

Helvecia Hidalgo

By Susana Hidalgo Hogg

My mother, Helvecia Hidalgo, who has died aged 91, was one of 3,800 children evacuated to the UK from northern Spain after the bombing of Guernica by fascists during the Spanish civil war in April 1937.

At the age of 14 she boarded the liner Habana with her 10-year-old brother Elvio and eight-year-old sister Delia. After the ship docked in Southampton the children were initially looked after by the Salvation Army at a camp in Eastleigh, where they slept 10 to a tent. The British government would not help the evacuees on the basis that such a move might compromise its policy of non-intervention in the war. But fundraising committees were set up and the public offered generous practical and financial support to the children.

Many of those who had been evacuated returned to Spain after the civil war, but others stayed on to live in Britain. Helvecia's father, Hermenegildo García López, who was involved in one of the first co-operatives in Spain, had died at a young age. Her mother, Martina Aldassoro Urreta, living in terrible poverty near Bilbao and struggling to look after other, older children who had remained in Spain, agreed that it would be better for the younger ones to continue living in Britain.

Helvecia and her siblings were therefore taken under the wing of George and Barbara Cadbury, of the chocolate-making Quaker family, who became the children's legal guardians, sent them as boarders to the Friends' school in Saffron Walden, and gave them a home during the school holidays near Bournville, Birmingham.

After school Helvecia, or Beth as she was known to some of her English friends, moved to London to train as a secretary, and worked at the Instituto Español in London before taking on various clerical and secretarial jobs. In the capital she met another Spanish exile, José Hidalgo, a Catalan whom she married in 1945. José had fought for the republicans during the Spanish civil war and had then become a commando in the British army. After the Second World War he worked as a translator for the BBC's Latin America service before buying a sweet shop, in which my mother also worked. They later divorced and he died in 1986.

Those Guernica evacuees who remained in the UK were always known as "the Basque children" and tried to keep in touch with each other. In 1967 Helvecia instigated an annual dinner where they could meet up and this was always a great success, with the "children" travelling from all over Britain to attend. Eventually, in 2002, the Basque Children of '37 Association was formed, and Helvecia, who continued organising the annual dinners until five years ago, was made its honorary president.

In 2012 all the records and information gathered by the association were handed over to the University of Southampton, which now holds them in the Los Niños exhibition. The occasion of the handover was effectively the last large gathering of the "children", most of whom have now died. However, young Basque people were there, and stories of the struggles of their forebears were passed on to a new generation. Many of the younger people knew little about the evacuations, as there had been a general reluctance among the survivors to speak about the terrible events of the civil war.

Helvecia is survived by me and my brother Michael, five grandchildren, six great grandchildren, and Elvio.