**OpenLIVES Spanish Émigré interviews –** Antonio ROJAS CASTRO

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| Interviewee: | Antonio ROJAS CASTRO |
| Interviewer: | Darren Paffey |
| Interview date: | 17 June 2008 |
| Location: | Hotel Dauro, Granada. |
| Duration: | (a) 76:00 (b) 05:42 |
| Countries of migration: | Civil War: Barcelona  1952-54: Panama  1959-62: France |

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** OpenLIVES materials are interviews with individuals and describe the personal memories, perspectives, and knowledge of those individuals. English synopses for OpenLIVES were created by students and researchers working on the project. The idea behind the synopsis is to give a broad outline of the content NOT to give an exact translation of an interviewee’s words. In some cases, there were sections which were difficult to hear or summarise and which we have been unable to clarify. These areas are highlighted in red. If users of this material do further work in contextualising this testimony, please share your work with the world through the HumBox!

**Synopsis part A:**

[00:00 – 40:00] Early life, education, migration to Panama, France

Born in Granada, 10 June 1933. 22nd June 1933,“*fui migrante demasaido joven*” [I was an emigrant too young] moved with family to Barcelona because of Civil War, lived there until the end of the war. Returned to Granada with mum and siblings. Lived with mother’s family.

Father exiled, and family knew nothing until 1942. Was in France. Was able to return because of military family member who was Governor of Granada.

In 1950 following problems at work, father went to Panama. In 1952 at 16 years old, Antonio went to Panama too. Mother’s sister went to Argentina.

1940 – Internos in Auxilio Social until 1950. Preparation for military, was run by Falange.

1942 – Training for *monaguillo*, [altar boy] in the Roman Catholic church. Learned Latin. Sent to seminary.

[Quite a bit of frustrating background noise, though voice not drowned out.]

Sent to seminary (Seminario de Comilla), but didn’t want to be a priest, so was sent back to Granada. Did altar-serving in many churches around Granada. In 1949 at the Seminario de Monagillo, of 60 students, ARC was in top 10.

1952 – Franciscan came to Granada, to family home, said ARC would have to help him at mass when he went to Panama. Shocked ARC that in Panama women went into church with shoulders uncovered; this never happened in Spain. All of family was Catholic. Brother had education sponsored because he was going to be a priest.

Arrived in Panama early one Sunday morning after 15-day journey by boat.

ARC had been learning to do woodwork, *banista.*

ARC was taken to dance *guaracha* and *mambo*. Danced with girl who noted he was Spanish; sweating; girl takes him out to a garden and rapes him ‘*me violó*’.

Spain in those days was still under rationing whereas in Panama they had all the sugar for coffee they wanted! Could eat all the bread they wanted too.

Had a younger sister, born in 1935 in Barcelona, died aged 52. Couldn’t be baptised in Barcelona as it was ‘*buena zona roja*’[[1]](#footnote-1); mother baptised her when they returned to Granada.

Older brother Manuel now lives in Malaga. After training, Archbishop wouldn’t ordain him because family lived apart (Dad and ARC in Panama), and he was the son of a ‘*rojo’*.

Priests trained 12 years, after 10 years they were ‘*ordenado de menores’*. ARC arrived back from Panama in 1954, sent by dad who couldn’t finish working there until the following year. Once family reunited, Manuel was studying law and wouldn’t be ordained.

Father went to France in 1957, then in 1959 ARC followed. Father didn’t like it much. ARC sent to Tolouse, ‘*fabrica de barnice’* (varnish factory). Father wanted ARC to have contract, but ARC wanted to get to know *patron* first. After 3 months (illegal), faced with ultimatum of having contract or going. ‘*Oficial primera de bainsta*’.

1960 – returned to Spain to marry, then went back to France with wife, and in 1961 first child born.

Salaries had doubled in Spain by then. At the time ARC left Spain, salary for his job was 25 pesetas; in France he earned 120-140 pesetas. By 1962, basic salary in Spain had risen to 60 pesetas. Decided to return Spain.

Went back to France last year for 14 July celebrations in Montauban with son and grandchildren. Returned to hotel where he lived with his father. Played football for the municipal team in Realville. When he married, mayor arranged for ARC to be given flat by the city council, before the French had been allotted them. Visited the old hotel owner, who paid for the whole family to have dinner out. Grandson amazed that having left in 1962, granddad had left behind a reputation such that had meals paid for in 2007!

ARC liked a lot of things about the French. 1960-61, De Gaulle referendum. Saw that same happened in France as in Spain. Got on well with mayor, went to speak to him about referendum and their decision. They supported it, and AC pointed out that Mayor was socialist. Mayor said that this is what had killed Spaniards, the attitude that if it’s an idea of the right, the left won’t support it, whereas the French looked at its merits for the people.

