

FROM DONOSTIA (SAN SEBASTIÁN) TO CAERLEON VIA WICKHAM MARKET

By José Duo Goldaracena

Translated by Maria Dolores Power

The 30th of June 1936 was the day Eduardo Duo, my father, received his Certificate of Primary Education in the French School of Donostia. On the 12th of July, he was given the Prize for Achievement and Diligence for the course 1935 – 1936.



He had just turned 13 and neither he nor his siblings Josefa and Enrique, were aware of what was about to befall them. Less than a week later, saw the uprising of General Franco and the beginning of the Civil War.

When the francoist troops entered Donostia on the 13th of September, the Duo family had already abandoned the city. My grandfather Luis was a sympathiser of the Republican Left and, together with thousands of other natives of Donostia, headed towards Bilbao, arriving there a few days after. Later on they were accommodated in Portugalete.

My grandfather was not called up as he had 3 children, but in the rearguard life was dominated by tension and constant worries. The lack of food, uncertainty and fear of bombs from the German planes made life very difficult.

When the bombs were being dropped, they ran inside a railway tunnel. For the children this was something of an adventure. There was no school and they spent all day playing in the streets with their friends.

On the 31st of March 1937 General Mola's offensive began against the Basque positions and events escalated: The advantage of their organised military and above all, their aviation, made for a slow but continuous advance along the length and width of the front. The Basque soldiers and militia fought with bravery, but with inferior conditions, little preparation, badly armed and without planes.

After the bombing of Gernika on the 26th of April, the Basque government called for international help to evacuate as many children as possible. France, Belgium, Holland, the USSR, Switzerland and Great Britain responded.

For months, the Member of Parliament Leah Manning and the Duchess of Atholl had been carrying out an intense campaign to reach an agreement with the British government to allow Basque children to come as war refugees to Britain. Under increasing pressure the government agreed to allow 2000 children to come on condition they were maintained and accommodated at all times through private endeavour.

Registration points were set up in Bilbao, where parents could register their children to be evacuated. My grandfather thought that of all the options, the country he most trusted was Great Britain. "They were the most serious", he would say.

On the 20th of May, at the Santurtzi dock, the Duo siblings, after a medical examination, boarded the "Habana", a ship with a capacity for 800 passengers. Swinging over their coats hung their identification on hexagonal shaped cardboard bearing their numbers 116 (Josefa), 117 (Eduardo) and 118 (Enrique).

The next day, at 6.20 hours the "Habana" set sail with 3,805 children and 234 adults for Great Britain. The yacht "Goizeko Izarra" was also put out to sea on its way to France with 350 refugees. The armed boats "Bizkaya" and "Gipuzkoa" of the Basque Auxiliary Navy and the destroyer "Císcar" escorted them up to the boundary of International waters.

After 3 miles, the Royal Navy took charge of their protection. The destroyer "Foxhound" accompanied the "Goizeko Izarra" as far as Bayonne; the battleship "Royal Oak" and the destroyer "Fearless" escorted the "Habana" almost to Southampton.

The crossing on the Gulf of Biscay was a nightmare experience for the children. The sea was rough and they soon became sea sick. Hardly any of them had travelled by boat before let alone for such a great distance.

My father would tell us how the sailors offered them food advising them that it was better to have a full stomach...It was well meaning but such advice did nothing to alleviate their pitiful state.

When the ship anchored in Southampton it was like another world. It went from disorder and terror to order and stability. After undergoing a further medical examination they began disembarking and were taken on buses to a camp in North Stoneham, Eastleigh.

There were lots of people on the pavements and the streets were decorated with bunting for the recent coronation of George VI. The children thought it was for them, but the truth is that it was decided to keep the decoration to make the welcoming of the children more complete.

