



Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity

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

Victor Risso - Interviewed by Mary Ingoldby on 13 February 2013 (Serial 003)

Track 1

Introduction

VR speaks about his parents and grandparents. His father was in shipping; both his grandfathers died before he was born, but had two grandmothers. All the family lived in Gibraltar and were very close.

The Family came to Gibraltar in the 1700's; some of the family were from Genoa and others from Spain. Mother's family name is **Rais** which dates back to the year 230 in Naples.

The Family would call themselves Gibraltarian

VR thinks his family was in Gibraltar before it became

Can you remember the house you lived in?

VR remembers living in Cornwalls Parade when he was four years old, above a restaurant called the Sombrero, as a young man VR managed the restaurant.

What you can remember about very early childhood?

VR remembers being taken out by his aunt, grandmother and mother to Victoria Gardens which is now the airport; remembers being there as a tiny child; remembers the lake and in the middle of the lake an Isolation Hospital; remembers Easton Beach – his parents liked to go to the beach; and a family called **Caporu** who would join them there.

VR remembers the beginning of The Civil War in Spain

The whole of La Linia alight with fires and the people walking along the beach, the refugees coming into Gibraltar, the Gibraltarians - opened their doors and looked after them

VR remembers being taken to The Almedia Gardens which is now Humphreys, he has photographs of them sitting on the big guns from the sieges; the Gardens on the side of Trafalgar Cemetery and don't exist anymore because the road was widened for traffic; he remembers going swimming – sea used to come up to Queens Way

Track 2

Evacuation – what happened to you family?

VR was seven, he remembers going aboard a ferry and saying goodbye to his father – his mother and two sisters, a baby brother, a grandmother and an aunt. The family arrived in Casablanca; VR recalls standing in pavilion with all the luggage, even mattresses.

Then my mother found a flat with some other people who were not related, it was a very large flat so we all had rooms; Casablanca was lovely and we used to go out.

VR remembers going out with his two sisters and walking along the wharf –

A Moroccan following us which frightened us because we weren't used to it. We ran home, my grandmother who was formidable and said no you can't go out on your own, and one night at midnight there was a knock on the door. A huge black Moroccan dressed all in white with a red fez on your head and he said I hear you are looking for someone to look after you children, and Hamigo became our minder he used to walk behind, huge fellow, and we would walk in front so we were quite safe.

VR remembers going out with his family in a carriage and the wheels fell off; he remembers a self service restaurant

I remember she used to send us out to eat, and there was I think the first self service – you came to the front and paid for what you wanted you walked along and there were little windows and whatever you wanted came from the other

side, you opened the glass window and you took out what you wanted.

Then there was trouble, we were bombed, not sure who bombed us, the French had capitulated, we were told we had to leave immediately

VR thinks they were probably there for a couple of months – July/August/September

Terrible weather on the crossing back to Gibraltar, enormous waves.

I have never been frightened of anything, although I was born in the period when people frightened you to keep you in check, but they never managed to frighten me.

The family arrived back in Gibraltar and VR's father arranged for them to board a ship to England. Everyone was seasick but not Victor, he remembers being by himself in the dining room having breakfast; the ship had a convoy.

Did you get special treatment as your father worked for the Shipping Company?

VR didn't think so, although they did have a cabin; VR thinks other families may have had to share.

What year was this?

I think it was 1939 or very early 1940 –

Track 3

We arrived in the London Docks – my grandmother I must take it from her, she was never frightened of anything, she walked along the wharf and the air raids started and she was told by a policeman to get under cover and she said, don't you dare tell me what to do.

VR's Grandmother became an ARP Warden

The family went to a small hotel in Gower Street – very near the air ministry. Grandmother and aunt became ARP Wardens – ***they used***

to stand on hotel roof in helmets and watch the air fights in the sky - I must have gone too because I think I remember

What did it look like?

Fascinating, absolutely fascinating

How old would your grandmother have been?

VR thinks his aunt was in her 30s, grandmother in 60s. The family had a nanny who used to take them out.

