

Mikel Peciña

### ISAAC PUENTE, ANARCHIST DOCTOR

(First published in the review *Muga*, No 5, April 1980)

Isaac Puente's name usually crops up in virtually every history dealing with anarchism and the Spanish civil war; he is regarded as one of the most influential anarchist writers during the Second Republic, on the basis of his celebrated pamphlet *Libertarian Communism*, which was the inspiration behind the final resolution passed at the CNT congress in Zaragoza in May 1936. Occasionally there is a reference to Puente's coming from Vitoria, his being a doctor or physician, his involvement in Zaragoza as a member of the CNT's Revolutionary Committee at the time of the December 1933 uprising and to his having been shot during the early days of the 1936 army revolt.<sup>1</sup>

This is pretty much all that can be found about him in books. Given that Gómez Casas in his *History of the FAI* characterizes him as the theoretician par excellence of libertarian communism, this strikes us as rather little. But, odd though such concision might appear, and in spite of the advances in history writing in recent years, we still know rather little about the life stories of high profile figures. In addition to that facet of him that was an intellectual in Spanish anarchist ranks, there was also a humbler, but no less significant fact that he was a doctor and activist operating in Álava province. Which explains, we believe, where these lines are of interest to the history of anarchism in the Basque Country.

#### **Isaac Puente (1896-1936). Biographical details**

Isaac Puente Amestoy was born on 3 June 1896 in Las Carreras (in the Abanto and Ciérvana township) into a Carlist family. His father, Lucas Puente García, a highlander born in Bustasur, a village near Reinosa, was an officer in Don Carlos's army and had been forced to cross the border in 1876 when it was defeated: Isaac's mother, Josefa Amestoy Hermoso de Mendoza, was born in Lanciego (Rioja-Álava). In 1911 the Puentes settled in Vitoria where first Lucas and then his oldest son, Federico, worked as pharmacists.

Isaac attended the Jesuit College in Orduña as a day pupil for the first four years of his baccalaureate studies, staying in the home of his godfather, the notary Isaac Uriarte. He spent his final two years of his baccalaureate schooling at the Vitoria Institute. In 1913-1914 he began his medical studies in Santiago de Compostela; his further studies continued in Valladolid, at which point his career was interrupted in 1918. Called up for military service, he was discharged early. He then started to practise as a doctor in Cirueña (Logroño), but after a short time, in January 1919, he secured a position as town doctor in Maestu in Álava. From 1919 up until his death, he worked as a country

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<sup>1</sup> Even though Puente had been born in Vizcaya and may well have been shot in Pancorbo, some writers reckon that he was born in Vitoria or somewhere else in Álava (See for instance the biographical note by Juan Ferrer in the August 1969 republication of '*Libertarian Communism*') whilst others have him being killed by the army in Logroño (Hugh Thomas has written that Puente "was killed by the Army in Logroño", p. 299, *Estudios sobre la República y la Guerra civil*, Ed. Ariel) More recently published books have adduced fresh information: we might cite Baltasar Porcel's *La revuelta permanente* (Ed. Planeta), where Juan Ferrer recounts previously undisclosed details of the Peiró-Puente polemic.

doctor in Maestu and the other twenty villages in the comarca. On 12 May 1919, Isaac Puente married Luisa García de Andoin; the marriage produced two daughters Emeria and Araceli.

And now, having set out the usual biographical particulars, let us now have a look at Puente's activist and political commitments.

### **Anarchism in Vitoria**

Vitoria, the setting for Pío Baroja's novel *The Priest of Monleón*, might not appear a likely location for anarchist ideals to prosper. Even so, in spite of the tradition that depicts the capital city of the province of Álava as a priest- and military-ridden city, there are signs of anarchism in its past. In *The Militant Proletariat*, Anselmo Lorenzo recounts that in 1870, shortly before the proclamation of the First Republic in Spain, he spent two months living in Vitoria and staying in the home of Manuel Cano and that during his stay there, together with a bunch of workers to whom he had explained the revolutionary aims of the International, he launched an Amalgamated Trades Section. Four decades after that, one of the affiliating associations that helped launch the CNT at the Palace of Fine Arts in October 1910, was a Vitoria-based "painters' and decorators' union". During those early years of the CNT debates between socialist and anarchist speakers were commonplace. Among those featured in such debates in Vitoria were Ovejero and *El Noi de Sucre* (Salvador Seguí) and Francisco and Tomás Herreros.

On 1 March 1920, the Sindicato Único of Vitoria opened its doors for business at 47 Calle Zapatería, after registering its statutes with the Civil Government. Its launch meeting was attended by Juan Aranguren (secretary), Alfredo Donnay, Juan Murga, Daniel Orille, Vera and others. Between 1920 and 1923, craftsmen (carpenters and cabinet-makers) and labourers (from the Ajuria Metalworks or from La Azucarera – Francisco Ascaso was employed by the latter) began to align with the Sindicato Único, at the expense of the UGT and the Catholic Social Centre. In *The Spanish Workers' Movement 1886-1926*, Manuel Buenacasa mentions a 2,000-strong membership. Against the backdrop of this expansion by the CNT, anarcho-syndicalists from Vitoria came into contact with Isaac Puente.

