

Basques at Stoneham

FORTY YEARS AGO A FIELD NEAR SOUTHAMPTON SAW THE FIRST AFTERMATH OF A TRAGEDY WHICH MANY BELIEVE WAS THE FIRST ACT OF THE POWER STRUGGLE WHICH HAS CONTINUED EVER SINCE.

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One day late on in May 1937 a liner looking the worse for wear and filled to overflowing with children came alongside at Southampton Docks. Her entry was silent. No ship's siren bid her welcome in case it frightened the children. They were Basques, refugees from a region of Spain that was suffering terribly from the civil war then raging in that country. So on this silent note began a saga that closely involved Southampton. At times the bitterness and passion that divided Spain was to spill over and reveal itself in the Basque children and the English participants.

Few motorists travelling into Chandler's Ford from Southampton will realise that the hypermarket now stands on the site of the transit camp for the refugees. In the fine summer of 1937 this was home for 4,000 children between the ages of 8 and 14. They came from all over the Basque region; some had even survived the horrors of Guernica, where tactical bombing on civilian targets had been tested for the first time with the resultant death toll of 2,000.

The Civil War in Spain had polarised the political passions of Europe. The plight of the Basques, however, had an international appeal which superseded any political allegiance. The fight for their homeland and *fueros* (ancient freedom and rights) drew forth a worldwide response of sympathy and support. The bombing of Guernica, the cradle of their nationalism, by the German Condor Legion added to the appeal. Offers to take the children came from America and Europe.

In England and National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief informed the Basque authorities they would initially accept 2,000 children. The body was made up of members from all political parties, the churches and other interested groups. To deal with the children the Basque Children's Committee was set up. A team was sent down to Southampton, chosen because of the port, to find a site for the transit camp, while suitable accommodation for a longer stay in England could be arranged.

The offer of a well-drained 30 acre site adjoining the then main Southampton-London road was snapped up. Lent by Mr G.H. Brown of Swaything Lane Farm, the field was a scene of beaverish activity until the arrival of the first children on May 23rd. Drains were installed, water piped in and 400 bell tents and five marquees were put up by volunteers under the guidance of the Scouts and YMCA. Soon help came from all directions. A large house Moorhill at Westend, was accepted for the use of staff and those children too weak to sleep in tents. The most unusual source of help was the bunting used at the coronation of George the Sixth; made of heavy woollen mat, it was ideal for blankets.

Work was going on apace when news came from Bilbao that the Basques wished to send a further 2,000 children. Urgent negotiations took place with the Home Office before permission was granted. Dr Richard Ellis flew back to Spain with the news and to accompany the children on their

voyage to England. He had been in charge of the medical mission sent out to examine all the children and discard those who were too weak. Against a background of frequent halts due to Nationalist air raids, he and his team carried out their work. A visit he made to the Civil Hospital in Bilbao illustrated the desperate plight of the Basques. Equipment lay idle waiting for spare parts, surgical dressings and anaesthetics were equally scarce with operations carried out despite the lack of drugs.

For the trip to England the old converted liner *Habana* was used. The children were taken down to the quay in trainloads of 600 amidst scenes of great emotion. All through May 20th the ship was loaded so she was ready to sail on the morning tide. Before she left the Basque President Senor Aguirre went on board to bid them farewell.

The *Habana* was escorted by a Spanish destroyer until she picked up the British convoy under the *Royal Oak* and the *Forester* a few miles off shore. The crossing was rough and spirits were low till England was sighted midday on the 22nd. By that evening the *Habana* was alongside at Southampton waiting clearance from health authorities under Dr Maurice Williams. The next day, Sunday, saw the first group of children move into the camp and receive a visit from the Home Secretary, Sir Kingsley Wood.

We have an excellent account of life at Stoneham Camp in the Pamphlet "*The Basque Children in England*" by Yvonne Cloud and Dr Richard Ellis. Although swept away in rhetoric of commitment to the Republican cause, it is most revealing on the setup of the camp and the problems encountered. Controversy straightaway broke out over the division of the children. The Basque authorities had allotted places on the ship to all the local political parties according to their showing at the last election.

