

Bilbao to Caerleon: The Basque Child Refugees of 1937



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PREFACE

On the 20th May 1937 four thousand Basque children were evacuated, as Bilbao was about to fall to Franco's troops during the Spanish Civil War. On the 10th July 1937 fifty-six of these child refugees arrived in Caerleon, a small town in Southeast Wales. Local people remembered the children living in Cambria House but how and why these children came to Caerleon was unclear.

This essay uncovers the children's remarkable journey from Bilbao to Caerleon and the help and support that they received. Many organisations were involved at international, national and local level including the south Wales miners, Quakers, National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, the Royal and Merchant navies, national and local governments.

Individuals were also heavily involved in the care of the children, in particular Mrs Maria Fernandez, warden of Cambria House. Under Mrs Fernandez' charge Cambria House became the most successful of the homes for the Basque child refugees in Britain.

But it is the children who were most remarkable, overcoming the trauma of war and separation from their families with courage and determination, and who are so warmly remembered to this day

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'The Basques are one of the unique people-islands to be found on the face of the earth, completely different in every sense from the peoples around them, and their language, surrounded by Aryan languages, forms an island somehow comparable to those peaks which still surface above the water in a flood zone'.

[Levy D'Arartigue 1986 cited Kurlansky 2000 p1]

Introduction

On the 10th July 1937 fifty-six Basque children, their teachers and carers stood on the doorstep of Cambria House, Caerleon. They had left their families, friends and belongings in Bilbao almost two months earlier. They had been evacuated under the protection of the Royal Navy, as Bilbao was about to fall to Franco's troops during the Spanish Civil War. Almost four thousand children had been evacuated that day, 20th May, in an operation that had involved considerable support and organisation in Wales, in particular from the miners and the South Wales Miners Federation [S. W. M. F.], but also from many other organisations and volunteers from all walks of life. It was a huge organisational enterprise that eventually involved the British government as well as the Republican government in Spain and was funded entirely through voluntary donations.

With courage and determination the children settled into life in Caerleon remarkably well under the auspices of their exceptional carer, Mrs Fernandez until they were either repatriated or settled in Wales.

These children are still remembered in Caerleon today but how they came to be in Caerleon and the details of their stay have become vague and unclear. It was clear

that there must have been organisational help at international, national and local level to bring the children to Caerleon and provide support for a number of years. To identify why and how these children had arrived in Caerleon a literature search was undertaken. Primary and secondary sources were obtained from the library at University of Wales College, Newport [UWCN], Newport Library, Gwent Record Office, Public Record Office, the South Wales Miner's Library and the Society of Friends Library. Although Mrs Fernandez was still living in Caerleon she had become very frail and was not able to be interviewed. However, one of the child refugees, who had remained in Gwent, very kindly agreed to tell her story [recorded on audiocassette] but with the understanding that she remains anonymous. She is therefore referred to throughout this essay as J.S.

From these sources it has been possible to piece together the events that brought these children to Caerleon [see appendix 1] and the organisations and individuals that made it all possible. Organisations included the south Wales miners, the Society of Friends, Aid Spain committees, the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief [NJCSR], the Royal and Merchant navies, national and local governments. There were many individuals who helped but the most outstanding were the Duchess of Atholl [Chairman of the NJCSR], Cyril Cule [Director of Cambria House], Christopher Hill [teacher at Cambria House and historian], Jack Williams [Secretary, Caerleon Urban District Council] and especially Mrs Maria Fernandez, the warden of Cambria House.

This is the story of the exceptional courage and determination of all those involved in the struggle to help these innocent victims of war. But it was the children who

showed the greatest courage and determination of all in overcoming the fear and trauma they had experienced through war, evacuation and separation from their families and home and who are remembered with such affection to this day.

Potatoes, Milk and Money



Drawing by Esevio in Cambria House Journal no.10 August 1939

In Wales there had been a long history of internationalist commitment and the response to the Spanish anti-fascist cause was a culmination of a process that had created an international class consciousness. The high unemployment in the 1930s created an intense community consciousness in which activists and political prisoners became folk heroes. In this light, by supporting the Popular Front and anti fascism, the Communist Party and the S. W. M. F. [South Wales Miners Federation] had more in common with Spain than Britain [Francis 1998 pp350-351].

The first indication of support for the Nationalists in Spain was when the British Union of Fascists attempted to hold open air meetings in Pontypridd, Tonypany and Merthyr as dissidents gathered to protest against the new Means Test Regulations. On 1st August 1936 River Level Lodge, Abernant carried a resolution to support the Spanish workers and undertake a pit head collection. It led to an unparalleled commitment by the S. W. M. F. to the Spanish Republican

cause. Action included demonstrations to the Spanish embassy in London by 5000 people and 10,000 people in Neath on 21st August 1936. The Communist Party produced a leaflet 'Spain' and there were poster parades in Tonypany that led to a surge of activity only temporarily sidelined by the Hunger Marches. There was broad organisational support throughout the coalfield and by the end of August 1936 Councils of Action, miners lodges, trades councils, Communist and Labour Parties were all active in support of the Spanish Republic [ibid 1984 pp107-110]. The greatest interest in the Spanish situation came from the traditionally militant areas known as 'red villages' such as Ferndale [ibid 1998 p352].

Popular and organisational support for the Republic initially lay heavily with the Communist Party. A delegation, which included the Communist members of the Rhondda Urban District Council Will Paynter, Jim Morton and Jesse Sweet as well as J. S. Williams the Secretary of Merthyr N.U.W.M [National Union of Welsh Miners] and Harry Statton, a Swansea taxi driver, was sent to Newtown, Montgomeryshire where the British Prime Minister Baldwin was staying. This gained national publicity for the cause. By September 1936 the Communist Isabel Brown had established the Relief Committee for the Victims of Fascism out of the International Workers Relief Committee. The Spanish Medical Aid Committee meanwhile sent a delegation to Spain to report back on the situation. From these activities the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief [N.J.C.S.R] was formed bringing together many diverse organisations such as the Labour Party, Trades Union Congress, Spanish Medical Aid Committee, ship owners, Teachers Committee for Spain, International Brigades Dependents Aid

Committee, Quakers, Basque Children's Committee, Save the Children Fund, Salvation Army and various religious authorities. At the same time Isabel Brown ran the Central Bureau for Spain of the Communist Party of Great Britain [C.P.G.B] [ibid 1984 pp110-114].

