

The Thornycroft Family and the Basque Refugee children

by Anna Cordon

Four thousand Spanish children from the Basque country, in the north of Spain, were sent by their parents to Britain in May 1937 following the aerial bombing of republican Spain (Bilbao, Guernica etc) by Franco's fascist rebels. The British government did not want to be involved, because it had a policy of non-intervention, and so all the children had to be looked after by volunteers (all kinds of voluntary organisations including left and right wing people) without any state support.

They arrived at Southampton on the overcrowded liner *SS Habana*, and were sent all over the UK, and about 60-70 of them were collected and brought back to Worthing by my grandmother Dorothy "Dolly" Thornycroft, nee Rose.

Dolly's father Edward Rose had been a successful playwright, and the theatre critic for the Sunday Times, a gentle man who had endowed a scholarship at the London School of Economics "for a girl of the industrial class" in memory of his first daughter who died young, and had sent his second daughter Dolly to a progressive school in Hampstead. . He introduced Dolly to early socialist ideas: we have pictures of her and her mother Lizzie Rose (herself a working class girl) photographed at the First Fabian Summer School by George Bernard Shaw in his garden in Wales. Dolly had married a family friend Oliver Thornycroft, a young engineer working on the design of early tanks, and they had five children, but Dolly was always interested in politics and became a Labour councillor. The eldest son Christopher, also an engineer, abandoned his degree course at Oxford University to go off to fight against the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War.

When the *SS Habana* brought the Basque refugee children into Southampton dock, they were welcomed by well wishers including the Thornycrofts. It had been a rough voyage for the already traumatised war refugees. Dolly's youngest son my uncle Bill, who was about 10 years old, described how even the priests who accompanied the children across the Bay of Biscay had vomit down the fronts of their black robes. Together with the Mayoress of Worthing, a Mrs Barber, Dolly brought 60 or 70 of them back to Worthing. She was the first secretary of the Worthing Committee for Spanish Refugee Children, and Mrs Barber was its Chairman. They set up children's homes for the children in three big local houses - the girls (and three of their little brothers) in Beach House and Penstone House, and the boys at Eventide in High Salvington. They then set about the enormous task of raising money for their support. My grandmother Dolly handed over the Secretaryship to her eldest daughter Kate who was about 25 at that time. The children were all given jobs to do to help pay for their keep. They gave Spanish folk song and dance concerts to raise money. Local people were asked to donate ten shillings a week to support a child - about thirty pounds nowadays. I think my Great Aunt Elfrida Thornycroft (Dolly Thornycroft's sister-in-law) was also involved in their care - certainly my Uncle Bill wrote about an aunt teaching them English songs and accompanying them on the piano in one of the homes and there are pictures of Basque children in her photograph albums. One older lad called Manolo Sanchez, who was one of the boys at Eventide, used to mend the refugee children's shoes to help earn their keep, and later seems to have become a family friend and sometimes drove the family car.

Both Dolly's elder daughter my aunt Kate, and the middle daughter my Aunt Priscilla who was 20, accompanied the refugee children when groups of them had to be moved to other places around the UK. Aunt Priscilla took them out on painting expeditions – we still have some of the refugees' paintings.

Hans Siebert, a progressive teacher who, as a Communist in Hitler's Germany, was in the UK himself as a refugee, became the Warden of the Eventide boys' home, and then at The Grange, a home in Street, Somerset, lent by the Clarks (a Quaker family noted for the shoemaking company). Hans and my Aunt Priscilla later married, and after the Second World War they went to live in Communist East Germany. Priscilla is still alive and well, living in Dresden at age 101.

At the end of the Spanish Civil War, the children had to be sent back to what remained of their families in Spain, to a very uncertain future including persecution by the Fascists from having been on the "wrong side" of the war. My Aunt Kate accompanied a large group of them on the train down through France to the border. She describes movingly in a letter* how horrible it was to watch the children, who had been treated with such love in England, walk across the border at Hendaye, to stony-faced border guards and no cuddles, and for Kate not to be allowed to witness any kind of reunion with the families which, it was claimed, were there to meet them.

I am sending all the papers and photos as I find them among my family's papers, to BCA'37 UK, and I hope they can be digitised in due course.

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* On the web at: <http://www.basquechildren.org/-/docs/lettersetc/thornycroftletter1>