

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

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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.

Only 15 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 orderly 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

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.



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

Barcelona, 25. 12. 37

Information

Petr. Rosita Davson

Davson ist die Sekretärin von Churchill.. War bereits frueher 2 1/2 Jahre in Spanien. Verliess Spanien im Januar 1936. Sie hielt sich 1 1/2 Jahre in der Sowjetunion auf, 1 Jahr in Deutschland, das sie kurz nach Hitlers Machtantritt verliess. Im August 1936 kehrte sie nach Spanien zurueck, wo sie als Dolmetscherin fuer die erste englische Ambulanz amtierte.

Davson spricht perfekt Deutsch, spanisch, franzoesisch, italienisch, gut englisch. Sie arbeitete einige Monate im englischen Hospital im Grafen, Aragonfront. Von hier wurde sie abberufen und arbeitete als Sekretärin fuer Churchill in Valencia und jetzt Barcelona. Da ist eine intelligente Frau, politisch ausserst beweglich, die es verstanden hat, sich an verantwortliche Personen der Ministerien heranzumachen. Sie ist nicht Mitglied einer antifaschistischen Partei. Unterhaelt eine umfangreiche Korrespondenz nach allen laendern Europas. Ihre Post wird nicht zensiert, da sie den Kurierweg der englischen Ambulanz benuetzt.

Ihre Adresse in England: Dr. und Mrs. Davson, Drift House, Olham Rd. East Hoveley, 2 Surrey - England. Es liegt die Vermutung nahe, dass Rosita Davson gemeinsam mit Churchill fuer den englischen Spionagedienst taetig ist.

Peter .

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politiquement ni moralement. Il y a eu aussi des individus comme Cron et Rosita Davson, qui ont eu des positions importantes et dont l'origine et l'activité sont suspectes.

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 résultats intéressants. 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 une position pour conduire une lutte contre tous les abus qui régnaient dans ce service, perte de matériel, etc, tels que Richard Bennett, Roy Poole, Vincent 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 la S.M.A.C. à Londres ont été baroques. Nous ne savons pas si notre Parti anglais a quelque autorité sur les actions de Leah 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 Prieto, etc).

L'Aide Médicale Britannique, qui existait par les efforts et les sacrifices des travailleurs anglais, nous semble avoir dépensé de l'argent en certains cas, d'une façon très frivole et même très criminelle. Quelques uns des dirigeants ont conduit toute une lutte contre son incorporation dans le Service Sanitaire espagnol, et le manque de contrôle sur son personnel a permis un nombre d'infiltrations douteux de s'infiltrer en Espagne et de trouver de bonnes positions "stratégiques" (Rosita Davson, Alec Newman, Monica Millward, etc) Ces infiltrations ont acquis une certaine prestige antifasciste par leur présence en Espagne. Les faiblesses dans le travail n'ont pas permis de les démasquer complètement, de sorte qu'il est à craindre que par ce moyen l'Intelligence Service aura pu infiltrer des agents en Espagne, les permettant d'acquiescer une réputation antifasciste en plus de faire un certain travail immédiat

REPORT TO SPANISH MEDICAL AID COMMITTEE

by Miss Rosita Davson

Wednesday 15th February 1939

Ten days before the actual beginning of the Fascist offensive in Catalonia, the Sanidad sent up every surgical equipage which would be spared to the front. Margaret Powell was with the XI Sanidad Army Corps at Pineda to Aragon. Lilian Dunton was with the XI Sanidad Army Corps near Villa. David King, Ann Organ, and Jim Smith at Sabadell with the two autoclaves. Ann Murray was on call in Barcelona to leave with the Hospital Train when considered necessary.

At first it seemed as if the front lines would be able to resist the Fascist attack, but ten days later it was evident that the amount of war material at the disposal of the Republic for outmanned our own and step by step the Republican troops were pushed back.

Shortly after the New Year, the Sanidad began the evacuation of the hospitals in Roses, Villa, Terragona and Sabadell to Vilafrauda and Vilanova. All this was done in excellent order - no wounded being left behind and no materials lost. The evacuation of hospitals went on steadily for three weeks - everyone hoping that a cease would be made soon and the danger of Barcelona falling averted.

