Excerpt from *The Wayfarer's Journey: A Doctor's Memoir of Exile and Meaning*
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The Scars That Never Healed

There are wounds that time cannot heal. They cling to the soul like shadows, refusing to loosen their grip. The Spanish Civil War left invisible scars—deep, silent fissures—that continued to bleed long after the gunfire ceased. I was born beneath that lingering shadow.

When the bombs finally fell silent in April 1939, Spain did not find peace. It simply stepped into a different kind of war: one without bullets but no less merciless. The Republic was crushed, and the country fell beneath the iron hand of Francisco Franco, who declared himself Caudillo by the grace of God. Freedom itself was dismantled: political parties were banned, unions dissolved, newspapers reduced to obedient echoes of the regime. Life became colonized by fear.

Tens of thousands were executed. Many more vanished into prisons and forced labor camps. Families, maimed by violence, learned to navigate a moral landscape where words could condemn, whispers could betray, and silence was the only safe refuge. The repression was ruthless. Some estimates place the number of post-war executions between 50,000 and 100,000. The Law of Political Responsibilities allowed Franco to punish anyone who had ever supported the Republic, regardless of the extent of their involvement. My family remained trapped inside that world of shadows. We were not among the hundreds of thousands who fled into exile—those who found uncertain refuge in France, Mexico, or more distant lands. We stayed, learning the quiet art of survival amidst devastation.

Spain was economically shattered. Agriculture collapsed; factories fell silent; food became scarce. Rationing was imposed. Everyone was issued *cartillas de racionamiento*—small books that controlled what we could eat: a few ounces of flour, some rice if we were fortunate, a drop of oil. Meat was a dream. Milk, a miracle. Sugar, a distant memory.

I still remember the bitter taste of those times—not just the hunger, but the humiliations that accompanied it. One day, Amelia came back from the market with a treasure: saccharin. Sugar was nonexistent. She dissolved the tiny white tablets into warm milk and served it to us with a hopeful smile. My brother and I took one sip. The strange, chemical bitterness repelled us immediately. We grimaced, cried out—"¡Puaj!"—and, as soon as Amelia left the kitchen, we poured the offending milk down the drain. Even as children, we had already learned the art of silent rebellion.

Valencia Under Siege

I was born into a Spain already torn apart, into a world that trembled under the weight of falling bombs and collapsing ideals. My brother remembers it too—far too well. While my mother traveled to Gestalgar to give birth to me, he remained in Mislata with our Aunt Josefina, caught

in the merciless grip of the war. The air raid sirens would howl like wolves at night, sending families scurrying to shelters, the smell of sweat, fear, and gunpowder thick in the air. The ground shook under the German and Italian bombs as Valencia—the temporary heart of the Republic—was battered again and again.

Valencia had become the last sanctuary of a desperate government: the fragile coalition led by Francisco Largo Caballero. It was a government of hope and contradictions, an uneasy alliance of republicans, anarchists, socialists, communists, and nationalists from Catalonia and the Basque Country—all desperately trying to preserve a vision of Spain that now lay bleeding. It was during these years that Spain appointed its first female minister, Federica Montseny, a symbol of the progressive dream that flickered even in the darkest nights.

But the Republic's dream was cracking from within. Deep ideological fractures splintered the fragile unity. In Barcelona, the May Days of 1937 exploded in a tragic fratricidal battle: government forces clashed with the anarchist CNT as they were forcibly evicted from their headquarters. Four hundred people lay dead. A thousand more were wounded. And with every drop of blood spilled, the Republic bled away its own strength.

The Global Silence

Beyond Spain's borders, the world watched with cold detachment or cynical self-interest. The British consul in Barcelona cabled home: "The Government appears to be at the mercy of the workers." A worker revolution terrified the European powers; they feared that the Soviet bear would extend its claws into the Mediterranean. Mexico alone offered brave, tangible support. Britain, France, and the United States clung to their shameful neutrality.

The International Brigades came from distant lands, answering a call of conscience that governments ignored. Volunteers from the United States, Britain, Canada, and beyond fought and died on foreign soil, giving everything for a cause that was not theirs, but was universal. When they were disbanded in 1938, Barcelona bid them farewell with tears and gratitude.

Among them was a Canadian doctor, Norman Bethune, who built a mobile unit to give blood transfusions to civilians fleeing the Málaga–Almería road massacre. His actions saved countless lives. Another truth-teller was British journalist George Steer, who exposed the Luftwaffe's destruction of Guernica. From his reports, Picasso found his voice. His painting became an immortal outcry against fascist savagery.

Exile and Erasure

There were heroes whose names most Spaniards no longer speak—erased from the official history by Franco's propaganda machine. Amparo Poch, a feminist doctor in Madrid, and Dolores Ibárruri, La Pasionaria, who roared "¡No pasarán!" across the world, stood on the side of compassion and defiance. On the other stood Pilar Primo de Rivera, sister of the fascist Falange

founder, who under Franco led the Sección Femenina and indoctrinated women into submission. The Catholic Church sanctified the regime. Nacionalcatolicismo—the fusion of Spanish nationalism and Catholic dogma—became the state's creed. Schools taught that Franco had saved Spain. Regional languages like Catalan, Basque, and Galician were banned. Culture was strangled. Women were instructed in obedience and silence. Informants were everywhere. Fear seeped into everything. We learned, from a very young age, that silence was safety. That forgetting was survival.

