Chapter 19

A Life Cycle of Extreme Survival Spanning Three Stages: Ana Vela Rubio (1901–2017)

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19.1 Introduction¹

The life trajectory of Ana Vela Rubio (hereinafter AVR) condensed the sociodemographic changes that took place in Spain during the twentieth century. This Andalusian woman, born in Puente Genil (Cordoba), lived through the changes that played a large part in our society's metamorphosis and modernisation, and in the well-recognised epidemiological and health transitions. AVR was born in 1901 to Andalusian parents in a humble home and in the bosom of rural society, in which gender-divided work was characteristic of the time – her certificates euphemistically code her mother's occupation as “her sex”. Fertility rates were high – the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) was constantly higher than 4 in the pre-1920s (Delgado 2009), as was infant mortality – the Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) was never lower than 100 deaths per 1000 live births (Gómez-Redondo 1992) in the same period. These figures are reflected in our case in the death of four of AVR's six siblings during early childhood due to infections that were rife in the pre-transitional stage.

However, in the course of AVR's life, Spain underwent major sociodemographic mutations and became a country with one of the highest life expectancies in the world. Furthermore, during the middle decades of the twentieth century, a rural exodus took place, with successive waves of massive movements of people from the countryside to the cities. AVR was a case in point. From Puente Genil, she first migrated to Malaga, a medium-sized city on the south coast of Spain, where she formed a family and brought up her children. Later, she uprooted again, this time to

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Barcelona, a hot spot for immigrants from all corners of Spain, and particularly from Andalusia and Murcia. This immigration process occurred mainly during the 1950s and 60s. In parallel, fertility and mortality rates started to tail off, with the TRF (4.7 in 1900) falling to 2.5 children per woman in the 50s, and the IMR (172 per 1000 live births at the start of the century) standing at about 50 in Spain when AVR's first grandchildren were born.

After our supercentenarian arrived in Barcelona, the processes mentioned above became more intense: migration acquired an international dimension (as shown in the experience of AVR's own children), while fertility rates continued to fall until they reached an all-time low by 1975. Longevity figures showed the opposite trend, as Spain became one of the highest ranked countries worldwide in terms of survival and extreme longevity, leading to an exponential rise in the centenarian population starting in the 80s. As we will explain below in greater detail, AVR's long life is a privileged example of more than a century of social and demographic changes in the life of a country.

19.2 An Example of In-Depth Verification

AVR's case is of particular interest because of her extreme longevity compared with the majority of European supercentenarians. Notably, at the time of writing she is one of the 20 longest-living persons in the history of humankind and the longest-living person in Spain. Moreover, before her recent death on 15 December 2017, she was the oldest living person in Europe and the third oldest living person in the world. For this reason, the work undertaken to verify AVR's age followed not only the protocol established by the International Database on Longevity (IDL), completed in May 2017 (Gómez-Redondo et al. 2017), but also a more in-depth verification using the different types of sources described below:

- (a) Official documents. These are the cornerstone of every age validation process. In this case, we corroborated birth certificates (AVR, parents and siblings), death certificates (parents, and of her six siblings, four who died in childhood), her parents' marriage certificate, and also the national identity cards of AVR and of three of her children.
- (b) Parish documents. Historically, parishes have been responsible for recording the religious ceremonies and rites of their parishioners. Most documents refer to life events such as birth (baptism), marriage (and its Catholic ceremony) and death (and its corresponding religious ceremony). We referred to these documents in addition to the official records to rule out incongruities and fill in any information gaps. Although parish registries have become less reliable lately compared to official civil sources, in historical demography they are a traditional source of inestimable value, especially in view of the inaccuracies and gaps in the incipient Spanish Civil Registry (created in 1870) at the turn of the twentieth century, which could have affected our case.

- (c) Witness accounts by relatives and other persons in close contact with AVR. Beyond the data recorded in official and religious documents, we reconstructed AVR's life trajectory through a total of nine personal interviews and telephone calls, as well as various minor consultations. During our verification work, we visited "La Verneda" care home in Barcelona four times. The staff reported on AVR's state of health and her quality of life, as well as any changes and limitations in her daily activities at the home.
- (d) Graphical materials. Through the visits and interviews mentioned above, we collected various photographs of recent events as well of AVR's whole life trajectory and the changes in her place of residence. These photographs complemented the validation process reported here. AVR's daughter and two grandchildren (Antonio and Ana) provided most of the photographs from the past and we also collected others in the course of our investigation through the interviews and visits.

