



I am an International

An Oral History of Nate Thornton

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I AM AN INTERNATIONAL

Introduction

The political activism of Nate Thornton spans seven decades, and he, with the support of his wife, Corine, has preserved a record of it. The idea of making it available as a worthwhile historical testimony came from Corine. I accepted this work as an honor. Throughout a series of interviews, conducted from February 2007 to April 2008, the 93-year-old resident of Hayward, California, shared his memories of participating in the Spanish Civil War as a volunteer ambulance and truck driver in the International Brigades.¹ His recollections come together to articulate a unique and rich narrative of personal experiences revolving around his affiliation with the Young Communist League and his support of the Spanish struggle against fascism with the Lincoln Brigade.

Focusing mainly on the decade of the thirties, I have selected from the extensive text of transcribed interviews, what I consider to be the highlights.² In that process, as well as in the formulation of questions, my own subjectivity has had an influence³. However, I have attempted, to the best of my abilities, to place the integrity of Nate's testimony at the center.

Framed by the perspective of the Great Depression and the labor struggles of that period, Nate's memories of his father's political background and labor experiences confer a distinctive aspect to his account. Nate and Mark Thornton shared not only a family bond as father and son, but also a political affiliation as Communist Party members and as international volunteers during the Spanish Civil War.

Parallel to Nate's verbal narrative, his woodcarvings and his singing of popular songs offer an additional dimension to his memories. They eloquently convey the sentiment and

¹ All quotations of Nate Thornton in this paper are from the transcripts of the oral history interviews with him conducted by Ileana Gadea Rivas between February 2007 and April 2008.

² Rebecca Jones. Blended Voices. Crafting a Narrative from Oral History Interviews. *Oral History Review*. Vol. 31, No. 1. Winter/Spring 2004.

³ Dora Schwarztein. *Memory & Identity between Franco & Perón: Memory & Identity*. Barcelona: Crítica, 2001.

political views of an individual who played an active role in a worldwide movement of solidarity with Spain. In the interviews, images and songs unite personal and collective testimony, placing them within the broader context of the labor and popular struggles to build socialism, which took place in the early 20th century.

I am an International

Grounded in individual and collective labor experiences, as well as in his participation in the Spanish Civil War, a strong identification with socialism and international solidarity emerges as a major theme in Nate's personal story. Revisiting the time when he first went to Spain to join the International Brigades, Nate's reminiscences bring back a self-portrait:

“Younger, 22 years of age, a Communist party member and hopeful Socialist, I worked odd jobs and was in the CC Camps⁴ in 1934. I had sailed to China from Boston through the Panama Canal, and had smoked marijuana in Havana in 1935⁵.”

Nate today describes himself as an international, a man who hopes for the day when humanity will be united as one class.

“I am an international. I believe in the international rule of the world and that people of the whole world should get together and decide that there are going to be no classes in this society, just one class. That the capitalists all have to go to work, get off their butts and go to work! No more CEOs, no more billionaires and millionaires, not that sort of thing. We work, and we decide when we are going to quit working. We decide it collectively, and everything of importance will be decided collectively⁶.”

Exploring the origins of his lifelong activism, Nate speaks about his father's experiences as a worker trying to make a living to support his three children. “The things my father went through. It should not be like that.⁷” Childhood memories of family life expose Mark's employment and unemployment experiences and the impact they had on his children. They also

4 Civilian Conservation Corps: a program for unemployed youth. From <http://www.u-s-history.com>.

⁵ Nate Thornton, interviewed by Ileana Gadea Rivas, February 2007-April 2008, transcripts and digital audio recording in the interviewee's and author's possession. Hayward, and San Francisco, California respectively.

⁶ Nate Thornton, February 2007-April 2008.

⁷ Nate Thornton, February 2007-April 2008.

appear as the starting point from which the narrative of Nate's own political life unfolds.

Early Memories

Nate was born in Oasis, Utah, on January 14, 1915. His mother died when he was 11 years old. Mark moved his family from Utah to Fresno, California, an agricultural town in the San Joaquín Valley. Early memories of his family moving around suggest a pervasive lack of stability in terms of housing and employment for working people that was taking place even before the Great Depression.⁸

“In 1924, when I was just 9 years old, we moved to Fresno and I went to school for a while in a little town called Auberry, about 30 miles north of Fresno, where my father had an acre. It was there, while walking through the field one day that I counted 20 dead cows. They had starved to death because the food was so scarce! It was so hot, and they could not afford to feed them, so they starved to death⁹.”

As was the case for many families at that time, the search for employment opportunities drove Mark and his family from one place to the next. Separated from their loved ones, once again looking for work, Nate and his father arrived in San Francisco.

