

A VILLAGE AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY - NAXXAR

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This study is based primarily on a document written by the parish priest between 1892-1903 wherein he listed all the inhabitants of Naxxar with personal details including nicknames, trade/occupation of the head of each family and many other details, thus throwing light on the socio-economic situation of the village – a veritable data-base.

An Overview of the Village

Village life at Naxxar during this period was dominated by two major events: the building of a new church¹ and the embellishment of Palazzo Parisio by the Marquis Scicluna.² The two events brought out to the forefront and underlined, more than ever before, the strong influence the presence of wealthy families held among the community. The question whether to build a new church or enlarge the existing one had originated way back in 1890 when the Marquis Bugeja left £2000 for the building of the side aisles. Those who later advocated the building of a new church were led by Salvatore Ellul Bonnici and Count Strickland who practically represented the Marquis Scicluna. It was these families who dominated village life in

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1. See P. Catania, *IN-NAXXAR-Titwillet fl-Istorja*, Malta 1999, 270-293 for a full description.
2. The Marquis Giuseppe Scicluna had bought Parisio Palace in 1898 and was transforming it into a stately baroque palace. This work lasted till 1906. See P. Catania, *Naxxar – A Village and Its People*, editors P. Catania and L.J. Scerri, Malta 2000, 359-374.

these years. By this time, most of them had established themselves firmly in the village through a good number of intermarriages.³

Apart from this quite turbulent socio-religious problem, however, there were many other positives. The village saw the beginning of a new type of entertainment: the theatre. This type of entertainment was to be dominant in the village for many years, practically throughout the whole of the twentieth century.⁴ When, finally, the “church problem” was solved by the enlargement of the existing one some years later, the impetus was carried on by further embellishments in the church and to village feast decorations. All this, once again, enhanced by the continued sponsorship of the wealthy families especially the Marquis Scicluna.⁵

The predominantly agricultural community of the nineteenth century was slowly changing into a more diversified, cosmopolitan one. The traditional craftsmen of the village, blacksmiths and carpenters, had now come to the forefront. The Naxxar territorial limits, which at the time still extended to St. Paul’s Bay, were indeed an agricultural one. But Naxxar proper was a veritable workshop where every type of furniture was produced and anything that was worked with iron was hammered into shape by the village craftsmen.

On the religious side, the dilly-dallying between new church and enlargement had dragged on for far too long and created many a problem for the populace. But this did not stop further embellishments in the church. This period saw also the establishment of the parish of St. Paul’s Bay, hence a reduction in the Naxxar parish boundaries.

A Diary of Events 1899-1905⁶

Wednesday 04.01.1899: The new Magistrate for the District Court, Dr Pasquale Frendo Azzopardi, held his first session when he heard a number of criminal cases.

Thursday 26.01.1899: A Government Notice regarding a Regulatory

3. Marquis Carlo Bugeja married Joanna Ellul Bonnici in 1898; Carlo’s son Eduardo (from his previous marriage to Rosa Balzan) married Antonia Ellul Bonnici in 1899; Gualtero Ellul Bonnici married Maria Bugeja in 1904; Giuseppe Milanesi, the wine merchant, had married Annetta Amato, daughter of Dr. Salvatore; Maria, daughter of Giuseppe Milanesi, had married Michele Said, another merchant, in 1894.

4. See Catania (1999), 238-247.

5. *Ibid.*,161-164.

6. All the information in this section is taken from the diary of Dr Ignazio Micallef entitled, ‘*Memorie di fatti Avvenuti in Malta e Gozo e specialmente in Casal Naxaro*’, Quaderno IX and X, covering the period from 30 October 1898 to October 1906. This diary is in the Naxxar Parish Archive (NPA).

Plan for some streets in Naxxar was published in the *Malta Government Gazette*. A copy of it was also fixed at the Police Station.

Saturday 28.01.1899: After almost three and a half months, the work on the restoration of the church organ, carried out by the Italian Guzeppe Bergomi from Brescia, was finished. It cost £40.00 sterling.⁷

Friday 17.03.1899: A water tap at the corner between St George's Street and Main Street was removed by order of the Government.

Thursday 18.05.1899: The District Courts were reduced to four. Naxxar became part of the 2nd District, hence its court was suppressed.

Sunday 21.05.1899: Bishop Salvatore Gaffiero conferred the sacrament of Confirmation.

Wednesday 14.06.1899: The District Magistrate held the last session in the Naxxar Court.

Thursday 15.06.1899: The Court Registrar, Mr Luigi Falzon, moved all papers, registers, and proceedings books to Birkirkara.

Friday 08.09.1899: The feast day was held with great pomp. In the church, a new silver antipendium for the main altar was inaugurated. This silver work was carried out in Milan on a design by the renowned painter Lazzaro Pisani. The plaster models were made by Antonio Sciortino. It cost £500.00 sterling, a sum collected by the parish priest over a period of two years.⁸

Tuesday 26.12.1899: The letter box in the square was moved to St. Lucy Street, corner with Prison Street, where the new police station was located.⁹

Sunday 31.12.1899: Two youths quarrelled in the area known as *ta l'Imdawra*. Luigi Micallef hit his cousin Giuseppe Cilia with a knife. Giuseppe died four days later.

Monday 26.02.1900: The Marquis Carlo Bugeja died at his residence in Victory Square at the age of 56. He was the president of the *La Pace* Band Club. The band accompanied his coffin till the end of Cross Street. It was then transported to the Addolorata Cemetery.¹⁰

Sunday 11.03.1900: The parish priest announced that the Bishop had accepted the people's wish, expressed in a petition made in January,

7. This organ had been installed in the parish church in 1775.

8. See A. Camilleri, 'Il-Ventartal ta' l-ortal maġġur fil-Knisja Arċipretali tan-Naxxar', *Feast Programme 1999*, 29-33.

9. The present premises of the Victory Band Club.

10. Vittoria Palace, Marquis Bugeja's residence in Victory Square, is presently the premises of the Peace Band Club.

to enlarge the church with the building of two side aisles. Bishop Pace had also appointed the Rev Luca Zammit, Rev Giovanni Debono and Rev Francesco Debono to see to the necessary works. The Parish priest encouraged the people to contribute since the sum of £2000 bequeathed by the Marquis Vincenzo Bugeja for this purpose was not enough. That same day, preliminary work was begun.

