

A look at the past

The revolutionary career of Joaquín Pérez

Miguel Amorós

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*That's the way my life is,
stone, like you. Like you,
little stone
like you,
little stone, that maybe was made
only for a slingshot....*

León Felipe

I

Some people think that memory is nothing other than preparation for death, but for those who are not afraid of death such an arrangement will not disturb their serenity in their last moments, even in exile. Montaigne thought that *Nature has taught us to think about death only when the time comes to die*. It is better to look back, to the life of the past. The memory of the exiles is a return to their places of origin, but without bitterness, because those who were illuminated by ideals of freedom never felt defeated or disillusioned. They made good use of their lives, and to lose them was no big deal; they departed content, not weighed down with a lot of baggage, without worries. With a person's death, however, something of the past of the collective of which that person formed a part also dies, the class epic that should be preserved: it is the moral legacy of a generation of *anonymous fighters*. In the home stretch of life a powerful sense of the approaching end arises, and its rapid onset causes one to make haste to put down in writing the testament of the revolt, the legacy that one's natural heirs will receive. That is why, in London, between 1995 and 1996, I urged a mild-mannered, retired anarchist, Joaquín Pérez, to record his adventures and ideals in a memoir; his title was *Un Relato Patético* [A Tragic Account]. Someone close to him was dealt a blow by fate; this served as a warning and a spur, for *disasters happen when one least expects them*. On December 4, 1994, his companion Carmen suffered a stroke that left her paralyzed on the right side of her body, and although she could still hear, she could no longer speak. She was practically immobilized, walking only with the aid of a cane, and only for a few minutes at a time. Joaquín, who was 88 years old at the time, was having trouble with his eyesight and his legs would not always obey him, until the time came when he could not leave his home to buy what he needed at the neighborhood stores because he was afraid that he would get dizzy and collapse. Carmen had to do everything and now she had to take care of him, too, as his condition deteriorated. In the spring of 1998 Carmen was no longer able to walk. Luckily they were not alone, left to the mercy of nurses and homecare aides; their daughter Violeta provided invaluable help during those last turns of the wheel of life. During this bleak time he exchanged letters with his surviving comrades: Félix Álvarez Arenas and his son, Germinal, in Toulouse; Floreal Rodríguez, in Alicante; Francisco Piqueras, in Barcelona; despite the fact that *every three or four lines that I wrote my eyes clouded over as if with a fog, and I had to get up from my chair, in order to begin again later*. But if he could no longer rely on his head, his legs were even less reliable. It could be said without exaggeration that it was ideals, more than anything else, that sustained him.

Joaquín had devoted his entire life to the "idea", to anarchy, that social phenomenon that is manifested, as Elisée Reclus recalls, *wherever sincere men rebelling against imposed rules of any kind, voluntarily unite mutually to teach one another and to reconquer part of their lives and satisfy*

their own needs without masters. The “idea” gave meaning to his life and the Spanish Revolution of 1936 was its last appearance in history. Recalling the revolutionary civil war, *that open struggle worth remembering, which no one can erase*, and the experience of libertarian communism that he was there to enjoy in Pina and Gelsa, Joaquín rendered homage to *all those brave Spanish and foreign anarchist comrades who, each and every one, died for the freedom of the world.* Today’s rulers *do not want anyone to know that we workers defeated the military.* And thus, ignorance of these feats implies *a disgrace and a setback for young people*, those of today and those of tomorrow, the legitimate heirs of an example that *must serve as a beacon.* According to the stalwart judgment of Joaquín, the anarchists and anarcho-sindicalists were the vanguard of that revolution, which was ruined by the perfidy of a corrupt and dictatorial republican government, the counterrevolutionary and criminal activities of the communists, and, finally, due to the betrayal of the leaders of the CNT and the FAI, who not only beheld all this and remained silent, but collaborated: *the most suitable word I can find to depict this false step of the collaborationists is BETRAYAL.* The truth will out; everything must be known so that *the new generations will not allow themselves to be duped.* Joaquín asks himself, and answers with sorrow: *Did we realize we were carrying out the Revolution? No! A thousand times no! And the fact is that if we were to have realized it, another world would have dawned.* This failure was a millstone around the neck of the workers that they are still paying for: *We were so naive that we thought that we had everything in our hands and that now we were the tough guys. No one escaped the defeat of the Revolution. Maybe those of us who were at the fronts, fighting fascism with all our might. But in the rearguard neither the leaders nor the militants escaped; the former because they were traitors and the latter because they consented to the betrayal.* The libertarians surrendered right at the beginning by attributing all responsibility for this betrayal to the circumstances of the war, and then they could not stop. The sincere anarchists, trapped between the dictates of their ideology and the collaborationism of their leaders, did not react decisively enough. An accumulation of deceptions, acts of cowardice, betrayals and usurpations put an end to that incredible proletarian achievement. And then, *the worst punishment that could have been inflicted on the working class, is the fact that an occasion such as was presented to us by that unparalleled July 19th of 1936, might not ever arise again for another five hundred years!*¹

Fate had ordained that Joaquín would decide to write his memoirs too late, when, due to his advanced age, his memory was unreliable and his account of the past was riddled with gaps. Luis Monferrar, an occasional collaborator who charged Joaquín a fee for his work, could hardly help him, since he knew almost nothing about anarchism and the civil war. His friend, Piqueras, who was also old and ill, and who was just as much of an autodidact as Joaquín, could only transcribe his imprecise account and proofread it at home, without verifying the accuracy of the details or even situating them in their context. During the summer of 2003 I attempted to interview Joaquín at his home in the London neighborhood of Islington, but despite the pleasure he experienced in speaking of The Friends of Durruti, the effort involved in doing so was very painful for him and after a few minutes I had to leave him in peace. In any event, Joaquín left a trail of biographical details dispersed among the numerous lines that connected the six or seven episodes whose narration he considered essential. It must also be pointed out that his written accounts and inter-

¹ Joaquín Pérez Navarro, “Un Relato Patético” (manuscript). An English language translation of this “memoir” has been published: Joaquín Pérez Navarro and Luis Monferrer, *One Man’s War in Spain: Trickery, Treachery and Thievery*, tr. Paul Sharkey, Christie Books, London, 2013 (Translator’s Note).

views displayed an excess of rhetoric and an absence of introspection. Joaquín did not talk much about himself. Among anarchists, a certain kind of class modesty is not unusual, which has a tendency to situate the collective above the individual. The individual only matters as a representative of the social group to which he belongs. His childhood, his adolescent friendships, his doubts, his moral struggles, his feelings, his tastes, his loves, his personal sacrifices, etc., pertain to the private world, against which we should not trespass. The dramatic tension took place outside of private life, in society. With regard to this point, anarchist morality is light years ahead of bourgeois morality. In accordance with his convictions, Joaquín would speak only of his revolt against tyranny, of the collective drama in which he played a role, of the long exile as a militant that was his fate, and above all of “the idea”, the instrument of freedom for which nothing is spared, the lever of the social revolution and the real protagonist of his history. The pamphlet, “Towards a New Revolution”, by The Friends of Durruti, would be included in his “memoirs” and would appear in *Cenit*, the journal of the libertarian exile community in Toulouse, and would have served as his testament if his own account had not been written.

