

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

Felix Amat talks about his memories of Langham, Colchester, where he lived for nearly two years

“They were the best years of our lives. And our friends that write to me from Bilbao and Barcelona, they still mention that, the fact that we were so happy there. It was a little paradise.”

“Well, the house itself, the gardens - massive gardens, cricket, football, tennis, greenhouses with two gardeners that worked there. I used to like to help the gardeners in the greenhouses. Yes, we did have lessons, but as I say in my recollection in the book, we must have had lessons, as we had the teachers there, but all I can remember is playing football all day long. And we seemed to be doing that all the time. Just playing football. It was marvellous. And the food was good. See, here’s another story. The cook, she was an auxillary, as they call them. Her name was Rafaela. She went back to Bilbao. And when she went back, I asked her to take a letter for my mother, which she did. She went to see my mother, eventually, when everything was sorted out as to where my mother was et cetera. And my mother – well, after the cook had seen my mother, my mother gave her my brother’s address, the one that was in Franco’s army. He was stationed in Madrid. This is after the civil war. And she went to work in Madrid, the cook, Rafaela. And she met my brother there, and eventually they got married.”

“Apart from playing football. We had lessons... in Spanish...” There were five teachers. “Then we had a German handyman, he was a refugee from [?] Germany, and there was Leonard Reed, he was a member of the PPU, and he was like a handyman. And there was Theo Wills, a Welshman, he was in charge, eventually. Theo Wills. And he married Señorita Amada. He was a Welshman, went to live in Wales, after Colchester. And they had children, and some years ago I had an address for their children. Señorita Amada and Theo Wills had been dead for some years now – but I never got a reply, I don’t know where they had moved, probably moved on – I don’t know. So – the staff. It was five Spanish teachers, all women – Theo Wills, the Welshman, he was like the director – and there was Otto, and Leonard Reed. They were two handymen. They did everything for us – cooked, mending, shoes, making sure we had clothes, because all the clothes we had were donated by people. We used to get parcels come with clothes, as well as other things.”

“Eventually, we went to the English village school. They came to some agreement – the education authorities said that we had to go to school, an English school. But we had a Spanish teacher. Señorita Deme came to the school, so we were still being taught in Spanish.”

He recalls weekend trips to London, Northampton and Nottingham on the train:

“There was always someone to meet us. But yes I remember being in St Pancras coming to Nottingham – there was a group of us. And when we arrived in Nottingham, people were there to meet us, and we went to the different homes... They were mostly professional people, like schoolteachers, solicitors, the managing director of the Nottingham Co-Operative Society, he fostered one of the lads... But they were all educated people...

“I tell you who was some of the prominent people that were so good to us: Barbara Castle’s parents. Barbara Castle... Her parents lived in Nottingham, and Barbara Castle did. I met her once when she lived in Nottingham. Yes, it was people like that. But as regards getting hold of us and teaching us English, it didn’t come into it. We just picked it up. We were hanging about in the gardens of Barbara Castle’s parents in Nottingham Park, which is a very select part of Nottingham, and we were running about in the gardens and shouting amongst ourselves. And I remember one of the Spanish professors that had come off the civil war – he said ‘Well, they might have forgotten Spanish’, he said, ‘but they haven’t forgotten how to swear!’ I remember it so distinctly...”

Felix Amat was eventually fostered and lived in Nottingham after Langham colony closed:

“We came to Nottingham, to do a concert... We just did dancing. I think somebody must have had a piano, or something like that. Yes it was in Mapperley - a local district of Nottingham. And the people that fostered me were in the Spanish Aid Committee, in Nottingham. Spanish Aid Committee. And they came to the concert. And I don’t know why – they just picked me... They invited me to come and see them. We went back to Langham as we did every time, after a week or so. And then we got a letter – I didn’t, but the people at Langham got a letter from this teacher here in Nottingham to say would I like to come and stay with them for a few days during the holidays, which I did. Two or three times. And eventually, when Colchester closed down, and we had to be dispersed, they fostered me. And that’s how I came to Nottingham. But I wasn’t the only one; there were others...”