



Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity

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

Mary Quinlan interviewed by Mary Ingoldby and Jerry Robinson on 23rd August 2013

Track 1

Introduction

Father posted to Gibraltar in 1942; family (mother and one sister) joined him in 1946.

Family background: father Irish family came from outside Dublin; mother was part Scots and part Polish, maternal grandfather father a refugee in the 1880s; Polish relatives in RAF during WWII.

Father not allowed to join up because needed in dockyard; worked in Generating Stations in Gibraltar providing power to damaged ships from convoys etc which came into the dockyard to be repaired.

MQ born in 1938 and went to Gibraltar when she was 8 in 1946.

Memories

Remembers going out to Gibraltar on *The Monarch of Bermuda* a cruise liner that was used as a troop ship, it took 10 days to get there because of mines in the channel; all passengers had to wear lifejackets.

MQ's first school in Gibraltar was St Josephs, she remembers it as a very small school without many resources; she then went to The Convent.

The family stayed in Gibraltar for eight years; mother relieved to go to Gibraltar after living through Bombing in WWII in England.

Childhood in Gibraltar

MQ: It was lovely, the dockyard used to provide a lorry to take us to school; the Convent had had a bomb and father got a team of people to re build a wall for the nuns who were eternally grateful.

Because of this MQ always got a senior part in the school play which she didn't always enjoy. Mother very friendly with the nuns – she was Catholic, whole family were Catholic.

Memories of Bedenham explosion

MQ: We were in class when it went up; they had a very big room which was partitioned by glass folding doors and we were in the middle class when it went off and all the glass fell in on us it was really quite dramatic. The teacher who was a lay teacher got out of the door first, we all told lies and said that she had got us all together and sorted it out but actually she was first out of the door....I don't know why we did it because we didn't like her very much

My mother thought that the generator station in the tunnel to Sandy Bay had gone off and thought she was a widow – in some ways as children we were quite excited really, everyone had got used to bombs during the war and you know it was a week off school –

I think people in England thought it was a bomb, the staircase to the chapel and the large paintings all fell down the stairs.

I was always very independent so I probably walked home, a great friend called Jimmy Shepherd who was a doctor in the dockyard, he went onboard the ship when they thought there was going to be a secondary explosion and I think he got the Military Cross for that...we thought very highly of him...Shrapnel went right over the rock over to Catalan Bay.

MQ: We lived in Cumberland Buildings which have recently been re build near Rosia Bay, I thought it was a nice flat we were on the top floor – Tim Gowan lived across the patio on the house at the end, and the wall of the patio was badly damaged at some stage and so we had Italian Pows re building it and they used to sing all the Neapolitan street songs, and they liked children...

JR: – both Italian and German Pows on the rock at that time.

Swimming at Rosia

MQ: It was very very nice, it had two clubs very much by fathers' rank, Officers Club near the entrance to the bay and our club which was by the beach, they did mix but not very often, you learnt to swim there, there was a bar and changing rooms and steps down, awful beach, ships kept throwing off their oil and every now and again you would find a dead pig....

We used to take our homework, down there, we had a raft in the middle of the bay, we worked from 8 – 1 in the summer, but a great challenge that you didn't drop your homework on the way back ...

We swam virtually all the time and we used to swim out to the entrance to the bay and back, currents quite strong outside the bay – my father used to fish out there...we roamed the barracks on the top which was empty, we would slide through the gate...I think we were a bit wild...I don't think my mother had any idea she used to sit and embroider table cloths

Mix of people

MQ: It was a wonderful way to be brought up, if you went to school there it didn't matter who you were what colour you were or what your religion was you just went there, in assembly in the morning some people didn't go to assembly and some people didn't go to mass but on the whole everyone got on very well, lots of Jewish girls....I went back to Gibraltar and discovered one of my friends was obviously Afro Caribbean mixture but it hadn't dawned on me before...A lot of Gibraltarians, one or two girls came in Rolls Royce's from Spain,

MI: Did you speak English at school?

MQ: Usually yes, we weren't allowed to speak Spanish at school, we would speak Spanish in the playground and then a nun would appear and we would speak English – really we used whatever language we had the right word for.

MQ had Spanish lessons at school.

MI: Did you have a maid?

MQ: My mother had a cleaning lady from La Linea she lived in a sort of shack attached to a wall, she was ill at one point my mother took her to the doctor (in Gibraltar) and paid for her

Father

MQ: I don't think he ever learnt Spanish and he never learnt to swim, but he fished a lot – he had quite a good war but he didn't talk about it a lot, when they took the electricity out from the generator station to the boats he had to paddle through a lot of unpleasantness....people parts and all sorts of things but he never talked about (these were ships coming in from the convoys to be repaired in Gibraltar)

I think he had a quite a difficult war in that sense, but he had a lot of freedom and he lived in a xxx? House which was a hostel for men and was friend with Bernard Devlin who was the curate for the Catholic Cathedral and they used to go over to Spain and bring back all sorts of things – Carlotta's Wheelers

He said that on Sunday afternoons people would cycle over to La Linea and they would bring back people who were escaping and they would cycle back with them, and other people would walk back drunk and everybody would let them through because oh the British are drunk again.....take no notice really

Bernard Devlin was a bit of a rogue he used to smuggle alcohol back, he and dad would come back in a taxi sometimes with all sorts of bottles up the Reverends' legs, and my father used to get out and talk to the police...Bernard would say yes I've got a bottle of this up this leg and bottle of that...and they'd just laugh at him and let them through

JR – the escaping British were allied servicemen they would be held up at Spanish brothers;

MQ: *that was the story they were passed from brother to brothel through Spain and that was their escape route...this was all gossip*

MI: Why was it called Carlotta's Wheelers?

