

LIFE & WELLBEING HISTORY

ORPHEUM THEATRE, Gzira

GRAND CARNIVAL BALLS

TODAY, TOMORROW & MONDAY
18th, 19th & 20th FEBRUARY from 8 p.m.

TUESDAY 21st FEBRUARY from 6 p.m.

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LADIES 2/6 GENTS 5/4

PRIZES for the best costumes awarded every night — Spot Prizes

PRIZES FOR COMPANIES: 1st £30, 2nd £20, 3rd £10
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TODAY & TOMORROW
18th & 19th FEBRUARY from 2.30 p.m.

10 valuable prizes awarded to children in best costume

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Carnival company



CHRISTOPHER GRECH

Last Sunday's article described the carnival costumes worn by the children of Prof. and Mrs Peter Xuereb in the late 1920s. In this article we take a look at how their youngest child, Mafine, celebrated carnival with her friends almost 20 years later.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, carnival was celebrated in a variety of ways; however, these can be split broadly into two types: the public displays in the streets and the more restricted ticketed events, like balls held in theatres and clubs. In both cases, attendees were encouraged to dress up in costumes, either as individuals or in companies; the truly dedicated carnival aficionados also developed their own dances. In both cases, revellers were highly competitive as their efforts were judged and prizes awarded.

The public revelries consisted of a procession of individuals and companies, some on foot, some on decorated cars or floats. At this time the primary défilé was that held in Valletta, where the cavalcade would work its way along Merchants Street and Strada Reale (Republic Street) before disgorging onto Palace (St George's) Square where the companies would perform their much rehearsed dances to be judged by a distinguished panel of judges: the judging board for the 1950 carnival competition, for example, included Emvin Cremona and Captain O. F. Gollcher.

In addition to the public events a number of ticketed events, were also held: these were principally fancy-dress or masked balls. As might be expected these balls were organised for groups of friends or members of the same sections of society to mix and enjoy themselves.

Typical balls were held in smart hotels (Phoenicia, Imperial), clubs (the Casino Maltese, Overseas League, Civil Service and Varsity Sports Club) and even theatres such as the Manoel Theatre in Valletta, the Radio City Opera House in Hamrun and The Orpheum in Gzira (where prizes of up to an extremely generous £30 were awarded). A wide variety of associations and societies organised the balls such as the Royal Malta Artillery and the Dockyard and alumni like the Old Edwardians.

Although the immediate post-war years were characterised by food rationing and a general austerity, the younger set was eager to cast off the gloom of war and start enjoying themselves: despite the scarcity of materials they literally went to town in devising convincing costumes.

Mafine Xuereb was 22 years old by the time World War II had ended. She had recently completed her education at the Sacred Heart Convent School in Sliema; these were formative years for her and her contemporaries who developed close friendships which are still very much in evidence more than 75 years later. The group socialised together regularly, organising country walks, picnics and parties, so it is no surprise that by 1949 we see a large group of them participating in one of the carnival companies as a tribe of Red Indians, to use the title used at the time.

As the accompanying photograph shows, the costumes were impressively elaborate, and included war paint, feather headdresses, tomahawks and even a couple of swaddled papooses.

Companies would at end balls at different locations over the carnival period and the Red Indians were no exception. The dutiful Bee, reporting in *The Sunday Times of Malta's* *Heard in the Hive*, wrote: "There was real carnival gaiety at the Old Edwardians dance... held at the Phoenicia, it seemed as if King Carnival himself was there to herald in the first appearance of the companies and preside over the festivities. The beautifully decorated ballroom, banked



Red Indians, 1949. Front row, seated (from left): (1) Mafine Xuereb (Mrs Leslie Grech), (2) Tony Debono, (3) Mollie Debono (Mrs Freddie Zammit Tabona). Second row, seated: (2) Mary de Giorgio (Mrs Maurice de Giorgio), (3) Jojo Gatt. Third row, standing: (1) Maurice Bonello, (2) Madeleine Debono (Mrs Ronnie Trigona), (3) Barbara Bonavia, (4) Charlie Sammut, (5) Josephine Azzopardi (Mrs Charlie Sammut), (7) Barbara Salamone (Mrs Robert Bonavia), (8) Ronnie Trigona, (9) Elizabeth Debono (Mrs Hadrian Vincenti). Back row, standing: (1) Leslie Grech, (5) Sonny Muscat. PHOTO: GRECH'S STUDIO, VALLETTA



