**OpenLIVES Spanish Émigré interviews – Angel Villar 2**

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| Interviewee: | Angel Villar |
| Interviewer: | Darren Paffey (University of Southampton) |
| Interview date: | 11 June 2008 |
| Location: | Bordeaux, France |
| Duration: | 146 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] [Family, France during the war, working for the Germans]

Angel Villar (AV) was the second of 8 brothers. One was a soldier- he went to war at 16 and didn’t return until he died. Fought in the Spanish Civil War, the Resistance, and then volunteered to fight against Franco in Spain. They said once Mussolini and Hitler were beaten they had to beat Franco, because Franco had won.

Looking at photos. Him, his brother and the Resistance committee decided one of them had to take care of their younger siblings who were in a convent. The Spanish government wanted to send them to Franco because their father was in a concentration camp and mother had died. They went to the convent under the pretext of getting the children baptised. If baptised they could stay there under the protection of God. They weren’t sent to Franco or baptised because he brought them a letter from the Resistance.

France was divided into 2 zones. The Occupied Zone went from the north to Bordeaux and from there to the South was the Free Zone. French collaborators like Petain, Laval and Renaud governed in the Free Zone with Germans. France was entirely occupied. At the time he was in Perpignan. He then escaped towards the north but when the Germans began bombing Orleans he escaped back to Perpignan where his Father was in hospital. He knew French so was well informed.

AV and his father were caught in a raid and sent to concentration camps. This taught him a lot. At school he only knew a bit of German. He didn’t want to know English because of Gibraltar. He was interested in learning French because growing up it was the neighbour country. When the Germans captured him he bought German books and whenever he was arrested these books saved him. The Germans said he was a ‘Good Spaniard’.

Whenever the French in Perpignan arrested him, the Germans freed him because he worked for them. He worked at the submarine base turning the lights off when English bombers came. *AV speaks briefly in German: Quick! Quick! Flights alarm! Turn out the lights!* They trusted him and this was helpful. When the French arrested him he would get them to call the *Kommandantur* [headquarters]and explain that he had done nothing more than eat in a restaurant. In restaurants he met with resistance members who planned sabotages.

AV and his father decided that once the war was over they would not talk about what happened to his younger siblings. They didn’t know about it anyway because they led a sheltered life in the convent. The family was broken up in that sense. In the convent the children had been made to work, not live a family life. Says it was not good that they didn’t know the sacrifices the family had made.

[10.00 – 20.00] [Family and Youth from 1934-1938]

His brother was always a soldier or a Maqui. AV and his father took responsibility for the younger ones, but they thought it was God that had protected them. They are fine now. One of them is a great painter and the other a sculptor. It is different for the girls because they didn’t study. They don’t have a close family. It could have been different.

[Break in recording.]

Briefly discusses the time he almost drowned and learning to swim in the river afterwards.

In 34 his father was punished and sent to Catalonia. They were there until 36. AV was in secondary school. His education in Galicia was very good. In Catalonia he was very advanced in his class. His teacher, who wasn’t Catalan, tutored him so he could go to another school. He stayed there until 38 when he went to France.

In 38 they were sent to war and the schools were closed. In order to eat they had to join the army’s help force. At 16 he was too young to be a soldier.

His teacher advised him to work for *el cuerpo-tren*; military transport. Worked in a garage repairing truck parts. The boss liked him because his training was different from other soldiers and he understood French. Boss unofficially adopted him because he was separated from all of his family.

One day his boss told AV the war had been lost and that AV had to save himself by escaping to France. He put him in charge of looking after his own wife and daughter. He gave him a driver, taught him how to shoot and told him to hand over the gun at the border so that they could cross into France. 15km from the border planes began bombing the motorway.