In short, to conduct this validation process, we visited Puente Genil twice, including an interview on one occasion, where we obtained AVR's parents' marriage certificate, birth certificates (and death certificates where applicable) of AVR and her siblings, as well as the parish records of these life events. We also made other trips to interview relatives (conducting various telephone interviews beforehand) and collect photographs in Malaga, Torremolinos, and Barcelona, as mentioned above. In 2017, we exchanged many emails with the principal informants and also with staff from registry institutions.

19.3 Three Stages, Two Centuries and 116 Years. An Extensive Validation of the Life Cycle of Ana Vela Rubio (1901–2017)

Ana Vela Rubio celebrated her 116th birthday in October 2017, shortly before her death. Hers was a unique case of extreme longevity in an unfavourable physical and sociodemographic setting for survival. Cordoba province at the start of the twentieth century, a family history fractured by the moral values of the times, and the harsh conditions of AVR's socioeconomic origin, meant she faced periods of poverty and high mortality during her childhood and early youth. Her life cycle was especially complex to follow in her life trajectory as a supercentenarian because she formed a family with a partner with whom she held neither a religious nor civil union – a status that was stigmatised in interwar Spain and for many decades to come. However, a positive factor that made our research feasible was the Vela-Rubio family's ability to surmount social and economic obstacles, adapting to their changing environment as a result of their migrations within Spain and beyond its borders, to Europe. Above all, we were supported by AVR's closest relatives and their interest to recover their family history and to understand and respect the purpose of our scientific investigation, undertaken from a sociodemographic perspective.

We have divided AVR's life trajectory into three stages, corresponding to her three different places of residence. The first starts with her birth in Puente Genil and ends when she moved to Malaga as a young woman starting her adult life. From this first period, AVR's descendants knew incomplete, disjointed stories from the family history; isolated tales that AVR had told her children, who in turn had passed them on in some cases to their own children, but there were gaps that had to be filled and verified. They were almost unaware of the existence of AVR's siblings. Only AVR's daughter mentioned a vague recollection of one of them, saying that he had drowned as an adult in the river Genil, which gives its name to AVR's place of birth. The order of AVR's siblings has been reconstructed through this investigation by in situ searches of documents held at the civil and parish registries of Puente Genil. We searched and followed up all the births (and deaths, in some cases) of the children born to AVR's parents, from the time that AVR's mother, Carmen Rubio, reached a reproductive age until her death. Thus, through a systematic review of official and religious documents from the period 1890–1917, we drew up a list of all AVR's siblings, in order to be able to rule out the existence of a sister with the same name, which could have given cause for doubts or objections in the international validation of AVR as an exceptional supercentenarian.

The second stage covers AVR's years in Malaga, where she set up her home and had her children, while working as a seamstress in private households. The reconstruction of a large part of this second stage has been possible mainly thanks to the testimony and documentary support contributed by two close relatives: AVR's daughter Ana, the only one of the four children who is still alive, and who has lived much of her life, including old age, with AVR; and AVR's grandson Antonio Vela, whose father, Antonio – firstborn of AVR and Antonio Padrón – had passed on fragments of family history to him during his life. In the course of several interviews in Barcelona, we pieced together significant portions of this family story. It was in fact the complementarity of the two sources that formed the basis of our registry searches. In addition, in Torremolinos (Malaga) we interviewed a second grandchild, Ana – daughter of AVR's youngest son, Juan, who formed a family in Leicester (England) but lived the latter part of his life with his daughter on the coast of Andalusia, where he died at the age of 84.

The third and last stage of AVR's long life takes place in Barcelona, where she worked until retirement and continued to celebrate her birthday, year in, year out, with her loved ones. Again, thanks to AVR's daughter and grandson, who live in the same city, and to the care home staff where AVR spent her last years (and particularly to David González, Raquel Cubero and María Rosa Martín, director, social educator and psychologist, respectively) we have been able to document this stage of active old age that AVR enjoyed until a few years ago, and of total dependence during her last years. From this final stage we have been able to step back into the past to complement all the official data we have collected during the course of our investigation.

19.4 Origins: Puente-Genil (Cordoba), Andalusia. Beginning of the Twentieth Century

A baby girl was born on 29 October 1901 in Calle Tintor 48, in the small town of Puente Genil, municipality of Aguilar de la Frontera (Cordoba). She was baptised (Fig. 19.1) on 10 November of the same year in a church called Iglesia de la Purificación with the Christian name of *María de Santa Ana, de San Simón y San Judas*, shortly after her birth had been entered in the Civil Registry, on 30 October (Fig. 19.2) in the same town. She was the first child born to her parents following their civil marriage on 22 November 1899 and religious ceremony the following day, as recorded in the respective certificates (Fig. 19.3). AVR's mother was Carmen Rubio Becerra, born in Puente Genil, who was motherless and had AVR at the age of 24; AVR's father was Pedro Vela Carrasco,² born in Ronda (Malaga), a hat maker by trade and aged 27 when AVR was born. AVR, the firstborn, was followed by three brothers and three sisters: Dolores (born 8-06-1903), María Dolores (06-02-1905, following the death of Dolores, her namesake, 1 year earlier), Francisco (15-02-1908), María del Carmen (02-02-1911), Juan (01-04-1913) and Manuel (31-10-1915) (Fig. 19.4).