To us it may seem strange but in the situation it was the only feasible way that would not lead to subsequent recrimination. The camp authorities controversially kept the divisions and so the children were grouped in tents according their parents' political affiliations. Not just two or three parties but all shades of Basque opinion were represented, including two anarchist groups – a strange phenomenon on English soil.

Politics pervaded all aspects of camp life. Though children, their political commitment was forged by the civil war and the passion that the Spanish bring to their politics. "Their smoking and interest in politics were the most noticeable things about them" said Mr Albert Arthur remembering his days as a young volunteer at the camp. On one occasion a group of children went without supper rather than wear the yellow armband – to differentiate them from those who had eaten already – because it was the colours of Franco's Moroccan troops.

The main purpose of the camp was to give time for the Basque Children's Committee to find homes for the children's stay in England; have them medically checked and record all details of their eventual return to Spain. While they were at the camp they had to be occupied and organised. Basque teachers accompanying the children gave lessons as well as those volunteers who spoke Spanish.

The occasional trip outside the camp was organised, the most popular being to Eastleigh airport where the children peered closely at the planes that had so frightened them when they first arrived in the country.

Entertainments were put on, with a cinema and shows from outside performers. A few Basques sat for Augustus John the artist, who had his own tent at the camp. However, nothing laid on for the children equalled the delight with which they greeted white bread, which they hoarded and bartered with great gusto.

Discipline was a problem at the camp. To induce a more responsible attitude in the older boys and in recognition of the adult duties they had of necessity carried out back home, they were given their own area of the camp to administer. This followed a fairly serious incident that reached the columns of *The Times*. A group of boys vandalised the chapel tent, slashing the canvas and breaking the cross. *The Times* also referred to a "mini riot" on July 12 when some children were caught stealing from the clothes store, otherwise only the occasional disappearance of boys bent on reaching London caused any concern to the camp authorities, save an incident on June 19, when the fall of Bilbao to the Nationalists was announced over the camp radio.

"We very much regret that enemy troops are now in the town of Bilbao"; the rest of the announcement was drowned in a heart-rending wail of grief and a mounting tide of hysteria. The loudspeaker van was stoned, the priest who had translated the announcement was attacked, and the children broke out of camp confines, while most stayed "swaying rhythmically in an abandonment of grief". Order was gradually restored, with those remaining shepherded to their tents. Police were called in to prevent any more breaking out and find the 300 who had already done so. By four o'clock the next morning all the children had been accounted for, some up to four miles away.

The announcement came at the end of a week which had seen a worsening situation in the Basque country and a growing tension in the camp. Extra entertainment was laid on but the children treated it as an obvious distraction. News came through on the Saturday afternoon of the surrender of Bilbao while Sir John Reith, head of the BBC, was visiting the camp. He immediately phoned London and passed the latest information onto the camp committee who decide to announce the news after supper. Those helpers present were stunned by the intensity of the reaction described by Yvonne Cloud as "the most spontaneous outburst of horror and mourning that has ever been witnessed amongst children".

Although the incident cast a shadow over the camp it did not prevent the dispersal of the children to homes proceeding at a steady pace. Three days after they arrived at Stoneham Camp the first group were on the move again, this time to the Congress Hall, Clapton in London to be in the care of the Salvation Army. They caused much embarrassment to their hosts by greeting the Home Secretary with the clenched fist salute. The Catholic authorities on their part found homes for 1,200 of which 70 stayed in Southampton. Apart from those mentioned the children were looked after by church bodies or else local voluntary groups under the aegis of the Basque Children's Committee. Numbers were dwindling at the camp and by August 13th it was down to 320. Finally on September 18th the camp closed with the last group of 220 children moving on to new surroundings.

There were still refugees staying in Southampton and the Isle of Wight but for most people in this area the affair had ended. The camp had had its darker moments with the death of two children, the outbreak of typhoid and the events of June 19th, but overall it was a great success. The provision of one million meals was witness to the efficiency of the organisation while the medical care was equally good with the outbreak of typhoid amazingly confined to one child. The camp finished on a happy note with the marriage of a Basque woman teacher to an English helper the day before it closed.

