

ODYSSEY TO OPPORTUNITY

© 2009 Roger R. Fernández

Smashwords Edition

Also by Roger R. Fernández

[Odyssey Fulfilled](#)
[Beyond My Odyssey](#)
[Odyssey Resumed](#)

To my mother
whose vision and personal sacrifice
made this Odyssey possible

PROLOGUE

My friendship with Roger Fernández dates from the summer of 1987. Since then, we have shared a frank and open relationship which accounts, in part, for me taking on the difficult task of writing the foreword to his autobiography.

What follows is, in essence, the story of a life's struggle. I will not attempt an assessment of *Odyssey to Opportunity*. Neither do I wish to expound on the message the book aims to convey. I have reserved these lines to express my admiration for the writer and the course of his life and professional career. The tale I shall allow to speak for itself.

As the chronicle begins, the Spanish Civil War is nearing its climax. From that moment, Roger is caught up in the turbulence of the times. From tending flock in his native region of El Bierzo, he goes on to teach in South Africa, translate for the Cuban State Press Agency in Havana, and travel extensively through Europe and America. Finally, his career culminates in being elected head of the Department of Foreign Languages and Humanities of Los Angeles City College.

Each of these experiences have contributed to shaping the character, understanding, and humor of a remarkable man. As director of the Los Angeles Community College District's International program in Salamanca, Spain, Roger has shown sympathy and tolerance for his students. In the anecdotes related here, the reader will sense the writer's passion, gusto, and love of life.

Roger's *Odyssey* reflects his personal striving to share in the opportunities present for all in America, but which for many, prove unattainable. This autobiography represents his commitment to the ideals which have given shape and meaning to his life, and, as such, offer an example of a life well lived. This is what makes *Odyssey* a story worth reading—and worth remembering.

Alfredo Miguel de Pablo
Founder and Director,
Colegio Hispánico Miguel de Unamuno
Salamanca, Spain

Chapter 1

SWIRLING WINDS OF CHANGE

April 1934.

The political climate of Spain was chaotic. In the elections seven months earlier, the ruling Left had been rejected in favor of the Right. Ignoring the will of the people, President Alcalá-Zamora bypassed Gil Robles, leader of the Right, and gave the government to Alejandro Lerroux, a Left-of-Center radical who once had this advice for his followers, according to Luis Bolín in his book, *Spain: Vital Years*: “Pillage and sack this decadent civilization, destroy its churches and its gods; raise the veils worn by nuns and make mothers of them. Burn all title-deeds to private property and elevate the proletariat to judicial rank! Do not hesitate before sepulchers and altars! Fight! Kill! Die!!!”

It was in this turbulent national environment that Roger Fernández was born on a cold but bright April 26 in the small mountain village of Salas de los Barrios, in the region of El Bierzo where man and nature coexist in harmony. With a delightful blending of fruitful valleys, picturesque landscapes of luxuriant growth and numerous hills crowned with vineyards or mountains of coal, El Bierzo is a zone of spectacular sights, idyllic living and opportunity to wealth. Its rivers Boeza, Cúa, Burbia, Sil, Valcarce, Selmo and Valdueza snake through the valleys bringing copious fertility and lush vegetation to an other-wise-barren land. Its capital, the ancient templar city of Ponferrada, projects hope with its economic vitality, and life with its festive and alluring customs. Located halfway between Madrid and La Coruña, the northwestern tip of Spain, El Bierzo became a most welcome and hospitable place of rest for pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela during the Middle Ages.

ANCESTRAL BACKGROUND

Being from a tiny, forsaken village was not an obstacle for Roger, but a challenge to success. He was the only one from Salas de los Barrios who left home and went thousands of miles away to study in foreign lands. In his adult life, he would live and work in three continents and would shake hands with some of the world’s notable and powerful.

On that April of 1934, however, Roger Fernández became the fifth child of a family that would eventually number eight children, four boys and four girls. Since 1931, the Fernández family, like the other sixty-or-so families of Salas, had been anguished and terrorized by national waves of crime, mass imprisonments, ceaseless persecution of the Church, hunger, hatred, blood and tears.

Roger came from parents opposite in ancestral background, formal education and purposeful aspiration. Don Antonio, the father, was born in Villar, near Salas de los Barrios, from a humble and poor family. He was the last of nine children and the only boy. He grew with little education, indulged by his parents and spoiled by his sisters. He had a heart of gold and a very generous disposition. A true peasant, he loved to work the outdoors and to attend fairs to exchange domestic animals to work the fields. He loved his children, who loved him very dearly in return, though he would not hesitate to use the belt as an instrument to discipline them. He was a warm human being, but his lack of education and the protective family life he led in Villar predisposed him to some harmful mistakes of judgment.

Doña Rosario, his very attractive wife, was born to a wealthy family. Her parents had left Spain for the Americas and settled in Rosario, Argentina where she was born. They returned to their native region of El Bierzo when she was ten years old. Unlike her husband, she was highly educated and very well read. Her ambition was to have her children attain good education as well. To that end, she spared no sacrifice. When the civil war ended in 1939, times became very rough. She would sell her ration of coffee, sugar and other supplies to pay someone to teach her children how to read.

She was a chapter of love, filled with pages of her children's illusions and hurts, for her tenderness made them joyful when close to her and sorrowful when separated from her. When they faltered or when they felt sad and lonely, they turned to her for comfort, they sought her guiding light. She was the love, the life and the leaven that made children smile when they met her and men admire her gentle genius when around her. In truth, near her, people found a tender meaning to their lives.

