

## THE BASQUE CHILDREN REFUGEES IN HEREFORD 1937 - A FAMILY HISTORY

By Maria Dolores Power

### POLITICAL BACKGROUND

The Second Republic in Spain was proclaimed in April 1931 after the deposition of King Alfonso XIII. Although it was a democratically elected government, it had little time to stabilise the country from the previous fascist rulings and before Franco's coup d'état. At the time of its election, it was a period of worldwide economic depression and in Spain there was a high level of unemployment and poverty as well as illiteracy. There was no such thing as a living wage for labourers.

There were clashes between the anarchists and socialists on one side, and the traditionalists in the form of the Catholic Church, Land-owners and the nobility on the other side who resisted the change to democracy, were afraid of communism and felt threatened by the growing freedom of the Basque Country and Catalonia. It was a time of violence leading to uprisings and assassinations. In July 1936, before the new government could get strong enough to manage all of this, Franco, on the far right fascist side, took over with the final and prolonged barbaric coup which had been cunningly planned with the help of fascist politicians over a long period of time and finally left deep gullies of bloodshed and destruction and a smashed democracy.

The opposition to the fascists and the right wing Falangist movement lost the war mainly because of the military and aerial aid to Franco from Italian troops, and the Luftwaffe from Germany. The losing side also had aid which came from Russia, Mexico and the famous International Brigades many of whom sacrificed their lives. In Koldobika López Grandoso's book 'The Spanish Civil War in the Basque Town of Barakaldo', there is an account of this imbalance and he writes how the Russian planes came dismantled to the Basque Country to be put together only to find that at times parts were missing. These planes were old and inefficient and replacement parts were difficult to find. The Germans sent modern planes with lethal bombs which they deliberately tried out on the Basque civil population. The failure to win was also because of the non-intervention pact between the other European countries, mainly France and Britain. By not intervening, they thought fascism would be contained in Spain and would also suppress communism which the British Government under Chamberlain was more afraid of. Today historians agree that this was an unfounded fear. Unfortunately, instead of fascism being contained, it would expand into the Second World War soon after the end of the Spanish Civil War. The other setback for the Republicans in Barakaldo in the Basque Country was the spy chain in the form of the Fifth Column, a spy ring controlled by the Catholic Church as described also in Koldo's book.

Most of us know of the atrocities of both sides, the main one that of Guernica, in the cultural capital of the Basque Country on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1937, famous for the incessant bombardment by the Condor Legion of its civilians including children. Ironically, there is a connection here between the Luftwaffe Condor Legion and Herefordshire as seen in the article in the Herefordshire Lore magazine 2014, 'Swastikas over Michaelchurch'. Flying displays were held at a private airfield in this hamlet and sometimes foreign flyers were invited to them. In July 1934, Alexander von Winterfeldt who brought British pilots down during the Battle of Britain, and Hans Seidemann, who led the Luftwaffe against Republicans in the Spanish civil War were amongst the guests.

To give you an idea of the atrocities in the Basque country just before the evacuation of children to Britain, I would like to quote from the writer Yvonne Kapp from a lecture by Dr. Peter Anderson. It is 'an account she took from a Basque child who had found sanctuary in the UK'.

“There was the mother with two children and the old grandmother. The planes circled about the wood for a long time and at last frightened them out of it. They took shelter in a ditch. We saw the old granny cover up the little boy with her apron. The planes came low and killed them all in the ditch, except the little boy. He soon got up and began to wander across a field, crying. They got him too. It was terrible; we were both crying out so much we could not speak.”

There are many of these stories, some powerful ones to be found in Koldo's book.

