

# Traditional Trades in Munxar

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## Introduction

This chapter focuses on some traditional trades typical of Munxar in earlier times. Several people involved in these particular trades were interviewed.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Baker

Bread has been a staple food since prehistoric times. The first bread was made in Neolithic times, nearly 12,000 years ago, probably of coarsely crushed grain mixed with water, with the resulting dough laid on heated stones and baked by covering hot ashes.<sup>2</sup> In Gozo, as elsewhere, baking remained a domestic skill for many centuries with few changes in equipment or in the processing method.<sup>3</sup> As the vast majority of people were employed in farming until the early decades of the twentieth century, many succeeded in producing their own cereal grains for their family needs.

Presently, there is no bakery in Munxar. Nonetheless, the villagers are well-served by circulating bakery vans and local grocers. According to Marija Saliba, the wife of the last baker in Munxar, until her husband's bakery began to function, people made use of bakeries in the nearby villages of Ta' Sannat and Fontana. Although Munxar is very small in size, the baker had to work very long hours in order to bake enough bread for all his customers. His normal working day started from about midnight and lasted until noon.

The first step of the baking process was heating the

oven. It consisted of a square enclosed chamber which was heated with dry stalks, straw, and thorns that were set on fire. The dough was kneaded in the *lembi* - a large, smooth stone basin. The dough was left in the *lembi*, until it was leavened. After the dough had risen, it was cut into equal chunks and shaped into loaves. When a certain temperature was reached, the baker first swept the floor clean of the ashes that were piled in one corner, and then with a peel shovelled the bread one by one inside the chamber to bake. The oven was deep and it could contain ninety-six loaves at one go. Generally, the bread took one and a half hours to bake. The customers used to take their own flour for their own bread. According to Marija, a customer brought a measure of flour - *tomna* - to the bakery and the baker kneaded the dough for the bread. Around twelve loaves of bread of diameter sixteen centimeters would be made from a *tomna* flour. The cost of these twelve loaves of bread was twelve pennies (Lm 0.05). One must keep in mind that the customers supplied their own flour. They also had to take the twelve loaves at one go. Some customers used to knead the dough for their own bread, thus saving themselves money and the baker a lot of extra work. Before taking the bread to the bakery, every family marked it with a piece of pastry in the form of a cross, a circle, a triangle, a letter of the alphabet or some other sign so that their bread would not get mixed with that of others after baking.

The oven had another small oven attached to it which was used to bake ring cakes. Another type of bread produced by the bakery was the flat bread - *ftira*.<sup>4</sup> There are several types of *ftajjar*<sup>5</sup> - plural of *ftira* - but

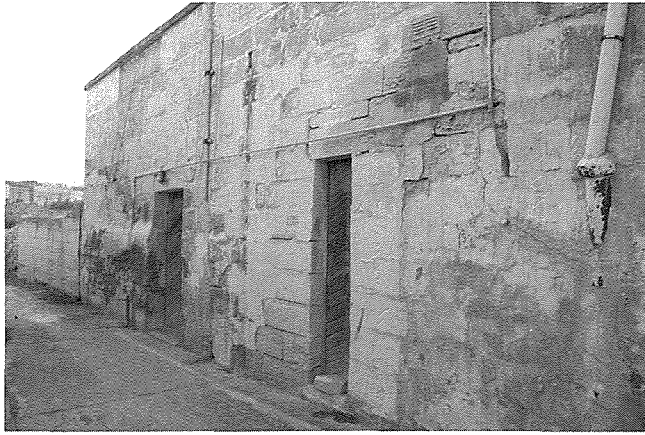
<sup>1</sup> In our quest to find the particular trades on which to focus our chapter, we pored through several issues of the magazine *Id-Dawl*. Where possible we interviewed the people mentioned in the magazine so as to obtain more details and clarify the subjects being discussed. See *Id-Dawl* Nos. 12 - 13, 15 - 19 & 23.

<sup>2</sup> See JOSEPH BEZZINA, *The Gozo baker - a domestic skill for many centuries* in *Malta this Month* April 95 (71-75)

<sup>3</sup> It was only in the late Middle Ages, and especially after 1530 with the arrival of the Knights of Saint John, that professional bakers began to be organised.