The British government however, determined in the aftermath of the First World War to avoid further conflict, set up the Non-Intervention Committee in the hope of containing the war in Spain. But even within the government this policy was not universally supported. Aneurin Bevan was one of the most vocal in his condemnation of the lack of government support for the Spanish Republicans but at the 1936 Labour Party Conference it was Ernest Bevin's call for the support of the Non-Intervention policy that won the day [Preston 1996 pp99-102]. Nonetheless, demands for support for the Spanish Republicans within the Labour Party and the S.W.M.F continued [unsuccessfully] throughout the Spanish Civil War.

On 18th December 1936 the Council for Spanish Aid was formed as a branch of the N.J.C.S.R. with 36 delegates representing 14 working-class organisations. From this the Cardiff Provisional Spanish Aid Committee emerged which collected foodstuffs, clothing and money. On the same night 11 hundredweight of food and clothing was sent from Cardiff to a Spanish food ship berthed at Southampton. The success of this venture led to support from the T. U. C. and area committees were set up in all areas of the city.

In the valleys the most enthusiastic supporters were those who already had experience of political protest and Communist Party activity. The most active

were those were in Bedlinog. Despite fifty percent of the population being unemployed, the United Front Committee for Spanish Aid collected £6 and food in one weekend. Food collections were stored in a rented shop in Cardiff.

The Spanish Aid Committee was established on 7th March 1937 eleven miles north of Neath in Onllwyn, an independent mining company owned by Evans and Bevan. Miners unions had never established branches there but many workers were Spanish and active in the Communist Party and Spanish Aid committees. The whole Spanish male population, numbering thirty, had volunteered in 1936 for military service in support of the Spanish Republic. Two of the committee joined the International Brigade [Francis 1984 pp117-120] that had been formed in October 1936 by Stalin's increasingly influential Comintern (military units) in Spain [Preston 1996 p122].

Spanish Aid Committees were then set up in Cardiff, Barry, Swansea, Talgarth and north Wales, which campaigned wholly for humanitarian aid such as, milk for the Spanish children, ambulances and cash donations. In north Wales the priority was the purchase of ambulances and with the support of Anglesey M.P Megan Lloyd George the first ambulance arrived in Spain in March 1937 [Francis 1984 pp117-123].

Many other non-military volunteers were active during the Civil War. The Religious Society of Friends [Quakers] was particularly active in its role of non-partisan relief work. On 9th September 1936 these organisations set up the Spain Committee which gave priority to the supply of food especially milk as Spain's

milk production had reduced to forty percent. Efforts were initially concentrated in Barcelona in conjunction with Republican authorities and Save the Children and then extended to other parts including the Basque country and Santander. By November 1937 two thousand children were being helped in four canteens in Spain.

In November 1936 the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief [N.J.C.S.R.] was formed to co-ordinate the Aid Spain committees and on 24th April 1937 chartered the SS Backworth to take food to Bilbao, Santander and Asturias. The children's colonies [children's homes] had been set up by Catalan and Spanish organisations and in conjunction with these the Quakers set up further colonies in 1937 as an alternative to evacuation abroad. Families in Britain were asked to 'foster' individual children but throughout 1937 the food situation worsened and refugees poured into northeast Spain [Fyrth 1986 pp158-174]. Children were helped irrespective of political allegiance; school classes and cultural values were maintained in the colonies that also provided rehabilitation. The main ethos was to provide hope for the future as well as humanitarian aid and to 'train children to be the citizens of a more peaceful and just world'. The girls were taught knitting and sewing for example and the children had their own council, pocket money and trips out. Elitism was always resisted and selection was purely on the basis of age [Mendelsohn 1999 p20].

In the first month of Franco's coup d'état in 1936 ten thousand people had died not in battle but summarily in their homes, in towns and villages. As the frontline

retreated the population of Bilbao doubled with refugees. The children of Bilbao vividly remember these dangerous times:

“Air raid shelters were built and we saw people coming to Bilbao from Guernica and Durango” [J.S. 2000].

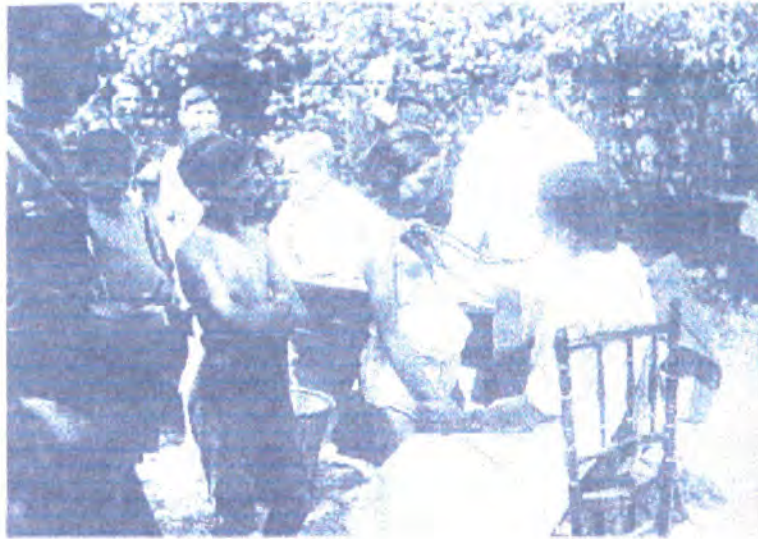
Under siege Bilbao was almost completely surrounded on land, by Nationalist warships at sea and Italian and German bombers in the air. Everyday life in Bilbao ceased as schools were closed, public transport halted and hotels were converted into hostels to house the refugees. There was food rationing and perpetual queuing and factories were forced to produce armaments whilst militia roamed the streets. A network of bomb shelters were built whilst the sound of sirens filled the air [Bell 1996 pp24-25].

