

Author: Quim Torra

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CHRISTMAS ON BOARD

«How can we allow all this? How will we justify it in the future? What are we waiting for? Supporting them is not only an act of justice, but a vindication of our own history»

They had boarded in Marseille, some day in December. It was the start of the end of an escape which had begun nearly a year earlier, during the last days of republican Catalonia. On a mobile library from the library service, along those roads that were getting busy with the big exodus of a people moving on defeated and silently.

During that first year of exile, everything was happening fast, except for the thousands of Catalans still waiting at the internment camps in southern France. The outbreak of WWII provoked a new exodus, a faster-paced one. The future had to be decided in a matter of seconds. Dozens of families decided to go to South America.

And Christmas arrived. In Prades, the families of Pompeu Fabra and Joan Alavedra sang songs next to the nativity scene. In Paris, the Carrasco i Formiguera family was crying for the missing father. Lluís Companys was with Lluïset, his beloved son. And thousands of Catalans were managing to find a minute to wish each other Merry Christmas at the camps of Argelès or Saint-Cyprien or in dozens of small French villages. Soon, many others joined the resistance and, chased by a tragic fate, ended up in the worst possible of hells – Mauthausen.

There were also Catalans in the USSR. Some Catalan aviators moved to Moscow. They would also be victims of totalitarianism and would end up at the endless Gulag camps.

Aboard the Florida, the mother of Francesc Trabal arranged a small nativity scene, and so did the wife of Joan Oliver, using some figurines from the Provence, to which she added a "field made with a green scarf and an aluminium foil star", while the children of Benguer sang Christmas carols "with the accompaniment of just the water coming from the bow". Trabal himself, the following December, in a magazine called *Germanor* ('Siblinghood'), explained: "A great peace helped the boat head to Rio de Janeiro – the water was not even moving. No light unveiled our voyage towards immensity. We were just like a fleck that the European wind was blowing to that side of the world and that a patriotic Basque priest blessed in the middle of the night humming a peace and faith hosanna which was making us feel brave. We raised our eyes towards the infinite, in that sweet night hour, and we discovered the Christmas angel guiding us. Soon after, we saw the first lights of the Americas, our hearts leaping".

It felt as if, that Christmas in 1939, every single thing stopped and, for the first time, the exiles were aware of the lost homeland, a thought neglected until that moment in the routine for survival.

Christmas in exile! Possibly one of the saddest moments. Thousands of citizens all around the world will live this year a Christmas in exile. And many of them on board, too, in the cold and enduring storms, though not on a ship this time but on a shattered and old float. And they will feel how we felt and miss what we missed. But they won't have the time to look at the sky or the stars, and, instead of feeling peaceful, they will feel scared. They have lost everything. They can only trust in the good faith of those with good intentions. The night will be as dark as pitch.

How can we allow all this? How will we justify it in the future? What are we waiting for? Supporting them is not only an act of justice, but a vindication of our own history.

Merry Christmas.