

A PASSAGE THROUGH TIME

When the Caruana brothers undertook the restoration of the only surviving *dghajsa tal-latini*, they were not only preserving a vital fragment of their island's history, but also the memory of their father. By **Sandra Aquilina**



Giovanni N Zammit

Hidden away in the maze of boats that lie close to Mgarr harbour, where the fishermen come in and the Gozo ferries enter and leave the harbour, you might chance to come across a large nondescript wooden boat, watching peacefully as life flows by around it. This is the only surviving *dghajsa tal-latini*, a forerunner of the Gozo Channel ferries: for about a century, providing a vital link between Malta and Gozo; now, a reminder of an era which is gradually becoming just another memory.

"Now it's almost ready," says Peter Caruana, running his hand gently on the boat's enormous hull. "Only the paint is left." At 69 years, Peter is the eldest of the Caruana brothers, whose father Guzeppi and uncle Ewgenju were the boat's original builders. Together with his brothers, for the past few years, Peter has undertaken the daunting task of the boat's restoration, after this was bought by Gozo Channel on the initiative of the

then chairman Mr John Sullivan and entrusted to the Caruana brothers by Wirt Ghawdex, the Gozitan heritage organisation.

"The boat had been lying abandoned in the dock for almost three decades," says Peter who, together with his brothers, is the fourth in a generation of boatmakers. Together with Peter's brother Guzeppi, Giovanni Zammit and Stephanie Coppini from Wirt Ghawdex, we are chatting inside the brothers' large garage in Mgarr; in the middle stands a huge boat which one of the other brothers is working on, while the walls are cluttered with tools and pieces of wooden boat models. The sea's faint murmur can just be heard. "It was a wreck," says Peter, "and most people round here told us that we would never make it."

Originally built in 1933 over a stretch of 11 months, the boat – the *Sacra Famiglia* – was commissioned by three

Ghajnsielem cargo handlers, Vitor Bajada, Pawlu Scicluna and Guzeppi Galea for Lm450. Its registration number was G32, although originally it seems to have been registered as G2. When completed, it weighed 25 tonnes, was 47 feet long, 14 at the beam and a hold of 5.5 feet. It could carry 32 tonnes of cargo.

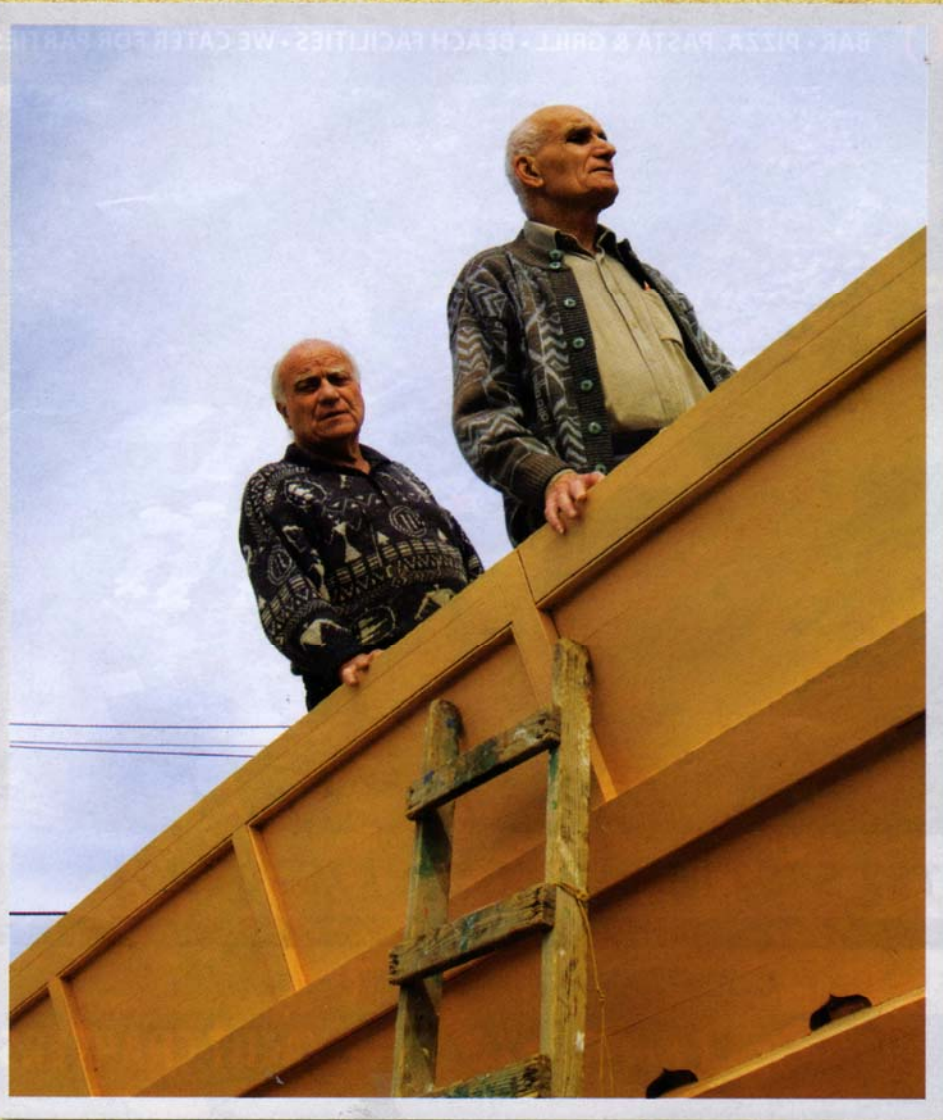
For the first few years it was used to transport merchandise between the two islands, explains Peter, from cheese to cement, from lamp poles to herds of animals – even bricks. Then, during the war, it was sent to Alexandria, as a supply boat with the warships. There, another *tal-latini* boat was sunk, but the *Sacra Famiglia* survived and returned to Gozo to serve as a link between the islands for several more years.

