

HOSPITALERA BEHAVIOR IN RABÉ DE LAS CALZADAS Jan 2007

On September 6th 2006 at 1330 we, Hannelore Biedermann (66 from Germany) and Bente Melå (51 from Norway), arrived at Rabé de las Calzadas. The albergue did not open until 1500 and there were no places in the village for purchasing food. Eventually we were joined by a German biker of about 60 years and his daughter. Later two French women (in their 60s) and Klaus (67) from Denmark arrived. All were in need for food and anxious to get out of the burning sun (the approximate temperature was 35 C).

At 1500 the hospitalera of "Albergue Virgin de la Guía", Michele, opened the door. In the heat outside one by one was interrogated about where we came from and where we had stayed last night. The bikers requested if she would allow them to stay, and they were accepted.

Three pilgrims in their 20s arrived and Michele repeated her questioning. She suddenly spotted insect bites on the young woman's legs, and got very upset. We did not fully understand what the problem was, but we were definitely shocked by the way she acted. She told the girl to get away from the premises at once and to burn all her belongings, because she was "infected". We asked what could be done to help the young people, but Michele ignored our requests for aid, and commanded them to leave. She offered no aid, nor food. The time was 1615.

We were exhausted and upset when Michele finally permitted us to step inside to register, in the same order as we had arrived. When came the turn of the Germans, she told them she was not convinced that the albergue they stayed the night before was clean. She again stated that she had to protect her house, so they had to leave. The woman started crying and said that they had been accepted and therefore already had spent almost three hours waiting to get in. But there was no mercy! The rest of us paid 20 Euro for the stay; dinner and breakfast included. We asked if it was possible to have a little to eat, but "NO". There would be no food until 8 o'clock!

Finally at 1730 we were permitted to enter the dormitory, an extremely hot room about 12 -14 m² with 4 bunk beds. We were allowed to sit in "The Museum", where the walls were covered with souvenirs and "Compostelas". Several scrap books were filled with clippings, where the hospitalera appeared as a board member of a formal organization of the Camino de Santiago. There were also photos in which she addressed pilgrims in the Cathedral of Santiago, plus others from the "grand opening" of the albergue. We were given the impression that here reigned an important representative of the Camino Santiago.

Before we were called in for dinner at 1945, four Spanish pilgrims arrived. They had started the walk on the same day from Burgos, so they were immediately admitted. We were seated around the table for 15 minutes before Michele put down two plates of salad on the table. She told us to use our forks and eat off the plates together. She eventually brought a portion of spaghetti for each of us, handed out in the same order as we had been signed in. For drinks there were two mugs of water and one mug of wine to share for the nine of us; a small glass of wine for each and no refill. On Klaus' request for more wine, Michele refused. In her house she did not permit guest to drink so much that they snored at night. It came to an argument between Klaus and Michele, and she turned very angry. Since Klaus was not able to discuss in a common language with her, Bente helped explaining that the Pilgrim menus along the Camino normally included half a bottle of wine pro person. She then offered us to buy some

bottles from her, an offer we found both immoral and expensive. We finished the plain Yogurt “dessert” and left the table. It had been an unpleasant and disgraceful meal!

Klaus wanted to write his diary, but the “Museum” was rather dark for a man of 67 years, so he turned on the light dimmer. At once Michele was furiously present. No one had the right to use electricity on her behalf! As Klaus got upset by this treatment, she suddenly accused him of being drunk (!) and making a lot of problems in her home. She wanted him to get out of her house immediately. We tried to calm her down, praying her to be reasonable to an elderly man, who only wanted enough light to write his diary. Then she turned even more furious and told Bente (the interpreter) to get out of her house as well. Michele telephoned to what appeared was the police, to get assistance to throw them out. When talking loudly and angry in the phone, the five of us went quickly into the dormitory (the Spanish were outside). There we made the agreement to stay together. If one had to leave, all would. We undressed quietly and went to bed.

Although the albergue had 20 beds, eight people had to sleep together in a suffocating air in the dormitory downstairs. Only one of the Spanish men got a bed in the upstairs dormitory. It was impossible to sleep. At midnight, when Michele finally finished her noisy telephone calls and the house got quiet, Bente moved gently to open the doors to the hallway and the bathroom, to make the air circulate. As she tried to open the bathroom window, Michele suddenly appeared. “No one had the right to make her home unsafe!” The window hopefully still has the iron bars to prove her illogic! We spent a sleepless night and at 0530 everybody was ready to leave. On a small table outside the room were “Breakfast reserved to pilgrim”, except for Klaus and Bente. For them waited envelopes with four euros and the following message:

“Estimada (.....) La devuelvo el coste del desayuno (Euros cuatro) porque me ha disgustado su comportamiento de anoche en mi casa y en el CAMINO DE SANTIAGO, que es un Camino de Paz y Fraternidad y sobre todo, de gran Respeto. No se merce se lo prepare.

Que Santiago le preteja.

La Hospitalera”

We stood outside the house ready to walk, when Michele came to collect the key from the one who had slept upstairs. Bente approached her and said no one should leave without food. Michele asked her to be quiet, because the village was sleeping. As Bente repeated her request, Michele viciously hit her across the face while shouting: “You are not a pilgrim! You are a tourist!” She then ran into the house.

When reaching Hontanas and “Albergue el Puntido”, we told the proprietors about last night’s experiences. “The hospitalera in Rabé de las Calzadas called me an hour ago and told me not to let Señora Mela in, if she was coming”, she said. (Bente had told Michele at arrival that she planned to stay in Hontanas the next day.) We later learned from more people that Michele had a disreputable manner of treating pilgrims.

We want to inform the official authorities of the Camino Santiago in Burgos-Leon about this treatment, in order to prevent more harassment of pilgrims at the “Albergue Virgen de la Guía”. We trust that the board will take the formal and necessary actions to secure both pilgrims and the Camino Santiago from ill mannered “protectors of Santiago”.

RESPONSE TO HOSPITALERA BEHAVIOR IN RABÉ DE LAS CALZADAS

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Bente Mela
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27 February, 2007

My Dear Peregrino,

We are so sorry to hear the terrible experience you and the other pilgrims lived through while passing through the village of Rabé de las Calzadas – Burgos.

Firstly, I want to point out that this particular albergue, where you had such an appalling treatment, is a private one, and the French lady (Michele) who runs it on her own initiative does not form part of any association.

Secondly, Michele runs her business as she likes and the only the authorities would be able to close her refuge or do something about her behavior if something happens there that may be against the law. You suggest that the lady in question may be an important representative of the Camino de Santiago, however, your experience knows otherwise. People who love the Camino de Santiago and are dedicated to the welfare of all the pilgrims DO NOT behave the way you described in your letter.

Thirdly, as we have mentioned before, Michele's private refuge is run as a personal business and the authorities can do little about her behavior. What you have done is the best method; to spread around the news that "el albergue Virgin de la Guía" should be avoided.

Finally, our Association apologizes most sincerely for your frightful ordeal while passing through the region of Burgos, as we are delighted to give hospitality to everyone going through this province.

Yours faithfully,

Amigos del Camino de Santiago de Burgos