

## Memories of my grandfather

# JOSEP TRUETA

by Antoni Strubell-Trueta\*

*The memories we have of our forbears are generally subject to a good many mental processes. Memory is selective and so we have a tendency to idealise them, a practice which may sometimes be ill-advised, as illustrated by Jaume Cabré's best-selling novel 'Les veus del Pamano'. In countries such as ours, taboo and fear have for years contributed to keeping things disguised, if not actually hidden. To this syndrome we must add that awkward habit (so Catalan and lastingly harmful) of keeping political subjects hidden well away from our children's ears to prevent them from 'getting into trouble' one day. Who can be surprised, then, that memories are subject to change, bias or even 'self-censorship'? Who can be surprised by the alarming distaste that exists for politics? None of this, I am glad to say, has affected my own memories of my grandfather Josep Trueta, professor of Orthopaedics at Oxford University (1949-1967).*

I am lucky enough to be able to say I had a forbear who was not only famous, but also truly worthy of admiration. In our family those 'other questions' were sometimes raised. They were certainly not taboo. This is probably due to the fact that, as a family in exile, we lived free from the whole web of fear many Catalans were subjected to. Nonetheless, even today new anecdotes emerge that invariably add to my admiration. In the book recently published by Quim Torra, *'Estimat doctor / Admirat mestre'* (published by *Acontravent*), there is a good selection of the correspondence Trueta maintained with the cellist Pau Casals. The letters reveal a whole series of episodes that speak of values that are sometimes not too easy to find nowadays.

Let me start by speaking of the selflessness and capacity for sacrifice of the two correspondents, Trueta and Casals. Despite residing far from home (the former suffering a second spree of German bombing raids, the latter the

Gestapo's constant scrutiny in Prada de Conflent) neither of them ceased to struggle for the freedom of their homeland and compatriots. Although there was a huge amount of work for any wartime surgeon, my grandfather managed to find time to write *'The Spirit of Catalonia'* (1946), a history book requiring months of research in Oxford's Bodleian Library. He sent the book to influential personalities in the hope that they would sympathise with the Catalan cause and put pressure on politicians to act accordingly. He wanted to explain to them what it meant to leave the Catalan people at the mercy of Franco. Little did he know that the *Generalísimo* would shortly become the free world's favourite dictator, the only fascist leader allowed to survive into the seventies. Obviously the book failed to have the desired effect despite its dozens of editions in several languages.

Meanwhile, Casals was bravely refusing to give concerts in countries that



acknowledged the Franco regime. One black mark on the British government's record is that Casals' bank account should have been frozen for his support of the legally constituted Spanish Republic. That same government also treated my grandfather as an alien (in both the legal and literary sense) for the same reason, despite the fact that he saved the lives of tens of thousands of allied wounded as well as obtaining British nationality as early as 1949. Thus it became clear that the West was not willing to do anything to rid Europe of the regime Hitler had helped create. It seems odd that a country that had declared war on another for invading Poland should have unquestioningly supported an ally of those same invaders for so long.

Catalonia was obviously on the wrong side of the great geopolitical divide. I do hope that before I die I shall see some kind of apology from England on that score. It would be most democratically fitting for some gesture to be made of the same calibre as the apologies made in 2008 by the Consuls General of France and Germany for the part those countries played in capturing and handing over our president, Lluís Companys, in August 1940, thus condemning him to a certain death. Couldn't the United Kingdom do something similar (albeit of a purely symbolic nature) as recompense for having penalised exiled enemies of Franco? And couldn't it be done with something just a little bit less private than the reception Queen Elisabeth



Doctor Josep Trueta  
with Queen Elisabeth  
II of England

offered the Catalan Joan Pujol, whose spying operations the Ministry of Defence termed as 'crucial' to the success of the 1944 D-Day landings? Even at the risk of upsetting Madrid.

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### MY GRANDFATHER JOSEP TRUETA, PROFESSOR OF ORTHOPAEDICS AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY, WAS NOT ONLY FAMOUS, BUT ALSO WORTHY OF ADMIRATION

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Another priceless episode that emerges from Quim Torra's collection, with more details than I personally recall, was the whole question of the BBC broadcasts my grandfather was involved in. They were designed to bring a ray of hope, albeit over the radio, to Catalan households suffering under Franco's regime 'in their own flesh', as we say in Catalan. The idea was to offer them a few minutes in Catalan every fortnight. The truth is that the subjects my grandfather was asked to speak about were sometimes quite innocent and far removed from what listeners might have been expecting. However, there was great pressure to keep them thoroughly apolitical and ideologically 'harmless'. I even think he had to speak about vaccinations or something as politically banal as that. He even had to double up and repeat the same contents in Spanish so that no-one could accuse the BBC of being partisan. Such is the lot of a people deprived of freedom!

