

MARY ELMES (1908-2002), THE FIRST IRISH 'RIGHTEOUS'

Mary Elmes was born 5 May 1908 as Marie Elisabeth Jean Elmes in Cork. Her parents had a family business in Winthrop Street, J Waters and Sons, Dispensing Chemists, her father being the pharmacist. She was educated at Rochelle School and Trinity College Dublin where she gained First Class Honours in Modern Literature (French and Spanish) and the Gold Medal. She went on to the London School of Economics as a scholarship student, where she was awarded the LSE Scholarship in International Studies which led to a summer school in Geneva in 1936.

No doubt Mary was heading for a brilliant career in business or academia, but the Spanish Civil War changed all of that. A letter dated Gibraltar 12 March 1937 from a Mrs Small of the Geneva office of Save the Children told how she had found her colleague Mrs Petter there, and that she was accompanied by a certain Miss Elmes, who wished to work in Spain voluntarily. Miss Elmes had obtained a permit for Spain for five days only. 'After discussion it seemed to me that it would be better to let Miss Elmes attach herself to the University Unit.'¹

The University Unit in question was the London University Ambulance Unit just set up by Sir George Young, a retired diplomat who had served in Spain, had written several books on Spain and was an acknowledged expert on that country. Mary travelled from Gibraltar to Almeria by a British warship, probably in the company of Sir George himself who had just arrived by ship. A letter to Edith Pye written five days later by Violetta Thurston, Sir George's leader of the Ambulance Unit, says 'Later, a worker came from Gibraltar, Miss Elmes, and I gave the feeding station to her'².

This was the feeding station set up at Almeria to help cope with the stream of refugees arriving from Malaga. 80,000 women, children, and old and infirm men had struggled into the town having walked or shuffled the 120 miles from Malaga, having been bombed and machine gunned daily. A further 20,000 had given up and turned back, and more than 5000 had died en-route, either shot, drowned or starved.³ What dreadful sights must have greeted this young Irish girl on her arrival in Spain!

It was not long before Mary's many talents were discovered and utilised. She spent a short time working in the children's hospitals at Almeria and Murcia before moving on to Alicante where she took charge of the hospital there. Shortly after moving there she received news that her father had died but she refused to leave until a replacement could be found. No replacement was forthcoming and so Mary stayed on. However, there was a serious problem with the hospital. Although a new building and well equipped, it was ideal except for one thing. It was near the coast and was being continually shelled by destroyers. The terrified children had to be moved to the basement, and it soon became obvious that somewhere safer would have to be found. After much searching, Mary found a deserted villa in the mountains at Polop, a small town some ten miles inland from the little fishing village of Benidorm.⁴

There is a letter in the Friends House Library written by Nurse Dorothy Litten soon after she arrived at Polop in August 1938. She says:

The hospital is now settled in the summer residence of a rich man who has fled to a more suitable spot for rich men. The land is being worked by five peasants but the house stood empty and really makes a surprisingly good hospital. The rooms are a bit crowded, but that does not matter now that the children are out all day, and perhaps before winter it will be possible to return to Alicante.⁵

She goes on to say that twenty-three children were moved there from Alicante, and that Mary Elmes, the responsible person in charge of the hospital, was marvellous at planning meals out of their very meagre resources. Sixty years later, in a rare letter to a friend, Mary remembers an incident from that time in Polop:

Dear Rose,

Have I spoken to you of Palmira? She was a beautiful little girl of 21 months, wounded in a bombardment of the market in Alicante in 1938. Her mother was holding her in her arms at the time of this happening. In the confusion which followed, she lost her daughter. The child was very severely wounded in the left leg, of which the foot was only held on by a few strands of flesh. The surgeon who was responsible for her wanted to amputate the foot. Fortunately, the doctor of our little hospital who was a paediatrician, opposed this and

brought her to our place where she lay on a plank for three months, at the end of which she was able to get up and eventually to walk normally.

