

José Nieto, Anti-Francoist Exile and CNT Member, Takes Refuge in New York

By Carlos García Santa Cecilia and Montse Feu

Translator Montse Feu

C. G. S. C.

Some men fight only a day and are good, others fight for a year and are better. A few fight all their lives like José Nieto has done. They are the essential ones. I met Pepe Nieto in New York in 2006 when I organized an exhibition on foreign correspondents in the Spanish Civil War. He walked toward me with microphone in hand to interview me for the Hispanic Television Network, HITN. We began to chat about Spain and the conversation has continued all these years.

Born in Orihuela during the Spanish Civil War and the son of a shopkeeper who was affiliated with the Republican Left Party, Nieto lost her mother to a bombing. A very young Nieto joined the National Confederation of Workers (CNT). He served in the Navy and participated in the infamous and unknown Sidi-Ifni campaign that cost Franco the main African enclaves. Nieto was close to bullets flying in the demonstration in San Bernardo Street, Madrid, February 1956. A Falangist was injured and it could have caused another “Night of the Long Knives.” Nieto was arrested in Barcelona in 1959. He was only twenty years old and was brutally tortured; his crime was distributing anarchist pamphlets.

Nieto still carries the picture of his torturer in his wallet – Juan Antonio Creix, who died in 1985. He showed it to me. In 2010, Antoni Batista published the shocking book *La carta: Historia de un comisario franquista* (Debate 2010) based on a long exculpatory letter that Creix wrote to the then Civil Governor of Barcelona, Rodolfo Martín Villa. Creix was the only torturer punished by the regime. Nieto confessed that he could not bear to read the book, nor was he able to finish *The Spanish Holocaust* by Paul Preston (Debate 2011), a historian who Nieto has often read as a source, "My eyes fill with tears of grief and rage."

Nieto's exile led him to Canada where he continued to denounce Franco. Without a visa he had to leave to Cuba, the wrong place for an anarchist. There, Nieto also suffered solitude and prison when he stood up for his ideals. Sent off again, he headed this time to the United States although he wanted to go to Mexico. He was asked to stay and apply for political asylum in a political effort to force the US Government to reconsider deportations of Spaniards. His long trial was fiercely debated on the front pages of newspapers. He did not get the refugee status under the Kennedy Administration, but interestingly, he did under Nixon's, most surely because of the enormous sympathy that the press coverage aroused. Nieto is the last official political refugee of the Franco's regime.

Nieto's legal exoneration was somehow his private conviction. Since 1962, he has lived in New York, an ungrateful town for a refugee, where he fathered two daughters. Not a single day has he abandoned the struggle and his commitment. He recently asked

me to bring him a republican flag because some old anti-Francoists still parade with it on October, 12 on Fifth Avenue. Nieto, who has worked as distributor and publisher, is a self-taught man with a passion for books about the Spanish Civil War. He used to have more than 4,000 volumes; most of them have been donated to friends or American universities. However, he still has a garage in Brooklyn packed with first editions and tomes that are bibliographic jewels.

He has sporadically returned to Spain since Franco's death. He even bought a house in the Spanish Levante, but did not like the country; he did not recognize it. Nieto pays attention to Spanish politics and Spanish television and shares his radical but always informed opinions. He is up to date on the latest publications and if you go to see him, the best thing you can bring him is the last issue of *El Jueves* magazine. Nieto was the last editor of *España Libre* with Eugenio Granell, surrealist painter and member of the The Workers' Part of Marxist Unification (POUM). Nieto is determined to bring attention to the exile newspaper because he argues: "I have little time left."

Nieto does not seek revenge but believes that Spain has not done justice to those who gave their lives fighting against Franco. In Spain, we commemorate the anniversary of the CNT as if we were commemorating some old battle; Nieto still feels moved talking about freedom and justice for historical Spanish anarchism. He is no longer a CNT member and wants nothing to do with the union but assures friends "If I were a little younger I would serve and fight again, not sure where, but I would again: there is so much to do."

