



History - compiled by Brita Haycraft

Cordoba: cradle of International House

By Brita Haycraft

This article first appeared in the booklet that was produced in 2003 for the 50th anniversary – IH at 50.



John and Brita Haycraft on the roof terrace of their Casa Internacional in San Fernando, 13 in Cordoba, 1956

Fifty years ago Cordoba still had traditions from centuries before: muleteers with their laden beasts, street vendors chanting out their wares, men wrapped in cloaks, servant girls in dainty aprons with baskets on their heads, ladies in mantillas and occasional guitar players strolling down the street at night.

Our first lodgings were in a winding white-walled street paved with Moorish (or possibly Roman) slabs. Mysteriously, you stepped through a small door, in a bigger heavy oak door and in to a shady marble patio with flower posts and terracotta urns. Through an archway another patio beckoned and here we rented two rooms. It was simple, but had character and warmth. Our landlady, Doña Carmen, gave us hot water to wash in and there was a closet with the privy in a small patio beyond, by a large fig tree. For twelve pesetas extra a day we got full board with delicious Andalusian dishes we'd always relish.



1953: the first school in Osio, 4 Cordoba. Doña Carmen is on the far right.

Almost at once we put up notices about English lessons in shops and inserted advertisements in the Cordoba Daily. Within three weeks, an astonishing total of sixty students had enrolled. We moved tables and chairs into our study/dining room and our bedroom, curtained off the washstand and

the bed. The students were unperturbed. Perhaps John's Oxford credentials, combined with his year at Yale, compensated. Doña Carmen ceded another room looking onto the outer, more presentable patio, and the school was in motion. The monthly fifty peseta fee for three hours a week ensured it wasn't exclusively for the very rich. Head waiters, doctors, lawyers, bookkeepers, well-to-do señoritas and schoolboys all mixed in our makeshift classrooms to study – clad, in the short winter, in overcoats. Some became our lifelong friends.



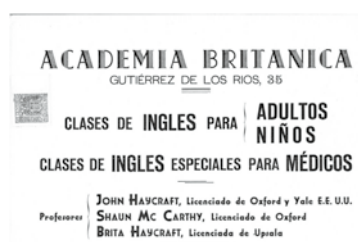
1950s: John Haycraft teaching a class in Cordoba

We used Eckersley's *Essential English* – RP English in a nutshell, with some good jokes thrown in. We tried using English only, but in the end our Spanish, aided by our students' Hispanic zest for anecdotes, overtook their English. But they enjoyed their English classes, intrigued because no other foreigners had come to stay in their lovely but quite isolated city. We were known as the *los forasteros* – the foreigners. Classes ran from 6 pm to 10 pm, and after dinner in the same classroom, we'd go to the cinema at 11.30, when the Spanish evening really began.

We hoped to stay a year, money permitting. Afterwards I was aiming for a job in the BBC Scandinavian section in London. But each time I asked about next year, John said 'Let's wait a bit'. We couldn't remain in the same place. But how could we abandon all our students? There was also our dog, impulsively adopted and now named Kalifa, causing us to be known as *los forasteros con el perrito* – the foreigners with the little dog.

One hot April day, a lanky Englishman strolled in and said a very casual 'hello'. It was Shaun McCarthy, a good friend from Oxford. Shaun became our first teacher, and our students were treated to the most clipped English and driest

humour imaginable. Shaun agreed to stay and teach the few remaining students over the long, hot summer and to look after Kalifa. We opted to come back for a second year.



September 1954 found us in a flat with a patio above a sausage factory. Five classrooms were equipped with blackboards and with van Gough chairs and tables from the

market stalls. Old friends Guy and Angela Wilson had joined us. John and his brother Colin had come out from England on a Vespa, a good two-wheeled ad for our Academia, followed by our four-legged ad, Kalifa.

Everything domestic was run by our sexagenarian maid, Micaela. Her illiteracy in no way hampered her perfect skills in other areas. She was honest, tactful and very poor. Unable to call her 'tu' at her age, we used the polite form 'usted', to her surprise and acceptance. In her rich and eloquent Spanish we heard moving stories about Spain.

John thought we should start Easter courses in Spanish for foreigners, taught by an erudite student of ours and housed in the grand exclusive club, the Circulo de la Amistad, where John already taught a class of señoritas. A small January ad brought twenty-five participants from France, Holland and England, who descended on Cordoba at Easter. They lodged in simple, charming guesthouses covered in flower pots. The object was for our Cordobese students to mix with the foreigners, which they did with alacrity. The beautiful Circulo obliged magnificently and a coach took us all off to the Montilla wine towns and to the Seville Holy Week. International House was waiting in the wings.

At last, our third year yielded some decent premises. Much as people liked us, no one was keen to rent out to foreigners. Who knew what might happen? Who were we anyway? What had taken us to Cordoba, healthy and energetic as we were? Were we spies? And no children . . . A student, now a close friend, was delegated to find out. Rather nervously he reported how some people wondered if we were spies. But what was there to spy on? Ludicrous rumours existed that the Nazi Martin Bohrmann was hiding out in a small village downriver called Two Sisters. 'Some think you might not be married,' our friend continued. 'Of course we are,' we responded, holding hands. 'But do you have a wedding photo?' The picture, dug out of a drawer, was hastily placed on the bookshelf. End of questions.

The sign 'Academia Británica y Casa Internacional' now hung over our entrance.



French and German were also taught. A German friend had arrived and also organised our library. Passing English visitors gave talks and the Spanish course brought the annual crowd from abroad. At our weekly school dances, students and teachers lingered around the bar and the atmosphere was good. John and I lived upstairs with a roof terrace overlooking the undulating Andalucian countryside.



The bar at Calle San Fernando

We were eight teachers now, mostly from ads in The Times or indeed Easter course members who had stayed on. One valiantly went off to direct our little school in Montilla. We started others in Jerez and Cadiz. With few exceptions, our teachers possessed the spirit of the language traveller. And travel was cheap.

Soon International Weeks started, the first describing Sweden in an exhibition, slides and talks, mainly given by me, about forests and snow. The Embassy came down and presided, and the Cordoba authorities reciprocated with lavish receptions. In the spring a splendid Dutch week followed. Later there was an exuberant American week. This raised our profile considerably. John dreamed of starting a European university.

To top it all, our first child arrived, feted and cosseted. Micaela had her photographed in Sevillana dress. Our second baby was born in Cordoba itself. The school thrived, as did John's writing. His book, *Babel in Spain* came out in 1958 in England to excellent reviews. As a family of four now, it was now time for us to settle in England.

In Cordoba the excitement over the book died down only after certain people had been unduly offended. There was some estrangement, and talk of making John 'beloved son' of the city evaporated. We should have foreseen such sensitivities in a country where the censorship imposed by Franco's government persisted. Eight years later, however, Spanish radio interviewed John, oblivious to the fact that he'd been banned from entering Spain.

Happily, Eulio Cremades came to own the school, which has gone from strength to strength as our oldest affiliate. Much of what is best about International House today has its origins in those magical years in Cordoba. It was a privilege to live there.

Further reading: *Babel in Spain*, John Haycraft. (Hamish Hamilton, 1958)