



# **NERIK MIZZI**

## **THE FORMATIVE YEARS**

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Andrew P. Vella Memorial Lecture, MUHS,  
Aula Magna, Valletta, 6th February 2009

**Henry Frendo**

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Enrico Mizzi, who died in 1950 in harness as prime minister of Malta, was popularly known as 'Nerik'. Between the wars, as the Anglicization drive drew strength in proportion to the loss of constitutional freedoms, pro-British newspapers such as Bartolo's *Chronicle* and Strickland's *Times* would refer to him teasingly as 'Henry', a name he did not recognize. In fact, at home, his mother, a Fogliero de Luna from Marseilles, called him 'Henri'. Malta's all-encompassing and apparently never-ending language question seemed to be personified in his very name. I remember when in the early 1970s the late Geraldu Azzopardi (a veteran dockyard worker and Labour militant with a literary inclination) had become interested in my pioneering writings on the Sette Giugno and Manwel Dimech, he had assumed that having been named after Mizzi, I could be nothing but a dyed-in-the-wool Nationalist. No doubt he had been named after Sir Gerald Strickland. But I had been simply named after my paternal grandfather Enrico, better known as 'Hennie', who was indeed a friend of Mizzi. The photograph of the young Mizzi we are projecting here belonged to him, with a dedication across the bottom part of it "all'amico Enrico". In fact, however, Hennie had contested his first and only general election in 1921 as a Labour Party candidate, becoming its assistant secretary for some years and signing the MLP executive minutes in the absence of Ganni Bencini, a former Panzavecchian who had become one of the Camera del Lavoro's founders and its first general secretary until the early 1930s. Do not forget that no other than Mgr Michele Gonzi started off as a Labour Senator in 1921, no doubt imbued with the principles of the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, and others besides. Names, like loyalties, were determined and changed by institutional, political and cultural contexts, including education systems and peer group pressures. When my mother had once gone to the Mother Superior at St Joseph's Convent to tell her not to list and call me 'Henry', as there were other 'Henrys' and 'Henritettas' in the family, all having been named not after Mizzi but my grand-father - and therefore she had always called me 'Henri' anyway - the learned English nun had replied unhesitatingly that it was not possible: that was an English school so the pupil should have an English name. In this lecture, I shall refer to Enrico Mizzi as Nerik.

What were the formative influences on him? Born in Valletta of Gozitan stock on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1885, that by an unlikely coincidence was on the eve of what would become Malta's Independence Day fourteen years after his death. He was the son of a lawyer, founding father of the Partito Nazionale, otherwise hailed as the 'Pater Patriae', Fortunato Mizzi; and of an exceptionally cosmopolitan and linguistically talented mother, Sofia Fogliero de Luna, having Italian, French and Spanish ancestry or connections. As a child, Nerik attended the Jesuit-run Gozo Seminary and then Flores College in Valletta, a private educational establishment. To the former, founded in 1866, a number of distinguished Sicilian families sent their sons.<sup>1</sup> The founder and director of the latter, Salvatore Flores, who died in 1929, was a noted educationalist, author and rapporteur, a Christian humanist and a great admirer of William Wordsworth.<sup>2</sup> One of the first to appreciate the value of vocational and technical schooling, it was necessary, Flores wrote in 1897, to focus on channeling knowledge to students through the system of subject options, which would prove useful in the calling to which a boy was destined.<sup>3</sup> Nerik then read arts and sciences at our Alma Mater, here, graduating in 1906. In his late teens, Nerik was already active politically. In the general anti-British agitation and the Nationalist mass meetings of 1901 outside Floriana, at the height of the Boer War in the Transvaal, we find Nerik closely following the emerging student participation in more organized form through such institutions as the Comitato Permanente Universitario, the Giovine Malta, the Società Dante Alighieri; he became a member of the La Valette band club, where the first Giovine Malta meetings were held, and his father Fortunat was made honorary president. He certainly would not have been immune to strident cries such as "Malta belongs to the Maltese!" or "This is our land!"<sup>4</sup>

I shall focus on Mizzi's studies, writings and contacts in Italy between 1907 and 1912, especially at the University of Urbino, in the Marche, where in 2007 I was granted full access to Nerik's student records. On Friday 11<sup>th</sup> May 2007 I was invited to deliver a public lecture in the Aula Magna of that splendid university on 'Il nazionalismo culturale nel Mediterraneo 'inglese',

<sup>1</sup> J. Bezzina, *Religion and Politics in a Crown Colony: The Gozo-Malta Story 1798-1864* (Bugelli, Valletta, 1985), p. 80, fnr, 276.

<sup>2</sup> R. Mifsud Bonnici, *Dizzjunarju Bijo-Biblijografiku Nazzjonali* (Dipartiment ta' l-Informazzjoni, Valletta, 1960), p. 214.

<sup>3</sup> R.G.Sultana, *Education and National Development: Historical and Critical Perspectives on Vocational Schooling in Malta* (Mireva, Msida, 1992), p. 108.