* * *

José Nieto: “Never Knew There Were so Many Reds in New York”

M. F.

On July 18, 1936, the news of a military rebellion in Spain reached the workers associations of New York City. In less than a week, union leaders, workers and small traders founded the Spanish Anti-Fascist Committee, which later became the *Sociedades Hispanas Confederadas* (Confederated Hispanic Societies). As one of the first grassroots organizations to support the Second Spanish Republic, the confederation grew to 65,000 members organized in two hundred associations throughout the United States and other countries. The *Confederadas* published two newspapers *Frente Popular* (NYC, 1936-1939) and *España Libre* (NYC, 1939-1977), which denounced Franco's dictatorship and raised a total of two million dollars to help Spanish refugees, political prisoners, and the underground resistance in Spain. *España Libre* testifies to the determination of the *Confederadas* members in their struggle for Spanish Democracy.

The anarcho-syndicalist anti-fascist solidarity that grew in the United States has yet to be documented and analyzed in all its richness. The press and personal archives of

exile Spanish workers are key to restoring the diversity of the Spanish Civil War exile in the United States; the research is to extend beyond Spanish professors and authors and American brigadiers. My methodological approach recognizes the distribution of a journalistic culture of migration and exile in non-institutionalized channels maintained by the working class in the Americas. Therefore, my study of the *Confederadas* focuses on both exile and working-class culture in the United States.

In addition to documenting the anti-fascist and democratic contributions of exile Spanish CNT members and labor leaders, my work considers their labor press as a window to the history of twenty-century transatlantic migration. While earlier migrations resulted from imperial trades, the century of labor movements and the Cold War marked the twentieth-century migration. Since the late nineteenth century, Spaniards who settled in New York organized labor associations where they read newspapers and performed radical and didactic plays. These community practices established networks of activism, culture, and non-institutional solidarity.

José Nieto Ruiz (1937 Orihuela, Alicante) arrived in New York in 1962 and volunteered as a staff member in the exile newspaper *España Libre* until 1977, the year of the first democratic elections after Franco in Spain. The interview is part of an academic research project about the *Confederadas*. My conversations with Nieto Ruiz have allowed me to learn firsthand about the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist solidarity and cultural production in the United States. After a lifetime in the country, his detailed and

disquieting account illuminates the brutality of both the Franco's regime and the way he uprooted Spanish citizens. However, his chronicle also demonstrates the willpower to place the struggle for workers' rights and democracy on record. Nieto Ruiz laughs helplessly when he narrates some of the absurd situations in which he has lived. Despite the adversities of his life and the twists of fate that have occurred, his sense of humor, devoid of any sarcasm, proves that he has never been a defeated man. His account also is a testament that he benefited from the solidarity of anti-fascist transnational networks. In this interview he talks about his arrival in the United States and about his career in New York as a television producer and documentary maker.

José, What was the reason of your exile?

Before we start the interview I want to emphasize that I was an anti-Francoist activist as far back as I can remember. I was twenty years old and I had just finished my military service. I was stopped when I was distributing propaganda of the *National Confederation of Labor* (CNT) in Barcelona. Someone ratted on me. It was 1959. I was taken to the Police Headquarters, I think the one located in Via Laietana. Antonio Juan Creix and Vicente Juan Creix tortured me. They hung me by the ankles and beat the most sensitive parts of my body for more than twenty hours. They wanted me to confess the names of Communists. I had just joined the CNT, and I did not know any Communists. They decided to continue the interrogation the next day. When I was taken to my cell, the officer asked me where I was from. He said he could anonymously contact my family and warn them that I had been detained. I told him that my uncle, Jacobo Rufete, was the director of the Madrazo clinic in Barcelona.

My uncle knew the Governor, who told him that if the report of my arrest had not reached Madrid he could get me out, but I would have to leave Spain. I was lucky that the report had not been sent. An ambulance drove me away, and I spent thirty days in a private room at the clinic. A doctor and a nurse cured me. Once cured, other CNT members brought me in contact with Francisco Sabaté, a.k.a Quico. I met him secretly in Barcelona, and he arranged a date to cross into France. We went by truck to Portbou, Spain. Upon arrival, he went into a bakery and came out with a backpack. We crossed the Pyrenees on foot. At the time of crossing the border, Quico took a machine gun from the backpack, but we had no problems. I went to Marseille. There, other exiles told me about a Dutch merchant ship, the *Coolsingel*, which was seeking sailors. When the ship arrived in Canada, I deserted.

