

**Alfonso Domingo**  
**MELCHOR RODRÍGUEZ AND LOS LIBERTOS**

Melchor Rodríguez García is one of the most representative figures from one strand of anarchism that during the civil war faced the toughest ordeal to which any libertarian could be subjected: having to defend the lives of his fiercest enemies, the very people who would not have shied away - and did not - from ruthlessly liquidating their working class opponents. That strand of humane anarchism was deep-seated in several Madrid anarchist groups, among them 'Los Libertos', the group to which Melchor had belonged ever since he joined the FAI. Former apprentice bullfighter, a panel-beater and trade union activist, he was the man in charge of the Republic's prisons from November 1936 until March 1937 and later, towards the end of the war, ran the cemeteries department in Madrid. As the representative of the Madrid city council, it fell to him to surrender the city of Madrid to the Nationalists on 28 March 1939.

The fact is that not only did Melchor Rodríguez save the lives of thousands of people in the Madrid besieged by Francoist troops, but his efforts were assisted by many within and outside of the anarchist ranks - the College of Advocates, the Supreme Court, the Diplomatic Corps - although, but for his resolute character and determination, his contempt for danger and without the firm beliefs on which these rested, Melchor might never have been able to rescue upwards of 10,200 people - the number of inmates in Madrid's prisons - as well as harbouring nearly half a hundred in his own home and smuggling others out to France. To manage much of this and above all to halt the "takeaways" and shootings in Paracuellos, Melchor relied on the FAI's 'Los Libertos' group. One of its members, his great friend Celedonio Pérez, operated on foot of a mandate from Melchor as director of the San Antón prison. Others helped in the commandeering of the palace of the Marqués de Viana in the Calle Duque de Rivas, where the widest conceivable spectrum of folk from Madrid - priests, army officers, Falangists, auctioneers and small industrialists, the owners of workshops and garages where Melchor had worked, officials from the Prison Service, their families and even the lover of a Radical ex-minister, plus her family - found refuge.

**Years of dictatorship and imprisonment: The Madrid of Primo de Rivera**

Before reviewing the civil war history of Melchor and 'Los Libertos', and in order to get a proper perspective, we need to look somewhat further back in time to the 1920s when a worker collective came together in Madrid that was primarily employed on the construction of the Metro and on redevelopment in the city.

When Miguel Primo de Rivera made himself dictator of Spain, first through a Military Directory and then through a civilian cabinet, his aims were plain: the mailed fist for the workers and an open hand for the war in Morocco. One of the first steps taken by the dictator was to cordon off the anarchist trade unions which were more pugnacious and revolutionary than their socialist counterparts. CNT militants were forced to go underground and spent more time behind bars than on the streets. Whilst their organisations were closed down, the libertarians took out membership of the *Casas del pueblo* [People's Houses] of the tolerated UGT so as to be able to carry on the struggle in secret. Among those who joined the *Casa del pueblo* in Madrid were Cipriano Mera, Mauro Bajatierra, Melchor Rodríguez, Antonio Moreno, Celedonio Pérez, the González Inestal brothers, Teodoro Mora, Feliciano Benito and David Antona. Later, under the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, they banded together at the Ateneo de Divulgación Social.

Melchor Rodríguez García had come to Madrid in 1920, on the run from the Seville police who had him on record as the secretary of the Woodworkers' and Coach-builders' Union, from which position he had orchestrated a strike against the employers after Manuel Pérez, the previous secretary was arrested.

Of humble origins, he had been born in the Triana quarter of Seville in 1893. His father worked as a machinist at the docks and his mother in a tobacco plant. At the age of 10, following his father's death in a work accident in Seville docks, he was obliged to seek work in Seville's foundries and carpentry workshops and forget about any plans he might have had to study. From apprentice he moved up to panel-beater, pursuing that trade whilst harbouring hopes of being a success in the bull-fighting world.

As an apprentice bullfighter he fought successfully in many rings such as in Salúcar de Barrameda in 1913. He quit that profession after he was gored in the Plaza de Tetuán in Madrid in August 1918 and a number of try-outs in Salamanca, El Viso and Seville in 1920. His various injuries removed him from the circuit and equally important was his entry into the CNT where, from the physician Pedro Vallina no less, he had received his initiation into trade union affairs from such charismatic men as Paulino Díez and Manuel Pérez, two continually harassed libertarian stalwarts. Paulino and Manuel were decisive factors in Melchor's

turning his back on bullfighting.

In Madrid where he had married Francisca Muñoz, a former dancer and friend of Pastora Imperio, Melchor worked at the best garages and was sought after for his expertise as a panel-beater. As in Seville, from the outset he was active in the CNT trade union organisation. The circles in which Melchor moved, the *crème de la crème* of Madrid trade unionism, not only attracted important people from the CNT who would determine the fate of the Confederation right up until the civil war, but also harboured the motley outlooks and affinities that were also to crystallize in the FAI. But it would be several years before that would happen, years of difficult activism, often underground, with those shuttling men in and out of prison - Melchor himself was jailed upwards of thirty times during the same period. Years when men were forged in trade union battles, disputes and strikes, in meetings and committees, by their reading and discussions.

On the morning of 12 December 1923, several police showed up with a search warrant at the Calle Amparo apartment in the proud Lavapiés quarter where Melchor was living with his wife and daughter. The police soon found what they were after: the minutes book, rubber seals and savings of the coachbuilders' union group of which Melchor was the secretary. Hidden in some pouches under the bed they found lots of anarchist newspapers insulting the authorities and the police. They also seized letters from leading trade unionists, names disguised by nicknames and all of this was a matter for further questioning and a trial that resulted in a thousand peseta fine which neither he nor the union was in a position to pay.

Ever since he had become a rather frequent habitue of the Modelo prison in Madrid, Melchor had had his eyes opened to the helplessness of the prisoners and their families and he knew all about their problems and isolation and despair at being unable to work and at their families being required to find resources for the inmates. In the union Melchor talked and made collections and directed campaigns. The organisation should not leave its people high and dry and its fighters should never have cause to doubt the support of the rest, those luckier and still at large.

In contrast with the marxists who were learned doctrinaires, propagandising on sites and in clubs, the anarchists also carried their message into the prisons. All inmates could be recruited to the struggle, liberation making no distinction between them. Redemption was the key word here. Having embraced the message, once in prison, the political and social prisoners were his target audience. He committed himself to this, having been appointed to it by the CNT's national official on the Prisoners' Aid Committee. His message was the raw message of the victim of exploitation, the cry of the outcasts of the earth but it flourished.

