

# Saverio Colombo Pluchinotta: a Young Sicilian Patrician in Gozo (1890)

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## Introduction

Amongst its holdings, the *Archivio di Stato di Ragusa* has acquired the *Archivio Pluchinotta*. This rich documentation, which runs from 1623 to 1914, was acquired by the Ragusa Archives in 1991. The Pluchinotta family was based in Modica and belonged to the small nobiliar classes that developed between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. Originally, this family was interested in various commercial activities and in the management of its fiefs in Sicily. Amongst the most prominent members of the family, one finds “il cavaliere Saverio *senior*, protonotaro e apprezzato giureconsulto, vissuto nella prima metà del Settecento, il canonico Vincenzo, rettore del Real albergo di Palermo, e il baronello Giuseppe, giudice d’appello nella Gran corte civile di Modica” (Iozzia, 2008: 31-32).

Amid these many holdings, one finds three letters sent from Gozo in 1890 by Saverio Colombo. These are catalogued as *Archivio Famiglia Pluchinotta* (1623-1914), Record 37, B. 37. Very little is known of Saverio. He was the son of Emanuele Colombo and Margherita Pluchinotta, both of Modica, the seventh of nine siblings. Saverio’s grandfather, Michele Colombo, had been a member of the *Comitato Rivoluzionario* of Modica, led by the Abate Giuseppe De Leva during the Risorgimento period, in 1860 (information provided by Dr. Rosario Di Stefano, in June 2013).

Saverio’s exact date of birth has been hitherto unknown but, according to notes compiled by the Ragusa Archives staff, led by the Director Dr. Giovanni Calabrese, he must have been born between 1871 and

1872. However, other sources differ on his date of birth. According to the *Archivio Parrocchiale S. Giorgio*, Modica, Saverio Colombo was born in 1875. The *Archivio Parrocchiale San Pietro* records his death in 1894, at the age of 19. One suspects that he could have committed suicide (Di Stefano 2013). As regards schooling, what was known until now was that he had frequented the *Convitto Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele*, in Palermo.

However, in reality this was not the only school he frequented. The three ‘Gozitan’ letters reveal some more information about his schooling and tastes. His first letter was written on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1890 and is addressed to his “Carissimo Papà”, who had written to his son on the 20<sup>th</sup> March. This letter starts with an explanation about a mix-up in the correspondence between son and father. The explanation *per se* is quite an irrelevant one but, in the process, Saverio states that the “Padre Ministro” had placed two differently dated letters in the same envelope.

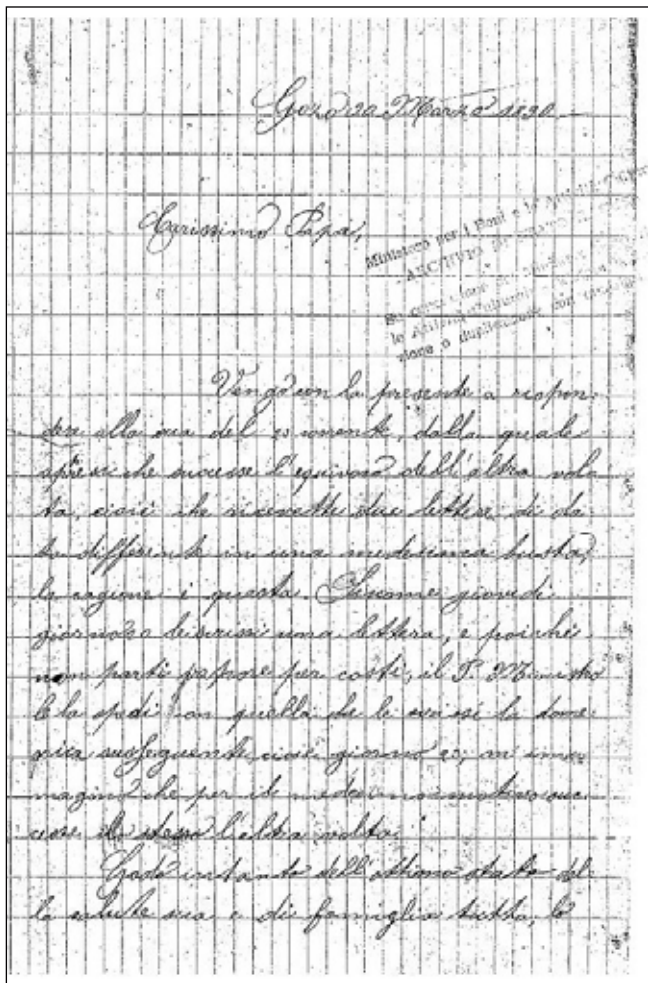
The reference to the “Padre Ministro” points to the fact that Saverio must have been attending a Catholic school in Gozo at that time. This is confirmed later on in the letter when Saverio, in reference to a not

