

# Report on the recent series of presentations in the Basque Country.

By Carmen Kilner

## Wednesday 26th April 2017

The journey started with our flight into Bilbao. It was chilling to realise as we were making our approach over land into Loiu airport at about 5pm, that *exactly* 80 years ago to the hour, waves of German bombers were travelling a similar route and bombing Gernika. I wanted to tell everyone on the plane - but made do with telling the strangers sitting next to me.

John and I drove to San Sebastián and met for a meal with the organisers, Luis Mari Naya, and Paulí Dávila, of University of the Basque Country, with the other speakers of the next day's event and with Javier Palop of SM, whose association had provided much of the funding.

## Thursday 27th April

The day's event was entitled "A Day Study on the Right to Education: Refugees of Yesterday and Today", and was hosted by the Faculty of Education, Philosophy. and Anthropology, EHU/UPV. There was one presentation in Basque and two excellent speakers from UNICEF and CEAR - (the Spanish Commission for Aid to Refugees).

At this point we met with Simon and Barbie Martinez who were combining helping and attending most of our events with a walking holiday along the 'Camino'. After a short break I spoke about the experiences of the "niños vascos del '37" in Great Britain, and also about my mother, a teacher with those children, who was born and educated in San Sebastián.



**ABOVE** The beautiful lecture theatre Aula Magna, Faculty of Education, Philosophy and Anthropology EHU/UPV

**LEFT** - Speakers and organisers of the study day. (John Kilner in the background doing techy things).



**BELOW** Luis Mari Naya showing me the scale model of *SS Habana* at the exhibition

We all then visited the exhibition entitled "The Most Important Thing. Retratos de una Huida" linking the plight of Syrian refugees with that of the Basque refugee children of 80 years ago. The exhibition featured many of our BCA'37 posters that had previously been translated into Basque and Spanish; display cases of teaching books of then and now; and other relevant artefacts. However, a highlight for us was the scale model of *The Habana*: this was loaned by the *Aquarium*



that is on the quay side of the Parte Vieja. *The Habana* was rebuilt as a cargo ship, and this, with changes to decking and funnel, was what was on display.

At some point in the morning I gave a radio interview for Radio Ser.

A journalist from the Diario Vasco, Nerea Azurmendi, attended the morning's talk and later interviewed Luis Mari Naya and me. This resulted in an impressive two page article in the Sunday Diario Vasco de Guipuzcoa, and a longer, more complete web report: <http://www.diariovasco.com/sociedad/201705/09/ocho-dias-para-acoger-20170430001220-v.html>

This same interview also appeared a week later Sunday in El Correo <http://www.elcorreo.com/bizkaia/sociedad/201705/07/ocho-dias-para-acoger-20170505173326.html>



## Friday 28th April

**Zarautz, Gipuzkoa.** A visit to Nerea Mendikute and her young family. Many of you will remember the dance group Keska Dantza Taldea who performed so beautifully at both our 70th and 75th Commemorative events at Southampton. Nerea was the prime instigator of this.

A few years ago I gave several talks at schools in Euskadi where again Nerea gave valuable support.

## Saturday 29th April,

**Elgoibar, Gipuzkoa.** A visit to my cousin Alfonso Guilló who has for many years been our tienda/shop for Spain.

**Eibar, Gipuzkoa** - a visit to Arantza Arrieta and Juan José Araolaza, parents of Oier Araolaza, the leader of the dance group Keska Danza Taldea. Arantza was the person who contacted and set up most of the school visits for me in Gipuzkoa a few years ago.

## Sunday 30th April

### Bilbao

The first speaking event in Bilbao was for the British Council on Monday, and they had provided accommodation for us at the very grand Hotel Carlton. This impressive building has an interesting link to the war in Bilbao. After the fall of Bilbao on 19th of July 1937, the Basque Government continued to meet clandestinely in a basement below the central reception area. You can see ventilation slits in the rise of the stone steps approaching the grand entrance. The government continued its meetings here until it went into exile. No doubt at some point the thousands of evacuated children and their fate were discussed here.

**RIGHT You can see the ventilation slits in the rise of the stone steps leading to the entrance of the Hotel Carlton**



## Monday 1st May

### May Day

A day of parades and marches. The weather was again beautiful, Simon and Barbie were walking and sadly I spent the day trying to catch up on work.

## Tuesday 2nd May

Simon and I went to the British Council - an institution bursting with energy and enthusiasm - to meet Rowan Hardman, Barbara Littlewood and others of the 60+ staff involved in teaching English to all from children to adults. They are also involved in various other cultural projects amongst which is an exciting project following the migration of the ospreys that were released a few years ago in the nearby National Park of Urdaibai.

Rowan Hardman, senior tutor and talented artist, produced a picture board story for their child pupils, about the evacuation of the children to UK

I spoke to two groups of young students: first an older group who were mainly from 15 to 16 years



old; secondly, a younger group aged from 12 to 14. Simon contributed actively to both talks and

obviously enjoyed himself - as did the audience. In each group there was a young person who had a family member who had been evacuated, the first had a grandfather who was evacuated to Russia and the second had a grandfather who had been evacuated to UK. We were impressed by the attention given to the talks by these young people, who had known only a little of the events that we were talking about.

