

ST JULIAN'S 125 YEARS OF PARISH STATUS

Round-up of certain distinguished past residents

by **Albert G. Storage**

The round-up below is perforce limited, and who knows how many more have lived here and perhaps managed to go unnoticed. Undoubtedly, the very first must have been members of that old Genoese family, the Spinola ("SpEEEn-ola" please!) It was their connection with the Order of St John which brought them to our shores. One of them, the Marquis Francesco Napoleone, bought land in the area of St Julian's Bay where, once the summer palace and little church of the Immaculate Conception were built in the late 1680s, soon gave way to an alternative name to the bay and surroundings as "Spinola". The Marquis had a younger brother, Paolo Raffaele, Grand Prior of Lombardy, who must have been a frequent visitor as he was rector of the church as well and saw to the carrying out all the terms of the foundation the

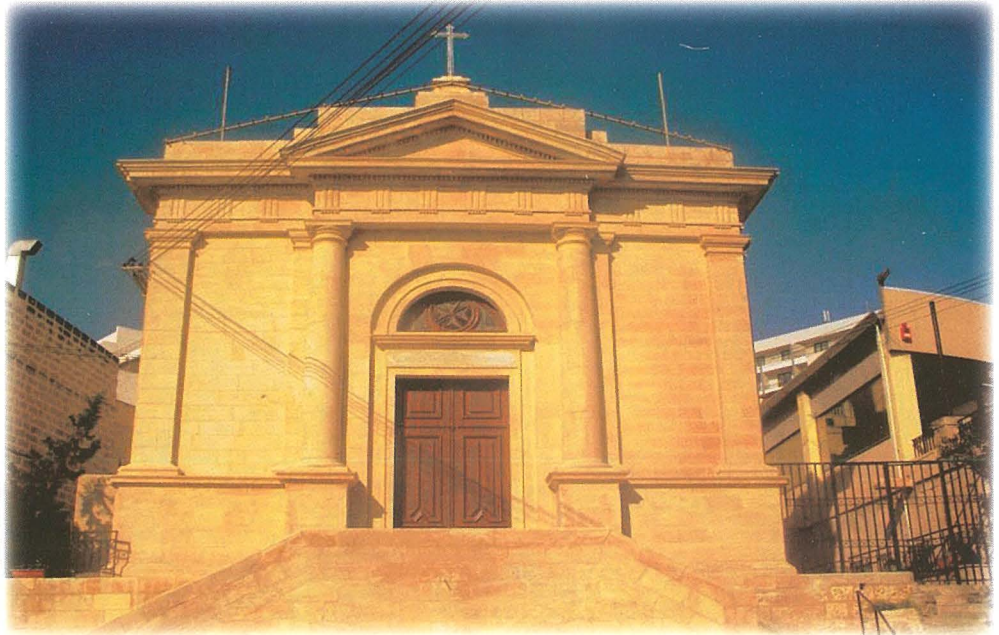
Marquis had set up. The family also had a town palace in Valletta and the properties passed on to a nephew, Giovanni Battista Spinola, another Knight of the Order. In an inscription on the façade of the summer palace, and dated 1733, both the Grand Prior Paolo Raffaele and his nephew are mentioned with Giovanni Battista, not omitting to say that he was Admiral of the Order's fleet and also served the Order as ambassador to Sicily, Spain and the Holy See.

Another personality with traditional connections with this Spinola complex is Dun Gejt Mannarino. He was one of the leaders of the abortive so-called Insurrection of the Priests in 1775. He was imprisoned for life and not amnestied when Grand Master de Rohan succeeded the hated Ximenes. Mannarino



Spinola Palace in the early 1900's

was kept confined as a warning that nobody guilty of treason could get off so lightly. Mannarino was only freed in 1798, by Napoleon Bonaparte. A strong tradition has it that Mannarino became rector of the church of the Immaculate Conception and died in 1814 in a small adjacent upper room. It is said that as the coffin could not be lowered via the very narrow staircase it had to be lowered from a window. Mannarino was taken for burial at the old parish church of Santa Marija, Birkirkara, of which parish St Julian's was still part.



Immaculate Conception church

and finally returned to Italy in 1944. In the 1970s, a State Trade School at Santa Venera was named after him. This was later tuned into a Youth Village run by the [Malta] Youth Agency.

When Spinola Palace was for some years turned into a number of flats, one distinguished tenant was Umberto Calosso (1895-1959). This Italian Socialist, journalist and anti-Fascist was forced into exile in 1931. Some years later, he came to Malta where he taught at St. Edward's College. In 1936 he went to Spain and returned to Malta in 1939. For a time, he and his wife Clelia lived at the palace

A far less troublesome priest in the same area was our National Poet Dun Karm, (Mgr Carmelo Psaila, 1871-1961). In the 1930s he rented a modest summer residence in Spinola Road. Speaking of literary figures, on

the opposite side of the bay a permanent resident was Ivo Muscat Azzopardi (1893-1965). He was involved in theatre and drama, co-founder of "Maleth", a leading theatre company, playwright, journalist and great promoter of Maltese.

