

## IN THE FRAME

# From history teaching to historical memory

**Malgara García Díaz. A historian, archaeologist, teacher and writer who is now president of the Casa de la Memoria Association**

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Margarita at the Casa de la Memoria La Saucedá, with a student helper. **sur**

In February 2020 Malgara García Díaz was elected president of the Casa de la Memoria Association, based in Jimena de la Frontera, in Cadiz province, but with the onset of the pandemic barely a month later, the activities and events she and her colleagues had begun to plan were unable to go ahead. That does not mean that Margarita, as she is known, has been idle. In fact, for someone who is officially retired from her profession as a teacher, she seems busier than ever, despite the limitations imposed by Covid-19.

In a way, Margarita has always been quite a pioneer. When she first went to university, Franco was still alive and the subjects she chose – History and Geography – were unusual for women at the time. There were still many differences in the way men and women were treated, and she recalls one incident when a friend was refused permission to withdraw money from her own bank account without her husband's signature. "The bank manager had to come out and intervene, because she and I made such a fuss about it. That was in 1977!" she says.

She originally dreamed of a career in journalism, but that course was not available at Malaga university, which was nearest to her home, and her parents refused to let her move away to study elsewhere.

She chose History because she found it interesting, but almost immediately discovered archaeology, which she describes now as "a true passion". She took part in excavations with some of the great names in archaeology and participated in research, but realised that there would be no jobs available after graduating. In the end, friends persuaded her to become a teacher.

"At first it was very painful to have to give up archaeology. I had been planning to do my thesis and had to abandon the idea. But then, I discovered that teaching is actually something wonderful. It's quite magical. I miss my pupils because they give you so much energy, I miss my History of Spain classes because they were always a challenge and I miss my colleagues a great

deal. They are extraordinary people, who are totally dedicated to what they do. For the first year after I retired, it was awful because it almost felt as if I had lost my identity, but then I was able to reinvent myself and do other interesting things that I hadn't been able to do before," she says.

## Historical memory

One of those interesting things was to become more active in the historical memory movement. Her interest stems from her own family history. Her great-uncle was shot in 1939, after the civil war had finished, and she was instrumental in locating his body and ensuring that he was buried with dignity. She still recalls her grandmother's pain at the loss of her

brother. Another great-uncle was recruited by Franco's troops and died after being sent to the front. The family have tried to find his whereabouts, but so far have been unsuccessful.

So for Margarita, it was a combination of personal background and ideology that led her to contact a fellow historian, Fernando Sigler, who manages the archive at the Casa de la Memoria La Saucedá, a civil war information and research centre, and offer to help.

It is an environment she loves, and has led to other things: for example, she has written articles and books, the latest of which is about the way the closure of the Gibraltar border by Franco was portrayed in the Spanish, Gibraltarian and English press. It was while chatting to colleagues in the archive that the idea was proposed of forming an association to manage and promote the Casa de la Memoria, raise awareness of the historical memory movement, and organise a busy schedule of activities. Then, as mentioned earlier, Spain went into lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic and these projects had to be put on hold.

Nevertheless, Margarita and her colleagues have continued working behind the scenes and online. "We keep the Casa Memoria website updated with information, and have just started a digital radio station called La Voz de la Memoria, which is a very powerful tool. We are digitalising the information in the archive, and working on publishing posthumously a book by the author Jesús Ynfante, called La Remonarquía. We are also preparing a series of talks and conferences, for when we are able to hold them again," she explains.

Someone as busy as Margarita must feel that there are not enough hours in the day, but she still manages to find time for hobbies and interests such as reading, writing, music, sport, and seeing friends. "But nothing relaxes me more than a walk in the woods, and then a shower," she says.

## Women's rights in Spain: "there's still a long way to go"

March 8th is International Women's Day and although Spain has made significant progress in women's rights in recent decades, a great deal still needs to change, says Margarita.

She believes that this will be difficult while so many employers still treat mo-

therhood as a problem and some sections of society find it more comfortable for women to look after the home and be responsible for care.

"Women's work is often undervalued and less well-paid and it is difficult for them to reach positions of responsibility. Women's achievements need to be recognised and be seen as normal," she

says.

Gender violence also continues to be a major problem. "So many women have been killed by their husbands, partners, boyfriends etc. I just hope their deaths will never be forgotten, and that women will stop being considered someone else's 'property'. The law needs to act inexorably in this respect".



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