Bilbao to Caerleon : The Basque Child Refugees of 1937

Introduction

On the afternoon of the 10th July 1937, fifty-six Basque children with their teachers and carers stood on the doorstep of Cambria House, Caerleon. Seven weeks earlier they had left their families, friends and belongings in Bilbao under the protection of the Royal Navy as Bilbao was about to fall to Franco's troops during the Spanish Civil War. Almost four thousand children had been evacuated on the 20th May in an operation that generated considerable support and organisation in Wales from the South Wales Miners Federation (SWMF) and also many other community organisations and volunteers recruited from all walks of life. It was a huge enterprise that eventually involved the British government as well as the Republican government in Spain and was funded entirely through voluntary donations.

With courage and determination the children settled remarkably well into their life in Caerleon under the auspices of their exceptional carer, Mrs Fernandez, until they were eventually repatriated or settled in Wales. These Basque children are still remembered in Caerleon today but how they came to be in Caerleon and the details of their stay have become vague memories in the local community. Fortunately memories of key participants have been recorded. It was clear that without organisational help at international, national and local level to bring the children to Caerleon and provide support for a number of years.

The research for this article has uncovered a number of organisations and individuals that made it all possible. Organisations included the south Wales miners, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), the Society of Friends, Aid Spain committees, the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (N J C S R), the Royal and Merchant navies, national and local governments. There were many individuals who helped but the most outstanding were the Duchess of Atholl (Chairman of the N J C S R), Cyril Cule (Director of Cambria House), Christopher Hill (teacher at Cambria House and historian), Jack Williams (Secretary, Caerleon Urban District Council) and especially Mrs Maria Fernandez, the warden of Cambria House.

This is a story of exceptional courage, struggle and determination to help innocent victims of war, but above all else it is the story of children who overcame fear and trauma experienced through war, evacuation, separation from families and home. The courage and determination of the Basque children has been remembered locally with obvious affection, but how they came to be in Caerleon and the details of their story have become vague memories. Fortunately, the personal testimony of some of the participants has been recorded and archived and one of the child refugees very kindly agreed to tell her story but with the understanding that she remained anonymous and is, therefore, referred to as J S.

Potatoes, Milk and Money

Wales has a long history of internationalist commitment and the response to the Spanish anti-fascist cause was a culmination of a process that had created an international class-consciousness. High unemployment in the 1930s created an intense community consciousness in which activists and political prisoners became folk heroes. In supporting the Popular Front and anti fascism, socialist and trade union activists, the Communist Party and the SWMF felt more akin with Republican Spain than Britain with its Conservative dominated Nationalist Government (Francis 1998 pp350-351).

In February 1936 the Republican government of Spain, consisting of Liberals, Socialists and a few Communists, was democratically elected (Preston 1984 p59). A coup detat by Franco's fascist Nationalists (supported by Germany and Italy) on the 18th July 1936 was the beginning of the Spanish Civil war (ibid p73).

The Republican government had been legitimately elected and therefore deserved support from European powers such as Britain. However, following the Russian Revolution (1917) fear and suspicion of the Soviet Union resulted in increasing anti- communist sentiment amongst Western powers including Britain whose official international line on the Spanish Civil war was one of Non-Intervention. But even within the government this policy was not universally supported. Aneurin Bevan was one of the most vocal in his condemnation of the lack of government support for the Spanish Republicans but at the 1936 Labour Party Conference it was Ernest Bevin's call for the support of the Non-Intervention policy that won the day. Nonetheless, demands for support for the Spanish Republicans within the Labour Party and the
S W M F continued (unsuccessfully) throughout the Spanish Civil War.