In all likelihood, Puente's interest in anarchism grew out of his meeting with Alfredo Donnay and Daniel Orille. Alfredo Donnay was an activist well known for his fondness for poetry and his 'Social Blemishes' column in the Bilbao-based *Solidaridad Obrera* was very popular. He worked at Sixto Arrieta's furniture factory in Virgala Mayor, a village near Maestu, from January 1921 to February 1922. Donnay's wife, a martyr to arthritis, was treated by Puente and this paved the way for dealings between the poet and her doctor. As for Daniel Orille, a young metalworker, let us reprint his own testimony:

"I got to know Puente during the construction of the Vitoria-Estella railroad. It was on a Sunday: I and another comrade were making our way on foot from Vitoria to Maestu for the purpose of organizing those working on the line and collecting dues payments from the ones already organized. Along the way we ran into a hunter and asked him about the town: he told us that we were on the right road and walked along with us ... Shortly after that we spotted Puente who brought us to an inn where the workers on the line were gathered: after placing the stamps on their union cards and handing out some propaganda, we were invited

by Puente to visit his home and it was there that we told him that we were from the CNT and had our own Sindicato Único in Vitoria. As we parted he said to us: 'I will drop by to see you this Wednesday.' And so he did: that Wednesday he showed up at the Calle Zapatería premises and caused a bit of a panic; with that hat on his head, folk mistook him for a policeman ..."<sup>2</sup>

Work on the Vitoria-Estella rail line started in August 1920: Daniel Orille was due to visit Maestu on a propaganda tour in the autumn of 1921 or 1922. By 1923 Isaac Puente was already writing for some anarchist reviews: which suggests that he first dipped his toe into anarchism thanks to that meeting with the CNT personnel from Vitoria and two years before the Primo de Rivera dictatorship came along. Prior to 1921-1922 Puente does not appear to have been active in any other organizations, although he was not unaware of social issues. Puente's widow, Luisa García de Andoin, recalls that while a student in Valladolid her husband had been an admirer of Oscar Pérez Solís, who in those days was a socialist and whom he must have heard speak at some rally or another.

### **Isaac Puente, doctor: Birth Control, Eugenics and Naturism**

Not that Isaac Puente was the only anarchist doctor. Viñas and Kropotkin's friend Pedro Vallina, the disciple of Salvochea who was behind an attempt on the life of Alfonso XIII in Paris, plus Doctor Queralto and the naturist José Martínez were all doctors too. In a sense, Isaac Puente was merely carrying on with a pre-existing tradition of furthering scientific knowledge whilst delving more deeply into medicine and the social vocation of the doctor with published materials, giving talks and even a program that he drew up in June 1931. Bearing in mind that during the civil war in Catalonia as well as in the case of the central government, the Health portfolio (no such ministry existed back then) was in the hands of anarchists, it might be useful to look into the thinking and activities of the doctor from Maestu.

Albeit that in his practice, Puente confined himself to working as a country doctor and treating the workers from the Ajuria Metalworks, he soon earned a name for himself with his published writings and stances. Medical-type articles not intended for laymen appeared in *La Medicina Ibera*, *La Medicina Argentina*, *La Revista de Medicina de Álava* and *Álava Médico-Farmacéutica*. But Puente made his name primarily through his contributions in *Generación Consciente* and *Estudios*, publishing lengthy articles from 1923 onwards, one of them signed with his real name and another using the nom de plume of "A Country Doctor".

*Generación Consciente* was an anarchist review focused upon birth control and eugenics. Birth control (neo-Malthusianism) was a teaching widely supported in libertarian circles and its most outstanding representative was the Frenchman Paul Robin, founder of the Human Regeneration League. It started from Malthus's famous law, whereby population increases exponentially whereas the means of survival only expand arithmetically, but Robin reckoned that the solution lay, not in chastity, but in birth control.

Eugenics was a teaching that complemented neo-Malthusianism and its inspiration was Galton, an English physician who had made a study of human biological heredity and who lobbied for

<sup>2</sup> Evidence of Daniel Orille: letter dated 25 May 1979 and interview of 8 September 1979. Vitoria is about twenty kilometres from Maestu.

thoughtful selectivity as a stratagem for addressing physiological dilution. During the years of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and the Republic thereafter, eugenics became extraordinarily widespread. Renowned doctors such as Gregorio Marañón, César Juarros, Nicolás Amador and Luis Huerta argued the case for eugenics. In feminist circles, the best known eugenicist was Hildegart: the teacher Antonia Maymón, who was a contributor to *Generación Consciente* and one of the founders of the FAI also deserves a mention. *Generación Consciente* and *Estudios* expounded the eugenic ideal of a focus on health and beauty, a concern for health and hygiene and used poetry, plays, pamphlets, etc., in an ongoing campaign against alcohol and the twin evils of prostitution and syphilis as the chief causes of degeneracy.

