

## "You can't help liking them" - The Basque Children in Great Britain

‘My sons, in these anxious moments when I see you depart to be saved from the bombs, in these moments as I write you fatherly words, I see the assassin's bombs falling and the people fleeing to the shelters. I feel the thunder and vibration of the bombardment; but nothing alarms me, and now that you children are safe, I am afraid of nothing. Now, when you reach England, where you will be received with open arms, you will tell them that no children in the world are suffering as Spanish children suffer and that you and your parents will be grateful for ever that in this terrible hour they are saving you from being singed by the flames of the hideous war started by those fiends that are destroying Spain.’<sup>1</sup>

The above heart-rending extract comes from a letter sent on 15th May 1937 by a Basque parent to his three sons who were about to be evacuated to England. His anguish at parting with his children is palpable: we empathise with his desire to send them away to safer shores, to protect them from the horrific and insecure environment where the bombing brought each day more carnage.

Conditions in Spain were dire; Franco had imposed a blockade along the north coast and after March 31st, 1937, he began a persistent and daily offensive against Bilbao and other large towns. Bombs dropped almost daily, their dull sound contrasting with the high-pitched sound of the anti-aircraft guns. Sirens warned people of imminent danger and they would rush to the nearest shelter, which was usually rudimentary in nature, in the cellar of a house, or more often, in a railway tunnel. One terrible day, a train came through during an air-mid, killing all who were sheltering there. Humanitarian aid got through, but the blockade of the Basque coast made it almost impossible to deliver food, so food was scarce, and there were long queues in the shops, often interrupted by the wailing of the sirens. Mr Stevenson, the British Consul in Bilbao, following example of France who had already taken in thousands of refugees, had on 8th April 1937 asked the Foreign Office to accept Basque children, but his appeal was rejected.

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<sup>1</sup> CLOUD, Yvonne: *The Basque Children in England*. London, Victor Gollancz, 1937, pp. 10,12.

The climax was reached on 26th April when Guernica was bombed by the planes of the Nazi Condor Legion. The town was almost totally destroyed; it was the first ever saturation bombing of a civilian population. That deliberate atrocity caused a deep impression: whatever their political opinion, people had been horrified and a vast international movement of solidarity sprung up. It was thought that Bilbao and other large towns would suffer the same fate as Guernica. Under pressure from public opinion, the Basque government appealed to foreign nations to give temporary asylum to the children.

From the beginning of the Civil War in Spain, there had been certain British empathy towards the Basque country. The Basques were considered by the British government and by the press as different from other Spaniards; for more than a century they had had commercial relationships with each other, based on the exchange of English and Welsh coal for Basque iron ore. But the British government, with other western democracies, adhered to its policy of non-intervention, stopping all arms shipments to the democratically elected Spanish Republican government (while Portugal, Germany and Italy supplied arms and troops to the nationalists). So, although British public opinion, shocked by the events of Guernica, was encouraging its government to accept the Basque refugee children, the government steadfastly refused to change its mind.

At the end of November 1936, the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief had been formed, which included representatives of the Trade Unions, the labour and conservative parties, the church etc. It was an umbrella organisation whose purpose it was to coordinate the different relief organizations. The President was the Duchess of Atholl, a conservative MP with a social conscience who was given the nickname 'the red duchess'. On 1st May 1937 she had a letter published in **The Times** which took up the campaign to urge the British government to accept the Basque children. On 3rd May in the House of Commons, Anthony Eden could or would still not take the decision, in spite of mounting pressure from public opinion. The NJC nevertheless sent Leah Manning, ex.-Labour MP and educationalist, to Spain to see what conditions were like and to organize the eventual evacuation of Basque children to Britain. At first, the Home Office was unsympathetic to her demands, but after bombarding prominent people with innumerable telegrams, her request authorising temporary residence in Britain for 2,000 refugee children was reluctantly granted on 15<sup>th</sup> May by the Foreign Office.

However, certain conditions had to be met: the government, intransigent, refused to be responsible financially for the children, saying that this would violate the non-intervention pact, and demanded that the NJC guarantee 10/- per week for the care and education of each child. The children should be aged between 5 and 15 and 300 adults (teachers, helpers, parents) should accompany them. They would be allowed to disembark in Britain provided that they were repatriated once the danger had passed. The government also insisted that the selection of the children should be impartial, that is to say that both children whose parents supported the nationalists and those who supported the republicans would be chosen.

