

Umberto Calosso's Mirage in Malta The quest for the Chair of Italian Literature

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Abstract

A vacancy for the Chair of Italian Literature at the University of Malta provided an opportunity for Umberto Calosso to endeavour to relieve from the demanding job at St. Edward College (1931-1940). He applied for the vacancy together with seven other applicants, five of whom were Lyceum teachers. Calosso presented an impressive list of testimonials, which few applicants could rival. A letter to his mentor, the philosopher Benedetto Croce was regarded as a summary of his life in Malta. For one, Calosso considered Italian citizenship as an obstacle, so he sought and obtained British citizenship. His quest for the Chair of Italian Literature provoked caustic criticism by the fascist press. His forte in teaching Italian literature was Alessandro Manzoni's I Promessi Sposi – lectures which he later collated in a book entitled I Colloqui col Manzoni, which became his visiting card for years to come. The imminent declaration of war by Italy made the post of professor at University redundant. In Malta, Umberto's Calosso's name is usually associated with a former technical institute in Santa Venera.

Umberto Calosso's academic career started at the University of Turin where he read history and philosophy, graduating with a dissertation on *L'anarchia di Vittorio*. He published his thesis in 1924 soon after Mussolini's seizure of power. Together with Antonio Gramsci he studied philosophy under the guidance of Benedetto Croce and Luigi Einaudi and then contributed to Antonio Gramsci's *l'Ordine Nuovo* as well as to the liberal thinker Piero Gobetti's *La rivoluzione liberale*.

Fate brought him to Malta while he was on holiday in England in 1931 – visiting a friend, Angelo Crespi, Professor at the University of Birkbeck. The Rector of St. Edward's College Fr. Frederick Kerr Mc Clement was in London scouting for the replacement of the Italian master Giuseppe Donati, who had died in Paris on the 16 August that same year. Mc Clement recruited Calosso on the spot after meeting Calosso with Crespi.

Calosso had concentrated on his teaching career while in Malta, continuing his antifascist struggle by mail with fellow exiled antifascists around the world. By pure coincidence, he happened to be in Spain at the beginning of the civil war. Together with Carlo Rosselli leader of *Giustizia e Libertá*¹ and some one hundred and fifty odd antifascist volunteers of all political creeds formed an Italian Column. This guerrilla group was known

¹ *Giustizia e Libertá*, which was founded by the Republican freedom fighter Carlo Rosselli in October 1929. It was a left wing non-party revolutionary movement in exile aimed at bringing together the disunited Italian left which aimed to stir up armed insurrection against fascism. The movement was founded by Carlo Rosselli in October 1929. Rosselli was of Jewish faith, married to an Englishwoman, Marion Cave, and was assassinated -together with his brother Nello- in France on 9 June 1937 by fascist thugs.

and has been associated with the ‘battle for Mount Pelato’. Calosso returned to Malta not only war torn but very edgy with his hectic assignment at St. Edward’s College. Therefore, he was looking forward to move on in his career when a vacancy at the University of Malta provided him with the opportunity.

During the inter-war period, Malta had its fair share of high-calibre Italian masters teaching Italian language and literature at the Lyceum, private schools and at the University. The veteran of these academics was Vincenzo Laurenza who spent 30 years teaching until he resigned from the Chair of Italian literature at the University of Malta on attaining the age of 60 years on 12 February 1940.² He was lucky enough to be able to leave Malta together with his wife Gisella on 21 May 1940, just a few weeks before the commencement of hostilities by Italy against Malta.

Laurenza vacates his University post

The vacancy left by Laurenza was bound to cause a fair measure of intrigue from various quarters - but this time round not the usual intrusion of the Italian government -in the choice of a successor. Since Italian influence was at its lowest ebb ever, the Italian government’s interest was limited to an attempt to block the candidature of Umberto Calosso who was unpalatable to the fascist regime.

Laurenza was considered an institution in the Italian cultural field in Malta, having taught here since 1907. He taught Italian at the Lyceum for 17 years, later becoming Professor of Italian literature. His tenure left an impact for many years at Malta’s *alma mater* as he spread his enthusiasm for Italian literature with Maltese students. His major contribution to Maltese historiography was his work ‘*Malta nei documenti angioini del Regio Archivio di Napoli*’ in *Archivio Storico di Malta* (1934),³ which consisted of sixty six documents pertaining to the Angevin administration of Malta in the period 1270-1300. This published documentation (from the Swabian and Angevin times) has preserved, for posterity, records which otherwise would certainly have been lost: when the German Nazis were abandoning Naples after the Anglo-American invasion of Italy, they set fire to the Neapolitan archives. This horrible act was carried out in spite of a serious shortage of fuel !

