



Excavation at Loma de la Montija

The focus of my studies back in the States is Modern Irish History and Literature. This spring I wrote a research paper on Irish participation in the Spanish Civil War. I focused specifically on the writings of an Irish socialist who fought in the International Brigade, but I also did extensive research on the Irish fascist movement and their participation in Franco's army. Our program director, Juanjo knew I had been researching the topic of the Spanish Civil War, so he suggested I volunteer in the excavation of a mass unmarked grave in Northern Spain. In early April I joined Aranzadi—a team of scientists and social scientists—to help with the excavation of 24 bodies found a mass grave outside a small town, called Loma de la Montija. The bodies belonged to the sympathizers of the republican government murdered by the supporters of the fascist army in the summer of 1936. Of the 24 victims there were 22 men, one woman, and one boy between 15 and 18 years of age.

A typical day started with breakfast around eight or eight-thirty, so that the team could be at the fosa—the grave—by nine to begin digging. Once the team uncovered the bones, they spent hours painstakingly cleaning the bones by removing the remaining mud and dirt. This process lasted for about three and half days. The team worked from nine until around eleven, when we would break for “amaiketako”—a Basque word for “eleven o'clock snack”—on good days this entailed morcilla—blood sausage, for which the regions of Northern Spain are famous—chorizo, cheese, bread, and cider—also typical of the region. After the amaiketako the team continued working until around three o'clock, at which point we headed back to the hostel for lunch. After lunch we would have coffee and then return to the excavation site around five to continue working until around eight or nine. We ate dinner at ten; it was rarely edible. Around midnight, Paco—the rather despotic and curmudgeonly director—would hold a meeting.

I partook in this schedule for about a day and a half, before deciding that my background in

history would be better put to use in other aspects of the excavation. On the afternoon of day two, after returning to the fosa after lunch, rather than return to digging, I observed the interviews conducted by the two social anthropologists. The social anthropologists working for Aranzadi were interviewing the family members of the people thought to be in the grave—DNA tests are still needed to confirm their identities. Of the different portions of the Aranzadi project these interviews interested me the most; of the work we did, they also related to most closely to my field of study, history. Very few of the interview subjects had actually known the people supposedly in the fosa, but they clearly related to this part of their familial history on a very personal and emotional level. The families were a large presence through the duration of the excavation, and, from my understanding of it, instrumental in the locating of the fosa and coordinating the excavation with Aranzadi.

The most interesting person I spoke to was the wife of a man whose father was thought to be one of the victims in the grave. Aranzadi needed a DNA sample from the man to send to another team in a lab to confirm the man in the fosa's identity. The man had fairly advanced dementia, so he could not answer the team's questions about his father or the time period in general. While the social anthropologists brought him to Paco for the DNA sample extraction, I sat with his wife; we got to talking. She told me her father had been the town's mayor while the murders had taken place. She recounted how though her father had been a conservative, when the local priest had approached him asking him to denounce republican and socialist sympathizers, but he refused. Instead, he warned those he knew had been singled out for their political views and warned them not to try to escape to the mountains, because soldiers would be waiting there. Apparently, they did not listen and were caught. Over and over, this woman kept repeating, "Es una historia muy triste, muy triste." This conversation stuck in my mind, because it was the only hint I received that the Civil War and this era in Spanish history was not something completely black and white; or that perhaps a great deal of its tragedy sprang from this. Unlike many of the others present, this woman's sadness was not all tinged with anger or indignation. Also unlike the others, she had witnessed the violence of the war and subsequent years firsthand.

By the third day most of the anthropologists had finished most of their interviews and back in the fosa it was time to start removing the bones. The team attacked bone removal in teams of two or three. Each group focused on removing one body before moving onto another one, placing bones and any other artifacts that had survived—most often shoes and buttons—in labeled bags to be sent the lab for identification later. I worked with two young archeologists. Bone removal lasted until the end of the following day. With all the bones removed, we took pictures, refilled the hole, cleaned up, and left.

