



Notes on the 1960 Centenary of St. Leonard

Jeremy Boissevain

Permezz tal-istudji u x-xoghlijiet tiegħu, l-Antropologu l-Professor Jeremy Boissevain poġġa lil Hal Kirkop fid-dinja letterarja u akkademika. Kien proprju għalhekk li l-Kunsill Lokali għoġbu jżejnu bit-titlu ta' Murtu Kirkop. Hafna jiftakruh bħala habib tal-Koppin idur fit-toroq tar-raħal tagħna. Avviċinajnieh u tlabnieh jaqsam magħna r-rikordji tal-festa tal-1960 meta l-Għaqda tagħna kienet qiegħda tfakkar għeluq l-1400 sena mill-mewt ta' San Leonardu. Infakkru li minhabba raġunijiet politiċi l-anniversarju ġie ċċelebrata fl-1960 flok fl-1959.

In the summer of 1960 Jeremy Boissevain, who had been in Malta from 1956 to 1958 as director of the CARE programme, returned with Inga and their two daughters, Ieneke and Lietje, to carry out research for his PhD in social anthropology for the London School of Economics. The following extracts recount his very first impressions of Kirkop and the celebration of the centenary festa of St. Leonard.

Extracts from Notebook no. 2

Saturday, 6 August 1960 – First Day in Kirkop

The first day in the house in St. Leonard Street that we rented from the Cutajar 'taż-Żinnu' family.

Francis Mizzi came by with his tape recorder. He played tapes of hymns to St. Leonard. Deafening! He said the speaker was not working as good as last month! They have hymns and a few noisy fireworks (murtali) on the 6th of each month as St. Leonard died on November 6th 560 AD. This was special for this centenary year.

Frans Cutajar stopped by and tried to repair the paraffin fridge. No luck. His sister, two doors down, was with our girls, who were having a lovely time playing with little neighbouring children and watching several thousand sheep pass the house – also horses, goats and donkeys.

On the way to the village square I met Remigio Sacco and Salvu Cutajar, who were all dressed up. Salvu was just returning from watching festivities at Lija. Lija is apparently noted for fireworks as a baron lives there and gives '£500 every year for display.' I went into St. Leonard's Band Club, where I met Frans Mizzi playing tapes. The Club President is Carmel Falzon, the baker. Angelu Spiteri told me this and mentioned that he was retiring next year. He had worked under (my friend) Francis Chetcuti who had been headmaster in Kirkop (several years before I met him in London). The old school in Frans Chetcuti's time was now the St. Leonard's club.

There was lots of good natured talk about St. Joseph and St. Leonard. Salvu is St. Joseph's, but according to Remigio Sacco he had been told by his girl friend that he should also attend St. Leonard's club. "For me it's the same" said Salvu. Good natured kidding. Seems to be a good pal of young 'Tito' Sacco.

Old Spiteri had directed the choir for the hymn and was quite proud of it. The music Francis was playing was by the Mqabba Band club, St. Mary's. (The other club is Tal-Gilju). But I think I may have Ghaxaq and Mqabba confused.

St. Joseph has no bandisti because all players emigrated in 1952 when 100 from Kirkop left for Australia. This killed the band – but not the club.

Men and boys talked about fireworks the whole time. They regarded this as high entertainment and really enjoy them. They make them all themselves and have already used up three huge sacks of nitrate. Recipe for black powder: one *wizna* (5 ratal) potassium nitrate, one rotolo of charcoal (from vines) and one rotolo of sulfur. Guaranteed! Children sang snatches of hymns and clapped loudly along.

One of the fireworkers said I could come tomorrow morning to see where they make the black powder.

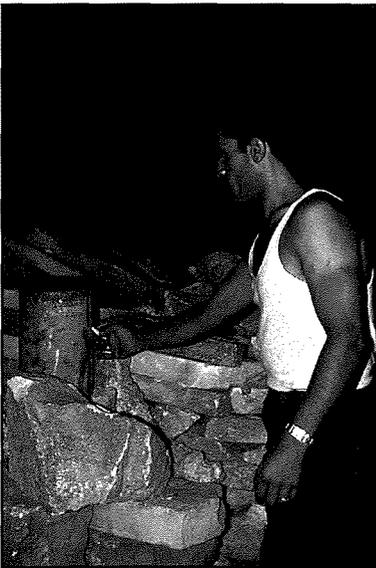
I walked through the village with Sacco and Salvu, who were conscious of others staring and passing comments -- which I missed.

Our girls were in bed when I came home. There was a terrific argument going on further down the sreet. Appears that a man - who I later learned was Benedict 'tax-Xula' Debono - had put a huge picture of Mintoff on his house front, and his neighbour objected – and so provoked a flaming row.