The first indication of support for the Republicans in Spain emerged when dissidents who had gathered to protest against the new Means Test Regulations clashed with the British Union of Fascists in Pontypridd, Tonypandy and Merthyr. On 1st August 1936 River Level Lodge, Abernant carried a resolution to support the Spanish workers and undertake a pit head collection. It led to an unparalleled commitment by the S W M F to the Spanish Republican cause. Action included demonstrations by 5000 people at the Spanish embassy in London and 10,000 people in Neath on 21st August 1936. The Communist Party produced a leaflet 'Spain' and there were poster parades in Tonypandy that led to a surge of activity only temporarily sidelined by the Hunger Marches. There was broad organisational support throughout the coalfield and by the end of August 1936 Councils of Action, miners lodges, trades councils, Communist and Labour Parties were all active in support of the Spanish Republic. The greatest interest in the Spanish situation came from the traditionally militant 'red villages' such as Ferndale.

Popular and organisational support for the Spanish Republic was, initially, dependant upon the Communist Party. National publicity was created when a delegation that included: the Communist members of the Rhondda Urban District Council, Will Paynter, Jim Morton and Jesse Sweet, J. S. Williams the Secretary of Merthyr N U W M (National Unemployed Workers Movement) and Harry Statton, a Swansea taxi driver, was sent to Newtown where the British Prime Minister Baldwin was staying.

In September 1936, Isabel Brown, who ran the Communist Party of Great Britain's (CPGB) Central Bureau for Spain, established the Relief Committee for the Victims of Fascism out of the International Workers Relief Committee. The Spanish Medical Aid Committee meanwhile had sent a delegation to Spain to report back on the situation. As a result the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR) was formed bringing together many diverse organisations such as the Labour Party, Trades Union Congress, Spanish Medical Aid Committee, ship owners, Teachers Committee for Spain, International Brigades Dependant s Aid Committee, Quakers, Basque Children's Committee, Save the Children Fund, Salvation Army and various religious authorities.

On 18th December 1936 the Council for Spanish Aid was formed as a branch of the N J C S R. with 36 delegates representing 14 working-class organisations. From this the Cardiff Provisional Spanish Aid Committee emerged which collected foodstuffs, clothing and money. On the same night eleven hundredweight of food and clothing was sent from Cardiff to a Spanish food ship berthed at Southampton. The success of this venture led to support from the T U C and area committees were set up in all areas of Cardiff.

In the valleys the most enthusiastic supporters were those who already had experience of political protest and Com munist Party activity. The most active were those in Bedlinog. Despite fifty percent of the population being unemployed, the United Front Committee for Spanish Aid collected £6 and food in one weekend. Food collections were stored in a rented shop in Cardiff.

The Spanish Aid Committee was established on 7th March 1937 eleven miles north of Neath in Onllwyn, an independent mining company owned by Evans and Bevan. Miners unions had never established branches there but many workers were Spanish and active in the Communist Party and Spanish Aid committees. The whole Spanish male population, numbering thirty, had volunteered in 1936 for military service in support of the Spanish Republic. Two of the committee joined the International Brigade that had been formed in October 1936 by Stalin's increasingly influential Comitern (military units) in Spain.

Spanish Aid Committees were then set up in Cardiff, Barry, Swansea, Talgarth and north Wales, that campaigned wholly for humanitarian aid such as, milk for the Spanish children, ambulances and cash donations. In north Wales the priority was the purchase of ambulances and with the support of Anglesey MP Megan Lloyd George the first ambulance arrived in Spain in March 1937.

Many other non-military volunteers were active during the Civil War. The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) was particularly active in its role of non-partisan relief work.

On 9th September 1936 these organisations set up the Spain Committee which gave priority to the supply of food especially milk as Spain's milk production had reduced to forty percent. Efforts were initially concentrated in Barcelona in conjunction with Republican authorities and Save the Children that then extended to other parts of Spain including the Basque country and Santander. By November 1937 two thousand children were being helped in four canteens in Spain.

In November 1936 the NJCSR was formed to co-ordinate the Aid Spain committees and on 24th April 1937 chartered the SS Backworth to take food to Bilbao, Santander and the Asturias. The children's colonies (children's homes) had been set up by Catalan and Spanish organisations and in conjunction with these the Quakers set up further colonies in 1937 as on alternative to evacuation abroad. Families in Britain were asked to 'foster' individual children but throughout 1937 the food situation worsened and refugees poured into northeast Spain.

