

## George Fenech – Il-Pittur u Karmnu Muscat – Il-Kaptin

Paul P. Borg

“B’xorti ħażina l-Mellieħa naqsulha tnejn min-nies li kienu magħrufin sewwa fl-oqsma tagħhom. Il-Banda Imperial thoss li għandha tagħti tislma xierqa lil dawn iż-żewġ persunaġġi biex turi mhux biss rispettt xieraq kif jisthoqqilhom, imma wkoll biex issellmilhom bħala persunaġġi li bl-attività tagħhom urew il-kobor tal-ħila tal-bniedem ħiereġ minn ambjent raħli, agrikolu u umli.

Hemm fattur komuni fil-Pittur tal-Ambjent Ġorġ Fenech u l-kompożitur Karmnu Muscat minkejja l-ġeneru tal-espressjoni artistika tagħhom: l-umiltà. L-umiltà kbira li kellhom minkejja l-qawwa artistika, hi xhieda ta’ bniedem kbir. Il-pittur Fenech studja Ruma, il-pitturi tiegħu mxerrdin f’Malta kif ukoll lil hemm minn xtutna u daħħal f’Malta dak is-sens ta’ sliem u ħemda mimli lwien u dawl li hu karatteristiku tal-pajsaġġ Malti u li ftit ftit donnu qed jispiċċa. Muscat kien kompożitur ta’ ħila kbira li qatt ma ried jiċċaqlaq lil hemm mill-Mellieħa u baqa’ msakkar fil-kobor tiegħu f’dan l-ambjent umli imma mimli ħiliet f’kull qasam tal-arti.

Dawn iż-żewġ kitbiet huma siltiet mill-ktieb tiegħi **QUEST for IDENTITY- the Mellieħa experience**. Jiena wkoll ningħaqad mal-Melliħin kollha u nsellmilhom. Fuq kollox grazzi tal-patrimonju li ħallejtu lilna l-Maltin.”

### *The Colours of the Soul* **ĠORĠ FENECH – il-Pittur**

#### **The Painter of the Environment**

It is said that the artistic eye has the privilege of seeing a lot more than what the naked eye can see. The painter beholds colours which other people do not see. The artist sees not only with his eyes, but also with his inner soul and with his spirit in such a way that feelings, emotions and vision interlace each other with every stroke on the canvas. The sensitive depiction of moods and sentiment on canvas through colour, develops as human experiences develop in such a way that the true artist enjoys the enviable spiritual state of realising these personal changes in his expressions as years go by.

When some years ago, I met George Fenech in his studio in Mellieħa that is exactly what he told me. George is soft spoken, calm and patient, unassuming and so gentle, always in good humour, an aura of peacefulness surrounding him. He is a

renowned painter, and I am indebted to him because together with the other artists Gabriel Caruana, Joe Borg Xuereb, Samuel Bugeja and Ġanni Bonnici he formed an unforgettable group of teachers at St Joseph Secondary Technical School in the 1960s. We occasionally met Esprit Barthet in the evenings. They all worked formidably to instill in us students the great idea that man does not live by bread alone. I shall never forget every single comment made during enlightening mid-day breaks as these wise men discussed art and society.

“There is colour all around us,” George told me. “The Mediterranean sun bathes us in colour and we cannot paint the environment unless there is a lot of colour. And for that reason shadows are so important. When I finished my studies in Rome, and I came back home that is what impressed me most. Light, colours and the brightness of colours!”

His return from Italy resulted in an important turning point in his art. Other emotional ingredients engulfed him in such a way that there was now a new, more meaningful way at how he looked at the environment.

“The local environment is changing so fast,” George told me, “that I am afraid that my life is too short and I will not be able to capture it all on my canvas. This thought frightens me so much. That is the only hurry I have in life. The colour will not yet have dried, and the scene will have already been changed altogether...”

George was born in Mellieħa on the 3 January 1926, and he was immediately captured by the scenes of sunrise and sunset. At times in good visibility he could even see as far away as Sicily.

“In Mellieħa you always see the sun and you always see the sky, on the garigues, at school, on the way from school or to school, always... and you do not see the clouds only, but you see colours, you see the fruits, you see the little flowers, you see the grass, you see vegetables... and you do not only see them, but you feel them as well... Who can explain what I feel when I see these colours!”

George’s attachment to nature developed into a close relationship with his environment that is hard to explain. The multitude of tiny flowers, the simple wild thyme, may be wild plants to which many are indifferent, yet he has always considered them sacred. He understands that the wild thyme shrub does not merit indifference, nature needs the plant because the bees need it. The depiction of colours on canvas starts taking place immediately when he beholds nature; it all starts inside his conscience, and the inevitable urge to transfer these feelings into light and tangible colour is then hard to subdue and contain. This internal and personal debate that takes place, has been developing mostly since he re-discovered the presence of the local light and the local colour immediately on his return from his studies in Rome. This was the point in his career that gradually resulted in the development of a colourful rendering of his peaceful spirituality, hazy yet solid, calm yet dynamic, ethereal yet visible and substantial. The sun and light, colours and feelings, started becoming the epitome of his paintings.

