

## **The Montevideo Euskal Erria Basque Brotherhood Society**

An assembly was held on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1912 to set up the Euskal Erria Basque Brotherhood Society. This meeting created the provisional commission, presided over by Manuel Cendoya, which had to draft the statutes for a new centre in Montevideo. After meeting six times between 8<sup>th</sup> April and 18<sup>th</sup> May this year, the commission called the associates together to vote on the statutes and to elect the first Leadership Council.

Once the statutes had been drafted, the provisional commission recalled the assembly to put the statutes to a referendum and elect the first council. This assembly took place on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1912 in the Colón Theatre in the Uruguayan capital. Comments were made regarding how the statutes should be articulated and corrections were presented by some associates. Once they had been approved, Pedro Parrabere was ordered to make the appropriate amendments and powers were awarded to the new board so that the new ruling would be definitively approved once these amendments were included.

They adopted a clause which established that the presidency should be alternated annually between inhabitants of Iparralde and Hegoalde. In order to determine who should start this sequence, Manuel Cendoya put six rubber balls in a bag. These balls were the same size but three were green and three were red. The three eldest people attending had to decide which of them would pick a ball from the bag. If it was green, the president should come from Laburdi, Baxe Nafarroa or Zuberoa; if not the responsibility would fall to someone from Araba, Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa or Nafarroa. When

the ball was picked, it was red and consequently, Nicolás Inciarte was chosen to be the society's first president. This is how *Euskal Erria* was set up forming an institution which is now about to celebrate its first centenary.

From the very beginning, the Society had to tackle difficult challenges. During the first months, its members had to put up with using premises owned by different societies and private homes. The events preceding foundation and its very constitutive assembly took place in the Catholic Worker's Centre, the Spanish Club and the French Society. From June 1912, when the leadership council started operating, it met just once in Manuel Cendoya's office and later in Pedro Bertceche's home. This situation continued until the end of August in the same year, when the meetings started to be held in the Shoemakers' Philanthropic Society, located at calle Ejido 114.

In November 1912, the president, Nicolás Inciarte, informed board members about the imminent auction of the 'pelota' court in calle San José, proposing to buy it in his name, including other directors who were prepared to second him, as long as the price did not exceed thirty thousand pesos. His project established that, later on, the premises would be bought off him by the society by means of shares sold to the associates. Although his project was approved, Inciarte did not manage to convince other associates to second him and his idea, so on 29<sup>th</sup> November he bought the Former Basilio Court in the central calle San José between Ibicuí and Cuareim for the sum of 25,000 pesos. However, and given that such an important decision exceeded the powers of the board, it called an extraordinary General Assembly which took place, for the first time, in the premises on calle San José. After years of financial difficulties, the society finally managed to buy the premises from their former president 14 years later, in 1926.

The history of the Euskal Erria society is part of the history of the exiled Basque community in the American continents and as such it has been affected by the same ups and downs that have plotted Basque history throughout the 20th century. Aspirations of cultural recovery promoted by Euzko Pizkundera penetrated Montevideo and were absorbed by Euskal Erria which was also strongly affected by the Falange rising in July 1936 which affected the Basque centre for several years, until the arrival of Lehendakari Aguirre in October 1941.

In 1937 Euskal Erria had no more than 600 members and nevertheless, the society was capable of significant work in both political and cultural fields. After holding the Montevideo Great Basque Week in 1943, the cultural field became an authentic hive of activity. This boosted the creation of the Department of Basque Studies in the Republic University, the first Basque language chair and also the first Basque culture chair in the American continents. It organised GALEUZCA Uruguay, the *Euskaltzaleak* group and the *Basque Book Club* within Euskal Erria in Montevideo, which was responsible for translating and publishing *Hamlet* by Shakespeare and *Platero y yo* by the Andalusian poet Juan Ramón Jiménez. Through the Department of Basque Studies it helped to organise and run the Basque Studies Congresses in 1948 and 1954. The first of these two congresses, held in Baiona, was attended by Gabriel Biurrun involving ten extensive exhibitions and more than fifty members including the University Rector, José Pedro Varela Acevedo, and all the senior members, the Culture Minister, Oscar Secco Ellauri, the president of the Republic, Luis Conrado Batlle Berres, and practically all the ministers in his government.

Now, 95 years later, the Euskal Erria Society continues to be a traditional meeting point for Basques in America. A study its history and that of other Basque centres, associations and foundations in America provides a very specific focus on the history of Euskal Herria, which would otherwise be incomplete. Examining and monitoring issues developing in the Basque Country over these last 95 years from the other side of the world does not simply constitute a vision or a focus on the facts but it shapes an integral part of our history and our culture. It shows that it is one culture, the Basque culture, which has been universal for at least the last 200 years. Because the members of the Euskal Erria society, like the members of other Basque collectives in America are not mere witnesses to the Basque people's historical ups and downs but, through daily work, collaboration and constant contact with European Basques, they constitutively shape part of our people's history.