



»MONTBLANCH, NEAR BARCELONA«

**Investigation about seven photos of
Robert Capa**

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1 ABSTRACT

The *Definitive Collection*² of Robert Capa's photos contains seven pictures (323-329) with title containing "Montblanch, near Barcelona". In this contribution we demonstrate that the photos were actually taken not taken in that town, but rather in the nearby village of Les Masies. We show evidence that these photos and those not found in the Definitive Collection but shown e.g. in *Hearts of Spain*³ were taken in what today is the Youth Hostel of Les Masies, a small village near Poblet, a local monastery of historic importance.

2 EXPOSE

In his biography of Capa⁴, Whelan mentions that

»On October 25 Capa and Chim (who had joined his friend in Barcelona) drove out to Montblanch, where government and military leaders were to bid farewell to a large delegation of volunteers of all nationalities. From a balcony, Prime Minister Negrín, André Marty (commander of the International Brigades) and Generals Rojo, Modesto, and Lister addressed the men assuring them that they had not fought in vain. As they listened to the speeches and sang the anthem of the Spanish Republic, the volunteers were filled with emotion; it was on their strong, good faces –registering determination and hope as well as sadness and anxiety—that Capa focused.«

Apart from photos 323-329 of the *Definitive Collection* there is other evidence of this farewell act of the Brigades. In fact, it is on this 25 of October that Negrín promises the Brigadiers the Spanish nationality, should they want it, after the war. Literally, he says: »The Republic recognizes your right to claim the Spanish citizenship when the war ends and with that we will honor all of you.«⁵

There was certain doubt, nevertheless, as to where actually –with the exactitude of the local perspective– this act took place. Almost all the important newspapers of the period report the act, but possibly due to the proximity of the front (at that moment situated near Lleida, a mere 30km away) no concrete names are mentioned. In the *La Vanguardia* we find the comment:

² Richard Whelan, *Robert Capa: the definitive collection*, Phaidon (London, 2001).

³ *Heart of Spain: Robert Capa's photographs of the Spanish Civil War*, Aperture (New York, 1999)

⁴ Richard Whelan, "*Robert Capa: a Biography*", Alfred A. Knopf (New York, 1985)

⁵ *La República os reconoce el derecho a reclamar la ciudadanía española cuando la guerra termine y con ella honraremos todos*

»...unos miles de hombres de 43 nacionalidades distintas, se hallaban ayer formados en un recinto cuajado de banderas españolas – muchas llegadas directamente de los campos de batalla – próximo a cierto pueblecito que tiene alto puesto en la historia de Cataluña«⁶

»...some thousands of men of 43 different nationalities were concentrated yesterday in a recinto cuajado of Spanish banners – many of which came directly from the battlefields – near a certain small village which holds an importance place in the history of Catalonia.«

Maybe the unknown journalist of La Vanguardia who wrote this article did want to give a hint as to where the act had taken place: the literal translation of the Spanish word *pueblecito* [small village] into Catalan is *Poblet*.

The name of Poblet –in the medieval a very important Catalonian monastery– can be found in conjunction with the farewell act in more places. Santiago Alvarez in his book⁷ even mentions literally the “Monastery Poblet” as the place where the act had taken place. Magí Crusells⁸ also mentions Poblet. Finally, Alvah Bessie in his diary⁹ makes the following observations:

»At 2 a.m. October 25 left Marsa¹⁰ in violent thunder and windstorm for station; soaked to the skin within 5 minutes after stepping outdoors. All night in leaky train-carriage, no windows, wretched night, huddled, unsleeping men, cold and shivering, hard 3rd-class benches. - to Espluga¹¹ - 8 a.m. here, sun coming up, but cold and wet still.

Marched 4 kilometers to town of Poblet, where 35 & 45 Division Internationals were gathered. Fed and stood in square courtyard in house to await farewell speeches. Negrin - fine intellect, forceful speaker, but very tired; Colonel Modesto, chief of Army of the Ebro, visibly overcome with emotion - strong, male guy. Marty - the demagogue, old and flabby. Others present, Rojo, etc. Herbert Matthews, remembering me from April, gave Luckies to the guys. Robert Capa, photographer, taking pix.«

⁶ La Vanguardia, October 26, 1938.

⁷ Santiago Álvarez, „Historia Política y Militar de las Brigades Internacionales“, Compañía Literaria (Madrid, 1996).

⁸ Magí Crusells, „Las Brigades Internacionales en pantalla“, Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha (Ciudad Real, 2001).

⁹ Alvah Bessie, “Spanish Civil War Notebooks“, University Press of Kentucky (Kentucky, 2001).

¹⁰ Actually, the village’s name is Marçà

¹¹ Correctly spelled, [L’]Espluga [de Francolí]. Local accent though makes an unstressed ‘a’ into an ‘e’, so Bessie quite reasonably repeated what he had heard.

From this entry in his diary, we have certainty that the act that Capa photographed is actually the same act of farewell, situated by different sources at Poblet.

In no case, though, Montblanc is mentioned as the site this act. There was indeed a certain number of foreign troops stationed in Montblanc, but there is no [local] evidence at all of some other act which could have been photographed by Capa.

