

## VALENCIAN AND CATALAN ENTITIES IN BUENOS AIRES

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### RESUM

A mitjan segle XX, molts valencians, catalans i balears emigraren a l'Argentina buscant possibilitats de començar una vida nova. Però ser immigrant no és senzill. Moltes coses es queden arrere, absència que no fa gens fàcil la permanència en el lloc triat. Per eixa raó els diferents centres espanyols oferien a l'immigrant un lloc on poder mantindre els seus costums, parlar la seua llengua i relacionar-se amb persones de la seua comunitat, província o poble. Analtzarem els centres catalans, balears i valencians que hi han en Buenos Aires, quins són els servicis que oferixen als immigrants i quina és la relació que hi ha entre ells i amb uns altres centres espanyols de Buenos Aires. També estudiarem com s'agrupen, si interactuen i quines són les diferències que hi han entre els diversos centres, així com els motius de les diferències.

*PARAULES CLAU: immigració, llengua, identitat, relació entre comunitats, integració, país i comunitat*

### ABSTRACT

Many Valencian, Catalan and Balearic people emigrated to Argentina in the middle of the twentieth century, looking for new possibilities and with the aim of starting a new life. But to live as an immigrant is not a simple task, many things are left behind which make the stay in the chosen place not easy. That is the reason why the different Spanish centres could offer the immigrant a place where to keep their customs, speak their language and to socialize with other people from their same community, province or even town. We will analyze the Catalan, Balearic and Valencian centres which are found in Buenos Aires, which are the services that they offer to the immigrants and what is the relationship that exists among them and with the other Spanish centres in Buenos Aires, how they join together, if they interact, and which are the differences that they have and the reasons for them.

*KEYWORDS: immigration, language, identity, relationship between communities, integration, country and community.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Many Spanish people chose Buenos Aires as their destination to settle down and start a new life. Conditions in both countries led to that immigration. Spain, under Franco's regime, was trying to recover from the effects of a civil war and suffering the consequences and restrictions of a dictatorial government. In addition, Argentina was considered the land of opportunities, where immigrants were welcome, they could easily get a job and under Peron's government workers felt that their rights were respected for the first time. By and large Argentina could be considered in two different ways as regards immigration. On the one hand, as a society reasonably well integrated, where all immigrants had assimilated with no difficulty; and on the other, as a country where different cultures had coexisted in an autonomous way.

Most of these immigrants arrived with their families and decided to raise their children in Argentina. Others built their families in that country and tried to adopt themselves as far as it was possible to the new habits and customs of their new place of residence. But in almost all the cases they preserved that wish to keep their roots, their traditions. For this reason many Spanish centres and institutions were created, whose main purpose was to provide different services to the immigrants, such as health, employment and advice. But the most relevant service they managed to provide was to satisfy their different needs: the need to meet with other people from their own country, to listen to their native tongue, eat their traditional dishes and listen to their folk music. In short, for just some hours, to forget their homesickness and to feel they were not so far away from the things they loved and that they were missing so much.

There are many Spanish and regional centres nowadays in Buenos Aires, and most of them belong to the Federation of Spanish Associations. Their main purpose is to preserve the local and regional customs and to transmit them to the new generation.

As regards the Valencian and Catalan entities in Buenos Aires, we can find the Valencian centre *Falla valenciana El Turia*, the *Casal de Catalunya* and the Balearic House. We will see the features of each centre, the services that they offer to their members, and in particular, which is the relationship that exists among the three Valencian-Catalan speaking centres.

## 2. 'CASAL DE CATALUNYA' IN BUENOS AIRES

The Catalan centre was created on June 12<sup>th</sup> 1886 by a part of the Catalan community living in Buenos Aires, and later turned into the *Casal de Catalunya* that is located on 863 Chacabuco Street.

