

# Anton F. Attard

## An expert in the Folklore and History of Gozo

### 1943–2018

JOSEPH BEZZINA

Anton was a prolific writer. He wrote a lot and it is possible to write as much about him. He was small in stature, but with a big heart ready to help and to share his knowledge with the student as well as with the scholar. He passed away on Wednesday, 18 July 2018 at 11.49 at night at the Gozo General Hospital, where he had been admitted a few hours earlier. This biographical note does in no way do justice to such a creative person but it may well serve as a basis for further research.

#### Early Life

Anton was born in a farmhouse on the outskirts of Victoria on 13 February 1943 at 11.30pm, the son of Manwel Attard and Anġla Gatt, two full-time farmers. He was baptised at the Parish of St George the following morning and christened Anton, Manwel, and Felic.

He celebrated his birthday on 14 February as he is registered to have been born on that day at the Gozo Public Registry, a *lapsus calami* by someone at the Victoria police station where births had to be registered as soon as possible. He received Confirmation on 30 May 1950. He passed his childhood in their farmhouse in the middle of Tal-Far, situated, more or less, where there is the present entrance to the Girls' Secondary School Complex in Victoria. His father tilled fields in the area of Tal-Far; an area that extended from the site of the present school complex down to il-Wied ta' Żejta. Eventually, when their farmhouse made way for the school, they went to live in a house at Trejjet l-Exchange, across the street from the main telephone exchange of Gozo.

All four walls of the rooms of his small house were stacked with row upon row of thousands of

