



Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity

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

Lydia Robles – interviewed by Mary Ingoldby 9th July 2013

Track 1

Introduction – Lydia Robles – maiden name is Lydia Neale – an English name, grandmother was Scottish, from Aberdeen and her other grandfather was Irish. Born on 27th May 1921 – she is now 92 years old. LR speaks about three people in her family having the same name.

MI: *What can you remember about Gibraltar before the war?*

Quite different but always always we wanted to be British, Gibraltar we were British, British Gibraltar. And I am part of Britain. I feel myself very British, I feel it in my blood. We never spoke Spanish at home, we had Spanish Maids but my Dad said we speak English as a family.

Brother was called Charles Neale – very English name

Discussion about Gibraltar in the old days, before land reclaimed from the sea.

When you were at school – what did you learn about British History?

My favourite subjects were English geography and history

Do you remember the build up to the war?

LR speaks about Spanish refugees coming over the border from La Linea, they worked in the dockyard

They worked in the dockyard, they were very good workers and they were trusted by the British Navy.

LR describes the dockyard and the different fleets that came in. The Mediterranean and the Atlantic Fleets.

Track 2

MI: *Tell me about the evacuation?*

I didn't want to leave my Dad, I was crying and crying and holding onto his hand and a soldier had to pull me back; we were then under the army, they behaved marvellously. You are coming with us, the boat is there waiting, I think the name was??? We were taken to French Morocco. But only a month and a half they surrendered to the Germans so the British Government brought us back to Gibraltar. They went on a Merchant Navy Ship – the David Livingstone – and then we had to go to England

MI: *What was your father's job?*

LR's father was a Chief Police Inspector so he had to remain in Gibraltar; she also had a cousin called Albert Neil who was a manager of the NAAFI at Europa Point, and he also had to remain in Gibraltar.

MI: *Was everybody crying?*

All crying, all crying...Many women had never left Gibraltar before, only to Spain which was near and was cheaper, La Linea, Algeciras, La Roque.

MI: *Was it the first time you had visited the UK?*

LR speaks about possibility of going to America, they went to England though and arrived in Liverpool. It was in the summer. ***We arrived in London on 3rd September – people were speaking about a German invasion that was the first thing we heard.***

The British people were marvellous – you know what they used to say- if you want to save your life go with the Gibraltarians wherever they are staying because they are blessed, go with them

MI: *Where were you in London?*

LR's family lived in an hotel in Gower Street, near The Dominion Theatre; she speaks about the hotel next door getting a direct hit. The people in her hotel weren't hurt but they were very shocked.

LR Speaks about the family house in Gibraltar being taken over by the army, mentions Gowing. Her father was allowed one room to store everything.

Anecdote about a moving a large bird cage.

Track 3

Interview returns to life as an evacuee in London during the war

MI: *How old were you?*

I was 19 – I was a fire watcher, with my steel helmet – but after the flying bombs then Britain moved the Gibraltarians to Scotland to Paisley Hill near Glasgow – we were up in the mountains living in Nissan huts – there was no bombing there... We had to come down to pick up breakfast and lunch and things, we were only there for 12 days

The family returned to Gibraltar on a ship called The Duchess of Richmond/Duchess of Bedford.

MI: *What was the fire watching like?*

I saw quite a lot what they used to call a basket of bombs, not many of the Gibraltarians spoke English at that time and they called it a canasta

I could see everything, so light but I couldn't do anything – we just remained there, me always praying because I am a believer and I am always praying and praying and praying.

The family was staying at the Harewood Hotel. LR mentions Captain Fox who was in charge of the Gibraltarians and always stayed with them when there was a bombing raid. There was no basement so they all lay down on mattresses in the dining room. LR also mentions a Miss Viners who used to visit the Gibraltarians every night.

Miss Viners was the second in command for the Gibraltarians – it was a small hotel we were about 200 – not many. ..we all had a room, we had one room with three beds, my mum, my brother and myself; we had a bathroom in a corridor for everyone, we had towels, we were given toilet paper.....The only meals we had were from Lyons and it was a dish that size for 6 people for each table...it was macaroni with tomato, no meat, no sausage.

