

**VALLETTA 450 SEMINAR – 25th October 2008**  
**Event organized by the Valletta Alive Foundation**

**PAPER**

**The Valletta Resident Community by Dr Antoine Cachia**

When I was presented with the opportunity to speak to you to-day I jumped at the idea because as a resident I have at heart the resident community which is very often disregarded when speaking of the city.

Over the years Valletta has progressively acquired the importance and world renown which it enjoys, and, recently, this is being felt with greater impact as is shown by the increasing number of visitors. To the casual visitor or the informed scholar, Valletta is a gem of a planned city with a profusion of baroque style buildings, impregnable from seaward with its high protective bastions. This is what you will find in any description both for a tourist visitor or for an in-depth study. Its history, culminating with the period of the Knights of St John and later with the British tradition, is paramount.

But for us there is another more important dimension – its residents.

Valletta was indeed intended to be the prime city in the Mediterranean region ever since 1566 when it was built. It is my conviction that this has been achieved. When Benjamin Disraeli visited Valletta in August 1830, on the recommendation of his friend, Lord Byron, he described Valletta as “a city of palaces built by gentlemen for gentlemen”.

It is my aim now to shed some light on these gentlemen, without of course forgetting the ladies, who now, the ladies and gentlemen, have the privilege of being the residents of this wonderful city. With all the beauty of its honey coloured baroque buildings oozing with history, it is its people who are the soul of the city, and we shall now discover what sort of life we enjoy.

The work done by the Valletta Rehabilitation Project, the pedestrianization of certain areas and new traffic and parking regulations evidence that the interests of residents have been taken into serious consideration. I have now however the brief to envisage how Valletta should be eight years on from the perspective of its resident community.

## The Valletta Villages

A period of eight years is, indeed, not a very long time. Our City, small as it is, will retain its villages. These villages are nothing new, same as in other larger cities which were not planned as such but proliferated into larger areas forming one large geographical unit. Friends of mine in London, for example, refer to the area they come from as “my village”.

In Valletta we have a similar notion as to distribution of areas. In the north side we have “id-due Ballii”, we then go round clockwise to Arcipierku, St Paul’s, Hastings area, Marsamxett, and the area where formerly there was the Mandragg. These villages have produced certain linguistic intonations particular to some of them, and also a spirit of competition as to social status.

It is interesting to note this varied linguistic intonation among residents living so close to one another. Although only a few blocks down to Marsamxett from the area where I live, the lengthening of vowels especially at the end of sentences coupled with a drawl identifies residents from this area. This is reminiscent of Professor Higgins in “My fair Lady”.

Communities living in these various “villages” have unhappily created a certain feeling of competition between them. The Mandragg area was the lowest area one could speak of. Now it has all gone, but the connotation still exists, although the area is now buried underneath Mattia Preti Square and is part of the core of Valletta. This competition is rapidly coming to an end with the rehabilitation of areas outside the core of the city. As this rehabilitation progresses I shall be happy to see this competition becoming a memory of the past.

## The Parishes

These villages are criss-crossed by the three parishes of St Paul, St Dominic and St Augustine each commanding a certain response and parochial loyalty which sometimes tends to be too exuberant in the celebrations of the titular saint.

Other religious celebrations include the Good Friday procession and the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. In the coming years I think we shall see a more united effort between the parishes to provide a common base both for the spiritual and social welfare of parishioners. This has already started and it will certainly progress in the next few years.

### Public meeting places

The churches in Valletta do not have a parvis where in the villages middleaged and elderly people meet to discuss their views away from home. However the alternative in Valletta is evidenced every morning and afternoon in Republic Street at the railings corner with St Lucia Street, and other meeting places, such as the steps of St Barbara's Church and the ruins of the old Opera House. I mention this because it is so intriguing seeing these men, always the same faces in each locality, and at specified times. Of course there are also the three gardens, Hastings Gardens, The Upper and The Lower Barracca. The Barraccas are a meeting place for mothers with young children.

Pride of place goes however to our Band Clubs. The magnificent building going down Republic Street on the left is "The La Vallette Band Club", and further down is "The King's Own Band Club, known as "The King's Own" for short. These are a haven for some of the residents and they are becoming popular also with tourists with the restaurants they are now offering. Of course there are a number of restaurants around Valletta, but only a couple of them are popular resorts with the resident community.

A new outlet which has now taken the place of tombola formerly played at street corners by women is the ever popular Bingo. Tombola at street corners was a hazard, as it was considered a game of chance and the players very often found themselves on the wrong side of the law. Now this has changed and we have the bingo parties. Frankly I have never been to any but I notice the local ladies dressed up for the evening to attend these games.

As an incorrigible romantic I would not like to see those men, whom I know, and who were boys when I was a boy changing their habits; and what about the ladies? Who am I to deny them a fling at their evening excitement?

