



# The First Aerial Bombardment on Malta on June 11, 1940

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I was born on the 31<sup>st</sup> July 1930. Being the eldest, I was nearly ten years old on that fateful morning. Although still a child, I was old enough to have a mental recollection of the turbulent events that dominated my early life. My father had already left home for work. Together

with mother, we were all at home because, unlike previous years, the summer holidays had started on the first of June as a precautionary measure.

I still retain an indelible vision of the first air-raid. The whining sound of the 'sirena,' or air-raid warning at six-forty in the morning alarmed all of us. We all huddled up in several adjacent beds in the limited space of the alcove annexed to my parents' main bedroom. We poured out of the disordered beds to crowd around mother who stood inquisitively watching behind the street door. The intermittent cracking noise of anti-aircraft guns rose from the nearby bastions surrounding the harbour window. The droning engines of high-flying airplanes and the muffled thud of a bomb hitting the ground sowed uncontrolled fear in all of us. Every reverberating explosion pounded the death knell to our minds. We nestled against pregnant mother holding on to her for dear life while praying fervently, hoping for delivery from danger and death.

Not one soul ventured into St. Thomas Street. The screams and cries of the children in neighbouring houses broke the eerie silence. The atmosphere was charged with the smell of indecision. The fear was contagious. The thought of helplessness stunned every unfortunate family. Like ours, the unprecedented attack threw everyone into static disarray and forced us into surrender to the Fate that haunted our homes. The moment of decision threw families into conflict. Arguments arose of how best they could save themselves. No religious sentiments or traditional proverbs could offer any consolation or ease of mind.

In the absence of our father, we continued holding on to mother, pulling at her dress, repeatedly calling 'ma, ma, ma,' and bombarding her with questions. When a lull broke the attack, she rushed to the door consisting of two wings of louvers the shutters of our main door. She was all eyes peeping outside between the louvers spaces, expecting to hear father's footsteps. There was no commotion in St. Thomas Street. Deadly silence shrouded Floriana like a pall over a coffin. Our crying and sobbing showed our hysterical fear of imminent destruction.

We had no means of knowing what the situation was like. We had not installed a Rediffusion set in our house yet, even though the British company introduced this system in 1935 and extended it to Gozo twenty years later, in 1955. We relied on the rumours of guessing street neighbours who were as much in the dark as we were. Thrown completely into turmoil and left to her own resources, mother was at a loss what to do. Yet she did her best to relieve us of our inordinate panic with a chorus of 'Hail Mary's.' She comforted us with the healing

words that the raid would soon be over. Though I was scared stiff, as much as my brothers and sisters, yet I kept thinking of what we should do to escape immediate death. Under these unprecedented circumstances, I honestly believed that our end was near.

Constructive thoughts raced through my mind: suppose we moved away from dangerous Floriana; suppose we stayed with 'nanna' Karmni, our grandmother, in the safety of distant Rabat! I spoke the words to my mother. All the children took up the cry and in a chorus of babbling voices, they repeatedly clamoured: Let's go to 'nanna.' Understandingly, mother caught in conflict between our safety and father's work in Floriana agreed to consult my father as soon as he returned home.

Then the droning engines of enemy aircraft faded in the distance. The church bells clanged the signal that the 'raiders passed'. The creepy silence of St. Thomas Street soon filled with incoherent hubbub of voices: the criss-cross shouts of gossiping neighbours rose from balconies and doorways on opposite sides of the road. The homes poured out the suppressed humanity. The street turned agog, eagerly and expectantly, the hubbub of their incomprehensible words and expressions of excitement. Ganging groups vaunted their emotions in unintelligible covert words of fear, of bravado and of hatred of the Italians. Quite openly their insults, some obscene, gave vent to their feelings. They moved and gesticulated hysterically; they contorted their bodies in restless animation as if enacting a dramatic scene on the theatre stage. From behind the louvers, I saw them shaking their heads, stamping their feet in anger and punching the air. Being too innocent perhaps, I could not understand all the non-Christian expressions being hurled into the space now void of enemy planes. The love for the Italian language and culture which people much appreciated at that time turned sour with racist hatred. In the circumstances, it was not easy for them to control the characteristically noisy and volatile old habits of belligerence then roused to passionate anger.

