

# THE FAITHFUL ALGUER

PERE CATALÀ I ROCA HISTORIAN



**T**he events organized in Barcelona between 26th October and 18th November 1987, centering on the theme *L'Alguer a Catalunya* (Alguer in Catalonia), attracted considerable interest and can be regarded as Alguer's contribution to the Catalan community spirit.

Alguer is a town of approximately 40,000 inhabitants, situated in the N. W. of the island of Sardinia. For the last six centuries, since King Pere *el Cerimoniós* settled a number of Catalan families there, the inhabitants of Alguer have spoken Catalan, in modern times with a dialect of their own.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Eduard Toda, from Reus, and consul to Càller, the capital of Sardinia, visited Alguer, where he at once felt linguistically identified with the town the locals themselves affectionately refer to as "Barceloneta", little Barcelona. Today, we have to face the fact that, under the massive influence of Italian in the schools, the cinema and the mass media, the inhabitants of Alguer are in a difficult situation as regards Catalan.

With a fair degree of accuracy, people tend to speak of the survival of Catalan in Alguer as a "linguistic miracle". It is certainly surprising that this tiny enclave should have been forgotten by Catalonia for so long. During the so-called War of Succession, when Philip V and Charles III (Archduke Charles of Austria) fought for the Spanish throne at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Sardinia shared the same fate as the *Principat de Catalunya*, and was occupied by the Carlist troops. Philip was unable to take Sardinia until three years after the fall of Barcelona (11th September 1714). Alguer,

under siege since 2nd September 1717 and almost in ruins, surrendered honourably on 28th. In 1720, the Bourbon king Philip ceded Sardinia to Vittorio Amadeo II of Savoy. Following this, the Spanish troops abandoned Alguer, their last position on the island.

In the book *L'Alguer a Catalunya* published in Alguer by *La Celere* and presented in Barcelona with an exhibition of photographs, publications and handicraft coinciding with the events mentioned at the beginning of this article, we read that "the town passed successively from Catalan control to Spanish and then Savoyard (1720), though always preserving its character as a Catalan town in its customs, traditions, language and place-names".

In 1868, when the amateur Barcelona archeologist Francesc Martorell i Penya, studying Sardinia's wealth of prehistoric monuments, arrived in Alguer, he discovered, to his surprise, that he could speak to the local population in their own language. A cultural and sentimental "discovery" was beginning to emerge and Toda was quick to report it in his book *Un poble català d'Itàlia: l'Alguer* (Barcelona, 1888). That was just a hundred years ago.

Many years later, in 1956, Osvaldo Montesano used a similar title for his *Barceloneta: un lembo di Catalogna in Sardegna*, published in Càller with the subtitle *Alghero. Origini e storia della città catalana*.

A hundred years ago, Toda said of Alguer, which then had some 10,000 inhabitants, "Within the town all is Catalan: the appearance of the streets, the construction of the houses, the architecture of the

temples; and if anything new has been done in the last two centuries, it has without doubt been to spoil the old, as has happened to one of the façades of the Cathedral. (...) One need only walk round some of the streets and see the entrances to the houses, with their semi-circular arches, or the windows, with their Gothic reminiscences, to believe for a moment that we are in a town on the Empordà coast".

Unlike today, when tourist propaganda produces slogans such as "Alghero, la Porta d'Oro di Sardegna", in the Alguer of a century ago "the city's trade is dead, and for this reason its port is deserted". This look of abandonment that Toda noticed contrasts with the present reality, reflected in the book *L'Alguer a Catalunya*: "The economy today is based on tourism, agriculture, fishing and local craftwork. As well as coordination of the different agricultural sectors, efforts are being made to encourage maritime trade activities and to market local handicraft". Contact must be maintained, and important recent events in this line have been the presence in Alguer of the Orfeo Català in 1970, the celebration of the 17th *Festes Populares Pompeu Fabra* in 1984, and the visit by the president of the *Generalitat de Catalunya* in January 1985. The participation of intellectuals from Alguer in the Second International Congress of the Catalan Language, in 1986, should also be mentioned.

At present, only just over half the inhabitants of Alguer speak Catalan correctly, although they all understand it. However, Alguer's whisper is beginning to get the attention it deserves from the rest of the Catalan-speaking world. ■