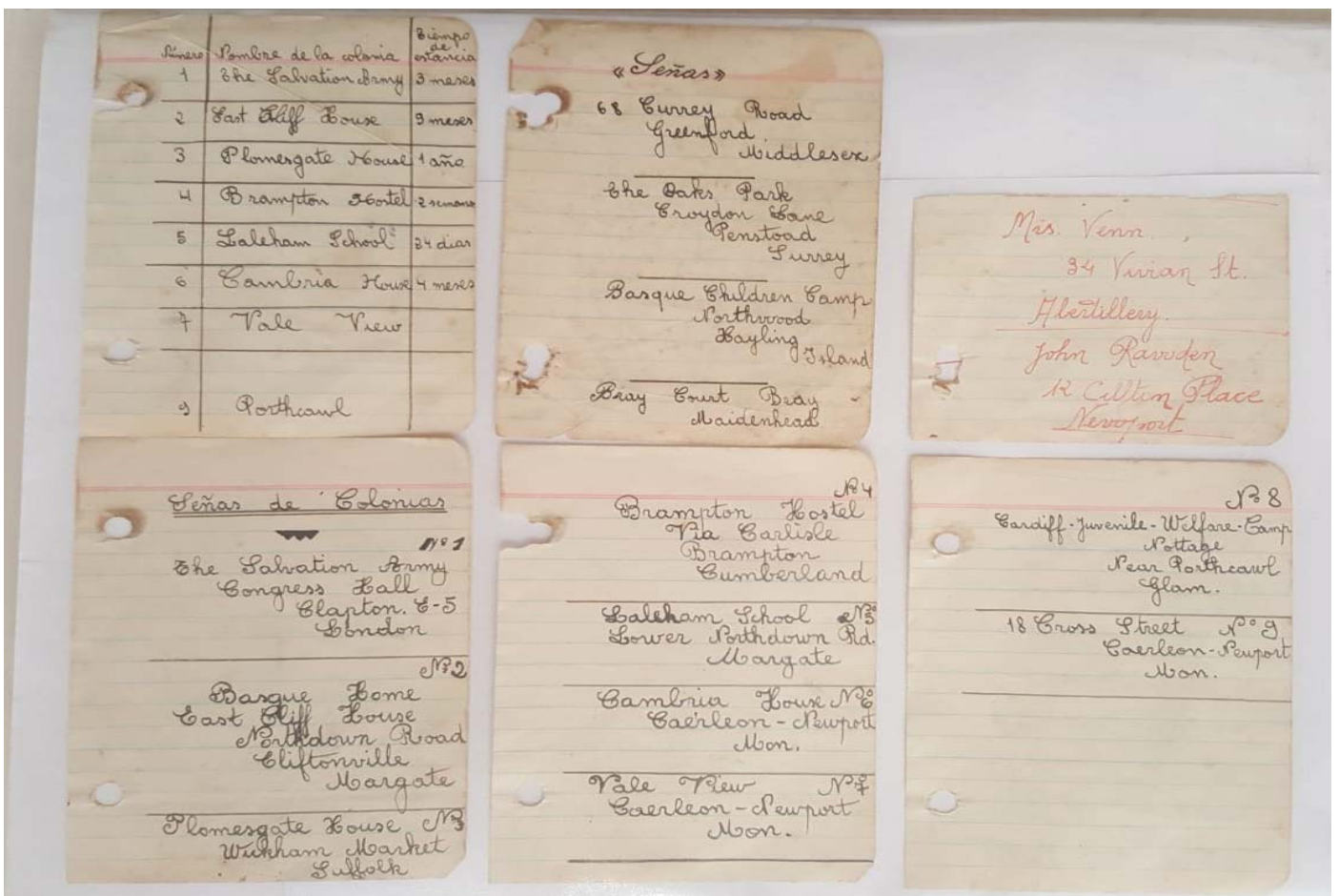
My father and my uncle and aunt were astonished to see the level of organization that had taken place in the camp; from the tents to loudspeakers, to dining areas and other services. After months of war and hardships, they were able to eat freshly made bread, chocolate, butter, jam, and drink fresh milk. And they also slept in tents. A real luxury for them.

There were many people that came to the camp daily as volunteers to help the children and make their stay as comfortable as possible. Their work was commendable. They would just as well teach English as they would sing, sweep or wash clothes. There were people of all ages, from adults to boy scouts.

