

PASSAGE TO AMERICA

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It strains my memory to recount the events of 1947, some 72 years ago. I know, however, that on January 11, 1947, my mother, Philippa, her youngest daughter, Victoria "Vicky", her second youngest son, Ronald, and myself, Fred, her youngest son, embarked on a journey that was to change the fate of our family of 10 children, two in-laws and four grandchildren forever. My memory evokes not a continuous narrative of events, but rather snippets of events that impressed me as a five-year-old.



Fred, Gzira, Malta, July 1944

Malta in 1946 was still recovering from the devastation of the War. Our family owned a home in Gzira with part of the first floor converted to a small neighborhood grocery store, a boon during wartime when food supplies were almost impossible to obtain. One of those snippets comes to mind. Owing to the food shortage, and despite owning the store, I remember Mom tasking the younger children with harvesting garden snails from the empty field behind our nearby parish church, Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. She would give us empty pots and we would bring them back filled with snails so she could feed the family.

Since we lived within a mile or two of the main targets, the dockyards, our family was constantly heeding the air raid sirens and we seemed to be always running to

the basement of our church. As we little ones slowed down the rest of the family, my mother used to take potato or flour sacks, and the older brothers would put us in them, feet first, and haul us to the air raid shelter at the church to wait out the bombings. The all clear did not come soon enough as the crowded, noisy, smelly shelter was an uncomfortable environment.

As my parents were not happy with this arrangement, my father, Michael, and my older brothers Charlie and Manuel, dug an air raid shelter under the floor of the store which became our shelter for the duration of the War.

Having been born in January of 1941, at the time the Luftwaffe had joined the Italians in the campaign to destroy and occupy Malta, the air raids were incessant. They were more so at the time because the HMS *Illustrious*, a British aircraft carrier, was undergoing repairs at French Creek within a mile and a half of our home.

On January 9 the carrier, as part of Operation Excess, was on convoy duty from Alexandria, Egypt to Malta and when she was northwest of her destination, the Luftwaffe went after her with a vengeance. Forty Junkers bombers and Stukas viciously dive-bombed and wounded the *Illustrious*. That attack was shortly followed by a second attack by even more Ju-88 bombers. Severely damaged, with her steering gear out of commission and with 126 of her crew killed, she managed to limp into the Grand Harbour.

I was born at home during a horrendous air raid on the dockyards. Mom would never forget that day. During the late afternoon on the day of my birth, she was in her bedroom being attended to by a neighbor midwife. Although she was resting upstairs in bed, my father had arranged a cot under the stone staircase below their bedroom in the event she could not get to the shelter. By nightfall, with the sirens blaring, my father herded the family to the nearby air raid shelter. Alone with the midwife, under those stairs in the midst of the air raid, she gave birth. She would recall that the attacks on the dockyards were constant and the explosions loud from the bursting of the 1000 pounders which shook the house. The skies were filled with many Stukas and Junkers bombers that unleashed their lethal payloads on the dockyards of Malta. It was one of the most horrific and frightening days of her life.

As a youngster, I recall about a dozen neighborhood children congregating in front of our store, and a couple of older boys would form us up like a small army. Then

we would parade down Reid Street toward Manoel Island bridge. We marched and sang Maltese songs denouncing Hitler and Mussolini while the two older boys dangled effigies of the two enemies from broomsticks. It was like a scene out of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Once we arrived at the middle of Manoel Bridge, the two boys took out matches and ignited the effigies of the hated Axis leaders. We all cheered as they burned, and when the fire was close to their hands, the boys heaved the burning remains into the water. It was an unforgettable experience for a youngster.

Although I attended Stella Maris College for boys in Gzira, the only memory that comes to mind of school days is playing in the schoolyard rubble where we used to dart between the rocks and mounds of dirt with sticks in hand mimicking a rifle while shooting at an imaginary enemy. Another memory of that period is that we would line up and take some sort of medication (cod-liver oil?) or tablets to ward off illness.

After the War, my mother made one of the most important decisions of her life. Although our family consisted of 10 children, only nine of us went through the bombings in Malta. The oldest son, Joe, in 1939, at the age of 22, embarked on the SS Queen Mary and immigrated to San Francisco. As we had cousins there, he had been corresponding with them quite frequently. They wrote about how great America was and sent him postcards displaying the beauties of the United States.

