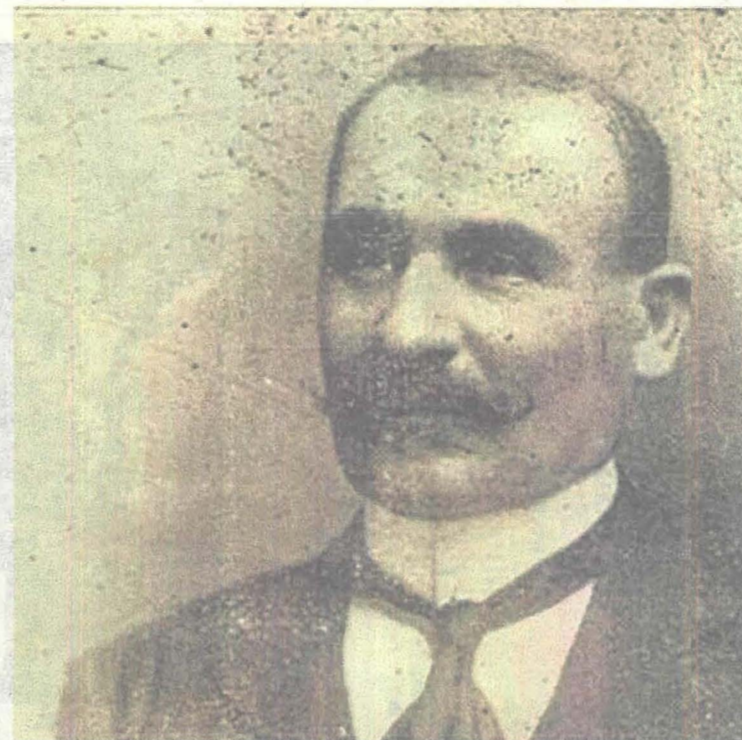


## LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY



Royal Artillery Lieutenant William Charles Curme was arrested for inflicting a grievous wound on 12-year-old Raffaele Debono.



Manwel Dimech tried to exchange counterfeit coins at a shop in Mellieħa.



Riding a cart in towns and villages while sitting on one of the shafts was illegal as the driver had no control over the animal.

# Life in a rural village – Mellieħa, 1891-92

JEFFREY SAMMUT

History usually focuses on important events as narrated by those in power. The normal day-to-day happenings of the commoners are rarely given any consideration. To make matters worse, they are rarely documented. But the daily life of the lower classes plays an important part in understanding the whole picture.

The following short occurrences, taken from police reports, shed light on the simple, rural life in Mellieħa between June 1891 and February 1892.

On June 1, 1891, Lorenzo Vassallo, head teacher of the Mellieħa elementary school, reported that three unknown children broke three window panes of the school. It may seem strange that Vassallo had to report this to the police but not only was he responsible for all that happened at the school but, in those times, replacing glass panes was not as straightforward as it is today. Here one must mention that school attendance was voluntary and many parents preferred to have their children work in the fields or help at home rather than send them to school.

Two weeks later, Giovanni Sammut was caught by the police driving a cart inside the village while sitting on one of the shafts. A cart has two shafts, which are the long wooden poles attached to the

animal. Mules and donkeys were not provided with reins and a bit, so riding a cart in this manner meant that the coachman had little control over the animal.

Inside inhabited areas, people riding carts were supposed to dismount and lead the animal from its halter. But some people were even caught riding driving carts while asleep. The animal would have made the same trip so often that it knew the way by heart. But, sometimes, the animal would be attracted by a field planted with fodder and the coachman would wake up and find himself in the middle of a field instead of at his destination.

On June 28, 1891, a steamboat ended up on the rocks near the White Tower at l-Ahrax. No one was hurt. Steamboats were powered by coal and the villagers, especially the women, would scour the seashore to collect any lumps of coal that fell off steamships. Driftwood was also welcome although any masts, beams, wooden doors and other large objects had to be reported to the police. Most of the finds ended up as firewood. In fact, in those times, even thorns and thyme, which were used for kindling, were worth their weight in gold.

