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# Mihalic Wantok tru bilong PNG

By Patrick Matbob

On August 5 this year (2010) Tok Pisin newspaper Wantok will celebrate 40 years. Today many people know little about the history of this newspaper that has been informing and entertaining the grassroots population of the country.

Wantok was the brainchild of Fr Frank Mihalic, an American Catholic priest of the Order of Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) who was tasked by the Catholic Bishops Conference of PNG in 1967 to start the paper. The first issue rolled off the press on August 5, 1970 in Wirui, East Sepik Province. The paper was one of a number of notable contributions that Tok Pisin language.

The 40-year-old Wantok niuspepa.

Mihalic has made to PNG in the field of education, health, media and in particular the development of the

The first edition of Wantok that Mihalic produced was nothing like the tabloid sized paper one sees today. It was an A-4 size with an intricately designed masthead and a logo depicting a handshake. Wantok literally means 'one language' and the word is used to describe a person from the same language group, or province or region.

Launch of Wantok in Wirui, Wewak. Mihalic (left).

Wantok is however, not the first pidgin language newspaper in PNG. The first paper was Nu Gini Toktok which was often called the most smoked newspaper in the world! Wantok would later claim the title. Nu Gini Toktok was edited and produced in the 1950s by a Papua New Guinean, Muttu Gware, of Morobe province. Muttu was then working for a newspaper called the Times Courier in Lae.

Mihalic can however claim to be the first to produce a newspaper in the standardized version of the pidgin language which is now known as Tok Pisin.

Mihalic arrived in the country in 1948 soon after his ordination to priesthood. He was the son of a Pennsylvania railway man and was born on November 24, 1916. Mihalic was named after his father who was a man of Croatian descent and had a flair for languages. His mum was Slovakian.

Mihalic's training included philosophy, theology, Greek and Latin and he also found time for medical studies at the Chicago College of Medical Technology.

His first place after arrival was the Divine Word Catholic Mission Headquarters at Alexishafen in Madang which had been reduced to rubble during the war. He wrote: "Our homes are like our Lord's tomb: close to the ground. They are ramshackle lean-to's of termited timber holding aloft a tin roof - for the time being. We have gunny sack walls and rainwater for drinking and washing. The work most of us priests did here over the past weeks was anything but clerical: overhauling jeeps, servicing diesel boat motors, hauling supplies by air and land and sea, setting up leftover army machinery and building."

After some weeks he received his first posting as the parish priest at Marienberg in the East Sepik. Here one of his parishioners was a young boy named Michael Somare who later became the first prime minister

of Papua New Guinea. He was later sent to the island of Kairiru off the coast of Wewak to rebuild the Catechist school there. He was fluent in Tok Pisin which was the language used for teaching at the time and developed his own teaching materials. He also obtained a license as a medical assistant and helped to provide health services to the people affected by numerous illnesses, particularly tuberculosis. He soon caught the disease himself in 1954 and was sent to a sanatorium in California where he was bedridden for 22 months. After recovering, he spent some more time learning to walk again. It was during his time in hospital that he turned to linguistics, and first began translating the New Testament into Tok Pisin. However, he abandoned the project when he learnt that the Lutheran Church had already started its own translation. Instead he started collecting a Tok Pisin lexicon which was to grow into his famous Tok Pisin dictionary and grammar.

As he recovered from his illness, he worked for some time as hospital chaplain, and in 1957, took the Norman, Oklahoma, Summer Institute of Linguistics course, for a formal training in linguistics. He also enrolled in the University of Michigan Graduate School and was given a teaching assistantship. In the meantime, he also published his dictionary and started work on his M. A. thesis. However, he was suddenly recalled to PNG and he left his studies unfinished. He moved to Enga where he was a parish priest until he was called to Rome in 1959 where he would be for the next 8 years. In mid 1967, the Bishops Conference of PNG asked him to come to start a Tok Pisin newspaper in the country.

He began in 1969 with no focus, no printing equipment and no media experience. He gained all three within a year. The offices were set up in Wewak and Frank trained the staff for the first issue himself. He explained: "Wantok is a typical Pidgin word which literally means someone speaking the same language. The word also implies being a friend, a chum, a confidant. We want the paper to be all those things to its readers."

He added: "One of the things we are going to have to settle before we even start printing is the smokeability of the paper we are using. That will help to sell papers. People here have the custom of rolling their home-grown tobacco into cigarettes with newsprint. They don't like the usual thin tissue paper for roll-your-owns. It burns too fast. They like newsprint-but not every kind-it must burn a certain way and produce a white ash. So we are experimenting among our staff with various samples from the paper manufacturers. We want to make sure that we have the best smoking paper in the country. Then we can advertise it that way. And we'll have to print a warning on the front page stating: PLEASE READ THIS PAPER BEFORE YOU SMOKE IT. Maybe someday we'll get into the Guinness Book of Records as the most smoked newspaper in the world."

