

Obituary Florita Bonilla de Santamaria

Florita was born in Recaldeberri, Bilbao on the 31st July 1926. She died peacefully, at home in London, surrounded by her family, on 6th March 2016. She was one of an estimated 22,234 Basque Children evacuated to France, along with two brothers. They returned to Spain soon after the civil war to be reunited with their family. Her father and eldest brother however, were not part of that reunion as the former had died defending the Republic and the latter was assassinated by what the family believed was a lethal injection, administered by his Francoist guards whilst imprisoned at Deusto University, which had been turned into a makeshift prison to house Republican prisoners. She was well grounded by her mother *Inés* who alone, and without the help of her husband and her eldest son, carried the family of 11 children forward. This was an example, which had great influence on our mother, and which was reflected in her own commitment to her own family in West London.

Florita came to England in 1952, and soon met *Luís Santamaría* one of the *niños* evacuated to England in the *Habana*, and whom she married in 1955. She established life-long relationships with many of the *niños* and attended many commemorative events and reunions. *Luís*, like his brothers, already had their cards marked with the Francoist authorities because of their political activism. *Luís* travelled on a UN passport, and our mother soon found out that all this would rebound on her. The Spanish Consulate in London issued her with a '*soltera*' passport: marital status: 'single' because she had not been married in a Catholic church. In the 1960s she travelled to Spain with her three children bearing the absurd, single person status passport.

Florita was also photographed by an undercover Francoist agent posing as a cameraman at a JSU (*Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas/ United Socialist Youth*) event in London. The photo was then used in an attempt by Franco's secret police in Bilbao to put pressure on her mother to get her daughter to abandon going to such events. Her mother *Inés* faked incredulity in their presence and when she eventually came to England on a visit, she was more interested in relaying what had happened, rather than in dissuading her daughter from upsetting General Franco. *Florita* was driven by her dislike of the dictatorship and she was not afraid to challenge the Francoist authorities when further problems arose over my father's passport; ably supported by my sister on one occasion at the Spanish Consulate in London, who as a young girl, when being told by a Francoist official to leave her mother and wait outside, responded to him "No". "I am not leaving my mother alone with you". "My father has told me that you are a load of bastards!".

Florita was thrilled when *Agur Euskadi, hasta nunca*; written by our father and telling the story of the Basque Children from his childhood perspective was published. The warm reception the book received amongst the *niños* and the Spanish community more generally gave her a sense of great satisfaction. She was equally thrilled when her daughter *Mirella* was awarded an MBE for services to Higher Education and Language Learning.

Domestically, she ran a tight ship. When I and my two sisters were children, the care we received was second to none. Christmas was plentiful. First it was Basque dishes; later we graduated to turkey, as the two cultures intermingled in our lives. The photos in our family albums of toys at Christmas, or holidays at home or abroad are indicative, not only of how well we were doing as a family, but the role of both our parents in mine and my sisters' daily upbringing. She was also careful to tell us extensively about her family in Bilbao, and life in Recaldeberri. These were fascinating encounters with our roots and our parents made sure that their children were all fluent Spanish

speakers. *Florita* saved a contingency fund with the Post Office. Many years later she told me that this fund was to get us to Spain, into the protection of our family in Spain, in the event that something happened to our father. She was a survivor who thought ahead, and that may be one reason for her long life of nearly 90 years.

Some may still remember her large kitchen at our Ladbroke Grove flat as a centre of social gatherings. Our next home in Hardinge Road was also something of a hub. In later life, she enjoyed a long retirement in her final two homes in London, where she was frequently visited by her grandchildren. In early retirement, time was spent in Algorta, on the coast near Bilbao and when her eldest sister *Lola* was dying of cancer in her old age, *Florita* and *Luís* dedicated themselves to her care for an entire summer. *Florita* also attended the *Centro Social de Mayores* (Spanish pensioners club). *Justo Moreno Ortega* and other republican exiles were amongst the founders of the club. *Justo Moreno* and his family became life-long family friends of our family, going back to the days we lived in Ladbroke Grove in the 1960s.

Florita enjoyed life, and her story has been a happy one, though at times sad. She was deeply saddened by the loss of her eldest grandson *Adam*, at the tender age of 27. She consoled herself with his graduation in music technology, and the songs he composed for her. Those who knew him believed he would have made it into the music business.

Florita arrived in England with two friends after a channel crossing that made her sea sick. Her origins were humble; her legacy is not. Antonio Machado sums these cases up well. *Caminante, son tus huellas el camino, y nada más; caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.* Her family will continue to love *Florita* dearly.

Luis Angel Santamaria.