

# Basque Centers in Argentina

**Munduko Euskal Etxerik gehien Argentinan dago, eta gaur bertan ere berriak sortzen ari dira. Bere kideek euskalduntasuna eta argentinartasuna bizi dituzte, eta saiatu ere gogotsu saiatzen dira bere izaera hau inguruko gizarteari erakusten**

## Introduction

There are at present, outside the geographical limits of Euskal Herria, 124 Basque Centers (*Euskal Etxeak*) in 18 countries with nearly 18,000 members.

Distributed all along the Argentinean geography there are 85 *Euskal Etxeak* with about 15,000 members.

The Basque Centers were associated in the Argentinean Basque Entities Federation (FEVA) on January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1955. At present, 54 of the 85 Argentinean centers take part in the FEVA with 10,700 members and 1,750 young boys and girls. 23 other centers are in the process of obtaining their legal personality, and they gather 1,900 members and 140 young boys and girls. There are 8 other cen-

During the last decades there have been many studies on Basque immigration to the Argentinean Republic from both sides of the Pyrenees. The investigators, Basques, Argentinean and from other nationalities, have provided valuable and clarifying conclusions, always based on thorough documentation and solid analysis.

We long for the same in relation to Basque Centers or *Euskal Etxeak* in Argentinean territory.

We are grateful for the invitation of *Eusko Ikaskuntza*/Basque Studies Society, and we wish to encourage research works on the role

played by the *Euskal Etxeak* in the experience and spreading of Basque culture in Argentina, as well as in relation to the interaction of the Basque and Argentinean culture.

The 123 years which have elapsed since the foundation of the first Basque Center in this country and the present, have been divided in the following chronological phases:

- a) 1876-1899
- b) 1900-1939
- c) 1940-1954
- d) 1955 to the present

## 1876-1899 phase

The first Basque Center was founded in Argentina on March 13<sup>th</sup> 1877: the *Laurak Bat* Center in Buenos Aires.

As its homonymous in Montevideo, which was created in December 1876, and disappeared during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was born with the same spirit «to maintain our love for the Basque Country and its fueros».

On the day of its foundation, Vice-president Daniel Lizarralde explained: «that under the critical situation the Basque Country was undergoing and considering the imminent danger in which the institutions that had secured from immemorial times the happiness of the Basques, we had to, forgetting old struggles between parties, achieve

**20 Euskal Etxetan Euskera irakasten da; 30 irakasle dituzte 300 adineko ikasleri eta 80 txikiri ikastaroak emateko; 36 ikastarotan 2.500 ordu baino gehiagoko irakaskintza.**



Necochea.

ters being formed or renewed.

The FEVA is the result of the evolution of the many Basque institutions having sprung along Argentinean history from the vocation of the Basque immigrants, their Argentinean descendants and their friends and relatives, who wanted to be united in a common objective: «Living and transmitting Basque culture while forming an essential part of the Argentinean people».

## Development

### Mikel Ezkerro Azpiroz

Member of the American Institute of Basque Studies  
 Coordinador Nacional de Cultura de la Federación de Entidades  
 Vascas en Argentina (FEVA)  
 Address: Avda. Belgrano 1150, Buenos Aires  
 Tel/fax (Work): 54 11 43814611  
 E-mail: [mezkerro@nettaxi.com](mailto:mezkerro@nettaxi.com)

the close union of all the Basques who, from these distant beaches looked anxiously and with the utmost interest toward the events that are taking place in our beloved country». The actions and purposes were also established:

- Creating a library of classical Basque works
- Establishing correspondence with the Basque Circles in Euskal Herria
- Using all available means to maintain the love for the Basque Country and its Fueros.

On July 1<sup>st</sup> 1878 the newspaper «*Laurak Bat*» was published for the first time. It thrived until 1891. We can find among the articles published in this newspaper the work «El Fuero Vascongado» (The Basque Law) by J. Arrese and «Amaya o los Vascos en el siglo VIII» (Amaya and the Basques in 8<sup>th</sup> century), by Francisco Navarro Villoslada. Antonio de Trueba was one of the collaborators in the Basque Country.