### A Changing Environment

“The bees need the wild thyme,” he told me. “That way a stone will not be simply a stone, but it becomes something else. It has feelings as well. You start looking at things, and you start seeing them. Frequently people look, but they do not see at all! You appreciate the necessary things, you look and you take nothing or take only what you must need,

the bee does not take the whole flower, it takes only what she needs, she is prudent. I started seeing and appreciating nature. That is when I start painting. I want to make a copy of that beautiful feeling. It is such a beautiful time! And all that light! And all those scenes!”

George’s Mellieħa environment is a universe that is never exhausted and he has been going all around it numerous times in his quest to capture the feelings of light and colour and the experience of that same internal joy. The fields are to him so *beautiful* and so *peaceful*. The shadows and the light are the elements that tell him the movement of the sun and the progress of the day. And he is at times sad because the sun does not always show him the beauty he is wont to find. Sometimes there have been changes in the environment and the sun does not appear to cast the same rays of beauty and hope on him any longer because people have been unkind to the fields or to the trees that used to be the secrets of calmness and peace.

### Colour Begets Colour

George loved painting but never intended to study painting. He simply got lost in depicting nature the way he felt nature. Going to the School of Arts was too far away for him. But then war broke out and he was conscripted and taken to St. Andrew’s with the Army in the weapons Section.

“That is where I met Louis Wirth,” he told me. “We were close friends during the war, but when we parted after the war, we never met again! He used to go to the School of Arts and that is what made me go there! Louis convinced me to go and I went. I studied Design under Ċensu Apap, History of Art with Carmelo Attard Cassar... Emvin Cremona taught us Painting... I kept going till 1956, and then I won a scholarship and they sent me to the *Accademia di Belle Arti* in Rome, where I stayed for five years!”

At the *Accademia* he studied Etching under Professor Maccari, Decorative Arts under Professor Ferrazzi, History of Art under Professor Mario Rivosecchi, and fresco techniques under Professor Ciotti. He also attended classes in drawing from nude at the *Associazione Artistica Internazionale (Circolo Artistico)*.

In Rome he would have liked to paint the sunny landscapes he was used to in Mellieħa, but he found things so melancholic in Rome, so dark and so colourless!

“There was a high window and the sun could not reach us properly!” he told me. “The rays had to go through cobwebs and thick air! But during the last two years they changed everything! Huge walls and

clean walls! But when Professor Bartoli came along he started saying, 'Is this a hospital? What are these marble walls? Come on, paint everything over!' And we painted over the huge walls as well!

"It is not that Rome is not beautiful! There are many beautiful places all over Italy. Not that, but when I came back home I could finally see light the way I wanted it and the way I liked it! In the studio you are tied, each colour is not natural, you have to think more than you feel, in nature it is different, each leaf has its colour, nature herself will never make a leaf exactly like the other! Every colour is found in nature. Every tree has its colours, each palm tree has its own green... they are like feelings; the sun is everything in nature, the sun! The sun is colour, warmth and colour... if there is no light, there is no colour. A colour can beget a colour. From life you get life. Life has its own colour... even death has its own colour..."

### Movement and Time

When he returned from Rome things suddenly changed for George. The Rome experience had not only brought him closer to the techniques of the profession, but his return had somehow stirred unknown emotions and new challenges. He started teaching art in secondary schools, always hoping to live the life of painting and rushing calmly wherever the sun shines on the wide plains of Mellieħa and all over the cliffs and the valleys to capture landscape and light on his canvas. It was also during this period when he first met his future wife, Doris Attard also of Mellieħa who sat for him as a model.

Then he told me:

"You will never get over this nagging feeling that you want to get somewhere and you never reach this somewhere and you do not even know where this somewhere is... That is why the great painters paint the movement of men. They paint men with four legs, and then they cover two and you see only the last two! It is because they never really know the ultimate point they want to reach! You always thrive to reach the best and the most beautiful, light... movement, and never manage to achieve what you want exactly until that moment when you decide! But you must be free to decide!"

As he talked to me he was sitting in his studio, around him canvases, frames, paintings, paint, brushes... and the front door left wide open so that the sun rushed inside and reflected and rebounded all over the place. I tried to understand what was meant by this ultimate point of arrival. I tried to guess whether he was always seeking fulfilment through his art, whether the views he depicted on his canvases succeeded to abate his inward needs to

his contentment.

"Do you think you've reached where you wish to reach George?" I asked him.

There was a half smile on his face. He bent his head.

"The painter will show you where he has arrived," he said slowly. "But he will show you also that he still needs to move on. He wants to keep looking for something, and that search will never stop, not even with old age! Each time has its own dress. Each century has its own dress. Giotto was revolutionary, but there was also the time of the Impressionists. You have to see the artist in the context of his time. I love Cezanne because he had the Mediterranean temperament that we have."

I looked at George. He had said wise words that once more gave another definition of time and space. Each time has its own dress. That is what he told me. They were simple enough words, but I knew that they were also simply deeper and deeper than what the ears can hear. I could not understand their intrinsic significance at the moment and I suspected their importance to me. I knew that they were words which would never escape my mind.

