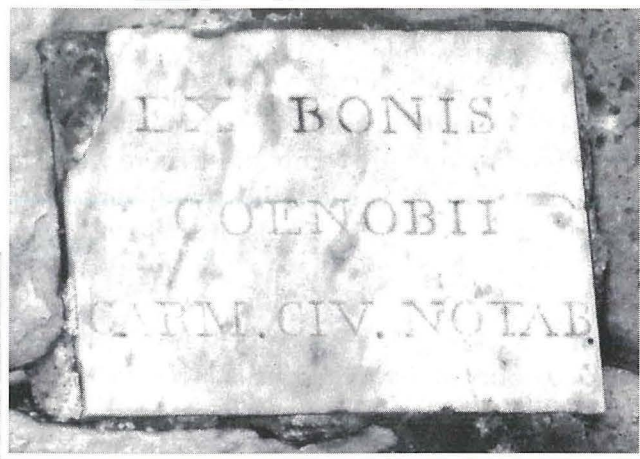


Carmel Street, Past and Present

written by Albert Storace

The genesis of this feature goes back to a request from Mr. Alfred Gauci, who asked me if I could write something about my late father Joseph's connection with the old Teatru Melita in Carmel Street. This is the street where I was born and still live. From here the idea expanded into one which would take into account the street as a whole, with references to some notable personalities, past and present, and who have had an intimate connection with it.

One could ask why the name "Carmel" was given to this street. This is simply because it is a reminder of the Carmelite Order in the area, as are St. Elias Street and St. Angelo Street, both named after Carmelite saints. It reminds one that the area enclosed by these streets was once the property of the Carmelite Priory of Mdina. Long ago this area was under cultivation and enclosed by gates and walls. The best preserved reminder is the arch at the corner of St. Angelo Street with Birkirkara Hill, complete with a stone bracket on either side. Unfortunately, erosion and some heavy vehicle destroyed the sole bracket at the corner of Carmel with Main Street. As for the two at the corner of St. Elias with Main Street, heavy vehicles chipped one of them and more recently what was left was almost completely scraped off the wall. Inscriptions in Latin at some end of each of the above streets bear the same message, even if differently abbreviated. The one at the bottom of Carmel Street reads thus: "EX BONIS COENOBII CARM. CIV. NOTAB" ("Pertaining to the Carmelite Convent of Notabile {Mdina}).



Plaque to commemorate the Carmelite Order

My father who died in this 98th year in April 1995 had a long connection with Carmel Street. Having been orphaned of both parents by the time he was just over three years old, he was brought up by his paternal grandmother and unmarried uncle and aunt. In 1913 they moved to St. Julian's from Hamrun and took up residence at No. 33 Carmel Street, Around 1926 they moved to Lapsi Street but after a few months returned to a smaller house at 26, Carmel Street. Like my three younger sisters I was eventually born there and still hold the fort, alone.



Dr. Tabone's residence (No. 33)

As for No. 33, in November 1941 it became the residence of a newly-wed couple. Dr. Censu Tabone and Mrs. Tabone, nee Maria Wirth. They brought up their large family there and they are still living in the big house. Dr Tabone must be the most distinguished personality of whom Carmel Street could boast. Renowned and recognized internationally, for his work in ophthalmology, he was also a politician who as such last served the country as Foreign Minister in 1987-89. In the latter year Parliament elected him as President of the Republic and served with his usual charm, sagacity and success



until 1994.

Some years before, Dr Tabone bought the properties Nos. 31 and 32 adjacent to his. Long-term residents know what No. 31 meant, but, I doubt whether new residents, especially those in the modern blocks of flat know that there is an old open-air theatre in their midst. Look for No. 31 and this is nowhere to be seen. Indeed, the narrow walled up space where the door used to be led through a narrow corridor and up a flight of steps into an open-air auditorium with a stone stage structure at the far end. This is/was the Teatro/Teatru Melita and it must be one of the oldest, if not the oldest in the St. Julian's/Sliema area. It was built about 130 years ago by Mr Luigi Pace Bonello and whose family owned it until Dr. Tabone's purchase. For many summer seasons there used to be performances by some of Malta's leading theatre companies. There were times when it was leased to the local Catholic Action and there were regular family film-shows, especially during the weekends. It was also a venue for meetings, talks and illustrated lectures.