The Sacred Heart Seminary in Victoria, Gozo  
- Photo taken early 1880s.

(Source: <http://www.sacredheartseminary.org.mt> - October 2013)



better described “orologio”, promises his father that he will get the “Rettore’s” permission to be able to wear it. Saverio must have therefore been attending a school in Gozo, that was run by a Rector, aided by one or more “Padre Ministro”.

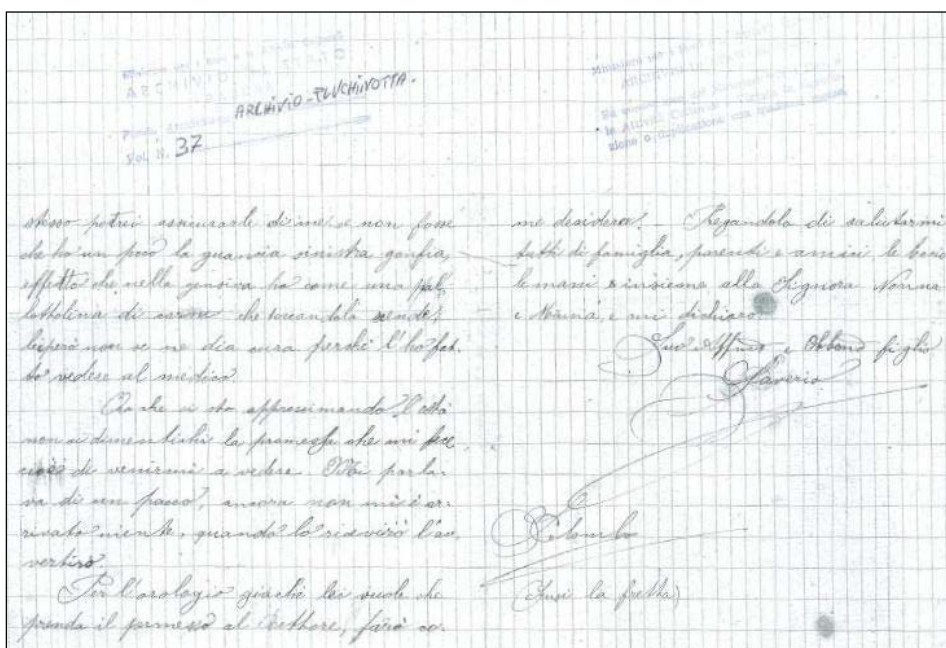


There is no talk about the nature of his studies in this letter. What we do get to know is something about Saverio’s state of health. Actually, it was not at its best since he had a swollen left cheek, which resulted in a “pallottolina di carne [nella gengiva] che toccandola scende”. Nothing to really worry about, though, since it was being taken care of by a doctor.

In this letter Saverio informs his father that the parcel that his father had sent him had not yet arrived, and then he also exhorts his father to honour his promise and to come and visit him in Gozo. Within such context, one can therefore presume that Saverio’s stay in this Gozitan school was to be quite a longish one.

