A Newspaperman in Madrid

David Wurtzel has been reading the diary of Lester Ziffren, the United Press correspondent in Madrid who, seventy years ago this month, witnessed the start of the Spanish Civil War.

On the evening of July 17th, 1936, Lester Ziffren, known to his friends as Ziff, was in Chicote's bar, the place he called 'our favourite thirst-quencher'. He was preparing his nightly radio broadcast to the United States, 'Spain Day by Day'. In the same bar was one of his well-connected friends, the Marquis of Bollarque. 'Have you heard the news?' Bollarque asked. 'It's started.'

Since the afternoon there had been rumours that something was going on in Spanish Morocco. During the course of a long night, Ziff pulled every string and used every stratagem to get the story past the government censors to the outside world. This was his greatest journalistic scoop since coming to Madrid in 1933. The army rebellion in Spanish Morocco signalled the start of a military coup against the Republican government, and the next day, July 18th, much of the Spanish army responded to their generals' call to arms. By the end of the month the rebels controlled about one-third of mainland Spain. Ziff's diary describes the situation in Madrid over the crucial first five months of the Spanish Civil War.

As the Spanish capital instantly became a city of the workers and a city at war, Ziff noted:

> The government with only civil guards, storm guards, police and carabineers to depend on, decided it had to arm the proletariat and it gave revolvers and rifles to the Socialist and Communist youths' organizations and the Anarchists and Syndicalists, so we had a 'red Militia'. They ran about town waving pistols and rifles and frisking pedestrians and demanding identification documents ... Lads and men and sweet, black-eyed black-haired senoritas shouldering rifles. The girls will probably be tagged 'Red Carmens' abroad but the censor says there's nothing 'red' in Spain. That is, we can't say so.

Lester Ziffren in Madrid, 1936.

The soldiers in the Montana barracks in Madrid rose unsuccessfully against the government on July 20th. Afterwards, Ziff went along to see things for himself:

> Couldn't get inside the loyal line because I didn't have a gun. They say over 200 persons were killed at the Montana. When we entered the barracks we found numerous officers who were said to have committed 'suicide'. Maybe.

Later he describes rebel snipers operating from the roof opposite his office. 'Shooting began as I was lifting the cup to my lips. I moved near a doorway to get a glimpse. A bullet stopped a few feet from my head so I moved and moved quickly.' All private cars in the city were commandeered – 'the anarcho-syndicalists succeeded in getting most of the Rolls Royces, Hispano-Suizas, etc. Plenty of them were wrecked.' By evening the next day calm had been restored to the city. Ziff reported that no one wore a hat or a tie – 'that's bourgeois and this is a hell of a time to be a bourgeois.' This did not prevent the militia from lunching at the Ritz or the Savoy hotels. The official salute was a raised fist and you either said *salud* ('health') or *abur* (Basque for goodbye) but not *adios*, which contained the Spanish word for God.

A week later, Ziff and his colleagues moved into the office:

> We sleep on mattresses, on piles of newspapers, on chairs; we eat out of cans because the restaurant keeper across the street is short on grub. In the morning, you have to get coffee early if you want milk with it because most of the milk goes to the numerous Red Cross hospitals which have been set up in hotels, club houses and private palaces and the supply of cafés is limited.

Writing to his parents in Illinois on August 9th, Ziff told them that he had been nowhere

> ... because there isn't any place to go to, nothing but work and sleep and work and sleep seven days a week, fourteen or sixteen or eighteen hours a day. Weather is wonderful. Sunshine and sunshine and plenty hot and it's all so beautiful it's hard to believe that Spaniards are killing each other in the worst civil war that has occurred in any part of the world since the Russian revolution.

Still, he added, he 'couldn't walk out on this story for anything otherwise why be a newspaperman?'

On August 29th, the first bombs fell on the city, landing in the war ministry garden. There were no more air raids for a while, but everyone lived in a state of heightened alert. The British, taking no chances, sent two hundred gas masks to their embassy.

Ziff took a nostalgic walk down to the bullfighting area around the Calle Victoria, 'where Ernest Hemingway and I used to strip and enjoy fried shrimp and fresh "bola" cheese washed down with beer'. Two tables away two old men were sitting with two younger men, professional flamenco singers. With a bottle of Gonzalez Byass sherry to hand, they discussed old time flamenco songs and each, to stress his point, would sing a bit from some composition:

> ... all different types of Andalusian songs which require that rhythm and timing so peculiar to Spanish dancing and voice control which would make some lyric sopranos listen enviously. And

Volunteers prepare to defend the Republic, July 23rd, 1936.

outside in the street militia dashed around with revolvers strapped to their hips, participating in the task of defending Madrid.