Ready to dance the *Maltija*. Front row (from left): (1) Elizabeth Debono (Mrs Hadrian Vincenti), (2) Ronnie Trigona, (3) Miriam Busuttill (Mrs Hilaire Vincenti), (4) George Sciortino, (5) Mollie Debono (Mrs Freddie Zammit Tabona). Middle row: Maria Rizzo (Mrs Ullò), (2) Benny Portelli, (3) Sophie Mizzi (Mrs Tony Grech), (4) Maurice Petrocchino, (5) Josephine Azzopardi (Mrs Charlie Sammut), (6) Albert von Brockdorff, (7) Mafine Xuereb (Mrs Leslie Grech), (8) Tony Debono. Back row: (1) Lucia Preziosi (Mrs Vjenceslav Hero), (2) Edward von Brockdorff, (3) Barbara Salamone (Mrs Robert Bonavia), (4) John Manduca, (5) Vera Camilleri (Mrs Raphael Camilleri), (6) Charlie Sammut, (7) Mary de Giorgio (Mrs Maurice de Giorgio), (8) Mario Stilon de Piro, (9) Magda Vella, (9) Joseph Terreni. PHOTO: RICHARD ELLIS

with coloured streamers and flowers... made a fitting background for the myriads of dancers as they whirled around in their brilliant costumes. There was hardly a person who was not in some interesting fancy dress, but the best costumes were undoubtedly those of the companies who raced on to the floor, in the various guises of Red Indians, Venetian Masks, Saturnians, Circus Clowns..."

The photograph illustrates how those Old Edwardians braved bagged themselves a collection of beautiful Sacred Heart squaws.

In the accompanying group photographs every effort has been made to identify each member of the company; however, there are lacunae since some of the sitters have not yet been identified.

If readers have corrections or identities to offer I will receive them gratefully.

"Eligible young bachelor alumni of St Edward's College paired up, almost exclusively, with the attractive alumnae of the Sacred Heart"

The naming convention adopted in the captions gives the young ladies' maiden names with their married names in parentheses. The numbers refer to the sitter's position counted from left to right of their respective row.

The following year the Old Edwardians again held their Carnival Ball at The Phoenicia Hotel which was, according to the Bee, "as to be expected, most enjoyable, with the younger set very much in evidence, having a wonderful time in costumes of every conceivable kind and design. Here again, the Forresters, who danced with vigour and evident enjoyment, won first prize while the Kalikonians were awarded second prize".

A group photo of the Kalikonians is included; however, it has been difficult identifying many



The Coons, 1951. Front row (from left) (1) Josephine Azzopardi (Mrs Charlie Sammut), (2) Cora Agius Ferrante (Mrs Arthur P Camilleri), (3) Mollie Debono (Mrs Freddie Zammit Tabona). Middle row: (1) Leslie Grech, (4) Bertie Mizzi, (5) Elda Radmilli (Mrs Bertie Mizzi), (6) Mafine Xuereb (Mrs Leslie Grech), (7) Yvonne Sullivan (Mrs Tony Amadeo), (8) Lola Mizzi (Mrs George Sammut), (9) Iris Radmilli (Mrs George Sciortino). Back row: (4) Tony Amadeo. PHOTO: THE ROYAL STUDIO, VALLETTA

of the members of this company. Mafine and her close friends, Josephine Azzopardi (Mrs Charlie Sammut), Marie Therese Gatt (Mrs Paul Camilleri) and Cora Agius Ferrante (Mrs Arthur P. Camilleri) among them, formed part of the company. The origin of the name 'Kalikonians' has been lost in the mists of time and memory.

In 1951, many of the same group of friends made up The Coons. Given the costumes worn by the company we must assume that the name chosen had quite a different meaning to that signified nowadays; the make-up and costume do not indicate any association with the racist tone of the word in today's vocabulary.

The final photograph shows largely the same group of friends wearing 18th century court dress in preparation for the *Maltija* dance. While the *Maltija* was danced in the Palace during carnival, recollections among surviving members of this group indicate that they performed not at carnival but at State balls, especially those held for Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh in 1951 and 1954.

Countess Mountbatten also organised charity balls to which she invited this group to dance.

The group received its dancing instruction initially from Lina Ganado (née Micallef) and later from Edward von Brockdorff.

The group photograph chosen has not been dated precisely but probably lies somewhere between 1947 and 1949.

A 1951 calendar shows Princess Elizabeth at the Palace, accompanied by Governor Sir Gerald Creasy. Members of the *Maltija* company can be seen lining the corridor. The photograph used for the calendar cover must predate 1951. Mafine Xuereb can be seen standing on the right of the photograph.

It is thought that the ladies' costumes worn by this group were made specially for the entertainments given during the visit of Queen Adelaide to Malta in 1838. If this was the case a century of dancers must have taken a great deal of care not to damage their costumes.

Readers will have noticed by now that the majority of women in these companies found spouses within the group. This therefore leads to the conclusion that these carnival dances served another, more long-lasting purpose, as

an opportunity to meet, socialise and find life-long partners. Thus, many of the eligible young bachelor alumni of St Edward's College paired up, almost exclusively, with the attractive alumnae of the Sacred Heart.

The author's own parents, Mafine Xuereb and Leslie Grech, met through their participation in Lina Ganado's dance company and married in May 1951, just three months after participating together in *The Coons*.

This was their last carnival caper. The following year their first child, Dorothy, was born and their attention turned to more serious matters. It was only in the 1960s that they turned their attention once again to carnival, this time to initiate their children in a very Maltese tradition.

Acknowledgements
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Orpheum Theatre advertisement in the *Times of Malta* of February 18, 1950.



1951 calendar cover