

Niños gather for 70th anniversary commemoration in Southampton

by Nicholas Rankin

On 26 April 2007, I attended the solemn international peace ceremony in the Assembly House at Guernica in Vizcaya, 70 years after German and Italian planes had fire-bombed the town and machine-gunned its inhabitants. Exactly a month later, I was at Solent University in Southampton to commemorate one direct consequence of that attack – the evacuation of thousands of Basque children to the UK.

A fascinating exhibition of photographs, newspaper-cuttings and memorabilia told some of the story, including a telegram from Leah Manning in Bilbao, dated 14 May 1937, begging the Trades Union Congress in Britain to get British government authorisation for a shipload of Basque children. "STOP German pilot captured yesterday declared intense bombardment Bilbao imminent STOP".

I bumped into my friend Fernando de la Torre, down from Sheffield with his wife Gillian. We first met at an International Brigade Memorial Trust rally where he and Cora Portillo both had Spanish Republican flags draped round their shoulders. There was another Republican flag pinned on the exhibition wall and Fernando explained its castellated coat of arms and what his father Silverio had told him about its red, yellow and purple colours: "un río de sangre, un río de oro, un río de paz". When we went into the theatre, there were flags of three other identities behind the speakers: the British Union flag, the Spanish national flag, and the Basque *ikurrña*.

The Chairman, Manuel Moreno, told us how the Basque Children of '37 Association had been founded in 2002 as an archive, a charity and for the "recuperation of historical memory".

Adrian Bell, author of "Only For Three Months", gave us an eloquent historical account of the coming of the children to Britain and their dispersal to 70 *colonias*. The bombing of Guernica – which Britain's then Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, later called "the first blitz of the Second World War" – changed everything. Stanley Baldwin's government reluctantly overcame its policy of appeasement and non-intervention in the face of humanitarian need, but insisted that not a penny of public money be spent on the refugees. A charitable appeal raised £12,000; the trade unions donated £5,000.

Vicente Cañada gave thanks. He came on the *Habana* aged seven and spent two years in England. Another who was evacuated aged seven was Herminio Martínez. He gave a moving speech of thanks to all the hundreds and thousands of ordinary British people who had helped the Basque children when their government did not want to. They included bakers, housewives, unionists, church-people, poets and politicians.

Miren Azkarate, the spokesperson of the Basque government, said that the dramatic evacuation of 38,000 children had been an extraordinary event in 1937. Most went to France, but 6,000 went to Catalonia, 4,000 to the UK, 3,000 to Belgium and 2,000 to the USSR. She said how her government admired the first Basque government for its political diversity and its administrative ability: the Ministry of Social Welfare managed to get 4,000 children, 95 teachers, 120 assistants and 15 priests onto a ship and safely to England.

Carlos Miranda, the Spanish ambassador, then thanked the committee and said he was honoured to be at the 70th anniversary celebration of the Basque children. He wanted to pay a special tribute to the parents who gave up their children to strangers in a strange land. This heart-wrenching act reminded him of two episodes in the Bible: Moses being put in a basket, and the mother who gave up her child before Solomon's sword.

The ambassador had visited the exhibition with interest, and noted the Spanish Republican flag. "I respect that flag, as a flag of democratic Spain, and as the exiles' flag." The Franco regime had been a dictatorship. "I am 64 years old," he said, "and only this year have I lived an equal time under democracy as I lived under dictatorship." The exiled Basque children lost much, but they had lived in freedom. Spain was now a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy. "The Spanish flag is not the flag of Franco. It looks with friendship on the Republican flag."

The memorial plaque was unveiled, with the green oak tree of Guernica and a ship on the sea. The *aurrekulari* danced in honour, to *txistu* and *tamboril*. We walked through a re-enactment of the Scout camp at North Stoneham to a big boozy lunch in the canteen, catered for nearly 250 people, including 56 *niños* and *niñas* of 1937. Talking to a few, I gained an impression of enduring vigour, of good lives hard won, and families that were proud of them.

After dancing and drinking, talking and singing, we settled down in the afternoon to watch Steve Bowles's superbly crafted documentary feature film "The Guernica Children", which told the story of the Basque evacuees through evocative black-and-white archive footage, old photographs, excellent interviews and discreetly unshowy re-enactments.

On 24 June 1937 there was a concert at the Albert Hall in London for the Basque children, sponsored by Pablo Picasso (who had just completed his famous painting "Guernica") and Paul Robeson. In Steve Bowles's hands, Robeson singing "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" achieves an even greater poignancy.



