



# RAFAEL BUCH BRAGE

**THE UNSURPASSED MASTER  
OF THE IBERIAN PIGEON BREEDS**

**By: Theo van Dissel (NL)  
Photos: Archives Theo van Dissel,  
unless stated differently**

Edited by Frank Povah

*Photo: Laudino Murciano, Emilio Pulido Machado (E)*

I had doves as far as my memory goes back. My grandfather had a beautiful pigeon loft on the roof of his house in the heart of the Schilderswijk in The Hague. He was not only a great pigeon expert but also a professional in dealing with his birds. Everything always looked perfect; the hens housed in the long lines of beautifully painted solo box pens - in The Hague usually called 'light boxes' - which were cleaned twice a day. This enabled him to keep in touch with his pigeons optimally. In my memory I still see the barred doors fitted with gleaming brass bolts.

My grandfather didn't allow anyone to take the pigeons out of the pens, except my father. Later, Grandpa sometimes allowed me to letting out the cocks, housed in the so-called 'dark boxes' outside the loft, by giving them freedom by opening the slide.

Yes, the actual management of a The Hague pigeon loft is a subject separate and only a few 'narrow-minded professionals' as I call them, really master this art and the corresponding rules of this ancient game.

**Right: Valenciana Croppers  
in The Hague.**

**Photo: Aviculture Europe.**

At the time in the 1950s and 1970s, Valencian Croppers - also known as Spaniards - were, in addition to the original The Hague thief pigeons, the great fashion on the pigeon lofts. These were the real pugnacious Valencians with their temper and impetuous temperament. The cock hit the tiles of the roof and the hens were born as



thoroughbred seducers who understood the art of love game like no other pigeon breed. They were absolutely irresistible for the ever-enduring passionate cock birds; entirely different birds than the present-day, somewhat sedate Valencians.

During that time, the meetings of the Valencian Croppers specialty club VVF were held at the in The Hague's pigeon shop 'De Zwarte Vogel'. The club members sat on crates and tins and everything that could be used for sitting and Dorus de Zwart, the owner of the shop, was chairman of the VVF. Dorus was a very amiable man and, although I was not a member, he allowed me to attend the meetings as long as I did not interfere.



**Left: A white Marchenero at the show in Castropol, Asturias. Photo: Aviculture Europe.**

In the early sixties, the first Marchenero Croppers came to our country (NL); Willem van Ostayen living in Loosduinen, who also bred the Valencian, brought them from Spain where he had been on holiday. These were beautiful birds, with the Spanish temperament, but friendly, although they did not shy away from mutual fights.

Because I knew Ostayen, I kept on begging to get some Marcheneros, which eventually succeeded. At that time I was about 14 years old and was already

fascinated with all the books in which something was written about pigeons.

Those Marcheneros were not comparable to today's. When I see the first somewhat stiff Standard drawings by Jan de Jong, which he made on the instructions of the then breeders, and compare them to what the breed looks like today, I see a huge difference.

Of course, I would like to know more about the Marchenero, and since I could not read a word Spanish, I asked if Van Ostayen could help me with this, if possible, with images. Although this did not really happen at first, he eventually came up with a name: Rafael Buch Brage. This man could tell me all about the Spanish pigeon breeds and equally important, he also spoke English. He also seemed to possess a large collection of pigeon books, at least that was what Van Ostayen had heard from some local breeders. Unfortunately, he could not get an address or place of residence, but the search could begin. Later I learned, Buch Brage stayed in the summer months and during the winter months alternately in another residence, which did not make my search easier.



**Right: Buch Brage (r) visiting Tally Mezzanetto and Frank Barrachina in Californië, 1993.**

To my sorrow, my collection of pigeon books disappeared through circumstances in the sixties, and due to my busy job I did not really put much effort in my search for Buch Brage. Meanwhile, I was married and had moved to a bigger house where I bred Norwich Croppers. Later, I re-started seriously with the construction of a pigeon library, now with books in many languages. The history of the keeping and breeding of pigeons still keeps me up to the present day.

