

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE BASQUE CHILDREN'S CAMP  
AT NORTH STONEHAM EASTLEIGH

THIS PAPER, ON MY ARRIVAL AND STAY AT THE NORTH STONEHAM CAMP, HAS BEEN WRITTEN FIFTY YEARS AFTER THE EVENT.

I HAVE PREPARED, AT VARIOUS TIMES, INFORMATION AND OBSERVATIONS OF SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF THE LIFE IN THE CAMP AND OF THE VOYAGE FROM BILBAO, BUT NEVER BEFORE FROM BEGINNING TO END, IN ONE PAPER.

I HAVE WRITTEN, BESIDES THE EVENTS IN THE CAMP, HOW WE ARRIVED THERE, BECAUSE IT ADDS TO THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL BACKGROUND. THE RECOLLECTIONS ARE PERSONAL. THEY STILL REMAIN VIVID IN MY MEMORY.

I LEFT THE CAMP AT THE END OF JULY 1937 AND I AM, THEREFORE, UNABLE TO SAY ANYTHING OF WHAT HAPPENED AFTER MY DEPARTURE AND THE CLOSING OF THE CAMP AROUND THE SECOND WEEK OF SEPTEMBER 1937.

1: **The Beginning**

On the 31st of March 1937 Franco began the offensive against Bilbao accompanied by aerial bombings of the capital and other towns behind the front line, some 40 miles from Bilbao. The bombings became an almost daily occurrence. On the 26th of April Guernica was set in flames by German bombers and with the armies of Franco still twenty miles from Bilbao the bombings increased and the blockade around the Basque coast was tightened further making it difficult for food ships to enter the port. Towards the end of April, it was announced that women and children would be evacuated to France and shortly after boats with children, women and elderly persons began sailing for La Pallice and Bayonne under the protection of the Royal Navy. On the 7th and 8th of May the Department of Social Assistance of the Basque Government announced that a number of children over 6 and under 19 would be evacuated to England (in Spain the term England is used for the whole of Great Britain) and that parents wishing to have their children evacuated should report to the headquarters of their respective political parties. For just over four thousand of us that was the beginning of a journey into a foreign land. We were told we would return in three months' time, when the armies of Franco had been thrown back a safe distance from Bilbao, if not completely defeated.

Though it may sound pretentious for me to say it, I did not believe that the advance of Franco's troops could be easily halted much less pushed back; there were precedents that belied the optimism, for in Bilbao there were still many refugees from San Sebastián and other parts of the province of Guipuzcoa that arrived his offensive in August - September 1936. The same thing was said about them: that they would return in three months' time but eight months later they were still in Bilbao and now getting ready for a second exodus.

## 2: Departure

On the 15th of May the radio announced that all the children who had registered for evacuation to England, should present themselves, with their parents, at the offices of the Department of Social Assistance for a medical examination and to receive the final details for departure. On arrival we were handed a cardboard disc, with our number and told to take no more than two sets of clothing, preferably in a small linen bag, as there would be little space in the boat and to be ready to embark within three or four days. Then two English doctors gave us a very cursory examination. So, clutching the hexagonal cardboard disc with our number, we went home to await for the eventual radio announcement.

It was on the morning of Thursday 20th of May that the radio informed us how to proceed to Santurce, the enter port of Bilbao. We were to report to the relevant railway station at different times according to our numbers. The trains began leaving Bilbao at about half-past two in the afternoon. My brother and I departed at nearly five o'clock for the outer harbour in Santurce, where the liner "Habana" was moored. The papers had already mentioned, two days earlier, that this liner would be taking the children to the port of Southampton.

