

Last year's **St Brigid's event in Donostia / San Sebastian (DSS)**, Northern Spain, involved the following iconic Irish women: Maud Gonne, Grainne O'Malley, Elizabeth Cousins, Katie Taylor, Constance Markievicz, Peg Plunkett and St. Brigid, herself. This year's list had Sinéad O'Connor; Mary Elmes, Lady Jane Gray, Marian Finucane and Bernadette Devlin. On the day before our St. Brigid celebration, the Irish-Basque Association *LagunCara* received this lovely letter (read out at the event) from Clodagh Finn, author of the biography of **Mary Elmes**:



*(I was) told that you are going to celebrate Mary Elmes as part of the LagunCara celebration of St Brigid's Day this year. That is wonderful and, it seems to me, very fitting. I have great time for Brigid, being so impressed, and moved, by the work of this early church leader, an eloquent speaker and - like Mary Elmes herself - a really gifted administrator. I love, in particular, the account (by Cogitosus written in the 7th century) of how she yoked up her chariot and sped to a king's palace to save an innocent man from certain death.*

*Mary also did so much to save many innocent men, women and children from certain death - the memory of her work in the camps in France is still so strongly felt by the families of those she helped. A few months ago, a man got in touch with me to say that the Basque internees in particular - often poorly treated in the camps - had great respect for her. He told me of a friend whose father recalled that Mary and her colleagues were always very kind to them.*

*It is wonderful that here in Ireland the name Mary Elmes is starting to be recognised. Her son Patrick Danjou travelled to Cork to the bridge inauguration event as did two of the children she helped to save: Charlotte Berger-Greneche and Georges Koltein. It was particularly moving to hear Charlotte address over 700 pupils at Mary's former school. Charlotte said there was a place in the world for everyone and that we could all learn to live together, despite our differences. There was a spontaneous standing ovation. Those pupils will never forget that experience, I think.*

*I wonder what she would make of it all. I think she'd hate the fuss but I imagine that she would love to be remembered by LagunCara. She had a deep love of Spain, its regions and its people. She greatly admired what she described as their unquenchable spirit. One of my favourite quotes of hers is the note she wrote, with her colleague nurse Dorothy Morris, after visiting an exhibition held by Spanish painters in the early years of WWII. The two women wrote: "Spirit and enthusiasm are the most important things in life, and these the Spaniards will have for ever."*

*I wish you all the very best on St Brigid's Day.*

*With very best wishes,*

*Clodagh*

## Mary Elmes (1908-2002) - Irish Humanitarian



Mary Elmes from Cork was another remarkable woman. She died in 2002 at the age of 93, having lived in the South of France with her husband and two children.

Three of the children she saved from the Holocaust were Georges Koltein, Charlotte Berger-Grenche and Ronald Friend. The first two, now in their 90s, were present last year at the opening ceremony of the pedestrian bridge in Cork city dedicated to Mary Elmes.

Mary Elmes volunteered in 1937 with *Save The Children* in Spain and, coming from a Quaker family, worked in hospitals in Almeria and Alicante. In May 1939, when Franco's fascist tide could no longer be stemmed, she joined thousands fleeing over the Pyrenees into France. After returning to Cork, she was soon reassigned by the *Friends to the Rivesaltes* refugee camp, near Perpignan in Catalunya Nord, where she organised food rations and supplied refugee children with educational material. This centre became in effect an internment camp for Jewish persons in Vichy (collaborationist) France and the conditions there were grim.

By November 1942, with America now in the war, Elmes and a few others remained and, at great risk to their lives, especially after they began to transport Jewish people to Nazi extermination camps in Eastern Europe in 1942, they continued looking after the children. They kept smuggling them to safety, often in the boot of Mary's car, falsifying exit visas for many of the children, transferring them to the safer children's colonies. Over 400 children were saved in this way, 80 directly attributable to Mary Elmes. Ronald Friend and his brother Mario were detained in the Rivesaltes camp from where Mary succeeded in rescuing them in 1942. The following year Mary was arrested and imprisoned for six months. On her release she returned immediately to her children, explaining after the war: "We all experienced inconveniences in those days, didn't we?"

Mary Elmes is the only person in Ireland recognised by Israel as *Righteous Among the Nations*. As Mark Elmes, her cousin, stated at the opening ceremony last year at the bridge dedicated to her in Cork: "*she had a tremendous ability and persistence to do what was right... She stuck with it through thick and then, and all she was concerned about were the victims*".