I felt that that was exactly what he always wanted. Light. The impressions of light during different parts of the day and during different circumstances. The chunks of light delineating the landscape. Seeking the perfect natural impression light renders to a landscape. That is exactly what he has always been after: the impression of the beauty of light on nature as well as on the soul, and its harmony with the different forms nature assumes to create the feelings only some people like him are able to capture with their heart and with their brush. I remembered the word *hubris* that troubled every dead artist and still troubles every living one. The perfection you need to reach - but the impossibility to achieve it! The beauty you need to see - but the impossibility to possess it for ever. The natural magnificence of the simplest item in nature you need to experience - but the disappointment the artist knows must be faced.

### Blending with Nature

George moved to the back room of his studio and looked through the window. He did not talk, but just looked at the scene spread before him from up there. Then he walked with his customary slow steps to look at the sun drenching the grass in front of his studio door. I knew what he was feeling, I thought it must be that feeling obtained when one roams the valleys and the open rocky plains. I thought it must be the bewitching feeling I knew so well when as a little boy I myself would run all over the plains from *Mistra* to *Qasam Barrani* and back

again, all by myself, just soaked in the light and in the warm silence and in the beautiful sensation of warmth inside me. As George looked at the rocks at the side of the opening in front of his studio, I knew that he was still experiencing the same happiness of roaming down into the cliffs, into the valleys, smelling the strong scents emitted by the tiny flowers abounding in the low shrubs hiding amongst the rocks and clinging to the rare soil stuck in the rocky corners. I was sure it must be the mysterious feeling when the outside world overwhelms all your senses, and you cannot differentiate any longer between the effects each one imparts individually on your heart and on your soul. You discover suddenly that the sun is warmth and happiness, you start knowing this sensation all of a sudden. Each time you experience it, it always releases that warmth and that beauty and that happiness inside your soul and inside your emotions in the same way your glands release their enzymes inside your body.

The painter was reading my silence. I suddenly realised that he was looking at me.

“Man must not ruin this beauty,” he told me slowly. “Man must become aware of the environment. Why is a *razzett*, a farmhouse so beautiful? Why must it fill you with happiness just looking at it?”

I thought he was just talking to himself and that his question needed no answer from me. But I realised he was actually asking me those questions.

“Don’t you know why?” he insisted. “It is because that *razzett* is so well blended with the rest of the environment. Not just the scenery, but its significance as well. That is why it is beautiful. It appears to be growing out of the soil like another shrub, only larger, blending sublimely. Its meaning is nature. Can you see that? The upper room is the one that is facing the sun because that is where they store their fodder to keep it dry, they must have sun. The peasant used to construct the rooms around a central yard to have enough shade and cool air whilst enjoying the light, enough light, as he rested. He used to place the stone curb above the well because he needed it and not to decorate the place with it. Everything was with a lot of sense, not placed there to decorate, not to decorate the building as they do today. The *razzett* would not have a window facing north because the north wind is a cold wind. You see? Everything made sense and that made the building blend with nature and with the needs of the environment.

“The Maltese *razzett* answers all the requirements man needs in nature. It is such a strong and logical construction that you cannot remove it from nature. It is a natural construction according to the nature of man who lives in this environment, on this soil,

and in this country, with this wind, and with this rain. If there is a window in England and you decide to build it over here, it will not make sense! And it is likewise senseless and not natural to put a cart’s wheel against the wall to make your building look local!

“That is the greatest mistake we are making now in many parts of Malta. We do not understand our environment because we do not look at nature. It is a very big farce... a tragic comedy that is killing the environment that we have...”

He would not stop once he started, but during each argument I noticed that he brought in the personal experience with nature. I noticed how strongly he held to the roots each human had with nature around him. The legacy of the relationship between man and nature was the base of all his arguments. He drew his spirit from the same environment nature sculpted and painted around him.

“In Tunisia, the palm tree is the lord of the country! And nothing is done to overpower the presence of the palm tree!”

He was afraid that the natural environment will disappear with time. *New scenes are being seen*, he told me. He had watched a television programme on Cezanne’s works. They had shown his paintings and the actual scenery as it is still today. He had been impressed by that, and wants less grey material for roads and more of the greenery of nature.

“Man is no longer fond of society,” he told me. “He does his best not to meet other people, he goes to church with his car, he does not walk at all and he cannot stop and talk to other people... all of this stems from one single inability of man, which is to understand the beauty of the colours of his environment in nature... the feelings of his environs...”

### Family Environment

In 1966 he was making preparations for his first exhibition when he met young Doris Attard whom he asked to pose for one of his paintings. The painting, called *Head of a Lady* was one of the paintings that caught the eye of visitors at the exhibition held in 1967 at the National Museum in Valletta. Doris was his model, sitting for his portraits and figurative paintings. It was an experience in both painter and model that could only result in something deeper. But in 1968 Doris decided to go on holiday to the USA where she stayed with relatives until her return in 1972. They met again and George asked her to marry him.

Rome had served the amazing purpose of showing him the beauty of the local sun and the beauty of the local colour. The USA had served

the amazing purpose of showing him the beauty of this young woman and the beauty of their mutual feelings towards each other.

