

THE G OZO OBSERVER

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The Gozo Observer

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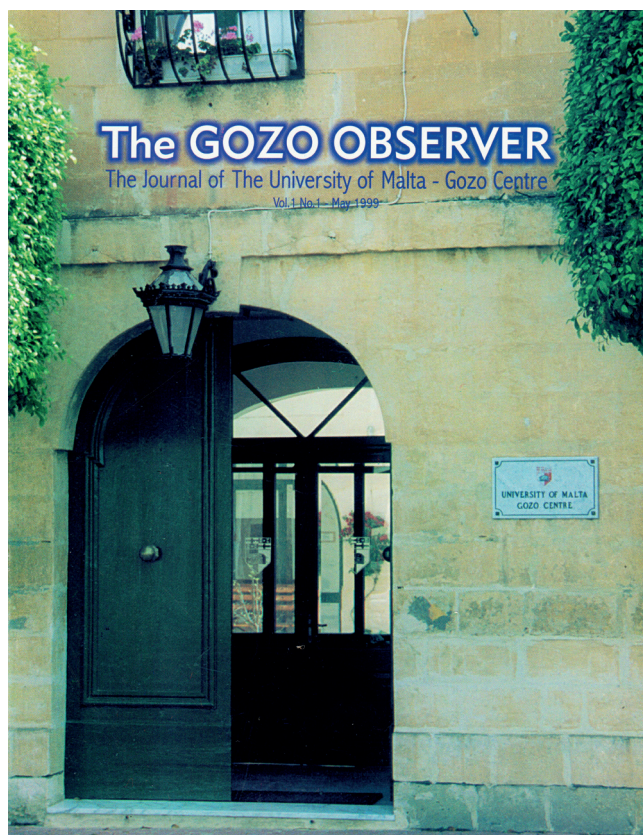
Front Cover Picture: Watermill and wild flowers,
Courtesy of Joanne Mohr.

Editorial: On the occasion of the 50th edition of *The Gozo Observer*

The Gozo Observer was first issued in May 1999, that is almost 27 years ago. Fifty editions (including the present issue) were published, carrying around 375 articles, covering a wide array of subjects associated with Gozo. The current editorial board of the journal is made up of three persons, namely myself as chair, Mr Joseph Calleja and Ms Caroline Camilleri Rolls. Professor Maurice Cauchi also served on the editorial board up to issue number 45. Mr Frank Grech was instrumental in the publication of early issues of the journal.

The Gozo Observer is published twice a year, with about six original articles per issue. Each submitted article is proof-read and peer-reviewed carefully to ensure that it is well structured, well written and deals with an issue of Gozitan interest. Not all submitted articles are accepted for publication. Some are rejected upfront, due to various factors, mainly the quality of the text. In some instances, the author is asked to revise the article and re-submit. About 50% of the articles carried in *The Gozo Observer* dealt with socio-cultural issues and history. The subjects of the former category varied widely, providing a spectrum of Gozo's rich cultural heritage. Various themes feature in this regard, including folklore, dialects, crime, migration, and religion. The historical themes related to events starting from pre-historical times up to the 1950s, with a large proportion of them covering the period under the reign of the Knights of St John (1530 to 1798), including the 1551 Siege of Gozo. Some articles dealt with the role Gozo played during the Second World War.

Other major themes are the physical environment of Gozo, famous Gozitan personalities, the Arts (notably music), health, tourism, and the economy. As expected, given that the journal is a university publication, many articles dealt with issues relating to education. The problem of connectivity between Malta and Gozo also features in several articles. A few articles focus on place-names, the Gozitan nobility, gender issues, migration and the Gozitan



The front cover of the first issue of *The Gozo Observer*.

way of life. In each issue, the final article describes events at the Gozo Campus, accompanied by photos relating to these events.

The front cover of the journal carries a photo depicting landscape scenes, intended to capture the beauty of Gozo. Most articles carry photos or other forms of illustrations, some of which are not easily available elsewhere. As is well known, illustrations are not merely intended as decorations but serve to enhance the reader's imagination and reading experience.

All issues of *The Gozo Observer* are available online at: <https://www.um.edu.mt/campuses/gozo/ugc/ourpublications/> and hard-copies of this and future editions can be obtained free of charge upon request.

Lino Briguglio

Mġarr Harbour: A Vision for Resilience and the Path to a Sustainable Gateway

IVAN FALZON AND MICHAEL GALEA

Connectivity is the pulse of Gozo. For those of us who call this island home, the stretch of water between Mġarr and Ċirkewwa is not merely a geographic divide; it is a daily reality that dictates the rhythm of our work, our education, and our access to essential services. At the heart of this reality stands Mġarr Harbour, our sole maritime gateway. It is an infrastructure that has served us faithfully for decades, yet today, it finds itself at a critical crossroads where the demands of the present are rapidly outstripping the structural legacies of the past.

Looking at the Hard Facts

To understand where we are going, we must first look at the cold, hard facts of where we stand today. In March 2026, the Gozo Regional Development Authority (GRDA) published the document *Mġarr Harbour: An Evidence-Based Review*, which paints a startling picture of our harbour's current state. Two decades ago, strategic plans projected that by the end of 2026, the port might handle seven million passengers under an improbable high-growth scenario. Reality has moved much faster

than those projections; by the end of 2025, we had already surpassed those figures, recording 7.4 million movements on the Gozo Channel and the fast ferry services only, excluding other options available. To put this into a national perspective, the volume of people moving through the gates of Mġarr is now broadly comparable to the total passenger traffic recorded at Malta International Airport.

According to Eurostat, data for 2024, Mġarr Harbour has reached a level of operational intensity that places it among the 30 largest maritime ports in the European Union in terms of vessel calls. Even more impressively, our throughput of passengers and vehicles has seen us climb into the top 20 for passenger activity and top 30 for vehicle movements across Europe. This is a particularly notable position given Gozo's small geographic scale and demographic profile, highlighting how much stress our infrastructure is absorbing.

This growth is not accidental. It is the result of a Gozitan economy that has expanded by 163% in value over the last decade. It is driven by a population



that has grown to over 41,000 residents and a tourism sector that saw same-day visitors increase by 135% between 2014 and 2024. Perhaps most tellingly, the number of registered Gozitan residents with main source of income in Malta has skyrocketed by over 300% in that same period. Every one of these stories, every new job, every visiting tourist, and every returning student, places a fresh pound of pressure on the narrow confines of Mġarr.

What are the Solutions?

The GRDA is often asked for the "one solution" to the Mġarr problem. Our answer is consistent: there isn't one. The challenges we face are multi-layered, and our response must be equally sophisticated. We cannot simply build our way out of this, nor can we simply optimise our way out. We need a multi-pronged approach that respects the evidence, values the community's quality of life, requiring long-term investment. This philosophy is central to the GRDA's strategy, which identifies the saturation of Mġarr as a core policy challenge that must be addressed to ensure our island's sustainable future. Our efforts also align with the broader ambitions of Malta's Vision 2050, which emphasises high-quality infrastructure and sustainable regional development as pillars for national prosperity.

The foundation of the GRDA's strategy is a commitment to evidence-based decision-making. For the first time, through the use of Automatic Identification System (AIS) data implemented in January 2025, we have been able to map the precise "heartbeat" of the harbour. We now know that demand is not a chaotic variable but a highly stable and repeatable pattern. Our data shows a sharp operational build-up starting at 05:00, leading into a sustained high-demand window between 09:00 and 16:00. We know that our absolute daily peaks consistently hit at 10:00 and 16:00, regardless of the season.

This data is our most powerful tool for immediate optimisation. By understanding the "asymmetry" of these flows, where morning volumes are dominated by inbound arrivals and afternoon peaks by outbound departures, we can better manage our berth allocations and passenger handling systems. Optimisation means squeezing every bit of efficiency out of our current footprint. It means refining the land-side interfaces where private vehicles, public transport routes

and park-and-ride shuttles all converge. We must acknowledge that Mġarr's congestion is not just a maritime issue. It is a territorial one that spills into the streets of Ghajnsielem and along the main corridor to Victoria.

Major Constraints

One of the most complex aspects of Mġarr is the spatial conflict inherent in its design. The harbour is geographically constrained, yet it must simultaneously accommodate an incredible variety of maritime activities. We have the heavy-duty Gozo Channel ferries sharing space with the agile fast ferries to Valletta. We have commercial fishing vessels that represent our heritage and local industry alongside leisure craft, private boats, and chartered catamaran cruises. We even have tender boats servicing cruise ships. Each of these groups has different needs, different berthing times, different depth requirements and different passenger flows. They all need space, and time. Managing this coexistence within the same small basin is a daily feat of logistics, but as volumes grow, the friction between these uses becomes harder to ignore, challenging to manage.

However, optimisation alone will eventually hit a ceiling. This is why our second pillar focuses on decongesting the hub by creating alternatives and fall-back positions. We must move away from the idea that Mġarr is the only possible point of entry or exit for every type of maritime activity. The introduction of the fast ferry to Valletta and the newer routes serving Sliema and Buġibba are essential steps in diversifying our connectivity. These services don't just save time, they enhance the resilience of the entire island. If one route faces a technical or weather-related disruption, having established alternatives ensures that Gozo does not come to a standstill.

Furthermore, we must look beyond the traditional harbour-to-harbour mindset. Enhancing Gozo's resilience means thinking about connectivity in a way that bypasses the single-point-of-failure model. We are exploring ways to encourage the use of the fourth and soon-to-be fifth Gozo Channel vessels in a manner that balances the load. But we must also be honest, the port is reaching a saturation point where the coexistence of ferries, fishing fleets, leisure craft, and cargo logistics is becoming increasingly difficult to manage.



The Future

Looking ahead, we must prepare for the future projected growth underlined in our latest research. According to the latest forecasts for Gozo, economic output and population levels are projected to increase further in the coming years. These trends will inevitably translate into additional demand on our already strained infrastructure. Initiatives like the introduction of the Sliema-Bugibba-Mġarr route and the expansion of the Gozo Channel fleet are intended to help, but they also add more complexity to an environment that is already operating at its edge.

This brings us to the final, and perhaps most significant pillar. The unavoidable need for infrastructure investment. The evidence suggests that even with the best management in the world, the physical capacity of Mġarr is being tested to its limits. To support continued economic expansion and tourism growth, as envisioned in both our regional strategy and Malta's Vision 2050, we must look at the structural development of the harbour. This is not just about making the port bigger. It is about making it smarter and more capable of handling a multimodal future.

The government has established a multidisciplinary taskforce to lead this strategic mandate. This group is tasked with moving beyond short-term fixes to develop a comprehensive plan for the future of Mġarr, looking at how the infrastructure can be expanded while protecting the unique character of the island. This may involve significant maritime works, but it also involves rethinking how we handle freight and logistics to move heavy traffic away from the passenger-heavy windows of the day.

Connectivity is a broad term that should not be restricted to the physical walls of Mġarr Harbour. As we look to the future, we must explore how digital connectivity and different modes of transport can reduce the physical burden on the port. Could some services be decentralised? Could certain commercial activities be relocated to more suitable points around the coast to free up Mġarr for its primary role as a passenger and vehicle gateway? These are the questions the Taskforce is currently grappling with as part of a forward-looking, balanced approach.

Our goal is to ensure that Gozo remains a vibrant, living community, not a museum or a bottlenecked suburb. We want a harbour that works for the commuter who needs to be in Valletta by 08:00, for the fisherman whose livelihood depends on safe berthing, and for the tourist who expects a seamless entry into our island paradise.

The path forward is complex and will require patience, significant investment, and a willingness to adapt. But by sticking to the evidence, prioritising the resilience of our island, and refusing to accept good enough as a standard, we can transform Mġarr from a point of pressure into a world-class gateway. This is the mandate of both the GRDA and GBC, and it is a commitment we make to every Gozitan who relies on that thin blue line of water for their connection to the world.

Ivan Falzon is CEO of the Gozo Regional Development Authority (GRDA).

Michael Galea is President of the Gozo Business Chamber (GBC).

Leprosy in Gozo – a Historical Review

CHARLES SAVONA-VENTURA

Introduction

Based on linguistic consideration, leprosy has long been known on the Maltese Islands. The Maltese vernacular term for leprosy is *Gdiem* [leper = *mgiddem*]; a word that originates from the Arabic *جذام* = *jozam* [leper = *مجذوم* = *majzoon*]. This potential long-standing endemicity of the disease is not surprising considering that the Maltese Islands have been central to the trade routes of the Mediterranean Sea right through history dating back to at least the Bronze Age period circa 3,500 years ago. The Islamic influence on the Maltese Islands, known to have lasted from 870-1249 AD, had a wide-ranging influence of various aspects of Maltese culture including language. In common with Semitic concepts towards leprosy, Islamic society looked upon leprosy as a punishment from God for immorality, and the Maliki law allowed either partner to dissolve a marriage because of leprosy.

Lepers were not allowed to mix with the rest of the healthy community (Dols, 1983: 891-916). While the early 5th century Christian Cappadocian fathers of the early Church promoted the responsibility of the faithful towards providing help and substance to victims of the infection much in line with Jesus's parable of the poor man (Calleja, 2019: 1-20), 7-8th century Rothari – Aistulph legislation in Lombardy in Southern Italy required victims of leprosy to be expelled from the community and to have their legal rights annulled, in effect considered legally dead (Skinner, 1997: 57-78).

In the 11-13th centuries, attitudes towards these unfortunates changed and they became viewed as potential 'gateways to heaven' promoting saintly individuals to provide care and attention to them. During this period, we also see the development of monastic-type institutions, such as the Orders of St Lazarus (est. ~1073) and St Francis (est. 1209) being organised for those victims needing care. Alternatively, care was provided in the community,

especially after the fall in leprosy prevalence which occurred as a result of the 14th century plague epidemics.

Medieval Gozo

Unfortunately, the available medically-related documentation pertaining to the medieval period in Malta is scanty especially before the 15th century. It has been claimed, without definite documentation, that the *hospitalis Sanctj Franciscj* established around 1300 outside the walls of Mdina by King Frederick III served as a leprosarium (Gulia, 1874: 372-377). The statement is simply based on the assertion that it is sited outside the medieval walls of the city and is known to have had links with the Order of St Francis which has a special relationship with the victims of the disease. However, 1494 documentation, albeit after the 14th century plague epidemics, mentions only *poveri abitanti* as being cared for in the institution and gives no reference to the victims of leprosy (Savona-Ventura, 2007: 48-52). The archaeological collection at Tal-Hagar Museum in Victoria-Rabat in Gozo includes two limestone bust depicting individuals showing signs very suggestive of end-stage leprosy. Unfortunately, these items do not have any provenance information (Savona-Ventura, 2024: 3-6).

