

## ANNIVERSARY FEATURE

# Remembering Manwel Dimech

## 99 years after his death

FR MARK MONTEBELLO

A year short of a hundred years ago, on April 17, 1921, a Sunday, Field Marshal Viscount Edmund Allenby, Britain's Special High Commissioner of Egypt and Commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force, had little time and care for petty news. His mind was elsewhere.

He had a major riot on his hands at Cairo. Though tempted to be rash and irritable, which never paid, he chose instead, as he invariably did, the English blasé, tarrying as if unperturbed while sipping his gin and tonic.

The matter was serious enough and partly his own doing. Saad Zaghloul, Egypt's one-time minister of education, minister of justice and vice president of the Legislative Assembly, was back from exile in France with a vengeance. He, Allenby, had consented that Zaghloul be allowed to be freed from his Verdala prison in Malta.

Now, at the beginning of April 1921, he returned to Egypt to a popular welcome, as expected, brandishing his politics of freedom and independence from Britain. The gamble to appease Zaghloul and his Wafd Party botched. Revolution – that word any sensible British dreaded – was in the air. It was not good.

Better deal with some small fry for the moment, Allenby must have thought, just to soothe the nerves. This particular message he had before him, coming from one of the hospitals in Alexandria that were pulled together during the Great War, would do fine enough.

It concerned a British subject from Malta who, oddly enough, had been held prisoner of war in British custody for the last six years. This was one of those odious if inexorable things an administration sometimes inherits without knowing what is to be done about it.

The prisoner's family name was almost certainly pronounced wrongly. It was spelt D-i-m-e-c-h. Whatever, since he had become High Commissioner of Egypt in 1919, Allenby had tried to use this wretched



Manwel Dimech 1860-1921. Right: Dimech as drawn by Salvu Astarita in 1914.

soul, Emmanuel Dimech, as a sort of deterrent against the Governor of Malta, Herbert Plumer. The Field Marshal dared threaten to throw in Allenby's lap Egyptian undesirables held in Malta.

Vaguely conscious that this Dimech was unwanted back home due to some paltry squabble with the local bishop, and that self-government was in the offing, Allenby impishly suggested that, had Plumer to go ahead with his threat, he would send this Dimech over.

Nobody was aware that Dimech had by then been already half-dead. Anyway, however preposterous, the bluff seemed to have worked nonetheless.

Palpably, such prisoners, whatever their guilt or lack of it, were not Allenby's direct concern, however bizarre their case might be. What worried the High Commissioner were the riots constantly brewing under the very ground he walked on. Anyway, now all this babble with this Maltese prisoner was over, it appears.

The note Allenby was given earlier said that Dimech had breathed his last breath less than a week before. All Allenby had to do now was officially inform London. He thus dictated a terse telegram to the Foreign Office to be sent immediately

and repeated to Malta. It said, "Dimech died here April 17th." That was the end of it. Case closed. Next.

Of course, Allenby could not have cared less about whatever had happened to Dimech's mortal remains or whether he had been given a decent burial, Catholic or not. None of this was his affair. Someone would have taken care of those trivialities.

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He most certainly never even thought about such matters just as he had never for a single second pondered what Dimech's story, or that of anyone else in a similar predicament, might have been. Why waste one's time on such trifles, after all, when other much weightier matters were at stake such as the fate of British Egypt?

Besides, seen against the background of a mighty em-

pire on which the sun never set, minnows like D-i-m-e-c-h were utterly dispensable.

Had he enquired, he would have been told that the deceased, half-paralysed for the last five months, forsaken by each one of his countrymen, even by a certain John Mamo who had previously visited him in his captivity for some time, had been laid to rest.

A coarser person would have told him that, when the ill-fated wretch kicked the bucket, his emaciated carcass had been hastily wrapped in the soiled bedsheets where it lolled, taken out to some desert patch, unceremoniously dumped there and covered in sand.

At his bedside, the few prayers said had been by an Anglican pastor who piously did his religious duty.

Beholding such a sorry sight of this 60-year-old sufferer, little could the pious man suspect of what really lay before him.

Not only did it seem that the spark of so much brilliance had been wiped off his countenance, not only did it appear that the blaze of so much vigour had been recoiled from his heart but it also looked as if the fine nobility of his dignity had been besmirched.

This, however, was only the cruel appearance which hid from mortal eyes a greatness

rarely found and an excellence seldom encountered.

Prior to his exile in 1914, for 17 years, Dimech had almost single-handedly championed in Malta the cause of the dispossessed and the impoverished in order that they may live in dignity and happiness. He advocated Malta's independence more than 50 years before it was attained.

A self-educated and a self-made man born in Valletta's slums, Dimech paid the dear price of the illiteracy, exclusion and poverty he was made to suffer by spending his youth and early adulthood, some 20 years in all, behind bars.

During his public life, he made two fatal mistakes which brought him ruin: he emboldened women to attain equal rights in education and employment, and enlightened Dockyard workers to unionise. The former being the domain of the Church, and the latter of the British colonial government, Dimech made a mortal enemy of both.

It was basically because of this lethal double-pointed spike that Dimech died in exile, broken and humiliated... though certainly not vanquished. For he was not destined to oblivion.

Throughout the hundred years that separate us from him, it was only for less than three decades, from about the mid-1930s to the late-1950s, that Dimech's name was not honoured. This was mainly due to the social impact of local Church politics.

From the early 1960s onwards, his name continued to grow in moral stature and acclaim. Today, he is collectively hailed as a national hero worthy of respect, study and heed.

Barely two weeks after Dimech's death, part of his life's ambition, to see Malta self-governed, was achieved. This came about with the proclamation of the 'Amery-Milner Constitution' on April 30, 1921, with which the Maltese were granted their first parliament.

The first centenary of both will be marked next year. The occasion will be one which should unite all local political shades into one bright rainbow of gratitude, brotherhood, goodwill and hope.