

In memoriam: Floreal Barberà, a life-time of freedom fighting

By Xavier Montanyà

Floreal Barberà has died at the age of ninety-eight. We have lost one of the greats of the antifascist struggle. He served in the front lines, escaped from Argelès-sur-mer and joined the Resistance and saved the lives of sixty Jews by guiding them across the Pyrenees. He was the son of founders of the CNT and a friend of Juan García Oliver.

On 20 July last Floreal Barberà Blanch died in Barcelona at the age of 98. We have lost a worthy fighter in the libertarian and antifascist struggles of the 20th century. A man of very set ideas, intelligent, consistent and demanding, alive to danger, a born fighter, soldier and underground activist. He was to operate as an independent libertarian well connected with the French resistance and with the British and French secret services. He carried out intelligence-gathering missions or helped rescue Jews, working with the group led by Aragon's Francisco Ponzán, with the Red Cross, the Jewish Combat Organization and the American Joint Distribution Committee.

Floreal Barberà, Cross of Volunteer Resistance Fighter

On 12 November 2001, France marked the armistice in the First World War. A small band of ex-combatants, relatives and sympathizers gathered in front of the French monument to the victims of all wars in the Montjuich cemetery in Barcelona.

In the course of that gathering, France's consul-general Christian Rouyer awarded the Cross of Volunteer Resistance Fighter (the Cross of Lorraine) and the Combatant's Cross (1939-1945) to Floreal Barberà. That dignified, solemn ceremony ended decades of silence. Furthermore, it opened doors affording us an insight into a little-known chapter of the clandestine fight waged by republicans and anarchists who served on every front and with all manner of weapons against fascism.

Floreal Barberà was thrice forced into exile. The first time was to Occitania back in 1924 at the age of three, because of the anarcho-syndicalist activities of his father. They had had to flee to Toulouse to escape repression. Both Floreal and his brother Calmisto attended school and received their middle-school education there, like every other child in France. His command of the French language and French culture were to prove vital to the successful of his underground missions in the future.

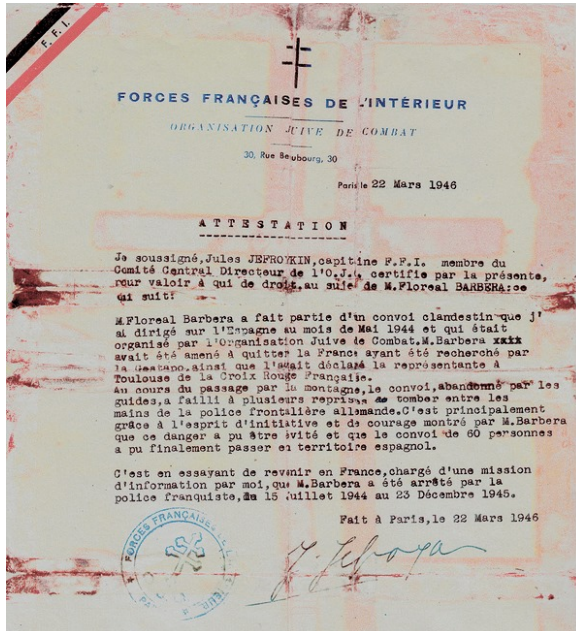
In 1936 father and sons returned to Barcelona. Floreal's father was president of the Collectivized Foundry Industry. The two brothers joined up for front line service. Floreal was assigned to the 117th Brigade of the 25th Division and to the Air Force on the Levante front. Having served throughout, he was posted to Barcelona and, like hundreds of thousands of other republicans, crossed the border on foot into exile in France.

Floreal's brother Calmisto enlisted in the 127th Mixed Brigade, the 'Roja y Negra' Brigade of the 28th Division; he was unable to slip through the enemy lines and was arrested and imprisoned in Teruel. He managed to escape 'the purge' carried out in the bull-ring, but was arrested and tortured in Barcelona at the hands of the gang led by Bravo Montero, the son of Bravo Portillo. In 1940 he was brought before a drumhead court martial and sentenced to a 12-year prison term for 'armed rebellion' and for membership of 'an anarchist group'. He served six of those years.