The first case of *morbo lepre* in the Maltese Islands affecting a Gozitan woman was documented in 1492. On the 24th March of that year, the woman, Margarita (*sive* Garita) Xeiba, daughter of Nardus Xeiba, prepared her will bequeathing an undivided half of a field called *In-Nigred* in the district of Ghajn Xejba of Xagħra (Caccia) to the Church of the Virgin Mary (*ecclesia Gloriose Virgines Marie contrata Hayn Xeiba*) located in the same district. Garita Xeiba is here referred to as *egra corpore morbo lebre* but of *sana tamer mente et rationis compos existens*, leaving the reader in no doubt as to the state of the woman's health. Interestingly, Garita could have the notary Jacobum Sabbara prepare her will and testament without any legal

restrictions, confirming that the prevalent 7th century legislation whereby the legal rights of these victims were abolished had long gone by the wayside.¹ Margarita Xeiba appears to have demised soon after she made her will since, on the 28th January 1505, her assigned procurator Angelus Demartino (married to Joanna) was himself bequeathing 24 Sicilian *tareni* to the same church, the funds being the fruit of the land bequeathed to him by Margarita.²

The purpose of Margarita Xeiba's bequest was to support the church to celebrate Mass on the festivity of the Virgin Mary, to help maintain the sanctuary lamp on Saturday evening, and to distribute bread to those attending Easter and Christmas services. Angelus Demartino's bequest catered for providing a meal at the church following vespers of the feast day of the Virgin Mary. A further bequest dated 21st May 1519 made by Paulus de Girardo and his spouse bequeathed the fruits of the adjoining land called Tan-Nigret to provide the celebrant of Mass at the Church with a meal. There appears to be no identifiable genealogical link between Paulus de Girardo and Margarita Xeiba or Angelus Demartino or his heirs.³

The *ecclesia sub vocabulo Sancta Maree ta Hain Xeibi* was described by the Apostolic Visitor Mgr Petrus Duzina in 1575. The procurator of the Church was at the time Leonardo di Siracusa who administered a *tumulo* of land belonging to the church which supported the celebration of Mass on the feast day of the Assumption (15th August) followed by the distribution of bread to the poor. He was also responsible to maintain the edifice in a good state. At the time, the church is described as

having no roof and no wooden door. Mgr Duzina decreed that the door was to be provided within a month under penalty of 10 scudi and no mass was to be celebrated in the church until this was carried out.⁴ By 1598, the Church had acquired a further four *tumuli* of land and a garden to support its work. It was then under the care of Francesco Bugeni, who was eventually substituted by Angelo Theuma.⁵ The Church was closed for worship in 1657.⁶ No remains of the church can be found today.⁷

The Hospitaller Period

The case involving Margarita Xeiba is the earliest documented case of leprosy in the Maltese Islands. The next documented case involved a Dominican friar who died in the order's convent at Rabat, Malta on 30th April 1629.⁸ The *Status Animarum* of 1687 reports that there was only one known case of leprosy – a 30-year-old woman married, but not co-habiting, from Qormi, Malta. The 1687 *Status Animarum* list includes practically all the towns and villages of Malta, Gozo being unfortunately excluded. The reported Maltese population in 1687 stood at about 50,788 individuals suggesting a diagnosed leprosy prevalence of about 2 per 100,000 population. Other cases suffering from Hansen's disease may however not been properly documented when the *Status Animarum* was being collated (Fiorini, 1986: 41-100).

Leprosy in Gozo does not directly feature in the records of the Hospitaller Period. However, legal sanctions were introduced by the general health regulations imposed by the Order's management. After the arrival of the Order of St John to Malta

- 1 [Mar]Garita Xeiba, will dated 24.iii.1492 not. Jacobum Sabbara. In: *Registrum Foundationum Beneficiorum Insulae Gaudisii 1435-1545*. fol.59-59v. Transcribed and edited by J. Busuttil & S. Fiorini, 2006.
- 2 Angelus de Amarino, will dated 28.i.1505 not. Guiglielmus Sansuni. In: *Registrum Foundationum Beneficiorum Insulae Gaudisii 1435-1545*. fol.64-64v. In: J. Busuttil & S. Fiorini, 2006, *ibid.*, 87-89.
- 3 Paulus de Girardo and Jacona de Girardo, will dated 21.v.1519. In: *Registrum Foundationum Beneficiorum Insulae Gaudisii 1435-1545*. fol.28v-29v. In: J. Busuttil & S. Fiorini, 2006, *ibid.*, 37-38.
- 4 Mgr Petrus Duzina. Vista Apostolica no. 51, 1575, fol.185v. Transcribed in: G. Aquilina & S. Fiorini, 2001, 191.
- 5 Archivium Archiepiscopae Melitensis (AAM) *Pastoral Visit 07 - Tomás Gargallo (1598-1604)*, 167r. Reported in: V. Borg, 2009, 623 – footnote 2.
- 6 Archivium Ecclesiae Gaultina (AEG). *Pastoral Visit 17 - Miguel Juan Balaguer (1656-1659)*, 15v. Reported in: V. Borg. 2015, 824 – footnote 2.
- 7 *Contrata Hain Xieba* in Xaghra, Gozo is presently served by the Church of Saint Anthony the Abbot. The *ecclesia sub vocabulo Sancti Antonij sita in contrata Hain Xeibi* was contemporaneously extant with the *ecclesia sub vocabulo Sancta Maree ta Hain Xeibi* being also mentioned by the Apostolic Visitor Mgr Petrus Duzina in 1575. See: P. Duzina, 1575, op. cit., fol.183v. When Xaghra was elevated to a parish in 1688, the Church of Saint Anthony the Abbot was used as the parish church until 1692 when the present parish church was consecrated. The church was destroyed during the Second World War and was rebuilt in 1947 and reconsecrated in 1955.
- 8 Archives of the Dominican Priory, Rabat (Malta). *De statu trium conventum. Parte I*, fol.129t, 188.

in 1532, the introduced public health regulations, *Domini Sanatatis*, ensured that the “sick of St Lazarus” were beneficiaries of special charities from the Order. The regulations however, debarred infected individuals from having any social intercourse with healthy individuals who were prohibited from receiving goods from lepers under penalty of a hefty fine, while the victims were precluded from practicing certain occupations unless sanctioned by the sanitary authorities. There was not however any attempt at legislative segregation and the victims were allowed to live in the community.⁹ In 1679, a commission was set up to study the situation of the victims of leprosy. This commission proposed that these individuals were to be preferably treated in their homes and given financial aid. Foreign sufferers were to be treated in isolation in the Falanga.¹⁰ Presumably these regulations would have also applied to infected cases in Gozo.

The Modern Period

In 1867, a response from the Maltese Islands to a survey carried out by the Royal College of Physicians of London stated that ‘it has been ascertained that leprosy is unknown’ in Malta. However, the authors of the report remarked that ‘it seems far from improbable that the disease may exist, although the fact was unknown to the respondents’.¹¹ This report elicited an interest in the epidemiology of the infection in Malta with the publication of a number of sporadic cases being reported in the local medical literature. None of these reported cases were in Gozitan individuals (Gulia, 1874: 399-400). With an increased awareness of the disease, the reported prevalence increased significantly in the subsequent decades of the 19th century. A population survey carried out in 1890 identified 69 known cases of leprosy

(eight : 11.6% from Gozo) with 11 cases being in an advance stage.¹² The prevalence of the disease in Gozo stood at 40.7 per 100,000 population, a figure that was lower than the prevalence for Malta which stood at 41.8 per 100,000 population.¹³ The increase in the 19th century prevalence has been attributed to the increased commercial intercourse between Malta and the east facilitated by the opening of the Suez Canal (1869), returning Maltese migrants from northern African countries, and the arrival of a strong 6000-men contingent of Indian soldiers stationed at Mriehel, Malta (1878). It may, on the other hand, have been simply due to an increased awareness by medical practitioners following the 1867 survey. In 1893, the Lepers Ordinance was promulgated requiring the compulsory notification of all diagnosed cases and the legally sanctioned segregation of all confirmed cases in a leprosarium.¹⁴ A Leper Hospital was set up in Malta in 1900 with an extension for females established in 1912.¹⁵ Gozitan patients were forcibly transferred to the Malta Leprosarium.

In 1929, the number of admissions to the male and female sections of the Leper Hospital throughout the intervening years amounted to 372 cases, of which 43 (11.6%) came from Gozo (Bugeja, 1932: 17-30). The Gozo population in the census of 1921 accounted for 10.6% of the total Maltese population suggesting the leprosy was slightly more (9.4% greater) prevalent on Gozo than in Malta.¹⁶ The large majority (88.4%) of the Gozitan cases came from villages in the southern half of the island with equal distribution between the eastern and western quadrant (Figure 1).¹⁷ This probably reflects the greater conglomeration of towns and villages in the southern region, especially marked during the early 20th century.

The majority (66.7%) of the cases from Malta and Gozo admitted to the Leper Hospital over the

9 National Malta Library (NML). 210.

10 NML. AOM 262 (1679), fol. 97, 141.

11 Report on leprosy by the Royal College of Physicians, prepared for Her Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies with an appendix (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1867), lxxiii.

12 Charitable Institutions Archives, Malta. Letters to Government from 20 April 1888 to 8 April 1895. f.300, 515, 550. Reported in: P. Cassar, 1965, 213-215.

13 Estimated 1890 population based on 1881 census: Malta 146,011; Gozo 19,651 persons. Malta Blue Book for the year 1890 (Malta: Government Printing Office, 1890), Section L, 4.

14 An Ordinance for checking the spread of the disease commonly known as Leprosy (Malta, 1893).

15 The Leper Hospital was renamed St Batholomew Hospital in 1937.

16 Return of the population according to Census of 1921. Malta Blue Book for the year 1929 (Malta: Government Printing Office, 1929), Section 15, 2.

17 Satellite picture credit: European Union, Copernicus Sentinel-2 imagery, 6.xii.2022. Available at <https://www.copernicus.eu/nl/node/12382>.

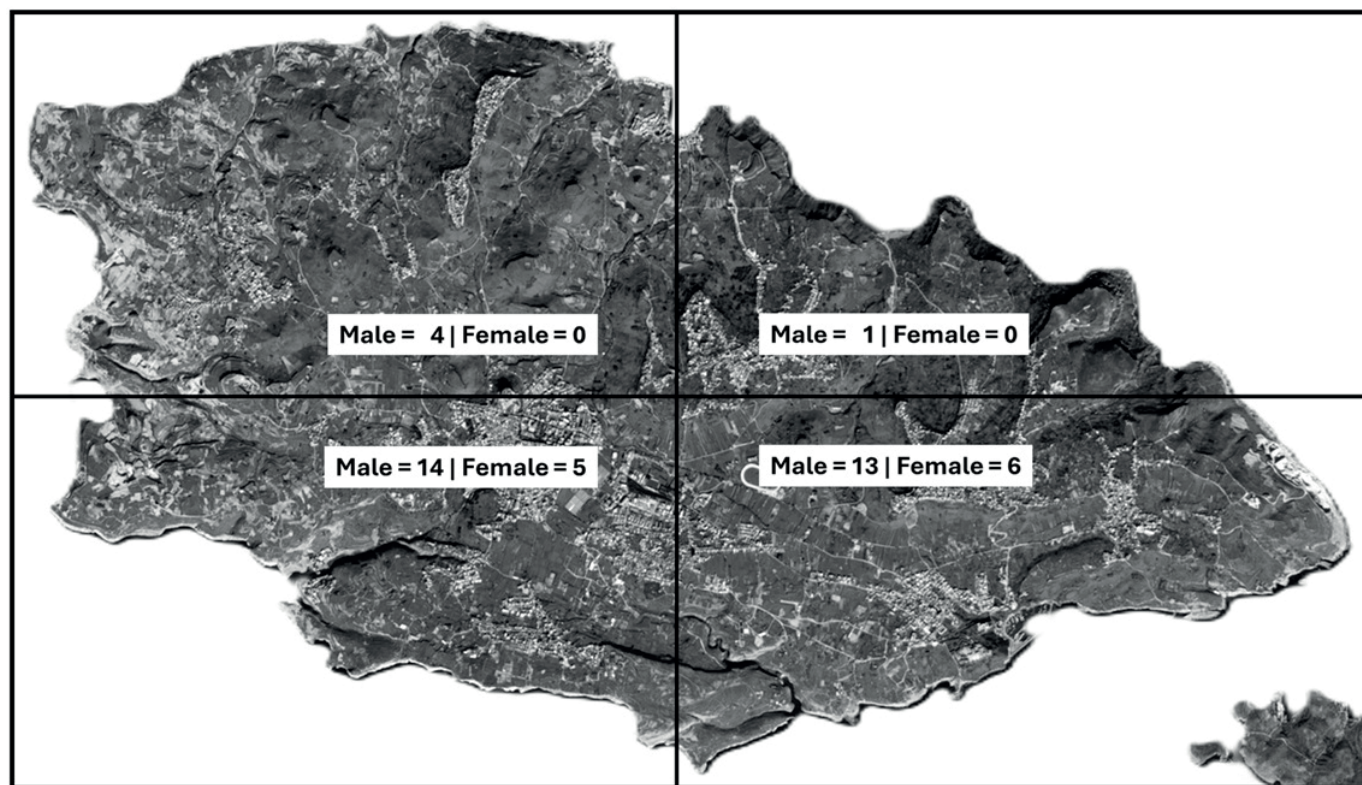


Figure 1: Regional Gozitan case distribution of admissions to the Leper Hospital: 1900-1929.

period 1900-1929 had died in the interim. Half of the admissions were aged 20-40 years, while 12.7% were aged under 20 years. The relatively young age of the infected individuals increased the likelihood of developing significant clinical features associated with the disease, thus increasing their likelihood of long-term morbidity especially when effective treatment was not yet available. Only 12.4% of the admissions were discharged as cured, i.e. non-infective. More than half (55.9%) of the admissions worked in the agricultural-fisheries industry or in the elementary occupations. A significant number (27.9%) were occupied in the service-sales and in the craft-related trade industries. By their regular contact with the community, these individuals were more likely to transmit the disease to healthy individuals (Table 1).

