

*The Folly has received a letter from Vernon Hale (a former Faringdon resident who now lives in Mold, Flintshire) in response to a review in our March issue of the book 'Only For Three Months'. Mr Hale writes vividly and movingly of some of his memories of the Basque refugee children:*

ONE of my earliest memories is of picking up a pamphlet from the cigarette-pocked arm of a large armchair in our sitting room in London House, London Street, and seeing on its cover a boy reaching up his open hands to catch a black bomb falling from a swastika-marked aeroplane.

I must have been as innocent about the horrors of aerial bombardment as the depicted child, but my parents, Jack and Jane Hale, initiated me as best they could for a five-year-old, into the reality of the Spanish Civil War. Spain must have been a strange land, for I was without the concepts of distance and global arrangement to give it more than a story substance, but children learn most things from direct experience and I was soon to be playing and partying with refugee Basque children.

I see their eyes still, even though most other details were either not well observed or forgotten. They haunt me now, almost 60 years later, those beautiful, dark and secret stares that once transfixed me as I stood at the edge of the group of little hosts, a solitary in a room transformed with trestles and benches and twittering with the joy of children's birdsong. It might have been 'Basque House' (Buscot Park) or a village room in Eaton Hastings, or St Joseph's, Aston, near Bampton.

My parents were both fiercely committed to the cause of Republican Spain, as were so many people in the Faringdon area in spite of the official silence. They became energetically involved in the resettlement of refugees of all ages.

The stories I inherited were of gargantuan feasts at Buscot House, cooked by a mythical chef called Fass. All the guests were diplomatically arranged by Mr Buck, Lord Faringdon's immaculate butler.

My mother remembered and recounted, in her lilting Wiltshire cadences and with her spirited giggle, how Mr Buck was especially attentive to her request for the bathroom. On her completion

of a particular task, he knew (by instinct, of course!) the exact moment, and as she reached for the handle of the bathroom door he opened it with a deep bow of cultivated propriety.

The gathering at Buscot Park included Spanish republican politicians, poets and artists, and of course many famous British and American sympathisers. As the Republic collapsed and Franco came to power, forebodings increased and there were anxious anti-fascist rallies in the Faringdon and Abingdon areas.

My father's friend at the time was a certain Geoffrey Trease from Abingdon Labour Party, who subsequently became and still enjoys the reputation of being one of Britain's most distinguished authors of children's historical novels. I still have in my possession an 'unreturned' Spanish language primer and a collection of Spanish lyric poetry with his signature inside. They were both learning Spanish with the intention of going to Spain, but their hopes were consumed by the onward march of Nazism.

One other abiding memory I have is of meeting a very large black man with a deep warm voice, into whose great secure lap I was placed. He was Paul Robeson.

I can romance to my grandchildren that I was his "curly-headed baby", but that would not wash... However, each time I hear his voice now, that remote time of the late thirties comes flooding back in the shape of marvellous, inspiring stories, resonant symbols, and that lingering sadness as I imagine Jack and Jane Hale as they were then.

When I think about them, there is Spain, Buscot Park, the Basque children and the struggle against fascism which still goes on. It is a story that needs re-telling for a new generation, as the film-maker Ken Loach intended in his magnificent recent film, 'Land of Freedom'.

The irony of all this for myself is that I have never been to Spain.

*★ Our thanks to Mr Hale for his memories, and also appreciation for his kind comments about the 'Folly' itself. He writes: "It is very well produced, very well written and provides those of us Faringdonians in exile with an antidote to absence."*