It was a triumph for Doctor Blanc and the English nurses, who should be admired for their devotion and patience. Being so young, she was not able to explain who she was and her family didn't find her for many days - what tears and what joy when finally her father found her! ⁶

Despite her mother's pleas that she should return home, Mary carried on with her work until the war came to an end with the victory of General Franco. In an interview given in September 1998 Mary described the headlong rush to the coast of thousands hoping to escape before it was too late, although she seems to have stayed on at the hospital in Polop well into May when she describes the conditions as becoming 'very uncomfortable'.⁷ She says that she was rescued by the Quakers in the person of Howard Kershner of the AFSC who drove her and a few other workers, across the border into France bringing with them all the records of their work in Spain.⁸

After more than two years, Mary was now out of Spain and able to return home to her widowed mother in Cork. But she did not stay very long, because her heart was with her Spanish friends who were enduring new hardships in France. In July 1939 she attended an interview in Paris with the International Committee for Child Refugees, and on the fourteenth of that month she wrote to the Spain Committee in Friends' House informing them that she had been appointed to work with her old colleague Dorothy Morris in the cultural work in the camps. She writes:

I think that the work will be most interesting and I hope that the years that I spent at college in the study of Spanish literature will prove of something more than the purely personal pleasure that they have been so far and be useful now in the choosing of books for the libraries that it is proposed to start for the men... Thank you very much in getting me back into this work again. I cannot tell you how glad I am to have the prospect of doing something for my Spanish friends again.⁹

In the meantime a mass exodus had been taking place across the Pyrenees dividing Spain from France. In the first two

weeks of February 1939, half a million Spanish men, women and children had struggled into France, bombed and machine-gunned by planes, while enduring the hardships of the terrain and the winter weather. The French response was to section off areas of the beaches with barbed wire, and to enclose the refugees between the wire and the sea. The French authorities hoped that their unwelcome guests would return to Spain - some did, but most refused knowing what fate might await them there. Pablo Casals, himself a refugee, was horrified by what he saw when he visited the camp of Argeles-sur-Mer.

The scenes I witnessed might have been from Dante's 'Inferno'. Tens of thousands of men and women and children were herded together like animals, penned in by barbed wire, housed - if one can call it that - in tents and crumbling shacks. There were no sanitation facilities or provisions for medical care...Scores had perished from exposure, hunger and disease. At the time of my arrival the hospitals at Perpignan still overflowed with the sick and dying.¹⁰

Later, Casals was to cooperate with Mary in providing help for needy neighbours, and the archives contain a number of letters written by Casals to Mary.¹¹

By the time that Mary arrived in France, things were somewhat more organised, there were now many more camps along the coast and some attempt at shelter and provisions had been made. There was still a pressing need for clothing and food, and conditions were still woefully inadequate. She saw however, that if these camps were to remain for any length of time, there was a need for schooling, for reading matter suitable for both children and adults, for the means to occupy their time and provide some kind of purpose to their existence. She saw the need for books in Spanish, and shortly after her appointment was in Paris buying books for the libraries she was soon to open. She became a familiar figure in the camps, thousands knew her as 'Miss Mary' and turned to her for solutions to their problems.

But things were to become worse still. With the outbreak of war in September of that year, German refugees who had sought shelter in France were immediately rounded up as enemy aliens, many of them ending up in the already overcrowded camps on the Spanish border. The following year, with the German

invasion of the Low Countries, another tide of refugees poured into the region. Now everyone was short of food. Mary and her colleagues in Perpignan opened canteens and provided meals in schools throughout the region, while still continuing the work in the camps

With the fall of France, British workers had to leave. Mary drove Dorothy Morris, her colleague, to Bordeaux, a harrowing journey, where they met up with Edith Pye. Mary saw them safely on board the last ship to leave, the SS *Madura*, but Mary as an Irish neutral returned to Perpignan. She was now in charge of the AFSC office in Perpignan and her work included the various camps for Spanish refugees on the coast, of which Argeles was the largest, and canteens in schools throughout the region, extending as far as Montpellier and Carcassonne. There was scarcely a town or village in the whole of that huge area that did not receive help in some form or another from the AFSC office in Perpignan.

