



Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity

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

Pepe Forbes - Interviewed by Mary Ingoldby on 24th June 2013

Track 1

Introduction.

PF speaks about origin of his name.

Born 16th September 1917 in Gibraltar; father died when he was 6 he was an engineer in the dockyard and died at 39; Gibraltarian, ***I have no Spanish blood, all British, Forbes is Scottish.***

PF's grandfather from Aberdeen, in the army, father and uncle were born in Gibraltar; mother was Victory? The family had been in Gibraltar for generations.

PF Went to school at Langbourne College run by the Irish Christian Brothers

What can you remember?

In my days Gibraltar was more Spanish than English, at the dockyard they were paid in Spanish money; Gibraltar has changed a lot now, for the best; we lived in a house, 3 rooms and a kitchen, no bathroom in those days, we went to the public baths; until we came to London I never had a bathroom.

What did your father do?

He was an engineer in the dockyard, my mother stayed at home, in those days the Gibraltarian women didn't work; PF was the only child; ***in those days, even if you were starving women wouldn't work; When Franco closed the frontier with Gibraltar we had had ten thousand people from Spain coming to work in Gib so then the Gibraltarian women had to do the jobs working in restaurants and hotel, cleaning, and they started earning money and they thought why wouldn't they work, and they were earning as much money as the***

husbands, they could buy fridges, washing machines, and that's how Gibraltar improved, without wanting to the Spanish did us a favour.

Day to day life?

My father was a Freemason and when he died they wanted me to come to England to study but my mother said I was too young, I was 6; in the afternoon went home, didn't have the liberty that the younger generation have today. My uncle who took over was strict but very fair, he had no children

Your mother didn't get married again?

No

What sort of food did you eat?

My mother cooked the whole time, cooked on a fire, keeping the fire alight; she cooked everything, Spanish food, Italian, French food, it was cosmopolitan

Did you speak Spanish?

More than English, much more than English, but speaking English at school, we had to study English at school; we learnt about English history,

Did you speak Spanish or English with your friends?

Mainly Spanish, can't remember speaking in English to them. Gibraltar more Spanish in culture in those days a lot of young Spanish girls came to work and they married Gibraltarians. Since Franco the girls didn't come to work in Gibraltar, only men. It became more English; as a matter of fact we have a habit we start talking English and finish talking Spanish, they call it Spanglish – it is a bad habit perhaps

When we came to England (for the second time after the war) my older son was 12 and my younger daughter was 5

Do you think in Spanish or English?

I happen to like a lot of Spanish things the Pasa Doble, the operettas – speaking and singing; I love that, I love bull fighting and the Spanish way of drinking, the tapas, I love that, the Spanish

people on their own are alright, we are talking about the government

What about the British in Gibraltar?

PF speaks about current TV programme - they are talking more about the English in Gibraltar than anything else

Were you aware of Englishness about you?

Oh yes we had English boys at school who couldn't speak Spanish, we had all sorts of religion; 12 o'clock lunchtime for Protestant and Jews – we had great respect for each other.

PF speaks about the mixed cultures in Gibraltar; tolerance; the celebrations in Gibraltar for 300 years of British Rule

17 thousand people hand in hand all round Gibraltar to signify unity; there was a Catholic Church, there was a Synagogue, Jews speaking to the Arabs and the English people say we never see this anywhere – it was a great thing.

It must have been different when you were a child, not so built up?

No they couldn't build because it is so small and then they said that it was a necessity to do something, now they have a project another 375 flats, another floor. 30 thousand people, and there about 8 thousand Spanish coming daily to Gibraltar to work.

PF speaks about relationship between Gibraltar and La Linea.

Did you go to the beach?

PF speaks about the summer timetable everyone to the beach at 2.30;

Track 2

What can you remember about the Spanish Civil War?

A lot of Spaniards came into Gibraltar looking for refuge, running away from the war, La Linea were on Franco's side so there wasn't any war there; they walked in;

PF speaks about relationship between Spain and Gibraltar, the frontier; the Spanish working in Gibraltar (both then and currently).

PF speaks about the tourists and visitors to Gibraltar; people don't go to Spain now because they don't want to wait in queues, Gibraltarians used to go but not now because of hassle. In Gibraltar everything used to be closed on Sundays so it was customary to go to La Linea, Algeciras and Malaga, I loved it.

Can you remember Spanish Civil War?

Gibraltarians took them in; many of them were Gibraltarians who lived in La Linea

International brigade – did Gibraltarians go to fight?

No not that I know of. In my opinion they were one as much as the other, Franco was supposed to be the bad one, but the other side started killing police, violating nuns and burning churches

Anything else about your childhood?

After school we went out and played in the street until 7 or 8 o'clock. I lived near the main synagogue, there was a Jewish policeman, you had a policeman or two to see that the kids didn't make any noise when a service was on in the synagogue.

