MALTA

ISLAND FORTRESS
or
BRIDGE of PEACE

IAN SCIORTINO

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For J, D and A

who will carry the rich line of
Maltese, Irish, Scots and English
into the great future

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FOREWORD

I first met Ian Sciortino when he called at the Malta Mission to the United Nations Office in Geneva when I was Malta's permanent Representative there. We conversed while some query of his was seen to, and I remember distinctly that I left a little confused. Here was a gentleman with obvious Maltese roots of which he was proud, but with a bearing which was so English, and whose current links with Malta were far from clear to me.

I had heard of Moral Re-Armament but I was not aware that it was represented in Malta. He aroused my curiosity enough to make me drive to Mountain House overlooking the Lake of Geneva. It was closed and it failed to impress me at that time of the year under the prevailing weather conditions. I returned to Caux in the summer of 1964 by a roundabout way following a meeting in Stockholm with a pastor-journalist, Claes Robach, and his MRA colleague Gunner Weiselgren, during a Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe conference. There, Julia, my wife, and I established a strong friendship with Sheena and Ian.

We were in Caux only two weeks later to let our friends know that our thirteen year stay in Geneva was at an end since I was being posted to Malta as Acting Secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In Malta we came to know the Sciortinos very well. We came to appreciate their tireless work, often done in a discouraging environment. What always stood out was their dedication to a cause they strongly believed in: the need and the possibility to live in peace and harmony even with others who do not share your views.

Reading this book I understand more their enthusiasm and the inspiration from dedicated parents who equally, though in different circumstances and for different aims, contributed wholeheartedly in a pioneering way to strongly held ideals.

The title of this book reminds me of the advice that Ian once gave to Prime Minister Dom Mintoff who often used the analogy of Malta as a bridge between nations. "A bridge," Ian reminded the Prime

Minister, who was an engineer, "stands firmly on, at least, two supporting ends." A dose of realism that is equally applicable today as Malta seeks a future in co-operation with others in an integrated Europe.

Evarist V. Saliba
Malta 1999

PREFACE

Today Malta is a beautiful and peaceful island in the sun, surrounded by the blue Mediterranean Sea. Up to three-quarters of a million tourists visit Malta for a holiday every year. Some of them will be interested in the towering battlements, the impressive churches, the two great Cathedrals, the amazing prehistoric remains, the museums and artistic treasures, and they will have discovered through these something of the history of the island and its people. This book is an attempt to put that little bit of history into a wider perspective.

For the Maltese, who know and are rightly proud of their history, it attempts to highlight Malta's significance in the world today. It is not a thorough exhaustive study but an attempt to suggest what are the options before her for future development: Island Fortress, as in the past, or Bridge of Peace in the future. It is clear from a glance around the world today that peace will never be possible unless there is a profound change in the mind-set of people and their leaders worldwide. In that field the island of St. Paul has much to offer.

If we can imagine there being purpose in a storm, and a shipwreck having a purpose such as Shakespeare portrayed in his drama *The Tempest*, then we could say that here is the purpose in the storm that brought Paul to Malta and laid the foundations of the Bridge of Peace which Malta is to be in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The list of all those I should thank and want to thank for all that they have done to help and to make possible the completion of this book is so long that it would require another book as long.

Of those who must be mentioned here first is Charles Robert Rudolph, architect from Switzerland. It was Charlie, as he was known to all his family and friends, who gave me this faithful old Apple Mac II, without which I would never have enjoyed so many blissful hours correcting my many mistakes, confusing the page numbers and searching for lost chapters. To be serious, the computer and printer were less than one thousandth part of all the help that Charlie gave, though they did encourage me to start out on the adventure of writing about Malta. His financial help, so generously and sensitively given, unasked but often timely, was one thing. Far more important was all he gave personally by his friendship and his presence with us in Malta. From the day he offered himself to be a partner in the Moral Re-Armament work which the Catholic Archbishop of Malta had encouraged us to undertake in his Diocese, he came twice a year to spend time with us. He was loved by everybody he met. In our village of Birkirkara he was always known as Il Bastaon, a reference to his walking stick which he always used in his latter years.

When Charlie came out to join us we had just bought, with help from Charlie and thirty-five other friends of MRA, a lovely old house, parts of it over four hundred years old. It needed a good deal doing to it. No plans existed, of course, so the first thing he did was to set up his drawing board in the main room on the ground floor, get out his measuring-tape and set-square to try to find a base line. No base line could be established. Nothing was square. After a few days, however, this lovely old building had a ground plan and a beautiful blueprint for each of its two floors, for the first time in its long history.

Among those who have helped with the actual writing of the book my thanks go first and foremost to our dear friend Ambassador Evarist Saliba for the many conversations over the years and now more recently for his careful reading of the typescript and detailed corrections of facts and dates. I hope that I have included them all: if any errors remain the fault is mine and not his.

My thanks go also to Elizabeth Locke whose experience of publishing has rendered her advice invaluable. Frank and Joy Abbott with their long association with Malta and many visits to the island contributed from their intimate knowledge of the Labour and Trade Union scene.

Our old friends Adam and Elspeth Maclean read some of the earlier manuscript and were very helpful from their knowledge of Malta and from Adam's experience as author of *Whatever Next*, the exciting story of his life in war and peace. George and Margaret Stephens for many years of friendship and much good sense, especially from George with his long experience of publishing with Grosvenor Books. Denis and Joanna Nowlan, our beloved daughter and son-in-law for the shock treatment with which they yanked me off a wrong track on to the right one, and last, but by no means least, my beloved wife and companion of so many years (fifty next May) Sheena Cameron Gillespie.

If I have forgotten any I trust they will forgive me. I would like to thank also all who have put up with my shortening temper over the years.

Morden College,
September 1999

INTRODUCTION

HOW WE CAME TO THE ISLAND

"What's so special about Malta? Why do we want to go there?"

Those were the questions being asked by my friends. They were a group, mainly young, touring the world with a musical revue, *Anything to Declare?* It aimed to present the Christian heritage of Europe in terms that all people everywhere would understand. Few of these young people knew anything about Malta, so it was natural that they should have a few questions to ask when I pressed them to come. To tell the truth I had known very little about Malta myself until a recent visit there, but I did have a special reason for wanting to go and get to know Malta and the Maltese people better. My father was Maltese and I could trace his line back to sometime in the sixteenth century when they came from Sicily. He was born and brought up in Malta, I was born and brought up in England, so with that strange longing that comes to many people at some point of their life, the longing to know their roots and their real identity, I longed to know the Maltese.

But why bring my young friends with their show to Malta? When I was discharged from the army at the end of the war I was looking for something positive and constructive to do after all the killing and destruction of the past four years. I linked up with the Moral Re-Armament movement (MRA) which I had known during my university years and went to work with them. Their aim of working for a hate-free, fear-free, greed-free world appealed to me.

At that time they were working with theatre and film. A group of distinguished Maltese invited me to bring out to Malta a musical revue called *Anything to Declare?* The Archbishop of Malta, Mgr. Gonzi, gave it his official blessing.

The people of Malta are a mixed race. A large part of their stock is Semitic, in fact Phoenician – cousins, you might say, to the Arabs; yet Malta has a very strong European culture and tradition going back to Greek and Roman times. Add to this over a hundred years of

British rule and English influence and you have a rich Maltese culture and somewhat explosive politics, almost a split personality. In politics the division is along historic left/right lines, in culture along European versus Arab orientations. Since independence these divisions, pursued with Mediterranean heat, have bedevilled Malta's political and economic development.

It was to those divisions that I hoped this musical revue might contribute a uniting and bridging challenge. But what makes this insignificant, rocky island, a mere eleven by twenty miles, so important in its ancient and modern history?

Until today the short answer has been war and trade. From Greek and Roman times Malta has been occupied by foreign powers. Throughout the Roman occupation, the three hundred years of Arab dominance, the Norman Kingdom of Sicily, the Knights of St. John of Malta (all foreigners), a brief occupation by Napoleon and finally a hundred and eighty years of British rule, the island was used to fill the role of "Fortress Malta", and the Maltese people bravely and loyally fought what were often regarded as "other people's wars".

On a number of occasions in 1971 Dom Mintoff as Prime Minister spoke of Malta as a bridge between Europe and Africa. The present government, which was then in opposition, sees Malta's role as an integrated part of Europe seeking peaceful solutions. To fulfil this function in the turmoil of religions and races, of religious and race wars, which continue to dominate the Mediterranean, where the great powers each have conflicting interests to pursue, is no easy task. To become a bridge of peace, Malta needs first to reconcile her own inner conflicts. It was in this perspective that I wanted to bring the musical revue to the island.

In 1979 there was a happening which is now a part of twentieth century history. It throws open a window into the heart and character of the Maltese people. The military base agreement by which NATO Forces were established on Malta was ended. The British Services left Malta after having been there for a hundred and eighty years. The President of the Republic of Malta was Dr. Anton Buttigieg, a well-known poet. He wrote a farewell poem in the form of a parting of lovers. The Supreme Commander of the British Forces set it to music

and, if my memory serves me right, it was played by the combined bands of the Maltese Police and the Royal Marines. Many were the tears that were shed on this unforgettable occasion.

I had recently been on holiday with my wife, Sheena, in Malta. We got to know some of my cousins and loved them. We learned that the island is rich in history, that the people love the English (mostly) and that they hate each other – or at least that their politics is bedevilled by hate. It had become a burning question in my mind: why do people who are so sincerely religious, hate so much? Why should a nation that is 90% Catholic be split down the middle on politics, a politics whose party political aims are pursued with such venomous hatred, often spilling over from violent arguments into violent fights and dividing whole families? Why should committed followers of Jesus Christ, the man who said "Love your enemies" and "I command you that you love one another", why should these people hate each other so much? I reasoned that the Maltese understood English, they understood the Christian ethic, and the show itself was composed of lively sketches, full of humour, good tunes and some very moving moments. One scene in particular had moved me to tears. It came from the recent experience of one of the tribes in Assam, north-east India, which had been engaged in a bitter civil war. It included a song with these lines:

Who will break the chain of hate?
Who will break the chain of sorrow?
Ancient wrongs shed blood today;
Blood today sheds blood tomorrow.
Who will break before too late
The ancient chain of fear and hate?

This seemed to me to be relevant to Malta and to many of the nations around the Mediterranean. Moreover the people presenting the show, both young and old, included many who had in their own lives a personal experience of lasting change; they had shed some bitterness, some hate from their own hearts. After all, that is what the whole world needed more than anything else. I also thought that the

sight of a group of young people from more than twenty nations and many and varied backgrounds, united by one great aim, could not but impress the bickering Maltese.

And so it was. By the third night of their performances the theatre of the Catholic Institute was packed. Shortly afterwards I heard of a Jesuit Father, one of the old school, preaching in his homily that "the musical play *Anything to Declare?* shows us how we should be living our Catholic Faith". I went to see him and that was the beginning of many adventures.

There was also another dimension to this adventure. As we were quiet and prayed about future plans, there came the clear thought: "Malta, the Island of St. Paul, is a Christian land. The creeping death of permissiveness is only just beginning to make itself felt. The young people of Malta will have something to give the world. Here you will recruit leadership for the world battle".

This was over twenty years ago and though the corrupting influence of Hollywood films was already apparent, the deadly drug trade, and the still more deadly drug of sex-worship, had not become the menace that they are today. Malta, we felt, was destined to be a bridge between Europe and Africa, between North and South, and should contribute leadership in the fight for one world.

That was the thinking which brought us to Malta and held us there for the next twenty years of our life. Our aim was to see if there was any hope that Malta could move from being the Island Fortress that she has been through centuries of her history to the Bridge of Peace that would be her destiny in the future. I cannot claim that the idea was fully formed when we arrived with the musical revue *Anything to Declare?* but it grew and matured over the years. We came not as mediators but to bring a hope that personal change might be the solvent that would clean the hate out of political as well as personal life and give a purpose to both young and old. We came to learn what Malta's great past could teach us and help us prepare for the future. We came to learn what had enabled this tiny island people to survive the wars of the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, the Turks and finally the tribal wars of twentieth century Europe.

The Maltese today are what they have always been, a kind and

friendly people; but I often wonder what, in the bottom of their hearts, they really think and feel. They know that we neglected them until we needed them. People may talk about having to "fight other people's wars" but they are wrong about the second world war, for that was everyone's war, everyone who cared about freedom; but I do understand what they mean. I have been told how when Lord Gort, on behalf of King George and the British Government, presented the George Cross to the whole Island, crowds stood on the streets rubbing their stomachs in demonstration that they needed food, not a medal, and still recently there were many who would never address their letters "Malta GC".

The rations which the Maltese Government had to enforce during the siege of Malta were a fraction of the rations we enjoyed in Britain during the worst period of the war; they even ate their goats, which for many were their basic capital. One of my cousins told me how every day she would take a plate down to the "Victory Kitchen" at the bottom of the road for a meagre dinner of goats' meat. They suffered.

Today the government and people of Malta have opted for a positive role in the Mediterranean and in the wider world. As a member of the United Nations, Malta has taken her turn as Chairman of the General Assembly, a role which she carried out with distinction, in the person of Foreign Minister Dr. Guido de Marco.

If you should come to Malta by day or by night, by air or by water, in winter or summer, you will be struck by two faces, two layers of character. In winter and spring the whole island is green, a paradise of flowers and blue Mediterranean water; in summer and autumn the island is brown and frowning, the heat and humidity oppressive – two streams of character, two streams of destiny closely interwoven.

The churches are massive, ornate, warm and welcoming – the fortresses grim, the battlements bloodied by a history of wars: again the two faces of Malta.

And the people? They are compulsive builders. What bombardment has blasted, skilled craftsmen have rebuilt; you would not know, could not tell it had ever been bombed. Courage, love, loyalty, skill; but like the battlements of Valletta, the people have

been scarred by wars. Nothing, no one is ever the same after war; and modern building programmes are scarred and marred by modern political wars; unfinished, abandoned building sites abound and disregarded planning laws are often evidence of political divisions.

The marvel is that after all this history, the people are as warm and friendly to visitors as when St. Luke wrote in his travelogue nearly two thousand years ago. "The rough Islanders treated us with uncommon kindness". Again the two streams of character: uncommonly kind, yet capable of unrelenting hate.

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS MALTA?

When all is said and done, just what is Malta? Malta is an island or rather a group of three islands with a total area about equal to the Isle of Wight, 316 km^2, 93 km from the nearest point in Sicily and 288 km from Tunisia, the nearest point on the North African mainland, 1,826 km from Gibraltar to the west and 1,510 km from Alexandria to the east. Into this tiny group of islands is crowded a population of about 360,000. I cannot be more precise because the Maltese are great emigrators and re-immigrators and so the figure varies from year to year. The figure I have given is taken from the census of 1992.

I remember an old fisherman who took me out fishing for lampuki. As we were trawling our lines he told me that he had emigrated to America and after so many years had returned home with a thousand dollars and "this old diesel engine. The thousand dollars is long since gone and the old engine is nearly finished. I shall go back to America, come back with some more dollars and a new engine. That will be the last time. A good confession, no more whisky, no more women and good night!" He seemed very happy and contented and so was I as I pulled in my line with a nice fat blue and gold lampuka on the hook.

Everything about Malta stems from its geography and geographical position, central in the Mediterranean sea. Mediterranean means inland sea, a sea surrounded by land, surrounded by those nations which have nourished our historical and cultural roots from earliest times: Palestine, Greece and Italy – and let us not forget what we owe to the Arabic culture of North Africa. What a rich and exciting mixture is to be found in the basin of this landlocked sea! Malta's central position in the Mediterranean gives it a strategic importance out of all proportion to its size. Every nation with ambitions to world power needs to have the freedom and if possible the control of this waterway. Malta is the master key.

Napoleon is reported to have said "I would rather see the English

in the Faubourg de St. Antoine than in Malta." With the duplicity of the French Knights of St. John, Napoleon took Malta for a few months until the Maltese drove him out with the help of Admiral Lord Nelson.

Nelson later stated:

> I now declare that I consider Malta as a most important outwork of India that will ever give us great influence in the Levant and indeed in all the southern parts of Italy. In this view I hope that we shall never give it up.

Today the Maltese are an independent nation, having won their independence from Britain in 1964. They declared themselves a Republic in 1973 remaining within the Commonwealth. Malta has a democratic parliamentary government modelled on that of the United Kingdom. The Speaker of the Maltese House of Parliament has regularly attended all Parliamentary Conferences of the Commonwealth member states. The first government after Independence was a left-wing government headed by Mr. Dom Mintoff, leader of the Labour Party, as Prime Minister. Today the party in power following the last election is the Nationalist Party, similar in character to the Italian Christian Democratic Party. Under Prime Minister Fenech Adami, Malta is seeking full membership of the European Union. This is hotly disputed by the Opposition Party, the MLP.

The German General Rommel wrote, after the second world war, "With Malta in our hands the British would have had little chance of exercising any control over convoy traffic in the central Mediterranean." In a total of five major Allied convoys from the west, the Gibraltar end of the Mediterranean, between 1941 and 1942, 49 merchant vessels were deployed to carry essential supplies to the beleaguered island. Of these 49 ships, 29 were sent to the bottom or so badly damaged as to be unable to reach Valletta.

To escort these 49 merchant ships 157 naval vessels, including battleships, destroyers, aircraft carriers and support vessels had to be assembled organised and exposed to extreme risk in order to bring food for a starving people, fuel and munitions for the army, navy and

air-force units operating from Malta. Such was the importance Churchill's War Cabinet attached to keeping Malta out of enemy hands.

Hitler had ordered a bombing campaign of unprecedented ferocity. In the first six months of 1942 there had been only one period of twenty-four hours without a raid. In the two months, March and April 1942, twice as many tons of bombs were dropped on this tiny island as were dropped on London in one whole year of the worst period of the blitz.

Some 80% of supplies intended for Rommel's army in North Africa were sent to the bottom by submarines and planes operating off Malta, in spite of the fact that Hitler had ordered a massive bombardment in a vain attempt to neutralise the "unsinkable aircraft carrier". My cousins told me that the whole population went underground, living in caves which they excavated in the sandstone rock, coming out only to do essential work to support the war effort, or to collect a plate of boiled goats' meat from a government 'Victory Kitchen' at the end of the road.