Soon after the fall of France, Howard Kershner, in charge of the AFSC work in France, wrote a memorandum to all the Quaker offices. He reminded his staff that the AFSC received cooperation from both the German and French authorities including customs exemptions, free rail transport, warehousing and other facilities. He ended with these words:

It is our desire to help those who wish to emigrate. We may furnish support while such people are waiting for their opportunity to go; we may help them to get in touch with their relatives who may be able to assist them financially; we may help them secure visas and other papers; the one thing that we must not do under any circumstances is to aid or abet any person in trying to leave France without the French 'visa de sortie'.¹²

In January 1941 Kershner was successful in obtaining an interview with Philippe Pétain, who was now the *de facto* dictator of France. The two men seemed to have got on very well together. Kershner stressed the non-political nature of the AFSC work in France, and avoided any reference to the Statute of Jews, published on 3 October 1940. This law effectively banned all Jews from employment in the Forces, press, commercial and industrial activities, and the civil service. Nor did the immediate internment of 40,000 non-French Jews on 4 October appear to be mentioned.

Meanwhile, Mary received a letter from Helga Holbek at Toulouse in which she was informed that Dr Limousin of the Ministry of the Interior was planning to use the former military camp at Rivesaltes as a model camp for families with children who would be transferred there from the existing concentration camps. There were to be separate dormitories for men and women and for the children of various ages, and each dormitory would be supervised by a trained nurse. There would also be a hospital at the camp. All the various aid organisations would be encouraged to cooperate. Helga writes:

This all sounds very beautiful; however, snag No.1. is that it, in the best of cases, will take a long time; No.2 is that he thought there were only about 2000 children in all the camps while the actual figure seems to be between 4000 and 5000.¹³

By March 1941, a letter from Helga Holbek to Mary makes it clear that at a recent meeting of the Nimes Committee all was not well. (The Nimes Committee was set up to co-ordinate the work of the various organisations in the camps). It would seem that the feeling of most of the aid organisations was that they should not accept the offer to cooperate in the working of Rivesaltes until representatives were permitted to have offices there and conditions in the camp were greatly improved. Helga felt that the presence of the Quaker delegation would give the impression that conditions were not so bad after all, but she accepted that Mary must decide for herself.¹⁴

For her part, Mary completely disagreed with the attitude of the Nimes committee. She felt that a boycott of the camp would only have the effect of causing more suffering for the children there.

During the summer conditions worsened. In July alone twenty-three infants died¹⁵. Dr Weil of the Nimes Committee alleged that this was due to malnutrition.¹⁶ Mary would not accept this, but believed it was due mainly to the intense summer heat.¹⁷ The camp was built on a vast open plain with no trees or shelter of any kind. In fact it was said that the reason it was not used as an army camp - the original intention - was because the heat of the summer and the severe cold of the winter and the almost continual wind of the tramontane made it unsuitable for the horses!

This difference of opinion between the majority of the committee members and the Perpignan delegation continued throughout the year. It is clear that Mary was fearful that their critical attitude would bring reprisals and possibly even their expulsion from the camp. Was she simply being 'non-political'. Was collaboration a necessary evil given these circumstances? One thing is certain, her presence in the camp brought comfort and hope to many of the inmates there. A visitor in 1942 remarked:

Everywhere Mary went she was greeted with great warmth and affection and we could not walk very far without being stopped by someone who wished to talk with her. One could see very plainly that 'Miss Mary' as they all call her, brought joy to many people on her regular frequent visits to the camp.¹⁸

Nevertheless, Helga had been right to be pessimistic. The camp had opened on 14 January 1941. Conditions soon deteriorated dramatically. By the end of the year there were well over 4000 in the camp, of which nearly 1500 were children. The monthly report by the AFSC read as follows:

The internees are now going through a time of great suffering. Winter has finally descended on the region with the bitter winds that characterise it in this part of the Midi. To their miseries of hunger and lack of liberty is now that of cold. They are cold during the night, they are cold during the day and their food is served to them cold. They crouch in unheated barracks and have no extra blankets or clothes to protect them against the searching wind. There has been an almost entire lack of wood in the camp - the supply has even been insufficient to cook the miserable soup that is served disguised as a meal. The infirmaries and nurseries are unheated and the ill and the babies shiver in their beds and their hands are covered with chilblains.¹⁹

In the meantime, Howard Kershner was continuing his close contacts with Pétain. Again, he met with the Marshal most cordially and spent a couple of days meeting various ministers and officials, but there is no mention of the Jewish question, even though the second Statute of the Jews had been enacted three months earlier depriving all Jews of their employment in any of the professions.²⁰

The dictator asked him to join the Presidential visit to the Haute Savoie region. There are several pages in his diary headed 'Two days with Marechal Pétain' in which he recounts with gusto the fine time he had with the French dictator. He remarks:

There is no doubt that the Marechal has a remarkable hold on the affection of the people of France and there is likewise no doubt that he is devoted to their welfare and shows the greatest interest in and concern for them. It is quite evident that he is the leader of the people.²¹

It would seem that this interest and concern did not extend to the inmates of the camps. At Rivesaltes at this time there were 6500 internees, and Mary was concerned about the state of the men's health. She says that even a mild illness was sufficient to cause death.

