

The Activities of the Spanish Anarchist Refugees in Melbourne

I first of all need to express my apologies for not being able to attend this gathering and personally present this brief history of the activities of a group of 11 refugee anarcho-syndicalist families that arrived in Melbourne during the decade of the 1960's and the growth of the group known as the "Grupo Cultural de Estudios Sociales de Melbourne".

Furthermore I plead with you to understand, realise and appreciate that what I am about to relate is but one of many thousands of chapters reflecting the history of the activities of the Spanish anarchist refugees that were scattered all around the world following the tragic final events of the Spanish Civil War at the start of the northern hemisphere spring in 1939.

The majority of these "compañeros" reached the Mediterranean shore of the Magreb which embraces the North African territories of Algeria, Tunis and Morocco during the month of March 1939; two of them (*Gargallo and Quiñones*) were (national service) sailors on the navy ships that remained loyal to the republic following the rebellion by the fascists in July 1936 and in March of 1939 sought refuge in Bizerta-Tunis.

Two others (*Beneito and Ruiz*) were able to escape on the renowned ship the "Stanbrook" departing Alicante on the 28th March 1939 with approximately 3,500 refugees on-board reaching the township of Oran in Algeria 23 hours later (*the tragedy sustained by all the refugees on-board the "Stanbrook" be they children, women, men and elderly is another of many episodes that deserves separate attention*).

Five others (*Collado, Dominguez, Castro, Robert and Orero*) were able to escape the Mediterranean shores of Spain on-board the flotilla of small fishing boats and reached the North African shores during the month of March and early April 1939.

And with the gratitude of the French Vichy authorities they all suffered unsurmountable atrocities and tortures whilst imprisoned in the various hard labour concentration camps, disciplinary camps and punishment camps located along the Sahara desert until the end of 1943 following the liberation of North Africa by the allied forces.

During the next decade they all made their way towards Casablanca-Morocco, where there was a fairly large community of anarchist refugees. A few of them met their partners in the different townships of North Africa and the rest were able to reunite themselves with their respective partners whom had escaped via different routes or clandestinely crossed the Pyrenees into France and then reached the North African territory.

It was late in 1949 that the last 2 compañeros of the group of eleven (*Burgos and Carmona*) were able to escape from Spain on board a fishing boat as part of the crew, jumping ship once the boat reached the harbour of Casablanca. It was in the early 1950's that their partners reached Casablanca.

During 1959 these eleven families were part of a group of 200 families that collaborated in establishing the first anarchist community house or “ateneo” in Casablanca, which was known as the -Asociación Cultural “Armonía”-.

On the 3rd of March 1961 Mulay Hassan II took over the throne of Morocco following the death of his father Mohamed V. The political alignment and co-operation developed between the new sultan and Franco's regime together with the difficulties encountered in obtaining renewal of their working permits, an exodus of Spanish exiled anarchist families erupted from Morocco under the protection of the United Nations, with the majority resettling in either France or Belgium, some going to Canada, and 11 came to Melbourne, this began from 1962 through to 1966.

This condensed introduction should give you a fair insight, background and understanding of the struggles, militancy and the ideology that formed part of their permanent desire for a better world which was carried to the grave by this small group of anarchist families that had now settled in the lands of the Woi Wurrung.

The first gathering of the nucleus of Spanish anarchist refugees resettled from Casablanca in the city of Melbourne took place on the 24th October 1965. This occurred in a small complex of units located along the railway lines and behind the silos in the suburb of Middle Brighton where six of the compañeros resided. The rest of the compañeros resided in a similar complex in the suburb of Preston behind the railway station.

It was during this gathering that the nucleus of the CNT/AIT Exiled Federation in Melbourne was created under the umbrella of the “Grupo Cultural de Estudios Sociales de Melbourne” - which by unanimous vote would be an anarchist affinity group-, basing it on the same philosophical principles they all had agreed upon in 1959 when setting up the -Asociación Cultural “Armonía”- in Casablanca.