A Child's View of a Wider War

At the time, my understanding of the world extended no further than the edges of my village. I knew nothing of the horrors consuming Europe. One day in 1945, I heard men shouting in the streets: "¡Se acabó la guerra! ¡Se acabó la guerra!"—"The war is over!" I looked up, puzzled. What war? I asked myself. Such was the isolation, the censorship, the narrow world we lived in.

Franco sympathized with Hitler and Mussolini. He sent the División Azul—18,000 Spanish volunteers—to fight on the Russian front. But Spain avoided full entry into WWII. When it ended, Spain was excluded from the Marshall Plan. The United Nations denied Spain entry. The economy stagnated. Basic goods remained scarce. A generation came of age in a country frozen in time.

But Cold War politics shifted the calculus. In 1953, Spain signed the Madrid Pact with the United States: military bases in exchange for aid and recognition. In 1955, Spain was admitted to the United Nations. Franco did not change, but the world's priorities did.

Resistance and Remembering

Inside Spain, censorship remained absolute. The Communist Party continued underground resistance, relentlessly persecuted. Guerrilla fighters—the maquis—were hunted down or imprisoned for decades. Meanwhile, exile communities in Mexico City, Toulouse, and Buenos Aires kept the flame of culture alive.

The scars of that war did not end when the shooting stopped. They seeped into our lives, shaping entire generations. We learned to live with loss, with silence, and with a hunger for truth. Yet amid that darkness, the dignity of quiet resistance also grew: children pouring bitter milk down the drain, mothers stretching rations beyond reason, whispered truths shared only in the safety of intimacy.

This is why I say: if you have lived your entire life under Franco's Spain, you carry a history that has been amputated. The full truth of our Civil War was buried beneath decades of silence and fear. But its ghosts remain. They walk with us still.

What we experienced in our household was a small echo of a much larger truth unfolding across Spain. I am a child of that wounded Spain. And like so many others, I carry within me those invisible scars that never fully close. But they also remind me that life—even beneath the weight of oppression—always seeks its narrow crack of light through which to survive.

The End of the War and the Second Dictatorship: Spain in the Shadow of Franco

What followed the end of the Spanish Civil War was not peace, but a new kind of war—cold, quiet, and merciless. There was no embrace of reconciliation, no solemn silence for the dead from both sides. Only victory—absolute, vengeful, and blood-stained.

On April 1, 1939, General Franco declared the war over. But for hundreds of thousands, the nightmare had only just begun. In the years that followed, somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000 people were executed. Tens of thousands more were imprisoned in overflowing jails. Some 450,000 were forced into exile—many never to return. Families were torn apart, homes seized or destroyed, histories rewritten by the victors. Guerrilla resistance smoldered in the mountains. Informers whispered in church pews and police stations. Fear lingered like smoke after a burning.

To call this a "postwar" period is to misunderstand it entirely. As with the end of World War II, historians now agree there was no single "zero hour"—no clean break between war and what came after. What followed was an extension of conflict through silence, hunger, repression, and the machinery of dictatorship. Franco didn't build a country—he built a regime.

And that regime would last nearly four decades.

It is no wonder that even today, Spaniards remain divided, uneasy, or simply exhausted by the subject. The wounds are too deep, the graves too shallow. How does one comprehend a conflict that extinguished more than half a million lives and exiled almost another half a million more? That left entire villages without men, entire generations without truth?

Some try to simplify it into slogans: fascism versus democracy, Christian order versus communist chaos. But such narratives flatten the complexity of a fractured nation. If we are ever to understand what truly happened—if we are ever to learn—we must turn to history, yes, but also to philosophy, to testimony, to memory. We must listen not only to the victors or the martyrs, but to the silences in between.

One thing, however, is certain: Franco's regime did not remain static. It evolved. It adapted. The Spain of the early 1970s bore little resemblance to the raw, punishing terror of the 1940s. And yet, we often forget this—flattening nearly forty years of history into a single monolith of repression. Doing so obscures not only historical truth but the lived experiences of those who endured, adjusted, and—somehow—carried on.

By the time Franco died in 1975, the dictatorship had transformed from a fascist war machine into a more pragmatic, technocratic state. Spain had gone from being a pariah—isolated for its sympathy with the Axis powers—to an increasingly integrated player in the capitalist world order. Ideologues gave way to economists. Indoctrination lost ground to infrastructure. The jackboot was exchanged for a necktie.

But not everyone was convinced. To many on the left, these changes were purely cosmetic—new wallpaper on the same crumbling foundation of violence, fear, and censorship. They argued, not without reason, that the regime never truly repented, never sought redemption, never admitted wrongdoing. It simply evolved to survive.

I witnessed this transformation with my own eyes when I returned from the United States to visit my father and Amelia. I remember standing at the airport, struck by small but telling signs: fewer uniforms, softer expressions, the absence of barking orders. The streets, once heavy with suspicion, now bore the faint glow of modernity. Bureaucracies that had once been slow and punishing began to function—if not efficiently, then at least more humanely.

It was not freedom, but it was change. Still, I could feel the tension beneath the surface—a nation learning to live with itself after devouring its own children. Progress, if we can call it that, came not from the ashes of reconciliation, but from exhaustion. Spain was weary of suffering, tired of fear. It wanted to grow, to join the world. And so the dictatorship, in its final act, put on a suit and tie, opened its markets, and tried to rebrand repression as order.

But I never forgot what lay beneath. The fear still lived in the old men's eyes. The censorship lingered in the pauses between sentences. The grief sat heavily on our family tables, where names were spoken in whispers—or not at all.

History has many faces. The face Spain showed the world in 1975 was not the face it wore in 1939. But beneath them all lay the same unburied bones.