Meanwhile, Helga Holbek was having a private struggle with Kershner. Several times the letters between them are strongly worded, and on two occasions she offered her resignation, which of course was not accepted! She felt that it was no longer possible to tolerate conditions in the camps without protest. Matters came to a head in February 1942 when, at the end of a long letter to Ross McClelland in the Marseille office, Helga ended with these words:

It is also good news that Mr Kershner at last has realised that we cannot watch people being locked up and leave them to starve to death from hunger and cold without a heavy responsibility.²²

Unfortunately, the recipient of this letter carelessly left it open on his desk, and it was seen by Kershner. Needless to say, he was not pleased! Apparently he sent Helga an extremely angry letter which has not been retained in the archives. But Ross McClelland, in apologising to Helga for his carelessness in leaving her letter exposed, says that Kershner 'had it coming to him'. 'He keeps making ridiculous general statements to the effect that "many children in the camps are better fed than lots of children outside."²³

It was a fact that the popular press frequently came up with stories of this kind, and Howard Kershner tended to put the needs of the French children in the homes and schools above that of the camp inmates. McClelland goes on:

One is always suspicious that his propaganda for aiding French children is motivated by a desire to receive favourable personal publicity (which helping the camp children certainly would not bring him).²⁴

The worst was yet to come. In 1942 Rivesaltes became the holding centre for all the Jews in non-occupied France. They were brought there from wherever they could be found, and then, between 13 August and 19 October, nine trains left the Rivesaltes camp for Drancy in the suburbs of Paris filled with Jews, a total of 2251 persons, of whom 110 were children.

The number of children would have been considerably greater had it not been for the intervention of Mary and her colleagues in the other organisations. The Vichy authorities allowed the aid organisations to take children out of the camps and lodge them in so-called 'colonies'. This had to be done officially of course. There was much paper-work and the understanding was that it was only a temporary measure and that after a period of convalescence the children would be returned. This involved Mary in a great deal of work, finding suitable places in the country or by the sea, staffing the centres, arranging food supplies, and above all, the necessary documentation. Obtaining permission from the parent was also necessary of course, but this was not difficult when it was clear that the children were simply going on a kind of holiday. But when the deportations commenced, mothers were urged to part with their children without any guarantee that they would be reunited. This was much more difficult, and more children could have been saved if more parents had agreed to part with their offspring.

Eventually, the children in the colonies were also at risk. On 29 August 1942 Mary writes to Lois Gunden who was in charge of the Mennonite colony at Canet Plage:

I should warn you that there is a possibility that the children whose parents are still at Rivesaltes may be recalled to leave from there with the rest of the family. We are doing everything possible to prevent this however, but it is unfortunately still an eventuality.²⁵

She goes on to say that she is getting the parents to sign a legal document in case they are deported without their children, giving the aid organisation the status of guardian. Two weeks later there is better news, Mary learns from the Head Office in

Marseille that all children in the colonies have been granted exemption from deportation, but that any children taken into care after 13 September 1942 will not be so protected.²⁶

It was in September 1942 that an American professor, Ronald Friend, then Rene Freund, a baby of eighteen months, was being taken by his family to the border with Switzerland in an effort to escape from France. Unfortunately, they were discovered, arrested, and sent to Rivesaltes. They arrived there on 7 September. Already four convoys had left for Drancy and the east. In the AFSC files there are a series of letters in which Mary Elmes confirmed that she knew the family well and was going to take the Freund children out of Rivesaltes that evening.²⁷ The date of this letter was 25 September 1942. In other words, almost two weeks after the exemption from deportation guarantee. Rene Freund and his brother were taken to the colony in Vernet les Bains where they were found to be suffering from scabies and promptly sent to hospital.²⁸ After that they seem to disappear from view, no doubt taken into hiding by OSE. They and their mother survived the war, being sheltered by a family in Albi, but Hans Freund, their father, a professor of engineering who had come to France to work for the SNCF, was transported by that same organisation to his death in Poland.²⁹

