Sam Aarons

What Made You Decide to Go to Spain?

The Spanish Civil War started on July 18, 1936, soon after the election of the progressive government which overthrew the monarchy and established the Republic of Spain. Republican Spain had aroused world-wide interest -- everyone was watching to see what would happen. July 18 was the day on which the Workers' Olympiad was to have started in Spain and many people, contestants in the Olympiad and those who had gone to watch, stayed there and formed the nucleus of what became the International Brigade.

I have always been interested in sport, although I have never played much; and the war starting that day shocked me considerably, and a lot of other people as well.

At the time I had no thought of going to Spain, but the formation of the International Brigade led to the Non-Intervention Agreement under the terms of which nobody from outside was supposed to go to Spain. In fact, it meant that Britain, France, and the United States refrained from "intervention" -- assistance to the elected government of Spain -- and left the way clear for Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy to intervene on the side of Franco. The Germans were there almost from the start and the Italian army too. And Franco, who had been fighting against the Moors for some time, brought them to Spain; they landed on the south coast. All these forces advanced towards Madrid, the capital.

Volunteers, supporting the government, flocked in from nearby countries, particularly from France, which had a Popular Front government at that time -- it gave some kind of blessing or tacit permission to the volunteers to go to Spain.

In no time there was a full-scale war. By October, 1936, the official idea was that Madrid would fall and that would be the end of it. But this did not happen and the International Brigade played a tremendous role in the defence of Madrid. This stirred me up quite a bit, and when the fascists were halted at the outskirts of Madrid, though the war went on, I thought that it was all very well to say you are opposed to fascism and that fascism must be halted, but maybe I should do something about it myself.

Before I left I went to see the Party leadership in Sydney and told them what I intended to do and asked them for some sort of credential, but they said, "Well, look, the non-intervention agreement has been reached and we don't think we ought to put anything on a document which, if it were found, would indicate that we were breaking this agreement. No obstacle was put in my way, but I went under my own steam without any official blessing from the Party.

I sailed from Sydney in a French ship -- I have forgotten the name -- it became a troop carrier during World War II and was sunk in the very early period.

Were There Any Other Volunteers With You at the Time?

No. But there were volunteers there -- people who were seamen. Ron Hurd was one, and Louis Barry and others who deserted their ships and got to Spain.

After a long and very painful journey in this lousy tub -- I was travelling steerage and steerage on a French ship was horrible -- after 10 weeks, we reached Marseilles. It was not a pleasant journey but it got me there and we had a little bit of action on the ship.
There were about 30 people travelling steerage; conditions were terrible. The food was horrible, the accommodation was awful, there were no hot baths and we used to get the scrapings off the first and second class tables. After picking up some French people at Tahiti who were going back to France, at my suggestion, we staged a hunger strike and had a deputation to the skipper, which led to some slight improvement in the food. But they refused to let us off the ship — that is, the steerage people — unless we were vaccinated. I refused to have this done and got a number of others to refuse too. The captain said “You’ve got to be vaccinated,” and I said “I’m not going to be vaccinated.” He said I wouldn’t be allowed ashore, so I said I would stay in the ship. He then said they would take me back to Australia, and I said “That will do me.”

After a lot of argument, the doctor came aboard and began appealing to people, but the only ones who were vaccinated were some French conscripts from New Caledonia who were going to serve their term in the French army.

The ship went into Marseilles; the non-intervention was still in operation. People who were trying to get to Spain were being caught and were getting 90 days jail. I found the Party there and was told that I had better wait as they were not sending anyone at the moment. They told me to wait until things got clarified a bit — “You can wait and get a ship here — there’ll be one sailing in three or four weeks which will go direct to Barcelona. Or, if you want to, you can go direct to Paris and they’ll see that you get to Spain.” I thought “Well, I might die while I’m in Spain and never see Paris.” So I decided to go to Paris. Incidentally, the ship, The City of Barcelona, carrying a couple of hundred volunteers for the International Brigade, was sunk by a German submarine outside either Barcelona or Valencia, I’m not sure which, and there were at least 10 Australians aboard who were all killed. Some people did get ashore, but no Australians, and nobody knows who they were. So I had a bit of luck.

Altogether about 60 or 70 Australians went to Spain — men who volunteered for the army, nurses, and people who went there to look after children whose parents had been killed or wounded. There was a special home for these children near the French border.