The prevalence rate was maintained and increased right through the mid-20th century (42.2 per 100,000 in 1948; 73.1 per 100,000 in 1972).¹⁸ The legal segregation policy caused significant distress to Gozitan victims of Hansen's disease since these were forcibly removed from their

environment and transferred to the leprosarium in Malta. To ameliorate their situation, a leprosarium was established in Gozo in 1937 in the building previously used as the Married Quarters at Fort Chambray, Ġhajnsielem. Named Sacred Heart Hospital, this establishment had a bed complement of 27 beds (Figure 2). In 1937, thirteen Gozitan men and two Gozitan women were transferred to the hospital from the Leper Hospital in Malta (Farrer-Brown, et al. 1957: 24).

While the inpatient population in the Sacred Heart Leprosarium during the period 1937-1948 generally amounted to between 15 to 23 inmates, the inpatient numbers started to fall in the subsequent years so that by 1955 there were only three inmates (Figure 3). This led to the closure of the establishment with the resumption of the practice of transferring any Gozitan patients suffering from leprosy to the Malta establishment. The male-female ratio of the Gozitan admissions stood at x1.7.¹⁹

Figure 4 depicts the prevalence rates of Hansen's disease in Malta and Gozo throughout the 20th

¹⁸ Statistics based on the annual statistical reports of the Maltese Department of Health. See: C. Savona-Ventura. Leprosy Archives – Maltese Islands. (Malta: Grand Priory of the Maltese Islands – MHOSLJ, 2021), 37-43.

¹⁹ Department of Health. Annual Reports on the Health Conditions of the Maltese Islands and on the work of the Medical and Health Department for the years 1937-1956 (Malta: Department of Health, 1938-1957, 20 vols.).

	Male	Female	TOTAL
Patient movement			
• Total Admitted over 1900-1929 period	264	108	372
• Discharged Cured	22	24	46 (12.4%)
• Left Island (all males)	6	0	6 (1.6%)
• Dead	195	53	248 (66.7%)
• Remaining in Hospital @ 31.xii.1929	41	31	72 (19.4%)
Patient's Age			
• <10 years (youngest 8 years)	1	0	1 (0.3%)
• 10-20 years	31	15	46 (12.4%)
• 20-30 years	73	33	106 (28.5%)
• 30-40 years	54	26	80 (21.5%)
• 40-50 years	49	10	59 (15.9%)
• 50-60 years	28	15	43 (11.6%)
• 60-70 years	18	8	26 (7.0%)
• 70-80 years	8	1	9 (2.4%)
• >80 years (oldest 84 years)	2	0	2 (0.5%)
Locality of original residence			
• Malta	232	97	329 (88.4%)
• Gozo	32	11	43 (11.6%)
Occupations			
• Agricultural and fishery workers	97	22	119 (32.0%)
• Elementary occupations	62	27	89 (23.9%)
• Service and sales workers	40	23	63 (16.9%)
• Craft-related trades workers	26	15	41 (11.0%)
• Clerical support workers & students	4	0	4 (1.1%)
• Armed forces occupations	4	0	4 (1.1%)
• Religious	2	1	3 (0.8%)
• Other unspecified occupations	11	2	13 (3.5%)
• Unemployed	18	18	36 (9.7%)

Table 1: Characteristics of Maltese and Gozitan patients admitted to the Leper Hospital: 1900-1929.



Figure 2: Sacred Heart Hospital, Gozo – modern view © the author.

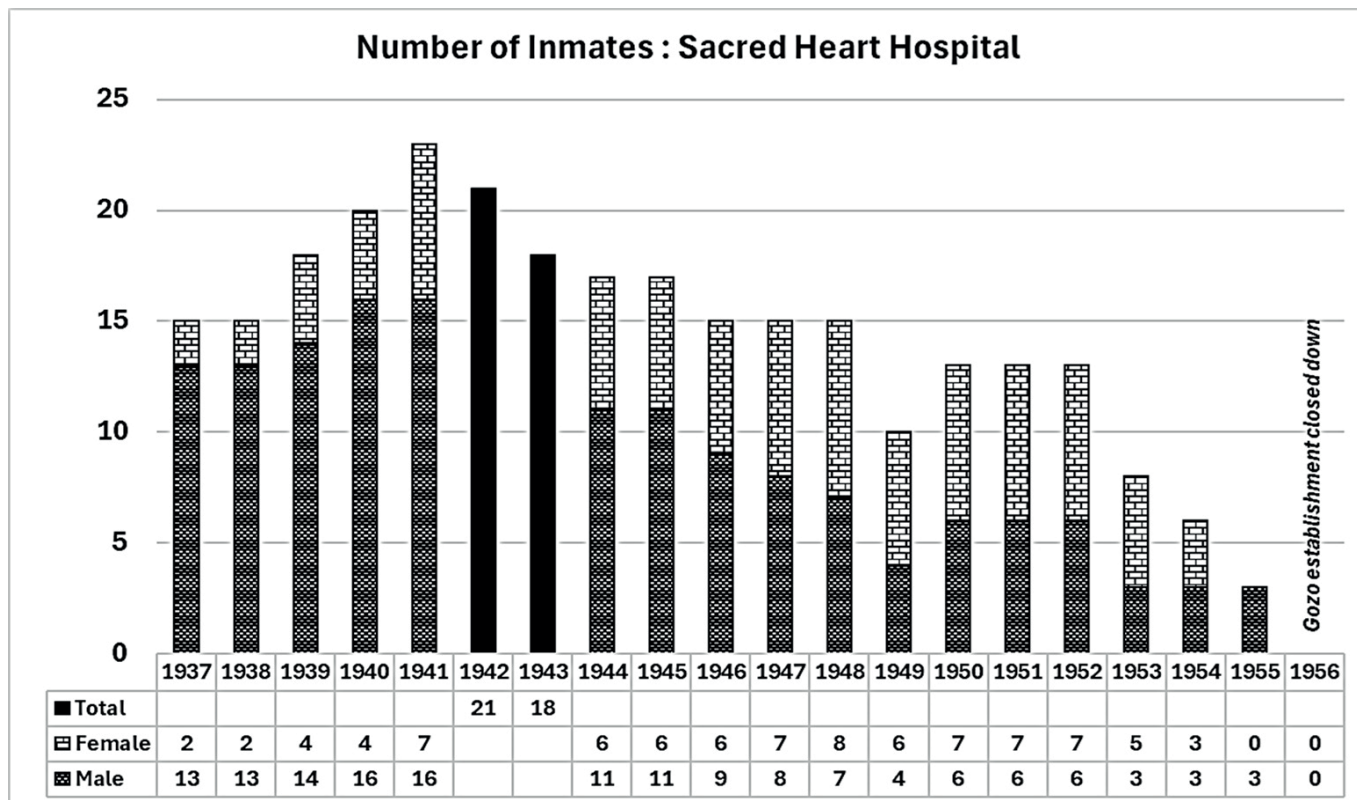


Figure 3: Inmates in Sacred Heart Hospital, Gozo 1937 – 1955 (no gender data is given for years 1942-1943).

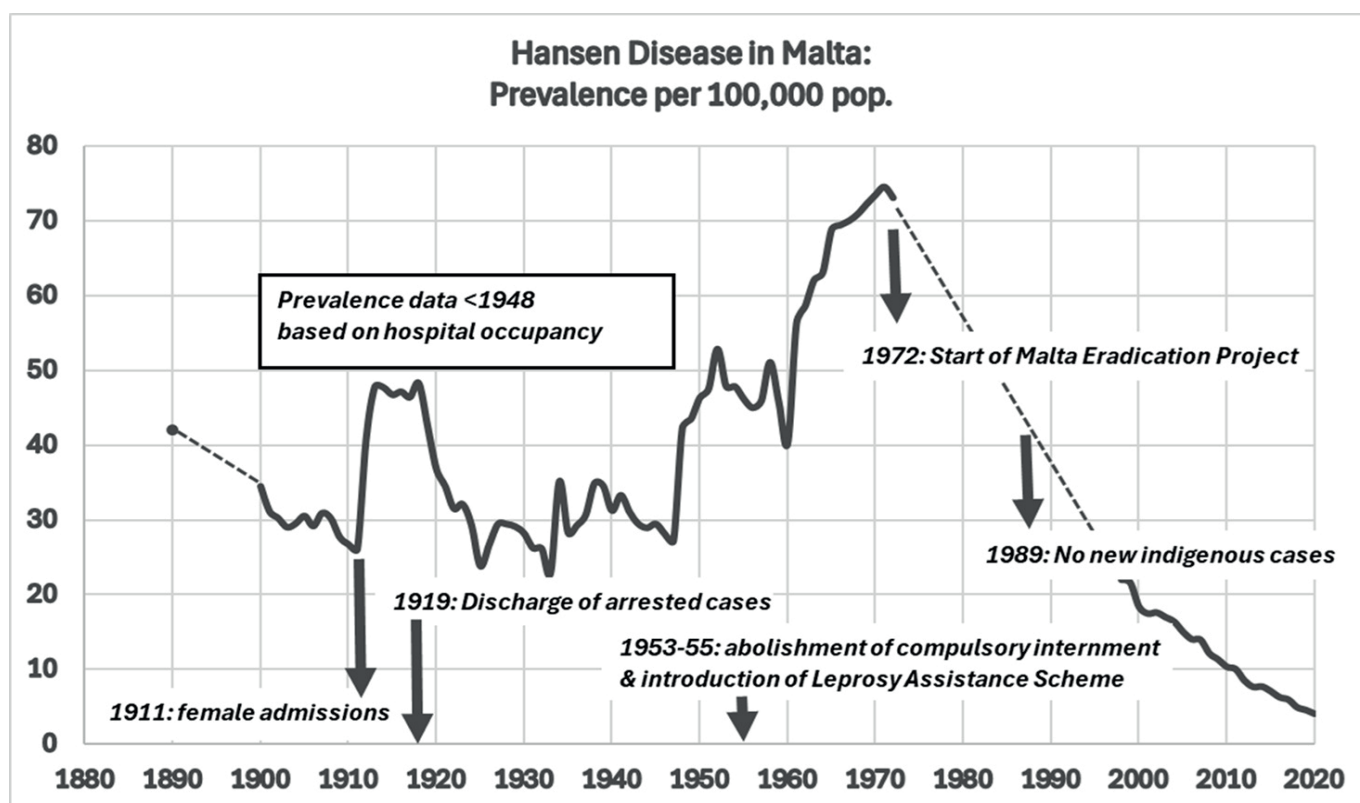


Figure 4: Hansen's disease prevalence in Malta and Gozo.

century with the pre-1948 figures being based on compulsory hospital occupancy rates. Some interesting observations may be made. There appears to be a marked rise in reported prevalence after 1911 contributed to by the opening of

the female section of the St Bartholomew's Leprosarium. This was followed by a fall after 1919 because of the introduction of the policy of discharging arrested cases. A marked progressive rise in actual prevalence can be noted after 1953

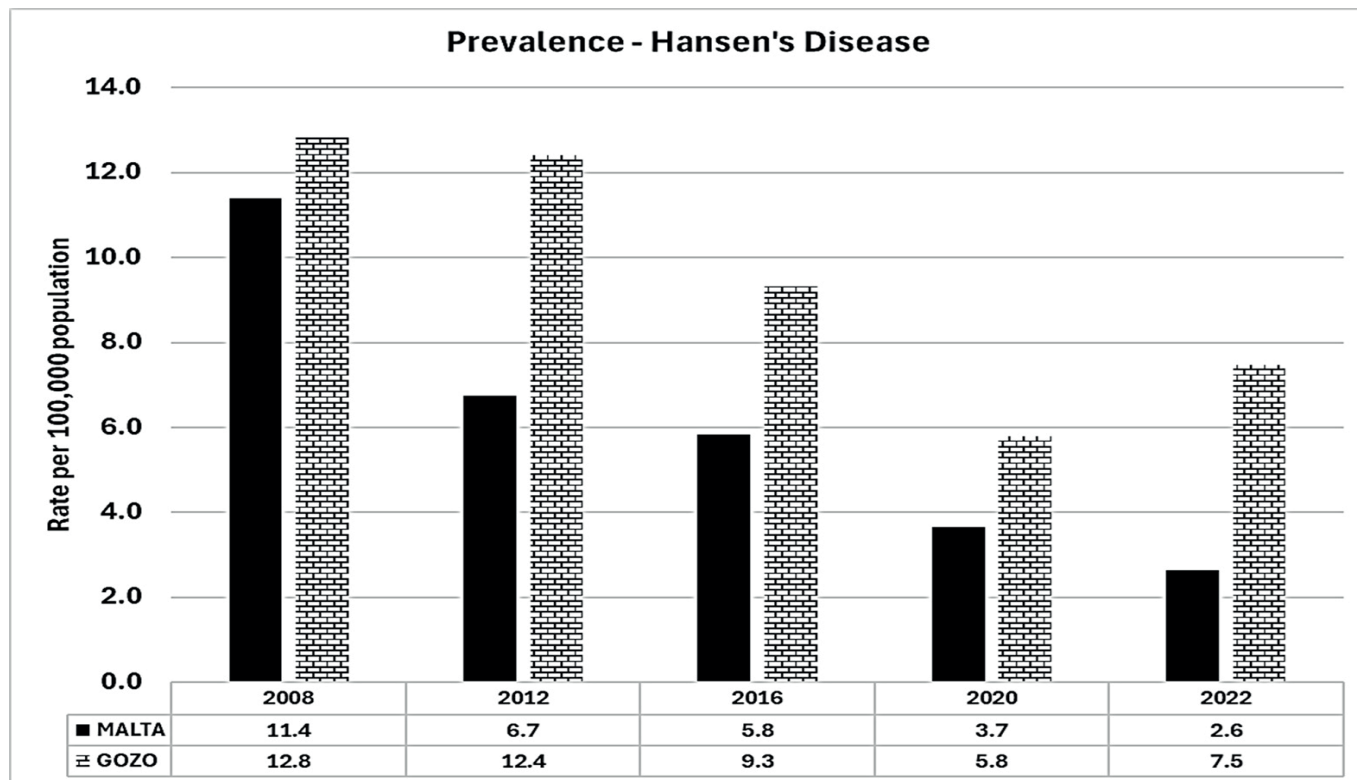


Figure 5: Prevalence of Hansen's disease by island: 2008 – 2022.

which can be attributed to the abolishment of the legal compulsory internment of victims and the introduction of a monetary state assistance scheme being made available to all diagnosed victims of Hansen's disease. These moves ensured that early cases came out of hiding and presented themselves for treatment and to receive the offered monetary benefits.

