

Basque Children of '37 Association UK

**AGM
16 February 2013**

Secretary's Report for the year ending 30 November 2012

Introduction

This has been a remarkably full year for the Association, both in terms of activities and also of commemorative events. The year 2012 marked the 75th anniversary of the arrival in Britain of 4,000 Basque children refugees, many of whom were destined never to return to their home country and never to see their parents again. We decided to mark this historic date by putting on a really special event which would be held in Southampton University in conjunction with the Spanish Department and the Library.

Activities

75th anniversary commemorative events

Various activities were planned for different times throughout the year and I shall start by talking about these.

The first commemorative event was held on 21 April, a Day School on "The Basque Refugee Children in Britain 1937-1939" run together by the Association and the Department of Continuing Education at Oxford University. Speakers were Tom Buchanan, Nick Rankin and Tony Kushner, with Herminio Martinez and Natalia Benjamin also presenting papers, Herminio talking about his experiences in the different colonies he had been sent to, while Natalia spoke about the many gaps there still remained in our knowledge of certain aspects of the Basque children's odyssey.

We had hoped to have our main event with Southampton University on 23 May, as that was the date when the *ninos* arrived and first stepped on English soil, but logistical restraints made this unfeasible, so we had to run the event two weeks earlier. This event was without a doubt the focal point of the anniversary commemoration and as it attracted over 230 participants, it required a great deal of planning. The Association was responsible for the programme of the 12 May and Southampton University for that of 13 May. Throughout the day it was possible to see the various exhibitions that had been mounted both in the Library and in the main part of the University. The proceedings started off with the showing of a moving short film of the journey on the *Habana* that no one had seen before. Then distinguished guests (amongst whom were the Spanish Ambassador and representatives of the Basque and Spanish governments, the Sherriff of Southampton, the Mayor-Elect of Eastleigh and the historian Adrian Bell) gave short speeches, as did four of the "*ninos*". There then followed an address by the Secretary of the Association. She outlined the work of the Association over the last ten years, stressing the importance of keeping archives and leading to the symbolic handing over of the archives she had been collecting over the years to the Head of the Special Collections at the university's Hartley Library, Professor Chris Woolgar.

Led by the *danzaris* to the dining room, our guests were served an excellent lunch, followed by entertainment. The **na-mara** folk duo (one of whom, Rob Garcia, is the son of a *nino*), performed some of their songs, including the poignant “Only for Three Months”. Lastly a troupe of nineteen Basque dancers who had come specially to participate in the event took to the stage and thrilled everyone with their performance. At the end of the day, it was generally agreed that the commemorative event put on by the Association had been a great success. The next day’s programme concentrated on film and was lead by members of the Spanish Department

The final specific event was the Anniversary Lecture of the Association, the fourth in our Annual Lectures series which was held in London on 20 October and given this year by Richard Baxell who spoke on “Defeat and Exile: the British volunteers and the Basque children 1937-1945”. His talk focussed on the two groups who left Spain for England on specific dates during the Spanish Civil War: the large group of 4,000 children who arrived in Britain on 23 May 1937 and the 300 surviving members of the British Battalion of the XV International Brigade who arrived on 7 December 1938. His talk was well received and a fitting tribute on this anniversary year.

Plaques

On 16 May a carved wooden plaque was unveiled on the building in Blackboys, East Sussex, that had been one of the colonies used to house some of the children, the only one to have been especially built for the children. It is now it is a youth hostel. The erection of the plaque had been organised by Mike Anderson of the IBMT who lives locally. Realising that two Basque “children”, formerly residents of Blackboys, were coming to Britain from America to attend the 75th commemorative event at Southampton University in May, he thought it appropriate to take advantage of their visit to set up a plaque as he wanted visitors to the youth hostel and local people to know about “this important piece of history”. It was unveiled by two of the *ninos* who had lived there and had later married, Miren and Moises Alonso. Several members of the Association attended the ceremony.

Radio and Television programmes

On 18 June, BBC: Radio 4 broadcast a programme: “Habana: Children of the Spanish Civil War”. It skilfully explored the psychological effect on the children who arrived in Southampton in 1937 and was narrated by Rob Garcia, who told the story of the *ninos* through songs and interviews. Among the members interviewed, Paco Robles and Herminio Martinez were living testimony of both the trauma and the resilience of the Basque children, whereas Manuel Moreno, Carmen Coupland and Josefina Stubbs were second generation refugees whose upbringing was often very different, some of their parents insisting on maintaining their Spanish culture, others refusing to recall the horrors of the war.

On 3 December a new documentary programme was shown on BBC Wales about the experiences of the Basque refugee children in Wales entitled: “Wales and the Basque refugees, the children’s story”. The programme, which focussed on the four colonies in Wales, Caerleon, Swansea, Brechfa and Old Colwyn, traces the sympathy of the Welsh people for the Basques and interviewed members Josefina Savery and her

brother Gerardo Alvarez, and Jose Armolea, as well as Hywel Davies, author of “Fleeing Franco” .The Association was closely involved with helping the production company find suitable archival material in its archive in Oxford.

Website

The Website has continued to be a source of valuable information. The Kilner family has been responsible for keeping it going over the years, and now feel it is time to pass it on to others. We are grateful to John, Joe and Carmen for their dedicated input. We now have Gerald Hoare and Willie Black at the helm, and they have already put in a great deal of time, which, again, we appreciate.

Links with IBMT

The Association continues to give close support to the International Brigades Memorial Trust, and members attended their annual lecture in London on 3 March given by Peter Carroll on “The Spanish Civil War in the 21st Century”, as well as the Memorial Day in Jubilee Gardens on 7 July, when Secretary Natalia Benjamin laid a wreath on behalf of the Association.

Research

There is still much to find out about the colonies and during the course of the year two of our members have been delving in old newspapers and have produced very interesting studies of colonies about which we knew very little before, those at High Wyckham and Burnastone (commonly known as Derby).

Publications

Natalia Benjamin produced a second, bi-lingual, book of testimonies of the children to mark the anniversary event: “Memorias: the Basque Children remember and are remembered”.

A nino, Blas Oscar Guerreo Uriate, now living in Spain but who was at the Street colony, has had the autobiography of his time in Britain published in Spanish: “*Blasin, un refugiado vasco en Inglaterra*”.

Talks

Throughout the year, Carmen Kilner, Herminio Martinez and Natalia Benjamin have given successful talks at the usual venues, such as local history societies.

Newsletter

The highlight of the year was undoubtedly the May commemorative event, and a special edition of the Newsletter has been produced containing 28 pages, four of which are in colour. This souvenir edition contains not only the texts of all the important speeches, but also letters from attendees, saying why it was such a special occasion for them.

Conclusion

All in all, it was a very successful year for the Association. However, we are now a decreasing workforce on the committee feel it is now time to take stock of what we do as we have accomplished many of our initial aims. At the forthcoming AGM, there will be proposals for the purpose of simplifying the structure, composition and administration of the Association.

Natalia Benjamin
Secretary

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