



**Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity**  
The Friends of Gibraltar Oral History Project (1930 to 1970)

**Ernie Reading interviewed by Mary Ingoldby on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2013**

Track 1

Introduction

Born in Gibraltar 18 August 1929, Parents Ernest Reading and Mary Sheriff, living in the UK for 34 years. Parents were both Gibraltarians, grandfather born in Aldershot, GG Grandfather came to Gibraltar 1860 with the army, married local woman, 13 children; both parents born in Gibraltar, Scottish in the family, parentage – ER's Great Grandfather was the first Reading in Gibraltar. Grandfather married twice both wives were Spanish.

Father was one of the founders of St Jo's Ambulance Brigade in Gibraltar.

*How many in your family*

Himself and his sister

*What you remember from Gibraltar before the war?*

Definitely not the Gibraltar it is nowadays – lived in a different atmosphere – went to school, ***I remember the Spanish civil war when people from Spain came into Gibraltar escaping from the fascist government – took refuge in Gibraltar until after the war...They came from la Linea taken care of by the services in Gibraltar, the army built tents near Victoria Gardens (where the airport is now) some had relatives in Gibraltar ; remembers seeing the Franco's ships bombarding Algeciras across the bay; remembers XXX destroyer fired on by the Spanish war ships; damaged and kept there until after the war; ship beached at Catalan bay.***

*Did the Gibraltarians welcome the refugees?*

***There was a faction from Gibraltar who sided with Franco politically; the union was the transport and general union who sided with the nationalist government – no direct action between Gibraltarians and Spanish, lived amicably for ages – my grandmother was Spanish***

We spoke English or Spanish at home, officially everything is English; school was English, taught mainly by the Christian brothers from Ireland

We lived in a house privately owned, flats were hardly known in Gib at the time; where I used to live has become ruins now.

*Not so built up?*

No, far from it,

*Huge population?*

Very well known in those years for 20 – 25 thousand, now at lot more – speaks about population of Gib

*Does Gibraltar have a strong identity?*

***British Gibraltarian, all the time, my ancestry is British; people in Gib don't want to be anything else but British, simple as that***

*Did you learn British history at school?*

***Oh yes, everything in English; I learnt a lot about Gibraltar many years after school,***

*Every day life?*

Life was quite easy, eat fresh food every day, no such thing as fridges; women went to the market every day;

*What about water?*

***We used to get the water supplied by fountains, where we lived we had a cistern under our house and we had a pump in the patio, every winter the roofs were cleaned before the rainfall and we collected rain water in containers. During the summer water in buckets, a halfpenny a bucket. We got running water just before or after the war; hardly any of the houses had running water at the time***

***Water was scarce immediately after the war. Water collected from the rainfall and from the back of the rock, into reservoirs, when it went short, tankers would bring water from the UK.***

## **Track 2**

Garrison and WWII

Remembers soldiers marching – led by pipes and drums down castle road to board a troop ship; closed the schools then started to evacuate – first to French Morocco –

ER went to Casablanca... herded into a sort of a store room full of straw on the floor for sleeping – grandfather went to look for a house and the family lived there; ER not sure – came back on a ship to Gibraltar; the ships were filthy, former troop ship – the governor refused to let them ashore but eventually re evacuated mostly to the UK ER's family were sent to Madeira.

*Was it random?*

***He (ER's father) opted to pay for us to go to Madeira rather than go to the UK because he knew it would be more difficult for the family in the UK.***

ER speaks about a British Indian family in Gibraltar which he is writing about

*Were there quite a lot of different cultures in Gib?*

***Indian, Jewish and Roman Catholic – religions rather than cultures – but they were all Gibraltarians, you ask anyone what are you they say oh I'm Gibraltarian, they were born reared and brought up in Gibraltar and that was that***

*Did you father stay?*

Yes my father stayed for the whole war – his job was working for the Public Health department, mainly helping in the ambulance service.

*Was it hard to leave your father?*

We didn't know what was going to happen in the end; it was 4 years we were away from Gibraltar – all the men folk were left behind – anybody doing any necessary work there all had to remain behind.

*Did he send you money to support?*

He had very little money to send us at the time, but we were well looked after by the British Consulate in Madeira

*Did you mother go to work in Madeira?*

No

*And did you two go to school?*

Oh yes A British school, teachers were a women who had been evacuated from Gibraltar and a couple of English teachers who used to live in Madeira – we were taken from the hotels by bus to this school, the buses in Madeira were run on coal at the back of the bus.

