

Humble Rise in Society

Ġużeppi Bartolo taz-Zomblu

Paul P. Borg

Ġużeppi Bartolo for many years the President of the Imperial Band Club, has sadly passed away on the 11th July 2018, at the age of 87. Some people referred to him as Ġużeppi tal-Posta, because of a career as a postman and officer, others as Ġużeppi ta' Selmun because he hailed from that tiny hamlet on the promontory that juts out between Mellieħa Bay and St Paul's Bay. I prefer to refer to him as Ġużeppi taz-Zomblu, as we traditionally called his family in Selmun where he is survived by his sister Katarin. That somehow helps me recall also his dear father, Salvu, with his infinite patience and goodness in teaching me, a mere 10 year old youngster, how to harness the mule and to let me drive the cart drawn animal. Together with my grandparents, nannu Pawlu tal-Qantara and nanna Ġużeppa, Salvu taz-Zomblu used to spend a long time answering my endless questions about fields and peasant work, about names and functions of different peasant tools, parts of various types of ploughs, harnesses for different beasts doing different work. Dear old Salvu would smilingly and unwearily try to answer all my queries as I sought information about whatever crossed my pestering, inquisitive mind on the chores of man the peasant as he related to the physical environment. Ġużeppi was truly Salvu's son, inheriting his patience, his accommodating disposition and unassuming demeanour. Ġużepp was a unique individual, so loving and so loveable was he, so gentle and humble, so affable and so courteous.

I am sure that those who knew him agree with these epithets I unhesitatingly freely shower on his memory, many with whom I spoke to after his demise referring to him as their 'second father', or 'mentor', or 'advisor'.

Year in year out, come July, I would expect his punctual telephone call to gently remind me about the contribution for the Society's Annual publication next September. But his call would always start with the same introduction, his hoarse, deep voice saying, *Tad-dor tajbin? Kulhadd jiekol, Pawl?* (How are things at home? Is everyone in good health?).

People like Ġużeppi produce the incredible link that shows that local man in his society managed to successfully strike and intelligently blend that unique balance between necessary work and joyful entertainment. Man needs to work, frequently hard and under difficult conditions, but man has other needs to form the complete human being. Indeed, Ġużeppi was a man who lived the life of a hard worker, he emanated from the deep roots in the sacred soil of a modest peasant who drew his subsistence from Mother Nature, but he also strongly believed that man does not live by bread alone. Such individuals are not easy to come by.

For my ethnographic research, I had interviewed him in 2009, and the following article is the chapter I had written about Ġużeppi Bartolo in my book '*QUEST FOR IDENTITY – THE MELLIEħA EXPERIENCE*', published by the Mellieħa Local Council in its series 'Ħannieqa Kotba Melleħin' the following year. In my study I had analysed the characteristics of the environment and of many people from all walks of life, case studies mostly from Mellieħa, in order to identify so many features that are indicators and descriptors of the true identity of the inhabitants of these Islands as a Mediterranean archipelago. The protagonists of the study showed that despite insularity, and limited resources, the local inhabitant had participated in the social and cultural development of the universal human being in his endeavours to extract livelihood and subsistence from his environment.

The Postman

Ġużeppi Bartolo, is almost 79 years old and is an old acquaintance of mine. I still remember him driving his motorbike in the searing summer heat, or in the wintry showers, delivering letters to the people of Selmun. He used to have a broad smile on his face each time he handed my grandparents a letter from their children or from other relatives in Australia. Nannu Pawlu may not have had a very good eyesight in old age, but his hearing was as keen as a young man's, distinguishing the throbbing of Ġużeppi's

motor from quite a distance away and moving slowly up the lane to meet him. I cannot forget my grandfather's disappointment when the postman sped by without stopping at my grandparents' farm.

Nannu would look sad, he would shake his head, walk slowly down the lane saying to himself,

"But how is it that he never sends us a little note!" referring to his son Leli who rarely wrote a letter to his parents from Australia.

When there were letters for my parents, Ġużeppi the postman not only had the patience and the very good sense to stop by for a minute or two to tell the two old illiterate peasants who had sent them letters, but frequently would read the letters.

