

A LINGUIST FOR THE REPUBLICANS

Sylvia Martin tells the story of Aileen Palmer's involvement in the Spanish Civil War

Hidden among the Library's voluminous Palmer family papers is the story of Aileen Palmer's involvement in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). Her participation came about almost by accident. Writers, Vance and Nettie Palmer, and their 21-year-old daughter Aileen, were on a working holiday in the small seaside village of Mongat, just north of Barcelona, when the military revolt against the Popular Front left coalition government took place in the city on the weekend of 17–18 July 1936.

A gifted linguist and committed communist—and recently graduated from Melbourne University—Aileen Palmer had been working as a translator and typist for the People's Olympiad, planned to begin on 19 July 1936 as a protest against the forthcoming Berlin Games. She was

staying in Barcelona to welcome the foreign athletes, when General Franco's soldiers entered the city with machine guns in the early hours of Sunday 18th and took possession of strategic buildings. The city was caught unawares, even though people had been alert to the possibility of a fascist uprising. The workers fought back, supported by Civil Guards loyal to the government, ripping up paving-stones to erect barricades.

Nettie Palmer's diary records their anxiety as she and Vance heard the gunfire from their village and listened to the cries of 'Revolucion!' from the villagers. The couple eventually managed to get a lorry ride into Barcelona, but it wasn't until the following Thursday that they found their daughter there, 'gay and grubby, in the blue cotton frock and white shoes she had set out in last Saturday'. Aileen was exhilarated and busy, making full use of her knowledge of English, French, German and Spanish to interpret for the athletes marooned in the chaotic city.

Although the coup had failed, tensions were running high and Vance was

above from left:
Unknown photographer
Portrait of Aileen Palmer, 1940
Papers of Aileen Palmer
Manuscripts Collection
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Harold Moyse
Portrait of Nettie Palmer with
baby Aileen, August 1915
sepia-toned photograph
13.8 x 8.9 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3584575

Unknown photographer
Palmer Family, Killenna, 1918
(Nettie, Helen, Vance and Aileen
(standing))
sepia-toned postcard
13.4 x 8.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3579985



Nettie waved goodbye to Aileen at the railway station and immediately left for the BBC studios, where she was to give a talk on Spain; Vance was writing newspaper articles about the situation. Nettie and Vance Palmer had long been socialists, although they never became members of the Communist Party. They subsequently returned to Australia, where they worked for the Spanish Republican cause for the next three years, Nettie as one of the driving forces of the Australian Spanish Relief Committee. Much of the committee's information came from letters from Aileen. Her parents were proud of her

