CARNIVAL TIME IN PRE-WAR SENGLEA

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Very little indeed has been written about the pre-World War Two Carnival in Cottonera, and how it was celebrated, especially in Senglea. It was a folklore event that has died out. An article was written about it by Mons. Arturo Bonnici (Lehen is-Sewwa, February 20, 1971). He was from Senglea, and lived right on the spot where most of the Carnival events were held. Other short write-ups appeared from time to time in local newspapers, but photographs are scarce indeed to come by, and the very few that survived the blitzes are hard to trace. My descriptions of Carnival scenes are personal observations made during my boyhood there in the late 30's. I had some help from old-timers but have kept descriptions of Carnival celebrations as much as possible as personal reminiscences. Perhaps from various scattered sources some folklore student would make further research and make a much wider study of Carnival in Cottonera, with special reference, of course, to Senglea, where the main celebrations were organised and held, up to WW II.

Senglea celebrated its own three-day Carnival, and this activity has long been seriously taken care of by a local committee. It has been held and organised in this city since time immemorial, and vied with the Carnival festivities held in Valletta. Traditionally, Valletta's old-time Carnival was for the Order's members and foreigners serving the Order, while Senglea's was for the indigenous Maltese population of the Three Cities. But Senglea's Carnival was fast losing ground to that sponsored by Government in Valletta, and up to the start of WW II hostilities this Carnival was still held in Senglea.

It was really the children who opened the celebrations and Carnival festivities on Thursday morning, Giovedi' Gras. Groups of urchins from the poorer areas went through the streets of Senglea making a din. Dressed in odd, old clothing and headgear, their faces besmeared with soot and red paste, they went around banging on tins with sticks of wood, shouting and singing: "Wi, Wi, Karnival! ... Illumjibda l-Karnival!" (Yeah, Yeah, Carnival!...Today begins Carnival!) But this was customary and usual, performed in every city and village, provoking approving smiles or unwelcome stares from bystanders, barking of dogs and scampering of cats in terror...

It was three days of revelry, merriment gaiety and frolic, starting on Sunday and ending on Tuesday night; Senglea was a happy town, and its citizens loved to swing to light, lively tunes, provided by the civic band for the occasion. Many people from all over Malta crowded Strada Vittoria for these days of merriment, and bars and cafes along that main street did brisk business, and so did the sweetmeat and perlini hawkers.

In the parish church, \textit{Kwaranturi} service was held on each of the three Carnival days, with prayers to atone for the "sins" committed during those "dark days" of carnival, as they were called by pious persons and preachers. However, King Carnival ruled Senglea and everyone present enjoyed himself.

That part of the city's geophysical feature at the lower end of Strada Vittoria, provided a perfect setting for such an occasion. Costumed companies and \textit{maskarati} dancers commenced their dance from the hilltop of Strada Vittoria near Strada San Pietro e Paolo, and proceeded dancing downhill to the widest part of the main street, where they continued their dance, and crowds also gathered for the spectacle. Many costumed people and companies came from many parts of Malta for the occasion, to dance or show themselves in Senglea. Performances were held at street corners, and later on companies in costume went to the other two neighbouring cities to perform their dances there. There were usually few mounted ornate floats, except for tradi-
tional animal-driven carts, loaded with country people, singing their ghana, or performing short, humorous sketches. karozzini dressed up and decorated for the occasion, with people in costume, who entered Senglea to entertain the public.

Senglea's civic band, The Queen's Own had a band stand at the lower end of Strada Vittoria, where it played its annual light and varied music for the costumed and organised companies. For the occasion it played popular jazz tunes and light music, waltzes, mazurkas, polkas and gallops for the general public to dance in a large, open-air social fete. Carnival festivities ended with a giant ball, in which many of those present joined in. So ended an annual happy event to the sound of merry tunes that interspersed many a programme given by The Queen's Own civic band.

As a rule, children were not allowed out in the streets during these Carnival days, unless accompanied by grown-ups. My brother and I were very rarely allowed to go out to watch these street celebrations. On the whole, these Carnival activities were sober and law-abiding. As we lived near the Isola Main Gate, Senglea's main arterial connection to the rest of Malta, from the window we were able to watch decorated vehicles and costumed companies entering Senglea to take part in Carnival festivities, or from along stone and balustrated balcony of the S.O.R.C. (Subordinate Officers Recreation Club), overlooking Strada Due Porte. However, urchins invaded the streets, and together with grown-ups they pestered the maskarati with the following rhymed verses:

Maskarata tini perlina,
Ghax warajk ghandek xdina
Iddur, taqbeż u toghla,
U taghmlilna gabirjola.

or:-

Maskarat, tini perlina,
Ghax warajk ghandek xdina,
Tigi tigri warajk Gola,
Biex taghmllekk gabirjola

(Masked one, give me a confetti,
As a monkey is just behind you,
Turning around and jumping high,
And makes a somersault)

(Masked one give me a confetti,
As a monkey happens to follow you
Gola comes chasing you,
To perform a somersault for you.)

and other rhymed verses, such as:-

Wi, Wi, Karnival!
Naghtuha ghax-xalar!
Ejja ngawdu l-Karnival,
Wi, Wi, Karnival!,
Niddivertu kbar u żghar
Wi, Wi i i i i i i!!!

(Yeah, Yeah, Carnival!,
Let us all enjoy it!
Let us all enjoy Carnival,
Yeah, Yeah, Carnival!,
Enjoy it young and old!
Yeah, Yeah.... !!!)