The "Habana" was one of the biggest Spanish liners, before 1951 carried the name "Alfonso XII" and plied the Atlantic route from the North of Spain to Cuba, Mexico and New York. Parents could not travel in the trains, so the tearful farewells took place on the station, though a few made their own way to the boat side, because they lived nearby or used the trains from Bilbao in order to have a few moments with their children. Embarkation continued well into the night. Everybody tried to find somewhere to sleep, the bunks in the cabins had at least two youngsters per bunk. My brother and I preferred to lay down on the sofas in one of the lounges and, somehow, slept until early morning when the boat began to move. Curious, we went onto open deck and saw we had already left the outer harbour and were in the open sea. The old cruiser "Jose Luis Diez" went ahead of us and astern followed the corvette "Ciscar". These two Spanish warships were to accompany the "Habana" as far as the three-mile limit of the territorial waters. The morning was grey, and a cold wind was blowing. We both stayed on deck and saw the Spanish warships turn back and three Royal Navy ships take the 'escort, the large one, I was to learn later was H.M.S. Royal Oak, the other two were destroyers. When we heard they were serving breakfast we went inside to make our way to one of the dining rooms, where we got a bowl of white coffee and a large bread roll. The roll would have represented two days of the 125grs. bread ration in Bilbao! And it was white, not dark brown and coarse!

The boat was rocking a lot and soon there was a great deal of vomiting making the corridors and lounges unpleasant and smelly. I, with my brother and two other boys, also brothers, went onto deck. The four of us were feeling sea-sick and our breakfasts went overboard. We had a lovely "senorita", who we identified as a teacher because she had a blue hexagonal disc and told us to sit down on the long bench by the wall. She was one of the 80 lady teachers who were coming with us children; there were also 120 auxiliaries who wore a brown disc. The wind did not abate during the whole day and hardly anybody moved in the boat, except the sailors trying to clean vomit from the floors.

The teacher sitting near us said that we should eat when they announced the midday and evening meals and my brother and I went with her to get some food but the other two refused to move. I must say that on both occasions what we ate was soon lost overboard. When it was getting dark and cold we went inside and found room again on the sofas in the same lounge as the previous night.

The second day at sea was quite different. The wind had died down during the night and the sea was calm. This day we ate with relish, my brother and I succeeding to get a second meal by visiting two different dining rooms. We were not the only ones to do so. Now the boat had children everywhere: in the salons, decks, corridors. There were young ones crying because they had lost their older brothers and sisters, and teachers and auxiliaries were doing their best to console them, though however they became reunited is a mystery to me.

The boat was large with several decks, lounges and dining-rooms, and no tannoy system, or if there was one it was not used, all announcements and calls being made by members of the crew using old fashioned loud-hailers along corridors, decks and lounges.

Finally, in the afternoon, we saw land on the portside. As the boat followed the coastline I was trying to recall the map in the atlas that I had consulted back at home when I heard we would land at Southampton. Only much later I realized we must have followed the East coast of the Isle of Wight. Later land appeared also on the starboard side and we entered a wide estuary. Soon after the boat came to a halt and dropped anchor. In the distance a launch appeared and as it neared the liner, the cries of "cena supper" were heard, so I never knew what the purpose of the launch was coming to our side and what the men in it did. Five years later I was told that that evening of the 22nd the "Habana" anchored at Mother Bank.

We were now in England! After the meal everyone returned to the various decks; but I could not see the launch and there was no activity in the estuary. It was obvious we were not going to disembark that night. Some lights appeared along both strips of coast. My brother and I went to look for a place to sleep.

### 3: England!

Sunday 23rd. We are still having breakfast when the liner begins to move. Some of us gobble up the bread and coffee in order to go to deck as quickly as possible. We go as near to the bow as we can and watch as we sail along a wide estuary. The banks are covered in green with fields and trees. We also see some small houses. The land on both sides is low-lying and there are no mountains, in contrast to the Basque Country where the mountains come right into the sea.

We must have been going up river for well over an hour when the boat tied up in a deserted, or almost deserted dock. There were a few men watching the ship and putting ropes round bollards. Soon two or three gangways were placed against the ship and some of the men came up them into the boat. Then we noticed that there, on the quay, were some ladies in uniform

with funny hats and a bun on the hair looking, to us, very old fashioned. Later I learned they belonged to the Salvation Army.

Teachers and crew members were calling that children between certain-ana-certain numbers should report to the first class lounge to prepare for disembarkation. As our numbers were still some way away, my brother and I went to a dining room for dinner. The amount of chick-pea stew we got was very small but due to the disorganised way of checking those who had eaten we were able to get a second dish of chick-peas.

