



ZEJTUN STORIES

by Alex Vella Gera

IT WAS precisely today 200 years ago, November 25 1797, that Zejtun was 'promoted' from humble village to illustrious town. Napoleon across the sea was rubbing his hands eagerly and gazing at a map of our island longingly. The then grandmaster, Hompesch, who had lived in Malta since childhood and could speak Maltese like a native, knew he was in dire straits and needed all the support of the population he could get.

So he was quick to raise three villages to the status of towns, this being a custom among grandmasters and one that always made them popular. Besides, the south of the island was exposed to invasion and having towns in the area strengthened defences considerably.

After Zabbar and Siggiewi, it was Zejtun's turn. Hompesch gave the new town the name of his mother, Bylandt and there was great rejoicing for weeks after.

Alas, this did not stop Napoleon landing on Malta six months later. Hompesch fled the island and even resigned from his post.

CELEBRATE

So the story goes and it was with pride that the citizens of Zejtun, led by their local council, celebrated this bi-centenary the last week, and will end tonight with a mass in the parish church of St Catherine's.

The two local bands, Beland and Zejtun, were both involved in the organisation and the proceedings were honoured with the presence of the a German delegation from the Otto von Bylandt Cultural Association in Monchengladbach. This society is responsible for the Castle Bylandt Rheydt.

All in all, the organisers rose to the occasion admirably in promoting pride in one's home town. Among the events organised were an exhibition about Zejtun past and present, blood donations, various musical concerts, and musical/literary evening attended by the President.

But what of the Zwieten, the 8000 plus families living in Zejtun? What are their views on their town's birthday?

WHAT IS ZEJTUN?

"It's a good opportunity for us people from Zejtun to show our patriotism," ventured one elderly man in the main square last week.

"It's a nice occasion," a housewife told *The People*.

"It's much the same to me," said Lawrence Baldacchino, "200 or five years, Zejtun is what she is today because we put her there!"

"It's unfair that people associate Zejtun with violence. Violence takes place everywhere!" was the comment of another man from neighbouring Ghaxaq.

"Just another excuse to celebrate! Who can say no to that!" a shop owner smiles good naturedly.

Former MP and President of the Beland Band Club for 38 years, Dr Alex Cachia Zammit has his own opinions.

"The bad element that gave Zejtun a bad name in the eighties has gone. They've either married, or calmed down, or even repented."

So is Zejtun trying to refurbish her image?

The Local Council is certainly doing a good job. What with the stylish street name signs and a new publication out

this week entitled "The Streets of Zejtun" by Fr Joe Abela, Zejtun is being promoted as a locality rich in history and typical Maltese beauty.

Mayor Joe Attard pointed out the old parish church of St Catherine's to me. From this church the knights overlooked the southern most coast of Malta, around Marsaxlokk and St Thomas Bay.

The fear of invasion was pre-eminent in the minds of the Maltese. Inside the hollow walls of the church, a large amount of skeletons were found and their presence remains unexplained.

This is the stuff that legends are made of.

CARLO DIACONO

Born in 1876, maestro Diacono held the position of musical director of the Beland Band Club for many years and is the author of a large number of compositions, among which an opera entitled "L'Alpino" which last week was performed for the first time by a band club.

