

Speech on receiving her Doctorate at Oxford Brookes University

by Dr Natalia Benjamin

Good afternoon to you all. It is especially rewarding to be receiving an honorary degree for my work documenting the Basque refugees in Great Britain, on today's date of 23rd May. That is the very same date that, eighty five years ago, in 1937, 4000 Basque children arrived at Southampton to begin life in Britain as refugees from the Spanish Civil War.

The British public had been shocked by horrific reports of the bombing of Guernica on the 24th April 1937, one of the first aerial bombings of a civilian population . The British government was persuaded to allow 4,000 refugee children to come to Britain for their safety. Armies of committed volunteers immediately rallied round to care for them. In setting up the Basque Children of 37 Association UK, I thought it was important not to lose the record of that generous response and the children's experiences of living in Britain. This is even relevant now, as we watch the unfolding refugee crisis of the war in Ukraine on our screens. We are all familiar with acts of collective remembrance following a war, such as ceremonies, documentaries and public monuments dedicated to soldiers, but young people who are equally victims of war, are frequently forgotten. My research was designed to place the experience of the exile in its rightful historical context, so the Basque children should not be '*los olvidados*' (the forgotten ones).

Where did my interest in these events stem from? The answer is surely my mother. My Mother, a 21-year old law student from Madrid, came to Britain wanting to help. She was sent to teach English at one of the residences for the Basque children near Colchester. In addition, she also acted as house mother to children who had been torn away from parents and siblings to live in a country whose language they didn't speak and whose cultural heritage they had to try and assimilate. My greatest regret is failing to listen to her story while she was still alive. I discovered that the story of the Basque children was virtually unknown in Britain and I set out to gather and preserve valuable archival material and testimony before it was permanently lost.

I hoped through this developing record and the newly created Basque Children of 37 Association, that others who wanted to find out about their family histories would find a welcome resource.

It wasn't until 2002 that I embarked on this project, a few years after retiring from my teaching career here at Oxford Brookes University, where I had spent an enjoyable 25 years as Senior Lecturer leading the French Contemporary Studies Course. In 1996 I was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease, but despite this I was motivated to make a further contribution in documenting the lives of the Basque refugees. I worked on my research consistently every morning and enjoyed making contact with fellow

enthusiasts and former Basque children. Much of my time was spent answering queries from relatives, students and researchers and anyone with a special interest in the subject. Expertise I lacked was sometimes supplied in surprising ways: at a local party, I met a neighbour living just two doors away who happened to be a Spanish lawyer from the Basque region. He was enormously helpful in preparing our successful funding applications to the Spanish government.

In 2012, our Association of 250 members commemorated, at Southampton University, the 75th anniversary of the arrival of the Basque 'children'. The University had agreed to provide a home for all the archival material we had gathered in the Special Collections Division of the Hartley Library. By this time we had achieved many of our aims and objectives. One of our main aims was to educate the public and we achieved this through giving talks all over the country, creating an exhibition available for hire, participating in international conferences, the erection of commemorative blue plaques, publishing 25 Newsletters, an annual lecture in London and promoting dialogue between the refugees, researchers and interested persons.

The world can look bleak in times of war especially, presenting us with challenges both personal and national as we struggle to find the right response. I speak both from my own experience and that of the Basque children that it is possible to retain a meaningful life amid difficulties, and I cannot do better than to try and leave you with that thought.

It is most gratifying to see so many of you participating in this graduation ceremony, the fitting culmination of all your hard work and dedication. The pandemic will have introduced extra challenges and I congratulate you on managing them. I hope your time of study at Oxford Brookes University has given you the skills and resources to carve out for yourselves a successful future. I feel proud to be awarded an Honorary Doctorate from this University.

It just remains for me to wish you all a wonderful day.

Thank you.

