

A journey to Bilbao

by John Simmons

Last year my novel *Spanish Crossings* was published. It drew on a family story. My mum and dad had ‘adopted’ a Spanish boy called Jesús in 1937 and he had returned to Spain six months later. I was not born until more than ten years later but I used the story of the 4000 *niños* who had come to England on the SS *Habana* as part of the narrative of my novel.

Carmen Kilner had then helped me discover more, including his full name Jesús Iguaran Aramburu. As my parents had died when I was young I had not been able to ask them about my Spanish ‘foster-brother’. So I did the modern alternative – I posted his photo on Twitter and asked if anyone could help.

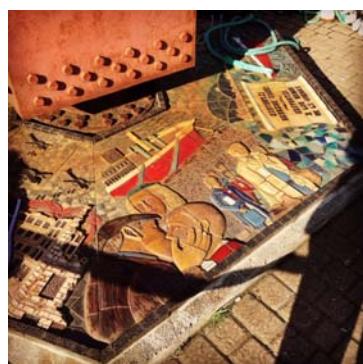
To my surprise a number of Basque people joined in the search on Twitter. As a result I was able to trace the history a little closer to my time without actually tracking down Jesús. But I felt I owed it to the people and the place to give my thanks in person. So, in September I visited Bilbao and was able to do two things.

First I met one of my new Twitter friends, Urko Aiartzia. We met for the first time in person over *pinxtos* and *txakoli* in Café Iruña in Bilbao. We talked for a couple of hours and I learnt that he was a lawyer in Donostia/San Sebastián. His great-uncle had been killed in Gernika in 1937. Then as a senator in 2010 Urko had proposed a parliamentary resolution to thank the British people who had helped the Basque children. All I could do was thank him. We now have a remarkable friendship.



Urko Aiartzia

The next day I visited Santurtzi/Santurce, the port from which the children had sailed over 80 years ago. One of my other Twitter friends had sent me photographs of my novel placed on the memorial to that time, so I decided I must visit the place. The memorial is not obvious. It has a working winch at its centre, and seems to be used by the local fishermen who prepare their nets nearby. Yet around the winch is a moving and colourful ceramic showing scenes from the bombing of Gernika and the evacuation of the children by boat.



We then walked along the quay to Portugalete, the station where the children had come by train from Bilbao. Brightly painted in yellow and blue, the old railway station is now a tourist information office, but there is still much that is genuinely historic in the town.

The train station at Portugalete where many children arrived before their journey to England on the *SS Habana*



It was a moving experience to visit the place and imagine the stress that must have been experienced at that time by the children and by their parents. I'm proud that my parents were able to play their part in bringing some comfort to the young people in 1937 and to Jesús in particular. The details of his life after return in 1938 are sketchy but my Twitter contacts were able to send me information to show that he had been imprisoned by the Franco regime between 1946 and 1953. Which in itself shows why the welcoming of the refugee children was so important and why the work of the Basque Children of 1937 Association (BCA'37 UK) continues to matter.

John's novel *Spanish Crossings* was published in a paperback edition by Urbane this year.