
VASSALLI'S STEP – FATHER IN PRISON

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With very minor exceptions, Vassalli's early years are still shrouded in mystery. This is most unfortunate since the experiences of adolescence bear very much on one's character later on in life. Fortunately, quite unexpectedly, I explored such a piece of valuable information. By now I have come to expect such unlooked-for discoveries. The most desirable findings are not necessarily those which are unearthed consciously. It is the least expected documents that sometimes satisfy your intellectual curiosity most.

As far as I am concerned, knowledge about Vassalli has always cropped up that way. My first published article about him was back in 1983 when I described his winning a prize for Arabic at the school which the *Propaganda Fide* had in Malta.¹ Such a valuable piece of information I had kept in my possession for seven years. I never imagined that the young man whom the manuscript described as *Michel'Angelo* was none other than the worthy *Michel'Antonio*.² It was only after the publication of Mgr C. Sant's article about Vassalli's stay in Rome³ that I drew my conclusions. My point is that in most cases it is wrong to taunt the historian with implications that had never entered his head. The writer of history does not, generally speaking, delve into the archives with *a priori* conclusions, or even with a theme in mind. It is most unscholarly, not to say defamatory, then, to ascribe to him ulterior motives and to claim that he is selective in his choice of material. To use a metaphor, the conductor does not execute his own work, but the music written by others.

On Sunday, 28 July 1776 between 9/10 a.m. were leased by auction at the civil chancery of the Inquisition, Vittoriosa, the plots of land *Gran Fontana* (Għajn il-kbira) and *I-Għars*, beneath Boschetto gardens. The highest bidder was Gaetano Mifsud. Internal evidence proves that

1. F. Ciappara, 'M.A. Vassalli wins a prize for Arabic', *The Sunday Times*, 19 June 1983, 12.
2. Archives of the Inquisition Malta, Registrum Actorum Civilium, C7 (1782-1787), ff. 174r-v. See also *AIM, Corrispondenza* 96, f. 399v.
3. C. Sant, 'M. A. Vassalli's Sojourn in Rome (1788-1790)', *The Sunday Times*, 3 April 1983, 9.

he must have been Vassalli's step-father. Not only was he of Zebbug, and the son of Giuseppe;⁴ but he is also mentioned in conjunction with his wife, Catarina⁵ Vassalli's mother, whom he had married on 19 June 1770.⁶ He offered the substantial sum of 901 scudi annually. The rent was to be paid in three equal instalments, while the lease was for eight continuous years. The deed was signed in the presence of the Tribunal's assessor, Fr Pietro Francesco Gristi, and the two witnesses Fr Vincenzo Abela and Fr Ignazio Abela. The sureties presented by Gaetano were Francesco Busuttill of Valletta and Angelo Fenech of Zebbug.⁷

No sooner, however, had Gaetano become a *gabellotto*, or tenant farmer, of the Inquisition, than he started being pestered by his creditors. He failed to pay the rents,⁸ the fodder,⁹ the *decime* or tithes,¹⁰ the price of a cow,¹¹ the manure, and the *mischiato*.¹² He did not even present the four capons he had to donate to the Inquisitor annually.¹³ On 30 January 1778 he had a bull confiscated by the captain of the Holy Office.¹⁴ On 20 August of the same year another mandate was issued against him. Four oxen of Susa, two calves, a roomful of hay, all the fruit on the trees, the cotton not yet collected, three *salme* of *mischiato*, the manure, and all the farming implements were to be sold by auction.¹⁵

On 26 June 1779 Gaetano presented a petition to the Inquisitor, Mgr Zondadari. He reminded him that three years previously he had taken the lease of *Għajn il-kbira* for hundreds of scudi. This proved to be such a financial burden that he had become debtor of about 300 scudi, and found himself daily plagued by creditors. At the moment he could pay none of his debts, chiefly because his lands were still under cotton cultivation. He, thus, humbly asked Mgr Zondadari to give him a respite till the following November by which time he would have gathered his products. Unfortunately, we do not

