

The Origins of the Scout Movement in Gozo

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Scouting is an adventure that will prepare its members for life.

Introduction

The Scout Movement in Gozo owes its beginning to Mr Carmelo Joseph Flores, a Maltese teacher at the Secondary School in Gozo. The first Scout Troop, known as The Gozo Secondary School Troop (No. 16), was set up on the 1st November 1916 and it was registered on the 24th November 1916. The Troop, with Mr Flores as Scoutmaster, was recognised officially by the Scout Association of Malta on the 26th December 1916. On the day of registration, the Troop consisted of 19 Scouts, but a year later, the number had increased to about 27.

One of the first problems which the Troop had to face, was that of having a place where to hold its meetings. Through the intervention of W.C. Millard, Gozo Secretary for the Government, the Scouts were allocated a Government property at Triq Żenqa in the Citadel. Since 1890, this building had housed the archives of the Gozo Law Courts but it was then refurbished so that it could be used by the Scouts.

This early experience of Scouting in Gozo is followed by a period during which there is no evidence of any form of Scouting activity on the island. The movement became popular again in the 1930s, when several Boy Scout Groups cropped up in Gozo namely Victoria, Lyceum, Għarb, Għasri, Żebbuġ, Xagħra, Xewkija, Għajnsielem and Nadur. A census on the number of Scouts in Malta, held in 1938, shows that in Gozo there were 359 Scouts in all: Għajnsielem 38, Għarb 37, Għasri 31, Lyceum 27, Nadur 68, Victoria 47, Xewkija 25, Xagħra 21 and Żebbuġ 15.

At the time the Scouts used to meet in a building close to the chapel known as San Ġakbu in Main Square, nowadays known as Independence Square. When, World War II broke out, membership dwindled. However, during the war, the Victoria Scouts played a part in the 'war effort'. The Scouts were used as messengers to give air raid alarms between police stations and churches.

When the war ended, the few members that had survived the war used to meet in Casa Bondi in the Citadel. In 1948, the Victoria Scout Group was amalgamated with the Salesian Scout Group of the Don Bosco Oratory. However, due to the numerous activities organised at the Oratory, the interest in the Scout Group waned gradually and this was dissolved in 1964.

During the 1950s, the Lyceum Scout Troop was formed again. However its existence was short-lived. During the same period, other Troops were formed at Sannat, the Victoria Primary School, Għajnsielem, Nadur and the Xagħra Catholic Action Movement. These too functioned for only a short while.

The Victoria Scout Group

The Victoria Scout Group, as we know it today, was officially inaugurated on the 13th July 1963. The first Group Scout Leader (GSL) was Mr. Joseph G. Grech, known as 'Skip' and the chaplain of the group was Fr Albert Curmi.



18th July 1963 - The first GSL of the Group, Joseph G. Grech and the Scouts celebrate the inauguration of their headquarters.

The Group used to meet in a house in Ghajn Qatet Street, owned by the Group Scout Leader's mother, Mrs Ġorġa Grech, who offered her house free of charge to be used 'temporarily' as the Group's headquarters. The headquarters were opened by the District Commissioner, Mr Anton Vassallo and were blessed by H.L. Mons. Giuseppe Pace, Bishop of Gozo.

Led by Mr Joe Grech, the Group continued to grow from strength to strength. In 1963, it started to publish its own newsheet. Its members took part in the fund-raising activity known as 'bob-a-job' week. The group had its own Scout band. It organised hikes and held two camps annually, in summer and during the Easter holidays. Its members took part in expeditions both locally and abroad. It performed good deeds. It helped out whenever it was asked to. Most important of all, it gave its members an education for life, according to the Scouting Method.

The first GSL of the Group, Mr Joe Grech remained at the helm for 27 years. Towards the end of 1990, Mr Grech was chosen by the Scout Association of Malta to take up the post of Chief Commissioner of

the Association. This meant a new GSL was needed. The person chosen was Mr Lorrie Saliba who still occupies this post.

