



Gibraltar: Challenge, Change & Continuity

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

Reggie Norton interviewed by Mary Ingoldby and Jerry Robinson on 23rd August 2013

Track 1

RN: Family background: son of Henry known as Harry Norton
mother Anita Norton, maiden name Stagnetto; RN born 1933; sister
who is 81 who lives in Gibraltar.

Paternal grandparents Gibraltarians; grandfather was eldest son of
John Norton who had arrived in Gibraltar in 1860s/70s;
grandmother came from Italian family in Genoa – ship chandlers
had come a generation before to Gibraltar, then lived in La Linea;
Grandfather was Chief Revenue inspector in the 1930s (appointed to
colonial service in 1888)

Grandfather was very careful with government property always
wanted to everything as cheaply as possible; meticulous; a Free
Mason – RN refers to documents.

RN recalls visiting family farm in the middle of La Linea. He
remembers the horses; RN's father going out riding with Spanish
when he was a young man, made friends and connections who were
very useful when he became Diplomatic Secretary.

***When father was a young man used to borrow horses and
ride in La Linea along the beach – in doing that he used to
meet up with Spanish army officers who were also riding –
because of this connection with La Linea and was more
accepted by these officer – always had a very good
relationship with the Spanish army. Very useful when he
became the diplomatic Secretary. He was able to solve
problems for the Governor and – just before Operation Torch
was able to assure Spanish officials that it was not a
preparation for invasion of Spain.***

He was a man who got on well with people, he had known many of them before they were generals.

MI – father born in Gibraltar?

Father and mother born in Gibraltar; Mothers family background – Gibraltarians. Had a tobacco factory importing tobacco from Cuba; factory was in Irish town; there were about three tobacco factories in Gibraltar; tobacco smuggling.

JR: The beginning of Gibraltarian economy – importing tobacco and coffee.

RN speaks about ship chandlery firm, family background; connections to South America. Mixture of cultures in family background.

Track 2

MI: you were six years old when the war broke out, what is your earliest memory?

RN remembers being a small child and trying to push his toy car on a gravel path; refers to 8mm cine films which he still has - content includes family life; parades; holidays in Normandy; 1936/1937.

WWII – evacuation. Family went to Rabat in Morocco and then to Madeira. Some went to Rabat some to Casablanca – lived in a small flat building quite nice, vivid memory of seeing goods wagons full of dejected French soldiers being repatriated to

MI: What was your father doing at this point?

RN: Still working as assistant colonial secretary – he stayed in Gibraltar.

Family got back to Gibraltar and then sent to Madeira – general thoughts about evacuation; very comfortable in Madeira, hotel still survives; family lived in the annex while in Madeira, recalls a hurricane and an earthquake; had a governess; a pilgrimage to Shrine of Our Lady; Watching wine making in Madeira; had an accident on a sledge; RN didn't go to school until he was 9 and a half, passed common entrance at 12;

MI – any privileges because of your father’s position

RN – no, but we had relatively more money to other people; families who had businesses in Gibraltar went to Tangier mainly; RN’s family went to Madeira with his aunt and some other Gibraltarian families.

MI: Did you see your father?

RN: He came once and spent a few days with us, in father’s family there were four brothers, one was the manager of Nestles, one of them may have come with him to Madeira.

Track 3

Harry Norton (Reggie Norton’s father)

RN: Four brothers in the family and not much money; RN’s father was the eldest went out to work - employed as a crane clerk at the age of 14; a brilliant man in his own way, clever and quick, promoted to Port Department, then worked for the treasury and then Colonial Secretariat, then Assistant Colonial Secretary

Beginning of the 1930s, Godley was the Governor; incident regarding the Calpe Hunt; relationship with Spain was important, at that time RN’s father became Diplomatic Secretary made part of the Foreign Office. *RN refers to photographs.*

He did a lot of work during Spanish civil war – *refers to docs*
Knew all these people who were prepared to help him, could find out and let the Governor know what was going on, rescued Spanish families – going to ports and getting them out of Spain – refers to letters/articles.

JR: refers to Dudley Gowing and importance of personal relationships/friendships between Gibraltarians and the Spanish.

RN: He knew people in Seville as well as around Gibraltar; involvement in Operation Mincemeat – part of authenticating story. He briefed the Ambassador in Madrid and Lisbon; RN speaks about his car a Ford8 which had an extra petrol tank so that he could go on long journeys; he was a courier carrying messages; often had better relationships with Spanish Foreign Ministers than the British diplomats in Spain.

