Battling at two fronts.

Friendship, loyalty and fascism in *Requiem for a Malta*

*fascist* by Francis Ebejer.

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Abstract

A discussion about the role of fascism and the influence it has on the relations between the protagonist Lorenz and the characters Paul, Elena and Kos in Requiem for a Malta fascist by the Maltese author Francis Ebejer, as well as a brief historical background as to why Malta ended up in their de facto tangibly decisive situation during the Second World War. The discussion also treats subjects like loyalty and priority and how these are affected in a time of national and international crisis.
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1. Introduction

My travels to Malta, as well as my numerous Maltese friends, have allowed me to penetrate the surface of these barren rocks; the eldest Christian community in Europe, the speakers of the remnant of the Phoenician language, the land that for only forty-five years has been ruled by its native inhabitants, and find a country seething with optimism, openness and eagerness to adapt to a new time in history. Nonetheless, the memories of foreign days, as well as the strong bonds with the Catholic faith persist and help create a bizarre, albeit unarguably attractive, cultural mix. Here, in the mid-Mediterranean, where West meets East, Phoenicians, Romans, Byzantines, Carthaginians, Normands, Arabs, the Knights of Saint John, the French and the English have all left their traces and hence given birth to the modern Maltese nation as we see it today (Azzopardi 1999).

Throughout his writing, Francis Ebejer (1925-1993) combines this historical background with the Maltese people’s constant struggle to keep their diminutive economy afloat and their witty, yet sarcastic, sense of humour. His writing is linked to everything that is included in the word “Malta” and that was mentioned above. Born in rural Malta, in Ħad-Dingli, where the Dingli cliffs fall steeply into the Mediterranean Sea, the Maltese landscape, as well as the sun and the sea, has come to play a significant role in Ebejer’s work. So have his personal memories of the Second World War, during which he served as an English-Italian interpreter with the British Forces in Tripolitania. The aspect of the war that Ebejer treats most frequently is fascism and its dominance over Malta in the 1930’s and 1940’s. In Requiem for a Malta Fascist, the novel that this essay will treat, fascism is a yoke that impedes and complicates the relations between the main character Lorenz and the other characters. This will also be the problem I wish to investigate through the study of Ebejer’s novel. The text will be analysed through close-reading. The discussion will not be carried out through the eyes of a particular theoretical standpoint. Rather, a more general approach to the text is what this discussion requires, as the subject of the discussion expands beyond the “classical” literary theories. Thus, Lorenz’s complicated relationships, and more precisely the factors that make them complicated will be the focus of this essay.
1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Through the course of history, Malta has had an importance out of all proportion to its diminutive size. All the great civilisations of European history have been in possession of the islands (Azzopardi 4-19) and there have been at least three instances in history when Malta has been tangibly decisive for the outcome of European fortune.

In 1565, the Knights of Saint John and their army comprising only just over 6000 soldiers, most of them regular Maltese farmers and craftsmen, completely untrained for war, defeated the Ottoman Empire under the command of the dreaded commander-in-chief Dragut (Turgut) Reis and his army of 48000 professional warriors. Thereby, the Maltese also brought the Ottoman and Muslim expansion towards Western Europe to a standstill and although the Ottoman Empire persisted, it lost its leading position in the Mediterranean after this event and it never really recovered again (Bradford 58-218).

During the Second World War, Malta, at the time a British colony, was under constant air attacks from the Italians and Germans. During the winter of 1941/42, Malta was bombarded more heavily than was London during the entire six years that the war lasted. The bombings almost obliterated the capital Valletta and more than 1500 people were killed that winter (Tamlander 28-33).

The third time that Malta was the focus of the world’s attention was in 1989, when US President George Bush and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev met at sea just close to the Maltese village of Marsaxlokk. This summit has generally come to be seen as the official end of the Cold War (Åselius 86-88).

With regard to this essay, the events in Malta during the Second World War are the most interesting ones. In fact, it is not very difficult to understand why Malta ended up getting the role it actually got during the war, given the historical background and the coeval cultural and linguistic situation Malta was in. Claudia Baldoli (2008) argues that once the British realised the strength of Italy and especially after the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1936, they concluded that the most crucial area in British-Italian relations was the area between Gibraltar and the Dardanelles. In this area, Malta was “the keystone of everything” (6).

Although never geographically part of an Italian-speaking nation or empire, apart from a short period of time in the 12th and 13th centuries, Italian was, beside the native
Maltese, the predominant language in Malta in the early 20th century. Italian was used for diplomatic purposes, as well as for legal and juridical matters. Likewise, it was the literary language of the islands and thus, it is reasonable to argue that it held a strong importance in Maltese community. However, Baldoli argues that in 1932, an Act of the British Parliament suppressed the teaching of the Italian language in Maltese schools and shortly thereafter, another Act introduced the Maltese language as the juridical language. English and Italian were given equal status in secondary schools and at the university, but teachers of Italian were disallowed from teaching this language, both in and out of schools. Two years later, i.e. in 1934, London passed a law prohibiting the use of Italian in administration and legislation and in November of that year, Italian was no longer allowed to be taught at the faculty of law at the University of Malta. Furthermore, in the shadow of the Anglo-Italian conflict over Abyssinia, students were no longer allowed to hold any kind of meetings. The Fascist movements in Malta then found themselves in the paradoxical situation of claiming that such limitations were scandalous limitations to democracy (9).