On 15<sup>th</sup> May, the Basque Children's Committee was formed to focus more directly on the care and housing of the young refugees from Vizcaya: it comprised representatives from the Quakers, the Salvation Army, the TUC, Save the Children Fund, Spanish Medical Aid, catholic and protestant churches, and political parties. Popular sentiment in Britain towards the conflict sympathised largely with the republican cause and branches of the BCC sprang up all over Britain to coordinate reception of the children. On the whole, the British people rallied splendidly, although there was some hostile reaction in the right-wing press, for example, a Birmingham newspaper sported the headline: 'Britons before Basques!' and the Daily Mail tried to prejudice public opinion, qualifying the refugees as 'red troublemakers'.

In Bilbao, the local radio had announced that all children registered for evacuation to Britain should present themselves to the Office of Social Assistance for a medical examination. Two British doctors, Dr Richard Ellis and his wife Dr Audrey Russell, flew in from Britain for this. Because of the frequent interruptions due to bombing raids, much of the work had to be done at night. Dr Ellis was amazed by the children's resilience and their generally healthy appearance, given the deprivation most had undergone. There was, however, some loss of weight and a high incidence of dental caries due to food deficiencies. After the medical examination, each child was handed a hexagonal cardboard disk with an identification number and the words 'Expedición a Inglaterra' printed on it, which they were told to tie or pin visibly on their clothes. It was the umbilical cord of their identity which in some cases would be separated for ever. The children were told to prepare two sets of clothing and to return on 20<sup>th</sup> May when trains carrying 600

children at a time would leave Bilbao from 2.30 pm to take them to the port of Santurce. It was generally believed that the children would be separated from their parents for only a few months, nevertheless, when they came to see their children off, the parents could not hide their sadness: newsreels of the time show us poignant farewells amidst the distress and confusion at the quayside. Many of the children would never again see their parents, brothers, cousins and friends who bade them farewell in Santurce that afternoon. Similarly, many of those waving goodbye to their children must have been aware that they might not be alive to welcome their children back.

The ship that was to take the children to Britain, the *Habana*, was a 10,500 ton transatlantic steamer which had already made two journeys to France with other children. It was, in fact, the most important boat in the evacuation of the Basque children. Built in the 1920s, the boat had been named the Alfonso XIII but with the advent of the Republic, the name was changed to the *Habana*. It was supposed to carry around 800 passengers. In fact, some 3840 children, 80 maestras (teachers), 120 señoritas (auxiliaries), 15 catholic priests and the two doctors travelled on the boat,<sup>2</sup> together with the intrepid Leah Manning, who by that time had managed to convince the British government to accept twice the number of children it had originally accepted. The Basque President, Jose Aguirre, came on board to bid farewell to the children and they left at 6.40 am on 21st May. They were crammed into the boat, and because there were obviously not enough beds for so many, had to sleep in corridors, the saloon bar, in the lifeboats. The sea was extremely rough in the Bay of Biscay, and that, coupled with the fact that on arrival the children had eaten a great deal as they were offered food they hadn't had in a long time, made most of them violently seasick.

The *Habana* was followed by the yacht *Goizeka Izarra*. conveying children who had missed the liner because of an air raid in Bilbao. It was hoped that the yacht would catch up the *Habana*, but this never happened. A request was sent to Southampton that when the *Habana* docked, vessels should not welcome them in the customary manner by sounding their sirens, since it was a sound that the children associated with an imminent aerial bombardment.

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<sup>2</sup> These numbers vary slightly in the different accounts by Arrien, Bell and Legaretta. The figures here are taken from the NJCSR Bulletin No 7, 10th June 1937.

As the steamer approached Southampton on 23rd May, the children were greeted by stirring music and a reception from the mayor. Representatives from the government, journalists and thousands of people lined the quayside. The children were excited and thought that the bunting that was up everywhere was to celebrate their arrival: later they learned that it had been put up for the coronation of George VI which had taken place ten days earlier! Before the children disembarked, they had to undergo yet another medical examination and be vaccinated; this was conducted by Dr Maurice Williams, the Port Medical Officer, together with nine medical officers and health visitors. On completion, a coloured tape was tied round the child's left wrist. White tape indicated 'clean and healthy', red tape indicated that they had lice and would have to be disinfected in the local baths. Great distress was caused to the girls who had to have their hair cut and clothing destroyed. A blue tape meant that they had a contagious disease, and those children were sent to the isolation hospital.