Matters sexual were another aspect of *Generación Consciente* and *Estudios* that should be underlined. In fact, any reader of those reviews was free to scan advertisements for free advice on sexual matters. In most cases, this sexological advice service took the form of correspondence with Doctor Puente in Maestu or in Virginia Mayor, the villages in which he was living. Younger than Isaac Puente, Félix Martí Ibáñez (1913-1974) picked up the baton in the pages of *Estudios* with his own 'Psycho-Sexual Consultations' in January 1936. Martí Ibáñez's work is familiar to us today thanks to the anthology compiled by Ignacio Vidal for the Acracia collection of the Tusquets publishing house. However, Puente's pioneering efforts have been eclipsed. Even though both Ignacio Vidal in his selection from the Psycho-Sexual Consultations and Mary Nash in her book on the *Mujeres Libres* (published by Tusquets, 1975), in dealing with women's issues during the Second Republic, award pride of place to the program carried in *Estudios* and signed by "A Country Doctor". We might do well to quote from that program:

"Sex education: abolition of prostitution; the fight against venereal diseases; spreading the means of prevention of venereal diseases; companion marriage; divorce; women's sexual freedom; birth control; banishing the poisonous religious conception surrounding sex."  
(*Estudios*, June 1931)

That program, that even today might seem utopian, was in part or in whole backed by a goodly number of progressive-minded intellectuals during the Republic. Thus, prior to 1931, *Generación Consciente*, which, though anarchist, styled itself as eclectic, used to carry Marañón's talks on sex education, articles by Margarita Nelken on motherhood and child-rearing or the criminologist Luis Jiménez de Asúa's writings in favour of abortion (such as the paper he submitted to the Third Pan-American Congress of Sciences held in Lima in 1925). The December 1935 decree legalizing abortion in Catalonia was not just a revolutionary freak, because doctors and jurists had been lobbying for years for its introduction.

From among Isaac Puente's pamphlets on matters sexual we might cite *Embryology Explained* (1925), *Birth Control Methods: Advantages and Disadvantages* (1933) and *Curing Sexual Impotence*, which he drafted in 1934 while in prison in Burgos.

With regard to naturism, Puente espoused a moderate approach. He was critical of extremism (strict vegetarian diets, denial of the efficacy of medicines and the money-grubbing charlatanism of some doctors) and instead stressed the subversive side to naturism and its tendency to make doctors redundant by making specific curative treatments known to all. The plethora of references in the

1920s anarchist press to naturist congresses, debates about nutritional science, the incompatibility of certain foods, etc., bears witness to the importance of naturism. Illustrations within such publications showed reproductions of statues and paintings of naked male and female figures. The nudist phenomenon was very far from being just some outlandish intellectual strand of anarchism. In the Barcelona-based review *Iniciales* there were candid snapshots of this or that Libertarian Youth group posing naked or bunches of social prisoners availing of their enforced incarceration in order to sunbathe in the buff. Finally, there was Puente's contribution to the *Cuadernos de Cultura*, the ambitious popularization venture launched by Luis Marín Civera in 1930.<sup>3</sup>

### **Social Strife in Vitoria: The 14 April 1932 Clashes**

In the 1930s certain strikes in Vitoria displayed great virulence. The sacking in October 1930 of three workmen during the demolition of the old barracks there triggered a strike by building workers that culminated on 10 October in clashes between the strikers and the Civil Guard. Gunshot injuries and arrests were the upshot: four of the demonstrators were hauled in front of military courts. Notably, the Civil Guard accused those arrested of being part of a Communist Revolutionary Committee<sup>4</sup>; even so, the strike was resolved in their favour and the workers were re-hired by order of the government.

Two months after that and in the wake of the would-be coup attempt in Jaca and elsewhere around the peninsula, a general strike was called in Vitoria. The local newspapers reported on the Sindicato Único being shut down and of lots of arrests being made "over the distribution and posting on street corners of clandestine publications and manifestoes inciting rebellion". Even though the papers, due to censorship, talked euphemistically about "strike symptoms", we can deduce from certain figures that the strike was wide-ranging. At the Ajuria Metalworks plant – to take only the biggest concern – no more than 94<sup>5</sup> out of its 600-strong workforce showed up for work on Monday 15 December, and normal working was not resumed until 18 December.

The most vicious clashes, in which there was a mixture of work-type disputes (over unemployment in the building trade) and violent opposition to the new republican set-up, came during the time of the Republic. We shall look in detail at the events of 14 April 1932 in that they represent a good example of the belligerent approach that the CNT adopted towards the Republic.