“We lived in Fresno for several years. My dad worked for an oil company. He would walk 12 miles, have a place to sleep, walk 12 miles further and have another place to sleep, and then, next day, he would walk back. He was examining the pipes to make sure the oil lines were not leaking. On weekends we had him, and during the week he was away. We kind of got a little bit used to not having him around, so when he finally got laid off he sent my sister to live with relatives in Clovis, one of the little towns down there, and he sent my brother to another place. I do not know what happened there, and he and I came to San Francisco¹⁰.”

I Joined the Young Communist League

Nate's memories of his affiliation with the Communist Party and later recruitment into the International Brigades come from a period when the left had significant influence in the United States. According to Howard Zinn, party membership was probably fewer than 100,000

⁸ Priscilla Murolo and A. B. Chitty. From the Folks who Brought you the Weekend. A Short Illustrated History of Labor in the United States. New York: The New York Press, 2001: 200.

⁹ Nate Thornton, February 2007-April 2008.

¹⁰ Nate Thornton, February 2007-April 2008.

but it was “a potent force in trade unions numbering millions of members, in the arts, and among countless Americans who may have been led by the failure of the capitalist system in the thirties to look favorably upon Communism and Socialism”.¹¹

A casual encounter with a man passing out leaflets led Nate and his father to their first meeting at the Workers School.

“I had never thought about communism or anything like that, and one day, a guy was standing on a street corner passing out leaflets, and he gave us leaflets about how great things were happening in the Soviet Union, and how over here we were fighting for socialism. My dad had been leery about it because he had been messed up in some coal union business. He worked in the coal mines, and during the time he worked there, there were some problems with strike breakers. They scared my father. They beat him up. There was a famous group, The Pinkertons. The employers needed scabs or people to come in and beat up their workers, and they would call the worker and they would proceed to do it, and the local governments would be in favor of it. So he was a little bit leery about the labor guy. And I say, ‘this looks good pa, let’s go see what they have to say’, and we agreed. Two days later we went to the meeting, and we both decided that we were going to join the Communist Party. Well, I was too young to join the Communist Party, but I joined the Young Communist League, so we joined, and that was 1932 or 1933. The meeting hall was located at 121 Haight Street in San Francisco.¹²”

As party members, Mark and Nate were exposed to socialist ideas and had access to information about the important issues taking place at home and internationally. Publications of *The Western Worker* covered relevant news. Headlines of May 14, 1934 provide an example:

“Antifascist Demonstration in Barcelona- Barcelona, Spain, April 30- 150,000 workers joined in a demonstration against fascism in Barcelona, important Spanish seaport, the population of which is about the same as San Francisco’s. Thousands of banners and 2,000 bonfires blazed the worker’s militant opposition to fascism.”¹³

Along with news from around the world and calls for the unemployed to demonstrate, the

¹¹ Howard Zinn. *A People’s History of the United States*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1980: 420.

¹²Nate Thornton, February 2007-April 2008.

¹³ *Western Worker*. *Western Organ of the Communist Party USA*. May 14, 1934. Courtesy of San Francisco State University Labor Archives.

Western Organ of the Communist Party USA informed readers of regional news such as the state election campaign and the numerous strikes taking place, and discussed the vagrancy laws.

Taking part in a larger movement of protest and organization, members of the Young Communist League, such as Nate, distributed leaflets in support of the longshoremen, engaged in fights for relief and against evictions and water shutoffs, and demonstrated in protest against the discrimination against African Americans.¹⁴

Mark and Nate were actively involved in Communist Party activities at a time when party members faced hostility and were arrested for alleged vagrancy and for inciting disturbances in the streets. According to newspaper reports, following the San Francisco general strike, a series of police and civilian raids targeting Communist Party members and their gathering sites took place in San Francisco. Among the buildings wrecked was the Communist Party headquarters, where Mark suffered cuts about the head. The Daily News reported that the interior of raided buildings, such as the Workers' School and the Western Worker, was destroyed.¹⁵

The newspaper quoted Captain John O'Meara, of the police Anti-Radical and Crime Prevention Bureau as saying, "These Communist hangouts raided today and yesterday must not be reopened. Anyone attempting to reopen them will be jailed." Judge Lazarus, admittedly stepping out of his judicial role, expressed his views in court, "I say these men are probably acting to further disturb the industry of the city. They are undesirable citizens, ready to pounce down in time of storm. I recognize we are existing in a time of public peril and I am going to keep that in mind. These men are enemies of the state and government." A couple of months later Mark would be "one of two alleged communists brought to trial, accused of inciting a radical disturbance out in the street".¹⁶

Under those circumstances, facing harassment and limited employment opportunities, Nate and Mark tried to make a living,

"I worked odd jobs now and then, longshoring or whatever I could pick up, mostly long shoring. My father could do a little better because he had some experience. When he came to San Francisco he took a class on how to press men's suits, but there were not any jobs like that,

¹⁴ Ibid, 1934.