“ I lived in Bilbao with my parents who were teachers and my two brothers and a sister. The war was very traumatic because school stopped, we were blockaded, we were hungry and we were bombed. There were queues at the shops. You hoped to get a tin of something but it was very hit and miss because the tins didn't have any labels”
[J. S. 2000].

“ We spent three-quarters of the time in the shelter; most of the day and the rest of the time queuing for food from queue to queue”
[Paula c1974-1979].

Beans and rice were the staple diet, flour and water was used for feeding babies; peoples 'nerves were frayed to breaking point' and hospitals were full. The situation was becoming dire and on the representation of the Basque government the N. J. C. S. R. embarked on the scheme for evacuation [Katherine, Duchess of Atholl 1937 p6].

115.
Revisión clínica de la salud de los expedicionarios hechos por las Drs. Ellis y Russell en presencia de Mrs. Murray.



DEPARTAMENTO DE ASISTENCIA SOCIAL
DEL PAIS VASCO
EXPEDICIÓN
A FRANCIA
No. 265

Baskisch Kinderwerk
van Z. Em. Kardinaal van Roey
Œuvre des Enfants Basques
de S. Em. le Cardinal van Roey

TREIN

GROEP: ~~ANTWERPEN~~

Naam v/h kind -
Nom de l'enfant:

Meisje - Pille - Jongen - Garçon

Naam der ouders -
Nom des parents

Adres:

265

116.
Estos son los signos de identificación y destino que portaban los niños a la altura del pecho.

Figure 1

Top - Basque child refugees undertaking a medical examination prior to evacuation in 1937

Bottom - Identification tags used by the evacuated children

128.
El Habana
entrando
en el muelle.

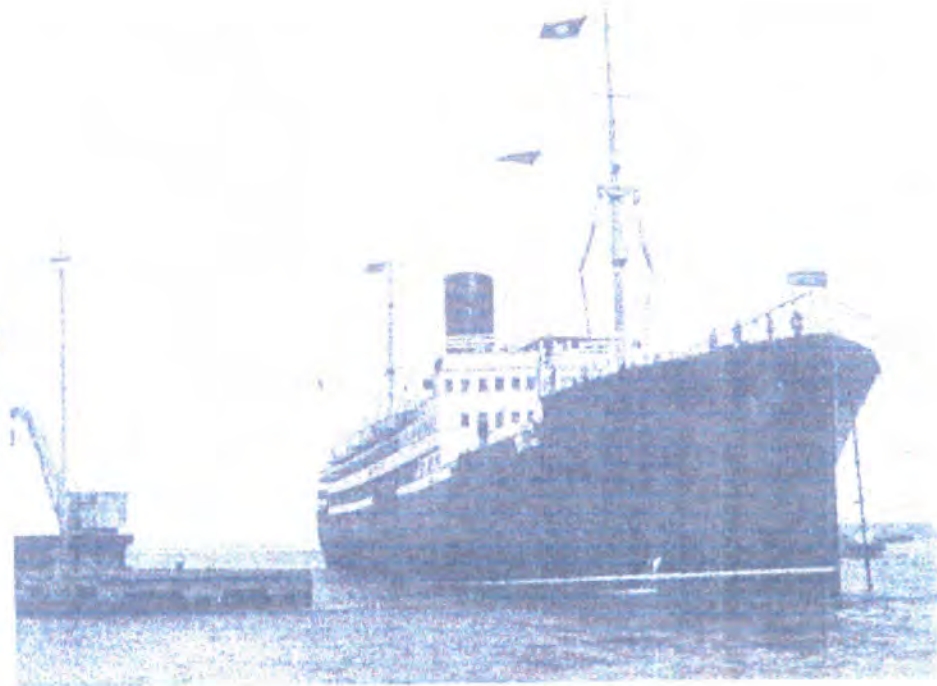


Figure 2 **The Habana : an old Spanish cruiser that carried the evacuated children to Southampton**

ARRIEN 1988 p102



120. Valtu parral del Habana, repleto de experforados.

Figure 3

The evacuated children on the deck of the Habana prior to sailing to Southampton

ARRIEN 1988 p97



Figure 4

Another view of the children on the Habana

[J.S and her brother are circled]

ARRIEN 1988 p95

Making Waves



Drawing by Esevio in Cambria House Journal no.9 July 1939 [possibly the Habana which brought the refugee children to Britain].

On 6th April 1937 Franco refused to allow further food supplies into Republican ports in northern Spain. The British government would not provide naval protection but merchant ships risked delivery to Bilbao, in part for profit. The first merchant seaman to break the blockade was Captain Owen Roberts from Penarth on his steamer the Seven Seas Spray on 19th April 1937 [Francis 1984 p123] which pressurised ministers in London into capitulating into allowing other merchant ships to break the blockade. At 11pm on 22nd April the British steamers Macgregor, Hammersley and Stanbrook made for Bilbao. They carried between them 8,500 tons of food [Cable 1979 p75-76] and one of the most well known of the merchant seamen, 'Potato' Jones, from Penarth, not only broke the blockade to deliver food but also managed to help evacuate 500 refugees from Spain [Francis 1984 p124].

The bombing of Guernica on the 26th April added urgency to the need for evacuation from Bilbao. On 29th April the British government agreed to the N. J. C. S. R. recommendations for evacuation of children but there were many opponents in the Foreign Office to the 'Bilbao Babies Policy'. However, Britain's relationship with the Nationalists had already soured over the breaking of the blockade by the merchant ships. On 3rd May Anthony Eden P. M informed the House of Commons that British warships would escort evacuees from Bilbao which resulted in anger and hostility from Franco and the Nationalist press.

