

# An Interview with Ann Monsarrat

MAURICE CAUCHI\*

## **When did you first come to Gozo?**

Nicholas and I came to Gozo for a week in October 1968, stayed at the Calypso Hotel in Marsalforn and immediately fell in love with the island.

## **What made you decide to come to Gozo in the first place?**

This is rather a long story. When I married Nicholas he was living in Canada, where he had been director of the UK Information Office, and he had recently bought one of the Thousand Islands in the St Lawrence River, a spectacularly beautiful area. The island was minute, with just room for a house, a boathouse and a few trees, but we both loved the isolation and being so closely surrounded by water. But the winters there, of course, were so cold that we could only enjoy it for a few months each year. So we began to search for a slightly larger island with a warmer climate on which we could live permanently. We first heard of Gozo from Professor Parkinson, of Parkinson's Law fame. He was a very sociable fellow, then building a holiday house for himself in San Pawl tat-Targa. Gozo, he told us, was very beautiful but far too quiet, no one could possibly live on it. It sounded exactly what we had in mind. We spent a week here looking at all kinds of properties but it wasn't until our last night that we were shown an old farmhouse in San Lawrenz which we both thought enchanting. Just a few hours before our departure, Nicholas signed the deeds by candlelight. The electricity had cut out all over the island, which was a quite a common occurrence then. Our lawyer was Dr. Anton Calleja, a delightful man. He and his sister, Maria, became our first Gozitan friends.

## **How has Gozo changed since you came here first?**

Well, happily, the electricity is now splendidly reliable. There used to be many shabby areas

and a general feeling of poverty. In the villages many houses were without electricity and for many families their only supply of water came from the village pump. America was still sending food parcels to the older inhabitants. Kerosene for cooking and light was delivered door to door by donkey cart. Children, especially the boys, left school at a very early age, often at ten or eleven, to help in the home and fields and many women rarely left the house except to go to church. Nicholas used to worry that the children had no fun and arranged for a conjurer to come over from Malta to entertain them at the annual San Lawrenz Christmas party. This was such an extraordinary novelty that many of the parents came to see him too. But really one shouldn't interfere. During one trick a small boy appeared to have been beheaded which caused tremendous consternation. It is very different now when so many families have television and there is a sense of real prosperity. There is also more compassion for the disadvantaged and fewer restrictions for the young. At festas when we first arrived, the girls all stood on one side of the square and the boys on the other, eyeing each other from a distance. Only the boys were allowed to follow the procession. However, there are several things I miss from those earlier, simpler days, like the great flocks of sheep and goats which rustled past the house every morning and evening and the donkeys, which pulled the ploughs and were for many the only means of transport. It was a much quieter island then.

## **How would you describe relations of 'expatriates' with the local population?**

They seem to me to be remarkably good. I don't know anyone who hasn't had a wonderfully generous welcome and made good Gozitan friends.

## **Are there enough facilities in Gozo to attract people from overseas to retire here?**

There certainly are for me and everyone else I know. There are excellent doctors and dentists,

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a very pleasant and efficient hospital, a wide range of shops and restaurants and there is certainly no lack of entertainment. Gozo has an extraordinary wealth of musical talent and great enterprise in putting on operas and concerts. It is often impossible to go to everything. And then there is an excellent cinema and library. The only thing I can think of which might be improved is the bus service. Both Gozitans and foreigners, especially those who no longer drive, might welcome smaller buses which ran more frequently.

**Do you involve yourself in any local activities, organisations, etc?**

I used to think that the best and probably only things foreigners should do was to donate money and encourage Gozitan enterprise and talent. It was with this in mind that I joined Wirt Ghawdex when it was revived a few years ago. I just wanted to give them some financial support but, since I had been a journalist in my youth, I was soon roped in to help with their publicity. It was a very exciting time. We got a lot done and I was very glad to have the opportunity to actually participate in doing something for the island.

**What would make Gozo more attractive to persons like yourself?**

I can't think of a single thing. I love it just as it is.

**Any comments relating to what makes Gozo different from Malta?**

Oh, the peace and the people. I enjoy Malta too, but compared with Gozo it is like going to the big city. There were only four ferries a day when we first came to live here and they were quickly cancelled at the slightest hint of a storm. Now, it is possible to enjoy both islands, but I still wouldn't want to live anywhere but in peaceful San Lawrenz. Gozo seems to me to be a very ancient patch of land, with its strange, flat-topped hills and deep valleys. Wandering along its goat-tracks one has a great sense of its history. I never tire of it.

**Tell us something about the working routine of your late husband?**

Nicholas was in the Navy during the Second

World War and, by the time I met him, he had curiously reverted to the naval regime of 'watches', four hours on duty and four hours off, though his timetable was rather more fluid than the Navy would have allowed. In Gozo he usually woke around 5 am, strolled round the garden, listened to several radio news broadcasts and then settled down to fair copy the two pages he had written the day before. He very rarely changed anything after that. He then began work on the next two pages before lunch and, after a four-hour siesta, worked again before and after dinner. He was extremely disciplined and had the whole book in his head before he began writing it. He did jot things down in notebooks during the planning stage but it was all very minimal. He was fortunate in never being short of ideas and he never took a holiday until he had written the first paragraph of his next book.

**Tell us something about what you yourself have been doing, writing etc.**

Well, I have been writing bits and pieces for guidebooks to Malta and Gozo and a chapter on the deity of the islands' amazing neolithic temples for a book, covering all aspects on Malta's prehistory. Daniel Cilia, a Gozitan of course, has been the prime mover in this and has taken many superb photographs for it. However, I haven't really been doing much writing since I had what I consider to be the very great honour of being put on the board of St James Cavalier in Valletta. It is a wonderful place, a showcase of all the arts. It has been a great experience seeing it establish itself so quickly. It means that I have been in Malta more than usual but I am still always delighted to drive onto the Gozo ferry and head back home. And, having lived here for thirty-four years now, more than half my life, I certainly do consider Gozo as my home.

**What are your plans for the future?**

To continue enjoying Gozo and one day, I hope, to finish writing a book for which I still have to do a great deal more research.