



Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity

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

Michal Reginald Azopardi interviewed by Mary Ingoldby on 10th July 2013

Track 1

Born 10th April 1928

Father and mother both born in Gibraltar. When MA was two years old in 1930, the family emigrated to America (his father had kept 200 goats on the Rock and he sold them pay their way). When the family arrived they were told that they couldn't stay because the father couldn't write or read, so they were sent back to Gibraltar. (This has been checked by Elizabeth (his daughter) subsequently in USA archives).

During WWII the family was sent to Casablanca.

MI: *Do you have any memory of the Spanish Civil War?*

When the Spanish war started, a lot of Spanish came over, Gibraltarians gave them shelter.

MA remembers the Spanish war ships firing at Algeciras, and another incident with a ship coming into the harbour, the wounded crew taken to hospital, only to be shot at again by the Spanish when they returned to their ship.

During the Spanish war the border was closed, the people were treated very badly.

When the Second World War started, the family went to Casablanca and then to Rabat; they were exchanged for French prisoners when French Morocco fell to Germany. They returned briefly to Gibraltar and then sailed for the UK on a Merchant ship which took 15 days; Arrived in Milford Haven and then to Cardiff; there were 200 planes bombing in Cardiff the night they arrived; the next day they went to London.

The family stayed in Marlborough Court hotel in Kensington High Street and were then moved to Putney which MA remembers as a beautiful place.

When the V2's started London was too dangerous and the family were sent to Northern Ireland. Evacuees dispersed to different places – Belfast, Ballymena and Londonderry where the Azopardi

family were billeted in Nissan Huts outside the town in a former POW camp; they stayed there for a year and a half.

When the war ended MA and his brother and went back to London and they lived at No15 Castle Road, Kentish Town for 11 years. MA's mother became unwell and the family returned to Gibraltar. Gibraltar they came by land, it wasn't a good journey and the MA's father returned to work as a gardener. MA and his brother worked for the civil police force.

Their old house had been taken by the military so they had nowhere to live; they were put in a Nissan hut on Mount Alvernia; MA asked The Commissioner of Police for better accommodation but he couldn't do anything about it. MA decided to return to London and started working as a cook in Wardour Street, stayed there for three years.

He then returned to The Rock and started work as a cook with The Royal Engineers; the wages very poor, so changed jobs to a sports stores man in south barracks. Used to help a lot of people in the sports stores; MA then went back into the police force and joined the Gibraltar Security Police which is the Gibraltar Defence Police. He started as a constable and finished as the top man, the Chief of Police.

Track 2

MA graphically describes being ambushed in 1957; the only time this has happened in Gibraltar. He was picking up wages with a colleague and was ambushed by four men on motorcycles, thrown over the wall. The perpetrators were never found and MA still thinks it was an inside job. He is still trying to discover more about this event; it has never been reported in the newspaper or The Gibraltar Chronicle.

Track 3

MI: *When the WWII was coming what was it like in Gibraltar?*

Yes people did know and people didn't want to leave Gibraltar, they were more or less forced, they didn't know where they were going. They used to read in the press that in the UK the women and children were being sent away to Australia, how come they are sending their woman and children to Australia and sending us to London where all the bombs were

MI: *Who went from your family?*

My father my mother and my two brothers, my father wasn't made to stay because he was a very nervous person so they decided to send him to be together with us; people who were not very well were sent with their family. My father always preferred to stay with the family he got a job in England as a gardener, for 11 years in Putney

MI: *What was the ship like?*

It was a merchant ship, we went in a convoy of 22 ships, it took us 15 days...we used to sleep in a blanket in the galley. MA speaks about sleeping in the London underground during WWII.

At 12 o'clock they used to stop the train and we used to go with a blanket and sleep in the underground and then in the morning we used to get up and go back home.

MI: *What was the food like?*

It was terrible, after 4 or 5 days they ran out of bread and we used to eat biscuits...we never felt hungry, people would look out for us – in the UK the WRVS helped us, we never ran out of food, we had to use ration books

MI: *Can you describe the hotel?*

It was completely empty...not very posh but it was very nice...we had two rooms, bathroom kitchen everything, you could go out into the shops and buy whatever you wanted and you could cook it at the hotel.

MI: *What was it like for your parents?*

The people had so much will, when they were telling us to move, they believed that they were doing it for our own good people were never complaining.

MI: *Could your parents speak English?*

Yes. The best thing that could happen to the people of Gibraltar was to send us during the war to England – we learned a lot of things in life, it was completely different. Our lives were more like the Spaniards than the British so that when we went to England it was the best thing, our children went to different schools. At the beginning it was a bit difficult, you used to get on the bus and the people had

the habit of speaking Spanish and you used to get – you bloody foreigners - you know, but then afterwards we used to get along with them perfectly

MI: *Did you see a lot of bombing?*

When I was living in Marlborough Court they gave me a bucket of sand and a long shovel, I was only 11 years old, I used to run in the streets around Kensington putting incendiary bombs out. I used to put the sand on top of the incendiary bombs, pick it up with the shovel and put it in the basket.

