3</sup> COMINTERN, "Personal Files of American Volunteers (Sp-Sr)", 2021

allowed to own “one dress at a time” despite the plentiful clothing that her siblings owned.

Perhaps Spiegel’s childhood experiences explain the mental fortitude she displayed later in life in Spain.

Though Spiegel’s exact schooling is unclear, it is suspected that she attended the Brooklyn Jewish Center Academy as a young child, which was the oldest surviving Jewish day school in America until its closing in 1985. Spiegel later moved from Brooklyn to 230 West 99th Street in Manhattan Valley. Despite being accepted to train at the prestigious Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York, she chose to complete her education at the Battle Creek School of Nursing in Michigan (the only Jewish student in a class of 300), which was an institution open for a brief period of time from 1923 to 1938. Nursing students in the 1930s were generally required to complete three years of schooling, which was priced at roughly 35 dollars per year. The investment paid off: once she became a nurse, she earned 35 dollars per week. Her education proved crucial in her development from a hardworking medical student to a nurse with a passion for saving lives.

As a young and educated nurse, Spiegel was a member of the Communist Party of the United States. Four-fifths of the Communists living in New York City were immigrants at the time, and while not an immigrant herself, Spiegel most definitely found a community of like-minded Americans with Eastern European Jewish descent.<sup>4</sup> She first heard of the Spanish Civil War through a flyer distributed by her trade union (United Professionals) that was recruiting medical workers for the American Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy. In April of 1937, she attended a presentation advertised on the Bureau flyer. The description of the impassioned fighting of the Spanish Republic against General Francisco Franco’s encroaching forces no doubt stirred a fervor inside of her. Following the meeting, she applied to be a military

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<sup>4</sup> Isserman, “When New York City Was the Capital of American Communism”, 2017

nurse in Spain, passed the medical exam, and was given an interview where they asked one question: why did she want to go to Spain? She answered, “to fight facism”.<sup>5</sup> The Bureau accepted her immediately; she was to leave in a month. Privately, Spiegel admitted that her reasons for going were not quite so ideological as she made them out to be, but rather that she simply “liked a little bit of adventure.”

On May 17th, 1937, at the age of 27, Spiegel received her passport and began preparing for her departure to Spain. Like many other young volunteers at the time, she chose to not inform her parents of her decision to go, as she “didn’t want there to be any fuss”, especially since her brother had passed recently. Ten days later, shortly after the resignation of Largo Caballero as Prime Minister of the Spanish Republic, she arrived in the war-torn country on the S.S. Normandie with 20 other medical volunteers.

Spiegel began working with the Medical Service immediately and worked at both local hospitals on the battlefield (Aragon, Murcia, and Teruel) as well as larger hospitals commanded by the International Health Service. Spiegel was commended for her diligence at nearly every hospital she worked at. Her personal file reported her as “professional and intelligent”. She was described by a patient, Harry Shepard, as a sweet nurse who was able to “dig up buttered toast, canned peaches, cigarets [sic] and chocolate out of thin air sometimes”.<sup>6</sup>

But life in Spain was not always sweet. Two months after her initial arrival in Spain, Spiegel experienced working behind the lines of her first major offensive. The Battle of Brunete, which lasted 19 days from July 6th, 1937, was a major offensive launched by the Republic in the hopes of liberating Madrid from Franco’s forces. It was a bloody campaign with roughly 40,000 casualties.<sup>7</sup> Of the 900 American soldiers who served, 600 were killed or wounded. When the

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<sup>5</sup> Newman et al., “Fighting Fascism: The Americans—Women and Men—Who Fought in the Spanish Civil War”, 2007

<sup>6</sup> Salazar, “Wounded Reporter Penned Letter on Back of Civil War Poster”, 2017

<sup>7</sup> VSCW, “Destruction at Brunete”, n.d.

fighting began, Spiegel was working as ward nurse at the divisional hospital under the esteemed Catalan surgeon Moises Broggi with surgical nurse Esther Silverstein (a fellow Abraham Lincoln Brigadier and a San Francisco native).<sup>8</sup> Under the watchful guidance of Dr. Broggi, the pair were an efficient team commended for completing thirty operations in twenty hours and saving the lives of many soldiers wounded in the offensive. Their medical team boasted the lowest fatality rate among those seriously injured in the offensive. Spiegel in particular was admired for her determination. It was said that she worked for five days in a row without rest and encouraged the other nurses by proclaiming, “a soldier doesn't leave his post before being relieved! We work for Spain, for glory and for Dr. Broggi!”<sup>9</sup> As a result of their valiant efforts, the divisional hospital was rewarded with a new ambulance from Doctor Oscar Telge, head of the International Health Service. Despite the glory, the battle left a large emotional impact on Spiegel. She noted repeatedly in her later life the story of how she cared for the dying Gerda Taro, a famed German war photographer who was the first female photojournalist to die covering the frontlines in a war. Spiegel mournfully recalled that “she [Taro] had the whole side of her body injured” because she was crushed by a tank while photographing the war and that her last words to Spiegel were “what's happened to my cameras?”

