

My name is Natalia Benjamin and I am Secretary of the Basque Children of '37 Association. I have been asked to say a few words about Helvecia's collaboration and participation in the organisation.

In fact, without Helvecia's help, there would not have been an association. She was intimately involved in its setting up. It all happened about 14 years ago. I had reached a period in my life when I wanted to know more about my parents, especially my mother, who I knew to have worked with the Basque children at the Langham colony near Colchester for 3 years. Adrian Bell's book on the Basque children had just come out and I discovered that the Langham colony was supported by the Peace Pledge Union and that every fortnight there was a column about the colony and the Basque children in the PPU magazine. I went to the PPU archives and photocopied every one of those articles. It was very exciting when I found that four of these reports had been written by my mother! Then I wrote a letter to "Saga" Magazine asking if anyone remembered her. I had a good response, including an invitation from Helvecia to the annual lunch of the Basque children in London in May so that I could meet more of them. I realised that their story was virtually unknown in this country and that valuable memories were being lost to posterity. I determined to change this and that is why the Association was set up in November 2002.

But we couldn't have set it up without Helvecia's help. We had no idea of where to start and she was generous in supplying names and addresses of the *niños*. We were subsequently able to send them all the information about what we were doing. There had been attempts in the past to create associations, but they had floundered. We were determined that the children shouldn't be "the forgotten ones" of history and the Spanish Civil War and that we would use the association to increase public awareness of the children's plight.

From then on began a felicitous collaboration between us and Helvecia and for me personally the beginning of a warm friendship. Within the Association, she was immediately given the status of Honorary President.

And then began for her what almost amounts to a new career, where she appeared in public and gave talks on what it had been like to live through the Civil War and how she had adapted to life in a country whose language she didn't know. I am sure that she never imagined that at her age (she was just 80 years old) she would have a new role in life, that is, as a spokesperson for this particular group of children about whom relatively little was known.

During the first year of the existence of the Association, we both went to Madrid to a conference on the exile of the children where Helvecia presented a paper. This was followed by her participation in a colloquium held at the Canada Blanch Spanish School in London, where she joined 3 other Basques and an Oxford University professor in putting forward her story and answered questions.

Helvecia was a highly intelligent woman who in normal circumstances would have gone far. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, until she had her children, Helvecia landed the prestigious post of secretary to the Director in the newly formed Spanish Institute in London. So she was used to organising and taking charge of projects: she was present for at least 5 of our blue plaque ceremonies, was always willing to take part in many

conferences about the Basque children. She participated in day schools organised by Oxford University and also in radio and TV programmes. In particular, she felt very keenly one of the foremost aims of the Association: to preserve the memory of the experience of the Basque children for descendents and future generations. As an ambassador, she had no equal.

Her memory was remarkable and she was able to identify readily the *niños* in photographs and could usually tell you quite a lot about them.. She was a natural leader, having in the 1940s organised football games on Saturdays for a group of Basque boys from the Midlands. When students or journalists wanted more information about the children for their theses or an article, she was always ready to speak to them, to ensure that they got the facts right.

Helvecia always used to like it when I stopped off at Ealing on my way to somewhere in London, and would have a lovely meal waiting for me. I would hear the latest stories about her grandchildren, of whom she was inordinately proud. I feel it a privilege to have known and worked with her.