The departure of Professor Laurenza provided an opportunity for Umberto Calosso to attempt to change from the atmosphere of the rigid schedule at St. Edward College. The role of Professor of Italian Literature was a prestigious assignment and competition among suitable candidates was to be expected. The lobbying for the candidature of the post started well before Prof Laurenza’s retirement. One prospective candidate, George Zammit, who had also been Master at the Lyceum since 1933, canvassed his interest in the impending vacancy even before this was made public. Zammit requested an appointment with the Lieutenant-Governor through the Director of Education, Dr Albert. V. Laferla. At that time, Zammit was undergoing research for a doctorate at the University of London working

² National Archives Malta [hereafter NAM], Lieutenant Governor’s Office (LGO, 707/1940, 20 January 1940.

³ Anthony Luttrell, *Approaches to Medieval Malta., Medieval Malta; Studies on Malta before the Knights* (London, 1975), 5.

on Melchiorre Cesarotti's translation of Ossian and its effects on contemporary Italian poetry. He claimed:

Now among the probable candidates I am the only candidate in possession of an English university Honours degree in Italian, and I think it would be extremely unjust if the Chair were to be given either to an Italian or to a Maltese with an Italian degree.⁴

However, the Lieutenant-Governor declined to meet Zammit as he felt that this matter fell under the competence of the Council of the University, not his.

Umberto Calosso's ambition was both to fill Professor Laurenza's vacancy as well as to become a British subject. Ever since the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, the general feeling was that Italy, sooner rather than later, would be embroiled in the war. Mussolini was in an ambiguous position of non-belligerence – formally an ally of Germany, while at the same time not participating in hostilities. In spite of this uneasy political situation, life looked normal in Malta. Communications by air and sea to Sicily were not suspended until a few days before the actual declaration of war. Somehow, the University authorities still felt the need to safeguard its linguistic links with a potentially hostile neighbour. Replacing Professor Laurenza was the aim of Umberto Calosso as well as that of his British sponsors. At this point in time, the colonial authorities wanted to assure themselves of a person who could command maximum loyalty to the Empire. However bright the antifascist credentials of Calosso were, Italian nationality in fortress Malta would seem to be a liability. Therefore, the attainment of British citizenship was mandatory.

Calosso took care in rectifying the nationality mishap by filing the proper application for himself and his consort. The world affairs scenario surrounding the days of Calosso's application was the British commitment and belief that the tide of the war would turn in their favour. One *Times of Malta* heading read "Mr. Chamberlain's Great Speech – The Allies are winning the war" even though Chamberlain had simply reiterated that 'surveying the trend of hostilities in the first four months of the war... the result was not unsatisfactory.'⁵ He warned that it was difficult to forecast how long war would take, saw the situation as calm but also as the lull before the storm. He believed that it was Britannia that ruled the waves. Calosso's possible application was presented under this shadow.

A call for "filling the post of Head of the Chair of Italian literature" was published in the *Government Gazette*.⁶ There was only one important condition which was not specified in this notice - nationality. Zammit had already forewarned Laferla on this point. However, this omission attracted the attention of an anonymous person writing on *Il-Berka* of the 27

⁴ NAM, LGO 3806/39, George Zammit to Albert.V. Laferla, 13 October 1939.

⁵ *The Times of Malta*, 10 January 1940.

⁶ *Malta Government Gazette*, 13 February 1940. The notice read thus: 'Applications for the post of Professor of Italian language will be received by the undersigned up to noon on Saturday 20 April 1940. The salary attached to this post, which is on Pensionable Establishment, is £220 per annum a year exclusive of examination fees. The selected candidate will not be debarred from the private practice of his profession as long as it does not interfere with his public duties. Each application must be accompanied by a birth certificate, list of qualifications and testimonials.'

February 1940 under the nom-de-plum *Jedd u Ħaq* (Right and Just) who protested against this slip and hinted that it was done purposely to give advantage to a particular candidate. The correspondent must have been aware of Calosso's citizenship application as it had previously been published in the press. He maintained that the applicant should not only be a British subject but should also have been born under the British flag. The prevalent pro-British perception was that British subjects were privileged to be protected by the Union Jack, itself believed by anglophiles to be a sign of stability, civilization and democracy. In addition, the writer expressed preference for those members of the clergy who were well-versed in Italian literature, hinting that anybody less would be considered almost as an infidel. Since it was an open secret that there were two native Italian-speaking applicants, the writer left it to the imagination of the readers as to who was the 'preferred' candidate. Among the academic body, speculation was rife that the reference was directed to Umberto Calosso. The anonymous correspondent of *Il-Berka* ended his appeal by stating that "The people expect therefore that the act of the notice published be put right, begs his Excellency the Governor (who is the highest authority in our University) so that the notice is published afresh duly rectified with the condition specifically emphasizing, *British Born Subject*."⁷