14 April had been declared a national holiday, marking the first anniversary of the proclamation of the Republic. Among the CNT's membership in the building trades there was great discontent because of the uncompromising stance adopted by the Eguinoa Brothers' contractors: it should also be pointed out that on 12 April the CNT had refused to sign up to an agreement between the painters and their employers. Such work-related issues plus others that were entirely political ensure

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<sup>3</sup> Marín Civera was to be Pestaña's lieutenant in the Syndicalist Party. Puente's pamphlets were the ones entitled *Germs and Infection* (1931) and *Personal or Private Hygiene* (1930)

<sup>4</sup> We know about this allegation thanks to the defence argument put up by Pedro Fernández de Arroyabe, as argued at his council of war by Captain Miguel Anitua. According to L.U., a former communist sympathizer, on one occasion Jesús Hernández arrived in Vitoria to oversee agitation there. Moreover the *Historia del Partido Comunista de España* (Ed. Sociales, Paris 1960) refers vaguely to this dispute as part of a wave of strikes in October 1930: "In Seville, Malaga and Huelva. Valencia, Murcia, Vitoria, Logroño, Barcelona and Badalona there was unrest that was clearly revolutionary in nature" (op. cit., p. 36). In the November 1933 elections, the PCE in Álava received 136 votes (97 in Vitoria and another 39 in the province).

<sup>5</sup> According to *El Heraldo Alavés*, 15 December 1930

that the majority attending a meeting called on the Sindicato Único premises decided that the republican celebrations on 14 April were to be boycotted.

On the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup>, and in spite of whistling, jeers and stone-throwing, the anarcho-syndicalists were unable to stop the powers-that-be and their allegorical cavalcade from parading. That afternoon they did manage to get a concert suspended by pelting the bandstand with stones. As a result of this mayhem, the Municipal Guard made one arrest, which a bunch of demonstrators attempted to resist. In the course of efforts to disperse the demonstrators a shot was fired and one of the Guards was killed. It might all have gone no further than a brawl between the forces of law and order and the trade unionists, but for other incidents that showed that the CNT had its sights set of grander objectives. Thus, no one saw it as a coincidence when seventeen electricity poles supplying power to the city were blown up using dynamite, leading to a power cut on the night of 14 April. According to the civil governor, José María Amilibia, revolutionaries had planned “a second Fígols” and “had they succeeded in plunging the city into darkness their aim was to set fire to the City Hall and the Diputación, raid the banks and carry out all manner of outrages under cover of the darkness”.<sup>6</sup> In all likelihood, these claims by Amilibia should be chalked up to police exaggerations, but the fact is that the CNT was beginning to present the governing authorities with serious law and order headaches. Even in a provincial city like Vitoria, with its reputation for calm social peace had broken down. Two months prior to the incidents referred to, in the early morning of 15 February that year, a watchman was shot dead in a clash with trade unionists. On that occasion, there happened to be a strike on the metalworking sector, which prompted the governor to order the arrest of the Metalworkers’ Strike Committee.

There was a heavy crackdown following the events of 14 April. The Sindicato Único was shut down, all leading anarchists (46 of them at the outset) were rounded up (regardless of whether or not they had been party to the incidents) and CNT members faced reprisals. The City Council laid off 187 workers from the municipal workshops just for being CNT members.<sup>7</sup> The backlash came from every direction. The UGT issued a statement of protest: reminding readers that the guard that had been killed had belonged to the socialist trade union. In order to pre-empt and wave of sympathy action in solidarity with those arrested, the governor let it be known that those workers going on strike “will be running the risk of being refused entry to their factories and workshops by their employers and so the latter had been given authority to lay off any who failed to report for work, these being deemed folk out to keep in touch with the rebels.”<sup>8</sup> In short, across the board in Vitoria, the anarchists were being pronounced undesirables.

For security reasons, some of those arrested on 14 and 15 April were relocated to Pamplona prison. The press was determined to draw a connection between their removal and some of the incidents that ensued. It was said that persons who had travelled from Vitoria to visit the prisoners had stoned and set fire to the home of the ex-deputy and provincial Carlist chief Joaquín Baleztena.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Statements made to the Vitoria newspaper *La Libertad* on 18 April 1932

<sup>7</sup> *La Libertad* 18 Aoril 1932 and *El Sol* of 16 April 1932

<sup>8</sup> *La Libertad*, 16 April 1932

<sup>9</sup> According to *El Sol* of 19 April 1932

Still in Vitoria prison were other people who had been the victims of the crackdown on the CNT unleashed by civil governor Amilibia. For instance, Isaac Puente was being held without trial; even though he had had no hand in the events of 14 April, he was regarded as part of the anarchists' top cadre in the province and had been picked up in Maestu on 16 April.

In *A Word in My Own Defence?*, which he tried to get the newspapers to print, Puente declared that he could not fathom the stance adopted by the authorities and wrote that "they ought somehow to have felt grateful to me for the cooperation I afforded them". Here we need to place it on record that Puente was on friendly terms with the republicans: in the dying days of the monarchy he had given talks at the Republican Club and contributed to the weekly *Álava Republicana*.<sup>10</sup> But we cannot be certain that they had actually conspired together.