<sup>4</sup> The *ftira* - the earliest form of bread - is still eaten in much of the Middle East and other areas of the Mediterranean basin. Its popularity was due to the fact that it was easily prepared at home.

<sup>5</sup> Other types of *ftajjar* that were prepared at home were *ftira tal-bakkaljaw* - with onions, garlic, boiled cod, flour, oil and parsley; *ftira tal-ful* - with beans; *ftira tal-makku* - with white-bait rolled in flour, sweet marjoram, sliced onions and spearmint; *ftira ta' l-incova* - with anchovy and *ftira tar-Randan* - a kind of fritter fried in oil with or without anchovy.



The last bakery in Munxar.

the baker used to bake only *ftajjar tal-gobon* - with local cheese and *ftajjar taz-zokkor* - with sugar. Marija also recalls that her father, who was also a baker, used to make *ħobż tal-maħlut*. This bread, thicker in its form, was made from a mixture of corn and barley, hence its name. The flour derived from corn and barley was sometimes mixed after milling; but the best *ħobż tal-maħlut* was that produced from corn and barley sowed together and, eventually, crushed together at the mill. This kind of bread was still available until the Second World War. It was made from coarse glutinous grain, and though it had what one might describe as an unattractive colour, it was rich in nourishment and had an excellent flavour. Its thick, brown crust was sometimes crumbled with fine sesame seeds whose nutty taste gave it a distinctive character.

## 2. Lime Kilns

In the village of Munxar, there were at least five lime kilns. One was situated below the street that leads from Rabat to Xlendi and the other in Wied l-Ilma which is situated in the limits of Munxar. These two lime kilns were very old. Another two were situated in Triq Munxar, whilst the fifth one was on the way to Ta' Sannat.

Karmnu Buġeja worked in the largest and the last lime kiln that operated in Munxar. This was the lime kiln that was situated in the upper part of Munxar, that is on the border between Munxar and Ta' Sannat. The kiln consisted of a large bell-shaped hole, about a storey deep. It was made of building stones in the shape of small bricks. The

stones were second quality coralline limestone as these resist heat and crumbling. The kiln had an entrance at its bottom part, where dry stalks, coal which was brought from Malta, tyres and petroleum were put on iron rods.

A hole was dug by hands and a stick of gelatine was inserted in this hole. The rocks from the blast were further broken down in the quarries and then taken to the kiln by means of a mule-drawn cart. At the kiln, the rocks were broken down again into smaller pieces known as *maskan*. Five baskets of *maskan* were hung at the top of the kiln. Coal, dry stalks and petroleum were replaced after every five baskets of *maskan*. This process was repeated till the kiln was filled. The kiln was set on fire from beneath and was left burning for three whole days. After the fire died out, the stones were allowed to cool down and were later gathered in a heap. Water was poured on the heap of stones until they broke into fragments. When sieved, the lime was ready to be used for plastering.

In the early nineteen hundreds, lime was important for plastering. It was carried on carts. Between sixty and eighty sacks of lime,<sup>6</sup> each costing five shillings<sup>7</sup> (Lm 0.25), were produced everyday. Lime was also transported to Malta. During the war, there was a rise in the demand for lime and so work in the lime kiln increased. Fine lime was used for plastering whereas thick lime was used for whitewashing. Lime was also mixed with fragments of coal and used for roofing. The ashes of coal when mixed with fragments of coal produced a cement like mixture which was used for tiling.



The last lime kiln that operated in Munxar.

<sup>6</sup> Each sack weighed a *wejba* - four *tumoli* - *erba' tomniet*,

<sup>7</sup> 1s (shilling - *xelin*) = Lm 0.05.

The lime kiln was also used as a boiler. Women used to stuff dirty linen in a cauldron of water and boil it on the lime kiln. This service was free of charge.

### 3. The trade of harvesting Salt

The trade of harvesting salt is very old. In fact, it seems that it was the Romans who first passed on to the locals the knowledge of salt pans, the digging of basins - known as cisterns - close to the sea, which are then filled with sea water to obtain salt by natural evaporation.