Meanwhile, I had also visited my first Spanish pigeon exhibition and inquired about Buch Brage at these Spanish breeders. He was not present on the show but luck was on my side and I came to know his address. I immediately started writing him a letter. In the reply I received, we agreed to meet each other and about a year later the first meeting took place in Spanish city of Valls.



**Left to right: Ramón Amenós (passed away in 2011), Raphael Buche Brage and José Antonin, in Valls, 1994. Photo: Aviculture Europe.**

Buch Brage proved to be an inexhaustible source of pigeon knowledge in the broadest sense of the word. He was also a born narrator; especially when it concerned his favourite subject, the pigeons, he could really talk about it for hours. Not only of the Spanish breeds but he even knew many things on the most exotic pigeons. To my pleasure, also his already famous and extensive library was discussed simultaneously.

The huge amount of stories about his adventurous life, often supplemented with humorous anecdotes, were virtually inexhaustible. Based on the talks and correspondence with him and his friends, I would like to try to give you an impression of the life of this remarkable pigeon lover.

His parents and ancestors were all born in Spain, where family history dates back to 1538. On the father's side of the family were many passionate pigeon breeders, something he was particularly proud of.

Rafael Buch Brage was born on July 26, 1915. His parents were native Spaniards who lived in New York City, so, at birth, he possessed American citizenship. He hardly gets familiar with the American concepts and lifestyle as his parents returned to Spain when he was ten months old. When he had the age he went to Madrid and obtained a university degree Doctor in Letters, and he also received his Spanish passport. However, later, wanting to perfect his knowledge of

English, he would return to America where he completes his Law study and successfully completes his degree.

He was an enthusiastic and talented soccer player as well as athlete, even being selected for the team of students Olympiad for the Barcelona games. (Even at high age he still played tennis.)

While studying in Spain, he kept and bred pigeons, like his father, grandfather and great-grandfather and many family members before him. One can say that he was more or less hereditary destined for keeping pigeons.

Over the years, he obtained his diploma of Rights, with Languages enjoying his special interest. He told me that he had to study Latin too, at the age of 16, although he sometimes wondered what he needed that for.

*I myself had to think of this during our joint research into the origins and history of The Hague dookits, when I requested him to assist in translating data from an old pigeon book from 1605 written in Latin. It stated that already the Batavians held specific pigeons that were closed in under nets and in cages, which, when set free, returned with pigeons of the neighbours. Although there was hardly any legislation at that time, there were certain rules of the game that were applicable to them.*

*Personally, contrary to the thinking in our country, I think that this tradition originated in the Saxon countries and came to Spain by the Franks; an opinion that is shared with Buch Brage. Spain and the Netherlands are the only countries in Europe where pigeons are kept in a historically similar manner, which were later laid down in laws, and among other things known in the time of Spanish domination under the Duke of Alva.*

From 1936 to 1939, he fought as an officer in the Spanish civil war against the fascist Franco. In 1936, he joined as a volunteer the so-called "Socialists" who formed the legal government at the time. Because he spoke six languages fluently, he was very valuable as an intelligence officer.

Later he became part of the famous Abraham Lincoln Mixed International Brigades in 1938, where he became a captain and later a commander.

He fought among others in the streets of Barcelona as well as in the support groups during the defence of Madrid, where it was fierce.

**Right: In the Servicio de Inteligencia Militar, XV Brigade, May 1938.** *Identification of item, date; Harry Randall: Fifteenth International Brigade Films and Photographs; ALBA PHOTO 011; item: 11-0189. Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, 70 Washington Square South New York, NY 10012, New York University Libraries.*

After the Spanish civil war he goes to France from where he ships to Mexico. Hence, he returns to the town where he was born, New York, where he becomes a teacher and works as a sports editor for a big newspaper.

It was then 1942, and Europe sighed under the fascist regime of Hitler in the Second World War. Because he was American and because this country participated in the war, he was assigned to the commands. In doing so, he joined the battle in Libya against the troops of Field Marshal Rommel during the battle around Tobruk.