## **THE EVACUATION**

After the bombing of Guernica, the Basque Country called to Europe for help. Whilst the British government argued against aid for refugees and non-intervention, The Duchess of Athol, famously known as the Red Duchess, headed a campaign to organize the rescue of the children and worked closely with the Basque government and the British consul in Bilbao, R.C. Stephenson. She headed the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR) founded in November 1936 which was a cross party parliamentary committee. The Duchess lobbied the British Government to accept the Basque children. The Committee sent Miss Leah Manning as envoy to Bilbao to help with the evacuation. Miss Leah Manning was an MP, a member of a Teacher's Union and the secretary of the Spanish Medical Aid Committee, one of the many aid organizations under the umbrella of the NJCSR. Fuelled by George Steer's report in the Times about the bombing of Guernica, there was a public outcry and the British government responded by capitulating to the NJCSR's demands allowing 2000 Basque children to come to Britain but as only one shipload was allowed and the situation was reported as dire by Leah Manning, the number quickly rose to 4000. Of this number of children that were registered to come on the SS Habana, only 3,862 arrived on board mainly due to the ravages of war. Similarly, not all the 234 adults arrived on board. The British government allowed these children to come on condition they were cared for and sheltered at the expense of public volunteers. No funds would be available from the government mainly on account of the non intervention pact. Antonio Aguirre, the Basque president, began arrangements for evacuations together with the British Consul R. C. Stephenson in Bilbao. The greater majority of the children were sent to France where many Basque adults were already in exile, and the rest to Britain, Switzerland, Denmark, Belgium, Russia and Mexico. Mexico was a staunch supporter of the Republican government as was Russia. It was a frenzied evacuation within the constriction of the war and the work of the Duchess of Athol with support from Leah Manning was invaluable for the safe evacuation of the children to Britain.

My aunt Felicity was one of the ones that had fled to France together with her sister and mother whilst her father fought on the Republican side. Other members of my family from Catalonia also made their way to the South of France and continued to live there permanently, making a living by running a village bakery. The refugees' movements were chaotic at that time. Some had fled to France during the attack in the North by the rebel forces and made their way to Catalonia via France for safety only to find that as the rebels took over Catalonia they then had to go back to France. One 16 yr old child was unavoidably left behind due to the chaos and ended up going to France alone. She was only able to make contact with her family whilst in Paris after the Civil War. Stories of this kind abound.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of May the refugee children at the port of Santurtzi, Bilbao, were medically checked before boarding the SS Habana. This ship with a capacity for 800 passengers had already undertaken two journeys to France with numerous Basque children and continued inexhaustibly with the passage to Britain. Some children had walked for miles since the crack of dawn to the port with barely a bite to eat. Some had not eaten at all for two or more days. They had suddenly left all they had ever known but for a few belongings which they carried with them. They were aged 5 to 15 years from all different political and religious family backgrounds but most on this trip to England were from working class families. They were soon fed on bread and milk as they arrived on board.

They were all given a hexagonal cardboard tag with their identification number and here began the wrenching of their individual identities to become part of a refugee community. The adults accompanied them comprised of teachers, auxiliary helpers, doctors and priests. The auxiliary helper who came to Hereford with nineteen children under her care was my mother Josefina Suñé Vidal, *Personal Auxiliar de identificación, registro número 19* – One of the first to board the ship. On the following day, Antonio Aguirre who was organizing the evacuation boarded the ship to bid farewell and a safe journey to all the refugees.

The Basque Auxiliary Navy had armed fishing boats called ‘Bous’ that escorted the SS Habana for the first 3 miles of their journey to International waters where the British convoy (the HMS Royal Oak and the HMS Forester) took over the escort till they were almost in Southampton. These precautions were necessary as in a previous journey to France with child refugees the SS Habana was threatened by a rebel destroyer, the Almirante Cervera, but was faced by the British ship the Ark Royal, and the Cervera went away. The sea in the Bay of Biscay was rough as it often is, many of the children were sea-sick and there were numerous cases of diarrhoea. They were crammed into every nook and cranny often sharing 4 to a berth.

Forty eight hours later the ship arrived at Fawley, outside Southampton where the children were given another medical examination and were labelled for treatment if needed. At Fawley the SS Habana waited for permission from the health authorities to be allowed to disembark at the port in Southampton.

In the DVD ‘The Guernica Children’ we can witness the arrival of the SS Habana in Southampton with its deck swarming with children and there is a glimpse of my mother Josefina Suñé sitting down reading something out of a book to a group of children – she can be picked out by the white top with large front buttons.

