

A WELCOME IN THE HILLS: REFUGEES IN CUMBRIA IN THE 1930S AND 1940S

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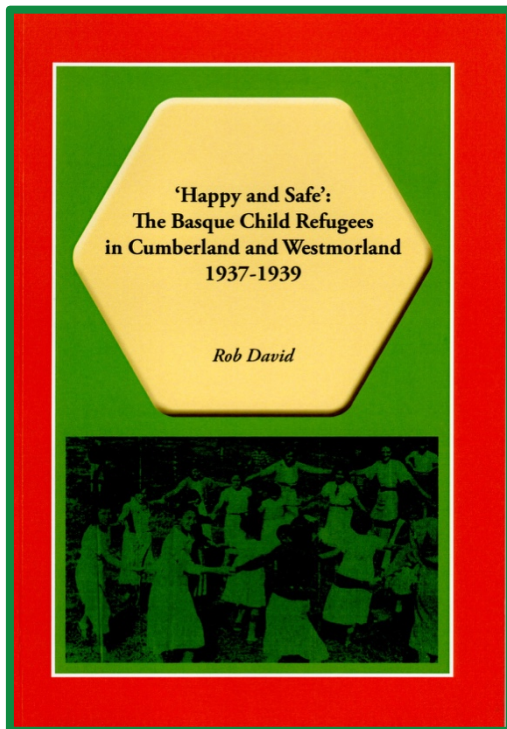
Rob David

A topical issue today, that of how we view refugees, started Rob David thinking of how we treated similar people in the 1930s. He found information available in Carlisle, mainly in the Charles and Cecilia Roberts archives and those of Catherine Marshall, a key member of The League of Nations. Living near Keswick made Rob particularly aware of how the children from the Basque region of Spain had made their way to Cumbria in the 1930s.

Three groups of refugees arrived in Cumbria during this period: Basque children in 1937, Sudetenland and Czech refugees from 1938 and Austrian and German refugees, mainly Jewish, from 1938.

The *Carlisle Journal* referred to the children arriving at Carlisle station as 'The Little Basques' in June 1937; they were fleeing the Spanish Civil War. After Guernica had been bombed, the people of Bilbao feared that they would be next, so they made an international appeal for countries to take their children. Britain took 4,000 in total plus teachers, carers and priests. They sailed on the SS Habana, built to carry about 800 people; it docked in Southampton. All that had been organised there, for their arrival, was a tented camp. The chief organiser of this action was Wilfred Roberts, MP for North Cumberland; the Roberts family have lived in the same house for many years and a descendant was aware that there were boxes of records relating to this time. Hearing that Rob was researching this subject, he passed him boxes; later they were added to the Roberts archive in Carlisle.

Brampton Workhouse was standing unused at this time, and the Roberts were able to gain access and, along with 125 people from the area, renovated the building to take 100 children aged between 5 and 15, with their carers. This was achieved in two weeks. The original plan was for the children to stay in Britain for about three months, by which time it was hoped that things would have quietened down in Bilbao. The government had declared that the country could take in 4,000 children but there must be no cost to the tax payer. Churches, trade unions, schools and local communities joined together to raise money for the children's upkeep. Some families decided to support an individual child, similar to adoption but the government had said that they could not be taken away from the Brampton hostel. The caring families had to promise to pay ten shillings per week to support their chosen refugee. During the winter Brampton was struggling to cope with the number of people so 25 of the children were moved to Fairfield Guest House in Ambleside.



Two other organisations in Cumbria took in refugee children, both were Catholic establishments. The Convent of Mercy in Wigton and Nazareth House, Carlisle, took about 35 children each. Some of the Basque children dressed up in traditional costume and sang and danced in village halls, the audiences paying for the performance. There is still one survivor of the Brampton Hostel who remained in Britain after most children returned. Her name is Carmen and she was adopted by a Carlisle family in 1939. Her two siblings were adopted by a family from Glasgow. Their parents had also become refugees so there was nothing to go back to. Carmen is now 95. After about two years, most of the children returned to Spain with about 40 remaining in Britain.

Rob then discussed the Czech refugees from 1938. Catherine Marshal started the Czech Refugee Trust Fund, the hostel she established at her home, 'Hawse End' on Derwent Water. She became a liaison officer for the Enemy Alien Tribunals in Cumbria. A total of 22 Czech refugees lived with her. She then looked for other places in Cumbria where the Czechs could be accommodated. Friar Row in Caldbeck was one place she found. Caldbeck History Society possesses some photographs of the refugees, one of which shows a group of them playing volleyball in the back garden. Mary Crewdson took on responsibilities for finding accommodation in Westmorland. High Cross Castle, Ibbotsholme Lodge and Patterdale Hall were amongst the places she secured. Most of the people who came from Sudetenland were young men. The reason given for this is that they were political refugees, being members of the Communist Party, an anathema to Hitler. One younger boy stayed in Westmorland, became a boy scout and regularly received birthday presents from the community. He later married a local lady and spent the rest of his life here. After the war started, the local schools became very busy; not only were there extra children from the refugees but evacuee children from Sunderland and Newcastle had to be accommodated too.

Rob's final group of refugees from the 1930s came from Germany and Austria and were almost entirely Jewish. The majority of these people lived in cities when they arrived but some 140 were taken to Cumberland and an unknown number to Westmorland. These refugees were classed as enemy aliens in 1939 after the outbreak of war. By this time there were a total of 75,000 here so the government categorised them and arrested 574 as a possible danger to the country. The remainder were allowed carry on their lives as before. Catherine Marshall and Mary Crewdson then became liaison officers working on behalf of these refugees. Only one of the Westmorland and Cumberland refugees was classed as possibly dangerous and was interned, the remainder were classed as 'Refugees from Nazi Oppression'. Even so, in May 1940, many of the free people were also interned as it was thought that invasion was imminent. Most of them were sent to The Isle of Man.

The Earl Baldwin Fund was one of a number of national funds established to support refugees in the late 1930s. In May 1939 there was also a national campaign led by the Mothers Union which raised enough money to rescue 1,000 helpless, suffering frightened children from Germany: 500 Jewish and 500 Christians.

Rob ended his most enlightening presentation by outlining the benefits which were brought to our area by the refugees. They brought employment opportunities by rebuilding the factories and businesses they had left behind. Their skills in the arts, science and education were useful and much enjoyed. They introduced "alien cultures" which provided novel entertainment and widened the outlook of many local communities.

Tricia Jagger