

The Repatriation of the Basque Children

Gerald Hoare and Simon Martinez

The story of the Basque Children's repatriation from Britain back to Spain starts with the evacuation of almost 4,000 children and accompanying adults (teachers, helpers and priests) from Bilbao on the *SS Habana* on the 21st of May 1937, their arrival at Southampton two days later, and ends two years later with the majority of the children having returned to Spain. Only about 10% of the children remained to live in the UK in exile. The situation for the accompanying adults was different with around half remaining in the UK and the rest either returning to Spain or joining friends or family in exile in other countries.

This article is the story of how the safe return of the children was effected; why so few remained in the UK and why there was a different outcome for the adults. This article has been written jointly by Gerald Hoare, son of Rita Gómez Mateo, *maestra* (teacher) who accompanied the children, and Simon Martinez, son of Enrique Martínez Baranda, who was one of the children.

Gerald Hoare - I am not a writer, I am not an academic, I am not an historian, but I am a son, a very proud son of a *maestra* or *señorita*. The Spanish does not translate well to 'teacher' or 'miss' as it doesn't have the same cachet, but my mother and about 95 others would have been known as *señoritas* to the nearly four thousand Basque refugee children who travelled to England on the *SS Habana* in those dark days of May 1937.

I have trawled through thousands of pages of documents to try and piece together the jigsaw of their repatriation to Spain and other countries. There is one paragraph, though, that stands out for me and will stay with me for the rest of my life. The paragraph is in an official report and it quotes Fr. Gabana, (the representative of the papal envoy in Bilbao after Franco's forces had seized the city) as saying 'that should any of the *señoritas* return to Spain then they will be imprisoned or shot.'

My mother never did return to live in Spain and I must confess that I do not know the real reason, but maybe the fear of being imprisoned or shot had helped her make up her mind pretty quickly!

Aid to Spain was organised by the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief (NJCSR). The Committee was set up just before Christmas 1936 and was the outcome of the visit of an all-party group of Members of Parliament to Madrid.

'The extent of the calamity which has overtaken the Spanish people convinced all who have seen the situation for themselves that a great effort was required from all engaged in humanitarian relief work. The threat of epidemics and famine overhangs the civil population of Madrid and other cities, in addition to the daily loss of life from bombardment and air raids. The Group of Members of Parliament, therefore, summoned a meeting of representatives of all organisations engaged in any form of humanitarian work in Spain at the House of Commons'.

The NJCSR was formed at this meeting with the object of preventing overlapping appeals, of facilitating the allocation of funds and of effecting economies in the despatch of goods to Spain. From the start it was agreed that though the organisations, as autonomous bodies,

remained free to give help according to their individual views or preferences, the work of the NJCSR itself should be purely humanitarian and non-sectarian in character.

The co-operating societies include the Social Service Council of the Society of Friends, the Save the Children Fund, the Spanish Medical Aid Committee, the Scottish Ambulance Unit, the Spanish Women's Committee for Help to Spain, the Women's Committee against War and Fascism and the Spanish Youth Food-ship Committee among others.

Almost all the organisations, which were already actively at work in Spain, associated themselves from the first with this joint effort. Their work falls naturally into three different classes, all of which were urgent:

- 1) The care of refugees
- 2) The removal of civilians from battle areas
- 3) Medical aid.

The Basque Children's Committee (BCC), an all-party group, held its first formal committee meeting on May 31st 1937 (see document below). It was specially constituted for the purpose of caring for the children in England.

'A Statement of Policy' issued by the BCC said that:

'The Basque Children's Committee is the temporary guardian of the Basque refugee children while in this country, on behalf of their parents or guardians. The Committee's duty is to care for and educate them and to arrange for their religious interaction in such a way, as their parents would individually wish. It hopes to reunite them with their parents, or those entitled to speak for them, at as early a date as may prove possible'.

The ages of the Basque children ranged from five to fifteen. I cannot begin to imagine what it must have been like for a five year old to be parted from his or her family. Some may have thought it was fun but I think most would have been frightened or confused when they waved goodbye to their parents. On arrival in England they camped in a field between Southampton and Eastleigh. After a few weeks the children began to be moved in groups to *colonias* / colonies, a form of more permanent family group home as stipulated by the Basque Government, where they would have lessons in Spanish and be kept together in family groups. I imagine that this splitting up would cause some consternation among the children and it would have been the job for the *maestras* and helpers to calm their fears despite having their own apprehensions.