Sixteen days later, on 6<sup>th</sup> April 1890, Saverio writes again to his father, this time in answer to a letter sent by his parent on 28<sup>th</sup> March. The declaration of his satisfaction at seeing that all was well in the family is a result of some sickness which had previously hit his brother in law, “cognato Zudo”, from which he had now totally recovered. Who was this brother in law?

Evidently he had married one of Saverio’s five sisters: Clementina, Concetta, Marietta, Giuseppina and Annetta. Now, Zudo/Zuddo is a diminutive in Sicilian of the name Vincenzo. And of Saverio’s five sisters it was Clementina who had married Vincenzo Blandino! So this Blandino is probably the “cognato Zudo” to whom Saverio was referring, even though one could not totally exclude the possibility that it might have been Carlo Rocciola fu Vincenzo, who had married Marietta Colombo Pluchinotta in 1889.



Saverio’s first letter to his father written on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1890.



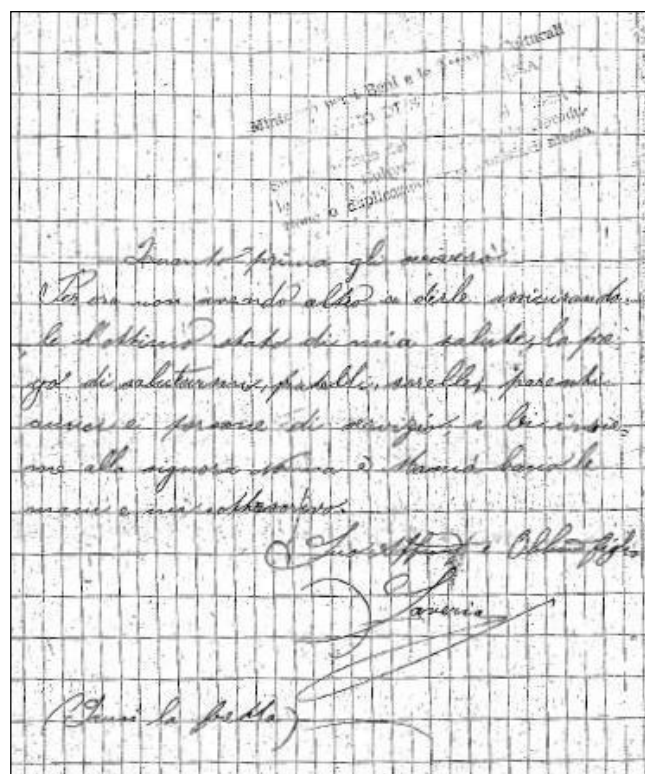
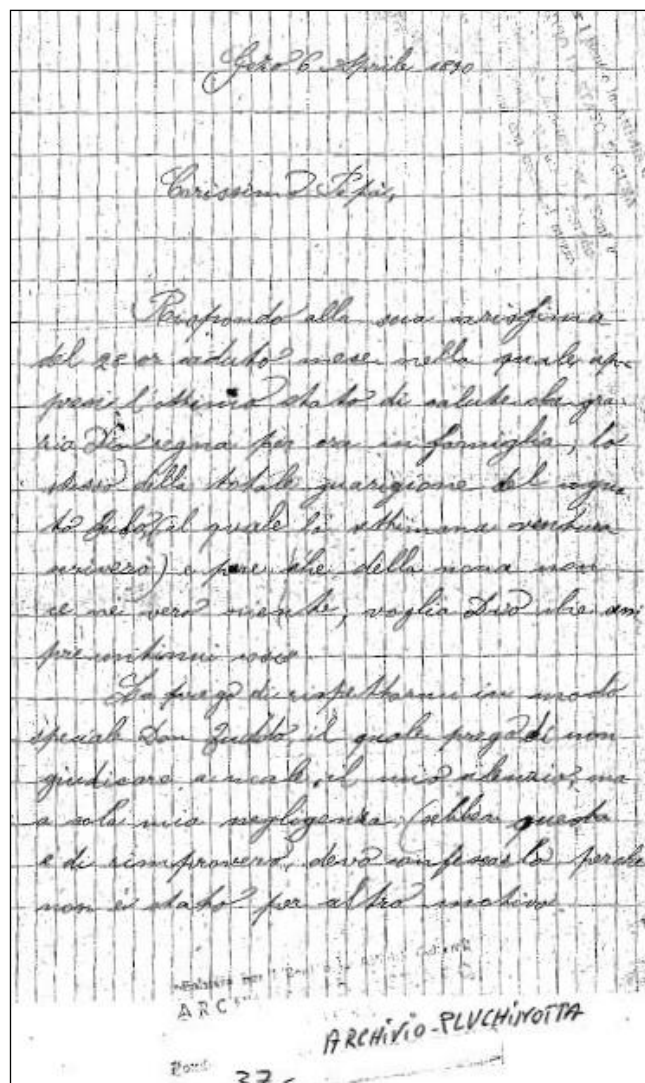
declaration that Saverio was in the best of health. On the contrary, the third letter, dated 13<sup>th</sup> April 1890, provides the reader with some juicy news regarding Saverio's vices and tastes, apart from news on his progress at school. First of all, we get to know that on 8<sup>th</sup> April, Saverio had been promoted to the senior school ("Oggi giorno 8 fui passato dai grandi") and was therefore transferred to a new dormitory. His new "prefetto" was a certain Padre Gennaro.