One in particular, taken of Mt. Tallac in Lake Tahoe, not only created a life-long memory, but inspired him, as an amateur artist, to paint the scene of the alpine mountain. Mt. Tallac is unique because in early summer, when most of the snow has melted, there remains a huge snow-filled crevasse on the side of the mountain which forms a Christian cross laying on its side. These images of the beauty of America hooked him on moving to the States.

In the U.S., he learned to be an upholsterer while working for his cousin, Tom Fenech, who owned a furniture store and whose wife, Jeanne, was my dad's niece. All was going well until the War broke out with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. The following year, although still not a citizen of the U.S., he was drafted into the Army and shipped to the Aleutian Islands.

A young man, who had spent most of his life in the

warmer climes of the Mediterranean, had been sent to the desolate, cold, windy and wet Arctic Aleutians. One day while on patrol there, Joe found himself in a blinding snow storm and blacked out from the cold. He was found lying unconscious in the snow, rescued and taken back to the base by native Aleuts. Shipped back to California for medical treatment, he was in a coma for quite a few months.

In October of 1946, while Joe was still in hospital recuperating and undergoing therapy, Mom had undergone enough worrying and heartache and told Dad of her plans to go visit him in the States. She would take the three youngest children with her while the rest of the family would continue running the store till her return. That's what she said. But that would change once she experienced life in the States.

That day of departure in January 1947 was a sad day for my father and the remaining four daughters and two brothers. My sister Jane recalls weeping incessantly and kept asking why Mom was not taking her to America. Mom replied that her father needed Jane to help the older sisters assist Dad with all the chores that would be required.



Citta di Tunis

We boarded the Italian ferry Citta di Tunis at Valletta on that cold, breezy, winter evening and settled down for the first leg of our trip, the sea voyage to Toulon, France. As the lights of Valletta disappeared on the horizon, Mom explained to my brother and sister that they had to help her keep an eye on me. And they did until by morning the effects of the choppy sea and the undulation of the ship got to my brother. He was so

seasick he could no longer keep me company.

Of course, I got bored as I had no one to play with. I did not get seasick and, in fact, I actually enjoyed riding through the swells, so much so that I wandered to the main deck of the ship to see the action outside. I don't know how I slipped my Mother's watchful eye, but I did.

Once there, I looked around and could see the cargo on the deck and even a couple of trucks lashed down. I meandered to the forecastle enjoying the motion of the rising and fall of the ship and noticed an oval opening in the starboard bow. It was a couple feet high and a couple feet wide. Although I did not know it at the time, I had discovered the hawsehole (in the Navy, we knew it as the hawsepipe) the hole through which the anchor chain passes as it is released and falls into the sea. A perfect spot to enjoy riding the swells for a boy, a couple weeks short of his sixth birthday.

I made my way there, then I laid prone on the cold deck and stuck my head and chest out the hole. And I had the ride of a lifetime. As the bow cut through the waves, my jutting head would go down towards the foaming sea. My small head seemed to be kissing the waves, then the ship would rise up again. The cold, misty ocean spray jolted me at first but the thrill of the ride overcame the cold spray.

I don't know how long I "rode the waves" as I was oblivious to anything but enjoying the moment. Up and down. Up and down. The fun and enjoyment were abruptly interrupted by a deck hand pulling my prone body out of the hawsepipe.

Although he tried to put on a stern face, I could see a slight smile on it. He was glad to have found me, but probably thought, "what kids will do". He took me by the hand and escorted me back to the main cabin. A crowd of passengers and crewmen were gathered around my mother and siblings. Apparently, the ship had gone to "general quarters" in the search for me. Heads were shaking, there were dour faces and smiles of relief and astonishment. Although I don't remember being scolded for my escapade, I imagine I received plenty of admonishment and an ear full from my mother along with some slaps to my backside. I do remember that the deck hand who found me came by later, and he presented me with a dozen metal soldier toys in various battle poses. I suppose he did that with the hope that I would play with them and not go wandering off again.