After some time, the three siblings were sent together with other children to a house belonging to the Salvation Army in Clapton, to the north of London, where they stayed for 3 months. There was more discipline there than in the camp, but they were well treated. They were able to walk around London and to get to know people living near their residence.

While all of this was going on in Great Britain, my grandparents left Bilbao and headed towards Santander, a few days before the Basque city fell into the hands of the francoists. They went in convoy, in separate vehicles.

During the journey, they were attacked from the South and the caravan was split in two. My grandfather remained in the part that was to be detained and my grandmother continued on her journey. They did not see each other again until the end of the war. And neither of them knew until then if the other was still alive.



My grandfather returned to Bilbao and then to Donosti. Despite the fact that he had fled and was a sympathiser of the left, he was not detained. He only had to present himself regularly at the police station. Due to his work background as a commercial sales representative he knew a lot of people, including fascists, and probably that is what saved his life.

They prevented him from carrying out his former work and he had no money not even for lodgings, but he was able to find rooms to sleep in through friends. He went from one house to another for quite some time.

As for my grandmother, she managed to reach Asturias. They were gradually fenced in and people tried to flee by sea. From Gijón she went to France by boat. From there she got a train to Catalonia. When she arrived there she was sent to Olot, in Gerona, where she worked in the kitchens of a republican army battalion until the end of the war.

During those years, in Great Britain, Eduardo, Enrique and Josefa lived in different colonies: 3 months in East Cliff House, Margate (Kent); 1 year in Wickham Market (Suffolk); 2 weeks in Brampton (Cumberland); 24 days in Laleham School, Margate (Kent) and 4 months in Cambria House, Caerleon (Monmouth), from where they were moved on when the house was requisitioned by the army. From there they went to Vale View, Caerleon (Monmouth), which was again also occupied by the military, and then to Nottage, Porthcawl (Glamorgan).



Salvation Army colony in Congress Hall,
London. 1937



Enrique, Josefa (Pepita) and Eduardo
Clapton, colony in Plomesgate House,
Wickham Market 28-5-'38



Colony in East Cliff House,
Cliftonville, Margate 1937



Eduardo – center back row with child in his arms.
Colony in Plomesgate House,
Wickham Market 28-5-'38

My father told me of a Roman amphitheater in Caerleon; that they had gone through an underwater tunnel in Wales; that they used to go strawberry picking and he took part in a Basque dance performance to raise funds for the running of the colony. He sometimes also mentioned that he worked in a foundry.

The three siblings always spoke with gratitude about all the people that helped them in those terrible times; for their selfless work, sacrificing their time, dedicating themselves to teaching them, entertaining them and keeping them happy, for their efforts in fundraising and the day to day organization of the colonies.

When they arrived from the Basque Country in traumatised circumstances, they were given clothes, shoes and other things they were in need of. And not only material things. They also offered love, respect and an example of work and solidarity.

They very much appreciated people like Cyril Cule, a Welsh teacher who spoke various languages, or Daniel Minton, a good man, married to Carmen from Seville...And many more names which unfortunately, have been forgotten over time.

My father told me that when the Second World War began, a rumour went around that the Germans were going to send paratroopers. Because of this and the fear of enemy planes, the "black out" was established (one of the first English expressions I learned), in order to avoid lights in houses being seen at night.....

In 1940, my grandparents, now reunited, reclaimed their children. It was a difficult moment. A decision had to be made: To return home or stay in Great Britain.

It had been established that when there were a number of siblings involved, the opinion of the eldest would be the one that prevailed. My father wanted to stay, but my aunt – who was the eldest- decided to return.

On the 20th of May, loaded with presents given to them, - including a brand new Meccano set, they boarded a ship for Santander.

On arriving on land they were welcomed by a Falangist with stripes, who as soon as he heard them speak English shouted at them "Here we speak the Christian language!"

Good bye paradise.

Welcome to hell.

My father died in 1969 at the age of 45.

He was never again able to return to Great Britain, but he always carried it in his heart.