

Maltese Carnival - Karnival Malti

by Doris Fenech

Originally, Catholics were not permitted to eat meat during the 40 days of Lent. A festive night was inserted before the first day of lent and was called Carnival from the Latin ("carne levare"), which means the putting away of meat because of Lent.

Maltese Carnival day ("jum ir-Rfugh"), or Karnival is back dated to the year 1400c. It was a tradition to hold a merriment celebration the day before Lenten days - masked festival, banter and costumed reveille. Many people did not appreciate this brawl event.

In 1535 Carnival was boosted by Gran Master Piero De Ponte. Three days of enthusiastic festivities were introduced - masked balls and extravagant parties. They were also known as Carnival mad days ("Rfugh, jiem dak iblah, bluh iz-zghir"), or three days of Carnival ("tlitt ijiem tal-Karnival").

The main celebrations took place in Valletta. The nobility people adorned with masks, wigs and beautiful gowns for the big fancy balls.

Village youngsters dressed up in Carnival costumes ("kostumi tal-Karnival"), made of - sacks, sheets, masks, and colourful clothes. They spontaneously festive along the streets playing turbulent music with old discorded instruments.

Around 1752 the Carnival was extended to five days. The first Carnival defile was held in Floriana. It involved masks and carriages ("karrozzelli"), defiles. The Carnival was led by the Grand Master's carriage ("karrozzella"), accompanied by the cavalry parading to the beat of the drums.

By time Carnival popularity was increased and more people participated in the event. Grotesque paper mache figures and colourful depicting floats preceded by the King Carnival ("Re tal-Karnival"), defiled through the streets of Valletta and Floriana.

Carnival dancers ("komittiva"), revelled on their huge mechanical floats and gracefully throw candied almonds ("*perlini tal-lewza*"), to the enthusiast crowd. Many people eagerly waited for the decorated carriages ("karrozzini"), with custom dressed commuters all out to amuse the spectators.

Children were squeezed along the streets to watch the bands parade in the grotesque masks and with the masquerades cheerfully dancing along.

Valletta cafe shops proudly displayed the *prinjolata* in their windows. A big white dome of sponge cake, pine nuts, almonds, and coated with meringue, chocolate and cherries. The pitchman used to be very busy selling cheese cakes and *prinjolata* by weight.

A group of farmers from Pwales and other hamlets ("irħajjen"), used to come to Mellieha with their traditional instruments - whistle flute ("flejguta"), single reed pipe ("iz-zummar"), organ ("farfisa"), framed drum ("it-tambur"), friction drum ("iz-zafzafa"), or ("ir-rabbaba"), and Maltese bagpipe ("iz-zaqq"), and roamed around the streets playing folklore songs and melodies

to entertain the crowd.

Various village people lay aside their excessive timidity and dressed up in Carnival costumes ("kostumi tal-Karnival"), masks and throw themselves dancing or chaff along with others.

Shrove Tuesday, Fat Tuesday and Madri Gras are different names know for the last day of carnival. The Carnival merry-makers gather together in the Village square shoving around a man made of straw and old clothes ("Majsi"), and call out -

IL-Maskarat

"maskarat tini perlina

ghax warajk għandek xadina

minflok waħda tini tnejn

ghax tiddobba xi daqqtejn"

IL-Karnival

Għax illum il-Karnival

Għax il festa tax-xitan

Ix-xitan irid ikanta

Għandu denbu daqs ta' randa

The throng joyful waited for time when Majsi was placed on top of a huge bonfire and lit to be burn as a sign of Carnival celebrations came to an end.

Maltese Proverbs - Qwiel Maltin

F'Hadd il-Bluh (Karnival) ix-xita tibd tuħ.