MOLDING INFLUENCES

Throughout his life, Roger will not forget his father's generosity and affection, nor his mother's tenderness and spirit of sacrifice. In fact, he would quite often talk about his parents, especially his mother, as having been the ones who molded him into a caring and dedicated human being.

He noticed his father's hard work in the fields, and his mother's unselfishness and self-denial at home. He was proud of his father for opening his home to the farmers of Espinoso and Compludo who when traveling to the fair in Ponferrada on their screeching, oxen-driven carts, would stop to warm their hands and feet at the furnace, or to quench their thirst with a glass of wine. He marvelled at his mother's kindness and warmth towards stranded travelers who would stop by the house in the middle of the night, seeking protection from the vicious cold of winter.

Unfortunately, the kindness and spirit of giving that Roger observed at home when he became of age to understand them were not the virtues prevailing in the nation at his birth. Killing of priests, burning of churches, highway robberies, political acts of vengeance, terrorizing chaos in the streets and countless crises in the central government: this was the social milieu in which Roger was born.

The downfall of the Lerroux government on April 28, 1934, did not do much to improve the situation, for the new government of Ricardo Samper and those that followed it were

unable to check the radicalization of political positions that would lead Spain precipitously towards a catastrophic civil war.

A ravaging civil war did in fact engulf the country in flames two years later. It caused devastation and bloodshed to the nation in general, and great amount of suffering and deprivation to the once comfortable Fernández family in particular. The pain was indeed overwhelming, for the weight of the scarcity of food was compounded by the sorrow of political division at home.

Yet, in this climate of political violence and religious persecution, Don Florencio, the village priest who frequently had to go in hiding, exercised a decisive influence on little Roger. That holy man initiated this future educator to an intellectual as well as spiritual life. Roger loved to serve Mass for Don Florencio, who, recognizing a certain ability in him, decided to teach him reading and the elements of Latin and mathematics. Occasionally, when he saw hunger in Roger's face, he would invite him to the garden and treat him to the fruit of several trees to satisfy that appetite.

Roger was baptized in San Martín, a sixteenth century church declared a "monumento" in 1976. No other church could best symbolize his future life than San Martín where he loved to go to ring the bells and serve Mass. Perched in a little hill, it majestically overlooks the colorful Bierzo valley, rich in agricultural products and vegetation. In its solitude, it evokes peace, tranquility, recollection, spirituality and eternal hope, the appropriate recipe for the forging of Roger's character.

The religious pageantry produced great impression on Roger or Gerín, as he used to be called with affection. The Christmas nativity scene in the village main church and the Easter procession with the meeting at the main plaza of the crying Virgin and her son carrying the heavy cross were among the happiest memories of his childhood. He frequently evoked them in later life to relive them in his mind and remind himself of some moments of bliss in a village whose political intrigues brought pain and tears to his struggling family.

The first blow to the Fernández family unity and happiness came when Don Antonio, the father, ignored his wife's advice and left the village with their second oldest son Antonio, and their oldest daughter Delia, to look for work in Irún, near the French border, hundreds of miles away. They stayed near Doña Aurora, Delia's favorite aunt. The move was disastrous, however, for within six months they returned with no money in their pockets and many debts to be paid.

Life in Salas de los Barrios became a difficult ordeal for the Fernández family. Doña Rosario, the mother, took care of the rest of the children and kept them busy working the fields in their father's absence. This clairvoyant and courageous woman managed the family affairs well, defying the prevailing wisdom that a woman could not attend to the needs of a farming family.

Some incidents occurred, however, that would have never occurred had she not been required to be both a father and a mother to the children. Once, she had to go to Ponferrada to buy coal for the house. She had to walk. It took her five hours. During that time, Roger, either to assert his masculinity or to show his strength, took a wooden hammer and hit his older sister Dorita over the head with it. Turning on the floor with

pain and tears in her eyes she kept saying: “Wait till mom returns. I’ll tell her on you.” Fearing that he had done some serious damage to his sister and fearing his mom’s wrath, Roger knelt down and asked repeatedly for forgiveness. The family learned about this only a few years later.

On another occasion, Roger and his younger sister Lidia were playing, coming down a little hill on a wooden raft, right in front of the house. Roger was to ride the raft and Lidia was to push it down the slope. Soon Lidia wised-up and decided that she should go down the slope too and told her brother of her wish. Roger complied but showed unhappiness. He pushed his sister down the slope, ran to the bottom to meet her and when they were both at the bottom of the hill and she was still in the raft, he decided to “pee” on her head. Lidia ran home crying and screaming, letting everyone know what he had just done. This time, he got a well deserved spanking, and was retired to bed without supper.

So, when Don Antonio and Delia returned from Irún, Roger was not the same innocent little boy they had left behind. He no longer enjoyed serving Mass or being taught by the village priest. He would rather play with his friends, much to the chagrin of his aunt and god-mother, Doña Antonia, whose whole ambition was for Roger to become a priest. When at table his father or mother would ask the question: “How is Don Florencio?” or “what did he teach you today?” he could not tell a lie because his pious, but nagging aunt would uncover it by asking a question of her own: “what was the color of the chasuble the priest used for Mass?” Since she had been at Mass she knew the answer. He did not.

Roger loved his teacher, Don José, and established a good relation with him. Don José used to tell Roger’s parents how well he was doing in school. However, he would like to play rather than to study, to observe nature rather than to sit in a classroom. In fact, the classes he enjoyed most were those that Don José frequently held in the meadows or in the woods. So, he decided to “play hooky” and enjoy nature on his own. This time his nagging aunt could not say anything, he thought to himself. His aunt did not, of course, but his teacher did.