The objectives of the “Grupo Cultural de Estudios Sociales de Melbourne” were to develop and enhance the political, cultural and social consciousness of the individual. To expose the concept of an alternative society through the anarchist ideals together with the establishment of a local federation of a revolutionary syndicalist organisation affiliated to the AIT, as well as re-establishing the entity Solidarity of International Antifascists in Australia. (Which had previously been set up by Salvador Torrents, Juan Jordana and Francisco Martinez during the period of the Spanish Civil War).

The first contact with Australian anarchists was also made in late December of 1965; this being with Andrew Giles-Peters, whom in turn assisted in contact being made with a few local anarchist groups from the various universities;

- the Italian anarchists in Melbourne;

(It should be noted that during the 60's and 70's both the Italian and Spanish anarchists groupings worked very closely together in a multitude of projects as well as fund raisers in

order to aid the families of both Italian and Spanish imprisoned anarchists. This was done through the organisation known as “Solidaridad Internacional Antifascista” (*the Solidarity of International Antifascist, which was set up in the 1930’s and is still in existence producing annual calendars as a way of fund raising*). The financial support from the Italian anarchist group also made possible the project of quite a number of anarchist pamphlets and booklets produced by Acracia Publications as well as Ravachol Publications, a venture that began in the late 60’s)

- the Bulgarian anarchists and the Bulgarian CNT in exile and in particular Jack Grancharoff who published the magazine “Red and Black” in Sydney;
- as well as the small nucleus of Spanish anarchists located in Sydney, Juan Fernandez, José Cuevas and the most prominent figure Antonio Jiménez Cubillo, whom had emigrated from Spain in 1960 and evolved towards anarchism after developing a friendship with José Cuevas. During the 1980’s Antonio was a main contributor in the development of the ASF.

By early 1966 the first Spanish language anarchist publications began arriving and being distributed amongst the migrant Spanish speaking community in Melbourne.

These publications were:

“Espoir”, “El Combate Sindicalista”, “Umbral” and “Cenit” published in France as well as the calendars from Solidaridad Internacional Antifascista;

“Tierra y Libertad” from Mexico;

“Ruta” from Venezuela;

“La Protesta” from Argentina;

“Solidaridad” from Uruguay;

“Ediciones la Escuela Moderna de Calgary” from Canada.

It was in December of 1965 that contact was also made with other Spanish anarchist refugees in Melbourne whom had suffered the consequences of the “retirada” in France and as soon as they were able to, elected to move to Australia. These were the families of Vicente Berenguer, Félix Castañer and Vicente Montón.

At the top end of La Trobe Street in the city of Melbourne you would find the Spanish Club of Victoria, this was more a club for entertainment, alcohol was sold, food was also sold, dances were held on Sunday nights, and under the same roof you could find all the political tendencies you could ever dream of, republicans, socialists, communists, fascists, etc. The one common denominator, they were all Spanish immigrants.

Within these walls there also was an old militant of the Madrid CNT, compañero Luis Perez, whom had arrived in Australia in 1962, and since his arrival had been trying to evolve some

social consciousness within this Spanish Club. Compañero Perez proposed that this small grouping of anarchists (which now including his family and comprised a total of fifteen families) should apply for membership to the Spanish Club of Victoria in an endeavour to propel some social consciousness within the Spanish community and at the same time develop a stronger anti-francoist front. Following a lengthy debate it was agreed to take this course of action, unfortunately this venture soon came to an end, due to the constant confrontations with both the fascists and the communists whenever the anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist newspapers and magazines were distributed.

By the end of 1966 relationships were cemented with the various anarchist groupings both in Melbourne and Sydney and although the Melbourne Spanish anarchist contingent was concentrating its efforts within the Spanish community in an attempt to develop a social consciousness as well as an anti-Francoist movement, it slowly began evolving and participating in local social issues in conjunction with the local anarchist groupings that were now based around the various universities in Melbourne as well as the inner suburbs.

It was 1967 that saw the first publishing venture by the Spanish anarchist groupings in Melbourne and Sydney with the printing of "An Appeal to the Young" by Peter Kropotkin in the English language, this was produced in Sydney, with Antonio Jiménez Cubillo being the main instigator behind this project.

