

From Euskal Herria to wet Pampa

Zergatik irauin ote duen bizirik euskalduntasunak Argentinan hainbeste urtetan galderari erantzuteko kontuan hartu beharko da, beharbada, euskaldunak nazio honen bizitzako lehen urteetan heldu zirela. Eta, beraz, nahiz eta haseran erakunde bereak izan ez eta espainiarren eta frantziarren Banketxeetan eta Elkarlaguntzarako Erakundeetan partehartu beharra izan, izan zuten, bai, ahalmena elkartasunerako jokabideak eta bitartekoak asmatzeko. Haseran, euskaldun giroa bizitzeko toki egokiak euskaldunen ostatuak eta hotelak izaten ziren: eurretan antolatzen zituzten bere bizitza, bere bilerak, jaialdiak, kirolak, dantza taldeak eta abar. Ondoren, *Euskal Etxeak* sortu zituzten.



Immigrants at Customs.

Going to America

Studying Basque immigration during 19th century is no easy task. The sources, few and lacking in information usually present it under French and Spanish nationalities. Moreover, the Spanish State did not register those who left it from the harbors and only at the beginning of 20th century did they write an essential information in order to trace the Basques: the province of origin. On top of these difficulties, the Basque immigrants with no papers (and there were a lot of them) escaped unregistered or from harbors very distant from their caserío.

However we can deduce some figures of the Basques that emigrated in order to have an idea of the size of the phenomenon. Considering the amount of emigrants in some specific years, we can estimate that about 200,000

Basques left Euskal Herria between 1840 and 1920. Basque immigration mainly went to Buenos Aires and Montevideo (about 60%), and from there an important percentage continued toward wet Pampa. Therefore, we can conclude that over 60,000 Basques settled in Argentina between 1840 and 1930. After 1939 a last and small wave of immigrants known as the exile followed, but they do not affect our calculations.

As a migratory group the Basques do not present many differences with most of the national or regional groups. They were in general unmarried men –with an important presence of families– aged around twenty. In the beginning of 19th century the immigrants came mainly from the country, but at the turn of the century they came mostly from big villages and cities. Their early arrival to Argentina may be the first difference we can observe in relation to other bigger national groups, and this could well be one of the keys to understand the peculiar development of their experiences of interrelation and integration in the coast of Rio de la Plata. It could explain how a reduced number of immigrants managed to leave such a lasting print and important presence for so long.

When and why did the Basques leave their caseríos? The most intense emigration period does not leave room for doubt: 1830 marks the slow beginning and 1920/25 the decline of the emigration tide. The causes of Basque immigration involve individual and family specific problems, regional conditions that caused the emigration of specific social sectors and other situations that reached with their effects every corner of the Basque Country. The causes more often mentioned by experts are related to the Carlista struggles, the rejection of military service, and the need to leave a caserío which could not feed all the members of the family and which was inherited only by the eldest son. But there were also more punctual causes, such as the corn crisis in 1856-57 and that of the phylloxera from 1880 on...

But having problems did not immediately mean becoming an immigrant. It is hard to find isolated cases of immigration without a context of more general movement. Knowing a place with better life conditions and having the minimum resources and mechanisms to reach it was the first requirement. Many farmers and craftsmen lacking the

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technological capabilities required by the new times or wishing to continue doing the same work far from their land and the industrial revolution, took part in that impressive movement of people. Although there were real and specific problems in Euskal Herria, it seems that among the Basques attraction was stronger than expulsion or to say it in different words, they saw a more promising future far from their villages.

The Basques and work

Argentina (and particularly the Pampa) was one of the favorite destinations. Since 1840 an important number of

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Basques could be seen in Buenos Aires and in the new villages, working in a wide range of autonomous activities (carpenters, salesmen, bakers, shoemakers). Some started in these activities right away, others

after having saved some money, however, the high salaries and the lack of qualifications of many immigrants ensured that they started working as shop assistants or laborers. Until 1870 those who went to the country could take part in the increasing wool production and make money quickly. The Basques were well accepted in this business because they knew about sheep breeding, something new for the natives. But as the century grew older, trade became the best business for the economic growth of those immigrants. Their activities ranged from very profitable storage of trading goods in provinces with no trails or railways until 1875/80, general stores offering an enormous variety of products, credits, savings entities, etc. In a state which was being built and which was more concerned about achieving peace than providing the minimum services, the Basques took advantage of their opportunities.