Capa's photos unfortunately do not permit the localization of the act, since "it was on their strong, good faces" that he focused. There are almost no architectural details to be seen on the selected pictures in the Definitive Collection. Fortunately, other photographers have left us with more visual information. We will focus here especially on a picture by the journalist Torrents¹² published in *El Treball* on October 28th, 1938.

Trying to localize the act exactly, we contacted the Poblet monastery and the adjacent Archive "Montserrat Tarradellas i Macià"¹³. The local experts of the monastery negated, though, that the act shown on the photo could have taken place on the grounds of the monastery.

Nearby Poblet there is a very small village (approximately 20 inhabitants) where already at the beginning of the 20th century an important spa was located. We show here a photo of an inner courtyard of this place of what today is a youth hostel. This small village, although technically belonging to a different commune than Poblet, is only a very short distance away from the monastery, about 800m.

We compare this with a photo extracted from a news-movie "The International Brigades are leaving Republican Spain"¹⁴, showing Modesto talking on a balcony to a mass. On the photos, presented here, there are marked the elements that coincide between all of them. Elements like number of columns, type of column, balustrade of the balcony, square door in one of the corner of the courtyard, coincide. There can be little doubt, we believe, that all three pictures show the same physical place.

¹² According to J.M. Pérez Molino, journalist and testimony of the Poblet act, an Argentinean journalist who returned to his home country when the Nationals won the war. He reported that Torrents died in Argentina.

¹³ Late wife of the president of the Catalonian local government in exile and first President after the Spanish democratization after 1978.

¹⁴ Spain Today



Els mil vegades gloriosos combatents internacionals escolten emocionats la paraula del president Negrin, la veu d'Espanya, expressant la gratitud eterna del nostre poble pels seus meritissims esforços, gestes i heroismes plens d'abnegació en defensa de la independència de la nostra pàtria i de la llibertat de tot el món. — (Foto Torrents)

At top left, a photo of Vila Engracia, beginnings of 20th century. At top right, a photo extracted from a news movie, showing Modesto. At the bottom reproduction of a photo from El Treball, October 28th, 1938.



Current view of the courtyard of Vila Engracia, trying to reproduce the perspective of the photo from El Treball. As can be seen, it has suffered some reformations.

There were several advantages in using Vila Engracia (Les Masies) to using the monastery as scene for the farewell act. First of all and most important, Poblet was abandoned at the time (as consequence of the Spanish confiscation of the church 1836) and in ruins. La Vila Engracia, on the other hand, was completely functional. Additionally, its inner courtyard gave space for the roughly 2000 men present in the act, while giving them cover. The act, being at a place so near the

front, was surely held in secret – at least in as much secret as possible. An aerial attack would have had a most disastrous for the Republic – even more disastrous than the farewell of the International Brigades. For the participation list in the act at Les Masies, published by *La Vanguardia*, reads like the *Who is who* of the Spanish Republic. The most important participants were President Negrín, Generals Líster, Rojo and Modesto, futhermore André Marty, Hans i Luigi Gallo, as responsables for the International Brigades. We know almost certainly that also Milton Wolf, commander of the American Brigade “Abraham Lincoln” was present at the act. Whelan reports that he had made friends with Robert Capa who had shot also some photos at the farewell at of Marçà, some days earlier (Photos 330-332 of the Definitive Collection). In comparison to the logistic problems of housing and feeding 2000 men in the open ruins of an old monastery, making the act take place in a fully functioning spa was definitely a much better decision.

Returning to the subject of Capa’s presence in Montblanc[h]¹⁵, we have to say that most probably he never set foot in that town. If he arrived by car from Barcelona (which is probable), he will have passed by the then little famous and little important village. Even if he arrived by train (as the rest of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade), his stop would have been

¹⁵ Today spelled without final ‘h’

L'Espluga de Francolí, and not Montblanc. Probably he wouldn't have noted anyway. The "walled city of the crown of Aragon"¹⁶ was little impressive at that time, since its most valued asset – the impressive stone wall that encircles the town with its more than 20 towers – was almost destroyed.

As to why Capa chose the name of Montblanc to describe the photos, we do not know. It is possible that the name was mentioned as the name of the capital of the region, or maybe Capa – as a ski-fiend – liked the name because of the Swiss mountain. There are many possible explanations. Actually, the most correct description would have been "Les Masies, near Tarragona" or "L'Espluga de Francolí, near Tarragona", but then:

»Life was so absurd, what did it matter if he changed a few details?«¹⁷

3 CONCLUSIONS

As we recently reported in the Special Edition of the local magazine El Foradot¹⁸, Capa most probably never was in Montblanc. He photographed one of the three most important farewell acts of the Spanish Republic to the International Brigades. During the act, Prime Minister Negrín promised the Spanish citizenship to the Brigadeers, an act which still is discussed in the Spanish public.

We present evidence, though, that this act did neither take place in Montblanc, nor in the monastery of Poblet, as reported by others, but in the Balneario "Vila Engracia" of the nearby village Les Masies. Currently, the building has suffered certain reforms and is occupied by a Youth Hostel.

We propose that in future publications said photos should be titled "Les Masies, near Tarragona".

¹⁶ www.montblancmedieval.com

¹⁷ Richard Whelan in Capa's biography

¹⁸ El Foradot 16, Cossetània (Valls, 2003).