



Charles and Mary Josephine Xuereb as Pierrot and Pierrette. PHOTO: J. CASSAR OF HAMRUN



Mafine as a Dutch girl. PHOTO: J. CASSAR OF HAMRUN



Drummer girls and boys. PHOTO: S. ZAMMIT HAMMET



Laura Xuereb as a Powder Puff.



Charles and Mary Josephine Xuereb as a Dutch boy and girl. PHOTO: J. CASSAR OF HAMRUN



George Xuereb as page. PHOTO: S. ZAMMIT HAMMET

Carnival vignettes of the 1920s



CHRISTOPHER GRECH

Carnival provides an opportunity for revellers to assume a new personality, albeit for a day or two; a chance to jest, play the fool or poke fun. The options and opportunities for children are myriad and exciting, more so today than ever before with electronic media fuelling the imagination.

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As Vicki Ann Cremona has demonstrated in her recent authoritative publication, *Carnival and Power: Play and Politics in a Crown Colony*, carnival celebrations in Malta have, from time immemorial, been loaded with symbolism and intrigue – often poking fun at figures of authority. Historically there has also been a more innocent component of these festivities: that dedicated to the entertainment of children.

As today’s revellers apply the finishing touches to their fantasy outfits this article takes a look at the carnival costumes worn by the siblings of one Maltese family in the 1920s.

The parents responsible for these carnival indulgences came from the professional strata of Maltese society: Prof. Peter Xuereb, MD, and his wife Mary née Debono. Their children in order of their birth were Laura (1921), George (1922), Charles (1923) and Mary Josephine (1924); as these dates demonstrate, the siblings were close in age, and for convenience sake they were generally split into an older and a younger pair.

Mary Xuereb engaged a dressmaker from Sliema who would habitually visit the Xuereb home in Valletta. This lady, unfortunately nowadays only identified by her first name, Maria, lived in St Pius Street and would visit from time to time to attend to the Xuereb family’s general sartorial needs; sometimes making up new outfits but more often making alterations to existing clothes that were then handed down to younger siblings.

The earliest carnival costume photograph is that of Laura dressed up as a ‘Powder Puff’; an appropriate get-up for a well-nourished toddler. Her generous outfit appears to be further enhanced by bands of cotton wool on her dress and bonnet with wool swabs and possibly a mirror in her hands. Cotton wool must have been a plentiful resource at Dr Xuereb’s clinic. This costume must date to around 1923.

A later costume worn by Laura was that of a Greek girl. This outfit was said to have been provided by

the Colombos family who were neighbours when the Xuerebs lived on Archbishop Street, close to Independence Square (then Piazza Celsi). This photograph was probably taken around 1927.

The characters of Pierrot and Pierrette were a perennial fancy dress favourite – no doubt resulting from the exaggerated collars and cuffs as well as the dazzling checkerboard outfit; and thus it proved also with the Xuereb children, who it seems, owned a pair of matching costumes to make up the Pierrot and Pierrette pairing.

These costumes were not technically correct since Pierrot/Pierrette (entirely white) and Harlequin (checkerboard top and bottom) wore distinct costumes, however the Xuereb examples combine components from both which, judging by contemporary illustrations, seemed to have been a common practice of the time. Nevertheless, the effect, enhanced by skillful professional photography, resulted in charming, captivating records of the event.

The photographs of all four children were taken by one of the best studio photographers of the era: Joseph Cassar of Hamrun who, as a master of his craft, elevated what might seem mundane to a high art. Cassar was a patient of Prof. Xuereb’s and regularly exhibited portraits of the Xuereb children in his Hamrun shop window.

It is interesting coincidence that Joseph Cassar’s son, Giuseppe (a budding photographer), started his medical studies at Rome University in 1936; in 1938, Prof. Xuereb spent three months in Rome and a further three months in London learning the latest practices in his discipline (as was the practice in those

times) in preparation for his new appointment as Professor of Medicine at the University of Malta.

Unfortunately, Giuseppe Cassar’s studies were interrupted by the war and the young student returned to Malta in 1939. Giuseppe took over his father’s studio in 1946.

All four children were photographed in the Pierrot and Pierrette costumes: Laura and George around 1925 (both children seem to be sitting on the same chair), and that of Charles and Mary Josephine quite possibly the following year.

“[It] must have proved a nightmare to coax all the children in the group to give the photographer their attention”

Cassar once again produced an affecting and animated double portrait which underscores the attachment of the two younger siblings whose births were just 11 months apart – Mary Josephine, or Mafine as she is better known, was born three months prematurely. It was because her siblings had difficulty pronouncing her double name that Mary Josephine was shortened to ‘Mafine’ and has stuck with her for life.

A few years later Charles and Mafine were dressed up as a



Laura Xuereb as a Greek girl.



George Xuereb as Pierrot. Right: Laura Xuereb as Pierrette. PHOTOS: J. CASSAR OF HAMRUN



Dutch boy and girl and again photographed by Cassar. In this photograph the artist has not been quite so successful in capturing the attention of his sitters. However a separate photograph of Mafine is picture perfect.

Another charming carnival photograph, and one that must have proved a nightmare to coax all the children in the group to give the photographer their attention, was a group of drummer boys and girls, taken by Hammett around 1929. Here Laura Xuereb can be seen in the back row on the far right, and George three places to her right.

A fine photograph of George Xuereb by Hammett Studios (Salvatore Zammit Hammett) shows him in page’s outfit; this was a costume of unusually high quality as demonstrated by the intricately formed ruff collar and general details of the outfit. This must represent the top end of carnival costumes.

Readers curious to know how the four siblings fared after they assumed these childhood carnival characters may be interested to know that Laura married Dr Vincent Depasquale, LL.D; George and Charles followed their father into

the medical profession: George was appointed Professor of Pathology and subsequently rector of the University of Malta (1982-87). George married Mary Rose Briffa. Charles married Charlotte Manché. Mafine married Leslie Grech, barrister-at-law, and at 94 years of age is the last surviving sibling.

In 1931, Mary Xuereb’s father, Prof. George Debono, MD, died and she went into deep mourning for her beloved parent. The absence of carnival photos in the years immediately following suggests that frivolities such as carnival costumes were put aside for a few years.

In a forthcoming article we will see how this same generation of youngsters, energetic 20-year-olds immediately after World War II, chose to throw off the misery and privations of wartime Malta, at least temporarily, by forming themed carnival troupes to enjoy themselves in the company of friends – and in the process finding life-long partners.

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