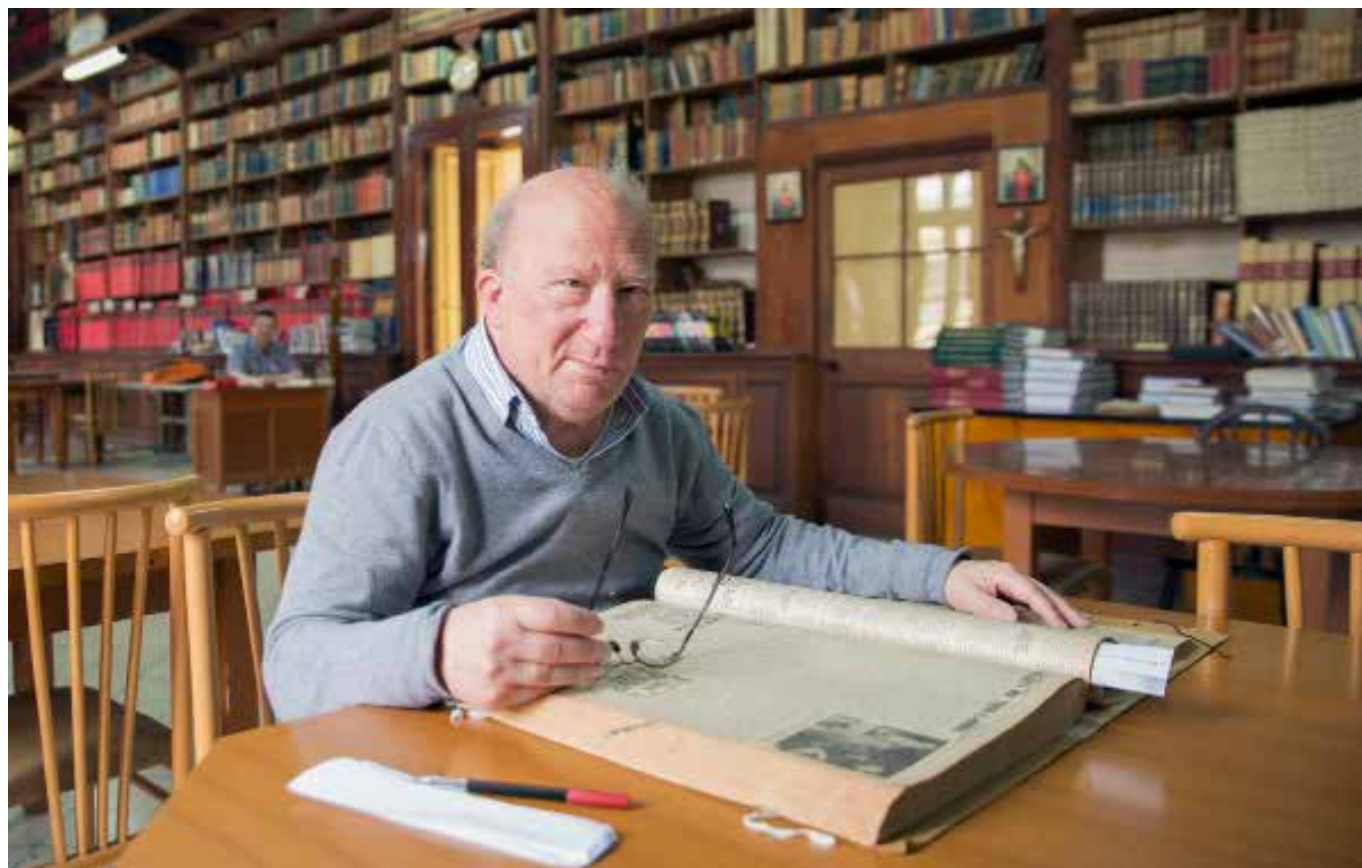


Photo courtesy Paul Falzon

books from floor to ceiling. His second home was the club of Il Leone Philharmonic Society, a stone's throw from his house, and he regularly frequented the Gozo Cathedral. His centre of research was the Public Library and, eventually, the Gozo section of the National Archives; after retirement, he visited these two institutions regularly every morning six days a week to pore through newspapers, books, and documents. Il-Pjazza tat-Tokk, Independence Square, and the people from all walks of life that he met there, were the oral source of his works on folklore.

### A Brilliant Civil Career

Anton started his education at the Victoria Primary School in Triq Vajringa and proceeded to the Lyceum, then situated close by in Strada Karità. He was trained as a teacher for two years at the St Michael Training College. Eventually, he frequented the University of Malta from where he graduated BA in 1973 and obtained a certificate in Linguistics in 1975.

He taught in the Government Schools of iż-Żejtun and il-Marsa, Malta, between 1965 and 1977. From the department of education, he passed on to the civil service where he was engaged until 2003. He was secretary of the Housing Authority (1977-1983 and 1985-1994) and, Director Customer Care, Ministry for Gozo (1994-2000). He was seconded to the General Workers Union between 1983 and 1985, where he worked as secretary of the Public Service Section. During these long years, he sat on an innumerable number of Government Boards both in Malta as well as in Gozo. Between 2013 and 2017, he was President of the Gozo Agricultural, Industrial, and Cultural Society, whose main task is to organise the annual show il-Wirja ta' Santa Marija.

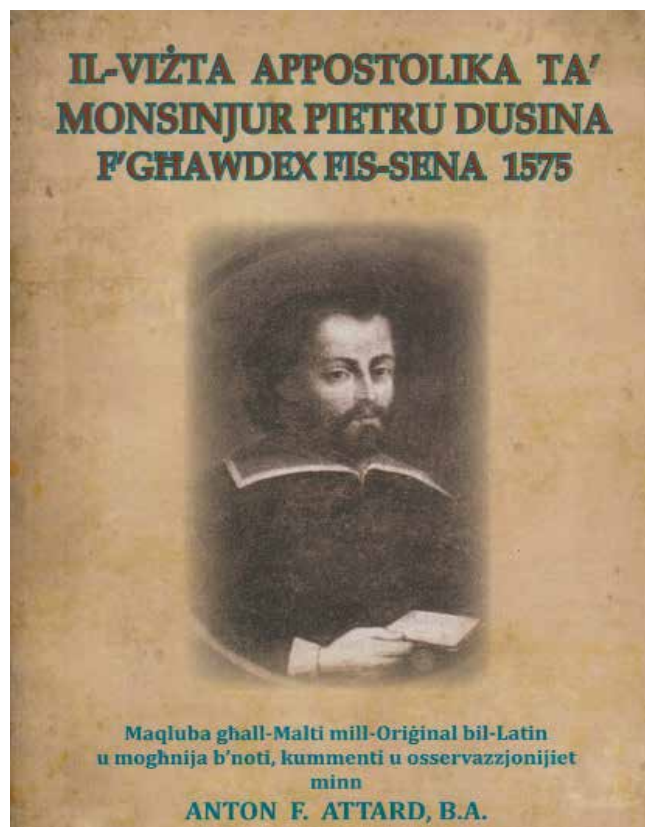
### Always On The Go

Beginning in his late teens, Anton turned his interest and attention towards the folklore of Gozo. He did sterling work gathering facts and data about specific subjects from people who had lived and worked before the Second World War. In its aftermath, the War brought a great upheaval in the way of living of the people and many customs would have been lost were it not for his painstaking interviews and research.

