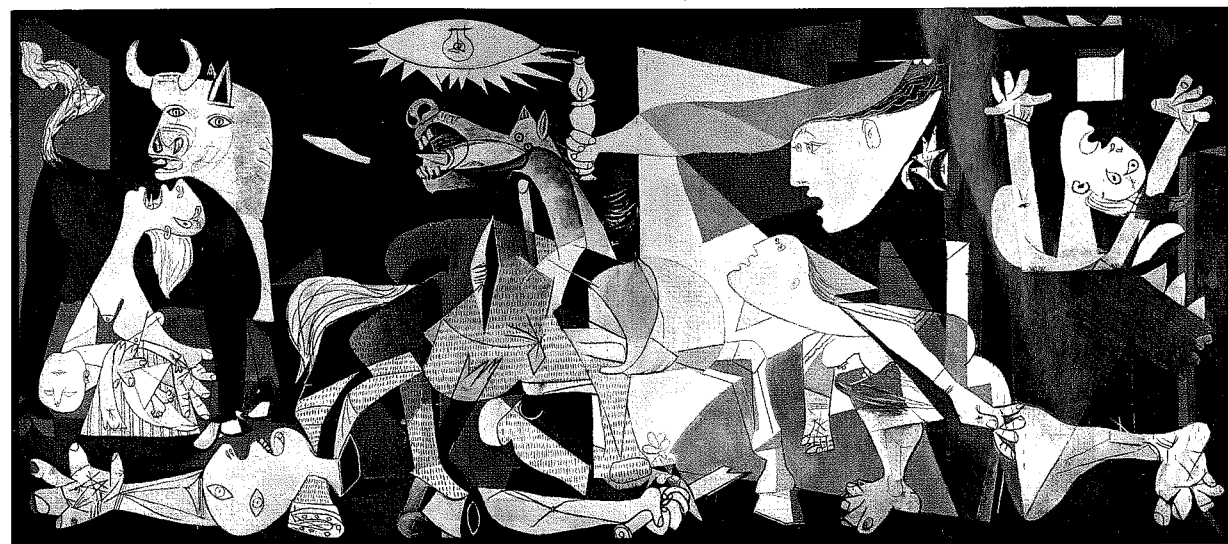




Nationalist troops advance through bombed homes in Madrid; below, *Guernica*, Picasso's response to the bombing of the Spanish city in 1937; below right, Francisco Franco, circa 1937; far right, Dorothy Morris.



INTO THE STORM

The stories of two formidable nurses – one a Kiwi – who risked all in the Spanish Civil War are at last being told. **by LYDIA MONIN**

They move like no thing there has ever been. They move like mechanized doom," wrote Ernest Hemingway in his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. During the Spanish Civil War, General Francisco Franco and his allies embarked on a bombing campaign that targeted civilians. Women and children were fair game.

Spain was a preview to a new type of war, and for an engineer's daughter from Cromwell, Otago, and a chemist's daughter from Cork, Ireland, the plight of civilians in the ravages of conflict could not be ignored. From opposite sides of the globe they travelled to Spain to nurse the maimed and dying under the storm raining down from German and Italian bombers. Dorothy Morris and Mary Elmes heard the tolling of the bell.

Almost 80 years on, their heroic life stories are being told in the countries of their birth. Later this year, a biography of Dorothy Morris that draws on a raft of family letters (*Petals and Bullets: Dorothy Morris – New*

Zealand Nurse in the Spanish Civil War, by Mark Derby) will be published in New Zealand and a documentary film (*It Tolls for Thee*) about her Irish friend will premiere in Dublin.

AN UNUSUAL MOVE

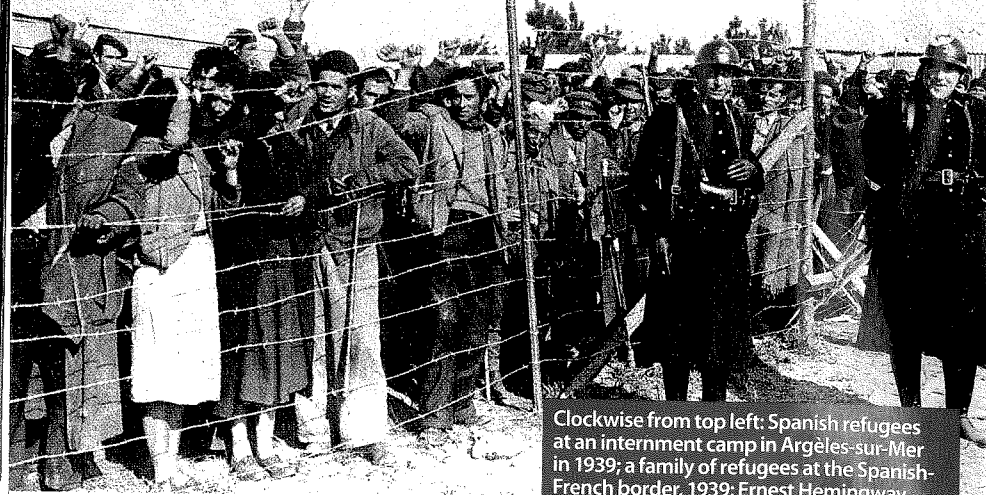
Dorothy Morris was living in London when she answered an advertisement for nurses to travel to Spain. The war had become an international cause. Republicans were fighting the Nationalists, the rebel fascist group led by Franco; volunteers from around the world went to Spain to fight for both sides. The aid agencies moved in as the humanitarian disaster unfolded.



