

The Niños speak

Vicente Cañada

En mayo de 2007 acudí como Presidente de la Asociación de Evacuados de la Guerra Civil, para celebrar con vosotros el 70º Aniversario de las evacuaciones y hoy vengo en la misma condición.

Regresé a Bilbao, después de una estancia de dos años en Inglaterra, sin obtener como regalo unos buenos conocimientos de vuestro idioma que me hubieran abierto paso en mi vida laboral, tan difícil para nosotros que nos encontrábamos faltos de instrucción. Este era el único reproche que podía presentar a una estancia que, por lo demás, fue feliz, y lo fue al encontrarme con magníficas personas que me dieron desinteresadamente algo verdaderamente necesario en aquella edad: cariño y protección.

Os diré que, en verdad, nuestro regreso fue sumamente penoso pues encontramos el país en una situación lamentable con unas carestías enormes y, lo que era peor, con el enemigo disponiéndolo todo a su conveniencia y sin olvidar que las guerras crean odios y represalias y, más aun, si hablamos de una guerra civil. Vivimos en la pobreza largo tiempo y, aunque trabajo si había, estaba tan mal pagado que mucha gente tenía dos ocupaciones y ni aun así se conseguían los ingresos suficientes para lograr un mínimo de desahogo.

Los que veníamos del exilio, tan carentes de formación como era mi caso, empezamos nuestra formación en el propio trabajo y poco a poco, algunos, tuvimos la suerte de conseguir ocupaciones de cierto nivel y desde esta posición fuimos mejorando.

Después de leer el interesante libro de Adrian Bell, *Solo Serán Tres Meses*, he visto que en este país ocurrió algo parecido, los que se quedaron sufriendo todos muchas penurias e, igualmente padecieron los desastres de la guerra. Afortunadamente se salió victorioso de la contienda que nosotros desde España seguíamos paso a paso.

Siempre que vengo a estas tierras lo hago con gran ilusión aunque en los últimos tiempos me acompañe una cierta melancolía pues mis viejos amigos, aquellas entrañables personas que alegraron mi estancia, ya no están, porque, poco a poco, nuestro tiempo se va pasando.

Probablemente este será mi último viaje a esta querida tierra pues la edad, por una parte, y la finalización de nuestra Asociación, que está prevista para diciembre de este 2012, después de unos años en los que nuestra principal actividad ha estado dedicada al recuerdo, celebración y cuanto se relacionaba con nuestras salidas al día de hoy está cumplida suficientemente y aconsejan una retirada honrosa.

Espero que este acto del 75º aniversario resulte tan espléndido como el del 70º que sorprendió a todos por su excelente organización y las espectaculares intervenciones de las que guardamos un grato recuerdo. Por nuestra parte tenemos proyectada la celebración de este aniversario en Santurce, el 24 de mayo próximo y conjuntamente con la Asociación de Niños Evacuados el '37 y acogeremos con cariño a cuantos deseáis acompañarnos.

Herminio Martínez

The circumstances of our arrival here in Southampton in May 1937 were quite extraordinary. We know that the British government of the time simply did not want us, and gave us no

help or support whatsoever. It would seem that the sympathies of that Conservative government, lay more with Franco's fascists than with the Republican government, freely elected by the Spanish people. It was the revulsion following the destruction of Guernica by the German Condor Legion that caused a change of mind.

However, if the British Government did not want us, the same cannot be said of the British people, who gave us so much help and support. These people came from all walks of life, from the full spectrum of British society. I want to take this opportunity to express our gratitude to so many, who did so much for us.

What a task these people took on! To bring 4,000 children in one boatload, and in such difficult circumstances to Britain. When I see photos of the Basque children when we arrived; so many, so young and so tiny, I realise the humanity that motivated so many British people of the time.

I feel privileged to have known some of these wonderful people. Like many of us, I have been inspired throughout my life by such idealists.

We came across many, who, working in the colonies all over the country, devoted years of their lives to us. Many were working class people with their own problems in those difficult years of depression and unemployment. Some, like Wilfrid Roberts the Liberal MP, Leah Manning the official of the teacher's union, and the Tory MP, the Duchess of Atholl, organised our evacuation. I want to mention others, as examples of so many.

Chloë and Poppy Vulliamy both took charge of some of the colonies. Chloe's support went further. She was arrested and imprisoned in Spain while providing help to the families of some of Franco's victims after the war.

Ronald Thackrah, very much involved with the Barnet colony, who was sent to Bilbao by the Basque Children's Committee, to verify that the requests for repatriation by our parents were genuine, and who was expelled by the Franco authorities.

Eric Hawkins, who rushed to the camp at Eastleigh to help out with interpreting, and who did excellent work both at the Cambridge colony and at the disastrous camp at Scarborough.

Then there was that lovely caring person Miss Picken, the Secretary of the Basque Children's Committee over so many years. She took such a personal interest in us and would even visit some of the children who were in hospital.

The Quakers, whose many members supported us in such practical ways. They did not preach; they practised their beliefs.

Everything we experienced as we were growing up was not all "honey" of course. There was that hell of a colony that was Margate. Quite an experience, certainly! There were the difficulties of life during the Second World War. The long years of loneliness, of growing up and having to fend for ourselves, still very young, without the support of our families. Life was tough.