There was also disagreement between the Save the Children Fund and the N. J. C. S. R. Save the Children who were opposed to separating children from their parents and argued that the N. J. C. S. R. was politically motivated. In consequence the government refused to provide public funding but donations poured in via appeals such as the Times appeal which raised £12,000 and the TUC £5,000 [Bell 1996 pp27-30].

On 14th May the Home Secretary and a deputation from the N. J. C. S. R. arranged for meetings to be held at the Home Office. The meeting held on 15th May was attended by the Duchess of Atholl, chairman, and other members of the N. J. C. S. R., representatives from Roman Catholic organisations, Salvation Army, the Immigration Branch, the Aliens Department, the children's branch of the Home Office and the Ministry of Health. Proposals were forwarded for housing and care of the Basque refugee children. It was established that the Salvation Army could take care of 400 children immediately. Roman Catholic homes, convents, schools and other institutions as well as individuals had also offered help.

Dame Janet Campbell described progress at the 36-acre field in north Stoneham, near Southampton and the support that had been received from the mayor and officials of Southampton. Many offers of voluntary help had also been received and water, telephone and sanitation services had been provided at the camp. Contact had been established with the Medical Officer of Health at Southampton and it was unanimously agreed that the children should only stay at the camp for no longer than two weeks. Identification and registration was of vital importance and records were to be kept at the Home Office. The Secretary of State authorised the admission of 2400 children, 100 adult female teachers and attendants and 15 priests. The British Consul in Bilbao, Mr Stevenson, was requested to agree to clearance of the Habana for the evacuation [F.O.a 1937 pp333-338].

Meanwhile, in Bilbao, the Ministry of Public Education and the Council for Protection of Childhood grouped to form the National Refugee Committee, making arrangements for the evacuation of children although parents, initially, objected to the children being taken abroad [Pye 1937 pp3-8].

On the 20th May 1937 Mr. Stevenson, confirmed that 3900 children, 15 priests, 199 teachers and attendants and had been examined by an English doctor ready to sail on the Habana the following day [21st May]. Each child would also be secured by a numbered cardboard disc [F.O.b 1937 P341] [see figure 1].

As they boarded the special trains at Portugalote station at 6 p.m on the 20th May parents had reassured the children that they would only be gone for three months. They were then taken to the Habana which was docked in Santurce [Bell 1996

pp41, 43] [see figure 2]. Amongst the refugees were children bound for Caerleon: J.S and her brother, Paula and Maria who remembered the fear and heartbreak of evacuation from their home and families:

“It all happened very quickly because of the blockade. We were just told we were coming because conditions were so bad and that we would soon be back. No one wanted to leave but by Christmas we would all be home. My father was keen we should come to England, which he said was very democratic, very tolerant. My father’s last words to me were that we must speak English and we tried our best. ” [J.S 2000].

“ I was an only child and my parents were very unhappy to see me going. They took us to the station and I remember saying goodbye ” [Maria 1987].

“I was an orphan and had little choice. There were four of us but my eldest sister was too old” [Maria 1987].

The children were taken in trainloads, 600 at a time, to the Habana, a fourteen-year old Spanish liner that had already taken refugees to France. At the quay was a mass of parents as the children, some excited, some crying, were taken on board [see figures 3&4]. They passed the breakwater early the next morning accompanied by a Spanish destroyer, the yacht Goizeko-Izarra with refugees for France and two cargo boats. They were then joined by their British convoy: the Royal Oak and a destroyer, the Fearless.

“The journey was horrendous because the Bay of Biscay was dreadful. There were all these children and Senoritas who came to help and some priests but children who had just left home were crying and hungry. It was very sad.

I got a bunk and felt very lucky. I went to get some food but when I came back my bunk had gone, it was just one of those things. I spent most of the time on deck but it was wonderful, particularly for the little ones, because we had white bread for the first time, beautiful bread. They forgot they were hungry and it cheered them up” [J.S. 2000].

“ The white bread, I ate it until I nearly burst and then I was sorry!” [Paula 1987].

The weather had been rough in the Bay of Biscay with many children suffering seasickness but by 6:30 p.m on 22nd May they docked at Fawley, Southampton [Cable 1979 pp129-132]. There were huge crowds of people when the children arrived in Southampton. The streets had been decorated and the children thought the British were very friendly! However, the decorations had actually being placed there because of the King’s coronation [Bell 1996 p35].

“When we arrived at Southampton it was quite exciting to see the coast. There were all these flags on the harbour and people thought it was a welcome for us but, of course, it was for the coronation” [J.S. 2000].

“ All I could see was the Salvation Army and thought what funny clothes they wore in this country” [Paula 1987].



Drawing by Esevio in Cambria House Journal no.11 September 1939

They did not embark, however, until 10 a.m the next morning, after further medical examinations. Buses then transported them to the Stoneham camp where 500 bell-tents had been erected [Cable 1979 p133][see figures 5-7]. The camp had initially been prepared for 2000 children but in the event nearly twice as many arrived. Remarkably, the organisers, hundreds of volunteer workers and the Southampton authorities, with a few days notice, managed to accommodate the extra numbers. There was help from doctors, nurses, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides as well as supervision by an English naval commander [Katherine, Duchess of Atholl 1937 p6].

Fortunately it was a warm summer. The camp was exceptionally well organised with all the children's needs taken into account. There was piped water, latrines, marquees and mattresses that had been organised by the local Co-op societies and donations from the local community [Bell 1996 p48]. Cinemas, stages, telephones, loudspeakers and electric lights were provided as well as schooling for the children

[Arrien 1988]. Except for one unfortunate incident, in which the news of the fall of Bilbao on June 19th was insensitively handled, the children settled in very well.

