

Għar Dalam: a shelter for WWII refugees and military fuel supplies

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Natural underground cavities have long been used by humans either as abodes or for storage purposes. These natural shelters have provided early humans with protection from the elements, from predators, as well as from other humans. The association between caves and humans is usually linked with the Stone Age, but their use by humans is not restricted to these remote periods of prehistory. In modern times caves still serve as animal pens as well as temporary and at times permanent human shelter. Caves have also been sought out as a last resort in cataclysmic or man-made events. In wartime people tend to abandon their homes, often most reluctantly, and seek shelter in safer areas.

Għar Dalam is a water-worn cave about 145 metres in length. The first 60 metres are relatively wide with a high ceiling which tapers off into small narrow chambers. Għar Dalam's main claim to fame stems from the innumerable palaeontological treasures found inside the cave, and its important role as the type locality for the earliest kind of pottery found in Malta. It was first excavated by Arturo Issel in 1865 and subsequently by numerous local and foreign naturalists.¹ The cave was opened for public viewing in March 1933 and over the years it has, together with its small museum, attracted many curious visitors.

A less known aspect of the history of Għar Dalam is connected with the outbreak of the Second World War. The constant bombing that the Maltese Islands endured in the war forced many Maltese to abandon their homes and seek shelter away from the prime danger

zones. On 11 June 1940, a day after Italy declared war on Britain and France, a series of air raids was carried out on these islands. The prime targets were the harbour areas and the airfields. Following one of these early raids along the southern coast of Malta, particularly on Hal Far airfield and the Royal Navy Air Station at Kalafrana, the handful of residents at Hal Far and Bengħisa packed a few belongings and headed off in search of a safe shelter away from the bombed areas. A few kilometres away, safely tucked along the side of a narrow valley, lay a natural shelter that would serve their purpose. But there was one problem – this site was closed off with a gate. This did not deter the refugees, and upon arriving at their planned destination – Għar Dalam – they threatened the old deaf watchman, who was made to open the iron gate of the cave, and they flocked inside this dark shelter.²

The refugees of Għar Dalam

Concern over the hygienic conditions inside Għar Dalam was raised by the authorities and on 5 July 1940 at 11 a.m. a visit to Għar Dalam was carried out by Mr F. M. Stivala, the District Commissioner (Air Raid Shelters, Valletta). He was accompanied by Don Angelo Fenech, the parish priest of Birżebbuġa, Mr. Sammut, a foreman from the Electricity Department, and by the police sergeant in charge of the Birżebbuġa police station.³ On the approach to the cave it was noted that there were many persons inside, mostly women and

children, attending to their domestic duties. The residents slept mainly on mattresses and planks but there were also a few beds. From preliminary information it was established that there were eleven persons from Cospicua whose homes had been damaged by the bombing, eleven from Kirkop, twenty from Żejtun, two from Luqa and 180 from nearby Birżebbuġa. It was then agreed that a proper census would be carried out the following Monday. The results are shown in Table 1.

| Place of Origin | Adults | Children | Total |
|-----------------|------------|-----------|------------|
| Birżebbuġa | 54 | 45 | 99 |
| Żejtun | 20 | 15 | 35 |
| Marsaxlokk | 21 | 13 | 34 |
| Cospicua | 10 | 15 | 25 |
| Valletta | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Tarxien | 1 | - | 1 |
| Għaxaq | 1 | - | 1 |
| Totals | 108 | 89 | 197 |

Table 1: Census results

Following the 5th July visit, the Birżebbuġa District Commissioner informed the District Commissioner (Air Raid Shelters) Valletta that no more persons were to be allowed to reside permanently in the cave. A minute noted in the L.G.O. file 2535/40 dated 10 August 1940 and signed by the Birżebbuġa District Commissioner, Mr J. Grima, recorded that the number of people living in the cave was decreasing gradually and up to that date totalled about 140. Furthermore all refugees were issued with non-transferable passes to control any further influx of people into the cave.

Hygiene and services

During the 5th July visit it was noted that the cave was kept clean. During a previous visit, Dr Galea, the District Medical Doctor, was satisfied with the hygienic state of the surroundings. The sanitary authorities attended daily to the sanitation of the premises and trenches were dug at about 91 metres from the cave into which urine pots and pails were emptied. Mr Stivala also suggested that the following materials and services be

requisitioned forthwith for use by the Għar Dalam residents: six electric lamps, ventilation fans, the construction of one anti-blast rubble wall and one screen (jute or canvas) to go round the men's latrines. Additional facilities and works were also suggested in case the refugees were allowed to stay in Għar Dalam for the duration of the war. These included the erection of suitable covered latrines for women away from the cave, one ablution bench similar to the one found in the Valletta tunnel shelter,

one rural shed for cooking, and the extension of the water supply to the vicinity of the cave. It was also suggested that one police constable would be on duty by day and a warden by night. A further request was for a chaplain to continue to attend to the spiritual needs of the refugees.