The quality of the orthography used in the drafting of this letter indicated that it was the work of an academic judging from the choice of vocabulary in as far as choosing the word of *Malti safi* derivation, *ghelt*. *Ghelt* is not a word used in colloquial Maltese as the more common synonym *żball* is preferred. *Żball* (mistake) stems from Italian. While the trend amongst pro-Italians of that epoch was to replace as much as possible any word which sounded Arabic, the reverse was also true with the academics of pro-*Malti safi* (Maltese filtered from Latin influence). So intellectual confrontation was not limited solely to substance but applied even to a detail of the choice of just one word. Probably, the average reader would not understand the word chosen just as much as he understood flowery and pompous Italian words poured forth every now and then. The bureaucrat working inside the Lieutenant-Governor's Office thought it was not only fit to file a translation in English of the letter to the editor but also the actual envelope addressed to the Governor. The readership of *Il-Berka* does not seem to have been impressed because no polemic followed the publication of this letter. The lay-out of the paper was basically a triumphant war bulletin portraying the invincibility of the British Empire with the occasional necrology of some victim of enemy action. The interest in culture, judging from readers' letters to the editor, centred on the theatrical shows of the *Indipendenza* and other prominent performers, the talk of the town being *Il-Parìgina*.

Calosso becomes a British subject

The granting of British nationality was governed by the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act (1918). The act also provided a chance for those who had valid reason to object for such applications. A classified advertisement appearing in the *Times of Malta* of 9 January 1940 informed the public of the existence of such an application.⁸ In case of a protest, it was expected that the person objecting would use the proper channels. In such a

⁷ *Il-Berka*, 27 February 1940.

⁸ *The Times of Malta*, 10 January 1940.

case, it was obligatory to identify oneself to the civil administration. Under the circumstances, a letter to the editor was ignored. It emerged frequently that readers raised complaints in the press using a nom-de-plume. It appeared that it was also quite a common practice to report anonymously grievances to the Government.⁹

It was relatively easy for Calosso to become a British subject. He filled the appropriate application for a certificate of naturalization on 29 December 1939.¹⁰ He presented referees as stipulated by law who certified that they had known him for eight years: namely his mentor Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici, his friend the Headmaster of the Lyceum John Brennan, and of course the Rector of the College, Father Kerr McClement.

The application was duly processed and the consideration noted was quite succinct: 'Professor Calosso has a fair knowledge of English. He is a well known antifascist and was brought out here to teach Italian at St. Edward's College, which institution is under the protecting wing of the Government.'¹¹ The accent was on 'antifascist.' Eventually, the certificate of naturalization was duly approved on the 15 April 1940 and published in the Government Gazette on 26 April 1940 followed by that of his wife on 7 May 1940. Umberto and Clelia Calosso were eventually granted a British passport on 21 May 1940.¹²

Selecting Laurenza's successor

The list of applicants resembled that of '*Circolo La Giovine Malta* Old Boys Association.'¹³ The Italian applicants were Professor Arnaldo Fabriani who at that time taught at the government Lyceum, together with Professor Umberto Calosso. The other applicants were Seraphim Vella and John J. Cremona (the youngest of them all) together with four Lyceum teachers, namely Vincenzo Frendo Azzopardi, Giulio Cortis, George Zammit and Giovanni Curmi.¹⁴

The process of handling the testimonials of the applicants, that seemed a Herculean task, was to be carried out by the University's administrative staff. However, the Rector felt that his secretarial staff, consisting of two persons, would be unable to cope with the clerical work involved in the processing of the applications.¹⁵ Therefore, he asked

⁹ NAM, LGO, 472/1940. The Secretary to the Government noted in a minute: 'I hate to say it but anonymous letter writing is prevalent among certain classes of the population here.' 15 February 1940.

¹⁰ NAM, LGO, 314/1940.

¹¹ *Ibid.* Minute, Secretary to the Government, 22 January 1940.

¹² NAM, MFA, 26969-70/1940

¹³ The *Circolo 'La Giovine Malta'* was founded on November 12, 1901, and lasted up to a few weeks before the declaration of war. One of its declared aims was to promote Italian culture in Malta. The *Circolo* was reckoned to be a satellite of the pro-Italian Nationalist Party. Enrico Mizzi, leader of the Nationalist Party and the intellectual mind of the party Arturo Mercieca were past Presidents, both of whom were deported to Uganda during the Second World War.

¹⁴ NAM, MFA, 26969-70/1940

Arnaldo Fabriani was employed on 7 January 1927;

Vincenzo Frendo Azzopardi 7 on November 1924;

Giulio Cortis on 1 September 1931;

George Zammit on 14 October 1933;

Giovanni Curmi on 7 January 1938;

¹⁵ NAM, LGO, 1766/1940, R.V. Galea to Edward R. Mifsud, 3 May 1940.