On November 6th, as the Nationalist army advanced towards Madrid, the government evacuated to Valencia. Ziff filed a report that Nationalist forces could have walked into Madrid there and then, had Franco's intelligence not failed him. News of the government's departure became public the next day and led to a huge popular determination to defend the city. The Nationalists launched their attack on November 8th but failed to take the city.

On November 14th Madrid came under renewed aerial bombardment. Three nights later Ziff was driving around the city: 'More bombs drove us into a fish store where I helped several aged women dressed in black, muttering their fear, into a makeshift cellar,' while incendiaries fell in the Gran Via 'as if they were flares marking off a gridiron'. He was running towards the Puerta del Sol when two bombs hit it 'and ripped up streetcar tracks, set fire to buildings alongside the ministry of finance and smashed in the subway.' Refugees ran through the streets clutching blankets and valuables. Burst water mains shot water in the air. 'Panic. Terror.'

On November 26th, between fifty and sixty 'evacuateds' left the U.S. embassy, where Ziff was now living, in buses provided by the Spanish government. A Virginian chicken farmer remained behind in charge of food and operations. There was no heating or hot water in the building. Ziff noted: 'When I came back to the embassy tonight, you could have cut the sadness and depressed atmosphere with a knife,' but the next evening, the newspapermen staying there banded together to buy a case of sherry and threw a party for the others, 'in an effort to drive the blues away. It was a success.'

Ziff went to look at the destruction in the Arguelles and Rosales districts following an air raid on December 1st:

> Streets covered with debris. People digging in ruins for kindling wood. Fires. Barricades. A garage with a motorcycle standing straight up in the air, held by debris ... An orphan asylum afire. I asked a woman whether anyone was in the place at the time. She said yes. Her companion, another woman, said no. The first one said under her breath to her friend, 'Tell him yes, he's a foreigner.'

During a lull in the fighting on December 9th, Ziff lunched at the Gran Via hotel with other newspaperman. A member of the International Brigade, an Italian-American from Connecticut, told him that he had joined up when he was broke in Marseilles. He had to leave his passport there: '...curiosity and no dough. His curiosity has been satisfied and he wants to leave but said "there isn't a chance. They would rather knock you off rather than let you go."' When Ziff tried to file a story about him, the censor, an Austrian, said 'do you think I am going to permit this to go out?' and tore it up in front of him.

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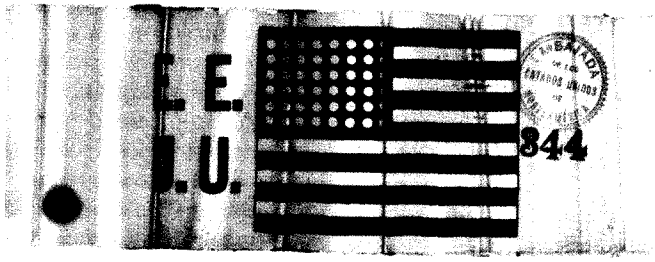
One morning later that week when Ziff got to the office, he was told that the London bureau wanted to speak to him: 'You've got a problem.' Franco had been shown the story about his intelligence failing him on November 6th and had told the United Press correspondent that 'when he gets to Madrid, he is going to take care of Ziffren.' As Ziff wrote to his parents at the time:

> They promised jail and more. It will be a long time before they take Madrid, if they ever do, but I felt that the threat would affect my work, virtually making me a belligerent. I decided that the best thing I could do would be to leave. I didn't want to be in the position of being personally interested in Madrid not falling. I was doing an objective reporting job. I'm a newspaperman, not a red or white partisan.

As it happened, the Mexican ambassador was leaving Madrid for home. Ziff travelled with him to Valencia and then via Barcelona to Paris, from where he made it back to America. Interviewed in March 1937, he said, 'Even now I have violent nightmares and wake up in a cold sweat. When I start talking about Spain I start weeping for no reason at all.' ■

David Wurtzel is a barrister and legal skills trainer. A cousin of Lester Ziffren's by marriage, he has researched his career through interviews with him and through his diaries and papers. On April 30th, he attended Ziff's 100th birthday party.



The armband Ziffren wore at the front.