In June 1972, the Malta Leprosy Eradication Project was initiated whereby all known cases of Hansen's disease were treated with multi-drug therapy (MTD) under the surveillance of the World Health Organisation. The project was sufficiently successful to encourage the WHO to adopt the MTD regimen for the management of Hansen's disease on a worldwide basis. By 1989, no new indigenous cases were being reported. The Malta Project was terminated in 1999, and Malta was declared free from endemic disease (Freerksen, et al, 2001:47, 309-331). Since then, there has been a gradual fall in the prevalence of Hansen Disease in Malta due mainly to the deaths from old age of those previously diagnosed and treated and the fact

that there were no new cases diagnosed (Figure 5). However, since 2000, there have been four immigrant cases of Hansen's disease diagnosed in Malta emphasising the need for doctors to be vigilant and sensitive to the early features of the infection so that early treatment can be instituted before neural damage occurs. It is pertinent to point out that in the last Population Census report, 38,000 of the resident population originated from countries where Hansen's disease is still endemic.²⁰ Immigration does serve as a potential source of infection. The risks are augmented by the fact that because of the assumed eradication of the infection, medical practitioners have a low sensitivity to the disease leading to delay in case identification increasing the risk of spread and the risk of developing non-reversal damage. It is therefore imperative that medical graduates and practitioners are sensitised to the potential presence of the infection and to its early clinical signs and symptoms. There must also be easy access for referral to specialist care for all suspect cases, especially for migrants.

²⁰ National Statistics Office. Census of Population and Housing 2021: Final Report: Population, migration and other social characteristics (Malta: National Statistics Office, 2023).

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The Beautiful World of Sea Slugs in Gozo: Ecological Gems of the Mediterranean.¹

RENALD BLUNDELL AND ABBIE BARLOW

Introduction

The island of Gozo, Malta's sister, is best known for its breathtaking coastal landscapes, azure waters, and limestone architecture that appears to rise seamlessly from its cliffs. Beyond these picture-perfect vistas, however, lies a hidden underwater world teeming with life and colour. Among the marine residents of Gozo's waters, sea slugs, particularly nudibranchs, are some of the most intriguing and ecologically important, yet often overlooked, creatures.

These enchanting molluscs are much more than their name might imply. Sea slugs, which include the captivating nudibranchs, come in a kaleidoscope of colours, shapes, and textures, adding a surreal vibrancy to the island's underwater landscape. It is important to note that while all nudibranchs are sea slugs, not all sea slugs are nudibranchs, a distinction that highlights the remarkable diversity within this group of marine organisms. Beyond their striking beauty, these small creatures play a crucial ecological role. They contribute to biodiversity, act as bioindicators for environmental health, and help to keep marine ecosystems balanced.



Figure 1: *Thuridilla hopei* showcasing its vivid colours observed in Gozo's waters.

This article explores the incredible beauty and the unsung ecological benefits of Gozo's sea slugs, revealing why they deserve admiration and conservation.

A Flash of Colour in the Mediterranean

While Gozo may appear to be a world of mellow beige limestone and crystal-clear water on the surface, beneath the waves, it transforms into a dazzling underwater paradise. Among the standout residents of this habitat are the sea slugs, particularly the nudibranchs, a specific type of soft-bodied marine gastropod. Unlike their terrestrial counterparts, nudibranchs are flamboyant in colour and intricate in shape, capturing the admiration of divers, underwater photographers, and marine biologists alike.



Figure 2: *Discodoris atromaculata* blending into its sponge-rich habitat in Gozo and demonstrating effective camouflage.

Nudibranchs come in nearly every colour imaginable: electric blues, vivid oranges, deep purples, and almost neon yellows. Their patterns are often otherworldly, featuring polka dots, stripes, and even intricate, swirling designs. Some species appear almost floral,

¹ Photos by photo@virgiliovalturdiving, <https://www.divebluewaters.com/blog/marine-life-in-gozo-nudibranchs> (Used with permission).



Figure 3: *Hypselodoris valenciennesi* displaying its vibrant yellow and blue markings providing an example of aposematism in Gozo's marine ecosystem.

adorned with petal-like gills and frilly appendages. Gozo's waters host a wide variety of nudibranchs, including the impressively large and vividly coloured Spanish dancer (*Hexabranchus sanguineus*), with its fiery red body and graceful movements, and the strikingly elegant *Hypselodoris valenciennesi*, renowned for its vibrant blue and yellow hues.

The colours of nudibranchs are far more than mere decoration. Species such as *Chromodoris rufomaculata* use their vivid hues to signal toxicity and deter predators. Aeolid nudibranchs, like *Eubranchus*, take defence to another level by storing stinging cells from jellyfish within their own tissues, displaying vibrant colours as a warning. The striking *Flabellina iodinea* blends seamlessly with red corals, offering effective camouflage, while *Nembrotha kubaryana* mimics the colours of toxic sponges it consumes, further deterring predation. In these Mediterranean waters, the bright colouration of nudibranchs also facilitates species recognition and mating behaviours. These marine slugs, thriving in Malta's rich marine ecosystem, exhibit a stunning array of colours as evolutionary adaptations to protect themselves, attract mates, and integrate into their environment.

Ecological Role and Importance

As attractive as they are, the importance of nudibranchs and other sea slugs extends far beyond their aesthetic appeal. These remarkable creatures play a crucial role in maintaining the health of marine ecosystems in Gozo and beyond.

Bioindicators of marine health

Sea slugs are highly sensitive to changes in water quality, temperature, and pollution levels. Due to their specialised diets and life cycles, the presence, or absence, of particular species provides scientists with valuable insights into the health of marine ecosystems. Monitoring nudibranch populations in Gozo can act as an early warning system, alerting researchers to shifts in the ecosystem that might not yet be evident in larger species or other marine organisms.

When nudibranch populations decline, disappear, or exhibit unusual fluctuations, it can indicate issues such as water pollution, habitat degradation, or even the impacts of global climate change. Their sensitivity makes them invaluable to scientists and



Figure 4: *Flabellina affinis* employs a unique defence mechanism by isolating nematocyst from its hydroid prey and storing them enabling them to ward off potential predators.

conservationists, as nudibranchs offer a relatively straightforward and low-impact method for assessing the health of marine environments.

Natural pest controllers

While they may appear delicate, many nudibranchs are voracious predators. Their diets include a range of organisms that could disrupt the balance of the ecosystem if left unchecked, such as certain types of algae, sponges, and hydroids. By consuming these species, sea slugs help maintain a natural equilibrium, preventing any one species from overwhelming the others and disturbing the marine ecosystem.

For example, some nudibranchs feed on sponges that, if not controlled, could overgrow coral reefs, stifling coral populations and reducing biodiversity. In this way, nudibranchs play an important role in preserving the health and resilience of reef systems in Gozo's waters.

Biochemical marvels with medical potential

Sea slugs are also remarkable for their ability to synthesise unique chemical compounds. Lacking

shells and other hard defences, many nudibranchs have evolved chemical defences to deter predators. Some acquire these toxins from their diet, while others produce their own.

Scientists have discovered that these compounds possess promising medical potential, with possible applications ranging from anti-cancer to anti-inflammatory properties. The study of these biochemical marvels could lead to significant medical breakthroughs, offering yet another compelling reason to preserve their habitats.

A Delicate Ecosystem at Risk

As beautiful and ecologically vital as they are, nudibranchs and other sea slugs face numerous threats. Climate change, pollution, habitat destruction, and overfishing all pose significant dangers to Gozo's marine life. Rising sea temperatures can disrupt the delicate balance of marine ecosystems, affecting the availability of prey species or making conditions inhospitable for certain nudibranchs. Ocean acidification, a direct result of increased carbon dioxide levels, threatens the survival of coral reefs and other marine

organisms, which in turn impacts the nudibranchs that depend on them.

Human activity in Gozo, while relatively low compared to more populated areas, can still have a considerable impact on these sensitive ecosystems. Increased tourism and diving, if not managed sustainably, can lead to habitat degradation, as coral reefs are fragile and vulnerable to damage from excessive contact or sediment disturbance. Pollution from land-based activities can also make its way into the ocean, affecting water quality and disrupting nudibranch populations.

Nudibranchs as Inspiration

Beyond their ecological role, nudibranchs have become a source of inspiration for artists, photographers, and scientists alike. Their surreal beauty, diversity, and peculiarities captivate those who venture beneath the waves. Underwater photographers in Gozo often focus on these “jewels of the sea” to capture their vibrant patterns and colours in close-up images that reveal their otherworldly beauty. Some artists use nudibranchs as subjects in paintings, sculptures, and digital art, introducing others to the wonders of the sea.



Figure 5: *Flabellina affinis*. Its vibrant colouration and graceful movements make it a favourite among underwater photographers and divers exploring the underwater world around Gozo.

For marine biologists, nudibranchs represent an endless source of curiosity and discovery. With hundreds of species still to be documented in Mediterranean waters, there is always more to learn about these creatures and their remarkable adaptations. By studying nudibranchs, scientists

aim to uncover further secrets of marine evolution, symbiosis, and chemical defence.

Sea slugs, specifically sacoglossan and nudibranch species, are marine creatures with a remarkable ability: some can capture chloroplasts from the algae they consume and incorporate them into their own cells to photosynthesise. This extraordinary process, known as kleptoplasty, allows them to harness solar energy much like plants. Among these, the most famous is *Elysia chlorotica*, also known as the "solar-powered" or "photosynthetic" sea slug. This unique adaptation is not only a fascinating example of evolution but also holds profound ecological and scientific significance.

The Mechanics of Sea Slug Photosynthesis: Kleptoplasty

The process of kleptoplasty allows some sea slugs to retain chloroplasts, the cellular organelles responsible for photosynthesis, within their own cells. These chloroplasts, stolen from algae such as *Vaucheria litorea* during feeding, continue to function inside the sea slug's tissues. The slug's digestive cells then encase the chloroplasts, preserving them and enabling the sea slug to produce energy through photosynthesis directly from sunlight.

This adaptation provides an essential energy source, allowing the slug to survive for extended periods without feeding. The process is particularly advantageous in nutrient-poor environments, where food may be scarce. The stolen chloroplasts, however, do not last indefinitely; they degrade over time. Yet, certain species, like *Elysia chlorotica*, can maintain their chloroplasts for weeks or even months after consumption. This is remarkable because chloroplasts typically require the genetic support of the entire algal cell to remain functional. Despite this, these sea slugs have developed the ability to keep the chloroplasts active independently.

Genetic Adaptation and Horizontal Gene Transfer

One of the most intriguing aspects of sea slug photosynthesis is the genetic adaptation that supports kleptoplasty. Research suggests that certain species of sea slugs may have incorporated genes from algae into their own genome, a process known

as horizontal gene transfer. This transfer could provide the sea slug with the genetic information needed to support the function and maintenance of chloroplasts over time, making the slugs partially "self-sustaining" in their photosynthetic capability.

While definitive evidence of horizontal gene transfer is still being studied, the possibility has profound implications for our understanding of genetic adaptation and evolution. If these genes are indeed present in the sea slug's genome, they may represent one of the few known examples of horizontal gene transfer in multicellular organisms. This could reveal a whole new aspect of evolutionary biology and hint at genetic flexibility across species boundaries, challenging our current understanding of species adaptation mechanisms.

Ecological Importance of Photosynthetic Sea Slugs

Sea slugs play a vital role in marine ecosystems, and their photosynthetic ability adds an extra layer to their ecological value. By photosynthesising, sea slugs contribute to nutrient cycling in coastal waters. The organic material produced through photosynthesis can serve as a minor but important nutrient source for other marine organisms when the slugs are consumed or decompose.

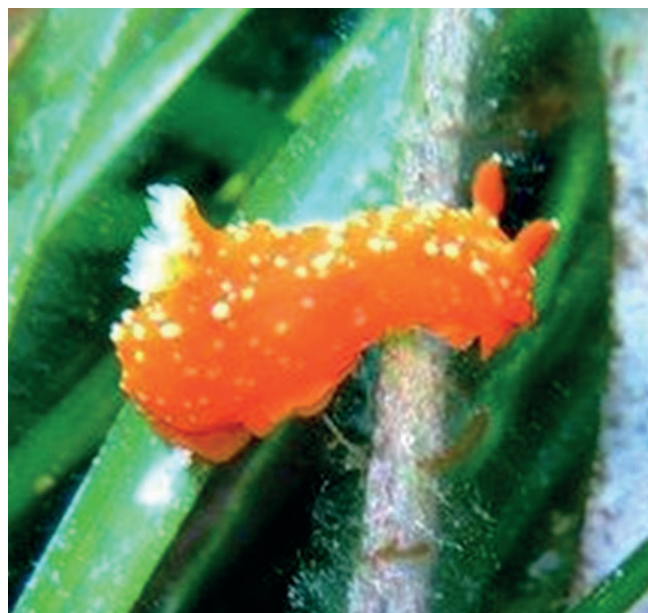


Figure 6: *Hypselodoris infucata* plays a crucial ecological role by photosynthesising via kleptoplasty, contributing to nutrient cycling and regulating algal populations in marine ecosystems.

Moreover, photosynthetic sea slugs may help stabilise algal populations. By feeding on algae and

sequestering chloroplasts, they indirectly control algal growth. This predator-prey interaction can influence the population dynamics of algae, particularly in coral reefs and sea-grass habitats where such algae thrive. Overpopulation of algae can have detrimental effects on coral reefs by blocking sunlight and depleting available nutrients. Sea slugs, through their selective feeding, contribute to maintaining a balanced ecosystem, fostering biodiversity, and supporting the complex food webs of these habitats.

