

## Personalities

# Remembering Leah Manning

by Natalia Benjamin

In April 1937, conditions in the Basque country were dire, with bombs dropping almost daily; food was scarce and children were starving. In spite of the fact that France had accepted many refugee children, the Foreign Office refused to do so. Nevertheless, the Duchess of Atholl, President of the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, asked Leah Manning, of Spanish Medical Aid, to go to Bilbao to organise an evacuation of children to Britain from the war zone. She arrived on 24 April. Two days later, Guernica was bombed and the town almost totally destroyed. It was thought that Bilbao and other large towns would suffer the same

fate, and under pressure of public opinion, the Basque government appealed to foreign nations to give temporary asylum to the children.

Leah Manning started a frenetic campaign aimed at the British government to allow Basque children to come to Britain. She bombarded influential people with telegrams: Walter Citrine of the TUC, the Basque Ambassador, Atlee, Lloyd George, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York. Her actions made her very unpopular, especially with the British government in London, but on 15 May, her interference paid off and it reluctantly agreed to provide temporary residence in Britain for 2,000 children. The

Basque people had to be persuaded that evacuation was the safest precaution, so to reassure the families, Leah Manning broadcast almost every evening on the Basque radio and published a daily "Letter to Mothers" in the local paper.

The children were due to leave on 20 May. Only two days previously, Leah Manning had managed to convince the British government to accept twice the number of children. In her autobiography "A Life For Education", she graphically describes the departure: "The quay was a black mass of

parents, defying bombs, as the children, some happy and excited, some in tears, were taken aboard in orderly companies. Head to tail, the *señoritas* laid out our precious cargo – on the bulkheads, in the swimming pool, in the state rooms and along the alleyways." (p.131)

On their arrival at Southampton, Leah Manning sent a wireless message for a priest from Southampton to come and celebrate Mass. She wrote: "For the moment, my work ended on that bright May morning. I had endured the siege, and disappointment after disappointment, but I had never wavered from my original intention. I had brought away 4,000 Basque children, in family groups and with their escorts, to a place of safety." (p.131)

But her work with the children didn't finish there. She was at the camp at North Stoneham when the news came that Bilbao had fallen, and she spent most of the night comforting and cuddling troubled children. The following letter was sent to her later by some of these children: "We have been given shelter by a second mother, this second mother we do not know how to thank for her attentions and kindnesses shown to us; this all the more so since we are here only temporarily so that when we are installed permanently, we just cannot imagine how wonderful it will be. For all this and to our second mother and to the committee we give our most grateful thanks." (p.134)

Had it not been for Leah Manning's rather unorthodox way of campaigning, it is unlikely that the government would have changed its mind. Leah Manning was instrumental in obtaining permission for and organising the evacuation of 4,000 Basque children to Great Britain and it is thanks to her tireless energy and insistence that they were able to escape the hardships and deprivation of life in Bilbao and find a safe haven in Britain.



Leah Manning with some of the niños.

## When the Basque children came to Woodberry

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the use of castanets, which she did not possess.

A good looking young man that I can vividly recall was Ramón de la Cal, a real charmer with the girls. Ramón, along with another Basque refugee, Martín Oviedo spent a weekend at my home in Edmonton. We travelled by bus to my home, arriving late Friday evening. Martín told me his father owned a factory, called Astra, which manufactured small arms such as pistols. He had been in Guernica at the time of the aerial bombardment by the Germans, but his father had driven him and his family out of the town to safety.

One of the children for whom I had strong, fond and poignant memories was Pili Cortés. Pili was 14 years old and I would have been coming up to 16. She was a girl whose company I found very attractive and was probably my first "love". On my visits to

Woodberry, I would spend time talking to her. It was purely a platonic relationship, there was no kissing, cuddling or holding hands. Then calamity struck, Pili was going to leave Woodberry and join a family living near Acton, in west London. The father of this family was an engine driver, active in ASLEF and a member of the Communist Party. One afternoon I cycled from Edmonton to Acton to see Pili, right through the busy heart of London. The family were very friendly and I told them of my involvement in trying to help the Spanish Republic. I was invited for tea and left in the dark at around 7pm to cycle home. I never saw Pili again and I heard through the grapevine that she had died in France from starvation. I still find my thoughts about Pili very upsetting, even at the age of 85½ years, and Pili was only one of many thousands who suffered at the hands of the Fascists at the end of the civil war. Another Basque I can vividly remember was

Jesús Alcón. He was a thickset young man with rugged features and I have vague recollection that he had slightly wavy hair. Jesús had a genial personality and he was one of the children with whom we would always have a conversation. He had a perpetual smile on his face despite the situation he was in, and he was as solid as a rock. I have learned that Jesús remained in England, his first wife died and he remarried.

I can also recall another Basque, Luis Sanz. Tall and slim, he was a very intelligent young man who went to university in England. He was another person with whom we would always have a conversation during our visits to Woodberry. I think he became a maths teacher. Sadly, I discovered that both of these had died.

I have often thought about how different the world might have been if the forces of democracy had been willing and powerful enough to defeat Fascism in Spain in the 1930s and how many millions of lives would have been spared in the subsequent conflict in Europe.