How was your stay in Canada?

I was there twenty months. I got in contact with anti-Francoist associations and with CNT members in the Spanish Center in Montreal. I was a founding member of the *La Liga Democrática de Montreal* and the newspaper *Umbral*. The Spanish Embassy organized an event about Federico García Lorca in a university. I cannot remember the name maybe it was McGill University. Some of us burst into the act because we considered it an insult to the memory of the poet executed by the Franco regime. Because of the incident, someone must have reported me to the Immigration Department. I was under arrest in Quebec for ninety days because I was in Canada without a visa. I asked for asylum in Mexico and Cuba. The Spanish Democratic League of Montreal asked for

my asylum in Mexico and Cuba, but the visa for Cuba came immediately and I decided to leave.

How was your life in Cuba?

It was in the late 1960s when I arrived. I worked in the garage of a Spaniard, so I lived well. I was staying at a boarding house on Galiano Street and Concordia Street, and then I moved to an apartment in the building America. I participated in the Spanish associations, but all was cut short during a fateful meeting. The Communists of the *La Casa de Cultura* insisted that all Spanish associations should join into one. I asked for a democratic vote, and some did not like it. There was José María González Jerez, who was the president of the House of Culture. Perhaps it was he who reported me as a counterrevolutionary, who knows. I did not see him again until September 13, 1983, during a demonstration against Augusto Pinochet in Madrid. I went with the Republican Left Party, in which my father had been a member. I saw him marching with the Communist Party. We recognized each other right away but did not exchange a word. Anyway, two days before the Bay of Pigs Invasion, G2 agents, the Cuban secret police, came to the apartment. I was arrested. Upon leaving the building, the President of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution of the neighborhood hit me with a baseball bat on my head. A crowd gathered and started to shout "to the firing wall, to the firing wall."

I was taken to the *Ciudad Deportiva*, there were several thousand detained. One night we were put on a bus. I was seating next to a Spanish Trotskyist. The militiamen

were armed with machine guns and dogs. I told the Trotskyist that things were looking pretty bad and that if we were going to be executed I was not going to let myself go easily. The others in the bus did not seem to realize the seriousness of the situation. However, the Trotskyist and I found the scene too recognizable after having lived in Franco's Spain. We arrived at the *Castillo del Príncipe*, but there was no room for more prisoners. From there we were moved to the *Blanquita Theater* (now Karl Marx Theater). Thousands of arrested people were crammed in the orchestra section and the main floor. The militiamen watched us with machine guns and dogs from the stage. One morning I was taken to the *Vedado* neighborhood. In a residential house, a Spaniard and a Czechoslovakian interrogated me without me seeing them. They stood behind me. They asked me why I was against the Revolution. I told them I was not against the Revolution, but that I did not consider myself a Communist. They asked me why I had been arrested and told them I did not know why. When I walked to the interrogation cell I saw Enrique Lister in the hallways. From there I was taken to *La Cabaña*, where I was detained for fifty-four days. There were leftists and revolutionaries from several Latin American countries and prisoners who did not even know why they were there. We were there simply because we did not confess to being Communists. The galleys were horrible and there were so many of us that we had to sleep sitting up, in an unbearable heat. I got a uniform that I believed was of an executed general because it was obvious that the stars had been pulled out and there were gun holes in the fabric. On the back and knees a capital P was painted, for political prisoner.

How did you get to New York after the detention?

