

THE KEIGHLEY COLONY

The colony was in the outskirts of the town; it had been a sanatorium. We were put up in houses which had exterior balconies looking out over a great valley. Below we could see that part of the hospital which was still in use. The fifty boys were divided up between two buildings, Keighley House and Halifax House. My brother and I were halifaxes, and I liked it from the beginning, because we were higher up than the keighleys. Soon a great rivalry arose between the football teams of each house. Another fifty girls and those in charge were housed in the main building, a little way off from our houses.

Keighley was near the towns of Leeds, Bradford, Halifax and Harrogate. It was smaller than Baracaldo, neither a pretty nor an ugly town, not by the seaside, but having swimming pools, a large park and three cinemas: *The Picture House*, *The Regent* and *The Cosey Corner*, later there was another one, *The Ritz*, and a lake which froze over in the winter. It was such a pleasure in winter to see the people skating on the frozen lake. They would bring record players, and couples or individuals would dance in time to the music. We also tried, but spent more time sitting down than skating.

Mr Balmer, a protestant minister, was in charge, but we rarely saw him. Mr Soubat was the Warden. He was a Chilean of French origin married to an Englishwoman. Another Mr Balmer, the younger brother of the pastor, was the history teacher. He spoke English, French, Latin, Greek and fairly good Spanish which he improved with us. The Maths and English teacher was Mr Alvarez, from Asturias, and Mrs Alvarez, his English wife, taught us swimming and dancing. There were some other three teachers and five or six helpers, all from San Sebastián, Bilbao and Las Arenas, and there was an English nurse. Two essential people in the colony were Luis, the cook, from Irún, and good Old George, who was in charge of the heating.

As time went on, more and more people came to visit us in the colony. They were curious to know what we were like, how we behaved, if it was worth their while taking us out or inviting us to spend the weekend with them. Mr Soubat opened the doors wide, sure of his success (he had great vision and sense of diplomacy, he hadn't been a consul for nothing). He made it perfectly clear to the visitors that if we were treated badly they would never be able to come to the colony again, and he let us know that the slightest bad behaviour would be punished according to its severity. He hit

the mark. Except for one isolated case, there was never any need for punishment.

One day, a certain Mr Wilson, who was a postman and a great football fan, came to ask Mr Soubat's permission to take eleven boys to play in a friendly match against an English team in a little village called Ingrow. There were more than twenty volunteers, and Mr Soubat, always the diplomat, sent some to play and the others as spectators to cheer the others on. Later, Mr Wilson told Mr Soubat that he wanted to form a stable team, which would have proper training, and that he wanted it to compete in local tournaments. He said he would manage it and organize the transport. Not only did Mr Soubat accept his proposition, but he encouraged him in the venture, realising its potential as a fund-raising activity. Mr Wilson bought the gear: yellow and black vests, like the Baracaldo team, what a coincidence! But with a diagonal stripe in front and behind instead of a vertical one, black shorts and black socks with yellow turn-ups. This team was much talked about in the local footballing world. What vision Mr Soubat had! Many people turned up to watch the games, and in the interval a beret was passed round: *For the Basque children, please!* And after each match, the two teams sat down together for a meal. The English paid for everything, and even gave for the colony money-box. We became

champions in two categories. We won the last match of the tournament 22-2 (yes, twenty-two to two). That team lasted for a year and a half, until some of the boys were repatriated. Letters had begun to arrive from relatives reclaiming the exiles, not all of them authentic.

Our studies went well, both in English and in Spanish. It was a pleasure to go to the lessons, specially those of Mr Balmer, who was besotted with ancient Greece and Rome. He used to say that no Spaniard who had not read “**Don Quijote**” could consider himself an authentic Spaniard, and that he himself would not be satisfied until he had learned “our” Castillian. We read a great deal in English with him: *The Prodigal Son*, *Robert Falcon Scott and the South Pole*, *The Romans in Britain*, *Joan of Arc*....

One day, Mr Soubat called us together and told us that although there was enough money coming in for us, the children in France were having a hard time and the football matches weren't bringing in enough to be able to send them money too. So he thought that we should form a dancing and singing troupe. After a month of hard work, we put one together. Much of it was due to the señoritas and helpers. Very few children got left out. Even the shy ones, who were too embarrassed to appear on the stage, were found a job collecting on the streets.

A choir was formed that sang on Radio Leeds. There were Basque dances for which all the costumes were made by the señoritas and helpers. Unfortunately we couldn't find any instrument close to the *chistu* and drum, so Mrs Alvarez accompanied us on the piano. We put on two comedies in Spanish: *El doctor simple* and *El alcade glotón*, with Mr Soubat explaining the plot in English from the stage before they began. However, *Christopher Columbus* was in English.....

We fulfilled our aims. We went up and down the country harvesting success, friends and money. After each performance, we all went on stage, hoping to be chosen by local families to go to their homes until the next day, when we would set out for another town. I specially remember a Mr and Mrs Houlding, a young couple with a little girl. They asked if we could spend long periods with them, and Mr Soubat agreed, provided we still were available for the football matches and the concerts. We went when we could to their house, sometimes for as long as a week.

The Picture House made available every Friday the afternoon slot from 5.30 to 7.30 for the Basque children. We would leave the colony in pairs, led by a señorita. Seeing such a group of us, some local

girls and boys would shout as we passed: “Spanish onions!”

There were many popular people amongst the English that were involved in some way with the colony, or who used to visit. “The bullfighter” earned his nickname because he was dark, for the way he walked and how he wore his cap. The barber was the good Mr Neeland, who cut everyone’s hair for no charge. The photographer, Mr Mereth, and his wife were very kind. He was lame, she was very beautiful. They used to invite us to tea and to see their laboratory. Mr Kennedy would come by bike to the colony. Whenever he let us ride it, you could be sure that it would have to be mended later. Jack the taxi driver was very nice too; he owned a garage, a taxi stop, four taxis and two funeral cars. One day, he showed me an electric shaver. I ran it over my face and it left me just the same as there was nothing to shave. He also gave me, with a nearly new suit of his, my first pair of long trousers.

José Luis Melero, “**Corazon de Cartón**”, Domingo Eizaguirre, 1999