<sup>4</sup> H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony: The Maltese Experience* (Midsea, Valletta, 1979, 2nd ed. 1991), pp. 121-122.

with special reference to Nerik, where he had graduated in jurisprudence in 1912; and next month, I am very honoured to say, the same university will be publishing my work entitled 'Colonialismo e nazionalismo nel Mediterraneo', with special reference to culture and politics in Malta during the British occupation, briefly updated to 2008. However, until I chanced to get to know Professor Giuseppe Giliberti, chair of Human Rights and European Law at Urbino during a Mediterranean inter-university congress in 2006, nobody at Urbino had ever heard of Nerik's association with that university, much less had anyone there realized that one of their alumni had become a prime minister.

Having been invited to deliver that public lecture, and afterwards to co-chair a seminar on comparative empires, I spent some days finding out more, tracing Nerik's whereabouts; his professors; the exchanges of correspondence concerning him, even his marks; reading his thesis; visiting and photographing the halls and the Aula Magna in the 'vecchio rettorato', close to the Palazzo Ducale, where graduands used to be robed in his time; learning about the University's own history; indeed about the city itself; and generally discovering what the ambience at that Alma Mater was like during the time that Nerik spent living and studying there when he was in his mid-twenties. Urbino University's rector, Professor Giovanni Bogliolo, a well-published author on French literature, had ready for me upon my arrival Mizzi's entire 'incartamento', largely in manuscript, from the university's archives. I returned home with a set of photographs and a pile of original documentation dating back to Mizzi's graduation ninety-six years earlier, on the strength of which he later obtained his Maltese warrant.<sup>5</sup>

Mizzi writings while still in Italy, especially during his last year there between 1911 and 1912, are arguably his boldest and most seminal, marking him for the rest of his life. Spending five years living and studying in Italy from 1907 to 1912, in the prime of his life, first at Rome, then at Urbino, after a first degree at Malta, during the formative and increasingly agitated pre-war

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<sup>5</sup> H. Frendo, 'Urbino: In Nerik Mizzi's Footsteps', *The Sunday Times* (of Malta), 3 June 2007, pp. 58-59; 'New-found alumnus premier', *ibid.*, 10 June 2007, p. 63.

decade in Europe, could not but have exercised a considerable pull on an already politically-conscious and alert mind, grappling with fundamental issues of self-identity, civil rights and international politics. What comes across mainly from those writings – at a time, incidentally, when Malta was without a constitution of representative government, that having been revoked in 1903 – is Mizzi's heart-felt drive to posit Maltese *italianita'* in a central Mediterranean context against the all-pervasive British military and political presence, a force he deemed to be altogether alien to Malta's cultural mind-set, lifestyle, geography and heritage.

## The Libyan war

Central to this recurring campaign against assimilation and absorption by “the Nordic stranger”, to whom the Maltese were in no way inferior, was an element (or at any rate a pretext) of *realpolitik*. Italy's occupation of Libya in 1911 and the subsequent Anglo-French entente in the face of a resurgent Germany, seemed to suggest that caught in between Sicily and Libya a ‘British’ Malta would stick out like a sore thumb just when, in any case, Britain was considering delegating to France supervision of the Mediterranean theatre. Hence Mizzi's suggested Malta-Eritrea exchange in *Il Convegno di Malta e una nuova soluzione della questione maltese* (Roma, 1912).

Mizzi was in Urbino when Libya became “un bel suol d'amore”. Throughout Italy, with the *patria* hell bent on redeeming the earlier humiliation of Adua, the air was dense with emotion, pride, prowess, controversy. One young Urbino graduate was killed in the occupation.

Urbino's rector was Professor Antonio Vanni, an expert in Roman law. According to Laura Ercolani and Paolo Giannotti, in the University's two volume history, published by it three years ago, Vanni was “un uomo di sentimenti democratici”. His reflections had nothing to do with the

exasperated tones of the prevailing nationalism: he wanted to explain to his students that besides the *patria* there was humanity, that the just defence of national rights should not go against a felt human solidarity. But test this against the text of his opening of the academic year address on 19<sup>th</sup> November 1911, where Nerik would have been listening attentively with his fellow students.

Vanni brought up the subject of the Libyan war which, as he put it, had profoundly bruised the nation. The young man killed in the war had been his student. But death, he continued, in the grave and solemn hour what the nation was going through, could not but reflect profoundly "sugli animi di tutti noi", and especially on his dear students, who were "la speranza della patria e che, con prodi che combattono una guerra di civiltà e riaffermano nella terre africane l'antica virtù italiana, avete comuni gli ideali." In the strong, persevering conquest of these (patriotic and civilizing) ideals, the students would be moved by the example of their comrade. A precious fruit of his commemoration would be an ever more intense aspiration "al compimento dei vostri doveri verso la patria e verso l'umanità".

Without wishing to suggest that turns of phrase in Mizzi's writings in *La lotta per l'italianità di Malta* or *Malta italiana* or *L'Italia e la questione maltese* were lifted from his rector's speech, what they do show is much the same discourse, and both certainly share much the same vision of the occupation: a war for civilization (*di civiltà*), reaffirming the old virtues of Italianity (*l'antica virtù italiana*); youths were the *patria*'s hope in pursuit of common ideals (remember Mizzi had been involved with the *Giovine Malta* ever since its inception, and would be its leading figure during the Sette Giugno). The phrase "dei vostri doveri verso la patria e verso l'umanità" could be read as taken straight from Mazzini's *I Doveri dell'Uomo*, but whether Mazzini would ever have had such an Italian invasion on his mind is doubtful. Times had changed, and Mizzi was caught in the thick of it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See H. Frendo, 'I Doveri dell'Uomo: Mazzinian Influences on Maltese Nationalism under British Rule', S. Mercieca (Ed), *Malta and Mazzini: Proceedings of History Week* (Malta Historical Society, Valletta, 2007), pp. 37-46.