The subsequent stay of the children in England was much less harmonious. Part of the problem lay in the varying standards of care at the homes where the children were sent to. Some were excellent with good facilities and teachers but others were inefficiently organised with an appearance more in keeping with a POW camp. Perhaps it was unavoidable with more than 100 locations but it was at these latter ones that the worst trouble broke out. On July 9th at Scarborough 80 children marched on the cookhouse to complain about the food. A brawl ensued and the cook had to run for his life chased by a horde brandishing knives. The authorities not appreciative of the more comic aspects of the affair rounded up the ringleaders and dispersed them to other homes.

Five were sent to a Ministry of Labour camp at Brechfa in Carmarthen. The camp was in an isolated situation and badly organised. The incidents mounted up. A car was stolen, a Bentley damaged and finally the boys marched on the village and attacked the pub. The police were recalled to restore order. Though the boys "alleged they saw guns pointing at them out of the window" the Committee for Spanish Relief decided the time had come for decisive action. They sent the ringleaders home to Spain, and divided the rest among other camps. After that there were no more serious outbreaks of violence.

The prompt sending back to Spain of the troublemakers only begged the question. If it was safe to return them then why not the rest of the children? By the end of October 1937 the war was over for the north of Spain. But by mid-summer the situation was so obviously running the way of the Nationalists that the English government set up an enquiry to suggest the children should be returned. The Basque Children's Legal Commission reported at the end of October and recommended the immediate return of 500 and the rest to follow as soon as possible.

Pressure had built up for this outcome since August. In that month the Papal Delegate in Bilbao with the implicit support of the Nationalist authorities sent over Father Gabana to seek the children's return. He brought letters from anxious parents wanting their children, but his reception from the Basque Children's Committee was frosty. For them any dealings with the conquerors of the Basque country was distasteful. The report of the Legal Commission may have nudged them into action but it was dilatory. By the end of January 1938 only 956 had been returned and 46 of these went outside Spain.

This approach to the problem was seen in some quarters as deliberate obstruction for political reasons. As a result a counter group was set up that same month calling itself the Spanish Children Repatriation Committee. Chaired by the Duke of Wellington it included such leading Tories of the day as Douglas Jerrold and the society hostess Lady Londonderry. They naturally urged an immediate return of the children, pointing out that the Basque country had been peaceful since August.

Significantly the instigation for the Repatriation Committee came not from the Tory party but from the Catholic Church in the form of Cardinal Hinsley. It revealed the dilemma the Catholic authorities felt towards the Basque children. Duty bound to look after those whose parents were Basque Nationalists (regarded as devout Catholics) all their sympathy lay with the cause of Franco. Therefore, in their eyes there was no need to dither with the Basque country firmly under Nationalist control. By sending the children back promptly they would also be giving implicit support and credibility to the Nationalist cause.

For the Basque Children's Committee with its strong leaning to the Republican side it was like a red rag to a bull. The letter columns of *The Times* were witness to the acrimony between the two groups. The children were converted "into Christ-hating little Communists" thundered those for Repatriation: no retorted the other side, a swift return to Spain would only lead to a reformatory and "re-education" to learn the ways of Fascism.

As for the children they were slowly sent back. By the end of 1939 there were still 1,000 left in England, 500 of which were only waiting for transport to Spain. The fate of the last 500 was undecided. The Basque Children's Committee considered it wrong to return these children. Perhaps because they had no family or relations to go to, or else those they did have, were in prison. Some never returned, and settled in England. Others eventually left for Spain or else to find a new life in South America. By then, anyway, the problems of the Basque children had been overtaken by events elsewhere in Europe, not to re-emerge in the glare of publicity until our own time, a generation later.

NOTE: this is a transcription of the original scanned document which is of low quality. See www.basquechildren.org/-/docs/articles/stonehamextract for a PDF of the scanned original.