

## **The Fountains of Silence – Ruta Sepetys**

As a result of taking part in the Carnegie Shadowing and reading the amazing book 'The Fountains of Silence' by Ruta Sepetys, one of our young shadowers, Lewis, discovered that his great uncle actually lived through this period of time. As Lewis and his mum enjoyed the book so much it initiated conversations with another family member who also then read the book and so starting a chain of events. This then sparked the research into 'Uncle Manny's' life and journey and here is a fascinating account written to Lewis from his uncle Peter about 'Uncle Manny's' life that the family wished to share.

They would like to thank Ruta for writing this book and so instigating this wonderful journey into their family history.

**Mrs Cullen – CHS Learning Zone Manager**

### **Uncle Manny**

The Spanish Civil War is a fascinating subject and the fact that we had a member of our family involved in that war is something I have always been very proud of. Manuel Surera (we called him Uncle Manny) was born in 1919 near the city of Cordova in Southern Spain. He was born in the midst of a pandemic. More people died worldwide in the flu pandemic of 1918/1919 than were killed in combat during the First World War. The flu was widely known as the Spanish flu even though it didn't originate in Spain. I won't go into why it was called the Spanish flu at this point but nevertheless it just struck me as being noteworthy that here we are a century later in a pandemic.

Manny was only 17 years old when the Spanish Civil War began in 1936.

He was born and raised in a fairly poor rural area near to the city of Cordova. In just a couple of years he would find himself leaving everything he knew ~ his home, his parents, his way of life ~ and he would not see them again for many years.

Where Manuel was born and raised just outside Cordoba is nearly 200 miles from Madrid, and I guess that as a boy of thirteen he would hardly have been aware of events going on in Madrid and beyond. A month after Manuel's thirteenth birthday the Spanish King, Alfonso XIII abdicated and left Spain and Spain became a Republic for only the second time in its history. The Second Spanish Republic was proclaimed on 14th April 1931 and the scene was set for the lead up to the Civil War.

At the outbreak of the Civil War in July 1936, Manuel was seventeen years old. The nearest urban centres to Manuel's home in Andalucia were Cordoba and Seville. Both quickly fell to Franco's Nationalist forces which had been transported from Morocco. Malaga, for a time at least remained in Republican hands. At the moment we have no information about Manuel's experiences in fighting for the republican side during the war but there is little doubt that he would have been caught up in wartime action very quickly. Malaga, only about seventy miles south of Manuel's home town, fell to Nationalist forces in the Spring of 1937. Manuel spent the remainder of his teenage years in the midst of conflict until with the capture of Barcelona in January 1939 and Madrid in the following March, the Civil War came to an end.

**The Retirada:** (The Withdrawal). Manuel was one of thousands of Spaniards who left Spain at the end of the Civil War. The majority of refugees fled north over the Pyrenees to France where most were herded into internment camps where conditions were appalling. With the German invasion of France in 1940, the position of the Spanish Republican refugees became even more precarious.

In Ruta Sepetys final chapter (Author's note) Ruth writes so powerfully and movingly:

*"History reveals that, amidst war, the highest tolls are often paid by the youngest. Helpless children and teenagers become innocent victims of wretched violence and ideological pressure. **Some in Spain were orphaned or separated from their families.**"*

This was Manny! He was to be separated from his family for many years. In Manny's case he was to flee Spain with thousands of others only to find himself caught up in World War II and eventually finding his way to England where he was able to build a new life and start a family of his own. In spite of all the horrors he had lived through, I knew him as the kindest, most gentle Uncle. I do remember as a child, knowing that Manny could never return to visit his family in Spain while General Franco was alive. "The Fountains of Silence" really makes it clear that even though the civil war 'ended' in 1939, life in Spain was dominated by fear throughout the next three decades. Returning to Spain could be a matter of life and death.

I remember the first time that Uncle Manny was able to meet his mother and brother was when they paid a visit to his home in Middleton and finally, after Franco's death when he was able to go back to Spain for the first time since the 1930s. What a moving, emotional moment that must have been for him.

Since I last wrote to you I have found out a little more about Manuel's early years. According to Manuel's marriage certificate, his father was farmer called Franco Surera and as far as I can work out they lived south of Cordova in the town of Aguilar de la Frontera on the road between Cordova and Malaga. On 5th April 1947 he was 28 years old and living in Heywood. He married your Great Grandmother's sister Elvina Halliwell on 5/4/47 in Middleton. After their wedding, Manny and Vina lived with Vina's Mum at Highfield St until the birth of their daughter Anita in 1951. At that time the house next door came up for sale and Manny and his new family were able to move into a home of their own. Manny would live there for the rest of his life. He died on 14th December 2002.

**Peter.**

**Uncle Manny**



**Uncle Manny – First on the left**



**Uncle Manny - Middle**



**Uncle Manny – First person on the left**

