

The Tale of a Street . . .

Triq il-Karmnu (Carmel Street)

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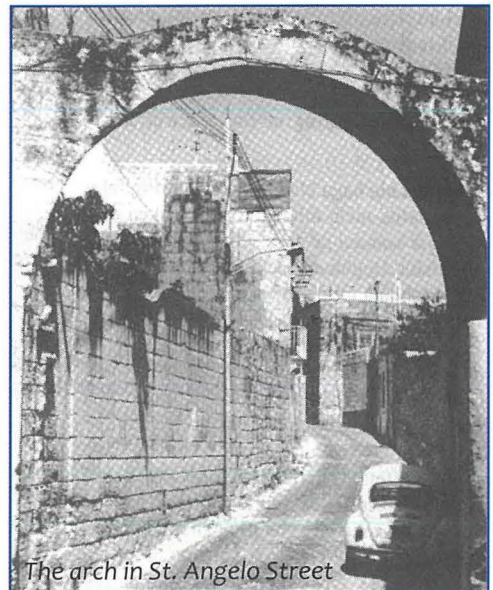
I think I am one of an endangered species, one of the last doomed to extinction. Aren't we all one may ask; yes just that I am one of a handful of residents here who are still living in the house where they were born. I have seen many come and go as is the way life goes: family members, neighbours, temporary residents and now new residents who are living in flats in blocks once occupied by single domestic units. The old houses they replaced are gone for ever and with them their gardens.

Every street tells a story. It is enough to look at the bottom end of the street, corner with Main Street to see two examples. One is the still visible "Strada Carmine" in heavy black on the wall above the more modern bilingual street name on a porcelain plaque. It is a reminder that until 1934 Italian was still an official language and most streets were still mainly known and indicated in Italian.

Right opposite is another even older reminder of things past. The area once enclosed by Lapsi, Carmel, St. Elias, St. Angelo and Main Streets was land belonging to Mdina's Carmelite convent. Leased to private holders who were paid rent by farmers, the area was cordoned off by gates and at corners such as in lower Carmel and St. Elias Streets and the arch end of St. Angelo Street there are reminders inscribed in Latin on small marble plaques. The one nearest to me reads "EX BONIS COENOBII CARM.CIV.NOTAB." (Pertaining to the Carmelite Convent of Notabile [Mdina]City).

Up to some years ago at that corner there was still a stone complete with one hinge which was an integral part of it. The protrusion suffered from erosion but was dealt its death blow by a passing heavy vehicle. The same fate which befell a similar protrusion now partly visible at the bottom end of St. Elias Street, with an intact one opposite and another complete pair at the arch in St. Angelo Street.

However, back to my street and some residents many of whom the personalities are still remembered by some. First and foremost the most



The arch in St. Angelo Street

illustrious was the much-loved Dr. Censu Tabone (1913-2012) who from 1941 lived at N. 33, except for the five years when he was President of the Republic in 1989-94. He was already known on the world medical stage for his work in the Far East in eradicating trachoma and glaucoma for which he was honoured by the UN's WHO and the countries which benefited from his work.

I remember another Censu, who also happened to be a distant relative of mine: Censu Rizzo, a high ranking official with the Department of Agriculture who lived in N. 20. Incidentally this big house used to be a Poor Clares convent until the nuns moved away to the fringe of St. Julian's to avoid the increasingly noisy neighbourhood. They jumped





out of the frying pan into the fire: they moved to what later became the Sliema Regional Road just outside their walls.

One of the biggest houses still intact is at the top, of the street, N.3. The earliest residents I remember there were the Arrigos. The house has two plaques attached to its façade. One commemorates the founding of the St. Julian's Boy Scout Group on 8 September 1932. My father Joseph (1906-95) who was a leading local journalist became its GSM in due course. From 1930-42 N. 3 was occupied by Colonel Bertram Ede of the 4th Queen's Hussars. He was Defence Security Officer and MI5. It was also known as "Careel Secret House" where MI5 was founded in Malta in July 1940, early during World War II. Another old house is N. 43 where for many years the ENT specialist Dr. Joe Sammut (d. 1978) lived with his family.



A set of three houses, Ns. 24-26 have welcomed some of Malta's most famous opera singers. Baritone Josie Satariano (1895-1992) visited his brother Eddie, a well-known piano tuner, who lived in N. 24 until his death in 1980. The house was merged with N. 25 in 1997 before which the former owners, the Galeas, sometimes welcomed a friend of theirs, tenor Oreste Kirkop (1923-98). N. 26, mine, was often visited by our friend tenor Paul Asciak (1923-2015) and his family and later his star pupil Joseph Calleja. Another Joseph (Calleia), the Hollywood film actor (1897-1975) was at times a visitor at his cousin's Dr. Tabone.

Next door to N. 3, a reminder of less cloak and dagger stuff was the traditional bakery where I still remember not only buying fresh bread but some residents having their roasts, rice and macaroni dishes baked there. The aroma was indescribably delicious!

I also recall a traditional tin and coppersmith, Nazju Muscat whose workshop was his front room at N. 45 and closed more than 50 years ago. Until relatively recently a neighbour now in his early 80s, Pawlu Saliba was still painstakingly carrying on a rare craft nowadays, that of painting traditional designs on the lower part of some karrozzin as well as carts. I remember his father Ġorġ driving one and practising the same decorative art in the workshop at N. 23 part of which was also a stable for the family horse while Ġorġ's brother Ġanni had his own horse and stable at the top of the street.

Andrew Bugeja (N. 29) was a noted expert connoisseur of cacti and I also recall the street embellished for the annual procession of Corpus Domini. It was swept clean by residents, carpets laid down, flowers strewn and potted plants lined a good part of both sides of the street. Many of these belonged to my good next-door neighbour Ġuži Pace Bonello (at N. 27), a fine gentleman who had dozens of them both in his yard and on the roof.

Memories of a happy childhood and a long vanished past,,,those were the days!