

In the outcome of the Spanish War (Autobiographical text)

Excerpts taken from:

Óscar Lopes, *Jaime Cortesão*, Lisbon, Edições Arcádia, 1962, pp. 130-1152.

"Through a very reliable source, we had learned, six days in advance, that Barcelona was condemned and that it would have to be militarily evacuated. For two days, we clung to the hope of a desperate resistance in the last lines of natural defence. Nevertheless, J. de M. [Jaime de Morais] and I knew that all effective effort would be in vain. From that same very reliable source we learned, for a fact, that a desperate shortage of arms weighed in on the Republican Army. This scarcity, which was already enormous regarding mere rifles and machine guns, was becoming truly distressing when it came to aviation and artillery."

"With such a handicap, the army, which was much smaller in number, could only withstand a week or two. But it was fatal that, under the massive attacks of the aviation and artillery, the time of the collapse would sound. Let us add that the rearguard, exhausted by two and a half years of deprivations, which in recent months had become extremely anguished, showed signs of obvious fatigue. At least half the population wanted the end of the war, anyway."

"By the 22nd, the collective consciousness of the catastrophe was palpable; and we could feel that everyone was deafly surrendering to the crashing of the tragedy."

"An eminent personality advised us to transport the families immediately to the border. This happened on January 22, in the afternoon. We decided to leave the next day. A decision that was easy to make, but difficult to carry out. The mass exodus had begun. And all those who remained began quietly making preparations for departure. Vehicles of all kinds were becoming scarce. Anyone who happened to have a car was harassed by dozens of friends or acquaintances who were desperately asking for a ride. In the mob, this distressed and precipitated movement, which preceded the tragic escape, could be guessed. The visible symptoms of the upcoming collapse were evident. On the 22nd and 23rd, the air raids were almost incessant. We would constantly hear the startling explosion of bombs and the raving bark of anti-aircraft artillery. A growing number of squadrons of enemy planes continuously flew over the city. From the lower city, the columns of fire and thick smoke rose at every step."

"On the morning of the 22nd, my house, which was in one of the highest points of the city, was violently shaken; not only by the aerial bombings but by the thunder of the enemy's heavy artillery that was fast approaching. News of astonishment circulated: fundamental positions were taken; mass escape; or, on the contrary, counter-offensive and impossible victories, whose rumour only increased the common anxiety and confusion."

"Through perseverance and combined efforts, J. de M. and I were able to get two small cars, in which the two families could not fit (3 + 8 people, at first), and a small covered truck, in deplorable conditions, for the luggage. Since space was, despite everything, limited; since in my luggage, books were forcibly abundant; and since we still had the hope of returning the following day to take what had remained, we just carried the essential (...) The speed of the events did not allow us to recover what had been left behind, and the misfortunes of a bumpy journey significantly reduced what had been taken.

We left Barcelona on the night of the 23rd. At night, because we were less likely to get hit by bombings along the way. We headed towards Centelhas first. There were other Portuguese people there, and the family of the sons of J. de M. lived nearby (...) The journey took place without significant incidents. We were installed in the house of the Count of Centelhas, with amenities compatible with the situation."

"Fortunately, in anticipation of a long journey and in a country whose resources were exhausted by war and blockade, we had taken with us almost all the food we had: mostly condensed milk, tin cans of all kinds of dried vegetables. (...) A new circumstance hindered the issue of a safe movement towards the border. Near Centelhas, there were several Portuguese people, some of which had gotten married during the war. Tormented by danger, everyone wanted to leave Catalonia and, not only to share our means of transport, which were already increased by a new bus but also to take advantage of any help we could get from the authorities to leave Spain. (...) Adding some family members of M. de M. [wife of Jaime de Morais] and one of the chauffeurs, on the night of the 24th, the group amounted to about 30 people".

"on the night of the 24th to the 25th, we were able to hear the news about the operations, broadcasted successively through various stations, which convinced us that not only was Barcelona hopelessly lost, but that the taking of Manresa and the first advance on the road of Vich had put the region in which we were transient guests in immediate danger. So we decided to leave at dawn on the 25th. At the time we had two cars and two trucks."

"Two *novias* of two Portuguese men, who had rushed to leave, sobbed in the arms of their *noivos*. Outside, in the cold air and the wan light of dawn, we could hear the close bombings of the aviation and the prolonged thunder of the artillery."

