



Ceferino Jiménez Malla – "El Pelé"

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Ceferino Jiménez Malla – "El Pelé" is a relatively unknown figure except, perhaps, in church circles. Today, though, he is coming to the attention of a wide public through his recent beatification. Beatification only sixty years after death is somewhat unusual within the Catholic church. However, on May 4, 1997, the Pope officially beatified Ceferino, primarily because of his martyrdom.

Many facts concerning Ceferino are unclear, beginning with his birth. Some sources claim he was born in Catalanian Benavente de Segria, in the province of Lérida (in northeastern Spain, not far from the French border); others say his place of birth was the little village of Alcolea de Cinca near Barbastro in Huesca/Aragon. He was born to Juan Jiménez, who was nicknamed Tichs, and Josefa Malla, but his year of birth is uncertain. While some relatives indicate that it was 1865, specialized literature suggests 1861. Travelling families of the *Kale* (Spanish Roma) [→ Roma – Sub Ethnic Groups] often deliberately postponed baptising their children until they were adults in order to avoid registration and the consequent induction of men into the army. According to the testimony of contemporaries, however, it was possible for a man to avoid military service by paying someone to replace him. It was in no way a matter of small sums of money - at that time it might have been the price of a house.

The *Kale* travelled around Spain and stopped in various towns where there were markets with animals. [→ Traders] Ceferino's family also travelled, but they earned their livelihood primarily as basket-makers.

Not much is known about his childhood. Tradition has it only that Ceferino accompanied his uncle, who was also a basket-maker, and sold his products around the villages. The travelling family usually waited out the winter on farms in places farmers set aside for them, or else they rented a cottage for a few months. Relatives remember Ceferino telling them how he often went hungry as a child: When he returned home from the market and saw the chimney emitting smoke, he was happy because he knew that he would be getting something to eat. When, however, there was no smoke, that meant that the women had not cooked anything. It is very probable that little Ceferino even went begging.

Despite all the uncertainties, everyone agrees that Ceferino never went to school and, all his life, never learned to read or write. At the turn of the century, however, illiteracy was not unusual – more than half the population of Europe did not have a basic education. Therefore, it seems quite exceptional that Teresa Jiménez Castro, who was born in Lérida and who later became Ceferino's wife, was able to go to school for a few years.

According to Roma tradition, Ceferino's father chose his son's bride. The *Romni* Teresa Castro reputedly did not want the young man because she thought he was very ugly. Nevertheless, after the unavoidable "bargaining", she and Ceferino Jiménez Malla were joined in a traditional Roma ceremony which, although "unofficial" was binding within the Roma community. [→ Bijav / → Mangavipen]

Shortly after his marriage, Ceferino began to trade in donkeys and horses and he quickly became a master of his trade. To this day, a few of his work tools have been preserved, e.g., a kind of paddle to clean a horse's hoof before shoeing. Tools with which he cleaned horseshoes and iron shoes for mules and donkeys were donated by the son of Ceferino's friend, Ferruchón, to the **Museum of Martyrs** in Barbastro. Ceferino had great success in the horse markets while being an absolutely honest horse trader. In a book by Father Fandosa we can read:



"In the markets where he traded in animals, he honed the skills of his profession, dexterously using every permitted method of gaining customers: a good joke, some made-up story, colourful comparisons, innocent tricks. Never swindles or lies."

Fandosa also tells that once Ceferino allegedly sold an animal to a buyer who did not notice any of its inadequacies. That night, however, Ceferino thought over what he had done and, in the morning, he hurried to the man to whom he had sold the animal and told him the whole truth. According to much evidence, through actions such as this, Ceferino enjoyed a good reputation in the town.

The couple remained childless. Not long after Ceferino's father, Tichs, had abandoned his family, the mother died. The couple then took care not only of Ceferino's younger brothers and sisters - Chiveca, Encarnación and Felipe, nicknamed El Menino - but also Teresa's niece, Pepita. They later enrolled her in a church school, which may have deepened even further Ceferino's relationship with the Catholic Church.

El Menino took his older brother's advice and, in 1902, married a woman named Alegria after Ceferino had dissuaded him from marrying two other girls. About the time of Menino's wedding, Ceferino stopped travelling. He and Teresa settled in a poor quarter of Barbastro. A year later, Menino had a son, Alfredo, and chose Ceferino to be the child's godfather. As Ceferino had no children of his own, Alfredo (and later Menino's other children) was considered Ceferino's direct descendant, in accordance with tradition. On Alfredo's birth certificate, we find a small inaccuracy: Ceferino stated that he was married in a church, although he actually had a church wedding in 1912, nine years later, i.e., almost thirty years after he and Teresa had begun living together according to Roma custom. At the time of his actual church wedding, Ceferino was about 51 years old and his wife, Teresa, 53. Their witnesses apparently requested that the parish priest waive the bans in order to avoid a scandal or the ridicule of the inhabitants of Barbastro for getting married after so many years of living together. The marriage finally took place in Lérida, about sixty kilometers away.