II

Joaquín Pérez Navarro was born on August 4, 1907 in Los Calpes, a village in the municipality of Puebla del Arenoso, county of Alto Mijares, province of Castellón. His parents, modest peasants, had three children: Joaquín, the eldest, a disabled younger son, and a daughter. The family possessed a few parcels of dry land that did not produce enough to support its needs, so its members had to work hard to get by. The death of Joaquín’s father was a serious moral and economic setback. Joaquín was only eight years old when he was forced to go to work: *in a little village like that you did not have a day off, you were always working with the men, with the horses, working on the land to provide for the household ... before I left the village for good I had already gone to Aragon to work as a harvester—with a team of men!—earning the same wage as the men, when I was fourteen years old, working from morning to night with a scythe, and they would not let me leave...*² The situation of the family was becoming ever more desperate and his mother decided to move the family to Barcelona. At this point, as so often in his memoirs, the date is uncertain: did they move to Barcelona in 1919, or was it in 1921? It was a big change; from almond orchards to narrow streets full of people, odors, noise, poverty.... They took an apartment on Miguel Ángel Street, in the Sants neighborhood. His mother and sister went to work as servants in bourgeois homes and Joaquín found a job as a laborer in the construction industry, working with bricklayers: *At the age of sixteen I was already a member of the CNT, a defender of the cause of the workers.* While still an adolescent, Joaquín joined the National Confederation of Labor sometime around 1923, probably the construction workers trade union. It was in that year that the conflict between the CNT and the employers reached a peak of intensity with the assassination of Salvador Seguí, the most popular figure in the history of the Catalan proletariat, if we except Durruti. Class trade unionism had become a major problem, so that the Catalan bourgeoisie, with the consent of the King, attempted to suppress it by encouraging the military to carry out a coup d’état. This meant the outlawing of the CNT and the persecution of its militants. It also led to split in the ranks of the CNT, because, in order to survive under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, some leaders attempted to adapt to its laws and institutions, and ended up establishing a *modus vivendi*

² Interview conducted by Luis Monferrer with Joaquín Pérez, London, July 1988.

with the liberal political forces. In the meantime, Joaquín got a job in the kitchen at Trink-Hall, a high-class bar and restaurant located on The Ramblas—at the corner of Conde del Asalto. One of his cousins, from the same village and almost the same age as he was—born in 1908—Marcelino Benedicto Navarro, also emigrated to Barcelona, where he got a job as a waiter, and the two of them struck up a friendship so close that only death would separate them.

In 1930, when Berenguer replaced Primo de Rivera, the CNT was once again legalized. The trade unions reorganized and Joaquín probably became a member of the gastronomic trade union, or the trade union of the food service industry, as it was also called. Released from police harassment, the trade unions presented their demands to the employers, not hesitating to propose strikes that annoyed their leaders, who had made deals with the politicians. Joaquín briefly recounts that he thought the “reformists” had their good points and their bad points. The Manifesto of the Treinta expressed the protest of this sector, and the situation was aggravated by the lukewarm support given by the reformists to the insurrection of the miners in Llobregat, and by the socialist vote to sentence the workers taken prisoner during the insurrection to deportation to Guinea. From that point on, *since 1932*, Joaquín became a “syndicalist of action” who was *always involved in all the clashes and strike movements that took place in Barcelona*. Juan García Oliver tells us that in 1932 he was establishing a structure of defense groups and committees for future insurrections, in which Joaquín was certainly involved. The leading man of action, however, with whom Joaquín was acquainted at the time, might not have been García Oliver, but Progreso Ródenas—the man who assassinated Bravo Portillo, a legend among libertarians, with a long history of clashes with the employers’ *pistoleros*, exile and life as a fugitive—for in 1932 and again in 1933 he met with his group at the home of his sister, Libertad Ródenas, the companion of José Viadiu, a syndicalist who was a very close associate of the assassinated Salvador Seguí. The group was composed of Joaquín, a person named Casas—perhaps Luis Casas Cazorlas, twenty years old, a bricklayer, born in Santa Cruz, in Almería—someone named Casanovas and José Pérez, a name that was too common to be able to identify this person with certainty. It is possible that his cousin Marcelino was also involved in this group, since he was later implicated in a weapons charge for which he was sentenced in April 1932.³ The organization of the defense committees was completed in December and Joaquín worked with the “sewer detachment” led by Ricardo Sanz, who was responsible for installing several oxygen tanks full of dynamite in the drainpipes under the General Office for Security, on the Via Layetana. In his book, Piqueras points out that the group planted *several bombs near the foundations of the Office of the Police Chief*,⁴ a mission that was undoubtedly connected with the preparations for the movement of January 8, 1933. The press, however, mentioned the throwing of bombs at the main door, which blasted an enormous hole in the building.⁵

The insurrection was aborted with the arrest of the revolutionary committee that was supposed to lead it. It took place anyway, leaving a trail of deaths and arrests. The massacre of Casas Viejas outraged not only the confederal militants, but also the constituencies that supported the government. On the other hand, the insurrectional dynamic merely widened the gap between the “*treintistas*” and the “*faístas*”, leaving the Organization practically split after the March Plenum. Despite the fact that nine thousand of their members were in jail, the trade unions continued

³ *La Vanguardia*, April 30, 1932.

⁴ Francisco Piqueras, *El luchador anónimo* [The Anonymous Fighter], self-published, August 2001.

⁵ See *La Vanguardia*, January 10 and 11, 1933.

to stage wildcat strikes, which Azaña attempted to break by transferring the responsibility for public order to the Generalitat. From that moment on, the Generalitat was the enforcer for the bourgeoisie, closing trade union offices and working class cultural centers, arresting militants and mobilizing strikebreakers. The CNT needed a display of force to fend off the wave of repression unleashed by the Government and the Generalitat with the support of the socialists. Piqueras relates that Joaquín, *whenever there was a rally, whether at the Monumental arena or the Olympia Theater, never failed to attend. He packed his lunch and went to listen to his comrades.* On September 22 he had a chance to attend the first such rally, at the Monumental arena, held to demand the release of the social prisoners. The attendance at the rally exceeded the expectations of the Organization, with eighty thousand workers packing the arena, demonstrating that the CNT was the only force that was really capable of confronting the bourgeoisie and the State. The speakers denounced the “Monarchist” laws promulgated by the Republic, such as the law of April 8, the law of Public Order and the law of Vagrants and Miscreants, calling for their repeal; they recalled that Durruti, Ascaso and Combina were prisoners in the jail at Santa María, and reminded the workers of the attack on the municipal council of Tarrasa and the peasants who were murdered at Casas Viejas; they denounced “*treintismo*” as cowardly and capitulationist, and criticized the great lie of bourgeois democracy, ready at any moment to transform itself into a dictatorship whenever the people rebelled. The speakers warned of the danger of an even more violent reaction as the bourgeois solution to the crisis, to prevent the proletariat from launching the revolution and establishing libertarian communism.⁶ Joaquín had to leave late that night, impressed. The rally was the ideal means to transmit the confederal strategy to the whole working class, and was as pedagogical as it was propagandistic. As for Joaquín’s group, it began to work on a plan to rescue the prisoners from the Modelo prison.

