Perhaps more than any other place in the Maltese Islands, Dingli, a small village perched on top of Malta's southern cliffs, holds a special place in my mind and heart. I was born there on the 28th August, 1925, in a house which is currently the site of the village police station — an intriguing combination that appeals to the warmer ironic side of my nature!

My father, Guże, was for many years the Headteacher of the Dingli Primary School; my mother, Josephine, née Cutajar, hailed from Lija and had been the first female Mathematics teacher in the old Central (Secondary) School in Valletta. Both my parents came from families — cliff-farmers and part-time bakers on the Dingli side; carpenters, lace-makers and small orange-tree growers on the Lija one — who, though hardly well off, gave first priority to their children's schooling. My mother had lost her father when she was not yet two, and her mother, Nanna Marta, had to go out and "do" for a couple of prosperous Lija families to keep herself and bring up and educate my mother and her brother, Ziju Salv, who died a few years ago, a pious, confirmed bachelor to the end.


In the dedication to the first mentioned book I stated that, while all characters in the work were imaginary, "the land is real." In point of fact, Dingli itself provides the locale to the story: it is the village and birthplace to which the protagonist Joseph returns after disillusionment with his life in town and at the University, and with the uglier facets of modern Malta. It seems that only amid the elemental rock and soil, and under the immemorial sun and to the sound of the ancient sea, could he hope for deliverance inside the very search for his roots.

The original Ebejers in the Dingli – Rabat area had been brought over from Spain, with other tenants, by the Noble House of Inguanez during the Spanish period in our history. There are still many Ebejers in northern Spain. Ebejer derives from Eber (a pastoral name) first mention of which appears in the Old Testament; the fact of its existence has now been irrefutably proved by the Pettinato-Dahood team of scholars deciphering the clay tablets found in the recently excavated city of Ebla in Syria, west of Mesopotamia. Ebla practised a pre-Ugaritic language, and Eber was ancestor to the ancient clan of Abraham.

The feel for Malta's landscape, its very essence of rock, sea and spray, its sparse and hence precious soil, its rich abundance of wild flowers, the unforgettable whiff of the earth after the first October rains; the sensed and often manifested presence of decay and decomposition, cheek by jowl with that of fertility and virility so immanent in this ancient land, have been, for as long as I can remember, recurrently steadying influences for me. This, in turn, accorded me the necessary insight into the politico-social climate of the times, which I have tried to examine through my novels and those of my plays with a Maltese setting. Nature, I feel, governs people and their passions and, therefore, their politics and mores.

Apparently this sense of land and roots were even present in the very first stories that I wrote, at age nine, with which I could cajole, or rather blackmail, my friends into winning football matches against teams from other parts of the village.

We were then living at Rabat, at 19, St. Dominic Square, having left Dingli when I was eight, my father remaining headteacher of Dingli School. Someone wrote that the artist's first years of life contain the seeds of all his future inspiration. Dingli and, to a lesser extent, Rabat, and their environs have had that influence on me, however widespread my travels abroad have been.
February, 1977. My mother is a member of a united and happy family, I remember what? The 1939-45 War caught me when I was stammerer up to age thirteen. Add to this the fact that I was agonisingly shy and a daredevil all at one time. Beyond that, the excessive craving after a material existence abounded with hidden dangers, not least the hardening of sentiment towards others. We had a happy home-life. All my parents were deeply religious, consistently Christian and Catholic, gifted with tolerance and blessed with a sense of edifying humour. To them I owe my life-long belief, only intermittently shaken, in the spiritual side of life. Doubts and even despair have not been lacking, nor bouts of rebelliousness; but no crisis or misfortune, no dark patch of pessimism could completely overcome and destroy, not simply my faith in the Creator, but also in humankind.

My parents paid out to have us educated - secondary education was not free then - at no small sacrifice: all on my father's pay as headteacher which was not exactly conducive to wine and roses. We were taught at home to give attention to the more material things of life only in so far as we might not want. Beyond that, the excessive craving after a predominantly material existence abounded with hidden dangers, not least the hardening of sentiment towards others.

I was a breach baby, born late; apparently my birth was as much a traumatic experience for me as for my mother. However, we both survived when everyone around had almost given up. I was a late talker and walker and, as if to compound the issue, a stammerer up to age thirteen. Add to this the fact that I was agonisingly shy and a daredevil all at one go, and perhaps one comes near to perceiving the truth behind the tag Oliver Friggieri gave my type of theatre: "a theatre of contrasts."

My father died at the age of eighty-two on the 11th February, 1977. My mother is eighty-five. Although a member of a united and happy family, I remember I was perenially restless, unquiet, forever seeking - what? The 1939-45 War caught me when I was fifteen. To the despair of my parents and relatives, I was bent on turning it into high adventure, at least in my mind. It became even more so in practice.