The children who were clear were sent to the camp at North Stoneham in Eastleigh that had been set up in three fields lent by Mr G A Brown of Swaythling Lane Farm.

The preparation of the camp in less than two weeks was the result of a remarkable effort by the whole community. Volunteers (boy scouts, girl guides, students, Rotarians, representatives of the political parties, the Co-operative Society, employees of the utilities) had worked round the clock and through the Bank Holiday to prepare the camp for a contingent of 2,000 children and were shocked when it was announced that double that number were expected. Drains had been installed, water piped in, some 500 bell tents and several enormous marquees hired from the Ministry of War had been erected. Banners used as Coronation decorations were transformed by girls students into sleeping bags for the refugees. Moorhill, a large house in West End, Southampton, was set aside for staff and those children who were too weak to stay in tents.

Ideological differences were fully represented amongst the older child refugees, whose political awareness and passion astonished their hosts; in the camp, the children were separated into three main areas according to the political affiliations of their parents, so there was a republican/socialist section, a communist/anarchist section and a Basque nationalist section, the last also having a large tent which was used for a chapel. These divisions exacerbated tensions amongst the children and sometimes rival gangs

created trouble, but the divisions were never terribly hard and fast: some parents, when registering their children, realizing that the places of their political affiliation had been taken up, registered them for one of the others in order to procure them a passage to Britain. When asked about this segregation, the historian Gregorio Arrien replied: “Aquel hecho fué una desgracia y una equivocación. Pero la verdad es que el PNV, los padres de los niños católicos y nacionalistas y algunos sacerdotes llegaron a imponer esa división, porque no querían que sus hijos se mezclan con los hijos de los 'rojos’”<sup>3</sup> (that segregation was a disgrace and a mistake. But the truth is that the PNV, the fathers of the catholic and nationalist children and some of the priests managed to impose that division because they did not want their children to mix with the children of the 'reds'.)

Girls and boys were separated and there were about eight to ten children per tent, with one maestra (teacher) and one señorita every four tents. A few children in the first few days 'lost' their brothers or sisters and some were not reunited for two days. Apart from tents for sleeping, there was an administrative tent, a stores tent, a mess tent, a medical tent and a clothing tent (every day, clothes donated by various department stores would arrive). The airport was very close to North Stoneham and pilots were asked to give it as wide a berth as possible so as not to frighten the children by reminding them of the fierce bombing in Vizcaya.

At first, all was chaos and confusion, especially when the children queued up for their food. The first meal took four hours to serve; the children were hungry and became impatient. Later a large marquee seating 250 was erected and there were several sittings. Groups who had not yet eaten wore a yellow armband. The older boys refused to wear it and were prepared to go without food as it was the colour of Franco's Moroccan troops. Some hungry children went round twice. They were delighted to eat soft white bread and chocolate, courtesy of Cadbury's.

At first, a certain amount of hoarding went on, but it soon stopped when the children realized that more food would be forthcoming. Provisions had to be on a vast scale to feed 4,000 people adequately. According to the NJC Bulletin No 7 of 10<sup>th</sup> lime 1937, there were 40,000 oranges, several tons of onions, 500 gallons of milk a day, 4,000 portions of chocolate and any amount of white bread and butter.

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<sup>3</sup>ARRIEN, Gregorio: "Entrevista emigración". Cana de España, No 484, Agosto 1994, p.2

The camp relied heavily on donations from local farmers and large stores. Visitors to the camp noticed that even after ten days there was a change in the children: they had gained weight and were not so pale, also they did not look so woebegone, some had even begun to smile. However, there was always an undercurrent of sadness as many had no news of their parents for weeks, if at all. Four children had to be taken to the Isolation Hospital with typhoid fever, the rest were vaccinated against it.