We came back to Gibraltar, I opted not to go back to school but back to work, I argued with my father but eventually I got what I wanted

*How was the notion of Gibraltar kept alive whilst you were away?*

We were used to communicating with my Dad – we always wanted to get back to Gibraltar.

*When you went back what was it like?*

***A lot of services about, soldiers, eventually they were reduced – a lot of the houses in Gibraltar had been commandeered by the military and some people didn't have any house to go to because they had either been completely destroyed, damaged to a certain extent. So they had to start building, people coming back from the evacuation were placed in centres, the Cecil Hotel in Main Street was turned into a repatriation centre, we were lucky we went straight back to our house. There was an old asylum where people lived, and also in the stores were turned into a repatriation centre, the barracks also. Built quickly, people were housed there....Housing is still a problem in Gibraltar***

*Tell me a little bit about the relationship between the Gibraltarians and the military?*

We never had any problem, there were drafted soldiers, big fights in Main Street, of course there were a couple of occasions - ER mentions a couple of incidents of troops getting drunk and getting into fights.

*After the war - infrastructure?*

Don't know much about the schools because I started working when I got back, my schooling finished in Madeira. I worked in the dockyard and did lots of other jobs

*How old were you?*

About 16 when I came back -

*What was it like in the dockyard?*

Working mostly with people from the UK who were sent from UK to work in the dockyard - then I left that I tried to become an apprentice, I failed the first exam I refused to go a second time, I went to become an apprentice in the printing business at The Gibraltar Chronicle where I learnt the trade, then I was called to enlist in the army.

### **Track 3**

Called up for military service in 1947 for 6 months; GDF - Gibraltar Defence Force. Young men had returned from the evacuation to become volunteers in the GDF - all anti air force artillery, based at Windmill Hill flats, there for 6 months; supposed to return every two years for a refresher course, after ER joined the police he was exempt.

Came out from there (national service) and went back to the dockyard to work in the royal naval torpedo depot - I was on board the ship when the *Bedenham* blew up.

*What happened?*

***I had gone on board to collect some paperwork, bills of lading, I was having a drink with the store master onboard, this big bang we looked over the side and saw the place where the ship had caught fire- we were chased out of the ship, by the time I was about 200 yards away from the ship the whole thing went up, bang. Just as I got off the new fire engine that was bought by the dockyard arrived, I saw it arriving just before the explosion, when I opened my eyes again all there was only a chassis and four wheels; and then of course the damage that occurred all over The Rock, our store was completely - we were only about 400 yards away from the explosion***

Tells explosion story again -

***....it looked like the whole world was coming down - on the jetty our torpedo store was a shambles and in the dockyard office all our store things were lying on the floor, and when we put it all back all we missed was one screw from the stock. In Gibraltar there was a lot damaged - the NAFFI office for example, panes of glass - where we used to live a***

**piece of shrapnel fell on the roof of our washroom – even in Catalan Bay there were pieces of the ship thrown over The Rock – in Main Street the shop windows were all broken, there was a guard because of looting, but in Gibraltar people behaved very well – 13 people died, two of them were the chief fire officer and his deputy died onboard , about three died in the lighter when the thing went up, three died where the Queens Hotel is now, a cousin of my mothers died; a hell of a lot of damage – Humphries buildings were supposed to be the strongest building in Gibraltar and there was practically no damage to them**

**After then I was transferred into the tunnel the ammunition side because by then they had amalgamated the naval armament depot, I was promoted to store manager**

**ER speaks about faulty explosive on depths chargers ( the ones that caused the explosion on The Bedenham) and there were sixteen of them in his store and ER had to supervise the dumping of these out of sea, a very delicate operation**

*Were you frightened?*

**I had to ride in the tug and it had to be very carefully dealt with – I was still a store assistant, the store manager was on leave...The naval officer told me all about it, every one knew about it – they covered the tunnel up with padding and little trolleys on rails had to be lifted one by one to be put on the ship – they did a ramp on the side so that they could be rolled down the ramp into the sea**

*When you had finished how did you feel?*

A big sigh of relief

**Then I came back and I decided – I was scared to be in the tunnel where there were so many explosives, I would sit on a 500 lb bomb and watch the lads – I started looking for something else to do, I applied to get into the police, I failed because I was an inch too short – now you see them they are half my size, and then through a cousin who was a sergeant they accepted me and I did 14 years in the police. Police training in Gibraltar, very similar to the British police this was in 1955/56 – I retired in 1970 – I resigned I did 14 years.**

