

Censu TABONE

THE MAN AND HIS CENTURY



Henry Frendo

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Published by
*M*altese *S*tudies
P.O.Box 22, Valletta VLT, Malta
2000

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‘Irridu naslu biex meta nghidu “ahna”,
ebda persuna ma thossha eskluża
minn taht il-kappa ta’ dik il-kelma.’

Ċensu Tabone,
Diskors fl-Okkażjoni tal-Ftuh tas-Seba’ Parlament,
4 April 1992

Many faces

A FULL LIFE

ĊENSU Tabone is a household name in Malta. And for good reason, too. Today, most people remember him as ‘il-President’. But for many years one of the country’s leading eye doctors, he was ‘Tabone tal-ġhajnejn’. In the 1950s, when the first clashes between Mr Dom Mintoff’s first administration and the Maltese doctors began, as a union leader he became ‘Tabone tat-tobba’.

Tabone and Mintoff would sit on opposite sides of the House for the best part of half-a-century – the two eldest, outstanding politicians of the 20th century who have made it into the new millenium. Ironically Tabone, like Mintoff, had a father from Gozo and a mother from Cospicua. Ċensu’s father Kolinu hailed from Rabat (Victoria), whereas Mintoff’s father Wenzu was from the small village of Ghasri. Their mothers, Lisa and Ċetta, were both ‘Bormlizi’. An intriguing potion.

Contrary to popular belief, Dr Tabone, unlike Mr Mintoff, has *not* been a politician for most of his life. When he first sought election to office in 1962, he was nearly fifty years old. He did not become an MP and thereafter a Minister, until four years later, in the fifth – and last – Borg Olivier administration. Mintoff, who is three years younger, was only 19 years old when he became the Malta Labour Party’s general secretary after a stint as an official of the Cospicua Labour Party club. Soon after

his return from England in 1944, when he became the party's deputy leader, he was 28. Whereas Tabone left active politics in 1989 when he became Head of State for a five year term, Mintoff fought on until in 1998 he brought down the one-seat majority Labour administration led by Dr Alfred Sant by voting against the proposed Cottonera development project. Except for his foray to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar followed by a spell in Britain during the Second World War, and although he certainly kept his architect's practice going, Mintoff was a politician through and through, spending his entire life in advocacy, agitation and militancy.

Ċensu 'the politician' would be, and had already been, other things besides that. He was first an army doctor. That was at a propitious moment when the Second World War broke out and, in 1940, just as the bombs started falling down on the Maltese Islands in what was probably the most demanding and devastating time within living memory. In the following decade, Ċensu's calling was a still more challenging one, taking him as a pioneering surgeon not just to his beloved Island of Gozo but to the far corners of the earth in the fight against a widespread blinding disease: trachoma. In the meantime, 'Ċensu' was a pupil at St Aloysius College in the 1920s; an undergraduate at the University of Malta and its Medical School in the 1930s; then a post-graduate student seeking and obtaining specialization as an ophthalmologist in the United Kingdom; he became a husband, a father and a family man – like his own parents with several mouths to feed.

As a politician, Ċensu would attain the highest offices, the most prestigious overseas one probably being that of Chairman of the Committee of Ministers, one which Mintoff had filled, quite differently, a decade before him, in Strasbourg. His last appointment was also his highest, as Malta's Head of State, one which Mintoff may well have coveted, in his case unsuccessfully. There were various other positions, mainly party ones, in the run-up to these. Yet Ċensu is reputed always to have remained close to the grass-roots, generally approachable and affable, staunchly guarding his own principles and opinions but moving up and down the social scales with an innate simplicity and ease, from the convent to the band club to the *fešta* in the Sacro Cuor parish enclave

and similarly elsewhere, so that many today might still regard him, as ‘the people’s President’; and certainly there, in the Sliema-St Julian’s area, which became his ‘heartland’ of a lifetime. In a front-page tribute after a year in office as President, *The Democrat* had actually called him that.

In the history of the Nationalist Party, in 1987 Ċensu Tabone became the first Foreign Minister not to hold office simultaneously as the Prime Minister (Dr Fenech Adami). When the Nationalists returned to office after a full sixteen years in Opposition – in what was frequently an unpalatable neocolonial context of internecine, even bloody rivalry and conflict – Ċensu was the only one in the new Cabinet team to have previously served as a Minister and been exposed to a stint of Cabinet government. He was thus a living symbol of continuity with the Borg Olivier era, one which however he would also see actively being brought to an end during the internal, generally ‘hushed’ but very tense leadership struggles of the 1970s.

More importantly, in the historic year 1989, as the Berlin Wall fell down and Communism and the Cold War with it, Ċensu became the first ‘Nationalist’ President of Malta. Here, as elsewhere in Europe, that marked a difficult and a delicate turning-point in contemporary history. Malta and her people slowly but surely yearned and indeed sought to leave behind them the *anni di piombo* associated with the worst aspects of Mintoffism: the roaming armed thugs from campus to curia, from club to printing press, the unwarranted police shootings and tear gas; the overly protectionist bans on imported chocolate and toothpaste, colour television sets and computers, in favour of such fanciful old-time recipes as *gulepp* or a *kappar* industry; the ban on making use of the words ‘Malta’ and ‘nation’ and their derivatives without prior government authorisation, causing newspapers, shops and even books to change name or title... Pugnacity and adversity also served however, in *angst* and *catharsis*, as a nation-building exercise: this saw a winning of internal rights and freedoms through a more home-grown political experimentation, communal solidarity, social democratisation, as well as a raised, if sometimes highly controversial, self-awareness regionally and internationally, with an adduced ‘republican’ slant.

As the Nationalist Party's Secretary General, then its first Deputy Leader, as a constituency MP for the Sliema and St Julian's area during 23 long years, as a Minister in different portfolios and as a parliamentarian in government and in opposition in Malta and overseas, Ċensu was one of those who most valiantly fought against abuse and excess – even as, by virtue of age and a shared generational resonance, he seemed to strike a chord in Mintoff's responses, or so he felt. Having a devout Christian social conscience, he would have applauded socially beneficial reforms, of which there then was a bonanza of sorts. Surprisingly perhaps, at times he or others in his circle would have been closer to Mintoff's party on certain 'nationalist' issues, such as, for example – during the seminal and historic Independence debates of the early 1960s behind closed doors at party headquarters – whether or not the Maltese national flag ought to retain the George Cross. Or indeed as to how far Malta's joining of the European Community should be pursued as a political goal and platform without due reassurance and persuasion (certainly not without Ċensu being duly reassured and persuaded first).

Ċensu was the first President of Malta to be officially boycotted by the Opposition (then led by Dr Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici). He was also the first one ever to be asked – as his constitutional term was coming to an end in 1994 – to stay on, by that same Malta Labour Party in Opposition, albeit now under a different leadership.

There is more, much more, to this man's exciting life and what it has meant. It spans almost a century, the last of the second millenium after Christ, and it ventures into the next. Born in Victoria, Gozo, before the First World War, Ċensu's life experiences and careers, his beliefs and ambitions, his foibles and fortunes, his failures and achievements express and sometimes mirror the twentieth century (not just in Malta), engaging it as if in a dialectic. At one end they embrace the nineteenth, at the other end the twenty-first.

International institutions which would allow Ċensu and other Maltese new spaces in which to operate, such as the Council of Europe and the

United Nations, including the World Health Organisation, were symptomatic of the post-war world. Others, such as the British Medical Association and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, went well beyond the parameters of 'colonial service' or tutelage. This life thus spans many contrasts, typical of the twentieth century, from concerns with infant mortality, blindness and mass emigration to elderly care, climate control and bioethics; the changing *raison d'être* of trade unions from past militancy to greater partnership in a welfare state; from a want of easy transportation or information to rampant pollution endangering the ozone layer and the search for new sources of energy; from the difficulty of getting a telephone installed or water in the tap to the revolution in communications with its attendant media hype and syphoning-off; from colony to nation, dependent to inter-dependent, nations to regions, citizenships across frontiers; the power dialectic in politics, leadership constraints and styles *vis-à-vis* the mobilised party machines and faithfuls; crises in faith, morals, family relations and perhaps a surge in the attempted re-interpretation of meaning while galloping secularisation and consumerism do battle on the stage of modernity and post-modernity. Internationally too, it is a life which coincides with a sea-change, 1989 being probably the most significant year since 1945, and 1918 before it, largely putting paid to the ideological-military divide in Europe and most of the world, suggesting a new beginning. These social, cultural, religious, political, economic, international and sometimes intimately personal threads converge in the multifold experiences of a very full lifetime.

This here is Censu's story – his and ours. It is as during scores of personal interviews lasting some 450 hours, two transcripts,¹ and several other exchanges mainly between 22nd February 1995 and now, I have come to see it and to value it. These encounters took place mostly at his modest residence, a homely terraced house with a little garden (and with an old 'Verbum Dei Caro Factum Est' placard dangling precariously on the electricity meter to the left as you ring the sonorous door-bell on the

¹ I wish to record my gratitude to Mr Mario Ellul and Mr Christopher Pollacco for their assistance in revising and typing a second version of many of the original transcripts from the recorded interviews, as well as to my sons Benjamin and Oliver for their help with scanning illustrations and other computer wizardry, to my wife Margaret, as usual, for her forbearance and encouragement. For other 'credits' see my bibliographical note at the end.

right) in 33, Strada Carmine. This is a narrow hilly street into which you turn at right angles (and at your peril), it being a blind corner steeply up from St Julian's Bay. I would sometimes find him, an octogenarian, always with a ready smile, fixing a clock or a fan, or experimenting on his scanner and ink jet printer. He has so many papers piled on top of each other in three rooms that we did not know where to begin; sometimes he would get certain letters and exchanges, secretively and hesitantly, which he would show me but initially refuse to give me. We did manage to unload from boxes tucked in one corner of his den, dozens of photo albums, some of which had never even been opened before.

Dr Tabone – some still address him as 'Your Excellency' – relished unscrambling the past, reminiscing and often bringing little known facts and events to life, sizing up people, sometimes in self-justification, at other times in self-doubt, and looking ahead, fortified by faith and blessed by the maturity of a ripe age. Indulging in controversial issues he would get all heated up, although he has not lost a sense of humour; but he seemed to relive the past and occasionally spoke to me, I rather felt, as if I were the party congress, not to say the Speaker of the House or a television camera, trying to ensure that he did not leave anything out, stressing the point forcefully but just as naturally. I wondered if a biographical rendering of such a varied life-long career was not an expurgation. The more one rose above the personal and the petty, the parochial and the partisan inherent in our 'national' context, history became a healer, a moderator, a reconciler, particularly when a person's humanity shone through all the official claptrap.

At home there was always Āensu's charming and hospitable wife Maria, a behind-the-scenes political analyst in her own right, ever ready with her mouth-watering culinary concoctions – in five years and more, never a coffee unaccompanied by some home-made goodie.

An instructive '*festschrift*' for Āensu without, I hope, any eulogistic streak, this is also a sharing of memories for all those who have known him or known of him, those who have worked with or for him in one capacity or another, or indeed voted for him, or against him, and for all those who have actually lived these times intently, or at least heard about

them from elders. Many of Ćensu's recollections, as these emerged in response to my probing, constitute a font of historical worth in their own right, in ways not strictly or primarily related to himself as a person: he was a witness. Given the frequently bewildering historical illiteracy so characteristic of our schooling and education policy in Malta still today, the fleeting 'mass media' images and cast messages in an age of the computer and the internet, and the emargination of intellect and talent from policy making and delivery by 'closed circuit' power politics, this biography may also serve as an initiation bearing on what has gone into the making of civil society, nationhood and statehood during the twentieth century, with some pointers at the resolution of endemic problems. That for the benefit too, I trust, of those who may never have heard of Ćensu Tabone, or of the world into which he was born.

I should say finally that this is not a conventional history; it certainly is not written from an ivory tower. Never before have I found myself writing a book about a person who is still alive. Much of it cuts close to the bone, especially in the later chapters; it touches the living as much as the dead. In a still secretive society or community wherein *omerta*' is not unknown, it is right and laudable that people should have it in them to speak out; that includes ex-politicians, if they have something to say. Ćensu does. I apologise for any personal offence, never intended, and I promise to make amends as necessary, if necessary, if any of the facts stated are demonstrably wrong. Opinion is free. I remember Andrei Amalrik being almost slighted when in 1978 I had referred to him as "an historian". I am also "a writer", he had told me; "I prefer to be described as a writer." Indeed, his *Will the Soviet Union survive until 1984?* was about past and future in one gulp. Not simply 'Orwellian', it was even Nostradamus-prophetic considering that Gorbachev came to power in 1985. (I remember finding – and buying – in 1984 a copy of that book, first published in Russian in 1969, at the Khartoum Hilton's bookshop, of all places; it must have been out of print.) That is not the case with this far more modest, unpretentious, non-prophetic personal-style biography; it will not sell in Khartoum. Still, I have tried not to emulate Louis de Bernières' dentist, Dr Iannis, in his attempts at writing 'The New History of Cephalonia':

...it seemed to be impossible to write it without the intrusion of his own feelings and prejudices. Objectivity seemed to be quite unattainable, and he felt that his false starts must have wasted more paper than was normally used on the island in the space of a year. The voice that emerged in his account was intractably his own; it was never historical...²

Henry Frendo
University of Malta
18th November 2000

² Louis de Bernières, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (Vintage, Lond., 1999; first published by Secker & Warburg, 1994), p. 4.

First Sight

A CHILDHOOD IN GOZO

AS place and date of birth tend to mark an individual for life, it is important to see what world 'Čensu' was born into.

Vincenzo Tabone uttered his first howls as a new-born babe at the family home in Victoria, Gozo, early in the year 1913. The son of a Gozitan doctor and a Cospicuan mother, he rammed his way through on the 30th day in March, an Aries.

His father, Nicolo', was known as 'Kolinu'. His mother, Elisa, was the daughter of Antonio Calleja, a legal procurator who made a career as a police inspector. Although the Callejas hailed from the harbour town of Cospicua on the main island, Čensu's father-in-law had been stationed in Gozo on police duties at the turn of the century. By force of circumstance he and his family thus became Gozitan, as it were. Most of his children actually got married in Gozo. Elisa's parents eventually went to lodge with Čensu's parents at the family home in Victoria. Space and goodwill permitting, that was an extended family practice not so uncommon in those days.

A staunchly Catholic and typical couple in the slow-moving rural and insular environment of Gozo, the Tabones had no less than ten children. The first born, Anton, died after a year; he was followed by Maria (later Gulia Millard), the eldest of the daughters; and by a 'new' Anton, the

eldest of the sons, who would become a doctor and endear himself to the Gozitan community where he came to be fondly known and remembered as ‘il-principjal’.³ Then came Olga (who became a nun with the Sisters of Charity and spent much of her life in France); Janie (later Pace);⁴ Josie;⁵ Victor (“Totò”), who became a doctor and got married (to Simone Vadala’) but passed away at the age of 34; and Helen, who also died at a young age. Then came Karmelina, who married a sanitary inspector, Victor Ullo Xuereb, and survives him – a ninety year old widow living in Sliema. Finally, on 30th March 1913, number ten arrived: Ċensu. Being the youngest of the lot, and his father Kolinu having been the penultimate child of five siblings, the difference in age between Ċensu and his paternal grandmother, Giuseppina De Gaetani, was remarkable.

Giuseppina De Gaetani, who died at the age of 89, was remarkable in other ways. Ċensu has childhood memories of her which he recounts with affection as he tries to piece the parts together. The De Gaetanis had come to Malta in the mid-19th century when, as Garibaldi fought the Bourbons during the Risorgimento in the then Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, several would-be Italians from both camps had sought refuge in Malta. It was held in the family that granny Giuseppina’s father had been the Mayor of Riposto, a coastal village off the eastern Sicilian town of Giarre, between Catania and Messina. The Mayor of Riposto would thus have been Ċensu’s *buznannu*, his great-grandfather. In fact it seems he wasn’t, although he may have been involved in the municipality in other ways. I have checked the list of Mayors of Riposto from 1842 onwards and his name does not appear in it. I did discover that another family who settled in Malta from Riposto, probably at about the same time, was the

³ The Speaker, his namesake Anton Tabone, who served as the first Minister for Gozo, is his son.

⁴ Ġiġi Pace, her husband, was the brother of Gozo’s bishop. The singer ‘Ray Ritardo’, popular in the 1960s, was one of their children.

⁵ On Josie, who married another Tabone, see below; the accountant Joe Tabone, who chaired the Bank of Valletta and then Air Malta, is his son.

Miceli, some of whose members were prominent in the life of that harbour town during the Risorgimento.⁶

In Malta, the transplanted De Gaetani family lived originally in Strada Federico, Valletta, to one side of the then Governor's Palace. Guseppina, who became a Tabone and ended up in Gozo, where she spent all her married life and lies buried, had trouble speaking Maltese. In order to cope she had developed a Sicilian-Maltese *patois* which as children the Tabones found greatly amusing, to their father's chagrin. But what Ċensu recalls most fondly is Guseppina's *torta tal-kavatelli*. This was a traditional Christmas speciality, at least in the large Tabone family, before the English Christmas pudding took over. Ċensu's wife Marija still does half-a-dozen of these pastries every Christmas, a peculiarly delicious variety of black honey rings cooked in the form of a tart.⁷ Apparently in Sicily this sweet has continued to be known as "torta Siciliana". In return for one jar of dark brown honey delivered to the Tabone household, the bee keeper would get a *torta tal-kavatelli*.

Ċensu's family home was in Victoria's main street, Strada Corso ("Triq it-Tigrija"), named after the horse and donkey races that took place there during certain festivals. It was a large and centrally located house with a garden just opposite the Bishop's Palace, close to the main square and below the Citadel. It only left the family in 1963, shortly after the mother

⁶ See Santi Correnti, *Riposto nella storia, nell'arte e nella vita del suo popolo* (Tringale Editore, 1984), esp. 'Elenco dei sindaci dal 1842 al 1985', p. 187. I am grateful to Mr Anthony (Nini) Miceli Farrugia for lending me a copy of this book. Santi Correnti makes no reference to the De Gaetani family. The Mayor of Riposto never answered my query to him, in Italian, about them. My paternal grandmother, the wife of Dr Enrico ('Hennie') Frendo, was also a De Gaetani, from the same family.

⁷ "Tikkonsisti filli taghmel strixxi twal ta' ghagina sfiljurata u mbghad qabel ma ssajarhom taq-tagghom biċċiet b'sikkina u taqlihom fiż-żejt. Dan l-ahhar il-mama' kienet taghmilhom fil-form, imma Marija taqlihom fiż-żejt. Imbghad meta jkunu lesti, tpoġġihom fuq karta xuga, dari karta taz-zokkor, biex iż-żejt ma jibqax fuqhom; taghmilhom l-ghasel iswed u tghaqqadhom forma ta' torta... qaghqa tal-kavatelli... Ghasel iswed ikun, kannella skur hafna... iġibulna flixkun wiehed fis-sena, flok thallsu, taghmillu torta." See also 'Maria Tabone's Recipe for Kavatelli' in Vanessa Macdonald, 'The Tabone's – A Couple for all Seasons', *Tune-In*, Dec. 1995, p.45.

died. She actually died, at the age of 94, on Ċensu's birthday: he was 50. The Tabone residence was purchased (for eight thousand pounds) by Gozo's long-established La Stella Band Club, which transformed it into a theatre, a cinema, serving on occasion even as an opera house.

Life in the Tabone household at the end of the 19th century and during the first decades of the twentieth century was fairly representative of a large middle class family bent on raising the children as uprightly as possible and giving them as good an education as possible – and equally bent on making ends meet. That this was not easy may be gauged from some manuscript sources that have just come to light. These show that – unknown to Ċensu – a year after he had graduated as a doctor his would-be father had been trying to emigrate. Kolin sought a job in the colonial service, preferably on the island of St Lucia, as a “Colonial Assistant Surgeon”, that is a government medical officer, for which there was a vacancy. His brother Toto' worked there, he had a career post in the Colonial Medical Service. But if not there, Kolin was prepared to go, he wrote, to “any other West India Colony”.⁸ He was “anxious, if possible, to obtain the vacant situation, thus bettering his personal condition.” He was moreover “tolerably acquainted with the English language.”⁹ As his medical practice in Gozo was most sought after and something of a rarity in those days, the colonial authorities were not prone to let him go at all readily. He was considered “proficient” and “fit” to fill the vacancy in question, and “deserving of every encouragement for his resolution to improve his position by emigrating to another British colony...”, but, the Assistant Secretary deemed it his duty to advise the Acting Chief Secretary that “should he be successful in obtaining the appointment sought for, I anticipate great embarrassment for securing the services of another medical man to substitute Dr Tabone.”¹⁰ In his petition, sent from the

⁸ de Petri/Holland, 22 Nov. 1887, Malta n. 280, National Archives, vol. 20, May 1887-Sept. 1888. I am grateful to Mr W. Zammit for having alerted me to this original correspondence.

⁹ Tabone/Simmons, Nov. 1887, enc. Trapani/de Petri, 3 Nov. 1887, Lt. Gov. files. National Archives, n.13030, 1887.

¹⁰ Min., Trapani/de Petri, 3 Nov. 1887, *ibid*.

Civil Hospital, Gozo, Tabone described himself as “Resident Assistant Medical Officer” at that hospital.¹¹

His salary, however, was small, particularly when he had to raise a family. Clearly he would feel the pinch; he was financially uncomfortable. After some time he was made a District Medical Officer. Although that did not augment his income much, it may have served as a palliative.

The son of a court registrar, Dr Nicolo’ Tabone had graduated as a medical doctor in 1886 and started off on a line for a “Resident Medical Officer in the Charitable Institutions at Gozo” on 1st October of that year.¹² Having remained in Malta, Nicolo’ sought repeatedly to obtain the vacant situation of District Medical Officer for Caccia and Xeuchia. In another such application in 1892, six years after his attempt to emigrate, he noted that his salary was £40 a year for duties at the Hospital, and £5 a year for duties in the Ospizio, besides rations and quarters. Although he was allowed private practice, he added, the profits accruing therefrom were “insignificant”. It was perhaps for this reason that “District Medical Officers in Gozo have always been granted an allowance of £10 per annum.” His salary, he complained, was “by far inferior to that of the Resident Medical Officer of the Lunatic Asylum and of the new Ospizio at Imghieret”, who were in receipt of an annual salary of £70, besides rations and quarters. He humbly begged that his salary be raised to the same rate.¹³ De Petri supported the application “the more so that he is frequently called upon to take charge, together with his ordinary duties, of Medical Districts in the absence of any of the

¹¹ See also the covering note to the petition, Tabone/Trapani, 1 Nov. 1887, *ibid*.

¹² He was one of eleven who became doctors that year, the others being Alfonso Agius, Antonio Borg, Salvatore Cassar, Francesco Debono, Giovanni Gulia, Francesco Saverio Licastro, Enrico Meli, Emanuele Muscat Fenech, Guglielmo Naudi and Guglielmo Rapinet. Six graduated in jurisprudence: Luigi Camilleri, Giovanni Caruana, Giuseppe Cremona, Vincenzo Frendo Azzopardi, Ruggero Leone Ganado and Agostino Vella. Education Office rep., 7 Aug. 1886, n. 8204, vol. 55, 1886, *ibid*.

¹³ Tabone/Smyth, 3 Dec. 1892, *ibid.*, n. 12176, vol. 82 (1892).

only two District Medical Officers in Gozo.” In further justification, he concluded that were Tabone to resign his post in order to better his position, the Government would find it “extremely difficult to appoint a successor.”¹⁴ Not long afterwards, Tabone was appointed “2nd Class DMO doing duty at Xeuchia, Sannat and Caccia”. From the 1st October 1894 he became entitled to the increment of £5 to his salary, having always performed his duties satisfactorily and shown “great interest for the service”.¹⁵ As a ‘DMO’ to Xewkija and environs, Tabone was the first one for this district. After that, he returned to the Victoria Hospital, this time as a Superintendent, where he replaced Dr Bartolomeo Mercieca, Sir Arturo’s father.

Apart from the St Lucia doctor,¹⁶ two other brothers were chemists, Anton with a pharmacy in Pjazza San Franġisk, Victoria, and Nanuri who worked for donkey’s years at the Economical Dispensary in Kingsway, Valletta. It was with the latter that Ċensu’s elder siblings lodged when they moved to Malta for educational purposes. In Gozo, Kolinu was the first to start surgical interventions in what was then “a cottage hospital”. Payment for a visit in private practice was one shilling (the equivalent of today’s five cents). Frequently he would get an additional payment or compliment in kind – a dozen eggs, or a dozen *gbejniet*.

Every doctor kept a chicken pen. When the chickens became too numerous Mrs Tabone would trade them in with a young vendor, one nicknamed “tal-Mazz”. In between his Xewkija and Victoria postings, Kolinu had gone to England to read some pathology and surgery, one of the first Maltese doctors to do so before the Great War.

¹⁴ Min., De Petri/Smyth, 3 Dec. 1892, *ibid*.

¹⁵ On 2nd Oct. the Asst. Secretary to Government at Gozo recommended to the Chief Secretary, Count Gerald Strickland, that the payment of Tabone’s increment be authorized. N. 1894 (2839/Gozo), vol. xix, Freemantle, 1894.

¹⁶ His son, an architect, emigrated to South Africa.

An exemplary and upright man, the father did not believe in spanking the children: a mere look would be enough to admonish and set things right. He took charge of everything and his presence at home was always a reassuring one.¹⁷ He was what might be called a kind-hearted disciplinarian, to whom everyone deferred. When he came back home from the hospital in the early afternoon he would stop the children shouting at play to have a little snooze. “Shout quietly”, he used to tell them (*aghajtu bil-mod*). As a kid, Ċensu found this “unjust”.

Mrs Tabone was fully occupied as a housewife and a mother. She spent practically the whole day in the kitchen from morning till night. After going to church she would wake up the children and then proceed to the kitchen from where she would not re-emerge before lunchtime, cooking for long hours on the stoves (*kuċinieri*). She was an expert at utilising eggs and *ġbejniet* to the best advantage in her cooking, because that was what her husband frequently got instead of his one shilling fee. She could perfect “a seamless ravioli the size of a quail’s egg”. A great cook, she was not one prone to go assiduously by the recipe. When a meal turned out to be really delicious she would say: “see, I did not stick to the recipe!”¹⁸

As was the custom, she used to tie up beef olives with a thread, but she would occasionally forget to remove it before the food was served. Father would make a joke of this by standing on a kitchen chair, holding up the end-piece of thread in his *braġiola* and unwinding it, pretending to measure its length. Understandably the children thought this funny. She didn’t.

She also loved pets. There were always dogs and cats around to gobble up left-overs. A quiet and simple life, this was not untypical of the family-oriented tradition in the Maltese Islands as a whole.

Tragedy struck in October, 1922. The well-respected, hard-working father suddenly fell ill and died soon afterwards. A heavy cigarette

¹⁷ “Il-papa’ kollox hu kien. Il-presenza tieghu kienet timla’ dar.”

¹⁸ “Ara, ma żammejt x id-doża!”

smoker, he died of lung cancer, when he was barely past his forties. Apart from other sentimental considerations, he was the only family bread-winner. The eldest of the male children and the first to follow in his father's footsteps, Anton had just graduated as a medical doctor one week earlier. Another brother, Josie, was constrained to get a quick job as a storekeeper at the government hospital to help out. Ċensu, the youngest, was 9.

The father's sudden loss in 1922 was a big blow to this household's young family, and indeed to the island of Gozo. It was a difficult childhood, with the widowed mother having to cope with (somehow) raising so many children largely on her own. When the widows of civil servants started to get a pension in 1926 – “the first social law in Malta”, Ċensu insists passionately, “was enacted by the Mifsud-Mizzi administration” – Mrs Tabone started to get an *ex gratia* payment of three pounds a month. She thought she had struck it rich: “ghax issa ghandi l-pensjoni!”

She lived the rest of her life in Gozo, where she also had a sister, Ċikka Masini (“Ċikka taghna”), who lived down the road. Further down there lived Mrs Ġeneż Xuereb whose husband had been a storekeeper at the hospital in Kolinu's time. The mother of Mgr Carmelo Xuereb, the Vicar General Emeritus, “is-Sinjura Ġeneż” used to make a dress for Elisa's children every now and again, after Kolinu had passed away. Next door, there was a twin sister, “iz-zija Żeż”. Thus comforted, the widowed Elisa Tabone *née* Calleja lived in the same house up to the venerable age of 94.

The Calleja side of the family was not less interesting than the Tabone one. Ċensu's mother was the twin sister of Tereža whose son, Ġoġ Pisani, became well known as a leading Maltese patriotic poet and literary pioneer who believed in a “Malta Maltija”.¹⁹ A journalist,

¹⁹ See for example his poem dedicated to Mikiel Anton Vassalli in T. Cortis (ed), *Antologija ta' Versi Patrijottiċi* (Valletta, 1989), p.106:
Dalwaqt jisbah jum ġdid, jum kollu dija,
U ssehh, missier, il-holma tieghek kbira:
Malta fil-lsien u l-qalb, Malta Maltija.

teacher, playwright and ardent propagator of the Maltese language, literature and culture, some of Pisani's poems would be learnt, memorised and recited as "homework" by generations of schoolchildren. Born in Gozo in 1909, Ġorġ was four years older than his cousin Ċensu. As youngsters they would become bosom friends.²⁰

Apart from Ġorġ Pisani, the Calleja family came to have another claim to fame. This was the celebrated Hollywood actor Joseph Calleja, who after a good stint on Broadway was contracted in 1935 by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. In a colourful and varied film career spanning over three decades until 1963 he played several leading and secondary roles in as many as 56 films, ranging from *Algiers* to *Father Damian* to *The Gorilla*, and from *Marie Antoinette* to *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *Valentino*. He starred with leading actors and actresses including Jean Harlow, Norma Shearer, Ingrid Bergman, Rita Hayworth, Hedy Lamarr, Gary Cooper, Spencer Tracy, Charles Boyer, and won the American Critics' Award in 1938 for his role in *Algiers*. Initially using his mother's maiden name of Spurin on stage before adopting 'Calleia', Joseph was the nephew of Ċensu's mother, her brother's son. Born in Rabat, Malta, in 1897, Joseph emigrated to England in 1914 at the age of 17, just as Europe was going to war and badly needed some verve. Three years later, he went to the United States. Singer, composer and actor, Calleja was a versatile performer ever since his schooldays at St Aloysius College, quickly becoming this College's "prim attur" in its stage performances. Going off as a teenager on tour abroad with a harmonica band he had formed, Calleia made his own way in the world, but he did not forget Malta or the family in Gozo whom he occasionally visited and warmly embraced. He retired in Malta where he spent the last twelve years of his life until his death in 1975.²¹

See also "Ġorġ Pisani – a lifetime spanning the present century", *The Sunday Times*, Valletta, 21 Mar. 1999, p. 34.

²⁰ Pisani passed away in 1999 at the age of 90.

²¹ Calleia repatriated from New York to Sliema in 1963. The Malta postal authority had a set of two commemorative stamps issued in his memory in 1997. See, i.a., J. C. Camilleri, '25 anniversarju mill-mewt ta' l-attur Joseph Calleia', *Il-Mument*, 27 Feb. 2000; L. Cassar, 'Joseph Calleia died 20 years ago today', *The Times* (of Malta), 31 Oct. 1995; 'Joseph Calleia's favourite film', *ibid.*, 28 Sept. 2000, pp. 20-21.



Ċensu's mother Eliza née Calleja (1857-1963) with her nephew, the Broadway and Hollywood actor Joseph on a visit to Gozo from America after the Second World War.

For the rest, the Gozo of Ċensu's childhood was a small and sleepy place, where just about everyone knew everyone else. It was cut off, as Ċensu put it, "not only from Malta but from the world."²²

As children, their playing field was the dust road outside their front door. They had what was known as a *karettun*. This was not a wheelbarrow as such with one wheel in front and two handles and legs behind. It was

²² "Illum Ghawdex parti minn Malta, hadd ma jsib diffikulta". Hija haġa reċentissima li Ghawdex qisu parti minn Malta... Qabel konna maqsumin, Ghawdex mhux barra minn Malta kien, imma barra mid-dinja, kien emarġinat għal kollox. Jekk ma tifhimx din, ma tifhimx il-hajja sempliċi li kienu jghixu l-Ghawdxin."

more of a hand-cart: two planks of wood stuck together on four wooden wheels, made by some carpenter friend. Pushing and riding the *karettun*, the children would wheel themselves up and down from the upper part of it-Tigrija opposite the Bishop's house down to the cross-roads for Marsalforn to one side and Xlendi on the other, and then up again...There was no asphalt. The fastest traffic on the island (presumably apart from their *karettun* racing downhill) was the *karrozin*. This was the covered Maltese horse-drawn carriage or cab which was used to ferry passengers and cargo, and which was exported alongside Maltese migrants, many of them from the sister island, to French North Africa. As they went out to play children would be cautioned to mind the *karrozzini*: "Oqghodu attenti mill-karrozzini!" That would have been a trifle more pertinent in this case since Strada Corso (Racecourse Street) was the capital's main road leading to and from the harbour at Mgarr, so the *karrozzini* trotted along at some speed uphill or downhill. Apart from these there were the slower-moving mules and carts, which naturally would be usually burdened with fodder or agricultural produce. Agriculture and fisheries were the mainstay of the Gozitan economy although several were also employed by government, joined the navy or worked for the army at Fort Chambray especially during the Great War.²³

There were also cottage industries, such as lace-making (*bizzilla ta' Ghawdex*) and cheese-making (*gbejniet ta' Ghawdex*), where women took the lead. The rate of emigration *per capita* from Gozo was generally higher than that from the main island, although there was always some return migration as well.

As night fell, it would be pitch dark, apart from such light as was emitted from the paraffin lamps. Electricity did not make it to Gozo before the nineteen twenties (much later than Valletta and the Three Cities) and even so, only in Victoria. There was what today would be called a 'sub-station' near the Seminary, and a small generator for Victoria only.

²³ Axisa/Frendo, 26 Feb. 2000. According to Major E. J. Axisa (whose grand-father Spiru built The Duke of Edinburgh Hotel in Victoria which he later sold to Pawlu Portelli "tal-Linghi") other forms of business, not excluding contraband, were engaged in especially during the Great War (1914-1918). Two houses on the water's edge, one in Marsalforn the other in Xlendi, were known as "id-dar tal-Ġermaniż".

Until the Second World War electric light was effectively limited to the capital, and that from six o'clock in the evening to six o'clock in the morning. Oil lamps thus remained the only means of illumination throughout the rest of the island.

Communications between Gozo and the main island were difficult and intermittent. The island's lifeline, including all merchandise, depended on the sailing boats known as *dghajjes tal-Latini*. It would take these between two and three hours to sail across from one island to the other, depending on the weather. For passengers, there was a ferry crossing once a day, weather permitting. The first small ship or *vapurett*, 'il-Golly' would lay down anchor in the middle of the harbour: there were no wharves. This would take between two and two-and-a-half hours to get to the Grand Harbour. It left Mgarr at about seven in the morning and returned in the afternoon. This meant that you had to leave Victoria by *karrozzin* at about four in the morning, before sunrise, to get a place on board. There were no shore boat shuttles (*firilli*) to get you from shore to the steamer. You had to hire a fishing boat and somehow or other to fit into a *kajjik*. Up the gangway to the deck was something else: you had to hold your balance and elbow your way through amidst pushing and shoving. Mindful of the weather as the modest boat made its way across the *friegu*, with many of the passengers feeling sick along the route,²⁴ you would finally get down to a *dghajsa* in the Grand Harbour and be rowed ashore. This was the only link, often interrupted by bad weather. There were no cars; it was only in the late 1930s that the first motor car arrived on the island of Gozo.

There were very few telephones. When news broke out of the firing on Maltese demonstrators by British troops during the *Sette Giugno* in June 1919, the family was anxious to telephone Malta to see if anything had befallen the eldest son, Anton, who was reading medicine at the university in Valletta. One of those shot dead, allegedly wearing the Maltese colours around his neck, was Ġuzé Bajada, 34, a Gozitan from

²⁴ "...trid tmur bil-kajjikki tas-sajjieda, toqghod kif toqghod. Imbagħad min jimbuttak fuq l-iskala, ser taqa' u ma taqax, tghaddi l-vjaġġ mohħok fit-temp, reġettar addoċc..."

Xaghra, in Valletta to prepare his emigration papers.²⁵ In 1919, only the police stations in Gozo had a telephone set except for some leading establishment like “Ta’ l-Orjenti”, further down Strada Corso, which imported plumbing equipment and tools. Still, they had managed to get through: Anton was alright.

Ċensu was six years old during the *Sette Giugno* but this incident must certainly have made a lasting impression upon him. He remembers more vividly the electoral result of 1921, when the first parliament under the new self-government constitution was returned. In Gozo, that election was a landslide victory for the Mizzian nationalist party: they won all four seats returning Mgr Hili, the Archpriest of Victoria; Sir Luigi Camilleri; Guzeppi Micallef; and of course Nerik Mizzi, whose family hailed from Gozo and had founded the Partito Nazionale led by Nerik’s father Fortunat. Strickland’s pro-British party was routed, prompting the colonial secretary Amery to observe that proportional representation had been intended to ensure minority representation so you could not have a district where all those elected came from the same party.²⁶ But Strickland was a great campaigner, not least in Gozo where so far he enjoyed little sympathy. In Gozo, where everything was personalized, he would stay at “ta’ Axisa” (The Duke of Edinburgh Hotel). On Sundays he would attend the mid-day mass at St George’s church, walking up from “ta’ Axisa” in it-Tiġrija, past the Tabone residence, and cutting across the town square, flamboyantly saluting everyone – to a chorus of boos, hisses and other unsavoury noises from

²⁵ See Henry Frendo, ‘Diskors Kommemorattiv’, in *Festa Nazzjonali tas-Sette Giugno. Programm Kommemorattiv imtella’ mill-Kunsill tal-Kultura ghal Ghawdex* (Ministeru ghal Ghawdex), Triq Bullara, Xaghra, il-Hadd, 6 ta’ Gunju 1993, pp. 7-9; *Ir-Rivoluzzjoni Maltija tal-1919: Harsa mill-qrib lejn il-ġrajjet storiċi tas-Sette Giugno* (Malta, 1970); ‘Poplu Wiehed: Is-Sette Giugno Sebghin Sena Wara’, *Il-Poplu*, n.12, July 1989, pp. 20-31. See also, i.a., Paul Bartolo, *X’Kien ġara Sew fis-Sette Giugno* (Malta, 1979), and Michael A. Sant, ‘*Sette Giugno*’ 1919: *Tqanqil u Tibdil* (Malta, 1989).

²⁶ On this see H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience* (1979, 2nd ed. 1991), esp. ch. 6, ‘Old Wine in New Bottles: Political Parties and the Grant of Responsible Government’, pp. 183-200.

bystanders. Taking all this in his stride, he would turn to those accompanying him and say: “These are tomorrow’s votes”.²⁷

From their haunts you would know them. Stricklandians stayed at “ta’ Axisa”, the Mizzians at “ta’ Rosanna”, across the street. “Ta’ Rosanna” was a small hotel, owned later by the chemist Abela. This was where the *italianista* firebrand Nerik Mizzi (who was court-martialled on a sedition charge in 1917) and the charismatic Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici “il-Gross” always stayed, for example. In the evening “il-Gross” would go to the Tabones. Nerik, who usually went up with “il-Gross” during election time, sometimes stayed in a mezzanine a little further up the street.

There were no nobles in Gozo. The “well-mannered” (*puliti*) were the professional classes (*il-professjonisti*). Allegiance to the band clubs – “ta’ l-istilla” and “ta’ l-iljun” – did not always translate naturally into support for one political party rather than the other. At the time, both the cathedral (more associated with “ta’ l-iljun”) and St George’s parish church (more associated with “ta’ l-istilla”), had the same archpriest. Mgr Alfonso Maria Hili (1865-1943), the Mizzian M.P., was at one time the Archpriest at the cathedral on top of the fortified hill, and the parish priest of St George’s parish church in the heart of town, close to the market place and main squares. “Ta’ l-Orjenti”, although businessmen, ranked with “ta’ l-istilla” and were not Stricklandians. My wife’s family, the Debonos – Ċensu remembered three generations of them, the medical doctor Gużepi and the Monsignori, “is-Sur Manwel” and all his children – were Stricklandians and “ta’ l-iljun”. The Tabones, however, were “ta’ l-iljun” without being Stricklandians. Why was that? One of Ċensu’s uncles, Sander, was a founder-member of the band club “ta’ l-iljun” while Ċensu’s brother Josie served as the club’s president for many years. Moreover he married into a family who were great supporters of this faction: they were “Ljuni, Ljuni, Ljuni”. Medical doctors, as Anton, Toto’ and Ċensu would later become, did not

²⁷ “Strickland ma telghax u ghadni niftakar kien imur il-quddies ta’ nofsinhar, ghaddej minn quddiem id-dar taghna Triq it-Tiġrija biex jarah kulhadd. Isellem ‘l hawn u ‘l hemm u kulhadd ibosslu u jibbuwjah, u hu jsellem. Lil ta’ fejnu kien jghidilhom: ‘dawn voti ta’ ghada’... Kien joqghod fil-Lukanda ta’ Axisa, id-‘Duke of Edinburgh’, u jittla’ bil-mixi biex jarah kulhadd li mhux mażun.”

normally foster such a strong involvement with *partit* – that is, the *partit tal-banda* – which did not necessarily translate into the same allegiance when it came to the *partit politiku*, although one was usually a convenient stepping stone to the other. The Tabones were Nationalists, actually Mizzians, as all the Gozitan Nationalists were called. They were always “Mizzjani”, Ċensu recalled, adding: “don’t ask me why”. Gozo remained Fortunato Mizzi’s fief. The Gozitans, he stresses, were “Mizzjani” – not Nationalists, Labourites or Constitutionals. Nerik Mizzi only came up during election time but “Gozo was his”.

Ċensu’s earliest recollections go still further back, however. That was his First Holy Communion, when he was four-and-a-half years old, during the Great War. At that time Pope Pius X had launched a crusade for children to receive their *prima comunione* early, which is why Ċensu was not yet five when he did his. For that reason he used to be taken by his father to the Franciscan Sisters in Strada Palma to learn how to swallow the host. These nuns of a Gozo-founded Order were known as “tal-bambini” because they had a nursery school (*skola tan-nuna*); they also used to supply all the Gozitan churches with hosts. They even sold the crumbs of hosts which they would pack into pouches, at maybe half-a-penny (*sitt habbiet*) each.

Ċensu went to the government school in Victoria: it was where it still is today, in Vajringa Street. On the way to school they would pass down the narrow Strada Pieta’ and on towards San Ġorġ parish church. Putirjal (a popular Maltese corruption of *Porta Reale*) was the direction which from Triq it-Tiġrija took you up to Pjazza San Franġisk. That was what everybody called it, as they still do, although unlike Valletta’s Putirjal (as it was commonly known in Maltese before its name was changed to “Bieb il-Belt” in Mintoff’s time) there was no arch there, then or later. Teaching was mainly in Maltese and English, there was not much Italian at the elementary level of schooling. Maltese as a language was not taught at all: everybody spoke it but nobody wrote it. Ċensu never learnt how to write a word in Maltese.²⁸ Nor did anyone

²⁸ “Malti xejn, qatt ma tghallimt nikteb kelma bil-Malti. Kulhadd kien jitkellem bil-Malti imma hadd ma kien jiktbu.”

teach them Maltese history: “we knew more about the Wars of the Roses.”²⁹

Two of his primary school teachers were Mr Attard “ta’ l-arkitett”, and Miss Vella “ta’ l-Orjenti”. As a six or seven year old pupil Ċensu rather liked Miss Vella, and, he reckoned, she rather liked him. When a pupil did well, Miss Vella had a habit of saying: “very good indeed”. So when Ċensu did well in an exercise and she said “very good”, he would put in: “indeed Miss?”

As for social life, well, there was not much of it, other than family and friends, school and church activities. There would have been the outdoor life, country walks or swimming at Marsalforn, which came for free and were taken for granted. Carnival consisted of some youths going out in a sheet, or painting a moustache with a burnt cork. The only club as such was the Circolo Gozitano; there was also a Casa Sociale, both of them on the edge of the main square of It-Tokk near the market street. Kolinu Tabone was a member of the Casa Sociale where in the evening he sometimes went to play billiard with his friend Ġiġi Bondi’. The billiard game played in Gozo so far was not snooker, a later English influence, but the “Karolina”, an Italian one. This was the game Ċensu learned how to play, too. Karolina was played with five balls, with the *birilli* set in the middle of the billiard table. Nobody spoke a word of English – except medical doctors because their course books were in English. In Gozo everybody who played billiards played the Karolina.

In all its smallness and apparent simplicity, Gozo also had its peculiarities, distinctions, complexities and social character, its internecine rivalries which were somehow or other linked to traditions, circumstances, perceptions or interests. It had its own scent and charm.

²⁹ “Lanqas hadd ma għallimna storja ta’ Malta...” This would include secondary schooling, on which see below, 3. See also, however, a poignant observation in the same vein made by the serving President of Malta, Professor Guido de Marco, in his Foreword to Henry Frendo, *The Origins of Maltese Statehood: A Case Study of Decolonization in the Mediterranean* (Malta, 1999, 2nd ed., 2000), p. 20.

It was, essentially, more isolated than Malta itself, a somewhat fossilized microcosm of it. This in turn reflected Southern European village life and mentality at the turn of the century; it was a pre-industrial community where the emotional resonance of a nickname went further than the formality of any officialdom.

Gozitans who wanted to move on in life could not stay on the tiny island indefinitely: they had to pack up and get out. There were three options: emigration overseas; the navy, merchant marine or colonial service; or, the most common one, go to Malta to pursue an education and ‘make it’, possibly returning to Gozo afterwards. Islander bonds die hard, and the Gozitan ones don’t die at all. But moving out was *force majeure*.

At the age of 11, Ċensu packed his bags and moved out – to the wider world of the main island.

The Jesuit Formation

A BORDER AT ST ALOYSIUS

GOING to Malta from Gozo in 1924 was tantamount to going overseas. In this case, it was all the more so, because the stay in Malta was intended to last, at least for some years. For an eleven year old, it was quite a wrench, leaving behind family and home, friends and surroundings.

At St Aloysius, Ċensu was a boarder. Unlike his elder brothers who had been through much the same rigmarol before him, he was not living with relatives. Anton and Toto' had both been to St Aloysius before going on to university, from where they had both graduated as doctors of medicine. Ċensu lived in college. He would write to his mother once a week – “like a lover”.³⁰

Ċensu's letters to his mother, of which sadly no trace exists, were written to her in Italian. Most of his mates similarly wrote in Italian. The rest wrote in English, or in Maltese using an Italian-like alphabet with the “ch” (“bic-ce hakka”) instead of the “k”. To this day, not having been taught Maltese, Ċensu is unsure of how to use the “k” and the “q”. This once again brings us face to face with the Maltese

³⁰ “qisni namrat”.

diglossia, as the phenomenon is known in socio-linguistics: people often spoke in one language and wrote in another. As we shall see, there were various instances of this even at student society and party executive levels.³¹ This means too that written sources in Malta can be misleading, and that as late as the second half of the twentieth century. It is wrong to suggest that “Maltese leaders” did not speak Maltese;³² they usually spoke it but did not write it. Maltese *diglossia* was such that there was more than one ‘in-group’ means of communication, but whereas one has tended to be mostly spoken until recently, the other tended to be mostly written. The vernacular was not a literary or scientific language, nor was it taught in schools at all professionally before the last few decades. Moreover, the social duality which applied to Italian and Maltese now belongs in somewhat different ways to that between English and Maltese, after a tense and politically-influenced period of overlap. It is a fascinating and perplexing story, but Malta in modern times has never been a monolingual place, and God forbid that it were, or became one.³³

As a boarder Ćensu used to visit Gozo once every three months or so. Children would make the trip to Malta and back on their own. It was too much trouble to be accompanied. That would take two days and involve an overnight stay on the main island. Gozitans used to stay at the Hotel de France which was owned by a Gozitan, one Camilleri from Nadur . This ‘Gozitan’ hotel in Valletta was in Strada Stretta between Strada Teatro and Strada Santa Lucia. Quite centrally located, it continued being used as a restaurant for many years. Among its regulars for lunch was Felić Cremona (the Professor of History of Legislation and of Commercial Law at the University in Valletta). Felić was another Gozitan from Victoria (and another old boy from the College).

³¹ See below, 4 and 11.

³² See Ranier Fsadni’s column, *The Times* (of Malta), 23 June 2000, p. 9, inspired by J. M. Brincat’s recent history of Maltese, in Maltese.

³³ See H. Frendo, ‘Language and Nationhood in the Maltese Experience. Some Comparative and Theoretical Approaches’, in *Collegium Melitense Quatercentenary Celebrations, 1592-1992* (eds. R. Ellul Micallef and S. Fiorini, Univ. of Malta, 1992), 439-470.

Ċensu speaks gratefully of the Italian Jesuits. He has felt indebted to them as these had very kindly accepted him as a pupil, indeed as a boarder, for free. He was only charged a nominal fee for the food that he ate. The same kindness had been shown to Toto', who was also at St Aloysius when their father had already died. Anton, the eldest son, who was just starting to practise as a doctor, had placed first in the medical course and returned to Gozo, while in the circumstances Josie, as we have seen, had felt obliged to get a government job as a storekeeper. Ċensu's mother put this 'survival' down to Providence, because all they had was the house they lived in, before she started getting her famous £3 monthly pension in 1926.

Entrance to St Aloysius College was by means of an oral examination. Ċensu had been to Malta to sit for this. He was interviewed by Fr Busuttill, the Prefect of Studies. As he had a good grasp of Latin, following private tuition by a Mgr Cefai, he somehow skipped the first form and was accepted in the *seconda media* right away. Among his contemporaries there were two who became jesuits, Fr J. Bernard and Fr Salvinu Galea; others included Salvino Mangion who later became Director of Labour, and Edgar Mercieca, who went to live in Australia.

Ċensu hated College life from the first day to the last. Although he himself was later constrained to send some of his own children to be boarders at the Sacred Heart and De La Salle colleges, another one at the Dorotei, when he was a Minister in the 1960s, he hated himself for it and remained opposed in principle to sending children to college as boarders.³⁴ That was like kicking the children out of the home so the family would be left in peace. Although he remained obliged to the Jesuits, and he was a good student, internal college life (naturally, with its set rituals and disciplines) was wrong, he felt. He is gratified that such schooling has now come to an end in Malta, for other reasons. For Gozitans, however, it was a necessary evil, because of the distances involved. As a boarder he missed the family immensely, and Gozo too, but Gozo he regarded as being at one with the family.³⁵ There was the

³⁴ See below, 12.

³⁵ "Ghawdex u l-familja haġa wahda."

paternal uncle at the Economical Dispensary in Strada Reale and the children, his cousins, down the Strada San Domenico, Valletta, but clearly it was not the same.

His preferred subject was Latin. He was bad at maths, except algebra. He liked history very much, but all they had on Maltese history was a little booklet and this was not really taught as a separate subject.³⁶ That the College was Italian-run was regarded as normal then. ‘San Alwiġi’, as it has continued to be popularly known in Maltese (its English name came into use later) was a Sicilian college, which had made Malta a ‘sub-province’ before the First World War. The first ‘Viċi Provinċjal’ was Giuseppe Delia. Moreover, Ċensu believes, Italian had developed as a language of culture in Malta at about the same time that it (or rather its northern prototype) was doing so in Italy, in Dante Alighieri’s time. Notarial contracts were already being written in Latin before then. In that sense, Italian was not to be regarded as a foreign language in Malta because “it was born here.” It was in use in Malta before it became current in the Valle d’Aosta and parts of the Tyrol. There was thus nothing out of the ordinary, in those days, for a college to be Italian in Malta.³⁷ Lawyers really knew no English. Ċensu’s uncle, a legal procurator, would go to the bank cashier and ask him to make out a “kekwe” for £10, meaning a “cheque”, a relatively new term which he just could not pronounce.³⁸

³⁶ Regrettably the situation is not much better today, although credit must be given to the valiant efforts made by the late Professor Vella. Some history teaching has at least become obligatory, soul-destroying though the syllabus is). I have undertaken to do the third volume of *Storja ta’ Malta*, started by Vella, for Klabb Kotba Maltin, as my next major assignment.

³⁷ Linguistic historians, such as J. M. Brincat, would be sceptical of this idealised version, clearly distinguishing between Sicilian and Tuscan, but Nationalists in colonial times held firmly to this generalised precept, if only as part of their politico-cultural armoury against anglicisation policy.

³⁸ ‘Jien niftakar liz-ziju Saliba, kien prokuratur legali, imur il-bank u tal-bank jidhku bih għax jgħidilhom: “agħmilli kekwe ta’ għaxar liri” – kekwe vuoldiri *cheque*.’ (It is held that the Marquis Scicluna, reputed to be the richest man in Malta in the 19th century, owed his nickname “iċ-Ċisk” to a mispronunciation of the word “cheques”.)

Ċensu was at St Aloysius from 1924 to 1930, after which he went on to university. However, in the scholastic year 1928/29 he went up to the Gozo Seminary to prepare for his Matriculation there. Ġużè Aquilina (of Munxar, and later Professor of Maltese at the Royal University) was there as well, and for the same purpose. They both failed in some subject; so back to Malta it was, where, abracadabra, success was achieved. There were five Matriculation subjects you had to sit for. These were: English, Italian, Religion, Mathematics and Physics. If you failed in one you had to re-sit all of them. At university it was the same: if you failed in one subject, you might have to wait three years for the next course to start, then you would try again.

Was he sportive? Not much, hardly any football, except if mandatory; but he played tennis fairly well and won a tournament. He was a member of the Marian Congregation, and of the Boy Scouts. Did they go for country walks? They rarely did. They would go to some parade, accompanied by Fr Robinson, the scoutmaster. A Scout Troup had been formed at St Aloysius College in 1916. This, wrote John Mizzi, was an important break-through “in that the sons of the more influential Maltese families were now becoming Scouts.” Besides, the Jesuit Fathers were giving open support to the Movement “and this countered the unjustified criticism that was forthcoming from conservative priests in the villages.” The rector of the college, Rev. Fr. Vincent Sammut, told parents: “Scouting is a good thing”. When in November 1916 the acting lieutenant-governor Mr Edgar Bonavia attended the investiture of the college Scouts he said that he was fortunate to be officiating as Island Commissioner for the first time at St Aloysius as he had “studied under the Jesuits at St Ignatius College at St Julian’s.” The Troop was presented with a bugle and a set of flag poles. A little later Governor Methuen presented it with a Union flag and a Scout flag, which henceforth the Troop carried on public occasions.³⁹ There would have been no escape from some participation in this Troop’s drill by a College student, still less so by a boarder. One of the few visual memories of Ċensu’s years as a pupil is a group photo of the College’s

³⁹ J. A. Mizzi, *Scouting in Malta. An Illustrated History* (Malta, 1989), pp. 52-53.

scout troupe, gathered behind a statue of the Madonna; another shows him in College uniform.

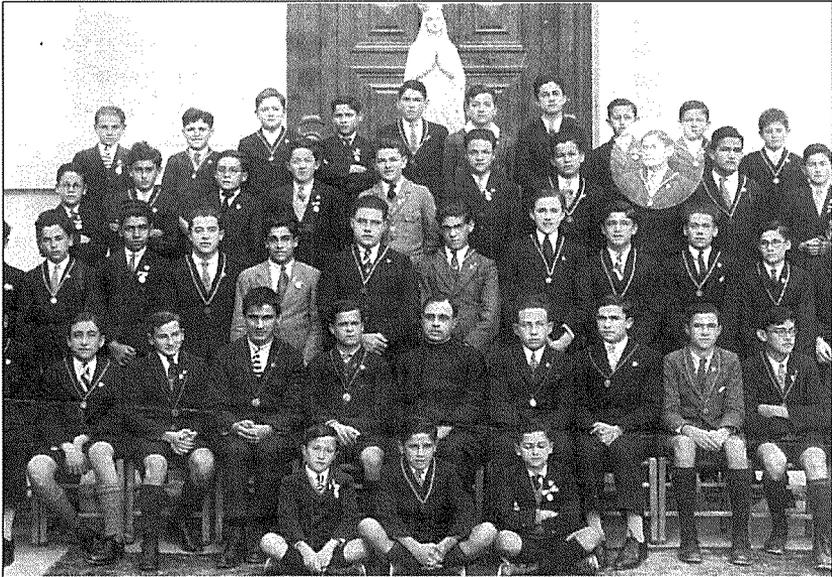
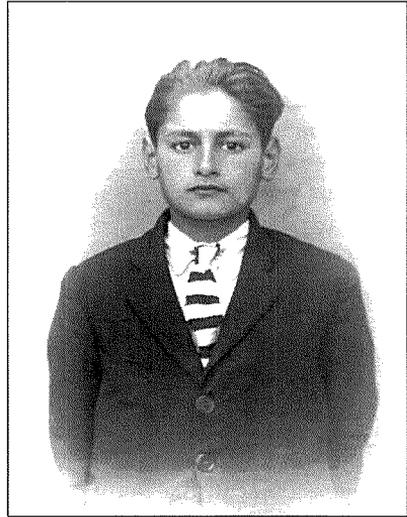
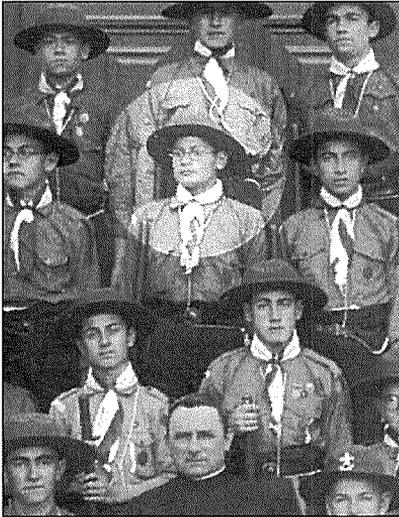
The big school hall at St Aloysius was built during Ċensu's time there. The Rector in the twenties was Padre Furei; it was he who orchestrated fund-raising activities for this hall to be built. It encroached on part of the playground. In college, Ċensu's best friend seems to have been Salvinu Galea, the one who later became a Jesuit. Did he get the lash often in college, the hated 'ferlas'? So he did, twice.⁴⁰

More so than the 'ferlas', what really got him was a slap in the face. When he was about 12 years old, in his second year, he had an argument with another pupil, Totty Borg from Floriana. A much bigger boy than him, Totty told Ċensu off by slapping him right across the face. The youngest child in the family who had led a sheltered life and was still rather timid then, a tearful Ċensu reacted by reporting Totty to the Prefect. He still remembers his sleepless night when he realised what a coward he had been. Instead of hitting Totty back, he had spied on him by going straight up to the Prefect (who must certainly have unleashed a good dose of blood-curling 'ferlas' lashes to discipline the culprit).

One ingredient of the life-long education Ċensu received in college was Totty's slap in the face. He resolved not to be bullied like that again, not to fear anyone. "That slap in the face changed my character...When, much later, I went to Totty's funeral – we had never quarrelled again, and later became friends – I recounted this incident to his son. I told him that his father had changed my character by teaching me to fight for what is right."⁴¹

⁴⁰ "Darbtejn hadthom f'hajti."

⁴¹ 'Ghedtlu "jien grat lejn missierek u qed nghidlek dak li lili m'ghedtlu qatt. Kemm jien grat li bidilli l-karattru li fejn ghandi raġun niġġieled ghalih. Grazzi għall-umiljazzjoni u l-kodardi-ja li hassejt dakinhar, li minflok tajtu daqqa jien, mort nirrapportah lill-Prefett.'"



Some glimpses of the years at St. Aloysius

Judging by his recollections of the increasingly turbulent political situation in Malta during the years spent in College – from the return of the second Nationalist administration under the self-government constitution in 1924 to its suspension in 1930 following the church-state dispute during Strickland’s time as prime minister – Ċensu already had a keen political nous. Sir Gerald Strickland’s return to power in 1927 he regarded as of enormous consequence, almost comparable to the “revolution” which took place in 1971 (when Mintoff took office in an independent state for the first time). The Terinu incident, when Strickland had been said to be a freemason, was serious, because to call someone “mażun” in those days was truly damaging. The Church was powerful: it was Mintoff who broke this reality so that the Church’s power today is very restricted, to the point where parishioners rebel against a parish priest. Before Mintoff’s onslaught on the Church, this had “a political monopoly” as well. Nobody dared oppose it. Even Nerik Mizzi, a devout believer, was wary of that; but it was Mintoff who would bring about this great change, when his “six points” (*is-sitt punti*) all essentially came about.

The Church’s power was “exaggerated”. It may have interfered where it should not have, yet the trauma on Maltese social life and on the Maltese character from then on was very much in evidence. Less people were going to church now, even in Gozo. Strickland had started it: were it not for Strickland, Mintoff would not have succeeded. There were many religious families who could not receive communion and they were deeply grieved by that⁴². These hurts remain in the family, as those of Mintoff’s time have remained to this day.⁴³

Being devout himself, Ċensu emphasized with the dilemma of those who could not practise their religion because the Church hierarchy had got so involved in politics, to the point of interdicting voters under pain of mortal sin if they openly supported the political party of their choice. On the other hand, there was no love lost between our young ‘Latinist’ at San Alwiġi and the likes of Strickland, who in the Nationalist, italianate

⁴² See below, 12.

⁴³ On this see below, 12.

and clerical atmosphere of the time, epitomised by Gozo, was perceived as a foreign body. After all the Nationalist Party hymn, which saw its birth during the inter-war period, stridently defined “true Maltese” as “Cattolici” and as “Latini”.

Long Trousers

STUDENT LIFE IN THE 1930s

THE 1930s were more agitated than the 1920s. Under Joseph Howard, Francesco Buhagiar and then Ugo Mifsud, the Nationalists had been in control for most of the previous decade. It was only after 1927 that politics turned sour and went haywire, leading to the suspension of the hard-earned self-government constitution in 1930. In neighbouring Italy, following the March on Rome and the Fascist takeover in 1922, Mussolini seemed to personify a new era offering more stable and dynamic government, although that was increasingly at the expense of parliamentary democracy. In 1929 the Italo-Vatican rift had been healed by the Lateran Pacts. In an intensely Roman Catholic island such as Malta was, and at a time of church-state strife, this seemed to imply to many that Mussolini was on the right side. Strickland wasn't. Although there is no doubt that Mussolini was interested in 'Mare Nostrum' including Malta,⁴⁴ the Italian fascist state had not rocked international

⁴⁴ On this and related aspects see H. Frendo, 'Plurality and Polarity: Early Italian Fascism in Maltese Colonial Politics', *Malta: A Case Study in International Cross-Currents* (eds. S. Fiorini and V. Mallia Milanes, Malta, 1991), 227-240; 'Italy and Britain in Maltese Colonial Nationalism', *History of European Ideas*, Oxford, xv, 4-6, 1992, 733-739; 'Intra-European Colonial Nationalism: The Case of Malta, 1922-1927', *Melita Historica*, xi, 1, 1992, 79-93; 'Britain's European Mediterranean: Language, Religion and Politics in Lord Strickland's Malta, 1927-1930', *History of European Ideas*, Oxford, xxi, 1, 1995, 47-65; 'The Naughty European Twins of Empire: The Constitutional Breakdown in Malta and Cyprus, 1930-1933',

relations so far, apart from isolated incidents, the most serious of which had occurred in Corfu' in 1923. The occupation of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica before the Great War had been tacitly agreed to by the Great Power caucus. The French were in much of North Africa already, while Britain had added Cyprus and Egypt to its Mediterranean outposts of Gibraltar and Malta. The mood at the Locarno conference in 1926 was positive and optimistic, Franco-German relations had improved under the inspiration of the Briand-Stresemann 'tandem', borders would be respected, and so on. Britain was not unduly concerned at what had befallen the Italian socialist leader Matteotti in 1924, or indeed freedom of the press and the parliamentary system itself already by that time. The League of Nations had been set up with a view to safeguarding collective security, not to poke its nose into the internal affairs of states. 'Human rights' came later.

In the 1930s Italy sought to flex its muscles more aggressively. With the invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 she seemed poised to assume control over the whole of East Africa, by hook or by crook, thereby to have an Empire 'like the others'. Apart from considerations such as the use of poison gas, Egypt and the Sudan were much too close to Abyssinia for any comfort. Britain advocated economic sanctions against Italy and feared a wider war. Malta's strategic interest increased by leaps and bounds; again here that was at the expense of such democracy as may be said to be at all possible under colonial hegemony. At the expense of the harbour-driven Maltese economy too, because the Mediterranean Fleet was moved to Alexandria. Malta witnessed a tough clamp down on Italian residents and suspected Italian sympathisers, accompanied by gas mask practice. Throughout the 1930s Maltese nationalism was stunned and incensed by the suspension of self-government in the middle of an election campaign which Ugo Mifsud had expected to win – as if a constitution, so long fought for, were nothing but a piece of paper to be dispensed with by London at will. Apart from that constitution's restitution and its revocation after a landslide PN victory in 1932, the 1930s in Malta also

The European Legacy, Boston, iii, 1, 1998, 45-52; see also *Malta's Quest for Independence: Reflections on the Course of Maltese History* (Malta, 1989), ch. 4, 'Collaboration and Resistance: A Nationalist Movement on Deck', esp. pp. 187-201.

saw the official substitution of Italian by English, once again by decree from London. For most of the decade, until another world war broke out in 1939, Malta had no representative government, let alone a responsible one.

The general resentment was shared, and to some extent spearheaded, by the student body itself, partly because the vast majority of university students came from a middle class Nationalist background anyway. Under the banner of the *Comitato Permanente Universitario*, which had been founded by Arturo Mercieca and other colleagues in 1900, students had quite an influential presence in the capital, where the University of Malta was located. The flame of discord would be fanned within the University by the likes of Owen J. Fogarty, the Professor of English, a brash Imperial propagandist who was all too prone to fail – in English, a compulsory subject – scores of would-be Maltese lawyers, doctors, architects and even priests. No “kekwe” there! Fogarty, who hailed from Northern Ireland, was described by Ċensu Tabone as “more English than the Queen”. Fogarty took care to involve himself directly in student affairs, including the sports club, and clearly enjoyed the backing of the colonial regime.

In 1935 a new University Statute was promulgated whereby the General Council was deprived of its legislative powers and restricted to a consultative role in matters of appointments, the real power being vested in the Governor. Convocation was abolished, and all student societies, other than religious ones, were dissolved. The *Comitato Permanente Universitario* was somehow ‘re-born’, under sufferance, with the English name of: “Students’ Representative Council”. Except for modern languages, and theology which was still taught in Latin, all teaching at Malta’s University henceforth would be in English or Maltese as the General Council should direct. In 1937 His Majesty King George VI was graciously pleased to accord the honour of His Royal Patronage to the University and, later in the same year, His Majesty also granted to it the title “Royal” thus changing its designation to: The Royal University of Malta.⁴⁵ Perhaps he was influenced in this by the customary practice of the Italian monarchy,

⁴⁵ See Andrew P. Vella, *The University of Malta* (Malta, 1969), p. 102.

where the universities were similarly all designated as “royal”! The University of Malta, which had started as a Jesuit College in 1592 and been raised by Papal Bull to a *studium generale* in 1769, thus had a new name, and a new statute, the influence of which would prove to be a long lasting colonial inheritance in various ways.

On entering university in 1930 at the age of 17, Ċensu had to find alternative lodging quarters. He could no longer be a college boarder. He went to live with an uncle, a priest, Dun Edmondo Tabone, in Sliema. He could go down to the Sliema ferries (*il-Janeċ*) and cross over to Valletta by boat, walking up to Strada San Paolo from the Marsamxett side of Grand Harbour. Alternatively, in bad weather, he might hire a *karrozzin*. But the sea route was a short cut from Sliema to Valletta to Sliema, whereas by land you had to follow the winding coastal contours. Thus was it that Ċensu first went to abide in the Sliema area, which later on would become his abode in more ways than one. ‘Tas-Sliema’, until the 19th century a remote fishing village originally linked to the Birkirkara parish, was one of Malta’s newest residential towns, having sprouted during the British period, by which its very architecture was influenced, with sea-front bay windows evoking Dover or Brighton.

Moving on to university in the 1930s was a hallmark, a change of life. You stopped wearing shorts. You put on long trousers. It was an ‘initiation’. You became a man. It was prestigious and respectable. You started taking life seriously. You entered an adult world. You could start mixing with adults in conversation, taking an interest in politics. Youngsters, such as schoolchildren, were “emarginated” from that world: it was not permissible to mix, to interfere; you kept to your place, child, and did as you were told. University was different: now that you had made the grade, you were ‘a somebody’. You even bought a top hat (*lobbja*). Some smart ass would get a walking stick (*bastun*). “The status of a university student was that of an adult person.”