Melchor did his homework. He read the books of the great anarchist writers, well-thumbed volumes passed from hand to hand like reviews and newspapers. The word was passed on, discussed and opinions shared. Along with prisoners, "ideas" were to be a fundamental part of his life, a commitment whereby he would be moulded by his night time and weekend reading. Briefed on movements and schools of thought, Melchor aligned himself with those who had a fundamental belief in the goodness of human beings, believing that people would do the right thing if only they had enough education. Learning was necessary before one could wake up to the world's problems and find ways of solving them.

But every bit as important as ideas is organisation, the power of those who band together freely in order to achieve some purpose. This meant, in short, the action that was so dear to and synonymous with anarchist praxis. One result of all this effervescence was the establishment of the FAI, a set of initials set to become admired and feared. The Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), launched amid paella and sunshine on a Valencia beach in 1927, was an umbrella for the bearers of the flame, thoughtful anarchists, the revolutionary brain that was to radiate influence within the CNT.

Together with Melchor, the 'Los Libertos' group took off with about ten men, men such as Feliciano Benito, Celedonio Pérez, Francisco Trigo, Salvador Canorea, Manuel López, Santiago Canales, Francisco Tortosa and Luis Jiménez and to these the Asturian Avelino González Mallada was added after 1931. It was a group of some importance within Madrid FAI circles.

Feliciano Benito came from the 'Los Iguales' group of which Pedro Merino and Mauro Bajatierra were also members; Celedonio Pérez, originally from Zamora, had been a coal-face miner in Asturias and having gone into exile in France in 1924 had made the acquaintances of Durruti and Ascaso. He was a leading figure in the construction sector and was by nature pugnacious, kindly and optimistic and his beliefs ran deep and he articulated and conveyed these well, especially to youngsters. His influence on other members of the CNT and FAI was self-evident, as was his impact on Garcia Pradas whom he had educated in anarchism. Despite

a weakened heart that eventually forced him out of construction, he was tireless and a fine organiser. The Galician Manuel López was also from the construction sector. Francisco Tortosa was one of those learned and kindly souls whose preferred audience was among the youngsters in the libertarian youth. He was a regular at the Casa del Pueblo and at the Ateneo de Divulgación Social as well as the rationalist schools. According to Gregorio Gallego's description of him, he cautioned everybody and not just the supporters of violence against the risks of resorting to a communist dictatorship which was every bit as dangerous as any fascist one. Shrewdly he was of the view that fascism was not so much an ideology as an amalgamation of rightwing interests designed to overcome capitalism's social problems, which required a docile working class. But communism was even more of a danger, for it passed itself off as the only solution and lured many workers on to the totalitarian path. The elderly Tortosa was persona non grata among the communists and many young libertarians carried away by violence and with their mouths filled with talk of revolution and they looked upon his humanistic ideals as obsolete. Gregorio Gallego recalls going with him to a rally held by José Primo de Rivera with whom he had crossed swords when they were in prison together. He was also an acquaintance of Largo Caballero and José Díaz aka *Pepillo*, back in the days when they had both been persecuted in Seville. Melchor Rodríguez and Francisco Tortosa took a similar line and whilst Melchor placed action on an equal footing with ideas, with the elderly Tortosa the main thing was to speak out and persuade one's opponents. It seemed to him that communism, or the anarcho-bolshevik dictatorship for which some were clamouring were anti-human, a product of the failure to develop a harmonious society of free human beings, wherein productivity went hand in glove with social justice and freedom. Against this backdrop, inside the FAI, the meeting-place for Spanish and Portuguese anarchists, Melchor, like Tortosa, dedicated himself to "ideas". He studied the Russian revolution, especially the anarchist Makhno, about whom he published articles. The feared communists, the Bolsheviks, had put paid to the anarchists in Russia - by then known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics - in the cruellest way: by simply shooting them down.

What with his articles and strike committees, Melchor was very active. When not under arrest for press offences, he was picked up under the Public Order Law or for membership of the Spanish Prisoners' Aid Committee "a subsidiary of Paris". 1927 and 1928 saw him imprisoned on four occasions and his home was forever being searched and some of those searches turned up documents from the Committee. Whilst renowned in trade union circles as the doyen of their prisoners, he was also starting to earn a name as a writer of polemical articles and as a born poet. This reputation was boosted by his poems, speeches and rallies. An indefatigable article writer, he was frequently published in *CNT*, *La Tierra*, *Solidaridad Obrera*, *Campo Libre*, *Castilla Libre*, *Frente Libertario* and *Crisol*. The upshot was almost always the same, up until 1930: weeks or months behind bars.

In the Modelo prison, shortly before the elections of 14 April 1931, Melchor and other anarchist inmates came to an accommodation with the republican leaders who had signed up to the Pact of San Sebastián. Libertarians' misgivings about these well-dressed, well-fed bourgeois with their telephone service and silk pyjamas were to be reinforced as soon as the new regime was in place.

### **The Republic, hope frustrated**

One of the first things done by CNT personnel – Melchor among them – on the afternoon of 14 April 1931, was to press the acting Interior minister, Miguel Maura, for the release of all social prisoners from the Modelo prison. Although Maura could do nothing to stop it, from then on there was to be strife between him and the CNT.

A slumbering dragon during the lethargic times of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, the CNT bounced back with gusto come the republic. The time had come for it to make itself heard, boost its organising and improve the dire conditions of a working class that was lagging behind the rest of Europe. The Telefónica strike was the first spat between the CNT and the government, especially with Ángel Galarza Gago (a socialist radical politician) as director-general of Security: this republican Mola figure took up the gauntlet flung down by the CNT which was after a Spanish-owned telephone service rather than one controlled by the USA's Standard Telephone Company.

Organised through the CNT, the workers brought pressure to bear on the company. The latter refused to negotiate and a mass strike began on 6 July 1931. Melchor (president of the Ateneo de Divulgación Social at that point) proved to be one of the driving forces behind the dispute which dragged on for several weeks. Leading to clashes, injuries and sabotage (with machinery and installations smashed) and violent

confrontations. The government sent in the security forces against the trade unionists, with orders to open fire on the strikers. Anarchist locals were stormed and workers' leaders arrested – (Melchor was one of the first) – and hauled off to the Modelo prison. According to a later article he wrote, some twenty leaders were isolated in punishment cells; the remaining thirty were packed into cells on the first floor and locked themselves in by way of protest. Melchor paced up and down his tiny cell which was filthy, lousy and where his choice was between standing up or sitting on the floor, as the cell was bare: there was no bench and no bed.