So much for the strategic importance of Malta in time of war. There is another perhaps even more significant factor arising out of Malta's geographical position in time of peace. The Italian peninsula would appear to have been part of a land bridge between the two great land masses, the continents of Europe and of Africa.

Taking that view, Malta would have been the southernmost part of the bridge. The Maltese islands would have been mountains, part of the great Appenine chain that runs the length of Italy. One can visualise the mighty earthquake which created the Mediterranean, the great inland sea, sinking what became the sea bed until some of the mountains were left with their summits just above the waves and so we have the Maltese archipelago as we see it today. Further evidence of this may be seen in one of the tourist attractions to which parties are frequently taken. It is Ghar Dalam, the Cave of Darkness. It is a cave through which, in the rainy season, runs a tiny stream. Near the mouth of the cave is a large deposit of clay. In this bank of clay have been found a collection of bones which have been closely examined by scientists and many of which are now on display in a small

museum. They include some which have been identified as bones of a number of animals which we today regard as natives of tropical lands: rhinoceros and pygmy elephant among others. They would appear to have been part of a great migration toward warmer climes as the Ice Age advanced south towards the Alps. There may have been a fresh-water lake here around which all these animals would have congregated. What the end would have been we cannot tell – an earthquake which allowed the water to drain away? a tropical rainstorm and a flood which swept all these bones into this one tiny corner? No one can say, but there they are for scientists to identify and tourists to wonder at.

A land bridge between Europe and Africa – is Malta's destiny written in this geological monument? Malta, a Bridge of Peace between Europe and Africa, between Christendom and Islam? No longer Fortress Malta, the unsinkable aircraft carrier, but a Bridge of Peace. The language of Malta is very close to Arabic and is understood by some of the Arab people in Egypt. In the Roman Catholic Church on Malta the name of God in the Maltese language is Alla, the same name as in all the Islamic nations. The Maltese language is, in fact, a direct descendant of the Aramaic spoken throughout Palestine in the time of Christ. This in terms of diplomacy gives Malta a good entry to the Arab nations of North Africa. Libya is a natural trading partner for Malta and there are times when the Maltese Government can talk with Colonel Gadafi more easily than can any other European state.

There is, moreover, a far wider field in which a tiny island nation may exercise an important influence. This was vividly shown in November 1998 when Presidents George Bush of the USA and Mikhail Gorbachev of the USSR chose Malta as the land base for the early December Mediterranean Summit. The meeting took place on board a warship in Grand Harbour, which proved to be almost as stormy as the open sea. It was supported by a land-based infra-structure on shore, and both Presidents met and had bilateral talks with Malta's Prime Minister, Eddie Fenech Adami. Prime Minister Adami had outlined Malta's foreign policy in an address to the 42nd Session of the UN General Assembly in 1987:

> Malta is declared today as a neutral state actively pursuing peace, security and social progress among all nations by adhering to a policy of non-alignment. We intend to adhere to this Constitutional provision and to interpret it with the responsibility and seriousness which it deserves. We want to engender confidence. We mean what we say and we say what we mean ... We look on the recent agreement in principle between the USA and the USSR, on the elimination of short and medium range nuclear missiles, as a positive step.

I quote from the editorial printed in the *Democrat*, one of Malta's leading English language dailies:

> Malta today is aware of its duties and obligations. It is fully aware that our country can contribute towards peace not by playing one country against another, as happened sometimes in the past, but by supporting each and every initiative which is truly conducive to world peace. It is in this spirit that Malta accepted the honour of hosting the delegations which will use Malta as a land base during the summit.

A reference to this historic event is a valid contribution to our understanding of just what is Malta, a bridge of peace in the middle of the Mediterranean.

In times of peace Malta is no less important as a trading post. Today one of Malta's most important industries is transshipment. Goods are brought to Malta and transshipped into smaller vessels for distribution to all the various ports around the inland sea

Malta, for all its insignificant size, still has the same vote in the deliberations of the General Assembly of the United Nations as the United States, Russia or any other nation, great or small. She also has the same right as any other nation to propose laws and initiatives. Malta has made good use of this right, in spite of such comments as "Malta's population is smaller than that of Catania" which were thrown into the argument.

The best known of Malta's initiatives in the Assembly of the United nations has been the establishment of a Convention on the Law of the Sea. This proposal was first launched by Malta in 1967 and became a reality in 1982 after fifteen years of intense discussion. It was at first regarded as controversial. A member of the House of Representatives of the United States raised a number of questions which are recorded in the US Congressional Record of 1967. I quote:

> The United States as a member, and I might add a paying member of the United Nations is entitled to know: First, why did the Maltese Ambassador, Arvid Pardo, make this premature proposal? Second, who put the Maltese Government up to the proposal? Are they, perhaps, the sounding board for the British? Third, and most important of all, why the rush?

He continued,

> It is my conviction that there is no rush. It is my conviction that the presently agreed-to international law is reasonable and substantive. There is little reason to set up additional unknowns and additional legal barriers, which will impair and deter investment and exploration and exploitation in the depths of the sea, even before capabilities and resources are developed.

It would not be difficult to see what lies behind the rather sly and hurtful insinuations of the Congressman's questions. Ambassador Pardo responded to these questions as follows:

> We feel that we owe a brief explanation to those in this room who may share the sentiments so frankly expressed by the Congressman.
>
> The Maltese Islands are situated in the centre of the Mediterranean. We are naturally interested in the sea which surrounds us and through which we live and breathe. We have been following for some time developments in the

> field of oceanography and deep-sea capability and have been impressed by the potential benefits both to our country and to mankind if technological progress takes place in a peaceful atmosphere and within a just legal framework, and on the other hand by the truly incalculable dangers for mankind as a whole, were the sea bed and ocean floor beyond present national jurisdiction to be progressively and competitively appropriated, exploited and used for loyalty purpose by those who possess the required technology. Hence our request for United Nations consideration of the question.
>
> Our proposal was formulated entirely without the benefit of advice from other countries and I can categorically state that we are not a sounding board for any State and that nobody "put the Maltese Government up to it".

The Maltese Proposal

> Examination of the question of the reservation exclusively for peaceful purposes of the sea bed and the ocean floor, and the subsoil thereof underlying the seas beyond the limits of present national jurisdictions and the use of their resources in the interests of mankind ...

This is the full title of the Maltese proposal, quoted from a comment which Ambassador Pardo directed to the Chairman of the First (Political) Committee who at the time was Ismail Fahmy from Egypt. Ambassador Pardo went on to explain what are the long term objectives of this Proposal:

> First the sea bed and the ocean floor are a common heritage of mankind and should be used and exploited for peaceful purposes and for the exclusive benefit of mankind as a whole. The needs of poor countries, representing that part of mankind which is most in need of assistance, should receive preferential considerations in the event of financial benefits being derived from the exploitation of

> the sea bed and the ocean floor for commercial purposes.
>
> Second, claims to sovereignty over the sea bed and ocean floor beyond present national jurisdiction, as presently claimed, should be frozen until a clear definition of the Continental Shelf is formulated.
>
> Third, a widely representative committee should be established ... to consider the security, economic and other implications of the establishment of an international regime ... etc. and to draft a comprehensive treaty to safeguard the international character of the sea bed and ocean floor ...

Malta's proposal, as it evolved over long years in the UN Conference on the Law of the Sea, has been agreed to and supported by almost all countries. Over 130 have signed the Convention although not all have yet ratified it. This Convention has introduced several revolutionary ideas, for instance the idea of the Common Heritage of Mankind as a legally enforceable concept. The power and influence which may be effected by one of the smallest members of the United Nations has here been demonstrated by this tiny island.

In answering the question *what is Malta?* one has to consider not only the existential fact of what Malta is but also the outreach of her political capability in an organisation like the United Nations which claims to be democratic.

Now let us turn to something else: the look, the feel, the smell, the sensation, the magic of Malta.

Malta, in Latin *Melita* meaning honey, in Phoenician *Maleth* meaning haven, lives up to its name in both languages. If you come to Malta in the summer, the dry season, you find a rocky, dry land: no green, no flowers. When the Knights of St. John of Malta were first offered the island as their base and sovereign territory they exclaimed "It's just a dry old rock" and were about to say "No thank you" to the Emperor Charles V of Spain. They wanted to grow their own fruit and vegetables as they had done in green and fertile Cyprus before they were driven out by the Turks. Then I imagine them walking further over those dry old rocks. If it was summer their nostrils would have

been assailed by the delicious perfumes of wild thyme, lavender and rosemary; if it was in spring they would have seen the sunbursts of wild chrysanthemums that astonish the rocks as May dries off the last of the April showers, and they would have thought again about this dry old rock. We tend to think of lavender as being an English garden shrub and truly there are few English gardens without this precious aromatic shrub. Lavender, rosemary and many other aromatic herbs are in fact natives of the Mediterranean. It is from them that Maltese honey gets its very special flavour. In 1530 the Knights accepted the gift of the island from Emperor Charles V of Spain who also reigned over the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies to which Malta belonged. Be that as it may, the Knights accepted the gift of the island from the Emperor Charles V of Spain and agreed to pay an annual rent of one falcon.

Who were and are the Knights of St. John of Malta whose works of peace are not insignificant? Today there are more than 10,000 Knights of the Order in the national associations of 39 nations. It is true that, of the Knights of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta, to give them their full title, few are actually Maltese; but their influence on Malta is considerable and one could say that Malta's influence on them makes it essential to describe them in any attempt to write about just what is Malta.

Their origin is confused in a mass of inaccurate historiography, but it is clear that as the nations of Europe became more prosperous and stable in the early years of the eleventh century there was a great flourishing of the custom of pilgrimage; this was the Medieval equivalent of our tourist industry. Jerusalem was the most important target of pilgrims and some of these stayed on in Palestine and set up hostels and hospitals to care for the steady stream of pilgrims who kept coming. They formed themselves into a semi-monastic Order which was recognised by Pope Paschal II in his Bull of 1131. It was not long before it became necessary to defend the hospitals and the land and sea routes used by the pilgrims. The Hospitallers took up arms and became the Military Order of Knights Hospitaller. As late as 1180 the Pope was reminding the Knights of their vocation as Knights Hospitaller and calling on them not to take up arms unless absolutely

necessary. By 1190, however, the Vatican was high in its praises of the military achievements of the Order. These activities became involved with the Crusades, and crusading zeal seems to have taken over the pilgrim tradition, with the tolerant relations between Christians and Moslems being tragically replaced by hostility and war.

Who were they and where did they come from? They came from all the nations of Europe and were mostly the younger sons of the feudal nobility. The strict custom of primogeniture left younger sons with no rights on their family property. One way out for them was to join a monastic order. Many went on pilgrimage and joined the Order of St. John of Jerusalem. Though they had no claim to their family wealth, yet they were able to draw considerable sums of money from home. No doubt, as elder sons died or were killed in battle, younger sons would sometimes have inherited great fortunes most of which found their way into the coffers of the different national Auberges of the Knights of St. John of Malta. Today the Order has become again an Order of Knights Hospitaller actively engaged in building and supporting hospitals and participating in bringing aid wherever needed.

The Knights of St. John accepted the gift from the Emperor Charles V of Spain and stamped their character on this little land. Magnificent houses, splendid churches, grim fortifications were built and add a fascinating depth of history to the fragrant countryside. They even imported tons of soil; every ship that came into Malta empty of cargo was obliged to fill the hold with good soil for ballast. Then they discovered what wonders may be wrought in a dry land by water and a little cunning irrigation. As you turn away from the sea and the rocks and plunge into a valley or wander along a country lane past terraced hills, you find yourself in an agricultural atmosphere of two to four centuries ago. True you may hear the roar of a tractor or a cultivator but are just as likely to see an old mule pulling an ancient wooden plough with a bare-foot farmer guiding it and encouraging the faithful beast in a language known only to him and the mule. You find irrigation channels carved out of stone and fitted neatly together, openings every few yards with stone plugs that can be removed allowing water to flood

the fields of potatoes, wheat, clover or whatever.

In the garden of the house where we lived for the last of our twenty years on Malta, such a stone channel ran around the perimeter wall watering three orange trees, a sweet lemon, a pomegranate and an ancient vine that climbed to cover the balcony with shade and delicious fruit. Water reached the stone channel from a well. It was lifted in a bucket and thrown into a carved stone basin at the back of the well-head from which it flowed out into the channel and watered the whole garden, an ingenious labour-saving device typical of the resourceful people of this little island. The well itself is another feature of the Maltese way of life that has been developed to cope with the long dry summers of the Mediterranean climate. There is a law in existence, though today honoured more in the breach than in the observance, that who builds a house must also dig a well. This type of well is usually an underground reservoir carved out of the rock, roofed with arches that support stone flags forming the courtyard, a distinctive feature of most Maltese houses. There is a well-head with a bucket and rope, today probably an electric pump such as we fitted to lift the water to a tank in the roof. The reservoir thus excavated and roofed over is filled by rainwater from the roof of the house.

These architectural peculiarities are little bits of living history which add to the special charm of Malta today. The modern tourist would need a guide in the person of any friendly Maltese – and we have seen that they are all "uncommonly friendly" – to get the full refreshment of a holiday on this fascinating island. It is not sandy beaches (there are only three in the whole archipelago) so much as churches, both gracious and grand, many with wonderful paintings, grim fortresses, prehistoric buildings of about the same period as Stonehenge, and Saints' days with processions, fireworks and festivals of all sorts that make the Maltese experience something never to be forgotten but savoured again and again. I should add that there is wonderful sea bathing to be enjoyed off the rocks, for which you would need good rope-soled shoes or something similar. Many hotels and holiday complexes have their own private swimming pools.

But truly Malta is the Maltese. It is the people who make Malta

what it is and who are made, formed and transformed by Malta, its land, its sea, its climate and its history. They are a combination, an alloy I would say, of what is most ancient and what is most modern, molten, hammered and annealed in the crucible of war, of many wars. When times were hard the Maltese were frugal and resourceful. When times were good and prosperous, as under the Knights who spent lavishly the wealth which they brought from all the nations they came from, they were generous.

It is of note that when an earthquake struck Sicily in 1693 destroying the city of Augusta, Malta immediately sent aid although there was considerable damage at home. In 1783 an earthquake destroyed Messina and caused widespread damage to the whole coast of Calabria. On this occasion records show that the Knights sent some of the best surgeons from their famous hospital in Valletta with six chests filled with medicines, 200 beds and tents, and were able to distribute food to 1,200–1,500 people whilst tending numbers of sick and wounded.[1]

The Knights' original calling was as "Knights Hospitaller". They were not themselves Maltese but their galleys were manned by the Maltese and the Maltese backed them wholeheartedly just as they did with heroic courage when the Turks invaded Malta. As I watched on television the terrible scenes of the refugees from Kosovo in April 1999 and saw the giant helicopters laden with aid and thought of this heroic effort of the Maltese in 1693 and again in 1783, I could not but reflect: "There is nothing new under the sun" – except, of course, the helicopter!

It so happened that I was invited by a group of distinguished Maltese to bring a musical revue called *Anything to Declare?* put on

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[1] Paul Cassar: *Medical History of Malta.* Wellcome Historical Medical Library

by some seventy young people from many different nations and backgrounds, East and West, to give their show in Malta.

CHAPTER TWO

WELCOME AND CONFLICT

They came by air in the Mediterranean springtime, piling out of two lumbering transport planes which had brought them from the Middle East. Where they came from and how they came by those transports is another story and must be told elsewhere. The island was green and welcoming, the wild chrysanthemums just beginning to brighten the landscape with their sunbursts of gold.

All was welcoming and so were the Maltese people. We received them at the Hotel Phoenicia; the Swiss Consul, a distinguished Maltese business man, was on the doorstep and some of the invitation committee inside. Refreshments were served, short speeches of welcome and introduction were made. Suddenly my cousin Mary Gera, who was sitting with her husband at one of the tables, called me over and announced that she wished to invite the whole party to tea in her home on Sunday. I was anxious about the number involved, but this is typical Maltese hospitality. The invitation was greeted with cheers.

We were away to a good start, but I knew it would not all be plain sailing. A week or so earlier I had met on the street one of the excellent committee who had agreed to sponsor the play. This was Father Dionysius Mintoff, brother to the Labour Prime Minister. He had said to me: "Ian, what's wrong with Moral Re-Armament?"

"There's nothing wrong with Moral Re-Armament," I said. "Why do you ask?"

His reply surprised me: "I announced in the University Drama Committee that we are going to have a wonderful play by Moral Re-Armament at the end of the month. There was this American professor who got very excited and banged the table and said, 'You must never, never let these people on the island!' So what's wrong?"

"There's nothing wrong with MRA," I said, "but there may be something wrong with anyone who talks like that!" This did not alarm me very much because there are always some who are ready to criticise, but there was worse to come.

A few days later Father James Orr, Director of the Catholic Institute and of the Institute's beautiful theatre in which we were to present the play, had invited me for a drive round the island to relax. I was looking forward to it. Our rendezvous was on the granaries, that wide open space in front of St. Publius Church, dotted with the grain pits which the Knights of Malta used to store wheat against a siege. No Father Orr! So I went up to his office, where I found a very worried man.

"Ian, I can't let you have our theatre. You'll have to go somewhere else. Everybody's ringing me. You'll have to go somewhere else."

"I can't go anywhere else. If we went somewhere else after all the publicity we've had, it would be a slap in the face for you and I don't want that. Either it is in your theatre, as you have arranged, or I must send a telegram to stop them coming." I tried to calm Father Orr; he had been so good to me, but my heart sank. At this point we were within days of the arrival of the show, but I knew we were in a Catholic country and that we must respect their ways.

"Well, Ian, you can't come here. You must do something."

I went outside with my heart pounding too fast and sat in the car with my friend Charles Piguet who had come out from Switzerland to help us. I knew I must calm down, so we were quiet. "We must see the Archbishop." We broke the silence together.