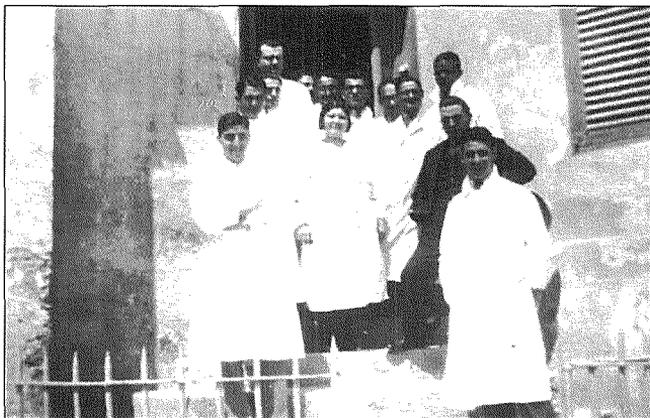


*Ĉensu, in long trousers,
gets a lift home.*

*(By courtesy of the late
Dr Victor Zammit Tabona)*

The C.P.U. president carried a certain weight, even if he wrote a letter to the newspaper. If today's university students were not as mature, for instance in public speaking, was that partly society's fault? Students now had money, whereas in the 1930s they didn't, so maybe they think of enjoying themselves today until tomorrow arrives. "We stimulate them by talk of tomorrow, forgetting that they are part of today as well." Which is not to say that in their own time Ĉensu's peers were not up to some mischief, such as stopping the traffic on opening day.

Why did he choose medicine? Well, Ĉensu's father had been a doctor. His two elder brothers were doctors. What else was there to do? Having lost his father at a young age, Ĉensu had long yearned to become a doctor, like him.



The class of '33 at work and play. Above, outside the anatomy theatre in lower Valletta, opposite what was then the Chapel of Bones; and below, Āensu in the University football team.



The greatest ambition of parents no less than of their children was that they would get on in life, receive an education, then go to university, although tuition was not free of charge (to say nothing of today's stipends.) The numbers were small, but the University could cater for all those who wanted to follow the courses on offer. Of the twenty students who started the medical course in 1930, fourteen finished it. There were only three reading architecture, Ćensu recalls. Among the MD students in his course there were Joe Sammut (later on an ear, nose and throat specialist), Josie Zammit Maempel, Frank Callus, Tommy Anastasi (a colonel who took up residence in England), Alfred Ferro, Anġlu Micallef, and Ġoġg Camilleri.⁴⁶

Of the professors in the MD courses, Ćensu remembers with utmost respect, above all, the Professor of Surgery, Pietru Pawl Debono: "the best professor we ever had, the best in absolute terms". Other professors well worth their salt were Bernard (hygiene), Ruggier (anatomy), and Vassallo (mental health), who was Nerik Mizzi's brother-in-law. There was also Professor Ferro, who had a command of both English and Italian; he taught medicine. Pathology was taught in English; it was a mix, but the text-books were mainly in English. A few others, who should probably remain nameless here, were pretty useless. One in particular was so completely bigoted and outdated that if students referred to some current development in the subject, of which (unlike, say, Professor Bernard) he would not have heard, he would just give them a zero. This happened to Ćensu among others, and it was not so easy to seek redress. Another 'professor' had lecturing notes which were thirty years old, dating back to when he had been at Edinburgh: the sheets had turned yellow. Other academics Ćensu remembered were Professor Randon (criminal law), Enrico Cortis (political economy) and Victor Caruana Galizia (civil law). Others in the humanities were Laurenza, the Professor of Italian, and Cuschieri, a philosopher.

The Professor of Latin, Mgr Edoardo Coleiro ("Dwardu Coleir"), he got to know later when he would serve on the University Council for some

⁴⁶ Dr Josie Muscat's father-in-law.

thirteen years. Coleiro's father sold cigarettes in one of the small shops below the Royal Opera House. Coleiro junior, a highly-strung but also an erudite and eloquent Latinist, Censu remembers as "a champion of lost causes", quoting in support anecdotal evidence from Council proceedings at the time that Edwin Borg Costanzi was rector (that is, after 1964). Various stories did the rounds at the time, one concerning a famed jurist who went up to London with the Prime Minister while allegedly forgetting to leave behind the exam paper for his students. Other stories were less palatable, on occasion suggesting nepotism and corruption, but on the whole standards were good. Until the radical changes to which the University was subjected in 1979 and in 1988, professors as holders of their respective chairs could exercise academic leadership as well as check and balance the rector's powers in senate and council.

What is noteworthy is the exposure which even medical students had to course subjects in faculties other than medicine and surgery. This was because all students did a three year preparatory course before they embarked on the academic studies proper in the professional courses, which took another four years. Thus B.Sc. students would also read philosophy for two years in the preparatory course. In addition to higher mathematics, MD students had botany, geology and, for the first three years, Italian and English literature. The lawyers and theologians also had Latin and political economy. Languages lay at the foundation of the preparatory courses. History was not taught. The dice were loaded in favour of English and there was "an enormous unbalance". There were two levels of admission for English – this was "the eliminating subject" in Censu's words, spoken with Fogarty in mind. If you obtained 45% or 50% in English, you would qualify to sit for the MD preparatory course. For B.Sc., however, you needed 55% – more English for a bachelor's degree than for a doctorate in medicine. Lawyers did the B.A. preparatory course. If you failed to qualify for the B.A. or B.Sc. degree, you could still proceed to do law or medicine, without a first degree. It seemed to be more difficult to read for a bachelor's than for a doctorate. The advantage was that every aspiring professional man would acquire a grounding in the humanities. For that reason, the average *professionista* was a more cultured person than, an 'all-rounder'.

In addition, there was the Italian Cultural Institute. This was located in Strada Tesoreria (later in Strada Zaccaria), just off from Piazza San Giovanni, and run by one Fleger who married a Maltese lady. The assistant director of the Istituto, Fleger was the father of Mario Fleri, who in the early 1990s was posted to Malta as the Italian ambassador. This Istituto was a real blessing, students felt: it offered a cultural bonanza to all those who were interested in literature and the arts: books, lectures, concerts. The Biblioteca had a lot of old stuff: you wouldn't find a modern novel there. "We discovered modern literature at the Istituto di Cultura. There we would spend every spare minute of time we had. We lapped it all up. Ugo Ojetti was just starting his literary career. Culture received a great boost."⁴⁷ There was also the British Council, which had a library, but evidently was not as active or as sought after until much later.

The University's campus was *Strada Rjali*. It had no campus as such. Mid-day would see many students lounging about and chatting in Strada Rjali, adding to the hustle and bustle. There were the girls from St Joseph's High School. These went home for lunch. From Strada Żakkarija they would go down Strada Britannica to pass from Strada Rjali, where the university students would be waiting for them. The medical students would have to attend the hospital, but as this was in Floriana – there was no St Luke's Hospital yet – they could walk from Valletta and back.

The main social get-together was the students' carnival ball. In Ċensu's time this used to be held in the Queen's Hall in Sliema, near Sant'Ignazio, where the English Jesuit College used to be located. The ticket was expensive: it cost five shillings (the equivalent of today's 25 cents). Only the boys paid, if you asked a girl she could be invited free. The men were the "competitors". Of course it was unthinkable that a girl would attend the ball unaccompanied by her parents. The 5/- ticket comprised "signor, signora e signorina". That great occasion saw many a catch and a match.

⁴⁷ "Il-letteratura moderna skoprejnieha fl-Istituto di Cultura. Hemm konna nghixu kull minuta Omien li kien ikollna. Konna nikluha... il-kultura ngihat spinta enormi..."

There were a number of university student societies. There was one promoting Italian literature, led by Vincenzo Maria Pellegrini, who edited the review *La Brigata*.⁴⁸ There was a “rival” society to promote English literature. Fogarty was in it.⁴⁹ Another student society, formed in 1931, was the Għaqda tal-Malti (Universita’), which published *Lehen il-Malti* edited by Ġużè Bonnici and Rużar Briffa.⁵⁰ There was the clergy-led *Lega Cattolica Universitaria*, of which Ċensu was a member. Then there was the sports’ club, where Fogarty again ruled the roost. This Fogarty was quite a character – my father and his generation also remembered him from their Lyceum days, with mixed feelings. He was a zealous progressive reformer but culturally one track minded and domineering. He was forthright and might even give private lessons to students at his house, free of charge, to those who would have failed in English, if they cared to attend. He certainly failed most of the students in university courses, by Ċensu’s count a very high percentage of them. A standard explanation for failure at university was: “*wahhlu Fogarty*” (“Fogarty failed him”).

Fogarty lived in small hotel in Strada Rjali, opposite the La Valette Band Club. When his mother died the CPU (then led by Herbert Ganado) planned a Mass for the repose of her soul. Naturally they invited Professor Fogarty. He replied to say that he did not “recognise anything whatsoever that the CPU did.” Once there was a plot to oust Fogarty

⁴⁸ *La Brigata* – “Rassegna di Lettere, Scienze ed Arti” - was first published as a monthly in January 1932. “La BRIGATA e’ sinonimo di liberta’, di liberta’ nello scrivere...” said Pellegrini’s editorial. In its fourth number, Apr. 1932, it published the inaugural address of the Societa’ Universitaria di Letteratura Italiana, ‘Societa’ culturali in Malta durante il settecento e l’ottocento’, by the Professor of Italian, V. Laurenza. Among its advertisers was Milazzo’s ‘Libreria Italiana’ in Strada Reale: ‘I piu’ bei libri – le ultime pubblicazioni’.

⁴⁹ The Malta University Literary Society was formed in October 1931, with Fogarty as its president. The other committee members were: Joseph Aquilina (Vice-President), John Formosa, B.A. (Honorary Secretary), Joseph Diacono (Honorary Treasurer), Thomas Anastasi Pace and Anthony Buttigieg. Its journal first appeared in March 1932.

⁵⁰ “Ghednieh mill-bidu li l-fehma taghna hi biss li mmexxu l-quddiem il-kitba tajba maltija bla ma nindahlu fejn ma jesaghnix, bla ma ninbxu l-hadd u bla ma mmellu l-hadd,” said *Lehen il-Malti*’s editorial (n. 13, Mar. 1932).

from both the English literature society and from the sports club. All was set for the general meeting in which the anti-Fogarty group would be in the majority and he would be out-voted. However, he got wind of this and had the meeting postponed.⁵¹

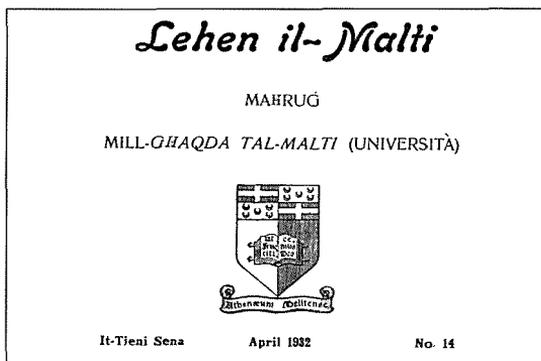
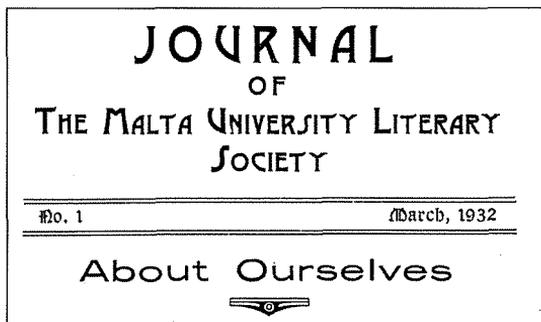
As for the students themselves, they might disagree and argue but then they would go and have a *pastizzott* together at the Café Premier (in Piazza Regina) – one, because they could not afford more. In Valletta, students were short of money but daily in touch with each other, they lived together, it was “truly a university”. There was a grand commotion in 1932, when the PN swept the boards after the British had given Malta her self-government back. Almost all the students were “nazzjonalisti”, but there were some exceptions. One was Duminku Mintoff, who was a course behind Ċensu’s (architecture). Another was Ġużè Bonnici, who was two courses ahead of him (medicine). These supported the Labour Party, which had been formed in 1920. There was another Gozitan, Ġużè Aquilina, who was a Stricklandian (law). They called Mintoff “l-ahmar” (the red one). A similar appellation was reserved for Pawlu Cassar (medicine). They debated and argued but, by Ċensu’s reckoning, the students were more “integrated” than they are today.

A revealing incident, at which Ċensu as a student happened to be present, concerned the adoption of the PN anthem in May, 1932. No sooner had the Letters Patent removing Italian from the primary school curriculum and the courts of law been promulgated than a nationalist hymn was put together. Josie Mallia Pulvirenti wrote the music, Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici the verses. On 7th May a “prova” of this anthem was scheduled at the premises of the Circolo “La Giovine Malta” in Strada Santa Lucia, where Nerik Mizzi was boss. Not everybody agreed with the proposed anthem, however. Sir Ugo Mifsud himself had

⁵¹ “Morna *l-general meeting* u kellna l-maġġoranza, u dan kif induna hassar is-seduta u telaq. Dawn kienu soċjetajiet ta’ l-istudenti imma kienu ddominati minn Fogarty li kellu hafna *backing* mill-awtoritajiet.”



Vincenzo Maria Pellegrini's
La Brigata, Professor Owen
Fogarty's Journal of the Malta
University Literary Society,
and Ġużè Bonnici's Lehen
il-Malti 1932.



reservations, no doubt because it sounded too ‘Fascist’ for comfort. A meeting was therefore held at the Giovine Malta club, at which some gramophone was used to decide about it. There was a debate. In the meantime, Ċensu and several other students were in the adjoining room at the club, playing billiards and waiting for the outcome. At one point Nerik came out and announced to them triumphantly: “approvat! l’innu approvat!” From around the billiard table there followed vocal endorsement and a warm burst of applause.

A full colour poster on good quality paper, printed in Italy, soon accompanied a special edition of the anthem, on sale at 1/6. In its top left-hand corner this carried a dedication: “*Ai capi Sir Ugo Mifsud ed Enrico Mizzi, a tutto il Partito Nazionale, Gloria e vanto della Patria, questo canto è consacrato.*” In larger print at the right-hand top corner was the slogan: “*Schiavi mai...*” (never slaves). An explanatory note taken from the daily *Malta* of 9th May 1932 said that during the “prova” at the Giovine Malta on 7th May, the “*Duce Nazionalista Enrico Mizzi*” had explained how the anthem – music and verses – had been “improvised” in the evening of the very same day (2nd May) that the “hateful and unjust” (anti-Italian) Letters Patent had been issued by the British Government. It was first played and sung during a public protest meeting held on 8th May 1932.⁵²

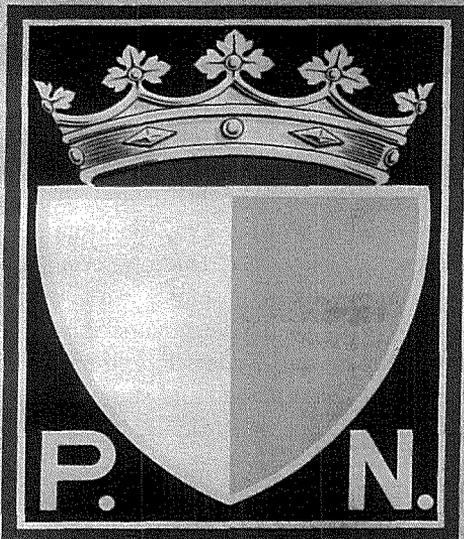
Tensions flared in 1935-1936 at the time of the Abyssinian war. The university students practically all sympathised with the Italian cause. The Maltese felt oppressed by Britain then because of her security interests. At every lecture or encounter at the Istituto di Cultura, for example, there would always be an English officer, yet men of learning went there regardless, including such personalities as Judge William

⁵² The original text read thus: “Patria bella, noi tuoi figli/Del Partito Nazionale/Ti vogliamo dagli artigli/Del Nemico e da ogni male/Conservar libera e santa/Come i Padri, qual baluardo/Di Cattolici/Di Latini/Di Maltesi/Ti lasciar. Malta nostra/Se tu lo chiedi/Eccoti il sangue/Di tutti noi. Pronti a tutto/Se tu ci chiami/Balziam cantando/Noi figli tuoi. Orsu’ Nazionalisti/Sorgiamo in fitte schiere/Spieghiamo le bandiere/E’ l’ora del pugnar. Dalle citta’, dai campi/Intrepidi corriamo/Iddio lo vuol, vinciamo!/E’ Malta che chiamo’.”

Il canto del Partito Nazionale Maltese, in onore di Ferruccio Wignacourt, Martir e salvatore della Patria, scritto e composto da Mifsud Bonnici, il 17 maggio 1932.

Schiavi mai...

INNO DEL PARTITO NAZIONALE MALTESE



MUSICA DI JOSIE MALLIA PULVIRENTI

VERSI DI C. MIFSUD BONNICI

VIETATA LA RIPRODUZIONE
TUTTI I DIRITTI RISERVATI

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PREZZO 1/6 NETTO

Stampato in 1932 Stampato in 1932

The controversial 1932 PN anthem. Note the slogan 'Schiavi Mai'. (By courtesy of Mr Richard Muscat.)

INNO DEL PARTITO NAZIONALE MALTESE

La musica e i versi dell' Inno Nazionalista qui riprodotto, furono improvvisati la sera stessa del 2 Maggio 1932, subito dopo la promulgazione, da parte del Governo Britannico, dell' odioso ed iniquo decreto (REGHE LETTERE PATENTI) con cui si bandisce l' insegnamento dell' italiano dalle Scuole Elementari di Malta e si menoma l' uso secolare della stessa lingua nei Tribunali penali dell' Isola nobilissima. Ciò fu spiegato dal Duce Nazionalista Enrico Mizzi in occasione della prova dell' Inno fatta nel Circolo "La Giovine Malta", il 7 Maggio. Il giorno dopo, l' Inno fu eseguito per la prima volta in pubblico e cantato dalla gran massa del Popolo Maltese in uno dei più grandiosi comizi di protesta contro il citato decreto imperiale.

(V. il quotidiano nazionalista "MALTA", del 9 Maggio 1932).

(CHIAMATA)
Con entusiasmo $\text{♩} = 112$

Harding and Sir Arturo Mercieca. When the British removed Italian from the University in favour of English, Ċensu and his mates had boycotted classes in protest. Maltese started being used some time later. Ġużè Aquilina did not participate in the student boycott, he continued turning up for lectures as usual. "He became a Professor of Maltese before he had even obtained his LL.D. All we secured was the option to answer exam questions in Italian."

When Ċensu entered university, Herbert Ganado was in his last year. He was the CPU president. Then Dwardu Magri became president. Contrary to what Mintoff once alleged in parliament, it is not true that in the CPU they spoke Italian. Not true at all, everyone spoke Maltese. The minutes were kept in Italian. Each course elected three representatives on the

CPU (SRC). Years later, Ċensu had the minute book consigned to the SRC for safe keeping and record.

After Magri's three year term (by which time Ċensu was in his fourth year, reading medicine) there was an attempt to stop the lawyers' monopoly of the CPU presidency. A lobby was formed, made up of students reading medicine, architecture and theology, to compete with the B.A. and LL.D students. The contestants for the top post were two. They were: Ċensu Tabone (supported by the former) and Ġorġ Borg Olivier (supported by the latter). On paper, according to his calculations, Ċensu had a majority of one. When it came to the vote, very probably one of the MD students went over to the Borg Olivier camp. Borg Olivier thus beat Tabone to it by that one vote. Victor Mercieca became secretary and Ċensu assistant secretary.

This election result had a bearing on the country's history, according to Ċensu. Academically, Borg Olivier was not one of the top notch students in his course, but among his supporters he had Godfrey Randon, Eddie Sammut, Michele Tufigno, Giovanni Refalo, Ettore Lucia, Ġuzé Maria Camilleri. Getting the CPU presidency was always a push in the direction of a public career. There can be little doubt that it was as a result of the fact that Borg Olivier had led the CPU for three years that Nerik Mizzi approached him and asked him to contest the forthcoming Council of Government elections with the PN. Borg Olivier had hardly received his warrant. He was taken aback and had not been expecting it. Moreover, his father was not favourable to the idea.⁵³ Ġorġ was just starting out as a notary. Malta was a colony; the notion of freedom was weak; he would be "exposed" immediately.⁵⁴

These elections were held in July 1939 under the "MacDonald" constitution (promulgated five months earlier). This allowed for a

⁵³ His father was an architect, not involved in politics. For an illustration see Henry Frendo, *Malta's Quest for Independence: Reflections on the Course of Maltese History* (Malta, 1989).

⁵⁴ "Hadha bi kbira. Ma kienx qed jistenniha. Missieru ma riedux johroġ. Kien ghadu ha jibda, ġlied kontinwu ma' l-Inglizi. Tesponi ruhek. Konna kolonja. Il-liberta' lanqas konna nafu xi t'fisser."

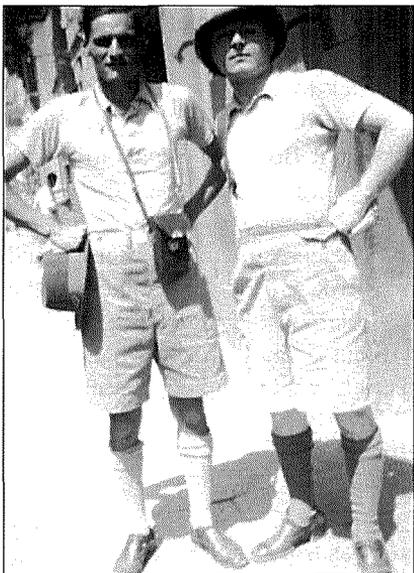
Council of twenty members, of whom ten would be elected. Moreover, the brand new notary Borg Olivier was returned in what might be called a freak result. The medical doctor Frederick Maempel, a contemporary, obtained more first count votes than he did. Had the preferences followed the first count votes, Maempel not Borg Olivier would have been elected. The outgoing CPU president must have attracted more of Sir Ugo Mifsud's second preferences than Maempel did, thus ending up with enough votes to get in as the third PN elected member, after Mifsud and Nerik Mizzi. Of the Nationalists, Nerik Mizzi, who contested the second district, which included Gozo, obtained the highest number of votes.⁵⁵ Borg Olivier was elected without a quota, the fifth and last member to make it for the first district, which included Valletta.⁵⁶ Heralding a life-long political career, his early success was by a twist of fate.⁵⁷ It was his first attempt, and he made it.

Before graduating a doctor of medicine in 1937, Ċensu went overseas for the first time, on a voyage to Italy. Overseas trips for university students used to be organized sometimes, but Ċensu never had enough money for that. However, in the last year of the course, he managed to scrounge £15 from his siblings. He had missed out on going with the student groups, but finally he went anyway. He was 24. It was an impressive first foray overseas, quite different from the ferry boat trips between the two islands, of which he had had his fill, *karrozzini*, *kajjikki*, gangways, vomit and all. At last, the *terra ferma*. His companion was his childhood friend and cousin from Gozo, Ġoġġ Pisani, the poet. Pisani had similarly managed to collect a sum of £15.

⁵⁵ There were three other PN candidates on Mizzi's district: Ninu Dalli, Count Luigi Preziosi and the lawyer Tumas Fenech.

⁵⁶ Maempel had 1,320 first count votes to Borg Olivier's 1,191, but at the last count the latter had 2,076 to the former's 1,823. The quota was 2,874. Mizzi led the PN poll (on the second district) closely followed by Mifsud (on the first). There were only two districts.

⁵⁷ 'Meta ssir president kien dejjem spinta għall-hajja pubblika. Ġoġġ Borg Olivier, żgur, il-fatt li kien għal tliet snin president tac-C.P.U. li Nerik Mizzi talbu johroġ miegħu għall-parlament u ma telax Maempel u tela' hu b'ċikka. Maempel kellu jitla'. Ma nafx x'għara. Destin. U Ġoġġ baqa'. "That's how it came about." Din l-elezzjoni kienet determinanti għall-istorja ta' pajjiżna... Din ġabet lil Borg Olivier għall-attenzjoni ta' Nerik Mizzi, bilkemm kien għadu ha l-lawrja.'



August 1937: Āensu with Āorg Pisani in Catania, and feeding the pigeons on the Piazza San Marco in Venice.

They went up the Italian peninsula from Catania to Venice, stopping, by train, in every major Italian town on the way there, exploring, observing, tucking in at some authentic taverna, and generally touring around to their hearts' content. They stayed in boarding-houses, which cost them five shillings (25c) a day. "We really enjoyed ourselves on that trip, and with the one pound I had left on arrival I paid for my warrant."

Doctor-Soldier

A SURGEON CAPTAIN IN WARTIME

IN 1937 Ċensu, 24, started practising as a doctor on the main island, only going to Gozo for any length of time in summer. He was just starting as a general practitioner. He sat in an established little pharmacy in Sliema, where patients could visit him and, in that way, he might begin to have some custom, a medical practice. This pharmacy was in Prince of Wales Road (now re-named after Manwel Dimech, who used to live in that road with his family until his exile in 1914). It was known as “l-ispizerija ta’ Gili”. A wise old man, Gili was a pharmacist, well known in this part of Sliema. His daughter was married to Professor Manche’ (who in 1948 became the University’s vice-chancellor). In what may now appear like a straw in the wind, Manche’ was a doctor and the son of an ophthalmologist; in 1937 he became the Comptroller of Charitable Institutions and senior medical officer with the Department of Health, where he was responsible for the completion of St Luke’s Hospital and for the preparation of the emergency service during the Second World War.

In Sliema, where Ċensu had gone to reside as a student, he had first lived with his aunt Marietta Tabone, the wife of his uncle Ċensinu (after whom he himself had been named). When their son Gualtiero repatriated from

Port Said, both Ċensu and his elder brother Toto', also a medical student in Malta, went to live with their cousin. Gualtiero's family had an apartment in Valvicra Flats, in Prince of Wales Road. When Toto' graduated he left and moved to Mqabba, where he set up his practice, while the senior Tabones, and Ċensu with them, moved to Victoria Avenue, still in Sliema.

Ċensu remembers his first patient at "ta' Gili". As if by premonition, it was a case of conjunctivites of the eyes. But a young doctor could barely survive on his earnings; it was a hard life. The charge for a visit to the doctor, as in this conjunctivites case, was half-a-crown (the equivalent, in today's currency, of 12 cents and 5 mils, although half-a-crown was not to be sneezed at in those days.)⁵⁸ Trying to make a penny and get on in life, Ċensu started looking around for a more regular, better-paid job. Opportunities were few and far between: you took what you could get. He wanted to specialize, but in what, and how? One chance that came along was to apply for a position in the field of mental health, but he didn't get it and he has harboured no regrets about that at all.

When war broke out in 1939, Ċensu joined the army. War had been in the air for some years, so much so that in 1938 Mr Leslie Hore-Belisha, Britain's Secretary of State for War, spent five days in Malta inspecting the situation, before flying to Rome where he was due to meet Mussolini. He spoke highly of Maltese readiness, alertness and loyalty but underlined the importance of further improving the defences by land, sea and air. A major recruitment drive was undertaken by Malta's two main units.⁵⁹ One was an artillery company, the Royal Malta Artillery, known as the 'RMA'; the other was an infantry company, the King's Own Malta Regiment, known as the 'KOMR' or rather the 'Territorials'. Ċensu joined the former. He applied, unsuccessfully, for a permanent posting as an army doctor. The first two doctors to be recruited were Godfrey Bonello and Jeffrey Camilleri. A few months later however the army

⁵⁸ "Tghix bil-hniena, viżta tmintax irbieghi."

⁵⁹ For more precise details see Brigadier A. Sammut-Tagliaferro's *History of the Royal Malta Artillery* (Malta, 1976), I, esp. p. 412 *et seq.*

sent for Joe Sammut and for himself as ‘emergency commission’. Both were taken on board. Other doctors were engaged when the consequences of war spread.⁶⁰

The RMA was composed of some nine hundred soldiers and other staff, but with the new recruits it would soon grow considerably; pay and promotion prospects were also being improved. It consisted of three regiments. These were the 1st Coast Guard, the 2nd Heavy Ack Ack, and the 3rd Light Regiment. Whereas the infantry had light weapons, the artillery had cannon, including heavy cannon, and looked after the forts. The main ‘RMA’ forts included Sant’Iermu (St Elmo), San Luċjan (St Lucien), Delimara, Ta’ Ġiorni: “we had a battery where today there is the Hilton Hotel.” The bofors (light anti-aircraft) guns were deployed around the harbour. One main battery of small cannon was below the Barrakka. All the forts were manned and controlled by the Maltese during the Second World War. There were very few Englishmen from the Royal Artillery. In Gozo, where Ċensu spent a year during the war, the main military station was a KOMR recruiting depot, and an infantry regiment.

On joining the army, Ċensu had to learn “how to become a soldier”. Army doctors actually reported to the Deputy Director of Medical Services, one Colonel McCallum at the Auberge de Castille, who in turn reported to a director general in London, through the General Officer Commanding; every command had its own ‘DDMS’. However, they wore the RMA uniform, buttons and insignia: to all intents and purposes they served as army regulars. Of course they had special duties: they conducted medical inspections, attended to the sick parades, and acted as medical advisors to the commanding officers.

Ċensu joined in 1939 as a lieutenant with two stripes (“ta’ bi tnejn”). He was promptly despatched to Mtarfa for training in army chores: how to wear and care for the uniform; how to drill and salute. After a few

⁶⁰ The Regimental Medical Officer was Dr Richard Casolani, who had replaced Dr Robert Randon in 1932; during the war, when he became a surgeon major, Casolani would serve as an anaesthetist at the Mtarfa Military Hospital. *Ibid.*, p. 476.

months at Mtarfa, which was the location of an important British military centre and barracks, Ċensu was posted to the 1st Coast Guard Regiment at Fort St Elmo, Valletta.

At St Elmo, where he was in residence, his quarters consisted of a small room which he shared with Captain Joe Pace, who was his elder and his senior. Lower St Elmo, now in a state of abandon, could accommodate a 700-strong regiment; it was huge but badly utilised. The atmosphere was completely different to that of seeing a patient who turned up at the pharmacy. Ċensu was pleasantly surprised to find that Maltese RMA officers were not the stuffed up, tight upper lip snobs and social climbers, pretending to be Englishmen, which they were made out to be in certain circles. On the contrary they were good people, keen to care for their dependants as best they could.⁶¹ Moreover, war created a sense of solidarity between all servicemen.

Nor was this just another war, least of all for Malta. I asked Ċensu if he recalled Mussolini's speech in Piazza Venezia on 10th June 1940, Italy's declaration of war. Indeed he did. They were all huddled together in St Elmo, listening to the Duce's address being relayed on the radio.⁶² Just about everyone who had a wireless set in Malta must have been similarly glued to it that day. Italy, a neighbour which for so long had symbolized civilization and friendship to so many Maltese opposed to anglicization and British colonialism in Malta, would suddenly transform itself into an enemy of war. People were incredulous. In the First World War, Italy had weighed the situation and waited, until in 1915 it had taken the side of the Allies (although, mind you, that had not stopped the British in Malta whisking away Manwel Dimech, or court-martialling Nerik Mizzi, both undaunted critics of the colonial regime). Now, however, after again waiting and weighing, Italy's Fascist leadership was taking sides *against* the British. And Malta, less than 60 miles away from the

⁶¹ "Qabel dhalt fl-Army, il-Maltin l-idea li kellhom tal-fizzjali tal-RMA kienet li jridu jaghmluha ta' Inglizi, kemm huma keshin... u meta tidhol maghhom tara kemm kienu nies sewwa, kemm kienu jehdu hsieb in-nies taghhom..."

⁶² "Sant'Iermu dakinhar, lejliet, konna miġbura ġo Sant'Iermu nisimghu u d-diskors tad-Duce. Smajnieh ilkoll, ghadni qed narana..."

southern Sicilian shore, was 'British'. No wonder the Duce's speech on 10th June 1940 was listened to in trepidation by Ćensu and his mates in the officers' mess at St Elmo – a fort, incidentally, which had fallen once before, to the Turks, after the deadliest siege. And yet the Duce's speech may have also been listened to passionately, by some colonial victims and *italianita*' fanatics, in anticipation of a soon forthcoming 'liberation' from the British yoke. (Unknown to them, only weeks earlier the possibility that Malta and other territories be ceded to Italy in order to keep her out of the war, had been twice discussed secretly in the British Cabinet.)⁶³

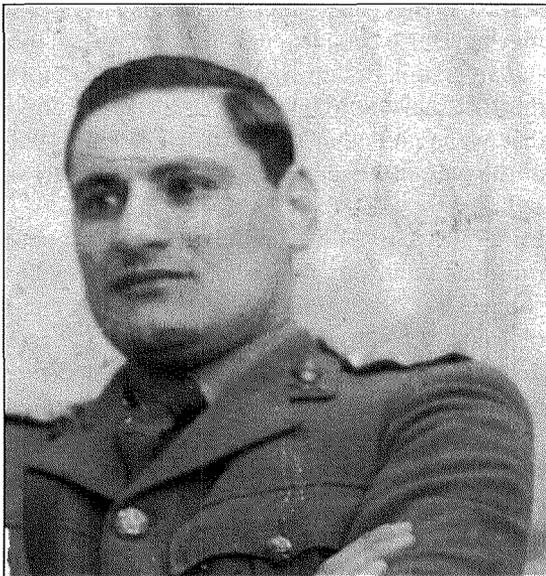
Either way, dismayed or elated, Maltese had little time in which to ruminate their fate. Malta was the first target of the Italian air force. No sooner had that night passed than the enemy planes struck. In the morning the air raid alarm sounded. Ćensu hurried out of bed. He quickly dosed shirt and trousers, no time for epaulettes, and rushed to his post at the medical inspection room in the yard. Just then the bombs started dropping on and around St Elmo. Six bombs exploded. It was "an earthquake". The bombs fell in a straight line. Between the fifth and the sixth bomb, his own room missed a direct hit. As soon as he strayed in the direction of his action station, the 'MI' Room, he was stopped in his tracks by news that people had been killed. On rushing to the spot, he found the corpses. There were several wounded people as well.

The Italian attacks were targeted on the Harbour Fire Command, concrete towers from where the commander directed coast fire. However, at St Elmo there were no anti-aircraft guns then, only coastal guns. As soon as a group of young Maltese soldiers at the Fort saw the enemy planes, they reached out for their rifles and went out to shoot at them in the sky. They had not waged war before; these rifles were all they had. Six of those brave lads were killed instantly in what was, historically, the first aerial attack on Malta in a war. Among them, there was the boy Busuttill. He was the Drum Major's son. He was 16.

⁶³ Henry Frenedo, "The Second World War: A Short Introduction to *The Epic of Malta*" (Lond., c. 1943, facsimile ed., Malta, 1990), iv.



The wartime surgeon in military uniform



Soon after this Ĉensu was faced by an enormous queue for the sick parade. Usually he would have three or four persons reporting sick. In the army you knew if a doctor was worth his salt when he had short rather than long sick parades. Long parades meant that the doctor pampered the would-be patients. On 11th June 1940, queuing up before Ĉensu for inspection, there was “three-fourths of the regiment”. They were all reporting sick. To go away to hospital.

Ĉensu went to the door and addressed them in these words: “Friends, everybody is frightened. Look at my face, I am as frightened as you are. But our place is here. Those of you who are ill and wish to stay, do so;

the others go back to their duties.”⁶⁴ One by one they started retreating until they all went back to their posts. Those few words from the heart, not a lot of shouting, worked. A bond of respect was strung which would last a lifetime. They were all terrified at this first encounter with death. But not one remained for the usual sick parade, not one.

The Italian bombings on 11th June 1940 were just a prelude to what would be regular encounters with death, sometimes daily and repeatedly, for the next four years. The German air attacks were still deadlier, much deadlier. Malta, the most densely populated country in Europe with 270,000 inhabitants on 122 square miles, suffered 3,343 air-raid alerts between June 1940 and August 1944. More than half of these were actual bombing attacks. On an area of approximately the same size as Greater London, some 16,000 tons of bombs were dropped, of which 14,000 fell in 1940-1942. That is, according to one calculation, an average of 147 tons per square mile. Worst hit of course were the cities around the Grand Harbour, and the environs of the air-fields of Luqa, Hal Far and Ta' Qali. By June 1941, 21% of the population were refugees, living outside their normal homes or indeed homeless. The number of buildings that would be destroyed totalled 4,400, including the law courts, the opera house, auberges, churches... Some 5,300 civilians were killed or wounded:

*But war cannot be measured simply by the number of deaths or ruined buildings. The whole experience of it, on such a scale, with such unrelenting fury, was a trauma, the real consequences of which may never be known fully. Camaraderie and endurance, sorrow and despair, faith and hope, perseverance and idealism, ingenuity and adventure, propaganda and victimisation, all went together in different convoluted ways and assumed an aspect of the whole catastrophe.*⁶⁵

⁶⁴ “Jiena hriġt fil-bieb, għedilthom: hbieb, kulhadd imbazza’. Harsu lejn wiċċi, qed nibza’ bhalkom, imma hawn postna. Dawk li huma morda, jekk joghġobkom ibqghu, l-ohrajn, kulhadd imur f’postu.”

⁶⁵ Henry Frendo, “The Second World War: A Short Introduction to *The Epic of Malta*”, op.cit., ii-iii. See the bibliography on Malta during the Second World War, *ibid.*, v-vi.

The Maltese gunners on whom the island so largely relied for its existence, wrote a sensitive British eye-witness (Capt. Lewis Ritchie of *H.M.S. Bartimeus*) “were once farming lads, tailors, gardeners and vegetable sellers. They fought their guns till the barrels were worn out.” Bemoaning the destruction of so much “historic loveliness”, he noted how “the narrow thoroughfares are choked with masonry”. Before the rock shelters and the surviving inhabitants around,

*The laundry blows in the wind and canaries sing in cages against the rock. The centre of the family is the bunk, and the cooking is done on stoves nearby. There is a wireless and the women gossip endlessly. There are no concert parties, no comedians to divert them, no children’s nurses, no books... And they pray, not for themselves, but for the men at the guns, the pilots of the Spitfires, the crews of the convoys... The blast of the bombs sweeps through the shelter, the choking white dust veils them; women wet their handkerchiefs and lay them over their babies’ faces to enable them to breathe.*⁶⁶

Apart from these first bombs that fell on St Elmo, there were other wartime incidents nearby in which Ĉensu was called to serve as a doctor, and to which he was a witness. He was present, for instance, when the law courts were hit by a parachute bomb. One such bomb had not exploded outside the walls of St Elmo. As the parachute was made of nylon, this was much sought after. From it, people made shirts, night-dresses, and so on. In this case, Lieutenant Bartolo and two others went to recover the parachute but as they did so the bomb went off, killing the three of them. Ĉensu was there when the Italian E-Boats tried, unsuccessfully, to storm through the Grand Harbour. The man in charge of the defending battery was Colonel Henry Ferro, who later became a priest. Three of the Italians remained here as prisoners of war. On another occasion Ĉensu attended to the wounded following the sinking by enemy action of a destroyer, *H.M.S. New Zealand*, just inside the Grand Harbour. Many of the crew lost their lives, others survived.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, ii.

In all, Ćensu spent six-and-a-half years in the army. After some sleepless nights following that first fatal bombardment of 11th June 1940, while remaining stationed at St Elmo, he started spending the night at Lintorn Barracks in Floriana, further down from where there used to be the *Ospizio*. Some of the doctors were based at this inspection area. Later on, after a year's service, he was promoted to the rank of Captain. Had he formed part of the Royal Army Medical Corps, after another two or three years he would have become a Major, but as he was in a gunner regiment he remained a lieutenant and a 'Surgeon Captain'. He only wore the RMA buttons, as an RMA doctor, working closely with the chaplain.

On went the sanitary inspections to see if there were any illnesses in the barracks, at least once a month; checks about hygienic facilities; cleanliness; refuse disposal; the quality of water. After St Elmo, the next posting was with the 7th Heavy Ack Ack Regiment. Ćensu was posted first to Tal-Handaq, then he went to St Paul's Bay. Before going back to Mtarfa, finally, he did a stint as a doctor at the '39th General Hospital' in St Andrew's, followed by a 'sequel' in Gozo.

Before displacing themselves from Sicily to the Russian front in April 1942, the Germans savaged Malta with 'scorched earth' bombardments incessantly for three whole days, and the hospital at St Andrew's was itself among the casualties. Ćensu was thus stationed at the hospital in what was, for Malta, the very worst of times. The hospital was full. There were some 300 patients. Among them was a German pilot whose plane had been downed by the anti-aircraft guns, and he was brought to the hospital. On the following morning, at dawn, the air-raid warning sounded. Ćensu was the only doctor at the hospital because the other doctors were in the mess at St Patrick's barracks (where today there is the Sandhurst school). He therefore led those who could walk towards the slit trenches which were next to the one storey wards. Next to each ward, there was a slit trench; other forms of very basic protection were hutments, used as stores. Ćensu was the last one to go down into the trench. Just before him, as it happened, was the German officer. To the sounds of sirens and low-flying attack aircraft, Ćensu could not help looking him in the eye and telling him: "you even bombed the

hospital?”⁶⁷ He could not resist telling him that, although he later regretted it. The man was terrified.

Worse was to come. Soon afterwards the hospital was razed to the ground. Ĉensu and several others were buried in the debris and only escaped with their lives after a salvage operation. The epicentre of the attack, he later found out, was the room where he slept. This simply ceased to exist altogether. Next door, there was a smallpox case, a Maltese soldier. When they went to search for him, instead of the room, which was divided from Ĉensu's by a wall partition, they found a crater made by a 2000 lb. bomb. The soldier's remains were crushed under his bed. As for themselves, their roof had caved in and they were literally buried in stones and debris. In a moment, without hearing anything or sensing any pain, Ĉensu found himself face down on the ground in pitch darkness, trying to breathe. After fifteen minutes, which down there seemed like an eternity, he could feel footsteps above his head. “Help! Help! Help!” he started crying out. The shouts were heard and he was the first one to be dug out of the trench. “There are ten others buried there”, he told his rescuers. These were all dug out, one by one. None of them had died, but several others in the onetime hospital had, and the wounded were legion. On examination, Ĉensu was sent home as he was told he could have a lung injury. He donned a battle-dress jacket on to his pyjamas and went to his in-laws in Sliema, just as those at the hospital site all started being evacuated.

The 39th General Hospital was itself ‘evacuated’ first to Mellieha and then to Gozo, where Ĉensu accompanied it for a year. The Mellieha site was opposite Ghadira, the one storey hutments being just where the General Workers Union now has a holiday complex together with some Danish unions. The opening up of the Russian front eased the aerial bombardments on Malta, so mercifully the German raids ceased. Although a few civilians were killed at Ta' Sannat, Gozo was always much quieter; there were no important harbours or military installations there.

⁶⁷ ‘Ma stajtix nirreżisti; ghedtlu: “hawn sptar, ibbumbardjajuh?”’

Other camp hospitals started being set up, in addition to the naval one at Bighi and the inland one at Mtarfa, with a view to the possibility of a landing in Sicily. The 39th was one of these, the headquarters being the 90th Field Hospital at Mtarfa. There were several specialists from Leeds Infirmary in Malta at the time, including an up-and-coming general who, with some assistance from Ċensu as a Maltese-English translator, published an enquiry on the polio epidemic by which British and American servicemen were severely effected during the war. Whereas the British and Americans in Malta were succumbing to it in droves, Maltese soldiers seemed to be immune to it. None got it.

It was thought that Malta had been affected by polio as a result of the importation of American powdered milk during the war. There was a lot of polio in the U.S.A. then. In Malta, however, polio had been a rare occurrence. As a medical student, Ċensu had only seen one case of polio. He remembers the anaesthetist Chretien explaining how ‘footdrops’ were the result of polio. According to one specialist known to Ċensu, there was a new strain of polio in Malta to which the Maltese were immune, but the British and Americans weren’t. However, new-born Maltese would not be immune to it. These would be hit by the epidemic, he foretold, and unfortunately he was right. The new polio strain had been introduced apparently by the war conditions. Although it was not infectious, several among the newly-born Maltese in the later 1940s would be hit by it.

Ċensu’s temporary ‘burial’ experience at St Andrew’s had commiseration value, it seems, because our gallant doctor was subsequently despatched to Gozo. In Gozo, apart from the KOMR recruitment depot, there was also the 2nd West Kent Regiment. There was nothing else, except that... it was a home-coming. Far from the perils of war. And for a year-long ‘honeymoon’ too. Ċensu had just got married.⁶⁸

Before bringing the army episode to an end, I wished to know more about the meaning of war, Ċensu’s reflections on it as a life experience,

⁶⁸ On Ċensu’s marriage and raising family, see below, 7.

and the repercussions this had had on Maltese human and political tissue. What direct exposure had he had, for instance, to the internees and deportees, whom the British had rounded up in the early 1940s?

One of his uncles had been interned. This was his mother's brother, Baskal Calleja. An architect by profession, he was the father of Joseph, the Hollywood star.⁶⁹ Baskal's great wish was that he would see the British leave Malta. He used to say that he wanted to live long enough to go stand on the breakwater and "salute" the British as they sailed out of the harbour.⁷⁰ He was so pro-Italian that in the mid-1930s he had written to Federzoni, the President of the Italian Senate in Mussolini's time, and told him that his old age did not permit him to await the forthcoming events ("la mia età non mi permette di aspettare gli eventi") but that, before he died, he wished to become an Italian citizen. Federzoni made sure Calleja got his Italian passport.⁷¹ But when the latter, very dutifully, went to the Governor's Palace to consign his Maltese passport and told them that he had become an Italian citizen, they wisely counselled him to desist: "you do what you like, but to us you are still a Maltese citizen."⁷² Thank God for that, Ċensu remarked, because otherwise he would not even have been able to practise as an architect in Malta!

Baskal never told his (second) wife Karmena about this. "Iz-Zija Karmena", who was herself from a pro-Italian family but half-deaf, found herself being addressed in receptions as "la nuova cittadina Italiana". "What are they saying Bask?" she would ask. During the Abyssinian War (when, following the League of Nations' sanctions

⁶⁹ On Joseph Calleja, see above, 2.

⁷⁰ "Kien dejjem jghid: jiena rrid nghix biex immur fuq il-breakwater u nboss lill-Ingliżi huma u herġin. M'iet qabel, kien..."

⁷¹ An ex-Nationalist from Enrico Corradini's stable who had agreed to fuse with the Fascists on the mistaken assumption of moderating or controlling them, Luigi Federzoni had served in Mussolini's Cabinet from the 1920s. He was a cultured man who enjoyed a certain reputation as a Liberal critic, but a vacillating, ambitious opportunist in politics.

⁷² 'B'ghaqal kbir, il-palazz qalulu: "inti aghmel li trid, imma inti ghalina ċittadin Malti."

against Italy, the “oro per la patria” campaign was launched), Baskal wanted to convince Karmena to donate her wedding ring. Many Italian women did this at the time.⁷³ Instead of a golden wedding ring, the lady patriots got a metal one. Baskal wanted to get Karmena one of these. When he finally told her what was afoot, she was furious. To calm her down, he promised to buy her a nice ring.

Baskal was interned, saved from deportation to Uganda by his age. He was in his eighties. Most people were not in favour of the Italians, however; they supported the war aims; Hitler and Mussolini were seen as dictators who had to be subdued. “Iz-Ziju Baskal” was one of the exceptions. These were few in number.

What about Nerik Mizzi, as Ċensu remembered him? What did he stand for really? Being a Nationalist did not mean being an irredentist. Nerik Mizzi probably desired a union with Italy, at least before his court-martial (in 1917), but he never sought to impose that because he knew that the Nationalist Party did not want it. Ċensu never remembers any movement in favour of union with Italy. The fight was more cultural, about the Italian language. “That saved much of our civilization, because otherwise we would have been dominated by the British.”⁷⁴ On the other hand, under fascism Italy’s prestige in the world rose considerably. Fascism also brought discipline, tourism started to flourish, the trains ran on time, and all that. It was a bad system, but then Malta’s was not much better. This is where the Nationalist Party distinguished itself: without it, there would not have been the struggle (for freedom). The Labour Party fought for workers’ rights and the Maltese language, but initially there was not the ambition to obtain Independence. In fact the first major Labour movement was for Integration (with Britain). Independence came as an alternative to Integration. Mintoff’s *madre patria* was Britain. That was his political

⁷³ It was later alleged that much of this treasure was dumped in a lake near Como as Mussolini’s caravan sought to escape capture at Midongo in April 1945!

⁷⁴ “Kienet aktar kulturali l-ġlieda tal-lingwa, li salvatilna hafna miċ-ċivilta’ taghna, ghax kieku konna nkunu ddominati mill-Ingliži.”

mould.⁷⁵ Unfortunately he was probably too conditioned by Marxist theory and the Fabian Society in Oxford:

Let's put it this way. We owe democracy as we know it today to Britain, but not in the colonies. In the colonies, they (the British) were fascists. They depended on the will of Downing Street. They then gave power to the obsequious, those subjected to them in the territory. That is why the worst secretary we had was Strickland. When Strickland ruled, it was the worst period of English colonialism. They make use of such persons. They exploited petty rivalries in the locality. What do they care if you got the contract rather than me? They left that to the locals. The situation was frightening.⁷⁶

This is a fairly typical Nationalist version of the colonial dynamic, influenced in this case by a personal reading of the inter-war years, which Ċensu lived through; but perhaps it is rather more than that.⁷⁷ While Ċensu fully realises that for Fortunato Mizzi to aspire to Independence in the 19th century would have been out of place, the ambition being to secure self-government within the empire, Malta was nonetheless privileged compared to other British colonies. Because of the culture which the British found in Malta, “we kept two institutions which safeguarded our culture. These were the civil service and the judiciary.” These were the two foundations. The Italian language then was “the strongest instrument to prevent us from being dominated by the

⁷⁵ “Mintoff *il-madre patria tiegħu* l-Ingilterra kienet. Hemm ġie plażmat fil-politika.”

⁷⁶ “Ejja nitkellmu, l-Ingliżi, l-oriġini tad-demokrazija kif nafuha llum, nafuha lil pajjiżhom, mhux fil-kolonji. Fil-kolonji kienu faxxisti. Jiddependu mill-volonta’ ta’ Downing Street. Imbgħad ċerta awtorita’ li jagħtu lil min jilgħaqhom u sugġett għalihom fil-pajjiż. Għalhekk l-aġar segretarju ngliż li kellna kien Strickland. Kien l-aġar perijodu tal-kolonjalizmu ngliż meta kien hawn Strickland. Huma jużaw lil dawn in-nies. Jisfruttaw il-’petty rivalries’ tal-lokal. Dak x’jimpurtah jekk il-kuntratt teħdux inti jew jien? Kienu jhallu f’idejn in-nies lokali. Tal-biża’ kienet is-sitwazzjoni.”

⁷⁷ I remember being impressed when in 1989 I had asked Dr Albert Ganado (1924-), while at his house in Valletta, whether Mintoff had not been “worse” than Strickland; after a pause his response was in the negative.

British in everything: it saved the Maltese identity.”⁷⁸ (And there was the Church, no doubt.)

How did the War change that? War reduced and changed this aspect. The Maltese now found themselves in dire need. Politics didn't work in wartime, because everyone was preoccupied with staying alive until the evening. Wartime politics were all in favour of the British winning, because otherwise “we would be invaded and God knows what would befall us.” Only a minority would have felt otherwise. The people were loyal, there was no dearth of volunteers. “When Borg Pisani was hanged there was no particular commotion.”⁷⁹

Life during the war was tense, there was misery; but it was also a time of solidarity. Although Malta as a colony was undoubtedly fighting someone else's war, the great majority of Maltese still felt that they were fighting on the right side.

Career-wise, Ċensu's army service opened up an opportunity which might otherwise never have arisen. That changed his life. After his earlier postings to Valletta, St Andrew's, Gozo, St Paul's Bay and Tal-Handaq, he returned to Mtarfa in one piece. It was there that, finally, he could become an ‘ophthalmic trainee’.

⁷⁸ “... Dawn kienu ż-żewġ sisien, u allura l-lingwa Taljana kienet l-aqwa strument biex ma nkunux iddominati mill-Ingliżi f'kollox, salvat l-identita' Maltija.”

⁷⁹ “Meta dendlu lil Borg Pisani ma kienx hawn xi agha.” Borg Pisani was a Maltese artist and irredentist who had been sent out from Italy to somehow spy on the situation in Malta. He ended up stranded and was unwittingly identified by a childhood friend, Tommy Warrington. On the Borg Pisani case, see Lawrence Mizzi, *Ghall-Holma Ta' Hajtu* (Malta, 1980).

Post-Graduate Training

THE EYE DOCTOR

GERMAN reverses in North Africa saw the tide of war turn in favour of the Allies; in 1943 the Italian fleet effectively surrendered at St Paul's Bay in Malta. After the Allied landings in Sicily, the number of troops stationed in Malta started to decline. Although war raged on to the north, for Malta the worst was over. The army doctor had less pressing duties to attend to now. He therefore asked to go to the Mtarfa 'headquarters' where he could begin some practical training as an eye doctor. The war was a lucky break in so far as Ćensu's army service led him on to other things, but it had also interrupted his medical studies. He could not specialize or sit for exams in wartime.

He signed on for a post-graduate correspondence course and, in the meantime, he could serve at the 90th General Hospital at Mtarfa. He had the further advantage that Mtarfa then had a resident British ophthalmologist, one Major Jamieson, a Londoner. Ćensu could thus assist him and learn from him.⁸⁰

Ćensu was demobilized from the army in 1946. He was now 33. A married man with a young family but still without any professional

⁸⁰ Jamieson retired in Malta after the war, where he developed a keen interest in painting, going to Caruana Dingli for lessons. He died some years ago.

specialization, he desperately needed to go overseas and get a post-graduate degree. As he could not afford to pay his way he depended on some kind of scholarship to be able to proceed. Fortunately, a few scholarships were available to those who had been demobilized. He got one of these. Once again the army connection had come in handy. The scholarship was for one year, renewable for a second year, at £600 annually. This was not very much, but it certainly helped; indeed it made it possible for him to embark on this new mission. He went as far as France by military transport. From Nice, he then took the train to London, where he arrived still wearing his military uniform.

A 'British' army uniform from the George Cross Island commanded a certain respect in London in 1946. Čensu was well taken care of on arrival, given temporary lodgings and assigned to the relevant hospital. This was not inappropriately called Warfields. At Warfields, Čensu sat for his chosen course and specialised there obtaining, initially, a diploma in ophthalmic medicine and surgery. So long as he was a student, he could not perform any operations. Needing surgical practice, he applied to university hospitals where he could further his optic talents.

Of the two universities he had applied for, Sheffield was the first to reply. He went up from London for interview and was accepted. Čensu arrived in Sheffield, in the Midlands, Britain's industrial heart, in the winter of 1946. It was just before Christmas. The ground was snow white, the walls as black as soot. A sadness overcame him at the sight. He could hardly live there, but he had to be patient. Sheffield had a good ophthalmology department. On returning to his London digs after his acceptance at Sheffield, Čensu found a letter in the mail from Cambridge. Cambridge too offered him enrolment. He opted for the milder and more prestigious Cambridge. Compared to Sheffield, this offered a pastoral 'town and gown' ambience. He told a less successful Dutch fellow traveller about his decision: she promptly contacted Sheffield, telling them that the Maltese doctor could not make it, and got enrolled there herself.

After a year in England, Ċensu returned to Malta with a diploma in ophthalmology and a basic surgical apprenticeship permitting him to get started on the job. While in London preparing for his exams, he also went down to Oxford for two months. He went specifically to follow a course by Professor Ida Mann, who was regarded as one of the world's top ophthalmologists. This made a great impression on him, so much so that he thinks that it was from the Oxford Medical School that he acquired much of what he had learnt for life in this branch of medicine and surgery. At Cambridge, however, he had also given some tutorials to undergraduates at the Adenbrooks Hospital in Trumpington Street.

Ċensu's ambition was to get the Fellowship, not simply the diploma. In England, such Fellowships were given in General Surgery, not in Ophthalmology. It was in Scotland that you could get the Fellowship he was after. On returning to Malta in 1947/1948, therefore, Ċensu took another correspondence course leading to this Fellowship. Towards the end of it, he went up to Edinburgh for two months and sat successfully for his exams there, in 1949.

Like many another ambitious Gozitan before him – from Sir Adriano Dingli to Sir Arturo Mercieca, and from Professor Ġużé Aquilina to Professor J. J. Cremona – Ċensu Tabone had now collected a string of qualifications with which to face life in relative security. Apart from his first degrees in pharmacy and then in medicine at the Royal University of Malta in 1933 and 1937 respectively, by 1946 he was also armed with two diplomas in ophthalmology, another diploma in medicine and surgery from the royal colleges of surgeons and of physicians in London a year later, and he was now, finally, a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, in ophthalmology. Collecting other certificates and distinctions on the way ahead, many years later, in 1991, the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh would award him a gold medal for distinguished service. As he was already an F.R.C.S. by examination, they could not give him an honorary F.R.C.S., but they felt they had to give him something. He was their only Fellow who had ever made it to Head of State!

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19 Jan 2000

Dear Professor FREUDO,

My brother Joe has forwarded to me your letter to him; I received it today. I am happy to be of any assistance because I have a very high opinion of Censu as a person, a friend, a doctor and a politician. Also, I think a biography of Censu is much needed and long overdue.

A further indication is that I am glad to make your acquaintance. My grandfather was my father's lawyer; while your father Joe and his mother Victoria were childhood mates of mine when they lived in Birkbeck before the war. We grew up through computers of Ferranti and remained friends until separated by war.

Censu and I first became acquainted at St. Aloysius College at borders there. He was 3 years older than me and 3 classes ahead. He entered the University to study Medicine (1930-37) whilst I followed (1933-40). As students our acquaintance grew into friendship as we shared the same style of friends in our school days and ways. I have a photo of Censu taken at that time: "Censu gets a lift home".

When, in 1940, WWII reached Malta, Censu joined the Army and I was appointed Junior Medical Officer at Ferrania's Central Hospital (1940-42). In 1943, I spent some time in 6020's Victoria Hospital & became friends with Censu's brother Dr. Peter (il' principal). During 1944-46, I was in London for postgraduate studies on a Nuffield Foundation Fellowship and in 1947 returned to Malta as Government Child Specialist. As such, I had a limited visiting 6020 and later on implementing the Malta's (1930) (re-nomination into) 6020 Campaign⁶⁰. I became acquainted with the quality and scope of Censu's brother's (il' principal) work in 6020. During that 6020 Campaign, Censu gave me splendid advice on several aspects of that campaign. He knew his island home so well!

The first folio of a letter to the author from Dr. Victor Zammit Tabona, shortly before he passed away in England, recalling his friendship with Censu over a long span and in different capacities.

For four decades, from 1947 to 1987, Ċensu Tabone “ta’ l-ghajnejn” would be one of Malta’s leading eye surgeons, seeing and healing thousands of patients. Many of those who saw him at the Vilhena Dispensary or, initially, at the Central Hospital, in Floriana, at Norman’s Pharmacy in Sliema, at St Luke’s Hospital in Guardamangia, or indeed at 33, Strada Carmine, in St Julian’s, where he has lived ever since he got married, and elsewhere, will remember his professional and gentlemanly manner mostly with gratitude and affection. In the words of a highly distinguished medical colleague, as an ophthalmologist Ċensu excelled in the study of the eye and the diagnosis and treatment of disorders that effect it. The scope of his work extended well beyond Trachoma for he was also “an excellent clinical ophthalmologist who would unfailingly detect retinal signs” and diseases ranging from hypertension to diabetes to brain tumours:

*Ċensu was a relative rarity: a very high level performer and all rounder in his chosen field of work. To this he added a humanity towards his patients which is seldom equalled.*⁸¹

One of the most extraordinary experiences Ċensu had as an eye doctor occurred in February 1964 when one of his patients, Carmelo Zammit Endrich, who was suffering from a detached retina, was suddenly, spontaneously and mysteriously cured – without any further ophthalmological intervention. Zammit Endrich was a 37 year-old government surveyor from Senglea living in Casal Paola, married to Antonia Iris. When the success of a first operation held in September 1963 had only lasted for a few months, and a second more serious one was due, a friend of Zammit Endrich, one Karmnu Spiteri, on 2nd February 1963 put under his pillow a black shoe-lace belonging to a holy man, Dun Ġorġ Preca, who had died a year earlier, and together they prayed to Dun Ġorġ.⁸²

⁸¹ Zammit-Tabona/Frendo, 19 Jan. 2000, f. 3.

⁸² The patient later recounted that during the first operation he had had a vision of Dun Ġorġ who went by his side. The patient had reached out for him, as if to hold or embrace him. Both Ċensu and another doctor who was present told him not to do that: they saw no Dun Ġorġ around (he was dead) and they were trying to perform an operation; obviously the patient had to keep still. When, after some months, his retina had become detached again, while awaiting a second operation (he had been medically advised against proceeding to London for treatment), in praying to Dun Ġorġ, the patient had placed a shoe-lace that had belonged to Dun Ġorġ on his bad eye.

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DATE: ~~27/8~~ 28.1.87

	Sph.	Cyl.	Ax.	Prism.	Sph.	Cyl.	Ax.	Prism.
DISTANCE	-4.0	-2.0	90		+0.25	+0.5	90	
READING								

Inter-Pupillary Distance: 62

Remarks: *Wearing Contact*

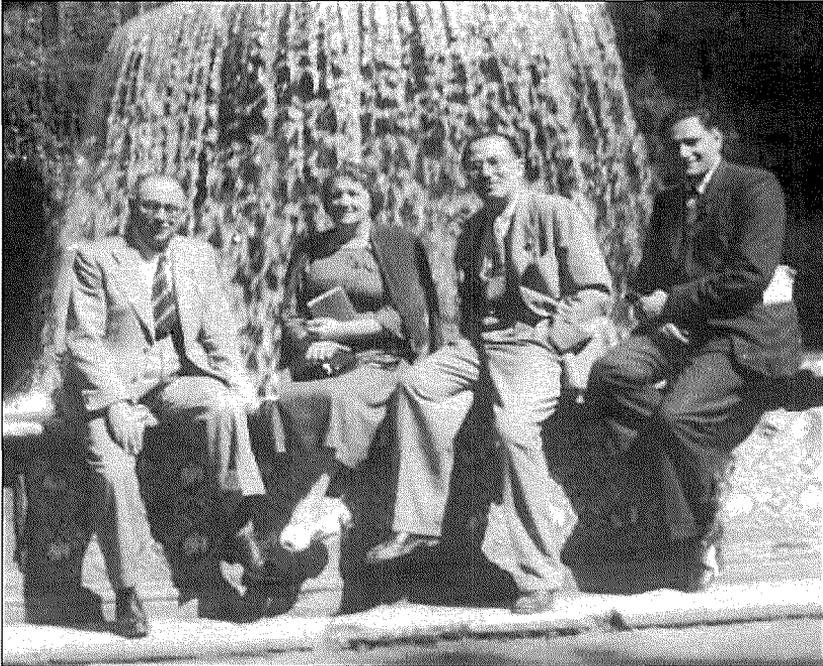
Name: *John...*
 45 St. ...
 Signature: *[Signature]*
 31249

4061951
DUPLICATE
 LICENCE TO DRIVE A MOTOR CAR
 (PRIVATE)
Dr. Vincent Tabone M.D.
 33 Camel St.
 St. Julian's
 is hereby licensed to Drive a Motor Car for the year 1951.
 FEE PAID 2/6
 STAMP DUTY 1/6
 Commissioner of Police
 Every Driver shall be in possession of a copy of the motor car regulations.
 Usual Signature of Licensee: *[Signature]*

Above Left: One of the thousands of eyesight prescriptions made out over the years.
 Above Right: Ćensu's first licence to drive a motor car.

No sooner had this happened, that Zammit Endrich's eyesight was perfectly restored, so that when Ćensu went to inspect him in preparation for the planned second operation he literally could not believe his eyes. Ćensu knew nothing about the prayers and devotion to Preca, or that his patient had placed the shoe-lace on his bad eye. On the advice of a Capuchin friar (Patri Daniel Tabone) to whom the wife, Antonia Iris, had immediately confided, they were not to tell Ćensu anything about what had happened, to see what his professional advice would be. Ćensu went in briefly to inspect the patient and see that everything was in order for the operation due, but instead of a perfunctory inspection this visit lasted more than one hour.

It was a cold, wintry day. Āensu, not being able to detect anything that required any surgical intervention whatsoever, sweated with perspiration. As he emerged from the bedroom, his wife asked him what he thought. He told her that, incredibly, he could find no sign of anything wrong at all. She then told him that they had prayed to Dun ĀorgĀ, still not mentioning the Preca shoe-lace Spiteri had obtained and taken to her husband. "In that case", Āensu replied, shaken, "go and thank whomsoever you prayed to because this man has nothing: he is completely healed."



A break in Tivoli from sessions of the first Congress for Catholic doctors held at Palazzo Venezia, Rome, in 1949. Seated on the fountain with Āensu (right) are his elder brother Anton ("il-principal") and his wife Estelle nēe Camilleri, together with the physician Walter Ganado.

88° TESTE (31° ex off.): Dott. Vincenzo TABONE, di anni 68.

Il teste, nato a Vittoria (Gozo) il 30 marzo 1913, alla morte del Servo di Dio aveva 49 anni. Coniugato e residente a St Julian's, al tempo della deposizione era deputato parlamentare. Nel 1989 divenne Presidente della Repubblica di Malta.

Il teste describe la guarigione straordinaria di un suo paziente il Sig. Carmelo Zammit Endrich. Il Dott. Tabone, oltre al suo impegno nella vita politica è noto pure per la sua professione di oculista.

Il teste ha deposto a La Valletta il 28 luglio 1981 nella sessione 261 (Proc., pp. 1033-1034).

(Proc. p. 1033) Sono l'oculista Dottor Vincenzo Tabone del fu Nicolò, di sessanta otto (68) anni, nato nella parrocchia di Santa Maria Assunta, Vittoria, Gozo e residente nella parrocchia di San Giuliano, San Giuliano a Mare. Sono Cattolico praticante e coniugato.

§ 941
Generalità del
teste.

Domanda "ex officio"

Che cosa sa dire di preciso l'egregio oculista sulla guarigione del Signor Carmelo Zammit Endrich di Paola? Come sa certamente il teste, il paziente lo scoglie dal segreto professionale.

Risposta: Il mio paziente, una quindicina di anni fa, ebbe un distacco della retina, non ricordo se dall'occhio destro o sinistro. Dopo un esame accurato, decisi di sottoporlo ad un intervento chirurgico. L'intervento fu praticato nella casa privata di un certo Carmelo Tabone ora morto, usando diatermia. La convalescenza fu alquanto tempestosa a causa di una infiammazione oculare. Eventualmente l'occhio si ristabilì con un riaccoglimento normale della retina. Alcuni giorni dopo, anzi alcune settimane dopo, ci fu un secondo distacco della retina nello stesso occhio, come delle volte accade. Un secondo intervento fu allora deciso dopo un esame accuratissimo. Il giorno prima, mi recai alla casa del Signor Zammit Endrich per fare dei preparativi per l'intervento e naturalmente riesaminai l'occhio concernato e con molta accuratezza e con mia grande sorpresa constatai che la retina si era completamente riattaccata da sé.

§ 942
Una guarigione, inspiegabile in modo scientifico.

(Proc. p. 1034) Il secondo intervento non ebbe luogo e durante questi anni ho rivisto saltuariamente il Signor Zammit Endrich e la retina è rimasta riattaccata e l'occhio è rimasto funzionale come prima. Aggiungo che faccio l'oftalmologo da trentacinque (35) anni e non ho mai avuto una simile guarigione; e neppure ho letto di una guarigione simile.

Preciso che non sono legato al Servo di Dio da vincoli di parentela o stretta amicizia, non ho interessi umani in questa causa e neppure sono prevenuto.

Concludo che non mi posso spiegare questa guarigione in modo scientifico.

Little did Ćensu know that before his arrival at the Zammit Endrich residence that morning, on 3rd February 1964, his 'blind' patient had already read the morning papers without the slightest difficulty, and the previous evening, again contrary to doctor's orders, he had even sat down to watch television! Still less did Ćensu realise that this cure would in time come to be regarded as miraculous, leading to the beatification of Dun Ġorġ, who now seems likely to become Malta's first saint.

87° TESTE (30^a ex off): Sig. Carmelo ZAMMIT ENDRICH,
di anni 55.

Il teste, nato a Senglea nel 1926, alla morte del Servo di Dio aveva 36 anni. Coniugato e pensionato, risiede a Paola. Ex-impiegato governativo.

Il teste fu chiamato "ex officio" solo per deporre una grazia ricevuta per intercessione del Servo di Dio.

Il teste ha deposto a La Valletta il 9 giugno 1981 nella sessione 260 (*Proc.*, pp. 1030-1032).

(*Proc. p. 1030*) Sono Carmelo, comunemente detto Charles Zammit Endrich di Carmelo, di cinquantacinque (55) anni, ex-impiegato governativo, coniugato, cattolico praticante. Nacqui a Senglea e sono residente nella parrocchia di Cristo Re, Paola. Non sono legato al Servo di Dio da vincoli di parentela o stretta amicizia; non ho interessi umani in questa Causa, e non sono affatto prevenuto.

§ 939
Generalità del
teste.

Domanda "ex officio"

Può raccontare in succinto la grazia straordinaria da lei ottenuta per intercessione del Servo di Dio?

Risposta: Nel mese di settembre del 1963, cioè poco dopo la morte del Servo di Dio, cominciai a notare i primi segni del distacco della retina dell'occhio sinistro.

§ 940
Grazia ricevuta
per intercessione
del Servo di Dio.