Don Antonio did not hesitate to use the belt when Roger failed to fulfill his study duties, and Roger feared the belt. So, he thought of a way to outsmart his father. He would take the road to school, with his father watching, until he had turned into the street where the school was. Then he would turn back to the main street to verify that his father had gone back home. After that he would disappear into the vineyards until school was over.

This went on for a few days until Don José, suspecting that Roger’s absence was not due to illness, decided one day to go from school to the Fernández house and find the truth. Unaware of this, Roger went home too, as if nothing unusual was going on. Very soon he discovered that his nagging aunt was there. He overheard her saying: “I told you he was up to no good. I told you he is becoming a bad boy.”

That was enough for him to decide instantly to run away from home. He returned to the vineyards and stayed there, wandering around for some three to four long, agonizing hours until late that evening. Not knowing where to spend the night he opted to go back home “to surrender and face the music”. He figured that his parents would show sympathy towards him, just as in the case of the prodigal son in the Bible. What he got instead was a stern warning and the severe punishment of going to bed without supper, a very harsh and inhuman punishment, Roger thought, for though, he had stayed in the

vineyards the whole day, he had not had anything to eat since breakfast. The grapes he so loved were not ripe yet.

Roger learned his lesson. From then on he faithfully attended classes and caught up with the work he had missed. It was a little difficult because Don José conducted his classes very professionally and did not feel compelled to waste other students' time to repeat explanations for students who had missed class on purpose. Roger made up for time lost by staying during recreation time, doing work for a while.

TORMENTING REALITIES

After the Civil War, Spain was scorned by the rest of the world. At the urging of the United States, England and France, the United Nations ordered its members to recall their ambassadors from Madrid. Only two countries refused to go along, and helped the Spanish people: Argentina, because of Evita Perón, and Portugal.

Spain suffered not only from scarcity of food, but also from lack of medical supplies. In Salas de los Barrios this situation caused some deaths that could have easily been prevented had the world cared more about the suffering of the Spanish people and less about the political leanings of their new leader, Franco.

Don Sergio, owner of the only store in town and father of two of Roger's friends, died one night, after a desperate effort by many people to save him failed. The doctor had come from Villar, and Roger's oldest brother, Joaquín, rode a mule to Ponferrada, four miles away, to get the needed medication. When Joaquín returned, Don Sergio had already died.

More than any other death, Don Sergio's symbolized the death of a town, for after Don Sergio's burial, there seemed to be no more life in Salas. The town was quiet. The town was sad and pensive. Don Sergio's children would no longer play with their many friends in their huge mansion. Roger had lost the warmth of a very loving and caring person, and what's more, the pleasant companionship of his children who withdrew in mourning.

As sad and painful as Don Sergio's death was to Roger, it was not as devastating, however, as that of his nine-year-old best friend Andresito. This was also another preventable death that happened at night. He died of diphtheria. Andresito and Roger played together, served Mass together, were altar boys together at Don Sergio's funeral. Now Roger had to be an altar boy at Andresito's own burial.

Roger, closer to Andresito than to any other boy in town, could hardly control his emotions. Reliving happier occasions in his mind, he cried all the way up the hill to the cemetery, near San Martín church where they had shared so many fun and joyous moments, including their first holy communion and the daily games at the Roman ruins of San Juan's arch near the school.

Those precious moments were to be no more. Gone were the cheerful visits to San Martín church and the nearby fountain. Gone were the games they used to play around San Juan's arch. What remained were the happy memories of a warm friendship and a daily reminder of its tragic conclusion. For now, these were to be two real constants in Roger's

life, for he would have to pass by Andresito's house on his way to school and think about his missing friend and the fragility of life.

In a very real sense, Andresito's death became Roger's awakening to the appreciation of life. This was a drama unnoticed by world leaders, but caused by their insensitivity and indifference to the Spanish people's suffering, and their misdirected isolation and punishment of the Franco regime. Therein lies the tragedy of postwar Spain, a true and bitter tragedy, dampened with the dry but real tears of millions of innocent Spaniards who continued hurting while the United Nations directed the rest of the world to ignore their plight.

The guns of the war had long been silenced, but the signs of civil turmoil were still visible in Salas de los Barrios. A small detachment of soldiers was stationed there not only to maintain peace, but also to keep people in line and to prevent looting. At first, they used Don Sergio's huge cellar as their barracks, adjacent to Roger's house. Later on, they moved their barracks to a mansion that was located at the entrance of town to control the curfew better and to make their surveillance easier.

While they were still at Don Sergio's place, strong bonds of friendship developed between the soldiers and the Fernández children. Roger was fascinated by their uniform and attracted by their kindness towards the young people of the village. He would often go to see them march towards the hills for shooting practice and would say: "Some day, I too, will wear that uniform". He was unaware, then, of the deadly power of the gun, he commented in later years.

Another function of the soldiers stationed at Salas was to keep in check the armed individuals who roamed through the hills, refusing to surrender to the new regime that was governing Spain. Though known as "rojos" (red ones) for their leftist views, some of them were decent men who wanted to continue fighting for their principles. They had sympathizers in town.

One such "rojo" was Señor Losada, a very kind man who had many friends and supporters. His home was a patrician home which had given shelter to many in the past. At the end of the civil war, Señor Losada went in hiding. Though many secretly knew his hiding place, no one would report it to the authorities. On the contrary, many men took food to him quite regularly, taking great care in evading the mayor's watchful eyes. One of those men was Roger's father, political twin of Señor Losada. The village mayor, Don Aurelio, a mean and vindictive man, determined that Losada and his followers should pay a price for their political stands. He organized week-end "posses" to apprehend him and drew a list of men whose heads had to roll. In that list was Losada's friend and admirer, Roger's father, Don Antonio.

