**OpenLIVES Spanish Émigré interviews – Rocio Lopez**

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| Interviewee: | Rocio Lopez |
| Interviewer: | Darren Paffey (University of Southampton) |
| Interview date: | 25 June 2008 |
| Location: | ASER, Seville, Spain |
| Duration: | 95.00 mins |
| Countries of migration: | UK, Germany |

**Synopsis:**

[00.00 – 10.00] **Childhood and early memories**

Born here in Seville, 16/05/42. Very good memories of childhood. Her parents were married 16 years before having her; her mother was 40 when she was born, and 43 when her younger sister was born. They didn’t go hungry even though there was hunger in those post-war years. Parents were very loving as they’d been so many years without children. Rocio remembers the beach, going to a *finca* belonging to mother’s godmother during summer. Father worked in the port, guarding the imports - mostly food that came in. Many people used to want to take some of the food, and would come to pick up any sugar that spilled, etc.

Her parents spoke about the Civil War. Her mother lost a brother during the Civil War. The brother was not political, but a place was burnt in their village, brother was arrested and taken away onto a boat along with several others. When mother took food & clothes to him, boat had gone, and never knew any more about it. This affected mother a lot.

Rocio experienced the post-war hunger at close quarters as mother would always give food to people who came to the house hungry. Lived in Triana, a typical *barrio*.

Always fought with brother, but although he was bigger, she was older. Says that if it weren’t for her brother being in Seville, she wouldn’t be here as she has her daughter in London.

Before going to the UK, she had ideas of the country as a ‘mecca’. Weren’t many career opportunities and wasn’t able to carry on studying, so decided to go to UK to study English when she finished *bachillerato* at 18 years. She was there over 3 years.

Father died when she was almost 13 years old. Father was old-fashioned, mother more progressive. Mother didn’t want her to go to UK. UK for her was a way of earning money and learning English at the same time.

[10.01 – 20.00] **Arrival in the UK**

She made the 3-day journey to Hertfordshire from Seville with a friend from school who was going too. Train Seville to Madrid, to Irún, to Paris, to Calais, boat to Dover, train to London Victoria. Even though she’d studied English for two years, she wasn’t understood by people, and had to use a dictionary.

Went to work in a very large mental hospital – it doesn’t exist now. Remembers arriving there around 11/12 at night with suitcases. Bus dropped them off there. One of first things she remembers eating was a salmon salad with beetroot – found English food strange. Wasn’t anything she liked. She didn’t know how to cook. When staying at the nurse’s home, they had a kitchen. To begin with she mostly ate bread, butter, jam, and drank milk.

There were a lot of Spaniards there. She remembers being surprised that no-one said to her to eat, whereas she was used to being told to eat at home. Didn’t eat much.

They had their contracts before going to the UK, through a friend who was there, and whose sister was a friend of Rocio and Maria José. Met lots of Spanish who didn’t speak English, so she decided to go to London. She arranged for a lot of people to go and work there, it was very easy, she just gave them the name and address of the Matron. Remembers being fully medically examined when arriving to work. Remembers she weighed 47kgs at her medical, and she was 1.61m tall. These have stayed in her mind. The hospital arranged for these medicals.

[20.00 – 30.00] **First impressions of the UK**

She took some books with her to England, some books in English which she’d used when learning English. She didn’t take novels, but remembers her luggage weighed a lot. In those days it wasn’t a case of choosing what clothes to take – what you had, you took! Took lots of socks for the cold. Doesn’t remember if she took photos. Maybe she took some later. She wrote to her mum every day, as the family didn’t have a telephone at home, until later. Then she used to go to a call centre.

Other first impressions – thought everyone in England was mad, as she was working in a mental hospital. Old people in the hospital too, and this was a shock because in Spain the families look after old people. This upset her, and she didn’t understand it then. Now she understands it a lot more, and has said to her daughter to put her in a home when she’s old and infirm.