When we went back on deck we noticed that the quay was now full of people and there were also several buses. Then a "señorita" told us to get our packs and join a queue she was minding. I think the idea of calling us by our numbers had been abandoned! So, we joined the queue and not long after we were having our heads examined by a tall, thin lady in a white coat. Afterwards a man put a stethoscope to our chests and backs and also a wooden spatula over the tongue and looked into the throat, then a second lady looked at the disc, noted the number on a paper and tied a white label on my left wrist. The label had an unintelligible scribble, perhaps they were her initials. Most of those near me had white labels but two girls well in front had red ones. Going down the gangway I noticed that those two girls were separated from the main stream of children and sent towards the left while the rest went slightly to the right and into a green double decker bus. In Bilbao we had no similar double deckers; the few that were had an external vertical ladder and the top deck was not fully covered, but this one had a proper internal staircase.

When full, the bus left the dock and went towards the town, today city, of Southampton, passing by a park, which later I identified as Watts Park, we saw some of the decorations still remaining from the coronation of George VI. I had read, in Spain about the abdication of Edward VIII, so I knew that Britain had just had a new King installed. The impression I received passing through the streets of Southampton was not favourable. The buildings were small, only two or three storeys in height, not many people in the streets, though the sun was now shining, we left the town and went along a country road (Stoneham Lane).

When we came to what I now know is called Chestnut Avenue we saw a thatched cottage which incidentally is still there today, and later two more. In the bus there were cries of surprise that an advanced country like England should still have cottages with "straw" roofs' In the industrial area of the Basque Country the roofs of even the poorest of farm cottages were covered in tiles or slates. That in the Basque region where we came from, there are not suitable thatching reeds and that the rainfall is greater than in Hampshire were facts still unknown to me. Soon there appeared a field with lots and lots of tents. Someone said it looked like a camp of red-Indians, but almost with one accord we all said, "They are for us" The bus went up the road towards the camp and then turned right into the compound where the tents were. Yes, they were for us. I did not feel elated though I knew not what to expect. A girl in the bus said, "I can't sleep there I am not a gypsy."

#### 4: In the Camp

Whether gypsies or not gypsies this is where we were going to stay, at least for a few nights, or so we thought I do not think any of us had been under canvas before. When I was six or seven I had heard about "exploradores" (boy scouts) and once I had seen them on parade, but the movement, at least in Bilbao, disappeared in 1931 or 1932, and we never had then, the inclination to go camping. That habit had yet to come.

As we got off the bus a young man in shorts (another novelty for us, grown men and women in shorts) looked at our discs and wrote the numbers in a paper he had, while a tall, stout man with balding white hair and a badge saying "Interprete" (interpreter) asked us to follow him in order to have something to eat. By a large table near a sign saying "Cantina"(canteen) we were given a slice of bread and an enamel mug which we dipped into a churn to get milk. This habit of dipping the mugs into the churns, as I learned later, was going to disturb the Sanitary Inspector of Eastleigh. The interpreter led us amongst the tents, his Spanish was difficult to understand and had a strong accent which I thought came from Mexico or South America. He found a row of empty tents and he placed twelve boys or girls per tent. He wrote on a little notebook the number of each tent and those of the respective occupants and said good-bye. I was in tent 457, a number I have never forgotten. In the tent there were paliasses, ground sheets and blankets, but no pillows. We started sorting out the various items but lacking the know-how of camping, could not fit in the twelve paliasses in the bell tents. Sometime after two boy-scouts came and showed us how to put them radially to the centre pole and the paliasses over the ground sheet. Despite the lumps in the paliasses that night I slept like a log.

It was when I had been two hours, or less, in the Camp, that I became aware of the language difficulty, though I never thought it would cause so many problems due to misunderstandings. The young man that, saw us off the bus, the men and women in the canteen, the two scouts who showed us how to prepare the bedding, could not communicate with us, they knew no Spanish, we knew no English. Even the interpreter's Spanish was difficult to understand. He told us he had been many years in Argentina, therefore his accent. I also suspected his Spanish had never been very good. We were to find that many of those wearing the interpreter's badge were not fluent in Spanish. The fact that we used some Basque words in our everyday speech certainly did not help. There were also children, usually young ones, who knew little Spanish having spoken Basque in their homes. My father had, probably, foreseen the language problem when he gave my brother and I a book called "Read Me and You Will Know English." It was a very old-fashioned book even by 1957 standards - I still have this book today.