Aurelio got his first wish. During one of the organized posses, a young man observed Losada drinking water from the stream at the bottom of the hill near Villar. He triumphantly yelled out his discovery, forcing Losada to rush back to his hiding cave, too late, however. His body, riddled with shots, was displayed through the town to serve as an example to those who still refused to surrender. He was buried outside the village cemetery as an outcast. His desolate widow and confused son of Roger's age, Esteban, left town in mourning, leaving their once warm house to the cold winds of change.

Outraged by the senseless killing of a respected citizen, strong voices rose to condemn Aurelio's revenge and to stop his madness. Daniel Tahoces, Roger's uncle on his mother's side, perhaps the richest man in the Bierzo valley and the most powerful councilman of Salas de los Barrios, grabbed him one day by the lapel yelling: "If you touch any one of those men in your ignoble list, particularly Don Antonio, I, myself will hang you." The hit list was promptly disregarded.

PAINFUL DEPARTURE

Life was becoming unbearable for the Fernández family at Salas, however. Mysteriously, the water of the well inside their home turned undrinkable. Roger's father and his two older brothers, Joaquín and Antonio, had to dig another well in front of the house. Many people used that well, particularly to mix its water with sulphur to spray the vineyards in the spring. To dig that well, a big fig tree had to be sacrificed. That tree meant a lot to Roger, for it had satisfied his hunger on many occasions. It was as if hope had been uprooted with it, and he cried. Meanwhile, Doña Aurora and her family had returned from Irún and settled in Ponferrada. This offered Roger an opportunity to go frequently to the big city and play with his cousins around the old venerable church of la Virgen de la Encina (the Virgin of the Evergreen Oak), patroness of El Bierzo. Included in these surroundings was the gigantic castle built by the Templars in the twelfth century, now one of the most impressive monuments of the region.

The Fernández family was faced with some internal problems as well. The second son Antonio, by now sixteen years of age, ran away from home several times, crossing the French border to meet with the Spanish exiled Left. He made contacts with important people who helped him, at the age of twenty-one, to leave for Cuba where he was born during his parents' short stay in that Caribbean island.

In the meantime, Roger's maternal grandfather, Don Joaquín, had taken sick and was dying. In his weak and feeble state, he did not find the strength to resist Don Antonio's insistence that he bequeath all his properties to him. He succumbed to the pressure and made perhaps the biggest mistake of his long and productive life by signing the papers, leaving much of his considerable wealth in Don Antonio's hands.

Unfortunately for the family, Don Antonio continued to be a political target and started taking steps to move from Salas. To that end, he went to Fuentesnuevas (New Fountains), on the other side of Ponferrada, some six miles away from Salas. There, he made arrangements with Don Felipe so that he, Delia and Roger would move immediately to Fuentesnuevas and live in one of his houses. Don Felipe was the god-father of Esterita, the seventh child of the family and four years younger than Roger. He also procured for Don Antonio a huge "finca" (farm property) in the outskirts of town. It was a property with many fruit trees, a wheel for drawing water from the well, but also many mole holes that would suck the water like a sieve.

Before the planned move to Fuentesnuevas was carried out, however, Don Antonio, pressured by the attacks directed at him and by the increasing needs of the family, made his biggest mistake yet by selling all the properties except the house and one vineyard, at a ridiculous price. When the devaluation of the "peseta" (national currency) hit the nation, the Fernández family fortune was reduced to nothing. Nobody understood the new situation better than Doña Rosario who, totally helpless, was burdened with a husband

fighting for his life and eight alert children, struggling to survive the loss which that fight brought upon them.

The move to Fuentesnuevas was effected, as previously determined, by the middle of 1944. Don Antonio bought a rachitic donkey from the gypsies to work the water wheel needed for irrigation. Not only was the donkey weak and feeble, but it was the dumbest donkey around. He would stop pumping water at any time, prompting Don Antonio to yell at Roger to make the donkey go. He would yell from hundreds of yards away: "Roger, arrea el burro!" (Roger, spur the donkey on!). After Roger had whipped the poor animal to run and pump up the water faster, Don Antonio would then yell: "¡No le des más palos que ya va bien!" (Stop hitting him; it's enough). This routine became the daily comedy in town. Wherever Roger would go in the Bierzo, all kinds of people would yell: "Roger, arrea el burro. No le des mas palos que ya va bien!". Roger did not mind. He felt quite good knowing that his father had made him one of the best known persons in the region at the age of ten...

And the donkey? He, too, attained some sort of celebrity. Shortly after the entire family moved to Fuentesnuevas, Roger's father went back to the gypsies to exchange the donkey, but he was forced to sell it to them at a loss, naturally. Since they did not have a replacement available, they asked him to return within four days. Four days later Don Antonio returned to the gypsies to complete the transaction. He rode back on the new donkey. As he was approaching the house, he saw his wife and, with great gleam of achievement in his eyes, he yelled: "Rosario, look at the beautiful donkey I just bought!" No sooner had he finished those words, that the poor animal collapsed, propelling the rider to the ground with the momentum of the fall. The donkey died almost instantaneously. Don Antonio then discovered that he had just bought back his old donkey which the gypsies had painted grey.

As the summer progressed and harvest time was nearing, it became evident that the huge property that Don Antonio had rented was not worth the money, time or sweat required to operate it. A change was needed, and a change was indeed made.

