

JULIA ROMERA YÁÑEZ (1916-1941), THE LIFE AND DEATH OF A FREEDOM FIGHTER

By Ángel Sody de Rivas

[...] I am sensible of a boundless love and today's rotten society places a hurdle in the way of my noble desire.

*I crave enjoyment but am surrounded by nothing but pain. I crave life and death's chill face meets my gaze. I am enthralled by what is beautiful and great, but all I see is a host of ugliness, pettiness and misery. I love work – it being the source of life – but those of us who work are being gnawed away by anaemia, beset by shortages and hospital is our only reward. I do think that a fairer, more beautiful, more humane society is possible, one that we have come to refer to as an anarchist, a-cratic or libertarian society [...]*¹

By way of justification

Autumn 1997 saw the publication of the book *Revolución y Guerra en Gramanet del Besós (1936-1939)*, written by our comrades Juan José Gallardo and José Manuel Márquez.² The closing chapter of that interesting historical publication was devoted to an organization of young Santa Coloma residents who were not resigned to Francoism's success and who organized themselves, using what few resources they had and within the restrictions imposed by the times, in order to make a stand against the established "new order". That organization was the UJA (Antifascist Youth Alliance) and one of its members was a woman by the name of Julia Romera. Similarly there were a few references to the indictment brought by the Emergency Summary Council of War mounted against her and 23 other people.

Prior to that, María Remedios Martínez Torres (aka *Remei*) who served on Santa Coloma town council on the *Participación Ciudadana* ticket had published a short outline life of Julia in *L'Ajuntament Informa*³, coinciding with the very first "Municipal Women's Day" organized by the town council. Finally, and more recently, in a major Barcelona newspaper⁴ marking the sixty years that had elapsed since the end of the civil war, two articles appeared in which Julia's case was brought up. These publications contained a number of errors. However, in addition to any inexactitudes that made it into print, there were a lot of aspects of this woman's life and death that still awaited clarification. Which is what prompted us to embark upon an investigation by relying essentially upon two primary sources: the oral testimony of family members, friends and comrades, consultation of documents held in a range of (Catalan and Murcian) institutions and a compilation of photographic and documentary resources. Furthermore, to complement those resources, we looked at – among other things – the secondary sources cited in the text.

¹ Taken from an article entitled "De Molde", published by Teresa Claramunt (1862-1931), textile worker and anarcho-syndicalist activist. The article appeared in *Suplemento de la Revista Blanca*, No 56, (9 June 1900). Like Julia, Teresa was jailed in 1911 and was stricken by paralysis in prison. In 1901 she had launched the newspaper *El Productor*.

² Published in 1997 by the Grupo de Estudios Históricos Gramanet del Besós, Santa Coloma, pp. 291-302

³ Remei Martínez, councillor on Santa Coloma town council "Un symbol de lluita i fermesa" in *L'Ajuntament Informa*, No 141, 6 March 1987, p. 3

⁴ José María Huertas Clavería "Historias del Bon Pastor" in *El Periódico* of Sunday 14 February 1999. See also Rosario Fontova "Barcelona revive la derrota de 1939" in *El Periódico* of Thursday 22 April 1999

Our purpose in this essay is: on the one hand, to pay well-deserved tribute to an extraordinary woman who gave her life in the fight for Freedom, whilst also doing right by all the women fighters. Plus, recovery of the historical memory of our recent past, which has been pretty frequently manipulated and hushed up on most occasions, the hope being that we can arrive at a better understanding of the present and amend our activities in the future insofar as we may.

Origins

“Sundays off work was still a distant prospect as was any law that would reduce the working day to 8 hours and social advancement back then was utopian and the miner had to be stoic in putting up with insults or threats from his foreman who had the power to dock his wages to pay for some tool that he might have accidentally damaged in the course of his labours or to fine him if he took the view that he had not carried out his instructions to the letter.”⁵

If we are to talk about the roots of our chosen subject, we need to travel back in our mind’s eye, to the town of Mazarrón in Murcia. There, on 7 April 1912 in that attractive little location in Spain’s south-east, Francisco Romera Rodríguez and Matilde Yáñez Pérez were wed in the church of San Andrés.⁶ The newly married⁷ couple moved into a modest home at 19 Calle de Cervantes, in a district known as El Molinete. Along with his father Martín Romera Fernández and some of his brothers, Francisco was working back then in some mining installations known as ‘La Impensada’ and owned by the ‘Aguilas Company’. ‘La Impensada’ consisted of two pits – ‘San Simón’ and ‘Santa Elena’. The latter – known also as “Dead Men’s Pit”⁸ became notorious due to one of the worst accidents to hit the mining industry in Mazarrón. The mine was located behind the famous ‘Santa Ana’ and ‘Fuensanta’ pits, in the very heart of ‘San Cristóbal Ridge’.

On 19 January 1913 Matilde gave birth to a daughter who was christened María. Three years after that, by which time the couple were living right in the heart of the mining district, they had another daughter whom they called Julia after her maternal grandmother. Julia’s birth certificate records:

“At eleven o’clock on the nineteenth of March nineteen hundred and sixteen, in the town of Mazarrón in the province of Murcia, Francisco Romera Rodríguez, a twenty-nine year old married man and native of that town in provincial Murcia, a labourer living in the Calle de la Serreta in said town, appeared before D. Francisco Zamora Gómez, the Town Judge and D. Pedro Martínez Martínez, his clerk, for the purpose of having his daughter’s name entered in the Civil Register and to that end he, being her father, declared: that said daughter was born at home on the fifteenth of that month at eight o’clock in the morning. That she was the legitimate daughter of the witness and of Cartagena-born Matilde Yáñez Pérez, twenty-seven, domiciled at her husband’s address.

That, on her father’s side, she is the grand-daughter of Martín Romera Fernández and María Rodríguez Sanz, both natives of this town, and, on her mother’s side, of Antonio Yáñez Barro and Julia Pérez Rubio, born in El Ferrol and in Cartagena, respectively.

⁵ Mariano C. Guillén Riquelme in *Mazarrón 1900*, Ayuntamiento de Mazarrón 1997, p. 91

⁶ The 16th century church of San Andrés is located in the oldest part of Mazarrón, very near the mining area. The couple’s two daughters – María and Julia – were also baptized there.

⁷ Their marriage is recorded in Tome 30, page 32, Section 2 of the Mazarrón Civil Register.

⁸ The “Impensada” pit was also known as the “Dead Men’s Pit” due to an explosion at the Santa Elena pit on 16 February 1893, claiming 28 lives, including the lives of three German mechanics carrying out some installation work. This was one of the most important accidents to hit the Mazarrón pits during their entire history.