In July 1989, the dream of the group of having its own premises came true when, after several years of hard work by council members, supporters, former Scouts and friends of the Group, a new Scout headquarters was inaugurated in Santa Dminka Street, Victoria. The Group had occupied the house lent by Mrs Ġorġa Grech for 27 years. Unfortunately, this great benefactor of the group was not there to see the realisation of this dream because she had passed away in March 1989. The Group is forever indebted to her. Were it not for her gesture way back in 1963, to provide the group with a premises it could call its headquarters, the story of the Group might have been quite different.

The story of the headquarters did not end here. Another inauguration ceremony, this time of an extension to the headquarters was held in March 2001. The original headquarters had become too small to accommodate the ever increasing number of members so the Group had to undertake yet another major project to improve its facilities.



8th July 1989 - The inauguration of the new HQ by the President of Malta, Dr Ċensu Tabone.

Both headquarters had their share of distinguished visitors. In February 1964, the Chief Scout of the Commonwealth Sir Charles McLean paid a visit. On the 7th November 1998, on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the arrival of Scouting in Malta, it was the turn of Dr Charles Moreillon, Secretary General of the World Organisation of the Scout Movement. Along the years, various Presidents of Malta visited the headquarters. There were also visits by Prime Ministers, Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries, MEPs, bishops, officials of the Scout Association of Malta, various Scout groups from Malta and Scouts from all around the world. The headquarters also hosts foreign Scout Groups who are visiting Gozo.



22nd February 1964 - The Chief Scout of the Commonwealth, Sir Charles McLean visits Gozo and awards the Thanks Badge to Mrs Gõrga Grech.

The Group was also present during certain historical events, such as the consecration of Bishop N. Cauchi in 1967 and that of Bishop M. Grech in 2005 and the visit to Gozo by Pope John Paul II in May 1990. In 1967 and 1992, it took part in the activities held on the occasion of the visits to Gozo by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

The present Group is still doing its best to continue the tradition of Scouting and offer a quality experience (and lots of fun!) to its members. While the training programme has evolved along the years to meet the needs and realities of today's children and youths, the core values of Scouting have not changed. The Scout Law and Scout Promise are still the same and bind members to do their duty to God and country and to be of service to others. The principle of learning by doing, working in a team, caring for the environment, the support provided by adults and the importance of youth involvement

from the planning stage to the actual carrying out of the activities undertaken by the Group are still of the utmost importance. The Group's members attend the weekly meetings at headquarters as well as other outdoor activities and Group and sectional camps. Members of the Group participate in national activities such as national camps, the annual rally for all the Scout and Girl Guide Groups in Malta and Gozo, Scout Forums and joint activities between both Maltese or foreign Scout groups. They take part in expeditions around the Maltese Islands and abroad. They participate in youth exchange projects funded by the EU. The group still issues its Newssheet on a quarterly basis. Scouts carry out clean-ups or tree planting sessions in different localities. Leaders of the Group attend training courses at Island Headquarters in Malta before they are registered as qualified leaders.

The Victoria Scout Group puts a special emphasis on the importance of being of service to others. Each year it organises different fund raising activities for the benefit of other philanthropic organisations, both local as well as international ones. These include car washes, walks for charity, bicycle hikes, lunches, barbeques, blood donating sessions, providing support in activities organised by the local councils and visits to the elderly. In this way it instils in its members the importance of thinking of others before one's self, which words are an integral part of the Scout Law and Promise.

The Gozitan Scouts have participated in almost all the World Scout Jamborees held from 1920 onwards. Jamborees are international camps held



April 2017 - Car wash in aid of ARKA and OASI

once every 4 years in different countries where Scouts from all over the world come together for around 10 days. The last Jamboree was held in Japan in July and August 2015 and the participants amounted to around 33,600. The next Jamboree will be held in the USA in 2019 and the Victoria Scout Group will be represented by 18 members.

In 2013, the Group celebrated its 50th anniversary by publishing a book which narrates its history. The author of this book is former Venture Scout Leader, Mr Carmel C. Cachia. In 2016, the Group celebrated the 100th anniversary of Scouting in Gozo. A parade was held around the streets of Victoria. The majority of the Maltese Scout groups and several Scout bands took part in this rally.



