

When the midwife calls





As a midwife, nearly 70 years ago, Řita Ěbejer delivered hundreds of babies and treated them all as she would her own.

popular TV series Call the Midwife, set in the early 1950s and 60s, has given us an informative and amusing idea of what the profession entails. Now, Rita, the first Maltese woman to qualify as a midwife, shares some strips of wood. of her memories of midwifery in Malta during that era.

wanted to do. She made up her mind at the age of six, when a short period as a patient in a hospital near what is now Floriana police station, in the care of knew where she was going, and the Sisters of Mercy, was all it worked towards her goal.

took to awaken this vocation. Soon she spent every day dressed up with a pillowslip over her head, imagining discussions with doctors about her patients, which were represented by carefully bandaged

Formal or academic education was not considered all that im-Rita explained from the start that nursing and subsequently midwifery were all she ever rupted a huge part of her education. Imagine trying to study squashed for hours in a dark,

Rita with members and colleagues at the MMDNA headquarters

part in a pilot scheme in Birmingham, in England, to attract girls into nursing, before they got the feel for money from their first jobs. She would have a year of theory, just until she was 17. So, on her 16th birthday, in 1946, Rita sailed for the UK, all on her own, on the SS Empire. Fowey a troop ship returning from being repaired in Egypt. It

was no cruise. In the Bay of Biscay they met terrible weather, there were engine failures and half the crew got sick. After four years training and having obtained her nursing qualifications and booked a subsequent midwifery course, Rita returned to Malta for a wellearned holiday. At that time, her father was very friendly with a member of the council of the Malta Memorial District Nursing Association (MMDNA) which was affiliated to a district nursing group in UK, and she was offered a scholarship with the intention that she should take over from the British nurses, and eventually take charge, as a completely Maltese group was being formed. During that course, Rita was also encouraged to take up health

visiting met the man who was to become took. One milestone was the her husband and feeling she early 1950s, when the anesthetcouldn't let him wait three more years, dropped the health visiting course. This was no hard thing as Rita points out, "I never liked admin. I did not really want to be a supervisor. I always loved being close to the patients."

As soon as her final course was over, Rita began the career she had always longed for. Without formally qualified midwives, women relied on what were known as handywomen, or Muestra for home births; and most births took place at home.

Luckily she was chosen to take same as in the UK. No doctor could come to the case unless the midwife called him. Doctors who did attend were often either skeptical about the midwives' obvious ability or rather condescending. Rita tells of a doctor who grandly observed a birth till the very last minute and, after merely patting a tiny emerging head, promptly took the credit for the whole birth. On another occasion a doctor, who was there just as a precaution, patronizingly handed her £1 (£1.20 cents) and reminded her to always call him whenever a doctor was required!

> For someone whose profession demanded such skill and excellent qualifications a gesture resembling a tip or a commission payment would have been very insulting. But that was how many doctors then considered their own position. Rita just saw the funny side.

Mothers were encouraged to book in when they were around three months pregnant, so they could be monitored. It was left to them to choose their own doctor. They were then visited every month for routine checks and to report if anything doubtful was spotted. Rita would care for mothers and their babies be-But on her Malta visit she had fore and after birth, whatever it ics gas and air and Trilene came into use. The midwives were given lectures in how to use them. They proved a joy for everyone.

In those days, so much less was known, or told to mothers, about anatomy or child development and birth, so there were still plenty of old wives' tales and superstitions surrounding the whole process. But Rita is happy that she managed to get so much confidence from mothers and relatives that they could see how different having a midwife in at-The rules in Malta were the tendance was, from what they

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Rita and two colleagues celebrate the birth of her own first baby

were used to; and that it was so warding experiences and memmuch more professional.

The midwives' reputation flourished. They were often the saving source of calm and confi-dence for a mother who was almost always driven to a frenzy by relatives, all screaming, crying and praying at the top of their voices, and giving her no peace or privacy. As Rita describes how, with tact and firm discipline, she was able to quieten everyone down and empty the room. It is easy to see how mothers would have been able to give her their complete trust and cooperation.

Rita always treated mothers as if she was in their position. And her empathy must have made all the difference. She was still working when her own children were born and thinks her job did make it easier. She knew exactly what to expect and when a complication arrived she knew what it was and how to deal with it, thus reassuring her relatives as well.

Her happiest and most re- have had her there.

ories come from every birth she attended. When, after all the hard work she would turn up the light a bit and create as much happy excitement and urgency as possible to finally encourage mother and baby towards their long-awaited meeting. "I always had tears in my eyes with the pleasure I felt at every birth", she says.

From the mid-sixties on, hospital births, which primarily included doctors, took over. Home births were not encouraged and the midwives were somewhat upstaged. Thankfully today their roles are more recognised and valued again, as they should

Rita and her fellow midwives and nurses in the MMDNA were true pioneers and it's quite obvious that all mothers, and patients on the district nursing lists, who saw Nurse Ebejer arriving in her little car anywhere on island, at any time of the day or night were so very lucky to