In the first weeks in the camp many material problems were encountered, such as sanitation, inadequate draining, the children's unfamiliarity with the chemical toilets, the wet blankets and bedding after a huge storm - to all this was added the psychological problem of how best to comfort nervous and anxious children separated from their environment, worrying about what was happening to their parents. Another problem was that the majority of volunteers did not speak Spanish, and so communication was difficult. Some use was made of language students from the universities, but there were never enough interpreters, and this often led to misunderstandings.

North Stoneham was like a small town, with all sorts of commodities, including showers, electric light, telephone, a cinema, a stage for performing plays and dances, loudspeakers for announcing news and give details of the different activities that were laid on. At first, local people would come to the barbed wire fence and stare at the children as if they were animals at the zoo: the children complained that they felt degraded to be ogled in this way. Others threw in sweets and cigarettes: visitors remarked on the large numbers of boys who smoked. Classes were not held systematically. It was after all the summer holidays, and the children had a great deal of time on their hands, so sometimes they got up to mischief. One group of boys set out for London but was found and brought back, others 'helped themselves' to apples in neighbouring orchards. Boys were reported to be throwing stones at the cats' eyes on the road and it transpired that the reason for this anti-social behaviour was that the maker was called Framco. There were also problems of discipline, the older boys in particular resenting being treated like children. Mature beyond their years, they had grown up to be politically conscious: their fathers and older brothers were fighting or had been killed, they had dug trenches on the front line, and they had become the head of the family. The organisers of the camp realized this and put the older boys together in one section of the camp where they were given a measure of self-government and encouraged to help the staff in running the camp.

With nearly 4,000 residents, the camp had to follow a strict timetable. Stirring music would be played on the loudspeakers to wake the children up at 7am. And then they would hear: 'Niños, abrid puerta y ventana ¡Que entre el sol!' (Children, open the doors and windows, let the sun come in!) They would get up and wash in the open air, then clean and tidy the tents, which were subsequently inspected. There was always a prize for the tidiest tent. Breakfast at 8am consisted of bread and butter and milk. From 10-11.30am there were lessons, then physical training. Lunch was at 1.30 and consisted of meat and vegetables, or stew, bread and fruit. In the afternoon there was siesta time, after which games and activities were organized: there were film shows in the camp cinema, dancing, football and boxing. Supper at 7pm consisted of bread and chocolate and lights out was at 9pm.

On 20<sup>th</sup> June 1937, news arrived that Bilbao had fallen; there was a great debate in the committee as to how to tell the children. Finally, Mr Henry Brinton, the camp commandant, made an announcement in English about it, then, as very few had understood, one of the priests, Father Cortez, gave the news in Spanish. There was a wailing and weeping and rhythmic swaying; some children sprang to the loudspeaker, threw stones at it and upturned the loudspeaker caravan. Some went sobbing to their tents to be comforted by the maestras, señoritas and the English staff; some three hundred children broke out of the camp, trying to find Southampton and a ship to take them home. Children were found as far as four miles away and were brought back by the police. The next day there was no reveille, the children were allowed to sleep in late. Their hope of returning soon to Spain had faded away.

The idea was that children should be dispersed to homes or 'colonies' as soon as possible, and local BCC committees in many parts of the country were preparing more permanent accommodation for groups of children. The Basque government had insisted that the children should not be adopted by families but stay in groups so as not to lose their national identity. The first to offer asylum was the Salvation Army, who undertook to take 400, followed by the Catholics, who committed themselves to take 1,200 children. Little by little, groups of children left the provisional camp to go to other, more permanent, homes situated all over Great Britain. Within a month, another 1,500 children had left, either to Catholic homes,



mainly convents, or to homes run by local BCCs. The BCC wanted to keep brothers and sisters together, but the Catholics insisted on single-sex groups, ostensibly to safeguard morals.

This separation caused an added wrench for the children, so recently separated from their parents and country. Some wealthy people lent their houses, such as Sir Paul Latham who received a group at Herstmonceaux Castle, or Lord Faringdon, who made available a home on his estate at Buscot Park. Organisations too sponsored the children: the Peace Pledge Union lent its house at Langham, near Colchester; the London Teaching Association subsidized the group that went to a large house at Theydon Bois, called the Leah Manning Home.

