

Surviving War: health, shelter and the Victory Kitchens

World War II was a terribly devastating experience for the population in general. To be sure, recollections of war are ubiquitous in most, if not all, of the oral history recordings and written life histories of the elderly who lived through this experience as children or teenagers. Their vibrant eye witness accounts of specific events and of daily life – particularly their struggle to survive through the constant bombardments – constitute substantial parts of these narratives. Apart from personal traumas, such as the death of one of their parents or other members of their family, friends or neighbours, during the heavy air raids, they also vividly evoke the sense of collective fear and panic; their playing and praying in the shelters; their parents' attempts to find food when all were on the brink of starvation; as well as problems of hygiene which led to a range of disease. Most of the oral history excerpts and written fragments of life histories (including those from the project: *War reminiscence exercise* conducted with members of the University of the Third Age) reproduced below, recall the strong solidarity and social assistance shown in their communities: telling us of their family members and neighbours sharing food rations and providing immediate assistance of every description. But they also remember episodes of exploitation, unequal distribution of, and fighting over, the scarce resources available. Hence the black-market, theft and forms of 'hidden exchange' with the soldiers are still vividly recalled.

Most of the memories which these persons have left, especially those living in the Grand Harbour area, evoke the acute sense of devastation of a whole urban landscape and their deep feeling of rupture with traditional modes of living. Against this background of material ruin and a strained atmosphere, most of our protagonists recall the frequent, bold, acts of 'ordinary' heroism shown by their parents, neighbours, medical doctors or members of the ARP.



Donated by T. Bonanno

Alex Randon: 'Well let's see. War in Malta started in June 1940. The digging started soon after and, by 1941, many shelters were ready, mostly in the villages. Well, one can say that digging started soon after the war broke out and by late 1941, they spread through the island[...] During those days, digging was done by pick-axe –there were no pneumatic drills in those days! I remember the digger used to sit on a large stone and start digging, first one side and then the other. Then he would hammer a steel wedge in the slit made, and prise out a large bit of rock. Then he would start all over again, all around, until he was surrounded by big chunks of rock.

This is how I remember the shelters being dug. Different tools were used to dig underground passages or workshops, but then when public shelters were dug they followed the same system. They used to dig and dig. First on one side then another, after which they used to insert a steel wedge and, using a big hammer, prise blocks of rock off...and continue going further and further.

Usually there used to be two men working together, with one of them hauling the bits of rock (the debris collected) up the road in a basket. The first thing that was dug was the flight of steps leading down. Sometimes they used to start by making a stairwell and then dig a spiral staircase instead. The debris collected used to be carried up in baskets and thrown onto a cart belonging to the public Works Department.

The shelters were public but government used to issue permits to anybody wishing to dig a cubicle for his family. That is what they used to be called – cubicles. Of course, one had to pay both for the permit and the work, but afterwards one could have his 'private' room in a public shelter. Room not rooms, as one was only allowed to have one cubicle.

Shelters were all different. The average shelter used to be from one end of the road to the first corner....They were different. I remember one shelter had three entrances or exits – three openings. I remember that, on one occasion when I had gone into the shelter at Dingli Circus [Sliema] a bomb fell on a house near one of the openings bringing down all masonry on top of the exit and covering it completely. The house belonged to Maestro

Manche' who led an orchestra ... Well this house fell on the entrance and blocked it completely, thus causing everybody in the shelter to panic.

Sometimes, however, niches used to be dug in the walls, and lamps were placed there instead. But government had provided this particular shelter with electricity. But when the bomb fell, causing the broken house to block entrance, a thick cloud of dust swept through the whole shelter, causing panic.

Well, when there was a lull in the attacks we children used to leave the shelter and go outside to look for splinters or part of a shell, called a nose cap. But during the actual raids, we used to sit near our mother and say the rosary with her. You could see that people were afraid during the worst part of the raid but, when it quietened down, nobody waited for the 'Raiders Past' to get out of the shelter. If we weren't allowed out we would simply play 'catch' or 'hide and seek' in the shelter itself. However, there were people, mostly elderly people, who simply lived in the shelter. The farthest they got was to the entrance of the shelter and they stayed there, ready to go down again the minute the air-raid siren sounded. But for us youngsters, the shelter was also a place for chatting up girls. Well, that was our life in the shelter, I suppose.

We never really slept there [in the shelter], but we had what were called 'nuisance raids', meant to lower the people's morale which lasted the whole night through. But everybody carried down something to sit on, a stool or a deck chair, so we somehow managed to snooze a bit. But we never really went down to sleep, as did the people who were scared stiff of raids. We used to go down during the raid and stay there as long as the raid lasted, even up to seven or eight hours. But the 'nuisance raids' were the worst as they were meant to lower the morale of both the public and the defenders. Sometimes these night raiders dropped their bombs quite near, especially if they were spotted by searchlights and had to drop their bombs suddenly'.

