

Telling our stories - voices from the Basque child refugee oral histories: (5) dispersal to the “colonies”



The National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief and the Basque Children's Committee, in the aftermath of the fall of Bilbao, and the realisation that the children's stay in the UK now would not be so temporary, began to make other arrangements for their care. From May onwards and throughout the summer 1937 groups of children were dispersed from the camp to across the UK. The Catholic Church offered to care for 1,200 children of parents who were practising Catholics, generally in single sex convent and orphanages, leading, in some cases, to siblings being split up. 400 were cared for by the Salvation Army in their London hostel and the remainder sent to the colonies set up by different committees.

José Armolea:

“There must have been between 50 and 70 boys that were allocated a new, we call it colonies, *colonias* in Spanish, because that's the best way to describe a group of kids going to a particular place all grouped together and in this case we found ourselves in Wales.”

There were around 90 colonies spread across the UK, ranging from stately homes to convents, converted workhouses and abandoned hospitals. Between 20 and 50 children were cared for in each colony. It was not always easy to enforce standards of care set by the Basque Children's Committee so that both care and level of education received in the colonies varied.

Josefina Stubbs:

“Some British people offered their private homes. The Cadbury’s chocolate people took three children. Helvecia [Hidalgo] was one of them, with her sister and brother. They educated them privately which was very good. It was amazing how good they were.”

Valentín Sagasti:

“We were just all marched to various places, whether it be plutocrats... or some beautiful places. I mean, in the Cadbury’s you got education, clothing and the food. But then, on the other end of the scale you could go with scraps, just scraps, you know.”