

In search of the Basque children in Salford

by Claire Hignett



I've always had a vague interest in the Spanish Civil War, but not being a historian and having a busy life, this notion has never gained enough momentum to arrive at the top of my to do list. This all changed in spring 2012 when I found a little book I had bought on a whim - who knows when? - called "From Manchester to Spain" by Bernard Barry. It's about the men and women from Greater Manchester who went to Spain to join the International Brigade. I read all 57 pages of it in one sitting and became intrigued by 4 paragraphs towards the end, under the title Basque children.

There wasn't a great deal of information, just a simple explanation that in June 1937 around 250 Basque children orphaned by the Spanish Civil War arrived in the area. They were split into groups and stayed in Salford, Manchester, Rochdale, Tottington, Watermillock and Bolton. Then, in paragraph two was the hook that got me!

"For those at Harold's Memorial Orphanage Home in Seedley Road the Friends' Meeting House on Langworthy Road was loaned to them for use as a school and a Panamanian student from Manchester University assisted with lessons."

I live near Seedley Road and I know the building that was the Friends' Meeting House. It's now the British Legion, but has its former title outlined in brick above the door. I realised that it was exactly 75 years since they arrived and wondered if anyone would remember them. I asked my Mother-in-law, who is in her eighties, and she remembers being 9 years old and leaving hospital after a bout of mumps. She went with her friends to look at the refugees because "we thought they would be dead exotic but we were dead disappointed because they looked just like us!" I loved the way she responded in an almost childlike way. This memory was completely uncontaminated with hindsight. She told me they walked down "Dog Entry" (the local term for a red brick path and steps running alongside Buile Hill Park) to look at the children in the big house at the bottom. I knew exactly which house she meant. It was a very large house in its own grounds with huge trees, situated in a triangle

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of land separating Seedley Road from Sandy Lane. It was demolished about 15 years ago to make way for a development of houses. I remember it well!

On Friday 21st May 1937 to the sound of honking fishing boat horns, in an old and decrepit vessel called the Habana 4000 Basque children left Bilbao for Southampton where they initially lived in a tented camp at Stoneham. These evacuees from the Basque region of Spain were amongst around 20,000 children who fled the civil war, leaving behind family, friends and everything they knew. Many went to France and others to Belgium, Denmark, Switzerland, Mexico and the Soviet Union. Franco had a particular distaste for the Basques and the region experienced the first ever aerial bombardments, not only by Franco's planes but by his allies the Germans and the Italians. The bombing of Guernica utilised all that was new in Hitler's Nazi Condor Legion, including new aeroplanes the Dornier and (according to some) the Messerschmitt BF109, causing an outcry and fear around the world. These planes could do the same to Southampton or Portsmouth!

In order to maintain its "neutrality" in the war in Spain, the British Government initially refused to support the request from the Basque Government to protect their children, but after a campaign by various religious, socialist and humanitarian organisations, it was agreed they could come to Britain, but all financial support had to be found from voluntary donations.

Following a trail left behind in reports from the Salford Reporter (the local newspaper of the day) I have uncovered the following story.

In a report on the 28th May 1937, readers are informed that "The Bishop of Salford (Dr. Thomas Henshaw) announced that some of the Basque children who are being evacuated from war-torn areas are to be cared for in the homes of the Salford Catholic Protection Society". This is the only reference in the paper to the Salford Catholic Protection Society and it refers to 8 or 10 children who were assigned to St. Joseph's Home in Eccles, run by the Missionary Sisters of St. Joseph. Eccles at that time was a separate borough with its own town council and local newspaper, The Eccles and Patricroft Journal. I've not yet had the opportunity to explore the Eccles strand of the story, so don't yet know whether they were treated as a separate colony or as part of the Salford group.

On the Friday 18th June 1937, The Salford Reporter announced

"BASQUE CHILDREN IN SEEDLEY - About 30 Expected to Arrive Tonight - OFFICERS OVERWHELMED WITH OFFERS OF HELP"

The children were part of a group of 100 who were to be cared for by the Christian Volunteer Force in Salford, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Unfortunately, due to a typhoid scare, their journey to Salford was delayed by 48 hours for their vaccinations to take effect.

There was a lot of interest from the public, and the officers from the Christian Volunteer Force - Staff Captain and Acting Matron Mr and Mrs Hutchinson, Adjutant McMullen and Commodor Hill - posted regular bulletins to "acquaint the public of the latest developments". Over 150 people visited the home to offer help, and a Manchester firm donated "forty dolls - baby dolls with eyes that open and shut, 'aristocrats' with silky curls and woolly cuddly dolls" and "sets of tools for the boys, puzzles, miniature planes and other games".

With an air of excited expectation, the correspondant describes "an atmosphere of busy happiness over the house" as preparations go "full steam ahead" for their arrival, describing the dormitories as "bright cheerful rooms decorated in yellows and browns with blue coverlets on the beds and blue floor colourings". He then goes on in great detail to describe specimen menus for potential meals, obviously trying to fill the void of news before their expected arrival.

“SPANISH CHILDREN LIKE SEEDLEY – A Birthday and a visit to the Dentist Already – MONDAY WASHING DAY AS USUAL” was the enticing headline to a completely impossible to read article dated 25th June 1937. Placed at the edge of the page, just where the microfilm was fed through the machine at the Local History Library, it had become scratched and illegible. Further articles mention a trip to Blackpool and going to school, but this was about the really normal stuff.

I paid a visit to The British Library Newspaper Section at Collindale to see an original copy. This building is now closed as the newspaper section is being re-located, so I feel privileged to have visited. I sat at a huge bench with a bound volume of original Salford Reporters for 1937 on a stand in front of me. There was so much in there that I wanted to read, but I stayed focused and turned the lovely old pages carefully until I came to 25th June and there, fully legible, was an unexpected treasure, the names of three of the children and not only an insight into their lives, but an insight into how two similar and yet subtly different cultures viewed each other.

