

Pura Arcos, 1919–1995

“She never stopped thinking, questioning, and learning.”

Fifth Estate Collective

1996

On October 12, 1995, our community lost another elder and member of a generation of anarchist revolutionary veterans now passing into history.

Purificación Pérez Benavent (Pura Arcos), companion of FE staff member Federico Arcos, was born June 26, 1919 in Valencia, Spain. She later moved to Barcelona.

[Both her father and grandfather were transport workers and members of the CNT, Confederación Nacional del Trabajo, National Confederation of Labor, an anarcho-syndicalist trade union federation. Pura grew up hearing discussions about social injustice, and the need for improving life for all people.]

[Although most girls and women in Spain did not go to school, or even learn to read and write, before the 1930's, Pura was very interested in obtaining an education. She prevailed on her parents to allow her to attend elementary school with an older cousin who was living with them. Most working class children who attended school left when they were 11 or 12, but, Pura was eager to learn whatever she could, and determined to continue attending school.] A very bright and promising student, Pura went to work at age thirteen to contribute to her family's income while attending night school at the Escuela Moderna. [In the Escuela Moderna or “modern school” students were not forced to learn lessons by rote, but were able to learn by pursuing their interests. There Pura met other young people who were concerned about social issues, and became involved in the anarchist movement.]

Pura was very active with the local federation of the Barcelona Mujeres Libres [Free Women], and became a member of the organization's national sub-committee. [In 1936, groups of women in Madrid and Barcelona founded Mujeres Libres, an organization dedicated to the liberation of women from their “triple enslavement through ignorance, through the traditional social subordination of women, and through their exploitation as workers.” During the Spanish Revolution Mujeres Libres mobilized over 20,000 women and developed an extensive



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network of activities to help individual women grow, realize their full potential and fully participate in creating a revolutionary anarcho-communitarian society.]

She participated in the sub-comités of branches of the CNT, FAI [Federación Anarquista Iberica, the Iberian Anarchist Federation] and the Federación iberica de juventudes libertarias (the Libertarian Youth) [the anarchist youth organization], often serving as recording secretary to meetings. She trained to drive a streetcar, but never did. In 1936 she met Federico Arcos in the Libertarian Youth. They lived half a block away from each other and would walk home together from the Ateneo Libertario [an anarchist storefront school and cultural center].

Pura was not happy with the attitudes and methods of the so-called leaders, the militantes responsables of the comités, and when the opportunity arose to teach children at one of the collectives, in Tabernes de Valldigna, she accepted. Emma Goldman once said, "To see the Revolution you had to go to the towns and villages... It is in Madrid, Valencia, and Barcelona where my heart sinks." As Federico remarks, "Life in such collectives was like a big family. Everyone was devoted to each other and to their ideals." Pura found happiness among the people of Tabernes.

When defeat of the Revolution came, instead of attempting to flee the country, Pura went into hiding. Later, she moved back to Barcelona with her family. She remained in hiding for two years until things calmed down. If the fascists had found her, she would have been one more in the long list of those executed. Pura spent the following years supporting libertarian prisoners.

In the 1950s, Pura emigrated to Canada with their young daughter to join Federico. There she learned English, worked as a nurse, and collaborated by correspondence with the libertarian press, particularly the Boletín de Mujeres Libres (edited in London from 1963 to 1977), and with the magazine Mujeres Libertarias [Libertarian Women], until its demise in 1993. She carried on an enormous correspondence with friends and comrades in Europe and the Americas, and supported Canadian women's and peace groups as well.

Pura will also be fondly remembered for her beautiful dried flower arrangements. It was a skill she exercised for many years, even overcoming a period of blindness and returning to her art. Her work was displayed in many handicraft shows and won several awards, and was frequently given in our own community to observe birthdays, births, marriages and other festive occasions. Pura's framed flowers can be found in innumerable households all over the world.

At a crowded memorial to Pura, FE staff member Marilyn Rashid's remarks spoke for us all:

"Pura was a very unique, strong and intelligent human being, and I feel honored to have known her and to have spent time in her kitchen eating her paella and listening to her stories... As all their friends knew, Pura always tempered Federico's romantic memories of the Spanish Revolution with her very sharp, opinionated realism.

"Pura was a woman who, because of her involvement in the Mujeres Libres and the Anarchist cooperatives, knew all about the potential for true liberation and for sexual equality. And so she knew and understood, too, the frustrations we all experience... the failure of those projects to achieve the expectations we have for them. Federico, for example, would describe with his characteristic fervor a meeting of the anarchists with Durruti, and Pura would remind us of the women in the back rooms working and cooking to feed all the men. One story did not negate the other: rather, each enriched the other and made us understand the complexity of that time.

"I appreciated Pura's wisdom, her sharp wit, her strong clear memory. She ... had a consistent love for poetry, for literature... She was very proud of her family, devoted to her daughter and grandsons and to her infant great-granddaughter. Pura was a very humble and unassuming woman who lived her life, fulfilled her ideals, and never stopped thinking and questioning and learning. It is with love and profound respect that we will remember her."

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