

Researching the Basque Children

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I'd like to begin by thanking Tom Buchanan for organising this Day School on the Basque Refugee Children in Britain, 1937-39, jointly with the Basque Children of '37 Association UK. It is, in effect, the first of a series of events marking the 75th anniversary of the arrival of the niños in this country, the other two being a special event including a lunch for 250 guests at Southampton University on 12 May and and a the annual lecture given in London in October by Richard Baxell.

As I mentioned the word "anniversary", I am reminded that we are also soon going to celebrate another important anniversary, that is, of our Association. The Basque Children of '37 Association UK was set up in November 2002, so we shall also be celebrating its tenth anniversary in a few months' time.

Anniversaries are always times for looking back, looking back at what we have achieved and trying to evaluate our work. It therefore seems opportune to reconsider the role the Association plays in the wider Spanish Civil War narrative. Within this topic, I am going to look especially at researching the Basque children, because it is through research that we have found out more about these very courageous and underestimated people.

Our flyer and indeed, every copy of our Newsletter, contains a list of our Aims and Objectives, amongst which are, and I quote: "To facilitate and support research into the history of the evacuation of the niños vascos who were sent to Britain; to inform members about new developments in the knowledge of the period through publications, bibliographies etc; to enhance the education of the public, students and academics on the subject of the exile." Support research, inform and educate then – this was the intention, the focus, in fact the project that we set ourselves. The war had shattered the children's familiar world. They left their country to escape bombings, hunger and fear. Deprived of a normal childhood spent with parents and siblings, uprooted for the most part at a very young age, they were sent to a country whose language they didn't speak and whose cultural heritage they had to try and assimilate. And the group sent to Britain in 1937, nearly 4,000 children, was the largest contingent of unaccompanied children that had ever come to Britain. This story deserved to be better known.

During the Spanish Civil War, the use of massive aerial bombardment, incendiary shells and strafing against an unprotected population ushered in a new era of civilians suffering in battle. The subsequent evacuation of thousands of young children to refuge far from their parents and their homeland was the first such event in a tragic series continuing today.

When we started the Association, I think I am right in saying that few of us knew very much about the *niños vascos*. But all of us on the committee had a personal link to the *niños vascos*, they were either our parent(s) or one of the teachers. We had reached a period in our lives when we wanted to know more about our family, and this no doubt also spurred us on. We had actually all read Adrian Bell's seminal book, "Only For Three Months", the story of the Basque children in Britain (published in 1996), but that was about as far as we had got. As we tried to find out more about them, we realised that the plight of the Basque children had been glossed over by historians. To give you an example, Hugh Thomas' great oeuvre "The Spanish Civil War", running to well over 900 pages, could only dedicate ten lines to it!

The only book published which dealt with the evacuation of *niños* to France, Great Britain, Belgium, Russia and Mexico was Dorothy Legarreta's book "the Guernica Children", written in the eighties.. At around this time too, Jim Fyrth published "The Signal was Spain" which had a chapter on the Basque children.

When we came together in November 2002 and decided to form an Association, it was in order to not only find out more about the children but also tell people about this extraordinary period in British and Spanish history. This was the impetus we needed to do find out The Basque children in Britain, should be allotted their rightful place in history, that they should be recognised as being equally victims of Franco.

Very soon after setting up the Association, we were approached by the two Fundaciones Pablo Iglesias and Largo Caballero to provide artefacts for a very important travelling exhibition that they were putting on starting in Bilbao from December 2003 and finishing in Madrid in June 2005. I was asked to write an article about the children's exile to Britain for the large catalogue of the exhibition. Until then, this story of the Basque children's exile to other countries - France, Belgium, Mexico, Russia had been written about in Spanish publications, but no one had thought to study the exile to Britain, in fact, it had been left out on an interactive presentation about the *niños* produced on the internet. It was

as if it hadn't happened. We proposed to change all that, determined that the children who had come to Great Britain shouldn't be "los olvidados" of the Spanish Civil War.

And in the ten years we have been in existence, we have rescued the story of the children from obscurity and have done a good deal of research on different aspects of it. A glance through the fifteen issues of the Newsletter that we have produced so far shows how more and more research is being done around the topic. In that time, 3 PhD theses, 7 MA theses and 9 undergraduate dissertations been written. The first port of call for the student is our website that contains much valuable information, including a bibliography of books and articles in English and in Spanish dedicated to the Basque children. We are always ready to give advice and encourage people to come and consult our archive in my study here in Oxford. The only proviso is that the students deposit a copy of their thesis with us for the archives. The Newsletter has also provided a forum for many articles on aspects of the Basque children written by us and by our members. The first issue shows the debt of gratitude that is owed to Leah Manning who was instrumental in getting the children over to Britain from the Basque country: there is a report about the naming of a square in Bilbao after her, one on the inauguration of a centre for older people in Harlow also named after her and the presentation of a plaque to the British government by our counterpart in Spain, the Asociacion de Jubilados de la Guerra Civil.

