



**The Basque children  
refugees in Caerleon**

by Gail Giles



**The Basque Children  
In Great Britain**

by

Natalia Benjamin

The Civil War had been raging for nine months and conditions in Spain were dire; Franco had imposed a blockade along the north coast and after March 31<sup>st</sup> 1937, he began a persistent and daily offensive against Bilbao and other large towns. Bombs dropped almost daily, their dull sound contrasting with the high-pitched sound of the anti-aircraft guns. Sirens warned people of imminent danger and they would rush to the nearest shelter, usually rudimentary in nature, in the cellar of a house, or more often, in a railway tunnel. One



The remains of a bombed street in Guernica.

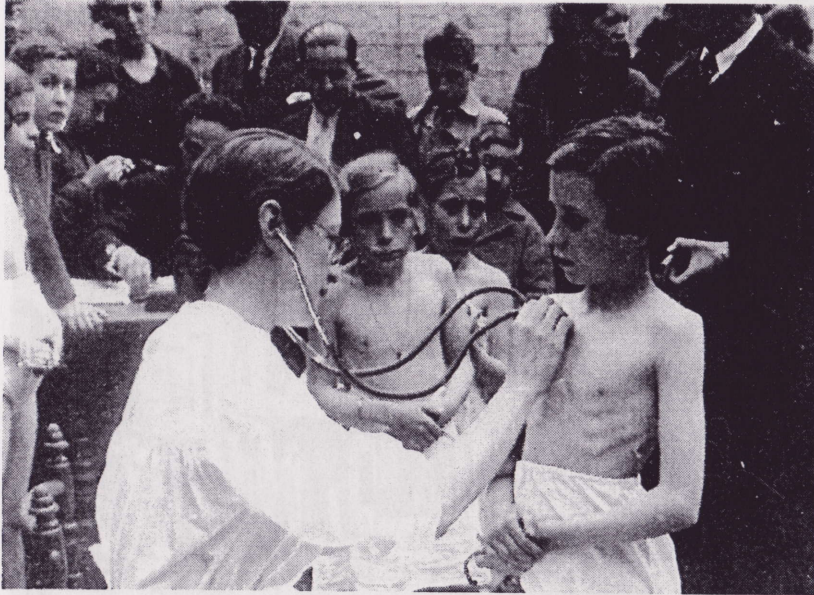
terrible day, a train came through during an air-raid, killing all who were sheltering there. Humanitarian aid got through, but the blockade of the Basque coast made it almost impossible to deliver food, so food was scarce, and there were long queues in the shops, often interrupted by the wailing of the sirens.

The climax was reached on 26<sup>th</sup> April when Guernica was bombed by the planes of the Nazi Condor Legion. The town was almost totally destroyed. It was the first ever saturation bombing of a civilian population: people were horrified and a vast international movement of solidarity sprung up. It was thought that Bilbao and other large towns would suffer the same fate as Guernica. Under pressure from public

(Cover picture) Two little Basque refugee children peeping out of a porthole on the Habana whilst docked at Southampton.

opinion, the Basque government appealed to foreign nations to give temporary asylum to the children.

On 1<sup>st</sup> May 1937, the Duchess of Atholl, president of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, had a letter published in **The Times** which took up the campaign to urge the British government to



Dr Audrey Russell checking the health of the children prior to departure.

accept Basque children. On 3<sup>rd</sup> May in the House of Commons, Anthony Eden could or would still not take the decision, in spite of mounting pressure from public opinion. The NJC nevertheless sent Leah Manning, ex-labour MP, to Spain to organize the eventual evacuation of Basque children to Britain. At first, the Home Office was unsympathetic to her demands, but finally her request authorising temporary residence in Britain for 2,000 refugee children was reluctantly granted on 15<sup>th</sup> May by the Foreign Office.

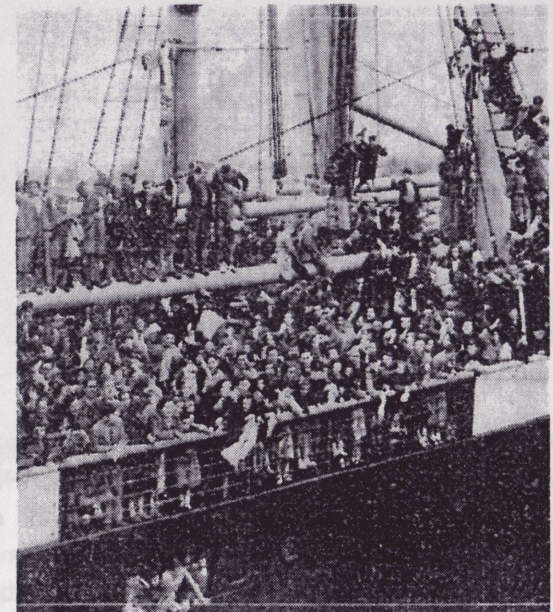
However, certain conditions had to be met – the government, intransigent, refused to be responsible financially for the children, saying that this would violate the non-intervention pact, and demanded that the NJC guarantee 10/- per week for the care and

education of each child. Furthermore, it stipulated that the children should be aged between 5 and 15 and that 300 adults (teachers, helpers, parents) should accompany them.