Children were helped irrespective of political allegiance; school classes and cultural values were maintained in the colonies that also provided rehabilitation. The main ethos was to provide hope for the future as well as humanitarian aid and to ' train children to be the citizens of a more peaceful and just world'. The girls were taught knitting and sewing and the boys carpentry for example and the children had their own council, pocket money and trips out. Elitism was always resisted and selection was purely on the basis of age.

In the first month following Franco's coup detat on 18th July 1936 ten thousand people had died not in battle but summarily in their homes, in towns and villages. As the frontline retreated the population of Bilbao doubled with refugees. The children of Bilbao vividly remember these dangerous times:

"Air raid shelters were built and we saw people coming to Bilbao from Guernica and Durango" [J S 2000].

Under siege Bilbao was almost completely surrounded on land, by Nationalist warships at sea and Italian and German bombers in the air. Everyday life in Bilbao ceased as schools were closed, public transport halted and hotels were converted into hostels to house the refugees. There was food rationing and perpetual queuing and factories were forced to produce armaments whilst militia roamed the streets. A network of bomb shelters was built whilst the sound of sirens filled the air.

" I lived in Bilbao with my parents who were teachers and my two brothers and a sister. The war was very traumatic because school stopped, we were blockaded, we were hungry and we were bombed. There were queues at the shops. You hoped to get a tin of something but it was very hit and miss because the tins didn't have any labels" [J S 2000].

" We spent three-quarters of the time in the shelter; most of the day and the res t of the time queuing for food from queue to queue"
[Paula c1974-1979].

Beans and rice were the staple diet, flour and water was used for feeding babies; peoples 'nerves were frayed to breaking point' and hospitals were full. The situation was becoming dire and on the representation of the Basque government the NJCSR embarked on the scheme for evacuation.

Making Waves

On 6th April 1937 Franco refused to allow further food supplies into Republican ports in northern Spain. The British government would not provide naval protection but merchant ships risked delivery to Bilbao, in part for profit. The first merchant seaman to break the blockade was Captain Owen Roberts from Penarth with his steamer the *Seven Seas Spray* on 19th April 1937 which pressurised ministers in London into allowing other merchant ships to break the blockade. At 11pm on 22nd April the British steamers *Macgregor*, *Hammersley* and *Stanbrook* made for Bilbao. They carried between them 8,500 tons of food and one of the most well known of the merchant seamen, 'Potato' Jones, from Penarth, not only broke the blockade to deliver food but also managed to help evacuate 500 refugees from Spain.

The bombing of Guernica on the 26th April added urgency to the need for evacuation from Bilbao. On 29th April the British government agreed to the NJCSR recommendations for evacuation of children but there were many opponents in the Foreign Office to the 'Bilbao Babies Policy'. However, Britain's relationship with the Nationalists had already been soured with the breaking of the blockade by the merchant ships. On 3rd May Anthony Eden, Foreign Secretary, informed the House of Commons that British warships would escort evacuees from Bilbao. This resulted in anger and hostility from Franco and the Nationalist press.
The British Government took advantage of disagreements between the Save the Children Fund and the N J C S R. Save the Children Fund were opposed to separating children from their parents and argued that the N J C S R was politically motivated and refused to provide public funding for the evacuations. Nonetheless, donations poured in via public appeals. £12,000 was raised by *The Times* appeal and the £5,000 by the TUC for example.

On 14th May the Home Secretary arranged for meetings with a deputation from the NJCSR to be held at the Home Office. The meeting held on 15th May was attended by the Duchess of Atholl, Chairman, and other members of the NJCSR, as well as

representatives from Roman Catholic organisations, the Salvation Army, the Immigration Branch, the Aliens Department, the children's branch of the Home Office and the Ministry of Health. Proposals were forwarded for housing and care of the Basque refugee children. It was established that the Salvation Army could take care of 400 children immediately. Roman Catholic homes, convents, schools and other institutions as well as individuals had also offered help. Dame Janet Campbell described progress at the 36-acre field in north Stoneham, outside Southampton and the support that had been received from the Mayor and officials of Southampton. Many offers of voluntary help had also been received and water, telephone and sanitation services had been provided at the camp. Contact had been established with the Medical Officer of Health at Southampton and it was unanimously agreed that the children should stay at the camp for no longer than two weeks. Identification and registration was of vital importance and records were to be kept at the Home Office. The Secretary of State authorised the admission of 2400 children, 100 adult female teachers and attendants and 15 priests. The British Consul in Bilbao, Mr Stevenson, was requested to agree to clearance of the *Habana* for the evacuation.

