

## *Bravery, Happiness and Nostalgia*

### **Basques in 20<sup>th</sup> century Valparaíso**

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It is popular in the Chilean Basque colony to make reference to the sentence which Miguel de Unamuno wrote to a friend, “the Basques have only done two things of a universal nature: the creation of the Society of Jesus founded by Ignatius of Loyola and the Republic of Chile”. Concerning his last statement, one only has to look at a basic history text to realize the obvious presence of important Basque figures in diverse areas of my country’s politics.

When I recently prepared to establish the first contacts and investigations to write this book, there were those who believed that Valparaíso did not have much to tell with regards to the Basque subject, but I believe that it has been demonstrated, in the end, that the region in which I live is not an exception with respect to what Unamuno said.

#### *Description*

***Bravery, Happiness and Nostalgia*** contains stories where the protagonists are men and women, almost all born in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who had to broaden their path in life beyond the limits of the Basque Country and set off on an ocean adventure toward a distant land called Valparaíso when they were simple children or entering their youth, due to social, economic and war time incidents that occurred in Europe during that period.

During the course of eight months, I had the opportunity to compile the testimonies of 43 Basque speakers. The majority of them, eighty-year-olds who, from the oldest confines of their memories, rescued details of an existence marked by an exodus sparked by factors of a different nature, the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War being the most drastic. The others, children or grandchildren of those who, around the year 1900, began to define the trajectory of Valparaíso Basques from the previous century.

Without the possibility of carrying out those interviews, a great part of the text would not have been written, since the records, dates and names that the interviewees provided were the fundamental tools to put together the missing pieces of the Basque presence in the area.

The records, taken from oral testimony and the data supplied by books, diaries and magazines that served to contextualize and provide exactitude to the contents revealed, are the two threads that linked this journey through the history of Valparaíso Basque speakers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The events that take place in this work occur, chiefly, in the region of Valparaíso, nevertheless, a high percentage of the pages are dedicated to the Basque Country, like the scene of events that initiated the entry of the Basques into Chile, but also as the focus of some most pleasant memories: the mountain, the caserío (farmhouse), the family... the mother.

#### *Contents*

Although it is a book about the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ***Bravery, Happiness and Nostalgia*** begins with a reference to Valparaíso before the turn of the century and the years of prosperity that drew a great number of philanthropists from Basque origin (second or third generation) who were imbued by the progressive enthusiasm and contributed to realize various road works, public health, structural, educational cultural and social works. Among these, the governor Francisco Echaurren, the Orrego family, the cabinetmaker Fermín Vivaceta, the engineer José Francisco Vergara Echevers, the politician Silvestre Ochagavía Errázuriz, the businessman José Tomás Urmeneta, the journalist Pedro Félix Vicuña Aguirre, the intellectual Pascual Ezquerria, the novelist Rosario Orrego and the vice-chancellor of the emblematic Liceo N° 1 de Hombres (secondary school) Eduardo de la Barra Lastarria can be pointed out.

Upon entering the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a more delicate Valparaíso because of the 1906 earthquake and, soon, displaced due to the Panama Canal's opening, does not offer boundless economic success, but does offer a place to live in peace. This is the region that the most recent Basque immigrants find, those who with effort manage to get on in commerce and, along with forming a family and settling, they set themselves to recreate a yearned for Basque Country through the foundation of clubs with varying degrees of luck.

Aboard mythical vessels like the Monte Amboto, Monte Udala, Cabo de Buena Esperanza, Reina del Pacífico, Orbita, Cristóforo Colombo, Orduña, Oropesa, Corrientes, Formosa and, of course, Winnipeg, the Basques reached Valparaíso between 1900 and 1950, they began their long journeys from different European ports, in most cases affected by the dangers of war, which brought them to the area by way of two possible routes: the historic Trasandino Train, after disembarking in Buenos Aires, or directly on Chilean shores.

Concerning the emblematic Winnipeg, here is a small part of Julio Garrote's story, who remembers what struck him on that pilgrimage he underwent at the age of 9. *"What I most remember is that I learned chess, since the old men played everyday. There was also a choir directed by the artist, Muguruza, and did the crossing singing. I fell ill at the Panama Canal, since I slept on deck one rainy night; I was almost unconscious, I did not open my eyes until Arica, where some people disembarked.*

(At the conclusion of the voyage), *"we arrived and remained on the deck of the ship all night, because Valparaíso seemed impressive to us. We did not sleep all night, we sang and threw a great party; finally, we disembarked on the 4<sup>th</sup> of September"*<sup>1</sup>.

Once we settled into Valparaíso, generally thanks to the help of some relatives who had already settled in the region years before (in keeping with what is called chain migration), for a Basque with a good work ethic and nose for business, it was just a question of time for them to create their "little America".

