

With almost a century of life, it has words, looks, gestures and the lucidity of those who have seen up close the greatness and misery of the human being. Virgilio Fernández del Real (Larache, 1918) is one of the last survivors who experienced the Spanish Civil War firsthand. On the front. In the trenches. Those that he has never abandoned on the ideological plane.

His story, his life story, is living memory. Virgilio Fernández wanted to defend democracy and enlisted as a soldier in the health service of the republican resistance. I was not 18 years old. Born in the old Spanish protectorate in Morocco. He ended up in the Dombrowski battalion in the XIII International Brigade to live a handful of the toughest battles of the race: Brunete, Guadalajara, Belchite, the Aragon front, the Ebro ... He now lives in Mexico and is spending a season in Madrid. The same city where he did internships in 1936 at the Hospital La Princesa when the fascists provoke the war in Spain.

### **How does a young man enrolled in the war end up?**

I worked at the Hospital de la Princesa [Madrid]. On the 18th I learned that Franco had risen but I thought it would be like before, in 32, when Sanjurjo got up. And I did not give much importance, I thought that it would last little. On Monday I went to work and had already taken the Cuartel de la Montaña the night before. Then they began to arrive injured. I was going to turn 18, and I was anesthetizing or cleaning wounds.

### **It ends up going through a multitude of fronts, for months.**

32 months After returning from the Ebro the Brigades disbanded, innocently thinking that the powers England, France and the United States were going to ask Franco to withdraw the Germans and the Italians. But no.

### **Remember which was the hardest and most complex to overcome?**

At the end of the battle of the Ebro, when we retired, there were some battles in the mountains of Pandols and Cavalls where one day we counted a thousand wounded. We did not see the dead. They were brought to us [the wounded] and had to be taken by boat across the river because the bridge was destroyed. And to pass thousand wounded in boat ... it already takes.

Of course there were other battles. One of tanks, important, near Morata and a very strong one was also Belchite. The Brigades were to break the front or, when they had broken it, go to plug. So, if it was not one of the two things, we were resting there or there. The rest could last three days or 15.

### **What does a medical team find in a conflict watered by fierce battles, as was the Spanish war?**

First we were the team for a battalion, but the number of doctors and practitioners as well as mobility grew. The Swiss had given us a special truck made as an operating room. He had his operating table, his autoclave, where to wash his hands ... And we got very close to the front, for the wounds that, if not acted right now, he dies, he bleeds.

### **The barbarism of war.**

The thing is that wars today are more planes and tanks than infantry. The machines are advancing more and more. It is awful. The one that has more armament is the one that wins. We started it without having a military side. There was no discipline or who could put discipline. In the morning they came from Madrid to the front in cars and taxis, of course, confiscated! They [the fascists] had an army that came from Burgos, and the column with General Mola, and they had a discipline. And we nobody sent in anyone. They were civilians who had seized a rifle, many of them did not know how to use it.

### **Is it a key to explain why the Republic and democracy lose the war?**

The war was lost because of the difference in armament, because of the difference in the army, the difference in discipline, the difference in principle. Afterwards we had some armament, a very heroic aviation but very small compared to what they had. And, of course, they had commanders who had studied military things. The most important military man we had was General Rojo.

### **Determinant was the support of Nazi Germany and Mussolini's Italy.**

That on the one hand. On the other hand, the alliance that they made of non-intervention, which meant that we could not go out to the arms market and buy what was needed, they did not let us buy. Paying Because to Russia what was bought was paid. The Bank of Spain had money and it went paying, it was not a favor that they did. France reached the point that we knew there was a train with ammunition and weapons that came from Russia on the border of Irun, and they did not let us pass until Franco got to have that area.

### **And with only 20 years leaves the country by the French border before the Francoist siege and ends up in a concentration camp in Saint Cyprien, which he defines as "a beach with barbed wire".**

Yes. They made a boundary of the beach with poles and barbed wire and Senegalese outside taking care that we did not leave. They fed us lentils with sand. First we slept on the ground and in the air, and then we made some barracks and there we slept, on the floor, but already covered by a roof.

### **A year later, in 1939, he knows from an ad in a newspaper that his mother is looking for him. How was that story?**

She lived in Madrid. When it was known that we had lost, she went to Alicante and took a boat to France. My mother, a sister and my brother.

### **Did you get to meet your family in Normandy again?**

Yes. Someone told me "there is an advertisement, they are looking for you". I looked for it, I wrote and it had been changed to Normandy, to a town. The police chief saw my

family and made me a laissez passer so I could leave the [concentration camp] and go to Normandy.

There we waited until they collected money in Mexico, my sister had already passed, and got a loan and paid a ticket on an American ship. And we went from Bordeaux to New York. From there, Havana, Progreso, Yucatan and Veracruz, my sister was waiting for us.

