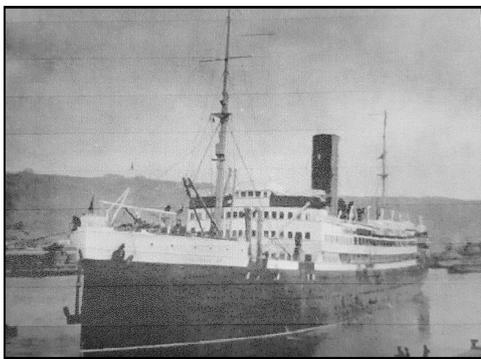




## The SS Habana: the journey from Bilbao and arrival in Great Britain

By Natalia Benjamin and Cliff Kirkpatrick (Naval information)  
Written some time before 2013.

**The Habana** was a 10,551 ton liner built in Sestao for the *Compañía Trasatlántica* in 1927 at a cost of 36,500,000 pesetas. It was 146 metres in length, 19 metres in breadth and 9 metres in depth. Its original name was the Alfonso XIII, the third ship of the company to bear the name, but the abolition of the monarchy and the subsequent formation of the Second Spanish Republic resulted in the renaming of several large ships for political reasons, so the Alfonso XIII became known as the Habana.



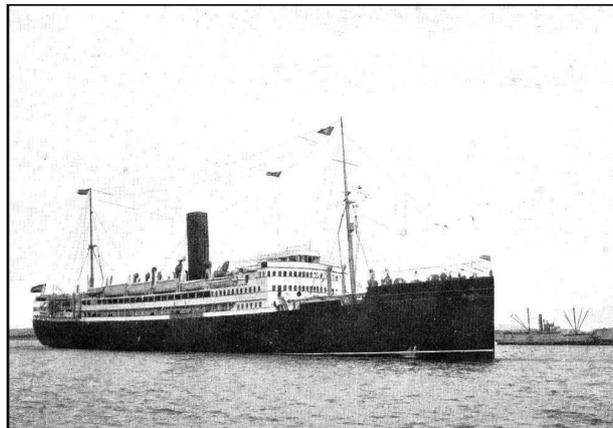
Steam Ship (SS) Alfonso XIII

From its launching until the beginning of the Civil War, it made regular journeys to New York, the normal itinerary being Bilbao-Cuba-Mexico-New York. In 1935, a brochure from the *Compañía Trasatlántica* advertised two cruises from the north of Spain to the port of London during the first fortnight of May and June. The ship was to leave from Bilbao for a six-day stay in London, after which it would return to Santander. The cost of this first class cruise was 1,000 pesetas: included in the price was daily transport to and from the centre of London and lunch and dinner there.



Brochure for Alfonso XIII

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The SS Habana

As the war continued in the northern front, the Republican authorities arranged for the evacuation of children from Bilbao. These Basque war children were shipped to France, Belgium, Great Britain, the Soviet Union and Mexico. It was in May and June 1937, between the bombing of Guernica on 26 April and the fall of Bilbao on 19 June, that the largest contingent of Basque children was evacuated. The Habana played an important role in these evacuations. It was readily available, having been requisitioned by the Basque government to be used as a hospital ship. It was involved in six “expeditions”, as the evacuations were euphemistically called. Here is a table showing the journeys made by the Habana:

6 May	2,275 children taken to La Pallice (La Rochelle) in western France
16 May	2,185 children taken to Pauillac (near Bordeaux)
21 May	3,861 children taken to Southampton
1 June	2,318 children taken to La Pallice
6 June	1,733 children taken to La Pallice
13 June	4,500 children taken to Pauillac, 1,610 of whom went on to Leningrad

While the Habana was away taking the children, other, smaller boats were ferrying more children to France. (Altogether some 20,000 children were evacuated to France.) And although the main contingent of passengers carried by the Habana was children, about twenty per cent of the passengers on the other vessels were adults, especially women and older people, as well as the handicapped.

The British government had not wanted to admit the Basque refugees, alleging that it would be a violation of the non-intervention agreement, but after the bombing of Guernica on 26 April, public opinion in Britain exerted pressure on the government to change its stance. Responding to a request from the Basque Delegation in London, Leah Manning as the representative of the NJCSR, had actually left for Bilbao two days before Guernica was bombed. When she arrived in Spain she immediately set about preparing for an eventual evacuation and this positive attitude and action paid off as approval in principle to the evacuation was given by the Home Secretary in a letter to Wilfred Roberts dated 29 April 1937.