And that said daughter has been named Julia ...”⁹

As we have said, Julia was born into a working-class family and in the middle of the Great War at that. A really tricky time in Mazarrón’s history. Even prior to that, the town had been feeling the early symptoms of an imminent and foretold economic crisis. The 4 April 1905 edition of *El Heraldo de Mazarrón* noted:

“no one, absolutely no one cares about us and when it comes to the outlook for the future we find all of the mining companies at a standstill, with the destruction of fishing holes due to the failure to re-route the Rambla de las Moreras in a timely fashion, sealing them off and flooding them with mineral sludge and the shrinking of what few worksites are still in operation, due to the lack of irrigation waters ...”¹⁰

Mazarrón’s economy ever since the mid-19th century was dependent on the mining industry. The rising costs of mineral extraction due to the exhaustion of deposits, the fall in lead prices, the loss of markets due to the First World War and the absence of a diversified economy, these were the telling factors in this significant crisis. In the foreword to the book *Cosas y hechos de mi pueblo: Mazarrón*, Guillén Riquelme has this to say of this period of history:

“... an extremely difficult period, given that the mining industry that decades earlier had delivered splendour and wealth to the town was now in the doldrums due to the over-exploitation of deposits and the low revenues from minerals. Mazarrón was in decline and there was no sign of anything that might take over from the mining industry.”¹¹

The only means of survival left to working people in Mazarrón – and likewise to other Murcian mining areas such as Aguilas, Cartagena, La Unión, Lorca, etc. – was to migrate en masse to other more industrialized areas in search of a better future (not that they always found one).

José Berruezo Silvente, the last mayor of Santa Coloma under the Republic and a relative of Julia’s, has this to say in his memoirs of the situation in Mazarrón:

“... when, in June 1917, I managed to secure a month’s leave from my military service in order to pay a visit to my parents who were mourning the recent death of my grown-up brother, I found a town that had changed completely and the younger generation of which had been carried away by a ghastly combination of circumstances. The European War (1914-1918) had destroyed the infrastructure of the mining operations and workers had called a general strike in opposition to mass lay-offs. The youngsters who had moved away were followed by the grown-ups and these by entire families. The Company extracting underground assets took the line that there were no profitable seams left and cashed in its chips.”¹²

⁹ Lifted verbatim from Tome 128, page 290, in Section 1 of the Mazarrón Civil Register.

¹⁰ *El Heraldo de Mazarrón*, No 289, 4 April 1905 cited by Mariano C. Guillén Riquelme in *Mazarrón 1900*, Ayuntamiento de Mazarrón, 1997, pp. 153-154

¹¹ Antonio Jorquera Zamora *Cosas y hechos de mi pueblo*, Ayuntamiento de Mazarrón, 1998, p. 11

¹² José Berruezo *Por el sendero de is recuerdos (1920-1936)*, Grupo de Estudios Históricos-Sociales, Santa Coloma de Gramanet, 1987, p. 25

Something that left its mark on her life

“...We are worse off than at the time of the colonial disaster and between that time and this we have watched this town’s income sources shrink, and looked on despairingly and angrily at the way in which our ranks were thinned of many hundreds of families forced by hunger to move away from the area.”¹³

In the autumn of 1918, the already grave situation with which the Murcian working class was grappling, was joined by another serious issue. South-east Spain, like other areas of the peninsula, was suffering from a terrifying ‘flu epidemic. That viral infection caused genuine havoc among the working population, leading to many deaths. 15 October 1918 Francisco Romera Rodríguez, Julia’s 30 year old father, passed away in his Calle Argüelles home in Mazarrón as a result of flu-related pneumonia. Three days later his wife Matilde Yáñez Pérez died of the same thing.

In light of this tragic circumstance, the Romera-Rodríguez family decided that María, the elder daughter should go to Cartagena to live with her maternal grandparents, whilst Julia, two years younger, should stay on in Mazarrón with her paternal uncles and grandparents.

And so three years passed before, finally in 1921 and due to several of the Romera-Rodríguez family members’ having lost their jobs, the family decided to move away to Santa Coloma, where one of Julia’s aunts, Mariana Romera Rodríguez, had been living for the previous two years with her husband Diego Berruezo Clemente and their sons.¹⁴

It is important that we stress that Mazarrón town began the 20th century with a population of more than 23,000 but that this had fallen by 1920 to a mere 17,600. As we can see, the phenomenon of migration was really significant as far as the town was concerned.

Santa Coloma, a place to live

“The Santa Coloma that I knew was a typically farming town, like many another in the Vallés, but just a hop, skip and a jump from Barcelona, whereas these days it is a sort of a Babylonian suburb, where, with effort and hard work, one can discover reminders of the many blessings available at the beginning of this century.”¹⁵

As mentioned, Martín Romero Fernández, his wife María Rodríguez Sanz, their children Concepción and Andrés and their five year-old niece Julia arrived in Santa Coloma from Mazarrón. Initially they moved into the Calle Ciudadela Alta. Later they moved into 36 Plaza de la Constitución. The Santa Coloma that Julia came to know on arrival there was a small and mainly agricultural town, with a population somewhat short of 3,000, but which, thanks to the wave of migration from Murcia during the first third of the century, would see its population boosted to something like 13,000 in a mere ten years.

We do not have much information regarding Julia’s early years in Santa Coloma beyond a few references from her relatives. The supposition is that she attended a college that operated downstairs at the Town Hall and which was run by a schoolmistress known as Doña Carmen. As Remei Martínez has stated in “A symbol of struggle and steadfastness” ... “Those who knew her

¹³ *El Heraldo de Mazarrón*, op. cit.

¹⁴ One of their sons was José Berruezo Romera, a leading anarcho-syndicalist activist.

¹⁵ Josep Maria de Sagarra *Memòries*, Ed. 62, “La Caixa”, Molc, 1981

attest to her outstanding intelligence, since she was a very advanced pupil at school and had an extraordinary facility for grasping things.”¹⁶

In 1926, Julia’s aunt, Concepción Romera Rodríguez gave birth to a son by her husband Narcís Guerra i Buscarons.¹⁷ Shortly afterwards, due to marital issues, Concepción moved back in with her parents, her brother Andrés and her niece Julia.

As far as Julia was concerned, Concepción and José, her son, were always akin to a mother and a brother. In a short text that Julia sent her aunt Concepción while she (Julia) was in custody in the Les Corts women’s prison, and preserved by José Guerra like a relic, this assertion is made:

“This little card shows my brother’s smiling face, he being the person I love the most.

Mother, keep him in the deepest recesses of your heart, he being the one I shower with the most kisses over the calvary of my death sentence.