It was this year that also saw the inception of the monthly Spanish magazine "El Demócrata", publication of the "Centro Democrático Español", the Spanish Democratic Centre, based in Sydney with a Sub-delegation in Melbourne. The "Centro Democrático Español", together with its publication existed until after the death of Franco and disbanded in early 1976.

The "Centro Democrático Español", was created in August of 1966 and represented a conglomeration of the various anti-francoist groupings located in Sydney, Canberra, Wollongong, Geelong and Melbourne. Although the majority of its membership in Melbourne was anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist, its rank and file also included Republicans as well as PSOE and UGT members. The situation was somewhat different in Sydney with quite a large number of Republicans and UGT socialists within its ranks. It was a very fine act of diplomacy that needed to be executed on a monthly basis when the editorial group with a majority of UGT and republicans met to determine the contents of the magazine, this task was arduously and competently achieved by Antonio Jiménez Cubillo until late 1974 when the editorial and publishing responsibilities were taken over by the Melbourne Sub-delegation.

Mariano Sussiac together with his compañera Isabel arrived in Melbourne early 1968, they immediately made contact with the Spanish anarchist group and began what became a long career of activism, assisting in the preparation and distribution of publications, as well as contributing with articles and poems in the numerous publications such as "El Demócrata", and later with "Nosotros" and "Acracia". During the eighties Mariano played an important role in the development of the Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation of Australia.

It was 1969; two young families had migrated from Spain and settled in Fitzroy, whom had already been exposed to the underground CNT in Madrid. Upon reading various articles in “El Español en Australia” and receiving copies of “El Demócrata”, they made contact with the Spanish anarchist grouping in Melbourne and incorporated themselves into all the activities, they were the Gallego and Costanza families.

With his electrical engineering knowledge, a trade with which he graduated in Spain, Pascual Gallego was able to repair an old Gestetner as well as an old IBM golf ball electric typewriter which provided the necessary equipment to launch the Melbournian Spanish anarchist group into a new and more vibrant era of producing leaflets, flyers, brochures and magazines.

By 1970 Spanish exiled and migrant anarchist families were now spread throughout the central geographical zones of Melbourne which also included large Spanish communities, these were the suburbs of Carlton, Collingwood, Fitzroy, Prahran and Richmond. The groupings of each locality took on the responsibility of distributing the publications received from overseas as well as whatever literature was being produced locally both in Sydney and in Melbourne.

They incorporated themselves into the anti Vietnam War Moratorium Campaigns, as well as the 4th of July campaigns and rallies that were held. Their presence was noticed at May Day marches with the massive distribution of leaflets both in Spanish and English. They were involved in the anti-apartheid campaigns, as well as the rally against the Springbok Rugby tour at the MCG.

Towards the end of 1970 six Basque militants were arrested and sentenced to death. As a result a massive campaign was organised by the Spanish Anarchist grouping in Sydney and Melbourne, Grupo Cultural de Estudios Sociales en Melbourne and the Centro Democrático Español, located in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. Demonstrations were held in these three major cities. The most successful demonstration was the one held on the afternoon of Wednesday 30 of December, with approximately 100 Spaniards and Australians demonstrating outside the offices of the Spanish General Consul of Spain in Sydney with 20 of the demonstrators gaining entrance to meet with the Consul and present a petition.

1971-1972 became a period whereby quite a number of more adventurous challenges evolved in conjunction with the birth of the Working Peoples’ Association. The most prominent of these being the “Free Store”, located at 42 Smith Street. This was achieved with the persistence of a number of local anarchist groups.

The Spanish anarchists saw the potential of the “Free Store” being the first “Ateneo Libertario” (anarchist community house) in Australia through which, an anarchists consciousness could be propelled into the wider community. The Spanish group contributed with clothes, books and china wear as well as including themselves on the roster of volunteers, in an endeavour to ensure that the launch and the continuing functionality of the “Free Store” was successful, with its dictum of “take what you need and leave what you do not”. The “Free Store” became the focal point for the majority of anarchists in Melbourne.