Joseph Caruana: 'During the war, I really could not tell and ... I was too young to notice such things. I could say that during the war everybody was poor. Nobody had anything to give away. Not even the rich could find any food or clothes to buy. These could only be brought when one had coupons left. But then there was the black-market, so if one were to make it worth their while, they would not have to go around wearing tattered clothes. We could not even buy glasses to drink from. They used to be made by heating off the top part of a bottle. [...]

One morning I woke up to the sound of gunfire. In excitement, I looked for my brother and, when my mother ran upstairs I told her that the Italians are coming to shower us with flowers ! But my mother took us downstairs and made us children go under the table for cover. When the air raid was over, I helped my mother carry all our bedding downstairs as my brother was too young to help. Together, my mother and I put the mattresses on the table for further protection, as the table was our only shelter for some time. Of course, we had no idea what a bomb really was !

I cried because I was afraid ... Then in the evening, my father and my uncle came home from the dockyard where they worked, and gone was our terror ! Later on, there was a really big air raid and, when my father and uncle rushed to the roof to watch, I joined them and stood close to the roof door, watching. I can still remember the sight of those enemy planes, approaching in groups of five and diving over the port, a short distance from where we went in Birkirkara.

[During one air raid] I felt terrified and the sound of the diving planes made me feel worse. We were living at Philip Street ... where buildings had been demolished, so we were covered in dust. It is amazing how dust covers your face, gets into your ears, covers your lips...goes everywhere ! My mother who was scared out of her wits, was crying and praying. She pushed me under an archway, and stood in front of me to protect me ! I really don't know what would have happened if a bomb had fallen there but, anyway, she stood there, crying and praying and grumbling against our German and Italian attackers, with the prayers rising to a crescendo whenever a bomb fell nearby.

I can remember that the kerosene was rationed and that people did not have anything else to cook with. Besides, there was very little food to be bought. So the Victory Kitchens were started and people were issued with coupons –one for every member –with which they were given a certain amount of food everyday. I vaguely remember us children queuing for hours, pots in hand, waiting for the food to be cooked – except, of course, when we ran off to play, leaving our pots 'to keep our place' in the queue ! However, when food was being served, it was either my mother or my aunt who held the pot, to make sure that we got what food was due to us, and to ensure that nobody got more than this due ! You see we were near starvation at the time. [...] I suppose we must have been given vegetable soup or something similar. Mostly soups, I think. I was not particularly interested in cooking as long as I was fed something. I loved bread mostly.

What I can remember is that on special feasts, like Christmas or Easter Sunday, we were given a bar of chocolate with our fortnightly ration of groceries. We rarely got such treats. I remember my mother saying that, on another occasion, were given a candle each. Normally we got nothing special on Sundays or festa days. We just got the usual food ... and lumped it.

There was a difference in the amount given by ration. Men were allotted larger amounts than women while old people and children got even less. What I remember clearly is that bread was scarce. I remember us asking my mother to give us the evening's portion of bread together with the midday portion. Who knows how many times my mother, grandmother and aunt gave up some of their portions to add to my father's and uncle's portions.

Probably the meals were cooked somewhere else, then brought to the Victory Kitchen. Then, using a soup ladle, they put our portions into our pots. One man got one portion poured into his pot while a family of four people was served one, two, three, four soup of ladlefuls. Not a drop more !

Victory kitchens I suppose must have been clean, as there were inspectors who inspected everything. Obviously, cleanliness was considered important as there was always the fear of making people sick. They must have been very careful not to give the three hundred people or so who were fed from that particular Victory Kitchen food poisoning. So I suppose that they were clean, as they did want to add to the existing problems.

I remember once I became the hero of all women in the neighbourhood ! Well, bread was rationed and our portions were dutifully weighed by our baker, with tiny pieces added or reduced from the loaf, to ensure that we got the exact weight due to us. Well our baker used to deliver our bread on a wooden cart, so every time that he leaned over, the weight of the bread shifted to one side, dropping crumbs to the shelf underneath. Probably, this was done on purpose, so that he could collect all crumbs for himself later. However, on that day the sight of that heap of crumbs was too much for me, young and hungry as I was. So, I put my little hand through the slats and scooped of some crumbs which I ate immediately. The women who were gathered around the cart turned to me and said 'Serves him right!'

they must have thought that I had realized that he was cheating us, and decided to teach him a lesson, whereas I had done it simply because I was hungry’.



Mollie Zammit Tabone: ‘We could go down into the shelter with all our toys. All toys in a wicker bag, we’d take down with us all our pets, the dogs, we had five dogs. All except one dog. Brownie, would not come down into the shelter. Brownie didn’t use to want to go down. But he had a craze for running after anybody who wasn’t in the shelter. At the time we had a deaf maid and she wasn’t afraid because she couldn’t hear anything and she’d remain in the yard, at her washing, anyway, and this dog

would bark and she’d see him and tell him ‘Be quiet or the Germans will hear you’...anyway, once we decided to frighten her somehow and we found a piece of shrapnel, shrapnel is a piece of a bomb and we went up the roof and threw it accurately at her as she was moving towards the basin and it got her wet as it fell and when she saw that she said ‘A bomb’s fallen into the basin!’ and she ran inside and anyway from that day onwards she’d join us in the shelter.

