

Telling our stories - voices from the Basque child refugee oral histories: (6f) Life in the colonies

Josefina Savery talks about her time in Caerleon

“And then of course we were split in various groups. And it’s strange, because - I had a book with all the weird things in the world, and one of them was the longest named village, and that’s in Wales. And there we were – we were going to Wales. And I thought – gosh – I remember that book! Of course you know there was no support from the government whatsoever. In there, there’s the official thing that they won’t be responsible for the upkeep. When we came to Caerleon people used to say “Oh you’re going to Wales, oh the miners there” - the miners were great supporters of everybody...”

“Where I lived, near Caerleon – Caerleon is the most delightful village. It’s got a beautiful Roman amphitheatre, it’s absolutely wonderful. And we were put there – 56 of us.”

“We were put on a train in Southampton with two [?] and two teachers, and we went to Newport, and there we had a civic reception with the mayor of Newport present, and from there on they took us to Caerleon by bus. And there we had a reception committee. And then our troubles started. We arrived in Caerleon, and it was an old people’s home. They had a matron who’d been in an orphanage. But we weren’t orphans; you know - we had parents, and one thing and another. And she was dreadfully strict. In fact, when Mrs Fernandez – I’ll tell you about it in a minute – came, one of the boys said ‘Señorita, are we allowed to breathe?’ As you can imagine – we were confined to barracks, we couldn’t come out anywhere, couldn’t mix with anybody... Cambria House there – it was an old people’s home anyway, and it was really dreadful. And I think there may have been trouble had it not been that Mrs Fernandez arrived. She lived in Cardiff, and she’d come over when she was a little girl. And a lot of people from the Basque country came to work in Dowlais. And she came, they picked her up, they picked her out there, and she offered help, and she was a miracle really. The first thing she did was open the gates. ‘Out you go.’ And it was wonderful. And then people started coming, they used to bring us sweets, they used to do all sorts of things. And eventually we just became part of the community. And then of course we went our own ways. But that I think may have caused problems, had it not been that she was brought in...she was quite incredible.”

“We had a routine, and first of all – Cardiff University helped out. Have you heard of Christopher Hill, the historian – he was a lecturer... at Cardiff University, and he knew a lot of people who had joined us for the Spanish relief. And he seemed to pick them the right way. And we had a teacher who was a linguist – he spoke I don’t know how many languages – and then Mrs Fernandez encouraged us, and then the children

started – I mean, Gerry [Josefina’s brother] went to a Juniors, an Infant’s school. So they opened it – and of course, once you put children with a lot of other children they learn the language almost immediately. So we did very well. I was lucky, really, because one of the visitors – her daughter was a teacher in Newport and she took me under her wing, because I could speak a bit of French. And she said ‘If you learn so much English by such-and-such a date, I’ll give you a day in London.’ And she did! I worked hard and I went to London. But, I mean, it was just a matter of interest, I liked learning the language. And she really opened the door for me.”

Josefina was sent to school in Bristol:

“I went to a Quaker school in Bristol for two years. Badminton School – it’s a very good school. Wonderful school... because there were all nationalities. There were some German Jews, Indian people. Iris Murdoch, the writer, she was one of the pupils. It’s a very, very good school. I was there for two years, and then I took the School Certificate.”

“The Quakers must be the most tolerant people in this world – and the kindest. Kindest and - they were so wonderful. We were exactly the same as the other children there – as I said, there were Jewish refugees as well. If you had a parcel, a present, you opened it in front of the matron, and all the presents that you had, and whatever you had, was put together and you shared it, and it was quite, quite remarkable. I don’t know what it’s like now, but with that headmistress, she really was.”