Later it became clear what was happening. I was chatting with the doorman at the Hotel Phoenicia and he told me that an English Member of Parliament had arrived a few days before. Mr. Tom Driberg, a sick man, had arrived in a wheelchair and was sitting in his room all day telephoning. I only had to put two and two together to realise what lay behind all those phone calls that had upset Fr. Orr. We had long known Mr. Driberg[2] as a dedicated and active opponent

[2] Chapman Pincher, in his book *Their Trade Is Treachery*, gives a documented account of the character and life of Tom Driberg. According to Chapman Pincher, Driberg worked for both MI5 and the KGB and it was Driberg's "long relationship with MI5" which "solves the mystery of why such a notorious homosexual, who was repeatedly caught in the act by the police, was never successfully prosecuted".

of Moral Re-Armament. Our strategy was clear, we must see the Archbishop.

We made an appointment and decided we had to be very simple and direct. He must understand that it was Moral Re-Armament that we were talking about; there must be no mistake about that. Naturally I was nervous; I, an Anglican, in a Catholic country, about to launch a musical play with a Christian message, and there had already been some negative noises. Yet I knew that we were in the right place and doing what we had conviction to do.

I had been warned that His Grace was deaf but that his eyesight was good. It occurred to me to show him a letter that had arrived that morning from the Governor, Sir Maurice Dorman – there was still a British Governor in those days – in which he wrote "I have known Moral Re-Armament since its inception and before and I fully approve its aims and its methods". This, I thought, would be a good recommendation and would put the words Moral Re-Armament clearly before the Archbishop's eyes. I did not know at that time that His Grace was an admirer of the English and especially of Sir Maurice Dorman. I had not even realised that he was Monsignor *Sir* Michael Gonzi, *KBE*.

We were ushered into a large, rather dark, uncluttered room dominated at one end by a great crucifix. The Archbishop, a tiny figure with a bright, alert eye, came forward to meet us. All my nervousness drained away as he asked us to be seated. I had the firm feeling that we were in the right place at the right time and that all would be well.

He carefully read Sir Maurice Dorman's letter and listened to our explanation of what is MRA and what we were hoping to do. He looked straight at me and asked: "Are you a Catholic?" – a natural question for him to put to someone like me with a Maltese name; I was ready for it.

"No, Your Grace, I was brought up by my mother in the Church of England."

"Well, are you a Christian?" I was not ready for that, but I did my best.

"I try to be."

"You're OK then, you're OK". And finally: "I will give my blessing for this play, but I don't want it to be a flash in the pan. You must stay on or at least come back from time to time to follow it up. I will send out a letter recommending all Catholics to come to your play."

And so we got clearance to show our play in the theatre of the Catholic Institute.

Later I learned that, a few days before this conversation, a letter had gone out from the Curia warning all priests, monks and nuns to have nothing to do with the MRA performances. I don't know whether this was a case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand was doing, or of an Archbishop's right to change his mind; but I do know that Mr. Driberg's efforts had rebounded to our advantage. We saw plenty of priests, monks and nuns in the crowded auditorium; in fact it seemed that all those who go to everything that is forbidden as well as those who go to everything that is recommended by the Curia were there. The play was well received, and from our conversation with His Grace we had a clue as to what we would be doing for what turned out – though we did not know it at the time – to be the next twenty years.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ARCHBISHOP

Mgr. Sir Michael Gonzi, KBE, was a typical Maltese phenomenon. The people of Malta are independent, self-sufficient, hardy, careful with money yet very generous and hospitable. He was born in 1885 and was ordained priest in 1908 and Bishop of Gozo in 1924. Twenty years later he was appointed Metropolitan Archbishop of Malta. I will not attempt to give the life of this hardy little warrior but it is of interest that he was elected Senator on behalf of the Malta Labour Party between 1921 and 1924. Rather I will describe him as we got to know him.

I first saw him when I attended a Pontifical High Mass at St. John's Co-Cathedral in Valletta. It was one of those occasions when all Malta, or nearly all the top brass, were present. It was the first such ceremony I had ever been to. I am a protestant by upbringing and was faintly anti-Rome until I met Frank Buchman and Moral Re-Armament. From them I learned that the Catholics are our best friends and that we have much to learn from them. So I found myself enjoying all the music and drama of an Episcopal High Mass in the beautiful setting of St. John's Co-Cathedral.

And what a setting! Built in the sixteenth century for the Knights of Malta by Gerolamo Cassar, a Maltese architect trained in Italy, it is an impressive building. From the outside it resembles a military fortress, for Gerolamo was primarily a military architect. Inside it is all aglow with gold-leaf and splendid frescoes. On the barrel vault of the ceiling are paintings of the life of John the Baptist by Mattia Preti; on the floor you can trace the history of all the Grand Masters and of some of the knights and their battles, inlaid in marble of many colours. Around the walls are magnificent sculptures and beside the high altar a fine Italian organ.

On this occasion the Cathedral was crowded with many standing as the great procession entered, choir-boys singing, censers swinging, numbers of priests in different attitudes of piety and, it must be admitted, sometimes of boredom. I noticed a few, mostly among the

poorest, who dropped to their knees as the Arch-bishop passed. Later I was told by the Archbishop's secretary that this, with some other expressions of simple piety, was being discouraged.

The tiny figure of Mgr. Gonzi might easily have been dwarfed by the size of the procession and of the Cross carried before him. On the contrary, he dominated the whole. His air of authority was unmistakable. Somehow it seemed entirely appropriate that the religious life of this tiny island should be led by this tiny figure as the head of its Church.

Mgr. Gonzi left politics when clerics were forbidden from taking an active part in them, by the then Bishop of Malta. In 1924 he became the bishop of Gozo. As such and in association with the bishop of Malta he had his first clash with the Malta Labour Party. When later he became Archbishop of Malta and in the 1950s when Mintoff sought integration with the UK, Gonzi thought that Mintoff was leading the MLP in a direction more closely aligned with Marxist doctrine and the rift became more open. In the 1960s Gonzi had taken the drastic step of declaring it to be a mortal sin to vote Labour or to help Mr. Mintoff in his election campaign, a grave misjudgement which was retracted after Vatican II. Nevertheless it caused untold suffering amongst sincere party members and we met some who were still bitter about the times when they had been refused Holy Communion at the Mass for no other reason than that they had voted Labour.

It became clear to us this was a man to be reckoned with in any attempt to take the hate out of Maltese politics.

One day Sheena and I were driving home along the coast road. This is one of the finest scenic roads in Malta. It was a lovely sunny evening. On one side rocky paths lead down to the sea; on the other the 'garigue' (it is difficult to find any other than this botanical term to describe it) stretches up to the crest of a low hill in the distance. The garigue is an important phase of natural development of the Mediterranean environment; it is characterised by a dry rocky terrain, covered with brilliant flowers for a very short period of the spring and for the rest of the year bears only dry shrubby plants, many of which are aromatic. Wild thyme abounds and scents the air as you walk.

Suddenly we saw the Archbishop accompanied by his inseparable secretary, Fr. Victor Zammit Mckeon, taking a walk beside the road. I was pleased to see that, in spite of his age and his busy schedule, he was able to take a walk on a sunny evening. We stopped the car, got out and greeted His Grace. We asked after his health and then Sheena, acting on a sudden thought, said how much we would like to invite him to tea.

It was well into winter before the proposed tea-party took place. Knowing that he liked all things English, Sheena, with her skills as a hostess and with the help of Mrs. Erina Henderson who was living with us, put on the sort of tea he might have been given in Buckingham Palace.

I nearly ruined it by putting my oar in. In this house, built for the British admirals, there was a splendid drawing-room with an open hearth. I decided to have a blazing log fire, and blazing it was. The Archbishop entered, took one look at it: "I must sit as far away from that as possible," he exclaimed, "or I shall catch my death when I go out". We moved an armchair, rearranged the room, and all was well.

It was not long before there was a return match. Mgr. Gonzi invited us to tea. We were graciously received in his private apartment at the top of the Archbishop's Palace in Valletta. Spread out on a side table for our inspection was his collection of royal Christmas cards which he had received from the Queen of England; there they were, year by year, the Queen and the Duke and their children, growing up like any non-royals, and the corgis: a charming collection of family photos. The friendship between this Catholic prelate, who had been a labourite member of parliament, and the English Queen was to prove of the greatest importance in the confrontation between Prime Minister Mintoff's Labour government and the British in 1978/9.

We talked about what was happening in the world and about the programmes of Moral Re-Armament and the great conferences in Caux, Switzerland, which he ever after referred to as "that place". From then on, each year, I used to invite him to attend the annual summer conference in Caux. This I did as a matter of courtesy and a way of keeping him informed about the

action of MRA world-wide as well as what we were doing on his patch.

I did not expect a reply to these invitations, so I was surprised in 1975, just as Sheena and I were preparing to leave for the ferry to Syracuse, Sicily and the mainland, on our way to the conference at Caux, when the telephone rang with a message from the Archbishop's office: His Grace would like me to call on him in Rome in three days' time, giving his address at the house of the Maltese nuns. At the appointed hour I presented myself at the convent, not knowing what to expect. I was very kindly received and immediately he asked if I was going to "that place".

"Yes," I answered.

"I am coming," he said, and gave me the time of his plane and its arrival in Geneva. "I want you to make all the arrangements."

That was it. We telephoned the conference at Caux, changed all our plans and hastened to arrive a day or so ahead of the Friday plane. Swissair were marvellous. It was pouring with rain when he arrived, but they had a car to meet him at the plane and a Maltese air-hostess to welcome him in the VIP Lounge.

Archbishop Gonzi stayed four days in Caux and took part in everything. He was eighty-eight, firm of foot and bright of eye and was delighted to meet his old friend and colleague, Cardinal Koenig, Archbishop of Vienna.

On his last morning I was sitting next to him in the front row of the plenary session. He whispered to me, "May I speak?" I passed a note to the leader of the meeting who chose the moment to invite the Archbishop on to the platform. In expressing his thanks for the hospitality he had received, he said: "I cannot withhold a word of support and my blessing for the wonderful work I have seen going forward here". From that moment until his death at the age of ninety-nine he was a firm friend. I believe that the friendship thus formed, crowned by those four days in Caux, was an important element in encouraging the development of the ecumenical spirit in Malta. This too could be seen as a part of being a bridge of peace across one of the great divides of our age.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHANGING HUMAN NATURE

Human nature can be changed. When I took on this commitment I had to face some very drastic changes. Though it may seem to be a digression from bridge-building in the Mediterranean, this change in human motivation is basic: there can be no peace without it. That is why I should like to illustrate it. To borrow a phrase often used by television presenters, "this comes to you live" from my own experience. I realise that for some this may be the "switch-off" point. Nevertheless I shall go ahead and hope that some of my readers will stay with me to the end of the chapter. It was a cataclysmic event which changed my lifestyle and set its direction and pace for the next sixty-seven years, in fact up to today, as I sit and write.

I had won a small Exhibition (grant) to help with the costs of university and had elected to read English Literature, which sounded to me to be easy and interesting. Later I discovered that this course included Anglo-Saxon, a daunting subject which I came to enjoy.

I arrived in Oxford in a brash, optimistic and confused state of mind. The vacation between school and university had not been good. I had no study-plan and no real aim until I would find my way at university. I had finished my years at Cheltenham College in a miserable state of depression and uncertainty. I went for a walk every morning, a walk which often ended in a pub crawl – at some distance from home, of course, since I was nervous about what would reach my parents' ears if I started my drinking at the King's Head at the bottom of the garden or The Three Tuns a hundred yards down the road. When I got home after a few pints of bitter, Dad would give me a glass of sherry before lunch. Not having a strong head this would unsettle my tennis in the afternoon. Dad never said anything, but I think he knew.

One day there was a terrific row. Dad got us all together and blew his safety-valve. I remember he threatened to move to Spain where living was cheap; maybe his irritability was caused by financial insecurity. He had commuted a large part of his pension for cash to

buy Furze Bank, a comfortable Victorian house with an acre and a half of garden, including a tennis-court and an orchard. He was certainly finding the cost of living in that area an uncomfortable shock after his life as a Senior Resident in the Colonial Service in Nigeria. No doubt we youngsters were the real cause, as we were not very responsive to Dad's sense of discipline.

We each responded to this explosion in our different ways; my next brother, Bernard, took it very calmly, the youngest, Jimmy, with open rebellion, I with repressed resentment and my sister, who was older, was smugly satisfied since she could blame it all on the boys.

And so it happened that I started at Oxford under a cloud. I had promised Dad that I would not drink till I was earning the money to pay for it, a glib promise without much conviction. The first thing I did on settling into my rooms in St. Edmund Hall was to order up a case of beer. We had a large sitting-room looking out over the High. I found I was to share this with a blond young man called John Hodson, the son of a clergyman. Those were the spacious days when a student had a bedroom and a sitting-room and a "scout" who brought breakfast and afternoon tea up to the room. Our scout was tall, thin and gloomy. His name was Alf and he was full of tales of students – "My young gentlemen" – who had committed suicide. These stories upset me, so I decided to put them out of my mind and enjoy myself. John did the same.

There was all sorts of life buzzing around and impacting us freshers at every moment. Secretaries of clubs and societies called on us in our rooms to solicit our membership, giving us, me at any rate, a great sense of our importance. The Boat Club I joined at once. Rowing had been my one achievement in six years at Cheltenham. Even though we had only competed on fixed-seat fours, I was sure I would soon show Oxford how good I was.

Of all the club secretaries who called on us I only remember two; one, K.D. Belden, wanted me to join his Socialist Debating Society. I did not join. Then came an ill-assorted pair, a tall, square, silent being and a small timid, mousy one whose nose was always twitching like a rabbit. The tall, square being introduced himself as Don Browne. I felt something very impressive about their calm assurance and quiet

friendliness together. Unlike all the others they did not ask me to join anything. They came from the Oxford Group and brought an invitation to a meeting. The card said, "If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who will repair to the battle?"

I thought this frightfully funny. I had no intention of going to any meeting, especially if there were trumpets calling me to battle.

Now I was to learn something about the Oxford Group – their persistence! Sunday evening and I dined in hall and drank too much of the college beer. This was a special brew, much stronger than the light ale I was used to. No, I am sure I was not drunk, but I was certainly very high. As we came out of hall, a group of new friends together, there were Don Browne and his friend, imperturbable as ever, waiting for us.

"Coming to the meeting?" said Don.

Up to that moment I had no intention whatever of going, but I heard myself shout, "Sure, we're all coming, we'll have some fun!" I don't know how many of us set out with Don and his friend but I remember bravely declaring as we wound our way up Queen's Lane past New College: "If they ask me whether I've been converted I will say I was perverted at an early age and have been happy ever since". At that time I knew little of perversion nor of its consequences, individual and nationwide. Had I known then what I know now I would not have been so flippant.

The OG people must have had plenty of warning that this bunch of rowdies were coming and I expected that they would bolt the doors against us. Not a bit of it! They welcomed us. I don't know how they did it, but when I sat down in the meeting hall of the Randolph Hotel I found I was separated from John Hodson and all our friends. Instead I was wedged between large, square Don Browne and a large round lady whom I had never met before. All my courage leaked out through my boots and I sat meekly to listen. That was my downfall, or rather the beginning of my great adventure.

I won't describe that meeting in detail, I don't remember it that well. It was led by an undergraduate from New College who told a racy story of cheating on his motorbike insurance and – this shook me – confessed to his father and went to pay back to the insurers, who

congratulated him on his honesty and refused to accept the payment! He later became a distinguished journalist and you can read about him in his autobiography *A Journalist for God.*[3] I recall a naval officer who also spoke, and an Oxford don called Alan Thornhill whom I later got to know as a distinguished playwright, also a lovely girl with whom I fell immediately in love, but that was nothing unusual as in those days I fell regularly in love with anything young, beautiful and feminine.

The meeting ended and we all trooped out. At the back of the hall there was a funny-looking fellow sitting on a table casually swinging his legs. I later learned that he was Garth Lean, writer and biographer. "Well, what do you think of it?"

"It strikes me as commonsense Christianity with no frills on it," I blurted out without thinking. By now I was sobered up and beginning to wonder what was happening to me. I sought out my room mate, John, and we walked back to Teddy Hall in silence.

The next morning I came down to breakfast in the room we shared. Over the bacon and eggs – yes, in those days that was our breakfast – John said: "Well, I've slept it off."

"Slept what off? What do you mean?"

"That meeting, I've slept it off."

"Well, I haven't!"

Many things were going on inside me, mostly deep down in my subconscious. But they didn't make much difference to the way I was living.

The rowing started, the tutorials started, chapel started and life was full and satisfying – or was it? Something was working inside. Looking back I would say that my conscience, long frozen and numbed by deliberate disregard, was beginning to thaw out, painful as when you come in from the snow with your hands frozen and your fingers hurt as they start to thaw.

As I said, I had won a small Exhibition which helped pay my expenses at university; I had then been persuaded to apply for and accept a grant from a Church fund for prospective ordination candi-

[3] Holme, R.A.E. 1995. *A Journalist for God.* Croydon: Bridgebuilders.

dates. It was made absolutely clear to me that I would be under no obligation other than to discover during my three years at university whether or not I had a vocation. As long as I could remember I had been conscious of feeling that there was a purpose to life, even for my life, and on that basis I accepted this grant. At the age of eighty as I look back, I can see that I was an arrogant, conceited and not very honest young man. In the few moments when I paused to reflect on my life I knew that I could not go forward to ordination with this state of affairs unresolved. Meanwhile there were three glorious years ahead, friends to be made, girls to be chatted up, races to be won, yes – and studies to be faced – forget about everything, especially that meeting, and enjoy life.

There were two distinct things which caught my imagination at that first meeting in the Randolph Hotel. First there were the people, some of whom I have described. I liked them. Far more important to me was the fact that they spoke about a God who could speak to you, who could put thoughts into your mind. This was what I had always been looking for.

As a child I had always wondered and often asked why the Bible, which I was taught to respect, was full of phrases like "The word of the Lord came to———" or "The Spirit said to Paul". Why did this not happen today? No one told me that it does happen, that God is always speaking as the sun is always shining, nor that we have to fulfil some simple conditions to be able to hear. There was silence on this subject.