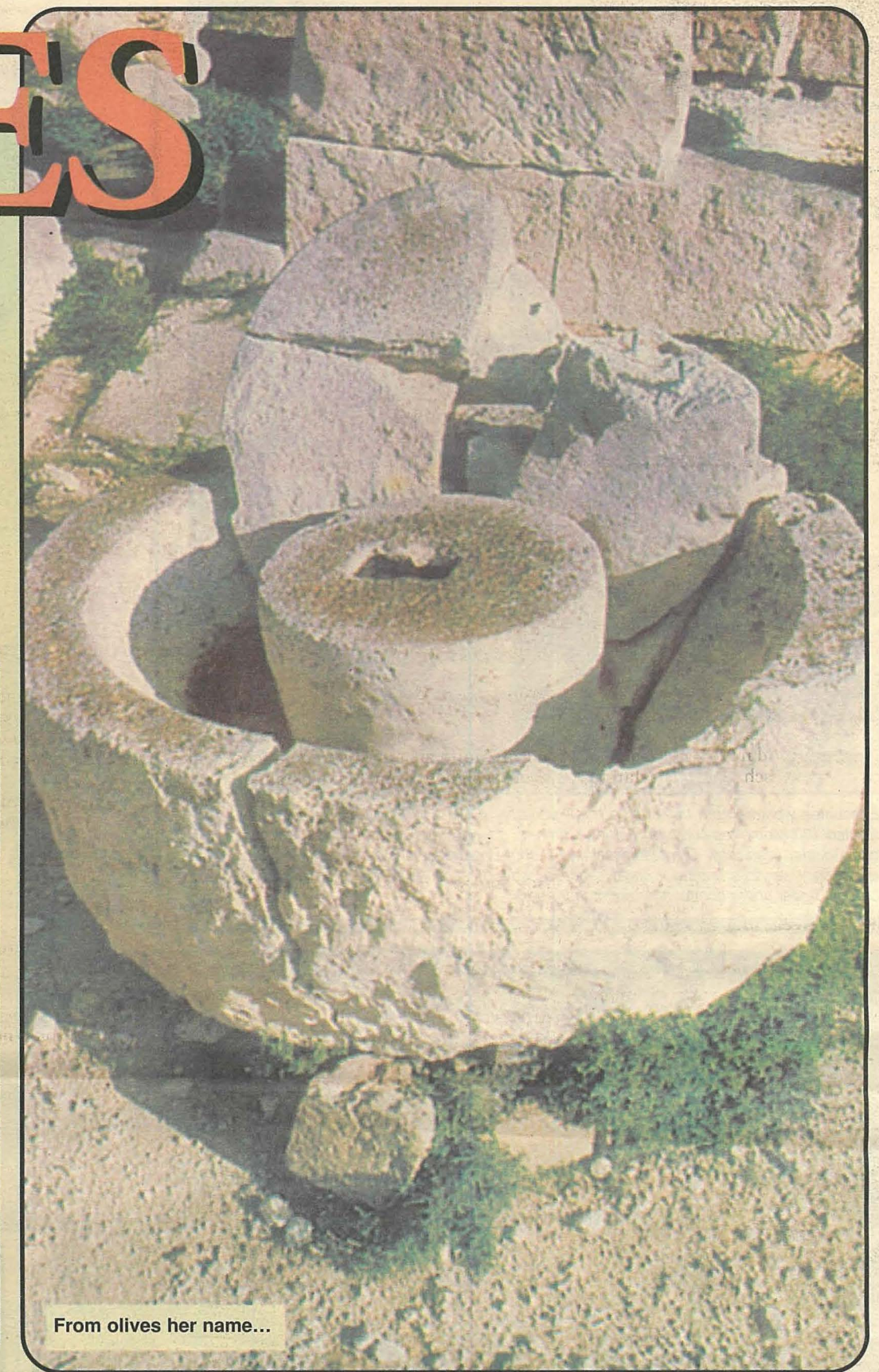
Meanwhile, in the premises of the Beland Band Club, an exhibition of obsolete instruments is proving to be popular. Relics of a bygone age, and a vital link to our past.

"Documents have been found dating back to 1802 which refer to a band of some kind playing wind instruments in Zejtun," recounts Dr Cachia Zammit.

"One cannot look forward without looking back," explains Mayor Attard. "Every river has a source."



