

ST JOSEPH SCHOOL SLIEMA: 1881-2011

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St Emile de Vialar was travelling with Sr Emilie Julien and the first Foundation in Malta was established in 1842 in two houses rented in Vittoriosa. The first school opened its doors to around one hundred day pupils and ten boarders. For close to four decades, the Sisters of St Joseph of the Apparition continued to devote their prayers, sacrifice, strength and fortunes to provide for the education of children and the relief of the unfortunate, often at great personal sacrifice. From 1842 to 1880, the Sisters lived in Vittoriosa, Valletta and Cospicua, but by 1878, with numerous day scholars and twenty three boarders, the need for expansion was felt. Attempts were made to rent additional premises in Cospicua beside and opposite the House, but these arrangements could not last. So the whole year of 1878 was spent in trying to find suitable ground on which to build a new House.

In January 1879 the Sisters took their plans for a new

House in Cathedral Street, Sliema to Bishop Mgr. Scicluna and asked for a loan out of charitable funds. The Bishop was not forthcoming in his support, but Sister Superior Josephine Peyre had faith, once again, in Providence. According to testimonies and records of the time, Mr Caruana was the man Providence made use of to come to the Sisters' help. The Superior General in France delegated Mr Caruana to entreat at Bishop's House on her behalf, after this good gentleman had promised "*Tell me where you would like to make a foundation, what resources you have at your disposal and I shall help you with my experience and use my influence*".

By late 1879 the Sisters set about gathering their resources. Records recount the following: "*We had decided in favour of Sliema. The piano lessons given by Sister Superior and Sister Therese, a fair number of pupils between 1875 and 1879, some surplus profit made on the furniture: all these savings came to three hundred pounds*

sterling... The Mamo ladies had given us twenty pounds sterling profit from a concert given by their nieces to help us, and for this future foundation, should it materialize."

Thanks to these humble resources and Mr Caruana's help, on the 3rd November 1879 the Sisters concluded the purchase of a house and garden in Cathedral Street, Sliema. The contract was signed and all was in order by the 4th December 1879: "*The Cathedral gave us the assurance of financial support in perpetuity, provided that, and as long as the Institute should remain in Malta and continue the work of education. It reduced the rent to half. On 24th March, 1880, we signed the contract concerning this concession, at La Notabile, the ancient capital of Malta.*"

Mr Caruana then hatched a plan to help the Sisters get the loan from the charitable funds and to entreat Mgr Scicluna's support. He made a contract for shares worth ten pounds sterling each. Mr Aphar and Mr Strickland were the first to guarantee ten shares each and undertook to show the contract to their friends. The initial loan was of eight hundred pounds sterling. In less than three days four hundred pounds sterling were guaranteed. But this was still not enough.

The Foundation's records relate the following incident as to how the required amount of money was collected:



In the parlour one evening (the Superior related the incident) Mr Bugeja and Mr Gasan, the parents of three of our Boarders said to me: "Is it true, Mother Superior, that you are anxious to put up a building in Sliema and that you need some security?"

"Yes", I replied, somewhat covered with confusion, for I was no good at begging.

"Well, give us the contract and we shall pass it on down at the Marine. This is where the majority of offices and shops are, belonging to important dealers." Twenty four hours later, these gentlemen came back with it all filled in telling us at the same time that if this sum would not suffice they were ready to guarantee more. This generosity on the part of the merchants touched me deeply. We expressed our gratitude to them, at the same time thanking the good God.

Mr Caruana took a second petition to the Bishop Mgr Scicluna, and this time permission was granted. Mr Spiteri, the Episcopal treasurer, collected the eight hundred pounds sterling; a further loan of four hundred pounds sterling was also collected. These loans were paid back with interest within a few years. The Sisters' House in Tunis also loaned seven thousand francs, which were repaid within eighteen months.

In March 1880, the foundations of St Joseph Convent, Sliema were laid. Mr Caruana and architect Mr Debono, directed and supervised the work, giving their services for



free. Building works were completed just over a year later.

On the 9th June 1881 the blessing of the new house was carried out by Bishop Mgr. Scicluna. The ceremony was attended by several Canons from the Cathedral, families of past and present pupils and numerous friends. All the boarders and day pupils from Cospicua were brought over to Sliema on a steamer, dressed in their white uniform dresses and blue scarves. All the Sisters were congratulated on having succeeded in settling definitively in Malta.

The following August, the Sisters began the move from Cospicua to Sliema. The police station put five or six lorries every day for over a week at the disposal of the Sisters. The admiralty provided pontoons for all the furniture that could not be transported by wagons; the Sisters' records attest to their gratitude for this service which saved them thirty pounds in transport costs.

On Saint Bartholomew's Day, 24th August 1881, the feast of the Apostle and the anniversary of the death of St Emilie de Vialar, the Sisters left Cospicua for good.

Over the past 130 years thousands of pupils from all walks of life have received an education at St Joseph School Sliema. Thanks to the dedication and hard work of numerous Sisters, the original school building has been transformed over the years to provide for modern needs in education. Dormitories have been replaced by laboratories, dining rooms by libraries, blackboards by interactive white-boards. The Chapel, the statue of Our Lady in the central court yard and the little grotto have retained their pride of place and every year processions, the Crowning of Our Lady and St Emilie's feast day are looked forward to by all.

Today, all these are symbols of a rich legacy but the substance of our purpose as lay administrators entrusted with the continuation of the school remains to provide a holistic education inspired by gospel values and the teachings of St Emile, in the knowledge that such gifts come from a loving God who asks us to use them for our good and that of others.

Bibliography

DARBON, E. (1901): 'Emilie de Vialar: SOUVENIRS & DOCUMENTS'