On 15<sup>th</sup> May, the Basque Children's Committee was formed to focus more directly on the care and housing of the young refugees from the Basque country: it comprised representatives from the Quakers, the Salvation Army, the TUC, Save the Children Fund, Spanish Medical Aid, catholic and protestant churches, and political parties.

In Bilbao, all children registered for evacuation to Britain had to present themselves for a medical examination. Two British doctors, Dr Richard Ellis and his wife Dr Audrey Russell, flew in from Britain for this.

Each child was then handed a cardboard hexagonal disk with an identification number and the words '*Expedición a Inglaterra*' printed on it which they were told to tie or pin visibly on their clothes. The children were told to return on 20<sup>th</sup> May when trains carrying 600 children at a time would leave Bilbao from 2.30 pm to take them to the



The Habana arriving at Southampton.

port of Santurce. It was generally be-

lieved that the children would be separated from their parents for only a few months, nevertheless, many of the children would never again see their parents, friends and relatives.

War had been erected. Banners used as Coronation decorations were transformed by girl students into sleeping bags for the refugees.

The camp was divided into three main areas, according to the political affiliations that their parents had registered, so there was a republican/socialist section, a communist/anarchist section and a Basque nationalist section, the last having also a large tent which was used for a chapel.

Girls and boys were in separate tents and there were about eight to ten children per tent, with one teacher and one helper every four tents. There was also an administrative tent, a stores tent, a mess tent, a medical tent and a clothing tent. The airport was very close to North Stoneham and pilots were asked to give it as wide a berth as possible so as not to frighten the children.

The first meal took four hours to serve, and some hungry children went round



Bath time, older girls helping with the little ones.

twice. Later a marquee seating 250 was erected and there were several sittings. The children were delighted to eat soft white bread and chocolate, provided by Cadbury's. At first, a certain amount of hoarding went on, but it soon stopped when the children realized that more food would be forthcoming. The camp relied heavily on donations from local farmers and large stores as provisions had to be on a vast scale: 4,000 oranges, several tons of onions, 4,000 portions of chocolate, any amount of white bread and butter and 500 gallons of

milk a day. Visitors to the camp noticed that even after ten days there was a change in the children: they had gained weight and were not so pale; also they did not look so woebegone, some had even begun to smile.

In the first weeks in the camp many material problems were encountered, such as sanitation, inadequate draining, the children's unfamiliarity with the chemical toilets, the wet blankets and bedding after a huge storm – to all this was added the psychological problem of how best to comfort distressed children separated from their parents and their environment. A further problem was the difficulty in communication, since the majority of volunteers did not speak Spanish.

With nearly 4,000 residents, the camp had to follow a strict timetable. Stirring music would be played on the loudspeakers to wake the



Children at North Stoneham camp.

children up at 7am, and then they would hear: '*Niños, abrid puerta y ventana ¡Que entre el sol!*' They would get up and wash in the open air, then clean and tidy the tents, which were subsequently inspected. There was always a prize for the tidiest tent. Breakfast at 8am consisted of bread and butter and milk. From 10-11.30am there were lessons, then there would be physical training. Lunch was at 1.30 pm

and there would be meat and vegetables, or stew, bread and fruit. In the afternoon there was siesta time, after which games and activities were organized: there were film shows in the camp cinema, dancing, football and boxing. Supper at 7pm was bread and chocolate and lights out was at 9pm.

On 20<sup>th</sup> June 1937, news arrived that Bilbao had fallen. There was a wailing and weeping and rhythmic swaying; some children sprang to the loudspeaker, threw stones at it and upturned the loudspeaker caravan. Others went sobbing to their tents to be comforted by the



Lessons at Stoneham camp.

teachers, helpers and the English staff; some three hundred children broke out of the camp, trying to find Southampton and a ship to take them home.