Chapter 2

A NEW BEGINNING

Fuentesnuevas was not a totally new town to Roger. One year earlier he spent one week with Doña Emilia, his mother's oldest sister, who thought it was beneficial for him to come and meet his cousins. Nestled in the lower Bierzo valley, Fuentesnuevas offered Roger new scenic features to behold and to appreciate. He was struck by the picturesque landscape and idyllic surroundings of the town, the newly painted school and the cozy little church just across from it.

While not taken unawares by the physical environment of the town, Roger was pleasantly surprised, however, by the joyful atmosphere around Café Bar Alegría. Being the only bar in town, it was a beehive of activity that Sunday afternoon when he walked into town through a shortcut road with a knapsack on his back. Popular music was playing full blast, creating a climate of rather boisterous enjoyment. This was certainly a noticeable

departure from the more traditional, festive music to which he had been exposed in Salas. There, one “tamborilero” (tabourer), dressed in local costume, would accompany his flute with a tabour, to play the only music to which people would dance in the surroundings of the Roman ruins of San Juan’s arch. On that music depended the success or failure of the dance and the festival.

NEW ADJUSTMENTS

Despite this pleasant arrival at his new hometown, and despite his sister Delia’s many kisses and his father’s warm hug, Roger felt some sadness. His move to Fuentesnuevas had been delayed for one week because he begged his parents to allow him to stay in Salas a few extra days. Now, he was with his father and his oldest sister, separated from his beloved mother, his older brothers Joaquín and Antonio, his three other sisters Dorita, Lidia and Esterita and his youngest brother, two-year old Enrique. He experienced sorrow away from his favorite priest, Don Florencio, his admired teacher, Don José, away from so many dear friends... He felt nostalgic about San Martín church and San Juan’s arch; about those rich vineyards that had brought wealth and fame to Salas; about those hills which the girls filled with sounds of folk music on their way back from school picnics and whose soft terrain boys often trampled with their rough games. He recalled the fond memories of Don Sergio and Andresito...

Roger’s thoughts indeed turned frequently to his native village. Every day that first summer in Fuentesnuevas, after helping his father irrigate the land with the aid of a rachitic, legendary donkey, he would go to the national road outside of town and contemplate San Martín’s majestic look over the Bierzo valley. This relished view would inevitably lead him to his most intimate and precious thoughts... Salas meant, then, that much to him...

The summer was nearing the end. The land was not providing the resources it was intended to produce. Roger had still not made new friends. Delia was disenchanted with Don Felipe and the house he had leased to them. Don Antonio resented the landlord’s patronizing attitude and decided to look for another house that would accommodate the whole family. He found one at the other end of town, near the school and the church. He rented the first floor and part of the second.

The owner of the house, Doña Josefa, an elderly rich widow from Madrid, had left the house in the care of Don José Bardó, the parish priest. Doña Josefa was a very shrewd lady. Knowing well the weaknesses of the Spanish society, she would adroitly use each one of those frailties to her own advantage. She knew that, in those days, many Spaniards still thought of rich people as persons rewarded by God for their goodness, and poor people as persons deserving God’s wrath, shown to the world in their need for work. So, every summer, she would come to spend two months in Fuentesnuevas. Every morning she would leave the house with a shopping bag, quite openly displayed, to buy the food she needed for the day. As she moved up the street towards the market, people would ask her the same question which was responded to in the same manner: “Doña Josefa, where are you going so early in the morning?”

“Oh, I am going to the market. I need some eggs.”

“Don’t bother, Doña Josefa. I have lots of them; please, come in and help yourself”.

Doña Josefa would continue her journey through the main street of town until she got every article she needed without ever reaching the market or spending one cent for her food. This went on for quite some time. Suddenly one summer she complained to Roger’s sister: “Dorita, I do not know what’s happening to this town. Before, I never had to buy anything. People gave me whatever I needed. Now, I have to go all the way up to the market and buy everything myself. What happened to these people?”

Those hard-working people had wised-up to her trick, of course, and had evolved in their thinking. She stopped coming to Fuentesnuevas but nobody noticed her absence, except Don José Bardó, who continued to look after her property and collect her rents without having to face her.

Meanwhile, the whole Fernández family had settled in their new home. The two-year lease to the land that had been so hard to keep had expired. Don Antonio had rented new land right next door. It extended from the house to the road in front of the cemetery. This land too, had been abandoned and, though adjacent to the house and more manageable than the previous one, it created quite a few headaches of its own.

By this time too, Joaquín, the oldest of the Fernández children and David, a cousin, had joined a force of volunteers to fight in the Blue Division, so called because they wore a blue shirt with their red beret. The formation of this army unit was, perhaps, an unofficial way for Franco to show gratitude for Hitler’s help in the Spanish Civil War, while officially remaining neutral during World War II, as Madrid maintained at the time and Washington confirmed years later.

The Blue Division consisted of about fifteen thousand young soldiers who volunteered to help Hitler against the Allies. They went to Germany led by General Muñoz Grande, but were soon sent to fight at the Russian front. Very little news arrived from either Joaquín or David, two of the three youngsters from Fuentesnuevas who participated in World War Two.

At the time, Roger understood little about war, but felt deeply about Joaquín’s absence, for Joaquín was more than his brother. Joaquín was also Roger’s godfather, his model as a dedicated son and his main teaser. Roger often relived with relish Joaquín’s frequent teasing, however cruel it appeared at the time it happened. He remembered with fondness the time when he, Roger, had the mumps. While he was lying in bed, half scared to death about his swollen face, Joaquín came to see him, touched his throat, and, as confident as a learned doctor said: “Yep, tomorrow you’ll die! Do not worry, though, you’ll be in heaven!” Despite this comfortable thought, despite his brother’s insistence that he was just joking and despite his mother’s reassurance of the same, Roger spent a sleepless night, looking at the clock, agonizing over the approaching final hour, feeling good only after the next day was really over.