Love, Julia

24-3-1940, Les Corts Women’s Prison.”¹⁸

In 1940, Julia was working for Pañolería Baró S.A. She had joined the firm when aged barely 14 and it was there that she soon learned to be a weaver. We know from Julia Buendía Romera¹⁹ that in 1932 María (Julia’s sister) who was staying in Santa Coloma for a time, spent three months working for the very same firm, before finally deciding to return to Cartagena where she spent the rest of her days.²⁰

Come the Republic [April 1931], the CNT which had been underground as a result of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, reorganized and opened premises on the corner of what is now the Paseo Lorenzo Serra and the Avenida de Santa Coloma. A lot of Pañolerías Baró’s male and female staff – Julia for one – joined the union during the labour organization’s second phase of organizing in Santa Coloma.²¹ Bear in mind that the CNT was first legalized there in late 1922. Returning to Berruezo, he tells us in his memoirs that the female staff at ‘Can Baró’, a firm also known at the time as the ‘Can Palaesqueuenes’, when it came to venturing inside the union premises, which back then were on the La Roca highway “scuttled past and without looking inside.” However, on the very same page, when he comes to the second phase of the union’s organizing, Berruezo stated: “The situation was different once the Union had been recognized again. So much so that the premises were constantly packed with workers applying for CNT membership cards (...) And, oddly enough, the staff (male and female) from the Can Baró textile plant, who had initially been kind of scared by the CNT, later became the ones who most casually applied for their union cards.”²² Obviously we are not suggesting at all that Julia, who was 15 years old back then, could have made any telling contribution towards

¹⁶ Remei Martínez *L’Ajuntament Informa*, op.cit.

¹⁷ Narcís Guerra i Buscarons ran on the ticket of the Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya ticket, in coalition with the Unió Socialista and the PRDF in the legislative elections of 19 November 1933. Francesc Macià and Lluís Companys stood in Barcelona on the same ticket.

¹⁸ Written on the back of a photograph of José Guerra that Julia gave her aunt in March 1940 whilst she was in custody in Les Corts prison. Maybe she sensed that her end was nigh.

¹⁹ Julia Buendía Romera being the daughter of Julia’s sister María Romera, living in Cartagena.

²⁰ Julia’s sister, María Romera Yáñez, passed away in Cartagena on 3 March 1986; she was married, with one son and one daughter.

²¹ At the Extra-ordinary CNT Congress held in Madrid on 11-16 June 1931, which Pedro Cané attended as a delegate, the organization had a membership of 500 in Santa Coloma.

²² José Berruezo, op. cit., p.43

this change of attitude. However, she was predisposed in its favour, in that she had grown up in a family with a great libertarian tradition and had lived cheek by jowl with union struggles from a very early age.

We have not yet been able to confirm how long Juia worked at Pañolerías Baró, since the non-existence of records there has prevented us from hazarding a guess as to the date, but on the basis of some indications we can be sure that in 1938 she was working for a firm in the Plaza de Lesseps area in Barcelona.

The Libertarian Youth in Santa Coloma

“Alongside the unions and entirely independently of them, the Libertarian Youth were active, organizing a Library, staging cultural information talks and free education classes for other youngsters who, on account of their age, had missed out on schooling: they also organized outings and country tours, sometimes at comarcal level, thereby bring a huge number of young people together.”²³

As yet we are still waiting for a study of this youth organizing, but even so we have a few clues that place its possible launch in the year 1933. From that date we have a notice published in the newspaper *Tierra y Libertad*, mentioning a youth group in Santa Coloma going by the name of ‘Juventud Rebelde’.²⁴ Evidently, since libertarian organizations, even under the Republic, were “illegal” groups and since their activities and growth hinged at all times upon the government’s tolerance, it is very hard to reconstruct their stories. However, from 1934-1935 onwards – that being the time when we reckon that Julia joined the organization – we have greater details in the form of documentation as well as eye-witness accounts. Initially their activities were organized out of the Casa del Pueblo, and, later on, out of some premises seized during the civil war. They organized talks, outings, amateur dramatics, etc. They distributed the CNT press, published pamphlets and oversaw the running of the Library.²⁵ They also came to publish the review known as *Aurora Libre* [mentioned in earlier editions of *Agora*]. That publication had to cease after its second edition because a lot of its contributors – including its main driving force, Joan Vives – set off for the front lines as volunteers. Another area worth mentioning in which other Libertarian Youth members were involved related to their working as teachers at the Rationalist School that had been set up at the Casa del Pueblo., offering night classes for young people above school age and to adults once their day’s work was over.

Epifanio García Murcia, a leading activist with the Santa Coloma Libertarian Youth, reminiscing about that time in his life told us the following:

“The various activities we were mounting were so intense that every single day of the week was given over to a different activity.

For instance, one day a week we took Esperanto lessons at the El Pensamiento educational body, where the Fondo sits these days. A different day was set aside for dance lessons at La

²³ José Berrueto, op.cit., p. 83

²⁴ *Tierra y Libertad*, 2 June 1933, p. 3

²⁵ The Library included books such as the Espasa *Enciclopedia*, Pasqual Madoz’s *Geographical Dictionary*, which currently sits in the archives of the Museu Torre Balldovina: there was also a collection of Martín de Lucenay’s *Temas Sexuales*, Dr Vander’s *Guía al Problema Sexual* and a broad selection of social publications and contemporary publications.

Colmena, and I have to say that dancing was not one of my strong points. Another activity related to cooperating on staging plays for the purpose of raising funds to cover our costs. On a different day we held the periodical Libertarian Youth meetings which were held surreptitiously on the outskirts of town, given the historical circumstances (this was during the *Bienio Negro*). The rest of the days available were filled with the offer of lessons for any neighbours who needed them. And, to round off the week, Sundays were left free for sports ...”²⁶

When we asked Epifanio about what he could remember of Julia Romera, he admitted to us that he had only vague memories of her, although he could not forget that she was a very active, clever girl and that her most outstanding Libertarian Youth involvement came from July 1936 onwards, at which point he had signed on with the Ortiz Column as a volunteer.

Unintentionally, Julia’s innate leadership qualities made her the group’s centre of attention. Proof of this is the fact that everyone who knew her has indicated to us that hers was an unmissable presence.

1936: a fateful date

“In Santa Coloma de Gramanet, as in most places, tension had been palpable from days before the revolt. On the afternoon of the 18th, some of Santa Coloma’s petite bourgeoisie were celebrating the *sardana* dance festival that was usually staged over a few Saturdays across the street from the Lliga’s clubhouse on the intersection that led away to Sant Adrià in one direction and to Sant Andreu on the other. From there they could see passing by CNT members en route to the Plaza de la Vila, whilst other labour activists mounted the first spontaneous patrols that were starting to monitor the traffic through that strategic junction.”²⁷

As set out in this introductory quotation, from the very outset of the army’s revolt, the workers’ organizations in Santa Coloma took the initiative in resisting the rebels. Given its proximity to the town, the San Andrés barracks constituted the main short-term danger. Machine-guns posted in sentry boxes there covered the highway and the bridge. It later came to light that the shooting was coming mainly from Falangists drafted in from Madrid.²⁸ The Santa Coloma youth’s élan had to be restrained by union officials who did everything they could to talk them out of their plans to force entry into the barracks, using a lorry that they had called in. The attack on the army barracks came the following day in a coordinated effort by the San Andrés groups and the Santa Coloma Youth groups. Once the popular forces’ victory over the rebels had been consolidated, the raising of militias to take them on in areas where the revolt had succeeded came up for discussion. To that end on 24 July the Casa del Pueblo leased a bus to ferry the volunteers that would serve in the Ortiz Column to the Estación de Francia. That group of militians included some of the members of the Santa Coloma Libertarian Youth²⁹ and their first posting was to Caspe where they became famous for the operations mounted as part of the ‘Petróleo’ guerrilla group.