No one knows what other rescues Mary may have had a hand in. Obviously the AFSC files do not contain anything incriminating. Her daughter, Caroline Danjou, has no knowledge of any, but she does remember her mother said that she had a secret hiding place in her bathroom where she would keep sensitive documents. Alice Resch tells us that Mary hid children in the boot of her car,³⁰ and Andree Salomon says that on 7 August 1942, when the aid workers were informed that children were now to be included in the transports, 'Mary Elmes, the Quaker delegate, immediately took a first group with her in her own car and came back the same day in search of others. The camp administration agreed to validate this departure as a regular liberation'.³¹

Some of the adult internees had been given jobs by the aid organisations. In late October 1942 when the deportations had been raging all summer, Helga wrote to the Marseille office in a desperate attempt to save two of her team who had been placed in Rivesaltes and were about to be deported. Lindsley

Noble, Kershner's successor, replied that there was nothing that could be done. He suggested that it was wiser not to 'irritate the authorities' with individual requests for exemption which might jeopardise larger projects. Helga Holbek was furious. She wrote:

I must say to you that I am entirely and completely in disagreement with your position that one should ignore individual cases when there are negotiations with Vichy concerning large groups...The request for exemption in individual cases cannot be regarded as a 'little thing which might irritate Vichy.' Each case presented is someone's life. It is the duty of the Vichy Office to examine each case, and it is my duty to present each case.³²

What more could they have done? Alice Resch tells us what she had to do in order to save the children she had taken and placed in the French orphanage at Aspet in the Pyrenees. When in November 1942, the Allies landed in North Africa and this prompted the Germans to occupy the so-called Free Zone, Alice realised that the Aspet children were now in danger. She says:

Gradually, we simply smuggled the children away from Aspet. We claimed that the colony was too far away and gave Coste (the Director of the Office for Aliens) a fictional list of people who were willing to take the children into their homes. The youngest came to Larade where we erased the 'JUIF' mark from their papers.³³

In November 1942, the Germans occupied the southern zone and the Jewish children in the colonies were in grave danger. It seems almost certain that Mary was instrumental in arranging safe hiding places for the children in her care, but of course we would not expect to find details of this in the files. But early in 1943 Mary was arrested by the Gestapo and imprisoned in Toulouse. She was suspected of a series of hostile acts against Germany, secret border crossings, information of all kinds, and propaganda against the Reich. She was to be charged with espionage.³⁴ Helga and the Toulouse delegation were able to visit her and take food parcels. But then she vanished, and although they were told she had been moved to the Fresnes prison in Paris, the Paris office could find no trace of her. Eventually it was discovered that her name Elmes had been recorded as Helmes, and the Paris Quakers were able to visit her and send

her supplies. After almost six months incarceration she was released without having been charged with any offence. Alice Resch says that she reappeared 'as attractive and well-groomed as always'³⁵ and it is recorded that when asked much later about her experiences she just replied 'Oh we all had to suffer some inconveniences in those days!'³⁶

Could she have done more in the camps, could she have saved more children? Could she and the aid workers have saved some of the adults if they had spoken out? Some thought that they should and could have done more. Rene Kapel was a Rabbi in the camps, a social worker and a resistance fighter. He was captured and sent to Auchwitz from Drancy on the last deportation train on 18 August 1944, just as Paris was being liberated. He managed to escape from the train before it reached Poland. Many years later he wrote of those days:

Of course, now that we know of the atrocities committed in the Nazi extermination camps, we realise that we should have acted differently. We were too inclined to respect a certain legality, in the hope of better serving the interests of the internees. Without doubt we should have silenced our scruples and bribed the Vichy officials, the internment camp directors... We should have furnished false identity cards to a larger number of internees, and done everything to facilitate their escape...³⁷

And Dr Weill of the Nimes Committee, just after the war, defended the Committee's reluctance to cooperate in the camps by admitting that:

To work to improve the camps... is to come little by little, unconsciously, to tolerate, then to admit the camps as conditions of life for certain categories of people...³⁸

It is easy for us today to say that more could and should have been done to protest and refuse to cooperate in this crime of stripping innocent people of their dignity and livelihood by herding them into unheated cages in appalling conditions, only to hand them over to the Nazi killing machine. Maybe this thought haunted Mary throughout those remaining sixty years of her life.