I was not religious. Confirmation classes had been a chance to get out of school and buy fish and chips at the corner shop. It was a surprise when the Chaplain at Cheltenham College invited me to accompany him on a tour of England. The Chaplain was the Rev. Harold Hubbard, known to us boys as "Hitch-up Harold" from the way he had of hitching up his trousers at the start of his run when bowling at the nets. I remember him as the type of solid English parson who took great trouble over training the cricket team. Incidentally I gave up cricket because I was scared of that very hard ball which would come at you with supersonic speed just when you were not expecting it. I took up rowing which turned out to be my

thing. Nevertheless Hitch-up Harold had his eye on me. It turned out to be a tour of some of the most distinguished bishops of the Church of England.

We started by staying two nights with one of the great statesmen and theologians of this century, Archbishop William Temple, in his palace at Bishopthorpe. Years later a friend, Peter Howard, lent me a copy of one of Temple's books, *Readings in St. John's Gospel.* I read it many times and bought my own copy. I would recommend it to anyone who wants to understand the Christian religion and to know more about Jesus Christ. From it I learned something about the great man with whom I had been privileged to stay those two nights. I realised how stupid I had been not to listen more attentively, especially when next day at lunch with the Archbishop we met another great man, Dr. Mansbridge, founder of the Workers' Education Association (WEA). All I can remember now is that Archbishop Temple told us, with a laugh against himself, for he was really very stout, that his white robe, called an alb, had come back from the laundry with an invoice "To laundering one bell tent".

Another night we were with the Bishop of Newcastle and then with the Bishop of Carlisle; that was where I was pointed in the direction of St. Edmund Hall, of which Carlisle was a sort of patron. Finally we were with the Bishop of Chester who boasted that he was the ugliest bishop in the Church of England. It seems strange, looking back, that neither Hitch-up-Harold nor any of his ecclesiastic friends made any attempt to get at the virus which was attacking the roots of my spiritual life; instead we talked about such trivialities as Archbishop Temple's alb and Chester's boasted ugliness.

Back at Oxford one day I bumped into Don Browne in Teddy Hall quad and he invited me to tea in his room. I had not given much thought to the meeting that had so impressed me at the time, but I accepted; I was grateful he had not pursued me after that first meeting.

His friend was there, along with several others, sitting around and all talking about God. This was a new experience. In the early thirties no one talked about God, not even the bishops, it seemed. These people did, and they talked about God as if he existed. This is

common today but then it came as an electric shock and I wasn't sure I liked it.

There was discussion and argument, but somehow the Oxford Groupers at that tea were different. We argued, they stated facts and told stories of revolutionary changes, where they themselves had had to change their behaviour, their character and their basic mind-set. They told me that God would speak to me if I was willing to obey. I could even write down the thoughts he would give me. I argued flatly that this was ridiculous – to take paper and pencil and think that I could write to the Almighty's dictation! After all I had stayed with the Archbishop of York and nobody talked like that in the 1930s!

Suddenly I realised that I was arguing simply to defend myself against this very uncomfortable suggestion of absolute honesty. I knew I was in a mess but I did not want to think about it. A moment later I heard myself saying, "OK, I'm only arguing to put off the moment of truth". Don Browne gave a friendly grunt and a minute or two later suggested we go for a walk. Looking back I can see that with Don there was never any pressure or push, never any hurry.

Don told me what it had been like for him. He was very simple and honest. He was extraordinarily like me, characteristics, fears, habits. We walked twice round the lovely Addison Walk in Magdalen College grounds. Don's experience of the God who speaks came up again and again. Apparently I would have to have given my life to God before I could expect anything from that quarter; and I would have to clean up my act and put right some things from the past. That was where those four moral standards – honesty, purity, unselfishness and love – first appeared on the agenda.

We completed our second circuit of the Addison Walk and wandered off down the High. When we came opposite St. Mary's, the University Church – I don't know whether Don had planned it that way or whether it was by chance – we went inside and in front of the altar, on our knees, I gave my life to God.

Just like that! I remember it as if it was yesterday. I have sometimes tried to get away from it when the going was difficult, and pretended it was just a pantomime, a foolish action with no real meaning. This time I could not. It was too real. The only way I could

do that would be to accept it as real and tell God, "I'm through with you. I want to break the contract". That I cannot do and after all the adventures that have followed, I don't want to.

Yes, that was a beginning, but there was a long way to go.

The very next morning I made the experiment Don had suggested – alarm clock fifteen minutes earlier; a prayer "God, if you are there, here am I". I took paper and pencil and chaotic thoughts of an undisciplined mind raced around in my cranium. Gradually my mind calmed and settled and there remained, distilled and settled like tea leaves at the bottom of a cup, an accusing list – all my camping gear which I had used on hiking holidays. I can still see that list: one pair of boots: one haversack: one army water bottle: two waterproof capes (the kind designed to double as cape and groundsheet). At first I did not take much notice; these were random thoughts, surely not the Lord God Almighty talking to Ian Matheson Sciortino in an Oxford bedroom on a cold October morning. Then it hit me, like a blow in the solar plexus. These were stolen goods!

Mind you, at the time of acquiring them we did not call this stealing; it was "organising," and anyway "there were plenty more where they came from". That was army talk, but here I was talking and listening to the Lord God, an altogether different matter; one did not play with words with Him. These were stolen goods. What to do next?

Right: a letter went off to Major King who commanded the OTC at Cheltenham, with the list enclosed. The goods were well used, lying behind my father's car in his garage and not in a returnable condition. A good response from Major King: "How much better things would be if more people owned up like you," and a bill for £10. This was not much, but a lot more in those days than today and anyway more than I had.

There followed, after some delay, an honest session with Dad; some of Dad's small change had found its way into my pocket, without so much as a by-your-leave; that and other things came out in a heart-to-heart chat. I found that Dad had known a lot more about what his eldest son was getting up to than I had thought. The result of this chat was a great liberation, not just a feeling but a freedom from

old habits. I even forgot to smoke! By the time I remembered to go out and buy a packet I thought, "How long since I had a cigarette?" I reckoned about a fortnight. "Heck! Why start up again?" At first all these old temptations and habits fell away without effort, and were not missed. Later I had to learn to maintain the standards by a more rational and spiritual approach.

Not long after this I went with a team of the Oxford Group to the East End of London, invited by a vicar, Rev. Wallace Bird. I met a bloke there called Al Henson. He was the leading spirit in a gang of illicit bookies called "The Tin Ring Tatlers". The tin ring, of course, was the corrugated iron fence around the dog track. They took bets in the street; Al got the odds by standing on a box and watching the tic-tac men over the fence. When I told him my story he said, "Blimey! You're a thief like me". He took steps of honesty and some of his gang followed him. Al cut back on his drinking and smoking, a real help as he was on the dole. With the money he saved he painted the outside of his house (which the landlord should have done). It was not long before the whole street had been repainted, giving employment and brightening the area. Al became the unofficial leader of the unemployed in that area of East London. In this way I learned that my change could have a knock-on effect in circles far wider than I had ever thought of. This is a common experience among all who have made the experiment of "changing the world by changing themselves".

That is what led me into a happy, if sometimes stormy marriage with Sheena, and finally, with Sheena, into twenty years on the Island of Malta. I learned, too, that my sins and failures, forgiven and cured, are far more interesting and convincing to the ordinary bloke than any amount of theological argument.

At first it was a battle, to have that quiet time every morning – a struggle to wake up, the lure of the pillow – but the cold tap was very refreshing and then a hot cup of tea. Yes, I can say that very few have been the mornings when I have not spent that hour of quiet in the early morning when the weariness of the previous day has passed off and sleep has ironed out the wrinkles of anxiety, the tension has been relaxed, the birds have finished their dawn chorus and fallen silent as

they go to work to get their living. All is so quiet you can hear the whispered words of God, the Word who was in the beginning. The Word God spoke to create in the beginning, He is still speaking, still creating and you are part of his creating.

Not always does a word come as sharply as in that first morning experiment. Often it is just good to wait on God, read the Scriptures, seek His presence and align yourself with His marvellous plan of creation. But thoughts do come, both correction, which I often need, and direction.

CHAPTER FIVE

AN EYE FOR AN EYE

How to take the hate out of politics? This is an aim which should not be unattainable, given that the mass of ordinary people, workers in the fields and factories, mothers and fathers of families and women everywhere do not want war; but there are always a few, a minority, who exploit the natural passions of people and hope to profit from conflict.

If you had lived through the two elections before those of 1992 you might well have thought the Maltese a violent people. Bombings there were, killings, provocations, threats, even a letter-bomb that killed a child – an escalation of bitterness and hate.

But the Maltese are not a naturally violent people. I recall the experience of a retired colonel of the Maltese army. He told me that he was talking one day to a policeman on duty outside a bank. Being interested in fire-arms he asked to see the policeman's pistol. The policeman handed him the weapon. My friend took the normal precaution of opening the breech; the pistol was not loaded.

"That's not much use, is it?"

"Its OK, the ammo's in my pocket."

"May I see it? ... But this is the wrong ammunition, not for that pistol!"

"What's the difference? I'm not going to shoot my fellow Maltese, am I?"

Of course that was only one policeman on one particular day. It would not be advisable to try tricks with a Maltese policeman on duty. Malta's police force is at least as efficient as that of anywhere else. But behind the attitude of "I'm not going to shoot my fellow Maltese" lies the peace-loving, easy-going even if hot-tempered character of these islanders.

How did it happen, then, that in those earlier elections these peaceable folk became so bitter and violent? The violent and evil tensions which characterised those earlier elections put me in mind of a paragraph in one of Ruskin's books, *The Stones of Venice*; he wrote

about the sectarian and nationalist wars which broke out in Europe after the Reformation and the Protestant schism:

> ... Europe was turned into a mere cockpit of the theft and fury of unchristian men of both parties; while innocent and silent on the hills and in the fields God's people in neglected peace, everywhere and for ever Catholics, lived and died.[4]

Unfortunately passions, even of the innocent, are too easily stirred, especially in these days of mass media and propaganda. So it has been that unchristian men of both parties turned Malta into a cockpit of political hatred.

But better times may be coming. There has been dialogue – at least both sides have talked about dialogue; sometimes it has been monologue, sometimes a dialogue of the deaf. A first principle for a democratic way of life is to learn the art of listening.

Charles, a young bank operative, was seeking this way of change, beginning with himself. One day he poured out to me all his bitter anti-socialist prejudices, partly inherited from his family. I said to him, "How about meeting one of the officials of the Labour Party and asking him why he thinks like he does?"

That he accepted the suggestion was a mark of the change that was beginning in him. The meeting was arranged. Charles was nervous but he decided to "seek Christ in his friend". He listened to him. He was not convinced, but he understood something more of the history of his country and the real feelings of his political opponents. There can, indeed there must, be different opinions among people who believe in the same God. The trouble came when Charles' family knew that he had been talking with a Labourite; for a few days at least they would not speak to him.

Of course there is another principle as important as listening: it is to be honest, even if that involves an apology. A worker, a declared 'red', apologised to his political enemy for his bitter hatred and for

[4] Ruskin, J. 1884. *The Stones of Venice.* London: George Allen. p55

maligning him behind his back. He did not change his vote, but he made his enemy his friend.

The fact is that the ancient Mosaic law of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" has been misinterpreted as an imperative to seek revenge. If taken in its proper context it is clearly a statute of limitation, to limit your claim for justice or compensation to what is just and prevent the escalation of violence.

For the Christian it is superseded by Christ's command to love your enemy and do good to those who harm you. I recall one dear lady who said to me, "Ah! But He didn't mean it for Malta today". Another, when we were talking about love and hate, said, "I am a Catholic; I don't hate anybody, but I could cheerfully murder Mintoff!" Said in jest, no doubt, but there was an underlying pressure-boiler of feeling.

Many different elements have contributed to the better climate in which the 1992 election took place though it is clear that much work remains to be done. It seems to me that the character of the Maltese people is one element, perhaps the most important. The Maltese want a democratic way of life and with the right leadership they will surely achieve it. Perhaps the quality of leadership emerging in both parties has made it possible for ordinary people to show their mettle.

One must also consider the more modern attitude of the Church since Vatican II. The work and prayers of many groups have laboured for a better spirit in politics. Among these I must mention the work of Moral Re-Armament and the films which have come from MRA Productions. Many have been shown on Malta Television and used for discussions in adult and student retreats. A professional documentary on the miraculous reconciliation between France and Germany after World War II, entitled *For the Love of Tomorrow* in the Maltese language, has been shown three times on Malta Television as well as in Labour Party HQ and the General Workers Union building and privately in many homes and schools.

This film was made at great sacrifice and with total commitment by the film producer, David Channer, and his team; it was translated into Maltese by Evarist Saliba and the dialogue recorded by well known Maltese actors in the studio of the Catholic Institute and

dubbed on to the film's sound track by Ian Corcoran in London.

When Madame Laure accepted to put her story on film, it was Denise Hyde who, having been at her first meeting with Germans, drew from her in many long conversations the stories of the Resistance and the change in her attitude to the Germans. Fourteen hours of tape recordings were edited for the film and translated into English for the book by Joanna Sciortino.

To take the hate out of any situation requires more than a change of laws or of ideological doctrine. When all is said and done, what is this passion that smoulders in a Christian people like the Maltese, smoulders and then suddenly bursts into flame when some malicious person blows upon it? Is it not the pent up bitterness and resentment for some hurt, genuine or imagined, inflicted long ago and nursed through the centuries? If this is the case could forgiveness be a forgotten factor in modern politics? And not just in Malta, but world-wide? Could a radical cure for unforgiving resentment in a few individuals, even in one individual, have a knock-on effect on whole nations and their international relations? There is powerful evidence in recent experience that this can be so.[5]

In Malta many have felt the need to learn this lesson, to forgive, to love their enemies and do good to those who hate them. This is a lesson that Malta could pass on to the rest of the world.

[5] This is highlighted in Michael Henderson 1996, *The Forgiveness Factor*. London: Grosvenor Books.

CHAPTER SIX

SOME MALTESE PEOPLE

You may think that the Maltese people are short and dark, as their Sicilian cousins are supposed to be, but you could be mistaken. My father was Maltese, of Sicilian stock, and he was, as I also am, over six feet tall.

Ralph Vella, or Vella Gregory as he prefers to be called after his English grandmother, is about six foot three; tall, thin, tough like steel wire, he is a shipwright in the dry-docks. He does the heavy work of holding up the steel plates for the welders. His passion is for safety in the work place. Ask Ralph about his politics and he gives you a straight answer, "I am red". His petite wife, Astrid, little more than half his height, smiles. Her family are of the opposite party and for years she had to use every subterfuge to meet her fiancé. It was only at her brother's engagement party that Ralph was able to meet his future father-in-law for the first time. They got to know each other, and a relationship started which ripened into a true friendship.

Ralph's brothers all did brilliantly, but Ralph was no student and failed most of his exams, leaving school with few qualifications. Dismayed, his brothers asked him, "What will you do now?" "Go for a swim," was his laconic reply. In fact he had always wanted to work in the dockyard and it was not long before he had signed up as an apprentice in Malta Dry Docks. He qualified well and has worked there ever since. Sometimes he came to help us with the many DIY jobs in our house and was never tired of quoting principles he had learned as an apprentice. "Plan your work and work your plan," he would say. In our home he would meet members of the opposite party and sometimes sparks would fly. He also met leaders of his own party like George Agius, Secretary of the General Workers Union. One evening, I remember, he and George had a real set-to on some issue of Trade Union policy. Meetings in our home were often like that and often ended in change of personality if not of policy.

Ralph was a red and had no use for "the others". Once he fell off a ladder and injured his back. Off work and confined to bed for a few

days he read a book for the first time since he had left school; in fact he read two and experimented with a quiet time of listening to that inner voice. One burning thought he could not forget: "If we got rid of 'the others' we couldn't do their jobs; Malta needs everybody!" This became his slogan at work.

Meeting in our home with a group of friends one evening, a leading Nationalist gave a profound and pessimistic analysis of the current situation in Malta. As far as I could judge it was an accurate picture, but it left us all with a heaviness; he was quite without hope. I could not think what to do; it was a very unhappy way to finish the evening, so I suggested we be quiet. We often did this and sometimes it brought an interesting result.

Suddenly Ralph spoke up: "The other day we had a ship come in – all beat up. It had been in a collision and looked fit for scrap. We looked at it, walked round it and all over it. Yes, we can fix that – what a mess! Yes, we can fix that bit – in the end we said OK! and got to work."

That was all, nothing more, but it was enough. The world is like a ship that has been in a collision, a collision between God's plan and man's self-will. We were all working on the basis that MRA means I start with myself and then tackle this ship on which we are all afloat.

The friend who gave the gloomy picture is a very fine man for whom I have the greatest respect and affection, but he had been targeted by the Labour Party press with the most vitriolic attacks. Ralph, of course, read all the Labour papers. We ended our meeting with prayer. Very simply we stood together and said the Lord's Prayer.

Later we learnt that Ralph went home in a turmoil and could not sleep. Those words from that prayer "Father forgive us ... as we forgive those ..." hammered in his brain. Through the night he wrote a long letter and apologised for criticising his friend behind his back and thinking all manner of evil about him. It has not all been easy since then, but they have talked and been in each other's homes. Neither understands why the other thinks as he does, but they talk and, which is more important, they listen. I have said "Nationalist", but he is not a party man but became opposed to many of the methods

and some of the policies of the Labour Party, as it was at that date. He was later Malta's Ambassador to Madrid and Athens and is now retired.

Perhaps it is only right that a tiny nation the size of Malta should be represented by an Ambassador who stands less than five foot eight in his socks. Whatever Ambassador Evarist Saliba's physical height, the American Ambassador was once heard to say of him, "To me that man stands ten foot tall".

