

STORY OF A BOOK

Questi non hanno speranza di morte.
E la lor cieca vita è tanto bassa,
Che invidiosi son d'ogni altra sorte.
Fama di loro il mondo esser non lassa;
Misericordia e giustizia li sdegna:
Non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa.
(Divina Commedia, Inferno, III, 46-51)

I feel I just cannot hide some of the more revealing episodes at high-level that went into the publication of "Lejn Tnissil Ta' Nazzjon, it-twemmin socjo-politiku ta' Manwel Dimech", as the Original Maltese version of "Birth Pangs of a Nation". Manwel Dimech's Malta' was called. The events in question, considering the relative harmlessness of the book in a supposedly post-Conciliar world, are nothing but a lasting characteristic of the closed society, where the least hints of pluralism are anathema, where the structure is monolithic by hierarchical sanction, where change itself is so slow as to be hardly visible at all. But no good will ever emerge from trying to bury disquieting episodes of recent history because there can be no faith in a people's future if their country's past, and its roots into the present, are hidden away from public knowledge and attention. Dimech is a living specimen of the small society's behaviour in function, a case in point which should interest observers of human nature at work.

Manwel Dimech knew how cruel the closed theocratic island society could be. "O most beloved and dear to me Astarita", he wrote from Alexandria to his friend Salvu Astarita in Malta some time before his death, "I am writing to you with my body half-dead, under the very eyes of my hangmen. A thousand thanks for your nice words which I read with great delight although more dead than alive. God will give you the strength and happiness that you deserve. You have gladdened me before my passing away. So our dear 'Xirka' has not died. May He who is Great about all greatness be blessed, and you too for remembering me. Dear friend, I have not forgotten the hour in which you, alone in a boat, rowed near to the ship that was going to take me far away from Malta, and bid me goodbye for a last time. Many times have I ruminated it during all this time. Joyously did I read that you are married and have children. May God bless them and fill them with the ability and cour-

age with which he has filled you.” (Dimech had been exiled by the British in 1914 after having been already excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church.) “The priests and the Peacock* wanted my death, and they have obtained what they sought. They used England as the means for their end. I pray that men of such race and breeding, and those others who helped my enemies to annihilate me, will never be admitted into the ‘Xirka’. Do not forget the great harm that they have caused us. They rejoiced when we cried.

“Remember I was the first to want a Maltese alphabet and a Society of Maltese Writers, but the enemy insulted us and obstructed our path . . . And the priests, enemies of the Enlightened ‘Xirka’, who want to leave the Maltese in darkness so all the more easily they might devour them up, are still alive as well . . . Dear friend I have no more strength to proceed . . . ”

I ARCHBISHOP GONZI

In January 1971 I started publication of a series of six articles on the life of Manwel Dimech in the Curia-owned daily paper “Il-Hajja” of which I was the editor. On the morning that the second article appeared, His Grace the Archbishop Sir Michael Gonzi, called me urgently to his palace in Valletta.

His Grace was obviously perturbed, not to say enraged, possessing copies of the Dimech articles all dabbed over in coloured felt-pens. He bid me to his throne and asked me if I knew who Dimech was. He was left completely unimpressed by the fact that I had obtained a first-class university degree with the Dimech thesis. He knew who Dimech was; he was “an antichrist who died outside the church”. Like Cordelia in front of her *pater familias* I carefully replied that Dimech seemed to have had a genuine interest in church affairs. But I could not excuse him. I should have been ashamed of myself to write about such a character in their paper. That was something they would never permit. Dimech had worried Bishop Pietro Pace ever so much, and disobeyed him. All these events were so recent. His Grace remembered confronting Dimech personally at the Vittoriosa

* Guzè Muscat Azzopardi — who was editor of the church newspapers “Is-Salib” and “Il-Habib.”

Gates, together with other young seminarians, and scolding him. "Dimech", Sir Michael had hailed him with a pointed finger, "these Gates you will not pass, here you will not enter!" That was Dimech, "an excommunicated person who died outside the church". He did not go to Mass. But how could I stop the articles which had already been promised to the readers? Immediately, as from that moment, the articles would have to stop once and for all. That was their paper not mine and that order could not be disobeyed. The memory of such a character could not be revived.

When the sixth article duly concluded the first part of the study, following consultations with my editorial board, I stopped the writings. In a front-page declaration in my paper I informed the many interested readers that all writings on Dimech would stop, but that the study would be published in book-form "so that the people would come to know the origins of Maltese socialism and nationalism."

II EMPIRE PRESS

I continued work on the book, translating my English-language thesis into Maltese, and by February had handed in the manuscript to the Director of the Empire Press, another Curia-owned enterprise, which had already printed my earlier study on the Maltese Revolution of 1919. At that time I was eager to have the book out as soon as possible since there was a general election fast approaching.

After much dilly-dallying I made an unpleasant discovery.

The MSS had been handed to some Monsignori for a moral evaluation. Who had given the Director of the Empire Press, a priest, permission to circulate my MSS like that? Nobody. Where were the manuscripts then? The Empire Press had better not print that book. The Bishop Coadjutor wanted to see me about it.

