

Célia Keren

Autobiographies of Spanish Refugee Children at the Quaker Home in La Rouvière (France, 1940) : Humanitarian Communication and Children's Writings

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Autobiographies of Spanish Refugee Children at the Quaker Home in La Rouvière (France, 1940) : Humanitarian Communication and Children's Writings

- 1 Studying the experiences of refugee children from their own points of view – as opposed to the points of view of adult witnesses, or the retrospective testimonies of the adults these children later became – is an appealing project, but also quite a challenge for historians². It is obviously difficult to find personal writings or autobiographical accounts by refugee children. But even when we do find these sources, they pose a number of methodological questions. Like all kinds of historical documentation, children's writing is constructed: it would be naïve to expect that they offer some form of direct, immediate access to children's hearts and minds. Even private, personal sources such as diaries are constructed narratives, a form of "self-staging" as Michelle Perrot pointed out³. Moreover, children's sources, depending on the context of their production, can be prompted, supervised, controlled, and sometimes censored by adults. As such, they require careful scrutiny and source criticism.
- 2 This is particularly the case for the fifteen biographical notebooks written by the Spanish refugee children who lived at the colony of La Rouvière, just outside of Marseille in the south of France (fig.1)⁴.

Figure 1



Albums/Thank You Letters Pre-WWII, Box 1.
American Friends Service Committee Archives (Philadelphia).

- 3 This colony was opened in February 1940 by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), a humanitarian offshoot of the American Society of Friends, otherwise known as the Quakers. Since 1937, the AFSC had provided relief to both sides of war-torn Spain, and after the *Retirada* of January and February 1939, they started a programme for Spanish refugees in France, particularly refugee children. This led the AFSC to open a number of children's colonies, one of which was La Rouvière, in the French region of Provence. Towards the end of 1940 or the beginning of 1941, at least fifteen Spanish refugee children living there wrote their life stories, from their birth to their lives in La Rouvière⁵. These constitute an exceptional source for the study of children's individual experiences, and of the ways they wrote about these experiences.
- 4 At the same time, probably following adult recommendations or prescriptions, all fifteen biographies keep to a similar pattern, thus forming a homogeneous, even standardised series. All but one are written in similar A5 school notebooks, and the general design (cover page, title page, illustrations, formatting) is identical from one notebook to the next (fig.2-3).

Figure 2



Albums/Thank You Letters Pre-WWII, Box 1.
American Friends Service Committee Archives (Philadelphia).

Figure 3



Albums/Thank You Letters Pre-WWII, Box 1.
American Friends Service Committee Archives (Philadelphia).

- 5 This suggests that they were composed at the same time as part of the colony's schoolwork. Moreover, many children attached additional texts "copied from their exercise books" to their biographical accounts. These little essays focus on aspects and episodes of daily life in the colony, such as a swimming session in a pond, or growing a vegetable garden, as well as other events witnessed by the children during their stay at La Rouvière, for example the first bombardment of Marseille in June 1940 (fig.4).

Figure 4



Albums/Thank You Letters Pre-WWII, Box 1.
American Friends Service Committee Archives (Philadelphia).

- 6 In other words, the children from La Rouvière did not put pen to paper either spontaneously or autonomously. Their writings responded to an adult proposition, in a school context. In a way, they can be considered as commissioned works: they had to meet specific requirements, which structured both form and content. At the same time, within these constraints, the children had some freedom to write about their experiences and feelings in their own way.
- 7 Here, I will present the working hypothesis that these texts can be most efficiently read and analysed as palimpsests, *i.e.* as the final result of layers of writings applied on top of one another. Each layer constitutes a different type of narrative about refugee children – a different way to write, or a different dimension of, the same story, which is that of the Spanish refugee children at La Rouvière. This paper aims at identifying the successive layers of texts and voices – institutional and personal, adult and child – that we can read and hear in La Rouvière’s notebooks.

Humanitarian aid, propaganda and story-writing

- 8 The very production of these notebooks was probably prompted by the necessities of humanitarian communication. They could provide material for the poignant stories published in bulletins and propaganda leaflets, and so help raise funds for the maintenance of the colony. The notebooks could also be shown in exhibitions. But in order to catch the imagination of American donors, they had to submit to a number of norms laid by the new “genre” of humanitarian literature, which forms the first layer, or the foundational structure on which the biographies of La Rouvière are composed.

Humanitarian aid and propaganda

- 9 From the beginning of the twentieth century, humanitarian aid was an international phenomenon, based on people in one country caring about the sufferings of people in another country. It therefore relied on the circulation of knowledge and information. For example, the AFSC relief programme in Spain depended upon American people from New York or Boston knowing and being concerned about children suffering on the other side of the planet, in a country to which they had never been, speaking a language they did not understand. Humanitarian aid is thus inextricably linked to the development of means of communication, mass press, and globalization in general⁶, and it generates a two-way transfer. In one direction, the country providing relief sends aid, *i.e.* money, people and know-how, to the country receiving relief. In the other direction, there is a flow of images and texts, aiming at creating