To be fair to Vanni – and Mizzi – there was also an ongoing discourse about social mobility and making education available to the lower or poorer classes: “far partecipare le classi popolari”, “questa fortunata ascesa delle classi umili”, “un continuo contatto coi figli del popolo”.

In 2006 Urbino celebrated 500 years since its first and best known faculty, that of jurisprudence, had been started in 1506. Although Mizzi was probably the only non-Italian on campus, communality was not difficult as Urbino has always been a relatively small city, with the last edifices in town built in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1911-12, when Mizzi was there, the student population was 420, of whom 349 were in ‘giurisprudenza’. (The student population today is 18,000.)

## **The Renaissance and Baroque spell**

Urbino itself influenced Mizzi. It was more compact and intimate than Rome, with an ethos of its own. A splendid epitome of the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, where the Italian genius was at its best, difficult to match, and in breath-taking natural surroundings, not much effort was needed in such environs to challenge any assumptions of British superiority or civilizing mission in “l’ultimo lembo d’Italia”. All too evidently, certainly to Mizzi, Britain and its Anglo-Saxon Empire was no match for Italy and its Latin achievement.

Most famous in the making of Urbino and the region was the Duca Federico da Montefeltro (1422-1482) and his second wife Battista Sforza, immortalized in the paintings of Piero della Francesca, now at the Uffizi in Florence. The dukedom and its subject towns were incorporated into the papal states in 1626 until in 1860 they became part of the newly-founded Kingdom of Italy. Largely thanks to the Montefeltro family, however, Urbino became a leading Renaissance city, and it remains a not insignificant art centre even today - on exhibit at the onetime Palazzo Ducale is Raffaello’s

"La Muta", which some compare to Leonardo's Mona Lisa; alongside for example Guido Reni's David holding Goliath's head; but some other important paintings also have an Urbino-centred theme, foremost among them Titian's uninhibited Venere di Urbino.

In contrasting the looks and (rather more inhibited) wear of Mediterranean women, from Valletta to Siracusa, from Tripoli to Tunisi, with the British soldiers' red and black coats and their silly sticks, Mizzi's imagination reverts naturally to Urbino. Romanticising the *faldetta*, he quoted approvingly the French writer Rene' Bazin who had asked if it was not this (the *faldetta* or *ghonella*) which had inspired "l'Urbinate" to paint the Sistine Madonna's swaying veil, with baby Jesus in her arms. And who, pray, was l'Urbinate? There was no artist by that name. He was Raphael. Urbino was, and remains, "la patria di Raffaello". His family home and birthplace, now a museum, is preserved in a pristine condition.

Bazin's actual words, as reproduced admiringly by Mizzi, were these: "Si e' forse l'Urbinate ispirato alle grazie della *faldetta* nel dipingere la sua immortale ed impreggiabile Madonna della Cappella Sistina?" (*Malta Italiana*, Torino, 1912, p. 6, col. i) The reference here must be either to Raffaello's "Madonna Sistina", which is at Dresden's Gemaldegalerie Alte Meister; or to his "Madonna con il Bambino" of 1512, otherwise known as the "Madonna di Foligno", which the French had taken to Paris during their occupation but which went to the Vatican in 1816 (it is at the Pinacoteca Vaticana, not the Cappella Sistina).

Another telling painting, at the Palazzo Ducale, is actually that depicting the Trattato di Tolentino of 1797, wherein Pope Pius VI, in the vain hope of preventing the descent by Napoleon's troops on the papal states and Rome itself, signs away enormous church riches further to its north, in addition to territory, rights and an indemnity, to Napoleon Bonaparte. That was a few months before the latter's departure for his Egyptian expedition (and the capture of Malta) and indeed before the Italian anti-French outbreaks that soon follow in 1798 (and at the same time in Malta).

Interesting too, given this background, and Malta's, is Mizzi's reference in 1912 (*ibid.*, p. 1, col. ii) to the Maltese as "Giobertiani nati", Gioberti having been the one to propose the Pope as King of Italy during the unification movement, presumably therefore a lingering nostalgia for the 'Papa Re', or was that simply a pacifier to the British: Maltese *italianita'* was a traditionalist rather than a revolutionary one. What Mizzi really meant however was that so intertwined were language and religion, as in Italy, that the Maltese could not separate one from the other.

## The University experience

But why did Mizzi leave Rome and choose instead to go and finish his studies at Urbino? Whether it is true or not that he had some disagreement with one of his professors at Rome, as has been suggested, his transfer from Rome to Urbino was a perfectly regular one. His 'libretto d'iscrizione' at the Real Università degli Studi di Roma, consigned to Urbino, contained a detailed transcript of all the courses he had followed each year from 1907 to 1910, four years in all, with the names and signatures of all the professors who had taught him. The courses included one in Storia della Letteratura Italiana but for the rest they were all routine law subjects.

