

## Book Review:

# Il-Qilla tal-Gwerra fuq Għawdex – 1940-1943

Frank Bezzina - New edition expanded by Charles Bezzina  
Gozo: A&M Printing Press (2020); 602 pages

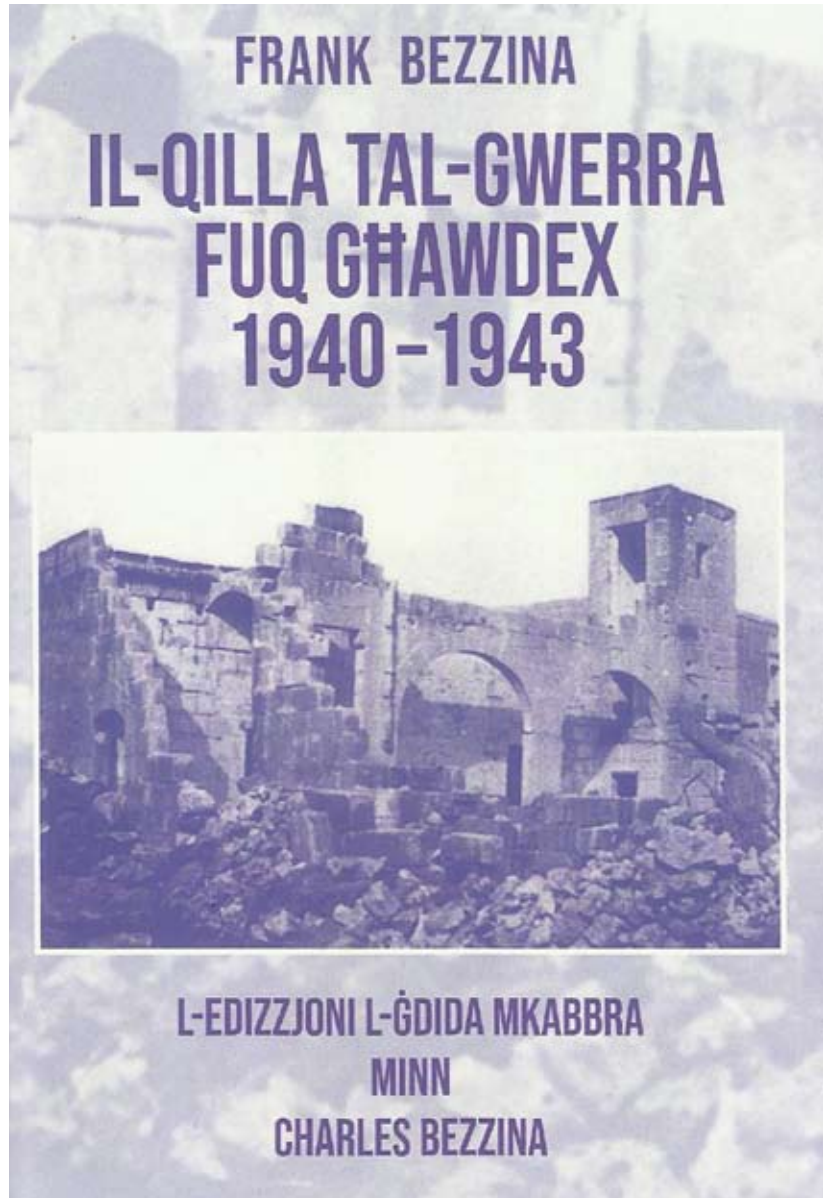
REVIEWED BY JUDGE JOSEPH GALEA DEBONO

The general impression is that Gozo was a backwater and completely isolated from the events that characterised the second siege of Malta in 1940-1943. That this view is far from the truth emerges from the father and son detailed account of the war years in Gozo authored by Frank Bezzina and his son Charles in a new publication that has recently reached the bookstalls *Il-Qilla tal-Gwerra fuq Għawdex – 1940-1943* (The ferocity of the war on Gozo).

This 602 page volume, copiously illustrated by photos taken by the teenager Frank Bezzina during the war and others collected by his son Charles, is a compendium of two previous books published by Frank Bezzina: *Il-Qilla tal-Għadu Fuq u Madwar Għawdex* (The ferocity of the enemy on and around Gozo) in 1997 and *F'Għawdex fi Żmien il-Gwerra* (In Gozo during the war) published four years later. These two books have been edited and annotated with footnotes of sources by Charles Bezzina who has further researched the subject and added new material discovered since the original publications. Charles Bezzina's considerable input in the second part of the book is based on further research he conducted over the last twenty years or so.