At the end of June, the police managed to put out a burning carob tree. Its owner, Antonio Gauci, declared that the tree did not suffer any damage. Carob trees provided shelter from the sun and wind, and more importantly,



Fortunato Aguis, from Sliema, was nearly hit by stones thrown at him by an unknown woman who was helping in the construction of the Mellieħa parish church.

their beans were used as food, animal feed and to make caramels and cough syrup.

In mid-July, 1891, Royal Artillery Lieutenant William Charles Curme was arrested for inflicting a grievous wound with a pointed object on Raffaele Debono, a 12-year-old boy. Dr P. Caruana Scicluna declared that the boy was in danger of losing his life. This was the shape of things to come.

When British soldiers were stationed permanently at Ghadira and Ghajn Tuffieħa

Camps, the troubles for the villagers became more frequent.

On August 29, 1891, Andrea Mifsud was reported for allowing his sheep to enter the fields of Vincenzo Mifsud, where they caused damage to crops. Again, this was a common occurrence. In many cases, the shepherds were young children.

October didn't start well for Francesco Xuereb. He threw a stone in Strada Reale, today Gorg Borg Olivier Street, and broke one of the street lamps. He had to pay for the damages. The street lamps gave little light and, more often than not, on windy or stormy days, they would go off. The police would take note of those that were unlit and the street petroleum lamp lighter would be held responsible, unless there was a valid reason for the lamps going out.

On October 11, 1891, Fortunato Aguis from Sliema was walking with his family near Mellieħa parish church, which was still under construction, when suddenly, two stones landed close to them. A woman who was helping in the building of the church had thrown the stones but he could not identify her when asked by the police.

Women helped the builders by bringing water from the spring in the valley close to the church and also mixed soil with water. The mixture, together with chips of stone, were then inserted in the gap between the inner and outer walls.

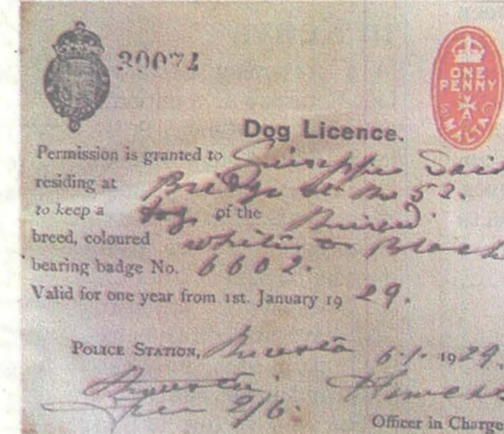
On October 29, Carmela Fenech went to the police station to report a missing chicken. She described the chicken as black, blind from one eye and worth a shilling and eight pence. The chicken was found by Carmela herself a few days later inside her house. The importance this woman gave to a chicken shows that poverty was rampant at the end of the 19th century.

**“Manwel Dimech slipped off his handcuffs, grabbed the revolver of one of his escorts, took aim and pulled the trigger”**

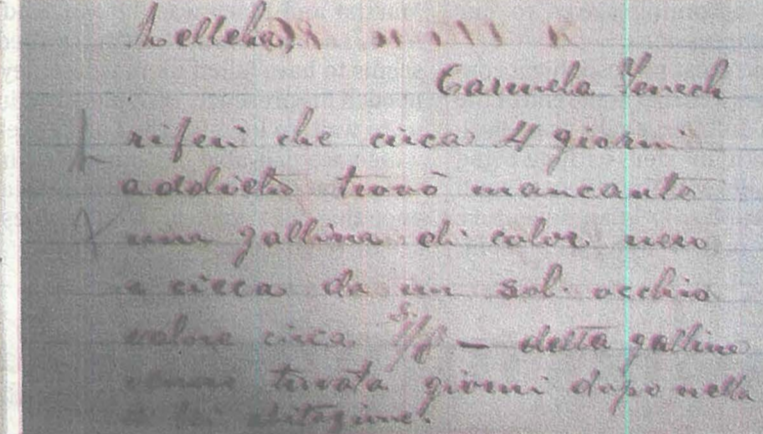
Fourteen-year-old Antonio Debono was warned for organising a lottery without a police permit. Debono was the sexton's son and the lottery was held four days before Christmas, 1891. The prize was a pig.