1959-62 was in France. Claims a pension from France now for the three years he worked there.

Had to present himself in Barcelona 8 days before leaving. Father had sent him boat ticket one month before. Boarded Marco Polo, an Italian boat. Went the day before due to leave to confirm ticket and submit papers (including vaccination papers). At travel agency, they tell him there are no places. ARC returned to house where he was staying, and the woman there said there was a *Comandante de marina* (Navy Commander) who was staying there. ARC went with this chap the next morning who sorted it out for him quickly.

15 August 1959. Remembers that on the boat, they played the *canción del inmigrante* (immigrant song) *–* Juanito Valdelrama ‘*Yo soy un pobre inmigrante, que vengo hasta tierra extraña, y en mu pecho un estandarte con la bandera de España’*.[[2]](#footnote-2)

ARC met the singer when he received the *Cruz de plata, Merito de la Inmigración (*Silver Cross, Immigration Merit)[[3]](#footnote-3).

Worked for Granada bus company for 22 years. Fell ill, and the doctor told him to give up work. Had radiography done.

[40:00 – 50:00] Beginning work for AGER

Was President of *Enlace Sindical*. ARC demanded to see consultant to know either what the problem was, or whether he could return to work. Weren’t going to sign him off to receive social security, but fought it and received 100% in the end, including backdated payments.

ARC wasn’t used to not working, so looked for something to do. Knew of existence of AGER (*Asociación Granadina de Emigrantes Retornados*, Granada Association for Return Migrants) so started as a volunteer. Only 3 people working there at the time. Became President and the first thing he did was to move the Association to another office, as the current one was too small. Other volunteers had been born in France, Germany, etc. so were able to use languages in service for AGER. In the end, he had 12 people working there.

ARC met with *Diputación, Ayuntamiento* [Provincial Council, City Council?] and convinced them to fund the AGER. Also convinced Madrid to give funding too. Amalia Gómez was *Ministra de Asuntos Sociales* (Minister of Social Affairs) and came to visit AGER. She was so impressed she agreed to double the budget from 5m pesetas to 10m. Had financial checks (*Inspectores de Hacienda*) which showed they didn’t have a single cent unaccounted for.

[50:00 – 60:00] Director of AGER

ARC received the ‘*Cruz de Plata, merito social’*. ARC used to protest a lot to Madrid that if conditions and support were better, there would be more return migrants and millions more in the Spanish economy, The Franco government recognised that thanks to emigration, *se habia levantado España* (Spain was improved).

Return migrants came from Jaen, Cordoba, Malaga, Almeria to AGER in order to get their papers sorted out. ARC helped to establish the Almeria Association.

ARC suffered a heart attack, but he carried on working for the AGER. He suffered a second heart attack in 1988 and has recently celebrated his 20th anniversary. ARC stepped down from being Director four years ago. When he became director there were 1,500 members; when he left there were 12,000 and today there are 16,000. It’s the strongest AER in Spain. Receives support from the *Caja de Ahorro de Granada* (Savings Bank of Granada). AGER sees around 150 people per day, 38,000 people every year.

[60:00 – 70:00] Law and return migrants

ARC’s brother is a lawyer and an expert on laws relating to workers’ rights and return migrants in particular. He planned to denounce Spain because it was the only country in the EU that did not pay contributions to the pensions of those doing military service.

Talks about various *sentencias comunitarias* that took place with return migrants claiming pensions from the destination countries they worked in as well as Spain. Includes his own story of claiming retrospective payment from the French government (for *conyuge cargo*).

[70:00 – 80:00] Impressions of France

Interviewer asks ARC if he had any impressions of France before going. His father had been a refugee in France. He came back in 1948 after spending the war there. He was part of a *colectivo* (union?) which was awarded the Legion d’Honneur by de Gaulle for its participation in the resistance. His father gave him ideas about the differences between France and Spain, beginning with the working week: 48 hours in Spain, 40 in France. Eventually Spain reduced working week to 44 hours. ARC was involved in negotiations and went to Madrid three times. These days, ARC wonders where the unions are, why aren’t they protesting about the kind of issues he’s reading about in the press.

ARC had to make an effort to learn French. When he was at school, they didn’t study it, it was only Latin in those days. He played for a football team in the village he lived in. The boss at work was also the president of the football club. ARC’s brother was also working illegally there in France, working on a three month tourist visa. ARC regularised his papers to become legal. He used to be taken from Montauban by a *delegado de trabajo* to help a Spaniard living in a nearby village who wasn’t earning enough to pay his way. The Spaniard didn’t speak good French. ARC helped him resolve his situation.