Other strange customs – the milkman left milk on the door (and she left the payment) and no-one took it. In Spain as it was post-war, if you left anything outside, people stole it. The streets were clean, people spoke quietly, people left their doors open, on the London underground there were unattended boxes with newspapers where you left the payment, and it was all trusted. When she lived in the UK later, things had changed and she had milk stolen. She yearns for the Britain of that time, and knows it has now changed beyond recognition. She used to cross Tooting Bec common on her own to start work at 7am and there was no problem – now she can’t cross the road without worrying.

When foreigners started arriving, cleanliness changed, there started to be crimes, rapes, etc. She remembers her mother-in-law lived on the 24th floor of a block of flats. England is not the same, and Spain has changed too. During Franco’s Spain there were *carteristas*, but if someone was poor they wouldn’t have their bag stolen in those days.

Had luck with the language. The ward sister liked her, and used to teach her all the words of items in English. She taught her very patiently and looked after her. When she then went to London, she was also very lucky.

First impressions didn’t really change. She began to like the food. In London she lived outside the hospital, her mother sent her recipes, she cooked for herself. Used to go to the Spanish shop in Portobello Road.

Money used to just suffice, but never had to ask for money. She loved the space, the commons.

[30.00 – 40.00] **Early days of life in the UK**

First lived in nurses’ home in St Albans. She was there for one year before going to London. She first went back to Spain to reassure her mum that all was OK but that she wasn’t learning English in St. Alban’s so she was going to London. Her mum first thought that she would be there for 6 months.

In London she rented a room from a Polish woman, very small place. Then moved nearby and shared a flat with a friend, between Tooting Bec and Balham (Streatham Road?). The landlady used to send someone to clean, and there were others in the same building. She lived there until she left the UK – her mother had had an operation, ‘no aguanto más’, wanted to return.

‘Home’ there in UK didn’t mean much – it’s where she had her place. Had to share bathroom, didn’t like. Didn’t go to UK for ‘liberty/freedom’ – she didn’t used to go out late lots. She knew others who went because their parents didn’t let them go out. Rocio’s mum used to let her go out whenever, and knew where she was.

She didn’t feel at home there, because she knew she would return (to Spain). Her future wasn’t there and she wanted to return. Matron thought she would put her roots down there.

Came back to Seville and started work in the US base, teaching Spanish to Americans and English to Spaniards.

Remembers that a letter came from the nephew of a Miss Merritt who had died and left her a ring worth £9. Asked if she wanted money but she said the value was in the fact she had left her something, so asked for the ring instead. She met the elderly Miss Merritt in UK and used to look after her. Doesn’t have the ring now as it was too big for her, Rocio gave it to her mother, and when mother died, her sister-in-law asked for it, so Rocio said why not. Sister in law still wears it. Quite often, patients used to say ‘nurse do this and I’ll leave you x, y and z’. Used to sit and chat to Miss Merritt, give her ‘complan’ and milk. Rocio looked after her mum at home when she was old.

[40.01 – 50.00] **Contrasting daily life in the UK with life in Spain**

When she sees the ring now, she sees Miss Merritt’s face, the little old lady with very white hair, very thin, sat in her chair. Lovely lady.

Used to put *cartu* everywhere on her walls. When she came back from holidays in Spain, brought photos of her mum, her brother and his wife. Brother married a neighbour from the family home. Rocio used to go home once a year, having saved very hard. Not like now when her daughter has 4 holidays per year.

Daily life – didn’t cook complicated food as she didn’t know how to cook when she arrived. Learned bit by bit. Used to go to the butcher’s and buy half a pig’s head for two shillings. Used to make *mantequa*, a kind of lard. Eat every part of the pig in Spain, and was amazed that the ‘uncommon’ bits of the animal in the UK sold so cheaply. Her mother used to go to the country to buy meat, and there were *duanas* on the city limits of Seville and she had to pay to bring it in.

Rocio used to cook Spanish-style at first. She was then in Germany for years and learned more recipes. Remembers her English husband opening the window so people could smell the delicious Spanish food she was cooking.

She forgot about Spanish festivals – forgot the dates. Always celebrated Christmas Spanish-style. 25th became more English with turkey, etc, but 24th was Spanish style. First time she was in UK, she didn’t stay for any Christmases. Later, custom was for married couples to invite singles for festivals, Christmas etc so her house was always full.