After the war period, it was now 1946, he had the opportunity to practice his great love again. He now lived in the town of Teaneck in New Jersey in America, where he kept and bred on a large scale the Spanish pigeon breeds that were unknown there at that time.

At the same time, he started building a library of pigeon books which at some point already contained about 3000 books. He also had a large number of documents and copied pieces, some with sometimes just one chapter and sometimes even one page that referred to pigeons. In books, dealing with eg ornithology, natural history or agricultural science, often interesting information on pigeons is found too.

Here he also participates in pigeon shows.



**Above: Buch Brage in his library. Photo: Courtesy of Carlos Loza. There is a video of Carlos Loza interviewing Buch Brage, on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mF8Pt6sq-w&t=61s>**

Between 1948 and 1952, he lives in Cuba, for his work as editor of the well-known magazine "La Hacienda", a leading agricultural magazine in the Caribbean. He also finds among others the famous writer Ernest Hemmingway, whom he had previously met in Madrid, but meets again here and now becomes acquainted with him.

He works here during the period that President Batista is in power, but after Communist Fidel Castro seizes power and chases away everything that is American, it is no longer safe for him in Cuba.



After his return in Spain he started working for the American film industry. Due to his vast knowledge of special places and architecture, gained during his many travels, he researches suitable locations for film recordings. He has collaborated on many American and English films, such as The Queen of Sheba, Lawrence of

Arabia, The Fall of the Roman Empire, 55 days in Beijing, El Cid, Cleopatra and many others.

He is fond of telling a special anecdote, at least he told me this story a few times, roaring with laughter: For the recording the movie Doctor Zjivago, he researched locations for recording very specific scenes. As a result, Madrid's station was dressed with the red flags with the famous 'hammer and sickle' images. Also life-sized portraits of Stalin, the then Russian ruler, were present; all this in order to imagine the Moscow station in this way. Then a train from Portugal arrived, from which a traveller alighted with a suitcase in each hand. Due to the decoration of the station, he thought he had arrived in Moscow and completely passed out. The film engineers bring him back to his positives and try to help him with his luggage. However, he does not want to let go of this at all and no one ever knew what was in the suitcases.



During the recordings of this film, he also became friends with Omar Sharif, who is known as a true animal lover. He learned that Omar Sharif had a farm of thoroughbred race horses, and therefore had knowledge of breeding animals. As a consequence of his work, he got also acquainted with many celebrities of the time such as Sophia Loren, John Wayne, Charleston Heston, etc.

**Photo: Carlos Loza.**

Later he settled with his wife and three children in Spain in the vicinity of Madrid. Here he built a pigeon loft of large size that he populated among others with a number of rare Spanish pigeon breeds that were threatened with extinction at the time. He wanted to bring these breeds to a large extent to the attention of the Spanish breeders, thereby passing on many pigeons to other fanciers, in his efforts to secure the future of this unique Spanish heritage; something in which he has succeeded in many cases.

Here he started collecting literature about pigeons on a really large scale. His library is impressive and contains books from many countries in the world; of its kind, it is one of the largest libraries in the world in this area. His collection contains many rare copies in which he as a historian in this area is particularly interested. It is also a memorial to his father and grandfather, both committed pigeon breeders. In addition, his father was a deserving amateur painter and draftsman of pigeons, especially of the Spanish races.