In Paris I found my way to the Party headquarters and went in and made some inquiries at the counter. The girl, only a young woman, spoke very correct English — she was obviously a university student. She regarded me very suspiciously while I was speaking and when I had finished she asked me: “What is your mother tongue?” I said it was English. “Oh, no, she said, “what language do you speak in Australia?” I repeated “English.” “Oh, no, I speak English very well,” which she did, “you speak English like a foreigner.” I told her it was my Australian accent, but she didn’t believe me and was obviously very suspicious. So I asked her to get someone who knew something about who lived in Australia. A bloke came down to see me and he sent me around to the committee which was arranging to get people into Spain. It was there that I met Professor Haldane’s then wife who was in charge of arrangements to get English-speaking people from Paris to Spain.

She told me I would have to wait a few days because of the non-intervention business, which was obviously a phony. I went back a couple of times and the last time I did she asked me if I could walk. I said of course I could and why did she ask. She told me she understood there would be quite a bit of walking to do but she asked me to return in two days bringing with me all my luggage. I would be transported to Spain one way and my luggage another and it would be waiting for me when I arrived. I took my two suitcases and left them there. I never saw them again.

The journey into Spain was quite an experience. There were quite a number of foreigners, nearly all English-speaking — English, Scots, Americans. I met them all when we started off. We got into a train — we were told to look as much like Frenchmen as we could, but I’m sure we were the crummiest lot of Frenchmen you’d ever see in your life. It took us about five days to get to the border. We’d get to some station, then get a bus to a little village where there was a Communist Mayor. The villagers would look after us until the next stage in the journey was arranged. Eventually we got somewhere near the border. About 10 o’clock one night we were taken by bus out into the bush where we had to wait. There was no moon and we later found out that a moonless night had been chosen deliberately because we had to get over the border without alerting the border guards.

After a while two blokes came along. It was pitch dark; we couldn’t see and we were not allowed to smoke, light a match or talk. They gave us a kind of sandshoe with rope soles. We had to take off our boots, put on the shoes and carry our boots. We nearly all slung them round our necks. Before we reached our destination they got to weigh about half a ton.

Then we set off. We walked uphill along a zigzag road and I thought this was the walk Mrs Haldane had spoken about. But presently we left the road and began to climb. It was a terrible climb. There was no moon and a clear sky, and when the bloke in front of you did something you could just see his head. We were told to do what the fellow in front did. He’d jump, then we’d jump with no idea where we were jumping — over a precipice or anywhere. This went on all night. There were people falling down; some never made it to the top. Some, when they did get to the top, could go no further. Eventually they arrived in Spain because people
were sent to pick them up. But we got to the top of this part of the Pyrenees just as the sun was rising. I think we were about five or six thousand feet up -- we could look back and see the coast of France. It was a really magnificent sight. We were not thinking about the scenery very much just then, but I have always remembered it because you don’t see anything like it in Australia.

When we got there, those of us who did, some were lame, others had fallen and hurt themselves. I had fallen. I still suffered from the after-effects of a broken ankle which had happened when I was run over when I was 11. My ankle was now swollen to three times its natural size. They were going to send me back. “You’d be no bloody good as a soldier,” they said. I assured them that the swelling would subside, so they let me stay. This ankle was the reason I became a transport driver because I could not be a foot-soldier with such a disability.

We went to a place called Figueras. This is where Hannibal crossed the Pyrenees, and it had a terrific old castle. I don’t know Hannibal’s dates, but the castle was well over 1000 years old. It had a huge stone wall all around it -- about 15 feet high and a foot wide at the top -- and it was hollow, there were two walls one inside the other. Or rather, it had been hollow, but it was filled up with soil with grass growing out of it. I think it had been used for a toilet for hundreds of years and that was what it was being used for then.

My first experience. Not doing anything, but being put on an alert.

I was getting experience and driving a truck. If I remember rightly it was a Russian truck -- it may not have been, but later I did drive plenty of Russian trucks. They had more of these than any others and they were all in much better shape than the Fords and other makes from France, England and America. The Russian trucks were very powerful but relatively slow. About 50m.p.h. was about the most you could do, and that unloaded.