Monday 24th. The first I woke up on English soil. After having received two slices of bread and a mug of milk from two women who were distributing breakfast I began exploring the Camp. There were two main wings to the Camp running approximately northwards from the boundary by Chestnut Avenue, and in the middle a smaller area described as the Second camp, the other two being the First and Third. (An aerial view of the Camp can be seen on page 160 of 'Southampton, An Illustrated History' by Adrian Rance.) Going towards this Second camp I was

told by a small group of children playing at its edge, that the ones with white labels should not enter that area as those there had red labels and had already been cleaned and given new clothes. I noticed that the boys and girls in this area were all wearing very un-Spanish clothes, identical jumpers and grey skirts or trousers. My curiosity about the cleaning and the new clothes was satisfied later when I found that those given a red label on the boat had been washed and deloused, their own clothes burnt and had been given new garments. It took a long time for this Second camp to lose the stigma of being contaminated. In some 7 cases brothers and/or sisters had been separated which created a resentment and mistrust of the Camp Authorities that was to last during the whole of our stay at north Stoneham.

That day's dinner or lunch, call it what you like, was chaotic. We obtained a coloured ribbon and queued up behind the flag of the corresponding colour. The meal consisted of a slice of bread and a plate of haricot beans or a slice of corned beef. The amount did not satisfy the appetites of many of us, but we soon discovered that we could exchange coloured ribbons and join another queue; like that I got two plates of beans and one slice of corned beef - my first taste of this beef - and three slices of bread! Some of the young ones did not like the unseasoned beans nor the corned beef, so they ate only the bread.

We found, that first day, that the Camp fence by the road, Chestnut Avenue, was full of English people looking at us and offering sweets, chocolate and even apples. We were being kept apart by the Camp staff making us go behind a rope line, long fallen to the ground, about two metres from the fence. They said something to the crowd, from time to time, who, then, would hide the offerings. A policeman also walked along the fence on the road side. The policeman seemed to chat with the people and laugh, he seemed a friendly man and had no pistol which to us was very different from the solemn Spanish policemen we knew. The fence was going to be a thorn in the flesh of the Camp authorities who would be, constantly, devising ways of keeping us away from it, while we tried to find new means of maintaining contact with the public who provided us with sweets, toys, coins and cigarette cards. These cards soon became a passion with us and we all collected them avidly and quickly learned to identify the various series. The English spectators also offered us cigarettes and it amused them to see youngsters coughing at the first puffs and soon many began to beg for cigarettes. In retrospect, I can see the spectacle had a resemblance to the monkeys' enclosure at a zoo.

In the evening the distribution of bread and milk for supper began by groups of two or three persons going with a billy-can full of milk and a tray of bread slices. The timidity of the previous day and of the morning had now disappeared and it became obvious that in order to eat one had to become somewhat aggressive, so we began to help ourselves from the trays to as many slices of bread as we could and to dip the mugs into the billy-cans for as many times as we were able to.

The rules of hygiene were going overboard. My brother and I had brought soap and towel but many did not, expecting that these things would be provided in the homes where they would accommodate us. Nobody thought we would be in tents in a camp. But having soap and towel was not enough, we had to find a water tap. There were few taps, and those at the South, or

top, end of the Camp, each with long queues waiting, to drink, wash themselves or even wash clothes. In fact, men were still laying water pipes along the East and West wings. Regarding latrines, the least said the better. They consisted of benches over open trenches and there was nothing like enough for over four thousand children, also they were wrongly labelled in Spanish, saying "Girls - Niños" and "Boys - Chicos." My father's little book informed me of the error, as being of a curious nature, I tried to look-up all notices. The following day the mistake had been corrected by somebody using a pencil (N.B. this fact is also mentioned in one of the reports prepared by the Sanitary Inspector of Eastleigh.)

Went to tent 437 to retire for the night. I only slept in this tent two nights but I have always remembered the number, while I have forgotten those of the later tents where I stayed for longer periods. That night we were only eleven of us as one had gone somewhere else to stay with cousins or friends that he had met during the day. The eleven of us talked for a long time about our experiences of the day and the places we came from in Bilbao and surroundings. I learned two of them had got apples at supper, but I saw none!