²⁶ Interviews with Epifanio García and some excerpts from his unpublished memoirs.

²⁷ Juan José Gallardo Romero and José Manuel Márquez Rodríguez, op. cit., p. 44

²⁸ José Berrueto, op. cit., p. 78

²⁹ Among the Santa Coloma youngsters who joined the Ortiz Column were Alfredo Marco, Enrique Casañas, Epifanio García, Juan Contreras, Mariano Bové, Nazario Faulí, Miguel Pérez, José Gatell, and Emilio and José Gómez Izquierdo, etc.

As stated earlier, many of the members of the Libertarian Youth had signed on as volunteers for the fight on the Aragon and Central fronts. Those left behind in Santa Coloma appointed Julia Romera as their general secretary and throughout the war-time period, she switched between that and the post of treasurer, performing both tasks effectively. Joan Vicente Castell, who was 16 years old at the time, had this to say about how he joined the Youth and made Juia's acquaintance:

"It was also at the school in El Clot that I was to make the acquaintance of a lad from Santa Coloma who was known as Vives. It was he that introduced me to the Libertarian Youth there. The latter were based on the first floor of what had been the Catalan Republican Club which the CNT unions had taken over as the base for their Local Federation, in the building that sat in the Passeig de Llorenç Serra where it meets the Avinguda de Santa Coloma. The folk I was to meet there were nearly all very young, since the ones a couple of years older had in some capacity taken part in the crushing of the army revolt nearby and in the attack on the San Andrés barracks and were by then away serving on the front (...) One of the people for whom I was to develop the highest regard was Julia Romera, a comrade of wondrous idealism and commitment, with whom I struck up a great friendship, even though she was 6 years older than me."³⁰

When Joan Vicente first set foot in the Youth premises, he found Julia sitting reading a book.³¹ He was impressed by the girl who was so full of life and was so approachable and with whom he could converse on any subject. His acceptance into the youth group³² in which Julia was the driving force came about quickly: not only did he share in its many activities, but he would often take on responsibilities and make suggestions. This attitude on Vicente's part should not come as any surprise to us for he was a tireless campaigner for education and against social injustices:

"We staged cultural evenings, outings and stepped out on to the streets some evenings to stick up propaganda posters. The Library held some important books (...) I was to serve as librarian very often, improving the stock and would also help sell *Tierra y Libertad* which we used to collect from the distributors on the Carrer Unió."³³

Despite the age difference, the friendship between the pair of youngsters grew stronger by the day. In our view and although he denies it, not only did Vicente admire Julia but he had a particular affection for her, something akin to a platonic love.

In the autumn of 1938, Julia sent her sister María and her husband³⁴ an attractive snapshot showing her in the company of another young woman, each of them holding an enormous pumpkin. On the back of the photo she had written a few lines in which Julia reported to her sister that she had a brand-new boyfriend now. She alluded to a certain Dionisio who, according to José Guerra, was

³⁰ Joan Vicente i astells *Allò que el vent no s'endugué*, an unpublished book currently in progress.

³¹ The book that Julia was reading when Vicente first set foot inside the Libertarian Youth premises was, according to him, Dr Vander's *Guía del Problema Sexual*.

³² Some of those who were in the Libertarian Youth during the war-time period were Carles Sanmiguel, Ramón Contreras, Joan Vives, Ángela Binimelis, Conxita Monzonís, Acracia Jornet, Ramona, Paquita Diaz, Carmen Cerdà, Paquita Marqués, Joaquim Miquel, the Abad brothers, Marín, Molina, Conesa, Berga, Bergalló, brothers Vicenç and Conxita Prior, Fernando Villanueva and so on.

³³ Joan Vicente i Castells, op. cit.

³⁴ Maria had married Santos Buendía on 22 June 1936. Their union produced two children – Santos, a renowned soccer player from Cartagena, and Julia, who very kindly furnished us with some details about her aunt.

political commissar with a coastal anti-aircraft battery set up in a look-out tower in the town of Malgrat de Mar. Dionisio lived in the Trinidad quarter, yet there are no further references to him in the remainder of Julia's life, or afterwards. Once the civil war ended, José and his mother Concepción tried to track down Dionisio's family to find out more about him, but their search proved fruitless since they had all moved away.

The note that Julia sent her sister stated, among other things:

"I am sending you this postcard that my boyfriend drew as a joke. I think you will be able to pick me out. The other figure is the girl who is to be my sister-in-law. You can see from the card that I have lost a lot of weight, but I am keeping well and will put some on again (...) just to show you that I am very mindful of you all and have not forgotten you.

Julia Romera."³⁵

The end of the war

"Between the two of us we must burn any papers and newspapers that might prove compromising in the event of a search. After that I will gather up all the books and copies of the review *Estudios* and make up two parcels and remove them to the Union premises. I will leave them under a table on the ground floor. It really pained me to destroy all those books, but the fascists would do that once they arrive. Ultimately, killing and destroying culture was their calling."³⁶

In the dying days of 1938, and the early days of the following year, the news reaching Santa Coloma from the front lines was highly alarming. Once the battle of the Ebro had been lost, Francoist troops made rapid inroads into Catalonia, their main short-term aim being to capture Barcelona.

One night, as Joan Vicente was chatting with Julia, the matter of possibly leaving for France should the situation deteriorate was raised. According to Vicente, he brought up the chances of their leaving together, in that he regarded her as someone with gravitas, someone he could trust:

"... we sat there for a while on a bench. Even though it was January it was not all that chilly. We sat for a while in silence, watching the searchlights of the anti-aircraft guns trying to pick out fascist planes in the dark skies, whilst firing at differing altitudes. Out of the blue, she said to me:

- I enjoy your company: and, because you are still young, your sense of responsibility and seriousness are all the greater. You belong to the sort of men one can trust.

And then she added:

- If, some day, you take it into your head to leave for France due to deterioration of the situation, make sure you let me know and I'll go with you.
- My response to her was that, yes, I would let her know, should that arise. She was to provide me with the phone number of the company where she was working."³⁷

³⁵ This postcard was supplied to us by Julia Buendía Romera, Julia's own niece

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Joan Vicente i Castells, op. cit.

On 25 January, General Yagüe's troops crossed the Llobregat river via the Molins de Rei bridge and Prat de Llobregat. The republican authorities had put out a call for Barcelona to be defended. However, in light of the city's imminent capture, the political and trade union organizations put all of their efforts into destroying or removing their records to safety, in order to avoid compromising documentation falling into fascist hands. At the same time, they set about evacuating the families of compromised persons, or at least of what few were still in the city.