Remembers neighbourhoods being very private, no-one knew each other, found it strange. In Spain life takes place in the street. She got to know her neighbours in UK though, used to take their kid for walks in pram. Later she moved to Stockwell, and didn’t like it. Lots of blacks – she says she’s not racist but that living near blacks made her racist. People have different customs. She had adapted to British customs as far as possible, e.g. she didn’t cook sardines at home because they smelt a lot and this bothered people. She sent her daughter to an English school – English first, and then 3 afternoons a week to Spanish school. Immigrants who, e.g. cut the head off a sheep in the street, that’s not acceptable. Particularly in Britain where they cared for animals. Blacks who do the same work as her absolutely have the right to earn the same money, but her experience is that she was the one who ended up doing their work.

[50.01 – 60.00] **Moving to Germany**

They arrive, start to bring lots of people, Brits have to sell their homes and move out. She has lived in Seville now for 8 years and she’s seen the same happening. Help poor people in their own country, they’re happier there, they should earn money there. What’s happening in UK, America is happening here. She has seen it. Don’t bring them here, they don’t adapt and they bother Spaniards – whoever says it’s not like that lies. If they say otherwise, they’re lying or they haven’t experienced it.

Didn’t like Stockwell but loved Queen’s Gate. Near to Kensington, daughter went to school. When she married she moved to Crystal Palace, lived in very quiet street. Nice people, fairly central location.

She didn’t have many English friends, still keeps in touch with a few. Used to go to church with some. Had lots of Spanish friends and keeps in touch. Her English husband liked the English far less than she did. He loved Spain, the food, beer, climate. They met through a Spanish friend in 1985, and married in 1986.

1960 – 1964 First stay in UK

1965, brother had to do military service. As Rocio was at home, brother was seen as ‘not needed’ so they were going to take him off. Mother worried about brother, had strong character. So Rocio said she would leave and go for 5 years to Germany, so that brother could stay at home and not do the military service. Had to be there for 5 years otherwise they’d take him away. Brother had also bought a van and was paying for it.

Ended up being in Germany for 10 years instead of 5 as she married and had a daughter. On leaving Spain, she didn’t feel much as she knew she had to do it. Her mother wasn’t so worried as when she left the first time, she’d grown up and her mother saw that she could look after herself.

[60.01 – 70.00] **Life in Germany and UK for second time**

She worked the whole time she was in Germany. Worked in sausage factory, worked *cociendo*, then worked on tripe. In the UK the first time, had to work 4 years to be able to then work in whatever you wanted. First few years, you could only work in hospitals, hotels or as an au pair.

In Germany, she was in a union when she worked for a metal company, car company. They automatically organised membership, she wasn’t asked and didn’t choose it. You could also make payments to the church, as they assumed that if you were Spanish you were Catholic. She wasn’t. Religion didn’t convince her so she didn’t go to church and didn’t pay. She was content being unionised as when there were strikes, the unions paid you the same. She stayed at home when there were strikes. She wasn’t active though.

Wasn’t politically active in Germany. In UK (2nd migration only) it was socialism, but that let her down as she saw the way it was going and so she voted for the BNP as a protest vote against socialism.

10 years in Germany, then went back to Spain as her marriage broke down. He returned to north of Spain where he was from. Occasionally sent money, came a couple of times after R’s mother died, then went a year without seeing his daughter. So R decided to go back to the UK in 1980, when daughter was 5. Went because mother had died, husband didn’t bother with daughter. R had friends there, she left daughter with cousin and went first to sort out school for daughter, etc, then went together.

Lived in Garrett Lane, Tooting Broadway near Wimbledom for 2 years. Then went to Streatham, daughter went to secondary school there. Then got job as housekeeper in Queen’s Gate when was more independent from daughter. Was an Arab company, and she lived next to Iraqi embassy. Knew an Iraqi exile who warned her about being so close to Embassy, due to conflicts etc. Many rich Iraqis used to go to Cromwell Hospital for treatments. She was in that job for about 3-4 years. Doesn’t remember exactly as she married and went to live in Stockwell. Before, she went to work for Australian diplomats who had 25 year old Down’s Syndrome daughter. R used to stay there overnight when diplomat was away. Contract was up after 5 years.