I remember one day she took us to lunch – when we got back it was dark, there was an air raid and we walked from the station back to the hotel and there were incendiary bombs landing on the pavement in front of us

When you were in the hotel were you in one room together?

Grandmother and aunt shared one room. VR's mother and children in another.

One night we were all in the basement because there were the air raids and when we came up there was a bomb in the middle of the hotel an incendiary bomb which was a huge thing but it hadn't exploded so it was still sunk there because I remember seeing it in the middle, so very quickly we moved out taken to a place called Putney College and then we were taken to a lovely building in Kensington High Street, at the top, Bedford Walk and we were given three rooms and a bathroom in one of the suites, a block of flats.

Were there other Gibraltarians in Gower Street?

Yes it was full of Gibraltarians

Did you start trying to have a normal life?

Not then, not until we got to Bedford Walk, it's still there in Notting Hill Gate.

There was a lull in the bombing for a while and then I started going to school, I went to Portobello School, and it's still there. My grandmother started having a normal life and she would go on trips to Hampton Court etc and we would go for walks in Kensington Gardens; I would walk to school up and

down up and down in my shorts, my other refused to have me in long trousers even in winter.

My aunt would go down to Ken High Street or we would walk or take the bus to Portobello – but I do remember having the mumps and they took me to St Pancreas Hospital, but by then the bombs had started again, so what my mother thought of her son in the hospital...

Do you remember going to actual air raid shelters or down to the tube?

When the bomb started badly there was no basement in the block of flats and the bombs were actually falling all around; the house on the other side of the road was blown away and we were in the building, my grandmother by then had gone to pieces, my mother was very upset, my aunt would refuse to come down, she would stand by the window and look at all the bombing all around her, the whole of London was red, absolutely red, and of course everything was dark because it was the blackout, and on top of that in the winter there was the smog.....by then my mother decided that we couldn't possibly stay in the building anymore and we used to go all the way down Holland park walk and there was an underground station and we used to go into The Underground very night

Was your father really worried about you?

Yes he must have been but we are a very strong minded family, my mother was an extraordinary woman and my father was very military....if you cried you went top a room on your own to cry

Can you remember the underground station shelters?

We used to go the station opposite Holland Walk and get a train to Bayswater and sleep in Bayswater and people just slept on the floor on the platform, every night and strangely enough there was a lovely atmosphere, usually very nice people, in the morning I would go up to a little newspaper agent that was on the street and I would deliver newspapers

Most women and children had been evacuated – do you think people were surprised to see children down there?

I don't know but they were very nice to us, I was 8 I think, they must have thought it was strange, a child here

Did you speak English or Spanish?

Both

Did the English people regard you with any suspicion?

Not us, not to my knowledge, at school I was just another school boy

Where did the other children come from at Portobello School?

They were locals, first I went to a little primary school called Fox school – they had a National Day in the playground and I was told that I had to take something from Gibraltar and I went home as children doand I went home and I said to my mother I have to take a Gibraltar flag tomorrow, and my aunt she stayed up all night, making a flag for me, two feet by three feet getting bits of white and red and black for the castle and then gold for the key an the next day I took this flag....strange isn't it.

Track 4

Can you remember ever seeing anyone being killed?

No I didn't. We were very lucky that the bomb that fell in the Gower Street hotel didn't explode. My grandmother would take us to the Carmelite church in Kensington Church Street and I became an altar boy – my grandmother would take us to a church in Soho Square, St Patricks – and I remember coming out of church crossing Oxford street to Tottenham Court Road and all of a sudden there was terrible noise and she said, children come here, and the three of us got against the wall with her in front , and a German plane machine gunning the whole of Oxford Street right past us and she didn't turn a hair – a woman who had been out of Gibraltar only to the Canary Islands – she was remarkable but by the time that we went to the underground she was an absolute wreck

How did you survive?

My father sent us money and I think that's about it, my aunt who was very beautiful and young had to work, but she had never done anything in her life so there were two blocks of flats in Notting Hill

Gate and next door she went as a house keeper, a daily, to a man who was the cartoonist for? He used to sign his cartoon Woop.