Given its proximity to Barcelona, the evacuation of women and children from Santa Coloma began on 25 January, using all sorts of vehicles or by setting out on a long and painful trek on foot towards the border; this entailed some risks, as National Highway II was continually being strafed by fascist aircraft. On that date Joan Vicente reported to the Can Girona (today's Macosa) works³⁸ where he was working as a telephone operator. There he ran into a friend who was ready to leave and who invited him to come with him:

"That day I reported again to the Can Girona works, to find my friend Joan Rovira, all agog. He was to tell me that he had it in mind to clear out and he suggested that I join him. The time to decide had come. I tried to contact Julia by phone; she was working in the Plaça Lesseps in Gracia, but it was hopeless and no one picked up. People were starting to leave their workplaces as a collapse was imminent. I was convinced that Julia had left with her family members, on the basis that they were people who held lots of positions of responsibility."³⁹

On the afternoon of 25 January, Vicente rendezvoused at the petrol station in San Adrián with his friend and workmate Joan Rovira and a Libertarian Youth member by the name of Conxita Prior in preparation for beginning the trek to the French border.

Julia stayed on in Santa Coloma to look after her grandmother María Rodríguez and her aunt Concepción Romera, or so José Guerra tells us. Obviously she too could have headed off into exile with some of her relatives.⁴⁰ However, as Vicente tells it, by the time that he came back from France in 1941 and went to visit her in prison, Julia took him to task for not having called her so that she might have gone with him.

Many years have gone by, making it hard to work out which of these two versions of events comes closer to the truth, although we do not think that they are mutually exclusive. Julia could have arranged with Vicente for them to leave for France together, but found it impossible to get in touch with him and stayed behind instead to care for her grandmother and aunt⁴¹, not fully appreciating the risks that she was running, in that she had done important work over the three years of the war, not just as a Libertarian Youth activist but also by helping out families that were in financial straits due to their having their breadwinners away serving on the front.

³⁸ Can Girona was called after the brothers Ignacio and Casimiro Girona. On 6 June 1864 they bought the Nuestra Señora del Remedio Ironworks, previously known as the Herrería Barcelonesa and in 1883 it was added to the Railway and Building Materials company launched the previous year.

³⁹ Joan Vicente i Castells, op. cit.

⁴⁰ Sometime overnight on 25-26 January, associates of Julia's who set off for the French border included Andrés Romera Rodríguez aka 'El Mani', José Berruezo Romera, José Berruezo Silvente, José Guerra Romera, etc.

⁴¹ In late 1939 or early 1940, Joan Vicente had a note inserted in Toulouse's *La Depeche* newspaper, asking for news of Julia Romera, Conxita Prior and Joan Rovira, in the belief that they were somewhere in France. The notice drew a response from Pere Berga, a member of the Youth, who was being held in a concentration camp together with lots of Santa Coloma folk. There were also replies received from Acracia Jornet and Paquita Díez, at which point Vicente discovered that Julia was in custody along with a bunch of comrades.

On 27 January 1939, troops from the Moroccan Army Corps took over the streets in Santa Coloma, thereby ushering in a brutally repressive dictatorship that was to persist for nearly forty years.

The UJA: resistance and repression

“The UJA, despite the limited reach of its activities, can be regarded as one of the very first organizations that set the resistance to the dictatorship in motion. Sprouting from a defeated Catalonia, and at a point when the war had not quite ended, it was an organization that was out to carry on the fight using other methods. Once the war was over and in the absence of continuity, the UJA turned into an agency for political resistance in terrifically difficult conditions and its activities can only be understood in terms of the no doubt rash idealism of a bunch of youngsters who did not accept fascism’s triumph, even though that entailed putting their own necks on the line.”⁴²

On 26 January 1939, Epifanio García Murcia arrived back in Santa Coloma from the Lérida front. He was coming home after having spent three years fighting, initially as part of the Ortiz Column and later with the 25th Division up until the retreat from Aragon. At that point he was posted to the 132nd Brigade attached to the 30th Division based in the outskirts of Balaguer. On 17 January Francoist troops broke through the front lines around Ponts and the 132nd Brigade lost contact with the Division’s commanders and a rout ensued. And then Epifanio set off on a trek back to Santa Coloma, reckoning that the bulk of the army would be making for Barcelona to defend that city. On arriving in the capital of Catalonia he was taken aback to find the city already occupied by Franco’s troops.

A few Libertarian Youth members had stayed behind in Santa Coloma and, like Epifanio, more had returned from the front lines. Towards the end of January a bunch of seven or eight youngsters⁴³ met up in the Plaza de la Vila and decided to hold a meeting to launch a resistance group which they dubbed the Union of Antifascist Youth (UJA). The UJA was launched as a group open to all-comers, ideologically speaking, as long as they came from the republican camp. The group started its activities in early February, at which point there was still fighting going on in the Centre and southeast of Spain. Its first actions were mounted in the immediate vicinity of the town:

“... early that February nobody had their papers in order, other than the fascists. Our deduction was that in order to de-stabilize things, the most effective course was to go skirmishing in a variety of locations during the night: in Santa Coloma, that is. We would demand documents at gunpoint and once the allegedly undocumented individual had established his identity “legally”, we all rounded on him, identifying ourselves as “reds” and warning him that we were still around.

We carried on with operations in various locations, switching barrio all the time, but keeping to the Santa Coloma area. When we crossed the river via the bridge we did so logistically. We transported the weapons for our use in my father’s donkey and cart whenever we were on our way out to work on a market garden that we had right beside the Maquinista, a location habitually chosen as the spot where we could

⁴² Juan José Gallardo Romero and Juan José Márquez Rodríguez, op. cit., p. 300

⁴³ The UJA founding group consisted of – in addition to Epifanio García (from whom we have this information) – Joaquín Miquel Montes, Salvador Alarcón, Miguel Colás Tamborero, Vicente Abad, Fernando Villanueva and Antonio Asensio. Others joined in later.

show that we “reds” were still in operation. We always picked places involving minimal risk, but which were well frequented.

We kept this up until the Centre region surrendered in early April, the view being taken that the ending of the war was reason enough for regarding activities of that sort as having had their day.”⁴⁴

When the war ended that April, Salvador Alarcón and Epifanio García – the latter being repeatedly interrogated and bullied by Santa Coloma’s Public Order Chief, a retired Civil Guard lieutenant by the name of Vergara – took the view that, with the war over, armed struggle in those conditions was tantamount to suicide. Besides, the group was still experiencing considerable growth and they did not see eye to eye with how it was operating. Since their draft had been called to the colours, they joined the army just to avoid arrest, whilst the remainder of the group carried on.

Joaquim Miquel, one of the founders and the ideologue of the organization and an advocate of *peaceful resistance*, has left us a faithful portrait of the fledgeling organization in his book *El Pati de los Oques*:

“After a few meetings up in the mountains, and with our numbers growing each time, a program was drawn up, a name determined and each member of the group was assigned his or her duties.