There were altogether over a hundred different colonies at the start - some had good facilities with many volunteers to help run them, others were not so good, and standards varied greatly. The children were often moved from one to another, especially once repatriation started and children left for Spain. Herminio Martinez said: "I was sent all over the country. To Swansea, to Tynemouth, to Brampton near Carlisle. The worst place was Margate. It was that terrible winter of 1939 and there was no heating. The place was so bad it had to be closed down. I was sent to live with a family in Leicester. I was very happy with them. But by that time, I was separated from my brother."<sup>4</sup>

The children who went to the Salvation Army house, Congress Hall in Clapton, east London, went there within three days of arrival at the camp. There is no doubt that they received a very warm welcome at the beginning, but they were surprised by the women's quaint uniform:

“Había que verlas, tan pulchramente ataviadas con trajes azules, impecables, con su gracioso gorro sujeto con un lacito bajo el mentón.”<sup>5</sup> (You had to see them, so neatly dresses in their blue, impeccable suits, with their funny bonnets tied in a bow under their chins). At first, the children refused to say grace before meals, singing instead the International, and caused a great deal of embarrassment when the Home Secretary made an early visit to the home by greeting him with the clenched fist salute. The food was not liked: 'Ni en mil años', said Jesus Urbina 'podría olvidar la primera comida que nos dieron, una especie de

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<sup>4</sup>Herminio Martinez in LENNON, Peter: "Tom Roots". Guardian Society, 22"" May 2002, p.6.

<sup>5</sup>URBINA, Jesus: *Corazón de Cartón*. Domingo Eizaguirre, 1999, p.17.

aluvias de color caramelo que sabían a demonios.,”<sup>6</sup> (Never in a thousand years could I forget the first meal we were given, some sort of caramel-coloured beans which tasted horrible.)

Clapton was a large, old mansion, surrounded by a two-metre high wall. The home was severely overcrowded with insufficient playing space; furthermore, the children were supposed to be in quarantine for sixty days as there had been two cases of typhoid fever. The boys reacted badly to their confinement and some of them scaled the walls, scouring the neighbourhood for adventures, but they had to be brought back by the police. They were sent back to the camp at North Stoneham. There were not enough staff, few of them understood or even spoke Spanish and they didn't really know how to deal with the children. Those in charge taught the children hymns and these they learned without understanding a word of what they were singing. To this day, they remember singing 'With Jesus and the family, Happy, happy home' as they queued up for meals. But the children soon tired of the hymn singing and the constant Bible readings. To ease the situation, it was decided to send 200 of them to the Salvation Army orphanage at Brixton, but its militant evangelical ethos persisted and created more problems. In addition, stories were put around that Brixton was haunted, and this terrified the younger children, 50 older boys were sent to the Salvation Army's Land and Industrial Colony at Hadleigh in Essex. This was not much more successful as there was no set programme for the boys: they worked with the alcoholics who also lived there, some making bricks, others working in the camp laundry or with the chickens, and the older boys rebelled against being used as unpaid labour. In August, the Salvation Army reneged its promise, deciding that it no longer had the necessary funds to maintain the children in their homes, so they had to be sent elsewhere.

The Catholics had agreed to take 1,200 children who were practising Catholics; most of the catholic colonies were run by the Sisters of Nazareth. Some were excellent, such as Nazareth House in Southampton., Heaton Park in Manchester, Holly Mount Convent in Bury and Weston Manor in the Isle of Wight. The Basque priests accompanied the children to the catholic homes and often took responsibility for the teaching. But adequate funding was not forthcoming, and some homes were poverty-stricken, such as St Vincent's Home in Newcastle, where lunch consisted of bread and jam. In Carlisle, the nuns were very severe, and punished the children for the slightest misdeed, hitting them on the hand with a stick.

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<sup>6</sup>URBINA, Jesus: *Corazón de Cartón*. Domingo Eizaguirre, 1999, p.16.

The Spanish cause had appealed to the Welsh, both countries through the centuries having preserved their essential and individual independence. There were four colonies in Wales, at Old Colwyn in North Wales, Sketty Park in Swansea, Brechfa in Camarthenshire and Cambria House at Caerleon in Newport. Lord Davies, the owner of several coal mines, had set up the Welsh Fund for Basque Children, personally contributing £2,000. 27 boys and 25 girls went to Cambria House which was run by María Fernandez, who had come to Wales as a girl in 1905 with her parents. The colony produced its own newspaper, the Cambria House Journal, which recounted the activities of the children and was sold locally to raise funds. Their football team, which the South Wales Argus called "The Basque Boys Wonder Team" because it was almost invincible, also met with a wide following.

