

BOECILLO MEMORIES

Having recovered from the shock administered by the Scottish bishops when they nominated me rector of the Royal Scots College in Spain and having made as many preparations as I could for the totally unexpected and daunting honour, I reached the college and assumed my duties on July 2, 1965. It was the fifteenth anniversary of my ordination (in Rome) to the priesthood. Year later, as I ended my years in the college and in Spain and left on the return journey to Scotland on July 2, 1974, I had been rector for exactly nine years. Since both the beginning and the end of my term occurred when the college community was living in the *Casa Grande*, the college's summer house in Boecillo, I calculate that I enjoyed exactly nine summers (extending from late June to as late in September as we could) with the community in the memorable and pleasant experience of life in and around the somewhat primitive but exceptionally relaxing house in Boecillo .

There was a basic daily programme of Mass and three meals; in addition we tried to have a little serious occupation for the students to undertake (I think we suggested studying some Scottish Church History and making some attempts to improve our abilities in Spanish) but, on the whole, there was an amount of free time for the students to spend as they wished, hopefully in useful pursuits, whether intellectual or recreational. As well as a tennis court for the enthusiastic, there were two principal pastimes. First, a daily walk down to the River Duero about four o'clock for a swim, or a trip up and down the river on an old boat with two students rowing and others occupied by the necessary duty of 'bailing out' and then, all safely ashore, making tea (brewed in a cauldron with water collected from a handy spring and accompanied with *galletas* (biscuits) as many as one could manage without being detected. Second, a round of golf on our home-made six-hole course laid out on rough ground adjoining the *Casa Grande*. The holes were little more than 100 yards in length but what they lacked in distance was compensated by unique hazards, viz., no fairways but only rough scrub and rocks; no greens but (provided one's ball had been located after driving off) only empty cans, each sunk in some small and fairly level sandy spot to provide what served as the green and the hole. Quite often, after supper, we would gather at the entrance porch of the house and one of the students who played the guitar would lead the community singing, mostly Spanish and Latin American songs of which we had a considerable repertoire. There was also relaxed conversation (in English) and occasional bouts of Spanish, perhaps taking advantage of where we were seated by asking the Spanish for such words as entrance hall (*zaguán*) and skirting board/wainscot (*zócalo*) – or similar diverting and fascinating topics!

The *Casa Grande* is about a kilometre from the built-up area of Boecillo. Our community, therefore tended to be somewhat secluded. But there were exceptions. At the annual patronal feast in early September, we went to the village church and took part in the Solemn High Mass and procession. On that day in the late afternoon, the square outside the church was the scene of a *novillada* when, with spectators clustered behind protective fences, some young bulls were, one at a time, set free to be 'fought' by a number of local would-be *toreros* (and one or two of the students); the animals were not injured, even less killed, while their human opponents were liable only to suffer the embarrassment of being knocked down by their challengers. While the ordinary public watched from behind the barricades, the

'dignitaries' (including invited guests such as the rector of the college) were taken up to the first floor of the *ayuntamiento* to be accommodated on chairs set out on the open-air balcony. The purpose was not only to give the dignitaries a good and comfortable view of proceedings but also, if possible, to entice one or more of the animals to enter the building and be driven up the stairs and out onto the balcony to the great confusion of the young bull(s), the much greater alarm of the dignified ones and the entertainment of 'the rude and scoffing multitude'. The plan succeeded on at least one occasion, although there were no reports of fatalities.

The family who were caretakers of our property, of both buildings and vineyards, resided in a house which adjoined the college building. The husband and father, Mariano Martinez by name, was also the *alcalde* (provost) of Boecillo and was therefore a useful link for us with the local authority. He was renowned for his familiarity with Spanish proverbs and his unfailing ability to illustrate his conversation with appropriate examples. On one occasion, a sunny day in February, I had invited the students to accompany me for a day in the country – specifically, to undertake a necessary item in viticulture, to dig beside the root of each vine a small hole into which some commercial fertiliser was placed. Mariano arrived and had a good look at our work. He then told us that there was a Spanish proverb apt for the occasion – the wording is rather lewd but you may be able to figure it out if I tell you that it is about the relative productive abilities of a hundred swallows and an ox, our efforts being likened to those of the former. It is a remark that those who heard it remember with amusement, recalling our enjoyment of the day out, enhanced by the February sun, the fresh air, the *bocadillos* which we had brought and which were washed down by quantities of our college wine. We may not have been of much use in the vineyard but we enjoyed ourselves!

When Mariano retired, his successor as *cachicán* was the quiet and reserved Angel Lozano with his wife Leonor and their family. Prior to coming to Boecillo, he had been a *resinero* (looking after pine woods where the trees were tapped for resin) but he adapted successfully to the tasks of viticulture and viniculture, the wine when ready being sold locally as well as being used for our Masses and drunk at lunch and supper by priests and students. Angel and his wife were very friendly. Now and again they would invite me to have supper with them in their house. Angel's nightly dish was *sopa castellana* but, for me, one of their pigeons was the usual fare.

