

MANWEL DIMECH: A BIOGRAPHY

Manwel Dimech was born in Valletta on Christmas Day 1860. At his Christening he was named after the infant Jesus who was called Emmanuele.

His childhood does not appear to have been a happy one. His father, an artisan, died when Emmanuele was still a boy. His mother was left without adequate means to ensure her children's education.

Manwel took to the streets and when he was not even seventeen years old, he was found guilty of complicity in a murder and sentenced to 20 years imprisonment. Soon after his release in 1890, he was accused of dabbling in false coinage and was again condemned to jail. In all he had to spend some twenty years of his life in prison. But instead of becoming a hardened criminal, as others are wont to do, he learned six languages.

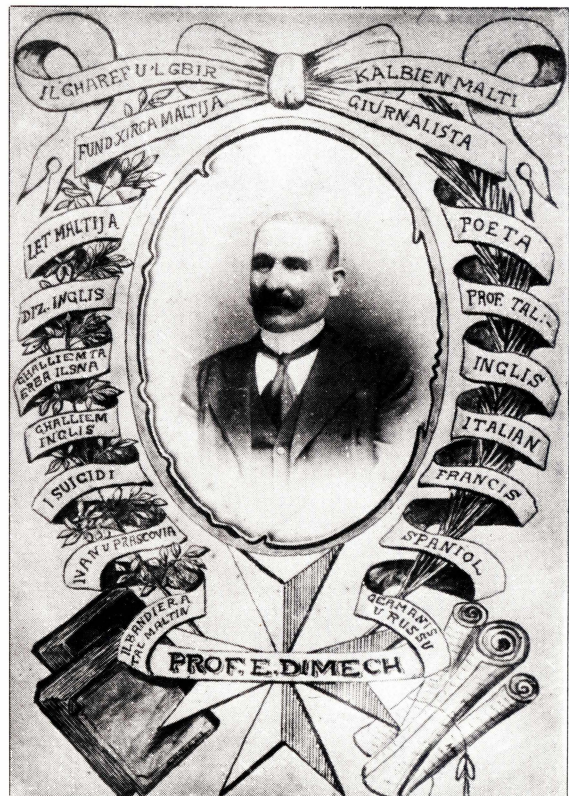
When he came out of prison, he took to writing poems of a radical nature, though they were of a very sensitive tone. He started to criticize the prison system as well as what he held to be defects in the upper reaches of Maltese society, especially in the administration. Above all he wanted to teach the Maltese working-classes, especially those whose parents could not pay for their education. In fact, Dimech began to earn his living by teaching Italian, English, French and Maltese.

In 1898 he started to publish a radical Maltese newspaper which he called *Il-Bandiera tal-Maltin* (The Flag of the Maltese). His aims were to create a public awareness regarding certain abuses, the absence of social legislation, and the necessity of well-organized worker associations. Above all Dimech wanted to eradicate what he called the "little mind" in so many sectors of

the Maltese population who accept without demur whatever they were told without asking the why's and the wherefore's. In his view they were like parrots, pastrydolls and ragballs.

Dimech attacked without respite the servile aspects in the Maltese national psychology with regard to the sense of dependence on the government, certain imports when many of these could have been manufactured locally and parochial rivalries about local feasts and band clubs. Under a colonial rule, Dimech was one who insisted on national unity, especially on the right and duty of every citizen to interest himself actively in what was happening around him.

Dimech published two books on learning languages: *Il-Chelliem Ingliz* and *Il-Chelliem tal erbat ilsna*.

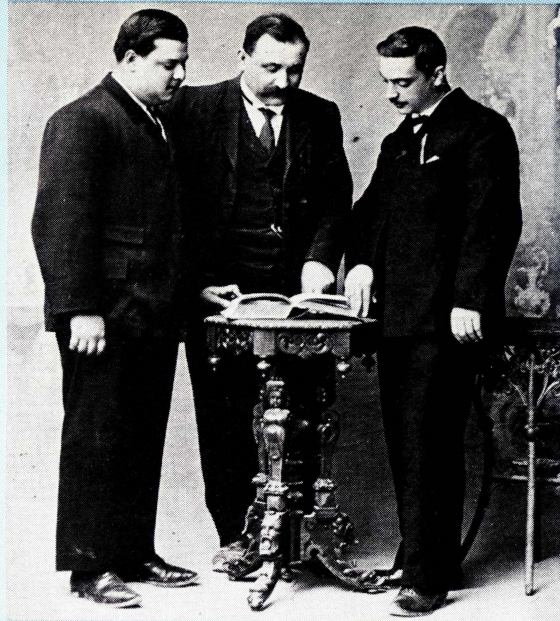


A picture of Manwel Dimech, decorated and framed by Salvu Astarita, an ardent follower of Dimech and editor of Malta tal-Maltin.

By Courtesy of Dr. H. Frendo



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Above: Dimech with two of his pupils.
 Left: The Xirka emblem as drawn by Salvo Astarita in 1914.
 Below: The music and words of the Xirka anthem of liberation.

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campane

campane. Trombe ... *chœur* ... *chant il s'en glori- fi- cation*

Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ...

Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ...

Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ...

Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ... *Je- su- chris- te- que- tu- es- ta- l'hu- man- ité* ...

By Courtesy of Dr. H. Frenido

In 1904 he began to write a revolutionary novel on the story of two Russian lovers under the Czarist oppression, but as he went to live in Italy in 1905 for about five years, probably near Genoa, this novel, *Ivan u Prascovia* whose final part of it was lost when still in manuscript form, was published unfinished.

Back in Malta Dimech set up a philanthropic association in 1911 which he named at first *Xirkatal-Imdawwlin* and then *Xirka Maltija*. His aim was to bring about popular support for reforms as outlined in the statute of the association *Is-Sisien tax-Xirka Maltija* (The Basis of the Malta Association).

On 28 November 1911 Dimech was excommunicated by Mgr. Pietro Pace, according to whom Dimech was preaching the "illuministic" philosophy condemned by the church. Among other things, the Maltese hierarchy objected to what Dimech had written on the emancipated role of Maltese woman in the family and in public life; on the attitude of members of the clergy in certain "religious" matters; and above all on how the individual should look at constituted authority, civil as well as religious.

With this excommunication Dimech's history entered a new phase because the masses turned away from him. At one time some people pelted him with stones when he was trying to address a public meeting in Qormi.

Dimech had to state to the Bishop that he was faithful to Catholic teaching but he felt that the ecclesiastical institution in Malta, if not the Catholic Church, was not being faithful to the teaching of the Gospels. In this it might be said that Dimech was influenced by protestant teaching.

In September 1914, shortly after the beginning of World War I, the Colonial Government arrested Dimech and sent him into exile because he was "agitating the Dockyard workers against the government and because he had anticlerical and socialist principles".

When the war was over, while thousands of political prisoners were re-patriated or were given the citizenship of the place they found themselves in, Dimech was not allowed to return to Malta where he had left his wife and three children the



Juann Mamo and Duminku Arpa place a commemorative plaque and flowers over a tomb, supposedly of their "Master", at the cemetery at Sidi Bishri Xatbi, Alexandria. Gerald Azzopardi claims the picture to be false in that the tomb shown is not Dimech's.

oldest of whom died during his absence. This was due to the insistence of Governor Plumer notwithstanding the views of the English High Commissioner in Cairo, the War Office and the Colonial Office. Dimech died a prisoner in Alexandria, Egypt on 17 April 1921.

Because of certain misunderstandings, one should note that after his conversion in jail, Dimech was inspired by Christian principles. Because of this and because of other reasons, one cannot classify him as a Communist. Rather than a product of violence, he was a victim of it, being an enemy of parochial fanaticism and obscurantist partisanship. If Maltese society did not forgive him, this could have been rather because of the

Alla 1. Sabree iibni biesse titghallim;
 Gmeleli se'r tibka' lumar;
~~Jese titghallim anti tiri;~~
~~Je-taghlim ta cullhadd' hua,~~
~~Tat taghlim cullhadd' hu sid.~~
 Mhuax bixx inti lumar tibkaghli.
 Minn Dimech dana 'l Ctico sar.

4. Bla taghlim xittem fid-Sinjia
 Hleif il lsiex minn ta' strazzi?
 Tgħim immakdar, tgħim imzeglali,
 Tgħim murtus taht id - sakazzi.

2. Għax ma jipx id lumar jidhellew
 Chemm ^{l'għajnej} ~~l'għajnej~~ Hares lertu
 Fost ~~ta' tniqqij~~ u suat bla huiena
 Ingholbi dejjem sa widnef!

3. Ksien uiehed mhuax bizzejjiet,
 Tneji u Uieła mehtegni.
 Erbatjar, u ahjor kausa.

Poem, in Dimech's handwriting, extolling the virtues of learning.

prejudices anyone needing rehabilitation had to face in his day. Essentially Dimech believed in the citizen as an active cell in a democratic society. In this he was influenced by French Republicanism and the secular movement in Europe and which had introduced itself in Malta.

Impelled by his great wish to see the Maltese worker react intelligently instead of being forever led here and there, Dimech insisted that the worker should develop his self respect. He should behave not only as a worker but also, and not least, as a fully fledged citizen.

Because of his belief in the sovereignty of the people, Dimech opposed the colonial system, like other Maltese leaders and their supporters. After 1911 he spoke out in favour of independence from England if and when Malta is given its independence.

Although he admired the courage of Dr.

Fortunato Mizzi, the Nationalist leader, Dimech did not accept this leader's doctrine of Malta's *Italianata*. He wanted to see the Maltese Language developed and recognised on a national basis. He was also closer to the working-class and could understand better certain problems of the poor and the needy.

On a purely human level, Dimech was a phenomenon. Accused of atrocious criminal acts in his youth, he became a philanthropist after he came out of prison. In his teachings he was courageous and consistent despite innumerable difficulties.

HENRY FRENDO

FURTHER READING:

Frendo, H., *Birth pangs of a Nation*, Malta, 1972.
 Azzopardi, G., *X'garrab Manwel Dimech*, Malta, 1975.