“ There were many children there and people were extremely kind. Then came the news of the fall of Bilbao [June 19th]. It was badly done, over the tannoy, without any warning. We had settled in but this was dreadful news and everyone cried” [J.S. 2000].

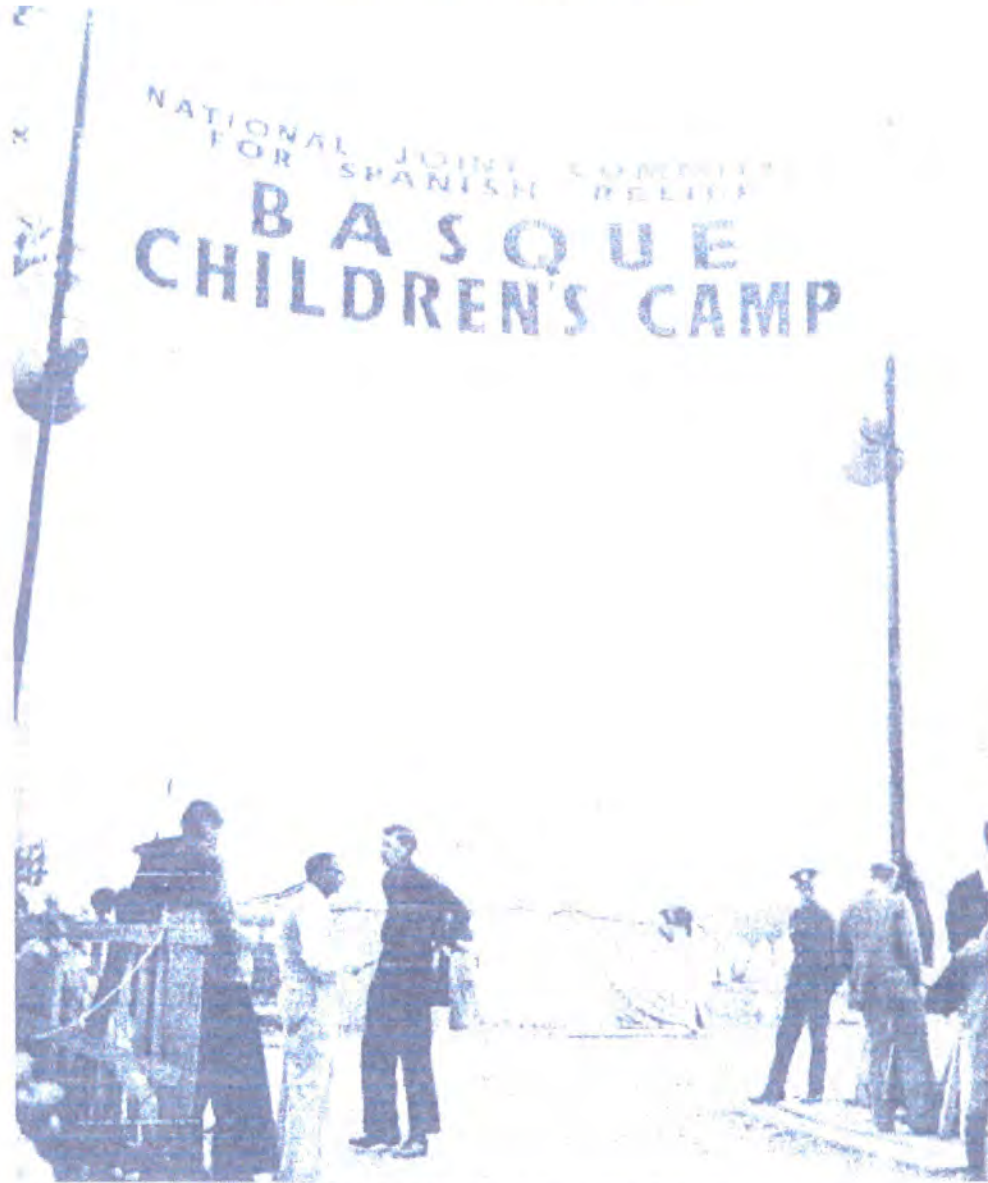
However, providing a more ‘normal’ life for the children, either in colonies such as those in Spain or in private homes, remained the priority [Katherine, Duchess of Atholl 1937 p6]. Unfortunately this was hampered by the fall of Bilbao as Nationalist propaganda was unleashed against the Basques who were labelled as ‘Reds’ and resulted in many Catholic families withdrawing their offers of help. Some of the children were still in the camp at the beginning of October [Bell 1996 p35].

From Stoneham the children were sent to fifty colonies and centres around Britain. The Salvation Army ran some colonies, others were Catholic colonies and families adopted some children. There were guidelines at all the colonies with regard to life, education and welfare of the children and special provision, by teachers and priests, was made for the Catholic children whose religion was their way of life [Arrien 1988]. On July 10th 1937 fifty-six children left the camp and headed for Caerleon:

“ We were put in groups and the sent away. Fifty six of us altogether came to Caerleon” [Maria 1987].

"I don't know how we happened to come to Caerleon. Various bodies took X number of children. I don't think they picked us for any special reason. We were told we were coming to Wales. I made a lot of it because I have never forgotten that someone had said to us that we were lucky to be going to Wales" [J.S. 2000].

3. GRAN BRETAÑA



94. Entrada al campamento de Stoneham, habilitado para la primera acogida de los niños evacuados a Gran Bretaña.

Figure 5

The entrance to Stoneham Camp

ARRIEN 1988 p 229



1936 - 1937 - A group of men in the mountains of the Spanish Civil War. They are packing straw into sacks which they use as mattresses.



Figure 6 **The camp at Stoneham** **[ARRIEN 1988 p232]**

Top - Packing straw into sacks which then serve as mattresses

[PRESTON,P.1990.*The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*.p73].