October 2016 - 100th anniversary parade in Gozo - photo courtesy of Mr Charles Spiteri

Presently, Gozo has 2 Scout Groups, the Victoria Scout Group and the Xagħra Scout Group. The latter Group was one of the first Scout Groups to be set up in Gozo and was one of the most active groups in the 1930s. In 1952 another attempt at reviving the group was made. In the 1970s, on the initiative of Vincent Vella, a leader with the Żejtun Group, the Xagħra Scout Group was revived. The same Scout Leader was instrumental in reopening the Xagħra Scout Group in May 2008. This Scout Group recently celebrated its 10th anniversary.

Presently the Victoria Scout Group boasts of around 130 members, divided into four sections: Cubs, Scouts, Venture Scouts and Rover Scouts. This number also includes the members of the Group Council. The number of members in the Xagħra



May 2016 - Official opening of the Xagħra Scout Group headquarters.

Scout Group amount to 111. This also includes members of their Group Council. The Xagħra Group is divided into four sections: the Beaver Colony, the Pack Section, the Scout Troop and the Venture Unit. The first GSL was Mr Vincent Vella who occupied the post from 2008 to 2012. In June 2012, Ms Loraine Borg became the 2nd GSL for the Xagħra Group. The present Group Scout Leader is Mr Josmar Azzopardi and he has occupied the post since October 2017. The Xagħra Scout Group can also boast of owning its own headquarters which was inaugurated in May 2016. During the year, the two Scout Groups organise several joint activities.

Throughout the years, the Victoria Scout Group has received several recognitions for the services rendered to the Gozitan community. The Venture Unit was placed 2nd amongst 18 submissions in the Għarfien Nazżjonali Żgħażaġħ fis-Socjetà 2003. In 2007 the Group was awarded Ġieħ Għawdex by the Circolo Gozitano. In 2010, it was awarded Ġieħ



June 2010 - Ġieħ il-Belt Victoria



January 2016 - The late Joe Grech during the awards ceremony at the AGM at headquarters - photo courtesy of Dr Victor Mercieca

il-Belt Vittoria by the local Council of Victoria. In 2010, it was chosen as the President's Group in recognition for its efforts to raise a considerable amount of money (€4606) for the Strina campaign in aid of the Community Chest Fund.

Quo Vadis?

The Scout Groups on Gozo have achieved a lot in their mission by helping Gozitan children and youths to Be Prepared for life. They faithfully carry out the Scouting Mission, that of educating young people to play a constructive role in society by contributing towards their local, national and international community. They have also spread the Vision for Scouting, that of creating a better world. They can be proud of what they have achieved so far. However they do not intend to rest on their laurels. They believe there is still more to be done. And so they will do their best to keep up the good work.

Final Note

At the end of this article, I feel I must pay tribute to the memory of Mr Joe Grech, the founder of the Group and its first GSL who sadly passed away unexpectedly

on the 6th September 2018. In 2007, when his two terms in office as Chief Commissioner came to an end, he was granted the status of Scouter Emeritus. Mr Grech remained an active member of the Group's council and continued to offer his constant help and invaluable advice to the group he loved so much till his untimely demise. In 2009 he was chosen as the Group Patron. Skip had also occupied other posts in the Scout Association of Malta amongst which that of Training Commissioner, District Commissioner for Gozo, Assistant Chief Commissioner and as a member of the Awards Committee at Island Headquarters. Mr Grech dedicated his whole life to Scouting and both the Victoria Scout Group as well as the Scout Association of Malta are forever indebted to him. Was it not for his determination, hard work and complete commitment to Scouting, the Group and its story would surely have been totally different.

Anita Muscat, from Victoria works as a Learning Support Educator at St. Theresa Primary School, Kerċem. She joined the Victoria Scout Group in 1992 and she is the CSL - Cub Scout Leader for the two Packs within the group. She is also the editor of the Group's quarterly publication, the 'Victoria Scout Group News Sheet'.