permission from the Lieutenant-Governor to employ temporary staff but his request fell on deaf ears. The events that followed within a month – the outbreak of war - made the request superfluous. Arnaldo Fabriani had been spared of what the Italian Consul General in Malta after the Abyssinian war, Marchese Agostino Ferrante di Ruffano, called ‘Persecution against Italians.’¹⁶ Despite his perceived antifascist leanings, he was nevertheless identified as a fascist by the British authorities, probably because he was known to be close to Nationalist leader Enrico Mizzi.¹⁷ Fabriani wrote various articles in academic papers. Furthermore, he also wrote in *Malta*. When he did so, he seems to have sought and obtained the relevant permission from the Director of Education.¹⁸ Working in a country where pro-fascist sympathies were very much evident, Fabriani kept a low profile under the circumstances. Still, he put the interest of his country above his personal political views: “right or wrong, my country.” He had taken part in the First World War, had been promoted to Captain and awarded the *Medaglia al valor militare*. One particular pupil at the Lyceum, Camillo Bonanno, attested from personal experience that he never used his academic role to indulge in propaganda against the fascist regime, but dedicated his time to defend and promote the Italian language and culture.¹⁹

The candidates had all, without any exception, produced impressive *curriculum vitae* of significant intellectual content. Professor Cortis was lecturer of Political Economy at the University. Frenzo Azzopardi, though a lawyer did not practise law, was born in Smyrna, He was a poet, had composed some 85 poems and excelled in patriotic themes, especially about the Great Siege of 1565. One such poem was dedicated to the *Otto settembre* published on *Malta* of the 7 September 1931. He had also translated into Italian *Nazju Ellul*, the classic of Guże Muscat Azzopardi. Curmi spent all his life dedicated to the propagation of Italian literature. George Zammit later became a lawyer but changed his interest to Maltese literature. Cremona was a poet in his own right at par with contemporary poets such as Umberto Saba (1883-1957) and Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888-1970) and had already won various contests in Europe at that time. Together with Dominic Mintoff and Victor Bartolo,²⁰ Cremona (later Chief Justice) had applied for the Rhodes scholarship, for which Mintoff was chosen.²¹ While the future of the Italian literature lecturer was being discussed in the corridors of the University, a landmark in the annals of the history of University was registered with the appointment of Professor Gużé Aquilina as the first Professor of Maltese language.

Therefore, Calosso was faced with a formidable task in his quest for the Chair of Professor of Italian Literature. He did not dare make a fuss about the publication of his thesis *L’anarchia di Vittorio Alfieri*.²² However, the Rome daily *Tevere* wrote that this

¹⁶ Archivio Storico Diplomatici Esteri [ASDE], *Affari politici 1931-45, Gran Bretagna, Busta* 8, Ferrante to Ministro degli Affari Esteri, Roma, 7 November 1935.

¹⁷ Reno Borg, *Malta u l-Faxximzmu* (Malta, 1991), 81.

¹⁸ NAM, LGO, 1815/1940. The Secretary to the Government noted in a minute that permission was granted to Prof. Fabriani by the Director of Education to publish a novel in *Malta*.

¹⁹ Bonanno, *ibid.*, 42.

²⁰ John Manduca, *The Bonham-Carter Diaries 1936-1940* (Malta, 2004), 279.

²¹ Victor A. Bartolo, in Michael J. Schiavone, *Dictionary of Maltese Biographies*, Vol. I (Malta, 2009), 189.

²² Umberto Calosso, *Biblioteca di Cultura Moderna, L’anarchia di Vittorio Alfieri* (Bari, 1924).

book ‘supported a somewhat paradoxical thesis which revealed in him a certain lack of equilibrium – a thesis which he tried to introduce in the school such that the Minister of National Education in February 1931 had to ask Professor Arnaldo Tallone to hold an enquiry on the educational activities of this young man who was trying to sow the seed of doubt and religious discord amongst the pupils.’²³ The title of the book in itself was taboo, and had been published soon after the Fascist March on Rome.



Figure 1: Umberto Calosso – portrait photo
(*National Archives of Malta*)

²³ The text of the *Tevere* of 7 March 1940 was duly reproduced in the edition of the *Unione* of Tunis printed on 9 March 1940.

Calosso's character and academic references

Actually, Calosso succeeded in attracting quite a collation of reputed academics who attested to his credentials. These were submitted together with his applications, as hereby listed:

- Giuseppe Antonio Borgese, Professor University of Chicago;²⁴
- Alberto Cianca, Director *Ligue Italienne des droits de l'homme*, Paris;
- Angelo Crespi, Professor *Birkbeck College University of London*;
- Benedetto Croce, *Accademico del Regno'Italia*;
- Guglielmo Ferrero, Professor *University of Genève*;
- Gaetano Salvemini, Professor *Harvard University*;
- Carlo Sforza, formerly Minister for Foreign Affairs;
- Carlo Tresca, Director *Il Martello* of New York;
- Lionello Venturi, Professor *John Hopkins University*.

In case of Salvemini, Calosso added in own handwriting in pencil: 'Gaetano Salvemini ex professor University of Florence is a historian very well known in England and everywhere. He is now professor at the Harvard University: but he never used his title "profs" because he is against any title'. After the closing date of the applications, he provided two further testimonials, namely:

- Marion Cave Rosselli, widow of Professor Carlo Rosselli;
- Silvio Trentin, formerly professor of various universities in Italy.