This brings me back to my father, among whose many interests was a very deep one in history, especially history of the Catholic Church. I remember him lecturing in the subject at the Melita. He was deeply interested in the history of the locality itself and the (old) parish church. In 1951, working on documents available at the time, he published the first printed history of the suburb. One of my father's other absorbing interests, apart from his work as a professional journalist, was the Boy Scout Movement. He was involved in the setting up of the local Scout Group, an event which took place on 8 September 1932. Precisely at No.3, which was then the residence of a high-ranking British naval officer. A plaque marking the 70th anniversary of the event was fixed to the facade in 2002. In 1942, this beautiful house, with its extensive gardens, was used by M16 (British Military Intelligence). Shortly after the War it became the residence of Mr and Mrs. E. Arrigo. Mrs Arrigo still lives there and it is thanks to the determined campaign she waged the most of the facade of No. 20 was saved when the site was developed.

Few know and many have possibly forgotten that at the same No.20 there was once a community of Poor Clares. My father used to serve at Mass in their chapel there and when the street became too busy and noisy for the nuns, they moved to the outskirts of St. Julian's in what used to be open countryside. Eventually it was to be a leap from the frying pan into the fire when the Sliema Regional Road was built and opened in 1971, right at their doorstep.

A residence opposite No.20, precisely at No. 42c brings back the Boy Scout Movement in this story. That is because for many years the late Mr. Paul Dalli lived there until his death in the summer of 1996. Like Mr. Tarcisio Giordano who lived at No.12 (and who died in 1983), both were very active in reviving the St. Julian's Boy Scout Group which had been in abeyance for a number of years.



Plaque to commemorate The St. Julian's Scouts Group (No. 3)



Community of Poor Claris (No. 20)

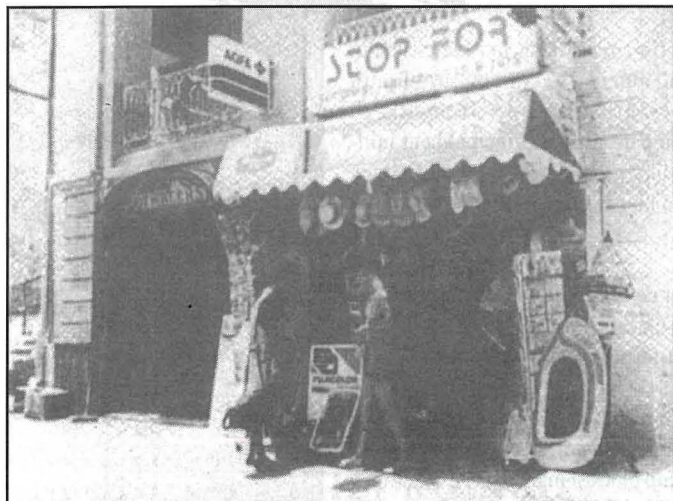


One of the three houses in Carmel Street (No. 24, 25, 26)

The last note, is appropriately a musical one; one expressly, operatic. Few are aware that in this still quite street a row of three houses has had close connections with partially all the most talented and internationally known Maltese male opera singers. The houses are Nos. 24, (25) and 26. No. 25 no longer exists as a separate unit because a former owner of No. 24, especially in summer, because one of his many brothers Eddie, and the latter's wife were the earliest neighbours I remember there. The visits stopped when Mr. Eddie Satariano, by then a childless widower, died in the summer of 1980. That same summer also saw the demise of Mr. Paul Galea, whose family were also the earliest neighbours I remember next door at No. 25 Mr. and Mrs. Galea were great friends of tenor Oreste Kirkop (1923-98). He was also a regular visitor and an autographed photograph of his hanged proudly on one the now vanished sitting rooms walls. I often saw him but never actually met him until 1997, during the ceremony when he was conferred with the Gold Medal by the Malta Society of Manufactures, Commerce and the Arts. Shortly after he kindly sent me two autographed CDs of his and which I still cherish.

I equally cherish the very warm friendship of tenor Paul Asciak (b.1923), a great family friend who with his late first wife Rina and family were frequent visitors to my house, mainly during his summer breaks during his brief but successful international career in the 1950s. I have his CDs too and it was through Paul that I met his star pupil Joseph Calleja in the mid-1990s. I have been following the latter's career ever since, whether in Malta or abroad, whenever possible, such as in Ireland, the UK, Austria and the USA. Joseph has been a frequent visitor too, although much less now since his dazzling rise to fame make it more difficult to "nail" him down. Simply because marriage and raising a young family, together with his ever-busy and full career leave him with little time. Not to mention of course my own frequent absences abroad, which make our meetings rare and therefore even more to be cherished. In Paul Asciak's own humble words, "Joseph has risen so fast and already achieved so much and so young, that one of us Maltese opera singers put together have managed to equal his record". Amen to that.

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