

A ROD AND A SHIELD

II Bandiera tal Maltin 1898 1998

A centenary from Manuel Dimech's 11 Bandiera tal Maltin

"This paper shall be a rod to the oppressor and a shield for the oppressed. It shall seek to eradicate from Malta and from the mind of the Maltese those thoughts ideas and antiquated customs which are worthless in this time and age, and place in their stead, and disseminate new ideas of light and progress"

With these words, the prodigious Valletta-born educator, social analyst and reformer, Manuel Dimech (1860-1921), introduced to the public his weekly newspaper in Maltese, *11 liandiere' tal Maltin* (The Flag of the Maltese), published for the first time a hundred years ago today. *11 Bandiera* continued to be published up till 1914. It had two interruptions, the first when Dimech went abroad (1905-1911), the second when it was condemned by the bishop of Malta and its editor excommunicated (1911). With great courage, typical of himself, Dimech continued to publish the weekly right up to the eve of his permanent exile from the island in September 1914.

Why did he start the publication at all?

Dimech's life had four phases. He lived the first phase of his life (1860-1897), the stage of his emotional and intellectual gestation, in a situation which he later dubbed "darkness": the wickedness of poverty and ignorance. Dimech spent the larger part of this phase at the Corradino prisons. There he grew to manhood while suffering, studying and learning.

With the publication of *II Bandiera*, Dimech began his second phase (1898-1911). He had come out in the public sphere and started to act publicly. This is the phase which had to lead him on to the unfortunate tragedy, but also to the matchless celebrity, of his exile and death far away from home.

The third phase of Dimech's life, that which had to be the last in the public sphere (1911-1914), was marked by the society he founded, named *Ix Xirca /al Imdaulin* (The Assembly of the Illuminated). In so doing, however, he brought upon himself the violent wrath and hostility of the grotesque ecclesiastical authorities and the English colonial government, then ruling the island.

The last phase (1914-1921), the most calamitous and heartbreaking of all, was lived in exile, at Alexandria (Egypt). Dimech was separated from all he cherished and treasured. In his extreme misery, humiliation and distress, Dimech proved himself to be a tremendously courageous man of heroic qualities.

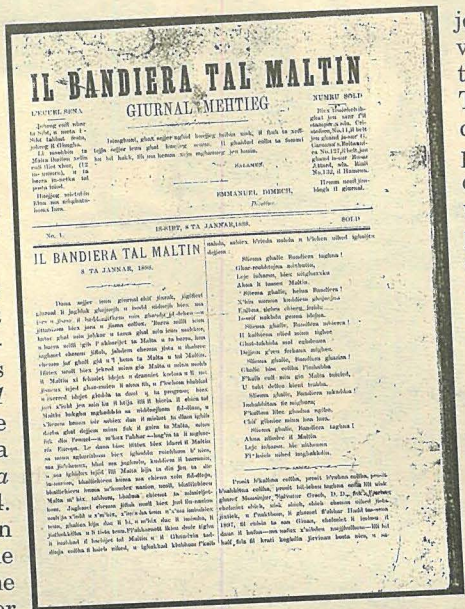
These are the four phases, the four eras, of a dazzling star in the turbulent sky of Dimech's human existence; the relentless glow of a man who cherished not only his motherland but those great standards which made Malta and the entire world a civil and humane place to live in.

Do the four epochs follow some logical development?

Dimech underwent the grim experience of prison because of the poverty and ignorance in which our people existed at the turn of the century. He definitely left the Corradino prisons in February 1896. For two whole years Dimech lived an unnoticed life without catching the public eye. His main occupation was teaching. Education was his true and natural vocation throughout his life. In January 1898 he started to publish his 500 to 800 copies of *11 Bandiera tal Maltin*

What had happened?

One of the most conspicuous effects of the partial elimination of censorship and the granting of limited liberty to the press, which the English government had introduced since 1839, was the sprouting of various



journals and papers which viewed ideas contrasting with the official version of things. Though he was not a regular contributor to the local press prior to 1898, Dimech intermittently wrote in papers which either had a declared political stand, such as *Public Opinion* of Sigismondo Savona, or in more independent ones, such as *11 Currier Malti* and *11 Veru Mannarinu*.

