Towards the end of January we could see that everything was collapsing and our leader, an Asturian called Antonio, who had lost both his hands except for two fingers, said that we needed to get hold of some lorries to take us to the frontier. He went to see the commander of the headquarters at Vich, a man from Santander who was disabled too, and he explained that if the Nationalist forces moved in fast we couldn’t just walk across like the others. He told Antonio not to worry and that we should have our lorries. But blow me, nothing seemed to happen and right at the end, when the fascists were already in Barcelona, we still had no lorries. So Antonio, the head of our barrack, said we would all go on crutches down to the army headquarters, which we did and we refused to budge until they found us some transport. Immediately they found some small lorries and we were taken up to Puigcerda, close to the frontier. We thought that we were about to cross over but things were not that simple because the frontier was closed on the French side; they wouldn’t let anybody through. So back we were taken and dumped in a former hotel at Regina and there we were without any transport again.

There we were, stranded, and the frontier was only two or three miles away, but for us it could just as well have been one hundred. Everyone was asking how we were going to get across when we had only crutches. In the end we managed to get in touch with some Asturian lorry drivers who were with the army transports at Puigcerda. They said, ‘We’ve put some lorries in a garage all ready to go. All we have to do is fill up the radiators with water (they were emptied because of the severe cold); don’t worry, those lorries are being kept just for you.’ We waited but everyone was anxious and on edge because the enemy was closing in: ‘Jesus Christ! When are we going?’ Nobody could sleep. There were some soldiers who tried to force their way over the frontier, but they were driven back. But at last one night word came that the frontier was open and the lorries turned up. ‘Come on! Come on! Everyone on board; we’re off.’

It was the 9th of February 1939 when we crossed the frontier; that was the famous passage of the Pyrenees, when the Spanish refugees came across the mountains. That was something quite criminal,
terrible. It was a disaster; a great flood of people, women, children, soldiers, driven on by the fear of the fascists just behind.

Once we had crossed into France there was a huge jam at the police control point and all us disabled soldiers had to get down from the lorry. We were searched one by one and the frontier police – they could nearly all speak Spanish – were saying, ‘Gold? Have you got any gold?’ ‘Gold?’, was the reply, ‘Yes, shit and lice.’ We climbed back up into the lorries and were taken to a railway station at La Tour de Carol.

There you could see the extent of the disaster; thousands and thousands of people, most of them living out in the open, in the snow and ice. Us disabled soldiers were taken to a railway depot, a great big shed where the railway line ran inside, and a lorry-load of hay was thrown down for us to sleep on. The first day or two, before the food supply began to get organised, there was nothing to eat and outside the snow was lying one or two feet deep on the ground. As the Spanish army came over the frontier it drove a lot of sheep with it and they had been penned up close by. At night there were men who would creep over in the dark, past the French police guards, and kill one to bring back to eat. That’s how we first got some food, by stealing sheep, stealing sheep which belonged to us. Everything was taken from us by the police: lorries, guns, horses, sheep, and after that you couldn’t touch a thing. I remember that as the soldiers arrived at La Tour de Carol they were disarmed and the police began to stack the weapons in the tunnel for foot passengers which went under the railway lines from one platform to another and it was completely full. And all the Spanish transports, lorries, vans, ambulances, were parked near the shed where we were. The drivers were removed and a police guard was placed on them and any materials they were carrying.

I managed to get into one lorry and found a piece of lard and in another, a mobile library, I took two fine books, one on natural history and the other on politics called The Miscarriage of the League of Nations. But a gendarme came and told me to put them back. I argued with him, ‘But these books belong to us.’ ‘No, no. They are not yours. All this stuff is under French control; you don’t have the right to take anything.’ ‘But this is a Spanish library; this is ours.’ He said, ‘No, no, no; give me those books’, and he tore them away from me. But I had hidden another in my shirt so I managed to get away with that. ‘Allez! Allez! Back to the shed.’

After a while they began to organise the food. A cooking range was