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## Solanell

**Author:** W. George Lovell

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NOTHING we were told in Urgel prepared us for what we found. Not even in Castellbo, itself long in decline but inhabited still, was our sense of anticipation properly kindled, for signs of life there were apparent, though hardly vibrant. What I knew of abandoned places had to do with mountain regions other than the Pyrenees: in Scotland, on the Isle of Skye, the mute stone ruins of Boreraig, one small community among hundreds gutted and burned to make way for English authority and flocks of sheep; in Guatemala, the militarized landscapes of Huehuetenango and El Quiche, entire areas emptied of people in the name of anti-communism. Where we were headed, the hand of force had not been heavy, but time and circumstance had wrought an equal measure of destruction.

We crossed a bridge at the edge of Castellbo and started to ascend. The car toiled. In front, the dirt road was pot-holed and rutted, a means of access initially hewn for feet and hoofs, not rubber tires. Off to our right the ground fell steeply. Water murmured far below. We continued upwards until we reached a wide bend beyond which the huddled shape of Solanell came partly into view. That first, magical glimpse was a rite of passage into a bygone era. I remember saying to my companion, "Let's park and walk the rest," for to take the car any further seemed an unnecessary violation. A nearby clearing beckoned. We parked the car in the shade of a tree, scaled a slope, and made our way across a field, our approach allowing Solanell to rise like a lost kingdom before us. Its haunted air entered our consciousness slowly, structure by structure, bit by bit. On the outskirts of town a well, no longer cared for, leaked water onto the trail. Our path through the mud soon became a rocky, uneven street. Houses on either side, their windows shattered, their doors broken, their interiors vacant, led up towards the church. We saw no one, but noticed that sheep roamed freely, moving in and out of dark rooms where once fires were lit, meals cooked, families raised, lives lived. Opposite the church, its Romanesque features not yet dilapidated beyond appreciation, we ate lunch mostly in silence, our enjoyment of bread, wine, and sun mixed with contemplation of all that surrounded us. On that high summer day in July, when the Pyrenees were full of people no longer there, the solitude of Solanell became a sadness my heart embraced, a story my curiosity would explore.

The Setting

SOLANELL is one of 28 towns in the mountains around the Catalan city of La Seu d'Urgell that, in the course of the last 30 to 40 years, have suffered a fate of total depopulation. A dozen or so other towns in the Urgel hinterland are inhabited only part of the year, are populated by newcomers fleeing the stress of contemporary urban life, or are occupied in such a precarious fashion that their existence at the start of the next millennium cannot be guaranteed. Some towns, like Sendes or Tost, lie completely in ruins. The state of decay elsewhere, as at Banyeres, Lletó, and Llort, is less advanced, due in part to their fields still being of some agricultural use, thus allowing passing workers an opportunity to stall the process of collapse. By the end of the century, however, one in three present agricultural endeavours is likely to disappear, so material upkeep is bound to deteriorate.

Historically, the Catalan Pyrenees have been one of the most dutifully tended regions of Spain. People have lived and farmed in these parts a long time. Something of a population climax may be said to have occurred during the ninth and tenth centuries, when Arab control of the Iberian peninsula meant that Muslim presence in the south exerted tremendous pressure on zones of Christian refuge in the north. This pressure was everywhere reflected in forest clearance, terrace cultivation, and village life at upper elevations turned to only in times of crisis. With the retreat of Muslim influence, pressure was relieved and population levels stabilized, to waver periodically, due mostly to pillage and sickness, until the nineteenth century, when another climax was reached. Around the year 1865, human numbers attained their maximum size, after which decline set in, slowly until about 1950, then sharply from then to the present.

One of 14 towns scattered throughout the valley of Castellbo, Solanell lies in the solana, or sunny half of the valley, at an elevation of some 1,200 metres. To the north, rise peaks of more than 2,000 metres. Five kilometres to the south and 400 metres below, the town of Castellbo functions still, albeit in modest form, as the valley capital. Towns in the umbria, or shady half of the valley, are colder and more humid places to live, but are better endowed with level, cultivable land than their solana counterparts.