On November 1<sup>st</sup> 1882, with the financial support of the Alavan Antonio de Apellaniz, the *Laurak Bat* acquired a spacious site which was called the Plaza Euskara, and which became for a decade the most important sports and social center in the city of Buenos Aires. More than 300 people attended the inauguration, including important Argentinean personalities such as the ex-President of the Nation, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento.

A resolution was passed in 1887, which said: «founding schools where apart from the branches of primary and secondary education, Euskera shall be studied. Encourage the study of Basque history, legislation and literature».

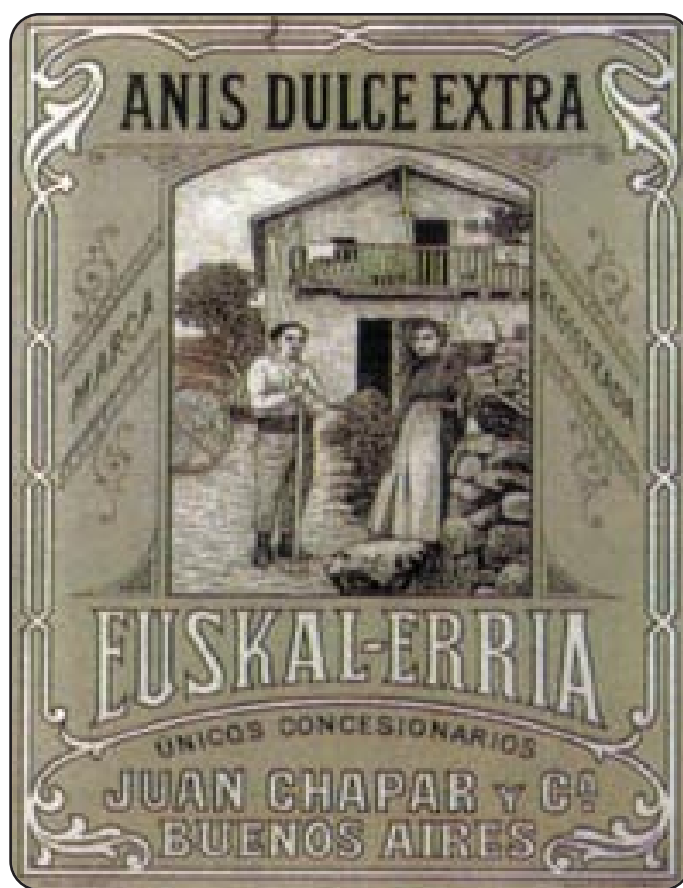
A sprout of the Gernika Tree was brought for the inauguration of the Plaza Euskara. The *Laurak Bat* also contributed with a generous sum for the building of the monument to Iparraguirre in Urretxu and they bought a copy of the picture of the bard, painted by Lecuona Echaniz.

In 1893, two immigrants, José R. Uriarte and Francisco Grandmontagne Otaegui decided to found an illustrated magazine called «La Vasconia» (since 1902, «La Basconia»). In their editorial adventure they received the support of the «culturalist» sector of the founders of *Laurak Bat*: Juan Sebastián Jaca, Daniel Lizarralde, José Antonio Lasarte, Juan Sagastume and Juan Elgarresta, etc., and from a man who had been devoting himself to the study of Basque prehistory and language: Florencio Basaldua, from Bilbao, who published this same year his novel-legend «Erne».

The influence both in Uriarte and Grandmontagne and in the above mentioned personalities of articles published in the magazine of the Asociación Euskara de Navarra, or Euskal Herria in San Sebastián, and of authors such as Arturo Campión and even José Agustín Chaho, is undeniable.

During the period we are now studying the main responsibility of «La Vasconia» was on the shoulders of

Francisco Grandmontagne, who used to sign under different pen names, the most popular of them being Luis de Jaizquibel. Since the earliest issues «La Vasconia» considered Euskal Herria as a cultural and ethnic unity, including information and notes from both sides of the Pyrenees and giving more and more importance to Euskera.



