

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

Jose Armolea recounts his experience in Brechfa, Margate and Barnet

Brechfa

“There must have been between 50 to 70 boys that were allocated a new, we call it colonies, *colonias* in Spanish because that’s the best way to describe a group of kids going to a particular place all grouped together and in this case... we found ourselves in Wales, outside... a little town called Brechfa which is about 12, 13 miles from Carmarthen.... As far as I can remember there was only one grown up person in charge of us and that was all. Didn’t see any, there was no, how can I put it, no direction, there was no way of discipline or of knowing what to do once you were there. We were confronted first of all, there was ... it was on a bit of slope and there were little house on one side and all we could see was eight or nine of cocoa. That’s what we called it in those days, chocolate. It wasn’t the chocolate I had in Spain, it was cocoa but they all were we used to use here in those days and it was warm, it was heating up in the middle of the camp. Anyway, but that’s what we ... and corned beef sandwiches, corned beef sandwiches, very famous during the War here which was shipped from America and Argentina, compressed beef.”

“Anyway, that’s what we had and I can’t remember how long that lasted because anyway, with that we were allocated, or we were told by this man that there was a big tent where there was a lot of straw and we had these mattresses with, lined very thick mattresses where you stuffed all this straw into it, pillow, different pillow as well and to make it softer to lay on... and then a blanket on top and... you had three pieces of wood, flat pieces of wood you put on top and you put your mattress on top and your pillow and that was it, so that’s what we did.”

Jose remembers the children as being a little wild in their behaviour:

By wild I mean we then went about and you know, some kids went into this little village, see what it was all about. Most of us around the camp, it was a beautiful camp. Our piece was a little bit on the incline, not too much but anyway, we then followed the river and it was a beautiful sight... It’s a beautiful country and we had a lovely football pitch there that we occupied ourselves somehow or other, we managed to get a football to play with and by that time we had already been issued with big thick boots, hard-wearing with, what do you call, nail, with nails... you know with tips, nails in the front and back to preserve them from... they were very heavy. Anyway, and lovely to play football in... Soon after and I don’t know how soon afterwards, we got a little bit more, a bit more supervision but not before we had a bad

encounter because, as I said, at that time we weren't kept in the camp and told what to do or whatever, as I say, no discipline but I never, I don't remember going to town at first, into this little village but some of the boys went there... and... a couple of the boys went into a little sweet shop. Don't forget we had no money, no nothing. And of course you know, boys will be boys. They helped themselves to a few sweets and of course the guy in the shop, you know, gave the lads a clip around the ears and told them to go and of course by the time they reached camp, which was about a kilometre away from the town, maybe more and they came into town, oh dear, these people in the village, they attacked us, they knocked us about and they did this and that and of course the older boys, you know they armed themselves with whatever they could, 'We'll teach them' and my brother, he was one of them and he said, 'You stay where you are, you are not going anywhere' so I stayed in the camp but anyway, the older boys, I suppose a group of about 20, 25 or that, I don't know how many. I didn't see them go in but they armed themselves and so on with whatever they could, they were going to teach the villagers."

"What I'm going to say now is the fact that that's been documented very well, but anyway, the boys went into town or were on the way to town. By that time someone had phoned Carmarthen. By that time the Carmarthen Police had despatched a coach-load of cops and they managed to get to the road before the boys could enter the village and of course, all the kids, they dispersed themselves and some of them, they had to find a way home back to the camp. Some of them had to cross the river fully-clothed because that's the only way they could avoid the Police and others, they had stories about the Police hitting them with truncheons and so on...

"As soon as we saw the Police come in [to the camp], darted into our rooms, into our huts and of course the Police followed us up and naturally to scare the daylight out of us and with his truncheon he would hit the tin roofs [of the Nissan huts] several times which scared us even more and we were naturally under the bed.

"My brother... didn't have any problems with the Police or anybody else but there was a lot of stories floating about how the Police had ill-treated them with, you know when they found them on the road but anyway, things seemed to, well seemed to, they did alter because everything changed completely. All of a sudden we got some supervision. Not only that, we got people in Carmarthen hearing about our problems, they came in coaches and private cars and everything to see us. They brought whatever goodies they could muster and don't forget South Wales at that time was a poor country as well, poor, there was a lot of unemployment but I remember there were this particular family... this man in Carmarthen who came with his wife, who took us under his wing and in fact, he looked after us and he kept coming back to see us every Sunday until the very last day we left but prior to that, we started playing football, we did quite a few journeys into different homes around the area and sang our Basque songs and ... but anyway life started being pleasant again. At that time also was a very bad time for the organisation because there was a lot of ... we didn't learn about this until well after we were away from the area and we were told the story of our misdemeanours in South Wales and the questions that were asked and told by

MPs in the House of Commons that we should be sent back straight away to Franco, to where we had come from. That we're nothing but a lot of hooligans and that we had done this, that or the other to the people of Brechfa. Anyway, other people didn't seem to think we were that bad because as I said, the people of Brechfa came in oh, many many times..."

