

Joseph Bezzina



**A walk through the districts of
il-Munxar and ix-Xlendi
and their history, heritage, and folklore**

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With input by Paul Curmi (Munxar)

Photos Anthony Grech (Xewkija)

Munxar – Gozo
GHAQDA INHOBBU L-MUNXAR U X-XLENDI
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INTRODUCTION

This book highlights the varied aspects of the historical, natural, and folkloristic characteristics of two contrasting but complementing localities of the island of Gozo: **il-Munxar**, up to now the last locality of Gozo to be established as a village with its own parish church; and **ix-Xlendi**, possibly the oldest harbour and port of call on the island with a name that originated during the Byzantines in the eighth-ninth century.

The Ministry for Gozo through *Eco Gozo* is indeed proud to have assisted the *Għaqda Inhobbu l-Munxar u x-Xlendi* in the publication of this book that will promote a walk through the streets, lanes, and paths of these two localities that are blessed with outstanding natural beauty and unparalleled scenes, and unique maritime archaeological remains.

Dr Joseph Bezzina's mastery of the heritage of Gozo coupled with photos of the stunning landscapes and seascapes by the photographer Anthony Grech will surely make this book a prized addition to *Melitensia* lovers and an indispensable tool for all those who walk and wander about through the localities of Il-Munxar and Ix-Xlendi.

Giovanna Debono
 Minister for Gozo

FOREWARD

The publication of this heritage walk is one of a series of initiatives which the *Għaqda Inħobbu l-Munxar u ix-Xlendi* has undertaken to **valorise the local Heritage of Munxar and Xlendi (a typical Gozitan village and hamlet) to improve the Gozo Tourist Product.** The other initiatives include the production of a documentary, the setting up of a web-site (www.munxarxlendi.org) and the installation of two tourist information kiosks and information panels, all having the same aim of promoting the natural and cultural assets of Xlendi and Munxar.

Through this project our organisation is taking on board in real terms the Government's vision to capitalise on the uniqueness of Gozo's characteristics and market the Island as a unique rural destination in line with the Eco-Gozo tourism objectives. By promoting Munxar and Xlendi, Maltese and foreign visitors in Gozo would be in a better position to appreciate the charm of these two localities all year round.

The realisation of the initiatives mentioned would not have been possible without the financial assistance of the Ministry for Gozo through the Eco-Gozo grant schemes for NGOs.

We invite you to experience the natural beauty of Munxar and Xlendi with their surroundings and their people. Enjoy your walk!

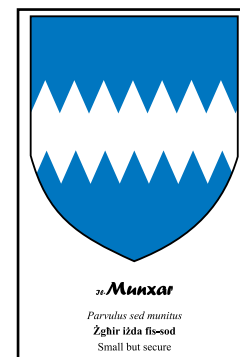
Paul Curmi
Inħobbu l-Munxar u ix-Xlendi

Il-Munxar is one of the smallest villages of Gozo. It lies to the south of the island between the village of Ta' Sannat and the suburb of il-Fontana, just under two kilometres from it-Tokk the centre of the capital city Victoria and of Gozo. It juts over the port-hamlet of ix-Xlendi that forms part of this village.

The name *munxar* is derived from a distinguished feature of the area. Munxar is Maltese for *bucksaw*, a type of saw typically set in an adjustable H-shaped frame and used with both hands for sawing firewood. The imagery is suggested from the promontory that runs from behind the village church up to Xlendi valley sawing into two the surrounding area with the tiny *Wied l-Għawdxija*, literally the valley of the Gozitan (woman) that starts from behind the village church, on one side, and *Wied ix-Xlendi* on the other.

The name is first recorded as *il monxar* in a notarial act drawn by Notary Ferdinando Ciappara on 2 July 1584. It is interesting that it is mentioned in relation to a *vinea vitibus et arboribus plantata in contrata Xlendi*, a vineyard flourishing with vines and other trees in the *contrata* of ix-Xlendi. This indicates that part of the area was an orchard. It is no wonder that il-Munxar is referred to as part of ix-Xlendi, for the latter, being a port, was of higher importance than a rocky expanse. The place-name is not restricted to Gozo; a similar headland to the east of Malta is also known as il-Munxar.