A Mr. T Clinton from Seedley was acting as interpreter and through him, the children reported that they had settled down and preferred sleeping in the house to being in a tent. 15 year old Luis Gonzalez said that they liked being here. Senorita Juanita Ibanez y Echarre celebrated her 16th birthday on the Wednesday after their arrival, “her first away from home”. Before the start of the war she had been an apprentice tailor in San Sebastian, moving to Durango to sew overalls for government troops and left for Bilbao only 6 days before Franco’s troops entered. She was “very afraid in Spain” with air raid sirens sounding up to 15 times a day because the front was quite close. We need to remember that at this point in 1937, Britain was not at war so had not suffered aerial bombardment, and that the cities in the Basque region were among the first to experience this phenomenon. We also learn that Juanita thought English women wore their dresses too short!

There is a bemused description of how the children approached wash day, highlighting the differences between cultures. “They soaked their clothes for an hour in liquid soap, then simply wrung them through in clean water and hung them out to dry. After a time they ceased work and when it was pointed out that they had not finished came the traditional Spanish reply ‘Tomorrow’.” There is another slightly bemused description of personal hygiene! “They will not go to bed until they have had a bath, and they like baths in cold water. Mrs. Hutchinson (known to the children as Capitan Elsie) comments that ‘It seems as if they are washing their hands every two minutes’”.

The toothache of the headline was suffered by nine year old Teresa Serrano who “developed toothache on Sunday night and was found crying very quietly to herself” she was taken to a local dentist and had two extractions and the dentist apparently “did not hurt as much as the dentist in Spain”.

After a week crowds still gathered outside the home to watch the children play, confirming my mother-in-law’s description of going to look at them. I have conducted some telephone interviews with people who remember them. Dorothy remembers asking her mother why the children looked so sad and being told that they were children with no mummies and daddies who had left Spain because of a war. When she was later evacuated herself during the Second World War, she thought of the Spanish children and was terrified she might never see her parents again. Vicki sent me a photograph of the children; her mother used to play with them and would often talk about them, knowing all their names. I wonder if she was the girl mentioned in the article “who brought with her a gift of cigarette cards and was seen to be obtaining autographs”.

For me, this was the most interesting article, as it discussed the normal activities the children were involved in, hints at their personalities and, although there is a slightly anthropological tone to the

article, which emphasizes their differences, their similarities as working class children shine through. As my Mother-in-law stated "They were just like us!"

In 1999, over 120 refugees from Kosovo arrived in Salford. They were moved into an empty tower block and had nothing. A public appeal secured toys, cooking equipment and clothing and there were crowds of well wishers bearing gifts when they arrived. The Council news magazine, Salford People, for October 1999 quotes "The response to the public appeal was wonderful. There was so little time to prepare but people gave so much, and it has all been so useful" ... "Everyone has mucked in". I find the similarities between these two events separated by 67 years heart warming.

In an article dated the 2nd July 1937 we learn that the friends Meeting House was loaned out until Christmas for the children to use as a school and that they were so excited they were all ready an hour before they were due to leave. They were to be taught by Senora Martin who travelled with them from Spain and Senorita Sarita Castel, a Panamanian Honours student at Manchester University. Three of the children were over school age, Juanita and Nata Ibanez y Echarre and a 14 year old boy. The two girls were trained "in the mysteries of housework" and again emphasis is placed on how they do things differently "Juanita's idea of washing a floor is to wring out a cloth nearly dry and wipe the floor carefully with it".

In July, the Mayors of Salford and Blackpool with the help of the Rotary Club arranged a trip to Blackpool. The mayor presented each child with a mug inscribed "City of Salford 1937". They visited the Pleasure Beach and the South Shore bathing pool where "a number of the children enjoyed a frolic" and they were given a block of rock at the Tower. Lunch was provided by the Blackpool Rotary Club and tea by a local hotel manager and they were given a Spanish hat. Interestingly, Vicki who sent me the photo of the children that had been her mother's, commented that someone is wearing a Spanish hat in the photo, and we assumed he must have brought it with him. However I now think the photo was probably taken as a souvenir of the Blackpool trip.

In October the children left Salford and moved to Grindleford near Sheffield where they were to stay at the Holiday Fellowship Home at Froggatt Edge at the expense of organisers in Sheffield. The Salford Reporter headline reads

"WEEPING BASQUE CHILDREN LEAVE SALFORD – Now in Residence in Sheffield- SPANISH SAILORS' GIFT OF CLOTHING"

Apparently it took 20 minutes to load up their bus with the cases (bought with money donated locally), toys and their other belongings. The crew of the Bartello, a Spanish Ship berthed in Salford Docks, raised £20 and took the children on a shopping trip buying the boys new suits and the girls new party frocks which they were wearing as they left Salford. The children were apparently weeping as they boarded the bus, crying "No more Salford! No more Salford!" A short article a week later tells us that Mr and Mrs Hutchinson received several letters beginning "Dear father and mother" and ending "your affectionate son and daughter". One child wrote "I send you the kisses of a daughter as a souvenir". Most letters mentioned trying to "keep back their tears" as they left.

By the start of Second World War most of the Basque children who came to Britain had returned to Spain. Those over 16 or whose parents were imprisoned or dead were allowed to remain in Britain, and about 250 did so. I'm curious to find out what happened to those who came to Salford. The next stage of my research is to follow the children to Grindleford and to find out more about the 8 to 10 children who went to St. Josephs Home in Eccles. I want to interview more of the older residents of Salford who remember them from childhood and research those who helped them. I think I've taken on a lifetime project!

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