

HUDDERSFIELD AND THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

Support for the Basque children arose from the wider sympathy of the labour movement in Huddersfield with the struggle of the Spanish republicans against Fascism. In February 1937 150 people attended a Left Book Club meeting on 'Spain in Revolt' chaired by Dick Horridge. L Pregar a medical student from Manchester described his experiences with the Spanish Medical Aid Unit which had gone out the previous August. Of six in the unit, three had been killed and two wounded. He related a conversation he had had with Ralph Fox only five hours before he died in which he said Spain's fight was also England's. At their meeting the Huddersfield Trades Council also decided to support Aid for Spain¹ In April a conference of the Huddersfield and District Aid for Spain Committee was held at Victoria Hall, chaired by Stanley North of the Labour League of Youth. Dr H Edelston of the Bradford branch of Aid for Spain warned of the danger of Fascism and the film 'The Defence of Madrid' was shown. Dick Horridge, Harry Sykes and George Hargrave were officers of the committee.²

Following a meeting with George Hargrave, the Revds Leonard Haley and J H Middlebrook approached the Mayor Cllr Barlow, who offered to support the campaign by making a non-partisan public appeal. On 8 June 1937 he chaired a meeting at Town Hall of 80 delegates from a wide range of organisations which resolved to do all it could to 'give sustenance and relief to the Bilbao refugees.' Approaches had already been made to the National Committee since a telegram was read out from the Duchess of Atholl thanking the meeting for its support and asking if 40 Basque children could be maintained 'in suitable premises.' A consultative committee was set up with the mayor, George Hargrave, E T Sykes, Archdeacon Albert Baines, the Rev Middlebrook, J C Maggs and Mrs J R Glaisyer with a mandate to approach 30 different organisations to elect representatives onto the committee with the power to co-opt others if necessary. The mayor estimated that £1500 a year would be required if the proposed number of children were supported. Archdeacon Baines said it was a cause which needed no pleading and reminded those present of the welcome given in the area to Belgian refugees 23 years previously.³

The following Tuesday the Spanish Relief Committee was formed at the Town Hall and it was resolved to adopt 20 Basque children as 'an experiment'. The Mayor was elected chairman and George Hargrave secretary, along with William Stoney. The committee was

¹ HUDDERSFIELD EXAMINER (WEEKLY) HEW 20 Feb 1937

² HEW 10 Apr 1937.

³ HEW 12 June 1937. Among the organisation represented at the meeting were: Huddersfield Rotary Club, Huddersfield Trades Council, Spanish Aid Committee (Milnsbridge Section), Spanish Aid Committee (Huddersfield Section), Peace Pledge Union, YMCA, All Saints Home (Almondbury), Waifs and Strays Society, British Federation of University Women, Left Book Club, Technical College, Labour Party, Charity Organisations Society, Chamber of Trade, Pattern Weavers Trade Union, Electrical trade Union, Huddersfield Industrial Society Ltd, Soroptomists Club, Hillhouse Congregational Church, Victoria Nurses Organisation, Royal Society of St George (Huddersfield Branch), Guild of Help, International Voluntary Service for Peace, Huddersfield Esperanto Society, Huddersfield and District Free Church Committee, Huddersfield Round Table, League of Nations Union (Gledholt Branch), New North Road Baptist Church.

given the power to act to obtain suitable accommodation by approaching the Corporation estates Committee with a view to using the Old Clergy House at Almondbury. An offer from the Cinderella Society of a home at Honley was also to be considered. A letter was read out from the local BMA, which had been asked to serve on the committee, expressing 'considerable disquiet' at 'the grave risk of serious infectious disease being introduced from Spain,' and proposing that 'complete segregation of the children for a period' be implemented. A discussion also ensued as to whether it would be better to raise support for the children to be housed at a location in the south of England 'where the climate was more favourable than the North'. Cllr Butterworth of the Cinderella Society repeated the offer of the home at Honley for three months, saying the Basque children's needs were greater and he presumed they would be 'segregated' and checked for diseases before they were sent. The Mayor proposed that the Old Clergy House, which belonged to the Corporation Estate, would be better since it was empty and available for more than three months and could house 20 children. Also it was opposite the recreation ground. It was decided to take 20 children and leave the finding of suitable accommodation to the Committee. ⁴

