

# The Basque Diaspora: One Step Forward

*Benan Oregi and Joseba Arregui*

*I know others that have envied our heritage, I've heard 'I wish I were Basque'. I think because we have a comraderie, or closeness that is envied in this scattered world.*

(Woman, 58 years old, resident in the US, second generation).  
Oiarzabal, 2005



## The Basques

Basque people call themselves *Euskaldunak*, those who speak the Basque language, and their land is known as *Euskal Herria*, a name which could have derived from the Basque Word for 'sun'.

The Basque Country, 20.664 km<sup>2</sup> in extent, is divided into seven territories, four of them on the southern side, within Spain, and three of them, on the northern side of the Pyrenées, within France. The Basques have never formed a unified nation-state incorporating all seven of their provinces. Historically, they have constituted a loose confederation united in defence of the Basque culture, language, customs, and *fueros*

the Basque system of common law. The Spanish-French border was established in 1512, and has been maintained since then, dividing the Basque Country between Spain and France.

Still the imposition of the border did not bring the end to their unique system: 'when the Basques entered into the consolidating French and Spanish states, each province did so with the agreement that it would maintain control over its traditional cultural and political organization. The Basques understood that they had binding legal contracts that regulated common interests with the crown. At the heart of these agreements was the all-important issue of preserv-

ing the *fueros* (Arregi and Crull, 1996: NET)'.

Actually, the end came with the instauration of liberal Republics in both France and Spain: 'the *fuero* system endured more or less untouched for centuries, until the French revolution of 1789 and the end of the second Spanish Carlist War in 1876. As both France and Spain attempted to forge unitary states within their territorial boundaries (a goal that remains incomplete today in both countries), they abolished the *fueros*. Abolition provoked limited resistance in France, but in Spain it engendered the Basque nationalist movement (Arregi and Crull, 1996:NET)'. These crucial events lie at the heart of the history of Basques abroad. The initiatives targeting Basques in the world developed by the Basque Government in Spain offer an interesting case of para-diplomacy performed by a sub-state actor using the possibilities offered by modern technology to retain Basque culture and reinforce Basque identity worldwide.

### **The Basque language and culture: ancient roots in a modern world**

The Basque language, one of the oldest still spoken, remains a mystery. Most philologists and anthropologists maintain that the Basques have occupied the same territories for at least 5,000 years, and, as American author Mark Kurlansky (1999), following José Miguel de Barandiarán, puts it, are thought to be descendants of the Cro-Magnons, who lived in the area 40,000 years ago, with the oldest remains dating to the Low Palaeolithic. Around 600,000 speakers use one of the nine different dialects

and sub-dialects of *Euskara* (Luis Lucien Bonaparte, 1869). Nowadays, a standardized language has been created since 1968 based mostly on one of the literary dialects, and is being used in the mass media, education and so on. During the last years, the decline of the last centuries in the percentage of speakers has turned into a slow increase, due to the support of the Basque Autonomous Government and its affirmative action policy that has enabled its introduction in education.

### **Basque emigration: the first wave**

Pierre Lhande stated in 1910 that 'to be an authentic Basque, three conditions were requested: To have an unpronounceable name, to speak the language of the sons of Aitor, and to have an uncle in America'. Basque whalers and cod fishermen were well known to be among the best fishermen and seamen in Europe. They sailed to Greenland, Iceland, to Finnmark, on the northernmost tip of Norway. Eventually the Basques arrived in New Found Land and established the first European industry devoted to the processing of whale products.

Place-names in the Newfoundland area and Canada, such as RED BAY or Isle-aux-Basques, *Portutxoa*, Placentia Bay, as well as several gravestones do give proof of the arrival of the Basque sailors by the sixteenth century. Many Basques took part in this Age of Discovery that turned European enterprises into global achievements. Among these Basques of global relevance we would like to mention Juan Sebastian de Elcano, one of the first man who circumnavigated the

globe, Ignacio de Loiola, founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), and Francis Xavier (Xabier), one of the most prominent Europeans in Asia.