Saverio's major worry in this letter seems to be his smoking habit. In his new "camerata" smoking was allowed. But it would seem that his prefect, Padre Gennaro, would not allow him to do so without the written consent of his father. So Saverio implores his father "La prego a non dirmi di no, e di rispondermi appena avrà la presente". He is so concerned about being able to smoke that, after having signed off his letter, he adds a *post scriptum* exhorting his father not to deprive him of such possibility: "Mi auguro che non mi faccia la negativa; per il permesso basta solamente scrivermi due parole nella stessa risposta". His insistence on the topic is a clear admission of urgency and anxiety.

His other worry concerned the "orologio" already mentioned in the 20<sup>th</sup> March letter. The context now becomes much clearer. Basically, Saverio's father was about to embark on a trip to Rome and therefore his son had asked him to buy him a watch with a golden chain from the eternal city. Saverio, therefore, did not disdain certain luxuries of this material world!

From this letter we also get to know that he had healed from his "gonfiore della gensiva". He therefore asks his father to stop worrying since "si fece dura di nuovo". Saverio seems to be quite disappointed that his father could not find the time to visit him in Gozo (or was it because of the watch!). But still he does not give up on this and reminds his father of the promise that he had made to him: "ma giachè mi promise al ritorno, aspetto ancora, augurandomi che presto termini gli affari". The letter ends with his apology for not having wished his father a Happy Easter in previous letters, and with the usual best wishes to family and friends.

What Gozitan school did Saverio Colombo attend in 1890? The clues in these three letters concerning the school, i.e. the presence of a Rector, a Minister and a