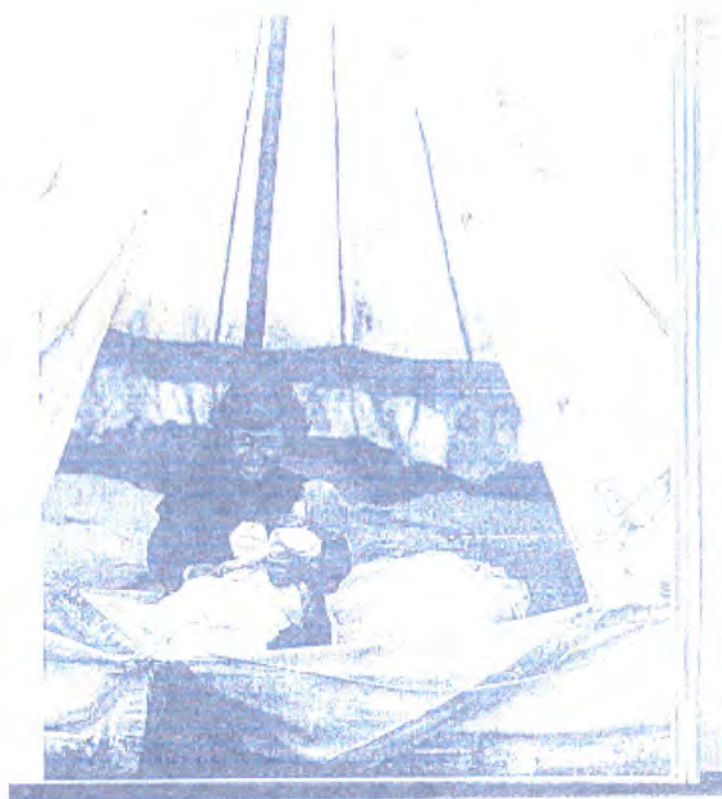


Figure 7

Basque child inside tent at Stoneham Camp

PRESTON,P.1990.*The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939*.p73.

Friendships and Farewells



Drawing by Esevio in Cambria House Journal no.4 February 1939 depicting Basque dancers

As the children arrived in Southampton plans were already underway to bring them to South Wales and the Cardiff Aid Spain committee negotiated with Monmouthshire County Council for the loan of Cambria House, Caerleon [Stradling 1996 p51].

There was strong support for the Basques in the Monmouthshire County Council who in 1936 had condemned the government for its betrayal of the 'League of Nations' in its treatment of the Basque people [M.C.C. 1974 p77]. On 29th June 1937 a meeting had been held to place a 'Public Assistance' institution at the disposal of the N.J.C.S.R. for the Basque children and a voluntary committee was formed to work with Caerleon Urban District Council [C.U.D.C] for local supervision and control of the premises [M.C C. 1937a p26]. Cyril Cule, a specialist in Spanish language and literature who had been in Madrid when the Civil war broke out, was appointed Director of Cambria House. He was paid ten shillings a week with full board and voluntary carers and teachers, such as the historian Christopher Hill, were able to give their services free. A new fund was instigated by the Duchess of Atholl [also known

as the 'Red Duchess' because of her sympathy for the Republic] [Stradling 1996 pp51-53]. Subscriptions to fund care for the children would also include reserve money for repatriation when necessary under conditions laid out by the government.

The N.J.C.S.R. were asked to arrange the transfer of no more than fifty children to their charge [M.C.C. 1937a p26] although in fact they accepted fifty-six. At a meeting in Newport Town Hall, presided over by the Mayor of Newport, Alderman I. C. Vincent, J.P., a committee representing Newport and Monmouthshire was appointed to work with the Lord Mayor of Cardiff's Committee, whose members were drawn from all political, religious and social groups. Alan Collingridge from the London office of the N.J.C.S.R. also attended. The Cambria House committee was formed, under the auspices of C.U.D.C, to prepare Cambria House for the arrival of the refugees [S.W.A. a 1937 p7]. Nationally, however, there was controversy. Right wingers believed that forced immigration was a propaganda ploy and, ironically, there were very few contributions received from Catholic communities [Stradling 1996 p53].

In Caerleon there had not been time to hold a public meeting and residents raised concerns about the costs involved for supporting the children. Local councillors assured them that there would be no increase in the rates and asked for a sympathetic approach to the refugees [S.W.A. b 1937 p6]. In the event there was no shortage of help. Students, social workers and local people helped to clean and prepare Cambria House. Friends and representatives of committees, including the N. J. C. S. R. and the Lord Mayor of Cardiff's committee were present to greet the children on their arrival at Newport Railway Station on 10th July 1937 [S. W. A. c 1937 p6] [see figure 8].

By July 15th 1937 the South Wales Argus was describing the children as having settled down well under the supervision of Gwen Jones, the warden, studying under with three Spanish teachers and willingly helping with meal preparation and the washing up. Visiting hours on Sundays between 2p.m and 6p.m had also been established.

In fact all was not entirely well in Cambria House. Gwen Jones didn't speak Spanish and had previously been in charge of an orphanage. The Basque children were not orphans ,however, and they were finding the lack of adequate communication and the strict regime difficult:

"She didn't understand. She gave us a list of rules and regulations and we were not very happy" [J. S. 2000].

It was recognised that there was a culture clash and Mrs Maria Fernandez replaced Gwen Jones. Mrs Fernandez had been born in Bilbao but came to Wales at the age of three when her father came to work in Dowlais in 1907. She had married a Basque merchant seaman and settled in Cardiff when, in 1937, a request was made for an interpreter for the 56 Basque children in Caerleon. Mrs Fernandez found that her first job was to interpret the 32 rules that had been set out for the children and when she had finished the children responded with "and are we allowed to breathe?"

Mrs Fernandez took over the running of the home and it became the most successful in Britain [see figures 9-10]. Her first priority was to encourage the children to go out into the community and for visitors to come into Cambria House to meet the children:

“When I arrived the children hadn’t been allowed to mix with the village and once they did people thought the world of them” [Fernandez 1987].

