

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

Herminio Martínez recounts his experience

Swansea:

“We were taken to Swansea it was large manor house in a beautiful setting, it was Sketty Park just outside Swansea and it was one of these estates with a large manor house and there must have been 80 children, boys and girls... The things were ordered, there were two of the young women we called señoritas who were not teachers... they came to help out... But all in all the life in the Swansea was organised very well, the colony was run probably by the subscriptions of miners. The person who seemed to be in charge was someone they called Mr Sunday, Mr Sunday who used to come in one of these lovely open cars with the wheels on the side you see and with his wife but sort of elegant woman dressed in the clothing of those days, of the 30s, and there was plenty of food as I said there were efforts to conduct the classes and there was the free time when again I used to roam this wonderful countryside. We used, all” sort of games going on, organised including football. There was plenty of green, it was a lovely spot for such a home. I have very happy memories...”

“We used to go on a Thursday afternoon all walk in lines to Swansea to the cinema, the whole colony and on one occasion... we were all taken to Swansea and we sat in a green area like a little park in the town overlooking the road and there was the procession of the cars with the King and Queen and the Princesses, they passed by lots of people followed by what must have been a demonstration of unemployed miners, I still remember they were carrying banners and there was general booing from the crowd.”

With the repatriation of some children back to Spain, the colony in Swansea had to close because it was no longer viable. The remaining children were sent to colonies in other parts of the country: Herminio was sent to Tynemouth.

Tynemouth, Tyneside

“Six of us, three sets of brothers, we were... put on a train and we arrived up in the north of England in Tyneside, in Tynemouth. And I remember going through all these valleys with all the slag heaps and so forth, travelling by train up to the north of England. So that was the next colony and in Swansea had been a wonderful happy experience... I was as miserable as sin...”

“It was in a large terrace house in Tynemouth, one of these seaside roads, very prosperous middle class sort of areas, with a back yard... But of course we went there, six of us, in to an already existing colony, we knew no-one and consequently this is why I felt so miserable because I knew no-one... Also we were very much restricted, it was baths constantly being given a bath and ordered about, a routine established in

which I wasn't accustomed to. I mean in Spain we didn't even have water in the house never mind a bath... Now, it's quite strange because this couple... they were Communists... but of course as a child in the colony they were Tio Will and Tia Nell, Aunt Nell and Uncle Will, you see, and for us in our sense of family you know you didn't just call someone aunt or uncle just like that... and we found these children they were so different to us, we had been what probably eight, nine months of freedom in Swansea and we entered this home where there were all sort of, they were organised, they had classes, you were restricted constantly, you were bathed constantly, you see."

The couple who ran the home: "he worked as a clerk in the ship building yard. She had been a nurse, a sister... and this meant that she had a mania for orderliness and for cleanliness you see. And the children were very well clothed, we were bought all the same... the whole lot were very organised and a lot of restrictions probably necessary because remember, and I've realised subsequently that there was quite a campaign to get rid of us, to send us to back to Spain..."

After Tynemouth, Herminio was moved to Brampton and then for a short time to a farm nearby.

Brampton, Cumbria

"I always felt that in Tynemouth there was a sort of sense of favouritism... My brother also comments on this... I remember going on to the beach and wondering how I could escape from this wretched place... But any way the next stop was Brampton and that was paradise again. It was a large, had been a workhouse and it was a very happy place... There was no real organised effort to have classes. There must have been 80 children of all ages from six to 14 possibly 15. It was, the colony was basically run by the family of Wilfred Roberts who was on the Basque Children's Committee. His mother was Lady Cecilia Roberts, and they had this country seat... Brampton... Lady Cecilia Roberts was lovely old, lovely woman... and she would frequently come to visit the colony in her Austin..., chauffeur-driven, and all the children would run to the car when she came along. There was a cook and we used to roam the countryside endless rabbits and pheasants and we used to pinch all manner of things from the farms and there was football and there was the gangs. We used to go out for the day, we all had our own spoons tucked in to our belt, our hanky you know, mug, these tin mugs on threaded through our belt and every so often we would take the rabbits we caught back to the house and the cook would cook them for us.... Oh it was a most happy place and all the children developed relationships and even today those that went to Brampton they all have that sort of togetherness that binds them together."

"Whilst we were in Brampton every so often the whole colony, all the young children, were invited by Lady Cecilia Roberts to her manor house and given sort of the run of the place for that day and be given tea with all her servants to attend to us and so forth, she was a lovely person..."

In December 1939 Herminio and his brother were sent to Margate as they were due to be repatriated back to Spain, although this ultimately did not occur. There were two very different colonies in Margate, Eastcliffe House and Laleham School.

Margate

“We travelled down to Margate in the middle of winter December 1939. And there it was hell. We were taken to Carlisle early in the morning, a tiny case was brought for each of us, one of those pressed cardboard cases, for our belongings. We were put on a train and we travelled all day until night time down to London... transferred across London to another station, put on another train and eventually very very late at night... we arrived at Margate. We were given cocoa downstairs and some bread and we went to bed and the windows were all broke... Next morning we went downstairs for our breakfast and it was hell. There was a large vast hall, it had been a school building so this must have been the assembly hall which was the dining room and it was full chock a block full of children.... and they were unkempt.”

“Margate was really horrible, really dreadful.”

“There were two colonies in Margate and when one speaks to some who were in the first colony, which was fine, they can't believe... the way we describe Margate that was a hell on earth.... All the windows were broken... the snow came in to the bedrooms. We were hungry. We used to go down to the beach scrounging for fire wood and also for crabs and things amongst the rocks and there was one room where there was a fire but otherwise there was no heating at all. There was a lot of bullying... There were two very large houses, ours had been a school house. I can only presume that the other one had also been a school house, that housed Jewish refugee children, and they were very well organised... they had food and we discovered this so we used to get in to the cellar and pinch their food... There must have been eighty children by this time probably from eight or nine to seventeen years of age, nearly all boys. There was a cook, Miss Salter but there was no food and there was a poor fellow there [who] shared our lot... There was a mug of, a bowl of coffee and two slices of thick bread with margarine that was the breakfast... And it was absolute chaos...”

“To deal with some of these characters in the colonies it must have been very, very difficult... And in some of the colonies like Margate for instance it was just impossible to deal with some of the youngsters who were by time 15, 16, 17, and who had gone through the problems, experiences in Spain and then over here and then some of them were shall we say... disruptive.”