

**The Guernica Children - Refugees from the Spanish Civil War
Talk by Simon Martinez - a Trustee of the BCA'37UK**

**Leicester Secular Society
Sunday 19 January 2020**

Report by Barbara Coombs

On a chance encounter by the Blue Plaque to the *SS Habana and the Basque Children* in Southampton this very successful meeting was organised. Such is the way in which our lives are threaded together. Steve Bowles, Adrian Bell, Manuel Moreno, and Simon Martínez had just come out of a meeting with Councillor Satvir Kaur to discuss the Southampton Council's support for a memorial to the Children and had paused for a photo. One of the group was talking to a passing Chinese Student about taking the photo of us in front of the plaque designed by Herminio Martínez and explaining the iPhone5 to him - a lengthy process given the workings of this ancient smart phone compared to those for sale now - when Eleanor and Frank of the Leicester Secular Society walked by. The photo was taken and the plans for the meeting in Leicester set in motion so that the working group of four could return to their plan of work, and lunch.

Four months later an audience of seventy on a dark January Sunday evening listened attentively to Simon's talk on the Basque Children in the historic setting of the Leicester Secular Society. Mary Attenborough the secretary of the local Basque Children Committee (BCC) held the local committee together and also played a significant role on the national BCC. Locally in Leicester she had completed the renting of Evington Hall and the fifty children and their Spanish Teachers arrived by train on the 6 July 1937.



A group at Evington Hall 3 or 4 days after arrival dressed in donated clothes. Happy children having chosen their clothes for the day.



Boys helping with meal preparation - peeling potatoes. Miss home believed the children should be busy, at their classes or helping.

Simon thanked the organisers of the meeting, Ned the Secular Society's historian who brought with him photos of the Children at Evington Hall and of Aid Spain, Eleanor who brought a slide about Mary Attenborough and talked about her, Richard Graves who had researched and published articles about the Basque Children in Leicester and the Doctors



Ellis, and everyone that asked questions or offered suggestions as to developing the work of the BCA'37UK both in Leicester and nationally.

In the Q&A session after the talk the idea of a Blue Plaque in the village of Evington or at the Hall itself was suggested, and future exhibition of the posters about the Basque Children and their stay in Leicester was suggested.



Basque Children at their lessons.
to Bilbao.



January 1938 a group of Basque Children returning

Lessons for the Children started two weeks after their arrival in Leicester. Miss McPhee the matron for the home approved. She is quoted in the local newspaper as saying 'It is a great relief to have them out of the way for a few hours during the day as 50 children all over the house are rather apt to upset household arrangements. She had also had to ask the police to clear the grounds of the Hall as so many supporters came to see the Children. Sitting on the railings outside supporters passed cigarettes were passed to the older boys which Miss McPhee disapproved of and took steps to stop.

Mary Attenborough attended National BCC meetings and took part in the discussions about the repatriation or not of the Children which led to the Holman Gregory Enquiry. She was opposed to returning the Children to the enemies of their parents and spoke out for allowing all the children to remain. Her support was resoundingly for the Republican Government and she used the letters to the children in her care in the late summer and Autumn of 1937 to evidence that the Children's parents were not asking for their sons and daughters return.

From January 1938 the Basque Children at Evington Hall in Leicester started to be returned but were replaced by Children from other Colonies which were closing. The numbers stayed at around fifty until the Colony was closed in July 1939.