### **THE CAMP AT STONEHAM, SOUTHAMPTON**

The organization for the children’s camp began 3 weeks before their arrival but the camp itself was set up just 2 weeks before. Five hundred tents were put up in a local field belonging to the farmer Mr. Brown, water and gas was installed together with a dining tent, a medical tent and space for entertainment. The bunting from the celebrations of King George was left in place in the town to welcome the children and the Salvation Army was there to greet them with their band. The children were ecstatic. Most children had only seen these cone tents in cowboy films and some of the daintier children were a bit dismayed but on the whole they welcomed the safety and stability of the camp. Planes from a local airport had to be redirected away from the camp as some of the children were terrified they were still being pursued by German planes.

Food and clothes came in abundance from the local communities including the local baker and the many organizations that rose to the occasion with aid; the Quakers, the Scouts, Guides, tradesmen, Boys Brigade, YMCA, the Salvation Army, to name but a few. Funds were raised locally too. Big businesses such as Cadbury, Rowntree, Clarks and M&S also contributed greatly whilst the Co-op supported everywhere they could throughout the whole of their stay. This was the first time in British history that Britain welcomed child refugees in such numbers.

At the camp, the children were organised according to their parents’ political leanings. Many had arrived traumatised and malnourished, ill or exhausted to the point of collapse and were given all the help possible.

So as not to romanticize, there were also quarrels to be quelled and plenty of homesickness. Some reporters took advantage of their vulnerability and would take pictures of children having encouraged them to raise their fists in a communist stance which did not go down well with some members of the public. A Gloucestershire paper complained that “no help should be afforded to

Basque children while there were British youngsters starving.”<sup>1</sup> But on the whole it was a happy, busy, successful and very positive venture – a tribute to the British people. There are many documented anecdotes of the gratitude of the children and the kindness of their hosts.

## THE COLONIES

Within two or three weeks, the children were slowly being distributed to all parts of Britain where they stayed in groups according to their family backgrounds. These groups were called Colonies. The funding and arrangements of each colony was undertaken by the Basque Children Committees under the organization of the NJCSR. One third of the children were taken in by the Catholic Church. Josefina and the 19 children under her care were housed at the Berrington Convent in Hereford. With the Church of St Francis Xavier in nearby Broad Street and the Catholic School St Francis Xavier in close proximity, they soon settled into an ordered and safe haven in a way they were used to despite being housed in a convent. The children were able to integrate with English children at school, something which was not always the case in other colonies where education took place in the same building they were in and children kept to their own culture for the most part so as not to lose their ties with their own country. In an article from the Hereford Lore magazine, about the refugee children from Berrington, a lady wrote in about the day in her infant class when they were told by Sister Agnes that ‘there would be other children in the yard and not to fuss or crowd around them. When we went out there they were: dark eyes, dark hair. Foreign! Some of the bigger girls taught us a skipping game; Laba, rerra, frandi, frandango, nebagay, nebagando, frandou, frandango. Who were they?’ There were also the colonies that provided therapy through painting and drawing to come to terms with the trauma they had experienced in the war zone. Many children painted houses being bombed and people running away. The colonies varied in size and many comprised of 50 or more children. The Berrington Convent colony was relatively small.

Until recently, nobody knew of the Hereford colony when I came across the Basque Children Association of ’37 UK, whilst doing some research with the aim of writing about my mother’s life and I was able to bring this information to them. The secretary of this organization Carmen Kilner confirmed Josefina’s registration on the SS Habana. As of today, there are over 100 known colonies.

As time went on and repatriation became a problem, it also became more and more difficult to raise funds and with the onset of the Second World even more so. Children became involved in fundraising themselves. Concerts were organized in which the children put on performances of Basque songs and dance. According to an article in the Hereford Lore magazine, some of the older children cut their hair and sold it to the local hairdresser for making wigs.

During Josefina’s stay, she had bumped into a gentleman in Hereford by the name of John Jones whilst she was walking with the children over Victoria Bridge that links the Castle Green to King George V Playing Fields and Bishops Meadow. Mr Jones from Hereford, a first mate on a Merchant ship, had volunteered to take food to the Eastern part of Spain for the Republicans on a ship regardless of non intervention, and from then on their extraordinary fates entwined.