Saturday 31.03.1900: Building material was transported from a number of quarries in the *ta Xwieki* area to the square for the construction of the aisles.

July 1900: During this month, house number 42A in St. Lucy Street was taken over by the Colonel of the Maltese Regiment to be used as an armoury for the regiment.¹¹

August 1900: During this month, two pavements were constructed in St Lucy Street from the square up to Prison Street.

Monday 24.12.1900: For the first time, midnight mass was celebrated on Christmas Eve at the parish church. Previously, it used to be celebrated at 5.00 o'clock in the morning.

Saturday 29.12.1900: Rev Luca Zammit was installed Canon of the Mdina Cathedral.

Monday 31.12.1900: As in all other churches in Malta and around the Catholic world, mass was celebrated at midnight in thanksgiving for the many graces received during the previous century and, at the same time, to ask God to help the communities into the new century. From 28 December to the 30th, Spiritual Exercises had been held in the church of Naxxar with daily sermons for men and women.

Sunday 31.03.1901: A population census was taken for the whole island. The numerators at Naxxar were Luigi Wettinger and Tommaso Muscat, both from Ghargħur. On the occasion of this census, a number of house numbers were changed.

Sunday 26.05.1901: On this Pentecost Sunday, Bishop Salvatore Gaffiero conferred the sacrament of Confirmation to many boys and girls in the Naxxar parish church.

Saturday 15.06.1901: 43 persons were arrested by the police, among them the Rev Fortunato Debono and the businessman Antonio Zammit, in connection with disturbances on the previous Sunday regarding the enlargement of the church. The balustrades in front of the church had been

11. Previously, the armoury was in number 52-53, Victory Square, the house which nowadays houses the Naxxar Lions Football Club.



The façade of Naxxar's parish church in 1886. It was eventually replaced by the present façade by 1913 when side aisles were added.

broken. They were later all released for lack of evidence. According to advocate Ignazio Micallef, the cause of all this was the weak character and bad administration of the bishop when he kept the population of Naxxar waiting for ten years to definitely decide whether to enlarge the church or build a new one.

Sunday 07.07.1901: The Hon Dr Fortunato Mizzi held a public meeting in Naxxar, speaking against the introduction of English instead of Italian, the introduction of new taxes and the increase of existing ones.¹²

Saturday 10.08.1901: Master mason Pio Ebejer, responsible for the building of the church aisles, took the necessary measurements to begin construction the day after. Stone dresser Fedele Falzon, *tal barbier*, began preparing the stone. On the previous days, work had begun on the clearing of rubble and terrain for the building of the foundations. On the following days, other workmen emptied the water from the big cistern under the church parvis since foundations were to be constructed there.

Sunday 08.09.1901: On this feast day, the church was illuminated for the first time with acetelene gas. For the same occasion, two papier-mâché figures, the work of master statuary Carlo Darmanin, were placed on two corners of the band stand.¹³

Thursday 19.09.1901: The draughtsman Luigi Borg from Birkirkara took some measurements in the area behind the church, where the proposed new church was to be built. It was to be a rotunda and was to have an octagonal shape. Mr Salvatore Ellul Bonnici and a certain Francesco Stivala known as *il bambin* (*ix-xitan* [the devil] would have suited him better) were behind all this. On the following days, notices were fixed in several places informing the people that work was to begin on 23 September. However, on the night between the 21st and 22nd, supporters of the enlargement of the church daubed these posters in black.

Monday 23.09.1901: A group of about 200 men and boys of all ages gathered in the square and then moved to the field behind the church and began to remove soil from various fields. They were doing this without any permits at all. The plan of the church, which had been sketched by Professor Nicola Zammit way back in 1883, was also affixed to a wall.

12. Dr Micallef gives a full description of this meeting. The orators were first entertained by the parish priest in his house and then, led by the official flags of the *La Pace* Band Club, they walked up to the square where a platform had been prepared. They were then introduced to the public by the parish priest.
13. The complete set of four angels which used to adorn the band stand is today kept for public display in one of the halls behind the parish church.

The crowd was indeed a mixed one. There were stone-workers, carpenters, blacksmiths, shoemakers, and businessmen. They had high expectations of building a new church that would be bigger than that of Mosta! And they continued to work on the following days after their normal work. All this was happening while the building of the side aisles was still going on.

Sunday 29.09.1901: A big crowd led by Salvatore Ellul Bonnici met in the square and then walked over to the parish house where they asked the Rev Briffa for permission to work. He promised them he would speak to the bishop on the following day but they ignored this and went over to continue the work they had begun. In the afternoon, Mr Ellul Bonnici even brought a band from Birkirkara to entertain the crowd.

Friday 04.10.1901: A delegation from the party in favour of the new church met the Bishop in Marsalforn, Gozo. He promised them to solve the problem in the best possible way.

Saturday 12.10.1901: Construction work on the aisles was stopped completely. In view of the mounting excitement of the population in favour of the building of a new church, a meeting was held between representatives of the two groups, wherein it was agreed that work on the side aisles would stop and the other party would make good for the expenses incurred up to that point.

Monday 14.10.1901: A delegation went over to Gozo to meet the Bishop again. He now promised them that the necessary decree for the building of the new church would be issued in a short time.

