

Notes from MaLIA and Malta: where small need not mean ineffective

by Laurence Zerafa and Robert Mizzi*

Introduction

MaLIA, the Malta Library and Information Association¹ was established in 1969² by a handful of committed library professionals who were among the first crop of qualified Maltese librarians³. The history of the first 20 years of the MaLIA has been well documented by Dr. Paul Xuereb^{4,5}. Reading through our history one can spot that it has never been an easy task to promote the library profession and libraries in Malta. Two reasons that stand out are the small number of practising librarians and the fact that government authorities, financing libraries, have not shown a generous or consistent commitment to libraries.

Our informed guess is that around 400 persons must be working in the whole spectrum of libraries at present⁶ and that includes the part-timers and volunteers, who may or may not be qualified. A good estimate is that there are around 200 locally qualified librarians⁷ on the island not all of whom would necessarily be working as librarians. MaLIA only manages to retain around 70-80 paid up members. Finding members to serve on Council⁸, from this small pool of members, is never an easy task. Council posts are all voluntary and meetings and associated work have to take place after work hours using premises made available by third parties⁹ and generally using personal equipment. A look at the names of people serving on Council at present and in the recent past shows that several same names keep appearing in various positions¹⁰. Indeed we are a small library association but with the ambitious aim of representing the interests of



The 'Island of Filfla' one the smaller islands in the Archipelago which makes Malta

all library, information and archive workers in Malta¹¹, without the role of a workers' union.

In spite of this small membership base and limited resources MaLIA has made progress over this past decade or so and these notes document some of that progress as seen through the eyes of two Council members.

The Local Dimension of MaLIA

Laurence Zerafa

If I had to ask myself the question "Where did the impetus for the current progress come from?" I would say that it is because of a 2006 MaLIA publication *Report on the State of Maltese libraries*¹². This report could only happen because there was a good number of qualified library professionals and, in its turn, that happened only through the repeated insistence, during the 1980s, of various Għaqda Bibljotekarij Councils, that there should be formal education for library workers. This persistence finally resulted in the first ever University of Malta course for librarians in 1986. The Diploma in Library and Information Studies qualification was a two-year evening course aimed at

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students already in employment. It became a regular course, on alternate years, in 1993 and since 2006 is offered at both Diploma and Bachelor degree level and covers also archival studies. Library studies courses are managed by the Department of Library and Information studies, which forms part of the University of Malta Faculty of Media and Knowledge Sciences¹³

It was only natural that qualified librarians were in a position to ask pertinent questions about the local library scene which was perceived to be generally in great need of improvement. A number of such librarians, sitting on MaLIA Council towards the end of 2004, decided that unless there was a clear irrefutable picture of the state of libraries in Malta we could never make our case for improvement with the authorities and the public. And that is how the *Report on the State of Maltese Libraries* came to be published. The statistical analysis, the result of personal interviews, during 2005, with a representative number of librarians in all sectors of library practice (national, public, academic, school and special) gave us this picture. With this tool in hand we could talk with authority to whoever was prepared to listen and MaLIA started being heard and respected outside the immediate circle of its membership base.

The next project we took in hand was in October of 2008 when MaLIA proposed that the April 1942 WWII bombed out site of the old Royal Theatre House and adjacent square at the entrance to Valletta should be rebuilt as a national cultural centre to incorporate a modern state-of-the-art public lending library. Using social media and on-line petitions the idea garnered considerable support and was the factor that put the lending library issue

on the public agenda to an extent never felt before. Several letters written by the MaLIA council, the public and established columnists appeared in the press. Our proposal and its public support were forwarded to the highest authorities. Even if in the end the idea was not taken on board by the authorities¹⁴, MaLIA's name and the public library cause got plenty of exposure.

Concurrently with these events, during 2008, MaLIA was making a concerted effort to re-establish formal and regular links with the Minister for Education, which Ministry is responsible for the funding of the National, lending, academic and school libraries. One cannot make progress in the libraries sector in Malta unless one is talking to ministry officials. As it happened, following the March 2008 general elections, a new minister was appointed and good relations were established. These good relations paid off when on our insistence (for a decade at least), and under our guidance, a new Libraries Act¹⁵ was enacted in Parliament in August 2011. Essentially, as MaLIA had suggested, the new act created two legal entities;

- An autonomous body (funded by the central government) by the name Malta Libraries responsible for the National Library and the Public Lending library system and
- A Malta Libraries Council (MLC) responsible for advising the National Librarian and the Minister on Library matters

MaLIA took the leading role in getting all stakeholders together to discuss the draft law¹⁶ making sure that library NGOs are given the importance they deserve in the MLC setup and seeing this act through parliament within

a reasonable time frame. MaLIA is pleased to note that its objectives in this regard were achieved in full. In fact several of its members are on the MLC and the MLC is chaired by a MaLIA Council member, Robert Mizzi. MaLIA has good relations with both the Malta Libraries (the executive branch) and the MLC (the consultative branch).