- a feeling of closeness and empathy in the donor countries: such images and texts as found in the notebooks of La Rouvière colony. As early as 1938, the AFSC programme in Spain had received public attention and funding thanks to the exhibition “They still draw pictures”, organised by the Spanish Child Welfare Association of America for the benefit of AFSC. With this show, hundreds of drawings made by Spanish refugee children in Spain and France toured in the US, and sixty of them were then published as a book later in 1938⁷. The event received good press coverage and so effectively publicized the AFSC child relief programme in Spain.
- 10 The AFSC ran many colonies for refugee children in Republican Spain during the Civil War. They started a similar programme in France at the end of 1939, when they were offered funds for this specific purpose by two other US-based organisations, the Spanish Refugee Relief Campaign (SRRC, stemming from the left-wing pro-Republican North American Committee) and the Confederated Spanish Societies (CSS, representing the Spanish-speaking community in the US). These two organizations were effective in campaigning and drawing together a pool of donors, but they had no working infrastructure in France. On the other hand, the AFSC were not specialised in fund-raising, but they were present in France and had a lot of field experience in relief. The AFSC consequently welcomed the two funding offers. However, to maintain and develop a colony programme, propaganda material was immediately needed. One week after the AFSC started taking care of Spanish refugee children in France in the name of the SRRC and CSS, John Rich, from the main AFSC office in Philadelphia, urged Howard Kershner, their Paris-based director, in these terms: “[The SRRC and CSS] will need photographs and other publicity aids to dramatize their work. [...] The more you can dramatize the situation in France, the better they will understand it and assist⁸.” Apparently the staff in Paris did not appreciate the urgent character of this request, since two weeks later, John Rich had to insist :
- 11 Will you please designate the property which is now to be known as the Colony of the Sociudades Hispanas Confederadas, and send promptly photographs of the buildings, the staff, and each individual child. I realize this is a large undertaking, but it is most important because the Sociudades Hispanas Confederadas will launch a campaign on receipt of this material and will be able to undertake the care of an additional one hundred children as soon as funds begin to flow⁹.
- 12 In the end, the job was so vital that John Rich told Howard Kershner that the AFSC had decided to appoint a new worker, whose sole job would be to gather information and report on the colony situation in France :
- 13 I cannot over-emphasize the importance of sending detailed reports, quotations from refugees and all the little touches of human interest that a fund-raising agency requires in order to keep alive interest in the cause. Photographs are needed constantly and no money can be raised for a new project unless it has been exhaustively presented in all its detail. We have suggested that Margaret Jones devote herself to this service. She should spend her whole time studying the refugee problem and reporting on progress of old projects and prospects for new ones. She should see to it that ample publicity is sent to America so that the SRRC can present effectively the needs of the Spanish refugees and the work being done for them, to its contributors¹⁰.
- 14 In the end, it was Margaret Frawley, not Jones, who got the job. She was not a humanitarian worker, had never been in the field, but she had “10 years of newspaper experience and [had] done publicity work for many social agencies¹¹”. The introduction of communication experts into relief work thus constituted a step in a professionalization process that transformed charity, into expert humanitarian aid.

A new “literary genre”?

- 15 Margaret Frawley’s task was to write the story of the Spanish refugee children who were taken care of by the AFSC in France. This story was written with a specific goal, *i.e.* fund-raising, and it accordingly fulfilled a certain number of functions: providing information (through “detailed

reports”), visual images (with “photographs”), arousing sympathy (adding “little touches of human interest”) and ultimately creating an impression of closeness and dialogue between the donor and the recipients of aid, with “quotations from refugees” which were usually extracts from thank-you letters sent by the recipients of aid to humanitarian agencies.

16 Margaret Frawley arrived in Paris in March 1940, and immediately the longed-for stories started arriving at the Philadelphia office. Her job, as John Rich had repeatedly pointed out, was to “dramatize” the case of refugee children, *i.e.* to build up a drama, fictionalize a story based on precise facts. One of the most common devices used to achieve this was to focus on one individual case. In April 1940, one month after her arrival in France, Margaret Frawley opened her report on colony Iberny, near Lyon, with these words :

17 Amor, rosy-cheeked and dimpled, is the mascot of Colony Iberny at Ecully, a suburb of Lyon. These two years of Amor’s life have been turbulent. Born in Barcelona, a city crowded with evacuees from other parts of Spain and which experienced numerous bombardments, she is the first child of Maria and Carlos. Carlos was fighting at the front when she was born and with the retreating Republican army crossed the French frontier, being interned at Perpignan. It was weeks before Maria learned that he was alive¹².

18 The AFSC was not the only humanitarian organisation who had to dramatize their work, and they were not the only ones to resort to this story-writing technique. The publicity material of the Office International pour l’Enfance (OIE), a left-wing, pro-Republican organization based in Paris, uses very similar devices :

“Typical case and pride of the colony is little Pascual Lopez, the youngest member of the community, twenty months old. His mother was killed in a bombardment in Barcelona and his father is in a concentration camp at Tarascon-sur-Ariege. Little Pascual had scabies, whooping cough, impetigo, general anaemia. His small stomach was swollen with hunger. His lips were pale, his eyes shone bewildered. He neither played nor laughed. Special food, rich in vitamins, gave him back his appetite. Medical care and constant cleanliness removed his scabies and his whooping cough was cured in the sunlit colony hospital. Today, Pascual romps with the others. He has learned to laugh again¹³.”

19 Humanitarian story-writing thus developed as an increasingly defined literary “genre”, with its own functions, patterns, devices and storylines, for which the biographical notebooks from La Rouvière provided invaluable source material. Between the lines of the children’s life stories, it is thus possible to read another narrative, centred on how Quaker humanitarian relief restored refugee children to happiness.

The Quaker narrative of child relief: Childhood, happiness and the family

20 After one year of running their colony programme, the AFSC rejoiced in “see[ing] [the children] once more leading a happy, normal life”, as the title of an article from their 1941 *Bulletin on Relief in France* put it¹⁴. In the view of humanitarian workers, war and exile had disrupted the regular course of children’s development and lives, which were supposed to be full of joy, innocence and play within the protective sphere of the family. This was both a normative and naturalising vision, defining what children should be and what they were essentially supposed to be – thereby de-historicizing as well as idealizing childhood. According to this notion, children who did not smile or play with their peers had ceased to be normal children. Child relief then aimed at making them “real” or “normal” children again, so they would “laugh again”, like “little Pascual Lopez” thanks to the OIE programme. Similarly, the AFSC 1941 *Bulletin* proudly concluded: “It was good to see them smiling, dancing and singing there on the sunny terrace and to feel that they were once more leading a normal, happy life, that they were learning to forget the terror and destruction of the war that had robbed them of their homes and families¹⁵.” Visual publicity material, such as photographs and films,

likewise systematically showed refugee children playing, smiling, dancing and singing in the colonies (fig. 5 et 6).