By October Joaquín had made contact with the Modelo prisoners who had conceived of the breakout plan, Adolfo Ballano and Pedro Campón, who had been arrested for a robbery at the Oro del Rhin café. Joaquín’s group had obtained a map of the Barcelona sewer system, which depicted the sewer lines that passed beneath the prison, and they soon began to work on digging a tunnel. The prisoners, for their part, began to excavate their end of the tunnel in a first floor cell in Cell Block Three, disposing of the soil by flushing it down the toilets or by depositing it in the prison’s garbage truck, or else they dumped it in an unused cell block of the prison. Meanwhile, Joaquín had become acquainted with those who would later form The Friends of Durruti Group: he already knew Pablo Ruiz; Antonio Pérez and José Paniagua were confidential associates of Progreso, who also introduced him to Jaime Balius, the editor of *Tierra y Libertad*. He later met Félix Martínez, a daring hold-up artist, and a skilled automobile driver, who on various occasions acted as the group’s chauffeur. The environment was tense; the political crisis had risen on the crest of the opposition to Lerroux, an old populist demagogue who was secretly allied with the agrarian right wing and the military conspirators. A victory for his party would have implied the rise of the Spanish fascism against which the CNT promised a revolutionary response that would bypass the voting booths. The electoral question was the most important point of friction with the political parties, because, with the elections just around the corner, the “Left”, the socialists, the communists and the *treintistas* feared that the abstentionist tactic of the libertarians would frustrate their parliamentary hopes. A huge rally would make everything clear. Once again, the CNT assembled the proletariat in the Monumental stadium, which was filled to capacity,

⁶ *Solidaridad Obrera*, September 23, 1933.

to speak of amnesty, abstention and the fascist threat. The rally was attended by one hundred thousand people, who came from every corner of Catalonia to listen to the speakers set forth their analyses of the situation and to proclaim the maximum demands of the workers. Durruti garnered clamorous applause, especially when he said that *there is another university, the one attended by those who get up at six in the morning; the factory where we learned to work; we are wise men with tools in our hands. We will not allow anyone to tell us that because we do not know how to read we do not have the right to emancipate ourselves*, to conclude with the statement that *the CNT is not going to conquer Parliament, it is going to conquer the factory*. Valeriano Orobón Fernández, the leading theoretician and strategist of the confederal Organization, also spoke at the rally, serving as a counterpoint to Durruti's address. He concluded his speech with the following maxims: *Those who vote, help the State; The CNT has won the elections outside of the ballot boxes; The social question is a question of force*.⁷ The other speakers did not disappoint the crowd and the rally ended with "Vivas" for the social revolution and libertarian communism. The morale of the working class rose to such a pitch that it could not wait to go on strike. On November 18, the day before the elections, with Joaquín trying to enlarge the diameter of the sewer and divert the flow of the water so that the escapees would not be drenched, the Transport Workers Trade Union went out on strike without notifying the Local Federation. Some trade unions then joined the strike and a few days later the department of Public Order of the Generalitat mobilized thousands of "escamots" [strikebreakers who were members of the paramilitary youth gangs of the *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*, the Catalan Republican Left] from among the *Juventudes de Esquerra* in order to keep the subways, the trolleys and the buses running. The clashes between the separatists under Miquel Badia and the syndicalists culminated in a hail of gunfire. Two years later, Badia would pay for his actions. On December 2, a "state of emergency" was declared throughout Spain in order to facilitate the transfer of power to the Lerroux government, the local offices of the CNT trade unions were closed and the daily newspaper of the CNT, *Solidaridad Obrera*, was shut down. The trolleys were militarized; they were driven by marines and escorted by strikebreakers and Assault Guards. The victory of the right wing parties forced the CNT to fulfill its promises, unleashing an insurrection on December 8 whose minor impact in Barcelona led to the abrupt end of the strike.

The embers of the workers uprising were hardly quenched when, on December 12, the mass prison breakout prepared by Joaquín's group took place. A total of fifty-eight prisoners escaped, men who had been convicted of sabotage, picketing, expropriations, involvement in the events at Tarrasa, and participation in the most recent insurrection. Some were outstanding anarchist activists, such as Justo Bueno and Lucio Ruano; others, like Alfonso Nieves, were writers associated with the FAI. Two escape routes were prepared, one by way of Calabria Street and another through a vacant lot next to the Maternity Hospital. The emergence of the prisoners from the sewer manholes in the street attracted the attention of bystanders and someone notified the Civil Guards, who were able to capture some of the prisoners as they exited the sewer and also arrested some totally innocent people who were at the scene as onlookers. The escape caused a sensation and the president of the Supreme Court himself, Anguera de Sojo, the future minister of the most backwards reactionary tendency, appointed a special examining magistrate and placed him at the head of the commission of inquiry. The guards of Cell Block Three and the

⁷ *Solidaridad Obrera*, November 7, 1933.

Prison Warden were relieved of their duties and put on trial.⁸ The four “*quijotes*” did not wait very long before they undertook a second adventure. The transport strike had failed, and one hundred and fifty trolley drivers and conductors had been fired, and the new employees had no recourse in the face of executives strengthened and protected by the authorities. The criticisms of the *treintistas* who pointed out the mistake of having linked the strike to the insurrection opened up old wounds.⁹ The Transport Workers Trade Union elected to utilize a tactic of sabotage, shootings and assaults on the company executives. Joaquín’s group was informed that the Director of the Trolley Company lived in a house located on the grounds of one of the trolley depots, in the Horta neighborhood, and the group decided to teach him a lesson. Only one member of the Peninsular Committee of the FAI was notified of the plan. The mission was carried out on May 26, underground, by way of the sewer system, which was Joaquín’s area of expertise, until the team reached the foundations of the Director’s house. They devised a kind of trolley to carry the dynamite, which was quite heavy. Once below the house, they planted a cauldron filled with thirty kilos of explosives, and, forty meters away, at the trolley garage, in the painting workshop, they left another cauldron packed with another twenty-five kilos of explosives, connected to the first bomb. They concealed the fuses and before leaving, they lit them. The explosions were felt throughout almost the entire city. Joaquín, who, on the day after the bombing, went to the trolley depot to see the results, beheld the roofs of the trolleys blown off, with some wrecked trolley cars still burning.¹⁰ As for the home of the Director of the Trolley Company, *it had collapsed as if by magic; his bed hung from the wall like a painting, which was certainly a source of entertainment for passersby*.¹¹ The Company, however, did not yield, and the sabotage campaign continued through the summer.

The CNT was exhausted and isolated, and the question of the “workers alliance” with the UGT and the schismatic reformist trade unions gave rise to bitter polemics. In Catalonia, basically due to the presence among the conspirators of representatives of the Esquerra, the CNT’s bitter enemy during its most recent battles, the Catalan Regional Committee abstained from participating in the insurrection of October 1934, while the Asturian Regional Committee of the CNT did just the opposite and joined the insurrection; yet the Catalan CNT was not thereby exempted from the subsequent wave of persecution. Nonetheless, in Barcelona, the trolley workers strike continued without concern for the political events of the moment; the trolley depots at the Plaza Lesseps were burned, various traffic signals were destroyed, and there were some tragic shootings. An action group stopped a trolley on Carolinas Street, ordered the passengers to evacuate the trolley, and then set it on fire, sending it careening through the Paseo de Gracia without stopping, until it crashed into the Telephone Exchange Building. Shocked by such audacity, Gil Robles, the Minister of War, declared a state of emergency. In 1935 the CNT had more of its militants imprisoned than all the other working class organizations combined and it started to become aware of the impossibility of carrying out the revolution without the help of other forces. The CNT therefore engaged in an effort to try to open up lines of communication with the other organizations, to which the CNT directed timid rectifications or clarifications, for the purpose of freeing the prisoners. Joaquín was always very careful and although Piqueras mentioned that he

⁸ *La Vanguardia*, December 14, 15, 16 and 17, 1933.

⁹ “Un comentario al conflicto del transporte público y urbano” [Observations on the Conflict in Urban Public Transport], *Sindicalismo*, December 6, 1933.

¹⁰ *La Vanguardia*, May 27, 1934.

