

## Jose María Martínez Castillo

Jose María Martínez Castillo was born on 21 April 1926 in Cabredo, Navarra. He was always quick to point out that he shared a birthday with Queen Elizabeth! He had three brothers, Javier, Tirso and Valentin. The family moved to Bilbao shortly before Franco's troops surrounded Cabredo, and a childhood playing with his brothers in the mountains was punctuated by daily bombing raids. "The militia took over the school and there was constant machine-gun fire", said Jose. "I remember walking past and hearing the constant crackling of the guns. They were firing and firing inside. Political prisoners were being killed – it was a terrible thing."

His father was a Republican sympathiser who earned his living as a lorry driver in the docks, which he used as cover for transporting arms to the front. As such, he was a marked man and knew he had to protect his family. After the bombing of Guernica at the end of April 1937, he heard that children were being evacuated in May to safety by sea and decided to send his three oldest boys away. There was talk of them going to Russia, but as his father knew Ricardo Fernández, the captain of the *Habana*, whose ship was due to take 4,000 evacuees to Britain, that was where they were destined. "England's a wonderful country – you'll be safe", were his father's last words. As the oldest of the brothers, Jose María had the responsibility for them on his 11-year-old shoulders. He was upset and angry to be separated from his family, he was upset at his parents for sending him away and he was upset at the war itself. "Leaving my parents was very difficult and the journey was horrendous, there was a lot of crying on the boat and everyone was seasick. We were all so hungry that we ate too much, and that made us all the more sick. As we left the harbour we were escorted by the British fleet and were being bombarded from the air."

Once in Britain, Jose María was sent to the Basque Children's Home at Bray Court near Maidenhead, and then in 1938 to Girton House at Hove. Here Charles Gildersleeve, a socialist benefactor, and attended Hove Grammar School, fostered him through the international charity Foster Parents' Plan until 1940. Fostering then simply meant inviting a child out for weekends and holidays and paying for their upkeep. By this time, many of the Basque refugees had returned to Spain. But Jose María had no home to go to. He didn't know if his parents were alive after Franco's victory in 1939.

In 1940, Jose María was moved to the Culvers at Carshalton, one of the three remaining homes for the Basque children. He spent his entire adolescence there and was described as "a healthy and good-looking lad with thick dark curly hair and full of energy". This time, from 1940-47, he was fostered by an American family, the Camoras, through the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

"Daily life in Carshalton was wonderful," recalled Jose María. "We used to go on outings in a bus. We would go to Windsor a lot for high tea because it was near. We also used to go to Brighton to the beach, to Kew Gardens and swimming in a pool at nearby Ashstead. It was such a happy time." There was a great deal of talent amongst the young adults at the Culvers; it was an inspiring environment, and several of his peers later went into acting, opera singing, one became a dancer with the Royal Ballet and yet another a famous sculptor. The Director of the home, Pepe Estruch, himself a

prominent theatre director and refugee, encouraged Jose María. He nurtured Jose María's natural artistic ability and with his support, Jose María gained a Juan Luis Vives Trust scholarship that enabled him to study at the Croydon School of Art under Frederick Hinchcliffe from 1942-45.

The young Basques at the Culvers used to produce a magazine, and the 1944 edition included thumbnail sketches of those who lived there. Jose María's read: "He is one of our artists and the most popular boy at the home. Everyone admires his good heart and sense of humour. He is our President and working hard for a forthcoming exhibition." This exhibition was held at the Spanish Institute and was followed in 1946 by an exhibition at the Archer Gallery, Notting Hill Gate. He was only 20 years old, and these exhibitions were the first of many one-man shows. It was at this time that Jose María decided to adopt the name Koke Markíniz as a poet and Coque Martínez as a painter. But he always signs his letters to me with "Koke".

But although Koke's real passions were painting and writing, he had to earn a living: he became a design and production display specialist from 1946-84. Basically, he organised in-store, window, showroom and exhibition stands. From 1948-53 he enrolled for evening classes at St Martin's School of Art in London and at the Horsham School of Art in Sussex. Over the years, his pictures have been bought by people from North and South America, France, Spain, Italy and Japan, and are mostly in private collections. "At first sight – and at first sight only – his work looks child-like and 'primitive'. He is no Grandson Moses, however, and behind his elaborate compositions lies an almost wicked sophistication." Thus wrote the critic in the Evening Standard of his 1956 exhibition in the Arthur Jeffress Gallery in Mayfair. And Koke's paintings, with their attention to detail, do have an immediate impact. There is a feeling of tremendous energy, life and enthusiasm.

Similarly his poems are powerful, thoughtful and provocative, drawing as they do on his life experiences. His poetry has been published by the International Library of Poetry Anthologies, and appears in "Memories of the Millennium", an anthology of the best poems of the 20th century. He was a member of Poets Anonymous Croydon and in 1997 he was deemed Poet of the Year. His poems are often written in Spanish and in English and show a mastery and understanding of the intricacies of both languages. He talks of having lead a bohemian life, amongst painters, sculptors, writers and actors. There is no doubt that his experiences as a child in the Spanish Civil War, and later as an adolescent in Britain during the Second World War marked him, and his work reflects this. "This traumatic experience during one's formative years can never be forgotten," he wrote. "It left indelible war scars that can never be erased, as we were expatriated forcibly into the unknown, separated from our roots and had to relinquish our families."

His parents were never far from Koke's mind. In fact, having crossed the Pyrenees into France with his little brother, his parents had been interned in a concentration camp. During the Nazi occupation of France, they went to live in Dax and a sister, Olga, was born in 1941. The Red Cross managed to locate them, but it was only in 1953 that Koke and his brothers were only reunited with their parents; they never returned to live in Spain, eventually dying in exile.

Koke lived with his friends, the Hinchliffe's, in Croydon from 1958, (Frederick Hinchliffe had been the Principal of Croydon School of Art), and Koke cared for him while he was critically ill until his death in 1960. He then shared the house with Hinchliffe's wife, known as Mimi, who became his "soul mate and partner"; he subsequently looked after her from 1993 for the last ten years of her life when she became increasingly infirm and finally bed-ridden. During their "forty years cohabitation and devotion", he immortalised her in poetry and paintings. She died without leaving a will and so began a long and stressful time for Koke as he tried to secure for himself the house he had shared for so many years with her. He wrote in a letter: "I feel as if I am in a cage surrounded by lawyers greedy for money and they want to gobble me up before obtaining part of the inheritance, very little of which will be left after paying death duties."

In his later years, Koke was active politically, going to Trafalgar Square on the peace march in November 2003 against Bush and the war in Iran. The following year, he campaigned with the Lambeth Pensioners Action Group, protesting against the increase in Council Tax. He regretted having sold some of his paintings and kept his own collection that was not for sale: "I have sold many of my 'children' in the past and regret it."

I got to know Koke when we set up the Basque Children of '37 Association UK in 2002. He befriended me, delighted that through our efforts, the Basque children would not be forgotten, because, as he said: "We, the Basque children, are historic monuments." He was the most enthusiastic of all our members, and the most supportive. He attended all our events, whether the unveiling of a blue plaque, a poetry reading, the annual lunch or a talk. There was always a letter of thanks after such an event, together with exhortations to look after myself and not to do too much. He especially appreciated the Newsletters and two of his poems were published in them. He also realised the importance of consolidating archives, and over the seven years I knew him, sent me many photos and cuttings for our archives. He was a remarkable man of many talents, extremely kind and good-natured, and to the end maintained a boyish vitality and sense of humour. We shall miss him.

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