(*Proc. p. 1031*) Lo specialista Dottore Vincenzo Tabone accettò che si trattava veramente del distacco della retina e fissò il giorno per l'intervento in una casa privata. Mentre aspettavo a letto avevo davanti un quadretto del Divin Redentore venerato nella Basilica di Senglea, assolutamente non ricordo che invocai anche l'intercessione del Servo di Dio. Per l'operazione il summenzionato oculista usò solo una iniezione anestetica e conservai il pieno uso dei sensi. È superfluo rilevare che avevo l'occhio destro coperto. Tuttavia durante l'intervento tutto di un tratto mi parve di vedere nel quadretto la figura di Don Giorgio e tesi la mano per afferrarla. Gli astanti, tra i quali p.e. il dottor Filippo Micallef, residente ora a Old Railway Road, Balzan, notarono questo gesto della mia mano. L'intervento, a giudizio dello stesso oculista ebbe pieno successo. Circa quattro mesi dopo, però, la stessa retina cominciò a staccarsi dalla parte opposta. In breve, lo stesso oculista fissò il giorno per un secondo intervento. Quella volta ricorsi sì all'intercessione del Servo di Dio, anzi un membro del Circolo della Società della Dottrina Cristiana di Senglea, precisamente Carmelo Spiteri tuttora residente a Senglea, mi procurò un pezzo dei lacci delle scarpe del Servo di Dio per me e alla vigilia dell'intervento, mentre guardavo il televisore, ad un tratto notai un notevole miglioramento nella mia vista.

The Catholic Church began an official inquiry into this mysterious incident, and generally about Dun Ġoġ, in 1975, collecting witnesses and sifting through circumstantial evidence. Dun Ġoġ Preca (1880-1962), a exemplary man of great humility who sought to instruct common people in the faith, was the founder of an evangelically-

oriented Society of Christian Doctrine, popularly known as “tal-Mużew”, and his quiet charisma held many in awe even during his lifetime.

Censu first testified before the tribunal on 28th July 1981.⁸³ His testimony would be requested in greater detail on 7th January 1992.⁸⁴ He would later sketch and confirm the condition from which the patient had been suffering and affirm that its healing was spontaneous and scientifically unexplainable. He even managed to trace some of his notes about the case dating back to when it had happened, and supplied the Vicar General with these, for the sake of absolute precision, in 1996.

⁸³ See the summary of the report *Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servi Dei Georgii Preca, Sacerdos Fundatoris Societas Doctrinae Christianae* (M.U.S.E.U.M.) (1880-1962), lasting between 1975 and 1987, esp. p. 385 (Censu's first testimony), and pp. 383-384 (Carmelo Zammit Endrich, now 55).

⁸⁴ See the subsequent investigations, *Positio Super Miracolo* (Rome, 1999), esp. pp. 6-11 (Censu), pp. 12-21 (Sig.ra Antonia Iris Zammit Endrich), and pp. 22-26 (Sig. Carmelo Spiteri). This last testimony has considerable bearing on the actual context of the case: ‘...La signora mi ha detto che suo marito aveva avuto una ricaduta con un altro distacco di retina... Sono stato informato che il dott. Censu Tabone lo doveva operare di nuovo. Io la incoraggiai ad avere fiducia nel Signore e di chiedere l’intercessione del Servo di Dio. All’inizio la Signora rifiuto’ il mio suggerimento ed aveva una reazione molto negattiva e non voleva pregare a nessuno. Ma poi con pazienza la convinsi e le dissi che avevo un laccio nero di una scarpa del Servo di Dio che avevo preso come ricordo. L’indomani il padre del sig. Zammit Endrich e’ venuto da me chiedendo il laccio che io gli diedi perche’ ero convinto che il Servo di Dio poteva procurargli la guarigione. Due giorni dopo, ho ricevuto una telefonata da casa Zammit Endrich e mi dissero di andare da loro al piu’ presto perche’ volevano parlarimi. Sono andato di corsa e ho trovato il sig. Zammit Endrich seduto sul letto e sembrava del tutto normale. Mi hanno raccontato, appena arrivato, che era venuto il dott. Censu Tabone per prepararlo per l’intervento chirurgico e durante la visita si mostro’ molto sorpreso perche’ non poteva riscontrare alcunche’ di anormale nel occhio “malato”. La signora Zammit Endrich chiese il perche’ di questa sua perplessita’ e il dott. Tabone aveva risposto “O si trattava di una grande grazia o di un miracolo” (Vulgo: Jew grazzja number one jew miraklu.) Poi mostro una lettera che aveva ricevuto dagli specialisti in Inghilterra ai quali aveva scritto e che scongiurarono che il sig. Zammit Endrich facesse un viaggio in aereo per l’Inghilterra. Il dott. Tabone non effettuo’ in queste circostanze l’intervento chirurgico. Mi hanno anche riferito che di notte si erano recati presso la tomba del Servo di Dio per ringraziare il Signore. Il sig. Zammit Endrich mi ha anche detto che mentre chiedeva l’intercessione del Servo di Dio ha messo il laccio delle scarpe sull’occhio malato. Due giorni dopo, il dott. Tabone si reco’ di nuovo per visitare il sig. Zammit Endrich e lo trovo’ senza alcun segno della malattia. Prima di lasciare la casa Zammit Endrich, il sig. Zammit Endrich mi ha consegnato il laccio che gli avevo prestato.’ I am grateful to the MUSEUM directorate in Hamrun and to Rev. Dr. Charles Scicluna in Rome for making this documentation available to me, with permission to quote from it.

During our interviews over the years, Ĉensu had not mentioned any of this to me. He had felt bound by professional secrecy. I found out about some of these revelations from others who informed me that on 2nd February 2000 there had been at the MUSEUM headquarters in Blata-l-Bajda a “Ĉelebrazzjoni tal-miraklu li sar bl-interċessjoni tal-Venerabbli Dun Ġorġ Preca”, at which both the patient’s widow as well as Ĉensu himself had been invited to speak out, as indeed they did, in front of a congregation of adherents of the Christian Doctrine Society. This was followed by another meeting, open to a wider public, in which more information about the case started slowly to become accessible and to percolate.

The key professional witness in the whole case was Ĉensu who, by 1963-1964, had an established reputation as an ophthalmologist; in 1981 he was also a leading Nationalist politician. In 1992, when he testified a second time, he was the President of Malta, no longer the fledgling graduate trying to get his grades or his Fellowship from Edinburgh.

That Fellowship from Edinburgh in 1949 had opened other avenues. The first and not the least seminal of these was that, in 1961, he could get a teaching post at the university in Malta. Before any of that, however, something else of much lasting significance in his life had happened: Ĉensu Tabone had met and married Maria Wirth.

Marsalforn Sweetheart

LIFE WITH MARIA

ĈENSU met Maria while he was still a university student, in the mid-1930s. Maria was the daughter of Dr Francesco Wirth, a magistrate, and Elena Caruana Dingli. Married in 1918, they hailed from Valletta. Maria was a city girl, raised at the family home in 3, Strada Tesoreria (“hdejn il-Premier”), in the heart of Malta’s baroque capital city. The Gozo connection came from the fact that her father’s duties as a magistrate entailed that during the summer months, if and when necessary, he would sit at the court in Gozo. The Wirths thus spent their summer months in Gozo, as did Ĉensu with his own family, who would move to Marsalforn from their residence at 9, Racecourse Street, Victoria. There were no lessons or lectures to attend: the Maltese summer was literally *fešta* time, the more so for carefree children and youngsters.

Hardly anyone lived permanently in Marsalforn then; the place only came alive in summer as a *vileġġatura*. Several Gozitan as well as Maltese families kept house there and made an extended seaside holiday of their summers. Life slowed down, employees were on half-days or took leave, schools and some other institutions closed for nearly three months. Marsalforn was ideal for children, with sandy and rocky beaches, healthy, serene and safe. Tucked in below the Qrolla s-Safra and stretching all along the Sicily-facing coast from Ghar Qawqla to

il-Qbajjar, a fishermen's den with plenty of fresh catch at Il-Menqa and a little old chapel perched just above the bay, Marsalforn was picturesque, quiet and quaint, characterised by life out of doors. Ideal for swimming and sea-side frolic, promenading and serenading, this living romance became many a lover's nesting ground.⁸⁵

Like the Tabones, the Wirths had a summer house in Marsalforn. The former lived down the road from Victoria close to the bay, overlooking the valley, the latter in the street leading to the chapel, across from it, named after Bishop Sir Pietro Pace. Such was the setting in which, one fine summer, Ċensu and Maria met. However, as Ċensu spent his student life in Malta, they did not have to restrict their casual encounters to the summer months.

Maria was a good seven years younger than Ċensu. By the time he had completed his MD, she had finished secondary school at St Joseph's High School (in Strada Zaccaria, Valletta). They were good and even favourite friends for many summers, but they only started really 'going steady' after Ċensu had become a doctor (in 1937). This was not uncommon; it was half-expected. Doctors had to start a clientele before they could wed. Then there were the two years spent at the hospital, after graduation, if you managed to get in. Ċensu did these (in Floriana) before he joined the army in 1939.⁸⁶

The two got married in wartime, while Ċensu, 28, was a surgeon captain in the army. The date: 23rd November 1941, at 9.30 a.m. The venue: a chapel in the Bishop's Palace, Gozo (in other words just across the street from the Tabone residence). The celebrant: His Lordship the Bishop of Gozo, Mgr Michele Gonzi; it was he who officiated and said Mass.

⁸⁵ In Ċensu's untranslatable turn of phrase: "Marsalforn il-post tan-namuri, kulhadd jghix barra."

⁸⁶ "Sabitni lest. Hi forsi kellha ideat fuqi qabel, imma qatt ma kkomplejnjat..."



*21st November 1941:
Ĉensu and Maria emerge from
the Chapel in the Bishop's
Palace beneath a canopy of six
swords held high by RMA
officers.*

The new couple had a 'military' wedding, with Ĉensu in full uniform, and a canopy of swords to usher them out of church. According to a report in *The Times of Malta* published on the day following the wedding, the bride, who was given away by her father,

wore a becoming white cloqué frock made with a long, close-fitting bodice and a train cut in one with the skirt. Her old lace veil (a family heirloom) was held in place by a topknot of roses and she carried a

bouquet of white roses. For ornament she wore a diamond cross – the gift of the bridegroom...⁸⁷

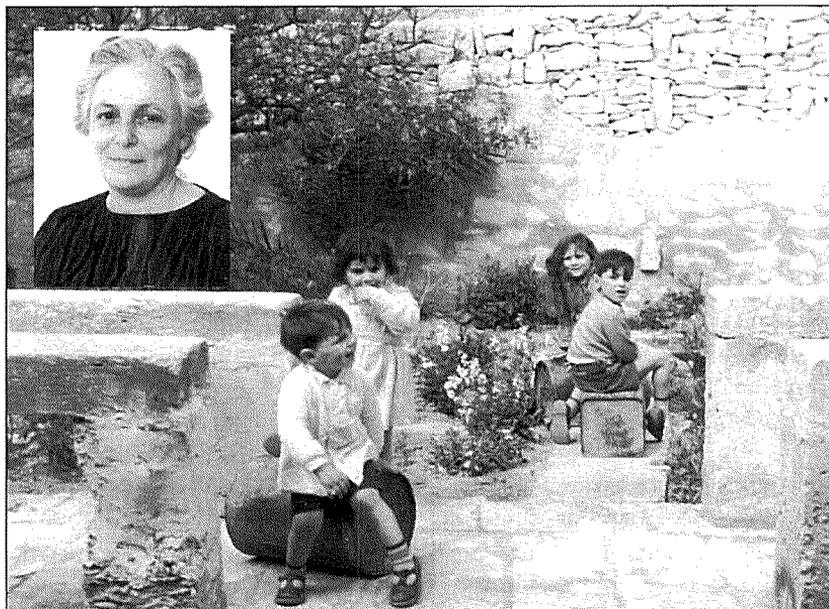
The bridesmaids were Ĉensu's sister Carmelina and Maria's sister Thérèse. The witness for the bride was Dr Paul Grima, and for the groom Lt. Col. T. F. Briggs, R.A.M.C., Officer-in-Command 15th Field Ambulance. Grima was the Superintendent at Victoria Hospital. Briggs was Ĉensu's commanding officer. Surgeon Captain G. Bonello, M.D., Royal Malta Artillery, acted as bestman.



*Below: "The Pirates' Den" in oldtime Marsalforn, as modernisation creeps in.
Left: by the bay in wintertime.*



⁸⁷ See the report, which also carried a posed picture of the newly-weds, in *The Times of Malta*, 24 Nov. 1941.



Four of the five children playing in the garden at St Julian's, from left: Francis, Patricia, the twins Monica and Vincent. The eldest child, Marilise, is not with them. Inset: Maria.

The published report of the wedding was not without a touch of make-believe. The reception held afterwards at no. 6, Bishop Pace Street, Marsalforn, was actually a home-made party at the bride's summer house: there was no catering out, everything was made at home by the bride's family. Moreover, sugar and eggs were very scarce. The Wirths were staying there, even in the Autumn, as 'refugees'. "On leaving for their honeymoon the bride wore a grey woollen coat over a blue frock and blue accessories." The honeymoon was to last ten days at a little hotel, The Royal Lady, in Mgarr, not more than twenty minutes away. The bride came with her father to Victoria in a hired *karrozzin*, and the married couple went back to Marsafornequally in a hired *karrozzin*. As no photographer could be found, Oliver Vella, a family friend who was the Assistant Commissioner for Gozo, took the only existing picture of

this wedding with a camera he had, as Ċensu and Maria were coming down the steps of the Bishop's Palace under the sword arch. Another photograph (the one given to the newspaper) was taken, at home. One relish was that the newly-weds were taken to Mġarr for their 'honeymoon' in a motor car. This belonged to the Commissioner for Gozo, Mr Martin, who happened to be on an official visit to the harbour.

Ċensu and Maria had barely unpacked their bags at the hotel when, in the afternoon of their wedding day, notice of a code-named first class emergency arrived. A German invasion of the Maltese Islands was gravely anticipated. All military personnel in Gozo had to report immediately to their units. A special schedule of Gozo boats was set up to transport the troops to Marfa by not later than that same evening.

Ċensu told Maria to stay behind. She would not. The Gozo army medical officer put his motor car at their disposal so that they could take leave of their families in Victoria and Marsalforn. Some honeymoon. The farewell scenes were heart-breaking, as might be expected on the eve of a forecast Nazi invasion. Pressed to stay behind by both the families, Maria refused. They were due to travel from Mġarr by the last boat in the emergency time-table, at 9 p.m. That adamant resolve to stay by her husband through thick and thin would distinguish Maria's personality and disposition throughout their married life, as wife, mother and, occasionally, a political activist in her own right. Ċensu's career certainly would owe much to her support and consideration. In time, she would also travel the world with him.

On that fateful evening of their wedding day, they were carried back to Mġarr to await embarkation. At six o'clock Ċensu had a call from the office of his superior, the Deputy Director of Medical Services. The emergency, Ċensu was informed, had passed. He could stay in Gozo for the whole length of his leave... The secretary of the D.D.M.S. later told Ċensu more accurately in what words their boss had reversed the emergency order in his case: "Tell Tabone to go back to bed!"

The large convoy of ships moving south from Sicily was packed with reinforcements and supplies for “the desert fox”, General Rommel, in Tripoli.

On getting married, the Tabones moved to a terraced house which Ċensu had rented from the Carmelite Friars in St Julian’s. Just about that whole street belonged to the Carmelite Friars of Rabat.

Bar the escapades to Gozo, where the couple later bought another house for themselves in Marsalforn, they never moved from this Strada Carmine residence, with its little garden – not before 1989 when they had to go to another palace, to live in it, for five years.

Maria was one of eight children in her family, Ċensu one of ten. True to form and to Catholic tradition in the Maltese Islands, Ċensu and Maria went on to have nine children themselves. These were (are): Marilise (1942), Colin (1943), Helen (1945), the twins Vincent and Monica (1948), Patricia (1949), Francis (1951), Joseph Pius (who only lived for one day in 1954), and Anna (1956). For a family with so many children, one following close on the other including a pair of twins, the garden in Strada Carmine was a godsend. “They played in it all the time”, Maria says.

Curing Trachoma

IN GOZO AND IN ASIA

IN between his Oxford diploma (1947) and his Edinburgh Fellowship (1949), and shortly thereafter, Ćensu started to put theory into practice in a big way. The up-and-coming eye doctor did not limit himself to treatment of individual cases at the Central and Gozo hospitals or in his pharmacy-clinics. Much more pro-active than that, as he was wont to be, Ćensu embarked on a national government campaign to investigate, diagnose and cure prevalent eye diseases in the Maltese Islands. The major test case, and the worst hit area, was his own native island of Gozo. Little could Ćensu have realised then that such a Gozo campaign, and his initial experimental findings in a remote little island, would catapult him to a pioneering field consultancy for several years on behalf of the Geneva-based World Health Organisation. The United Nations had been founded by 51 countries in October 1945 to maintain world peace and foster international cooperation. WHO was one of its major agencies, Ćensu its first trail-blazing contracted specialist operating in this sphere.

Let us reconstruct this impressive story slowly, trying to plug in all the gaps as it begins to take shape. In the late 1940s, by which time the Tabones already had five children, Ćensu moved part of his still struggling private practice to the capital, Valletta. First he sat at the British Dispensary in Kingsway, this was known as “ta’ Stilon” and was situated a few doors away from the Kazin Malti. Then he moved to another pharmacy, also in Valletta’s main Street; this was the Kingsway Pharmacy (“ta’ Abela”), near the Church of St Francis. A third, always

in Strada Rjali, was Muscat's Pharmacy. However, he retained a practice in Sliema. In the evenings, for nearly twenty years, he sat at the Windsor Pharmacy in Point Street, Sliema, and later at the dispensary opposite Stella Maris church. It was only in the late sixties that he would move to Norman's Pharmacy, which was at the start of Tower Road, Sliema, in front of Villa Drago. Another pharmacy he would frequent became the Vilhena Dispensary in St Anne Street, Floriana, "taht il-*loġoġ*", just outside Valletta.

In addition to moving around these pharmacies – Valletta in the morning, Sliema in the evening – Ċensu also worked for the government's Health Department as a medical officer, with the right to private practice. He was a senior ophthalmic surgeon at St Luke's and a consultant at the Gozo hospital. However, medical officers in government employ had a salary of only £250 a year, because of their private practice. The fee for an ordinary medical visit by a general practitioner was two shillings and sixpence (12c5);⁸⁸ although a specialist would have charged twice as much. Ċensu went up to Gozo for work once a week, on Sundays. Later on, however, he changed his Gozo 'visits' day to a Saturday. He took Sunday 'off'. Until his mother passed away in the early sixties Ċensu saw patients at her house; then he hired a clinic across the road, near the Victoria police station (where there is the Tigrija Palazz shopping centre today); this he continued using until he stopped practising, decades later.

In 1947 Malta's administration was the first ever (and, so far, the last ever) to be led by a medical man, Dr Paul Boffa. Boffa was also Malta's first Labour prime minister. Late that year, it was decided to start sending three consultants to the Gozo hospital on a monthly basis, with effect from the following year. These had a roster, one week each, with a free week. They were Walter Ganado, a physician; Alfred Craig, an orthopaedic surgeon; and Ċensu Tabone as the ophthalmologist. In career terms, Ċensu was the junior of the three – and the only Gozitan.

⁸⁸ On this see L.J.German, *Landmarks in Medical Unionism in Malta 1937-1987* (Malta, 1991), pp. 7-8, 12.

Ganado and Craig had graduated as doctors from Malta in 1931, two courses ahead of Ċensu. At the time, Ganado, a Member of the Royal College of Physicians, was already the Professor of Physiology at the Royal University in Valletta and was just starting to serve too as a physician at St Luke's Hospital (as this slowly transferred to Guardamangia from the old 'Central Hospital' quarters in Floriana). Craig, a Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, had worked in hospitals in England during the Second World War and become, in 1945, a lecturer in orthopaedic surgery at the Royal University. A university position would elude Ċensu for some time to come but, in the meantime, as ophthalmic consultant to the Victoria hospital, he set his foot again in Gozo, where he would leave his stamp.

Soon after his monthly consultancy, Ċensu went one further when he was appointed School Medical Officer for Gozo, specifically to carry out an anti-trachoma campaign there. The new Chief Government Medical Officer in 1948 was Dr A. C. Briffa, who held a diploma in public health from Liverpool and had been lecturing at Valletta. The C.G.M.O. Briffa held a conjoint post as he had just been appointed Professor of Preventive Medicine at the University. Ċensu immediately wrote to him to say that the eye treatment being administered in Gozo was antiquated: he knew of a better one. As in Malta the island of Gozo was known to have the highest incidence of trachoma and conjunctivitis of the eyes, Ċensu was entrusted with conducting a survey on the conditions existing there. Since it was assumed that nobody would cooperate much in this survey if the cases identified were not *treated*, it was agreed that Ċensu would survey and treat at the same time.

This Gozo anti-trachoma campaign, as it came to be known, lasted three years, from 1948 to 1951. It yielded important results not only with regard to numerical and qualitative data as found and as diagnosed but also, and more importantly, with regard to the possible methods of the treatment and indeed of the cure of such a serious and widespread disease, which could lead to blindness and, in many different parts of the world, it often did.

Records of the existence of trachoma, a blinding disease which has been described as a scourge of mankind, go back to the most ancient times; references to it exist in old Judaic and Pharaonic scripts. New attempts at controlling it finally started to become possible in the 1940s as a result of the use of antibiotics (following Fleming's discovery of penicillin). However, a fuller understanding of what caused trachoma, whether this infection was viral rather than bacterial, and what, if anything, could actually cure it, eluded medical science until a decade or so later. It was only in 1957, with the discovery that the trachoma micro-organism could be grown in the laboratory, that fundamental studies on the disease agent and the development of experimental vaccines became possible. I am establishing this to show, at the outset, that in experimenting with a cure for trachoma in the late 1940s and early 1950s, in Gozo and later elsewhere, Ćensu Tabone was a pioneer practitioner in this field.

It is clear that Ćensu was drawing not only on the formal training he had received during his studies in Britain but also on observations he had made, and doubts he had entertained, as well as on some innovative and potentially seminal, still unorthodox approaches to which he had been exposed, which he himself now sought to apply. In post-war Britain, Ćensu had been lucky to be able to benefit from exposure to the teachings of, among others, Duke Elder and Ida Mann. Sir Stewart Duke Elder would in time be recognised as "the father of ophthalmology". In 1958 the 15 volume work *System of Ophthalmology*, which Duke Elder wrote and edited with other leading specialists, started to appear. The classic student textbook of which Duke Elder was the editor, *Parsons' Diseases of the Eye*, was, by 1970, in its fifteenth edition. In its tenth edition in 1944, Parsons had written thus at the top of page 175: "It may be stated at once that in England it is a rare disease except where large numbers of Irish or aliens are herded together." By the time that Ćensu was doing his post-graduate studies in London a few years later, the view that in England there was no trachoma had not changed much, as we shall see.

The methods Ĉensu applied in the Gozo anti-trachoma campaign seem to have been largely indebted to what might be called the Sorsby model, and may indeed be said to have been case studies which generally proved it right. The nature of the treatment administered – consisting of tablets, eye drops and ointment, at certain hours and for a defined number of days – was on the lines which had been recommended by Professor Sorsby. To Professor Sorsby, Ĉensu wrote,

*we owe the observation that under treatment with sulphonamides the follicles of trachoma tended to follow a certain pattern of evolution: they first became larger and more opalescent, they next coalesced with neighbouring ones, and finally they became flatter before disappearing. My cases showed this behaviour, which enabled me to make a diagnosis in dubious cases, as follicles other than trachomatous did not evolve according to this pattern.*⁸⁹

In all, Ĉensu saw 4,058 Gozitan school-children. Of these, he found 721 to be suffering from trachoma, and 270 from a less intense or widespread form of eye infection, conjunctivitis, which could however lead to trachoma if neglected. Ĉensu also saw members of their families, not restricting the survey to school-children alone. This was important because he was dealing here with an infectious disease, and he was naturally keen to identify the causes and contexts of its incidence. However, of the 12,698 persons seen in house-to-house examinations, only 612 had trachoma. This meant that, on the island of Gozo, the incidence of trachoma was much greater among school-children than among the rest of the population.

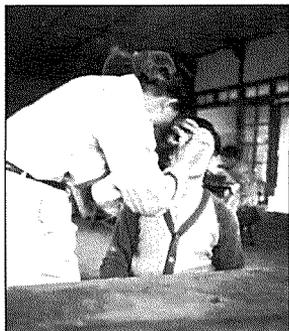
Another interesting finding was that of the actual distribution of this eye disease in Gozo. Whereas in Ghasri only 4.6% of school-children showed signs of it, in Ta' Sannat almost half of the school-children did – 42%; that was nearly ten times as much as in Ghasri. Ĉensu's treatment consisted of sulphonamides by mouth for one or more periods of 10 days

⁸⁹ V. Tabone, 'Anti-Trachoma Campaign in Gozo', *British Medical Journal*, vol. 1, 7 Apr. 1951.

each, the instillation of sodium sulphacetamide drops (a similarly-based 30% solution) administered locally, and the application of sodium sulphacetamide ointment (at 6%). And the good news was that after thirteen months of this course, only 117 cases of trachoma and 7 cases of conjunctivitis were still under treatment in the primary schools of Gozo. In two years, only 6 out of 721 cases remained under treatment. Hence Ćensu's claim that:

The sulphonamides have no doubt proved to be a milestone in our age-long fight to conquer trachoma, but they are not the ideal answer to the ophthalmologist's dream. Our goal should be to find a method capable of controlling the disease in a matter of days. Despite several claims, we are probably still far from this, although newer drugs, such as aureomycin, are proving very satisfactory.

The data tables included in Ćensu's studied report, as published in the *British Medical Journal* in 1951, are being reproduced here for easy reference. These also show that children aged between 8 and 11 were more prone to get conjunctivites or trachoma, although the age of primary school children ranged from 6 to 14. Ćensu moreover found trachoma to be spread with practically equal frequency among social classes and it was not, therefore, "a disease of the lower classes". Upper class patients tended to have fewer complications, probably because they saw a doctor sooner or more regularly. Lice and flies did not help, but on the strength of these findings, Ćensu could not state that they were the causes of the disease, or that the trachoma carrier was the fly. Flies were to be found in great numbers in some of the areas where trachoma was prevalent, as in Ta' Sannat and Xewkija, but this insect was "practically ubiquitous in Gozo". (The Maltese proverb "fitt daqs id-dubbien t'Ghawdex", regarding the Gozo fly almost as a pest, bore on this, although that was simply another way of saying that there was a greater density of farm animals, breeding for milk or slaughter, and agricultural produce, on that island. Gozo was more rural and fertile, often without the required standards of hygiene, as on the main island.)



A Gozitan M.U.T. member assists in placing healing drops in a schoolboy's eyes during the pace-setting anti-trachoma campaign in Gozo. Victoria, Gozo (above right): the veterinary surgeon Victor Restall, the court registrar Victor Borg Grech, Ĉensu and Dr Willie Grima, who became the Principal Medical Officer in Victoria in the early 1950s. Below left to right: in a chance encounter in Rome, en route to Malaya, in 1953, Mrs Vera Hyzler née Bonnici, her husband Dr Ĝorĝ Hyzler who had joined the Royal Army Medical Corps serving in the UK; and Dr John Cremona, a constitutional law lecturer at Malta. Right, Singapore, 1958: Ĉensu with, from left, Victor Tonna, an officer in the British army, and Colonel Wally Fava, an army doctor, together with their wives.



The publication of Ĉensu's findings in 'the BMI' (a doctors' acronym for the highly-respected *British Medical Journal*) gave them greater currency and credence than an expose' Ĉensu had attempted during a gathering of specialists in London a year earlier. That was at the International Ophthalmological Congress held together with the Organisation Against Trachoma. Recalling the dubious response shown towards his presentation in 1950, in a letter to another doctor many years later, Ĉensu expressed himself thus:

TABLE I.

School	No. of Pupils	Trachoma	Conj.	2 Courses Tablets	3 Courses Tablets	No. of Cases Left after 2 Years	
						Trachoma	Conj.
Victoria :-							
Boys	324	42	20	19	Nil	Nil	Nil
Girls	357	32	21	11	"	"	"
Ghajnsielem :-							
Boys	136	22	Nil	7	"	1	"
Girls	173	21	11	6	"	Nil	"
Zebbug :-							
Mixed	183	18	19	6	"	"	"
Sannat :-							
Mixed	269	113	14	9	"	2	"
Nadur :-							
Boys	260	26	20	11	"	Nil	"
Girls	374	47	36	8	"	"	"
Naghra :-							
Boys	255	38	11	6	Nil	1	"
Girls	339	50	42	5	2	Nil	"
Gharb :-							
Mixed	222	15	12	4	Nil	"	"
S. Lawrenz :-							
Mixed	71	6	7	1	"	"	"
Kercem :-							
Mixed	193	21	12	8	"	"	"
Ghasri :-							
Mixed	65	3	9	Nil	"	"	"
Xewkija :-							
Boys	223	74	Nil	6	"	2	"
Girls	375	141	6	20	"	"	"
Qala :-							
Boys	84	25	Nil	16	1	Nil	"
Girls	116	27	17	4	Nil	"	"
Total	4,056	721	270	141	5	6	"

TABLE II.

School	Trachoma Cases		Average Age	No. of Contacts of School-children
	No.	%		
Victoria	74	10.4	8.07 years	103
Ghajnsielem	43	13.6	8.04 "	42
Zebbug	18	9.8	7.5 "	21
Sannat	113	42.0	8.05 "	161
Nadur	73	11.5	8.34 "	144
Naghra	68	14.8	8.81 "	102
Gharb	15	6.8	11.05 "	7
S. Lawrenz	6	8.4	10.66 "	1
Kercem	21	10.9	9.47 "	8
Ghasri	3	4.6	8.33 "	3
Xewkija	215	35.8	9.48 "	272
Qala	52	23.0	9.35 "	62

Censu's article in the British Medical Journal showed clinical findings and explained pioneering techniques during the Gozo anti-trachoma campaign

The comments of those present were anything but favourable, as the concept of ‘no cure for trachoma’ was embedded in the medical official line for too long! Only one, a doctor from Tunisia, Dr Rais, spoke in support. I was furious, as the pundits at the top table, which included the better known men in the field, came from Europe, where according to the earlier editions of Parsons’ ‘Diseases of the Eye’, trachoma was only present in Europe “where Irishmen and Jews are herded together”.⁹⁰

The “pundits” expressed themselves against the conclusions of his paper: they could not accept these results, they had said, because trachoma being a virus it would not respond to sulphonamides or antibiotics. All Ĉensu could have done if he had good results, they held, was cure the secondary infection. According to the prevalent wisdom, such drugs could cure the secondary infections thereby helping trachoma to get better sooner. In his attempt to explain their incredulity, Ĉensu recalls vividly the words spoken by the Dean of Moorfields Eye Hospital in London, one Mr Davenport, during his student days in England. Davenport would show them a case involving a male patient – which Ĉensu now knows to have been one of florid trachoma – but which then was called ‘conjunctivitis’, and say: “This is what trachoma looks like, but this cannot be trachoma because he has never left England, and he is not a Jew or an Irishman.” Davenport, Ĉensu further recalls, was a very nice chap, but so widespread was this presumption that “I was the first one in the world to use that case for the treatment of a large sample.”⁹¹

‘Trachoma’ was not simply and solely of one kind, much less of one strain. The better initiated in this field of specialization list variations of ‘bacterial conjunctivitis’ (in lay terms, red eyes discharging mucus

⁹⁰ Tabone/Savona Ventura, 23 Mar. 1998, f. 2: and, in much the same vein, in earlier interviews with this writer.

⁹¹ “... persona mill-ahjar imma tant kienet imxerrda din ix-nniegħa li jien kont l-ewwel wieħed fid-dinja li għamilt sensiela ta’ numru kbir ta’ każi u ttrattajtjom b’dan il-każ.”

where the eyelids can get stuck); ‘vernal conjunctivitis’ (or ‘spring catarrh’), an early summer allergy especially in young people mainly as a result of dust and pollen; ‘chronic conjunctivitis’, which could be more related to the first or the second type; ‘viral conjunctivitis’, which is caused by a virus that can also attack the cornea. It is as a result of the gradually increasing use of antibiotics that in more recent times bacterial *conjunctivitis* became less common than viral infection. Trachoma was rare in England and North America but it was common in the Middle East including North Africa; it spread to Asia, India, Central and South America, and Africa, while it is known to occur sporadically in southern and eastern Europe. Some believed that it was Napoleon’s troops who had brought it to Europe from North Africa. Eventually it came to be accepted that the main cause of it, a group of organisms known as ‘chlamydiae’, was a biological substance rather more bacterial than viral and therefore, unlike true viruses, this was indeed susceptible to treatment by sulphonamides (basically sulphonic acid with antibacterial action) and some antibiotics.

It continued to be held in various quarters that the disease, being contagious, thrived most where populations were crowded together in poor hygienic surroundings while shortage of water and the myriads of flies attracted to human waste aid its dissemination. E. S. Perkins noted that in some ways trachoma was more of a social than a medical problem: if living standards can be improved, overcrowding reduced, flies discouraged, and adequate water supplies ensured, the incidence of trachoma decreases rapidly.⁹² Censu does not agree with this position, regarding it as “certainly a remnant of the old concept that viruses cannot be cured by sulphur drugs or antibiotics”. Certain specialists were disillusioned when it came to be known that viruses could be cured by the drugs mentioned, he feels; it was because of such erroneous concepts that the discovery of how to grow the trachoma virus had been delayed...

⁹² See his detailed entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed., 1980, pp. 117-125. See also E. S. Perkins and P. Hansell, *Atlas of Diseases of the Eye* (2nd. ed., illus., 1971).

Original correspondence exchanged within Malta's Department of Health already in the late 19th century reveals that various cases of disease were then known and being monitored in Malta, as elsewhere. These included leprosy, smallpox, diphtheria, while the later enclosure of an infant mortality chart shows all too graphically how it was only in the post-war era that prevailing, alarming trends started to be redressed effectively. Quarantine was considered important because certain diseases, not excluding eye diseases, usually arrived via ships coming from North Africa or the Orient. What I found most pertinent in this original documentation, however, was the practice, at least on the main island, to ask school children to go for eye checks to the government dispensary. For this purpose, pupils would be accompanied by their school teachers after permission would have been duly obtained from the Education Department.⁹³

Could a stricter adherence to this practice on the main island have been one reason why the incidence of trachoma or conjunctivitis was noticeably lower there than in Gozo? Or were living conditions in Gozo worse, because of the lack of proper water and drainage systems? Or was the environment itself partly to blame, although the housing conditions in and around the Grand Harbour towns were certainly less palatable than the farmhouse and an open-air lifestyle? Gozo being more cut off, and the disease being contagious, it would have spread more quickly unless there was somebody who knew how to cure it. There appears to have been a genuine professional concern on the part of the departments responsible for charitable institutions, health and education, to monitor the least sign of any disease and to prevent it spreading. Exchanges of letters, instructions and reports, frequently still done in hand, show routine liaison with the District Medical Officers, usually through the office of the Chief Government Medical Officer, for purposes of both prevention and medication.

⁹³ Reports and exchanges of correspondence, Office of Charitable Institutions, Valletta, 1887-1910, *passim*.

The real dangers of trachoma lie in the scarring of tissue that occurs in attempts to heal it; it is the corneal scarring that can cause blindness. Unfortunately, the earlier treatment applied to trachoma dating back to Hippocrates with some modifications, was itself more scar producing in the short-term than the disease itself, Ćensu maintains. That consisted of the scarification of the everted eyelids followed by the application of copper sulphate, silver nitrate, or other astringents. Proper treatment was delayed for so long because no medicine had been found to control the growth of the causative agent, which had been originally postulated to be a virus but later was found to be, in more technical terms, a 'rikketsia' (*Rikketsia Trachomatis*).⁹⁴ Hence the importance of the new way of treating the disease, as in the Gozo campaign, subsequently assisted by more sophisticated antibiotics which, according to contemporary virologists, effectively attacked the causative agent of trachoma, thereby curing it. That the BMJ had accepted to publish Ćensu's findings was, internationally, still more of a breakthrough than the positive results of the Gozo campaign itself. It meant that this empirical evidence should be taken seriously, and tried.

In 1952 Ćensu was the first ophthalmologist to be engaged as a consultant by the World Health Organisation. Ćensu attributes this to the publication of his findings in the BMJ. That would have been duly noted among interested specialists in Geneva at the time. Ćensu recalls being approached by a Dr Giaquinto, who was the deputy head in WHO's communicable diseases section; the head of section was a Dutchman, Dr Bonne, who at first was rather sceptical of Ćensu's treatment formulae. Previously, WHO did not have a consultant ophthalmologist as they did not cater for eye diseases, either because they knew of no cure or because this organisation had not developed sufficiently to start catering for infective eye diseases.

⁹⁴ Ćensu's technical elaborations go into further details which are beyond the scope of this book; a more detailed study would be appropriate in a specialised medical history.

Unknown to Ċensu, other forces were at work in his favour. Ċensu had made a great impression upon a co-national who happened to be at WHO Headquarters for briefing before taking up an appointment as a resident representative in an important field posting, in January, 1952. Clearly it was at about this time that the decision to engage Ċensu's expertise was taken in Geneva. A few years younger than Ċensu with whom he had been a boarder at St Aloysius, and a medical course behind him at University, the co-national was also a friend and fellow traveller, having served as Junior Casualty Officer at Floriana's Central Hospital between 1940 and 1942. In 1943, he had also spent time in Gozo's Victoria Hospital where he had befriended Ċensu's eldest brother Anton 'il-principjal'. This was Dr Victor Zammit-Tabona.⁹⁵ After his post-graduate studies in London on a Nuffield Foundation Fellowship from 1944 to 1946, Dr Zammit-Tabona retired to Malta as the Government Chest Specialist. As such, first as a consultant visiting Gozo and later in implementing the Malta and Gozo 'Vaccination with BCG Campaign', he became acquainted with "the quality and scope" of Ċensu's trachoma control work in Gozo. During that Gozo campaign, Ċensu gave him "splendid advice on several aspects of that campaign. He knew his island home so well!"

Zammit-Tabona left Malta in January 1952 to take up a WHO appointment as WHO Representative to Iraq (where he served in that capacity from 1952 to 1956):

During my briefing in Geneva before I left for Iraq the problem of Trachoma in that country came up. I said I would like to have Dr Vincent Tabone as Consultant for he was very well qualified and I had seen the quality of his work. Dr Maxwell-Lyons agreed. WHO invited Ċensu to go to Taiwan, Indonesia and Iraq to organise Trachoma Control in those countries.

⁹⁵ Zammit-Tabona/Frendo, 19 Jan. 2000, f. 1. Dr Zammit-Tabona sadly passed away in England shortly after he had written this letter.

Ĉensu duly went to Iraq, where he stayed at the home of the Zammit-Tabonas, and implemented the Trachoma Control programme there. On leaving Iraq in 1956, Zammit-Tabona was awarded the Rafidain order of merit – Rafidain means twin rivers – for services rendered to Iraq’s public health. In the farewell speech of the award ceremony, he was told that “the Iraqis would always remember also the splendid work of my (your) countryman Dr Tabone.” Zammit-Tabona wrote: “He was singled out from about sixteen international consultants I had worked with during my stay, a unique tribute to a Consultant in my 21 years with WHO.”⁹⁶

There is no doubt that Ĉensu went about his new challenge in style, enthusiastically, meticulously and vigorously, not only in the Orient but also in Asia and the Far East. The pioneering work he conducted in these several countries was well appreciated by WHO., because he was asked to return and to return again. Ĉensu went out on WHO missions to Asia over a seven year period, from 1952 to 1959; he went out there again in 1969 for an official visit when he had become a Minister. His work was appreciated where it was most needed, among the populations concerned: from Indonesia to North Borneo, from Malaya to Hong Kong, from the Philippines to Singapore, and above all in Taiwan.

Although Ĉensu travelled widely and was of service, to a greater or lesser extent, in many different parts of Asia, it was Taiwan that saw his most demanding anlarge-scale tasks. After Malta, Ĉensu likes to quip, Taiwan is the country he knows best. His first consultancy there lasted six months, subsequent ones were shorter. WHO was divided into five regional centres. These were Europe; America; the Middle East, which included Africa; South East Asia; and the Western Pacific. As Taiwan, like the rest of Asia, was full of trachoma, a specific request had been lodged by the Western Pacific Region for a proper findout and remedial action.

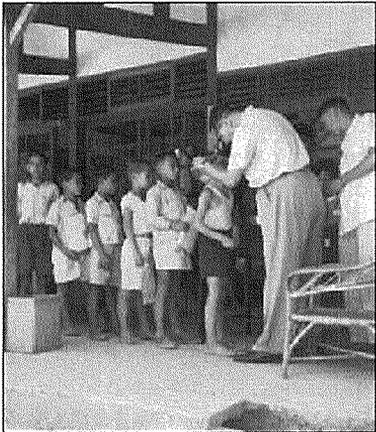
⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, f. 2.



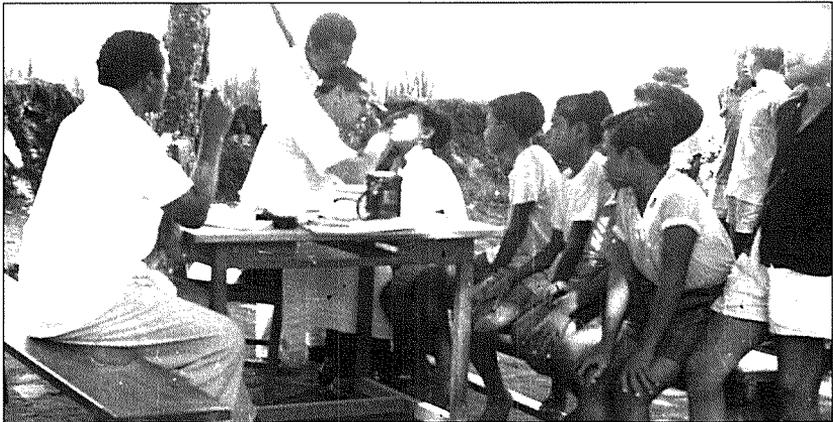
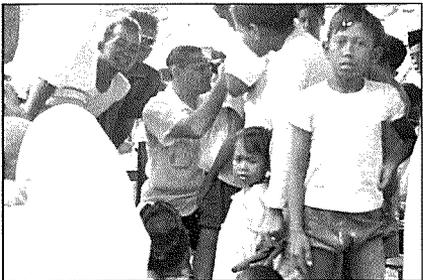
The WHO Resident Representative in Iraq, Dr Victor Zammit Tabona, and his wife Marselle, entertain Āensu to dinner in a Baghdad restaurant, before the start of his WHO missions to the Far East in 1952. (Courtesy of the late Dr V. Zammit Tabona). Left: Taipei, October, 1952: the Coordination Committee's first working session.

The mission to Iraq would have fallen under a separate division, the Middle East one. WHO had a regional centre for the Eastern Mediterranean in Alexandria, Egypt, where its imposing building still stands, and functions.

Āensu's mission in Taiwan was to do 'a Gozo' there, on an incomparably larger scale, and in an area where the disease was far more widespread. In Gozo, Āensu had already started making use of aureomycin,



A few samples of Ćensu's many Far Eastern memories.



somewhat tentatively. A friend of his, Charles Degiorgio, was the agent of Lederle antibiotics, and since aureomycin was not readily available on the Maltese market Degiorgio used to supply him with it for his Gozo rounds. The Taiwan stage of trachoma control saw more systematic use of aureomycin, later developed into acromycin, together with the sulphur drugs. Ĉensu saw thousands of cases during his repeated missions in Taiwan and neighbouring Asian countries and had the same successes there which he had seen in his first try, back home.

Again he focussed his clinical research on school-children, those in secondary as well as in primary schools. A Coordinating Committee was set up, of which he formed part, to plan priorities, strategy and logistics. A Dr Chen was assigned by the Taiwanese authorities as Ĉensu's counter-part and they struck up an excellent working relationship. The incidence of trachoma he found was frequently as high as 97%. In some primary schools it was 99.4%. Just about every child of school age was somehow or other infected with trachoma or some variation of it. He started with a pilot project using 1% aureomycin solution administered three times a day for periods of three weeks at a time. After the three weeks, an assessment would be made. Those who were found still not cured were given a second course. He returned again and again to monitor progress, enlarging the sample in the process. As the results were extraordinarily good and were sustained, he then launched a mass campaign, with the help of the Taiwanese Government.

Ĉensu returned to Taiwan ten years later, this time as a Cabinet Minister, and accompanied by his wife Maria. The occasion, on 10th October 1970, was the 'Double Ten Feast' of Taiwan, commemorating the 10th day of the 10th month. Generalissimo Chiang Kai Chek was still alive; he passed away a little later. Many of those medics, nurses and assistants who had worked with Ĉensu in the anti-trachoma campaigns were there. Ĉensu asked if he could link up with Dr Chen, who had been his main counter-part. Chen was located with some difficulty. There was an emotional reunion. Chen had become a professor at the University of Kao-Shung in the south of the country.

Duly alerted, Professor Chen went to see Ćensu at his hotel. “You know, Dr Tabone,” he stuttered, “I cannot find cases of trachoma to show to my students.” It was a moving statement, signifying perhaps the greatest moment in Ćensu’s professional life as an eye doctor.

As the results of his energetic anti-trachoma campaigns were increasingly recognised, throughout the 1950s Ćensu conducted smaller scale campaigns for WHO in Hong Kong, Singapore, the Phillipines, Indonesia, North Borneo, Malaya, Sarawak, Brunei, Egypt and elsewhere.

In 1955, he was asked to sit on an expert trachoma committee which included, among its other distinguished members, Duke Elder and Ida Mann. There was also Italy’s Professor Bietti. In 1959 Ćensu organised a trachoma conference in Tunis for countries falling under WHO’s Eastern Mediterranean Region. This gathering now concentrated on treatment and cure. Trachoma had become an ordinary ocular disease. It was no longer a calamity.

A first strike

**LEADING THE DOCTORS
AGAINST MINTOFF**

WHILE history does not quite repeat itself, there is usually a nexus between events in time. And the more so when the personalities or ‘bodies’ doing battle happen to be the same ones, even as circumstances shift. With the advantage of hindsight, it can be said today that the highly consequential doctors’ dispute with Mintoff in the 1970s (leading Malta into a decade which many would prefer forgotten) would be only partly comprehensible without an understanding of an earlier dispute with the doctors in the 1950s. The first strike had a different conclusion; and Malta was still a British colony. The jagged *continuum* would apply to other things that happened when Mintoff’s party took office in June 1971, for the first time in an independent Malta. Without actually saying so, some of the material contained in *The Origins of Maltese Statehood* shows the extent to which history could almost be read backwards from 1987, if not from 1998, for forty or fifty years.

According to Ċensu, what happened to the doctors in the 1970s was nothing but a “vendetta” to avenge their hard-won victory in the 1950s. ‘It is never pleasant and hardly ever right to call such a momentous event for the medical profession a “vendetta”, but it is almost impossible to understand the reasons and the methods that produced such a catastrophe...’, he adds. At the risk of simplifying matters, one would be

tempted to adopt a similar line of ‘vindicating the past’ reasoning for the 1970s and 1980s, at least with regard to Labour’s failed hopes during the Independence negotiations: the ‘secularising’ six points, one of which also condoned a resort to violence in certain circumstances; the republic as against a constitutional monarchy; the abrogation of the defence and finance package then being concluded between the Maltese and British governments (notwithstanding, at the same time, a lurking disposition to permit the conditional use of Malta as a military base if the economy still demanded it); the would-be distancing from Western European ties for bargaining purposes *cum* ideological ‘neutrality and non-alignment’; etc. It was all there in those intensely seminal, revealing years, the early 1960s, with the difference that then, as of course in the mid-1950s, *Malta was not an independent state*. And that was not an indifferent difference in the 1970s, given the iron-fisted lock-out from St Luke’s, the forced emigration of many academics, doctors and their students, the importation of black-legs and enticement of some nationals to break the strike – generally a behaviour without precedent in Maltese history. Had Ċensu known *that* would somehow result from the earlier industrial action he had led, he would have wished it never to have occurred in the first place.

Into the 1950s, doctors employed with the government (because some of them had private practice) still were paid a miserly £250 *per annum*; yet according to the GWU paper, a groceries distributor in Sliema made £200 in weekly profits. That was in 1944.⁹⁷ It seems that the civil service philosophy at the time was not intended to remunerate the service given, which for most medical doctors was in fact as full time as for those without private practice, but to give salaries in relation to all the private earnings of the category. Doctors, who sweated for seven long years at university and Medical School to get their warrants, were usually entitled to private practice, including District Medical Officers, but even so, as we have seen, an ordinary medical visit still cost half-a-crown (12c5). Bad pay was a grievance of long standing, as Ċensu’s own father had found out for himself.⁹⁸ What made matters worse was the prospect

⁹⁷ *The Torch*, 9 Sept. 1944, quoted after L.J.German (1991), p.8.

⁹⁸ See above, 2.

of a national health service partly inspired by the British post-war model wherein, in this case without any consultation, Maltese doctors risked becoming simply full-time and salaried government employees, like civil servants, while the patient would not have the right to his or her own doctor. Indeed doctors would be subjected to the nod or rod of unqualified administrators, and to a political class who pulled the strings. No self-respecting doctor would accept readily to be so deprived of his cherished professional status and autonomous rights. This was serious business, seen as unethical, demeaning and dangerous. It demanded, and got, a full-blooded response.

Maltese doctors so far were not represented by any union. The strongest lobby they had was a local branch of the British Medical Association, originally set up in 1888 as the 'Mediterranean', then the 'Malta and Mediterranean' branch. There was also the somewhat defunct, pre-war *Camera Medica*. Neither one nor the other was a registered trade union. A District Medical Officers Association had been formed in 1951 but this only catered for DMOs and it did not apply for union registration before May, 1954. By then, a new union had been registered, in February, 1954. This was the Union of Government Medical Officers with Private Practice, more simply the MOU. (Medical Officers Union). The *Camera Medica* disbanded and transferred whatever funds it may have had to the MOU. Less than two years later the D.M.O.A. did the same. It was the MOU. that would spearhead the doctors' all-out fight against the schemes and attitudes of the first Mintoff administration.

Ċensu was one of the main instigators of the Medical Officers Union, and its first president, from 1954 to 1962. "For Dr Vincent Tabone", wrote Lino German, "the setting up of the MOU meant the realisation of a long-standing dream, and it was fitting that the man who had worked so hard towards this end should be elected the Union's first President."⁹⁹

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

In 1950 Ćensu had joined the Health Department as a 'junior consultant surgeon', still working from the old Central Hospital in Floriana. This was at the same time that Dr Frans Damato, an ophthalmologist of Ćensu's age, was appointed senior ophthalmic surgeon at the Hospital as well as a lecturer at the University. Some years later Ćensu too became 'senior' and was appointed to a university position as a 'clinical teacher'.

The date of his appointment as 'teacher', later qualified as 'clinical teacher', in the University's Faculty of Medicine was 2nd January 1960. It was signed by the university registrar, Mr L. M. Pace.

Since 1924 the Professor of Ophthalmology at the University had been Sir Luigi Preziosi, world famous for his sight-saving operation known as 'Preziosi's operation', a personality of the highest stature who had also chaired the Maltese *Assemblea Nazionale* in 1947 which led to the restitution of internal self-government. When Damato and Tabone were making their debut at the Hospital and subsequently at the University, Preziosi, a count married to a noble lady, was in his early sixties, and had served as president of the *Camera Medica* in the past.

The lot of these new recruits to the service, much the same as that of all the others in government employ, was not that rosy. In feeling the pinch of raising a family under the prevailing conditions, Ćensu was speaking for practically all doctors. That was still more so, perhaps, on matters of principle, when these came to be faced with the prospect of an imposed, collectivizing 'national health service' system.

Once again it was somehow 'Gozo' that set the ball rolling. One Saturday morning Ćensu was in Victoria for his private patient rounds while Walter Ganado was there on his consultancy roster. Ćensu would still call at the hospital, out of interest, to see how his patients there were doing. The hospital then was in Pjazza San Franġisk, where today there is the Ministry for Gozo; this was well before the new hospital was built. Tabone and Ganado met in the stairs between two of the main wards, as the latter was going to see an elderly patient. Today, Ćensu reminisced, when you have private practice you get one-half of the government

salary; then you got one-tenth: ‘I told Walter: “why don’t we set up a doctors’ union?” He said: “I have the B.M.A.¹⁰⁰ You do it.”’ When the BMA staff in London were approached, they were of the opinion that doctors normally formed an association, not a union; but Ċensu and his colleagues went ahead just the same.¹⁰¹ As it turned out, the local BMA and the new union would work hand in hand, with most Maltese doctors becoming members of both jointly.

Ċensu, Walter and ten other doctors signed and circulated a paper with the announcement that a meeting would be held at Palazzo Caraffa in Strada Forni, Valletta, to set up a Medical Officers’ Union. A number of such meetings were in fact held at Palazzo Caraffa, where a statute was formulated together with claims, grievances and a mission statement aimed at improving the lot of the medical profession generally. The MOU was formed on 3rd February 1954 and very quickly attracted to its fold practically all the government-employed doctors from the various departments and institutions where they served. In April 1954 the Union deplored the fact that the medical profession had not been consulted on the free hospitalisation scheme. In August of the same year it submitted a claim for a 20% increase in the remuneration of part-time medical officers in government service.¹⁰² Representations were also made concerning general practitioners’ fees, travelling allowances, pensions and the status of medical officers vis-à-vis the administrative grades in the civil service. Early in 1955 an independent committee of inquiry was set up and by May this had submitted a report to government. A Hospital Board was established as a result, but the fourth and last meeting of this Board was held in October 1955.¹⁰³ It seems that cooperation from the first Mintoff-led Labour administration, elected in February 1955 – the Minister of Health was Dr Albert V. Hyzler – was not so forthcoming.

¹⁰⁰ He was the branch president.

¹⁰¹ “Ma tajniex kashom.”

¹⁰² As already noted, those who had private practice were called ‘part-time medical officers’ but they were, in fact, as full time as those who didn’t.

¹⁰³ L.J.German (1991), 14.

While the MOU was proposing the establishment of a Medical Council, a Hospitals Board, a General Practice Committee and such institutionalized consultation services and professional organs, in August 1955 Mr Mintoff announced the government's intention to introduce a pilot scheme for a full-time state-salaried district medical service in Gozo, about which no consultation had taken place. In October, Dr Hyzler announced that the government did not intend to advertise any more medical posts in Malta carrying the right to private practice. "It is the Government that is running the country and not the Union", the Ministry told the Union. In the same month of October, the union changed its statute to extend membership to all medical practitioners in the Maltese Islands, while maintaining a close liaison both with the BMA and the Malta Government Professional Officers Association.

In the following month, after an extraordinary general meeting about the implications of the Gozo scheme, members bound themselves to pay £1,000 should they fail to observe any directive approved by the general meeting or two-thirds of all members in a referendum.¹⁰⁴ The union sensed that the Gozo scheme would be the thin end of the wedge. It was further angered by the government's refusal to consult, and by derogatory remarks made about the medical profession in parliament. Minister Hyzler had also attacked the union's legal adviser Dr Herbert Ganado and the *Times of Malta* journalist J. G. Vassallo. The government was advertising posts for the Gozo scheme and offering a starting salary of £360 on a scale leading eventually to some £500 yearly, including a bonus. This certainly was some improvement on existing pay but only about half of what doctors in comparable jobs were then making in Cyprus, and almost a third of those in Gibraltar.¹⁰⁵

In January 1956 the union directed doctors not to apply for the Gozo posts. The government dismissed five medical officers to make way for

¹⁰⁴ "Ghamilna kuntratt regolari quddiem in-Nutar Philip Saliba... u jkunu *boycotted* minn shabhom kollha *all their lives*..."

¹⁰⁵ These details are well documented in German, *ibid.*, p. 18 *et seq.*, but see E. Grey-Turner's *Report upon the Medical Dispute in Malta* (1956).

new appointees. In fact, only two doctors applied, one of them a former Labour MP; and they had to resign as a result of a social and professional boycott by all the other doctors, which must have made their life unpleasant. A number of BMA officials and other British intermediaries became involved in mediation efforts, without much success. Mintoff refused to reinstate the five dismissed doctors and threatened to import foreign doctors. The government also refused arbitration, although some hope for conciliation was entertained still. Next, the union resolved that all doctors in government service would resign unless the government agreed to certain basic conditions, including reinstatement of the dismissed doctors and an independent review of Malta's medical services.

In April 1956, when mediation efforts failed, 124 doctors resigned. (Those who had university positions held on to them for as long as they could.) Only 6 government-employed doctors did not heed the union's directive, hardly enough to break a strike. The MOU – called 'Mau Mau' by its detractors – set up its Action Headquarters at the Phoenicia Hotel in Floriana and embarked on a very 'full-time' make-or-break confrontation with the administration.¹⁰⁶

Portrayed as "blood-suckers", the doctors were reviled by the Mintoff mob, and they implored police protection. Mintoff's statements in parliament, delivered under pressure, appeared fairly conciliatory.

At the very centre of all this was Ċensu. The hustle and bustle at the Action Headquarters, night and day, was painted in indelible colours by Herbert Ganado in *Rajt Malta Tinbidel*. There were doctors, young and old, coming and going, telephones ringing with calls from the hospitals and other doctors, messages. There were courageous doctors, worried

¹⁰⁶ 'Kienu jghidulna "l-Maw Maw". Dik il-habta kien hemm il-Mau Mau u meta bdejna l-għieda ma' Mintoff kienu jghidulna "l-Maw Maw".' Actually this was a phrase used by the colonial authorities for the uprising in Kenya, largely among the Kikuyu, in the early 1950s, and much of the violence was directed against fellow Kikuyu who were thought to be collaborating with them. The Mau Mau riots hastened Kenya's transition to independence under Jomo Kenyatta, himself a Kikuyu. At the time of the Tabone-Mintoff confrontation Kenyatta was in prison on trumped-up charges.

doctors, optimists and pessimists, those hoping for a quick agreement, others determined to fight for their principles. Ganado – never lost for insight and a comic touch even in moments of such *gravitas* – saw a “world of humanity” in all these doctors without a stethoscope, not using the technical terms of their profession. The MOU committee was a shop-window of types, capturing a mood and a mission:

The President, Dr Vincent Tabone, intelligent, energetic, as hard-headed as rock and what a rock he was in that struggle. Dr Albert Fenech, a ‘Masu’ like his father,...Professor Ganado, my brother, peering beneath his spectacles, diagnosing the situation. Professor Victor Griffiths, already a well-respected surgeon, cultured and erudite, but quiet and silent, hardly uttering a word.¹⁰⁷ Professor Victor Vassallo, accustomed to madmen and thus not prone to be surprised by anything that was said or done...¹⁰⁸ Dr Frank Callus, the most realistic and pragmatic among his colleagues, who takes X-rays of every condition to see what lies hidden there.¹⁰⁹ There was also Dr Edgar Cesareo in the committee, the Floriana D.M.O., who at the worst moment of the crisis took out his palju to fan himself, although we were still in April really.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Griffiths had replaced Walter Ganado as head of the B.M.A. branch.

¹⁰⁸ The Professor of Psychology at the Royal University, Victor Vassallo served as physician and medical superintendent at the mental hospital in H’Attard (‘il-manikomju’) for thirty years.

¹⁰⁹ Dr Callus would lead the Medical Association of Malta (M.A.M.), as the MOU’s successor was called, in a second, longer and more bitter confrontation with another Mintoff administration in 1977-1987 when, in addition to some Maltese strike-breakers, foreign doctors were indeed imported as ‘blacklegs’ following a government lock-out from St Luke’s Hospital of all the striking doctors and specialists. On this, see German (1991), part 2, pp. 80-227.

¹¹⁰ “U fil-kumitat tal-MOU, kien hemm vetrina kbira ta’ umanita’ bil-pezez kollha. Il-President, Dr Vincent Tabone, intelligenti, energiku, rasu iebsa daqs il-blat u vera blata f’dik it-taqtiegha... Kien hemm ukoll fil-kumitat Dr Edgar Cesareo, id-D.M.O. tal-Furjana, li fl-aghhar mument tal-križi hareg il-palju, ghad li konna ghadna f’April.” H. Ganado, *Rajt Malta Tinbidel* (Malta, 1977), Vol. IV, p. 167.

Ganado forgot to mention the union's secretary, Dr Francis ('Çikku') Pullicino. The enterprising Albert 'Masu' Fenech, of Siggiewi, Censu described as the committee's "factotum".

Doctors' Dispute With Government

Hostile Demonstration in Kingsway

By A Staff Reporter
WHILE the "Mercy Staff" of the Medical Officers' Union dealt with emergency cases in hospitals, and former D.M.O.s also freely attended to their patients, a sizeable crowd staged a demonstration against doctors in dispute with the Government, as well as against Nationalist Members of Parliament and Members of the Casino Maltese in Valetta yesterday morning.

The demonstrators assembled outside the Governor's Palace, where Parliament was in session, debating the final stages of the National Insurance Bill, later approved.

The demonstrators then gathered opposite the Casino Maltese where they hurled threats, abuse, and accusations, and threw pennies at Dr. Reynaud, retired Senior Crown Counsel, and other members of the Casino.

Some demonstrators shouted "Give us Ganado"; others shouted threats and angrily called on the doctors to return to work, calling them "Assassins", "Bloodsuckers" (*saugisugi*), and "Hangmen." One demonstrator was heard shouting "We give you time until next Saturday," while another one repeated Dr. Hzyler's allegation in Parliament — "And what about the girl who ran away from hospital?"

Pennies were thrown at the Casino and there were shouts of "We'll evict you and turn the place into a tenement building."

The Police then dispersed the crowd and cleared the demonstrators out of Queen's Square. Mounted police, standing by, were not called in.

Police reinforcements stood by down Britannia Street, while other policemen patrolled the area near Kingsway Pharmacy, where a crowd gathered after the demonstration near the Casino Maltese. The crowd

glared at the pharmacy, which also houses the private clinic of Professor Walter Ganado, Vice-President of the Medical Officers' Union. Earlier during the week Prof. Ganado received anonymous threats of lynching.

Medical Officers Union's Service

THE Medical Officers' Union Headquarters yesterday dealt with 31 urgent cases at St. Luke's Hospital, 25 of which were admitted for further treatment. One major surgical operation was performed. Two blood transfusions were given during the day.

The service was supervised from M.O.U. Headquarters as their surely to keep a free medical service for poor patients throughout the Island.

The ex-D.M.O. service dealt with 304 calls free.

Appeal for Protection of Union Members

The following letter was sent by Dr. F. Pullicino, Secretary of the Medical Officers' Union, to the Commissioner of Police on April 18:

I have been directed by the committee of the M.O.U. to bring to your notice a declaration which has been made and signed by Dr. G. Florini and Dr. R. V. Consiglio and which I am enclosing, to the effect that Mr. J. Micallef Stafrace, the editor of "Is-Sebh", stated in the presence of the above-mentioned doctors that the Minister of Health should publish a list of certain doctors with the view of inciting the people against them.

"This threat was followed by an aggressive and inciting editorial in "Is-Sebh" of the 18th April, 1956, against four doctors, and in one instance the address of a doctor's clinic was specifically mentioned. Prof. Walter

Ganado has also received an anonymous letter with the words 'we shall lynch you' in Maltese. It is symptomatic that the Minister of Health had, some time ago, used similar words in relation to Dr. V. Tabone, President of the Union.

"I am confident that you will take any protective action which you may think fit."

"We the undersigned (on April 17, 1956) met J. Stafrace, P. Holland and G. Montanaro Gauci last Sunday evening and during a discussion, Mr. Stafrace, editor of "Is-Sebh," said that in his opinion the Minister of Health should get hold of a list of certain doctors and read it to the public, or rather to his supporters, and tell them that these dishonest doctors are double-crossing the Government and incite them to attack them in their homes.

R. V. CONSIGLIO.
G. FIORINI.

THE REASON WHY

WHEN the ships of the N.A.T.O. Navies entered Malta's harbours on Friday it was noticed that they did not include the Greek units. We have been officially informed that the sole reason for this is one of finance involving a seven-fold increase in the pay of ships' companies immediately any Greek ship drops anchor in a non-Greek port. The Senior Greek Officers landed at Malta yesterday for the critique on *Medfax* Dragon.

1. The present bad conditions of work.

2. The Honourable Minister for Health wants to introduce a health scheme where the free choice of the doctor by the patient is sacrificed. This system has been condemned by the doctors of 52 nations, that form the World Medical Association, because the medical profession maintains that human patients are not like animals that are being sent to the Veterinary Surgeon.

3. The Minister for Health discharged five doctors on the flimsy excuse of redundancy while he advertised 24 vacant posts.

4. The Medical Profession was offered a Commission of Enquiry but were asked to disarm themselves completely of all their legitimate means of defence.

5. The Minister for Health insulted the medical profession in Parliament, and up to now he has refused to take up their challenge to repeat outside Parliament those insults so that the medical profession would have the chance of redress.

6. The resignations were handed in on April 12, 1956. Last minute attempts at conciliation broke down because agreement could not be reached on safeguards against victimization.

7. The Medical Profession has stated several times that they are in favour of a National Health Scheme on British lines. The B.M.A. in London upheld the Maltese doctors' cause and is fully supporting them in their present struggle.

April 1956: not everyone was on the side of the doctors, as can be seen from these reports in the local Times, where the M.O.U.'s demands were clearly set out.

Like most other MOU doctors at the time, Ćensu believed that Mintoff planned to import Egyptian doctors in an attempt to break them. From German's researches it seems that it was rather British doctors whom the administration had in mind, including in the first instance locally-resident doctors employed with the British Services. The administration even tried to involve the Red Cross.

The prospect of a country not served by its doctors, except in emergencies, was a daunting one. It was unprecedented. Archbishop Gonzi sent for Ćensu and asked him how could he leave Malta without doctors, to which Ćensu retorted that they were prepared to offer their services free of charge so long as they ran them. If the government wanted otherwise the outcome would be its responsibility, not theirs. It is not clear whose bidding Gonzi was doing, if anyone's. Was it the government's or, more likely, the Governor's, or was he taking it upon himself? When Gonzi said that it was "blackmail" (*rikatt*) for the doctors to withdraw their services, Ćensu replied that, morally, they could not be obliged to work under unacceptable conditions, but on their part they were fully prepared to offer their services freely, not only in emergencies.

Mintoff sounded Governor Laycock on the alternative of importing foreign doctors. He had to, because this was an external matter which required the Governor's approval. The Lieutenant-Governor, Trafford Smith, was also much involved in these exchanges. The doctors sought guarantees against victimization. Mintoff threatened to scrap the advice of the independent commission investigating the medical service. That was the last thing the union wanted, as it was hopeful that the commission would find in its favour. It seems that, partly under the influence of the BMA in Britain, and partly because neither Britain nor 'her' doctors were at all keen to rush in where angels feared to tread, such a plan – the importation of foreign doctors by the Maltese government – was not supported by Laycock.

Laycock was impressed by the union's determination to stick to its guns and by Ċensu's own indomitability. Tabone and Victor Vassallo went to London for talks with the BMA, but the single most determining factor was probably an encounter Laycock had with Ċensu at the palace, at the former's request. Laycock tried arm-twisting. He threatened to order the doctors back to work under the provisions of the Supplies and Services Act. Tabone replied that they would disobey:

“What?”

“We shall disobey.”

“Then you shall go to prison.”

“If we go to prison, there will be no one to perform emergency medical services.”

Robert Laycock had known Ċensu since his arrival in Malta two years earlier. Now he asked him to repeat what he had just said in the presence of the Legal Secretary, Mr Denis S. Stephens. Ċensu did. And Stephens duly jotted it down. *Intelligenti pauca*. Ironically, while all this was going on, government medical officers still were carrying out their normal duties in government hospitals and clinics of their own accord, without government control.

The remaining British mediator saw no alternative for the Government but to give in to the doctors' demands. On 24th April 1956 government and union delegations met at the Auberge d'Aragon. An interim settlement was reached and a joint statement signed. There would be a Commission appointed to review the medical service and submit recommendations to Government and the MOU on its reorganisation, including the terms and conditions of service of medical officers in government service. The five discharged doctors would be reinstated. A written undertaking was given that no doctor would be transferred or victimized on political grounds or on account of trade union activities. The new posts would be re-advertised and filled on a temporary basis pending the report of the Commission, and the salary attached to these

posts would be £600 yearly plus a bonus. No action would be taken to fill the advertised posts in Gozo, or similar posts in Malta, until the report of the Commission had been considered. As a result of this interim settlement, medical services in the Maltese Islands were normalised immediately. The question dragged on until 1958, when the Integration plan had fallen through and the Mintoff administration was on its last legs. The end result was that a Medical Council was established as was the Hospital Management Committee. Generally speaking, the medical service would henceforth be less dependent on politicians or civil servants, more on a professional 'peer group' self-management.

All told, this was a great victory for the MOU, and not least for President Tabone. The adversary, Mr Dom Mintoff, was no easy nut to crack. It was probably the inability to thwart the Maltese doctors' stand through the importation of foreign blacklegs – because Britain looked unkindly on such an option – that forced the government to more or less capitulate.