The NJC's plan was that the children should be dispersed to homes or 'colonies' as soon as possible, and local BCC committees in many parts of the country were preparing more permanent accommodation for groups of children. The Basque government had insisted that the children should not be adopted by families, but stay in groups so as not to lose their national identity. The first to offer asylum was the Salvation Army, who undertook to take 400, followed by the Catholics, who committed themselves to take 1,200 children. Little by little, the

children left the provisional camp in groups to go to more permanent homes situated all over Britain. Within a month, another 1,500 children had left, either to Catholic homes, mainly convents, or to homes run by local BCCs. Some wealthy people lent their houses, such as Sir Paul Latham who received a group at Herstonceaux Castle, or Lord Faringdon, who made available a cottage on his estate at Buscot



'The Oaks' – the colony at Langham (Colchester) sponsored by the Peace Pledge Union.

Park. Organisations too sponsored the children: the Peace Pledge Union lent its house at Langham, near Colchester; the London Teaching Association subsidized the group that went to a large house at Theydon Bois, called the Leah Manning Home. There were altogether over a hundred different colonies at the start – some had good facilities with many volunteers to help run them, others were not so good and standards varied greatly.

The Spanish cause had appealed to the Welsh, both countries through the centuries having preserved their essential and individual independence. There were four colonies in Wales, at Old Colwyn, North Wales, Sketty Park, Swansea, Brechfa in Camarthenshire and Cambria House at Caerleon in Newport. Lord Davies, the owner of several coal mines, had set up the Welsh Fund for Basque Children, personally contributing £2,000. There were 27 boys and 25 girls in Cambria House, which was run by María Fernandez, who had come to Wales as a girl in 1905 with her parents. The colony produced its

own newspaper, the *Cambria House Journal*, which recounted the activities of the children and was sold locally to raise funds. Their football team, which the South Wales Argus called "The Basque Boys Wonder Team" because it was almost invincible, also met with a wide following.

The central problem for the BCC was that of raising money to finance the colonies. The children contributed to their upkeep by their frequent participation in concert tours round the country - almost every



A group of dancers from the Barnet colony.

colony had its own concert party. The children and the *señoritas* made the costumes, and throughout Britain, traditional Basque songs and dances were presented to the public, being performed in schools, church halls, even factories. Another source of income was collecting at the football matches, which were very popular and which the

Basque children usually won. Continuous appeals were made to the public and the Labour Movement and the TUC played a pivotal role in finding resources. In particular, they sponsored the Save the Basque Children fund, launching the appeal with a donation of £5000. The BCC promoted two Parlophone records of Basque songs sung by the



A group of children from Caerleon.

children's choir and published a book of twenty Spanish songs with English translation, entitled *Los Cantos de los Niños Vascos*. Amongst other fund-raising activities were the house-to-house collections, the flag days, the sale of the BCC Bulletin, calendars and Christmas cards made by the children.

By the end of July 1937, the war was over for the north of Spain, and the British government pressed for the return of the children, as did Franco. Once the genuine requests for the children's return had been received, the repatriation process began and from November 1937, groups of children left at roughly monthly intervals. By May 1938, half the children had returned to Spain; a year later 420 were left in Britain.

When the war began, nearly all of the colonies had closed and only those at Caerleon, Carshalton and Barnet remained. With the fall of France, repatriation was suspended and a number of children were

widely distributed over Great Britain with foster parents, some had transferred to one of the three remaining colonies, others were found jobs and lived in lodgings. Both older boys and girls participated in



In the reading room at 'The Culvers', Cashalton.

work of national importance, and many girls went into domestic work and attended evening classes to further their education, some becoming dressmakers or training as secretaries. There were opening for the boys in the war industries, in engineering, agriculture,

the clothing or building trade. Some joined the RAF, the Home Guard and the Merchant Navy.

At the end of World War II, there were 383 children left in Britain. 25 girls and 8 boys had got married. Some more children returned to Spain, but for many this was a terrible ordeal: some did not speak Spanish, others had forgotten their parents. They could not get used to the restrictions in Spain. Reduced to poor living conditions, without work, they wrote to Miss Pickin, the Secretary of the BCC, lamenting they had left Great Britain and asking to return.

In retrospect, the evacuee experience in Great Britain was on the whole a positive experience for the children from a practical view. "We went through hell, but we got a lot out of it. Everyone who stayed in Britain was better off than if they had gone back to Spain," says Josefina Antolin. However, it was not so successful from an emotional point of view. Many of the children spent their years of puberty in a foreign country, deprived of the love and influence of their parents. Many regret not having really known their parents and having missed out on family life. Paco Robles sums up the feeling of many of them: "I don't feel Spanish in Spain. I feel like a foreigner. In England too I feel like a foreigner. As evacuees, we had our national identity taken away from us, it was stolen from us".