From a letter Puente wrote that was addressed to Amilibia, it can be deduced that on 2 May he embarked on a hunger strike and, five days later, was still in prison and that the special judge had not yet arranged for him to stand trial. In that letter there was a reference to a report in which the governor had alluded to Puente as an "instigator of revolts, a menace to the peace of society and a storer of arms and explosives." As far as arms went, a search of his home had turned up nothing beyond an old and faulty pistol. That was not the last time that the police came looking for him: on another occasion, when the police station found out that Puente had taken delivery of a bulky parcel, it aroused their suspicions and they decided to investigate the contents. Gabriel Martínez de Aragón, the civil governor at that point, warned Puente that he should get rid of the suspect package. However, Martínez de Aragón's friendly tip-off was not necessary, as all the police found upon carrying out a search was, not bombs or guns, but some gramophone records.<sup>11</sup> The anecdote flags up the differences between two civil governors, but, quite apart from their personality differences, it was obvious that as time wore on the gulf between republicans and anarchists was deepening.

In December 1933, when a libertarian communist uprising erupted in Aragon and La Rioja, the CNT declared a general strike. The strikers expected those workers still at work to join their action. This attitude triggered a serious fall-out at the Ajuria Metalworks plant. Shortly after the works was opened for business, a bunch of workers made to enter the Ajuria works, intending to switch on the siren and thereby prompt those working there to walk out. The strikers failed in the attempt due to the presence of some Assault Guards who gave chase and opened fire on the strikers. Assault Guard gunfire claimed the life of Francisco Bastera, a 17 year-old workman and CNT member. Seven arrests were made.<sup>12</sup> But it was in the Rioja Alavesa area and especially in the town of Labastida that the strike attempt turned nastiest. In Labastida events followed the usual sequence: weapons were seized from the neighbourhood, the records in the town archives were set alight, there was an attempt made to cut the telephone lines and siege was laid to the Civil Guard barracks.

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<sup>10</sup> Even though we have no documentary evidence, Don Odón Apraiz has assured us that Puente wrote for *Álava republicana* using the nom de plume 'Zubi Carrasacal' (based on a Spanish-to-Basque translation and the reversing of his actual surnames) *Álava republicana* (1930-1936) does not appear in the catalogues of public bodies in the Basque Country: which may well be the reason why Saiz Valdivieso in his book *Triunfo y Tragedia del periodismo vasco (1900-1939)*. *Prensa y política* "makes no mention of the existence of Vitoria's only left-leaning weekly."

<sup>11</sup> This incident was reported to us by Don Odón Apraiz (conversation of 22 December 1978). Gabriel Martínez de Aragón was the first republican governor of Álava province.

<sup>12</sup> *La Libertad*, 11 December 1933

In this attempt to install libertarian communism, Isaac Puente, stepping beyond his role as a theoretician, was actively involved alongside Buenaventura Durruti and Cipriano Mera.

### **Isaac Puente, anarchist theoretician**

Juan Manuel Molina aka *Juanel* the secretary of the FAI's Peninsular Committee mentions the circumstances whereby Puente ended up leading the attempt at revolution that followed after the Right's success in the November 1933 elections. Initially, Eusebio Carbó had been chosen to join the Revolutionary Committee on the behalf of the FAI. When Carbó declined, so *Juanel* says: "We picked Isaac Puente ... I wrote to him on behalf of the FAI's PC and, despite the demands of his medical profession he dropped everything and, as soon as he got my letter, joined the Zaragoza Committee."<sup>13</sup>

This involvement raises the issue of the doctor from Maestu's FAI membership. How had he actually joined? Was it through José Elizalde, one of the very first FAI secretaries, with whom he was friends? Right now, we have no way of offering a proper answer to that so we will have to make do with a hypothesis.<sup>14</sup>

*Generación Consciente* and *Estudios* were not Puente's only platforms. His signature appeared more or less frequently in all the Spanish-language libertarian publications: although this list is not exhaustive, we might mention *Inquietudes* and *Cultura Proletaria* in New York; *Algo* in Cleveland; *La Protesta* and *Nervio* in Buenos Aires; *Prismas* in Beziers; *La Voz Libertaria* in Brussels; plus the Iberian publications *Ética*, *Iniciales*, *Orto*, *El Sembrador*, *Solidaridad Obrera*, *Tierra y Libertad*, *Tiempos Nuevos* and *La Revista Blanca*.

His principal topics – Medicine, Psychology and Biology – reflected his penchant for the history of Science, its present and its future. His articles also covered critical reviews of philosophical and literary works. Certain of his enthusiasms hinted at his literary tastes and, above all, at the moral values making up anarchist humanism; hence his admiration for Panaït Istrati, a writer who sings the praises of friendship, selflessness and love, or the great, fashionable French individualists such as Han Ryner, Lorulot and Armand. The search for the truth, the doing of good and the contemplation of beauty came to represent the half-moral, half-aesthetic concerns of the anarchist circles of which Puente was representative.

Another telling feature was his naturist approach to life. Naturism, a harmonious relationship between man and nature, affording him health and inner peace, was part and parcel of his anarchism. One redeems the living being, the other the social creature. In short, the regenerative appetite for education presided over this venture which we might well describe as a cultural revolution.