The village arms are Azure a fess indented Argent; that is a blue shield with a white horizontal double-edged band across the centre. Its motto is *Parvulus sed munitus*, in Maltese *żgħir iżda fis-sod*, small but secure. This motto refers to the size of the village, but its location on solid rock.



Walk

This circular walk starts and ends upon the village square of il-Munxar. It goes along a number of streets (= *triq* in Maltese) of the village of Munxar, through the adjacent countryside, along the port of ix-Xlendi, and back to the village square. The whole length of the trail traced here is just under 6500 metres or 6.5 km long. A number of diversions, indicated by the word **DETOUR** may prolong the walk or, in some cases, provide a shortcut. Most of the walk is along country streets and pathways, but two short tracts are over rather rough terrain so it is imperative to be prepared. The walk is divided into six segments; distances from one point of the walk to another are rounded up.



A. From the village square, down Triq San Pawl, up Triq Żġhawri (1000 m).

The first part of the walk is from the village square, down triq San Pawl for a few metres, and then a ninety degree turn on the left up triq Dun Alan Fenech, onto an irregular square between triq Tnax ta' Diċembru and triq Żġhawri, and then, at the crossroads, along the whole length of triq Żġhawri.

The spacious square is dominated by the village parish church dedicated to *The Shipwreck of Saint Paul*. Its foundation stone was laid on 22 March 1914 and it was consecrated on 18 October 1925. It will be referred to again at the end of the walk.

The corner house between the square and triq San Pawl, to the left, has an old niche with a stone statue of Saint Margaret, a virgin and martyr of the early fourth century, patron saint of the neighbouring village of Ta' Sannat and, formerly, also of Munxar. The statue was commissioned in 1908 as an ex-voto for graces received by Toni Curmi, who lived in that house. On 20 July, the feast day, it was embellished with flowers and banners. At the beginning of World War II, a shelter was excavated beneath this section of the square to shield the villagers from enemy bombs



Down a few metres in the adjacent *triq San Pawl*, there are another two niches. The first, on the right, has a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. An inscription records that in 1902, the Bishop of Gozo granted an indulgence to those who recited



the Creed in front. On the opposite side, at the beginning of *triq Dun Alan Fenech*, there is another niche with a statue of the Immaculate Conception.

This short street leads onto the irregular square between triq Żġhawri and triq Tnax ta' Diċembru 1957. A few paces down the street on the right, there is a beautifully sculptured niche on the corner house with a stone statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Rosary. This niche, blessed on 18 January 1903, attracted many devotees who regularly went to pray in front. On that occasion, the Bishop of Gozo conceded an indulgence to those who recited the Hail Holy Queen on the spot.





The sculpture in the middle of the irregular square at the crossroads between the *triq Tnax ta' Diċembru* and *triq Żgħawri* is by Christian Köller, an Austrian sculptor and occasional visitor to the village. The imagery depicted is related to Gozo and to Austria and it wants to enhance the unity and harmony existing between the two countries. The children of the locality had the opportunity to be part of the project by carrying out chiselling in small areas of the stone under the guidance of the sculptor.

From this square, one is to proceed up *triq Żgħawri*, a word that in the Maltese language is the diminutive form of *żgħir*, small. At the Y-junction, one is to make a right turn. There was a well-known limekiln in the area. The fields on the left thrive in former quarries of the local globigerina limestone, the stone used for building houses. The stone, given as a donation, for the building of the parish church was extracted from these quarries. The street continues in the middle of some very fertile fields up to a T-junction.

B. From Triq Żgħawri to il-Kantra at ix-Xlendi (1500 m).

Triq Żgħawri ends at this T-junction; at this point one is to make a ninety-degree right turn onto a dirt road *triq Tax-Xatba*. This goes down between more fertile fields and, after some 400 metres, it makes a ninety-degree right turn and continues first up and then down onto *triq ta' Qsajjem*, the road going to ix-Xlendi.



