

The First Child to be Returned

By Cliff Kirkpatrick

Of the 4000 or so children and adult helpers who came to England on the S.S. *Habana* in May 1937, the first sizeable group, comprising 160 children, were returned to Spain under the auspices of the Basque Children's Committee on 12 November 1937. This date is generally accepted as marking the beginning of the process of repatriation. There were instances of children being reunited with their parents, a parent or other family member earlier than this but numbers were extremely small and they were not returned to Spain but to some other destination which almost invariably was France. Calls for the return of the children had begun within days of the fall of Bilbao on 19 June 1937 but the Basque Children's Committee, responsible for the welfare of the '*Habana*' children in Britain, rightly resisted taking precipitous action. Exactly when, then, did the committee consider the time and conditions right to make arrangements for the first refugee children to leave and who was the first child to be reunited with his or her parents?

Among the Foreign Office papers relating to Basque refugee children in the National Archives at Kew is a three page typed letter from J.R.J. Macnamara, one of the joint honorary secretaries of the Basque Children's Committee and the only Spanish speaker on the committee, addressed to the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden. The letter is dated 9 July 1937 and was written in a private capacity with the committee's approval, seeking advice but also providing draft proposals for implementing repatriation. In it he states:

Last Monday, at my suggestion, the matter of repatriation was discussed. It was at once generally agreed that should any individual parents write for their children they should be returned at once, provided that the request was bona fide. One, in fact leaves to rejoin her parents in Portugal to-morrow and some others are leaving soon for France.

.... What in my opinion is of urgency is that there should at once be a policy formulated for the return of the children so that all may appreciate our good-will and that negotiations be initiated by us, rather than others saying we are holding them back from them.

The reference to the child leaving to rejoin her parents in Portugal is particularly interesting and is the earliest case that I have found in the archives, taking place, as it does, some seven weeks after the children arrived at Southampton. The name of the *niña* is not given as her mention is only incidental in the context of the letter but I was hopeful that she could be identified by consulting the list of children evacuated to Britain, reproduced as Appendix 1 in Gregorio Arrien's book, *Niños Vascos Evacuados a Gran Bretaña*. This book regrettably does contain printing errors, usually incorrect year dates, which can easily misinform the unwary reader. For example, several children are listed as having been returned during the first quarter of 1937 before they even arrived in England. Two boys are shown as having been repatriated in 1935 and three sisters during 1933!

That said, it is still an important and useful book and did provide the information I was seeking as on page 190 it confirms that Karitza Olariaga Basterra, 14 years of age, identity tag number 1309, was sent to Portugal on 12 July 1937. It would seem then that she actually left England two days later than Macnamara anticipated but there is no doubt that Karitza is the girl referred to in his letter as no other child is listed as having been taken to Portugal.

Although not the experience of the majority of the children, it is nonetheless gratifying that the words "Only for three months" said for comfort and encouragement by so many parents to their departing children were, on this occasion and a few others, not just wishful thinking but actually turned out to be an overestimate.