

Chapter 27. Félix Carrasquer

Apart from Fujii Guruji and the short meeting with Légaut, Félix Carrasquer is the only *mutant* whom Grothendieck knew personally. He not only knew him, but he refers to him as his oldest and best friend. Grothendieck had probably met Carrasquer and his wife Mathilde (Mati) Escuder¹ by the end of the fifties. Grothendieck's children report that it is through their mother Mireille that he made their acquaintance. At this time Carrasquer and his wife were running a small poultry farm in Thil, not far from Toulouse. In 1963, 1964 and 1965 (and possibly other years as well), the Grothendiecks had been spending their summer holidays in Thil. The children, who were very young at the time, probably saw little of their father as he was very busy with his mathematical activity.

Carrasquer and Escuder had been members of *Survivre* since 1970. Escuder, who occasionally worked on the administrative committee, played something of an outside role. As someone who was not a scientist, she was doubtless welcome in order to demonstrate that the movement had some outreach. She was probably not too active a participant, however, as she lived far away. After *Survivre* came to an end there was a lengthy break in the relationship with Grothendieck, and there is no trace of further mutual visits. At the beginning of the eighties, Carrasquer and his wife were living in Spain again, and only Grothendieck's sons wanted to them, in order to work in the orange harvest.

Grothendieck dedicates about forty pages of *Les Mutants* to a biography and the life's work of his friend. Unlike most of what Grothendieck wrote, these pages can be read as a homage to a friend. The manner in which Grothendieck writes about him resonates like an echo of the time when his father was fighting for anarchism. Perhaps Carrasquer was less a friend than a recreation of the lost father, and when Grothendieck was writing about him he was remembering his own youth and his parents in the period before, during and after the war.

Let us quote from Grothendieck's text, rearranging the segments chronologically and shortening some of them slightly. Grothendieck's own text is interspersed with citations from letters by Carrasquer, which are set between quotation marks. These citations are longer than necessary for this biography, as we return here to the past of | Grothendieck's parents and his own childhood.

¹ Matilde ("Mati") Escuder Vicente, born Dec. 12, 1913 in Villafranca del Cid, died Aug. 5, 2006 in Thil (Haute-Garonne).



Félix spent the first fourteen years of his life in the village where he was born, Albalate de Cinca, where his father was a secretary at the town hall. A lively and curious child, he learned to read early, devouring any printed text that fell into his hands. He could hardly wait to attend school like the older children, there was so much to learn! But when he finally reached the right age, he spent exactly one full day in school. Repelled by the brutality and stupidity he saw there, he escaped on the second day [...] His parents had the good sense to not force him to return. He spent his childhood in complete liberty [...]

Apart from this first conclusive attempt at six years of age, Félix never set foot in a school or any official educational institution - at least not as a student! He never received any diploma, whether pedagogical or of any other kind. Nevertheless, from his earliest years he had a passion for education and even a *passion for school* - but for a school worthy of the name! He says that this passion was able to develop and grow thanks to the fact that in his early years he had never been formatted in a normal school, a training-school [...]

Surely it should be possible to do much better than that! And throughout his life this was the thing that he considered the most important and the most urgent. (p. 427-428).

Already at the age of fourteen he wanted to learn more than he could in the village, and announced to his father his intention to leave for Barcelona. [...]

“The city and its various inhabitants offered numerous attractions. But the focus of all my attention was the quarter of Atarazanas with its second hand bookshops. I discovered innumerable treasures there. [...]

It was during those years that Félix constructed the bases of an entirely auto-didactic culture of encyclopedic dimensions. Throughout his life he continued to add to it whenever an opportunity presented itself, with lectures, conversations, radio broadcasts, and reflection [...] It was during these years as well that he became clearly conscious of his vocation as an educator, and it took the central place in his life which it would hold from then on. [...]