The UJA’s activity was to be confined to pushing the political line which was essentially democratic (as far as our resources would permit). It was to promote an entente between any activities of which the Popular Front parties were capable, smoothing over differences and aiming at their common purpose: a campaign to defeat Francoist rule. Every member of the group tried to steer clear of altercations or acts that might lead to serial arrests. They were not supposed to take part in any political or social act to which the collective had not given its approval: and anyone in possession of weapons of any description was to dump them (because, by unanimous agreement, anything done by the UJA or any member of the group, had to be completely harmless).”⁴⁵

Julia’s membership in the group, if we rely on the statements included in the book of evidence, dated from mid-May. Which may well be true, given that when Epifanio reported for army service in late April, Julia was not yet a member of the group. There was another woman in the group called Ángela Boada, the partner of Antonio Asensio, but she died before any arrests were made.

Contacts designed to expand the group, contacts not just with folk from Santa Coloma, but with personnel from other areas as well (San Adrián, Badalona, Buen Pastor, etc.) were handled by Vicente Abad, Joaquim Miquel and Julio Meroño. It could have been any one of them that slipped Julia a letter suggesting that she join the organization and serve as its treasurer. Julia agreed and had practically no time in which to take on that responsibility. On 30 May, as the result of a tip-off, the first arrests of group members took place, triggering a series of arrests leading to the complete dismantling of the organization.

Julia was arrested on 30 May by a couple of Civil Guard members while she was doing some sewing at home with her aunt Concepción Romera. They took her to the ‘Can Coronel’

⁴⁴ Handwritten memoirs of Epifanio Garcia Murcia, borne out in conversations with the author.

⁴⁵ Joaquim Miquel i Montes, *El Pati de les Oques*, unpublished.

farmhouse on the Calle Mayor, where the Civil Guard had its premises at the time.⁴⁶ She was held there, incommunicado, for three days, during which time she was subjected to all manner of abuse and ill treatment. However, they were unable to extract a single name from her, nor a single particular, nothing that could have compromised her comrades. In the statement that was beaten out of her, all she admitted was that she had been active in the Libertarian Youth and was a member of the UJA:

“Statement of the detainee Julia Romera ...

Questioned by officers of the law, she stated: That her name was as stated, she was twenty-three years old, a resident of the town, living on the Calle Ignacio Iglesias.

Asked to state whether she belonged to the Libertarian Youth, as well as whether she held any office within them, she stated: that while the reds were in charge she was a member of the Libertarian Youth and that roughly a fortnight before had received a letter that was handed to her ... inviting her to join the Antifascist Youth and take up the post of treasurer, being identified as Number Two, having accepted that position. Asked how many meetings she has attended, since agreeing to take up the post she holds within that group, she said: That she attended none on account of her having been seriously ill; that she had received a letter inviting her to attend one meeting due to be held in the mountains out by the ‘Fuente de la Encina’, on Saturday the twenty-seventh.

Asked to state how many were in the group, as well as [illegible]

... she does not know the number, not having been present over the time since she agreed to take up the post of treasurer, which was on the nineteenth of this month, having been prevented from attending by sickness.

Asked whether she knows in how many towns these youth have a presence, she said: That she does not know where they have been set up.

Asked if she had anything to say regarding the questions put to her and having stated that what she has said is the truth, she affirmed that and ratified her statement in writing after having read it through and found, together with the officers, that it corresponded.”⁴⁷

The statement was signed by Julia and counter-signed by the two Civil Guards who had been questioning her.

In his autobiography *El Pati de les Oques*, Joaquim Miquel has this to say of the first interrogation to which he was subjected in those very same Civil Guard premises within days of Julia’s arrest, at a time when Julia had been detained after going there to make a voluntary statement after her family had received threats from the ‘*Benemérita*’ [Civil Guard]. Miquel records the methods consistently employed during questioning:

“The sergeant clutched the baton and slapped it rhythmically into the palm of his other hand, occasionally stroking it as if fondling it ... and then giving it another slap. It was an ostentatious gesture meant to intimidate or frighten; it was calculated to perfection and there was no doubt but that it created the intended effect.

‘Well, well’ – he opened, emphasizing and highlighting his words.

⁴⁶ The Santa Coloma Civil Guard post was manned by a squad made up of one corporal and five Guards.

⁴⁷ Santa Coloma Civil Guard record, included in the Summary Council of War Record held at the National Archives of Catalonia.

- Let me tell you right now what you must NOT tell me. Don't go telling me (as one of your pals has) that you were trying to set up a sports club. And don't go telling me that THEY DRAGGED you into this; that they signed you up unbeknownst to you. And don't go denying that you are the poet who composed those pretty verses. Or deny that you went with Vilaro to the cave where you had stashed the weapons and picked out the finest pistol for yourself ... because this baton, which has already had more than its fill with your comrades, does not want to lose its patience again in your case (...) Even as Joaquim spoke as persuasively as he could, the sergeant simply shook his head and stated that everything that I was saying did not fit in with the statements made by the comrades who had already received their beatings."⁴⁸

On 2 June, after three interminable days spent at the mercy of the whims of such people, Julia "barely able to walk and with her belly swollen from the injuries they had inflicted upon her", was removed to the 'Cervantes Theatre' in Badalona where some rooms had been repurposed for use as a female prison. The purpose of the transfer was so that she might make a statement before the local military magistrate, something that did not take place, officially, until 31 October of that year, as recorded in the book of evidence.

Oddly enough, in the Provincial Women's Prison's "Daily Record of Admissions and Discharges"⁴⁹, it is recorded that on 1 June 1939, Julia was admitted to the prison from the Badalona Command together with Mercedes Lara Pérez and Concepción Vázquez Agulló.⁵⁰ However, as our readers will already have deduced, that date is incorrect since Julia had spent three days at the Civil Guard post in Santa Coloma and several months in the Badalona women's prison based, as we have stated, in the 'Cervantes Theatre'. In all likelihood, after she had been in custody for 72 hours and on the instructions of the military judge, they had her recorded as being held in the Provincial Prison in 'preventive' custody, even though she was actually being held elsewhere.

Later, Julia was to be held in the 'Les Corts' female prison as it was known back then, up until the meeting of the Summary and Urgent Council of War held in the Barcelona Courthouse on 2 January 1940. Two months earlier, and specifically during the first few days of the month of November of the previous year, all of the detainees were removed to the cells of the Courthouse, but on that occasion the trial was put back.

The Council of War

One Civil Guard, really taken with the spectacle, could not resist remarking as he used his handcuffs:

- 'That defence of yours was a good one ... I'll say! The best and the longest I ever heard in my life ... It's a certainty that they won't kill all of you!' (...) He clung to the idea that it had been akin to a stage play, in which the protagonists had been seeking their freedom, without a care for convincing the Court that they were in the right. It was common

⁴⁸ Joaquim Miquel i Montes, op. cit.