On 7 and 8 May, the *Departamento de Asistencia Social* announced that a number of children would be evacuated to Britain and that parents wishing to send their children should go and register their names. On 15 May, the British government reluctantly agreed to take 2,000 children, on condition that it would not be responsible financially for the children, that they should be chosen impartially and that those coming should be between 5 and 15 years old. There was another announcement on the radio that all children who had registered for evacuation should present themselves with their parents at the *Asistencia Social* Office for a medical examination. Two doctors, Dr Richard Ellis and Dr Audrey Russell were flown in from Britain and they had the task of examining the children. Those who were deemed fit to leave were handed a hexagonal identity disc with the words: "*Expedición a Inglaterra*" and a number printed on it. It was to be pinned on their clothes when they left and came to be known as their "*corazón de carton*" (cardboard heart)..

The children were told to go home to await a radio announcement and to be ready to embark in three or four days. By then, the British government had agreed to double the number of children coming to Britain. On the morning of Thursday 20 May, the radio informed them that they were to proceed that afternoon to Portugalete, the station in Bilbao, whence they would be taken by train to Santurce, the outer port of Bilbao. They were to go at different times according to the numbers on their

hexagonal discs. Their parents were not to accompany them on the trains as there was not enough room.

From about 2.30 pm in Portugalete Station, groups of 600 children at a time boarded the special trains to take them to Santurce where the Habana was moored. There were tearful farewells; some parents who lived near the port were there to bid goodbye to their young children. Newsreels of the time show us unbelievably poignant scenes. "It was terrible saying goodbye to my mother. She kept telling me what to do, to look after my brother and sister. I was only ten and felt this a big burden," said Luisa.

On the boat, the children were given food and had to find a place to sleep, two or three to a bunk, on the settees in the saloon and in lifeboats. There were children everywhere and embarkation continued well into the night. During the course of the evening, Lehendakari Aguirre came on the ship to wish the children well.

Before embarkation was completed, war planes dropped bombs over Bilbao. Leah Manning sent a telegram to the authorities in Southampton which said: "Trying re-check children. Had air-raid. Caused many miss boat. Severest sickness on record". The Habana was not hit but eleven children who had not yet embarked were killed and for safety's sake, the ship was despatched from the harbour. Fortunately, the steam yacht, the Goizeko Izarra, which had been donated to the Basque government by the wealthy shipowner family De la Sota, was available and took on board those children who had been left behind. The intention was that it should catch up with the Habana, but in fact, it left its cargo of children in Bordeaux.

The Habana carried altogether 3,861 children, 95 teachers, 120 helpers and 15 priests, not forgetting the two doctors, two nurses and Leah Manning, as well as the ship's captain and crew. (The numbers vary slightly in the different accounts.) It was flying the Spanish Republican flag, not the Basque Nationalist flag<sup>1</sup>, as Barcelona was her port of registration. With its complement of child passengers, the Habana presented an unprecedented spectacle. Children were everywhere, huddled on the floor, in nooks and corners, sleeping peacefully on pillows and mattresses in passages and saloons, or peeping their tousled heads through portholes and railings. Some, mercifully unaware of the tragic feelings expressed on the quayside, were scampering excitedly up and down the ship playing hide and seek or exploring the novelties of an ocean liner.

With a new more vigorous response to the insurgent blockade of Bilbao, the Royal Navy were present in superior force to ensure that the Habana and other ships leaving port were given protection on the high seas. The battleship HMS Royal Oak recorded in her log on the 21 May that the SS Habana and one yacht left Bilbao with

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<sup>1</sup> That flag, the "Ikurriña" was and is that of the Basque Government, composed then and now of nationalists and non-nationalists. Ed.

refugees at 06.55 BST that morning. She was accompanied by the Spanish destroyer José Luis Díez as far as the three-mile limit of territorial waters where she was temporarily taken under the protection of the British destroyer HMS Forester shortly after 07.00 and proceeded at 12 knots on a northerly course. HMS Fearless took station ahead of Habana at 07.32 and then took over escort duty from HMS Forester. HMS Royal Oak kept close to the convoy for the next three hours before parting company and leaving HMS Fearless to escort the Habana all the way to the Isle of Wight just outside Southampton Water.