Credit for the establishment of the “Free Store” must be allocated to one person, this being Margot Nash. Margot had just returned to Melbourne after spending a few years in the United States, where she participated and experienced the development of similar collectives, she therefore proposed that such venture was possible in Melbourne. And although this period has been labelled by many as “carnival anarchism”, it was during this period that many positive activities evolved.

It was during this era that the tradition of marching on the 1st of May was reactivated by the “Free Store” collective with the “Corpse of Capitalism” being dragged through the streets of Melbourne both on the 1st of May itself as well as the first Sunday of May 1972. It also was from within this collective that the concept of making available to the community both a “free” legal and medical service evolved. The Spanish anarchist nucleus was instrumental in ensuring that in early June 1972 the “Free Store” was able to provide such a service to the community with an interpreting service for Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and French. The collective surrounding the “Free Store” was also responsible for the publication of the newspaper “Dingo”.

The Spanish anarchist grouping took on the challenge of distributing the newspaper “Dingo”, with the result in late 1972, compañero Pascual Gallego being detained and charged with distributing subversive literature. Subsequently a subscription was organised by both “Grupo Cultural de Estudios Sociales de Melbourne” and the “Sub-delegación del Centro Democrático Español en Melbourne”, in order to cover the fine incurred, his defence was prepared by the solicitors involved with the “Free Store”. *(See page 21 of “El Demócrata” number 58)*

Regretfully, too many other varying activities became a contributing factor leading to the disintegration of the “Free Store”, nonetheless due recognition must be given to the fact that the “Free Store” was the launching place to what evolved being very positive activities as well as solid groundings for the exiled / migrant / and local anarchist groupings during the following decades.

Although the “Free Store” closed its doors in January 1973, this was the month that the “Fitzroy Free Legal Service” (as it was originally known) opened its doors from the basement of the Fitzroy Town Hall. All individuals (which included some of the Spanish anarchists) involved in providing the legal service at the “Free Store” were amongst the first volunteers to the “Fitzroy Free Legal Service”. In 1974 this same group of individuals historically connected to the “Free Store” were also involved in setting up the Collingwood Legal Service which operated from the Collingwood Town Hall.

The Magazine “Nosotros” a Spanish language magazine (produced by the Melbourne Spanish anarchists group) appeared in July 1972 and was distributed throughout the Spanish migrant community in Australia. The same year saw the inception of the magazine “Acracia” *(also produced by the same Spanish anarchist group)* which from its inception identified itself as a Spanish language anarchist publication; “Acracia” transformed itself into the official bulletin of the Anarchist Black Cross in 1973. Within a couple of months quite a number of students as well as former students from the three Universities in Melbourne

joined the entity of the A.B.C. and thanks to their efforts and dedication “Acracia” was converted into a bilingual magazine. Its presentation was transformed from being a Gestetner publication to an offset publication printed by the collective of Strawberry Press and afterwards Slash / Asterisk *, which was located at 11 Johnston Street, Collingwood; and after 1975 Ravachol Press.

1973 saw the establishment of Strawberry Press a collective set up for the purpose of printing anarchist literature as well as teaching the art of lay out and the printing process on a Multigraph 1250 offset press to whomever was interested in learning the trade. It would also be of historical interest to recognise that Strawberry Press was the first printer used by the “Fitzroy Free Legal Service” for the printing of its letterheads. During 1974 a transition occurred within Strawberry Press, three individuals with background from both the “Free Store” and the “Anarchist Black Cross” accepted the responsibility and administration of Strawberry Press, subsequently changing the name to Slash / Asterisk*, and converting it to a movement press. Consequently the location of 11 Johnston Street, Collingwood, where the press was located, became a meeting point for Melbourne anarchists.

With this new printing tool made available by the dedication of a group of young anarchists, the Melbourne spanish anarchists received the injection that was necessary to encourage them in further developing and enhancing their publishing ventures with the expansion of “Acracia Publications” and “Ravachol Publications” producing anarchists brochures both in Spanish and English.