Unfortunately, the new accord was “nearly shattered when the Government decided to conduct an inquiry into alleged professional misconduct on the part of two medical officers”.¹¹¹ By an all too pertinent coincidence, these were Dr Albert Fenech, the DMO at Siggiewi, whom Ċensu had described as the MOU committee's “factotum”, and Dr Anton Tabone, the Medical Superintendent at Victoria Hospital in Gozo. There was a contest in court and in the end neither doctor was found guilty of anything.

However, Anton Tabone “il-prinċipal” was Ċensu's eldest brother and ‘a father’ to him. He was a family bread-winner when Ċensu and his brother had gone to St Aloysius College for their secondary school education.¹¹² So petty and contrived was the ‘charge’ against Anton Tabone that this, Ċensu believes convincingly, was simply a dastardly way of trying to get at him through his brother, for having won the medical dispute. “This is where Mintoff's nature shows.” No sooner had

¹¹¹ German (1991), 28.

¹¹² See above, 3.

the interim settlement been signed than Mintoff, on the following day, sent Superintendent Effie Bencini to Victoria to conduct an investigation about Anton, to see how he was running the hospital, if he took bribes to perform an operation. To assist Bencini in the Tabone investigation, Minister Hyzler sent a civil servant, one Darmanin from Floriana. Bencini stayed in Gozo for a whole month trying to find something. He checked the register of all the operations performed at the Victoria Hospital, ticking at random the names of those whom he wanted to interview for further information. Among these were some nuns who had undergone operations at the hospital.

“My brother Anton and I never charged any of the Gozo nuns a penny when we saw them privately at the convent,” recounts Ċensu, “let alone when he operated on them in the (public) hospital.” The thought still rankles in Ċensu’s mind forty years later; how such a bad turn (*vendikazzjoni*) must have hurt then. In the end, Anton Tabone was charged with a parking offence in front of the Duke of Edinburgh Hotel (the wider part of Racecourse Street) for allegedly obstructing the road; his legal counsel was Francesco Masini (formerly a Gozo Party MP). In court, the interrogation of the police constable who had made the charge proceeded on these lines, “just to show you how obsessed Bencini was”:

Q. How far out from the pavement was the car?

A. 24 centimeters.

Q. How do you know how much?

A. I measured it; it was ‘two shoes’ out (*żewġ żarbuniet ‘il barra*).

Q. Why did you measure it with your shoe?

A. Because I thought that some fool (*xi ċuċ*) would ask me!

“I need hardly tell you he was acquitted,” Ċensu concluded. “I hate to recount this because it truly shames us.”¹¹³

¹¹³ As for the Siggiewi D.M.O. ‘Masu’ Fenech, his daughter Priscilla recalls how C.I.D. officers called at their house and for a while any visitors would be taken to the police station for interrogation. The police confiscated whatever documents they found from Dr Fenech’s house, including the counterfoils of prescriptions made out to patients. Eventually they returned all these papers saying Fenech’s handwriting was so atrocious they could not “make head or tail of it”. Camilleri/Frendo, 9 Oct. 2000.

Be that as it may, this MOU episode was a bridge in Ćensu's career. Through it, he crossed over from being a *de riġeur* ophthalmologist, admittedly with a flamboyant sense of adventure, to becoming a politician. As Founder-President of the MOU, engaged in a relentless and ultimately successful clash with an administration such as Mintoff's was, he had become a public figure, and a success story, with trachoma and all that behind him. As it has often done, trade unionism thus served as a springboard to further commitment in a still more political arena. His had not been a partisan trade unionism – many of the MOU members sympathised with the Labour Party – but taking that kind of a national stand was also a political activity. When Mintoff accused Tabone of 'politika' in the union's confrontation with the Labour administration, Ćensu would respond: "How is that, when half of us support your party!"¹¹⁴ Rather than intimidating or disheartening him, being in the thick of that first strike and fight had whet his appetite for more.

Ćensu, 49, resigned his chairmanship of the union and contested the forthcoming general election as a Nationalist Party candidate.

¹¹⁴ 'Ghidtlu: "kif jista' jkun jekk nofsna huma mieghek!"

Constituency Care

1962 AND ALL THAT

A Nationalist from his's mother's womb, as he put it, Ċensu had long yearned to go into politics. Until he obtained his teaching position at the university, however, he could not afford to do so. It was by virtue of such a position, that he could stand for election to parliament, without losing his government job as a medical officer. His involvement at the head of the doctors' clash with Mintoff's administration in and after 1956 had come close to a political immersion, but still, it was not quite the real thing.

That Ċensu-led trade union militancy was at its zenith just as Malta was seeking to be integrated as part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, a policy which Ċensu opposed with an intestinal resentment. A fervent Roman Catholic whose favourite subject at school had been Latin, raised in the 'anti-Strickland' *bourgeois* tradition of the 1920s and 1930s, an official of the *Comitato Permanente Universitario* which the Professor of English refused to recognize, a proud independent-minded Maltese *Nazzjonalist* with his head held high, how could Ċensu ever go along with Integration? Not even Archbishop Gonzi did (or indeed, when she came to it, Mabel Strickland).

During our conversations on the medical dispute, Integration never figured directly as a factor, nor was it. However, in fact it constituted a major backdrop to political life in Malta at the time; it was on everyone's mind. In the same year of the medical dispute and its 124 resignations, when Mintoff thought he could use British doctors to quash the MOU, the country went to vote in a telling referendum, with 'trusted friends', on the issue of Integration. And most of those who voted actually supported it. Ironically, that was also a year when Britain, France and Israel attacked Egypt following the nationalisation by Nasser of the Suez Canal and were then obliged to beat a humiliating retreat. Decolonisation was in the air. Gunboat diplomacy was *passee*. In line with the trend towards national liberation from foreign yokes, 1956 was also the year when Hungary, partly inspired by Khrushchev's 'secret' denunciation of Stalin at the USSR party congress, tried valiantly to wriggle out of the Soviet grasp until it was crushed by Russian tanks. Both these events, at one time real and symbolic, took place at the same time. One succeeded, the other didn't in the short-term. Both however rather strengthened Russia's hand in international affairs: the spectre of a spreading Communism therefore loomed larger on the horizon.

KONGRESS NAZZJONALISTA

17 TA' DICEMBRU, 1961

AGENDA

1. Rapport tas-Segretarju Ġenerali.
2. Rapport tat-Teżorier.
3. Rapport tal-President.
4. Elezzjoni ta' 8 membri għall-Kumitat Eżekuttiv.
5. Mozzjonijiet oħra.

*Min ma jemminx fid-Dominion Status
Mhux Nazzjonalista.*

*Il-Partit Nazzjonalista Huwa
Partit ta' Centru, Partit tan-Nazzjon
Mibni fuq Żewġ Kolonni
Religjon
u
Patria*

A fliersheet announcing the party congress which elected Ċensu to the PN executive. (By courtesy of Mr P. P. Portelli.)



Well-wishers during the 1962 election campaign.

Now why would Ċensu decide to enter the political fray in 1962? Could he not have done so earlier? The earliest he could have done so would have been 1955, probably, when however he was fully stretched as a WHO consultant travelling long distances, as well as the MOU Founder-President engaged in a lingering industrial dispute until 1958 or so. Moreover, he had not yet got his university appointment, which was practically unpaid to be sure. He was a junior, a part-timer, never becoming a professor or, thereby, a departmental head. University professors held chairs in those days; they could participate in the institution's management and direction, the more distinguished among them moderating the rector's power through their *ex officio* presence on decision-making bodies. The professoriate, then a substantive position to aspire to, always eluded Ċensu.¹¹⁵ At law, however, his university appointment, such as it was, served him as a *deus ex machina*. In 1961, soon after he had got it, as he could go into politics without losing his

¹¹⁵ That situation was turned on its head by the 'bureaucratising' Education Act of 1988: in 'refounding' the University of Malta after Mintoff's fracas, this did away in practice with all the professional norms on which academic leadership in universities of study tends to be predicated.

government job, Ċensu stood for election as a member of the party executive and was elected by the party congress. This congress was held at the Hollywood Theatre, Hamrun, on Sunday 17th December 1961, and the fourth item on the agenda was the election of eight members to the executive committee. The eight members elected were Dr Albert Borg Olivier de Puget, Lawrence Cachia Zammit, Dr John Caruana Galizia, Notary Rosario Frendo Randon, Giuseppe Pace, Dr Victor Ragonesi, Notary Philip Saliba and Dr Vincent Tabone.¹¹⁶ He must have already decided then to commit himself further, or at least to sound his way into the prospect of a political career. He was a paid-up member of the party – a *tessera* cost half-a-crown, as much as a visit to the GP, even less by now. Like many others, Ċensu's pink party membership card was signed by the party leader, Borg Olivier, and the party secretary, Ragonesi. Thus by 1961 Ċensu had moved tentatively, but no doubt ambitiously, into the party's executive hierarchy. By this time, too, he was already a member of the Sliema Band Club, of which he would later become the president.

There was no general election in Malta between 1955 and 1962. Before 1955 you had the short-lived, rather wobbly stints under Borg Olivier and Boffa. Mintoff had split the Labour Party in 1949, thereby allowing the Nationalists under Nerik Mizzi to return to office much sooner than they would have done otherwise. The 'bolxevist' of Ċensu's undergraduate years in the 1930s¹¹⁷ was becoming a prime mover in national politics.¹¹⁸ He would not lead an administration before 1955. In December 1957 the Malta Legislative Assembly had unanimously passed the 'Break with Britain' resolution, epitomising the collapse of the Integration plan, and in April 1958 Mintoff had resigned office, taking the fight demagogically and riotously to "the squares":

¹¹⁶ 'It-Tmien Membri Eletti mill-Kongress', *Il-Poplu*, 19 Dec. 1961, p. 6.

¹¹⁷ See above, 4.

¹¹⁸ A replica of this happened in 1998 when Mintoff, now a back-bench Labour MP, voted against the Sant-led Labour administration, which had been in harness (with a 1 seat majority) for about as long as Boffa's had been before the split of '49 (two years). In the subsequent election (which Mintoff, 82, did not contest after half-a-century on the elected bench) the PN, still led by Fenech Adami, was returned with a 5 seat majority.

“niggvernaw mill-pjazez”. The fight was no longer for Integration with Britain now, but for Independence from it altogether.

What bothered most Nationalists and Catholics in Malta, as well as many Boffisti, probably was not so much the shift to a pro-Independence stand, although Archbishop Gonzi and several others had grave reservations about that too. It was rather a lurch to the left by the Mintoff-led Labour Party. As I have shown in *The Origins of Maltese Statehood*, mainly through the then top secret British intelligence reports, there was more to independence than met the eye. On the other hand, that the MLP had joined the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organisation in 1961 was no secret. Although Gonzi had been led to believe, probably by Toni Pellegrini of the newly-formed ‘anti-Independence’ Christian Workers Party, that Mintoff had joined AAPSO without his party’s consent, the MLP minutes, courtesy of Dr Alfred Sant, indicate otherwise. A motion for joining AAPSO was proposed and seconded in the party’s executive and passed unanimously, whether or not all of those present heartily agreed with it.¹¹⁹ The proposer was Mintoff himself.

AAPSO was a Peking-backed, Cairo-based ‘Third World’ alignment adopting an anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist rhetoric, typical of the times especially in parts of Africa and Asia, from Ghana to Vietnam. This was a discourse in which Mao’s Communist China had an increasing and ‘expanding’ interest, following its quarrel with Moscow in 1960, and the ongoing tension with Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist China, that is Taiwan (which was still the China recognised by the USA and represented in the UN Security Council).

The MLP’s membership of AAPSO also coincided with Fidel Castro’s transformation of the Catholic island of Cuba in the Caribbean Sea into a Marxist-Leninist, pro-Soviet state, and the defeat of a (botched up) invasion by Cuban exiles with American support at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. A year later, as a result of the Cuba missile crisis, the world

¹¹⁹ On this point see H. Frendo, *The Origins of Maltese Statehood. A Case Study of Decolonization in the Mediterranean* (Malta, 2nd ed., 2000), pp. 165-166, and p. 166, fn. 11. For evidence of a Pellegrini-Gonzi nexus, see the excerpts from Archbishop Gonzi’s letter to Cardinal Tardini, 7 Mar. 1961, and the corresponding caption to this, *ibid.*, p. 49.

seemed to be (or was) on the verge of a nuclear war: the real possibility of global annihilation. A clinical look at this evolving situation from a Maltese point of view would reveal a certain contradiction, in that whereas AAPSO until 1967 was pro-Peking, not pro-Moscow, Cuba was pro-Moscow rather than pro-Peking. In any case, they were all Communists, and from the standpoint of the Gonzi-led Maltese Church, as well as from that of Borg Olivier's Nationalist Party, the MLP was distancing itself markedly from its earlier pro-British and hence pro-Western alignment to one in the murkier waters of 'neutrality' and 'non-alignment' at the height of the Cold War.



Mintoff in Moscow in 1964. (By courtesy of Dr V. Moran, who was with him.)

Mintoff said he was not a Communist and did not want a dictatorship but he did not make things better by his often fiery language and turns of phrase which showed him to be sympathetic to “our friends the Arabs and the Africans” rather than “the English and the Americans”, threats of violence and hints at a civil war. The friendships he keenly sought to nurture with Nasser’s Egypt, Ben Bella’s Algeria and indeed Khrushchev’s Russia, were increasingly suspect, although the MLP also cultivated a good rapport with the Israeli Labour Party, among others on the left but in a democratic parliamentary mould. Moreover, one of the options being contemplated tentatively, and secretly, was another *genre* of integration or special association, this time with neighbouring Italy, which was a member of NATO.¹²⁰

Dr Vincent Moran, who met Ben Bella and accompanied Mintoff to Moscow in 1964, has confirmed that Ben Bella helped materially the MLP, and that in meetings with the Russians, Mintoff would start by telling them not to expect the Maltese to become Communists. In the first case, Moran recalls clearly, Ben Bella gave them “money, not arms”. In the second, Mintoff told him: ‘Imagine what those who call us “Bolshevists” in Malta would say if they heard me!’¹²¹

We now know that in the run-up to Independence in 1963-1964 ‘Mintoffian’ discourse and manoeuvres were consequential in British, Italian, American and NATO assessments of Malta’s profile as a would-be independent state. Mintoff was seen as Malta’s possible future (unreliable) premier, particularly so in the context of Western security concerns in the volatile Mediterranean region, including the Near East. The British strongly suspected there might be a foreign-backed *coup d’état* in Malta shortly after Independence, and made various contingency plans both to pre-empt and to counter it. Borg Olivier and his Cabinet were wary of the eventuality of grave trouble and tried to

¹²⁰ On this, see *The Origins of Maltese Statehood*, *op.cit.*, ch. 12, pp. 327-370. See also H. Frendo, ‘Mizzi, Mintoff and Italo-Maltese relations’, *The Sunday Times*, 31 Oct. 1999, p. 76; and see below, 11.

¹²¹ ‘Mur ġib lil dawk li jsejhhulna “Bolxevisti” f’Malta jisimghuni nghidilhom hekk!’ Moran/Frendo, 14 Sept. 2000.

ensure their survival.¹²² There was even a troubling, perhaps unduly alarmist report (followed up in all seriousness by Scotland Yard) that Borg Olivier could be assassinated.¹²³

Malta in the early sixties saw not only the restitution of self-government; it also saw both the main parties, Nationalist and Labour, holding out Independence as a political ideal in their respective manifestos, with the not insignificant difference that whereas the former nailed its colours to the Western mast, the latter departed from that. The Nationalist Party in whose interest Ċensu contested the 1962 general election was one pledged to getting Independence (“Dominion Status”) within the Commonwealth for Malta, as well as one caught in the acrimonious and socially riveting ‘politico-religious’ dispute spearheaded by Gonzi on one side and Mintoff on the other.

By 1961 Archbishop Gonzi and Mr Mintoff had fallen out with each other in a big way. The former, an authoritarian dignitary reared in a previous century, distrusted Mintoff and was terrified of a Communist threat. The latter irreverently and sometimes insultingly sought to diminish the power of the Catholic Church in Malta, while experimenting dramatically in foreign policy. Three small ‘Church’ parties, which opposed Independence, sprung up, one led by a leading Catholic journalist (who had been the MOU’s legal adviser) Herbert Ganado, a splinter from Borg Olivier’s party; another led by Toni

¹²² Two of Borg Olivier’s Cabinet Ministers have confirmed to me that their secret visits to the Tarġa Gap bunker with Borg Olivier were precautionary measures in case it would not be possible temporarily to govern from the Auberge d’Aragon in Valletta.

¹²³ On all this see *The Origins of Maltese Statehood*, *op.cit.*, especially chapters 14-16, pp. 406-639. Some of the more pertinent documents are reproduced *tale quale*. See also the news items, features, interviews and revealing exchanges of correspondence, following the book’s publication, relating to a *coup d’état*, Mintoff-Nasser contacts, Borg Olivier’s diplomacy, the church question, etc., i.a. in *The Malta Independent on Sunday*, 12 Sept., 19 Sept., 7 Nov., 21 Nov., 12 Dec. 1999; *The Times (of Malta)*, 9 Oct., 23 Oct., 6 Nov., 10 Nov., 15 Nov., 27 Nov., 21 Dec., 1999, 8 Jan. 2000; and *The Sunday Times (of Malta)*, 19 Sept., 24 Oct., 31 Oct., 7 Nov., 21 Nov., 5 Dec., 1999, 16 Jan., 23 Jan., 6 Feb. 2000. See also *Il-Mument*, 19 Sept., 3 Oct., 10 Oct., 24 Oct., 31 Oct., 21 Nov., 5 Dec., 1999; *In-Nazzjon*, 10 Sept., 28 Sept., 1 Oct., 30 Oct., *L-Orizzont*, 22 Sept., 19 Oct., 25 Oct., 1999; *Ir-Torċa*, 31 Oct. 1999, and *Il-Ġens*, 8 Oct., 22 Oct., 29 Oct., 5 Nov. 1999.

Pellegrini, who had been the MLP's Secretary General; and a third led by Mabel Strickland, Lord Strickland's daughter and Malta's most influential press baroness.¹²⁴ The MLP held up 'six points' which were essentially secularising and laicising policies, on which Mintoff's party would not relent, much less repent. In this agitated scenario, replete with crusading mass meetings on both sides, fears of a 'Cuba in the Mediterranean' and wrath at the Church's 'interference' in politics, first Lorry Sant and subsequently Mintoff *et al* were 'interdicted'. That was a kind of excommunication. The Bishops advised the faithful not to vote for Mintoff's party in the forthcoming elections, under penalty of mortal sin.

It was into this fray that Ċensu jumped when, by presenting himself as a PN candidate, he took the plunge into Maltese party politics.

The 1962 general election was an extraordinary one in many ways. The number of political parties contesting it – no less than six of them – was a record. In an island whose colonial and post-colonial electoral history, for better or for worse, has tended to be dominated by a government-opposition bipolarity, a party/anti-party bipartisanship, to have six parties doing battle in the same election was most unusual. Given Malta's small confines, on a *per capita* basis this may well have been unique in the history of 'national' electoral politics in the democratic world. No 'one party' totalitarian streak there!

Even in Malta, 1962 was *sui generis*. Unprecedented, it has not had a repeat. In the excitement characterising the grant of self-government in 1921, there were four parties contesting the election. There would have been five but Gustu Bartolo's and Gerald Strickland's cleverly allied into one before the election. One of the four, the *Camera del Lavoro* or Labour Party, was relatively new; although it also carried a 'social-Catholic' Panzavecchian stamp of sorts. The Gozo-stronghold Mizzi party was largely a personality-driven and territorially-anchored

¹²⁴ There was a fourth party under the church 'umbrella'. Ransley's Christian Democratic Party; none of its candidates were elected to parliament.

Nationalist faction. In 1926 these four parties re-aligned, becoming two formations, one led mainly by Ugo Mifsud, the other by Gerald Strickland. After the Second World War and the re-restoration of self-government, there was another flurry of party activity. Even so, you had five parties then, two of which (the Masini-led Gozo Party and the Jones-led Jones Party were territorially-based). The newest of the parties in 1947, in the absence of Strickland's Constitutional Party, was the short-lived Democratic Action Party, led by Professor Hyzler.¹²⁵ With the Labour split in 1949, you got three parties, Mintoff's Labourites, Boffa's Labourites (the Malta Workers' Party), and Borg Olivier's Nationalists. By 1955, we were back to two: Mintoff's MLP and Borg Olivier's PN. But in 1962, we had *six*. A phenomenon, indicating what agitated times these were, destiny unknown.

Ċensu's first general election saw a record number of candidates contesting it, as many as 302, with the PN and MLP fielding exactly 63 each in the ten districts. This election would establish another record, that of the percentage of registered voters actually voting. Very nearly 91%.

The decision to enter politics changed Ċensu's life. But not so much immediately: he failed to get elected at his first try. He almost made it, but he was pipped at the post. He blames the alphabet. In that he may be right, but I could not help thinking of his attempt at winning the CPU presidency in 1933. He had been beaten to it, by that tyrannical one vote, by Borg Olivier, Giorgio. Then, a would-be supporter, who has remained

¹²⁵ Giuseppe Hyzler (1886-1953) is unstudied. The Professor of Forensic Medicine at Malta from 1927 to 1946, he started off as a Panzavecchian activist after the Great War, then successfully contested the 1932 election for the PN on the first district. He was an executive member of the Camera Medica and represented it in the post-war National Assembly drafting a new constitution. Distancing himself from the PN, in 1947 he formed a new party, the Democratic Action Party, and returned 4 members to parliament, including himself. His son, Albert, also a medical doctor, formerly a DAP deputy then a Boffist one, joined the MLP. He was the Minister of Health in Mintoff's 1955-1958 administration with which Ċensu's MOU clashed. See above, 9.

un-named, had second thoughts.¹²⁶ Well, many more people voted in the general election, of course, yet Ċensu again failed to get in by a few votes. And who beat him to it this time? Borg Olivier, Gaetano.

Ċensu contested the seventh district, which comprised Gzira, Sliema and St Julian's. With 16,968 registered voters, this was numerically the largest of the ten districts. Next came the first district, comprising Valletta, Floriana and Marsa, with 16,725 electors. As the quota is worked out as a percentage of the electors, the seventh district also had the highest quota. In 1962, this was 2,829 votes. In the proportional representation system, votes had to be obtained individually as much as by the party itself, because the party fielded more than one candidate on the same district. This system naturally leads to tension between the candidates of the same party, because they contest each other at least as much, and indeed more, than they do those of the rival party or parties. It also gives the voter a right to choose among the party's own candidates, by indicating preferences.

In a Maltese general election, preferences count too, because few candidates obtain enough first count votes to match or exceed the quota and be elected outright. Preferences can be more determining even than first count votes, when a candidate does not make it on the first count, and will have to wait his turn as one candidate after another is either elected or eliminated (*waqa*). The candidate has to find and surround himself with a caucus of canvassers who work out the names and connections of voters street by street, according to the last available elector register, and have campaign activities organised to attract potential voters not so much to his party as to his own camp. This task is harder when a candidate is contesting for the first time against better-established candidates, because unless there has been a swing to the party it means having to poach their votes. A candidate may also be constrained to make strategic alliances for second preferences with a candidate who may be stronger in an area of the district rather than another. This is not exactly a pleasant exercise in itself, but that is how

¹²⁶ See above, 4.

Maltese party politics have worked since PR was introduced with self-government in 1921, on the premise that it would ensure a representation of minorities more than a first-past-the-post system did (as in Britain). Censu was hostage to the system as much as any other candidate.

Against the disadvantage of newness, there was the fact that he was a leading eye doctor with a large clientele. He had practised in Sliema, the Nationalist core of this district, ever since his graduation in 1937. He had made a name for himself in the anti-trachoma campaigns and, more so in a Maltese context, through turning the screws on Mintoff's administration during the doctors dispute,' still a very recent memory. Mintoff was the *bête noir* of all the other contesting parties in 1962. Although the smaller parties opposed Independence, which the Nationalist Party upheld, they nevertheless opposed Mintoff's party all the more. This meant that preferential voting naturally favoured the Nationalists, not the Labourites, if and when smaller party candidates failed to make it; but it also meant that there was much competition from these parties as well, denting the Nationalist vote.

The Sliema district was very typical of this situation, as the election result showed. Gżira and St Julian's had tended to have less of a Nationalist margin. Sliema, a town which came into existence during the British occupation in the 19th century, was generally more middle class and less instinctively or collectively of one party; even less so was it unabashedly 'nationalist'. Of the five seats in this district, in fact, two were won by the anti-independence 'church' parties. Three of the leaders of the four smaller parties contested this district. Two of them were elected: Miss Mabel Strickland of the Progressive Constitutional Party obtained 1,596 first count votes and was the third candidate to meet the quota, while Dr Herbert Ganado of the Democratic Nationalist Party obtained 1,657 first count votes (more than her) and was the fourth to reach the quota. The MLP came last, electing only one candidate without a quota (Dr Patrick Holland). The first two candidates to be elected were Nationalists. Dr Giovanni Felice, a Sliema man who had already been a Nationalist parliamentarian for some years and served as Minister of Justice in the 1950s, led the poll and was almost elected on the first

count. Felice, a capable lawyer who would later play a key role in pioneering industrial development and tourism, was the PN's main battle horse on the Sliema district.

The real fight within the party was for runner-up position to Felice, and this was where preferential voting may have played tricks on Ċensu. The PN fielded seven candidates on this district where, if they had a clean sweep, they could never elect more than five. The two best-placed PN candidates after Felice on the first count were Dr Gaetano Borg Olivier with 1,171 votes, and Ċensu, with 1,058. The candidate next in line, Oscar Rizzo, an architect, had less than 700 votes, and the one after him, M. A. Refalo, a lawyer, had 528. Whether Ċensu got elected or not therefore depended on the second preference votes of those candidates from all parties who were eliminated one by one. As many tended to vote for their preferred candidate and then simply go to the top of the party list and give their preferences numerically in the order that the name appeared on the ballot paper, the 'B' came first and was evidently in an advantageous position compared to the 'T'. In this particular case, Borg Olivier appeared first on the PN list, while Tabone appeared last. The former moved up from 1,171 to the quota of 2,829, increasing his share by 1,658, whereas Ċensu was the last of the PN candidates to be eliminated having reached 1,965, an increase of 907 on his first count vote of 1,058.¹²⁷ Apart from being a Borg Olivier, Gaetano ("Gejtu") was, like Felice, a lawyer who had served already as a Nationalist MP, having first been elected, like him, in 1953.¹²⁸ Like Gejtu Borg Olivier, Ċensu lived in St Julian's but, unlike him, he had not been born there.

¹²⁷ For collected electoral data see Michael. J. Schiavone (ed), *L-Elezzjonijiet f'Malta 1849-1991* (Malta, 1992), Remiġ Sacco, *L-Elezzjonijiet Ġenerali 1849-1986* (Malta, 1986), and for the official results the respective numbers of the *Malta Government Gazette*.

¹²⁸ In 1955 Gejtu had not been returned for this district. The three Nationalists elected were: Felice, Dr Jackie Frendo Azzopardi and Oscar Rizzo. The MLP had elected two MPs: Joseph ("Ġużè") Ellul Mercer (d.1961), who led the poll, and Maurice DeCesare, a medical doctor.

There was another factor, very probably the determining one. By the time that the votes of the other PN candidates had been transferred, Ċensu was leading Gejtu by some 300 votes, although neither of them had made it to the required quota, obviously. But when the CWP candidate was eliminated, most of his votes went to Gejtu Borg Olivier. The CWP candidate was Salvinu Privitera, an architect, who started with 484 first preferences but commanded as many as 1,325 by the time he was eliminated. Among the parties known as “*ta’ taht l-umbrella*” (meaning the pro-Church, anti-Mintoff parties, including the PN, backed by the Diocesan ‘Junta’), the trend was that these would vote first for their own party candidates – Ganado’s, Pellegrini’s, Strickland’s and Ransley’s. Then, they would continue giving their preferences to all the other ‘allied’ parties’ candidates listed on the long ballot paper. In other words, those Privitera preferences inherited by Gejtu were not really from Nationalist voters as such, but from anti-Mintoff or pro-Church ones, who then went to the top of the ‘umbrella list’, and marked their remaining ‘preferences’ downwards, omitting the MLP candidates. The main candidate left in the race, fourth from the top of the ballot list, was Borg Olivier, and he had his box filled in accordingly.

The three main CWP candidates on this district were, in this order, Privitera; Dr George Zarb, a medical doctor; and Ganni Bencini, 73, a founder-member of the Labour Party (and its general secretary for several years in the 1920s and 1930s), who had later supported Boffa against Mintoff. Privitera had inherited the Zarb and Bencini votes, so far as strict party voting went. From then on the umbrella dynamic took over, mostly top down. Gejtu having overtaken Ċensu thanks to Privitera, Ċensu was eliminated before him, thereby ‘electing’ him immediately with the full quota through his (Ċensu’s) own preferences. There were not enough votes to elect a third PN candidate, not with Ganado and Strickland from the smaller parties getting in themselves.

Ċensu and his supporters were disappointed, naturally; but as a first try it had not been bad at all, in the circumstances. Nor would it happen again. Ċensu went on to be returned in every subsequent parliamentary election he contested in broadly the same area in 1966, 1971, 1976, 1981

and 1987. In this process he came to embody the trappings of every constituency MP, canvassers and pockets of support and, inevitably, some hangers-on and foes as well, but he commanded much genuine respect, and he continues to do so to this day, often irrespective of party.

One important base in his network was the Sliema Philharmonic Society or Band Club, of which he became President in 1966 and with which he continued to have a close association almost to this day. He served continuously as president of the club for 29 years, and as a member for many years more. Ċensu was not just a decoration: band club members note that he took an active part in proceedings and contributed as best he could to the club's progress and well-being. Nor, incidentally, was this club a Nationalist nest. Partisan leanings were split about 50%-50%, so respect for the elective presidency was not simply or even mainly a deference to party. This may be seen from its presidents. Ċensu's predecessor for eleven years was no other than the architect Salvinu Privitera. From 1951 to 1954 it had been Felice.

The club, founded in 1923, had always been linked to the Sacro Cuor Parish, whose activities it promoted and in which it participated, devoted to venerating the Sacred Heart of Mary, patron saint of the locality. The club moved to its present quarters in St Trophimus Street, facing the church, as early as 1924. The present premises, restored and enlarged in the course of time, are spacious, bright and with a large garden area, especially for this residential part of Sliema characterised by rows of 19th and 20th century terraced stone houses in the Maltese village core tradition, surrounding the impressive, richly decorated church itself. As has been typical of Maltese band club culture over the past two centuries, the Sliema band club had a string of activities, musical, cultural and social, to its credit, with a whole repertoire of band marches even on cassette, sometimes involving the winning of prizes in competitions locally and abroad. In 1989 it would 'win' the most unusual prize of all, when its serving president became the Head of State.¹²⁹ Ċensu was also associated with the Spinola Band

¹²⁹ For a popular outline of this band's history, see Winston Zammit and Fr Raniero Zammit, *Socjeta' Filarmonika 'Sliema': 70 sena ta' storja b'risq il-mużika u l-kultura* (Malta, 1993).

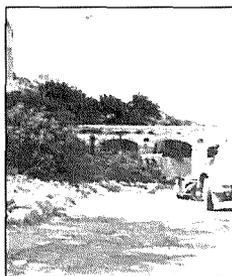
Club of St Julian's, where he was resident; this too would fête him on assuming the presidency.

Another regular haunt was Sliema's Sacro Cuor parish church, where Ćensu, like his wife, continued to participate prominently in the sacraments, the *festa* and in liturgical and devotional rituals each year. One of his unfulfilled dreams was a project whereby the band club would have been moved further inwards towards its large back garden, so as to create a proper square in front of the church façade, and realign some of the buildings facing it for the same purpose. An inspection of the site shows the advantages of this and, with relative ease, its feasibility. Not all the district politicians in power apparently favoured the idea, which was of course identified with one of them. Nothing happened. Ćensu's other 'works' project to have a bridge constructed across Wied Ghomor, effectively linking up two sides of St Julian's, did happen. It is one of the visible signs of achievement for him as a constituency MP.

Ćensu felt at home, too, with the Franciscan friars in the nearby monastery. In their company, with wine at table, he ruminated and philosophised about life, Christianity, politics and humanity's lot, as he is wont to do, not usually at a loss for words even in his late eighties. Envy, he once told an interviewer in their magazine, was a stronger force than either love or hate; he also said it to me. It is one of the lessons that life has taught him.¹³⁰ There certainly is no shortage of that in so small and over-crowded an island as Malta, as anyone who ever dreamt of achieving something will know, for the proverb aptly has it: *ghal kull ghadma hawn mitt kelb* (a hundred dogs to every bone).¹³¹ In addition, Ćensu continued to practice as an eye doctor, seeing patients regularly, although politics would take a toll on his practice to some extent, and indeed on his family life and finances, especially when he became a Minister some years later.

¹³⁰ See below, 16.

¹³¹ Respect for the individual generally, and for the citizenry, also remained weak.



Construction work in progress on the Wied Ġhomor bridge in the late 1960s.



On the morning of the 'Sacro Cuor' festa in July 1975, the new vicar general Mgr Mercieca and ecclesiastics who concelebrated mass with him, hosted at the Sliema Band Club's premises by the committee. (By courtesy of Mr W. Zammit.)

Ċensu's baptism of fire as a politician remains that 1962 election, an intense and seminal scenario, with values and personalities rather juxtaposed. It was a time or reckoning, of missionary zeal on all sides. It encapsulated different world-views which carried on in time: the religious and the secular, the familiar and the unpredictable, the parliamentary and the authoritarian, the colonial and the independent, deference and defiance. All seemed to be caught, somehow, in a 'do or die' battle. In fact, there is much that was not Manichaeian about the period, although it stank of the black and white stuff, *à la Maltais*; and it

stung with it too. Undoubtedly, Mintoff with his vitriolic air was an overriding factor. But so was Gonzi, with his fire and brimstone. 'With us or against us'. How absurdly 'Judaic' could one get? As social, cultural and political values and interests shifted, mutual fears arose, attitudes polarised and hardened. Yet Malta was not a frieze in anyone's ceiling, nor was it any politician's pocket borough. The reality was far more complex, and it is well that time, distance and scholarly evaluation should begin to distil it.

Other freshmen lured into the political arena in 1962, like Ċensu unsuccessfully so far as the votes went, were Dr Edward Fenech Adami on the Birkirkara district and Dr Guido DeMarco on the Valletta district.

The Party Man

ORGANISING A SECRETARIAT

ĈENSU's entry into politics led to other things. The first most important one of these was that, soon after the 1962 general election, he became the PN's Secretary General, lending his energies to organising that office. His predecessor, Dr Victor Ragonesi, became Public Relations Secretary to the Prime Minister, Dr Borg Olivier, at the Auberge d'Aragon. For the first two years Ĉensu was Acting Secretary; he was then confirmed in the post of party secretary which he had re-named 'Secretary General', thus distinguishing his role from that of the secretaries of other party sections, local and district committees, at the same time as upgrading the nomenclature of the post.

Ĉensu served in this capacity during a most formative decade, from 1962 to 1972, although he also performed other duties simultaneously, such as when he served for as a Cabinet Minister from 1966 to 1971. This means that his secretariat spans the demand for Independence and its acquisition in 1964. It also covers the immediate 'post-Independence' phase, when in most other ex-colonies the European constitutional presumptions guiding their separation from the 'mother country' went haywire. In Malta's case the PN's return to office in 1966 ensured a marked continuity and a certain stability in government, notwithstanding

the new challenges arising in the wake of Independence which besought a reinforced dose of alacrity.

Finally, Ćensu's secretariat also coincided with his party's defeat in 1971 after nine years in office, and the radical changeover under Mintoff's direction. Ćensu has described that as "revolutionary", comparing it to Strickland's victory in 1927 (when he was at St Aloysius College).¹³²

The state of the party's organisation in every respect left much to be desired in the 1960s; it was no match for the Labour Party. Ćensu's task was a tough one as there was not much money and little hands-on assistance. Initially, there was hardly any headquarters to operate from at all. Plans to start a printing press and build a headquarters began in his time and only came to fruition before the crucial 1971 general election, which the party lost. The PN's so-called 'sede' was in the old Valletta club. Files were held in one or two cabinets kept in its wooden balcony, under the arches, overlooking Piazza Regina.

Ćensu set about putting things in order, filing the minutes, promoting membership (*tesserati*), making the first contacts with the Christian Democratic movement, seeing the birth of a women's section, and generally taking stock of policy from the point of view of a party secretariat, not the least important element of which was the planning and the financing of a party headquarters and a printing press.¹³³ I got the feeling that, organization-wise, this was a rather solitary undertaking.

The executive committee met and all that, every now and again the party congress also met, but Borg Olivier was never particularly keen to structure the party into a mobilised organic force. Although the party had a youth and, now, a women's section, his was a rather leisurely way of

¹³² On this see above, 3.

¹³³ See below, 11.

doing things, having the party revolve around its leader. This may have suited him. He probably disliked all the Mintoffian drill with uniformed children marching, loudspeakers blaring in party clubs, routine mass meetings, beauty competitions, song contests, brass bands and carnivals. It ensured his survival for as long as he could carry the country with him. From a party standpoint in the long-term, it may look like a self-confident calculation, lacking in foresight, but *post factum argumentum non est*.

24 Ottobre, 1963.

COMITATO ESECUTIVO DEL PARTITO

Mercoledì 30 Ottobre, 1963, alle ore 18.30 in punto, si terra' all'Auberge d'Aragon una seduta del Comitato Esecutivo del Partito col seguente ordine del giorno:

- (1) Lettura del verbale.
- (2) Corrispondenza.
- (3) Relazione del Segretario (ad int.) sul Consiglio Generale tenuto il 24 Agosto e sulle riunioni dei Presidenti e Segretari dei comitati sezionali e dei circoli nazionalisti.
- (4) Nomina di comitati politici per i diversi ministeri e per lo studio di particolari punti di programmazione politica.
- (5) Nomina di una delegazione del Partito per stabilire contatti coi partiti di ideologie affini alle nostre nei paesi dell' Europa Occidentale.
- (6) Memorandum sulle decisioni dei Presidenti e Segretari dei comitati sezionali (qui annesso)-Confidenziale.
- (7) Nomina di un Segretario Propaganda.
- (8) Nomina di un altro Assistente Segretario e di un Assistente Tesoriere e di un Archivista.
- (9) Decisione su un conto presentato dal Sir. Pulis.
- (10) Possibilita' di aiuto finanziario ai circoli nazionalisti.
- (11) Congresso del Partito.


V. Tabone
Segretario Generale (ad int.)

MEMORANDUM LILL;
President Kunitat Esekutiv tal PARTIT
Onor. Ministri

Nhar il Hamis, 5 ta Settenbru u nhar il Hamis, 26 ta' Settenbru kien hemm laqgħat fis-Sede Centrale, il Bolt, tal Presidenti u Segretarji tal Kunitati Sezjonali, ta-Cirkoli Nazjonalisti, u ta' l'Esekutiv tal Moviment Zagħah tal Partit Nazjonalista; appresjeda f'dawn iż-żewġ seduti is-Segretarju Generali (ad int.) tal Partit.

Li skop ta dawn il laqgħat kien dak li jigi studjati procediment kif is-Sezjonijiet jistgħu ikollhom access aktar effettiv mal gvern, u biex isiru suggerimenti oħra għall gid tal PARTIT.

Dawn il laqgħat gew hafna apprezzati minn dawk li attendew, u urew li il fianna tal fidi Nazjonalista għada tixgħel bħal qabel fl-inhawi kolla ta Malta; urew ukoll li is-Sezjonijiet għandhom sodisfatti li lehenhom qegħied jigi miemuh bissejjeq fit-tfassil ta policy u fl-esekuzjoni tal programm Nazjonalista, u għaleq saru diversi proposti importanti li hu intemat jigu kunsidrati u effettwati mill kunitat esekutiv. Il proposti fil qsoor kienu dawn:

- (1) Hemm bzonn kbir u urgenti li il Partit ikollu il gurnal tiegħu ta kuljum. Dan huwa il htioga li għanda ikollha l-owwel priority, u l-ebda sforz u l-ebda spisa na għanda tfixkol dan il progett. Il Partit ma jistgħax jirresisti iżjed għall attacki li jidhru f'hemm gurnali ta kuljum mingħajr l'opportunita' li jirrispondi jekk hemm bzonn kull jum. Huwa mistenni li l-Esekutiv jidher il passi necessarji għal dan il għan.
- (2) Hemm bzonn htioga kbira ta kuntatti iżjed intimi bejn il Gvern u is-Segretarja, u bejn din u is-Sezjonijiet, għux biss fuq il policy generali tal Partit imma anki fuq l-amministrazzjoni ta kull jum. Hafna drabi, jekk mhux dejjem il partitarji ma jkunux jafu kif jirrispondu għall kalunnji u għall kritika għanula mill-avversarji tagħna.
- (3) Il Ministri għandhom jgħatu kas iżjed għar-rapprezentanzjonijiet tal kunitati sezjonali.
- (4) Il Ministri għandhom jikkuntattjaw u jekk hemm bzonn jikkonsultaw lil kunitati Sezjonali fuq xogħol li jsir fid-diversi sezjonijiet partikulari.
- (5) Il Ministri u d'deputati għandhom bzonn kuntatti iktar mall kunitati ta-sezjonijiet toħhom.
- (6) It-tesseri għal kull kunitat sezjonali għandhom ikollhom għux biss il firma ta'segretarju generali imma ukoll tal President tal kunitat sezjonali. Dawn it-tesseri għandhom jigu usati biss bl-autorizzazzjoni espressa tal kunitat in questioni, u għaleq għandhom jigu rispettati iżjed mill Ministri.
- (7) Il Ministri għandhom jirriservaw nofs ta nhar kull hmistax, għall kunitati sezjonali u l-organi oħra tal Partit.
- (8) Il Ministri għandhom jottienu min għand il kukkitati sezjonali dawk l-informazzjonijiet li tinhtegilhom fuq nies li huma jimpiegaw.
- (9) Il Ministri għandhom ikollom lista aggrornata tal kunitati sezjonali.
- (10) Il Ministri fil għazla ta li staff personali tagħhom għandhom jimpiegaw nies li jistgħu u iridu incoxu il quddiem l-interessi tal Partit.

One of Ċensu's action-oriented circulars in 1963. (By courtesy of Mr P.P. Portelli.)

While in 1962 the PN had admittedly obtained 42% of the vote, a good third of the electorate still had risked eternal damnation and voted Labour. Borg Olivier managed to scramble an absolute majority in the Legislative Assembly because one of Ganado's MPs, a Gozitan contractor, was induced to cross the floor, giving the administration 26 seats out of 50. Borg Olivier may have relied on the fact that the votes

obtained by the smaller 'anti-Mintoff' parties would largely revert to the Nationalist fold, while Mintoff's own brashness and brouhaha would bring about his own downfall. Such a self-justifying reasoning hung on a knife's edge.

When Ċensu assumed charge of the party's secretariat in 1962, the only party organ *Il-Poplu* was nondescript, limited in circulation, even irregular in publication. Editorials were written by the lawyers Benny Camilleri, Eddie Fenech Adami, Ugo Mifsud Bonnici... The *Malta Tagħna* was Ganado's. From 1962 onwards the General Workers Union, which supported the Labour Party, consolidated itself under the leadership of Joe Attard Kingswell. Among other things, it started a mass circulation daily newspaper in Maltese, *L-Orizzont*, killing off the 'Stricklandian' *Il-Berqa*. It thus came to have the only effective daily Maltese language newspaper available to anyone conversant with Maltese rather than English. That included the bulk of the working class. Without an internal mobilisation probably involving an overhaul, including statutory changes, and backing for that preferably from the leadership itself, there was not very much that could be done to the party in such a situation.

These were exciting times nonetheless. Borg Olivier and his colleagues had other things on their minds. These were of much greater consequence for the country than a party reorganisation. Ċensu assumed responsibility for the party secretariat at a time when Malta in general, and the Nationalist administration in particular, were embarking on a momentous mission: that of obtaining Independence, a status which Malta had long aspired to but never quite enjoyed. He was therefore involved in some of the more important decisions taken by the party and the administration in the constitutional negotiations and otherwise. Some of these discussions and decisions were taken in camera, and have not so far been aired. Nor are the party executive's minutes for that time available in the archives at Headquarters. Ċensu was present in an advisory capacity with the Borg Olivier delegation at Marlborough House in July 1963, and was of course in touch with his premier, as party secretary, on various matters.

By way of a hand-over, Ċensu received a file with some data, and not much else. In the age of offset printing, mobile telephony, computer and e-mail, when the PN has the best-equipped, most proficient research library on Maltese politics and public affairs, it is difficult to comprehend the laborious and painstaking manual dedication required to put a party secretariat on its feet. Ċensu managed to find and to give a job to the party's first salaried employee. On the recommendation of Spiru Portelli, a Nationalist merchant and supporter who was president of the party's Sliema section committee, Ċensu obtained approval to engage the services of a dockyard pensioner, one Oscar Bascetta. For his devotional labours, Mr Bascetta, who would spend much of his time working in the famous wooden balcony under the arches, was paid the princely sum of thirty pounds a month.

The party's one employee was entrusted with the task of organising and keeping the membership records in order, as well as acting as secretarial backup for whatever was necessary. Updated membership cards and records hardly existed, although it is possible that a former secretary "iż-Żiz" (Dr Rosario Frendo Randon) might have had some old *tesseri*. Bascetta's quarters consisted mainly of the Valletta club's balcony where, as I have noted, there were some filing cabinets. But the primitiveness of the system may be gauged from another straw in the wind. The minute books, which contained lined pages, were acquired by a supporter from Marsaxlokk, so that Ċensu would have something on which to write. "We didn't even have paper to write on, do you understand?"¹³⁴ Ċensu then would type out the minutes and paste them with glue on these minute books.¹³⁵ An inspection, with special permission, of the party executive's two bound minute books, from 1965 to 1981, clearly bears this out for the first years.

In addition to keeping and saving the minutes in this fashion for posterity, Ċensu undertook a drive to increase the membership, and to

¹³⁴ "Kien jehodhom minn xi dittra li kien jahdem maghha. Bir-rigi hekk, u dan. U fihom kont niktib. Ghax lanqas kellna fuq xiex niktbu, fhimt?"

¹³⁵ "Kont nittajpjahom bit-tajpraġter u nippejstjahom fuq dal-karti."

keep records of it.¹³⁶ The membership fee remained half-a-crown, which clearly was no disincentive to whoever wished to join the party. When he became Secretary, the *tesserati* were at best counted in their hundreds. By the time he left (shortly after Mintoff's sensational return to power in 1971) the number of party members had increased considerably.¹³⁷

His first remarks about the party's executive meetings revolved on the Ganado-Borg Olivier clash. These executive committees were always chaired by the party leader, but Ganado strongly believed that the party leader should not be, at the same time, chairman of the party's executive committee. This was the main bone of contention, although underlying it there certainly must have been Ganado's impatience with Borg Olivier's way of going about things and his delaying tactics, particularly when he disagreed with an impending decision and wished to quash it in a round-about way. From Ganado's writings it is amply clear that he and his colleagues felt that Borg Olivier was not putting up a strong enough resistance to Mintoff. Ċensu, who knew Herbert well, reckoned that the Archbishop also had a finger in the pie. Herbert, one of Malta's best Maltese language journalists long associated with *Lehen is-Sewwa*, was close to the Curia and was the Catholic Action's president. Moreover, at about the same time, moves were afoot also to split the Labour Party, through Toni Pellegrini's resignation and realignment under a 'Christian Workers' banner. So you came to have 'Democratic Nationalists' on one side, 'Christian Workers' on the other. "The cause of religion was vital at that time... it is an historical phenomenon of great importance that the two main parties split."¹³⁸

¹³⁶ "... il-minuti qeghdin fis-segreterija tal-partit għaliex l-uniċi minuti *extant* mill-hajja twila tal-Partit Nazzjonalista huma l-minuti li bdejt jien. Jiena bdejt il-minuti, u jiena bdejt it-tesserament modern. Issa kien hemm partit qabel dak in-nhar imma ma nafx fejn huma dal-karti."

¹³⁷ "...żdieđu naturalment... dawk kollha qeghdin hemm, u kollha bi tletin lira fix-xahar is-Sur Bascetta kien iżommhom b' mod aċċessibbli, ineċċepibbli."

¹³⁸ "...fenomenu storiku ta' importanza kbira, iz-zewg partiti kbar inqasmu... Imma Pellegrini hareġ minhabba r-religjon, għalhekk il-kawża tar-religjon kienet vitali dak iż-żmien, biex jiddefendi r-religjon anke għal-Laburisti. U nista' nifhem li Gonzi inkuraġġieħ... inkuraġġixxa lit-tnejn u Ganado hassu ttradut... imwarrab ftit, taf int."

confusion, they were back where they had started. It was “a plebiscite, a plebiscite”.

There were those who feared that Ganado might challenge Borg Olivier for the leadership. Borg Olivier may have been one of these, so he would rather have him outside than inside.¹³⁹ Ganado tried hard to lure Ċensu to his camp, first offering him co-leadership and subsequently even the leadership, but to no avail. Ċensu felt that the party had to unite under Ġorġ Borg Olivier, because it was he who had come out with the cry for Independence. “That was a *sine qua non*”.¹⁴⁰

Ċensu’s new role in the party necessarily brought him closer to dealings with the party leader, who was also the prime minister from 1962 to 1971. Borg Olivier greatly impressed Ċensu by his knack of taking a person’s measure in a short time and then, having sized up the person, he would see to what use he would best put him or her. It was an intuitive streak; he was a master at this. As a rule, Borg Olivier would not write a first draft of a text, but once he had it in hand from whomsoever would have prepared it, he would go through it with a fine tooth comb, changing even a comma if and as he thought fit. Although Borg Olivier was firmly in place at the head of the table during these executive committee meetings in the Valletta club, everybody spoke: “we had no intimidation”. Nor were matters due to be brought up for decision in committee ‘fixed’ in advance; who was there to do it? Still, Borg Olivier never wanted to give up his chairmanship of the executive committee. He was prone to waive aside an issue on which he felt he had no majority, if necessary by prolonging discussion and carrying on into the

¹³⁹ In 1962 Ganado was returned from two districts with a full quota, the Valletta one (which was also contested for his party by, among others, Dr Guido DeMarco), and the Sliema one, which he ceded (to Dr Antonio Busuttill). On the Valletta district Borg Olivier was elected on the first count, but on the ninth district he did not make it.

¹⁴⁰ “L-eżitu ta’ dak il-Kungress kien qasma. Il-firda kienet saret qabel, imma Herbert kien lest u jiena rrid niddefendi lil Herbert, ghax qalu li jiena l-ambizzjoni ta’ Herbert. Herbert wasal biex, qabel ma kont intermedjarju, l-ewwel offrieli li nkunu ‘co-leaders’ fil-partit tieghu... Wara, biex ihajjarni iżjed, offrieli l-‘leadership’...”

early hours of the morning until some of the members got tired and went to bed, thereby altering the would-be voting balance.¹⁴¹

On occasion, the executive would approve something, such as no longer having candidates listed on the ballot paper in alphabetical order, but no action would be taken to implement it. Borg Olivier's main speech-writer came to be a young and devoted health inspector from Żejtun, Joe Zahra, who was an assistant editor of *Il-Poplu* in the early 1960s. Borg Olivier's speeches sometimes made policy, without first having gone through any official party channels.

There were a number of so far unknown debating points during the 'Independence years' which, in the absence of minutes recording them, may have to depend largely on oral history. These concern primarily verbal lobbying and discussion, which may not have been duly registered through official correspondence. They include internal party debate with a bearing on the PN's own viewpoints and standpoints.

One controversial issue which arose in the party executive during the Independence negotiations was this. Should the Maltese flag carry the George Cross or not? The MLP's position on this was known because it was made public. That of the PN is not because it was not. In fact there was a division of opinion on the matter among the executive members. Ċensu, among others, was initially opposed to the idea that, once independent, Malta should continue to carry a British decoration from colonial times on her national flag. About half of the executive members had doubts on the same lines.

Borg Olivier, conscious of the delicacy of the negotiations under way in which he sought to make the most of his retention of British goodwill, advised that it would be impolitic to offend the Queen by removing a deserved honour which her father had awarded to the Maltese people.

¹⁴¹ Borg Olivier of course is not alone in employing this political subterfuge. For example, the same tactic was partly to blame for a Bolshevik minority substituting a Menshevik majority in a decisive Socialist Workers' party reunion, to that extent probably changing the future course of Russian history.

“Would we want to offend our Head of State?” By way of a compromise, it was agreed that the blue background to the G.C. in the pre-independence flag in the top left-hand corner be replaced by a silver one, with only a thin red lining separating this from the white fly for heraldic purposes. By means of this compromise, the G.C. remained in the same place but was less conspicuous. It gave independent Malta a new flag, with the ‘true blue’ quality removed from it.

Another still more intriguing move that came up, secretly, during the Independence phase, concerned the Order of St John, alias the ‘Knights of Malta’. As is well known, this Order had ruled Malta, which nominally belonged to Spain, for nearly three centuries until it quickly gave in and departed, with full military honours, at the sight of General Bonaparte’s fleet in June, 1798. Four years later, however, by means of Article 10 of the Treaty of Amiens, it had almost succeeded in returning to govern the islands. It had not given up. As the British transfer of power approached, it tried again. The Order, via the British, made a further attempt at regaining a foothold in Malta. Borg Olivier found out about this from British sources – he may well have been asked for his reaction. The Order was then led by Grand Master Fra Angelo De Mojana, the predecessor of Fra Andrew Bertie, who is the current Grand Master; but it was the Order’s chancellor, Principe Napoli Rampolla, who made the *démarche*. What the Order wanted was Fort St Angelo, Fort St Elmo and St John’s. Ċensu found out about this from Borg Olivier, as the Independence celebrations were being organised, with the Order’s Grand Master among the invited guests. “So why on earth did you invite him to the feast?”, Ċensu asked Borg Olivier indignantly, on finding out what had occurred behind his back.¹⁴²

Some years later, once Malta was a sovereign state, the Order wished to open an embassy in Valletta. For that, the Borg Olivier administration offered them St John’s Cavalier, on the understanding that they would restore and maintain this historic edifice. They got it at a very low rent. Ċensu was opposed to the suggestion that they should get it for free. The

¹⁴² “Mela x’invitajtu jaghmel ghall-festi?” (Dr Alexander Cachia Zammit, a fellow Cabinet Minister at the time, also knew something about this episode. Cachia Zammit/Frendo, 13 Sept. 2000.)

Cabinet agreed. Just as Charles V had given Malta to the Order in 1530 subject to the token annual offering of a falcon, so the Borg Olivier administration gave it St John's Cavalier subject to a nominal payment and, more importantly, caring for it.

Much later, as the Order persisted in its wish to re-establish its Malta connection through a physical presence, a similar deal was struck with regard to Fort St Angelo. Thus one of the Order's lingering wishes, that of somehow regaining possession of Fort St Angelo, actually materialised. Understandably, even here debate ensued as to the conditions under which this Order should be allowed to 'return'. Mintoff expressly stated in parliament, during the Sant administration, that if St Angelo were offered to the Order unconditionally he would vote against. St John's cathedral, which became and remained a bone of contention between Church and State ever since the Order's abrupt departure in 1798, has not so far reverted to the Order, and is unlikely ever to do so.

Unknown to Ċensu and to the Borg Olivier administration, Malta's sovereignty was somewhat at risk in another way at the same time. Mintoff was engaging in secret soundings with Italians about the prospect that, come Britain's transfer of power – Independence – Malta might strike a special relationship with Italy,¹⁴³ possibly in the nature of a regional autonomy with special attributes, on lines similar to his party's earlier Integration plan, and indeed 'federal' suggestions made by Nerik Mizzi before the First World War.¹⁴⁴ I am publishing here for the first time documentary evidence datelined, in manuscript, 'Partito Laburista di Malta, Sede Centrale, Strada Reale 41, Valletta', which enters into the merits of such a special arrangement. There is also an

¹⁴³ See 'Nota Informativa sull'indipendenza attualmente richiesta dai Malesi'. and 'Partito Laburista di Malta, Sede Centrale, Strada Reale 41. Valletta, Malta', n.d. These documents were laid on the Table of the House by the Hon. Not. G. Bonello du Puis during sittings number 173 of 21st May 1978 and number 174 of 5th June 1978.

¹⁴⁴ On Mintoff's Integration plan see e.g. Denis Austin's *Malta and the End of Empire* (Lond., 1971); see also J. M. Pirota, *Fortress Colony: The Final Act* (Malta, 1991, vol. 2). On Nerik's proposal see H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience* (1979), *op.cit.*, pp. 151-161.

accompanying slightly different typed version of this. It is argued in these papers that Britain ought not to oppose such an Italo-Maltese pact because it depended on Italy's support for joining the Common Market. In the last paragraph of the handwritten note it is stated that a proper inquiry into this prospect was required:

Il partito Laburista Maltese lo richiede anche per poter proseguire con questo suo piano ed a questo scopo fu diretta la visita in Italia del suo leader Dom Mintoff nel Febbraio del 1963.

This documentation supplements and reinforces the revelations contained in chapter 12 ('Oltre Mare' – The Italian Option') of *The Origins of Maltese Statehood*. In these MLP *démarches* behind the scenes, I do not exclude the hand of Dott. Onofrio Messina, the Italian Consul in Malta (later promoted to Consul General) and of Professor A. di Pietro, a Christian Democrat who held the chair of Italian at Malta. From the Valletta end, Mintoff's visit to Italy in 1963 had been arranged by Messina.¹⁴⁵

There also seems to have been some question as to section 6 in the draft constitution, but it is not clear, in that case, what this was or how far it was thrashed out openly. Two former Cabinet Ministers have been at best equivocal about its insertion, although there was a party commission to vet that draft and such a clause would most certainly not have escaped Borg Olivier's keen eye. The Cabinet had approved the Attorney-General's constitutional draft. Section 6, which held the Constitution to be the supreme law, was not itself entrenched; in other words, it could be used cynically as an expedient, by simple parliamentary majority, to change the constitution without observing its otherwise clearly stipulated procedural obligations. This prospect would be raised, unfortunately, during the tension (accompanied by violence) surrounding changing the form of the Constitution from a monarchical to a republican one in 1974.¹⁴⁶ Professor J. J. Cremona argues that the supremacy of the

¹⁴⁵ But see *The Origins of Maltese Statehood*, esp. pp. 327-370.

¹⁴⁶ On the turmoil surrounding this constitutional change, see below, 13.

Partito Laburista di Malta. (434)
 Essi in tal modo stanno a dispetto per l'indipendenza
 dopo aver raggiunto con la nuova Costituzione
 un punto di equilibrio con l'attuale sistema con
 simili concessioni democratiche.

2. In attesa che il Partito Laburista di Malta
 abbia il tempo di prendere a prendere, in entrambi i sistemi,
 gli elementi di una politica con l'adesione
 al Commonwealth e in non altre una
 parte del territorio originario del suo sistema.

25. Una simile situazione potrebbe essere
 se non fosse sospicibile nel comune interesse
 che Malta restasse neutrale su base come Singapore
 per essere così utile all'Italia ed al Mec.
 (inviato a Londra)

26. Il partito Laburista di Malta ha
 la richiesta anche per poter far parte con
 questa sede prima ed in seguito dopo far
 parte del partito in Italia del suo sistema
 come partito con l'adesione del 1955

25. La forma precisa di queste suppiccate relazioni più
 strette fra Malta e l'Italia potrà essere stabilita dopo
 uno studio esauriente della questione ed in modo tale che
 essa ricada la migliore e la più utile nell'interesse
 comune dell'Italia e di Malta. Si potrebbe pensare a dei
 rapporti simili a quelli con San Marino, oppure ad una
 autonomia regionale simile a quella della Sicilia.

26. Uno studio esauriente potrebbe accertare inoltre
 se mai sarebbe suppicabile nel comune interesse che Malta
 restasse territorio neutrale come Singapore (una simile
 proposta fu fatta nel trattato di Amiens) e fosse così
 utile all'Italia ed al Mec.

Extracts from 1963 documents regarding the possibility of a special Italo-Maltese constitutional arrangement to follow on Britain's departure.

Constitution is a 'super-norma', so it would make little or no sense to entrench it. "That was unnecessary and would be contradictory: you cannot insure against all risks."¹⁴⁷ Once again, in the absence of any available Cabinet minutes or the PN's executive committee minutes, nearly forty years after the event, it is not possible to settle conclusively any lingering doubts or misunderstandings as to what went on exactly with regard to this pivotal clause. It is indeed a 'super norma', and it ought normally to be regarded as such.¹⁴⁸

One internal party development while Ĉensu headed the secretariat was the creation of a Women's Section of the party, in addition to the *Żghaḥaġh Nazzjonalisti*, which had existed before his time. He was the one to propose it.¹⁴⁹ A General Council was convened soon afterwards to approve this and other measures, such as the publication of a new Sunday paper. The MLP's women's section was quite active, but the PN did not have one until 1971. Ĉensu's wife Maria, who was also active in the party, had been the only one to vote against this, on the ground that women were not a race apart. Not all women were as self-confident or as *engage*'. Voting was by show of hands and she did not mind. Ĉensu, however, supported the setting up of the PN's women's section, arguing that women then were not as free as they later became to participate in meetings, sometimes held at late hours, in party clubs, or to mix socially in male-dominated social environments, as these then were, much more than today. It was therefore necessary for them to have their own section, where they could discuss matters of direct concern among themselves, before these would be tabled before the party executive and/or the party congress, and to organise their own encounters and reunions separately.

¹⁴⁷ H. Frendo, *Malta's Quest for Independence: Reflections on the Course of Maltese History* (1989), p. 255.

¹⁴⁸ See J. J. Cremona, 'Article 6 of the Constitution', *The Sunday Times* (of Malta), 13 Feb. 2000, p. 15.

¹⁴⁹ Min., Ex. com., 10 Dec. 1971.

Today, there no longer is a need for such a women's section, he believes. What was necessary more than thirty years ago had now become anachronistic. Maltese society and ways of doing politics had changed; women were no longer inhibited or restrained. They could and should mix and participate in general private and public activities of all kinds as they pleased, just like the men and with them.



Ċensu presiding over a ladies' meeting.

They would be integrated as part of the whole, rather than segregated into a sectarian-like gender-based formation, with almost discriminatory overtones. If women are equal to men, why have a separate section, when socially they are now free to mix with men?¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ "Il-Moviment tan-Nisa kien necessarju ghax in-nisa ma kinux imorru l-kumitati ta' l-irġiel, kienu jghidulhom. U l-kumitati jsiru bil-lejl. Allura l-irġiel miżżewġin ma kienux jistghu, ma jhaliuhomx imorru ghax kien hemm klima oħra. Dik il-verita' kollha. Imma llum illi dal-kumitat tan-nisa serva biex hareġ il-mara mill-familja u tiehu parti fil-politika, illum huwa anakronizmu, m'ghandux jibqa'... Il-Moviment Nisa m'ghandux jibqa' ghaliex huwa l-iżjed istituzzjoni illi hija settarja u klassista. Jekk huma ugwali f'kollox, ghaliex ghandhom ikollhom tagħhom għalihom? Jekk tkun mara taht l-ghoxrin sena ghandek ċans li tkun fl-M.Z.PN, nisa u rġiel..."

In support of this view, Ċensu mentions changing international approaches to such matters. As Secretary-General, he travelled quite a bit, frequently at his own expense, to represent the party in overseas gatherings and keep abreast of goings-on in Christian Democratic circles, with which the party started to be associated. One such gathering in the Republic of San Marino, way back in the sixties, was chaired by a lady. She was in fact the secretary of the Christian Democratic Party of San Marino. She herself proposed the abolition of the Women's Section of the party. Not only was her motion approved unanimously, she was re-elected to the party's chief executive post. Not sticking up only for women's rights did not mean that she was against equality of the sexes. Nobody thought so anyway.

In terms of party organisation, the single most ambitious, significant and lasting transformation that took place during Ċensu's tenure was the identification and acquisition of a site for the installation of a party-owned printing press, and for a proper, spacious, equipped, modern general headquarters. Only then would it become possible for this party to start having a daily newspaper. It was probably the most important means whereby the party faithful could be reached and briefed as to what was afoot, although that did not exclude the need for various face-to-face encounters if the rank-and-file were not to feel cut off from the hierarchy. So, there was the construction job, and fund-raising for all this, then seeing the whole project through, basically implemented and functioning, by 1970-1971. The MLP, in Opposition, had constructed a new headquarters and got themselves a printing press by 1963, which at least published their own party organ; it had offices, a conference hall, a sandwich bar. This was the Freedom Press at Marsa, largely built by voluntary labour and equipped rather piecemeal, in part by donations from European social-democratic parties. The PN took longer to get round to this target, but when it did so, the project embarked upon was bigger and better.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ The Freedom Press at Marsa was subsequently demolished to make way for Malta Shipbuilding and a brand new headquarters built in Hamrun, in place of the Radio City Opera House.

Many were those involved in the project, foremost among them Dr Karmenu Caruana, the energetic Minister of Public Works affectionately nicknamed “il-*bulldozer*”, and the Casal Paola M.P. Ġorġ Caruana, who was a draughtsman. There was Notary Sammy Abela, who actually found the site between Tal-Pieta’ and Hamrun, then a huge hole in the ground and a dump, with a little house on the Pieta’ side in Our Lady of Sorrows Street. Operationally speaking, Ċensu and Dr G. G. Gatt were the two mainly in charge of fund-raising. This involved a lot of towing and frowning, with Minister Caruana often alerting industrialists and other potential donors to the fact that Ċensu and/or ‘ĠeĠe’ would be calling on them at such and such a time. Several of these donors preferred not to be identified, although their assistance was indispensable. In the executive, receipts were presented; auditors checked and kept records. Any money and other papers which the affable ‘ĠeĠe’ had kept at home were duly handed over to the party by his wife Marie Louise when he passed away in 1973 at a young age, just as the whole project was being finalised.

In-Nazzjon Taghna started publication as a daily, printed at the new “National Press”, in 1970, with Michael Schiavone as its first editor. It was the PN’s first fully-fledged Maltese language daily and in spite of many obstacles it has not missed a number since then.

Another prospect of the mid-sixties concerned the creation of a new post in the leadership hierarchy, that of a Deputy Leader. Borg Olivier apparently went along with this. The proposal had not come from him, nor – true to form – was his heart in it. The executive approved it, so something had to be done. The first debatable point in October 1965 was whether a two-thirds majority would be required, which evidently would make it more difficult to select a winner. The main contestants were Karmenu Caruana and Ċensu, but then, out of the blue, it seems that Borg Olivier asked Sandy Cachia Zammit to stand as well. In a three-cornered fight, the votes would be more dissipated, naturally. Caruana in fact got the most votes, followed by Ċensu and then Sandy. And then

autorizzato dal Capo del Partito di ~~scogliere~~ ^{scogliere} lui i suoi collaboratori e di mandare circolari e direttive. Il Capo del Partito nego' di avere dato tali autorizzazioni. Il Segretario del Partito disse che lui non ~~è~~ ^è stato mai informato delle attività del Comact ed ~~amix~~ ^{amix} opinò che l'Esecutivo fosse l'organo competente ~~ad ammix~~ ^{ad ammix} a formulare il policy del Partito anche nel campo della propaganda, anzi specialmente nel campo della propaganda, una intesa stretta quindi doveva aver luogo tra la Segreteria ~~amix~~ ^{amix} del Partito ed ogni attività di propaganda. Il Segretario Generale propose quindi che l'Esecutivo dovesse procedere alla nomina di una Commissione di propaganda, includendo tutti i membri del Comact. Dopo una lunga discussione, su proposta del Presidente fu deciso di nominare una Commissione composta ~~dal~~ ^{dal} l'Onor. C. Caruana, dall'Onor. P. Saliba, e dal dott. V. Ragonesi, per prendere contatto coi membri del Comact e per fare opportuni suggerimenti all'Esecutivo.

3. La mozione dei signori Fenech Adami e Portanier sulla forma del ballot papers fu rinviata alla prossima seduta su proposta del Presidente che doveva sottomettere all'Esecutivo alcuni documenti sulla questione.

4. La mozione numero 4 e quella numero 8 furono quindi ~~discusse~~ ^{discusse} insieme. I due proponenti delle mozioni chiesero che il Governo riconosca il MAS e l'Onor. G.M. Camilleri sottolineò la necessità di portare modifiche alla Malta Joint Council; egli illustrò pure il bisogno di rivedere le nostre leggi sindacali. Dopo una lunga discussione fu deciso di nominare una commissione composta, dall'Onor. A. Caxaro Zammit, l'Onor. G.M. Camilleri, e l'Onor. A. Bonnici per studiare la situazione sindacale a Malta e per riferire all'Esecutivo.

Essendo l'ora tarda le altre mozioni furono lasciate per una altra seduta e la seduta fu ~~aggiornata~~ ^{aggiornata} sine die.