At Urbino, no less than at Rome, Mizzi registered of his own free will, and then transferred at his explicit written request, with all documents attached (even those of his earlier degree at Valletta). He had been admitted to the Regia Università di Roma on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1907. Following the advice of the Faculty of Science and Literature at Rome, his documentary evidence of a degree in science and literature studies at the University of Malta had been approved by the Ministry of Public Instruction by a letter dated 17<sup>th</sup> June 1907.

For 4 years Nerik had attended courses regularly, at the end of which he passed exams in these nine subjects: Istituzioni di Diritto Romano, Storia

del Diritto Romano, Diritto Amministrativo, Scienza dell'Amministrazione, Diritto Costituzionale, Diritto e Procedura Penale, Diritto Internazionale, Medicina Legale and Filosofia del Diritto. For reasons retained valid by the Roman university, on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1910 Mizzi asked to transfer to Urbino to continue his studies there. After regularly attending courses at Urbino during the academic year 1911/12, he passed his exams in the following seven law subjects: Istituzioni di Diritto Civile, Diritto Civile, Procedura Civile, Diritto Commerciale, Diritto Romano, Diritto Ecclesiastico and Storia del Diritto Italiano.

Academically speaking, like Borg Olivier and Mintoﬀ after him, Mizzi was no shining star; but, like them, he pulled through in the midst of engaging himself, like them, in extra-curricular activities, and in trying times. In his case, he was a rather prolific contributor to mainly Italian newspapers and reviews, mixing in such circles. His final average mark was 21 (in between the lowest possible, which was 18, and the highest possible, which was 30).<sup>7</sup>

There is no doubt at all that the Libera Università di Urbino was famous for its law faculty. The number of students registering in its law faculty was steadily on the increase from year to year. Moreover, at that time, Urbino was only a three hour direct train journey away from Rome. (Today it is not; the railway line was stopped in 1984.) Anyway Mizzi had already been in Rome for four years. His preferred subject was civil law, which was amply catered for at Urbino.

According to Michael Galea in his anonymously published recollections-based 85-page Maltese language biography 33 years ago, Nerik lived first at the Albergo Italia, then moved to the more modest Pensione Mercatale.<sup>8</sup> The former hotel still exists and is next to the theatre, less than 300 metres away from the Faculty of Jurisprudence, on the way to Piazza Repubblica. The Piazzale Mercatale, where Nerik's *pensione* would have been located, is just outside the walls at the entrance to the city; there is now a bus terminus

<sup>7</sup> This was explained to me by Professor Giuseppe Gilierti, who also had a look at the 'incartamento' with me.

<sup>8</sup> ANON, *Nerik Mizzi: Il-Hajja ta' Patrijott Malti* (Valletta, 1975); see also M. Galea, *Nerik Mizzi: Tifkiriet* (Pin, 1990).

and a car park but this used to be the site for Urbino's main market. Still more interesting and hitherto neglected is a photograph showing Nerik with five student colleagues on a cart in Urbino in 1912, all of them in period suits and hats, if not also sporting a moustache like him.

The barely legibile signature at the top of the front folio of Nerik's thesis typescript is by the *ordinario* (full-rank professor) of civil law, M. Ricca Barberis, who also taught 'istituzioni di diritto romano'. But what is possibly more interesting is the fact that Urbino had a new professor of 'pratica civile', to which the subject of Mizzi's chosen research for his thesis also related. As we shall see, this treats essentially of contemporary journalistic freedoms and practices as contractually safeguarded or otherwise. His name was Ruggero Luzzatto, who first went up to Urbino in the academic year 1910-1911 and stayed there until 1921. Professor Luzzatto has been described by Dottoressa Anna Maria Giomaro of Urbino, co-editor of the prestigious journal *Studi Urbinati di scienze giuridiche, politiche ed economiche*, as: "*studioso schivo e appassionato, che non volle mai esercitare la professione d'avvocato, neppure come consulente o arbitro, per poter dedicare tutte le proprie forze alla scuola e a una lunga attività scientifica, e che ha lasciato lavori giuridici importanti e originali...*"

Another Urbino don who would have a later resonance was Professor Francesco Ercole, who taught 'filosofia del diritto' and 'storia del diritto italiano'. He could well have been still more of a kindred spirit or mentor to Mizzi at a time when Enrico Corradini's Partito Nazionalista Italiano was starting out; and Mizzi was undoubtedly close to it, and much involved with its organ *L'Idea Nazionale*.<sup>9</sup> In 1928 Ercole would publish in Rome *Dal Nazionalismo al Fascismo*, on the transition from liberal to integral nationalism, a tormented supposedly revolutionary changeover which many people at the time lived through or were caught in. Some years later he would be named to head the education ministry. In the thirties, this 'Accademico d'Italia' became president of the Regia Deputazione per la Storia di Malta housed at Palazzo Antici Mattei in Rome's Via Caetani. It was

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<sup>9</sup> In his prison diaries Gramsci mentions Nerik three times but excludes that he was one of the founders of the Partito nazionalista italiano although he would have known Corradini, Federzoni and the like.