One month later and several of the trade unionists were released. That same day, Melchor addressed some 600 workers at the daily rally held the Telefónica strikers at the Ideal cinema in the Calle Embajadores. A telegram from Barcelona was read, endorsed by Niembro, a director who had been seized by the CNT workforce as a means of pressurising the company.

"Behold, Niembro, all a-tremble-o!", a wisecrack devised by Melchor, a read wordsmith when it came to quips and slogans, was echoed by a number of those present.

"Galarza's a liar. He has answered *La Tierra* back by saying that lots of comrades have been released, but another 31 are still inside. And when he says that the Ateneo de Divulgación Social has reopened, he forgets to mention that this was down to pressures from trade unionists. Pay no heed to the police nor to any grasses or moles in our ranks. This strike is going to succeed!"

Melchor, slim and fiery of speech concluded his harangue waving his arms about and shouting: "To hell with Galarza!"

After Miguel Maura was toppled from power, Melchor wrote an article attacking him on 27 October 1931, weighing up the six months since the proclamation of the republic. The piece was scathing. As was the label that Melchor hung on Maura:

#### A CHALLENGE AND A REPLY

*For Maura, the man of the 108 dead.*

*Señor Maura, the man of the 108 dead, says that the CNT does not abide by the law and a time will come when the government, whichever it may be, will have to disband it and go after it. This Señor Maura, the man of the 108 dead, does not scare those of us who, sacrificing everything, defend the glorious CNT. Ever since that revolutionary workers' organisation sprang to life in Spain, it has been constantly hounded and dissolved and its militants jailed, deported, gunned down in the middle of the street and the criminal ley de fugas has been used against; as it was in the day of the tyrannical monarchy, so it is now in the present days of the "democratic" "workers'" tricorn-hatted Republic.*

*No one is better placed than you, the son of "that other Maura" who stained his hands with the blood of our teacher, the great Ferrer, to say that. 108 families wear mourning through the direct fault of he that was the Ministry ... of Oppression; 108 households turned into lasting spiritual tombs for those 108 dead who will never be stricken from the memory of their kin and that of all men of honest sentiments; 108 murders carried out in cold blood by the man who, from a seat bequeathed to him sent out the order to the Civil Guard: "Fire without prior warning."*

Officers from the Social Investigation Squad rearrested him on 15 February 1932 as the leader of the panel-beaters' strike. He was out again within days and found time to speak at a big rally held in Madrid's Fuencarral theatre in support of deported prisoners. These deportations were the outcome of a revolutionary general strike that the CNT had promoted the previous 19 January in the Upper Llobregat district in the Catalan Pyrenees. The government picked out 104 anarcho-syndicalists and placed them on board the vessel 'Buenos Aires' [Melchor sneered at it as the 'Malos Aires'] leaving Barcelona for Spanish Guinea and stopping off at Valencia and Cadiz. Its filthy holds housed, among other leading libertarians, Durruti and the Ascaso brothers. At the rally Melchor read letters from social prisoners in the Modelo prison in Madrid to the packed crowds and recited a poem that drew warm applause.

He also wrote a fiery piece in *La Tierra* against the excesses of bourgeois rule which was blind to the protests from workers and inclined to set the security forces on them. Melchor gave a breakdown of those who had perished in the government's crackdown between 14 April 1931 and 14 April 1932:

*Pasajes! Maria Luisa Park! Barcelona Police Headquarters! Arnedo! That damned ship 'Malos Aires'! Proletarian Spain in mourning! Behold the funereal symbol of an age-old Spain whose litany of suffering will conjure up a new Spain as a sublime prologue to a better world, one wherein the sun of Justice and Liberty may bathe all human beings in equal measure, flooding consciences and hearts with love and brotherhood until it becomes impossible for men to exploit, hate and tear at one another like wild animals ... And nor will we have occasion to weep over the depressing balance sheet of some second 14 April, its anniversary plentifully marked by entertainments that the suffering people may not*

*share whilst grief, pain and poverty rampage through the humble homes of those missing one hundred and sixty six victims!*

He was rearrested over a piece he had written for *La Tierra*. And was asked for 50,000 pesetas bail. From the police station he was relocated to the remand court and the General Directorate of Security where he was placed in a cell already packed with 25 ordinary prisoners; two police officers gruffly demanded names and nicknames. When Melchor, having informed them of his affiliations, told them the reason why he was there – that he was a socio-political prisoners – he was cut off by one of the policemen:

“Social, my balls! You’re here because you’re a thief or something along those lines!”

“You’re the thief or something along those lines!”

Bristling at this response, the officer pushed Melchor.

“A thief and a murderer, for the CNT has nothing but thieves and murderers!”

“I say again, the thief and murder is you!” Melchor returned, more determined than ever. “And you’re a boor as well, unworthy to describe yourself as a man, let alone a policeman, since you haven’t the education to be dealing with people!”

“I’m going to stick my boot in your balls. I’m going to take you down a peg or two!”

Melchor defended himself against the policeman’s assault and gave him a slap. The policeman managed to shove him back into the cell and snatched his neckerchief, the corners of which were poking out from his jacket pocket and he ripped it to shreds.

“Give that here! It’s plain to see that the only thief around here is yourself!” the anarchist scolded the officer. The policeman redoubled the tide of abuse but Melchor silenced him: “Would you be so kind as to tell me your name just as I gave you mine, Melchor Rodríguez. You there, do you want to tell me his name? Just to be sure I know who I’m dealing with and whose face I have to smash!”

Melchor’s pilgrimage through the Modelo prison finished up in the fifth floor, in the company of ordinary prisoners. The anarchist picked up his pen again and wrote another piece published by *La Tierra* and *Solidaridad Obrera*. Under the title “How they demanded ten thousand *duros* for my release and how a boorish police officer behaved towards me” he told of his adventures en route to jail. Like other anarchists he was not granted political prisoner status, whereas, for the same offence, “high society” figures like Juan March enjoyed privileged treatment.

As a result of the article March, who at the time was being held in the Modelo prison’s special cells – where he wanted for nothing – tried to post bail for Melchor in order to win him over. This was a ploy rejected by the libertarian, just as it had been by other prison comrades who had turned a deaf ear to March’s blandishments.

January 1933 and the Casas Viejas massacre was a crucial date in the history of the Second Republic in Spain. The tragedy, as recounted by Manuel Pérez Cordon in *CNT*, Ramón J Sender in *La Libertad* and Eduardo de Guzmán in *La Tierra* came as a hammer blow at the CNT’s Madrid headquarters. Melchor was the most emotional of all the people on the CNT premises. Tears streamed down his face, he was distraught and looking for some way of venting his outrage.