Looking back, the interesting result of our experience is that what might have been a disaster for many of us, brought out the best in us, and that we grew up to become independent and responsible citizens who have made a positive contribution to this Society.

Paco Robles

I was almost 11 when my sister and I were sent to England, 75 years ago this month. The journey from Santurce to Southampton was terrible, on that we all agree - vomiting and trying to sleep on

the floor, terrible! At Stoneham camp we were eight to a tent. Of course we didn't undress, so soon we had picked up fleas, which we then took to the other colonies. A lasting memory is of being woken up every day in the camp by loudspeakers playing "Land of Hope and Glory". It is still my favourite song.

We were there about a month after which we were taken to Wherstead Park, Ipswich, to a lovely big house set in magnificent gardens and grounds. This was a very happy time for us. I remember Mrs Chloë Vulliamy and others visiting us bringing sweets and toys – I particularly remember being given a torch.

After almost year there, I went to live with Mrs Vulliamy for a few months, but I missed my pals, so I moved on to a colony at Wickham Market, in a disused hospital re-opened specially for us. It was a terrible place: we all caught scabies and the house was infested by rats. But it was not all bad as I formed some long-lasting friendships there and also started to learn English. I wasn't too keen on this at first – I couldn't see the point, as I thought we would be going home soon and it sounded very strange to my ears. The first words I learnt in English were: "I think so". I liked them so much that I repeated them to any question that I was asked, such as: "What is your name?" "I think so." "How old are you?" "I think so" etc. When I saw the questioner smile, I said to myself, I know how to speak English and I thought that I had mastered the whole of the English language, which made me very happy. But eventually I put my mind to it and my friend Pedro Encinas and I shot to the top of the class! To this day I enjoy repeating: "I think so"!

My sister and I were then fostered for two years by a family from Birmingham. They had recently lost a son and didn't feel too kindly towards us. I had to help the father on his smallholding: I was up at six to milk the goat, clean the pigsty and collect the 5 gallon churn of milk. After that I had breakfast, some bread with very little jam and a cup of tea. Then I went to school. We were hungry here - even the dog had more to eat than us. But school was good and I enjoyed it: I could swap Spanish stamps for more food!

After 18 months with no word from us, (we were forbidden to write letters), the Basque Children's Committee came to find out what was happening to us and they soon took us away from that place.

I spent short periods in colonies in Carlisle, Margate, Carshalton, Barnet and Finchley so I got an idea of how different the colonies could be. I had both good and bad experiences, and I think that many of us who were moved around a lot will have similar mixed memories and feelings.

One thing that we all share, though, is that 75 years ago we made enduring close friendships that are still going strong today, even though there are fewer of us every year.

Juanita Vaquer

I was born and lived in Santurce until, when I was eight years old, we left for Britain on 21 May 1937. My mother had recently heard of the death of my father defending Gernika, so it was left to an elderly relative to bring my sister and me to the docks to join the thousands of other children embarking for Britain.

Paco has just told you about his mixed experiences at several colonies. I was only at one place after North Stoneham and did not have a good experience at all. My sister and I were among twenty girls sent to the Sisters of Nazareth Convent at Didsbury,

Manchester. I was there from 1937-1943, and I don't want to say much more about it. At the end of the Spanish Civil War we couldn't go home because we had no home to go to. As I said, our father had been killed, and our mother was now a refugee somewhere in France.

We were taken out of the wretched convent by a doctor friend of a relative. I was fourteen years old. We lived with him and his wife for a year, then they had a baby and there was no longer any room for us. The doctor found a job for my sister at his hospital in Manchester, and I decided to move to London. I stayed at the colony at Woodside Park in Finchley for a year and then went to the Basque Children's Committee who found me a job as a nursery nurse. I was fifteen at the time, the Second World War was in its last year and there were plenty of jobs for nursery nurses. I spent three years looking after children in a beautiful Queen Anne house in Bethnal Green that was owned by Cambridge University. I was happy there and well looked after.

There were two other Basque girls in Bethnal Green with me – Rosita Sánchez and Ma. Jesus Robles, Paco's sister. We all became good friends. Rosita took me to the *Hogar Español* and there to my surprise I found that I was not alone, there were **lots** of other niños vascos who had stayed in Britain after both the wars. We developed very close bonds and became for each other the family that we had all lost. And we have remained a family ever since. I don't know if others who have not gone through our experience can quite understand how we all feel towards each other.

After Bethnal Green I took a job in a factory belonging to John Lewis where I worked in the dressmaking department as a finisher. It was there that I met my husband to be, Jaime. We married in 1952 and have just celebrated the 60th anniversary of our happy marriage.

I am the last of the *niños vascos* to speak today so I will end by welcoming our special family of *niños vascos*. Over the 75 years we have shared happiness and laughter but also a lot of sorrow. Now is perhaps the time to think in particular of our brothers and sisters who are not here today, either because they cannot travel or because they have died. We remember all of them at today's events.



Vincente Cañada Herminio Martínez Paco Robles Juanita Vaquer