

Remarks on the 50th Anniversary of NYU in Spain

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Fifty years. There's something special about that interval of time. It's brief enough to fit comfortably in the span of an individual's life, yet long enough to provide a sense of historical sweep. A half century is just enough time to confirm—or, more often, confound-- one's sense of what is fleeting, of what will last. If you read through the Washington Square yearbooks from 1956 to 1959—as I did this morning—you will see that in those years, everyone's eyes seemed to be fixed on the construction of an ultra-modern, state-of-the-art student center, on the corner of Washington Square South and Laguardia Place. You will have to study those yearbooks much more carefully, and even read the fine print of the descriptions of the activities of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, if you want to find any mention of the creation of a Junior Year Abroad program in Madrid, Spain. Fifty years is long enough for a cutting-edge building to be built, grow obsolete, be dismantled, and replaced by... yet another modern, state-of-the-art student center building. Fifty years is also long enough to see a simple idea, conceived and nurtured within an academic department, grow and flourish and become one of the centerpieces of the university's 21st-century vision of itself as a Global University.

Let's look at three snapshots in this fifty year history.

1958

Less than twenty years have passed since the end of the Spanish Civil War, one of the most horrific conflagrations of the twentieth century, which left about a million dead, wounded or displaced in a country with a population of about 25 million. In Madrid, and throughout the country, the signs of the war are still visible everywhere: the jails are full of political prisoners; poverty and food shortages are not uncommon; mutilated veterans sell lottery tickets on street corners; many of Madrid's buildings still display the pockmarks of bullets from hand-to-hand streetfighting or gaping holes from air raids or long range artillery. In the 13 years since the defeat of the Axis, the country's dictator, Francisco Franco, has been busy remodeling himself; playing down his alliance with Hitler and Mussolini, and playing up his credentials as a staunch anticommunist. Franco's new aim throughout the 1950s is to position Spain as a strategic Cold War bulwark against communism, and his repackaging campaign would turn out to be remarkably successful. In 1953, Spain signs economic and military agreements with the US, authorizing the establishment of US military bases there, in exchange for economic and diplomatic support. The fruit of this diplomatic support is quickly forthcoming; two years later, Spain, on its third try, this time with strong US backing, is finally admitted as a member state in the United Nations; Franco has successfully broken the diplomatic ostracism of his regime. In September of 1958, probably right around the time when the

first NYU students were arriving to take part in the inaugural class of NYU in Madrid, Spain would become a member of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

In New York in 1958, the memory of the Spanish Civil War was still very much alive. Although this history has largely been forgotten or eclipsed by subsequent events –World War II, the Holocaust, and the Cold War chief among them—from 1936-39 the city had been passionately engaged in what was going on in Spain. Almost 1,000 young men and women from New York –including several NYU students-- took the extraordinary step of volunteering to fight against Spanish fascism in the American contingent of the International Brigades. Many of those lucky enough to return alive would lead the fight in New York against the normalization of relations with Francoist Spain in the 1950s, and throughout the 60s and early 70s; other New Yorkers, like Nancy Macdonald, James T. Farrell and Arthur Schlesinger Jr. would found Spanish Refugee Aid in 1953, an organization dedicated to supporting the thousands of Spaniards still suffering from the displacements caused by the Spanish Civil War.

The memory of the Spanish Civil War was also kept alive in New York throughout the 1950s by the considerable number of Spanish intellectuals living in exile here, and teaching in the city's major universities, including Francisco García Lorca, brother of the great martyred playwright and poet, Federico. Francisco García Lorca, after brief stints at Queens College and here at NYU, would end up at Columbia University, where he taught for many years. The Civil War diaspora was represented on the NYU Spanish faculty in the late 1950s by Ernesto Dacal and Carmen Aldecoa, among others.

In this climate, NYU's decision to establish a study-abroad program in Spain in 1958 was undoubtedly a bold and controversial move. Some surely saw it as an unacceptable recognition of an illegitimate, authoritarian regime; others, undoubtedly, as an opening, an opportunity worth seizing. I've often wondered how I would have felt about opening a study-abroad program in Francoist Spain had I been on the faculty here in 1958. I'm not entirely sure, but I think I would have opposed it. And now, with fifty years of hindsight, I have to wonder about the wisdom of my hypothetical opposition.

