

## **Antonio Muñecas San Calixto 23/10/1926 – 4/8/2013**

Antonio Muñecas San Calixto was born on 23 October 1926 in a small town called Sestao, near Bilbao. He lived with his father Fermin, who worked in Altos Hornos, his mother Rosario and his younger brother Jesus and, although times were hard, he remembered being happy and spending many hours in the streets playing football with his friends.

However, following the bombing of Guernica, his parents decided to evacuate Antonio and his brother to England. Antonio boarded the *Habana* on 21 May 1937 and set sail for Southampton. The identification number on his hexagonal disk was No. 539. The crossing was rough but as his father knew one of the sailors on board, they were given a bunk to sleep in. On 23 May they arrived at Southampton to be greeted by the Salvation Army band and were taken by busloads to North Stoneham in Eastleigh, where tents had been erected to accommodate the children and teachers. Little by little, during that summer, the children left the provisional camp and were sent to colonies all over Britain.

On 23 June 1937, Antonio and his brother were sent to the Wakefield Old Hospital colony. Whilst there, he suffered rheumatic fever and was very ill. At Wakefield a kind family called the Ecklestons used to take him and his brother out on a Saturday and give them pocket money. They owned a fish and chip shop and Antonio was delighted to be fed well on that day. Even when he was sent to other colonies, the Ecklestons continued to send him the Wizard comic he loved. He remained friends with their daughter Vera all his life. In December 1939, Antonio was sent to Margate where he was so hungry he and some other boys caught and ate a seagull.

In February 1940 he was sent to The Mount in Plymouth where he stayed for a short while with foster parents. In September 1940 he moved to Rowley Lodge, Barnet, where he worked in a garage making parts for planes. In 1941 he was transferred to Ashley House School in Worksop, Nottinghamshire. He also went to stay in Woodside Park, London, where he went to school for a while, as well as in Dollis Hill, Victoria and, finally, in a hostel in Holland Park.

Antonio's mother had fled to Barcelona in 1937 then to France in 1938 where she was a refugee in Narbonne. She wrote in August 1939 saying that she was ill and could not have the children back. Their father's whereabouts was unknown and, with the outbreak of World War II, they were unable to return to Spain.

By the end of WWII Antonio decided that his life was now in England : he had friends, a job and none of the restrictions found in Franco's Spain. He started work at the Savoy Hotel but left shortly and joined the Dorchester Hotel in January 1945, where he stayed for many years. In 1955, at the age of 29, Antonio met Charo at The Astoria Dance Hall on Charing Cross Road. Charo, also from Sestao, had recently moved to London to work as a cook in a big house in Kensington. They fell in love and married the following year.

They bought a house in Wembley and made a very good life for themselves and their two daughters Pilar and Begoña. Antonio finally had what he had been missing for so many years, a proper family of his own. He enjoyed family holidays in Sestao and later in Alicante, where he loved to sit and soak up the sun. The family grew to include grandchildren Asier, Xavier, Isusko and Leixuri. He loved to spend time with them and took great delight in everything they did. Antonio loved football and was a lifelong supporter of Athletic Bilbao and Chelsea and followed them through the good times and the bad.

In May 2012 the whole family travelled down to Southampton University to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Basque children arriving in England. It was a very special day, filled with Basque music and dance, good food and much laughter. He talked about his life in the colonies and he was reunited with some of his old friends. He was in good health and enjoyed the day tremendously.

Following ill health, as a result of ten years on dialysis, Antonio died peacefully in Hammersmith Hospital on 4 August 2013.

Antonio was an extremely kind man, much loved by his family and friends. He was never truly English or Spanish but always remembered his Basque roots. Antonio's ashes will be taken to Bilbao to their final resting place – another *niño vasco* will have returned home.