



Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity

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

Paul Baker interviewed by Mary Ingoldby - 31 January 2013 **Transcript (Serial 001)**

Italic bold – direct quote

Italic – interviewer

Track 1

Introduction

Born in Gibraltar 1932 – father was a Government employee, had a decent house and garden; evacuated from Gibraltar in May 1940 SS **Narcanda?** arrived in Southampton, conditions bad on board, mother and two sisters and self had scabies and had 4 weeks treatment in hospital in London, put into a bath and scrubbed with a scrubbing brush, four inch brush with horrible brown ointment all over our bodies, ***we went home in our pyjamas under our clothes so as not to spoil our clothes.***

Early childhood in Gibraltar?

PB went to a Hebrew School; Gibraltar a mixture of religions, no antagonism between them – Jews went to Christian schools and vice versa. Then to the Sacred Heart School

Parents – Grandfather came to Gibraltar in the 1800's in the Royal engineers he married a Gibraltarian girl.

PB's Mother English; his parents met in London in the 1920s – father went to London for the Wembley Jamboree for the scouts (Wembley exhibition 1924). They married and lived in Gibraltar until the 1980s when PB's mother returned to the UK.

Can you remember the build up to the war?

All I could remember was my mother saying, we've got to go to England because of the war; to us in Gibraltar the war was something much further away, we were in fact much more conscious of the Spanish Civil War

PB tells anecdote about the Spanish Civil War, a refugee arriving on their doorstep – refugees from la Linea

PB's father was an architect; he was the Clerk Of Works in the building of the war memorial in Gibraltar

Most of the men stayed in Gibraltar – PB; 2 sisters and mother evacuated from Gibraltar

The voyage

I can remember going down into the hold and seeing the bunk beds because we were from the government we had a cabin and were better off than the rest of them.....people lying on mattresses on the deck of the ship

PB doesn't remember going ashore; he remembers the scabies (as in introduction)

PB and family left Evacuation system when they arrived in the UK as they had family in North London;

The family went to live in Neasden all the English children had been evacuated; PB's mother decided that they should leave London so they went to Wales for one year and then returned to London; after this PB returned to Wales by himself and stayed for another year in South Wales Rhonda valley. PB's uncle was the arts master of Rugby College so PB was sent to a prep school for Rugby College, where PB stayed for 18months – 2 years and then returned to London just before the family returned to Gibraltar.

Re-joined evacuation in London, taken by train to Neston, near Liverpool and put into ex Polish army camp where they stayed for about a week.

We were always at loggerheads with the local boys, they called us Rock Scorpions and we called them Liverpool rats..

Then the family went by train to Glasgow. Terrible conditions on the train. PB remembers a huge stations where the WVS had coffee and tea and then taken out to the ship - *The Sterling Castle* – meant to leave in a convoy which included Queen Mary but they couldn't raise the anchor – wouldn't let them cut the anchor so convoy sailed without them so they were stuck for 14 days and then sailed to Gibraltar with an escort of a cruiser and two destroyers

Arrived in Gibraltar on August 4th 1945 – **my father was waiting for us on the quay. That was the end of the war as far as we were concerned.**

Track 2

Did your mother try to keep the notion of Gibraltar Alive?

Yes definitely, although my Mother was English she had lived 20 years in Gibraltar, to us we were Gibraltarians and we were virtually foreigners in England, we were made aware of that from the people around us

Were they racist?

Very much so, because we were able to speak Spanish, because of the war any foreigners were suspected at that stage, very evident especially when we were in Neston, and antipathy towards foreigners.

PB returned to Gibraltar when he was 12

What was it like being with all the Gibraltarians Again?

It was like being back home, like being back to a normal life; we were among people that we knew families that we knew.

When you were stuck in Glasgow what was the boat like?

The conditions on the boat weren't bad at all, under war conditions but food was plentiful and water was available, not like the other when we were washing in sea water, it wasn't bad.

Why did the British Government decide to send everyone back so near to the end of the war?

The allies had forced the Germans well away from the coast, there wasn't much danger, it was only the U-boats we had to worry about; and obviously we went right down the outside of Ireland down through the centre of the Atlantic, but although we had a couple of scares on route it was relatively safe - they seemed to think so anyway.

Evacuation of British children from London

We were not removed from Gibraltar for our benefit we were removed from Gibraltar for the benefit of the military, I've actually seen documentation in the archives where the Governor was talking about how they couldn't feed the civilian population and the military population so the civilian population should be moved, and that was the philosophy at the time, so we were moved for the benefit of the military not for the benefit of the Gibraltarians

What were the scenes at the dockside?