Anarchist writers were constantly concerned with outlining the structures of the new world to come: the recommended re-building blocks being the commune or free municipality and the union.

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<sup>13</sup> See Gómez Casas *Historia de la FAI* (Ed. Zero, p. 166)

<sup>14</sup> José Elizalde, a disciple of Han Ryner and translator of Istrati and leading advocate of Esperanto and publisher of the review *Ética*, was a friend of Puente's. Maybe consultation of the FAI "papers" (currently inaccessible) at the Institute for Social History in Amsterdam may shed some light on the matter of Puente and his links to the FAI.

Following the proclamation of the Republic, the predictive literature about libertarian communism flourished to an amazing extent, as it was believed that the revolution was imminent.

In his study of the anarchist utopia<sup>15</sup>, Antonio Elorza highlighted the range of the discussion and the differing ways in which libertarian communism was construed. Isaac Puente was to become one of the most widely heeded theoreticians and his draft program one of the most widely distributed. But neither the vision of the future set out in his very famous pamphlet nor the schemes supported by other Spanish publicists during the 1930s can be regarded as, strictly speaking, novel. All Puente did was rehash the teachings of earlier thinkers. The influence of Kropotkin was plain as some of his ideas are reproduced almost verbatim. Puente's success among the anarchist membership derived more from the originality of his approach, the clarity of his exposition and that, rather than offering abstractions, he offered a concrete model for libertarian communism that was tailored for implementation in a Spanish context.

Not that the debate around libertarian communism was just a creation of intellectuals; its theoretical implications made a real impact. Gerard Brey and Jacques Maurice noted how Andalusian peasants in Casas Viejas were well versed in the matter thanks to their reading of Isaac Puente's articles in *Tierra y Libertad*.<sup>16</sup> But, in addition to the short-lived proclamations of libertarian communism sparked by the FAI's insurrectionist line, practical and peaceful experiments were under way, even before the collectivization experiments mounted during the civil war.

For instance, in late 1932 the shoemakers of San Sebastián, after their employers refused to agree the work demands submitted by the union, set up collective workshops and started making shoe repairs on their own account, dispensing with the involvement of employers.<sup>17</sup> There were other instances of collectively organized work too – building workers' cooperatives in Barcelona, a farming community in Albalate de Cinca and the 'El Nuevo Sol' plasterers' cooperative in Soneja; these deserve to be examined.

As to his stance, Isaac Puente was anything but as purist: to quote his own words "the determination to get something done is more important than the program" and "If we are going to make a reality of 'The Idea', we are going to have to be willing to see it disfigured". Puente was perhaps the leading exponent of anarchist spontaneism, which made him an outstanding ally of the FAI's activism.

### **18 July 1936 in Vitoria: the shooting of Isaac Puente**

The Popular Front weekly paper *Álava republicana* went on sale in Vitoria on 18 July 1936, as it did every Saturday. The front page recalled that the murder of Calvo Sotelo had been preceded by the murder of Castillo, but, in spite of the gravity of the times which accounted for the editorial's being headlined "Civil War", when the focus shifted to Vitoria it offered an idyllic picture of a violence-free city. Psychologically speaking, the belief that they were living in an oasis of peace in the midst of a tempest was not inclined to prompt Popular Front supporters in Álava to espouse a pugnacious

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<sup>15</sup> *La utopia anarquista bajo la Segunda República (precedido de otros trabajos)* (Ed. Ayuso, 1973)

<sup>16</sup> "Casas Viejas: reformism and anarchism in Andalusia (1870-1933)" (in Spanish) in *El movimiento libertario Español*, supplement to Cuadernos de Ruedo Ibérico, 1974

<sup>17</sup> For this and other examples, see Fontaura's pamphlet *Como es posible vivir actualmente en anarquía?* (Ed. Faro, 1934, pp. 20, 21, 22 and 23

approach to the military who were shortly to rise in revolt. That very same edition of *Álava republicana*, in a latest news item, reported on the army revolt that had broken out the previous day in the garrisons in Morocco, whilst at the same time offering assurances, with overstated optimism, that the government had the situation under control.

The attitude to that revolt varied from place to place according to the local circumstances and the degree of determination displayed by activists from the political and trade union activists. In Vitoria, the people would have needed mobilizing and arming if the government's overblown confidence was to be countered and the army rebels effectively resisted. But time and determination were missing.

In the early morning of Sunday 19 July, Lieutenant-Colonel Camilo Alonso Vega, Mola's liaison officer and the man in charge of the plotters in Álava brought his troops out on to the streets after securing the backing of generals García Benítez and Gil Yuste. The few officers who failed to throw in their lot with the rebellion were swiftly neutralized. Nor was there any serious resistance forthcoming from civilians: this was in part because of the military's swift action pre-empted any backlash, contrary to what happened elsewhere. But there was an attempt made to put up a fight: Daniel Orille, representing the CNT, lobbied the mayor to distribute the arms of the Municipal Guards and Assault Guards. Representatives of the republicans, socialists and CNT were due to hold discussions at the Civil Government building as late as 7.00 p.m. on Saturday, 18 July. That meeting never took place after the governor, Navarro Vives, failed to show up. By then it was too late in any case.