The Second World War

He would then smile kindly again, and would speed off to deliver the remaining letters.

"Our life was conditioned by the Second World War," he told me. "We spent five years of our youth simply destroyed because of the war. We spent more time in the shelter or taking shelter somewhere, than in our classroom. Initially we used to go in private houses here and there, but our school was then near the Labour Party club in the main road. They would take no chances, at eight o'clock straight to the shelter! We had a terrible time! There were soldiers everywhere, the fields full of barbed wire, the coast full of barbed wire... In the 30s they had already started building a net of barbed wire all around to prepare for an eventual invasion.

"On the site where there is now fort Campbell, there were the farmhouses of about six families. I remember that they moved them away and built new houses for them further away, just behind the Palace. Ġamri *l-Għawdx* used to live in one of those farmhouses... *tal-Midneħ* the father of Ġamri *l-Lott* and Kunsolat, Toni *l-Kbir*... others who lived at *Xemxija*...

"Works on the fort started around 1936, and I think half of the population of Mellieħa worked there! There were so many workers on site! Your grandmother's brother, your *barba* Karmnu, worked there building those beautiful rubble walls. He later drove a truck and I still remember him when he started taking interest in my cousin Karmni, whom he eventually married. She used to come to sleep with my aunt Rozi at Selmun and Karmnu saw her and then married her!"

Ġużeppi started laughing at that point. He had hit on a very common fact that frequently goes unnoticed in society.

"Why do people marry this person and not the other?" he asked. "Why did your mother from Birkirkara marry your father from far away Selmun? It was because her father worked with the Jesuits

and was frequently sent to Selmun. Why did I have to marry my wife from far off Mgarr? It was because I was a postman! That is circumstances are created that bring about other circumstances in life.

"And when the war started the fort was not yet complete. It was meant to be a fortress to defend the port from sea attacks. Fort Campbell was built on a cliff and could defend even the Grand Harbour. When the guns shot out seawards, one could hardly see where the projectile splashed into the water! The distance was so large! The guns were so powerful! There were three of them, all directed towards the sea. These guns aimed at sea targets always with thicker muzzles, and had very thick shells, whilst the anti-aircraft had longer muzzles and more slender projectiles.

"There was a Bofor beneath Fort Campbell, but there it was useless and was soon brought over near the *Germudi* farm, near the carob trees... we were little children tending our sheep... the soldiers used to let us play with them! One of us would turn it around whilst the other would change the angle of elevation! And the soldiers would let us play! Sheep and goats and many boys all around the army personnel! And when the time came for them to have their tea, we would queue with them in single file and they would give us tea and bread! We used to have whatever containers we had which we would hide in the rubble walls. We had fields all over the place and on our part we supplied them constantly with whatever we had, tomatoes, melons, figs...

"Inside that lane, beyond the garigues where my uncles lived, there were other small anti-aircraft batteries... always moving with the land forces to cover them in case of any air attacks... they had four very large guns...

"And once I was returning home from school running around as if I was an aeroplane and there was a soldier on his bike coming over from Mellieħa and I ran straight into him! I then spent forty whole days in hospital with a broken leg! The hospital was at the Bugeia Institute at Santa Venera, and the anti-aircraft guns were near the round-about at Fleur-de-Lys. This was in line to defend Luqa airport.

During the war there were some people who came to Selmun as refugees. One of them lived next door to Ġużeppi's family. He was the lawyer George Zammit who eventually became also a writer of some importance, depicting frequently the village life in his poems and prose. Zammit was the god-father of Ġużeppi and was also his witness when he married.

"I still remember the charm of this family," Ġużeppi reminisced. They had a daughter called Marquita and Celine and we are still very good friends."

He also remembers, however, the bad times they

had to endure during that war. “We were still children and took life as children do. Just one big adventure. But those who were slightly older than we were had to suffer a lot because they perhaps understood a little bit of what was going on and had to pay for it as well! Your father was only some years older but he was taken to carry aviation fuel into the Mdina tunnels...

