

Caerleon remembers the Welsh reception of Basque children in 1937

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The colony in the small UK town was one of the most successful in integrating evacuees from Bilbao.

Pic

Throughout this weekend, a small town in Wales - Caerleon, with some 8,000 inhabitants - commemorates the arrival 85 years ago of 56 Basque children who were refugees from the Civil War. Some two hundred of the 3,900, aged between 7 and 17, who were evacuated from Santurtzi aboard the steamer Habana, were transferred to 'colonies' in Wales, after their arrival on the English coast.

Exhibitions, talks, music and dance, visits to the Roman legion amphitheatre or to the remains of a Basque ship in neighbouring Newport, sports competitions,... are part of the events organised by the Basque Children's Association in the United Kingdom, with the help of the Basque company CAF, which has a factory in Newport. The Chief Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, took part in the opening ceremony.

The Caerleon settlement was one of the most successful in integrating the children. The County Council provided a house, Cambria House, to accommodate them. Volunteers adapted it for the reception of the refugees, offered themselves as assistants or teachers. Individual donations, from the Quaker humanitarian fund and in particular from the miners' union, funded the costs. Gail Giles, a nurse by profession, decided one day to study archaeology and history, and for her dissertation she delved into the experience of those children. She speaks enthusiastically of her meeting with Josefina Alvarez, who was evacuated with her siblings. She stayed in Caerleon, where she married and raised a family. She recounted her life for the first time to Giles, never mentioning what she had seen in the war.

Pic

Josefina's account suggests that the colony's success was due to María Fernández from Bilbao. She had come to Wales at the age of three, following her father, who was employed in 1907 in the Dowlais steelworks. The daughter, married to a merchant seaman, lived in Cardiff and responded to an advertisement for a job at Cambria House. She had no children but she became 'mother' of about fifty children.

Under her influence, Josefina, "a wonderful person", according to Giles, played badminton, her brothers played football, she studied mathematics at the University of Birmingham. Giles now gives talks to local groups about the experience of the children, who listen to her enthralled and "it leads them to become convinced of the need to help people in difficulty".

Pic footballers

It is *this* important

Also taking part in the events is Eddie Butler. A Cambridge graduate, he travelled to Madrid at the age of 18 to improve his Spanish. He was captain of the Welsh rugby team that toured Spain in 1983. He was chronicler of that sport in 'The Observer' and also a journalist for the BBC. He is the author of a documentary about the Basque children.

"We have to look to the future but also know the worst of the past," he said. He gives the example of the soldiers of the First World War, who had the strength to tell what they had lived through only many years later, and it was good for them. From the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, at the end of apartheid in South Africa, "as a way of purging the national soul". "We have to teach these things", he concludes.

The Secretary General for External Affairs of the Basque Government, Marian Elorza, recalled in her speech the medieval wool trade between the Basque and Welsh coasts; the navigation in the 19th century which put in contact the mining and steelworks communities of both countries; the role played by the British Consulate in Bilbao in the 1937 evacuation and in today's relationships.

"The Basque Government wanted to join the descendants of those boys and girls and the Welsh authorities," she said. "to pay tribute to all those people who altruistically opened the doors of their homes and their hearts to those children. And to remember the experiences of those children whose childhoods were cut short by war".

"They all cried".

photo

The president of the association in the UK, Carmen Kilner, is the daughter of a teacher from San Sebastian who accompanied the children, along with almost a hundred of her colleagues, two doctors and 16 priests, on a eventful journey in the Bay of Biscay and on their first English experience in a tented camp built on land provided by a farmer to the north of Southampton.

When she was 4 years old, Kilner accompanied her mother on a furtive meeting, on a platform at Hendaye station, with the family that had returned to Spain. "What I remember is that everyone was crying," she says.

Integrated in England, she decided one day to leave her profession as a lecturer in paediatric dentistry teacher and dedicate herself to "this story we grew up with".

"That's how important it was to me".

"We want to have close relations with the Basque Country"

MARK DRAKEFORD, FIRST MINISTER OF WALES

The Labour politician is committed to furthering the understanding with the Basque Government that will bring "tangible benefits" -

Did you know about the historic episode of the arrival of the Basque children during the Civil War?

-Not with the details that I have known recently, but growing up in Wales I had an understanding of the Civil War. Many Welshmen fought with the International Brigades. The trade union movement, and in particular the miners' union, strongly supported the legitimate government of Spain. Someone, like me, interested in the history of the labour movement, was aware of Wales's connection with the Civil War. I grew up in the west, in Camarthen, which is very close to Brechfa, where one of the three groups of Basque children was housed.

- **He wore a tie in the Cardiff Parliament a few days ago that was given to him by a Jewish refugee in the Second World War.**

- It is inevitable that in today's circumstances we think about the impact of the war in Ukraine with the perspective of what happened 85 years ago. A fortnight ago I visited one of the welcome centres for Ukrainian families. They are sorting out their situation and thinking about their future. I asked some children how they felt living in Wales and a seven-year-old pointed to the sky and said: 'No missiles'. How can you imagine being seven years old and having to live through such an experience. Those who came in 1937 would have direct experience of bombings of Basque communities, which occurred shortly before they had to leave.

- **- Is Wales a country noted for its reception of refugees? -**

- I don't want to make grand statements about Wales as a place that is different from others. There is a long tradition of offering sanctuary to people from other parts of the world. In recent times, as well as Ukrainians, we have taken in people from Syria and Afghanistan. My personal experience is that if you live in a community with a lot of people from other countries, you accept it as an everyday occurrence. I live in an area of Cardiff which is the most multicultural area of Wales, and it's very peaceful. The places where there are tensions are usually the ones where there are fewer people from outside. I think you have to understand it as anxiety about the unknown. If you see it every day you understand that it's a strength. That will be as true in Wales as anywhere else.

- **- Is the Memorandum of Understanding with the Basque Government symbolic or material?**

- I think there are real benefits. I have spoken to two old friends from the Basque Government who have come to the commemoration and we agree that we are not interested in just signing papers. We want them to translate into tangible benefits. Our first relationship with the Basque Government was about language policy. The Welsh language is spoken by a similar percentage of the population that speaks Basque. We were able to explain our experience. We have had exchanges on that agenda for the last 50 years. And we have had very close ties with Mondragon, because of the cooperatives. We set up a Wales Cooperative Centre, following a visit by the trade union association to Mondragon some 40 years ago. Those links are important to us. More recently, after the creation of Welsh autonomy, we have identified four or five regions of the

European Union with which, for specific reasons, we want to have close relations, and the Basque Country is one of them. It reflects our history but also our contemporary interest in marine energy, in sport and culture, in what we can learn from each other about health policy. We are very committed, and I think the Basque Government is too, to developing the face-to-face meetings that we have missed so much in the last two and a half years.