Floreal, on the other hand, escaped from the Argelès concentration camp and joined the underground struggle. He was sought after by the Francoist, the Vichy regime and the Gestapo. He was arrested, questioned and tortured and made to serve years in prison in Francoist Spain as well as in occupied France. He was in the Saint Michel prison in Toulouse at the same time as his friend Francisco Ponzán. Barberà was one of the last comrades to see him alive, before the Gestapo murdered him and burned his body in 1944 just two days short of the city's liberation.

Saved the lives of sixty Jews fleeing from the Nazis

We attach to this article a document issued by the French Resistance regarding Floreal Barberà; it was issued in Paris in 1946 by French Forces of the Interior captain Jules Jefroykin, one of the military leaders and founders of the Jewish Combat Organization (OJC).



FRENCH FORCES OF THE INTERIOR
[FFI]

JEWISH COMBAT ORGANIZATION [OJC]

30 rue Beaubourg, 30°

Paris, 22 March 1946

TESTIMONIAL

I, the undersigned Jules JEFROYKIN, a captain with the FFI, a member of the OJC Central Leadership Committee, hereby certify the following as he deserves, regarding M. Floreal BARBERA:

M. Floreal Barbera was part of a clandestine convoy that I led into Spain in May 1944, one organized by the Jewish Combat Organization. M. Barbera had been prompted to leave France, being wanted by the Gestapo, as stated by the Toulouse representative of the French Red Cross.

In the course of passage across the mountains, the convoy, having been abandoned by its guides, came, several times over, within an ace of falling into the clutches of the German border police. It was primarily thanks to the enterprising spirit and courage demonstrated by M. Barbera that that danger was averted and the 60-strong convoy eventually made it through to Spanish territory.

It was while attempting to return to France on an intelligence-gathering mission that I had entrusted to him that M. Barbera was arrested and held by the Francoist police from 15 July 1944 to 23 December 1945.

Declaration made in Paris on 22 March 1946.

FFI Seal & signature

The adventure of that caravan of Jews lost in the Pyrenees is one of the most impressive stories I have ever encountered regarding the Second World War escape lines. Let me summarize it as it was recounted to me by Floreal Barbera himself.

Floreal was only 23 years old at the time. The Gestapo was after him and the director of the Red Cross in Toulouse, Madame Cassagnavère, offered him two options: hide out in a Trappist monastery or take part in a border-crossing mission bound for Spain. Floreal chose the latter. It was an adventure that was to reunite him with his brother who was behind bars in Barcelona and allow him to get him out to France.

The OJC had organized an expedition of Jewish fighters in order to escape the Nazis. Floreal was assigned the task of protecting the life of a certain *Dika*. He did not know it at the time of course but

this was Captain Jules Jefroykin, founder of the OJC, one of the Germans' "most wanted". "In the event of a tangle with the Nazis up in the mountains, you are to abandon everybody else and look after just you two. *Dika* must not fall into German hands." Those were the secret orders issued to Floreal Barbera who could plainly see that he was not to let himself be taken alive.

The outing entailed coordinating all the underground movements to which the expeditionaries belonged, drawing them all into the mountains near Saint Giron (Ariège department) by a variety of routes. *Dika* and the entire expedition mustered there: two French guides and sixty-two individuals, five of them children, in addition to a number of grown men who were to go on to be important.

One was *Dika*'s father-in-law. Food rations and weapons were distributed. "Few weapons for this many people", Barbera reckoned; he secured himself a Sten gun and handed over his Beretta pistol.

They trekked under cover of dark in small batches. Once up in the mountains the guides asked for payment and after issuing them with a few instructions, left them to their own devices. In fact, these guides were to betray them. They left them on their own, with no maps or compasses. That was step one in the betrayal. The trekkers had to make their way to Esterri d'Àneu where a courier from the organization was waiting for them. Following the instructions received from the guides, they set off on their trek but after a few hours Barbera had his suspicions raised: he had the feeling that they were going around in circles and that that route would not bring them to Spain. Tipped off by him, *Dika* ordered him to assume control. Off they went, with no particular plan. They were unfamiliar with the mountains.

A shepherd warned them that they were heading back in the direction of France and that there were Germans in the forest ahead of them. They beat a hasty retreat, but the trap closed and the Germans opened fire. They returned that fire whilst beating a retreat. And managed to take shelter in a forestry worker's hut at their point of departure. It was snowing heavily. Darkness was falling. Barbera got no sleep that night; if he was to abide by his orders, he should have quit the group and headed off with *Dika*. In the end he decided that he was not going to abandon anyone, although that would have been the easiest option. He decided to defy his orders.