The family's health and living conditions were precarious in Puente Genil, a rural town in the Cordoba countryside. AVR survived in a setting where infant mortality was high (which could be a predictor of her biological strength and health preservation in the face of adverse conditions) as seen by the deaths of four of her six siblings: Dolores at 9 months, María Dolores at 5 years, Francisco at 3 years and

Fig. 19.1 AVR baptism certificate

²AVR's maternal grandparents were Juan Rubio Bascón and María del Carmen Becerra Morán, and her paternal grandparents were Francisco Vela Domínguez and Ana Carrasco Matoso.

Fig. 19.2 AVR birth certificate

Fig. 19.3 Parents' marriage certificate

Fig. 19.4 AVR family tree

Manuel at under 2 years, a few months after their mother (Carmen Rubio) died in April 1917.³

AVR was the oldest of her siblings and appeared to play an essential role in the home despite her young age, as shown by the baptism records of her younger brothers, Juan and Manuel, in which she was entered as their godmother, as if she were an adult, despite being only 11 and 14 years old, at their respective baptisms. Although the figure of godmother has lost relevance over the years, it is noteworthy because in a fervently religious Spanish society at the beginning of the twentieth century, a godmother held great responsibility in the upbringing of her godchildren, especially if one of the parents died. Proof of this is the following statement in both baptism records:

his godmother is Ana Vela (...), whom I duly cautioned of the obligation and spiritual relationship that she has herein acquired.

AVR's role as protector, in sole charge of family welfare, was also mentioned by her surviving daughter and grandchildren during the various interviews that we held. Their responses revealed that AVR's household responsibilities and care of her siblings became unsustainable shortly after her mother's death, and was compounded by the fact that her father was blind. The family's accounts were consistent in that, according to AVR, these circumstances led to her departure from Puente Genil to Malaga in the 1920s, to seek a new beginning there.

³With regard to AVR's two other siblings, Carmen and Juan, we know they reached adolescence at least, since they were alive in 1924, as corroborated by a margin note in their baptism records, stating that they received Catholic confirmation that year. The family story suggests that these two siblings may have spent their childhood in orphanages outside Puente Genil or even outside Andalusia.

19.5 The Birth of Her Children. Second Decade of the Twentieth Century. Malaga (Andalusia)

Carmen Rubio's death was a turning point in the life trajectory of her daughter, AVR. Her "maternal" role as an adolescent, which the family apparently assigned her during the parents' reproductive phase, increased following her mother's death, driving AVR to emigrate at a very young age, without her family, to a nearby city in Andalusia that was prosperous at the time. There, she lived her youth and early adulthood, working as a seamstress in local stores and households of the Malaga bourgeoisie. It was in one of these homes that she met her partner, Antonio Padrón Valderrama, who was to be the father of her four children. However, in view of the circumstances (testimonies from interviewees indicate that Antonio married another woman), they never married through a recognised civil or religious ceremony, and therefore AVR's descendants carry both her surnames, not the first surname of each parent – first the father's and second the mother's – which was mandatory at that time in Spain. But despite this, the couple maintained a stable relationship, according to the testimonies, and apparently for at least the early years when their children were small, the couple enjoyed a degree of tacit recognition from a social point of view among friends and neighbours in Malaga. From a research perspective, these unusual family circumstances made it harder to reconstruct the family tree, demanding highly meticulous protocols and corroboration through complementary sources during the validation process.

To all intents and purposes, AVR was a single mother who brought up her four children at number 32, calle Cuarteles in Malaga. The children, offspring of a single relationship, bore the same surnames, Vela Rubio: Antonio was born on 16 July 1923, Ana on 11 November 1927, Juan on 03 August 1930, and Carmen (Figs. 19.5, 19.6 and 19.7) was the youngest, dying in puberty in the mid 1940s, according to AVR's daughter Ana's testimony. Ana recalls her mother as a very active woman who took care of the household chores and her children's upbringing, as well as doing sewing work at home for clients, and later running a small store. She describes her mother as efficient, with no time for fun and games, but very concerned about educating her children well, a task she carried out conscientiously, if somewhat inflexibly.

