

# When the midwife calls



Dame Rita Ebejer OCL, SRN, SCM, QN (Eng)



Midwives used a small car to visit cases all over the island



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

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

The 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 of her memories of midwifery in Malta during that era.

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 strips of wood.

Luckily she was chosen to take 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.

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 with members and colleagues at the MMDNA headquarters

Formal or academic education was not considered all that important for girls when Rita was young and World War II interrupted a huge part of her education. Imagine trying to study squashed for hours in a dark, airless stone shelter while bombs rained down close by.

After four years training and having obtained her nursing qualifications and booked a subsequent midwifery course, Rita returned to Malta for a well-earned 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.

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.

were used to; and that it was so much more professional. The midwives' reputation flourished. They were often the saving source of calm and confidence 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.

warding experiences and memories 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.