

M A L T E S E   S P I N N I N G   T O Y S

by

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Children of the eighties and nineties born in an electronic world have become adept in the use of toys of a totally different nature from those we used to have before the last World War. But the basic need of having a toy has always been the same, and will continue to exist so long as children remain human beings. Children's need to play is part of their natural development, and gains them experiences in the manipulation of different shapes and materials with different properties, besides perfecting skills. It is well known that toys fall into several categories, but they could be grouped into main classes, as toys which are creative, competitive and passive. The latter class require the child's imagination during play.

In this short essay I wish to discuss the Maltese spinning toys, which are basically the various types of tops. Tops are toys involving activity, therefore cannot be classified with the passive or creative, but they belong to the competitive toys which, although quite suitable for individual enjoyment, lend themselves more satisfactory if involved in competitive skills. Tops have therefore also become the playthings of grown-ups of all ages, both for competitive purposes or merely for self satisfaction.

The Common versatile Top

The Maltese use the term *zugraga* for the top, and the simplest known is the usual bulb-shaped wooden top which is spun by strongly pulling away the string which would have been wound around its grooved sides, and spins on its pointed side, which, in Maltese is called *pern*. This point was made of a metal screw or nail adjusted and smoothed to fit the top's end. The cord or string used for winding on the top is locally known as *vlontin*. This should be quite long, and preferably of cotton twine which grips better. This simple spinning top could be of various sizes, from about three to four inches or more (c 7-11cm).

One must here stress that pre-war toys had to be made locally. It is true that quite a large number of foreign toys were imported, many of them elaborate and mechanical, but not everyone could afford to buy them as poverty was widespread, and normal budgets quite strained. Although some wooden tops were imported, most of the others were made locally on the carpenter's lathe, and one top, therefore, was not necessarily identical to another.

The Skills

On a competitive basis, playing with tops required certain skills, and there were several games or tricks one could practice. The first is to learn to wind the string and to pull it correctly. But the second was to pick up the top on the palm of the hand while it was spinning, and it went on spinning for some time, the latter gaining points in competitions. The third, and more difficult and daring skill, is to spin the top in the air at



eye level, pulling the string in such a way that the top is first thrown away, but drawn back towards you before the string runs out, and the top caught in the air, on the palm of the hand. This skill, and for that matter also all other games with spinning tops, must always be exercised out in an open space, as otherwise accidents on furniture and spectators may happen!

You don't see anyone playing with tops nowadays, probably they are no longer in fashion. Before the war the yo-yo was quite fashionable, and you could see young men fooling around with them to impress the ladies, but they were also used during carnival to add to the fun; it was also a spinning toy, with its own skills to learn, but did not have the challenges of the top. I met a man of 71, this year, Joseph Apap, of Marsaskala, and he brought out his old spinning top and showed me that he still retained much of his pre-war skills by not only picking up on his hand the spinning top from the ground, but also from the air! He also showed me another game he used to play. It is called *Tad-Dawra*, which means "of the circle", but really played for coins. One of the two or three contestants drew a circle on the dusty road by using the string as a radius, pressed at a centre by someone else, and drawing a circle by means of a coin pinched at the end of the string; the circle was about a meter diameter. A smaller circle of about seven or eight inches diameter was drawn in the centre, and in this were placed coins by the contestants. The thing was that you had to throw the top on to the centre circle. When released the spinning top starts kicking away pennies (or halfpennies) out of the circle, and these are won by the spinner. The way the top is released into the inner circle from above, is called *bil-maghmul*, which means that the movement for the throw is similar to the directional gesture made by witches or wizards, when they relay a spell on some object.

### The Humming Top

Humming tops in various sizes have been imported for quite some time, and have given pleasure to thousands of children; they were made of tin and had a screw mechanism to build up the rotation, which caused the humming. However, as I stated before, our forefathers made their own tops, and they also contrived to produce a humming top made of wood. This was not necessarily of the same calibre as the large, metal ones, and the hum was not so clear, but it was quite entertaining. This wooden humming top was called *zugraga ta' bil-lejl*, which means "top of the night". The reason why it was given this name is that in order to hear it hum, all should be as quiet as night; (the nights of today are not the quiet ones we knew in the past!).

This humming top was not used for competitive purposes, but the skills were of a different nature from those required in the simple top. It had to be made from hard wood, and in such a shape, size and thickness of walls as to produce a hum. One had also to learn how to spin it as strongly as possible.

This humming top is quite large, the "bulb" being from three to four inches diameter, or more, and about four inches high, with a three inch rod rising on top. The latter rod is used for