The struggle for the defence of the Italian language as the official language of Malta raised the issue of the origins of the islands. Nationalist writers and propagandists linked the question to the idea of Italianità (the conformity to the peculiarities of Italians or their language or culture in the Mediterranean basin). Some literature in Malta began associating the language question with the cultural differences between Britain and Italy and some writers (with Ettore Rossi being the most prolific and ardent one) even went as far as to suggest that both from its geography and its history, Malta was a Sicilian island. In the meantime, Lord Gerald Strickland, leader of the pro-British Constitutional Party and Prime Minister of Malta, had long sought to prove another cultural origin of the Maltese and he was in fact among the first to put forward the idea that the Maltese people and language were actually remnants of the Phoenician people and language and thus of Semitic origin.

In 1932, the tenth anniversary of the installation of Mussolini’s Fascist government in Rome was celebrated and it proved to be a crucial year for Maltese fortunes. Fascist organisations in Malta had had some success in recruiting members and supporters and this is also the year in which Britain began its most vigorous attacks against Italian institutions. The Institute of Italian Culture had opened in Valletta in February of 1932. The institute soon became a social as well as a political hangout for fascists of all ages and the Colonial Office soon realised the clear links between the institute and Rome. For the rest of the 1930’s, the institute, as well as other buildings, study circles and centres that sought to
spread fascist ideas were under constant suspicion from the British and they were often closed down and prohibited, only to reappear in a different guise at a different location (Baldoli 9-13).

It is in the middle of this struggle for identity, history and belonging that the reader of Requiem for a Malta Fascist meets Lorenz, the protagonist of the novel. From now on, the issue of making relationships and friendships function with as little social impediment as possible in the midst of this bedlam will be the topic discussed.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The front cover of Ebejer’s novel tells that it is a “(...) powerful (...) novel of fascist love lust and intrigue (...)” (Ebejer, 1980). Unarguably, the novel treats the subjects of love, lust and intrigue from various angles, but the keyword is nonetheless fascism. This ideology drapes over the entire plot and is at the same time an impediment and a trigger, an obstacle and an escape, not only for Lorenz, the protagonist, but for all the characters of the novel.

Keith Wilson (1984) argues that Ebejer’s writing, just like all writing, is linked to the social context of the author. Although some people might argue differently, Wilson’s approach to the text is both a relevant and a valid rapprochement to any kind of text. Wilson continues by raising the question of whom Maltese authors actually write for. He maintains that given the historical and social background of the country itself and its people being inhabitants of an enclosed community that rapidly has shifted from the effective rule of the Catholic church to rule by the state, as well as from dependence to independence, it is likely that authors find themselves in a state-of-mind that Wilson calls a “literary schizophrenia” (471). Albeit an ignorant and vastly inappropriate use of the word schizophrenia, the expression could aid the comprehension of the troubles that Maltese authors might find themselves in. Struggles between church and state, between modernity and tradition and between older and younger generations, of a kind that challenges basic assumptions of identity, have been particularly acute and enacted within a minute geographical area¹ that can only exacerbate their effects (472). Wilson brings forward the idea that the writer in such a context easily finds himself having problems with loyalty and belonging and that he uses literature as a means of controlling his own scission of loyalty (472).

¹ Malta is only 316 km² in area and has just over 400 000 inhabitants as of July of 2008 (Internet A).
Thomas Bonnići (1992) shares Wilson’s thoughts to a certain extent, arguing that in *Requiem for a Malta fascist*, Ebejer makes the Maltese village the setting of Lorenz’s upbringing. Based on the village culture portrayed in the novel, Lorenz’s childhood is completely alien to national problems and apparently lacks a wider vision of the upheavals of the world outside of the enclosed village (132). It is not until Lorenz moves to the capital city Valletta that a strong change in his outlook on the world around him occurs. Thus, city life becomes the dichotomy of everything that is traditional and that is also considered positive. Bonnići argues that the village, with its Maypoles, kite flying, family outskirts, wedding feasts, church lore and human solidarity, is a symbol of the independent pre-colonial life and spirit (132-134). Although it would seem reasonable to assume that the genuinely Maltese lifestyle is more palpable in the villages than in the capital, one must keep in mind that Malta has been colonised at least for the last 3500 years (Azzopardi 4). Thus, it is also reasonable to assume that traces of the colonial powers that have been mentioned previously have penetrated and been added to the lore that was already there. Malta is in fact an admixture of cultures that have merged and evolved into something completely unique. Accordingly, there is no pre-colonial culture in Malta today; there is but a merger of many.

