

Books

War, terrorism, kisses: a century in pictures

Simon Mercieca

TOMAS ALCOVERRO (Curator): *La Mediterranania del segle XX: realitats i mirades* (The Mediterranean of the 20th century: realities and images), Institut Europeu de la Mediterrania.

La Mediterranania del segle XX: realitats i mirades portrays through photography the 20th-century history of the Mediterranean.

This century opened with a terrorist attack, the assassination of the archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife in Sarajevo in 1914 and ended with a series of terrorist attacks and the war in Bosnia. In between, the Mediterranean went through the Second World War.

Malta features once in this catalogue of the exhibition put up by the Institut Europeu de la Mediterrania in Barcelona, on page 80. The entry shows the historic connection that existed between Malta and Tunisia in the past decades. The photo was taken at the height of WWII.

The photo is captioned: 'A Maltese soldier with the British Army bids farewell to his wife in Tunis, c. 1942'. It is not clear when it was taken but it was probably shot after this country was recaptured by the allied forces following the victory of El Alamein. It is a particular photo insofar as photos of the war normally express a different genre and rarely portray images of love.

During WWII, Tunisia was on the Allies' side as *La France Libre* continued its fight through its colonies but was occupied by the Axis powers until it was liberated in 1942.

Yet, this photo shows us a different angle of Tunisia featuring members of the Maltese community who kept their British citizenship in this French protectorate, despite the pressure exercised by the French in the previous decades to adopt French nationality.

The photo represents a Maltese who did not naturalise himself,



A Maltese soldier kissing his wife in Tunis (c.1942).

departing from Tunisia, dressed in a British uniform to fight for the Allies. It is a photograph that captures the spirit of the belle epoch; the husband giving a farewell kiss on the lips to his charming young wife - quite provocative for its time.

This photo also sheds proof on the stand taken by the Maltese towards France after Tunisia became a French protectorate as well as how they reacted to the

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policy of Francophilisation. The Maltese community was divided: some accepted to be naturalised French while others preferred to resist and this was undertaken on two fronts. First, they supported the Maltese Roman Catholic traditions. Secondly, a strong Maltese contingent remained faithful to the British Crown.

The loyalty of the Maltese to their home country caused a stir not least within the Catholic Church in Tunisia. The Maltese

practised their religion very differently to the way it was in France.

Of more interest is the fact that while in France, the Church opposed the Francophilisation of the region, in Tunisia, the Church took an opposite stand and supported French radical policies aimed at Francophilising the Maltese and the Italians.

The most important feast for the Maltese in Tunisia was of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. It assumed great national importance, exceeding by far the importance this feast was given in Malta.

When one observes that, in the Church calendar, this feast is celebrated two days after the *Quatorze Juillet*, one can immediately understand why such a religious celebration achieved so much significance in Tunisia among this migrant community. It was a clear political message to the imposed francophilisation on this small ethnic minority. In the 1930s, the situation became even more complicated due to international politics.

This photo exposes the hidden tensions between the Maltese and the Italians due to the rise of fascism. Maltese politics influenced the relationship within the Maltese community: for those who refused to be naturalised, some favoured Britain while others sided with Italy.

It seems right to assume the Maltese soldier featured in this photo was on the British side.

Milestone by an often forgotten Maltese author

Alex Vella Gregory



JUANN MAMO (Mark Vella, Ed.): *Graja Maltija*, Klabb Kotba Maltin, 102 pp.

It is curious to see how certain authors are taken up by political circles as ideal role models, and given such titles as 'National author', while others are more or less ignored.

This has been the case with Juann Mamo, a Maltese author from the early 20th century whose fame so far has rested on one novel: *Uljed in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka*.

All that is about to change with the publication of *Graja Maltija*, a series of short stories by Mamo, edited and annotated by Mark Vella. These 19 stories, recently discovered by Vella, are perhaps the most important discovery in Maltese literature in recent years.

They are an invaluable addition not only to the study of Mamo's work, but also to the study of early 20th century Maltese literature.

To understand Mamo's writing one has to understand Maltese society at the time. It was a time when the local population was divided into several factions.

On one hand there was the ruling British class, supported by a newly formed middle class that tended to be liberal.

This was countered by the Italianate classes, made up mostly of local aristocracy, the clergy, the judiciary and the medical professions. These tended to be conservative and had never forgiven the British for taking over the jurisdiction of the island.

Struggling underneath all this was the remainder of the population, made up of illiterate and poverty-stricken lower class, constantly at the mercy of the other two factions.

Mamo draws most of his characters from this section of the population. Later generations of socialist propagandists have used Mamo as a champion of the working classes, which is why he fell into disfavour in more conservative literary circles.

However, he does not edify his characters in any way, but instead glories in their ineptitude and ignorance that borders on the sadistic.

Mamo's mastery lies in the way he mercilessly exposes all his characters to scrutiny. Although his antipathy towards the pro-Italians is apparent, he does not seek to redeem his literary victims in any way.

I use the word 'victims' because all his characters end up prey to their own superstitions and misconceptions. Very often they end up ridiculed (*Kikinu fil-Hamrun*), injured (*Qorti fuq xejn*), or dead (*Petest lahaq*).

Mamo manages to instil in the reader a mixture of fascination and revulsion towards his protagonists. His sense of humour is dark and unforgiving, such as in *Wizu u Gorgi*.

Two starving men are duped into believing that to inaugurate the new church bell in Birkirkara the local population had turned it upside down and cooked soup inside it.

Mamo's language is harsh, adopting a Maltese vernacular full of corrupted words and idiomatic expressions. He also has a peculiar sentence structure that does not always follow accepted rules of grammar.

All this heightens the roughness of his subject matter, and contrasts sharply with the contrived poetic Maltese of many of his contemporaries.

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This edition comes with an extensive and masterly introduction by Mark Vella which is well worth reading as it puts all the stories in context.

Moreover, all the stories are annotated, with historical figures and events explained in detail. There is also an Appendix with three unauthorised stories that bear Mamo's stylistic imprint.

Graja Maltija represents a milestone in Maltese literature both in terms of the content as well as the research involved.

I hope this publication will lead not only to a reappraisal of Mamo as an author but to more scholarly research into Maltese literature in general.

LOCAL COUNCILS' ASSOCIATION
LOSAMEDCHEM
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE



The Local Councils' Association will be hosting an international conference on the 8th of June 2011 at the Dolmen Hotel, Bugibba. The conference will discuss a number of SWOT analysis and Best Practices produced by the project's partners that originates from Italy, Slovenia, Spain, Greece and Malta.

The reports deal with the security and safety of transport modalities and port operations in the partner countries. Persons interested in the transport and port operations may register to attend for the conference which is free of charge.

Further details on the conference can be found from the LCA's website:

<http://www.lca.org.mt/pages/iseSinglePages.asp?m=182>

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