In the course of the ten years, we have been sent valuable and interesting archival material: newspaper cuttings about some of the colonies, video recordings of same, photographs, books. Many of these have been used as the basis of research. Members have written books about the colonies; there was a fairly short paperback about the colony in Middlesborough, Hutton Hall, and a longer book about the five colonies in Wales. In the course of our research, we have also made interesting discoveries: two in particular stand out. First a collection of wonderful photographs of some of the children from the Aston colony near Faringdon in Oxfordshire taken by a professional photographer, Cyril Arapoff, himself a refugee. These were found in the basement of the Oxford Public Library. Then there about 30 line drawings of children in the Langham colony by Richard Murry, the brother of John Middleton Murry from the Peace Pledge Union, who lent his house, the Aldephi Centre in Langham (Colchester) to the Basque children.

We have produced a valuable documentary film which won an award and which has been shown 6 or 7 times on the BBC, as well as in Spain. We

have erected seven blue plaques now in colonies where the children stayed, put on several exhibitions and our committee members and increasingly our members, regularly give talks to local history societies, or university of the third age groups. We have also sent out teams into schools in the Basque country and have been struck by the fact that the story of these evacuated children is not generally known in Spain. From the reactions to all these, we can see that the aims of our project are being met and we realise that there is certainly an increase in public awareness of the *niños*.

When we started the Association, the *niños* were already of an advanced age, and because their story had largely been ignored in Britain, no systematic attempt had been made to record their individual life stories in Britain. No one had thought to collect their oral histories - oral histories which are such a valuable adjunct to the researcher since they add a new, personal dimension to history, and are an invaluable tool for a writer.

I was acutely aware of the passing of time and decided that it was important to try and collect as many testimonies as possible before it became too late, so five years ago, when we celebrated the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the *niños* in Britain, I managed to get a grant from the Spanish government and was able to publish a bi-lingual book of reminiscences. It contained sixty testimonies up to 2,000 words and it has proved to be a remarkable source of information about the lives the Basque children lead in exile. Of course, I realise that this is the *niños* speaking as adults, nowadays, not as the youngsters they were when they first came to Britain, but many of them remember how they felt and it is in the spirit of the recuperation of historic memory that I have elicited these life stories.

Another of my aims has been to establish a definitive list of all the colonies and to find out more about those we have very little information for. There is still much work to be done and many avenues to explore, even as regards something as basic as this. Dorothy Legarretta's book "The Guernica Children" purports to have the most complete list of all the colonies. But it is woefully incomplete and in some cases plainly wrong. One problem is that the colonies were known either by the name of the house (they usually were large dilapidated mansions which nearly all had names) or by the name of the town, which wasn't always that near, as in the case of Elford Hall near Lichfield and Avon Agricultural College in Evesham, which are usually just called "Birmingham!". This makes locating them sometimes very confusing. The reason for this is

probably because the Lord Mayor's Appeal came from the Birmingham Basque Children's Committee.

About 2 years ago, I came across 4 "forgotten" colonies that aren't mentioned in the published lists. From late June until 13 October 1940 West Hill, Putney, was home to 40 Basque children prior to their relocation three and a half miles away to The Grange, Kingston Hill. I found this out through reading the diary of a Spaniard who used to visit and help entertain the niños and who recorded his visits to the Putney home before they moved to Kingston. Then when proof reading Hywel Davies' book "Fleeing Franco" about the niños in Wales, I discovered another colony in Wales. It was a mock castle in Bronwydd which the children went to in September as it was too cold to continue staying in huts in Brechfa. José Armolea who was one of the niños there recalled the gloominess of the place. The next colony I discovered through reading an article in a Lake District local paper of the time; it reported that some children in the Brampton colony home were being transferred to a house in Ambleside. This was corroborated by one of the niñas who had been sent to Ambleside. The final one was the house of a Dr Grace Griffiths in Suffolk. When the children had to leave Bray Court they were allotted places in other colonies and there was a list of these attached to a set of Minutes of the Basque Children's Committee. All the names of the colonies where the children were relocating were familiar to me except one which said c/o Grace Griffiths, Newton Green, Sudbury, Suffolk. I rang a local historian who said there had indeed been children staying at Dr Griffith's house. I confirmed this information by talking to Dr Griffith's daughter and reading something about it in some recently acquired minutes of the Basque Children's Committee. It is important to check your new information, and not only rely on, say, one newspaper article. In several instances, because no one checked, there were articles saying that there had been colonies in Bognor Regis and Milton Hall, Cambridge. While there had once been a possibility of a colony being established there, it had in fact not materialised.

