**OpenLIVES Spanish Émigré interviews – Angel Villar 1**

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| Interviewee: | Angel Villar |
| Interviewer: | Darren Paffey (University of Southampton) |
| Interview date: | 9June 2008 |
| Location: | Bordeaux, France |
| Duration: | 143 mins  |
| Countries of migration: | France (Orleans, Perpignan, Bordeaux) |

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** OpenLIVES materials are interviews with individuals and describe the personal memories, perspectives, and knowledge of those individuals. English synopses for OpenLIVES were created by students working on the project. The idea behind the synopsis is to give a broad outline of the content NOT to give an exact translation of an interviewee’s words. In some cases, there were sections which were difficult to hear or summarise and which we have been unable to clarify. These areas are highlighted in red. If users of this material do further work in contextualising this testimony, please share your work with the world through the HumBox!

**Synopsis:**

[00.00 – 10.00] [Photos, poems and drawings he has held onto]

[Chats with Darren for 2 minutes.]

Angel (AV) begins to look at photos. His brother fought for the republicans, he volunteered at the beginning of 36 and was always a military man, first in the war and later as part of the Resistance. He became a squad leader in France, then a Lieutenant and the leader of the group Division 24. Angel describes photos of the troops in France. He, Tomas and Ruiz were members of the Resistance.

After the occupation Ruiz returned to Spain and joined the guerrillas. Angel was already distancing himself from such political ideas. He believed it was a senseless mission. They had lost many comrades and there were Germans and Spanish soldiers waiting to kill them. He and Ruiz did military service together and were like brothers. This was in 1944.

Angel has kept many photos and drawings. He wrote 140 poems during the occupation. He began writing them in the concentration camp in Argelès. He has never published them. They were inspired by love, the concentration and refugee camps. He had no mother or belongings and was taken in by a mother and daughter who had escaped from Spain. Franco had imprisoned the male members of their family and they stayed in France until the liberation.

[10.00 – 20.00] [Building the submarine base in France]

Another photo shows when he is reunited with his siblings and father. His wife and his son are there too. It shows when they had enough money to get his siblings from the convent. Before that, neither he or the nuns could afford to send them away. Tomas is not there, he was a guerrilla in the Pyrenees.

AV says he has kept a lot, but lost a lot too.

Shows photo of the submarine base and describes how it worked. His job was to make sure water ran into the German submarine base as it was on the Italian side. The Italians arrived first and claimed the smaller base. It fitted 3 submarines and the Germans wanted to fit in 13 larger submarines. They always had to outdo them.

The base was close to **Bacalán**. Now there are fishing boats and lots of sailing around that area. No more submarines and war ships. Describes materials used to make the base. Above the roof there was artillery for defending the base against the English bombers.

He worked opposite the base in the electrical power plant and after they finished the base it was torn down. Their first job was to build, then afterwards to destroy everything. He describes the plant. It was protected by cement in case a bomb fell and destroyed it so they would have to start again.

At the very beginning AV worked at the base bringing gravel and iron rods to make the shuttering. They worked in groups of 20 because the carriages with the iron were huge. They used bags to protect themselves from the cold. His comrades always protected him. They put him between 2 taller workers so he did not have to carry the iron. It annoyed him but they would say, ‘you have to live to tell people what happened here’.

After being in the concentration camp, prison and being interrogated he was quite ill. The only doctor was his father; they had been detained together. All food and drinks were rationed. One night there was a fight because some comrades had tried to steal his rations, but other comrades were looking out for him. It was slaves’ work, but he was freed from it because he was protected.

He spoke with the Catalans and Galicians at the camp in Catalan. It was their secret language so German and Spanish spies couldn’t understand them.

Describes another photo of the base and how boats came in and out of it.

[20.00 – 30.00] [The attack of the submarine base, more photos and Spain’s problem]

When the Germans left the boats were all exploded and sunk, so that they would not fall into the hands of the English. Now only scrap metal remains there. Now boats can only enter so far into the water in case they crash into them.

The English sent saboteurs to sink 2 torpedoes at the base. One wasn’t badly hit. The other had a big hole but didn’t sink.

AV wasn’t working that night and came to see what was happening. A German patrol stopped him. He thought someone important must have been killed. Everyone nearby was sent down to the boat to install water bombs to expel all the water that had leaked in. The patrol shouted for the fire brigade, but water continued to pour in. The muddy water prevented the bombs from functioning properly. When the bombs stopped exploding the Germans began to scream ‘Sabotage’.

From 9 at night to the early morning the Germans did everything to block the hole. They couldn’t keep it afloat. The English did a good job and got away with it. This badly affected the Germans. They had a lot less soldiers at the time because of the battle of Stalingrad. Says that if it weren’t for that battle we would all be German now.