Father used to tell us how many people actually died because of the dangerous fumes or how many people became crazy to die later on in hospital. He himself had become very sick because of toxins absorbed in his blood, but his mother cured him... in time to be taken by the coastal defences to help fix barbed wire around the coast and to dig shelters in the hard rock.

Work in the Fields

“My father was Salvu and we used to work a lot at *l-Aħrax* tal-Mellieħa. We used to go with our uncles Pawlu and Ġużepp all the way to *l-Aħrax*. They worked over there and they always went with their mule from Selmun!”

L-Aħrax is quite a distance from Selmun. But those were the days when distances and time seemed to be of little consideration. In order to be able to have a good day’s work, Pawlu and Ġużepp would attend mass at four o’clock early in the morning and before sunrise they would be on their way to *l-Aħrax*. I still remember the two bachelor peasants, one distinctly tall and his brother distinctly short, both of them as gentle as ever, always with a peaceful friendly smile grinning beneath their moustaches. I can still picture them as they walked silently downhill from the chapel to start moving towards *l-Aħrax*.

Ġużeppi still remembers the threshing of the corn in Summer.

“*Fuq il-qiegħa*, threshing of the corn,” he said, “was a source of joy and play for us children. To prepare the ground for the threshing activity, they used to find an open space on the garigues, and clear it of thorns or shrubs, level it properly and then put water on it. Finally a heavy stone roller used to be moved over it all around until it hardened to a smooth and level surface. When still wet they used to mix some straw or some dead algae from the sea so that when it hardened it would have some fibres to hold it even more together without cracking. On the way to *Mġiebaħ*, at *Latnija*, there was an old well from where we would get the water.”

A rather interesting point made by Ġużeppi here suggests some social changes going on. This is noted in the way he remembers this activity as a place where children played, and where children were left to play. This is exactly what other old people recounted to me, remembering that the activity was in Summer during children’s holidays.

In spite of the need of extra hands on the threshing floor, children were left to play. This may give us a hint about the importance of threshing the harvest by these traditional methods. This laborious process was already on its way out. Ġużeppi speaks of a time when the first machines had already appeared in Malta and Gozo, so that threshing the corn to retrieve the golden seeds, was already being done faster and more easy using mechanical means. Also, although corn was always harvested as an agricultural product of prime importance by the local farmer who baked his own bread, a new system was already taking over whereby the farmer could buy his own corn rather than having to grow enough for his use. Not only that, but it was also time for the farmer to buy his own bread already baked, rather than having to take the trouble of growing the corn, threshing and grinding it, and then baking his bread.

The Quarry

On the way to *Mġiebaħ* one can see a lot of surface quarries. The site is known as *il-Latnija*, the word *Latnija* being probably of Greek origin for the word quarry. In olden times many a quarry used to be seen around the garigues showing sites where slabs of stone were cut from the surface by labour intensive methods. It may sometimes be rather difficult to spot these quarrying sites, simply because whoever had the quarry was obliged to rehabilitate it after its use by filling it with soil and using it as a field. Ġużeppi told me that stones for the building of the nearby Selmun castle might have been brought over from some quarry down there. But it could also be that stones were brought over from *Armier*, in spite of the distance. The stones for building the Mellieħa parish church were in fact brought over from that site at *Armier*.

The stone slabs to build the old buildings of Selmun are very different from the castle’s. The old farmhouses were built from the quarries one finds around the area. Up the hill on the left hand side of the palace, one can still find traces of the beginning of a new quarry which was somehow abandoned and never used.

“At *il-Latnija* there was also a deep well,” Ġużeppi was telling me. “A young man died in that well many years ago. He was a shepherd and he was tending the flock of one called *it-Tafaħ* who had a large flock. There are a lot of water troughs near the well so that shepherds could place water for their flock. A ram knocked him cold into the well and he drowned!”