Of course, integration into society did not come without its typical anecdotes. Which is what happened to Mr. Victoriano Zabala when, on his first day at work he encountered a confusing incident: *"I began working at La Estrella (hardware store) on a Monday. On entering, they gave me a broom to sweep the shop, I tidied up and I went to the counter set on serving the clientele upon their arrival. My bosses observed me attentively from a distance. As I stood there, an elderly woman entered, set on serving her I asked her, "What would like?", she replied, "una bombilla (a bulb)". I brought what she asked for and the elderly woman declared that that was not what she had asked for. I was surprised, I insisted that it was and the good woman repeated, "My son, that is not a bulb", but I was confused.*

*My bosses observed me and smiled surreptitiously. I could not understand what had occurred and, finally, I went to them to ask what had happened. They explained to me that what she had asked for was a bulb to drink "mate", but what I had offered her was called an "ampolleta" in Chile. Having cleared up the issue, I made my first sale. Incidentally, I had never even heard of "mate" or the "bulbs" used to drink it. The next client asked me for a "pan de cola"; I was greatly confused, but later they explained what they were talking about"*<sup>2</sup>.

The commercial history of Valparaíso has seen classic empires, pawnshops, hardware stores, bakeries and the variety of Basque establishments that one day packed the port's avenues as well as those of Viña del Mar and other towns inland. In fact, it is still possible to find Basque speaking businesses that remain active, refusing to succumb to the passing years and the competition of large shops; one can also discover shops currently run by new generations of Basque immigrants.

The list is extensive, some shops that remain open are the soap factory La Yolanda, Button and Lace Shop Ibarra, Magaña Sports, Blanca Nieves uniforms and La Paloma and La Francesa hardware shops. Those that have disappeared are the shops El Planeta, El Gallo, El Vapor, El Cañonazo, El Caballo Negro, El Crédito, El Nuevo Cometa, El Águila and many more. Those may only sound like names without any importance, but those who know Valparaíso are aware of the importance that the once essential shops had in its commerce tradition, and those who are connected to the nostalgic essence of the city understand the significance of these entities as symbols of a lost time.

However, the Basques that made Valparaíso their adoptive home did not only make their mark in commerce: in sports, the priesthood and art, for example, there is much to tell. In the first category, names like Fermín Lecea, who was an idol for the young Basque speaking residents who, every Sunday, attended the stadium to see him play on the port's team, Santiago Wanderers; or Jesus Magaña, who in cycling and basketball took pride in his athletic abilities, and along with the Ibaceta brothers who played for Chile and Valparaíso in the golden age of regional basketball.

Always interested in sports, among the Basques of Valparaíso, the visit made by the Basque National Football Team to the city on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 1938 was legendary. The following

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<sup>1</sup> Julio Garrote, in "Arrojos, dichas y nostalgias"(Bravery, Happiness and Nostalgia).

<sup>2</sup> Victoriano Zabala, in "Arrojos, dichas y nostalgias"(Bravery, Happiness and Nostalgia).

appeared in the press: *“The ‘Euskadi’ Basque football team’s reputation of great players and a powerful team was completely justified during yesterday’s event at the Stadium, which, despite being a work day, had an attendance of four thousand people. Their rival was the Santiago Wanderers”*<sup>3</sup>.

Passing on to other areas, in religious circles there are local well-known individuals, among them, Vicente Echevarría Bilbao, Félix Ruiz de Escudero and Kepa Bilbao Laca. And in the field of art, it is impossible to leave out the composer and conductor Ramón Muguruza Zubillaga, Emiliano de Virgala the cabinetmaker and Pablo Mondragón the architect.

Devoting themselves to their talents and abilities, the Basques settle into their lives in Valparaíso, while they try to maintain the bond with the Basque Country through the establishment of centres to celebrate their ancestral traditions and the consolidation of bonds of cooperation among the members of the community. That is how long-standing institutions such as Irurak Bat are born, a team of proud pelota players that in the previous century’s first decades enjoyed great popularity among the members of the port’s society. The most remembered group, one that brings about nostalgic feelings today for all those who lived through the community’s boom, is Eusko Etxea or Valparaíso Basque Centre, which hosted endless days of camaraderie for three decades.

Valparaíso Eusko Etxea had its origins on a bohemian night in 1943, when a group of friends got together at the Billiard Academy Bar, owned by Victoriano Lluvia, and in an enthusiastic discussion set the foundation of what would later be the institution. Of those who assisted that evening in 1943, three have survived to recall old times and help me write this book: Victoriano Zabala, Pedro Leguina and Pedro Elorriaga, of the three, the last remained in the Quinta Region, the first returned to his native Algorta and the second moved to Santiago.

But it was in 1947 when it had a venue, a place that is now remembered as the “Casona on Freire Street”. Just to name a few of the important representatives of that golden era, they are the businessman Juan Aboitiz Amesti, the first president of the institution, and Pedro Leguina and Juan Andraca, who were part of the original board. Luis Mondragón is fondly remembered, at the head of the body for over 15 years and a great txistulari (Basque flutist), and the singer and accordion player Antonio Narvart, who livened typical festivals with his festive music like the Aberri Eguna and the Iñaki Deuna. The ladies of solidarity, lead by Begoña Magunacelaya, Agustina Coscorroza and María Nieves Undabarrena, organized numerous charitable lunches and mid-afternoon meals.