There are passages of the novel that could allow a post-colonial reading of the novel, as well as there are excerpts of the text that would make it reasonable to adopt other theoretical views on it. However, when reading and understanding *Requiem for a Malta Fascist*, there are also aspects that do not require the reader to have any particular theoretical approach to the text. Thus, as far as this discussion of the novel is concerned, it will be more interesting to examine it through the application of certain notions, among which fascism is one. Doubtlessly, the war situation and the division between fascists and non-fascists that occurs in the text could to a certain extent be related to the circumstances of Malta being a colonised country. Nonetheless, the text is more complicated than just an anti-colonial manifesto and as such, it requires understanding from more than one perspective.

With this theoretical background in mind, the rest of this essay will be dedicated to an analysis of Lorenz’s relations to the other characters of the novel; his cousin Kos, his best friend Paul and the count and the countess (who is also Lorenz’s mistress). The impingement of fascism will consistently be interwoven and have a special bearing.
3. LORENZ’S COMPLICATED RELATIONSHIPS

The story of Lorenz is also the story of a young man’s thorny relationships to the people who surround him. In Lorenz’s case, an external factor, fascism, impedes the evolution of healthy and sound relationships. In this chapter, we shall have a look at the fruition of Lorenz’s relationships to the other characters and how fascism afflicts and impedes these relationships.

3.1 His best friend Paul

Apart from the superficially mentioned Gozitans² with whom he shares his place of residence, Lorenz does not seem to have a lot of friends. Paul is, however, a close friend of his. It is not clear at what point in time Lorenz and Paul first met or under what circumstances. Already before Paul is introduced in the novel, the reader understands that Paul is a fascist and that Lorenz objects to this:

“‘Your politics disgust me,’ I told Paul one spring day in 1938.

(...) ‘They disgust me because I have seen them turn friends against each other. Only friendship (such as ours) is real and important. Politics (such as yours) debase it. They threaten us like man-eating tigers (they surround us at dead of night). Don’t let them’.

(...) Paul looked resplendent in his fascist uniform.”

(Ebejer 37)

From this excerpt, at least two important conclusions can be drawn. The first one is that Lorenz does not like politics and that he certainly does not like fascism. The other one is that his largest objection to fascism is not that it is undemocratic, war-romantic, oppressive to workers or any of the other negative connotations that fascism has. Instead, Lorenz disapproves of it because it threatens his friendship with Paul. This is interesting also from the point-of-view that Lorenz values friendship more than most other things in the world. This is something we shall return to later.

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² Malta comprises seven islands: Malta, Gozo, Comino, Cominotto, St Paul’s islands and Filfla. Of these, only Malta, Gozo and Comino are inhabited (Azzopardi, 1999). The word “Gozitan” refers to a person from Gozo.
Throughout the entire novel, Lorenz’s character is represented by extreme diplomacy, bordering on fear of actually ever speaking his mind. In spite of not liking Paul’s political preferences, Lorenz divulges that Paul looks “resplendent” in his fascist uniform (Ebejer, 1980:37). Just like Bonnić points out, Lorenz is “loyal to Paul in all circumstances” (Bonnić, 1992:132), but to his country only when in real danger. Thus, to Lorenz, political matters and stand-taking comes second to retaining his friendship with Paul.

A major altercation between Lorenz and Paul appears already before the war breaks out, but can nonetheless be related to their conflicting political interests. Lorenz’s obvious disinterest in politics has the consequence that he does not at all mind working for the British and he receives an employment as a delivery boy and dish washer at the casino, the British Military Headquarters and at bars and pubs mainly frequented by the British. Lorenz does not pay too much attention to the fact that he works for the colonial power. Paul, however, frequents Balilla, a young fascist group and he has also advanced to the higher echelons of this group and become a prominent fascist in Malta. Lorenz mentions this as the first major crevice in their friendship. Although they have had political disagreements before, Lorenz now notices that this disagreement is of a whole different depth and that as Paul has grown older, the “fascination” of his childhood has now been consolidated into “conviction” and “bigotry” (Ebejer, 1980:41).

Lorenz feels hurt personally by Paul starting to prefer his political allegiances before their friendship. The fact that Lorenz carries these feelings may of course stem from his having no other real friends. All through his childhood, Lorenz, coming from a very traditional rural upbringing, has never been subjected to the large conflicts of the world outside. Especially, his never having had to care too much about political issues makes him feel both chocked and offended by having politics, which is something he finds very trivial coming before such a profound and important human quality as the ability of remaining loyal to your friends. Likewise, Lorenz and Paul have never disagreed on anything other than politics and Lorenz feels appalled by all of a sudden having to see one single subject of disagreement fail everything they in fact agree on and that has made them remain friends for such a long period of time. He never reflects on the colonial situation and/or the fact that Malta could be under serious threat. Rather than being a sign of deliberate ignorance, the awkward situation seems to emerge from the simple fact that the two young men have conflicting interests in life. Both of them are immense idealists. However, they turn their idealism towards completely different objects, with Paul being the more radical and
outspoken of them and Lorenz being more withdrawn and afraid of conflict. Although Lorenz blames Paul for their deteriorating friendship, neither of them has the outspoken interest of ending it. Lorenz wants it to return to what it previously was and Paul does his best to convince Lorenz into fascism.