Trentin had a brief stint in parliament with Giovanni Amendola's *Alleanza Democratica*. Not re-elected he had returned to university teaching. In 1925 he immigrated to France so as to be able to combat fascism freely. He owned a book shop in Toulouse, which became a point of reference for antifascists in France.

With the exception of Benedetto Croce, all the above academics were émigrés who had fled from Italy to practice their respective professions, ideals and, in case of Jews, their religion. *Il professore* sought to obtain the intellectual patronage of the respected Neapolitan philosopher, Benedetto Croce. By this time he was becoming a bit weary of the image of the eternal *Umberto errante* - the wandering Umberto (*Ramingo*). Paradoxically, with the advent of war imminent, he was about to start a series of wanderings by hopping from one country to another, not exactly according to his own design. To reinforce his intellectual bandwagon, he asked Croce for help by writing a rather long letter dated 9 April 1940 to his address in 12 Via Trinitá Maggiore in Naples. Since Croce did not receive the letter before the censors' scrutiny and the transcribing of the hand-written letter, he did not have the time to answer Calosso since, by that time, Mussolini had declared war. Nevertheless, Calosso presented the University the testimonial he valued so much from Croce dated 23 March 1933.

Calosso's letter to Croce resembled a confession. He was so vexed on how matters

²⁴ Giuseppe Antonio Borgese was the father of Elisabeth Mann Borgese, the founder of the International Ocean Institute with headquarters in Malta.

evolved that he was ready to dispense with the bonanza of an annual salary of five hundred pounds sterling he was receiving at St. Edward College to get only half as much as that from the University. In this letter, he lamented over the fact that he was detested by the Maltese clergy whom he called *fascio papisti*. He also claimed that the Imperial Government wanted him to get the job and felt intimidated by the Catholic clergy that formed a power base that could not be ignored. He was annoyed by the bad publicity he suffered in Malta because of his participation in the Spanish Civil War. Superstition reigned in many sectors of public life. Calosso also mentioned in his letter to Croce that lobbying clerics included sonnets invoking the Madonna to intercede on their behalf to secure a post in the University. In reality, no member of the clergy applied for the vacant post. He even stated, without disclosing details, that such an inconsequential practice was nothing compared to other ploys which were being carried out.

At the same time he was writing to Croce, he also wrote a letter to the Secretary of Archbishop Mauro Caruana²⁵ enclosing a copy of the testimonial secured from the Parish Priest of his place of origin, Belveglio – the same he made available to the Rector of the University of Malta.²⁶ He urged the Secretary, Canon Emanuel Galea, to ensure that the Archbishop took a quick look at the Belveglio tribute. Canon Galea, who throughout his life was known for brevity in his writing, while returning the document back to the sender, diplomatically assured Calosso that the Archbishop had noted the reference written by Don Giovanni Abbracchio.

The injury in Spain and the tough schedule at St. Edward College was tiring him out. Furthermore, he affirmed that exhaustion was the cause of the death of his predecessor, Giuseppe Donati. This claim was an exaggeration because Donati was already very sick prior to his arrival in Malta. In both cases, injury at war had a say in their fatigue. Calosso, wearing the hat of an educationist, pleaded for a push by asking the help of both God and Mammon. The Parish priest of the village in which Calosso was born and raised, Belveglio, was asked to send a testimonial to the Rector of the University and Don Giovanni Abbracchio gladly conformed.²⁷ Calosso was known for his generosity and modesty. He had donated a missal to the Church on the occasion of his marriage with Clelia Laiolo on 15 February 1927. He had also contributed for the restoration works to the parish church of his village dedicated to the Nativity of Our Lady (the same as that of the suburb of his adopted town in Malta, Senglea). He had contributed for the statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and for the steeple of his village Church. Don Abbracchio wrote to the Rector of the University: *Parroco e Parrochiani lieti e riconoscenti al loro compaesano, la chiamarono a far parte del comitato onorario*, (The Parish Priest and the Parishioners, pleased and grateful, asked him to form part of the honorary committee). The Committee consisted of village notables under the chairmanship of the *Podestà* Cavaliere Giuseppe Petazzi. His mother Giuseppina Damasio, who was a widow of Giuseppe, was among the members of the Committee. The *Arciprete* specified in this declaration that this good work was promoted by the evangelical spirit of Calosso

²⁵ Archbishop's Curia Archives, Floriana, Caruana Correspondence, Volume XXXVIII, 1940, Calosso, 4 April 1940.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Galea, 23 April 1940.

²⁷ Declaration by the parish priest of Belveglio dated 2 March 1940.

The fascist authorities in Rome hoped to add fuel to the fire by taunting the evangelical character of the *professore* to suit the tastes of the *fascio papisti* in Malta. In the circumstances, the OVRA²⁸ ensured that the military censor's office in Malta was updated about what Italian newspapers printed about Calosso.²⁹ The Censors Office through its deputy chief censor, R. Windgrave Tench, forwarded the paper cuttings to the Lieutenant-Governor with typical Colonial style parlance using minimum verbiage and just adding an understatement: 'It appears that the Italians [the Italian Government] are displeased with Mr. Umberto Calosso.' Mr. Tench added the appellation 'who is reputed to be *very* antifascist.'³⁰ This is what the British government exactly wanted in the University: an antifascist. The British authorities wanted a person who could influence a breed of traditionalist students, bordering on the reactionary, who equated culture with fascism, which was fast becoming a threat to British interests in the Mediterranean.

