**OpenLIVES Spanish Émigré interviews – Manuel SIMÓN VELASCO**

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| Interviewee: | Manuel SIMÓN VELASCO |
| Interviewer: | Alicia Pozo Gutiérrez, Darren Paffey |
| Interview date: | 7 July 2008 |
| Location: | Hotel Petit Palace Arenal, Madrid |
| Duration: | 110 mins |
| Countries of migration: | France, Belgium, Germany, Portugal, Spain, Argentina, Switzerland |

**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:**

[00.00 – 10.00]

We begin by explaining how we will conduct the interview. APG opens the interview. MSV born in 1942 in Decazeville, Aveyron, France. Mining area. Very Spanish *barrio*  – 12,00 – 13,00 Spaniards working in area. Father arrived in France after the Civil War. Mother was a widow with 3 children – her first husband had signed up to fight the war without telling mother, returned to Spain and was killed in the war. They were both originally from Asturias. Mother then met MSV’s father and they had two children together. Remembers departure of Nazis when he was 2-3 years old. One of his stepbrothers (which he calls brothers) fought with the Maquis. Came home regularly. Remembers him running home once because the Nazis were leaving.

Remembers departure for Belgium. Many other memories, playing as children. Many went hungry but their family didn’t. Remembers different coloured bread, depending on quality, and how they ate white bread on Sundays. They always had sufficient, including Christmas gifts of oranges.

His mother and father did not live together, lived instead in opposite houses in the same street. Remembers markets of Decazeville, and the sirens of the mines. One of biggest open mines in Europe, mined coal by dynamite. When siren was on regular time, not a problem. However, if the sirens didn’t go off when expected, they knew there was a problem, and wives would run to the mine entrance to get news.

APG clarifies parentage. His father was from León. MSV is older of two brothers born to his parents. The family moved to a mining area in the Francophone area of Belgium.

[10:01 – 20:00]

His parents were not married, so things weren’t ideal for them, living in the Spanish community of Decazeville. They later found out that his father had left behind another (large) family in Spain. As with a lot of Spaniards who left Spain, they changed surnames, and any Republican military didn’t mention their rank. After migrating to France, with the arrival of more Spaniards, there were some who recognised his father. His father was always a coal miner (49 years) – he died in Belgium as a miner. Belgium was a very welcoming country – a lot of solidarity. When the Civil War finished, the Francophone area of Belgium received a lot of exiles (the Flemish area, not so much). Socialist solidarity. Spaniards therefore knew that Francophone Belgium would be a good destination for exile.

The locals used to simply call his father *l’espagnol*, and they were the sons/wife of ‘the Spaniard’. Colfontaine – name of area they lived in. They lived there until 1961 when MSV was 15 years old. In 1952/3, his mother returned to make contact with them again. MSV’s parents only began to live together as a family when they moved to Belgium. They never married, as there was never the correct documentation. Francoist Spain protected his family. His father entered France as a refugee. Father didn’t talk much about his involvement in the Civil War, didn’t like to remember. MSV knows that his father, as a miner and a dynamite specialist, was used in the *cuerpos especiales* to dynamite bridges, fortresses, etc., as far as Barcelona. Mother’s memories of war were of losing her first husband (Cecilio) – he died in Pozuelo, (la batalla de la Jarama?). Organisations, solidarity bodies formed very quickly amongst Spanish refugees and MSV’s mother’s first husband was very involved in Communist party, and their three children (Mingo, very Asturian surname) were activists. Eventually his mother (Teresa) would say ‘don’t get involved in politics, look what happens’, even though she was a committed activist. She died in France in 1985 without having returned to Spain. (21:43)

[20:01 – 30:00]

Basically raised in Belgium, lived for 14 years there. *Ecole de soir* was where he went, along with many other children who worked in the mines during the day. Did a qualification in *electromecanico*. Father was member of UGT (*Unión General de Trabajadores*) – children were the same by intuition and tradition. In the Belgium mining area, workers were mostly socialist rather than communist. Communists existed, but they were mostly *favocitados* (?) by the *Partido Socialista* and by the *Sindicato Socialista Belga*. Exile associations existed too: UGT, PSOE (*Partido Socialista Obrero Español)*, *Juventades Socialistas* (JJSS) – which MSV created in that particular mine. In 1963, the exile associations asked for volunteers to go and work with immigrants who had been arriving in Europe from 1957 onwards. 380,000 Spanish immigrants in Germany at that point – JJSS saw it as a good opportunity to approach that generation and ‘proselytise’, as did other exile associations. MSV went in October 1963 to Hamburg.

