

GERARDO J. CUETO ALONSO

Departamento de Geografía, Urbanismo y Ordenación del Territorio, Universidad de Cantabria

The frustrated expectations of the Azucarera Montañesa in Torrelavega (Cantabria), 1898-1920

The establishment of a sugar refinery in Cantabria took place during the so-called “sugar fever” that Spain experienced towards the end of the 19th c. and, especially, due to the loss of the Antillean colonies in 1898. An extraordinarily protected market stimulated the growth of the sugar sector, although it did so in a disorganized manner, in such a way that at its peak in 1902, 49 sugar beet factories had been set up in Spain, even though sugar consumption in that country was low and remarkably inferior to other European countries.

In the city of Santander, the social and economic impact of the colonial disaster was especially profound. Its port activity, which depended in large measure on merchant shipping, had deteriorated over the last quarter of a century once the commercial monopoly on the flour trade with the Americas had been lost, but the independence of the colonies was to declare beyond doubt the end to its commercial bonanza.

The new economic times that were opening up obliged the bourgeoisie of Santander to find new activities for investing the capital accumulated over previous years and by doing so to revitalize maritime traffic. The mining of iron, which was enjoying a period of expansion in the province, and industry were the top-ranking sectors for investment. On this second activity, the press in Santander reported almost simultaneously on two projects that were under development in Santander, to whose ports Antillean sugar had been shipped over decades; a business in which numerous ex-colonials also had interests who had returned from Cuba in previous years.

In November 1898, José María González Trevilla, a known industrial mill owner from the province, called over forty capitalists and merchants from Santander at the headquarters of the Bank of Santander, in order to communicate his project to them to establish a sugar factor to refine sugar beet on a large scale, emulating other projects that over those months were being launched at various locations in the north of the Peninsula.

The project was very well received among those attending, in such a way that before the year was out the sugar refinery called Azucarera Montañesa had been set up with social capital of 2,500,000 Pesetas. Its Board of Directors was composed of the following members: President Guillermo Yllera Tejedor; Vicepresident Benito Corral Ezquerro; Secretary Antonio de Huidobro y Ortiz de Zárate; and, spokesmen José María González Trevilla, Leopoldo Cortines Sánchez, Dámaso Aja Fernández, and Bonifacio Alonso Bedia. They were all well known in the business world and reflected the double origin of capital in Santander at that time: mercantile, linked to milling and seaport businesses, and ex-colonials, repatriated after the loss of the Spanish colonies abroad.

After studying the proposals that were received, the Board of Administration contracted the supply of machinery with the company Carion Delmotte, from Anzin (Francia), which undertook to have the factory up and running at the start of October of the following year, in other words coinciding with the start of the sugarbeet harvest. The machinery to be installed was to mill 400 tons of sugarbeet daily, which, in a period of 100 days would amount to 40,000, from which, taking into ac-

count the envisaged yield of sucrose, it could produce some 4,000 tons of sugar.

In January 1899, the construction of the factory commenced on land at Alisar, in Torres, a village close to the city of Torrelavega, although within the boundaries of its municipal district. The land, which had been offered to the company by González Trevilla, embodied an important symbolic character, in so far as at the end of the 18th c., the first factory of Torrelavega had been built there; a spinning factor, the property of the Duke del Infantado.

The selection of the site was ideal for a sugar refinery. The city of Torrelavega had broad and extensive arable land appropriate for growing sugarbeet. The factory was located on the right bank of the river Saja-Besaya, which guaranteed supply of water. The Cantabrian Railway line ran past the estate to the South, which ensured the supply by the train of raw material from the Cantabrian coastline and, thanks to the Northern Railway line that ran through the city, even from interior provinces. Likewise, the nearby city of Torrelavega would facilitate the recruitment of a workforce.

The factory had a main building where the production process took place, composed of three units or sections assigned for diffusion, a filter tower, and a sugar warehouse. The sugarbeet stored in the silos of the factory grounds that had previously been weighed, either on scales at the reception area, or in the factory itself, was transported along a canal pushed by the flow of water into the main building. Here the actual production process itself began with the washing of the root for the removal of impurities such as soil and undersized beet. Once washed it was sent for shredding; the sugarbeet was reduced to thin and elongated cossettes in a sugarbeet shredder. The next step was the extraction of the juice in a diffuser, which consisted of heating it to a temperature between 65 and 75 degrees to extract the sugar contained in the sugarbeet cells. At that point, the pulp was obtained, which properly dried, could be passed on to the warehouse for packaging and sale on the market, preferably as cattle feed. Subsequently, the juice was then treated with lime (defecation process), to neutralize the acids and coagulate the albumins, and the carbonic acid (saturation or carbonation), which ended the purification process. The juice then underwent filtration, by passing it through bone char. The next step was the evaporation of the juice so that the resulting syrup lost 70 or 80% of its water content, which was achieved with an apparatus known as a concentrator. Following that step, the syrup was heated to complete its slow crystallization by leaving it to rest or up until its crystallization in the same

pan. Centrifugation was used to separate the crystallized sugar, obtaining different qualities of sugar in the process and molasses as a sub-product, usually employed for the preparation of industrial alcohol and yeast. Both products were finally carried to the warehouses along a covered walkway that communicated with the main building. The sugar was presented on the market in different grades known as coarse sugar, fine sugar, granulated sugars G1, G2 and GF, and 1st and 2nd grade centrifuged sugar.

