

memories

Once upon a time in Marsalforn

Alan Vella recounts fond memories of his childhood years in Gozo.

Otters! It was waterpolo time on the local sports programme I was watching on TV, and the journalist announced the day's results. Otters were playing.

It was enough to ignite flashbacks. My mind switched back to the Gozo I grew up in, when I used to practically spend the entire summer months at our family apartment in Marsalforn. It is not an easy task to pin the subsequent nostalgic flashbacks to a specific period, but I would say my thoughts spanned from the early to mid-1970s to the mid- and late 1980s, when Marsalforn was broadly still a seaside village rather than a fully-fledged resort. Let's say 30 to just over 40 years ago.

Otters were actually our rivals. The waterpolo scene in Gozo was busy at the time, and a Gozitan league was formed. Around the second part of the 1970s, Otters had to fight it off against Sharks, Penguins and Dolphins, but I also vaguely remember a couple of trial appearances of teams formed from Xaghra and Xewkija. The league was played at Marsalforn's Il-Blokki, since the area occupied by Otters' existing pitch next to the Spring-board (between Il-Banju tal-Isqof and Il-Ponta ta' Santa Marija) was only popular with bathers in those days.

My cousins were all playing for Sharks, and it was only natural that as the youngest, I would join the team myself. Sharks soon established themselves as the only credible rivals to Otters, prompting many derbies with separate sets of boisterous supporters crowding Il-Blokki. The Sharks and Otters supporters usually occupied the left and right hand sides of the triangularly shaped Il-Blokki respectively, when facing the pitch.

Otters were admittedly always the better organised and more resourceful team, but we fought many David and Goliath battles under the charismatic baton of Is-Sur Said, and did manage to spring a couple of surprises. With time, interest however waned and after a couple of seasons playing (alongside Otters) in the Maltese national league, Sharks were confined to the annals of local waterpolo history together with other Maltese teams competing at the time, such as Barracudas, Valletta St Paul's and Senglea.

Apart from Il-Blokki, the bay's configuration was rather different at the time too. A semi-circular, perched concrete platform separated the area known as Ir-Ramel from Iċ-Ċagħaq, also serving as a panoramic belvedere. Most people chose to bathe at Ir-Ramel, because of the finer sandy beach, so my cousins and myself usually opted for Iċ-Ċagħaq – definitely less crowded – to play pika, a two/three

against two/three ball slinging game in shallow water. Other times, we used to play ċama ċama at Il-Paletta, still a popular bathing spot nowadays although it has broadly lost its tennis racket-like shape.

Another favourite spot was Ghar Qawqla with its endless possibilities focused around what we called Il-Ġebba, the partly submerged rocky structure just off the mainland, that facilitated diving but that was also particularly attractive for adventurous games in rougher seas.

Swimming time was usually in the afternoon, since mornings were usually dedicated to other activities and errands. I was not a big errand fan but I did run plenty of them for mum and Nanna Nozzi at the local grocer. Dad also asked me to buy the newspaper, but at times it arrived rather late in Marsalforn especially if the morning ferry from Malta was delayed or cancelled because of bad weather. These were the days when the Jylland was the best ferry in inclement weather, and I vividly remember dad telling me that the ferry was a much-improved offer when compared to the days when he used to board the Imperial Eagle (nowadays one of Malta's main diving attractions) in his first forays crossing over to Malta. The Imperial Eagle, which I also remember berthed at Mgarr (but not as a passenger/car ferry), could take less than 10 cars on board, but there were no queues or demand-supply issues at the time.

Once a week, I used to catch the bus to Victoria (it cost two Malta cents) to pay a visit to the Gozitan Public Library. I enjoyed spending time browsing through magazines, newspapers (no internet, of course) and looking around the library in the unlikely event that I manage to spot an Enid Blyton title that I hadn't yet