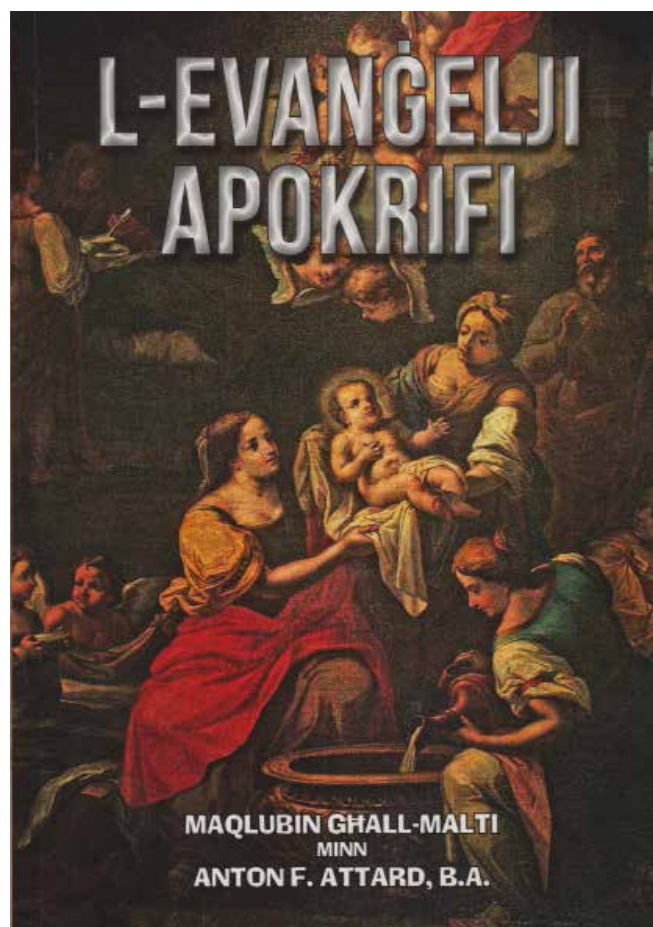
He soon started to share his acquired knowledge through the publication of hundreds of articles on the folklore of Gozo in the newspapers *Il-Passa*, *Il-Pass-temp*, *It-Tromba*, *It-Torċa*, *L-Orizzont*, *Tagħna t-Tfal*, and in the magazine of the Gozo diocese, *Il-Hajja f'Għawdex*. The series of articles for the latter magazine will continue posthumously as, during his last weeks, he passed on a number of unpublished articles to Francesco Pio Attard, its editor, for future publication.

He also took part in numerous programmes on the Redifussion, Radio, and Television, appearing regularly in programmes originating from Gozo in the last forty years: *Il-Bronja*, *Il-Manbar*, and *Għawdex Illum*. He had the ability to explain the subject under consideration in very clear terms and he could thus be followed with interest by children, and adults alike.

He also translated a number of works; foremost amongst them is *Il-Viżta Appostolika ta' Monsinjur Pietro Dusina f'Għawdex fis-sena 1575* (Gozo 2014) – the report on Gozo by Pietro Dusina, the Apostolic Visitor, who left an excellent description of the ecclesiastical establishment in Gozo in February 1575. It is important as it gives an idea of the devastation left by the Turks during the siege of Gozo in 1551.



He also delved into Bible studies, not from a religious or theological point of view, but from a folkloristic standpoint. For example, he published a number of articles on the birds and the fish referred to in the Bible. He also translated a number of apocryphal writings. One of his very last works was *L-Evangġelji Apokrifi* (Gozo 2018). The apocryphal gospels were written by anonymous authors who appended the name of an apostle to their work, such as the Proto-Gospel of St James or the Gospel of St Thomas. This is the first time that a good number of such writings were translated into Maltese.



## Folklore

One of his greatest contributions is the record that he left on the traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of the community of Gozo, facts passed through from one generation after another by word of mouth. This body of popular myths and beliefs that he gathered relate to the whole of Gozo but also to particular villages of the island and to activities taking place in these villages.