¹¹ *Un Relato Patético*.

spent some time in the Modelo, if this was really true, it was merely a minor incident. The instability of the right wing governments allowed the CNT to emerge from clandestinity at the end of the year to demonstrate against the death penalty and to demand amnesty in several rallies at the Olympia Theater. At these rallies, Joaquín heard Durruti, Combina, Ascaso, García Oliver and Carreño reaffirm anarchist ideals and exhort the audience to prepare to meet the fascist threat, for, now that the “democratic” stage had concluded, the Spanish reactionaries were making great strides towards a military coup. In his neighborhood, Sants, Joaquín participated in the Defense Committee and awaited the time for action.

III

On July 19, *all the confederal and anarchist defense groups of the city of Barcelona spent two days without sleeping, patrolling and guarding all the strategic positions for entry into and exit from the city...* Armed only with clubs, pistols, shotguns and hand-made grenades, the men and women of the Committee of Sants, together with the Libertarian Youth of the neighborhood Cultural Center [*Ateneo*], 17- and 18-year-old boys, went to fight a company of infantry coming from the Pedralbes Barracks. The soldiers were equipped with a seven-inch artillery piece that they aimed at the groups of people that surrounded them, shouting, in order to deceive them, “Viva la República! Viva España!” When this unit reached the Gran Vía, groups of workers engaged them in an exchange of gunfire from the openings of the cross-streets on both sides of the avenue. It did not take long for the company of soldiers to come to a halt and then disperse, as they began to fraternize with the crowd and surrender their weapons. Upon its departure from the Paseo de Gracia, the armed workers from Sants turned left with their recently conquered artillery piece and arrived at the gates of a monastery, close to the Pedrera building, which they attacked. They found the monks hiding in the cellar, alongside recently buried corpses. Later, they returned to Sants to suppress a rebel stronghold in a church close to the trolley depot. When they entered the church the fascists had fled by way of a secret passage that led to the train tracks.¹² Without paying any attention to the deliberations of the meetings of the responsible committees and leading militants of the CNT and the FAI, the combatants of the previous day, almost without recovering from their fatigue, departed for Aragon with Durruti and liberated Caspe, Candosos, Bujaraloz, and Pina y Gelsa. Joaquín finally got to know Durruti! Behind the front, the dilemma of whether to declare libertarian communism or collaborate with the Generalitat was resolved in favor of the latter option. The complete victory of the workers had lasted only forty-eight hours.

The offensive was stalled at Osera. Durruti had received the order from Barcelona not to continue his advance until the columns proceeding up the left bank of the Ebro caught up to his units, but these columns were brought to a halt before the defenses of Quinto and Belchite. The Durruti Column devoted itself to organizing its units into centuries and platoons, and, in order to avoid the dangers of inactivity, the Column engaged in work related to the social question in the countryside. One of Durruti’s units would offer the land of the *caciques* [rich landowners] to the people so that they could cultivate it collectively. Joaquín played a significant role in the construction of libertarian communism in Pina y Gelsa, which had arisen from the mutual commitment and solidarity of the militiamen and the peasants: *There I was with my rifle, and when there was no danger, you saw me working alongside the peasants, reaping wheat, or pulling*

¹² Interview with the author, August 8, 2003.

weeds, or digging potatoes....¹³ The meetings attended by peasants and militiamen, the explanation of anarcho-communist principles, the allotment of tasks, barter, etc., was an experience which Joaquín participated in with great joy. Indeed, the militiamen of the Food Service Workers Trade Union formed a group they called “*Acción y Alegría*” [Action and Joy]. It was *composed exclusively of comrades*,¹⁴ that is, of anarchists, sixty-two in number, all of whom joined the Column before September. Its delegate was Antonio Pérez Valera, the comrade in arms of Progreso Ródenas, and its members included Joaquín Pérez and Marcelino Benedicto, according to a report signed by Antonio himself and the assistant delegate for statistics, Francisco Jorrín.¹⁵ The group was assigned to a post at the *Meandro de Belloque* [a bend in the Ebro River], near Kilometer 40 of the railway line, facing Quinto, from which its members kept watch on the movements of the enemy and dug two lines of trenches. In November the group had a total of ninety militiamen, manning the trenches and observation posts.¹⁶ Joaquín repeatedly claimed that he was a member of Century 21, which is consistent with the fact that the Fifth Group, to which that Century belonged, occupied the roads near the Ebro between Pina and Gelsa, and Belloque was between these towns. The Fourth Group was posted at Gelsa; its delegate was Pablo Ruiz, assisted by a committee of war featuring Progreso, Eduardo Cerveró, José Paniagua and the young José Alba Albert, a mechanic. Felix Martínez joined this committee later. Their comrades in action, José Pérez and Luis Casas, were also members of the Centuries. The International Group was posted on the other side of Gelsa, in Velilla. Given the position they occupied, the military efforts of these units were focused on Quinto, which they shelled with two mobile batteries of artillery when they had munitions. The shortage of arms and ammunition was cruelly felt in this sector and Joaquín recounts that Century 21, around November, sent a letter to Largo Caballero demanding arms. At that time, militarization was the Sword of Damocles that was poised over their heads. Most militiamen rejected militarization and Durruti, shortly before his famous radio address, signed a declaration echoing the general sentiment of his Column.

The CNT’s entry into the Government, with four Ministers, was a hard blow for the revolutionary militants: *organizations that had always fought against all kinds of governments with the same weapons that those governments employed against them—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—folded*. For Joaquín this capitulation discredited the libertarians in the eyes of the world’s revolutionaries: *I was always against that false step by which political collaboration was accepted. In just a few days, the CNT became just another party, subject to the “order and command” of the Government of the Spanish Republic*. And Joaquín angrily claimed that *by accepting political collaboration in the name of anarchism, it became quite clear that our reason for existence, our defense, was handed over, bound hand and foot, to our enemies, and all for a handful of Ministerial positions....* He spares no insults in his denunciation of the “Superior Committees of the Organization”: traitors, vultures, sellouts, altar boys.... It is understood that, once the CNT was inside the Government, the militarization of the confederal columns would not take long, especially after the death of Durruti. In Gelsa, they could not believe it; an army, even if popular, was still an army, and therefore a threat to the Revolution. Even if the war was won, things would stay

¹³ Interview conducted by Luis Monferrer.

¹⁴ Letter from Eduardo Cerveró to Diego Camacho, dated July 21, 1972, consulted at the Ascaso-Durruti Foundation of Montpelier.

¹⁵ Roster of the group *Acción y Alegría* in PS Aragon, documents of the Durruti Column, CDMH of Salamanca.

¹⁶ This information is derived from a report generated by Franco’s espionage service, “*Columnas rojas*” [Red Columns], AGMAV, 2N C.1299.

the same; the Revolution would be in abeyance. But returning to the rearguard was not a good decision if a way could be found to stay at the front: in Gelsa they spoke of irregulars and guerrilla units. But *for some comrades this idea caught their fancy, especially for those who aspired to obtain a high level officer's commission.*¹⁷ As the advocates of militarization, supported by the leading militants of the superior committees, gained ground, more and more militiamen deserted. Pressure was exerted, and bribes were offered; Joaquín was offered Captain's stars by a certain Martorell, who worked for the military committee of the Column, if he would join the new Division. He responded by saying that *you can take your stars and shove them up your ass*. The Fourth Group, the International Group and the Action and Joy Group published their counter-proposal for groups, infantry groups, squads and sections, in a leaflet dated January 8, 1937, Gelsa. The opinion of the majority opposed to hierarchical ranks was as follows:

It would be childish to think that militarization does not bear the seed of disaster, since it is subordination, negation, and, frankly, before we are soldiers we are men. If by chance we were to carry out an assessment of the past, we would see that with inferior arms we defeated a powerful modern army that needs foreign support to continue the war. The only thing we need is the offensive weaponry that will make victory possible.

