

BASQUE REFUGEES AT NAZARETH

The plight of children during the Spanish Civil War caused conflict in Britain. At first the British Government, as signatories to the 1936 Non-Intervention Agreement, refused to accept any refugees. However, following the bombing of Guernica in April 1937 there was such outrage that almost 4000 children were evacuated from Bilbao to Southampton. The British Government refused to provide any funding for the care of these children.

On 23rd May 1937 the children, accompanied by priests, teachers and auxiliaries, disembarked from the SS Habana at Southampton. They were initially sent to a reception camp at North Stoneham in Eastleigh. The children, aged mostly between 5 and 16, were the sons and daughters of farmers, factory workers and fighters, and had suffered greatly from the terrors of the war in their homeland. However, their arrival was met with mixed feelings among British people, some of whom feared that they would bring trouble and disease. Others wished to help and paid 10 shillings a week for a child's maintenance in Britain.

The days that followed the arrival were busy for the Sisters at Southampton Nazareth House. Priests went backwards and forwards to the Camp and made Nazareth House their centre for saying Mass and their general headquarters. Mother General wished to accommodate some of the children, 1500 of whom were to go to Catholic Homes. 180 children were sent from North Stoneham to Catholic Homes in the North of England. Of these, 50 girls went to Crosby Nazareth House, 10 boys to Ditton and 20 children to Middlesbrough. Mother General was very pleased when Captain Herbert Ward offered the use of his house, Weston Manor at Freshwater on the Isle of Wight so that more children could be accommodated by the Sisters.

Boys and girls were gradually moved out of the Camp, where conditions were poor. On May 29th 48 of the boys moved to Southampton Nazareth House and settled well. A few days later, on 2nd June, 100 girls, accompanied by 2 priests and 2 teachers, moved to Weston Manor. They were welcomed by Mother Bernard, Sister Lucy and Sister Joseph Gonzaga, who had worked tirelessly to prepare the house. It was soon necessary to expand the Community. At first Mother General thought it would be possible to keep the House going by sending Sisters for their rests, but eventually the Community became more settled and the usual round of collecting was commenced.

On 13th June the formal inauguration of the new Nazareth settlement took place. The Blessed Sacrament was carried in procession of Bishop Cotter of Portsmouth from St. Saviour's Church to the Manor. Thousands of people took part in the procession, and the children, dressed in their colourful national costumes, gave a display of dancing.

On the 2nd July a further group of 14 girls arrived from the Camp, and soon life at the Manor settled into the Nazareth routine. The children attended to their religious duties, and some made their First Holy Communion. A garden fete was held to raise funds to supplement the money collected from local benefactors. It was not long before the Sisters and their charges became part of the Island community.

The Sisters did their best to make Christmas special for the children. They all received presents, had a lovely dinner and a party. The children entertained the Sisters to a tableau of the Nativity, which they acted with reverence and skill.

By this time some of the children had started to return to their families. The first group left in November 1937, followed by others in December and early in the New Year. However, as the numbers of Basque children had also decreased at Hammersmith, it was decided that those

remaining should be transferred to Southampton and Weston Manor. Thus 5 new girls arrived at the Manor in February.

Daily life continued for the Sisters at the Manor much as at other Nazareth Houses, although they felt somewhat in exile on the Island. Departures of children continued throughout 1938 and early 1939. The fall of Barcelona on 25th February and General Franco's victory were met with sadness by the Basque children, although they were relieved that the war was over and hoped that they would soon be able to return to their families.

The Sisters made preparations to leave the Island in June 1939, surprised at how much they had accumulated during two years in the Manor. It was originally planned that a group of German refugees would live at the Manor, so it was decided to leave beds and bedding and some other furniture for them to use. 16 girls and 2 priests moved to Southampton and 2 teachers went to Southsea. The Sisters left the Manor on 2nd June, the second anniversary of their arrival on the Island. Captain and Mrs Ward and many friends and benefactors were sorry to see the Sisters and children leave, and quite a number came to say Goodbye.

To the knowledge of the Congregation none of the Basque children in their care were left orphans by the war. The mother of one little girl was killed by a bomb and another girl's father was executed for political reasons. By January 1940 all but three of the children had left the Sisters' care.

To thank the Sisters of Nazareth for their care and many kindnesses two silver trays were presented in 1987.





[This article was researched and written by the Congregation of the Sisters of Nazareth Generalate Archive from the Generalate Archive Collection held at Hammersmith, London, UK. The archive can be contacted on: archive@nazarethcare.com]