I could not leave Cuba. I was desperate and not quite knowing how to protect myself, yet I continued participating in political events. One day I was in a demonstration with Asturians on the Galiano Street. They were the small wine shop owners that the Revolution had seized. The Cubans joined us and they were shouting "Freedom, Freedom!" The secret police arrived and we started shouting "Live Don Pelayo, Live Don Pelayo!" We told the G2 that we were celebrating Don Pelayo of Asturias, and of course they had no idea who we were talking about and they left. I thought of asking refuge in the Embassy of Mexico. I even enlisted in the Movement to Recover the Revolution. The movement was with Castro, but it was not a Communist organization. We were about to head to the mountains. If CNT members in Miami had not gotten me a US visa, I would be dead now. Cuban CNT members helped me, but there was no way to get a place on the weekly flight to Miami. Those days I used to go to a wine shop in Concordia Street. There I met a politician associated with the former Fulgencio Batista's regime. One afternoon, I told him about my situation, and he was able to help me because he was a friend of someone in Pan American. At the airport, I was asked to jump up and down naked because they wanted to make sure I had nothing hidden in my anus. They took the little savings I had and my grandfather's gold ring, in short, everything I was carrying. I left for the United States wearing a shirt and pants, nothing more. It was March 30, 1962. In Miami I was locked in an immigration detention center, in Opa-Locka, Florida. After four days in the center and several interrogations, I was released. Cuban anarcho-syndicalists in Miami came to pick me up, and I stayed in the home of one of them. The International Rescue Committee asked me where I wanted to go. I remembered the name of Jesús González Malo because the Canadian anarchists were in contact with him. I

knew that he lived in New York City. The International Rescue Committee gave me a ticket to New York City, ten dollars, and a jacket for the cold. I traveled on a cargo plane. We were forty passengers and six cows. There was a storm, and we stopped in Philadelphia. Eventually we arrived at La Guardia at three in the morning. I sat down in the airport and spent the night there. Four Puerto Rican boys took my ten dollars. I asked them to let me have at least one dollar because I needed to make a call in the morning and they gave me seventy-five cents. After a few hours, a small old lady approached me and spoke to me in English but I did not understand the language. Then she offered me an apple. I ate it with pleasure. At seven o'clock I called a waiter (I can't remember his name) in the *Liborio*, a Cuban restaurant on 47th Street. I got his information from the Cubans in Miami. A lady answered and told me the waiter did not start to work until five in the afternoon. I took a cab because I did not know how to get to the *Liborio* nor did I understand English. The *Liborio* owner had to pay the taxi, and I offered to work to pay it back, but she told me to wait for my friend sitting at a table. I waited until four in the afternoon. The waiter, an elderly Cuban anarchist, took me to a boarding house on 47th Street, in the area known as Hell's Kitchen. He paid two weeks in advance for my room and gave me five dollars so I could eat. I started going to the *Confederadas* and attended my first commemoration of the Spanish Second Republic, on April, 14th. I was looking for work but could not find anything, and soon I ran out of money. When the people in the *Confederadas* asked me if I had eaten, I lied to them. I was embarrassed to beg for money. Once, Augustine Carcagente [*España Libre*'s Editorial Director] gave me five dollars and González Malo [*España Libre*'s editor] gave other five dollars. I bought bread so that the money would last longer. I would leave the boarding house at six o'clock in

the morning to look for work and to avoid seeing my landlady who would ask me to pay another week. Once I had not eaten anything for three days. I went into a French restaurant, *La Fourchette* (in 46th Street, between the Seventh and the Eighth), and asked if they needed anyone to wash dishes or bathrooms. They did not. I heard myself saying, "Can you give me something to eat. I have not eaten anything for the last three days and I am feeling dizzy." He gave me a beefsteak, fries, bread and a beer. I ate it with such desperation that I got sick and spent a day in bed. I eventually found work washing dishes in *Street Corner* at Fifty and Seventh Avenue, next to the *Hotel Taff*. I was paid twenty-five dollars per week. I could pay for my room and board. Later I got a job washing dishes in the *Liborio*. I was paid twenty-eight dollars per week and was given food. I could pay for the room and save money.

Tell me about your service in the Sociedades Hispanas Confederadas.

I used to go there each night. I checked the mail, wrote letters, and was in charge of the library. We were a handful of CNT members who were doing the daily work. People from all walks of progressive ideologies were involved. It was Jesús González Malo who taught me how to print the newspaper. When he died, I served with Miguel R. Ortiz, although Eugenio F. Granell criticized my tone even when Carrero Blanco was killed. There were a few of us doing all the work, but often we did not sign articles because the Spanish Consulate was watching us closely, and we wanted to avoid problems for our families in Spain. For example, the Spanish Civil Guard questioned my father about my relationship with *España Libre*. My father argued that I distributed the newspaper for a living. From then on I was given adjunct positions. We were wary of

putting our names in the newspaper. My father had had enough. He was arrested after the Spanish Civil War. He was a member of the Left Republican Party but he was accused of being a mason so that he could be sentenced to death. When Germany fell, he was saved because Franco stopped the pace of executions in prisons. In 1945 he was released.

