

Basque Children Association of '37 UK and BCA'37UK-Euskadi

A report of the inauguration of the exhibition "The children of '37 in the United Kingdom" / *Los niños del 37 en el Reino Unido* at the San Mamés stadium, Bilbao.

By Christopher Evans



The inauguration of a new exhibition entitled "The children of '37 in the United Kingdom" took place at the San Mamés stadium in Bilbao on 27th April, a day after the 85th anniversary of the bombing of Gernika.

Basque football giants Athletic Club de Bilbao's new exhibition, the result of a collaboration with both Basque Children Associations '37 (UK & Euskadi), focuses on the child refugees who fled Euskadi to the UK during the Spanish Civil War following the destruction of the towns of Durango and Gernika.

After the horrific "shock and awe" attacks on the Basque towns, petrified parents had to make the drastic, yet necessary decision to send their children away from the horrors of the war.

On 23rd May 1937, almost 4,000 children, teachers and assistants arrived in Southampton after a treacherous crossing on board the *SS Habana*. Following three weeks at a temporary camp, the children were gradually rehoused in groups or *colonias* around the UK.

Using archive photographs and documents mainly from the BCA'37 UK, the exhibition will now be open to the public for the next six months.

Asier Arrate, director of Athletic Club's museum, opened proceedings by welcoming attendees who came from all over the Basque Country, Spain and the UK.

Those in attendance included Athletic Club's president Aitor Elizegi, Idoia Mendia (Second Vice Lehendakari), Derek Doyle OBE (former British Consul), Begoña de Ibarra (Director General for Culture of the Provincial Council of Viscaya), Carlos Sergio (Director of Sports at the Provincial Council of Viscaya), Jose Antón Rodríguez Ranz (Basque Government Vice-Minister for Human Rights, Memory and Cooperation) and Carmen Kilner (Secretary of the BCA'37 UK and President of BCA'37 UK-Euskadi).



Asier Arrate, Derek Doyle, Begoña de Ibarra, Manu Lezama, Carmen Kilner, Idoia Mendia, Aitor Elizegi and José Antonio Rodríguez (Credit: Athletic Bilbao website)

Athletic's president Aitor Elizegi spoke about the tragic circumstances of 85 years ago that led to a rushed evacuation of so many children. He talked of how they hoped it would be for a short time of two or three months and how, for some, this became for their whole lives. He spoke of his pride that Athletic had played a part in maintaining the children's spirits and hoped that they would continue to inspire youngsters.

"The only thing you can do when you first hear this story is listen and open your eyes wide, because after a few seconds you realise you are hearing about something special," said the charismatic president.



Athletic Club President Aitor Elizegi spoke of his pride in the exhibition (Credit: Athletic Club website)

Carmen, whose mother was one of the teachers on board the *SS Habana*, thanked Athletic Club for their collaboration and support in putting on the exhibition. She also spoke of the parallels with the current crisis in Ukraine.

“The sound of the impact of the foot on the ball is an international language, whether with boots and a full crowd in a stadium, or barefoot in the streets or in a park.”

She continued: “The Basque boys played, they won - not only matches but also the hearts of their hosts and delighted them with their skills; friendships were made that lasted a lifetime; they became local heroes, and some became professionals. Football was, and still is, a way for refugees from all over the world to find acceptance, pride and dignity.”



Carmen Kilner of the BCA'37 UK gives a moving speech during the inauguration (Credit: Christopher Evans and Athletic Club website)

Football played a huge part in the children's lives, giving them an outlet to express themselves and to help them momentarily forget about their experiences and the horrors of war in their homeland.

Some of the children went on to play professional football, notably Sabino Barinaga, who scored the first ever goal at Real Madrid's Santiago Bernabeu stadium, Raimundo Lezama, who won eight trophies with Athletic Club, Emilio Aldekoa, and Enrique Garatea. (See Athletic Club website for their stories here: [Enrique Garatea](#), [Emilio Aldekoa](#) and [Raimundo Lezama](#)).

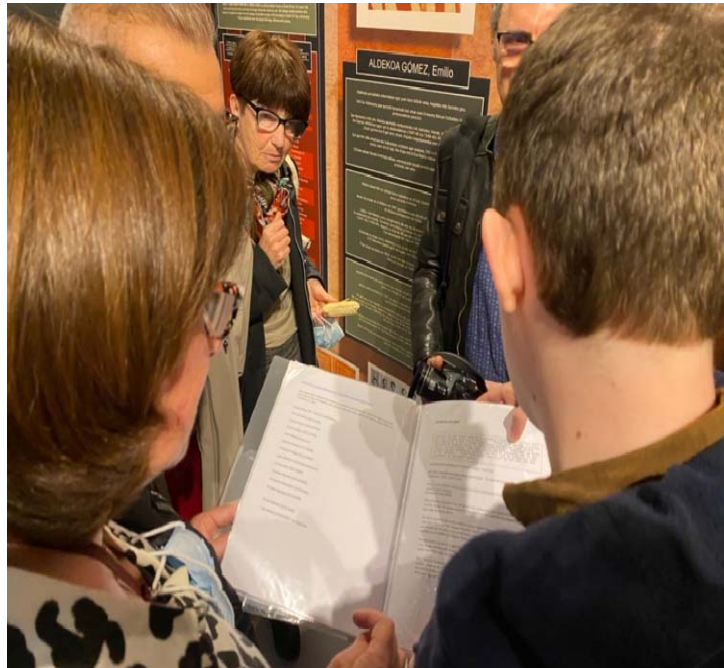
Manu Lezama, the son of legendary Athletic Club goalkeeper Raimundo, spoke emotionally about his father at the inauguration.

