

My father Blas Armando Guirles and
my aunt M^a Angeles Hernando Guirles
'niños de la guerra' (war children) in England.

By Javier Hernando Ortega

In these times of confinement, of standstill, of reflecting, of giving time to that recovery of memory, I would like to tell you a little story of two people who notably influenced my life: My aunt **M^a Angeles Hernando Guirles** (1925 – 1998) and my father **Blas Armando Hernando Guirles** (1927 – 2014), siblings from Bilbao, the children of **Barbara** and **Angel**, my grandparents.

I am writing the story that has been heard a thousand times in my house, so many times brought to life with detailed anecdotes in round the table gatherings, rescued from various folders filled with maps, notes, photos **and letters, the many letters** that my father kept so carefully during his life...

The beginning of this story is well known. On the 21st of May 1937 the *SS Habana* left the port of Santurtzi for England, arriving in Southampton two days later. M^a Angeles and Blas Armando were passengers on this steamer; they were 11 and 10 years old respectively.

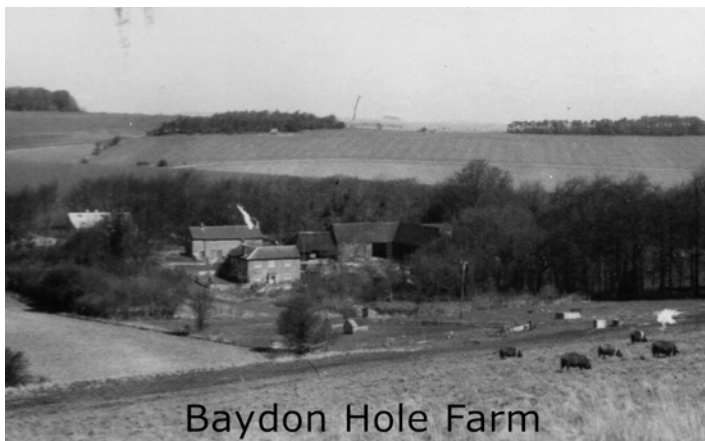
In the face of the imminent fall of Bilbao which took place in June 1937, my grandparents decided they would protect their children. This was a decision that would leave its mark for the rest of their lives. I don't know whether this was the case for my aunt for I never asked her, but it certainly was for my father who would never forget the treatment he received during the year and a half in which they both became '*niños de la guerra*' (refugee war children).

The story of this infernal voyage by boat as told by my father still echoes in my mind; children crammed together, sea-sickness, piercing screams in the night. My father and my aunt did not dwell on the details of this part of the story probably because they did not want to remember that suffering.

I copy from the rescued notes: "...*We arrived in Southampton on 23rd of May 2017 and stayed in Stoneham...*", ending up at the camp at North Stoneham (Eastleigh) that had been set up by English volunteers.

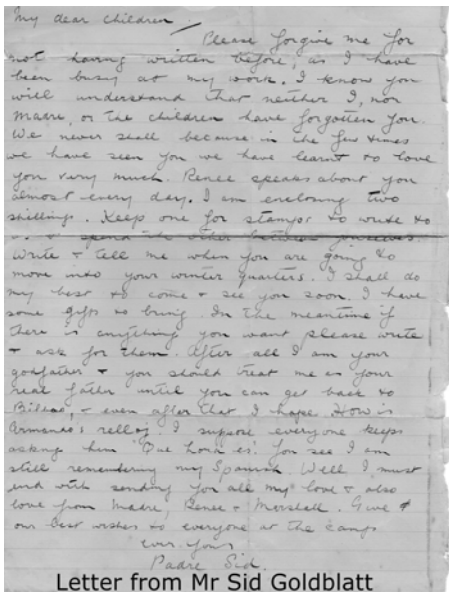
I don't remember hearing anything about this camp from the mouths of the two protagonists. I don't know anything about their lives during those weeks.

The notes continue...,"*Then we went to Baydon Hole Farm, near Lambourne, and stayed there from May to October*"...





Here the story begins to be punctuated by letters from an English “godfather”, Mr S. Goldblatt, as he called himself in his first letter which was signed “Father” Sid and was always headed with a loving “My dear children”, in which he lent himself as a father to my aunt and father until their return to Bilbao, although he also showed concern for the other boys and girls of Baydon Hole.



NOTE: The photographs in this article can be viewed at a higher resolution at:

<http://www.basquechildren.org/photoset/set022>

As many as 4 letters were received by his dear children during their summer stay at Baydon Hole Farm during which “Father Sid”, married to **Nettie**, the father of a 6 yr old girl and a boy who was only 1, **Marshall**, in which he sent photos, asked after the health of all the refugee children, and told them that his daughter **Renee** constantly remembered them. He would enclose a “shilling” for stamps so that they could write back.

