

Guide to searching Maltese Ancestors

H.V. Wyatt*

For much social, historical and medical research, a basic tool is the availability of data about the people. Malta is fortunate in the time-span and details of its records. Church records in Malta began in the sixteenth century and the government Public Registry [PR] started in 1863 so that searching for ancestors is possible. The records are complementary, but are also incomplete and frustrating. While in the past much historical research has looked at earlier times, I have assumed that the most useful period is from 1863 when the PR records give the occupation of the parties. The church records give details of consanguinity.

Some Background

The records are very dependent on the handwriting of the priest who wrote the certificates for the PR as well as the parish registry. One priest at Qormi had very bad handwriting and many of the names in the parish records and the certificates in the PR cannot be deciphered eg. Zammit or Sammut. He lived for a long time and may well have celebrated some marriages too well, as on several occasions he reversed the parental names of the married couple.

Several surnames imply the bearers came from a particular place (eg. Attard, Catania from Sicily and Genovese from Genoa). There is no telling whether people with a particular surname are related – it is likely that unrelated people came at different times to different places, but received the same names.

Over the years some surnames have changed eg:

Armenio to Armeni about 1869,
Cipirott to Chipiotte (Sliema),
Degabriele to Gabriele (Vittoriosa),
Destefano to Distefano (Sliema),
Genius became Genovese (Florianna, Cospicua and Hamrun) with other versions –
Genovise, Genuis, Genarus in Valletta, Sliema, Senglea, etc.,
Mummery to Memory (Senglea),
Mackay to Mackey in Valletta and vice versa there and in Hamrun
Monsigner and Monsigneur in Valletta, Monsinieur and Musunier (Valletta)
Pizzuto to Pezzuto (Cospicua) ,
Sanchez and Sanges (Valletta),
Steer to Stur (Valletta).

* H.V. Wyatt is Visiting Lecturer in Philosophy (formerly Honorary Research Fellow in Public Health), University of Leeds, England. Dr. Wyatt has held teaching and research posts in the U.K., U.S.A., India, Bangladesh and the West Bank. He has traced more than 5,000 births and 16,000 marriages in Malta for his research on poliomyelitis and MND.

The Public Registry

Public Registry births were recorded from 1863, but marriage notification was not compulsory until 1975 so that 10 % or more of marriages are missing from the records of the nineteenth century. I have been told that the local police, having received a sheaf of certificates from the *kappillan* (parish priest) would sometimes use them to heat the office in winter. The PR records for Gozo, including the indexes, are kept separately in an office in Victoria: unfortunately the early marriage certificates are in a wretched condition with missing pages and no binding.

The thousands of births, marriages and deaths recorded every year have their own annual indexes, with the common surnames having their own separate listings: the uncommon ones listed eg: Ha-, He-, Hi-, Ho-, Hu- and H-. This means that each common name like Camilleri or Farrugia, occupies many pages. The certificates and indexes have been preserved on microfilm, but I have found these very difficult to use. The microfilms are now housed with the National Archives Malta [NAM] at Rabat (where there is a museum pharmacy housed in a sixteenth century pharmacy).

Births

For births, each entry in the annual index comprises the Christian names (including the one the child will be known by), the Christian name of the father, the parish of birth (but only the town where there is more than one parish, eg. only Valletta) and the number assigned to the child when received in the PR. Thus births in December may be registered in the next year. This registry number, with the suffix of the year and M or G[ozo] is used as the identity number [ID] for each Maltese. However since 2000, the letters have been changed: L for Malta and H for Gozo. The Electoral Register gives the ID of each voter and thus his or her age for example: 14820 M, who was the 148th registered birth in Malta in 1920. Searching for example: Joseph son of Joseph, it may be easier to look down the column for the village (eg. Gudja). There are also cards, from 1863, which have more information than the indexes: the date of birth and the names of both parents. These are important as in a large village there might be several births in the same year, all with the same Christian names of child and father. Again, these cards are probably no longer available as they are stored at *Camerata*. Finally, there are the bound copies of the birth certificates which can be viewed in the PR.

Births can be found on the computer database either by name or by the parents. All the PR records are in process of being computerised, but this has made access very difficult.

Birth Certificate

Parish and date of registration; place, hour, day and month of birth; gender; christian names; name to be called; names of parents; their professions, trade or other status, their ages and where born and now residing. Names and surnames of parents' fathers and whether living. The computer screen does not give the ages and occupations of the parents or details of the grandparents.