this Deputazione which, apart from other activities, would commission in 1939 Agostino Savelli's *Storia di Malta*, which Professor Ercole would personally present to the Duce in April 1943, accompanied by the author Savelli and the publisher Pierfranco Gaslini, Direttore dell'Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale.<sup>10</sup>

Colleagues at Urbino were intrigued by the slogan "resistere, resistere, resistere", to which I had referred in my lecture as Nerik's motto. From some research undertaken as a consequence by Professor Rozo Acuna and Dottoressa Marina Frunzio it transpired that this Mizzian exhortation - in Malta intended against assimilation and colonialism - owed its origin to a onetime law professor at Rome, who became prime minister at about the same time that Nerik was confined to a cell in military barracks at Verdala after his court-martial for alleged sedition. His name was Vittorio Emanuele Orlando and he was trying to raise the Italian national spirit after Italy's utterly humiliating defeat at Caporetto on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1917: "Resistere! E neppure il grido di quelle madri che non vedranno tornare alle loro case la giovinenza fiorente dei loro figli, resistere! La voce dei morti e la volontà dei vivi, resistere, resistere, resistere, resistere!"

Rather *avant-garde* for his time was Mizzi's choice of thesis subject: the legal implications for journalism and journalists in the light of changing technologies and expectations. Comprehensive legislation was required, he held, to regulate journalistic work practices in the light of fluctuating doctrines and a not sufficiently well-defined jurisprudence. This was the title of the thesis, as proposed in Mizzi's letter to Vanni: "*Si impone una legge che sottragga i rapporti fondamentali della locazione d'opera giornalistica alla fluttuazione della dottrina e della giurisprudenza*".

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<sup>10</sup> G. Casarini, 'Legami Italo-Maltesi 1940-1950', unpublished MA thesis (U.M., 2000), Cap. II.

## Protecting the journalist

Through the family-run paper *Malta*, Mizzi had been exposed to journalism since his very childhood, and he was very much of a publicist himself. The Associazione della Stampa and the Congresso dei Giornalisti (on whose organizing committee Mizzi himself had served in the previous year at Rome) had been concerned with establishing “una giurisprudenza tutelatrice dei diritti della nostra classe professionale”. Mizzi quotes at length to this effect (ff. 8-10) from a talk at the 1908 journalists’ congress held in Berlin, by Andrea Cantalupi, who chaired Rome’s press college.

One relationship which badly needed defining, for example, was that between owner and editor. How inviolable was a journalist’s contract and what exactly determined how or why it could be extended or terminated?

Mizzi’s preoccupations as outlined in his introduction are and remain very valid. For some time, he says, journalism, even in Italy, was moving closer to industrial organizations so that now the importance of a newspaper was often determined by its profit margin (“l’importanza di un giornale e’ molte volte stabilita dalla cifra dei dividendi”). This “mercantile” press tendency certainly did not favour moral standing, but on the other hand a rigorous economic underpinning even to journalism could assure and guarantee better salaries, reduce uncertainty and dilettantism (which, he adds, no Congress, not even the last one, had ever discussed or opposed). What the civil code required was “una legge speciale sul contratto giornalistico”.

He then looks critically at the existing literature and legislation on this subject relying, to a large extent, but by no means exclusively, on Filomusi’s works relating to the nature of a journalistic contract, delving into the ifs and buts which could be better regulated at law. These concern, briefly, the duration of a contract and its renewability or otherwise; the manner of remuneration and its implications; what distinguished definite from indefinite contractuality in journalism and indeed, if and as appropriate,

the estimate of damages; deadlines for a mutual understanding reached between the contracting parties; probation, and especially how to avoid its abuse by the employer, thus safeguarding the journalist including his right to compensation (*"il periodo di prova si presta a sfruttamento... liberandosi così da ogni obbligo di indennità e magari di retribuzione..."*, *ibid.*, f. 18) Before terminating a journalist's contract, he would have to be given notice, in the absence of which, his contract should be automatically renewed (*"debba intendersi tacitamente rinnovato"*). Should the journalist not be allowed a time frame within which to find another job? This had not been the view of the last journalists' congress, a view with which Mizzi apparently disagreed. There it was held that giving a notice of termination would harm the journalist, embarrassing him in front of his colleagues.

Distinctions had to be made between the capacity in which one wrote for a newspaper, whether simply as a columnist or in an editorial vein, the latter implying necessarily adherence to a school of thought, following a current or embracing a party. This phenomenon, says Mizzi, was most evident in political journalism but to a greater or lesser extent it was to be found in all periodical publications. In determining the notice to be given in the case of terminating an indeterminate contract, Mizzi wisely stresses, consideration had to be given to the fact that every newspaper writer was destined to face a range of enemies or adversaries (*"una certa schiera di nemici o avversari"*). Most importantly, Mizzi upholds the triple guarantee laid down by Cantalupi: an economic safeguard in administering a newspaper; a political one in the newspaper's policy; and a moral one, reflecting on journalistic ethics generally. What were a journalist's rights then if the newspaper's policy changed? Once again this leads him to legal considerations of modalities, including damages if an editor were constrained to leave by the owner. If it was the owner's right to change a newspaper's policy, was it not equally the journalist's right to be indemnified?