Doris was now present in his life so that his art became her love, and her love became his art. In 1973 they got married and his artistic expression was extended from the natural Mellieħa rural landscape to a more intimate and closer family environment that unfolded his love for her and their two sons, Conrad and Gilbert. His art had now taken a visibly new meaning that enveloped hitherto latent expressions. His inspiration was now captured not only by the rural landscapes of his beloved Mellieħa and the ever changing colours governed by the sun, the seasons and his ever peaceful moods, but also by family love as another factor in his surroundings. He realised this newly found expression by his depiction of family members in his paintings.

The adage that behind every successful man there is a woman, is perhaps never truer than in this case. Doris is an independent personality that complements George's docility and gentleness, always backing him in all he needs, supplying the fortitude he needs. She sees to it that there is the required peace around him as the fertile spiritual atmosphere that gives rise to his personal artistic expressions.

George is today the mature octogenarian who never grows old because the youthful heartbeats of art keep clutching him to fresher depictions of life around him. He goes places and paints landscapes with the same enthusiasm that has not left him. He is happy to have imparted his artistic disposition to his two sons Conrad and Gilbert. The latter has accompanied his father in the fields since he was a toddler. Gilbert has inherited the love for the Mellieħa environment, and is well on his way in quest of his own identity as a painter, flying away freely but taking his father as the ultimate guide along the long way ahead in depicting nature.

### The Painter of the Environment

The Mellieħa painter had a lot to say to young people.

"They have to feel part of this environment. Technology is good but they must not forget that they are natural beings. Not everything is machinery and technology! The young man must look, and he must create. Do not let technology rule you! Do not accept all you see on a monitor! That is what I would like to tell young people, they must look

at the clouds, feel free, feel the freedom of the winds. Walk in the countryside and watch the little stones, note their irregularity, the little shrubs, even if you think they are worthless, just look at them and at their beauty. Try to feel them. Look at the insects. Look at the little snails, look at the marvels abounding all around us... don't destroy nature, don't turn your back on nature... I used to take my children in the country and I used to ask them to look at the marvels they can discover in just one square foot! They used to enjoy it and would be happy making all those discoveries!"

I realised that George was not the painter of light and shadows only, but the painter of the Mellieħa environmental and emotional character in its totality. The painter of the treasured local family idiom as much as the painter of the equally treasured natural landscape environment. The title of the *Painter of the Environment* in Malta befits him amply. This is what he told me on one occasion.

"When I am in the countryside painting and I see that movement and I hear those sounds, I see that Mother Nature is unfolding in front of me and I know I must hurry because those moments are rare and brief... because the cloud will soon pass by, and the bird will soon stop chipping, and it will not be the same if the cloud passes by and if the bird stops chipping! You will not be as happy, your mood may change, even if the sun changes colour, or if there is wind and the wind changes the colour you are seeing... or the branches move differently and therefore they will have different colours... Nature is so beautiful and so varied... that is why young people must look at nature and see nature..."

George Fenech's paintings are dispersed all over the world in private collections and in museums. He exhibited frequently not only in Malta but also overseas showing the harmony of nature and man in our changing rural and family environment. George Fenech is the artist who painted nature and captured her silent beauty by revelling on the Mellieħa landscapes, cliffs, sea, valleys, trees, fields and farmhouses taking them as unparalleled representatives of Mother Nature herself. He is the *Painter of the Environment* who celebrated in silence the harmony between light, colour and natural surroundings of this humble locality; he exteriorised his deep emotions about nature through an infinite number of colourful strokes from the infinity of the palette of his soul.

*Energy in the Mind***KARMNU MUSCAT – *il-Kaptin***(Based on a talk with him on the 8<sup>th</sup> May, 2010).

“They tell me that when I was born,” Karmnu said with a smile, “I was so little that my mother thought that I would not live long! But the midwife got hold of me and lifted me and said ‘Of course he will live! He will be a captain! That’s what he’ll be!’ And they started calling me *the captain!* I was the youngest of nine children, but two had already died. Some time after my birth my elder sister was at school; she was selected as the captain and they gave her a brooch with the word Captain on it. Apparently she fixed this brooch to my clothes. I was only six months old! But the term stuck to me for ever.

“My father came from the family called *ta’ Bembu*, and my mum’s family was *ta’ Sila*, a family from Gozo. My father’s family was a large family, we call it *razza*, and there are many people who loved art in that family. But people call me *il-Kaptin* to this day! Even family members call me that. You cannot do anything, can you? But I have always led my own orchestra and my own musical band, and I have always led my own life the way I wanted it as well! That means that I have always been truly a captain!”

**Il-Kaptin**

Many people had talked to me about *il-Kaptin*, the Captain, and I had long resolved not to miss making his acquaintance. I was to understand why so many people in the village speak highly of him and consider his views as some kind of reference. His ideas on music, God, people, and life are rather original, and his consideration of unlikely conversational topics such as time, creation, man, eternity, infinity, energy and movement as a journey or movement as progress, was a joy to listen to.

