The Retirada (Retreat) as told by a British Volunteer from the Spanish Medical Aid Committee (SMAC): ROSITA DAVSON

Carmen Pérez-Aguado, Alejandra de Leiva Fundación Diabem, Barcelona, Spain cperezaguado@vahoo.es aledeleiva@fdiabem.org

The Spanish Civil War was the result of a coup d'état on 18 July 1936, led by General Franco against the legally constituted Government of the Republic.

Before the end of July, the International Red Aid asked England to send medical supplies and personnel to Spain. The Spanish Medical Aid Committee (SMAC) was established on 8 August at a meeting of members of the Socialist Medical Association and the Relief Committee for the victims of Fascism, among them Isobel Brown and Leah Manning.

Only15 days later, on 23 August 1936, the first British Medical Unit left for Spain. Among the twenty volunteers was Rosita Davson, who was listed as secretary and interpreter.

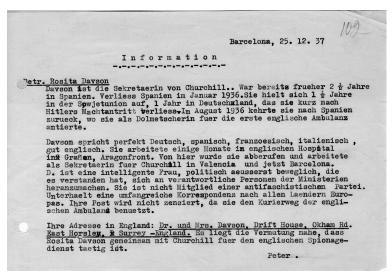
Throughout the war, Rosita remained in Spain, both as secretary of the British Medical Unit and as hospital administrator. When the Government of the Republic moved to Barcelona, Rosita was appointed representative of the SMAC to the Government. In Leah Manning's words: "She worked with the first unit and was extremely valuable member, not only interpreting, writing, keeping accounts, etc., but acting as a ward ordely whenever she was asked to do so (...). I do not think that the members of the Committee have ever envisaged exactly what this meant for a young girl of Rosita's age. As it was her work as representative made the standing and prestige of the Committee improve out of all knowledge".





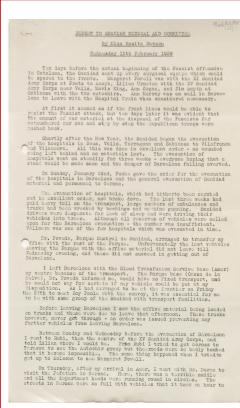
Rosita Davson with three British volunteers in Sitges, Barcelona, November 15, 1936

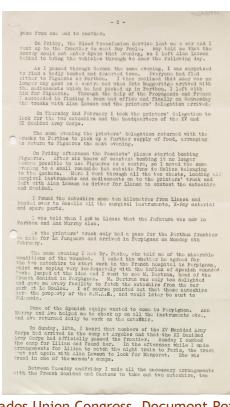
There seems to have been some hostilities among the group of volunteers towards Rosita. Rosita was an intelligent, competent, independent woman. She was not affiliated to the Communist Party of Great Britain. Fund 545 of the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI) contains multiple references to her, acknowledging her qualities but also pointing out that she might be a member of the British Intelligence services

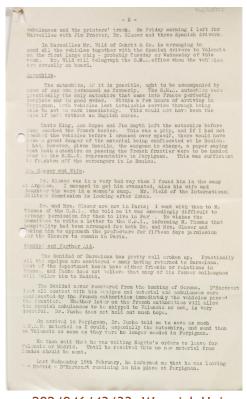


On 22 January 1939, when Franco's troops were approaching Barcelona, Dr. José Puche Alvarez, Director of Health of the Republican Army, gave the order to evacuate the hospitals of Catalonia towards the French border. On 26 January the insurgents entered Barcelona and Rosita Davson arrived in Girona. During those four days Rosita was very active, collecting material and personnel from the SMAC that were destined in different Catalan hospitals. After she arrived in France she visited the refugee camps and gave an account of the distressing situation in a report she sent to the SMAC on 15 February 1939, to which we have had access.

comme Orom et Rosita Davson, qui ont eu des positions importantes et dont l'origine et l'activité sont suspectés, Nous pensons qu'il vaut la peine d'entreprendre une étude beaucoup plus détaillée que nous avons pu faire jusqu à maintenant sur le personnel que l'Aide Médicale Britannique a envoyé en Espagne. Une telle étude pourrait donner des ré-sultats intéressantes. Depuis le début, l'histoire de cette organisation en Espagne a été peu claire, avec beaucoup de luttes internes, etc. Les communistes qui se sont trouvés dans un position pour conduire une lutte contre tous les abus qui régnaient dans ce service, perte de matériel, etc, tels que Richard Bennet, Roy Poole, Vinitred Bates ont été généralement loin d'être de taille à faire face à la situation. Il semblerait que les rapports présentés par de bons camarades, infirmières, etc, au Comité de 18 A.M.B. à Londres ont été bafoués. Nous ne savons pas si notre Parti anglais a quelque autorité sur les actions de Leak Manning. Dans le cas affirmatif nous pensons qu'on doit enquêter sur toute son activité vis à vis de l'Espagne (rôle dans l'Aide Médicale Britannique, appui de Rosita Davson contre l'opinion de tous les communistes anglais responsables, liaisons avec Pristo, etc).
L'Aide Médicale Eritannique, qui existait park les efforts et les sacrifices des travailleurs anglais, nous semble avoir dèpensé de l'argent en certains cas, d'une façon fir frivole et même trés criminelle. Quelques uns des dirigeants ont conduit toute une lutte contre son mincorporation dans le Service Sanitaire espagnol, et le manque de contrôle sur son personnel a permis un nombre d'éléments douteux de s'infiltrer en Espagne et de trouver de bonnes positions "stratégique s" (Rosita Davson, Alec Wainman, Monica Willward, etc) Ces élé-ments on acquis una certain prestige antifasciste par laur présence en Espagne. Les faiblesses dans le travail n'ont pas per mis de les démasquer complétement, de sorte qu'il est à craindre que par ce moyen l'Intelligence Service aura pu infiltrer des agents en Espagne, les permettants d'acquérir une réputa-









tion antifasciste en plus de faire un certain travail inmédiat

Archives of the Trades Union Congress, Document Reference 292/946/43/33. Warwick University Archives

Rosita Davson went back to England and, according to a document held at the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick, she took active part in a meeting at the SMAC's headquarters, where she gave an account of the situation of Spanish refugees in the south of France.

The Retreat ("Retirada") is the name given to the Republican exodus that took place between January and February 1939. More than 400,000 people crossed the French border to avoid reprisals from the victors of the Spanish Civil War.