My father had been appointed Protection Officer for Dingli when war broke out, and we turned over our Rabat house to war-evacuees from the Three Cities while we went to live with relatives in Dingli. Although schools were closed, some sort of schooling continued to be given out, largely inside air-raid shelters, finally, in my case, to culminate in It-Matrikola which was held along one of the cavernous and draughty corridors of the Dominican Priory at Rabat. I got through, even if only just. I cannot say that I ever enjoyed studying, as such. I was too busy reading and writing stories and poems to indulge in proper homework!

In the meantime, I had appointed myself as plane and air-raid watcher for an assortment of shopkeepers, bakers, farmers and extra-busy housewives around our Dingli wartime house. I hardly went down a shelter, to the alarm, again, of my parents. But following the siege at close hand, and watching almost every raid and air combat - with one or two miraculous escapes for me - stood me in good stead later when I came to write Requiem For A Malta Fascist, as well as the finale of In The Eye Of The Sun which, though fiction-based, both contain episodes from real life. The latter novel has been translated and published in Maltese.

At seventeen plus, that is, in late 1942, with my Lyceum days over, together with an abortive four-month stint at a University medical course, I applied and was accepted to serve as an English-Italian interpreter with the British Eighth Army in North Africa; this was a month after the Allied occupation of Tripoli, with the Axis forces in retreat towards Tunisia. They wanted eighteen-year olds, but they apparently needed interpreters so badly that they never looked closely at my (over-) stated age. We were flown out on three war-bashed Blenheim bombers, sitting on the floor of the fuselage, with luggage hurtling at us from all directions at every

Changing faces ... the Sixties look and as now in the Eighties!
shudder of the aircraft, which was pretty often. Two Messerschmitts were reported sighted at one point; thankfully, they turned out to be Spitfires: we had no fighter escort. We were the second plane to leave the crater-pocked airway at Luqa, but we arrived after the third one. The reason was all too human, I suppose: a couple of female typists travelling with us had somehow chummed up with the crew, who in turn felt inspired enough to prolong the journey by cutting a tangent towards Benghasi “to show us the sunken ships”, before proceeding to Tripoli!

When a year later I returned from the desert to Malta and home, I discovered that people at Dingli had, on the receipt by my parents of my first letter home, revealed to them that they had been praying for my soul, and even having Masses said for its repose, as rumour had spread – but clearly not to my parents’ ears; the village conspiracy of silence had been complete – that my aircraft had crashed. I have always been, and unfortunately still am, a notoriously irregular letter writer. Be that as it may, I feel that that tumultuous year in North Africa when I had “to stand on my own two feet or else,” gave me the gumption to tackle, and somehow survive later crises.

In 1944, I joined the Education Department as a teacher. In 1948 I was sent off on a two-year course at St. Mary’s College in Twickenham, Middlesex, at the end of which I was appointed Headteacher, a job I held until I retired in 1978 for psychological reasons and when I was fifty-three. In the meantime, too, I had been awarded a Fulbright Travel Grant to the United States (1961–62) where I stayed for eight months, long enough to provide me with material for my fourth novel Come Again In Spring (Vantage Press Inc., New York, 1980).

Up to 1950 I was writing solely in English – poems, short stories, articles, essays. My first venture abroad was in the form of a short story in a 1953 issue of “Woman’s Own.” – I was the only non-British writer from among six in that particular story competition. It is somewhat odd that I did not start writing Maltese before 1950, especially when one considers that my father had been one of the first members of the “Ghaqda tal-Malti” way back in the 1920/30s. It was on his and Ganni Cilia’s researches in syntax and orthography that Ninu Cremona based a good bit of his Gammatka Maltija.

I turned bilingual writer in 1950 when I entered a radioplay writing competition sponsored by the Malta Drama League in conjunction with the then Rediffusion (Radio) Relay System. It was Ħpar Fizz-Xemm which won me the first prize. It was later published in Lehen il-Malti (April – December 1952). Other radioplays followed in rapid succession throughout the 1950s, such as: Bwani; Sefora; Is-Sejha ta’ Sarid; L-Għassiesa ta’ l-Alpi; Tieqa Bla Qamar (later Hefen Plus Zero); Lil Hinn Mill-Biża’; Dawra Durella; Ir-Rewwixta Tas-Swaba; Iż-Zjara; Majjistral; Izfen, Ors, Izfen; Ix-Xorti Ta’ Mamtazz; Elsie; Loghba; Il-Bidu Jintemm, and others, a few of which were also first-prize winners. I had discovered an important metier: the theatre; even though so far it was just plays for the radio. Another discovery: what an extraordinarily sensuous, truly workable language Maltese is!

Francis Ebejer

(to be continued)