It would be impossible to write about the Basques in Argentina in the period 1893-1938 without reading this publication, which obtained great compliments at the time, both from Basque and Argentinean journalists.

In 1894 it widely covered the information on the «Gamazada», with the popular rise in Navarre in defense of its foral jurisdiction. In this occasion, Florencio Basaldua, a Basque immigrant in Argentina, attended the reception in honor of the Navarran deputies when they returned from Madrid, in the company of Sabino and Luis Arana Goiri, who were also born in Bizkaia. Basaldua was one of the speakers during the banquet offered by the President of

the Navarra County Council, Eseverri y Eseverri. Basaldua exchanged letters with José Martí when the Cuban great man lived in the United States, and he wrote in the newspaper *La Mañana* from La Ciudad de la Plata, a much talked-off article in favor of Cuban independence.

In April 1895 the «Centre Basque Français» was founded in Buenos Aires. It was integrated by 29 Basques born in Laburdi, Baja Navarra and Zuberoa. The reasons for its foundation were explained in 1945 by the only survivor of the founders, Juan Etchelecu: «The Laurak Bat did not admit us in the center because of its statutes, the French Societies such as La Gauloise and Les Enfants de Beranger did not provide the kind of atmosphere where we felt at ease, those were the reasons why we founded our own association». The statutes of this social and entertainment entity were written in French and translated into Labortan Euskera.



Mixed Laurak Bat chorus in 1915, under the direction of Luis Samperio.

Its first President and Mentor for more than three decades, Jean Pierre Passicot, was born in Bidart and emigrated to Argentina in 1880, where he became a solid businessman, the founder of the Architects and Contractors Society, the President and Director of the French Bank in Rio de la Plata, and a director of the newspaper «Le Courrier de la Plata». A fervent Euskaldun, reader of the weekly magazine *Euskalduna*, he supported financially *La Baskonia* and other publications in Iparralde such as «Euskal Herria» (1897), «Haritza» (1899) and «Euskaria» (1908), all of them written in Euskera and French.

On this same year 1895, eight Navarrans from the south of the Pyrenees, who loved choral singing, formed the «Centro Orfeón Gayarre», with the name of the great

tenor from Roncal, Julián Gayarre, who died in 1890 and had performed with great success in Buenos Aires in 1876. In March 1897 they decided to change the name to «Centro Navarro».

The «culturalist» sector, founder of Laurak Bat, returned in 1897. Chemist Juan Sebastián Jaca became President. In 1882 he founded in the city of Tandil the newspaper «The echo of Tandil», and he kept active correspondence with the cultural personalities in Euskal Herria.

In 1897, during a public act, the physician José Antonio Lasarte made a speech where he explained his idea of the relation between the Basques of both sides of the Pyrenees: «it was necessary to make the Laurak Bat a society which welcomed with no distinctions all Basques, its name could even be changed into Denak Bat or Euskal Erria, uniting the French Basque Center and the Navarran Center, admitting in it the Basques from both sides of the Bidasoa, from river Adour to river Ebro». But in spite of all the efforts of these great men, there were others with less future vision, who were opposed to these changes.

However, although the longing for union did not materialize institutionally, its promoters insisted, this time in the field of education of the children and young Argentineans of Basque descent, and in that of the care of destitute elderly Basques. Martín de Errecaborde, from Zuberoa, emigrated when he was a very young man to Argentina, where he worked as a farmer and became one of those who introduced the Durham sheep race and established in the country the first butter factories, which helped him become one of the richest men of his time. In 1882 he wrote in a letter to Jaca: «it is us, the country Basques who speak Basque, that have made Basques popular and prestigious in Argentina, we call ourselves simply euskaldunak». As it happened with Martín Errekaborde, the ideas of those men were to create a cultural entity with human actions that would include all Basques and Argentineans of Basque descent. The task would last the whole lifetime of the members, starting with training during childhood, and youth, and ending at the end of their lives. This great work which had to be done in Argentina should also be impregnated by Catholic, humanist and Basque philosophy.