When Wantok moved to Port Moresby in 1976, it had become a weekly with a circulation of 9,000. Today it has circulation of 30,000 and a readership of 200,000. In 1979 Mihalic resigned as editor and spent a few years traveling through Papua New Guinea as a roving reporter writing feature articles for Wantok. Publishing had in the meantime gone to Word Publishing, a press sponsored by Divine Word Missionaries.

In the meantime Mihalic had revised his grammar and dictionary for the new Jacaranda publication, which appeared in 1971 and was reprinted many times until 1983. He also found time to translate the PNG Constitution into Tok Pisin, and in 1981 he was awarded the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire for "services rendered to Pidgin in Papua New Guinea."

Recognition also came from the University of Papua New Guinea which gave him an honorary doctorate of linguistics. While for some, the honors would have meant retirement, but there was no such thing for him. He was invited to join the newly established Divine Word Institute in 1983 where he set up the journalism training school within the Communication Arts Department and trained journalists for the next 8 years.

Mihalic recalled that when he first came to DWI, he did not possess any academic qualifications in journalism or its related fields. "All I had was 12 years of experience in newspaper editing, news gathering and reporting, proofreading, typesetting, page layout, advertising, distributing, photography and translation". But that did not worry him to much. He was a practical person and believed in George Bernard Shaw's philosophy that "those who can, do; those who can't, teach."

His journalism students found him to be one of the best teachers they ever had. One of his student recalled: "From Mihalic we learnt to be our own greatest critic. We were taught never to be satisfied with what we wrote and continue to rewrite because the story will improve each time it was rewritten. He showed us examples of how many times he had rewritten his own stories. He taught us to criticise each other's work, the exact phrase he used was 'tear it apart', because then 'you were really helping each other.'

Another wrote: "Fr Mihalic also taught us a lot by the type of person he was. His eyes almost always twinkled with humor. I had never seen him get angry. For him things either happened or did not. You won or lost. You succeeded or failed. So what's the big deal he would ask? He would shrug his shoulder regretfully and say, 'Oh shucks,' and that was that".

By the end of 1990, he retired from teaching at DWI because he said, "DWI had accumulated properly degreed and academically fine-tuned professors for my department so I yielded to them ..."

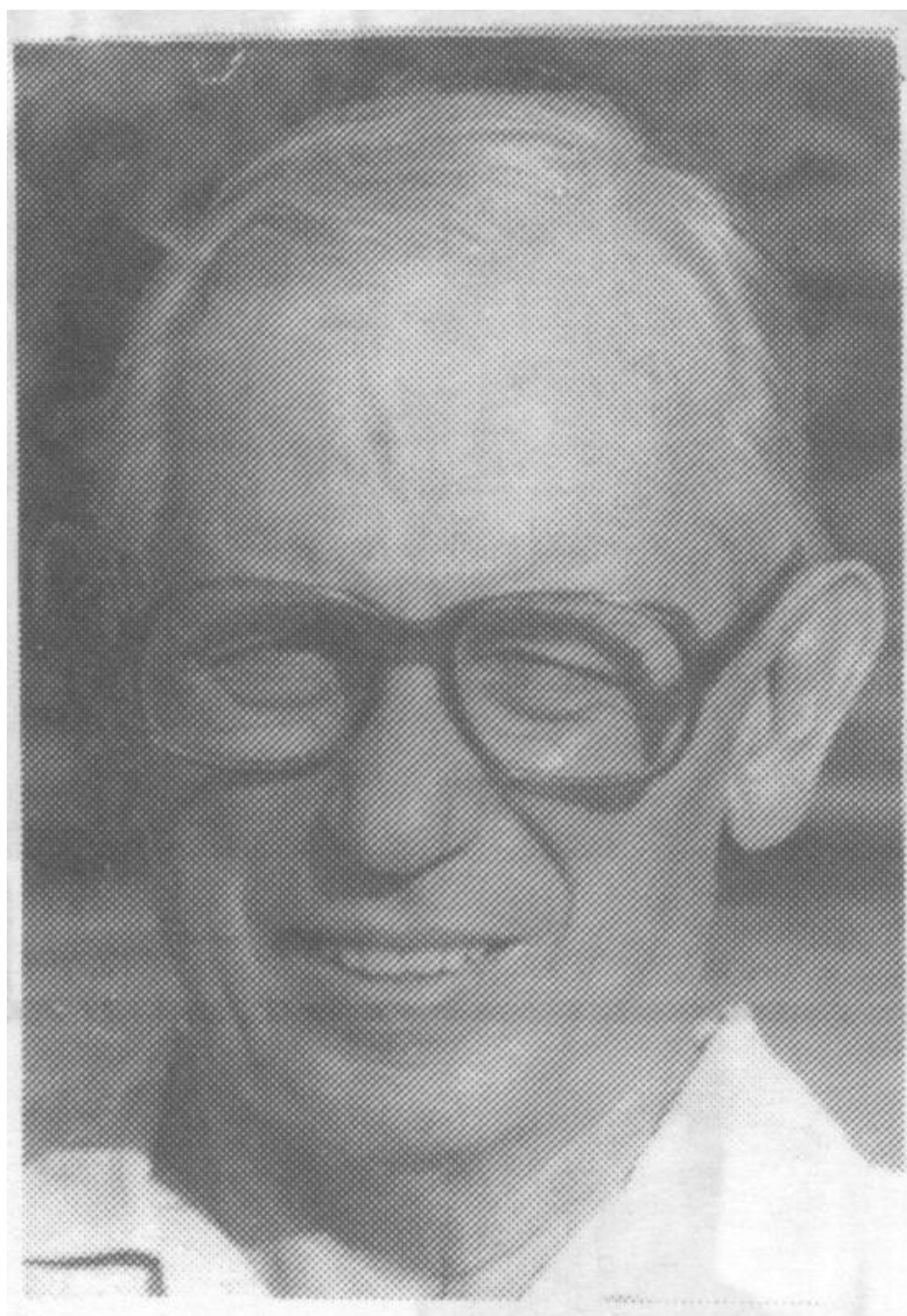
However, with his vast experience in journalism, he was still needed and returned to DWU finally giving his last lesson on August 7, 1997. He told journalism students: "This is where my teaching career ends."