Meanwhile, in Bilbao, the Ministry of Public Education and the Council for Protection of Childhood grouped to form the National Refugee Committee, making arrangements for the evacuation of children although parents initially objected to the children being taken abroad.

On the 20th May 1937 Mr. Stevenson, confirmed that 3900 children, 15 priests, 199 teachers and attendants had been examined by an English doctor and were ready to sail on the Habana the following day (21st May). Each child would be provided with a numbered cardboard disc.

As they boarded the special trains at Portugalote station at 6 pm on the 20th May parents reassured their children that they would only be gone for three months. Amongst the refugees were children bound for Caerleon: J S and her brother, Paula and Maria who remembered the fear and heartbreak of evacuation from their home and families:

"It all happened very quickly because of the blockade. We were just told we were coming because conditions were so bad and that we would soon be back. No one wanted to leave but by Christmas we would all be home. My father was keen we should come to England, which he said was very democratic, very tolerant. My father's last words to me were that we must speak English and we tried our best. " [J S 2000].

" I was an only child and my parents were very unhappy to see me going. They took us to the station and I remember saying goodbye" [Maria 1987].

"I was an orphan and had little choice. There were four of us but my eldest sister was too old" [Paula 1987].

The children were taken in trainloads, 600 at a time, to the *Habana*, a fourteen-year old Spanish liner, docked in Santurce, that had already taken refugees to France. At the quay was a mass of parents as the children, some excited, some crying, were taken on board. They passed the breakwater early the next morning accompanied by a

Spanish destroyer, the yacht *Goizeko-Izarra* with refugees for France and two cargo boats. Their British convoy then joined them: the *Royal Oak* and a destroyer, the *Fearless.*

"The journey was horrendous because the Bay of Biscay was dreadful. There were all these children and Senoritas who came to help and some priests but children who had just left home were crying and hungry. It was very sad.
I got a bunk and felt very lucky. I went to get some food but when I came back my bunk had gone, it was just one of those things. I spent most of the time on deck but it was wonderful, particularly for the little ones, because we had white bread for the first time, beautiful bread. They forgot they were hungry and it cheered them up " [J S 2000].

" The white bread, I ate it until I nearly burst and then I was sorry!" [Paula 1987].

The weather had been rough in the Bay of Biscay with many children suffering seasickness but by 6:30 pm on 22nd May they docked at Fawley, Southampton. There were huge crowds of people when the children arrived. The streets had been decorated and the children thought the British were very friendly

"When we arrived at Southampton it was quite exciting to see the coast. There were all these flags on the harbour and people thought it was a welcome for us but, of course, it was for the coronation" [J S 2000].

" All I could see was the Salvation Army and thought what funny clothes they wore in this country" [Paula 1987].

They did not disembark until 10 a.m the next morning, after further medical examinations. Buses then transported them to the Stoneham camp where 500 bell-tents had been erected. The camp had initially been prepared for 2000 children but in the event nearly twice as many arrived. Remarkably, the organisers, hundreds of volunteer workers and the Southampton authorities, with a few days notice, managed to accommodate the extra numbers. There was help from doctors, nurses, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides as well as supervision by an English naval commander.

Fortunately it was a warm summer. The camp was exceptionally well organised with all the children's needs taken into account. There was piped water, latrines, marquees and mattresses that had been organised by the local Co-op societies and donations from the local community. Cinemas, stages, telephones, loudspeakers and electric lights were provided as well as schooling for the children. Except for one unfortunate incident, in which the news of the fall of Bilbao on June 19th was insensitively handled, the children settled in very well.

" There were many children there and people were extremely kind. Then came the news of the fall of Bilbao (June 19th). It was badly done, over the tannoy, without any warning. We had settled in but this was dreadful news and everyone cried" [J S 2000].