This centre is a living example of what the Catalan immigration to Argentina was like, and in particular to Buenos Aires. Throughout its history it was the shelter and point of reunion of the first Catalan immigrants. It also became a centre with a great literary, cultural and political activity in the city, and together with the *Casales* from Mexico, Santiago de Chile and Montevideo, it was the place where the post-war emigration could gather.

The building has more than five thousand metres square and it is found in the district of San Telmo, within the so-called “historic area” of the city.



The library, *Pompeu Fabra*, is provided with more than fourteen thousand books, some of them with an important historical value.



To keep the Catalan community informed, the *Casal de Catalunya* also has a radio program called The Catalan time (*La hora Catalana*) on the AM 890 station Radio Soberanía.



The *Casal* also offers as a means of information for the members the magazine *Anem-hi* which summarises the events and social life of the institution and all those who wish to participate can do it.

The *Casal* offers Catalan classes from April to December every year. The teachers who give the classes are graduated and officially recognised by the Ramón Llull Institute. There are five different levels and eventually there are

intensive courses for those people who have to travel and need to know the language more quickly. Such courses have twenty hours in a month.

In addition to the Catalan classes, the *Casal de Catalunya* offers tango classes, there is a choir, a choir for children, classical dancing, board games and drama classes.

All in all, we can appreciate that despite the many difficulties that these centres have to suffer, mainly economic, the *Casal de Catalunya* is making an incredible effort to keep the Catalan spirit alive in the city of Buenos Aires. They are constantly opening their doors to show exhibitions of art, concerts, lectures, football games, inviting the younger members to take part in the wide range of activities offered, presenting books, in brief, reminding the community that there is an important Catalan culture eager to be discovered by the public.

### 3. BALEARIC HOUSE IN BUENOS AIRES

The first centre where the Balearic people who settled down in Buenos Aires when they emigrated from the Isles participated was in Montepío de Monserrat, founded in 1857 and with a wide participation of Catalan people. Later on, at the beginning of the twentieth century, there were several other centres but divided according to the Isles they belonged to. Therefore, we can find the Mallorcan, the Ibiza and the United Menorca centres. After many attempts of creating only one Balearic entity, the 13<sup>th</sup> August 1905, 84 people met in a house on 117 Entre Ríos Avenue, owned by Juan Caubet. That is the moment when the Balearic House was born. The aims of its creation were the social aspects, such as assistance, education and sports, but without forgetting to deepen the values of the Balearic culture and tradition. All this for both, the Balearic people living in Buenos Aires and for those living in the Isles who might need help.



*A hundred anniversary*

*“1905 – 2005 – A hundred years of Institucional Balearic Presence in Argentina”*

Throughout the years, besides fulfilling their assistance objectives, the Balearic customs, traditions and dancing have always been well represented by the dancing group, the choir, the teaching of the language spoken in the Isles: the Catalan language, the creation of important drama groups, sport teams and the issue of newspapers for the spreading of news related to the Balearic Isles and the activities of the centre.



Different courses are offered in the Balearic House. Of course, there are Catalan classes, Balearic dances and choir, tango classes, knitting, gastronomy and the training of waiters, Italian, taekwondo, tapestry, yoga, computing, and so on.

#### 4. VALENCIAN CENTRES IN BUENOS AIRES

The first Valencian centre which existed in Buenos Aires and which received most of the Valencian immigrants was called *El Micalet* and was founded at the end of the nineteenth century. Many parties, paellas and dances were organised there with the aim of joining the Valencian community just arrived from Spain. It was attended by the immigrants and many Valencian couples were formed there, building therefore a new family in Argentina.

The main difference between the Valencian centre *El Micalet* and the *Falla Valenciana El Turia* existing today is that *El Micalet* was attended by Valencian people, therefore, Valencian was the language spoken, not Spanish, whereas in *El Turia* Spanish is the only language spoken, nobody speaks Valencian there, for the simple reason that no Valencian immigrants attend it, only their descendants, first or second generation and although in most of the cases they know Valencian, they do not use this language to communicate.