 Segretario Generale


 Presidente

August 1965: Two of the earliest minuted motions on record in the PN's executive committee to revise the alphabetical listings in ballots, and industrial relations legislation.

il Deputy Leader. Tale decisione fu presa a scrutinio ~~segreto~~ ^{segreto} col risultato di voti 17 a favore, nessuno contrario e ~~una~~ ^{una} ~~amix~~ ^{amix} astensione. A questo punto il Capo del Partito assunse la presidenza ed in sua presenza fu deciso che ~~alla~~ ^{alla} ~~seduta~~ ^{seduta} ~~di~~ ^{di} ~~oggi~~ ^{oggi} ~~si~~ ^{si} ~~tenesse~~ ^{tenesse} ~~la~~ ^{la} ~~seduta~~ ^{seduta} ~~di~~ ^{di} ~~oggi~~ ^{oggi} ~~per~~ ^{per} ~~la~~ ^{la} ~~discussione~~ ^{discussione} ~~dei~~ ^{dei} ~~temi~~ ^{temi} ~~di~~ ^{di} ~~oggi~~ ^{oggi} ~~che~~ ^{che} ~~sono~~ ^{sono} ~~stati~~ ^{stati} ~~discussi~~ ^{discussi} ~~il~~ ^{il} ~~giorno~~ ^{giorno} ~~di~~ ^{di} ~~oggi~~ ^{oggi} ~~per~~ ^{per} ~~la~~ ^{la} ~~discussione~~ ^{discussione} ~~dei~~ ^{dei} ~~temi~~ ^{temi} ~~di~~ ^{di} ~~oggi~~ ^{oggi} ~~che~~ ^{che} ~~sono~~ ^{sono} ~~stati~~ ^{stati} ~~discussi~~ ^{discussi} ~~il~~ ^{il} ~~giorno~~ ^{giorno} ~~di~~ ^{di} ~~oggi~~ ^{oggi} ~~per~~ ^{per} ~~la~~ ^{la} ~~discussione~~ ^{discussione} ~~dei~~ ^{dei} ~~temi~~ ^{temi} ~~di~~ ^{di} ~~oggi~~ ^{oggi} ~~che~~ ^{che} ~~sono~~ ^{sono} ~~stati~~ ^{stati} ~~discussi~~ ^{discussi} ~~il~~ ^{il} ~~giorno~~ 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nothing further happened. That was it. A General Council was meant to be held on 2nd December 1967 to elect this Deputy Leader. In the first bound volume of the PN executive committee minutes there is a folder entitled 'Deputy Leader – Nominations', dated 9th December 1967, but it is empty.

The year 1967 was a rather turbulent one in Anglo-Maltese relations but as a visit by Queen Elizabeth II was approaching while these preparations were taking place, I wonder if that could have been used as a pretext for postponing the deputy leadership election indefinitely. Another election for a Deputy Leader would only take place years later, with the party chastised if not traumatised, and facing an uphill political struggle.¹⁵²

¹⁵² See below, 13.

Minister Tabone

JOBS, STRIKES AND SINS

BEING named a Minister must be the greatest ambition of every serving politician, or so it appears. The position also has its headaches and its pitfalls. On the one hand, it may be an opportunity to get things done, good things too, if you can deliver. On the other hand, it can twist, turn and contort the Minister, and open up many a can of worms, with the worms crawling all over... Ministerial deficiencies are not simply those so hilariously satirised in 'Yes, Minister', where the Minister may end up being managed, not to say bossed around, by his own 'personal assistant' 'special adviser', 'permanent head' in the civil service, or otherwise, so that one wonders who really *is* the 'Minister', or indeed the 'Prime' Minister. There are other constraints and liabilities, endemic to the system. Such as, for example, the Party Whip. And the Doctrine of Collective Responsibility. The more so for a Cabinet Minister. That means, in other words, possibly agreeing in public with what you disagree in private, and disagreeing in public with what you feel and know in your own heart and mind. Not as a medical condition, simply as a political obligation or strategem. Of such stuff are party politics – and the exercise of power – made. So, what about the individual's opinion, morality, integrity, learning, and all that? Tricky. Would dictatorship or anarchy be a reasonable alternative? "Two cheers for democracy", Winston Churchill once said. But there it was. Being an honest Minister could mean a steep rise in costly social obligations accompanied by a

hefty cut in the Minister's real income, just about impoverishing him and his family. In Malta, in the 1960s, a Cabinet Minister's yearly salary was £600.

In the general election of 1966, which again returned Borg Olivier's Nationalists to office – for the first time in an independent State – Ċensu headed the poll in his district with 2,456 votes. He was the first candidate to be elected, before Ganni Felice, elected fourth, and Gejtu Borg Olivier, elected fifth and last. The MLP got two candidates in, Patrick Holland and Joe Baldacchino. Neither Herbert Ganado nor Mabel Strickland, both of whom had opposed Independence, now a *fait accompli*, were returned from the seventh district (or from anywhere). Salvinu Privitera of Pellegrini's Christian Workers, whose preferences had tipped the balance in favour of Gejtu Borg Olivier and against Ċensu in 1962, was eliminated with 383 votes (1,325 last time). Many of those who had voted 1 for Ganado in 1962 must now have turned to Ċensu. Herbert Ganado's showing was a bashing, down to 196 from 1,657. To a lesser extent, so was Mabel's, down to 701 from 1,596. Minister Felice's first count vote, at 2,172, was 286 less than in the previous election, although the quota and the electorate were marginally lower. Gejtu held firm, just below the 1,200 figure.

The all-out Nationalist winner was Ċensu, the party's Secretary General. An M.P. at his second attempt, he was 53, mature enough to have been a Roman senator. He might have succeeded earlier had he considered the party's suggestions to contest the Siġġiewi or Casal Paola district, but, in the Sliema-St Julian's area, which he much preferred to the others, he was playing 'at home'. 1966 proved him right. In that year, the PN obtained a majority of the popular vote (48%, up from 42%), and had an absolute majority in parliament (28 out of the 50 seats). The MLP, mortal sin or not, got 43%, up from 33%, of the vote, and 22 (up from 16) seats.

The elections were held on 26th, 27th and 28th March and the result was known by the end of the month. Two days after the result, on the day that Ċensu and his canvassers were planning to celebrate victory by a dinner-dance at Bahar-iċ-Ċagħaq, Borg Olivier sent for Ċensu in the morning, and asked him to join the Cabinet. Ċensu, who was half-expecting it, and

felt he deserved it, did not accept immediately (although he certainly had not turned down the invitation either). When he realised that he could not retain his professional practice at the same time as being a Minister, as he had imagined, he felt torn, and wished to sleep over it. The children were anxious to know what he would do: “x’sse taghmel papa’?” Apparently there was no great exhilaration about the matter.



Left: Ĉensu beaming, as Borg Olivier welcomes him to the cabinet (below) in 1966.



Still, word got round. Although Ĉensu had not yet accepted officially, that evening the wife of a parliamentary colleague, who was senior to Ĉensu in parliament, phoned up at home purportedly to “congratulate”

them.¹⁵³ The following morning Ċensu accepted, and went to take the oath of office as “Ċensu Tabone”. He is rather proud of thus institutionalising his first name as “Ċensu”, which is how people actually knew him since his childhood – “Ċensinu” in Gozo. As personal names always are, it was part of his personal identity, although he retained his habitual signature as “V. Tabone”: ‘only *The Times* (of Malta) continued calling me “Vincent Tabone” to this day.’¹⁵⁴

Ċensu had expected that the Prime Minister would ask him to be Minister of Health, although in view of his MOU past he was in two minds whether he would have altogether relished that. In fact, Borg Olivier gave this Cabinet post to Dr Alexander (“Sandy”) Cachia Zammit of Żejtun, a younger medical doctor who had served in the previous legislature as Minister of Labour and Social Welfare.¹⁵⁵ Borg Olivier asked Ċensu to head the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare which, as in Cachia Zammit’s case, would include the emigration portfolio. This ministry was meant to include Housing, but Ċensu was disappointed to learn on the following day, from Joseph Rossignaud and Edgar Cuschieri, two senior civil servants, that it had been decided to assign responsibility for housing to the Minister of Justice, Dr Tommaso (“Tommy”) Caruana Demajo. A Hamrun lawyer and former ‘industrialist’ who was a few years older than Ċensu, Caruana Demajo had served twice as Minister in the fifties, first for industry and commerce, then for justice in the legislature just ending.¹⁵⁶ In fact, as Ċensu himself had reason to be well aware politically, this was a

¹⁵³ “F’tieghek haseb Ġorġ... ma hasibx f’tiegħi!”

¹⁵⁴ “‘Vincent Tabone’ baqgħet tghidli sal-ġurnata ta’ llum biss it-*Times*.’ (That, too, is how he remained listed in the telephone directory.)

¹⁵⁵ On Cachia Zammit’s work during the 1962-1966 legislature especially in the field of emigration, see H. Frendo, *The Origins of Maltese Statehood. op.cit.*, ch. 13, “The Push to Diversify the Economy: Industry, Tourism, Emigration”, pp. 371-405.

¹⁵⁶ Given the still ‘clientelist’ mentality, housing allocations also translated into votes. One of Ċensu’s tiffs with Caruana Demajo during a cabinet meeting is known to have concerned the Marshall Court apartments in Gżira (which formed part of the Sliema electoral district). In this case it was feared that these former Services’ apartments would be turned into a hotel rather than re-allocated to Gżira engaged couples who could not afford to buy apartments on the open market. See e.g. the news items and letters in *Il-Haddiem* during March 1969.

crucially sensitive area, one increasingly crying out for dynamic attention and regulation by government during the ‘housing boom’. The Cana Movement championing the problems of ‘houseless’ engaged couples and newly-weds under Fr Charles Vella’s direction, and the student-led national housing campaign “Djar għall-Maltin” in 1968-1969, would show this impressively and effectively.¹⁵⁷

In 1966, and for the rest of this legislature until 1971, Ċensu was the only new minister. Otherwise, apart from some internal shifts and transfers, Borg Olivier’s Cabinet was much the same as in 1962, composed of the same eight members. These included Ġanni Felice from Sliema who was *de facto* the administration’s number two man, and the Prime Minister’s elder brother Pawlu. Pawlu, Sandy and Ċensu were the three doctors; the remaining five were all lawyers or notaries by profession.

The only minister missing from the 1962 line-up was Dr Antonio Paris, who had been entrusted with the Ministry of Education. A vintage Nationalist oldtimer from Cospicua, at the age of 77 Paris, a doctor, did not contest the 1966 election. It was this ‘vacancy’ which Ċensu was asked to fill, thereby becoming the junior minister in Malta’s first post-independence cabinet. Ċensu well remembers the 1966 victory

¹⁵⁷ Housing in the sixties deserves a study all to itself. It may be seen in a context of ‘neocolonial’ development, a fast spreading, uneven prosperity and changing social mores: rising ‘better living’ expectations, matched by rising prices and local competition with foreign settlers, buyers and speculators on the open market; but see e.g. *Il-Haddiem*, 7 Mar. 1969, *Times of Malta*, 19 Mar. 1969, H. Frendo, *Malta’s Quest for Independence. Reflections on the Course of Maltese History* (Malta, 1989), pp. 230-235. See esp. the illustration showing a press conference by the S.R.C.’s 1968/69 Housing Commission under my chairmanship, sporting the banner “L-ISTUDENTI U L-HADDIEMA JINGHAQDU FIT-TALBA URGENTI GHAL DJAR GHALL-MALTIN”. The members of my Commission as shown in that illustration were, from left to right, Klaus Vella Bardon, Alexander Sceberras Trigona, Paul Galea, Colin Apap, Louis Galea, Joe Meli and Joe Sciberras. On 18th March 1969 we led a protest march down Kingsway and presented the 75,000 signatures we had collected door-to-door, together with a proposed plan for low-cost housing and better land and environmental control, to the Prime Minister; we had also called on Archbishop Gonzi. This national initiative was the closest to a Maltese student ‘Spring of ‘68’, although in those two years we also pioneered moves to have a student presence on the University Council, and organised a march in honour of Jan Palach on the first anniversary of his symbolic suicide, in Wenceslas Square, Prague, in condemnation of the Russian-led invasion of Dubcek’s Czechoslovakia.

demonstration from Putirjal (today's "City Gate"): the open jeep with Borg Olivier in it, Felice and himself, as Secretary General, after him, followed by a truck with elected deputies and supporters singing and waving PN flags...

Enthusiasm and challenge apart, there were no monetary gains to be made from Ċensu's new position, not for him. "Financially, I well and truly suffered considerably, when I was first a Minister, a lot..."¹⁵⁸ Ċensu recalls, with a grimace. "I was impoverished (*ftaqart*)." I had mustered quite a good practice by then (1966), although visits still brought in five shillings (25c) or half-a-pound. When I was Minister, I could hardly afford to have a suit made (*lanqas stajt naghmel libsa*). His being a Minister was "a financial disaster for the family". As already observed, the pay was £600 a year. Some of the elder children had found jobs, so there was no income tax rebate.

Due to pressures of work and non-stop commitments, Ċensu and Maria were constrained to do what they certainly would not have done otherwise: send off some of the younger children as boarders, against their better judgement. Helen and Marielise went to the (Convent of the) Sacred Heart. With the Bishop's cooperation, Ċensu could send Francis to De La Salle College for a year or two. Anna they had to send as a boarder at the 'Dorotei' (St Dorothy's Convent in Mdina). These moves were "negative", for him as for them. Ċensu speaks of them with a heavy heart, with remorse, almost a guilt begging for absolution. When he was their age he had necessarily to be a boarder, because his family lived in Gozo; but he only sent Francis and Anna to boarding school because he was a Minister. Anna was 12. They could not very well take care of Francis either. The elder siblings were nearing the end of their teenage years.

In spite of all that, it must be said that during his years as Minister, Ċensu not only retained the party's chief secretariat post, he also assumed the presidency of the Sliema Band Club. He continued as president of the

¹⁵⁸ "Batejt ferm meta kont Ministru qabel, hafna..."

Sliema Civic Committee, a post to which he had been elected before becoming an M.P.: “much work was done, in particular the paving of Ghar-id-Dud with coloured cement tiles from the chalet to the convent of the Carmelite friars at Balluta.” That was an experiment, as the tiles were made at the Public Works Department, with the help of the architect Carmelo Psaila. Ċensu came to be involved too in the activity of the St Julian’s’ Civic Committee.

What appeared as an impressive aura in terms of public service was not exactly a rosy picture so far as the family was concerned. By the Grace of the Spirit, the family still held together and has evidently remained rather closely-knit to this day. They spent their entire life in the same ‘first-time’ residence and neighbourhood, the very same terraced row house which, at the time of its purchase sixty years ago, was located in one of the poorest, lowliest and ‘non-Nationalist’ neighbourhoods in this onetime fishing village of St Julian’s. Ċensu proudly recalls how the history of ‘his’ street, to which he feels a belonging, reflects the progress of Malta during the past sixty years. Then it was all dust, the villagers were in tatters, now each family had a car or two, everybody had bathrooms and televisions.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ “Jiena rajt il-progress ta’ Malta fl-*adulthood* tiegħi. Il-progress li hawn fi Strada Karmni. Meta ġejt noqgħod hawn fl-1941 kienet l-aghhar, l-iktar triq fqira żgur li kien hawn Malta, kulhadd jimxi ‘bil-patata barra’, bla żraben... Lanqas asfaltata, mill-aghhar... Hu tul daż-żmien kollu li rajt in-nies ta’ dit-triq (jinbidlu), u llum hafna minnhom huma uliedhom, li kienu jilgħabu mat-tfal tiegħi. Kollha għandhom djar bħal tiegħi, qed tifhem? U kulhadd għandu l-kamra tal-banju, kulhadd għandu t-*television*, karozza kulhadd għandu u nofshom għandhom mejn. Il-progress ta’ Malta hu riless fit-triq li ngħix fiha jien. U din stajt naraha mill-poplu, in-nies jafuni kif jien nafhom kollha...” The residents of Censu’s street were typical in ways other than social betterment. Being lower class, they had been mostly Stricklandians, the anticlerical ones became Labourites. Had his neighbours not voted for him? Not one, he reckons: “Jiena rrid ngħid li l-ewwel darba li hriġt... l-uniku voti li ġibt (mit-triq) kienu l-ewwel tiegħi, imbghad tal-mara tiegħi, il-bqija nahseb li ma hadx vot iehor. Ghax il-fit Nazzjonalisti li kien hawn kollha vvutaw ta’ Ganado.” Today the Tabones are held in the highest esteem by their neighbours. In a recent casual encounter with my wife in Wied iż-żurriq, one of the neighbours got talking about Censu and his wife because, she told her, he lived in their street. When this neighbour had had a child, she continued, “Maria” had sent them her maid for a week to help out in the house. In their street they were on first name terms: they all called him “Censu”.



Ministerial rounds: a toast with Archbishop Gonzi; assistance handouts to migrant families; and wheelchairs for handicapped children.



Čensu's record as Minister of Labour and Social Welfare was not a bad one at all. He managed to change quite a few things for the better in different areas of government, particularly employment and labour relations, the social services and also emigration, including the agreement in 1970 for the 'portability' of Australian pensions for retired returning migrants. It is difficult to incapsulate a particular ministry from

the general government programme in areas such as employment, because job creation could not be and was not the result of just one ministry's work. Industry, tourism, agriculture, the infrastructure, investment, and various other related activities were not directly the domain or prerogative of any one ministry and have to be seen in a wider context. There is no doubt however that Ĉensu was himself an energetic and pro-active Minister. He was also a key member of the Cabinet, usually with something to contribute to any discussion.

He was, as he readily admits, not "quiet" in the Cabinet. But he reckons that Borg Olivier always knew where he stood with him because he was frank. When somebody tried to influence Borg Olivier against him, Borg Olivier would say that he was not worried because with Ĉensu he knew where he stood; he was straightforward and told him to his face what he wished to say or do ("*ma' Ĉensu naf fejn jien*"). That was in character – for both of them. A disciplined professional man of stature and experience with a mind of his own, however Nationalist his emotional and partisan commitments by birth right, Ĉensu was not a 'yes man'. He sought to question, to understand and analyse situations, and he wanted to get things done. At the same time, not only had Ĉensu and 'Ĝorg' been university students – and in the CPU – together, already in the fifties Ĉensu used to write to Borg Olivier, when the latter was in office, congratulating him on this and that, or offering his advice on the other, generally taking an interest in what the administration was up to.¹⁶⁰

Another advantage in life was that Ĉensu could climb up and down the gamut of social class relationships. Not one with his nose stuck up in the air, he enjoyed carpentry and fixing things from clocks to fans even as a hobby, still does. He was by background 'a people's man'. Told off by that famous slap in the face as a schoolboy, cut down to size by the War's touch of death, close to humanity's plight as an eye doctor, widely-travelled and exposed to contrasting 'anthropological' settings, inspired and sobered by his Catholic conscience, waited upon by a

¹⁶⁰ What did he write to him for? "*Meta ma kontx fil-partit...jaghmel xi haġa tajba, kont niktiblu... Niktiblu biex ngħidlu 'prosit', hekk u hekk u hekk... Kien jaf li jiena miegħu, fhimt?'*" Ĉensu has not kept copies of his various letters to Borg Olivier in the 1950s.

strong-minded wife, Ċensu went about his ‘rounds’ as Minister trying to get adversaries to reason things out and work together for the common good, and in their own interests, by knocking heads together if necessary. Not unlike his father perhaps, he was prone to measure the string in the beef-olive.¹⁶¹ Punctilious and fastidious he may have been, but he had, as Dr Joe Psaila Savona once put it, “a bedside manner” with people.¹⁶²

On a number of occasions throughout his political career, Ċensu would stand up to Mintoff, not as a trade unionist now, but as a parliamentarian. He could be good, even provocative as a speaker and debater (in spite of the ubiquitous Gozitan ‘ka’, a Cottonera-like way of talking which was not a speech impediment but a 19th century cultural inheritance, in exchange for the guttural ‘q’). Perhaps that was why the Labour press nicknamed him ‘il-melha’, that is a busybody. In the sixties, and later, he put forward forcefully the Nationalist viewpoint through many party broadcasts on behalf of the administration about a variety of subjects – devaluation, the dockyard, the rundown, employment and emigration.

Collective responsibility was not something Ċensu ever lived with comfortably, however. It was not the first time that he thought of resigning, he admits, because he would undergo a certain crisis of conscience. That happened, it seems, when he did not get his way or things were not what he assumed they should be, or he felt slighted. On

¹⁶¹ See above, 2.

¹⁶² J. Psaila Savona, ‘Legġenda ta’ żminijietna’, *In-Nazzjon Taghna*, 30 Mar. 1989, p. 6. ‘Kien xi 30 sena ilu li rajtu l-ewwel darba. Kien wahdu wahdu, jaghmel corner meeting fi Triq Blanche f’Tas-Sliema. Udjenza kellu fut li xejn, imma l-entuzjażmu li bih kien qiegħed jitkellem kien qisu qed jindirizza Mass Meeting minn dawk li kien kapaċi jlaqqa’ l-PM fl-aqwa tas-Snin Tmenin. Ergajt smajt bih meta hargu r-riżultati ta’ l-Elezzjoni tal-1962... Niftakar lii wahda mit-tfal tiegħu tolfoq u tibki għax il-papa’ ma telax! ...wara ġejt wiċċ imb’wiċċ miegħu, meta fl-eżamijiet finali biex nilhaq tabib, kien qiegħed jagħmilli xi domandi fl-ispeċjalita’ tiegħu – l-ghajnejn. Il-ħażen tiegħi ta’ student rebah fuq l-eżaminatur u approffittajt ruħi mill-entuzjażmu ta’ Ċensu u d-domanda li staqsieni hu. irrispondiha hu stess... B’Ċensu bhala leader f’partit politiku għandek hajt ta’ kenn. Hemm bahar jaqsam fil-mod kif iħrsu lejn il-hajja t-tobba u l-politiċi l-ohra, speċjalment l-avukati... ta lill-politika dik l-umanita’, il-ġenwinita’ u s-sentiment nobbli tax-xjenzat li jħabbat wiccu mal-batut. B’Ċensu, il-Partit Nazzjonalista zamm il-“bedside manner” tant meħtieġa mal-poplu Malti tul iż-żmien fl-Oppozizzjoni...’ On the long years in opposition, see below, 13.

Caro George,

Prego di far referenza alla nostra conversazione di stamane nella quale ti ho offerto la mia resigna da Ministro. La mia umiliazione ricevuta ieri corona una serie, ed era assolutamente inutile. Le umiliazioni sarebbero sopportabili e forse anche accettabili se venissero dal campo avversario, ma sento che da te mi che ho sempre rispettato e servito con assoluta fedelta' mi aspettavo almeno un rispetto reciproco, questa non e' stata, come ben puoi immaginare una decisione facile o piacevole ma in coscienza non ho ritenuto di poter far altro quando mi sono accorto che o non godevo la tua fiducia o che dovevo essere tutelato piu degli altri. Il mio trattamento mi e' valso la fiducia dei subalterni al mio ufficio ed un ministro senza autorita' deve dimettersi se si rispetta.

Com' e' ho detto stamattina sono pronto a collaborar sulla data effettiva delle dimissioni purché questa non si prolunghi troppo e sono anche pronto ~~ad accettare le condizioni~~ di presentare gli estimi del 10 dicatore se me lo domandassi. Spero che questo non distrugga la nostra amicizia e senza dubbio non indebolisca nemmeno la mia fede nei principi del nostro partito e nel suo destino per la nostra cara patria.

Tuo affmo.

Исполнение 100
Время 00:00 мин.

СУВЕР. ПРИЗВИЩЕ УГЕХУИДИУ
ИМОНЕ: 30060
ВЪ ВЪ 1213 УГЕХУИДИУ
ЛОС ЛАС СУВЕРЕН МЕДИТЕРИДИУДИ
РЕГИОНУС ОМОНЕ

HEALTH ORGANIZATION
MOBTD



ИДЕСКИ ПРИЗВИЩЕ УГЕХУИДИУ
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ЛОС ЛАС МЕДИТЕРИДИУ ОМОНЕ
РЕГИОНУС ОМОНЕ

MONDIALE DE LY ZVILE
ORGANIZATION

May 1968: a draft of Censu's resignation from cabinet.

Mio caro George,

Stamattina durante la seduta del Gabinetto mi hai invitato a lasciare la Segreteria del Partito per dar agio al nuovo Segretario di far pubblicare il giornale. Senza che me lo avessi detto esplicitamente, sembravi di voler additarmi come corresponsabile della mancata uscita del nostro quotidiano. Se non lo hai già fatto privatamente certo che presto seguirai Joe Spiteri nel additarmi tutte le mancanze di organizzazione, mancanza di entusiasmo e tutte le altre mancanze di cui soffre il nostro Partito. Stamattina ho subito sebbene con garbo risposto che eri 'unfair' ed ingiusto e sento che devo riperterti queste accuse anche per iscritto. Non son pronto a lasciare la (tu sei il leader ma non certo il padrone del Partito) Segreteria solo perché me lo domandi tu, ma soltanto se cessero' di godere la fiducia dell'Executive o se si trovano' una altra persona che voglia ~~assumere~~ dicitarsi almeno quanto son disposto a fare io per il Partito. Ne lasciero' alcuno incolparmi di mancanze che sono di altri. La mia dicitazione al nostro Partito non e' secondo a quella di nessuno e se molti sinceri partitari sono di morale un po' piu' e' perche sono dispiaciuti di una certa inerzia del Governo di cui faccio parte e sul quale sento molte lagnanze. Alcune di queste lagnanze le conosco benissimo e conosco anche la pressante richiesta

A spirited rebuttal addressed to Borg Olivier in 1969.

one occasion, when he came closest to resigning, for this last reason, it was his own constituency's senior fellow-traveller Āanni Felice who dissuaded him. Āensu considers this as "a sign of great integrity on the part of Felice."



Melbourne, December 1970: "The belief overseas that Australians are seven feet tall is a myth", said Victoria's premier Sir Henry Bolte. Inset: The 'Gozitan' Minister unveiling the Civic Council's plaque in memory of the Xaghra born novelist Laurent Ropa (1891 – 1967).

Rumaging through Āensu's many (not exactly catalogued) box files and stacks of papers, I came across two drafts of a resignation letter addressed to "Caro George", written on 29th May 1968. "Il mio trattamento mi e' valso la sfiducia dei subalterni al mio ufficio", he wrote to his prime minister after he had already verbally offered him his resignation earlier that day, "ed un ministro senza autorita' deve dimettersi se si rispetta." It must have been at this precise point that Felice, a rival party contestant on the same district, rose to the occasion

by stopping the impulsive Ćensu in his tracks, prevailing upon him to reconsider.

Another more pugnacious draft, first hand-written (barely legibly) from his office at the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Welfare at 144, St Christopher Street, Valletta, must have been typed in late 1969 although neither the manuscript nor the typescript bear a date. In this, addressed to "Mio caro George", Ćensu took umbrage at a comment passed by Borg Olivier in Cabinet to the effect, it seems, that the publication of a planned daily party newspaper (*In-Nazzjon Taghna*) might start sooner if Ćensu relinquished his post as secretary general while serving simultaneously as a minister. "Chi parla!", Ćensu is in effect telling Borg Olivier in his very forthright, very political response. Here, Ćensu took Borg Olivier to task for at one time depending unduly on a government run by civil servants while being himself a dictator in practice, accusing him of a leadership deficit. Borg Olivier, Ćensu added, knew of the present demand for a Cabinet reshuffle, but he seemed incapable of effecting it. On his part, Ćensu had been waiting on him for at least a month, he concluded, so that they could discuss urgent party matters relating to policy and the election campaign:

Se non fosse per la mia convinzione di servire il Partito e per esso la Patria non starei un giorno solo ad assumere responsabilita' senza potere, perche' il vero potere lo hai solo tu co-adiuvato da Cuschieri e Edgar Mizzi. Sai benissimo che il nostro governo ha solo la parvenza della democrazia, perche' si fa solo quello che vuoi tu dentro e fuori dal gabinetto. Questo lo sanno tutti ma nessuno, incluso io, e' disposto a spezzare la unita' del Partito per agevolare il vero nemico. Tu ti approfitti di questo nostro atteggiamento per far da dittatore nelle cose in cui t'interessi. Ci lasci fare nelle altre. Se credi che ci sia incompatibilita' tra le cariche di Segretario e Ministro io potro' benissimo scegliere, ma in tal caso c'e' piu' incompatibilita' per te rimanere Presidente di tutti gli enti del Partito...

Ćensu was at one time a humble and proud man; he was sensitive to being criticised, side-lined or over-shadowed; in time he would regularly monitor sins of commission or omission even in the Nationalist press reports. He was self-conscious, meticulous and something of a

perfectionist, as a rule not passively accepting anything. That must be akin to a nightmare in politics, where there is always a muddling through and ongoing intra-party tensions, to say nothing further. He was inquisitive, a man of principle, and a patriot, not easily intimidated. Besides that, Borg Olivier and some of his cronies were never in an inordinate hurry to get things done and over with. Ruminating the cud, they counted on the healing qualities of time, the advice of some ‘assistant’ or ‘expert’, risking losing everything in the meantime (as was the case with the non-allocation of housing units practically ready for occupation, on the eve of the 1971 election). That must have been frustrating for someone of Ċensu’s ilk, a people’s representative at a time of post-colonial change, rudimentary and rapid as that was; with a general election due to be called in a year’s time.

Certainly, Ċensu was no push-over. Once he missed a Cabinet meeting because he was abroad on government business. On his return, Pawlu Borg Olivier told him jokingly that he should travel more often: “we got over everything so quickly and went home much sooner than usual.” (“Kellek bżonn issiefer kull meta jkollna *Cabinet*, kemm ghaddejna kollox malajr!”)¹⁶³

When the prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, visited Malta in 1968, Ċensu was the only member of Cabinet familiar with Singapore. Governor Dorman hosted a dinner in Lee Kuan Yew’s honour at the palace.¹⁶⁴ Singapore was, like Malta, a former British outpost of empire and, like Malta, facing a rundown of British services. Its Simbawing Shipyard came to be run by Swan Hunter, who were also managing

¹⁶³ ‘Fl-ewwel leġislatura jien m’ghaddietx ġurnata hekk mindu tlajt, meta kont ministru żgur m’ghaddietx ġurnata li jien ma hsibtx f’li nirriżenja. Ghax meta ma naqbilx hekk, u ma naqbilx hekk, u jiena *the collective responsibility* tal-*cabinet* rajtha bi kbira wisq. Kultant inkun niġġieled kontra xi haġa hemmhekk, jiena ma kontx kwiet eh, fil-*cabinet*, eh... Meta kont inkun xi darba msiefer eh, niġi lura... Pawlu Borg Olivier, li kien habib hafna tieghi, qalli: “Kellek bżonn issiefer kull meta jkollna *Cabinet*, kemm ghaddejna kollox malajr!” Qed tifhimni? Pawlu żbokk, gustus eh...” What about the Whip? “Imma inevitabbli. Hemm kien inevitabbli. Id-demokrazija parlamentari kif nafuha llum bla *Whip* ma timxix...”

¹⁶⁴ Cachia Zammit/Frendo, 13 Sept. 2000.

Malta Drydocks, or trying to.¹⁶⁵ Understandably, Ċensu got talking to Lee Kuan Yew and, it seems, just about 'monopolised' him. Butting in, Borg Olivier caught Lee Kuan Yew's eye: "He is my Minister for Opposition", he told him whimsically, glancing at Ċensu. "Good for you to have one!", quipped back Lee Kuan Yew, who was much more dictatorially inclined himself.

Some of Ċensu's achievements as Minister stemmed more directly and exclusively than others from his own predilections and priorities, whether consciously or sub-consciously. Among these, I would include measures taken to alleviate the condition of the blind, the handicapped, the aged, widows and orphans. Thus, for example, in 1967, an old age pension started being paid to persons who were certified to suffer from impaired eyesight, rendering them unable to work in any employment for which a normal eyesight was necessary. In fact, old age pensions were increased in three consecutive years: 1968, 1969 and 1970. In 1969 elderly and blind persons in government hospitals, in addition to free hospitalisation, became entitled to a weekly allowance of seven shillings. Elderly and blind persons in government-subsidised institutes also started to benefit from this allowance. In government hospitals out-patients receiving treatment became entitled to free medicines if they could not afford to buy these, while government-subsidised philanthropic institutes started getting a free supply of fresh pasteurised milk. In 1968, but with effect from 1965, widows who had no pension became entitled to a special allowance. In February 1969 parliament unanimously approved a law, piloted by Ċensu, which made the provision of jobs possible for the handicapped. This was another seminal, path-finding initiative, at a time when to be handicapped was a stigma, effectively barring the "*immankat*" from all forms of employment, even ones which he or she could perform proficiently, let alone any social recognition for achievement in life. In a related move, managerial and pastoral responsibility for the San Filippo Neri school, which took care of orphans and children in need of help, was formally

¹⁶⁵ Nearly a year later Borg Olivier visited India and Singapore. See *Malta Today*, iv., 1, Jan. 1969, p. 9.

assigned to the Jesuit Order; Ċensu took much interest in this school and the welfare of its pupils, visiting it twice a year.¹⁶⁶

The government party was itself committed to the betterment of social conditions, as may be seen from its manifesto and the various other measures initiated during this legislature by one whose social-Catholic worldview was fully consonant with them. Among these, Ċensu pioneered a consciousness of the needs of the elderly, as a social category deserving of special attention. He did this not simply locally but, as in the case with trachoma, internationally as well. On behalf of his government and country, in 1969 he submitted a request to the 24th session of the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York that the question of the elderly and the aged be put on its agenda for deliberation. The request added that the Secretary General should survey the situation in selected countries and, for that purpose, appoint a representative panel of consultants to report back to the 25th session. Today it has become topical to talk of the welfare gap, as longevity of life (and hence of pensionable age) and the decreasing birth rate, result in an imbalance with potentially grave generational and financial implications.

This ‘elderly and aged’ proposal was being submitted by Malta’s Ċensu over thirty years ago, when the consequences of the post-war ‘baby boom’ first started being felt. It showed remarkable ‘gerontological’ foresight, and a sensitivity to the sometimes dismissive attitude towards old age whereby elderly persons would be tolerated, not integrated. It was a medical and a Maltese concern, perhaps influenced by Ċensu’s own childhood and his old mother’s life in Gozo, the still extant Maltese extended family network, and a long-existing *milieu* of Christian care. From the nature of its textual discourse – for instance, the adoperation of such terms as “social policy” and “knowledge skills” – it is clear that the proposer was abreast with ongoing developments, evolving notions and changing terms. It pointed to a real problem which would grow in importance everywhere.

¹⁶⁶ See e.g. ‘L-Impiegi u l-Ghajnuna Soċjali’, *Ir-Review*, 25 Mar. 1967, p.4, 25 Apr. 1970, pp.4-.5, and *Il-Poplu*, 2 July 1970, quoted after Winston Zammit’s typescript ‘Dr Censu Tabone Ministru (1966-1971)’, kindly made available to this writer. ff. 2, 4, 5, 7.

The survey proposed by Malta had to report on medical advances which could retard the process of aging, and the implications derivable therefrom for social policy. Possibilities had to be sought for making suitable and effective use of the knowledge skills and experience of larger numbers of elderly and aged persons, in the context of different social systems. Desirable forms of international cooperation on matters relating to elderly and aged persons, with a view to developing guidelines for government policies and establishing standards of assistance, were to be pursued. The proposal was accepted by the General Committee of the General Assembly, and allocated to another committee which dealt with social, humanitarian and cultural questions.¹⁶⁷

The ‘elderly and the aged’ question generated considerable debate. From a strictly Maltese angle, it eventually led to the opening in Valletta, in 1988, of the U.N. Institute for the Aged.¹⁶⁸ Not long after that, Ċensu would himself be decorated by the United Nations for his role in recognising the elderly and the aged as a special social category deserving of expert attention, and for generally promoting their cause. In addition to deriving the old age pensions and social security benefits due to them by right after life-long service, elderly and aged persons were also potential fountains of knowledge and talent which, if shunned or neglected rather than valued and utilised, would render society the loser. Also implied was the principle of continuing education, which would blossom into many a university of the third age, the famous “*non è mai troppo tardi*” and the “*terza età*”. Some years ago, under the direction of the late Tony Schembri, Malta had its ‘University of the Third Age’ started too, enrolling hundreds.

Ċensu’s five years in the 1966-1971 legislature were haunted by the spectre of unemployment and, in 1967, by a heightened tension in Anglo-Maltese relations because of the accelerating ‘run-down’ and some related disagreements. Trying to put brakes on this shedding of personnel by the British service establishments, and simultaneously to

¹⁶⁷ On this see *Malta Today*, vol. iv., n. 7, Nov. 1969, p.14, quoted after W. Zammit., *op.cit.*, ff. 5-6.

¹⁶⁸ Ċensu continued interesting himself in its work.

create new jobs for the young and not-so-young, were primary concerns, and especially so for the Minister of Labour. Ċensu was also concerned about protecting the right to work, and the worker against arbitrary or abusive dismissal from work.

One of the finer pieces of social legislation enacted in Malta was that against unfair or unjust dismissal from work, passed by parliament in 1969. Briefly, this law held that no worker could have his or her employment terminated without a just and sufficient cause. The Labour Office would have to be satisfied of that and would be obliged to ensure good practice. Another salutary feature of this law was that where workers lost their jobs due to redundancy or suchlike, if the employer needed to re-employ labour in future those who had belonged to the enterprise earlier would get first preference. In other words, the company would be expected to re-employ first those whom it had sacked. Naturally, laws are made to be broken, but this law gave more protection to the employee against unfair dismissal than he had ever enjoyed before. It was a milestone in labour rights.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ I think I was the first person to benefit from it, and most certainly the first one ever to do so where the employer was none other than Malta's episcopal curia. Ċensu's successor at the Labour ministry in St Christopher Street, was Dr Ġużè Cassar, an erudite veteran lawyer-politician. When he saw the sudden termination of my appointment as editor of the daily newspaper *Il-Hajja* and the terms of that appointment more than a year earlier, including a month's probation, Dr Cassar immediately invoked the law which had just been passed by the outgoing administration, and took action accordingly against the employer. After a protracted court case which lasted a year and in which many persons were called to the witness stand, heard before the late Magistrate Dr Stephen Borg Cardona, the court held against the employer in every respect, ordering reinstatement and all salary payments due. It so happened that 'my' newspaper had more than doubled its readership and substantially increased its advertising revenue during my short tenure while I was still a university student, although some of the more topical news stories I had carried, such as those concerning the administration of the Church's property and finances, had been inevitably controversial. I had started (and, on Archbishop Gonzi's orders personally dictated to me in my office, I had to stop) an original series of writings on Manwel Dimech, a left-wing nationalist militant who had been excommunicated in 1911 and exiled in 1914, but about whom it was still not permissible to write anything that sought to understand instead of condemn. Moreover, when my MS for a book about Dimech had found its way from the church-owned Empire Press to the bishop's palace, I was admittedly warned by Bishop Gerada that, as the editor of their paper, I could not publish that book, and certainly not before the election (which was due in June 1971). I was ably defended by Dr Joe Galea Debono who, like Minister Cassar, took a personal interest in this case; but when the employer appealed, the case was appointed for hearing before the late Mr Justice Fortunato Mizzi. In one five minute sitting that learned judge dismissed the reinstatement and financial compensation

As far as the shedding and creation of jobs went, the statistics speak for themselves, to the point of rendering comment superfluous. Between 1963 and 1968, 3,680 jobs had been lost from employment with the British Services alone. The number of gainfully employed persons in 1965 was 88,120. By 1970, this had gone up to 101,160, run-down notwithstanding. Unemployment in 1966 stood at 6.8% (6,584 persons out of a job). By May 1971 this had gone down to 4.7% (4,946 persons out of a job). Without emigration, which increased greatly in the mid-sixties, the unemployment would undoubtedly have been much higher. However, by 1968 emigration was down to a third of what it had been in 1964, from about 9,000 to about 3,000.¹⁷⁰ The pattern was clear enough. Prophets of doom had been proved wrong. Meanwhile, hotels, factories and villas mushroomed, changing the social no less than the physical landscape. A new university campus and a Polytechnic – the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology – were also built at this time, both in Msida, bolstering the provision of better-qualified and more varied human resources to cope with the arising needs, such as engineering, teacher training and catering.

Censu also made it very difficult for foreign workers to be employed where a Maltese equivalent existed. In any case, no foreigner would be given a work visa unless he undertook to train a Maltese counterpart to do the job within a specified time-frame. Although Malta had to remain competitive, that was no justification for cheap labour. What was required was greater proficiency, but the Maltese had to pull up their

parts of the sentence, saying that the law on this point was prescriptive not imperative: therefore their Lordships needed neither re-instate nor pay or compensate anything. There were public protests of course, including an impressive silent march in Valletta led by journalist Godfrey Grima and Francis Zammit Dimech's '4Ts': most of the paper's columnists including Lino Spiteri and Oliver Friggieri, immediately stopped their contributions in protest. The paper's circulation quickly dwindled to what it had been originally. The three ecclesiastics mainly appearing in court for the employer, who had formed part of my editorial board, were later themselves relieved of their posts, one left the country. Eventually the newspaper itself closed down. Censu's law had been put to the test. See however the very limited circulation pamphlet I had printed at Lux Press in 1972, *Story of a Book*.

¹⁷⁰ See e.g. 'The Budget 1969/70', *Malta Today*, May 1969, vol. iv, n. 5, pp. 3-4; *ibid.*, vol. ii, n. 5, May 1967, p. 3; *ibid.*, vol. iv, n. 4, p. 4; the Central Bank of Malta's *Quarterly Review*, June 1971, p. 56; and W. Zammit, *op.cit.*, ff. 1-2.

socks and get on with what necessary themselves. The first head of Barclays Bank, Louis Galea, was appointed in Ċensu's time (and he had a hand in it too). BP and Shell also got Maltese to fill their top local posts. "What we could provide, we should do", Ċensu held. Where foreigners were needed as part of the industrialisation drive – cooks, for instance – his ministry would agree to a work visa for up to five years, but renewable on a yearly basis, so that they could check whether the foreigner was training a Maltese chef or not. The foreign chef thus had a vested interest to train a Maltese counterpart, otherwise he would not be able to stay at his job in Malta for five years and would have to leave earlier. So soon after Malta had been a colony for so long, it was not easy to get Cabinet to accept such a scheme, Ċensu recalls vividly and in some detail.¹⁷¹

There are two main areas which preoccupied Ċensu during the latter part of his tenure in this legislature. Both of these had much resonance in the country as a whole, and they continue to come to mind today. The first of them was Ċensu's industrial relations bill, which was well-intended but had an Achilles heel. The second was the arrival of Bishop Gerada (whom Ċensu regarded as a personal friend) with a brief to end the Church's anti-MLP sanctions.

Ċensu and his colleagues wanted to improve social conditions and guarantee workers' rights, but they also wanted to ensure, so far as possible, that there was industrial peace. Without that, it would be more difficult to re-orient the Maltese economy and make it viable, attracting investment from overseas and otherwise. The sixties saw the largest – at that time the only – 'general' workers' union, the GWU, which was pro-Labour, further organise and consolidate itself. Under Joe Attard Kingswell's leadership, this became more self-sufficient financially.¹⁷² The then Union leadership also realised, however, that it had as much interest as the Borg Olivier administration had in fighting the run-down

¹⁷¹ 'Nghidilhom: "Jiena sakemm nibqa' jien intikom kull sena, imma ghal sena biex jekk fis-sena tghiduli li ma ghallem lil hadd ma ntihx ghal sena ohra!" U rbahtha kontra pressjoni enormi minn shabi fil-Cabinet...'

¹⁷² On this see H. Frenzo, *The Origins of Maltese Statehood*, *op.cit.*, esp. pp. 413-453, and *passim*.

and helping to induce a job-creating environment. This was why Attard Kingswell accompanied Borg Olivier to London for talks with the British Government in 1967 on a subject of common concern and ensured, with him, that the best possible arrangements were being concluded in the difficult circumstances. This irked Mintoff because the union's cooperation with the Maltese administration, led by his rival party, could be seen as a not sufficiently loyalist posture from a partisan 'power struggle' viewpoint.

I happened to be present at the MLP mass meeting in which Mintoff inveighed against Attard Kingswell, without mentioning his name, and I can still hear his words "min ghajja, jwarrab"¹⁷³ ringing in my ears. I refer to this in order to evoke the kind of 'Mintoffian' politics that were being played, while Mintoff reigned supreme as a charismatic, demagogic mass communicator, with a striking command of the vernacular to arouse and to amuse.¹⁷⁴

Party politics seemed to be plagued by the institutionalised, not to say fossilised, 'government-opposition', 'opposition-government' *formamentis* of colonialism, whereas Malta was now an independent state: its leaders and its people had to pull together when national issues of survival were at stake. The government was no longer British, it was Maltese, and the buck stopped with it, but mentalities only change over time. Unfortunately, in the over-baked context which was still warmed by the flickering fires of 'mortal sin' politics, flames continued to be fanned by a "*min mhux maghna, kontra taghna*" logic, or interest: he who is not with us, is against us. In this context, with a spiralling housing boom now accompanying the accelerated Services run-down, the late sixties also marked the heyday of Lorry Sant as a GWU leader, with the dockyard as his stronghold. Actually, the once 'royal' dockyard was in financial terms the greatest liability inherited by Malta from colonial

¹⁷³ Literally, "whoever is tired should stand down", but the Maltese turn of phrase is stronger.

¹⁷⁴ Mintoff's marathon speech spread over three sittings of parliament which finally brought down the Labour administration, coincided with the World Cup in 1998, yet few people in the Maltese Islands were not tuned in to the national radio station which broadcast parliamentary sittings live. And that when Mintoff was an old man and a backbencher! Admittedly the government's future was at stake.

times. Moreover, for many reasons, its workers were largely of a pro-Labour, anti-Nationalist mould. For decades they had constituted the only proletarian concentration in the country, although ironically they were better paid than the average worker in Malta. The dockyard was a sociological phenomenon as much as a political one.¹⁷⁵ What this meant, in practical terms, was that Lorry Sant had the industrial-political muscle to mobilise thousands of workers in the country's main harbour nerve-centre and in what was still a leading ship-repair industry: that, in opposition to Borg Olivier's administration and in favour of Mintoff's party, of which he was a leading militant.

In Ċensu's time as Minister, Wages Councils were increased, and Ċensu himself spent long hours in his office in St Christopher Street, munching sandwiches with the delegates if necessary, trying to conciliate disputing parties before strike action was resorted to. I have heard Nationalists speaking contemptuously of the fact that he kept a GWU ashtray on his desk. There was a determined attempt to promote conciliation and arbitration, thereby sorting disagreements around a table wherever possible. In most cases, this tactic worked; in others, as at Lorry Sant's dockyard in the run up to the 1971 general election, it seemed plainly impossible to deal with an even hand. Ċensu would have none of it.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ On this see Edward Zammit, *A Colonial Inheritance: Maltese Perceptions of Work, Power and Class Structure with regard to the Labour Movement* (Malta, 1984); see also H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience* (Malta, 1979; 2nd ed., 1991), and J. M. Pirotta, *Fortress Colony: The Final Act* (Malta, 1987, 1991), vol. 1 (1945-1954), vol. 2 (1955-1958).

¹⁷⁶ This strike lasted nine months and was mainly against the principle of flexibility in duties required, but when Labour got in, partly on its wings, the GWU Metal Workers Section immediately called off the strike - Lorry Sant became a Minister - and negotiated for benefits which essentially had been offered to them by the outgoing administration. 'Tad-Dockyard kont tajthom dak li mbaghad hadu tliet snin wara taht Mintoff. Jien tajtullhom u komplew bl-istrajtk ghax riedu jaghmlu strajk. Jiena gheadt: dawn se jitilfu, mentri rebhu, kienu bravi iżjed, ghax bl-*industrial unrest* in-nies bdew jghidu: "ma jkollniex dan l-inkwiet kieku (Mintoff) fil-gvern." U kienu jghidu wkoll, tant sar ġid, ghax fis-*sixties* tbiddlet l-ekonomija ta' Malta: "jekk hadnihom taht dal-gvern rieqed", kienu jghidu "tghajjatx ghax tqajmu lill-gvern! - ahseb u ara Mintoff x'ser jaghmlilna." Kien hemm din.' Ċensu told Borg Olivier he would not get involved in a political strike: 'Gheadtlu: "dan ma nidholx, ma mmissux, ma mmissux." ...Imma d-*dockyard* il-flus dehlin dejjem!... mhux ghalhekk jaghmlu l-istrajks! Heqq, ghax meta m'hemmx flus jaghtihom il-gvern! Kemm hi tajba! U hadd ma kien jew jista' jissuspetta illi d-*dockyard* ma jkunx hemm. U ghandu jkun hemm id-*dockyard* imma ghandu jiġi mmaxxi kummerċjalment.'

The fundamental basis of the industrial relations bill moved by Ċensu was this: conciliation and arbitration wherever possible, the strike itself would be only an ultimate resort to action when everything else has failed and subject to certain established modalities, no wild cat strikes would be permissible. Consultation with the would-be strikers themselves was also mandatory. The Achilles' heel was where, in the bill's first reading presented on 12th March 1969, a penalty clause was included, subjecting union leaders breaking the law to a prison term of, at most, some months. Ċensu immediately undertook to remove this, saying its inclusion was a mistake, but Mintoff, Lorry Sant *et al* latched on to it with full force.

In parliament, Mintoff described the bill as "loathsome".¹⁷⁷ In public, at Msida, he promised a civil war if it were made law. It was a threat which a loyalist Mintoffian and onetime dockyard supremo would recall publicly as late as 1993.¹⁷⁸ Attard Kingswell went up to London, accompanied by a university lecturer in industrial relations, Dr Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici, to seek advice. The latter referred to the bill as a "muzzle".¹⁷⁹ The official GWU position was that it gave "exaggerated powers to the government."¹⁸⁰ The Civil Service Staff Union was not too happy with the bill either.¹⁸¹ Ċensu approved of the consultation with foreign experts.¹⁸²

¹⁷⁷ 'L-Abbozz ta' Ligi dwar il-Unions huwa moqżież'. *L-Orizzont*, 21 Apr. 1969, p. 1.

¹⁷⁸ Sammy Meilaq, 'Il-midalja lil Ċensu Tabone', *ibid.*, 9 Oct. 1993, in the letters column, criticising the GWU for giving Ċensu, among various other personalities, a 'service' medal.

¹⁷⁹ The word used was "sarima". *ibid.*, 17 Apr. 1969, p. 1.

¹⁸⁰ "poteri esaġerati lill-gvern", *ibid.*, 12 Apr. 1969, p. 1.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 29 Apr. 1969, p. 12.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 30 Apr. 1969, p. 3.

That Industrial Relations Bill was most important (*importantissimu*): in Ċensu's words "arguably the single most momentous piece of legislation which was proposed, which has not been enacted and which is still in abeyance." Following long discussions with the GWU, including Lorry Sant, Ċensu had submitted a comprehensive memo to Cabinet with a revised draft of the same bill, but this apparently was not considered a priority when there was a general election approaching, with serious industrial-political trouble brewing in the dockyard. Ċensu is confident that he would have successfully piloted the bill, as modified, and had it passed. He is sorry that didn't happen. What he had wanted to do, which is what Margaret Thatcher would do many years later, was to introduce into industrial relations the concept that as a rule questions should be resolved peacefully. "In the world when people disagreed rather than grab one another by the neck or kill each other, they go before a tribunal, according to law", Ċensu said. "The same would apply in the event of an illegal strike."

The prevention of such strikes was pivotal to the avoidance of social unrest, when you had one large "enormous" union and many small ones: "I tried doing something which nobody had done." That was why the bill made provision for various stages of conciliation, cases of arbitration and the rules governing these. Contrary to what those who had not read the bill or had other motives said, the object was not to prevent strikes from taking place, but before a strike could take place the union had to give some days' notice; it had to organise an internal ballot amongst its own members to see what they thought before a directive for strike action was issued. Once a collective agreement would have been reached, with or without a strike, that would stay in force for at least one year, before another strike relating to it could be called. Alternatively, a penalty would be due. In the text of the bill as presented for its first reading, such a penalty included up to three months in prison for any union leaders guilty of ordering illegal strikes, that is, in breach of a fresh collective agreement, without due notice, etc. Under pressure Ċensu soon came to regard that provision as a mistake. It would also have been better to issue a White Paper first, although the White Paper concept was practically unknown in Malta in the sixties. Otherwise, the bill comprised many methods for the peaceful settlement of disputes, which

remain valid to this day and which have been slowly creeping into bits and pieces of legislation.¹⁸³

Ċensu is almost sure that the Opposition MPs who most vociferously opposed the bill, saying the government wanted to throw striking workers into prison, such as Joe Debono Grech and Dr John Buttigieg, had not even read it properly. And yet when Mintoff, on the first reading, had asked for leave, Ċensu had pledged himself not to proceed to the second reading before a consensus would have been reached, so the first reading went through. In fact, long discussions had been held about the bill with the GWU, Ċensu's most important "counter-part" being Lorry Sant. The first thing Ċensu told them was that they did not have to discuss the prison clause because that was being removed.

In a seminar held at the Osborne Hotel, Valletta, very soon after the Industrial Relations Bill had been laid on the Table of the House, it had been fiercely criticised by a priest who was then the chaplain of the Young Christian Workers, Fr Peter Serracino Inglott. The latter held, and Ċensu came round to this view, that the prison clause could not stand in the absence of a code stipulating what rules applied, in preference to letting one Magistrate or another decide without specific guidance.¹⁸⁴

Ċensu's memo to Cabinet, as a basis for the bill's second reading, contained some amendments and left out the controversial 'prison' clause; it also included a number of suggestions on which agreement had been reached with the GWU during their discussions about the bill. Ċensu is convinced to this day that had the bill been put forward as now

¹⁸³ The lingering weaknesses in industrial legislation and ill-defined industrial relations practices in Malta, still manifested repeatedly in sometimes hysterical, frontal confrontations especially (but not only) with the GWU, occasionally goading the I.L.O.'s attention, make this proposed legislation of 1969 still worthy of attention today.

¹⁸⁴ 'Ghamilna seminar dwar dan il-famuż Industrial Relations Bill u fetah Father Peter fejn ikkritika bl-ahrax... ikkritika bl-ahrax il-klawsola tal-habs għax ahna m'għandniex kodiċi stipulat x'għandhom ikunu r-regoli biex ma tmurx il-habs. Allura ma tistax thalli din, arbitrarjament, bejn maġistrat u iehor. U għedtlu: "għandek raġun. Dik il-klawsola ikkondrawha qisha m'hix qegħda hemm għax jiena lest li din biex stampajtha biss..." Mill-ewwel għedtlu li m'inx se nkompli biha...'

proposed it would have passed the remaining stages and become law. “I would have been able to get it through and, as Minister of Labour, to make it work.” Not every one in Borg Olivier’s cabinet was keen to take the bull by the horns, which is what Ċensu had attempted to do by means of a comprehensive ‘no nonsense’ bill systematically to regulate industrial relations in the mutual interest of all concerned, in a climate of industrial peace and stability for development. There is to this day no published text for a second reading of Ċensu’s bill, although a Memo to Cabinet submitted thirty years ago should be available by now in the National Archives. It isn’t.¹⁸⁵

The other factor colouring the late sixties was the arrival of a Vatican diplomat, Mgr Emmanuel Gerada, 59, as Auxiliary Bishop with a right to the succession, supposedly to assist but actually to replace Archbishop Gonzi, 84. Not surprisingly, Gonzi resented this, but he had to bow his head to superior instructions. As is amply clear from Gonzi’s letter to Cardinal Tardini in 1961, the Holy See rightly or wrongly had long suspected that the clash between the Church and the MLP was at least partly one between the two personalities mostly involved in it, Mintoff and Gonzi. The Holy See, it appears, was not over-impressed by Gonzi’s ‘anti-Communist’ remonstrances and protestations.¹⁸⁶ We now know that on becoming Pope, Paul VI took a personal interest in the Malta question and had some reservations as to the illiberal nature of at least certain aspects or attitudes on the Church’s part in the Mintoff-Gonzi dispute, and indeed in the Independence negotiations so far as human rights and the church were concerned.¹⁸⁷ Paul VI knew Gerada as an up-and-coming ecclesiastical diplomat who had served in Egypt, India,

¹⁸⁵ On its 50th anniversary the GWU honoured Censu, among others, by a gold medal; he was then the President of Malta. See above, fn. 178.

¹⁸⁶ See the relevant parts of the text of the Gonzi-Tardini document in *The Origins of Maltese Statehood*, *op.cit.*, p. 49; on the politico-religious question, *ibid.*, esp. pp. 216-240, and *passim*. See also, i.a., Adrianus Koster, *Prelates and Politicians in Malta* (The Netherlands, 1981) and Mario Vassallo, *From Lordship to Stewardship: Religion and Social Change in Malta* (The Netherlands, 1979).

¹⁸⁷ *The Origins of Maltese Statehood*, *op.cit.*, esp. pp. 276-283. There was even an indirect suggestion that some compromise might have been reached on civil marriage, were it not for the fear of an electorally damaging all-out opposition from the local ecclesiastical establishment and networks.

Ireland, Tokyo, and Mexico. In 1965, shortly before his turbulent Malta interlude, Gerada was appointed counsellor of the nunciature and a 'domestic prelate' by Paul VI, then posted as *chargé d'affaires* at Kigali, Rwanda, in 1966.

There can be no doubt – Ċensu certainly has none – that Gerada's brief was to reconcile the Maltese parties, somehow, and to bring the long festering 'politico-religious' quarrel to an end, although it is not clear how far Ċensu was aware of this in 1967. Being a personal friend of 'Lino' Gerada, he went to greet him on arrival at the airport, forgetting perhaps that he was Minister, and the Nationalist Party's Secretary General. Ċensu had been an intimate friend of Mgr Gerada's brother Fonzu, the doctor, and remembered 'Lino' affectionately as a child at the family home in Zejtun. As Ċensu used to go and study with Fonzu in Zejtun as a university student, he knew the entire Gerada family, parents and children. He also knew Lino at university in Malta: he was in his first year when Fonzu and Ċensu were in their last. On the day that Gerada was consecrated a Bishop by Gonzi himself in June 1967, he did Ċensu the honour of accepting to go to his house to dinner in the company of Fonzu Gerada and the Apostolic Nuncio, Mgr Martin O'Connor.

Ċensu regarded the imposition of the interdict and of mortal sin on the Labour leadership and, more so, on rank-and-file Labourites, as a misfortune. When mortal sin had been imposed by the Bishops on Strickland and his party in 1930, and later on Mintoff's, more harm than good had ensued. Mintoff would not have been able to take on the church the way he did had it not been for Strickland before him; that was were Maltese loyalty to their pastors first had been seriously dented.¹⁸⁸ As an example, Ċensu mentioned the case of a personal friend of long standing. This was Henry Borg Cardona, who spent many years serving as a

¹⁸⁸ See above, 3. 10. Ċensu, born in 1913, does not remember Dimech, who was excommunicated in 1911 and exiled in 1914, although his case was not identical to Strickland's or Mintoff's. Dimech was not repatriated only because of episcopal pressures on the colonial governor; but see e.g. H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony*, *op.cit.*, pp. 148-151, and the still continuing correspondence about my writings on this man and his times, e.g. Michael Grech, "On getting our history right", *The Sunday Times* (of Malta), 1 Oct. 2000, p. 14. The first volume of my history of Malta between the Wars, will include a full discussion of this question: why was Dimech not repatriated?

magistrate in Gozo. He was, Ċensu recalled, “the best gentleman you could hope for, but (he had been) a Stricklandian to boot.”¹⁸⁹ He could not bring himself to renounce siding with Strickland, so he could not receive Holy Communion. He was a just man (*rett*): “I can testify to the moral suffering he had to endure.”¹⁹⁰ There was much suffering. When a group of people stopped going to church or receiving communion, although they had been accustomed to do so, that was “the basis of Maltese anticlericalism”.

Ċensu’s view of the politico-religious question is consistently a moral one: it is that of a socially-minded Christian and a doctor, not of a power-hungry politician. If Gerada had a diplomatic job to do, Ċensu, it turns out, was indirectly supportive of it. Now, after so many years, Ċensu says that Gonzi was “too severe” when he had imposed mortal sin. There was “a way” (of doing things). This no longer happens. “He (Gonzi) was too severe when he gave the first interdict to Lorry Sant” (who, he added, was “the nephew of Mgr Sant”).¹⁹¹ Brought up in another climate, the bishops were led to believe that if Lorry were disciplined he would desist. Instead, he became as hero, and it was the Archbishop who had given the push for Lorry Sant’s “greatness”. He became the ring-leader (*perċimes*). Other bishops whom Ċensu would meet in his travels later would ask him: but why had the interdict been given? Ċensu would blame the local conditions. Those were other times, but he felt and feels that it caused more harm than good.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁹ “Ġentlom mill-aħjar li jista’ jkollok, imma Stricklandjan sa ruhu!” Ċensu repeatedly tends to regard Stricklandjani and Mintoffiani as one *continuum*, especially in families where the anticlerical strain prevailed.

¹⁹⁰ “It-tbatija morali illi kellu (dan) nista’ nixhu jien.”

¹⁹¹ Dun Karm Sant, as he was better known, was a biblical scholar. A quite different person, he held the Chair of Holy Scripture, Hebrew and Greek at the university, where he succeeded Mgr P. P. Saydon, the distinguished scholar who had held the same chair before him.

¹⁹² However see also above, 10.



A 'spaghetтата' at home with doctor friends Fonzu Gerada and Frank Callus.

Gerada's brief was to stop it; and he did. He sought to gain Mintoff's confidence; he even went swimming with him at Peter's Pool in Delimara. One fine day, two years after Gerada's arrival, Borg Olivier called Ċensu on the telephone from the Auberge d'Aragon. He told him: "Those here, next to me, have come to an agreement... Bishop Gerada came to see me and told me that the interdict was going to be lifted..." Ċensu exclaimed: "Thanks be to God!" What did he say, I asked. "He said nothing."¹⁹³

Seen in political terms, after all that the Gonzi-led church and faithful – together with the 'loyal' and 'Catholic' parties had gone through in the past decade – this sudden raising of the olive branch was a victory for

¹⁹³ 'Kien imur jghum ma' Mintoff u niftakar li annunzjali Ġorg Borg Olivier li l-paċi mal-Labour Party saret. Ċempilli mill-Auberge d'Aragon. Qalli: "Dawk ta' hdejja, hawn, ftehm." Ghidtlu: "Niżżihajr lil Alla, ghax din il-kwistjoni m'ghandniex x'nirbhu minhabba fiha." In-naha l-ohra kien hemm silenzju. Nahseb għaġġibtu. Din hija l-verita'..." On another occasion our exchange went like this: 'Qalli: "Isma' Ċens, qalli hemmhekk ġie jarani l-Isqof Gerada u l-interdett se jitneħha." "Niżžu hajr lil Alla", ghedtlu jien... "U hu x'qal?" Hu ma qal xejn. Hadtha...' The Archbishop's palace was only a few doors away from the Auberge d'Aragon.

Mintoff and his party. With an eye on the vote, Borg Olivier probably thought Ċensu naïve.¹⁹⁴ Gerada became the *bête noir* of the Nationalist Party, Ċensu a solitary apologist of his in the party executive. They used to say that Gerada was a ‘Mintoffian’. Ċensu would retort: “Everything is possible, but if so, he is as Mintoffian as I am.” This person has instructions from the Vatican, he would explain; “he is doing his job. I cannot take it out on him.”

Those against Gerada were many. In fact, he did not succeed Gonzi at all. What he may well have done, perhaps unwittingly, was help Mintoff’s party win the 1971 general election. In 1973, in the wake of the bitter Anglo-Maltese dispute with Malta’s future alignments hanging in the balance, Gerada left for his next posting. On his appointment as apostolic nuncio to Guatemala and El Salvador, he was made an Archbishop there.

Did Ċensu think that the Gerada-brokered peace with Mintoff’s party was the cause of the Nationalist Party’s electoral defeat in June 1971? No, he did not think so. “I think he (Mintoff) would have won just the same”, Ċensu told me. “He took a few votes from priests and nuns who did not vote Nationalist but I think he would have won just the same. Otherwise, we might have had another five years of religious strife, which caused so much harm to religion in our country.”

The MLP only won the 1971 elections by a whisker, a one seat majority on a district where the balance went the other way. However, there was a swing towards the MLP so that it had more votes overall than the PN. Had the PN held on to office by the strength of a seat, not their majority vote, all hell would have broken loose. The least that can be said is that Malta was spared such anguish in 1971 (and had to wait for it, when the boot was on the other foot).

¹⁹⁴ See the front-page news story in *L-Orizzont*, 7 Apr. 1969: “Il-Knisja u l-MLP jaslu fi ftehim – il-Knisja ma timponix id-dnub il-mejjet bhala ċensura”, carrying pictures of Mintoff, Gonzi, Gerada and the MLP club at Hamrun illuminated, bedecked with flags and sporting a large portrait of Mintoff. See also the front-page of *Il-Hajja*.

In Opposition

RESISTING MINTOFF, REPLACING BORG OLIVIER

THE 1971 general election saw a swing towards the MLP, still led by Mintoff. This overtook the PN by more than 4,000 votes and obtained a one seat majority in a legislature comprising 55 MPs. Of the smaller parties only Mabel's contested this election: it got 1.1% of the vote. The majority obtained by the larger of the two parties was an absolute one, nearly 51%. After nine years in office, the PN rallied 48%.

In Ċensu's words, this result brought about "a total change" (*bidla totali*). Mintoff had intimated that if his party again failed to win office (for the third consecutive time), he would leave. In fact, 1971 introduced what would become the longest uninterrupted rule by the same party in Maltese electoral history – a full 16 years. In all probability, it was also the most consistently controversial one ever. Mintoff would serve as premier for no less than 13 years at one go, another all-time record. In 1984 he ceded the party's leadership and the country's premiership to a *protégé*, Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici.

Ċensu believes that had Borg Olivier agreed to call the election some eight months earlier, just after a successful round of Anglo-Maltese negotiations had taken place, the PN would have carried it. Instead, the administration hung on until the very last possible minute, holding the election in mid-June, 1971. The period in between the first and second

timings saw a wave of strikes hitting nerve centres such as the Grand Harbour, including a prolonged, disruptive overtime ban by the GWU at the dockyard. Without its demands having been met, this GWU strike came to an end immediately the Nationalists were ousted from office. It was a sign of things to come.

These sixteen years were highly agitated ones when much was achieved but even more imperilled. They deserve a few meticulously documented, tightly argued volumes of a comprehensive history to themselves, when it becomes possible to write this in a more detached, better instructed manner. In this chapter, I shall try to limit myself to what Ċensu himself was mainly up to during this time, with enough context and analysis to make it intelligible, insightful and, I hope, engaging. This should help future historians who will have the temerity, I trust, to tackle this very recent, vitally consequential period more organically and from different angles. Meanwhile, oral history remains of the utmost importance to complement such written evidence as exists, apart from printed and official sources. To an extent I am including myself in that process, especially my forthcoming Borg Olivier biography, scheduled for publication in 2005 on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Borg Olivier's death.

The 1971 election was one in which I happen to have been somewhat involved, having followed it at close quarters as a working journalist, and scored an unprecedented scoop in Maltese journalism by managing to arrange full-scale interviews, in the same newspaper, with both Borg Olivier and Mintoff. These interviews, which took up about three pages each, were carried as front-page lead stories on two subsequent days just before election day; and it is not to be discounted that what was said or left unsaid in them bore decisively on the election result. This journalistic endeavour was only possible because of the Gerada-brokered 'peace' with Mintoff's party in April 1969. Otherwise it certainly would not have been possible to get Mintoff to speak to *Il-Hajja*, let alone to get published so prominently in it at so crucial a time. Even so, it was difficult. Were it not for Mintoff's curiosity about my still largely unpublished research findings on Manwel Dimech¹⁹⁵ and Dr

¹⁹⁵ Mintoff's tendency when he met me was to dismiss Dimech as "an anarchist".

Ġużè Cassar's 'mediation', he still would have been disinclined to speak to what was actually the 'church' daily newspaper, however 'independent'.

I saw Mintoff in the evening. He had accepted to have the interview recorded. Having switched off the tape-recorder and as I was leaving the Freedom Press in Marsa, he warned me, jokingly no doubt, if chillingly, not to criticise them now as they would "do to us like the Tupamaros" (*issa toqghhodux tikkritikawna, ghax naghmlulkom bhat-Tupamaros*).¹⁹⁶

The interview with the Prime Minister, who asked for written questions in advance, was carried on the following day, with equal prominence. I saw Borg Olivier at the Auberge d'Aragon, where I was left waiting for him for over two hours in the office of George Borg, his secretary. When he finally turned up he did excuse himself for the delay, courteously enough as he was his custom. Had I not already recorded and transcribed the Mintoff interview I would have been tempted to get up and leave. Electioneering was of course at a climax and it was the afternoon: an after-lunch appointment. Although Borg Olivier held that in spite of all the usual "pastazati" (of the Opposition), his party would win again, he could not have been too sure of that, I felt. But he was not far off the mark. When I named some younger, promising MPs, and asked him if he would change his Cabinet and include them in it if his party were returned, Borg Olivier replied in the negative. I asked him why not. He seemed to be suggesting that the Cabinet had worked well as it was, and that such MPs were young and enthusiastic but they tended "to put party before country". I decided on my own account to omit some of his justifications of the *status quo*, as I wondered if that was not demeaning to third parties. It would certainly have been still more damaging to Borg Olivier's cause. Had he not said enough? He seemed oblivious to the fact that many Nationalists were fed up with the slow-moving pace of governmental decision-making, and with the same old faces (not all of whom exhumed confidence or competence) over a fast-changing decade.

¹⁹⁶ The Tupamaros, an Uruguayan urban guerilla group belonging to the *Movimento de Liberacion Nacional* and named after an Indian rebel, had been founded by a labour leader in 1963 and was active in 1971; it was suppressed by the military-controlled government in the following year.