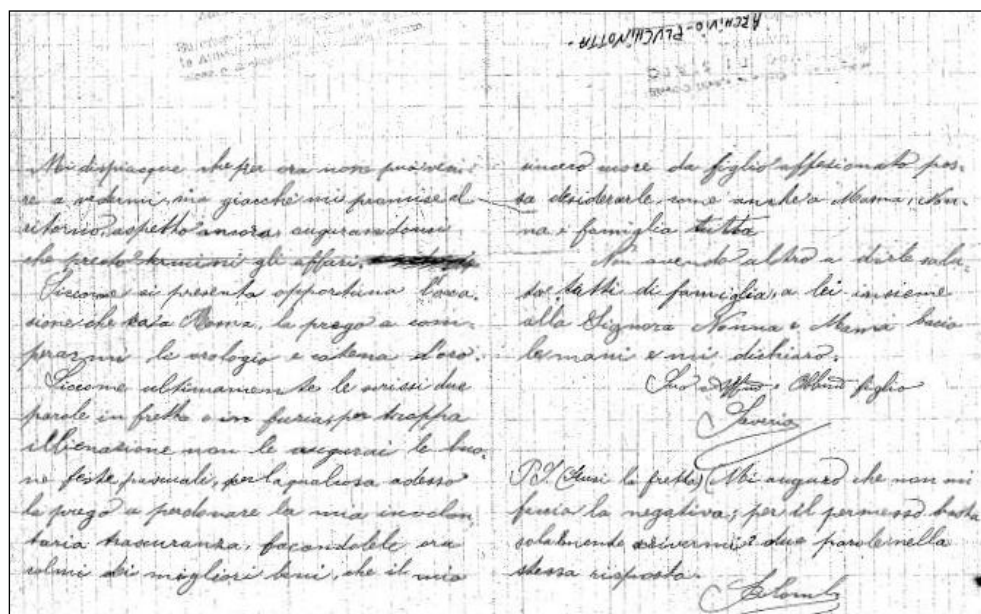
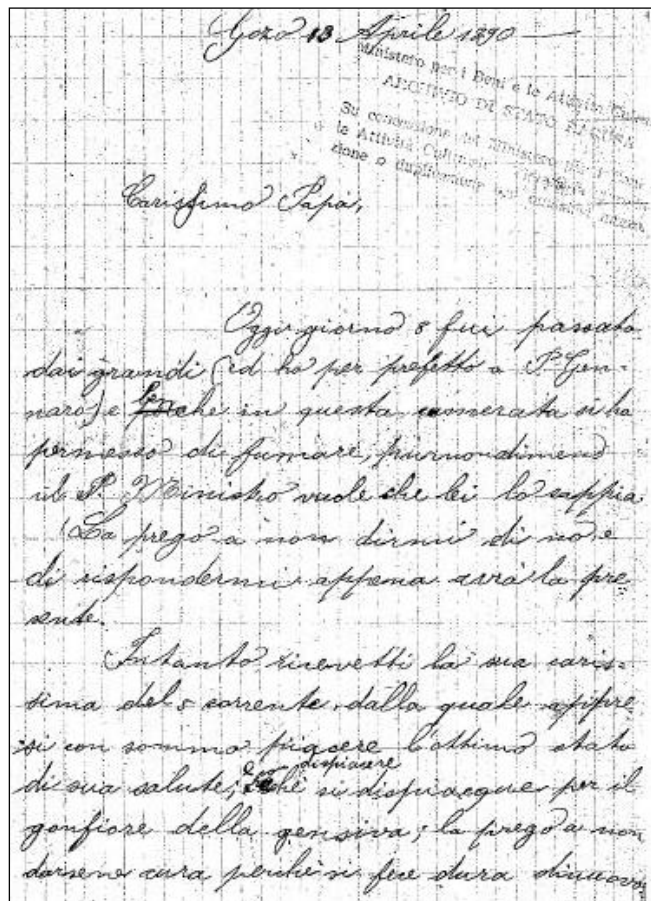


Saverio's second letter to his father dated 6<sup>th</sup> April 1890.



Prefect, point in a very clear direction, i.e. the Gozo Seminary, which was run by a Rector, supervised by a Minister and an Assistant Minister and divided into four sections, the *Grandi*, *Mezzani*, *Piccoli* and *Piccolini*, each run by a Prefect.

The Seminary in Gozo was inaugurated on the 4<sup>th</sup> November 1866. The running of the seminary was entrusted to the Sicilian Jesuits. In fact,



Saverio's third letter to his father dated 13<sup>th</sup> April 1890.

“on 28<sup>th</sup> May 1865, the Bishop [of Gozo, Mons. Francesco Buttigieg] proposed to [Fr. Pierre-Jean] Becks, [Superior General of the Society of Jesus], to authorize the Sicilian Jesuits, dispersed by the revolution of Garibaldi in 1860, to take over the direction and staffing of the Seminary” (Bezzina, 1991: 14).