Once the new act was in place the next phase was to make sure that public libraries have some essential tools in their hands to ensure a process of improvement. The new Libraries Act speaks of standards for libraries but never really defines them. Over the second half of 2011 MaLIA started working on a draft for library standards limited to the smaller public libraries found in each town and village. A number of them serve as branch libraries, under the auspices of the Central Public Library¹⁷. A few are administered by their respective Local Councils. In February 2012 these guidelines



Outgoing MaLIA Council March 2012-Feb 2013

Front row: Mr. Claudio Laferla (Deputy Vice-Chairperson, no longer on Council since Aug 2012), Mr. Laurence Zerafa (Chairperson), Ms. Mary Samut-Tagliaferro (Secretary)

Back row: Mr. Louis Cini (Membership Secretary), Mr. Victor Vella (Treasurer and Events Organiser), Ms. Josephine Spiteri (Assistant Secretary) and Mr. Robert Mizzi (International/Public Relations Officer)

and standards were presented for discussion at a well attended public meeting and have been published¹⁸ and distributed to all MaLIA members and all interested public libraries stakeholders.

To increase the visibility of the Association with its members and the general public, in 2012 the MaLIA Council decided to start holding regular monthly talks on various subjects for members, friends and the general public. Advertised through our official facebook page¹⁹, the talks serve as a cultural and educational service to our members, promote MaLIA's name with the general public and forge links with various commercial companies and other NGOs.

For this current year our efforts are geared to;

1. Publishing a *Directory of Libraries, Information Units and Archives in Malta* which is in its 2nd edition²⁰
2. Organising a national library conference *Maltese Libraries – What Future?* on the 10 May 2013²¹. Details will shortly be available on our web-page²²
3. Holding a commemorative social event for all past university library and archives studies graduates, their lecturers and department administrative staff to mark the 20th anniversary since library education at university level was established on a sound footing in 1993

MaLIA has tackled several of the essential aspects that ensure that libraries and librarians move ahead over the coming years in Malta. However our programme of work is far from being comprehensive. Some of the areas that we have not dealt with effectively, in spite of several attempts, are:

1. The professional status of library staff and
2. The continuing professional development of qualified staff

What we lack is the manpower, expertise and funding to push these essential issues forward. Our Association could benefit from assistance by the international library fraternity.

MaLIA International Relations

Robert Mizzi

Over the years MaLIA has contributed in its own way to the international library scene. From its early years, MaLIA had identified the importance of keeping in touch with international developments through memberships in international associations. In fact, MaLIA has been a member of International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) for several years and is one of the founding members of the Commonwealth Library Association (COMLA). In recent years, MaLIA has also become a member of EBLIDA (European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations) thanks also to the support and assistance of Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP). The co-operation and communication with CILIP has in fact been strengthened in recent years with visits to London by MaLIA representatives and also through a CILIP Career Development Group study visit to Malta in March 2009.

The limited financial and human resources of MaLIA are the major deterrents in fostering further these international relationships. This notwithstanding, MaLIA continues to support its council members when they are in a position to travel to conferences and meetings abroad through part-sponsorship of the costs involved.



MaLIA and Malta Library Council (MLC) at the National Library of Malta at a historic 1st meeting
 Front row; Ms. Cecily Rizzo (MLC member), Ms. Mary Samut-Tagliaferro (MaLIA), Dr. Lillian Sciberras (MLC), Mr. Laurence Zerafa (MaLIA Chairperson), Dr. William Zammit (MLC member & Head of Dept Library, Information and Studies University of Malta)
 Back row : Mr. Charles Farrugia (MLC member & National Archivist), Mr. Louis Cini (National Library of Malta Staff), Mr. Oliver Mamo (MLC member & National Librarian/CEO Libraries Malta), and Mr. Robert Mizzi (MLC Chairperson and MaLIA).

MaLIA is also very willing to cooperate in the organisation of visits to Malta by groups of foreign librarians.

Despite the mentioned limitation, the proliferation of social media has helped MaLIA in no small measure in keeping in touch with our colleagues in various institutions and associations across Europe and in other continents and keeping abreast of new developments in our profession²³.

It is felt that the next logical step for MaLIA is to try and coordinate exchange trips for Maltese library and information workers with our counterparts across Europe. Historically, MaLIA feels very close to the library world in

the UK²⁴ and we feel that if we can establish an exchange programme for Maltese and British library staff this would be a win-win situation for everyone. This is now a possibility thanks to MaLIA's close co-operation with the already mentioned Malta Libraries Council. Further more, Malta being a member of the EU, a number of individual members, through their employers, have made use of EU funds for such visits.

During 2012, MaLIA was represented for the first time at the EBLIDA AGM and conference held in Denmark and thanks to contacts established during this visit, the EBLIDA President accepted an invitation to give a presentation in Malta about the work of EBLIDA on the 4th of December 2012. This was part of the activities organised to mark *Libraries Day 2012* of which MaLIA was an active supporter. This year's EBLIDA conference and AGM will be held in Milan and it is hoped that MaLIA will again be represented as it is important to build up co-operation with European colleagues and keep abreast of the challenges being faced by libraries across Europe.