¹⁵ San Francisco Daily News. July 17 and 18, 1934. <http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist/>.

¹⁶ Newspaper, No Title. October 11, 1934. Courtesy of the San Francisco Public Library History Center.

so when the time came to go to Spain, we had nothing here. So, why should we stay here? We did not have much family left anyway¹⁷.”

Nate highlights with gratitude the role played by the Communist Party in the recruitment of volunteers for Spain, a process initiated by a Comintern¹⁸ call for aid to the international community.

“We did not go to Spain just by ourselves. We had people here who were very sympathetic with Spain, and the communists did most of it. The party decided to recruit members for Spain. Archie Brown, who was one of our local leaders in the party, had us in mind. The Communist Party here gave us quite a nice sendoff, and in France the communists helped us quite a bit to get over the border.”

The International Brigades, People of the World

Nate’s characterization of the International Brigades reaches beyond the particular national origin or specific roles of its members to highlight their common driving force, to defeat Franco’s fascist forces, and to defend the democratically elected government of Spain,

“I would say that the International Brigades were people of the world, who were unhappy about the way Franco was trying to take over Spain, and the Spanish government. 48, 000 of them went there, from one country or another, to help defeat Franco.”¹⁹

Aware of the critical labor issues happening then in the United States, Nate explains the reasons for their commitment mainly in terms of class consciousness and hope for socialism,

“There was a lot of class consciousness in the country, and especially among the people who had taken on the beliefs of communism so that when they could see that the legally and democratically elected government of Spain was being defeated by Franco, with his Moorish troops from across the Mediterranean Sea, they just gathered together. The conditions here in the US were so bad; there were no jobs for anybody. We had just gotten over the 1934 longshore strikes. I did not volunteer because of that alone. I volunteered because I had hoped to see a

¹⁷ Nate Thornton, February 2007-April 2008.

¹⁸ Danny Duncan Collum and Victor A. Birch. African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: This Ain’t Ethiopia, but it’ll do. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992:24.

¹⁹ Approximately 40,000 volunteers from 53 countries is the estimate provided by Alvah Bessie and Albert Prago. Our Fight. Writings by Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998:26.

Spanish socialist republic, and I thought I would like to live in a socialist republic²⁰.”

As reflected in Funeral Procession (Figure 1), this was ‘a period of mourning, protest, and intense labor organization’²¹. The woodcarving depicts the funeral of Howard Sperry and Nick Bordoise, labor men killed by police on Bloody Thursday. The image of a multitude marching silently and orderly memorializes the lives of those killed and the solemn demonstration of labor’s strength and unity displayed by the longshoremen and their supporters. Nate’s representation of ‘the most moving funeral San Francisco has ever seen’²², speaks of his determination to preserve pieces of history that matter to him.

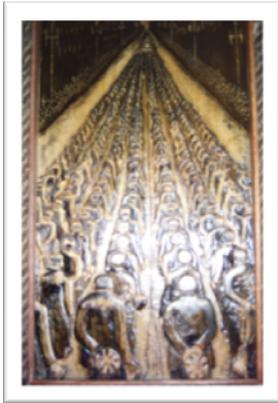


Figure 1: Funeral Procession

Other examples of such resolve are his renditions of popular Spanish images such as The Volunteer, representing a militia man ready to fight, (Figure 2) and El Més Petit de Tots (Figure 3), The Smallest of All, marching along.

Reaching Spain to join the fight was in itself an ordeal for the international volunteers. Those from the United States would not be deterred by the passport stamp reading ‘Not Valid for Travel to Spain’ or by the federal statute which made it illegal for US citizens to enlist in a

²⁰ Nate Thornton, February 2007-April 2008.

²¹ David Selvin. *A Terrible Anger. The 1934 Waterfront and General Strikes in San Francisco*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. 1996:13.

²² *Ibid.* 1996.

foreign army²³.

Nate remembers that in March of 1937 he gathered a few clothes, and began the journey with his father and some other comrades from San Francisco. He also remembers “sitting with a cute girl on the bus to Chicago”, then going on to New York, next, taking a transatlantic boat from New York to Le Havre, France, followed by a bus ride to Paris. The Spanish people acknowledged the newcomers by raising their fists, a greeting that united those who supported the antifascist movement.



