

My mother and I flew to Malta in the autumn of 1951, to join my father during his Royal Naval posting there. I had just turned five and this meant enrolment in the island naval school, a move which would place me among others of my age and some of older years. This was my first ever introduction to school life and my start at the Verdala school involved a bus ride of a few miles across the island, from our Birzebbugia apartment. A parapet surrounded the inner flat grounds and a large entrance was cut out at one end, under which our bus would pass, to deposit us inside.

Of great interest to me was a large climbing net I spied and my urge to conquer it remained just that, for it was always populated by older children. I also recall being in a 'band,' banging a tambourine, while other pupils hit triangles, or drums, making a truly awful noise. Writing was done in the form of large, individually pencilled letters, on a grid of horizontal lines, to ensure that a cross, or dot, appeared at the correct height, as did the middle of a 'w.'

At Christmas time we sang about a soldier and his beloved sweetheart doll, cruelly parted. This ditty upset me, which is probably why I still remember the lyrics, in part, after more than sixty years: "Oh, the handsome wooden soldier," it began, telling how in the toy maker's shop the man, resplendent in his uniform, loved the doll on the shelf beside him. When the festive season approached they were separated, to be sent to different homes as gifts. "As she said goodbye, it made him cry and it nearly broke his heart." That was the line which gave me some difficulty. However, all was not lost, as they were later reunited, fortune having dictated that they be sent to the same house. I'm not sure of the word "He" in the final verse, as it sounds like some Divine intervention, which, I suppose, wouldn't matter: "Now he's put them both together, they're as happy as can be, as he kissed his bride, they're side by side, on top of the Christmas tree."

If that story were not traumatic enough for five year olds, my daughter's much later rendition, in England, of a different version, had the poor guardsman falling off the tree and into the nearby coal fire. More entertaining in my Verdala school days was the ditty "I'm a little teapot, short and stout." With one hand on hip and the other curved outwards, swan neck style, the line could be delivered, "Here's my handle, here's my spout." The approaching climax declared, "When I get the steam up, hear me shout," followed by leaning over to the side with a triumphant, "Tip me up and pour me out!"

Food and drink presented me with greater problems; I was not just a fussy eater, I adhered to a strict diet, being one sourcing only 'Mummy's cooking'. This reluctant diner was always last in the school canteen to finish, mainly as he had not made a proper start. A young girl tried to cheer me up by reciting, "Last is first and first is last," although that made no sense, despite her good intentions. The burnt sausage and lumpy potato meals were more endured than enjoyed and I have borne a lifelong hatred of butter beans, after my retch inducing introduction to them in that Maltese dining hall. The pungent smell of the room has also stayed with me as an olfactory memory.

The deciding moment came when I set eyes on a chilling, unidentifiable dessert - which I now assume to have been figs or prunes - whereupon I could face the school's canteen fare no longer. To my rescue came my maternal saviour, preparing packed sandwiches for me and a bottle of squash, the latter of which I drank happily during the hot bus journey to school. At lunchtime I would envy others downing their drinks under the strong sun, asking if I might share some, mine having long since been imprudently

consumed. The responses were always negative and I suppose I had to learn the hard way in the end as to making my provisions last.

Apart from writing tuition, lessons also involved licking the backs of coloured pieces of shiny paper we had cut out with small scissors. By sticking them on notebook pages, patterns could be made, or paper chains could be fashioned from gummed strips. I discovered to my surprise that if I did some yellow crayoning and overlaid some blue, or vice versa, I could create the colour green. At other times we modelled with Plasticine of various hues and my teacher showed me how to make wheels for the little car I had shaped. By rolling small balls of the modelling clay and squeezing them between finger and thumb, flat discs were magically produced. My class neighbour had a pleasing small ruler, a pencil case and turquoise crayon, all of which I coveted. That evening I showed my mother the items I had purloined from the adjacent desk. Somehow I thought she would be pleased with me and my enterprising efforts to secure implements at no cost. Instead, she berated me and I was ordered to return the objects next morning, which I did.

I still possess a pair of Verdala school autumn term reports from 1951 and 1952. In the first, I am noted as being five years and two months of age. Along with thirty seven other children in my class, Form 8, I was being marked academically: my reading and word building were “Good,” writing “Quite good, has tried,” and number work was “Good, especially orally.” My recitation was fine, drawing and handwork likewise and I was noted as making a good use of colour. I was summarised as working well and likely to achieve good progress. Final words were added, “Has settled down happily. Behaviour good.”

In the next year I would be in Class 4, with 39 other pupils. My reading and word building had improved to “Very good,” but my writing was “Too big and black.” Number work was also “Very good,” with the addition, “Progress has been startling.” Drawing was again “Very good.” Class teacher Cathleen Roper finalised my report with, “Roger has done very good work and has made rapid progress, but is still rather slow in setting down his work. Behaviour is fairly good.” Ah, the nascent rebel streak was already building inside me.

Recently I have found some crayon drawings I did at school, aged five. My mother has written neatly on them what they depicted and I surmise that she felt them to be important enough to merit saving. I have also come across a postcard from the same time, sent by my father to her from his ship, which at the time had docked in a Middle Eastern port. On it he calls me “Sonny” and looks forward “to being back ashore soon”.

One aspect of schooling I favoured was the natty summer uniform. My classroom clothing comprised a pith ‘safari’ helmet, or ‘topee,’ light khaki shorts and matching shirt. I felt like I was headed for the jungle each day and I adored the headgear, with its green interior lining. The outfit was discarded for the lengthy sun-drenched holiday break, the heat being too much for school attendance, a time of roaming freely among local back streets and visiting the various beaches. We left Malta early in 1953, but I still have my Verdala ‘winter’ blazer badge, with its Maltese Cross emblazoned on it.

Roger Langley, autumn 2014



1. My summer uniform
2. My winter uniform, with Maltese Cross badge
3. My parents and me at some Malta spot, with hired car
4. Our downstairs apartment - "Happy House", Birzebbugia