Eventually, it changed hands and, in 1975, the *Sacra Famiglia* sailed its last, its owners having invested in a motor vessel which could meet their needs better. Three years earlier, it had crashed into Comino during one of its crossings, sunk and brought up again. Finally, it was docked at Mgarr, where it lay for many years until it was finally bought by an entrepreneur who in turn sold it to Gozo Channel.

"When no one else dared to venture out, you would see the *Sacra Famiglia* at sea," says Peter. "Its owner did not like to leave it idle, because produce had to be delivered as fresh as possible, so it gained the reputation of working under all weather conditions."

If its sails were open, the crew had to be very proficient to navigate it, says Peter. The trip from Mgarr to the Grand Harbour in Valletta took around two hours, he says, and the boat required a crew of about eight to man it.

"I remember at least seven *tal-latini*



boats crossing the Channel,” says Peter’s brother Guzeppi, “but, in its heyday, there used to be many more. People used to watch them come in and called them ‘birds of the sea’. They were very beautiful to look at.”

Originally from Kalkara, the Caruana family moved to Gozo during the war, after their house was demolished by bombs. “I was the only one to be born in Malta,” says Peter, “all my brothers were born here in Gozo.”

The restoration work was extensive and entailed the scraping of the entire boat, the changing of some of the frames and some of the planking. Only wood is used in its construction, different types for the various uses, depending on the parts of the boat. “At least half of it is now new,” says Peter. Few boatbuilders retain a knowledge of the construction of the *tal-latini* boats, he says, and the Caruana family’s children have now moved away

from the boatbuilding trade. Wooden boats are dying out, he says, being replaced by fibreglass which is more economical and much easier to maintain.

For the Caruana brothers, now ageing slowly themselves, the boat is not just a memory of the past – but also of their father. “We only did it because it was our father’s boat,” says Peter. “And because everybody used to talk about the Gozo boat... now at least we have one.”

When the restoration process is complete, the *Sacra Famiglia* will be displayed in Zewwieqa, Mgarr, and will be clearly visible when the ferry comes in, says Giovanni from Wirt Ghawdex. Currently works are underway for the setting up of a stand and tent, sponsored by the Gozo ministry, he says. There it will stand, watching quietly as the ferries enter and leave the harbour, a reminder of the passing of an age – but also a sons’ tribute to the memory of their father. ☐

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