Sunday, 7 August 1960 – Gun Powder

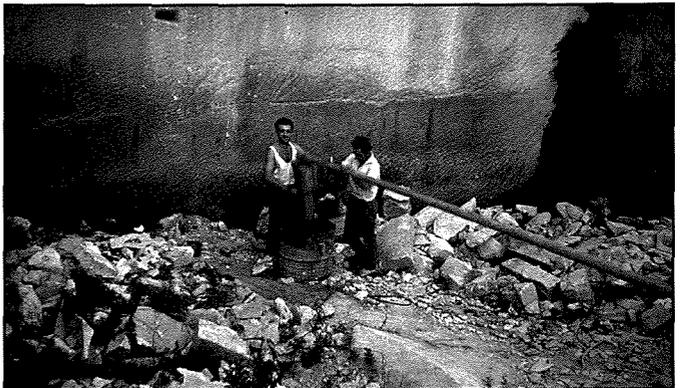
Francis 'Ċikku' Mizzi brought me along to an abandoned quarry near his fields where several churns were at work mixing and pounding the black powder:

Leonard 'Żabuba' Abdilla (who had been in England for three weeks) was working the pestle and is engaged to baker's daughter; David Falzon; Leonard Spiteri, son of Angelo (the school teacher); and Falzon, son of Baker?



Żabuba about to test a murtal
(Photo: J. Boissevain)

Francis said they have been making fireworks for five months. At one stage they were producing five batches of black powder a day. Powder ingredients are bought centrally by club from subscriptions collected from supporters. Ingredients were then given to the mixing crew, all of whom



Sunday 7 August - Grinding black powder (Photo: J. Boissevain)

seem to be young unmarried men.

Once prepared, the powder is given to various expert 'dilettanti' in the village for preparation into various forms and shapes of explosives. These experts are all a little older. They have already made 5000 kaxxi. Target is 7000 kaxxi by festa time.

Recipe: same as above plus a bit of water. Pound for 2 hours. Just before (15 minutes) finished, mix in two cups of Gum Arabic. Pound some more, then scrape powder out, press through a sieve, dry for 15 minutes. Ready.

During pounding mix in two ratal (or as much as you like) of English gun powder.

Equipment: the giant home-made mortar and pestle consisted of a huge (hardwood) pestle attached to a 30 foot flagpole poised at a low angle over the mortar that is made from half a 50 gallon petrol drum filled with concrete with a bit scooped out.

After each operation the whole lot is dismantled and brought on a cart to the nearby Mizzi farm. The crew spoke with envy of people at Ghaxaq where they are supposed to have 30 men working on the fireworks for their feast and have a target of 10,000 kaxxi.

Sunday, 21 August 1960 - Hruġ

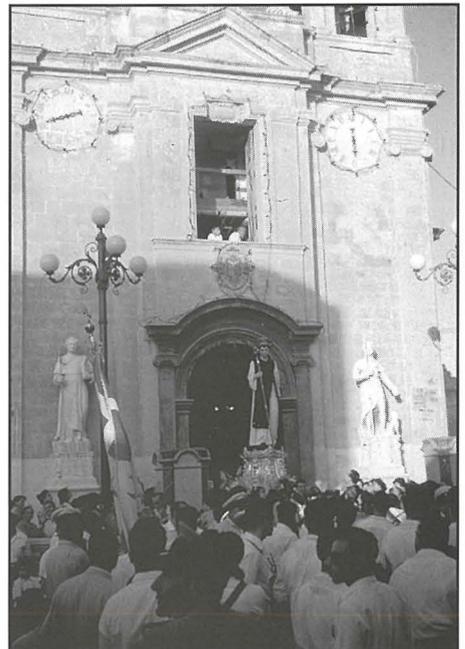
Statue of St Leonard placed on the pedestal and the box protecting it was readied. The church had been decorated all day Saturday. At 5 P.M. people began to congregate. At about 5:14 P.M. the band arrived and they brought the statue out. The carriers of the statue were partly hidden in the crush but I took a photo. Ċikku Mizzi, Saviour Tabone and the chap who decorated the church (Leonard Agius) were the only ones I recognized. Ġulino Spiteri was at the window overhead conducting the children singing the hymn of St. Leonard. Parish priest was next to the statue. Crush of children all around.

After the Hymn there was a thunder of fireworks – 500 kaxxi - and a rattle of musketterija firecrackers. The carriers picked up the statue and carried it back into the church. Almost as soon as it was inside, a group of girls began to argue about which saint was best. St. Leonard supporters, wearing red neck cloths were on the left facing the church (side of St. Leonard's statue normally) and St. Joseph girls with white handkerchiefs were on right (St. Joseph side), ranging back and forth shaking handkerchiefs in each other's faces.