I remember at Langbourne College next door to synagogue, it had triangle saying there was a school there, we started throwing stones at the sign, without realising that when we missed the stones went into the synagogue – and we ran away – my uncle insisted that I go to the synagogue to apologise. The man (rabbi) was delighted that such a nice boy went to apologise and he took me into the synagogue and we looked around

Did you uncle come and visit you at home?

He lived close by; most people lived in crowded conditions – it was normal, cooking on a fire, keeping it going, no gas

Food?

FB speaks about his mother who could cook everything and also his wife; tells a story about his son in the UK going to watch football and his wife cooking 100 meatballs, rice and spaghetti.

What happened when you left school?

I got a clerical job import export and stayed there and then soon after came over to England

Were you worried about the war?

We knew and we knew what the Spaniards were going to be, they were neutral but everyone knew they were not neutral so had to change to non belligerent so had to decide which side so sided with the Germans, speaks of ship interned in Algeciras; speaks about convoys and the ships being blown up in the harbour; Gibraltar was bombed by the Italians (French/Tangier?)

Gibraltar was very well armed?

PF speaks about the British Military in Gibraltar. 65 thousand troops, the names of the roads inside the tunnels - they had all these names, Maida Vale, Marble Arch you could drive 35 miles, names of roads inside the rock – all built by Royal Engineers; RE's began in 1704; Freedom Of The City

Did you think of enlisting?

You could see it was coming and we knew that the Spaniards were not on our side; speaks about relationship between Spain and Gibraltar; we are very very British in Gibraltar and a lot of things we complain to the UK government that they should do more to stop the Spanish at the frontier, more to help us, they know how loyal and British we are.

Track 3

Evacuation?

PF speaks about Franco and Spain in the war, the vulnerability of the frontier.

How soon did people know about being evacuated?

They could see the thing coming and getting worse, my mother went to Tangiers, and I went to see her a couple of times, and then when it got worse they decided to send some people to Jamaica and some to England, my mother was coming to the UK so I put my name down to go with her. I was 24

Never been to England – what was it like?

Can you imagine coming to London from Gibraltar, we were put in Lancaster Gate one of the best places of London, those lovely houses facing the park, Bayswater Road, Marble Arch;

We arrived in Swansea.....in a way I was glad I was in London, outside Gibraltar, although I have been here for 50 years and I have done well, but I still feel Gibraltarian

Did you have a picture of England?

I imagined England being strong; PF speaks about Germany;

In the first place we were opposite Hyde Park, so just imagine, I went through it and used to run sometimes, and seeing Park Lane, it was something I had never imagined I had only seen it in films.

And seeing the shops, although we always had very good shops in Gibraltar, perfumery, watches, Indian shops but nothing like Selfridges or Harrods.

PF speaks about the Indian shops in Gibraltar.

We had no choice but to come to England, my mother made friends with people of her age in the hotel and she started a new life – to begin with we had a bath which we never had in Gibraltar which was something; ...Sometimes there were a lot of Spanish people, Spanish by birth married to Gibraltarians, they couldn't speak English, you got on with them and the English people

Mrs Steel the manager in Lancaster gate, a lovely lady, it was blocks of houses, it all depended how many in the family, I had a room for myself and my mother had another one, meals were cooked, very good bearing in mind rationing was on, doctors, nurses, everything was laid on.

My mother didn't work but I immediately went to work, I went to the American Red Cross, security and in the accounts department, doing night shifts to see that everything was safe, helping with the accounts;

In London in middle of blitz?

I met my wife practically straight away, I met her in the hotel and we became very close, we used to go out everywhere, I remember on a Sunday fighters and flying bombs, we used to go out to work, shopping, to the pictures or whatever, life went on, we used to play football

Just imagine. I got a national health number which is 125399 those were the numbers of the three buses that passed by Lancaster Gate – used to get a bus to go to Piccadilly and back

Air raids?

A lot of people went to the underground, I never went my mother never went – it must have been so uncomfortable, we didn't go, when they were bombs we sat and looked out from the balcony, we were on the 6th floor, the only time we were in no 100 they dropped incendiary bombs on 105 – and we got smoke in our lungs and two days very ill. You took it, many people saying hurry up it is quarter past four they will be here in half an hours time, it was scary but it was normal, people took it in their stride

Did people used to pray?

Oh yes, first thing we do when we have a problem, please God

Was your mother worried?

Oh yes, about me working at night time, many times when I came from work, I'm back mum, I think she had the light on and everything, reading and waiting for me to come

PF got married in 1944 in Paddington

Meeting his wife

They met when first got to London got married 3 years later.

50 shilling tailor, a suit from 50 shillings, used to go to Saville road to the office of Saconne and Speed for a bottle of whisky, the head man was from Gibraltar, sometimes came out with a couple of bottles of wine.

