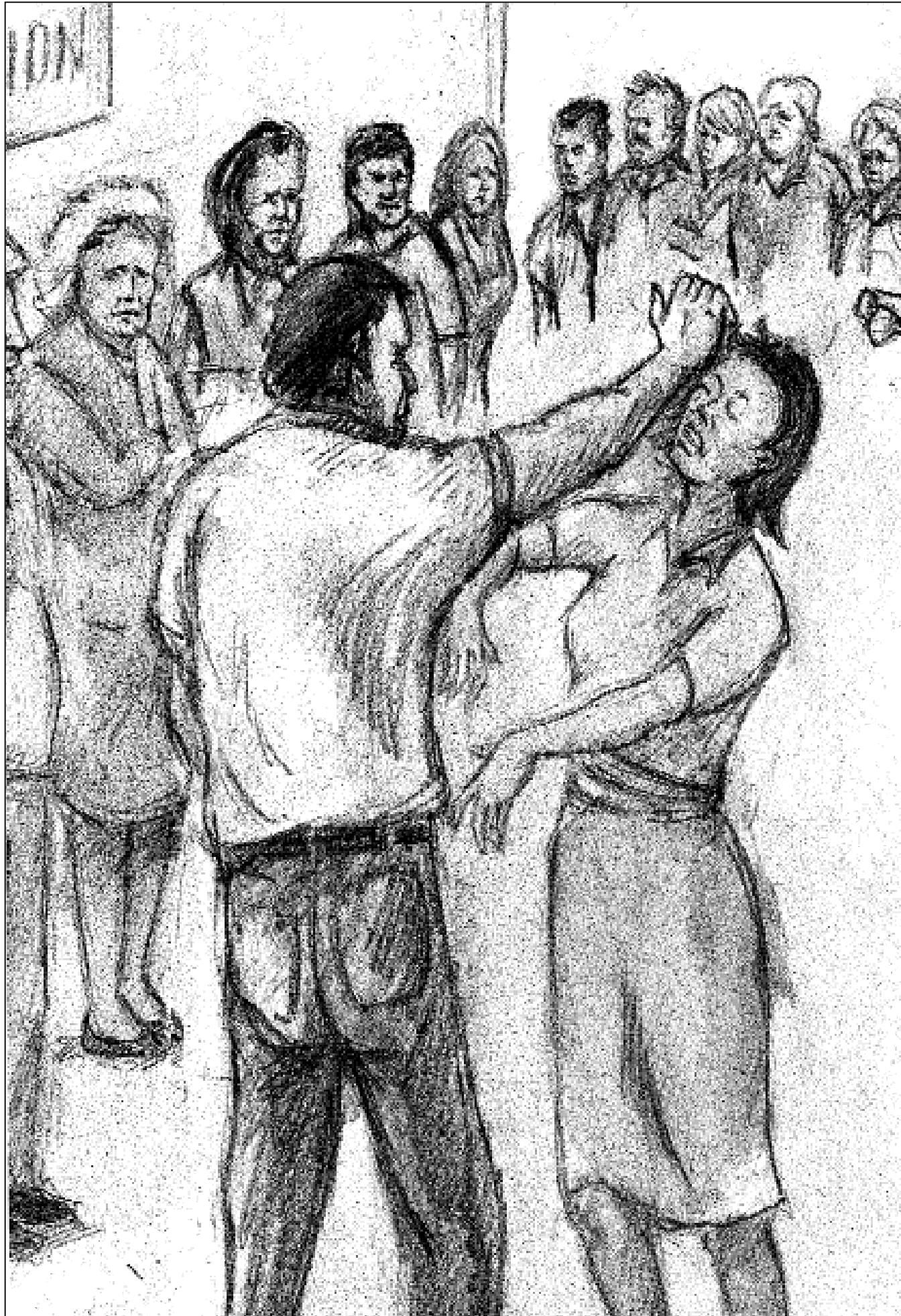


One of Malta's darkest hours



The violence Zejtun had witnessed so far was by no means over yet. On the 9 May, 1987 - polling day, Zejtun was once again the

site of physical violence and terror as desperate Labour thugs and supporters tried, in a last ditch bid, to sway the outcome of the general

elections by beating up and terrorising the people who had to use the polling booths of the locality into voting for Labour, or not at all.

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People who were queuing up, waiting for their turn to vote were beaten up and bullied by the thugs. The official of the electoral commission did not report any unusual activity, because whenever they turned up to check, all illegal activity ground to a standstill. This was accomplished by the simple expedient of somebody giving the thugs prior warning, just before the officials showed up.