We have an elevated concept of responsibility that is notoriously incompatible with that military mentality that is fatally leading us to a dictatorship, which as conscious and responsible men we must prevent. If we do not accepting militarization, it is because it conceals such an imminent threat that, if one does not perceive it, it is only because one exists under the influence of the war. Winning the war does not mean winning the revolution. If we win the war and we establish a basis for a new militarism, we shall fall into the vice of bourgeois society that in order to live has been compelled to construct the monolith of an omnipotent and tyrannical State.

For us, conscious men, militarism is the supreme manifestation of the State. And since we are against the State, we must therefore reject militarization.

*We accept military technology and strategy, but not militarization, regardless of its form.*¹⁸

The superior committees of the CNT and the FAI threatened the anti-militarists of the Aragon Front that if they did not change their attitude they would face the worst consequences. The militiamen in Gelsa responded on January 16 with another manifesto, which was also signed by the Action and Joy Group, in which they reaffirmed their positions and pointed out that the problem was not rooted in the organization, but in the lack of war materiel. And not even that problem would be guaranteed to be solved with militarization. They told the superior committees that their proposals for reorganization of the militias would vindicate them with regard to the historical responsibility they assumed by rejecting militarization.¹⁹ For Joaquín, Zaragoza was lost because *at the only opportune moment the necessary armaments were lacking*. Not only was it necessary to reject militarization, but the war, as well; he was in favor of *guerrilla war, working behind the enemy's lines, destroying bridges, highways, barracks, airfields, railroads, factories, power plants and gas lines, reservoirs, etc.*²⁰ They won the support of various Centuries of

¹⁷ *Un Relato Patético.*

¹⁸ "A los compañeros de las columnas confederales. Lo que opinamos la mayoría de los compañeros de la Columna Durruti" [To the comrades of the confederal columns. The position of the majority of the comrades of the Durruti Column].

¹⁹ "A todos los compañeros: A las columnas confederales. El problema de la militarización" [To all comrades: To the confederal columns. The question of militarization].

²⁰ *Un Relato Patético.*

the Column and a wide array of groups in the rearguard, and played their last card when their representatives appeared before the Plenum of Confederal and Libertarian Columns convoked in Valencia by the Iron Column. A procedural maneuver on the part of the National Committee prevented its delegates from speaking, and it was finally clear for all those present that the rejection of militarization was a lost cause. The Iron Column voted to return to the rearguard and hold a general assembly to examine the implications of the decision that had been imposed on them. The Fourth Group, the Action and Joy Group, about half of the International Group and a handful of Centuries were in favor of abandoning the Front, but not without taking two machine guns along with them. Joaquín, Marcelino and José Pérez boarded one of the two trucks commissioned to take them to Barcelona, penetrating the checkpoints manned by the communists by means of the simple expedient of driving right through them. If they were returning to the rearguard it was for the purpose of continuing the struggle, and therefore, instead of trying to convince everyone around them of the correctness of their position, they issued an appeal for regrouping in a new organization, one that would be faithful to the principles of the CNT and the FAI which their leaders had abandoned, an organization that they called The Friends of Durruti.

Joaquín confessed that the interest that informed the decision to return to the rearguard was that of warning the working people about the counterrevolution that, led by the communists, was advancing irresistibly in the face of the passivity of the Committees: *In ten months of war we lost ninety percent of what we had achieved on July 19.* In March The Friends of Durruti Group was formed, Félix Martínez was named President, and Jaime Balius, the only prestigious intellectual in the Group, was appointed to the position of Vice President. Balius placed the evening newspaper, *La Noche*, for which he served as editor in chief, at the service of the revolutionary cause. Joaquín pointed out that *over the course of twelve days more than six hundred comrades joined the Group—I am sure of this—all of them members of the CNT and the FAI.* The Friends of Durruti were *the mustard seed, the real revolutionaries of the indestructible temple, the most loyal devotees of direct action and social justice.*²¹ Its rising fortunes reached their limit in the May Days. It was the only opposition faction that had a program and had a grasp of what had to be done and what should not be done. Right after the attempt by the Assault Guards to seize the Telephone Exchange, the streets of Barcelona were once again filled with barricades. Joaquín, José Pérez and other comrades took a machine gun and departed from the office of The Friends of Durruti, at the corner of Las Ramblas and Hospital Street, in order to open fire at the Assault Guards who had occupied the Plaza de Cataluña. On the next day, four companies of the Republican National Guard, the former Civil Guard, *the most hardcore force in favor of tyranny*, left their barracks with the mission of occupying the radio station on Las Ramblas and neutralizing away any barricades they encountered along the way. They opened fire on anything that moved, whether or not they were insurrectionaries. Joaquín and his comrades, with a group from the Central Defense Committee, halted the progress of the company that was heading down the Gran Vía towards the Plaza de Cataluña, forcing it to retreat towards the Plaza de España. The others had been expelled from the Ronda and from the Paralelo and took refuge wherever they could. The seventy Assault Guards who tried to hide in the Cine América had to try to escape on foot and try to reach the Casarramona Barracks. On the night of May 4, Joaquín, Progreso and the people of Sants went to that Barracks with the intention of definitively neutralizing the Civil Guards. *After six minutes they broke out the white flag, and opened the doors of the Barracks.* The attackers arrived at the

²¹ *Ibid.*

guard post of the Civil Guards in an automobile. In the barracks they seized weapons and uniforms. Joaquín insinuated that forty-eight Civil Guards were executed in an abandoned lot, but if there were reprisals, it is clear that there were no more than twenty victims. On the morning of May 7, the Sants Defense Committee, obeying the directives of the superior committees, released two hundred thirty Civil Guards. It is to be assumed that the corpses of the executed Civil Guards were discovered, since the press pointed out that some of the bodies were hung up on display in a lecture hall in the Medical School. On May 10 they were buried.²²

Everyone knows how the May Days concluded; the leaders of the CNT and the FAI, especially the Government Ministers García Oliver and Montseny, shouted themselves hoarse with their repeated cries, Cease Fire! Almost by accident, the victory of the workers was transformed into a defeat. For Joaquín the treason of the Organization's leaders was obvious: *The "superior" committees of the CNT-FAI were betraying the revolution won by the people.* This is how The Friends of Durruti expressed it in a pamphlet distributed to hundreds of people, a pamphlet that would earn them countless accusations of being provocateurs, *incontrolados* and fascists. While the members of the POUM *acted as if they were members of the CNT*, Federica Montseny and García Oliver forfeited all their moral authority in the eyes of the militants. Joaquín thought that they were in the hands of Largo Caballero or the Soviets, and he even discussed with other comrades the advisability of taking a shot at the Minister of Justice. The popularity of The Friends of Durruti after the May Days began to be a matter of serious concern for the leaders of the libertarian movement who, fearing a split, disavowed them and attempted to expel them from the Organization, not without slandering them in every conceivable way. The Trade Unions reacted with studied ambiguity; on the one hand, they obeyed the cease-fire directives of the Committees; on the other hand, however, they refused to expel the members of the Group, protecting them from the rush to judgment on the part of the Negrín Government, which outlawed the Group. The situation would deteriorate, however, more rapidly than the revolutionaries expected. They quietly buried their murdered comrades; investigations were conducted concerning secret grave-sites, special tribunals were created, a Military Investigation Service was organized, the Control Patrols and the Defense Committees were dissolved, and the forces of public order multiplied in the rearguard; raids on libertarian headquarters proliferated, along with interference with the collectives, assassinations at the front, and the persecution of anarchists and members of the POUM.... Joaquín reflected bitterly: *With the May Events the Revolution was definitively lost, as a result of the fact that no one knew how to carry it out; the morale of the people dissolved and with it the fronts began to collapse....*²³ During the summer, the counterrevolution hardly paused for breath: The *cenetista* leadership renounced its principles and goals in favor of "unity" with the republican reaction and begged to be allowed to participate in the Government that presided over these defeats. The favored treasonous slogan, which originated among the Stalinists, was put into the mouth of the deceased Durruti: *We renounce everything except victory.* Communist domination was definitive, as the Party had almost absolute control over the crucial positions in the police and the army. In the meantime, the Modelo prison was filled with anti-fascists.

