

The truth of the defeated

By Carlos Miranda

When I was in my late teens my father gave me Hugh Thomas's "The Spanish Civil War" to read. It was at this point I discovered there was no one truth about what had happened in Spain during the Second Republic and the civil war. There was that of the victors, the official and widely-known truth, but there was also another one, that of the defeated, who knew of the official one but also had their own truth.

In order to heal past wounds, both near and far, and to be able to enjoy a sincere reconciliation, it is necessary to know both sides of the truth. I am not speaking about having to take sides with those having most cause, which might be better. I am only speaking about shedding light on what the other side suffered.

Forty years of dictatorship in Spain crushed and drove to oblivion not only the Republic's side of the truth but also the knowledge of its existence.

Undoubtedly, the law known as the Law of Historic Memory, which was approved on 26 December 2007 "so that certain rights may be recognised and broadened and measures will be established in favour of those who suffered persecution or violence during the civil war and the dictatorship", sets out to heal those wounds. After the death of the dictator, the recuperated democracy failed to heal them, for those who, in Spain and later in Europe, fought against fascism and Nazism or suffered because of it.

An indication of my ignorance thanks to Franco, but also that of many people in Spain, was the fact that, when I arrived here in 2004, I did not know that in Jersey, around 1,500 of my compatriots had been mistreated during Nazi Germany's occupation of the Channel Islands. Those slave-workers suffered great hardship and some died. In 2006 I paid homage to them during the annual 9 May commemorative ceremony in Jersey. It was the first time a representative from the Spanish embassy in London had attended. I understood then that no satisfactory relationship existed between the embassy of Spain in the UK and those Spaniards who, for different reasons, had a link with the Spanish Republican exile after the civil war. Since then, I have tried, as I believed it was my duty, for those of us who now come to the UK from Spain, because we want to, to get closer together with those as well as their families who left Spain years ago, having been forced into exile.

In the same vain, after Jersey, I also had the opportunity to address the members of the International Brigades that same year in July. I also participated in the inauguration of a mosaic entitled "Echoes of Spain". On another occasion I offered a reception for the courageous Spaniards who, during the Second World War, had enrolled in the British army to continue fighting and defend democracy and who were stepping foot in the embassy for the first time. I will never forget what one of them said to me: "For me, the war has ended today". Last year I was invited to preside over the commemorative ceremony of the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Basque children in the Habana, which was a great honour for me.

In all these occasions I have said, and will do so again today, that what we have today in Spain is what those who were forced into exile, like their families, had fought for in their day: a democracy. Their sacrifices were not in vain; the memory of their histories and their own fight contributed to Spain becoming a democratic country again.

In this endeavour, in this determination, I have been able to count on the invaluable help of many present here today, like: Gary Font [from Jersey] and Marlene Sidaway [IBMT Secretary]. However, among these friends, there was always one person who was a constant help: Manuel Moreno, who has made an exceptional effort in recuperating facts from the past of the Spanish exile and bringing them into the present day.

This is the speech given by Carlos Miranda, the Spanish Ambassador, when presenting the decoration of "Oficial de Merito Civil" to Manuel Moreno, President of the Basque Children of '37 Association UK in London on 13 May 2008.