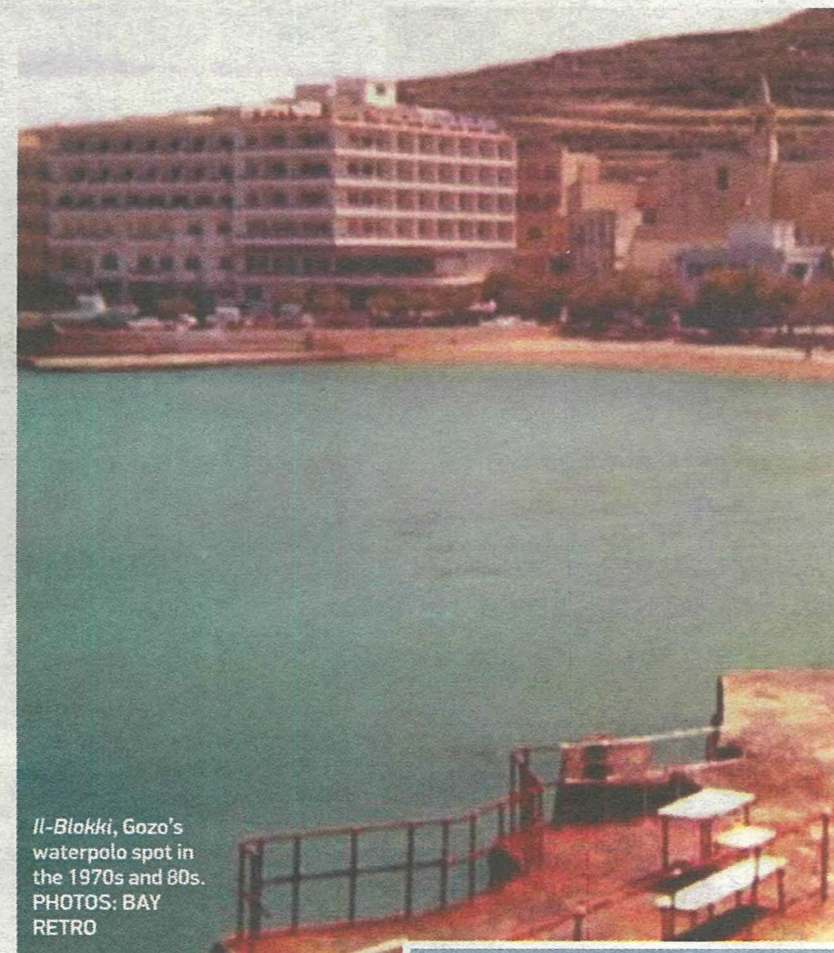
read. Blyton's books were very much in demand as the children's favourites, at a time when Harry Potter had yet to be conceived.

Before catching the bus back to Marsalforn, I always left enough time for an ice-cream at Lola's behind Pjazza San Ġorġ. Lola was a household name in Victoria with her homemade ice cream, at a time when Italian brands had yet to be imported.

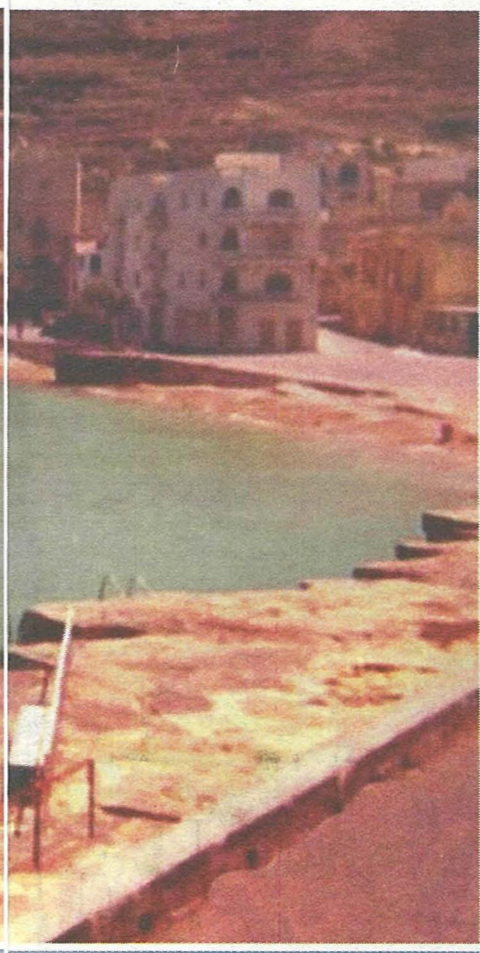
Fishing was another of my favourite pastimes, but I was admittedly never that good at it. I used to try my luck Wara l-Menqa, on the curved, narrow rocky ledge (iċ-ċinta) leading from il-Menqa to il-Paletta. I did manage to catch an gharusa or two, but my nightmare was always the thought of catching and having to handle a skorfnia. I always fared better when accompanying Uncle Joe on his fishing boat. His favourite method was to throw out various suffri for instance off il-Menqa towards Ghar Qawqla, keep a bit of distance, and wait patiently until the sufrun ducked. I always felt a thrill, knowing that it was the right time to grab the sufrun (and many a time a shiny, silvery kahli or sargu) with the extended net. Of course, the number of leisure boats poking into Marsalforn Bay at the time were a rarity, so fishing activities of such a nature were facilitated.