Even to the eye, the solana appears less hospitable, more difficult to work. Soils are thin, rock outcrops common, water scarce. Natural vegetation consists of groves of oak broken by extensive scrub in which juniper, wild rose, and boxwood spring up at random; species of introduced pine grow higher up. Along the banks of streams, alders, elms, poplars, and willows do well.

In the solana, only Albet and Seix, with less than twenty folk between them, are inhabited. Sallent and Sendes, like Solanell, are now deserted, left behind to rot after centuries of continuous occupation.

Solanell has the tragic distinction of being the largest abandoned town in the High Urgel. About thirty houses, together with associated barns, sheds, and threshing areas, constitute the settlement core. It was home to some 180 people not much more than a century ago. Save for one or two exceptions, dwellings both for humans and animals now reflect years of neglect. Roofs have caved in, walls fallen down, whole units become unsafe even to enter. A maze of narrow streets connects one scene of desolation with another. Watering holes and fountains are no longer maintained. Part of the cemetery has subsided, and the church is beginning to show serious deterioration from the ravages of rain and snow. Resident priests disappeared during the Spanish Civil War, and no school was ever built. Modern conveniences such as piped water and the telephone never arrived. What did arrive was an electricity line, in 1963, years too late to stem the flood of departures.

When Solanell was alive, its inhabitants moved to a very different rhythm than that dictated by vehicular access and indoor plumbing. Like scores of other towns in the Pyrenees, Solanell is a casualty of modernity, a way of life swept aside by the values, demands, and priorities of the late twentieth century.

#### In the Tradition

FOR generation after generation, Solanell's ways were the ways of the land. Around and about, the land could be put to six different productive uses. First, in the immediate vicinity of the townsite, families tilled their own agricultural plots, large gardens rather than even modest-sized fields. Second, below town, along the banks of brooks and streams, were the best strips for pasture. Third, in closer proximity, livestock grazed a more extensive tract of land, one of lower quality, where thorns and nettles invaded meadows of grass. Fourth, some distance from town, a zone of upland terraces was devoted to cereal cultivation, with rye growing better in this thrown mountain niche than barley or wheat. Fifth, scattered here and there, were forests where wood was cut either for construction, for domestic fuel, for making farm implements and household utensils, or for charcoal. And sixth, high above, lay mountain areas where stone was quarried, animals hunted, berries, herbs, and wild mushrooms gathered. Everything won from the land was won with human labour or the help of draught animals. Few machines, certainly no tractors, were of any practical use in such remote and rugged terrain.

In the unglamorous round of peasant subsistence, self-sufficiency was the goal. Few earned a wage. People worked for themselves, growing their own food and assuming responsibility not just to provide for their families but for their animals as well. Sheep were raised in flocks ranging from perhaps 50 to 200 head. Donkeys, mules, and horses were far fewer in number. Each family fattened a pig or two, and fed some rabbits and chickens. Milk cows came much later, in the 1950s, bringing with them the difficult challenge of regularly producing a specialized product for the world beyond Castellbo. People took part in a market economy only occasionally, dealing with the outside for certain specific transactions, seldom on a daily basis, frequently with barter or payment in kind as the operative means of exchange. Peddlers with miscellaneous wares passed through town from time to time, their mules as often as not laden with contraband goods from Andorra or France. No road, not even one of dirt, broke Solanell's isolation until 1935, though a bridle path linked it to Castellbo and other towns in the valley. People lived much as their forbears had, within the physical and mental confines of the place in which they were born. La Seu d'Urgell - where a doctor could be fetched, some grain sold, or a relative dispatched to work in a factory in Barcelona - was a different universe three to four hours' walk away.

#### Abandonment and Decline

SOLANELL'S demise, as that of other dead or dying towns in the Urgel periphery, represents the failure to adjust from one mode of being to another. Age-old ways of doing things could no longer be sustained when peasant self-sufficiency was confronted in the 1950s by commercial agriculture. The number of inhabitants had certainly dwindled over the course of the previous century, but the lure of milk production accelerated the process of depopulation considerably. Many families simply were unable to accumulate enough resources to make the crossover from eclectic producer to specialized supplier of milk. Other families did manage to marshal enough capital to become small-scale dairy farmers. The money they received in return, alas, fell short of the amount needed to secure goods and services they formerly furnished themselves but now had to pay for as part of a new economic order. Only a few savvy folk were able to adapt their land and their lives to the relentless advance of a cash mentality, a mentality insensitive to (and corrosive of) traditional mountain mores.