## 5: Settling In.

I still remember very clearly and in great detail the events of the last day in Bilbao, Thursday 20th May, and those until the second day in the Camp, Tuesday 25th. After that, perhaps because life becomes more of a routine, the mind seems to see out only the more special events to be clearly remembered. Perhaps I was adapting to the circumstances and accepting many unusual experiences as normal unless they were truly exceptional or had some significance out of the ordinary everyday routine.

The morning of the second day, 25th, some "senoritas" came along the Third, or East, camp saying that this area was for those who were members of the P.N.V. party (Basque Nationalists) and therefore likely to go to Mass. With us had come, besides the teachers and auxiliaries, also four or six priests (both numbers have been mentioned in writings but I am unable to confirm one or the other.) The Basque Government maintained a close relationship with the Catholic Church and, no doubt, decided to send some priests to look after our spiritual needs. I suspected then, and I still do, that this separation was thought of by the priests wanting to keep together those who were regular communicants fearing that the less religious children would encourage apathy towards religion amongst them. Be that as it may, my brother and I, together with five others left tent 457 and went towards the top of the First, or West, Camp where we would be entrusted to the care of a "senorita". Two "senoritas" took about fifteen of us and led us to the three tents they were looking after. Both had the blue teachers disc. They told us that during that day a number of their children had left for London and that was the reason why they had space in their tents. The meals, now, had to be collected by the "senoritas", who issued the food to us, though there were a number of boys and girls not attached to any "senorita" and they tended to create difficulties regarding food distribution. It was the following day when the first protest, or revolt according to some reports, took place. At midday, the "senoritas" had brought to the tables a very watery stew containing bits of onion, some pearl barley and a few pieces of potato, this and a slice of bread was the meal.

How the protest began I do not know but soon we were all converging towards the central area where the kitchens were asking for food. After a good deal of shouting and some bananas being stolen, a loud-speaker call was made asking us to return to our tents and that the "senoritas" would collect apples and bananas for us. Finally, we calmed down, went back to the tents and soon we were given an apple, a banana and a slice of bread each.

Later, when I had left the Camp and was staying at the home I was sent to, in Huddersfield, I read in one of the South American weeklies brought to us by an English friend, how the Basque children at North Stoneham, near Southampton, had rioted two days after arrival because they thought the planes using a near-by airport were going to bomb them. I have since then, read this statement in many papers, books, articles and reports. We knew we were in England where there was no war and we were never afraid of the planes using Eastleigh airport. How the myth started I do not know though I am inclined to believe that it was a cover-up story for the protest over the watery stew, and also for several other difficulties that arose from time to time and had nothing to do with planes. The myth of our fear of the planes still persists and no doubt it has now become part of the history, or legend of the North Stoneham Camp.

More taps and more latrines were being provided. It was also being made more difficult for us to go to the fence. Instead, visitors were coming into the Camp and giving us sweets, chocolate, cigarette cards, pennies and even cigarettes. The handing of cigarettes annoyed me very much. I came from a family of non-smokers and even as a child I detested this habit which in the England of 1957 was almost universal. It annoyed me more the fact that the cigarettes were given as a sort of amusement. We gained a reputation of young smokers but it was never mentioned that the encouragement came from English visitors. Nobody would have smoked at home until they were at least sixteen or seventeen.

We were also visited by concert parties which provided a welcome relief in the rather monotonous daily life of the Camp. After one of these concerts given on a hot and sunny afternoon, there was at the end an unpleasant commotion. The performers lined up for the national anthem and we were asked to stand and those wearing caps to remove them. "God Save the King" - the first time I heard it -we began to sing the Spanish Republican anthem, while the artists were walking off and collecting the props. This action displeased some of the boys who from the anthem went to "The International" and gave the clenched fist salute. "God Save the King" was not sung at subsequent concerts in the Camp. But, on the whole, the concerts were very successful. There was a performance of the play rehearsal from "A Midsummer Night's Dream" in English, which of course we could not understand, but it was presented with a great deal of clowning and in a somewhat licentious manner, causing much laughter. Another day came a party of girls and in one of the numbers a girl danced a Welsh dance dressed in white blouse red skirt and green apron. Red, white and green are the Basque colours, so she was well received. The applause grew when she lifted her right hand and folded the fingers looking like a clenched, fist salute. She was asked to repeat the dance at least twice and I am convinced that in the repeats she firmly clenched the fist aware of what created the reception but perhaps not knowing the meaning.