Mary refused to accept the salary which had accrued while she was in prison, and according to her family she also refused the Legion d'Honneur, though her name does not appear on the

official list of those refusing the honour. She was not a Quaker, though she led the Quaker work in Perpignan throughout the war. When the war ended she married Roger Danjou and had two children who continue to live in the area where their mother worked. Mary Elmes died on 9 March 2002, aged 94.

Sixty-five years later, when her name was totally forgotten in the area where she had done and risked so much, a stele was unveiled on the seafront at Canet Plage on the spot where one of the colonies had operated. It was followed by a ceremony at which her children and grandchildren were presented with the gold medal of Yad Vashem, honouring Mary Elmes as 'Righteous among the Nations' for her work in saving Jewish lives. A journalist writing in 1947 summed up her achievements:

Tirelessly, with courage and simplicity, she brought to the most deprived the food and clothing which prolonged their lives and the hope of survival. Her confident, affectionate and smiling presence kept the memory of happiness and liberty alive.³⁹

Bernard Wilson

This article is based on a talk given at the Library of the Religious Society of Friends, Friends House, London on 25th November 2014.

END NOTES

1. Friends Service Council Spanish files Letter dated 12.3.37
2. FSC Letter. Dated 17.3.37
3. Linda Palfreeman, *Aristocrats, Adventurers and Ambulances: British medical units in the Spanish Civil War* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2013), p.129
4. FSC Letter dated 18.1.38 and report dated 2.8.38 from Dorothy Litten
5. FSC letter dated 2.8.38.
6. Letter dated 1.12.98. In Danjou family collection.
7. Interview in the Danjou family collection.
8. Farah Mendlesohn, *Quaker Relief Work in the Spanish Civil War* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002), p. 118
9. FSC Letter dated 14.7.39
10. Albert E. Kahn, *Joys and Sorrows: Reflections by Pablo Casals* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), p. 233.
11. AFSC Records Relating to Humanitarian Work in France 1933-1950 box14 folder 64, pp. 28-39
12. AFSC b12, f36, p.5
13. AFSC b9 f4 pp. 43-44
14. AFSC b9 f4 pp. 55-56
15. AFSC b6 f1 p. 23
16. AFSC b11 f27 p. 10
17. AFSC b11 f27 p. 10
18. AFSC b15 f77 p. 51
19. AFSC b6 f1 p. 8
20. AFSC b60, f55, pp. 70-72
21. AFSC b60, f55, p. 74
22. AFSC b27 f10 p. 28
23. AFSC b27 f10 p. 30
24. AFSC b27 f10 pp. 30-31
25. AFSC b2 f16 p. 124
26. AFSC b55 f83 p. 49
27. AFSC b11 f29 p. 66
28. Oeuvre Secours Enfants Service Recherche 21/3/45
29. Yad Vashem, Central database of victims' names

30. Alice Resch Synnestvedt, *Over the Highest Mountains: a memoir of unexpected heroism in France during World War II* (Pasadena CA: Intentional Productions, 2005), p. 117
31. Vivette Samuel, *Rescuing the Children: A Holocaust Memoir* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p. 78
32. AFSC b56 f84 p. 59
33. Synnestvedt , p.143
34. Letter from Ministere de L'Interieur 22.12.43. From the collection of Caroline Danjou, daughter of Mary Elmes
35. Synnestvedt, p. 144
36. Quoted in Howard Wriggins, *Picking Up the Pieces from Portugal to Palestine: Quaker Refugee Relief in World War II* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 2004)
37. René S. Kapel, *Un Rabbin dans la Tourmente 1940-1944: Dans les camps d'interement et au sein de l'Organisation juif de combat* (Paris: Editions du Centre, 1985)
38. Dr Joseph Weill, *Contribution à l'histoire des camps d'internement dans l'anti-France* (Paris: 1946) pp. 177-178
39. *The Republican* 12.7.47 quoted by Tristan Castanier in article of December 2007.