Mizzi also enters into the assessment of credit, mobile and immobile property from printing machines to editorial premises, including short and



long term interest, loans, lease or rent, once again aspects of life he would have been familiar with since childhood in Strada Zecca, and would remain so for the rest of his life. In other words, he makes the case for his thesis well enough: a comprehensive law about the journalistic profession was necessary, beyond vague assurance of freedom of expression and suchlike. What needed to be shown, had been shown. *Quod erat demonstrandum*, are its last words. As a *tesi di laurea* it was rather on the short side, no more than 32 faintly typed folios, but it served its purpose well.

## Premonition and predicament

With the advantage of hindsight, Mizzi's delving into such issues unwittingly betrayed a premonition as to what his own predicament might be in future. Little would any such law have helped him in the outrages that fate had in store for him as a journalist, editor, printer, publicist and indeed tribune once back home in the estranged Mediterranean fortress.

Nor was his expectation that the stronger Italy would be, the more would Britain heed Malta, ever realised. Quite the contrary, *a fortiori* so far as he was concerned, with his newspaper office broken into and ransacked, his newspaper harassed and stopped, whether Italy happened to be fighting for the Allies as in 1917 or for the Axis as in 1940.

What is worth noting, however, is the irredentist strain in Nerik Mizzi by 1912, the belief possibly linked to "una piu' grande Italia". This dimension had been absent from his father's discourse, although in other respects – cultural, geographical, religious, even ethnic – the *continuum* is crystal clear, Nordic stranger and all. Although, in his 1917 court-martial defence, Nerik distinguished between nationalism and irredentism as between thought and action, he did not deny being an irredentist at heart.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps there were very many more like him but few would have dared admit it, much less said that such a state of fact would hopefully become a state of law at

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<sup>11</sup> A. Sammut, *The Court Martial of Enrico Mizzi* (Midsea, 2005), II, iv.

some future date. It wasn't easy. But it is at least comforting that, so it has been held, Mizzi's *Malta* was never on the Duce's payroll.<sup>12</sup>

Nerik said more than once that he was prepared to lay down his life for his beliefs (which went well beyond any irredentism); and he nearly did ("l-aqwa fost il-Maltin", Mintoff called him in 1950). Essentially, to him and his followers, Malta belonged with the continental *terra ferma* and certainly was not a natural ingredient of the WASP variety, or even an 'Anglo-Maltese' variant of the genre. Whether Malta should have become (again) part of Italy was and would be a much more contentious stance, even in Mizzi's own party, which his wily successor Borg Olivier steered in a different direction. What remains equivocal is the culture-politics mix, or mix-up, that endured throughout the twenties and thirties. For Malta that, especially after 1933, as in the pre-war years, and worse still, was once again a time of rule by colonial diktat. So far as press freedoms were concerned, however, after 1926 Italy had precious little of these left, with Mussolini's office increasingly bent on clearing even the following morning's headlines. The admiration for Italy and Mussolini with it nevertheless remained, as I shall be showing in two works about the mid-1930s which are currently in the press, whether that could be said to have been at all irredentist or not. Under such a light, in retrospect, the formative influences on Nerik in Italy may be seen in some important respects to link up the earlier man to the later one, although Maltese nationalism remained predicated on an internal contradiction, for how could a movement aspiring to freedom from despotism close one eye, if not both, to an ideological dictatorship next door? To Nerik, Italy was not only the fountain of culture in Maltese civil life, nor just a political lever with which to win concessions from Britain; "it was a spiritual mother, perhaps like his own mother, a magnetic caress without which the Maltese people could not move towards their natural destination." Malta was the furthestmost fringe of Italy, the Maltese were by "natural attachment" linked "alla gran madre Italia". Nerik held the Maltese to be superior to the British, if not also to the Italians, unless the two were almost one and the same thing. The patriotic principles and sentiments of

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<sup>12</sup> J.M. Pirota, *Nerik Mizzi: Il-Verdett ta' l-Istorja* (Pin, 1995), pp. 1-33. These sometimes equivocal or inconclusive exchanges (including references in Count Ciano's diary) refer mainly to the inter-war period, especially the 1930s; there is no suggestion that Nerik's integrity was in question.

the Maltese, he wrote, should serve as an example to many of “our brethren across the sea and beyond the boundaries” (*i nostril fratelli d’oltremare e d’oltre confine*).<sup>13</sup>

There can be little doubt that a manifestly irredentist streak had crept into Nerik’s psyche and public discourse during the five years he spent in Italy and particularly it seems during that final year, the year of his graduation, at Urbino. That of course was before the advent of fascism as such a decade later. If Mizzi had harboured such an “oltre mare” sentiment earlier, he now found the strength to express it, and to elaborate on it repeatedly, once he had approached the end of his law studies. The changing international relations situation characterizing Europe and the Mediterranean was clearly a pertinent coincidence. That must have seemed a fit and ripe time for the emerging lawyer-politician to speak up fearlessly, as a possible realignment of spheres of influence dawned on the horizon for the future. His writings would also have been read and interpreted differently in Italy, in Britain and in Malta. The more so in 1912 when, in the face of a growing German threat, Britain was planning to delegate Mediterranean defence to France while it concentrated its own forces in the Channel and North Sea. That was the context in which the famous Eritrea exchange was proposed. Popular and loved by his supporters, Nerik remained always a marked man, insulted, harassed and spied upon relentlessly by adversaries and the colonial regime’s agents, in the 1930s more than ever, controversial even in his own party; but his courage and conviction, even as they mellowed, never faltered, whether in prison or in exile or in office. A very Mediterranean-conscious European, Nerik wanted a Maltese autonomy which respected Maltese culture, tradition and identity, as he fervently believed them to be: no domination by what he called “the Nordic stranger”; because as he would say, “*la politica cambia, la geografia no*”.