However, providing a more 'normal' life for the children, either in colonies such as those in Spain or in private homes, remained the priority [SWA 1937]. Unfortunately this was hampered by the fall of Bilbao, as Nationalist propaganda was unleashed against the Basques who were labelled as 'Reds' and resulted in many Catholic families withdrawing their offers of help. Some of the children were still in the camp at the beginning of October.

From Stoneham the children were sent to fifty colonies and centres around Britain. The Salvation Army ran some colonies, others were Catholic colonies and families adopted some children. There were guidelines at all the colonies with regard to life, education and the welfare of the children. Special provision, by teachers and priests, was made for the Catholic children whose religion was their way of life. On July 10th 1937 fifty-six children left the camp and headed for Caerleon:

" We were put in groups and the sent away. Fifty six of us altogether came to Caerleon" [Maria 1987].

"I don't know how we happened to come to Caerleon. Various bodies took X number of children. I don't think they picked us for any special reason. We were told we were coming to Wales. I made a lot of it because I have never forgotten that someone had said to us that we were lucky to be going to Wales" [J S 2000].

Friendships and Farewells

As the children arrived in Southampton, plans were already underway to bring them to South Wales and the Cardiff Aid Spain committee negotiated with Monmouthshire County Council for the loan of Cambria House, Caerleon. There was strong support for the Basques in the Monmouthshire County Council who in 1936 had condemned the government for its betrayal of the 'League of Nations' in its treatment of the Basque people. On 29th June 1937 a meeting had been held to place a 'Public Assistance' institution at the disposal of the NJCSR for the Basque children and a voluntary committee was formed to work with Caerleon Urban District Council (CUDC) for local supervision and control of the premises [MCC 1937a]. Cyril Cule, a specialist in Spanish language and literature who had been in Madrid when the Civil war broke out, was appointed Director of Cambria House. He was paid ten shillings a week with full board and voluntary carers and teachers, such as the historian Christopher Hill, were able to give their services free. A new fund was instigated by the Duchess of Atholl (also known as the 'Red Duchess' because of her sympathy for the Republic). Subscriptions to

fund care for the children would also include reserve money for repatriation when necessary under conditions laid out by the government.

The NJCSR were asked to arrange the transfer of no more than fifty children to their charge although in fact they accepted fifty-six. At a meeting in Newport Town Hall, presided over by the Mayor of Newport, Alderman I C Vincent JP a committee representing Newport and Monmouthshire was appointed to work with the Lord Mayor of Cardiff's Committee whose members were drawn from all political, religious and social groups. Alan Collingridge from the London office of the NJCSR also attended. The Cambria House committee was formed, under the auspices of CUDC, to prepare Cambria House for the arrival of the refugees. Nationally, however, there was controversy. Right wingers believed that forced immigration was a propaganda ploy and, ironically, there were very few contributions received from Catholic communities influenced by the labelling of Basques as communists.

There had not been time to hold a public meeting in Caerleon and residents raised concerns about the costs involved for supporting the children. Local councillors assured them that there would be no increase in the rates and asked for a sympathetic approach to the refugees. In the event there was no shortage of help. Students, social workers and local people helped to clean and prepare Cambria House. Friends and representatives of committees, including the NJCSR and the Lord Mayor of Cardiff's committee was present to greet the children on their arrival at Newport Railway Station on 10th July 1937.

By July 15th 1937 the South Wales Argus was describing the children as having settled down well under the supervision of Gwen Jones, the warden. They were studying under three Spanish teachers and willingly helped with meal preparation and the washing up. Visiting hours on Sundays between 2pm and 6pm had also been established.

In fact all was not entirely well in Cambria House. Gwen Jones did not speak Spanish and had previously been in charge of an orphanage. The Basque children were not orphans however, and they were finding the lack of adequate communication and the strict regime difficult:

"She didn't understand. She gave us a list of rules and regulations and we were not very happy" [J. S. 2000].