He was trustworthy, they trusted him, it comes out in all the letters – he was very valuable they would tell him things

JR – refers to Ben Macintyre’s book on Operation Mincemeat

RN speaks about the Sinking of *The Hood*, a big party afterwards to celebrate.

JR: What governors did he serve under?

RN: about 5 or 6 – Godley, Ironside, Gort, Macfarlane, Eastwood from circa 1928 – 1944/46

JR: What it was like serving under the different Governors?

RN his favourite one was Gort; anecdote about Sir Charles Harrington at garden parties calling everyone George.

Discussion about dates/events/Governors.

MI: did he talk to you about his work?

RN he told me a lot of these stories – important relationships; good relationships with Gort and Admiral Sir James Somerville; RN refers to letters; his father pinching Sir James Somerville’s identity card as a souvenir; anecdote about driving Sir James Somerville over the border

JR: one of his roles was to brief and be the Personal Secretary for each of these Governors?

RN refers to a wonderful letter from Somerville saying: **he was always being asked what was the intelligence like, I said the intelligence was awful except from Harry Norton he was excellent.**

RN – refers to letter from Macfarlane saying **I don’t know if I would have been able to carry on without you**

Track 4

JR refers to National Archive MI5 files- MI5 looked after security on The Rock.

RN refers to National Archive papers (his son is a press officers at the National Archives) shows SOE papers- discussion about SOE.

RN quotes:

'one of the most interesting personalities in Gibraltar with whom I had several long conversations is Mr Harry Norton

the advisor to the governor, Mr Norton is a Gibraltarian who has, in my opinion, a profound knowledge of Spanish politics and although his views are not generally speaking shared by the higher officials of the British embassy in Madrid he has sound personal contacts in Spain and I feel that an opinion from him on forthcoming events there will be always valuable Mr. Norton proposes to visit this country in May and I would like to suggest that he be entertained by some senior official of SOE as I think a little attention of this kind would prove to be a good investment

Reply

I would like to know when Harry Norton arrives in England

MI: And did he meet them?

RN I don't know, he probably did

JR: general comments on relationship between Harry Norton/Gibraltar and Spain and UK

RN – refers to another paper from The British (?) Embassy – referring to Harry Norton in the Foreign Office.

RN: My father was a bit of maverick because he had these connections and all the rest of it he did it in his own way... that's the way he was...they did in the end like what he had to say.

Discussion about relations with Spanish and Gibraltarians and Harry Norton.

RN speaks about his work in South America for Oxfam – importance of speaking Spanish/Gibraltarian.

JR refers to WWII politics: Madrid/Algeciras/La Linea relationship with Franco; German and Italian plans to attack Gibraltar; Blue Book entry on Robert Norton and Harry Norton.

RN referring to paperwork/photographs of father British/Spanish connections. Spaniards who believed that Germany would win the war.

My father knew all these people – my father was the other Master of Calpe Hunt. It was quite clear that they knew these people thought that Germany was going to win the war – but we invited to them around and had good relationships with them.

Looking at photographs

Discussion about Spanish relationship with Germany/UK

My father was trying to make sure of the relationship with our neighbours – that was his responsibility

MI: Did he know about espionage and that sort of thing?

RN – he might have known something...I'm not sure he wasn't particularly interested, his main thing was the diplomatic front

JR refers to National Archive files – knowing what the Germans were up too – MI5 prevented 56 out of 58 proposed attacks on The Rock. You get to know that through good relations so the Spanish would know what the Germans were up to, meeting people like your father to sort of warn them – would that be a possibility?

RN – might be...

Discussion/Looking at photographs and papers.

JR: he knew all the main political figures

RN Absolutely yes

Looking at photographs/papers – Gibraltar Chronicle/Noel Coward visit/Anthony Quayle

RN: anecdote about plane and his father understanding the Spanish character.

Track 5

JR: can you remember the social life from colonial period?

RN recalls the 200 Club; the Yacht Club; Motor racings; socialising ; parties; New Years Eve at the Yacht Club and then going to Mass at 8 o clock the next morning still in dinner jackets; playing tennis, squash, swimming, running;

JR Was your father required to go to a lot of functions at The Convent?