**Right: Lynn Watson (USA) - another collector, with Buch Brage in his library.**



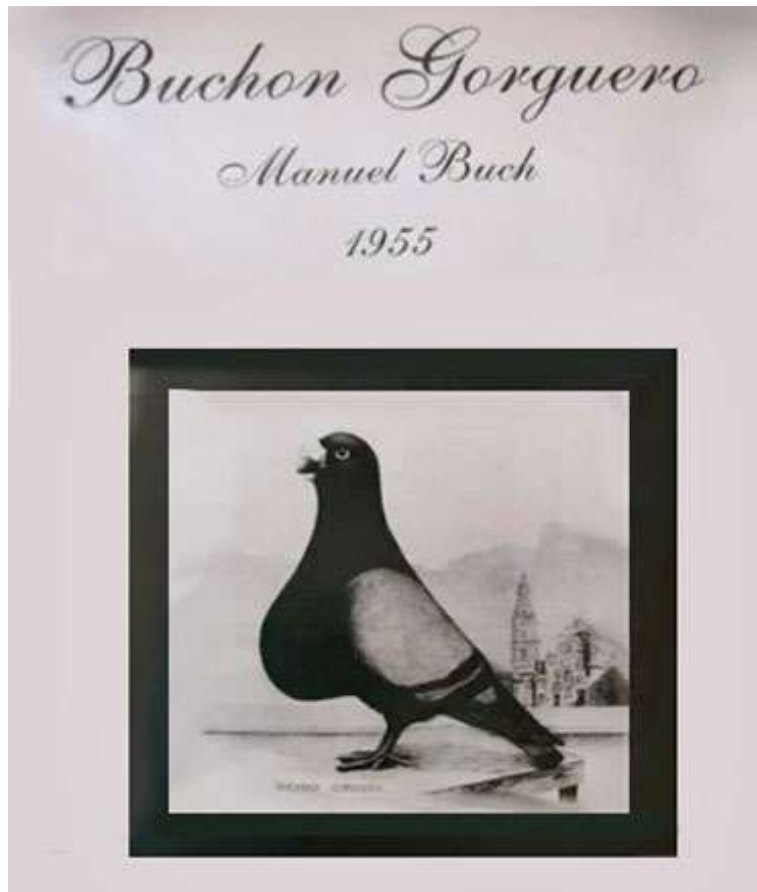
At the invitation of Nico van Benten and his son Ad van Benten, he was present in our country (the Netherlands) at the 105<sup>th</sup> Avicultura Show in 2001, where he was guest of honour and opened the show. Here he also came into contact with Jan de Jong (pigeon artist) whose art he admired. During the conversation between the two, I was able to act as an interpreter. Jan was impressed with the pictures of the father of Buch Brage, inspiring him to make a beautiful drawing of the Punalada - an ancient Spanish wattle pigeon and one of the favourite breeds of Buch Brage. Jan also made a drawing of a Valencian Cropper for him; both drawings got a place in his Spanish home.

**Right: Punalada, drawn by Jan de Jong.**

Due to his many travels, combined with searches for rare documents and related matters regarding our hobby, he has succeeded in building a highly special and varied collection over the years. He also has a beautiful collection paintings of various rare and even of some extinct Spanish and Portuguese pigeon breeds; unique in the world, as being proof of their existence in the past. These have an invaluable sentimental value for him because they were collected by his father and some were even painted by father Brage, whose favourite breed was as a matter of fact the Giant pigeon of Mallorca, and he also kept the classic homing pigeons of Valencia.

**Right: Gorguero, drawn by his father Manuel Buch. Photo: Carlos Loza.**

When we talk about pigeon books and collecting these, we are almost irrevocably at Spruijt, for whose work Buch Brage has a huge admiration; he calls him one of the greatest of his time and also a man who has left an incredible legacy. However, he finds it incomprehensible that Spruijt has hardly mentioned the Spanish pigeon breeds in his books. He believed that Spruijt, who had a lot of information about many pigeon breeds, would have been well informed.



In his great masterpiece, the famous book "Onze Duivenrassen in Woord en Beeld" is only one image of a Valencian Cropper, a drawing by Johan Lentink, as well as a description of this breed.

**Right: Valenciana, drawn by John Lentink (NL).**

Also the not mentioning of the name of the greatest American writer in this jargon, Wendel Mitchel Levi - author of the two most famous pigeon books in the world, "The Pigeon" and the "Encyclopedia of Pigeon Breeds" - was in his opinion because of Spruijt hated his Jewish name. Spruijt had studied at Leipzig in his youth and also worked for German companies. In the war years, although under pressure, he printed books on



# ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PIGEON BREEDS

By Wendell M. Levi



behalf of the rule of fascist occupants of large parts of Europe.