At St. Edward College, Calosso had succeeded to separate fascist fervour from Italian literature. In all fairness, he did not need to make a big effort as the majority of the students there belonged to the pro-British elite with no sympathy for fascist Italy. Some of the students' parents spoke Italian at home just as today some Maltese speak English to their children. These pupils were destined to become the pick of the British Army in the forthcoming war and the years that followed, earning a respectable place in business circles.

The titles and especially the translation of these newspaper cuttings were enough to show what was stored inside the articles: - *Un bel tipo di "educatore"*³¹ translated into 'A fine type of 'Educationalist'' or *la losca figura di un fuoruscito che tenta di ottenere una cattedra all'Università maltese*³² was translated into 'The stupid personality of a voluntary exile who seeks a Chair in the University of Malta.' The gist of the articles was directed to interest the clerical lobby circling around the University who felt somehow threatened with what, to them, appeared to be Calosso's sacrilegious extravagant behaviour.

Calosso had often been referred to as paradoxical. Though in most cases this was not meant as a compliment, he was indeed paradoxical. After all, being paradoxical is a characteristic of every valid intellectual. He was definitely consistent in his antifascism from day one, *antifascista di prima ora*, and never compromised with this principle. In Malta, he was not really active in any antifascist agitation. His adopted country was in some respects as intolerant as his fascist motherland. So he kept a low profile. At one time, his conduct in Malta attracted the criticism of his mentor Carlo Rosselli. While keeping a low profile in Malta, he was actively serving as a link with an Italian antifascist organization in the spread of the clandestine press.³³ He was very much pragmatic. Calosso taught in an English Catholic school. Its headmaster was an exemplary but progressive

²⁸ *Organizzazione per la Vigilanza e la Repressione dell'Antifascismo* (OVRA); namely 'Organization for Vigilance and Repression of Antifascism' was the secret police of the Kingdom of Italy founded in 1927 under Benito Mussolini.

²⁹ *L'Eco della stampa*, was an agency based in Milan that provided newspaper cuttings on current topics diverted to the Censors Office in Malta attempting to act as *agent provocateurs*.

³⁰ NAM, LGO, 312/1940, Censors Office letter 29 March 1940.

³¹ *L'Unione*, Tunis, 9 March 1940.

³² *L'Italiano*, Torino, 7 March 1940.

³³ Centro Studi Piero Gobetti, Fondo Umberto Calosso, Busta UA1, CV in Italiano 1949-51.

priest who refused to wear the cassock when ordered to do so by the Archbishop. Calosso was very proud of his Italian culture but was also very keen on English literature. The paper cuttings exhibited tended to show his *curriculum vitae* in a rather bad light. While teaching in Italy, he had opined to his pupils that they ought to study more what the bible had to say, a notion interpreted as offensive and almost beckoning Protestantism. One of the persons sitting in the University Council was the biblical scholar who translated the bible into Maltese, Professor Pietru Pawl Saydon, Professor of Holy Scripture and Hebrew since 1931. What Calosso was saying about the bible was no different from what Saydon taught throughout his life. The fascist propaganda machinery hoped to win its audience with a false notion, apart from the fact that they were the least qualified to talk on religion.

The *Colloqui col Manzoni* was Calosso's visiting card. He gave a copy to various colleagues and contacts including Carmelo Mifsud Bonnici and Dominic Mintoff. The copy he gave to Professor Owen J. Fogarty has survived with this dedication: 'Of course to the old friend, to the professor of English, and to the independent character, but *not* to a possible examiner which is a thing my independent character and exile's vocation will not interfere with.'³⁴ At every opportunity, he always underlined his 'independent character'.

Another benefactor of Calosso's intellectual generosity was J.A.C. Cruikshank, Assistant Secretary at the Lieutenant-Governor's Office (also Clerk to the Council of Government). He gave him a copy of this book with a lengthy four page handwritten memorandum dated 2 April, 1940, which sounded more like an epistle than a memorandum. Calosso badly wanted the job at the University. He was exhausted with the time-table of St. Edward College which left him very little free time. He reacted to the bad publicity nurtured in Italy especially in the *Giornale di Politica e letteratura*, which he described as 'the official organ of the "irredentism" for Malta.' He felt he was being deceived by the British authorities who did not keep their promises. It seemed that fate dictated so until his return to Italy after the overthrow of Mussolini, and even after as will be pointed out *infra*.