DETOUR At the T-junction between triq Żgħawri and triq Tax-Xatba, it is possible to proceed straight ahead along a well-laid path up to the cliff edge known as Is-Sanap – a path that should be skipped at all costs on windy days. From the edge, there is an unparalleled view of the south coast of the island of Gozo. *Sanap*, from Maltese *senapa*, is the mustard plant that was possibly cultivated in the area. The place lies between Ta' Bardan, on the left, and Ras il-Bajjada at ix-Xlendi, to the right. The viewpoint spot is specifically known as *il-Pinnur*, literally the weathercock. This is the highest point in the area and is perched to the winds just as a weathercock. The island of Comino is to the left, and the north coast of Malta in front. It is possible to proceed, with very great caution, along a hardly marked path along the edge of the precipice. It is treacherous on windy and rainy days. The path eventually comes to



end in an expanse at Ras il-Bajjada, dominated by the Xlendi watchtower.

This walk proceeds down *Triq ta' Qsajjem* in the direction of the sea up to *il-Kantra* off ix-Xlendi. At its end, one comes in front of the just mentioned Ras il-Bajjada promontory dominated by the port's watchtower.



LEGEND 1 It is said that an escapee from nearby Sicily lived in the area just like wild rabbits. He had been unfaithful to his wife and she succeeded to cast a spell on him that he would never again live with other people. It was fine if he found enough to eat; if not he became dangerous and attacked any passer by so as to appropriate any food that the person might carry. People kept away from the spot; they were certain he was possessed.

In 1923, a **rock tomb** of a pre-Christian type was discovered in the area beneath the present parking lot. It was cut in the vertical face of the rock a few feet under the surface and consisted of a large quadrangular cave with a flat roof. It had a square entrance sixteen centimetres high enclosed with an arched lintel made of a slab carefully laid across. Its entrance was at the bottom of a small square pit sunk about a metre below the surface. A sarcophagus built with slabs on end and covered with another three slabs was discovered inside. There were two skulls and other human bones inside and another three skulls and other bones on its top. The unearthed fragments of pottery were of the ordinary clay variety. They are on display at the Gozo Museum of Archaeology.



C. Il-Kantra to ix-Xlendi Tower and back (500 m).

The small inlet on the left side seaward of ix-Xlendi is known as **Il-Kantra**, a name that literally means an arch. It must have got this name as it resembles an arch when approached from the sea.



A path leads down onto a stone bridge built by the British across *Wied il-Kantra*, to ease access to the tower. On the other side of the bridge, a partly eroded path leads up to a flat tableland with the tower at its extreme end. One may opt to proceed up the street parallel to il-Kantra. At the end, on one's left, there is a partly dilapidated building that probably served as a summer residence for a Knight of Saint John or a well-to-do Gozitan.





LEGEND 2 It is believed that an Arab once landed at *il-Kantra* and proceeded to this house where he surprised a woman kneading. He abducted her, but she begged him to let her finish so that she could bake some bread for both of them. He acceded to her wish and sat on a stone besides her while she continued moistening the flour with a lot of hot water. All of a sudden, she took a handful of the dough and threw it into his face. She partially blinded him and escaped to safety.

At the end of the valley, one is to make a U-turn along a path in the fields going towards the tower – it is imperative to proceed with attention; the land is private property.

The **tower** was built in 1650 on a promontory known as *Ras il-Bajjada*, at the expense of the *Universitas* – the

regional government of Gozo. It cost a hefty 1000 *Skut* (€194). The tower is a massive building able to resist gunpowder shots. It is 10.7 metres (35 feet) square and rises to a height of 30 courses of stone. Its front and rear walls are 3.35 metres (11 feet) thick while the lateral ones are 2.45 metres (8 feet) thick. Its adjunct platform jutting out seawards is unique.



From the top of the tower, the castellan on duty had an extensive view of the southwestern approaches to Gozo. Besides denying entrance to smugglers, the tower also guarded the island against evaders of quarantine when a plague raged along the Mediterranean littoral. This tower, with that of *id-Dwejra*, was of major importance. Unlike other coastal towers, they were under the control of the Commander of the Artillery of the Knights of Saint John and not under the *Universitas*.





Around 200 BC, a sizable merchantman foundered in the sea off Ras il-Bajjada. Over two thousand years later, in 1961, a Royal Navy divers' team led by John Woods discovered the wreck. It carried a big cargo of jars, sixty of which were retrieved in whole or in part. They came from Italian, Greek, Spanish, and Punic ports. There were

North African amphorae with a long cylindrical body; Italian cargo amphorae used mostly for the storage of olive-oil; as well as flat-based amphorae, most probably for the preservation of food.