You must picture a man short, stocky with an athletic carriage, a round cheerful face, honest, friendly eyes and a chin which seems to project too far either by natural bone formation or by a determination to tackle whatever life may throw at him, and withal an aura of kindliness. He would have made a perfect schoolmaster; but destiny marked him for something different. He was in fact a schoolmaster and became a Headmaster and President of the Malta Union of Teachers before he transferred to the Diplomatic Service. At the coming of independence there had not been time to set up a school of diplomacy so Evarist was sent to England for training and then to a British Embassy for his apprenticeship. After serving for some time as Malta's Representative in Libya, he opened the Malta Mission to the United Nations in Geneva. From there he was sent to Helsinki for the opening of the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE). He served in this capacity on and off for some eighteen years and became well known and respected by most of the representatives to this standing conference.

Diplomacy is not always diplomatic. There were occasions when Malta's representative had to show his true Maltese fighting colours. One such occasion took place when the USSR still existed and was able to manipulate her satellites. It was near the end of the day and, by protocol, Malta's turn to speak. Malta had a point to make. The Russian delegate, knowing what to expect, did not want Malta to have her say. In the Chair was one of the Soviet's satellites; a nod from the Russian and the Chairman gave the floor to the next speaker, the Representative of the Soviet Union. Mr. Saliba jumped to his feet and, on a point of order, protested: "You will do nothing of the sort. It

is Malta's turn to speak." After a sharp exchange of words and an exchange of glances from the Soviet delegation to the Chairman, Malta was, reluctantly, allowed to have her say.

At the end of the meeting a Soviet delegate told Ambassador Saliba that he had overstepped the limit. He replied, with memories of Khrushchev in New York, "Maybe, but at least I did not take off my shoe and bang it on the table".

Mr. Saliba often had difficult times in those days: Prime Minister Mintoff's Foreign Minister was his master. Obliged to obey and loyal to his directives from home but also to his own principles, he sometimes had to object when directives from his master were not morally or politically acceptable. Mr. Mintoff seems to have had great respect for Saliba, and trusted him to follow his own judgement. Relations with the Foreign Minister, however, were not on the same level.

There were occasions when Mr. Saliba had to take actions which were extremely unpalatable to the rest of the delegates at the CSCE. In fact it was literally possible for little Malta to stop the world in its course.

The constitution of the CSCE requires unanimous decisions. One nation, even the smallest member state, can blow the whistle and stop the whole process. On one occasion the session had dragged on for weeks and months and everyone was tired and longing to go home. From the beginning Malta had called for a clause to extend the CSCE to include its "Southern flank" i.e. the Mediterranean. Eventually everyone agreed that this was desirable, but Mr. Mintoff had included a demand that all Mediterranean nations be included and allowed to speak and vote on all questions concerning their area. It was felt that this would introduce complications and many nations were not ready to accept the proposal.

Finally a compromise was worked out with difficulty during weeks which came to be known in Malta as "the Assedio di Evaristo" (the Siege of Evarist). But the same problem cropped up with annoying repetition in one CSCE meeting after another, Mr. Mintoff being unavailable when compromise solutions were being offered.

One day when Mr. Mintoff himself was present at the CSCE session he went for a walk with his Ambassador, to relax. In the course of conversation he said, "You know, Evarist, you must never say anything is impossible – just look at France and Germany! After centuries of war and bitter hatred they are now united." I don't know if it was this remark that encouraged Evarist Saliba to undertake to translate the script of the documentary film *For The Love of Tomorrow* which tells the story of the French woman who did so much at the grass roots to make that impossible miracle happen, but translate it he did, into beautiful Maltese.

Monsignor Victor Grech is another Maltese, typical in being himself, unique and quite unlike anyone else. Picture a handsome man, young-looking for his years, capable, professional in his work, with charm and personal charisma – his Lenten Talks draw up to three thousand young people every night throughout the week before Easter – and you see a man born to be ambitious but with no ambition; his driving force seems to be care and love of people; there is an aura of depth and peace about him which, to me at least, bespeaks a man of prayer. I once wrote him a letter beginning "Dear Father Victor ..." but I addressed the envelope "Revd. Mgr. Victor Grech". Next time I saw him he waved the envelope at me and said "What's all this? Just Father Victor, please!"

It is said that at one time Fr. Victor's name figured on a Vatican short list for the office of Archbishop of Malta. He had the backing of high personalities and the majority of the Maltese but he never lifted a finger to get there. He was terrified of the idea.

Perhaps in God's plan he was meant to remain a priest of the people and with the people he loves and serves unconditionally. Fr. Victor's impact on the Church and the Maltese remained and increased by time.

It is well-known that Mgr. Victor Grech's sympathies have always been with the working class and the people on the margins of society.

Such was the man we got to know when he was Rector of the Seminary. I was given an introduction and went to see him in his

office to solicit his support for our play in the Catholic Institute. He listened carefully but I couldn't tell what he thought. In the event he came himself and brought a number of his students. Ever since then he has been a friend and a wise advisor and counsellor.

As Director of Caritas Malta, Mgr. Victor Grech has presided over the development of a large team of volunteer workers. These are not amateurs. Each must undergo a thorough training by competent professionals, each in their chosen field of activity: parish work, mental health aftercare, rehabilitation programmes for drug abusers and their families, drug-prevention, education programmes including parenting skills, as well as social and life skills for teachers and students, care of the elderly and care of families with special needs.

But Fr. Victor is also a man of heart as well as an efficient administrator. This I could see from the way he said Mass in St. Publius Church, for children on their way to school at a quarter to eight every morning. I felt it most deeply when the great French mime artist, Michel Orphelin, came to Malta. He presented a one-man mime of the life of St. Francis of Assisi. This was no hagiography; he showed St. Francis in the round, warts and all. We saw him with the lusts and ambitions of a young man; we saw his doubts and fears, his victories and his failures; we saw him in his battles with his rebellious Friars and we saw him in his great physical sufferings. We saw him welcoming Brother Death – all presented with supreme sensitiveness and with haunting music.

It was a great experience to arrange Orphelin's programme in Malta. He played to a mixed audience in the Catholic Institute, to 400 students in the Sixth Form College, to a large audience in Fr. Dyonysius Peace Laboratory. There were sometimes mishaps, of course. On this last occasion in the lovely open-air theatre of the Peace Laboratory, where Fr. Mintoff was such a gracious host, Michel Orphelin sang the Hymn to Brother Sun and Sister Moon as usual; in the other performances Michel had always mimed to an imaginary moon on stage right; here was a real, brilliant, Mediterranean full moon shining on him from stage left; it took a moment for him to find it!

The final performance was to about a hundred of Fr. Victor's

Caritas staff and volunteers. The atmosphere was electric. At the end of the evening Fr. Victor rose to express thanks; there were tears in his eyes and he sat down, quite unable to speak. We had lived through the life of one of the greatest of the Saints in the Christian calendar.

I cannot leave Father Victor without mention of another much loved Maltese Monsignor; which is not to imply that these are the only two much loved Monsignori; there are many but these two are typical in being such fresh, individual and unexpected Prelates.

Many years ago, as a young priest, Dun Mikiel Azzopardi had been faced with the problem of handicapped and mentally retarded children. At that time in Malta, as in many other countries, little was done to care for them, nor, indeed, to educate families. Parents often felt it a stigma to have a handicapped child and would hide them away.

Dun Mikiel decided there was a need for a home. He spoke about this need in a radio programme and a lady who was listening sent him £100. That sum was worth much more at that time than it would be today, but it was little enough with which to start building. Full of faith, Dun Mikiel started.

It is a strange fact of human nature that whenever someone starts to do something good, there are always some who will criticise. On this occasion someone went to the Archbishop and said. "Dun Mikiel Azzopardi is mad. He is starting to build a home for children and he has only £100. He will bring the Church into disrepute". The Archbishop sent for Dun Mikiel and the following conversation ensued. Monsignor Azzopardi himself told me of it.

"Dun Mikiel, what are your plans?"

"I plan to build a home where we can look after handicapped children."

"How much money do you have?"

"I already have £100, Your Grace."

"You must be mad!"

"Your Grace, I am reading a book. It is called 'The Gospel'. In it is written, 'Knock and it shall be opened to you. Ask and it shall be given you'."

"All right, my son, Go ahead with your plans. You have my

blessing!"

Sheena and I visited the home that Monsignor Michael Azzopardi built and ran entirely on the well-tried basis of faith and prayer. It was always a joy. At first I was afraid. I was shocked the first time I came into contact with such children; and they were not only children. Some had been in the home many years and grown to adulthood. I did not know what to do nor what to say. I watched the nurses, male and female, who were looking after them; I saw the gleam of love and affection that followed anything done for them.

I remember in particular one young man whom they told me was thirty-five, totally paralysed; I talked to him but he could not speak; I stroked his cheek with one finger and the look of joy and gratitude which shone from his face made me at peace with all those strange, handicapped souls. We came back many times and loved to be present when they celebrated the Mass, usually at 4.30 in the afternoon. The children would crowd in, sing loudly all out of tune, and be so quiet at the most profound moments of prayer. There were two little old men (they were only forty) with Down's Syndrome, who used to carry up the bread and wine to the altar. I would hold my breath expecting one of them to drop his precious burden. Never in the many times that we visited did anything untoward happen.

Mgr. Azzopardi travelled the world to learn the latest and most modern technology for the physical, mental and moral care of these, his "angels". He attended one international symposium on "Life Satisfaction for the Handicapped". Amid all the sophisticated arguments that the handicapped must have sex to be satisfied, he maintained that religion gives the only full satisfaction and told of the daily Mass in his homes. From what we saw there, we were both convinced that he was right.

Of course as the children grew up, different provision had to be made for them. When I was last there I saw many going out to work in factories or other regular jobs, and some working at home on a "cottage industry" basis.

It is also necessary to say that every effort is made that children should be brought up at home in their own families; but there are many cases where this is not possible, or results in situations that

would not be fair to other children in large families.

Now I would like you to meet a very special friend, Father Joe Bernard. I first met him at a wedding reception. He looked like a little bird hopping around among the guests, yet not a bird; he was too shaggy and too purposeful. It was his bright eye and quick movements that were bird-like. His purposeful movements showed that he knew what he wanted; in fact he was more like a good bird-dog.

When eventually I was introduced to him he was friendly but I didn't know what to talk about with this Jesuit priest. He proved to be a no-nonsense Jesuit of the old school with a reputation for being strict and old-fashioned.

I was surprised and delighted, therefore, when I heard from a friend that Father Joe had been preaching about the MRA play *Anything to Declare?* and saying that this was a model of how Catholics should live their faith. This came to my ears just when a Rev. Professor had written to the *Sunday Times* of Malta criticising the play and MRA as being "too American". Naturally I called on Fr. Joe.

"Thank goodness you've come," he greeted me. "I first heard of this movement in the thirties and I've been waiting for a visit ever since." He had been a student at the Jesuit College in London and had read of Dr. Frank Buchman and the Oxford Group in the press. "I knew it was the work of the Holy Spirit," he added, "but you must let me have some books."

Next day I went round to Xavier House in Valletta with a pile of books. During the following weeks I went round from time to time to collect whatever he had finished reading. He was very pleased with all the material I had given him and, as a lively correspondence had now developed in the *Sunday Times*, he promised to join in the fray with a letter. Fr. Joe was meticulous and slow; on the very day that I was to take his letter round to my cousin, the Editor of the *Sunday Times*, there appeared the announcement "This correspondence is now closed".

No matter, we had found a new ally and Fr. Joe's letter, slightly modified, appeared later when the *Sunday Times* was announcing a

new MRA book in Maltese.

One day I was chatting with Fr. Joe.

"It's good that you are here," he said, "but what decided you to come just now?"

"Guidance, of course," I glibly replied, using a far too common verbal shorthand for the guidance of God. I knew at once that I had made a mistake for Fr. Joe's eyebrows shot up in a shocked expression. Later I realised that in that 'of course' my old enemy, arrogance, had taken over.

"Very dangerous!" said Father Joe.

"I know," I stammered, trying to recover.

"Private interpretations of divine guidance have caused wars in the past."

I knew all this but a thoughtless phrase had endangered our new friendship, or had it? I noticed a twinkle in Father Joe's eye as he waited to see what I had to say. I decided that now was the time to tell of my own change and of my experience of the God who speaks. But first, Frank Buchman's six-fold test to be applied to the thoughts that come in times of prayer and quiet, seeking divine guidance. I explained that Buchman had taught us:

"First the willingness to obey without self-interested editing; next circumstances: if a thought comes that turns out to be wrong in view of facts or circumstances, that thought is obviously not from God; a third test is the test of moral standards: any thought which does not square with the standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love is out; fourthly the Scriptural test, anything that does not fit with the overall teaching of the Scriptures; then to talk honestly with friends and listen to them; sixth and last, the teachings and experience of your Church."

Up to this point in my life since that day when I had given my life over to God the experience of seeking and following the guidance of God had been exciting and satisfying; but the need to check with friends had often been irksome and boring, even frustrating. Nevertheless it had proved to be the real breaking point of my self-will and so an important step in learning about the Inner Voice. As I explained Buchman's six-fold test his face lit up and his eye twinkled:

"Ah, that's quite different," he said. "The willingness to obey means a serious commitment to God. Circumstances, well, God gave us our commonsense, didn't He? – If we have any," he added, shooting a shrewd glance at me. "The absolute moral standards and the Gospels, OK, but the hidden agenda of our private motives, we are experts at deceiving ourselves, aren't we! That's why we have to talk things over with good friends. And then you say that Frank Buchman mentioned the experience and teachings of your Church? That means discipline. There, with those six tests, you have a complete pathway of the spiritual life. If you live that you are on track."

What I have written here is a summary from memory of several conversations with Fr. Joe and perhaps with other Catholic priests. It is an accurate résumé of all I have learned about God's guidance from my Catholic friends in Malta.

"What are the Sciortinos teaching our children?" This not unnatural question was passed on to us by Fr. Joe one day. What followed was more surprising, coming from some of his class of old alumni from the Sacred Heart College for girls. "They have only one child. They must be teaching them contraception."

So Fr. Joe called a special meeting and invited us to meet with these anxious mums. He took the chair and some of them expressed their worries. I remember Sheena and I were indignant at being thus quizzed about our private lives, but we recognised that they had a right to know and that this was a good chance to witness to the power of Christ.

We told them that we had decided to let God do our family planning and that our only contraception was absolute purity even when that meant chastity within marriage; that this was not easy but the power of Christ is there and available and that married life with this sort of discipline is a great joy.

Fr. Joe, in the chair of this extraordinary meeting, summed up by saying, "I can assure you that if it is the Oxford Group and Moral Re-Armament, it is the four absolute standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love and you can rely on it absolutely".

From the earliest times Malta has been noted for its surgeons and doctors, many of whom have been at the forefront of research and the

establishment of medical procedures. In 1574 the Order of the Knights of St. John of Malta, faithful to their original calling as Knights Hospitallers, built the famous hospital known as La Sacra Infermeria in Valletta. Boasting the longest hall in Europe, it could accommodate 746 patients who were fed off silver plate. The food seems to have been worthy of the platters: it is recorded that 200 chickens went daily into their broth. Later the silver plate was looted by the French on orders from Napoleon. When melted down it is reported to have weighed 1,600 kg. This would have gone to finance Napoleon's wars if Nelson had not got there first and sent Napoleon's treasure ship to the bottom somewhere off the Nile delta.

The Knights of the Order pioneered the practice of boiling all surgical instruments. They did this believing that it would lessen the agonies suffered by patients undergoing surgery without anaesthetics. Who would grudge them the credit of pioneering this important step towards the as yet unrecognised principle of sterilisation?

The Sacra Infermeria not only ministered to in-patients within its hospitable walls, but also sent aid wherever it was needed. There are records of shipments of humanitarian aid, of chests of medicines, of tents and beds accompanied by teams of doctors when earthquakes devastated Messina and the coastal regions of Catania, southern Italy. Those were early indications of Malta's future role as a bridge of peace among the warring nations of the Mediterranean. Even in World War I Malta served as a hospital base for the wounded. In World War II Malta again became the Fortress Island, the Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier in the desperate fight to save the world from falling under the dictatorship of Adolf Hitler.

Malta was again seen as a bridge of peace when in November 1989 President George Bush of the United States and Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev chose Malta as the base for their Summit to discuss the limitation of the construction and use of short and medium range nuclear missiles.

It seems as if there is no alternative to being either Island Fortress or Bridge of Peace.

Another Maltese pioneer in the field of medicine was Sir Themistocles Zammit who, on June 25, 1905, identified in the blood

of goats the microbe of the deadly Mediterranean fever, better known as undulant fever. Sir Temi Zammit shares the honour of this discovery with Colonel Sir David Bruce whose name is commemorated in the official name of the fever, *brucellosis*. Sir Temi Zammit's laboratory, in which this research was done, is preserved today as a museum open to the public.

Another distinguished surgeon still practising until recently is Dr. Vincent Tabone, whose honours and distinctions read like a catalogue of all possible degrees. Hon Vincent Tabone, MD, DO (Oxon), DOMS (Lond), DMJ (SA, Lond), FRCS (Edin).

As a member of the Committee of Experts on Trachoma of the World Health Organisation, he was entrusted in 1948 with the Anti-Trachoma Campaign on Gozo Island. This was so successful that the disease was, in due course, practically eliminated from the island. This became the pioneer scheme for Anti-Trachoma Campaigns world wide. Dr. Tabone served as Medical Consultant with the WHO in Geneva, Philippines, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Malaya, Singapore, North Borneo, Brunei, Sarawak, Indonesia, Iraq, Alexandria and Tunisia.

He was also active in politics, being elected to Parliament for the Nationalist Party in the elections of 1966, '71, '76, '81 and '87. He served as Minister of Labour, Employment and Welfare, 1966-71. On April 4th 1989 he was elected by Parliament to be the fourth President of Malta. In World War II he served as Medical Officer with the Royal Malta Artillery. He fulfilled his role as President with dignity and distinction whilst still remaining the same friendly and cheerful Censu, as he was always known to his family and friends. His capable and charming wife, Maria, was a gracious hostess at many official as well as informal dinners. One of the Palace staff told me that it was the first time that the kitchen staff had been invited into the dining hall in front of the guests to be thanked for preparing and serving a perfect meal. With all these travels, activities, achievements and responsibilities, Dr. and Mrs. Tabone found time to raise a family of eight children, three boys and five girls.