It was a joyous day when Joaquín came home, unexpectedly, from the war. He brought home some books in German, but also lice and fleas on his person and in his clothes. It took weeks before the family finally got rid of these pests and continued living without the shame that it had brought upon the household.

What mattered, however, was that Joaquín was home, and so were the other members of the Blue Division. Most of them returned in good health, but others lost their lives and some came back fatally injured. Such was the case of Joaquín. He was hit by close-range artillery fire. The doctors at the field were unable to remove all the ammunition splinters, some of which continued to travel through his body until they reached his heart and caused his death nine years later at a sanatorium in Zamora.

SCHOOL HAPPENINGS

For his part, Roger started to warm up to Fuentesnuevas when the whole family moved in. He finally set foot on the school that had impressed him at the time of his first visit. Unlike in Salas de los Barrios where boys were taught by a man and the girls by a woman, in Fuentesnuevas both boys and girls were taught by a man, Don José Tahoces (no relation to Roger's rich uncle Daniel Tahoces).

He was tough, but effective. He was very strict, but became frequent target of his students' tricks, in spite of being both respected and feared.

Roger liked his new teacher, who taught him how to make quick calculations in his head, how to write clearly and how to recite a poem with meaning. Don José used to have frequent tests and reward the first five winners. In mathematical calculations, Roger was unbeatable. It was good that the teacher had many other types of competition, so that other students could be recognized. Unfortunately, Don José Tahoces is better remembered for his method of disciplining his students than for the teaching method he so effectively used. Every now and then he would look at the students' fingernails. If he found them to be unclean or long, he would ask the student to stretch out the hand with fingers tightly pressed together, and then mercilessly hit the fingers with a ruler, producing an excruciating pain on the student in the name of healthy habits.

One of his favorite ways to punish students who disturbed the class was to send them in front of the room and make them kneel on garbanzo beans (chick-peas). Occasionally, though not often, he would slap the student. Roger was, at one time or another, disciplined in any one of those ways. An incident that he would never forget occurred when he was sent to the blackboard with other students to solve a mathematical problem. To his right was his sister Dorita, and to his left was a very pretty girl, Pepita whom Roger liked a lot. Believing that the teacher was not looking, Roger helped Pepita solve the problem. Don José rushed to the board and slapped him on both sides of the face. Roger ran out of the classroom and went home crying, not because he was hurting, but because he had been humiliated in front of the class and, particularly, in front a beautiful girl for whom he felt some affection.

When Roger arrived home, he complained bitterly to his mother about the treatment to which he had been subjected. He protested vehemently that he did not want to go back to school. Since his mother would not have any of that, he kept insisting that he should be allowed to go to the Instituto Nacional in Ponferrada where he would learn more without being abusively treated. However, the teacher had dismissed the class, and went to talk to Roger's mother. When Roger told him that he should not have slapped him, the teacher said: "What did you expect, a piece of candy?" This did not pacify Roger, but his mother's reasoned rejection of his impractical request did. He went back to school next day, albeit with anger in his face.

Don José Tahoces' pupils had their moments of revenge, however. One year he decided to conduct classes during summer mornings and afternoons. His students failed to appreciate his dedication and tried anything to avoid going to class, or at least reduce the hours of their hated attendance to a minimum. Every afternoon, instead of going directly to school, Roger and the boys would go swimming at the "Cachapón", a pond with warm and clean water. After enjoying a good hour of swimming, they would slowly walk to school. As they were approaching the building, Don José would rush downstairs to wait for them with a belt. As they entered, he would swing the belt with pleasure and hit their behinds with satisfaction.

The boys would not change their routine. They would rather feel the belt than miss the enjoyment of swimming. However, they considered themselves at war with their teacher on this point. One day at the "Cachapón", they decided to take stock of the past, examine the present and plan the future. They came up with a strategy that they were sure would work. They went to school as in previous afternoons. The teacher was also waiting for them downstairs ready to strike, as it was his custom. This time, however, the students rushed into the building like a stampeding herd of cows, making it impossible for him to swing the belt. He could not hit anyone. The plan worked.... for that day... The teacher had the last laugh, however. He went to each student's house to talk to their parents, and that was the end of the swimming and of the use of the belt, but also the beginning of longer school hours.

While people's memories of Don José Tahoces stress his severity as a disciplinarian, some remember him as the good teacher he really was. Many of his pupils went on to further their studies and rose to prominent positions. One of Roger's fondest memories of him was his ability to organize educational excursions with students from surrounding villages.

One such excursion that most fascinated students was to the construction of the Térmica, a most impressive factory in the process of being built to produce electricity, using water from the river Sil. Not only was this site formative and intriguing, but the road to it had a view of distinct human interest. On their way to the Térmica they had to pass near two hills, known to the region as "Las Tetas del Bierzo" (The Teats of el Bierzo), so called because they lay at each other's side, producing the curious geological sight of a woman's breasts. This part of the Bierzo's landscape attracts everybody's attention and did not go unnoticed by the youngsters.

COPING WITH DEPRIVATION

Though life in Fuentesnuevas became rather normal by 1948, it still was not easy for the Fernández family. The children found it difficult to adjust to the new situation wherein acts of political vendetta were still being perpetrated locally as well as nationally. As a result, their economic condition grew worse, and the family had extreme difficulty to make ends meet, as did most families around the country at the time. Their best meal was always the Christmas meal. The mother would make sure that nothing would be lacking on that happy day, except the gifts that in the Spain of the time were always given on the sixth of January, the feast of the three Kings.