What about your mother?

No neither mother nor grandmother had to work; VR thinks his grandmother was given the job of looking after the linen at the flats where they lived.

Was there a sense that the British Government were looking out for you?

Oh yes, they built a wooden dining room that became like the village hall and people assembled there for meals and in the evening had various functions, and when there was a lull in the bombing people led quite ordinary lives.

How long were you there?

VR can't remember exactly.

but when the V2's started, that was very interesting because we were in the Carmelite church and it was bombed when we were in it – we were in the pew and there was a terrible whistling noise and she said get under the bench and by the time we came out of the bench there was not much church left but enough not to have killed us....and she just walked us home (grandmother)

I think she had a nervous breakdown she had been bottling it up

You could stand and see the V2, it stops and then you think ooooh I wonder where it is going. The thing is that if you could see it you knew it wasn't going to hit you, it was when you heard it stop and you couldn't see it that you thought oh is it coming and that is when we were moved to Ireland.

Did you have friends?

There was a lad who went to school with me, my mother had a strange idea that if I had friends she had to vet the friends and the family – this very nice boy Charles Borges who's mother was a lovely lady, they were lovely people she first had to see who the mother was, and Charles became my friend so we used to walk to school or back again, my mother wouldn't let me join boy scouts, didn't believe in it – my sister went to The Sacred Heart Convent in

Hammersmith. I remember having trouble with bullies and I remember trying to push a bully's head through the railings until they got me off him.

Was the war fascinating to boys?

Yes you are standing there and you are seeing these aeroplanes fighting each other and you see this pilotless plane that comes along with a flame at the back, and then it stops and there is a pause and it is as if the whole world has stopped, the silence is extraordinary, and then it dives, and you look to see where it is going to drop....it's fascinating.

The bang is a very strange sound it sounds as if it is falling into a sack, the sound is muffled, it is an extraordinary sound, and once the bang has happened that's it, you move on to the next one, it's very strange, I was never frightened.

Were you surprised when other people were frightened?

Worried

Track 5

They took us by train to Liverpool Street, and by ship to Belfast, and then we were put in Nissan huts, not the best kind of accommodation really but one has to get used to it

What was it like being in the middle of nowhere?

I don't think it was a very happy time for the older people, how they coped having led a very sheltered life really, first being brought to London

What was the Nissan hut like?

It wasn't very comfortable but you had the space, it was surrounded by fields, VR remembers being burnt by a frying pan on the stove; bunks in the Nissan Hut, VR probably 10 by this time, mother slept with the children in one part of the hut and grandmother and aunt and little brother slept in another part. They had a pet cock called Peter which used to run around, VR used to play with other people in the fields, used to pinch turnips, wash them in the stream, peel them with our teeth, it was great fun

Were you hungry?

No no no we were never hungry, on Sundays in London mother would send the children to a restaurant, no we weren't hungry at all; we had very good clothes because my father used to send enough money. In N Ireland I used to go shopping, my sister and I and sometimes on my own, we would get a bus to the border, cross the frontier into free Ireland and do all our shopping there, about once a week, and bus it all the way back

Were you there long enough to be at school?

No I think it was only months, no time to organise any educational system.

Did each family have a hut of their own?

VR not sure, it was big, Ballymena, it was camp, it was Red Cross. **I think I spent most of my time in the fields and it was such a lovely feeling of being free you didn't have to run in because the bombs were falling**

How did your mother and grandmother kept the notion of Gibraltar alive?

We didn't, my mother was an extraordinary woman, in fact I think she was so happy living in England, I have a feeling that if my father had said we did not have to go back to Gibraltar she would have stayed happily, It's the freedom of space, having lived in a tiny place 2.5 by three quarters of a mile, then not now

Perhaps she had a bit more anonymity there?

Yes very possible, yes it could be, I think she just enjoyed the space, that you could get a bus or a taxi.

VR remembers getting off the bus going between two buses and ending up under a taxi.

....and two very nice old ladies in the taxi having hysterics because they thought I was dead, and there I was between the wheels, it was entirely my fault...I've always been a survivor I think.