Marriages

The records for marriages follow the same pattern as births. There are index entries under both groom and bride - again one can choose the more uncommon surname to save time. The fathers of the groom and bride are given. I have found several times that the Christian name is another version of the one given at birth. There are cards for marriages from 1900, but not before. The marriage certificate gives the age and occupation of bride and groom, where they reside and where they were born and their parents. The occupation in itself may not add much information as the description of farmer may mean anything from a small-holder with a few strips, to a wealthy land owner. Late registration of a marriage is indexed under the year of registration.

Marriage Certificate

Parish and date of registration; names of bride and groom with their ages and professions, trade or other status; where born and now residing; parents names, where born and now residing; names and surnames of their parents with their professions, trade or other status.

Deaths

Recent death certificates give details of the causes of deaths according to the International codes and may be computer searched from about 1990 by the cause. There is also the ID number which is useful as this immediately gives access to the birth details. The place where death occurred is now not very helpful as many deaths take place in the hospital. The previous residence may be found from the electoral registers which can be searched in the printed editions or by computer if one has the necessary permission. The cause of death given on the certificate may not be accurate. Where this cause is important for the research, it may be necessary to check with the person who submits data to WHO. A doctor at the Health Information Unit checks each cause of death and in case of doubt will obtain the medical notes and, if necessary, amend the cause of death.

Death Certificate

Name; married, unmarried, widower or widow; profession, trade etc; age; place of birth; residence; names of parents, living or dead; cause, place and time of death, place of burial.

Parish Records

Each parish has records of the births, marriages and deaths, with indexes. The record of births is really that of baptisms as babies were baptised within a few hours of birth. Most *kappillani* have been very friendly and even very hospitable (whisky, homemade wine and sandwiches!), but in a few parishes officious lay helpers have been obstructive. One *kappillan* has recently demanded payment for each search – an impossible burden for the academic researcher. The records are usually kept in the parish office which is open for short times in the morning and afternoon or evening. It is wise to telephone to find the times of opening. *Kappillani* have to choose their priorities between opening the office and other tasks – the office may open late or close early if, for instance, he has to say a mass. In small parishes, the office may remain closed without notice if the *kappillan* has other business (eg. a parishioner's death). In some parishes, the *kappillan* locked me in the office – with my drinks and sandwiches – until he opened again in the evening. In one or two parishes I have not, at first, been allowed to handle the records.

Recent church records are in Maltese on standard forms, but older ones are in Latin, more or less standard for marriages. In some parishes, births were recorded with only the father's name and no record of the mother except her Christian name. Where the name is a common one like Mary, this will be the end of the search. For uncommon names like *Consolata* or *Scholastica*, progress may be possible, but there must be an element of doubt. In one parish, the priests have annotated the birth records with marginal notes of later marriage details. I could not trace one child with polio in the parish in which she had been born. Some years later I was talking to the *kappillan* in an adjacent parish who identified the lady, whose parents had registered her in their old parish which they attended after their move. The lady had been paralysed as a baby and was, in middle age, active in the church and well known to the *kappillan*.

In some parishes, volunteers are transferring the records to computers. Some indexes have addenda for entries that have been missed so that, hopefully, missed entries may be more easily found. The Rabat entries for baptisms and marriages from 1902 to 1961, with indexes, and deaths 1902 to 1925 are available at the Wignacourt Museum in Rabat. It was customary for the wedding to take place at the bride's church.

Dispensaries

The marriage record will specify that there was either no impediment or will give details of dispensations given by the Vatican. For the researcher, only consanguinity is of use: *criminale* and *affinitas* dispensations may not be our concern. Dispensations were required for I/II, II (first cousin), III and IV relationships, but after 1917 were no longer required for IV. I found 6 marriages of niece and uncle (I/II). The original petitions are held in the *Curias* in Floriana or Victoria (Gozo), in brown paper parcels tied with red tape, with the list of petitioners safely hidden inside. The petition will contain the relevant family tree which may save much searching. I have suggested that the lists of petitioners be photocopied and bound so that tying and retying be a chore of the past. But tradition is against change.

Indexes

Indexes to the records are vital, but in many parishes are in very poor condition – some with pages missing. I have urged *kappillani* to make photocopies for use instead of the originals. Some marriage indexes give only the bride's Christian name so that each marriage may have to be checked. Several parishes have either computerised records or splendid new copies of indexes. Some marriage indexes are by surname of the grooms, others by the bride. Some are by the Christian name of either the groom or the bride - in a parish where Joseph was the preferred Christian name, the letter J goes on for pages. In the town of Mosta, without any indication, the indexes suddenly change from male (most recent) to female (going back).