Antonella Cutajar was accosted by a large group of men who threatened her and her daughter with violence if she went in to vote. When she did actually attempt to enter to vote, she was struck on the face and the voting document was snatched out of her hand. However, she managed to snatch back the document.

Andre' Cutajar's voting document was snatched from his hand by Ganni Psaila (Il-Pupa), a Labour hoodlum, later to become a Nationalist hero. Cutajar gave chase but Psaila entered the polling booth. Cutajar was kicked and told to leave immediately

John Busuttill, an assistant commissioner said that while he was manning a polling booth in the primary school at Zejtun, around ten people barged into the room, pushed him into a corner and roughed him up. He was hit in the face and someone made as if to strangle him by tightening his tie against his throat.

Charles Cumbo was hit in the face and his glasses were sent flying. Another victim and his wife found themselves in a room full of men who began to scream for everybody to get out of the polling booth, or they would be kicked out. On the way out they caught sight of the examiner Wistin Abela. When they turned to him for help, one of the thugs pulled Abela away from them, supposedly to talk to him. The minute the parliamentarian was pulled away, the victim and his wife received a volley of kicks.

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Carmen Baldacchino was waiting in line to vote when she was attacked by one of four people who entered the polling booth. She was struck in the face by Michael Spiteri and her glasses were sent spinning. When she stooped to retrieve them, Spiteri crushed the spectacles under his shoe.

Antonia Schembri and her husband were intercepted by Edwin Bartolo (*Il-Qahbu*) who told her husband to vote for labour. In the tussle of the thronging Labourites she was separated from her husband. Bartolo now a Dom Mintoff henchman and supporter of *Front Inqumu Malta* told her to leave the polling booth as there was no way she was going to be allowed to vote. A policeman simply reiterated what Bartolo had told her. She saw her son being beaten up and tried to stop the thugs, but it was only after her son managed to escape that they managed to make their way home. That evening when they made another attempt to go and vote, her son was set upon by again by Edwin Bartolo and a group of thugs. When they

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beseached Wistin Abela for help he escorted them out of the polling booth.

One assistant commissioner recounted how he had been terrorised by a group of men who had entered the booth when preparations to receive voters were under way. When they were asked to make less noise, on account of the Socialist hymns that they were chanting, one of the thugs pushed the commissioner hard. Some of them remained outside the room and kept looking into the room, in order to scare the official. At another polling booth unauthorised people were present. In spite of the fact that they were evicted, some of them trailed back inside and heckled and annoyed a couple who had come to vote because they were very suspicious of how the couple was going to vote. They forced the man to show them how he had voted but he tore up his vote. He was given a second document and this time he showed the hoodlums that he had in fact voted labour.

An old man was brought to vote, but he was so annoyed at the interference he was getting that he walked out in disgust, without carrying out the civic duty he had originally come to perform.

Many other voters and assistant voting commissioners came face to face with naked aggression that fateful day.

On the 19 June, that year fifteen men were arraigned in court, charged with corrupt practices as well as other charges which they had committed on polling day. The case was due to be heard in front of magistrate Dr Michael Mallia. However a horde of Labour thugs who had come to lend support to their friends burst into the courts and wrecked havoc.

Eight of the magistrates halls on the ground floor were badly damaged.

Offices were also damaged and one of them was actually set on fire. Documents were sent flying all over the place and some of them were taken to the street outside and set on fire.

Because of the chaos, Magistrate Mallia had no option but to postpone the hearing to a feature date.

Those who actually broke into the courts were a small representation of the hundreds who had entered Valetta. The courts were breached when a small crowd managed to open a side door. In turn these opened the main doors. Outside the courts the crowd broke through the police barricade and destroyed some police vehicles. Shields were snatched out of the hands of the police, who offered little or no resistance.

While this was happening Mr Karmenu Vella and Mr Lorry Sant were in the court building. At one point a fire broke out in the building. It transpired that the fire was in the office of Dr Mallia. Plaques and busts had been damaged.

Whenever one of the thugs emerged to throw out documents the crowds outside the courthouse cheered and clapped. As these documents were set on fire, the police did not do anything to stop them. Among the casualties of this fiasco were the documents relating to the Egypt Air hijack and a Maltese flag.

The violence of the crowd spread, and a number of shop windows were smashed up. The contents of some of the shop windows were plundered. Some of the shops to be damaged were Wembley Stores, Tip Top and Square Deal. Some of the mob tried to set a couple of shops on fire.

Next week's Special Report continues to examine this dark episode in Malta's history