By the end of 1974 the number of Spanish anarchist families affiliated with the “Grupo Cultural de Estudios Sociales de Melbourne” totalled 50. Collectively they contributed to the explosion of anarchist literature which occurred in Australia both in English and Spanish during the decades of the 70’s, 80’s and 90’s with a series of magazines and brochures that were initially printed on a gestetner, afterwards on a 1250 Multigraph at the premises of “Strawberry Press” and “Slash / Asterisk*”, and thereafter on a 1960 two colour Multigraph operated by “Ravachol Press” (a printing collective operated by various members of the Spanish anarchist group).

A substantial collection of anarchist books were deposited with public libraries all around Australia, and this group of Spanish anarchists were also responsible for the distribution around Australia of the two volumes of the Anarchist Encyclopaedia produced in the Spanish language by the group of exiled anarchists in Mexico “Tierra y Libertad”.

What today is known in the state of Victoria as the Tenants Union was the initiative at the beginning of 1974 by the Spanish anarchist grouping together with other tenants of the Housing Commission of Victoria within the suburbs of Abbotsford, Collingwood, Richmond, Prahran, Carlton and Kensington. Following numerous confrontation between tenants and the bureaucracy over basic services, a number of meetings were held resulting in the establishment of what was originally known as the “Housing Commission Tenants Union”.

By the late 1980's this group of Spanish anarchists began to fade away, they were all exhausted physically, some were restricted by illness but they continued producing and printing anarchist literature both in English and in Spanish.

The following is the legacy of the magazines produced by the Melbourne spanish anarchist group:

- “Nosotros”, spanish language magazine, first appeared in 1972 and continued until 1975.
- “Acracia”, a spanish language anarchist magazine first appearing in 1972, converted as the official organ of the Anarchist Black Cross in 1973 and becoming the first anarchist bilingual magazine published in Australia. This continued until the end of 1975, when, following Franco's death, the Melbourne branch of the ABC disappeared and “Acracia” ceased being published as a bilingual anarchist magazine, it nevertheless continued being published in the spanish language. The last issue of “Acracia” *Publicación Anarquista de habla Hispana en Australia*, appeared in May 1992.
- “Militando”, a spanish language anarchist magazine appearing in 1975 with a brief life of only two issues. This was a joint venture between spanish and south american anarchists residing both in Sydney and Melbourne. The lay out and printing was done in Melbourne.

In addition to these magazines there is a total of 15 booklets that were printed and published both in English and Spanish.

In August of 1975 a communiqué of support and encouragement was sent by the “Grupo Cultural de Estudios Sociales de Melbourne” to the Intercontinental Congress of Local Federations of the CNT of Spain in Exile, signed by both Vicente Ruiz and Juan Beneito.

From the 1st to the 4th of May, 1986, Antonio Jiménez Cubillo, Mariano Sussiac and Vicente Ruiz Gutierrez participated in the Australian Anarchist Centenary Celebrations which were held in Melbourne. An event that was attended by quite a number of local and international anarchists, amongst them Marianna Enckell from Switzerland, Miura Seiichi from Japan, Ha Ki Rak from Korea, Phillipe Pellitier from France and Diego Camacho, better known by his “non de plume” Abel Paz (*the author of Durruti in the Spanish Revolution*) from Spain.

On the 19th July 1986, Juan and Elena Beneito, Mariano and Isabel Sussiac, José and Maria Orero as well as Vicente and Matilde Ruiz participated in the 50th anniversary celebrations organised by the Anarcho-Syndicalist Federation in Melbourne, during which they spoke of their experiences from confronting fascism, the period of revolution, the collectives, the women in the revolution, the counter revolution and the exodus.

Slowly and gradually they began to pass away, only one veteran from the Civil War is still alive as well as a few of the children that were born in the North African exile. Together they maintain the “Grupo Cultural de Estudios Sociales de Melbourne” and the anarchist publishing editorial of “Acracia Publications”, which has now joined the digital publishing world and since 2011 have published 28 digital booklets in PDF format.

None the less we must accept as part of the laws of Mother Nature that another chapter of the history of the Spanish anarchist exile will soon come to a closure.

Grupo Cultural de Estudios Sociales de Melbourne.