In 1994 Mihalic was in a reflective mood when he wrote modestly about his many achievements. He wrote: "Playing second fiddle, doing ancillary or supportive work has been the story of my life. It has meant being a stopgap to fill some temporary need, or being a spare part that either helps to start something or keeps it going. The euphoria of being continually needed could easily have inflated my ego had I not luckily chanced upon a very sobering biblical text. One day I looked up the word 'need' in my concordance and was shocked to find out that only once in the entire New Testament had the Lord ever said that he had need of anything. It was the time he was going up to Jerusalem. He said he had need of a jackass!

I took the hint. And ever since, Luke 19:34 has become my text. You will find it on my desk, scrawled across a snapshot of a genuine donkey patiently standing at the Damascus Gate".

In 1999 he left PNG for the last time and in Port Moresby was fare welled by a large group of his former journalism students at a luncheon. He passed away in US aged 85 on December 8th, 2001.

Mihalic has made valuable contributions to PNG firstly in his role as a priest and pastor at the parishes he worked in, as a health worker, an author of 30 books, publisher of the first dictionary of Melanesian Pidgin and grammar, a mission teacher and journalism lecturer and mentor for 52 years.



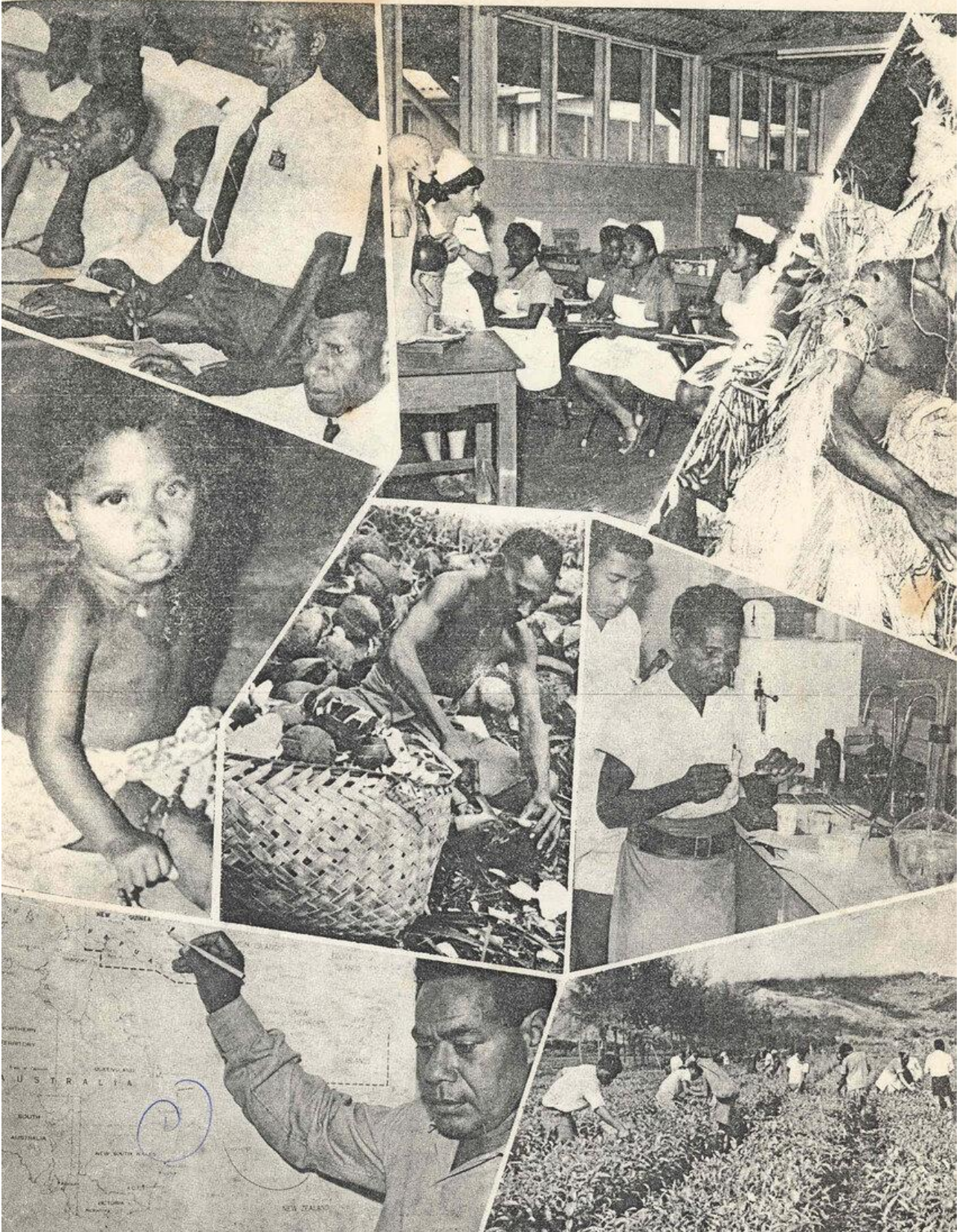




# WANIUK

MBA 1

Trinde Ogas 5 1970





## Wantok Kamap 100 Taim



• Pater Francis Mihalic

Edita bilong WANTOK i save kisim planti pas i kam long ol rita.

Sampela i save autim ol kain wari bilong ol, na sampela i askim bai sampela senis i kamap long WANTOK olsem bai i gat nius long ol arapela kantri. Sampela pas moa i askim ai Edita i autim sampela tingting bilong em long ai wari i kamap insait long Papua Nu Gini.