The first part of the book titled: *Djarju t' Għawdex fil-Gwerra* (A Gozo diary during wartime) is a day-by-day account of what happened on the Island gleaned mostly from police records and The Times of Malta and Il-Berqa. There are numerous instances of reports of loose mines floating in the Comino channel and close inshore, the finding of dead and mutilated bodies of enemy airmen or sailors washed ashore

on Gozo's bays, repeated sightings of suspicious submarines by the Coast Police, fishermen's reports of bits of floating parts of enemy aircraft out at sea and reports of stray bombs dropped in the countryside damaging crops and killing animals. As the siege tightened further during 1941, Gozo boats hitting mines with consequent loss of life and the occasional crash of an enemy aircraft start filling the daily occurrence reports of the Gozo Police.



The phenomenon of mass migration to Gozo in the early June 1940 days but, more so, after the Illustrious Blitz in January 1941 is also analysed and its inevitable positive and negative effects on the hitherto simple Gozitan way of life is also given prominence.

But the worst was still to come in 1942 when the Nazis and Fascists were hell-bent on neutralising Malta. The first five months of the year saw an unprecedented increase in the number of air raids with the climax being reached in April. The deliberate bombing of Nadur village on 3rd and 15th January 1942 and that of Ghajnsielem on the 29th heralded the collateral assault on the sister island. The diary features the repeated attacks on the Gozo ferries Royal Lady and Franco by low flying aircraft, the sinking of the Anna Dacoutros on its way to Gozo from Grand Harbour with supplies on 2nd April culminating in the bombing and sinking of the Royal Lady at Mgarr harbour on 6th May. This attack was followed by the deliberate strafing of buses and passengers in Racecourse Street and Ta' Savina Square in Victoria on the same day. If that was not enough, on the next day Messerschmitt 109s went for grazing sheep and goats, killing 35 heads. These gruesome events are brought to light by bystander and survivor first-hand accounts.

September 1942 saw the demonstration of the George Cross Medal, awarded to Malta by King George VI in April, to the Gozitan population with ceremonies in various places attended by all and sundry.

The sense of false security generated by the decline in the number of attacks during the summer of 1942 was shattered by the indiscriminate attack on the village of Sannat on 10th October, when two German Ju 88s dropped 2000 lb. bombs destroying or damaging seventy-six houses, killing eighteen and wounding over sixty-five, including a number of babies.

A new leaf was turned in 1943 with the Royal Air Force establishing air superiority and the decline of air raids. The festivities in Rabat and Gozo villages following the fall of Tripoli and Tunis in early 1943 get special mention. A somewhat comic incident is recorded from 6th

June, when rumours that Germans had landed near Qala made the inhabitants take to the streets brandishing butchers' knives, pitch forks, hoes and the like to repel the invaders. These turned out to be only three POWs who had escaped on a dinghy from detention in Pembroke and who were providentially apprehended by British soldiers and saved from potential lynching at bayonet point by the escort!

This first part concludes with the construction of an airfield at Xewkija by the Americans in preparation for the invasion of Sicily which took place on the night of 9th July and reports on how Gozitans flocked to Marsalforn and the ramparts of the Citadel to watch the hundreds of ships of the invasion fleet on the horizon heading for the South Sicilian beaches. Days later, a ferocious retaliatory night attack on the Gozo airfield, repelled by the anti-aircraft guns and searchlights manned by Americans brought enemy action against Gozo to a close.

The second part titled : *Għawdex fil-Gwerra 1940-1943* is a detailed and well researched study of the impact of the war on the administrative, social, religious, medical, commercial and supplies situation, expanded by the research conducted by Charles Bezzina and, though somewhat repetitive at times, provides a valuable historical documentation of life in Gozo during this troubled period. It is a wealth of information for any history buff conveyed in a flowing and very readable style. Charles Bezzina has a number of literary and poetic works to his name but, like his father, the war theme is his passion. Among his works are: *When the Siren Wailed* (2012), *The Gozo Airfield* (2004), *Vittmi Għawdxin tat-Tieni Gwerra* (2006) (Gozitan victims during the second world war) and *Wartime Gozo 1940-1943* (2015). He also co-authored with his father Frank: *Ir-Refugjati Maltin f' Għawdex fi Żmien il-Gwerra* (2017) (Maltese refugees in Gozo during the war).

The book, which was sponsored by Bank of Valletta, is a welcome addition to the vast collection of Melitensia that has been built up in the past seventy-five years since the end of World War II, but which was almost all concentrated on events on Malta to the complete exclusion of the sister island.