But now I have discovered a wonderful source of the names of all (or nearly all) of the colonies. The National Archives at Kew publish their catalogue and they have a lot of material from the Home Office, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Health. The Home Office papers contain information about aliens and the Basque children evacuated from 1937-39. This last one has proved to be the most helpful for my purposes.

What I didn't know, as it's not documented anywhere, was that every time a group of children left the North Stoneham camp for a more

permanent home in a colony, the Medical Officer at Eastleigh would write a letter to the Minister in London reporting on the numbers leaving, the dates of their departure, and naming their destination. (One of these letters made me laugh when I was looking through them the other day. The Medical Officer must have been tired, for he wrote: "2 boys left this morning for somewhere!")

When he received this information, the Minister of Health would send inspectors round to the various colonies. Their reports appear in full in the archives. The colonies were not obliged to accept the recommendations of the inspector, but they were no doubt very useful. There is also a list of the colonies that were inspected and a brief summary of the report, together with the numbers of children who came to each colony and the date they arrived. Needless to say, this list doesn't always tally with the information given by the Eastleigh Medical Officer to the Ministry of Health! But when I saw the list, I did discover quite a lot of "new" colonies. For example, who has heard of the colonies "Salvation Army Maternity Home" in Ladybrook Road, Birmingham, or "The Old Edwardian Memorial Ground" at Perrie Common, Birmingham, and yet 20 girls went to the first and 32 boys to the second! (Incidentally in that same letter we learn that 6 boys ("the toughs") are being sent to the Spanish Embassy in London for return to Spain!) The next stage in the research process is to try and find out something about The Maternity Home and what exactly the Memorial Ground was. This can be done in various ways, the local studies library is often a good first source, or the local history society can be approached. And there's sometimes the possibility of finding a niño who was actually there.

How else can you get information on the colonies? It is a laborious process but one which sometimes pays off. The way to get more information is by going to the library nearest the town where the colony was situated and trawling through local newspapers of 1937 onwards. . Several of our members have in fact done this and added to our collection of information about the colonies, in some cases their research has led to them being asked to give a talk to a particular group about the colony. Very recently, I was trying to find out about the Derby colony that I had never heard about. It was Burnaston House, Etwall, which I understand to be now a suburb of Derby. I rang up the local history society and the outcome of this was that the person I spoke to was fired with enthusiasm to find out more about this local landmark, and decided to do some research of her own about it. She was able to consult many newspapers of the time and has subsequently produced an article about the colony which

will be published in her local history magazine and in our Newsletter. She has also been asked to give 2 talks to local societies in the subject.

This is a case where personal research leads to educating the public, and spreading the story of the Basque children. I was thinking about what I should say as regards researching the Basque children, the first things that came to my mind were the subjects that I was particularly interested in, and I've talked about establishing the definitive list of the colonies, and I'd like to add to that and try and find photographs of each of them, and include articles about the houses from newspapers.

But there are many other subjects that merit research, and I'll try and mention a few now. The catholic church took in, reluctantly, a quarter of the contingent of children and there is work to be done on the uneasy relationship between the Catholics and the Basques. Articles from "The Tablet" and the correspondents' pages and editorials in these newspapers should be useful. There is also work to be done on the relationship between the Quakers and the Basque children, the ILP and the BCC, the Peace Pledge Union, the boy scouts,

Much information can be gleaned by studying the media coverage and its effects on the population. The arrival of and hosting of the Basque children in Britain was a large scale organisational problem that called upon the resourcefulness of the British and was well documented all round the country. The children were portrayed at first as innocent victims who were vulnerable and helpless and this no doubt helped maximise the sources of support for the children. Their Basque origins were always emphasised, the headlines always talked of "the Basque children" rather than "the Spanish children". The Basques were considered to be more like the English, a hard working people, whereas the stereotype of the Spaniard was that he was bloodthirsty and cruel. The label "Basque" created a set of refugees who were worthy of sympathy.