When I was at school, which consisted of about 650 pupils, there were always those who got into trouble to which most of you who are reading this article would testify the same. So just imagine what it must have been like to look after almost 4,000 children living in the confines of a camp with about 500 tents. The ratio of *maestras* to children would have been about 1 to 40. Add to that the *auxiliaries* / helpers from Spain and the volunteers from this country and the ratio of adults to children comes down to around 1 to 15. There was huge public sympathy for the children and so the BCC was able to call on a very broad base of support. Inevitably with young children and teenagers, some of an age where they were almost ready to go to work, some trouble did arise. This was quickly seized upon by the right wing press and gave fuel to those who did not want the children to be here in the first place.

The arrival in England of such a large number of children was a massive task for those charged with looking after their wellbeing. Thanks to the foresight of many compassionate

organisations and individuals suitable housing was found, and the feeding, care and medical needs of the children were attended to.

Repatriation was to become a major battle - a battle of wills between two opposing sides: on one side was the BCC, committed to ensuring the safety of the children, on the other the Spanish Children's Repatriation Committee (SCRC), committed to repatriating the children as soon as possible.

The Roman Catholic Church had originally participated in the BCC at the request of the Home Office and took over the care of almost one third of the children. As the war in Spain progressed Franco's supporters in England set up the SCRC. The Roman Catholic Church in Britain resigned from the BCC over the issue of repatriation moving their support to the SCRC.

The BCC was set up by the NJCSR in May 1937 specifically to organise the care and support of the children whilst in this country, and ultimately to fund and organise their repatriation when, and only when they, the BCC, were assured that conditions were safe and secure for the children's return.

The SCRC was set up in October 1937 at the behest of the same de facto military government put in place by Franco that had: sanctioned the bombing of Guernica and Bilbao; the blockade of shipping which had cut the supply of food and medical supplies and, after the fall of Bilbao, had driven the elected government of the Autonomous Basque Country into exile. Its main purposes were to foil support for the BCC, and repatriate the children as soon as possible.

In March 1938 the bulletin of the NJCSR clearly describes their view of the SCRC. Here is a flavour of what was said:

'It must be clearly understood that the campaign to which the children have been subjected has very seriously affected our funds. The 'Spanish Children's Repatriation Committee' has made it its business to conduct propaganda in the Press and in speeches throughout the country to prevent support being given to these children, and it has even pursued our own money-raising efforts with letters in the Press in order to nullify them.'

'We have had severe controversy with them and they have changed their grounds many times. For example, last December Sir Arnold Wilson was writing to the Press claiming that all children should be 'returned to the place from which they came.' When, in the course of controversy, we made it clear that this was not all our responsibility, that we were responsible to the parents and not to any regime or administration, Sir Arnold shifted his ground and now claims that all children should 'go home to their parents, except those who specifically ask for them to remain.' In this, however, Sir Arnold conveniently ignores the many hundred parents who are refugees themselves, or who are divided from one another or are untraceable'

'The true purpose of the [Spanish Children's Repatriation] Committee was allowed to slip out by Sir Nairne Stewart-Sandeman in a speech reported in The Manchester Guardian, in which he said: I don't mind telling you that I am on the Repatriation Committee about these little Basque devils and it is very difficult to get them back. Don't pay a penny towards the upkeep of these Basques because not a single member of the [Spanish Children's Repa-

triation] Committee is going to put up the money to keep them. They are a pretty expensive cup of tea.'

Simon Martinez - my father Enrique Martínez Baranda came as a twelve year old on the SS *Habana* with his two younger brothers Juan Antonio, eight, and Tomás, seven. They remained in England as exiles and did not return to Spain. My grandfather Tomás, was killed at the end of the war in 1939. They were reunited in London in 1948 with their mother and youngest brother whom they had not seen for eleven years. Their oldest brother Jose Luis joined them in 1958 reuniting a family that had been fractured by the war. Sometimes I too feel like an exile. But growing up, studying and working, having a family, my own children and grandchildren in England I also feel British. I suppose I am both an exile and British.

Despite its initial reluctance the British Government had allowed the Basque Children into the country offering them protection from the war in Spain. The Government's adherence to the 'Non Intervention Agreement' did not prevent them from criticising attacks and persecution of civilians and the harsh punishment of defeated combatants but it offered no funding to support the refugees in Britain who had to be supported by local efforts. With Franco's victory over the Basque Country and the war going badly for the elected government how was the BCC going to react? And how was the British Government going to react?