Saturday 30.11.1901: The marriage took place in Rome between the Marquis Giuseppe Scicluna and Corinna Abela Pulis.¹⁴

Sunday 15.12.1901: The parish priest informed the congregation, after the Sunday high mass, that the bishop had informed him that the relevant decree would soon be issued. He therefore encouraged everybody to support this big project. He also asked them to possibly clear the square from building material before Christmas.

Sunday 19.01.1902: The parish priest announced that the Bishop had issued the decree, on 15 January, giving permission to the people to build a new church.

Sunday 26.01.1902: The parish priest informed the congregation, after the first mass, that a committee had been formed for the construction of the new church. On that same day, four priests organized a collection through all the streets of the village.

14. The Marquis was married at the Vatican by the Pope himself. Corinna was the daughter of the pharmacist of the village.

Saturday 01.02.1902: The parish priest, as president of the committee, presented a petition to the Governor to release government property to the committee for the construction of the church.

Tuesday 25.03.1902: A thirteen year old boy, Edward Muscat, died tragically when he fell into the reservoir next to the church. It was being emptied of building material.

May 1902: Towards the end of this month, a number of workers who had arrived from Palermo to work at Palazzo Parisio returned home after finishing their job. They were marble-layers under the direction of Professor Giuseppe Valenti.¹⁵

Summer 1902: The summer months saw the formal beginning of the theatre in Naxxar. Two small theatres were built for that season, one called *Vittoria*, built in a garden in Castro Street, and another called *La Pace*, built in a small garden in New Street.

Friday 07.11.1902: The approved Regulatory Plan for the streets of Naxxar behind the church was published. It included the area where the new church was to be built.

Wednesday 31.12.1902: The Roman painter Filippo Venuti left Naxxar together with his family after finishing his pictorial work at Palazzo Parisio.

Sunday 31.05.1903: The parish priest informed the people that he was leaving the parish as he had been appointed archpriest for Senglea, his home town. He left Naxxar on 5 June.

Sunday 14.06.1903: Work began officially on the construction of the new church by master mason Francesco Stivala, *il bambin*, together with other masons under the direction of Count Carlo Strickland.

Tuesday 11.08 1903: Eight priests applied for the vacant seat of the parish of Naxxar.

Friday 14.08.1903: The Rev Francesco Saverio Mifsud, parish priest of Gudja, was informed that he was being nominated the new parish priest of Naxxar.

Thursday 27.08.1903: The Rev F. S. Mifsud visited Naxxar for the first time.

Wednesday 25.11.1903: Catarina Micallef, wife of Notary Emmanuel, died at her residence in Piazza Vittoria. She had been born in Naxxar in 1825.¹⁶

15. The names of these Sicilian workers were listed in the document which is being studied here.

16. Catarina was the mother of Dr Ignazio Micallef, the author of this diary.

Sunday 29.11.1903: Rev Mifsud celebrated mass in Naxxar for the first time. It was the first Sunday in Advent.

Sunday 20.12.1903: Rev Salvatore Milanesi celebrated his first solemn mass in the Naxxar parish church. The following Sunday, another newly-ordained priest, Rev Carlo Cortis, also celebrated his first solemn mass.

Tuesday 12.01.1904: Rev F.S. Mifsud was officially installed as parish priest of Naxxar.

Saturday 03.09.1904: Elisa Scicluna from Naxxar, at 28 years of age already Headmistress of the primary school at Msida, was transferred to the school in Naxxar.

October 1904: Work on the construction of the foundations of the new church was stopped because of lack of funds.¹⁷

Saturday 10.12.1904: The reading club *Vittoria* was closed. It had been established in the village way back in 1854.

Tuesday 11.04.1905: The parish priest announced that Bishop Pietro Pace had issued a decree whereby the territory of St.Paul's Bay was established as a separate parish. The official decree was dated 9 April 1905.

Thursday 18.05.1905: An Italian company made up of men and women under the direction of Antonio Zerbini who had been holding representations with (and without) horses in a small garden at *Il-Hofra* since 10 March, left for Cospicua. They had held three-hour shows every Saturday and Sunday.

19-21.07.1905: A number of oleander trees were planted in the square in addition to other oleander and olive trees which had been planted several years previously. They replaced three cypress trees which had been planted there some 40 years before.

Sunday 24.09.1905: Abele Ellul Bonnici, 22 year-old son of Salvatore, while fishing in a small boat near St Paul's Islands, was driven out by a strong wind and disappeared. He was found dead five days later near the island of Comino. After formal recognition by his father and two brothers in the presence of a Magistrate, his body was buried in the small cemetery on the island.

The 1901 Census

The Census Report of 1901 gives a total population of 3429 for Naxxar together with another 185 residents at St. Paul's Bay. In Naxxar itself, if one

17. The new parish priest had shown a complete lack of enthusiasm for the project. He had never called a meeting of the committee and did not encourage people to donate money for the project.

excludes the countryside, the population density was 917 per square mile. Actually, the village had registered a slight decrease in population because the previous census of 1891 had produced a figure of 3485 persons. During this ten-year period, there had been 1202 births and 894 deaths, hence there should have been a natural increase of 308. This number, if added to the 3485 persons enumerated in the 1891 census, should have produced a total of 3793 souls. There was, therefore, a total decrease of 364 persons. Excluding the urban areas of Malta, Naxxar had registered the biggest loss of population, a fact that can only be explained through family mobility. It will presently be noted that an appreciable number of families had moved to Sliema.

The census gives quite a healthy report on dwellings. In Naxxar itself, there were 690 dwellings including 3 common lodging houses (*kerrejas*), while in the countryside there were another 35 and 46 in St. Paul's Bay. Besides these, there were another 256 uninhabited dwellings in the central area. Other buildings in the central area included 4 mills, 2 of which were inhabited; 63 farmhouses; 103 shops/stores of which 65 were uninhabited; and 47 stables.¹⁸ A good number of the houses could be considered big with 351 having 5 rooms or more, 112 with 4 and 152 including 3 rooms. Single-roomed family houses were few, just 42. Very few cases of chronic diseases were reported.¹⁹ On the whole, therefore, the health situation was quite a good one.