Mrs Fernandez organised Spanish food and arranged the children’s education, initially in Cambria House and then at local schools [B. B. C. 1987]. Classes included English, arithmetic, Spanish and music and there was sewing and knitting for the girls and carpentry for the boys which the children seem to have thoroughly enjoyed:

“Here in Cambria House, as in other schools, there are several different classes, but the one we like best is the carpentry class as in that one we make things including fine galleons”

[J. L. A. January 1939 Cambria House Journal p3].

The high standard of care and education that the children received was clearly successful as three girls went on to Newport High School, one of the boys, Esevio, gained a place at Newport College of Art and J. S.’ brother attended school in Abersychan [J. S. 2000]. J.S achieved a scholarship to the Quaker school at Badminton and then attended Birmingham University:

“First of all I was taught by Mr Cule and Mrs Ward contacted me and said if I was prepared to go to Newport her daughter, who was a teacher at Durham Road, would teach me. So I went. I was well motivated and to encourage me they said they would take me to London if I did well. She took me for the day and I think we saw everything!

Badminton was an excellent school and one of the teachers was a friend of Christopher Hill. I won the scholarship by writing an essay about the Spanish summer in the countryside where people had to work from dawn to dusk and had to have a siesta because of the heat. I used to come back to Cambria House for the holidays” [J.S. 2000].

Discipline was achieved by reminding the children that they were representatives of their country and their behaviour was exemplary [B. B. C. 1987].

“We remember her [Mrs Fernandez] talks about being ambassadors for our country. She was marvellous, a bit of everything. She would never refuse you, would sit you on her lap and nothing was too much trouble” [Maria and Paula 1987].

They also had a tuck shop and could gain points for good behaviour that could be used as currency [J. S. 2000].

Everybody was involved in fund raising. The children formed a highly successful football team and concert party [see figure 11] as well as writing and producing the Cambria House Journal that sold throughout Wales and in England for 2d each:

“Money came from all sorts of people. The Miners Federation was absolutely superb, even when all interest had waned. We had a big advantage with our soccer team because they were so good. They beat the Cardiff champions and so everyone was interested and would make a donation” [J. S. 2000].

There was only one incident when there was any complaint about the children's behaviour and it was during a football match as J.S [2000] recalled:

"The referee picked on one of the twin boys and threw him to the ground and so all the boys went for him. For the newspapers it was 'manna from heaven' about the Basque children but the poor soul was certified afterwards"

The concerts were organised nationally. The children performed Basque music and dance in their national costume and presented the shows throughout the South Wales valleys where they were welcomed "with open arms" [Fernandez 1987].

"The Basque costumes were made at Cambria House. We sang and danced in groups: it was similar to Morris dancing. We really enjoyed it because it was a change from Caerleon and school" [Maria and Paula 1987].

But not everyone was so welcoming as Cyril Cule describes in 1938 in his introduction to the first Cambria House Journal produced by the children:

"Although they have often been slandered by those who do not scruple to misrepresent these helpless children as 'murderous little wretches' in order to make political propaganda out of their misery, these little refugee have, on the whole, gained a pleasant impression of the land which has given them shelter and where they have been shown such kindness"

However, it was the arrival of WWII that was to have the greatest significance on the children's situation. At the beginning of the war the military took over Cambria House with the result that the children, their carers and teachers had to move into Vale View, a building situated in the grounds [see figure 12]. Unfortunately there were sixty people to accommodate but only space for twenty. An appeal was made for families to take in some of the children and eighteen children found homes. The army then requested the use of Vale View but accommodation for the remaining thirty five children and adults was found at 18 Cross Street [see appendix 1] under the "careful management of Mrs Fernandez who endeavoured to make things as comfortable as possible".

Repatriation of children had taken place throughout 1937-1939 but many parents were desperate to have their children with them as war broke out even though conditions for them were very difficult. In November 1939 twenty-five of the children were repatriated and some clearly had mixed feelings which is a tribute to the care that they had received in Caerleon:

"It is a great joy to go back to our parents, but it is a sad thing to have to part after living together like brothers and sisters for two years. Still, however far away I may be, I shall never forget the friends I am leaving behind in Britain. Goodbye and thank you for all you have done" ['R'. Cambria House Journal June 1939 p2].

Thirty children remained at Cross Street. These were children whose parents 'languish in Fascist gaols' or who were living in refugee camps in France [Williams 1939].

Those in Cross Street were joined by Mrs Fernandez' sister, Mrs Garay, and her children. J. S.' mother and brother, who had been evacuees in France, also came to live there but never settled and in 1946 returned to Spain. In 1947 J. S. married and settled in Wales. Of those who remained, Welsh families adopted some children and others went to countries around the world.

"I think we left a good name. The motto was 'people judge your country by your behaviour' and the name of Caerleon is remembered not just in the Basque country but in France, Chile, Argentina and Australia" [J. S. 2000].



BASQUE CHILDREN.—These Basque children are now comfortably settled at Cambri House, Caerleon.

Figure 8 **The Basque children on their arrival at Newport Station**

S.W.A July 12 1937 p1

Cambria-House. S. Wales.



