

Telling our stories - voices from the Basque child refugee oral histories: (1) the journey on the *Habana*



3,681 children boarded the *Habana* alongside 95 female teachers, 120 auxiliary helpers and 15 priests. The majority of the children were travelling in groups of 2-4 and with other siblings, although nearly 500 travelled alone. All were given a hexagonal badge to wear with an identification number. They also were given abundant food – white bread, chorizo, boiled eggs and sponge cake – which many had not had the opportunity to enjoy in recent times. This encouraged many to overeat, with dire consequences when they hit the choppy Bay of Biscay.

Boarding the vessel was a daunting prospect for the children who were to find conditions crowded and the journey rough.

María Carmen Wood:

Well somebody did carry me because I got halfway up and I thought I'd had enough... One of the seamen picked me up, slung me over his shoulder, and ran up the gangplank and dumped me at the top. Loads of kids. Loads of them there. I've never seen so many children, even at school I've never seen so many at any one time. I hadn't even had breakfast then. I only just remembered that! No breakfast, no cup of coffee, nothing. Anyway, somebody – it must have been one of the crew – took me down below, to where other children were sitting around on the floor and I sat down with some of them. And I don't know what went on... I must have fallen asleep, and finished off my night's sleep that way."

Herminio Martínez:

“Down below it was very very crowded and when night came of course we slept on the floor and my brother and I didn't have overcoats and everyone was sick, it was dreadful and of course the crying, a girl was crying I think just about all night long saying tell the captain to go back...”

María Carmen Wood:

Because they were – the company that took us, it was a shipping company, you know, a transporting ship that takes goods, as far as I can remember. And they couldn't have cabins for children. We were all sort of bundled together in – well I remember being in a room with two baths, or three baths, I'm not sure – but we bundled down in one of them.

Josefina Stubbs:

“We kept together until we got onto the boat. My brother couldn't get anywhere to sleep, neither could we... Every bunk was taken below... We never undressed or had a wash. We just couldn't. There were too many of us. We were packed like sardines. Too many.”

And **Luis Naya**, one of those who travelled on his own, remembered the loneliness despite the crowds:

“All my family said goodbye and of course I felt lonely, I was left all on my own. I had no friends, nothing.”

Angeles Cubas:

“When we got on board the first thing they gave us were sponge cake, and all the kids were so hungry, and hard eggs. What an abundance of food! Of course we ate with such eagerness and then all over deck... there was nothing but vomit. I've never forgotten, all that sponge.”

Josefine Savery:

“We were allowed a little bag with just clothes, nothing else but we had plenty of food on the boat. Because we had been very short of money in Bilbao and they had white bread and chorizo and that was like manna from heaven, it was absolutely marvellous... I got a bunk for my brother and one other for myself and Gerry said, ‘Oh I'm hungry and look they've got chorizo and so and so'. So I went to get it for him and when I came back my bunk had gone. So I spent all the journey to Southampton on deck, being terribly sick.”

Helvecia Hidalgo:

“They gave us a cabin and we were bored so went outside to see what was going on and to see if they would give us something to eat. We never saw the cabin again. Then we had to sleep on the floor like everybody else, with our coats, and the sea was rough

and everyone was vomiting. I wasn't but my sister was, and the new coat that mother made for her was all soiled. And I had to leave her to go and queue to get food and when I went back to her she didn't want to eat... What an ordeal!"

María Carmen Wood:

"When the ship set off – it was horrible. We all started being sick one after another. It just was the most horrible feeling, you know, when you want to be sick – well, you don't want to be sick but you can't stop it. And everybody seemed to be in the same state."

Juanita Vaquer:

"It was a horrible, horrible time... Everybody was sick. 4,000 children there"

Josefina Stubbs:

"Well, I went up on deck when my sister took me on her back because I was so sick. I'll never forget it. It was so rough. Terribly rough and everyone was being sick. The smell of it was shocking...."

