



Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity

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

Outline Transcript of Mary Lou Benson nee Montigriffo – Interviewed By Jerry Robinson on 11 June 2013

Track 1

Mary Lou begins by joking about being born on Bastille Day, 14 July 1926 and how this contributed to her growing up a revolutionary. Her first recollection was going to military parades and playing with toy soldiers and cars, rather than with doll houses. Her father adored her. He desperately wanted a boy so brought her up as a son. Mary states that this made a complete difference to her life. Mary Lou comments about not really relating to other women, and at having two brothers and subsequently two sons.

Mary Lou tells a tale about being cheat when very young. Her father promised to take her to see a military parade, but instead took her to a visiting Spanish surgery where she had her tonsils removed with prong without any anaesthetic – it was circa 1930 before anaesthetic were routinely available. She relates how she was shocked by the sight of blood and was ill for several days afterwards. She later needed further corrective surgery.

What did your father do for a living?

Her father worked for the Eastern Telegraphic Company and her mother's brother was a manager of the company out in Palestine. As a consequence, Mary Lou believes that she had more contact with English people than other children of her age. Her father was Gibraltarian. His family possibly originated from Italy/Genoa but the actual details remain unclear. Her mother's side of the family, in earlier times, fought with the Knights' of Malta. When the Knights disbanded, the family remained for a while in Malta but eventually split with half the family going to Granada and the other half coming to Gibraltar. Her family was called the Batuches. One of her relatives is Mariano Batuche, a famous Spanish artist.

Where was your family home in Gibraltar?

Mary Lou recalled that the family lived in a top floor flat with large terrace in City Mill Lane. Mary Lou had fond memories of the place, as at the start of the Second World War in 1939, there were military exercises of the air defences using powerful search light – Mary was fascinated at how the search lights picked up aircraft overhead. Mary Lou comments further about her childhood, at being a loner and how girlish things never interested her. Her memories are of her father taking her to local soccer matches as well as military parades.

Track 2

Her recollections of the Spanish Civil War, circa 1936:

Mary Lou's recalls how she hated spending holidays in the Campo. She recalls how her greatest joy during the summer was being taken by horse drawn garry to Eastern Beach where she spent the afternoon playing on the beach and swimming. She recalls fondly that playing with the children of about five other local families was bliss. She remembers the racecourse and Victoria Park and the firing range where target shooting took place, and how she used to escape off the beach and go on the ranges looking for ammunition shells. Her father used to join her on the beach after work.

Mary Lou describes how during 1936 her mother, who had relatives in San Roque, decided that they would holiday there. Mary was livid and didn't want to go, so became rebellious. She used to escape and go off playing in the woods, climbing trees. **Mary Lou relates how there were travelling fairs, and how the fairground workers offered free rides for sexual favours. She describes how her maid who was just 16 years old used to go with the workers and the young children had to wait in the kitchen. Her mother subsequently asked why they all smelt of fish. Later Mary read about how these things had gone on.**

Mary Lou states how she didn't like going to church on Sundays and how one **Sunday, 18th July 1936, her father declared that they shouldn't go to church nor venture out that day. They had rented a house in San Roque at the top of the hill near the main Square and church. Mary Lou regales how the road outside their house was packed with workman. She describes how Franco had landed in Morocco where he gather allied troops and brought them over to Algeciras. The Spanish Foreign Legion advanced up the hill, bands playing, forcing the local workers to flee. Once it had quietened down, her father went to the military headquarters where he arranged for her uncle to come over by taxi to take them back to Gibraltar. On the way they saw how the troops had ransacked local churches (in La Linea). They had difficulty getting across the border into Gibraltar due to the large crowds trying to flee**

the conflict. Mary describes how crowds sought refuge in Gibraltar were subsequently billeted in Victoria Park and the race course in tents. Mary later learned from her father that after they had left San Roque the troops took six people out of their homes and shot them. Mary Lou also tells a story about how in 1934 she visited an uncle in La Linea, whose father was a General, on the opposing side. She claims that while visiting him someone threw a small bomb or banger at the uncle's house.

Track 3

What was her situation in 1939 at the start of WW2?

Mary mentions local talk about a possible invasion of Gibraltar. She comments on Franco's negotiations with Hitler and how he wasn't stupid and cleverly kept Spain out of the war. Mary Lou then moves on to describe the evacuation. She stated how they first went to Casablanca where relatives there had obtained a flat for them. On the day they arrived, Italy entered the war and their neighbours being Italians were arrested and interned. Mary Lou recalls that without her father - her mother having never done anything regarding the management of the family - how she (Mary) had to take on most of the responsibilities. Being only 13 years old, Mary Lou recalls how she had to sort out the banking, organise the flat and even obtain furniture. When France fell and with the Vichy government were in place, all the Gibraltarians were expelled from Casablanca. They were told they had to go to South Africa (??). However, when the men in Gibraltar went on strike, the decision was revised and the women and children were allowed back temporarily to Gibraltar before deciding where next they would be sent. On the day before departure, Mary Lou and her family were packing up her flat, the Italians were released by the Vichy Government and returned to their flat, so helped them pack, allowing them to stay overnight in their flat.

