

Lorenzo Zammit Haber: Unsung Gozitan Patriot

GEOFFREY G. ATTARD

Introduction

One of the less renowned Gozitan patriots was undoubtedly Chev. Lorenzo Zammit Haber of Xewkija. Lorenzo was born on the 10th of November 1875 in Xewkija, Gozo, the son of Francesco and Maria n e Haber. He studied under the Jesuits at the Gozo Seminary in Victoria. On the 15th of February 1908 he married Carmela n e Scicluna (Borg, 1978: 96-97). They had five children; two boys and three girls.

Antiquarian

By modern standards, Zammit Haber would be easily described as a first-class antiquarian; he collected all that had to do with Melitensia and Gaultiana. The history of his native country was so much to his heart that by just being a collector of items related to the history and archeology of the Maltese archipelago, he would have also made a name for himself. However he was more than a mere collector; Zammit Haber was chosen by the British Governor in Malta to take Major Hugh Braun's place as an esteemed member of the Ancient Monuments Committee; it was in this capacity that he designed the various *mejilli* that are to be found sculpted out of stone in the Mgarr ix-Xini Valley in the limits of his native Xewkija. During his life-time he was also considered an authority on the history of our islands and he had in fact an encyclopedic mind. When Professor Luigi M. Ugolini was about to write his *Malta: Origini della Civilt  Mediterranea* he consulted Zammit Haber. So did British Governor in Malta Sir Harry Luke – an admirer of Maltese history – when he wrote his *Malta: An Account and an Appreciation*. Zammit Haber was mentioned by Luke in his book. Lorenzo also helped Professor Aldo Farini in his publication entitled *Fiabe – Tradizioni – Leggende Maltese*.

Heraldry and Painting

Zammit Haber had ties with the Sovereign Hospitaller Military Order of St John known simply as the Order of Malta due to his contribution in the compiling of an important publication about the Order. Count Carlo Augusto Bertini Frassoni, the author of *Il Sovrane Militare Ordine di San Giovanni di Gerusalemme detto di Malta* referred to the help he received from Zammit Haber and acknowledged him on page 103 of this publication. He was later on invested as a member of the Sovereign Military Order of Malta by the then Grand Master and Prince Fra Galeazzo von Thun und Hohenstein on the 13th of January 1927.

Chev. Lorenzo Zammit Haber as he was henceforth known was a collector of portraits and an



Lorenzo Zammit Haber.

accomplished painter himself. He is the author of a collection of portraits of the twenty-eight grand masters who reigned in our islands between 1530 and 1798; he also designed the coat-of-arms of all the villages of Gozo. These items are still kept in the Zammit Haber residence in Xewkija's main square. In 1935 he was commissioned to design the crests of various surnames for Blasinato Pasinati's encyclopedia of surnames at the Bibliotheca Nazionale of Rome. The original copies designed by Zammit Haber are now to be found in New York at number 3, Guido Pitoni, Walnut Street, Rochester (New York). The silver flower-stands around the titular statue of St John the Baptist revered in the Xewkija parish church were designed by him as well as the reliquary of the saint together with two altar-frontals (Ml. ventaltari) and the baldachin. On the 18th of December 1936 he was awarded a diploma of appreciation by the University of Venice for these works of his.

Zammit Haber and Xewkija

One of the lost architectural treasures of Gozo was undoubtedly the Gourgion Tower of Xewkija. The Gourgion Tower at Xewkija, Gozo has been described as one of the architectural gems of the Maltese islands (Calleja and Zammit Haber, 1997: 3). In the historical publication about this tower which has been co-authored by Lorenzo's son, Frans, the latter states that many people had raised their voices in protest against the decision of demolishing the tower in order to make space for an airfield. Foremost amongst the protest there was the distinguished Gozitan Lawrence Zammit Haber. Zammit Haber was in fact so keenly interested in the heritage of his native Gozo that when his pleadings came to naught, he took great patience to collect all the carved inscriptions, pieces of sculpture and coat-of-arms; they were later preserved in the Museum of Archaeology in the Citadel, Victoria (Calleja and Zammit Haber, 1997: 13).

Zammit Haber was also involved in the project of the enlargement of the old parish church of Xewkija. When the new naves were added to the main body of the church Lorenzo was chosen to supervise the work; the project began on the 21st of May 1936

and ended on the 25th of May 1938 (Various, 1973: 33); the old parish church was later demolished so that the new rotunda would take its place. Zammit Haber was one of the founding fathers of the Preskursur Band of Xewkija and served twice as its president; in 1929 as the first president and again from November 1932 to November 1933¹.

Lorenzo Zammit Haber died on the 1st of June 1961 and was buried in the family's burial ground in the Xewkija Cemetery. The Xewkija Local Council named one of the streets of the village after him. The fact that he was left out of the two-volume Dictionary of Maltese Biographies is in itself a sign that Chev. Lorenzo Zammit Haber needs to be known better among the list of Gozitan lovers of history and Gozitan patriots.

References

- Borg, S. (1978). *Ix-Xewkija Fi Ġrajjet il-Kappillani U L-Arciprieti Tagħha*. Malta: Progress Press.
- Calleja, J. and Zammit Haber, F. (1997). *The Gourgion Tower*. Malta: Midsea Publications.
- Various Authors, (1973). *Ix-Xewkija Tul iż-Żminijiet*. Gozo: Orphans Press.

Fr. Geoffrey G. Attard was ordained for the diocese of Gozo in June 2004. He graduated M.Th. in Ecclesiastical History from the University of Edinburgh in November 2005 and he graduated M.Lit. in Practical Theology from the University of St Andrews with a dissertation entitled "Climate Change and the Catholic Church" in 2008; he has recently published his dissertation in book form.

¹ http://bandaprekursur.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=33&Itemid=42 (accessed 7th of August 2011).