From reading these letters I conclude that Sid and his family spent the summer season in Baydon and made friends with the refugee children, although this is only a theory. At that time, Sid and his family actually lived in London in a poor area of Tottenham.

And the story continues, I keep reading notes: "...from here we went to Bray Court near Maidenhead, from October 16th, 1937....



Bray Court

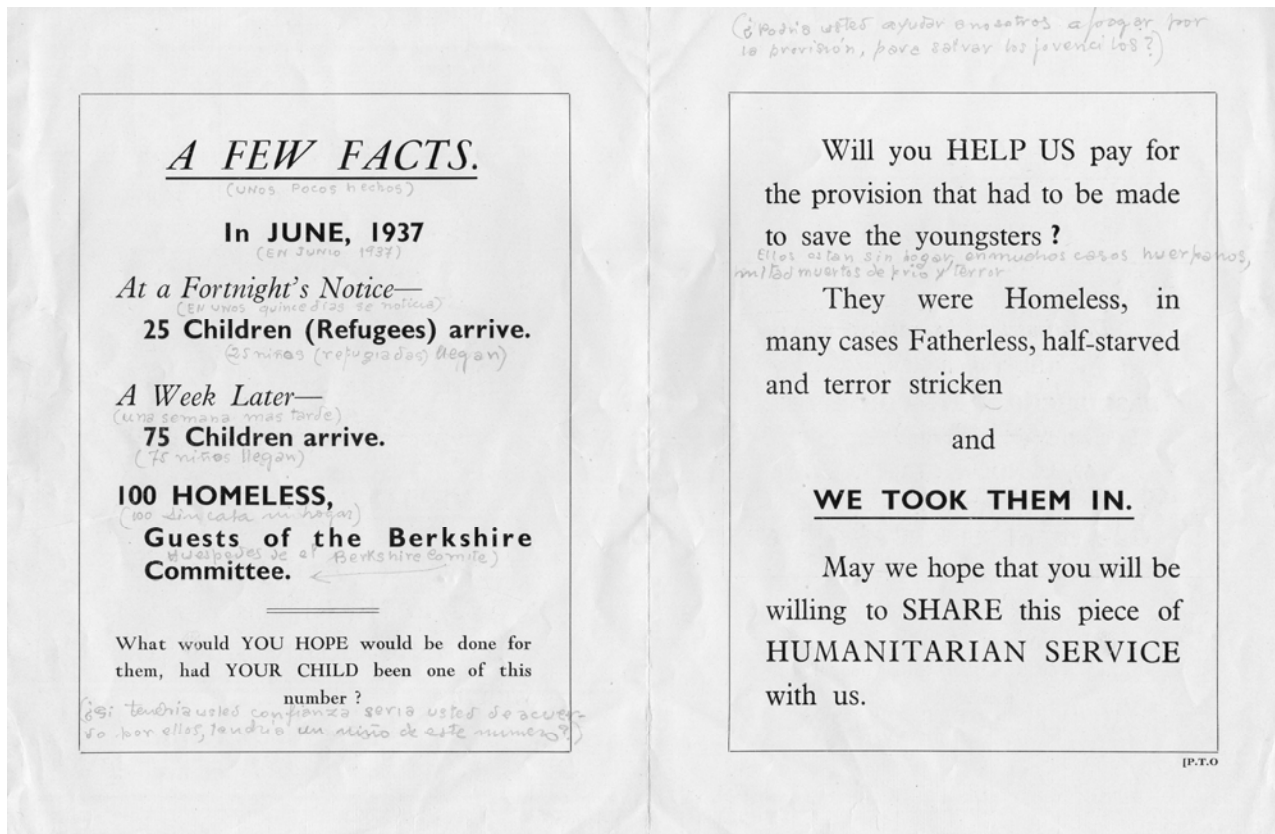


Judging by the number of maps, guidebooks and papers my father kept, the year he spent at Bray Court was the one that left the biggest impression on him.

Out of one of the folders I fish out a pamphlet published by the "Basque Children's Committee" that was based in Reading, requesting humanitarian aid for the 100 refugees who had been invited to come by the Berkshire Committee.



The notes in Spanish are my father's and I wanted to preserve them.



Sid Goldblatt's letters continue to arrive, it is Christmas time and on the 21st of December 1937 a letter headed "My dear Maria Angeles and Blas Armando" informs them of the impossibility of visiting them at Bray Court and of the refusal they received from the authorities to let them both spend Christmas time in London.

The letter is accompanied by several gifts, for them and several other girls: "Rosario, Benedicta and Maria Uriondo", and calls on Miss Burke, the person who ran Bray court, to show my father how to use the toys, "...a clockwork motor car & a magic lantern gun..." so that he would not break them.