The most successful best homes were run by local committees where there was good support for the Aid Spain movement. In Birmingham, the Lord Mayor had set up the Spanish Refugee Children's Relief Fund, and the money raised went to support the colonies in the area. The best colony in the area was the one run by the Walsall committee at Aldridge Lodge. The Cadbury family were heavily involved and each Christmas, the workers at Bourneville would put on a party for the children. Local families were asked to 'adopt' a child. This in effect meant providing 10/- a week for their keep, inviting them out on Sundays and giving them presents. Watermillock at Bolton too was a great success: 54 children lived in a large Victorian house, which had playrooms and carpeted floors. Bray Court near Maidenhead was another spacious house, formerly a hotel and it took in nearly 100 children. Appropriately renamed 'The Oaks', in view of the sacred oak tree of Guernica, the symbol of which was of great significance for Basques, the colony at Langham, near Colchester, was the former Adelphi Centre, a socialist commune run by the writer John Middleton Murry. There were three Spanish maestras and two English teachers, and the 40 or so children were looked after with care and dedication. Even now, in spite of having been separated from their families, some children recall the time spent at Langham as being the happiest in their lives. Another popular colony was at Carshalton, in a grand house also called The Oaks, where the children lived in one of the wings of the house; when it closed, the children moved to The Culvers, the younger ones spending all day there, while the older ones went to work and returned in the evenings.

Individuals also organised colonies; Miss Poppy Vulliamy, daughter of a prominent magistrate in Ipswich, whose Sister Chloe ran the colonies in Ipswich, Wickham Market and later the Culvers, when

the North Stoneham camp was about to close in August 1937, realising that older boys could not be treated like children, took charge of 55 of them. She took them to Diss, in Norfolk, where they again stayed in tents until the weather broke. Using personal contacts, she was then able to move them to a run-down rectory at Great Yarmouth before going to Tythrop Park, near Thame. Miss Vulliamy then wrote to the labour peer, Lord Faringdon, and he responded by making available the gatehouse of his estate at Eaton Hastings and providing eggs and vegetables for the refugees. There they were able to give vent to their energy in the grounds of Buscot Park and go rowing on the lake. When that colony closed down, the boys moved again to St Michael's, a large house in Shipton-under-Wychwood loaned by Alec Wainman, a local philanthropist and sympathiser of the Republic. They did not stay there for very long; by that time, many of the original boys had gone back to Spain, but three went to the colony at Aston, near Bampton in Oxfordshire.

The Cambridge colony was considered one of the most privileged. From June 1937 until January 1938, 29 children from Ayuda Social, an orphanage in Bilbao, whose fathers, militiamen, had been killed in the early stages of the war, stayed first in a former derelict vicarage at Pampisford, then transferred to a house in Cambridge loaned by Jesus College. The children had been brought up in an intensely political atmosphere and were very receptive to and benefited from the support of local academics and students. A programme of essentially child-centred educational activities was drawn up, mornings being dedicated to schoolwork, afternoons to painting, music and handicrafts. The children produced a magazine, *Ayuda*, which came out monthly. Their music teacher was Rosita Bal, a pupil of de Falla, and she trained them in music and dances which were performed at concerts in East Anglia and London.

These performances were an important cultural phenomenon - almost every colony had its own concert party. It was also a considerable source of fund-raising. The children and the señoritas made the costumes and throughout Britain, traditional Basque songs and dances were presented to the public, being performed in schools, church halls, even factories. On 24th June 1937, there was a show at the Albert Hall, and on 1st April 1939, the Basque children performed there again at the Festival of Music for the People. The children's talent was widely recognised, and they were taken on tour to Czechoslovakia and Switzerland.