Having fallen in love, eventually Josefina met Jack’s parents, Amy and Arthur Jones who lived at 86 Ryeland Street, Hereford, opposite Bulmer’s cider-making factory. Arthur worked as a draper in his father’s Taylor’s shop in Commercial Street which was sold when he died and the shop eventually became a Sports shop followed by, I believe, a lingerie shop in more recent times. In later years, Amy’s attic was found to be filled with garment patterns and books of samples of cloth used for making suits and coats. These samples were used by Amy during the war to make warm patchwork blankets in mute colours of greys and greens. Amy was a strong character with a sharp mind, who came from a country background. She was a fabulous cook, home organizer, made country wines and chutneys and jams as well as the most wonderful cakes and pies. She also worked part-time doing the accounts of one of the pubs in Hereford.

Josefina's family lived in the centre of Bilbao. Her father Juan was a notorious fencing master who won several tournaments and ran a gymnastics and health centre in his home aside from the fencing academy. It was in this academy where the lives of the future Basque president, the then young lawyer Antonio Aguirre, and Juan's crossed. Juan was his fencing master and Antonio his pupil. Juan was also a renowned bone setter who treated the rich and poor alike without charge for the poor but always appreciated a chicken or a well grown cabbage as payment.

## REPATRIATION

The fate of the Basque children in Britain and other countries was marked by the fall of Bilbao and repatriation problems that bore life-changing repercussions for many of them as well as for their accompanying adult refugees and this included Josefina and her husband to be, John (known as Jack). The fall of Bilbao was announced over the public address system at the reception camp in Southampton shortly after their arrival. This created fear, panic and hysteria and some of the older boys ran away 'to fight' but they were caught up with and brought back to the camp. This now meant that instead of the expected 3 month stay, their time here was prolonged till it was safe for them to return.

Franco did not like the children staying abroad as this seemed to mar his leadership of Spain. He could not accept that children should in the eyes of the world be seen as running away from his wonderful ruling of Spain and he put enormous pressure on the parents to request the return of their children. These letters of request were not always authentic and their return was fraught with danger, especially as most children were from the Republican side. Many of the parents of the children were imprisoned, killed, shot by firing squad or exiled as well as tortured. As the enemy they were punished by disallowing them to retain their former jobs, by confiscating their businesses and taking away their licences to teach, practice medicine<sup>2</sup> etc. In the case of my aunt Feli's family in Bilbao, their shops and plumbing businesses were confiscated. On top of that her father who had belonged to a trade union was imprisoned. When he came out after the war, if he was seen in the streets, he was beaten up by the civil guard fascists. Beatings, repressions, punishments, assassinations etc continued for a long time after the victory of Franco as did the food rationing. Hunger was prevalent. Some died of hunger, others ate whatever they could find, be it orange peel or an egg mixed with flour for a family of six for supper<sup>3</sup> etc. Pensions for soldiers and their widows were confiscated if you were on the wrong side of the conflict. Parents sent secret messages to their children warning them of danger or for them not to return as they would die of hunger as in the case of a friend's mother. Secret messages such as a torn corner of a letter meant 'nothing...was to be believed'<sup>4</sup> or 'your uncle is in good health' which meant it was a lie as they knew their uncle was in prison. There is also the story of the letter that arrived from a parent requesting a child to return. The child thought it was a miracle as he knew his parents were illiterate. They could also be put in one of Franco's orphanages and be indoctrinated to the point of them rejecting their own families and they could even be forced to do military service in Franco's army now that some of the boys had turned into men even though they were from Republican families. Today it is also known that thousands of new born babies were stolen by the fascists and older children were taken from impoverished families from the republican side in order to bring them up 'in the correct way' by fascist families.