He published five books on folklore. The first, the most original, and a real treasure trove is *Logħob*

*Folklorisiku ta' Ghawdex* (Malta 1969), in which he describes one hundred and thirteen games through which children of Gozo past whiled away their time. This book fills the elder readers with a mixed feeling of happiness, sadness, and longing when recalling the games in which they were protagonists in the distant past.

The other books on the subject are: *Mill-Folklore ta' Ghawdex – ġabra ta' ġhana u taqbil* (Gozo 1986) – a collection of traditional Gozo folk-music. The word *ġhana* is associated with singing, verse, rhyme, and even *kantaliena*, a type of singing with a slow rhythm. *Mill-Hajja ta' l-Imġhoddi, taġħrif folkloristiku minn Ghawdex* (Gozo 1991) describes a wide range of local traditions. *Mid-dinja tas-seħer u tal-Folklor* (Gozo 2002) carries a number of fairy tales that originated in Gozo. Finally, a few weeks before he passed away, he published *Mill-Għerf bla miktub tal-Maltin u l-Ghawdexin u taġħrif ieħor* (Gozo 2018) – another collection of local beliefs and customs.



## Linguistics

Anton also carried out a scientific study of several aspects of the Maltese language and its structure, including the study of grammar, syntax, and phonetics. He also touched upon specific branches of linguistics such as dialectology, comparative linguistics, and structural linguistics.

He published five books in what he named the Maltese Language Series, books that touch upon aspects that very few have ever delved into. The first in this series was, *The dual number in the Maltese Language – Il-Għadd imtenni fl-Ilsien Malti. A Linguistic Study* (= Maltese Language Series 1) (Gozo 2008). This was followed by *The Sound Stem -an or -ien endings – Plurali sħaħ bid-deżienza -an jew -ien. A Linguistic Study* (= Maltese Language Series 2) (Gozo 2008). The third was a study on a particular place-name: *The Maltese toponym “Forn il-Ġir” – It-toponimu Malti “Forn il-Ġir”*. *Studju Lingwistiku* (= Maltese Language Series 3) (Gozo 2009).

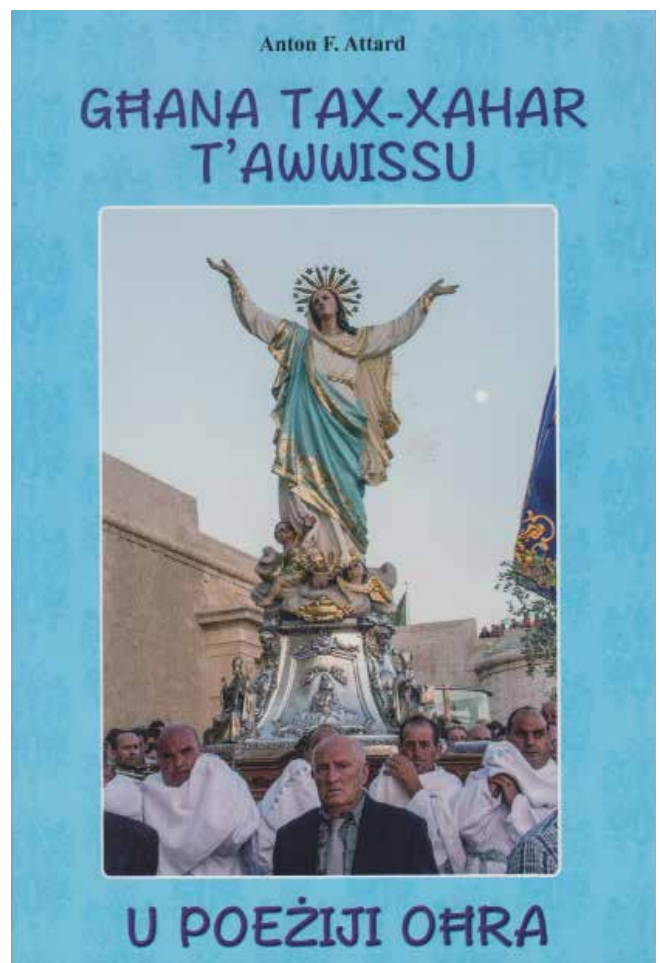
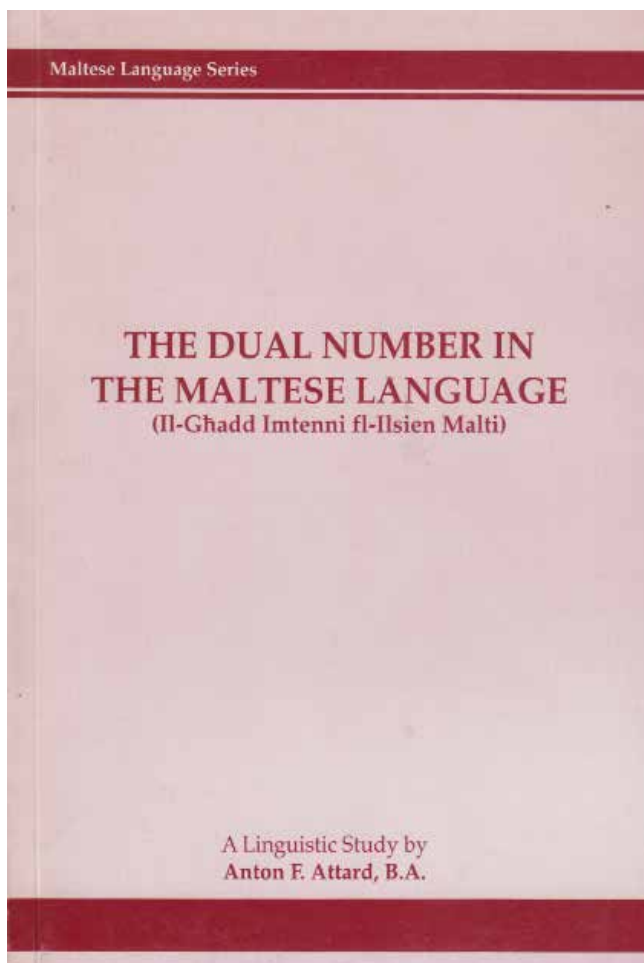
Anton disagreed with a number of decisions taken by the National Council for the Maltese Language.