Figure 5



Albums/Thank You Letters Pre-WWII, Box 1.
American Friends Service Committee Archives (Philadelphia).

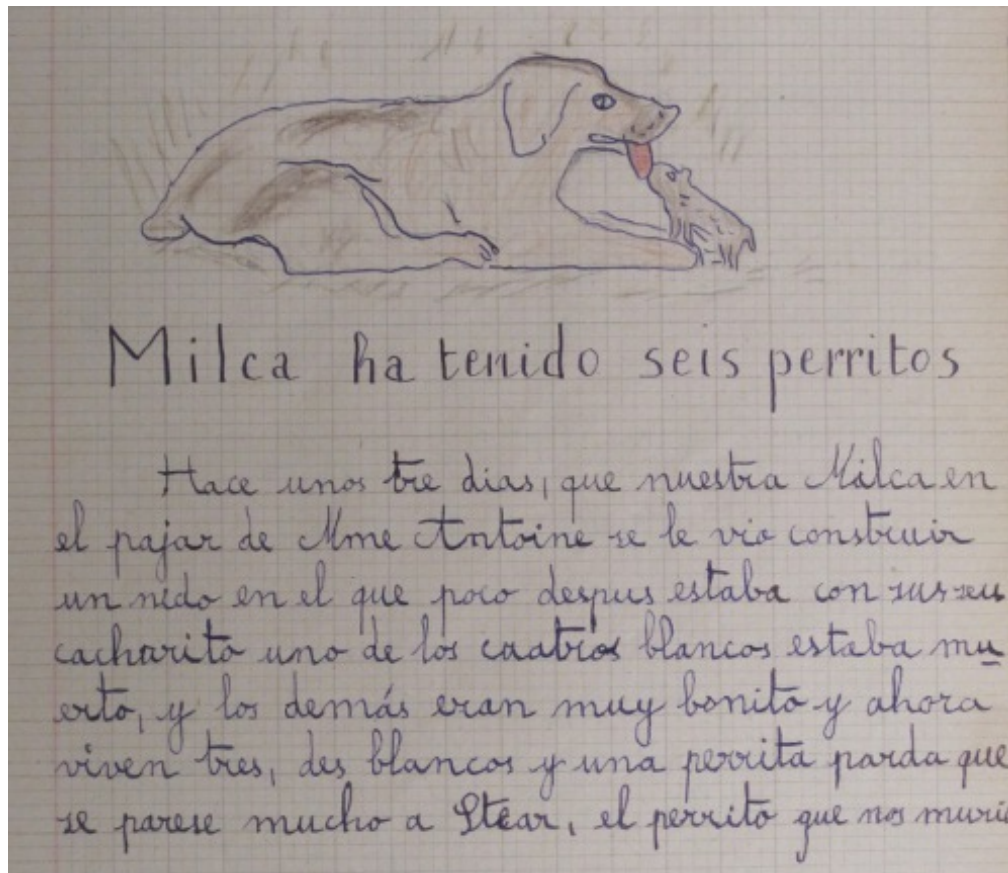
Figure 6



Albums/Thank You Letters Pre-WWII, Box 1.
American Friends Service Committee Archives (Philadelphia).

- 21 In addition to restoring children's happy nature, the AFSC also wished to recreate their natural milieu, *i.e.* the family. In a report dated July 1940, Edna Ramseyer, La Rouvière's directress, wrote: "It is very gratifying to see how much like a family a colony can be. Altho [sic] each child has his number for his tooth brush and towel, he really is an individual in our big family and shares in our fun, work and sorrows¹⁶." According to the AFSC, the family was a place of love and affection, but also an ordered, structured, standing together community where everything and everybody was in its right place.
- 22 These notions of childhood and family pervaded the La Rouvière children's biographies. In fact, these can be read as the testimonies that the AFSC relief programme was actually delivering on its promises. First, the notebooks showed that children were indeed "forgetting the terror and destruction of the war", as the 1941 AFSC *Bulletin* had claimed. Many essays copied from the exercise notebooks dealt with light, entertaining and child-like subjects, such as growing a vegetable garden, or the colony dog giving birth to six puppies (fig. 7).

Figure 7



Albums/Thank You Letters Pre-WWII, Box 1.
American Friends Service Committee Archives (Philadelphia).

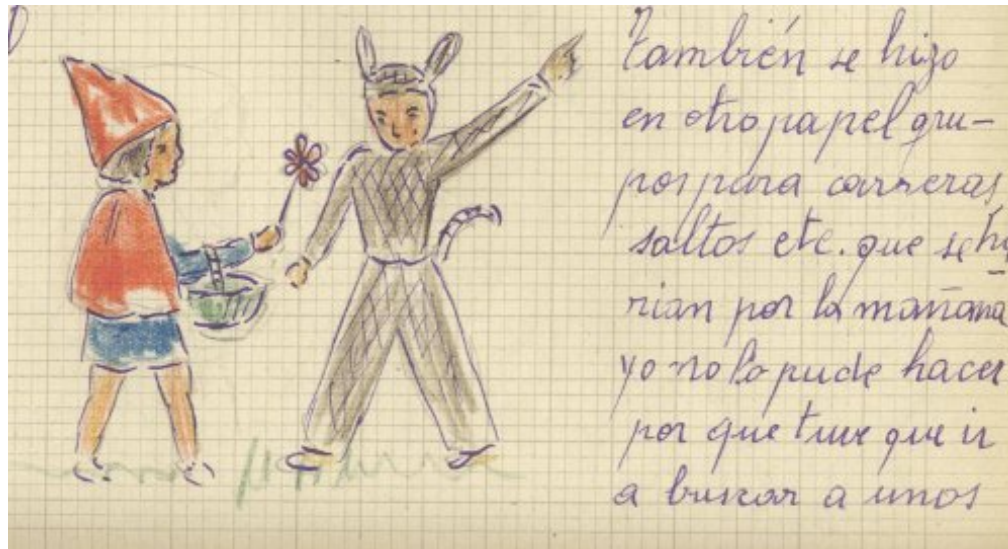
- 23 Similarly, the illustrations of the notebooks conveyed an image of innocence and naivety (fig. 8).