Life goes on in the Victorian mansion of Bray Court between studies, games and Basque dances. My father always said that during the course of that year he was happy, though for my aunt it was not the same as she missed my grandparents. My father liked climbing the trees around the mansion, showing off his skills to the other children and enjoyed all the activities that were organized.



During that year of 1938, no more letters came from “godparents” Mr S Goldblatt and Nettie, until the 10th of September 1938 shortly before their return to Bilbao. It is a very emotional letter addressed to my aunt, in which he says goodbye to her, my father and the rest of the children. He sends some recent photos and points out that on the back of them is his address, urging her to write on her arrival in Spain:

“...P.S. DON'T FORGET TO WRITE FROM SPAIN....S.G....”

No more letters arrived from the godparents until the one written in December 1943, in the middle of the Second World War and received in June 1944! Then another one came later, the last one recorded on my father's notes, in June 1948.

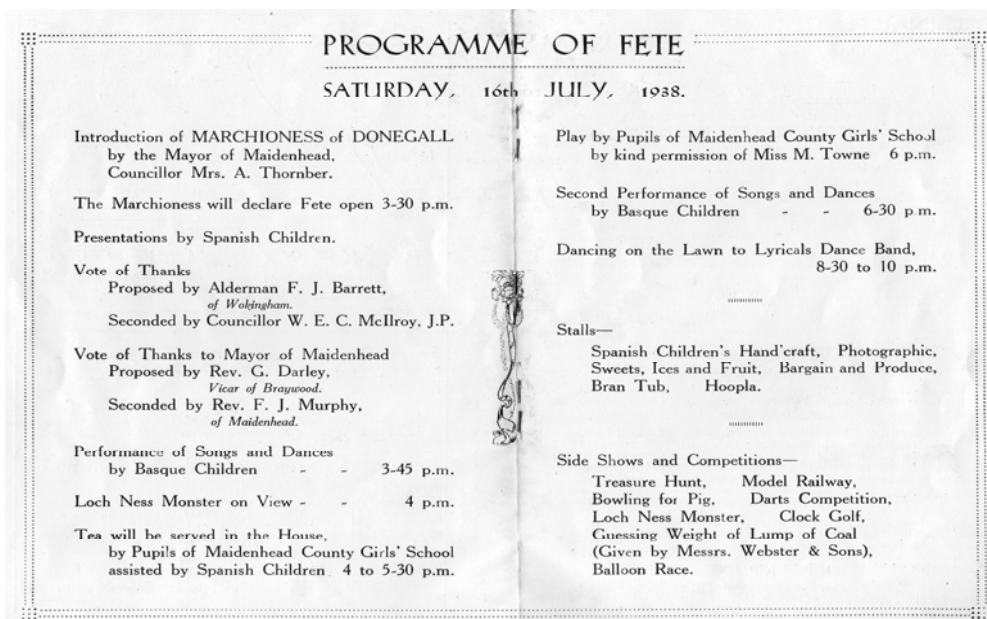
In the 1943 letter, Sid Goldblatt apologizes for not having replied earlier, claiming that his wife had put the letter in a safe place and he did not find it until 5 years later.

In the 1948 letter, he describes how difficult the years had been after the end of World War Two and that he had received a letter from Mr Donald S Connett of Honiton (Devon) reminding him that my aunt and father would like to hear from him. He also wrote of Renee's progress as a dancer and of Marshall's as a pianist and that his children remembered them. Due to post-war circumstances, it was impossible for them to travel to Spain, and they wondered if it was possible for they themselves to come to England for the summer of 1948, something which was clearly completely impossible.

There were no more letters from Mr S Goldblatt, and that is when all contact was lost. Many years later, my father tried to contact his godfather Sid Goldblatt's son, Marshall, and even wrote to the Royal Academy of Music in London, knowing that Marshall had been awarded a scholarship to study there, but the Academy replied that there was no Marshall Goldblatt on their files, nor in the London telephone directory, or at any music academy.

But let's go back to 1938...

It is July and a Fête has been organized in Maidenhead, in which refugee children would take the leading roles with their Basque songs and dances. I do not have any real proof, but I do have the original program of the festival which includes the story of the Basque children and their daily life in Bray Court. Here is the fête program:



There is little time left till the end of the summer when they would be repatriated. My father told us countless times that because of the excellent care he received during his stay in England he did not want to leave.

The return journey took him from the North to the South of France after crossing the English Channel. I am not sure how he travelled, but I remember my father saying that it was by truck but from what I have read most of the repatriations were made by crossing France by train.

In any case, my father did remember that at the border, the reception “committee” had made them sing the “Cara al Sol” (Face to the Sun – Falangist hymn) with their arm raised.

On their arrival in Bilbao, they were taken to the ‘Casa de la Misericordia’ (House of Mercy). My aunt used to tell us how the people of the Castaños neighbourhood who at that time lived near the Artxanda funicular, had notified my grandmother who immediately dropped everything and ran to fetch them.