This media representation was simplistic and distorted: the children while being innocent were certainly not passive. They had come to Britain with a considerable political baggage, many of the older boys had seen active service. A study of the newspaper reports of the time shows how the public attitude changed within a matter of weeks from benevolent endorsement to denigratory disapproval. Why was this? At the end of June when news of the fall of Bilbao had reached the children, their reactions had been fully documented, especially in the right wing press. There followed "an incident" at the Brechfa colony in Wales. Surely the misbehaviour of a handful of the children threatening the wardens was

not entirely to blame? In fact, only about 12 children were involved, and that this number should riot and complain was not really significant in the greater vision of things.

Another cause for criticism was soon found: initially considered “a deeply religious people”, it transpired that not all that many of the niños were practising Catholics after all, and some instances were reports of children spitting at Catholic priests. The press soon latched on to this and started to criticise them and soon xenophobia reared its ugly head in the correspondence columns in the papers.

There were over one hundred colonies and although the policy for refugee children was decided centrally by the government and by the National Joint Committee, their practical support and experiences in Britain were played out in local contexts. Little is known about their experiences at this level and information on this would be welcome. Newspapers and correspondence pages are good source materials and provide an indication of the local networks involved in supporting the Basque children. The Basque Children’s Committee was made up of an alliance of the three major political parties, the Quakers, the Catholics and the TUC so documents appear in a variety of local records. This research would be useful also in revealing more details of the local volunteers. And moving on from that it would probably reveal women as the key figures and more work could be done on the role they played.

The list of subjects about which one can do research grows longer.... Surprisingly there has been scant academic research about the psychological trauma suffered by some of these children. Here for information, one could turn to the book of testimonies - some of the stories of how the children were taken onto the Habana are horrific. One little girl was “dumped” on the gangway, which didn’t fail to have psychological repercussions later. The harsh treatment meted out by the nuns to the Basque children in some of the convents was cruel and unnecessary. One of our members when filling in the application form to join the Association, in the section where she was required to name the colony she had been at, wrote: “Convent from hell.” But it is difficult to get information from the convents, which I suppose is not unexpected, given the reputation some of them have got in recent years.

Another of my interests is education. Various perspectives in relation to the question of education can be studied. Whereas for the most part the Basques were schooled in the colonies and did not mix with the English, they nevertheless had a more organised system of education than we are

lead to believe, since nearly all of the testimonies mention schooling. We can study what they learned, what part of the curriculum was considered to be the most important. We can study the role of the educator, Margarita Comas, who was appointed by the Basque government to oversee the education of the young Basques and who later taught at the progressive Dartington Hall. She was obviously influenced by its progressive ideas and tried to pass them on.

Useful information about the niños can be researched in some university Libraries which specialise in the Spanish Civil War. The Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick for example, has all the Wilfrid Roberts papers. These include the minutes of most of the meetings of NJCSR and the BCC, and we can learn much from these, from the amount it cost to maintain the colonies to the names of those who were repatriated. In fact, the whole subject of repatriation has yet to be studied systematically. And now the papers have been digitised and will be available on-line. This is a wonderful resource for the researcher. Other sources of information can be found in the Library of the Marx Memorial Trust, where there are three catalogues, mainly about the International Brigaders but they also contain a considerable amount of information about the Basque children.

So the list goes on. It seems as if finally people are taking stock and realizing that the child who has been through the experience of war is a person whose needs are only just starting to be met. The last 5 years has seen the setting up of the Research Centre For Evacuees and War Child Studies at Reading University and it has held two international conferences.

In ending, I would like to draw your attention to a form of research that many of you will not be familiar with but which is fertile ground for those interested in the Basque children. Outside the main depositories of archival material relating to the Basque children refugees are the letters, postcards and other postal paraphernalia, much of it in private hands. This material has the potential to provide interesting corroborative or even new information. Every letter or postcard is unique and can include detailed background information with regards to individual children and colonies that might not be found in the surviving public records. Even envelopes on their own, without a letter inside, addressed to a Basque child or helper, or from a Basque child after repatriation, are of value. They give an indication of where the child was on a particular date and show that a colony was in all likelihood still in operational use as a Basque children's home at that date. Although these are only small jigsaw pieces in the

overall picture, they are important nevertheless if the Record Card of the child in question is missing or if the exact opening or closing dates of a particular home are unknown. The study of the postage stamps, labels, cancellations, postmarks, censor marks, political slogans, addressee and sender's details that are to be found on such envelopes are in themselves a rich field of research for the serious collector and postal historian.