"By then, the wave of fugitives had formed a stream. Vehicles of all kinds, from luxury cars and buses to modest rural carts, pulled by donkeys or by the arms of their owners, continuously rolled their human load between blankets, mattresses, trunks, gutted boxes, rags. It was a continuous crossing of ghastly faces - poor people, slimmed down by privations, now crushed by disgrace, half immersed in the remains of broken homes – like shipwrecks that were incessantly thrown to the shore by the stormy sea."

"Catalonia was Barcelona; and if Barcelona had fallen, the rest would soon fall too. We were about 20 kilometres away from the border (...). We learned(...) [on January 27] that Col d Arês was not completely blocked by the snow, that is, that the crossing was possible, but the military authorities had received orders to oppose the exodus of civilians and military personnel who were crossing the border.

A threat was then being drawn. In their retreat, the troops had begun occupying localities near the border. Supplies were progressively scarce. We no longer had bread, and we were at risk of becoming homeless."

"We found the roads invaded by the avalanche of fugitives, mostly on foot, civilians and soldiers, carrying miserable luggage, exhausted women and children falling in the ditches, in a torrent of distressing misfortune. The small town of Figueras, where we arrived almost at night, was submerged by the invasion of fugitives, of vehicles of all kinds, by the astonishing wreckage of broken homes. It was hard to make way through the crowd of people and piles of objects. But the same disorder that was observed inland invaded the spirits. More than ever, we were convinced by certain visits we made that no force could halt the collapse of Catalonia."

"From above [the castle of S. Fernando] the show was feeble and tragic. The road that led to the border was brilliantly drawn by the headlights of hundreds of cars, in a row of a few

kilometres, which were headed to France; the surrounding fields were permeated with fires of random campsites, where the most wretched were going to spend the night, homeless." (...) "at that time, another obstacle was putting us at risk: gasoline became very scarce (...) In fact, only a few hours later, on the 28th, military checkpoints set on the roads began requisitioning all cars that did not circulate in official service (...). In these conditions, the problem of exiting had become extremely difficult and even more distressing due to the rumour, which had spread on the 28th, that the enemy had reached and gone beyond Vich. In this context, the collapse was becoming vertiginous."

"informed by the radio that the disaster was not as huge as certain rumours had made it appear, in Camprodom, we tried to solve, with the military authorities, the issue of leaving with official authorization, claiming our condition of foreigners and explaining our situation regarding food, because we were already reduced to hungry rations.

By that time, our group had already been enlarged by twenty-two Portuguese individuals and their families."

The license we were granted, adamantly stated that we had to leave on the night of the 29th to the 30th. (...) It rained copiously. However, the authorisation period did not allow for any vacillation. So, the caravan left at 4:30 am, under the relentless rain. We had to stop at each step to make the soldiers of the checkpoints read the official authorisation. (...)

"The sun was already rising. The mountains of the Pyrenees, covered in snow, spread to the end of the horizon. At the side of the road, or downhill, until the depths of the ravines, there were vehicles of all kinds, knocked down, semi-destroyed; many with wheels up to the air and, around or coming out of the windows, blankets, books, bags, shoes, food, in a desolate pandemonium.

However, the rain had not stopped falling. Or, rather, it had ceased in certain places, replaced by the snow. The poor travellers who were in trucks were already flooded, like most of the luggage. The children were transported to the closed cars, which were literally full with two layers of occupants, whose harassment of each other felt like torture."

"The horizon had become opaque and glacial. The accumulated fatigue, the stress produced by the setbacks and the delay of the journey, the weakness and the organic impoverishment – overwhelmingly depressed the tempers."

"There was, therefore, no other choice but to seek temporary shelter in one of the few poor houses of the mountain. The snow fell endlessly. The fatigue, the freezing of the soaked bodies, the annoyance of forced positions and, finally, the hunger, made the situation intolerable (...). The cars, of course, stopped. Without prior order, everyone got out. And we went down the hill, each of us dragging a smaller, more precious, part of our luggage, under the heavy rain of the storm, splashing in the mud, slipping in the snow, dragging blankets or suitcases down the steep and slippery trail.

One of the three small houses of the group (...) was invaded by the dismantled and anguished mob (...). We were fifty castaways, completely soaked, filled with sorrow and despair. However, there were already many other refugees inside (...) The two other smaller [houses] nearby were in the same conditions."

"there were suddenly more than 100 people who could barely move, standing, writhing, going against each other, stumbling (...). What happened there during the first few hours was unspeakable horror. M. J. de M. [wife of Jaime de Morais] was struck by congestion due to the

cold and nervous breakdown (...) in the middle of the desperate and semi-insane voices of a hundred people.”