**Left: Cover of the famous book by Levi.**

*When I told him that I have Spruijt's personal archive, as well as all his books, as well as all other editions in my collection, and also have examined the true history, he advanced his statements. He found Spruijt a great pigeon expert and all his books were very interesting, but he did not think highly of him as a human being. In view of the events in Buch Brage's life and his active involvement in two wars, including the regime of dictator Francisco Franco and later Adolf Hitler, I could understand this. The feelings about the war of the generation for me, in my opinion, played a clear role in his opinion.*

For C.S.Th. van Gink, another Dutch poultry and pigeon expert, Buch Brage does have a great admiration. He described him as a true gentleman and as a great artist of international name and fame. He also found him an enormous animal

connoisseur with great general knowledge. He still recalled Van Gink's search for the origin of the Valkenet, which he still has a good idea of.

Spruijt claimed in his books that the Valkenet - named Barb in English - was from the Barbarian-Berber coast of North Africa. This pigeon travelled through France, then reaching the other European countries through England, Germany, Poland, Italy, while the breed was often transformed and renamed with a different custom name. Spruijt, however, never mentioned Spain, in spite of the fact that the Barbarian coast was only 14 kilometres away from Spain. (The Arab Moors dominated the southern part of Spain from 711 to 1492; the Moors were devastated pigeon breeders and the actual founders of many southern Spanish pigeons.) Spruijt however stated that there were hardly any original pigeon breeds known in the North of Spain.

In the famous Dutch pigeon book by Johan van Vollenhove from 1686 the following description of the Valkenet is mentioned:

*"From the Short Beak and Crested pigeon breeds, a well-known Short Beak pigeon was sent here from Spain, and most found by Juserren in Amstelstad. Its loveliness is in its blood red eye ceres, and a thick and heavy beck, but short and large bodied, with grey or black plumage and with clean brown legs".* Spruijt completely ignored this unique and original old book, which clearly points to the Spanish origin of the Barb breed, although he had at least a photocopy of this book in his possession. The same was true with the book "Pigeon Breeding" by A.H. Hedden, issued in 1844 by Gebr. Diederichs and auctioned after his death.

Buch Brage continued: In the period 1950-1954, I began sending information about the Spanish pigeon breeds to the Swedish Pigeon Magazine, "Svensk Duvavelsforening Tidskrift", led by the famous publisher

and pigeon connoisseur Bertil Harrison. Harrison was a good friend of Spruijt and also collected pigeon books. He had a huge collection - including very rare speci-





mens - which was more extensive and also more valuable than Spruijt's. This huge collection is currently owned by the University Library in Swedish Lund under the name of Bibliotheca Columbarum.

In April 1953, Buch Brage received from R.R.P. Van der Mark (NL) a letter stating among other things that Spruijt looked for a mutual acquaintance in the Duivenpark in Gouda.

Unfortunately, and to his regret, this meeting never took place because he was stationed in Latin America for the time being.

When in 1955 there was finally the opportunity, the plans were crossed by the death of Spruijt.



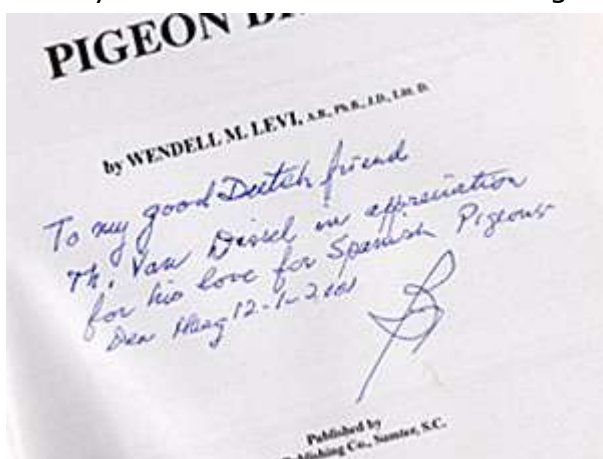
**Left and below:**  
**A Christmas card with accompanying envelope, from Buch Brage to Spruijt.**

He added quite ironic to the conversation that the total lack of mentioning the Spanish pigeon breeds in Spruijt's books, was probably still hampered by the domination of the Spanish duke of Alva.

