

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

Juanita Vaquer recounts her experience of life in the UK

“Everybody was sick [on the *Habana*]. And then of course we landed in Southampton, and from there we went to the camp there. And there as well it was very – the things that must have happened there, because the police were always coming. ’Cause some of the older boys, they were just pinching rowing boats and trying to get back to Spain. They wanted to get back to fight. They wanted to fight. 13 and 14.”

“The camp finished by September, I think. So we were there from May. Perhaps others might see it differently because we were so many, you know – but that’s how I remember it.”

From Southampton Juanita and her sister were sent to Manchester

“So then from here, from Southampton, my sister and I, we ended up in Manchester, in a convent, for six years.

“It was an enclosed convent – we never went out. For six years. The only time we went out – a boat came from Bilbao, and they knew that there were some of the children, and I don’t know who told them. We were 25 children in the convent, Spaniards, and we had one teacher. And her name was Johanna de Beristi?. Never forgot it. She was a very Basque lady. From a very – you know, very well educated – and she stayed with us – not long because, ’39, the Second World War was going to start, so she went back with most of the other children, and there was only three of us left. But we had to be claimed officially through the Basque Committee...”

“We had a Spanish Basque government here, in London, in Exhibition Road... I think we slipped, my sister and I, through the system. So we were never really – they knew there was two girls but they didn’t know where we were. So when this uncle – he was a Catalan, I think, or he lived in Barcelona – and there was a Catalan club... and met this doctor and this doctor – there was a whole crowd of them – and they were talking ‘How did you escape’ because they all escaped, and this doctor said, ‘Oh I work in Manchester in the hospital there’ he said, and so this uncle said to him, ‘Would you find out? And this is where they are, the nuns of Nazareth in Didsbury, could you be able to come?’ So the doctor found out, because he was very Republican, the doctor, very Catalan and very Spanish and he came to see us and I always remember because the nuns dressed us differently and we came into this room and there was two nuns there and the doctor said to them, ‘Please leave’ and the nuns said, ‘We could never leave two girls of 12 and 13 with a man in the room’ so he said, ‘How dare you’ he

said, 'I'm a doctor' and he said, 'Please leave because I want to talk to them, not you, without you here.' Of course as soon as the nuns went 'Ooh!' – my sister and I started crying, 'Oh. Have you come to take us home?' and you know, and he said, 'I'm very sorry' he said, 'But now that I've seen you I can see you're Spanish' and he said, 'I'm going to do my best for you'... He came to see us quite a few times and he said 'I'm working with the Basque Committee' he said, 'and I'm going to sign for you to come and live with me and then from there you'll have to go to the London, to the Basque Committee.' So he signed everything and I said to him, 'I want my clothes.' ... so he asked the nuns and they said, 'Oh no, no' ... I can still see my dress, it was all hand embroidered, they used to do all that ruching in the front."

"My mum, she had everything made for us, new. We were very well off in that sense, you know, we were very well presented and very nice."

For a while Juanita Vaquer and her sister lived with the doctor, who was quite a famous haematologist.

"He was quite famous. And we went to live with him. We went to live with him probably about nine months and his wife had another baby. So he said 'You've got to go to London'. But my sister then was 15, 16, and she had started going with a doctor to work in the lab and she said 'I'm not coming with you, Juanita'. And she stayed."

She then moved to London

"The first colony I went to... was in Finchley... it was a big house in Woodside Park, and it was full of girls and boys like myself. And I was one of the youngest, and we must have been – they had about – the way I saw them – about 25, 30 boys and girls there. The boys upstairs and us downstairs, and it was like a community. And we used to have a Welsh man who looked after us there.... he was a lovely man. And I was there, and from there they found me a job and I went as a children's nanny, to Bethnal Green, the East End of London. It was the last year of the war, where there was – the children were taken to the nursery. We had about 25 children, because the mothers – the fathers were soldiers – and the mothers were doing war work. Working in the factories. So the children – some of them were very very young. I stayed there for three years and I went to a college, you know, to be a children's nanny. But then another Spanish girl like myself came – because we were living in this beautiful Queen Anne house in Bethnal Green, that belonged to Cambridge University, because we, you know, we were helped, behind the scenes, we didn't realise that you were being helped."

"At six o'clock in the evening, the mothers finished factory work. They used to come and pick them up, and then they used to bring them at six o'clock the next morning. 'Cause that's how long they worked, here. And I was there the three years. The last year, Rosita came along, Rosita Sanchez – she was one of five children that came

over, like myself. And she said 'We're working here for nothing'... 'Come along', she said, 'we're going'. I needed someone like that, to be decisive, you know?"

As well as bed and board at the house in Bethnal Green "they used to give us 75 pence a week pocket money... Those 75 pence, that was ours, and we used it to get to the Spanish [club]".

"I joined straight away when I came down to London, El Hogar Español, a club in Westbourne Grove, in Upper Inverness Terrace, and we used to go there. That was our salvation, there."