Ceferino gathered the children of Roma families and adult neighbours, explained the Holy Scriptures to them and taught them prayers. He was able to reconcile problems that arose every day in the community and thus lend a helping hand for peaceful coexistence. Contemporaries also tell how Ceferino treated children with great respect and spoke to them "just as if they were grown-ups." He often brought Roma and Spanish children together and he earned the same respect and admiration from both groups. He was apparently very pleasant and always good-humored, and it was hard for him to keep a straight face when he wanted to appear strict. Tradition has it that Ceferino never argued, either with a Rom or with a *gadžo*. His friends and relatives always praised his diplomatic ability to resolve disputes that arose among the Roma. They say that, to lessen tension, he admitted that each one had some right on his side, and so everyone liked and respected him.

Ceferino never stopped being a *Rom* [→ Romanipe-The Roma Identity] and he always declared he was one of them. Among them he apparently spoke *Kale*; with *gadže* he spoke Spanish. Spanish Roma (*Kale*) speak a *Romani* ethnolect of Spanish, a language characterised as "Pararomani". It is basically Spanish mixed with *Romani* expressions. Another Para-*Romani* language is a *Romani* ethnolect of English, spoken by *Romanichels* living in England. Ceferino's contemporaries remember how humble he was while also being an obliging, cheerful, humorous man who earned respect in his public as well as his private life.



As for Teresa, she is remembered as a rather short, stocky woman who wore large gold earrings. Her hair was decorated with colorful combs. Her rings and scarves attracted people's attention. Some said she was a spendthrift. Pepe, Ferruchón's son, remembered that once, when he was still small, Ceferino gave Ferruchón a silver coin he had found in the street in front of the house. Ceferino supposed it belonged to the woman on the balcony. He had wanted to ask her, but it seems that Teresa did not want him to because she was not so magnanimous. And so Ceferino apparently gave it to Ferruchón with the words, "I'm giving it to you to get rid of this problem."

One of Ceferino's closest friends was a man of his age, Nicolas Santosa de Otto Escuerda, who lectured on civil and canon law at the university in Zaragoza. He later became a professor at the university in Murcia, in Oviedo, and finally in Barcelona. The beginning of their great friendship dates back to about 1915, shortly after Ceferino had accompanied the professor several times on his journeys around Spain. Through the professor, Ceferino gradually got to know many lawyers, politicians, doctors and tradesmen who were, at the time, the most important men in the town. Nicolas Santosa de Otto Escuerda remembered Ceferino this way: "Very few people understood friendship the way he did." Ceferino treated not only friends, but also strangers, with the utmost respect. Ferruchón's son, Pepe, remembers how once a few people were playing "guiñote" in the Luisito bar. His father's group apparently declared Ceferino the winner. However, he reacted with the words: "Here there are neither winners nor losers; here friends are having fun." He never used a sharp word against those with whom he disagreed.

The following story, which dates back to 1919, can serve as an example of Ceferino's way of doing things. An ex-mayor, Rafael Jordán, suffered from tuberculosis and, on one of his journeys abroad, he had a seizure, with blood flowing from his mouth. They say that Ceferino did not hesitate for a minute. Without fear of contagion, he put the ex-mayor on his back, carried him home and, on the way, gave him words of comfort. His deed aroused the admiration of everyone in the vicinity. Jordán's brother, Simón, later met with Ceferino to reward him for his help. He offered him a trip to France to buy a wagonload of mules, which Ceferino could then sell for a profit. In fact, not long afterwards, Ceferino set out with a sizable sum of money and, when he sold the mules, he hurried back home, not only to return to Simón the money he had borrowed, but also to share his profits with him. Simón Jordán declined his magnanimous offer. Later on, Ceferino bought the house which he had been renting until then, and onto the house he added a stable. It is said that he willingly and often lent money to poor Roma, but he apparently also allowed them to remove from the stables the animals they liked most. They could pay their debts when they sold them or at the end of their seasonal work when they could afford to do so.

At the beginning of the 1920's, Ceferino found himself in prison. It happened during his stay in El Vendrell in Catalonia, when a certain trader identified among Ceferino's mules those which had been stolen from him a short time earlier in the market of a nearby little town. Therefore city police imprisoned Ceferino. Immediately, his close friend, Nicolas Santosa de Otto Escuerda, rushed to his aid. The court decision, however, dispelled any doubts. Someone else had stolen the mules from the market. Ceferino then bought them without having any idea that the animals were stolen. He even presented the court proof of payment for them. Eyewitnesses mentioned that, after his return home, they saw Ceferino, two candles in his hands, walking on his knees to the church, a distance of about 700 meters, to thank the Lord. From that time on, he was apparently even more devout. He attended mass not only on holy days and Sundays, but every day. In the early 1920's, he was invited to join a brotherhood called **Archicofradia de los Jueves Eucarísticos** (Society of Eucharist Thursdays), which was comprised of the most esteemed men of the city. Among their duties was attendance on Thursdays at hourly adorations. Many people also remember when Ceferino would accompany a priest on visits



to sick people he may not have known. He attended funerals and christenings at which he and his wife would give generous gifts. He is also said to have often visited the sick from the local poor house and prayed with them. He tried to keep his membership in the philanthropic Saint Vincent Society a secret, and he contributed anonymously. He did not want to humiliate anyone and he always gave alms prudently: here, milk to a mother for her child; there, clothing or food to vagrants.