The Friends of Durruti, now driven underground, continued to publish its newspaper, *El Amigo del Pueblo*, and the groups of the Local Federation of the FAI, now in opposition to their Peninsular leadership, published a newspaper called *Anarquía*. The clandestine broadsheets had a wide

²² *La Vanguardia*, May 6, 8 and 11, 1937.

²³ *Un Relato Patético*.

circulation, saying what *Soli* [*Solidaridad Obrera*] would not dare to say. The prisoners imposed their own conditions in the prison and the Defense Committees, officially disbanded by the confederal leadership in June, were still organized and active. The same elements that prepared the provocation of May, conceived another provocation in September, to put the finishing touches on their work. On the morning of September 20, units of the First Assault Division showed up at the doors of Los Escolapios, in the Ronda de Ricardo Mella (facing San Pablo), on the pretext of carrying out a search. The former college and monastery was the headquarters of the Food Service Workers Trade Union, the Central Defense Committee, the Faros Cultural Center, and other libertarian organizations, and the real reason for the presence of the Assault Guards was clear: it was a pretext to attack the building with artillery and the tanks that the Guards brought with them. The occupants of the building prepared for resistance and the workers in the neighborhoods mobilized for battle. The rapid intervention of the Regional Committee of the CNT succeeded in preventing a working class counterattack, but the defenders of Los Escolapios did not agree to surrender. After hours of negotiations and pledges that there would be no arrests, pledges that would not be honored, the doors of Los Escolapios were opened up to the Assault Guards. They arrested twenty-six people, who were swallowed up by the legal system, while the most compromised escaped by way of a secret exit. Joaquín, who was in the building at the time, was one of the last to leave. In vain would one search for the least reference to these events in the official libertarian press. Toryho, an inveterate bureaucrat, controlled every line of *Soli*, and soon the paradoxical situation prevailed whereby, if one wanted to be informed about something, if you could not obtain a copy of *El Amigo del Pueblo*, you would have to resort to the bourgeois press.²⁴ *Tierra y Libertad* was not backward in the matter of bowing and scraping. From then on, Joaquín tried to do the best he could to avoid arrest—did he hide in a collectivized factory like Balias, Pablo Ruiz and Marcelino Benedicto? We do not know, but he did tell us that he never returned to the front, to conceal himself in a libertarian unit, as many did in order to escape the persecutions. He remained in the rearguard until the end of the war.²⁵

IV

After the assault on Los Escolapios by the forces of order, we lose Joaquín's trail for fourteen months. What did he do besides go into hiding? The only thing we know is his reference to certain mysterious "missions" in Barcelona and elsewhere. Did he work for one of the "information and coordination" committees that emerged after the suppression of the defense committees? Did he join an action group to support the prisoners? We can only speculate that he remained in contact with The Friends of Durruti, that he was armed, and that whatever he did, he did it secretly. Joaquín did not live in the city, but came and went. In November 1938, he was arrested *while passing through Barcelona, by a squad of policemen of every type, under the command of the Special Police Command, which was itself composed of the most various police agencies,*²⁶ a reference to the political diversity of its components, some of which were from the CNT, even including the "chekists". He did not recall whether the headquarters of this Command was located

²⁴ In fact, *ABC* and *La Vanguardia* published the decree of the Interior Minister in their September 22, 1937 issues; *La Vanguardia* reported the arrests and the discovery of arms and uniforms in its September 30, 1937 issue.

²⁵ Interview with the author, August 8, 2003.

²⁶ *Un Relato Patético*.

on Córcega Street or Provenza Street. At 389 Provenza Street, between Nápoles and Sicilia Streets, there was a barracks of the Assault Guards that may have housed “special” cells working for the Soviet GPU or the SIM. At 304 Córcega Street, on the fourth floor, on the upper level, there was a much-feared cheka of the SIM that was responsible for certain “disappearances” of anti-Stalinist communists and anarchists, denounced by Katia Landau that same year.²⁷ We think it was the latter location, since Joaquín was tortured and that was one of the house “specialties”. After two days of torture, when he was in very bad shape, he was taken away in an open truck, since there was no way he could escape, and brought to the Palace of Justice, where a military tribunal sentenced him to death *in its first and then its second deliberations*. A sentence for the illegal possession of arms was not usually so severe, although now and then the special tribunals of the Assault Guards would pronounce the ultimate penalty for the most trivial offenses. If the military court directly intervened, this was because Joaquín was declared to be an outlaw because he was a fugitive and a deserter, and this is what entailed the maximum penalty. His cousin Marcelino, concerning whom we know that he lived on Provenza Street and that he was married, had been discharged on March 12 from his job at a factory where he was working in order to be mobilized for the army.²⁸ Joaquín, who was one year older than Marcelino, must also have been served with his draft notice. At that time the rearguard was full of people who had fled from the fronts or who did not comply with their draft notices. No one was eager to go to the slaughterhouse for a government that they detested. The SIM was for the most part employed in the hunt for deserters and fugitives, but it did not usually torture them more than was necessary. This excess was reserved for the enemies of the State and of the Soviet Union. Was Joaquín one of these enemies? Joaquín did not set the record straight in the least by claiming that his only crime was that he “was an anarchist”, but Piqueras provides us with the key to the case by saying that in the cheka he was asked by *two guards and the commanding officer, with two flashlights pointed right into his eyes, if he had participated in the preparations for an attempt on Negrín’s life*.²⁹ All hated governments react with extreme violence to their own failures, since the latter reveal their weakness and invite retaliation. As a response to the defeats and in order to prevent a feared proletarian uprising, Negrín was trying to militarize all of society, eliminating ordinary justice and proclaiming martial law. The agents of the SIM themselves, assisted by the communists, had fabricated an assassination plot allegedly planned by POUM militants working with Franco’s secret services. The headquarters of the republican government was located in the building at the corner of Mallorca Street and the Paseo de Gracia, and Negrín always left this building with a powerful escort, against which the plot was supposed to be directed. This pretext served to justify a general strategy of intimidation, with checkpoints at every corner and systematic searches of houses and apartments. The headquarters of the CNT itself, on Vía Durruti (previously known as Vía Layetana), was raided in a search for weapons. The catastrophe of the Battle of the Ebro only increased the paranoia of power. Joaquín was captured at the worst possible time.

During the days he spent in the Palace of Justice, Joaquín met three “comrade” Assault Guards, all of them found guilty and one condemned to death. Before they were arrested they had served at the Castillo de Montjuich, a sinister place where those who were sentenced to death were sent, and that is where they thought Joaquín would be going. In fact, that was where he was destined

²⁷ Katia Landau, *The Assassins of the Spanish Revolution*, published in French in 1938.

²⁸ File in PS Barcelona 75, CDMH of Salamanca.