#### **Daniel Orille spoke with Isaac Puente on 18 July**

Orille had a clear recollection of this final encounter:

"We ran into one another on the Cuesta de San Fernando at about five o'clock that afternoon; he and I were equally bewildered. He invited me to travel on to Bilbao with him by car. I declined the offer because I was due at a meeting of a socialist and republican delegation at seven o'clock. I urged him to get away. His reaction was: 'If you're not coming, I'm staying put.' And after a brief discussion, each of us trying to talk the other around, we went our separate ways, never to meet again."<sup>18</sup>

After this encounter and the failed meeting at the Civil Government building, Daniel Orille went into hiding: it was only seven months later that he managed to pass through the lines and reached Bilbao with another ten people on 1 March 1937. Isaac Puente made his way back to Maestu to rejoin his family, his wife, their two daughters and his father, the one-time Carlist officer. On 28 July, at three o'clock in the morning, the Puentes' home was surrounded by a number of Civil Guard personnel and the local sergeant in Maestu placed Isaac Puente under arrest. At which point the question arises: How come he did not try to get away? Was he aware of the risk he was taking?

It is hard to come up with a satisfactory answer to those two questions. Just to keep things in the proper perspective, we ought to point to the limited part played by the news media regarding the significance of what was going on and the relative isolation affecting a town like Maestu. Besides, there was no comparison between the social climate in Vitoria and that in Barcelona or Madrid, let alone closer at hand in places like San Sebastián and Bilbao. It seems that Puente said of what was

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<sup>18</sup> Evidence of Daniel Orille (see Note 2 above)

going on: “This is a *militarada*”<sup>19</sup> But what did he mean by a *militarada*? Was he thinking of a *pronunciamiento* along the lines of Sanjurjo’s back in August 1932? And in the end, during the first few days, how many people appreciated that all-out civil war was in the offing?

The climate in Vitoria, although less violence-prone than in neighbouring Navarra (the first shootings in Vitoria came on 25 July), was still menacing enough for Isaac Puente to have been somewhat anxious. One day, he happened to be in the village of Atauri with his wife when a member of the CEDA, who was armed, taunted them: “I’ll do for this pair!” At first, Puente hid out in the hills; he had arranged with his wife that his return home was contingent upon a certain signalling light. A boy from Los Arcos (Navarra) had turned up in Maestu with a bullet wound in his leg. Luisa García de Andoin, after rendering first aid, had sent for her husband who arrived to carry out an examination. After the patient had been admitted to the hospital in Vitoria, Puente decided to hang on at home. On 28 July, the Civil Guard undertook, as it had done before, to arrest him and transfer him to Vitoria jail.

Manuel Chiapuso, the secretary of the San Sebastián CNT, was involved in an attempt to trade the industrialist Ajuria who was being held there for Puente.<sup>20</sup> But the plan fell through. On 24 August Millán Astray arrived in Vitoria, tasked with whipping up the people which, so it was said, had been “cold and apathetic”. After the visit by that legionnaire general, the repression was stepped up, prison visits suspended and the removal of prisoners from custody became more widespread. With prisoners denied contact with the outside world, the pharmacist Antonio Buena remembers Puente remarking: “And now they’re going to kill every last one of us.” The doctor from Maestu was one the very first to suffer that sad fate. On the night of 1 September 1936, a removal order reached the prison. This removal order, like many another, bore the signature of Alfonso Sanz, a military man and government delegate. Somebody claimed to have seen Isaac Puente leave wearing a raincoat over his pyjamas. Outside the prison, a lorry and death awaited him. In all likelihood, he was murdered out by Pancorbo in Burgos province; the teacher from Subijana was shot with him.<sup>21</sup>

To this day the entry for Isaac Puente in the Civil Register has him as ‘missing’; the memory of him, the memory retained by those who had him as their doctor, comrade and friend, lives on.

Translated from Mikel Peciña *Isaac Puente, médico anarquista* (pamphlet, 2024) part of the ‘Cuadernos de Formación Libertaria’ series published by the Ateneo Libertario Carabanchel Latin (Madrid). See <https://www.portaloaca.com/historia/biografias/isaac-puente-medico-anarquista/>

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<sup>19</sup> Conversation with Federico Puente at Christmas 1978

<sup>20</sup> See p. 194 of Chiapuso’s book *Los anarquistas y la Guerra en Euskadi: la comuna de San Sebastián* (Ed. Txertoa). Isaac Puente made no mention of the exchange scheme to his wife, but did mention a visit from Juana, the company doctor at the Ajuria metalworks plant. Juana’s presence in the prison may well have had to do with the exchange scheme. This and other details were revealed to us by Puente’s widow (in a conversation on 18 August 1979) in Madrid.