¿And your mother?

My mother died in Valencia in one of the Italian bombings during the Spanish Civil War.

Tell me about Jesús González Malo, one of the Confederadas' leaders.

He was a fighter and a good man. I remember the day he died. It was the night of the blackout of 1965. The hospital was dark. Malo asked me two favors, knowing he was on his deathbed. He asked me first to stop a priest that was in the hospital and had insisted on Malo receiving a dying confession and second to make sure that the *Confederadas's* papers were not get scattered or lost. He asked me to donate them to an American University. His hospital room had a small hallway. I slept there to keep Carmen Aldecoa (his wife) company. She left in the morning because she had to go to work, and the priest came and tried to enter the room. I had to push him out of the room. Later a younger priest came. This time, it was the priest who pushed me, and I pushed him back. He called the police to arrest me but luckily the nurse had seen the incident and told the police that it was the priest who had started the altercation by trying to get into the room uninvited.

Do you remember any report that Malo wanted you to work on which was based on the underground democratic resistance's reports about Spain?

I wrote an article about the poet Manuel Moreno Barranco. He went to France to publish a book and got in contact with exiles there. On his return, he was tortured because the police thought he was working with the resistance. They threw him from a window to the prison yard. The sister asked for the corpse, but was told that he had already been buried. A left-wing forensic doctor exhumed the body and took photos. It had broken feet and other signs of torture. We send the photos to Senator Jacob K. Javits, but Spanish diplomats indicated that it was a case of suicide. Another work that I remember with high regard is that of Manuel de Dios Unanue, a journalist for *La Prensa* (NYC). Drug cartels killed him when he was investigating them. I helped him in his research of the disappearance of Jesús Galindez, a member of the *Confederadas*. Manuel Vázquez Montalbán interviewed De Dios Unanue for thirty hours and then published his novel *Galindez* (1990). De Dios Unanue published his research, *El caso Galíndez. Los vascos en los servicios de inteligencia en Estados Unidos*, in 1999.

What were the relations with the FBI and the CIA?

There were rumors of informers. When we were working in the editorial office, all kinds of extreme radicals would come and would shout the most far-fetched statements. We paid no attention. When they would leave, we all looked at each other and someone would say, "Another provocateur agent of Franco or the FBI." They were never very convincing as undercovers. The problem was the rumors of informers in the

Confederadas for money or who worked out of fear. Malo was very angry about the rumors because he could not conceive any member doing so.

Would you tell me about Ernest Fleischman y John González, the lawyers that volunteered to help the Sociedades Hispanas Confederadas to prevent deportations of Spaniards?

Yes, Fleischman, a Jewish lawyer, took my case. He volunteered in the *Confederadas*. It was a titanic work and thanks to Fleischman I was not deported. The prosecutor who took my case wanted to find something criminal to use to deport me but found nothing. My case was in the newspapers. Fleischman and his family adopted me as a family member.

España Libre covered the trial. Your case is discussed in several of the Confederadas minutes of 1962 and 1963. The Confederadas wrote several letters to US unions asking for help because you were going to be deported. Malo asked Abelardo Iglesias, a Cuban anarchist, if they would consider you a Cuban syndicalist and this way argue to avoid deportation.

When my case got to the press, several countries offered me political asylum, including Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Mexico and France. I was the first and only Spanish Civil War exile to obtain political asylum in the US. It was very difficult, and I almost went to Mexico

How were your relations with the Spanish Consulate?

When Franco died, I asked Eugenio Granell to help me get a Spanish passport. When Granell called the Consul, he was reproached because I was a CNT member. At the end, I went there and demanded my passport. I told them they could not refuse granting me a passport. When I was leaving, a young man approached me and told me he had seen reports of the *Confederadas* in the Consulate. I thanked him but told him that I already knew that. He was stunned. I told him, "The Reds, as you call us, know how to find information.