In spite of the fact that two celebrated Spanish pedagogues had in the second Bulletin of the BCC of August 1938 written an article entitled: 'Suggestions for the education of younger and older children', intended as a guide for the teachers, it has to be said that the education the children received in the different colonies was patchy. Initially, the children were unable to attend local elementary schools as they had no command of the language, but later, some of those who stayed were able to integrate the system. Many colonies had maestras and extra English teachers who spoke Spanish and some were able to put together a syllabus, but Spanish course books were difficult to come by. Very little Basque was taught, since very few of the children spoke it, but as we saw above, Basque culture and folklore flourished through the singing and dancing performances. The National Joint Committee was later criticised for not having organised an efficient system of education, but since the refugee children had come on a temporary basis, it is hard to see how this could have been implemented. Most colonies did indeed provide some schooling, but it was difficult to maintain regularity, as children would leave for Spain and others replace them who were of different educational levels.

The central problem for the BCC was that of raising money to finance the colonies; it was not possible to rely entirely on voluntary assistance, and full-time paid assistance was sometimes necessary to run the local establishments. There were continuous appeals to the public for money and much of the correspondence from the Secretary of the BCC relates to schemes to raise money to keep the colonies going. The Labour movement and the TUC played a pivotal role in finding resources. In particular, they sponsored the Save the Basque Children Fund, launching their appeal with a donation of £5,000. The BCC promoted two Parlophone records of Basque songs sung by the children's choir and published a book of twenty Spanish songs with English translations, entitled *Los Cantos de los Niños Vascos*. Amongst other fund-raising activities were the house-to-house collections, the flag days and the sale of the BCC Bulletin, calendars and Christmas cards made by the children. In addition, many social events were held, like balls and a cabaret dance which attracted the patronage of the liberal middle classes. The children too contributed to their upkeep by their frequent participation in concert tours round the country. The football matches were yet another source of generating income and were always popular, although the Basque boys' teams nearly always beat the British teams!

Other problems arose as it was inevitable that among the children, many of whom had arrived traumatised by their experiences of the war in Spain, there would be some unrest. In Scarborough, a group of boys pelted the cook with missiles, claiming he had brandished a knife at them; in Brechfa, the police were called when boys, claiming that a villager had knocked one down and another pointed a gun at them, broke windows and threatened the villagers. As a result of these 'riots', 23 boys were sent to France. The right-wing press, which had already begun a campaign to send the children back as soon as Bilbao fell, had a field day, with headlines such as 'Basque children attack police' in the **Daily Mail** and 'Basque children must go' in the **Sunday Dispatch**. In reply, Wilfrid Roberts MP, Secretary of the BCC, issued a statement to deal with 'hostile rumours', pointing out that, in fact, these were only two isolated local incidents caused by a handful of troublesome boys. They had suffered terrible experiences back home, they didn't speak English and, moreover, Roberts pointed out, schoolboys and undergraduates often did more damage which passed without comment.

By the end of July 1937, the war was over for the north of Spain, the British government pressed for the return of the children. The papal delegate in Bilbao, with the support of the nationalist authorities, sent over an envoy, Father Gabana, to organise their repatriation. The nationalists asked the Basque Children's Repatriation Committee for a complete list of all the children, but this was refused on the grounds that it would expose the children to the real danger of retaliation. The BCRP held to its policy of requiring a firm request from the parents before letting the children return. Once the requests for the children's return had been received, the repatriation process began and from November 1937, groups of children left at roughly monthly intervals. However, in a few cases, where contact had appeared genuine, it turned out that the parents were in prison, or couldn't be traced. In January 1938, under the chairmanship of Lord Wellington and including leading Tories of the day, a counter-group, the Spanish Children's Repatriation Committee was set up. It urged the imminent return of all the children. But the Basque Children's Repatriation Committee played for time. Many letters were false: to send the children back to Spain where they would return to conditions of semi starvation, where they would be indoctrinated by the Falange seemed to be a betrayal of what the parents would have wished. Other letters the BCRC received were carefully coded, warning children to stay, as their fathers were in dead or in prison and the mothers could hardly survive and were struggling for the bare means of existence.