The many Spanish-language books, including some rare copies, which he sent me with great regularity, prove that Buch Brage did not really have bitter feelings. Of course, also Dutch literature was sent in return.



Worldwide appreciation and recognition was given to Buch Brage after the publication of the famous books, also known as "the pigeon bibles", from the well-known American W.M. Levi, also owner of the huge Palmeto Plant meat pigeon ranch. All detailed information about the Spanish pigeon breeds and their history mentioned in these books originate from Buch Brage.



During our meeting at the 105<sup>th</sup> KNV Avicultura show in 2001, he was so kind to sign me these two books, which have been in my possession for many years, so that they obtained their own personality.

**Left: The signed book.**



**Left: Buch Bage handing me my signed book.**

In the meanwhile, he kept himself busy and was engaged in the promotion of Spanish pigeon breeds worldwide, both in his native America but also in the South American countries. In the many Spanish-speaking countries, the interest awakened in the numerous special and beautiful

pigeon breeds that Spain has to offer. But also in Europe the interest awakened. In France, the Club Francais des Pigeons Iberiques was founded in 1984, but in Germany, a similar club was established later.



**Above: Visiting a restaurant after judging at the show in Valls, Spain, 1992. Left to right: Nico van Benten, Frank Sotto, Tally Mezzanetto, José Antonin, Pedro Toro, Gemma van Benten, Frank Barrachina, Christian Reichenbach, Raphael Buch Brage and Pere Prats. The two men at the back are David White and Pat Pratt. Photo: Aviculture Europe.**



**Left: Buch Brage showing how to drink wine from a porrón, a sort of glass bottle with a pointed spout from which a thin jet of wine spurts out whenever you tip it up. The man on the left is Pedro Toro, today living in Germany. Photo: Nico van Benten.**



Of course, our country did not stay behind and especially in The Hague, where many Spanish pigeon breeds had secured a fixed position in the many pigeon lofts, they were a huge success.

The founding of the Dutch Specialty Club for the Iberian Pigeon Pigeons shortly called the SIS became a fact on April 9, 1989. I still remember that day and this club was immediately a big success.

The first board consisted of chairman Leo den Dulk, with next to him his unequalled secretary, Nico van Benten and with the commissioners, among others, the great Huub Vermeulen, who would be the later chairman.

**Right: A Laudino Sevillano**  
**Photo: Marcel Fehling,**  
**chairman SIS.**

Buch Brage was very enthusiastic about our Dutch club and in every conversation he inquired about the state of affairs, which I could fully tell him that this was a great success. Today we are growing to an amazing number – according to Dutch points of view – of three hundred and fifty members!



**Below: A Laudino Sevillano.**  
**Photo: Marcel Fehling.**



It was to be expected that such an initiative would also be taken in Germany, partly because he had made many good and influential friends there over the years, I mention Christian Reichenbach, former editor-in-chief of the famous German magazine Geflügel-Börse and also a great and famous collector of pigeon literature. In earlier years Reichenbach had also been a very good friend of the unforgettable Werner Möbes. In the third and rare edition of his famous book Bibliographie der Tauben, Buch Brage accounted for 100 of the 580 pages.

But also Martin Lindner, who has been a great fan of Spanish pigeon breeds for many years, he knew well, same as Werner Zahn and Karlheinz Sollfrank - the latter two are among the largest

collectors of pigeon literature in the world.

Because he is also a collector as well as expert of ceramics and special art, he was invited to the world-famous English auction house Sotheby's for his help and

expertise. This brought him close to his other great love, namely all things from the past that have to do with pigeons.

Here he discovered, among other things, the existence of two precious sixth century BC amphoras showing pigeon figures.

**Right: Being an expert of special art, Buch Brage was also invited to visit the famous J Paul Getty museum in Malibu.**

But also the rare pigeon book of Madame Choinard de Jouy from 1754 he was on track in this way, as far as I know the only copy in the world that is still available.