“I have been to primary school only,” he explained reading my thoughts as soon as we settled in his dining room. “But I read, and what goes in the human mind will never be forgotten. Do you understand? It goes in and it stays there even for sixty, seventy years and you can make use of it if only you look for it and can find it.”

Indeed, what I never expected was that talking to him was not to be simply another meeting, but a real experience with much food for thought. I sensed immediately that I had to be careful about my input questions; *il-Kaptin* has that rare ability of understanding more than one asks, he absorbs

more than one tells him, he gulps attentively even the unspoken, frequently hidden peripherals of the question. I felt that *he* was directing the conversation, but it did not matter as long as most of my curiosity was satisfied. At times he answered by making clearer the surrounding contextual information required for the eventual answer.



“A conversation has to be on a register governed by who is participating,” was one conclusion I heard him say. “There are some points we’re talking about, I would not dream of talking about at the club.”

“I knew you would be asking me that,” he said smiling at another point. “If you were following what I was saying, perhaps you would not have asked...” That was simply a brave aside, an undertone almost barely audible, and quickly uttered. Then he continued with what he had to say.

“Musical composition?” he enquired at some point. “You just tell me what you need and I’ll do it! I have hundreds of compositions. I have my compositions all over the place! And I mastered the mandolin, the guitar and the violin without anyone showing me how! I was musical, that’s why!”

**The Early Years**

We entered his home passing under a traditional *ħasira*, cane curtain, into a simple yard with the traditional stone colours, the traditional greenery popping out of pots, the traditional doors that lead into different rooms. He welcomed me in his dining room and I knew at once that, typically, *il-Kaptin* was not a collectionist. He reminded me of that great man, the composer Charles Camilleri and his rooms devoid of luxury and furniture.

“I have hundreds of musical compositions,” he told me. “But all are kept in another place... they

are all in a safe place... I have composed a lot of music and I love both band clubs. I am a Melleħi, the *Imperial* and the *La Vittoria* are both Melleħin, that is how I look at them, and I am an honorary Musical Director of them both. They respect me so much and I will compose anything for them.”

The furniture was the simple furniture that reminded me of what I used to see at *nanna* Ġużeppa many years ago. Soon I was going to understand that Karmnu was able to keep abreast of progress in his preferred musical field, but was not impressed at all by modern furniture that added nothing to one’s basic needs and basic comforts.

“I was eighty-two last March,” he said. “I was a normal boy, and I attended till Class 5 of the government school. My mother had wanted me to proceed with my studies, I never had any problems at school, but my mind had already been set. I knew I loved music and I knew that my mind was musical. I did not know it at the time, but I knew then that sounds and melodies fascinated me. I wanted to have a life for music. I remember as a small boy I used to strike the tea spoon on different objects to listen to different sounds, and if there is water in bottles they will emit different sounds.

“My mother used to be so angry at times! And perhaps one cannot blame her. I was always playing with these cups or beakers... I was always beating them with spoons and discovering the successive notes they produced. She had somehow managed to buy half a dozen cups or glasses and she was afraid that I would break them for her!”

*Il-Kaptin* remembers that he was perhaps just six years old, a little schoolboy, playing also with glass bottles containing different amounts of water and hearing them emit different sounds. It was then that he probably discovered the different notes and the scale of notes. He used to place the exact amount of water so that his scale was a perfect one simply by listening to what his ears told him. He still recalls how he loved this xylophone.

“A short while later I used to play the mandolin,” he told me. “There was a bar in the parish square, the barman was *il-Keliez*, Ġanni Bartolo, he played the mandolin and the guitar, and he used to let me play the two instruments so that by the time I was eight years old, I could play them both! I simply heard a tune and I was able to play it immediately on both instruments!”

### Discovering Music

His older brother bought a guitar and Karmnu said that mastered it as well on his own. But he could not yet read music, and he was conscious of that fact. However, when he was about fourteen

years old he had acquired a book in Italian about the trumpet and its music. He decided to study it. His elder sister Mari, who was fourteen years older than him, had been made to learn Italian and not English at school in her days, so that she could fortunately explain to him what the book said. It took him only a fortnight to understand the basic language of music! So he could now read music. Looking at the written notes and being able to sing the tune was to give him a boost in his endeavours to learn even more. He then started buying books, studying and reading all he could find on music. It was to him a wonderful time and in a short time he became an excellent sight-reader of musical scores.

Karmnu never sat for any examination in music and never felt the need to. He was simply conscious that he could read and play music: Verdi and Beethoven, and Ciappara and Camilleri never sat for examinations, he told me. They were simply musical by nature. *That* was their unique and rare qualification. And it needed no diploma to recognize it.

“You couldn’t speak of a Verdi and his diploma! Any diploma would degrade him!” he said laughing. “You could similarly not degrade Ciappara by tagging a label with letters to his name! How degrading it would be! That is how I look at it. It is today’s society that needs this measurement. But the musical mind and the musical soul do not need it. That is how it was in those days! If examinations existed, I did not know about them!”