The bandsmen readied themselves and went up St. Leonard Street, preceded by the diehards with red scarves. Young (Saviour) Tabone was very much in evidence - and very jolly with drink. All the baker's girls were there, too. Must have been 50



The fireworks produced for the centenary and the dilettanti who made them (Photo: J. Boissevain)



Sunday 21 August 1960 - Hruġ accompanied by Pinto band (Photo: J. Boissevain)

to 70 youngsters, boys and girls, jumping, clapping and waving. Moved slowly up St. Leonard Street under confetti (street was not decorated). Down St. Benedict Street, then down St. Rocco, around the corner and down High Street to Kirkop Square.

Group of celebrants wild with excitement. Baker's girls looked intoxicated! They asked Ieneke to join them. I tried to take a picture. Later they stopped in front of the St. Joseph club and the diehards did their best to arouse the Josephites, who just stared contemptuously at their antics and insults. A police sergeant stood in front with his back to the club steps and two constables were nearby. All St. Joseph people were lined up on the steps.

Then the processions moved up near the club. They had paraded about for an hour and a half.

The Pinto band also played (54 bandisti). The social rules seem to relax because I saw many young boys smoking and going about trying to look tough.



Sunday 21 August 1960 - Crowd through St Leonard Street accompanying Pinto Band (Photo: J. Boissevain)

Saturday, 3 September – The Eve

People were feverishly decorating: paviljuni in St. Leonard Street, statues outside the church, a huge crown suspended over the square. Pavaljuni in St. Rocco Street. Band stand being erected. Many vendors arriving and bustling about setting up their stands.

There were two bands. Unione by the Church. Tal-Karmnu by St. Leonard's club. The procession was slow to start. There were only two or three lions and three small umbrellas.

Later we saw a beautiful display of fireworks from the Mizzi roof. The roofs of the two clubs were crowded with supporters who cheered each one of the six mortaletti tal-kulur that were sent up. Ċikku went wild and jumped about like a dervish at every explosion. When one unfortunately exploded too low he was silent, but when he heard St. Joseph boeing it, he became furious. I had never seen him that angry

All cheered Pudino Spiteri, the chap who made these coloured fireworks.

Seems that a year or ago, St. Joseph fired some mortali tal-kulur which all went kanni. No one from St. Leonard said anything from the roof. So when one of Pudino's mortali went short and St. Joseph jeered, Francis was furious. 'Not honourable. We didn't jeer at theirs, but they jeer at ours.'



Pudino weighing mortals (Photo: J. Boissevain)



Sunday 4 September Feast Day. Notice the prayer to St Leonard on the 14th century from his death on the Church's façade (Photo J. Boissevain)

Had very nice display of ground fireworks that was followed by some wild dancing. Just after the dancing started a chap from Luqa stuck his foot out and tripped Falzon, who told him not to do it again. The Luqa chap then hauled off and clobbered him. A general free for all started that police, quickly slicing through the crush, soon broke up. The police kept the Luqa boys bottled up in St. John's alley until the festivities were over, around midnight. Police escorted them out of the village.

Sunday, 4 September 1960 – Festa

Things started slowly. Morning quiet. There was a huge Pontifical High Mass with a bombastic orator who delivered the Panegyric. He spoke for about one hour. Whole service lasted until about 11 A.M., when there was another mass attended by the Birkirkara Canons and Mgr. Galea, the auxiliary Bishop.

The band was supposed to arrive at 3:30 P.M. but did not come until about 5 P.M. St. Leonard's band played in front of the club – all the bandisti were outsiders and very good; the Duke of Connaught's band was positioned near the church door and the Queen Victoria band played in far corner of the square.

A vast crowd swelled through the village so that moving about was very difficult. The procession left the church at about 6:30 P.M. It moved very slowly. It passed through St. Leonard Street and St. Benedict Street. On its way back to the church it paused in the piazza, with the statue positioned under the huge suspended crown. The Hamrun choir then sang the Innu of St. Leonard. Little Bishop Galea must have remained motionless in the Square clutching the relic for about 45 minutes.

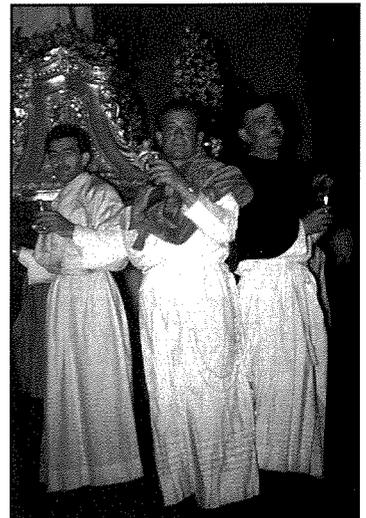
Finally the procession moved forward amid a display of mortaletti and a kaxxa. The dilettanti had wanted to fire these off before the Innu, but they were not yet ready.