In the south of the American continent, the conquest of indigenous lands attracted many Basques. Basque sailors, missionaries, merchants and mercenaries began to spread and settle in the newly established Spanish colonies during the next centuries: the percentage of Basques among the governors of Peru, the founders of new cities and settlements in the Rio de la Plata area, or even in first positions of the Mexican territories and beyond, is spectacular. During this colonial era, soldiers, merchants and missionaries from the seven territories established themselves mostly in Peru, Mexico, Cuba, Chile and Venezuela. The first Basque institution founded in Mexico was *La Hermandad de Nuestra Señora de Aranzazu* (1671), religious brotherhood hosted by the Franciscans (also Basques); fifty years later, the *Real Compañía Guipuzcoana de Caracas* was established in Venezuela, with a totally different goal: to keep a Basque monopoly in the commerce of products such as tobacco or cacao.

### **Second wave: wars and crises**

Among the factors compelling Basque emigration in the nineteenth century the following are of foremost importance. Firstly, the primogeniture inheritance system in rural Basque Country; the tortuous topography did not permit the Basque farmers to divide their land among their siblings, and such was the law of *mayorazgo*: the oldest would inherit the farmhouse. For the rest, they

were pushed to join religious orders or leave the place looking for a better future in far away lands. Secondly, the loss of the *fueros*, or the rights that the Basque people had kept for centuries. Since the Middle Ages every King of Castilla had had to swear under the holy tree of Gernika that he would be respectful with those rights, while the Basques would swear their loyalty in exchange. The defeat in the two Carlist Wars (1837 and 1876) brought the end of the system and the loss of this unique political system that the Basque people had kept for ages. Since then, Basque young men had to serve for years in the Spanish army, and that change made thousands leave their villages and then jump ship in ports around the world.

This as well as the five revolutions that took place in Europe in the late 1800s (industrial – liberal – agricultural – demographic – transportation) and the personality of the Basque young men, as has been noticed by authors like Moya (1998), made thousands escape from poverty and lack of freedom and depart towards a better life. Between 1880 and 1910 thousands of Basque citizens (most of them young men) left the Basque mountains and embarked for America, the Rio de la Plata being their preferred destination. This massive and sudden movement of people brought about depopulation, affecting especially rural areas. Some small villages lost entire generations of young males, due to the ‘chain migration’ effect. The ‘American Dream’ resulted in such a fever among young adults that even the local authorities tried to stop the phenomenon. In 1883, the Provincial Council of Alava published the arti-

cles that the local journalist José Colá y Goiti had been writing with the purpose of deterring youngsters from falling into the hands of recruitment agents that used propaganda about the conditions of life and opportunities in places such as Uruguay. Colá wrote about the horrible conditions of travel, the low salaries, the lack of security in those countries, or even the compulsory military service in places like Uruguay, where twenty different wars or revolutions took place in a period of fifty two years. For the women he warned about the possibility of becoming a mistress or a prostitute if they happened to emigrate.

Despite these efforts to deter it, emigration to America continued and got even stronger. During those years, Basque ethnic associations were founded in Argentina, Uruguay, Cuba, Mexico, Chile, and some others since the 1870s on. Their main goals were to offer mutual support, the maintenance of culture and the celebration of their festivities. Not only did they serve as landing platforms for those who arrived, but also as *homes away from home* for those who were staying longer, or never went back to their homelands.

Due to their successful integration in the hosting societies Basques earned leadership roles in the new republics, for example, at the end of the XIX century, Errazuri was the President of Chile, Uriburu was the President of Argentina, and Idiarte Borda was in charge of the government in Uruguay. All three of them were of Basque descent. Between 1853 and 1943, ten out of the twenty two Presidents of Argentina were of Basque origin. Douglass and Bilbao refer to this period as 'the old Basque

emigration'. But let us now focus on the newer emigration.

### **The Third Wave: the Franco Regime and beyond**

During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) thousands of Basques were violently forced to leave their country and flee to exile as political refugees. Again, the countries of destination for many of them were located in America: Argentina, Chile, Mexico and Venezuela received them with open arms. In the case of Argentina, and thanks to the lobby work of the Committee organized by the Argentinean Basque colony, their President, Roberto Ortiz Lizardi, born of a Basque father and a Basque mother himself, passed a regulation on January the 20<sup>th</sup>, 1940, due to this successful mediation. This extraordinary measure:

permitted the entrance to Argentina of Basques without any distinction of origin and place of residence, the Committee Pro-Basque Immigration being allowed to participate in the legalization process of all Basque passengers.