“I knew I had mastered two musical instruments. I felt I could do anything with them. The war had just finished and I started looking at the violin. How I wished I owned one! How I wished to learn it! But it cost £5 and we did not have that money. But then there was an old man and he told me not to worry. ‘Boy,’ he told me, ‘tomorrow you will have your violin!’ And I couldn’t believe it! Next day he gave me a real violin! The violin was mine! And I started playing it and never stopped playing it for the next two years. I could play anything with it. I would play for seven or eight hours every day! I mastered it and I loved it!”

### Painting and Sounds

A sixteen year old cannot possibly remain at home playing musical instruments without making a contribution to his subsistence in a numerous family. His father was a fisherman and his four elder brothers worked with him with their boat. Karmnu was never inclined to that life, although he did accompany them on some trips sometimes. The importance he still attaches to those experiences was the new sounds he heard. The sound of the

sea and the silence of nature out there were a new experience to his sensitive soul. He still remembers that the others used to work at the *tunnara* as well. They led a very simple life at home, the elder brothers going around Mellieħa selling the day's, or the night's catch which they carried in large flat containers balanced on their head.

"But I could also paint!" he told me. "I discovered I could paint because I loved writing the letters in a nice way, trying to write them without raising the pen off the copybook and without stopping... you have to feel how you depict each letter in order to economise on movement and make it smooth and flowing, sometimes people call it artistic... you start each letter and each number from a place and finish the whole letter to the very end..."

Karmnu had a pen close by and started drawing the letters of the alphabet and the numbers, demonstrating the philosophy that related writing to art and feeling.

"So people asked me to paint numbers and letters and the British services got to know and they used to hire me to paint plaques for them. I liked doing that and I used to draw words like 'Kitchen' or 'Bedroom' or names of vehicles and painting on truck bonnets, and flowers and landscapes. Who knows how many I did? Hundreds of them! And I used to earn good money as well and I used to have time to play music too. I painted a lot, remember that my first cousin is Toni Fenech *il-Pajżan*, he's a painter and he's musical too, and the painter George Fenech is also my second cousin..."

"And then there is another thing," he told me. "Some members of my family are born artists. And I will explain to you in a minute the meaning of art and creation. I know that my father had a good ear for music. I know it. Even my mother. You have to understand that hearing music was very rare in my childhood. We heard some music only during the feast of the patron saint by listening to the programmes of the musical clubs. Nothing else. No electricity, no radios. The cable radio or *Rediffusion* was introduced many years later. But my father was always humming some tune which I know was always created by him on the spur of the moment and according to what he was doing and according to how he felt. He was musical as well, I'm sure, but he never hummed known music because he never heard music in those days! He did not know it, but he was always showing me sounds and their creation, and the organization of sounds was so captivating, so enthralling!

"It is the sound of birds as well, it is the sounds of nature... shall we call it instinct or shall we call it talent? That is the whole story.

## Teacher and Composer

By the time he was twenty years old, he had studied harmony and had gone through all available books and scores with music for the violin, guitar and the mandolin. He was so glad to have command of these three instruments.

"At that age I started teaching these instruments to others, and so many young people would want to study music! Many came from all over Mellieħa and from other places as well. I was so busy teaching music and I was also called to play in orchestras, Maestro Carmelo Pace wanted me to play in his orchestra and I earned money as well. I wanted to be a full-time musician."

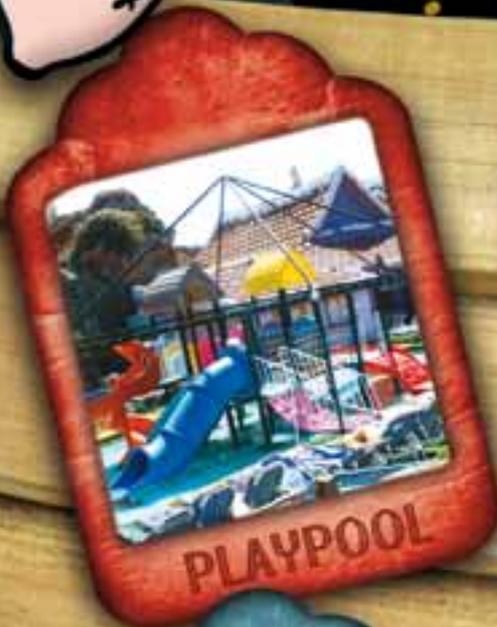
At twenty-five he had made up his own orchestra and played during weddings and during parties and dances for British servicemen. He also branched into playing the electric guitar, and played on different occasions all over Malta. He spent more than a decade playing the guitar and the violin in the evenings at a local restaurant. He could therefore live well off music not only as a teacher, but also as a band leader. Furthermore, musical band clubs wanted his musical compositions and he was pleased to oblige by composing so many musical scores, and hundreds of band marches. He is also so proud to have been a good teacher for more than fifty years, students who became well known and successful in the musical fields. He still remembers singers Mary Spiteri and Freddie Portelli amongst others, and musicians Simon Vella, Tonio Borg, Carmine Lauri and others.

"I was also involved in many festivals, teaching music and arranging musical scores. Who knows how many parents came along asking me to see if their children had any talent! They need only play or sing a single note and I will be able to feel the talent or otherwise of a person in front of me. But there must also be imagination and style. Once a girl with a beautiful and powerful voice came over, but she insisted to imitate an Italian singer all the time. I warned her. I told her 'Why don't you want to be yourself only? Why do you want to be someone else?' She would not listen, that was many years ago and she had of course to pay for her mistake in not obeying what I said to her. She got lost."