[20.00 – 30.00] [Escaping to France]

Army police ordered them to hand over the car. It had to be used to transport injured soldiers to French hospitals. The police told them to climb over the snowy mountain beyond them to get to France. It took AV, his boss’s wife and daughter a day and half to reach their destination. It was too dangerous to climb at night so they slept in a cabin. Climbing down was more difficult than climbing up but a soldier helped them. He thought they were a family. He showed them how to descend and gave them a machete.

In France they separated the men and women. He could understand what the men at the border were saying-men to concentration camps, women to refugee camps. The boss’s wife began to cry and he told her where she was going and said that he would find them.

He had injuries from the climb. The doctors taking care of him thought he was boy not a man. *AV speaks in French: He told them he was a soldier. He said he had studied French and this was his mother and sister. He told them he was not a kid but had gone through the war.* The doctors decided not to send him to the concentration camp, as he would not recover there. He ended up going to Orleans. They stayed in a factory used as a refugee camp for the Spanish.

When the Germans arrived he went to Perpignan to be with his father who was in hospital. AV knew where he was because of the radio announcements looking for lost people that were played in the refugee camps. Because AV spoke French he worked as an interpreter for the man in charge of the announcements. He read answers sent in and organised how they would help them.

[30.00 – 40.00] [Impressions of France, life in the refugee camp and reuniting with his father]

One day his father sent a message to find AV and his brother. His father knew where AV’s younger siblings were as he had sent them to the convent to protect them from the bombs. They were all in contact and had all survived the bloody war. This was in 39.

Looks and describes map of his journey. Says the journey to Perpignan was very good. It was luxurious because they had food that in Spain didn’t exist. The nurses were scared to feed them too much in case they couldn’t digest it.

Before going to France he thought it must be a lot more developed than Spain. He thought it would be bigger. They took most of your valuable possessions at the border but they let him keep his camera. They thought the Spanish were very primitive. There were other differences too; the transport, culture, people. Friendship was more about money in France. In Spain it was more personal.

In Orleans they were kept in industrial tents and the conditions were poor. The French government was opposed to the Spanish Civil War. It is difficult when neighbouring countries don’t help each other.

One day ***el precepto*,[[1]](#footnote-1)** who had been in the International Brigades, came and told the people at the refugee camp about what was going on and invited them to a party. Through him, AV met the camp’s Director. He was Jewish, crippled and a very good man. AV and others from the camp ended up helping him to fix up an old castle he owned. He paid them so that they could go to the ball and buy cigarettes but AV always saved. He saved up lots of money so he could reunite his family. He was the family’s bank.

The Director warned him that the Germans were coming and the first people they would deport would be Jewish and Spanish republicans. He told him to return to the Spanish border, he said people would be more helpful there than in the North of France. He told him how to escape **Luana[[2]](#footnote-2)** and then he put AV in contact with a friend of his so he could earn some more money.

[40.00 – 50.00] [Working in the north of France and journey south]

He worked for a man called Giovanni in a military canteen. He paid him well and they got along. One day Giovanni told him to go and work for the military bosses. He would earn more money with them than preparing food for soldiers. Although AV wanted to stay, Giovanni insisted he left and said AV needed the money.

When the Germans were about to invade, Giovanni decided to leave with all his family and he felt bad that he could not bring AV. He left AV an envelope stuffed with money and with his address to find him.

AV caught the last train to Perpignan. The station manager told him that afterwards the railways would be blown up. With friends he went from Paris to Vierzon. There was lots of shooting and bombing along the road but they had learnt a lot from the war. They would lie facing up to see in what directions the planes went. They had left one war and entered a new one. He journeyed on foot and by train. On the train to Bordeaux they were stopped for 4 hours because of the bombs. Once there, he caught the last train to Perpignan. His ticket was for the carriage for goods and horses.

Planes bombed the train and they had to jump out and hide in the grass. Some carriages were uncoupled so they had to wait to fix them. Then he went to the hospital in Perpignan, which was for refugees from the concentration camps. His father was better but was kept there as a voluntary nurse.