The risk was enormous. At the same time, the British government also put pressure on the BCC for the Basque children to be returned, especially as the Second World War was approaching. The Basque Children Committee was put under tremendous pressure to send the children back. They studied each case individually before making that decision. For the most part, children returned to their families or what was left of them. But there were also mistakes that occurred whilst acting under such pressure and one or two children returned to empty homes. When Raimundo Pérez Lezama, now a young man, returned to the port in Bilbao, he had no idea whether his family was

alive or dead as he had had no replies to any of the letters he had sent them. One can imagine his surprise and emotion when they were all there to meet him at the port!<sup>5</sup>

The majority of the children at Berrington Convent were sent back but it is not known what happened to them when they arrived in Spain. Josefina was then sent to one of the two colonies in Cambridge, Salisbury Villas, lent by Jesus College which was also used later by the Kinder Transport when the Second World War broke out and where there were still some refugee children left. Before leaving Hereford, she had made a commitment to Jack and had met his parents. At this colony she met Jack's brother Tom who was at university there, and his wife to be Sonia. They seemed to get on well and had some good times together. In a photo of my mother and the Basque children there showed they were happy and relaxed. At the end of the Civil War, Josefina and Jack were married at the Catholic Church in Cambridge, The Church of our Lady and the English Martyrs, despite the fact that Jack was an atheist. Soon after this, they moved to Marseilles to live and work. But the phrase 'and they lived happily ever after' at this time of war is only found in fairy tales. Little did they know what the Second World War was about to bring.

### **THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND THE REFUGEES**

The Second World War had even more challenges awaiting Josefina and Jack, the refugees in Britain and the wider Basque refugees particularly those in France and Russia who suffered the most. Some of the refugee homes in Britain were needed for the army at the start of the Second World War and children had to move around. Eventually funds started to run out and the ones who were not repatriated were put into foster families and others were adopted but this meant at times separating siblings as in the case of my friend Dolores' mother and her two brothers.

A number of the refugee boys were now old enough to enlist in the British Army. Others were trained at technical colleges, in agriculture or further education but most worked locally in factories or shops. The girls became seamstresses and went into domestic service. In an article from the Hereford Lore magazine in 2006, a lady writes in, stating that in the canteen for munitions workers, there were two Spanish refugee girls working there. My friend's mother became a touring ballet dancer, another of the niños (children) as they were called, became an art teacher, and Raimundo Pérez Lezama became a famous footballer and so on. Some married English people but I know that others married within their groups. Teachers and Auxiliaries were given the choice by the British government of a paid passage to Bilbao or Venezuela or of employment in domestic service in Britain.

As written in Koldo's book, the Basque children refugees in Russia suffered a different fate. Out of the total 2,900 refugees from all parts of Spain, 1,495 child refugees aged 4 to 15 years accompanied by 75 adults went to Russia from the port of Santurtzi in Bilbao at this chaotic time. Brass bands and orchestras welcomed the children and provided them with the best care possible like the British did. The children responded with the soviet salute raising their fists. Due to the long journey, the weakened state they were in when boarding the ship and the different colder climate, a few children died shortly after arrival. Further problems emerged by the arrival of Hitler in 1941. The return of the children had been prolonged because the Russians under Stalin were reluctant to send them back to a Fascist country after the Civil War in Spain since the children were from Republican Spain and many of their families were communists. Stalin assumed their parents would want them to stay in a free country rather than return to a dictatorship. Then Germany invaded through the famous Red Beard operation on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of June 1941. As soon as the older refugee boys reached the minimal age for conscription, they were mobilised. The rest of the children were left to the mercy of the general public. Some suffered hardships and disasters and at times died of hunger or were killed by German bullets either in combat or as civilians. Those that survived fighting in this war were commemorated with medals for fighting in major battles.

Koldo also explains that after the war between Russia and Germany, the Russian authorities did not want to let go of the Basque children because they were in need of a workforce. The children had received a very high level of education and even the girls studied economics, medicine, dentistry and engineering. Some of these ladies did return much later, and found it difficult to adapt to an imposed machismo culture prevalent after the Civil War in Spain. There were those who stayed behind permanently having married Russians and those who stayed because of their political ideology. A few returned to Spain as late as the 70s, 80s and 90s to spend their old age in the Basque Country.