“Murderers! Damned murderers, I curse you and all respectable folk! The republicans are worse than the monarchists! We have to dump this government. Starving peasants shouldn’t be murdered just for asking for work and bread!”

Over the ensuing days, Melchor acted. The reports by Cordon, Sender and Guzmán spoke of someone’s having survived the incident, a female eye-witness to the unconscionable behaviour of police officers who behaved like wild beasts. She was under arrest in Cádiz and Melchor travelled down to the Andalusian city in his capacity as head of the national prisoners’ aid committee. He wanted to secure the release of the woman, the grand-daughter of *Seisdedos* and daughter of one of those killed in the tragedy.

The legend of María Cruz Silva aka ‘*La Libertaria*’ began to spread through all of Spain’s workers. She was moved from Medina Sidonia to Cadiz where she was to be visited by Melchor together with Miguel Pérez Cordon who was committed to securing Maria’s release. Amid a political scandal, María Cruz Silva was freed. In Cádiz, Miguel and Maria fell in love. By August they were travelling up to Madrid, having entered into a free union with each other. Perez Cordon started working for CNT. And by November María was taking part in the great rally in Madrid.

The rally at which Melchor introduced ‘*La Libertaria*’ at the Europa cinema in the Avenida Bravo Murillo was long remembered. The premises and adjacent streets were packed with thousands of people. A number of

CNT speakers addressed them, and, among other things, the story of the Casas Viejas tragedy was recounted. There were tears when Melchor spoke to recount the story of a young slip of a girl, now grown to womanhood, listening to the lessons imparted by the elderly charcoal-burner Francisco Cruz aka *Seisdedos* who was like some sort of an apostle planting ideas in Casas Viejas. An Andalusian village prey, like so many others, to the feudal controls of the *caciques* (political bosses) and priests. María Cruz Silva was dressed in black, like a martyr. She managed to read out one sentence before she was overcome by emotion. On 18 April 1933, Melchor Rodríguez returned in the pages of *La Tierra* to his sinister narration of the police repression: 121 fresh victims in a single year. In pride of place the 23 who perished in the confrontation in Casas Viejas. Between 1931 and 1933 the police of the “Workers’ Republic” had claimed the lives of 287 proletarians. The jails were packed with trade unionists, most of them held without warrants. Others had been deported to Guinea, the press was labouring under government censorship and the enforcement of the State of Emergency and the Law for Defence of the Republic and Public Order had slashed to a minimum the guarantees and right of the person.

### **Debating with Ramiro Ledesma in Ocaña**

In 1933 the government sought to raise the stakes and to eradicate the rising tide of fascist groups. After some members of Ramiro Ledesma’s JONS group raided the Spanish-Soviet Friendship Association, the police rounded up a few rightwingers and Casares Quiroga gave it out that he had just stumbled upon a plot against the regime, a plot featuring an unnatural alliance of the FAI, no less, with the JONS and other fascist groups, with the connivance of the Christian socialist Father Gafo.

And in the wake of the announcement came the crackdown: 3,000 arrests were made across Spain between 19 and 23 July, the latter being the day when Melchor, the González Inestal brothers and other FAI members were arrested. The real guilty parties, of course, were nowhere to be found. In the early morning of 26 July they were relocated to Ocaña prison, to where a shady conspiratorial amalgam of monarchists, Primo de Rivera’s fascists and some JONSistas, including Ramiro Ledesma, were also delivered. Ramiro Ledesma tried to win the anarchists over to his cause and Melchor had a number of entertaining arguments with him in the prison.

They were all to be out again shortly. But it was not long before Melchor was back in the Modelo again. As head of the prisoners’ aid committee Melchor took part in a meeting at the Monumental theatre on 16 December. Although he did not approve of blind violence, he explained what was happening by citing the day to day hunger that failed to move the *señoritos* [nobs] to compassion. The police arrested him an hour later as he returned home. Even though no compromising papers were found on him in the course of searches, the Social Investigation Squad forwarded the magistrate a report on Melchor’s police record: it also contained a number of falsehoods, adding fuel to the fire: “Whilst it has not been possible to find evidence, the conviction is that he was one of the people in charge of triggering the recent disturbance in the capital.” His defence was handled by a lawyer who had previously defended many CNT members: Mariano Sánchez Roca, a fellow contributor to *La Tierra*. Like other prominent anarchists, Melchor stood accused of sedition, a serious charge that was not given the same treatment as press misdemeanours or libel.

Following the December 1933 revolt, frictions between the groups making up the FAI’s Federation of the Centre exacerbated as they analysed its failure as being attributable to isolation and lack of allies; not only had arms been in short supply, so too had been a broader base and vigour. Four groups made it their business to bring influence to bear on the others and went all out for a worker alliance. When this was rejected, the issue of violence cropped up. Reviving the old debate about hold-ups or expropriations. The group that was advocating unity with other trade union and social forces was not in favour of hold-ups and it spelled out its stance. It acknowledged that sound militants had perished and lost their liberty in the raising of funds for the organisation, but whilst this had on occasion been driven by necessity, the practice had proved itself a pernicious one in the current conditions: “It is our conviction that he who starts out carrying them out as a matter of necessity finishes up carrying them out in a systematic way.” The pens of Melchor, Avelino and Celedonio could be detected in the documents circulated by the dissenting groups. Hold-ups had done the organisation more damage than harassment by the bourgeoisie and government: “They have brought dishonour upon us, ruining many comrades’ morals and cost us a lot of money in that even though the proceeds have reached the Committee it costs us more to get folk out of jail. Lots of innocent comrades have paid with their lives and others are imprisoned, or have gone crazy in prison and quite a number have drifted away from our beliefs, become dangers to our organisation and turned into immoral

bourgeois.”

The irrefutable and ultimate conclusion was that anybody wanting to be a hold-up man could not be in the FAI or the CNT: “The FAI cannot have any truck with money raised through hold-ups, because it brings dishonour upon us and harms us. Robbers have no place in our ranks.” Although it was agreed that anybody involved in such deeds should be expelled from anarchist ranks, nothing came of the resolution, for the CNT was girt by pressing necessity: any revolution requires its wherewithal.