As we approached the port of Toulon a day or so later, many passengers were leaning over the rails to view the spectacle that was unfolding before us. All the strange shapes that they had seen from a distance jutting out of the water were now identifiable. Everywhere in the harbor were masts of sunken ships. Smoke stacks aimed like missiles at the sky. Half-submerged huge battleships with some of their almost visible naval guns being lapped by the sea. Debris littered the harbor. I never forgot this astonishing and memorable sight of massive destruction.

Two or three tugs nestled up to the *Citta di Tunis* and gingerly herded the ferry into the port.

The port of Toulon by the 1940s was France's most important naval base and home to the majority of her fleet. In November of 1942, it was under the control of the Vichy government. Germany feared that the French fleet would either fall to the Allies, or that the French ship captains would defect to the Allies, so they decided to invade the port to control the fleet. The Vichy government, however, ordered the French captains to scuttle and destroy the fleet to thwart the Germans. They consequently scuttled 77 vessels which included three battleships, two cruisers, and many destroyers, submarines, torpedo and patrol boats, various auxiliaries and tugs. Most of these submerged hulks remained in the harbor and were still being removed when we sailed into Toulon.

From Toulon we traveled by train for over 700 miles to Cherbourg, the port on the northwestern coast of France. Although the trip went through Paris, the one thing I recall on this leg of the voyage was that somewhere near one of the train stations, there was a huge locomotive that was de-railed. Laying there like a stranded whale dying on a beach.

The port of Cherbourg was reminiscent of Toulon as it too was littered with sunken vessels and obstacles. Besides these obstructions, the port area was congested with jeeps, trucks, heavy equipment and various war materiel that was being returned to the U.S. My brother Ron remembers that, when we were exploring around the port, he uncovered a bag full of coins. We ran excitedly to Mom to show off our find. She identified the booty as American coins and told us she would hold on to them so when we got to America, we could use them to buy candy.

The ferry trip from Cherbourg to Portsmouth, England lasted a few hours and was uneventful as was the 75-mile train trip from Portsmouth to London. We spent the night in London and the next day we headed to the airport to board our flight to the States.

This was the era of the beginning of mass migration by air from Europe. Airlines were few and commercial airplanes were still in their infancy.

In 1946 there were only 16 commercial flights to the U.S. with some Maltese passengers. Our flight was the second in 1947 carrying Maltese emigrants. But a minuscule amount compared to those arriving by ship. The reasons were twofold. The cost was expensive, and probably more of a factor was the fear of flying.

The aircraft we flew in was originally a C-69 military transport, a four-engine aircraft designed and built by Howard Hughes. With the end of the War, the U.S. government cancelled the Hughes contract, so he converted the C-69s to commercial airliners, changed the designation to L0-49 Constellation and sold them to the airlines. One buyer was American Export Lines, the passenger ship company. Congress disapproved the sale as they believed the shipping line would have a monopoly on the passenger traffic between the U.S. and Europe. So American Export Lines created a subsidiary called American Overseas Airlines which eventually became American Airlines. The company called their airliners "Flagships" and named them after cities or countries. Coincidentally, the Constellation we flew in was called *Flagship America*.



L0-49 Constellation *Flagship America*

What I recall about the flight was that we boarded the "Connie" in the afternoon. My mother set me down in a

window seat over the front of the port wing; she took the aisle seat and put Ron and Vicky in the two seats behind ours. Although I was elated and excited to be on the plane, I must have been worn out from all the excitement as I slept shortly after take-off. I don't remember flying during daylight. What I will never forget, however, is the noise of the four Wright R3350 engines. Nor, will I forget, as I gazed out the window into the dark, cold, winter night over the Atlantic, the even more memorable sight of the exhaust flames shooting out the manifolds from behind the whirling propellers. Awesome.

Upon landing at Laguardia airport in New York in the early hours of January 18th, there was snow falling as we taxied towards the wooden, two-story terminal. Needless to say, I had no idea what was falling from the sky. It was strange, white, powdery and beautiful and was settling on the wing. The other 10 Maltese on our flight were probably just as mystified.

As we made our way off the Connie, we must have been the last four passengers as Mom was struggling with the bags, and corralling her three children. A uniformed crew member and a stewardess came to her aid. The man lifted me up and carried me into the terminal, the stewardess escorted my mother, another crew member took my brother and sister by the hand and led them into the warm terminal. My first impression of Americans was a joyful one of thoughtful, caring people going out of their way to be helpful. That impression has lasted a lifetime as Americans are still one of the most generous people on the planet.