As a result, “the first Sicilian Jesuits arrived in Gozo on 11<sup>th</sup> September 1866 and on the 13<sup>th</sup> they moved to the Seminary to supervise the finishing touches to the place. They were Antonio Tommasi, eventually appointed first Rector and Procurator; Salvatore Dipietro, first Minister or Administrator of the house and the community as well as master of mathematics, physics, and natural history; and Brother Antonio Ardagna, the chef” (Bezzina, 1991: 15).

The school proved to be extremely popular straight from the beginning, so much so that in the first year there were 52 seminarians from Gozo and 48 from Malta. Students from Sicily were accepted too. Saverio Colombo must have been one of these. He probably joined the Seminary under the rectorship of the Palermitan Jesuit Gaetano Tranchina, who was appointed rector on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1888 and stayed on until 1895 (Bezzina, 1991: 49).

Saverio must have certainly attended at least two of the four sections of the seminary since on the 8<sup>th</sup> April “fui passata dai grandi”. This would mean that he had been promoted from the section of the *Mezzani* to that of the *Grandi*. Presumably, therefore, he

might have been preparing himself for the priesthood in Gozo. But is there any proof in Gozo of Saverio's presence, proof that could provide the researcher with further information on this youth?

Indeed, there is, and I am indebted to Dr Joseph Bezzina from the Gozo Library for having indicated to me the ASG - *Archivum Seminarium Gaudisiense - Catalgo degli Alunni (1888-89) + (1889-90)*, which gives the following details:

SAVERIO COLOMBO  
Ingresso - 12 Sep 1889  
Figlio di - Emmanuele  
Nativo - Modica  
Nato - 7 Feb 1874  
Entrato - 12 Sep 1889  
Convitto - Mezzani  
Classe - Seconda Ginnasio  
Direzione - Strada Teatro 19, Valletta

This consists of only a few words, but indeed they are very enriching. First of all, from this entry, we are provided with Saverio's exact date of birth, 7<sup>th</sup> February 1874. Which means that he was sixteen years old when he was writing his Gozitan letters to his father Emanuele in March-April 1890. Then we get to know that he was accepted at the Gozitan school on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1889, when registrations for that particular scholastic year had not yet started to be accepted. That is why his registration was first inserted in the 1888-1889 catalogue. Only later was he inserted in the 1889-1990 catalogue.

Anyway, he was certainly in time for the beginning of the 1889-1890 scholastic year, and was admitted to the "Seconda Ginnasio" class, which formed part of the *mezzani* section. Finally, as previously gathered, on reaching his sixteenth year of age the following year, on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1890, he was admitted to the "grandi" section. Another interesting point of information is the address given under "Direzione". Normally, this would be the parents' or guardians' address. What is sure, therefore, is that whoever paid for Saverio's school fees lived in Strada Teatro 19, Valletta. Did he have any relatives or close family acquaintances in Malta?

Did Saverio complete his studies in Gozo? As things stand, with the information gleaned from these two catalogues, it would seem that he certainly did not. What is sure is that he must have spent at least one scholastic year there, between September 1889 and September 1890. His name is no longer included in the 1890-1891 list, which probably means that he must have left the Gozo seminary after September 1890. Possibly, then, he must have continued his studies at the Palermo *Convitto Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele*, until his premature -and possibly, tragic- death in 1894, when he was laid to rest at the age of 19, therefore, presumably, in January or February of that year, before celebrating his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday.

One final consideration: Saverio's paternal grandfather, Michele Colombo, had been one of the most active patriots in Modica during the *Risorgimento* period. It was also thanks to his efforts that the Jesuits' College was closed down in 1860 and the Jesuits were expelled from Modica, because of the nationalisation of Church property, following the advent of Garibaldi and his "Mille".

It is quite an ironic twist of events that not more than thirty years later Michele's sixteen year old grandson, Saverio, was to travel from Modica to Gozo to get his schooling from those same Jesuits who had been expelled from Modica by his grandfather, who must have been totally oblivious of the future effects of his actions on his own family members.