The foundations of one of the greater cultural contributions done by the Basque community in Argentina were being laid. We are referring to the Asociación Cultural y de Beneficencia Euskal Echea (Cultural and Welfare Association)

**FEVA**  
**Argentinako**  
**85 Euskal**  
**Etxetatik 54**  
**biltzen dituen**  
**elkartea da.**



Before the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century the popular bertsolari Pello Mari Otaño arrived in Buenos Aires. Otaño and the Northern Basque Mendiague became the two most important bertsolaris in a city where, as it happened in Montevideo too, this typical cultural expression of Euskal Herria abounded.

In January 1899 the *Euskal Etxeak* called «Sociedad Laurak Bat de Socorros Mutuos» was created in Bahía Blanca. There were 47 members from Alava, Guipuzcoa, Navarre and Vizcaya. The first member was Tomás Latasa, from Navarre. The purposes of the Basque Center in Bahía Blanca were to promote mutual support, and the cultural, social and sporting aspects of the Basque Country.

In 1897, in the Buenos Aires Laurak Bat, the Argentinean with Basque parents Dr. Tomás Otaegui Cueto, who years later became the first defender of historical rights of the Basque Country in Argentina, organized a conference on «Basque habits and customs».

On the other hand, Francisco Grandmontagne published in 1896 his first book «Teodoro Foronda», a fiction work based on his experiences in the Argentinean countryside, which was followed in 1898 with another title «La Maldonado», a description of Buenos Aires in 1890, with the political and social changes which were happening at the time. Grandmontagne held an active correspondence from Buenos Aires with Miguel de Unamuno, who became interested in the study of Argentinean writers such as Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, Juan Bautista Alberdi and José Hernandez, the latter being the author of the national Argentinean poem «Martín Fierro».

During those years, the magazine «La Vasconia» did not only provide a meeting place for the Basque cultural élite, it also lured many more intellectuals, among them two names which reached the highest summits of prestige in international literature: Rubén Darío, from Nicaragua and Leopoldo Lugones, from Argentina. In fact the first editions of the poem books «Los raros» (the weird) and «La Montaña de Oro» (the gold mountain), corresponding to both authors, were printed by La Vasconia in 1896 and 1897 respectively.

## Conclusions

At the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century the culturally more active sectors of Argentinean-Basque immigration had created four centers and laid the foundations for another one. The five entities have lasted until our days because of the deep Basque feeling of those born in Euskal Herria, which was transmitted and assumed by the Argentinean descendants that constitute now a days the great majority of the mentioned institutions, which are at present aged over a century.

If we compare what was happening in Euskal Herria in the period 1877-1899 with what was being done in Argentina by the cultural sectors which had such a great influence in the foundation of entities such as Laurak Bat, the French Basque Center and Euskal Echea, it is easy to understand why Basque reality in Argentina presents peculiar features inside the vast field of Basque immigration to the American continent. The climax of the last Carlista war, the Parliament debate which ended in the law of June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1896, the different positions of the defenders of the Fueros, the cultural renaissance which took place in both sides of the Pyrenees around 1880, the events of San Sebastián, the «Gamazada» in Navarre, the first steps of what was known then as Sabino Arana Goiri's «bizkaitarrismo», Nocedal's integrism, the Cuba struggle, the crisis of 1898, all

those events found their echo in the men who promoted the creation of the *Euskal Etxeak*.

As it happened generally in every immigrants center, the Basque centers created in 19<sup>th</sup> century financially supported those in need, they raised funds to help the victims of natural catastrophes happened in their distant homeland, etc. But apart from all that, we have to underline the action of a cultural élite that, gathered initially for the defense of the Fueros and of Basque ethnic personality, undertook since 1890-1900 the study of anthropological, language and historical subjects. In the period 1896-1897 opposing opinions started to emerge inside the Basque Centers in Argentina, and these differences became full-blown from 1900 to 1936.



The Rosario Euskal Etxea in Argentina.