“Thus at twenty-three years of age I decided to return to the village to begin the work that corresponded to my aspirations. Primo de Rivera's dictatorship was coming to an end (1928), and there were many difficulties in mobilizing people and getting them to cooperate in an innovative educational project. [...] It was at this time that my friend Justo returned to the village. [...] During our very first conversation he suggested opening

a library. It was very easy. I had already brought the thirty or forty books in my possession; he added his, a dozen. And the library was up and running!”

But many villagers did not know how to read, or worse, had not the slightest desire to do so. It was necessary to teach some, to motivate others, or rather, to motivate everyone to read, to express themselves, to think about the world which surrounded them. For this it became necessary to found a school with evening courses for children and adults. [...]

Later, well into the republican period and after the people had acquired the property of the Duc de Solférino, the Cultural Group envisaged more ambitious projects and brought them to fruition: a collective agricultural farm, a field for agricultural experimentation, and an experimental school where boys and girls from ages six to fourteen participated in a climate of liberty, cooperation and responsibility.”

This first educational experiment in the village of his birth, which continued in an atmosphere of intense ideological fermentation and social convulsions seems to me to foreshadow the two later pedagogical experiments and even sets the same basic tone: that of *liberty*, and that of a *complete and brotherly cooperation* between teachers and pupils. For Félix, this cooperation was not a question of “method” but something completely different [...]

This fruitful experiment continued for five years, between 1928 and 1933, with one or two temporary interruptions due to the agitated political situation. It came to an end after the shock caused by two unforeseen events following shortly one upon the other. First, in 1932, Félix suffered a detached retina. For him it was a terrible blow. For months he was condemned to total immobility. After being cured, which turned out to be short-lived, he started working again. But then during the following year the stormy political situation in which he was heavily (and sometimes rashly...) involved obliged him to leave his village in great haste. He fled to Lerida, where that same year (1933) he became permanently blind. A terrible trial surely for a man so intensely and passionately active. And on top of this, a severe handicap, which he endured day after day for the rest of his life. But his revolutionary faith, united with the faith in his mission to create and to promote for example a new form of education, was not shaken. Today, more than half a century later, in a slack world which is stagnating and disintegrating, this faith and the unreasonable hope which it carries within itself, remains alive and active [...]

In Lerida he met with a group of teachers who, inspired by Freinet, had brought the technique of printing in the schools to the country. Félix was immediately “captivated” by the ideas of Freinet. He succeeded in getting his younger brother José interested [...]

Two years later (in 1935) the two brothers and a third, Francisco, gathered together with their sister Presen in Barcelona, and with the enthusiastic and devoted support of a group of new friends, they set to work on a project for an school entirely based on “self-directed learning” [*école autogérée*]. José’s diplomas were invaluable in lending a legal existence to this school, the Eliseo Reclus School located in the Rue Vallespir.

In the meantime Félix had had the opportunity of familiarizing himself with the thoughts of liberal pedagogical thinkers such as Godwin, Saint Simon, Proudhon, Bakunin, Reclus. He learned about them with enthusiasm [...] But he himself says that it was *Leo Tolstoy* and his educational experiments in Yasnaya Polyana (the village of his birth) which had the strongest influence on him.[...] (p. 429-434)

The Escuela Eliseo Reclús, calle Vallespir, Barcelona, was the first of two self-directed learning schools. It functioned uniquely during the year 1935/36, as its activities were interrupted by the civil war. It was almost a family enterprise, as the four permanent teachers were the three brothers Félix, Jose, Francisco, and their sister Presen [...] The school functioned under the patronage of the liberal Athena Committee [a liberal organization which operated all over Spain.]. (p. 440-441)

The second school of self-directed learning founded and inspired by Félix was the Escuela de Militantes de Monzón. This was a rural school in Aragón, which existed from January 1937 to January 1939, during the two war years. This time, older children - boys and girls aged fourteen to seventeen - lived together as boarders. Their number varied from forty to about sixty. Félix was the only adult amongst them: there was a war! During those years, many of the boys left for the front, and the collective required others for jobs in administration and organization in the hinterland. New students came to take their place. In this way, a total of around two hundred students actually spent time at the school.[...] Aragón was at that time divided into twenty-five agricultural collectives (or "Comarcals"), which included six hundred and one collectivized villages and three hundred thousand farming families who had opted for libertarian collectivization. Among these collectives was Monzón, which included thirty-two villages. [...]

