



Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity

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

Lilian Baker - Interviewed by Mary Ingoldby on 30 January 2013 (Serial 002)

Italic bold – direct quote

Italic - interviewer

Track 1

Introduction

Born in Gibraltar, parents both Gibraltarians, father's family from Portugal, mother's family from Minorca. Went to St Mary's School, Gibraltar; evacuated to Casablanca during WWII; father stayed in Gibraltar as he was a Special Policeman, also worked in shipping. Father used to come to Casablanca on the boat to visit the family; then brought back to Gibraltar for a month and then evacuated to England as WWII had started. 16 days and 17 nights on a convoy to the UK.

Family

Great great grandfather came from Portugal to trade in Gibraltar. Mother's family from Minorca; LB has a book from her great grandmother of the family marriages and births. No record like this on the Portugal side. LB has visited Minorca to research her family history, some of the papers/church records which were destroyed in the Spanish Civil War. LB did locate her family graves.

What language did you speak at home?

Spanish – LB speaks about Spanish people working in Gibraltar, only English spoken at school. LB's sister died from rheumatic fever when she was four and half; LB still has a brother who lives in Gibraltar, the family lived together with their Auntie and cousins. LB's father born in Gibraltar so he never spoke Portuguese. LB speaks about her Grandparents (on father's side) family history.

Did you speak English better than your mother?

LB never heard her mother speak English although she used to read it, the family never spoke English at home. LB says she is still bi-lingual now and speaks to her husband half in English and half in Spanish

Evacuation and WWII

Not really aware of coming of the war – told they had to leave The Rock and go to Casablanca, living in a flat in Casablanca.

They didn't want us to leave the boat, they wanted to put us in another boat to go to England

Children wives and the elderly people went to England. LB's father stayed in Gibraltar during the war, they kept their flat. Father worked for the **Imosi** (?) family

LB was 7 when she arrived in England

We came by boat the boat was called the **Anusetta**? We were sleeping down in the hold of the boat, all the women and children in one side of boat and the men on the other. We had to take our own mattresses and we had to take some food with us. I was a very bad sailor, I couldn't stay down they used to take me up every day, the captain used to give me dried biscuits because I couldn't take anything else

How long was the voyage?

We were 16 days and 17 nights. Not much food on the boat, they mainly ate food that they had brought with them. LB speaks about mattresses in the hold, rolled up during the day so there was room to move. Basic toilet facilities

Track 2

We were taken off the boat and taken into a very big big hall, we were checked by the doctors, our hair was checked, they told my Mum I had nits, my mother had never heard of it before. Then we were put on trains and brought to London. We were all put in the Royal Palace Hotel Kensington next to Kensington Gardens.

10 people in the room, My Mum and my brother and myself and then my aunties and two children and two old ladies. We

were on the third floor, I think there were about 7 floors, a lovely hotel wide corridors. They had the dining room downstairs and we had to go down for everything; we were given the masks in cardboard boxes, my Mum had a tin one.

Sometimes we didn't like what we were given for food, if we didn't like something my Mum had a little paraffin stove on a chest in the very big bathroom and she would cook things differently for us.

We had coupons so we could only go to the shop and get what we can with the coupons.

I was born in 1933

Do you remember your mother, the adults in the room talking about it all the time?

It was all trying to get clothes for us, trying to get as comfortable as we could because we were all in the same room. We had camp beds which were kept under the beds; we had two good beds for the elderly people;

LB not sure why her uncle came with them. He got a job during the war in England. LB's brother was only 4 years old.

LB speaks about the air-raids:

When the air raids went we all had to leave the rooms and we had to bring the mattresses and put them on the floor in the big corridors that we had, the hotel manager would come and see if we were alright. Later on it must have been two years after, they made shelters in the hotel and then we were not allowed to stay in the room there so every time the siren went we had to go down to the shelter, and in the shelter we had bunk beds in three layers but what my mum and my aunty did, they let the children sleep on them, and then we would put up the flaps and my aunty would sleep on one.

LB also remembers sleeping on mattresses under the tables in the dining room before the sirens went. Her mother and aunty used to sleep on chairs and their ankles got very swollen.

I know my Mum always had a little brown case with clothes for us in case we were bombed, and she also kept her

money, she made a little material bag with a button and she always had some money there and she would pin it on her bra, in case we had to run – she always had some money for us, she always said that will keep us going.