It would be naive, however, to lay all blame on the insidious forces of capitalism. Local, decidedly Pyrenean reasons for town abandonment and population decline must also be recognized. In Solanell's case, inhabitants had to cope with remoteness, inaccessibility, limited cultivable land, steepness of terrain, shortage of water, and harsh winters when heavy snowfall could result in days or even weeks of isolation - all these factors took their toll. One former inhabitant declared that he and his fellow townfolk "had to work hard to live poorly," commenting also that every activity "took such an effort, that's why people left."

Difficulties related to the environment also affected what social services and infrastructure could reasonably be provided. Solanell, by any contemporary standards, may be said to have endured chronic insufficiency in this regard. The list of things lacking is seemingly endless, but the absence of a school is particularly noteworthy. Children from Solanell were schooled in Castellbo, an hour or so from Solanell on foot. Having children return home was advantageous, but more than two hours of potential labour was lost in their travelling back and forth each day. Other towns in the region were even less fortunate, for greater distance between home and school resulted in children being boarded, thus cutting them off from their families during most of the week. The effects of this removal meant

systematic socialization to ways other than those of one's parents or grandparents. In school, bonds were formed and interests sparked that might later lead to marriage with a non-local partner or employment far from home. Towns like Solanell thus gradually became abodes of old people, places where younger folk were conspicuously few. The manner in which children were schooled, in essence, educated them to leave. Towns without children are destined to die, are half-dead already.

What happened to Solanell must also be placed in the context of economic and political trends affecting Spain and Spanish society as a whole. The development priorities of General Franco throughout the 1950s and 1960s favoured investment in urban/industrial complexes at the expense of improving the lot of people in rural/agricultural areas. Franco's policies toward mountain communities like those of the High Urgel at best resulted in stagnation, at worst in progressive disintegration, as individuals and entire families left to seek work elsewhere in Catalonia, or even farther afield in Zaragoza or Madrid. Central government decisions to close schools in which less than twenty pupils were still in attendance are remembered by local inhabitants with a bitterness that time has yet to erase. Now, more than two decades after Franco's death, a radically alternative political agenda and an unimagined range of political scenarios certainly prevail. Yet recent moves to reopen schools where perhaps only five children will be enrolled, commendable though they may be, do little to reverse the tide. Today, the power of decentralized authority, inspired by notions of Catalan autonomy in a New Spain and a New Europe, is a concrete political reality. But so too is the impact and legacy of the Franco years, as the fate of Solanell in part attests.

### Taking Leave

AFTER lunch we walked around a little more. In the churchyard, amidst a sea of blue and yellow wildflowers, a toppled tombstone carried the inscription "Pere Julia Guitart, 10-1-1963, als 45 anys." It struck me as symbolic that the only resident of Solanell I would know by name died the year electricity came to town. As we entered the church itself, it was impossible not to feel the need for some kind of prayer. Particles of dust hovered in a shaft of sunlight. Wooden pews lay pushed to the side. A panel on the altar, singular in the extreme, had been painted over with the figure of a skeleton, a perfect visual metaphor. We were there, I realized later, to mourn the loss not of one soul but of many, to acknowledge not the passing of life but the end of an era.

Outside, the sky echoed with the sound of birds and crickets. The bells of wandering sheep clanged and clanged monotonously. On our way back to the car, I noticed a fresh pile of dung on the trail, around which flies buzzed in frenetic, dizzying circles. Sheep indicated a presence, a cow confirmed it. I suddenly felt that we, the observers, were ourselves being watched, that behind one of the houses we walked past, someone was waiting for us to leave. Not until we were beyond the town perimeter did I hear a door slam and a dog bark. I looked back to see the figure of a man move up a street, then disappear into a barn. The next day we learned of an old farmer who returns each summer to pasture sheep and graze a cow. After our departure, the solitude of Solanell was again exclusively his.

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