Around that time, Mr. Pedro Elorriaga remembers with nostalgia that *“on Sundays we had Basque and traditional dances at Italy Park, I dressed up as an ‘espatadanzari’ (Basque folk dancer), and dressed in white pants and shirt, red beret, and green sash; my wife says that before meeting me she always went to see the Basques dance, since she loved to see how we showed off our outfits”*<sup>4</sup>.

Where the “Casona on Freire Street” once stood, opposite the shade of Italy Park’s trees, the Basque speakers of Valparaíso experienced historic moments: the visits by Basque Country Presidents José Antonio de Aguirre (for the second time, the first time was in 1942) and Jesús María de Leizola are some of its most important milestones.

Sadly, for different reasons, the Eusko Etxea venue had to close its doors, which signalled the end of an unforgettable era for the colony, an event on which an elderly Luis Mondragón reflected on in his last speech, from which these words are taken: *“They were all, we were all, enthusiastic Basque patriots; it was a historic moment of enthusiastic patriotism: the war in Spain and the war in Europe had us in a frenzy just like everyone.*

*But after, along with the gradual fading of that frenzy, Eusko Etxea also went cold: we started getting old, dying, and we could not and did not know how to attract the young, mainly, without a doubt, because of a lack of space to enjoy leisure activities. And that way, our Basque Home died of old age, a natural death. Those who were left were old emaciated foyeys, living off memories”*<sup>5</sup>.

Currently, and since 1995, the Valparaíso’s Eusko Etxea has reappeared and, not without difficulties, it has managed to drive a new generation of ideas and activities around the bond that unites its members with the Basque Country.

Returning to the book, **Bravery, Happiness and Nostalgia** concludes with a chapter stripped of bibliographic data, constructed only by personal memories and family archives.

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<sup>3</sup> La Estrella de Valparaíso, in “Arrojos, dichas y Nostalgias”(Bravery, Happiness and Nostalgia).

<sup>4</sup> Pedro Elorriaga, in “Arrojos, dichas y nostalgias”(Bravery, Happiness and Nostalgia).

<sup>5</sup> Luis Mondragón, in “Arrojos, dichas y nostalgias”(Bravery, Happiness and Nostalgia).

On the one hand there is the presentation of nine testimonies, selected interviews that were transformed into first person stories, in chronological order and without embellishment, attempting to keep the content and simplicity of the account. They are intimate; they reveal the experience of migration and insertion into a different society, from the particular view of those who lived through it, blending dramatic incidents with funny anecdotes starring the then children and youth of this work.

On the other hand, the short story of three Basque brothers who were sent to the Soviet Union by their mother to avoid the violence of the Spanish Civil War, and could be told thanks to a nephew of theirs who compiled a considerable number of letters that triangulated between Moscow, Valparaíso and Bilbao during those years and which, for many years, represented the only way a divided family could communicate.

### *Conclusion*

Better than saying that **Bravery, Happiness and Nostalgia. Basques in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Valparaíso** deals with “the story of Basques in Valparaíso”, it is correct to say that it deals with “stories of Basques who went to Valparaíso”, a subtlety that makes a great difference in its contents.

Its pages are made up of stories of private lives that give shape to a general perspective, which, to my understanding represent other thousands of lives that have been drawn out by wars, exoduses and rebirths in strange lands.

Valparaíso received the immigrants that arrived from Basque Country with open arms, immigrants who carried out great and small contributions through the activities they undertook. They were the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Chile began to be built and its people preserved the simplicity and ingenuity typical of the villages that were not totally wiped out by modernisation or absorbed by globalization.

The Basque speakers arrived prepared to start from scratch, and through hard work, they began to grow alongside the community that they had found. The majority of them mixed and began close relationships with the local people, and through the years, succeeded in making the region feel like home, so much so that many opted not to return when they had the chance (of course, this does not mean that they stopped missing their native land, by no means, something like that is not in a Basque’s nature).

The men and women that arrived in Valparaíso left behind the hectic days of their first years of residence, those who gave themselves to a cause or assured themselves a future and formed a family. Many of them left this world and others live from their successes along with children, grandchildren and even great-grandchildren, after travelling along a long path through **Bravery, Happiness and Nostalgia.**

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### *Summary of the presentation.-*

**Bravery, Happiness and Nostalgia. Basques in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Valparaíso** takes a trip through stories of men and women who arrived to this Chilean region during the first half of the previous century, emphasizing their participation and contribution in various areas of business, social, artistic and sports undertakings, among others. In her presentation, Rubila Araya Ariztía, the author, describes the characteristics of the investigation and conducts a summary of the books highlights.