²⁹ F. Piqueras, *El Luchador Anónimo*.

to go. He arrived there *handcuffed to the Assault Guard who was condemned to death—he was just the way I would like the Assault Guards to be! The poor man cursed the day that he went to work for the State.* While passing through the various offices to be searched, as the guards had advised him, he was presented to the warden, a member of the SIM and the CNT, who was not at all interested in his membership in the CNT, responding laconically: *I am only doing my duty,* and he was searched from head to toe. The jailor who brought him to the cell block at gunpoint was also a member of the CNT. When he entered the “tube”, *a group of comrades came over and embraced me. They were comrades whom I had known for some time and were entirely trustworthy. After the first emotional greetings were exchanged, I asked them to explain why they were there and they responded: All we know is that we are here, some as “suspects”, and others as “dangerous”; and, it would seem, condemned to death. With great sorrow they told me about how they were treated by the comrades of the CNT—treatment that I would soon be able to verify firsthand. No one could explain how, after so many years of the struggle for freedom, after so many shared sacrifices before and during the war, we were being guarded by jailors who, telling us that they were members of the CNT, pistol-whipped us or put us up against the wall. We had surrendered our victory to our enemies and these people were exacting their vengeance on us in the most cowardly fashion!*

The fascist prisoners were treated quite differently, and their cells were much cleaner. *After all, they were fascists and we were dangerous anarchists!*³⁰

One of these “dangerous anarchists” was José Alba, called “el Nano” [the kid] by the other prisoners, a comrade who had been a member of the war committee of the Fourth Group in Gelsa, along with Progreso and Pablo Ruiz. A member of the Metal Workers Trade Union, was a member of The Friends of Durruti right from the start. Later, perceiving the collaborationist stance of the CNT’s leadership and its toleration by the membership, he left the Organization. The increasingly repressive nature of the republican government, a government supported by certain responsible committees that looked the other way while the libertarians were being persecuted and assassinated, caused him to lose all hope for any possible reaction on the part of the proletariat, which then led him to think only about himself, breaking all the rules like a good enemy of authority. The hold-up at the Born market provided him with a substantial amount of loot, around half a million pesetas, but they caught him. He entered the Modelo prison on October 12 and, having been condemned to death, he was transferred to the citadel.³¹ The three other comrades that Joaquín mentions were a certain Camillo or Canillas, Guerra and Manuel, victims of a police conspiracy. They lived in the ramshackle district of Can Tunis, a working class neighborhood with a long libertarian tradition, segregated and hardly accessible to the police, where the intense class-based sociability still permitted a degree of freedom of movement unthinkable anywhere else. In its bars, implacable militants, counterfeiterers and thieves got along peaceably, all of them outlaws and consequently public enemies in the eyes of the authorities. The borders that separated them from each other, during times of skepticism and desperation, were more than just blurred. These three comrades, Manuel Asensio, Francisco Pérez “Guerra” and José Alcaraz “Canillas”, had been implicated in involvement in a hold-up by an informer in August. The police fabricated some evidence and arrested the witnesses for the defense, while the judge overlooked the contradictions and inconsistencies in the testimonies of the police agents and their informer. They were

³⁰ *Un Relato Patético.*

³¹ Pelai Pagès, *La presó Model de Barcelona. Historiad’un centre penitenciari en temps de guerra (1936–1939)* [The Modelo Prison of Barcelona. The History of a Penitentiary in Times of War], Publicacions de l’Abadia de Montserrat, Barcelona, 1996.

sentenced to death in November and the Minister of Justice received the “notification” from the president of the Generalitat, Companys. In their final statements before they were executed, one of them, Alcaraz, *repeatedly proclaimed his innocence, and that the whole frame-up was bullshit, that it was a deliberately planned act of vengeance to punish them for having belonged to the Control Patrols.*³² In the same cell block there was a fifth man sentenced to death for another crime, Ricardo Martínez, whom Joaquín forgot to mention. They enjoyed their last few days together. The day they were taken to be executed, a fateful December 23rd, Joaquín requested permission to leave: *In the custody of a group of hitmen, we embraced to say goodbye forever, shouting with all our might, Viva la anarquía! Their last words were: Only a few hours of life are left to us; we request that you tell our comrades and the whole Organization that we died thinking of our beloved ideals as we shouted “viva la anarquía”.*³³

Alcaraz wrote a final letter to his parents, *telling them that they should not be ashamed of their son; he wrote a letter to his comrades at the Sangrà factory asking them to never allow anyone, for any reason, to ever speak ill of him, that, having come into the world, he will leave it, having given everything to the revolutionary cause.*³⁴

The following disgraceful and cruel little note appeared on the following day in *La Vanguardia*: *Yesterday, within the compound of the Citadel of Montjuich, five robbers were executed by firing squad after having been sentenced to death by the Tribunals.*³⁵

During the final offensive staged by Franco’s troops, the prisoners of Montjuich remained behind bars, without any knowledge of what was happening outside the prison, with the “nationalist” soldiers at the very foot of the mountain. *The guards in the citadel—communists, republicans and even some so-called “anarchists”—had fled the day before, leaving a large number of prisoners locked up in the cells of the “tube”, at the mercy of the victorious Franquistas, so they could shoot them at their leisure. They were unable to communicate with each other but they broke down the doors and bars as they made their way to the main courtyard and the gates of the citadel. Together with many other prisoners, I managed to escape in the confusion. Everywhere, we heard gunfire and cries of pain amidst the evacuation of Barcelona. Lost in an avalanche of humanity I was able to reach the outskirts of Barcelona.*³⁶ On foot, along with a few others who, like him, were going cross country, walking by day and night out of sight of the highways, careful not to allow themselves to be surprised by any fascists or even by a member of the SIM, Joaquín reached Figueras within seven days. He ate the few coarse vegetables he found on his journey, herbs and sprouts and things like that. The city had been shelled and the railroad was still out of service. The people in their thousands were on the move. After one more day of walking towards Port Bou he reached the French border, with his shoes in tatters, accompanied by soldiers who were still carrying their rifles, and he was then led by gendarmes directly to the refugee camp of Argelès-sur-Mer. The camp consisted of narrow strip of sandy beach surrounded by barbed wire, guarded by Senegalese soldiers. There, thousands of people of all ages and conditions were packed like sardines, fed with lentil soup and a little rice and chick peas. Because there was not enough fresh water for everyone, the refugees improvised a water filtration system so they could drink the seawater.

³² Pere López Sánchez, *Rastros de rostros en un prado rojo (y negro)* [Traces of Faces in a Red (and Black) Meadow], Virus editorial, Barcelona, June 2013.

³³ *Un Relato Patético.*

³⁴ Pere López, *op. cit.*

³⁵ *La Vanguardia*, December 24, 1938.

³⁶ *Un Relato Patético.*

Many people died every day. Joaquín, without even a rag to cover himself, had to sleep for a week out in the open. He made contact with other comrades of the CNT who were trying to organize in the camp, but we do not know if he participated in the attempt to create a “Franco-Spanish” group of The Friends of Durruti within the camps. They were informed that Casas and José Pérez, who had preferred to remain in Barcelona, had been shot.³⁷ After spending ten months in that miserable warehouse of the vanquished, he was brought to the Barcarès camp but he had to remain there for only a short time, because he volunteered to work in a labor squad that was going to build a dike at the port of Brest, on the Atlantic coast.