The doctor was grateful for his arrival, as he could understand Catalan, French and Spanish. He told AV to stay there and he was very happy to stay in one place. He worked there as a medical interpreter.

[50.00 – 60.00] [Hospital work, getting his sister from the Convent and being arrested]

AV worked in the operating theatres and helped serving meals to the 140 patients. The conditions were bad. Most people that arrived there were Spanish. For most of them it was too late. The hospital lacked resources.

The patients were Spanish soldiers who had been sent to the camp in Argelès. AV had to be on night duty because this was when the patients would call out if someone had died. They did not want to sleep next to a dead colleague. He would then take them to the morgue. This was in 41.

He explains how they transported the dead at night. His colleagues would make it even scarier for him. He describes a frightening incident where he ended up running into a tree trying to escape. If they had found out about this they would have sent him away to a camp.

Trucks would take the dead away. 12 or 15 per night. AV reads a poem he wrote for the dead. They said it was good that he wrote poetry as one day someone would have to talk about what happened.

Here they received news from the convent that his sister Zulima was not religious. Someone had warned him about this when he took them the paperwork for their baptism. Z was very ill because the nuns punished her.

They wrote to the nun saying they were aware of her illness and that she was badly behaved. They made an agreement that AV would send them money and in return they would send Z to them. She stayed with a French family they knew and then a friend.

AV and father would visit her at night but someone gave them away and they were arrested. The police thought they ate in the houses of Resistance members. Fire fighters organised the Resistance and they wanted to know which ones.

They were interrogated for 8 days. In the end they decided they knew nothing about fire fighters but they did know that AV left the hospital at night and worked loading trains with fruit for cash in hand. The fruit packers would throw bicarbonate on the fruit so that when it arrived in Germany it was mouldy, but this sabotage was never discovered.

[60.00 – 70.00] [Sent to concentration camp in Argelès]

The police thought they were planning political sabotage and sent them to the concentration camp in Argelès. The gendarmes separated them and other prisoners into two groups: political prisoners and thieves. Walking to the camp the boss of the gendarmes spoke to AV in French. It turned out he was part of the Resistance. *AV speaks in French: He told AV that the group of political prisoners would be sent to the concentration camp in Argelès and then would be sent to work for the Germans. He said that because they were part of the Resistance they wanted to protect them and if they escaped in the night they would send the group of thieves to the camp instead. He told him to tell the others, to tell them that not all French were collaborators.* AV then passed this news on to the others.

AV’s father refused to escape and told AV to stay with him. He said if they escaped his siblings would be sent to *Orfelinatos de los hijos del Diablo[[3]](#footnote-3).* After the liberation an illegitimate child of one of Franco’s officials who was kept in one of Franco’s orphanages wrote a book about his experience. They used the children for blood transfusions and many died of malnutrition and abuse.

His father said they had to stay there so that the little ones would be saved. AV replied he had no intention of going anyway, if he escaped it would be to rescue his siblings. His dad trusted him. In the morning guards came with Senegalese men and hit them and brought them to the camp. This was August 1941. Huge carriages full of Spaniards arrived at the camp. They were handed over to the Germans to build the submarine base and install its electricity.

[70.00 – 80.00] [Work at the submarine Base and the end of the war]

Describes how they made the base. Whilst they installed the electricity they went about sabotaging the cables so they would break under pressure. Once a good friend died horribly working with the faulty cables. These things happened when they worked like that-sometimes they were reckless.

They stayed there until 44 when Bordeaux was liberated. He describes a photo of a bridge where his friend Pablo Sánchez was killed. The Germans had placed dynamite on the bridge to blow it up. The Resistance knew about it and the damage it would do. It had to be neutralised.

Sanchez volunteered to neutralise it. When he left the bridge AV and the politicians had to make a diversion to distract the guards but a German shot his friend and killed him. This was at the end of the war. They had to save the bridge so that the Germans couldn’t escape to Spain. They wanted to blow it up after crossing it.