Potential for Climate Change Research

Understanding sea slugs' kleptoplastic ability has significant implications for climate change research. The efficient conversion of sunlight into energy through photosynthesis is one of nature's most effective ways to harness renewable energy. By studying sea slug kleptoplasty, researchers may gain valuable insights into alternative bioenergy sources or enhance artificial photosynthesis methods. If the mechanisms enabling chloroplast longevity in sea slugs can be understood, they could inform biotechnological advancements aimed at creating more efficient solar energy systems or bioengineered photosynthetic organisms that contribute to carbon reduction.

Additionally, photosynthetic organisms like sea slugs play a small role in carbon sequestration within marine ecosystems. Although their direct impact on reducing atmospheric carbon dioxide is minimal compared to larger photosynthetic organisms like phytoplankton or seaweed, the presence of photosynthetic sea slugs in coral reef ecosystems may still contribute, albeit modestly, to carbon cycling.

Conservation Implications

The survival of photosynthetic sea slugs is intricately linked to the health of marine habitats, particularly coral reefs and sea-grass beds, which are facing increasing threats from climate change, pollution, and habitat destruction. Rising ocean temperatures and acidification stress these ecosystems, potentially disrupting the food web that sea slugs rely on for algae and other sources of sustenance.

Preserving sea slug populations is crucial not only for the biodiversity of the marine environment but

also for sustaining the ecological roles they play. As bioindicators, sea slugs are highly sensitive to environmental changes and can signal shifts in the health of marine ecosystems. Protecting their habitats, therefore, becomes an essential conservation objective, supporting broader marine conservation efforts aimed at preserving coral reefs, sea-grass beds, and associated marine life.

Medical and Biotechnological Implications

The study of sea slug kleptoplasty could also contribute to advances in medicine and biotechnology. The mechanisms behind chloroplast sequestration and maintenance within the sea slug cells might provide insights into cellular integration and immune tolerance. This has potential applications in developing treatments for autoimmune diseases or improving transplant success rates by offering insights into how cells tolerate foreign organelles.

Moreover, understanding how sea slugs maintain and regulate chloroplast function could aid in synthetic biology. Scientists are exploring ways to engineer cells to harness solar energy or produce biofuels, and the sea slug's unique cellular adaptation offers a natural model for integrating foreign organelles into animal cells. Sea slugs have essentially solved the problem of cellular energy acquisition in a unique way, and studying these processes could inspire similar methods for harnessing energy in human-designed systems.

Conservation Efforts and the Role of Awareness

To protect these mesmerising creatures, it is crucial to promote awareness and sustainable practices among locals and visitors alike. Gozo has the opportunity to become a model for eco-tourism and marine conservation by highlighting the beauty of its underwater biodiversity, including the often-overlooked sea slugs.

Local conservation efforts, such as establishing marine protected areas, enforcing sustainable fishing practices, and educating divers on how to interact with the marine environment responsibly, are essential for safeguarding Gozo's nudibranch populations. Simple actions, like reducing plastic use and supporting environmentally friendly

businesses, can help minimise pollution and maintain the health of these marine habitats.

Eco-tourism initiatives that showcase the underwater world, such as guided dives focused on macro photography of nudibranchs and other marine creatures, can raise awareness about the fragility and beauty of Gozo's marine life. When people see the vivid colours and fascinating behaviours of sea slugs up close, they often develop a greater sense of responsibility for protecting these creatures and their habitats. Additionally, diving specialities that emphasise conservation, such as eco-friendly diving practices and habitat protection, play a vital role in promoting responsible interaction with marine environments. By minimising disturbance to ecosystems and promoting awareness of environmental threats, divers can contribute to the preservation of the ocean's delicate balance.

Conclusion: Protecting the Underwater Jewels of Gozo

Sea slugs, especially nudibranchs, offer a rare glimpse into the vibrant diversity of Gozo's underwater world. They remind us of the hidden beauty that exists beneath the surface and the importance of protecting even the smallest creatures that play critical roles in the health of our ecosystems. As climate change and human activity threaten marine biodiversity worldwide, the preservation of Gozo's marine habitats is crucial.

By recognising and appreciating the beauty and ecological significance of these mesmerising creatures, we can help ensure that future generations will be able to dive into Gozo's waters and be greeted by the dazzling colours and graceful movements of the sea slugs. Through conservation, education, and sustainable tourism, Gozo can continue to be a sanctuary for these remarkable creatures – a place where beauty and ecology exist in harmonious balance beneath the waves.

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The Case of Dun Karm Cachia of Żebbuġ: Colonial Medicine, Stigma, and Cultural Hegemony in Mid-Twentieth Century Malta

MARIO SALIBA

Introduction

The case of Dun Karm Cachia (1882–1950), a priest from Żebbuġ, Gozo, offers an illuminating lens through which to examine the interplay of religion, medicine, and social prejudice in British Malta during the early twentieth century. His life illustrates both the devotion of a contemplative priest and the devastating effects of medical suspicion, stigma, and sanitary regulation.

This article reconstructs his biography and ordeal, while also situating his experience within the framework of Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. Colonial public health in Malta functioned not only as a means of disease control but also as a strategy of surveillance and discipline, embedding state authority into the daily lives of ordinary citizens (Gramsci, 1971). Dun Karm's experience demonstrates how colonial regulation extended beyond the medical sphere to impose forms of social control, often legitimised through fear of contagion.

Biography of Dun Karm Cachia

Carmelo (Dun Karm) Cachia was born on 9 December 1882 in Żebbuġ, Gozo, in a modest dwelling on Wara tal-Birgu Street, near the alley of the Cavalier at No. 19, Point Street (Vella, 1998: 12). His family circumstances were humble and following the death of his parents he lived alone. From an early age he embraced a life of contemplation, marked by devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and the Virgin Mary.

He spent long hours in church, leaving only for a brief afternoon rest. Despite frail health, he mortified his body and remained tireless in hearing confessions, even serving as confessor to Karmni Grima of Għarb (Vella, 1998: 23). Although intellectually able and



Dun Karm Cachia.

trusted by the bishop, he declined prominence, refusing requests to preach at the Cathedral (Vella, 1998: 18). His reserved character and avoidance of social interaction led to perceptions of eccentricity. Known for his modesty, calmness, and aversion to praise, he nonetheless suffered from prejudice and gossip throughout his life.

His biography, therefore, already reflects the mechanisms described by Gramsci: a “common sense” shaped by cultural hegemony, in which social suspicion and gossip reinforced the authority of institutional structures.

Suspicion, Rumour, and Sanitary Procedures

By the mid-1930s rumours circulated in Żebbuġ that he suffered from leprosy. Parishioners distanced themselves from him; vestments were set aside exclusively for him, and his confessional was occasionally disinfected. Though he bore these humiliations silently, the psychological burden was compounded by biblical associations of leprosy with impurity and divine punishment.

Contemporaries remarked upon his austere simplicity: he sometimes prepared soup from discarded scraps as penance. On one occasion, the vapour caused burns to his face and hair, which some misinterpreted as signs of disease (Vella, 1998: 26).

On 27 April 1936, the District Medical Officer, Dr Alfred Cauchi, formally reported him as a “suspected case” of leprosy. His name was entered in the *Register of Infectious Diseases* at the Public Health Office, Victoria, Gozo.¹ In accordance with the Public Health Ordinance (Cap. 36 of 1908), even suspected cases fell under compulsory regulation.²

Here the dynamics of colonial hegemony become visible: the medical report, shaped by scarce diagnostic resources, was nevertheless authoritative enough to stigmatise an individual. The health system’s authority rested not only on medical expertise but also on its role in sustaining colonial order through regulation and surveillance.

Medical Investigation and the Journey to Rome

Public pressure eventually compelled the authorities to order a medical examination of Dun Karm. The notice was delivered by the village policeman, Ċikku Saliba. Fearing compulsory isolation, Dun Karm left Gozo for Malta, staying first with clerical acquaintances in Hal Kirkop and later in Raġal Ġdid (Paola). According to information later passed on to the Rev. Frank Mallia by relatives of Rev. Frangisk Xuereb, a close friend of Dun Karm, after his sudden disappearance from Gozo he was, for a time, sought by British soldiers.³

Although his departure could technically be

construed as an attempt to evade health protocols—thus constituting a criminal offence—his purpose was not to defy the law but to avoid the stigma and hardship of confinement in an Isolation Hospital. Previously, Gozitan patients diagnosed with leprosy were sent to Malta for treatment, separated from their families, and detained until declared no longer contagious. Dedicated leprosy section in Gozo was established in December 1937 at Fort Chambray (Cassar, 2022: 254). Convinced of his innocence, he sought instead to vindicate his name.

Determined to prove the truth, Dun Karm travelled to Rome with the assistance of the Rev. Frangisk Xuereb and Vicar General Mauro Caruana OSB. There, two eminent specialists—one English, the other Italian—certified that he was indeed free of the disease. Relieved of this burden, he undertook a pilgrimage to Padre Pio at San Giovanni Rotondo, who strengthened him in his perseverance in prayer. On his return, Monsignor Andrea Vella recounts an episode that captures both the providence and humility of Dun Karm: when short of funds, he discovered in his pocket precisely the amount needed for his fare (Vella, 1998: 27). Such moments, coupled with his steadfast faith, reveal a man not only wronged by suspicion but also ennobled by resilience.

Life in Paola and Return to Gozo

Despite his foreign certificates, the Maltese health authorities refused to accept them, noting their reliance solely on clinical observation rather than laboratory tests (Mancuso, 1970: 201-4). Dun Karm was placed under monthly medical surveillance and remained in Raġal Ġdid, offering discreet pastoral ministry.

During the Second World War, as many sought refuge in Gozo, he returned to Żebbuġ. There he was welcomed by the parish priest, the Rev. Frangisk Mercieca, and resumed his ministry despite declining eyesight and physical weakness.

The British Authorities' refusal to accept the foreign medical verdict demonstrates how colonial institutions sought to maintain control by privileging

1 Public Health Office, Victoria (Gozo), Register of Infectious Diseases, 27 April 1936.

2 Prevention of Disease Ordinance Cap. 36, Government Gazette of Malta, 10 August 1908.

3 Personal communication from the Rev Frankie Mallia.

their own bureaucratic authority. In Gramscian sense, this represents the “disciplinary” aspect of hegemony, where state regulation penetrates everyday life, even when evidence is insufficient.

Illness and Final Years

By the late 1940s, his dermatological condition appears to have been inactive or “burned out”, and therefore non-contagious (Browne, 1952: 92). Nevertheless, years of suspicion had left psychological scars. His final years were dominated by near-blindness, but he continued to attend church with assistance, never complaining and offering his suffering to God.

Death and Funeral

Dun Karm died on 20 October 1950, aged 68. The parish death register records no specific medical cause. Sanitary regulations required a private funeral within twenty-four hours; his zinc-lined coffin was taken directly from his home to the cemetery under police escort. Yet, the people of Żebbuġ, many of whom had once stigmatised him, crowded the cortege, showering flowers as a mark of posthumous respect.

He was buried in common grave no. 30, covered with lime, as required by procedure. The next day a funeral Mass was celebrated in the parish church. This final paradox—an anonymous grave yet a public display of reverence—underscores the contradictions of cultural hegemony: official stigma coexisted with popular devotion, revealing fissures in the colonial order.

Discussion

The case of Dun Karm Cachia cannot be reduced merely to a personal tragedy or an instance of possible medical misdiagnosis. It illustrates how colonial medicine in Malta functioned simultaneously as a public health mechanism and as an instrument of cultural hegemony. In Gramsci’s terms, the state’s authority was not enforced only through coercion but also through the creation of “common sense”: a shared set of assumptions that stigmatised the suspected leper as impure, dangerous, and socially unfit (Gramsci, 1971: 323). The rumours that circulated

in Żebbuġ, the disinfecting of his confessional, and the avoidance by parishioners reveal how stigma operated as an informal extension of official regulation, embedding the disciplinary logic of the state into everyday life.

Public health policies under British colonial rule in Malta were intended not only to protect populations from contagion but also to reinforce structures of authority. The Public Health Ordinance of 1908 provided the legal framework for compulsory registration and isolation, even in suspected cases. Such measures granted administrators wide discretionary powers, effectively silencing the individual and privileging institutional control. In this context, the refusal to accept foreign medical certificates—despite their professional authority—appears less a matter of scientific disagreement than an assertion of colonial bureaucratic supremacy. It is also possible that the certificate he obtained indicated that he was not suffering from active leprosy, rather than confirming that he did not have leprosy at all; however, since no copies of these certificates survive, the case remains unresolved.

Dun Karm’s ordeal also highlights the fragile position of priests in small rural communities, where ecclesiastical respect could be undermined by gossip, prejudice, and medical suspicion. While he drew strength from spiritual conviction and the support of a few clerical allies, he remained subject to a system in which both church and state were reluctant to openly defend him against the stigma of contagion. His case demonstrates how, in colonial contexts, medicine and religion were often intertwined within the hegemonic apparatus, sometimes in tension, sometimes in collaboration.

From a wider perspective, the treatment of suspected lepers in Malta parallels patterns across other colonial territories. In British India, for example, the *Leprosy Act* of 1898 mandated the segregation of sufferers into asylums, justified by medicalised fears of racial degeneration (Arnold, 1993: 215-8). In colonial Africa, leprosy settlements such as Itu in Nigeria or Kalaupapa in Kenya combined medical segregation with moral discipline, effectively turning patients into subjects of both biomedical scrutiny and missionary oversight (Manton, 2004: 43-44). In the Caribbean, too, stigma often carried biblical overtones: suspected lepers were excluded from churches and denied burial

rites, echoing the social ostracism that Dun Karm endured in Żebbuġ (Vaughan, 1991: 119-22).

Seen in this comparative frame, the Maltese case reflects both the global reach of colonial medical ideologies and their local variations. Leprosy was rare in Malta, but its symbolic power was amplified by biblical imagery and by the island's status as a small, close-knit community where rumour quickly translated into stigma. Malta thus exemplifies how colonial hegemony adapted to local cultures: state surveillance and medical authority found reinforcement in religious associations of purity and impurity, magnifying the impact of suspicion.