In the book *Id-Deċiżjonijiet l tal-Kunsill Nazzjonali ta' l-Ilsien Malti. Kemm huma tajbin? Studju Lingwistiku* (= Maltese Language Series 4) (Gozo 2010), he listed a number of linguistic arguments as to why some of the decisions taken by the National Council were wrong. He criticised some of the decisions as “orthography of convenience, linguistically erroneous and based on phonetics, without any consistence, and with a dilettantish rather than a scientific core”.

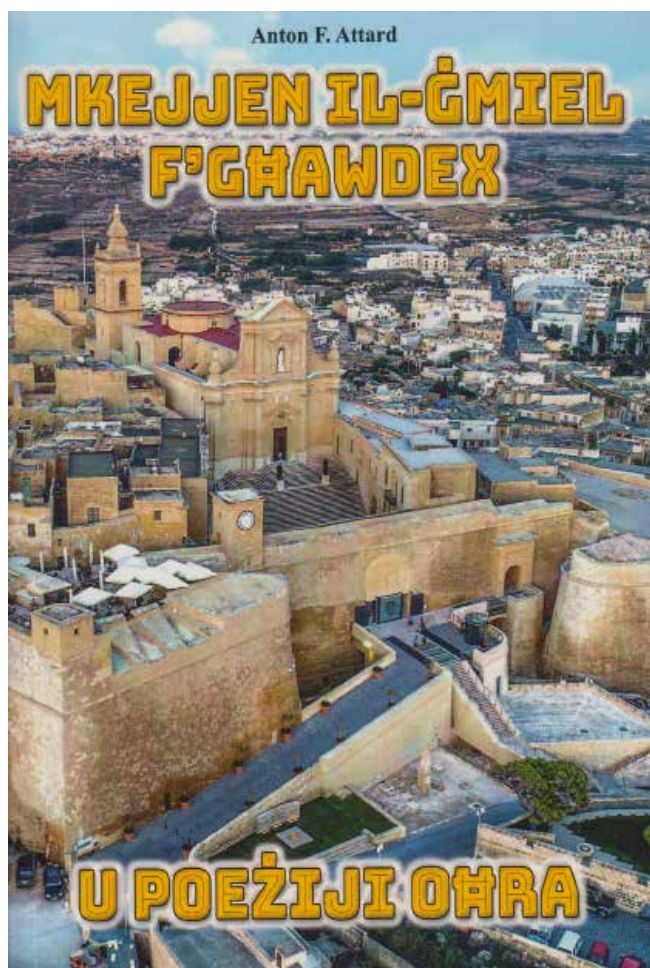
His final book, again published weeks before he passed away is *Maltese Palindromes – Palindromi fl-Ilsien Malti. A Linguistic Study* (= Maltese Language Series 5) (Gozo 2018). A palindrome is a word, phrase, or sentence that reads the same forwards and backwards.

