

The Gozo Channel Tragedy that Wiped Out Twenty-Three Lives

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It was six in the morning of Sunday, 31 October 1948, seventy-five years ago this year. In-Nanna Marija had been on her feet since the chimes of *il-Paternoster* from the parish church of St George, invited her out of bed at four o'clock to hurry to the five o'clock mass. It was a rather chilly morning.

Nanna's Family

After mass, Nanna took out the wicker basket tucked under her *ghonnella* and hurried to the butcher's shop to purchase a ratal of beef (0.79 kg) for the special Sunday dinner. At a time when there were no domestic refrigerators, it was imperative to buy meat just before cooking it for otherwise it could go rotten. *Ġanga bil-patata l-forn*, roast beef with potatoes Maltese style, was her favourite when all the family dined together on Sunday.

Nanna had a fairly large living family, two sons and five daughters. She had been widowed thirteen years previously and, initially, it was with utmost difficulties that she made ends meet. But things had lately changed for the better: her eldest son Salvu, a renowned trombone player with the *Il Leone* Band of Victoria, had emigrated to Detroit, Michigan, and he never forgot his mother. Pawla, her eldest daughter, helped at home and was second mother to her siblings. The dire situation took a good turn when three of the daughters Mananni, Ġużeppa, and Ġikka, had become teachers in quick succession. Ġużeppi, her younger son, born on 7 March 1923, formerly conscripted into the "C" Coy Tenth Battalion, KOMR, stationed at St Elmo, Valletta, during World War II, had started to work as a postman in Malta and was preparing to join his brother in Detroit where they planned to open a restaurant serving Maltese specialities. Ġorġa, the youngest, was establishing herself as a seamstress. Nanna could afford to buy meat.

Ġanni Zammit, alias *Ġanni ta' Qorru*, the butcher, looked rather worried that morning, a stark difference from his usual jolly self. News that a Gozo *luzzu*



Ġużeppi Xikluna in a digitally coloured photo taken for his passport in February 1948, eight months before he drowned. He was born on 7 March 1923, one hundred years ago this year.

had capsized the previous evening taking a load of passengers with it was penetrating and devastating every Gozitan household. The *Ġittadella* clock had just struck six, vividly remembered Nanna twenty-five years later, when for once in her lifetime she told me this tragic story. It immediately crossed her mind that her beloved Ġużeppi, who had promised her to be home for the long weekend, had not yet arrived.

An Appalling Ferry Service

On Saturday, 30 October 1948, the Gozitans who worked in Malta were more eager than usual to travel home. That weekend was unusually long. Monday, 1 November was a public holiday, the feast of All Saints.

Everyone was anxious to return to Gozo. They all had a family eagerly awaiting them; some wanted to embrace their wives and children after a six-day absence; more than one had their fiancées on tenterhooks; another had to stand as witness in the wedding of his sister the following morning; a Żurrieq resident was traveling to the Gozo Seminary to visit an orphaned seminarian whom he was wholeheartedly supporting.

They went to Pjazza Kastilja, Castille Square, Valletta, to board the Gozo bus at 3.15pm, the last of the day. At that time, the ferry operated only three round-trips a day, departing Mġarr, Gozo, at 6.15am, 1.00pm, and 4.00pm, returning from Marfa, Malta, at 7.45am, 1.45pm, and 4.30pm. During summer, it also operated a trip at 9.00am, returning from Marfa at 10.15am. Notwithstanding an unfavourable forecast – the sea was to develop a moderate swell from the south west (il-lbiċ) – according to the forecast in the *Times of Malta* – they hoped to make it home safe and sound.

Since 1 November 1947, the monopoly of the Gozo–Malta ferry service had been won by the company *Joseph Gasan*. It purchased a twin-screw motor yacht, the *Migrante*, to convert it for the channel crossings. After a botched-up modification, it started to operate between Mġarr, Gozo, and Marfa, Malta, but not for long. The Company was compelled to withdraw it from service as it failed to meet contract specifications. For months on end, the Company offered a haphazard and erratic service by mostly inadequate craft. The Police *Okkurrenzi* at the National Archives Gozo are replete with reports of cancellation of trips, especially the last crossing. And Gozitans frequently lamented the poor service in the correspondence columns of the *Times of Malta* and *Il-Berqa*, its Maltese counterpart. The Company had put back the Gozo ferry service by decades.

In October 1948, the conversion of the *Migrante* at the Malta Naval Drydocks had been put on hold. The Company lacked another boat and it was compelled to re-introduced it on the route before works were complete. To make matters worse, on Wednesday morning before that fateful Saturday, the *Migrante*, re-named *Banċinu* – but, as a matter of fact, still registered at Lloyds under the previous name – had

run into shallow water and remained struck there for twenty-five minutes.

On Saturday, 30 October, the captain of the *Migrante*, aware that its conversion had not been completed and, worse, that Wednesday’s damage had not yet been fully assessed, decided that the sea was too choppy for the last trip. On a Saturday of a long weekend, he decided to cancel the last ferry trip.

When the Gozo bus reached Mellieħa, it was common for the driver to stop in front of the police-station across the road to enquiry about the ferry service. The policeman duly informed him that the last trip had been cancelled.

No one, other than a Gozitan, going through this can understand, even remotely, the disappointment and frustration of a Gozo resident at such news. The driver decided to return to Valletta, however, the passengers wanted to proceed to Marfa just the same. They had paid the fare to Marfa, but the driver would not give in. It was not before they offered him a tip that he conceded to their request. Others had reached Marfa before them. There were twenty-five in all.

