



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

Flowers at the prison

A prison setting is no playing field. We can call it a Correctional Facility till we turn blue in the face but the truth is that that some 560 individuals, some of whom are hardened criminals, definitely not the bonbon of characters, are locked up in one massive complex at Paola, delimited by rock-solid walls, barbed wire, watch towers and security personnel.

In Malta, the reality of containing such an outsized crowd is further complicated, and in a way it is even more terrifying because we have only one jail (except for the forensic ward at Mt Carmel Hospital and the youth section in Mtaħleb). Other than that, whoever has a prison sentence or is awaiting trial is in this unsightly compound we dare to refer to as the 'Corradino Correctional Facility'.

I believe that one of the biggest political and policy decisions ever taken in relation to our penitentiary system was when we changed the name of this site some 20 odd years ago. The moment we took this viewpoint it became a nightmare for every policy-maker and politician involved in this sector to try and transform the character of this place from representing a retributive haughty justice system to a rehabilitative oriented mindset. Keeping in mind that at the end of the day people are not sent to CCF to be reformed but to pay for their wrong doings, it makes it increasingly challenging for the prison regime to make this shift in method.

Whoever has gone to visit someone in prison or had to see through a Court verdict or went for a meeting or to work there, will agree that it's not a nice place at all. In many ways it is a ditch in our social design because it hosts and has housed the ghastly people in Malta and Gozo, some of whom have been responsible for heinous and dreadful crimes.

Nonetheless some days ago I

met Mariella Camilleri, Assistant Director responsible for education within this institution. She is a lovely woman, dedicated and committed to the cause and strikes you as determined to try and make a change. She has worked in this sector for ages and has always done her utmost to try and dig up the good that there is in every single person in there – no easy task at all.

Now with all the religious values and insignia we have implanted in our society, with all our 'dedication' to the poor and the needy, I can't think of many people who speak well about the cluster of people who have gone through our penitentiary system. Probably most of us are infinitely grateful that this place exists and we have the pseudo-tranquillity that all those responsible for wrong-doing are safely tucked away in-between those high-ceilinged walls, decorated with search lights, alarm systems and watched over by highly-trained guards, police officers and correctional officers.

So there you go we can breathe easily!

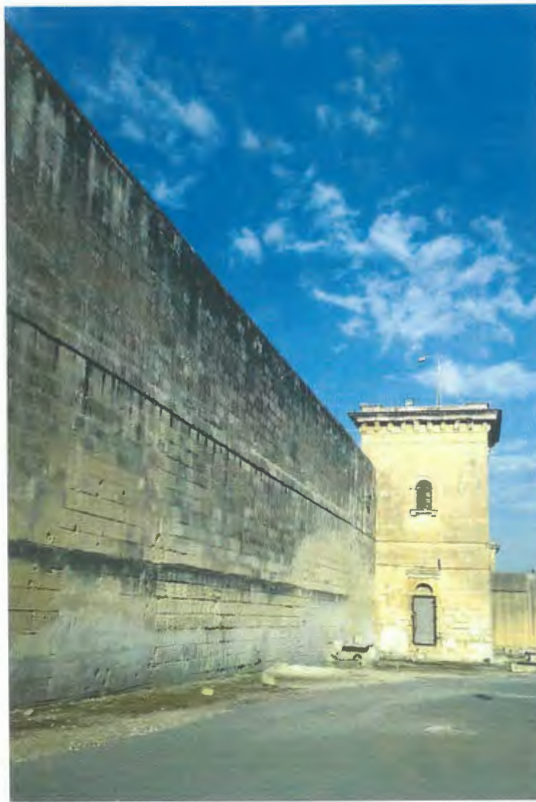
When I went to visit Mariella, the feeling I got as I walked into CCF was prickly.

As soon as I turned the handle of the cumbersome solid green door to walk into the reception area adjacent to the control room I was greeted by a young correctional officer, who after the routine security checks, politely accompanied me to Mariella and the equally dedicated CCF CEO Simon Buttigieg.