Well-read and fluent in several languages, Morris had quit her university studies in Christchurch to become a nurse. It was an unusual move for a well-educated young woman in the 1920s. "While New Zealand nurses had made considerable progress in elevating the status of their work from a calling to a medical profession, a 19th-century odour of bedpans and low-paid drudgery still clung to it," writes Wellington historian Derby in *Petals and Bullets*.

FROM PETALS & BULLETS BY MARK DERBY

WAR HEROINES



Clockwise from top left: Spanish refugees at an internment camp in Argèles-sur-Mer in 1939; a family of refugees at the Spanish-French border, 1939; Ernest Hemingway, left, in the Belchite sector, circa 1937; Italian leader Benito Mussolini, who provided military support to the Spanish Nationalists.



Nursing at Christchurch Hospital during the Depression meant dealing with the jobless and the destitute. "I think this would have been a distressing experience for somebody like her," says Derby. "She would've seen that Christchurch retained a wealthy upper layer that wasn't particularly affected by the Depression."

Morris travelled to Europe in search of pastures new, but when a rebel group of generals rose up against the elected leftist Government of the Second Spanish Republic, Morris found her true calling.

"She didn't appear to be as badly affected as many other people who describe feeling utter despair [and] unable to stop crying," says Derby. "Very, very hard thing to do, having to operate on people, including children, when you've run out of anaesthetic and so on."

WHEREVER THEY WERE NEEDED

It was on blood-red Spanish soil that Morris met the "very calm, collected and capable" Mary Elmes from Ireland. Elmes wasn't a trained nurse, but she'd gained first-class honours in modern literature at Trinity College Dublin. Working first for an ambulance

unit run by English aristocrat Sir George Young and then in Quaker-funded children's hospitals and refugee relief services, Morris and Elmes went wherever they were needed most.

In 1938, the hospital Elmes was running in Alicante had to be moved north to a small mountain village because of the relentless

"Very, very hard thing to do, having to operate on people, including children, when you've run out of anaesthetic."

bombing. In an old tape recording included in the film *It Tolls for Thee*, Elmes tells of a toddler who was at the Alicante market when it was bombed. "She was in her mother's arms and there was terrific confusion and the woman lost the child, whose left leg had been almost torn off."

The little girl was taken to Elmes's hospital, where a Spanish doctor refused to amputate the leg of such a young child. "For months

she lay on a board with the leg stretched out. It mended and she walked again."

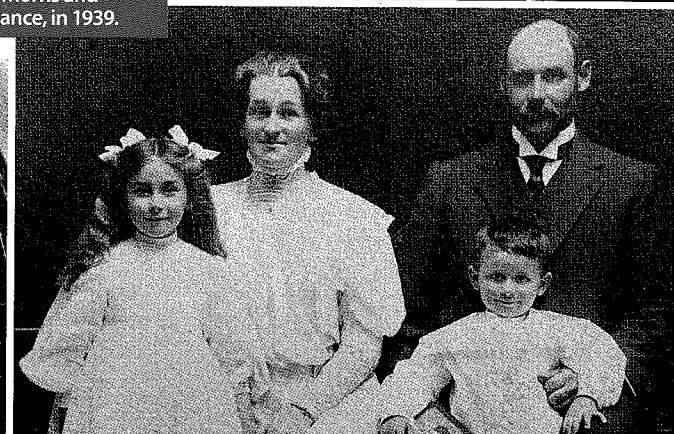
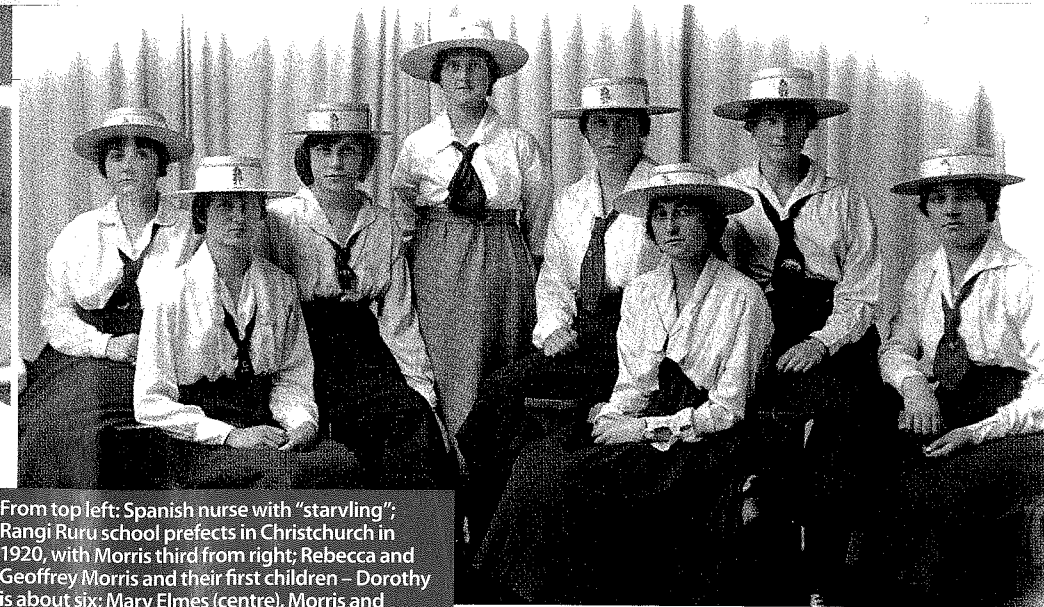
DODGING DEATH

