

Foreword to Ted Mizzi (2015). *The Rotunda: A testament to faith, courage and love*. Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, pp. vii-viii.

Ix-xita traxxax hesrem hekk kif dalam
Anna bdiet titriegħed tant bil-bard
Il-logħob tar-*rummy* fil-kwiet kien dak li fadal
Waqt li Luke jaħassra jissielet kontra l-mard.

Il-hoss ta' trakk għaddej f'Triq il-Hamriija.
Skoss nagħaġ ma' ragħaj jimirħu fuq bankina.
Bla televixin, tpaċpaċ u tilgħab filgħaxija.
U żjara lil Mulej għal quddiesa u tqarbina.
Il-gass jillijkja mill-*cooker* ta' Marija
Dan huwa l-gost u s-seher tax-Xewkija.

Freely translated into English as follows:

As it grew dark, the rain started falling.
Feeling cold, Anna started shivering.
Noting else to do but play rummy.
While poor Luke bravely fights his cold.

A truck could be heard driving along Soil Street
A bunch of sheep, and their shepherd, navigating the pavement
No TV, so we play and chat through the evening,
And visit God for mass and communion.
Maria's cooker is leaking gas.
This is the fun and magic of Xewkija

Feeling inspired, I wrote this poem, in its Maltese rhyming version, on April 1, 1997. My wife Anna, along with James and Luke, our two (then young) sons aged 12 and 6, and I were spending some quality time in frugal surroundings: a semi-furnished ground-floor flat in Soil Street, Xewkija, rented from our good friend Marija Grech (*ta' Bejza*), enjoying our annual Gozo getaway in the week after Easter. Looking back, these were special times: so many adventures on those Gozo escapes, including – on this occasion – power cuts, leaking gas, bad weather, and a bout of ill health. What else could go wrong?

And yet... There was, there is, something about Xewkija that continues to allure me. An elusive *je ne sais quoi* that has whiffs of nostalgia, authenticity and rusticity, even though, as a critical social scientist, I am more than aware that much of this suite of features may be my own construction, a figment that has been willed into existence to satisfy my own expectations of a successful holiday. But then, it is surely not just a fanciful invention of a single mind: Xewkija was – is – a human and physical community that has inspired some deep relationships in our lives; Anna and I connected intimately with people there, even though we would only see them and talk to them for a few days, and then not again until twelve months or so later. These included Maria, her son Ġanni and his wife Anna; Saminu the baker; our friends Joe and Rosemarie Azzopardi and their two daughters, living at Ta' Ġok. I guess many Maltese, hopeless *aficionados* of the island of Gozo like myself, would have similar warm feelings of the place: redolent with meaning and affect.

Part of our daily ritual while in Xewkija was to go to evening mass in the rotunda that is the subject of this book. The building is an icon of the local community that built it in the first place; a living testimony of faith as much as sheer hard work and collective effort.

I was actually introduced to the story of Xewkija and its church while reading a master's degree in development studies in The Hague, the Netherlands, in 1985-86. One of our professors, a Dutchman by the name of Gerard Kester, had been a regular visitor to Malta and he thought fit to refer to the Xewkija Rotunda in the introduction to one of his courses. I was taken completely by surprise: here I was, the only Maltese student at the Institute, and suddenly the majestic product of the toil, sweat and savings of so many Gozitan workers is referred to as one clear example of collective participation. We were then cogently reminded that people *can* cooperate in pursuit of a cause they strongly believe in, and that not everything that people do is done for material gain. (Marija ta' Bejza was one such embodiment, always on the go, organizing lotteries and events, and with all proceeds going to the Church.) Two ideas worth keeping in mind in this individualistic and consumer-driven age.

I am grateful to Ted Mizzi for putting pen, and photos, to paper, regaling us with this book, a rich testimonial to the people of Xewkija, past, present and future.

Professor Godfrey Baldacchino