Life

“My mother was Karmena Debono from Mellieħa,” told me Ġużeppi. “There were six

children in my family, and we used to live where your *zija Mari* had the oven. Our house was built on the site of the old oven. One of my brothers died in Australia in a traffic accident. He had earlier escaped death when the ship he was on caught fire in the middle of the Indian Ocean. There were about ten from Mellieħa, because many had to emigrate to find work... but they were picked up by a ship passing by and landed at Aden. They lost all their possessions, but only one person died.

“In the evening the most important thing was reciting the rosary together. Either we went up to the chapel in the castle, or we prayed at home. But children are always children, we played a lot, not taking things as seriously as the adults would have liked us to do! Selmun was full of children in those days, perhaps around seventy families with six or seven or ten children each! I remember at least ten to twelve boys of my age. But people went away to live in other places, or they emigrated to Australia. The old people died... The population of Selmun rather than growing, got always less and less.

During his primary school years Ġużeppi had to travel four times every day to and from school at Mellieħa. His mother Karmena always insisted that they took a particular shortcut at *l-Ibrażż*, cutting through the garigues to avoid traffic, even if so many years ago one would see a car passing by perhaps every hour! But she was so afraid of anything happening to them that she simply wanted them to take a longer shortcut.

“Until the war there were no more than four or five cars,” he said. “But there were about six trucks, however. They were always very busy because they worked with the services, supplying the British forces with sand to make concrete mixtures. They brought their sand from Mellieħa Bay! Mellieħa Bay was full of sand in those days. I still remember sand dunes all around, and the area was larger than it is today. There were so many sand dunes that you could not see the sea when you were among them! But if you keep taking daily truckloads of sand, then you have the scenes that we have today!

“And the mixing of concrete was always done manually!” he continued. “All trenches were cut manually by the picks, all foundations cut manually... all rock was cut slowly and manually!”

Ġużeppi was in the first group of youngsters from Mellieħa who was sent to a technical school at *Mrieħel*. He still remembers the hardships they had to go through because there was no transport and they walked all the way daily from Birkirkara to *Mrieħel*.

“It was not really a school...” he said. It was only a converted farmhouse. But we learnt English, Arithmetic, Engineering Drawing, woodwork... I

loved woodwork... there I spent four years.”

He started work at Msida with the furniture maker Arcidiacono, then several years in Gasan’s garage repairing cars. However he doubts whether he was ever able to repair a car in that garage.

“School is one thing,” he insisted with me, “but actual work is different! I worked for three years with Gasan, but then I became a postman and stayed a postman for forty whole years!”

Initially he was at the head office as a substitute, that is called for work only if there was any other postman absent.

“Eventually I was given a motor-bike, around 1950 something I think, and spent eighteen whole years with that. I had to cover a very large area with the motor-bike delivering letters. Just imagine, I had the area from *San Ġużepp tat-Tarġa* just beyond Mosta, then to Burmarrad, to *Wardija, Qawra*... the last building was a farmhouse pulled down to build the *Luzzu* restaurant. From there I went up to *San Martin* to deliver *The Times* to Sir Hannibal Scicluna every single day! And not only that! I had also to drive into *Għajn Tuffieħa*, then to deliver letters to the people who lived in the caves nearby, then to *Manikata... Miżieb* and then back again to *Xemxija*..”

The trip took Ġużeppi several hours everyday. Ġużeppi mentioned having to deliver letters to the ‘caves’. He refers to the caves one can see on the right hand side going into *Għajn Tuffieħa*, and we can conclude that there was still troglodytic activity in the area. Also one can notice the large number of people that still lived in the countryside as farmers in their farmhouses, today’s house clusters being confined solely to the village’s vicinity. *Xemxija* was still scantily populated with little houses and farmhouses at the top of the hill.

“That is not all!” Ġużeppi was saying. “The postman’s job was very tough in those days. There was then Selmun, Mellieħa and all the way to Armier and *Ċirkewwa*, and *Marfa*! Then they built the hotels and I had also to stop over at the hotels. And I had to do this every single day on my bike, irrespective of whether it rained or not! At *Manikata* there were many people in those days. And you must remember that I had to pick the post from *Valletta* and *St. Paul’s Bay*.”

All in all he considers himself lucky as he had only three accidents, crashing once into a bus and spending three weeks in bed. He knows the utility of the helmet, but he never wore it.

