

FIFTY YEARS A SURGEON

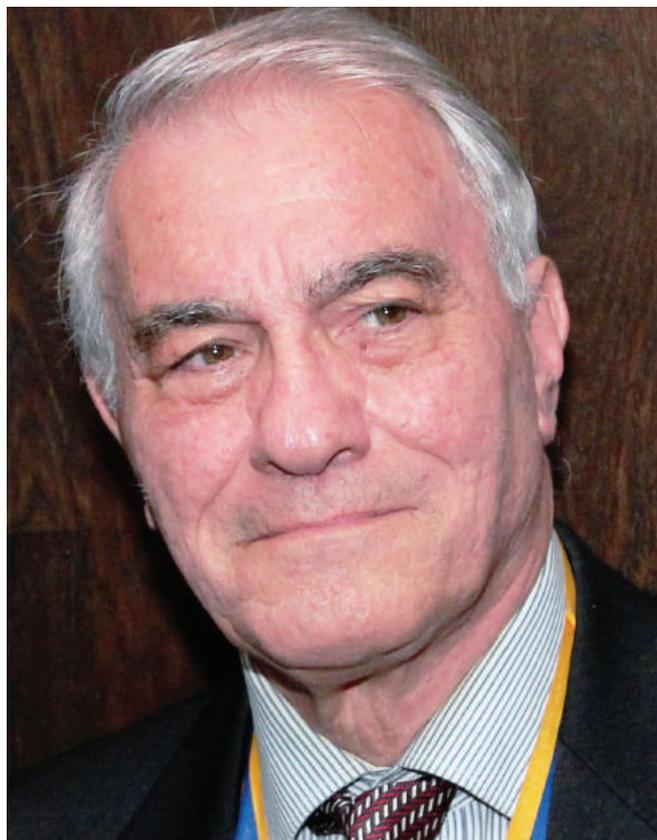
**PROFESSOR CARMEL LINO CUTAJAR
SHARES SOME MEMORIES WITH
MARIKA AZZOPARDI**

TS: WHAT WERE THE KEY EVENTS THAT MARKED YOUR FIRST YEARS AS A DOCTOR AND SURGEON?

I graduated in Malta in 1964. I married my wife Irene in early 1966. We immediately proceeded to London for me to commence my surgical training. I was lucky to be attached to one of the best teaching hospitals, the Middlesex Hospital. My main objective was to train in general surgery which meant a lot of hard work. After I was admitted by examination to Fellowship of the Royal Colleges of Surgeons of England and Edinburgh I decided to pursue further specialisation. I was lucky to be offered a Commonwealth Scholarship which allowed me to do two years full-time research in vascular surgery. I presented my research work in haemodynamics, which at the time was ground-breaking, to the Surgical Research Society and to various reputable journals. Just when I thought that my training was complete an opportunity unexpectedly arose to join the urology unit of Sir Eric Riches, the



Saudi Arabia, 1980. Lavish Bedouin hospitality. Prof. Cutajar is 2nd from left dressed in Arab garb as requested by his host (on my right). His wife, Irene, and the two children, David and Louise, are on the right



doyen of urology at the time. I was hooked and spent two further years of training in that speciality. Therefore when we finally did return to Malta (now with two young children) I was able to practice general, vascular and urological surgery. The latter would eventually be my dominant interest.

TS: YOU AGAIN LEFT MALTA IN 1977. WHY WAS THAT?

Unfortunately in 1977 there was a head-on clash between the Government of the time and the medical profession. I will not go into this dispute except to mention that as a result the vast majority of Maltese specialists in all departments left country, myself included. With my family I went to Saudi Arabia where I was engaged in an American-run hospital with the main objective of opening a specialised urology department. We initially spent over four years in Saudi Arabia before the same American organisation asked me to move to Abu Dhabi (Emirates) for another 30 months. On the one hand these seven years in the Middle East were very exciting as we were exposed to new cultures and experiences. The negative side, however, was that due to lack of adequate education facilities we had to send our two very young children to boarding schools in England.