The BCC had committed itself to protecting the children and returning them to their parents when it was safe to do so. These humanitarian objectives were its primary concern but it is clear that its sympathies lay with the Republican Government, and that its members were antipathetic and hostile to the war unleashed on Spain by Franco. The BCC found it difficult to work with the emissaries and representatives of Franco and wanted to deal with the parents of the children directly. Bilbao had fallen to Franco's forces in June 1937 and a new unelected de facto military government was in place. The oppression of the supporters of the Republic was brutal and many civilians fled to South West France and then back into Spain to Barcelona.

We know that the BCC took its responsibilities towards the children very seriously. Central records of the children were kept to show where they were in the UK and who was looking after them. Communication with parents by letter and telegram was recorded. This was hazardous for the parents because the mail from their children was being read before it was delivered to them. Any support for the Basque Government or the Government of the Republic in Madrid in the previous years was dangerous for individuals. The BCC was also recording news of the parents from other sources often that they were dead, in prison, or in exile and giving this news to the children in as supportive a way as possible. We know from first-hand accounts that the children followed news from Spain closely and that the children met bad news with great distress and anguish. A disastrous event at the reception camp at North Stoneham had taught the BCC and NJCSR the importance of a careful, personal approach to imparting bad news to children. Shortly after the children had arrived at the reception camp the news of the surrender of Bilbao had been announced by loudspeaker the acutely distressed children took matters into their own hands and broke out from the camp, wanting to return home. It took many hours to return all the children to the camp. In the case of my grandfather's death the news was delivered to his sons in person.

And yet the BCC was constantly faced by the pressure from children and parents wanting to be reunited, the difficulty in raising money to support the children here, the campaign of the

SCRC to have them all returned, and the opposition of many of its members to returning the refugee children to Franco controlled Spain.

What was happening in Bilbao over the latter part of the summer of 1937? The Basque Government was now in exile and the area was now under control of Franco's forces. Those members of the church hierarchy that had been broadly supportive or neutral to the Republic and the Basque Country had been replaced by supporters of Franco with the support of the Pope.

The evacuation of the children had been a heavy blow to Franco's pride and the new church leaders set about 'correcting' the story of the escape of the children. The newly appointed archbishop of Vitoria urged the immediate repatriation of the children calling the evacuation a 'horrible crime' and stating that they were 'dragged violently from their homes by an unjust order, and taken in foreign ships far from their parents by these enemies of God and country for vicious reasons'. The representative of the Papal Nuncio, Fr. Gabana had returned from his tour of certain of the *colonias* in Britain and reported to large meetings of parents and others that the children were not being brought up in the Catholic faith. Parents were advised to come forward to sign for the return of their children, and in their absence relatives were encouraged to come forward. This resulted in a list of 800 children being presented to the Basque Children's Committee for their return to Bilbao. This list was checked by the BCC and questions about the authenticity of some of the signatures and other matters were raised. To answer their concerns the BCC proposed, as it had done at the beginning, to despatch representatives to Spain to meet with parents independently and without what was perceived by them as pressure on the parents to establish the veracity of Fr. Gabana's list. The de facto government refused this delegation. In October 1937 the BCC set up the Holman Gregory Commission to look into the request to return all of the 800 children on Fr. Gabana's list.

The Holman Gregory Commission met over three days and considered the evidence presented by all sides. (The full report can be seen here <https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/scw/id/13571/>) From the viewpoint of the 21st century its final report seems to be a compromise between the two sides of the argument represented by the BCC and the SCRC and it allowed the British Government to not have to step in and take responsibility for the children. The Commission upheld the position of the BCC as being responsible for the children so long as it agreed to return the children when requested to a parent but crucially agreed with the SCRC that they could be returned to another relative or guardian if the parents were missing or dead. The children were to be accompanied on their journey by representatives of the BCC who would meet the parents and hand the child safely over the BCC agreed in its discussion of the Commission report. In the event this was refused by the Franco authorities who received the children at the border between France and Spain and then called parents in to receive them once they had reached Bilbao.

On the important point the Commission decided that the children should be returned under these circumstances only and that it should be done 'as soon as convenient'. The joint meeting of the BCC and the NJCSR at the end of October 1937 considered the report and accepted it only with very strong reservations on the part of some of its members and the strong affirmation that the children should only be returned at the 'freely given' directions of the parents. They also introduced a further step that once a child had reached 14 years of

age their views would be sought whether or not to be repatriated. And so the children started to return.