Arrangements were finalised after a meeting between members of the committee and David H Thomson, the travelling officer of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief on 13 July. It was announced that 20 boys, aged 5 to 12 would arrive on 30 July from a camp at Stoneham, accompanied by a teacher and other adults. The Ladies Committee section of the Relief Committee was busy equipping the Old Clergy House. It was estimated that 10s a week would be required to support each child and an appeal was made for funds. The mayor proposed that individuals or groups should sponsor a child. In the following week four individuals and New North Road Baptist Church agree to maintain one each. ⁵

The Duchess of Atholl was billed to speak at the Town Hall on 29 July and it was agreed to try and get the children to Huddersfield a few days before the 30th. Mr Bernard Pilkington, clerk to the health committee, who was also secretary of the Ladies Committee, reported that a 'matron governess', a Spanish refugee of British nationality would be in charge. George Hargrave appealed for boots, shoes, socks, towels, caps, games and musical instruments, while Mrs W Lawton, of Marsh, chair man of the house committee, asked for help with the gardening and donations of carpets, furnishings, balls, cricket bats and boxing gloves! She, along with other volunteers, had been at the house every day from morning until night spring cleaning and renovating the rooms, helped by her husband who was a railway charge hand joiner, whose skills were called on for the repairs. Members of the Labour League of Youth helped with transforming the 'wilderness' into the semblance of a garden and stripping the wallpaper.

She considered the mental break the work offered a good substitute for her fortnight holiday. The large house with its mullions and leaded windows had been unoccupied for years, some of the panes were broken and the floors were filthy. Four of the upper rooms were converted into bedrooms and the downstairs included a kindergarten and a dining room with trellis tables which could also double as a class room. There were also facilities for a matron-governess, a teacher and a cook. Mrs Lawton said the intention was that they should not feel that they were in an orphanage but receive motherly love. She asked for donations of

⁴ HEW 19 June 1937.

⁵ HEW 17 July 1937.

sweets for the tuck-shop and the services of anyone who could speak Spanish. The house was also well stocked with coronation mugs for the use of the children. As a finishing touch an hanging basket donated by a local florist, decorated the porch entrance.

The Matron Governess was Mrs Clark, the widow of William P Clark, who she had met in Barcelona when he was a representative of the British Dyestuff Corporation Ltd. She now lived with her sister in law at Kaye Lane, Almondbury.' It is a lovely old house. I think it will be ideal for the children,' she said.' I hope to be able to help them forget the horrors of the Civil war.' For those concerned that the children would suffer because of the climate she pointed out that the Basque country could be even colder than Huddersfield.⁶

The boys arrived by train at 7.30 on the evening of 28 July to a reception by the mayor in the station entrance hall and the greetings of a crowd of several hundreds in St George's Square. They were then loaded onto a special bus and taken to Almondbury where another crowd was waiting. They were accompanied by a teacher and assistant teacher, Senioritas Soleded Gorrino , from Guernica, and Hilaria Alonso, who were to remain with them and a Miss Sykes and a Senor Lipovitch, an interpreter, who returned to Stoneham Camp the next day. They were met by Mrs Clark and her 12 year old daughter Jean, a pupil at Greenhead High School, who also acted as an interpreter. Some had already picked up some English, since some responded 'Good Night' to the mayor's parting 'Buenos Noches' . After coffee they had a medical examination and it was proposed to quarantine them for two weeks to monitor their health. They were put to bed on 'a good Spanish supper' of tripe, onions, potatoes and coffee.⁷

A spokesman for the Committee asked the Examiner to reassure its readers that they were 'all very nice children and we need not expect the slightest trouble from them.' These reassurances were unfortunately necessary since the same edition of the paper which announced the boys arrival also carried an eyewitness account of the Brechfa incident by Harry Ducksbury, the manager of the George Hotel in Huddersfield, who had been on a fishing holiday in Wales. A gang of boys, housed in what was formerly a camp for the unemployed, were accused of a 'raid' on the village , smashing windows and holding up motorists to demand cigarettes. His own car had been vandalised. ⁸

The Duchess of Atholl spoke at the Town Hall on 29 July. Opening the meeting the mayor announced that 13 of the boys had now been 'adopted'. Catholic organisations including St Patrick's Church, St Joseph's, the St Vincent de Paul Society and the Society of Ladies of Charity had come forward with support. The Duchess explained the background to the refugees coming to the UK and the concern to evacuate Bilbao following the air raid on Guernica. The National Joint Committee had got permission from the government to bring in 4,000 children on condition that they were not selected according to their parent's politics and that they were maintained by voluntary effort. The Roman Catholic archbishop of Westminster had promised to place 1200 in homes and the Salvation Army hundreds more.