Due to the various locations of the battles, military nurses often worked at several hospitals over the span of a few months. After the Brunete offensive, Spiegel relocated to a ward at La Puebla de Híjar, an extremely small town in Teruel. After several months, she relocated once again and began working as head nurse at the Vic Hospital, a position she occupied from June to August of 1938. It was at the last hospital she worked at, the British Hospital in Mataró, Barcelona, where she met her husband.<sup>10</sup> Harry Spiegel, a brigadier from Austria, was the

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<sup>8</sup> Coale, “Moisés Broggi i Vallès (1908-2012)”, 2013

<sup>9</sup> Republic of Biscay, “Apirila 2017 Abril: Mabel Irene Goldin”, 2017

<sup>10</sup> Sugarman, “Jews in the Spanish Civil War”, 1939

political commissar in the 4th Battalion of the 11th Interbrigade. He had been wounded in the Battle of the Ebro in the summer of 1938. Upon being treated by Spiegel, the two rapidly fell in love and married in September of the same year. She shed her maiden name upon marriage and took on the name Spiegel.

As one of the last Americans to leave Spain, Spiegel was committed to the end. But on February 7th or 8th, 1939, she had no choice but to evacuate from S'Agaró to France with her husband.<sup>11</sup> Upon arrival in France, her husband was captured in an internment camp for five months as an “enemy alien” due to his Austrian background. However, Spiegel was able to visit and negotiate his release because the French government had mistakenly given Spiegel full authority to travel despite her refugee status. The couple remained in Marseilles to wait for Harry’s visa but by June of 1940, Nazi Germany had turned its attention to France. Unable to leave France upon this outbreak of World War II, the couple watched as yet another war tore apart their temporary home. They found refuge with others who had fought in Spain in the Cazaux-Debat commune in the Pyrenees, where Spiegel gave birth to her son Peter in 1941. The couple later found work at a children’s refuge run in Baroness de Rothschild’s chateau. In 1943, Spiegel and her husband donned forged identities and joined the anti-Nazi resistance movement that had sprung up when Vichy France was established in the summer of 1940.<sup>12</sup> When World War II ended, Spiegel’s husband returned to Vienna, Austria. Spiegel chose to remain in France with her son to head the Southern French branch of the Unitarians’ Universalist Service Committee Refugee Aid Office in Marseilles. There, she distributed food, clothing, and financial aid to vulnerable refugees, paying special attention to those who had escaped or been released from Franco’s internment camps. In 1947, she left her job and joined her husband in Vienna

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<sup>11</sup> University of Barcelona, “GOLDEN, Mabel Irene”, 2020

<sup>12</sup> Lerner, “French Underground During World War II, Communication And Codes”, n.d.

because she “felt that a child [Peter] needed to be with his father”. Spiegel returned to the United States once for only a year in 1947 to live with her mother-in-law before settling permanently in Vienna.<sup>13</sup> The post-Civil War years were exceedingly hard on Spiegel; she had contracted tuberculosis, was experiencing marital issues, and often had to care for the young Peter alone. She encapsulates the years in a simple phrase: “I was working too hard.”

Despite the Republic’s loss in the war and her own personal losses, she expressed no regret in her participation in the Spanish Civil War. When she visited Madrid in 1996 on the occasion of Spain’s Homenaje to the Civil War Volunteers, she explained: “The International Brigades did not fight and lose their lives in vain. I’m always glad that I went to Spain. I’ve felt that was the great, great achievement of my life.”<sup>14</sup> She died at age ninety three on January 15th, 2004 and is survived by her two children Peter and Ilse. Much as the Spanish Civil War changed the course of her life, she changed the lives of many fighting in Spain.

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<sup>13</sup> ALBA, “Goldin, Irene”, n.d.

<sup>14</sup> Newman, “Goldin Speigel, Irene”, 2003

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