

Basque Children in Colne, Lancashire

Colne is a town in north east Lancashire, close to the border with North Yorkshire. Often referred to locally as 'Bonny Colne upon the hill' it was originally a market town. During the industrial revolution, rivers flowing in its north and south valleys provided much needed power for the development of its cotton mills. I was brought up there. Two of my parents' best friends were Luís and Mary Sánchez. Luís worked as a butcher for the Co-op in Colne until his retirement. My dad also had links with the Co-op. I remember Luís as a quiet pipe-smoking man with a sense of humour and an occasional twinkle in his eye.

After reading several novels set at the time of the Spanish Civil War I became interested in this period of history and realised that Luís must have been evacuated from Spain during the war. It was not until after his death and that of my father that I asked the question - how did he come to be in Colne? Was I too late to find the answer? I do recall my dad saying that Luís never talked about it.

I will try to put together the various pieces of information I now have which come from several sources, some is documented fact, some is intelligent (I hope) speculation and some is memory/ oral history as shared with me by various contacts on Facebook, Ancestry and of course the BCA '37 UK.

Luís Sánchez González was born in 1928. He had an older brother José María, born in 1925, and a younger sister, Feliciana, born in 1930. His family lived in the part of Bilbao called Deusto. His father, who is listed as a factory worker and member of the Communist Party when the War broke out, seems to have ended up in an infamous prison camp in Cordoba. His mother was 'address unknown' until 1945 when she and possibly her husband have an address in Deusto again.

His father's political sympathies probably explain why the three children were evacuated to England on the SS Habana in 1937. (Their cousin María Teresa, born 1928, travelled with them and returned to Spain in 1939.) They were looked after first at colonies in Bolton and then Barnet. José María then lived in Lincolnshire at a farm colony before joining Feliciana in Carshalton in 1945. Feliciana later married Caireles Martínez.

BCA '37 UK records confirm that after Barnet, Luís went to an address in Colne. I understand that this was fairly unusual as the The Basque Children's Committee liked to keep children in family groups. Luís went to live with Malachi and Linda McDermott, probably in 1940. The 1939 register for Colne shows the McDermott's living in Lowther Street but Luís was not with them then. They later moved to an address in Priestfield Avenue. Luís lived there with them and later with his wife Mary until his death in 2009. The McDermotts were both weavers and from what I understand Malachi was a well respected member of the local Co-operative movement. I have photographs of the Barnoldswick and Earby Times between 1947 and 1952 giving notice of meetings of the Colne and District Co-operative Society and Malachi's name is included as a committee member. I remember my dad referring

to Malachi as 'Red Mac'. He described him as a communist but I have no idea if this is a fact or merely a general description. (He died in Southampton in 1976 - what was he doing there so far from Colne? Was it anything to do with the fact that this is where the SS Habana landed all those years ago?)

But why Colne and why with the McDermott's?

All the evidence points to Luís being found adoptive parents in Colne through the Lancashire and Cheshire Spanish Aid Committee although I have been unable to find any information on-line about this organisation. It is referred to on page 188 of "Only for Three Months" in part of a letter from the Basque Children's Committee to a prospective host family. The letter mentions that a boy might be sent for a three months trial period. The author, Adrian Bell, states that this arrangement clearly worked out well as the boy spent the rest of his life in that part of Lancashire. In the notes at the back of the book it says that this extract has been included courtesy of Mrs Feliciano Martínez. Feliciano also contributed to the book 'Changed Destinies'. She refers to her brother Luís and how he was sent to 'a wonderful family in Colne where he was showered with love'. I thought that was amazing!

Another informant - a nephew of Mary Sánchez - recalls that Luís worked in the butchery at the Co-op in St Neot's Cambridgeshire. Mary worked in the supermarket and that is where they met. They married in 1964. I don't know what he was doing in St Neot's!

It transpires that Luís Sánchez was one of five Basque children, three boys and two girls, to live in Colne possibly/probably organised through the local Co-operative Movement or Labour Party. In response to one of my FaceBook posts on 'Colne Lancashire Now and Then', a lady remembered Luís Sánchez being in her class at Primet School around 1941. Intriguingly she also remembered two other boys, Luis and Tomas Arroyo and two girls, whose names she couldn't fully recall. This would not have been the nearest school for Luís Sánchez but it might have been for the others. Perhaps it was decided to keep the children in the same school.

Luís Arroyo and his brother Tomas went first to Hexham where the Colony was closed because of public opposition. According to BCA '37 UK records they lived with Arthur Pickles and his wife Florence at the Nook, Colne. On the 1939 Register Arthur is described as a wholesale meat salesman and Luís Arroya is thought to have worked in a butcher's shop. So Arthur and Malachi didn't have the same occupation and I don't know if there were any other links between them such as the Co-operative Movement or their political sympathies. Tomás left Colne and went to Carshalton. As for Luís, I have found a marriage between a Luís Arroyo and Gillian Kay in Nelson, Lancashire in 1957 but by 1958 they are living in Bedfordshire.

The BCA '37 UK has identified the girls as Araceli Morales Cubillos and her twin sister Alicia who arrived in the UK at the age of 7. They were born in Barakaldo which was near, and is now part of, Bilbao. They spent time at the Bradford Colony and were 'adopted' by the Bradford Telegraph and Argus. In Colne, I believe they lived with Mrs Calvert of Keighley Avenue. They moved from Colne to the Carshal-

ton Colony. In 1948 they left England for Mexico to join their parents, Santos and Carmen who left Spain after the War.

This has been a really interesting piece of research. I now feel I know much more about Luís and about how he came to be in Colne. But there are still many questions - about him and the other Basque children in Colne. I would love to know more about Malachi and Linda who obviously provided a warm welcome and a loving home. Any help or information would be gratefully received!



References:

Adrian Bell : Only for Three Months

Members of the Spanish Community in London: Changed Destinies