

In the exhibition 'La Eterna Juventud' (The Eternal Youth), Olivia Hernaiz explores the ways in which cultural heritage, national identity and memory influence the individual. Her interest in these themes was awakened while studying her family history, which led her to Russia. She spent three consecutive summers there with a family – her family - she had never previously met. Her grandmother's two younger brothers, Arturo and Pablo, had been shipped to the then Soviet Union in 1937, together with 3,500 other Spanish children. In total, more than 30,000 children left Spain for various European countries for protection against the Franco regime and the civil war. Olivia Hernaiz' grandmother thus arrived in Belgium at the age of thirteen, refugee separated from the rest of her family.

In order to communicate with her family members and document their stories, Olivia Hernaiz learned Russian. During her stay, she visited the orphanages where the children had once lived. Initially, the children were raised in comfortable conditions. The teachers and members of the communist party who had accompanied them from Spain placed an emphasis on the Spanish language and culture during their education. After all, the intention was to eventually repatriate the children as saviors of their homeland. The outbreak of the Second World War derailed this plan, however, and they remained in Russia. Only after Stalin's death in 1956 could the children return to Spain. That they were no longer 'eternal niños' (eternal children), but had grown up in the meantime, was a source of confusion and even disappointment for the families of origin. There were also some young people, such as Olivia Hernaiz' great uncles, who decided to stay in Russia.

Throughout their entire period in exile, they were regarded as Spaniards who would one day find their way home. It was vital that they developed a sentiment of belonging that created a mental bond with the country of origin as well as to their future. The Spanish authorities in exile stimulated that national identity, but not entirely selflessly. 'La Eterna Juventud' refers, furthermore, to the strategies behind the fascism of the 1930s, but also to the rise of nationalism today. Personal involvement in a particular region through, for example, cultural, culinary and recreational benchmarks, often serves an administrative tactic. The political climate is therefore reflected in governmental communication strategies. For example, the presence of Spanish children in Russia was instrumentalized by both the Spanish and Russian authorities. Franco portrayed the children as prisoners to be saved, while Stalin erected them as the embodiment of the communist dream. 'La Eterna Juventud' examines how an individual deals with these forms of political wrangling. Olivia Hernaiz' cousins are still identified as Spanish, but they are now part of a third generation building a life in Russia. In what way do they still feel connected to a land that has never been their home? And how do they view themselves within a country in which their family tree has only just been planted?