RN: Yes while still employed but retired at 50

MI: What did he do then?

He started a scrap metal business and an insurance company; he had met this guy called Savon Hudson – for 10 shillings you could insure all your belongings – because it was so cheap they made a lot of money – run from the offices of Willy Thomas by a guy called Victor Dumas and a young guy called Francis.

MI: Where did you live?

Mother owned houses through the estate of her father but they were all occupied; RN's family didn't own a house; RN's cousin married a Russo so RN's family lived in the top floor flat of a house owned by the Russo family – 27 Cumberland Road; family lived there until RN's mother died; his sister then lived in one of the houses belonging to mother's estate in Main Street; RN speaks about his mother; her illness. She died at the age of 93 in 1993; his father died in 1974.

MI: How long were you in Gibraltar?

RN came to UK in April 1943 then holiday in Gibraltar after the war in 1945 – hadn't seen his mother since 1943 but his father had made one visit which upset him more than anything else – **they all started speaking to me in Spanish but I couldn't answer back, I had lost my Spanish and it took me two weeks to get it back again** – returned to Gibraltar after school university, training to be a lawyer; RN didn't like practising Law; initially worked in Chambers with his cousin; gave up the law but it helped him to secure the post of Assistant Town Clerk.

RN: working as Assistant Town clerk (1960s) and after 10 months promoted to Town Clerk; talent for being administrator, running

departments; City Council looked after all the public facilities – the highways, the markets, service, telephone, gas electricity; public health. Government looked after hospitals and health service.

JR: significance of 1960s/70s when Gibraltar changed from colony to self government and overseas British Territory.

RN: City Council and Government Departments amalgamated RN always thought City Council department more efficient; RN set up new department – Head of planning and development; RN found the work atmosphere was completely different to the council and didn't like it, much more bureaucratic – then RN left although offered higher positions but said he didn't like the law and didn't feel he was any good at – so he left and he joined Oxfam

Track 6

RN's work with Oxfam; Latin America Field Secretary; working in Central America; 1972 earthquake in Nicaragua; 1976 earthquake in Guatemala.

MI: What about Gibraltar?

RN speaks about politics in Gibraltar; relationship with Spain; writing an open letter to Franco in the Gibraltar Chronicle made him a Persona non grata with Spain; incident with Hugh Kay at Spanish border proved the point of the Spanish attitude to Gibraltarians and Gibraltar.

JR: You were in Gibraltar when Spain started bid for return of Gibraltar and when they closed the border?

RN – yes – biggest mistake Spain had ever made; it made Gibraltarians define themselves decide on relationship with Spain, building a Gibraltarian identity; people are proud of being Gibraltarian and relationship with Britain; comments on the amount of people and space in Gibraltar, a psychiatrist saying that Gibraltarians survive because of their belief of who they are and what they are doing.

JR: had Spain been kinder to Gibraltar could it have gone the other way?

RN – if Spain had opened the gates then 25 years later said do you now want to be Spaniards the Gibraltarians would have said no because we are not like the English we are not like the Spanish we have our own way of doing and looking at things and being what we are and we wouldn't have

wanted to loose that; ultimately we would have found it very difficult to say we are going to hand ourselves over to the Spaniards and we wouldn't have trusted them

RN: Speaks about Spain stopping the workers coming in; Gibraltarians bringing in the Moroccans; didn't treat them very well when they came in they were based in Casemates Square, might have done better, but in the end we have done a lot for the Moroccans, and now part of the community;

MI: Who do you think you are?

I am Gibraltarian British, first Gibraltarian and then British – I always sty that – you love Gibraltar because it is such a unique place; people know you, you know everyone, a very nice place to be part of – a tiny percentage 5 % would get very violent if any of Gibraltar went to the Spanish.

RN speaks about the riots? RN was there; Brigadier Chambers suggesting bringing in the troops the Mayor replying (Joshua Hassan?) – ***This is a pro British riot we don't need the troops I will control this – so thank God he stopped it.***

We will always be staunchly Gibraltarian staunchly pro British the Spanish will keep doing this – and then everything goes back to normality and I hope that little by little relations will improve and we will get back to improve life for everyone – I wrote a letter to The Chronicle which didn't go down very well because when the people in Spain were saying terrible situation, we should charge people coming in I wrote to say I think we should help these people – why not have voluntary collection, didn't go down very well

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