Il-Wied (valley) was another popular area with us youngsters. We played headers close to Aunt Kekin's house next to the formal open space currently located opposite Marsalforn's only pharmacy. This open space was at the time replete with bushes and shrubs, besides blossoming oleander trees that also served as natural shades protecting the few cars parked there from the sun.

What impressed me most however were the huge reeds that,



Il-Blokki, Gozo's waterpolo spot in the 1970s and 80s. PHOTOS: BAY RETRO



Marsalforn Bay, with the semi-circular perched platform separating Iċ-Ċagħaq from Ir-Ramel, followed by Il-Paletta and Il-Menqa.

alongside the rubble walls, separated the fields from the rugged lane that lead to the inner part of the valley (still predominantly rough terrain at the time). We played numerous soldier games and hide and seek around what we referred to as massive "bamboo sticks", occasionally stopping to admire the colourful butterflies, grasshoppers or dragonflies that buzzed close by especially if there was a puddle or two in the vicinity.

Other times, Uncle Ġorġ would ask all children whether they would accompany him to Spain. All obliged – this was his characteristic way of leading all children for a short walk into the valley, which he humorously referred to as the exotic destination Spain. He would naturally adorn the visit to Spain with his lovely stories, invented or not, which kept all us children wide-eyed.

The building envelope at Triq il-Wied leading on towards the valley was confined to fewer houses. Roughly in the area where there is currently the local access road linking the car park to the main road from Victoria to Marsalforn stood what we affectionately called 'il-



The Rabat-Marsalforn-Rabat bus, with The Teens Bar (in green) in the background.

grawnd tal-futbol' (football ground). There were no formal recreational facilities in those days, and I vividly remember treating the (still existing) concrete angled platform towards one side of the steps leading on from Marsalforn church to the police station as a slide. Otherwise, the swings concept was nowhere to be seen in Marsalforn. Another noticeable difference was the complete absence of a formal car park in Marsalforn: the current car park was at the time simply a continuation of the terraced fields sloping from the road to Xaghra downwards.

Il-grawnd tal-futbol was nothing more than a larger than usual informal open space that luckily for us children had an even, gravel type of terrain. Four stones from il-Wied to serve as goalposts quickly transformed it into Marsalforn's football ground. At the time, Juventus and Leeds were dominant teams in their respective leagues, and football games usually lead to these two teams fighting it out in Marsalforn valley too. The games were more or less an extension of the Sharks-Otters rivalry as our Juventus team consisted of my extended family – myself with my cousins, second cousins, cousins of cousins, everyone became a cousin when it mattered – against the Leeds team having the Dimechs and Tabones as their backbone. Other youngsters joined the fun occasionally. Among them was a youngish Daniel Cilia who most probably still had to discover his love for photography at the time.

children should participate on a daily basis in the 6pm mass, as the parish priest had decided that this mass should be for children.

It was never easy leaving the beach and going back home in time to have a quick shower and change, so occasionally I pretended not to hear the dominant church bells reminding all that mass would commence in 15 minutes. Of course, that would mean being late for the 6pm mass, and invariably being gently chided by the parish priest for turning up for the 7pm mass, which he more or less preferred billing as 'tal-kbar biss' (for adults only).

The children's mass was quite animated and enjoyable. Cousin Stephen produced heroics in mastering the foot pumping, ageing, non-electric black wooden organ, and did manage to keep it in tune. One day, Stephen was not around, but dad happened to be there, so the parish priest asked him whether he would take over the role himself. Of course, dad obliged, and the parish priest quickly jotted down the list of hymns to be sung during mass. Looking at the list, dad had difficulty remembering the tune of a particular hymn chosen. Luckily, he was with a chummy of his, and asked his friend to quietly sing it to him. On the basis of his friend's vocal talents, dad figured out the tune and was able to meet il-kappillan's request in full.