What you said about it

● For a small charity with limited resources, to mount a major commemorative event was a significant achievement. The reunion was a great success for the Association. The whole event was well coordinated in the presence of the Spanish ambassador, the Basque Minister of Culture and other distinguished guests.

● Mi madre desea nuevamente agradecerles por las extraordinarias jornadas que vivió en su viaje a Southampton desde Caracas. Para ella ha sido muy emocionante ver lugares donde vivió de niña. Por mi parte, también deseo agradecerles a todos por este momento tan bello que vivimos y por todas las atenciones que nos brindaron.

● I would like to congratulate the committee and all those involved in the tremendously successful event in Southampton. However, there was no mention of the Communist Party, a quite extraordinary omission. It was the Communist Party, together with some members of the Labour Party, the Co-operative Party and trade unions, that was the backbone of the anti-fascist movement of the 1930s. From this movement sprang the Aid for Spain campaign and then the Basque Children's Committee.

● It was a truly memorable, emotionally charged and professionally organised event.



Above: Niños outside tents erected by Scouts.

Left: Natalia Benjamin speaks at the opening ceremony.

Right: Spanish ambassador Carlos Miranda unveils the commemorative plaque.

Top right: Danzaris performed outside the conference centre and at the lunch.

Bottom Right: Some of the more than 200 participants in Southampton.



Being there also made me appreciate how much hard work had been put in to it by committee members beforehand. It was a fantastic success for the Association, and most important of all, hugely appreciated by all the *niños*.

● I want to say thank you, thank you. How well organised it was! My mother was ecstatic. How pleased she was to have come from the south of Spain to experience what happened and to meet a number of her former friends!

● ¡Qué triunfo! ¡Qué día más memorable! ¡Cuanta gente querida del pasado! Tuvimos suerte con el tiempo, nos encantaron los bailes. Muchas gracias.

● I want to congratulate you all on giving us a splendid and memorable day. It was very well organised with excellent speakers and speeches, a first class exhibition, an entertaining lunch and social time, completed with a memorable – and at times very emotional – film. I shall always remember the event and the many lovely people there.

● I wanted to say a huge thank you for a wonderful day – you even arranged good weather. I was there with my mother, uncle and aunt who were all *niños* and it was very special.

● I congratulate you all for organising the gathering. It was the finest assembly that I have attended for a long time.

● Había un ambiente fantástico. La atmósfera se podía tocar.

● We wish to thank you for working so hard so we could have such a wonderful, happy day.

● For me the highlight which stays in my mind is that of over 200 people, led by Basque dancers and musicians, walking across Southampton parks from the conference centre to the restaurant. En route, they were met by a patrol of local scouts who had erected some 1937-style bell tents and recreated the entrance to the Stoneham camp.

● My wife and I enjoyed the day immensely, in particular as it educated our son and his girlfriend: "Nobody taught us this!" Please pass on our congratulations to you all.

● A note to say thank you committee and all the helpers for a well-organised and happy reunion. We enjoyed meeting the other *niños*, but the tears came when the film started and my wife realised the pain that her parents felt on saying goodbye. For many years she felt abandoned... many others shed a tear whilst the film was on.

● Quiero felicitaros de todo corazón por lo estupendo que resultó todo. Ha sido un éxito completo de los organizadores, bien merecido por el trabajo hasta casi la extenuación que habeis realizado y por el enorme entusiasmo y cariño que habeis puesto en el empeño. Yo me

considero muy afortunado y satisfecho por haber tenido la oportunidad de haber podido participar con los niños en los actos del sábado.

● We felt we had to let you know just how much we enjoyed the event. It was emotional, happy and exhausting. The whole programme was splendid.

● We thoroughly enjoyed the whole day; everyone was helpful and friendly and everything had been organised and set out so well, down to the last detail. We met up with old friends but it was sad that some of our dear friends were no longer with us. With our guests, we enjoyed it all, especially seeing the tents and the dancers.

● En nombre de mi familia os damos las gracias por el gran acontecimiento que nos brindasteis, en un ambiente tan alegre y fraterno. Todos salimos muy contentos, con la pena de no poder estar más tiempo.

● What a warm welcome we had, so much was going on! We were led to the dining room across the park by two *txistularis* playing traditional Basque music. And in the park, the organisers, with the help of the boy scouts, had set up some bell tents and recreated the camp at Eastleigh where we first stayed. Photos were taken of all the *niños* underneath the camp banner. What a wonderful surprise and what memories it brought back!