<sup>21</sup> Federico Puente wrote to the priest in Pancorbo in an effort to identify his brother’s body: the priest from Pancorbo replied with a powerless “They shot so many!”

Javier Irazabal

ISAAC PUENTE, EIGHTY EIGHT YEARS ON

The announcement of the forthcoming talk scheduled for 22 April next by Celedones de Oro on the subject of the Puente Pharmacy, has prompted me to seek out and track down an article about Isaac Puente that I published in the review *Punto y Hora* of 26 July – 2 August 1979. 45 years have elapsed since then and I was just about to turn 35 years of age. I honestly believe that in spite of the time that has passed, the article still stands and has lost none of its validity.

The article in question – entitled *Isaac Puente, a deliberately ignored figure shot by the requetés in September 1936*, was one of 52 “Contributions to a life of Isaac Puente” listed in Francisco Fernández de Mendiola’s book *Isaac Puente. The anarchist doctor* (Editorial Txalaparta, Tafalla, May 2007). 37 of those were published after 1979; 7, prior to that date; and 3 are undated. Those texts come from 31 different authors.

Furthermore, Fernández de Mendiola’s book contains an exhaustive cataloguing of Isaac Puente’s writings: books and pamphlets, forewords to books by other writers (6) and newspaper articles (510), published in a total of 35 different publications, albeit that the publication in which six articles appeared goes unrecorded.

It was the director of *Punto y Hora*, Javier Sánchez Erauskin (brother of Miren Sánchez Erauskin) who commissioned the article about Isaac Puente from me. I approached the task with a document folder that was literally empty. Hardly surprising, since, back then, it was commonplace in our journalistic work for a single professional to have to grapple with a wide variety of topics and fields, meaning “knowing a bit about everything and knowing nothing”. And I am convinced that, in spite of that, we were also putting history together, albeit without the ready assistance of a network like the internet.

I had basically two sources of information: Isaac Puente’s own family and CNT activists from Vitoria. I still have the hand-written notes from my interviews with his brother, Federico, as well as some photocopied documents furnished to me by both sources: his text written from prison in Vitoria on 25 April 1932, entitled *A Word in my own defence?*; the letter forwarded days later, on 7 May to José María Amilibia, Álava’s civil governor, as well as the long, interesting letter sent to Federico Puente by his friend, the researcher Abel Ramírez, dated 21 June 1979 from Drancy, northwest of Paris, France. In it, Ramírez reported that his research was moving along towards piecing together the outstanding scientific, medical and social philosophical work achieved by Isaac.

Among these documentary contributions, I should mention a couple of photocopies of press articles published in *Ahora* and in a like-minded newspaper and two small pamphlets entitled: *The Confederal Conception of Libertarian Communism* (published by the CNT in 1976) and *Libertarian Communism by Isaac Puente*, published in Paris by *Le Combat syndicaliste* (Official Mouthpiece of the National Federation of Labour) in edition No 570, on 21 August 1969.

Anyway, I finished up with four pages of original text that the veteran Vitoria CNT member Macario Illera Tejada had expressly written up and handed me to assist me in writing the article for *Punto y*

*Hora*. Macario was barely able to speak as the result of a stroke he had suffered. But in a simple, intimate and admiring way he used his notes to sum up the life and works of Isaac Puente, as one who had known him.

But, that said, I think there is a certain dispute as to the precise date on which Isaac Puente was murdered, as I was able to register in the course of reviewing the information I jotted down by hand in the notes I took in the course of some conversations with his brother Federico Puente and when comparing these later with other published sources.

I still have the original notes taken down during those exchanges with Federico Puente. One of the states, literally: "Died on 1 September 1936. That night, after midnight they set him free, which amounted to his emerging on to the street outside where the requetés' lorry was waiting for him."

On page 43 of his book *Isaac Puente. El médico anarquista*, Francisco Fernández de Mendiola writes: "Isaac Puente was taken out of the prison after midnight on the night of 31 August to 1 September 1936. It is not known whether he was on his own or along with other prisoners (....) There was a lorry waiting for him outside (...)"

A lengthy, documented article by Mikel Peciña Anitua, published in the review *Muga* (No 5, April 1980, pages 80-93) and entitled "Isaac Puente (1896-1936). Anarchist doctor" has this: "On the night of 1 September a removal order reached the prison. ... Somebody claimed to have seen Isaac Puente leave wearing a raincoat over his pyjamas. Outside the prison, a lorry and death awaited him."

In Fernández de Mendiola's book (page 45) there is mention of a report drawn up by the Álava Provincial Assets Seizure Commission stating that "Puente had been detained during the early days of the *Movimiento* and had been formally released on the first of September, since when his whereabouts have been unknown, and he is presumed missing."

So the final question outstanding is this: Was Isaac Puente murdered in the early hours of 2 September 1936, or rather, in the early hours of 1 September 1936? A 24-hour difference.

Translated from: <https://celedonesoro.blogspot.com/2024/04/isaac-puente-javier-irazabal-kazetari.html>, published Wednesday, 10 April 2024

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