So what happens is that the farther the novel elapses, the more does Paul give up any other interest or hobby in order to concentrate fully on politics. Thus, his friendship with Lorenz is constantly given less and less priority. Paul has a female friend too, Ester. To complicate the situation even more, Ester is a Jewess and as a fascist, Paul is not in any way expected to have any kind of relationship with a Jewess. In Malta, the Catholic church at the time performed more or less all the functions that states or municipalities normally do, such as health care and education (Tamlander 99), and thus held a power that is somewhat difficult to comprehend for anyone who lives in a non-Maltese and non-Catholic context. Benoît Laplante (2006) argues that in most Catholic contexts, once a girl has publically been announced the fiancée of a boy, mariage is not too far away. Paul, however, revokes his intended wedding to Ester with the excuse that he has to spend his effort on his political engagements.

When Ester tells Lorenz about the annulled wedding, it seems to impact Lorenz’s feelings a lot. Lorenz is a person sometimes driven by emotions and passion rather than sense and logic. In any context, breaking the unwritten social codes of conduct is hazardous and when Lorenz reacts so strongly to Paul’s breaking these codes, it is a sign of Lorenz being a person who is indeed strongly influenced by and who deeply respects the traditions of the culture he lives in. After seeing Paul cancel the wedding, Lorenz starts reflecting on the position he finds himself in and how this relates to his friendship to Paul. He realises immediately that it will have an impact on his entire life and he describes it as “the beginning of a search that lasted for a good stretch of my life” (Ebejer 53). He also realises that perhaps he has demanded somewhat too much from Paul. Hence, for the first time ever, this idea that many of us carry with us in childhood that our relationship to our best friend will last forever and that Lorenz certainly has been carrying up to now, is slowly slipping away. Unarguably, this event marks a major shift in Lorenz’s and Paul’s relationship. Lorenz desperately wants to protect the friendship from the machinations of foreign political influences. Ebejer himself argues in an interview by Daniel Massa (1984) that despite being fully aware that progress also means pulling together, the Maltese, by nature, always search to resist collectivisation. In Requiem for a Malta fascist, the urge for individuality and the right
to take a personal stand shines through blatantly after the episode of the cancelled wedding. Lorenz is unexpectedly forced to battle on two fronts. Partly, he must operate on the front of individuality whereon he hopes to have the possibility of being himself and making his own judgements and partly, he is drawn to a front that requires giving up the individuality he craves in order to help the common cause. This whole issue of finding yourself in the turmoil of the time is evidently not abetted by the war situation. Similarly, the common good in this context need not necessarily imply doing whatever it takes to give a hands-on aid to your countrymen in danger, but also to choose the political road your country should embark on in order to be successful in a much longer perspective. This internal conflict is further accentuated when Paul introduces Lorenz to the count and the countess, but this we will return to later.

Another important episode that challenges the friendship of the two young men is when the count is arrested, an event for which Lorenz is to blame. As an act of trust, Paul has shown Lorenz a small summer house in the countryside used by the fascists as a hideout for weapons. In turn, Lorenz anonymously reveals the location of the summer house, as well as its usage, to the police. The consequence of this is that a handful of prominent fascist leaders (among them Count Matevich, who we will learn more about later) get arrested and eventually sentenced to life imprisonment or even execution for their betrayal. Among the arrested fascists is the count, who by now has become a common friend of Paul’s and Lorenz’s.

One day, Lorenz is requested to appear at the police station. Superintendent Čefai suspects that Lorenz is a fascist too, given that he has frequented fascist meetings and is over and over again seen together with Paul. Lorenz, however, defends himself very well and leaves the interrogation having promised Čefai to reveal the identities of leading fascists should he find out who they are. Once again, the aforementioned battle of fighting at two fronts becomes even more tangible, as Lorenz is terribly afraid of revealing Paul’s identity to the police. Like we have already stated, his friendship with Paul is what matters most to Lorenz.

