

Luis Santamaria Garcia 1926 – 2024

Obituary.

Luis Santamaria Garcia was born on the 18th of October 1926, in Bilbao. He passed away peacefully in his sleep on the 4th of July 2024, at his care home in Nuneaton, close to where I live. He was 97. He is survived by myself, his daughter, a nephew, two nieces, their partners and four great-grandchildren. He was the second of five children and came to the UK with his brothers, José and Ramón on board the Habana in 1937.

In the UK, he was to marry Florita, also born in Bilbao and who came to Britain in 1952. They set up home in a small flat in Ladbroke Grove, in the heart of North Kensington's Spanish community. They had three children, myself and my two sisters Mirella and Belinda. In 1970 we graduated to a semi-detached home of our own in Brent.

Luis was known as "Luisito" by both friends and his birth family. He was never referred to as such within the family that he and our mother had started when I was born in 1956. Our mother would always refer to him as Luis. When she spoke about him to my sisters and me, he was always "tu padre" or "vuestro padre". He would simply refer to her as "Flor". Once Luis and Florita became grandparents they unwaveringly progressed to "Amama" and "Aitite."

Luis was devoted to our mother and ourselves. He spent the 1960's working every conceivable hour, not for himself, but for his family. His entire income went into the family pot, from which he was allocated a small amount to get to and from work. I still remember what his work lunches consisted of; tortilla (Spanish omelette) and bread. I hold a vivid image of the round metal container used to carry it all to work.

Another precious memory I retain showing his unconditional devotion and love to his family is of how he spent the limited free time he had. On a Sunday morning, he would take my sisters and me to Hyde Park. First to the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens to fish sticklebacks and admire the ducks. After that, it was off to the Serpentine's cafeteria for our weekly drink of Coke.

Luis had several interests, some of which he excelled at. He became an exceptional cabinet maker of renown. During lunchtimes at work, he would diligently make things for us all and one day the item would suddenly and unexpectedly appear in the house. Cabinet making was not his first choice - music was - and his most iconic wood products were arguably the flamenco guitars he made. It would be hard to say how many. I still come across them to this day in the homes of those they were gifted to. He never sold a single one. Overtime, he became an accomplished guitar player, although I only remember his renditions of Flamenco music. Undoubtedly, he was a naturally talented musician.

Flamenco was integral to his Spanish identity and while campaigning politically against the dictatorship in Spain, it was obvious that the most creative expression of this activism was musical and cultural. He was an avid promoter and participant in the Basque Children's musical activities - including the tours of Europe made in his youth as well as his

performances for the BBC's broadcasts. No one should be in any doubt that Spain was his "patria". He was grateful to Britain and understood it like a native, willingly sharing all the privations of the Second World War in London, with a people whose courage in that conflict he so admired. Working class solidarity must have been one of the bonds that made all this possible. Apart from the Spanish political organisations he advocated for, he was a shop steward at his longest serving workplace. His last job was as a woodwork instructor. Various young people made it into the trade because of him.

He fought for his Spanish nationality when it was denied to him. He may have had to travel on a UN passport for many years, but the battle he and others relentlessly fought to have their nationality restored was ultimately successful. He never took out British nationality, not because he was against it, but because he firmly believed that Spanish nationality was his birth right, and this was not in the gift of a tyrant to deny. His statement as a proud Spaniard was unequivocal.

Our father left a testimony to his life when his book *Augur Euskadi hasta nunca* was published by the Spanish authorities. He also contributed to another book of memories *Aventuras en la Nostalgia*, again published by the Spanish authorities. He participated in documentaries, wrote articles and contributed orally to other books. His knowledge of carpentry, his exile and the fact that he lived through the Second World War made him an ideal candidate for a Catalan documentary on air raid shelters. He knew everything there was to know about Anderson shelters.

One of his legacies might be how he saw war and exile through the eyes of a child and his ability to convey this to the end in his published work. At least because that was what had happened to him. No doubt he was recalling first person narrative accounts drawing on personal experience. He did not merely convey the message that wars were imposed on children by adults, but that children had the inherent ability to understand much of what was going on.

Whatever care children experiencing warfare and exile should receive, our father and two uncles survived those years because of the support and attention they received from the British people and Spanish exiles. Frankness however was one of Luis' trademarks: There were good experiences like the colony at Shipton, and poor ones like at Margate. Our father did briefly experience life in Franco's Spain. When the civil war broke out, he was at a children's sanatorium in Laguardia in the province of Alava which immediately fell into the Francoist zone. Luis and others were identified as the children of Republicans. They were exchanged for Francoists held by the Republic. The reprehensible treatment received at Laguardia must have played a role in our father's rejection of Francoism.

In old age Luis lived in London's Notting Hill and demonstrated an extraordinary independence which I can only attribute to his childhood. He would cheerfully walk down Westbourne Grove with his two walking sticks. He would often tell me "yo no me doy por vencido". During this time, he greatly enjoyed family visits and the Basque Children's reunions.

In latter years he lived with the principles which had informed his life. He did not want to be a burden to us or anyone else for that matter, and only sought the support that was indispensable from the carers. The start of this year gave way to living in a care home. He was very happy there and in his characteristic manner settled immediately into a beautiful ensuite room with large plasma TV and a 24-hour dedicated care service. One of his life passions had always been the cinema and he was extremely knowledgeable on films from the 40's and 50's. The large plasma screen certainly aided the transition, but more importantly was the loving care he received from the wonderful staff. The Manager of the facility referred to Luis as "an absolute pleasure to have", as he gaily entertained the other residents on his mouth organ. One might conclude that the care home was at least as good as the best colonia.

Luis Ángel Santamaria.