⁴⁹ Women's Provincial Prison (Barcelona) Admissions Register. Catalogue number 5.3.01.2, Box 314, National Archives of Catalonia

⁵⁰ These two women were indicted along with Julia. Mercedes – mother to the brothers Vicente and Manuel Abad - was released on 9 October 1940 after acquittal by the Council of War. Concepción – who was 17 years old at the time, was freed on 18 December 1939.

knowledge that the proceedings based on the books of evidence had been pre-planned.”⁵¹

For servicemen who just three years before had risen in revolt against a legally constituted government to be chairing a Summary Council of War mounted against young people between the ages of 15 and 25 and paradoxically charging them with ‘military rebellion’ was a bit of an oddity.

The proceedings opened at one o’clock in the morning with the detainees being questioned by the prosecuting counsel. Twenty minutes in, into the room walked some medics escorted by Civil Guards and carrying a stretcher on which lay Antonio Fernández Vallet, a 17 year old also indicted in the case but hospitalized due to a serious illness. The stretcher was set down in the corridor and the proceedings continued, only to be interrupted after a few minutes by this incident. At a quarter to three that afternoon, the presiding judge, Lieutenant-Colonel Azcona, declared a recess, and scheduled the resumption for two hours later. The afternoon was taken up by an intervention by the Prosecution and Defence, with plenty of exhortations about *The New Spain* and the *Generalissimo of all the armies*.

Oddly enough, the defence counsel for the accused spent almost all his time upbraiding the Civil Guards who had arrested the youngsters over their *lack of diligence*, in that in his view, they would have been better advised planting an agent inside the UJA rather than being in such a rush to arrest them all:

... Rather than rushing into the arrests the way they did, they could have gone and planted one of our agents inside the organization, which I reckon might have produced a better outcome and rendered a more outstanding service to the Postulates of the New Spanish State.”⁵²

With a defence like that, small wonder that the verdict brought in five death sentences, eight life sentences, two 20-year sentences, four 15-year sentences, two 6-year sentences and three acquittals of some under-16s, albeit that these were handed over to the Tribunal for the Care of Minors.⁵³

In addition, Epifanio García and Salvador Alarcón, who had been UJA members up until late April, were arrested in their respective barracks in June 1939 and brought to Barcelona, but, due to lack of evidence, they had not been included in the same indictment. They were held in preventive custody up until April 1943, at which point the case was provisionally dropped for want of evidence. They were later sent back to their military units to complete their military service.⁵⁴

For Julia, the prosecution demanded a death sentence, and she was sentenced to life imprisonment by the Court Martial. The sentence pronounced on the day of the trial was ratified and adjudged *Firm and Binding* by the Advocate-General on 7 March 1940. Here we have to agree with Miguel de Unamuno when, alluding to “military justice”, he contended that “The military mind and the sense of justice are two things that do not sit well with one another. Added to which there is the profound ignorance of those who administer military

⁵¹ Joaquim Miquel i Montes, op. cit.

⁵² Records of the Summary Council of War, General Archives of Catalonia

⁵³ Another four people arrested along with the above were freed without charge after serving several months in prison.

⁵⁴ Epifanio Garcia deserted from the army a few months after being returned to its ranks. In September 1963 he was arrested at the Policia Nacional premises in the Plaza de Espana whilst attempting to sort out a passport. There was still an active warrant out for his arrest but the charges were dropped and he was freed.

justice (...) the almost absolute lack of independence of court martials, the members of which are victims of this stupid discipline that is the indelible seal set upon militarism.”⁵⁵ There was a notable incident as the detainees were being brought out of the Barcelona Courthouse on 2 January 1940 and being taken off to their respective holding facilities once the proceedings had ended:

“Medics and the custody officer carried the sick man who was shivering from the cold. As they were making their way to the coaches, passing through the Courthouse vestibule, shackled in pairs and in double ranks, some exclamations were heard from one of the guards and there was a bit of a scuffle. With one blow from the butt of his rifle, the guard had brought the Group’s most determined girl (Julia Romera, who was to pass away two years later) to her knees ...”⁵⁶

Seemingly, Julia had found the sight of young Antonio Fernández Vallet, grievously ill and with a raging fever, being ferried from one location to another in such conditions outrageous and had voiced her exception to this. The brutal response from her Civil Guard escort was recounted to us by Joaquim Miquel in his narrative. The ill-treatment to which this woman was subjected, initially during the days she spent in the Civil Guard post in Santa Coloma and later during her prison time, accelerated events and led to her untimely death.

Les Corts: imprisonment and death

When prison walls screen off the sun’s rays from entering and leaving ...
Daybreak shatters
On impact with the stones and towers
Of this dark, derelict, unmoving monster

And up in the towers, in those same towers
The black and green vultures of death
stand watch unremittingly over imprisoned liberty.
Meanwhile, beneath their jet-black boots
Tears of fury well in innocent eyes
Like dewdrops in that dismal September.⁵⁷

What with ration cards and a dearth of basic necessities, the situation during the ‘40s was so difficult that we can have some idea of what life was like behind the prison walls, all crammed together into the direst of hygienic and health conditions.

When Julia arrived, the Les Corts prison facility held some 1,400 female inmates. She shared a cell with Conxita Vives and the actress Maruja Tomás for much of her stay in the prison. They held her in high esteem, given her spirit of solidarity, her tremendous sensibilities and great sense of responsibility and even went to the lengths of claiming that Julia had a sort of “aura” that made her stand out from all the rest. They all pooled what little food their families and friends brought them. During this time she had visits and encouragement from her aunt Concepción and her cousin José. She also had the occasional visit from some female and male friends, including Joan Vicente once he got back from France in mid-1941. Out of

⁵⁵ “Los tribunales militares”, editorial of the Bilbao-based socialist weekly *La lucha de clases*, No 119, 9 January 1897.

⁵⁶ Joaquim Miquel i Montes, op. cit.

⁵⁷ Taken from a poem by Darío la Vuelta.

gratitude for Vicente's ongoing attention to her niece, Julia's aunt, who loved her as if she was a daughter, tried to make him a gift of the French geographer Elisée Reclus's (1830-1905) natural sciences encyclopedia *Man and the Earth*, but Joan declined the offer, thinking it far too generous. Those volumes must have been part of Julia's personal collection; she was known to be an avid reader.

Thanks to Luis Tarrasón, María Berdejo's son (María was a close friend of Julia's and a workmate of hers at Pañolerías Baró) who supplied us with two of Julia's letters to his mother we can say something about an interesting document dating from 1940. The two letters, dated 18 January and 5 March that year, respectively, paint us a portrait of a courageous, impetuous, idealistic young woman with a heightened sense of friendship. In one part of the earlier letter, she stated:

"Officially, I know nothing but as soon as I find out I will let you know (talking about her sentence).

I can imagine how distasteful you will find my dismal fate but that is all in the past now and happiness has washed over me again as I forget all about the past and I hope you will forgive me for all that you have been through on my account and I thank you for it because it is indicative of the affection you feel for me (...) when I get out I can fill you in and you can judge for yourself (regarding inquiries about the conditions inside the prison)."