The Confederadas helped many Spaniards who were to be deported to Spain.

We got them political asylum and entry into Mexico. President Johnson's Administration recognized our work when we were invited to the ceremony of the signing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. We were the only Hispanic organization invited.

Do you remember the last years of España Libre and its end?

The Spanish Transition was an act of high treason against the Spanish Second Republic and the working class. No one has been interested in the work of the *Confederadas* nor have its contributions been acknowledged, even by those we helped. Events in New York have been exasperating because the history of CNT members gets mixed with that of the Communists. Once I went to a ceremony because of the visit of Felipe González and Julio Feo in June 1983. The hall was crowded. I estimate that about five hundred people were there. Upon entering, I told some acquaintances who were

there: "I did not know that there were so many Reds in New York." Suddenly everyone had been an antifascist in the past.

How did you start in the editorial and journalistic world of New York?

New York public libraries and bookstores fascinated me. I made friends with European Reds there. There was an old man in the *Strand Book Store* on Broadway who would whistle me the anthem of the Spanish Second Republic because he had been an Abraham Lincoln Brigade member, and he told me that he was wounded in the Battle of Jarama and that he was cured in a hospital in Murcia. He did not want to talk about Spain because of McCarthyism, but he would quietly whistle the anthem when I went to see him. I also met Aleksandr Fyodorovich Kerensky in that bookstore. We became friends. He was a gentle and robust man. He lived with the nostalgia of knowing he would never return to Russia. In these encounters someone told me that publishers were seeking staff for books in Spanish, and this is how I started in the field.

How was your life after España Libre?

Abel Plenn, the author of *Wind in the Olive Trees* (1946), taught me to sell books in Spanish to schools. In 1973, I met him by chance in New York, and he encouraged me to enter the trade. Bilingual programs were starting in schools. I worked on it for a while. Then I taught the trade to José Luis Rodríguez, a Puerto Rican Spanish teacher. We became great friends. José Luis surprised me one day with the utopian idea of founding a television network in Spanish. To me it seemed a daunting undertaking, but I helped him

because of the great friendship between us. Hispanic Information and Telecommunications Network, Inc. (HITN) started with only five hundred dollars that young José Luis had available (he was then twenty-eight years old). Every Monday we would go to the Federal Communications Commission in Washington to request the broadcast license, and it was always denied. I think we finally got it because we were a real pain. He named me producer of cultural events in New York. The first conference I covered was one about Joan Miró. Then, I was in the direction of production for nine years. I conducted five weekly programs: *Noticultura* on cultural news; *Música en el restaurante*, in which I interviewed live bands in restaurants; *City Hall*, all kinds of cultural reports in the city. It's been thirteen years now conducting my literary program *El author y su obra*.

Only nine years old, Nieto Ruiz entered the American Embassy in Madrid and hid the embassy newsletter under his clothing. Certainly, it was the first incursion into the search of news in defense of the working class. This struggle has marked his life: he has been tortured, imprisoned, and exiled. However, both his professional development in the Hispanic Information and Telecommunications Network, Inc. and his stateless passport during the long years of exile describe Nieto Ruiz's tenacity in the historical and political circumstances that he has lived.

Montse Feu is Assistant Professor at Sam Houston State University and is finishing a manuscript that examines the cultural production of the *Sociedades Hispanas Confederadas*. She has published several academic articles on the *Confederadas* and the exile newspaper *España Libre*. Her book, *Correspondencia personal y política de un anarcosindicalista exiliado: Jesús González Malo (1950-1965)* examines the American exile of Jesús González Malo, anarcho-syndicalist and editor of *España Libre*. The University of Cantabria will publish the book next year.

Carlos García Santa Cecilia is a writer and journalist. He has been part of the *fronterad* staff since its founding and is coordinating editor of print publications and e-books. He has published [Las dos Españas de Virginia Cowles](#), [Destino fatídico](#), [El grano de Herbert Matthews](#), [César González-Ruano en el 'Heraldo de Madrid'](#), [Los marcianos de Orson Welles](#), [Un gran paso para Neil Amstrontg](#) y [El retorno de Napoleón](#), among others. Santa Cecilia also runs the blog [De libros raros, perdidos y olvidados](#).