Unlike his predecessor Giuseppe Donati, Calosso did not consider himself an exile because he had come to Malta voluntarily. Even the *l'Unione* of Tunisi, which was quoting the Roman daily *Tevere* as a source, agreed with his assertion. All of a sudden, he had made himself an exile and a victim of the regime at the same time. Until he became a British subject, he retained his Italian citizenship. Irrespective of whether he was entitled to the appellation of 'exile' or not, he did not possess an ordinary passport. It entitled him to travel Italy with a validity of only six months and was regularly renewed at the Italian consulate in Malta. Calosso wrote:

As you know, the Italian Consul in Malta after one year I was here wrote to me an official letter by which I was kept in my position in Italy as an exceptional qualification for my goodness, and I am still, theoretically, an Italian teacher. The idea of the Consul was to suggest to me to go for my holidays to Italy, a very delicate idea, is it not! I have this letter which was communicated to Mr. Edward Mifsud at the time.³⁵

³⁴ Calosso gave a copy of *Colloqui col Manzoni* to Professor Fogarty with the above-mentioned citation.

³⁵ NAM, LGO 192/1940, Cruikshank.

In any event, Calosso did not avail himself of the generosity offered by the Italian Consul in Malta. The passport issued by the Consulate had its limitations but a fake passport issued by the British authorities to travel to Europe satisfied Calosso's needs. Having been an antifascist throughout his adult life did not prevent him from retaining the military grade earned during the First World War. However, Italian bureaucracy discovered this fact and took care to remove him from the Army Officer Lists, but only after he obtained British citizenship³⁶

The testimonials attached with the application for the professorship were eventually returned to the Calosso. Calosso was hounding the authorities wherever he went after leaving Malta. As already noted *supra*, the call for filling the vacancy had stipulated the provision of testimonials. In addition, it was specified that other material – like copies of literary works produced – were to be made available. All the participants in the contest treated the material delivered to substantiate their application as valuable because they insisted on it being returned when it was made known that the post would not be filled. Specific requests were made by the applicants themselves for the return of these testimonials. Even Professor Giulio Cortis, who was interned at Fort San Salvatore, wrote to the Rector to have his records returned.

Amongst the testimonials accompanying his application for the professorship, Calosso sought and obtained one from Silvio Trentin, father of the post-war secretary of the more important trade union, CGIL, the late Bruno. Trentin knew both Giuseppe Donati and Umberto Calosso and was willing to give a helping hand to his friend. In his testimonial addressed to the Rector, he stated:

Endowed with a sense of observation and an extremely keen critical spirit, Mr. Calosso has demonstrated many a time in the area of literary criticism, where his culture is resolutely flawless, to be of astonishingly sound judgment.³⁷

The testimonial by Carlo Rosselli's widow,³⁸ Marion Cave arrived a few weeks before the declaration of war. She wrote:

My husband knew him for a long time, and myself also, and we both appreciated his brilliant literary qualities as well as his absolute trustworthiness as a friend. As an Englishwoman, I particularly appreciated his feeling of admiration and esteem for my country.³⁹

The respect between Mrs. Rosselli and Calosso was mutual. She was already sick when she wrote this letter. On her death, Calosso commemorated her movingly in the Chamber of

³⁶ Archivio Centrale Statale [ACS], Casellario Politico Centrale [CPC] Busta 958, Lettera riservatissima della Questura di Asti al Ministero dell'Interno, Direzione della Pubblica, 4 October 1940.

³⁷ NAM, LGO, 192/1940 Testimonial by Silvio Trentin: 14 April 1940 from Toulouse *Doué d'un esprit d'observation et d'esprit critique extrêmement aigu, M. Calosso a fait preuve en maintes occasions dans le domaine de la critique littéraire où sa culture est, on peut dire, sans lacunes, d'une étonnante sûreté de jugement.* (Translated by Elena Peresso)

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Testimonial by Marion Cave Roselli, 5 May 1940 from Nantes.

³⁹ *Atti Parlamentari, Camera dei Deputati*, 22 October 1949, 12679-80.

Deputies on 22 October 1949. *L'onorevele* was in a class of his own in parliamentary oratory, a style which was unique, not easily imitable. He said that Marion 'came to Florence young, fed up of the monotony in England. She wanted to come in a country where something new is always happening: wars, revolutions, muddles ...' Fellow parliamentarians laughed when he continued his commemoration. He added that this courageous English lady came to Italy and married a bold Italian man, Carlo Rosselli. They fell in love and got married. He was sent to the camp in Lipari where he escaped. It was she who wandered in Lipari, Rome, Paris, Marseilles, and Tunis, who embarked on the romantic evasion. After the escape, she was arrested, when pregnant, by the *heroic* fascist Government. She suffered from a heart condition even then, but still she was always bold.⁴⁰ The Acting Speaker, Giuseppe Chiostergi, a republican deputy from the Marche and a freemason like Calosso, was thrilled with the unconventional necrology expressed by the friend of the Rosselli couple.

The selection process of the submissions for the University professorship was very slow. Even slower was the return of the documents submitted. John J. Cremona had his documents returned on 3 January, 1941. Professor Fabriani had to leave Malta as soon as hostilities were announced, so he had to wait till well after the end of the war to come and collect his documents personally in 1949.

