

Book Review: Anton Tabone. Il-Pont bejn Għawdex Reġjun u Malta Nazzjon

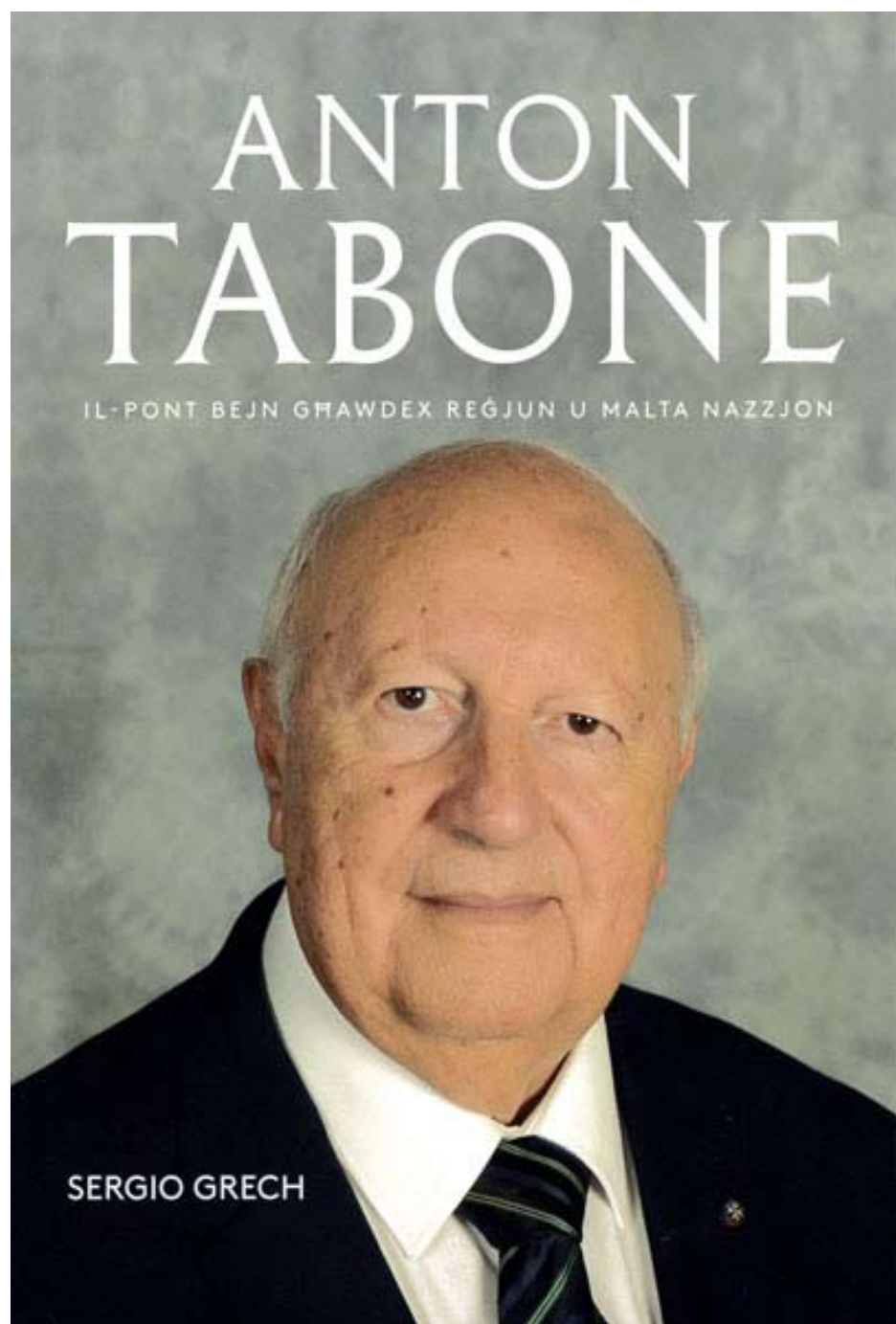
Sergio Grech

Malta: Kite Group Publishers (2017); 330 pages

REVIEWED BY GEOFFREY G. ATTARD

Gozitan patriot, Minister for Gozo, Speaker Emeritus of Parliament, promoter of Gozo, its history and its culture, Anton Tabone is a name that become synonymous with Gozo and with all that is Gozitan. He dedicated his entire life for

the promotion of the second largest island of the Maltese archipelago, the island that gave him birth, the island of his fathers, the land of his inspirational ancestors who went out of their way to see Gozo become a separate diocese and enjoy a status that the island had enjoyed two thousand years ago when the Roman imperial power ruled supreme in the Mediterranean and the countries surrounding its basin.



Anton Tabone. Il-Pont bejn Għawdex Reġjun u Malta Nazzjon is not a mere biography; it is a political statement. As the name of the book shows, Anton Tabone was instrumental in preparing the way for the European Union to be able to consider Gozo as a region in its own right, part of the Republic of Malta, speaking the same language, professing the same religious beliefs yet with a different anthropological tinge. As author Sergio Grech aptly shows in this biographical account, Anton was the right person at the right moment and therefore with the right timing to pull the strings in order to open before us the stage on which the idea of a ministry for Gozo was to be set.

The reader who goes through the pages of the book will notice how the notion of a ministry of Gozo as dreamt by

Tabone and as put into reality by the Nationalist Government of the late eighties was not to interfere with the greater reality of a Maltese nation. Carrying the disadvantage of double insularity, the ministry was not 'of Gozo' but rather 'for Gozo' thus emphasising that with the delegation of power emanating from Castile, Parliament was not rendering Gozo an autonomous entity; instead, the newly-set ministry would address issues such as health, education and infrastructure in such a way that the particular needs of Gozo would not be misunderstood or handled indifferently. The ministry for Gozo was not therefore another department within a greater entity. When becoming the first Minister for Gozo, Anton Tabone showed how this was not only possible but beyond that, it was an idea that had become a reality.

Genealogy, local history, Maltese politics and a historical milieu leading to the entrance of Malta into the European Union all play their important part in the gradual unfolding of the biographical sketch. As I said before, this is hardly an ordinary biography; it is the history of an island and an epoch, focusing on important and timely events which changed the face of Gozo leading the island to a point of no return. Gozo could never be the same again after the consolidation of the Gozo ferry

modern service, the introduction of local councils and the abandoning of the idea of a ministry of Gozo by a new Labour administration. It is true that setbacks are part of history yet the abolition of Gozo's ministry must have struck Tabone very hard. It was only the enhancement of Gozo as a region by the E.U. that could give Gozo the status that could bring it out of its limbo. Having said this, it is important to state the fact that even in his own political party, Tabone found colleagues who did not believe in the idea of Gozo having a ministry of its own and the same can be said for the rival party. Yet for all their misconceptions of the idea or lack of agreement, Tabone still commanded respect on both sides of the parliamentary chamber. His love for Gozo was never perceived as parochial, provincial and inward-looking; on the other hand, Anton Tabone was always seen as part of the whole, and a healthy part at that.

Sergio Grech's book is a must for those who want to better understand Gozo and its recent history. Being only a few kilometres to the north-west of the main island of Malta, it has its own mystique, a mystique that enchants the foreigner and boosts the locals to identify themselves with the island which gave them birth and made them what they are today.



Mr Tabone welcoming Mr Shimon Perez during his visit to Gozo. [Photo courtesy: <https://www.bdlbooks.com>]