

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

**Francisco (Paco) Robles, like many of the children was moved to a number of colonies. Here he recounts his experience of some of them.**

### **Ipswich, Wherstead Park**

“They sent us to this colony, beautiful house in Wherstead Park, in Ipswich, that belonged to some very wealthy person, some aristocrat, probably royalties, Duke or Count or something like that. And we were there for quite a while, probably a year or so and then ... and in the winter ... in the autumn I think it was they used to come, him and his friends, the owners, used to come and shoot grouse, and we used to run and find them and bring them back to them instead of the dogs. And we used to get sixpence, in those days sixpence, a little ... the size of a shilling today, five p[ence], which was a lot of money. Because in those days, sixpence would buy you two whiskeys. Just imagine. And for every grouse we would bring back they used to give us sixpence.”

*From there he moved to:*

### **Wickham Market, Margate and Carlisle**

And from there they took us to another ... what we call a colony in Wickham Market in Ipswich... I think it was an old peoples' home or an old hospital. It was full of rats and I'm dead scared of them. And we were there for a year I think and from there I went to Margate. And this is a place that I saw a couple of years back. It's very, very small comparing to what I thought it was. There was about 80 of us living in Margate and there the football grounds that we had is now occupied with flats, you know.... And then Carlisle, because we were shifted all over the place, a couple of weeks in Carlisle, Carshalton and then up in Margate again. Very bad times in Margate. I could tell you stories about Margate that are terrible about the ... what some of the boys used to do to us, you know, with rats and things like that. I don't know what you want to listen to all these things.

### **Birmingham**

From there I was adopted in Birmingham by a family. They had a little farm there, a Welsh family, but I wasn't treated very well... Their son died and they took me in to just take his place, but not blood relative, to work. I was twelve, thirteen. I worked very hard there... And they had a big dog there called Paddy, a big black dog, and he died one very hot summer's day and he forced me to dig a trench there for the dog...

They came to see me from the Committee in Chancery Lane, London to see how I was and I told them that I wanted to get away from there.”

### **Rowley Lodge, Barnet, London**

“Then they took me back to Arkley in Barnet... Rowley Lodge, that’s where we all ended up... And we lived there for about three years or so and then worked in Boreham Wood in the munitions factories during the War. And... a bomb dropped where we kept all our chickens and little animals and rabbits and everything there. Of course that’s where the bomb fell, a thousand kilo bomb and it never ... we heard it, we heard the whistling, you know coming down and a big bang and everything was like daylight and none of us were hurt and around two o’clock in the morning ... this happened about one in the morning, around two o’clock in the morning the police shifted us from in buses to a place in High Barnet, an old peoples hall looked after by nuns to this old people and in one of the empty halls that they had, they put the girls there and then in the other big, big rooms the boys. We were sleeping on biscuit mattresses that the soldiers used to sleep on in those days. And we’re still going to work and one Friday a couple of weeks after that, one Friday afternoon, one of the chaps from London came from the Chancery Lane Committee, came over to tell us that they had found another place for us and they gave us the address. And they said, ‘Tomorrow, Saturday morning, tomorrow there’ll be a couple of buses to take you there, but anyone that wants to go there now, it’s only three miles from here’, he said. ‘Anyone that wants to go now can do so, this is the address.’ So we all looked at each other and I said to my sister, ‘Come on, I’m going.’ We all decided to go that night, that evening on a summer’s day, Friday. And you know we went into this place, everything was ready for us and we sorted out the rooms and, ‘I am going to sleep,’ here and all that. And my sister, ‘You go and find a place for yourself in the upstairs.’ It was a big house. And at three o’clock in the morning we heard this ... we heard it, this – purring noise like a cat purrs, and it was a land mine ... it was a mine, aerial mine like a torpedo on parachute that they dropped, the Germans dropped in Barnet and then it fell on top of the house that we were occupying for two weeks. And it flattened everything for about a square mile where we lived. So after that I wasn’t frightened, you know, I never went to shelters or anything like that after that. I said, ‘Well, I escaped that, nothing’s going to kill me now.’ But... we were all very lucky and that same place if we had decided to stay there that night I wouldn’t be here now. But we all decided to move. But it killed a lot of other poor English fellows that, old boys and old ladies that were there with the nuns looking after them, killed them all. It flattened everything there. And then I got a job from the Boreham Wood ammunitions, I got a job in High Barnet in a bakery, for a Mr Buckling, and he wanted me to take over one of his bakeries he opened in London Colney, but they moved us to London and I told him, I said, ‘We’re moving to away from here.’ We used to go also to Mill Hill on our bikes, which we had to get permission to ride a bike, because they thought we were going to hand it over to some German parachutist and all that kind of thing... we had to get permission to own a bike and if ever I wanted to stay out after

midnight, I had to get permission from the sergeant in the police station in High Barnet, a written letter, 'Please allow me to stay out because I'll be at such and such address from Friday night till Sunday night.' You know, we decided to stay away from our home, the colony we were living in after midnight we had to get permission from the police. We were classified as aliens because of Franco's friendship with the Nazis."

"There was another time when we lived in Barnet, in Arkley... there was an English fellow looking after us, he was in charge of this place and we had a woman, a Mrs Runneymee who used to be a lovely person, looking ...caring for us as well, meals and all that and she was a sister of ... a great actor in England... Will Hay... He used to invite us to his terrace to look through ... he was an astronomer you know, a very keen astronomer and he used to pointy out all the stars and everything for us. We used to look through his telescopes and this actor is such a great actor, tremendous actor she was a relative of him in Arkley."

"There was an English fellow looking after us, he was in charge of this place... He was a sadistic man. If we went to the cinema and we came back late at 10 o'clock there was nothing for us to eat. One day... he really beat us, that fellow. Apart from that we lived well. Sometimes you had people like that and other times we had very good people looking after us. On the whole he was a one-off."

### **Learning English**

"When we lived in Wickham Market in Ipswich, they said, 'Right, we've been here longer than three months, we're not going back yet, obviously.' You had to learn English. And I said, 'I'm not going to learn this language, I can't understand it.' To me, English was like listening to German, now, it sounded just the same. Exactly the same. I couldn't grasp it. The only thing I liked were the tunes 'Land of Hope and Glory'. That's why I loved it. And I said, 'I'm not going to learn English. I'm going back soon and I won't learn English.' But eventually, a friend of mine said, 'Come on, let's go to the class' and we had private tuition and I came first in English."

"And they brought me on a holiday to London and the person that gave us this holiday in London... invited us to his home and swimming before breakfast and all that was one of the King's chauffeurs. Very generous and he spoke Spanish, he spoke good Spanish and his brother, he told us that his brother was fighting in Spain against Franco and all that kind of thing, you know. And that's how I started learning English and I came first with English and then I liked it. What I liked about the ... the first thing that I grasped was I heard someone say, 'I don't think so' and that word, I don't think so was the one that I learnt first and whenever anyone spoke to me, I used to say, 'I don't think so.'"