Unconsciously and without the comprehension of their meaning, this was the time when the first seeds of prejudice and racism germinated into my immature and uneducated mind. The people's repeated words of anger against the Italians indoctrinated me into this crusade of repulsion that settled into the subconscious mind. So did the unjustified aerial attacks on a helpless Island and on innocent victims of circumstances. Though later on in life, I erased my prejudice and racism, yet the Italians and what they stood for remained objects of disdain. It was so much so that, when later on circumstances brought me face to face with Italians, I had a nagging feeling not to trust them. Even in such a harmless activity as sports, I would never give their national football team any support. In fact, men of my generation did harbour ill will against Italians: we often referred to them as cowards shouting the derogatory Italian words: 'coraggio, fuggiamo:' pluck up courage, let's run away! Wanting to ward off the possibility of any danger, the Authorities thought fit of deporting Italian nationalities, even though their long stay in Malta made them indistinguishable from Maltese except in their Italian intonations when they attempted to speak Maltese. Truly, we felt sorry for them for they really were neighbours and friends.

As if God decided to wave a magic wand to assuage our indiscriminate resentment against Italians, the excited groups of neighbours disappeared again into their abodes. The air raid was on again. Five times the Italians came that morning: they sowed their seeds of iniquity on peaceful people, destroying random homes, missing their targets. Five times timid families, like ours, sought shelter in the 'kantina' or basement of their homes. Mother made us recite prayers to so many saints that I am sure that their intercession had kept us safe and sound. Were we cowards then? Of course we were! Then, months later, we children got so used to living with danger that very often we threw caution to the wind. However, let me not digress!

While my mother stepped down into the cellar, my brothers and I preferred the secluded refuge of hiding huddled under our parents' large bed, as we previously did in playing 'Noli' or hide and seek. It was a momentous moment of fearful indecision that wrung our carefree hearts into frenzied panic. All aerial attacks had ceased by noon that day.

Gradually, the street scenes changed. The previously animated and dramatic atmosphere took another turn. Then, most families came out into the street carrying their decisions into bundles of clothes, beddings and cooking utensils. They were on their way to the 'Mina' the underground railway tunnel. The train ran from Valletta, under the Mall Gardens and the Argotti Botanical Gardens through the villages of Hamrun, Birkirkara ending its run in Rabat.

However the chaotic situation bordered on the uncontrollable: the families of Valletta and Floriana seemed all determined to run away from the impending danger of enemy action. They clogged the main road of Floriana, religiously named after Saint

Anne. They drove away in buses, vans, cabs, and carts carrying crying babies and cuddling children too young to understand. This was an unexpected exodus of humanity to outlying and remote villages from Floriana. It was, in a sense, a pilgrimage to the safety of distant villages and to the patronage of other Saints, such as St Helena in Birkirkara, St Paul in Rabat, or Saint Mary in Attard! It seemed then like a microcosmic 'Diaspora' as when after Babylon the Jews dispersed all over the world! Maltese families uprooted themselves from their home environment, their lifetime friends, and the district institutions they knew so well. They started afresh in new surroundings under different circumstances and conditions.

As if father and mother were of like mind, he appeared unexpectedly to see if everything was well. He had closed his business that very morning, led the cart and donkey to the 'remissa' or stable in another street and rushed home during the second air raid throwing caution to the wind. The presence of our father boosted our morale as if he was a god-like creature able to solve all problems and grant us all our favours. Without hesitation not only did he assert his consent to the suggestion of evacuating to Rabat but also went next door to order a chauffeur driven taxi holding seven people. This car belonged to Gużepi nicknamed 'Il-Ghannej,' the crooner because he was renowned for his 'impromptu' singing of Maltese 'għana' or songs while driving his clients to various destinations. These songs were similar to the ancient French 'chanson;' nevertheless, the traditional form and musical interpretation retained their distinct Maltese identity. Then, the whole family, like so many others, evacuated to Rabat except for father whose work demanded that he should stay behind. He could not leave his clients without kerosene, the essential fuel for lighting and cooking in those days. Besides, as the only bread-winner his business was our life line.