Thereafter, it was time for dinner. Mum would always prepare an evening meal, but the temptation to top that up with a bag of chips at times proved to be irresistible. Marsalforn did not have many take-aways at the time, so the one next to the bus station made brisk business in selling fries. I vividly remember queuing up, hoping that the chips would not be delayed unduly. I was fascinated with what seemed like a high tech potato peeling and chopping machine where the establishment owner would dump plenty of potatoes into the machine, and happily retrieve them chopped on the other side, ready to be fried.

When my turn would finally arrive, I would proudly hold on to my chips and quietly head home. Invariably, Nanna Nozzi would be on her doorstep and call me over, asking me if she could try one. With the pen-

chant of a seasoned oenologist, she would always give her opinion on the quality of the particular chip she chose, and to ask for another one to gauge whether it would taste better than the first. One day it was too much salt, the other too little pepper, another day she complained about the ketchup and further still the vinegar. What I did not realise at the time was that she was pulling my leg and enjoying my not-too-amused reactions! Eventually, I did figure out a way to avoid her by taking a longer walk back home through the other side of the valley. The problem was that the fries' smell was irresistible and only the bag, and no chips, ended up on my dinner plate by the time I reached home.

Evenings at Marsalforn were a hub of activity. In my younger days, I used to hang out with my cousins around Il-Wied, playing all sorts of games but also watching the weekly Giochi Senza Frontiere on Italian TV. If mum and dad were in Malta (Auntie Lelina often offered hospitality), I used to phone them from the only public phone booth available in Marsalforn at the time. This was located close to the dedicated bus lane just off Iċ-Ċagħaq, and consisted of a metal black and grey box which required the caller to press lever 'A' to be able to speak and lever 'B' to recover one's money in case the call never went through. Of course, lever 'B' was subject to many frustrating moments as pressing, pushing, shaking or banging on the phone box did not always bring one's money back.

As years passed by, we traded Il-Wied with Il-Menqa, joining other groups of children as happens when youngsters taste the teenage years. Commercial activity alongside Marsalforn promenade was at the time focused around Il-Menqa, except for a few bars and restaurants on the Il-Banju tal-Isqof side. The modern-day row of nightspots in the Il-Blokki area was at the time a fully residential area, occupied predominantly by Victoria residents who spent their summer months at their seaside house. Nowadays, an increasing number of families reside permanently in Marsalforn.

One of our favourite spots for a drink was The Teens – more or less a boathouse transformed into a bar – next to Il-Banju tal-Isqof,

but we also spent countless time playing billiards at the only Marsalforn spot offering such a possibility (at Il-Menqa). At a later stage, evening activity of course shifted towards The Rook at Il-Qbajjar, better known in Marsalforn circles as It-Torri, which quickly established itself as Gozo's most popular hangout.

At night, the extended family regrouped in front of Grandpa Ganni's house, grabbing any available chair or cushion to sit down and enjoy the evening breeze along the pavement. Jokes and group chats abounded, until grandpa decided that it was time to say the rosary. Nanna Nozzi would be there, tucked away behind il-boxxla on her favourite armchair, with a warm cover on her lap, which she particularly cherished.

Having passed my formative schooling years in Malta, I was quite surprised to learn in my younger days that the Gozitan meaning for 'boxxla' was not a 'compass' as in Malta, but rather a door knob or the inner door.

With time, I also discovered other Gozitan variances, the likes of 'qed itini l-mejri' which meant dizziness, 'hajz', which was widely used by Gozitans to emphasise something they disliked or even the expression 'bhal xejn', which was broadly used whenever a Gozitan expressed surprise.

Thereafter, everyone went back home for a good night's sleep. I however always spent some time on our apartment's balcony, sipping through a thirst quenching glass of cold water and hearing the closest bar owners next to the promenade drag and group their metal tables and chairs in one specific area, as they prepared to close shop late at night.

This was the effective indicator signalling that it was really and truly time to go to bed.

This article is based on true childhood recollections of mine, and is intended as a realistic, sociocultural snapshot of the simpler and calmer (when compared to modern times) Marsalforn in the 1970s and 80s. The article is dedicated to those mentioned in my article who have since passed away, particularly my own father Maestro Joseph Vella who just missed celebrating my 50 years of age by a couple of months.