We soon found that it was very easy to go out of the Camp and into a copse at the North end and from there to the large recreation ground of Fleming Park where the swings were a big attraction. The English youngsters generally welcomed us in these escapades and often ladies in near-by houses gave us sweets and biscuits. While I understand that a number of people complained to the press about our behaviour, those I met, inside or outside the Camp, were generally friendly and their generosity with apples, sweets and biscuits gave us the feeling that the Camp Authorities wanted to keep us prisoner.

Rumours, usually without foundation, spread easily, due to the wide mental gulf between us and the Authorities. Our ages varied between five and fifteen or sixteen, for it was obvious that the age limits mentioned in Bilbao had not been closely observed. Also, we had lived for months in a civil war full of political implications. Even before the beginning of the conflict, politics were very much a part of everyday life in Spain. We were well aware of the double-talk and unsavoury dealings of the European powers in relation to the Republican Government. In the Camp hardly any of the British personnel could speak Spanish and the language barrier did not help to reduce the mistrust and smooth over the misunderstandings. There were sporadic attempts to start classes in English but they rarely continued beyond the third lesson, on the part of teachers and children, the emphasis being in teaching how to conjugate the verbs to have and to be. The Administration had a herculean task in trying to cope with us. It seems to me that the whole operation had been prepared as if it was some sort of Scouts and Guides jamboree, all knowing camp drill and ready to co-operate, but we were not Scouts and Guides, but youngsters, reluctantly separated from our parents and known surroundings.

One evening a rumour spread that there was typhus in the Camp and they were going to burn all our clothes. Mostly boys but also a few girls, packed their belongings and began leaving the Camp towards the copse. I thought it was silly to leave as we could go nowhere and this was the case, the escapees trailing back half an hour later. But the rumour, this time had some foundation for three days later we were all given the first inoculation against typhoid fever. Little by little the numbers in the Camp were decreasing as boys and girls went to homes in various parts of Britain, as far North as Montrose.

## **6: The Fall of Bilbao**

As we were getting towards the middle of June the facilities in the Camp were improving. Not only more lavatories and water taps had been provided, but also a cinema showing programmes similar to those of the News Cinemas of the thirties and forties, had been established. "Horlicks" was being distributed in the middle of the mornings, a drink that gained in popularity as the days went by and when it was stopped the queues for the drink were usually very long. The meals were served in the dining-room marquees instead of being collected by the "senoritas" and taken in the open by the children, creating problems on wet days. Soap became easier to obtain. Unfortunately, these improvements were being followed by an insidious cloud, which while not obvious to everybody; it was so to some of us, certainly it was to my brother and I. The growth of the cloud could be observed when the news from the war was read over the loudspeakers. These were read about two or three times a week, in

Spanish. They were rather brief and usually told us how brave "gudaris" (soldiers in Basque) were successfully counter attacking the forces of Mola, the general commanding Franco's armies on the Basque front. Most of the children knew the relative distances between Bilbao and places mentioned in the bulletins, but how many were aware that Franco's troops were gaining ground I do not know, though I think that most of the older ones were. The news given on the evening of the 17th of June made it clear that the "gudaris" were counter-attacking in Bolueta and that the "Iron Belt", as the defences around Bilbao were optimistically called by the Basque Government, was holding all attacks! But Bolueta was inside the "Iron Belt", so who was cheating who? My brother and I were next to three "Senoritas", one of whom exclaimed. "God, but my home is in Basauri" implying that her home village had fallen to Franco.