Yes, mipela i no lusim tingting long ol dispela askim bilong ol. Mipela i laik bai ol senis i kamap si isi. Bai mipela i redi, ai ol dispela senis i ken arap.

Yu laikim sampela senis pa, orait, salim pas i kam long: WANTOK Edita, P.O. Box 396, WEWAK. E.S.D.

Dispela em i namba wan handet taim mipela i bin prinim WANTOK niuspepa. Mipela ol memba bilong staf i amamas tru long dispela mak i kamap nau long mipela.

WANTOK niuspepa i bin stat long yia 1970. Pater Mihalic, papa bilong en, i wari olsem: Hia long Papua Nu Gini ol Kristen misin i save tromoim planti mani i go insait long ol wok edukesen.

Planti studen i pinisim praimer skul tasol, na bikpela lain gen i save lusim haiskul long Fom 2. Tru, ol i no inap ritim gut ol buk na niuspepa long tok Inglis.

WANTOK i wok long helpim ol dispela lain na ol nara-pela bikpela manmeri tu long ritim na raitim TOK PISIN. Nogut edukesen bilong ol i pundaun nating.

WANTOK i wok long givim ol

kain kain nius i laik kamap insait long PNG - bilong gavman, bisnis, na ol misin bai ol pipeli save gut long kantri bilong ol.

Nau mipela i stap long taim bilong planti senis. Kos bilong planti samting i laik hariap go antap. WANTOK tu i karim bikpela hevi long ol dispela senis - kos bilong baim pepa nating na bilong prinim na salim i go long ol distrik i ran i go antap na i no gat profit i kamap long WANTOK.

Mipela no laik prais bilong WANTOK i go antap. Yu ken helpim sapos yupela olgeta i baim planti moa WANTOK.

• WANTOK Staf, 1974: (stat long lephan) Pius Pos, Brian Namiat, Pater Cashmere, Josephine Tupa, Pater Jurczyk, Crescentia Lementi, Francis Mana, Albert Singer.

