

Ġorġ Pisani (1909-1999) – Patriot, Educator, Author and Poet – One Hundred Years from his Birth

PAUL G. PISANI

Introduction

It is a bit awkward to sing the praises of a close family relative. In fact Ġorġ Pisani is my father. He passed away peacefully on 24 February 1999. His life was hectic and busy, spanning almost the entirety of the twentieth century and he has left an indelible mark on Gozo's cultural and social patrimony.

Pisani was born in Victoria on May 6, 1909, to Paul, a Gozitan wine merchant, and Theresa nee' Calleja, a Maltese lady from Cospicua. Pisani had a sister, Josephine, born in 1901, who married Dr. Paul Borg Grech and settled in Malta, and a brother Anton, born in 1904, who married a Maltese lady, Ines Spiteri, and settled in Gozo. Another brother John, born in 1906, died in infancy.

Pisani spent his childhood in Republic Street, the hub of Gozo. In his novels he recounts the advance of progress on Gozo, the electricity and water services, the early emigration, the first motor car in Gozo, the parish rivalries, the San Ġirġor devotional pilgrimage and the unobstructed vistas from his hometown.

Pisani recounts that one could see as far as Marsalforn from the present Republic Street crossroads and that as a child he used to play with other children in the same street. He never wrote an autobiography but he has described his early childhood years in his numerous literary works. He received his early tuition at the Government Primary School and the Lyceum in Victoria.

Drawn to Priesthood

Pisani made several excursions outside the country, some with his cousin and best friend Censu Tabone, later President of the Republic. At a certain point in time, Pisani felt the vocation for the priesthood and joined the Capuchin Order. Here he carried out advanced studies in classical

literature, philosophy and theology. It was during this period that Pisani started to write his first poems. His name as a Franciscan was Fra Alipju. Pisani was not to pursue the ecclesiastical career, but his strong attachment to the charisma of St. Francis was to remain with him for the rest of his life.



Ġorġ Pisani in a promotion of Gozo Cottage Industries. A propaganda photo to advertise Gozo lace.

Pisani collaborated with E.B. Vella in the *Ġabrat*' *Ward* series published by Oxford University Press. The poems in this anthology were to make him a household name with generations of students.

Pisani joined the editorial staff of the *Times of Malta* and *Il-Berqa* and in 1933 was the editor of the literary page of *Id-Dinja*. He was appointed the first teacher of Maltese at the Gozo Lyceum between 1935 and 1940. He introduced the teaching of Maltese to the students of the Gozo Seminary and to primary school teachers who attended a

Post Certificate Course in 1936. Between 1931 and 1935 he won several literary competitions organised by *Lehen il-Malti* and the now defunct *Pronostku Malti*. In 1939 he co-founded the *Xirka għat-Tixrid ta' l-Ilsien Malti*.

World War II

In 1940 Pisani joined the Information Department in Valletta. There he worked as a translator and co-editor of the Maltese language version of the Information Service Bulletin and other Government publications. His contribution to the war effort was mentioned by Francis Gerard in his masterpiece *Malta Magnificent* (1943). During these years Pisani also taught Italian and Maltese at the Girls' Secondary School, Valletta and introduced the teaching of Maltese to students at the Sacred Heart Convent School, St. Julian's.



Gorg Pisani with Viscount Gort during his wartime visit to Gozo in May 1943.

In 1942 Pisani was appointed Assistant Information Officer in Gozo. He immediately opened an Information Office in the *Banca Giuratale* at It-Tokk as well as several other information bureaux

in the villages of Gozo. On 29 May, 1943, Lord Gort visited Gozo to view these bureaux and highly commended Pisani for his efforts.

During this period, Pisani was in charge of the collection of wheat to be transferred to the famine-stricken sister Island of Malta. Pisani had to face the diffidence of the Gozitan peasants but his fiery exhortations in the village squares had the desired effect and the farmers willingly released their wheat.



Gorg Pisani in the first Rediffusion transmissions from Gozo.

Pisani immortalised this eventful period in his life in *Il-Gabra tal-Qamħ* (1945). During the war and before the advent of Rediffusion, he also devised, with the help of a certain Mr. Vella from Hamrun, a primitive broadcasting system for Gozo, whereby Government notices and general information could be conveyed to the public.

Civil Service Career

In 1947, Pisani resumed teaching Maltese and other subjects such as Italian, Latin, History and Religion at the Gozo Lyceum. In 1957 he was appointed Publicity Officer with the Government and in 1963 he was promoted to Senior Information Officer.