There was an interview with Radio Euskadi which can be heard here:

<http://www.eitb.eus/es/radio/radio-euskadi/programas/graffiti/audios/detalle/4807711/los-ninos-ninas-vascas-guerra-recuerdan-ninos-sirios/>

The proceedings then moved to the Azkuna Zentroa, that used to be known as the Alhondiga. This was an evening presentation in 'normal' English. The audience were adult students of the British Council and other English speakers. A significant guest was Derek Doyle - the British Consul in Bilbao. The talk was both well attended and well received, with a lively discussion afterwards.

Simon and Barbie ran the book stall most efficiently, and John ably fulfilled his role as technical assistant.



**ABOVE L-R  
CK, Simon Martine, Rowan Hardman and Barbara Littlewood**



**ABOVE CK in full flood.**

The British Council considered the day a great success - as did we. We were happy to have established a really good relationship with the two senior tutors Rowan and Barbara and we all look forward to future collaborations and a few pintxos in the future!

### **Wednesday 3rd May**

Another interview, this time with Lander Munagorri for the Basque language newspaper Berria, which came out on Sunday, again another two page article, this time though in Basque.

[http://www.berria.eus/paperekoa/2083/054/001/2017-05-07/ingalaterak\\_ez\\_zien\\_eskaini\\_babes\\_instituzionalik\\_euskal\\_haurrei.htm](http://www.berria.eus/paperekoa/2083/054/001/2017-05-07/ingalaterak_ez_zien_eskaini_babes_instituzionalik_euskal_haurrei.htm)

My initial reason for going to Bilbao was to visit the Historical Archives of the Basque Government; I had visited several years previously when the archives were in Bergara. However, my trip was hijacked by invitations to speak and I was left with hardly any time to do research. Never mind, next time! Simon and I visited the Artxibo, and were warmly welcomed by the Head Archivist Francisco de Borja de Aguinagalde Olaizola and Roberto Kerexeta Zulaika.

Most excitingly we were able to examine the original ledger with the list of children, *maestras* and *auxiliares* who travelled to England. The archivists were aware of and pleased to see the lists of *Habana* passengers on our website and expressed a hope that we would add the digitised copy of the ledger at some point. This we hope to do as soon as feasible.

## Thursday 4th May

### Gernika

Before leaving home, I had received a phone call from Derek Doyle, the British Consul, saying that the President of the General Assembly of Bizkaia, Ana Otadui Biteri had expressed an interest in meeting me as a representative of the BCA'37 UK. She was currently in Auschwitz planting a sapling of the tree of Guernica as a symbol of peace, as had also been done in Hiroshima and Dresden among other places. We were to meet at the historic Casa de Juntas de Gernika, just next to the tree of Gernika

<http://www.jjggbizkaia.eus/home2/sedes/gernika.asp>



Derek accompanied John and me to this most historic meeting, where we were met by the Presidenta Ana Otadui and her colleague Ana Alberdi. We were given a tour and a history of the assembly buildings whose origins go back to the Middle Ages. The significance of the Casa de Juntas and the importance of Gernika both symbolically and historically became clearer than ever to me.

**LEFT In the Casa de Juntas: Presidenta Ana Otadui Biteri, Carmen and John Kilner**

I was taken aback and overwhelmed when I was asked to sign the Visitors of Honour Book, which I did in the name of the Association and all the families of those evacuated.

**RIGHT In the Casa de Juntas signing the Visitors of Honour book on behalf of BCA'37 L-R**

**Derek Doyle, British Consul in Bilbao, CK, Presidenta de la Asamblea de Bizkaia, Ana Otadui Biteri**



I perhaps don't need to give further reasons as to why this was an incredibly moving meeting for me, but there was an added reason - my mother might have been teaching at the Primary school on 26th April 1937. But because of her ill health following two strokes, I was never able to be quite sure, I am going to be helped in this search by a local history organisation GernikaZarra.

Ana Otadui presented me as representative of our Association with two books, one “Introduction to the History of the Basque Country “ and the second a very large book “Statute Law in Bizkaia” , beautifully illustrated with photographs, which is far more interesting than it sounds! We discussed the lives and circumstances of the niños in Britain, and those that remained; our association, what we do and how we keep going; and ended with a hope for future collaboration between us.



LEFT Guernika. Derek Doyle and CK

### Bilbao, Euskadiko Artxibo Historikoa



The talk later that evening at the Basque Government’s Historical Archives was in Spanish. We had a few technical problems which were dealt with and I hope did not detract too much.



ABOVE Another action shot

RIGHT With Vicente Cañada, one of the *niños de la guerra* who returned.

I was delighted to see Vicente Cañada there together with his daughter; Derek Doyle (British Consul and a glutton for punishment having also come to the talk in English at the British Council); the historian and author Koldobika Lopez (La Guerra Civil en Barakaldo). Again, there was an animated discussion following the presentation, and the evening ended happily and - as can be expected - with txacoli and pintxos.

## Friday 5th May



So ended the tour. John and I took half a day's break and visited Bermeo. There we had a delicious meal in the casino, together with many locals of this most typical of Basque fishing villages, before taking our flight home.

**LEFT The strikingly beautiful stained glass window in the Casino Restaurant of Bermeo**

It was quite an exhausting ten days and would have been impossible but for the help of many others. I would like to express my thanks to: all the institutes for inviting me to speak on behalf of the BCA'37 UK and for - between them - making it financially possible; to Derek Doyle for his help and support, excellent taxi services and several txacolis; to Simon for his luggage handling talents - support at the meetings including speaking and dealing with the shop - he and Barbie were calm faces in a sea of chaos; and my husband John for his technical and other skills.