The heating pans were built alongside the main building, all six built by the Maquinista Terrestre y Marítima [Land and Maritime Machinists], with a chimney and smoke conducts, a lime kiln, offices and laboratories and the repair workshops. The sugar and molasses factory was situated in a separate building linked to the other, as previously mentioned, along a covered walkway. Likewise, other ancillary constructions were built within the grounds, such as the silos for the sugarbeet, an auxiliary lime kiln, a well for drinking water, the pulp deposits, the scales, three railway sidings for railway wagons and goods vans, as well as the track and side-lines that connected the factory with the mainline Cantabrian Railway. In Torrelavega, the construction of housing for management and workers at the factory was not necessary, as was habitual in other Spanish sugar refineries, as we understand that the staff had no difficulty finding lodgings in the nearby town.

In the first months, the Azucarera Montañesa sugar refinery launched an active advertising information campaign among the Cantabrian rural farmers intending to convince them of the better economic returns on cultivating sugarbeet rather than others the farmers knew better such as maize. To that end, they distributed a brief leaflet, entitled *Instructions for the cultivation of sugarbeet in the present agricultural year of 1899*, where they explained the labours and care that the new crop demanded and they committed themselves during the first year to supply seed to the farmers at no cost, the chemical fertilizers and, if necessary, some tools, to guarantee a buying price equivalent to the value of the maize and bean crop. They also committed themselves to deliver the pulp to the farmers for feeding their cattle. As was the custom in other parts of Spain, agricultural production was under contract, so that the farmer knew that all the crop was to be purchased at the price agreed with the sugar refinery.

On December 4, 1899, the factory was opened and blessed with the presence of the civil, military and religious authorities of the province along with the members of the Board of Directors of the company. In the first campaign, it was able to refine over 10,000 tons of sugarbeet to obtain 900 tons of sugar. Without doubt, it

was an encouraging start, although not as many workers as expected were attracted, due to the pressing deadlines. In the second campaign, the results were more fruitful, the factory having received almost 20,000 tons of sugarbeet. However, it was short-lived, as that figure was never reached again in the history of the factory.

Sugar production over subsequent years was disappointing, as hard as much as 10,000 tons of sugarbeet came in through the factory gates. This drop was motivated by the small number of farmers cultivating it in Cantabria, limited to the coastal zone close to Torrelavega, the county of Trasmiera and around Santa Cruz de Bezana; the farmers to the western areas, who had started their cultivation with interest, abandoned it faced with the high price of transport by sea, as the prolongation of the Cantabrian Railway to Asturias had yet to be completed.

This scarce production affected the future of the factory, in so far as the competitors in the sector, as we have mentioned, had increased exponentially. If during the first sugarbeet campaign there were 24 factories refining sugarbeet in Spain, three years later the figure had doubled, with which the refining capacity of Spanish sugarbeet factories was almost 200,000 tons, over twice the need for national consumption.

In 1903, the Sociedad General Azucarera de España [General Sugar Factory Refining Company of Spain] was constituted, to restructure the sugar industry, whose objective was to group the factories of the sector into a single firm incorporating 90% of national production, which would end competition and introduce a degree of rationality in the production of each one. It was in short a matter of setting up a Trust company that would monopolize sugar production in Spain. Nevertheless, by doing so, the less profitable and obsolete factories would have to close, redistributing production and trying to export sugar, for which it relied on the support of the government. In an extraordinary general meeting of the board, on 14 March 1903, the shareholders of the Azucarera Montañesa Sugar Factory authorized the incorporation of the factory in the Trust. In total, 46 factories joined it, although there were still over a dozen independent ones, which over time entailed serious inconvenience to achieve the objectives sought by the new company.

The constitution of the sugar factory Trust company was observed with great suspicion, as was foreseeable, in public opinion in Cantabria, in as much as the rumour began to circulate that it had the intention of leaving only the Andalusian and the Aragonese factories open, which were the ones that had higher production and better returns. Although the intention of closing the factory was not explicit,

the conditions that the new owners imposed on the farmers complicated their future, for which reason the farmers demanded that large areas of land be contracted for the crop, which had not until then been reached, and they stopped using railway transport from distant areas to their lower costs. The three first campaigns under the management of the Sociedad General Azucarera were dispiriting, as rather than reactivating the cropping of sugarbeet in the region, its surface area had fallen concerning the first years.

In 1909, the Sociedad General Azucarera announced the reduction of sugar production in Spain, as it greatly exceeded the needs of the market. The Torrelavega factory was one of those affected by this decision: it was practically a *de facto* closure, in so much as the price offered for the sugarbeet was so extraordinarily low that many farmers decided to abandon its cultivation, resulting in a notable reduction in production.

The worst fears became a reality in the early days of 1914 when the Board of Directors of the company announced the closure of the Torrelavega factory. Joaquín Sánchez de Toca had assumed the presidency one year earlier with a clear agenda: reduction of the price of the raw material, reduction of manufacturing costs, tax exemption and regulation of production and the domestic market, which implied the reduction of the capacity installed in Spain. The factory at Torrelavega had not managed to overcome its structural problems, despite an appreciable increase in production as the area of sugarbeet cultivation in the region was still much reduced.

After remaining closed for two years, thanks to the intervention of provincial members of parliament with the board members of the General Azucarera, in November 1916 the factory reopened. Nevertheless, after three disappointing campaigns, the factory definitively closed its doors at the end of the 1918-19 sugarbeet harvest. It was, in brief, its swan song; it was never to recover from the incessant lack of raw material to be able to work normally, which was why its continued operations were always hanging from a string.

In July 1920, the principal local newspapers, and some from Madrid published the notice of the sale of "the land and buildings of what was the Azucarera Montañesa in Torrelavega in the state in which they are found at present". Although the local press reported its sale in no time to a well-known foreign engineer, it was not until November 1926 when the sale was formally completed. The new owners were to dedicate the factory grounds to a new industrial activity much more at home in the province with a far more promising future: the preparation of dairy products.