Yet, as elsewhere, resistance and counter-hegemony were never absent. Dun Karm's perseverance in ministry despite surveillance, his pilgrimage to Padre Pio, and the anecdote of providential financial help in Rome all illustrate a refusal to be defined by stigma. In the end, the villagers' reversal of attitudes at his funeral—showering flowers on his coffin despite sanitary restrictions—reveals the instability of colonial authority. While official policy dictated suspicion and exclusion, popular memory reclaimed him as a holy priest. This duality underscores Gramsci's insight that hegemony is never total: it is continually negotiated, contested, and at times subverted by faith, culture, and communal solidarity.

Conclusion

Whether Dun Karm truly suffered from leprosy remains uncertain. The available evidence suggests a chronic dermatological condition misinterpreted as Hansen's disease. The foreign certificates lacked laboratory confirmation, explaining their rejection by Maltese health authorities.

His case illustrates how limited medical knowledge, social taboo, and strict sanitary regulation combined to inflict profound suffering. More broadly, it highlights the persistence of stigma in Gozitan and Maltese society in the early twentieth century.

Through the lens of Gramsci, Dun Karm's ordeal exemplifies the operation of colonial hegemony: public health functioned as a tool of surveillance and discipline, entrenching state authority under the guise of medical necessity. Yet his resilience, humility, and pastoral witness represent a form

of counter-hegemony, challenging the narrative imposed by colonial institutions. His story remains a testament both to the destructive power of prejudice and to the enduring strength of faith in the face of unjust suspicion.

Note: The present author is grateful to the Rev. Frankie Mallia, whose doctoral thesis, *L'Idée della Carità Pura della dottrina spirituale del Padre Carm Cachia (1882–1950)* (PhD diss., Università Cattolica di Rozmberku, Facoltà di Teologia, Košice, 2012), has been an important source for this study.

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Il-Poetessa Mary Meylak (1905–1975) – Kif Nafha Jien

CHARLES BEZZINA

F'dir-rivista universitarja, din il-kitba kontra s-soltu mhux qiegħed niktibha bl-Ingliż, imma bil-Malti, għar-raġuni li l-persuna li se nikteb dwarha mhijiex għajr Mary Meylak, li barra li kienet għalliema tal-Malti, kienet l-ewwel poetessa ta' l-sienja fil-għejjer Maltin. Meylak kitbet ukoll kotba ta' proża bħal ngħidu aħna storja marbuta ma' kull raħal f'Malta u Għawdex, avolja f'ħafna minnhom qatt ma marret. Għax hija ħabbet il-Malti qatigh u saħansitra tgħid li hija qatt ma żżewġet biex tiddedika ħajjitha għall-kitba bil-Malti.

Kien għalhekk li jien iddeċidejt li nikteb dan it-tagħrif bil-Malti, għax Meylak kienet iffissata fil-Malti. F'dan l-artiklu, mhux se nikkritika jew ngħarbel ix-xogħlijiet ta' Mary Meylak, imma se ngħid dwarha ... dak li naf, kif niftakarha jien bilqiegħda fuq pultruna fi Pjazza San Ġorġ, ir-Rabat. L-analiżi u l-kritika tal-poeżiji tagħha se nħallih għal xi hadd aħjar minni, il-Professor Immanuel Mifsud, li jekk Alla jrid ma jdumx ma jitbogħ ktieb bil-kitbiet tagħha miġbura.

Il-pultruna li fuqha kienet tpoġġi u tistrieħ hi, kien fiha min-naħa għall-oħra fejn tpoġġi jdejha, qisha biċċa għuda f'it wiesgħa, u fuqha kienet tikteb ... għax hija kienet timmedita ħafna u dak li jiġi f'moħħha kienet tiktbu f'pitazz, dejjem miftuħ quddiemha ... u taħseb u tikteb anki żewġ versi ... u dan kienet tagħmlu biex ma jaħarbux minn moħħha. U tista' tgħid kollox kien jispiraha ... anki jekk biss tara grampun imwāħħal ma' xi ħajt. Għax hekk il-poeżija, jiġik ħsieb, u jekk ma taħtafx il-mument proprju jaf jgħosfor u jtir mar-riħ. Jien li ndomm il-versi naf xi jfisser. Ġieli nkun ngħum jew nimxi u jiġini f'moħħi ħsieb li nkun nixtieq inniżżlu, u anki kif se nniżżlu b'mod poetiku. U meta nidhol id-dar ġieli dan kollu jdub minn moħħi u nibqa' ma nikteb xejn.

Kelli 12-il sena. Missieri wara x-xogħol kien iħobb jittawwal fil-ħanut tal-inbid u x-xorb ta' Dolara "Tal-Bellu", li kien fi Pjazza San Ġorġ. Kienu jkunu qishom madwar il-5.30 ta' filgħaxija ... wara



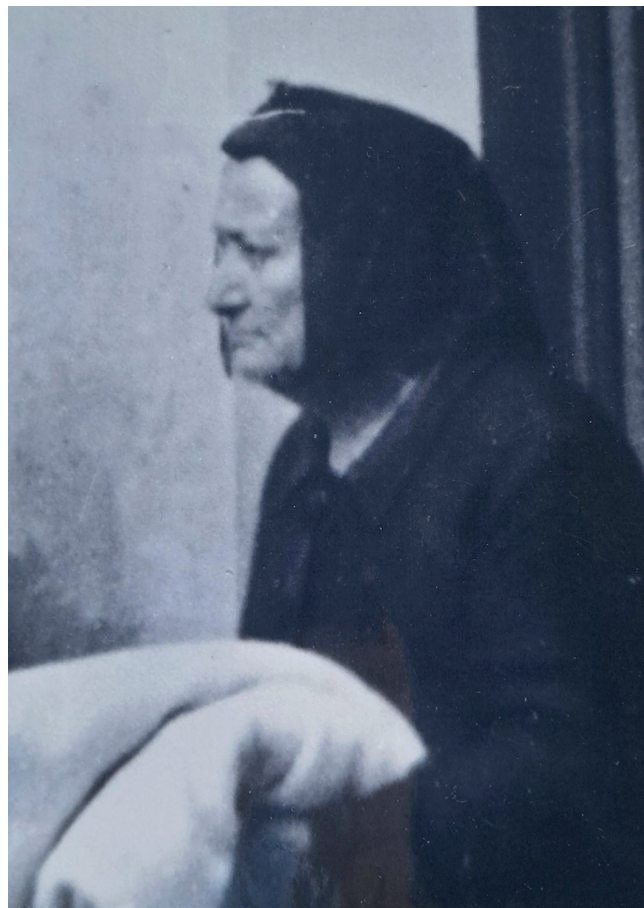
Mary Meylak.

x-xogħol ... u hu lili kien jehodni miegħu, l-aktar fis-sajf, għax fix-xitwa studju biss, inkella b'rasi jdur. Missieri kien jidhol fil-ħanut ta' Dolara, jiltaqa' mal-ħbieb u jpaċpaċ magħhom. Tgħidx fuq xiex kienu jittkellmu ... għax dwar kważi kollox kienu jpaċpċu u kulhadd jaf ħafna. U min ipejjep, min iqaxxar f'it karawett, min ilegleg xi pinta nbid, min jixrob xi tazza te ... u min moħħu fit-telewixin. Għax tgħid it-telewixin ma kienx ilu snin kbar li ddaħħal Għawdex, u minkejja li fid-djar kien hawn biss f'it minnhom, Dolara kellha wieħed fil-ħanut. Għalina dan kien għadu xi haġa maġika ... affarijiet li ma jtwemmnux, tad-dinja l-oħra, li tara l-istazzjon Taljan minn fuqu, jew li tara l-qamar meta xi astronawta kien jitle' fuqu. Meta kien ikun hemm xi loġħba futbol ... għagħa kbir fil-ħanut, għax min iżomm ma' naħa u min iżomm ma' oħra, u fl-aħħar jispiċċaw jitlewmu.

Il-ħitan tal-ħanut kienu miksija bit-triplaj miżbugħ lewn ħadrani ċar ... u speċjalment fis-sajf ġieli lmaħt xi wirdien ħiereg minn xi toqba minnu, u kokroċċ la ssemmix, is-sena kollha. Jien kont nixba' hemm



Id-dar fi pjazza San Ġorġ, fejn twieldet u ghexet Mary



Mary Meylak imdajha fiż-żmien.

ġew u għalhekk kont noħroġ barra u nara nsibx lil xi hadd tampari ma' min ngħaddiha. Dakinhar ir-Rabat fiċ-ċentru kien hawn ħafna tfal żgħar u mhux bħal-lum, kbar u xjuħha biss. Illum it-tfal jinsabu mferrxin fit-trufijiet tar-Rabat, fejn tela' ħafna bini ġdid. Minkejja dan, it-tfal illum ma jilagħbux barra ... għax il-karozzi żdiedu u l-mod kif ilu kienu jqattgħu s-siġhat it-tfal fil-hin liberu tagħhom, tiddel qatigh. Illum jehdew ma' xi laptop, mobile u l-bqija. Il-logħob ta' tfuliti sparixxa għalkollox.

Fil-pjazza, ġieli kien ikun hemm xi tfal, u ġieli le ... imma Mary Meylak hemm kienet tkun, bilqiegħda fuq il-pultruna, thares jew tiċċassa, taħseb jew tikteb. Hekk nafha lil din il-mara, dejjem liebsa l-bies skur ... b'parrokka f'rasha ... jekk mhux b'xi velu iswed, u f'idejha lapas tilgħab bih u ddawru bla heda ma' subgħajha. Jien ġa kont bdejt ninnamra mal-poeżija ... kont niehdu pjaċir naqra l-leġġendi ta' Patri Ġużè Delia SJ, mhux biss, imma anki poeziji ta' Pisani, Buttigieg, Meylak, Dun Karm, Cuschieri u oħrajn. Dik il-ħabta kienet taffaxxinani l-poeżija tagħha 'Santa Barbara'. Kemm kont niehu pjaċir naqraha u nerga' naqraha. Għax hekk kont jien, poezija toġġobni, naqraha kemm drabi sa ma nitgħallimha

bl-ament. U jien ta' zagħżuġ li kont, dejjem nittanta nharbex xi haġa. Kelli biss xi 12 jew 13-il sena. Meta ma kontx insib lil hadd tampari ma' min noqgħod fil-pjazza, kont immur fejn Mary Meylak ... u hi kienet thares lejja. Imbagħad kont kurjuż nistaqsiha x'inhit tikteb. Ma kinitx twegibni fil-pront, imma wara xi sekondi, kienet bħal donnha tintebaħ li hemm xi hadd qiegħed jistaqsiha xi haġa. U hi kienet tgħid ... linji ... linji ... poeziji. Ftit ftit, u hawn qiegħed immur għas-sena 1973, hi bdiet tidrani, u kultant tiftaħ qalbha u tibda tgħidi xi affarijiet.

Kien hemm xi punt fil-Konċilju Vatikan II, li kien ħareġ xi snin qabel, li Meylak ma qablitx miegħu ... tant li kitbet lill-Papa Pawlu VI. Stenniet anzjuża t-twegiba, imma li ma waslet qatt ... u Alla jaf kemm gergret. Għamlet xi xahar issemmiħieli u tilmenta li l-Papa ma wegibhiex, u jien kont indur wiċċi kontra u nibda nidhaq naraha tishon. Kont għadni żgħir biex nifhem. Il-gwarniċa tal-ġebel fejn suppost kien hemm l-arloġġ kienet vojta fil-faċċata tal-Knisja ta' San Ġorġ ... u dan kien jagħtiha fastidju bil-kbir. Ma nafx kemm iffittatu lil Dun Anton Grech Vella (Ta' Fenka) li kien it-teżorier tal-knisja, biex dan jieħu ħsieb jagħmlu. Imma minn widna diehel u minn oħra

hiereg. Dan nafu għax ġieli missieri kien jgħin lil Dun Anton f'xi lotterija li kien jagħmel għall-knisja ... u missieri ġieli kien għal ċertu hin joqgħod floku jbigħ il-biljetti tal-lotterija. L-arloġġ baqa' ma sarx. Mary Meylak kellha drawwa li tikteb lil nies li kienu famużi fid-dinja. Darba kitbet lil Luċija ta' Fatima. Naf li wegħitha u baġħtilha xi santi. Kemm ferħet meta rċeviet mingħandha. U għamlet ġimġha tgħidli. Darba wkoll kitbet lir-Reġina Elizabetta II. Il-Lady in Waiting, li illum naf kif isejhulhom, wegħitha u ħadet gost ħafna. Qaltli x'kienet qaltilha, imma illum insejt. Mary Meylak kienet ġejja minn familja li jbigħu d-deheb. B'hekk kienu familja li fihom mhux ħazin. Kellha appartamenti kemm Għawdex u kemm Malta. Naf, għax meta missieri kien jaħdem Malta, kienet krietlu wieħed tas-Sliema... iżda ma damx fih. Kienet tikrihom bix-xejn.

Mary Meylak kull meta tidħol il-knisja kienet iġġorr banketta żgħira magħha. Tgħidlihiex toqgħod bilqiegħda fuq sigġu tal-knisja. Le, imma fuq il-banketta tagħha. Niftakarha għand 'Ta' Nisju' li kien ibigh il-laħam, li kien kważi bieb ma' bieb magħha, u hi bilqiegħda fuq il-banketta fil-ħanut tistenna wara nies oħra bla għaġla ta' xejn. Qiegħed nikteb bla għaġla ta' xejn ... iva hekk kienu n-nies ta' dari ... jieħdu kollox bil-mod u bis-sabar. Mara tiltaqa' ma' oħra fis-suq u jagħmlu xi siegħa jlabalbu. L-irġiel xjuħ min bilqiegħda fuq xi bank il-Pjazza tat-Tokk jinki x-xemx, jew jintasbu f'xi ħanut u jgħaddu nofstanhar ireddnu. Imbagħad kien ikun hemm min imur il-knisja u qabel nofsinhar bumm ma johroġx. Imma wkoll il-ħaddiema li kienu jridu jmorru xogħol. M'hemmx ġenn biex imorru ... u l-mara li dik il-ħabta ma kinitx taħdem, imma d-dar tnaddaf, issajjar u taħsel ma kellhiex dak il-paniku li għandhom il-ġenituri tal-lum. Xhin niftakar f'dik il-ħajja nġhir, u nibki f'ja għal dak iż-żmien li qatt ma jerga', meta Għawdex kien liebes libsa modesta u mhux bħal-lum, waħda tlellex li ma tixraqlux. Fuq kollox Għawdex dik il-ħabta kienu jgħixu ħafna karattri sempliċi u helwin li kienu jlewnu t-teatru tat-triq ... iżda wkoll ħafna faqar, ħafa, u t-tallaba.