A family from Munxar used to own the salt pans which are found right below and adjacent to the Xlendi watchtower. Each series of salt pans touches its neighbour and the entire salt pans extends for over half a kilometre. Each salt pan is small, roughly square in shape and cut out of limestone rock by hand to a depth of five to ten centimetres. The size of each pan varies from about one metre to several square metres. According to Ġamri Stellini his father had purchased these salt pans on a yearly perpetuity lease of four Maltese Liri and fifty cents (Lm 4.50).

The process of harvesting salt was as follows. Big cisterns which were on the seaward side, were regularly filled with sea water due to the rough sea. Until the cisterns got empty or dried out, the person in charge of the salt pans used to fill the salt pans from them. This was done by using buckets. When the cisterns got empty, handmade canals ensured the distribution of sea water to the cisterns.

About four days later, the salt pans dried out and Ġamri used to go to sweep the salt using a purposely self-made broom. The salt was left in a heap for some hours so that it would dry out. Then with the help of others he used to store it in the caves below the tower. When the salt dried out completely, it was packed in sacks and carried all the way to Xlendi Bay. There were a few times when Ġamri borrowed a small boat from a local fisherman to avoid the strain of carrying the heavy sacks. He would put the sacks in the boat and use the sea route from the tower to the bay. From Xlendi, Ġamri used to load all the sacks on a cart. Some of the salt was distributed in Munxar and Ta' Sannat. The rest was sold in Rabat.



Salt pans at Xlendi.

Bakeries in Victoria also used to make use of Ġamri's salt. According to Ġamri, in those days, a measure - *tomna* - of salt cost five pennies<sup>8</sup> (Lm 0.02,1). A sack of salt contained four *tmiem* - plural of *tomna* - and cost twenty pennies (Lm 0.08,3). Nowadays a *tomna* of salt costs about four Maltese Liri and fifty cents (Lm 4.50). In winter salt could not be harvested because, due to the cloudy and rainy weather, it could not dry out. Approximately the harvesting of salt started at the end of March or the beginning of April and lasted till the beginning of October.

### 4. The growth of Cumin Seeds

Cumin is a plant which grows to the size of parsley. This plant makes seeds resembling those of a fennel plant but are longer and thinner. Cumin is sown in March by spreading the seeds in the fields. Cultivation was not that easy since constant weeding had to go on almost up to the time of harvesting. It was of utmost importance to remove these weeds otherwise they would suffocate the cumin plant. Women used to help in removing such weeds and they were paid sixpence (Lm 0.02,5) for a whole morning. At the beginning of June after the cumin had dried up it was harvested by hands without the use of tools. It was then carried with carts and placed on roofs to dry well. The bashed plants were beaten up by a strong piece of wood, while the residual seeds were gathered. The dried foliage was thrown away since it was good for nothing, not even as animal fodder. The cumin seeds were then cleaned from the chaff and purified by winnowing in the breeze. The more it

<sup>8</sup> 12d (12pennies - 12-il sold) = Lm 0.05

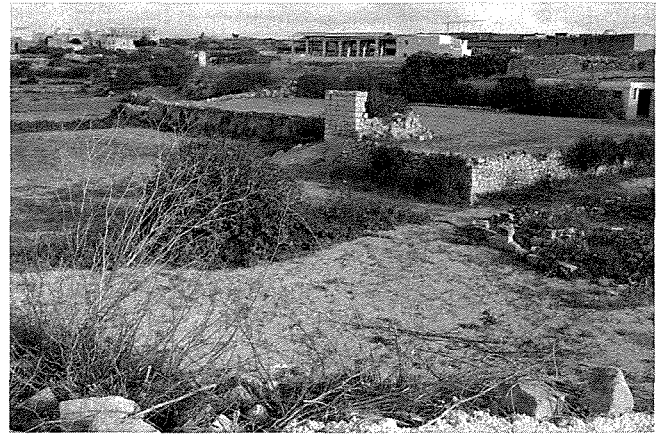
was clean the higher its value. Seeds were packed in sacks, weighed and made ready for the market. In olden days the growth of cumin seeds was very important. The product cost a lot of money and was exported. It was used together with aniseed as a digestive cure. It was also used as food seasoning with all types of dishes. When mixed with vervain,<sup>9</sup> cumin would become a decoction for high pressure. Extracts from cumin seeds were used to produce animals' medicine.