Describes photos of the French Resistance taken around 44.

[80.00 – 90.00] [July’s story (Angel’s wife)]

At the time of the Liberation the English sent a team of saboteurs to destroy the German boats at the base and do a raid. AV was protected because he had documents to show he was a Spanish republican. Later his wife would burn these to protect him but he didn’t know that then.

They were promised that after the war the Resistance would send Spanish guerrillas to help the rebellion and finish off Franco. He still had a lot of unofficial support. Says if the Russians did not win in Stalingrad the Americans and English would not deploy soldiers. So much was lost but they did it anyway. Europe would be split in 4. When the Russians closed in on Berlin they deployed and Berlin was divided into 4 zones between the English, American, French and Russian. The Russians promised to support the Resistance after the war.

The Spanish in France began to organise the *Unión Nacional Española[[4]](#footnote-4)* to fight against Franco and to help those in Spain. In one of these meetings he met his wife although they’d been in meetings together before. She was in a Resistance group that transferred parts in sports bags. She was sent to Toulouse for the arrival of the *Pasionarias*.

July was born in Salamanca but her family came to find work in France in 31. When the Civil War began in 36 all Spaniards who had not been more than 10 years in France had to return and join a side. Except women and children. In July’s family there were 5 people. She was the oldest child.

They lived in Catalonia during the war. When they returned to Bordeaux they all came separately. Her sisters and mother were in one place and she was in another. Luckily she spoke French so she was fine in the refugee shelter she ended up in. The Director of the shelter swore he would help her find her family. She helped him because he did not speak Spanish.

They went to Bordeaux to reunite with her father along with her aunt. One evening she went to find food because the journey had been long and they had escaped bombings. While she was gone the border police took her family across to France and would not let them wait. When she returned she began to cry. Soldiers took her to a colony. Her family weren’t there but she had to stay. They called her the lost girl.

[90.00 – 100.00] [July’s family reunited in France]

At the colony she was very useful because she spoke French. At first she was too upset to speak but when some French people brought them food hunger made her speak up. By 13 she wasn’t a little girl any more. She helped interpret for the doctor and the Director. He helped her to find her family.

In Spain her sister was ill with typhus. There was an epidemic. When her dad told them to come to France, by foot if they had to, her mother refused to leave her sister in the hospital. The nurses said she would die but her mum stayed with her. She didn’t die. Later they were evacuated from the hospital and they began their journey. It was four days on foot from Barcelona. During the day planes shot at them. Her four sisters, her mother, grandfather, aunt and father ended up in different places. The Director reunited them.

[Speaks briefly in French with husband.]

Says it’s a good thing she spoke French otherwise her life would have been different.

Angel says they both ended up becoming interpreters.

Says she had friends at the colony. [Speaks briefly in French.] She had a lot of work there. It shocked her sometimes. The Director told her not to worry. He said he would find her family and he stuck to his word. He brought them to Bordeaux where her father was living. They already had friends there that were like family. They found them a flat and helped them out.

She remembers the journey walking to France. Mother made her carry so much, even a blanket. After days of walking they ended up throwing most of it away-it was too heavy. Silly memories from that journey have stuck with her. All five of them have remained very close. They are all in Bordeaux; married and widowed.

[AV and J discuss the weather and chat to interviewer.]

[100.00 – 110.00] [Discussing Angel’s photographs]

[AV and J chat to Darren and discuss potential future interviews.]

AV looks at and describes some photos of himself. In one he is painting the old castle, the other shows his brother in a concentration camp.

[Offers Darren a drink.]

He describes a photo of submarine base. Shows the transport used so that they couldn’t escape. They walked 8km on foot and had to leave for work at 4am. Discusses other photos; of escapees from the camp and his dad after he escaped. Says they were taken to a punishment camp. Describes a photo of the boats they took to get to the camp. Shows a picture of him in the Spanish army. Shows his Free Spaniard document that allowed him to get around.