Clearly one of the suspicions of members of the BCC was that children were being falsely claimed by people pretending to be the parents and that this might lead to children being placed with supporters of Franco rather than returned to their own parents or relatives. So the BCC continued to press for its representatives to be allowed into Spain to meet with parents. This continued to be denied them. By the end of 1938, 2,175 children had returned leaving 1,704 remaining under the care of the BCC.

The detailed information collected, and the subsequent care taken by the BCC is exemplified by the files kept by the BCC on my family. In the files corresponding to Enrique Martínez Baranda, and his two brothers, it is recorded that their father had died in March 1939, and that their mother was firstly a refugee in Barcelona, and then returned to Bilbao in 1939 where she is described as 'very poor and in ill health'. It appears that my grandmother could not have her children back in her care and that she sought escape from Franco's Spain and reunite with her family in Britain. This was achieved in 1948 with support from the BCC.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, 450 children remained in the U.K. In 1948 the number had fallen to 283 as more children were reunited with their parents sometimes in exile, sometimes in Spain. By then the children had become adults and they were choosing to leave for a life abroad, or perhaps in a Spanish speaking country. In 1939, 122 of the 217 adults who had come with the children as *maestras* or *auxiliares* were still in the UK. What happened to the 15 priests who came with the children is to be explored in further researches. Some were directed to Spanish speaking countries in South America.

The *maestras* and *auxiliares* who stayed in Britain were accepted as refugees in the UK and settled here. Franco at the end of the civil war had instituted a crime of insurrection against his government punishable by death or life imprisonment. These punishments had also been called for by Fr. Gabana in 1937 and had been noted by the BCC in its deliberation of the Holman Gregory Commission report.

The children who had arrived at Southampton in 1937, aged between 5 and 15, were either adults or teenagers. Most had returned to Spain but some remained in the UK. The BCC continued to support them with accommodation, support for training, and liaison with their families. The office had closed by 1951 but individuals continued to support some of the children remaining in the UK informally throughout their natural lives.

The BCC kept its promise to parents that it would look after the children entrusted into its care. It continued to liaise with parents in the days before email and mobile phone networks mostly by letter. It did not break its promise to look after the children and accepted the conclusion of the independent enquiry it set up that in the absence of parents the children could be entrusted to a relative.