"The most important thing about the experiment in Monzón was that with three hours of agricultural work per person, we could meet all our financial needs. That is to say, if our kind of school became more common we would save millions and billions that we spend on an education which dulls the youth, and they would learn to really combine practice with theory, with a cooperative savoir-faire that would be enriching for all." (p. 445)

The Monzón school had been founded with a view to satisfying the needs of a libertarian revolution in a rural environment, but surely also with a long-term vision which alas, was never achieved. When Aragón fell, in April 1938, the school was hastily transferred to Catalonia, near Barcelona [...] It was dissolved at the last minute, at the time of the final debacle in 1939. Félix crossed the border in extremis into France in the following days. (Four years of concentration camp lay before him - the price to pay for having escaped the firing squad...) A large number of former students from Monzón fell on the front lines. Also his brother José [...] (p. 443-446)

Grothendieck goes on to give detailed information about the organization, work methods and spirit of the progressive schools founded by Carrasquer. Many times while writing, he telephoned with Carrasquer in order to get information, and apparently also received long letters from him. Altogether it is clear that Grothendieck studied various progressive educational movements intensively, and that it was a subject in which he had a strong personal interest. In particular, he makes a detailed comparison between the Summerhill School and those founded by Carrasquer, and asks Carrasquer for his opinion on Summerhill. Contrary to his brooding, frequently moralizing and condescending texts, this one radiates sympathy and benevolence. Filled with admiration, he writes about the events in Aragón:

This was, I believe, the only moment in the history of mankind that the libertarian ideal of cooperation and popular solidarity, without hierarchy or constraint, was experienced on the scale of a vast province, by men, women and children, united and transported by the same powerful wave which surged forth from the depths. [...] Félix's account is well served by his formidable memory and scrupulous honesty, from a man who from his youth was at the heart of the movement which culminated in these three ardent and fecund years. [...]² (p. 557)

² Carrasquer's books have apparently not been distributed widely and have only been translated into French. They are:

La Escuela de Militantes de Aragón, Una Experiencia de Autogestión y de Análisis Sociológico, Ediciones Foil, Barcelona 1978;
Una experiencia de educación autogestionada, Edición del Autor, Barcelona 1981.

Concerning the next fifty years of Carrasquers life we learn somewhat scattered details, no more than the bare essentials:

Since the abrupt end of the experiment in Monzón, half a century (minus one year) has gone by. [...] For Félix, during this half century, there were sixteen years of captivity, followed by eleven years of exile in a foreign country, waiting for Franco's totalitarian regime to end. In fact, he and Mati took the calculated risk of returning to Spain as early as 1971. [...] Throughout his exile in France, and later in Spain, Félix did not fail to speak and write about liberal education and schools of self-directed learning within the Spanish immigrant milieu. [...] At the beginning of the sixties, after his arrival in the Paris area, he attempted to start up a “Centro de Estudios Sociales” for the Spanish immigrant population, in the same spirit as the evening courses for adults in the village of his birth Albalate and later in Barcelona (1928-1936). This attempt failed. [...] (p. 458)

In the years following their emigration to France and until their (second) clandestine return to Spain in 1971, Félix and Mati lived with their family on a farm in the countryside near Toulouse, where they earned a modest living raising chickens. Our two families were very close, and we frequently spent a large part of our vacations at their house, with all the children [...] They also helped us, with their friendship and their superior maturity, during a very difficult moment [...] These are things which one cannot forget. We lost track of each other somewhat afterwards, especially after they returned to Spain [...] But I believe that it is not exaggerated to say that Félix and Mati, each in their own way, were the two closest friends that I have ever had in my life, and also, more than anyone else, they were the ones I knew I could count on absolutely if there were any need.