MaLIA would also like to take this opportunity to ask any library and information professional planning to visit Malta (for whatever reason) to get in touch with our association before arriving in Malta. In recent years, our members have benefited from such visits as a good number of visiting colleagues accepted our invitation to deliver a talk about their area of expertise despite being on holiday. This is one way of trying to provide our members with a possibility to experience aspects of library and information work which they do not necessarily come across during their work in local libraries. MaLIA is also in touch with a number of foreign librarians resident in

Malta, several of whom are our members.

One other aspect in which MaLIA could encourage co-operation between Maltese and British libraries could be twinning agreements between libraries in Malta and libraries across the UK. There was an attempt to start this a few years back thanks to MaLIA's long time friend and supporter Dr Mike Freeman but it did not work out for reasons which were beyond MaLIA's control. The local co-operation between the various entities is now much stronger and MaLIA is of the opinion that another attempt to start such twinning agreements is due.

Notes

¹www.malia-malta.org, www.facebook.com/malia.malta.

²In 1969 MaLIA was established as the Malta Library Association (MLA) and between the mid 70s to 1999 we were the Ghaqda Bibljotekarji (the Maltese version of 'Association for Librarians').

³The only option then for getting a library qualification was to study overseas, usually, but not only, in the UK.

⁴Xuereb, Paul. *Promoters of information : the first twenty years of the Ghaqda Bibljotekarji 1969 – 1989*. Valletta, Malta : Ghaqda Bibljotekarji, 1989. Print.

⁵An update to the next 25 years (1989-2014) still has to be commissioned but our AGM papers from 2007 onwards are available on-line at www.malia-malta.org/about-malia.html.

⁶The bulk are in academic libraries (around 80), the National Library (around 15), public lending libraries (around 85), school libraries (120), with several others in government department libraries and private libraries such as religious houses, banks and a few companies.

⁷The first University of Malta-based library education course at diploma level was first offered in 1986. It became a regular course (alternate years) in 1993 and since 2006 started being offered at both diploma and

bachelor degree level. There are a small number of librarians who have pursued studies abroad at both bachelor's and master's level and a couple at doctorate level. The Schools Library Service, a government body offers an in-house course for teacher-librarians.

⁸The MaLIA Statute www.malia-malta.org/statute.html at present stipulates 7 members on Council.

⁹MaLIA has never owned or leased its premises. However, the University of Malta Library grants us use of its premises for the monthly Council meetings, occasional meetings for members and the AGM traditionally held towards the end of February of each year. Other libraries (e.g. MCAST) at times offer their premises for some other meetings.

¹⁰The authors of this paper, Laurence Zerafa (currently Chairperson) and Robert Mizzi (currently International/Public Relations Officer) have been on Council since 1994 and 1998 respectively.

¹¹Since a good number of years, there does exist a Malta Schools Library Association (MSLA <http://malta.sla.wordpress.com/>) which however caters only for the needs of school libraries and librarians up to secondary school library level. MaLIA, however has a number of school librarians amongst its members.

¹²Mizzi, Robert ... [et. al.]. *Report on the state of Maltese libraries*. Msida : MaLIA, 2006. Print.

¹³www.um.edu.mt/maks/las

¹⁴A new Parliament house, an open air theatre and a new entrance to Valletta all designed by Renzo Piano, all nearing completion by mid-2013 now adorn the area.

¹⁵Malta Libraries Act, available 2011 www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lp&itemid=22133&l=1

¹⁶The draft law carried many of the points that MaLIA has been asking for and that were explained

2 years earlier in a paper *The role of a library association in modern society: MaLIA's experience* written by Robert Mizzi then MaLIA Chairman and published in Zerafa, Laurence V., Victor Vella and Catherine Vella (ed.) *A mosaic of library and archive practice in Malta : a collection of papers by MaLIA members and friends on the occasion of its 40th anniversary 1969-2009*. Malta : Malta Library and Information Association, 2009c. Print.

¹⁷The Central Public Library is located in Floriana, just outside the capital city www.libraries.gov.mt/

¹⁸Zerafa, Laurence & Mary Samut-Tagliaferro, ed. by Mary Samut-Tagliaferro. *Guidelines & standards for the development of the Malta public library service: A case study for public lending (branch) libraries*. Malta.Paola: Malta Library and Information Association, 2009c. Print. Available <http://www.malia-malta.org/bank/media/web/pdfs/Full%20document%205th%20nov.pdf>

¹⁹<https://www.facebook.com/malia.malta/events>

²⁰Ragonesi, Anita and Laurence Zerafa. *A directory of libraries and information units in Malta*. Msida: Għaqda Bibljotekarji, 1996. Print.

²¹The last time the MaLIA organised a library conference was in 1999 on the occasion of its 30th Anniversary. The proceedings were published as Zerafa, Laurence V. ed. *Libraries and national development : proceedings of a conference organised by the Għaqda Bibljotekarji on its 30th anniversary 11th December 1999*. Malta : Malia, 2000. Print.

²²www.malia-malta.org/ and www.facebook.com/malia.malta.

²³See earlier reference to our on-line presence.

²⁴English is our second and official language and postgraduate library studies generally tend to take place at UK Universities.