My aunt cried inconsolably when she saw my grandmother.

I’m getting goose pimples as I write these lines.

Of that historical moment, I still have the inherited original cover and second page of number 372 of the newspaper “El Correo Español”, subtitled “Diario de Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las J.O.N.S.”, with the news written on page 2:

I am writing out the text of this page to make it clear and for its historical content:



Repatriation of Basque Children

The Caudillo's Work

The eight forty Basque Railways (Ferrocarriles Vascongadas) train arrived from England with a group of children who were exiled by **redseperatists**.

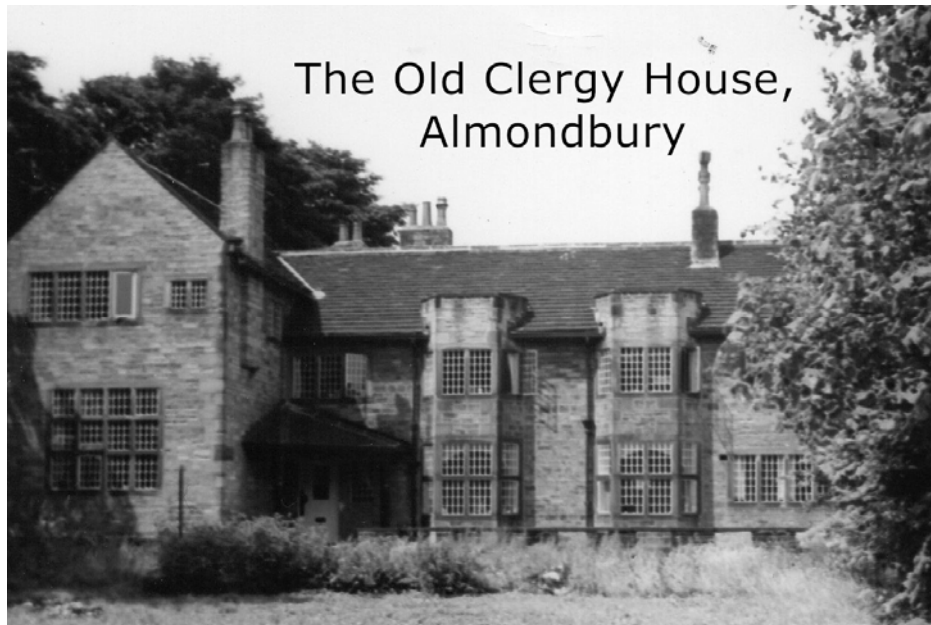
.....

The names of my father and my aunt appear below with all the other repatriated children.

Today I read the news article once again and it sinks in like a dagger.

The story does not end here. As a result of my father's past experience, he turned to learning English so that he could continue exchanging letters with his English godparents.

When Sid Goldblatt stopped writing to him, he devised a way of continuing the correspondence with another person who had taken in two Basque children, Paulino and Baltasar, in the Almondbury (Huddersfield) colony. The excuse was that he wanted to continue to perfect his English but in his heart of hearts I am convinced that he had a real need not to lose contact with that host country.



Eric Waring Taylor, the person our family called '**Eric el Inglés**' (Eric the Englishman) would in time become part of our family. Well, actually Eric... and his daughter **Dilys**, my father's contemporary who when Eric passed away continued to exchange countless letters with my father.

The first letter that I have kept of Eric's dates back to 1953 and was followed by many others.

Neither my aunt nor my father ever went back to England but Eric turned up in Bilbao on several occasions both at my grandparents' home when my father had not yet married and at my home once he married my mother. Each visit turned into a party with the chocolates he brought along with comics, guidebooks, maps, photos...I still remember an English coffee set from Yorkshire which became the centre piece of our celebration meals throughout my life. And will continue to be so.

Among other things, Eric also inculcated in my father the love of stamp collecting which led him to subscribe to the English Royal Mail to get the collections as they came out. It was a hobby that he enjoyed until well into his old age. Each envelope that arrived from England was a cause for celebration for my father whether they were Eric's letters at the beginning and Dilys' later on.

There was a funny anecdote that I remember very clearly my father telling me about the time Eric came to Bilbao for the first time and dressed impeccably for going out like an English post-war gentleman with bowler hat and jacket...They had to stop him on his tracks explaining to him that he would otherwise attract far too much attention with that attire.

Eric died in 1972 and Dilys continued with the exchange of letters, forging a beautiful friendship from afar. They told each other about how their children and then their grandchildren were growing up, about their travels, world news whether bad or good. Sadly Dilys died in November 2001 when she was relatively young. I guess she was only 61 years old. Her death greatly affected my father who was never the same again.

The group that initially came together at a certain date, the 21st of May 1937 at the port of Santurtzi, was slowly but surely fading away.

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