A number of **saltpans** have been hewn on the ridge beneath the tower and people harvest salt from them to this day. The ridge on the opposite side of the tower is known by fishermen as *Ras il-Mahrax*, that



is a headland jutting out from a mass of land. Beyond the ridge, there is another clearly visible flat tableland known as *id-Dkieken*, literally a huge bench. Gozo historian De Soldanis, writing in 1745, records that fishermen used to go by boat to harvest salt from the crevices on this tableland too.

Beyond the tableland, there is a large cave opening in the sea known as **il-Ghar ta' Santa Katerina**, Saint Catherine's grotto – visible sideways from this spot. It is named after a chapel that once dominated the sea from above. It is a huge natural cave that can be reached by boat. For several years, it was monopolized by the Grandmaster of the Knights of Saint John, who on beautiful summer days used to come to the cave to entertain guests in the unparalleled setting of the grotto.

LEGEND 3 In the imposing cliffs across the stretch of sea, there is a natural cavity in the coastline aptly called *Iż-Żirżieb*. Some dauntless fishermen suspended themselves on ropes over the cliffs to fish in the otherwise inaccessible areas in the cove. Indri, a fisherman from the hamlet of Xlendi, was one of them.

One stormy morning while hauling a fish on the cliff face, a large wave swept him with full force into the billowing waters below. He was a strong swimmer but the rocks were too inaccessible to grasp and hurl himself on land again. He prayed and prayed and suddenly a young lady appeared down *iż-Żirżieb* pointing towards the cliffs. As his glance followed the direction of her hand, he noticed that his fishing gear was still on land secured fast in a cleft where he had placed it to haul the fish that he had just caught. To his wonder he also noticed that the line was dangling below moving to and fro with the waves. The lady was pointing out his lifeline.

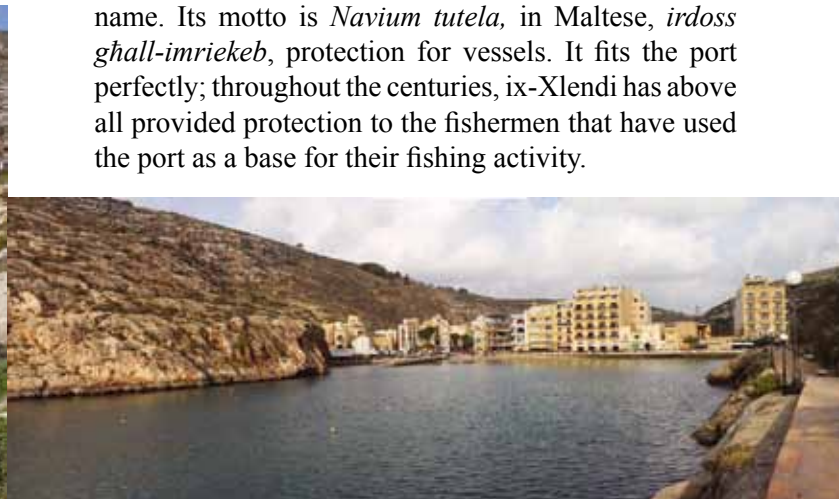
Struggling in the waves, he caught the line, pulled hard

to ascertain that it was secure, and slowly but surely hurled himself onto a ledge. The lady disappeared before he could say one word of thanks, but, of course, he knew who she was. That tract of coastline is known to this day as *iż-Żirżieb tal-Madonna*, Our Lady's Cove.

Retracting one's steps back to Il-Kantra, one cannot fail to admire the view towards the majestic cliffs that enclose the fishing village of ix-Xlendi – just one of the splendid spectacles of the coastline of Gozo.

D. Along the port of ix-Xlendi (500 m).

Ix-Xlendi, wedged between the majestic cliffs of Gozo, is definitely one of the most picturesque and romantic spots of the island. Its place-name is derived from *xelandion*, a type of Byzantine vessel known in Arabic as *xalandi*, a word once also current in Maltese, but now obsolete. At one time, this lovely bay must have provided refuge to Byzantine ships that gave it its name. Its motto is *Navium tutela*, in Maltese, *irdoss għall-imriekeb*, protection for vessels. It fits the port perfectly; throughout the centuries, ix-Xlendi has above all provided protection to the fishermen that have used the port as a base for their fishing activity.