But in spite of everything, repatriation continued, slowly but surely, and by May 1938, half of the children had returned to Spain; a year later, 420 were left in Britain. That same year, the BCC encouraged the public to adopt a child for 10/- a week, describing them in the publicity leaflet as "small, dark, little people with straight black hair and merry, dancing eyes. They love to dance and sing... You can't help liking them." In July 1939, the Basque Boys Training Committee was set up to find placements in agriculture or in industry for the older boys (there were 150 aged from 14 to 18); it was hoped this training would make them economically independent. In May 1940, the boys brought out the first issue of *Amistad*, "periodico de los chicos españoles en Inglaterra" (the newspaper of the Spanish boys in England.)

When the war began, many of the colonies had closed, and only those at Caerleon, Carshalton and Barnett remained. With the fall of France, repatriation was suspended, and a number of children were widely distributed over Great Britain with foster parents, some had transferred to one of the three remaining colonies, others were found jobs and lived in lodgings. Both older boys and girls participated in work of national importance, and many girls went into domestic work and attended evening classes to further their education, some became dressmakers or trained as secretaries. There were openings for the boys in the war industries, in engineering, agriculture, the clothing or building trade. Some joined the RAF, the Home Guard and the Merchant Navy.

In 1942, Juan Negrin, the exiled republican Prime Minister, used some of the funds he had brought from Spain to establish scholarships through the Juan Luis Vives Trust, which enabled children of school-leaving age to continue vocational or academic training. Between 1942 and 1947, a total of 83 Basque children received grants for courses that varied from apprenticeships to classes in night school, to university degrees.

During this period, some of the older boys who were studying at the university shared a flat in London that the philanthropist Alee Wainman had rented for them. They were visited there by exiled Spanish and Basque republican politicians, writers and artists and not only would they have endless discussions there but also bold parties. Foster parents who had 'adopted' children were advised to encourage the young people to keep in touch with one another, so they didn't forget the language, but some, like those in Nottingham, had to go to evening classes to refresh their Spanish. The Hogar Español was set up in

Bayswater in October 1941 as a convivial meeting place, not only for young Basques but also for republican exiles. The Culvers too, at Carshalton, continued to be a focal point where older children working round London could meet. The success of the home stemmed from its policy of self-government which developed in the young people many latent qualities of surprising variety. The young people were fortunate in being taught by some of the exiled intellectuals, including Luis Portillo. The Culvers colony harboured exceptional talents; it produced its own newspaper, *Basque House News*, students in cabinet making designed and made furniture, others put on concerts and exhibitions (Jesus Caerelis and José M Martinez both went to art school and became accomplished painters), yet more of the young Basques produced plays under the guidance of Pepe Estruch. In 1947, the colony finally closed after nine years. Perhaps the most accomplished of the Basque children were Jose Alberdi who was to become famous as a sculptor in Britain and in Spain, and Pirmín Aldabaldetrecu who danced with the Royal Ballet before becoming a choreographer and running his own ballet school in Portugal.

At the end of the war, there were 383 children left in Britain. Of those, 25 girls and 8 boys had got married. Some of the children went back to Spain then, but for many of them it was a terrible ordeal: some didn't speak Spanish, others had forgotten their parents. They couldn't get used to the restrictions of life in Spain. Reduced to poor living conditions, without work, they wrote to Miss Pickin, the Secretary of the BCC, lamenting they had left Great Britain and asking to return. Finally, about 250 children settled permanently in Great Britain. Those who live in or near London still meet weekly at the Club de Jubilados (Pensioners' Club), and every year in May, a reunion lunch is organised on a date as near as possible to the date they arrived in Southampton in 1937.

In retrospect, the evacuee experience in Great Britain was on the whole a positive experience for the children from a practical view. "We went through hell, but we got a lot out of it. Everyone who stayed in Britain was better off than if they had gone back to Spain"<sup>7</sup> says Josefina Antolin. However, it was not so successful from an emotional point of view. Many of the children spent their years of puberty in a foreign country, deprived of the love and influence of their parents. Many regret not having really known their parents and having missed out on family life. Paco Robles sums up the feeling of many of them:

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<sup>7</sup> In conversation with the author, May 2003



“I don't feel Spanish in Spain. I feel like a foreigner. In England too, I feel like a foreigner. As evacuees, we had our national identity taken away from us, it was stolen from us.”<sup>8</sup>

Natalia Benjamín, Oxford Brookes University, August 2003

Basque Children of '37 Association UK

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<sup>8</sup> In conversation with the author, June 2003