The Valencian centre *El Turia* was founded in 1951 and at the beginning many people went to both Valencian centres as the main objective of *El Turia* was to keep the activity concerning the *fallas* and the authorities of *El Micalet* kept a more active social life.



But soon after *El Turia* opened *El Micalet* closed and *El Turia* was the only Valencian centre in Buenos Aires which remained opened. The authorities of *El Turia* are trying to get all the files and records from *El Micalet* as this would allow them to know who were the first Valencian members, when they arrived in Buenos Aires, and all kind of information related to the immigrants, but up to now it seems to be a difficult task.

*El Turia* has a dancing folk group which is considered as a symbol of the presence of Valencia in Buenos Aires, as it transmits and spreads the true folk Valencian expressions.

There is a library and most of the books have been given by the Valencian Generality and by members or friends. We can find books, brochures, catalogues, posters and books in the Valencian language.

Should we consult the *Falla Valenciana El Turia* webpage, we will discover, to our amazement, full information about certain aspects of the institution. For instance, its history; the different *fallas* that were held during the fifties and sixties (and are not held anymore), the parties, the dancing folk group and the library. But were we interested in knowing about the different courses to attend Valencian classes, timetables, levels offered or bibliography needed, we would feel disappointed. Nothing is mentioned about it. If you needed information, you would have to phone. But always taking into account something: to phone on



Saturday mornings because that is the only day in which we can find somebody in the centre.

## 5. RELATIONSHIP AMONG THE DIFFERENT CENTRES

The question is: what is the relationship that exists among these centres located in Buenos Aires, which share the use and wish to transmit the Valencian and Catalan culture and language? There is practically no relationship at all.

We interviewed the presidents of the three institutions to know about their activities, the relationship among them and the reason for that. In the three cases, we were allowed to record the interviews.

The interview with Mr Jordi Font, president of the *Casal de Catalunya* at that moment took place on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2005. He expresses that they do not share any kind of activity with *La Falla* and they do not have any kind of relationship. This is due to political ideology, because, according to Font, the Catalans are and feel completely 'anti-Spain', they do not have any kind of contact with the other Spanish entities, and the Valencians do, there may probably lie the main difference. They keep a relationship with the Basques because they share the same feelings towards Spain and with the Balearics because of a question of affinity. The Catalans do not take part in any kind of celebration or event which concerns Spain. In the first place, in view of a question of principles, and secondly owing to tradition. For example, should you go to the *Casal de Catalunya*, you will find the Catalan, the Argentine and the European flag, but not the Spanish one. Those are their three flags. And it has always been like that. The Catalans do not belong to the Federation of Spanish Associations and do not participate in the exhibition of Spanish communities but they do take part in the one of Foreign communities. To their way of thinking, the Valencians have another profile, they feel first of

all Spanish and that is with no doubt the main reason for the absence of relationship between both communities.

With respect to the Valencian language, he defined it not even as a dialect or variety but just as a way of speaking; to put it briefly and clearly, an accent, simply an accent. He has never been technically interested in the Valencian language, but he considers it as another way of the Catalan speaking, as we can find in Tarragona or in Lleida, which are very similar to the Valencian, south Catalan, it comes a moment that they overlap and speak practically in the same way.

In the Balearic House we were received by Mr Miguel Vanrell, at that moment Secretary of the institution and nowadays the President of it, on 13<sup>th</sup> February 2009. When he is asked about the relationship that they keep with the *Casal de Catalunya* he answers that they do not have any kind of contact because they have completely different opinions about important matters. The Balearics are not separatists, they are Spanish. Generally speaking, they say that they are first Spanish, then from their isles, and finally from the town they come from. They keep a better relationship with the Valencians. The Catalans, the same as the Basques, do not belong to the Federation of Spanish Associations, and consequently, they do not interact with the other communities. Moreover, according to Vanrell, the last sad decision taken by Catalonia of opening diplomatic offices, one of them in Buenos Aires, does not benefit Spain.