The rifts within the FAI were exacerbated with the failure of the October '34 revolution which brought a difference of opinion into the ranks of anarcho-syndicalists: no arms, no revolution worthy of the name. Even though Asturias had got as far as a revolutionary strike, in Madrid and elsewhere in Spain unity had been absent: and the whole thing had been a disaster. Except from the heroic armed resistance offered at the Madrid UGT headquarters by a tiny number of socialists to the Army and Assault Guard forces, the remainder of the membership had not wanted to know about what weapons they had and the barracks that had given commitments had not lived up to them. The Madrid anarchists who had sought weapons from their colleagues had been met with refusals. Yet the repression batted upon them and the socialists alike. Things inside the FAI were at sixes and sevens with everybody suiting himself and this was infecting the CNT. Most of Madrid's anarcho-syndicalists were against a compact with the socialists. Six FAI groups championed that line as against the 8 groups opposing it: in all, about a hundred people were in the ring and there were a hundred different views.

Then again, the libertarians arrested were of every school of thought and were entered prisons whose populations were already swollen. Melchor, Celedonio Pérez and other prominent CNT personnel were housed for some months on the fifth floor of the Modelo prison. They strove in vain to get the press to cover their predicament and to get the authorities to back down. Their lawyers – Sánchez Roca and Benito Pabón, who tried everything and who were also the link to their families – got nowhere. The organisation had been driven underground and the prisoners' aid committee was barely functioning.

By early November the Interior minister eased the pressure. A few inmates were freed, Melchor Rodríguez and Celedonio Pérez among them. The day after they were released, Melchor and Celedonio, the leading lights of the 'Los Libertos' group, turned up at the Interior ministry to press for the release of the *presos gubernativos*, comrades locked up without due process. “We left that prison filled with comrades. Either set them loose or send us back to them, since we were arrested on the same day in relation to the events of October. If we can be set loose, there being no crime committed, the same rights should be granted to the rest.”

“I acknowledge that you are abundantly correct” – said Eloy Vaquero, the Interior minister, one of Lerroux's Radicals, “I am all in favour of not turning the screw. Circumstances have forced us to take steps against any attempt at revolution. But given the calm that prevails around the country, you have my word that I will accommodate you in your just desires.”

Within two days, 250 prisoners left the Modelo. But the anarcho-syndicalists leaving the jails did not do so without some controversy. CNT members wanted no truck with the Radical politicians and increasingly there was grumbling about Melchor and Celedonio, especially after their visit to the minister was reported by *La Tierra*.

Within days a note from the Local Federation of Unions had been issued, disowning them. Melchor was outraged and published an article in *La Tierra* which friends described as ill-timed and his enemies as unacceptable. In it he insisted that he had done nothing dishonourable nor deserving of censure, but rather a selfless act on purely anarchist terms, that he had made no claim to be a formal representative and he launched into an attack on the Local Federation's committee for its ineffectuality; its line-up included Amor Nuño, a man he did not get on with.

With passions rising and Melchor's case likely to add to the discord, the Federation of Anarchist Groups stepped in insisting that Melchor and Celedonio make a public apology so as to avert a split. Celedonio backed down, but not Melchor who stuck to his guns out of pride.

A plenum in late February 1935 expelled him. The Peninsular Committee, based in Barcelona, cooled matters down and recommended reconciliation on the grounds that proper procedures had not been followed. But by that point the fraternal bonds between the two factions of the Madrid FAI had snapped, there were too many matters unresolved and too many points of difference. First and foremost the issues of unity with the UGT and of hold-ups. The groups, openly at war with one another, made it their business to ruin the

standing of those who espoused an opposite line and the tone of the confrontations grew shriller as did the mutual dismissals. This was a sad, dirty business and insults were traded as they charged one another with being reformists, traitors, sell-outs to Gil Robles or Lerroux. There were charges of embezzlement of funds, until the situation became impossible. There was a schism between the two factions. One faction, the hard-line majority faction, numbered eight groups and 62 individuals: 'Los Hermanos', 'Los de Siempre', 'Adelante', 'Los Rebeldes', 'Acción y Cultura', 'Los Desconocidos', 'Los Impacientes' and 'Actividad'. The other, smaller faction which was in favour of alliance and opposed hold-ups comprised 6 groups and 43 individuals: 'Los Intransigentes', 'Los Libertos', 'Productor', 'Acción y Silencio', 'Joven Rebelde' and 'Los Irredentos'. These latter groups include some of the most illustrious names in Spanish and Madrid anarchism: in addition to Melchor, there were Celedonio Pérez, Feliciano Benito, Avelino González Mallada, the González Inestal brothers, Benigno Mancebo, Falomir, Maroto and Francisco Trigo. But reconciliation was eventually achieved. On the night of 11 January 1936 all of the FAI groups gathered for a plenum. Melchor's expulsion was but one item on a lengthy agenda. Although he insistently requested permission to speak and explain what had happened, he would not get the chance to address the gathering which finished in the early morning after its participants had been ground down by tiredness, their energies expended on a stormy plenum which had witnessed just about everything: talk, rebuttals, hugs and renewed friendships, the discovery of shared ground and the breakdown of consensus. There was still some vestige of cordiality between the libertarians all of whom agreed on the revolutionary unity for the purpose of overthrowing the bourgeois social order. Actually, the frictions had become personalised on both sides but they all engaged in high-faluting talk and talk of the need for unity in the face of what was undoubtedly imminent.

Anarchism is a movement into which several streams flow together. Practitioners of naturism and vegetarianism, homeopaths, *La Revista Blanca*, the anarchist thinkers dreaming up idyllic futures, madly jealous of their freedom and suspicious of association, plus trade unionists and – within this latter category – supporters of alliance with the UGT, and opponents of it. On a lesser scale the FAI mirrored the internal trends within anarchism. Melchor stood for the humanistic, non-violent ideal of purity, advocating education of the masses and of society so that things might collapse of their own accord. Unwittingly this came close to defending what Julián Besteiro, the socialist and UGT leader would come to advocate, but at this point, he was in a minority in the trade union camp where the winning position staked all on something different. In May 1936, with preparations underway in Madrid for a construction strike, the CNT met for its confederal congress in Zaragoza. The Confederation was at its height just then: 650 delegates representing upwards of a million and a half members. Anarcho-sindicalists put paid to earlier crises and committed themselves to a revolutionary alliance with the UGT. Many trade unionists arrived by train to attend the closing session of the Zaragoza congress. Melchor himself travelled up from Madrid with some comrades from the FAI's Federation of the Centre Region, all of them now in harmony, unity apparently having been restored after the heat had gone out of the situation.

As they arrived in Zaragoza, Gregorio Gallego and all the other libertarians on board the train broke into a song written by Melchor for the occasion: *"Beautiful Zaragoza/libertarian city/anarchist brain/ of bold Aragon/you are a living example/of day to day struggle/for the ideals of emancipation/you have revolution in your history/ and you fight with conviction and freedom.."*

Melchor was a complex, intelligent person with a dash of extravagance about him that sat ill with those cadres of the revolution who were always dour and serious. A great one for wisecracks, he also wrote poetry: a sort of a *zarzuela* (light opera) that always stood out, he always took a hand in discussions and threw in his two pennies' worth.