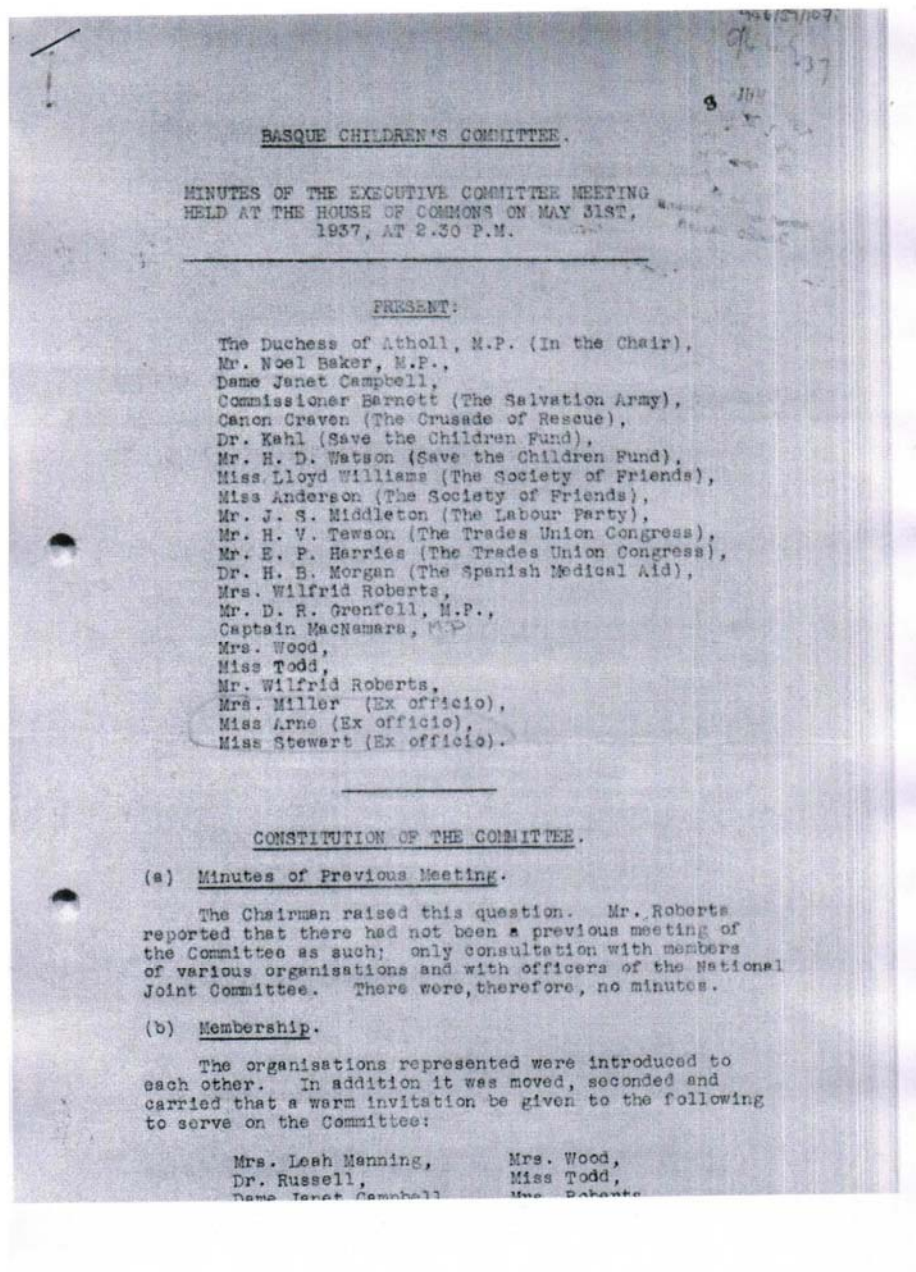
The Government was under considerable pressure from the SCRC and some sections of the British press to return the children and to take responsibility away from the BCC. This both the Home and Foreign Office refused to do and so enabled the BCC the time and space, but sadly not the financial support, to carry out its humanitarian tasks. As a precursor to the United Nations Convention of Human Rights it allowed those at risk of persecution and harm, the safety that sanctuary and exile gave them. This was also to allow the

larger number of Jewish children brought to the UK by Kinder-transport to settle here. Only with the coming of the United Nations after the Second World War was there a willingness in Britain to accept adults as well as children as refugees.

Without the kindness of strangers the children who left Spain in 1937 would not have been saved by evacuation from the daily bombing of cities, nor would those strangers become lifelong friends in some cases. And without these events Gerald and I would not exist.

Gerald Hoare & Simon Martinez

BCA'37 UK - the Association for the UK Basque Children



BCC Basque Children's Committee:

The Duchess of Atholl, MP (Chairman), Miss Eleanor Rathbone MP, H.V. Tewson Esq, (Vice Chairmen), Mr. Wilfred Roberts, Esq, MP, Capt. J.R.J. McNamara MP, Mr DR Grenfell Esq, MP (Hon. Secretaries), Viscount Cecil of Chelwood PC, QC, (Hon. Treasurer), Miss Betty Arne, Mrs. Mary Miller, Dr Morgan (Joint Organising Secretary)

NJCSR National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief:

The Duchess of Atholl MP, (Chairman), The Earl of Listowel, Miss Eleanor F. Rathbone MP, (Vice Chairmen), Mr. D.R. Grenfell MP, Capt. J.R.J. McNamara MP, Mr. Wilfred Roberts Esq, MP, (Hon. Secretary and Hon. Treasurer pro.tem), Miss Elizabeth Macadam (Hon. Organising Secretary).

SCRC Spanish Children's Repatriation Committee:

The Duke of Alba (President), The Duke of Wellington (Chairman), Col. Sir Arnold Wilson (Deputy Chairman), A. F. Loveday Esq, (Secretary), Viscount Fitzalan, Canon Craven (representing the Archbishop of Westminster), the Marchioness of Londonderry, Viscount Castlereagh MP, Captain Victor Cazalet MP, Sir Nairn Stewart Sandeman MP, and Mr. Douglas Jerrold.

The Sir Holman Gregory Report of Repatriation Committee

<https://wdc.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/scw/id/13571/> From the archives at MRC, Warwick Digital Collections.