Whatever it was, there may soon be a memorial to Nerik Mizzi at his long-forgotten Alma Mater. One left-wing Columbian professor, responding in question time to my lecture, described Nerik as “un eroe”;

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<sup>13</sup> See H. Frendo, *Party Politics in a Fortress Colony*, pp. 155-156.

while another requested that I immediately send the University a good photograph of their new-found alumnus-premier, for framing and exhibiting in the main hall.

## Question and Answer session

Compiled and edited by Ivan Vassallo

**Q:** Had Nerik Mizzi obtained his first degree in Malta and what kind of degree was he reading for? Was it a post-graduate?

**A:** *Yes. In Nerik Mizzi's time the University of Malta did not have the LLB as a first degree. His first degree was in Arts and Sciences. He then proceeded to further his studies for the postgraduate degree in Law. His first Maltese degree was recognised by the Italian universities.*

**Q:** In Urbino did Nerik Mizzi take the LLD as a postgraduate or follow the five-year course?

**A:** *He took the full five year-course. Four years were spent in Rome and the final year in Urbino. He asked in writing to be transferred to Urbino.*

**Q:** What were Nerik's connections with the Italian Nazionalisti? Will this talk be published?

**A:** *At this stage I don't know if this talk will be published. On Nerik's relations with Italian nationalists, the Partito Nazionale Italiano was set up at the time that he was there; Enrico Corradini was there. L'Idea Nazionale, their review, he was involved with it. Sometimes it has been held that he was a founding member of L'Idea Nazionale, if not of the party. I cannot prove it but certainly he contributed to it and he published in it. In one of its very first numbers, we find Mizzi's writings. So there is no question about that. The more complicated question is that of the transition or metamorphosis from 'liberal' to 'integral' nationalism.*

**Q:** For someone born in this small country going to Urbino, and perhaps after Urbino, it is not surprising to feel a kindred spirit to and an empathy with the Italian culture rather than Britain's. There was once an interview with Professor Aquilina on Malta Radio in which in which Professor Aquilina had discussed the story of Nerik Mizzi, and this great vacuum of Maltese culture, this duality, that

Malta was part of this Italianita' but there still there was a greater link between the Maltese and Malta Being in another context you are very, very keen and conscious about it. Mauritania is an interesting case, where the French try to teach their religion in French.

**A:** *I accept this duality theory. I think Nerik Mizzi was thinking in a different way at a different stage. I do recognize the influence which Urbino – 'la patria di Raffaello' - could have had on Mizzi. No doubt about it, just walking through the streets of Urbino. You get lured by it.*

**Q:** You cannot but be influenced by Urbino. But there seems to be a conflict in identities.

**A:** *But there were two pulls. For him they were not conflicting but rather complimentary: the Maltese and the Italian pull. Of course in the context of colonial Malta you had many kinds of people were also benefiting; there was also this social engineering going on, the one gains at the expense of the other, you know. Nerik felt that there was a complimentary pull. In fact I have quoted a number of people like Manoel Mizzi, who is here, but also Carmelo Bonanno in Rome, who would see themselves as Italiani di Malta or Maltesi-Italiani, such a concoction but there's always the two. What provoked Mizzi's outburst in the Council of Government 1917 against what he called la proverbiale ipocrezia inglese was the attempt to have the Bible at school taught in English by an Englishman.*

**Q:** We know that Enrico Mizzi's ideas are in some way a continuation and development of his father's ideas, But my question is as to how these different ideas developed in time: are they a continuation?

**A:** *Yes, I would say there is a lot of continuity in the essentials. His father died in 1905 when he was 25. I would say that the main divergence was the fact that you had a transition from Mazzini to Mussolini, from the Risorgimento spirit to a Fascist one, to which it also related. So the Italian spirit, the Italian culture and its perception, being an attribute of Maltese identity, changed. Now how do you resist that? How do you go along with that? And that's where I see the main divergence,*

*that is, in this time, there were ideas of a piu' grande Italia, clearly when there was the debate on whether there should be an invasion of Libya or not. Fortunato Mizzi never spoke of irredentism as such, but irredentism in Fortunato Mizzi's time was oriented towards redeeming the northern parts of Italy, mixed with ideas of culture and social policy. Later on, if we read an electoral programme of 1921, I think we would find some ideas there which are more social and economic, probably are also a manifestation of that. But again I think that after the Rerum Novarum encyclical and the creation of the Camera del Lavoro i.e. the Labour Party, the 'Panzavecchian' Partito Popolare and so on, there was a growing force on the social wing, especially the rights of workers. And that figured too in Professor Vanni's forma mentis. It is absurd to limit our discussion of the political situation in Italy just to political institutions. There were also ideas which were not strictly related to the constitutional issue, which were related to the introduction of mass politics in society.*

**Q:** I was particularly interested by the comment that his ideas were already there by 1912, before the later rise of fascism in Italy. As a World War Two researcher I have a particular interest in how the advent of fascism played an impact in Malta - the political influence of fascism on the Italianita' di Malta. I took possession of a collection of documents which were issued by the Comitato d'Azione Maltese in Italy and they were referring to various instances in History for public consumption; one of them dated 1942 glorifying the internati by that time, and Fortunato Mizzi.