But the education picture was not so rosy. Only 60 persons could speak, read and write English and only 115 knew Italian. Most had no knowledge at all of either English (2667) or Italian (2574). There were 862 children of school age but only a small percentage actually attended classes.

On considering the population by age, one could say it was a rather young population with only 163 being 65 and over. 1811 persons were under 25, 643 under 40, and another 612 under 60.²⁰ This was more or less the general picture of the Maltese islands at the time.

The Document

The document being considered consists of two volumes listing all the families living in the Naxxar parish between 1899 and 1903, but with further additions up to 1905.²¹ Therefore, they also included families

18. This rather big number of stables is explained by the large number of cabmen and cartmen as shown *infra*.

19. There were 11 lepers and 2 apoplectics.

20. I have included only figures for Naxxar in this calculation.

21. The two volumes can be considered as a type of *Status Animarum*, having definitely served the parish priest to draw up these lists year after year noting the additions/subtractions as a result of births, deaths, and movement of families to and away from Naxxar.

living in St. Paul's Bay which formed part of the Naxxar parish up till April 1905. Rev Francis Briffa, the parish priest who had taken over the spiritual direction of the parish in 1891, was a very meticulous and able administrator. He had a steady and clear handwriting, bequeathing us with a very easily readable record of all the families in the parish that had been entrusted to his spiritual care.²² It is clear from the entries that he had begun compiling this list as early as 1892, his first full year in Naxxar. The first volume covers families with surnames Abela to Gauci while the second continues from Grech to Zammit.

The families are listed in alphabetical order, according to surname, and every family under the same surname is given a number.²³ Normally, each surname begins with one person households: widows/widowers; unmarried single persons. Very often, these were the elderly members of the community. Then he continued with the other families listing first the husband, then the wife and the children, all on separate lines. Horizontally, he inserted all the relevant information spread over two adjacent pages. All this was written in this order: number of the family under the given surname; surname; Christian name; date of birth; name of parents; trade/occupation of head of family; date of marriage; date of death; other remarks; Easter obligation. He inserted the nickname of the family in red in the first column, just above the number given to the family.

Additional details were added as time went on. Thus children marrying after having been listed were marked as married, very often giving also the date of marriage and the name of the spouse. The dates of deaths were noted when this happened after the person had been listed. Missing information meant often that a person was not born in Naxxar; however, the place of birth is then given. This was also the case with marriages taking place in other villages when inhabitants of Naxxar married partners from other villages. In the parents' column, he also pointed out whether they were still alive. *Del fu Giuseppe* or *dei furono Angelo e Maria* meant that the parent/s had died. In this same column, those children who had received the sacrament of Confirmation were marked with *conf.* In the column where the occupation of husband was listed, he also noted the status of persons: single, poor, widow(er); as well as the relationship to the first-listed person:

22. Every register (Birth, Death, Marriage) begun during his term of office is wonderfully introduced by a nicely-decorated page showing the title, the year and other relevant details.
23. It is, therefore, easy to know the number of families under each given surname. He also always left two empty pages after each surname to be able to insert newly-married couples.

A typical page in the Naxxar quasi-Status Animarum of 1892-1903.

wife, son, daughter, brother, sister. The next two columns showed the dates of marriage and death.²⁴

The remarks column is full of information relating to social life: movement of families/persons into and out of Naxxar; the occupations of other members of the family like servants in Sliema/Valletta, and even servients in hospitals; whether a person was being hospitalized or was living in an old people's home. He also marked in the same column those who were serving prison sentences or were divorced, officially or not. At the very end of the second page, he then noted those who had satisfied the Easter obligation with a small letter *a*, written in pencil. From the number of *a*'s (5 at most), it is clear that he used the document as a basis for five consecutive years, 1899 to 1903.

In June 1903, parish priest Francesco Briffa left Naxxar as he was nominated archpriest in his native town Senglea. The new parish priest, Rev Francis Saviour Mifsud, did add some entries like new marriages but with little information. The change of person is quite clearly visible from the way the registers are kept. New marriages are registered up to 1905 and

24. It is from this column that we can tell that he had begun writing the list as far back as 1892.

Rev Mifsud also counted the total population for 1905. We have therefore to consider the document as covering the whole period from 1899 to 1905.

Because of the complexity of the information given, in the sense that persons might be registered twice over the period covered, after marrying or being marked as having died, it is difficult to study the document on a yearly basis. Therefore, this study covers the six years as one period of time.

The total number of persons listed in the document reaches 4769, more than the actual population figure for these years. This is due to the duplication of persons who had married: 307 were noted as having married after they were listed as members of a family. Another 101 persons, including 6 families, had moved to other villages or to a foreign country. Yet another 379 had died. The number of deaths in the Deaths Register for 1904/05 was 138; for the years 1899-1905 it was 521. This shows that, actually, 383 persons had died between 1899 and 1903, the year Rev Briffa left the parish.

Together with the parish priest there were another 18 priests, 9 of whom were still under 40 years of age and another 7 well under 60. This was quite a young and energetic group. The total population figure, according to the census of 1901, was 3429 and 185 for St Paul's Bay. But the figure noted by the parish priest in 1905 was 3294 including 127 persons whom he listed as living in St Paul's Bay.²⁵ In that year (1905), as already noted, St Paul's Bay was established as a separate parish.

