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ROBERT GRAVES

SCHOOL LIFE IN MAJORCA 1955

DEARMRS HAMPSTEAD-HENDON:

Mother asks me to answer about schools for your children when you come to see us in Majorca, because they are the same age as Richard and me.

First we lived in a village called Binijiny where they do nothing but grow tomatoes. I and Richard were sent to the Franciscan nuns, and I looked after him until he was old enough to do up his own buttons. Then he went to the State school because the Bishop won't let girls and bigger boys learn together, although at Binijiny there were only ten boys in the boys' school and only four girls in the girls' school. The Franciscans had the other eight girls, mostly with baby brothers. Richard's headmaster got 800 pesetas a month, not quite £2 a week, which he couldn't live on. So he spent his school hours at home translating William Shakespeare into Spanish; but as he knew no English, he translated a French translation. He had learned French when he was a waiter-boy in a Marseilles Economical Restaurant which his uncle had; he didn't like the life because his uncle used to buy the left-overs in the market, stinky fish and rotten vegetables, and say: 'We must show our clients an example by eating no better than they do.' That's how he came to be a schoolmaster.

You can see the Inspector's car coming up to the Binijiny mountain from two kilometres away, and it always stops halfway to cool down the radiator; so Jaime Frau, the boy who knew the lessons best, used to teach the little boys, and Juan Grau, the boy who knew least, kept watch from the Calvary outside. The Master said: 'This is good training for your careers, if you don't like growing tomatoes. Jaime can be a schoolmaster like me and Juan can be a guardia like his father.' Juan never missed the car and when it arrived the Master had rushed from his house to the school and was busy giving a lecture on the glorious days of Philip II -- which is where history really stops in the school books until it starts again with Franco and the glorious liberation of the Patria. So the Inspector who was a Madrileño had a lovely arroz paella at the Fonda, and lots of wine, and then lots of licores, and a cigar, and said that Binijiny had the best school in his district. Once he sent for ten ensaimadas, which are a sort of very light sugar bun in the shape of a whirligig, and said: 'Now, my little friends, see which of you can eat the quickest. This will be a useful lesson to you in this island of bandits.' When Juan Grau won easily, the Inspector shouted 'Olé!' and then grabbed Richard's ensaimada and asked: 'What is wrong with you, little English boy, are you ill? You have taken only one bite.' Richard said: 'No, sir! But we English can't eat so fast as you Spaniards.' Then the Inspector laughed and swallowed the ensaimada himself at one gulp. Then he made Richard kneel down with his arms stretched out

like the penitents on Holy Thursday and said: 'Stay like that until you have given me back Gibraltar.'

Mother kept me with the Franciscans, because at the Girls' State School there was too much religion and also politics. One day the Señorita of the Girls' School saw me sitting on the convent steps eating my lunch, and said in a loud voice that all Protestants will go to Hell and burn for ever. But Sor Juana came out and told the Señorita that I was top of the class in Sacred History. At the back of our arithmetic book which we had to use was the Spanish eagle holding the Falangist arrows in its claws, and that day Sor Juana told the little ones: 'That's the Demonio who comes for naughty children.' In Spanish schools one learns everything off by heart and chants it, and nobody explains what anything means, and nobody cares. Mother paid the nuns fifty pesetas a term for Richard and me, and they were very contented. We talked Majorcan in the playground. It is an easy language, a sort of Italianish French, but one has to shout it or they think you are ill and want to give you a purge.

Two years ago we moved to Palma, which is a large city, and were sent to State schools near our flat. They never opened our windows and I had sixty in my class, mostly poor girls. There was no fireplace but the room soon warmed up even when there was snow on the mountains, and we sat three girls to every desk made for two. My Señorita was very sweet, but I got fleas and sore throats. One day, when a steamroller passed, a window pane fell out and broke; and it never got mended, which was a good thing, of course. Richard's boys in the school next door were lucky to have a playground where they played bullfights and 'hit me harder'; we girls had to stay at our desks (taking turns to go to the retrete) and embroider. He got into trouble because his friends caught the steamroller in a booby-trap and burst the water-main, so that the whole suburb was without water for a month. And he learned to throw stones at cars and insult policemen.

Mother took us both away and now we go to the two best schools in the Island. Mine is a convent, and we wear sailor suits and learn French and I am actually allowed out early to learn ballet -- because my ballet teacher is a Catholic refugiada from the Russians -- but I have to be very industrious to make up. One gets ribbons and coloured scarves to wear for being that, and now I am so dressed up that the girls nickname me 'The Capitán General of the Baleares'. Richard's new headmaster is a priest who knows Piccadilly in London and says: 'To everyone his own religion!' and asked Mother about Richard's psychology before he went. He built the school on an English plan with windows that go up and down, and lavatories with water; and he gives gymnastics and basket-ball. There's an old grey cockatoo who knows the whole Grado Elemental book off by heart, and a huge black dog who wanders in and out of the classrooms. Mother pays a lot for us -- more than £3 a month each, including school dinners and school books; but we are supposed to make valuable friendships with the daughters and sons of rich businessmen. The playground language is Spanish, because the rich businessmen don't like to have their children mistaken for ordinary

Majorcans, even though they are. I think your children would be happy in our schools and soon learn Spanish, but they might not like having to eat bread and oil rubbed with garlic at dinner. We are accustomed to it; but not to the garbanzo soup, which is filthy. When it comes round I ask the girls at my table: 'Does anyone know the third person plural past definite tense of the verb avoir?' And they shout it out, and it sounds like everyone being sick, and the nun gets cross.

Love from Margaret

P.S. I enclose the Bulletin of St Modesto of Bobbio's College in case you are interested.