It could be that this was the traditional lottery organised in many villages. It involved the donation of a pig to the church by one of the citizens. The animal was then allowed to roam the village's streets, feeding on leftover food, peels and other rubbish given to it by the residents. Then, when it grew fat, it was raffled and the proceeds donated to the church. The money was used to say Masses for the souls of the departed.

On February 3, 1892, Marianna Mifsud, owner of a grocer shop, reported that Lorenzo Vassallo, head teacher of the elementary school, paid her with a fake coin. At the end of the 19th century, there were a lot of counterfeit coins around, and most probably,



All dogs had to be licensed. Any dog, stray or not, which was caught by the police was destroyed after 24 hours, if no one went to claim it back. This receipt is from 1929. Right: Carmela Fenech went to the police station to report a missing chicken.



Vassallo didn't even realise he was paying with one.

A more serious case occurred on January 30, 1891. It involved the well-known Manuel Dimech, who challenged the authority of the Church and the British rulers in his mission to try to improve the lot of the Maltese lower classes. Dimech, who had just been released from prison, bought some forged coins, most probably from a priest. He thought he would get away with it by exchanging them at Mellieħa, where the people were still 'backward' and 'ignorant'.

Unfortunately for him, Maria Vella, a shop owner, immediately suspected foul play when Dimech asked her to exchange his silver coins for a smaller quantity of gold ones, since they were too heavy for him to carry around. She accepted a florin and told him to wait while she went to find someone who could exchange more money for him. Instead, she took the florin to the police station where Sergeant Vittorio Gauci confirmed that the coin was counterfeit. He went to the shop to confront Dimech who ran away, with the policeman chasing him. He was finally apprehended with the aid of some villagers.

Dimech was handcuffed and taken on a cart to Mosta, escorted by Gauci and two men. On the way, Dimech slipped off his handcuffs, grabbed the revolver of one of his escorts, took aim and pulled the trigger. The gun did not go off as it had a safety catch and he was quickly overwhelmed.

For this misadventure, Dimech was sentenced for another nine years in prison. Unfortunately, the occurrence for this case has been lost but information about it can be found in Fr Mark Montebello's detailed books about this Maltese pioneer of social reforms.

Two days later, the Mellieħa police captured a stray dog, and after keeping it for 24 hours, it was destroyed. If its owner had gone to claim it, he or she would have had to pay a 10 shilling fine. In fact, many did not bother or refused to pay and allowed the dog to be killed. Dogs had to be licensed and have a number engraved on a badge attached to a collar.

In mid-February, three youths, 13-year-old Salvatore Bartolo, 15-year-old Paolo Vella and 17-year-old Vincenzo Cutajar, were booked for throwing stones in a street with danger to passers-by. Even running in the middle of crowds

was considered a crime, for someone could get hurt. Thus, many a boy's name ended up written for posterity on police logbooks.

On February 17, 1892, Andrea Vella reported that during the night, a dog entered his yard and attempted to catch some of his rabbits. The dog was taken to the police station and in the morning, its owner, Angelo Mifsud, went to retrieve it, paying the customary 10 shilling fine. The police wrote the word 'levriera' to describe the dog, so it was undoubtedly a Pharaoh hound, the Maltese kelb tal-fenek.

These were a few of the goings-on in Mellieħa and its environs around 130 years ago, handed down to us on old police logbooks in an elaborate calligraphy. Despite their simplicity, they give us a priceless insight of the life of the common folk.

## Acknowledgements

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