

From Midwives to Funeral Directors: The Attard-Gatt Connection

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Introduction

Having become a formal colony of Britain with the publication of the Treaty of Paris in 1814, Malta's lifestyle and costumes were definitely influenced by that of England as it was expected to be in an age of imperialism and colonialism. Although much nearer to continental Italy than isolated Britain, the influence of the British *mens* on the people of the Maltese islands is a fact that no serious historian would dare to challenge. The presence, unto this day, of the British post box, the 'VR' slabs and the fire-places in some of our homes, are certainly among the main relics of what was once British Malta.

Family Life

It is against this background that family life in Malta evolved in Victorian times and even later on during the first decades of the 20th century. Malta, like Ireland, was very much a Catholic colony where the British governors of Malta were extremely careful how to act in order to not hurt the feelings of a traditional Roman Catholic people. The town of Rabat in Gozo had been given the status of a 'city' by Queen Victoria on the occasion of her diamond jubilee. This happened on the 10th of June 1887. Mgr Pietro Pace, the bishop of Gozo who eventually became the archbishop of Malta, was instrumental in the acquisition of this honour. Those clerics who wanted to climb to the highest echelons of the Catholic hierarchy of the islands, had to exhibit their pro-English leanings as did Pietro Pace and later on Michael Gonzi. However, on a local level, the pro-Italian population was still going strong even in Gozo's Rabat.

The establishment of Victoria's two band clubs in 1881 was proof that the language question had its implication felt also on the little island of Gozo. It has to be said that although the 'La Stella' and 'Il Leone' Band could have expressed pro-Italian or pro-English sympathies respectively, it would not be right to say that the division was so clear-cut.

The very Italian names of both band clubs prove this point. From a general point-of-view Italian was still strong, especially in ecclesiastical circles. In the lower levels of society, the man-in-the-street would rarely have the possibility to express his own sympathies in public.

The Gatt Family of Victoria whose residence was then in Charity Street had connections with the 'Il Leone' Band. It is known that Ġorg Gatt, the head of the household, was the bandsman who, on the day of the band's christening, appeared on the doorstep of the premises and said: 'Leone huwa isimha' (Grech, 2012: 26). The reason for the name of the newly-established band has been the subject of discussion; it is unanimously accepted that the crest was inspired by the lion present in the Royal coat of arms. It is not known what Ġorg Gatt did for a living but he must have been



Adelina, who married Ġużeppi Attard, was the eldest child of Ġorg Gatt.

a prominent citizen in his own town; a couple of his grandchildren agreed upon the fact that he was called 'il-Pupu' due to the cleanliness for which he was known. Thankfully a photograph of him has survived and it is enough to prove the point referred to herein.

Life in Gozitan Society

Ġorġ Gatt married Marirož nèe Scicluna, daughter of Ġużeppi Scicluna and Ġiovanna Xuereb. Ġorġ was fifteen years his wife's senior. The baptismal records show that Ġorġ was born on the 1st of July 1858 while his wife was born on the 21st of March 1873. Incidentally, her sister Maria Antonia, who later married Ġanni Vassallo of Victoria, was to become the grandmother of Mgr Ġużeppi Mercieca, one of the archbishops of Malta. From the marriage, four children stemmed; one son and three daughters. The eldest child was called Adelina and she was born on the 1st of September 1894. Ġużeppa followed on the 1st of January 1907. Anastasia followed on the 4th of April 1910 and Tarċisju – who later on became a priest – was born on the 20th of February 1912.

The main focus of this article is the connection between the family of Adelina, the eldest child of the Gatt family and her future husband Ġużeppi Attard. Ġużeppi was born in Victoria, the son of carpenter Baskal Attard and M'Conċetta Buhagiar¹; his baptism is recorded on the 14th of May 1889². Ġużeppi was to follow in the footsteps of his father and became a carpenter; his workshop – now used by his grandchildren – was at the upper half of what was then Triq Santa Dminka, and which now is Sir Arturo Mercieca Street. Ġużeppi and Adelina were married at the Cathedral Church on the 25th of July 1916³.

After their marriage, Ġużeppi and his wife Adelina obtained a house in this street, the house in which they died. They had eight children; Felic, Baskal,



Ġużeppi Attard (ta' Kuncetta) one of the best 'klarinetisti' of Gozo.

Ġorġ, Ġużeppi⁴, Anton, Ġiovanni, M'Conċetta and Ġiovanni. The first Ġiovanni mentioned died when he fell out of a window, while M'Conċetta did not survive childhood. A look at the baptismal records of St George's Parish, Victoria, show that two of the children, Baskal and Ġorġ, are not listed. They were baptised at the newly-established parish of Fontana.