### The Letters

Gozo 30 marzo 1890

Carissimo Papà,

Vengo con la presente a rispondere alla sua del 20 corrente, dalla quale appresi che successe l'equivoco dell'altra volta, cioè che ricevette due lettere di data differente in una medesima busta; la cagione è questa. Siccome giovedì giorno 20 le scrissi una lettera, e poichè non partì vapore per costi, il P. Ministro le la spedì con quella che le scrissi la domenica susseguente, cioè giorno 23; m'immagino che per il medesimo motivo successe lo stesso l'altra volta.

Godo intanto dell'ottimo stato della salute sua e di famiglia tutta; lo stesso potrei assicurarle di me, se non fosse che ho un poco la guancia sinistra gonfia, effetto che nella gensiva ha come una pallottolina di carne che toccandola scende, lei però non se ne dia cura perchè l'ho fatta vedere al medico.

Ora che si sta approssimando l'està non si dimentichi la promessa che mi fece cioè di venirmi a vedere. Mi parlava di un pacco, ancora non mi è arrivato niente, quando lo riceverò l'avverirò.

Per l'orologio giachè lei vuole che prenda il permesso al Rettore, farò come desidera. Pregandola di salutarmi tutti di famiglia, parenti e amici, le bacio le mani e insieme alla Signora Nonna, e Mamà, e mi dichiaro.

Suo Aff.mo e Obb.mo figlio  
Saverio Colombo  
(Scusi la fretta)

Gozo, 30<sup>th</sup> March, 1890

Dearest father,

*With the present I reply to your letter of the 20<sup>th</sup> instant, from which I found out about the misunderstanding of last time, namely your receiving two letters of different dates in the same envelope; the reason being this. Given that I wrote you a letter on Thursday 20<sup>th</sup>, and since no mail steamer came that way, the Minister mailed this letter with the one I wrote the following Sunday, that is on the 23<sup>rd</sup>; I assume that this is also what happened the other time.*

*In the meantime I enjoy hearing about the state of your good health and that of the rest of the family; I would be able to assure you of the same in my regard were it not for a minor swelling of my left cheek, that comes from a small lump of flesh in my gum, that moves down when touched. However you must not worry because I have already shown it to the doctor.*

*Now that Summer is approaching don't forget the promise you had made me, that of visiting me. Did you mention a parcel? Up to now I have not received anything; when I receive it I will advise you.*

*With regards to the watch, since you would like me to ask the Rector's permission, I will do as you wish. I kindly beg you to extend my best regards to all the family, relatives and friends; I kiss your hands together with those of my esteemed grandmother and mother, and remain,*

*Your affectionate and obedient son  
Saverio Colombo  
(Please pardon my haste)*

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Gozo 6 Aprile 1890

Carissimo Papà,

Rispondo alla sua carissima del 28 or caduto mese nella quale appresi l'ottimo stato di salute che grazia Dio regna per ora in famiglia; lo stesso della totale guarigione del cognato Zudo, (al quale la settimana ventura scriverò) e pare che della nova non ce nè vero niente; voglia Dio che sempre continui così.

La prego di rispettarli in modo speciale Don Zuddo, il quale prego di non giudicare a male il mio silenzio, ma a sola mia negligenza; (sebben questa è

di rimprovero, devo confessarlo, perchè non è stato per altro motivo.

Quanto prima gli scriverò. Per ora non avendo altro a dirle assicurandole l'ottimo stato di mia salute, la prego di salutarmi, fratelli, sorelle, parenti amici e persone di servizio; a lei insieme alla signora Nonna e Mamà bacio le mani e mi sottoscrivo

Suo Aff.mo e Obb.mo figlio  
Saverio  
(Scusi la fretta)

Gozo, 6<sup>th</sup> April, 1890

Dearest Father,

*I reply to your kind letter of the 28<sup>th</sup> of the past month, in which I learned about the state of excellent health that, praise be to God, reigns up to now within the family; the same goes for the total recovery of my brother in law Zudo, (to whom I will be writing next week) and it seems that there's no truth about grandmother, so let's hope that God willing all keeps going as it is.*