With Franco about to win the war, Morris was ordered to leave Spain, because she'd worked at an International Brigades hospital and the general inflicted terrible revenge on his defeated foes. Morris left so as not to further endanger others who were staying, like Elmes, who'd only worked with non-combatants. The fall of Barcelona in early 1939 led to La Retirada (the Retreat), when nearly half a million refugees fled over the Pyrenees into France during a freezing winter. Those who survived were herded into hellish internment camps on the beaches. Once again, Elmes and Morris were there, organising basic needs from a hub in Perpignan and sharing an apartment.

When the Germans entered Paris in June 1940, all British personnel were ordered to leave France. Ireland was neutral, so Elmes stayed, driving Morris and others through the night in a desperate bid to reach the last British ships leaving from Bordeaux. Morris spent World War II working in London munitions factories as a welfare supervisor.



From top left: Spanish nurse with "starving"; Rangitapu school prefects in Christchurch in 1920, with Morris third from right; Rebecca and Geoffrey Morris and their first children - Dorothy is about six; Mary Elmes (centre), Morris and their driver Juan in Perpignan, France, in 1939.



She'd avoided Franco's bullets, outpaced the Gestapo and dodged the bombs of the Blitz, but it looked as if Morris's luck was finally going to run out in early 1945 in Egypt when she developed a high fever while working at a refugee camp. No one at the British military hospital in Alexandria could cure her and she later told her family she was "put into a corner of the hospital to die". By remarkable coincidence, her life was saved by a fellow Kiwi from Cromwell, Doug Jolly. Jolly was a renowned battlefield surgeon who'd joined the Republican Army in Spain and was stationed with the British Army in Tobruk. He happened to arrive in Alexandria, heard of Morris's plight and gave her penicillin.

AFTER THE WARS

Morris didn't return to New Zealand permanently until she was in her seventies, and she never married. After the wars, she risked arrest by Franco's secret police by going back to Spain to find out what had happened to a doctor she'd fallen in love with, only to discover he'd been killed at the Battle of the Ebro.

"According to several of her friends,

Morris's life could be sharply divided into the periods before and after she received this anguishing confirmation," writes Derby.

Elmes stayed in France, saving many - probably hundreds - of Jewish children from the gas chambers. She worked in Rivesaltes, a holding camp at the end of a railway line that took Jews to the death camps in the

She risked arrest by going back to Spain to find out what had happened to a doctor she'd fallen in love with.

east. Elmes smuggled children in the boot of her car and drove them to safe houses in the Pyrenees. She was eventually arrested and imprisoned by the Nazis. After the war, she married a Frenchman and spent the rest of her life in Perpignan. She posthumously became the first Irish person to be honoured as Righteous Among the Nations, an award given to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.

Like her friend, Morris shunned publicity while she was alive. "She saw what she had done as part of a collective effort," says Derby. "She certainly wasn't any sort of shrinking violet. [Hospital matrons] have to be very strong women indeed ... But I think she would have recoiled from the idea that her own individual contribution and her own life story should be the focus of attention."

Close to the beach at Argèles-sur-Mer, where more than 100,000 refugees were penned in between the ocean and the barbed wire, stands the historic castle of Valmy. There's an entry in the castle visitor's book from September 1939, when a community of 12 refugee artists put on an exhibition of their paintings, drawings and sculpture in a country house in the castle grounds. The message reads: "Spirit and enthusiasm are the most important things in life, and these the Spaniards will have for ever." It's signed, "Dorothy A Morris & Mary Elmes, Los Amigos Quakeros (the Quaker Friends)". ■

PETALS AND BULLETS: DOROTHY MORRIS - NEW ZEALAND NURSE IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR, by Mark Derby (Pott & Burton) is out in September.