Our old friends, Frank and Joy Abbot, came out to stay with us. Frank is the editor of *The Industrial Pioneer*, a British industrial shop-floor

publication. While in hospital with heart trouble he had received a telephone call from a Maltese cabinet minister, a regular reader of his paper, who was passing through London, "Get well quick, Frank, we need you".

Encouraged by this, Frank had written to the minister asking to see him. We knew Danny Cremona from his face on posters all over the island at election time; he was regarded by his colleagues as one of their best vote-winners. He was a popular personality with a generous nature but impetuous. In the dispute between Prime Minister Mintoff and the Malta Medical Association he had come down to the hospital gate in person, to enforce the government's lock-out of the doctors, even though, as Minister of Tourism, it was no business of his Department.

I admit I was nervous when Frank told me who his friend was, but then I did not know Danny personally. I soon learned that he had a big heart that could transcend party politics, a rarity in this divided land. When his doctor died, Danny attended the funeral. The doctor and all his family are of the opposite party. Seeing the doctor's sister distraught with grief, he went over and put his arm round her shoulders; a small but significant act.

Frank's visit passed with no response to his letter until the very last evening. Then, as we were sitting chatting, there came a knock at the door.

"Is Frank here?"

"Sure, Frank's here. Who wants him?"

"I'm Mr. Cremona's driver. Can he come in?"

In a moment they were all piling in, Danny, Mrs. Cremona, two children, and of course we invited the driver and his fiancé too. It was a merry party and we rustled up sandwiches and all that.

"Frank, where have you been hiding? I've been knocking on every door in the street to find you."

It was a great evening and a good send-off for Frank, returning home refreshed. I made up my mind to keep in touch with this fiery comrade. It was already noticeable that he was terribly thin. I thought he was burning himself out with his political passion. We saw him several times after this but it was not long before he died tragically

from cancer and the island lost a valuable leader, a controversial and lovable character.

An unexpected fall-out from this meeting occurred when we were buying a house. We were just off to the International Conference for Moral Re-Armament in Caux, Switzerland. I made an appointment to see Danny in his office, to inform him and invite his co-operation. There was a crowd of suppliants in his outer office waiting to ask a favour; this is quite normal in Malta as in most Mediterranean countries. I felt very conspicuous among all these people because of my height and my English looks.

Danny received us warmly. Not wanting to waste his time I pitched in immediately with the information I had for him, but he wanted to talk.

"What have you been doing? I haven't seen you for ages."

"Actually we've been trying to buy a house; we have to live somewhere."

"Have you found what you want?"

"Yes, needs a lot doing, but a lovely old place."

"Where?"

"Birkirkara."

"Good, Lorry Sant's wife's constituency," naming another prominent Labour politician, "but have you applied for a permit to buy?"

"Yes, last week."

"Why didn't you come to me first? I would have fixed it for you."

"Heavens, Danny, I don't run to a busy cabinet minister with all my private affairs!"

"Well, I don't know how long you'll have to wait. The Minister of Finance has just gone on holiday and he has dozens of applications on his desk."

On that gloomy note we left. The permit came through while we were at the conference in Switzerland. When we returned I went round to give the Minister of Tourism an account of the proceedings. He did not look well, but his eye twinkled as I came in. Immediately he said: "Did you get your permit?"

"Yes, it's just come through."

"I am so glad."

We were deeply shocked when, shortly after that, we heard of Danny's death.

A robust and cheerful figure, George Agius looks exactly what he is, a Workers' Representative, but with one big difference: instead of 'My class is always right, I stand up for them, right or wrong!' George works on a different principle: 'Not who is right but what is right!' This, he maintains, is really radical. Nowhere was this better demonstrated than in 1972, in the dispute between Mr. Mintoff and the British Government over the withdrawal of the British Garrison from Malta.

The tension was such that many British residents were packing their belongings and leaving. There were fears of an escalation to a violent situation reminiscent of Cyprus. George Agius helped draft a letter to Prime Minister Heath and Foreign Minister Lord Carrington. He maintained that, even though Mr. Mintoff was adamant, there were good grounds for discussion and a right solution could be found.

This letter, dated 6 January 1972, was carried by a British Trade Unionist friend of George's, and delivered personally at Westminster. Two days later the Daily Telegraph of January 8 carried the headline: CARRINGTON STANDS BY ON MALTA. He had postponed his trip to the Far East at the very last minute.

We must pay tribute to one who, unseen and unknown, acting on the principle 'Not who is right but what is right', helped to ease the situation and make the departure of the British Armed forces, after 180 years, a parting of lovers. It was commemorated as such by the Maltese poet and President of the Republic, Dr. Anton Buttigieg. It was set to music by the Commander of the British Forces and played by the combined bands of the Malta Police and the Royal Marines at a never-to-be-forgotten ceremony, a Parting of Lovers.

In most countries it is, I suppose, in the countryman that you would find the true character of the people with their roots, origins, aura and personality unspoiled by modern technological civilisation. With this thought in mind, Sheena and I set out one day for a country walk. We

drove our old VW to the end of a road that led nowhere, got out and walked along a lane past a low stone building on the right, from which the welcoming baa of a goat made me feel at home; a little further on, on the left, the farmhouse – tall hollyhocks and a rosebush bright in the front garden – stood with its front door wide open. As we approached, peals of laughter came from within. It was irresistible. We turned through the opening in the garden wall, there was no gate, tapped on the door and were welcomed in typical Maltese fashion.

We got to know and love this family. The father, Dominic, affectionately known as Domingu, had a few sheep and goats. I could never tell t'other from which. The goats are goats and I have no difficulty with them but the Maltese sheep are long legged and rangy and I was never quite sure. Domingu ploughed with a wooden plough which was pulled by an old mule. Domingu followed barefoot on that rough, stony ground. Always the wooden plough. He would not use a tractor or mechanical cultivator, for two reasons, he said. First, he must feel the soil as he turned the furrows with his wooden plough which was perfectly adapted for the purpose; and second, he loved to hear the birds and all the other sounds of the countryside. There was a sanity and wisdom in all he said. I couldn't help feeling that we have lost much with our noisy machinery and technology.

He took us with pride to see his olive grove with trees said to be two thousand years old, standing like a cathedral at the bottom of his farm. We saw the ancient stone channels through which he could irrigate his potatoes, clover field and so on. In subsequent years we often visited this peaceful corner which for me has always been the true Malta.

Then we met Domingu's wife, Theresa, who ran this hospitable home, his two sons, Charlie and Jimmy and three girls, Antoinette, Maria and Josephine, the eldest. I will let her introduce herself and tell her own story.

Josephine's Story

At the age of twenty-one I was working in a factory building the memories of computers. I was happy that I had a job and was able to help financially at home. I was the second eldest of six children. But I did not know what I was living for. There were times when, walking home from work, I would say, "I have money, but I cannot buy happiness".

On 5th April 1978 my brother invited me to a performance by a group of young people from different countries, at Belleview in Mellieha. The theme of the evening was "What are you living for?" I was impressed by the purity shining in the faces of these young people who worked with Moral Re-Armament. They shared experiences, sang and danced. It was wonderful! 400 young people attended. During the evening one of those present said "God loves you and has a plan for you". Those words were like light in the darkness of my life. At the end of the performance I met with two Swedish girls and asked them what was their secret. Why did they look so radiant? They told me. "You have two ears and one mouth. That means that you can listen to God twice as much as you talk."

Those words set me off on a road of experiment. I took time in silence. Three of the first thoughts I had were: I should be honest with myself. I should be honest with my parents and tell them what kind of daughter I was. I should be honest at the factory where I was working. Thoughts need to have legs, and I began applying them. That started a deep change in my life. I wrote a letter to my boss at the factory. In the letter I told about the cheating I had been doing in order to earn more bonus and taking sick-leave without being sick. I apologised and wrote that I wanted to make a fresh start.

I told about the four standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. I must admit that I was afraid of sending the letter, but was encouraged by the author of this book.

On Monday the foreman, my boss, asked me to his office. With my knees shaking I stood in front of his desk, thinking that I would lose my job. Instead the foreman thanked me for my courage in writing such a letter. He showed me an article in the *Sunday Times of Malta* by Prof. Joseph Aquilina about Moral Re-Armament. At that moment I received a living faith in God. I saw that once God asks me to do something He prepares the way. By having read that article my boss was able to understand my letter. There and then I said to myself: "OK, God, I risked once. I will be ready to take risks for Your sake for the rest of my life".

I am still at it, twenty-one years later. I spent four years in Brazil. There I met the one who has become my husband, Bjorn Ole from Norway. He was also serving God in that part of the world. Now we are living in Malta with our two children, Martin (six years old) and Anne-Marie (four years old). Two years ago I was in Lebanon together with Dr. Omnia Marzouk from Egypt. She is Muslim and I am Catholic. Seeing so much suffering and how Lebanon had been shattered by war, I felt a clear calling to work for Malta playing a greater role in peace-building and reconciliation in the region. Recently we arranged a dialogue in Malta for people from a number of Mediterranean countries. The openness and trust which was quickly established between the participants gave me hope. I believe that we need to strengthen friendships between people who respect each other's culture and religion and are united in a commitment to reconciliation and peace.

Josephine Austad
December 1999

CHAPTER SEVEN

ANOTHER MALTESE EMIGRANT

Of all the Maltese men whom I got to know and respect and admire, the one whom I love, admire and respect most, and indeed stand in awe of, must be my own father. He was of pure Maltese stock as far back as I was able to trace his ancestry, and typical in that, like so many Maltese, he emigrated and integrated perfectly with society where he settled.

I remember him as a handsome, pipe-smoking man in his late fifties. I hardly knew him before that, as he worked in the British colonial administration of Northern Nigeria. My sister, brothers and I lived with guardians; Dad's tour of duty was 18 months in Africa with six months leave of which some six weeks were spent travelling by Elder Dempster steamer. We children were away at boarding school from the age of about eight, so you can see that we had very little time together as a family. Today I see this as a grave deprivation; at the time, however, it seemed to be normal living, the consequence – one might say the price – of Empire, for the colonisers pay a price as well as the colonised.

As we consider the history of Malta as an Island Fortress at the service of whichever of the great powers needed her, we see that she may sometimes become an outpost of Empire, of somebody else's Empire. We have already seen in Chapter One that Admiral Lord Nelson in an official statement said, "I now declare that I consider Malta as a most important outwork of India ... In that view I hope that we will never give it up". Whatever one's opinion of imperialism, certain facts emerge from this. In the case of the British Empire, until a comparatively recent date all natives of a British Protectorate like Malta were British citizens who could have a British passport on the same terms as any other and had the right of free entry into Britain.

The adventurous career of my father, John Carmelo Pio Sciortino to give him his full name, is worth recounting. It shows the resourcefulness, courage and sheer guts of the Maltese as well as something of the situation for good or ill of the British Empire.

My father was full of fun and little jokes. I remember boating at the Isle of Wight on one of those rare holidays we had together, Dad singing "Another little drink and another little drink won't do us any harm!" He would then shout "Are we down-hearted?" and we all had to shout "No!" which we did with a will. He was not a heavy drinker; he liked a tot of whisky, which he always took straight without water or soda, but never before sundown. He would drink a glass of beer at lunch and after his retirement he always had a cask in the cellar of our house. "Whistle all the way!" he would call after me when he sent me down to draw a jug.

As he grew older, and I too, I often wondered about that "Are we down-hearted? – No!" stunt. Was he down-hearted, lonely, depressed? In his latter years I used to see him sitting by the fire gazing into it with a glazed look in his eyes. What went on in that handsome, balding head? Was it frustrated ambition? What had been his dreams and ambitions as a young man? How I regret that I never penetrated to his heart! The fact is that I was too preoccupied with my own life, my own affairs, to care very much about anyone else.

According to his birth certificate he was born in Valletta at 3.15 am on July 14, 1875 and christened John Carmelo Camillo Pio, but he signed my sister's birth certificate as John Charles Sciortino; he always kept the two Cs in his initials, but I always knew him as John Charles Cecil.

As a young man he was certainly full of get-up-and-go and of initiative. You had to be, in those early days of the British administration of Nigeria. He told me that he went out with Major (later Lord) Lugard in 1903, one of a batch of twelve young men, to set up the civil (non-military) government, with no particular training. I have to question this, knowing something of the meticulous planning and careful preparation that was characteristic of Lugard. Certainly much would have been left to his own initiative; but it is unlikely that he was sent into a position of responsibility "with no particular training".

He told me he was "sent up river on a stern-wheeler" and set down on the bank at a certain point, with twelve native policemen. His brief was summarised in five points: Build a Residence; Map;

Learn the language; Become the whisper behind the local throne; Start taxation.

The nearest army post was forty miles away. All of this accords with what I have been able to read of the history of Nigeria and of Lugard's policies: the river was for a long time the principal, almost the only, means of transport. The early traders often lived on river boats; in fact it was thought by some of the Africans that these strange white men were some kind of fish as they never moved far from the river. It seems to me probable that this "Five point Brief" was the culmination of a definite period, if not of training, at least of briefing, which took place in Jemaa *after* he arrived in Northern Nigeria.

There is a photograph of my father in front of the Residency at Jemaa clearly dated 25.6.3. There is a well-built house with a garden and Dad showing off the fence around the garden which he had evidently constructed with telegraph wire. He had sent this to "May" in England; this was my mother's name. He is dressed in whites with a topi looking very relaxed. This all seems too well developed and civilised at such an early stage in the history of the Protectorate; but it could well accord with the practices and the standards maintained by the British Colonial Service of the time. Did my father have his dates wrong? Hardly, though there is a charming letter from a former servant welcoming him to the Residency at Jemaa dated 1920. Could it be that he went first to the Jemaa Residency for some preliminary briefing before being sent up river to build his own Residency and that whilst in Jemaa he had taken on some jobs like setting up the garden fence and later, in 1920, returned to Jemaa as Resident? Be that as it may, he was sent up river on a stern-wheeler.

Set down on the river bank, he set about fulfilling his brief with typical ingenuity. He told me that he started mapping by the triangulation method. You march one day in one direction, camp for the night, turn 120° and another day's march to the next camp, turn 120° and a day's march should bring you back to your start point having completed an isosceles triangle, if your days' marches have been equal. Meanwhile you have sketched in any land marks you have noticed. Dad was a clever artist and for some time, so he said, his maps were held up as an example for newly arrived officers.

Unfortunately no one had told him about the curvature of the earth's surface; when the three sides of the triangle failed to meet it was a simple matter to make some "minor" adjustments. This was all right until the Ordnance Survey came out!

He set about learning the language and became fluent in Hausa. He built a Residence – how? I don't know, but there was already a Public Works Department in existence and they may have helped even though he was possibly several hundred miles from Government HQ.

As for becoming the power behind the local throne he certainly made real friends among the native African leaders. I remember several coming to visit us when Mum and Dad were on leave and we were living together with our guardians, Uncle Frank and Aunt Mary, in the spacious grounds of Epsom College. Dad said he played polo with the Sardauna of Sokoto, one of the great rulers of the North. I don't know when polo was first played in Nigeria, but certainly the Hausa, like many of the Arab peoples, were, indeed are, magnificent horsemen. To become the whisper behind the local throne was the great Lugard principle, known as Indirect Rule; no foreigner, which included the British of course, was permitted to buy or own land, or settle in Nigeria. British government officials were to be known as Residents, to emphasise that they were there as *advisors* rather than *rulers.* This policy is criticised by some as being undemocratic and reactionary, supporting the local feudal system. It had, however, this to be said for it, that it respected local customs and culture and left the people to decide how they would govern themselves when they eventually claimed their independence from their imperial rulers.

Finally he must start taxation. Taxation has never been popular in any nation at any stage of development. There is a picture on an ancient Egyptian papyrus illustrating tax collection under one of the Pharaohs. An unfortunate farmer is stretched out on the ground being beaten with a flail in order to discover where he has hidden his store of wheat! And in modern times when some Inland Revenue officers of a certain district in the west country were having their annual outing together, culminating in a dinner at which they had hired an

orchestra, the musicians heard for whom they were playing, packed up their instruments and walked out!

Lugard realised, however, that the local Emirs must be allowed their revenue, their income. This was being collected by a system of agents or middle-men, each taking their cut; it was expensive to operate, wasteful and open to corruption. Accordingly he instructed his Resident Officers to get to know every village or other convenient unit of taxation, study the people and their systems and promise the local ruler to support his dues and lay down how they must be collected and what percentage must be paid to the British Government. He knew that this would be a heavy burden on already overworked Residents, but it forced them to get to know their people and to simplify the method of collection and resulted in Northern Nigeria having a more justly graduated system of taxation than any other colony in British Africa. This all helped to establish more firmly his political settlement.

My father's method of putting this part of his brief into action was simple, original and hilarious. Clearly he had to go out into the villages, meet the Headmen, discuss the traditional system of assessing dues and taxes and enforce their collection.

It soon became known that the visit of the local Resident Officer would be followed by talk about dues and taxes and a firm system would be established; some local agents might lose their jobs, clear assessments would be made and taxes collected. So, at his first appearance everybody would disappear into the bush – not a soul to be seen. Part of his equipment was one of the most recent inventions to come on the market, a gramophone with a great horn and a crank to wind it up. He would play "The Laughing Song". I remember hearing this when I was small; each verse ended with a "Ha! Ha! Ha! – Hee! Hee! Hee!" and finally the singer burst into peals of side-splitting laughter. At the sound of this rich throaty voice ringing out from a strange machine a few heads would appear. Finally as the peals of laughter rang out the whole population was gathered around, caught up in the marvellous infection of mirth. And then, when all were in this relaxed and jolly mood, the local chiefs would have no difficulty in collecting the tax and paying the agreed due to the British official.

You may say that this was patronising and degrading. By today's standards it is, but today's standards were not the standards at the turn of the century. You may also ask by what right we were there. As far as my father was concerned we British were there and this was all a part of the British Colonial Empire of which his native Malta was a tiny member. This was as massive a fact of reality as the Niagara Falls or Mount Vesuvius and he was there to make the most of it, and make the most of it he did.