A letter dated 14 July 1940 and signed by the Chief Government Medical Officer recommended the provision for the Għar Dalam shelter of at least ten buckets with seats to serve as latrines in two screened enclosures, one for men and one for women. Moreover the 260 refugees⁴ were to be supplied with petroleum tanks provided with taps to serve as water tanks until water services were extended to the vicinity of the cave. The CGMO also recommended the provision of a grease trap and soakage pit for water, and that a warden be assigned to this shelter.

Expulsion of refugees and handing over of cave to the Military

However clouds started looming over the population of Għar Dalam. A reconnaissance of the area in early September 1940 led by

Major R. J. Pope, chairman of the General Storage Committee, had the aim of examining the possibility of storing petrol inside Għar Dalam. In a letter to the Protection Officer for Birżebbuġa, Major Pope reported that according to the Army Engineers, Għar Dalam was ideal for such a purpose. He also enquired on the need to find alternative accommodation for the refugees living inside the cave. In reply to this a Government Notice was drafted which stated

‘In exercise of the powers vested in him by Regulation 60 of the Malta Defence Regulations 1940 His Excellency the Officer Adminstrating the Government has been pleased to order that after the 1st October 1940 no person shall be in the area known as Għar Dalam in the vicinity of Birżebbuġa without permission of the Military Authorities.’⁵

As a result of this draft a letter was prepared by the office of the Lieutenant Governor and was sent to the District Commissioner for Birżebbuġa on 20 September 1940. It stated that the persons living in the cave who had their homes in Żejtun, Valletta and Għaxaq should experience little difficulty in returning to their native towns. Residents of Tarxien and Cospicua, however, could encounter more problems and it was suggested that these residents should seek accommodation elsewhere on the island. Should this not be possible, alternative sites, especially in the Valletta shelters, had to be sought. It was strongly recommended that because of the large number of inhabitants in Marsaxlokk and Birżebbuġa, the Għar Dalam refugees who had originally resided in those localities should be strongly discouraged from returning there. A press notice to this effect was published on 23 September and Legal Notice 482/40 was published in the Government Gazette of 24 September 1940.⁶

A letter to the General Storage Committee dated 25 September 1940 and signed by G. V. Cameron (Secretary to Government) highlighted the prehistoric importance of Għar Dalam.⁷ Concern was raised regarding the necessity for the committee to be made aware of the danger of the cave being defaced with infill rubble to level the cave floor. Mr Cameron also insisted that the monument had to be restored

to its previous state after the war. Mr (later Sir) Hannibal Scicluna, Acting Director of the Museums Department, was satisfied with the proposed method of treatment, provided that a layer of earth was placed on the exposed palaeontological and archaeological sections before the rubble was put in place. Further suggestions were made that a meeting was to be sought between the officer in charge of the works to be undertaken at Għar Dalam and Dr Joseph Baldacchino, Curator of the Natural History Section of the Museums Department. The aim of the meeting was to point out the exact nature of the precautionary measures needed to preserve the palaeontological and archaeological sections from damage.

Agreement with the Museums Department was followed by a Legal Notice 491/40 of 27 September 1940 which stated that: “It is hereby notified that Għar Dalam Cave and Museum at Birżebbuġa, will be kept closed to the public from 1st October until further notice”.⁸

The Għar Dalam refugees reacted in a civilised manner by writing a letter to the Government. The unsigned letter, dated 25 September 1940, read as follows

‘Sir, excuse liberty we are taking for writing to you but we are the Refugees of Għar Dalam, we like to bring to your notice that we are told to leave the cave for another destination. Sir, we don’t wish to go against Military, and we are all ready to obey the order, but we are waiting to hear good news from you, we often hear and read that people must take shelter as soon as an air raid comes, and not to stay under the building, so why take us away from here to put us into houses. Sir, please we all pray to you for the sake of our children to do your best for us to leave us where we are, we thanking you in anticipation and oblige, we are all the Refugees.’⁹

Needless to say, the reply to this plea was in the negative.

The electricity bill

As electricity had been installed inside the cave for the benefit of the refugees and considering the fact that in October the military had taken over the cave, the Maltese Government in a letter dated 26 June 1941, wrote to the

Lieutenant Governor's office stating that the sum for the said installation amounted to £25.5.10d., and asking for a refund of the said sum of money.¹⁰ Following five months of correspondence between the Maltese Government and the office of the Lieutenant Governor, the matter was finally settled on 27 December 1941 with the Air Ministry paying the bill in full.¹¹