The arrival of these political refugees supposed a revival of the Basque institutions that they found in the host countries. The former social aid and cultural nature of these associations were reinforced and homeland politics entered into their agenda. A new wave of fortune seekers left the Basque country during the fifties and the sixties, looking for better opportunities, but this time they preferred new destinations like the West of the United States of America, and, for a few hundred, Australia. These last wave of fortune seekers found new employment working as shepherders in the US and sugar cane-cutters in Australia.

Regarding homeland politics, there is a clear distinction between on the one hand Basques who headed towards countries that hosted refugees such as Chile, Mexico, Uruguay and Argentina, who being intellectuals, professionals, ... were much more active ideologically and politically and, on the other hand, those who emigrated in more recent years due to economic reasons (most from rural areas of the Basque Country and the vast majority towards English speaking countries). This more recent typology tends to join with other people of Basque origin who celebrate their culture and speak the language, but they avoid politics.

### **The Basque Autonomous Government and the Diaspora**

The Basque Autonomous Government was established in Euskadi after the Statute of Gernika was approved in 1979. The Statute of 1979 provided for the transfer of a wide range of powers to the Autonomous Basque Community, which encompasses the three Basque provinces of Araba, Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa. Under the Estatuto de Gernika, the Basques have created an autonomous parliamentary government to enact laws regarding powers transferred from the central government to the autonomous region. Powers transferred thus far include control of the public education system, the Basque police force, industrial planning, public health services, and welfare/social security programs. In addition, the Autonomous Basque Community, has developed a unique foreign action initiative that has relations with the Basques Abroad as one of its core areas. The Directorate of Relations with

Basques Abroad is placed within the Basque Presidency, at the highest level of the Basque political structure.

This same year Basque institutions started to contact Basques abroad. In fact, only three years later, in 1982, a Basque World Congress was organized and several representatives of the Diaspora were invited to attend. It was in 1994 when the Basque Parliament passed a Law (Law number 8/1994) to regulate the relations with the Basque communities abroad. The Law was approved thanks to the vote of all political parties represented in the Parliament, 'because every single Basque family had a connection with the emigration'. Law 8 established an official register of Basque associations abroad and also a series of rights that corresponded to: 1) members of those associations, 2) Basque-born emigrants who kept their Spanish citizenship and 3) those who had been exiled during the Civil War. Two official institutions were created to help establish new Basque Clubs around the world and serve as stimulus for those associations that had been founded one hundred of years ago but were still alive: The Advisory Board for Relations with Basques Abroad; and the World Congress of Basque Communities, to be held once every four years.

The time had come for Basques who lived abroad to have an institutional reference in the homeland that would help them achieve their purposes. After thirteen years since Law 8 was passed we can argue without hesitation that the relation between Basques abroad and their homeland has improved dramatically, thanks not only to all the programs that are on-going, but also to all the multi-

directional links that are being created. Nowadays, the field of migration studies attracts public attention and is an area of increasing interest for citizens, politicians, academics, and so on. Celebrations of Basque heritage and pride in Argentina (with the annual Basque National Week) and the United States (with Jaialdi Festival every five years) are gathering crowds of more than 30,000 people, showing their *pride to be Basque*.

Law 8 has been developed into several regulations that contain the legal framework for a handful of possibilities of funding for cultural programs, aid for those who are in high need in Latin America (especially after the economic depression of 2001 in some of those countries), exchange programs, visits to the Basque Country, seminars, conferences, and also institutional contacts, in which Basque emigrants often play a first hand role as facilitators. And, of course, there is a Four year institutional plan that is approved by the Basque institutions since they receive the conclusions of each of the Congresses. As William Douglass puts it: 'it is fair to say that Euskadi is among the most proactive territories on the planet with respect to maintaining ties with its emigrants and their descendants (ibid, 2000:162)'.