Describes a photo of him and the boss of the female saboteurs, Pili. She gathered German weapons and hid them in marked food containers – she was never found out. They ate a lot of corn flour with nettles and plums, food typical of the region. She was in charge of food supplies. He met her when they came to rescue some Russians who had been imprisoned and abandoned by Germans. In the photo there is a Catalan friend who was also part of the Resistance. They are surrounded by Russian girls who they looked after.

[30.00 – 40.00] [His political ideas]

When he to went back to university to study Law and Spanish the *Unión Nacional Española*[[1]](#footnote-1) was being founded. Spain had a serious problem because it was divided by many political parties that hated one another. Communists, Trotskyites and Anarchists fought amongst themselves instead of uniting against the enemy. This harmed Spain. He agreed with the communists that the war had to be won before dividing the land. The anarchist Durruti also said this and was killed by other anarchists.

After the occupation they needed to found a Unión Nacional. Spain couldn’t free anybody because people were still fighting there. Germans had come to Spain too. They had helped Franco win the war. None of the political parties could be counted on. They needed national unity.

The war years had made them grow up. Perhaps if Spain had acted differently it would have won but no other countries had faith in it. Without foreign support it was easy for the Germans and Italians to enter. Meanwhile Franco was waiting in Morocco for the defeat of the Republic. That’s what happened. Despite the efforts of the Unión Nacional nothing was achieved. Says the more you divide the less strength you have.

The government’s first order was for all those who made up the Resistance to hand in their weapons. De Gaulle who made this order was on the side of the English and Americans. Petain was on the German side. This meant that whatever way the war went one of them would be on the winning side. America and England delayed deploying troops until the Russians won in Stalingrad. A lot of people, money and material were lost during the war, it was very sad.

Says the Spanish nationended with the death of Franco. The King helped a lot. He denounced the atrocities committed against Spain and promoted democracy.

The communists were the only ones to focus on opposing Franco. Many communist fighters sacrificed themselves and were killed horribly. The Franco regime was well established and supported by the Germans. The Italians had less and less influence. Relations between them and Germany were difficult.

In this period he wasn’t a member of a political party - he was in a Resistance party. In Spain he was in the *Juventud Socialista Unificada de Cataluña[[2]](#footnote-2)* which was part of *PSUC[[3]](#footnote-3)* a socialist and communist coalition unique to Catalonia. This party had been influential during the war but then the Communists became more popular.

[40.00 – 50.00] [Meeting his wife and Alberto’s story (1944)]

When he came to France he was still influenced by PSUC. By then it wasn’t a political party-instead of political meetings they held work and defence meetings and organised sending money back to Spain.

He met his wife in a meeting. She was in a female group that helped members of the Resistance without family go to Spain and attack the Government. He said that Spain had already lost one battle and had sacrificed too much. His own battle was to free his brothers and sisters and reunite his family. In his eyes sending people to attack the government was sending them to the slaughterhouse and he had already lost many friends. His family were finally reunited in 1948.

The year his boss was arrested and disappeared he met his ‘connection’, a man called Alberto. He said he could arrange a safe living arrangement for AV - they would share a flat but never be in it at the same time. If they were detained they would say they only recognised each other from eating in the same restaurant. Alberto had devised a system using napkins to warn Angel if they were safe to meet in the restaurant. If questioned about Alberto he had to say he thought he was a pimp.

One day AV’s landlord told him Alberto had been caught. He said the police had prepared a trap for him and he had to meet another connection who was in the Resistance.

[50.00 – 60.00] [Alberto’s story part II]

The Police later found Angel and demanded his papers. The Police spoke to him in French.*AV speaks in French: He said he was a soldier. They asked him if he spoke French. He replied that he studied it and that he was here with his mother and sister and his friend with some men. He told them he was not a kid and that he had gone through the war. They said to him to keep quiet and go with his mum and sister.* He argued that he had a German passport because he worked for them and was a free Spaniard not a *rojo[[4]](#footnote-4)*.

He had hidden some of his documents that would have given him away. July [his wife] burnt them whilst he was detained. In the Police station they shouted at him. They did this when he was detained before being sent to the concentration camp. Then they brought some people in; one of them, covered in blood, was Alberto.

AV said he didn’t recognise him because the office was dark. Then they showed him a photo of Alberto and he said he recognised him from a local restaurant and that he was probably a pimp.

AV asked the Police to call the Germans and tell them that he has been arrested. AV had the keys to the plant and complained that he didn’t want to be shot for being arrested for no good reason. Although they were still suspicious they let him go.

He met with the second connection. He informed AV his father had been captured and sent to work at the San **Dedan** camp[[5]](#footnote-5). This was punishment for those who had attempted to escape. It was very dangerous. Luckily his father was sent to work outside not inside the submarine base.

Angel managed to take photos of his father as he kept a camera in a complex, double bottomed toolbox he carried about with him. This and Alberto’s story took place in 1944.