I must confess that, on the specific request of Joe Camilleri, who was Mintoff's assistant, a damning part was also omitted from the interview with Mintoff. Mintoff had reacted dismissively to a question I had put to him: did he think the Labour Party had changed much since its foundation? Indeed, he spilt out: the Labour Party "was born singing the *Tantum Ergo...*" On second thoughts he must have realised that such a comment in a Catholic newspaper would not do him or his party any good, hence his insistence that it be left out of the transcribed text of the interview. That omission balanced out the other one, I thought. It was a delicate and tense moment for all of us. I heaved a sigh of relief when it was all over. But it wasn't! Those interviews taught me something about the contrasting manners of dealing and attitudes of mind of these two Maltese party leaders, as time had shown already in the 1950s and 1960s, and as it would do with greater force in the years to come.

My Mintoff and Borg Olivier interviews also focussed on foreign policy. The contrast was all too evident here, as indeed it had been since pre-Independence days. The difference now was that Malta was an independent state: there were no 'colonial' brakes. Whereas Borg Olivier saw colonialism as internally divisive ("*kesksuna ma' xulxin*") and Mintoff as unduly quarrelsome ("*jigġieled ma' kulhadd*"), he struck to a pro-Western and a pro-European stance as the best recipe for Malta's security, stability and continuing prosperity. Mintoff, on the other hand, stretched a hand to the Arabs and particularly to the Libyans. "What harm had these ever done us?" he asked me rhetorically. Why should we say that (an expression I had never heard before) God was kind and Muhammed a pig ("*Alla hanin, Mawmettu hanzir*")? This was evidently a more experimental 'Mediterranean' and 'neutralist' stance, at best. It would take shape in different ways during the 1970s and 1980s. Its unfolding is still within the living memory of many. Its multiple consequences are still with us today.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ On Malta and the European Union, see below, 14. Mintoff's "blood brothers" stance (*ahwa fid-demm*) would change to a "worst enemy" accusation (*aġir ta' l-akbar ghadu*) after the SAIPEM II incident in August 1980. Libya threatened using military force to stop Malta from drilling for oil in allegedly disputed waters, leading to a hurried technical-financial *cum* security fall-back agreement with Italy. This was signed in Rome on 15th September 1980 by Foreign Minister Emilio Colombo and Prime Minister Dom Mintoff. Art. 2 of the 'Declaration' made by the two countries included a reference to territorial integrity.

In Opposition, Ċensu was the Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs and was in the thick of the debate about neutrality and democracy, tolerance and oppression, West and East, Europe and the Mediterranean, money and security, terrorism, bioethics.

The first major issue with which the Opposition had to deal was the re-negotiation of the Anglo-Maltese defence and finance agreements entered into on Independence, which were due to expire in 1974. This was no laughing matter. Malta's future seemed pretty rudderless for a year or two, while the Mintoff mob bared its teeth. The ensuing negotiations were very much a circus tight-rope act, with a dubious safety net. By far the most readable (and frequently hilarious) account of them that I know of is that given by Lord Carrington in his memoirs. To paraphrase indecently, Mintoff ranked (to Carrington) somewhere in between a balmy bastard and a sneaky snatcher, a kind of pushy, calculating *scugnizzo*. The NATO Secretary General Joseph Luns thought that the British, represented by Carrington, the Foreign Minister, were being too tough on Mintoff, 'colonialist' even. Mintoff soon made Luns change his mind. After some fairly anodyne Luns interjection during a joint meeting, Mintoff jumped to his feet screaming at the top of his voice:

Shut up, Luns! Who the hell do you think you are? Are you God? I am not going to be treated like some Indonesian nigger!

"I have negotiated with Sukarno", Luns told Carrington afterwards, much moved, "with Nasser, with Krishna Menon. But never have I met such a bastard!"¹⁹⁸

In September 1971 Carrington accompanied Mintoff to Chequers where Dom rambled on about Malta's problems and needs for over two hours while Ted Heath, the prime minister, sipped brandy. On the following morning, they met again and agreed to Heath's suggestion that "our

¹⁹⁸ *Reflect on Things Past. The Memoirs of Lord Carrington* (Fontana/Collins, 1989), p. 244.

allies” be drawn in to help arrange for a new defence agreement. But there was someone else Mintoff thought of drawing in, on his own accord. Two hours later, Heath called Carrington from Chequers:

Heath: *The most extraordinary thing has just happened.*

Carrington: *Oh dear!*

Heath: *At 4.30, a short while ago, the front doorbell rang. Mrs Mintoff walked in.*

Carrington: *They’re separated.*

Heath: *I daresay, but he had asked her to meet him here. Here! To talk things over, over tea, with me! ... I persuaded her to sit in the car with him, anyway!*¹⁹⁹

The late Moira Mintoff was English, the daughter of a British admiral.

But it was the Italians who most propped up Mintoff’s ‘I want more’ strategy, although even the Communist-fearing Archbishop Gonzi went up to London to put in a good word for Malta (which Mintoff dearly appreciated).²⁰⁰ “Some of our allies were particularly worried about his threatened *démarches* to various communist powers, including China,” Carrington wrote, “and despite all our efforts there were still whispers in a few quarters that we were being too harsh, and might by this harshness be jeopardizing the whole Western position.” No sooner had a new agreement with higher stakes been signed than Mintoff flew off to Maoist China and returned with another package from there, he concluded, incredulously.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

²⁰⁰ When, years later, Dr Daniel Micallef had shown the 1961 Gonzi/Tardini letter (*The Origins of Maltese Statehood*, p. 49) to Mintoff and suggested making it public, Mintoff had reacted negatively: “iġġib xejn ghax dak gheña fil-ġlieda ma’ l-Ingliżi,” he told Micallef. Micallef/Frendo, 12 Sept. 1999.

²⁰¹ “Next week he flew to China and returned with £17 million and a button ‘I like Mao’! You had to hand it to him!” *Reflect on Things Past, op.cit.*, p. 246.

Some internal party re-thinking followed the 1971 electoral defeat, although there would be no 'reawakening' before a successive defeat in 1976. One innovation took the form of a Sunday paper in Maltese, *Il-Mument*, which started publication in 1972, edited by Michael Refalo. This meant that the party now had a seven-day presence in the media through a daily and a weekly paper, both in the Maltese language. More significant in terms of party structures was the decision, finally, to elect a Deputy Leader of the party.

As in 1967, Karmnu Caruana and Ċensu contested this election. Two newer faces in the contest were those of Guido de Marco and Ugo Mifsud Bonnici. A two-thirds majority was necessary for any one contestant to be declared the winner, according to the party statute. When the election was held on 23rd April 1972, 367 members of the General Council took part in it. However, as in 1967, none of the four candidates obtained a two-thirds majority. The election was postponed subject to the submission of nominations for another reunion. Whereas in 1967 none of the three contestants had returned to the ring, this time a compromise was thrashed out within the party's inner sanctum. This permitted a deputy leader to emerge but prevented an open contest, partly because it was felt important at this stage not to give the impression that there were any divisions within the party.²⁰²

When the General Council met again on 24th June, Borg Olivier announced that de Marco and Mifsud Bonnici had withdrawn their nominations. Caruana presumably had dropped out. That only left Ċensu. A secret vote was taken nonetheless. This resulted in 340 votes for him, five abstentions and 8 invalid votes. Shouts of "Ċensu, Ċensu" greeted the outcome.²⁰³ In their speeches the three remaining candidates all thanked the delegates and each other while professing their loyalty to the party and its leader. The party wanted to have a deputy leader and now it had one, Ċensu affirmed. As of that evening, those who had

²⁰² See 'Il-Kunsill tal-PN jivvota għad-Deputy Leader – Ebdha kandidat ma kiseb iż-żewġ terzi', *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 24 Apr. 1972, p. 12.

²⁰³ 'Demarco u Mifsud Bonnici jirtiraw in-Nomina – Tabone Deputy Leader tal-PN', *Il-Mument*, 25 June 1972, p. 1.

One of his heated interventions as Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs with Notary Alexander Sceberras Trigona (after 1981 Mintoff's irascible foreign minister) was during a debate on foreign policy in December, 1983. Accusing Trigona of "lies, half truths and wrong conclusions", Ċensu denied that his party had ever damaged the Maltese people in Malta or abroad, that it sought a NATO or other military base, wanted a nuclear base, or had ever tried to deny international financial aid to Malta. As for neocolonialism, in a press conference called after that debate Ċensu pointed to the policy shifts in Mintoff's long career "from mass evacuation-emigration schemes" to ensuring "better defence possibilities for Great Britain and NATO", to the "notorious" Integration plan...²⁰⁶

Ċensu actually prided himself on having spoken in favour of a policy of neutrality for Malta as early as December, 1970, in an address he had delivered in Brisbane, Australia. Malta, he had said, was determined not to be "a pawn" in big power confrontations in the Mediterranean. It should maintain "a strict policy of neutrality" and that especially with regard to Arab-Israeli relations...:

We are particularly interested in a political solution in the Middle East. The closure of the Suez Canal was bad for our dockyard... We are oriented towards the West in the sphere of defence, but we shall never allow Malta to be used as a base for attack... ²⁰⁷

An instance which Ċensu recalls vividly concerns his role during an official visit to Malta by the Libyan supremo Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, who had addressed Members of the House from the Speaker's chair, at the time that Malta had been re-baptised a Republic at the end of 1974. Borg Olivier, perhaps in protest, did not attend on that occasion, when Gaddafi spoke. Ċensu, as Deputy Leader, therefore spoke on behalf of the Opposition. They did not agree with the way in which Gaddafi ran his country, Ċensu told him to his face, but just as they

²⁰⁶ In a press communique', Ċensu referred to Mintoff's "'Malta u l-Patt Atlantiku" – Xandira Stampata – Rediffusion, 31.8.50'. See 'Press Conference by Dr Ċensu Tabone', PN newsrelease, 20 dec. 1983.

²⁰⁷ 'Informazzjoni – Partit Nazzjonalista', 7 Feb. 1987.

would not interfere, they did not want him to interfere in Maltese affairs. They wanted friendship with neighbouring Libya to be a plank of policy. Gaddafi started clapping: “Keep talking in Maltese because I understand you”, he said.

Later that day, during a private meeting in the Main Guard where Libya had its cultural centre, there was a private encounter between the Libyan and Nationalist delegations. The Libyan ambassador was sent to get the Nationalist MPs to meet Gaddafi. Accompanied only by the Speaker, Attard Bezzina, they made their way across a throng of MLP supporters in Kingsway. In a one exchange, Tabone told Gaddafi this: “We ask you to demonstrate your friendship towards us by facts”, Ċensu told him. On this question (of sovereignty) we cannot give in, but you can help us. You have a lot, we have nothing...” Taking the cue from this, Ġorġ Bonello du Puis, a keen football enthusiast, butted in and told Gaddafi that “we need a football pitch”. “You came here for the first time, but in that case we’ll remember you always”, he added. “Yes I do it”, Gaddafi replied, as Ċensu recalls. In fact, the national stadium at Ta’ Qali was built with Libyan assistance. As the meeting came to an end, Gaddafi gave each Nationalist MP a copy of the Koran.

Ċensu would meet Gaddafi again later, including when as Foreign Minister he accompanied the new Prime Minister, Dr Fenech Adami, on a visit to Tripoli. “You are a Libyan, Tabbuni”, he greeted him.

In addition to shadowing the foreign ministry, Ċensu was throughout this period an active member of Malta’s delegation to the Council of Europe. In this role, he was involved in, among other things, the Council’s bioethics committee in the light of increasing experimental life-related engineering; he acted as a *rapporteur* on a number of standing issues, and chaired the committee for relations with non-member states, who were mostly the East Europeans. This committee was concerned with fostering a dialogue with these countries, in the long-term hope of encouraging their eventual return to the democratic European fold. A seminal meeting which the Eastern European countries attended, under Ċensu’s chairmanship, was held in Klagenfurt, Austria, in March 1982.²⁰⁸ In time this committee came to be

²⁰⁸ See e.g. Dr Josef Maderner’s letter to Censu dated 2 Apr. 1982.

more pivotal in an evolving East-West rapprochement as this gathered momentum until 1989 changed the face of Europe and of global politics.

Before Malta's active participation in the Council of Europe was suspended by government *fiat* in the early 1980s, Ċensu had come close to being elected president of the Parliamentary Assembly. In a run-off with another contender from the CD bloc (M. Hanin, a Belgian), who chaired the CD group in the Assembly, Ċensu had won, thus making him the official CD-Liberal candidate. As it was the CD's turn to have a president, the matter was just about decided. Herr Lederman, the German CD group leader, took charge of the publicity campaign to ensure that result. At the last minute, Ċensu alienated his German Christian Democratic colleagues by voting "against them" on a motion regarding the rights of Turkish immigrants in Germany. He voted, he says, "according to his conscience"; he saw the Turks as social underdogs who deserved his support. Lederman went up to him: "Why did you vote against us?" When it came to the vote for a president, a Spaniard from the same camp, Senor Aerliza, was elected in his stead. A near miss, it would have been an all-time first for Malta to have a President of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly. It would still be so now.

One of Ċensu's contributions concerned the treatment of dissidents in the Soviet Union, which the Council of Europe regarded with growing disapproval. Reporting for the Committee on Relations with European Non-Member Countries in 1980, Ċensu submitted a resolution, accompanied by a detailed memorandum, on the question of human rights in the Soviet Union, and more specifically in condemnation of "the arrest and forced exile of Dr Andrei Sakharov", about which the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe had expressed grave concern in an earlier resolution that year. Ċensu's committee was actually examining the human rights situation in East European countries in detail in an attempt to monitor the implementation of the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe with regard to humanitarian problems dealt with in the third 'basket', as submitted to the CSCE's Standing Committee in Madrid in July, 1980. Such an investigation also had in mind another 1980 resolution passed by the

Parliamentary Assembly on freedom of thought, conscience and religion in Eastern Europe. Other related reports being prepared by other members of Āensu's committee concerned the situation of the Jewish community in the Soviet Union and the right to peaceful assembly and of association in Eastern European non-member countries. Āensu's report on human rights in the Soviet Union noted, in its conclusion, that

The methods used to break down all forms of dissidence have been visibly harshened of late to such an extent that... there is now reason to fear that the recent blows inflicted on the dissident movement, through an unending succession of arrests since October/November 1979, are aimed not merely at "cleaning up" Moscow before the Olympic Games, but at radically eliminating all opposition. This is confirmed by the report circulated last April by Amnesty International on the treatment and conditions of political prisoners in the USSR...²⁰⁹

Democratic Europe had a clear duty to speak out against the flagrant violation of human rights in the Soviet Union, including the misuse of psychiatry for political purposes. Moreover, the Soviet Union was expected to abide by the understandings and agreements being entered into by the CSCE in Helsinki and Madrid:

Words alone are not enough, however. It is necessary... to employ a bargaining procedure 'do ut des' as far as possible. In other words, cooperation with the USSR and the Eastern European countries in general, in areas which are important to them – namely, the trade and technology sectors – should be conditional upon gradual, but substantial and visible progress in respect for human rights. Such an attitude would be in keeping with the recommendation which Andrei Sakharov addressed to Western countries in 1976 (Le Monde Diplomatique, May 1976) exhorting them to demand that the Soviet Union respect human rights in exchange for equipment, credit and so forth...²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ V. Tabone, 'Explanatory Memorandum', *Human Rights in the Soviet Union* (Malta, 1981), p.31.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

The resolution accompanying this memorandum, while expressing concern at “the repressive measures taken against free trade unionists” including police harassment, forced exile, disappearance of persons and internment in psychiatric hospitals, welcomed the concessions which, in conformity with the Polish Constitution, had been won by the Polish workers and hoped that all agreements reached would be “soon implemented in full”. It invited the governments of member states to take a common stand insisting that respect for human rights, in conformity with existing covenants and the Helsinki Final Act, was “indispensable to understanding and confidence between nations” and was therefore “a major factor of détente and an essential prerequisite for progress on East-West co-operation in all fields”. It asked member states to urge Eastern European governments to respect “freedom of trade unions”, as guaranteed by various conventions, as well as to seek worldwide support, within the UN, for the conclusion of a convention to prevent and punish the abuse of psychiatry for political purposes. As a gesture of goodwill, the USSR should authorise observers from Council of Europe member countries to attend criminal trials before Soviet courts. Similarly, the USSR and Eastern European governments should release all imprisoned members of the Helsinki monitoring groups.²¹¹

Another pioneering activity in which Ċensu became involved was the creation of the Academy for the Development of a Democratic Environment, known in Maltese by the acronym ‘AZAD’ (Akkademja għall-iżvilupp ta’ Ambjent Demokratiku). This was a Malta branch of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the German Christian Democrat political studies institution which acted as a think-tank for the CDU. For Malta, AZAD was a first, in that there had not so far been a semi-autonomous body, linked to a party’s ideology but outside the actual framework of the party itself. As deputy leader responsible for political education and the creation of ‘a political school’ within the party, Ċensu was AZAD’s founder-president. He was ably assisted by Richard Muscat, who became the organization’s first full-time executive secretary. The headquarters was at 5, Tagliaferro Centre, Sliema. Various innovative approaches were started by AZAD from 1977 onwards. One was the publication of an ‘intellectual’ quarterly,

²¹¹ ‘Draft Resolution’, *ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

Perspektiv. This provides the best record of its activities from now on. Seminars, conferences and debates involving people of different political persuasions started being organised. Various distinguished personalities were invited, the most famous of whom was probably Andrei Amalrik, the Russian dissident historian who, like Sakharov, was campaigning for human rights and the ‘third basket’. Speakers from the MLP were sometimes invited to debates; again this was new for Malta. An outdoor ‘friendship’ and ‘family’ feast became an annual event, a popularising attraction, with guest stars such as beat groups from overseas. AZAD started a ‘political studies’ library; some books and speeches were published. Research grants were given for specific projects, mainly to promising youngsters. An annual essay competition sponsored by Ċensu himself was also started. AZAD became a hive of activity and offered scope to thinkers and writers, at that time highly appreciated by the Opposition. Although the leading PN officials all sat on AZAD’s board of directors, Ċensu and Richie Muscat were jealous of their autonomous ‘KAF’ status, and strove not to be gobbled up by the party machine.



Some of AZAD’s first award winners in 1977 were Marco Macelli, Francis Zammit Dimech and Michael Frendo (second, third and fifth from left).

The first number of *Perspektiv* carried as its first article a speech by Ċensu on the erosion of democratic institutions in which he explained how in countries where democracy was recent and still feeble, the constitution may be quite democratic in structure “but no actual democracy prevails because those in power are bent on imposing their will regardless.” Those who were “blessed with a democratic way of life” had to remain “ever vigilant” lest they woke up one morning and found themselves “under a dictatorship of one kind or another”:

I firmly believe that no government can survive for long against the will of its people, and this is particularly so of democratic government. In such countries full use must be made of democratic institutions to maintain their freedom, every erosion of one's rights and every attempt against human rights must be promptly and loudly denounced as it occurs; full use must be made of freedom of expression and of association within the laws of one's country to preserve such laws; insistence must be laid on the necessity of balance in radio and television and on the right of every section to make use of such facilities. It is indeed necessary that any monopoly in broadcasting including government's monopoly must be removed. This is too important a weapon of democracy for it to be allowed to be used for partisan purposes...²¹²

Although Malta was not once mentioned by name in this article, *al buon intenditor poche parole*. There was no doubt in anyone's mind what Ċensu was alluding to. Broadcasting had been effectively taken over by the Mintoff administration, following a GWU 'lock-out' incident and a takeover from Rediffusion two years earlier; the medium became increasingly partisan from then on, to the point where the Leader of the Opposition's name was banned from any mention in the news or otherwise. Clandestine transmissions through *Radju Liberta'* began and AZAD's executive director would be constrained to leave his country in 1981 and try broadcasting from Sicily through an improvised TV station arrangement, *Studio Master*.²¹³ 'Xandir Malta' and all those who

²¹² V. Tabone, 'Erosion of Democratic Institutions', *AZAD Perspektiv*, Oct. 1977, n. 1, pp. 8-9.

²¹³ On this see Richard Muscat's illustrated autobiographical work, *Ghandi missjoni ghalik: Djarju dwar ix-xandir tal-PN minn Sqallija* (Malta, 1996). On the MLP's Cairo broadcasts in 1964, see H. Frendo, *The Origins of Maltese Statehood, op.cit.*, esp. pp. 449-455, but see also F. Zammit Dimech, *The Untruth Game: Broadcasting under Labour* (Malta, 1986).

advertised in any of its media were subjected to an effective mass boycott by consumers and advertisers.

While resisting Mintoffian excesses, in Opposition the Nationalists were also trying to clean their own stables during the 1970s. This decade saw two consecutive electoral defeats for the PN, in 1971 and again in 1976. These were trying times for the survival of Malta as a democratic state. Accompanied increasingly by political violence until the late 1980s, they led to a growing international concern about Malta's future and fate. Ċensu describes the first Mintoff administration (1971-1976) as "on the whole, positive", the second one (1976-1981) as "so and so" but deteriorating, and the third (1981-1987) as "a national disaster", with the three years under Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici (1984-1987) as arguably the worst ever in modern Maltese history.²¹⁴

Changes had to be structural, nor simply cosmetic or propagandistic. These took the form of statutory amendments, restructuring and spreading out the party hierarchy, in the run-up to the 1976 election, when talk of removing Borg Olivier as party leader was rife, as we shall see. In formulating the statutory changes in the mid-seventies, one who played a strong hand was Dr Edward Fenech Adami, known as 'Eddie',

²¹⁴ There is no love lost, I should add, between Ċensu and Karmenu. While Ċensu retains some respect for Mintoff, he has no time for Karmenu. For documented political critiques of this period see, for example, Michael Frenzo's *Is Malta Burning?* (Malta, 1981), Francis Zammit Dimech's *The Poll of '76* (Malta, 1980) and *Il-Loghba tal-Qerq: Xandir Soċjalista* (Malta, 1987), *The Popular Movement for a New Beginning* by "Marengo" (Malta, 1981), Henry Frenzo, "Messages from Mintoff's Malta", *Quadrant*, vol. xxx, n. 12, Dec. 1986, pp. 18-33, and "Freedom after Independence: A Western European or a Third World Model for the Maltese Islands?", *World Review*, vol. 26, n. 2, June 1887, pp. 37-68. *Malta and the Security of the Mediterranean Region* (ed. C. Lichenstein, New York, 1987) contains the proceedings of an American-initiated conference (Milan, Nov. 1986) with an emphasis on Maltese foreign policy as a danger to the Western Alliance. For different approaches, see, e.g., Anon, *Ġrajja ta' Poplu: Il-Ġhieda għall-Helsien* (Malta, 1981) and Anon, *Il-Mixja tal-Haddiem lejn il-Helsien* (Malta, 1982). ("Mintoffian History", by "Marengo", *The Sunday Times* (of Malta), 20 June 1982, p. 21, is a dismissive review of the latter; in the same newspaper see the weekly contributions on "Page Thirteen".) Edgar Mizzi's *Malta in the Making, 1962-1987: An Eyewitness Account* (Malta, 1995), is instructive, if selective. See also, i.a., Remig Sacco, *L-Elezzjonijiet Ġenerali, 1849-1986: Il-Ġrajja politika u kostituzzjonali ta' Malta* (Malta, 1986).

who had been co-opted as an MP upon the death of Ġorġ Caruana on the Casal Paola district in 1969 after unsuccessfully contesting as a PN candidate twice (in 1962 and in 1966) on the Birkirkara district. It was Borg Olivier who sent for Fenech Adami to take care of submitting these proposals, which could have been a way of distancing better-established MPs, such as Ċensu himself, Guido de Marco and Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, from breathing down his neck. At about the same time, Fenech Adami started to occupy two key posts within the party structure, as president of both its General Council and its Administrative Council. As a result of these changes, the party leader finally would no longer chair the other party organs, the Parliamentary Group alone excepted. Spaces and identities were created for other politicians, committees or sections. Ċensu, for one, became chairman of the party's executive committee some time later. As a change in the leadership itself had not happened earlier it was now too risky to change horses in mid-stream, so close to another election. That all-important change had to wait for a second PN defeat in 1976.

Internal party reorganisation was caught up in the Mintoff-led push to change the Independence Constitution from a monarchical to a republican one. In a political climate that was not conducive to clinical debate, many Nationalist MPs had no desire to stand out as being anti-republican, nor were they. On the other hand, they could hardly consent to having a Constitution changed as if it were a change of clothes. Borg Olivier said that the Constitution belonged to the people because it had been approved in a referendum and nobody could take it away from them. Others thought it wiser to come to some accommodation with the iron-willed Mintoff administration and at least to ensure that the Constitution would be changed constitutionally, and democracy safeguarded in that fashion. This impasse may be gauged from a spate of motions and counter-motions in the PN's executive committee meetings, especially during 1974. What these represented, in sum, were attempts to keep the party together without renouncing to regulated changes by mutual consent. But that was easier said than done.

IN-NAZZJON TAGHNA

Gurnal Independenti

Il-Tnejn: 29 ta' Mejju, 1972

Il-Tnejn: Sena — Numru 592

Jieghgh 15

Il-Parsons

Il-Kinzi

Il-Konstituzzjoni

Mir-Rally Grandjuż tar-Radio City

Ighid xi iġhid dan il-Gvern, iġhid li jrid il-Prim Ministru tal-Jum, dik il-konstituzzjoni hi l-konstituzzjoni tal-poplu Malti illi għaddiha mill-Parlament u ma waqqgħathex l-Oppozizzjoni. Għaddiha mill-pajjiż b'referendum. U meta jkun referendum dik tkun il-vuci tal-poplu. Il-poplu għamilha, u dik tal-poplu u hadd m'hu se jehodha lil-poplu. — DR. G. LONG OLIVIER



Il-Konstituzzjoni hi tal-poplu

... u hadd m'hu se jehodilhu

Although on a number of occasions the difference between the two main factions seemed to be as little as one vote, it was becoming clear that Borg Olivier was slowly but surely losing his grip. He was resolved to stay put – dithering, modifying, lobbying, delaying; but he was no longer fully in command of the situation, as he had been wont to be for so long. When points of divergence, even relatively minor ones, were put to the test, he simply no longer had the votes to carry the meeting with him. He repeatedly cast his vote for motions or counter-motions which were defeated. He may have hoped that, in the absence of a referendum on the issue, the implementation of any constitutional agreement in principle could be kept in abeyance until after the 1976 general election, which he must have felt he could win. Although there were several in the executive prepared to humour him on that, probably for the sake of keeping the party compact, it was a tall order, not one which Mintoff would have readily conceded. Would he not, as a populist, at least accept to go to a referendum? Mintoff did not seem too keen on that option either; he too may have been unsure of the strength of forces opposing his brand of 'republicanism' on the ground, or of using a referendum to express disapproval of other faults his administration was seen to be guilty of. During the negotiations as to how to bring about the constitutional changes, Borg Olivier seems to have thought better of it

In January 1974 several meetings took place among Nationalist MPs, on the initiative of three prominent members of the Youth Movement “in their personal capacity”. The subject of such meetings was “the state of the Party, its potentialities and particularly its leadership”. These meetings culminated in an enlarged meeting which was held at the office of Dr G. M. Camilleri. This was attended by 18 Nationalist MPs.²¹⁶

*All members present with the exception of Dr G. Demarco and Dr H. Farrugia agreed to ask Dr G. Borg Olivier to resign the leadership of the Party, failing which these members would no longer follow his leadership in Parliament. Dr H. Farrugia agreed to the request, but was unwilling to approve such a proposal before a new leader was elected by the group. Dr Demarco did not agree with the proposal but said he would abide by the decision of the majority. Dr Demarco did not want to create a crisis in the leadership of the Party.*²¹⁷

Both Dr Farrugia and Dr Demarco in the end signed a document with the proposal to request Dr Borg Olivier’s resignation failing which the members of the group would elect a new leader and would no longer follow in Parliament Dr Borg Olivier’s leadership. The other members present likewise signed this document, which within 24 hours was also signed by Dr E. Bonnici, Mr A. Cauchi and Mr C. Attard. Thus in all 21 MPs signed the document.

As the PN had elected 27 MPs to the MLP’s 28 in the 1971 election, this meant that only six MPs had not signed the ‘change of leadership’ plea. They were Dr J. F. Cassar Galea, Dr Albert Borg Olivier de Puget, Dr Alexander Cachia Zammit, Dr Alfred Bonnici, Dr Paolo Borg Olivier and Dr G. Borg Olivier himself. As it turned out, this minority group within the party would stand firm in their own viewpoint. When, later that year, it came to a “free vote” for a ‘new’ constitution through parliament, they did not stand up to be counted. It was a very difficult moment for them too. Mintoff got his two-thirds majority, but not Borg

²¹⁶ They were: Dr M. Felice, Dr E. Fenech Adami, Dr G.M.Camilleri, Dr J.Spiteri, Dr John Muscat, Dr Josie Muscat, Dr V.Tabone, Mr A.Tabone, Dr G.Demarco, Dr H. Farrugia, Dr M. Refalo, Dr C. Caruana, Mr Alfred Baldacchino, Dr U. Mifsud Bonnici, Dr G. Bonello Dupuis, Mr C.L.Spiteri, Mr L.Gatt and Dr G.Hyzler.

²¹⁷ Tabone/Felice, 13 Jan. 1974, ff. 1-2.

Olivier and the others. What he also got was as close to a party split as the Nationalists had seen since the days of the Mizzian and Panzavecchian factions, refreshed in the late 1950s and early 1960s by the ‘Ganadjani’. Irrespective of the merits of the case, no leader could assert control over a party with five devotees, two of whom were close relatives, out of twenty-seven MPs elected in the party’s interest. And yet, Borg Olivier jockeyed for position before that vote, and continued playing for time after it, hoping against hope that everything would soon be enveloped by election fever and, just possibly, his return to office in 1976.

The January document having been signed, some of the signatories began wavering, as Ċensu saw it. One proposed that the executive committee meeting due to be held on 11th January he would propose a motion in the terms of the document. Ċensu rejected such a move. He proposed instead that all the other members of the group should be immediately approached and that when this was done, Dr Borg Olivier should be informed by prominent members of the group. Such a proposal was accepted. Dr Caruana, Dr Mifsud Bonnici and Dr Josie Muscat were selected by ballot to present the document to Dr Borg Olivier.

The group learned that Dr Borg Olivier wished to meet with them. A meeting was arranged for the following Thursday night at the Press. Borg Olivier did not turn up. Dr Demarco was asked to request Dr Borg Olivier to fix another meeting. Such a meeting was held at Demarco’s residence on 12th January at noon. At this meeting all Nationalist MPs (who were signatories) attended with the exception of Notary J. Spiteri, Mr A. Cauchi and Mr C. Aттard (the latter two were Gozitan MPs).

The writer then turned on the secretary of the Parliamentary Group, to whom he was addressing himself, reminding him that “the group of 21 signatories” had agreed that “only you should be their spokesman” and that “your task was simply to state that the group would be prepared to honour Dr Borg Olivier in every possible manner provided he agreed to resign the leadership of the Party.” Recalling factually the unequivocal posture adopted by Felice within the group, Ċensu expressed surprise that in a subsequent meeting he had heard Felice speak to Borg Olivier

in a manner “totally different from that agreed by the group”. He was “negotiating”, Ćensu told him, instead of showing “the irrevocability of the decision taken by the group”. Ćensu felt Felice had no right to do that without prior authorisation. Another MP to depart from his earlier vociferous position within the group was Dr Josie Muscat. Like Dr Mario Felice, he too was entertaining what the group had rejected as “half measures”.

The position had been numbed somewhat since the group had last met, as a result of a face-to-face encounter with the party leader afterwards. During the meeting to which Ćensu was referring, held on the previous Saturday, it had become evident “from certain remarks” by Dr Borg Olivier and two other MPs he mentions, that “Dr Borg Olivier was not prepared to resign and that as a consequence the Party would be split”. It became evident, Ćensu deduced, that “the Leader of the Party was not ready to accept the request for resignation by almost three-fourths of his parliamentary colleagues” and that he was prepared “to lead a splinter group of the Party in Parliament”:

It was I believe this position that led my colleagues in the group to seek a compromise solution which would take away from Dr Borg Olivier some of the important powers which as a leader our unique statute confers upon him.

One such power, Ćensu added, was that of presiding over the Executive Committee. It seems that when at an executive committee meeting held at the Preluna Hotel those present had proposed to curtail that, Borg Olivier had threatened “to take the matter to the Congress.” In the interest of Party unity executive members had been inclined to withdraw their proposal. Thus, noted Ćensu in dismay,

In a matter of a few months members of the Executive Committee and members of the Parliamentary Group were prepared to withdraw their aspirations (in order) to keep the party united, while at the crucial test the Leader was not prepared to accept what amounted to a vote of no confidence...

From internal evidence in Ċensu's own 'personal manifesto', and from what he admits further down, it transpires that if Mario Felice and Josie Muscat had been drawn into bargaining for some face-saving compromise in spite of the hard-and-fast document signed in Borg Olivier's absence, they were hardly alone in this predicament: on Ċensu's own admission, most of the executive at the Preluna had been led down the same path, in the circumstances. Ċensu obviously regarded this as a trap, but he seems to have had no alternative but to go along with the rest at this juncture, however reticently. He respected all his colleagues in the group, and also "those who did not join the group", and he understood "the motives for their actions". Half-way through Mintoff's first term of office in an independent state, just after dramatic international negotiations as to Malta's future, and just before an equally dramatic constitutional change, the wily Borg Olivier succeeded in making a case for him to carry on at least until the next general election,

Il-Kungress

Is-Segretarju Generali gharraf li l-Kungress tad-9 ta' Marzu se jsir il-Plaza bi hlas ta' £30. Il-Kummissjoni tal-Kungress iltaqet bosta drabi biex tagħmel ix-thejjigiet tagħha. Gie mitlub li d-diskorsi li jsiru dik inhar ikunu miktuba bil-quddiem.

Is-Segretarju Generali gharraf lill-Ezekuttiv li kien ircieva petizzjoni iffirmata minn madwar 80 kunsallier li kienet tghid:-

"Ahna hawn taht iffirmati membri tal-Kunsill Generali, jidrinla li hu mixtiq li l-Kungress tad-9 ta' Marzu juri l-għaqda u s-solidarjeta tal-Partit; u

Billi għal dan l-iskop huwa essenzzjali li fil-Kungress ma jitressqux kwestjonijiet ta' natura kontroversjali li jistgħu ifixxlu l-approvazzjoni tal-Istatut il-gdid, nitolbu għalhekk li ssir laqgħa urgenti tal-Kunsill Generali qabel il-Kungress fuq imsemmi, biex jirrevoka l-provediment ta' l-Istatut il-gdid li jneħhi l-elezzjoni tal-Kap mill-poter tal-Kungress u biex iħalli f'idejn il-Kungress dan id-dritt li dejjem kellu."

Wara li sdejt diskussjoni twila dwar din il-petizzjoni gew imressqa zewg mozzjonijiet; l-ewwel waħda imressqa mis-Sur Louis Galea u sekondata mis-Sur Laurence Cachia Zammit kienet tghid:

"Illi l-Kumitat Ezekuttiv jilqa t-talba tal-firmatarji biex jissejjaħ Kunsill Generali u jiffissa d-data ta' dan il-Kunsill għal nhar il-Hadd, 2 ta' Marzu 1975 fid-9.30 a.m. b'din l-Agenda:

1. It-talba tal-firmatarji
2. Organizzazzjoni tal-Kungress"

It-tieni mozzjoni mressqa minn Dr E Fenech Adami u sekondata minn Dr Ugo Mifsud Bonnici kienet tghid:

"Billi t-talba li saret biex jiltaqa l-Kunsill għall-iskop imsemmi fit-talba ma tistax m tigi milqugħa, għax il-Kunsill diga ippronunzja ruħha fuq l-ietes^s talba, l-Ezekuttiv jiddecidi li ma jistax jilqa t-talba. L-Ezekuttiv pero jiddecidi li l-Kunsill jigi msejjaħ biex isir appell biex il-Kungress juri għaqda shiha bi-approvazzjoni unamina tal-Istatut il-gdid."

Meta dawn il-mozzjonijiet tqegħdu għall-votazzjoni, il-mozzjoni ta' Dr Fenech Adami giet approvata fil-waqt li dik tas-Sur Louis Galea giet mēlghuba.

Il-Kunsill Generali għalhekk gie msejjaħ għal Hadd, 2 ta' Marzu fid-9.30 p. skond il-mozzjoni approvata.

February 1975: deciding on a 'grassroots' petition against impending statutory changes which would facilitate the selection of a new party leader.

even if he would be prepared to appease and compromise to some extent. As he had done before in other situations as far back as 1968, Censu then proceeded to distinguish between requesting Borg Olivier's resignation "as a matter of conscience", in other words "loyalty to the Party and to the nation", on one hand, and "loyalty to Dr Borg Olivier", on the other hand. Harking back to the signed document, which was practically a New Year resolution, Censu continued to argue his case thus:

*They expressed the view that the Party required more vigorous and imaginative leadership if it is to weather the coming electoral storm and to be voted back to power. I am still of that opinion and I am not withdrawing my signature from that document with regard to the request for Dr Borg Olivier's resignation. I am not withdrawing from the parliamentary group and I am not making my position public because I would only do that if I was a member of a majority group.*²¹⁸

He was still loyal to the party and to its principles and he renewed his pledge to do his utmost towards its electoral victory. He did not consider that Dr Borg Olivier's person was the same as the Party:

*While he is its leader I follow his leadership but I disagree with the personality cult that he seems to foster so much. We are all, including Dr Borg Olivier, the exponents and the active workers of the Party, but no one of us impersonates the Party. We speak of democracy and freedom and both are put in jeopardy by being loyal more to the persons than to the Party. The Party was there before Dr Borg Olivier and each member of it now living, and will go on, I feel sure, long after we all have gone. The dangers of anchoring one's loyalty to persons rather than to Parties has been shown in this present crisis in the Party. Our great and sincere concern about the person of Dr Borg Olivier has clouded our better judgment and has made the task of rejuvenating the Party almost impossible.*²¹⁹

His colleagues "who were members of the group" had either been wrong when they had signed the (January) document, or they were wrong when

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, ff. 4-5.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, f. 6.

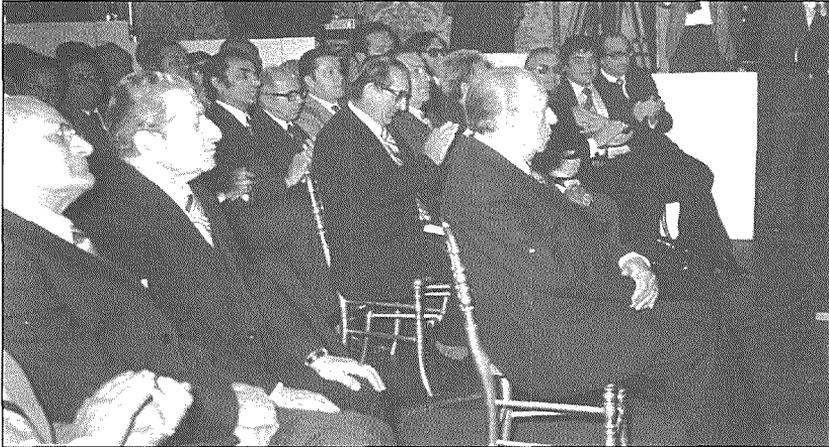
they had accepted a compromise. Ending on a personal note his long letter meant to be, as he called it, “a historic record of recent happenings”, Censu wanted to assure Mario Felice (and posterity, I assume) that no ulterior motives were involved on his part:

You know that I have not taken a prominent part during the meetings of the group, and also during the parliamentary group meeting of yesterday. I did not agree with yesterday's compromise agreement, but I did nothing to prevent it. My attitude at the group meetings and at the parliamentary group meeting was conditioned by my knowledge that I was not the favourite for the position of new leader of the Party. As a matter of gentlemanly behaviour I did not wish to impose leadership on friends who did not appear to welcome it. Under these circumstances no one could accuse me of wanting the resignation of Dr Borg Olivier to take his place, or of writing this letter for selfish motives.

In a subsequent letter to Mario Felice that same month, Censu thanked him for his support during a meeting of the Parliamentary Group held on 21st January when his letter (of 13th January) was read. It seems that during that meeting Dr Albert Borg Olivier de Puget had expressed himself negatively as to divulging or circulating the contents of Censu's letter. In a second paragraph, Censu commented icily about Dr Borg Olivier's preference (*sic*) regarding the wish expressed by the Group of 21 to the effect that they would have attempted “to place Dr Borg Olivier in a high place in the history of the Party and of the Nation...”

Apart from a gnawing, inauspicious family problem which was rudely and crudely exploited by the least edifying among his Labour adversaries, what put paid to Borg Olivier's chances of surviving a leadership challenge, after the split parliamentary vote on the Republic in December 1974, was his party's second consecutive defeat in 1976. Had the PN won this election, Borg Olivier might have resumed control. It was his very last chance. He lost it. The MLP's administration had not been the most orthodox or well-mannered, but it had more money to dish out, uplifting the lower strata of society, and taking care of its own. It had boosted the national ego by a new-found post-independence nationalist rhetoric and symbolism, given wide coverage in the now state-owned media, a state monopoly since 1975. In a straight two party contest in

1976 in which the PN fielded more candidates than the MLP, the MLP increased its vote to 51.5%, whereas the PN obtained 48.4%, in what was now a 65 member parliament elected from 13 districts. This result offered little consolation and no reassurance to the Nationalists.



In sombre mood after a second electoral defeat in 1976.

Ċensu's district was split into two, with St Julian's and San Ġwann now linked to Guardamangia, Msida and Ta' Xbiex as the 9th district, while Gżira and Sliema formed the 10th district. Whereas in the previous election in 1971 Ċensu had led the 7th district poll with 3,963 votes, elected on the first count, this time his votes were split. However, he was returned comfortably from both the new districts, getting nearly 5,000 first preference votes in all, more than any of the other candidates. A growing Nationalist challenger in this area, also elected from both the districts, was Dr Mario Felice, who overtook Ċensu on the Sliema district getting elected just before him. He was Ġanni Felice's son, 46, a lawyer like his father, who had retired from politics.²²⁰

For the PN as a party and as a parliamentary Opposition, 1977 was a crucially important year, leading to a change of leader, of discourse, of tactics. Once again Ċensu was at the forefront in all this. He himself would stand as a candidate for the party leadership.

²²⁰ The elder Felice passed away some months after this election.

As we have seen briefly, Borg Olivier's minority position in the party, although not necessarily among the party's rank-and-file, had been embarrassingly brought into the open already in 1974. In a free vote, he and five other Nationalist MPs had voted against the adoption (without a referendum) of a republican constitution, instead of the constitutional monarchy which had been endorsed in the referendum on the Independence Constitution in May 1964.²²¹ It transpires that in negotiations behind closed doors, Borg Olivier had been prepared to do away with a referendum so long as the Mintoff side agreed not to bring a republican constitution into force before the next election (in 1976). Noises to this effect were also made in the party executive. Maybe this was Borg Olivier's method of playing for time – "*temporeġġjatur*", Ċensu called him at one point – in the belief that if the PN were returned, they might put paid to the whole idea, and perhaps to Mintoff with it. As already noted, the other Nationalist MPs voted with the government side, thus giving the bill changing Malta's constitutional status the required two-thirds majority in parliament in December 1974, well before the next election. Ċensu voted with them. He hated colonialism and had no desire to see a Briton, Queen, King or governor-general, as the head of an independent Maltese state.

As Borg Olivier would not make way at all readily, a nucleus of mainly younger Nationalists started to pave the way for a successor. It was as part of this impetus that a number of 'secret' meetings were held in the offices and private residences of Nationalist activists and MPs, in which discussions took place about a strategy to have a new leader democratically elected, according to the statutory provisions required. Almost everybody in the party was convinced, now more than before, that the time for Borg Olivier to go had arrived. In his mid-sixties, he was past retiring age, a politician from a pre-war generation who had reached the zenith of his career in the mid-sixties, ending the colonial era. Worst of all, he was a loser. It was simply a question of how and when. Would he go nicely, or would his hand be forced? The statutory changes brought into effect required that the party leader had to be elected subject to given provisions and had to be confirmed by the General Council within three months after every general election. The

²²¹ For a full discussion of this, see *The Origins of Maltese Statehood*, pp. 210-263. See also above, fn. 215.

deputy leader and the party officials too had to be re-elected in similar ways.

The three ‘functional’ lynch-pins of the internal PN campaign for a change of leader were John Camilleri, Louis Galea and Karmenu Schembri ‘ic-Ċenċulin’. It was mostly Camilleri and Galea who worked in tandem, with the support of many others who may have been less prone to take the lead although without their backing no change would have been conceivable in the first place. That would include potential contenders for the top job. John Camilleri, 29, a technician and onetime GWU shop steward at the University from a dockyard family, had emerged from his base in the Floriana section committee in the mid-sixties to become general secretary of the party’s youth movement, until in 1975 he was elected the party’s first ‘Organization Secretary’. He was an action-oriented, behind-the-scenes operator with a left-leaning social Catholic mental formation, who came to know the party inside out. Louis Galea, 28, came from a lower middle class family in the village of Mqabba – his father was a nurse and a bandsman – and attended the seminary before joining the B.A./LL.D. course in 1965 at University, where in the late 1960s he became involved, with me, in campaigns first for student representation on the University Council and, more conspicuously on a national scale, for low-cost housing and environment-friendly land planning. After a stint as president of the Students Representative Council he became in 1974 president of the PN’s youth movement, where the better-grounded factotum at first was Camilleri. The group’s typology was not bourgeois, these were not the children of *professionisti*; nor for that matter were Fenech Adami or de Marco. It was a lively sample of the forward-looking, more self-made Independence generation, which had lived through the changing values and aspirations of the sixties in Malta and abroad. Understandably, they wanted to see new faces at the helm, better organisational structures, fresher ideas and approaches for the party and themselves to move ahead.²²²

The Deputy Leader of the party was Ċensu. The first to hold this position in the party’s history, he had been at it now for five years. It was by virtue

²²² “Borg Olivier kien jilhaqlu, kien jaf in-nies sew. Ġorġ ma setax ikompli, kien spiċċa, ma kien kapaċi jagħmel xejn. Imma ma riedx jitlaq. Il-ġlieda ta’ l-eżekuttiv konna rbahniha...”

of that position that he had on occasion deputised for the leader both at a party level and in parliament, as in the famous encounter with Gaddafi during his first visit to Malta. Because of this, Ċensu was reluctant to be seen to be pushing for the leader's replacement, lest it would be thought that he was doing that out of self-interest. He also suspected that the prime movers saw him as too old – he was approaching 65 – and that they backed another horse (mainly Dr Eddie Fenech Adami, who was then 43). At the same time, however, he too felt that Borg Olivier's time was up; he had long supported the 'opening up' of the party structures which eventually became fully operative after the 1976 election; and he had indeed shown a decided interest in the post of deputy leader as early as the mid-1960s, when this post first came up. Under Borg Olivier's baton, he had contested an inconclusive election for it in 1967.

While he respected Borg Olivier for his wily assessments and powers of negotiation and of synthesis, as well as supported the party policy in general terms, he was no fan of Borg Olivier's slow-moving or delaying tactics, or of what he came to regard as his autocratic bearing. He partly blames bad housing policies for the 1971 defeat, when, for example, scores of apartments which were practically ready for occupation remained neither consigned nor assigned before that election. By 1976 Borg Olivier was "finished", he says; it was Joe Zahra who wrote his articles and speeches.²²³

In February 1975, the executive proposed a motion for the forthcoming Congress so that Ċensu's election as Deputy Leader would be endorsed by it.²²⁴ In December 1976 it was proposed that in view of important statutory changes which had to be finally endorsed by the General Council, the election due for Deputy Leader would be postponed until later. Ċensu was thus exceptionally confirmed in his post beyond the

²²³ "Jien dik il-ġlieda ma hadtx sehem fiha għax kont naf li jien ma kontx il-favorit biex nissuċċedieh, *di piu'* riedu jagħtuha xejra li għax xih, l-eta' li għandu Eddie llum. Lil Ġorġ riedu jnehħuh għax kien spiċċa bhala *leader*. Joe Zahra kien jiktiblu l-artikli u hu kien il-kap tal-partit. Kien spiċċa Ġorġ. Thabatna u għamilna..."

²²⁴ Min., exec. com., 7 Feb. 1975.

limits of his term.²²⁵ The party was in some turmoil; violent incidents had erupted during the General Council of 23rd October, when Borg Olivier supporters had intimidated those who wanted to remove him. Ćensu, for one, mentioned “threats” (*theddid*) and “anonymous telephone calls” (*telefonati anonimi*). Borg Olivier said he had not known that such people would be attending the meeting and that these harmed his case.²²⁶

When the General Council was called, it was practically certain that Borg Olivier would be asked to resign and procedures initiated to have him replaced. It would be up to Ćensu to hold the fort, as Acting Leader, until an election for another leader could take place. As soon as they went into the hall – all the executive members were on stage – and before a motion asking him to make way could be put, Borg Olivier asked for a suspension so that executive members could meet privately to see what could be done. Everybody agreed to the suspension.

Interlocutors on Borg Olivier’s behalf came up with another stratagem. The intended proposal would be put aside, instead a formula was devised so that an eventual successor would be chosen who would take over on a date agreed to by the incumbent party leader. On one hand, this seemed simply like a sugaring of the pill; on the other hand, it was a stay of execution, returning the ball to Borg Olivier’s court by putting off a succession until he would have agreed to its coming into effect.

When this proposal was put to the assembly, there was a hushed silence. Everybody was dismayed. Ćensu felt awkward, all eyes pointed at him; he had been mentioned as possibly a temporary ‘bridge-in’ successor. All his colleagues on stage were saying that they agreed, but how would he lead if they didn’t really want him? These were the thoughts that crossed his mind. Would he also agree to the counter-proposal, or would he object to it? The general feeling in the hall was that they were prepared to remove Borg Olivier if he still refused to go. Had a vote been taken, the anti-Borg Olivier lobby might well have carried it.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 3 Dec. 1976.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 29 Oct. 1976.

Would Ĉensu claim the right to act in Borg Olivier's stead until a more final decision was reached, or would he simply go along with the others and wait upon the leader for him to determine how and when his successor would be appointed? In giving in to the counter-proposal, Ĉensu felt he was betraying the delegates, but in the circumstances he saw no option but to go along with the rest and hope for the best. That was a 'Kap Suĉĉesur' – one who would succeed, but who does not... yet. The weeks rolled by and Borg Olivier still remained the party leader.

Elections for a 'Kap Suĉĉesur' were held at the end of 1976. In December 1976 de Marco sent a circular to every councillor calling for nominations for a 'Kap Suĉĉesur'. The election committee was composed of Mifsud Bonnici, Bonello Dupuis and Notary Joe Cachia, with the first in the chair, and nominations would close on 23rd December at 7 p.m., practically on Christmas Eve.²²⁷

The three contenders were Ĉensu, who as deputy leader felt that he could hardly not contest; Guido de Marco, who had served as the party's secretary general since 1973; and Eddie Fenech Adami, who chaired two of the main party organs. Of the three, the only one to have been elected from two districts in the previous election was Ĉensu. Fenech Adami had scored a personal electoral triumph in the same election polling the highest number of votes (4,397) after the two party leaders, which actually was still less than Ĉensu's aggregate for the two districts. He was however more than twenty years younger. De Marco, a fiery orator, was only marginally older than Fenech Adami (less than three years).

Ĉensu reckoned that age by itself was no disqualifier. (There are several examples in history to substantiate that view. Konrad Adenauer was 73 when he undertook the task of rebuilding Germany in 1949. Winston Churchill led his party back to office in 1951 at the age of 77.) Age was also a mental disposition; Ĉensu was still energetic and sprightly for his age. He was 64. He reckoned there was a chance that if he came in second after Fenech Adami, he might then inherit de Marco's votes,

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20 Dec. 1976.

although he also remembers some of his canvassers counselling him against throwing his hat in the ring.

Undaunted, in a letter dated 28th December 1976 circulated to party counsellors – the ones to decide the leadership – Ċensu outlined the party's past successes and the challenges facing it and Malta in the near future, including the final departure of the remaining British troops in April 1979. He would “stand or fall”, he told the party counsellors, on his record as a nationalist always, an executive member for fourteen years, the Secretary General for ten years, as an MP, as a representative in the Council of Europe, the leader of delegations overseas, a bureau member of the UECD., as a Minister, as chairman of the party's press board, a Shadow Minister and the Deputy Leader.

The desire for change and for a new image of the party was legitimate, he wrote. “I think however that nobody wishes to break with the past by removing all those who worked, whoever acquired long experience in efforts which led our party to be where it is today. I think nobody wants to make a new Party. I think there is a need for continuity in the political line and in the beliefs of the Party. What is needed is a change of method, a development in the Party's outlook, there is a need for more dynamism, more decisiveness and less uncertainty. We need to bolster our work in the international field...” Underlining his track record as experience, and promising a dynamic vision, Ċensu felt that he was in a position to offer his services. He mentioned too that he had experienced government (which was more than any one of the other two contenders could say). Those who were close to him knew that he had never held back from any reform, that he was always ready to consider “new and progressive ideas”, and that he always liked to consult with colleagues in problem-solving. “Those who know me realise that although I usually defend my ideas with fervour and determination, I am always ready to desist when convinced otherwise.” He knew that he had many defects, which he did not always succeed in overcoming, and that he could not look forward to “a long time at the Party's helm if selected”. But this could be an advantage, he was quick to add, because it would give the party time to nurture and make use of other personalities, of which the party was not shorn, as leaders. If the party extended its trust to him, he was prepared

to dedicate the rest of his life to its advancement. If it thought that it should remove him from its leadership, he would respect that verdict promptly. His loyalty to the party would never be found wanting.

The first round of voting took place at 'the Press', as party headquarters were then known, on Sunday 2nd January 1977. Of the party's 550 counsellors, 538 turned up to vote. Borg Olivier was there and duly cast his vote; his arrival in the hall was greeted by loud applause. When after less than two hours the result was read out, it read as follows: Dr Eddie Fenech Adami: 274 votes; Dr Guido de Marco: 213 votes; Dr Ċensu Tabone: 48 votes. Dr C. Caruana, who chaired the meeting, declared that as none of the candidates had obtained the required majority, another round would take place on the following Sunday. Ċensu, being third, and last, was the first to be eliminated.²²⁸ On 9th January it was clear that Fenech Adami had taken almost all of Ċensu's first preference votes, as he increased his own tally by 41 votes, thus remaining firmly in the lead.²²⁹ De Marco, who had proved a creditable challenger, withdrew, becoming the new Deputy Leader, uncontested.

Ċensu had expected he would do much better than he did, even if he very much doubted that he could make it. It seems that as the electioneering for the leadership post got going de Marco was gaining ground at a rate which alarmed the Eddie camp and there was pressure for a tactical switch of preferences from Tabone to Fenech Adami. Evidently, Ċensu's showing was a poor one. He withdrew, thus facilitating a second ballot with was a straight but keen contest between the remaining two candidates. De Marco also increased his vote somewhat but not enough to beat Fenech Adami. The former thus withdrew and moved from Secretary General to Deputy Leader, while Fenech Adami became 'Kap Suċċessur', the eventual inheritor of Borg Olivier's mantle later on that year.

²²⁸ 'Il-Kunsill Ġenerali Jerġa' Jiltaqa' Nhar il-Hadd', *In-Nazzjon Tagħna*, 3 Jan. 1977, p. 1.

²²⁹ 'Nomina Wahda Wara t-Tieni Sejha – Fenech Adami', *ibid.*, 13 Jan. 1977, p. 1.

33, Carmel Street
St. Julians,
28 ta' Diċembru 1976

Ghaziz Kunsillier,

L-elezzjoni għas-suċċessur tal-Kap tagħna qegħda ssir bejn tliet hbieb li jirrispettaw lill xulxin u li ilhom jaqdmu fl-interess ta' Malta fi hdan il Partit Nazzjonalista, għalhekk jirbah min jirbah l-elezzjoni, il Partit ser ikollu Kap li tkun tisthoqqu il lealta u l-fiduċja tal-partitieri kollha. Din l-elezzjoni għanda turi li t-tħaddim tad-demokrazzja fil-Partit is-saħħh u mhux id dajjeġ l-għaqda tiegħu.

Tul dawn l-aħħar snin rajna il Partit jikber fis-saħħa u fl-influenza tiegħu fil-Pajjiż, rajnieh iwassal lill Malta għall-indipendenza politika tagħha u jgħabidha triq tal-vijabilità ekonomika, għalhekk il Kap il-għid ser jiret prinċipji sodi ta patrijotizmu, ta demokrazzja, ta lealta għat tagħlim tal-Knisja u eredita ta hidma u ta suċċessi, ser jiret ukoll il piz enormi li jnaxxi ma sħabu il Partit għal rebħa elettoralni wara żewġ telfiet. Għandna quddiemna hames snin fl-opposizzjoni u l-ewwel prijorita fil-hidma politika trid li nizguraw rebħa meta jkollna elezzjoni, tiġi meta tiġi. Il-Kap il-għid irid jideddika hajtu għal dan il-għan, b-intelliġenza b'hila u b'kuraġġ. Nistneww li il-hames snin li għojin ikun: għalina jktar iebes min dawt ta qabel, il Gvern ta Mintoff ser ikollu iċ-cans li jsaħħab posizzjonijiet li bona b'ċerta diffikultà. Il-kontroll sħih ta l-ekonomija ser ifikkell li s-vilupp industrijali li jkun jista jgigura full employment għaz-zagħazag tagħna, u xi whud min dawn jistgħu jaqgħu għat-tentazzjoni ta jabbandunaw il-fehmiet nazzjonalisti biex jayvanzaw fil-hajja, l-edukazzjoni ser tiffaċċja problemi mhux zgħar fosthom aktarx il-limitazzjonijiet fl-edukazzjoni terzjarja u il-kontroll tal-Gvern ser jikber fl-oqsma kollha tal-hajja. Dalwaqt sejin insibu ruhna f'April 1979 meta l-Ingliżi jkunu telqu minn Malta.

Il-Programm elettoralni tal-Partit Nazzjonalista ma tilef xejn mill-validita tiegħu speċjalment f'dak li għandu x'jaqsam mal-politika barranija. Ridu naraw li il-volonta ta nofs Malta ma tiġix ikkalpejata min minn jirrapresenta n-nofs l-iehor, u li ma tirrenjax id-dittatura tal-maġġoranza. Dan irid isir ukoll bil-hidma u bil-personalita tal-Kap il-għid, li jrid jipprojetta l-'image' tal-Partit tant f'Malta kemm ukoll barra min Malta.

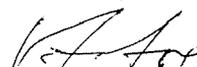
Aħna ilna nafu xulxin u ilna nahdmu flimkien. Magħandix bżonn ta 'introduzzjoni miegħek, u magħandix bżonn infakkrek fis-servizz li tajt lill-Partit u l'Malta. Noqgħod jew naqa fuq ir-rekord tiegħi bhala nazzjonalist min dejjem, bhala membru tal-Esekuttiv għal erbatax il-sena, bhala Segretarju Ġenerali għal għaxar snin, bhala membru parlamentari, bhala rappresntant fil-Kunsill tal-Europa, bhala mexxoj ta delegazzjonijiet nazzjonalisti barra minn Malta, bhala membru tal-Bureau ta U.E.C.D., bhala ministru nazzjonalista, bhala chairman tad-diretturi ta lis-Stamperija, bhala shadow minister u bhala viċi-Kap. Noqgħod jew naqa wkoll fuq dak li nista nagħmel f'din il-legislatura waqt li aħna fl-opposizzjoni biex meta tasal l-elezzjoni nirbhu. Dan ta l-aħħar, nahseb, hu l-aktar punt importanti li trid tikkunsidra f'għażia tiegħok.

Naf li hemm xewqa legittima għal bidla, għal imago għida tal-Partit. Nahseb, pero, li hadd ma jrid jaqta ma l-magħdidi billi jwarrab lill kull min hadem, lill kull min ha esperjenza twila fil-hidma, wasslet lill Partit tagħna fejn jinsab illum. Nahseb li hadd ma jrid jagħmel Partit għid. Nahseb li hemm bżonn ta kontinwita fil-linja politika u fil-twevmin tal-Partit u hemm bżonn ta bdil fil-metodi, hemm bżonn ta s-vilupp tal-vizjoni (outlook) tal-Partit, hemm bżonn ta aktar dinamizmu, aktar deċiżjoni u ingas inċertezz, hemm bżonn li nkabbru il-hidma tagħna fl-kamp internazzjonali biex iwasslu il-leben tagħna u nhejju t-triq għal meta nkunu fil-gvern, hemm bżonn li nighna bi sħih biex insibu soluzzjoni xierqa, li tkun taqbel mal-fehmiet tagħna għal problemi li ser niffaċċjaw fl-1979, u dan nistgħu nagħmluh ukoll mill-opposizzjoni.

Nahseb li jiena f'posizzjoni li noffri s-servizzi tiegħi biex titwetq din il-hidma, anki għaliex għandi esperjenza ta gvern. Min jafni sewwa jaf li qatt ma bjaqt lura għal ebda riforma, anzi hafna drabi is-sugġerjotom jiena, min jafni jaf li dejjem lest biex nikkonsidra ideat godda u progressivi, u li dejjem inhobb nikkonsulta ruħi ma sħabi biex magħhom insib soluzzjoni għal problemi li jingħalbu, min jafni jaf li minkejja li s-soltu niddefendi l-ideat li jkollni l-hexxa u determinozjoni, dejjem inkun lest inżarma meta jipprovsaduni. Għandi hafna tifetti, u mhux dejjem jirnexxili nirbahhom, naf ukoll li ma nistax inħares lejn zmien twil ta tminn tal-Partit jekk inkun magħzul, imma dan jista jkun ta vantagġ għax jagħti l-opportunita lill-Partit li jrawwem u jagħmel uzu min personalitajiet oħra li minhom il-partit mhux nieqes bhala leaders.

L-għażia tiegħek trid issir fil-liberta u fl-interess biss tal-partit kif tarah int. Jekk il-partit jgħoddidi il-fiduċja lest li nideddika il-bqija ta hajti għal avanz tiegħu, jekk jiduru li għandu jwarrabni mit-tmexxija tal-partit, nirrispetta min issa il-verdett tiegħu, u il-lealta tiegħi leja il-partit ma tiġi qatt nieqsa.

Inselli għalik, u għoddi tiegħek dejjem,


Censu Tabona

Censu's 'leadership appeal' to party councillors in December 1976.

students, intellectuals and, to a lesser extent, the Church (which saw the ‘Blue Sisters’ expelled, the existence of its schools threatened, the Seminary and Curia attacked, chapel and all).

Symptomatic of the virulent Mintoff years was the repeated changing around of Malta’s national day which, as in most other ex-colonies, had been Independence Day (21st September). This was first moved to the *Otto Settembre* in 1971, then changed again to the 13th December (Republic Day) in 1974, and then changed again to 31st March, the date when in 1979 the extended Mintoff-Carrington agreement had expired and what was left of a British military presence in Malta steamed out of the Grand Harbour. This was hailed as ‘Freedom Day’, Malta’s true ‘independence’ as it were.

There was an important ideological debate going on in the Nationalist Party, in which Ċensu was involved, which deserves some space before we turn over the page, as the ‘Mintoffian’ era began its decline. Of overriding importance to contemporary politics, this debate was solved and settled in the Nationalist Party itself well before 1987, but it is very much a continuing one in Maltese party politics. It concerned whether or not the party should go for full membership of the European Economic Community as a matter of policy.

Like a good old Nationalist, Ċensu was not too sure of this policy. Malta had fought to become independent, would it now join the EEC? His greatest ideal in colonial times having been Independence (he still finds frustrating ‘neo-colonial’ traits in some present-day mentalities and attitudes), he was initially sceptical, even averse, to the idea of Malta joining another bloc.²³² He waited to be convinced before he could go along with that.

Once again it was the Italian Christian Democrats who mainly came to his rescue. It was only after a long brain-storming meeting with a leading EEC dignitary, Lorenzo Natali, that Ċensu changed his opinion about the advisability of this policy. He was the last one to say “yes”, provided that

²³² “Assolutament. Jiena ma ridtx wara l-kolonjaliżmu Ngliz. li jkollna kolonjaliżmu Ewropew. Dak kien il-*basic thinking* tiegħi. Illum qed tinbidel...”

Malta would join "under the right conditions". It was clear that a referendum would become necessary when the time came to join or not because then we would be in a position to know what the conditions were. "You cannot hypothec the future without knowing it."²³³ The right conditions would be known just before entering.

"Il-Kumitat Ezekuttiv tal-Partit Nazzjonalista mlaqqa lllum 16 ta' Frar 1979

IFAKKAR li kien il-Partit Nazzjonalista fil-Gvern li fl-1967 ghamel talba formali lill-Komunita Ekonomika Ewropeja biex jibdew negozjati dwar ftehim ta' Assocjazzjoni bejn Malta u l-Komunita liema ftehim sehh u gie ffirmat fil-5 ta' Dicembru 1970;

Il-Ftehim ta' Assocjazzjoni kien isemmi zewg stadji, wiehed ta' hames snin li bdew fl-1 ta' April 1971 u l-iehor, fil-principju wkoll ta' hames snin, li kellu jwassal għall-għaqda doganali sal-1981; sa liema data kien mahub li Malta tkun lahqet kisbet vijabilita ekonomika;

Il-Ftehim gie mgaded mill-Gvern prezenti billi gie mtawwal l-ewwel perjodu ta' hames snin sal-31 ta' Dicembru 1980 imhabba l-qagħda ekonomika ta' Malta u għalhekk skond il-ftehim attwali, l-għaqda doganali mistennija li ssehh sal-1985;

Il-Ftehim ta' Assocjazzjoni jipprogi li s-sena d-diehra għandhom isiru negozjati dwar it-tieni perijodu ta' l-assocjazzjoni;

Il-Gvern Nazzjonalista kien iddikjara mill-bidu nett li skop ewlieni tal-ftehim kien li jwassal lil Malta għal għaqda shiha ma l-Ewropa.

JINNOTA li wara li gie iffirmat il-ftehim ta' Assocjazzjoni il-Komunita kibret għal disa' pajjizi u waslet biex tizzied bi bliet pajjizi oħra;

Bid-dhul tal-Portugall, Spanja u l-Grecja, il-pajjizi Ewropej tal-Mediterran li ma humiex komunisti, jkun jiffurmaw parti mill-Komunita Ewropeja barra Malta, Cipro u t-Turkija;

Id-dhul tal-Portugal, Spanja u l-Grecja fil-Komunita, aktarx ikollu effett hazin fuq Malta jekk tibqa' barra, għax dawn il-pajjizi ikunu f'pozizzjoni aghar biex jikkompetu għas-swieq Ewropej u l-progress mistenni fil-ekonomija tagħhom wara li jidhlu fil-Komunita jista jgħtihom vantagg ukoll fis-swieq ta' l-Afrika u l-pajjizi Għarab li magħhom huma għandhom rabtiet tradizzjonali;

JIFHEM li Malta mhux biss għandha bzonn is-swieq tal-Komunita Ewropeja izda l-għeluq tal-bazi Ngliza din is-sena igib il-bzonn ta' għajjnuna ekonomika qawwija mill-pajjizi tal-Komunita u minn pajjizi oħra;

Malta ma tistax tiehu vantagg bi dritt mill-istituzzjonijiet tal-Komunita Ekonomika Ewropeja sakemm ma tkunx membru shih tagħha;

Il-Komunita Ekonomika Ewropeja qegħda bil-mod tersaq lejn l-iskop ta' għaqda politika li tiggerantixxi dejjem aktar il-paci u l-liberta tal-pajjizi membri.

Aktar ma Malta ddom ma tiddikjana l-bsieb tagħha li tidhol fil-Komunita Ewropeja aktar ma jikbru id-diffikultajiet biex Malta ssir membru shih;

JIDDIKJARA li Malta mhux biss tagħmel parti mill-Ewropa geografikament, storikament u kulturalment izda taqsa mal-Komunita Ewropeja l-ideali ta' paci, liberta, progress soċjali u titjib kostanti fil-livell ta' l-għaxien miktuba jil-Trattat ta' Ruma;

JIRRIISOLVI li huwa fil-interess ta' Malta li jinfethu negozjati mal-Komunita Ewropeja biex jekk jinkisbu kundizzjonijiet xierqa Malta ssir membru shih tal-Komunita Ewropeja u li l-Partit Nazzjonalista għandu minn issa jibda jwitti t-tiq biex Malta tikseb dawn il-kundizzjonijiet xierqa li jirrendu possibbli idhul tagħha fil-Komunita Ewropeja."

²³³ "Ma tistax tagħmel ipoteka generali fuq il-futur minghajr ma taf il-futur."

Ċensu also came round to the view that ‘Independence’ as he had conceived of it when a colonial subject, was changing as states became increasingly inter-dependent. If Malta could not go it alone, as it were, it was within a European Community setting that a more secure future lay. He remained very sensitive on this point, arguing in favour of neutrality on the ground that, in his view, so long as you had a military presence in your midst you could not very well say that you were fully independent. The emancipation from and the prevention of any oppressive foreign hegemony formed an integral part of his *forma mentis*. On the other hand, he came to realise that an anchor in the European Community would also help ensure democracy and peace, a philosophy which had long been central to the post-war European integration movement. He realised too that Malta’s security was practically non-existent...