Félix and Mati are friends of long date, and “family friends” on top of that. I first met them in 1960, more than thirty years ago. It was not long after Félix had come out of prison, where he had spent the twelve years between 1946 and February 1959. He had been arrested for clandestine political activity in 1946 in Barcelona, where he had been participating in an attempt to reorganize the CNT [Confederacion Nacional de los Trabajadores]. He and Mati are Anarchists, and their pedagogical activity was inseparable from their militant political commitment. After the failure of the Spanish revolution and the debacle of the Anarchist and Republican forces at the end of 1938, Félix escaped in February of 1939 to France, where he shared the fate of hundreds of thousands of Spanish political refugees, arrested like criminals and parked in makeshift concentration camps constructed in great haste by the French government and known as “Popular Front” camps. Félix spent four years in the camp Noë. (My father also spent time there, before being deported to Auschwitz and killed there by the Germans in 1942...) He succeeded in escaping in October 1943. It was no small feat: at that time he had already been blind for over ten years. In spite of this, he succeeded in returning clandestinely to Spain in May 1944, in order to recommence his unthinkable clandestine political work which he succeeded nevertheless, God only knows how, in continuing for two years before being arrested again. [...] Altogether he spent sixteen years in captivity [...] of which twelve in a Francist prison. One of the greatest days of his life was February 7, 1959, on which date he found himself outside the prison walls and free at last! [...] After one year he obtained the authorization to emigrate to France [...] but with a permanent interdiction to return to Spain.

[Mati] met him for the first time in 1935, when visiting the school in Calle Vallespir [...] She herself was a teacher, dedicated body and soul to her pedagogical vocation. What she saw in Calle Vallespir made a profound impression on her. She must have clearly felt the scale of Félix's mission, and she must have known that her own path would be to associate herself with that mission as far as she was able. She met Félix again in 1946 when he was working clandestinely, and it was then that they joined their lives together. [...] She went to prison twice for political crimes, first for one year and subsequently for

two years. They would meet again when Félix came out of prison in February 1959. The following year they trod the path of exile together.

Let us make some brief remarks on the personal relationship between the Grothendiecks and the Carrasquers. After a long pause, communication between the two was resumed in 1985, when Grothendieck sent Carrasquer the first parts of *Récoltes et Semailles*. Carrasquer thanked Grothendieck with a few polite lines, whose content can be understood even without knowing Spanish:

Querido Shurick y Familia:

Con satisfacción íntima hemos recibido tu amplio manuscrito, como una prueba afectuosa de tu parte y una muestra inequívoca de confianza. Gracias por todo y sobre manera por haber iniciado de nuevo una comunicación que creíamos realmente perdida.

An intensive correspondence followed which, apart from personal matters and family news, dealt above all with the planned translation and publishing of Carrasquer's books, a project which Grothendieck forcefully pursued. He contacted various publishing houses, suggested that his ex-wife Mireille could prepare the translation, and was even prepared to pay her an appropriate fee out of his own pocket. He was indignant when several publishers eventually refused.

In *Les Mutants*, Grothendieck also mentions incidentally that around 1987/88 Carrasquer was busy writing his autobiography, and that eight hundred pages had already been typed. It appears that even this doubtless highly interesting autobiography was never published. Wilfred Hulsbergen tried to enquire about it with the family and among Carrasquer's acquaintances, but met with no success.

Carrasquer's youngest brother Francisco, mentioned earlier, emigrated first to France and later to Holland, where he became a professor of Spanish literature at the University of Leiden.

Let us conclude this chapter with the first and last verses of a poem which Carrasquer wrote on the occasion of Grothendieck's birthday in 1987:

*La verdad es relativa
cual una brisa de astio,
que a veces nos regocija
y otras nos da escalofrío.*

*Porque el Hombre es como un arco
de amor e imaginación,
abriendo a la historia, cauces
de feliz cooperación.*