Many parish records were microfilmed by the Benedictines of Minnesota and are housed in the *Hill Museum and Manuscript Library*. The records of the *Archives of the parishes* are part of the *Mdina Cathedral Museum Microfilm Project* Collection which lists the archives which may be seen on-line. A copy of these records are listed in ref. 1. Duplicates of the microfilms were held at Mdina, but many have perished.¹ I have been to see them, but found only some from a very few parishes and these were extremely difficult to decipher. There was no working reader there, so that I arranged for the films to be taken to the *Curia* to use the reader there. The originals may be viewed at St. John's College, USA and digitised records may be bought. Using these records may be very frustrating and time consuming as there appear to be very few indexes.

Many illegitimate children were born in the hospital in Floriana or at St. Venera – there was a special baptism book. As adults, some were married with their mother's surname on the certificate, but subsequently registered their babies under their own father's surname. I have found a very few births for unions 'not married' and two cases where neither parents were known. I have found a few children born illegitimately to married women.

Difficulties

With paper records, the eye may sometimes spot an errant or unexpected entry whereas the computer will only retrieve what is asked. Several of the older PR staff have a fund of possible clues to difficulties, but they will shortly retire and their knowledge will be lost. The computer was unable to find the father of the son with the surname of Birmingham: William Birmingham married a Maltese girl and signed his name legibly with a U for his son. However, his grandson was registered as Birmingham with an I. This I found by chance in opening the index page for 'B' instead of the 'Bi'. On a visit to Cospicua, searching through the index for another marriage, I spotted the marriage of a 'Genius' for which I had searched in vain in Valletta. The records at Vittoriosa are incomplete as some were destroyed in World War II by bombing. Unfortunately they have not been restored from the records at the PR.

Christian names may be of Italian, Latin, Maltese or British spelling. Some names can also present problems with variations. For instance *Gratia* is the same as *Horatia*, *Innocent*

¹ J., Azzopardi, 'A microfilm project by the Benedictines of Minnesota for Malta,' in *Guardians of Memory. Essays in remembrance of Hella Jean Bartolo Winston*, C.J., Farrugia ed. (National Archives of Malta) 2008, 352-290.

can be *Vincent* or *Lucien*, *Ludgarda* can be *Roberta*. and in one family *Albert* and *Robert* were interchanged. *Carmel* can be *Charlie*, *Carlo* and *Lino*. *Jane* can be Joan, Giavanna, Vanna, Jean, Ganna as well as variations on these. For *Joseph* there are 29 variations including *Giuseppe*, *Guzi*, *Peppi*, *Beppi*, *Giuze* etc. *Giovanni* can have 52 variants including *Ian*, *John*, *Nicholas*, *Paul*, *Pierre*, *Sean*, *Shaun*, and *Thaddeus*. I have a computer print-out with hundreds of variants.

It was customary for children to be christened with the name of the church's saint and many were chosen as the first name. In villages with many of the same surname, there were many confusing children eg. Mary Vella in Mellieha. George was common at Qormi and Victoria (Gozo), from the parish churches of St. George. Many villages were isolated with some family names almost restricted to a small area. In general, *Barbara* came from Gudia, *Magro* from Qrendi, *Degabriele* from Zeitun and *Giordamaina* from Rabat. British men came to the dockyard area from the mid- Victorian period and married local Maltese girls, whereas British soldiers were stationed at the barracks at Mtarfa, Sliema and St. Julians and at coastal batteries etc. Marriages to foreigners were common in the ports of Cospicua and Senglea and in Valletta.

Before visiting a parish office, one should telephone to confirm when it will be open and to check where it is – some offices are a little way from the church. For earlier records check that they are held by the present church (see Appendix). Since World War II there have been many new parishes whose previous histories can easily be found. The old names of Maltese towns or parishes can be mystifying for foreigners:

Valletta, Saint Dominic: Porto Salvo; Saint Paul *Naufraġo*

Nova Porte : Cospicua/Bormla

Floriana : Vilhena

Hamrun: Via San Giuseppe

Marsa: Albert Town

Mdina: Notabile

Mqabba: Micabiba

Qormi/Ormi/Curmi: Pinto

Rabat: Citta Vecchia

Senglea: Invicta or L'Isla

Siggiewi: Citta Ferdinand

Vittoriosa: Birgu

Zebbug: Rohan

Victoria (Gozo): Rabat

Xaghra (Gozo): Caccia.

Gaps in the Records

British servicemen may not be found in the Maltese records: for example Captain Andrew Moynihan died on 19 May 1867 and his son, later the great Leeds surgeon, had been born 2 October 1865, but neither were registered in Malta. In the health records, some British adults and children with a notifiable disease (eg. poliomyelitis) were treated by a Maltese doctor, but others were presumably treated at the service hospitals and were not notified (personal records).