On the night of the fifth, before going to bed, the children would leave their shoes outside their room door so that, at night, one of the Kings would come to fill them with gifts.

Then, on the morning of the sixth, the children would get up and go straight to their shoes to see what the kings had left for them. In one of those occasions, Roger received an onion as a gift. So hungry and happy was he that he went to the kitchen and ate it with a small piece of bread.

There was another regional tradition that made the sixth of January special to the children of the Bierzo. In the afternoon they roamed the town by groups singing “villancicos” (Christmas carols). People would give them presents, sometimes candy, but most frequently fruit or land produce. When the bag was full, they would run back home to empty it and then continue their merry journey through town. In the household of the Fernández family, the treats embodied good tidings for quite a few days.

Roger established a good and friendly relation with the village priest, Don José Bardó. Though this rapport with the spiritual leader of the town never reached the same level as with Don Florencio in Salas de los Barrios, it still provided an opportunity for Roger to be very involved in the religious life of town. He became an altar boy as he had before. He would recite church prayers in front of the congregation with ease, prompting the parishoners to exaggerate that he knew as much as Don José Bardó. Being an altar boy provided him with an opportunity to participate fully in the life of the town, as was the case in weddings.

It was the tradition in Fuentesnuevas that the priest and the altar boys were to be invited to the wedding banquet. Consequently, Roger attended many such banquets. Normally, he would sit at the children’s table. On one particular occasion, a fifteen year-old boy sat with the children and offered Roger a cigarette. Not knowing how to smoke, Roger inhaled the smoke. By the end of the banquet and the dance, with the mixture of smoke and wine in his stomach, Roger was feeling no pain. He finally went home very late at night singing happy songs and trying to kick balls that were nowhere to be found. When he arrived home his father opened the door for him and, seeing the condition he was in, slapped him in the face yelling: “Is this the way you come at this God forsaken hour?” Stars burst out of Roger’s eyes and he never smoked or got drunk again.

Unfortunately, these were moments of great need in Spain. The world had turned its back on a nation with limited supplies and unlimited demand. What’s more, the national government’s policies of sequestration and rationing of goods were not working as intended, for they were left in the hands of people who had vested interest in keeping things as they were.

Sequestration empowered government officials with the right to determine the amount of food products allowed in each household. Anything in excess of that set quantity was to be surrendered to the government which would then distribute it among the needy. What developed eventually was a very active blackmarket that created greater scarcity.

Similarly, the rationing that was supposed to be carried out by “abastos” (supplies of provisions) failed to produce equity in sharing, which was its original purpose, but provided public officials with an excellent opportunity to cheat or to abuse. The full amount of supplies accumulated through these two policies never reached the targeted population, and deprivation continued unabated.

Almost everybody in Fuentesnuevas can remember these trying times, and could recite chapter and verse of steps they took to cope with this oppressive situation and to alleviate its burden. Some were perhaps more imaginative or ingenious than others, but they all had in common the will to survive. When fruit became ripe, no matter where, it became the object of common prey. Now that things are plenty, people recount with glee their exploits to get coveted, but forbidden fruit.

Like any other boy in town, Roger had his share of the activity. One incident he recalls vividly is a visit that he and two of his friends made to a cherry tree that belonged to the town's mayor, just to get a few cherries. The mayor had the reputation of been watchful of his property and unforgiving to trespassers. So, Roger stayed outside of the property to relay the message in case the mayor showed up. One of his two friends stationed himself under the tree to warn the one picking the fruit, the mayor's own nephew. As expected, the mayor showed up. Roger relayed the message. The second boy panicked and left running full speed without warning the boy who was on the tree picking up the cherries. The mayor arrived at the tree and started pulling the boy by the pants. Thinking that the one pulling his pants was his friend, the boy kept saying: "Not yet. I do not have enough cherries." He finally looked down and saw his uncle there. He jumped to the ground expecting a beating, but to his surprise, his uncle just reprimanded him.

In times past, people would take fruit from anybody's trees or grapes from anybody's vineyards and think nothing of it because there was abundance, and it was just a traditional act of common sharing. The phrases: "Vamos a las cerezas", or "Vamos a las uvas." (Let's go to pick cherries or let's go to pick grapes) meant just that, anybody's cherries, anybody's grapes; like an extension of "Mi casa es tu casa" (My house is your house). But in this period of common deprivation, however, they became less the expression of people's love for the preservation of tradition than a public statement of the need to satisfy real communal hunger.

This became very evident to Roger one day when, going with his father to "pick grapes" he asked him: "Dad don't you think that God is going to be angry at you because of this?" His father gave him an answer Roger has never forgotten: "God would be angrier, in fact, He would never forgive me, if I left all of you starve." Fortunately, few years later there was abundance in the land, life became normal again and boys like Roger would not have to worry about picking cherries or grapes any place in town.

Before that came to pass, however, Roger used his position as the main altar boy to its full potential. In that capacity, he had to ring the church bells to call the faithful to Mass and to announce any other event of importance, like the existence of a raging fire within the town's boundaries. Since Don José Bardó was not in the habit of saying Mass daily, Roger found it conveniently necessary in summer, to go to the rectory after siesta hours to inquire whether there would be Mass next morning. When the doors were closed, which was most of the time, he would call Don José from the street. The priest would open his window, listen patiently to the question and give the answer. What prompted Roger to make these special visits to the rectory was less his interest in finding out about next day's Mass than obtaining from the priest the half-awake invitation to enter the garden and help himself to the fruit of his choice. Quite frequently, he extended such an anticipated enticement to Roger's delight.