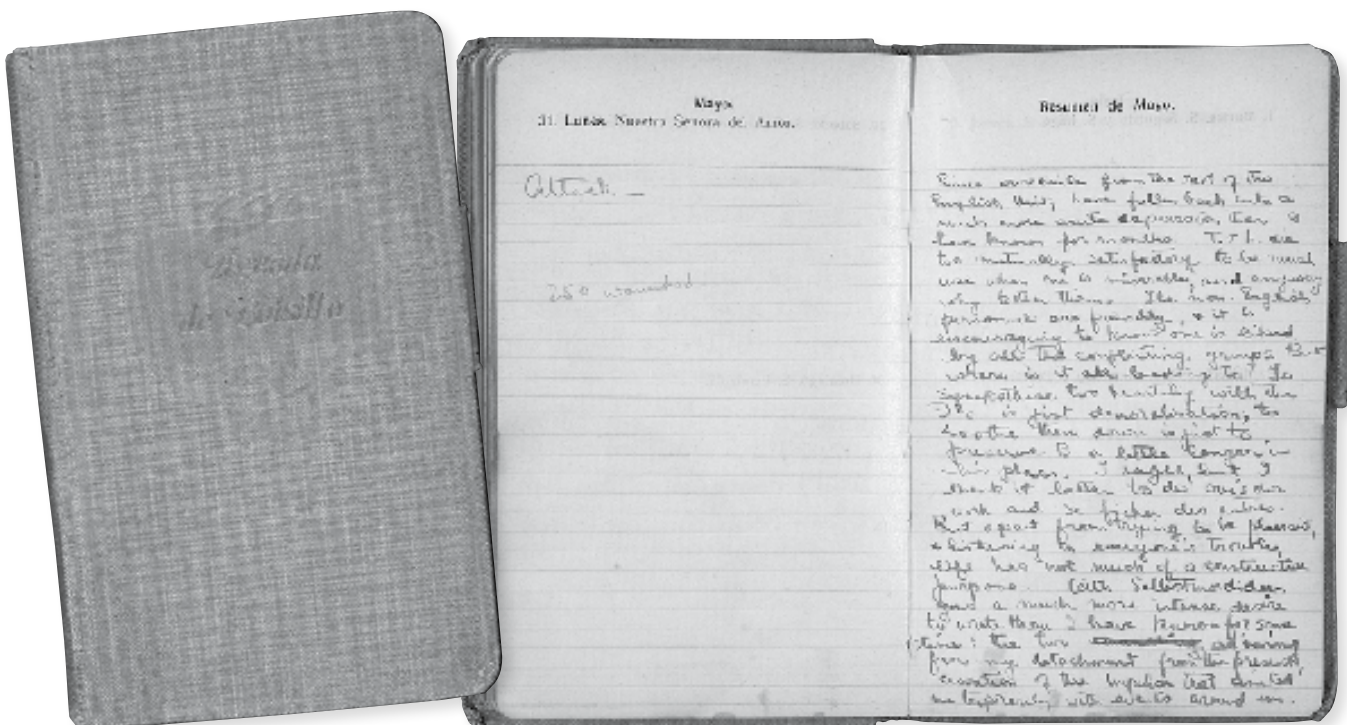
above:
Unknown photographer
Australasian Supporters of the Spanish Govt Meet in Barcelona
(Aileen Palmer second from left) 1936
Papers of Aileen Palmer
Manuscripts Collection
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determined that the family should leave on the warship *HMS London*, scheduled to pick up British subjects on 28 July. Aileen submitted, but was determined to return to Spain as soon as possible and join the forces fighting the fascists. On reaching London, she worked tirelessly for the newly formed Spanish Medical Aid Committee and less than a month later boarded the train at Victoria Station amid much fanfare as part of the first British medical unit bound for Spain. Her job was to act as the unit's secretary and interpreter.

commitment, but knew from the outset what she was undertaking. As Nettie wrote, 'It's bewildering to think her time there has only just begun: it may [mean] years almost & nothing whatever that we can do.'

Aileen Palmer was to be in Spain for years, as the war gathered momentum and escalated after Germany and Italy joined Franco's troops, their planes wiping out whole towns like Guernica in concerted strikes, and bombing the cities of Madrid and Barcelona. Aileen spent from 1936 to mid-1938 criss-crossing Spain in trucks

below:
Aileen Palmer (1915–1988)
Cover and 31 May entry of
Spanish diary
Papers of Aileen Palmer
Manuscripts Collection
MS 7162



and ambulances as her unit moved from front to front treating the wounded. Her experiences are recorded in her letters to her family and friends and, for several months of 1937, in a small grey 'agenda de bolsillo' (pocket diary).

In her correspondence with her parents, she is determinedly cheerful, often requesting supplies that are most needed, such as soap, fruit, tinned meat and, most importantly, cigarettes. 'Do not send beans,' she implores, 'as the Spanish diet consists very largely of beans, and even baked beans and tomato sauce are not much of a change.' Her diary entries often record just the barest news of the day: 'attack—150 wounded'; 'attack—250 wounded'. In the lulls between attacks, clashes between those confined in close quarters sometimes broke out and Aileen vents her feelings in the pages of her diary. On the other hand, when the British unit was split and Aileen joined the larger XIVth Brigade and was separated from many of her comrades, she was devastated. In her summary for January 1937, she writes: 'A slack & uninspired feeling due to change over to a new set of people, & not yet developed sufficient interest in any of them. For the first time, it really occurs to me to want leave, but we find it is not possible.'