## Poems

Anton published his first poem in the comical paper, *Il-Joker*, in March 1959. For ten years (1997-2007), he regularly took part in the monthly Poetry on Gozo evenings that were held in several venues.



He published eleven books of poetry. The first *Sunnetti – l-ewwel parti* (Gozo 1985) is a collection of sonnets, a fourteen-line rhyming poem with set structure. He employed a number of rhyming patterns for sonnets, usually written in iambic pentameter. His last two poetry books were, *Għana tax-xahar ta' Awwissu u poeżiji oħra* (Gozo 2017), and, *Mkejjen il-ġmiel f'Għawdex u poeżiji oħra* (Gozo 2018), published just a month before he passed away.



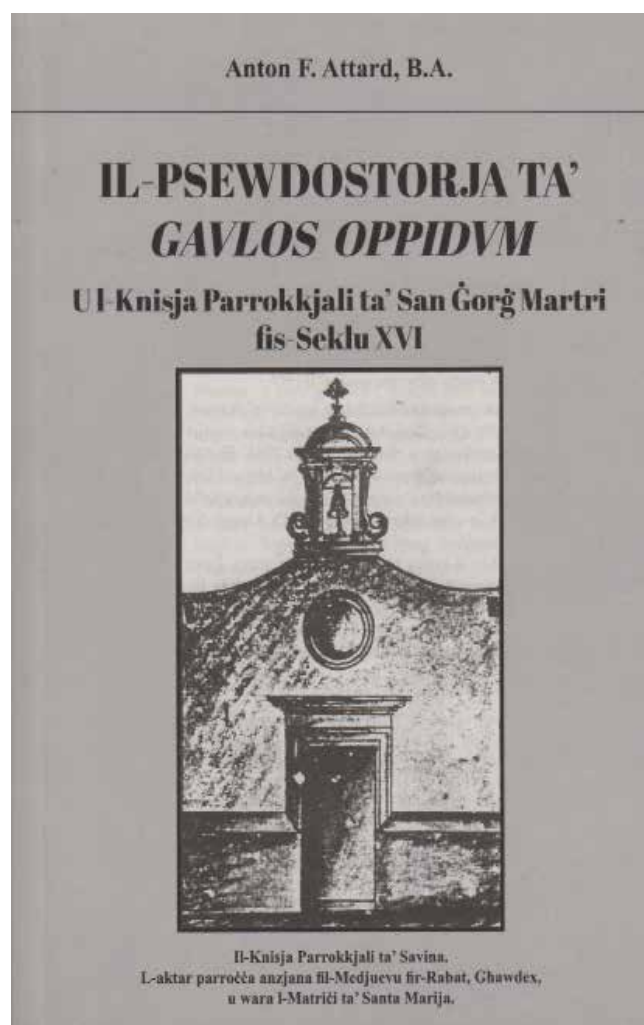
### Santa Marija, the Cathedral, and Il Leone Philharmonic Society

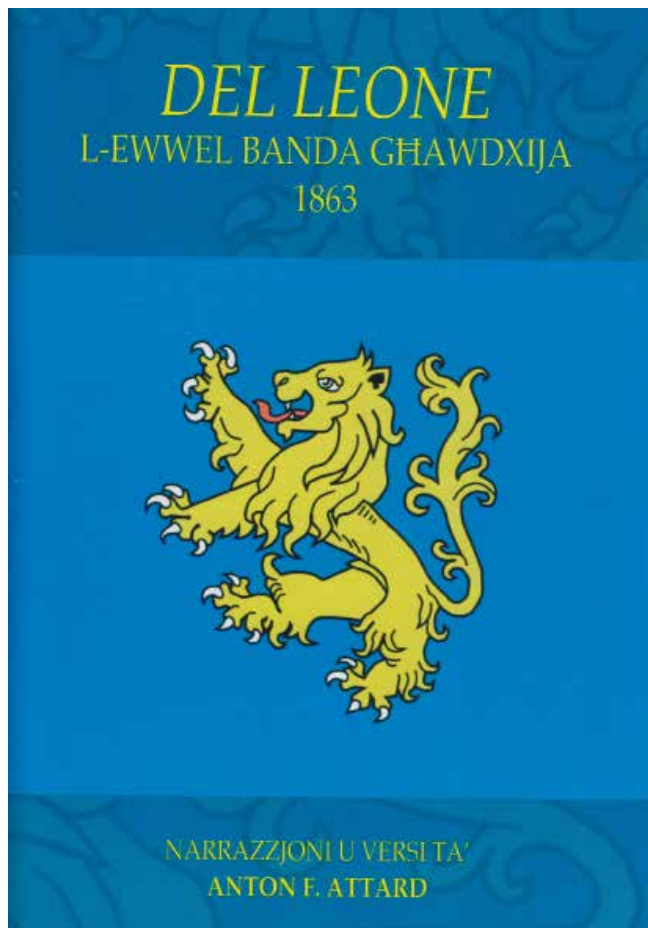
Gozo, Victoria, iċ-Ċittadella, ir-Rabat, the Cathedral, and Il Leone Philharmonic society encapsulates the great love of the late Anton.