MI: *Did you do fire watching?*

Oh yes of course, they used to give us a helmet and we used to go fire watching, we used to go up on the roof – I did that as well....I was never frightened, I was the type of person I was never frightened of anything you know, I tackle anything you know..when you are young you don't think about these things.

Track 4

MI: *Did your mother work?*

No she stayed at home...

MI: *What was it like seeing the shops etc?*

MA speaks about the difficulty of many of the women not being able to speak English so they had to use hand signals to convey what they needed.

MI: *Was there a shelter in the hotel?*

We used to go underneath a tennis court; we used to go in there as if it was an underground. In that place my father used to gardening on top of what was supposed to be the shelter

MI: *Do you remember people being frightened?*

No no

MI: *Were the Gibraltarians lucky?*

The English people they used to come to our place because they said we were so lucky, so many bombs and so little casualty.

MI: *Did you ever see a bad bombing?*

I have seen in one day nearly 200 planes throwing bombs all over the place...I could see the spitfires fighting them, like if it was a film, you wouldn't think it was dangerous to be there – you would say look what are they doing look, look at that one coming down...at night time it was really bad, a lot of bombing at night time....we were pleased when they sent us to Ireland we had a rest, but it was more or less the end of the war and everything was quieter

MI: *What about going to school?*

MA only at school for about a year and a half; when the family went to Putney he worked in a factory, and then a munitions factory in Wandsworth.

MA speaks more about living in Putney and the football league of all the hotels where the Gibraltarians were staying. There were about 10-12 hotels who played in the league.

We had a football team there and at the final of the Gibraltar Hotels I played in the team at QPR ground;

MI: *Did English people understand where Gibraltar was?*

Not many people knew where it was, they though Gibraltar was a place where there was only caves and monkeys..

MA speaks about the invasion of North Africa – 17,000 soldiers in barracks in the tunnels in Gibraltar; Montgomery and Eisenhower; invasion.

MI: *Did you hear about any of this when you were in London?*

No nothing....we hardly had any news from Gibraltar we were concentrated more in what was happening in England than what was happening in Gibraltar...for some people it was difficult.

MI: *Do you remember the women being upset?*

No not really

MI: *Cultural change?*

Not everyone, but a good number of the men who stayed here they got together with the Spanish girls, their wives were in England and the only way to communicate was by letter.

MI: *What happened when the women came back?*

Sometimes when they came and found out their husband had been with a Spanish girl, sometimes they accepted and sometimes not, there were a number of divorces. An uncle of mine, his wife was sent to England, he had a partner and they had five children and there were none with his wife, he gave his surname to the five of them

MI: *Do you think it is something in that Gibraltarians don't really talk about?*

They don't like to talk about it they prefer to keep quiet about it, but it did happen

MI: *What about women who started an affair in London?*

We didn't hear of any cases

Track 5

MI: *Can you tell me more about Northern Ireland?*

It was like a concentration camp it was Nissan huts which had been built for POWS. It was during the winter, it was snowing, it was very cold, there was no work, people used to do little things like make mats and sell them but there was no work at all.....We used to go once a week to Londonderry on a busIt was a hard time...very very cold although they used to bring some coal but it was really cold during the winter...

MI: *What about religious prejudice?*

MA speaks about the attitude between the Gibraltarians, the northern and southern Irish; he says it was more about fascism than religion.

Occasionally we used to go to Londonderry to try to find a job, to the labour exchange and the first thing they used to ask you was what is your religion.

MI: *Did you lie about your religion?*

No we never used to lie

MI: *Were you able to go to mass?*

No never – I don't remember seeing a priest in the camp...

MI: *What was it like when you came home to Gibraltar?*

MA said they did miss things that they had had in England, and if his mother hadn't got ill the family would have stayed there.

MI: *Did you say you lost your house?*

Yes we lost everything when we came back, we had nothing at all, they had to place us somewhere, we stayed at The Little Sister of The Poor which is now Mount Alvernia – the house was given to somebody else, to the local people, they took all the furniture out and put it in a store – it was hard for father and mother because they thought they would go back to their own home and they say they lost everything, a lot of sentimental things.

MI: *What happened to you?*

MA speaks about joining the police force with his brother; Commissioner of Police, Gowing, not able to help with accommodation;

MI: *Was Gowing in charge when the ambush happened?*

No...when the ambush happened Pepe Morello was commissioner of police, the first Gibraltarian Commissioner of Police.

Track 6

MA speaks about the Gibraltarian Defence Police Force and the occasion when the British and Gibraltarian Government want to call the force 'custodians' so that they could save money. MA made a speech outlining why he felt it was imperative that the Gibraltar Defence Force remained; he won the day. It was the 75th year of the force last year

MI: *Cultural identity?*

I feel myself as a Gibraltarian as I was born in Gibraltar, I am not British 100% I am 1001% which is more and when I was in England I used to work with English people, I am more British than you are, and I would do anything for my Britishness; my passport has always been a British passport;

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