TS: BACK IN MALTA IN 1984, YOU WERE APPOINTED CONSULTANT SURGEON AND UROLOGIST AT ST LUKE'S HOSPITAL. CAN YOU ELABORATE?

Certainly. My appointment at St Luke's Hospital was primarily as urologist but also undertaking general surgical work. Opening the Department of Urology was a big challenge as one needed to focus and absorb the spectacular advances which urology was experiencing. I was also entrusted with the opening of the



Receiving the diploma of Fellow of the Royal college of Surgeons of England from the President, Sir Thomas Holmes Sellors in London, 1971

Endoscopy Unit. This was the first-ever dedicated day-care surgery department, a novelty at the time. In 1986 we started the technique of percutaneous nephro-lithotripsy (key-hole surgery for the removal of kidney stones), a very sophisticated and advanced technology. We were among the first in Europe to do so which greatly enhanced the reputation of our urology department still in its infancy.

TS: IN 1991 YOU WERE APPOINTED DIRECTOR OF SURGERY. CAN YOU COMMENT ON THIS NEW DEVELOPMENT?

My appointment as Director of Surgery within the Department of Health and Professor and Head of the academic department of surgery in the medical school ushered in a period of intense activity which would last a full ten years. One should remember that at that time we were emerging from the trauma of the events I mentioned before. I was lucky to have a young team of excellent surgeons, mainly trained in the UK. Thanks to their support we managed to push surgery to new heights. New sub-specialities (such as urology, cardiac, plastic, vascular) were introduced to strengthen the ones already available. I pressed for the opening of a day-care unit. We managed to start the service in a rather restricted space area. Nevertheless it was an immediate success liberating hundreds of in-patient beds. Having already established keyhole surgery for the removal of kidney stones we then

turned to abdominal keyhole surgery, pioneered by our famous compatriot, and my great friend, Professor Sir Alfred Cuschieri working in Scotland. On the academic side we introduced structured tuition and encouraged surgical trainees to do at least part of their surgical training in Malta. I am impressed by the great progress made in this respect in the last few years. During this period I was also involved in expanding my own speciality of urology. I became member of several European urological societies and also took part in research programmes as a member of the European Organisation for Cancer Research. I was also Founder Member and President of the Association of Surgeons of Malta as well as Founder Member of the European Society of Surgery of which I was President in 2005 and still on its board.

TS: IS THERE TIME FOR ANYTHING OTHER THAN MEDICINE IN YOUR LIFE?

I lead a very active social life. I have been President of the Malta Red Cross and of Rotary Club Malta. I am also a Knight of the Order of St John. I like to read especially biographies, history of art and, of course, medical journals. I enjoy classical music and opera. My other hobby is medical philately. I love watching football. I support Arsenal in the English Premier League. I have travelled extensively with my wife.

TS: YOU RECENTLY PUBLISHED YOUR OWN AUTOBIOGRAPHY. WHY?

My book entitled *'In at the Deep End'* was published by Progress Press and launched by Her Excellency the President Marie Louise Coleiro Preca. I decided to write it to explain, perhaps also to myself, the developments in my life and career as a doctor and surgeon in Malta and abroad, as well as to provide an overview of the social and historical events which marked Malta in those years and of the medical developments which concerned my profession. I dedicated the book to my wife, Irene, who was a beacon of strength for me but who unfortunately passed away before she could read our shared experiences. ❄️



Investiture in the Sovereign Military Order of St John, 2008



The Urology team on Prof. Cutajar's retirement, 2001. From left Surgeons P. Zammit, S. Mattocks, Prof. Cutajar, K. German, R. Jovanovic, and two head nurses Stephen Balzan [2nd from left, partially hidden] & Maria Pace [far right]

I READ THE SYNAPSE BECAUSE...

It is like a breath of fresh air keeping me abreast with various aspects of medicine beyond my speciality.