## Society

"In the past Mellieħa was a primitive village in many ways. Not just livelihood, but all society was primitive. In music there were the band clubs, but at the same time there was no other music... perhaps some folk music with a drum and with some *zaqq*, bag-pipe music... and other things to make some sounds with. In 1907 there was the *La Vittoria* that

# POPEYE VILLAGE



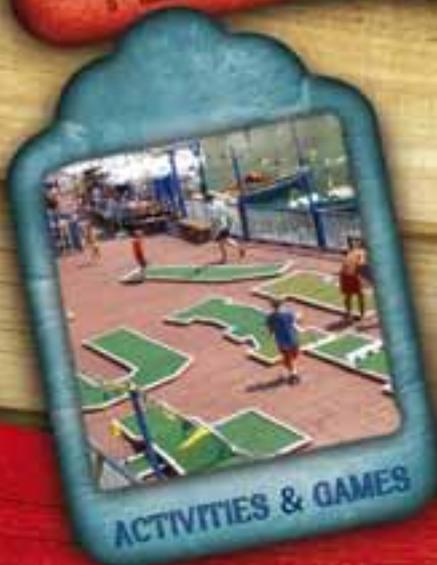
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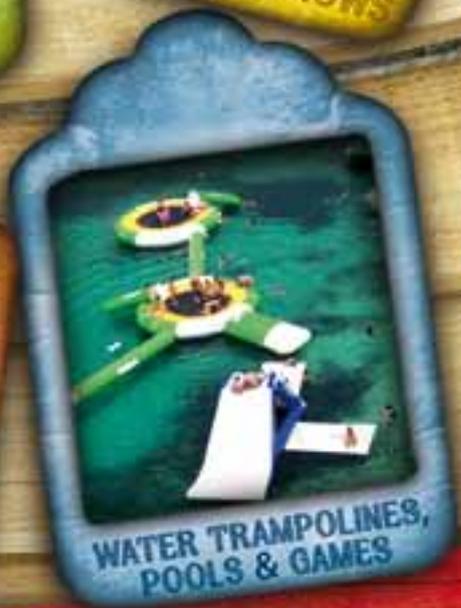
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started some progress. At the end of the war things started changing. We had electricity, we had radio, later on we had television and Mellieħa became suddenly different. Mellieħa is not a village with a dozen peasants and a dozen fishermen anymore. There were many fishermen here in the past, perhaps as many as peasants. But there are none today. There is not a single fisherman now. Mellieħa is like a city now. In summer there may be more than twenty thousand inhabitants here! There is now more possibility to listen to music, there is more possibility to compare one's ability as well.

"The two band clubs have all improved so much. There are good musicians, they play serious music, they take up challenges, and I am always there to help if they need me. The people of Mellieħa are of course changing. Many come from other countries or from other places to live with us. It is a new society. They all say that we are nice people to live with, the Mellieħa people are easy to live with and this is the truth. We *are* nice!"

"Only the older people talk the Mellieħa dialect now. The younger ones do not, unfortunately. And it is a beautiful dialect. The vowels are something so natural, the sound of nature that the mouth can make. The vocal chords vibrate and the mouth makes the sound. At Mellieħa we make use of seven different vowels not just five, that is the dialect is richer. You start with your mouth wide open for the 'a' and then to pursed lips and finally to the rounded lips for the vowel after the 'u'... each time a different vowel is sounded... The Maltese language is so old. It is as old as Hebrew and as Arabic itself..."

### God, Energy and Time

At a certain moment, Karmnu left the table to make a cup of tea. He had already offered me a drink, and I opted for water. But he kept talking even as he prepared the tea for himself. I do not know what really happened, but we were suddenly talking about God. I thought that we were somehow talking about the universe, but *il-Kaptin* said:

"The universe! I love talking about that! I love talking about music and then I love the universe! Listen to this," he said. Then he stood up, he brought a piece of paper and a pen and resumed with what he had in mind, jotting down letters and numbers and figures and lines.

"Do you know about eternity?" I asked at a certain point.

He looked at me

"I only know that it baffles me," I said. "I would like to know what it really is and what infinity is as well, not just eternity. But infinity as well... there is the infinite universe, but what lies beyond it... that

is what I would like to know!"

"Look here," he said slowly.

Karmnu drew a circle.

"This is what eternity is," he said. "No starting point and no end. But look at this as if it were a perfect sphere. Not just a flat circle. Can there be a beginning? Can there be the edge of this sphere? One must be prepared to go deeper in this, just to try to understand it. That is God in fact. That is the idea of God, in fact!"

I looked blankly at him as he drew circles on the paper and as he scribbled words around them.

"We know God because we can understand only two attributes about God," he continued. "These two attributes are *spirit* and *matter*. We cannot understand other attributes he must surely have, because we are of limited intelligence and we cannot imagine more than this. We are *matter* and we understand matter; and we more or less do our best to understand the idea of *spirit*, that is we cannot even comprehend these two attributes in all their fullness in our attempt to understand the idea of God, can we?"