Looking back on this experience, I have to say that, although at the time I found it unpleasant—the work was harder than I expected and the director, Paco, was brusque and unwelcoming—I can now find great value in it and have discovered that I learned a lot. Going on this trip I expected to be incensed or outraged by what I saw. I wanted to feel the way the families did or even the other team members. When I did not, I was initially ashamed at being unmoved; however, I realized as I continued working and had a chance to speak to some of the family members, especially the daughter of the old mayor, that my lack of an emotional response allowed me to see things that others could not. I noticed that most of the people involved in the excavation—people either a part of the team or family members of the victims—were really angry about what had occurred and understandably so; however, aside from the one old woman I had talked to, there was no acknowledgement that this was a war fought by two sides, both of which committed atrocities. While Franco's sympathizers executed democrats in their strong-holdings, the socialist forces massacred priests and nuns in the streets. I think being an outsider gave me the objectivity to realize—like the old woman said—this was a sad, sad history, but not only because there were 24 bodies in an unmarked grave in Loma de la Montija, but because an entire

country tore itself apart.

In addition to this, I realized I am as passionate about my own field of study—Irish history—as these people were about Spanish history and the events that had led to this excavation nearly 100 years later. I realized I feel the same outrage about events in Ireland's past, as the Aranzadi team and the victims' families felt about the Civil War. While this passion drives my studies, this dig forced me to see that this passion, while in many ways an asset, leaves me with the same blind spots that I observed in the group at the fosa. This experience has made me approach my own studies with more caution and attention to maintaining a firmer sense of objectivity than I had perhaps practiced in the past. This dig helped me to become a better student of history and I think forced me to grow a great deal morally and intellectually.

Monika Wnuk

Aranzadi Archaeological Dig

Loma de Montija, Burgos May 2011

“Me duele hasta las pestañas!” I remember saying upon waking up on day 2 of the archeological dig in Loma de Montija, Burgos. My first dig, this one was especially challenging both emotionally and physically. We weren't digging for well-preserved fossils; we were digging for the remains of Republican victims of the Spanish Civil War, brutally shot with their hands tied behind their backs and thrown unsystematically into a hole about 3 by 3 meters in length. As some of the archeologists of Aranzadi, the group of archaeologists who had been called to the site by family members of the individuals in the grave, shared stories about other digs where bodies were well preserved—usually in sand— it was clear from the beginning that this was not going to be one of those sites. Set in the middle of a field, the remains were preserved in a thick clay material, making extraction and cleaning of the remains particularly difficult. In addition to the pressure I felt working with such skilled archaeologists (some of them had participated in 200 digs!), there was added pressure from the families looking on as their relatives were extracted from the grave. Although the dig was not easy in any sense, it was an unforgettable experience that I'm proud to share with my friends and family through pictures and stories.

The Spanish Civil War (1936-39) was nothing short of complex, brutal, and unforgiving. While many different groups fought on each side, essentially the fight was a coup by the 'rebels' seeking to take down the Second Spanish Republic. To provide a sense of ideologies, the rebel group was supported by a number of conservative groups including the Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right, monarchists such as the Carlists, and the Fascist Falange. The coup was partially successful and left General Francisco Franco in power of a conservative dictatorship supported by Nazi Germany, the Kingdom of Italy, and Portugal. Franco would be in power for another 40 years of repression and unwarranted violence. The period of repression was riddled with casualties. Loyalties were stated and known. If an individual spoke out against the government or the Church, they risked persecution and quite frequently death.

Standing at the site where individuals suspected of subscribing to a different ideology were brutally murdered for alleged free-thinking just a few decades earlier was simply unreal. Coming from the United States where I've only known ideological and religious tolerance, it was hard to imagine that such tolerance was far from practiced during the times under Franco. People are just now beginning to feel comfortable talking about all that they experienced. It has taken the greater part of a century to regain trust in Spain and its liberation. As I watched and listened to the family members record their stories for Aranzadi, I realized the great contrast of their honesty and fearlessness with what their relatives must have experienced. Some relatives were still too afraid to speak on tape about the

experience. Forty years of fear are not easily forgotten.

One of the most rewarding parts of the experience was hearing the family members speak about their relatives who were in the grave. What struck me was how normal the lives of the victims seemed. Many were farmers, husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers. They were completely normal people who lived the wrath of rumors.

There was a lot of controversy in the neighborhood about the dig itself. Some people thought that digging up the past was a bad idea, that the victims in the grave should rest in peace. I understood, though, that this service was requested by the families. The families showed up every day to check on the progress, participated by sharing their stories, and were genuinely excited about laying their relatives to rest in a place of their choice. While the work involved hunching over on your knees for hours digging, clawing, and scraping, it was definitely an experience I will never forget and completely recommend.