

Basque Children – evacuees in Bolton and the current refugee crisis in Europe.

Meeting at Bolton Socialist Club – Friday 22 February.

A report by Barbara Coombs.



A full house at the historic Bolton Socialist Club gave Simon Martinez a warm and generous reception. His talk on the Basque Children coming firstly as evacuees, then refugees, then exiles was well received by the audience which included María Louisa Toole and her twins Sean and Ana. The audience was delighted to see María in good health and mind.

Simon outlined the history of the 54 children coming to Watermillock and included the recording by Joe Wilcock, a volunteer with the Mass Observation Worktown Project and also the report of Frida Stewart. Joe's comments from June 1937 about the children settling down in Bolton after their brief stay at the camp at North Stoneham records unruly and perhaps challenging behaviour by the children and the young *Maestras* not being involved in the running of the house. This contrasts with Frida's view later in October about the children being happy and settled; and the house being 'extremely good for every reason'.

Two things that raised a smile if not a laugh were Joe Wilcock recording some of the Republican sentiments of the children and the attitude of the staff to maintaining order amongst the children. On the 26 June he records: one of the boys came up to the observer with a large bread or carving knife and said '*¿esta bien para cortar el collo a los fascistas?*' There had been an argument that day between two English priests who had tried to remove a red flag that some of the children had. And on the 16 June the following: 'I started off by talking with a group of girls who went into bloodthirsty descriptions of what they would do to fascists they caught. Miss Peel (the matron) informed me that five boys were waiting till Mr Freeman was free before being caned for bad behaviour.'

The history of the Basque Children was discussed by Simon in the context of the current refugee crisis and the question of what to do to help the current refugees in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq as well as those arriving, as unaccompanied children, in Europe. The 'cleansing' of reds from Spain and the resulting refugee crisis of the *Retirada* as well as the children evacuated from Spain to Britain, France, Russia, Belgium and Mexico left large numbers of children, families and soldiers and republicans in exile. The involvement of the Red Cross, Save the Children and the Quakers were all highlighted.

The meeting listened attentively and asked many questions. Their warm applause for Simon's talk was backed up by a generous filling of his father's beret to support the work of the Association of the Basque Children which will include support for the mounting of a blue plaque remembering the children at Watermillock and their supporters in the town later in 2019.

Barbara Coombs

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