The weightiness of the door, the clang of the gates, the strange alarms that represent different routines, the fall-in, the occasional unannounced searches in the prison cells, the elite team of security officers on stand-by to quell any acting up, the blurriness of the place, the anonymity and unresponsive look on the eyes of the inmates transmit nothing less than a sense of sting and a throbbing that is hard to describe.

These people have done wrong, no excuse about that. Some others are kept waiting before facing the Courts of Justice because their alleged behaviour was serious and grave. But the soreness you feel as you walk into that place is barely credible and the people who work there have to endure this tense and overwrought feeling all the time.

The inmates are angry, they might feel society has let them down, they feel helpless and powerless and think that they mean absolute nothing, or almost naught to the rest of the community. I am quite sure that most of them have lost hope and if there is anything that captures the soul of an individual is



when hope is lost.

These are the people who live in this place.

There are 560 narratives of people who are accused or have been found guilty of messing up their and other people's lives.

They are not my heroes. I don't like what they did and I am afraid of these people. They instil fear even if you don't know who they are and what they did. I will not champion them. As far as I'm concerned they are guilty as charged. Most of them have hurt people who were going about their business innocuously. The way that they have instilled terror, created indelible marks on other persons makes me want to throw up.

These are individuals who are responsible for implanting disorder, unbalancing the equilibrium in our community, pushing people's lives off-track through their violence, and there is no greater pain that you can infuse on others more than this sense of terror.

So there you go you know how I feel about these inmates.

But there is another side to the story.

These individuals are getting a gigantic punishment for what they did.

There is hardly any sanction I can think of that is more excruciating than being locked up with

people you don't know, spending hours on end in your prison cell and 'division' trying to think how you are going to get your life back on track. The life these people live is terrible – not being able to hug or be hugged, not able to redeem or ask pardon, not able to pick up the pieces and go forward. These people are surely getting a raw deal.

Can you even imagine the sense of loneliness that envelops you when the guards 'lock you into your cell' at night, just 'you and your' thoughts?

Can you even imagine what it feels like not to smell the sea and the fields, not to be with friends in the summer months, not to enjoy the village *festas*, the simple gracious things in life?

Can you even imagine how it feels like that 'you' are treated as if 'your' mistake can never be forgiven?

Can you even imagine how it feels like having to face 'your' children, parents, family after doing time and trying to convince them that there is a different side 'to your character'?

I am not letting off these people in any way, far from it.

I am just saying that the prison, this 170-year-old building, is frightening, it's forlorn, it's painful and it's not a walk in the park. I am also saying that the work that Mariella and her

team do, deserves our deepest respect because what they are doing goes against all social odds. It is absolutely fantastic, it is a lifeline and it is the only opportunity where these people can pick up the pieces.

The fitness classes, the gym sessions, the community service, the formal and informal learning, the courses with other establishments, the music, sports and art classes, the personal care sessions and the list goes on, are an attempt at trying to make this facility truly correctional.

If you ask me, even with all the effort that they are putting into this, they will keep failing because rehabilitation should also happen with the rest of society. We should bring up to scratch our educational system that has known about these kids turned men and women who would be getting themselves into trouble. In all probability we were happy that they didn't attend school, that they skived MUSEUM, that they were thrown out of the football nurseries and we are not ready to admit that part of the fault in all of this is ours.

The inmates we have at CCF are human beings.

They are afraid, they are vulnerable as well as tormenters and offenders.

Incidentally, whilst I was at CCF last week a man who was about to get parole after 10 and a half years of incarceration was alright. He had a face that radiated hope, optimism and anticipation, hopeful that he will be given another chance by his community. But with the risk of sounding off-putting I think his life in the community will be agony because unfortunately our society still doubts whether these people should be given another opportunity in the first place.

What Mariella and her team are doing is amazing. They know that the success stories are hard to come by, but they keep at it.

Mariella, the correctional and security officers of good purpose are working hard without taking away the role that this building embodies, that this institution represents. They are a clear beacon that invites all of society to understand that even though these people have done repugnant, revolting and gruesome acts, they deserve to be given an opportunity, because without knowing or wanting to admit, we have a responsibility to share – a bit of us in them and a bit of them is in us!

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