As recent revelations have also shown, the subject matter of the broadcasts was not the only bone of contention. Their very existence incensed the Spanish authorities. What is perhaps more shocking to have found out, quite recently in my case, is that it was not only the Spanish Embassy in London (headed by a distant relative of Churchill) that riled against those broadcasts. Even Republican exiles of the status of Salvador Madariaga did so. This Spanish intellectual is known to have written letters to the British government to have the broadcasts interrupted while at the same time he was acting as if he were the best of friends with Trueta, with whom he went on regular weekend rambles on Headington hill overlooking Oxford. I cannot help saying, at this stage, that if we observe the current political relationship between Catalonia and Spain, the sense of *déjà-vu* becomes quite oppressive. As my grandfather used to say, it is really the Spanish, with the expression of their acute allergy to Catalonia, who are the most separatist.

When I reflect on episodes such as these, I cannot help thinking that history has so far been cruel and unjust to Catalonia. Perhaps other Catalans may feel that we have what we deserve, as does, in general, The Economist. Allow me to counter this by suggesting that Franco worked very hard to make the former think just that. It is as if history had been swept away and Catalonia had never been a nation. Trueta and Casals were members of a generation that had committed themselves heart and soul to the cultural and political emancipation of Catalonia before the Civil War. When the Catalan Statute was done away with and the Catalan president shot by Franco, they never witnessed the return of their country to democracy and freedom as they had dreamed. May I add that, quite frankly,

neither have I. I fear that if they could see us today, Casals and Trueta would be shocked to see how little we have advanced with our meagre autonomous regime in line with sixteen others. They would surely be distressed to see the bullying that Catalans still have to put up with daily in Spain.

I feel they would not have remained silent on seeing the recent humiliation Catalonia suffered with the High Court sentence which suspends 15 articles of its new Statute. They would not have remained silent on contemplating the State's ongoing refusal to officially pardon all who were sentenced under Franco. I'm sure they would have suffered to see how today's *Generalitat* (Catalan Government) sees fit to pay a higher tribute to certain ex-Francoists than it did to its only former president to have died since Franco's disappearance. I'm sure they would have protested that the only TV stations broadcasting entirely in Catalan were being closed down by the courts in Valencia. They would certainly have complained that the Catalan language should have been deemed inferior in status to Spanish and non-obligatory, as the Constitutional Court has just done, a decision that is both offensive and humiliating to so many Catalans. In other latitudes such steps would be catalogued, I feel, as nothing short of cultural genocide.

Catalonia today is sadly bereft of personalities such as Casals and Trueta, who would surely have made it much more difficult for episodes like this to go

by unnoticed. In this sense, I remember how my grandfather, shortly before he died, openly challenged Spanish president Suarez for declaring that Catalan was not 'a language that could be used in science'. Nowadays the Spanish political make-up has completely lost its respect for Catalonia and its politicians. What has current Catalonia got to do with 'The Spirit of Catalonia' or with Casals' famous 'Cant dels Ocells', itself almost an anthem to Catalan dignity? I'm sure that my grandfather would have thought there was still a lot of work ahead for his country. Not only with regard to achieving an acceptable degree of democracy, but also in beginning to be able to see itself as a country that is free and respected.

In Catalonia, therefore, memory is still a problem. This isn't England with its Poppy Day and the Dambusters' March. No. Ours is a country that a Swedish friend of mine describes as 'the Estonia of the Mediterranean' but where 'the Soviets and the Soviet mentality still exist'. The severest blow to the incipient rebirth of Catalonia's national freedom was inflicted in the thirties, to the on-going benefit of a minority. It is a country where an agreement between Francoists and democrats vigorously prevent the memory of our forbears' ideals taking root again with any real political consequence. The contemplation of today's situation would certainly have made my grandfather a sadder man than he was when he died, at a time when it still seemed possible that Spain might respect us.

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BORN IN OXFORD IN 1952, TO AN ENGLISH FATHER AND A CATALAN MOTHER. HE HOLDS A DEGREE IN ROMANCE LANGUAGES (FRENCH, CATALAN, SPANISH) FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD (1971-1974). HE HAS JUST PUBLISHED *El moment de dir prou. La manifesta incompatibilitat amb Espanya* (TIME TO SAY 'ENOUGH'. THE OBVIOUS INCOMPATIBILITY WITH SPAIN. PUBLISHED BY PAGÈS) WITH A PROLOGUE BY FRANCESCO COSSIGA WHICH HAS BEEN TRANSLATED INTO SPANISH, *Hasta aquí hemos llegado. Claves para entender el hartazgo de Catalunya con España* (THIS IS WHERE WE ARE AT. KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING WHY CATALONIA IS FED UP WITH SPAIN. TARTALO-ELKAR). HE IS COORDINATOR TO THE SECRETARIAT OF THE DIGNITY COMMISSION. HE WAS AWARDED THE ST GEORGE'S CROSS IN 2003.

