

The History of the SS Habana 1916 – 178 – translation July 2021 - by Maria Dolores (Lita) Power

From Santurtzi, Historian Zehar – blog de Genealogía e Historia Local

Eighty years ago, the first scheduled refugee evacuations abroad took place at a time of war. Said in this way it appears that one should take pride in this, but unfortunately and despite it all, these acknowledged *war children* were of a generation scarred by unforgettable and tragic events. Due to this *children's exile* the image of the SS Habana in the port has stayed engraved in one's memory, in the commemorative mosaic, and over the last few months also in local street signs.

But what else do we know of the SS Habana?

Firstly, it must be pointed out that the SS Habana was one of the ships employed for the evacuation and not the only one. Another of these boats used for the evacuation was a yacht called the Goizeko Izarra belonging to Ramón de la Sota Llano. There were even more of which I will give an account in a future entry.

The Habana was docked in the port of Bilbao, (yes indeed, in Santurtzi) on the 18th of July 1936 preparing for its usual journey to America. The coup d'état deterred its departure *sine die*. In the following months, the unfolding of the conflict in Gipuzkoa made it necessary to provide provisional shelter for the refugees coming from that area and the ship was requisitioned to be employed for that purpose. In January 1937 it was then used as a hospital ship and finally as the leading ship for the evacuation of a huge number of war children that were taken overseas.

It made six voyages from the port of Santurtzi. This is a fact that many often forget whilst remembering only the voyage to England. It left on the 6th of May for the French port of La Pallice, on the 16th of May for the port of Pauillac, on the 21st of May for the English port of Southampton, on the 1st and 6th of June for the French port of La Pallice and, finally, on the 13th of June for the French port of Pauillac (where without disembarking, a group of those children were transferred to another ship bound for the former Soviet Union). With research it has been possible to find the name of the captain, Ricardo Fernández Orsi. He happened to be born in a town in Extremadura where his father was a pharmacist. The latter was shot against the execution wall by the coup rebels. Ricardo Fernández who lived and studied nautical science in Bilbao went into exile in France.

I have also found the name of a signal lights officer, one José Santos from Santurtzi, of whom I know nothing more.

With the whole of Bizkaia occupied the following week, the SS Habana remained moored in Burdeos as a hospital ship till the end of the war. After the war, it was reclaimed by the Francoists together with another 67 ships anchored in French ports.

This may appear to be the end of the usual story regarding this iconic vessel. However, there exists a before and an after. And it is this less known part that I am going to explain now.

Few people know that the vessel was built for the Transatlantic Company in the shipyards owned by the Spanish Society for Naval Construction in Sestao. In fact it was the first to be built. It was made of steel manufactured with local iron and its structure sewn by rivets, as in those days there were no electric arc welding machines.

Although the keel was laid down on the 27th of April 1916, it was not launched until the 14th of September 1920. The delay was due to the vicissitudes brought on by the First World War.

The ceremony was presided over by King Alfonso XIII and Queen Victoria Eugenia and this was not without mishaps. Once its patroness the queen had broken the classic champagne bottle on its prow, the ship began its course towards the estuary but half way it stopped for a moment or two. Fortunately it was able to start again and float freely in the estuary.

This little incident could be interpreted as the foreshadowing of the challenges this splendid ship, baptised with the name of Alfonso XIII, would suffer throughout its life. One of these challenges was to be met two months later after its launching. On the 27th of November, whilst moored in the armament dock of Sestao, there was a fire on board which was thought to be sabotage and caused further delays.

In its time it was the biggest ship built in Spain (14,400 displacement tonnes). It was of the following dimensions: 146.30 metres long by 18.6 meters beam, 10.9 meters depth and 6.3 meters draught. Two Parsons steam turbines with two propellers generated a power of 10,700 hp to take it to a speed of 19.5 knots.

It cost exactly 36,625,109 pesetas as opposed to the 10 million pesetas originally budgeted. After its final refit it was delivered to the Transatlantic Company on the 29th of August 1923 and with the King aboard it undertook its sea worthy test on the 1st of September. From then on it started its life as a transatlantic passenger ship bound for Cuba, Mexico and New York.