## 5. Quarries

Two back-breaking trades that were carried out by locals were stone-cutting in quarries and stone-transportation. Fortunately, nowadays, technology has taken over and this work is not as difficult as it used to be. Two brothers, Salvinu and George Mercieca told us how stone cutting in quarries was carried out.

Salvinu started working regularly at the quarry when he was sixteen while George started working when he was eighteen. The quarry had been established by their father. The first quarry they owned was at Ta' Marżiena. The quarry's entrance was through a pathway which led to the area below Ta' Sannat cliffs. Today this quarry lies buried but the pathway can still be seen. With the depletion of this quarry, they started another one at Ta' Sannat without however, finding good quality stone. The last quarry they owned was in the area known as Ta' Żgħawri.

When starting a quarry the first task was cleaning the area from soil and stone fragments. Then the area was surrounded by a kind of trench which was about five courses - *filati* - deep and about five inches wide. When trenching was ready, a hole about half a metre wide was dug to a depth of a little less than a third of a metre. Two thick pieces of tin were placed inside the hole and held in place by four wedges. There used to be about six of these holes - *pettijiet* - in line with each other. At each one of the *pettijiet* a man would be ready with a mace. They would then hammer the wedges until the rock propped up. This mass of rock - *tratt blat* - came up as a whole big piece. Holes - *pettijiet* - were again dug into this rock and it was then split in half and again in quarters. Each quarter was shaped into a



Old quarry area at Ta' Żgħawri

building stone - *kantun*. In a day, about four loads of building stones were produced. Each load consisted of about twenty one building stones.

In George's and Salvinu's quarry, the stone was globigerina limestone of which there were three types. The top layer was white rocks - *blat abjad* - used mostly for building houses. The second layer - *tisfija* - was used for foundations. The lower layer - *safi* - was the best and most in demand, especially for *fattura*. The latter word refers to roofing stones, balconies, stairs, and columns; in other words the aesthetic parts of a building. Whenever a quarry was used up, it was filled with soil and used for farming.

The war brought a lot of unemployment and George, Salvinu and their comrades had to look elsewhere for work. Their only option was to go to work at the quarries in Malta. In fact most of the Gozitan quarry men moved to Malta where there was a shortage of workers. In Malta, quarried stone was in great demand for shelter coverings. The quarries were much bigger and deeper and the process of cutting stones was also different. They used to dig only one trench around the whole quarry, thus extracting only one huge mass of rock. This made the work much easier and in return they got better money. On average one earned about twelve to fifteen shillings (Lm 0.60 to Lm 0.75) weekly in Gozo whereas in Malta one could earn up to forty shillings (Lm 2.00).

Due to greater depths, the Gozitan method of stone transportation was not applicable in Malta. Gozitan men worked in the Maltese quarries throughout the

<sup>9</sup> For more information about the vervain see chapter 3.2.

war, then they came back to Gozo when the war was almost over.

When interviewing George and Salvinu, we came across another type of work connected with their trade - that of stone transportation. Leli Aguis used to do this work.

Before the war, Leli used to work as a *burdnar*. His work consisted of carrying building stones on his cart<sup>10</sup> from the quarries to the building sites. The carts were loaded according to the strength of the beast used, normally a mule. They could take up to twenty building stones. The number of times a cart was loaded depended on the distance to be travelled. If the building site was far away, only two journeys were made daily since the mule was stopped to rest and to eat at frequent intervals. When going uphill, half the burden of stones was unloaded and the uphill journey was made twice to make it easier for the mule. On the other hand, if the site was near, about four journeys daily were made. The *burdnar*'s wage, about forty-five years ago was roughly fifteen shillings (Lm 0.75) weekly .

Leli stopped working as a *burdnar* at the beginning of the war when he started working in shelters. Later on his work was taken over by the lorries.

