

## TV documentary

# 'The Guernica Children' shown on BBC4

Some of you may have seen the information on our website and in our Newsletter about the documentary film project, "The Guernica Children".

Steve Bowles – the director/producer – had previously directed a film for Discovery Latin America and Basque Television – which told the more general story of the children who were evacuated from Spain during the civil war. His new project aimed to tell the story of the four thousand Basque children who were brought to Britain.

Steve had been trying to persuade the TV commissioners over the merits of the project for more than four years. After a dozen rejections, BBC4 finally commissioned the film at the beginning of December 2004, with BBC Wales coming on-board on the basis of having a different version of the film for BBC2W.

"One of the greatest challenges was always going to be telling a coherent story," said Steve. "With 4,000 children there were inevitably going to be 4,000 different stories and condensing that to tell one compelling story was always going to be hard."

Adrian Bell – author of "Only for Three Months" – kindly agreed to make his own research on the story available to Steve and provided the expert interview which is the back-bone of the film. Interviews with the "children" were conducted in Spain and in Britain and archive was sourced from both countries.

"We had some tremendous luck with the archive footage" explained Steve. "At the beginning of January a roll of film came to light at the Southampton City archives. A cook at the big hotel adjacent to the docks was, apparently, an amateur cameraman and would regularly wander round the docks taking cine film of the boats coming and going. And guess what...? he was in the docks when *La Habana* docked at Southampton!"

As if one piece of luck wasn't enough, Manuel Moreno, President of the Basque Children of '37 Association, discovered another role of film shot at the Cambridge colony. The film had been

taken by a Mr Brunney – a professional cameraman – who helped at the Cambridge colony. His son, John Brunney, was delighted that the film would be used as a tribute to his father's work.

At the heart of the story is the conflict between the British Government, who did not want the children here, and the remarkable grass-roots movement that cared for them. The "children" who eventually returned to Spain invariably remember their stay in Britain with great fondness.

Jesus Urbina who returned in 1940, touchingly concludes his contribution by saying how grateful he is for the way he was looked after. The children who remained in Britain for a life-time are also grateful for the way they were cared for but, somehow, their experience is tinged with sadness for what was lost.

The 40-minute BBC4 version of the film was finally broadcast on 24 April. The 30-minute BBC Wales version was shown two days later. Both channels had been keen to screen the film to commemorate the bombing of Guernica.

Steve's persistence with the idea has proven to be well-founded. 140,000 people watched the film on BBC4 – a much higher rating than they would normally expect. Perhaps the Spanish Civil War and the Basque children are not so forgotten after all.

● *"The Guernica Children" is sure to be repeated. Try to keep an eye on your TV listings for the next showing. Alternatively we have copies of the film here which you can buy for £15.*

### Postscript

What they said about the film: "es muy interesante y merece ser visto"; "a powerful documentary"; "this amazing new story"; "an extraordinary film". The film "The Guernica Children" scored a big hit for the BBC as it was watched by 140,000 people on its first showing, an exceptionally high number for a documentary carried on a digital platform. The Radio Times selected the documentary as one of its "Choices of the Day".

▶ example of Franco's version of history. It is presented as a monument to all who fell in the civil war, and yet it was constructed with the slave labour of Republican prisoners, many of whom died as a result of the dangerous and inhumane conditions. Only a handful of token Republican victims are included in the memorials there.

All in all, it is estimated that over 180,000 non-combatants were murdered by Franco's forces. When trials were held, they were kangaroo courts of the worst kind, with defendants not allowed to hear the charges against them, no consultation with legal counsel permitted, and only junior lawyers allowed to represent the accused. Franco always had the last word when it came to commutation of death sentences. He did not commute a single one, and sometimes specified a particularly barbaric form of execution, such as garroting.

It was an unsettling lecture: the people of Spain need to know the truth in order to come to terms with what happened and to ensure that such events are never repeated.

## Republicans remembered

by Manuel Moreno

She waved. I returned the gesture. Thrice she did wave and thrice I replied in similar fashion. She was being driven in a large Bentley, I walking with companions. We were both on the island of Jersey, in St Helier on 9 May, she to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Liberation of the Channel Islands from German occupation and we to remember all those who were there as slave labourers. It was a sunny day and many people attended both functions, more than ever before. Hers was a celebratory occasion, a victory over the oppressor, with thousands turning up, waving union jacks in the centre of the town; ours was a large gathering of people at the cemetery beside the graves above the town.

We were there to not forget all those thousands of foreign slave labourers who were used by the Todt organisation of the German army to construct the Atlantic Wall, the underground hospitals and other sites on the islands, which can still be seen and visited today. They were mainly from the Soviet Union, the Ukraine, Poland, Morocco, Algeria, France and Spain. They worked long hours in appalling conditions, were given little to eat and were badly treated: many died as a result.

Our growing flock of over 100 men, women and children gathered around the particular grave as they had done over the years – to remember them, the suffering they endured, the inhumanity of man and the message that this should not be tolerated, now or ever again. We all from different parts stood together to grow, learn, to educate and to call out.