Figure 2: The Volunteer-Militiaman

“We stayed in Paris for 2 or 3 days and got equipped for our trip through the border. We were not carrying very much. They had guards, scouts around in case people wanted to cross, during the day anyways. We had guides that got us across and we hiked all night and got into a place called Figueres. It was a fortress on the other side of the Pyrenees in Spain. We stayed there a few days, and then we went to a little town called Albacete and on the way there, on the train, people were raising their fists, showing us that they knew who we were²⁴.”

²³ Danny Duncan Collum and Victor A. Birch. African Americans in the Spanish Civil War: This Ain't Ethiopia, but it'll do. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992:24.

²⁴ Nate Thornton, February 2007-April 2008.

We Were Drivers in Spain

Shortly after arriving in Spain in April of 1937, Nate and Mark were recruited as drivers in Albacete. They had no military training and only basic knowledge of the Spanish language.

“We got to Albacete and stayed there for a couple of weeks, and one day they got us all together out in front of the mess hall and asked if anybody could drive trucks, ambulances, anything, so my father and I stepped out and were drivers²⁵.”

Driving was an essential and valuable skill, which male and female volunteers contributed. Mobile Front, an English language newsletter from Albacete, stated the drivers’ view of their contributions as follows: ‘We came to Spain to join the war against international fascism. Many of us found it necessary to remain behind the lines and render service to assure an organized and efficient rearguard. Work behind the lines is as important for victory in Spain as work at the frontlines. As sincere antifascists, it is our duty to help build and consolidate this rearguard.’²⁶

Nate served in the fronts of Cordoba and Brunete, at the military school in Madrid and at the Ebro front; Mark in the Brunete, Teruel, and Ebro fronts. Nate’s description of his duties confirms the Mobile Front assertion.

“We had what we called ‘Ejército de Tren’, and that is what I got into really. When I was driving ambulances and when there was a battle going on, I would be driving to the front to pick up the wounded and would bring them back to the hospital so that they could be treated, or taking people back to the front. If I was not driving ambulance, I would be driving truck.” After the Brunete offensive was over in the winter of 1937, Nate’s outfit was sent to Teruel.

“It was quite cool, and it started to snow quite a bit. They had just started a battle there, and my dad stayed there with them. I stayed in Madrid. My dad had set up camp up there. He worked on tires and things. When the Teruel offensive was over, something developed on the Ebro River, and our outfit was sent down there. This time I went with them, and I was still driving a truck. I was there until the Ebro offensive was over. We came back and hung around Madrid then for a few months. My dad had come back a couple of months before I did. It was

²⁵ Ibid. February 2007-April 2008.

²⁶ Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks. Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. New York: Routledge, 1996:334.

shortly after that when we came home because I think that was one of the last battles. Franco had taken over by that time and the Spanish government wanted to get us out of there before he got a hold of us²⁷.”

Farewell

The decision of the withdrawal of the International Brigades was announced to the League of Nations by Spanish Primer Minister Juan Negrín in September, 1938. In Nate’s memories the Republican government’s assessment of the impending defeat signaled the time for the surviving volunteers to return home.

“The Spanish government could see that it was not going to be long before they had to give in to Franco, so they put us in camps and set dates to send us back.” For the remaining international volunteers the last months in Spain ‘mixed grief with celebratory public occasions’²⁸.

“I had gone there with the hope of the Spanish Republic becoming a socialist regime, but it did not turn out that way because the United States, Germany, Italy, all the big capitalist countries did not want it. They wanted the capitalist system.” Nate was at a camp when the memorable October 29 farewell gathering in Barcelona took place. He expresses his appreciation for Pasionaria’s tribute to the volunteers, “Wonderful speech she gave! She told us come back, come back!”

The Best Song

An additional dimension to Nate’s record of political activism stems from his love of songs, evidenced by his readings of lyrics, singing, and commenting on their meaning. Holding in his hands the Little Red Book,²⁹ Nate explains.

“This is a book that I have had for many years. It is called Songs of the Workers, To Fan the Flames of Discontent. It is an old Wobbly book. It's got all the old songs in it. It's got The Internationale, which is my favorite song. It's got others like Are You a Wobbly, and Banner of

²⁷ Nate Thornton, February 2007-April 2008.

²⁸ Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks. Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. New York: Routledge, 1996:452.

²⁹ Paul Buhle and Nicole Schullman. Wobblies! A Graphic History of the Industrial Workers of the World. New York: Verso, 2005:274.

Labor, one called The Boss, and one called Casey Jones, the Union Scab³⁰.”