For the young woman brought up in an unconventional, though essentially middle-class Australian family, the rigours of life on the battlefields of Spain were extremely challenging and it was inevitable that the passionate enthusiasm which had brought her there would diminish; but, in spite of the privations, Aileen seemed to thrive, and maintained a stoic attitude to the conditions. The makeshift hospitals were set up anywhere available—ranging from filthy, derelict farmhouses to disused mansions with lavatories that didn't work and hot and cold water that didn't run. As the war progressed, tents were used as mobile hospitals and the brigaders staffing them slept in fields as they travelled. In one letter, Aileen writes that she has not slept in a house for five nights, but notes that 'luckily, this time I had refrained from packing my typewriter too deep'. The weather could add to the challenges: from sudden spring storms in the Guadarrama mountains (where they were encamped during the La Granja offensive), they had to adjust to the heat

and flies of the arid hills of Torreldones, near Madrid.

Aileen was required to interpret in several languages and in a variety of situations, 'according to the needs of English nurses giving directions to their Spanish assistants, English chauffeurs explaining a situation to their French "responsable", or any of these to the German-speaking medical chief of the sanitary service; also between nurses and patients of any of these tongues'. She often travelled with ambulance drivers, to interpret for them, and helped in communication between the staff and officials in the Spanish villages where they were setting up hospitals. She also acted as secretary for the surgeon in charge, writing letters in several languages and taking down details of incoming patients.

Her office was often just a table and chair in a cupboard with a light installed. Sometimes, as her first 'boss' Dr Kenneth Sinclair-Loutit put it, 'she had the thankless task of accepting and packing the pathetic "efectuos de los muertos"'. On one occasion,

Unknown photographer
Sunbathing at Our Last Hospital.
Centre Forward: Our Chief
Spanish Surgeon (Aileen Palmer
seated at left)
Papers of Aileen Palmer
Manuscripts Collection
MS 6759/5/1



it was the effects of a close comrade she gathered together: 'One should be used to this sort of thing, but somehow it has taken the heart out of me for the moment,' she wrote to a friend. Another of her tasks was to relieve nurses on night duty, and she also had to give blood when it was needed: 'I have just given a small amount of blood for a transfusion, which always makes me feel sick and sorry for myself.' When she had time, she read anything she could find—Shaw's *Three Plays for Puritans* on one occasion. '*Caesar and Cleopatra* has something of a kick about it,' she wrote to Nettie, 'but *The Devil's Disciple* seemed terribly flat in Spanish. Is it the same in English?'

By the time she was stationed at the ancient village of El Escorial, near Madrid, after almost a year of constant frontline work, she was nearing exhaustion. The Brunete Offensive began on 6 July 1937, and that night she wrote in her diary: 'I am feeling that unless I get my leave soon I will go mad.' She later wrote to her parents that in the fortnight she was in El Escorial, their hospital of 150 beds had received 1300 of the gravest cases. One of these was Julian Bell, nephew of Virginia Woolf, who had just joined the unit and was wounded by a piece of shrapnel from a bomb that fell on the lorry he was driving. He died a few hours after being brought in.

After a month's leave in London in August, Aileen was back in Spain, stationed along the Aragon front for several months. In the

winter of 1937–38, she moved to the Teruel Offensive, high up in the Sierra Palomeras, inches deep in snow and ice. There, the English writer Winifred Bates met her: 'She comes in looking very rosy and well; dressed in corduroy trousers, muddy boots, and an enormous old sheepskin coat.'

In the prolonged and bloody battle for Teruel, the Republicans captured the town, only to have it recaptured in a counter-offensive by the Nationalists in February, after which the medical units were withdrawn. Aileen reported to her parents that 'the situation is certainly grave.' As her unit retreated towards Barcelona they saw 'pitiful pilgrimages—peasants driven from their homes by the annihilating bombs, uprooted Spaniards trekking eastward to the coast with their flocks and herds'.

Recovering in a mansion owned by a Catalan poet sympathetic to the popular front, Aileen reviewed her situation, writing to her family: 'I am still meditating on coming home, as soon as I can find a decent substitute. It would have to be someone bilingual, who wrote and spoke fairly good Spanish, as well as typed.'

In May 1938, she returned to London, where she continued her work for the Spanish Republic as well as writing a novel about her experiences, 'Last Mile to Huesca'. It was never published, and only an early draft survives in her papers in the National Library (MS 6759). Barcelona fell to the fascists in January 1939; with the surrender of Madrid in March, the Republic of Spain was defeated. Aileen Palmer did not return to Australia until 1945, after working for the Ambulance Auxiliary Service in London during World War II.

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Unknown photographer
Medical unit at Granila,
Aragon front
Papers of Aileen Palmer
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