

Right: Jessie Simmons (née Branch) with a group of Basque refugee children at an unknown location in 1937.



As we approach the 80th anniversary of the bombing of Guernica on 26 April 1937, **JOHN SIMMONS** explains how his family's involvement with the Basque refugee children who came to Britain inspired him to write a novel with the Spanish Civil War as its backdrop.

A novel inspired by my parents' involvement in the aftermath of the bombing of Guernica



Time marches on even if the members of the International Brigades no longer can. We're losing those with personal memories of living at that time, so it makes anniversaries even more important. Eightieth anniversaries come at us fast: the start of the Spanish Civil War last July, the bombing of Guernica just ahead. And, less well-known but important to me and my family, the 80th anniversary of the arrival of the *Habana* in May 1937, the ship carrying nearly

4,000 children from Bilbao in the Basque region to a refugee camp at Stoneham, near Southampton.

All this has been brought vividly to life for me by the research and writing of a novel called 'Spanish Crossings'. I wrote it by drawing on aspects of my family history. But of course it is fiction, and increasingly we need to keep stories of that time alive by use of the imagination, not just the naturally diminishing memories of those who were there.

'Spanish Crossings' is the story of a young woman, Lorna Starling, who is making her way in London in 1937 at the novel's opening. The law firm where she works in an administrative role supports trade union and left-wing causes, and Lorna is assigned to work with the committee that takes responsibility for the child refugees. She meets Harry James, an International Brigader who has returned briefly from the war. They embark on an affair before Harry has to return to the war. He leaves a letter with an eye-witness account of Guernica.

Lorna waits anxiously for news until the worst news arrives – Harry has been killed in action in Spain. Lorna rededicates herself to the cause of the Basque children, 'adopting' one of them, Pepe. The rest of the novel – its second part in 1943, third part in 1947 – keeps the situation in Spain pivotal to the narrative. The novel's climax is at the French border

town of Hendaye that played a significant role in events during the war.

Digging deeper into my own family history for the novel's background, I discovered what I had always been too vaguely aware of. My parents, Jessie and Frank Simmons, had been fighters against fascism in 1930s Britain – present at Cable Street, campaigning for the Spanish Republican cause and 'adopting' a boy called Jesús, whose existence I knew of only through photographs in an old family album; because, unfortunately, my mum and dad died in the 1960s and, as a teenager then, I had failed to ask all the questions I wanted answered now.

I did eventually track down more details of the Spanish boy Jesús, thanks to the Basque Children of '37 Association UK. They gave me his full name – Jesús Iguarán Aramburu – and the date of his return to Bilbao in January 1938. There the trail ended – I presume, after all these years, that he is now dead.

In my family we still have a precious memento of that time – a child's desk made by Jesús's father to say thank you to my mum and dad. The desk was used by my brother, then by me when Dave died, then by my son and now by my grandchildren.

The desk is a constant reminder to my family of the extraordinary dedication of ordinary people at that time to resist fascism. The novel 'Spanish Crossings' now provides another way of keeping those memories alive. It comes at a time when we need to be more aware than ever of the historical lessons that should be drawn from that turbulent period. ▲

'Spanish Crossings' (£12.99) is available to order from the Urbane website (<http://urbanepublications.com/books/spanish-crossings>) and bookshops. It will be published in April, the 80th anniversary of the bombing of Guernica.



Above: Guernica following its destruction by German and Italian bombers during Franco's offensive against the Basque Country in the spring of 1937.

Left: Jesús Iguarán Aramburu, one of the *niños vascos* (Basque children), who was 'adopted' by the Simmons family while in Britain.

Below: With nearly 4,000 refugee children on board, the *Habana* prepares to leave Bilbao for Southampton in May 1937.