The People of Naxxar

There is no doubt that the village was still considered as a predominantly agricultural locality. The largest number of 'heads of family' were listed as farmers, 180. To this figure, we have to add another 6 female farmers and another 13 (10 of them women) who were listed as farm workers. Actually, the largest number were those listed as labourers, 253 in all, but these obviously undertook any kind of job offered to them and, therefore, cannot be listed under any particular occupation. The two important tradesmen in the village were still blacksmiths (43) and carpenters (20). This was a centuries-old tradition in the village, but it is clear from the increase of master craftsmen throughout the nineteenth century that there was now a greater demand for their products. The pride of the village were

²⁵ These families are marked in the register as living in St Paul's Bay up to 1903. There were 25 families in all.

the blacksmiths who could produce anything from simple garage doors to the most complicated wrought-iron decorative works.²⁶

Two other occupations which were quite common were cart-men (*bilkarettun*, donkey-driven) and cabmen (*bil-karozzin*, horse-driven). The cart-men, 43 of them, carried stones from the many quarries in the area to building sites. The arrival of the machine-driven vehicles was still far away. Hence the cart-men made up a very important group of transport personnel! The cabmen (20) did a similar job transporting people from one place to another. On a similar level, there were two listed as couriers, probably also making use of the horse-driven cab. Yet another important occupation was that of pick-axe workers (30). These worked wherever they were needed, cutting trenches in stone quarries or in street works. Some were experts at cutting the hard coralline limestone so common in the area.²⁷

Servicing the village people for their normal daily needs were 4 butchers, 10 fish sellers, 7 vegetable sellers, 1 fruit seller, 2 milkmen, 6 bakers, 5 tailors and 4 shoemakers. The number of bakers is quite noticeable. It was still the time when housewives took their meals to be baked in the big oven of the baker, especially on Sundays. It appears that Naxxar people took great care of their houses. There were 11 whitewashers and 3 paint workers to brighten their homes. And to entertain men in the evenings they had 34 wine bars, quite a significant number. But this is understandable when considering there was no TV to keep the males at home, nor yet the general sport mania that we have nowadays. In those days, sitting in the smallish bar drinking a cup of wine with a few friends was as much of a social occasion as going to a training session or some cultural activity today.

On a different level to the working classes there were the well-to-do families, quite a significant number for a small village. Among them one could count six businessmen, six tradesmen, six builders, a building contractor, a banker, and three middlemen.

An industry that was so dominant in the eighteenth century was still lingering on: cotton. Two cotton workers are still listed and there was one of the last cotton merchants too. Three of the five mills were also still working at this time, as if to continue this touch of old. Both these two

26. See P.Catania and J. Magro, 'The Master Blacksmiths of Naxxar', *Treasures of Malta*, No 37, Vol. XIII No 1, 15-19.

27. Note in this respect the hard stone blocks on the façade of Palazzo Parisio which was being embellished at this time. Such workers were known as '*ħaddiema tal-qawwi*'.

Labourers	253	Businessmen, Bakers	6
Farmers	199	Tailors, Fishermen	5
Blacksmiths		Butchers, Shoemakers,	
Cart-men	43	Soldiers	4
Wine Bar owners	34	Paint workers	
Pick-axe workers	30	Windmill owners,	
Carpenters		Middlemen	
Cabmen	20	Street Sweepers	
Whitewashers	11	Non-Clerical workers	3
Fish sellers	10	Shepherds, Couriers,	
Vegetable sellers	7	Milkmen, Cooks	
Builders, Tradesmen	6	Cotton workers	2

Banker, Barrel-maker, Basket-maker, Candle-maker, Clerk, Cooper, Decorator, Fruit Seller, Grave-digger, Grinder, Grove-cutter, Gas-worker, Painter, Quarry-worker, Ship's Captain, Stone-dresser, Street-seller, Tobacco-cutter, and a Weigher.

Table 1: Heads of Family by Occupation

activities were reaching the end of their time. And, in keeping with this touch of old, two persons were listed as shepherds.

A small number of men were involved in activities which showed that times were changing in the village. There were two cooks, a tobacco-cutter, three non-clerical workers, a gas-worker, a ship's captain, a clerk as well as three street-sweepers!

Notwithstanding all this variety of occupations there were some people without a job. One person was listed as being without a job while seven others were officially considered as beggars. There were others whom the parish priest listed as being poor. While there were nine men so listed, the number of women was quite high, thirty in all. These were mostly widows.

The village medical doctor at this time was Dr Ignazio Zammit, while the pharmacist was Gaetano Abela-Pulis. The school headmaster was William Somerville while Maria Magro was a teacher in the same school. The most prominent members of the community were, however, the wealthy families who had, years before, moved into the village. Foremost among these were the Marquis Bugeja, the Marquis Scicluna and Count Strickland together

with Salvatore Ellul Bonnici. Among the businessmen, there was Antonio Zammit, the cotton merchant; Giuseppe Milanesi, wine merchant. Other well-to-do citizens were Maria Said, wife of the late Michele (merchant); Vittoria Mangion *Ta Teresi*; Catarina Micallef, wife of the late Notary Emmanuel; Rosa Amato, wife of late Salvatore together with her son Emmanuel who was a Legal Procurator; Michelina Cauchi; M. Antonia Decelis *tal Ispizjar*; Pietro Paolo Mifsud *ta Pulitu*. These, together with the clergy, formed the elite group in the community.

Others were making a name for themselves in a different way. Vittorio Scerri had by this time established himself as a leading decorator. He was one of about fifty craftsmen who were working for Marquis Scicluna, creating what was to be one of the most beautiful baroque palaces on the island. He had also distinguished himself as a designer when drawing intricate baroque designs for the village wrought-iron craftsmen.²⁸ Rev Fortunato Debono had also distinguished himself as a writer of Italian poetry.²⁹ Luigi Ciappara was an established actor. His occupation was actually that of a blacksmith but the parish priest made it a point to put the word *attore* in the remarks column next to his name.

