ALFONSO'S LETTER TO HIS GRANDCHILDREN

Réalville, October 1994

Queridos nietos, (Dear grandchildren)

In this letter, I will try to share with you some of my memories of the past because it is also your story. I wanted to tell you that you are more important to me than anything else, even though I never knew how to tell you directly. By writing to you, I also hope to set my mind at rest.

What I want to tell you is not easy for me. It has always been difficult to talk about it, but the time has come because I am getting old. I’m writing these few words so that the story will be remembered. I’ve always been a free spirit. It was the C.N.T., the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*, (National Confederation of Labour) which taught me that. I was active in the CNT for a long time and my comrades and I took part in demonstrations and strikes to defend the people and democracy.

I have lived the most tragic story that a human being can bear, war, famine, exile, without ever being able to return to my homeland. In 1936, when the civil war broke out, I too joined the struggle. And we shouted “E*n pie el pueblo obrero, a la batalla !*” (“Workers, stand up and fight”). So that we could remain free and not give in to the fascists! Although we lost the war, I remained free in my mind and kept my friends, heroes who gave their lives, in my heart. This war marked the beginning of a long journey. On 20 January 1939, I had to flee to France on foot. The sun was shining but it was terribly cold. The Francoists were advancing from Barcelona to Girona then to Figueras and Port-Bou. My companions and I, all fighters, were exhausted because of the cold, hunger, marching in the Pyrenees and the fear of enemy planes. Once we entered France in early February 1939, we were treated as enemies or rather like dogs: inspected, stripped of our possessions, locked up in a camp. We had fled Franco, but we were not free; we were shunted from camp to camp: Le Boulou, Argelès-sur-Mer. There were no facilities for housing us, no shelters, nothing! I remember that we used to bury ourselves in the sand to try to protect ourselves from the cold and raging winds. It was hell. Then we were sent to the Vernet and Septfonds camps. *Ya no sentíamos hombres*… (We no longer felt like human beings.)

I arrived at Septfonds in early June 1939, after an uncomfortable march from Borredon station under the supervision of a regiment of Senegalese riflemen, who treated us roughly. I understood immediately that we were in for a hard time.

The camp was a reservoir of labour. As soon as I arrived, I was put in a band of foreign workers. *No tenia opcíon, es obligatorio*. (I had no choice, it was obligatory). There was a price to pay for taking refuge in France, modern slavery. I remember the humiliating line-up in front of farmers who chose the healthy men! Many took advantage of the situation...Everything was well organised; the camp was a labour exchange for selecting and dispatching workers! The Labour Inspectorate tested us to check our technical skills and send us elsewhere, sometimes very far away to farms, companies, mines or the steel industry. I, children, was employed at the Septfonds Hospital as a cook. I was escorted by a guard to go there because it was in the village, 2 kilometres from the camp. At night I returned to the camp, to hut no. 22, where I lived with 300 people. A tiny little hut! We were squashed in together. The promiscuity was terrible, there was almost no hygiene to speak of. We felt less than human. I tried to keep up my moral, for myself, but also for a child who arrived a few weeks after me. His name was Angel, a *niño*, and he was about your age. One day he was reprimanded by Juan, another inmate, because he was eating like an animal and Juan gave him his spoon so that he could eat with dignity. From then on, "*el niño*" set out to find spoons for everyone! So, as soon as I could, I too stole spoons from the hospital... But the guard, Duval, who escorted me, suspected something. One day he took me to the hospital, to get me to come clean. I didn’t tell him anything, but in the end, he discovered what was going on when the huts were searched. Fortunately, we all stood by one another. *Como se dice, la solidaridad es una fuerza !* (How can I put it, solidarity makes you strong!) We even played football with the Polish pilots and yet they didn't think like us! No one is ever all black or white. They had fought the Germans and that’s what mattered to us. In May 1940, most of my companions left the camp. I stayed on, I even saw the Poles coming back, this time as prisoners. They had been caught trying to go to London... And that's when I thought to myself that even they deserved to regain their dignity. I managed to throw my spoon through the barbed wire to Maximilian, with whom I had played football. There was no need to say anything, he knew what it meant. We looked into each other’s eyes for a long time. In April 1942, when my group, the "GTE 533" went to work in Réalville, I was recruited by a private individual, Señor Aubry, as a farmworker. I stayed with him for two years. It was in Réalville that I met your *abuela* (grandmother) Jeanne. We were married on 17 August 1944.

A routine was beginning to set in, when at the end of August 1944, my life changed again and I became a cook at the Grand Hotel de Toulouse. I was finally earning a better wage, which allowed me to open our beloved bakery at Réalville in June 1945, where I settled permanently.

I was never able to return to Spain. But you children should go! For me, but also and especially for you, this is where your roots are. Remember this freedom, what it feels like and preserve it, *porque el bien más preciado es la libertad!* (the most precious thing is freedom). *Hay que defenderla con fe y valor* (it must be defended with faith and courage). Remember that despite everything, your grandfather never abandoned his principles or his friends. You are the fruit of this war, remember our history.

*De parte de su abuelo, Alfonso* (on behalf of your grandfather, Alfonso).