In December 1922, Ceferino's wife, Teresa, died. Eight months later, her niece Pepita got married, but she and her husband remained in her uncle's home after their marriage. Ceferino was very much attached to their children and he spent a great deal of time with them.

After the death of his wife, he became more pious than ever. From that time, they tell the story of Ceferino catching sight of the bishop of the local diocese, Emilio Jiménez, in the street. Ceferino immediately greeted him and reverently kissed his ring. The two men knew each other well and exchanged a few friendly words. Suddenly a Piarist priest, also named Jiménez, approached them and joked that someone should send for a photographer to immortalize the three most pious Jiménezes in the city. About that time, Ceferino also entered the third order of penance in the parish of Saint Francis of Assisi.

As he got older, he went even more often to the de Otto family, where his room was always ready and a table was set for him. The children treated him like a member of the family and they always lovingly remembered the stories and legends that Ceferino told them at bedtime. Pepita's children also recall his colourful stories about the saints taken from Spanish literature and legends. Ceferino, who himself could not read, probably knew them from the theatrical performances of travelling Roma, who added a little to their livelihood with their plays.

After the election success of the "Popular Front" in Spain in 1936, the country's anti-democratic forces responded with a putsch of the clerical-fascist military under General Franco. The catholic church also sided with the military putsch against the democratically elected government. The church's position resulted in attacks against their representatives in the course of the cruel Civil War. With the electoral defeat of the right-wing parties in February 1936, the political situation also radicalised in Barbastro. The new bishop already had some problems with his succession to the cathedra, and the mayor soon forbade the ringing of the church bells. Locals recall it was dangerous to move freely in the streets and that day – July 19 – both Pepita and the de Otto family tried to discourage Ceferino from walking to town. Pepita's oldest daughter remembers:

"Ceferino was sitting in front of the house and I was sitting next to him. Another Rom was there, too. We were glad that the weather outside had cooled off a bit. All of a sudden, he asked for a cigarette and left."

Ceferino wanted to know what was going on in town and, when he saw soldiers arresting a priest, he pleaded for him. The soldiers pounced on Ceferino, beat him with their fists and, when they found a pocket knife and a rosary in his pocket, arrested him, too, and took him away to the local monastery, which had been turned into a prison. He was locked up with 350 other people.

A young anarchist member of the revolutionary committee, Eugenio Sapena, knew Ceferino and visited him. In an attempt to spare him any further suffering, Sapena tried to talk Ceferino into letting him take away his rosary. He said they would then let him go. Ceferino, however, refused and, according



to witnesses, began to pray even harder. He spent another two weeks in the cell. Early in the morning of August 9, he and nineteen other prisoners were transported to the cemetery in a truck.

The driver later stated that Ceferino, who was about 75 years old at the time, kept proclaiming during the journey, "Long live Jesus the King". Then they placed the prisoners along the cemetery wall and shot them. Ceferino clasped his rosary in his hand. Forty thousand worshippers attended the celebrations on May 4, 1997, during which Pope John Paul II beatified Ceferino Jiménez Malla. Said the pope in his homily: "*The beatified Ceferino Jiménez Malla sowed understanding and solidarity among the Roma. In conflicts, he was a mediator who strengthened relations between Roma and non-Roma.*" The Pope then reminded Roma who attended the ceremony in large numbers from all over the world that "it is necessary to overcome old prejudices causing your suffering which is brought about by various forms of discrimination and undesirable marginalisation."

In 1999, a Prague-based non-governmental, non-profit organisation, **MENT**, whose projects included Education of Roma children, prepared, with the assistance of the editors of "Romano Džaniben", a compendium of brief information about ten Roma personalities from countries throughout Europe. The personalities were not only to serve as positive role models for Roma children, but also to raise awareness among Czech children of the history and culture of the Roma. Alongside → Matéo Maximoff , sisters Katarina and → Rosa Taikon , Bronislawa Wajs – → Papisza → Django Reinhardt and others, the collection also included Ceferino Jiménez Malla – "El Pelé". The texts in this Rombase are an expanded version of that collection.

References

Fandosa, Ángel M. (1973) *Un Gitano con madera de Santo*. Barcelona.