Margate

"But of course like everything else, all things have to come to an end and we, and winter was approaching and, because we are talking 1937... they took us to a big mansion house in Cardigan.... It was a mansion and with a lot of trees and a long drive to it with a lot of birds making the most horrendous sound. We were there for about a month before we then transported to London. We ended up in London and we were in the train and we ended up in the East End of London overnight, prior to moving on to... Margate. Leyland School, which was a big, a big home, a lot of children, boys of all ages and girls of all ages as well, but I would say that was a very good well-organised home for us. A big football camp, football field, now we have one of the teachers, well I call it teacher, caretaker I should say... he lived in Wales and his job was to look after us and to maintain some sort of order... He was quite into his 30s but a very good man and of course we had the Matron... [and] at that time, the women teachers, or women assistants that came with us from Spain. But for some reason or other they didn't stay very long."

"We didn't have many teachers. In fact it was very difficult to get any teachers and we did have, don't forget there was well over 100 kids and I don't know how many girls, but... I remember one of the oldest boy, who was, had started or was about to start university in Spain... wrote to the woman who had been responsible, the MP that was responsible, Mrs Manning, he had written a letter to her because he wanted to be moved to a school. He wanted to... continue his education and she found a very good school for him, higher education and indeed he went on to university."

"While in Margate, as I said, there was no school... In the end they sent us, a group of us, because we were many, they sent us to an English school. But of course at that time we had no English at all, so that must have been at the beginning of '38, and they gave us magazines with pictures to look at and so on and of course in the school, very good school too, we had been able to learn the language properly but we must have learned something because we were then allocated in the school, we were allocated into houses, different houses. I don't know what other methods they use in America or elsewhere and there were four houses and there was a competition between the different houses. I belonged to the swimming section together with cricket which I didn't particularly like. It was so strange, but swimming was my favourite since I had been involved and I'd been swimming since a very early age... I wasn't good at anything else because I have to remember at that time, when I remember, we had the

hob nail boots, up to there and you were supposed to do everything. You were supposed to run as well... and we had many cross-country runs and the sports day in particular, we had, where you know, you're supposed to enter the how many miles of course but you would have to run although the teacher would come behind us on bicycles, pushing us on. They were alright... they would push us all the way."

"I remember as a matter of fact, one of the Spaniards actually won this cross-country run but he had been clever. He had taken his shoes off and somehow or other he had running shoes of some kind and he won the race. But anyway, we were treated OK but as I say, apart from the fact that you know, as far as the schooling was concerned, we had nothing, very little."

"In Margate... there was a very well organised home. We went about choirs, I was in the choir and we went to several cities, towns I should say around and we had a very strong choir I must say and we had a very good football team which proved to be winning very well and we also had, what do they call it? Garden parties because in front of the home we also had a lot of, a big lawn, quite big, big drive. Along one side we would have a section for, vegetable section so there were kids involved in that side. There was another section where we had a lot of fruit trees. There was another lot of guys looking after them and of course, I remember when the produce came in, specially I remember the apples and pears and so on and they were quite good and of course they went back towards the upkeep of the home..."

"Early '39 my brother became ill and he went, they took him to Margate hospital and there he was for some time until the War started... I went to see him often because... *Senor* Lander, the man in charge of the home, was very kind and he used to take me to the hospital every so often to see him but anyway, that time things were getting a little bit nasty and I remember the siren sounded for the beginning of the War, European Second World War. We had a little mount as it were, where we started excavating and made a bit of a refuge, a bomb refuge. That was quite interesting, kept us a little bit, it kept us busy..."

In Margate there was a transit camp which housed the children who were being sent back to Spain: "even right up to the beginning of the War, kids were sent back to Spain because Franco had won the War in March 1939 and even kids that, as early as soon after we came over, '39 and '38, they started going back. But that seemed to be a transit camp for kids that were claimed, supposed to be claimed by parents. Now definitely we weren't claimed by anybody because my sister was still in France..."

From Margate just before Christmas 1939, Jose was amongst a small number of children sent to Barnet:

Rowley Lodge, Barnet

“Before Christmas we were sent, sorry only some of us, not many, a very small home colony, *colonia* as I call it, in Rowley Lodge in Barnet. Now it was boys and girls and a very good home indeed... Lovely spot. From there it’s only small, it wasn’t even a village, it was about a mile or so, a kilometre from High Barnet and, but from there of course the time had to come where we had to start working. You know, I was already 14 by that time and of course there was no money coming in and so a group of us, they found us jobs in Borehamwood which is about two miles, mile and a half, two miles down all the way down from Borehamwood... and I was working up there in a knitting factory and some of us went into War work as well... My wage packet was... 12 shillings and three pence. In those days there was 20 shillings to the pound. I won’t go any further. Now all that money was handed back to the home and of course we were given a shilling pocket money which of course was always saved, never spent it.”