As the statue came in front of the Church there was a tremendous firework display with 2000 kaxxa tal-kulur. The statue then entered the church.

After that the Hamrun choir sung arias from La Traviata and the festa ended with some wild dancing during which all the dilettanti tan-nar were carried about on the shoulders of dancing supporters.



Sunday 4 September - Bishop Galea processionally carrying the relic
(Photo: J. Boissevain)



Sunday 4 September – Members of the three confraternities carrying the statue of St Leonard take a moment's rest and some refreshments. (Photo: J. Boissevain)

Monday, 5 September 1960 – Politics and a Fight

About half the decorations were removed, and as were the pavaljuni, the papier maché saints and the poles. Sweepers swept up masses of confetti and rubbish and the firework launching tubes were returned to the storeroom.

The confraternity - or band club - of St. Joseph went to the church early in the morning and collected the four huge candlesticks that belonged in the confraternity's shrine. They had been lent to the church for the feast.

I had a long talk with Toni Busuttill, 'tal-Gwardjan'. He deplored the effect of politics on village life. He said there had been much more cooperation seven years ago than now. He attributed the lack of cooperation to the factions within the clubs. People were politically divided and because of that were unable to organise for the festa, even though political rivalry was suppressed this year in honour of the patron. Hence things got off to a late start.

The example he gave was the cancellation of the Archbishop's visit for the festa, which he attributed to the fact that the St. Leonard's Labour supporters were going to refuse to set off the firework salute to the Archbishop when he passed their club in the procession. It was apparently put to a vote and the Labour faction won the day.

He mentioned that most festa celebrations do not have demonstrations. If they do take place they do so on the last day of the Tridum, the Friday, not on the Thursday or Saturday as had happened this year. In fact this was the first time in seven years that there had been demonstrations and dancing during a festa.

This evening there was a fight between a group of 'Teddy Boys' from Luqa and St. Leonard supporters. At about 8:45 P.M. some 15 boys from Luqa arrived with knives and sticks. Salvu Cutajar said that he and Remigio were following them down the road and recognized several. The Luqa boys would not let them pass to get to the village to spread the news.

One version of the event has it that the group went off into the fields first and found St. Joseph dilettanti preparing to test a new batch of fireworks, but left them alone because their quarrel was with St. Leonard's.

At about 8:50 P.M. the first of the new St. Joseph's mortali tal-kulur was fired off. St. Joseph supporters were on their club roof to check the test firing. St. Leonard supporters were also on their roof to observe their rivals.

The Luqa group arrived and found only Pudino and a friend in the square and began to crowd them. Żabuba and Saviour Attard dashed down from the club roof and helped fight them off. They too were injured. Saviour Tabone had blood all over his shirt.

They chased the Luqa boys off. Even some St. Joseph members joined in, and caught one, leaving him on the street after giving him a good beating and kicking.

I arrived just as people were surging around and swearing in the square. Women were screaming and Pudino was in his car being bandaged. People were shouting and calling for their children. Pudino's brother set out right away in his van to find the attackers. Couldn't find them and returned.

Constable Camilleri walked about trying to get an idea of what was going on. Someone said that he had gone into the police station and locked the door when trouble started.

A police sergeant came from Żurrieq with a few men and set about dispersing the crowd and getting statements. The St. Joseph contingent was lined up solidly in front of their club, although I saw Ġużeppi Bonnici ('Zaqqoċ') walking swiftly through the piazza towards home. The parish priest came out of his house ten minutes afterwards and talked to some women. His wooden door had been closed.

All went over to police station for statements, including the parish priest. The doctor came

and treated the wounded in the police station.

After a bit there was as a dispute in the police station and Ċoqqu, Frans Mizzi and Ġanni Spiteri went in. Seems that the sergeant was from Luqa and two of the Luqa boys were related to him. He was asked to get the inspector over from Zurrieq, but refused.

I went home, wrote up my notes and went to bed.

Thus ended one of the busiest, most pleasant and interesting months in my life. In fact, during this month our whole family experienced and learned so many new things and, most important, made new friends who patiently helped us adjust to their ways.

Finally, I would like to express my deep gratitude to all Koppin for awarding me the Mertu Kirkop. This was a surprise and I am greatly honoured. Inga and I have not enough words to tell you how much we appreciate the continuing friendship and kindness you have shown us over the years since 1960.