APG asks to return to the different associations in Belgium. MSV says that at that time, the mining areas in which he worked were threatened with closure – they worked at 1,800m depth and that strata of coal were only 50-60cm thick. In the Flemish area, there were much better (2m deep) coal reserves. Many Flemish came to the Francophone areas to work in the mines. The two language communities did not communicate. There were many strikes, including the 3-week general strike in Belgium. MSV was 16-17 years old at the time. Belgian President was Eyskens. The general strike brought about the downfall of Eyskens. Paul Henri Spaak was working in NATO and left to come to govern in Belgium. MSV remembers a lot of anti-monarchy movement at that time too. Process of decolonisation. In effect, as MSV sees it, the Belgian Congo never belonged to Belgium, but to the King.

[30:01 – 40:00]

These were times of great tensions. There were two major unions at the time, one Christian Democrat, and other Socialist. UGT showed great solidarity with miners of Francophone areas. Houses, *locales*, were all provided for them. Miners’ syndicates managed to get immigrants involved in union activity which was not easy because Spanish immigrants simply came to work, save money quickly, didn’t necessarily have the language, came very much conditioned by the Francoist context of avoiding union activity expect in cases of very small issues (holiday rights, etc.). In their Spanish-decorated homes and meeting places, there were Spanish flags, castanets, Spanish practices. Anti-Francoists abroad had been painted as anti-Spain. When other Spaniards emigrated, they found people who were as Spanish as they were in culture, practices, identity. The union work was 24-7 and enabled them to maintain themselves for 38 years as part of the Spanish diaspora.

JJSS was about organisation, information and training of Spanish compatriots. Spent many Sundays talking about the same things. Encouraged workers to be part of the nationally-based unions, as well as to be part of the Spanish unions in exile, keeping Spaniards prepared for returning to Spain one day. Also important to maintain international syndical and socialist relations. MSV remembers that Harold Wilson in the UK played an important role in the socialist international. It was important to look after Spaniards who were back in Spain in clandestine conditions. In particular when there were strikes in Asturias in 1958, 1962 and in Basque Country, it was important to be able to call on the solidarity and support of other parts of the socialist international.

[40:01 – 50:00]

Their job was to keep international connections going, and to inform/mobilise public opinion on cases of suppression such as the ‘*picantique’*(?) which is featured in the documentar *El Salvador*, the *caso Grimado, Proceso de Burgos*. Getting help and aid for these cases was important. They ran publications, newsletters, conferences in difficult conditions. MSV was doing all of this after work from the age of 15. All of this lifestyle was completely natural and necessary. MSV was the only member of his family to have returned to Spain after 1967, and he always had the idea that one day he would return, from the age of 15.

Ideas of Spain came from the exile newspapers produced in France that he received in Belgium. Obviously these were shaped by very particular and preconceived ideas. MSV was interested in how exiles viewed Spain, and how those in Spain viewed the exile community. There were exile writers who gave very general views of Spain’s disaster, hierarchy, dictatorship, etc. Others, however, conducted more detailed studies and looked at the government’s budget, analysed the *Boletin Oficial del Estado*. The exile/refugee community eventually came into contact with the Spanish economic migrants and got further ideas about Spain from them. The refugee, exile and socialist community/ies had coexisted for many years. MSV compares these communities to cheese kept under a glass cover as they do in French restaurants. They were like the cheese, protected, but if you lift the lid there was a strong stench because they were a mix of everything (*laughs*).

For the generation of children of refugees, things were difficult. With the arrival of economic migrants, these migrants discovered the exiled community of Spain which they had either been told didn’t exist, or which they had never heard of. These included humble workers but also great intellectuals, writers, painters, etc. Migrants told exiles and children of exiles about life in Spain, the conditions, the cities, family life, education and lack of; in general, they recounted Francoist Spain of the 1960s. Representatives of European unions met together, trained together.