**When the explosion happened you were blown flat on your back...I felt the whoosh and I just dived down**

*What did people think the explosion was?*

**People thought all sorts of things, they thought the ship had been bombed by Spain, that it was a terrorist etc. Eventually it turned out that this batch of explosives/depth charges were filled in a machine – they weren't filled properly there was a gap left which caused the explosion**

*How big a thing was it in Gibraltar?*

**A very big thing, people were scared, people were saying there was a risk of another explosion, people were rushing around like headless chickens, people who had family in the dockyard – it was chaotic**

*The funerals?*

**Must have done, the funerals were a mixture of religions, church of England, Spanish and Gibraltarian roman catholic – there was a communal funeral and the families from Spain came across – a few years ago they built a memorial – the ship blew up at the end of 40 berth**

#### **Track 4**

*Gibraltar strategically placed/ espionage?*

**Not espionage as such what was being done was that the Germans were taking a village or a villa near Campmento – then there was the attack by the human torpedo's from Algeciras across the bay, and then there were Spanish saboteurs who were paid by the Germans, if that had happened the whole of the rock would have blown up, it was caught in time – there was a saboteur that was arrested after he placed the bomb in Coney island – Spanish – he was hanged in Gibraltar.**

**The one who was going to place the bomb was working in a fruit shop in Gibraltar in Main Street but they found the bomb.... the other one was arrested in coming away from having placed the bomb, by the Gibraltar police, the explosion went off, only a little bit of damage around the area – it wasn't as much as doing damage to the town.**

ER wasn't there at that time – I know that two of them were hanged in Gibraltar – ER knows about it because he has studied it?

*A lot of Spanish came through the border?*

**It has always fascinated me, they took the women and children away from Gibraltar because they feared it was going to be attacked by the Germans through Spain – instead they were allowing women to come into Gibraltar from Spain to work and a lot of families broke up because of this.**

**Everyone says we were having a whale of a time, always been in my mind, why allow these women to come into Gibraltar – the fact that they say it was to protect the people from the Germans, what they wanted was to empty Gibraltar to get more troops in that's why they got rid of us, simple as that – and they did that they took hold of Gibraltar there were about 14,000 of them (military)**

*Did they think some Gibraltarians wouldn't come back?*

Some of them didn't; a lot living in UK that didn't come back, a lot in Fulham.

*There were children born of relationships (between Gibraltarians and Spanish during the war)?*

Oh yes children born here, of course there was

*Do you think the children found out who they are?*

They have been brought up by their own families

ER speaks about Gibraltarian children being evacuated to London.

*Was there a lot of suspicion?*

ER speaks about the historic and present relationship between Gibraltar and Spain; the forming of the first Gibraltarian City Council in 1921.

The Gibraltarians had no argument with the military – ER speaks about 'riff raff' presence in British military.

*Attitude between Gibraltarians and the British establishment?*

***The only thing is that we think that they should be doing more to defend the waters of Gibraltar. All fallen on the shoulders of the Gibraltar police***

*ER in the police – what sort of duties?*

***Working from 1956 – looked after the dockyard; divided into a and b divisions; street duties, night duties, looking after the dockyard, the moles, the magazine – everything, patrolling in the dockyard; most of the time in the communications centre alternative days of patrolling inside – night duty I was always in town***

*Was there a lot of crime?*

Not as much as there is nowadays – no where near what its like today.

Coming over to the UK

1979 – ER's sister got married and ER's mother came over with them and then ER came over – Work in the UK;

*Do you miss Gibraltar?*

been going back to Gibraltar practically ever year and before his wife died sometimes twice a year and after she died going back, before Stan died two years ago – went back 6 times in one year.

*What do you feel when you are in Gibraltar?*

Safety, here you are always looking over your shoulder....

*Identity?*

***Born and bred British Gibraltarian simple as that***

***Regretfully we feel we are leaving our loved ones here, our mother, my wife and my brother in law, they are all buried here, Harrow Weald Cemetery – that is the only feeling I've got – have thought about having them cremated and taking the ashes back, but its lots of money and we couldn't afford it. We will come back once or twice to a year to keep an eye on the place, we paid a lot for that place for them, but otherwise happy to go back to Gibraltar we love Gibraltar, not as it is now, it is our place of birth and I am very glad to be going back to it.***

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