We were on rations, everything was, bread, butter...stinking margarine really....everything was rationed, all right. There was this grocer we had, Konslu, we had this booklet and he’d put a stamp in it every time we had something and one day it would be the stamp for the pasta and one day the stamp for the sugar, anyway, and we had corned beef, big tins of corned beef which we’d buy by the quarter and this guy, Konslu, would open the corned beef from one side of the tin and then he’d puncture it from the top and he’d blow through it and end up sweating with his blowing, and I’ll tell my mother about it, and she’d say ‘yuk’...she’d say ‘don’t let him give you the piece he’d been blowing on’. Anyway, then we had, how do you say in English ‘perks’, you understand, because we used to live near the NAAFI, and sometimes the British, you know, seeing so many young children, we’d scrounge some chocolate or something and we had the ration too, anyway’.

Grace Callus: ‘I was still small and hungry. I was hungry! And I don’t know from where, they bought a piece of bread... and I ran after them [...] at night my mother used to tell us “so we will now take you in the shelters at night, so that if we die, we will not die all together. At least you will still be alive! Alas! We can die, now we are old, but you are still four small kids”. And we went. Hungry! We did not have anything to eat. Always hungry. Then because the war took long, the ‘protection’ people came, that was how we used to call them...then there were the Victory Kitchen. These were community kitchens which provided us with food: sometimes with a little pasta and on other times some little other. But we were never satisfied. We never really had to eat.

Ones we had a field full of cauliflower and a man, nicknamed *Skaligg* came, he used to live here. He told her [my mother] “Anni, will you sell me all that cauliflower in your fields ? ” She replied “it is better to bring me a bag of flour for these children of mine”. “So I’ll provide you with a bag of flour and you will give me this field produce”. He gathered all

cauliflower and brought us a bag of flour. We used to knead it in pancakes and fry them at night. *Pazzulati* we used to call them.'

Antonio Attard: 'The Victory Kitchen.... We used to enjoy going there as children... but the Victory did not give us enough to satisfy our hunger. But we used to go with a saucepan in our hands, to get a bit of minestrone, pasta "beads" in water, and they also gave us beans and sardine. And we, waiting outside, used to enjoy [singing]:

Minestra and Pasta

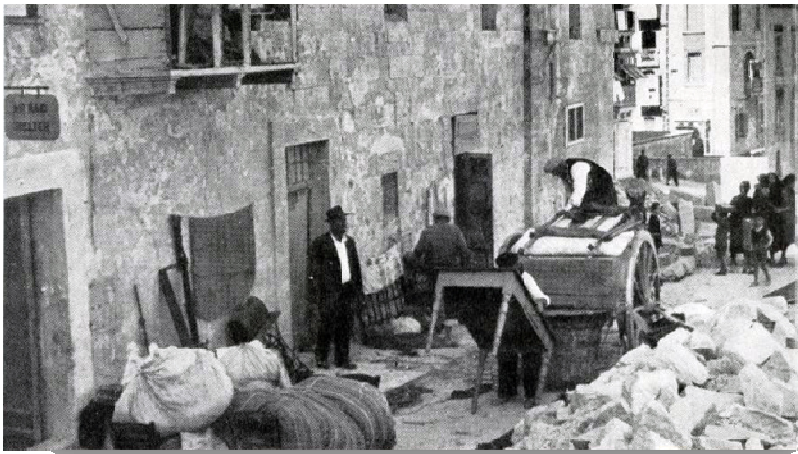
Beans and Sardine

From the Victory Kitchen

...and it was longer. But I forgot it. I don't know it.

[In Gozo] I only remember one of these Kitchens at Rabat, Ghain Street... we used to go there. It was at the very beginning of *Triq tal-ghajn*. There we used to go. But the villages, I don't know about those in the villages... I think there were some, but we at Rabat, we all used to go to that one.'

Lawrence Cassar: 'When the raids sounded, we had to run for the shelters and it would be so dark that you won't see the street. Even though on the dock basin there were four blue lamps... but you'll have to fix your eyes to find them... [in Senglea] it is true, there were shelters and ones people got buried in them. There were those who in the entrance used to



block themselves there, there were others that had another entrance [to the shelter], but these were far away to get out of them...

Food was scarce. Bread ... all we were given was a quarter and a half [pounds], today you take this for breakfast ... then you had to be satisfied with that. The only trouble was that we had only bread. It was not as if there is no bread and you can eat biscuits or honey rings...

because flour was used for bread only. That's all about it!'