

Re-tracing Our History

James Chadwick, 2 July 2022

In May 2022, my mother Emilia and I were invited to attend and speak at an event in Southampton, organised in cooperation with the Basque Children of '37 Association to mark the 85th anniversary of the sailing of the Habana to the city.

I had the opportunity to share the story of my grandfather, Rodolfo Vela-Santos, with those in attendance. At the event, Emilia took great pleasure in speaking to other descendents of the *niños* of 1937, and shared a scrapbook which charted some of the children's time at the Guildford home which he attended.

The timing of this event married up neatly with a special trip that she and I had planned to celebrate her 70th birthday. In June 2022, we flew to Bilbao for the start of a six day trip to take in the sights, sample pintxos galore, and visit places of historical interest both to my family's own story, and of the *niños* and Spanish Civil War more broadly.

As an avid football fan, I'm always quick to vouch for the power of sport to transform and inspire. That was certainly the case for many of the young boys who travelled on the Habana in 1937, but is also a key reason why I, a 27-year-old with a limited grasp of the Spanish language, have taken so much interest in this significant period of history and am so keen to learn more.

Having followed Athletic Club for a number of years, my sense of Basque identity has grown, along with my intrigue in the events of 1937. It was, therefore, appropriate that the the first stop on our journey (after a quick pintxo pit stop) was at Athletic's fabulous new San Mamés home. Following a lengthy visit to the club's award-winning museum and stadium tour, we found the *Children of 37 in the UK* exhibition. Within this were photos and artefacts covering the story of the *niños* more broadly, as well as information and artefacts on two of the refugees who went on to become well-known players in the Spanish game, having started playing football in Britain. Sabino Barinaga, who played 150 games for Real Madrid, and legendary Athletic keeper Raimundo Lezama.



We then took a trip to visit my mother's cousin, who is also called Rodolfo. We recently received a copy of my grandfather's ficha thanks to the Association, which contained information we had not seen previously about his older brother, who was this Rodolfo's father. He was lucky to survive execution by the Francoist forces due to an administrative error.

The following day, we took a trip to find my grandfather's childhood home, on Calle Castaños, which sits at the foot of the Funicular de Artxanda, a popular spot with tourists, taking visitors to the Parque del Funicular, which offers amazing views of the city of Bilbao below. On the opposite side of the park is a re-construction of the trenches and defensive positions from the Civil War, as well as some interesting display boards, which describe the strategic importance of the hilltop during the war. When we learned of the intensive bombing which was directed towards this area of the city (which was also used as a last refuge prior to the fall of the city) one can only further understand just why my great grandparents felt so compelled for their fourteen year-old son to depart for safer shores.



After this, we headed directly to Portugalete, where we crossed the famous Vizcaya Bridge and walked along the front towards Santurzi. This was the point where the Habana sailed from with 4,000 children and, this and the wider events of the period, are depicted in a wonderful tiled mural.



The following day we took the bus from Bilbao to Gernika. Here, we visited the Basque Parliament building and saw the Tree of Gernika. I was interested to learn that the Francoist forces were cautious not to cause any damage to the tree during their occupation as they feared discontent across the Baque region were it come to any harm. This I considered somewhat ironic, given the destruction wreaked on the town and symbolic status it has gained following the

events of 1937. We also paid a trip to the Euskal Herria Museoa, the Parque de los Pueblos de Europa (which features sculptures by Henry Moore and Eduardo Chillida), before visiting the Peace Museum, which offers a detailed history of the bombing of the town in 1937, including interactive exhibits and notable artefacts. Outside of the museums, there is a route with display boards describing key points of interest around the town connected to the events which unfolded there, along with a tiled mural of Picaso's famous painting. We also visited the air raid shelter, which sits within a building in the central square and is free to visit. The town is small, so all of these sights can be covered without difficulty.



Over the course of the rest of our trip we visited San Sebastián and took in the remaining sights of Bilbao. Everywhere we went, the strong feeling of Basque identity and Basqueness unified our experience - and despite being hundreds of miles from the UK, it still felt like home. I'm not sure if this sensation would have prevailed for the children heading in the opposite direction 85 years ago. However, it must have been this indefinable sensation of Basque nationality which the parents of the children of '37 hoped to preserve by sending the next generation off to a foreign land, at that point free of conflict.