## 6. Sale of Milk

Milkmen from all places around Gozo used to go to Victoria with their flock of sheep and goats to sell milk. Ġamri Curmi who died in the early nineties was a milkman from Munxar. In Victoria every milkman had a particular place and time where and when to sell milk. Each milkman would take his flock round the town streets milking the goats and sheep at the customer's doorstep. The price of a glass of milk was half a penny (Lm 0.00,2). The milkman used to fill the glass with unprocessed milk directly from the goat's udder. Mostly, the glass was filled with foam rather than milk and many were those who used to ask the milkman for more. Every family bought a day's supply, since the round of selling milk took place everyday of the week, Sunday included. Each milkman had his own customers. After selling most of the milk to his



Selling of milk.

usual customers he used to go around the streets of Victoria to try to sell some other glasses of milk. The trade of selling milk directly from goats came to an end when in an effort to wipe out *Brucellosis Melitensis*, or undulant fever transmitted to humans by a bacterium in the milk of goats, the Government imposed compulsory pasteurization. A new law was enacted, enforcing all the milkmen to sell the milk to the Government so that it would be pasteurized before being sold to the general public.

After this law was enacted, some of the village folk still kept a goat and a sheep or two in their backyard for a daily supply of milk. Sheep's milk was also used for making the local cheeselets - *ġbejniet* - available either fresh - *friski* - or half dried - *moxxi* - or even peppered - *ġbejniet tal-bżar*. In fact, this was, and still is a flourishing home industry, especially in the villages including that of Munxar.



Shepherding in Xlendi.

<sup>10</sup> Special carts were used to carry building stones. According to Joe Attard, the carts were heavy and big in size and the axis was made of wood in order to be able to carry the heavy stones.



## 7. Grape-Pressing

Another trade which was present in Munxar was that of grape-pressing. We interviewed Vangiela and Toni Bajada about this trade. Grapes were bought at the beginning of September and placed in large grape baskets till it was time to start pressing the grapes. The barrels would then be taken to Mġarr on a donkey to be washed in sea water. Since wood swells when wet, the barrels would get tight and become secure against leakages.

The process of grape-pressing was as follows. Everything used to start at around ten o'clock in the morning till five or six o'clock in the evening for eight days. Two big frames of wood were put on cisterns made of cement. Men used to climb on the wooden frames and press the grapes under their feet. The juice used to pass in the cisterns and the crushed skin of the grapes stayed on the frames of wood. Measures of dissolved sugar in boiling water was added to the juice and the mixture was left to ferment for six days. The cisterns had a large tap of wood from where the wine was collected and poured into barrels. More boiling water and sugar was added to the residue in the cisterns and the same process was repeated.

Both white and red grapes were used. Thin grapes were the best ones. Different barrels were used for red and white wine. Wine that was to be used in the church was pure grape juice and nothing was added to it. No one was allowed near the grapes basket since the suffocating heat could make one dizzy. In fact, those who pressed the grapes were secured by a rope to prevent themselves from falling in the cisterns.

A sulphur wort was burned before closing the barrels to block the air and then seal them with a bung and sometimes with a piece of a sack. The sulphur wort was brought from Italy. Every year new wine was made and the wine was opened before the end of November. A bottle of wine cost a shilling (Lm 0.05) in the early sixties.

Vangiela's father was a wine wholesaler. He used to sell wine in Malta. Later, he opened a bar and had the wine and spirit license - a *supplika* or *sepulka*

- that cost about fifty cents in the forties. Men frequented such a bar and drank wine into the hours of the night. People used to buy wine in pints.<sup>11</sup>

From the carboy - *tramiġġjana* or *damiġġjana* - the wine was poured in a jug and then in glasses. Carboys were green bottles made of glass, placed in a frame of wicker. The biggest ones used to hold six gallons and they were carried by two people since they were very heavy. When people suspected that wine was mixed with water they would file a Police report.

## Conclusion

A closely knit agricultural community throughout the years, the village of Munxar has been populated mostly by farmers. However, over the years other trades, such as those described in this chapter emerged. Most of these trades have since died down. This has been the case especially when there was only a particular person or group of persons who carried out the trade and who for reasons of their own stopped practicing their trade, for example the baker and the milkman. Other trades such as the production of lime by using lime kilns have fallen into disuse with the passage of time.

This short overview of the different trades which used to be practiced in the village of Munxar should make interesting reading to everyone; those who will remember how life used to be in the olden days and those who are too young to know that these are some of the trades which used to be carried out by their forefathers.

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<sup>11</sup> 1 pint = 0.567 litres