According to Koldo, France took over 100,000 refugees including some 20,000 children from the Basque Country. The outcome of this was tragic. In the León Blum government, camps were organized all over France but many of the ones set up on beaches were guarded with barbed wire and African soldiers that treated them badly, and therefore these camps were more akin to concentration camps. These refugees were clearly not welcome. There was very little food, illness was rife, and the level of infant mortality was high. Before the invasion of Hitler, many had been working in work battalions on the Maginot Line but after the invasion of Germany from May 1940 some adult refugees and children who were now young men ended up in extermination camps and some in the Mauthausen camp for medical experimentation. Other young men had escaped before the invasion and went back to Spain, others managed to escape during the invasion. Several joined the resistance in the French army in the newly formed Gernika battalion, one of the first battalions to enter Paris during the Liberation in August 1944.

### **THE REFUGEES OF TODAY**

The refugees of today are just as much in need of care as the child refugees that came to Britain in 1937. They all have emotional, educational, medical, housing and financial needs.

However, the political situation is completely different today. It is far more of a problem due to the increased amount of people seeking asylum or running away from environmental disasters that leaves them displaced and hungry. The problem is now on a global scale and the responsibility lies with all countries as the situation is sometimes triggered off by political or environmental mismanagement. This means that sympathetic cooperation is needed across the whole world to address the root of the problem. At the same time, people in Britain feel threatened by the numbers pouring in from abroad feeling that their western culture will be taken over, the refugees will overcrowd the health system, schools, etc. and that their cultures are not compatible with British culture. However, in my opinion, our collective consciousness is evolving and moving towards a world harmony in which we are all concerned for the wellbeing of all people. The practicalities may take decades, if not hundreds of years to surmount.

### **JOSEFINA AND JACK**

My parents Josefina and Jack were living in France when Germany invaded this country in 1940. As they tried to escape from the city of Marseilles in southern France, Josefina in high heel shoes and tight skirt, holding hands and running for their lives over cobbled streets, they were caught by the Germans. Jack was taken prisoner and Josefina was sent back to Bilbao on the back of a military truck. It was while she was in this truck that she realised she was going to have her first child. Jack pretended to be Spanish and was put in an Internment camp in northern France for men that were not the enemy as Spain was a neutral country. He would otherwise have been shot as the enemy or taken to a concentration camp. He was put to work in the offices as a translator. Here he forged a passport and papers with his name as one Juan Gomez and a few more passports for other prisoners so that they could escape too. The conditions in this camp were dire. Over the winter he shared one blanket with 4 other men. His diet consisted mainly of carrots which he then hated for the rest of his life, and he was also able to find snails to eat. Jack escaped and was heading for the South of France

on a train through the Loire Valley when he realised the Gestapo had got on the train. In a blink of an eye he was out of the train window while the train was running and he rolled down a bank into some woods. He stayed there working as a charcoal burner and woodcutter for the next 5 years. The Germans had his head on a poster up and down the country to be found. Neither Josefina nor Jack had any idea of whether either of them was alive or dead.

Whilst Jack lived in a primitive cottage in a village by the woods during the war, Josefina lived with her family in Bilbao. When Josefina's first child was a few months old, a portrait photo of Josefina holding the child was sent to the Hereford family. The child was also named Josefina but called Finita as this is the endearing pet name for a young one of that name. By the end of the war, Amy, my grandmother, had been able to contact Jack. He responded instantly to the news of the whereabouts of Josefina and his daughter, and arrangements were made to meet in Biarritz. When they met, Finita was 5 years old and was endeared by her father who gave her a puppy as a present. They were all overwhelmed with emotion.

### **BACK TO HEREFORD 1945**

In 1945 Josefina and Jack moved to Hereford where they had originally met taking along their daughter Finita. They began living with Jack's parents in Ryeland Street where their second child was born in the same bed Jack had been born in, a boy. Jack began looking for work. He first found a job in Cardiff and later found a job as a farm labourer on Bredon Hill near Tewksbury where they lived at Lalu cottage. Shortly after that they went to live in London whilst Jack trained to teach. Another girl was born in London followed by myself a year later.

### **BACK TO SPAIN 1949**

When I was 3 months old, we all went to live in Miranda del Ebro in northern Spain where my youngest sister was born and then went on to Bilbao where Jack worked at the English Institute and the youngest boy was born. We were now 6 children.