⁶ HEW 24 July 1937

⁷ The 'Examiner ' reporter was intrigued by every detail and, while not reporting what they had for breakfast, recorded that they had two meals during the journey, 'corned beef, sandwiches and fruit for lunch, and fruit, biscuits and chocolate for tea.'

⁸ Fyrth, Jim, *The Signal Was Spain*, (Lawrence & Wishart 1986) pp. 230-231.

Yorkshire was one of the first places to offer help and now, nationally, there were 71 centres. She believed that the children would soon endear themselves to the people of Huddersfield since 'They are very bright children, very graceful, with good manners, a sense of dignity, a certain Spanish pride and a great deal of feeling'. She described the emotion with which the children in the camps had received the news of the fall of Bilbao. In moving a vote of thanks, G Hargave compared her to Florence Nightingale, whilst the Rev Middlebrook said,

'The National Joint Committee was one of the bright things in these days of fear and hatred. It stood for co-operation, compassion and philanthropy, the elements that made for civilisation, the spirit that made for peace. He hope that the focusing of attention on the children would result in efforts to give a squarer deal to the children of our own country and that arising from this work we would have a better England and a better world.'

The following day, along with the Rev. Middlebrook and the mayor, the Duchess visited the Old Clergy house and talked to the voluntary workers and the boys. She was presented with a bunch of flowers by the 'tiniest little refugee', whilst the eldest boy gave a short speech of welcome. She thought the accommodation 'a charming old house' and was delighted that they had a garden. A cinematograph film of the event was made for the mayor which showed him having a 'hay fight' with the boys⁹!

On Wednesday, 25 August, the boys were treated with a trip to Greenhead Park. They tried every facility in the playground, but Giordano Diaz was forbidden by his brother Amador from trying the slide because he had his best pair of trousers on. He was given a stick of rock as compensation, while Amador protected his own trousers by acting as goalkeeper in the elder boys game of football. The reporter found them 'terrifically keen' about 'soccer' and said they had been to a Huddersfield Town practice match a couple of days before. An appeal was also made for bicycles since the boys had a tendency to 'commandeer' other children's bikes in Almondbury, 'something the committee doesn't approve of. Generally speaking, however, the young Basque boys are well behaved, especially if other children don't tease them.'¹⁰

In order to increase public involvement permits were issued by the secretary of the Committee, Mr Pilkington, to those interest in visiting the Old Clergy House which was open for an hour on Wednesday afternoons. Visitors were encouraged to donate either to the children's entertainment fund or the general fund, although money had to be sent to the treasurer care of the Town Hall and not left at the house. An appeal was also made for winter clothing, particularly gabardine coats and a request was made for a globe of the world so that the teacher could 'show them where they have come to, as graphically as possible.'¹¹

A newsletter, 'Ambiente Nuevo' was also published, priced 4d and available from Mr Pilkington at the Public Health office. He also edited the translated articles and pictures by the boys. The first issue contained a dramatic eyewitness account by Amador Diaz, (the boy so concerned about his brother's trousers), of the bombing of Guernica, which he

⁹ HEW 31 July 1937.

¹⁰ HEW 28 Aug 1937

¹¹ HEW 4 Sept 1937

described as, 'one of the criminal actions of the war.' Mrs Clark, the Spanish matron, expressed 'Many thanks to England'...'The shadowed and sorrowful faces of the children are now illuminated by a smile, because they are beginning to forget the horrors of the cruel civil war...England with a gesture of infinite pity has done a very great favour to these poor children.' Pilkington expressed the delight of the committee with the behaviour of the children, who all of whom were now being taken out on trips by local people or visiting them for tea.¹² The second edition of the bulletin, price now 9d, came out at the beginning of November with articles by the Spanish teachers on their impressions of England and the description of a bull fight by J B Wilkinson of Thornton Lodge, one of the local interpreters. The Examiner also reported that although repatriation of the children would take place as soon as possible it would not begin in less than three months¹³.

