

What happened to the *Habana*?

by Natalia Benjamin

The *Habana* remained at Southampton until 29 May when she left for the return passage to Bilbao, once again escorted by the destroyer Fearless. It was proposed that the *Habana* might take back with her on the voyage much-needed medical supplies but this was not permitted by the British government who felt it might be perceived as a breach of the non-intervention agreement. This trip by the *Habana* to England was, in fact, to be a one-off event. Shortly afterwards, when the fall of Santander appeared imminent, fresh approaches were made to the British government for permission for Spanish refugees to be allowed entry into Britain but the proposal was unequivocally rejected.

So that is the end of the association of the *Habana* with the Basque children. But what happened to the ship after that? She had an eventful life. She was moored at Bordeaux until the end of the war as a hospital ship and returned to Bilbao in 1939. There was a fire on board that destroyed much of the accommodation, and the *Habana* was remodelled to take both passengers and cargo. In 1942, she sailed to Latin America with 12 passengers and 518 cubic metres of cargo. At the end of the war, she was refitted as a passenger ship, burning only fuel, and spent many years going from Spain to America until she moored in Vigo in 1960.

Then Pescanova bought it. It was a company founded that same year by José Fernández López, who set out to solve the age-old problem in the Spanish fishing industry, namely how to preserve fish caught away from Spain's ports – in the South Atlantic for example – so that the fish did not spoil during transport times of as much as three weeks. Fernandez recognised that the development of refrigeration and freezing technologies offered a new possibility for transporting fish. In 1960 he began outfitting his first freezer vessel, the *Lemos*. It was successful off the coast of Argentina, and then went to South Africa, returning with more than 250 tons of hake. Encouraged by this success, the company then acquired its second vessel, "a retired cruise ship called the *Habana*". Pescanova converted it into a giant floating factory, renaming it the *Galicia*. In its new capacity, the boat set sail for South Africa in 1964, supported by its own fleet of fishing boats. While the *Galicia* served as a production vessel, including freezing but also breeding and frying facilities, transport back to Spain was provided by a fleet of dedicated freezer vessels.

In 1975, she laid anchor at Vigo and what we learn about the fate of the *Habana/Galicia* is that in 1978 she was sold for scrap and broken up at Vigo. Later, the anchor of the *Habana* was donated in 1990 to the Philippe Cousteau Anchor Museum by the



Ayuntamiento of San Sebastián: it is considered to be one of the treasures of the museum. The open air museum is situated on La Peñon peninsula in Salinas, a town within the Castillón municipality in Asturias.

As a footnote, in 1980, Ricardo Fernández, the former master of the *Habana*, saw an announcement in the press that the Basque children from England were planning a reunion in Bilbao, and so he wrote to the mayor asking whether he could go to the reunion and meet some of those *niños* whom he had ferried those many years ago. His letter was passed on to Helvecia Hidalgo, the organiser. She replied to him, saying that unfortunately the meeting had to be postponed, but she hoped he would be able to come the following year and that the *niños* had been very touched to see that after such a long time he still remembered them. Ricardo Fernández replied that as he was 76 years old, he wasn't sure of being there and her letter had moved him to tears.

What an interesting history the ship has, although its role in evacuating the Basque children is for me the highlight of its eventful operational service.

El Parque de la Memoria, Sartaguda

by Olwen Zornosa

Navarra now has a memorial to the province's victims of Nationalist troops during the years of the Civil War and after. *El Parque de la Memoria*, standing just outside Sartaguda, a village some 40km south of Estella, was officially opened in May 2008 and Venancio (a *niño*) and I were taken there by family when we were visiting his home town of Alsasua in June that year. Sartaguda has long been known as "el pueblo de las viudas", because of the high proportion of its men taken away and not seen again, so it was an appropriate place to choose, if in no way unique.

The site is high and open, the day we visited a bit stark under the burning sun, but trees have been planted and in time it will become more like a garden. It is dominated by a gigantic metal sculpture, 8m high, of three standing figures, heads bent together, linked by their arms on one another's

shoulders. There is another two dimensional sculpture, a sheet of rusted metal with the cut-out figure of a bound man, riddled with bullet holes. And there are standing tablets on which poems have been inscribed, in both Castilian and Basque.

The site was chosen by the sculptor, Joxe



The memorial park features the names of 3,420 civilians murdered by the Francoists.

Ulibarrena, with the original intention of erecting a single sculpture but the project was expanded by the wishes of local people and the necessary funds were contributed by provincial government, by many local municipalities and by national government.

Central to all is a wall with the name of every man, 3,420 in all, whose death researchers have been able to verify by searching records, often hidden or obscured, and disinterring and identifying bones from unmarked graves, work which has taken many years and which still continues. Listed alphabetically, town by town and village by village and, again alphabetically, name by name, it did not take long for Venancio to find his father's name among the 86 listed for Alsasua.

I am sure his gratitude for this belated recognition was shared by all the relatives of the identified victims, who have waited so many years for some kind of memorial to their dead.