### Numbers of Basques Abroad

In August 2007, there were 5 federations and 162 associations of Basques officially registered with the Basque Government, representing 21 countries (many of them in America, some in Europe and 3 in Australia). Members come from any of the seven territories, without dis-

tinction. Argentina is the country with the highest number of clubs (near 90), and the second is United States (35). In both countries, their federations (FEVA and NABO) play a key role. The total of members is of about 25,000. But these are the Basque activists abroad. The census of voters in the homeland elections contain near 38,000 people who live outside the borders and maintain the right to vote. They do not correspond with the former, since this second group comes from nearly 60 countries in all the five continents. Only one out of four of them voted in the last elections. There is still a third figure, corresponding to the descendants of Basques. During the First Congress in 1995, some rough estimates were presented by Iñaki Aguirre, Secretary General of Foreign Action of the Basque Government. In Argentina alone, 10% of the total population is of this origin, i.e. 3.5 million. In Uruguay, they are 14% of the total population, 420,000 (according to other reports, 25%, 750,000), all over the country. In the United States there are about 50,000 families living mostly on the West coast and the Midwest (in the last US census, 2000, 57,000 people declared themselves of Basque ethnic origin). Venezuela has roughly between 8,000 and 10,000 Basques. Mexico has an estimated 5,000 families in the Federal District. In Chile Basques make up about 20% of the Chilean population, some 260,000 people. 'On the whole, we can soundly estimate', the report concludes, 'that the total population of Basque descent is about 4.5 million'.

### **Emigration today: changing trends**

During the last meeting of the Advisory Board, two phenomena were studied. The first was a new kind of emigration, short term, of hundreds of young Basque people that leave for other countries, mostly Europe and places like China, Malaysia or elsewhere in Asia. This is thanks to their high education and the opportunities offered by globalization. Globalization enables the freedom of movement for workers, the relocation of companies and breaks the borders within the European Union. The second of those phenomena was the return movement that we are observing from the countries that were receiving emigrants. The generally high standards in the homeland and the economic crisis that affects Latin America has reversed the cycle. So, from being a country of emigrants, we have become a country of immigrants.

As a result, the Basque homeland society is undergoing a sociological shift in thinking about migration. Out of the 4.4 Million immigrants in Spain in 2007, only 98,108 were settled in Euskadi, although this number is growing yearly. Colombia, Bolivia, Romania, Morocco, Portugal, Ecuador, Brazil, Argentina, China and Algeria are the ten most important countries of origin of those immigrants. Regarding emigration, out of the 71,005 people who moved in the Basque Country (including Navarre) to a different Basque historical territories, or even Spain, only 1,406 of them chose as their final destination to settle abroad - the United Kingdom and France being the two main destinations (INE, National Institute of Statistics).

### **Technodiaspora: a new opportunity in the making**

New technologies allow the establishment of ethnic communities through the Internet. This will not necessarily replace the traditional ones, but it does create new opportunities that will take us to a new scenario still difficult to imagine. The public and the private sectors, scholars, universities and all kinds of interest groups are fast becoming new actors in relations with Basques abroad. Numerous new initiatives are building new bridges for those who live far away; globalization has opened new opportunities and it is now easier to find your personal roots. All this is making it more and more feasible to rediscover the cultural origin for thousands of connected Basques.

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) make it possible to ask for public funding, to request any kind of information, to search for the meaning of a last name, to look for relatives and to participate in interest groups or to chat every night with other people of the same ethnic origin. It also enables the opportunity of sending an e-mail to the Basque President, using the computer. All these factors enable a new real time relationship among Basques no matter where they live. Indeed, ICTs break the 'space-time' barrier that has for many centuries limited the relation between Basques in the homeland and abroad.

Regarding the potential of ICT and how they can help minority cultures in general, and more precisely, the oldest language in Europe, the following has to be mentioned: BOGA a computer program is being used by thousands of

students that try to learn the basics of our complicated language not only in the Basque clubs abroad but also in 21 Universities of Europe, America and Australia. As for the Basque Diaspora members, they are becoming aware of the importance of being connected. As a result, many Basque clubs and federations have their own web pages. The Basque Government offers information about their programs through their main page [www.euskadi.net](http://www.euskadi.net), and is sending a weekly bulletin to more than 10,000 e-mail addresses. In addition, they send a paper magazine they send every two months to more than 36,000 homes abroad. Virtual communities have been established by the Society of Basque Studies-Eusko Ikaskuntza ([www.eusko-sare.org](http://www.eusko-sare.org)). One can find what is now going on in any of the Basque communities through private pages such as [www.euskalkultura.com](http://www.euskalkultura.com), is able to get the way to learn the basics of the Basque language through [www.habe.org](http://www.habe.org) or can even see how to dance an intricate step of a Basque ancient dance through [www.dantzan.com](http://www.dantzan.com). As well as this, Basque studies are on the increase in the world academic map, as well. For example, the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada, in Reno (USA) offers an on-line course in English about Basque emigration studies, and various kinds of top level publications are being distributed to the most important universities internationally.