Everybody was shouting and screaming, I hadn't seen my father for four years, he was brought to England for a month's leave, most fathers were, and then he went back so I saw my father once in four years so obviously it was tremendous to get back, the scenes on the dock were incredible.

Military trucks on the wharf took us to a central point and then we went off home, there was no civilian structure in Gibraltar after the war, there were no nurses, no teachers, the only teachers we had were those that we brought with us back from England, in fact my teacher was from the Army Education Corps. We had to virtually start from scratch again.

Many of the houses had been taken over by the military and were rendered uninhabitable but there was no compensation ever offered to the local people....the majority of houses in those days were rented from the government anyway but the contents completely disappeared, the soldiers just took what they wanted and that was it.

PB comments that although there was no combat in Gibraltar during the War there was a lot of damage to the houses.

Was there a lot of boredom during the war?

They had a lot of entertainment in the army, they had the YMCA, the library for the officers, there were concerts going on all the time, there was plenty of entertainment but there definitely was a lot of boredom, we must also understand that not all the damage was done by the English, there were a lot of Spaniards coming over and we don't know how much of it was done by them.

What about espionage/spying – was there a lot of this?

That's true yes, quite a number of incidents, there was the sabotage on the Coaling island where they blew up one of the drum stores, a couple of spies captured and executed in Gibraltar, most of the spies were over in Spain in Algeciras observing the ships that were coming in and out of Gibraltar There's quite a number of interesting stories of that going on. The two men submarines based in Algeciras on an Italian ship that was interned – but it had actually been turned into a two men submarine base, the ship was the called the SS Olterra – the two men submarines used to come out from the base of the ship, and sail into the bay and put limpet mines on the ships that were anchored in the bay. This is where the famous story of Commander Crab started and the British Underwater Service who used to check all the ships before they left.

Gibraltar very important during Operation Torch (the landings in North Africa) – refers to story in the latest Gibraltar Chronicle magazine – picture of airport.

Track 3

British military in Gibraltar?

It was difficult because everything that was done on The Rock was done on what the military required – for example we couldn't go up The Rock without a pass...they were the ones who decided what you could do and what you couldn't do

Anecdote about Stone Jetty – a swimming area – hiding in a military lorry so that they could go and swim.

Was there resentment?

No never any resentment between us and the Military.

PB speaks about when The Fleet was in – ***There were a large number of bars and it was nothing to see sailors coming out through the windows of the bars and landing on their backs....***

Anecdote about living in Humphries – a series of high rise houses that overlook the dockyard – watching the sailors having to sober up when they went back onboard.

One of things I do miss is that at night in the summer the young boys and girls used to go around the streets with guitars and mandolins playing at night, they'd come at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning and knock on the door, you'd be asleep but you'd get up open the door, they'd come in, they'd play two or three tunes, have a drink and then they would go again – and at night time you could hear the various **Compassas** around the town all playing, it was absolutely beautiful but of course television has killed it off..

Gibraltar population?

Hasn't changed very much always been between 25 – 30 thousand – people used to get married and live with their parents, most of the houses government owned, gradually more houses available for purchase, people used to pay a rent controlled by government; housing in Gibraltar – the beginnings of mortgages and housing market.

Today even with the number of houses being built they still haven't got enough...

Influx of people because of the good economy – people coming from UK and all parts of Europe – living in Spain and coming to Gibraltar to work.

12 or 14 thousand Spaniards would come in every day to work in the dockyard – today it is commercial work
All the menial tasks have been done by Spanish.
PB speaks about the change from Spanish to Moroccan labour when the border were closed; relationship between the Moroccans and the Spaniards; French Moroccans.

Geography?

PB speaks about the history of Gibraltar and the writing and editing of The Chronicle Magazine four times a year, never a lack of information, always a story, amount of information in the archives for a place so small

Cultural identity of Gibraltar?

The problems with Gibraltar is we are very similar in make up to America, because we have the original Spaniards which are few when we captured the rock, but Genoans, Maltese, Italians, Portuguese all came to Gibraltar and made up a population which is a similar make up to The States, so our identity would have been a bit different had the Spaniards had a different attitude.

PB speaks about politics between Gibraltar and Spain;
Border closed in 1962

Track 4

Evacuees arriving back?

Evacuees returning every month after the War from Madeira, Northern Ireland, England and Jamaica

Was it random where people were sent?