The 40s and early 50s were characterised in Spain by social disorganisation and a serious economic crisis, making it hard for many families – including the Vela Rubio family – to survive at an economic level, as we learned from the in-depth interviews conducted. At the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939, first, hunger, and later, political and economic isolation under the Franco regime, drove families to emigrate to cities that were recovering economically.

Fig. 19.5 AVR with her children, Antonio and Ana

19.6 Second Half of the Twentieth Century and the Beginning of the 21st. Catalonia and a Split into Two Family Branches: From Barcelona to Leicester (England) – Torremolinos (Malaga)

Internal migratory movements occurred throughout the Iberian peninsula, and intensified over the next two decades. The main target locations, depending on a migrant's place of origin, were Barcelona, Madrid and the Basque Country. In the case of Barcelona, extensive migratory flows came fundamentally from southern Spain. AVR and her family formed part of these Andalusian masses who increased the population in the Barcelona metropolitan area.

Fig. 19.6 AVR with her children, Carmen (bottom), Ana (top) and Juan

At the start of the 50s, Antonio (son) emigrated to Barcelona with his newly wedded wife, where he lived until his death at the age of 82. AVR and her two other children, now adults and of working age, followed her first son's path to Barcelona a few years later. Initially, they lived in various locations on the city outskirts, mainly in Tarrassa, where the former Hospital de Enfermedades del Tórax [Hospital for Chest Diseases] was located, because AVR worked at the hospital as seamstress and also lived on the grounds in the hospital nuns' home until her retirement.

Again, she proved to be a woman of character and initiative, although somewhat shy with strangers. These traits were invariably described by the people close to her throughout her life, even in the final stage of her life cycle, as a centenarian at "La Verneda" care home.

Only in the 70s did AVR and her daughter acquire a property in La Verneda area, an industrial zone of Barcelona, where a working class neighbourhood sprang up to absorb the popular classes and continued to grow throughout the second half of the twentieth century. AVR moved there in 1973, together with her daughter Ana, and lived there after retirement, for more than 30 years of her old age.

During this long period, from her arrival in Barcelona to the present day, two sub-stages can be identified, which in turn include the international migratory movements of her adult children. The first sub-stage covers the second-generation formation of new family nuclei. AVR's grandson, Antonio, son of her firstborn, was born in 1952. Antonio lived in a town near Barcelona, where his father (also Antonio) migrated with his wife a few years before Antonio was born. Antonio (grandson)

Fig. 19.7 Photo of Antonio in 1936, dedicated to his mother, AVR

(Fig. 19.8), our second informant, his children and grandchildren still live in Barcelona. They are an example of a four-generation family's survival, coexisting at the time of AVR's 116th birthday in October 2017. Together, they were able to celebrate her exceptional longevity. With higher education and professional qualifications, this family branch has remained in the autonomous community of Catalonia and has followed the process of marked ascending social mobility in this area, which also characterises and represents the process followed by a large majority of Spanish families in the second half of the twentieth century.

As mentioned earlier, Ana (daughter) has lived much of her life, including her old age, with her mother. For this reason, she has been our principal informant until now, and still is at the age of 90. However, Ana emigrated to Leicester (England) in her youth, where she continued to work as an auxiliary nurse, having started nursing in Barcelona. After this migratory experience, she returned to Barcelona, where she concluded her nursing studies and married in the early 80s. Years later, divorced and

Fig. 19.8 AVR with her grandson Antonio (1960s)

childless, Ana returned to her maternal home at number 179, calle Josep Pla, formerly General Manso, where she lived until July 2017 when she sustained a hip fracture and finally had to be admitted to the same care home as her mother, benefiting from the right to family reunification, given the circumstances.

In parallel, AVR had a second branch of descendants, the children of Juan, the youngest son, who emigrated in his sister Ana's footsteps to Leicester, and also worked in the English National Health Service. Juan married a woman of German origin and they had three children (Wolfgang, Elmar and Ana María). The youngest of the three, Ana María,⁴ has been our third informant. AVR's youngest son, Juan, stayed in Leicester until retirement. The interviewees – both close family members and other more distant relatives from our supercentenarian's extended family who

⁴It should be noted that in her youth, Ana (granddaughter) adopted the double surname, Vela Rubio, of her grandmother and her father, breaking the single surname tradition of the English-speaking world, and thus adding a third generation of women in the family who bear identical first name and surnames.

live in Malaga province – remember Juan as an enterprising man, who retired in England and returned to Andalusia as a widower, where he lived until his death in Torremolinos (Malaga) near his English daughter who married a Spaniard. Following his return from England, Juan re-established and nurtured his relationship with cousins living in the province of Malaga but born in Puente Genil, who put him in touch with relatives and acquaintances from his mother's town. Although their marked English accent have made it hard to identify Juan and his daughter as Spaniards, together they have closed the family trajectory circle through the family branch that has returned to Andalusia.