Figure 9

Some of the Basque boys outside Cambria House

ARRIEN 1988 p297

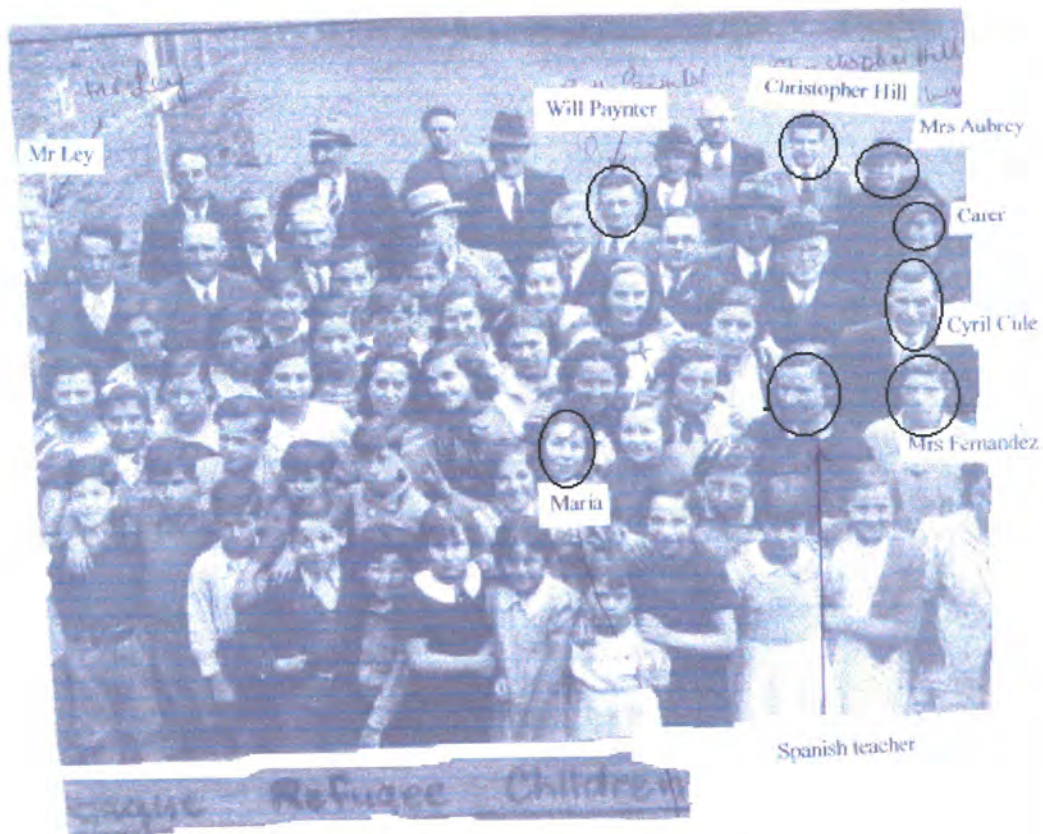


Figure 10 The Basque children with teachers, carers and supporters

Courtesy of J.S 2000



Figure 11 Cambria House football team [top]
and concert party [below]

Courtesy of J.S. 2000



Figure 12 Mrs Fernandez and the children in Vale View [1939]

Courtesy of J.S 2000

Conclusion

This was a remarkable chapter in British and, in particular, Welsh history. There was a huge response by the miners of the south Wales valleys to the plight of the Basques during the Spanish Civil War at a time of great hardship and deprivation in Wales. It was, however, also a time of high levels of political activity and in particular by the Communist Party who turned their political beliefs into highly successful fundraising and publicity activities for the Basque refugee children.

It was the miners that were to provide funding and support throughout the years that the children were dependent, even when other sources had dried up.

The Society of Friends [Quakers] provided enormous help in Spain and set the standards and ethos of the colonies, including Cambria House, and continued to provide support in Britain, for example, providing education at Badminton School.

They were also influential in the formation of the N. J. C. S. R. Particularly influential was the Duchess of Atholl who chaired this committee and worked at all levels to ensure the evacuation and care of the children. The Salvation Army and Save the Children organisations were also prominent in their activities but many organisations of all social and political hues battled with bureaucracy and governments to bring about the evacuations and care of the children. Local authorities played a crucial part; Southampton City Council provided the camp and facilities at Stoneham; Monmouthshire County Council and Caerleon Council provided accommodation and ongoing support for the children. There was public goodwill throughout Britain and particularly in Caerleon and Newport. These local communities assisted with funding, friendship, took children into their homes and

were clearly not influenced by, albeit limited, negative propaganda that raised its head from time to time.

But it was those who cared for the children in Cambria House that were the most remarkable. Cyril Cule, Christopher Hill and especially Mrs Fernandez whose outstanding dedication and achievements provide these lonely and frightened children with life long, happy memories which was reciprocated with dedicated devotion to her [see appendices 2 & 3]. They enabled these exceptionally courageous and traumatised children to find peace and safety far away from home and it is an example that is still relevant today where wars and their innocent victims still abound.

This essay has been able to provide an overview of how and why these young refugees came to stay in Caerleon . However, it has also raised many more questions such as: how did the miners manage to provide financial support for the children for so long and at a time of great hardship for them?: who was the Duchess of Atholl and how did she come to be so influential in helping the Basque children?: who were the key people in the Basque government who organised the evacuation?: how were the children chosen for the evacuation from Bilbao, was it on a 'first come, first serve' basis?: how did they manage to organise and sustain the Stoneham camp for so many months?: who provided 18 Cross Street, Caerleon and how was it funded?

These are just some of the questions left unanswered due to the limitations of this essay and further, more in depth, research is needed to provide the full story behind the Basque child refugees of 1937.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

B.B.C	- British Broadcasting Corporation
C.P.G.B	- Communist Party of Great Britain
C.U.D.C	- Caerleon Urban District Council
M.C.C	- Monmouthshire County Council
N.J.C.S.R	- National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief
N.U.W.M	- National Union of Welsh Miners
S.W.A	- South Wales Argus
S.W.M.F	- South Wales Miners Federation
T.U.C	- Trades Union Council

APPENDIX

Appendix 1 - Aerial view of Caerleon

Appendix 2 - Reunion of the Basque children

Appendix 3 - Reunion of Mrs Fernandez with Maria, Paula and J.S.

**Appendix 1 Aerial View of Caerleon c 1927 showing Cambria House [top]
and Cross Street [centre]**

<http://www.caerleon.net/history/photo>



Aerial View of Caerleon 1927



A reunion of the Basque children at Mrs Fernandez home in the 1980s

[Mrs Fernandez is circled]

[courtesy of J.S.]



A reunion of Mrs Fernandez with J.S, Maria and Paula

[courtesy of J.S]

Appendix 3