Social Aspects

The structure of this community was now a very mixed one indeed. Although the majority of the inhabitants had been born in Naxxar, however, there was quite a mix. A study of the families reveals interesting details. An impressive number of spouses, 298, husbands or wives, came from another village. Quite obviously, the largest number hailed from neighbouring villages, especially Mosta and Ghargħur. Between them, these two localities provided half of that number (151). But the mix was spread and included practically the whole island. Society was thus really a very open one.³⁰

Besides such marriages, a few others had even married in a foreign country and lived there. There were Naxxar people, including whole families, living in Tunis, Alexandria, Sfax, Cairo, Gibraltar, Tripoli, Susa,

28. Vittorio was a man of many talents. He was a prolific composer, writer, church organist and band master.

29. A poetry book written by him is to be found in the Naxxar Parish Archives.

30. This was not really a new phenomenon for the village. Way back in the sixteenth century, there was already a sizable number of mixed marriages, even with foreigners. See K. Gambin, 'Casal Nasciaro during the Rule of the Order', in (editors) P. Catania and L.J. Scerri, *Naxxar -A Village And Its People*, 109-120.

Mosta – 102;	Għargħur – 49;	Birkirkara – 18;
Gozo – 16;	Valletta – 15;	Floriana – 12;
Qormi – 12;	Rabat – 12;	Lija – 9;
Balzan – 8;	Żebbuġ – 7;	Mellieħha – 7;
Attard – 6;	Tarxien – 5;	Hamrun – 3;
Għaxaq – 2;	Luqa – 2;	Msida – 2;
Siggiewi – 2;	Vittoriosa – 2;	Żurrieq – 2;
Cospicua – 1;	Gudja – 1;	Senglea – 1;
Sliema – 1;	St Julian's – 1.	

Table 2: Marriage partners from outside the village

Bona, Phillipville, Costantina, Corfù, and Port Said. These covered the whole North African coast from Egypt to Algiers.

Similarly, a good number of families, having contracted marriage at Naxxar, later on moved to other villages. The parish priest had noted these movements of families too and even wrote the place they had relocated to. Again the list was very impressive. Families or individuals had moved to or were already living in places as nearby Mosta, Lija, Balzan and Għargħur but also as far away as Gudja, Għaxaq, Tarxien, Żurrieq and even Gozo. The Gozo connection included persons from Ĝ harb, Nadur, Qala, Sannat, Xaghra, Xewkija, and Żebbuġ. Other villages in Malta with a Naxxar connection, besides the above-mentioned places, included Attard, Birkirkara, Floriana, Hamrun, Mellieħa, Qormi, Rabat, Sliema, St Julian's and Valletta.

With so many Naxxar people living in other places, it was no wonder that young women began to venture out of the village to seek work. This was especially so in Sliema where no less than 14 young girls were working as house servants. Others worked in Valletta (4), Birkirkara (3), Floriana (3), Balzan (1), and St Paul's Bay (1).

All these movements were a clear proof that society was a very mixed one, very open to outside influences and therefore forward-looking. These were the people who formed the family basis for the twentieth-century community of the village.

Other Social Factors

The number of very large families (eight children plus) was quite big, 28. One family included eleven children, all alive. There were six families

with ten children, eight with nine offspring, and thirteen with eight. This sizeable number of big families was indicative of better times. It meant that children were no longer dying so young. Some children were unlucky to lose their parents when young, but there were generous couples who adopted these orphans and brought them up as their own children.

There were also broken families but they were few in number. The listed four illegitimate children are indicative of this. Two couples were living together although they were not married. Over this period of five years, nine men had served or were serving prison sentences.

As was the case towards the end of the eighteenth century, the number of widows outnumbered that of widowers.³¹ There were 126 widows of whom 9 remarried, and 116 widowers of whom 57 remarried. The difference in numbers remarrying is significant. Men very often married a second time especially when they still had young children. In a few cases, such men married sisters of their deceased wives. It was not unusual for widows to marry widowers. There were 7 such cases. In three cases, a husband lost his wife twice and married a third time. Michelangelo Stivala was widowed three times. No wonder that, after he had lost his third wife, he was nicknamed *tal Mewt* (of death).

Social Mobility

Fortunately, there exists in the parish archives another document with a list of inhabitants dated to circa the 1880s that includes similar details found in the document under consideration. It was, therefore, possible to compare occupations to a certain extent. More or less, these were quite similar. An interesting fact, however, came to the fore. A good number of men had changed their occupations. This type of mobility, mainly vertical, is very significant and indicates that society was not stagnant, with opportunities being present for those who could take them.

This study revealed that thirty men had improved their position within this period of twenty years. Most had begun as labourers but then took up a trade. There were movements from labourer to blacksmith, to carpenter, to shoemaker, to stone-dresser, to whitewasher, to fish-seller, to farmer, to baker. Other even bigger jumps were from labourer to master mason, to cabman. Another case involved one who, from house servant, became a cook. A middleman went on to become a ship's captain. Three cases involved policemen who turned to a trade. This could possibly have been

31. See Catania (1999), 57-59. Widows then outnumbered widowers by 57 to 9.

a case of retirement from the police force when still young enough to continue working. Other movements, rather on a horizontal level, involved a bar owner becoming a blacksmith or a soldier entering the police force. Vincenzo Ciappara *ta Prisu* (of the meat seller) was not only a butcher but he also opened a wine bar.

A few others were not so fortunate and their position regressed. There were movements from policeman to labourer; a wine bar owner to labourer; a stone-dresser to labourer, and from labourer to beggar. To these could be added all those persons noted as poor or beggars in the list. The picture was surely not a rosy one for these members of the community.

