

Musings from My Hermitage by Larry F. Ginsberg

“PREMATURELY ANTI-FASCIST” Bill Susman aka William Susman aka Robert Ellis



Bill Susman in Spain, 1938

President Ronald Reagan, defending private U.S. citizens fighting with the Contras in Nicaragua against the Sandinista Regime, invoked the Abraham Lincoln Brigade as part of “a long, honorable tradition.” But Reagan further argued that the Brigade fought on “the wrong side” in defending the Loyalists and the Spanish Republican Government against the 1936 right-wing Nationalist coup led by Francisco Franco.

Lincoln Brigade and WWII veteran William Susman retorted: “The wrong side was soon to be the side we were opposing in World War II. If Hitler and Mussolini were alive, they would be supporting the Contras.”

Homage to the International Brigades from recruitment posters.

ALL THE PEOPLE OF THE WORLD ARE IN THE INTERNATIONAL BRIGADES AT THE SIDE OF THE SPANISH PEOPLE!

GREED, MILITARISM, WAR – THIS IS FASCISM! UNITE TO DESTROY IT.



Picasso Guernica in support of the Spanish Republic

Most historians today regard the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) as the first effort to stop Hitler and Mussolini from spreading fascism across Europe. Thousands of Jews, mostly adherents of the political left, from 53 countries joined the Loyalist Forces in the Spanish Civil War against Franco and ultimately world-wide fascism. Thousands of other Jews were involved in fundraising, solidarity campaigns and rescue of Spanish Republican refugees. In excess of 10,000 Jewish men and women, probably over 30% of all the International Brigade Fighters, fought against Franco and the victorious fascists.

Bill Susman was one of those 10,000 Jews who served with the International Brigades in Spain. He was born September 1915 in either Bethel or New Haven, CT, raised in Bridgeport and the Bronx, and died in Sarasota, Florida, February 21, 2003. His father and mother were charter members of the Workers’ Party of America, which morphed into the Communist Party after a split within the Socialist Party on the issue of workers’ loyalty during World War I.

WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE, WE HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT OUR CHAINS.

Growing up, Bill’s home was a meeting place for the radical left. “People would come to our house for meetings and they would engage in hot debates and arguments about who was right – Trotsky or Lenin or Bukharin, whom I was convinced and persuaded were all Jews. After all, the reports about what they were saying came through the Jewish Press and they all seemed to speak Yiddish perfectly...”

“... And if you asked me why I went to Spain. I would tell you I was born to go to Spain because with this background there was nothing else in my future but to do precisely that. I wouldn’t have been carrying out my program had I not gotten involved.”

Perhaps a third of those who fought in the International Brigade were Jewish. There were left-wing intellectuals and workers; communists and anarchists; writers and poets; blacks and whites. Oliver Law, the first Commander of the Lincolns, was also the first black American Officer to lead white troops in combat. They were Jews and non-Jews who realized that fascism had to be stopped and they knew what was happening in

Germany. Bill Susman knew and has stated: “The Holocaust hadn’t started yet, but the arrests and concentration camps had. When I hear people say they didn’t know, it was too late, it makes my blood curdle. WE KNEW SO THE GOVERNMENT KNEW.”



Falling Republican Youth Soldier during Battle of Cerro Muriano

In December 1937, Bill Susman, a former member of the NY National Guard 258th Field Artillery and a seaman, crossed the Atlantic and hiked the Pyrenees to aid the Legal Republican Government of Spain against the fascists insurgents led by Franco and aided by the Nazi German Condor Legion and the Italian Fascist Corpo Truppe Volontarie and Royal Italian Navy. The Loyalist Spanish Republican Forces were aided by the Soviet Union and the International Brigades. Before leaving for Spain, Susman had recruited volunteers for the IBs in Puerto Rico. He served as a Teniente with the Estado Mayor of the XV International Brigade, the Abraham Lincoln Battalion. Susman was wounded in the left elbow by machine gun fire and returned to the U.S. on December 20, 1938, where he continued to work diligently on behalf of the Republic.

Following Pearl Harbor, Susman, possibly using the alias Robert Ellis, enlisted in the U.S. Army. He remained stateside, classified as a “security risk” being “prematurely anti-fascist” until 1944. Then Sergeant Susman was sent to the European Theater of Operation where he fought in the Battle of the Bulge.

Following the war, Susman remained active in left-wing radical anti-fascist causes. He worked as a producer and ultimately a Vice President of MPO Videotronics, focusing on the production of political documentaries related to U.S. relations with Latin America, despite being blacklisted by McCarthyism.

Susman created the Emergency Committee for the Defense of Latin American Filmmakers following the 1973 coup in Chile in which the General Pinochet overthrew the duly elected government of Salvador Allende. This committee publicized the identities of filmmakers who “disappeared” during the Pinochet dictatorship, thus saving many lives. He used the same strategy to oppose the Argentine dictatorship in 1976. In 1978, Susman raised funds to purchase ambulances and other supplies to support the Sandinista government in Nicaragua against the insurgent U.S.-supported Contras.

Susman deeply cared about his service with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and the Spanish Republic in 1937-1938. In 1978 he founded the Archives of the Lincoln Brigade (ALBA) a documentation center on the Spanish Civil War located at New York University. Since 1998 NYU has held an annual ALBA/Bill Susman Conference on important, usually left-wing, world events.

Ernest Hemingway in his 1939 prose poem “On the American Dead in Spain,” stated: “The fascists may spread over the land, blasting their way with weight of metal brought from other countries. They may advance aided by traitors and by cowards. They may destroy cities and villages and try to hold the people in slavery. But you cannot hold any people in slavery.”



Entrance of the Republican Troops in Teruel



Battle of Teruel - December 1937