When she married, she worked cleaning houses. Husband didn’t want her to work too much; he was a *conserje* in the rehabilitation centre.

[70.01 – 80.00] **Second migration to the UK**

She was very happy during her second migration in the UK as her husband was lovely. He wanted to move to Spain, he loved everything about the culture, families, etc. Her husband was a cockney, but had never been to Spain before meeting R. He ended up more Spanish than R!

R’s brother let them know there were some new houses being built in Seville, so they went, looked, bought one. If her husband hadn’t wanted it, she wouldn’t have thought about buying a house there.

She wasn’t political in the UK, just here in Spain. When she first left, Franco was alive and one couldn’t be socialist, communist, atheist, Protestant or anything. Many things couldn’t be explained as people just didn’t know. When you go abroad, you understand more about your country than when you’re there studying. That’s what Franco wanted – if you studied politics then you were taught that all left-wingers were evil, etc. R had a very good friend who was evangelical Christian, and they used to have to meet in secret in a house. When in public, you couldn’t talk to her about beliefs either, because all of that was opposed in public. Politics was the same – meetings of more than 10 people could be dispersed. When there were demonstrations in the centre, when the police came they would all run. Then she left political activism, saying that if you can’t keep your own house in order, how are you going to sort out your neighbour’s?

[80:01 – 90.00] **Returning to Spain**

Withdrew from political activism. Annoys her when people don’t vote. She uses her vote to punish other parties and voted for BNP to punish socialists in UK.

RETURN TO SPAIN:

Idea was always there. When her English husband died, her daughter was 18 years old and had started at Royal Holloway 3 weeks earlier. Had a car to be able to come and go at weekends. Daughter couldn’t carry on studies, but Rocio managed to convince her to try and carry on. By Christmas, she decided she couldn’t concentrate or study. Took a year before applying for UCL. Had 3 As at A-levels. Finished degree, started work and then Rocio decided to return to Spain. Daughter had boyfriend, was settling down and about to live together but daughter didn’t want to leave Rocio on her own.

On arriving back, felt like she’d never been away. Main difference was language – wasn’t quite Spanish or English. If can’t think of word in one language, said it in the other. Daughter does the same but neither realised until others told them. When she couldn’t do this with people here, she was sometimes left without way of explaining things!

Lives in house on her own, very happy. She doesn’t have her husband or daughter, but says that she has her life and daughter has hers. Returned to the house that they had bought.

First impressions were that Spain had changed, for good and bad. More crime, but economically there had been big changes. Spaniards received her well, she joined gym, knew people in neighbourhood from when they came on holidays. She lives her own life English-style, not going to others’ houses, if she goes out with others she comes back and is in her own home. Doesn’t see need to go out every day, less so with the heat. She knows her daughter is happy. She’s happy with life as it is, minus the things she misses but which no-one can give her.

Felt more Spanish on her return – 100% Spanish. There are things about England she prefers, but she says she belongs here. Nowhere like Seville for beauty, for good living. She goes to Barcelona and Madrid and likes them, thinks they’re nice, but Seville is where she is, and where she’s *en mi salsa*. Has always been more Spanish than English. Used to take daughter to Spanish school after normal school as she didn’t want her to lose her roots. In English she always obeyed the laws.

She goes to the UK at least twice a year, and her daughter comes a couple of times too. Her daughter has bought a flat by the beach in Spain. Rocio is normally there, but not now because of the hospital treatment. Daughter is now with different boyfriend and lives with him in his flat in Ravens Park. When she goes, she has her own room. Boyfriend was in Argentina, speaks good Spanish. It’s not Rocio’s home, however kind they are. Only has one bathroom, whereas Rocio had two in hers. Rocio says she’s very territorial, likes having her own bathroom. R prefers them coming over here.

[90:00]

Daughter lives more centrally in London than they used to. Complains about the trains in the UK, were always messing up.