Nate’s preference for songs concerning politics and labor is consistent with his expressed views on internationalism and sympathy with the working class. One of the first songs he ever learned, The Preacher and the Slave, was written by Joe Hill, a poet, artist, songwriter, and labor leader who declared himself a citizen of the world, and pledged allegiance only to the revolutionary working class of all countries³¹.

After singing the chorus of The International, Nate said:

“To me The Internationale is the best song. It takes in the whole world; it’s not the Soviet Union, it’s not the United States. It is not any one or two or three countries, it takes in the whole world: Arise, yee prisoners of starvation, arise, yee wretched of the earth! That is quite a prophecy if you stop to think that under socialism, there will be no classes³².”



Figure 3: El Més Petit de Tots ("The Smallest of All")

³⁰ Nate Thornton, February 2007-April 2008.

³¹ Franklin Rosemont. Joe Hill. The IWW and the Making of a Revolutionary Workingclass Counter-culture. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2002:101.

³² Nate Thornton, February 2007-April 2008.

Conclusions: “Letting People Know about what Happened in Spain”

As documented in the interviews conducted for this Oral History project, Nate’s firsthand testimony speaks of the individual, as well as the collective history of the thousand of men and women who, acting according to their convictions, were willing to fight and to defend Spain from the expanding threat of fascism.

As indicated by Peter Carroll³³, for the majority of veterans the experience of Spain gave meaning to their lives and also shaped their identity. For Nate, the experience of Spain led to other experiences of political activism and international solidarity, including continued support to the labor movement in the San Francisco Bay Area through his participation in the International Longshore and Warehouse Union, as well as support to various international causes. In the decade of the 80s, he joined Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to Nicaragua where they delivered ambulances. As members of a local and international network of supporters and friends, Nate and Corine remain active in various political associations, such as School of the Americas Watch and the association of Veterans of the Lincoln Brigade. In a challenge to the US travel ban, they travelled to Cuba with other veterans, friends and activists in 1993³⁴. “Well if I had not gone to Spain, probably it would not have occurred to me to go to Cuba”, says Nate.

They attended in Spain the 50th anniversary commemoration in 1986, and also the 1996 events, when the international volunteers were granted Honorary Citizenship by the Spanish government. They also travelled to the Soviet Union with Grandmothers for Peace, where they participated in a peace march at Gorki Park.

Nate’s open articulation of political thought and activism is noteworthy given the harassment that Communist Party and Lincoln Brigade members have faced over the years in the United States, “We were listed twice by the FBI, once as the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and also as Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade!”³⁵

Regarding the impact of the Spanish Civil War on the Spanish people and other volunteers, he refers to the victims of the Franco regime:

³³ Peter Carroll. *La Odissea de la Brigada Abraham Lincoln*. Sevilla: Espuela de Plata, 2005:498.

³⁴ Richard Bermack. *The Frontlines of Social Change*. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2005:93.

³⁵ *Ibid.* February 2007-April 2008.

“There were thousands of people massacred after Franco took over, and the ones that escaped went to France and some were put in concentration camps. We were fortunate that we were able to get on a boat and head back to the US. The German participants had it pretty rough. Hitler was still in power there, and he was giving those vets from Germany who fought in Spain a rough time and some from other countries the same thing. Rough!”³⁶”

As proposed by Willa Baum, through this Oral History project, important information of historical interest from a firsthand participant has been collected and preserved³⁷. In addition to that, by offering his relevant testimony of political activism, today Nate is contributing to the preservation of the historical memory, an effort that continues to develop and grow in Spain and other countries around the world. After decades of repression under the government of Franco, followed by many years of silence, today multiple references about the Spanish Civil War and its impact are coming to light³⁸.

Aware of the importance of history, Nate has generously dedicated many hours of his time for the oral history interviews that are the subject of this paper. He expresses his views “with an ageless energy”³⁹:

“I think steps should be taken to let people know about what happened in Spain and how it happened, so that it will not happen again in this world”⁴⁰.”

³⁶ Ibid. February 2007-April 2008.

³⁷ Willa Baum, The Other Uses of Oral History, *The Oral History Review* 34, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 2007):24.

³⁸ 2006 was proclaimed in Spain as the Year of the Historical Memory and in December 2007 the Law of Historical Memory was passed. Ministerio de la Presidencia. Boletín Oficial del Estado. Madrid: 2006-2007. http://www.boe.es/g/es/bases_datos/doc.

³⁹ Jack Hirschman, Poet Laureate of San Francisco, *Izobongo for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. The Volunteer*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 1 (March 2006):21.

⁴⁰ Nate Thornton, February 2007-April 2008.