This English-Andalusian branch has also contributed to AVR's flock of great-grandchildren; some live in Barcelona, some in Torremolinos and some in the United Kingdom. As a whole, there are more than twelve members of this third generation.

Despite its peculiarities, it is remarkable how this family expanded and integrated wherever they moved to, without losing track of their past. Today, Ana (daughter) still retains the soft Andalusian accent of her Cordoba-Malaga birthplace and childhood, recalling her ancestors' origins. AVR's accent was similar, until her cognitive deterioration advanced.

AVR's final stage in Barcelona refers to her period of advanced age, mainly from the time of her admission to "La Verneda" care home (Fig. 19.9). Located in the heart of AVR's neighbourhood, "La Verneda" is a day centre combined with a residential unit, managed by the Fundación Salud y Comunidad [Health and Community Foundation]. This dual-purpose centre allowed AVR to enjoy her long old age in an ideal setting, while adapting to her changing state of health and to the process involving her gradual loss of autonomy, characteristic of her advanced age. AVR attended first the day centre, from the age of 104, while she was independent and in a good state of health and mobility, requiring no more than the aid of a walking stick. Then, on 18 April 2008, at the age of 106, she moved into the residential unit. From her early years at "La Verneda", AVR was recalled as an autonomous, very active, independent person, with initiative, as characterised by her ready participation in activities, dances, parties and other events. She was cooperative and willing to help others, as far as her incipient age-related dementia would allow. She remained in this state until she had a fall and broke her leg (a femoral fracture), which drastically limited her mobility. According to the staff, this triggered a progressive deterioration in her health and autonomy and, in turn, an increasing need for care. Although she looked younger than her chronological age, AVR was wheelchair bound in her later years. Despite not having any illness requiring the polypharmacy that is commonly found in older people – except for medication to alleviate the consequences of her forced sedentary lifestyle – she was in a state of high dependence from the age of about 110, with very advanced cognitive deterioration, responding less and less to external stimuli. At our last visits (Fig. 19.10), we observed a response only to two types of stimuli: music rhythm, and above all, to the caresses of her daughter Ana (Fig. 19.11), responding to these stimuli while constantly babbling, with words that sounded like "*mummy...mummy*", sometimes also accompanied by emotional facial gestures in mother and daughter.

Fig. 19.9 Places where AVR lived: Calle Tintor (Puente Genil), Calle Cuarteles (Malaga), Calle Josep Pla and La Verneda care home (Barcelona)

Fig. 19.10 AVR with her daughter Ana, Rosa Gómez-Redondo and Ramon Domènech. June 2017

Fig. 19.11 AVR on her 116th birthday, with her daughter Ana. October 2017

On 15 December 2017, shortly after finishing this chapter and 6 weeks after celebrating her birthday, Ana died peacefully in her sleep at 3.30 a.m. on a wintry morning in “La Verneda” care home, Barcelona, at the age of 116 years and 47 days, thus relinquishing her privileged position as the oldest living woman in Europe.

19.7 Conclusion

We believe that the longevity of this Spanish supercentenarian is amply validated through the various documents we have obtained from the multiple sources consulted during our investigation, together with the information obtained from the various interviews with family members spanning two generations of AVR’s descendants, and also through the technical and multidisciplinary details provided by the staff at the care home where she spent the last 12 years of her life.

Despite being an atypical family with a single legally-responsible parent – which presented some challenges when we started our investigation due to the gaps in the family’s account of their history – and given the prevailing values in Spanish society in the period when AVR and her children were brought up, AVR’s family later showed keen and recurrent interest to recover their complete family story. The study has been more complex for the above reasons, but this has given us the opportunity

to broaden the investigation scene by following the stages in AVR's life cycle, meeting and getting to know her relatives, friends and neighbours, and reconstructing – with their testimonies – an exceptional life cycle of demographic and social survival. This study provides evidence that the three children who survived to adulthood got to know each other better during old age and coexisted with their mother, Ana Vela Rubio: one of the longest-living women in Europe of the twenty-first century.

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Family context:

- Ana (daughter), family memory and guide. Ana was the first and main informant in this study.
- Antonio (grandson) collaborated with us and understood the scientific interest of our work.
- Ana (granddaughter) helped us enthusiastically to recover her family history.
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