Kif semmejt, jien kont ga bdejt inħobb il-poeżija ... u f'waqtiet kont nipprova nħażżeż xi erba' versi. U jien, għax tgħid, għalhekk kont immur fejnha biex nitgħallim mingħandha. Kelli herqa li nibda nikteb il-versi jien ukoll. Biss dik il-ħabta mhux poeziji kont nikteb, imma tħarbix jew aħjar taħwid tal-bidu ... u meta darba ħadtilha waħda jisimha 'L-Għasfur',

malli ratha qattgħehieli, u qaltli dik mhix poezija. Kellha raġun għax la kien fiha ħsieb sew u lanqas binja suriet in-nies. Kelli xi 13-il sena biss. Imma l-fjamma tal-poeżija tiegħi kienet bdiet tinxegħel u tnewnem bil-mod il-mod, u qatt ma ħsibt li għad 'il quddiem nitbogh ħdax-il gabra ta' poeziji.

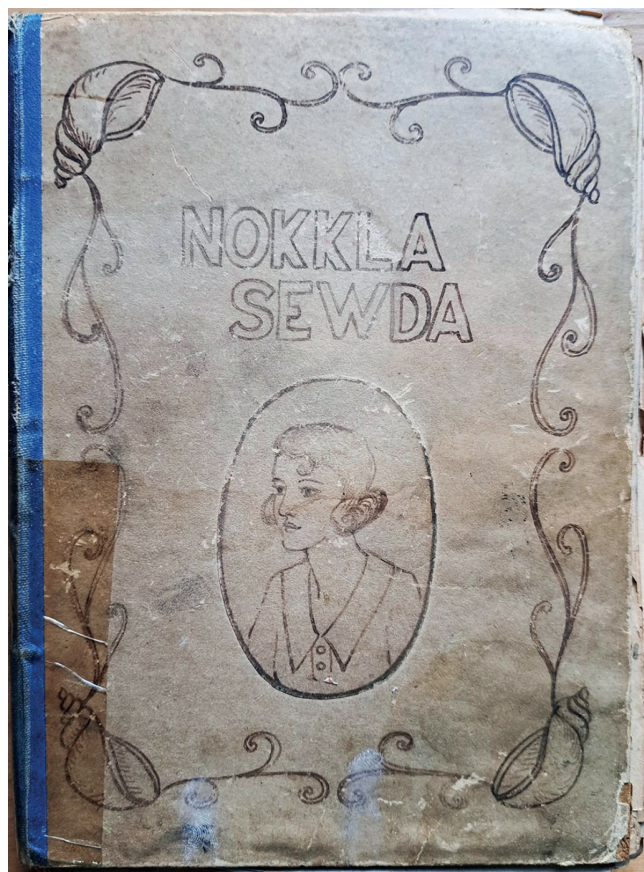
Mary Meylak fis-snin tal-gwerra kienet tgħallim il-Malti, fis-Central School, l-iskola sekondarja tal-bniet, fi Triq it-Tigrija, ir-Rabat. Kellha klassijiet studenti bniet. Waħda minnhom kienet Rita Galea ta' xi 13-il sena, li fil-15 ta' Jannar 1942, tard wara nofsinhar intradmet u mietet fid-dar tagħha fi Triq it-Tigrija, in-Nadur, meta d-dar iġġarrfet bil-bombi li ntefġu mill-għadu. L-għada xhin ma rathie x fil-klassi, Meylak staqsiet għaliha u malli xi ħadd mill-istudenti qalilha, u saret taf bl-aħbar, inħasdet, u sogħobbieha mhux ftit ... tant li għamlet xi ħames minuti siekta bilqiegħda fuq is-sigġu, rasha 'l isfel, u ma kellmet lil ħadd mill-istudenti. U fil-klassi waqa' skiet perfett. Imbagħad bħal donnha stejgret u b'herqa qalet requiem għaliha, mal-istudenti. Dan, qalithuli waħda studenta tagħha, illum mejta, li kienet dakinhar fil-klassi tagħha. Fatt li ġbartu aktar minn 25 sena ilu meta kont qiegħed infittex, nirriċerka, nistaqsi u nikteb dwar is-sugġett ta' Għawdex fil-gwerra. Mary Meylak fuq kollox kienet tiddarras meta tara kunjomha miktub Mejlak, jew Meilak. Ma setgħetx għaliha. Kemm kienet tirrabja u tishon meta xi ħadd kien jiktibhulha hekk ... għax tabilhaqq fil-kotba kollha li ħarget u anki meta kienet tikteb 'l hawn u 'l hinn, kunjomha dejjem kitbitu MEYLAKE. U kienet tgħidli ... 'imma dawn ma jitgħallimux kif jinkiteb kunjomi la l-kotba tiegħi kollha hekk'. Kellha raġun, u sfortunatament anki illum għad hawn min jikteb kunjomha ħazin. Meta se nitgħallmu niktub sew kif riedet dejjem hi!

Mary Meylak (Tas-Sabiha) twieldet ir-Rabat, Għawdex, fid-9 ta' Awwissu 1905. Studjat fl-iskola tal-Gvern, ir-Rabat, u minn età żgħira rawmet fiha l-imħabba kbira għall-poeżija. Bdiet tgħallim l-Ilsien Malti fl-iskola primarja fl-1925, fi żmien meta l-Malti ma kienx meqjus il-lingwa uffiċjali, meta l-Malti kienu jgħidhulu 'Il-Lingwa tal-Kċina' u meta sfortunatament kien hawn ġlieda kontra l-Ilsien tagħna minn ħutna stess. Għax tajjeb inkunu nafu li f'pajjiżna, speċjalment il-professjonisti u magħhom anki xi saċerdoti, kienu jtkellmu u jktbu bit-Taljan u mhux bil-Malti, għax kienu jemmu li l-mamma tagħna hija l-Italja. Imbagħad kien hawn

min iħobb lill-Ingliżi, għax fl-opinjoni tagħhom l-għajxien tagħna kien ġej mingħandhom, u allahares ma kinux huma. Bħallikieku d-dinja kieku taqa'. Kellna, għalhekk nies fis-sakra għat-Taljanizmu u l-Ingliżizmu, u l-Maltin li huma vera Maltin kienu ftit.

Mary Meylak kienet waħda minn dawk il-ftit li jħobbu l-Ilsien Malti. Għallmet il-Malti sal-bidu tas-snin erbgħin, għax wara bdiet tgħallem il-Malti fl-iskejjel sekondarji ta' Għawdex sal-1962. Meylak kitbet għadd ta' kotba ta' poezija, fosthom l-aktar magħrufa huma 'Pleġġ il-Hena' u 'Villa Meylak'. Għandha kotba ta' poeziji fosthom 'Dawra Misterjuża' u xi oħrajn. Kitbet ukoll poeziji dwar kull Gran Mastru ta' Malta u għadd ta' poeziji oħra fosthom dwar il-passjoni ta' Kristu u l-bqija, li llum għadhom mifruxin lil hawn u lil hinn u li whud minnhom jinsabu stampati fil-gazzetti. Tul is-snin tal-gwerra, Meylak kienet tippubblika spiss poeziji fuq 'Il-Berqa', anki b'rabta mal-gwerra. Fl-arkivju tal-Parroċċa ta' San Ġorġ hemm illum għadd gmielu ta' manuskritti tagħha. Meylak kitbek ukoll ir-rumanz 'Nokkla Sewda', diversi stejjer, u xi essays.

Ħabibi l-Professur Immanuel Mifsud ilu snin jiġbor il-poeziji tagħha b' dedikazzjoni, u nappella biex min għandu xi poeziji tagħha, jgħaddilu kopja tagħhom, halli anki dawn ikunu miġbura, bit-tama li fi żmien qrib ikunu lkoll fi ktieb wiehed. Min jagħmel dan ikun qiegħed iwettaq ġest nobbli għal waħda li għexet u kibret u xjiehet u mietet thobb lill-ilsien. Mary Meylak bħala poetessa tradizzjonali tibqa' l-aktar magħrufa għall-immaginazzjoni kbira li hija wriet fil-poeziji dwar temi, kultant strambi, li ma jiġix f' moħħok dwarhom; kwadretti ħelwin li jhalluk taħseb u timraħ fid-dinja kkulurita ta' din il-poetessa. Magħha trid titla' fuq it-tapit tas-sħaħar u ttir f' dinja fantastika li tieħdok lil hinn mill-konfini ta' moħħok. Meylak ma beżgħetx u lanqas sħat għax kienet mara unika fost hafna poeti rġiel, iddomm il-ħsus ta' qalbha u tissokta b' seher u b' mużikalità. U hi la qatt fittxet unuri u lanqas qagħdet tippoża għal xi ritratt. U għalhekk ir-ritratti tagħha llum tgħodhom fuq is-swaba'. Fit-28 ta' Ottubru 1995, flimkien tal-Kunsill tal-Kultura jien kont organizzajt fis-sala tal-Ministeru għal-Għawdex serata f' ġieħha. Kont tellajt konkors letterarju f' għeluq l-għoxrin sena minn mewtha. Għadni niftakar ġie jgħid dwarha n-neputi tagħha, il-Kanonku Joe Mejlaq, poeta iehor, li nħoss li wkoll jixraq li nfakkruh għal dak li damm u kiteb.



Ir-rumanz, 'Nokkla Sewda'.

LIL RITA GALEA

(Studenta tas- 'Central School' li mietet waqt hidma tal-ghadu)

*Hsibtek se ddum ma tasal, xhin gol-klassi
Battal 'il postok nara
U f' daqqa ġie x' hatafni għax tfal shabek
Gew tieghek tawni l-bxara.*

*Minn idi rteha kollox, qalbi ntghafset,
Għajnejja mtlew bid-dmugh
Għax Rita blanzun ckejken illi nqata'
Minn qabel ġie miftuh.*

*Biex dhaqtli dakinhar fl-ahhar lezzjoni
Fil-bieb sibtek tistenna,
Għedt mieghi l-ahhar Angelus u nfridna
Sakemm niltaqghu l-genna.*

Mary Meylak

Charles Bezzina, born in 1961, is a poet and a writer, who has published 26 books. He twice won the Book National Prize for poetry. He is also a researcher about Wartime Gozo and has published several books about this subject. He also delivers lectures to students and the public.

Bizzilla in Gozo During the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

SAVIOUR TABONE

Introduction

Around 1846, lace-making started to be organised on a professional basis. This meant that the production and selling of lace were fine-tuned, leading to improved efficiency, guaranteeing more profit for the lace-makers. In 1855, the Industry and Agriculture Exhibition, organised on the feast of Santa Marija, offered a platform for displaying fine examples of Gozo lace.

Lace-making was a very much time-consuming work, demanding constant attention to detail. It also meant a good income to that wide band of society who, before the dawn of lace, lived in dire poverty – so even the little return which they got out of selling lace was, to them, a boon.

During that period, there was widespread poverty in Gozo. According to Bezzina (1996):

This centralisation of the administration led to the elimination of Gozo from the picture and the island was left in a complete state of abandonment. The British who had so willingly replaced the Order did precious little to substitute the foreign revenue previously spent in the island. Besides, due to several reasons, the cotton industry had failed. The result was widespread poverty. As attested by the 1836 Royal Commission instituted to inquire into the affairs of Malta and Gozo, poverty reigned supreme on Gozo.

The Benefits of Lace-work

In his booklet *Memorji u Taghlim* (Anon, 1920), Ġużeppi Diacono (a priest) indicated that, on average lace-makers made 3 pence (*tliet soldi*) per day. Others received a higher pay, up to a shilling (12 pence) per day, depending on the level of skill and accuracy with the original design.

Overall, around 1816, Diacono calculated that the net profit (after all costs were paid) for all Gozitan

lace-makers was that of £31,800 annually. This meant that, on average, the 6,800 lace-makers in Gozo earned £4.68 annually – some got more, others got less, depending on the grade of the finished work.

It was not mainly the lace-makers who profited most – as theirs was a relatively low remuneration. The merchant middlemen were the ones who earned the lion's share. To add insult to injury, the middlemen often forced the lace-makers to lower their selling price so as to increase their merchants' margin of profit, which, according to Diacono, led to thousands of pounds being earned by Gozitan and Maltese traders in lace-work.

Diacono argued that lace-working, apart from material gains, was also spiritually beneficial for women, mainly because:

1. Women were kept busy and did not loiter, hence gaining spiritual respite. Perhaps, Diacono was referring to the Maltese proverb “laziness is mother of all evils” (*l-għažż hu missier il-vizzi*).
2. Lace-work meant that women spent their time inside their houses, hence lessening the chance to sin.
3. Being gainfully occupied, also meant that they could afford to buy new clothes and other needs without the need to borrow money.
4. With the money that they gained from lace-making, women were also at the forefront in helping churches' embellishment, financially supporting ongoing projects and producing altar cloths as well as lace for the priests' liturgical vestments.

Why did Diacono Write *Memorji u Taghlim*?

Diacono wanted to write this booklet to preserve, for generations to come, the memory and usefulness of the lace-making industry. Before his time, there wasn't any published work about Gozo Lace. All was kept alive via oral tradition. Diacono could have been aware that he was living and experiencing the



The lace-making class and their teachers at the Casa Industriale in Xaghra.

last few years of the lace industry, mainly because its price had fallen due to the supply being larger than the demand, and because the merchants were more interested in profits, often exploiting the lace-makers. The worst problem was that those who should have known best about the preservation of the lace industry, were very reluctant to act.

Diacono finished writing the booklet in 1916 when he was 68 years old, in the middle of the First World War, which was a period of great uncertainty. He published the booklet in 1920. One might wonder why there was a four-year gap between finishing writing the script and publishing it. Probably, in 1916, the economic situation was not as dire as it was in 1920, and this could possibly have led Diacono to think that the lace industry could survive. However, by 1919, the economic situation in Malta was far from serene, leading to the Sette Giugno revolt. In the opinion of the present author, when Diacono saw these events happening, he was convinced that the end of the lace-making industry was very near and so he published the booklet one year after the termination of the war, intending it to serve as a postmortem testament of this once great industry.