Eventually, Paul’s identity is revealed and he, too, is arrested and sentenced to prison. Lorenz has reached a position where he no longer knows what to believe in or what to do. Paul was previously the only factor that still connected Lorenz to his background, to his childhood and the roots of his life. Now, Lorenz is subjected to the realities of a changing world and he has to face the fact that the world is not as innocently beautiful as he had always
thought and wanted it to be. His last instrument of protection has been swept away from under
his feet. Before, Lorenz was quite a blameless and childlike person whose refusal to stand
back from the danger posed by having fascist entanglements now returns to punch him in the
face callously and without remorse. The alienated, suffering, self-conscious hero has lost his
sense of roots in an unfulfilling and changing atmosphere. After handling this crisis in a
manner that has the consequence of his betraying both himself and the few people who are
close to him, he either remains alienated from family, church and tradition or he achieves an
uneasy and compromised reconciliation that is, at best, a pyrrhic victory in the battle with self
and environment. When all escape routes from the foulness of reality have evaded him, he
addresses his concerns about the events to Paul, during a visit in the prison where Paul is
being kept. He suddenly realises that he has been unaware to the urgency of the situation of
the islands and the role they play in the raging war. He starts building up inside himself this
feeling of shutting off from his mind the spectre of insuperable separation that had slowly
been taking place, both in the world as a whole, but also in the relationship between Paul and
himself. Lorenz brings these issues up with Paul, who avoids answering in a way that makes
sense to Lorenz. Probably, Paul has taken advantage of Lorenz’s ignorance and naivety and
used it for his own purposes, such as hiding away from the police or trying to persuade
Lorenz into joining the fascist movement. Now, however, Lorenz has gone through a brutal
awakening and realises that his extreme diplomacy and his constant refusal to take a firm
stand, even if this also means that he will have to sacrifice some things that are important to
him (such as his friendship to Paul), have led him into a cul-de-sac where he has ended up in a
situation that could pose several threats to him. One night, after visiting Paul in prison, on the
top of his frustrations, he cries out into the emptiness surrounding him:

“Trust me (...) to side with the British, have a fascist for my best friend, a
fascist’s woman for my mistress, a Jew for a conscience (...) while I worried
over a dear friend and the great evil he was courting, and wanting to know
if he wanted to embrace evil – or for that matter, love or passion or jealousy
or hate – and why I couldn’t share all that, too. I, Lorenz, lonely, hungry,
doomed...”

(Ebejer 152)
Paul is able to escape from prison and goes to Lorenz’s temporary home in the countryside for shelter, which he shares with the countess. Ultimately, however, when Lorenz realises the danger of sharing his residence with two prominent fascists he is aggravated and during an impulsively arisen fist fight, he ends up killing Paul. Lorenz refers to this by stating that it was in fact “the time of my own death. My little death. The big death, the long glorious one, was Paul’s” (Ebejer 197). Lorenz referring to Paul’s death as his own seems to imply that in one way or other, Lorenz has identified himself with Paul. Or rather, he has seen himself and Paul as complimentary. That is, all through their lives up to this very point when he kills Paul, Lorenz has both hated and loved his friend. Like we saw before, Paul’s politics “disgusts” Lorenz and it “debases” their friendship. However, Lorenz still admitted to Paul’s looking “resplendent” in his fascist uniform (Ebejer 37). Lorenz seems to silently acknowledge some kind of addiction-like relationship to Paul. When Ester (Paul’s friend) confronts Lorenz about this, he admits to being “(...) aware of contradictions in myself” (Ebejer 70). These contradictions, as well as the lack of roots that surround Lorenz, create a character desperate for belonging and understanding of his place in the world. At the same time, Lorenz refuses to let these feelings corrupt him completely. He always keeps a large distance between himself and the fascist ideology. He enshrines his integrity at all hazards. Subsequently, he ends up finding himself in a position he no longer knows how to relate to. Lorenz can be seen as a scale urgently trying to find equivalence between its pans, despite their continuously getting more and more load to them. However, when reality catches up with him, his inner conflicts pilot him to a frustration that eventually makes him, albeit inadvertently, kill his friend, who, figuratively, could be seen as the content of one of the scale pans.

In a wider perspective, the relationship between Lorenz and Paul needs to be understood as a description of Malta’s place in the world. If we imagine Lorenz to be Malta and Paul to be the surrounding world, we can more easily understand what Wilson wants to say when using the phrase “literary schizophrenia”. Lorenz, coming from a very traditional, rural background, experiencing the hardships of life in the periphery, has a world view severely conflicting the world view of Paul. Paul is habituated to a life being in the centre of attention and does not have a difficulty making up his mind. Where Paul is certain about his position in life and in relation to the contiguous reality, Lorenz is subjected to a new kind of reality that both threatens and frustrates him. He does not feel secure in his identity and neither does he carry a comforting sense of belonging. There is a fierce struggle going on inside him. Equally, the entire Maltese nation experiences the same lack of identity and belonging, which is easy to understand if we take the history of the islands into consideration.
Furthermore, Malta also had an internal struggle at the time; a struggle between powers that wanted to develop the country going in different directions. Subsequently, it is reasonable to claim that Lorenz stands as a symbol for the Maltese nation and the exhausting conflicts within it, whereas Paul symbolises the rest of the world and its security in its own position. Lest we forget it, at this point in history, when dictatorships and extreme ideologies plagued the European continent, nations were compelled to take definite stands in a range of questions and never really amend their position. Paul incarnates this, as he is never ostensibly in doubt about his political position and Lorenz incarnates the troubled and insecure Maltese nation in relation to its European neighbours.