Different attitudes to going into shelters/underground; mainly spoke Spanish, even in England.

People thought that the Gibraltarians were lucky?

I think we were all lucky with a hell of a bombing, I think the Germans on 15th September 1940 France capitulated, Germans sent hundreds of planes at a time, on the night of the 15th September they shot down 30 spitfires of which 10 pilots were saved but we shot down 165 bombers and although they had many more planes than we had they couldn't afford that lost, so they changed methods, the following day they started to bomb buildings instead of bombing military objectives.

The bombings were terrible, we were right in the centre of London, many times we were looking out of the balcony, undercover just in care of the flak, we saw the explosions from a distance.

Were you very frightened?

We had no options so we took it in our stride, we had to work, we had to go shopping,

Was it exciting?

Yes it was, the pubs were full, the one thing the Germans couldn't beat it was the spirit of the English

Did you ever see any tragedies?

No, I would not have liked to, PF speaks about the incendiary bomb in the hotel next door.

How was your mother's English?

My mother spoke practically no English, no she wrote in Spanish mainly.

When I met my wife she had her mother, two aunts, grandmother they got with my mother and my wife used to do all the shopping, my mother practically never went out, she was with people of her age in the hotel

How old was she?

Born 1885 – 55/60 years old – she had a tremendous memory, her name was Antonia

Track 4

Gibraltarian women and men separated – other relationships?

Anecdote: a woman was sick, she was Spanish, her husband was in Gibraltar and her brother in law went with her to the doctor, she's pregnant, she cannot be pregnant, her husband is in Gibraltar – that was a joke in those days.

The husband of the women concerned was a very good friend of mine, very good footballer and I saw him when I went back to Gibraltar never spoke a thing about that, I suppose he got somebody else and he got on with his life. PF speaks about a man's reaction when his wife has an affair. They reckon that in times of war it is a natural thing.

PF speaks about his wedding celebrations; speaks about bureaucracy

Northern Ireland

PF Speaks about Northern Ireland

It was a camp with huts and we had about 480 people there, I became the chairman of the committee and I had to go to Stormont and had rows with the people there

Why were you having rows?

The police said - We shoot first and ask questions later so I said Hail Hitler and walked out. Ridiculous to say must be catholic must be protestant, if you get a job to do as long as you do I couldn't care about your religion but they took it like that, and the manager in Northern Ireland he made me mad, I called him all the names on the sun and he never lost the smile on his face which is what upset me more

PF speaks about his baby being born, putting a door up in the hut to get some privacy.

Were you in the middle of the country side?

Yes about 30 miles from Belfast we were in xxxx the Down Patrick side. PF speaks about people not being repatriated if they didn't have an existing house in Gibraltar, i.e. if they came from La Linea

PF left their house but got it back when they returned to Gibraltar, the house was looked after

Pictures/photographs of Ireland – protests, children holding banners?

Not where we were I think. I was the chairman (of Gibraltarians?)the manager was completely against the Gibraltarians, because they were Catholics. I remember the night before I left they gave me a party and when he had to speak well we are sorry to see our chairman go and I said you liar, he must have been glad to see me go. I never cared about the religion, but they did,

Did people go to mass?

We had a priest Father Murphy and when my son was born I called him Joseph Patrick after Father Murphy - he was a very nice man, he could drink 30 cups of tea a day.....We used the dining room as a church – in that respect we never caused any trouble.

PF speaks about people who tried to help them, local people bringing clothes for those who didn't have enough. You had no option so you had to make the best of it

Where did you leave from?

Went back from Ireland to Gibraltar

What was it like coming home?

It was nice to get out of there, if it had been London I wouldn't have minded because in London we had everything we wanted. We could buy things in the village (in Ireland) you took it in your stride, you had to make the best of what was going on

What was Gibraltar like when you got back?

Getting a job, and carrying on. PF Speaks about Royal Gibraltar Regiment; Gibraltar will always be the same, they are happy people, they have got jobs, nobody starves, we have an English Governor, Speaks about the governors, past and present;

What made you decide to return to England?

Because I thought there was more future for my children here than in Gibraltar, my wife had some relatives here, so we came over, and I got a job, and then got involved in the boxing;

When you think of Gibraltar now?

I see the Gibraltar that I knew, and the Gibraltar I knew, everybody has jobs, and there is no anger anywhere.

British I've always felt British, British Gibraltarian and when I talk about Gibraltar I say British Gibraltar..I haven't been for three years The first thing I did when I went back was go to the Royal Gibraltar Association club there

Track 5

PF speaks about the beginning of his boxing career working with Bobby Diamond and getting his agent's licence. Taking boxers to Spain and became representative in the UK for Spanish boxing;

World boxing organisation nominated as representative in Europe.

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