[AV and Darren organise potential future interview.]

He shows a photo of himself, two guerrillas and a politician. One is his brother the other a close friend who said he would die before betraying them.

[Offers Darren a drink.]

Shows a photo of him at Law School. Another photo shows Russian prisoners and an American whose plane was shot down. He parachuted out but was caught by the Germans and held prisoner. When the Germans went they left the prisoners behind. They didn’t know the Germans had lost the war when AV and his friends freed them.

Describes a photo of Pili, a woman who played an important role in smuggling guns she stole from the Germans. She cooked for the Germans and hid the guns in marked flasks. When they had a marked flask it meant there was a gun in a watertight bag inside. She was hardworking.

[110.00 – 120.00] [The press and saving a journalist from the Germans]

Shows a photo of a Catalan called Fornel who was in the Resistance and an American called Willy. They brought the prisoners back to their homes to eat and then to a camp for homeless people.

[Discuss the weather and photocopying the photos.]

AV says he wants Darren to publish his name, not a pseudonym. Says his granddaughter is documenting his life and everything he has said and done has photos as proof. AV says the past needs to be re-examined because they have been saying that a German official saved the bridge. AV asked them for proof and told them it was a lie. He maintains a Spaniard saved the bridge from being blown up and was killed after. It was a member of the Spanish Resistance. AV says the press has been misinforming the public. It has distorted information to make people like the Germans. Says Germans are good and bad but what matters is what happened.

The occupation resulted in many problems. He says the French were the ones who caused them the most harm. The French arrested and imprisoned them. However, because they were asylum seekers in France they didn’t have the right to claim financial reparation. The Germans who were sent to concentration camps received pensions but the Spaniards who fought the Germans got nothing.

AV says they did what they did and didn’t get a penny for it. J comments AV hasn’t insisted much. AV replies that they did what they felt was right. To do something for money is to do it badly.

Once at the submarine base they saved a journalist. He was going to be sent to a concentration camp and AV’s idea was to hide him at the base. They would dress him in a mechanic’s suit and cover him in oil and cables to make him look like all the other workers. They sent him to the attic and told him not to make any noise whatsoever. During the day he had to walk about with the other workers.

The journalist said when the war was over he would write about them and how they saved him, but he never did. AV says there are many stories like this.

[110.00 – 120.00] [Angel and July’s relationship and where they have lived]

When the war ended, they had to move on and start saving up to send money to help the fight in Spain. That’s when they met each other. AV says J wanted to send him back to Spain. J replies that she wanted to send everybody back.

They talk about the meeting where they met. AV had already decided his priority was reuniting his family (and then the liberation of Spain). J said if everyone did that (think of their family first) then Spain could not be liberated.

AV argues its not about that. Says for better or worse his family ended up leading different lives, and J’s family had similar luck. They were happy in France but then things got messy.

Everyday they used to meet at the Unión Nacional meetings. They ended up renting a place together. After meetings he had a long journey back to **Talance** on foot because they had no money. His brother had come back and found work destroying the submarine base they had built. They weren’t lazybones. AV and J got on very well and ended up marrying in 46. AV says he remembers it all very well.

There was a lot of bombing near Bordeaux. J had a friend who split up with her boyfriend and no longer needed her apartment. J and AV moved into it. It was a small flat. Two of their children were born there. Then they moved to Bayona and later their children convinced them to return to Bordeaux because of J’s illness.

J says they have changed the way they live a lot because Bayona and Bordeaux are so different-Bayona is wonderful, it’s like being Spain. It made sense to move to Bordeaux. At first they lived with their daughter and then a friend found them a flat. They have been married for 62 years. [Speaks in French to someone who has arrived.]

1. Not sure what he means here. Clearly the individual in authority over them. Possibly <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Preceptor> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Not sure of location of this place. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One of Franco’s orphanages for children of Republicans. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. National Spanish Union: an anti-Franco organisation founded in France in 1942. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)