1983

NYU in Spain celebrates its 25th anniversary. Throughout these years, a number of my colleagues in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese have worked hard to cultivate and expand the program: including Helene Anderson and Salvador Martínez who are here with us today. And in December of this year, President John Brademas bestows an honorary doctorate on a distinguished visitor from Spain: King Juan Carlos I of Spain, Franco's handpicked successor. After Franco's death in 1975, Juan Carlos had surprised the world when, instead of perpetuating the Francoist regime, he helped oversee a remarkable process of democratic transition, in which Francoist institutions dismantled themselves, and erected in their place, a parliamentary democracy. The King was at the height of popularity in 1983, because just two years before, when a military coup attempted to dissolve the parliament and undo the democratic gains of post-Franco Spain, Juan Carlos had ordered the military forces to stand down, and the coup was aborted. [I

remember the coup particularly well because at the time, my sister was a student in NYU-in-Madrid, and my mother was hysterical! I remember her frantically trying to get Lois Higgins on the phone to find out if the NYU students were OK.] It could be argued that in the 1950s, Franco had tried to open up Spain –to diplomacy, to foreign investment, to tourists, and to students—for the same reason he had anointed Juan Carlos as his successor: to try to prolong his regime and his values. But NYU-in-Spain students between 1958 and 1983 were both privileged witnesses –and, in a small way, probably contributors to—the backfiring of Franco’s survival plan. Franco’s regime and values could not withstand the forces unleashed by his strategic “opening.”

At the honorary degree ceremony in 1983, President Brademas –a fluent Spanish-speaker and an expert on Spanish history and politics—announced the creation of an endowed chair, named in honor of the king, to promote the study of Spain at NYU. It was also during this occasion that Brademas, the King and their advisors began to talk in earnest about the possibility of creating a center at NYU that would promote research, teaching and dialogue about Spain and the Spanish-speaking world.

2008

Here we are. Spain is a thriving, prosperous democracy; the United States is struggling to once again become a thriving, prosperous democracy. In that 1958 Washington Square yearbook, one of the front pages juxtaposes two large photos, one labelled “the new”, the other labelled “the old.” The photo whose caption is “the new” is of the now

extinct Loeb student center; the photo labelled “the old” is of the entrance of Judson Hall, which now, beautifully renovated, is home to the King Juan Carlos I of Spain Center. It takes only fifty years to distill this kind of irony. The campanile of Judson Hall, and the King Juan Carlos Center are today only the most visible fruits of NYU’s intense, historic, fifty-year-long engagement with Spain, pioneered by the founders and the students of NYU in Madrid. Our Department of Spanish and Portuguese is, by all measures, one of the best in the country; our Tamiment library is home to two unique archival treasures related to Spain: the Archives of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, and the Archives of Spanish Refugee Aid; the Center for European and Mediterranean Studies is home to an exciting new initiative, led by an alumna of NYU and of NYU in Madrid, the Catalan Center of New York University, directed by Mary Ann Newman. And while we’re talking about distinguished alums of NYU in Madrid, let me mention a few others, you may or may not know about: the most prestigious scholar of Spanish Art in the United States, today, Professor Jonathan Brown, of NYU’s Institute of Fine Arts, was an undergrad at Dartmouth College when he heard that NYU had just established a program in Spain, and he jumped at the chance to participate in it. Our current dean for the Humanities, the most prestigious scholar of Latin American Art in the United States today, Professor Edward Sullivan, is also an NYU-in-Madrid alum, as is my distinguished colleague and former chair of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese, Kathleen Ross. The director of one of Spain’s most exciting wineries –Abadía Retuerta, in the Duero Valley – Don Cusimano, who grew up around the corner from me in Flatbush—is an NYU in Madrid alum, as is José Ramón Ripoll, the accomplished poet and music critic, and director of one of Spain’s most important poetry magazines, the

Revista Atlántica. And for every one of these luminaries, there are thousands of other NYU students who, over the last half-century, have pursued the dream boldly conceived and carefully nurtured by a few professors in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. Today, over 300 students each year enroll in NYU in Madrid, which now enjoys its own academic site in the Spanish capital.

Study abroad and international education, particularly over the last 25 years, since the presidency of John Brademas, have moved to the front and center of NYU's agenda: the thorny question of where to establish programs is no less complicated or controversial than it was 50 years ago, and, in my opinion, warrants careful discussion first and foremost at the level of the university's faculty and students. But we are here today not to argue about policy, nor to celebrate a building or any such fleeting thing. Today we celebrate the permanent, indelible and largely intangible legacy of an idea, of a bold decision made 50 years ago. We're here also to honor all of those who, during this past half-century, have worked so hard to make NYU in Spain a cornerstone --so to speak-- of the university's global vision.

Salud.