The 1977-1987 decade and the last Mintoff legislature (1981-1987) in particular must have opened the eyes of Euro-sceptics, who might never have imagined that democracy in Malta could have been led to the brink. In a broad long-term European texture, there was also an evolving nexus between political freedom, economic well-being and cultural enrichment. As we shall see in the next chapter, from the last one to say “yes” to the policy of EU membership, Ċensu, once convinced, would become the first one to say “yes” to applying for it.²³⁴

As the European prospect slowly began to take shape as an alternative vision to an equivocal ‘non-alignment’, political violence continued to rear its head. This may be said to have been epitomised on 15th October 1979 by the gutting of the Progress Press building in Valletta, followed by an attack on Fenech Adami’s home and family in Birkirkara, without a single police arrest. However, not surprisingly, the government party lost its elective majority in the next election, held in tense circumstances in December 1981. There were many other incidents, for example the 18th November 1977 on campus, at Żebbuġ on 25th April 1982; on one Independence Day commemoration after another, as on 21st September 1984; at Rabat on 5th April 1987. In Gudja a Nationalist youngster was machine-gunned to his death by a passing squad. As for smashed-up party clubs the one-roomed Floriana club held the record: it was broken

²³⁴ See below, 14.

into and ransacked twenty times or more. One police commissioner ended up in jail for complicity in the killing and dumping of an accused person while in police custody at Police Headquarters, and so on.

What ensued in 1981 was at best a gross technical dysfunction of proportional representation as an electoral system or, at worst, a cynically manipulated gerrymandering exercise. It sent the Nationalists back to the Opposition benches when they had gained an absolute majority of the popular vote. With 50.9% of the popular vote in December 1981, the PN somehow obtained three seats less than the MLP, which hung on to power regardless, whereas in June 1971 the MLP had obtained 50.8% of the vote and a one seat majority. With 114,168 votes for the PN to 109,993 for the MLP, the former's majority was as large as that which the MLP had obtained earlier, when it had taken office. In a tense press conference with de Marco to one side and Ċensu to the other on 15th December 1981, Fenech Adami implored Mintoff not to accept to form a government.²³⁵

The “perverse result” of 1981, as Mintoff himself would call it publicly, led to a serious political impasse. The Nationalists decided to boycott parliament, probably in the hope that the government would concede or promise an early election, at least. Mintoff might have been inclined to do so, but apparently his Cabinet colleagues prevailed on him. “Over my dead body”, one of his Ministers later confessed to having told him. In the end, Mintoff simply told the Opposition members to take their seats, and promised nothing in return, other than that they would lose their right to sit in parliament if they did not go back, more or less unconditionally. However hard they swallowed, most Nationalists found it too galling to return to the House of Representatives as if nothing had happened, when the pendulum had swung around, by Maltese standards significantly, and more so in the prevailing difficult circumstances. After changing their leader and style, in spite of the odds stacked against them, the ‘new’ Nationalists had managed to win an absolute majority of the popular vote, but a re-drawing of electoral boundaries, they firmly believed, was now denying them a deserved victory.

²³⁵ See *In-...Taghna*, 16 Dec. 1981, p. 1.

The victors-losers of 1981 had to *do something*. They began to resort to an extra-parliamentary ‘Gandhian’ discourse, threatening passive resistance and civil non-cooperation, except that Malta was not India. Not reporting for work on the traditional feast-day of Imnarja, which the Labour administration had wiped off the public holiday calendar, was one such tactic, to which the administration retaliated by victimising the defiant workers. As such direct action had no protection under industrial law, it not being a strike directive by a registered trade union, what, in the Maltese context, under Mintoff’s party, could the PN do to safeguard the rights and interests of its supporters? The choices were certainly limited. Even striking workers had been roughly treated, suspended from work without pay for weeks or months, under the same regime’s previous term of office. Moreover, the GWU had been “married to” – that is statutorily incorporated with – the governing party. This ‘trade union’ was effectively at one with the ‘minority’ government, reviling all opposition, including the free trade unions, through its press and media machines. This unprecedented Maltese ‘industrial-political’ concoction was known as “the Socialist Movement” and as “the Workers’ Movement”. Labels apart, the GWU in 1981 was not exactly *Solidarnosc* – Lech Walesa’s independent trade union movement founded in Gdansk in September 1980, which had just been made illegal by Poland’s declaration of martial law in December 1981 under General Jaruzelski.

Within the PN leadership itself, the only dissident voice against the would-be government’s boycott of parliament was Ċensu’s. Ċensu (who had again been returned from two districts although the electoral boundaries had been changed again) never supported the boycott on the ground that the Opposition’s absence from parliament could strengthen rather than weaken the Mintoff administration or regime. He recalls the advice of some Italian Christian Democrats who similarly disagreed with this boycott tactic. One of them was Scelba, a Sicilian who became premier in his early forties and ran Italy successfully for three years. He used to say, rightly according to Ċensu, that in politics whomsoever was absent was at fault: “*chi e’ assente in politica ha torto*.”²³⁶ Ċensu was ill at ease because he heartily disagreed with his party line at this delicate stage.

²³⁶ ‘Ghaliex jiena nemmen f’dak li kont nisma’ lil Scelba... jghid..., u hekk hu. Kienu kontra taghna hafna meta ma dhalniex. Kienu jghidulna: “Taghmlux bhal ma ghamilna ahna fl-Aventino meta d-Demokristjani ta’ Sturzo kienu hargu. Mussolini ma kienx jitla’ kostituzzjonalment.” Tort taghhom ghax ma marrux jivvutaw...’

Parallels could be drawn with the Aventine Secession in Mussolini's time. In June 1924, in protest at fascist vote-rigging and the murder of Matteotti, MPs representing the main Italian opposition parties had staged a walk-out from parliament. That protest move was clearly intended to deny legitimacy to Mussolini's regime but as a result of it the Fascists came to dominate the Italian chamber of deputies, while those boycotting were said to have "gone to the Aventine hill". Ċensu's position could be compared to the Giolitti-led liberal reluctance to support the boycott, which they regarded as useless. Perhaps sanguinely, Ċensu felt that if instead of boycotting parliament they went there with their heads held high and every time they rose to speak they would say that they did so "in the name of the Maltese People", Mintoff would have been unable to stomach it, and he would have left after a month.

More insidiously, Ċensu notes that Mintoff might have been tempted to change the Constitution, then blame the Opposition MPs for their absence. This was like saying that, without the Aventine Secession, Mussolini would either not have become absolute ruler legally or there would have been a *coup d'état*. Hobson's choice, really.²³⁷ Mintoff did neither.

²³⁷ 'Inti qed tiehu l-konkluzjoni ta' Eddie Fenech Adami u l-partit kollu. Konkluzjoni hazina. Illum nibqa' ngħid li kienet hazina u ngħid li għamilt hażin li sšottoskrivejt għaliha, allavolja kieku spicċat il-karriera politika tiegħi. Għamilt hażin għax jiena jidherli li d-dover tagħna kien li nidhlu fil-parlament għax il-poplu tellgħana biex nirrappreżentawh fil-parlament... and we failed our people. U Mintoff seta' biddel il-Kostituzzjoni u jmexxi b'dittatura u kien iwahhal fina kif id-Demokristjani baqghu kolpevoli għax Mussolini hataf legalment il-gvern Taljan... hafna jahsbu, u jiena fosthom, li Mintoff ma riedx jieh u over il-gvern għax kien qal qabel l-elezzjoni li "jekk ma jkollix maġġoranza ma nigvernax". Pero' shabu ma hallewhx. Din ikkonfermaha Joe Grima. Kien wiehed li ma riedx għax ried jibqa' Ministru. "Over my dead body", kien jgħid. Mintoff issokkomba. Mintoff baqa' jiggverna u kien ill at ease... ta' warajh ma riedux jagħmlu elezzjoni għida. Jien ridt nidhlu u (kull meta nqumu nitkellmu) ngħidu: "Jiena f'isem il-maġġoranza tal-Maltin qed ngħid Hekk..." Wara li ndumu xahar sejrjn hekk, Mintoff jispara għal rasu u jitlaq kien. Jiena nafu lil Mintoff, ma kienx ser jaċċettaha din l-umiljazzjoni... kienu l-agħar hames snin tal-gvern ta' Mintoff... kieku rrepetiet ruhha fl-87, kif irrepetiet ruhha, kien ikun hawn riviluzzjoni. Wara Tal-Barrani. Mintoff kien induna li l-poplu mhux ser jerga' jaċċetta dak ir-riżultat, u min ikun kap tal-gvern oppost jibza' għal rasu... Ma kenitx demokrazzija għax kien ilu jiddisprezzaha, imma Malta gawdiet... Jien kull laqgħa ta' l-eżekuttiv u kull laqgħa tal-Grupp Parlamentari kont ngħidilhom biex nidhlu. Insistajt... Kienu kissrulna l-karrozzi... Konna nirriskjaw hajjitna... Dhalna fuq flimsy guarantees... b'dawk li dhalna stajna dhalna fl-ewwel ġurnata...'

“As the oldest politician still in harness”, Ċensu decided to write directly to “My dear Dom” on a personal initiative, “purely in a spirit of love of Country”. The first letter in these secret ‘boycott exchanges’ was drafted on 27th July 1982 and sent two days later. The present political, social and economic situation could hardly be called satisfactory by anyone who wanted to be objective, Ċensu began, “and I am sure that even you, who hold the reins of power and who keeps saying that there is no crisis, would prefer a better climate and a more serene environment.” Division, hatred, insecurity, verbal violence, threats, intimidation, declarations of self-righteousness were not “the elements on which you and I would want to build a peaceful Malta”:

*Our people deserve a better fate and our electors would want us to bend ourselves backwards to restore harmony between us all.*²³⁸

Malta had been brought to “the brink of disaster”. “We have both lived intensely every minute of the last few months”, Ċensu told Mintoff. In a place like Malta, which had no racial, linguistic or religious issues, there were no issues which could not be “resolved by goodwill and by honest discussion and negotiation”, without inflicting on anyone unnecessary pain, without imposing or expecting humiliating and unacceptable conditions:

The alternative to a negotiated solution is the imposition of the will of those in power on the majority of the Maltese people, and the unavoidable reaction of those who feel cheated or oppressed; a situation of constant confrontation and stress which, alas, may also lead to violence and bloodshed. This is not what the Maltese have voted for, or what they deserve.

²³⁸ Tabone/Mintoff, 29 July 1982, f. 1.

There was no alternative, Ĉensu concluded, to “a negotiated solution”:

I believe that we both share loyalty to all principles of fair play, of true democracy and of freedom, and I also believe that as a patriot you would draw back from inflicting harm on our nation.

He wondered, therefore, whether an informal meeting between the two of them could be useful in paving the way for an acceptable solution. For this purpose he was prepared to meet Mintoff at the latter’s convenience.²³⁹

The prime minister replied in a four page letter on official note paper from Castille only a few days later. Addressed to “My dear Ĉensu”, Mintoff felt that Ĉensu’s letter was worth answering because he believed it to be ‘truly typical of the state of mind of many de facto leaders of influential sections (“correnti”) within the Nationalist Party’. Mintoff held Ĉensu’s letter to imply, for the first time, the recognition of “some form of collective leadership in our country and you no longer accuse me of a personal dictatorship”. He then proceeded to examine his “logic”, as he put it.

Mintoff ploughed back into the past, as he saw or imagined it, mentioning the language question of 1932, and alleging that the PN had “openly sided with the Italian dictator” on the eve of the Second World War. He mentioned the period 1958-1962 and the PN’s alleged connivance with the British and the Church to keep “the Socialist Movement” out of office. He then mentioned the 1962-1969 period, when Ĉensu had entered politics (and, he forgot to mention, there were six parties fighting for seats in parliament):

It was during this period that the Nationalist Party with hardly 42% of the electorate became the sole Government of these Islands. This Nationalist Government promptly sold their soul to the local Catholic

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, f. 2.

hierarchy and officially became their accomplices for the continued suppression of the most fundamental human rights on the false plea of defending the religion of the people. It was also during this “glorious” period that the Nationalist Government connived with the British Government and NATO to deceive the people of Malta and the international community by keeping Malta as a foreign-dominated war fortress and at the same time masquerading as an independent country.²⁴⁰

Mintoff then harked back to 1981. In a ten line sentence, he said that the Nationalist Party, “over-confident and arrogant and over estimating the results of five years continuous fomenting of dissent and undue influence exerted by the moral and financial support of foreign organisations”, had walked out of Parliament “and turned their backs to the Maltese Television cameras... before the crucial debate on the nation’s budget...” He specified AZAD, the European Christian Democratic Union, Strauss, Piccoli, Kohl, etc., as their backers, and further alleged that “they had been given a whole station in Sicily by European reactionaries”.

The next folio was dedicated to a flattering description of how far Malta’s conditions had improved. He mentioned food, housing, education, children’s allowances, pensions, hospital care: “secure foundations for a more humane and a more enlightened young nation”. The economy was also much stronger than it had ever been, Mintoff added. He mentioned the reserves, infrastructure, financial investments, shipbuilding, the foundry, the Marsaxlokk complex and grain silos. Moreover Malta was “equidistant from the two super-powers”. He held that such achievements had been “largely” made in spite of, and against the wishes of, the Nationalist opposition:

I said largely because I believe the biggest achievement of the Maltese people in the past 100 years has been the Republican Constitution of 1974 for which the Socialist Movement had also the support of the majority of the Nationalist Party.

²⁴⁰ Mintoff/Tabone, 5 Aug. 1982, f. 3.

Ironically, however, Mintoff continued, it was this “greatest achievement” and with it “the whole democratic structure of Malta” which Ċensu and his Party wished to destroy “with the flimsy excuse of having gained – after the most obscene foreign political intervention – a few more votes than the legitimately elected majority”. Shorn of its “false sentimental appeal”, Ċensu’s letter boiled down to a simple choice:

Shall we as the duly elected Government give in to your blackmail, give up our responsibilities and bring chaos to our islands so that as in Chile some monstrous fascist group will recall the West which will once more enslave our people for unknown years to come?

Or

*Shall you swallow your pride and abide by the Constitution which we fashioned together in 1974 so that we can together make an effort to improve it and make our young democracy more secure?*²⁴¹

The first alternative, Mintoff concluded, meant “national suicide” and he was certain that “you and all your friends know how the Socialist Movement will resist you with all its might if you persist in this choice”:

If as you state you are in good faith and are prepared to accept the second alternative I promise that there will be no humiliations or unacceptable conditions. On the contrary I shall bend backwards to perform this worthwhile task.

Ċensu drafted a reply to Mintoff on the following day and sent it on 7th August. Mintoff’s assessment of the role of the Nationalist Party in the political, social and economic development of Malta – past and present,

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, ff. 3-4.



*The Prime Minister
Malta*

5 August 1982

My dear Censu,

Your personal and confidential letter of July 29, 1982 is worth answering in some detail because I believe it to be truly typical of the state of mind of many de facto leaders of influential sections ("correnti") within the Nationalist Party.

You begin by boldly declaring "the present political, social and economic situation can hardly be called satisfactory". Instead of giving some facts or even making some comparisons to substantiate this sweeping assumption you hasten to baptize it as "objective" by saying "even you, who hold the reins of power and who keep saying that there is no crisis, would prefer a better climate and a more serene environment".

or

shall you swallow your pride and abide by the Constitution which we fashioned together in 1974 so that we can together make an effort to improve it and make our young democracy more secure?

The first alternative means national suicide and I am certain that you and all your friends know how the Socialist Movement will resist you with all its might if you persist in this choice.

If as you state you are in good faith and are prepared to accept the second alternative I promise that there will be no humiliations or unacceptable conditions. On the contrary I shall bend backwards to perform this worthwhile task.

*Very sincerely yours
Dom Mintoff*

Dom Mintoff
Prime Minister

Mintoff's reply to Censu in 1982 about the PN's boycott of parliament.

Ċensu dismissed as being, as usual, “unfair, extremely biased and not borne out by facts”. Without taking Mintoff up on his various points, he felt he should state in the most categorical and emphatic manner that no “Chile type solution” was acceptable to the Nationalist Party which was “determined to resist with all its might the imposition of any type of dictatorial regime in Malta”. Indeed the party was proud of the role it had played in the shaping of events in Malta, culminating in the acquisition of independence in 1964.

Ċensu could not accept that Mintoff really believed that the Nationalist Party would accept any solution other than that which conformed to his own definition of democracy: “a state wherein the will of the majority prevails with due and effective respect of the constitutionally guaranteed rights of all citizens.”²⁴²

Coming to the substance of Mintoff’s letter, Ċensu stated that his reading of the situation was that “the confrontation course on which the country seems embarked will lead to national disaster.” A solution to “the present impasse” was “imperative” and, he continued,

I feel I can assure you that my colleagues share with me the belief that a solution within the constitutional frame-work is desirable and possible. I am also sure that my colleagues would share my view that in all good faith we should not leave any stone unturned to take the country out of its present impasse. ²⁴³

Ċensu also wrote to his party leader on the eve of an important speech which the latter was due to deliver on 27th December. It is an instructive piece of advice, prudently and soberly composed, of a kind which party leaders may not often receive from their colleagues. Not one which any party leader worth his salt could afford to disregard, it is not simply patriotic but also strategic, as it was perhaps time to retreat from this boycott before it was too late. The boycott in any case may have been running out of steam, so other solutions had to be contemplated. Ċensu

²⁴² Tabone/Mintoff, 7 Aug. 1982, f. 1.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, f. 2.

felt that Fenech Adami was being egged on too much by those around him: he should pause to consider a different course of action. The meeting of the parliamentary group on Christmas eve was not much help for him either to assess or tackle the situation:

Apart from repetitions of previous statements and arguments based mainly on pride and on the need of saving our face, little was said about a possible showdown and of the conditions that would follow. We are all conscious of our rights and of the will of the people on the matter, we are justly proud of the increasing support of the people, we denounce Mintoff and his evil doings, but we are totally indifferent to the important fact that we have no strategy for winning political power, for changing majority support into governmental authority. Many of us uphold our absence from Parliament as an axiom, almost as a dogma, without stressing that it was only meant as a means of pressure and not as an end in itself. And yet after a year outside Parliament, we are no nearer a democratic solution, and the constant reminder of abnormality which our empty seats signify is in my view amply balanced by Mintoff's ability to do what he likes without opposition, and his continued recognition by other governments as a democratic government. ²⁴⁴

After discussing the pro-boycott positions taken by members of the group at the said meeting, except de Marco who had remained silent, Ċensu listed several advantages of their returning to parliament:

Our going to Parliament should signal a renewed vigour in our campaign for the return of full democracy to Malta, and there is nothing that we are doing now that we could not do better while in Parliament. We should put this issue out of the way and concentrate on a winning strategy to make Mintoff come to terms. Our presence in Parliament opens the way for a democratic solution but is certainly no guarantee for it. It looks as if we are heading for a direct confrontation within two or three months and I would rather be in Parliament if such a confrontation materialised. ²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Tabone/Fenech Adami, 26 Dec. 1982, f. 1.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, f. 4.

The blue carbon copies of this plea on letter-heads of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, may be seen as eloquent and exemplary testimony to Ĉensu's resolve to place not only party before leader, but also country before party. Invoking his confidence in the leader's "judgement" and his "charisma among our people", he further wrote thus:

*A confrontation with a one party Parliament must lead to a dictatorial regime and it is our duty to keep away from our people with all the means at our disposal such a situation developing. This is a duty which I strongly feel and I am not prepared to take part in any action likely to bring about such a result. Democracy and the future of Malta depend also on what we do; we have our share of responsibility for the division that is increasing and for the politicisation of everything in Malta; we should above (all) ensure that whatever we do leads to victory and not to defeat...*²⁴⁶

Mintoff had lost nothing of his verve and arrogance while they expected something to happen "without knowing what":

*I have told you before that your leadership is on trial and I fear that not all around you pull their weight to help you exercise it as you think best; they try to exercise it themselves through you... I may be getting old, but I still feel a patriot and while I have the strength I shall continue to say my view without fear or favour, having no secondary aims. May God give you wisdom, light and courage tomorrow. I shall and give my support.*²⁴⁷

At about the same time, Ĉensu was writing to a British colleague at the Council of Europe, Tom Urwin, M.P., to protest at a decision of the Legal Affairs Committee not to allow Dr de Marco to address it. The Political Affairs Committee had also discussed a resolution on Malta. Ĉensu earnestly hoped that the latter would not do like the former when it met in Paris on 22nd September 1982:

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, ff. 4-5.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, f. 5.

I have read the letter which Dr Demarco wrote to you, and while it describes adequately the situation in Malta, where democracy hangs by a thread, he would be able to expound on facts and issues if given a chance... Our absence from the Council (I hope only temporary) should not serve as a pretext for listening to the arguments of one side only on a matter which may prove vital to the survival of our democratic freedoms. You are no doubt aware that only two weeks ago the “Foreign Interference Act” was passed by the Malta Parliament, and this Act is in our view inconsistent with human rights as accepted by the Western democracies, and goes counter to the free flow of information proclaimed so loudly in the Final Act of Helsinki... the Foreign Interference Act (which) practically builds up an iron curtain round Malta.²⁴⁸

After some behind-the-scenes mediation by Miss Agatha Barbara, President of Malta, the Nationalist MPs took their seats in parliament, hoping for the best. They were ‘coopted’ in March 1983. Unfortunately, the best was nowhere in sight until the still stormy calm of 1987.

Still, the Nationalist MPs took their seats in parliament. Mintoff did not complete his term as premier, opting to choose a successor in mid-term. He bid goodbye to premiership and leadership, hand-picking an unlikely successor, Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici, an industrial relations lawyer who had been a Junta promoter in the 1960s.

The first two years of Mintoff’s third post-independence administration were largely dominated by this boycott question. In 1984 there was a change at the helm, at least nominally. The year 1984 was, among other things, the year of the church schools dispute, when many pupils from these schools, threatened with closure and a Socialist state takeover – “*jew b’xejn jew xejn*” (free or nothing) – temporarily attended voluntary tuition in private homes, basements, garages and backyards. MLP supporters from the bankrupt dockyard, in a demonstration attended by Mintoff’s brand new successor Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici on a truck, attacked the Curia, situated opposite Police Headquarters,

²⁴⁸ Tabone/Urwin, 20 Sept. 1982, ff. 1-2.

with impunity. Karmenu subsequently called dockers “the workers’ aristocracy”.

By 1986, as the increasingly bloody Maltese political scenario came to rather resemble that of an impending civil war, it was Mintoff who, ironically but mercifully, pushed through parliament a constitutional amendment to the effect that henceforth a party obtaining an absolute majority of the popular vote would be entitled to govern. It was the votes that mattered more than the seats: seats should correspond to votes, at least sufficiently so not to deprive a people’s party from governing.

This elementary ingredient of parliamentary democracy, otherwise known as the majority principle, would henceforth be applied as a constitutional norm in Malta. Seats would be adjusted accordingly to ensure that the party with over 50% of the vote would have at least a one seat majority by which to govern, even if that came in exchange for a ‘neutrality’ and ‘non-alignment’ clause in the constitution. It had taken nearly five turbulent and anxious years before the obvious democratic norm became law in independent Malta. In the meantime, dealing with the arising situations, and if possible devising compromise solutions, was a nightmare.

Another intriguing prospect, in which Ċensu was involved during the 1980s, concerned the presidency. Mintoff was ill at ease after losing the electoral majority in 1981: he had said on television before the election that without a majority he would not govern, and when he effectively lost it, he publicly described the outcome as “a perverse result”. Ċensu believes that had it been for Mintoff, he would have wriggled out of that situation, probably by calling an early election, but his Cabinet colleagues were against giving up power, arguing that the MLP’s victory, even if it was a fluke, was according to law. When Mintoff gave up the party leadership and the premiership in 1984 – so it is generally held, on both sides – he had hoped that he would replace Agatha Barbara as Head of State. However, Agatha did not make way. Efforts were initiated to redimension the presidency, moving this away slightly from its largely ‘ceremonial’ role, but without turning it into an executive one.



European Christian Democrats listening to Emilio Colombo (top) in the shadow of a poster showing Borg Olivier (d. 1980), at the Italian DC headquarters in Piazza del Gesù after meeting Aldo Moro. Left: nail-biting in 1984.

This kept the two sides talking, which was not a bad thing. A commission in the form of a Select Committee of the House to propose amendments on this was set up on 10th August 1987. Ċensu was one of the members, the others being de Marco, Mifsud Bonnici, Mintoff and Cassar. Nothing much actually came of it in the end, and Mintoff never became Head of State.²⁴⁹ Ċensu did. Between 1984 and 1987 Mintoff was a backbench MP, although still most influential under Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici's somewhat 'titular' leadership; he remained a very pivotal backbench MP until 1998.²⁵⁰

After further clashes and confrontations, which mainly sought to muzzle or cow the opposition party, including sheer gangsterism and police-directed assaults through the Special Mobile Unit (including once or twice the firing of live ammunition at demonstrators) especially between 21st September 1984 and 5th April 1987, the next election found the PN retaining an absolute majority of the popular vote. There was one difference: Mintoff's 'democracy saver' ensuring the majority principle in practice. It was thus that, after sixteen long years in opposition, the 'majority' party in the country could finally form a government in May 1987, bringing the Mintoff era effectively to a close.

Borg Olivier had led his party for 27 years, until he was finally replaced by Fenech Adami in 1977. Mintoff had led his for 35 years, anointing as his successor Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici in 1984. Both politicians had assumed the leadership of their respective parties at about the same time, in 1949/50, simultaneously moulded and provoked by a colonial situation, from which they had seen their country emerge with difficulty. In the end, it seemed that independence from without would not be denied freedom from within.

²⁴⁹ For details see e.g. 'Dokument ta' Diskussjoni dwar ir-Rapport tas-"Select Committee"', published by the PN in Apr. 1988. This Select Committee presented its preliminary report by laying it on the Table of the House on 23rd Feb. 1988.

²⁵⁰ The last election Mintoff contested was that of 1996. Since 1945 he was always returned.

Second Thoughts

FOREIGN POLICY AND THE STALLED E.U. APPLICATION

IN May 1987 Ċensu was sworn in as Foreign Minister replacing Alexander Sceberras Trigona and ceasing to be 'a shadow' of him. As Borg Olivier had always kept the foreign ministry under his own wing, Ċensu thus became the first Nationalist MP to hold the fort in this important domain. The only member of the new Cabinet to have had ministerial experience (between 1966 and 1971), he was responsible solely for foreign affairs, nothing else. Naturally, Fenech Adami as Prime Minister retained a keen interest in foreign affairs; he certainly was *primus inter pares* in that too. Foreign affairs were of the utmost importance to Malta especially after the Mintoff era had dislodged the country from its traditional Western European moorings, and in some respects tarnished its image as a democratic state where the rule of law prevailed.

One of the new government's first tasks, and perhaps the most important one, was to rebuild trust and confidence in the country, changing its perception overseas. This was no easy assignment, as it had become customary in many quarters not only to identify Malta with Mintoff but to associate or identify Mintoff with 'Gaddafi', Malta with 'Libya', and to a lesser extent the Maltese, who were Europeans, with the Arab world.

Malta's historical and cultural credentials (and anti-Arab, anti-Muslim prejudices over the centuries) were very much less known overseas, even in European countries, than people in Malta seemed readily to assume. Stories about the quarrels with NATO, Gaddafi's visits to Malta, dealings with the Chinese, Rumanians, North Koreans, etc., had stolen a march on practically all and any news emanating from the Islands. All this may be unpalatable to Maltese ears today but many, including MLP supporters, would have been faced by such general misconceptions in their travels, even on their holidays in Europe or the North African coast, and not least, certainly, in North America. Such was the image which Malta tended to convey in the late 1980s. This had accumulated and crystallized progressively, ever since the dramatic turns of event in 1971 when Governor Dorman and Admiral Birindelli had been unceremoniously told to pack their bags, followed by the bazaar-like defence-finance renegotiations with Britain and NATO, the 'Cain-and-Abel' talk at Strasbourg, repeated recourse to the Malta veto in CSCE meetings at Helsinki and Madrid, and suchlike.

As late as 1990, when I was in the newly reunited Germany as a guest of the German government, shortly before President Weisacker's first overseas state visit (to Malta), I had a search conducted in Bonn of news reports carried about Malta in the previous years in all sections of the mainstream German press. These stories, features and commentaries almost invariably mentioned Libya in connection with Malta. I would not be at all surprised if similar searches of the Italian, British and American press reports between 1971 and 1987 would yield much the same findings. Television footage, showing for instance Gaddafi in Malta with machine-gun toting female bodyguards, would have been still more evocative: Gaddafi had become the West's whipping boy. (And similarly for the 'local' handling, and outcome, of an Egypt Air hijack in 1985: a massacre.)

To the Western press, it made news that a former bastion of Christendom and of the Allied cause was veering towards another power bloc, coming within a new (to them generally hostile) sphere of influence. The sensation made the news, thus finding some column inches for Malta in newspapers. Otherwise foreign journalists or locally-based stringers would have had precious little to report about this little 'holiday' island

in the sun. There was less interest in the internal goings-on as such, which were sometimes misunderstood or misrepresented. Left-wing idealists may have found inviting and instructive Mintoff's policy, portraying Malta as a new-found haven of Mediterranean peace, free of a military presence, friend to all, and so on. In *realpolitik* it was different. There was also a 'David vs Goliath' aspect to the impression that little Malta dared take on the world, as it were, not always without success. As we have seen, Ċensu himself was one of those Nationalists who most sympathised with a 'neutral' distancing from military blocs and saw the total dismantling of a military presence on Maltese soil as a vindication of sovereignty.

The generally negative 'Libyan' perceptions of Malta were as strong as they were real. It was not easy to dispel them quickly. The Nationalists themselves, from the Opposition benches and as a political party, had denounced human rights abuses, the tilt to the East and intimacy with Gaddafi's version of the Arab world, right across Western Europe. A number of reputable international organisations had also expressed concern about instances of violence or torture, the direct police complicity or their sudden, chronic bouts of blindness (not trachoma cases) in the face of such abuses. A cruel irony was that most Arab countries did not look kindly on Gaddafi's regime; relations were at times strained – if not bellicose – with Libya's own neighbours, in that supposed pan-Arab brotherhood of solidarity. Malta however came to enjoy a favourable balance of trade with Libya; this after all was a neighbouring country and one with which Malta had long had close associations, not only of the 'corsairing' variety.

When, like so many others, I was constrained to leave Malta in the late 1970s – when the striking doctors (and consequently their students) were locked out of Malta's only general hospital, the faculties of arts and of science at the University abolished, etc. – the politically sensitive UN agency I had joined had not a single Libyan on its staff. It was not easy, as a Maltese national, to distance oneself from the 'Libya' connection, which meant all things to all men, usually sinister ones. Rightly or wrongly, in American and Western European circles, Gaddafi's Libya had become like a rogue elephant, and Mintoff's Malta with it.

As a foreign minister, Ċensu had a see-saw to swing. On the one hand, Malta was not to make enemies of friends who had overstayed their welcome; on the other hand, suspecting older friends had to be reassured that Maltese diplomatic relations were being normalised in a pro-European, pro-Western direction. This was government policy. The new administration's immediate incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into the Maltese *corpus juris* was meant to signal the change in direction. Diplomatic relations with Libya (which was also Malta's main oil supplier) continued in all earnest, as did discussions on mutual interests, but Malta announced that it would not honour the military clauses in the Malta-Libya 'friendly agreement' entered into three years earlier. Many of the supposed Malta-Libya agreements existed on file but were not being implemented. It was an attempt at a normalisation of relations with a comparatively powerful and potentially useful neighbour.

Another platform of policy was membership of the European Community. It was a principle, an aim, but the when and how were open to question. An inter-ministerial committee was set up to study the implications of Malta's membership in the EC. Ċensu wanted Malta to apply. During his short stint at the sumptuous Palazzo Parisio office in the company of Bonaparte's marble bust, there was probably nothing that he desired more than to be the one to submit Malta's application for membership of the European Community. He had good reason for that too. It was not to be; and he regards that to this day, resentfully, as a missed opportunity.

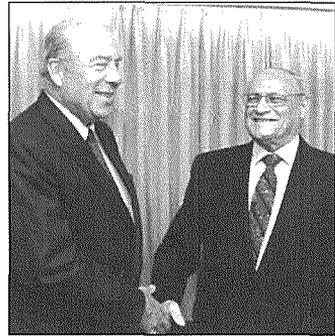
In a full-range interview with *Il-Qawmien* published in April 1988, Ċensu said it was possible that within a year or so Malta would submit her application to join the EEC "and we are very confident that if we make this request it will be accepted by the Community." He insisted that the best conditions would have to be negotiated, and expected that there would be a consensus on this point. He did not see neutrality as a problem because Ireland, which was neutral, had joined, and Austria, which was still more so, was applying. The administration was re-negotiating Malta's dormant protocol with the EEC, an inter-ministerial committee under the aegis of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been formed to look into the technicalities of membership, and senior civil

servants were being sent for administrative courses in Brussels. He assumed that the difficulties would be political rather than economic and regarded the scare-mongering being disseminated by the Leader of the Opposition as “ridiculous”. Had he been an Arab he would have been proud of it, he said, but the Maltese were and had always been Europeans. To be a European and pro-European was not to be anti-Arab. More education was necessary, however. The argument in some quarters that the Maltese spoke a Semitic language simply proved how European the Maltese were because it was the only Semitic language written in the Roman script; it had continued being used during a succession of foreign dominations. “And certainly our language of culture had been and remained European.” Europe was a choice: it was “a vocation based on our identity, dictated by historical, social and above all ethnic realities.” He just hoped that “education would be tied to the teaching of the history of our land”. “And I hope”, he concluded, “that the children of today and of tomorrow will know more about what their forefathers have done and what their country went through rather than what the foreigner did in our country and in his.”²⁵¹

In his new role Ċensu travelled around quite a lot, beating the government’s drum and his own. He visited Russia and some Eastern European countries, various Arab countries and of course a number of European ones. By May 1988, during his first twelve months at the ministry, he had already paid visits to the USA, Canada, Britain, France, Italy, Bulgaria, Poland, Yugoslavia, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt.²⁵²

²⁵¹ See the interview by Joe Felice Pace, “Fi żmien Sena Malta Tista’ Tapplika Għal Shubija Fis-Suq Komuni”, *Il-Qawmien*, Apr.-May 1988, n. 644, pp. 2-4, 8.

²⁵² ‘L-Ewwel Sena tal-Gvern, 14 ta’ Mejju – 13 ta’ Mejju, 1988. Rapport mill-Onor. Ċensu Tabone, Ministru ta’ l-Affrarijiet Barranin,’ mimeographed, ff. 5-6.



Opening up to the West: with counterparts Raimond in Paris, Howe in London and Secretary of State Shultz in Washington. Left: welcoming Pope John Paul II to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

Āensu's tenure lasted less than two years but it coincided with Malta's second term to chair the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, as from 5th May 1988. A decade earlier it had been Mintoff's turn. Now of course it will take much longer for Malta to get a turn because the Council of Europe's members have doubled. The chairmanship rotates, six months each. In this capacity, Āensu had the privilege of welcoming Pope John Paul II, whom he had already met, to an official visit in Strasbourg. He also welcomed the Republic of San Marino as a new member.

A former chairman of the Council's committee on relations with non-member European states, the time was fast approaching when hopes and dreams expressed years earlier would materialise. Spain, Portugal and Greece had already joined. There could hardly have been a more pregnant brew in European and world affairs than that represented by the second half of 1988, in which Čensu became immersed. To recapitulate briefly, this coincided with conflicts or tensions in Iran and Iraq, Afghanistan, the Persian Gulf, South Africa, the Western Sahara, Cambodia, in all of which some progress towards peaceful solutions was made or thought to have been made. There was an international effort to stop the use of chemical weapons. The CSCE initiatives were continuing and nearing conclusion: the Council of Europe naturally took a keen interest in these, as did Čensu personally. The Council's Secretary General even visited Hungary and Poland. The former state expressed interest in acceding to some of the Council's conventions. Gorbachev had unleashed his famous metaphor about Europe being "our common house", as well as changed discourse and vision through his "*glasnost*" and "*perestroika*" approach. Another concern was the Council's relationship with the European Community. Čensu thought that it was perhaps in cultural co-operation, and the promotion of "our common cultural heritage and assets" that the Council could make its greatest contribution to the evolving situation. He was also supportive, as was his Committee of Ministers, of campaigning for the promotion of a betterment of North-South relations, the related Madrid Appeal and, still more concretely, through a Portugese proposal, the setting up of a Lisbon-based "centre for global interdependence and solidarity" (the 'North-South Centre' as it came to be known):

*I can assure you that the Presidency of the Committee of Ministers will fully support that proposal which constitutes a concrete way in which to follow up a campaign which was an outstanding success.*²⁵³

He also spoke in support of the recognition by Cyprus of the right to individual petition, the opening for signature of the convention on the

²⁵³ 'Presentation of the Statutory Report by the Chairman of the Committee of Ministers', 40th Session, Parl. Ass., 6 Oct. 1988, mimeographed, f. 4.

prevention of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, the adoption of a declaration on equality between women and men, and the work being done in the Council with regard to bio-ethics.

Speaking from his professional background and his personal conviction, he could not emphasise this enough:

This concerns life itself and our responsibility for the future of mankind. Bio-technology makes possible today what nobody would have imagined yesterday. But all will agree that not the things which are possible are also permissible. The moral, ethical and legal implications of bio-technology and bio-medicine for individuals, the family and society as a whole are tremendous and require serious and urgent reflection.

The Committee of Ministers in 1985 had instructed an *ad hoc* committee of experts on progress in the biomedical sciences to draft common rules, principles and guidelines which would be acceptable to all European countries. This committee had reported on subjects such as genetic screening and counselling, medically assisted human procreation, the use of human embryos and fetuses for research. It was not enough, Censu went on, to see bio-ethical rules adopted in the member states. Those who did not want to abide by these rules could be tempted to avoid them by actions elsewhere. Several abuses of this kind had already been reported in the press. What he intended to propose to his colleagues on the Committee of Ministers was to start working on preparations for “a European bio-ethics Convention”. While guaranteeing on a non-discriminatory basis the positive benefits of bio-medicine, this would guard against abuses which could occur within or outside the boundaries of Europe. As a protective regime of this nature concerned mankind as a whole, it should ideally not be limited to Europe, but Europe could give the lead. He also mentioned other social problems relating to the spread of infectious diseases such as AIDS, sexual exploitation, pornography, prostitution and trafficking in children and young adults, which the Committee of Ministers was following up. Another “major social problem” was the development of transfrontier television as a result of swift technological progress.

In concluding this *tour d'horizon*, Censu turned to Malta's role in European and international affairs, recalling particularly its role in the last world war. "We cannot conceive Malta without Europe and a Europe which does not include Malta", he underlined:

It is therefore natural for Malta to look with favour at the efforts to strengthen and enlarge European integration to ensure that the conflicts and divisions of the past will no longer be possible: Malta belongs to this process and wants to share fully in it. For us, European Union, to be complete, should include all countries from the Atlantic to the Urals but, in the short term, we all know that this is not possible and that the immediate priority must be the union of Western European democracies...

Having achieved Independence in 1964, Malta had joined the Council of Europe in 1965, and in this institution it had played "a not-inconsiderable part, in spite of some difficulties of a passing nature":

I, for one, owe to the Council of Europe a debt of gratitude for the experience, knowledge and 'camaraderie' enjoyed and shared with so many colleagues in Strasbourg in a serene and cordial atmosphere, which is the hallmark of the proceedings of this Institution.

Malta had entered into an association agreement with the EEC in 1970 and "now Malta seeks membership of that Community as a natural outcome of its European character and vocation."²⁵⁴

He then mentioned the various initiatives Malta had taken or been associated with – the UNEP Regional Oil Polluting Combating Centre, the UN International Institute for the Ageing inaugurated earlier that year, the new international law concept of "the common heritage of mankind" as applied initially to the seabed through the new Law of the Sea. He mentioned too Malta's proposal to the UN (in which he himself would be much involved) concerning the conservation of the earth's climate as part of the common heritage of mankind principle. Returning

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 8.

to Christian morality and the family, he made a strong plea in favour of support for family life:

We are convinced that the preservation of the family as a primary cohesive unit of society is essential to the development of our civilization. One of the major negative effects on the family is violence which in different manifestations afflicts many families. Malta would endorse a Convention by the Council of Europe intended to protect the family and possibly leading to a universally-acceptable Family Charter...

Malta had long adhered to the European Convention on Human Rights, it had introduced the right to individual petition for its citizens, signed and ratified the European Social Charter, the European Convention for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman and Degrading Treatment. Moreover, as the very first legislative enactment of the Parliament elected in 1987, the European Convention of Human Rights had been incorporated as a superior law within the Maltese *corpus juris*.²⁵⁵

Only a few weeks after this address, Ċensu as Foreign Minister had occasion to welcome the Council's Political Committee, of which he had been a member for many years, to a meeting in Malta. In referring to Gorbachev's "common house" philosophy, Ċensu warned against any indifference or diffidence in responding to the closer interest being taken by Eastern European countries in the Council of Europe with a possibility, already expressed by at least one of them, of joining it (this would have been in reference to Finland):

I do not share the fears expressed by some that closer association of the Eastern European countries with us carries the danger of giving them political mileage which they had not been able to achieve in Vienna at the C.S.C.E. conference. I do not feel that any of our countries would be in danger if we made greater efforts to show to our Eastern European friends that our pluralistic democracies worked better for the good of our workers and people than their own, by inviting closer contacts and closer

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, f. 9.

*dialogue. When we were trying to reach the peoples of these countries, they refused us; now that they are showing greater interest in us, let us not withdraw away from them. We are living at a time of extraordinary potential for the unity and future of Europe...*²⁵⁶

The Vice-President of the Legal Committee, Miguel Martinez, confirmed that at one point the Committee of Ministers had looked “with fear” at the Parliamentary Assembly’s development of relations with the Eastern European countries. He said that “during the period of Malta’s chairmanship, relations between the Assembly and the Committee had improved.”²⁵⁷

Perhaps the main properly ‘international’ initiative taken during Ċensu’s tenure concerned climatic change and the awareness required to prevent damage to climatic conditions. This message was taken by him to the United Nations. It represented a growing – and a continuing – world concern. “On the weather front”, observed *The Diplomatic World Bulletin* in a front-page comment in November 1988, “Malta won widespread approval for bringing in an agenda item on conservation of the global climate as the heritage of all humanity”:

It will be recalled that it was the same country that first invoked the heritage principle for the seas and oceans, leading to the adoption of that monumental treaty on the law of the sea.

*Maltese Foreign Minister Vincent Tabone, who opened the General Assembly debate, called for support for what he termed a crusade to defend the climate against man-made and other threats that have already produced serious changes, including the so-called greenhouse effect.*²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ See his ‘Welcoming Address’ delivered at the Dragonara Hotel, St Julian’s, 31st Oct. 1988, ff. 3-4.

²⁵⁷ Attached minutes of answers to questions, *ibid.*, f. 2.

²⁵⁸ “GA Discusses Climate Defense, Expanded War on AIDS Threat”, *The Diplomatic World Bulletin* (New York), vol. 18, n. 11, 14-21 Nov. 1988, p. 1, p. 5. See also e.g. ‘Kumitat tal-Ġnus Magħquda dwar il-Klima’, D.O.I. press release n. 2889, 13 Oct. 1988. UNEP already had two related conventions, to which Ċensu referred, i.e. the Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer and its related Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer.



The Arab world: with Arafat, pistol in holster; and in Gaddafi's tent.

Āensu addressed the UN General Assembly about this on 24th October 1988 and returned to the charge on subsequent occasions during a meeting with Mostafa Tolba, the UNEP director, and at a conference on the ozone layer hosted by Mrs Margaret Thatcher's administration in London in March, 1989. Britain was one of the 19 states which had joined in sponsoring Malta's unanimously endorsed resolution at the UN entitled 'Protection of Global Climate for present and future generations of mankind'.²⁵⁹

Āensu's immediate concerns as Foreign Minister were more mundane: he had to see to the ministry's staff, some of whom left much to be desired, with one or two regarded as security risks. He also had to appoint new ambassadors. Given that many 'civil service' employees were not ambassadorial material – there certainly was no 'closed shop' diplomatic service career tradition in Malta – some of these necessarily would be 'political' nominees. Non-career ambassadors, as the civil servants like to call them, were removed, with one or two exceptions who were transferred to other duties. A few former members of staff appealed against decisions taken in their regard. The foreign ministry, Āensu recalls, was inundated with partisan politics; that included the

²⁵⁹ See the comprehensive report in *The Democrat*, 11 Mar. 1989, p. 7.

embassies. At the Rome embassy, for example, there were the portraits of various Ministers on display. The general mentality verged on the anti-European and the pro-Communist, whereas the new administration wanted to convey a different message locally and overseas. In a memo to Cabinet dated 1st March 1988, which somehow found its way to *L-Orizzont*, Ċensu laid down that “the security needs of government should transcend individual needs”:

Persons whom we need to transfer include one who had been alleged to have declared that he can never accept Dr Fenech Adami as Prime Minister of Malta, and another who is an active organizer of Labour Party activities...

Several senior personnel may have been transferred from one posting to another but were retained, irrespective of party affiliation or inclination. Ċensu told them he did not care what their political opinions were: he would not allow partisan politics to get mixed up with professional duties:

I wanted us to move towards Europe. I wanted to show that our vocation to join the Community was real and serious. I had to demonstrate credibility through an effective change. For the first time I had to put into practice Malta's neutrality, which had only been inserted in the Constitution just before the general election... We had to start working to join the Community.²⁶⁰

Ċensu's first international commitment on his return to Cabinet was a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement at Brioni in Yugoslavia in the first week of June. The West looked down on this movement because it was regarded as pro-Communist – Fidel Castro, for example, had served as its president for a time. After consultations with his prime minister, it was agreed that Ċensu would attend this meeting without being over-enthusiastic. It was his first overseas challenge as Foreign Minister, and he fully realised that he had to be careful.

²⁶⁰ “Ridt li nersqu lejn l-Ewropa. Ridt nuri l-vokazzjoni li nidhlu fl-Ewropa kienet reali u mhux taċ-ċajt. Kelli nuri kredibilita' f'kambjament reali. Kelli wkoll niġġestixxi għall-ewwel darba n-newtralita' ta' Malta għax il-gvern ta' qabel ma kellux cans, għax xahar qabel ma spiċċaw (din) dahlet fil-Kostituzzjoni. Ridt nara kif se niġġestixxi n-newtralita' li ddikjarajna li ser inżommu. Jiena kont favur tagħha... Nibdeu nahdmu biex nidhlu fil-Kommunita'...”

To counter-balance his participation in such a meeting, Ĉensu hit on the idea of arranging another meeting with someone from the Western camp. He called Leo Tindemans, an old friend of his from the UECD, who well remembered Mintoff's Malta. Tindemans chaired Belgium's Christian People's Party, had served as Belgian prime minister from 1974 to 1978 and now chaired the EEC's Council of Ministers. Tindemans told him he could go and see him whenever he liked, so Ĉensu saw him (and exchanged views with him) *en route* to Brioni.

The Brioni meeting issued no declaration against anyone. For a change, it condemned neither the USA nor Britain. Malta had made it clear that it would not associate itself with any declaration against any country whether or not that was a member of the Non-Aligned Movement. India and Yugoslavia were the first to accept a rhetoric that was less antagonistic than usual; Libya and Syria also came round to that. Malta tried to assume the role of a mediator, which was more or less accepted. One friend Ĉensu made at Brioni was his Libyan counter-part, appropriately enough called Habibi.

No sooner had Ĉensu returned than an unannounced twelve man delegation from Libya descended upon his ministry, led by the Minister for Commerce. Malta had enjoyed good commercial relations with Libya "at a very good price". These delegates had come for political not commercial reasons: "to persuade us not to proceed with the application to join the European Economic Community". Various meetings were held between the two sides, with Ĉensu declaring that Maltese-Libyan friendship had to be "a fundamental basis of every Maltese government". However, Malta's response to this entreaty was that Malta had many joint ventures and that, if Libya collaborated with Malta, it would be in the European Community "through us".²⁶¹ Ĉensu went twice to Libya as foreign minister and met Gaddafi in his tent. On his first visit in this capacity he was used as bait to condemn the Americans after their air attack on Libya, about which Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici had given them

²⁶¹ 'Dan (Gaddafi) ried jikkonvincina, ma hemmx xi nghidu, ma kkonvinciena xejn. Anzi ghednilu: "ahna ghandna hafna *joint ventures*; intom ser tkunu fil-Kommunita' *through us* jekk intom tahdmu maghna." Dik il-linja li hadt jien u ghadhom jippressawha sal-lum.'

advance warning. In noting down his remarks, Ċensu took care to condemn the horrors of war and that everything possible should be done to avoid wars in favour of peaceful means of co-existence. "I condemned nobody."²⁶²

With Tindemans, Ċensu discussed Malta's desire to join the European Community. He explained the neutrality posture. Tindemans replied that they would help Malta join, and as an example of a neutral member state of the Community, he mentioned Ireland. Ċensu felt that he enjoyed very good working and personal relations with the EEC member governments and with the Commissioner in charge of enlargement, who was Natali. He met them frequently as the leading EEC member states had Christian Democratic governments or governed in alliance with them – Germany, France, Italy, Belgium. "There was no disposition against enlargement; and they wanted enlargement through governments they could trust."

In that case, why had Malta not applied to join before 1989, while Ċensu was the foreign minister?

It was Dr Fenech Adami who, on the advice of Malta's ambassador to Brussels (the economist and former UN officer Dr Joseph Licari), absolutely did not want to submit an application, Ċensu maintains. Licari, who had the prime minister's ear, feared that if Malta were to apply so soon after a change of government, its application would not be taken seriously and could back-fire. Unknown to Ċensu, it seems, at least one other senior adviser, recalled from retirement to serve at the Office of the Prime Minister in Valletta (former ambassador Evarist Saliba) was no less opposed to a hurried application, if not always for the same reasons. The objections were not political but economic or strategic, mainly intended to safeguard Malta's viability and credibility.

According to one view, which Fenech Adami evidently shared, an application by Malta would have risked being lumped together with applications made in April and July 1987 first by Turkey and then by Morocco. The application by Turkey did not excite the EC one bit; in fact an unfavourable opinion would be given on it in 1990. Turkey was

²⁶² "Ma kkundannajt lil hadd."

a huge, largely Muslim country with a poor human and minority rights record, hugging the South Eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor borders. Although geographically closer to the heartland of the EC, Morocco was simply not European; it was an Arab country in North Africa. Another consideration was that Malta would lose access to the Generalised System of Preferences, which would adversely affect exports to the USA. There was some recollection of NATO's rebuff to Borg Olivier's wish to have Malta associated with that organization;²⁶³ and doubts as to why not even Austria's application had made much progress. Austria's Alois Mock was a long-standing PN friend, who had been to Malta: what, if any, had his advice been? On 16th January 1987 the leader of the Austrian People's Party became his country's Foreign Minister.

Malta's stability was still open to question in European eyes, it was thought, in view of certain incidents that had occurred even after the 1987 elections – the law courts attacked by a hostile mob, the army chief thrown into the sea, the Ark Royal prevented from entering Grand Harbour. There was even a rumour that Mintoff might become President.

In the same month that the winds of change started to blow over the Maltese Islands in May 1987, Cyprus had concluded a protocol to their 1972 Association Agreement envisaging the formation of a customs union by 2002. The Malta-EEC Association Agreement of 1970, which had served as a model for the Cypriot one, had envisaged a similar scenario but had gone haywire. In any case Malta now felt that, for various reasons, it would much prefer membership to a customs union. At the Brioni meeting of the 'non-aligned', Ċensu had told his Cypriot counterpart who had just signed for a customs union, that Malta derived so much income from customs that it could never go for that without compensating benefits; it was a cold shower for him but it certainly set him thinking and he would later describe their policy as a mistake.

²⁶³ On this see *The Origins of Maltese Statehood, op.cit.*, p. 515 sq.

In addressing the European Parliament in January 1989 the President of the European Commission Jacques Delors referred to Turkey, Yugoslavia, Cyprus and Malta as “Europe’s orphans”. The remark was all the more painful because it was true, remarked Licari, who was present in the diplomatic gallery listening to Delors. “In an increasingly interdependent world, a country’s personality and clout depend on the number of groups, organisations and alliances it belongs to.” The four countries mentioned by Jacques Delors, including Malta, belonged neither to EFTA (the European Free Trade Association)²⁶⁴ nor to COMECON (the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, founded by Stalin in 1949).²⁶⁵ According to Licari, it took Delors three years to be persuaded “of Malta’s place in Europe”. At the Lisbon European Council in June 1992, he was one of Malta’s strongest backers. On September 14, 1992, he made the case for Malta’s accession to Europe against those who doubted that such a small country could have a role to play. In an interview with the French daily *Liberation*, he said:

*There is a country one tends to forget, but which has great symbolic importance: Malta. One should not shift Europe too much to the north while forgetting the south. Otherwise we risk losing our sensitivity to the Mediterranean world which is our own, but which at present is adding on dangers for the future of all of us.*²⁶⁶

Did that mean that Malta had to wait for others to be convinced of her right to join before applying to join? Still sore about not having applied earlier, Ċensu would disagree with such a line of reasoning. He resented what he considered to be Licari’s influence, particularly his ‘hot line’ to Fenech Adami, over his own Minister’s head. Ċensu told his Prime Minister that Turkey would never join, and if it ever did, it would be the last country to do so. Knowing that he did not have the premier’s nod for an early application, Ċensu says he did not press the case unduly in Cabinet, during his short stint at the Foreign Office, before he was asked to become

²⁶⁴ Intended as a Western European counter to the EEC, this was established in 1959; it was slowly losing members to the EEC.

²⁶⁵ COMECON was disbanded in 1991.

²⁶⁶ Joseph Licari, “Malta: Europe’s orphan?”, *The Sunday Times* (of Malta), 5 Apr. 1998, p. 54.

President. Up to a month before he consented to take up his new appointment, however, Ċensu actually asked Fenech Adami whether he had changed his mind about Malta applying to join the EC. The latter would tell him that the time was not yet ripe because of the Turkey question, and so on.²⁶⁷

Ċensu's posture seems much stronger today than it could have seemed then. Who ever imagined that 1989 would mark such a turning-point in the history of Europe and of the world, with a Bush-Gorbachev 'summit' declaring the end of the Cold War – in Malta? The turn-around of 1989 and its aftermath, epitomised by the fall of the Berlin Wall, meant that, suddenly, Malta's competitors were not just the unlikely candidates Turkey and Morocco, or even Austria, but practically every Baltic and Eastern European state, big and small. Until then, these had been disqualified as Soviet satellite states inside the Iron Curtain, possessing none of the democratic credentials or the economic performance required for EC membership. Malta was the eighteenth state to accede to the Council of Europe, which today has 41 members. Other countries – Portugal, Spain, Greece, – had been admitted into the Community as soon as possible after they had rid themselves of despotic regimes. Why not Malta too, had it applied?

It still is not clear how far the EC would have stooped to accept Malta as a member in the late eighties, because when Malta finally applied in July 1990, it was still left out of the next 'EFTA' enlargement, taking in Austria, Sweden and Finland, by 1995. The latter two countries had applied after Malta, in July 1991 and March 1992 respectively, but they still joined before. There was probably more reticence to a 'micro-state' joining the EC, initially, than met the eye, so that promises made in private and general political rhetoric about European enlargement and unity, need not have been that easily translated into a push for Malta to join. It is always safer for promises to be made, even to a 'sister party', when this is in opposition than when it is in power and expects delivery, not words. That conceivably could be seen to apply to

²⁶⁷ 'Ghedtlu: "Eddie, it-Turkija ma tidhol qatt, u jekk tidhol, tidhol l-ahhar." Kull darba nghidlu, sa xahar qabel sirt President: "Eddie, int reġa' bdielek fuq il-Kommunita'?" Sa xahar qabel sirt President, kien jghidli: "U le, mhux ghalissa." Reġa' beda bit-Turkija..."

the likes of Flaminio Piccoli or even Leo Tindemans, who could hardly have acted by themselves; nor was Belgium the most 'expansionist' or 'flexible' of member states.²⁶⁸

One piece of information that rather shocked me was that when, soon after the PN's return to office, Fenech Adami at an EUDC meeting spoke of Malta's forthcoming bid to join the Community, mentioning Germany's Helmut Kohl, who was present, as one of Malta's supporters. When he had finished, Kohl crossed over to him. In Ćensu's presence, he told him: "Did you have to mention me by name?" It was almost a rebuke.

This piece of first-hand information assumes greater significance if, as I have every reason to believe happened, the working committee on enlargement meeting under Portugal's presidency in Lisbon in 1992 had included Malta in the list of would-be applicants, to be admitted in the next enlargement. Overnight, that recommendation was reversed. Malta's name was struck off the list. Which member state had thrown its weight against it? Or was there more than one state which suddenly had done so, for a different reason? Was it because some big brother, in his own name or at someone else's bidding, still regarded Malta as "a security risk"? Was it perhaps the one who had taken umbrage at the mention of his name by an ideological fellow-traveller? Was it because of Malta's suspected involvement in the Lockerbie incident, which led to sanctions against Libya and would only come to trial years later? That, on top of the "Libyan connection"? Was it because Malta had not been in EFTA? Was it because smallness now became a consideration? But Malta's shape and size had not changed, had they?

Another possibility is that, in the eyes of at least one member state, Malta's admission would have been linked to that of Cyprus, whose

²⁶⁸ Tindemans was well disposed towards Malta and the Fenech Adami administration, as well as being a very nice man with whom I had the pleasure to wine and dine more than once during a Salzburg seminar on the changing face of Europe in the winter of 1989; he remembered Ćensu and asked me about him. However, in July 1989, in a diplomatic gaffe, the Belgian foreign minister Mark Eyskens contended that Austria's application could not even be considered because its letter of application had insisted on neutrality. Malta had not yet applied.

name had not been included in the Lisbon list. A bold and insightful article by a member of the European Parliament entitled “The Loss of Malta” appeared in a Spanish conservative mass circulation newspaper, *ABC*, in November 1996. Written by a well-connected Spanish politician who knew Malta, the article appeared just after Fenech Adami’s administration had been voted out of office. After describing what had gone on during the Mintoff years and the PN’s resistance until they finally got through in 1987 on a pro-European platform, the columnist continued as follows:

The negotiations with the European Union took place without great problems. There was no obstacle to membership, except one: Greece. Malta’s membership has been associated with Cyprus, therefore both had to join simultaneously. This decision did not correspond to the spirit of the European Union nor the treaties; it only wanted to please Athens... This questionable attitude was maintained against all juridical and moral arguments. Hence the result of 27th October. Under the leadership of Alfred Sant, the socialists have obtained a majority, although scant. Their first decisions were to withdraw the request for EU membership, withdrawal from PpP, and to start the way which, we can most certainly suppose, leads to Libya...²⁶⁹

A later article in the same newspaper by Carlos Robles Piquer, a former Spanish ambassador to Libya and to Italy (including Malta), was supportive of this interpretation:

The delay caused by the Cypriot burden disillusioned the Maltese and weakened the Government of the Nationalist Party, a member of the P.P.E., which had accepted the Community recommendation to introduce VAT, a rational but unpopular tax. On some occasion we may learn if this decision and the withdrawal from the Partnership for Peace Agreement signed between the old enemies of East and West were entirely free, or whether this ‘cocktail’ was influenced by admiration or fear of the very nearby Libya of Gaddafi which the Maltese Labour introduced since the times of Dom Mintoff...

²⁶⁹ Otto de Habsburgo, ‘La Perdida de Malta, *ABC*, 20 Nov. 1996.

During a chance personal encounter on a social occasion Mitterand walked up to greet Ċensu when he had become President and asked him whether he knew the reason why Malta had not been included in the EU's enlargement. Ċensu hesitantly gave the impression that he might have an inkling, or so he thought. Just then, as Mitterand was on the verge of telling him, Mitterand's attention was directed elsewhere and he was whisked away. Ċensu has deeply regretted not having bit his tongue and replied: "No. Tell me."

Still, the scenario after 1989 was completely different to what it had been before then. Had an application been submitted earlier it might have found favour more quickly, if only to secure the southern flank against some repetition of the Mintoffian saga. As neutrality and non-alignment faded out of the discourse of international relations, Ċensu came to regard security as the number one justification for joining the EC. "That's why I wanted to go for the Community and for no other reason", he says. "I didn't want to join because of economy or culture; following Maastricht, it was the security I wanted. Behind Maastricht there was the concept of European security forces which would safeguard the continent from the Atlantic to the Urals."²⁷² And mainly for that reason, an application in 1987 or 1988 or even 1989 would hardly have been turned down. It might have been shelved, literally and metaphorically; but it would have been there, well ahead of the other contenders who suddenly mushroomed.

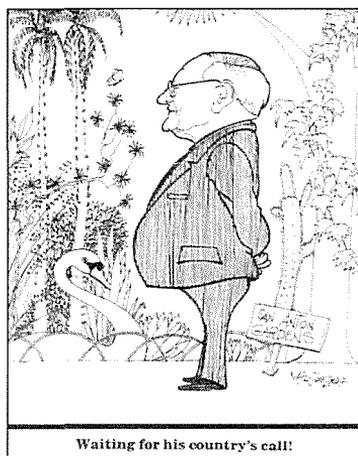
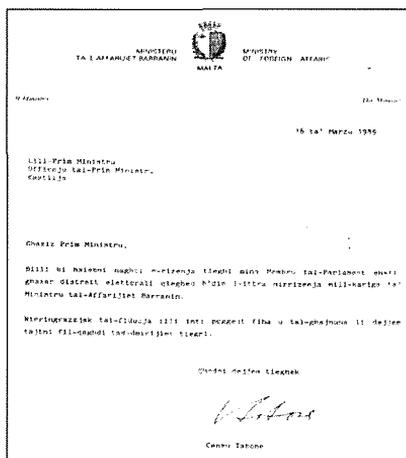
As things happened, or rather did not happen, that eventuality now is likely to remain hypothetical, unless in time secret archival sources may reveal that there was in fact no real intention (or otherwise) to admit Malta before, had an earlier application been submitted. Well, it wasn't; and these things can take time. When it was, soon after Ċensu had left, there was another Foreign Minister to do it (Guido de Marco), just after

²⁷² On this see Malcolm J. Naudi's interview, 'PN's policy on security, foreign affairs', *The Sunday Times* (of Malta), 22 Mar. 1987. See also the feature by a correspondent "Ministru li dejjem ghaddej", *Il-Mument*, 18 Sept. 1988.

Cyprus had put its own application in.²⁷³ Cyprus was attentively watching Malta's steps and no sooner had it found out when Malta would be applying than it applied before it in a rush.

During a European Movement seminar in 1999 another former cabinet minister and President, Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, was asked from the floor "if it was a wrong decision for the PN government not to apply for membership in 1987 instead of 1990". Dr Mifsud Bonnici recalled that, at the time, "there was constant debate in Cabinet, when Ċensu Tabone was foreign minister, whether to submit the application for membership":

There were a lot of discussions with people in favour and others against. The argument at the time was that Malta was not prepared for membership and still had a long way to go. In 1987, we reckoned there was still a long way to go... Only history will be able to decide whether Malta made a mistake or not at the time. ²⁷⁴



²⁷³ De Marco presented the application, dated 16th July 1990, to his Italian counterpart Gianni de Michelis, in Brussels; Italy had just assumed the presidency of the European Commission.

²⁷⁴ Ivan Brincat, "In 1987, some thought we had a long way to go" – Ugo Mifsud Bonnici', *The Malta Independent*, 2 Nov. 1999.

Ċensu was upset that Malta had not applied earlier than it did, and even more upset when the EU was enlarged in 1995 and Malta left out. From this, and from his impressions of Kohl's apparently reticent behaviour on more than one occasion, he deduced that "they did not want us". Soon afterwards, Ċensu was asked to dinner at PN Headquarters on the occasion of the visit to Malta by an old Italian friend, Gerardo Bianco, who had been secretary of the European Popular Party. In an after dinner speech, in the prime minister's presence, Ċensu said that if it were for him, at that stage, he would have withdrawn Malta's application. "You would have withdrawn it?" Bianco asked pensively in a subdued voice.

After various ups and downs – an *avis* was drawn up in 1993, the application "frozen" by Sant's administration in 1996, then "re-activated" by Fenech Adami's in 1998. By then Ċensu had spent a full term as President, and retired. He resigned from his ministerial office on 16th March 1989, just before giving up his parliamentary seat.²⁷⁵ Negotiations for EU membership finally started in the new millenium, a full decade after Ċensu had left the foreign ministry.

²⁷⁵ Tabone/Fenech Adami, 16 Mar. 1989.

President-Ambassador

A FATHER TO THE NATION

IN 1989 Malta's foreign minister was 76. But he was still bubbly and on the go, up to his neck in his new-found, equally travel-oriented portfolio. Writing at the time of his appointment, one Labour MP observed that "in spite of his peripatetic approach to his job he often came across as much fresher and younger at heart than most of his junior colleagues who in some cases already tend to look bloated and burnt out."²⁷⁶ Moreover, Ċensu's presidency coincided with a high tide in the affairs of men. He was relishing that.

He did not seek or ask to leave politics in order to become President of Malta, instead of staying on as Foreign Minister, although some hold that he had been expecting it, even aspiring to it. Was he kicked upstairs, because of his insistence on applying to join the EEC, or because of his age? Had Pawlu Xuereb been 'Acting' President for too long? A former Labour MP and Minister who had resigned his seat in April 1983 to permit the co-option of the MLP's designate-leader Dr Karmenu Mifsud Bonnici, Xuereb had been appointed Speaker in 1986 and then Acting President in 1987. Perhaps Ċensu was promoted to President for one, more or all of these reasons; but 'upstairs' was not exactly an empty

²⁷⁶ Leo Brincat, 'Ċensu', *The Weekend Chronicle*, 20 Mar. 1989.

place either. There was much to do there too; and knowing Ĉensu, he set out with aplomb and gusto.

Unfortunately, his presidency got off to an inauspicious start. At Karmenu's bidding, the Opposition ordered a social boycott against the new President. This hurt Ĉensu no end. It was unprecedented. There had hardly been a personality so eminently suited for the role of president by qualifications, life experiences and the maturity that comes with age. "The man's integrity was never in doubt", the same Opposition columnist continued. "The Nationalists couldn't have found a more ideal candidate from their ranks. But..."²⁷⁷

The first thing Ĉensu knew was that he would be boycotted by those representing nearly one half of the population of his country. This anti-Ĉensu boycott cut closer to the bone than the PN boycott of parliament which Ĉensu had opposed strongly in 1981-1983. It was a boycott directed at himself now, as the new Head of State. It seemed to be *ad hominem*. Was it? Was it because he was the first Nationalist appointee to first citizen status since 1974? All his predecessors – Sir Anthony Mamo (1974), Dr Anton Buttigieg (1976), Miss Agatha Barbara (1982) and Pawlu Xuereb (1987) in an acting capacity – had been appointed by Labour administrations. Was it because Karmenu had it for him, due to some old disagreement or incompatibility, possibly dating back to the much maligned industrial relations bill of 1969? Was it because Mintoff, Karmenu's mentor, had expected to be the next President? In other words, was this another way of getting at Ĉensu, at putting him off track, for that reason, or with such a prospect in mind? Or was it because, to quote a charged article by another leading journalist and Opposition MP, "the wheels of reform" had not been allowed "to complete their historic journey"? What most irked this journalist-politician and intellectual was that, as he put it:

Dr Tabone was one of the three Nationalist elders, together with Prof. Guido de Marco and Dr Ugo Mifsud Bonnici, who signed the House of Representatives' Select Committee interim report confirming the need to reform the role of the President, and suggesting how. He is,

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

therefore, on this basis, eminently not suited to be made President now...

The Nationalists, by appointing a President, whoever he may be, under the old system they themselves had declared deficient, were torpedoing the joint efforts to strengthen Malta's democratic institutions... The government's decision was deplorable, according to Lino Spiteri in 1989, because many had believed that the two political parties were really making an effort to strengthen democracy by at least reducing the areas of potential stalemate brought about by genuine disagreement or political posturing. It was sad because Dr Tabone would "go down in history as the first Nationalist President of the Republic, yes, but also as the man whose appointment further split an already divided country":

*This is not a fitting last lap for a man who dedicated his political energies, at personal and family costs and sacrifice, to his beliefs. The last lap in cases such as his should be triumphant, his last hurrah full-throated. Instead, jeers and hostility will dog his presidential term.*²⁷⁸

Time, effort and circumstance would prove this last prediction wrong, but such was the context surrounding Ċensu's appointment, at least in the eyes of the Opposition at the time. No president before him had been boycotted in this way (even if not every labourite, or indeed every Opposition MP, heeded the boycott call with the same fidelity). Apart from the *sui generis* case of Sir Anthony Mamo, a former chief justice who became President for what was left of his term as Governor-General after Dorman, none of the other presidents had been unanimously approved by the Maltese parliament. The Nationalists had voted against Anton Buttigieg because of a frightful statement he had uttered in parliament during a tense moment when he was (*sic*) the Minister for Justice ("jekk imissu xi xagħra minn ta' xi wiehed minnha hadd minnkomm ma johroġ haj minn hawn il-lejla").²⁷⁹ Agatha

²⁷⁸ Lino Spiteri, "A sad last hurrah", in a letter to the editor of *The Sunday Times* (of Malta), 2 Apr. 1989, p. 17.