Triq ix-Xlendi

Triq il-Munxar

Triq ix-Xlendi

Triq ir-Rabat

Triq San Xmun

Triq il-Kontra

Triq il-Forti

Triq il-Qassam

Triq ix-Xatba

Triq Ras il-Bajjada

Triq Ras il-Bajjada

Triq Żgħawri

Triq San Pawl

Triq il-Kalkara



Triq San Xmun, the street from il-Kantra to the port, is so called after a seventeenth century chapel dedicated to Saints Simon and Jude that stood, more or less, at its corner. A cross on the adjacent rocks marks the spot. The rocks and the path beneath the street are always staked out with locals and tourists enjoying sun and sea.



The creek that is ix-Xlendi is the mouth of a deep *wied* or valley with high precipitous sides. The port has considerable charm with its front, once shaded by tamarisks, a tiny

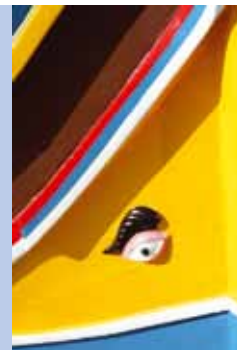
sandy beach, and a number of swimming spots off the rocks. Up to the 1960s, it was a small fishing village that was deserted in winter, except for the owner of an old wine shop and the policeman. It is now a busy tourist resort overflowing with hotels, holiday flats, restaurants and bars, and a major tourist spot. This seafront is defended by nature itself from the heavy seas. At the mouth of the bay, *is-Sikka tax-Xlendi* or Xlendi reef, rising up to one metre below the sea surface, serves as a breaker of the mighty waves saving the waterfront from destruction. A sculpted niche with a beautiful old stone statue of Saint Joseph embellishes one of the two odd old houses still standing on *ix-Xatt tax-Xlendi*, the seafront.



A larger than life statue of the **Saint Andrew** the Apostle, patron saint of fishermen, once dominated the port from a high plinth. The statue, dwarfed nowadays by the high-rise buildings, was erected by fishermen in the year 1882 to seek the apostle's protection when they were out at sea. In front of the statue, beyond some tamarisk trees, there is

a small sandy beach known as *il-port iż-Żghir* or *il-port tan-Nisa*, the small or the women's port. It was once reserved for females, as they wanted to seclude themselves from men. It is excellent for children, but is usually very crowded. The tiny cave is *l-Għar tad-Dghajjes*, the boats' cove.

Under Saint Andrew's protection and the shade of the tamarisks, there are always a number of fishing boats at rest. The fishing boat *par excellance* is the **luzzu**. It is a double ended open boat on which a spritsail could be rigged up in a few minutes when needed. A *padrone* helped by four



men usually manned the craft. The use of primary colours together with the rather short stem, the *oculus* at the bows, and the *moustaches* fore and aft are the main distinguishing features marking it out as a purely



Maltese craft.

A flight of steps cut out into the rock beyond takes one high above the port from where one can enjoy a bird's eye view of ix-Xlendi. The path proceeds up and

down to a small secluded natural cove known as **il-Ghar ta' Karolina**, Caroline's cave.

Caroline was a rich spinster and the only child of a notary from Victoria, who in 1889 founded a local congregation of nursing nuns known as the Dominican Sisters of Malta. At an exorbitant expense, she cut these steps and path to provide a private bathing spot for the nuns. In fact,



when they went bathing, they barred the entrance to the cove by locking an iron gate. The gate is still there as well as the cove, but the sisters have given up this property. Before the passage was cut, the cove could only be reached from the sea.

Ix-Xlendi, popular with swimmers since time immemorial, has lately attracted **divers** too, especially beginners. Going down the steps cut in the rocks for swimmers, the diver descends to the floor of the twenty-metre deep bay. This is covered with a lot of seaweed on a sandy bottom, where there are different species of fish. Less than one hundred metres beyond Caroline's cave and five metres down, there is the opening of what is known as the Xlendi underwater cave. This cave is in fact a large bent tunnel that joins both sides of *Ras il-Mahrax*, the rocky promontory that forms the northern extremity of Xlendi bay itself. Once inside the rounded entrance, it is possible to see the turquoise sea



at the other end. It is also possible to surface during the crossing. The passage should never be attempted without expert supervision.