They got all the drivers and a lot of blokes with guns up about one o’clock in the morning and told us we were going to Barcelona. Figueras is not far from Barcelona -- probably about 40 miles. There had been an attempted uprising by the Workers’ Party of Marxist Unity -- they were Trotskyites. There had been some fighting -- barricades in the street, a few people might have been killed, there were quite a number wounded. But it was all over by the time we got there. We stayed in Barcelona a day or so and then we went back. This episode led to the outlawing of the WPMU.

From Figueras we were sent to the headquarters of the International Brigade at a place called Albacete, about three or four hundred miles away, well south of Madrid, which is in the centre of Spain.

Albacete was something of a town and housed the headquarters of the International Brigade Transport Department. There were all kinds of nationalities there, but mostly Americans. At that time there were very few Spaniards who could drive because there were not many cars in Spain. But all the Americans, English, French and other foreigners could. We spent a lot of time there doing nothing. We’d drive an officer here or there, take food into Madrid, deliver it and come back. I don’t know where the food came from, but we’d only be in Madrid a couple of hours. This went on for some months but then a few of us were sent to Madrid and we lived there for a while. Madrid was the centre of everything. It was the hero city. You could go to a point in Madrid which is some three or four thousand feet above sea level, and look down on to the university which was about five miles away, and see the fascists camped there. Every now and then they would open up with indiscriminate artillery fire; there was occasional bombing from the air too, which did not make life very happy, in spite of Madrid’s underground railway -- the Metro as it was called -- into which people would dash to shelter from an air raid.

There was a soldiers’ club where you could get not a bad meal for that time, and the first time I went there I met an Australian bloke. I think he is a school teacher, I’ll think of his name in a minute. Anyway the artillery opened up while we were there. The place had been either a palace or a big hotel -- it had a big glass dome under which we were sitting and all of a sudden a shell hit the dome and glass and bricks and god knows what came down. We went downstairs and out into the streets and people were running. I said to the bloke I was with “I’ll show these people how to run,” but they left me standing. I had always read about the people of Madrid, how they were brave and calm and did not get excited and worry about such things, but it was not true.

It was quite an experience, because life went on in a normal sort of way and it was only when planes came over or there was artillery bombardment that they seemed to worry at all. And yet there was only one small side road into Madrid open. The city was practically surrounded.

The original part of Madrid is a beautiful place with huge churches and public buildings. It was built by royal command. Some Spaniard told me the king lived in a place called Valladolid, an old place, and he drew a cross on the map of Spain and where the lines crossed he said “That is where my city is to be,” and that is how Madrid comes to be where it is. One of the things that was very noticeable was the contrast between the beautiful city of royalty and all the hangers-on of the court and the rich people, and the terrible slums in which the poor Spanish people lived. As a matter of fact, just out-
side Madrid was a place where people lived underground. All that was to be seen were chimneys sticking up out of the ground with smoke coming out of them. There was no sign of people about, and driving past it was impossible to see how they got into the places. But there were some hundreds of people living there this way. These horrible slum conditions were one of the reasons for what was happening in Spain.

THE NAME OF THE AUSTRALIAN -- WAS IT LLOYD EDMONDS?

That's right. I met his son at our Congress. Lloyd Edmonds, he was the only Australian I met in Spain. I was playing football -- gridiron. I didn't know what it was all about. They could throw a ball as far as an Australian Rules layer can kick it, almost. There was some bloke on the other side and he called out something. I thought "Gee, he's an Australian," and I went up and talked to him. He told me that he had gone to England and talked to some Left Members of Parliament about how to get to Spain. He arrived there a couple of months after I did and I was with him a lot because he was truck-driving too.

I was near Madrid, parked outside Valladolid with its magnificent cathedrals; many of the kings of Spain are buried in the vaults. The coffins are made of marble -- there are very many of them -- about eight feet long, three feet wide, and four feet deep.

The French ran the town -- the supply depot which distributed uniforms, food and so on was there because it was pretty secure. The Italians, Mussolini's army, had got a terrible hiding there and it was pretty quiet.