He had at heart the history of the Cathedral and of Il Leone Philharmonic Society writing extensively in the annual *Festa ta' Santa Marija*, issued by the former, in the quarterly publication *Aurora – Lehen il-Banda Leone*, and in *Il-Għid tal-Assunta* – the Cathedral annual.

He edited and translated into Maltese a number of sources to eradicate the erroneous interpretation of historical facts that were in contradiction to these sources. He also published a number of books to annihilate the arguments of those whom he called “*psewdo-storiċi* – pseudo-historians” – a number of writers who tried to obfuscate the story of the Cathedral and Il Leone Band and construe a totally different history of the Church and of the first band in Gozo to accommodate it to their viewpoints. One book in this series was distributed posthumously for the feast of Santa Marija 2018. Entitled *Il-Psewdostorja ta' Gavlos Oppidvm* (Gozo 2018), the book exposes the fallacy of arguments put forward to belittle the role of the Gozo Matrice in the religious history of Gozo.

The history of the foundation of Il Leone Band is narrated in verse in his book *Del Leone. L-ewwel banda Għawdxija 1863* (Gozo 2013). Published on the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of the band, the story is largely based on a number of original sources.





For his determination in this field, he was awarded *Ġieħ il-Katidral* (2003); made Honorary Member of Il Leone Philharmonic Society (2003), and awarded *Ġieħ Ghawdex* (2013).

### Adieu!

Late in 2017, he became aware that his end was fast approaching due to a terminal illness that he had bravely fought off for some two years. He never lamented his fate.

On 29 April 2018, he confided to his friend Leo-Mario Haber that he would have liked to live another year so as to have time to publish his research with greater ease. Notwithstanding his increasing pain, he engaged on a publishing marathon and brought out, as pointed out, a total of five books between February and June 2018.

In mid-June, during one of my regular visits to his house, he felt that the end was near and confided to me and others: *Ma nwassalx sa Santa Marija* – I will not be here by 15 August. Mgr Joseph Sultana, archpriest of the Cathedral, visited him regularly on Saturdays to convey Holy Communion. On



Saturday, 14 July, four days before he passed away, he gave him the first copy of his book *L-Evangelji Apokrifi*, that was delivered to him by the printer the previous day. It was his last book but he had, by that time, concluded for publication the revision of a voluminous dictionary on the stat kostrutt – which hopefully will be published posthumously.

He was admitted to hospital in mid-morning on 18 July 2018 and passed away that night. On the morrow, Joseph Muscat, Prime Minister of Malta, tweeted: *Ghawdex tilef wieħed mill-istoriċi u l-istudjużi ewlenin* – Gozo has lost one of its eminent historians and scholars”. The majority concurred.

The funeral cortege left the premises of Il Leone Philharmonic Society on 26 July 2018 and was accompanied by Il Leone Band. Mgr Dr Joseph Sultana, the Cathedral Archpriest, led a concelebrated mass *præsentate cadavere* and delivered the funeral oration. Anton passed away, but the rich heritage that he left lives on.

Joseph Bezzina studied at the University of Malta and the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. He was ordained priest by Pope Paul VI in 1957. He was for many years Head of Department of Church History at the University of Malta and Senior Lecturer in history in the Faculty of Theology at the same University and at the Sacred Heart Seminary, Gozo. He is the Assistant National Archivist of Malta and Head at its Gozo Section that he founded in 1989.