The relationship between Lorenz and Paul is on one level the story of two young men trying to retain their friendship at all expenses, despite their having radically different objectives with it. On another level, the relation, as well as their individual characters, stands as a symbol for the political havoc and pressure that Malta was subjected to during the first half of the twentieth century.

3.2. Countess Elena Matevich

Elena Matevich is a countess, married to count Lionel Matevich. Their background is much more thoroughly presented than Paul’s background. Both of the Matevichs are part of the quite large Diaspora of Russian nobility that settled in the Valletta suburb of Sliema in the early 1900’s. They also briefly lived in Spain, but had to flee during the Spanish Civil War. Lorenz makes acquaintance with the Matevich couple through Paul. Just like when Paul is introduced in the text, Lionel Matevich does not make any secret of the fact that his political preferences are fascist already at his very first hand shake with Lorenz.

One of the ingrained descriptions of Elena Matevich is that she is unusually promiscuous. Lorenz has a suspicion of this already at their first meeting, but at the same time, he is mesmerised by her good looks:

\[
\text{Medium height, eyes wide apart, beautiful eyes of the same quality nearly as her husband’s, a delicately shaped nose that led to the contours of her cheekbones in two inspired lines. Her lips were fresh and ripe. Her mouth} \]

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3 At the time, Malta had three dominant parties, the pro-British Constitutional Party, the pro-Italian Nationalist Party and the Labour Party that advocated independence (Internet B).
unfashionably large. She smiled. Quite mischievously and vulgarly, I thought.

On another instance, Lorenz describes Elena’s beauty as “spellbinding” (Ebejer 62). Whenever the four friends (i.e. Lorenz, Paul, Elena and her husband) meet, there is a certain affection between Elena and Lorenz. He is transfixed by her beauty and charm and she in turn uses this to bombard him with fascist propaganda. Interestingly, when Elena leads their conversation in a pro-fascist direction, Lorenz argues back:

(...) I’m Maltese and I’m in Malta and I refuse to be indoctrinated by fascists into their way of thinking.”

“Why?” – still that smile – “Because the British have already indoctrinated you into their way of thinking?”

“Perhaps”, I admitted. “But you see, I like it. It agrees with me. Besides, if we assume that freedom is relative, then it’s a much better freedom, even if incomplete and dented in places, than what our friend across the water is offering”.

This objection to fascist ideas is radically more ardent and outspoken than any other of Lorenz’s remarks on fascism. Although he quickly contemplates the risk of losing Elena as a friend by embarking on a verbal gripe of this magnitude, Lorenz decides that at the point where their friendship currently stands, it is worth the risk. Thus, the question needs to be asked if Lorenz actually values friendship in general higher than any other thing, or if it is his friendship to Paul that he attributes this value to. Needless to say, the mindset that objecting to Elena’s ideas may have the price of him losing her friendship implies that he has in fact attributed a certain value on it. However, it is likewise obvious that the fact that Lorenz never objects very violently to any of Paul’s claims shows that he values his friendship very much more. Accordingly, the above excerpt from the novel makes it reasonable to assume that Lorenz indeed has a need to object and take a stand, but that for some reason, he is unable to do so when and if his friendship with Paul is in jeopardy. If we interpret the previously mentioned symbolism of Lorenz as an image of Malta, we understand that Malta’s possibility of objecting and speaking their mind is only viable when the country has very little, if anything, to lose. It could of course be regarded as a country and a people having ended up in a very sad situation, but lest we forget it, Malta’s voice in an international context is severely
restricted given its size. Likewise, in the era that the novel depicts, Malta’s voice was even more limited, due to the colonial status of the country. Subsequently, Lorenz, or the country, can only protest to those people with whom he/it has relations of which a loss would not leave him/it more isolated or make him/it pay a high price.

Doubtlessly, Lorenz gets romantically interested in Elena rather quickly. One night, when the count and the countess invite him to a dinner-dance, he sits in a corner observing Elena dance with several men and, although he has known her barely a week, he already dreams of marrying her: “(...) I imagined myself at thirty or even forty still loving this woman and growing old with her (...)” (Ebejer, 1980:105). After the dinner-dance, Elena and Lorenz escape to a country-house owned by the Matevich couple to make love. Elena, in the capacity of a married woman, does not have any scruples when it comes to engaging in sexual activity with men who are not her husband, something of which the count is aware, according to Paul (Ebejer, 1980:59). The love making between Lorenz and Elena thereafter becomes a recurrent action in the novel, especially after the count is arrested (which indirectly is Lorenz’s fault). Lorenz, however, denies being besotted by Elena and he soon starts doubting why he continues to consort with her. One evening, after a session of love making, he is in bed thinking about his situation:

Here’s the woman I lust for even if I don’t love her. Here’s the woman who loves me. Her husband an enemy of my people and country, corrupter and evil genius of my best friend, maimer of the girl I’m fondest of. What am I doing here? What’s the point now that Paul is locked up far from this house (...)?”