On Sunday, January 22nd, Puche gave the order for the evacuation of the hospitals in Barcelona and the general evacuation of Sanidad material and personnel to Girona.

The evacuation of hospitals, which had hitherto been carried out in excellent order, now broke down. The last three weeks had paid heavy toll on the transport, large numbers of ambulances and trucks had been wrecked by bombings and machine gunning. Sanidad drivers were desperate for lack of sleep and were driving their vehicles into trees. Although all reserves of vehicles were called upon for the Barcelona evacuation - the number was insufficient. Vilanova was one of the few hospitals which was evacuated in time.

Dr. Ferrer, Ferrer Central de Sanidad, arranged to transfer my friend with the rest of the Ferrer. Unfortunately the last vehicle leaving the Ferrer with the office material did not leave till Wednesday evening, and these did not succeed in getting out in time.

I left Barcelona with the Blood Transfusion Service base (Amor) my centre because of the transport. The Ferrer base (Casa de la Colina), Dr. Ferrer informed me, would have no fixed transport, and he could not say for sure in if my vehicle could be put at my disposition. As I had arranged to be at the frontier on Friday the 17th to meet my friends with the convoy, it was essential for me to be with some group of the Sanidad with transport facilities.

Before leaving Barcelona I saw the office material being loaded on trucks and there were due to leave that afternoon. These trucks however, never got through - an order was issued preventing any further vehicles from leaving Barcelona.

Between Monday and Wednesday before the evacuation of Barcelona I went to Sabi, then the centre of the XI Sanidad Army Corps, and told Lilian where I would be. From Sabi I tried to get across to France to see the Ambulance group but the roads were so badly bombed that it became impossible. The same thing happened when I tried to get up to Solsona to see Margaret Powell.

On Thursday, after my arrival in Amor, I went with Dr. Dunn to visit the Ferrer in Girona. Here, there was a terrible muddle and all the important heads were running round in circles. The trucks in Girona were so full with vehicles that it took an hour to

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pass from one unit to another.

On Friday, the Blood Transfusion Service lost no car and I went up to the frontier to meet my friends. My toll was that the convoy could not enter Spain that evening, so I left Ann Leven behind to bring the vehicles through to Amor the following day.

As I passed through Girona the same evening, I was surprised to find a badly bombed and deserted town. Everyone had fled either to Figueras or Portbou. I then realised that Amor was no longer my goal as a centre and when Eric Huggard arrived with the materials which he had picked up in Portbou, I left with him for Figueras. Through the help of the Propaganda and Ferrer I succeeded in finding a room and office and finally on Wednesday the trucks with Ann Leven and the printers' delegation arrived.

On Thursday 2nd February I took the printers' delegation to look for the two autoclaves and the headquarters of the XI and XI Sanidad Army Corps.

The same evening the printers' delegation returned with the trucks to Portbou to pick up a further supply of food, arranging to return to Figueras the next evening.

On Friday afternoon the Fascists' planes started bombing Figueras. After six hours of constant bombing it no longer seemed possible to use Figueras as a centre, so I moved the ambulance to a small roadside hut outside Portbou to hold things belonging to the ambulance. Here I went through all the ten chests, loading all surgical instruments and materials on to the printers' truck and left with Ann Leven as driver for Amor to contact the autoclave and Sanidad.

I found the autoclave some ten kilometres from Llanes and handed over to Rosalie all the surgical instruments, X-ray material and spare parts.

I was told when I got to Llanes that the Ferrer was now in Portbou and Ann Murray also.

As the printers' truck only had a pass for the Ferrer frontier to reach for La Pineda and arrived in Portbou on Monday 4th February.

The same evening I met Dr. Puche, who told me of the miserable conditions of the wounded. I asked him whether he agreed for the two autoclaves to start work in the French hospital in Portbou, which was coping very inadequately with the influx of Spanish wounded. Puche jumped at the idea and I went to see M. Burton, head of the French Sanidad in Portbou. M. Burton was only too delighted and gave me every facility to take the autoclave from the car to La Boulon. I of course pointed out that these autoclaves were the property of the S.M.A.C., and would later be sent to Valencia.