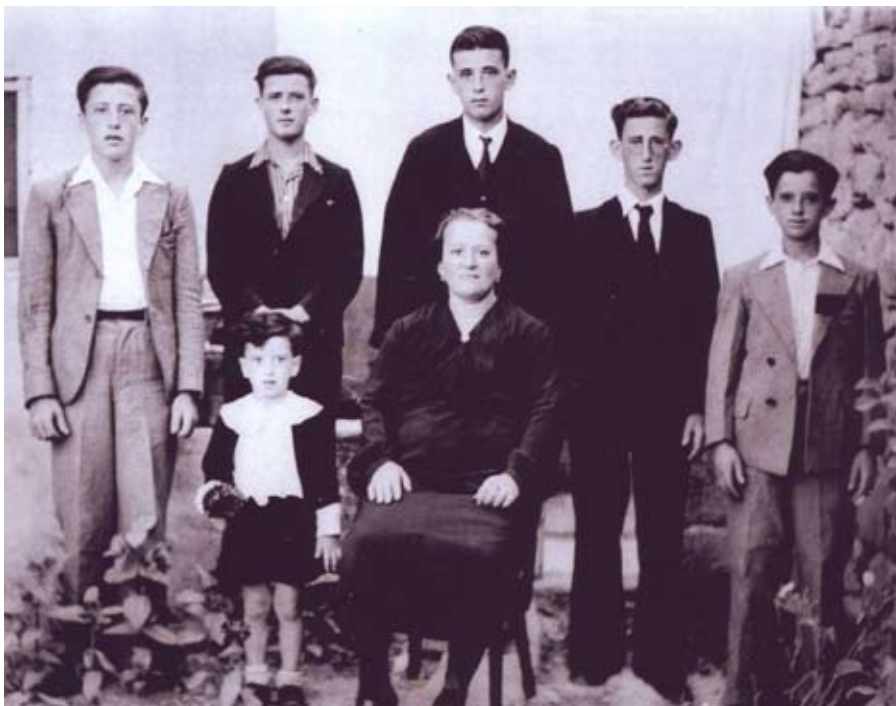
Ġużeppi Attard earned his living as an established carpenter. He was also one of the first funeral directors on Gozo, in the modern sense of the term. Two of his sons and many grandsons of his are funeral directors to this very day. His wife Adelina followed in her mother's footsteps and helped out as a midwife. She used to accompany her mother Marirož, known in Rabat as ta' Qaraboċċu (nicknames were very popular then), even to various villages in Gozo, whenever they were

¹ The family is now known simply as *Ta' Kuncetta*. M'Conċetta Attard nèe Buhagiar was the daughter of Michelangelo Buhagiar who was also a carpenter and who is mentioned in documents related to the festivities held in honour of the first bishop of Gozo, Mgr Michele Francesco Buttigieg. Cfr. Toni Calleja, "L-E.T. Mons. Mikiel Franġisk Buttigieg – isqof b' maternità Ġhasrija" in *Il-Korpus* 39 (2014), 19.

² Liber Baptizmorum St George's Basilica.

³ Cfr. NAG (National Archives Gozo) Ġuljana Masini.

⁴ Ġużeppi eventually became a police constable and was in charge of the siren in the Citadel in Victoria, Gozo during the second world war. Cfr. (Bezzina, 2015: 43). A photo of him features also between pages 24 and 25. The page is unnumbered.



The Attard Family left to right. Standing: Ġużeppi, Baskal, Feliċ, Ġorġ and Anton. Seated: Ġiovanni and their mother Adelina.

called upon. This must have helped in the running of the family since families were constantly short of needs and being so numerous, it was not easy to run them.

Early 20th century Rabat was smaller than it is now, with the inhabited area located around St George's Church and the area leading to St Augustine's Square to the west and St Francis' Square to the east. Places of leisure were more restricted and the band clubs must have been one of the few outlets for passing time. Ġużeppi was a member of the 'La Stella' Band Club and was in fact a renowned clarinet player; he was considered by one and all as one of the best *klarinetisti* on both islands.⁵ Being such a proficient clarinet player, Ġużeppi must have been asked by the band director to teach the new students who wanted to learn the clarinet; Ġanni Vella was one of those students who learnt at his hand.⁶ Later on, Ġanni became the director of the 'La Stella' Band himself and his son Joseph was also to become director of the same band. A photo featuring Ġużeppi Attard with the 'La Stella' Band still survives. His cousin was Dun Andrea Buhagiar, who also hailed from Victoria, and was ordained priest on the 18th of December 1920 (Attard, 2014: 21).

The Two Band Clubs of Victoria

One has to keep in mind that up to a certain point in time, the members of the 'La Stella' Band used to play during the funeral of bandsmen of the 'Leone' Band and vice-versa; unfortunately the tradition was discontinued.

Before the separation of the parishes, which took place in 1955, the inhabitants of Rabat who lived in the area that was within the circumference of the old Roman wall, used to be buried from St George's parish while those who lived in Victoria in the area that was outside these Roman walls used to be buried from the Cathedral parish. This tradition was also discontinued with the establishment of the formal division of the parishes and I can still remember my grandfather speaking about it.

Conclusion

Life in Gozo after the war was not easy. Gozo was always the backwater of Malta and the reality of the double insularity was stronger than it is now. The people in the town of Rabat earned their living either by running a little shop such as a grocery or a butcher, or by doing manual work such as

⁵ Information given to me verbally by Mr Mario Attard, son of the late Anton, bandsman with the *La Stella Band*.

⁶ *Lehen il-Belt Vittoria* September 1957 (Numru 4), 3. I quote 'Tah l-ewwel prinċipji tat-teorija u fil-prattika tal-istrument is-Sur Ġużeppi Attard, illum mejjet, li kien wiehed mill-aħjar klarinetisti li kellna Ghawdex'. See also *Lehen il-Belt Vittorja* Lulju 1957 (Numru 2), 4. I quote: 'Mro Ganni Vella tghallem tajjeb il-klarinet ghand is-Sur Ġuże Attard'.



Clarinet player Ġużeppi Attard seated in the middle, fifth from right.

carpentry and similar works. Others earned their living by being employed with the government (Bezzina, 2012: 13-23). In the villages, life must have been harder since many people were full-time farmers or fishermen and the like. It was only when the ferry service between the islands was upgraded that young Gozitans began to frequent the main island and seek work there or to further their studies according to the ability of their financial means.



The 'Ta Kunċetta' Brothers from left to right: Ġovann, Anton, Ġużeppi, Gorġ, Baskal and Feliċ during a family reunion.

In spite of all the changes that took place during the last three decades, Gozo has still managed to keep some of its unique characteristics and has been aptly nicknamed 'the island where time stood still'.

References

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