(Ebejer 137)

According to himself, Lorenz does not immediately apprehend the reason as to why he maintains this relationship with Elena. However, he does realise that he has put himself in a difficult situation. Superintendent Ĉefai and his colleagues at the police are constantly suspicious against him, due to his fascist entanglements and they are not easily convinced when he tries to reassure them that he poses no threat to his country. In his function as a spy for the police, he must constantly battle with his duties to report fascist activity and sympathisers to the police, while at the same time make sure that Paul and Elena are safe, as he still carries the sense that he needs them both, one way or other. There is no doubt that as the distance between Lorenz and Paul widens, the distance between Lorenz and Elena
narrates. What Lorenz loses when Paul is slipping away, he tries to compensate by getting
closer and closer to Elena. Surely, Lorenz enjoys his sexual encounters with Elena, but he
does not want to live together with her and therefore he installs himself in a flat close to
Elena’s house. However, the war drives the couple away from Sliema and they settle in
Elena’s country-house, a relocation that further enhances Lorenz’s feeling of loss and
frustration: “inside the wild tangle of betrayal and love and lust lay always the desperate sense

The relationship between Lorenz and Elena gets a brutal termination when Elena
is killed in an air-raid. Prior to that, she has given birth to a baby she has conceived with Paul.
Elena’s death deprives Lorenz of the very last thing that connected him to the life he had lived
before the outbreak of the war. Subsequently, he decides to go back to the village he was born
in. He expresses the loss of Elena in a way that makes the reader understand that although he
may never have been in love with her, she came to represent something in his life that he does
not want to be without.

Elena serves as Lorenz’s morale-shattering factor. Her external gentleness,
prodigality and good manners hide the ruthlessness of her grasp. Lorenz is lured by her and
only very slowly does he become aware of her mesmerisms, but he never fully abandons her.
Elena may very well be seen as a symbol of the decoying power of any type of colonialism,
imperialism and dominance, because although she is publicly opposed to the British
colonisation of Malta, she does not in any way seek independence for Malta, which is the
impression she cares to give when consistently talking well about the country and its people.
Rather, she wants to replace the British colonisers with an authoritarian regime like the one in
Rome. She is skilful in her seductions and had it not been for Lorenz’s utter conviction that he
does not want anything to do with fascism, it is more than likely that she would have made a
fascist out of Lorenz, too. This seductive side of hers troubles Lorenz before he is able to see
through the mask. When he does that, however, he is restricted to remain in the country-house
with her as his only company. This gradual conscious release from colonising fascination is
crowned by Lorenz’s attitude of leaving the conception of a child to Elena and Paul. He will
not top his involvement with a permanent symbol, but rather leave that to the two ingrained
fascists. Thus, his onetime dichotomy is felt too unsustainable since the two cultures do not
make a subject out of an “othered” person.

The relationship between Lorenz and Elena is complicated. Lorenz, as a symbol
for Malta, has involved himself in a relationship to a woman whose true character he did not
realise until it was too late. Similarly, the Maltese were not able to realise the threats posed by
the countries surrounding them and once they did, they had ended up in a situation of severe
dependency. Lorenz is being pushed by both ends of the political spectra. On one hand, he is
being pushed by Ćefai, who in his position as a superintendent must remain loyal to the
British colonisers and on the other hand, he is being pushed by Elena, who wants to seduce
him into fascism. No one ever really considers Lorenz’s own feelings in the matter. Likewise,
Malta was on the one hand pushed by the British to relentlessly stand up against the Italian
and German invaders, since the British saw Malta as an indisputable part of the British
Empire. On the other hand, Malta was pushed by fascists, both within and outside the country,
who in the long run of course wanted to install a Mussolini-like government in Malta, but
publically argued that Malta must be independent from British and other foreign rule and that
it must be given the right to select its own allegiances.

3.3. Cousin Kos and the home village

The first character apart from Lorenz who is introduced is his cousin Kos. Starting already in
the very first pages, Lorenz’s dislike of Kos is evident. His account of Kos’s personality and
behaviour gives the impression that Kos has some kind of psychical impediment to his
person. A constant displeasure for Lorenz is Kos’s habit of pronouncing Lorenz’s name
incorrectly: “He would call Enz for Lorenz” (Ebejer 4), as well as his favourite pastime of
emptying buckets filled with washing water over the heads of Lorenz and his friends (Ebejer,
1980:3-4).

Čoġ Mifsud-Chircop (2008) retells that in Maltese folklore, mentally impeded
people have since long been seen as having some kind of supernatural powers or gifts based
on a 15th century poem by Maltese poet Pietru Caxaro. Lorenz, who is the narrator of his own
story, commences his narration with the account of how Kos suddenly and inexplicably
disappears from the village. The whole village engages in the search for Kos and Lorenz finds
this stir almost appalling. The words he uses to make ironical marks are “thus in the beginning
was Kos” (Ebejer 4). This is unmistakably an allusion to the initial words of the Gospel of
John, which read “In the beginning was the word (...)” (Holy Bible 1044). The first chapter
alludes to the Bible on many occasions and the function of these biblical allusions seems to be
to enhance the fact that Kos is seen as somebody with sacred gifts. It is reasonable to question
what impact the augmentation of Kos and his being seen as more or less unimpeachable and
beyond criticism has on Lorenz’s feelings for his cousin. As already mentioned, Lorenz
clearly is not as fond of Kos as the rest of the village seems to be. Lorenz admits to being
content with life only during the period that Kos is not with the family. He even goes as far as to confessing he is “glad Kos was lost, or stolen, or dead...” (Ebejer 10). With this comment in mind, it seems accurate to establish that something is pushing Lorenz’s feelings for his cousin to the worse.