Until the Franco regime built the Bierzo canal, numerous brush fires erupted as coal-driven local trains crossed the dry corners of the valley, especially between Ponferrada and Fuentesnuevas. The forty-mile long canal ended all that and brought wealth and beauty to the already picturesque region. With the opening of the canal, government property that till then had remained untouched and barren, was distributed to the citizens to dispose of as they wished. The vast land, known as “La Dehesa”, was divided into parcels and then allotted to the peasants.

To be entitled to a parcel, an arbitrary requirement of a three-year residency was established. The Fernández family was denied share of the land, for they had lived in Fuentesnuevas two years and ten months, not three full years. Don Antonio considered this a political maneuver to avoid giving him his due. All this time he had faithfully contributed to the life of the town. He had fulfilled the required duties of any other head of a household and received no benefits. He had been there to repair the streets after torrential rains. He had been there to help extinguish, ravaging fires and save people from drowning. Yes, Don Antonio had been there with unselfish dedication to serve a town in need. But the town was not there to postpone for two months the allotment of national land and reward him and his family with property they could claim as their own. It was clearly a political maneuver. Once again, Roger and his brothers and sisters were victimized for their father’s political stand which happened to displease an all-powerful mayor. Once again they felt like strangers in a town unwilling to extend its welcome to a deserving family in need.

Each town has its own character, its own personality. This was the darker side of an otherwise generous and joyous Fuentesnuevas. As hard as it was for the Fernández family, they continued living there and, as time went by, they managed to forgive and forget. In the main, they all have good memories of Fuentesnuevas and yearn to go back and visit a town that is truly blessed with a “gusto de vivir” (savoring of living).

This pleasure of living is clearly manifested in its culinary customs and exuberant merrymaking, for Fuentesnuevas displays, with its local tasty cuisine and, two main religious celebrations in June and August, the best of what attracts people to the Bierzo region from April to September. It is within those two months that life becomes really exciting in the valley with the weekly festivities that enrich the local color in every town, large or small. Corpus Christi in May or in June, and Our Lady of the Assumption on the fifteenth of August, also known as La Fiesta de la Sardina (Festival of the Sardine), are the two festivals in which Fuentesnuevas rightfully takes great pride.

At the time when Roger was a shepherd in Fuentesnuevas, Corpus Christi was more than a religious celebration. It was also the opening of new pastures in the green meadows that had been off-limits since November. The first activity of that day’s celebration was taking cattle early to pasture, a very easy job indeed, since the animals had plenty of grass to graze on and the shepherds plenty of time to play before going home to dress up for the ten o’clock High Mass.

That day also represented the inauguration of new clothes. Every boy and girl in town would go to church and show off their new outfits. This then became the topic of conversation at the dinner table. Since for some kids these would be their only new clothes for the whole year, this day was awaited with great anticipation.

The other religious festival observed in Fuentesnuevas, held on the fifteenth of August to honor our Lady of the Assumption, initiated the tasting of the first grapes. This time of the year, some vineyards in the “Cogolla” hills were ready to be often visited till harvest time in October. Then, children would help themselves to those succulent grapes while jumping on passing oxen-driven carts, under the owners’ watchful, but consenting eyes.

Years later, the festivities of August fifteenth came to include the celebration of the sardine. Thousands of pounds of grilled sardines are consumed every year with just bread and wine during the festival dances that attract people from the surrounding towns.

Though the reasons to celebrate those two occasions were different, the festivities themselves followed identical patterns. The band contracted for the music would parade through the town the day before the festival. The morning of the observance there was a religious procession, with fireworks exploding simultaneously in the air as the procession weaved through the streets on the way to a High Mass. Then came, for some, the visit to the bar with friends, and for others, the “ronda” (singing from winery to winery) until the main meal at three in the afternoon. In present-day Spain, the “ronda” from bar to bar still exists, but the singing has all but disappeared.

At five o’clock in the afternoon the town was treated to popular sport activities, such as bicycle racing and a soccer game. To Roger and to the boys and girls of his age, this was a real bonus, for none of them had bikes, and the only soccer balls they played with were balls they themselves made of cloth to play small matches, even under the rain.

Following the sports, dancing would then start until about ten thirty at night when people would go home for supper. Dancing would resume at about midnight to end at four o’clock the next morning. The celebration went on for four days and concluded after drinking hot chocolate and the performance of the last dance by the old people of town at five o’clock in the morning.

MOORS IN TOWN

Festivals in Fuentesnuevas were few and far between. Life was rough, demanding and perilous. A detachment of soldiers was stationed there, as in many other villages. First, the Moors came to maintain order, but they had to be replaced by Spanish soldiers because the young people of town made fools of them at night. Challenging the imposed curfew, the youngsters would divide into four groups which would then proceed to the four corners of town. Following an agreement, one group would make noise, yelling insults at the Moors. To enforce the curfew, the Moors would rush to where the disturbance was occurring, only to find out half-way to the scene of noise that the commotion had moved to another part of town.

The Moors would spend sleepless nights roaming through town trying to catch the curfew violators. The Moors had played an important role in Franco’s ultimate triumph in the Spanish Civil War. They were an integral part of the initial force that struck north from Morocco and carried Franco to victory. At the end of the war, some remained in Spain for a few years as part of Franco’s personal palace guard, and others were stationed throughout the country to help secure the stability of the new regime. In Ponferrada, there was a large contingent of Moors with barracks at the entrance of the city. Their customs and beliefs clashed with regional traditions and religious faith. This produced suspicion

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