Mary Lou describes how the Gibraltarians left Casablanca in some of the oldest cargo ships in use - theirs was the called 'The Strategist of Liverpool'. There was panic as they still believed that they were to be taken to South Africa. There were no cabins available so all passengers remained on the decks. Mary Lou went off to explore the ship, where she met the ships 'Sparks' (electricians), and was given the use one of their bunks. On arrival back in Gibraltar their bags were dumped in the Main Square. They arrived in Gibraltar on her birthday 14 July and left on 24 July. They were due to be evacuated to London but the father arranged for them instead to go to Madeira, as he undertook to pay for their accommodation.

How did you find Madeira?

Paradise. There was a school established for Gibraltarian children and she eventually did her school certificate there. Mary Lou was then aged 14, and became a leader of the group. When the Governor of Madeira visited, Mary Lou was got to stand in for the gym teacher. There were 5 girls and 15 boys. Her father visited them once in Madeira.

What about Spanish workers and House Maids in Gibraltar:

Mary Lou stated that nearly everyone one in Gibraltar had live in maids in those days. The women became concerned at the continuing presence of live in maids in Gibraltar and their husbands. The Government subsequently closed the border and all non-Gibraltarian/British had to leave the Rock by 7oc at night. This reassured the women. Mary Lou commented that there were no brothels in Gibraltar and so consequently many of the menfolk went into La Linea. As a result, Mary Lou believed, many Gibraltarian women hated the Spanish. Mary makes passing reference to a submarine with a problem (possible German??) coming into Gibraltar.

What happened after Madeira?

Mary Lou recalls how they left Madeira in 1943. They went via Lisbon to Tangier, which was international, which made it easier for her father to visit. They remained there until the end of the war in 1945. By then Mary Lou was 17 years of age.

Track 4

Working for the British Consulate in Tangiers:

In a measure to prevent Mary Lou running round with the local boys, her mother got her a job at the British Consulate. Mary Lou describes how the British used to send people, mostly Arab Moroccans (as spies), from Tangiers into the North Africa. They used to return with reports on what they saw. They were usually written in French, Spanish or Italian, which Mary Lou used to translate into English and send back to the Ministry of Information in London. Mary Lou couldn't remember the content of such reports. Towards the end of the war many Gibraltarians were allowed to return to Gibraltar, but the Consulate asked her mother if she could stay on. Her family went back but Mary stayed – she was having fun. Mary Lou recalls how she had an Italian boyfriend at the time and used to go to the local cinema. There was an unwritten ruling that the Germans and Italians used to sit on left side and the Allies on the right. On entering the cinema they had to sit apart. When Hitler

appeared on the Newsreel the Italians and Germans used to cheer and when Churchill appear the Allied cheered.

Return to Gibraltar:

Mary Lou states that she returned to Gibraltar in 1944. Her first impression on being back there was how very small the place was. She had heard from girlfriends how there were a lot of officers and dances and wondered what she was missing. Mary Lou talks about meeting RAF people and inviting them home for tea. She talks fondly about the amount of men and parties, but was conscious that she needed to do some kind of good work. She therefore chose to work in the hospital as a welfare worker. Here she met an American called, Charles Speer, aged 26, very rich, ex Harvard University, who was Captain of the last Liberty ship sunk in the Straits during the war. Mary Lou stated that up until that time her priority was to have fun and party, but that this man changed her life by making her think more seriously about life, intellectually. She used to visit him between 6-7oc every day for months. She related that talking to him was like going to university. Afterwards she visited him on his ship, where he taught her to sail. She described him as a real gentleman.

Track 5

Time in UK:

Following the departure home of her American friend, Mary's father decided to send Mary Lou to UK to attend secretarial college in London. Mary Lou described her stay there as hell and a shock to the system with not having the right clothes and the cold during the winter. To make matters worse, she stayed with an uncle in a room with no heating. She was at secretarial college for six months before being given a job with British South American Airways, which was being set up by Air Vice Marshall Bennett, who she described as a real character. With her language skills, she was used as a translator on landing procedures. He then sent her to Lisbon, where she ended up running the office. She described how the documentation was 'out of this world' and needed to be sorted out. Subsequently, she was head hunted by Scandinavian Airways where she was offered more money. Mary (laughter) describes how she needed a new uniform - to send it to her would take about three months, so instead they flew her to Geneva to collect her uniform. Dressed in just her underwear with an overcoat she arrived in Geneva but missed the connection flight, so was stuck in Geneva, until the manager was forced to take her out to buy her a dress. She worked for the Airlines for about two to three years

What happened after Lisbon?

Mary Lou felt that she had done everything in Lisbon so returned to England where she joined BOAC where she undertook training as an air hostess. Mary

Lou wanted to go to the Far East but ended up on the South American routes. She comments about meeting rich Brazilians and the amount of presents she used to receive.

Mary Lou recalls how she didn't see her parents very much, commenting how they gave her up for lost, although her father remained very proud of her, but her mother was rather scared of her.

Concluding – her identity:

Mary Lou describes herself as 'international' citing her time in Casablanca, Madeira, Tangiers, England, Lisbon. Mary describes that her home is where she lives - at present in Soto Grande in Spain with a magnificent view of Gibraltar. However, she never considered Gibraltar to be home. She recalls subsequently living there whilst married to an RAF officer. She talks about starting up a frozen food company and being the first woman to be admitted to the Gibraltar Chamber of Commerce.

She comments on the people of Gibraltar and their view of the Spanish. She said that Franco's closure of the border caused a lot of lasting resentment.

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