



Fleeing Franco: How Wales gave shelter to refugee children from the Basque country during the Spanish Civil War

Hywel Davues

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This is the story of how children escaping the Spanish Civil War were given a home in Wales. In one of the biggest mass evacuations in modern history four thousand children, crammed onto a dilapidated ship, fled for their lives. Parents entrusted their offspring into the care of strangers at a time of mortal danger. The year was 1937 and the forces of General Franco were advancing on the Basque city of Bilbao. In Britain a groundswell of popular feeling forced a reluctant government to offer sanctuary to the refugees. A few hundred of the children found a welcome in Wales where they were given shelter in all four corners of the country: Swansea, Old Colwyn, Caerleon and Carmarthenshire. In one camp there was trouble. Some of the boys, traumatised by their experiences, went on the rampage, an event that made headlines around the world. In Wales, in that most radical of decades, generosity towards the dispossessed greatly outweighed any meanness of spirit. With the backing of the Miner's Federation and with the overwhelming support of the wider community the children were housed, fed and nurtured. At a time when the ordinary people of Wales were themselves undergoing terrible deprivation there was a tidal wave of giving. Under duress most of the children eventually returned to Spain but for some their exile stretched to a lifetime. There remain in Wales a handful of survivors of those events, witnesses to a depth of solidarity that could not have been bettered.

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