In a country churchyard annexe

by Adrian Bell

Among the graves that surrounded All Saints' Church in the Oxfordshire village of Faringdon there was no signpost directing you to the churchyard annexe, but the vicar was helpful: it was only a short distance back up the hill, he said, and he would take us there. Natalia and I explained that we'd come in search of a memorial stone that had been set there to commemorate Arturo Barea and his Austrian wife, Ilsa, who had lived in exile in Britain since March 1939, the month in which the Spanish Republic finally collapsed.

The vicar was surprised: he didn't know of any such stone; nor was he aware that one of Spain's most celebrated novelists of the 20th century might have been buried in this patch of rural England. It would help to locate it, he said, if we knew when Barea had died. We told him that Barea had died in 1957 and his wife some years later in Vienna, but the information we had was that the stone had been placed by a friend at the head of the graves of Ilsa's parents. They, too, had found refuge in Britain after the Nazis had occupied their homeland, and had lived with the Bareas until they died, within a few months of each other, in 1948.

The stone was visible from some distance off – a solid, rough-hewn lump of pinkish granite that contrasted with the polished, grey-white headstones of Faringdon's native parishioners. It carried no epitaph, simply their names – Arturo Barea and Ilsa Barea Pollak – and their dates. Surprisingly, both the stone and the Pollaks' graves appeared well tended.

Arturo Barea is best remembered for his trilogy of autobiographical novels that are collectively known as "The Forging of a Rebel". Written in the early 1940s and skilfully translated by Ilsa, they were first published in English. By the end of that decade they had been translated into nine European languages and at that time Barea stood fifth on the all-time list of most-translated Spanish writers, but it was not until three years after Franco's death that they were finally published in Spain.

A Castilian edition had been published in Buenos Aires (and had circulated clandestinely in Spain), which was not surprising since Barea was enormously popular in Argentina. From 1940 right up until his death he worked for the South American section of the BBC's World Service and, under the pseudonym of Juan de Castilla, broadcast a weekly chat...
about life in England. It was a job for which he was suitably experienced: throughout much of 1937 he had broadcast nightly as “the voice of Madrid”. He described his BBC broadcasts as “little stories from my village”, and from 1947 to 1957 “my village” was Eaton Hastings, five miles from Faringdon, and where the Bareas rented Middle Lodge, a house on the edge of Buscot Park owned by Gavin Henderson, the second Lord Faringdon.

In England Barea maintained only a limited contact with the many other Republican writers and intellectuals who’d been similarly driven into exile. He was, however, at home in English literary circles, or among the Middle European refugees whom he met through Ilsa when she worked at the BBC monitoring centre during the war. And unlike a number of other Spaniards who’d arrived in England at the same time, such as Luis Portillo and Pepe Estruch, he had no links with the Basque children who were still left in England – he did not teach in any of the remaining colonies, for instance, as they did.

And yet, there was a coincidental connection with the Basque children. Like a number of those children, he benefited from Lord Faringdon’s Republican sympathies. Half a mile down the road from Middle Lodge there is a gate-house into Buscot Park. It was here in 1938 that Lord Faringdon provided accommodation for the 40 Basque boys who formed Poppy Vulliamy’s colony. They were amongst the last contingent to leave the Eastleigh camp, and had lived a somewhat nomadic life since. Poppy took them from Eastleigh to another set of borrowed tents in another farmer’s field, outside Diss in Norfolk.

Then, with the arrival of autumn, she secured a house – a redundant vicarage out on the marshes near Great Yarmouth. It was a roof over their heads, but with neither gas nor electricity, and with earth latrines that the boys had to dig at the bottom of the garden, it was little else. In the freezing winter of 1937-38, as the boys were breaking up what little furniture there was for firewood, Poppy sought out better accommodation. The account she gave to me ran:

“So I wrote to Lord Faringdon, and I said – I was very cheeky – I said, ‘Call yourself a socialist. Why are you living in that great big house all by yourself? Why don’t you share it with my Basque boys?’

“He wrote back and said, ‘How many Basque boys are we talking about?’

“And I said, ‘Forty.’

“He wrote back again and he said, ‘You’d better come up and we’ll talk about it.’

“So I went up to see him in the House of Lords, and I was so nervous. He was in all his robes.”

Lord Faringdon stopped short of sharing Buscot House with 40 Basque boys, but he offered them the gatehouse and had a set of prefabricated garages erected in its garden to serve as dormitories. And he gave them the run of the park and its lake.

On our way over to Faringdon in our search for the Bareas’ memorial we stopped at the gatehouse – to this day it is still known as “Basque House”. The prefabs have long gone, but otherwise the house looks the same and the view down across the lake looks just as it did in the photographs Poppy took of her boys nearly 70 years ago.

The stone in memory of the Bareas had been placed in the Faringdon churchyard annexe after Ilsa’s death in 1977 by Olive Renier. She had met them, and the Pollaks, when she and Ilsa sat together through their long shifts at the BBC monitoring centre in 1940, and befriended them in their first years in exile. Years later she wrote:

“I put up a stone, but could find no words to express my feelings for those four people, whose fate (though they could be said to be among the fortunate ones) was symbolic of the giant lost causes of our generation – the fate of Spain, the fate of the Jews, the fate of social democracy in Germany, in Italy, in Europe as a whole.”

Here was an epitaph that might equally have been spoken for the Basque children, and the private erection of that memorial stone a quiet gesture symbolic of the thousand acts of kindness that supported them through their time in England.

There is a coda to that morning in Faringdon. A few weeks later Natalia wrote to say that she had had a visit from Martin Murphy, a retired academic from Oxford, to whom we were indebted – he’d first brought to our attention the story of Arturo Barea’s connection with Faringdon. He confessed that it was he who continues to clean the moss from the memorial stone and who weeds from the Pollaks’ graves.