MQ: *I think the wheelers were the bicycles and perhaps Carlotta's was the name of the brothel.*

MI: Was Bernard Devlin involved in this?

MQ: *I Don't know...*

MQ: *Bernard Devlin became the bishop in Gibraltar – the last time I saw him and he came to tea...he was very well know – mentions the (Jerados ? who knew him very well) – he used to sit and have coffee in Main Street and people would come and see him so they didn't have to go to confession, he was very well known in Spain and when there was a bishops conference in Spain they would always consult him to see that he could manage the date*

JR – speaks about relationship between Gibraltar and Spain at this time.

Discussion/speculation about Bernard Devlin

MQ – *he used to drive my father mad because he had a motorbike which he didn't look after very well, and my father repaired it on the dining room table and started it on the dining room table and my mother went completely mad.*

MQ talks about visiting Bernard Devlin in St Bernard's Hospital and being taken by a nurse to see the operating theatre which influenced her later choice of a career in nursing. Mentions a Military Hospital which was out near Europa Point.

Social life

My parents didn't do much Military/Colonial social life – MQ belonged to the Brownies who met at the stables of The Governor's House; remembers going to see *Romeo and Juliet* in the gardens.

MQ: *My parents did New Years Eve at the Rock Hotel with friends, very friendly with people called Maskells, he was the one who built Humphries (first flats in Gibraltar after the war) They had a lovely house built for their staff, wooden houses going up the rock and while they were working there they lived in these houses.*

Discussion about housing after the evacuation.

MI: How do you compare the places now?

MQ: Sometimes it is quite difficult to see because they have reclaimed an awful lot of land – they've ruined Sandy Bay, they use boats that suck up the sand, they have sucked up WWII bombs, took all the sand from Sandy Bay, much smaller than it was ...a lot of reclamation which seems odd...promenade with sea...the airfield was quite short at the time landings was difficult...

Family returned to the UK for a holiday/break and got stuck there for six months because of all the ships were requisitioned for the Malayan Emergency (1950s); family eventually flew back to Gibraltar. Family returned to the UK for good in 1953 the day before The Coronation.

Culture and strictness of Gibraltarian families

MQ's parents strict but she was allowed to go to Bull Fights; Gibraltarian girls; some of MQ's friends remember going out to La Linea for the evening but MQ never went; MQ had a bicycle and was a bit of a tomboy.

MQ: When the Australian navy were in we weren't allowed out; they got very very drunk and their ships would send out lorries and they would just pile them in these very very drunk people – we sat on the roof and watched them all being taken back

MQ: Our flat over looked the over the Number One Dock, saw the ships being brought in for repair, a lot of the boats would have parties for us, magnificent parties on Vanguard and Eagle (the second one) – they enjoyed seeing children because they had been at sea for so long– the second Eagle.

MI: Were you aware of news during the war?

MQ: I think it was 1948 when the Jewish people were going out to Israel the boats came into the harbour and they weren't allowed to dock...and I can remember my father taking us up on the roof and saying this is history, and I remember thinking that they had their sheets hanging over the sides but actually they were slogans written on the sheets – girls at school would say that they were either taking or sending things out to the people on the boats. They were moored in the Bay.

MI speaks about The Exodus; discussion about contemporary Jewish community in Gibraltar.

Track 2

Coming home to UK

Difficult for MQ when she came back to England; right in the middle of O Levels, sent to school in Chatham who regarded her as rather stupid because she hadn't studied the same syllabus; caught up trained to be a nurse at Westminster Hospital; trained in midwifery; met her husband Michael Quinlan at a party.

Michael Quinlan's career - He was Private Secretary to Chief Of Air Staff Sam Elworthy; then after 5 years posted to NATO in Brussels, three years out there, went on to be Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Defence and his specialty was nuclear weapons;

JR: Was seen very much as the architect of the UK's nuclear policy, very much a strategist

MQ: *He was known as Whitehall Jesuit – he was a very clever man and very interesting, I suppose I didn't ask enough questions – but I have emails from all sorts of people – i.e. what do you think Michael would have done about Syria*

Michael Quinlan's books; returning to Gibraltar with Mi Q; possibility of Mi Q being Governor; Mi Q's correspondence; work; anti-nuclear lobby; faith and Catholicism; lectures.

Mary Quinlan's career - 4 children; went back to nursing; fundraising for hospice and worked there as a volunteer and worked at St Antony's; trustee of women's charity in Northern Ireland – security; International Conference Centre Whitchley ? ; Guide at Broughton Castle;

MQ speaks about need to restore banners/colours in The Kings Chapel, Gibraltar; friends in Gibraltar.

MI: When you think about Gibraltar what is your image of the place?

MQ: *Well it's home because they were such formative years and when I walk down Main Street which is really quite scruffy and dirty , I think well I'm home, it's really nice....I think you either love it or you hate it...*