²⁷⁹ 'Ir-raġuni għaliex għaddiet li kellna nivvotaw kontra kienet frażi li darba Toni Buttigieg kien qal bhala Ministru tal-Gustizzja, meta xi partitarji kienu dahlu l-parlament biex jiddefenduna, u ahna konna bagħtnihom lura. Il-frażi kienet din: "Jekk imissu xi xagħra minn ta' xi wiehed minnha, hadd minnkomm ma johroġ haj minn hawn il-lejla." (Literally: "If they touch a hair of one of us, none of you will leave

Barbara had been named after the 1981 election when the Nationalists were boycotting parliament because of the “perverse result”, so she was approved by the government members voting by themselves. Pawlu Xuereb never actually became President at all. Ċensu (as would his two Nationalist successors Ugo Mifsud Bonnici in 1994 and Guido de Marco in 1999) drew a negative vote from the Opposition benches – for one reason or another.

In explaining why he had accepted to become President, in an interview with *Il-Ġens*, Ċensu noted that as for various reasons recommendations made by the Select Committee, had not been implemented, the situation at law remained that, as stipulated in the Constitution, there had to be a President of Malta “elected by a resolution of the House.” The Select Committee was contemplating possible changes to the presidency, a discussion which had begun in the light of the constitutional changes proposed in connection with having a new ‘republican’ constitution in 1974. Mintoff had said that if the President were to be directly elected by the people – a proposal which the PN eventually opposed – his powers should be increased. Points which had been agreed upon in the Select Committee related to the administration of justice, commissions regarding employment and the public service, the electoral process, parliament, the speaker, state security, neutrality and matters relating to the National Day. In the case of the Speaker, it had been agreed that he could be selected differently and his status would be somewhat different, but there too nothing had changed. The President would have had various other duties and rights. There were no provisions as to how to proceed in the absence of any implementation of that Select Committee’s recommendations: the basic law remained the Constitution and it had to be respected. He personally disagreed with the mentality that “because we do not agree about something, we agree about nothing.”²⁸⁰

here alive tonight.”) Din il-fraġi ma kienitx fil-minuti tas-seduta, imma dahlet bhala emenda għal dawn xi xhur wara. Dak kien żmien ikrah għall-parlamentari ta’ l-Oppozizzjoni u darba kienu kissrulna l-karrozzi tagħna waqt seduta parlamentari. Ipparkjati quddiem is-suq. Il-gvern kien hallas il-hsara.’

²⁸⁰ “Għala aċċettajt li nsir President”, *Il-Ġens*, 11 Jan. 1991, p. 1, p. 24.

Ċensu took the oath of office from the Speaker, Dr Lawrence Gonzi, on 3rd April 1989. His presidency coincided almost immediately with some of the most momentous events that ever occurred in Malta's history. The three most notable and unprecedented ones, in this order, were the Bush-Gorbachev encounter in December 1989, formally declaring the end of the Cold War; the first ever visit to Catholic Malta by a Pope, John Paul II, in May, 1990; and the first ever state visit undertaken by the Head of State of a reunited Germany, Richard von Weizsacker – to Malta – in October, 1990. There were other state visits during Ċensu's tenure, including one by Queen Elizabeth II who knew Malta very well, having lived at Guardamangia and enjoyed polo at the Marsa. Ċensu and Maria in their turn were invited on state visits to a number of countries, including the Holy See, Italy and the Order of St John, all in Rome; Albania; India; Hungary; Communist China; Uganda; Australia and New Zealand. Here it was Ċensu who acted the ambassador, with a poise which endeared him to his hosts and audiences, including Maltese migrants, when he all too willingly reached out to these in countries of settlement, warmly embracing long lost childhood friends from the island of Gozo. It must have been, too, that "bedside manner" – a fellow doctor-politician had put his finger on it.²⁸¹

Apart from a commitment to philanthropic activities such as the Community Chest Fund and a warm if commanding presence in innumerable social occasions, from meetings with Salesians, Scouts and sopranos like Miriam Gauci and Cecilia Ricciatelli, or the Sliema Band Club at Sant'Anton, the Fire and Rescue Centre in Hal Far or the St Andrew's Society at the Marsa Sports Club, and the routine *salon* chats in the presentation of credentials by ambassadors, Ċensu's most significant undertaking as President was an attempt to unify the country. He saw the Maltese as one people who could and should still pull together even when they disagreed, democratically, without undue pique or rancour. This message was a *leitmotiv* of his presidency, recurring in different words, always impelling, in numerous addresses and messages.

²⁸¹ See above, 13.



April 1989: leaving the palace after being sworn in as President.

At his venerable age, he was in this sense a father to the nation. After just one year in harness, he was hailed as “The People’s President”.²⁸²

Ċensu’s reconciliation mission was manifest from his very first speech as President. Stressing Christian values and love of family, he insisted that if the Maltese had remained united in the past how much more so should they be on essential matters today, “when no foreigner reigns over us any more”, and when the government of the day was “freely chosen by the people and stays there only until the people want it”. Differences of opinion or of political persuasion there would always be but these should not serve to divide (“*tifred*”). On the contrary, such diversity of views ought to enrich Maltese social and political life – so long as “we knew how to observe certain limits in our divergencies”, and

²⁸² “The People’s President – Warmth, Wisdom and Statesmanship”, *The Democrat*, 31 Mar. 1990, p. 1.

so long as “we do not permit such limits to be exceeded through moral or physical violence.” The liberty which “we all cherish so much” should only go so far as the freedom of others. Nobody should bypass these confines. In an age-old lecture about the elementary meanings of right within the rule of law in a just society – *servi legum sumus ut liberi esse possimus* – Ćensu heartily exhorted ‘his’ people:

We don't have to agree on everything, but we need to agree on what is essential: surely we agree on Malta's full sovereignty; surely we agree on the Constitution which we amended together. If we think that the Constitution is not perfect, and it certainly isn't, we should continue looking for consensus so that it will be changed through persuasion, tolerance and mutual respect. I hope and I expect that, in a constructive and democratic spirit, the two sides of the House will find the way to agree on the changes which can strengthen democracy in our country.

Malta belonged to all the Maltese, Ćensu insisted, as he would do again and again. Nobody should deny a people the peace and serenity by means of which their well-being and prosperity would be nurtured.²⁸³

It was in pursuit of this conciliatory and civil ideal, too, that after 1992 Ćensu started the custom of inviting the Prime Minister (Dr Fenech Adami) and the Leader of the Opposition (Dr Alfred Sant) separately as his guests to lunch at Sant'Anton, for informal exchanges of view (and some good wine) at regular intervals. At one time symbolic and pragmatic, this gesture worked: it was a good way for the President to act as a sounding board and maintain a cordial working relationship with the political leaders, in the course of which he might put in a word of advice or caution, conciliate or recommend. However constitutionally ceremonial his role, the President thus could be a confidante, a mediator, a broker. It was a recognition that the presidency should be *au courant* and that it could exercise some moral sway if and when necessary in the national interest, not only if and when there was a constitutional crisis. As is so often the case in life, much depends on the persons involved. Ćensu's rapport with the new MLP

²⁸³ *Pajjiżna*, 1989, n.9, pp. 12-16; see the text of his address to the House of Representatives, 4 Apr. 1989, published by the D.O.I., Valletta.

leader was incomparably better to what it had been with his predecessor. So much, then, for the social boycott. 'New' Labour put paid to all that.

When Ċensu's presidency was nearing the end of its term in 1994, it was Dr Sant's Opposition who, in an unprecedented gesture, suggested that if the government wished, his term could be extended.²⁸⁴ That would have required a constitutional amendment, and could have implied political considerations. If no extension ensued, that was not because of any lingering hostility towards Ċensu or his presidency from the Labour Party. There was some new-found civility in this engaging social rapport. Malta badly needed a show of civility after some of the nerve-shattering nastiness in preceding decades. Once he had managed to clinch his party's leadership, Sant seemed interested in 'de-Mintoffizing' and 'taming' Labour, capturing the middle ground through schematic campaigning under another guise, and beating Fenech Adami's Nationalists that way. This he did, at least for a while, winning the 1996 general election, and confounding the over-confident forecasts of Nationalist pundits, whose electoral success in 1992 was over-turned four years later.²⁸⁵

Much of the glamour of the presidency rested on fanfare and colour at the highest levels of state and of society, hence the attention devoted by the media to state visits, even when in some cases these seemed perfunctory. At the same time, one should never under-estimate the potential of face-to-face encounters and hence of familiarisation visits by state dignitaries at home or away from home. Nothing can substitute the chemistry of personal human contact and fellowship. Even if heads of state may not directly broker deals or fathom policy, they can pave the way and heighten the understanding in international relationships. Occasionally they may even clinch a deal over dinner, as for example Ċensu did, while on his state visit to Italy, with regard to landing rights for Air Malta in Milan.²⁸⁶

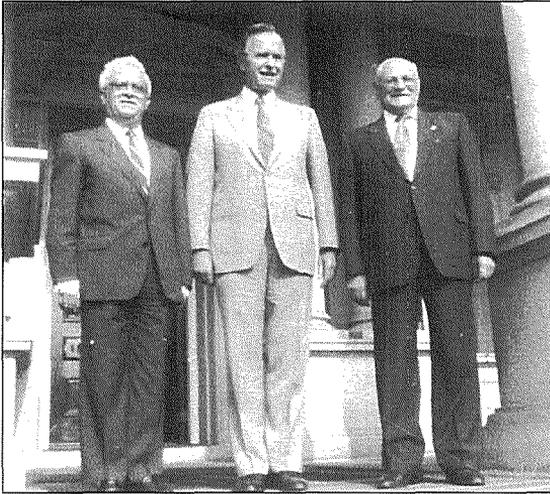
²⁸⁴ Rosanne Zammit, 'MLP prepared to consider Tabone as President for second term', *The Times* (of Malta), 6 Dec. 1993, p. 1.

²⁸⁵ Much the same thing happened to Sant in 1998, but that is another story.

²⁸⁶ Michael Testa, 'President Tabone in Italy - Way open for Air Malta to operate to Milan', *The Times* (of Malta), 13 Oct. 1993, p. 1.

Of the vast array of photographic albums portraying such visits to Malta or by 'Malta', the impression which most lodged itself in my memory was that of a leisurely and pensive chit-chat between the Indian and Maltese presidents in New Delhi, as they strolled around the onetime gardens of the Viceroy. The 'Raj' of colonial India was not there, but his presence was, lingering invisibly like a fading shadow, a receding breath in the serene stillness, as these post-colonial inheritors of national governance sought to comprehend and compare each other's cultural matrix, and to charter paths ahead for the well-being of 'their' independent peoples. Perhaps it was the already diagnosed 'peripatetic' quality which commended itself to anyone with an intellectual bent, be he in politics or outside it. These photographs speak for themselves, which is why I am publishing several of them in colour here, including two India ones. Ćensu had been to India before, with Fenech Adami: among other things, they had inspected and been impressed by Indian manufacturing plants and power stations.

The significance of the Bush-Gorbachev encounter in 1989, just a few months after Ćensu's 'ascendancy', has been much written about. It attracted to Malta the largest battery of press reporters and photographers ever, as well as witnessed a storm of the calibre which must have shipwrecked the Apostle of the Gentiles in the first century A.D. Malta's own role in the whole thing was marginal, but, considering that Malta had been pivotal in the Second World War, in part leading Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt to Yalta in February, 1945, it was not by sheer coincidence that what had started then should be wrapped up by their super-power successors in Malta. Yalta-Malta was not a nonsense rhyme, it was a poetic justice. Maltese PN leaders had a line to Washington. They had met Bush, who served in the U.S. Navy during the Second World War, when he was still Reagan's Vice-President; and apparently it was Bush who had suggested Malta as a venue for his historic encounter with Gorbachev. As President, Ćensu greeted both presidents on their arrival.



*Befriending
Vice-President
George Bush in
Washington while
still in Opposition.*

Āensu's presence was much more felt in the Pope's visit. These two had met more than once before, the first time being when Āensu as Chairman of the Committee of Ministers had welcomed John Paul II to the Palais de l'Europe in Strasbourg. Āensu's profound Catholic sentiments mark his discourse as they do the Pope's in the exchange of addresses, underlining yet again the imprint of religion on Maltese national identity: "Successor of Peter on the Island of Paul", he told him, "you will no doubt reconfirm us in the Faith first brought to us, through Divine providence, by the Apostle of the Gentiles":

When you visited your native Poland in June 1979, barely eight months after your election to the Supreme Pontificate, you had courageously and fearlessly told a massive congregation in Warsaw that "there can be no history of Poland without Christ". May I humbly repeat such a phrase and apply it to our dear Malta, whose history has, for the last two thousand years, been impregnated by Christianity...

“Most Holy Father”, Ċensu continued,

When as President of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe I had the honour, two years ago, of welcoming you to Strasbourg, you rightly told us that the family is without doubt the reality in which the interaction between personal responsibilities and social conditions is most clearly expressed. Christian communities have considered the family as the guiding value of their individual and social lives. And we, in this Island, have traditionally linked our cohesion and steadfastness as a people to the stability of the family ensuring its reverence and generosity for the gift of life.

In expounding his views on the family almost as a metaphor for the national one, Ċensu was stating his own Catholic philosophy of life:

Within the societal framework of our country, we seek too, to transform all our work-force – those who till the land, those who forge products for our daily use, those who advance culture and science and those who, in various forms, mould those moral values which cement our society – into a family of interdependent relationships where participatory planning and decision-making characterise the thrust of social and economic development.

In encouraging the adoption by Europe of a new Social Order, we wish to emphasize the dignity of all workers so that all may contribute to that shared common good which, fruit of man’s joint endeavours, is the foundation of social justice.

In referring to his private audience with the Pope the previous December, Ċensu recalled how John Paul II had identified a special vocation for Malta, confirmed by her history and her culture, “to act as a mediator and promoter of peace in the complex situations affecting the entire Mediterranean area”. Malta on her part responded to that challenge “with modest but committed dedication”. Malta was fully committed to the attainment of social justice among nations through a North-South dialogue as an instrument of lasting peace and guarantor of true security. The evolution towards greater European integration from the Atlantic to the Urals found inspiration “in that common heritage of

historic, civic and spiritual values which give Europe its identity” and had, Ċensu added, “always been encouraged by the Church”. This possibility now seemed “nearer to realization than ever before”. As European Malta worked for closer ties with Europe and for full participation in this integration process, Ċensu once again invoked the spirit of Christianity:

I vividly recollect your exhortations to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe concerning religious freedom and, in that context, I am glad to affirm that Malta’s Constitution recognises freedom of conscience and liberty of worship, even as it acknowledges the Church’s right to enlighten us on the authentic interpretation, in our social and normative action, of the spirit of Christianity...²⁸⁷

The Pope was given a memorable and tumultuous welcome wherever he went in the Maltese Islands in his ‘pope-mobile’, while his visit was recorded for posterity in various ways in some of the places that he visited, such as Valletta and Attard.²⁸⁸

In the context of European history and politics, government and international relations, still more significant than the Pope’s visit in May 1990 was von Weizsacker’s in October. Here in Malta, which had been razed to the ground by the German air force, hospitals not excluded²⁸⁹ – and that within the living memory of thousands both in Malta and in Germany, not least Ċensu’s – was the President of a reunited Germany, on his very first state visit overseas. If the Bush-Gorbachev encounter in Malta ten months earlier had been a vindication of Yalta, well, Weizsacker’s was the olive branch, hand outstretched.

Not only was a grave being dug for the Cold War – peace offerings and confidence-building measures by the onetime belligerent parties were in

²⁸⁷ See the “Address of Welcome by H.E. Dr Ċensu Tabone, President of Malta, on the occasion of the visit to Malta of H.H. Pope John Paul II”, May 1990.

²⁸⁸ See the colour illustrations in e.g. H. Frendo, *Attard: The Life of a Maltese Casale* (Malta, 1997), p. 30.

²⁸⁹ See above, 5.

full bloom. It was a sign of the rapidly changing times, and of the symbolic reality which, as Delors had come to realise, Malta's living democratic European-Mediterranean presence continued to offer Europe and the world. Just as Ċensu's short stint at the Foreign Ministry in the late 1980s had coincided with Malta's turn to chair the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, so too his presidency just happened to coincide with all these things: overseas, a dramatic change in the European and world order, in line with Council of Europe prodding over the years, by means such as the committee for European non-member states which Ċensu had himself chaired;²⁹⁰ at home, finally, hopefully, a marked change in the MLP's leadership style, in the Opposition's way of doing politics; together with these very important visits by, among others, John Paul II and President von Weizsacker.

As if by a magic wand, the 'normalisation' sought in Malta during the late 1980s and early 1990s was reflected, and profoundly so, in the new emerging realities to its north. Such coincidences, if that is all they were, immersed Ċensu in the spirit of the age – just as on the local level his student activities had been enmeshed with the inter-war politics of nationalism and fascism, imperialism and colonialism, Roman Catholicism and secularization;²⁹¹ and just as his direct involvement in the war years on behalf of a suffering humanity had brought out the horrors of military conflict mixed with a survival heroism against a totalitarian and murderous ideology.²⁹²

The post-war reconstruction – of the destroyed buildings and memories, of an attempted international order based on human rights, mainly through the UN and its agencies, and on collective security, for the West through NATO – saw Ċensu up to his neck in such new opportunities as this newly-emerging world of science and of hope provided. Truncated unfortunately by the relapse into a Cold War and the descent of an Iron Curtain across Europe, as Churchill first called it in his famous 'American' speech, a new

²⁹⁰ See above, 13.

²⁹¹ See above, 4.

²⁹² See above, 5.

consciousness and many new possibilities nonetheless characterised the post-war world, not least among them scientific discovery, as in the medical field.²⁹³ Malta could not contribute pro-actively in such fields as the nuclear deterrent, except indirectly through the values it placed on its still strategic location, its own security policies, and that only after independence; but in the medical field, for example, Ċensu as an eye doctor made a significant contribution in different parts of the world, as well as in the Maltese Islands. Short of a colonial service, such a contribution would not have been possible without the World Health Organisation, which was a UN agency. Another UN agency, the International Labour Organisation, provided a structured forum for the evolution of exchanges and a new discourse on labour relations, to which Malta was a participant, not just an observer, certainly when Ċensu was Minister for Labour and Social Services in the sixties.²⁹⁴ Just as Malta's post-independence initiatives on the seabed and the ocean floor associated with Arvid Pardo were possible because of the existence of a constituted world body to which all independent and sovereign states could belong, so too were similar initiatives related to the elderly and the aged, and to the problems of climate, which Ċensu put forward on his country's behalf.²⁹⁵

The whole movement from colony to nation was an experience which Malta shared with dozens of other colonies, protectorates, mandated territories and dependencies from one corner of the globe to the other. In this, too, by force of circumstance and by dint of character, Ċensu was involved, mainly through his positions in the Nationalist Party. It was fitting, after all that, that he should live 1989, and beyond it, at close quarters. If Herbert Ganado (1906-1979) saw Malta change, so too did Ċensu, in a bigger way and from better vantage points. It is for all of these reasons that I have sub-titled this biography: *The Man and His Century*. It was also *our* century, but never as much as *his*, for unlike most others alive today he represents a generation born into a world which pre-dates the Great War. Ċensu has lived a life as full as it has been long. It therefore spans over a gamut of human experience, activity and recollection which few could match.

²⁹³ See above, 6, 8.

²⁹⁴ See above, 12.

²⁹⁵ See above, 12, 14.

Ironically, if diplomatically, Ćensu's address of welcome to von Weizsacker made not the slightest reference to the Germany which so many of our fathers and mothers had hated in anguish. It was an address in a completely different spirit, because delivered in a quite different epoch to that in which, in a crumbling trench at Pembroke, Ćensu could not help asking a wounded and terrified German pilot why "they" even bombed a hospital. *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis.*

The truth was that Maltese-German relations had developed considerably since the 1960s, especially through German investment in industrial plant and production. That showed how "a major industrial power" and "a fledgling small state" could cooperate:

Joining hands, in many cases with domestic capital and know-how, German-Maltese factories so flourished that today we have thirty-three manufacturing plants, providing employment for over 4,000 persons, generating more than Lm45 million worth of exports, and making Germany one of our main export markets. Our visible exports to your country have been matched by our very considerable imports totalling Lm65 million.

The unification of Germany, Ćensu noted, constituted 'a great contribution to the embodiment of this "Common House" of Europe', where all European states which embraced genuine principles of freedom and democracy belonged:

Believing in this process, the Maltese people want to be involved. This is why there is consensus to get closer to the European Community and why the Government of Malta formally applied for membership on the 16th July this year.

We have already embarked on fundamental changes to our economy... Such is our vision of the new Europe, in the pursuit of which Malta will not forget that it offers to Europe another threshold to the Mediterranean world... We are convinced that Germany will in future be in the forefront of the dawn of a new European age marked by a new social order, and one which our Prime Minister augured in his address last month to the

Council of Europe. In that evolving Europe, beacon to the world of economic might, tempered by social justice, Germany's leadership will help the continent to live up to those high expectations rightly demanded of it...

Ever the doctor, Ċensu praised German collaboration with the Order of St John by means of which in the early nineteen seventies leprosy as an endemic disease had been eradicated from Malta. Weizsacker being President of the German Evangelical Convention and a member of its Synod and Council, Ċensu also remarked favourably, typically and appropriately, on the Christian values which inspired the work done by voluntary organisations, including the German churches, "in the more remote and difficult terrains of the world".²⁹⁶

The other most noteworthy official visit to Malta during Ċensu's tenure was that of Queen Elizabeth II, who arrived on the royal yacht *Britannia* in April, 1992. The occasion was a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the award of the George Cross to Malta, which had retained its historic place in a corner of the Maltese national flag after all.²⁹⁷ A symbolic ceremony was that at the Great Siege Bell erected below the Lower Barracca Gardens, overlooking Grand Harbour. George Cross medals were struck for the occasion and distributed by the score to Allied ex-servicemen for services rendered in Malta or the Mediterranean. Ċensu, the distributor, was also one of the recipients. In addition, you had the standard fare of such visits – the walk-about, the banquet, maybe a theatre performance, and so on. The Queen, who also visited the sister island of Gozo, was generally very well received. Although she had ceased to be Malta's head of state in 1974, she was still head of the Commonwealth, of which Malta became and always remained a member after 1964. By 1992 Elizabeth II had sat on her throne for nearly forty years.

²⁹⁶ See the 'Speech by H. E. Dr Censu Tabone President of Malta at the State Dinner in honour of the President of the Federal Republic of Germany and Freifrau von Weizsacker' at the Palace, Valletta, on 22nd October 1990, pp. 3-7. See also H. Frendo, 'Maltese-German Relations, 1965-1990', *25th Anniversary of Diplomatic Relations between Malta and the Federal Republic of Germany* (Malta, 1990), 2-4.

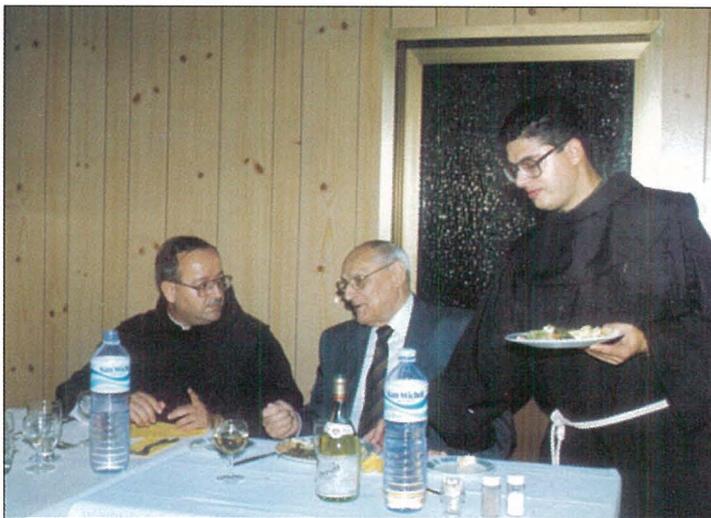
²⁹⁷ See above, 11.



In 1987, on the hustings for the last time.



A final farewell at the foreign ministry in 1989.



A quiet meal in the refectory on the feast day of St Francis in 1990.



A portrait of the President for the parish priest of San Lawrenz from the Sliema Band Club.



21st September 1989: toasting the 25th Independence anniversary with the Duke of Edinburgh and Senator Spadolini.



With commissioner Abel Matutes in 1992: the EU opens its 'embassy' in Malta.



Welcoming presidents Bush and Gorbachev for their 'end of the Cold War' encounter in December 1989.





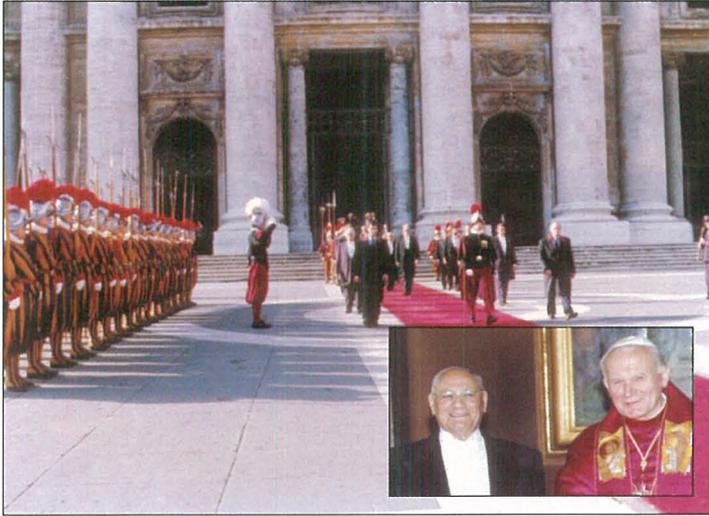
With President Weizacker behind the one German flag at Sant'Anton.



April 1992: Queen Elizabeth II leaves the royal yacht Britannia in the Grand Harbour, Valletta.



Saying it with flowers at It-Tokk in Victoria, Gozo, on the 50th anniversary of the award of the George Cross to the Maltese Islands.



*Above:
visiting Pope John
Paul II at the
Vatican.*



*Left:
the Pope at the
President's Palace
in Valletta.*



December 1991: inspecting a guard in the Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square.



President, Speaker and press exchanging New Year greetings.



1st October 1991: Ćensu on World Day of the Elderly and the Aged.



At Verdala with the Salesian boys.



At Villa Malta on the Aventine Hill overlooking the Tiber, Grand Master Bertie greets the President and Mrs Tabone.



In Villa Malta's chapel.



With President Scalfaro at the Quirinale.



A warm salute between old friends: meeting Amintore Fanfani as guests of prime minister Ciampi.



*School children fund-raising for the Malta Community Chest Fund.
Inset: an Albanian folk dance in Tirana.*





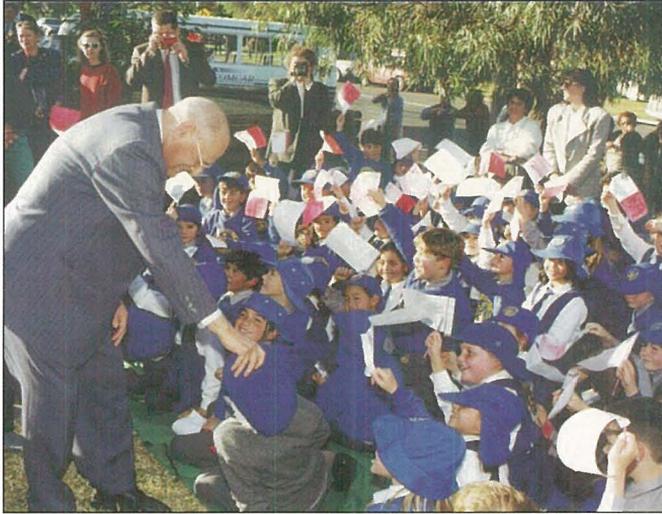
In the footsteps of the viceroys: the Maltese and Indian Presidents in New Delhi.





A Maltese return to Uganda.





A warm welcome from school children of Maltese descent in Sydney – and another one from an earlier resident of Terra Australis.





The Tabone family before leaving Sant'Anton in 1994.



Ex-Presidents as guests of Prime Minister Sant at Girgenti.

Ĉensu's own state visits (on which he was always accompanied by Maria) comprised countries in Europe, Africa, Asia and Australasia. There was one, in February 1994, to Uganda, where the hosts were President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni and his wife Janet, who greeted the Tabones on the tarmac at Kampala airport on arrival, and generally showed them around and entertained them. Museveni, a onetime assistant of President Milton Obote after Uganda's independence from Britain in 1962, was forced into exile and became a leading opponent of the wild dictator Idi Amin who had staged a *coup d'état* in 1971. After the civil war which followed Idi Amin's removal, Museveni eventually took office himself, with Tanzanian assistance, and in the late 1980s he sought to pursue a policy of national reconciliation.

The Maltese and Ugandan presidents must have had a word or two to say about the difficulties of transition from one genre of governance to another, as well as about the ideals of a democratic statehood. That a Maltese head of state should visit Uganda officially was something of an 'atonement': the last prominent Maltese to go there had lived behind barbed wire. Those British-deported Nationalists during the Second World War had included a chief justice and a future prime minister, all without a charge, let alone a conviction. Malta, in conjunction with UNHCR, had offered hospitality to Ugandan Asians in 1972, when the country banishing them was ruled by Amin. By June 1991, when Museveni visited Malta, these had all been permanently resettled in third countries, according to the agreement. To them, as to the Maltese deportees in Uganda, that had been a temporary stay of a few years. Apart from Kampala, Ĉensu also visited Entebbe, close to where the Maltese camp had been located. In their memoirs, Sir Arturo Mercieca, Edgar Soler and Dr Herbert Ganado all described their Ugandan interlude. After the Amin and Obote regimes and a civil war, Uganda seemed poised to be more democratic and conciliatory, at least that was what Museveni's return augured at the time. Historically, Ĉensu's was a rare high level Maltese presence and interest in the heartland of Africa. Malta's presence in sub-Saharan Africa had always been weak, it was not even represented diplomatically. Much earlier, however, one of the best-known explorers of the Nile (if not a slave hunter) had been Maltese: Andrea Debono.

Two of Ĉensu's visits were to Asia, where he met the leaders of India and of China. The former was the world's largest surviving democracy, the latter its largest country and, by the end of 1991, one of the few remaining Communist regimes in the world. Both these countries faced separatist pressures and were keen to underline the central power of the state in their respective metropolitan capitals. Ĉensu went to India in January 1992, only months after Indira Gandhi's son Rajiv, who led the Congress Party, had been assassinated, as his mother had also been a few years earlier – the former by a Tamil, the latter by a Sikh. Clearly India was a difficult democracy but a surviving one; it had also inherited a strong British colonial legacy, like Malta.

Malta's rapport with India ran deeper than that with Uganda, or China. As in the case of Uganda, India had belonged with Malta in the British Empire. Several Indian trading families had come to Malta, initially mainly from Egypt, starting in 1890 until 1952, when such immigration was stopped. Several of their children or children's children eventually inter-married with Maltese, so that there are today some 150 'Maltese Indians', who are well integrated in spite of some religious and cultural differences. Indian silk and garment shops became a feature of the Maltese commercial landscape, especially in Valletta and Sliema. Four in number in 1915, these outlets had increased to 8 by 1947, to 18 by 1989.²⁹⁸ Maltese mission settlements and schools in India were also strong, especially those run by the Maltese Jesuits; many Maltese have sent money, stamps or clothes regularly to these Catholic missions in parts of India. In imperial strategy and thinking, Malta and India were sometimes allied, so indeed were troop movements, as at the time of the Congress of Berlin in 1878, after the Russo-Turkish War; and on other occasions in times of peace and war. In October 1989 the Delimara power plant contract was signed with an Indian firm. In recent years Indian-made cars also made an appearance on Maltese roads.

Ĉensu's counterpart in India, President Shri Venkataraman, was a highly distinguished man. A Tamil and an economist, he became a judge, then a parliamentarian and a Minister; he served as governor of the International Monetary Fund, of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Asian Development Bank. He

²⁹⁸ See e.g. 'Il-Komunita' Indjana f' Malta', *Il-Ġens*, 13 Jan. 1989.

chaired the UN's Administrative Tribunal from 1968 to 1979. Venkataraman had been President of India since 1987.

The Maltese president went to China less than three years after the Tiananmen massacre (in June 1989) although certainly not for that reason. The Indian and the Chinese governments, as well as their large markets, had for several years interested Malta. Malta would have been of some economic, political or strategic interest to them too. Both countries came to have a resident ambassador accredited to Malta, while Sino-Maltese relations under Mintoff had lurched forward, getting as their flag-bearer the Red China Dock. Transshipment at Malta's Freeport was one area of possible co-operation between Malta and these large countries; offshore banking and work for the dockyard were others. Joint ventures already existed with Metalfond and Hydraulic Units. The presidents of the Chamber of Commerce (Dr Noel Arrigo) and of the Federation of Industry (Mr Joe Zammit Tabona) formed part of Ċensu's India delegation.²⁹⁹

In China, Ċensu met President Shang-un and the Communist Party's Secretary General, who later became president, Chiang Zemin. He was given an *honoris causa* MD by the Peking Union Medical College, in recognition of his earlier work in the fight against trachoma in Taiwan.³⁰⁰ It was of course an honour for him; but perhaps it was also a way of scoring a point against Taiwan, showing it as an integral part of the mainland state, with China acting as it were on its behalf. Taiwan had welcomed Ċensu in the 1960s and would not have objected to the award, but by now it was a different politico-economic reality, a thriving capitalist, democratic state, with its own armed forces, and saw no way either of recapturing the mainland or of submitting to a reintegration within it. By sheer coincidence no doubt, it was only in 1991, the year of Ċensu's visit, that Taiwan for the first time since 1949 officially recognized the People's Republic of China. To India, Ċensu had been before; to this China he had not. One of his predecessors, Miss Agatha Barbara, had

²⁹⁹ See e.g. 'President's State Visit to India', *Malta Weekly Review of the Press*, D.O.I., 20 Jan. 1992, n. 195, p. 1., p. 3.

³⁰⁰ Taiwan was then known as Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist China, which had lost out to Mao Tse-tung's Communists in the civil war of 1949. Chiang Kai-shek died in 1975. On Maltese-Taiwanese relations in the 1960s see H. Frenco, *The Origins of Maltese Statehood*, *op.cit.*, pp. 657-663.

been on a state visit to China in February 1986, also visiting Singapore, where she had met Lee Kuan Yew. Another visit to Asia was for a funeral – heads of state also attend several state funerals and investitures; this was the Emperor of Japan's, Hirohito, who was succeeded by his son, the Crown Prince Akihito, in 1989.

As president, Ċensu also had occasion to re-visit Australia, where he had first been as Minister of Labour and Social Services in Borg Olivier's time.³⁰¹ Here again he met and held talks with the highest dignitaries on matters of mutual concern, including immigration. Not surprisingly, the real highlight of Ċensu's tour lay in his jubilant encounters with Maltese-Australian settlers in different parts of the country. He even met one old Gozitan friend whom he had not seen for decades, and the two embraced warmly in fraternal greeting. Ċensu did one better than any other Maltese dignitary this time by also visiting New Zealand. Ċensu met the Governor-General of New Zealand, among others. Again here there was a small but self-respecting Maltese settler community going back to the 1950s. Although this community has been upwardly mobile and now includes several successful professionals, they had always felt abandoned, a second-best to their much more numerous (and therefore important) brethren to the north. They therefore appreciated Ċensu's visit and his meetings with them immensely. The pictorial records of these visits are evocative, especially in places like Australia and New Zealand where there was an added humane and patriotic dimension. Before he was President, on visits to the USA and Canada, Ċensu had had similar 'migrant settler' encounters. Always cheerful, Ċensu beamed with greater pride in the midst of fellow countrymen spread in the *diaspora*, including the occasional reunion with some long-lost friend of his youth, schoolchildren waving Maltese flags, or a cuddly koala bear.

Other visits were to more familiar haunts, closer to home. Three of these were in Rome. These were the Order of St John and the Grand Master; the Holy See and the Pope; and the Republic of Italy itself, where Ċensu met President Scalfaro, Prime Minister Ciampi and other leading figures, some of whom he had known over a long time. As Ciampi's guest at Palazzo Chigi, he met, among others, Amintore Fanfani, an old friend in

³⁰¹ See above, 12.

more ways than one – he was five years older than Ćensu. Fanfani was one of the leading Christian Democratic personalities of post-war Italy, who had served as prime minister five times and as foreign minister three times. In some of his visits Ćensu was accompanied by the foreign minister and Mrs de Marco; de Marco too knew several of the top brass personally, especially the Italians. Malta had ongoing financial protocols and other standing agreements with Italy; Italy was Malta's closest neighbour and the one with whom Malta has long enjoyed a close affinity and rapport in a multiplicity of ways. Italy was also Malta's top backer in the bid to join the European Community. Moreover, there was the Christian Democrat connection through the EUCD and otherwise. Italo-Maltese relations were the longest and the deepest of all, and deserve more than one book to themselves. There was also a Maltese community in Italy, including several mixed marriages. In all three visits to Rome and other Italian cities, Ćensu and his entourage were received with a cordiality bordering on affection.

In Eastern Europe, Ćensu visited Hungary, and also Roumania. As foreign minister he had made it a point to pursue his 'opening up' policy concerns in Eastern Europe, visiting even Bulgaria. By 1994, Hungary was perhaps the most advanced Eastern European country embracing democratic norms. He met the President Arpad Goncz, who later returned the visit, and the prime minister, Perer Boross. Although Malta and Hungary had diplomatic relations since 1970, this was the first visit to Hungary by a Maltese head of state. The two presidents discussed mostly co-operation in trade, agriculture, tourism, health and education. Goncz mentioned the importance of "security" to both countries, and was keen to bring his country closer to Europe; Hungary had just then obtained an associate status with the EU. He saw Malta's Mediterranean position, he said, as possibly providing Hungary "with a bridge to Africa".³⁰²

Another official visit in Europe was in 1993 to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, which Ćensu knew like the back of his hand. Here he was welcomed by the charming French Secretary General Catherine

³⁰² "Tabone on state visit to Hungary", *The Times* (of Malta), 4 Feb. 1994.



With the Council of Europe's Secretary General, Catherine Lalumière, in Strasbourg.

Lalumière, who had addressed the Maltese parliament in 1989, the articulate Spanish President of the Parliamentary Assembly, Miguel Martínez, a onetime Franco prisoner, and others from the parliamentary assembly and the secretariat. More of a homecoming than an official visit, this gave Āensu the chance to catch up, in style, with many old friends and colleagues, with whom he had spent many years in mutual discussion about every aspect of European affairs, social, cultural and political. He addressed the assembly about familiar topics, not without a sense of satisfaction shared in the Assembly at the turn which European events had been taking, 'Yugoslavia' excepted. From 1973 to 1987 Āensu had formed part of Malta's delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly. As Foreign Minister, then, only a few years earlier, he had chaired the Committee of Ministers.³⁰³

More outlandish was one of Āensu's last state visits – to Albania, in February 1994. After one of the most repressive, backward and isolationist Communist regimes, Albania had held its first free elections in 1991. President Berisha, a former Communist and one of Tirana's leading surgeons, needed all the help he could get to resuscitate that country. Albania was (is) picturesque, rustic and quaint but still a very

³⁰³ See above, 13, 14.

backward, very poor ‘hob-nail’ country. Traumatized by Enver Hoxha’s Stalinist terror, rigid and doctrinaire, for forty years, Albania needed reconstruction in every sphere, regionally, locally, economically, politically, financially, even mentally and culturally. Its very psyche had been shattered. On the southern Dalmatian coast, Albania was actually not too far from Malta geographically. Various Maltese religious and voluntary organizations quickly showed an interest in helping out, while at least one leading Maltese entrepreneur, Anġlu Xuereb, was in the process of trying to establish a major tourist project there. Another Maltese company, Med-serv, was interested in some work related to shipping. There were therefore interests in common, a potential working relationship to look forward to, and above all the need for solidarity. There were problems ahead, more than Ćensu could have known of then – before the war over Kosovo – although trouble was already brewing on more than one front. Berisha reciprocated the visit two years later.

In Albania, Ćensu visited the Preca Institute, a secondary school run by Maltese volunteers on behalf of the Society for Catholic Doctrine known as MUSEUM. This was the organisation whose founder, Dun Ġoġ Preca, would be considered for sainthood on the strength of a miraculous healing, for which the star witness was Ćensu.³⁰⁴ As a result, Ćensu might meet the Polish Pope yet again when he intends apparently to re-visit Malta in that connection. The Albanian children at Preca Institute greeted the distinguished Maltese guests on arrival by singing to them the Maltese national anthem – in Maltese. On returning to Malta, Ćensu received several poems and essays from these children, all of which he dutifully read. Although Albania remains nominally and generally a Muslim state, decades of ‘scientific atheism’ and *de rigueur* laicism and secularism seem to have worn off on the population; I saw no semblance of Islamic militancy or any fundamentalist fervour in daily life, although mosques and minarets abound, as do television aerials and satellite dishes popping out of roof-tops and windows. People are concerned with their livelihood and look to the West and to Europe now for support to re-integrate themselves into the economic and cultural mainstream from which a harsh, xenophobic Communist

³⁰⁴ See above, 6.

austerity had long deprived them. In Tirana's main street kiosks sold Italian magazines.

Although Āensu went abroad on other occasions – twice to congresses in the USA, for example – Albania was one of his last state visits before his five year presidential term ended in 1994. In the month of February 1994, weeks before his term was due to expire, Āensu went on no less than four state visits: Hungary, Albania, Uganda and finally Roumania. He had moreover collected an array of *onorificenzi* for his contributions in different fields from the UN, the Council of Europe, the Order of St John, the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh, university institutions including his local 'Alma Mater' who conferred on him an *honoris causa* degree, the *Fondation pour le Merit Europ en*, and others, even the Boy Scouts gave him a special badge; he was admitted to Malta's 'National Order of Merit'; soon after his retirement he would also get a medal from the Pope.

When that last day in office arrived in the first week of April, Maria and himself bid farewell to all their staff at Sant'Anton, one by one, from adjutants to cooks and chambermaids. It was a moving experience because for five years they had "lived together like a family". They left Sant'Anton Palace in Attard and proceeded to Valletta, with a police escort. On the palace square, Āensu inspected a guard for the last time. As he had done when he had taken office in 1989, he kissed the Maltese flag.

And that was it. His mandate had been fulfilled to the letter; mission accomplished. Back home now, to the cosier but rather more solitary marital abode in St Julian's.

At 81, Āensu was in the best of health.

Two Lives

WHAT FUTURE?

IF he had to choose between his 'two lives', one as an eye doctor the other as a politician, Ćensu says he would choose the former. This is understandable: ophthalmology was his profession, a specialised training, a commitment practised over many years. Ultimately it remains, perhaps, the area in which he was of the greatest service, especially earlier on in life. On becoming a Minister in 1989 he still tried to attend a pharmacy for a few hours once a week, so as not to feel cut off. On completing his term as President, he thought he might go back to it, but he had stopped operating a decade earlier.

Comparisons are odious, even between overlapping careers embodied in one person. When prodded to reflect on past experiences with a view to drawing any lessons or messages for the future, it was to the political arena that Ćensu most frequently turned. Working through various postures in the form of passing comments, studied reflections, lingering impressions, desired changes including failed attempts at change in different spheres of public life and at different times, it becomes possible to identify some of the core concerns which have animated this man during the multifold encounters and experiences which he has lived through during the twentieth century. "The past century", he tells his children and children's children, "belonged to me; the new one belongs to you."

Democracy he regards as the best available political system, but he is all too conscious of its flaws, such as the dependence on votes for election, which could mean favours or abuses. Political parties are essential to its working, but these lack democracy within themselves, enthroning the leader almost as a god. Unlike other European countries in Malta, even if some groups may share friendships, ideas or interests, there are no open factions, and any criticism of the leader would risk branding the critical or dissenting thinker as a traitor (*sic*). The hegemony and longevity in leadership, epitomised in the past by the ‘reigns’ of Gonzi, Borg Olivier and Mintoff, is seen decidedly as a negative factor, working in favour of the power-wielding caucus of ‘inner sanctum’ secretaries, advisers, businessmen, politicians or other confidantes – what he calls “*il-klikka tal-poter*” – to the exclusion of all others in the wings. A static sameness in authority aids and abets time-serving, parasitic elements appropriate power even if they represent no electorate; it emarginates talent and potential while simultaneously reducing vigour and enthusiasm. Collective responsibility in Cabinet and obeying the whip can be trying enough, however required for the workings of democracy, but the trappings of a veritable ‘leader principle’ hierarchical structure, as experienced rather emphatically in Malta, are worse. Without a maximum duration of a leader’s tenure, say a decade, leadership could risk becoming a regime or a dynasty in a “second class democracy” (“*demokrazija sekonda klassi*”). Had there been greater democracy within the PN, Ċensu holds, the Ganado split would not have occurred. Giving a party a *carte blanche* for five years would tempt it to operate “like a mafia”.

Speaking about the future of democracy of Malta in 1976, Ċensu defined the best political system as one which balanced the rights of the citizen with the needs of the collective. It was individuals who first met to form a government for their respective communities: no system should invert and reverse this natural order of creation by putting collective government as the aim of the civil community, rather than as an instrument for its service. So far as Malta was concerned, its parliamentary democracy, although it ultimately rested on the vote in parliament, was “centred on the great power of the Prime Minister and less so on that of Cabinet”. Although all the responsibility fell on Cabinet, because of collegial responsibility, “initiatives of the highest

importance were taken by the Prime Minister.” The Cabinet rarely consulted the Parliamentary Group, on which it depended, before presenting bills and resolutions in parliament:

The Prime Minister’s power is a factor which favours the subjection of Members of Parliament, especially when he alone decides who to appoint to which important functions (karigi), initiatives such as electing the speaker, nominating ministers, naming ambassadors, judges. This is a democratic system in so far as his (the Prime Minister’s) colleagues may in theory deny him confidence, but in practice that sort of thing is very difficult. In some other democracies, the Prime Minister’s power is truly that of one person – primus inter pares – because the ministers are held in rein by the group (sottomessi mill-grupp), or by groups of deputies, since all positions (karigi) are either mutually agreed or freely elected. Prime Ministers change and the ministers themselves serve under different ones...

The advantage of the British system was more group cohesion because everyone bows to the prime minister, but the difficulty of expressing one’s views without prejudice sometimes forces members to go ‘underground’ where they may undermine support for the government. There was no one system which applied equally well everywhere, Ćensu noted. Democracy had to be worked out according to traditions, history, experience and possibilities. The British variety had been exported to ex-colonies but in time nowhere had the same constitution prevailed intact.

Governing solely on the strength of a slight majority was not terribly democratic. ‘The system we have might as well be called “a dictatorship of the majority”, rather than one in which citizens’ views are really executed. True democratic participation ought to imply that governments represented opinions in proportion to their strength. Coalition governments were always dominated by the majority in parliament, but at least in administrative capacities there you also had the minority’s voice, which could be as big or bigger than that of the government.

The system whereby the prime minister takes all important initiatives while responsibility for them fell on the cabinet collegially was not good

(*mhux tajba*), Ċensu held. Responsibilities and initiatives had to go together:

I do not agree that Prime Minister or some one other person in particular should have the privilege of himself choosing the cabinet, that he himself makes certain appointments, or that he has certain prerogatives such as that of deciding when to dissolve parliament or call elections. I believe no one should have such right over others even if in theory others could rebel and not endorse the Prime Minister's actions. The very fact that one had this right put him in a position of privilege which has little to do with a participatory democracy. After all even in dictatorships the power of a person or a few persons is maintained if everyone else obeys and acquiesces (joqghod) but history teaches us that it is difficult to organise a common action against someone who retains great power in his hands (kontra min ghandu poteri kbar f'idejh). I think that the way to avoid dictatorship of one kind or another is by removing great power (poteri kbar) from the hands of one person or a few persons; this is also a means how to prevent abuses or whims (kapriċċi).

In various European and other non-European systems, Ċensu went on, the cabinet was chosen by the deputies. This was not a system shorn of abuses, because the vote could be given on the basis of friendship, or 'counter-party' ("*ta' kontro-partita*"), but it was less dangerous and more just than a choice by one person only. There was never a perfect system in any democracy but that was why one should continue searching and experimenting. That was why, Ċensu was suggesting, reformism should emanate from the parliamentary group, this should be a sounding board. The same should apply to the election of a speaker and important state positions. "In this way executive power spreads and the sense of democracy grows." Politics would shed off much of "the political patronage which could lead to favouritism or corruption." One did not have to change the Constitution for the introduction of such measures.³⁰⁵

³⁰⁵ 'Il-Futur tad-Demokrazija f'Malta' (AZAD, 1976), pp. 1-6.

These are views which Ċensu has more or less continued to hold, although some important changes were being introduced in his party, not without difficulty, at about the same time that he was throwing all this up in public.³⁰⁶ Nor was it ever easy for any politician readily to divest himself of powers or positions held, to make way for someone else or vaguely for the ideal benefit of the greater good. In thus addressing himself Ċensu would have had both the party leaders in mind, Mintoff and Borg Olivier. The former was in office and very much in power. The latter still held sway over his party and the Opposition, such as it was, in spite of grave rumblings against his continued leadership.³⁰⁷ Ċensu was speaking at AZAD in Sliema during an election campaign, just four weeks before a general election.³⁰⁸

What about the electoral system? Ċensu is critical of this too. He is particularly critical of the alphabetical listing of candidates; names in the voters' roll in the polling booth. As we have seen, he felt that it was the alphabet which had lost him the chance of being elected when he first contested for a parliamentary seat. He said that if one looked at the names of all Maltese MPs since 1921 (when internal self-government had been introduced), one would realise that more than three-fourths of their surnames only reached the letter F. Even if one considered that there were more surnames starting with certain letters, it could not be denied that "certain politicians had made a career because of their surnames".³⁰⁹ Since then, a quarter-of-a-century ago, this and related deficiencies in Malta's PR electoral system have been brought up time and again but, apart from the majority vote clause which happily determined the 1987 election result, and set a precedent, little progress has been made. Even the alphabet has remained paramount.

³⁰⁶ See above, 13.

³⁰⁷ Ċensu by now was a leading critic of Borg Olivier's leadership and in 1974 he had championed the view that he be forced to resign. See above, 13. He had sometimes strongly disagreed with Borg Olivier's political and administrative manner of dealing even earlier. See above, 12.

³⁰⁸ The conference was held on 16th August 1976. The elections were set for 17th and 18th September.

³⁰⁹ *Il-Futur tad-Demokrazija f'Malta, op.cit.*, p. 7.

Such trends may be partly the consequence of a colonial legacy in a small island society, where the individual is reduced to a passive agent, or just plain ignorance. In his last Christmas address as President in 1993, Ĉensu suggested that parties should become more open, more democratic: it does not make sense that a party may have tens of thousands of members or adherents but, in practice, not more than two or three hundred officials or other persons, at most, decide everything. Party members, even in the localities, should be able to input decisions on policies, possibly including the selection of candidates. Such powers would attract (hopefully) better quality activists – in other words, not hangers-on or opportunists. Such feelings naturally bear on the quality of education, confidence and maturity of people, or otherwise, but they relate as well to the nature of society and of government, which impact (or ought to impact) on one another meaningfully, in a changing dynamic.

In that address, Ĉensu described local councils, which were just being introduced, as a means for the spreading of democracy. He agrees that mayors should be directly elected by the people whom they would be expected to represent and to lead in their respective locality and community. Experience has shown that even the manifest desire of a community in its natural choice of mayor may be thwarted by the motivated intrigues of one or two self-seekers. Given the internecine implications of a ‘preferential’ electoral district system, such decisions could also become an extension of party candidate or factional manoeuvres. Although there is no doubt that devolution was a move in the direction of greater participatory democracy as favoured by Ĉensu, this remains an unsolved problem to date, especially in so far as the Nationalist Party is concerned. The Labour Party has settled it by giving the right to candidates on their lists who poll the highest vote to get first preference in the mayoral appointments.

In his 1993 Christmas address Ĉensu put it like this:

If one counts the number of persons who serve in these committees in each party, those who are involved in the formulation and implementation of policies, this number does not exceed that of a few

*hundred. My preoccupation is how can these few hundred people be in an efficacious and continuous dialogue with the many thousands of electors who sustain them with their vote in each election. I think that if the parties agree they can fashion new instruments so that even in this sphere democracy could spread further.*³¹⁰

As one who has lived through the transition from colonialism to statehood, at least politically, Ċensu remains very critical of colonialism in general, and its British variant in particular. “We are still a colony” (“*ghadna kolonja*”), he says when inveighing against indications of the reluctance to be more self-reliant, more self-assertive, in public policy and in mentality. He remains in this sense a classic nationalist, moulded during the inter-war period, but confirmed in his beliefs by, *inter alia*, his travels across large chunks of what were the colonial empires, especially in Asia. Human suffering and physical subjection were marked by servility and deference; there was little respect for the self or for the other. But now that Malta was independent, there was no longer the need to mobilise in unison against the foreigner or the invader, and even less the need to mobilise against one another in a tribal ‘us’ and ‘them’ fashion. This was an anti-national nonsense. Discrimination against Maltese in relation to foreigners is utterly unacceptable.

One of Ċensu’s hobby-horses in this regard is what he regards as a sick adulation of the Grand Masters and of the period of the Order’s rule over Malta generally. This mindless, exuberant, romanticised exposure today of what was essentially a mediaeval, feudal, despotic, aristocratic, theocratic, even racially exclusive set-up – in what is supposedly the independent and sovereign state of a free people – he finds offensive. Nor is this simply a commercial trait for tourist consumption, from torture chambers to works of art; it goes further than that, to the point where at one stage a Maltese government contemplated the sheer giving away (or was it the restitution?) of Fort St Angelo to this Order. Ċensu finds most annoying reference to what is now the Palace of the President as “the Palace of the Governor” or “the Palace of the Grand Master”. In what was again being called “the Grand Council Chamber” (“*is-Sala tal-Gran Kunsill*”), he had placed

³¹⁰ ‘Indirizz lin-Nazzjon mill-President ta’ Malta’, D.O.I. press release, 24 Dec. 1993, ff. 2-3.

framed portraits of his predecessors as Presidents of Malta. These had since been removed to another hall...

Ċensu's repugnance to uncritical attitudes and dispositions towards the Order's rule over our forefathers, as well as to colonialism, has something to do with that most seminal epoch in Malta's history, the early 1960s, when a long-occupied island moved boldly towards the acquisition of its statehood.³¹¹ I suppose that at heart he always remained a "Minister for Opposition", as Borg Olivier had once described him; perhaps more such internal critics who could hold their own were needed. In his party and in Malta generally these have always been in short supply.

International affairs Ċensu continued to find compelling. After his retirement from the presidency he was appointed a visiting professor at the local university in this area of studies. In the first Bush-Gorbachev annual memorial lecture hosted by the Malta committee of the European Cultural Foundation in Valletta in December 1994, Ċensu argued that the world was changing at a very fast rate and Maltese could not continue to reason things out "by past mentalities". Although he had always upheld the principle of neutrality, arms reduction, the Palestinians' right to their own state co-existing with Israel, the CSCE, confidence building measures and similar policies, it seems he was becoming increasingly conscious of Malta's want of security:

*If we look at the strategic position of our country without any prejudices, we should realise that we have no form of defence against external aggression (l-ebda forma ta' difiża kontra xi aggressjoni barranija). What some, including myself, might think as to guarantees from countries interested in our security, is hampered by what we are seeing happening today in ex-Yugoslavia – that no country today is disposed to sacrifice its children in favour of the security of another (jaghmel saġrifioċċju b'uliedu b'risq is-sigurta' ta' haddiehor).*³¹²

³¹¹ See above, 11.

³¹² "Ilkoll iridu nindunaw li Malta hi parti minn kontinent u mid-dinja", *In-Nazzjon*, 6 Dec. 1994, p. 7.

While lauding the revolutionary change brought about by the Bush-Gorbachev encounter ending the Cold War, Malta's security deficit was one reason why he believed it was necessary for Malta to form part of the European Union. The EU, he concluded, was essential for the peaceful evolution and the progress of countries within its fold, the continent's security, political stability and the implications of a large European market.

One of his lingering concerns is the failure by successive administrations to tackle industrial relations legislation comprehensively, thereby to ensure that in the national interest social partnership rather than confrontational scheming would tend to prevail in the regulation of disagreements. This ties in with his strong beliefs in arbitration and conciliation, his abhorrence of irresponsible 'wild cat' strikes which endangered Malta as a new and a small state. He is sorry that his Industrial Relations Bill, as amended in his subsequent memo to cabinet in 1969, never came to fruition. Committed to the right to strike, he remains as convinced as ever that that should be a last resort. Several socially beneficial laws in fact owe their origin to the time when Ċensu was a Minister in Borg Olivier's last administration. (His only objection to Labour's 'childrens' allowance' was that Mintoff had limited this to only three children!) If, however, it was laid down that trade union behaviour was regulated within a certain framework – for example with trade union members having the right to decide by secret ballot whether they wished to strike or not – Malta would be saved much unnecessary, unproductive hostility, and its exchequer millions of *liri*. No administration so far has had the gumption to tackle this whole question head-on, sensitive though it may be. Human relations had to be ordered, subject to right and obligation as regulated by law. Of course workers had their rights, but was it in the interest of the paid-up union member simply to obey a strike directive if a dispute could be solved around a table instead of in the street? Certainly not, Ċensu would say, and all the more so if such a dispute were motivated by purposes other than *bona fide* ones. Such expectations may be idealistic, but they remain pertinent. Ċensu often spoke of the need to pursue "a culture of consensus", that would be one of his lasting messages to posterity. Employer-employee relations could be seen to figure in the same equation. This he would regard as

part of being an independent nation, one people, one homeland, a shared future.

Censu's other concerns rotate on the fast changing moralities around him, particularly as these risked endangering the survival of the family as a natural unit in society. He is disturbed by what seems to be a prevailing 'culture' wherein to question permissiveness may no longer be seen as politically or socially 'correct': what is the world coming to? Have values changed to the point where these defy biology, for instance by same sex 'couples' marrying and raising adopted children? What about sperm banks, surrogate motherhood, foetus experimentation, and suchlike? To him, life remains sacrosanct. What are the limits of science for man's own good, are counter-norms becoming norms? Censu expressed related concerns many times in different fora. There is nothing he cherishes so much as the family, now probably more than ever. He has a score of grandchildren. Once again here, he is open to progress and reform and has not been left behind by the times, but he believes that nothing works in excess, or in violation of the natural law. To him, the divine law is of the utmost importance as well. A committed Christian he continues to be inspired by faith and cannot quite understand how man can live meaningfully and purposefully without it. He may accept someone being an agnostic, but self-professed atheism he regards as cynical, nonsensical, utter presumption.

Addressing the World Medical Assembly, he exhorted his colleagues in the medical profession to abide by ethical and moral standards. The profession was today facing grave ethical issues in many fields, but he believed that those which were most cogent revolved around "the period of the beginning of life and the period towards the end of life." While there was general agreement that physicians were expected to help couples wishing to have a child of their own with all the means open to them, and while all agreed that they should do all we could to alleviate pain and suffering at all times, including the time of dying, there were many controversial practices whose legitimacy was doubted by many:

New techniques of fertilisation outside the body have raised important ethical problems which do not concern exclusively the medical profession, as they are also of interest to religious, legal, social and

cultural spheres of society. Such techniques have made possible the separation of the act of conception from the process of gestation, introducing the odd concept of surrogate motherhood. The old adage 'mater semper certa est' is now not always applicable. The fact that a woman can rear in her womb a child who is not her own has, in my view, done away with the oft repeated assumption that the right of a woman over her body includes the right over the child in her womb. Here, it seems, we have the scientific proof, if any were needed, that the child in her womb is a separate entity from the woman who is bearing it, whether she is her mother or not...

It was a great pity that procreation, intended to be the most exquisite manifestation of love between man and woman, should have been turned in some cases into "a calculated, cold scientific laboratory procedure..." There had recently been reports of the possibility of impregnating a woman long past her menopause by artificial methods:

It is difficult to foresee where such interference with such natural processes of life will lead us. Not all that is possible is morally lawful or desirable. The laws of nature are sacrosanct and interference may only be considered when it is intended to facilitate nature's laws, and never to go against them.³¹³

Speaking in Strasbourg on the avoidance of poverty and marginalisation in the same year, Censu observed that

If we are to continue to accept the family as the basic unit of society we should protect it better against the increasing attacks, against its unity and stability, while promoting marital fidelity. We should be consistent in protecting life from its inception to its natural end. Family units should remember that the life of the unborn child, of the old, of the sick and of the dying, is as sacred as the life of all other human beings, and should therefore not be tampered with under various spurious prettexts.³¹⁴

³¹³ Address at the opening session of the 43rd World Medical Assembly, Valletta, 6 Nov. 1991, f. 2.

³¹⁴ The text of this speech was released by the D.O.I., 3 Dec. 1991.

Inaugurating the 5th Meeting for Religions and Peace, held in Valletta in 1991, Ċensu quoted Cardinal Glemp's definition of peace as "halting the growth of evil. It is the reconstruction of the good; it is that quality of the spirit of men and of nations out of which are born freedom, justice, truth and love." Understanding peace, Ċensu told the assembled patriarchs, cardinals, bishops, imams, mutifs, rabbis, Buddhists and Hindus, was about understanding ourselves:

We congregate here for the pursuit of the most noble of human ideals: that is the transcendence of the human spirit and its search for perfect tranquility over what is purely material and temporary. The common element that gathers us all here is the belief in the spiritual vocation of our existence, meaning that while our body grows, ages and decays, our spirit or soul lives on. Our common yearning for peace can only be satisfied by goodness, understanding and solidarity... Let this be the spirit of Malta: the new covenant of religions for peace and of peace through religion.³¹⁵

In an interview with a Franciscan magazine in 1990, Ċensu described envy as "the strongest emotion in the life of man, more than love or hate, although hate is the result of envy." "*Min ma jghirx, ma jidnibx.*" (He who does not covet, does not sin.) He wondered if the future of faith lay in whether or not "we would continue to cherish what we had", such as the family-oriented community in the Maltese Islands:

I see for example the change in mentality with regard to marriage, in the idea that everything goes, everything is permissible. But this rather preoccupies me: it is difficult in a world of T.V. and travel that we not be like others, but the family is really at risk. There is need for an initiative to save the family.

Had his faith helped him in carrying out his duties and decisions as President of Malta? Indeed it had; he believed in justice:

Every one in one's life, until one dies, wishes to be happy, content. This is the wish of every person. But experience has taught me that happiness

³¹⁵ See the text released by the D.O.I., 8 Oct. 1991, f. 1, f. 4.

*and contentment are only short periods, a moment. The rest is called serenity. This is what we should aspire to: peace with yourself. Serenity brings the moments of contentment. I never came across continuous happiness, although we seek it. Serenity yes. In the greatest sorrow, you can still be serene.*³¹⁶

Fascinated by e-mail, fixing things in his workshop, planting vegetables in the garden, conversing with wife, children, grand-children, reading the newspapers, listening to the news, still socialising quite a bit, regularly attending Holy Mass, and generally following goings-on not only in his ever-growing family, Ċensu will be 88, God willing, in March 2001. In November, he and Maria will have been married for 60 years, a diamond jubilee.

Ċensu has said much, done much, travelled everywhere and mixed with everyone, but he has also lived by example. Having lost his own father at a young age, he has sought to ‘father’ not only a family but a profession, a party and a people.

³¹⁶ “Kulhadd fil-hajja tieghu, sakemm imut, jixtieq illi jkun ferhan, felici. Din hija x-xewqa ta’ kull wiehed. Pero’ l-esperjenza ghallmitni li l-felicità’ u l-kuntentizza huma perijodi żghar biss, mument. Il-kumpliment jissejjah serenita’. Dan hu li rridu nimmiraw ghalih: Peace with yourself. Serenita’ ġġib il-mument ta’ kuntentizza. Ferh kontinwu qatt ma ltqajt mieghu, ghalkemm infittxuh. Serenita’ iva. Serenita’ tista tkun fl-akbar dispjaċir u xorta tkun seren.” Interview with President Tabone by Jesmond Micallef and Pawlu Bugeja, *dawl franġiskan*, n. 104, Nov. 1990, pp. 14-15.

The Sources

A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

As noted in the first chapter, this work is very largely an oral history, supplemented by whatever additional documentation I could lay my hands on to make sense of it in a general context. For this I depended largely on Dr Tabone's own archive, both for documents and illustrations, and, to a lesser extent, on the papers and numerous publications in my own study at home. The assistance rendered to me by the librarians of 'Informa' at PN Headquarters was invaluable; I am most grateful to the director Ms Tessa Baluci for her general guidance, and her assistant Claudette Schembri, who also copied several illustrations I had selected on to a CD for me. Similarly, Dr Philip Farrugia Randon kindly copied on to a CD for me various other colour illustrations I had selected from many photo albums at his father-in-law's residence. I thank too the PN secretariat and direction for permitting me to consult the party's executive committee minutes from 1965 to 1981, and publishing selected extracts of these. Ms Monica Scicluna at the DOI was promptly helpful as usual. The librarian at the Library of Parliament, Mr Ray Grillo, was very cooperative, although I have avoided referring much to the texts of debates in which Dr Tabone took part. Sometimes I could do so through other means, such as original mimeographed texts in his possession or related documents, including newspaper reports; moreover these are readily available for consultation by anyone – they are even indexed. Much the same would apply to archival material relating to WHO and ILO in Geneva, the UN Secretariat in New York, the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly in Strasbourg, and probably the national archives in Taipei, among other sources in various countries where Ćensu stayed or visited over the past half-a-century. I have had neither the time nor the resources to travel and consult these but I am

confident that I have given the gist, succinctly, of what was mainly at issue in Ċensu's connections there. The Cabinet minutes I have not seen; I understand these are not available so far.

Apart from former students and family members whom I have already thanked in chapter 1, various people helped me with documentation in their possession, illustrations and advice. Among them I would like to mention first Mr Winston Zammit, especially but by no means only for his data on the Sliema Band Club, the late Dr Victor Zammit Tabona, formerly of WHO; Mr Richard Muscat, formerly of AZAD; Dr Vincent Moran of the MLP; Cabinet ministers in Borg Olivier's last administration Dr Alexander Cachia Zammit and Notary Joseph Spiteri to whom I spoke; Mr Peter Paul Portelli whose father Spiru was president of Sliema's PN section committee; Dr Lino German, a onetime MAM leader; Mr John Camilleri a former PN official; several others from whose conversations I benefited, whether they realised that or not at the time; and staff at the University of Malta Library including senior librarians and the Melitensia staff. I have tried to credit individuals who have offered their assistance to me specifically on the relevant pages. Where I do not do so it is normally because the material derives directly from Dr Tabone's archives or the Informa library. Newspapers and magazines I have source referenced on the relevant page, the main newspaper after 1970 being *In-Nazzjon*, and before that *The Times of Malta*. I have also looked at *L-Orizzont* and *Il-Haddiem*, apart from official publications such as *Malta Today* and *Pajjizna*. Illustrations I have tried to insert as close as possible to a reference or references in the book to which they relate; this was less possible with the colour illustrations which also cover Ċensu's state visits as President. A more detailed rendering of party-related affairs, policy, legislation, social networks and constitutional history I am reserving for my Borg Olivier biography in 2005.

I believe I have said enough here to give credence and substance to Ċensu's role during his years in politics from 1961 to 1989, as well as his private and public life earlier and later. I have tried to convey his views and feelings faithfully and respectfully, although I may not always have agreed with them. There is no presumed finality in this work for the simple reason that many archival sources are still unavailable or

unknown and anyway it is much too soon to write with the authority I would prefer. I believe that the book does bring to light many new facts and a meaningful interpretation of these, which is certainly relevant and pertinent to our times. It brings up and gives cause for reflection on various issues relating to politics, society, morality and international affairs. Without it, much of this knowledge might never have come to light or been treated organically.

As for books and political pamphlets, I have not consulted too many but wherever I have done so I source referenced them, or specified their authorship and subject matter, in footnotes on the same page for the reader's easy access. My last book before this one, *The Origins of Maltese Statehood: A Case Study of Decolonization in the Mediterranean* (1999) contains an updated bibliography of sources I consulted or referred to for it: primary, printed and secondary (see pages 693-706). Thus *The Origins of Maltese Statehood* may be used sometimes to supplement what I say or leave unsaid here. In turn, some of the information given in *Ĉensu* about the early 1960s (when Dr Tabone was the PN's Secretary General), updates or supplements the contents of that more voluminous work.

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The product of six years of interviewing and follow-up, *Ċensu* highlights the testing times before and after Malta's Independence, including the Mintoff years, and the PN's change of leader in 1977.

In 16 chapters spread over 350 pages, which include several colour illustrations, Henry Frendo's *Ċensu* ranges from a Gozitan childhood during the Great War to a pioneering eye surgeon's career, from student days in the 1920s and 1930s to the politico-religious question in the 1960s, from a dedicated involvement in the St Julian's constituency to a presend of the Cold War. Professor Frendo is his purposeful, sometimes controversial octogenarian protagonist, who has led a very full life, as a witness and an interpreter of a country and of a century.



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