**Follow the current political and social Spanish, what opinion do you have?**

In general terms, in Mexico and around the world, the 1% is the one with the money. The United States has so far not allowed any parties to come to power anywhere. There are always two. In France; in the United States, the democrats and the republicans; in Mexico, the PAM or the PRI; here, the PP or the Socialist Party, which as a socialist has nothing. Felipe González, who at first seemed like he was going to eat the world, turned out to be an Andalusian gentleman, who only worried about how much his family earned. He allowed all the junk contracts.

**The crisis in Catalonia is causing imprisonment of politicians, repression in the street ... Do you think that the members of the Government and the Jordis are political prisoners like in the Franco regime?**

Of course there are political prisoners. And politics is all this. I think that the Catalans prefer to leave Spain to be under a government with so much corruption, although within Catalonia there is also. I prefer that they do not separate. Moreover, I prefer that borders, passports and all that disappear. But, the Catalans must decide what kind of government they want to have.

**Then, consider that there are political prisoners in Spain.**

Of course, they are political prisoners. As you are saying now, this strike is not a strike by workers but a political strike. Yes sir. A political strike is much better than a war imposed on us by Franco. For that they did not protest so much.

**In unionist demonstrations, small groups of marked character are appearing with impunity ...**

Fascist. And they take out the flags, and the arm up [makes the fascist salute].

**Are you finding your breeding ground?**

They have always existed here. These people during the war were camouflaged and some with Communist Party card or anarchists. When the war begins everyone tries to have a card so they do not take it as the Fifth Column and live more quiet. Those have always been there.

**Why do you think they are "always there"?**

Because here, since Franco died and there was what they call Transition, we have not had a government that sets rules to prevent these fascists from continuing to exist. In

contrast, the Communist Party was illegal for a long time and was given the opportunity to be legal in the Transition, which was wrong, because the Communist Party was more effective when it was illegal than after.

**And does that mean that Spain has not closed the wounds of the civil war? The Government ignores the Historical Memory, there is Franco symbology in the streets, the country is strewn with mass graves ...**

Historical Memory ... If you do not know the story, you fall into the same hole again.

**Do you think that the country of forgetfulness does not yet understand that taking the dead out of the graves is a matter of Human Rights?**

The dead one is dead and will not be resurrected. But people want to know and, above all, let it be known that they were not killed for being bandits but for an injustice. That's the main. If removing the dead and putting them in a place with the name will fix something ... but I do understand that people who still have those customs and want to know exactly if they killed him but that it was unfair, that he had not done anything. And when I came to Spain the first time, Franco was dead, there was still Generalissimo Street, Sanjurjo ... this was very strange for me.

**The current king, Felipe VI, has participated in some recognition to the republican fighters of La Nueva. But in Paris, they are ignored here. And the Government has been able to do it with the Blue Division. Would you like some tribute here for those who fought for democracy?**

To the Brigades, yes. When I see the Felipe full of 'things' [the breastplate is pointed out], as if he had won fifty battles, I always believe that we are in a musical theater. Before, his father was General of the Navy, of Aviation, he had all the uniforms ... He's a puppet. They would have to admit that people who were not adventurous came, that they did not come for what they were going to win, that they were not going to plunder the villages, they were not going to rape the women, as they did to the foreign legion. This thing about hearing Queipo de Llano say to the women: "They're going to see you, they do not know what a man is, now my legionaries are going to show it to me, not those communist fagots."

**The return of the program Saved by Jordi Évole has entered the capital of Daesh, Raqqa. Appears a Spanish citizen who fights the so-called 'Islamic State', as other foreigners, and in the arm carries a Republican flag with the insignia of the International Brigades. Do you find a relationship between the will and objective of these volunteer soldiers and those who fought fascism in the war in Spain?**

Yes. Fighting for a just cause is what they did. They came here not only to fight for the Spanish Republic, it was to fight against Hitler, against Mussolini. There is a book called The Yoke and the Arrows, written by the American ambassador in Spain, and describes what happened, and went to talk with Roosevelt and said "we are wrong, we had to help the Republic."

But they were more afraid of Stalin than of Hitler. Then, they did nothing. And it cost them a lot of blood and a lot of money. When I arrived in New York, there was a lady who was registering the names and what religion each one had. Then he told me: "How do you come from Europe now ?! I should have been fighting against Hitler!" And I said: "Ma'am, I was already 32 months, now send your son". It was a mistake and allowed Hitler to complete the entire strategy of how he was going to devastate the villages. That's why France fell into nothing, a matter of weeks. We last 32 months containing that amount of weapons and planes and tanks.