Joaquín was put to work in a quarry as a drill operator, but within a few days, after passing a medical examination, he was sent to work at the bottom of the sea, in a caisson filled with compressed air, laying tons of cement. He had been in Brest for two months when war was declared and the Germans invaded France. Towards the end of May of 1940, a flood of French and English soldiers were heading towards the port of Brest, which was full of ships sent to evacuate them. If the Germans were to reach Brest, the situation would have been very ugly for the refugees. The managers of the works promised that nothing would happen to them, but it was quite certain that their fate would be otherwise. With the Germans on the verge of entering Brest, Joaquín and a group of twenty Spaniards quit work and went to the docks. They approached a warship without knowing either its nationality or its destination and jumped onto its deck. The gap they had to leap across was about five meters, and very good form was required for this feat. Almost all of them made it, and then they concealed themselves under some tarpaulins. The ship set sail, and when it reached the open ocean, the stowaways were discovered and given something to eat. The ship docked at Southampton a few days later at high tide. They were allowed to disembark; then, they boarded a bus that took them to the Crystal Palace. Their treatment at the hands of the British was magnificent, and within a few days Joaquín was given a place to live in a house with an English family. The government gave him an identification card and granted him a small stipend so he could meet his basic needs, but it did not allow him to seek employment until several months had passed. One day in September, he was caught out in the street by the famous German Blitz. From then on, and over a period of nine months, London was bombed daily by the German air force. As a result, the refugees obtained jobs removing debris from bombed houses. It was Joaquín’s first job in England; later, in Regent’s Park, he worked on a crane excavating a tunnel for the subway. Finally, he got a job in a hotel; for several years he worked at the restaurant in the Berkeley Hotel in Mayfair. After so many hard ordeals he finally obtained a stable position, perhaps for the first time in his life. He was more fortunate than most of those who fled from Spain and from Franco. When the Second World War came to a close, he felt no temptation to leave the British Isles.

In December 1941, there was a group of eighty *cenetistas* in the United Kingdom, and among them were some outstanding militants like the former Minister, Juan López, the former member of the National Committee, Delso de Miguel, Mariano Valle (another former member of the NC), Pablo Polgare (from the Peninsular Committee of the FAI), Suceso Portales (of the Mujeres Libre), and the *madrileños* Cabañas, Villanueva, Gerardo López, Salgado, Falomir, Acracio Ruiz and García Pradas, most of them with a collaborationist past. There were also people who were close to

³⁷ For evidence indicating that several people named Casas and José Pérez were executed at the Fossar de la Pedrera, see: José Corbalán Gil, *Justicia, no venganza. Los ejecutados por el franquismo en Barcelona (1939–1952)* [Justice, Not Vengeance. Executions under Franco’s Regime in Barcelona], editorial Silente, Guadalajara, 2008.

Joaquín such as Marcelino Benedicto and Francisco Alba (José Alba's brother). The Hungarian Polgare, whose real name was Pal Partos, had a background in the communist left and was very close to Karl Korsch. Joaquín got to know him while serving on the Aragon Front and struck up a close friendship with him that lasted until his suicide in 1964. The exiles in England, as was the case with the other exiles, tended to be divided between those who advocated working with the other republican forces, and those who supported a return to the apolitical and anti-state principles and tactics of classic anarchosyndicalism. There was, however, unanimous agreement in favor of avoiding relations with the Negrinists and communists, since many of the exiles had been members or supporters of the Casado Junta. That is why the first joint declaration of the Spanish Diaspora in England, which was, furthermore, signed by Joaquín and Marcelino, condemned García Oliver's proposal to open up lines of communication with those elements.³⁸ The former anarchist García Oliver had already aroused suspicion earlier by proposing the founding of a political party. The polemic revolved around the participation of the CNT in the republican governments in exile. Because of the victory of the *Montsenistas*, who favored a return to ideological purism, at the 1945 Paris Congress, the libertarian diaspora was irremediably divided. Joaquín was certainly opposed to any libertarian presence in governments, and he was much less in favor of fighting for the Bourbon monarchy or the "democratic republic". In one of his first articles, entitled "Crítica de actualidad" [Critique of the Present Situation], dated August 1947, he engaged in a polemic with J. J. Doménach, one of the worst bureaucrats in the Catalanian Regional Committee and a bitter enemy of The Friends of Durruti. In another article from March 1948 bearing the title, "Pido una previa" [I Demand Preliminary Clarification], he demands that *every militant must clearly and cogently define his position and be a faithful reflection of the cause that we are working for*, and denounces the ambitious scramble for positions within the movement, the "Cabinet Cuckoos" and the "political swindlers", the deluded collaborationists of the past who are demanding executive positions: *The anarchist militant is a synthesis of reason and conviction, and on this road, we are adults who know how to guide our steps along the path of what is good, of progress and humanity, and not along the devious ways along which they, the poor devils, want to lead us*. In any event, once the community of exiles was convinced that the great powers that had defeated Hitler did not have the least intention of overthrowing Franco, the activism and the hopes of one after another faction melted away like a sugar cube in hot water. The European economic situation was very favorable, so that everyone was able to settle down and enjoy their private lives with well-paid jobs. In 1953, Joaquín met Carmen, Marcelino's sister-in-law, who had just arrived in London, and he married her. They had one daughter. In 1960, the Confederal Nucleus of Great Britain sent delegates to the Reunification Congress in Limoges, but the unity achieved by this meeting, which was only skin deep, did not last very long. When Joaquín succeeded Acracio Ruiz as secretary of the Commission for British Relations, the nucleus had only about a hundred aging and weary, albeit committed, militants. Joaquín and Marcelino managed the George and Dragon Public House, in the South Kensington neighborhood, until their retirement.

Historically, the Spanish libertarian movement was worn out, incapable of overcoming the contradictions that tore it apart during the civil war and the Franco regime. When the Franco regime was ready to hand over the reins of power, and the opposition was jockeying for positions in the new government, the anarchist exile community was incapable of formulating its own

³⁸ *Solidaridad Obrera*, Mexico, October 18, 1942.

alternative beyond the repetition of the old schemas and ideological commonplaces. Basically, Joaquín assumed responsibility for the correspondence of the exiles, for propaganda mailings and for aid for libertarian prisoners who were barely surviving in Franco's jails. He sent hundreds of pounds to help the prisoners. Among his papers, a few boxes of documents that never made it to Amsterdam in 1939 along with the rest of the confederal archives were found. It was most likely Polgare who brought them, since he participated in the efforts to transfer the archives of the CNT and the FAI to the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. These documents include confidential CNT reports on fraudulent arms purchases, the chekas of the SIM and the Soviet spies, on communist proselytism in the army, on the assassinations of militants at the fronts, on particular incidents like Turón or the 153rd Mixed Brigade, etc. Scandalized by what he discovered while reading these documents, Joaquín did everything he could to publicize these reports, sending copies to all the offices of the exile groups and even to Spain, but with meager results. This information was a public secret, denounced long ago and unfortunately forgotten; on the eve of the death of the dictator, the CNT was legalized and the communist party dominated the ranks of the opposition, which is why few CNT members were prepared to muck around in the past and risk being called provocateurs. Franco's death also marked the end of forced exile, although Joaquín did not return to Spain. For those who once excelled as men of action, the era did not allow them to play a leading role anymore. One by one, the news of the death of his old comrades in arms arrived: Progreso, Balias, Pablo Ruiz, Marcelino.... But the idea, like a flower withered by a long, hot summer, still preserves its scent. It occurred to Joaquín that the time had come to tell his story.

Joaquín Pérez Navarro died on August 21, 2006 in London. His companion Carmen had died two years earlier. In accordance with his express desire, his library was donated to the Kate Sharpley Library, and his corpse was draped in the red and black flag. His body was cremated on August 30. The daily newspaper *The Guardian* published a brief obituary.³⁹

³⁹ Nick Heath, *The Guardian*, September 18, 2006.

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Miguel Amorós
A look at the past
The revolutionary career of Joaquín Pérez
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