

Our early years in the UK and our thanks to the British people

Hundreds, thousands of people, through their work and generosity, made it possible for us to survive those difficult months and years, after we arrived here, in Southampton in May 1937. Many of us were only six and seven years old. What a task these people took on!

It is a paradox, that whereas the people of Southampton and the British People, received us with such warmth, the British Government did not want us. Indeed, the policy of appeasement and of so called non intervention pursued by that government, would contribute to the defeat of Republican Spain and the oppression of 36 years of a dictatorship.

But, we are here today, to express our thanks and gratitude to all those wonderful British people who helped in so many different ways; to thank them for their generosity, their solidarity and their humanity.

I want to mention some individually, just a few from the many, who did so much for us. They came from a wide range of society and ideologies, from all walks of life: from Trade Unions, Boy Scouts, Church groups and political parties

Mrs. Somerset. Her name was always mentioned with affection and respect. She worked in a number of colonias. She had a five year old son. While playing with some of the children, some just a little older, he was hit on the head by a swing and was killed. All the children were terribly distressed. Mrs. Somerset comforted them to reassure them that it had been an accident. This, while dealing with her own sorrow. Nell Somerset was a Communist.

The Duchess of Atholl was towards the other end of the political and social spectrum to Mrs. Somerset. She was a Tory MP; an extraordinary person. She had seen the plight of children in besieged Madrid. She saw the danger of Nazism in Germany and Fascism in Italy. This was the time of appeasement of "Herr Hitler", as Chamberlain referred to him. I understand she presented a copy of "Mein Kampf" to each member of the cabinet so they should be in no doubt as to what Hitler stood for.

Chloe and Poppy Vulliamy devoted years to our welfare. Chloe, cultured and perhaps shy. Poppy, exuberant and full of energy. She wrote to Lord Farringdon that as a Labour peer, he should not live in a mansion, while her refugee children lived in a camp. Lord Farringdon responded. He made accommodation available on his "estate". Adrian and I attended Poppy's memorial service. The Vicar, who had had many a tussle with her, referred to her as a goat among the sheep ---but, he conceded; in heaven.

There were the members of the BCC. Amongst them, Ronald Thackrah; always very much involved. He persuaded Juan Negrin to fund the Juan Luis Vives

Scholarships. Miss Picken, so quiet, so kind and so devoted to us. Wilfred Roberts the Liberal MP, who waged such a battle with the Foreign Office, that wanted to pack us all back to Spain whether we had parents to go back to or not; so as to appease Franco: to appease a brutal dictator.

There were many, many others. Walter Leonard, himself a refugee from Nazism. Charlie West, a baker's roundsman, who collected funds for the Oaks colony in Carshalton.

At the centre of events was Leah Manning who worked in education and had been sent to Bilbao to organise the evacuation of the children to come to Britain and who, subsequently ran one of the excellent colonias. In Bilbao there is now a "Plaza de Leah Manning" to commemorate her work.

Our education was in many cases totally disrupted. But the experience of living with others in the colonias and our contact with exceptional people in some of them, gave us an education that was in many ways, unique. It was the University of Life: at times, a tough university.

For some of us, these early years brought us into contact with older Spanish exiles. Some of them, the young Spanish intellectuals, who had been part of the new cultural Renaissance and were now in exile. Amongst them, Pepe Estruch, Luis Portillo, Luis Cernuda the poet and others who became our friends and teachers and who opened our eyes to that idealistic Spanish dream that had been crushed by fascism.

Luis Portillo had been a professor of Law at Salamanca University. He was now in exile in Britain. He taught in one of the colonias but at times, had to earn his keep working in a café, peeling potatoes and washing up.

Pepe Estruch who worked at "The Culvers", the last colonia to close, was absolutely brilliant with his theatrical work with the children, producing plays by Lorca and the classics of the Spanish Golden Age. He was an excellent natural teacher and such an inspiration to many of us.

To all these wonderful people, to all these exceptional people and to many, many others, those of us who are here today, who arrived in Southampton in May 1937 as refugees, want to say: thank you..