At the beginning of the road going up from ix-Xlendi to Victoria, just beneath the church, there is a side path on the left leading inside a huge **flourmill** built by the British Military Services in 1954-55. It was constructed at the height of the Cold War as a contingency measure to provide the Gozitans with their staple food in case of a nuclear attack by the Soviet Bloc in the Mediterranean region. The complex is entirely cut into the rock and consists of an entrance passage three metres wide leading inside the milling chambers where generators and machinery are placed at ground and upper floors. Adjoining the milling chambers, there is the silo for the storage of grain. It is placed on the higher part of the site so that grain is fed into the mills by gravity and conveyor belts. The mill is one of the seven built in the Maltese Islands,



but the only one in Gozo and has been restored by the Munxar Local Council.



The **church** of ix-Xlendi is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel. It was raised through the munificence of Notary Nicolò Cauchi and his daughter, the already mentioned Caroline, on land donated by the Carmelite Fathers, hence its dedication. The building was commenced in 1864 and concluded four years later. The church was prolonged

from the back between 1969 and 1972 and the interior was more than quadrupled. It has a beautiful altarpiece depicting the Blessed Virgin handing the scapular to Saint Simon Stock, the work of Salvatore Micallef (1869). The villagers contributed towards the statue of the Blessed Virgin in thanksgiving of their deliverance from injury during a severe storm on 26-27 August 1964. It was consecrated on 10 August 1974.





very special festa is celebrated in the first weekend of September. There are a number of church ceremonies, a procession, bands, and fireworks as in other villages, but also an impressive water festival. The most popular is *il-gostra*, the greasy pole competition. A pole is set up at an angle over the water on the left hand side seaward and competitors try to grab a flag at its end.

LEGEND 4 On 11 January 1693, the island of Gozo suffered its worst recorded earthquake. A few minutes before two in the afternoon, the earth shook and the sea engulfed the land. The shepherds tending their flocks in the vicinity of ix-Xlendi had the greatest fright of their life. They saw the sea receding, they claimed, for a kilometre, and then roaring back towards land with a deafening noise. Further to the south at *ta' Ċenċ*, about half a hectare of land simply tumbled down several hundred metres into the sea below.

In that moment of peril, as if by common consent, the people sought the intercession of the Blessed Virgin of the Graces and of Saint Ursula, patron saint of

Gozo. The tremors continued for a few minutes, and then died down. Many churches and other buildings were damaged, but no Gozitan died. Some pledge that they actually saw the Virgin and the Saint in a vision protecting the island of Gozo.

When news reached the island on the havoc wrought by the earthquake in southern Sicily, the people agreed in unison that it was the Blessed Virgin and Saint Ursula that had delivered them from certain death. Within a fortnight, they organized a pilgrimage from the Citadel to the chapel of the Blessed Virgin with the statue of Saint Ursula venerated at the Cathedral Church. It was decided to organise the pilgrimage every year for everyone knew fully well why on that Sunday the earth had quaked but failed.

E. From triq ix-Xlendi, to upon *il-Fekruna*, to triq il-Munxar (2000 m).

The road adjacent to the valley continues uphill towards Victoria. In the complex of buildings above the valley bed, to the left, there is a large grotto under the road. This was once a troglodyte chapel dedicated to Santa Dminka, a virgin martyr of the early centuries. It has been converted into a disco: it is claimed that *La Grotta* is one of Europe's top discos.

The valley beneath is very fertile and it used to be cultivated after the rainy season. For during the dry

summer, there always remained *erbat iswieqi* or four springs to water plants. The reeds that still populate the valley were and partly are still put to many uses by local farmers and fishermen.

LEGEND 5 Around 600 m up the road on the right, in the opening between the buildings, one cannot fail to notice the promontory that juts in Xlendi valley. The gorge on its right is the end of Wied l-Ghawdxija, the one that starts from behind the village church; while that on the right is Wied ix-Xlendi. The place-name *il-Munxar* was most probably inspired from this promontory that “saws” the surrounding area into two. The promontory itself is called *il-Fekruna*, Maltese for tortoise, probably from its squatting shape.