As regards going to parties or celebrations, on one occasion the Balearics had to go to the Casal because one of their members from Menorca, a painter, exhibited her work there. Vanrell attended it as the Secretary, together with the President of the Balearic House, and they did not feel at ease there at all. With the *Falla valenciana El Turia* they keep a relationship because the Valencians are members of the Federation of Spanish Associations. The only drawback that the Valencian centre has is that it is almost always closed, and he is certain about it because he lives near the *Falla*. Concerning the language, he explains that

they do not feel part of the same linguistic community, and that the Balearics speak their own language (ignoring what is stated in the Statute of Autonomy of the Balearic Isles)

In the *Falla Valenciana El Turia* we interviewed the president, Mr Oscar Reis on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2005. He agreed that the relationship with the *Casal de Catalunya* is simply inexistent, owing to the fact that the Catalans, the same as the Basques, do not participate or interact with the Spanish community. He smiles when he explains that they do not have communication with the ‘Valencians of the north’ (obviously referring to the Catalans). But that the Valencians keep a good relationship with all the other Spanish communities in Buenos Aires.

As for the language, Reig claimed that they speak the Valencian from the AVL. Sometimes they disagree with some words because they consider them Catalan, but that does not mean that some words that are Catalan cannot also be Valencian. To his mind, all those words which are typically Valencian will gradually disappear if pure Catalan continues to be taught at school. Reig believes that the question about the differences between the Valencian and the Catalan language has more to do with the city of Valencia than with the people in general. And the political parties have used it as a point of discussion to take advantage of that situation. On the other hand we have the extremes, because if we consult the web page of the RACV (Royal Academy of Valencian Culture) it can not be understood that Blasco Ibáñez is not mentioned, and just because of the fact that he did not write in Valencian. There should be a more globalized and integrated approach.

## 6. CONCLUSION

We can observe that both the *Casal de Catalunya* and the Balearic House share some aspects as regards offering their services. Firstly, they are located

in the centre of the city of Buenos Aires, which means an advantage for their members when they want to attend the different events. Secondly, they are open every day, from Mondays to Saturdays, which eases the communication and integration with their members.

The *Falla Valenciana el Turia* does not share those advantages. It is not located in the centre of the city and is opened to the public only on Saturdays, which gives the impression, as the secretary of the Balearic House said, that it is always closed.

The *Casal de Catalunya* does not keep any kind of relationship with the other entities. The authorities of the *Casal* are not interested in keeping in touch with them and it is clear that neither are the ones of the *Falla* and Balearic House. Because of not belonging to the Federation of the Spanish Associations, the *Casal* is automatically excluded from their social life, excluded and we should make it clear, self-excluded.

Therefore, we can appreciate that there is not a complete integration among these regional centres. They ignore the similarities that they share and they outline the differences, as for example, the language. They highlight what the statute mentions as regards the own language, but they ignore the decision about two names for the same language.

Another important difference is the question of the identity. Whereas the Valencians and the Balearics feel identified first with Spain and then with their community, they are 'Spanish', the Catalans feel solely Catalans and leave Spain completely aside, even not letting a Spanish flag in their institution.

Strange as it may seem, what could have been a rich and profitable integration between communities which are so far away from their native land and which are so close geographically and culturally in Buenos Aires, there is only a division. They are divided by something deeper and more extensive than an ocean. There is an ideological and socio-political barrier that makes impossible any kind of project or approach between fellow citizens. And that

is something that we deeply regret and we truly wish this situation changed in the near future.

It would be wonderful that the three entities were attended by equally Valencians, Catalans and Balearics, that they shared their language, accepting their similarities and keeping their differences, that they enjoyed their traditions and customs, that they shared their dances, choirs and food, and all this would let them feel as if they were in their own homeland.

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