We really got jock of the French. They were domineering, they were the blokes on the job and they had all the power. This was the first experience I had had of that kind of nationalism which, in my innocence, I never thought could spring up between groups of working people who were fighting in a common cause. But I was very quickly disillusioned. As a matter of fact, it is one of the most painful memories I brought back from Spain. Of course, there is the language problem, but nationalism is very powerfully imbedded in the minds and hearts of people, even communists. It was a lesson to me and an eye-opener, because in Australia we don't mix much. At that time there were not many foreigners in Australia and, in any case, there are still relatively few, so that many people do not see them or have anything to do with them. But when you are in a country, in a war, where life is difficult and food is scarce, food becomes a burning question. And if one national group is in charge of it you find that they live very well relatively, and everybody else lives not so well. There was real hostility. The Americans, who lived better than the Australians, found their standard of living disappearing almost completely, so it was easy to understand their increasing hostility when they saw how other people fared. The French had nice uniforms, servants to clean their shoes, and things like that. I staged a bit of a revolt and got kicked out which pleased me very much -- not out of the town, but out of the service I was in.

Perhaps I should say something here about my impressions of the life of the Spanish people. I have no doubt it was worse during the war than it had been earlier, but Spanish people assured me that the war had made very little difference to their standard of living.

The Spanish villages then, and I feel sure they are much the same today, had to be seen to be believed. There was no sewerage, no running water. The houses, which were two or three storeys high, comprised three rooms one on top of the other. Chickens, ducks, and even donkeys, if they had one, were all housed on the ground floor and all the sewerage ran out into an open gutter and the place stank. These people hadn't a cracker. As a matter of fact, I was reading about the conditions today in Spain in a recent edition of "New Times" and the same conditions prevail.

The people had the most primitive utensils for cooking -- an open fire with practically no fuel. There are no trees to provide wood for fuel -- over the centuries the forests have been denuded -- and what they burned were the previous year's grapevine cuttings. They cooked on a kind of trivet. When I was on my way home by ship we called at Naples and with some English people I went to see the ruins of Pompeii and there I saw that 2000 years ago the women of Pompeii had cooked in the same way as the women of Spain today.

I saw a woman harnessed to a plough! The plough, which had two little wheels at the back, was made of wood, with a piece of metal, about an inch or an inch and a half, fastened to the top. The woman pulled the plough and a man, her husband presumably, pushed it. How can agriculture be developed like that and what sort of lives do people live?

The road from Albacete to Madrid is very flat -- it runs along a plateau -- and you can see for miles. Driving along we would first see a spire sticking up because the curvature of the earth would prevent you from seeing its base. You couldn't see the houses until you were within a half-mile of them -- they were made of mud, washed away by rain or flood. More than 50 per cent of the people were illiterate -- even the young men. I never had the chance to find out about the girls. But the young blokes in the army were often on guard when we approached a town in our trucks; we'd show them our papers and they would look at them but as often as not they would be holding them upside down. This was not uncommon.
The countryside was different - in many ways it was comparable to China. The most beautiful and substantial buildings and the only irrigation canals to speak of at that time at any rate were built by the Moors when they were in Spain hundreds of years ago. And Spain is nearly as dry as Australia, except just along the Mediterranean coast where the rainfall is more plentiful. They had planted a lot of Australian eucalypts and this was one of the main things that made me homesick, because at night we would gather the sticks and leaves and light a fire, and the smell...

The problem in Spain when I first got there and for quite a while after was that there was no centralised army. The Communist Party had an army, the Socialist Party had an army, the Republicans had an army, and they all had their own independent command. You can't fight a war, especially against an enemy the Germans were directing, that way. But there was so much suspicion between the various parties that it became very difficult to change it. It was changed, but changed much too late. The International Brigade as such was disbanded. These people were not put in with other units as individuals but as groups, and the group I was with was part of one of the Spanish army units. From all I gathered, the worst people, the most difficult, were the anarchists. There was a story current in Spain about the long struggle the Spanish Communist Party put up to get a unified command under the command of the government -- the anarchists posed the greatest opposition to this. There were many stories about the anarchists, whether they were true or not I don’t know. This is one of them. Before the International Brigade got there, the Spanish people were on their own in defending the Republic and the story goes that at one place which had been fortified -- trenches dug and so on -- at five o’clock in the evening a lot of these anarchists, who all lived in Madrid, would take their rifles and go home! When they were questioned, their answer was “We are fighting this war to get an anarchist society. We fought and we worked just eight hours a day before the war to get an anarchist society and we are not going to scab now and fight more than eight hours a day.” I believe that’s a true story.

