

## Spain grants citizenship to Canadian veteran of the Spanish Civil War

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The young Canadian was a long way from home, the woods of Northern Ontario, but he was ready to meet death. He had known when he volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War, in the fall of 1936, that he probably wouldn't return alive.

Standing shoulder-to-shoulder, Mr. Paivio and several fellow prisoners raised their fists in a show of defiance. But a sudden stroke of luck saved his life. In fact, Mr. Paivio came out of the war unscathed. Today, he is the last surviving Canadian brigadista – one of the men and women who came from around the world to defend Spain's fledgling republic from the fascism of General Francisco Franco.

More than 1,500 Canadians joined these International Brigades, but for decades they received little recognition. They had fought in a conflict in which their government took no part, and most were committed socialists, viewed with suspicion during the Cold War. Even today, their contributions to one of the 20th century's great battles against tyranny is often overlooked here.

But Spain has not forgotten. On Thursday, it will honour Mr. Paivio by granting him citizenship at a ceremony in Toronto.

"He risked his life for us and our democratic system – we owe him a debt," said Consul-General Francisco Pascual de la Parte. "Now, people fight for money or oil, but he fought for ideological reasons."

The slender, unassuming 94-year-old, who lives in a retirement home north of the city, said he was also motivated by humanitarian principles.

“People in Madrid were getting bombed and shot down,” he said. “I had to do something about it.”

He grew up in Port Arthur (now Thunder Bay) and Sudbury, the son of Finnish immigrants who instilled in him their left-wing political views. At 18, he was working in the hardware department of Eaton’s when war broke out in Spain. On one side were the Republicans, a loose coalition of liberals, socialists, communists and anarchists, backing the elected government. On the other were the Nationalists, led by Gen. Franco and supported by the armies of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

Mr. Paivio sailed to Le Havre with American volunteers, crossing into Spain through the Pyrenees amid falling snow.

The first taste of combat was brutal. He hopped out of a trench, only to see the man next to him shot immediately. Later, the tank he was riding on was disabled by enemy fire and he had to scramble back to safety, ducking behind bushes to dodge bullets.

“As I was diving into our shallow trench, an American looked out. He got a bullet right to the head,” he said. “That was life.”

When there were enough Canadian volunteers, they formed a battalion of their own, naming it for William Lyon Mackenzie and Louis-Joseph Papineau, their home country’s most famous revolutionaries. Mr. Paivio took officer training and became a captain.

One day, he was directing the placement of machine guns when two Italian soldiers emerged from over a hill. Taken behind enemy lines, he and a dozen other prisoners were marched down the road to a farmhouse and lined up against a brick wall. The firing squad readied their guns.

Just then, an Italian general rolled up in a limousine and ordered the men's lives spared so they could be used in a prisoner exchange.

The group was taken north to San Pedro de Cardena, a prisoner-of-war camp in a converted abbey. They survived on fish-head soup and shared one tap of water. Mr. Paivio developed scurvy and stomach problems. The commandant used a lead-filled bullwhip to thrash his captives and ordered summary executions, with prisoners buried in unmarked graves.

At Christmas, the men decided to stage a concert and invited their captors. To their surprise, the guards accepted the invitation, sitting on the prisoners' bedrolls to watch. The best performance, Mr. Paivio said, was by a group of Germans who sang Christmas carols, moving the guards to tears. The performance was even more poignant because, once these men were released back to Germany, they were certain to be killed.

"This was so effective, everybody stood up and just cheered them," he said. "A moment of humanity."

After a little more than a year in the camp, Mr. Paivio was exchanged. As he and fellow Republicans were led to a train that would take them to France, townsfolk lined the road and cheered – to spite the fascists.

Mr. Paivio returned home. During the Second World War, he trained soldiers in map-reading and surveying at CFB Petawawa. He married, had children and enjoyed a long career as an architect and academic.

The Canadian government was reluctant to honour brigadistas, and it took decades for them to attain recognition here. A monument was finally erected at Queen's Park in the 1990s; in 2001, then-governor-general Adrienne Clarkson dedicated one in Ottawa. The government of Spain recently decided to extend citizenship to all veterans, including Mr. Paivio.

He is modest about it all. Asked about the significance of his status, he shrugged.

"I have a charmed life," he said with a laugh.