War makes the post redundant

The Rector of the University, Professor Robert V. Galea, noted that once 'Professor Laurenza could not return to the University on account of ill-health, the General Council had to recommend that Professor Cortis be asked to act as Professor of Italian literature until the appointee will be in a position to take up his duties.'⁴¹ Professor Cortis, who lectured in Political Economy at the University, was recommended for the transitory assignment on the basis that he had not expressed openly his intention to apply for the post.⁴² However, he ultimately did apply for the post but was soon dismissed from Acting Professor on being interned as the beginning of hostilities was expected.⁴³ At the outbreak of war with Italy, the evaluation process of the applications was suspended and the University Council decided against appointing a full-time professor. It seemed absurd that, while Italy was blanketing the Maltese landscape with bombs, the University had to hassle with providing the students with tuition of Italian literature. Yet it did so, albeit as a temporary measure, to enable those who had completed the first year of the two-year course of Italian literature. Though not an applicant, the post was offered to Professor Monsignor Luigi Catania – which would satisfy *Jedd u Haqq!* However, the *monsignore* declined.⁴⁴ Therefore, the Rector offered the temporary post to Seraphim Vella. While some of the members of the University Council interrupted their activity because of the war, bureaucracy still proceeded with its routine and its normal office hours. So the Secretary to

⁴⁰ *Atti Parlamentari*, *ibid.*

⁴¹ NAM, LGO, 192/1940, Minute, Rector: 30 January 1940.

⁴² *Ibid.*, Minute, Secretary to Government, 7 February 1940.

⁴³ *The Malta Government Gazette*, 21 May 1940.

⁴⁴ University of Malta Archives [UMA], Minutes, 14 November 1940.

Government still expected ratification from the University Council. Vella commenced his duties with effect from the 1 January 1941.

With the declaration of war looming, Calosso was not of any use for British interests in Malta. He literally fled Malta a few days before the war started in Malta bound for Tunisia. With the fall of France his position in Tunisia was also untenable. He eventually flew to Portugal, worked in Egypt for some time until he settled in England for the rest of the war in Italy. Finally, he returned to his country as a free man in 1944. He was elected in parliament but did not make it for the second term. He died in Rome on 9 August 1959.

Archives:

Primary Sources:

Archivio Centrale, Statale, Roma.

Archivio Storico Diplomatico Esteri, Roma.

Archbishop's Curia Archives, Malta.

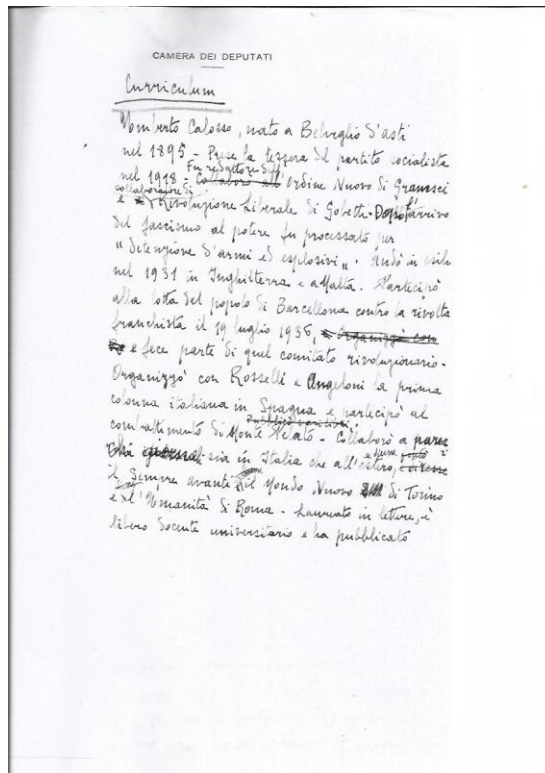
Camera dei Deputati, Roma.

Centro Studi Piero Gobetti, Torino.

National Archives Malta.

University of Malta Archives

Figure 2: Curriculum Vitae – Umberto Calosso's own handwriting
(acknowledgements: Centro Studi Piero Gobetti, Torino).



**Figure 3: Testimonial by Prof Giuseppe Antonio Borgese,
University of Chicago**
(acknowledgements: *Centro Studi Pietro Gobetti, Torino*)

The University of Chicago
Department of Romance Languages and
Literatures
April 5, 1960

Consiglio Universitario
Malta, British Empire.

Gentlemen:

Mr. Umberto Calosso who has applied for a teaching position in the University of Malta is wellknown to me. I think he is an excellent scholar, a fine writer and a perfect gentleman. His knowledge of Italian literature and history is supplemented with an excellent learning in English language and literature and with a fine feeling for all the Anglo-Italian ties that make of Malta such a significant place in the world today.

Sincerely yours,
G.A. Borgese
G.A. Borgese
Professor of Italian Literature.