Figure 8

Albums/Thank You Letters Pre-WWII, Box 1.
 American Friends Service Committee Archives (Philadelphia).

- 24 Secondly, the books proved that the children were really spending a lot of time “smiling, dancing and singing”. The birthday party of a teacher in the colony in September 1940, for example, is the focus of five children’s essays, thereby featuring as a recurring theme in the biographical notebooks (fig. 9).

Figure 9



Albums/Thank You Letters Pre-WWII, Box 1.
American Friends Service Committee Archives (Philadelphia).

25 Ten year-old Encarnación, for example, had written :

La colonia está revolucionada. Mañana es el día grande, es el cumpleaños de doña Carmen. [...] Estamos preparando bailes y funciones. La fiesta se hará en la terraza. El Sr. Alfonso y chicos mayores han hecho un escenario al pié de la escalinata. Nos vamos a divertir mucho. Yo bailo en dos danzas y recito una poesia de Gregorio Martínez Sierra titulada 'Cuna, cunera'¹⁷.

26 Thirdly, the notebooks confirmed that the children at the colony were indeed part of a loving, well-ordered family. Ten year-old Clara thus concluded her biography: "*Aquí estoy muy bien. La casa y el campo son preciosos. La Directora Miss Edna Ramseyer es todo dulzura para nosotros y el resto del personal español como hijos y en verdad que constituimos una gran familia*"¹⁸." In a more literary and lyrical manner, Maria, who was already fifteen years old and, furthermore, a fluent writer, also described the inner workings of the AFSC colonies as those of a family :

Somos una gran familia. Todos los niños nos queremos como hermanos y las tres señoras que nos cuidan lo hacen con amor de verdaderas madres. [...] A veces nos peleamos pero nuestras peleas duran poco porque nos queremos todos, nos sentimos intimamente unidos por la desgracia. Todo es de todos y la alegría o la pena de cada uno de nosotros es la alegría o la pena de todos¹⁹.

27 Maria had written this text about a year and a half before she put together her biographical notebook, when she lived in another of the AFSC colonies, "Val des Pins". As a school assignment, it aimed primarily at satisfying the teacher's explicit or implicit expectations – which it did magnificently. However, this does not mean that Maria did not really *mean* what she wrote at the time when she wrote it. Moreover, we do not know either who chose to include this specific essay in her biography: Was it her? The colony teacher or directress? Was it Margaret Frawley, the AFSC professional communicator? We can only notice the correspondence between AFSC values and the ideas conveyed by children in their writings. Now, returning to the hypothesis that the children's biographies of La Rouvière can be read as palimpsests, the AFSC discourse appears as one of the layers upon which the children's stories were written, helping us to understand and interpret these texts. The question then remains: can we read, through these promotional and institutional layers, the voices of the children themselves?

Children's writings: format and freedom

Formatted narratives: a five-part story

28 La Rouvière notebooks form a coherent series, structured along a common fivefold storyline, and sharing recurring words and phrases. All start with a self-presentation, in which children state their names, age, number of brothers and sisters, parents' names and professions, and place of residence before the war (1). They go on telling their life before the Francoist coup, a tale of happy childhood shattered by the war (2). Then starts the time of ordeals, beginning with war and followed by exile (3). These misfortunes eventually end when the child enters the AFSC colony system (whether at La Rouvière, or in another of the Quaker homes) (4). It is thus only natural that most of the notebooks close with a thank-you note to the AFSC and American people (5). Within this structure, how original are the stories? What is the relative weight of format on the one hand, and freedom of expression and inventiveness on the other? Addressing this question requires a systematic comparison of all notebooks, in the five successive stages of this narration. This would, however, be long and tedious to read. I will thus confine myself to the first two of these narrative stages, and to a sample of four notebooks, written by two girls and two boys ranging from 5 to 15 years old: those of Encarnación Ríos Guerrero (10 years old), Laureano Rodríguez Bujeiro (14), Carlos Ríos Lopez de Gamarra (5) and Maria del Carmen Romero García (15).

29 The openings are the most formatted parts of the notebooks, hence their similarity :

“Me llamo Encarnación Ríos Guerrero y mis padres Enrique y Antonia. Nací en Malaga en el mes de Febrero el día 27 del año 1930. Mi papá tenía un comercor de comestibles”.

“Tengo 14 años me llamo Laureano Rodríguez Bujeiro, nacido en Madrid hijo de Carmen y Laureano también madrileños igual que todos mis hermanos. Quede huerfano de padre a los dos años. Somos cuatro hermanos”.

“Hijo de Francisco y Maria. Nació en Málaga el día 13 de Marzo de 1935. Su padre comerciante y su madre modista”.

“Me llamo Maria del Carmen Romero García. Soy hija de unos profesores de la Escuela Normal del Magisterio Primario de Guadalajara y he nacido en Madrid. Tengo 15 años, soy alta y delgada, de pelo y ojos castaños²⁰”.

30 As Maria's text shows, however, the older and more educated youngsters can move away from the common format to provide additional details (in this case about her physical appearance). Conversely, the biographies of the younger children who cannot write, like five year-old Carlos, are written in the third person by one of the adult caretakers of the colony, here in a rather telegraphic style.

31 The second part of these four biographies likewise present remarkable similarities, with recurring phrases :

“Antes de estallar la guerra y vivia muy feliz con mis padre y mi hermana dos años mas pequeña que yo.” “Hemos vivido con cierta holgura y mi madre satisfacía todos nuestros caprichos si eran razonables. Viviamos felices hasta que estallo la revolucion.” “Vivian sencillamente y bien²¹”.