Foreign Workers

The parish priest also noted those craftsmen who had been brought over from Sicily to work in the embellishment of Palazzo Parisio: marble-layers and painters. There was Baldassare Armato from Marsala together with his wife Antonia Valenti and five children. His eldest son, Domenico, in 1905 married a young lady from the village. Andrea De Stefano came from Catania with his wife and three children. And Francesco Bondin arrived from Palermo with his wife and baby son. These marble-layers were under the direction of Professor Giuseppe Valenti. Giacomo Olzai, the painter, came from Rome as was the case with the other painter, Filippo Venuti.

The presence of these workers could not be considered as an intrusion into the Maltese workers' rights since they were specialized workers. What they left behind them was to be a legacy of baroque beauty: Parisio Palace, a landmark in Naxxar.

The People of St Paul's Bay

Since St Paul's Bay still formed part of the parish of Naxxar up to 1905, the parish priest also listed all those families living in that area. There were 25 families making up a total of 127 persons. They may be considered as the first inhabitants of the newly-created parish.³² Quite a revealing point is the fact that these families came over to St Paul's Bay from different villages in Malta and Gozo. Of the 25 families, 2 each came from Ghargħur, Mellieħa, Mosta, Rabat, Valletta, and Xewkija. One each came from Floriana, Siġġiewi, Tarxien, and Żebbug. The police sergeant came

32. These were not however the first inhabitants of this village. The Census reports of 1861 and 1871 give figures of 82 and 44 respectively. And, much earlier, the parish priest had already noted people living in that area.

from Luqa and his constable hailed from Birkirkara. The other 7 families were from Naxxar.

Carmela Cilia, a widow who was there with her three youngsters, already had a wine bar in the *Vecchia* area. There were three others with wine bars: Giovanni Debono from Valletta and Lorenzo Debono from Floriana as well as F. Saverio Cassar from Tarxien. Alfonso Micallef from Ghargħur and Carmelo Micallef from Mosta were both fishmongers. Bartholomeo Cuschieri from Ghargħur was a fisherman.³³ Police sergeant Antonio Mifsud came from Luqa and his wife Bernarda Pulis was born at Valletta. They had five children, two of whom were born at St Paul's Bay.

Surnames and Nicknames

Rev Briffa followed normal procedure by listing people by their surnames followed by their names, surnames being the proper distinctive. However, there were only 107 surnames covering the 974 families listed in 1899. As was the case in 1789,³⁴ Sammut (52) was still the most common. Other surnames were becoming equally common: Fenech (48), Camilleri (47) and Borg (42). Among the top ten, eight were the same. Mifsud and Frendo had dropped out from the earlier list to be replaced by Grech and Muscat.

The Grechs made a significant jump from 15 families to 37 while the Muscats went up from 18 to 33. Among the surnames which had become more common were Zammit 3 to 16; Sciberras 12 to 29; Agius 20 to 36; Calleja 6 to 15; Attard 8 to 32; and Deguara 6 to 18. Other surnames had gone the other way, slowly disappearing during the nineteenth century. These were not very common surnames, even in earlier times, so their disappearance from Naxxar is not surprising. Barsia, Callus, De Scotto, La Duca, Quattromani, Ricupero, Calafato, Ongaro, Felici, Liparotto as well as Saliba and Psaila were not present any more. Of the new surnames on the list, only a few became established. Most were one-off cases and had already disappeared by 1905. However, Somerville and Strickland are still present today. Basically, therefore, the same group of surnames (hence also, to a certain extent, the same families) were still present in the village. There had been newcomers as noted above, but the general picture was more or less the same.

The number of surnames in relation to the number of families was, however, quite small, 1:9 (107:974). It was evident that some other kind

33. In Naxxar there were four other Cuschieri families, all originating from Ghargħur who were fishermen and another one selling fish.

34. Catania (1999), 80.

of distinctive was necessary. This is the reason why nicknames were still very important. For the same number of families there were 397 different nicknames, just above 1:2 (397:974). This was indeed a better way of individualizing members of the community. It was for this reason that the parish priest bothered to insert the nicknames right at the first column and in red. In this way, he could identify the family at first sight.

It is not the intention here to go into a full study of the nicknames of Naxxar. This has already been carried out in previous works.³⁵ But a number of observations are noteworthy, considering the importance of this vast wealth of information. In a study of nicknames of Naxxar in 1789³⁶, 396 different nicknames were noted for a community made up of 655 families, with each family carrying a nickname. In this period 1899-1905, of the 1100 families listed, 971 had a nickname. By a coincidence, there were 397 different nicknames, almost an identical number. However the number of families had increased.

Therefore, an equal number of nicknames represented a larger number of families. A quick look at the list of nicknames with the corresponding family surnames reveals that now the nickname often represented four or more families with the same surname. 74 nicknames covered 443 families, 45%. This might be a case of better living conditions, hence more children surviving into manhood and marrying. The extended family was getting bigger. Note the 14 Falzon families with the nickname *tal Barbier*, and another 14 Muscats, *tal Pixxi*. It might be tempting to suggest that the nickname was now distinguishing the extended family rather than simply one family.

Having noted this, another important observation is that, from the first list of 1789, only 74 nicknames were still present in 1899. The growth of population had necessitated the invention of new nicknames, even for the same family. The Catania family, for example, was known as *ta labiat* in 1789. In 1899, some Catanias were *ta Kobros*, others were *ta Cornier*. Later they became *tal Brajba*. This was not an isolated case. This observation would strengthen the idea that, basically, the families had not changed that much.

35. Lengthy studies on this subject have already been published: Catania (1999), 79-95; J. Cassar Pullicino, 'The Folklore of Naxxar', in *Naxxar - A Village and its People*, P. Catania and L.J.Scerri editors; S. Fiorini, 'A Survey of Maltese Nicknames, I-The Nicknames of Naxxar,1832', in *Journal of Maltese Studies*, No 16, 1986.