During this period, and before the advent of television, Pisani organised open air film shows in various villages of Gozo where documentaries were shown and explained in Maltese to the population. During the same period Pisani contributed several articles on historical and folkloristic subjects to *The Review* and *Tajjeb li Tkun Taf*, publications issued by the Department of Information.

He was due to retire from the Civil Service in 1969 but was kept in Government employment until 1972.

After his retirement, Pisani resumed his writing and broadcasting, notably on the Rediffusion Sunday morning programme *Nofs Siegħa ta' Għawdex*, later renamed *Mill-Gżira tat-Tlett Għoljiet*.

He also occasionally served as a tourist guide, taking coach loads of tourists around Gozo. Pisani confided to several people that this gave him the opportunity to sing the praises of his beloved Gozo to people coming from all over the world. He also continued writing and published several books.

In 1977 he was awarded the Malta Literary Award for his first novel *Beraq u Qawsalli* (1976). Pisani won the same prize again in 1983 with another novel *Żernieq fuq l-Għoljiet* (1982). In 1983 he was awarded the international prize *Città di Valletta*, and in 1986 he was nominated life member of the *Għaqda Poeti*. Pisani was a very active member of the *Akkademja tal-Malti* since his early youth. In 1992 he was awarded the *Midalja Għall-Qadi tar-Repubblika* and in 1997 he was awarded *Ġieh il-Belt Vittorja* by the Victoria Local Council.



Ġorġ Pisani in the last years of his life.

Pisani also served as chairman of the Cultural Council and National Festivities Committee for Gozo between 1977 and 1985, and as a member of the Emigrants' Commission (Gozo Section) and the Gozo Agricultural, Industrial and Cultural Society, up to his death.

Literary Output

Pisani has been a very prolific writer. He published four books of poetry: *Il-Għid taż-Żgħożija* (1945); *Il-Waltz tad-Dellijiet* (1951); *Melodiji u Kuluri* (1953); and *It-Trijonf tal-Paċi u Poeżiji Ohra* (1984). Apart from *Il-Gabra tal-Qamħ*, he also published five plays: *Is-Sengħa ta' l-Imħabba* (1945); *Għajn tar-Rebbiegħa* (1947); *Il-Kewkba* (1949); *Apoteosi* (1978) and *Is-Sigriet ta' Swor Kristina* (1978).

He has published two collections of Gozitan legends: *Għawdex Joħlom fil-Legġendi* (1980) and *Mill-Gżira tal-Ħolm* (1995). He also published a collection of novels *Għoxrin Novella* (1946) and a collection of essays *Evviva l-Ħajja* (1963). Some of his works have been translated in English, Italian, German, Esperanto and Russian.

Posthumous publications, edited by the present author were *Id-Duwa tal-Madalena*, (2000), a collection of articles on medical folklore and *Għana Bikri u Għana Wahħari* (2006), an anthology of unpublished poems written in the last years of his life. In 2000, Professor Oliver Friggieri edited an anthology of Pisani's best poems, entitled *Poeżiji. Ġorġ Pisani*. Other works such as collections of Gozitan legends, travelogues, popular history, poems and drama still await the light of publication. It is hoped that these works will be published eventually and not lost in oblivion.

His Final Years

Pisani spent the last ten years of his life writing and receiving the numerous students and researchers of the Maltese language and history at his home in Main Gate Street. Various people remember him reading and writing in the window that faces this busy street, stopping every now and then to acknowledge and reciprocate the greetings that both young and old would give to this fine old gentleman.



Monument to Gorg Pisani erected by public subscription in Victoria Gozo.

At times he used to spend hours chatting to persons sitting in the waiting room of his son's notarial office, attached to his residence. He had a kind word for everyone. In summer he used to take a stroll in the shade of the Rundle Gardens, book in hand, and occasionally in the company of his granddaughter Maria, who was a source of much of his joy during the last years of his life.

The Last Adieu

Pisani passed away after a short illness on 24 February 1999 at the Gozo General Hospital. The news of his death was reported in news bulletins of local radio and TV stations that same evening. The morrow's newspapers gave extensive coverage of his death. *The Times* gave it front page prominence. He was even commemorated in Parliament and was given the nearest equivalent to a state funeral in his native Victoria. His funeral was held on 26 February 1999.

A Centenary From his Birth

2009 marks the centenary from his birth. I hope that public spirited persons and entities will not let the year pass by without giving him a fitting commemoration.

Paul G. Pisani graduated diploma of Notary Public in 1985 and Doctor of Laws from the University of Malta in 1986 and currently practices as a notary public. He is currently reading for an MA in Mediterranean Historical Studies at the University of Malta, Gozo Centre. He has published various works on Malta's literature and history in several journals.