Towards its centre and about a quarter of its height from the top, there is a fairly large cavity in the rock face. It was my aunt Ċikka Scicluna, a very cultured teacher, who when I was a young boy going down to ix-



Xlendi for a swim and returning back home brought this cavity to my attention. It is known, she told me, as *it-Toqba ta' Kristu*, the Cavity of Jesus Christ. It is indeed a curious cavity for as one passes in front from the road, the cavity seems to close and then to open again. It is of course nothing but an optical illusion due to the passage formation immediately inside.



The people were however impressed by the illusion and surrounded the cavity with mystery. She explained to me that this opening-closing cavity conveys the truth that God is invisibly present everywhere; hence a name with a clear message.



The walk proceeds up to a small roundabout. The beautiful country house halfway up the street has a well-kept large niche with a stone statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, the patron of ix-Xlendi. Every night to these times, a candle is lit in the lantern in front of the niche.

Almost opposite the house, across the valley, there are the remains of the scarped lower half of a medieval limekiln. Limestone was burnt to get lime. It was ideally situated in area with an abundance of firewood and water, both necessary in the production of lime. It was built of finely worked, smooth-faced ashlar or blocks of limestone laid in courses; each course is around 34 cm high. Judging by the surviving remains, it is obvious that the kiln was rebuilt a number of times. This spot is known *il-Ħofra*, the hole; water gushing down from Munxar used to hollow out a deep hole on the valley bed. It is also referred to as *Wied Mulin*, the valley of the *mulino*, probably after an unrecorded water-mill.



On one's left, there is one of the greenest spots in Gozo, *Wied il-Lunzjata*. At the roundabout, one has to make a right turn over a bridge across *Wied ix-Xlendi* and up *triq il-Munxar*. Past an old partly derelict farmhouse, the medieval limekiln, just described, is to the right. At the hairpin bend, there is *Ġnien Regalna* – a comune (municipality) 20 km northwest of Catania, Sicily, twinned to Il-Munxar.

At the end of the climb, the street going left continues to the village square. This walk proceeds to the right

upon the tableland of *il-Fekruna*, the promontory that gave its name to the village. A section is also referred to as *l-Andar*, the Threshing floor.

The tableland is home to an endemic species of snails known in Maltese as *dussies ta' Ghawdex*, Mamo's door-snail, *Muticaria macrostoma* var. *mamotica*. It is a terrestrial pulmonate snail with shell sinistral, medium-sized, and light yellowish-grey in colour. The external case is more or less closely ribbed with about 40 to over 200 ribs. The snail belongs to the family *Clausiliidae* *Morch*, of which four species with many different forms occur in the Maltese Islands. It usually occurs in crevices and cavities in rocks and occasionally under vegetation growing in soil pockets. It is an endangered species and it should not be disturbed.



Along the walk, one must have noticed a lot of flora and fauna. Some are worthy of mention. *Il-Fekruna* supports a number of endemic plants and other typical vegetation. The cliffs on its sides are ideal for typical hanging plants. The pools that form in the cavities on the rocks support a freshwater ecosystem throughout the wet season. These are colonised by a number of

insects and soft water crustaceans. One endemic plant is the *Žigland ta' Ghawdex*, Gozo Hyoseris (*Hyoseris Frutescens*). It is a small, evergreen shrub with fleshy leaves that has numerous rounded lobes. It flowers all year round. A rare plant on the tableland is the *Naghniegh in-Nahal*, balm (*Melissa officinalis*). It has a citric scent and a concoction was widely used against stomach aches. A rare water-plant in the area is the annual *Damazonju*, Mediterranean Starfruit (*Damasonium Bourgaei*). Its first leaves are flattened and float on the surface. As the water dries, the leaves become erect and more robust. In spring, it flowers in white. Still another not so common plant is the *Fjurdulis Sqalli*, Sicilian iris (*Iris Sicula*), a herbaceous, perennial plant with rhizomes. It has broad evergreen leaves and flowers in spring, often reaching a height of one metre. A concoction of the flowers was used as a cure for tuberculosis of the lymph glands.

The fresh air and the sweet scent of wild thyme and other plants in the area are invigorating. Retracting one's steps back, the walk proceeds up *triq il-Munxar*.



F. Triq il-Munxar to the village square (1000 m).



There are three other old niches embedded in the façades of houses along the street. The first, just after an alley, on the right hand side has an artistic stone statue of Saint John the Baptist, patron saint of the village of ix-Xewkija. The niche and the house were built by a Xewkija man who transferred his residence

after marrying a girl from Munxar.