It was classified as a passenger ship and had a capacity of just over 2,000 passengers distributed as follows: 245 first class, 82 second class, 148 third class, 1,589 emigrants or troops. We must also take into account the 245 crew members.

According to the brochures and photos of that time, it was a fairly luxurious liner of the aforementioned Transatlantic Company, the most famous and oldest Spanish shipping company, based in Santander and Barcelona, which although not as great as it was at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, it still has transatlantic vessels of substance.

When the second Republic was proclaimed, the shipping company was discredited due to its special association with the previous regime and as a consequence the contract established between the company and the State in 1910 was terminated. Even so, it continued to be of service independently for those vessels departing from Cantabrian ports and calling at New York, Cuba and Mexico. Of course, it had to change its name to the SS Habana. As an example, the insignias put on uniform lapels were now different to the previous ones.

After the Civil War, the French authorities returned the ship to its former proprietor, The Transatlantic Company, and it began a new stage of its long life until its demise on Galician soil. It arrived in Bilbao on the 27th of June 1939 and was refitted at the naval facilities with the aim of returning it to its former service. However, on the 14th of September, it suffered another fire which appeared to be intentional once again, causing significant damage to both the structure and the machinery after which it was finally decided to rebuild it as a cargo ship. The finished repairs resulted in an unprofitable ugly cargo ship with a capacity of 14,168 cubic metres to be put out to sea again in 1942 covering various transatlantic cargo voyages.

At the end of the Second World War it was repaired in the shipyard Todd of New York and was once more transformed into a mixed cargo and passenger ship with a capacity for 12 people in Tourist class A and 102 in Tourist class B.

In 1960, due to low profits, it was moored in the port of Vigo, initially with the idea of scrapping it. However, in 1961, because the shipyards were unable to satisfy the demand for the construction of freezer ships, the firm Pescanova, having come across the old SS Habana, has it towed away to Ferrol on the 1st of February 1962 and has it refitted at the Northwest Shipyard and Repairs (Astano) to serve as a freezer factory-ship. It is painted grey and light green and with its Pescanova identifying mark on its funnel and its new name of Galicia on its stern and bulwarks, on the 7th of September 1964 it set sail for the South African fishing grounds, accompanied by a flotilla of 10 trawlers built in Barreras.

There were even more transformations to be made, since in 1971 its old and inefficient boilers had to be replaced by new ones. This was carried out by opening up the side of the ship without damaging its superstructure or the rest of its installations within a record time of 8 weeks in the dry dock of the National Bazán Company of Military Vessel Construction S.A., also in Ferrol.

Back in the fishing grounds of South Africa and Namibia, it is of service to fifty fishing boats which on board the Galicia unload their catch for freezing and they in turn receive foodstuff, fuel, medical aid and also repairs. Finally, in 1975 its return journey is destined for scrapping which is carried out in February 1978 in Vigo.

It is said that an anchor, gifted by the Donostia-San Sebastián City Council, is kept in the Philippe Cousteau Anchor Museum in Castrillón (Asturias), although I have my doubts as the dates attributed to the ship (1927-1966) do not coincide with those of the Habana.

A note from the translator

It is worth noting that there is a wonderful account of the captain of the SS Habana, Ricardo Fernández Orsi by his grandchild, **Sabina Fernández** in the Newsletter no.35, and in the previous Commemorative Newsletter by **Natalia Benjamin** in her article 'What Happened to the Habana?' where she writes:

'As a footnote, in 1980, Ricardo Fernández, the former master of the Habana, saw an announcement in the press that the Basque children from England were planning a reunion in Bilbao, and so he wrote to the mayor asking whether he could go to the reunion and meet some of those niños whom he had ferried those many years ago. His letter was passed on to Helvecia Hidalgo, the organiser. She replied to him, saying that unfortunately the meeting had to be postponed, but she hoped he would be able to come the following year and that the niños had been very touched to see that after such a long time he still remembered them. Ricardo Fernández replied that as he was 76 years old, he wasn't sure of being there and her letter had moved him to tears. What an interesting history the ship has, although its role in evacuating the Basque children is for me the highlight of its eventful operational service.'