[50:01 – 60:00]

Need for renewal of associations and unions in exile, if they were to be effective and not ‘miss the train of history’. While many exiles simply waited for Franco to die, in Spain itself, unions were becoming active, political institutions were taking shape, and exiles needed to keep abreast of these changes. Renewal happened in 1971 for the UGT, followed in 1972 by the PSOE and the famous conference of Surenne. At 30 years old, Felipe Gonzales was highly involved in PSOE, before becoming General Secretary in 1974. These were decisive people in the transition, after having been elected in exile.

Many clandestine contacts along the French/Spanish border, with many in particular in the Basque region, passing books, materials and people. These people were in contact with Customs and knew the mountain passes into Spain. There was contraband too. Runners were paid in advance in strong currencies such as the Deutschmark. Books and publications of the unions and PSOE were among the books considered to be subversive and the war to state security. Furthermore, a well-prepared report by the UN’s *Organización Internacional de Trabajo* (International Labour Organisation) in 1968 was extremely critical about Spain’s government and the supposed opening and liberalisation of Spain. MSV and others believed this to be like a bomb on the Spanish government and saw the need to spread this report throughout Spain.

People also passed by clandestine paths into/out of Spain. Even the police were infiltrated by clandestine exiles.

[60:01 – 70:00]

In 1963-65, MSV was in Germany and organised 16 sections of the UGT de las Juventudes. Dealt with immigrants and had the support of the German union. *El comité de ayuda a la República* paid for MSV’s lodgings, and MSV worked some hours a day in the *economato*/the company store. MSV didn’t go to the factories but normally met with representatives in train stations, which were huge in Germany. It was often very cold in Germany, and stations were actually dry and warm places. He used to walk around these stations, eat ghoulash and drink beer there.

In June 1965, those who asked him to go to Germany had a conference of JJSS in Toulouse and invited him to come. There, at 23 years old, they elected him *secretario de la organización* of the exiled JJSS. MSV worked there in Toulouse from 1965 until 1974. In 1967, he was elected a member of the managing board of UGT. MSV worked in all of these posts in the hours outside of his normal day job in electrics for construction companies. MSV applied to work in aerospace for Airbus and Concorde. As a political refugee, MSV was not allowed to work on Concorde, so he carried on working on Airbus until the Carnation Revolution in Portugal. He married in 1970 and in 1971 he joined the UGT executive – for this, he and his French wife put off having children until later. His wife worked in a hospital in oncology. In 1965 MSV went to Israel and fell in love with the place and the kibbutz, the whole cooperative experience. In 1967 after everything that happened in Israel he went there to a kibbutz and helped out for a month or two. MSV was invited to speak about his Israeli experience in France – there he met his wife.

He remembers that around that time, when he saw his father in Belgium, people didn’t buy electro-domestic goods or furniture, because one had to be absolutely ready to drop everything and return to Spain when the moment came. (71:04)

[70:01 – 80:00]

The culture of the time was like that. They used to say that in Mexico, you could walk into a bar and know immediately if there were Spanish refugees there because their index finger was shorter than the others. This was because they spent every day in the cafe tapping the table [taps the table with finger] saying ‘next year we return to Madrid’, and they would say ‘that one’s a Republican’!!

With all of the readiness to return, MSV recognises he ‘let his guard down a bit’ and got married. After marrying, it becomes more difficult to be active in the exile community. MSV’s mother was happy because settling would mean that he would leave politics. His wife’s family had more problems – when he met them, they said ‘who’s this? Where’s he from?’ etc. When MSV was working for Airbus, he received a call from the Secretary of the UGT asking him to pass by after work. There he received the news about the revolution in Portugal and remembers being envious that they had been working 38 years to organise things for the fall of Franco who was already dying, and these Portuguese *cabrones* had been lucky enough to stage a coup and get rid of their dictatorship. Franco did not see this as good news. The second thought they had was that there were now 800km of open border on the French side. The unionist international wanted to send a delegation to Portugal to see how things panned out in the working world after the dictatorship. MSV took two weeks of unpaid leave. They travelled from Toulouse to Lisbon and MSV travelled on a legal French passport. They presented their report in Brussels to the directorate of the unionist international. The suggestion was made to open a satellite office in Portugal, given that in those days nothing was better than actual presence (no internet, email, etc). MSV then moved with his wife and first son (born that year) to Lisbon.

The situation in Portugal was very different to Spain, and it was fascinating and valuable experience. They had many good times there.