I think my Mom breathe a sigh of relief once in the warm terminal. We were finally in America. The country where so many Maltese aspired to immigrate and one that held out so much hope, so many freedoms and so much bounty. The country that had played such a pivotal role in the battle of Malta. From the USS *Wasp* transporting Spitfires to the Island, to the American tanker SS *Ohio* delivering its precious fuel which prevented Malta from capitulating to the Axis.

Our long train trip from New York to California must have been beautiful at that time of the year. Don't remember much about that trip, but I do remember the train station in Chicago. The station was a scene of pandemonium. People were rushing around to catch trains or meet someone and the noise was almost

unbearable as it echoed through the station.

Through all that chaos there was an elderly Chinese fellow getting some shut eye. He was sprawled across a bench. His legs were spread, his body slouched, and his hat covered his eyes.

Remember that bag of coins we found in Cherbourg? Well, we did buy that candy. My brother and I were eating some of it, and had accumulated a hand full of empty wrappers. When I was done eating the candy, I approached the sleeping man from behind the bench and carefully deposited the handful of candy wrappers on his tilted hat. I then exited the scene and joined my brother who couldn't help but laugh at what I had done.

We waited and watched. After some time, the man awoke and began to stir. All the candy wrappers rained down on his lap but as he was half asleep, he had no clue as to what had happened. He looked around for a perpetrator, then shook his head, fixed his hat and walked away.

My brother and I were still laughing when my mother returned from taking my sister to the bathroom. I'm not sure if my mother found out what I had done as I don't recall any consequences for my mischievous behavior. Had she seen what I had done, she probably would have shaken her head and tried to hide a laugh.

When the train finally pulled in to Oakland, California, I imagine Mom felt like a huge weight had been lifted off her shoulders. The passage was nearing the end. One last ferry boat board and then sail across San Francisco bay. She took in the magnificence of the San Francisco skyline, the Bay Bridge and finally the Ferry building, with huge letters emblazoned across it announcing "Port of San Francisco". We were met by our cousins and my brother, Joe. It was a typical Maltese welcoming - loud, joyful crying, hugging, and quite boisterous. My mother would not stop hugging and kissing her oldest son. It had been so many years. So much worry and anguish.

Though my mother had told Dad and the family that she would return to Malta, it did not take her long to fall in love with America and change her plans. She began making arrangements for bringing the entire family to her new homeland. Within a year and a half, Dad, my

sisters Pauline, Stella and Jane, along with my brothers Manuel and Charlie and his wife Maggie all sailed on the Polish ship *SS Sobieski* to New York. They then made their way to San Francisco. An interesting sideline to that trip was the fact that when the Polish ship was off New York in U.S. territorial waters, Charlie's wife, Maggie, gave birth to their son, Austin. As he was born on a Polish ship, of Maltese parents, in U.S. territorial waters, he was entitled to citizenship from three different countries.

Since the remaining oldest sister, Mary, was married with three children, she remained in Malta and finally joined the rest of the family in 1950. My Mom's dream had finally been realized as she had united the entire family in America.

As I reflect on that passage to America, I am still grateful, amazed and in wonderment of my mother's adventure. At the ripe age of a month shy of 50, with a fourth grade education, and a rudimentary knowledge of English, bravely and without trepidation, for the first time in her life, took three of her youngest children in hand, and set off for the new world and temporarily left the rest of her family.

Traveling thousands of miles, she boarded ocean ferries, rode multiple trains, and even took a flight on a fledgling airline on an almost new airplane to reunite with her oldest son and to better the lives of all her family.

Further, editing on the past, I am astonished that my father at the age of 58, when most are looking towards retirement, without an education, unable to speak English, nor able to read or write, having never driven an automobile, for the love of his wife and family, uprooted his life. He followed the love of his life and joined her in a strange foreign country. That takes fortitude, faith and love.

For their sacrifices I will always be indebted and grateful. And I wonder what life would have been like to have remained in Malta. Many years have passed since their death. The family has grown and prospered by leaps and bounds all owing to those two courageous immigrants. Thanks, Mom & Dad.