*I beg you to send my regards especially to Don Zuddo, whom I also beg not to negatively judge my silence, because it is only due to negligence; (although I must admit that this is reproachable, because there was no other motive).*

*I will write to him very soon. Not having other to add, for now I assure you of my best health, and beg you to send my regards to my brothers, sisters, relatives, friends and the servitude; to you together with my lady grandmother and mother I kiss your hands and remain*

*Your most affectionate and obedient son  
Saverio  
(Please pardon my haste)*

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Gozo 13 Aprile 1890

Carissimo Papà,

Oggi giorno 8 fui passata dai grandi (ed ho per prefetto a P. Gennaro) e benchè in questa camerata si ha permesso di fumare, purnondimeno il P. Ministro vuole che lei lo sappia.

La prego a non dirmi di no, e di rispondermi appena



avrà la presente.

Intanto ricevetti la sua carissima del 5 corrente, dalla quale appresi con sommo piacere l'ottimo stato di sua salute; e con dispiacere che si dispiacque per il gonfiore della gensiva; la prego a non darsene cura perchè si fece dura di nuovo. Mi dispiacque che per ora non può venire a vedermi, ma giacchè mi promise al ritorno, aspetto ancora, augurandomi che presto termini gli affari.

Siccome si presenta opportuna l'occasione che vada Roma, la prego a comperarmi l'orologio e catena d'oro.

Siccome ultimamente le scrissi due parole in fretta e in furia, per troppa illienazione non le augurai le buone feste pasquali, per la qualcosa adesso la prego a perdonare la mia involontaria trascuranza, facendolele ora colmi dei migliori beni, che il mio sincero cuore da figlio affezionato possa desiderarle, come anche a Mama, Nonna e famiglia tutta.

Non avendo altro a dirle saluto tutti di famiglia, a lei insieme alla Signora Nonna e Mamà bacio le mani e mi dichiaro

Suo Aff.mo e Obb.mo figlio  
Saverio

P.S. (Scusi la fretta) Mi auguro che non mi faccia la negativa; per il permesso basta solamente scrivermi due parole nella stessa risposta.

Colombo

*Gozo, 13<sup>th</sup> April, 1890*

*Dearest Father,*

*Today, the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the month, I have been transferred to the senior school (and my master of studies is now Father Gennaro) and notwithstanding the fact that in this dormitory smoking is allowed, the Minister still needs your approval.*

*I beg you not to refuse your permission, and to reply as soon as you receive this letter.*

*In the meantime I am in receipt of your kind letter of the 5<sup>th</sup> instant, through which I note with utmost pleasure the excellent state of your health; and regret that you are distressed about the swelling in my gum; I beg you not to worry yourself about the fact that it has again congealed. I regret that for the time being you cannot come to visit me, but since you had promised me to return, I still*

*hopefully await that you may soon finish your commitments.*

*Given that the opportunity of your going to Rome presents itself, I kindly solicit you to buy the gold chained watch for me.*

*Seeing as lately I have only written a few hurried words, I absentmindedly omitted to augur you my best wishes for Easter, for which I now kindly beseech you to pardon my unintended negligence, thus sending them to you now filled with all the good things that my sincere heart as a devoted son would wish you, as well as my mother, my grandmother and all the family.*

*Not having anything to add I send my best wishes to all the family; I kiss the hands of your goodself as well as those of my lady Grandmother and Mother and declare myself*

*Your most affectionate and obedient son  
Saverio*

*P.S. (Please pardon my haste) I hope that you won't decline; it suffices to only write a few words in the same reply to give your permission.*

*Colombo*

*(English translation of transcripts by  
Ms Miriam Muscat)*

## References

Bezzina, J. (1991). *The Sacred Heart Seminary – The Heart of Gozo*. Gaulitana 11. Victoria, Gozo: Bugelli Publications.

Iozzia, A. M. (ed). 2008. *Archivio di Stato Ragusa e Sezione di Modica*. Italy: Viterbo: Betagamma.

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