We should not forget, either, that at the heart of the British Imperial effort there were other real aims besides trade, profit and political power. Lugard's driving motives included his hatred of the cruel, degrading slave trade and of the all-pervading corrupting influence of hard liquor. Slave raiding and trading had continued in this part of Africa long after it had been eliminated in the West. With slaving suppressed and the liquor trade controlled, prosperity grew, food was in good supply and movement free, and a stable modern society began to develop.

My father evidently worked hard at his five point brief and enjoyed it. Eighteen months passed and another officer arrived to tell him: "You are gazetted on leave and I am taking over". He didn't want to go, tried to stay, enjoying the life, but go he had to.

He went, not to Malta but to Bedford, England, where he had cousins, the Montanaros and Paskes, and where he had met my mother on an earlier visit. As a native-born Maltese he held full British citizenship and the right to a British passport, as did all citizens of British colonies at that time. How he came to get this job in Nigeria is of interest for the light it sheds on his character and on the interwoven pattern of the purely personal, national and international threads that made up the fabric of British imperialism.

When my grandfather died very young, his oldest son was just finishing his education and his youngest just starting; my father, in the middle, was the one who had to go out to work. He got a job with the Eastern Telegraph company (ETC), which sent him to learn telegraphy in Alexandria. Here he evidently had a happy time since his father's regiment, the Royal Malta Fencible Artillery, were stationed in Egypt. Proficient in telegraphy he was sent to Perim and

Lourenço-Marques where he quickly became bored. Reading, in some journal or possibly a government circular, an advertisement for twelve young men to join Major (later Lord) Lugard to set up the Civil Administration, he wrote and applied. With typical self-confidence he resigned his position with the ETC and took ship for home and then on to England. In 1901 we find him in Malta.

I have a photo of a parade of the Marines on the race course dated 1901. Underneath is written in my father's hand, "A parade of 14,000 Blue-jackets on the Race Course. Lord Mountbatten is taking the salute," and in the corner of the picture are three figures walking briskly toward the crowd of onlookers; one of them is my father. As if he was not perfectly recognisable by the angle of his hat and his confident stride, he has pencilled in the initials of each of the three, along with his own J.C.S. Lord Mountbatten must have been Prince Louis Battenberg, as Lord Louis Mountbatten was born in 1901 and could hardly have been taking the salute in Malta. I think my father must have been writing up his photo album at a much later date.

Now a digression: I got an idea of what must have been going through his mind as he walked briskly, even jauntily, towards that impressive parade. It came about like this: One day in 1970 I was in the Casino Maltese, that most English of Malta's clubs, with my cousin, George Sciortino. He introduced me to a lady of about my age. As soon as she heard my name she exclaimed: "My God, you're John's boy! Your family say that my mother jilted your father for a uniform. It's not true. Your father never wrote!" This surprising outburst rocked me back for a moment before I could reply soothingly that things were much better as they had turned out. It seems that Dad had called in at Malta on his way to England and found that his lady love had married somebody else, an army man presumably.

He went on to England where he met and proposed to Mary Grace Matheson, my mother. When he went to the Colonial Office to claim his place in the Nigerian Civil Service, he was told that all twelve places had been filled. He told me that he made such a row about this that they threw him out of the office. Later when one of the twelve fell ill "the only one they could remember" was my father who had made such a row, and they sent for him.

That was how the British Empire grew and developed its peculiar character – the moral conviction and drive of a Lugard, the search for work and adventure of young men like my father, the courage and loyalty of women like my mother, the greed and power hunger of politicians and traders, the heroism of missionaries and the luck of the draw in much of its bureaucracy.

As a boy the Empire did not interest me. It was too big, too far away and above all, too dull and unadventurous. My father, on the other hand, was to me the heroic adventurer. He came home on leave during World War I with a round loaf of delicious brown sugar concealed in his topi whilst we had no sugar at all. All the names of the Nigerian places to which I had to write my compulsory weekly letter to Mum and Dad were vibrating with romance: Maiduguri, Zaria, Mina, Bida, Lokoja, Sokoto, Keffi, Jemaa, Zungeru. There was a clear gap in my mind between these places, with Dad in them, and the British Empire, the Colonial Office and the Ministry responsible. This gap in my mind mirrored exactly the gap which often existed between the administrators in London and the men in the field. There is a letter which my father wrote to Sir Hugh Clifford, the Governor of Nigeria: "Be guided by me, I am the man on the spot and you are a hundred miles away," or words to that effect. This was not likely to advance my father's career, in fact it nearly got him sent into early retirement; but it illustrates the gap which can grow between the romance of action in the field and the sober realities of responsible government.

Without the heroic and willing self-sacrifice of its Administrators, the great British Empire could not have existed. Mary Matheson spent one year of my father's eighteen-month tour of duty with him in Nigeria, returning home, generally to have the next child, to be followed by my father six months alter. She had five children, the first being a boy whom she christened Harvey who died tragically of meningitis when only a few months old. I cannot tell how she suffered in that makeshift family life, commuting between Blackheath (London) and Northern Nigeria. It must have been terrible and yet, endured by so many, it was one of the foundation stones of the mighty British Empire.

I know nothing of my father's courting but it must have been done in accordance with the best Victorian traditions of the day, even if at top Mediterranean speed. Mother evidently had a very sheltered upbringing. She told me that neither she nor her sister were ever allowed in the kitchen; her mother was afraid of losing her cook! Although her given name was Mary Grace she was always known as May and when Dad came visiting, her sister, my Aunt Minnie, would call out, giggling: "Here comes April Showers!" for, of course "April showers bring May flowers". Perhaps that is where he got his well-known flair for punning.

After the wedding came a honeymoon in Oxford and Cheltenham and I don't know where else. There are some photographs taken during this holiday and a charming little water-colour sketch of Magdalen College Tower from a punt on the Isis, signed and dated 29/7/9. After the honeymoon she accompanied him out to Nigeria with a supply of tinned food and everything needed to last for eighteen months, Mrs. Beeton's Cook Book under her arm.

At that time the port of Lagos had no deep water harbour and no quay at which to land passengers, their luggage and all the other goods being imported. The steamer lay out at sea and a boat of some sort would draw alongside for the passengers who were then lowered, one at time, in a bosun's chair from a derrick. The ship was rolling with the Atlantic swell and the little boat heaving up and down; passengers were warned to take their weight on their arms as the impact of the swinging chair making contact with the boat could damage the spine. Dad did tell me that there was always a percentage of the goods unloaded missing the boat and ending at the bottom of the sea. I think they were more careful with the passengers.

Such was her homecoming, very different from the comfort of her home in England. I am sure that Dad's bride got a warm welcome from all his colleagues. Lugard himself had recently married his Flora (1902). You should read about her one day, she too was a great character.

Many were the adventures recounted to us after Dad's retirement and I am sure that they lost nothing in the telling. They used to wear calf-length boots against the malaria-bearing mosquito, but you had to

be very careful before putting them on in the evening as you never knew what might be lurking in the toe of the boot. There were tales of snakes and a bird called the Secretary Bird which they used to feed in the garden. This bird's great joy in life was killing snakes which it did by stamping on them.

Mother certainly won the hearts of those who worked for her and with her. I have a charming letter which my father received from a former servant, when he came to Jemaa as Resident. He writes, clearly referring to my Mother, whom he regards as his own mother, "... if my mother was with you, and my best compliments to the her, if her was at home, send my salutations to the her, may God Almighty prosper you amen".

Once in the early days Mother had a very painful abscess in her tooth. Dad had to ride four days to fetch a doctor. He had to cross a river and leaving his horse on the bank he crossed by canoe; as he returned with the doctor they were chased by a rogue hippopotamus which took a bite out of the back of the canoe as they reached the bank. When they got home they found Mother preparing a meal for them, having lanced the abscess with a darning needle, the pain had been so great. I tell this to illustrate the heroism of the wives who kept company with their husbands in these strange circumstances. I have read even more alarming experiences in a letter from Flora Lugard to a friend in England.

Lady Lugard wrote to a friend about a dinner party for twenty guests which she gave on Coronation Day. "I was struck with the thought as I looked down the table and noted the fine type of English gentleman's face which presented itself in rows on either side, that it really is a phenomenon of our Empire that we should be able in the heart of Africa to bring together for dinner twenty well-bred English officers of as fine a type as you would hope to meet in the most civilized centres of London ..."

Of course phrases such as "fine type of English gentleman" and "well-bred English officers" strike the ear strangely today when so many of the old values have been devalued. Even the word "Empire" has become a dirty word. Nevertheless there are still many who maintain and live the old values and they may even be coming back.

The next paragraph of Lady Lugard's letter could conceivably refer to my father: "One of the young Residents who dined with us on Coronation Day is on his way out to a post just a thousand miles distant. There is, of course, no railway and as yet no telegraph, but he goes out there practically alone to deal as he can with the problems that may arise and to maintain his authority practically by the prestige of the British flag." That could have been Dad. I wish I had asked Lord Lugard about that dinner party when Dad took me over to meet him in his retirement in Abinger.

The level at which moral values and standards were maintained at that time, at least by my father and his friends, was brought home to me when he told me how furious he was at the betrayal by the British government of a promise made to one of the native tribes in South or it may have been East Africa. One of the indigenous tribes had been moved off their land to make way for white settlers. They had been given good new land with the promise that it was theirs in perpetuity. According to my father they had asked for a treaty with the Great Queen (Victoria). They had been told that this was not necessary: "The white man's word is his bond". Within ten years gold had been found in their new territory. They were moved again. To my father this was the betrayal of everything that he and all his friends were working for.

It is a fact that when the Germans invaded Northern Nigeria from the (then) German Cameroons, the Muslim Emirs wrote letters to Lugard pledging their loyalty, encouraged recruiting and raised a levy to contribute to the costs of the war – and this at the moment when they were faced with a perfect opportunity to revolt against those who had so recently conquered them. Lugard had been very strict in enforcing his authority, but his integrity, honesty and generosity and that of his staff had won their hearts. I have no doubt that this would be the best way to govern the world: strictness of rule plus integrity and generosity of the ruler. It came to me at that time that I would like to give the rest of my life to maintain, not so much the Empire, but the best of the standards which it stood for.

I can picture mother trying to teach a native young man an art she had hardly mastered herself, Mrs. Beeton's famous cook book in one

hand and a rolling pin in the other. She got so cross once when trying to make pastry that the young man escaped through the window, ran round the Residence flagpole and back in through the other door with the pastry still stretching in a long elastic line behind him and mother after him with the rolling pin. They must have had a good laugh afterwards, to judge from the affection of that letter to my father.

Of course these empire builders, even the most committed and idealistic of them, were human, and all was not as rosy as the picture I have tried to draw. In fact I learned much from a conversation with a senior member of the new Legislative Council, forerunner of the independent Nigerian Parliament.

He had agreed that the British administration had been as honest and uncorrupt as it was possible for any human institution to be, so I asked him, by way of being provocative: "Then why is it that your new administration is so corrupt?" I knew he would not disagree with that description.

"That's easy" he replied. "Your government makes the money. Their officials don't need money. There are other things they need and can't make."

"Such as?"

"Women – our women and our boys – and we see it all."

I could see him watching me to see how I would take this very unpleasant accusation. We had, by that time, a very good relationship, but it was a shock to me. I had never thought of my father and his closest friends in that light. I am in fact convinced that he lived straight and was untouched by such suggestions; but I know enough of human nature and of the stresses and strains undergone by men living in harsh conditions with great responsibilities and without their wives, to know and understand what he was talking about. Mother had often told me that she was unwilling to stay in England with us children, because it was not fair to my father to leave him alone in Africa.

This is a part of the price of empire which both the colonists and the colonised have to pay. There is a hardness that creeps into families that lack, at an early age, the tender love and care of family life. It happened in my family and in myself. The system of aunts,

nannies, guardians and, ultimately, boarding school, which allowed absentee parents to park their children while they went off to rule a far-flung Empire, impinged on the colonial rulers themselves and their relations with their subjects.

In my family we children were entrusted to an elderly childless couple who were kindness itself and as good as could be; but it is not the same and, though we did not realise it at the time, we missed the tenderness and love of our own mother and father; and Mother herself paid an agonising price in her separation from her children. When her first, a boy whom she had christened Harvey, tragically died of meningitis, she could not bring herself to write and tell Dad, alone in Nigeria. She wrote for a whole year inventing the little boy's first words and other adventures and had to break the news to him when he came home on leave.

Retirement! This should have been the chance to catch up on the lost years of family life. Sadly it did not work out like that. By the time I was in my teen years I had developed my own ideas and interests and was hell-bent on going my own way. Interested in myself I am ashamed to say that I took little or no interest in getting to know my own father. As I look at his photograph hanging on our wall here I feel a great sadness at that missed opportunity. Families are among the greatest and best gifts we receive in our lives and, through my own crass selfishness, I threw it all away.

Retirement means leaving behind your working life and taking up the chance to be yourself and do what you have always wanted to do. For Dad it meant a garden, fruit, flowers, vegetables and a lawn to mow and becoming what he had always admired, an English gentleman. That is what he did. He commuted half his pension for a lump sum to buy a house with a garden. He bought Furzebank, Sunninghill, Berkshire, not far from Ascot. He once told me that he came here to live cheaply and die quickly; after he had settled in he read in a local guide that Berkshire around Ascot is too expensive to live in and too healthy to die in. Nevertheless it proved to be perfect for him. He escaped the demands and restraints of the old-style, inward-looking Catholicism of Malta of those days and slipped easily into the easy-going Anglicanism of Mother's C. of E. Soon he was

Church Warden and member of the Parish Council, drinking a tot of whisky with the Vicar who liked it straight as he did himself. He slipped into the round of bridge and tennis parties which was the established way of life.

But first Furzebank had to be furnished. Beds came in, sofa and chairs and, of course, all the memorabilia of Africa. Then there was the lion skin. As the house at Sunninghill got furnished there suddenly appeared an enormous lion skin which, neatly sewn on a rug, draped the back of the sofa in the drawing room. In fact it was the skin of a lioness complete with head and enormous fangs in its gaping jaws. This brought home to me the realities of life which had been till then a distant dream. Not that Dad spent his time there shooting big game; but like most Englishmen at that time, given the chance, he would try his hand as a hunter. If Dad did not have the skin of that noble creature in his parlour she would have had what was left of him in hers. Eventually the moth had the lion skin, so who was the victor?

Retirement for Mother was a different thing. For her it meant carrying on doing what she had always been doing: house-keeping, cooking and shopping, though now without the servants she was used to, without the security of the Colonial Service hierarchy, without the excitement and romance of Africa. She was a good, even a brilliant bridge player and she and Dad were always in demand in the neighbourhood. But, for her, retirement must have brought more strain, not less.

I remember everybody used to comment to me on her sweet smile. How well I remember it! She cooked all our meals and what meals they were! Plentiful, hot and on time – screams from the kitchen: "It's ruined! It's ruined!" and we would look at each other and say, "Come on, hurry up, lovely grub! don't be late!"

This scream from the kitchen – "It's ruined!" – showed me the tension under which she worked. I could see it and relate it to her youth, when she was never allowed into the kitchen, marrying this handsome, exotic Maltese, whisked off to Africa with only Mrs. Beeton to turn to. But what a good job she made of it!

Yes, there was stress, and she smoked a lot. "I never enjoy a cigarette except with a cup of coffee or when I am miserable", she

said once and "All my life I have expected the worst and what has happened has been worse still!" It was surely not that bad, but she had some terrible experiences, little Harvey who died of meningitis, Barney who pranged his plane and was killed just at the beginning of a brilliant career, young Jimmy who ran away from home and joined the army and Ian who passed up a good job to work with MRA and no security but Faith and Prayer.

She was such a dear. When I brought Sheena home to present her with her future daughter-in-law she exclaimed: "How wonderful, at last to have someone good-looking in the family!" She was never reconciled with my lifestyle, bringing up a family whilst working with MRA without salary and no security but the conviction that I was following God's plan. Yet on one occasion when we came to stay with her, bringing our baby daughter, Joanna, she peeped into our bedroom just as we were putting Joanna to bed. We were both on our knees saying our bedtime prayers with Joanna. The next day she said: "I feel so much happier after seeing you last night. You must be all right." Yes, she was a dear and a darling and I was not worthy of her. Perhaps now, in heaven, she has felt my repentance and forgiven me. I feel at peace after writing this.

Mother was the first white woman in some parts of Northern Nigeria. She must have had great courage, coming, as she did, from such a sheltered Victorian background.

Dad's retirement in 1930 helped me to begin to grasp the realities which made up that extraordinary institution which was the British Empire, an institution which won't lie down but carries on as a multi-coloured, English-speaking creation called the Commonwealth. I realised that whatever benefits my father and the British Empire, which he served, had brought to Africa, I and my brothers and sister had benefited too. For the first time in our lives we lived in a house of our own; my parents had been able to pay for a good education for me, all the fees at Cheltenham College and part of my university fees, my brother at Shrewsbury and my sister at "The Bee Hive" in Brighton.

Yes, we had benefited too. Dad had been able to save from his

salary and had his pension. He told me that he had not made anything on the side, what today we would call moonlighting. He had once picked up a gold nugget and kept it on his desk as a paperweight because Government officials were not allowed to prospect or speculate. I heard it confirmed many times when I visited Nigeria in later years that the Nigerian Colonial Administration had been the most fiscally honest and un-corrupt of any and I believe it. I suppose motives are always mixed and this was true of the British Empire as well as of its individual pioneers.

Lugard seems to have used the greed and power-hunger of some to support his own plans, and his idealism not only to moderate the greed and power-hunger, but also to persuade the idealists and mission-minded at home to support his imperial ambitions.

