



Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity

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

James Lagares – interviewed by Mary Ingoldby July 10th 2013

Track 1

James Lagares (JL) has lived in Gibraltar all his life apart from the four years during WWII when he was evacuated with his family to London; they returned to Gibraltar in 1945.

Both parents from Gibraltar; Great Grandfather was Scottish, Great Grandmother Irish.

JL born 15th November 1929.

What was it like growing up in Gibraltar?

Very good until the war came along – JL was 10 years old when war was declared and he vividly remembers dashing for the window because he thought he would see the soldiers running past

The family were evacuated to French Morocco for three months – ***When the French capitulated we were exchanged for war prisoners, this took place in the middle of field – I remember coming in a train and suddenly the train stopped and there was another one with French people, so we were released and allowed to come back to Gibraltar. The Governor wouldn't allow us to come ashore because ships were being got ready in the dockyard to take us away again, apparently some of parents that were left in Gibraltar decided to go to the Governor in protest and we were allowed by special permission to come ashore with the condition that in two weeks we should leave Gibraltar again – it was then that the ships were ready, the cargo ships were American on a lease agreement....Then we came to England***

What was the ship like?

It was horrible it was cargo ship, we were sleeping and living down in the hold of the ship – 4- 500 people, mainly women and children, we were 17 days at high seas and there was no bread left and I remember vividly at night one of the ship members he was a radio operator he used to come down into the hold ask my brother and me up to his cabin and he would give us an apple and when we ate the apple he would bring us back again – I remember him vividly, his name was Garry – he was an Indian man, his teeth all white and his hair all black and wavy.

We could only see sky and sea, sky and sea for 17 days, and eventually we saw land, we didn't know where we were, gradually the ship pulled in, somebody asked us, what do you want and everyone cried out bread bread – and then a small ship came along and tossed us bread

We were in Swansea, we were taken in to a school, we were fumigated, I can remember have DDT sprayed down our backs and after that we went onto a train and then we came to Victoria Station in London. We had never seen such tall buildings it was something out of this world, we were in England in Kensington High Street and there we spent four years.

My father took up a job, he worked in a pharmacy he was qualified pharmacist and had left his shop in Gibraltar. This shop in London was about to close down, the owner was a Mr Cowen, a Jewish asked for his credentials and he brought out his certificate – father left the certificate with him and two days later we went back and he got the job – people got to know the Gibraltarians – most of the women who were evacuated hardly spoke English so word got around that my father was in the shop so all the Gibraltarians who were scattered around Kensington they all used to come to the pharmacy – he eventually bought three shops when he was in England.

Bombing every night

MI: *Tell me about the hotel*

It was very good – the British Empire hotel 28 De Vere Gardens – the floors had bare wood

MI: *Unusual that your father came to England?*

But my father had been parted when we went to Morocco and he wouldn't do it again

JL Speaks about only men with essential jobs who had to stay in Gibraltar, working in the dockyard for example; but because JL's father had pharmacy was allowed to go

MI: *Did your mother speak English?*

Yes

Lagares pharmacy – when they returned he left the shop in London – Mr Cowen the owner didn't want him to return to Gibraltar- the last week he never turned up, never said goodbye, never shook his hand or anything

But in 1950 I went back to England to study my chiropody; my mother used to say to me don't forget to go and see your cousins, so I went to Victoria Station it was a Sunday there was a gentleman reading his newspaper I sat opposite we were the only two in the carriage and when the train started I didn't want to interrupt his reading, so I waited and when we started and I asked him how many stops there are to St Marys; about 8 stops thank you very much where do you come from I said I come from Gibraltar, have you been here before and I said yes during the war, on your own, no with my parents m brother and my sister, is your name Jimmy, yes, and your brother Ernest, yes and your sister Angela, yes and I said yes and your father Jerome I was flabbergasted how do you know all this, I am the secretary to the company where your father used to work at the pharmacy and Mr Cowen didn't let one day go by without mentioning the Lagares family.

JL went to meet Mr Cowan

He gave me a letter to give to my father – make sure your father gets this letter and it was a letter of apology how sorry he was not to say goodbye.

Track 2

MI: *What happened to you?*

I was ten we lived there was bombing every night, went to the shelter, there was a basement in the hotel was turned into a shelter, tier bunk beds and we slept in there and from there sometimes went to the underground which was nearby.

MI: *Were you frightened?*

No but we were shocked one day because a landmine was dropped by the back of the hotel and everything was flattened – windows were blown out – so we were taken to another hotel the following day to Marble Court Hotel also occupied by evacuees and there we stayed about 6 or 7 months while the British Empire was re done and then we came back again

Mother stayed at home, brother and sister were working in the pharmacy

I used to go to school at the Victoria and Albert Museum

MI: *Can you remember The Museum?*

We went in, first turn was the boys and on the left was the girls

MI: *Have you been back?*

Yes –I was struck with cancer and my son in law came with me and I took him there we went into The Museum – the security guards were surprised that it used to be a school. It was the same but no desks or chairs.

MI: *Did you just go to your classroom?*

Everything was taken away, there was nothing. No exhibits

It was empty just the bare walls – we weren't allowed to wander about

MI: *Who were the teachers?*

Two of them Gibraltarians, Mr Silver. We did English maths, history and religion.