## From the Secretary

Steve Bowles' new film "The Guernica Children", which was broadcast on 24 April to coincide with the date of the bombing of Guernica, was the fulfilment of a dream for me. It is a powerful rendering of the *niños*' story, combining personal reminiscence, film footage from the time and present day representations. It received excellent reviews, being described by "The Times" as "an outstanding film"; it certainly brought the story of the *niños vascos* to a wider audience. A version was made for BBC Wales, and there is a shorter one for BBC South, showing on 26 September. As the film originally came out on BBC4, the digital channel, some of you may not have been able to see it, so we have made some copies on video that you can buy from me.

A blue plaque was unveiled in Cambridge in May, the third plaque that the Association has promoted. The day was hot and sunny and Cambridge was looking at its best. There were about 75 guests, including 16 *niños* and many members of the Association. Yet another blue plaque, you may say. But in fact, the plaques have a far wider social function than merely recording the *niños*' stay in a particular colony. They are also a means of thanking British volunteers for their unswerving dedication in looking after the children. Furthermore, the ceremonies are inevitably happy occasions, bringing together, not only the *niños* themselves, but also the descendants of those who were involved in some way or another in the children's care. For example, in Cambridge, there were representatives from six or seven families who helped and befriended the *niños*. A further function of the blue plaque ceremony is the dissemination of information – through the press coverage we get on these occasions, the story of the *niños* becomes more widely known. So although it can be very hard work preparing for these ceremonies (the Cambridge event took over a year of negotiation and planning), it is very worthwhile.

We are grateful to the Master of Jesus College for letting us use the Upper Room in the college at no charge, and we would also like to express our thanks to the Basque government for funding the plaque and ceremony.

The same social function evinced by the blue plaque ceremony was evident in the short ceremony that opened the exhibition at Eastleigh Library in July, when *niños* were reunited after such a long time with helper Jack Puntis, a schoolboy of 17 in 1937. Both the events had a similar

cathartic effect: you can read the poignant account of the Eastleigh reunion in the Newsletter.

During recent months, a great deal of work has gone into producing more display boards of photographs and newspaper reports, especially in connection with the events at Cambridge and for an exhibition at Bradford during Refugee Week at the end of June. The Association loans out these display boards: several educational establishments have recently approached us with a view of holding an exhibition.

The author Adrian Bell, who is known to many of you, delighted us with his talk in June at the Marx Memorial Library on "The Basque Children and the British Government", a shorter version of which will appear in the next Newsletter. He also gave a talk at Bradford.

We welcome the Spanish government's initiative to pay a decent pension to the *niños* who left Spain during the civil war. Although it will not be applicable to many, if any, of those *niños* who live in the UK, nevertheless, it will make a great deal of difference to those *niños* living in Latin America or Russia who have great difficulty in surviving, as the pensions in some of those countries are totally inadequate.

What is becoming increasingly evident in recent months from emails and phone calls I receive, is that not only do the children and relatives of the *niños* want to know more about their parents'/grandparents' lives, but also members of the general public. This upsurge of interest has been matched by an ever-growing number of researchers in the field. This is just one of the justifications for starting up the Association, especially so that the *niños*' story should not be consigned to oblivion. To this end, we have produced a bibliography of books and articles for family members, potential researchers and other interested parties. It is, however, never very far from my mind that these *niños* were deprived of a normal childhood with their parents and family. Some 4 000 children came to Britain. But in all, some 30 000 children were evacuated from Spain. It is an awesome figure. Their courage and determination are equal to none.

In closing, I want to remind you that in 2007 it will be the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the *niños* in Britain. Let us have some suggestions as how best to mark this event!

*iAgur!*

Natalia Benjamin

*Natalia Benjamin*

to the table to join in and I felt anxious.

Steve Bowles, whose excellent and powerful documentary "The Guernica Children" was recently shown on BBC television, indicated that the time had come to begin the opening of the exhibition and gave a short talk. We sat in rows and Dad was in the front. When Steve handed the scissors to Josefina to cut the ribbon, I had expected that she would just declare the exhibition open – but NO! She lay the scissors down on the table behind her. Holding her arms out, she took a few paces towards Jack and said with such feeling: "All of my life I have wanted to meet someone who helped me when I was a child. I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for all you did for us, as I would like to thank all the English people who were there." She put her arms round him and hugged him and was joined by Carmen and Serafin shaking his hand and thanking him. This was an incredible and magical moment that will remain with me for the rest of my life. All these years I had thought that if only Jack could meet someone from Stoneham Camp, he might have some feeling of resolution and completion. What I had not understood until now was that those who had been children in the camp needed that too! I feel privileged to have witnessed this meeting. I was awed too by the fact that this was a very special opportunity as there will not be too many people left who were camp volunteers, because at 17 Jack was probably one of the youngest volunteers and he is now 86. It was a chance in a lifetime. Thank you Josefina, Carmen and Serafin for remembering even though you were so young at the time and for the loving and gracious way you greeted Jack. Thank goodness we were able to get to Eastleigh on that very special day. Little did we know the opportunity it would provide for this very important and poignant reunion.

So the ribbon was cut and when we could



Josefina Stubbs cutting the ribbon to open the Eastleigh exhibition.