The important family name in Boecillo was Gamazo. There were several branches of the family, including the Conde de Gamazo himself. The branch with which, in those days, we had more contact comprised father (Don José María Gamazo), mother, grown-up sons and daughters with their children, assembled each summer from various parts of Spain to spend the long holidays together in their large house (with garden and swimming pool) in Boecillo. They were a friendly, happy crowd and, since there was a chapel in the house, one of the priests in the college was asked to celebrate Mass for the family each Sunday. That was followed by a noisy breakfast with the family. At first, I found this an ordeal for me since my inadequate Spanish plus the conversation of several people speaking at once meant that answering their questions or thinking of something original to add to the general hubbub of talk was beyond me. But it was a good experience and they were kind people. I preserve a

copy of a poem (in fact, two sonnets) which D. José María had written and which I am happy to transcribe as a postscript for this essay. It is about a dining table which a carpenter had made from the wood of some ancient barrels that had once been used to store the wine produced from the family vineyards.

In addition to contacts with Boecillo residents, we had the pleasure during the summer months, of hosting many visitors, mainly bishops and priests, from Scotland. They came, most of them, with plans to spend a couple of weeks in Spain, sometimes wholly in our summer house and others partly with us and partly with plans to visit other parts of Spain as well. On one occasion, the typical variety of plans was neatly summed up by the following exchange between two priests from the north of Scotland on the evening of their arrival: "Well, Tom, where shall we go tomorrow? Burgos or Segovia or Tordesillas?" "Och, Charlie, why don't we just stay here. You know, when you've seen Fochabers, it spoils you for everywhere else!" Quite often, after guests' arrival, we had *gazpacho* as the first item of the meal, suspecting (and perhaps hoping) that they would think that our housekeeper-cook had forgotten to heat the soup served to them and had placed them in a dilemma, either to point out the mistake or to be brave and polite and just say nothing. One evening we had a double embarrassment – a large beetle fell from the ceiling right into the bowl of *gazpacho* just served to a guest and then, after the meal and on our way upstairs, we had the misfortune to find a snake wriggling its way up on the same staircase.

Most of us in the community, both students (usually about twenty) and priests (rector, vice-rector, spiritual director) were anxious to understand and to speak Spanish as well as we could – vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, intonation – and it was gratifying to be aware of the success of the efforts that we made, as well as suffering the occasional inevitable embarrassment. I knew hardly any Spanish when I arrived in Spain and was aware that I had to learn to speak the language as well as possible and also, of course, to understand what Spaniards were saying to me. It wasn't easy but I had the benefit of two colleagues who had been students in the college for six years before ordination and who shielded me at the start and coached me patiently. I also found constant use of *Everyday Spanish* (one of the *Teach Yourself Books*) helpful as well as daily reading of the newspaper (*El Norte de Castilla*). Gradually I found myself able to cope linguistically and to gain confidence, though always aware of my tendency to make mistakes in addition to the embarrassment of not understanding what I was hearing.

In this general connection, our most frequent summer visitor was Mr Derek Wagg, a lecturer in Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Edinburgh and a person whose specialism was Spanish history and philology. Derek was usually with us at Boecillo for several weeks each year. During his stay he would give us some talks and informal classes which I found very interesting and enjoyable. He spoke about various parts of Spain which he knew well (especially Covadonga in Asturias), about the history of the Iberian peninsula and, in particular, about the era of the Moslem occupation and the *Reconquista*. He gave us details of the derivation of Spanish from earlier languages (Latin and Arabic) and how it had developed into its present form with its special characteristics; and he urged us to avoid the temptation to speak Spanish in a slovenly manner in a false attempt at fluency. He had many

anecdotes to share, one of which he recalled from a visit to a school in a village in Asturias where the children wanted to let him hear a poem they had learned and which, to his dismay, began:

¡Fuera, fuera, Protestantes; viva la religión!

Que queremos ser amantes del Sagrado Corazón.

Yes, happy memories of summers at Boecillo and glad of the chance to record them in print!

Historia de una mesa

I

(Boecillo, 27 agosto 1949)

La viga del lagar de mis abuelos
que tantos “moyos” estrujó de vino
al peso de los años y el destino
yace ahora destrozada por los suelos.

El tiempo que a ellos elevó a la gloria
a la viga comió de la polilla,
del árbol que fue orgullo de Castilla
apenas queda ya frágil memoria.

Diferencias son estas esenciales
entre el alma que sube hasta los cielos
y los caducos bienes terrenales.

Ayúdame Señor con tus consuelos
a perder los afectos materiales
y emprender hacia Ti más altos vuelos!

II

(Boecillo, 27 agosto 1959)

La viga del lagar de mis abuelos
que hace diez años reputé perdida
ahora ha vuelto a cobrar más larga vida
y no está ya tirada por los suelos.

De mi imaginación súbita empresa
por cuidadosa mano ejecutada
convirtió la madera abandonada
en familiar acogedora mesa.*

Quiere el Señor que se use de tal modo
en comer y beber sobriamente
que en ella mi prole empine el codo.

Confiado en su diestra omnipotente
busque siempre en su reino antes de todo
y siempre lo demás tranquilamente.

*There are a number of wine cellars (bodegas) excavated into the escarpment or steep bank which separates two land levels (viz., that of the Duero and that of the houses of Boecillo, including the Casa Grande). Several of the bodegas (including the former Scots' bodega) are now popular restaurants. During my time in Spain, 'our' bodega – a network of nooks and crannies - was still in use as our wine cellar in

which were a number of oak barrels in which wine was kept until needed. Several of the barrels were no longer in use when the college reopened in 1950. The rector, Mgr Philip Flanagan, following the example of D. José María Gamazo, engaged the same two skilful carpenters, the brothers Baraja Salgado, to dismantle the surplus casks and fashion the wood into a handsome dining table and a series of pews for the college reliquary chapel.