

MOVING OVERSEAS?

Lessons Learned From a Family Who
Moved to Spain's Canary Islands

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Chapter 1

Our Overseas Adventure: From North Dakota to the Canary Islands

(This book is about our experiences in raising our children in Spain during the time Generalissimo Francisco Franco ruled the country with an iron fist. *It is not about religion.* However, if I do not explain the reason for moving to Spain's Canary Islands, it will be hard to understand why we moved there.)

I married Grace Cummins—a young widow with two children, Vonda four and Vernon six—in 1958. Grace knew in advance that I was planning to move to some foreign country to help start our work as volunteer missionaries. No problem—she agreed to follow me to any country on the planet.

We sent the Bible Society a list of countries that we thought would be great places to raise our children—countries with no drug problems and where girls were expected to remain virgins until after they married. Since we felt that the best languages for the children to learn would be Spanish, Portuguese, or French, we offered to move to Madeira (Portuguese), Tahiti (French), or Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, or Spain's Canary Islands (all Spanish). I secretly hoped that we would be assigned to Tahiti.

I had explained in our letter that I would not have to work because I had a nice outdoor-sign business in North Dakota and the workers would carry on and mail me a check every month. With that in mind, they suggested we move to the island of Tenerife, population 250,000, to start the work there. We were also told that because the dictator, General Franco, was a Catholic, that was the only religion he allowed in the country. Our work, therefore, would have to be done underground.

For that reason, we were to spend the first four months on the neighboring island of Gran Canaria, where a new congregation had been formed just the previous year by volunteers from Europe. We would have to take a crash course in Spanish and at the same time learn how to carry on our work without drawing the attention of Franco's secret police.



When the time came to move, I was not nearly ready, but we had set a specific date. I was determined to leave the country on that date, whether I was ready or

not. It was a wise decision. Had I waited until we were ready, we would never have moved at all. So exactly one year after we married, we traveled by train to New York, where we boarded the Norwegian freighter Ada Gorthon, bound for the Canary Islands.

Learning Spanish turned out to be far more difficult for us than we had expected. We adults studied with a teacher for two hours every morning, followed by four hours of homework. Later in the day, we took turns going out in our missionary work with others from Germany—persons who had moved to Gran Canaria a year earlier and were progressing well with the new language.

Since this activity was against the law in Spain, we had to be careful. Outwardly, I used my actual name and identified myself to neighbors as an American who had retired young. Secretly, we all used different first names and no last name. I chose "Ricardo," and even today, I am called by that name when I visit Tenerife.

As for the language, the children did not need to take any lessons at all, and within a few months they were fluent in the language. We took one of them with us wherever we went shopping and used them for translators.

The next chapter will deal with living in a dictatorship.

Chapter 2

Challenges of Moving to a New Country: Democracy vs. Dictatorship

(The United States is a Federal Democratic Republic,
but “democracy” is more common in use.)

When I asked Dave, one of my readers, his opinion about writing a book about our experiences in Franco’s Spain, this was his answer, in part:

"I think Franco is much misunderstood today. He is (intentionally) mislabeled a Fascist, which he was NOT. He was a conservative and proud of it. He kept the Fascists on a leash, certainly using them as needed, but defending and protecting Spain's heritage and culture against an onslaught of international forces bent on the destruction of heritage, culture, and values. (Even in the 1960's.)"

I agree. Unlike many famous Americans such as President John Kennedy, Dr. Martin Luther King, and actor Gary Cooper, I never heard even a rumor that Franco was a philanderer. Also, he was not a fan of interfaith. He considered Catholicism to be the one and only true religion. For that reason, he made it the official religion of the country. I am not a fan of interfaith either. According to the Scriptures, there can indeed be

only one true religion. It is just that I disagreed with the dictator as to which religion that was.

I certainly agreed with General Franco as to drugs. In all the major airports in the country were posters that warned travelers about taking drugs into Spain. The penalty for a first offense was six years and a day, even if it were the son of a foreign ambassador! As a result, Spain in the 1960s was almost drug-free. If anyone was caught with even marijuana, they had to tell where it had come from to the police. If they refused, their bare feet were beaten with a rubber hose until they did tell the police. They, in turn, contacted the seller, who was forced to reveal his source.

We lived in Santa Cruz for eleven years. Franco's Guardia Civil, the ones with the patent-leather 3-cornered hats, openly carried machine guns with live ammunition. They were visible everywhere. The result was that our young daughters could have walked the streets anywhere, night or day, and would never have been molested.

I once asked a former Guardia Civil why someone guilty of getting drunk over the weekend and picking fights never went to jail. He explained that in Spain, most people are poor. They need every peseta they earn. They cannot afford to lose their job. Instead, they just take the offender down to the basement of the comiseria and give the guy a mild beating, taking great care not to have any marks show up on his face. He can therefore go back to work on Monday morning, as usual. And believe me, he appreciates the fact that he did not lose his job!

As for more serious crimes, of course, the guilty person goes to prison. What is interesting, however, is to compare Spain with the United States. The United States consistently ranks as number one when it comes to the largest percentage of the population in jail, and Russia is not too far behind. But after Russia, all the rest of the countries drop sharply, including Spain.

During Spain's Civil War—1936-1939—the Americans formed the Abraham Lincoln Brigade to fight in Spain against Franco's Nationalists. It was organized by the Communist International with great care to conceal the communist character of the enterprise. It was made to appear as a campaign on behalf of progressive democracy. Volunteers served in Spain as soldiers, technicians, and aviators fighting for the Spanish Republicans against General Franco's Nationalists.

There were no heroes on either side in that bloody conflict. However, I was once visiting a wealthy widow in Tenerife after an upscale wedding where Nancy and I had been the photographers. The subject came about how Franco had started the war by assembling his troops in the Esperanza Forest, not more than eight or nine kilometers from where this lady lived.

"In 1936," she said, "The anarchists were gaining strength. Bombs were going off, killing people, and the king seemed powerless to stop them. Someone had to *do* something!"

I do not know much about the subject of anarchy, but it does appear that Franco did indeed put an end to its golden years.

Let us next consider a feature of many dictatorships. Bribery!