III BISHOP GERADA

There they were — sprawled all over his office desk. His Lordship, Malta's Chief Bishop, too had been scrutinising my writings. "Henry, forget about publishing this book, it is too polemical", His Lordship, 53, didactically told me as he gently took me by the arm. Had he read it? Not all, but certain parts were definitely objectionable. It would be too much for the

Nationalists, who had criticised him enough already. I did not know about the Nationalists, what I knew was that the MSS were my private property.

But why was I so upset? His Lordship was not prohibiting publication, he merely wanted the work revised. Otherwise it might raise the politico-religious question once more.

There was that bit about Dimech's desire to make the Maltese family less religiocentric, for example. That might be associated with what Mr. Mintoff, then Leader of the Opposition, had told Mr. P.A.C. Brockington of "The Guardian", an interview in which the former had expressed his belief that family ties should be horizontal rather than vertical. Then there was another bit, regarding what Dimech thought of Baby Jesus, surely that was heretical.

Present for this conversation was His Lordship's secretary, the brother of "Il-Hajja's" manager, who kept interrupting to say that everybody knew me as the editor of "Il-Hajja" and that I could not publish the work — "and certainly not until we'll after the election will be over." At this point, I was ready to give His Lordship my salary in return for my individuality.

However, it wasn't so much Mgr. Emanuele Gerada who objected to the study, there were "others".

As a *coup de grace*, the Bishop bade me consult myself with a University Professor who, he assumed, would subscribe to his opinions. We left it at that; but I carried the MSS away with me.

IV DOM MINTOFF

By this time a newly-formed book club, *Klabb Kotba Maltin*, had taken a keen interest in the study and were prepared to publish it themselves as soon as possible. I gave it to them. The book never saw the light of day until two months after the elections.

In June however, on the very eve of the election, my interest in Dimech made possible a two-hour tape-recorded interview with the Leader of the Opposition, now Prime Minister, Mr. Dom Mintoff.

Mr. Mintoff accepted to be so interviewed, many thanks to my academic association with Dimech.

When I met Mr Mintoff at the Malta Labour Party Head-

quarters, he would not at first have the interview recorded. So for a while, unrecorded, we discussed Manwel Dimech.

Dimech was an interesting figure, but he was an anarchist. That was something I would not have said of him. He had heard about Dimech from various labourites who remembered him. I myself had spoken to a few old Dimechjani; and there were others who knew him. There was a lot to say about Dimech; I should check my sources well. "When is this book coming out, I must see it". Here I explained why the book was still unpublished. And as I did, Mr Mintoff's eyes narrowed and, glowing seemed to pierce the spectacle lens; I felt a steadfast and defiant look that to me seemed full of ejaculations.

But he said nothing.

So, would we start recording? "Switch on".

V THE DIMECH BRIDGE

"Lejn Tniissil Ta' Nazzjon", subtitled "It-twemmin soċjo-politiku ta' Manwel Dimech", appeared at long last in August. After a long and heated controversy about Dimech in "Il-Hajja", Dimech had been mentioned favourably in a Malta Labour Party publication called "Il-Qawmien tal-Haddiem Malti". The appearance of the book, then, answered some of the queries and suppositions which had arisen as a result of the sudden stoppage of the Dimech articles in "Il-Hajja" earlier.

In September the newly-elected Labour Government named the Sliema Regional Road Project bridge after Manuel Dimech.

In a news item in my paper, this event had been briefly hailed as the first official recognition of Dimech; and there was, too a picture showing His Grace the Archbishop with Minister Lorry Sant, in front of the commemorative slab. In the caption to the picture it was stated that His Grace had blessed the plaque. Next morning, Monday 20th September, when I went to my office I found Sir Michael at my desk. He had a bit of paper in his hand, which he immediately waved at me. Typewritten by himself, it denied that he had blessed the plaque; it asserted instead that he had only blessed the bridge project. Next day I had to print the Archbishop's correction in my editorial column. "It was you who wrote that report. therefore you include this in the editorial." It was a lie to assert that His Grace had blessed that plaque and he was ordering me unquestionably

to carry an editorial denial. Breathless I consented.

Two days after that incident the paper's Board of Directors in a meeting decided to "terminate my contract" — they insisted that they were not "sacking" me at all. I had been the editor of "Il-Hajja" for thirteen months.

VI THE SACKING

On the 29th September I received a letter terminating my employment and enclosing notice money, a decision which had been taken at a meeting of the 22nd of the month. I was to cease being editor of the paper from next day and also to cease being a member of the same Board of Directors of which until then I had been the Assistant Secretary. I was asked to go and collect my things from the office, to return the keys and the documents that I had and I was finally thanked for my services to the paper, which had, incidentally come to be regarded as a national paper during my tenure of office having greatly increased its sales, and bettered its image and reputation. Certain influential Board members, including the vice-chairman and the legal adviser, were not informed of the 22nd September meeting.

