

The Basque Children in Sheffield and the Spanish Civil War

Barbara Coombs

**Afternoon of talks Wednesday 23 May 2018 hosted by Sheffield Museums and Galleries
at Weston Park Museum, Western Park, Sheffield.
And 'Changing Lives' exhibition which continues until 1 July.**

The afternoon of talks, held on the 81st anniversary of the arrival of the SS Habana, heard most interesting talks from the panel which engaged the large audience with the history and interpretation of this ship's arrival in the early hours of the 23 May 1937.

Each speaker was followed by searching questions from the audience and many individual conversations, observations, and questions were dealt with in the interval. These included Sue Pearson, a child brought to Britain by the Kinder Transport, reminding us of the role played by individuals like Basil Rawson of the Woodcraft Folk who firstly took child refugees from Spain into his home and followed these with Jewish children.



Speakers from left to right:
Simon Martinez (BCA'37UK), Dr James Yeoman (University of Sheffield), Dr Peter Anderson (University of Leeds), Stephanie Wright (University of Sheffield).

James Yeoman introduced the themes of the Spanish Civil War as both a national and international conflict which brought tragedy to too many in Spain and predicted the events of the Second World War and the Cold War. Peter Anderson followed this with his talk setting in context the evacuation of the Basque Children within the largest peace time movement 'since the Chartists' whose roots had been laid by the events and public outcry following genocide in Armenia, the foundation of Save the Children, and the ongoing political and humanitarian debate as to whether child refugees should be seen as threat or demanding of public support.

These were some of the questions asked by the Sheffield Press at the time as plans to bring 25 children to the Guest House at Froggat were made. The fear of contagion was inflamed by councillors in the Hope Valley who campaigned against the children camping there and so they arrived at Sheffield Midland Station in October 1937 to carry on by coach to Froggat. They stayed there more or less happily for 6 months. Simon Martinez explained before either returning home, going to homes in Sheffield, or to other colonies across the north of England. Simon Martinez explained that his father had to remain in England at the end of the Civil War because the risk to him and his two brothers was too great in Spain. He did not return there until after Franco's death in 1975. Simon's father had achieved much in his life joining the Merchant Navy and having a long and successful career in that industry.

Stephanie Wright was the last speaker and she reflected on what the lasting memory in Spain of the Basque Children was. Her conclusion was not very much was known about them there. In the forty years of the Franco dictatorship these victims of aggression from his army and his allied air forces from German and Italian Fascist countries were portrayed as the perpetrators not the victims. And in the forty years since the Franco dictatorship they were forgotten in the 'Pact of Forgetting'. Questions from the audience who largely stayed until the end explored the role of film and literature in exploring and explaining these frightful times to new and younger audiences who had only the experiences of great grandparents to call on. Preferences were stated for 'Pan's Labyrinth' rather than 'Homage to Catalonia' or 'Land and Freedom' as talking to larger audiences in Spain, telling the story through fantasy and metaphor rather than romantic fiction involving British characters on their own journey of exploration and self development.

Four generations of the Martínez family were present and the youngest aged just 8 months accompanied Peter's talk of 'Save the Children' with hiccups and coos before rattling a rattle. John Birkbeck, grandson of the Reverend John Balmer the organiser of the colony in Keighley, and Daniel Vulliamy, nephew of Chloe and Poppy Vulliamy who organised colonies in Diss in Norfolk and at Oxford joined the Sheffield audience in a most interesting afternoon.