

# A Tribute to Mario Tabone (1938-2022)

JOSEPH MIZZI

Humble, kind, witty, intelligent, fair, well-read ... all describe the person that Mario Tabone was. But since the dreaded news of his passing away in the early hours of 20 August, and with the outpour of eulogies, his persona seems to be even bigger than that.

My first recollection of the person is of a young ten-year old boy. My father, Pawlu, realised that my eye sight had deteriorated and that I needed some 'help'. His obvious choice was a Gozitan ophthalmologist who saw his patients at a clinic in a Floriana dispensary. I distinctly remember that the 'eye-doctor' was more than a doctor. Although I cannot remember the conversation, it was obvious that the two were good friends and the conversation was definitely not about my eye sight. However

when it came to me, his menacing boxes of black-framed lenses was in contrast with his gentile way of handling a frightened young patient. The glasses that I needed were not something that would 'uglify my face' but a 'new way at looking at the world'. And so it was ...

Mario and my father knew each other well. My mother recalls that their friendship goes back to the years when my father started his teaching career. In those days, in the early fifties of the last century, having teaching duties for apprentice teachers was no easy task. Commuting between the islands was dependent on a few trips per day and when the weather was rough, the service was halted, leaving stranded anyone who wanted to go to work or was ardent to be home. It was on one of these rough

days when my father, not being able to make it to Malta where he taught at St Joseph Technical Institute, was asked to go teach at the Government Primary School in Vajringa Street. There he was assigned Standard Four for the day, and it was on that day that he came across Mario for the first time, still as a young student. Eversince, everytime they met, Mario would always jokingly remark that 'you were my first teacher'.



Pawlu Mizzi (left) and Mario Tabone (right) during an event that celebrated Pawlu's 80th in 2009.

Mario, like my father, was born in Rabat Gozo, on 24 November 1938. Like most Gozitans he was a proud son of this tiny island. From a young age, as my father had noted, he was bright, attentive and eager to take on the world. In fact from the primary at Vajringa Street he ended up continuing his studies in Malta at St Aloysius College first, and later graduated as a medical doctor from the University of Malta in 1965. He underwent specialist training in ophthalmology in England, obtaining the Diploma in Ophthalmology of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons. In his profession, Mario was particularly interested in the applications of laser technology.

Notwithstanding their early encounter, their friendship was kindled many years after when both settled in Malta. I believe it was comforting for them to seek some form of solace in each other. Mario, an established eye doctor and my father, a teacher and a publisher. Their love for history, culture, arts, politics and whatever Malta was made of, was their common ground for discourse. Mixed with a good sense of humour, their conversation was always interesting and entertaining. A visit to check his eye sight never ended. Today, I cower to think what the people in the waiting room thought. But those were other times – when the clock was just an accessory and everyone had time for everything.

Personally I kept on visiting Mario as a patient for as long as I remember since my first eye-test. I used to go with my father first and then as I grew older I went alone until the years when my father couldn't drive anymore when it was truly gratifying to go together again, and seeing them both interact as if time stood still for both. He would never charge us, so I made sure that there was always a recent publication with me to compensate for his generosity.

However it was in the years when Mario was chairperson of Heritage Malta (2002-08) that we fostered the same friendship as he had with my father. He was always eager to ask about the publication projects we were working on and how the newly set-up agency could improve in bringing the community closer at large to learn from our past and preserve it for our future.

I distinctly remember the day when we discussed the discovery of Luigi Maria Ugolini's archive

on Malta. His eyes gleamed and immediately he started churning out all the information he had on the archeologist and what a treasure had been unearthed. It was this enthusiasm that forged the collaboration agreement to have the archive, scanned, studied and finally published after 20 years. Even when his term was over, he never ceased to ask about the progress of work. During my periodic eye-check visits he always made it a point to ask about our forthcoming publications and discuss a book that he had just read, or to comment on books he was reading.

Mario will be remembered for his virtues more than his attributes. Undoubtedly his incredible way of interacting with people was outstanding. His ease of communicating with anyone and everyone was an art only a few could master like him. He greeted everyone with that sparkling smile. His presence was always silently felt. He never had a bad word for anyone. Even with those he was in disagreement with, he always tried to find a compromise, or at least that small bit of common ground. I am sure Mario had his defects and differences with people, but he hid them well. They were extremely difficult to find.

I take inspiration from an appreciation written by Dr Tonio Borg in which he asks if the cast from which Mario was made still exists and if it still exists one should find it immediately as the country needs more people of his stature.

Mario was a son of a generation of Maltese and Gozitans who loved their country for what it is. Their knowledge and reading of the past made them love it and wanted to transmit it for years to come. Sadly Mario's generation is fast disappearing making way to the onslaught of the barbarian hordes who's love for the nation is as deep as their pockets. People like Mario should be a beacon to us all. Let us not fail their memory.

Joseph Mizzi is a graduate of the University of Malta in Business Management and currently manages Midsea Books and Klabb Kotba Maltin. Between 2010 and 2013, he chaired the Public Broadcasting Services (2010-13) and is currently a member of the National Book Council.