

## Josefina's Story

by Gail Giles

### Introduction

On the 10th July 1937 fifty-six Basque child refugees, their teachers and carers stood on the doorstep of Cambria House, Caerleon. Amongst them was 15 year old, Josefina Alveraz and her younger brother Gerardo.

Josefina and Gerardo had lived in Bilbao with their parents. younger brother and sister. They had their grandmother and wider family too. It was a normal life. Their parents were teachers, they went to school, played with their friends and had their dreams for the future. Franco's coup d'état changed all that, their innocence stolen from them as they lived day after day, week after week through the bombing and blockade that brought terror and hunger to Bilbao.

This is how Josefina described what she remembered:

*"Air raid shelters were built and we saw people coming to Bilbao from Guernica and Durango.*

*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.*

*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.*

*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 "*

As the children arrived in Southampton plans were already underway to bring them to South Wales where Monmouthshire County Council made Cambria House in Caerleon available for them.

On 29th June 1937 a voluntary committee was formed to work with Caerleon Urban District Council for local supervision and control of the premises.

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 and a new fund was instigated by the Duchess of Atholl.

Following a meeting in Newport Town Hall, presided over by the Mayor of Newport, Alderman I. C. Vincent, JP, the Cambria House committee was

formed, under the auspices of Caerleon Urban District Council, to prepare Cambria House for the arrival of the refugees.

Initially concerns about costs were raised by the community but 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. By the time the children arrived at Newport train station on 10<sup>th</sup> July 1937 to a warm welcome by many including the National Joint Committee and the Lord Mayor of Cardiff's Committee and the Mayor of Newport, before travelling to Caerleon by bus.

At first the children appeared to have settled in well under the supervision of Gwen Jones, and their three Spanish teachers. However, in fact all was not entirely well in large part due to the language and cultural differences between the children's homeland and their life in Caerleon.

As Gwen Jones did not speak Spanish had previously been in charge of an orphanage. She set a very strict regime, had no knowledge of the Basque way of life, food, culture nor understand what these children had suffered.

They all needed to feel safe and cared for.

Josefina recognised: *"We were a different type of child than those who came from a broken home. We were war children. She didn't understand. She gave us a list of rules and regulations and we were not very happy"*.

And so replacement was found. Mrs Maria 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 was living in Cardiff by 1937. However, her husband was away at sea for long periods of

time and she had no children herself so helping these young children in Caerleon, was just what she was looking for.

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?*"

Cambria House quickly became a happy, loving and supportive environment which could certainly be described as the most successful of the colonies in the UK.

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:

And she described the situation: "*When I arrived the children hadn't been allowed to mix with the village and once they did people thought the world of them*".

Mrs Fernandez organised Basque/ Spanish food and assisted 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"*

Three girls went on to Newport High School, one of the boys, Esevio, gained a place at Newport College of Art and Josefina's brother attended school in Abersychan.

Despite having little English on her arrival, Josefina managed to achieve a scholarship to the Quaker school at Badminton and then attended Birmingham University, where she studied maths, English and British Institution:

*"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".*

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

Josefina, Maria and Paula all recalled: *"We remember Mrs Fernandez talked 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. We also had a tuck shop and could gain points for good behaviour that could be used as currency .*

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:

Josefina describes: *"Money came from all sorts of people. The Miners' Federation was absolutely superb, even when all interest had wained. 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".*

There was only one incident when there was any complaint about the children's behaviour which was during a football match and Josefina 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, Mrs Fernandez said they were welcomed "*with open arms*".

Maria and Paula remembered: *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".*

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 WWII that was to have the greatest significance on the children's situation. At the beginning of the war the military took over Cambria House leaving only a smaller building Vale View, available.

So a public appeal was made for families to take in some of the children and as a result eighteen children found homes. The army subsequently requested the use of Vale View too. Accommodation for the remaining thirty five children and adults was found at 18 Cross Street, just across the road from the Priory Hotel, where a blue plaque is placed above the door.

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, this is what they wrote in the Cambria House Journal:

*"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".*

Thirty children remained at Cross Street whose parents were described by Jack Williams, Chair of Caerleon Council, as:

*'languishing in Fascist gaols' or who were living in refugee camps in France.*

Those in Cross Street were joined by Mrs Fernandez' sister, Mrs Garay and her children and we are so delighted that Mrs Garay's relatives are here today and also the Benavente family were also under Mrs Fernandez care.

On 28 March 1939 Jack Williams wrote a letter requesting urgent assistance for Josefina's mother, amongst others:

*' there is also the case of Josefina's mother, Engracia Alveraz, who writes a despairing letter to say that she expects to be sent across the Spanish frontier at*

*the end of the week. We cabled Lady Hall giving her the address of the lady and asking her to do something immediately. We also cabled Engracia Alveraz offering her hospitality here and saying we would pay all expenses of the journey here. We told her to show the cable to the director of the home where she is.*

*She would receive at least a long term of imprisonment if she went back to Spain. What would then happen to her 6 year old son and Josefina. The only near relation she has in Spain is her grandmother ( possibly dead) and as you know her father has already been killed by the fascists.*

*If you can think of anything more that can be done to help this desperate woman, please do it. She has enclosed a letter of farewell to Josefina to be given if nothing more is heard of her after she goes to Spain, so she knows what to expect.*

Thankfully, Engracia and Josefina's brother were rescued and Josefina had the joy of being with her mother and brother again but they didn't settle and in 1946 returned to Spain. Josefina never gave me any indication that she had been aware of the very serious danger her mother had been in.

Her father was never seen again. Josefina explained that her parents had planned to get out together with her younger brother, Paco, they got so far but then he put her mother and brother on a boat to France. He was then taken prisoner when he got to Gijon, Asturia and a cousin had told her that her father had said: *"I'll be home soon because I have been tried and found not guilty of any crimes"* but he was never seen again.

Her brother, Gerado, emigrated to Australia and she told me that they never managed to meet all together again as a family.



In 1947 Josefina married and settled in a small town called Risca, just north of Newport . They had two sons Martin and John who were unable to be here today, and grandchildren all of whom she adored. Her home was full of their photos and achievements.

Of those who remained, Welsh families adopted some children and others went to countries around the world.

Josefina told me:

*"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".*

I think you will agree that this is the story of the exceptional courage, determination, generosity and kindness of all those involved in the struggle to help these innocent victims of war.

But it was the children who showed the greatest courage and determination of all in overcoming the fear and trauma they had experienced through war, evacuation and separation from their families and home and who are remembered with such affection to this day.