PB speaks about the plans for evacuation – evacuees originally sent to North Africa but British attacked the French fleet, returned to Gibraltar, Governor wouldn't let them off the ship, wanted to send them to England in the same ferry boats. Tito Benady's Uncle faced up to the Governor and arranged for the evacuees to come ashore on the understanding that they would return to a reasonably sized boats to go to the UK; some to Jamaica, some to Madeira, problems with the safety of crossing the Atlantic so decided to send the rest of them from the UK.

N Ireland?

Evacuees sent from London to N Ireland at the end of the War
PB refers to an article written about the evacuees in N Ireland – sent there as a temporary measure, some of them didn't get back until 1952

Antagonism between the Gibraltarians British establishment?

No, so used to being under the heel of the military that we accepted what was done, most of the Governors have been accepted by the local population, latest governor has got an extension because so well liked.

PB speaks of one governor who was particularly antagonistic, who wanted to evacuate the entire civilian population during the War.

Where did you go to school when you came back?

PB went to a school in South Barracks, run by the Royal Army Education Corps, then to Gibraltar Grammar School until he was 14; then PB asked his father if he could go for an apprenticeship, and became an apprentice engineer in the dockyard.

1952 – The explosion

I was working on a ship called the St Austell Bay which was moored in the dockyard, working on the refrigerators, I needed some spares so I walked back to the workshops, just as I walked back the explosion occurred and it threw me the whole length of the Nissan hut and I ended up with my back against the back wall.

Chaos in the dockyard, fire engines and ambulances. All the windows of PB's house had blown in – speaks about Ernie Reading who was in Torpedo Department; two people died on the ship, it turned out to be the unstable powder in the mines.

Problem was didn't know what it was, wasn't until later that we found out what had happened. Everyone kept out because worried it might blow again.

PB speaks about torpedoes and mines stock piled because of the threat of The Cold War - Russian fleet in the Black Sea could come through the Straits of Gibraltar.

Spying?

PB says obviously was but doesn't know about this.

PB tells anecdote about working on an aircraft carrier and nearly crushed in the dry dock.

Did explosion have huge impact on the country?

Fortunate it didn't happen later, it happened when everything was quiet – close to the dock gates; if it had happened at lunch time it would have caught everyone out for lunch

Any suspicion of sabotage?

No definitely proven to be faulty torpedoes

Funerals?

PB doesn't recall the funerals; don't recall anything in the UK papers, what happens in Gibraltar gets very little acknowledgement in the UK.

What did you see when you emerged

All I saw was everyone running around like headless chickens, no one knew what had happened and what had caused it, it wasn't until the next day we found out what had happened...glass everywhere and our workshops had to be cleaned out..

Did you speculate?

Yes, we had no idea what it could be; it could have been one of the underground ammunition dumps that had blown up.

Track 5

How PB met Lilian

Walking up main streets – the custom all the young people go down to main street each night, the girls walking one way the boys the other....the first day that Lilian and I walked up and down by ourselves, both of us when we got home our parents said to us – who was that you were with?

Getting the job with Shell

Finished apprenticeship in 1952 – had to do his National Service, worked at the dockyard, and then at the airport; then Shell sent PB to Nigeria.

National Service?

Gibraltar Defence Force which is now the Royal Gibraltar Regiment, had to do 6 month National Service in Gibraltar, we were attached to The Royal Artillery – marching and drills, and then anti aircraft guns; At the end of NS supposed to do two weeks every two years to keep up to date.

PB tells anecdote about the treacherous conditions of the steep roads going up the rock; splitting his kneecap, so PB medically unfit and discharged from NS.

PB speaks about the present use of Military barracks, converted into housing, and a school, - there isn't much evidence now of the military presence, other than the ancient fortifications

How long did NS continue?

PB thinks around the late 1960s - same as in the UK

What do you feel - British Spanish Gibraltarian?

We are Gibraltarian first and British second - there is no argument about that - and British and not English because to be English you have to be born in England.

PB speaks about the contribution of commonwealth soldiers in both WWars

In every single fight that Britain has had since 1800 there has always been Gibraltarians

PB speaks about the war memorials in Gibraltar and the Military Cemetery

Do young Gibraltarians have a connection with their history?

A watered down version yes - all they know is what their parents have told them, they are very proud of being Gibraltarian. PB speaks about September 10th Gibraltar Day - everyone comes out in red and white on that day, which is our flag.

PB speaking about the sea scouts - Operation Torch - Spitfires and Hurricanes brought inboxes and assembled in Gibraltar, boxes turned in to accommodation for the troops who were there for the operation - RAF built sailing boats made from left over wood - PB and a friend bought one each for £5 made from the spitfire cases.

End of Interview