“We could hear cries, pleas, recriminations and insults. Some women accused each other of theft. A black and confused semicircle of people, soaked and dripping mud, narrowed, shouted and struggled around the fire, extending their legs and dripping shoes towards it. The confusion, the shouting, the general misery and lack of hope for a solution had led the helpless mob into a hectic affliction.

The owners of the house themselves, overcome by panic, had taken refuge in an interior room, from which they would make one or another incursion in the midst of the horrible people that had invaded the common room. One of the sons of the owners, already an adult, suffered from this disease, common in high altitudes: the cretinism of the mountains. His head and throat were horribly deformed by the goitre. His body, knotty and twisted like a log, moved heavily in his clogs, with the oscillations and bumps of a mad bear. From time to time, he would burst into the room with his eyes wide open in astonishment, and try to make his way through the mob, sinisterly howling, furiously crying and struggling with the invaders; until an old shrew ran after him, brutally beating him and dragging the wretch, suffocated by the foul hiccups of a beaten and gagged beast, back.

In this picture, which was already horrifying, the moral distress about the near future was terribly heavy.”

"Under the weight of this concern, we laid down. In the two free rooms (for which we paid a high price) we unfolded the mattresses, each narrow compartment harbouring eight people (...) And, although we were feverish and wall to wall with the stables, from which the warm and acre smell of cows and manure emanated, I consoled myself with the idea that the Redeemer had not been granted better luck when he came to this world of miseries. Others had it worse. Above the next room was a group of refugee women. Due to a lack of suitable pots, at night, whenever they needed, they would pour their waters on the floor made of simple, ill-adjusted boards. The poor tenants below, including a seriously ill lady, despite their continued protests, spent the night under the sick rain.

The next day, fortunately, the sun shined splendidly. (...) With the sun, rose the hope and the plan for the next departure. We soon realised, however, that it was, once again, almost impossible to leave that day. (...) The departure was scheduled for the following day at 7:30 a.m. (...) it is difficult to imagine the anxiety with which the dawn was expected. Our hopes had not been ill-fated. The sun came up splendid.”

"After an hour of travel, and when we were still a good kilometre away from the border, we realised it was impossible for the cars to proceed since the layer of accumulated snow was too dense. (...) Now the difficulties were becoming apparent, and the biggest was the transport of luggage. A happy coincidence provided the solution. A family of refugees had just reached the border in an ox-cart, rented for that purpose. (...) so it was a question of convincing the Catalan ox-cart driver to carry the luggage to French territory. (...) When he was convinced (...), we loaded, at the expense of great efforts, the tiny and unsteady heap. The numerous baggage formed an oscillating pyramid, and it was no small job to get the ox-cart across to the border, on the snow and between the maze of abandoned vehicles.”

"There, the traces of the disordered escape, the image of panic and chaos, reached their peak. Cars, suitcases, garment wrecks, unpaired shoes, books, papers, food – piled up, abandoned on the road or the slopes of the ravines, highlighting the endless desolation of the snow. Groups of

women, with their heads cloaked against the cold, were bent over the spoils of the tragic stampede, searching for the most valuable objects.”

[After crossing the border and taking a break for food] " the caravan was set in motion (...) followed by the small ox-cart, with its excessive pyramid. (...) Suddenly, there was a chorus of anguished screams behind us. The yoke of the ox-cart had loosened, and so it had fallen, with all the cargo, down the ravine. The oxen remained at the top of the ravine with the ox-cart driver and his companions, who gestured in despair. In the first few moments, I was stormed by a terrible affliction. My scarce possessions were going to stay at the bottom of the immense ravine, buried in the snow, some of which had already been saved from so many shipwrecks. However, what caused me more affliction was losing my files, where I had accumulated the efforts of twenty years of research and my most precious books, some of them fundamental working tools. I went back; I climbed up the mountain again, stamping with difficulty in the snow. I was trying to save some, even if a tiny part, of my luggage. (...) due to haste or fatigue, I slipped and rolled down the cliff, terribly hurting my body.”

"The storm and the setbacks did not stop in France. But about this new chapter, prudence dictates that I be discreet. The fact that we arrived sick allowed us to be accommodated in a small village hotel, where we remained while we tried to restore the health of the body and the spirit, which were very shaken. Time has already shown us other chapters of this immense disaster. There has been no shortage of tragedy. We hope to describe it in a more quiet time.”