The steady flow of immigrants presented in itself many exceptional opportunities. The overflowing population of these new villages demanded bakers, bricklayers, blacksmiths and carpenters, but even more ur-

gently the sublease of parts or the opening of extemporized and modest inns to

provide a roof and food to an increasing number of single men. The demand of food was also on the rise (many Basque pork butchers, dairy salesmen, laborers and bakers took advantage of this opportunity). But there were other elements needed in everyday life which had to be supplied; this explains that crafts which were decaying in the increasingly industrialized Europe, were essential here. This was the case of shoemakers and tinsmiths among others. On the other hand, the few Basque women who came with their bothers and husbands, and those claimed by fiancés or relatives immediately found work as maids, laundresses and ironing. These women played the most important role (although anonymously) in many professions associated now a days with the Basques: cow farming, trade, inn-keeping and hotel business.

Although villages provided great opportunities many Basques made their money in the cattle industry as herdsmen. It is frequent to find Haras and Cabañas well known nationally and internationally, in the hands of Basques. The Basques not only improved the breeding of cattle, but they usually completed their production with agriculture and dairy products.

Many other Basques who did not have important real estate possessions or capital used their capabilities in very profitable crafts –not very strange jobs, but certainly demanding– which enabled them to live better and with more independence than they enjoyed in their villages in Euskal Herria: until 1870 they were mainly shepherds and well-diggers and later on wire makers. Other less explosive activities which were just as profitable, started to be related with the Basques in 1850/60: milk farms and not so frequently inn-keeping.

Generally speaking the return of the Basques is considered to be under 50%. But we cannot reach many conclusions (although we know most of them made money) about their successes or failures considering only the high number of Basques who settled once and





The Gernika Tree in Jujuy (Argentina).

for all in the Pampa. Staying was no definite sign of success just as coming back did not always mean total failure. Not only the wide range of possibilities which fanned out through the years (marrying a local girl, children; the acquisition of property; accidents and many others) but mainly the inheritance policies of the *caseríos* in *Euskalerria* (*mayorazgo*) determined that many Basque immi-

grants left their land with the certainty that their condition of younger brothers would never allow them to go back, whether they were lucky in America or not.

The social aspects

The Basques, just as most of the pioneers in the Pampa, quickly became integrated with the rest of society. The abrupt surroundings and their own needs ensured it and ethnic particularities were soon forgotten amidst the daily obligations as neighbors and clients. However this did not prevent the Basques from keeping a collective identity, which was formed and kept, strangely, with no ethnic institutions, and based on social and cultural aspects (sports, clothes, customs) and on the leadership of a few Basques. In the beginning the Basques did not have their own institutions, so they shared Mutual Assistance Societies and Banks with Spanish and, less frequently, with French immigrants. If only few Basques took part in them, especially in smaller villages, it was partly because the hotels owned by Basques (spaces clearly identified as *Euskaldun*) and later on *Remate* houses and farming associations covered several of the economic and social services provided by those Mutual Societies.

However the Basques were clearly identified in the melting pot of that plural

Pampa. Many mechanisms to bring together the *Euskaldun*s took place (marriages, meetings, religious peregrinations, *pelota* courts...), but they did not resist a quick integration with the rest of the society. On the contrary, the social spaces owned by them, such as stores, inns and hotels, although they did recreate a typically *Euskaldun* atmosphere, were open to the rest of the social spheres. Mo-



Building Chascomus Basque Center.

reover, some of the cultural features which initially distinguished them (clothes, games) were massively adopted by the natives. In any village in the area of Buenos Aires, living next to other Basques, bearing witness for an illiterate fellow countryman, asking for help in a Mutual Assistance Society or giving work to a fellow countryman were attitudes which did not ignite any phobias among their contemporaries. On the contrary, witnessing marriages among natives, taking part in neighborhood commissions, buying and improving land and attending the same church as the rest of the village were seen as attitudes which promoted integration and good relations. Therefore, in spite of their strange clothes and customs, the Basques were seen more and more frequently as «good neighbors».

At the same time, in the Buenos Aires suburbs, where the roles of neighbor and client were diluted and debilitated in urban anonymity, it is understandable that many Euskalduns took a more ethnic role, organizing specific meeting places such as the Basque Center Laurak Bat, the French Basque Center and other institutions like the Iruñés Center or the Spanish Club, etc.

A brief summary

In the first stage (until 1880-90) the Basques presented elements that provided them a definite identity. After 1880 certain social spaces which were clearly identified became stronger, therefore, they became a community. Basque-owned inns and hotels and also –although not with the same importance– general stores, played a crucial social and economic role in different parts of the province of Buenos Aires.

After 1939/40 after the migratory flow had decreased, a small wave of Basques escaping Franco's regime arrived in Argentina. They went to the places where other Basques had settled and where they received economic, social and friendly support. The Basque hotels had ceased to be clearly ethnic cultural refuges, both because of the decrease of immigrants and for other social changes. That way, although they provided rooms and served as meeting places to the newly come during part of the forties, they soon gave way to other centers of Basque sociability, which are still strong now a days: the *Euskal Etxeak*...