[80:01 – 90:00]

After a year and a half of talking with colleagues including Felipe Gonzales in Sevilla, MSV made the decision that he would not return to France – the next place would be Madrid. MSV and Gisele did not speak Portuguese when they first arrived, and although they lived in basic conditions, it was all very exciting. They were observing what happened and if things had failed in Portugal, it would have had serious ramifications for the Spanish exile effort. In Portugal, MSV was the Representative for the *internacional sindical* and was paid to do this, until September 1975. MSV had been travelling into Spain since 1965. He used a Swedish passport that he had acquired from a colleague in the JJSS – it was much easier to change photo in those days. He did two more trips on a French national ID card. One trip he went on the train from San Sebastian to Gijon. There were often *policia civil* on the trains, and while they never asked him for documents, he was very afraid. The objective of the trips was to meet up with other exiles who had gone back to Spain clandestinely, to sort out all types of problems and business. In 1967 he organised a meeting of 42 directors of the international in exile, from all across the world. They met clandestinely in an abandoned house, and communicated in English, with translation into Spanish. By night, he remembers the Mauritian representative walking around wearing a Basque *boina*. They were shut up in the house for 3 days and it was quite risky. When it was suggested to the directorate, some were sceptical, above all the Germans, but in the end they agreed. It all went well.

[90:01 – 100:00]

Back then, MSV knew the father of the current leader of the PSOE in the Basque Country. Going to Spain clandestinely, MSV was fearful. He had thought about and imagined Spain, not to mention talking about it with exiles and immigrants. Without having ever been to Madrid, he knew where places like the Puerta de Sol were, where to get tickets for the football games and bullfights etc., and he was able to convince people, absorbing all the details about the city.

Some of MSV’s first impressions of Spain were of the landscape of Cantabria and the Basque Country, and they were amazing.

Remembers Franco on black and white television saying that ‘Spain is Africa’, and ‘Africa begins in the Pyrenees’, wanting Spain to have nothing to do with the supposedly corrupt states of Europe. MSV saw this in a cafeteria in Gijon, and managed to use his French accent to convince the others there that he was French and nothing to do with Spain. However, when they asked where he was from, he couldn’t say Toulouse: that was tantamount to admitting that he came from the ‘mecca’ of anti-Spain activity, so he simply said ‘from the south’. One had to go around very discretely then.

The return to Spain in 1975. Felipe Gonzales was beginning to bring people back to Spain in preparation for potentially governing. MSV was destined to go to Asturias, because of his family’s mining roots, because of links with the unions there, but his problem was that he wasn’t Spanish, he only had French nationality. One last conference of the unions in exile was to be organised in Brussels, but they took the audacious decision to hold the conference in Spain instead. This was put to the vote of members and was approved.

On Franco’s death, MSV says that it’s always a shame to talk of the death of someone, but in this case, they were also talking about the arrival of freedom. It couldn’t have happened any quicker, in the end he died in his sleep. MSV and his union would not endorse the vertical union structure that had existed throughout the fascist period. The communists were prepared to endorse this in order to replace the Francoist leaders with their own.

[100:01 – 110:00]

MSV and his colleagues were pressing for a classical model of syndicalism. 120th anniversary of the UGT is next week (July 2008). Franco’s death brought hope for change. The UGT congress took place in 1978 in Madrid, and these were historic days. MSV was named International Secretary of the UGT and began to establish unions in the factories throughout Spain, forge links with other representatives, and work on the structure of unions for the future. Talks about the communists and the unions, and how specifically communist union in Spain in 1976 was unimaginable.

In 1977, Suarez realised around election time that historical memory was not insignificant. PSOE won 30% of the vote, 180 deputies of 350 after 40 years of dictatorship. The communists only won 20 seats. The UGT had reconnected with people, with only 5.9% less than *Comisiones* in elections for factory *delegados*.

In 1978, MSV was commissioned to bring back the remains of Francisco Largo Caballero which were in Pere Lachaise cemetery in Paris. Brought him back on 5th April and buried him (again) on 8th with half a million people in the streets. Remembers that the headlines of the right-wing newspaper *El Alcázar* said that ‘*estos aún saben respetar a sus muertos’*. One year after Franco’s death, there were 50,000 people on the streets, and 20,000 the year after that, whereas the unionists – 50 years after the death of Largo Caballero – were 500,000 strong.

The task then was to reconstruct and restructure the UGT, factory by factory. They tried to do this as quickly as possible.