Starting that June the construction and allied trades – plumbers, carpenters, painters, electricians and gas employees – strike in Madrid really put the strength of the CNT to the test. In all, some 70,000 workers from the Madrid construction sector went on strike following a general meeting jointly held with the CNT and UGT together. A commitment was given at that meeting that there would be no return to work unless a fresh meeting so agreed.

The construction dispute turned into rather more than a campaign for better pay and a reduction in hours. The construction bosses held out: and the strike turned vicious. In working class districts hunger was abroad and the strikers forced shopkeepers to serve them, taking over restaurants and eating without paying. Strike pickets clashed with the police who proved powerless. At which point in came the Falangists, only too eager to deploy their counter-revolutionary violence against the bricklayers. First they picked off solitary workers



and later escalated to the small clustered gathered outside sites. These attacks were carried out on the orders of Ramón Fernández Cuesta, one of the most active Falangist leaders – jailed along with José Primo de Rivera and transferred to Alicante prison. He was itching to break the strike.

The CNT's defence groups, headed by Cipriano Mera, responded to the attacks and marched Falange Española members off sites in Nuevos Ministerios at gunpoint. The Falangists hit back and seriously wounded several anarchists. In the tit for tat the CNT machine-gunned a café where Falange members gathered. Three Falangists from José Antonio's bodyguard were left dead on the ground.

With the CNT strikers gathered on the ground floor of the Colegio Maravillas in Cuatro Caminos, they were addressed by Cipriano Mera, Teodoro Mora and Antonio Vergara. Mera warned those there about the imminent reactionary backlash in the offing. A military revolt was expected, a trial of strength that the workers had to face up to. After consulting its membership, the UGT ordered a return to work; its main objective had been won and the rest of its demands could be thrashed out in negotiations. The UGT reckoned that the dispute could seriously threaten the regime, more so than just the government.

The bosses had given all that they had to give but among the bricklayers were the Madrid CNT's most pugnacious militants and they carried on with the strike which by then had turned into a trial of strength with the State, the UGT and the communists who were accused of scabbing by breaching the decision made by the general meeting. A return to work was not easy: the CNT members' violence came down harder on strike-breakers than on the agents of the authorities. Scuffles erupted, pitched battles between strikers and non-strikers; some were carrying weapons, with the butts of their guns tucked into the pockets of their work overalls. In a number of incidents on 9 July, five people lost their lives on the sites: three from the UGT and two from the CNT.

The leaders of the construction strike – David Antona (national secretary), Teodoro Mora. Eduardo Val (waiter and leader of the Hospitality sector), Cipriano Mera, Melchor Rodríguez and Celedonio Pérez (from the Metalworking sector), Mauro Bajatierra (baker) and Antonio Moreno (Gas & Electricity), were rounded up and put in the Modelo prison. Which is where they were when Calvo Sotelo was murdered without warning. Some of them were freed on 16 July.

### **Civil war erupts**

From 18 July onwards, with the army in open revolt, the CNT decided to jemmy open the premises sealed by the police, commandeered cars and go in search of weapons. National Committee secretary David Antona was freed from prison on the morning of 19 July. His first move was to head for the Interior ministry. Face to face with General Sebastián Pozas, he threatened to send the CNT's militias out to storm the prisons unless the militants held therein were freed. By that evening the remaining CNT militants had been set loose – Celedonio Pérez and Melchor Rodríguez among them.

Dressed in a militiaman's overalls and carried away by the heroic sensation of someone about to set off to help change the world in a change that would be dramatic but which had to be welcomed with enthusiasm, Melchor addressed meetings and criss-crossed Madrid on propaganda and organising missions. He scuttled back and forth, caught up in the frenzy. In his waistband he carried a pistol, a pistol issued to him back at the union and which he always carried unloaded.

Unlike many at that point, Melchor felt no hatred. Maybe he was one of the few who, despite having endured prison and tough times, felt no hatred. There was always this *joie de vivre* about him and it was notable and infectious. Nor did he know fear which is the preface to hatred. He had never known fear, not when facing the bulls and was not about to harbour it now when there was so much that needed doing and a new society in waiting. Not that Melchor and his humanistic anarchism were all that rare. He came from a world – its roots deep in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – of men and women who, over decades, had been hatching the seeds of the society that precipitated the July 1936 coup. The revolutionary process that kicked off that summer and which transfigured cities, factories and countryside was rather more than mere destruction and bloodshed. Lots of libertarians believed that they were about to build the new world they carried in their hearts, a world from which hatred and vengeance would be banished. This ideal world made up of workers and bourgeois, libertarians and republicans, socialists and even moderate, forward-thinking right-wingers was part of what the frustrated coup-makers had revolted against.

Four days after the revolt, Melchor, having seen what was happening, committed himself to the rescue of victims of persecution as did Celedonio Pérez and Salvador Canorea and a few other 'Los Libertos' members.

During the Republic the FAI had played a more background role, always in the shadow of the CNT, inspiring some of what the latter did, sometimes attempted revolutions that came to tragic ends. But after the army revolted the FAI mustered all its fighting strength and sprang into action. Melchor's own group, 'Los Libertos', had always focused on ideas, wary of losing its principles amid the mass influx of members in recent years, a result of the radicalisation of social conflicts. For some time now Melchor had been warning of the dangers besieging the organisation as it welcomed in new recruits looking for some shelter under the anarchist initials in order to satisfy their craving or yearning for revenge. Among them were common criminals who threw in their lot with the revolution, the better to carry out their crimes with impunity. Melchor had recently been fighting, using his standing, authority and gift of the gab, to keep those beliefs unsullied. Now that they ran the risk of being drowned in blood-letting. In the months leading up to the war, at meetings, his comrades had paid him no heed. "Melchor's at it again", they said. When the war arrived, alongside well-meaning men and women there were others with murkier interests.

Melchor watched the deterioration. Unbridled anger let loose. A few of those he bumped into on the streets asked him, with terror in their eyes, for safe conducts, some scrap of paper that might authenticate them as loyalists. And he signed these and vouched for them, seeing as he did the imprint of excesses and the violence gnawing at everyone's hearts. Melchor had an idea in mind and he needed "cover" to pursue it. What better cover than to commandeer the palace of some fugitive aristocrat gone to ground. He had one in mind because it was close to Lavapiés and the Calle Amparo where he was living. He talked it over with Celedonio Pérez and a few comrades from 'Los Libertos'.