I'm most interested to know, keeping in mind that Enrico was kept by the authorities during the war, as to whether was he outspokenly in support of the fascist mentality, concept, philosophy, or whether he steered clear of this and stuck to his irredentist vision which I am definitely well versed in, or rather I came across a lot of it. Did this association include issues of pro-Italianity or were there were issues of being perhaps pro-fascist? I recognise it is a very dangerous topic and I do appreciate what time the people were living in during those years, and the context of politics at that time in mind, but is there any public writing by Enrico or any public statement either to support fascism

or to condone it? Have such expressions ever existed in a written format?

**A:** *This is a sixty four thousand dollar question, and a very complicated, because what do you mean by fascism? You mean an ideology?*

**Q:** Yes

**A:** *You mean the ideology...*

**Q:** Because the irony is that the ideology was motivated, created by a dictator and autocrat. On the other side of the spectrum, the British in Malta too were rather autocratic and used Malta for their own ends and they too were openly criticized by the Mizzis for their double standards in relation to the Maltese; so there were two realities, one the Anglo-Saxon ideology and the Italian ideology and I'd like to know whether Enrico took a position away from the politics of these ideologies and whether he stuck to the irredentist feelings or whether he simply condoned whatever came from Italy with the advent of Mussolini and the fascist party. Could it be that with his visit to London in 1932 demanding Dominion status Enrico Mizzi together with Sir Ugo Mifsud, Mizzi was aiming to give the space needed to Britain while aiming to preserve Italianita' independently of fascism?

**A:** *We need another lecture for this. But when we speak of fascism as an ideology, is Mussolini fascism? But there was greater support for Mussolini until the war, even Churchill at one point expressed his admiration publicly. So Mussolini had this charisma, and one observer put it, very often the people would listen to Mussolini as they did to Caruso, listening to the music without understanding the words. So there certainly was this charisma but if you are asking me whether Nerik Mizzi ever stated in writing his support for the totalitarian ideology I would tell you, no, he never did. But he admired Mussolini and like many other people in the Abyssinian war, when Britain was leading the campaign in the League of Nations, and then there were not just economic sanctions but also oil sanctions as well on Italy, Mizzi would have definitely been sympathetic to and supportive of Italy's position. If you read the Malta...then there was a lot of sympathy in public writings, admiration*



*for Mussolini and opposition to British-driven sanctions. Britain, of all the states, from a Maltese point of view, at from the point of view of all the colonized people in the world from India to Ireland, would not have seemed as being normally opposed to invasion, expansionism, despotism, militarism. So if there is an enemy of my enemy, he becomes my friend, that's almost a hackneyed phrase. Mizzi, like others, was caught in this predicament, and at the same time, as Ivan Vassallo said, he went with Sir Ugo Mifsud to London to demand Dominion Status. Now, Dominion Status was a status within the British Empire but it would have given a high degree of autonomy to Malta. What do you do when having just been elected in a landslide victory and somebody incites the governor, by a stroke of the pen, to sack the government and to revoke the constitution? How do you react? How do you do? So, there was this formal position of seeing Italy as a power to the elbow against this tyranny. That was how it was seen, a colpo di stato! A coup d'état, the abolition of the government after it has just been elected in a landslide.*

*There were a lot of sympathies of this kind. In the Abyssinian question, for example, you will find the Malta certainly not averse to the occupation. I quoted Mizzi already before that he would have almost seen it like a civilizing mission, equivalent to the English civilizing mission – in a way. You know the Italians would have argued that there was slavery in Abyssinia, that they would abolish slavery, the whole idea or pretext of a civilizing mission.*

*There is no very clear answer really to your question. There is an ambivalence. But I tend to see that time and perhaps suffering mellowed Mizzi; and you know partly because to live in Malta and to write in the way he was writing, before he returned in Malta in 1912, would have been suicidal and it was already. I think already it was, he was brought to court a number of times, the Malta was also censored, even stopped. There is no evidence that Nerik ever wanted or encouraged any physical violence against the state. His main concern was autonomy and more freedom. So there is what appears to be an internal contradiction.*



# NERIK MIZZI

## THE FORMATIVE YEARS

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Professor Frendo is chairman of the University of Malta's Editorial Board and Director of the Institute of Maltese Studies. He has been closely associated with the Malta University History Society since his student days, when it was led by his professor the late Fr Andrew Vella, O.P., B.Litt (Oxon), and acts as its vice-president; he remains the editor of its Maltese History journal *Storja* which he had started with Professor Vella and others in 1978 and is now celebrating its 30th anniversary in a special edition.