### Population pattern

There has been a significant decrease in the Valletta population, a pattern which has progressed since the early 1950's. The overall population of Malta has been on the increase whereas the population of Valletta has followed a consistent downward pattern. At present the population of Valletta is around 6300, which is a fraction of what it was fifty years ago. Age-wise, Valletta is thought to consist of an ageing population. This may be so when one considers that the average age is 44. This is however surpassed by other localities such as Sliema, where the average age is 46.

This leads us to the housing situation. There is a number of big houses which by to-day's standards are uneconomical to run and maintain. In wintertime they are

a problem to heat, and in Summer they present the contrary problem. This is of course made more difficult with the rising costs of electricity and other services. Special rates for Valletta residents would help the resurgence of the City with greater attention to maintaining properties in a good state.

### Shopping

Residents have easy access to shopping in the main streets as well as in the daily open air market in Merchants Street which on Sundays and other feast days moves to St James ditch. Whether in the former or in the latter locality the Monti, as the market is known, attracts crowds and it seems it is there to stay.

### Sport

With regard to sport, football is our main activity and it is very encouraging to see our youngsters take part in the training sessions in the nursery just outside the City walls. This contributes to our consistent performance in the national league and there is no reason why this should not be maintained in the years to come. Our waterpolo and rowing teams have also a good standing.

### Behavioural patterns

We have here a very promising future. It is something we should look at more closely.

Our city is not immune to certain behavioural patterns which are the scourge of modern times. Such problems exist in all communities. I refer to petty and not so petty crimes, substance abuse, whether drugs or alcohol, usury, family problems, and other social problems which may arise. In this scenario when the dragon raises its head, all the community suffers. This is not something particular to our area, but as we have our fair share we are in the fortunate position that something has been done about it. The initiation of this process goes back three years. Three areas were chosen to be targeted:

1. children and youths, with reference to broken families, education behaviour and substance abuse;
2. the elderly , to offer a secure environment and neighbourhood watch and help in loneliness;
3. adults with social problems.

After my stint with the Valletta Local Council I am fully aware of the limitations, financial and otherwise, in which the Council operates. Of course, it is one of our democratic rights to grumble but I am afraid the Council receives more than its

fair share due mainly to the fact that certain counter-balancing achievements are not immediately known.

It was the Valletta Local Council hand in hand with Appogg which started the movement to tackle these social problems on a local level. This resulted in the creation of The Valletta Community Network supported by the three Valletta parishes and NGO's. These efforts in a relatively short time found the support of Government who have declared their support to invest in community services. This required a base from which to operate.

Some eighteen months ago a building has been identified in Melita Street corner with Old Mint Street as a one-stop-shop Community Centre. A joint agreement between Agenzija Appogg and the Valletta Local Council was signed and the service of a community worker was enlisted. Activities have already started in relation to the three social areas mentioned, and, what is interesting, is the consciousness that has been aroused that both private individuals and companies have started contributing to the success of this venture.

### Conclusion

We, residents of Valletta , have come a long way over the last decade. There has been a significant arousal of interest in all that is happening in the City.

Besides the traditional festivities, religious and otherwise, and the various cultural events, we are experiencing an intensive exposure to the glories of Valletta: witness the rehabilitation of buildings and streets, St James Cavalier as a centre of creativity, the Notte Bianca and Notte Magica in autumn and winter. In Summer we have just had another edition of Streets Alive.

But what has been done, although it augurs well for the future, is not enough. The Valletta Alive Foundation has assumed a big challenge. It has shown that it can be a prime mover to organise and pressurise action in the right direction.

However to keep Valletta alive we have to remove from it the face of death. I refer specifically to the ruins of the old Opera house, crumbling wooden balconies defying the law of gravity, disused shops with accessible fronts overflowing with litter, buildings both private and government owned crying for rehabilitation, and uneven street paving. Somewhere, somehow I feel there is either lethargy or lack of power to get things right.

We, residents, want to see all this done by the year 2016. We want to see responsible people with the will and the courage to act. An example has been set for us because we have seen how national issues were handled recently with courage and purpose and success was achieved or is in sight. We, residents,

want to see this spirit injected into our area so we can look with confidence to achieving our goals in the year 2016.

The Valletta Alive Foundation, under whose auspices all the events mentioned take place has emerged in the appropriate time when Valletta is experiencing this resurgence. All that is happening does not only add to the importance and regeneration of the City both physical and cultural; it is giving a new dimension to the City as a place well worth it to come and stay.

This is a consequence of events which have vindicated my personal pride of being, together with my wife, anchored residents of Valletta, virtually born and bred here. There is now an increasing indication that the exodus away from the City is being reversed, and I am sure we would all be happy to share the Valletta experience with our new arrivals.

Let us show them that the switch was worth it.

~~~~~