None of the Spanish equipage wanted to come to Portbou. Ann Murray and Eric helped me to check up on all the instruments etc., and Ann returned daily to work on the autoclave.

On Sunday, 12th, I heard that members of the XI Sanidad Army Corps had arrived in the camp at Argelés and that the XI Sanidad Army Corps had officially passed the frontier. Sunday I contacted the camp for Lilian and found her. In the afternoon while I made arrangements for Lilian to enter the night train to Paris, the truck went out again with Ann Leven to look for Margaret. She was found in one of the women's camps.

Between Tuesday and Friday I made all the necessary arrangements with the French Sanidad and Customs to take out two autoclaves, and

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ambulances and the printers' truck. On Friday morning I left for Harville with Jim Proctor, Dr. Glaser and three Spanish drivers.

In Harville Mr. Will of Harbit & Co. is arranging to send all the vehicles together with the Spanish drivers to Valencia on the first large ship - probably Tuesday or Wednesday of this week. Mr. Will will telegraph the S.M.A.C. office when the vehicles are actually on board.

Autoclave.

The autoclave, if it is possible, ought to be accompanied by some of our own personnel as formerly. The S.M.A.C. autoclave were practically the only autoclave that came into France perfectly complete and in good order. Within a few hours of arriving in Portbou, the vehicle lost invaluable services through being able to get to work immediately. This would not have been the case if it had been an English nurse.

David King, Ann Organ and Jim Smith left the autoclave before they reached the French border. This was a pity, and if I had not reached the vehicle before I crossed over myself, there would have been a great danger of the material being confiscated at La Boulon. I had, however, given Rosalie, the surgeon in charge, a paper saying that both autoclaves on passing the French frontier were to be handed over to the S.M.A.C. representative in Portbou. This was sufficient to frighten off the smugglers in La Boulon.

Dr. Glaser and Will.

Dr. Glaser was in a very bad way when I found him in the camp at Argelés. I managed to get him evacuated, also his wife and daughter who were in a woman's camp. Mr. Will of the International Military Commission is looking after Eric.

Dr. and Mrs. Glaser are now in Paris; I went with them to M. Thomas of the S.M.A.C., who told me it was exceedingly difficult to arrange permission for them to live in Paris. He wishes the Committee to write a letter to the S.M.A.C., informing M. Thomas that hospitality had been arranged for both Dr. and Mrs. Glaser and asking him to approach the prefecture for fifteen days permission for the Glasers to remain in Paris.

Sanidad and Further aid.

The Sanidad of Barcelona has pretty well broken up. Practically all the equipage are scattered - many having returned to Barcelona. Most of the department heads have either friends or relations in France, and Puche does not allow that any of his former colleagues will follow him to Madrid.

The Sanidad never recovered from the bombing of Girona. D'Harcourt lost all contact with his equipage and material and ambulances were confiscated by the French authorities immediately the vehicles passed the frontier. Whether letters on the French authorities will allow the Spanish ambulances to be shipped to Valencia or not, is very doubtful. Dr. Puche does not hold out much hope.

On arrival in Portbou, Dr. Puche told me to save as much S.M.A.C. material as I could, especially the autoclave, and send them to Valencia as soon as they were no longer needed in Portbou.

He then said that he was writing Morris's orders to leave for Valencia or Madrid. Until he received this no material from London should be sent.

Last Wednesday 15th February, he informed me that he was leaving - Madrid - D'Harcourt remaining in his place at Portbou.

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All further aid to be sent direct to Valencia and consigned to the Inspeccion General de Sanidad.

Refugee Camps.

During the ten days I was in Portbou, I visited daily the different camps of refugees and was a terribly horrified at the terrible conditions. After days and sometimes weeks of hardship on the road, bombed from town to town and village to village, the Spanish refugees straggled into France, exhausted, hungry, and many without a change of clothes or a blanket, some were publicly separated from their husbands and children and all were driven like cattle from one place to another without food or shelter for five days. This, after two and a half years defending Spain from foreign invasion, was the treatment accorded to them by the French near Portbou. Many relief organisations offered to help with the feeding of the Spanish refugees, but only after a fierce battle with the French authorities in Portbou were the kitchens allowed to set up canteens in the camps.

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.