The following day my brother and I began reading more intently the newspapers we could find in the dustbins by the Administration compound and try to glean as much information as we could. In this manner two other boys and us became aware in the afternoon of the 20<sup>th</sup> that Bilbao had fallen, because we found a copy of the "Daily Mail" with a front page headline saying "ANTI-REDS ENTER BILBAO". There was no need to know English in order to understand that! For good measure there was a map showing the front line to the West of Bilbao. No news had been read over the loudspeakers since the 17<sup>th</sup>

The evening of the 20th, after the evening meal, the news of the fall of Bilbao, was read by one of the Basque priests in the Camp. The news was received in silence but soon some of the young ones began to cry while the older ones marched to the Administration block asking for more news. Camp personnel were everywhere. Afterwards I learned that they had all been alerted to calm the hysteria expected from us, but the feeling was rather of repressed tragedy and anger. We were at the height of the solstice so there were more than two hours of daylight after the news had been read. During these hours we had time to discuss whether our parents would have had time to escape towards Santander or not and also whether we would now be returned to Bilbao at Franco's request. We had little faith in the British Government helping the Republican cause and thoughts that we would be tricked and sent to Franco's Bilbao began to appear in our minds. It was this fear that prompted some to leave the Camp by the copse towards Eastleigh. They were all returned before darkness fell. The following morning the loudspeakers did not play the usual wakey-wakey music.

## **7: Uncertainty**

While conditions in the Camp had improved, helped by the reduction in our numbers, the fall of Bilbao created a deep sense of uncertainty. Nobody had received letters from our families since we left Bilbao, four weeks previously. One did not know what was happening to them. Have they left the town? Have they been jailed? After all, most of us had somebody in the ranks of the Basque army. In fact, soon after the fall, letters began to arrive from Bilbao bearing stamps not before seen by us. They were from parents and relatives who had stayed behind when the town fell. The days passed and many still received no letters, adding to the uncertainty of what had happened in Bilbao and having us in a state of tension which tended to explode at any small provocation. I remember a visitor, who spoke tolerable Spanish, coming to the Camp some days after the fall and saying to a small group of us that now we will soon be going back to Bilbao; this comment produced a sudden angry reaction calling him fascist and

worse, while two boys threw on the ground the chocolate he had given us because it was from a fascist. I had eaten my share so I was unable to join in this manifestation of disgust.

The routine in the Camp became more humdrum, monotonous and boring every day. There was little motivation to do anything. Two or three weeks after the news of the fall I joined a party of four boys helping in the kitchens. This job gave us better food, eating in the kitchen with the cooks and also receiving a daily coupon worth two pennies of that day, in the canteen established in the Camp. Soon after the beginning of July the cinema was closed and "Horlicks" was served no more. Classes to teach English were again started and again failed though I finished learning very well the present tense of to have and to be. More useful words were learned playing with the English boys in Chestnut Avenue or by the swings in Fleming Park, places where we were not supposed to be. Then towards the end of July the "senorita" in charge of our group said she had been asked to take twenty boys to a "colony" (home) 400 kilometres to the North. She could take only boys so those in our group who had sisters did not want to come. Somehow, she got her quota of twenty and also one "auxiliar". Those not coming went to other "senoritas". So, I had another medical examination, was kitted out with some new clothes, at least new to me, a new pair of boots and given the name of a town, Huddersfield, which I had never heard during my geography lessons in Bilbao. I knew about Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds, York and many others but I had not heard of Huddersfield.

## **8: Farewell North Stoneham**

Early one morning in the last week in July I put on my new second hand navy blue jacket and grey trousers on top of the white shirt I had brought from Bilbao and went to the marquee for the last breakfast in the Camp. All those around me knew I was leaving as otherwise I would not have been wearing a jacket and posh white shirt. Soon after breakfast a call over the loudspeakers was asking that the boys and two "senorita" leaving for Huddersfield go to the Administration area. The "senoritas" and their luggage went into a car, we, the boys, and our "bundles" got into the Camp's grey van where they had put two benches for us to sit on. The van left the Camp and turned left into Chestnut Avenue. The white tents we saw to our right on arrival, we were leaving them to our left now, there were also less than half of the original number. Soon we were in Eastleigh station where we boarded a special carriage that was going to take us on the long journey to the North.

The life in the home at Huddersfield was quite different from that at North Stoneham.

I was to stay there until early in June 1939. But that is another story.

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