Transfer of Għar Dalam back to the Museums Department

Hostilities over the Maltese islands terminated by 1944 and a letter from the Air Ministry (Directorate of Works) to the office of the Lieutenant Governor dated 9 December 1944 announced that all the petrol stored in Għar Dalam had been removed and that the Air Ministry did not intend to make any further use of the cave. Immediate action was taken to remove the rubble and layers of earth that had been deposited on the cave floor. In a letter dated 22 December 1944, signed by A. Salomone, Secretary to Government, and addressed to the Secretary of the Antiquities Committee, it was proposed that a site meeting be held between the Royal Air Force authorities, the Public Works Department and the Antiquities Committee. The Acting Director of the Museums Department, Mr Hannibal Scicluna, agreed that a meeting should be held and appointed Dr Joseph Baldacchino, Curator of the Natural History Section, to represent the museum. The final line of Scicluna's reply emphasised the financial aspects of the clearing operation, pointing out that "I need hardly add that all expenses in connection with the work are to be borne by the Air Ministry."¹²

A meeting between all the interested parties was scheduled to be held at Għar Dalam on Tuesday 30 January 1945 at 9.30 a.m. During the meeting it was agreed that the rehabilitation of the cave necessitated the following expenses: carrying away debris on shoulder for a considerable distance with several flight of steps (1,151 cubic yards @ 10/-p.cu.yd - £575.10.0); removing sand bags and brushing surfaces (432 sq. yds @ 6s/8d p.sq.yd. - £144.00.0); reconstructing rubble walls (21 sq. canes @ £2. p.sq.yd - £42.0.0);

repairs to iron rail gate, lock-key and belt (£3.10.0); providing and fixing wire netting to gate (£1.10.0), and repairing and refixing iron hand rails to passages in cave, about 450ft @ -/9d.p.ft (£16.17), reaching a total amount of £783.7.6.¹³

The presentation of the bill and the eventual payment of the above sum, however, were two different matters altogether. On 24 April 1945, the Secretary to Government received a letter from the Air Ministry (Directorate of Works) stating that the total sum involved was beyond the limit of power of settlement of his office and the matter had therefore been referred to the Air Ministry in London. Six months after the initial request was made, a letter was sent by the Air Ministry (Directorate of Works) to the Secretary to Government informing him that the total sum of £783.7.6 was passed for payment on the 19 September 1945 and that full payment was forthwith and should be received in the following days.¹⁴

Re-opening the cave and museum to the public

The clearing of the rubble and other debris started on 3 December 1945 under the direction of Dr Baldacchino. Mr Joseph Inglott, assistant custodian and official guide at Għar Dalam, who had also overseen the infilling works in 1941, supervised the workmen from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, so doing three hours overtime. The Director of the Museums Department strongly recommended that Mr Inglott be granted overtime allowances of 15s/- a week. The Treasury raised no objection to this demand. Progress in the clearing operation was slow as great care was given not to damage the bone-breccia layer, other bones, as well as geological features such as stalagmites and stalactites.

The Government Gazette No. 9538 of 25 March 1947 published the following statement: "It is hereby notified that the Għar Dalam Cave and Museum at Birżebbuġa will be re-opened to the public as from 1st April 1947."¹⁵

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Abbreviations

LGO = (file of) Lieutenant Governor's Office

LN = Legal Notice

MGG = Malta Government Gazette

NAM = National Archives of Malta

Notes

- 1 G. Zammit Maempel, *Għar Dalam: Cave and Deposits*, (Malta, 1989).
- 2 NAM, LGO 2535/40, letter dated 5th July 1940.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 It appears that people continued to flock to Għar Dalam in the first weeks, the highest recorded total being 260. From this point onwards the numbers started to decrease, reaching 140 by August of the same year.
- 5 LN 482 in MGG 8761 dated 24.09.1940.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 NAM, LGO 2535/40, letter from G.V. Cameron (for Secretary to Government) to the Chairman of the General Storage Committee dated 25th September 1940.
- 8 LN 491 in MGG 8762 dated 27 September 1940.
- 9 NAM, LGO 2535/40, letter from the refugees at Għar Dalam to the Governor dated 25th September 1940.
- 10 *Ibid.*, letter from J.M. Borg Cardona (for Secretary to Government) to the Brigadier in charge of the Administration Malta Command dated 25th June 1941.
- 11 *Ibid.*, letter from J.M. Borg Cardona (for Secretary to Government) to the Superintending Engineer at the Air Ministry Directorate of Works dated 27th December 1941.
- 12 *Ibid.*, letter from Hannibal Scicluna (Acting Director of the Museums Department) to the Secretary to Government dated 26th December 1944.
- 13 *Ibid.*, letter from A. Salomone (for Secretary to Government) to the Supt. Engineer (Air Ministry Directorate of Works) dated 13th March 1945 highlighting each cost estimate for the works to be carried out.
- 14 *Ibid.*, letter Reference No. W/L.5/70 from Squadron Leader R. Young on behalf of the Wing Commander (Supt. Engineer) Air Ministry Directorate to Secretary of Government stating that the total sum of £783.7.6 was passed for payment on 19 September 1945.
- 15 LN 138 in MGG 9538 dated 25.03.1947.