In the second, longer letter, Julia told her girlfriend about her frame of mind and asked about some girlfriends about whom she had had no news and moaned that: "Many of them, if they were to bump into me in this place where I am will find that I am no longer the same Julia as before."

Elsewhere in the letter, she said:

"You complain and label my letter to you as unduly harsh and that may be so, but do not be surprised if I speak to you that way as you know the sort of person I am and that I call things as I see them and call a spade a spade just as my heart dictates, as I know that being the sort of person I am is going to cause me suffering and bring me a lot of disappointments, but, like it or not, that's how I am and nothing and no one will alter me: I am a girl with no tolerance for society's hypocrisies and conventions, that's all. But, deep down, I am not a bad person."

On 29 July 1940, Julia received the bad news that Manuel Campeny Pueyo, a leading light in the UJA, had been shot by firing squad in the Campo de la Bota. As the fascists would euphemistically put it, he had died "as a result of gunshot injuries". Campeny was the only one of the five that had received death sentences to have that sentence enforced against him. The other four had their sentences commuted to life imprisonment. And so the days slipped by for her, between those filthy walls, with very little hope and with huge preoccupation, in that her deplorable frame of mind had to be factored into her health issues which had worsened considerably due to the mistreatment doled out to her and which were deteriorating day by day due to lack of medical attention. Towards the end of the summer of 1941, after several fever attacks, the prison doctor established that several of her vital organs were infected with TB. That serious illness which had grown out of the internal injuries inflicted by the beatings she had received under interrogation and during her imprisonment, required, if she was to recover, decent food, the application of antibiotics and

other treatments, which Julia of course was denied. She was taken into the prison infirmary at a point at which the seriousness of her affliction had become irreversible. As Josep M Solé indicates, some 35.5% of the deaths that occurred in Barcelona prisons were ascribed to TB; “Therefore indicative of a higher death-rate from TB, partly ascribable in all likelihood to the hygiene conditions inside the prisons and partly to the disease’s being endemic towards the end of the war.”⁵⁸ On Saturday 6 September, she passed away in that same facility at 22.00 hours, after having declined the “spiritual assistance” offered to her by the prison chaplain, thereby indicating that she was consistent in her beliefs. Her aunt Concepción, cousin José and some fellow prisoners kept a vigil over her corpse, in an impressive display of mourning inside the prison. More recently, José Guerra, still emotional about it, stated:

“Covered with flowers there, she was as beautiful as any wax effigy.”

From among all the female prisoners, Julia’s *compañeras* collected a little money to afford her the decent burial that she deserved. And a friendly family let her use the niche⁵⁹ they owned in the ‘Casa Antúnez’ cemetery, which is where Julia was laid to rest on the morning of Monday 8 September 1941.⁶⁰

We would not like to finish these lines without quoting a few lines from a poem by Salvador Angulo dedicated to Julia: having sampled for himself torture under a different dictatorship, they carry an enormous emotional charge:

O Julia mine
How painful life is
Without freedom.
How tough this confinement,
This imprisonment, these irons
Needless and unprompted
How many tortured creatures
Perished in this prison. O Julia, comrade, friend
Sister!
Only death
could bring you to your knees!
Your clear mind
Your steady gaze
Which is why, like a flower
You were nipped in the bud.
Fascist torture
Cut short your life in that early autumn.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Josep M Solé i Sabaté *La repressió franquista a Catalunya 1938-1953*, Edicions 62, Barcelona, first edition, January 1985

⁵⁹ The niche in which Julia was laid to rest is on the Via Santa Eulàlia, Agrupación 3, Columbarium B, No 4,221, level 4 of the South-West Cemetery (Can Antúnez)

⁶⁰ As noted in Book 138-8 of the Barcelona Civil Register’s third section. The death certificate mistakenly records that she died at home. Yet further evidence of the lack of credibility of Francoist records. The person “instructed” to enter Julia’s name in the Civil Register was one Juan Ferrando Ciurana, a shop assistant living at No 24 in the Calle de Campo Sagrado in Pueblo Seco. We have not been able to establish any connection between this individual and Julia’s family.

⁶¹ Salvador Angulo Valverde, nephew of the great composer Salvador Valverde (1895-1975) wrote a moving poem dedicated to Julia, from which this has been extracted. Salvador Angulo was detained in Chile and tortured by Pinochet’s goons and, now based in Spain, Salvador still suffers from the after-effects of that

By way of an epilogue

“We think it a political disgrace that those who fought against the dictatorship and on behalf of democracy have not had the recognition they deserve.”⁶²

Our purpose throughout this article has been, if you will, to make known without at any time trespassing against documentary rigour, some of the little known aspects of the life of an extraordinary woman who gave her all in the fight for a better society. Meaning one based on solidarity, free and democratic. She saw it through with all its consequences, acting out a phrase that provided the title for an article by José Berruezo in *Aurora Libre*, which spoke of “Propaganda by example”. At the age of 20 she took on the duties of Libertarian Youth secretary, which position she swapped for that of treasurer, displaying a great sense of responsibility and solidarity, features that typified her throughout her short life. Julia was always the “soul” of that band of selfless young rebels, ready to give their all in the fight for freedom. Young folk who, on seeing their most precious asset in jeopardy never hesitated for a minute before getting themselves organized in order to combat repression. They might be written off as naïve, reckless, rash or as dreamers, but remember, several of them were just 15 years old. However, it can never be disputed that this band of young folk from Santa Coloma, for all their limitations, became the very first Catalanian organization resisting the dictatorship.

On 18 October 1998, the Santa Coloma town council paid a well-deserved tribute to Celestí Boada, who served as the town’s mayor from 1936 to 1938. Thereby paying tribute to an honest man engaged with his times, a man who lost his life due to fascist intransigence.

Which strikes us as a laudable move on the part of Santa Coloma’s corporation. However, by our reckoning there are a few tributes still outstanding. One, for instance, is due to José Berruezo, the town’s last mayor under the Republic. Another, as we set out here, being Julia Romera Yáñez.

The occasions in history when tribute has been paid to a woman have been few. And in Santa Coloma, in particular, we have no memory of any such thing happening. We reckon that now might be the right time and a good opportunity. It will soon be the sixtieth anniversary of Julia Romera’s death, she being a fighter for freedom, democracy and for that *fairer, more beautiful and more humane* society that was the dream of Teresa Claramunt, and who embodies the pain of all those nameless women who fought and suffered for a better society. And it is high time that this woman was rescued from her civil death once and for all.

Translated from Ágora. Historia de Santa Coloma de Gramanet, No 5, March 2000

[Trans by PS for the Kate Sharpley Library <https://www.katesharpleylibrary.net/>]

torture.

⁶² Gabriel Perles (PSC) “Homenaje a un guerrillero ...” in *Memoria ..* in *Butlletí d’Informació*, No 29, second trimester of 1999