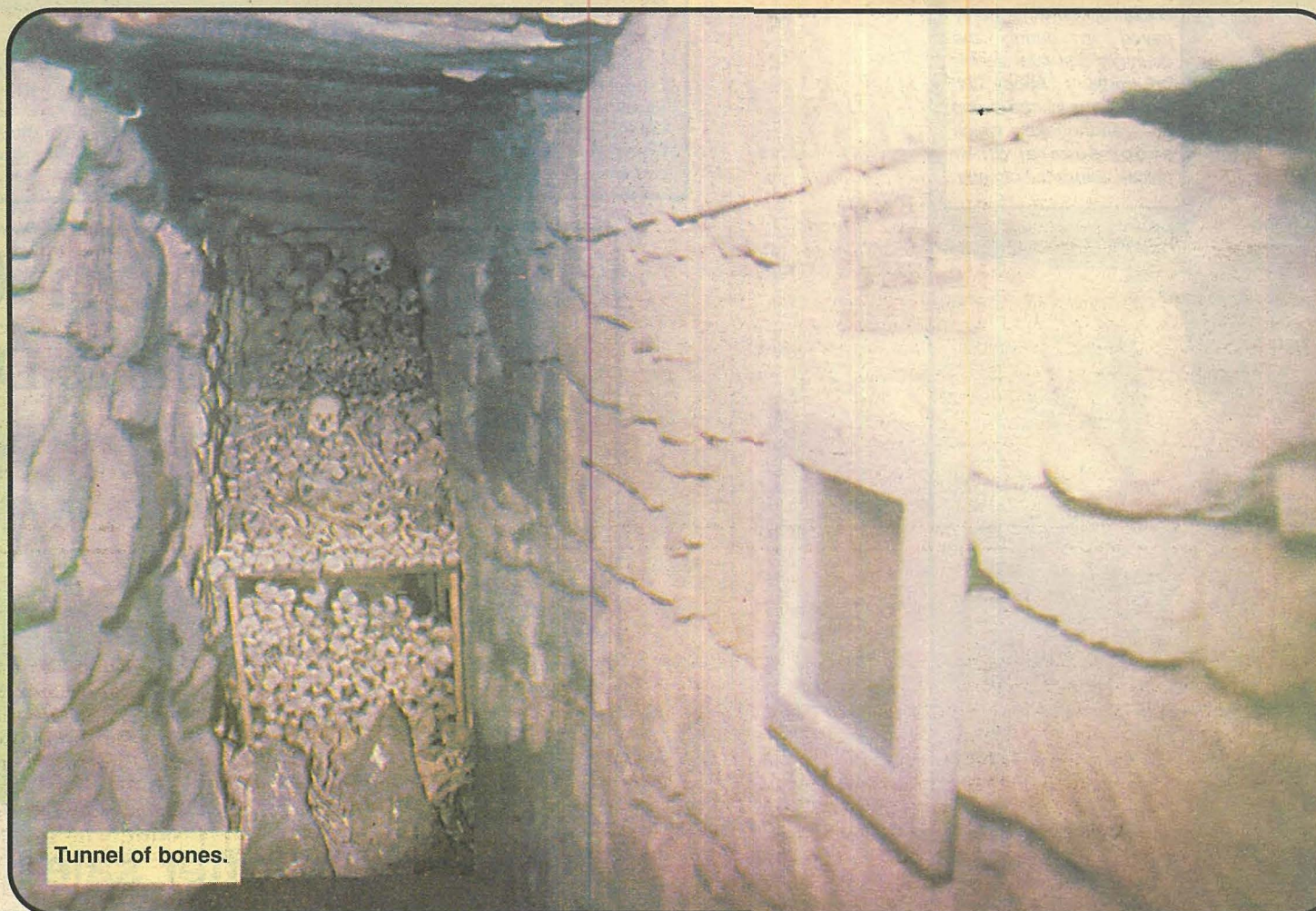
Old church of St Gregory.



From olives her name...



Hompesch declares Zejtun Città Beland. Parish priest Tortella looks on.



Tunnel of bones.

REQUEST GRANTED

Hompesch could rightfully be referred to as a Maltese, having lived on the island from the age of twelve. When Grandmaster De Rohan died in July 1797, Hompesch succeeded him four days later, but this move did not prove popular, especially among the French, some of whom were secretly collaborating with Napoleon.

However, the Maltese population looked up to the new Grandmaster, mainly because he was close to them and participated in village festas.

When parish priest Dun Giacomo Michele Tortella requested of Hompesch the title of town for Zejtun, the grandmaster immediately accepted.

Tortella's request read like this: "The Clergy and people of Zejtun, your faithful ser-

vants, devotedly wish to show you that their parish is one of the oldest, and counts about 6000 people, and is commercially successful, and has reached the grade of Kulunella in the Task Force. Therefore, they ask of you to raise their parish to the state of town, under any name you choose fit. And in this way they will be honoured."

Hompesch's reply was short and sweet: "It will be as asked under the named BILAND".

The Zwieten have since celebrated this event. On 14th January 1798, three dozen "soffarelli" were purchased for three scudi for a feast of thanksgiving. And just a few days later, in the town's registry, Zejtun is referred to as Citta Biland.

ZEJTUN From village to town

Zejtun's name originates from the Olive tree, or rather the oil (zejt) produced by the olive. Zejtun was known as Bisqallin (Sons of the Sicilians) owing to the frequent visits of Sicilian fishermen to the south of Malta, but many other names are recorded, including Casal Santa Catarina, after the town's patron saint, who incidentally is the patron saint of Christian philosophers. In 1436, Zejtun was declared a parish.

It was a custom for grandmasters to give their name to towns. When Malta's last grandmaster, Hompesch needed the support of the Maltese (Storm clouds were brewing in France with Napoleon showing a keen interest in Malta) he raised three villages to the title of town in the space of a few weeks, late in 1797. These were Zabbar, Siggiewi and finally Zejtun, the last being named after Hompesch's mother, Bylandt. With time, the Maltese pronunciation became official and Zejtun is known as Citta Beland.