[80:00 – 90:00] Migration to France

He remembers one time he went to Irún to *pasar reconocimiento* (pass a medical exam?). There was also a group from Madrid who were made to strip for medical examinations. There was a young man with a large mole, and the border doctor believed it might be cancerous and he so was not allowed to enter France. The young man came so full of hope and cried when he was put back on the train to Madrid. ARC had had a hernia operation at a military hospital in Spain, and the doctor noticed the operation scar. However, he was allowed to pass as he was going to a job as an official.

Interviewer asks ARC about the belongings he took from Spain to France.He had won the lottery – 60,000 pesetas – with which he could have bought a house. He spent it badly, lending money to friends. When he was down to 12,000 pesetas left, he went to France. Friends only repaid him small amounts. Those who owed him most had left Granada when ARC went back.

ARC went by train from Granada to Madrid, then to Irún, crossed the border to Andalla, train to Toulouse and finally arrived in Montauban. When he came back to Spain to get married, they took back his sister-in-law to France. They had a flat at that point. ARC asked the secretary of the local council what documents he needed for his wife-to-be. Told she was legal by marriage for 5 years. Needed to sort out *carte de séjour* (residence permit). After 8 days they called hum to say that actually ARC’s wife could not stay beyond the 3-month tourist period. Two days before that time was up, the Gendarmes (police) came and said if they were there the next day they would be arrested. ARC and wife went to Irún, crossed border in order to renew pass. Had to do this each time 3 months was up. Eventually regularised by immigration.

[90:00 – 100:00] Life in France

Impressions on arriving in France first time? French had known ARC’s father since the war. They were treated well. ARC played football, cards, managed to integrate well. They lived in a village called Realville. No problem with French customs or practices. There wasn’t much difference between France and Spain. Many in the village went fishing and hunting, and used to give ARC fish they’d caught. ARC never fished or hunted.

Remembers that the secretary from the council used to say sorry all the time for the mix-up on immigration with ARC’s wife. No general other problems with bureaucracy. ARC already had a contract before he came to work in France. After 13 days he got his *carte de séjour* for 3 months. ARC had to go back after 3 months, then got it for 6 months more, then for 2 years. ARC was about to receive a *carte de séjour* for 15 years, and his boss was even talking about him taking French nationality. Howerer, ARC didn’t do this, and moved back to Spain. ARC didn’t earn so much, even though he lived better in France. Remembers going to the shops with his wife and telling her to buy a whole chicken – she was surprised. They lived well.

[100:00 – 110:00] Housing in France, story about life in Panama

They had a flat in a converted school, on the third floor. It had three rooms, with a window each in two of the rooms but one without a window. Big flat. The bad thing about accommodation in France, which ARC missed about Spain, was that there were no bathrooms in the house. They had to go downstairs to the toilet, and pay to shower at a nearby hotel. ARC used to work from 8am to 6pm. On Sundays he used to pass by the hotel on the way home around 6.30pm and have a shower. When they used to go to Toulouse, they used to see lots of houses where there was no bathroom and so people used to go to the toilet in the street and bathe in the canal. ARC was amazed as everyone could see everything. Nine neighbours in their block of flats, all of them had to go downstairs for the bathroom. Used to go to look for wood for the fire between October and May because of the cold. Coal was expensive and you had to keep putting it on. So wood was better.

[105:05 – 106:00 ARC and interviewer arrange next meeting.]

Learnt punctuality from the Americans in Panama. ARC used to play the lute. There was an exhibition of Catalan painters that came to Panama. The journalist that came was the child of Granadinos but raised in Barcelona. There was a party near the canal, they invited the daughter of the boss of the canal. ARC was playing there and the daughter wanted to learn to play the guitar. Journalist told ARC that he was going to teach daughter to play.

ARC had learnt scales and the accompaniment to the *paso doble* for the guitar when he was at school. Learned to play a song – *Adios a Granada* – remembers the opening notes even now. Bit more of this story.

[110:00 – 120:00]

[111:24 – more talk organising next meeting and a visit to AGER.]

ARC says he worked for his company for 28 years and so gets free bus travel as part of a deal, but not all pensioners get this.

***Synopsis part B:***

[00:00 – 05:42]

ARC was director of the national Federation of Associations for four years, and director of the Andalucian Federation for three years. For the 20th anniversary, representatives came from the Associations in Canaries, Austrias, all around.

ARC did all he could for the Associations. ARC organised with the *Caja de ahorro* that any members who banked with them would not have any kind of charges taken from their German/French pension payments. Threated to denounce the other banks (which were charging returnee migrants) to the European court of fraud.

ARC says his generation has been punished for a lot, even since childhood. Because of that, they have to fight.

1. under the control of the communists [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rough translation: ‘I am a poor immigrant, I come to a strange land, but I have on my breast the flag of Spain’. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cruz de Plata de la Orden Civil de la Solidaridad Social (national award for services to social solidarity). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)