Unregistered marriages cannot be found in the Malta PR. Perhaps the marriage took place on Gozo. A few surnames were originally from Gozo and some, mainly men, emigrated to Malta, taking those surnames with them eg. Sultana, Hili, Haber and Debrincat. Other marriages may have been made overseas: there were sizable Maltese communities in Egypt and Gibraltar, etc., as well as in many smaller communities eg. Crete. The church records in Egypt were destroyed in the riots following the British-French invasion of 1956. I have received records from Gibraltar. In Tunis, Algiers, Tripoli and Benghazi, Maltese goat

keepers with their families were expelled about 1909 when it was clear that their goats were infected with brucellosis.

Data Protection

For my researches on poliomyelitis and motor neurone disease (MND/ALS) I have permission from the Health Ethics Committee of Malta and a letter of introduction to *kappillani* in Malta from the Curia. A previous Bishop of Gozo very kindly asked his clergy to help me. The PR records are being transferred to a government database. I have made a few requests for information from the birth database which friends in the PR have accessed for me. Individual access to the database is more complicated as a password is required and knowledge of how to use the particular database. At least one professional genealogist is allowed access to the PR.

The PR marriage records will be available on computer, but no arrangements have been made for access to these records. The certificates for births, marriages and deaths are now stored in an archive room at the PR and may be requested by the appropriate number and year.

Conclusion

From the beginning I have used 8x5 inch coloured cards which are big enough for details of the subject (top line), parents, grand-parent and great grand-parent details of births, marriages etc. The back is used for details of the PR registration numbers etc. I use a different coloured card for ancestors from other villages/towns. The cards may be sorted by village (bottom left corner), number (top right corner) etc.

Many Maltese emigrated, especially to Australia. Their death certificates give their place of birth and their occupation and can be recovered from their state databases – in my survey of deaths from MND, one quarter were from Australia. However, strict interpretation of data protection laws have prevented me from receiving recent death certificates. Details of Maltese clubs etc., in different countries can be found in the editions of the *Malta year book* (see also).²

Various groups may be helpful in finding patients etc., for example MND societies in Australia and the Multiple Sclerosis Society of Malta.

The Maltese records are fascinating and very rewarding. The National Archives Act of 2005 created the National Archives at *Santo Spirito* in Rabat which is a wonderful resource for future researchers. However the future may be daunting. In 2009 the Public Registry moved to new, less roomy quarters so that most of the card indexes are now housed elsewhere and cannot be used. The PR itself is now open for fewer hours and security is stricter. Some years ago, the head of the PR was, by tradition, a lawyer with sympathy for research. After managerial consultations, the PR is now a minor part of a bigger department with the emphasis on economy and efficiency. The managers may have little sympathy with research.

The University of Malta with its *Melitensia* collection and the National Archives of Malta have excellent collections and other institutions eg. the National Archaeological Museum and the *Curia* of Malta and the one on Gozo have smaller collections.

Past researchers on surnames have used telephone directories and the electoral registers - both of which cover very limited periods and have serious omissions. A useful essay can be read in the National Library (ID or passport required).³ Numbers of births could be used for earlier periods, but there were many deaths - in Siggiewi in 1933, two thirds of babies died in the first year and only one in four had survived beyond the age of five. Infant mortality was less in other years and villages, but was still high until the early fifties. I have used the

² L.E. Attard, *The Safety Valve (A history of Maltese emigration from 1846)*, (PEG, Malta), 1997.

³ J. Brincat, 'Surnames in Malta: What can they tell us?', *The Sunday Times Of Malta*, 8 Feb. 2004, 48-49.

indexes to the marriage registers to look at the range of surnames in villages in Gozo.⁴ An advantage to the researcher is that clergy, nuns and those who do not marry are excluded so that the frequency of surnames may more accurately predict the future.

Appendix

<i>Present parish</i>	<i>established</i>	<i>from:</i>
Qormi, St. Sebastian	1936	Qormi, St. George
Gzira	1921	Birkirkara
Sliema, Sacro Cor	1918	Stella Maris Sliema,
Santa Venera	1918	Hamrun
Birzebbuga	1913	Zabbar
Marsa	1913	Hamrun
Paola	1910	Tarxien
St. Paul's Bay	1905	Naxxar
Rabat	1902	Mdina
Kalkara	1898	Vittoriosa
Marsaxlokk	1897	Zeitun
St. Julian	1891	Birkirkara
Hamrun	1881	Qormi, Birkirkara, St. Paul's (Valletta)
Sliema, Stella Maris	1878	Birkirkara
Msida	1867	Birkirkara
Floriana	1844	St. Paul's (Valletta)
Mellieha	1844	Naxxar

⁴ H.V. Wyatt, 'Migration, surnames and marriage in the Maltese island of Gozo around 1900,' *J H Malta on-line* (2011/2012), no. 2, 35-41.