

THE POST-WAR TREASON TRIALS

Laurence Mizzi, the biographer of the war-time Maltese pro-Italian 'spy' Carmelo Borg Pisani - an artist and dreamy idealist and irredentist - has now documented for us the basic goings-on in the so-called 'treason' or 'sedition' trials of 1946-47. His book is entitled: Mixlija b'Kongura u Tradiment [P.E.G., 1996] and contains 223 pages of text, including a name index.

It is important for this story to be told because of the many and varied ramifications of 'italianita' we have had over the decades. In war-time, sympathies and sentiments take a different turn, not less because they risk being caught up in an almost uncontrollable web of emotions, militarism, survival and intrigue. No sooner had Italy surrendered and the Allies' advance was assured that senior members of the Malta police force - Axisa, de Gray, Calleja - were despatched to Italy by British Field Security to ferret out Maltese nationals who had supported the Italian war effort. They netted in all seventeen Maltese who were in Italy during the war, and dragged them to Malta for trial on grounds of disloyalty to the British king. In the case of eleven of them, the Maltese prosecuting officers, who served the Crown, asked for death by hanging. In four jury trials, however, all the accused were acquitted, many of them returning to Italy.

The biggest catch of all would have been Dr Carlo Mallia, a former Nationalist minister who like some other Nationalists suffered at British hands in the mid-1930s; he went to Italy and became a confirmed Fascist official, who pressured the Maltese in Italy to hand in their British passports in return for a monthly allowance and, more importantly, being saved from the POW 'concentration' camps. However, Mallia escaped the net - he stayed in Italy and was never tried.

Practically all those who were Italian scholarship holders in universities would automatically have been regarded as members of the GUF [Gioventu' Universitaria Fascista] while those Maltese who had traded in their passports rather than go to jail out of loyalty to the British king, ended up members of the CAM [Comitato d'Azione Maltese], led by a Foreign Ministry official, Prof. Umberto Biscottini, aided however by Dr Mallia and some others. Some Maltese, like Dr Carlo Liberto and Dr Camillo Bonanno, had taken Italian citizenship before the war, so they were free to serve the regime as they liked, and as they did, but they could not be arrested for it. A few

were genuinely pro-Fascist, but most weren't that keen on Fascism, and of those arrested some would have been sceptical if not opposed to it. One or two even rallied 'underground' to the allied cause, especially it seems Giuseppe Gonzi, who was in Rome on behalf of the Banco di Roma, which had a branch in Valletta before the war. Another, Willie Apap, was one of Malta's leading painters and did not shirk from taking on commissions or exhibiting his paintings at the quarters of the Regia Deputazione per la Storia di Malta at the Palazzo Antici Mattei, the same building where the CAM was lodged – and where now the Bibliotheca di Storia Moderna e Contemporanea is housed, in Via Michelangelo Caetani.

As the Maltese 'collaborators' knew English they were useful as interpreters and translators, even as broadcasters, but several were sent on field training and some saw battle. None were particularly enthusiastic to fight for Italy, or for anyone: their enthusiasm to serve the Fascist cause may be evenly counter-weighted by their reluctance to suffer for the British one. To a large extent, most of them were caught between two stools. Some had not been born in Malta and had direct familial Italian connections – for example Edoardo Frendo and Manoel Mizzi - so of course they could hardly have supported the British. But there was a fine line to be drawn between sympathy and forced support, or even membership of some action committee, or attending a Sette Giugno commemoration, or the unveiling of a bust to the PN founding father Dr Fortunato Mizzi [d.1905] at the Pincio Gardens in Rome, or an odd, touched-up article for the Rome Malta newspaper, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the necessary proofs at law of outright sedition or treason: that is the act of willingly wanting and actively seeking to overthrow the government of His Britannic Majesty. [As it happened, several of the accused got their Maltese-British passports back once the war came to an end.]

And least of all, the Maltese jurors must have felt, was there much scope in splitting hairs about all that in the wake of a devastating war, which had by then not even landed Malta with a promised self-government constitution, while discharges from the dockyard by the thousand were on the way.

Mizzi's text is based almost exclusively on reports of the trials in the Progress Press newspaper *Il-Berqa*. His book is well illustrated, including some telling Willie Apap sketches, drawn even in the court-room. The war years and the immediate post-war need a proper academic job done on

them from archival and even oral sources, in Rome as much as in Valletta, so that a more comprehensive account can result, but Mizzi's book is certainly a good starting-point for that.

One of the greatest and perhaps saddest ironies in this story is that it was none other than Carmeio Borg Pisani himself who, once under British hands, had squealed much of the information on which British Intelligence later acted to try and round up his fellow 'traitors'. He paid for his deeds with his life, but those whose names he had revealed were acquitted.

As Albert Ganado notes in an introduction to Mizzi's book, whereas Maltese nationalists suspected of disloyalty were deported without charge and risked their lives and their health in the bomb-infested seas, those who actually aided and abetted the enemy somehow or other in Italy itself ended up scot free.

The main prosecutors were Dr [later Sir] Anthony Mamo, who became Malta's first President and Head of State in 1974; and Dr William Buhagiar, the son of Dr Francesco Buhagiar, who had served as Malta's second [Nationalist] prime minister in the early twenties. Buhagiar later joined the Colonial Service as a Judge and went on to become President of the Courts in Emperor Selaisse's Ethiopia, before retiring in Geneva where he died.

Henry Frendo