

Fifty Years Ago – The Storm that took Gozo by Surprise

GEOFFREY G. ATTARD

Introduction

The year 1964 will continue to be remembered in Maltese history as the year in which the Maltese Islands were given their independence from Britain and became a sovereign nation, one of the many British colonies to have done so during the era of the so-called ‘dismantling’ of the empire. Ten years later Malta became a republic.

Less than a month before the granting of Maltese independence, the Maltese Islands experienced one of the harshest storms ever in its history. It was actually Gozo – the sister island – and the second largest of the Maltese archipelago which was struck in the worst of manners. The night between Wednesday the 26th and Thursday the 27th August is still fresh in the memory of many Gozitans who although in their sixties, seventies or eighties will never forget what they went

through on that weary night. An attentive look at the newspapers of Friday the 28th of August 1964 provides the reader or researcher with invaluable information about the course of events that took place on that dreadful night when Gozo was taken by surprise and the small island suffered up to a quarter of a million sterling worth of damage.

The Media Coverage

The daily English newspaper *The Times of Malta* as well as *Il-Berqa* covered the event in their main pages and the event continued to attract attention even weeks after it happened. The researcher who goes through the succeeding issues of both newspapers in the early September issues will come across ample information about the horrible night of Wednesday the 26th of August. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of this sad event, it is worthwhile to look at the event as



The house in Kerċem where Luigi Vella lived at the time of the storm of 1964.

well as its repercussions on the people of Malta and Gozo with special attention to the inhabitants of Gozo since it was they who had to face the consequences. A Staff Reporter of *The Times of Malta* for the issue of Friday the 28th of August began his report by saying that ‘Wednesday/Thursday night was a terrifying experience for the Gozitans, when a heavy thunderstorm struck the islands. Torrential rain fell without respite from 10.30 p.m. on Wednesday to 4.30 a.m. on Thursday’.

Later on, the same reporter provides the readers with background information on the weather conditions in Europe when he writes: ‘Airline planes were delayed over three hours yesterday owing to storms for over parts of Europe. A night flight which was scheduled to arrive in Malta at 1.10 a.m. yesterday touched down one hour-and-a-half later’. What followed in the report gives

an inkling of the terrible weather conditions of that particular night: ‘It landed a passenger who was so terrified and shocked by the thunderstorm, which the plane had flown through, that oxygen had to be administered’. Although storms are characteristic in late August through September in the area where the Maltese Islands are situated, the storm at the end of August 1964 was of unique dimensions as these media reports clearly show.

Impacts on Marsalforn and Xlendi

Marsalforn and Xlendi, both popular summer resorts for locals as well as for foreigners, were worst hit. Motor-cycles and vans in Marsalforn were swept out to sea due to the floods. *The Times of Malta* referred to Dr. J. Pace, popularly known as Ray Ritardo, a pop-singer, whose car was swept away at Marsalforn. The floor of a cafe known as Il-Began caved in. This particular place was very popular among the Maltese who used to spend their summers at Marsalforn.

A Michelangelo Saliba who also resided at Marsalforn almost drowned together with his family had he not been helped by his neighbours. At Żebbuġ, a house was struck by lightning. Many trees were uprooted and seacraft on the slipway at Xlendi and Mġarr ix-Xini were swept out to sea.

I find it strange that Mgr Anton Gauci does not refer to the storm in his book *Pajjiżi Taht l-Ingliżi* (1993) in which he provides a detailed outline of the history of Gozo for the past century and a half.



A plaque commemorating a new water collecting system put in place in Kerċem in memory of Luigi Vella who died as a result of the storm.

The main roads leading to Xlendi and Marsalforn were closed to the public due to the damage caused by the great amount of rainfall.

‘Il-Menuna’: A Life Lost at Sea

The saddest event that took place during the storm was the death of Wigi Vella, an 82-year old man from Kerċem in Gozo. The man, who co-incidentally happens to be the paternal grandfather of Mgr Dr Joe Vella Gauci of Victoria, was swept away at sea from his house in Għajn Tuta Street. The house which was situated in a corner facing the Kerċem Primary School on one side and overlooking the valley that leads to both the Lunzjata and Xlendi valleys on the other, was severely damaged; in fact part of this house collapsed due to the downpour. It is believed that this happened at about 3.00 a.m. when the man was asleep. The police reckoned that he was swept out to sea even miles away from the coast because the body was missing for many days and was only found a relatively long time after.

Il-Berqa did not agree on the age of Wigi Vella; the Friday the 28th issue of this newspaper, written in Maltese, reported that Vella was 78 years old. It did report however that Wigi lived with his son who had advised his father to sleep on the first floor rather than on the ground floor, a piece of advice that was unfortunately not heeded.

Il-Berqa also reported that much of the street decorations for the Għajnsielem titular feast of Our Lady of Loreto was heavily damaged and that the arch in Apparition Square in the same village collapsed.

The big wall that had been built next to the Silver Jubilee Ground in order to create a parking space was

destroyed as was the wall at the Victoria Terminus in Main Gate Street known as *Taħt Putirjal*.

At Xlendi Bay, thirty Boy Scouts from England who were camping in the area, had to abandon the site without collecting their belongings; they found refuge in the Police Station of the locality. In the same locality the St Patrick’s Hotel suffered great damage.

Marjanu Vella, a local farmer lost one hundred chickens and fifty rabbits, according to *Il-Berqa* which gave prominence to the event by dedicating half of its front page to the storm and carried also a photo.

An Unforgettable Event

The storm of August 1964, or the ‘maltempata li ħadet lill-Menuna’ as it is often still referred to by many a Gozitan until this very day, is history for most people. However it is still alive in the memory of those who experienced it. For the young generation it is an event that can only be experienced pictorially by photography.

The 1964 storm can easily be referred to as one of the main sad events of the last half a century, ‘the storm that took Gozo by surprise’.

Fr. Geoffrey G. Attard was ordained for the diocese of Gozo in June 2004. He graduated M.Th. in Ecclesiastical History from the University of Edinburgh in November 2005 and he graduated M.Lit. in Practical Theology from the University of St Andrews with a dissertation entitled “Climate Change and the Catholic Church” in 2008; he has recently published his dissertation in book form.