Not allowed to use the lifts when the sirens went; LB speaks about the Gibraltarians in the hotel, a number of people they knew from Gibraltar.

In the afternoons we had a room with a kettle and toaster and an ironing boards so my Mum used to wash the things for us in the bathroom and then my Mum's aunty used to do the ironing, but she also used to get slices of bread and toast it for us from when we came back from school – there was always a long queue because everyone was doing the same thing.

The first school that I went to was at the Victoria and Albert Museum– all the girls from 6 – 14. with four mothers, two mothers in the front and two at the back and we used to walk every day to the school, and we used to take sandwiches for lunch – we had to walk because we didn't know anything about buses at the beginning and all that.

What can you remember about the school at the V&A?

Everything was in English – LB thinks that one or two of the teachers might have been from Gibraltar, all Gibraltarians, no English girls there. I know we did arithmetic and English.

LB speaks about photographs; speaks about the boys going there too, her cousin also has a picture of himself on the steps.

They were at the hotel for 4 years

Track 3

Convent of the Sacred Heart

Lovely school, they had uniforms, had to have 3 or 4 pairs of shoes which they couldn't because her mother didn't have the coupons. They got a bus from outside the hotel to the school, the children all went together. Taught Geography and History, all the main subjects.

Did you feel excited to be in London?

It didn't bother me, I had to be here, I took it for granted that this was going to be my life until the war finished.

What about air raids at school?

It was always at lunchtime so we had to leave the dining room and hide under our desks until it was safe. We were nearly always lucky that the raid never went before we got back

Can you remember being frightened?

Yes – we were on the third floor so we had to go down about five floors, yes I was very frightened, I used to get out of the room and run downstairs and then I was worried because I didn't see anyone else from the family, but of course they were elderly and they took longer

LB enjoyed school – Mother didn't like them walking back from school, she thought it was too dangerous

LB speaks about making her first communion, no other girls from Gibraltar, she could do it because she had her birth certificate - but many others didn't have their birth certificates in the UK. LB also confirmed in the UK, in a church in Kensington in 1942. LB remembers her long dress and her veil, the nuns giving her a book and a rosary. LB speaks about the nuns being very good to the children. LB returned to the school after the war and it was lovely to see it again, LB remembers the corridors and the gardens. The Sacred Heart Convent is still there. It was a private school when LB went there, her mother used to pay.

How did she pay?

LB's father was sending money to England; he worked for **Gerrity Mossey**? It was also another company – GM was a shipping company, shipping coal into Gibraltar.

It was an English fellow who used to come to the hotel with a bowler hat and he came downstairs to the reception and they would call my mum downstairs and they would hand her an envelope. Once a month he came

What happened in 1944?

Gibraltarians were beginning to re-patriated in 1944 but because LB's Uncle died the British would only allow some of the family to return (they would only allow people to return to Gibraltar if they had family and somewhere to live when they arrived). LB's father wanted the whole family to return but the British Government said no and they were sent to a camp in Northern Ireland.

The camps in Northern Ireland were on Nissan Huts on farmland. There were many Gibraltarians in the camps. LB's family was separated – her auntie and cousins went to a different camp because they had been living in a Barnardos Home? LB speaks again about the British Government only repatriating people who had a place to go in Gibraltar. LB's father came to visit them in Northern Ireland

What was that like?

I used to write to my father a lot, my mother took a photograph of us every year and sent it to my dad so that he would see what it was like. (LB has one of these photographs)

LB thinks she was in the camp for about five months. Her Auntie and cousins were in Northern Ireland for a further two years.

We had to go to the restaurant for meals every day, no schools, just had a good time, if we wanted to go shopping there was a farmer across from us, he had a red van and he would sit us at the back, just sitting on the floor, we had to pay for him to take us, I remember that.

What were the conditions like?

The food was from the restaurant, the dining rooms, we only had in the middle of room, one of these iron stoves, and of course My mum always had a the kettle there and made us tea, and that's what made the room warm

LB, her mother and brother returned to Gibraltar at the end of August 1945.

Do you think you had forgotten about Gibraltar?

No because my Mum always spoke about it and I could remember the house all the time, because I pictured my Dad

being in the house and what it was like when I was there, the family always talked about it.

Were people very upset when they were in England?