32 However, once again, Maria follows the common storyline (happiness destroyed by the breaking of the war) in a more original, personal and detailed way :

“Comenzaba el verano. Teníamos grandes proyectos: ir a la playa de Santander y después a Francia, Bélgica y Suiza porque mi papá tenía concedida una pensión para hacer estudios en estos paises. Esta maldita revolución lo echó todo por tierra²²”.

33 Developing this comparison might be, like the biographies themselves, somewhat repetitive. However, this short analysis shows that the children's story-writing was, if not totally constrained, at least firmly directed. The children may even have had some sort of questionnaire guiding their writing, or a precise, elaborated essay subject itemizing the

different parts the biographies should contain: “Write your biography. Introduce yourself, where you come from, your parents’ names. Then provide details of your life before and during the war, etc.”.

Interference between the lines

34 Any biographical essay written in a school context raises the question of the degree of liberty the pupils possess, and honesty with which they approach their writing. But here the question is even trickier since, like five year-old Carlos’s, some of these texts are not autobiographies in the strict sense of the term: four out of fifteen are in fact third-person narratives, written by an adult in the name of a child who had not yet learnt how to write. However, the nature of this adult intervention varies greatly, from transcribing what the child says, to rephrasing, restructuring, and sometimes actually putting the story together. Behind the question “who is writing?” thus lies a more important point: “who is speaking?” Indeed, in many of these third-person narratives, it is clearly not the child’s voice we hear. For example, in Lolita’s biography, little Carlos’s sister, we read :

“Dos meses después de morir su madre, vinieron a esta colonia, donde aún no había ningún niño. Ellos, los tres fueron los primeros coloniales que tuvo “La Rouvière”. Los primeros días se encontraban muy tristes, pero ahora, parece que estén entre su familia querida. Así es. La Rouvière es toda una familia bien ordenada²³”.

35 This extract presents the point of view of the adult caretaker, who witnessed the entry of the three orphans into the colony and took care of them. The identity of the narrator is, moreover, made clear by the conclusive remark, which explicitly conveys the AFSC institutional discourse about the family quality of the colony.

36 However, even when the children are actually writing, they are not necessarily the ones speaking. Pepita and Encarnación are two sisters, aged nine and ten. They had, of course, more or less the same life story, but their biographies are completely identical, word to word, including grammar and spelling mistakes – except that Pepita makes even more errors than her big sister, which may suggest she simply copied her essay. The problem is that these two, similar texts express personal opinions and feelings, and we cannot be sure to whom they should be attributed. For example, they both write: “*Por fin nos vinimos esta colonia que a mi, en comparación con el refugio me pareció el Paraíso terrenal*²⁴.” The statute of the ‘I’ then becomes highly problematic: are we still dealing with individual texts or with a collective voice? The picture is further complicated by the fact that it is not actually clear whether either of the two sisters is actually the narrator, especially since we know that their mother also lived in the colony, where she worked as a cook. The following extract strongly suggests that she helped her two daughters putting together their life store :

“Nosotras como éramos pequeñas dormimos tranquilamente pero los mayores pasaron una noche terrible porque los barcos fascistas estaban vigilando y si nos descubrieran nos hubieran bombarado. Al fin escapamos del peligro y llegamos a Orán ¡pero no nos dejaban desembarcar ¡Qué trabajo costó obtener el permiso! [...] Parecíamos el judío errante²⁵!”.

37 This text tells us more about what the adults felt (afraid on the boat) or did (dealing with the administration) than about children’s experience – the latter are, in fact, asleep during half of the scene described. Moreover, the opening comment (“*Nosotros como éramos pequeñas dormimos tranquilamente*”) is more likely to reflect the mother’s vision of children’s nature, free from all cares, than the children’s ideas of themselves. Similarly, the cultural reference to the Wandering Jew is unlikely to have come spontaneously to a nine or ten year-old girl. A close reading of La Rouvière’s texts thus reveals that there is sometimes a sort of “interference” or “scrambling” in the narrative signal: the voice we hear is not necessarily unique and unified.

Three reading aids: Distortion, disruption and variation

38 Finally, I would like to suggest three methods or “reading aids” which may help us identify where children’s voices and points of view emerge in La Rouvière’s notebooks. These methods consist in trying to locate specific patterns of originality in the texts, which can be attributed to one child’s specific experience.

39 Like distorting mirrors, “distorting” textual patterns enlarge or magnify some events while diminishing or eliding others of equal (or more) “objective” importance. They thus tend to show what really mattered to or impressed the child. This is how, for example, Laureano Rodriguez Bujeiro describes his stay at a children’s colony in Tarragone during the Civil War :

“Pasábamos mucha hambre en la cual quede yo y un amigo mio, luego no nos parecio muy mal el refugio, pero nos daban muy bien de comer. Luego a los dos meses nos daban poco lla de comer y nos daban cada semana un cuarto de kilo de pan por persona y pasabamos mucha hambre y no solo eso que nos teniamos que labar la ropa y sin jabón. Asi estuve un año y medio resistiendo el hambre y las calamidades. El dia 7 de Junio del 1938 sali de Tarragona y de aquel infame refugio que donde tengo echadas más lágrimas que pelos tengo en la cabeza. Un amigo de mi hermano vino a verme y al ver la terrible vida que llevaba, me llevo con el al ejercito y me puso en la cocina donde al fin pude hartarme de comer y comi tanto que cogi una endigestión que por poco me muero. Hubiera sido completament feliz si la guerra no fuera de mal en peor²⁶”.

40 The vocabulary and themes of hunger and food are omnipresent, almost obsessive in this passage. Laureano experiences war in a bad or good way, depending on the availability of food, which becomes a touchstone making his life either “*terrible*”, or “*completamente feliz*”. Similarly, Maria del Carmen Romero García devotes one whole page to the three days spent in a dreadful refugee centre in Perpignan, describing its premises and population in great detail. Despite the relative brevity of this experience, it felt very long to her: “*En esta situación espantosa estuvimos tres dias enteros y cuatro noches*”²⁷. On the other hand, the definitive disappearance of her father at the beginning of the Civil War is described as an event whose importance was not clear to her, even though she was already eleven years old at the time: “*Yo era pequeña entonces y no comprendía bien todavía lo que pasaba, no tenia mas que 11 años pero mamá debía sufrir mucho*”²⁸.” This types of “distortion patterns” tell us something of children’s actual experiences, which we might not have expected.