The Tragic Crossing

There was no shelter whatsoever at Marfa. The twenty-five huddled together by a rubble wall to shield themselves from sea spray. They still hoped to make it to Gozo. As had happened on a countless number of times in the past months, when the last ferry trip was cancelled, a Gozo boat would certainly come to their rescue.

Karmnu Grima *ta’ Hanini* from Qala and his assistant Salvu Refalo *ta’ Harbat* from Għajnsielem, alerted to the cancellation, sailed out of Mġarr with their *luzzu* to pick up the stranded passengers at Marfa. The *luzzu* is a sturdy carvel-built boat with a double-ended hull. Originally, equipped with oars and sails, it had been motorised by that time. The passage to Malta proved uneventful, but trouble cropped up upon arrival at Marfa.

A crew of two plus twenty-five passengers were too many for the boat. Karmnu insisted that he could not carry them all. He offered to take half of them

and return for the other half immediately afterwards. Yet, seemingly, few agreed to his proposal. Their laments and entreaties finally convinced the kind-hearted Karmnu to acquiesce to their request.

It was close to seven in the evening and pitch darkness when the moorings were loosed for Mġarr. There was no shelter whatsoever on the boat. Drenched to the skin with salty water, hungry and exhausted after waiting for over two hours in the cold, and shivering all over, the passengers huddled together from bow to stern hoping for the best. Leli Camilleri, a member of the Society of Christian Doctrine from iż-Żurrieq, the only Malta resident on the boat, began reciting the Rosary and beseeching a safe passage to the Blessed Virgin Mary of Ta' Pinu.

The captain decided to head towards Comino and turn around the island to shield the boat from the wind. The first part of the passage proved uneventful, but as the boat sailed past Comino, the wind started whipping up waves against it and it started to take water.

Karmnu became visibly anxious. He offered to disembark them in the nearby inlet of Hondoq ir-Rummien. He became afraid that with such a load he would not make it to Mġarr. Few were seemingly in agreement; many argued that it was not possible to reach home in pitch darkness from Hondoq at the tip of the village of il-Qala. Karmnu, once again, gave in to their wish and decided to take up the gauntlet. As they were sailing in a patch known as Taç-Ċawl, the boat took more and more water. The passengers panicked. The boat started going down. Those who have pitied with tearful eyes the fate of Leonardo di Caprio in the 1997 American epic romantic disaster film Titanic might conceive a remote picture of the rest. The shoreline was some fifty metres away.

The good swimmers tried to reach land. Those who did not know to swim clutched at others and augmented the tragedy. Ġużeppi, with the October salary well-tucked in his pocket, was a strong swimmer. He always won first prize in swimming competitions from *il-Banju tal-Isqof* to *il-Menqa* and back in Marsalforn. He was confident that he would make it to land.

Karmnu Attard, a sixteen-year-old teenager from Qala and the youngest person on board, was the first

to reach land. He knew the area very well and he sped up the steep hill from Hondoq to Qala, rushed inside the police station, and raised the alarm. Yet the Gozo police were neither trained nor had the means to deal with a disaster. They contacted the Royal Air Force and the British Navy in Malta, but help did not reach the spot until several hours later.

Four swam to safety. Ġużeppi was not one of them. A female passenger unable to swim – as witnessed by Pawlu Zammit, one of the four survivors – grasped him and dragged him to the bottom. Twenty-three, including the captain and his assistant, celebrated All Saints Day in the world beyond.



A card with the persons who perished circulated the following year in a failed attempt to collect funds for the families of the drowned.

My Name

As Nanna Marija heard the news at the butcher's shop, she began trembling with horror and sped home upset. She broke the news of the tragedy to her five daughters: "Who knows if our dear Ġużeppi was also there?" Two of them, Ġużeppa and Ćikka, sped to the police station, from where they were unceremoniously and pitilessly sent to the Victoria Hospital. The police, as it transpires from a number of reports, handled the affair in a very bungled manner, to say the very least. By ten in the morning, Nanna Marija knew through the survivor Pawlu Zammit that Ġużeppi was indeed there.

A few months later, Ġorga, her youngest daughter, married Anton and they named their first-born son Joseph. This tragedy had given me my Christian name.

It took fifty years to remember the victims of this tragedy. A monument was finally raised at Iż-Żewwieqa, off Mgarr, through the interest of the Ministry for Gozo and not without the endless encouragement of this writer. It was inaugurated on Sunday, 25 October 1998.



The monument at Iż-Żewwieqa with the names of the twenty-three persons who perished in the disaster.

Later on this year, on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the disaster, Joseph Bezzina will be publishing a commemorative researched book *TRAGEDY IN THE GOZO CHANNEL* in conjunction with GRDA – the Gozo Regional Development Authority. This book will provide a full background of the tragedy, a biography of the twenty-three who perished, and the inadequacy of the Gozo-Malta ferry service at that time. It will also, for the first time, analyse the Inquiry carried out by Magistrate G. F. Gouder upon the disaster, an inquiry recently unearthed at the National Archives of Malta.

Joseph Bezzina, born in Victoria, Gozo, is a graduate of the University of Malta and the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, from where he earned a first-class Honours doctorate in Church History. He was, for seventeen years, Head of Department of Church History at the University of Malta. In 1989, he founded the Gozo Section of the *National Archives*, which he directed until his retirement in 2020. During the same time, he was Assistant National Archivist. He is the author of close to eighty books and many studies published in English, Maltese, French, German, and Italian.