

A Tribute to Pawlu Mizzi (1929-2019)

SERGIO GRECH

Pawlu Mizzi's narrative is one of courage and perseverance. Those were my first thoughts when Pawlu's death was announced on 5th August. I came to know Pawlu when we two served on the National Book Council, some years back, and we used to have frequent chats during the Malta Book Fair which I will cherish forever. There were occasions where Pawlu and I crossed swords over book trade in Malta but such encounters never damaged our sound relationship. Undeniably, Pawlu was the guru in the field, and I respected his opinion which after all was proven and tested.

On the day of his death, I realised that I had come to know Pawlu even before my tenure at the National Book Council. In my teenage days, an outing to the Naxxar Trade Fair was a must and I clearly remember Pawlu and his wife and his kids Maria and Joseph on their stand selling books and talking proudly to customers about their latest products. Personally as a teenager, it never crossed my mind that one day, I would know Pawlu the way I did and even collaborate closely with him. He was an encyclopaedia in his field. An excellent reference point. His opinion was clear and unequivocal.

Hailing from tiny Gozo, almost an insignificant island for a long period of time, he studied in Malta and, being keen on Maltese – a language with almost no historical tradition – he made history by founding one of Malta's main publishing houses, the Klabb Kotba Maltin.

It was not an easy decision to take. It was an epoch when Gozo lacked investment and many Gozitans chose or rather were forced to choose the internal emigration option settling down, away from their families, in Malta. Still, it was an epoch when Malta chose the Independence path, and when decolonisation was not an easy route for a people whose DNA was characterised by continuous colonialism. So Pawlu not only fought Gozo's insularity but also the people's closed frame of mind and mentality.



Pawlu managed to infiltrate into the Maltese society and employed his investment skills. I would define this as a family affair coming from Gozo. He opened a business that on paper could have yielded only failure because, unfortunately, books were never really on the nation's agenda. Still, he went on looking for material in an era when book trade was inexistent. It was a period when literature was in the closet and perhaps 'dominated' by two or three authors who kept repeating Dun Karm, the island's national poet.

Of course, Pawlu never forgot his roots, and books and projects on Gozo were periodically included in his publishing ventures. Pawlu himself wrote a book about St George's Basilica. That area was a soft spot for Pawlu and no compromises could be made when the subject was raised.

It is not a coincidence that up to some years ago he was still publishing articles about Gozitan personalities, famous and not-so-famous, in “Il-Hajja f’Għawdex,” a magazine dedicated to Gozo and published by the Gozitan diocese. Those articles had sociological and anthropological value.

Mizzi went one step ahead and based his venture on mostly new authors, to a certain extent inexperienced. But it transpired that they were to be the future of the new wave literature. Still, he understood a very crucial strategy. He had to offer variety otherwise the whole venture would wreck and his ship would sink. In the process, he also discovered new authors. The likes of Mario Azzopardi, Victor Fenech, Oliver Friggieri and Ġorġ Mallia worked closely with him. Through his efforts, and with other book publishing companies like Merlin, a solid library of Maltese was being built. Maltese language and literature were given a new vest.

Mizzi did history by registering a number of milestones in the history of local publishing. Of foremost importance are Erin Serracino Inglott’s “Miklem Malti” and Ġużè Aquilina’s dictionaries. He also curated “Heritage,” a series of publications about Malta’s and Gozo’s history. The facsimile editions of key books from the past are a must for Melitensia lovers. Pawlu also opened his arms widely to academics so that the latter could publish their findings related to Malta’s chequered history.

Mizzi’s achievements will be cherished for ever. He has a unique place in the history of local publishing. On a personal level, I will miss him. Of course, his books will live forever.

P.S. From now on, I will be missing the verse *Pawlu Mizzi, Editur Ġenerali* on books published by the Klabb Kotba Maltin.



Pawlu Mizzi’s funeral mass attended by many dignitaries. (Photo courtesy of Martin Agius)