41 “Disruptive patterns”, such as slips of the pen or even “politically incorrect” opinions also help us identify children’s voices in the texts. For example, when Manuel was taken in by the AFSC, he did not like the first colony he went to: “*Nos instalaron, pero ni a nuestro Director de Draguignan ni a nosotros nos gustó y pedimos que nos llevasen a La Rouvière*”²⁹.” This surprising comment proves by the same token that the children’s biographies of La Rouvière were not censored by the AFSC staff.

42 Finally, when several children write about the same event, whether in their biographies (in the case of brothers and sisters), or in their school essays, variations between different versions give evidence of the peculiar perceptions of each child. Four children have included in their biography a text entitled “*Mis impresiones del primer bombardeo de Marsella*”; but they all tell a slightly different story. When the bombings start, José is out in the countryside with some of his Spanish companions. He describes an atmosphere of general fear, and specifies that the smaller children cried³⁰. His brother Manuel, as well as young Clara’s impressions are very different. This is mainly because they are attending a French primary school at the time of the bombing: their texts and experiences are determined by the comparison between the French and Spanish children’s reactions. Both Manuel and Clara note that the French cry, whereas the Spanish remain calm. Like in José’s text, all are afraid, but not for the same reasons: “*Todos teniamos mucho miedo los frances porque era la primera vez que lo sentían, y nosotros porque hacia ya un año que no lo sentiamos y porque sabiamos sus terribles consecuencias*”³¹.” The French are afraid due to their lack of experience and ignorance, whereas the Spanish

children's fear is rational: they are afraid because they know the possible consequences of bombing. These texts provide a valuable methodological lesson against generalisations and psychologising presuppositions, which often present Spanish children who experienced the Civil War as systematically traumatised by the experience of bombardments, so much so that any new bombing, or even just the sound of an alarm, would put them in a state of shock because that would revive their trauma. On the contrary, Spanish children developed resilience, of which Manuel is very proud: "*Los españoles dimos ejemplo de serenidad y valor a los franceses ya eramos veteranos*"³².

- 43 Finally, Clara's brother Felipe's "impressions" are, again, different from those of the others: "La aviación alemana ha bombardeado Marsella. Los pequeños franceses lloraban, pero no porque tenían miedo a la aviación sino porque no se podían defender de ninguna manera lo único que podían hacer era lo mismo que los demás; echarles maldiciones. [...] ¡La hazaña del fascismo sigue adelante!: destruir y matar"³³. Felipe suggests a new interpretation of the various attitudes of French and Spanish children. The French do cry, but not because they are afraid and ignorant: because they feel powerless. This original point of view can be related to the feelings expressed by Felipe himself in his biography. Powerlessness and frustration are central to his experience of war, and more particularly of defeat and exile. When his family decides to evacuate, he writes, "Me quedé blanco, la cara se me caía de vergüenza"³⁴. Later on, he adds: "A mi se me cayeron las lágrimas como si yo fuera un traidor que abandonase España en poder de esos bandidos que harían de ella una prisión"³⁵. Using the essays on the bombardment of Marseille as a touchstone for children's personal perceptions can thus help us spot the particular voice and subjective experience of one child, in this case Felipe's experience of powerlessness.

Conclusion

- 44 This paper aimed at tackling a difficulty one often encounters with children's texts which are obviously heavily formatted, structured, constrained by external, adult requirements. How "personal" are such writings? Do they tell us anything of the children's actual point of view, or should we discard them as "artificial" narratives? Studying the notebooks written at La Rouvière colony shows us, on the contrary, the extreme richness of such "hybrid" sources. Firstly, not only can we hear the children's voices despite the format and the constraints imposed upon them, but in a way, the very existence of these constraints makes original, personal points of view stand out. The common structure, the coherence of the collection can help us identify what is really specific to one child's experience and point of view, as well as what may be specific to children's points of view in general. Secondly, these journals are also invaluable sources for the study of the professionalization of humanitarian work. An increasing part of the sources historians use for writing refugee history comes from humanitarian literature. It is thus necessary to reflect on the constitution of these kinds of sources, why and how they were produced, and what are the generic rules and features of humanitarian story-writing.

Notes

1 In earlier version of this paper was first given at the Conference "Writing Refugees Into History", organised by Sharif Gemie at the University of Glamorgan, Wales, on September 7th, 2009.

2 Manon Pignot magnificently took up the challenge in her recent Ph.D thesis on children during the First World War, paving the way for further historical studies focused on children's experiences : Manon Pignot, *Allons enfants de la patrie ? Filles et garçons dans la Grande Guerre : expériences communes, construction du genre et invention des pères (France, 1914-1920)*. Thesis prepared under Professor Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2007.

3 Michelle Perrot, « Introduction », in Philippe Ariès et Georges Duby (dir.), *Histoire de la vie privée*, tome 4 « De la Révolution à la Grande Guerre », Paris, Le Seuil, 1999, p. 10. Quoted in Manon Pignot, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

4 These notebooks are presently held at the American Friends Service Committee Archives (Philadelphia), Albums/Thank You Letters Pre-WWII, Box 1. I wish to thank the AFSC Archives, and in particular Donald Davis, for his kind help and for authorizing the free reproduction of these notebooks in this article.

5 Judging from other material on La Rouvière colony (pictures, films from the AFSC Archives), there might have been up to a hundred refugee children, Spanish but also French, Italian, and possibly German and Eastern-European at La Rouvière. Sixteen notebooks can be found at the AFSC Archives, fifteen written by Spanish children, and one by a Franco-Italian orphan girl.

6 I would like to thank Tara Zahra for suggesting the link between humanitarian aid, rise of mass press and communication, and globalization to me.