Of the many distinguished personalities who lived in St Julian's there was Dr Lewis F. Mizzi (1847-1935). Lawyer and linguist extraordinary, Mizzi



Dun Karm'Psaila's summer residence in Spinola Road

was one of the brightest legal brains of his time. He forged a career abroad, mainly in Constantinople and returned to Malta after many decades. In 1917 he defended his nephew Dr Enrico ("Nerik") Mizzi, future Prime Minister who was charged with sedition by the British authorities. In due course and with great irony, uncle and nephew ended up on opposite political sides when Lewis Mizzi joined the Constitutional Party. He lived in a house at 176, Main Street behind which was a terrace or balcony facing the sea front. A block of flats rose on the site but I remember very clearly Dr Mizzi's widow sitting on a rocking chair either alone or chatting with visiting friends: all very visible through the glass-panes of the "antiporta" (inner door).

Keeping to Main Street but on the other side, there are four beautiful old houses between St Elias and Carmel Streets. At n. 92, the late architect and civil engineer Arthur S. Mortimer lived with his family for several years. Next door at n. 93 lived the late Joe Mompalao de Piro who served as Major in the British Army for many years. He was very keen on



Dr. Antonio Busuttill (1899 - 1967)

amateur dramatics and had a long association with the MADC. What many did not know is that both locally and abroad he was a respected expert in the cultivation of hibiscus. He also explained to me that the monogram MMP seen on the wrought iron grille above the main door stands for "M[amo] M[ompalao de] Piro, an ancestor who must have built the house. I still remember next door (n. 93) as the residence of Magistrate Francesco Wirth who died in 1957. He was a handsome and distinguished man with snow-white hair, with a dignified sober mien and publicly aloof as all members of the magistracy and upper judiciary used to be in those days. He would walk up the street to the old parish church, softly nodding and acknowledging respectful greetings without looking right or left. However, privately he was a most beloved father and grandfather.

The last two personalities in this round-up both belonged to the medical profession. At n. 10 (now 21) Birkirkara Hill, many still remember the kindly and very humane Dr Antonio Busuttill (1899-1967). Originally from Valletta he graduated as medical doctor from Palermo University and married Maud, née Schranz, raising a family of eight. For a while he was district medical officer at Ħad Dingli but spent most of his life in St Julian's where he was a highly respected family doctor and GP. In 1962 he was returned to Parliament after a casual election which won him the seat vacated by Dr Herbert Ganado, leader of the Partit Demokratiku Nazzjonalista who had also been elected to the First District. Dr Busuttill retained his seat until the general elections of 1966.

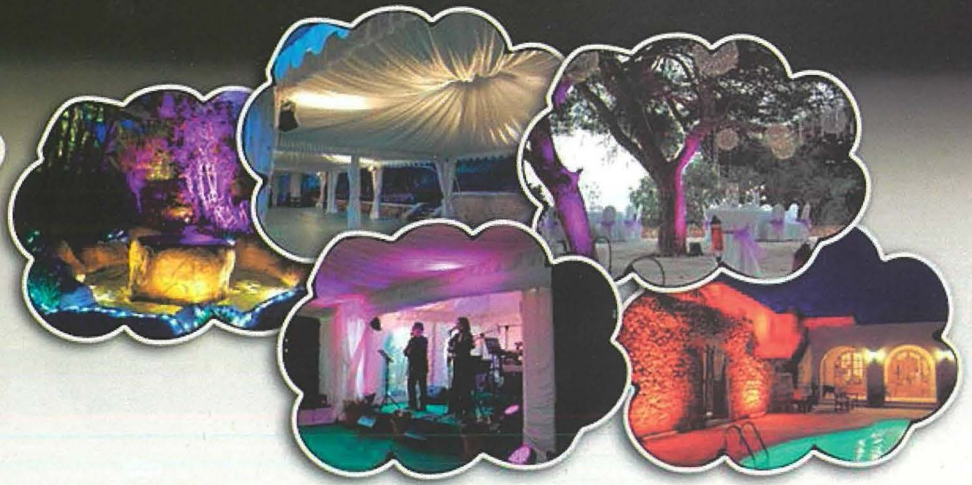
Perhaps the most distinguished of all personalities one could think of is Dr Ċensu (Vincent) Tabone, born in Gozo in 1913. He graduated in medicine in 1937 and in 1941 married Maria Wirth, a daughter of Magistrate Francesco Wirth. They moved to n. 33 Carmel Street and lived there and raised a large family. Dr Tabone specialised in ophthalmology, founded the Medical Officers Union in 1954 and by

then had already carried out an extensive anti-trachoma campaign in Gozo. Based on this success he embarked on similar and successful programmes launched by WHO in various S.E. Asian countries. He emerged with honours, tributes and acknowledgments by various countries concerned. From the early 1960s he took active part in politics and was Nationalist cabinet minister 1966-71, remained an MP until 1989, when after two years as Minister of Foreign Affairs he became 4th President of the Republic serving until 1994. Dr Tabone was a much-loved and respected personality and great family man. He died on 16 March 2012, just two weeks short of his 99th birthday and, after a State Funeral, was privately buried in his native Gozo. A monument to President Tabone now stands at one corner of Balluta Square.



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