### **BACK TO HEREFORD 1956**

In the early 1950s, Jack's father Arthur died leaving Amy much on her own as Jack's two brothers were working in the south of England, one as a medical doctor, one a doctor of mathematics at a training college and both were busy with their own families as well as with their demanding jobs. This changed the course of our lives too as we ended up going back to Hereford to be near Amy. The eldest three children were sent ahead to live with grandmother in England in 1955 and the following year I was to join them. Jack escorted both groups each time and the rest of the family followed shortly after.

Whilst living with Grandmother, it seems to me that I was echoing the lives of the refugees who came in 1937 but of course, without the trauma the children refugees had experienced in the war. The similarity was in leaving all I loved behind including the Spanish extended family and going into the unknown. I did not speak English and my grandmother whom I barely knew did not speak Spanish which was a difficulty to be surmounted like the experience of most of the refugees. Luckily Amy was a very good substitute mother; loving but firm. I learned English by being at school, sometimes through games such as skipping. Amy helped me to read English each day after school through the book 'Mr. Turnip'. School and home were happy places to be in and this helped whilst waiting a few months for my parents and the rest of the family to arrive.



## LITTLE BIRCH

In 1956 we all trooped into our new home and our new way of life on a smallholding in Little Birch. The village school had just closed down and we had to travel a long way to school on Morgan's country buses.

At some point, the old chicken house adjacent to Sunny Bank Cottage where we lived, was turned into its original purpose as a dwelling and became my parents' retirement home. It was called The Old Cottage and it had once been thatched and had heavy oak beams. It rested in the most beautiful village of Little Birch. We had far reaching views from Sunny Bank Cottage and from the sitting room of the Old Cottage looking towards May Hill close to where I live now. This latter view remains in my mind as a symbol of peace and calm in fraught times.

## THE BASQUE CHILDREN ASSOCIATION OF '37 UK

I came across the BCA whilst researching about my mother and it has been very helpful. It seems that many children of these refugees are still seeking information about their families that remained in the Basque Country or exiled elsewhere whilst others are still contributing newfound stories. I attended one of the BCA talks by Carmen Kilner the secretary of the BCA, organised by the British Council in Bilbao. Here I met the author of the Book 'The Spanish Civil War in the Basque Town of Barakaldo – Eleven Months of Resistance' by Koldobika López Grandoso which I had the honour to translate. It appealed to me because one of the children of a niño (child refugee from the SS Habana) in Britain had contacted me to help him with translations to find information of relatives in the industrial town of Barakaldo. The book was filled with information about this area and other Basque areas that would be useful for the diaspora of Basque people all over the world and for those, as the second generation or third generation that do not know the Spanish language, they now have it in English.

The association was started in November 2002 by Natalia Benjamin, a daughter of one of the teachers. This association keeps the archive materials about the children and is responsible for education, talks, plaques, the Newsletter, and keeping this piece of history in the well deserved spotlight. It was time to remind the world of the largest group of unaccompanied children that had ever come to Britain. Research on this subject has grown enormously over the years and many papers from academics and students have been introduced to their website [www.basquechildren.org](http://www.basquechildren.org) as well as stories from children of the niños. The association has an educational value and there have been travelling exhibitions in Spain, England and recently Ireland. There is a trail of colonies in England and a trail of blue plaques. One plaque was recently renewed at Caerleon with a celebration with dignitaries, relatives and friends of the niños, the same number of school children as the children that arrived there in 1937, (56 of them), all wearing a number tag in the same way and they even sang a Basque song.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>3</sup> Koldobika López Grandoso – 'The Spanish Civil War in the Basque Town of Barakaldo-*Eleven Months of Resistance*' – Translated by Maria Dolores Power

<sup>4</sup> [basquechildren.org](http://basquechildren.org) - Isabella Brown – University of Durham- '4,000 Basque Child Refugees: Britain's Response to the Victims of the Spanish Civil War'.

<sup>5</sup> Koldobika López Grandoso – ‘The Spanish Civil War in the Basque Town of Barakaldo-*Eleven Months of Resistance*’ – Translated by Maria Dolores Power