HMS Royal Oak

That first day at sea, the weather in the Bay of Biscay was atrocious and almost all the children suffered sea sickness. There was vomit everywhere. Vicente says: "The journey became a real nightmare, it took away my childhood. I was suddenly no longer a boy and I found the whole thing very difficult. Overnight I became an adult." The following day, the weather had calmed down and by 5 pm the boat had reached the Needles. It was told to anchor off Fawley in Southampton Water to await the arrival of the Port Medical Officer. Two launches left to go to the Habana, one carrying the port sanitary staff and customs and immigration officers, the other with officials of the NJC carrying supplies of milk, glucose, meat extract and medical requests. Dr Maurice Williams, the Port Medical Officer, described the conditions on board: "Children all herded together in the public rooms, in the gangways and on all the decks. Some were lying rolled in blankets, then running around the ship screaming, and a few, cool and complacent, appeared to accept the circumstances of their arrival in a strange land, having been parted from their parents, without any emotion." It was decided that the Habana should move the next morning to an inner mooring for a detailed medical examination of the children. A sick twelve-year-old boy was immediately removed and carried down the gangway by one of the doctors and placed in one of the launches. He was taken ashore and then went by ambulance to the Southampton Borough Hospital for an operation.

On Sunday 23 May, Dr Ellis was woken by the sound of thousands of feet on the deck, and on going out, was asked perhaps 500 times when they would arrive and would they really get white bread and butter, and would they eat meat in Britain.

Suddenly, he recounted, the whole ship listed to one side as 4,000 children crowded the rails and deck and rigging to wave frantically at a blue strip on the horizon. "Inglaterra!" they shouted. At 8 am, the Habana steamed up Southampton Water to Berth 106 of the New Docks. Its entry was silent, since a message had been sent ahead requesting that when it sailed into the harbour, vessels shouldn't welcome it in the customary manner by sounding their sirens since it was a sound that the children associated with imminent air bombardment. As soon as the ship docked, voices singing hymns were heard from the upper decks as a priest celebrated an open air mass.

Hundreds of people, with representatives of the press and photographers lined the quayside. The children were greeted by stirring music played by the Salvation Army band and by a reception from the Mayor of Southampton. Sra Azcarate was there, with Sr Lisazo, the Head of the Basque Delegation in London, as well as the Duchess of Atholl, Sir Walter and Lady Layton, Sir Walter and Lady Citrine, and many representing the various Spanish aid movements. There was decorative bunting up everywhere and the children thought it had been put up for them. In fact it had been for the coronation of King George VI eleven days previously!

Before leaving the ship, the children, who were in a state of great excitement, were medically examined again. The two main saloons were used for this and cubicles were erected with screens. There was a team of nine doctors and they examined the adults first so they could help to marshal the children into groups. This medical examination divided the children into categories and to this end, tape was issued to put round their wrists. White tape meant "clean and healthy", red tape meant "verminous": the child had to go and be deloused in the corporation baths, to be issued with a new set of clothing and to have her/his hair cropped (there were 712 children in this category) and blue tape meant "contagious disease" and the child was sent to the isolation hospital (two children went). The medical examination over, the children filed past immigration officers who took details of their names and parentage and fixed another label to their coats, before they trooped down the gangway, helped by a line of white-uniformed Red Cross nurses. In the afternoon, Sunday 23 May, disembarkation started, and the first batches of children, the ones with white tape round their wrists, left at regular intervals, being taken in double-decker buses to the camp at North Stoneham. The examinations went on until 7 pm and were continued the next day.

A reporter on the "Southampton Echo" was favourably impressed by the children and wrote: "Here and there were children in tears, children who looked pale and underfed, but the majority of the refugees looked well and in excellent health and high spirits. But they had terrible stories to tell."

Two children were later found hiding in one of the life boats of the Habana, a girl and boy who were ten and twelve years old. “We want our Mummy!” they said, having intended to stay on the ship and return to Bilbao.

Captain Ricardo Fernández, Master of the Habana, who had been responsible for the evacuation of two previous shiploads of refugees to France, looked very tired when he talked to the press about the voyage to England. For the past forty-eight hours, he and the rest of the crew had only been able to snatch a few hours sleep: “Six children slept in my cabin and five in the Chief Officer’s cabin. Wherever they saw a door, they opened it and of course, we wouldn’t have thought of turning them out. There has been a great deal of sea-sickness on the voyage – it was very rough in the Bay of Biscay - but as you can see, the children have quite recovered their good spirits.”