The second, on the opposite, is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary of Sorrows. The stone statue was commissioned by Salvu Debrincat when he raised the house around 1900. Further up the street, on the same left hand side, there is another niche with a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Along the street there are a number of old stone balconies.



Professor Ġużè Aquilina (1911-1997), whose name is synonymous with the development of the Maltese language, was born on 7 April 1911 in the house next to the one with Saint John's niche. He was founder and first holder of the Chair of Maltese and Oriental Languages of the University of Malta, a position he held from 1937 up to his retirement in 1976. He was Dean of Faculty of Arts for twenty-one years and Pro-Rector between 1970 and 1974. He was also a member of the Council of the University for twenty years and of the Senate for thirty years. He is author of numerous works, including novels, critical studies, drama, linguistic papers, religious books, and a monumental dictionary.

Triq il-Munxar comes to end at a minor crossroads, beneath which there is another wartime shelter. The street beyond is *triq Ġużè Aquilina*. The playing field at



its end, where one is to make a U-turn to return to the village square, is also named after him. The large building on the left is the Parish Centre of il-Munxar. It has a spacious hall, where plays are sometimes held; a number of meeting rooms, where children receive catechism lessons; a library for the commodity of the Munxarin; and a bar, where many go to meet friends and have a chat.

The house on the right just before the village square has a monumental niche with a stone statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel. It originally stood high up on a stone plinth and was integrated in the façade when the house was built. It was raised by Ġamri Curmi in thanksgiving to the Blessed Virgin Mary for delivering his





family from the cholera outbreak of 1837. A total of 346 Gozitans succumbed to the infection in July and August of that year. On 16 July of every year, feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel, the niche was decorated with flowers and candles and a number of races were organised for the village youth and children.

The village square is the stage where the principal events of the village take place. The main activity is the village festa in honour of Saint Paul Shipwreck on the last Sunday of May, when there is a procession with the statue of the saint accompanied by a band and concluded with a fireworks display.

The need of a church in the midst of the ever-increasing population of il-Munxar was felt since the mid-nineteenth century but the ball was only set rolling in 1913. Dun Mikelang Spiteri, a priest from Rabat, decided to promote the wish of the Munxarin. He got the bishop's permission to undertake the venture. Wenzu, Ġużepp, and Marija Cassar, two brothers and their sisters, donated a piece of land upon which the church was to be built. On 2 February 1914, Wigi Vella started laying the foundations of the church on a plan by architect Ġużeppi Refalo. Faced by a number of obstacles, Dun Mikelang was constrained to retire his leadership and his place was taken by Dun Spir Gauči, another priest from Victoria.



The foundation stone was laid on 22 March 1916. All the Muxarin, especially youths and males, offered a helping hand especially in the quarrying and transport of the building blocks from the quarries off triq Żghawri. On 25 January 1917, part of the building began to be used for the celebration of mass. The dome was crowned with the cross on 21 February 1921. It was dedicated to Saint Paul and consecrated on 18 October 1925. Il-Munxar was dismembered from the parish of Ta' Sannat and established an autonomous parish on 12 December 1957.

In the year AD 60, while journeying to Rome, Saint Paul was shipwrecked on Malta (Acts 28, 1). The inhabitants gave him a warm welcome and he eventually converted them to Christianity. This shipwreck scene is depicted in the main altarpiece, a large canvas by Robert Caruana-Dingli (1882-1940).

In the early 1930s, Dun Spir launched the idea of a statue of the patron saint. Ġanni Saliba, a villager, immediately forked out three-fourths of the costs; the rest was raised in a matter of weeks. The papier-mâché statue is by well-known Gozitan statuary, Wistin Camilleri (1885-1979). It was blessed on 31 January 1933. Saint Paul is represented immediately after his shipwreck on the island, his eyes seemingly piercing the hearts of the Maltese, who hurried to help the ill-fated passengers. The statue was first taken out in a procession on 10 February 1951. The feast proper falls



on the tenth of February, but nowadays the village festa is celebrated in the last weekend of May. On that day, the people of il-Munxar express their love and zeal to their patron in a tangible way.



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