In the village where Kos and Lorenz grow up, life is very much centred on the church. Much to the dislike of the priest, Lorenz is not an eager churchgoer and he ridicules traditional Catholic teaching. Dennis M. Linehan (2001) stresses that in Malta, church and churchgoing has for centuries been the cornerstone that life circles around. Thus, when Lorenz revolts against church and ridicules it, this also implies that he revolts against the traditionalism that characterises the nation. Throughout the introductory chapter, it is a frustrated Lorenz that meets the reader. Subsequently, the frustrated young man wants to escape his home village and to go look for “a different approach to life” (Ebejer 28) and when Kos returns to the village from wherever he has been, Lorenz decides to make his plans reality.

However, when the war is over and Lorenz has lost everything that he held dear, i.e. Paul and Elena, he returns to his home village and finds Kos. After spending some time in Israel, searching for Paul’s and Elena’s child who lives there with Ester, a common friend of Paul’s and Lorenz’s, he decides to stay with his mother and thus also with Kos. The home village has not changed a bit, despite the war that has beleaguered the islands for some years. Kos is still residing in the very same house, doing the very same things and speaking the very same words as he did prior to the war.

The home village can be seen as a symbol for security and habit. Lorenz revolts against the security and comfort, but also against the simplicity and routines that he contends traditional village life constitutes. Nonetheless, after discovering the turmoil and horrors that the surrounding world can bring and after having to face the challenges of life in the middle of attention, he ultimately decides to settle at a place he is familiar with and that gives the comfort he has sought for, even when it seemed impossible to reach. His reflections on the war years when he was torn between all the influences he was subjected to lead him to the conclusion that “(...) I still cannot make up my mind what it might have been. When I do, I’ll die. With Kos beside me.” (Ebejer 243). By thinking this way, Lorenz shows that he is ready to face the truth, now that he has found something that attaches him with the rudiments of his personality. And much to his own surprise, this “something” is everything he used to despise: traditionalism, village life and – above all – cousin Kos.
4. Conclusion

On one level, *Requiem for a Malta fascist* tells the story of Lorenz, a young Maltese man torn between tradition and modernism and between fascism and colonialism. It serves as an account of a situation that could possibly be the true story of a man in the middle of this political upheaval. Lorenz has a friend, Paul, who in several respects is the polar opposite of Lorenz. A young persuaded fascist, Paul is attempting to convince Lorenz into this ideology by introducing him to his fascist friends and by spreading fascist propaganda whenever Lorenz is in the vicinity. However, Lorenz very openly repudiates any fascist claims to his conviction and he succeeds in never getting engaged in political activity. Nonetheless, Lorenz defends Paul and is loyal to him in every circumstance and refuses to terminate the friendship.

His friendship with Paul leads him into the arms of Elena, the promiscuous wife of a Russian count. After the count gets arrested because of his fascist activity, Lorenz and Elena embark on a love affair. Eventually, Elena has a child, before she gets killed in an air-raid.

On another level though, the novel could be seen as an account of how the Maltese nation positions itself in relation to its neighbouring countries. It is reasonable to claim that Lorenz stands as a symbol for the Maltese nation and the conflicts within it, whereas Paul represents the surrounding countries and their security in their own positions. Furthermore, Lorenz has a certain dependence of Paul; he needs him as a sort of compass where his political engagement is concerned. In the same fashion, Elena serves as a morale-dividing factor for Lorenz. She stands as a luring symbol of the danger and oppression imposed by colonialism and dependency. When both Paul and Elena ultimately die, Lorenz sees no option but to return to his native village and nurse his mentally impeded cousin Kos.

Cousin Kos could also be seen as a representative of the “natural” Maltese; the security felt when surrounded by habits and rituals well-known to the people of a certain context. In all his simplicity and despite the fact that he has a handicap that makes him function somewhat less well, he moves from being hated by Lorenz into actually being the object of Lorenz’s care. While Lorenz once left his home village aggravated by the way he is consistently neglected by his family, when the world around him has collapsed, he ultimately decides to return to his maiden village and to his roots.

Evidently, several other interpretations and readings of the novel are not only possible, but also required in order to create a comprehensive picture of it. Nonetheless, it is
reasonable to argue that one important aspect of the essentials of *Requiem for a Malta fascist* has been covered in this essay.
5. Bibliography

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