“I always had it on my handle bar... but would not like it on my head! Whether it rained or not, one had to deliver the post. Every single day. If it rained I just inserted my head through a cover resting on my shoulders, and that was that. Off you went uphill, downhill!”

The Band Club

Ġużeppi Bartolo is the President of the Imperial Band Club, and has been a committee member since 1956. That is a very long time of service, working consistently hard to achieve success. The band club is an integral part of the village life in Malta, and functions simply by sheer determination, dedication and belief in this cultural aspect of entertainment for the village festa.

“In order to be of service there is only one word that must be understood and followed,” advised Ġużeppi. His look was a curious mixture. He was simultaneously serious and stern, kind and understanding.

“Commitment,” he said. “Commitment.”

Then he just stopped. His thick fingers intertwined together. He looked at me as he would probably look during a meeting with his committee members to make sure that the word has sunk in effectively, and that during the silence that ensued it would have enough time to cling better to the listener.

“You need to have commitment,” he went on. “You need to understand that you must involve yourself and you must engage yourself as a duty to the common good. There is work to be done and you must do it. Initially I was simply crazy about fireworks, I still love fireworks. So long as it is done safely and with moderation, there is absolutely nothing wrong. We must avoid danger at all costs, but it is not right to build a house near a fireworks factory and then expect the factory to close down because of the residence! Permission should not be granted in the first place to build in these areas. Fireworks are beautiful... just go to the Grand Harbour when there are some festivities! Fireworks and hunting and other things are in us as a people and there should be ways and means to regulate these things with intelligence and moderation to accommodate everyone. We are able to prepare fireworks as no other nation perhaps. We win competitions, so why stop this tradition? We just cannot keep promoting the sun and the sea for tourism!

“Anyway, as a young man I used to frequent a lot of my friends who used to be involved in preparing fireworks. That is how I got caught in the band club actually! I simply wanted to help and found myself with some others in the committee. I was later appointed treasurer, and my mother was so worried because I was supposed to have money on my person! Poor soul! She was so worried because on the road to Selmun from Mellieħa there were no houses and you would not meet a single person at night!”

He used to play the euphonium, and was the

society’s treasurer for thirty two years. He always worked hard for the club, and always tried to push its ambitions as far forward as possible. He followed it to give concerts in cities in Italy, Tunisia and Germany. The concerts they gave abroad were always well received.

“Once we were in Germany and we were going to give a concert to the German community. There was a very big hall, it was a modern hall. And I was so tense wishing things would go perfectly well, and we make no mistakes. There were many important people, it was to be a Maltese night... but just twenty minutes before we started there were very few people. Suddenly, but exactly on time, the hall was filled with people. There wasn’t any place for the people left *outside!* Even the German compere turned out eventually to be actually a Maltese who had married a German who used to work with the radio *Deutschewelle!* Not only that but she happened to be the grandchild of peasants who lived in the old farmhouses at *Kalkara!*

The Last Word

“It is important to have one quality in this activity,” he said. “You must be accepted as you are by your family. Your wife must back you up. If your wife is not in resonance with the ambitions and the ideals that you have, then forget it! You will not be able to be happy. It is long hours and dedication. Your family will be in it as well. Also, you must love what you are doing and you must do what you are doing with responsibility. I ask myself, would it not have been better if I just did nothing and went relaxing under the Mediterranean sun? But I am happy with what I did.

“Sometimes I tell myself, blessed are those who do not feel pressed to do something, that is those who have no hobbies and no other interests in life,” he said finally.

“But I say this against my own feelings. Would not the world turn on its axis just the same with or without your little extra work? Of course it would! With or without human efforts, life goes on just the same! But if there were no extra efforts and extra interests, would these famous artists have existed? Musicians, writers, painters... What would have happened if many of them wanted to be rich and wanted to take life simply easy doing nothing?”

Then he stopped and looked at me. The characteristic wisdom of a humble, self-made man who managed to gain the respect of the society’s members for so long.

He asked, “Would life be so enriched without music and art?”