There was an anarchist force north of Madrid on the Aragon front, I think, facing the Franco forces. There was no fighting going on, and they actually played football against the enemy. One general, who commanded the anarchist forces in the Republican army, and who was later killed in action, was one anarchist who believed there should be one army with a central command. He called a meeting and said “We must have discipline.” Many of the soldiers he was addressing were very angry at this. Some of them said “We are anarchists and anarchists believe in indiscipline, not discipline,” to which the general replied “I, too, am an anarchist, and I believe in indiscipline, but I am a soldier and we must have organised indiscipline.”

As the war went on things like this disappeared under the very pressure of events; they just couldn’t continue in that way. All sorts of wrong things could happen; one army could completely negate good things that another army had done. Eventually the government did them over -- there was considerable political struggle going on all the time -- and when that happened the Republican forces did very well for a time. But there were many other factors involved. The Germans, for instance, used blitzkrieg tactics towards the end of the war. We didn’t recognise them as such at the time, but after the other war broke out I did. The Spaniards were in no position to defeat this move because they had no tanks and no armor and their idea of the war was that it was a positional war.

Some time later we were sent from Madrid to another place the name of which I cannot remember, but we didn’t do any good there. It was the first time I was bombed and machine-gunned from the air. They were aiming at the trucks. We were on a long straight road -- no trees, no shelter and bombs going off and every 50 years they would come down machine-gunning. The death toll and injury rate among truck drivers were higher than among soldiers in the field.

It was bad, too, in the mountain country with narrow roads and many of them in pretty grim condition. And you’d drive and drive. Once I had to drive constantly for 48 hours. Some of the drivers would go to sleep and drive over the edge. I learnt through hard experience. What I used to do was to stop even for 10 minutes, shut my eyes and sleep probably for a little while. But our eyes wouldn’t stay open, they’d close even if we weren’t asleep.

At one particular place where we were camping -- I don’t know who the genius was who picked such a spot, it was at the junction of two railways and two main roads and there we were -- we’d only been there 10 minutes when the bastards, German planes, came over and bombed it. Fortunately, nobody was killed, it was remarkable. Two were wounded. That was my first experience and I didn’t know what to do. We had not even been told to dig funk holes. Everyone was very inexperienced and at that time we had Americans for officers. They were just blokes like myself; they’d had no army experience, they were just good truck drivers, but they were made
officers in Spain. That experience frightened the life out of me. The scream of the bloody bombs coming down... It is a terrifying business...

Of course in Barcelona I saw a lot of indiscriminate bombing and I must say that the Spanish people were very cheerful under terrible conditions. They were kindly and I got on very well with them, especially when I had learnt to speak their language a little. Perhaps it was just wartime... But one thing I did discover was that they hated the Germans, they despised the Italians and they were terrified of the Moors. Perhaps this fear was based on some kind of a legend that had grown up in the country because the Spaniards had fought the Moors for so long and had got a terrible hiding from them. But they were really frightened of the Moors. The Spaniards were very fine people, especially in view of the kind of life they were living.

I can't help thinking, and I'll finish on this for now, that Spain was the Vietnam of 30 years ago and that if the outcome of that struggle had been different I think the world would be a very different place now. I think it probable that there wouldn't have been a World War II.

After I left Spain and went to England I met a bloke I'd known very well in Australia - he thought I was some sort of small business man - and he took me round and introduced me to his friends, saying "Sam has just come back from Spain." Almost invariably the reply was "Spain, what have you been doing there?" "You know there's a war on," I replied. But they said you're an Australian, what did you go there for? And rather than tell them the story of how I came to go there what I said was "I've seen towns and villages destroyed by German planes, by Italian planes -- kids dying and never knowing what hit them, the country devastated and people living a miserable sort of life. And if Franco wins this war you people in London are going to see the same thing."

And they laughed at me. This was less than a year before the bombs were falling on London and other places. They were digging air raid trenches in Hyde Park, and yet the people, not all but many, were very insular. What the hell should anyone care about Spain and what happened there!

So many things have happened since then, and Spain, to most people, is just part of history. Certainly the young people in our country know little of its drama, its tragedy or of the impetus it gave to fascism.

The date is 23rd December, 1968. I left Spain about the time of Munich (September 1938), and I was given permission to leave by the Spanish Government.