It was recognised that there was a culture clash and Mrs Maria Fernandez replaced Gwen Jones. Mrs Fernandez had been born in Bilbao but came to Wales at the age of three when her father came to work in Dowlais in 1907. She had married a Basque merchant seaman and settled in Cardiff when, in 1937, a request was made for an interpreter for the 56 Basque children in Caerleon. Mrs Fernandez found that her first job was to interpret the 32 rules that had been set out for the children and when she had finished the children responded with "and are we allowed to breathe? " ( )

Mrs Fernandez took over the running of the home and it became the most successful in Britain. Her first priority was to encourage the children to go out into the community and for visitors to come into Cambria House to meet the children:

"When I arrived the children hadn't been allowed to mix with the village and once they did people thought the world of them" [Fernandez 1987].

Mrs Fernandez organised Spanish food and arranged the children's education, initially in Cambria House and then at local schools. Classes included English, arithmetic, Spanish and music and there was sewing and knitting for the girls and carpentry for the boys, which the children seem to have thoroughly enjoyed:

> *"Here in Cambria House, as in other schools, there are several different classes, but the one we like best is the carpentry class as in that one we make things including fine galleons"*

[J L A January 1939 Cambria House Journal p3].

The high standard of care and education that the children received was clearly successful as three girls went on to Newport High School, one of the boys, Esevio, gained a place at Newport College of Art and J S's brother attended school in Abersychan [J S 2000]. J S achieved a scholarship to the Quaker school at Badminton and then attended Birmingham University:

"First of all I was taught by Mr Cule and Mrs Ward contacted me and said if I was prepared to go to Newport her daughter, who was a teacher at Durham Road, would teach me . So I went. I was well motivated and to encourage me they said they would take me to London if I did well. She took me for the day and I think we saw everything!

> *Badminton was an excellent school and one of the teachers was a friend of Christopher Hill. I won the scholarship by writing an essay about the Spanish summer in the countryside where people had to work from dawn to dusk and had to have a siesta because of the heat. I used to come back to Cambria House for the holidays" [J S 2000].*

Discipline was achieved by reminding the children that they were representatives of their country and their behaviour was exemplary.

> *"We remember her [Mrs Fernandez] talks about being ambassadors for our country. She was marvellous, a bit of everything. She would never refuse you, would sit you on her lap and nothing was too much trouble"* [Maria and Paula 1987].

They also had a tuck shop and could gain points for good behaviour that could to be used as currency [J S 2000].

Everybody was involved in fund raising. The children formed a highly successful football team and concert party as well as writing and producing the Cambria House Journal that sold throughout Wales and in England for 2d each:

"Money came from all sorts of people. The Miners Federation was absolutely superb, even when all interest had waned. We had a big advantage with our soccer team because they were so good. They beat the Cardiff champions and so everyone was interested and would make a donation" [J S 2000].

There was only one incident when there was any complaint about the children's behaviour and it was during a football match as J S [2000] recalled:

"The referee picked on one of the twin boys and threw him to the ground and so all the boys went for him. For the newspapers it was 'manna from heaven' about the Basque children but the poor soul was certified afterwards"

The concerts were organised nationally. The children performed Basque music and dance in their national costume and presented the shows throughout the South Wales valleys where they were welcomed "with open arms" [Fernandez 1987].

"The Basque costumes were made at Cambria House. We sang and danced in groups: it was similar to Morris dancing. We really enjoyed it because it was a change from Caerleon and school" [Maria and Paula 1987].

But not everyone was so welcoming as Cyril Cule describes in 1938 in his introduction to the first Cambria House Journal produced by the children:

"*Although they have often been slandered by those who do not scruple to misrepresent these helpless children as 'murderous little wretches' in order to make political propaganda out of their misery, these little refugee have, on the whole, gained a pleasant impression of the land which has given them shelter and where they have been shown such kindness"*

However, it was the arrival of World War II that was to have the greatest significance on the children's situation. At the beginning of the war the military took over Cambria House with the result that the children, their carers and teachers had to move into Vale View, a building situated in the grounds. Unfortunately there were sixty people to accommodate but only space for twenty. An appeal was made for families to take in some of the children and eighteen children found homes. The army then requested the use of Vale View but accommodation for the remaining thirty five children and adults was found at 18 Cross Street under the " careful management of Mrs Fernandez who endeavoured to make things as comfortable as possible".