The Habana remained at Southampton until 29 May when she left for the return passage to Bilbao, once again escorted by the destroyer HMS Fearless. It was proposed that the Habana might take back with her on the voyage much-needed medical supplies but this was not permitted by the British government who felt it might be perceived as a breach of the non-intervention agreement. This trip by the Habana to England was, in fact, to be a one-off event. Shortly afterwards, when the fall of Santander appeared imminent, fresh approaches were made to the British government for permission for Spanish refugees to be allowed entry into Britain but the proposal was unequivocally rejected.

So that is the end of the association of the Habana with the Basque children. But what happened to the ship after that? She had an eventful life. She was moored at Bordeaux until the end of the war as a hospital ship and returned to Bilbao in 1939. There was a fire on board which destroyed much of the accommodation, and the Habana was remodelled to take both passengers and cargo. In 1942, she sailed to Latin America with 12 passengers and 518 cubic metres of cargo. At the end of the war, she was refitted as a passenger ship, and spent many years going from Spain to America until she moored in Vigo in 1960.



SS Habana refitted as a cargo ship

Then Pescanova bought her. It was a company founded that same year by José Fernández López, who set out to solve an age-old problem in the Spanish fishing industry, namely how to preserve fish caught away from Spain's ports – in the South Atlantic for example – so that the fish did not spoil during transport times of as much as three weeks. Fernández recognised that the development of refrigeration and freezing technologies offered a new possibility for transporting fish. In 1960 he began outfitting his first freezer vessel, the Lemos. It was successful off the coast of Argentina, and then went to South Africa, returning with more than 250 tons of hake.



SS Galicia, a factory fishing ship owned by Pescanova

Encouraged by this success, the company then acquired its second vessel, “a retired cruise ship called the Habana”. Pescanova converted her into a giant floating factory, renaming it the Galicia. In its new capacity, the boat set sail for South Africa in 1964, supported by its own fleet of fishing boats. While the Galicia served as a production vessel, including freezing but also breadmaking and frying facilities, transport back to Spain was provided by a fleet of dedicated freezer vessels.

In 1975, she laid anchor at Vigo and the last fact we learn about the Habana/Galicia is that in 1978 she was sold for scrap and broken up at Vigo. But what an interesting history the ship has, although its role in evacuating the Basque children is for me the highlight of its eventful operational service.

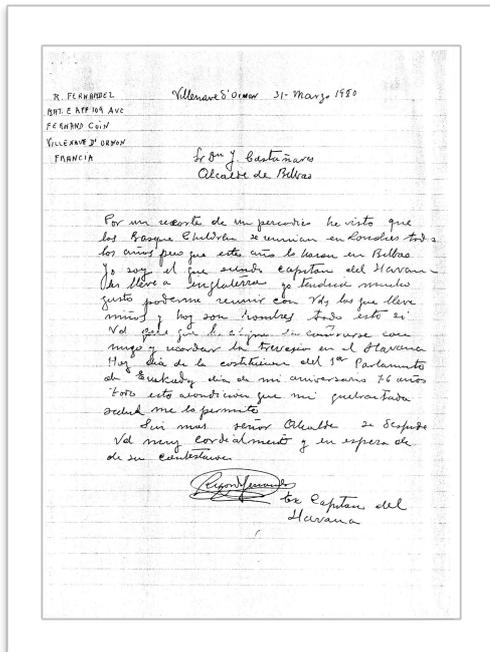
As a footnote, in 1980, Ricardo Fernández, the former Master of the Habana, saw an announcement in the press that the Basque children from England were planning a reunion in Bilbao, and he wrote to the mayor asking whether he could go to the reunion and meet some of those niños whom he had ferried those many years ago. His letter was passed on to Helvecia Hidalgo the organiser of the Basque Children's Association.. She told him that the niños had been very touched that he still remembered them after so many years and that unfortunately the meeting had to be postponed but he would be very welcome to come the following year. Ricardo

Fernández replied that as he was 76 years old, he wasn't sure of being there, and her letter had moved him to tears.

(Ed. Captain Ricardo Fernández died in 1981)

### Natalia Benjamin and Cliff Kirkpatrick

This article was written some time ago but was unpublished. The naval information was contributed by Cliff Kirkpatrick who died in 2017



The letters of Captain Fernández. 1980:

