



Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity

The Friends of Gibraltar Oral History Project (1930 to 1970)

Magda Risso - Interviewed by Mary Ingoldby on 13th February 2013 (serial 004)

Track 1

MR introduces herself and gives synopsis of her experience as an evacuee.

Born in Gibraltar – all family Gibraltarians, no Spanish connections. Evacuated to Casablanca and Tangiers during WWII. MR's grandfather was Charles Thomas Po, one of the first four men to be a city councillor. Because of this he decided that they would be evacuated privately, one of his brothers had gone to live in Casablanca – so family went to Casablanca; met by cousin taken to Majestic hotel; and then had two flats in Roche Noir where the family lived for a year. Incident with Vichy France resulted in the Gibraltarians being brought back temporarily to Gibraltar. MR's grandfather suffered a stroke and was not allowed to be moved; the family then stayed together in Casablanca for another year. They had cousins in Tangiers and went there; found accommodation in **La Consula** – a hotel which was managed by a British Company, the family lived there for three years, it was luxury, like being on holiday.

MR's Grandfather died in Tangiers but was brought back to Gibraltar; MR's first memory of return to Gibraltar after the war looking down at the wharf and seeing men in motorbikes and helmets and wondering who they were. (British Army)

So we came back and I remember finding Gibraltar a horrible place dark, horrible, not like Tangiers at all, and I can remember saying to my father – shall we go out now to a cafeteria for the evening meal and he said oh no the main street is full of drunken sailors, so I hated it.

MR had never gone to school, she had private tuition in Casa Blanca and Tangiers. When she returned to Gibraltar education was being re-organised and she couldn't speak a word of English. She went to the Loretta Convent for four years which was excellent and got a credit in English Language.

After this MR then got various jobs and then worked for *Nestles* – Not many women had a good paid jobs, most of them went in for teaching. MR worked there until she got married. Then Victor wanted to live in England because when the frontier closed down, he ran a restaurant and things became difficult for the people working for them, her son Robin was one year old.

(Looking at photographs of her grandfather – recognises her grandfather from a photograph in the Gibraltar Heritage magazine, image of first election in Gibraltar , all the people, and details. 1921 The workers union; the first four Gibraltarians to be City Councillors – she has sent these to Geraldine at Gibraltar Museum)

What was his work?

He was an accountant who decided to go into politics.

In Tangiers MR remembers one night the ferry that came from Gibraltar a bomb exploded on the wharf and the Arabs blamed it on the English and that night the Arabs stoned the English hotel, MR remembers her mother pushing her sister and herself under the bed. They came in and smashed everything.

Recently a plaque has been unveiled In Gibraltar to the people who died in the bomb in Tangiers. ***They said the bomb had arrived in the ferry from Gibraltar but nobody knows how the bomb arrived.***

Tangiers – so you were living in hotel who else was living there?

My sister, my little brother died in Casablanca, my mother my sister, my grandmother, my grandfather and his second wife; accommodation was excellent; they were given a lot of room; it was living in luxury, paid for MR's grandfather, he paid because he was a very wealthy and well known man, ***whoever organised the evacuation they did not pay us a penny, everything was paid for by the grandfather.***

Were there any other Gibraltarians?

Yes but a very few, the ones who had remained in Gibraltar until the very last. An aunt of MR lived with them in Casablanca but then went to live in apartments separate from them, they were financed by family.

What was your father's work?

He worked for the City Council – but he could come and visit family in Tangiers

Track 2

Did you go to school?

No we had private tuition. Get up in the morning the weather was beautiful, lovely gardens, behind the hotel friends with family who lived in a huge house, visited The Embassy, there was the beach, there was cinema, you went out in the evenings to a cafeteria to sit out in the evenings – and then we had lessons in the afternoon, there was no shortage of food, no austerity – it was luxury it was international, any ones who was anyone lived in Tangiers

Do you think it was like the film – quite a lot of spies?

Oh yes definitely, some Gibraltarians had stayed behind, they were the ones who came into Tangiers, a very small group, because they had no children,

As you go to the **Boulevard Pastel** there is a little wall there and you can see The Straits of Gibraltar, a lot of Gibraltarians used to sit there and we used to call it la parade de los saliaros – because that is where they used to sit to wave goodbye

MR spoke Spanish all the time and feels this is still why she cannot relate to British culture

They weren't living in such luxury – the others – were they poor?

No definitely not, no hardship, they must have come independently

Can you remember you community, was it generally Gibraltarians?

The man who ran the hotel was a Spaniard from Madrid, we were friendly with him, the hotel didn't provide food, we had an Arab and two women who did the cooking and we were friendly with them; speaks about man at the entrance to the hotel; the Arab festivals; what people wore; the music and culture; the funerals and the feasts – killing a lamb and running through the streets with it; the costumes of the Arabs in the evening like a film; everybody spoke four languages although they had never been to school – English,

French, Spanish and Arabic, even the small boys in the market; Arab character; going to the souk; description of Tangiers, man in little wooden tables with sweets – world change ever currency that you wanted without a computer or paper- fascinating to me

It must have been hard to go back?

Of course it was, compared to Tangiers it was dark and we lived in a flat, and it was not like the hotel, the openness, and going to school and trying to learn a language I didn't know anything about

At home did you speak Spanish?

All the time, that's where I acquired this thing that I relate more to a Mediterranean culture than to an English culture and I have been here (UK) 40 odd years.

Have you been back?

MR describes going back to visit Tangiers

.....like going back home, those years were part of my life, formative years that haven't left me – I have brought it with me, if you notice I have to have carpets on the walls, colour everywhere hanging everywhere when people who don't know me walk in, like living in a souk – I have to have the Mediterranean colours with me, I have to.... If you go to other Gibraltarians houses in the UK it is a typical British house but if you come here it is like going into the souk.

Do you go back to Gibraltar?

MR's sister lives in Malaga now but they still have family in Gibraltar so go back and visit.

Gibraltar has changed a lot, it is home in a way because I was born there, it's not home in a way, it's beautiful and people live very well in Gibraltar, people live in luxury, there's a lot of money in Gibraltar You hear them talking and I think gosh you're in another bubble in Gibraltar they don't go through the hardship you go through here.

The population in Gibraltar is roughly 30 thousand we employ 8 thousand Spaniards that cross the frontier every day to work, the ones that come and in and come out.

How can they fit in such a small space?

When you are inside it is quite big, it gives a different image

When Victor was talking about leaving, he didn't want you son to be brought up there?

That is his version, and what he said, but I think the memories of the war in England attracted him back to England somehow because whilst in Gibraltar Victor mixed in with the service people, he was involved with the community that was not Gibraltarians.

Really formative experiences?

Those formative years made an impression – if you talk to people like my mother, Victor's mother living in a very sheltered Gibraltar before the war the ones who came to England, it must have been a terrible shock and yet they coped very well. they became independent, women became independent of men, they started working...I think by law they had to work, seeing another world, some of them even found another man they liked more than their husband, and so did the man in Gibraltar find another woman from Spain, that's the story my father used to tell us, the Spanish women could come into Gibraltar nobody could stop them so the men in Gibraltar started getting involved with the Spanish women, and broke up marriages as well. If they wanted to find out how many women had not gone back into Spain they used to put the air raid on and then they all rushed to the underground and then they caught them there.

Coming back?

They didn't find a home or their husband, the war was fought by everyone, the Gibraltarians had a bad lot to be taken out of such a secure affluent society, my mother used to say that women had to go out wearing a hat and gloves there was nothing casual about it, coming back and some of them found no husband and no home, terrible terrible.

Do you think there are lots of family secrets?

Oh yes, even now children have appeared in Bilbao somewhere from some of those relationships – the most important thing is the women became independent they saw

a life away from the male domination and some of them enjoyed it.