He said: I'd like to thank Carmen (of the BCA'37 UK) for all she has done and is doing to remember *los niños de la guerra*. This year is the centenary of my father's birth and this event fills me with pride. After living through terrible events, my father learnt to be a good goalkeeper and was forever grateful to the English people for all they had done.”



Manu Lezama, son of legendary Athletic Club goalkeeper Raimundo Lezama (Credit: Athletic Club website)

Also in attendance were the daughters and younger half-brother of Enrique Garatea, one of the children who stayed in Wales. Enrique was the talented goalkeeper of [Basque Boys AFC](#) of Caerleon and went on to play professionally in Spain.



Enrique Garatea's daughters and younger half-brother Juantxu reading the description of Enrique's personality from the archives (Credit: Christopher Evans and Tom Wardle)

Garatea's daughters were shown images of their father from his time in Wales, as well as a description of his personality from the archives. Cyril Cule, in his unpublished biographical manuscript *'The Spanish Civil War: A Personal Viewpoint'* (1975), describes Garatea as a "sturdily built boy of 11; big for his age, bright eyed and vivacious."



Basque Boys AFC goalkeeper Enrique Garatea and defender Antonio Asencio pictured in the grounds of Cambria House (Credit: Southampton University)

However, he also talks about the young boy's nervousness due to the ordeals that he had gone through and that he "seldom has news of his parents" who have been "torn apart by the war and are somewhere in Northern Spain."

Thankfully, Enrique later discovered that his family were alive and well and returned to the Basque Country after the war in May 1939.



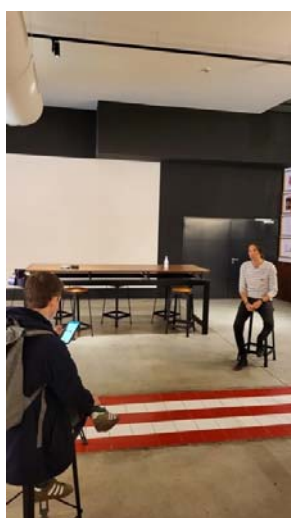
Some images of the exhibition at the San Mamés stadium (Credit: Christopher Evans and Athletic Club website)

Poignantly, one of the *niñas*, Amaia Rentería Aurrekoetxea, attended the exhibition at the museum in the San Mamés. She was in a colony in Newcastle-upon-Tyne with her elder sister Jule, who was a maestra, and younger brother Gotzon, who tragically died there. Amaia will be 100 later this year.



99-year-old Amaia Rentería Aurrekoetxea, one of the *niños de la guerra*, attended the inauguration at the San Mamés (Credit: Athletic Club website)

Following the inauguration, Carmen Kilner, Christopher Evans and Tom Wardle from the BCA'37 UK were interviewed by Dan Parry of Athletic Club about the event. The film can be seen [here](#) on Athletic Club's twitter account.



Carmen Kilner, Christopher Evans and Tom Wardle are interviewed by Athletic Club de Bilbao journalist Dan Parry. (Credit: Christopher Evans and Tom Wardle)

Conclusion

The event in Bilbao was a fantastic occasion and well attended. It received a tremendous response and coverage in both the Basque Country and the UK.

The exhibition was the first of its kind at the San Mamés museum and was innovative with the archive material. It has generated much interest and ensured that many visitors will pass through its doors to see history of such importance.

Following the inauguration, a meal took place overlooking the San Mamés pitch to thank and celebrate the work of both the BCA'37 associations.

For tickets to the exhibition go [here](#). (Visits to the exhibition are included with general admission to the Athletic Club Museum and the San Mamés Tour).

Watch the full inauguration here:

<https://youtu.be/54oEUJTDOdM>

Links:

Spanish articles/videos

<https://radiopopular.com/podcast/el-athletic-y-los-ninos-del-37-en-reino-unido-aunque-no-hablaban-el-idioma-los-pies-se-entendian/>

<https://www.athletic-club.eus/noticias/2022/04/27/ac-museoa-inaugura-los-ninos-del-37-en-el-reino-unido>

<https://dotkirolak.eus/el-athletic-presenta-la-exposicion-los-ninos-del-37-en-el-reino-unido/>

<https://twitter.com/AthleticClub/status/1519281763482230785>

<https://twitter.com/RTVEPaisVasco/status/1519325273812054017>

English articles/videos

https://twitter.com/Athletic_en/status/1519695082697506816

<https://www.athletic-club.eus/en/news/2022/04/27/ac-museum-opens-the-children-of-37-in-the-united-kingdom-exhibition>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hampshire-61179882>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hampshire-61179882.amp>

<https://twitter.com/BBCSouthNews/status/1520503118206840832>

Christopher Evans articles

<https://nation.cymru/sport/how-a-basque-refugee-football-team-overcame-tragedy-to-take-wales-by-storm/>



<https://nation.cymru/sport/unearthed-programme-from-basque-wonder-team-match-in-wales/>

<https://nation.cymru/sport/a-special-relationship-when-wales-played-the-basque-country/>

Athletic Club de Bilbao articles (by Dan Parry)

<https://www.athletic-club.eus/en/news/2022/04/20/the-children-of-37-pt-1-cambridge-coventry-and-caerleon>

<https://www.athletic-club.eus/en/news/2022/04/24/the-children-of-37-pt-2-emilio-aldekoa>

<https://www.athletic-club.eus/en/news/2022/04/26/the-children-of-37-pt-3-ramundo-lezama>