For an entire year, from February 1896 onwards, Dimech took no special initiative. Then, in 1897, he established his school of private tuition, teaching languages and arithmetic, and also preparing his works on grammar, mostly for his own use.

In such manner he spent a little more than a year when, in January 1898, unexpectedly one may say, he started the publication of his own weekly. Why? What exigency was there for his very own paper?

In prison Dimech lived the most cruel effects of poverty and ignorance in which the Maltese people were unscrupulously left to rot. There, in the dark corridors of Corradino, he met people who helped, educated and enlightened him, mostly English Protestant pastors. But he also met unhindered political corruption and crooked public administration. One of the most horrid episodes therein, which left an indelible mark on Dimech's mind, was the obscene annihilation at the gallows, in July 1894, of an innocent tightwad, Rosario Mizzi, known in Maltese as *Il-Lajs*, a victim of a disgusting conspiracy worked out by unconscionable prison and police authorities.

On examining the entire sequence of *II Bandiera tal Maltin*, particularly the first series from 1898 to 1905, that is, before Dimech traveled to Italy, one may easily see that the bond between the weekly and *Il-Lajs* is fundamental. As a victim of the system, Dimech held *Il-Lajs* to be none less than a veridical symbol of the Maltese. The seductive figure of *Il-Lajs* dominates not only those numerous writings which deal with him directly, but also in some way all of the other contributions.

It is difficult not to note that *II Bandiera* even when it presented Rosario Mizzi as a victim, was itself the counter-argument of *Il-Lajs*, the public alter-symbol of the hapless private man destroyed at the gibbet. It is clear to the discerning eye that the weekly went beyond the mere expression of Dimech's need to communicate with others. It had that mysterious something more. But what?

The decision to publish the weekly was neither taken hastily, and nor was it unconnected to a general plan which was outlined in Dimech's mind for the betterment of Maltese society.

Former studies on Dimech have contented themselves with merely acknowledging the fact of *II Bandiera's* publication. They failed to give too much thought to the reasons which gave rise to that fact, as if it was the most natural thing in the world for a man of humble means living a century ago to produce his own weekly.

If Dimech had to publish a paper, why should he had to wait a whole two years? Why not before? Why not later? One may safely say that, in January 1898, Dimech already had a strategy

schemed out in his mind in which *II Bandiera* had its rightful place as an instrument of change. How?

Dimech was first and foremost an educator. His weekly alone is proof enough of this fact. But he was also a social analyst and reformer. *II Bandiera*, a laborious product both of a long and agonizing torment as much as of fertile and productive reflection, is in itself the arm of political action with which Dimech chose to affect change.

11 Bandiera came forth from the appalling and shocking experience Dimech had of poverty and ignorance, an experience shared with all Maltese because of an unjust political system in which the Catholic Church disgracefully concurred. In its turn, *II Bandiera* gave forth (in 1911) of *Ix Xirca tal Imdaulin* - that society which Dimech wanted to be an image of how he envisaged a yet to come Maltese society: a society of "light", of fraternity, of equality and of freedom. In short, a republican society. *11 Bandiera* had to show the way.

It is for this reason that Dimech's weekly had to be both a rod and a shield: "a rod to the oppressor and a shield for the oppressed". Today, in affectionately marking the centenary from its first issue, we cannot fail to be enthralled at the farsightedness of its one and only editor as at the long way we came in our last memorable hundred years. O

Tonight, starting at 6.00 p.m., Daritama thankfully commemorates Manuel Dimech's "*11 Bandiera tal Maltin*" with a conference at the Phoenixia Hotel. Jack Calamatta, Josephine Sultana, Fr Mark Montebello O.P., Maria Darmanin, Henry Frendo and Guido De Marco shall address the conference. The public is invited to attend. Entrance free. Limited facsimile copies of the first issue shall be on sale. Other copies, if available, may be ordered from Dar it-Tama 144/5, Matty Grima Street, Cospicua CSP02 (Price 99c).

by a correspondent of Daritama