That was nearly the last in a series of sensations. What was left was a *case celebre* in H.M. Criminal Court since the Labour Office, on my behalf, immediately instituted proceedings against the chairman of the Board. I also instituted an action against the paper's acting editor for a heavily incriminating affidavit, taken by two priests and a monk from the editorial board, and published as a frontpage lead story in October. During these cases the writings on Dimech were consistently mentioned by the witnesses for the defence and the chairman of the Board of Directors, a layman, even told the Court that the Archbishop had called him personally in order to formally protest about the Dimech report of September 20th.

When the news of my dismissal was splashed it became common to associate it with the book on Dimech. However it is erroneous to assume that this book was the only reason. A pertinent coincidence, which has been rather hush-hushed even in court, is Bishop Gerada's objection to my journalistic stand on the question of church financial reform.

Early in 1971 the Vatican had asked the international financial consultants McKinseys to inquire into the finances and property of the Maltese Church; the American experts carried

their work to a close by presenting their report, a report which the ecclesiastical authorities in Malta would not make known to anybody outside the little inner circle of their Palace. Amongst other things, the report suggested that church money could be invested into home ownership schemes for the poorer sectors of the population, that priests should be better paid and that there should be an efficient, professional centralisation of all church property and finances. Mgr. Luigi Ligutti was sent from the Vatican to carry out this project. However all the devils of reaction obstructed his path and, soon after he came, he went away disillusioned.

On Sunday April 11th, 1971, Easter Sunday, two English papers — "The Sunday Times" and "The Observer" leaked out the news that Bishop Gerada was opposing the reforms and gave details of the progressive reforms set down by McKinseys. One article was entitled "God, Mammon and McKinsey" and the other "Making Maltese Cross". On Easter Monday "Il-Hajja" was the only morning Maltese paper to reproduce what had been written. Bishop Gerada and his small, intimate entourage, were just furious. The lead story I called "Il-Gazzetti Inglizi Jikxfu l-Karti" (The British Press Puts the Cards on the Table).

"In a clash of ideologies which must rank as a classic of its kind", Desmond O'Grady and Magnus Linklater wrote in *The Sunday Times*, "the Roman Catholic Church has come into violent collision with 20th century business efficiency. Last year the Church in Malta, whose power is as all-pervasive as its centuries-old tradition, called in the high-powered American management consultants, McKinsey & Company Inc., to advise them on reorganisation. The shock of the encounter has proved traumatic for all parties concerned, but for the moment it is McKinsey who are on the floor looking a trifle dazed. . . .

"They (McKinseys) found, amongst other things, that the Church was still tied to legacies, half of which were founded long before the twentieth century (some being actually mediaeval); they learnt that the Cathedral Chapter held 29% of the underdeveloped rural land belonging to the Church while its financial needs were only 11% of the total; and that 90% of the property payments were less than £5 per annum. . . .

"Archbishop Gonzi may have swallowed hard when he saw how drastic the cure was, but he took it in his stride. On September 14th a meeting was called in which he managed to per-

suade the most important potential opponent of the plan to sign a statement accepting the proposals. Bishop Emanuele Gerada is Gonzi's deputy and the man who succeeds him. He has close contacts with the Vatican through Giovanni Benelli, substitute to the Vatican Secretary of State and a key figure in the hierarchy. Gerada had to be won over to the report if it was to succeed. At the meeting, however, it became clear that Gerada was less than enthusiastic, and, in spite of his signature of the agreement, he prevaricated to such an extent that both Gonzi and McKinseys realised he had the power to scupper the report. . . ."

Then, in Court, where both Gerada and Gonzi through their lawyer made it known that their evidence should be heard, the disc ran that as editor I was a Nationalist Party supporter and "hostile" to the Mintoff party. A monk, who was a member of the Editorial Board and of the Board of Directors of "Il-Hajja", on October 23rd declared in Court that he knew me as an independent person; on October 29th he joined forces with two priest-Directors in a front-page affidavit to claim he had always known me as pro-Nationalist and anti-Labour. At the same time, Manwel Dimech has come to be understood as a symbol of the Malta Labour Party and in January 1972 Nationalist Party supporters blackened the bridge plaque with tar in retaliation at a Labour Party demo which tore down a monument to former Nationalist Prime Minister Nerik Mizzi.

Meanwhile the work of a special Commission, announced in mid-October, under the chairmanship of Labour Party veteran Karmnu Zammit, proceeds in earnest collecting funds for the erection of a suitable monument to this man Dimech. In November, a "Henry Frendo Action Committee", under the leadership of *The Financial Times* Malta correspondent Godfrey Grima, climaxed its activities by a protest march in Valletta, with the support of the largest youth club in the island, parading banners such as "Frendo, McKinsey, Dimech", "Sacked for being Independent" and "After Ligutti . . . Frendo".

And, for good measure, in a recent May Day mass meeting, Prime Minister Dom Mintoff inveighed against the clerical "Il-Hajja" administrators calling them ("rats . . . for whom the Labour Party was on the alert."

Malta, May 1972.

Henry Frendo