I know my Mum and my aunty always talked about it, are we going to survive are we going to go back. We were very lucky because my Dad was still there, but my auntie had nowhere to come back to because her house was over taken by the military, she never got it back. We didn't own the houses, they were all rented.

LB speaks about shortage of houses in England – and how her eventually her aunty had to come to the UK to live

Track 4

Coming back from Ireland (LB was 12)

The house hadn't changed at all; a few weeks after return they went back to school, can't remember the building, teacher had been evacuated to Madeira; LB speaks about having some English friends, children of servicemen and women. They still spoke Spanish and English.

LB speaks poignantly about worrying about her school friends when she was in the UK during the war.

What I hated when we were in England was having to go to school in the morning and see whether my friends were still there, that was the worst thing for me, some of them had lost their house but they were still alive, and that is what I dreaded every morning, that was my worse problem

Every afternoon we would say goodbye, hope to see you in the morning, and of course on my way to school I would say are they all there, am I going to see them again. And of course being in the convent there weren't many English girls because they were all evacuated and I always wondered why the English had put us all in London.

LB speaks about the convent in Hammersmith – her brother was there until he was seven; hardly any English girls

We were all very lucky because the four years I was at the school we were all there, ok two or three lost their houses but they were alive which was the main thing.

LB speaks about the other hotels where Gibraltarians lived

Track 5

Return to Gibraltar after the war

Was it much changed?

LB felt that it felt much smaller than when they left, perspective of a child; LB describes the flat she lived in; no bathroom and shared toilet with the neighbours; bath day was in a big sink put out twice a week; Spanish maid who came to help with the cleaning;

LB brought up with cousins, they were like brothers and sisters, they had lived together in London and continued to live together in Gibraltar.

LB speaks about the new houses which were built at Humphries, LB's father had put his name down and so he got one of the houses;

The explosion of the Bedenham

The new houses at Humphries had their windows shattered as they were opposite the dockyard. LB was on her way to clean the new house with the maid from La Linea when the explosion happened.

We heard this big explosion, we didn't know what it was, a friend of ours who lived near the docks, the boy came with a big cut on his forehead, bleeding, we had to clean him all up and they stayed with us, and in the evening we found out what had happened. We stayed in our old house until the new one was fixed up again.

LB says they were very lucky; a lot of people with cuts, a piece of the ship was blown on the other side of the rock.

Were there a lot of British soldiers everywhere?

Oh yes, and we used to get a lot of ships in those day, Main Street you couldn't see, all you could see was the hats of the navy people, the Australians they came in, we had a lot of people drunk everywhere, when we moved to Humphries we lived on the seventh floor.

LB tells anecdote about finding a hat and shoes on their doorstep where somebody had had a sleep, father took the things down to the military police.

Too many drunks

Relationship between Gibraltarians and armed services

The military that were there, they got on well, it was just the boats that came in, the sailors they were the worst – the bars and the Spanish girls, and of course they got drunk

Because I lived on the 7th floor I could see them all going into the dock all drunk and singing but just as they got to the boat they had to be very straight otherwise they wouldn't be allowed to go onboard

Were your parents worried about you as a young girl?

LB not allowed to be out after 9 o'clock. LB speaks about the girls and boys walking up and down Main Street.

Were most of your friends Gibraltarians?

Yes, but LB had two English friends because they were educated at the convent, one of her English friends father was in the navy. LB speaks about her English friends.

LB describes meeting her husband Paul, her parents knew about it the first day they went out together. This is what Gibraltar was like ***you just had to walk down the road and they knew who you were going out with.***

Scarcity of property in Gibraltar meant that after Paul and Lilian were married they had to live with her family.

After Paul had done his National Service he joined Shell and they travelled all over the world.

What do you think you are?

I think I am Gibraltarian, I live here but we've got a flat over there. We've got this house because we have our four children here and four grand children, one of our grandchildren is in Gibraltar

How has Gibraltar Changed?

Not my friends, but there are so many buildings now, it doesn't look like Gibraltar at all, it's more like Monaco, all high buildings, people are the same, my friends are the

same, I've got my brother still there and Paul has two sisters there, I love going back but I like coming here because I've got my children here

So what do you feel when you do go back?

Just like being at home, that I've never left it because my brother is there, my cousins are there, my friends are still there.