[60.00 – 70.00] [Difficulties visiting Spain after liberation]

Alberto was deported to Germany in 44. Whilst in prison he did not eat. When he was liberated the Americans fed him and he died of indigestion. It wasn’t poor treatment that killed him, nor gas, it was eating too much once he was free.

After the liberation AV planned to return to Spain with his father but this was impossible. Whilst Franco lived his father had a death sentence. AV also had trouble visiting Spain during the Franco years as he was named after his father. He was often detained because of this.

In 49 he, his wife and children wanted to go to Barcelona to visit family. They also had word that his father had crossed the border and was living clandestinely. The family stopped at the border and AV told July to return to France if he was arrested. The border police stopped him because they were suspicious about his South American passport.

Angel and his family were originally destined to immigrate to Santo Domingo, reuniting first in Bordeaux. A trip organised by PSUC. However, nobody from his family ended up boarding the ship. This was their salvation because the boat was sunk by Germans.

Many border police were illiterate at the time and these ones didn’t realise that AV and his father had different birth dates. He argued that he had never been to America and that a mistake had been made. Then a captain who knew how to read arrived.

[70.00 – 80.00] [Returning to Spain and beginning to reunite the family]

The Captain continued to threaten AV. He had to argue a lot to convince him it was his father who they wanted. Finally they let him go. Before crossing the border a kind soldier told them they would be ok and if anything happened he’d let them back into France.

That was the first time he had returned to Spain in 11 years. He had to present a document in the police station of every city he visited stating who he was, where he had been and where he would stay.

It was good to return and see different scenery and different, more sociable people. The journey was dangerous but it ran smoothly. They continued returning every two years. All holidays were in Spain so the children would learn Spanish. They ended up buying a chalet on the Murcian coast. Says it is beautiful there.

One year they ended up on holiday in the same place as Franco’s wife. There were many police around. They had known she would be there as they were warned by a friend who worked in the hotel. He didn’t mind. He was happy to see his friend and bring him things from his family.

Angel was against returning to Spain and fighting Franco. They ended up alienating him from the Party. He couldn’t join in their discussions but he never betrayed them like some expelled members did. He had good friends there. He had no intention of dying for his political ideas.

[80.00 – 90.00] [The journey to the convent]

For him the most important thing was reuniting the family. He found out that the convent where his siblings lived was in an occupied zone. He had to get them out or they would be sent to one of Franco’s orphanages. *AV speaks in French: He was told that these were survival trains for him to escape the Germans. So he should get on the train and don’t stop ‘to pay’[?].*

The director of the convent wrote to his father telling him to bring the children home. She wanted to keep them there but could not because they were not baptised. Angel had to arrange their baptism but could not do it by post. He had to travel from Perpignan, a free zone, to occupied Burgundy.

AV travelled clandestinely on a steam train, he had been smuggled on by the engine drivers who hid him amongst the coal. The Germans didn’t even check this part of the train. He stayed there and followed their orders until Monpou where someone was waiting for him.

The boatman in Monpou informed Angel that his sister Zulima was ill. Unlike the other children she was not religious and so the nuns punished her by making her stay in a cold woodshed.

Once in Perpignan Angel’s father and the doctor decided she must return. They wrote a letter to the convent saying that she had to be cured and if she came to Perpignan she would no longer be a nuisance to the nuns.

[90.00 – 100.00] [Being arrested with his father]

When his sister arrived she stayed with a contact from the Resistance, not at the hospital, which was more like a prison. They visited her every night and then returned to the hospital. After a week someone reported their night time activity and the Police arrested him and his father to find out where they were going.

At the time AV and his father earned money loading fruit onto trains at night. The police did not know about this and assumed they must be working for the fire fighters. The fire fighters organised the Resistance. They interrogated them and arrested them on suspicion of being part of the Resistance. They were in prison for 8 days and then sent to a concentration camp in Argelès.

Describes train journey to the camp, the barbed wire fences and sharing a carriage with gypsies. There, a police chief informed him that he too was part of the Resistance and said AV would be safe. The chief knew all about his sister and who she was with**.** *AV speaks in French: The police officer explained what would happen to AV and his friend. They needed to go to the camp in Argelès, the ‘punishment camp‘, instead of going to the camp in Drancy where they would be sent to Germany until the end of the war. Because the officer was from the Resistance, he told them that he was there to protect them and that not all French people were collaborators. He advised them to escape during the night and said it was their last chance.*

Many of the prisoners escaped but AV and his father decided not to. They were imprisoned there for 3 weeks. Then they were taken on one of the famous overcrowded trains to Orleans where he stayed until the liberation.

