



Qrendi Underground

by Dr. A.N. Welsh



The Mayor, Mr. Carmel Falzon, kindly gave me details of the underground shelters which were built in 1941-2 to provide refuge from the Axis bombing raids during World War Two. There were nine altogether, details are given below, using the street names as they were then -

1. Running from Curate Mizzi Street with two entrances under the corner to Parish Street, where there was another entrance,
2. In Saint Mary Square, with two entrances in the Square and one going towards the Church with an entrance before the Alley. An arm ran to a private entrance in what is now the Lourdes Band Club, and another ran under Strait Street to a private residence in Market Street.
3. On the High Street, where it intersects with Strait Street.
4. On St Nicholas Street, entering just beyond Alley 2.
5. On the High Street entering below Alley 1
6. Round St Salvator Chapel, with entrances either side and behind the Chapel and in Zurrieq Road.
7. In Tower Street on the bend at the bottom end.
8. In Tower Street entering from Alley 1 and running westwards to another entrance on the street itself.
9. In St Catherine Street at the junction with Tower Street.
10. In Church Street where it joins the High Street.
11. In St Matthew Square. At one end was uncovered a huge well shaft, which served as the escape end.
12. In Guarena Street between Alleys 1 and 2.
13. Round St. Anne's Chapel
14. Opposite Tal-Grazzia Chapel.

These shelters were two or three storeys deep, and all had either two entrances or an escape so that if an entrance was blocked by bombing people could always get out. The shelters were planned and financed by the government, but one could dig out a family room provided that the

work was completed within three months, was at the same level as the rest of the shelter, all rubble was cleared out immediately and the room, which was not to exceed six feet in width was kept clean and available in emergency, and an encroachment fee of one shilling per annum was paid.

After the War, in 1947, the shelters were closed and the entrances slabbed over, and most are hidden under tarmac now. When Santa Marija Square was being paved the shelter there was opened and a few photographs were taken. The tunnels appeared to be clean and in good order, and could be used again in



Entrance to Air Raid Shelter in Piazza Santa Marija



A room in one of the air raid shelters

any future blitz, which God forbid. (The recent rains have entered some and it will be remembered back in the nineteen forties precious rainwater was run off and collected, houses did not have mains water). Some private entrances still exist, mostly blocked off. However, the shelters provided necessary protection and barring a direct hit on an entrance were pretty safe. In Safi a shelter was destroyed when a bomb ricocheted on the ground and bounced into the entrance.

The bombing raids started on June 11th 1940, the day after Italy joined in the War. The targets were primarily the harbour area and the airfields at first, but Italian raids were not too precise, and I am told that the very first casualty was a lady from Zurrieq. From January 1941 the Luftwaffe joined in and there were almost continuous raids day and night from then on. The idea was to reduce Malta into submission or at least to soften it up sufficiently for an invasion. You will all be familiar with the story of the death and destruction and the gradual drying up of food and other supplies.



A private shelter vent



Passage inside the shelters

Hitler nearly succeeded, but he was warring on too many fronts at once and gradually Malta was resupplied and armed with Spitfire airplanes to take the offensive and attack the Axis fighters and bombers and Mediterranean convoys. The last air raid of the Italian Regia Aeronautica was on 26th February 1943 and there were only a few Luftwaffe attacks after that. Rations improved and the Axis were being driven out of North Africa. The invasion of Sicily started in July and by September the Italians had surrendered and their battle fleet lay in Valletta Harbour. However, the War did not end until 1945, and in the East, 1946, and it took Malta many years to return to normal and repair the damage.

Qrendi was not targeted specifically, although chapels were bombed as they were sometimes used to store ammunition. St Matthew was hit, and was shortened by two bays and refronted. Pits caused by shrapnel can still be seen on some facades, and there is still a piece of shrapnel lodged in a fence, but from a general point of view, and bearing in mind that the blitzkrieg ended nearly seventy years ago, there is nothing much to see now. Even Qrendi airfield, built primarily to enable an invasion of Sicily, is mostly fields, though some of the buildings remain. The airfield was opened on the 10th of November 1943 by Lord Gort and Air Vice Marshal Park piloted a ceremonial landing, but it operated for only a few months.

However, during the height of the bombing air raid warnings were often two or three times a night; sleep in the shelters which were dark and damp, crowded, and extremely smelly, was difficult. In the public shelters there was no ventilation other than through the entrances and exits, there was no plumbing or sanitary facilities, and lighting and was by paraffin or candles. The population was swollen by refugees, and some poor souls had to live in the shelters if their home had been destroyed. Goats and chickens were also kept.

There is much more under our feet. Older houses had wells, and cisterns to store the winter rainwater; the stone to build the houses was often quarried from below them and there were some big cellars. When piped water became generally available in the seventies many wells and cisterns were filled up with rubble and closed, but we may need them again sometime when water inevitably becomes scarce. It was rumoured also that there were catacombs, as one would expect, and a Punic tomb and two large natural caves with stalactites and stalagmites were uncovered when the bypass was being constructed. Who knows what we tread on !