That month, the local Spanish Relief Committee met to discuss the running of the home at Almondbury. It was chaired by Cllr Joseph Barlow and George Hargrave reported that the children had the best level of health of any of the homes. B Pilkington gave an account of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief conference which he had attended in London saying that he had 'come away...with the firm impression that the Huddersfield Committee has cause to be well satisfied as to the position in this town.' At Almondbury the cost of each child was 13s.10d per child, per week while the national figure was 15s.9d. Food cost 5s.2d per child a week compared to 6s.7d nationally. It was announced that the Almondbury children were to give a concert at the Victoria Hall. At this event Commander Pursey gave an eyewitness account of the bombing of Bilbao.¹⁴

In January 1938 Miss Jessie Moorhouse from Leeds spoke at a meeting at Brunswick Street School in Huddersfield chaired by T. Bertram Porritt on the International Voluntary Service for Peace, appealing for support for the starving women and children of Spain. She had spent three months at IVSP farm at Pulgierda with volunteers of different nationalities producing food. She showed slides of the activities. The chairman said that 'Some of the volunteers gave all their spare clothing to the refugees and left Spain with only the clothes they stood up in.' The Labour Party held a 'Milk for Spain', meeting at the Victoria Hall in February chaired by J.P Mallalieu at which the Leeds MP J Milner spoke. The Basque children were also invited to the Labour childrens' treat in the Northumberland Street Methodist Chapel to be entertained by songs and Punch and Judy¹⁵.

In October Alec Tough, age 22, son of John Tough of 129, Moorend Rd, Lockwood returned after six months in a nationalist 'concentration camp' at Burgos living on sardines and red beans. A former engineer at David Browns & Sons he had gone to Spain in December 1937 and been captured on the Ebro front in March. In December he spoke at a meeting to support a food ship for Spain along with Ms D Brook of the Left Book Club. The campaign was supported by the mayor, Fred Lawton. 'Rosalind' in the Examiner's 'Woman to Woman' column also reported on a concert of the Basque boys from the Old Clergy House

¹² HEW 18 Sep 1937

¹³ HEW 6 Nov 1937

¹⁴ HEW 4 Dec; 18 Dec 1937.

¹⁵ HEW 12 Feb 1937.

held along with the children of Dalton New Church who had performed an operetta 'La Princesa Carmencita'. She told her readers, 'some of them don't even know whether or not their mothers are alive.' They had already made many friends in Huddersfield. B. Pilkington, secretary to the committee of the home had asked her to appeal for Christmas gifts, 'surely we can remember this little family of refugees and help to make their Christmas a happy one.'¹⁶ By now there was also concern for other victims of Fascism in Europe and a carol singing event was held for the relief of Czech and Jewish refugees.¹⁷

The food ship for Spain campaign was launched in January 1939 and the Examiner carried a photo of the opening of the depot for donations, featuring the mayor, Mrs Glaisyer, the Rev, J.B. Middlebrook, and B Pilkington with six of the Basque boys from Almondbury and their Spanish teacher Senorita Gorrina. The Depot on New Street was also a centre for spreading information about Spain.¹⁸ Some grocery shops (one was photographed in the village of Kirkburton) put out baskets for donations for the food ship. ¹⁹The first lorry load of food was ready less than two weeks later and the mayor was pictured shaking the driver's hand before he set off²⁰. It was announced in April that Huddersfield's donations had reached Spain safely. The Committee, of which F S Wilmott was the secretary, said it had wide support from the churches and the Urban District Councils. In June the last seven boys left Almondbury for a home in Camberly. [?] They were photo'd at the Old Clergy House with B Pilkington and the matron Hilaria Alonso and at The 'Touching Leave Taking at the Station', Ramon Ortega, 'The Mascot', shed some tears as the boys said goodbye to Mrs Dennis who had befriended him in Almondbury. Senoritas Gorrino and Alonso remained behind in Huddersfield.²¹

In the following months before the outbreak of the war which everyone now anticipated, efforts were focused on the 400,000 Spanish refugees in France and the thousands fleeing Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia.

¹⁶ HEW 29 October; 17 Dec 1938.

¹⁷ HEW 24 Dec 1938 There was also growing concern for the plight of British 'refugees' if war broke out. 'Puck' in the Examiner complained about the use of such a term because it implied foreignness ! This view was obviously held in official circles because the term was abandoned for 'evacuee'.

¹⁸ HEW 21 Jan 1939.

¹⁹ HEW 28 Jan 1938.

²⁰ HEW 11 feb 1939.

²¹ HEW 24 Jun 1939.