Some hours of great tension followed. Floreal Barbera was working on the assumption that the Nazis had stopped shooting because they were out to capture *Dika* alive. They had no idea where to make for. They decided to make a U-turn, retracing the trail the treacherous guides had set them on. They scaled some very difficult mountains, hour after hour. At times they were waist-deep in snow. And lost. They had no option but to press on uphill. *Dika*'s father-in-law passed away the following day. *Dika* wanted to bury him and say a few prayers over him but Barbera was against that. His mission was to rescue the living, not bury the dead.

In fact, as he admitted to me, they had no clue as to where they were. Nor even that they needed to press south. There was a devastating loss of heart. There were injuries, eagerness, thirst and attacks of hysteria and they stuffed their mouths with snow. They were forced to stay quiet with their weapons at the ready because the Germans might hear them. To no avail. At times, nerves got the better of them. Floreal selected a small band of the stronger ones in an attempt to seek out the right trail. One of them died after falling over a cliff. He was the second death on the expedition.

It was bitterly cold and there was a deep snowfall. *Dika* complained and Floreal turned on him. At one point *Dika* stated: "I can't go on. Let's go back. We'll head back into France and give ourselves up to the French police." Floreal lied that Spain lay just beyond the next mountain-top. "You're the boss, but I'm in charge of this convoy. Nobody here is giving up. Trust me. We'll get through it. How? That I cannot say. But get through it we will", Floreal Barbera answered him. And the very next day, after all the hard slog and danger, they did it.

In 1957 Jules Jefroykin bumped into Floreal Barberà again in Paris with Floreal's wife. The captain's first words to her were: "If I am alive, it is thanks to your husband. But I deserve some credit too, for having believed in him." Floreal never ever set eyes on the rest of the members of the expedition again.

I published an outline account of his feats in *Temps* back in 2002. After a short stay in prison in Lérida, *Dika* and Floreal Barberà regained their freedom. The American Joint Distribution Committee in Barcelona had organized everything to perfection. Barberà was issued with a French passport in the name of *François Buhler* and could have travelled on with the rest of the expedition to North Africa but refused to do so. He was keen to be reunited with his brother and together they fled to France.

In July 1944 Floreal was arrested in Cerdaña while on another mission. He was imprisoned in Gerona and Barcelona up until Christmas 1945. His brother was held until 1946.

The World War was over, but Floreal Barberà's war was not

There were more chapters to the life of Floreal Barberà than this article has space for. Of these, it is worth mentioning that, inside prison and in conjunction with other comrades, he organized a resistance movement, in imitation of the French model. And so the Resistance Forces of the Interior (FRI) were born; the aim was to bring all factions together under the same colours and build up a strong, compact movement like the French had.

On leaving prison, he set off on a tour of locations where there were anarcho-sindicalist, republicans, socialists and National Front of Catalonia (FNC) forces. The plan was to seek the endorsement of the Spanish republican government in exile, led by Álvaro de Albornoz, who made Floreal Barberà his agent in the Spanish Interior. They could count on Albornoz's backing until 1948. But within the government and all the various organizations there was disagreement as to the propriety or otherwise of armed struggle operations.

In the end, the faction in favour of passivity carried the day. The funding promised to the FRI failed to arrive. And counterfeiting cash was not acceptable. So the venture fell through. In the absence of funds an underground organization cannot survive. Somebody was trying to frustrate them, Floreal reckoned. The message was to swap machine-guns for typewriters for propaganda use. This was to prove the Spanish Republican government-in-exile's last ever effort to activate the armed struggle in the interior.

Following that fiasco, Floreal Barberà was to move away to Venezuela. *Dika* paid for his fare. In Venezuela he worked to reunify the CNT and collaborated with Venezuelan organizations against the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship in the country. Over time, he, Juan García Oliver and Octavio Alberola, exiled in Mexico, held meetings to reactivate the fight against Franco, but Caracas was simply too far away. García Oliver and Alberola relocated to Paris where, along with Cipriano Mera and a few others, they launched *Defensa Interior*, the clandestine organization which, from 1962 onwards, revived the armed struggle against Franco in the Spanish Interior.

Source: VilaWeb, 16/09/2019 <https://www.vilaweb.cat/noticies/in-memoriament-floreal-barbera-una-vida-de-lluïta-per-la-llibertat/>

Translated by Paul Sharkey.