It was a carefree and unrestrained participation for all, and even British residents and their children, besides organisng Carnival activities and dances in their own clubs, rented costumes and mingled with the local revellers. Occasionally, one could see sailors of the Royal Navy mingling with the crowds to enjoy themselves in the frolic after bars close down.

During these three days of Carnival, my mother rented Carnival costumes which she made herself, and hundreds of these of all sizes and colours, designed by my father, used to be hung in one of our larger rooms for viewing. Prospective Carnival revellers usually put down a pound deposit on a rented costume, put it on, and rushed out to join the general fun in the streets.

After performances in Senglea the Carnival companies proceeded to Cospicua and performed their dances in Piazza Gavino Gulia, to be followed by another performance in Piazza Paolino Vassallo, to rouse the Carnival spirit there. Later on, after a few drinks at Cospicua, the companies proceeded to Vittoriosa where they
The Capstan's Dance (Iż-Żifna tal-Argnu)

they carried a heavy, wooden capstan with its long, wooden levers........
performed dances and sang songs in Victory Square to the music of the city's own civic band's merry tunes.

The Capstan's Dance (Iż-Żifna tal-Argnu)
During one particular Carnival, I was impressed by one distinct dance, a folk dance performed by a group of young men from the Punta area of Senglea, at a crossing near Isola Main Gate. My father told me, it was an 18th century Maltese Capstan's Folk Dance. These young men were dressed as 18th century Maltese seamen's dress with horizontal blue stripes, wide open white shirt, white rough cotton trousers, rolled up trunks, red sash and red barnuta. Wherever they went around, they carried a heavy, wooden capstan with its long, wooden levers. For their dancing they had four musicians; a flute player, a fiddler, a rabbaba player, and a tambourine player, who, while beating rhythm with their hands and elbows, danced and jumped all the while. The sailors ended their dance by raising both their hands high up in the air, giving a big shout and turning to face the public. This old folk dance, Żifna tal-Argnu, has since long been forgotten. It was that maritime folk tradition particular only to Senglea.

Death of Carnival, Coffins and Komitīva Band
Carnival celebrations ended on late Tuesday evening, and nearly all the Societies and Clubs that organised Carnival dances on their premises prepared some coffin for the end of the celebrations. As soon as the communal open-air ball and dancing ended in Strada Vittoria lower end stretch, a crowd of masked people, led by a masked reveller dressed as "Death", carrying a scythe, went around the city streets, dancing and jumping about, accompanied by a small band, the Komitiva Band (Banda ta' Indri'), and people carrying a black-painted cardboard coffin, representing Carnival. All this was done in a mock funeral, and the crowd, sang repeatedly in Maltese, in gallop rhythm, the following folk tune:-

Everyone has to die,
They'll take us in a coffin;
And then to the cemetery,
And there worms will eat us up.

(for the musical interpretation and transcription, I am indebted to Mro. Paul Arnaud).
There were two other variations of this short rhymed song:

(2) Kulhadd irid imut,
Johduna ġo tebut,
Jitfughna ġewwa hofra,
U ġisimna jieklu d-dud.

(Everyone has to die,
They will take us in a coffin,
They'll throw us in a pit,
Then worms will eat our corpse.)

(3) Kulhadd irid imut,
Iqeghduna ġo tebut,
Jitfghuna ġewwa l-bahar,
U hemmekk jikluna l-hut.

(Everyone has to die,)
They will put us in a coffin,
They will throw us in the sea,
And then fish will eat us up.)

At times, the song was sung slowly like a dirge. In the crowd there were persons dressed as hags with long hair, imitating the old-time bikkejja (professional mourners) who shrieked, wailed and wept, and as they wore long haired wigs, they tore and threw pieces of hair inside the coffin. The crowd wended its way through part of Strada Due Porte, then turned down to Strada Prigione, then proceeded through the narrow Strada San Giuseppe to Strada San Giuliano and turned to the Marina. The "mourners" and band went along an to the end of the strand, near Strada Dolori, where, after much mocking, wailing and shrieking, the coffin was thrown into the sea. The crowd then went back to Strada Vittoria, whence the revellers slowly dispersed to their homes, remembering that on the following day, Ash Wednesday, (Ras ir-Randan), Lent begins with its strict fasting and penance.

There were in Senglea, some rhymed verses relating to the end and "Death of Carnival", to Ash Wednesday and Lenten fasting:-

(a) Issa spiċċa l-Karnival
Ghada hu Ras ir-Randan.

(Carnival is over now.
Tomorrow is the beginning of lent.)

(b) Il-Karnival spiċċa u miet,
Ghada l-Erbgha tal-Irmied,

(Carnival is finished and dead,
Tomorrow is Ash Wednesday.)

(c) Ghadda u spiċċa l-Karnival,
Kemm bdejna nixxalaw!
Ghada għas-sawma tar-Randan
Hobż u ilma u bakkaljaw.

(Carnival is finished and gone,
How we have enjoyed it!
Tomorrow for the Lenten fast,
Bread and water and salted cod)

The "elite", professional, class-conscious people who spoke in Italian (to be apart), who rhymed this:

Oggi gallina,
Domani sardina.

(Today a chicken,
Tomorrow a sardine.)

(Piu Grech, Senglea)

Only bad weather could have spoilt this fun but during the winter months, the people of Senglea organised their winter activities along Strada Vittoria, in their many social clubs or in theatres, such as the Teatro Nazionale, with well-organised fancy dress dances, in a big way, which were known as Veljuni.