MI: *Did you walk to school?*

***We used to take the bus
When we went into Kensington High Street and we saw Barkers – what a huge building – escalators, we used to love going on there. After that we became altar boys in Kensington High Street – that church was bombed – the Carmelites also and protestant church.... all three were bombed***

A miracle took place in Carmelites church, the whole church was completely destroyed with the exception of a crucifix which was made of wood which didn't burn, how can that be - that was a miracle

MI: *You believe in miracles?*

Oh absolutely – that crucifix should have been burned, the same as all the benches – it was inside

MI: *What sort of food?*

Sometimes edible sometimes not, we used to have a pie an open dish a crust of pastry on top and all minced bacon, very nice, one night this was served – inside coins, screws, nails and hair – apparently it must have been sabotaged in the kitchen of Lyons.

Speaking about the food – everything was rationed – Lyons did well, they were the suppliers, did very well during the war, restaurants in Piccadilly.

MI: *Did you ever see anything terrible?*

JL Tells story of a grandfather of his close friend Raphael, taking the boys to Kensington Gardens, the time of the flying bombs, they also heard guns nearby they had to take shelter in a tobacconists shop, there were other people in the shop taking shelter; they made a dash for it back to the hotel, when the all clear went they saw that the tobacconists shop had a direct hit and everyone was killed in the bombing raid, ***if we had stayed there I wouldn't have been here now.***

MI: *The Gibraltarians were lucky?*

English people used to come to the shelters where we were

MI: *Why do you think that is, because of faith?*

It could be one of the things, but we are blessed in more ways than one, Gibraltar is blessed, if all the world is in problems and we are alright, plenty of work, we are well looked after by someone up there...

Track 3

MI: *Can you remember about listening to the news?*

Listened to the radio – my brother had a little radio and when it stopped we knew the sirens were coming

MI: *Was the pharmacy was a centre for the Gibraltarians to catch up on news etc?*

We all knew the war was on, we used to speak English and Spanish – in those days a lot of Gibraltarians had married Spanish girls which was why these women didn't know the language

MI: *Prejudice in England?*

Yes if we were in the bus talking in our language Spanish we were Gibbos, refugees – I said - Madame we are not refugees we have been evacuated from Gibraltar. After the war the English people started travelling outside, before the war they didn't go anywhere

MI: *Did anyone get into fights?*

No – JL speaks about the church – Our Lady of Victory and the English children being evacuated from London.
we were taken in to this church with open arms – because there were few children the priests used to take us to different convents to say mass, we used to get tea, we loved going there, on one occasions there was a service in Piccadilly (St James?) – JL speaks about special occasion when bishop was going to be knighted or something like that and the bishop fell off his chair, the chair collapses- everyone laughed, it was hilarious.

Served in Brompton Oratory , Westminster, going in the lift in Westminster cathedral, it was frightening, the first time in my life – when the door opened I was the first one out, Benediction, Mass, quite an experience.

Canon Walton in Kensington High Street Church – a very serious man

MI: *What about social life?*

We used to go to the pictures, sometimes the siren went and we would go off to the hotel

We had a club – speaks about mother playing the piano and father singing opera and JL had to turn the pages – put his name down for piano lesson with a Mrs Webber she offered me extra lessons, in her house on a Saturday morning, huge living room, two grand pianos, because her husband was also a pianist – so they would sit and demonstrate how to play, it was lovely until the flying bombs came until my mother said no, you stay here with me and what happens to me happens to you. So I had to give up piano,

Track 4

MI: *When did you know you were coming home?*

It was quite sudden it was on the notice board of the hotel, in alphabetically order, leaving for Gibraltar on such and such a day, the buses came along and off we went – we went off to Scotland, there for nearly a month waiting; eventually got marching orders again down to the river Clyde embark on a Stirling Castle ship and back to Gibraltar.

One morning when we were moving we came up on deck and all the ships in our convoy had gone, we got to know later on the winch that was supposed to lift up the anchor burned and with one anchor the ship was not allowed to travel – eventually were on the high seas and we came back, escorted by a destroyer

MI: *What were the living conditions like in Scotland?*

Living in brick huts – a whole family per hut – in the wilderness after London

Returning to Gibraltar, life getting back to normal, being reunited with his brother and uncle who had stayed in Gib to look after the family home.

MI: *Were people all waiting at the dockside?*

Families, the army helped us down from the ship – people were crying with joy – we hadn't seen each other for four years – it was great to be back but the war was still on –

JL tells story about pharmacy; meeting a sailor from the Destroyer who escorted them back to Gibraltar - Pepe Vaughan; Speaks about photograph

MI: *When you got back was your house OK?*

Yes because brother and uncle stayed behind and lived there – brother worked in the army medical core and uncle in the dockyard. Some people lost their houses, requisitioned by the army

MI: *Did you go back to school?*

There was school eventually run by the army, more to keep you out of the street – my mother said I must get a job, employed by the Chamber of Commerce at 14 years old

JL gives a good description of his work for the Chamber of Commerce; and subsequently having the opportunity of going to England to study Chiropody.

Went off to England and did the course – JL wanted to be a surgeon but the war interrupted – I used to see my mother opening a chicken – that's why the war came along and spoiled everything for me, difficult and costly to go to the UK to study, later on it was different and so this is what I did.

MI: *Infrastructure in Gibraltar after the war?*

Yes hospitals still here, St Bernard's –

Speaks about military presence military in the street, not much bad behaviour except when they used to drink, quite a good relationship between the military and the Gibraltarians and mutual respect between Gibraltarians and the English.

MI: *Reclaimed land – what was it like before?*

The sea was huge – conversation about reclaimed area of sea.

MI: *Cultural identity?*

My inner side is British Gibraltarian, British Gibraltarian, I am English the blood that runs in there is English, Irish and Scottish, it's a peppery mixture...

*Compiled: December 2013
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