7 *They still draw pictures*, New York, published by the Spanish Child Welfare Association of America for the American Friends Service Committee, 1938. Reissued: New York: Oxford University Press, 1939. This book is available on the University of California, San Diego webpage at <http://orpheus.ucsd.edu/speccoll/tsdp/frame.html>.

8 Letter from John Rich, executive secretary of the AFSC Committee on Spain, to Howard Kershner, director of Spanish relief, December 7 1939, letter 70. AFSC General Files, 1939. Foreign Service – Spain, Box 2 Folder: Committee on Spain: Coms & Orgs. International Commission for Relief of Child Refugees in Spain. Correspondence from/to Kershner (Aug-Dec).

9 John F. Rich to Howard E. Kershner, December 20, 1939, letter 79. *Ibid.*

10 Letter from John Rich to Howard Kershner, February 2, 1940, letter #117. AFSC General Files, 1940. Foreign Service – Spain, Box 1, Folder: Committee on Spain: Coms & Orgs: International Commission for the Assistance of Child Refugees in Spain: General.

11 Letter from John Rich to Howard Kershner, February 12, 1940, letter #123. AFSC General Files, 1940. Foreign Service – Spain, Box 1, Folder: Committee on Spain: Coms & Orgs: International Commission for the Assist. Of Child Refugees in Spain: Correspondence from/to Kershner.

12 Report on colony Ibernien at Ecully near Lyon, supported by the Spanish Confederated Societies, by Margaret Frawley, April 17, 1940, 2 p. AFSC General Files, 1940. Foreign Service – Spain, Box 1, Folder: Committee on Spain: Coms & Orgs: International Commission for the Assistance Of Child Refugees in Spain: Reports.

13 Brochure: « Children in exile. The story of Ile de Ré ». General Files, 1939. Foreign Service – Spain, Box 3, Folder: Committee on Spain: Coms & Orgs. Spanish Refugee Relief Campaign – Publicity.

14 “... To see them once more leading a happy, normal life”, *Bulletin on Relief in France*, n° 20, January 21, 1941. AFSC Serials, Foreign Service Relief Bulletins, 1937-1944.

15 *Ibidem.*

16 *Bulletin on Relief in France*, Vol. 1, n° 3, August 1, 1940: “Excerpts from Reports Sent to the AFSC from Their Workers in France: From Edna Ramseyer, July 1, 1940”. *Ibid.*

17 Encarnación Ríos Guerreros, “Lunes 9 de septiembre (copia de mi cuaderno)” : “The whole colony is overwhelmed with excitement. Tomorrow is the big day, it’s doña Carmen’s birthday. We are preparing dance shows and performances. The party will take place on the terrace. Mr. Alfonso and the older boys built a stage at the foot of the staircase. We are going to have a lot of fun. I perform in two dances, and I will recite a poetry piece by Gregorio Martínez Sierra entitled ‘Cuna, cunera’”. NB: I have chosen not to correct grammar and spelling mistakes from the Spanish texts, and not to use the notation [sic] which would, considering the number of errors, hinder the flow of the reading.

18 “I am doing very fine here. The house and country are beautiful. The directress Miss Edna Ramseyer is all sweetness with us and the rest of the Spanish staff like sons, and truly we form a real family”.

19 Maria del Carmen Romero, “Colonia de niños españoles Val des Pins (Aix en Provence)”, 22 June 1939: “We are a real family. All the children love each other like brothers and sisters and the three ladies who take care of us do so as lovingly as real mothers. Sometimes we fight but these fights do not last because we all love each other, we feel intimately related by misfortune. Everything belongs to everyone and the happiness or sadness of each and one of us is the happiness or sadness of all”.

20 “My name is Encarnación Ríos Guerrero and my parents’ are Enrique and Antonia. I was born in Malaga on February the 27th of 1930. My dad ran a grocery store”. “I am 14 years old my name is Laureano Rodríguez Bujeiro, I was born in Madrid son of Carmen and Laureano also from Madrid

as well as all my brothers and sisters. I became fatherless when I was two years old. We are four brothers and sisters”. “Son of Francisco and Maria. He was born in Malaga on the 13th of March 1935. Shopkeeper father, dressmaker mother”. “My name is María del Carmen Romero García. I am the daughter of professors of the primary teacher training college of Guadalajara, and I was born in Madrid. I am 15 years old, I am tall and thin, with chestnut brown eyes and hair”.

21 “Before the war broke out I lived very happily with my parents and my younger, by two years, sister.” “We lived comfortably and my mother indulged all our whims, as long as they were reasonable. We lived happily until the revolution broke out” [Here, the “revolution” refers to the “military revolution”, *i.e.* the military rebellion.] “They lived simply and well”.

22 “The summer was beginning. We had great plans: go to the beach in Santander then to France, Belgium and Switzerland because my dad had obtained a pension to study in those countries. This wretched revolution ruined it all”.

23 “Two months after their mother died, they came to this colony, where there were no children as yet. The three of them were the first colonists “La Rouvière” had. They felt very sad in the first days, but now, they seem to be with their beloved family. So it is. La Rouvière is just like a real, orderly family”.

24 “In the end we came to this colony, which to me, compared to the refugee centre, seemed like paradise on earth”.

25 “Since we were little we slept quietly but the adults spent a terrible night because the fascist boats were patrolling and if they had discovered us they would have bombarded. In the end we escaped the danger and arrived in Oran. But they wouldn’t let us disembark! How much effort did it cost to obtain the permits! [...] We seemed like the Wandering Jew”.

26 “We were very hungry in the one where I stayed with one of my friends, later the refuge centre didn’t seem very bad to us, but they gave us very good food. After two months they gave us very little food and they gave us the quarter of a kilogram of bread per week and we were very hungry and what’s more we had to wash our clothes, and without soap. I lived this way during a year and a half, resisting hunger and calamities. The 7th of June 1938 I left Tarragone and this dreadful centre where I had cried more tears than I have hairs on my head. A friend of my brother came to see me, and when he saw the horrible life I was leading, he took me with him to the army and he put me in the kitchen where in the end I could eat my fill and I ate so much that I got an indigestion and almost died. I would have been completely happy if the war hadn’t gone from bad to worse”.