MR speaks about the women who went to Madeira who had a very good life, and women who went to Jamaica. MR speaks about a Jamaican woman she knew who had married a Gibraltar man during the war. Some had a lovely time; others had a very bad time. MR speaks about her cousin who landed in England without knowing any English and she did very well, lots of very happy stories it depended

Track 3

Do you ever think, when you left and came to England, were you sad?

*Not to start with, the very first time I came to England was when we married, our honeymoon which was great, London etc. when MR came to live, a shock to the system, left a good life a good job, family good climate – to a country that was cold, totally different austere life, and we lived in Yorkshire – **I came in April, speaking about pushing push chair in the snow, my idea of England was, especially when it was misty, that people were murdered when they left the house, because it was foggy.***

Wonderful neighbours in Yorkshire – found a playschool for Robin, then they wanted to move to the city, moved to London, had a lovely time, things improved;

How had Gibraltar changed after the war?

According to my mother it had been a quiet respectful place, after the war families had broken up, women felt differently, the formality and the elegance disappeared, disappeared with people having been through a war, respect for the families, for Gibraltar I think it is unique in the world, all religions live together and respect each other, nobody is a foreigner, my mother never called anyone a foreigner – very different in the UK – it had never entered her head.

England

MR speaks about being discriminated against when she lived in Streatham and worked as school assistant. To start with. MR speaks about the prejudice of the English and it being an island, British not

wanting to be European; MR speaks about England wanting to convert people to their culture but this is impossible

What do you think about the relationship after the war between the Gibraltarians and the military?

Very strong, Gibraltarians have always been in awe of the British, I don't consider myself English, I have a British passport because I was born in Gibraltar, but they have always been in awe of the military the navy the governor, the parades – Gibraltarians going to mess nights, visiting aircraft carriers

What do you think defines a Gibraltarian?

I tell you what I think now I have been away for so long, I say now and I will say it to anybody, the Gibraltarians are Spaniards with a British passport because they are more Spanish in their way of life, the way they think and the way they behave, than a British person, definitely when I say this to a Gibraltarian they want to kill me but I don't care The Gibraltarians are really Mediterranean more Spanish than anything else they happened to have a British passport because they were born in Gibraltar.

They come here to shop they come here to school and university it is all paid for them, they come here when they are ill and it is all paid for by the Gibraltarian government, they get all that, but none of them come here to spend the summer here.

MR speaks about Calpe House in Bayswater, London – where Gibraltarians can come for medical treatment.

They arrive because they are ill and the first thing they look for is Spanish television, there is nothing wrong with that, but they live in the med next door to Spain they speak Spanish all the time, I sometimes talk to them in English and they answer in Spanish.

We have Spanish and English television – we like the culture and films and the politics, everything really, it is a very mixed culture but I think they tend more to be on the Spanish side.

They can't do with Spain, they should be ashamed of themselves because with all that Spain is throwing in

Gibraltar they should not cross into Spain, and that part of Spain is only there because of Gibraltar, spend their money in Spain.

All the Spanish who work for them, does it make the Gibraltarians look down on the Spanish?

No we had staff all the time, they were like family, we treated them beautifully, but having said that when Franco started becoming nasty and then we saw the other side of these people, speaks about a particular guy a carpenter he came in one day and said when this is Spanish all this will be mine so that at the end of the day they will stick a knife into your back.

They are feeding La Linea – you do not trust the Spaniards, they are totally corrupt;

Spain would like Gibraltar to disappear but what are they going to do when they get it back make the mess that they've got in Spain now

Who do you think you are?

A Mediterranean person, British passport because I was born in Gibraltar but I relate more to a Mediterranean culture than I relate to the one here, that is my honest honest opinion I would say that to anyone, in England I find I cannot adjust to the British way of thinking - the way they think of families, not living together, the treatment of the elderly.