And so, on the afternoon of 23 July, Melchor, Celedonio Pérez, Luis Jiménez and other 'Los Libertos' members, armed with a few ammunition-less Mausers, turned up at the gates to the palace of the Marqués de Viana in the Calle del Duque de Rivas in the heart of the city. The Marqués, Teobaldo Saavedra was in Rome at the side of Alfonso XIII and his wife, the Duquesa de Peñaranda, had fled to the Romanian embassy. The couple's major domo, Salvador Urieta, quivered as he showed them around the palace. But he had nothing to fear. Neither he nor his family, nor any of the servants, the gardener and Maria, the housekeeper. In the whole of Madrid they could not have found a safer haven. From the outset, Melchor and Celedonio drew up an inventory which they were later to mail by diplomatic pouch to the house-holder in Rome. The Marqués de Viana's palace was to be the only one that survived unscathed. As the Marqués himself was to confirm, once the war was over.

Melchor and Celedonio reorganised the palace: A number of rooms were set aside for them, as were the rooms nearest the gate. The palace became a haven for lots and lots of people, including priests, military figures, Falangists, prison offers, industrialists and employers.

Melchor signed off on type-written notices that were put up on the front of the palace, stating that this palace had been commandeered for use as a people's museum and cultural centre. And he set about issuing loads of references, safe conduct passes and other documents to help people and VIPs from a range of social ranks, many of them suspected of supporting the rebel coup attempt, and their lives and possessions were spared. Hundreds found their problems evaporate as they produced a document – made out in some name, genuine or phoney – bearing Melchor's signature and seal. Some document that became a dedicated portrait, a photograph of the man that was churned out in hundreds by the photographer Espiga complete with a poem on the subject of anarchy,

Many rightwingers called the palace number, which was displayed on references so that they could call for assistance in the event of searches or arrests. During those early months between July and October, he saved dozens of lives. As the days passed the word spread. At Viana's palace there was a bigwig of sound antifascist credentials and humane instincts who would extend his protection to wanted persons who sought it. Visits to the palace multiplied: everybody dropped by for references or to press for the release of family members held in the secret prisons (checas). He rescued hundreds from certain death amid the lethal chaos of the time.

### **Prisons chief**

He was soon in a position where he could implement his beliefs as a humanitarian anarchist. With the help of some republican leading lights and officials, and with the aid of the diplomatic corps – the vast majority of which was in sympathy with the rebels – in November 1936 Melchor was appointed special prisons delegate

by the anarchist minister Juan García Oliver. From this post he brought to an end the *sacas* (removal of batches of prisoners for execution) and shootings behind the lines in Madrid, saving thousands of his own ideological adversaries. Differences of opinion prompted him to step down for a fortnight, during which time some of the shootings carried on. Reappointed to his post, at which he remained until March 1937, he was able to apply the brakes to the public order bosses of Madrid's Defence Junta where Santiago Carrillo to begin with, and then José Cazorla, with incalculable assistance from Serrano Poncela were acting on the advice of soviet advisors in 'purging' the rearguard. This brought Melchor a lot of criticism from the communists, and he was accused of aiding and abetting fifth columnists.

On 6 December 1936 there was an incident that has entered Melchor's name in the annals of the civil war. Over a number of hours that day, alone and with no weapon but his command of language, he stymied an angry mob in Alcala prison that was hell bent on taking the law into its own hands following a rebel air raid that had left a number of people dead and injured. Thanks to his actions he was able to save the 1,532 inmates held there; they including such VIPs from the future Francoist regime as Muñoz Grandes, Raimundo Fernández Cuesta, Martín Artajo and Peña Boeuf.

Melchor Rodríguez was a key figure in the Republic's recovery of control of public order and prisons. He ensured that there was order inside the prisons and restored dignity to the legal process. During his term of office, conditions from the 11,200 prisoners held in Madrid city and province improved, so much so that the inmates started referring to him as 'The Red Angel', a label which he rejected. He set up an information bureau, a prison hospital and improved food for the prisoners. Likewise, he personally escorted hundreds of inmates when they were being transferred to prisons in Valencia and Alicante.

Not that his efforts escaped the attention of all who took the line that no ease should be extended to the enemy; these included some fellow libertarians. He was soon having to dodge all sorts of dangers and close shaves and on a number of occasions his commitment placed his own life in jeopardy. During the war he came within an inch of death up to a dozen times, as he himself set out in some of the papers preserved in the archives held at the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam. These included a half a dozen attempts to murder him and even though Melchor never breathed the names or 'master-minds' behind these murder attempts, it is not hard to guess that most of them emanated from among the communists.

His locking of horns with the PCE continued when José Cazorla was head of the Madrid Defence Junta's Public Order Department. In April 1937 Melchor exposed the existence of Stalinist *checas* under Cazorla's direct command. This was when he had to step in to rescue the nephew of Sánchez Roca, García Oliver's secretary at the Ministry of Justice, from the clutches of the communists. Even though Melchor had by then been dismissed by García Oliver the argument between the CNT and the PCE was used by Largo Caballero as a pretext for winding up the Defence Junta.

His efforts to protect those under threat and harassed carried on even after he was stood down as Prisons director and his appointment as Madrid corporation's councillor in charge of cemeteries, representing the FAI. From his new post he helped the families of the deceased to be able to give their loved ones a decent burial and visit their graves, extended the burial grounds and sorted out the problem of the interment of refugees who had died inside the embassies. Insofar as he could he helped writers and artists and allowed his friend Serafín Álvarez Quintero's burial to proceed with a crucifix displayed in the spring of 1938. Even though he was aware of Colonel Segismundo Casado's plans – they were firm friends – to mount a coup and set up a National Defence Council which he was invited to join, Melchor was not actively involved with it and, even though he fell into the clutches of the communists like other councillors, he escaped being shot at the last moment.

### **The final act and the surrender of Madrid**

Come the final act of the civil war in March 1939, Melchor was placed by the Libertarian Movement's National Committee in charge of coordinating aid for libertarians fleeing to France. He had a sum of money at his disposal and a seat on a plane that could have saved him many a hairy moment. However, he decided that he would not be leaving Spain and that Celedonio Pérez and his wife should go instead.

Actually, Melchor Rodríguez was the last mayor of Madrid during the Republic and on 28 February 1939 was commissioned by Colonel Casado and Julián Besteiro from the National Defence Council to hand over the city to the winning side. He oversaw the transfer of powers over a two day period – even though his name would not feature in any deed or record – making speeches over the radio and striving at all times to

ensure that things went peacefully.

