

BOOK REVIEWS

MIZZI, LAWRENCE

Għall-Holma ta' Hajtu

Malta, KKM, 1980. 102pp. Illustrated.

In 1942 the Germans were planning the invasion of Malta and Carmelo Borg Pisani, a Maltese living in Rome, volunteered to land on his native Island, gather and transmit vital information and, possibly, be picked up again. Since 1937 he had studied art in the Italian capital and on the start of hostilities had joined the Italian army.

What actually made him embark on such a difficult mission is not too clear. Physically — probably even psychologically — he was the last man for the job and, indeed, failed miserably in his task. Dr. Tommy Warrington, a former childhood neighbour then serving as a Colonel with the British Army, recognised him and within six months he was tried and hanged.

Għall-Holma ta' Hajtu is about this attempt which in itself has no importance at all in the annals of World War II. The episode would actually have passed into oblivion even among the Maltese had it not struck the imagination of Laurence Mizzi, then still a boy of twelve.

Mizzi started researching for his book some years ago. Official and family channels were of little or no help and the only substantial documentation available was Guido Puccio's *Vita di Carmelo Borg Pisani* (Florence, 1943) and a special edition of *Malta*, a paper published in Rome by a number of Maltese who believed that Malta's fate lay with Italy; both sources were heavily biased.

Borg Pisani shared this belief and it seems that in his book Mizzi is primarily concerned with placing the Spy's tenets and actions in a proper context and thus, in a sense, rehabilitating "a traitor" who, in the ordinary course of events, could have made a name for himself as a painter.

Mizzi opens his book with the historical background of the strong links Malta had with Italy since time immemorial. It is a concise exposition, but also one of the clear-

est, of a thorny question which bedevilled Maltese politics in the first part of the 20th century and had an adverse effect on Great Britain's relations with the Italy of Mussolini.

Malta formed part of the Two Sicilies till the arrival of the Knights of St. John who, being of European stock, further strengthened the island's cultural connections with the continent. The influence of important Italians living in exile in Malta at the time of the Risorgimento buttressed claims to the island which were later to be stressed by Mussolini and his Fascists.

In Malta irredentism did not make much ground but it did boost the pro-Italian tendencies of the *Partito Nazionale* in its struggle to contain the British onslaught on Malta's cultural links and traditions.

British influence on the Maltese mind and way of life is of fairly recent origin in spite of the fact that the British era in Malta opened in 1802 (it was to last till 1964). By the end of the 19th century it had made so little impact that British administrators were forced to adopt measures to impose a wider use of English. The *Partito Nazionale* reacted vigorously and its stance was only defeated by direct legislative measures from London in the 1930s.

Borg Pisani was born in 1915. He was educated at the "Umberto Primo", a school financed by the Italian Government and as a young man frequented the Fascist club. In 1937 he was given a scholarship by the Italian Government to pursue in Rome the study of painting which he had begun under the famous Maltese artist Caruana Dingli.

Mizzi's account of Borg Pisani's Roman sojourn shows how it strengthened the student's Fascist beliefs. It therefore sounds quite logical that he should have joined the Italian Army and, later on, subscribe to a mission which, he must have thought, could lead to the fulfilment of his "irredentist" dreams.

The second part of the book deals with the arrest of Borg Pisani, his trial and his death at the hangman's rope.

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Again Mizzi was hampered by official silence but through sheer patience he succeeded in interviewing a sufficiently large number of eye-witnesses to be able to provide a complete story and prove wrong the Fascist version of the spy's death.

Among the author's primary informants are Dr. Warrington himself, Mr. Vivian de Gray, a police officer (later Commissioner of Police) who was involved in the case against Borg Pisani, and Fr. F. Bilocca, one of the two Capuchins who assisted him in the final days in the death cell.

Mizzi also engages in an interesting discussion on the trial's outcome in the light of later legal action taken by the British against Maltese colleagues of Borg Pisani who had joined the Italian army during the war.

Għall-Holma ta' Hajtu, now in its second Maltese edition and due to be translated into Italian, puts in a novel perspective facts which prejudice and ignorance might have obfuscated. The passage of time has led to an objective assessment of Borg Pisani's "dedication" to his country.

JOE FELICE PACE

CASSAR, PAUL

Early Relations between Malta and the United States of America

Maltese Social Studies, No. 2

Malta, Midsea Books, 1976. xi-129pp.

When in April 1753 the Liberty Bell cracked for the second time, the State House of Philadelphia turned to the firm of Pass and Stowe for a third, and hopefully better, example to be cast. Little is known of this John Pass, though we have the unimpeachable evidence of the Speaker of the Philadelphia Assembly that he was 'a native of the Isle of Malta'.

This, however, is not the earliest connection between the American States and Malta. As far back as 1719, the Order of St John had suffered considerable losses after an