Thus, he also discovered that the Fantail was already kept and bred by the Great Emperor of India (1545-1605), as described in the very ancient and unique book Ayeen Akbari by the Prime Minister of his country, in honour of his prince.



His unique and very large pigeon collection, combined with many artefacts, has now moved to the famous pigeon museum of Karlheinz Sollfrank in Nuremberg, Germany, which allowed me to see this book as well as the other rarities.

## Los Angeles Pigeon Club Pageant of Pigeon Banquet 1994

Friday, November 18th, 7:00 p.m.  
San Bernardino Hilton  
285 E. Hospitality Lane  
(909) 889-0133

Ralph Buch Brage  
Guest Speaker

our legendary speaker hails from Pensicola, Spain  
come and hear one of the greats in pigeon history

Dinner Selection: \$23.50 per person  
London Broil or Cornish Game Hen

Must Present Ticket to be Served - Tickets will be also be available at the Show

But also his American friends did not forget him. During the biggest and most famous pigeon show of America, the Pageant or Pigeons, organized by the Los Angeles Pigeon Club, he was invited to the opening ceremony. He also served as a guest speaker at the traditional dinner; an honourable invitation, were all guests are dressed in a tuxedo and, of course, also welcomed by him in the same style, moreover, something that's right up his alley though.

Only carefully chosen prominent and well-known celebrities who meet the highest standards will be invited for the opening of such a big show of international allure, which is therefore definitely no sinecure. However, with his infectious enthusiasm, knowledge and humour, he showed that they had made the right choice with him as opener of the show. Because he is also a born narrator besides his innate civilization, many stories from his adventurous life played a major role. In addition, he changed his lectures with humorous anecdotes that he experienced during working in the film industry, making the audience hang on his every word.

In recent years he lives a more secluded life, partly because of his very high age. However, he can look back on highlighting his great love, the inimitable Iberian



pigeon breeds, with great success. Not only in his native country but also worldwide, his dedication has led to the huge bloom of this rich and beautiful Spanish cultural heritage. This is shared by the many admirers of the same passion with him, which has led to an unprecedented interest and succession worldwide.

**Left: Rafael Buch-Brage with his wife and Bob Nolan (USA). Note the very apt name of the restaurant: "Las Palomas".**

From the above, you have already noticed that his great knowledge does not originate exclusively from the practice of the actual breeding of pigeons, but also results from the fact that he has written a great deal about pigeons as a major expert. Not only did he set up a comprehensive library for this, and studied the contents of this, he was also well-acquainted with all the major pigeon book connoisseurs and collectors in the world, among whom he has many friends and admirers.

Revealing the past of many races and studying the history of the phenomenon of pigeon is indeed in the hands of the experts of books about pigeons; on our behalf they keep the history in honour, cherish it and pass it on.

For example, many people wonder why certain breeds have their specific body form, behaviour and appearance. The answer to these questions is often hidden in the literature about this.

**Right: A Valenciana cropper.**

Our ancestors have achieved a lot, especially if we assume Darwin's theoretical theorem that claimed that all now-known pigeons originate from the *Columba Livia* - the "simple" rock dove. His statement, as it is, is still unprecedented to date. The development process of today's pigeon breeds is highly interesting and knowledge of this arouses the interest of a lot of people. Because of this, all the worshipers of these pigeons, provided with the undeniable and immediately recognizable Spanish temperament, speak the name of Buch Brage with great reverence, admiration and gratitude, because he is inextricably and forever linked to these pigeons.



Buch Brage is a man who has already established a monument for himself and is respected at home and abroad for his unprecedented knowledge.

Photos: Marcel Fehling, SIS.



The thousands of instructive talks, always sympathetic, and many at the almost scientific level, expressing his great love for the characteristic pigeon breeds from his homeland, have brought him esteem and gratitude from many sides.



We reiterate with great gratitude the many efforts of this inspired and widely respected man.

**Photo: Still from Youtube video by Carlos Loza.**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0mF8Pt6sg-w>

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