

STRADA STRETTA

'THE GUT' WHICH FOR MANY
YEARS LIT UP VALLETTA

GEORGE CINI

*Lil Prof. Carmel Bassar
b' apprezzament.*

Cini
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Allied PUBLICATIONS

Foreword

GUT FEELINGS

A few years back, while having lunch at one of the older Cambridge colleges in England, I was introduced to an elderly gentleman, who as soon as he learnt that I came from Malta, went out of his way to show me his interest in the island's history. He asked where I came from and without any hesitation, I answered that I grew up in Valletta. Barely giving me time to add that, since many years ago I had moved out of the city, the delighted gentleman declared that he had a fascination for Valletta, and considered it to be his favourite place in Malta.

He added that despite the many visits to the island, he will never forget his first night in Malta. It goes way back to the late 1950s, when, in the company of an older friend who was somehow addicted to the 'Gut', he thoroughly enjoyed his first night in Malta down Strait Street! My new friend admitted that this first night was a shock. It was a night spent singing, drinking, and eating, in the company of genuine music and dance lovers, among men and women of dubious standing, and a multitude of soldiers and sailors of several nationalities. These standard customers frequented the Strait Street bars until the early hours of the morning.

The conversation with this gentleman turned out to be very enjoyable. However, it never occurred to me that, during lunch at one of the oldest colleges of a university of great repute, I would ever be discussing The Gut.

My views of The Gut were based on what I was told as a boy growing up in Valletta in the late 1960s. At the time, I was constantly warned to avoid it. I vividly remember walking across town every morning to go to school, back to lunch, and then back again for the afternoon session. Each day, like most Valletta children, I had to criss-cross the town and inevitably pass through one of the streets intersecting Strait Street. In those days we used to walk to and fro to school, and our mothers constantly reminded us to avoid loitering on the way, especially around Strait Street.

The Strada Stretta grid, including Strada Francesi – literally, meaning the street of the French, also known as Strada San Giuseppe and others – was to be avoided at all costs. This zone was associated with sailors and soldiers, barmaids and bar owners, troublemakers, military and civil police, and of course pimps and prostitutes. It wasn't the ideal place for a boy who attended church regularly, frequented the sacraments daily, and participated actively in Catholic associations.

In its heyday, under British colonial rule, Strait Street was full of bars, restaurants, lodging houses, and music halls. The street was an antithesis of the rest of the city.

Ladies of loose habits were most often ready to assist servicemen after their long days at sea. Alcohol flowed like a stream and money changed hands fast. Illicit behaviour abounded and fights among drunken servicemen were a regular spectacle. Of course, at times, some locals did not mind sharing the fist.

George Cini somehow brings out this atmosphere of Strait Street through photographs and a number of rather nostalgic watercolours by Paul Caruana, who, it must be said, hails from close to the Valletta skid row, and is thus very conscious of the setting. The watercolours seem to be an attempt to revive the ambience that was once witnessed by those who lived in and frequented Strada Stretta.

The Strait Street of my early years was merely a shadow of its former self. The bars and music halls were still there but the folly and fun of its great frolicking days were over. After the 1967 British services rundown, there was a sharp decline in the number of servicemen on the island. This cut short the racing pulse of this street. The end of Malta's role as a NATO base and the closure of the British military base in 1979 further contributed to the decline of this once unique street in the heart of the city. However, one can still sense the street's dormant soul as some bar signs still hang on the many small doors that once welcomed servicemen in search of booze, a good time and company. Some of these houses, once an integral part of Strait Street's murky past, have now become fine restaurants and wine bars.

Through his straightforward and unpretentious ethnographic approach, Cini manages to portray clearly the life and style of Strait Street. He manages to bring this unique street back to life through the transcripts of no less than 18 interviews he carried out with some of the most important protagonists who were still around at the time of his compiling the data. This gives this publication a very important dimension as it allowed the people who lived and experienced Strait Street to give their personal point of view.

In his descriptions, Cini manages to rescue for posterity much of the lost charm of what was perhaps the best-known and most avoided. The most striking aspect of these interviews is that while outsiders did their best to physically avoid The Gut, and spoke about it in whispers and much bigotry, its dwellers appear to have retained a certain nostalgia for the good old days.

Without doubt, The Gut continues to generate interest because it is that one street in Valletta that is full of contradictions. This emerges clearly from Cini's narrative in his genuine effort to understand the real function of this unique street. Like most post-war children of Malta, Cini grew up in a society that identified strongly with the Catholic faith. Unmistakably, this sense of identity was strongly felt in Valletta. The many Baroque churches, the various religious associations for youth, and the strong presence of the Archbishop and his Curia (administration) in the city strengthened this identity.

At the same time, Valletta had a thriving business community and a strong British and NATO naval presence. The latter necessitated a place for fun and amusement to the large community of servicemen. Its association with the military, and particularly the sailors,

helped to ensure that Strait Street stayed empty and seemingly unloved long after the doors of its last bars and dance halls closed down.

The people who continue to live along Strait Street presently form part of the elderly community of Valletta – former barmaids, dancers, musicians and cabaret artistes – some of whom live above the former bars where they starred as the main attraction. Cini shows very convincingly that they now feel marginalised. The attitude of the rest of Malta towards this unique street is, however, slowly changing. The street's fabric, its former bars and music halls, and the signs and advertisements, appear to be driving this process through the memories they evoke.

In a way it may be argued that Cini has managed to provide us with an unconventional social history of Valletta that can rightly claim its place as an integral part of Malta's heritage. In the material presented, there is richness and glory. Dignity is emerging from the street's 'undignified past'.

Carmel Cassar

Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture,

University of Malta

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Carmel Cassar is Associate Professor of Cultural History at the Institute for Tourism, Travel and Culture of the University of Malta. His books include: Society, Culture and Identity in Early Modern Malta (2000); A Concise History of Malta (2000, 2002); and Daughters of Eve. Women, Gender Roles, and the Impact of the Council of Trent in Catholic Malta (2002), Honour & Shame in the Mediterranean (2003) – translated and published in French (2005), Spanish (2004) and Italian (2002); Witchcraft, Sorcery and the Inquisition (1996), Eating Through Time: The Culture of Food in the Mediterranean (2007) and Fenkata. An Emblem of Maltese Peasant Resistance? (1994). Cassar was also responsible for the development of an Ethnography Section within the Malta Museums Department and the initial stages of the rehabilitation of the Inquisitor's Palace in Vittoriosa as a proper functioning museum between 1992 and 1999. He is founder, and presently, leader of the Slow Food Malta Convivium, and coordinates the Mediterranean Culinary Culture Programme at the University of Malta.