

Ricardo Fernández Orsi, Captain of the SS Habana

by Sabina Fernández



Sabina Fernández with her grandfather, Ricardo Fernández Orsi and her grandmother Sabina Fernández de Pinedo Pardo

Ricardo Fernandez Orsi, my grandfather, had always dreamt of the sea.

Before I begin I should explain that the male line of my family consists purely of Ricardo Fernandezs, so where there could be confusion I am going to number them; my great great grandfather being Ricardo I and my grandfather Ricardo III.

Ricardo I had left Oviedo to emigrate to Pinar del Rio, Cuba. His son Ricardo II, born in Cuba ,was considered an ‘Indiano’, the name given to those Spaniards who had made good in America. It was Ricardo II who wento Madrid to study pharmacy and there that he met his future wife Elena Orsi from Seville but with an Italian surname. They chose to settle down in Valverde de la Vera a village in Extremadura located in a fertile cherry orchard about a dozen kilometers away from the famous Monastery of Yuste to where the emperor Carlos V retired with his mother Juana la Loca. And here it was that Ricardo III the future captain of the Habana and my future grandfather was born.

My grandfather told me that he knew from a young age that his place in this world was not to be in landlocked Valverde de la Vera but was to be on the seas. Aged 16 he took a train to Bilbao to attend the prestigious Escuela

Nautica de Bilbao in Deusto. During his studies he lived with his Cuban aunt and her husband from Bilbao. They led a comfortable life and enjoyed a good position in Bilbao society. In 1932 during the time of the Second Spanish Republic, he obtained his diploma as captain and navigator. A man of strong social conscience, as soon as he could, he became a member of the UGT (general union of workers) the strongest union in the Basque country. Despite his own somewhat privileged position, he supported wholeheartedly their ideology of more rights for all workers.

He started on his sea faring life as a captain/navigator knowing his chosen career had been the right one. He was a true 'man of the world' understanding the arbitrary nature of the accident of birth in time, place and society. Sea-life gave him a tremendous sense of freedom. He loved to sail - away from the constraints of society and politics and narrow-minded visions of the world. He loved to spend time with the cooks onboard and learnt a great deal from them and indeed became an extraordinarily good cook himself! He loved his new home in Euskadi in all its aspects, apart from the fact that clearly the people were being carried away by nationalism.

As a young captain he had seen the world through its harbours. He would learn a great deal about a nation and its culture through the structure, efficiency and organisation of its harbours. He felt at ease and protected in the microcosm of the steamship world. Ricardo used to say, "Wherever Spanish is spoken, I am at home". This sentence well describes the way we lived during my family's exile. The Spanish language was the key to home. When Spanish was spoken, we understood this space to be 'Spanish territory': we were Spaniards abroad.

In July 1936 the Second Republic was shaken by a coup organised by some rebel army generals against the democratically elected government. Rapidly the attack turned into a civil war. On the 26th of April 1937, market day, a squadron of the German Condor Legion bombed the small town of Guernica, symbol of Basque freedom.

Consequently the Basque government decided on the immediate evacuation of 33,000 children aged between 3 and 17 years. "Save the Basque children!" was the cry addressed to the world: five countries answered the call, England, France, Belgium, Denmark, the Soviet Union and Mexico.

Between May and June 1937 Ricardo captained the biggest transatlantic steam ship in Spain, the SS Habana. This ship set to sea from the harbour of Santurce under the flag of Saint George. Santurce or Santurzi means Saint George in Basque. He made a total of six journeys to different countries to evacuate the children. He was escorted by British battleships sometimes under dramatic conditions due both to the treacherous Bay of Biscay and under threats from the Francoist warship Almirante Cervera.

Up until then he had only carried merchant cargo, now he was transporting people. The children were crying for their mothers and many were sick, some enjoyed a visit to the bridge to better see and understand what was going on.

The harbour entrance to Santurce had been mined by the Republican forces to prevent rebel access, but as Ricardo would say "I knew the port like my pocket, we knew where the floating mines were placed against the enemy" and on his many journeys in and out of Santurce there were never any mishaps.

On his first journey to France he took with him his wife Sabina Fernández de Pinedo Pardo and their second born, Maricarmen aged 3, my future mother; leaving his first born, Ricardo IV in Madrid with his Sevillian grand mother Elena Orsi. My grandfather was convinced that everything would be over in a matter of weeks!