36. Catania (1999), 77-121.

1. Abela-Pulis; Altaj (0); Amodeo (0); Armato (2); Bajjada (0); Baldacchino (0); Bellia; Bondin (0); Bonz; Cardona; Cauchi (1); Chircop; Cini; Cutajar; Curmi (1); Cuschieri (0); Cassar (0); De Stefano; Demarco (0); Diacono (0); Ebejer; Grixti (0); Mamo; Mascoli (0); Olzai (0); Pace; Palmier; Strickland; Sultana; Tabone; Tanti; Tonna (0); Trionfi; Vassallo (2); Zahra (0).
2. Amato (0); Cremona (0); Magri (0); Mangion; Milanesi; Mula (1); Somerville (1); Spiteri; Zerafa.
3. Bonello (4); Dimech; Ellul Bonnici; Mercieca; Mizzi; Pullicino (2); Zarb (2).
4. Abela (3); Balzan (5); Brincat; Decelis (2); Ellul; Scicluna (3).
5. Bartolo (1); Buhagiar; Busuttil (3); Cortis (6); Farrugia (4); Pirotta.
6. Briffa (2); Mallia (5); Portelli (4); Said (4).
7. Aquilina (4); Bugeja (8); Catania; Cilia (5).
8. Bonnici (7); Caruana (9);
9. Gatt (8); Xuereb.
10. Grima (8); Sant (6); Xerri (9).
11. Bezzina (9); Bonavia (13); Cachia (10); Debono (8).
13. Ciappara (11); Stivala (9).
14. Azzopardi; Magro (12).
15. Calleja; Chetcuti (12).
16. Zammit (13).
17. Schembri (13).
18. Deguara (19); Frendo (13).
19. Falzon (20); Mifsud (12).
29. Sciberras (26).
32. Attard (25); Micallef (25)
33. Muscat (31).
35. Gauci (31).
36. Agius (29).
37. Grech (34)
38. Galea
40. Vella (38).
42. Borg (38).
47. Camilleri (44).
48. Fenech (44).
52. Sammut (52)

Note: The figures in brackets show the number of families with the particular surname in 1905. Therefore, Altaj (0) means that, while in 1899 there was only one family, in 1905 there was none.; Cauchi (1) means that in 1899 there was no one while in 1905 there was one; where there is no number in brackets means that there was no change.

Table 3: List of Surnames (1899-1905)

Of the 1100 families listed there were 142 without a nickname. In 75 of these, the husband came from another village and 21 were of a higher class, including the well-to-do and businessmen. Only one member of the higher classes had a nickname, the Marquis Scicluna, *Iċ-Ċisk*. As for the others without a nickname, the new parish priest did not bother to input this information with the newly-weds.

Nicknames derived from names were still very common, over 55. However, those connected with a surname were very few, only 4: *ta Cini*, *ta Grima*, *ta Mizzi*, *Zrafina* (Zerafa). A possible English influence can be noted in *ta L'Ingle* (of the Englishman?); *tas Sur Chally*; *Tal Milord*; *ta Michi*. Others like: *ta Marmazz*, *tan Naiz*, *ta Niappa*, *ta Satalimma*, *ta Sinestru*, *tal Uakuieki*, *ta Wassissu*, will forever be enigmatic.

Worth noting are those nicknames which were connected with some trade or occupation. This is quite a long list: *tal Barbier*; *ta Biskottu*; *Canu*; *Ciccu tal Haxix*; *id Daqqaq*; *il Furnar*; *Grezzju tal Halib*; *il Hauli*; *ta Hobzu Hwejgu*; *tal Hut*; *tal C(K)analı*; *tal Kontistabbli*; *tal Labbra*; *tal Majjistra*; *ta Mahlugu*; *tal Mejlaq*; *tan Nahli*; *Pietru tan Nagħag*; *tal Prisa*; *tas Sagristan*; *ta Spalla*; *tal Ispizjar*; *is Surgent*; *ta Tabibua*; *tal Vapur*; *tax Xahxi*; *is Zebbiegh*; *taz Ziemel*. They give us a good idea of new and old occupations of the village people.

Society still did not look kindly on those who, for some reason, had not followed the accepted norms and their derisive nicknames were carried by other members of the family. Family members of *il/tal Gelliedi*; *ta Gengen*; *tal harraj*; *tal-Lehja*; *li Iboss*; *tal Misruma*; *il Mustaccia*; *Pexxetta*; *il Pixxi*; *Zubbatu*; *ix Xaghbana*, were surely not so proud of their inherited nickname. Neither was society so kind with those with some physical condition. Note for example *ta Bla Snien*; *tac Conk*; *ta Harbat*; *ta Lablab*; *il Mustaccia*; *il Misruma*; *tat Tap*. Opposed to these there were a few quite positive ones: *ta Gesu Bambin*, *il Bambin*, *tal Bambina*, *ta Pulitu*, *ta Santu*.

Nicknames therefore, were still a very useful means of identification, pointing to the family rather than the individual. But, otherwise, it served the same purposes as before, identification and social control.

Conclusion

The village of Naxxar was still to a large extent a major agricultural area with a high percentage of its labour force engaged in this occupation. However, the picture was evidently changing with the village craftsmen

coming to the fore. This was clearly the result of increased demand for their products, especially from the wealthier families living in the village. This positive effect of the presence of these families was rather marred by the long-drawn out problem of the building of a new church,³⁷ an idea formulated by these families. The village also saw the introduction of a new kind of social entertainment with the establishment of the village theatre, an activity which was to be the main attraction for many years into the twentieth century. One may venture to conclude that the village, in its own way, was self-sufficient with a labour force covering practically all areas of activity, an adequate agricultural produce, and a social life with the varied activities of the band club, the theatre and the church.

Note: With reference to pp. 328-331, a list of nicknames is available from the author on request by e-mail (see page 303).

37. A new church was not built but eventually, by 1913, new side aisles and a new façade with two belfreys were constructed.