With the war now over, not only were Melchor's efforts not recognised, but he was subjected to the very same repression as all the others on the losing side. It was not long before he was arrested, facing trial at a court martial – twice. On the first occasion he was acquitted and after the prosecution appealed this he was sentenced in a mockery of a trial using false witnesses, to 20 years plus one day, of which he served five years. It should be pointed out that at the second trial, General Agustín Muñoz Grandes, one of the military captives Melchor had saved during the war, spoke up gallantly on his behalf. Muñoz Grandes lobbied on his behalf and handed in thousands of signatures from people rescued by the anarchist. Melchor served a number of years behind bars in Porlier and Puerto de Santa María prisons, serving most of his sentence in the latter.

When freed on licence from the latter prison in 1944, Melchor Rodríguez had an opportunity to throw in his lot with the dictatorship introduced by the winners and take up the post he was offered in the Francoist trade union system, or live a life of ease doing one of the cushy jobs offered him by some of the thousands whose lives he had saved, but he always rejected these options. Instead he remained a libertarian and stuck with the CNT, which choice earned him several further periods of jail time. In material terms, he lived very austere on commission from selling insurance. Together with the teacher Padilla and others he wrote lyrics for pasodobles and couplets and had articles and poems published on occasion.

As the long night of Francoism and underground anarcho-syndicalism began, he was a stalwart supporter of Enrique Marco Nadal's National Committee. Together with Nadal he kept in touch with the British Embassy, pressing for recognition for the ANFD (National Alliance of Democratic Forces). In 1947 he was arrested and put on trial in 1948 on charges of smuggling propaganda into Alcalá prison, as a result of which he was sentenced to a year and a half. He continued to lobby on behalf of political prisoners, using the personal friendships he had with persons inside the dictatorship, despite the criticisms he earned from his own comrades or from the left generally by so doing. Among his connections was the Christian Democrat and chairman of the Editorial Católica publishing imprint, Javier Martín Artajo (the man who had dubbed him 'The Red Angel') and the Falangist and Labour minister José Antonio Girón.

When disenchantment settled on anti-Francoism (in the 1950s and 1960s), he kept the torch of the CNT of the Interior burning and opposed the actions of the *Cincopuntistas* (relating to an alliance between one group of CNT members and the Francoist vertical Syndicates) in 1965. Throughout his busy life he participated in lots of regional and national committees and gatherings and it is no exaggeration to say that within the CNT he had great friends and great adversaries.

### Symbolic death

His very death on 14 February 1972 mirrored his life. Hundreds gathered around his coffin in the graveyard and they included VIPs from the dictatorship and anarchist comrades alike. It was the only instance in Spain where someone was laid to rest draped in the black-and-red anarchist flag during General Franco's rule. Some of those there said a prayer and at the end Javier Martín Artajo read out a few verses from one of Melchor's own poems:

*And should one of the outcasts of the earth*

*Ask you anarchism's inner secret*

*Explain it to him*

*as its teaching suggests:*

*Beauty, love, poetry*

*Equality, fraternity*

*Sentiment, freedom*

*Culture, art, harmony*

*Reason the ultimate guide*

*Science, truth above all else*

*Life, nobility, kindness*

*Satisfaction, joy.*

*All of this is anarchy*

*And anarchy, humanity.*

Pig-headed, optimistic, outgoing, an Andalusian with a touch of angel thrown in as Jacinto Toranzo put it,

Melchor's lifetime of work represents an adornment to humanity and – along with many other male and female leftists – he is an example to be kept in mind in these days of intolerance and sectarianism. As he himself argued time and again “you may die for your beliefs but you may never kill for them.”

A multi-faceted person full of lights and shades – a few of his comrades accused him of talking up his activities and of indiscretion – the very figure of a Spaniard from a bygone age, the stature of Melchor Rodríguez has merely increased with the passage of time. May these few lines serve as a thank you to a libertarian who captivated me a few years ago. The research towards a book on his life, which has taken me more than four years now, has opened my eyes to the exceptionality of his life and handiwork, so much so that may a time I wondered if he was not actually a literary, a fictional character. The final product is the book *Melchor Rodríguez, anarquista con ángel*, a well-deserved tribute to this model of all who displayed great humanity during the civil war.

### **The fate of ‘Los Libertos’**

As to the other ‘Los Libertos’ members, their fates differed but they never reneged on their principles. One of the first to die was Avelino González Mallada, one of the mainstays of Asturian trade unionism who joined ‘Los Libertos’ at the time that he was director of *CNT* newspaper in 1932; he was a great friend of Melchor's and the addressed rallies and suffered imprisonment together. He spent the early part of the civil war in Gijón, holding down a number of posts before becoming city mayor, serving only one year before Franco's troops arrived. After the collapse of the Northern front, he moved to Barcelona and shortly afterwards left for the USA on a propaganda tour. There he met his death in Woodstock in March 1938 in a suspicious car crash (a convenient method to which the FBI has occasionally resorted) while on a tour whipping up support for the Spanish antifascist cause.

Feliciano Benito would survive the war and was shot after rejecting Francoist overtures and efforts to get him to switch sides. In the early days of the war he had served in a column with Cipriano Mera, taking Guadalajara. He also served with Mera in the militias defending Madrid. Later he served as inspector of militias with the Popular Army and as political commissar with the IV Army Corps.

Manuel Lopez died shortly after the war ended, in Albatera (camp).

Francisco Tortosa was more fortunate. At the outset of the war he fought in the ranks of the Águilas de la libertad (Freedom Eagles) column on the outskirts of Madrid. In 1939 he managed to get out of the county before the surrender and in the concentration camp at Argelès, by then in his sixties, he was bitten by the art bug. And actually earned a living as a painter in exile in Mexico.

Celedonio Pérez who was the governor of San Anton prison during Melchor's time as director of prisons, later served as a divisional commissar with Cipriano Mera's division. Even though he managed to get out to France before the war ended, he was handed back by the French in 1940. It would appear that he was caught up in an attempt on the lives of Hitler and Franco in 1940. Although sentenced to thirty years in prison, he was granted remission and was released in 1944, after which he helped reorganise the CNT national committee, especially the committees headed by Vallejo and [Cipriano] Damiano. He was rearrested in 1953 and sentenced a year later to 15 years which term he started serving in Guadalajara. His delicate health led to his release and in 1956 he died in Madrid

Source: *Germinal: Revista de Estudios Libertarios* (Guadalajara) No 6, October 2008

Available at <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/articulo?codigo=3179223>

Translated by Paul Sharkey for the Kate Sharpley Library