I have taken far longer writing about my father than about other more important Maltese; yet he is the most important Maltese for me. Anyway in his life and in his retirement he was typical of thousands of Maltese who have emigrated to Britain, Australia, the USA and Canada; he was typical in that he perfectly assimilated into the community in which he lived. At Dad's funeral old Mr. Pither, who throughout the week was the front-of-house manager of the Westminster Theatre and at weekends the Sacristan of our parish church at Sunninghill, remarked: "There goes a real English gentleman". He might as well have said, as I would say: "There goes a real Maltese gentleman".

I am so glad to have written at such length about my father. It has made me realise how much I love him, how much I regret that I cared so little for him in his lifetime, and to feel that he understands and has forgiven all.

After he retired we did get to know him better. Many were the tales he told us. He never said much about Malta, but a great deal about Nigeria. Some of these were difficult to fit into any picture I could form of the situation in general. For instance he told me about fighting the Germans in World War I. I could not see how this could have been, but I never questioned him. Of course I now know that Germany had colonised the Cameroons, which after Germany's defeat were given to the French. There was much fighting along all

the frontier with the Cameroons and for the vital port of Douala which had the only deep-water harbour between Lagos and the Cape. He told me of one action in which a native witch doctor had put a spell on the white man's guns; sure enough the British rifles kept misfiring. Subsequent investigation revealed that a large batch of cartridges for the standard .303 rifles were faulty, with the percussion caps off-centre. Dad was convinced that they had come from America and that the Ministry of Supply had got rid of them by shipping them to this out of the way station where they would never be fired in anger. Probably this was the natural reaction of all active-service men at an error committed by somebody at home.

German submarines were active off the west coast and Mother had a terrifying tale of sitting for ten minutes or longer with a floating mine bumping against the hull of her steamer whilst the sailors got a tow rope on it and towed it away from the ship where it was exploded by gunfire. The full import of this terrifying experience never registered in my mind until I read, in a letter from Lord Lugard to his wife Flora, quoted by Margery Perham in her biography of Lugard, how, of Elder Demster's flotilla of eleven passenger ships serving on this line, seven were sunk with a devastating loss of life. My esteem and love of my mother has grown beyond bounds since I have started writing this account.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE GOD WHO SPEAKS – AN ADVENTURE

It was Moral Re-Armament (MRA) which had launched us on this path of working for reconciliation and trying to make a difference in the way people live, and which landed us in Malta for twenty years at the invitation of the Catholic Archbishop. Central to MRA is the idea and the experience of the God who speaks. That, as I have said in Chapter Four, was one of the things that first caught my interest in the group of people called the Oxford Group.

In March 1935 Frank Buchman, under God the initiator of Moral Re-Armament, speaking to a crowd of 10,000 in Kronborg, Hamlet's Castle of Elsinore in Denmark, made this statement: "Definite, accurate, adequate thoughts can come from the mind of God to the minds of men. This is normal prayer". He went on to call for "a spiritual dynamic which will change human nature and remake men and nations".

If this is true, if Buchman was not talking rubbish. If thoughts can come from the mind of God to the minds of men and women and if these thoughts are such that they can produce a change in human nature which will remake men and nations, then surely the most urgent and vitally important task for all believers is to learn to live by listening for these thoughts, to obey them and to proclaim this truth to the world at large and to our friends one by one; and not only for believers – unbelief does not prevent anyone from listening to the inner voice of conscience, a step which has linked many into the supernet of the God who speaks.

Buchman's statement that definite, accurate, adequate thoughts can come from the mind of God to the minds of men and women is nothing new. In both the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible there are countless stories, many of history-making significance, in which "the word of the Lord" has spoken, often with startling results following the Inner Voice.

"Today if you will hear His voice, harden not your hearts." This line from the ninety-fifth Psalm, better known to Church of England people as the *Venite*, was peculiarly relevant to the Jewish nation. Amidst the neighbouring nations who were worshipping idols, involved in human sacrifice and other bestialities, the Israelites were discovering the way of listening for the mind of the One who created the world as they knew it. They were pioneering a way for the rest of the world. The Book of Psalms in the Old Testament is full of references to the God who speaks in such phrases as "The Word of the Lord came to ...". Throughout the Book of Psalms and elsewhere we find such words as "law", "testimonies", "statutes", "commandments", of the Lord. The German scholar and theologian, Dr. Klaus Bockmuehl, points out in his book *Living by the Gospel*,[6] that two Hebrew words in Psalm 19, verses 7 and 8, translated in the English Bible variously as Law, Statutes, Commandments, are also used as direct verbal orders given by commanders like Joshua in battle. Understood in this way Psalm 19 becomes a poem in celebration of the God who speaks and of the joys and blessings which follow on the practice of listening to and obeying the inner voice; this may also be said of the long alphabetical Psalm 119, where the same words appear.

The Psalms also contain frequent accusations that the Israelites were stubborn and stiff-necked and did harden their hearts against the promptings of the voice of God in their hearts. This is a challenge which must apply with equal force to Christians who regard themselves as the new Israel, successors of the old, called to pioneer the way for the rest of the world.

Of course many thoughts, both good and bad, do present themselves to our minds, flashing through in as many seconds, to be accepted or rejected according to their worth. Buchman himself was aware of the dangers of private claims to divine revelations. He offered a six-fold test of the thoughts that come in a time of prayer and meditation: first was the willingness to obey, without self-

[6] Bockmuehl, Klaus. 1986. *Living By the Gospel.* Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard.

interested editing; second was common sense – for instance if circumstances proved a thought to be wrong; a third test was the test of the moral standards of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love; fourthly the over-all teaching of the Bible; fifth was to seek the advice of trusted friends who were also committed to seek God's way of living; sixth the experience and teaching of the Church. Of great interest to me was the reaction of my friend Rev. Joe Bernard S.J. to this six-fold test (see Chapter Six).

I am neither theologian nor scholar. I am simply writing down my own honest experience as an ordinary person trying to find out what is or should be normal living.

The proof of the pudding

What has been my experience of trying to live by listening to God? It has become so normal to expect to be led through the complications of modern life that we are no longer surprised when the name of a friend comes into mind and we bump into him round the next corner. Coincidences of this sort are common occurrences; most people experience them from time to time. When, however, they become so frequent that you feel you can plan your life on them, then they are a convincing evidence of the reality of God speaking.

One very simple example. Valletta, shortly before Christmas. I have a present I want to send to our daughter and am returning home from the post office after learning that I have missed the date for it to arrive in time. Annoyed with myself and praying quietly to avoid cursing and swearing, I wonder which way to return to the car park in Parliament Square; equidistant are Archbishop Street and Old Theatre Street. Without much thought I pray to be led and choose Archbishop Street. In front of the Archbishop's Palace are a couple of English tourists looking up at the Latin inscription over the door. Without thinking I start chatting with them, doing my usual turn as amateur guide. I ask where they come from?

"Cheshire."

"Oh, do you know Tirley Garth in Tarporley?"

"Yes, we go there often, in fact we shall be there next week."

I told them that our daughter would be staying there for Christmas. They took my parcel and Joanna had her gift in time.

Coincidence? Perhaps, but coherent. Too small and petty to call it divine guidance? Perhaps, but God as well as being almighty is our heavenly Father, "Father of the fatherless", says the Psalmist, and what father would not care for the least detail of a Christmas present for a small child? You have only to read in St. Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 7, verses 9-11 to understand that the God who speaks cares for the smallest details. I have never ceased to be surprised with joy at these 'coincidences'.

There have also been happenings of a more dramatic nature which could not be described as coincidence. It so happened that Sheena and I were working in Nigeria. We had been invited by a number of distinguished Nigerians in the days before independence. We were based in Lagos and were working together with an American Lutheran minister called Paul Hogue, a young Dane called Thorsten Hvidt and Peter Hannen from Northern Ireland. On the other side of Nigeria in Enugu was a friend of mine from college days. Hugh Elliott was now a Resident Officer, later made a CMG of the British Colonial Service and eventually given the MBE for his work in Africa. At college we had worked together in the Oxford Group. His wife, Bridget, was gravely ill with yellow fever from which few at that time could expect to recover. Insistently the thought came that we must visit them and be with them by Christmas. In those days there was no bridge over the Niger in the south. To go by train meant travelling north for several days and then south to Enugu; there was no time for this, but Nigerian Airlines would take us. Three of us, Sheena and I and Paul Hogue were to go. We counted our pennies and found that we had enough money to buy tickets to Benin, half way. Insistently the thought came that we must be in Enugu by Christmas. We paid the air fares, took our courage in our hands and our few remaining pounds in our pockets and set out for the airport.

Full of faith we boarded the plane. Just before take-off a tall, bronzed young man came and sat next to me.

"Ian Sciortino! I know you."

"I don't know you. Who are you?"

"My name's Wallace Bird."

Of course I knew his father, Rev. Wallace Bird, who had invited us to come and work in his parish of West Ham where he was the vicar. This must be the small boy of six or seven some twenty-five years ago whom I remembered very well.

"Goodness me! What are you doing here?"

"I'm employed by Shell Oil and I have two million pounds to spend setting up petrol stations all over Nigeria and Ghana."

Naturally being the tricky character that I am, the thought crossed my mind that some of those two million pounds would not be missed if they found their way to me – and anyway they would be doing a better work than setting up petrol stations. Quickly I put this unworthy thought out of my mind. Anyway it was my principal never to ask for money.

Wallace asked: "And you, what are you doing here?"

"I'm doing the same as I was when I used to come into your mother's kitchen for a cup of tea and a sandwich and we had that Oxford Group campaign in West Ham. With my wife and a friend we are going to Enugu to see an old pal of mine whose wife is sick with yellow fever, and I don't have two million pounds to spend."

"What are you going to do in Benin?"

"No idea. I hope to find some means of getting on to Enugu."

"Not to worry. I am lunching with a Syrian who runs lorries all over Nigeria. Come with me to lunch with him and he'll get you on your way."

"But, Wallace, you can't just turn up with three complete strangers, uninvited."

"Oh yes you can. You don't know Nigerian hospitality."

I felt very peaceful and calm, reassured by this extraordinary 'coincidence' on this particular day on the coast of West Africa. The plane touched down: hardly an airport in those days, just a landing strip, a shed, and then nothing, no taxi, no bus service and miles from Benin city. Without young Wallace Bird we would have looked very foolish. A large limousine was awaiting him and we all piled in with our meagre luggage and in a few minutes were eating a delicious Nigerian curry and discussing MRA and its message for today with

Wallace's friend, the Syrian who owned a transport company.

Sure enough Wallace's Syrian friend had a lorry waiting to leave for Enugu. A quick telephone call told the driver to wait for us. This was to prove an adventurous journey. It was a three-ton lorry laden with merchandise of various sorts; on top of the goods were a number of planks on which were seated a mixed crowd of Nigerians, men, women and children. I did not count them but it is fixed in my mind that there were forty. Probably my memory is exaggerating; anyway there were a lot of people in that truck. That was the third class. In front beside the driver was the first class and Sheena was welcomed there. Paul and I climbed into a narrow space between the driver's cabin and the body of the truck. This, it seemed to me, was the second class. I did not stop to think about the racism of this segregation of the black plebs and us white tourists, for this was before independence and I knew that we were already breaking a serious taboo by travelling in this fashion, as we were to find out before the end of the journey.

The road consisted of two concrete strips, one for the near-side and the other for the off-side wheels, stretching far into the distance with nothing to break the monotony of unbroken scrub on both sides of the track – unbroken until another lorry appeared bearing down on us at breakneck speed. It seemed that both drivers accelerated towards what seemed to be an inevitable head-on collision until at the very last moment one of the two drivers would lose his nerve and swerve off the concrete onto the sandy soft shoulder. We stopped for a break in a village and a certain amount of buying and selling took place around us; then on until suddenly we saw, just as we so often see at home in old England: "DIVERSION! Road Repairs". Off we went into the bush on what proved to be a twenty-mile detour.

Now it appeared that our kind Syrian host did not wholly trust his driver and had supplied him with enough petrol to go from Lagos to Asaba but had not allowed for a detour of twenty miles in the bush; or – perish the thought – had someone, as is not unknown in good old England, syphoned off a few gallons? Be that as it may, Sheena, from her vantage post beside the driver, was watching the needle of the petrol gauge flickering down below that red line which marks the

imminent danger of an empty tank.

Then it happened. Just as darkness descended on us, as it does in the tropics, like a curtain dropping at the end of theatrical performance, the engine stuttered and died and there we were deep in the bush, in pitch darkness. Paul spied a light and we set out to see what we could do. There was a village nearby and no doubt the majority of passengers on the lorry would have been made welcome with typical Nigerian hospitality; but we were anxious to move on to Asaba and so, in fact, were they. We were expected at the Methodist Agricultural College for the night.

Paul and I found the light in the Residence of the local British Official. The Resident Officer kindly sold us two gallons of petrol which got us and all our fellow travellers on our way, but he took the opportunity to read us a very stern lecture about the wickedness of us whites travelling in this manner in a native means of transport. In fact it would not be an over-statement to say that he was absolutely furious, but it was very satisfying to us to enable the lorry to proceed on its way and deliver its human cargo to their destination before night. The driver kindly drove a couple of miles off his route to deliver us to the Methodist Mission Station with its Agricultural College at Asaba. The Missioner and his wife were extremely kind and took us in. They had invited us to stop off with them on our way to Enugu but unfortunately our telegram giving the day and estimated time of arrival was not delivered until after we had left. This did not faze them a bit. As old Nigeria hands they seemed to expect it. The following morning they had to send to Enugu for supplies and kindly drove us in their jeep, crossing the Niger by ferry. I enjoyed the river-crossing looking out for the hippos and crocodiles my father had told me of. Alas, there were none but there were beautiful birds, water fowl about which I knew nothing, and I enjoyed the general sense of excitement on the crowded ferry.

We arrived in Enugu. Sheena spent the days of Christmas in a Government Rest House next to the hospital where Bridget Elliott was being cared for by a brilliant Indian doctor. Paul and I were met by Hugh who took us to his Residence some miles distant.

I am glad to say that Bridget recovered thanks to this Indian

doctor. I will end this tale of an adventure by repeating that I still marvel and thank God for the "coincidence", if you believe in coincidences, of meeting young Wallace Bird on that plane.

CHAPTER NINE

NEW MEN, NEW NATIONS, A NEW WORLD

How well I remember those early years. I had joined the October Club, gateway to the Communist Party, full of hope like so many in the thirties. We wanted to do something different, to make the world a better place. You have only to read a book like *The Light that Failed* to see how many intelligent, respected intellectuals believed that the left wing was the right way. Then I ran into Frank Buchman and the enthusiastic young group that he had gathered at Oxford.

Buchman was saying: "We, the remakers of the world, is that not the thinking and willing of the ordinary man everywhere?" That struck a chord with me. When I spouted my left-wing theories to them, his merry men tackled me head on. "You want to put the world right? Well, why not start with yourself? You seem to think you're number one, so why not start there?" This Moral Re-Armament thing had one big snag, it had to start with yourself, and I did not want to change my lifestyle, which was based on Me First in every field I got into. But Buchman's group were persistent and yet they were such attractive people. Natural unforced laughter flowed in and out of their conversation.

Remaking the world through remaking men and women was a wonderful idea, but how do you do it? Very simple. First you start with yourself, put right what you can. I soon found that I couldn't. I put right what I could, like paying back for things I'd stolen, but my character didn't change. I was soon doing the same old things again, like hurting people by my arrogant know-it-all attitude, or being a bit free with the truth when I wanted to cover up something I'd done or forgotten to do. To change me obviously needed a super power and to change the world by changing people would require a super power too.

Then I discovered how long it takes for someone to change, at least for this one. I've been at it for well over sixty years and I expect and hope to go on changing till the day I die. So much for remaking

the world in my lifetime, if I was ever naive enough to believe that. But I admit I was bitterly disappointed when the second world war broke out. It has always been said that we should aim to leave the world a better place than it was when we entered it. My belief is that, if there is a purpose for mankind, it is to care for each other and the environment, to work with nature in the great process of evolution and to leave the world a better place than it was before.

The idea of remaking the world by remaking men and nations is no new idea. One might say that it is as old as the Ten Commandments. To find the super power to change oneself and others it is not necessary to have faith in the God of any particular Church; even those with no faith at all can make the experiment of listening to their Inner Voice. That is because there seems to be, in-built in the heart and mind of every man, woman and child, the ability to listen to that Inner Voice that speaks clearly to those who listen. Moreover this Inner Voice, when obeyed, infuses power into life, the power to break the bonds of old habits, fears and inhibitions, power to achieve inner freedom in an amazing way. When I got honest with my Dad about money I had "borrowed" from him without asking and about a number of other hidden activities, many unexpected things happened in me and in the family. For instance I forgot to buy cigarettes for a fortnight and a long addiction was broken without effort by me. There is power in the Inner Voice and it is available to anyone anywhere. I got to know and experience the power that flows from obedience to the Inner Voice. How do you pass it on? How do you go about enlisting people in this task of remaking the world?

There are a few simple don'ts. Don't preach, it is counter-productive and easy to be boring. Don't "buttonhole". Don't use any of the tactics that have been the mark of many old-time revival movements. They have been valid in their day but will be unlikely to be effective in today's sophisticated world. Well, what should you do? Do it by setting a good example? If you are like me there is a serious danger here. When I have tried to set a good example, be a sort of role-model, I have found myself becoming a self-righteous prude and an uninteresting bore.

Try being yourself! Dangerous? Yes it was for me, but with the

help of moral standards and the Inner Voice it has worked for some people and for some situations.

One further point. I feel that I have no warrant to interfere with other people's lives, even by praying for them, unless I am willing to make a lifelong friendship. I cannot keep in touch with everyone I meet or have anything to do with, but I can be willing to make a lifelong friend of them. On that basis I may be able to help them to be their greatest and their best.

EPILOGUE

Every independent nation today exists in a world of conflicts and wars as does every independent human being. Each faces a choice. Either to be a peace-maker or risk becoming a tool in the hand of some warmonger. That is the choice for every individual and every independent nation in a warring world.

It is true that he who wants peace must be prepared for war. The real peace-makers, however, are those who build a bridge of peace wherever they may be.

Peace is people being different. Peace is only possible if human beings find a new motivation. It is possible and I believe it is almost within our grasp.