After his final trip with evacuees 13 June 1937, he left the ship in the hands of the Spanish Consul in Bordeaux. He returned to Euskadi and put himself at the disposal of the republican army. He fought at the battle of the Ebro. In 1939 with some 500,000 thousand other refugees he was part of the Retirada, crossing the Spanish/French border by foot with Franco's troops hot on their heels. He spent over half a year in French concentration

camps Le Barcarès and Argelès-sur-mer. He was classed as an undesirable and was kept in these infamously cruel camp conditions where the temperatures could fall to minus 18C at night. He was eventually able to join his family in Bordeaux. His father Ricardo II was shot in Puebla de Sancho Pérez in the province of Badajoz without any official reason being given.

As soon as he arrived in Bordeaux he joined the local UGT. His open allegiance to the UGT meant that the French police had his name on the membership lists which were then handed over to the Gestapo. With the help of these lists the Gestapo were able to hunt down 'undesirable' Spanish refugees on French territory.

About 10 km from Bordeaux in Cadaujac was a château built on swampy ground by the River Garonne. It had many out-houses, stables and cellars and this is where the 30 or more families of refugees from the concentration camps and their families were housed by the French Government under poor conditions. And here it was from October 1939 until 1940 that my grandfather and his family were housed. Conditions were crowded, insanitary and unsafe with many distressed and war damaged people of varying extremes of political views.

Much to the initial distress of the local population who feared for their lives, Ricardo and other refugees were obliged to work in a vineyard at Isle-Saint-George. Getting and returning to the vineyard required an eight kilometer walk each way, the workers would be exhausted at the end of the day. Against this terrible French landscape time and time again there were courageous local individuals who saw beyond the stereotypes of these refugees - 'the red murderers' and saw the human, the individual and treated them as such. Gradually the villagers lost their fears and later organised tractor transport for the refugees.

In 1942 the Nazi 'clearance of human scum' was at its height in France, and having been exposed as a republican and UGT member Ricardo feared for his life and that of his family. He wrote to one of these courageous women he had met in Ilse-Saint-George, Mlle Adeline Lutard, who immediately gave

refuge to the whole family till the end of the second World War.

In 1942 the Nazi's were building the submarine base at Bacalan and, under Field Marshall Rommel, fortifying the infamous Atlantic Wall. These were built using the forced labour of Spanish Republicans, many of whom perished, poorly paid local men, or, in exchange for food rations, you could volunteer. Food was scarce and in order to get more food stamps for his children, since only French citizens were entitled to them, Ricardo volunteered to work on the fortification. Digging underground galleries and the many months inhaling sand from the quarry led Ricardo to later developed silicosis which eventually led to his death in 1981.

In 1947 a lack of work opportunities together with his craving for the sea led Ricardo to agree to a dangerous mission. Some old colleagues, Basque sailors from Mundaka who knew of his skills as a navigator asked if he would be prepared to transport displaced people from Marseilles to Palestine, then a British Protectorate. The work was dangerous, illegal, clandestine, no paper or documents, but very well paid. He agreed. The people were Jews from all over Europe, gathered at Marseilles. The boats for their transport had been hired by Jews in the USA, and it was they who paid Ricardo to take them from Marseilles to Palestine against British wishes. Few French captains were willing to take the risk, Ricardo and some other Basque captains were. His wife collected his handsome reward from a *poste restante* address in Marseilles. Ricardo was off the coast of Haifa when he was taken prisoner by the British and sent to a prison camp on Cyprus for six months. During this term of confinement the American Jews continued to send money to his family and they in turn continued to visit the *poste restante* in Marseilles to collect it.

At the end of his life on being asked why he had taken on such a dangerous mission, he explained that he understood that he had been unable to do anything for the return of his fellow refugees to Spain but he could use his navigation skills to help people who had suffered atrociously to bring them back to *their* promised land.



Captain Ricardo Fernández Orsi, SS Ville de Genève



Captain Ricardo Fernández Orsi, Certificate of Identity 1957

In the fifties he was finally able to navigate and captain different merchant ships on the Mediterranean. In 1956 he was visited onboard by his mother and siblings on the open sea outside Spanish limits off the Valencia coast.

He very much enjoyed the company of the international crews on those ships: a Spanish second-captain, a Chinese cook, a German machinist, an Armenian captain -the world in a nutshell!

Suspecting all announcements of amnesty offered by Franco's government, it was only after Franco's death in 1975 that he returned to Madrid for the first time.



Ricardo Fernández Orsi National identity card 1978

Amongst other things Ricardo loved to dance the pasodoble and to the end of his life whenever he was happy he would dance a few steps!

Ricardo was an extraordinary man who led an extraordinary life and I feel privileged to have known him until I was 22 and am proud to be able to tell some of his story now.

Sabina Fernández de Perry. 2021