### **Gathering history to launch the future**

During his opening speech at the Second World Congress of Basque Communities that took place in 1999, Professor

William Douglass, former Director of the Center for Basque Studies at the University of Nevada in Reno, urged the Basque authorities that were following his words in the audience, to rescue the history of the Basque emigrants:

...We are only at the beginning when we look at the enormous potential of tracing the history of specific Basque colonies in specific periods of time and how they became associated, without forgetting the importance of biographies built from archives and passed down orally... Intellectually this work is urgent, because sources are lost over time... It is the substance necessary for the creation and maintenance of a tradition that... may serve as a basis for the future of the different Basque identities scattered around the Diaspora (William A. Douglass, 1999).

This acted a wake up call for the Directorate for Relations with Basques Abroad. Four years later, during the opening of the 2003 in Vitoria, the Basque Government introduced a new Collection of publications under the name *Urazandi* (From Overseas). Since then, twenty volumes have been edited up to compiling the history of the most important Basque Clubs all over the World, written by academics and top researchers from those countries. Personal memories of emigrants are being collected in the *Euskaldunak Munduan* series, of which eight issues have been produced. The purpose of this collection is to offer a space for private life stories. In fact, there are thousands of families with a lot to tell about emigration, and some of their members are starting to read their family letters and put together the history of those who had had to emigrate.

Furthermore, an annual award was created in 1999 under the name "Andrés de Irujo" <sup>(1)</sup>

In the last eight years, researches from Uruguay, Argentina, Chile and both sides of the Basque Country have been distinguished with the award. Last July, 2007, the Fourth World Congress of Basque Communities was held in Bilbao. Regarding the compilation of this chapter of our history, a new step forward was presented: the birth of *Digital Urazandi*. *Digital Urazandi* (2007) is a new series based on the digitalization of the written production of the Basque Diasporas during the twentieth century. The first volume, *Hemero-teca de la Diáspora Vasca*, comprised of 9 DVDs, contains the digitalization of 134 different magazines published by the Basques abroad during the last 100 years, most of them in America. It gathers a total of 180,000 pages that can be consulted conveniently by researchers.

If the first *Digital Urazandi* focuses on what the Basques abroad published, the second one wants to gather what has been published about Basques in the local printed media. This second phase of the project will target articles or references about the Basques (even publicity) that have been published in local newspapers in those cities where important Basque Communities were settled. An agreement was signed in 2006 between the Basque Government and the Federation of Basque Institutions of Argentina (FEVA) on the one hand, and three universities of Argentina on the other. Students and Basque youngsters will be trained to record millions of references. For the near future, it is foreseen that *Digital Urazandi* will also cover another series focused on oral histories.

## Conclusions

For more than 800 years Basques have been going abroad. This collective experience is a treasure of high value in our contemporary transnational and knowledge driven world. The experience of the Basques abroad has made us rethink the nature of Euskadi has political, economic, social and cultural reality far beyond the original 7 territories of Euskal Herria, opening new possibilities. In the light of this, we consider Euskadi as a transnational and deterritorialized reality that encompasses Basques in 21 different countries world wide. In planning the future we are moving towards a 7 (original territories) + 1 (generic for Basques in the world) scenario. The experience gathered by previous generations abroad is not only a question of saving the past, It is also and foremost about preparing ourselves for today and the future. Recovering the experience and knowledge of Basques abroad is also fundamental in order to 1) generate empathy to new immigrants in the Basque homeland and 2) train new generations in 'integrating without losing identity;. If done so, new generations of Basques will be better prepared for living and working in an internationalized and multicultural world. We are living a transition era, in which the history of Basque migration is being constructed but, at the same time, we are also preparing for the future, imagining the myriad of opportunities that await in Diaspora collaboration.

## Notes

<sup>(1)</sup> Andrés de Irujo founded together with Ixaka Lopez Mendizabal a publishing house in Buenos Aires, Ekin, which during the Francoist regime, became the most important printing service for the Basque culture (hundreds of books, magazines, and so on that could not be published in the homeland were produced from their exile in Argentina).

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<http://www.euskadi.net/euskaldunak>