I felt him gazing at me.

"Both infinity and eternity combine to form God," he said. And I tried to understand. "And both spirit and matter combine to form the understanding of God. God the Father God who is energy, the Son who represents the matter component because he himself was matter, and God the Holy Spirit who is the spirit component. This is not three, but this is one idea and one concept which is God one single idea."

"Do you mean that God is therefore an idea of energy only?" I knew that this had nothing at all to do with Mellieħa and with livelihood at all, but I was really intrigued at discovering a basically old man who as far as I knew had never come across Philosophy and these heavy religious concepts of God, the Universe, infinity and eternity, presenting his own ideas.

"What I'm saying is that energy gave way to matter," he said "Yes, that's right. That is God. And we cannot explain that in five minutes can we?"

"Do you mean that that energy can become matter?" I asked, remembering vaguely what Physics teachers tell their students.

"That's right!" he exclaimed. "And who can understand the process by which energy becomes matter?" he asked. "Not only that. But God did become *matter*, God had his Son made man, his first born. But that is not the end of the story! There is more to it than that! Then there are other sons, *we* are the other sons, the angels are the second in line, then there are human beings... we are third in line

that is... Then there are the animals, there is nature, there is also Mother Nature and all the matter in the universe, and there is then all Creation. But as man we are high up in that order... do you understand how it is? That is Creation..."

Rather than discussing, I was asking myself, whether *il-Kaptin* had actually been hitting on the idea of the explanation of the Big Bang theory and the moment of Creation.

"Have you ever heard of the Big Bang?" I asked.

"No one is absolutely certain what happened," he said matter-of-factly. "But whichever way you look at it there was the moment which no one can be sure of. Everything must have been created in this way. Even wrongness and wickedness come out of this for a simple reason."

He looked at me in my eyes.

"Do you know why even wrong resulted from all this?"

I shook my head.

"It is because of God giving freedom to all. God gave us all a good measure of autonomy which in time gave rise to the wrong that destroys what is perfect! God is perfect, and we come back to the sphere I talked to you about. And that sphere is perfect. For the sphere or for God, there is no need of the idea of time for example, because the sphere has no beginning and no end even in time. In fact, *that* is time. It is the human need to move away from perfection. Do you follow? The need to find the edge of the sphere and move on. God does not move; for God there is no need of the idea of time and there is no past and there is no need for a future. Only we have the need of the idea of movement, and if we have this idea of movement and the idea of time, that is the idea of speed, we must have the baffling problem of infinity in space, and the idea of eternity in time which are tied to the understanding of time and the understanding of movement. That is something which only humans need to worry about!"

The discussion was so enjoyable, yet so unexpectedly baffling, amusing and at the same time so surprisingly enlightening. We mentioned Stephen Hawking, the Big Bang, galaxies and stars, clay and the creation of Adam and Eve, and we talked about concepts one discusses only in the Physics classroom. *Il-Kaptin* expounded his ideas on gravity and further points on perfection, distancing oneself from God, and the music all about us. I marvelled at the nature and the depth of what we were talking about and could not help looking at the simple environment I had around me, the simple table, the simple table cooker, the simple chair and the humble characters I was supposed to

expect to find in my quest for identity with Mellieħa as my site of investigation. *Il-Kaptin* had only been to a primary school more than seventy years ago. He kept looking at me shrewdly yet kindly, affectionately. And I knew exactly that he was aware of what was going on in my mind.

Then I smiled.

### The Cook's Story

Talking to Karmnu *l-Kaptin*, I had the same predicament that I had felt when I was talking to Professor Godfrey Wettinger. These are old people and they are Mellieħa characters who also indicate clearly the characteristics of our identity. A people's identity has so many facets. There are so many details that describe it. Man does not live by bread alone. *Il-Kaptin's* interest in his own subsistence was to him secondary. His environment was a different environment. It was clear that moving towards his musical aptitude and interests was to him the most important thing in life.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?" I asked suddenly. "If you do not want to answer it, do not..."

"Karm," I asked, "How come you never married?"

He smiled. He chuckled to himself.

"I'm a normal man," he said slowly. "But it was my choice not to want to marry. I had my chances, but I never wanted to go for it for two reasons. Firstly I was always of the idea that I wanted to play music only, and a wife with children would somehow detract my attention from what I wanted. I was sure it would not be fair on me and not fair on other people as well.

"Secondly I had been seeing so many beautiful females and talking to them daily all my life from the time I started teaching when I was just twenty years old till fifty years later when I was seventy! I was to experience the same story of the cook! Do you know what happened to the cook? Eh? Well the cook had been preparing one fine dish after the other and when he had finished people expected him to choose a nice dish for himself! But he had had all he could! And he knew all about them as well! So he just wanted a piece of bread with some oil! Nothing else!"

"I now need to listen to you playing the violin," I said after some time.

He is an octogenarian, yet he is so alert, so calm.

"Sure," he answered with a smile, and brought his violin from a cupboard.

And the next minute I was listening to a melody of his creation that floated around the room and out into the yard and into the streets of Mellieħa.