[100.00 – 110.00] [Reuniting the family continued and jobs Angel had]

Whilst working there they met Otto; a man his father knew from when he worked for the Government of Catalonia. Otto had been a spy for the Germans. He was now the director of a shelter for Spanish refugees.

AV’s father used this information to his advantage. He asked Otto to help him reunite his family as a favour. AV’s family had gone through a lot whilst Otto had stayed in Barcelona. They got authorisation to move out of the shelter and buy a flat. Angel had earned lots of money and worked in many jobs. His father was very proud of him and they shared everything.

They bought a house. The neighbours were women who worked with the fire-fighters. Whenever they had any problems communicating with the Spanish they would call on AV to help interpret.

The family was reunited little by little. His brother managed to escape a massacre in the Pyrenees and when he returned he said Angel had been right all along.

After the liberation he worked for a business run by a communist. It was hard work and he was quite weak. He knew a bit about electricity from working at the submarine base. AV describes in detail his work in the electrical power-station.

[110.00 – 120.00] [Earning a living in 50s-60s]

A man who needed electricians to make batteries employed him and his dad. He worked there for a year and a half. Once married his father insisted he should go back to university. He wanted to continue working and the boss said he could return after studying.

Making batteries was bad for their health but it paid well. The boss liked them and looked after them well. They worked much harder than the French. They had to because they had nothing.

Angel and his father were very close. They shared their money. His father would cut his hair and Angel would buy them the newspaper *Le Sylvester*.

When he married July they lived with her mother. Then they moved into another flat and decided to change jobs. They would work in commerce. They worked for friends who had shops. In time these shops became supermarkets. At first they worked at different stalls in the same market but as they earned more money they began to buy more and bigger stalls.

Business went well and all the family worked. The children helped collect and prepare the fruit. His children had the best things because they had to work for them. The family worked long hours and had to travel between different markets. They earned good money working at the beaches where rich clients went. This is how they earned their living.

[120.00 – 130.00] [Thoughts on returning to Spain after the civil war]

They had spoken about returning to Spain. Lots of people did it especially after Franco’s death. Angel had family in Asturias, Galicia and Catalonia.

They did not consider moving permanently to Spain. It had economic and education problems. France was more advanced. They had adapted to French life. However, they felt more comfortable in Spain than France. In Spain there was a greater sense of family and neighbourly kindness.

It was very cheap to buy houses in Murcia so they decided to buy 2 holiday chalets. Problems with foreign buyers led to financial problems. The builder who was constructing his chalets went bankrupt and so one of them was not built.

Angel struck a deal with him to finish the chalet but when he arrived there he was informed that it had already been sold. The builder had fallen out with his brother and so AV had bought the land but not the apartment.

In the end they got a fantastic chalet, which they sold cheap but at a profit. They had it for 20 years. They sold it because the children already spoke good Spanish and were no longer interested in going there.

[130.00 – 140.00] [Some differences between France and Spain]

In Spain their neighbours were wonderful. The lady who informed him his chalet had been sold was very kind and although she had just met him, she offered him the keys to her holiday home. They had some annoying neighbours but others became like family to them.

The last time Angel and his wife visited Spain was two years ago. They used to go on IMSERSO[[6]](#footnote-6) funded holidays. Then his wife had an accident. There are many problems with hospitals and strikes nearly every day in Spain. Now she cannot see well so they no longer return there.

He misses going on holiday to Spain. Says the French are colder and even the Spanish people in France have changed because the lifestyle is so different. Spanish people are more sociable. Where they lived in Spain everybody was very well off. They were all from Murcia and did not have to travel many hours to get there like his family.

[140.00 – 150.00] [Thoughts on Franco’s death]

AV and his wife look at and discuss family belongings and gifts they been given that remind them of Spain. Things typical of Spanish regions.

He has family documents that show the journeys his brothers and sisters took. They were very young when his mother died. They sent them to the convent where they cut firewood and tended to the cows. He didn’t see them until the Germans lost the war. Tells Darren he will send him photocopies.

For him Franco’s death meant an end to the suffering of the Spanish people. Whilst alive he had the support of the Germans, Italians, English and Americans. It wasn’t England robbing Gibraltar that turned him against them! Franco was a traitor to his country. His brother on the other hand was a pilot for the Republicans. Franco betrayed his country and instead of being punished was sent to Morocco where he planned the downfall of the Republic.

He was in power for a long time. Religion governed during this period and this was bad for everybody. There was widespread abuse and exploitation. His death was a relief. It meant a return to democracy. The King confirmed this.

1. National Spanish Union: an anti-Franco organisation founded in France in 1942. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. United Socialists of Catalonia youth branch. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Partido Socialista Unificada de Cataluña (United Socialists of Catalonia Party): a coalition party of moderate socialists, socialists and communists. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Rojo*: Red, term used to describe Republicans. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Uncertain reference [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Instituto de Mayores y Servicios Sociales. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)