When did you go back and re visit London?

Oh yes when I went back to Gibraltar, my mind was always here, also my wife will tell you different, I'm not very happy in very hot weather, I was very ill when I was small - the

day that I put my foot in England my illness stopped and the day I went back to Gibraltar my illness started.

The doctor said he was allergic to sea water!

Going back to N Ireland – what time of year?

VR got sun stroke so it must have been very hot. VR speaks about an old lady in Bedford walk, and Queen Mary coming to Kensington; The whole school going to the Albert Hall for musical appreciation on a Saturday

Track 6

Returning to Gibraltar?

1945 – We were one of the later ones, some weren't repatriated, and I had a feeling that by what people say that they didn't want people to go back, they didn't want the Garrison to go back to civilian life.

It had changed a great deal?

VR not really sure, the family went back to their old flat. The government, The Garrison, there was no local government then, had requisitioned everyone's property, and there were squatters.

Were they Spanish, British, Gibraltarians?

VR thinks they were Gibraltarians, VR's grandmother's house was taken over by a Gibraltar family and she couldn't get them out

People left everything behind?

Oh yes, my father lived in it anyway.

One of my aunts went into her flat and there was nothing left in the flat

Who had been in there?

Well the army must have been My grandmother's little flat, that disappeared. For a while they had to stay with us, and we had only a small flat

So people lost personal things?

Yes furniture, I imagine

VR speaks about his grandmother

– I think by the time she got back to Gibraltar she had totally blocked out anything that had gone behind her, and she just went forward, not the kind of woman to dwell on the past really

Infrastructure when went back?

VR never went to school, had tutors, VR refused

Did they try to cure you?

No ..Don't cure you now..I don't think they could VR speaks about this; speaks about his elder sister working as a secretary (in London) she worked in the office, Slater, a chain of shops, younger sister went to the convent and said to my mother she was going to become a nun and my mother had a fit.

What do you think – how do you think it changed?

It didn't change for a long time after the war, it tried to find it's feet, my Uncle Albert Risso fought tooth and nail for the rights of Gibraltarian eventually he became part of the Government and when he refused to stop fighting I think they side stepped him which I think upset him terribly

What about the relationship between the Gibraltarian and the Military?

With us it was very good, very good friends in the forces. People didn't have problems with The Garrison.

VR speaks about the main street being full of sailors;
the bars which were called honky tonks, and they had a band of Spanish women, it was difficult to get down the street; you couldn't actually walk up and down – at closing time it was hilarious...they were only drunk, they weren't being offensive, I never heard of anyone molesting civilians, girls, all they wanted was to explode into a stupor, if they were too drunk to walk they would be grabbed by the scruff of their collar and the seat or their pants and thrown into these vehicles. And if there was a fight in one of the honky tonks you didn't stay and if you wanted to look you looked from far

away because the bottles and furniture would fly out of the building.

VR speaks about meeting his wife Magda; they were neighbours all their life.

Returned to England when his son was born.

I looked round and I thought I can't bring up a child in two and half miles, the atmosphere in Gibraltar, people are very close to each other, you only have to breathe and they know next door that you have breathed and I thought it would be better to take him back to England, and I am very pleased that I did. I could never live in Gibraltar I just couldn't not even if I could go into Spain with the political situation as it is deplorable, so we brought him up here

Did you go back ?

VR speaks about returning to London and to the places he knew as a child in London, taking his son to all his old haunts.

I still walk around I still remember my childhood and my grandmother taking me out for walks

What does it feel like when you find the places?

I get a thrill, it is like a breathe of fresh air, and smells, there were

... speaks about a plant that has a very strong smell, if that smell comes I go straight back to Bedford walk, it is lovely, and lilacs ...way back..I've gone...and music...you hear All the war songs...it's so lovely.

Who are you?

I'm British because when we were small, I can't remember being Gibraltarian you were British you were a Colonial,

Gibraltar was a colony, colonial office very strong – tells story about her grandmother going into colonial office.