Repatriation of children had taken place throughout 1937-1939 but many parents were desperate to have their children with them as war broke out even though conditions for them were very difficult. In November 1939 twenty-five of the children were repatriated and some clearly had mixed feelings, which is a tribute to the care that they had received in Caerleon:

"It is a great joy to go back to our parents, but it is a sad thing to have to part after living together like brothers and sisters for two years. Still, however far away I may be, I shall never forget the friends I am leaving behind in Britain. Goodbye and thank you for all you have done" ['R' Cambria House Journal June 1939 p2].

Thirty children remained at Cross Street. These were children whose parents 'languish in Fascist gaols' or who were living in refugee camps in France [6].
Those in Cross Street were joined by Mrs Fernandez' sister, Mrs Garay, and her children. J S's mother and brother, who had been evacuees in France, also came to live there but never settled and returned to Spain in 1946. In 1947 J S married and settled in Wales. Of those who remained, Welsh families adopted some children and others went to countries around the world.

"I think we left a good name. The motto was 'people judge your country by your behaviour' and the name of Caerleon is remembered not just in the Basque country but in France, Chile, Argentina and Australia" [J S 2000].

Conclusion

This was a remarkable chapter in British and, in particular, Welsh history. There was a huge response by the miners of the south Wales valleys, at a time of great hardship and deprivation, to the plight of the Basques during the Spanish Civil War. It was, however, also a time of high levels of political activity in particular by the Communist Party who turned their political beliefs into highly successful fundraising and publicity activities for the Basque refugee children.

It was the miners that were to provide funding and support throughout the years that the children were dependent, even when other sources had dried up.
The Society of Friends (Quakers) provided enormous help in Spain and set the standards and ethos of the colonies, including Cambria House, and continued to provide support in Britain, for example, providing education at Badminton School.
They were also influential in the formation of the N J C S R. Particularly influential was the Duchess of Atholl who chaired this committee and worked at all levels to ensure the safe evacuation and care of the children. The Salvation Army and Save the Children organisations were also prominent in their activities but many organisations of all social and political hues battled with bureaucracy and governments to bring about the evacuation and care of the children. Local authorities played a crucial part; Southampton City Council provided the camp and facilities at Stoneham; Monmouthshire County Council and Caerleon Council provided accommodation and ongoing support for the children. There was public goodwill throughout Britain and particularly in the south Wales valleys, Caerleon and Newport. These local communities assisted with funding, friendship, took children into their homes and were clearly not influenced by, albeit limited, negative propaganda that raised its head from time to time.

But it was those who cared for the children in Cambria House that were the most remarkable. Cyril Cule, Christopher Hill and especially Mrs Fernandez whose outstanding dedication and achievements provide these lonely and frightened children with life long, happy memories which was reciprocated with dedicated devotion to her. They enabled these exceptionally courageous and traumatised children to find peace and safety far away from home and it is an example that is still relevant today where wars and their innocent victims still abound.

This essay has been able to provide an overview of how and why these young refugees came to stay in Caerleon. However, there remain many more questions such as: how did the miners manage to provide financial support for the children for so long and at a time of great hardship for them?: who was the Duchess of Atholl and how did she come to be so influential in helping the Basque children?: who were the key people in the Basque government who organised the evacuation?: how were the children chosen for the evacuation from Bilbao, was it on a 'first come, first serve' basis?: how did they manage to organise and sustain the Stoneham camp for so many months?: who provided 18 Cross Street, Caerleon and how was it funded?

Sources

1. Archive and library evidence played a great part in uncovering the children's story but it is the primary oral evidence that really brings their story to life. BBC audiocassettes provided oral evidence from Mrs Fernandez, Maria and Paula and one of the child refugees, who had remained in Gwent, very kindly agreed to tell me her story but with the understanding that she remains anonymous. She is therefore referred to throughout this essay as J.S.

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