The booklet contained original lace designs, for one and all to see, indicating that he was not worried

that these could be copied, given that, Diacono was of the opinion that the lace-making industry was on the brink of collapse. But he was mistaken, as the lace industry survived, albeit facing competition from machine-made imported lace.¹ It is heartening to see attempts to revive the industry through various educational projects, including those held at the University Gozo Campus. Dr Consiglia Azzopardi, a lecturer of various courses on lace-making, continues to inject zeal, dedication and expertise into this craft.

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Saviour Tabone a teacher by profession and currently works at Gozo College, Żebbug Primary School. He recently completed a course on Maltese Lace, developing a strong appreciation for this traditional craft. His main interest lies in exploring the history of Maltese lace and understanding the unique techniques and cultural significance that set it apart.

¹ Lela ta' Strumu can be considered as the person who made every effort to preserve the lace-making tradition by producing and selling genuine Gozo lace from her tiny shop in Marsalforn.

Book Review:

The Gozo Airfield

Charles Bezzina,
Malta, 2025, 72 p. (Revised Second Edition)

REVIEWED BY GEOFFREY G. ATTARD

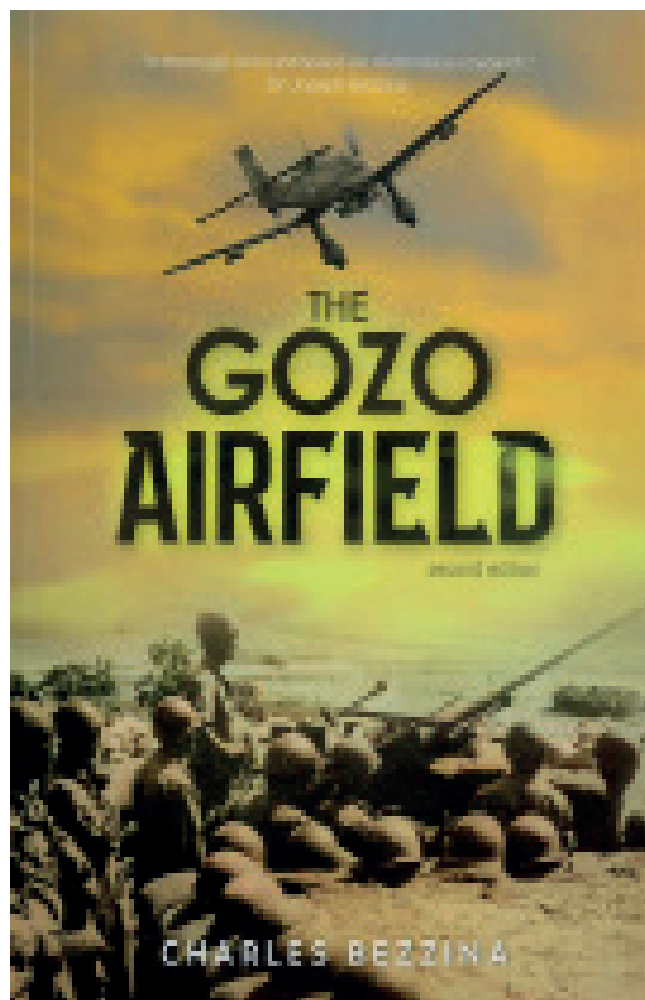
The Gozo Airfield is the name of the most recent publication by renowned Gozitan poet and writer Charles Bezzina. The revised second edition can now be read and enjoyed by all those who cherish the history of Gozo during the years of the second world war.

Charles Bezzina found himself in the best of situations when he inherited the documentation that his late father, Frank Bezzina, had collected as the Second World War was raging and affecting our islands. Coincidentally, the 16th of May 2025 marks the centenary from Frank Bezzina's birth. There is no need to mention that Bezzina junior continued where his father had left off; he made the best use of the diary his late father used to keep, but continued to collect information that had to do with Gozo and the war.

The short biographical sketch on the book's back cover reminds us that besides his poetry anthologies, Charles has written and published at least eleven books about wartime Gozo, gradually established himself as the main authority on the subject. Gozitan historian Rev. Dr Joseph Bezzina, who coincidentally is a cousin of the author, wrote in the book's blurb that 'this book is different from the several other war books written by the author... because it chronicles the story of *The Gozo Airfield* that up to now remains the only airstrip to have ever been laid in Gozo'.

Dr Bezzina further stated that the book is based on 'meticulous research', a characteristic that is clearly communicated in both the style and contents of Charles Bezzina's writings. Attention to detail and a clear, straightforward style are typical of Bezzina.

The author writes about the need for the airfield and its construction by the Americans as well as about the sad demolition of the renowned Gourgion tower which Grand Master Adrian De Wignacourt had



built on Gozo in 1690, in the locality known as 'Ta' Lambert'. Although the Americans had vowed that they would build the tower again after the war, the decision never materialised and one can now only see photographs of the tower, two of which appear in the publication itself. All chapters of the book are interesting, and the narrated anecdotes, reflected by first-hand diary entries, make it even more engaging.

Bezzina conducted research at the National Archives of Gozo and accessed the Gozo Hospital Records in order to enrich his publication by providing names and other important information about the soldiers

involved in a serious car accident that took place on the road between Victoria and Marsalforn on the 25th of July 1943, an accident that could have been fatal. The book contains information that is being made public for the first time, rendering the publication invaluable to History teachers and students alike.

Bezzina is a researcher who never tires but continues to surprise the general public with his extensively researched publications about a theme that is dear appreciated to so many.

Eighty years after the war the name of Charles Bezzina is now synonymous with the Second World War and its effects on the tiny island of Gozo.

The book can be obtained from the main bookshops of Malta and Gozo.

Book Review: Life is What you Make It

Michael Galea
Malta, 2024, 173 p. includes a reference list

REVIEWED BY MARIO SALIBA

"Life is What You Make It" takes readers on an introspective journey into their own potential, highlighting the ability to shape destinies through conscious choice, resilience, and purposeful intention. More than merely inspiring, the book encourages confronting dreams, questioning why so many remain unrealised, and understanding that within each of us lies untapped creativity and strength. Too often, these gifts are overshadowed by self-doubt, excuses, and fear. This work calls readers to challenge these internal barriers and believe in their capacity for growth.

The book is a captivating collection of stories and situations that beautifully highlight the resilience and strength of the human spirit. Each narrative is imbued with an overarching sense of positivity, demonstrating how hope and determination can triumph even in the most challenging circumstances. The author masterfully weaves optimism into every chapter, ensuring that readers are not only engaged but also inspired.

This is not a book to be rushed through in one sitting. Instead, it invites readers to take their time,



savoring a couple of sections at a time and reflecting on the insights they offer. Even after finishing, it remains a timeless resource – one you can return to at any moment, revisiting sections that resonate or discovering new layers of meaning. Its messages are always helpful and relevant, making it a book to cherish and revisit throughout life's journey.

Its impact lies in its honest portrayal of human experience. "Life is What You Make It" acknowledges that success and fulfilment are rarely straightforward. Life's unpredictability, unexpected setbacks, and moments of wavering confidence are presented not as failures, but as opportunities for growth. The book emphasises patience, persistence, and adaptability as key traits that distinguish those who persevere from those who give up too soon. Professor Galea's approach is both humble and genuine. He does not offer quick fixes or easy solutions; rather, he emphasises that meaningful progress requires sustained effort and resilience. His message is clear: time and patience, when paired with determination, can transform setbacks into steppingstones. The book urges readers to recognise that life's most significant achievements are born from perseverance and a willingness to endure challenges.

The essence of "Life is What You Make It" is a reminder of the agency we possess over our lives. Our potential is limited only by the courage to act upon it and the choices we make to harness or deny our own power. For those seeking growth, self-understanding, and purposeful engagement with life, this book is more than a guide—it serves as a mirror reflecting both our limitations and our ability to transcend them.

In a world often obsessed with immediate success, "Life is What You Make It" offers a more reflective perspective. It invites readers to pause, re-evaluate what truly matters, and pursue goals with deeper purpose. For anyone willing to look inward and confront their own challenges, this book serves as a powerful reminder that the journey to self-realisation is both meaningful and rewarding.

Authored by Michael Galea, an associate professor at the University of Malta and experienced clinical psychologist, "Life is What You Make It" draws on his extensive background in academic and

clinical practice. This fourth book in Galea's series on psychological guidance, and the first available in English, blends scientific insight with practical advice, reaching a broader audience. It is available in both print and as an eBook on Amazon at: <https://a.co/d/2vLdtte>.

Galea's expertise lends the book both depth and authenticity. He understands the fears, doubts, and excuses that hold us back and encourages readers to engage with their own paths to self-discovery and resilience. His compassionate perspective makes clear that life's challenges are meant to help us evolve, not defeat us.

Balancing realism with hope, Galea acknowledges that life is messy and unpredictable. Our goals may not align with our desired timelines, and failures can be disheartening. Yet, he emphasises patience, persistence, and adaptability as key to progress. Galea's reflections remind us that setbacks are merely chapters that build resilience.

In this English-language debut, Galea's voice is warm and authentic. The book calls readers to see their potential as something worth striving for and to persevere through doubt and hardship. Through every page, Galea shows that life is what we choose to make of it, and with effort and resilience, our aspirations can become reality.

For those seeking psychological insight and practical wisdom, "Life is What You Make It" offers a deeply moving roadmap to self-realisation, transforming challenges into opportunities for growth and helping readers become their best selves.

Recent Activities at the University of Malta – Gozo Campus

JOSEPH CALLEJA

Graduations

During the graduation ceremonies held in November 2025, two students who successfully completed the Bachelor of Commerce in Business and Enterprise Management and Economics at the Gozo Campus were awarded their degree. The graduates are Jeanette Grima and Mariya Said.

Courses at the Gozo Campus

During academic year 2025/26, the Diploma in Commerce course continued with its second year, while a new diploma course in the same area commenced in October 2025. These courses are being offered on a part-time basis with lectures mainly held on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings.

A new postgraduate course leading to a Masters in Health, Medicine and Society commenced in the same month. This course, which is being run by the Department of Sociology within the Faculty



The graduates in the Bachelor of Commerce.

of Arts, explores the ways that aspects of social life, on both a local and global level, impact health and experience of illness. It examines aspects of society at the root of processes where medicine, illness and health are impacted by beliefs, place and culture. Lectures are being delivered using a blend of methods: virtual (via live zoom), online



Dr Consiglia Azzopardi (centre) surrounded by the students during one of the lectures of 'LAS1082 The Art of Maltese Bobbin Lace I'.

via Virtual Learning Environment, or in-person on campus. Students resident in Gozo are following the lectures via a virtual link from the Gozo Campus.

The Centre for Liberal Arts and Sciences, at the University of Malta, continued with the offering of a number of micro-credentials. Each micro-credential consists of 28 hours of lectures, practical sessions and site visits. During the first semester the following micro-credentials were held:

- LAS1082 The Art of Maltese Bobbin Lace I
- LAS1085 Appreciating Antiques: An Introduction to Art and Antique Collecting in Malta and Gozo
- LAS2078 Maltese Lace - Advanced Approach 2.

During the second semester, the following micro-credentials are being offered:

- LAS 2044 Leadership in Action
- LAS 2050 The Art of Maltese Bobbin Lace 2
- LAS2074 Maltese Bobbin Lace: An Advanced Approach

The Department of Gender and Sexualities, within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing, is also offering a micro-credential entitled, 'Gender Based Violence and Domestic Violence for Police Officers'. This course is being attended by a group of Gozitan police officers.

As in previous years, the University of the Third Age continued with its programme at the Gozo campus.



The students enrolled in the micro-credential 'LAS1085 An Introduction to Art and Antique Collecting in Malta and Gozo', accompanied by their lecturer Mr Mario Cassar, during a site visit at a well-established antique dealer in Malta.

The courses offered during the first semester were:

- Modern and Contemporary Art History
- Treasures of Gozo
- Wellbeing and Health
- Explorations in Literature

As usual, the number of participants for these courses was very encouraging.

IMPULSE Project Pre-Hackathon Workshop Report

On 17th and 18th September, the Department of Digital Arts within the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences at the University of Malta, hosted a two-day online pre-hackathon to launch the prototyping phase of the IMPULSE Project



Participants during one of the lectures on 'Modern and Contemporary Art History' held by the University of the Third Age.



The participants who took part in the IMPULSE Project workshop, organised by the Department of Digital Arts (MAKS), University of Malta.

(<https://euimpulse.eu/>). The workshop, which was coordinated by Prof. Adnan Hadziselimovic, brought together educators, students, developers, and artists in a collaborative effort to design innovative digital experiences that meaningfully engage with cultural heritage collections.

The sessions focused on extending the functionality of existing software libraries and components to build virtual environments that foster both rich interaction with heritage content and vibrant social engagement. Working with an incremental, prototype-driven approach, participants documented workflows, tackled challenges, and set the groundwork for developing a high-quality, hi-fidelity prototype in the targeted application area, prioritising quality over quantity.

A strong emphasis was placed on artistic research and creative experimentation. Through speculative methods and performative engagement in metaverse worlds, digitised cultural heritage assets were reinterpreted in new ways. Artists reimagined collections within immersive environments, offering fresh perspectives and expanding cultural understanding.

The workshop successfully bridged technology, culture, and creativity, opening up new possibilities for innovative digital tools and experiences shaped by a diverse community of contributors.

Exams

As in previous years, University of Malta students who reside in Gozo, were given the opportunity to sit for their exams in Gozo. Thus, in September 2025, around 100 re-sit exams were held at the campus. During the January/February 2026 session, the number of exams held reached the amount of 511. Of these, 91 consisted of the WISEflow type.

Joseph Calleja is Manager at the University of Malta – Gozo Campus.



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Medicine and Society**

5 Semesters | Part-time Evening

*Students residing in Gozo have the possibility to
follow the course virtually at the Gozo Campus*



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The Gozo Observer is published twice a year by the University of Malta - Gozo Campus. It contains articles relating to all aspects of life in Gozo, including culture, education, business, arts and literature. Those wishing to submit articles for inclusion in the Gozo Observer should contact the Editor of the magazine (contact details below).

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