27 “In this awful situation we stayed three whole days and four nights”.

28 “I was little then and so I didn’t understand well yet what was going on, I didn’t have more than 11 years old, but mummy must have been suffering a lot”.

29 “They settled us in, but neither our Director from Draguignan nor us liked it and we asked to be taken to La Rouvière”. [The “director” was a former Spanish milician, in charge of the refugee centre of Draguignan where Manuel and his brother José were staying before entering the AFSC colonies].

30 José Izquierdo Torres, “Mis impresiones de primer bombardeo en Marsella”.

31 Manuel Izquierdo Torres, “Mis impresiones del primer bombardeo en Marseille”: “We were all scared the French because it was the first time they heard it, and us because it had already been a year since we had heard it and because we knew its terrible consequences”.

32 *Ibid.* “We, the Spaniards gave an example of serenity and courage to the French we were already veterans”.

33 Felipe Llerandi Segura, “Mis impresiones sobre el primer bombardeo de Marsella (copia del cuaderno de escritura)”: “The German airforce has bombarded Marseille. The little French children cried, but not because they were afraid of the airforce, but because they could not defend themselves in any way the only thing they could do was the same thing as the others; cursing them. [...] The great deed of fascism carries on: destroy and kill!”.

34 *Ibid.* “My mind went blank, I was hanging myself with shame”.

35 *Ibid.* “Tears came out of my eyes as if I was a traitor that abandoned Spain in the power of these bandits who would make a prison of it”.

Pour citer cet article

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Abstract / Résumé / Resumen

Writing the history of children's experiences in exile entails exploring how children refugees have written about these experiences themselves. It is obviously a challenge to find contemporary texts by refugee children, but even when we do, we are faced with a number of methodological issues. This paper attempts to present and tackle some of those, through the study of fifteen biographical notebooks written around 1940-1941 by Spanish refugee children who lived at La Rouvière in France, in a colony created and run by the American Quakers Friends Service Committee (AFSC). These notebooks form a homogeneous, standardized series, with similar cover and title pages, and a similar structure. They were most certainly composed at the same time, and written as part of the children's schoolwork in the colony. As much as these children's experiences, opinions and sentiments, they thus reveal the adult requirements guiding and imposed upon children's writings. This paper suggests a method for reading such heavily formatted children's productions as palimpsests, *i.e.* as the final result of layers of writings applied on top of one another. Each layer constitutes a different narrative about refugee children: the story-writing of humanitarian aid, the Quaker tale of child relief and, finally, the narratives of children's experiences.

Les autobiographies des enfants espagnols réfugiés à la colonie Quaker de La Rouvière (France, 1940) : communication humanitaire et écritures enfantines

Écrire l'histoire des expériences enfantines de l'exil suppose de s'intéresser à la manière dont les enfants réfugiés eux-même ont pu écrire sur leurs propres expériences. Or, si la recherche de tels textes, contemporains des faits, représente manifestement un défi, leur découverte nous confronte à des problèmes méthodologiques non moins aigus. Nous tentons ici d'en présenter et d'en aborder quelques-uns, à travers l'étude de quinze cahiers biographiques écrits vers 1940-1941 par des enfants réfugiés espagnols qui vivaient à La Rouvière, en France, dans une colonie créée et gérée par les Quakers de l'American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). Ces cahiers forment une série homogène, standardisée, aux pages de couverture et de titre identiques, et à la structure narrative similaire. Ils ont très certainement été rédigés au même moment, dans le cadre du travail scolaire à la colonie. Tout autant que les expériences, les opinions et les sentiments de ces enfants, il nous révèlent donc les exigences adultes qui guidèrent et s'imposèrent aux écritures enfantines. Dans cet article, nous proposons de lire ces textes comme des palimpsestes, c'est-à-dire comme le résultat final d'une succession de couches d'écritures posées les unes sur les autres. Chaque couche constitue une narration

distincte autour des enfants réfugiés : la mise en récit de l'aide humanitaire, la fable Quaker de l'aide à l'enfance et, en dernière instance, les écritures des expériences enfantines.

Autobigrafías de Niños Españoles Refugiados en el Hogar Cuáquero de La Rouviere (Francia 1940) : Discurso Humanitario y Escritos infantiles

Escribir la historia de las experiencias de los niños en el exilio conlleva explorar las formas en las que los propios niños han escrito sobre sus experiencias. Si ya es de por sí difícil encontrar textos contemporáneos escritos por niños refugiados, una vez localizados, estos plantean una serie de problemas metodológicos. Este artículo tiene como objetivo tratar algunas de estas cuestiones a través del análisis de quince cuadernos autobiográficos escritos en torno a 1940-1941 por niños refugiados españoles durante su estancia en La Rouviere, una colonia a cargo del American Quakers Friends Service Committee (ASFC) en Francia. Los cuadernos forman parte de una serie homogénea y estandarizada, con cubiertas, títulos y páginas parecidas, y estructurados de forma similar. Es casi seguro que fueron escritos en la misma época y que formaron parte del trabajo escolar de los niños durante su estancia en la colonia. Al mismo tiempo que reflejan las experiencias, opiniones y sentimientos de los niños, los cuadernos dejan entrever como los requerimientos de los adultos se yuxtaponen a los escritos infantiles. El artículo propone como método de aproximación a este material infantil tan fuertemente formateado el palimpsesto, lo que nos haría interpretar los escritos como el resultado final de varias capas narrativas yuxtapuestas. Cada capa constituiría una narrativa diferente sobre los niños refugiados: en primer lugar, el discurso de la ayuda humanitaria; en segundo lugar, la historia cuáquera de socorro infantil y, finalmente, las narrativas de las experiencias de los niños.