MI: *Were you hungry?*

LR says yes they were hungry – LR tells a story about a little girl who longed to eat egg and potatoes, and one orange. LR's brother, Charlie, searched and found a restaurant who would cook the egg and potatoes for the little girl for free.

Mama – says in Spanish – potato come huevo – everybody started crying.

LR speaks about her family, and what they did in Gibraltar. One of her cousins was in the Royal Navy he was torpedoed twice but his life was saved – story about loosing accordion.

LR tells a story of two of her cousins who were in the British armed services during the war. Story of bravery. One died in Singapore. Tortured by the Japanese LR speaks about family.

Were your mother and your auntie they very frightened?

Oh yes she was very very frightened...my brother was very very brave;

LR tells fantastic story about her brother Charlie, who used to translate the news into Spanish every night for the Gibraltarians who couldn't speak English.

My brother was very very brave; one lady there, her husband sent money and a radio from Gibraltar, and Charlie, my brother he will listen to everything in English and then he will translate it into Spanish.

And that's what he did, and at night when they were all together, we all sat down in the biggest room they had to listen to the news, my brother listened and then explained the news...that's how we heard that Britain was bombing Germany

Track 4

MI: *Did you father come to see you?*

No he wasn't allowed, because he was in the police, but he used to write to us, they had to be light and small letters but letters were sometimes censored and didn't know what it was – when we went back to Gibraltar I always tried to remember and you know what he told me....in some way

trying to disguise the name of the boat and the name was Protector.

Were you working in London?

No I didn't because father used to send money, but I did voluntary work. I worked in a nursery in Camden Hill Gate – I helped with the children, they couldn't speak English and the mistresses were Miss Pollard and Miss Moon, they gave us 10 shillings a week. LR says names of other helpers, Gladys, Lucy, Magda,

Was it exciting to be in London?

Oh yes big shops, the only thing that we didn't have a car, had to queue – used to make soup with butcher's bones. Minestra – Spanish dish/Italian, all vegetables, pumpkin, aubergine, carrots, parsley

Did you go out, socialising?

I didn't because I didn't want to leave my Mum, my brother used to go, a few girls had their mothers there and they said Mum let us go because Charlie (her brother) is going to go – and we will go with them.

English people liked it that Gibraltarians played Spanish music and taught the English girls how to dance the Paso Doble and the Tango, and more like Flamenco – the girls they did like it.

What about when you knew you were coming home?

It was lovely, we did cry to leave some of our good people behind and they said we are going to miss you.

LR Speaks about Charlie and how much everyone loved him;
(Dunia's father)

Do you remember the air raid shelters?

No never wanted to go – people wanted to go to the tube stations, but I never wanted to , I wanted to stay where I could see something and my brother one night he came back

and he said, how I have remembered your words Lydia tonight, one of the bombs exploded in the underground.

MI: *Tell me about Gibraltar when you came home?*

LR speaks about coming home and being in the charge of the army. It was still the war and there were still blackouts in Gibraltar. The family was taken to the Police Barracks in a jeep.

LR speaks about being welcomed home, families so pleased to see each other again.

MI: *Could you back to your old house?*

Yes they took us home.

LR tells anecdote about the family piano which they gave to the RAMC, it was pulled by 8 men half way up the rock to the hospital. The family never got it back. LR speaks about the whole family being musical, playing instruments and singing. Her father was very fond of opera Aida and Rigoletto

LR sings a piece from Rigoletto

MI: *Did you think that life had changed after the war?*

Ah yes it did change....we were very happy to be back in Gibraltar but as soon as we were here a few days I told my Dad, as soon As you finish the police we go to England, I would like to be there.

LR speaks about people who had nowhere to live after the war, the army had taken their homes and they had to live in Nissan Huts.- speaks about people who stayed in England and didn't come back

Families had to notify authorities about their relatives so that they could return to Gibraltar.