4. AIM, RAC, C6 (1776-1782), f. 39r.

5. AIM, A(itti) C(ivili) 551 (i), ff. 119r-v. AIM, AC 553 (i), ff. 189r, 190r, 192r.

6. Parish Archives, Zebbug. Liber Matrimoniorum IV (1762-1814), 103-4.

7. AIM, RAC, C6, ff. 38r-42v.

8. See for instance, AIM, AC 553 (i), ff. 223r-229v; AIM, AC 556 (i), ff. 9r-14v; AIM, RAC, C6, f. 247r; N(otarial) A(rchives) V(alletta), R 138/1, ff. 178r-180v.

9. AIM, RAC, C6, ff. 175 r-v.

10. AIM, AC 556 (i), ff. 98r-103v.

11. AIM, AC 554, ff. 4r-12v.

12. AIM, AC 551 (i), ff. 198r-207v.

13. AIM, AC 553 (i), ff. 217r-218v.

14. AIM, RAC, C6, f. 148r.

15. Ibid., ff. 179v-180r.

know what sequel there was to this petition, except that the creditors were to be notified, *intimetur creditoribus*.¹⁶

The following month, July, Gaetano was made to pay 75 scudi for a cow;¹⁷ while at the end of the year it was the turn of Fr Pietro Zammit to ask for 55 scudi.¹⁸ Another creditor was Antonio Camilleri who had already demanded on 8 August 1778 32 scudi for fodder.¹⁹ In September 1779 Antonio claimed that he was still owed 21 scudi; but, as Gaetano denied the charge, he produced three witnesses who were examined at the instance of the Tribunal's chancellor by notary Filippo Amato of *Città Rohan*. They were not sure what sum Gaetano still had to pay, but they knew for certain that he had truly bought the *forraina*. They had seen his mare and young she-mule eating the said fodder, which they had even seen the accused transporting to the *Gran Fontana*. Another witness was Pasquale Galea, the captain of the Holy Office, who made his deposition in front of notary Paolo Vittorio Giammalva on 1 March 1780. He testified that Mifsud had paid another 7 scudi of the remaining 21 scudi; but, though he had succeeded in earning a respite, he continued to procrastinate from week to week.²⁰

Eventually Gaetano ended up in the prisons of the Inquisition. On 23 February 1779 he had been given two days' time in which to pay 150 scudi to Francesco Borg;²¹ by February of the next year he still had not paid his debt. On the 16th of the same month at the instance of Francesco he was incarcerated.²² On 10 March 1780 Gaetano asked the Inquisitor to let him stay outside the prison cell, though in the limits of the Sacred Palace.²³ He was suffering, as the prison doctor, Angelo Pace, testified, from hydrocele in the right testicle – *ernia nel testicolo destro*.²⁴ Francesco Borg was notified of this petition, and had to answer within twenty-four hours if he would consent to Gaetano's request. Since Borg replied in the affirmative, Gaetano had his wish granted on 13 March 1780.²⁵ Then, on 20

16. AIM, AC 556 (i), ff. 35r-36v.

17. AIM, AC 554, ff. 4r-12v. See also NAV, R5/23, ff. 508r-v.

18. AIM, RAC, C6, f. 281v. NAV, R328/36, f. 407r.

19. AIM, RAC, C6, ff. 175r-v.

20. AIM, AC 555 (i), ff. 404r-417v.

21. AIM, AC 561, f. 77r.

22. AIM, AC 555 (i), f. 215v.

23. *Ibid.*, f. 211r.

24. *Ibid.*, f. 212r. I would like to express my thanks to Prof. Dr R. Ellul Micallef for translating this term to me.

25. *Ibid.*, f. 211v: *Praesentata fuit, et est praesens supplicatio per Gaetanum Mifsud*

Cromo e Rom. Mongig.

Gaetano Mifsud uomo ser. ed Ore di U. E. Roma
riv. espone, che da venticinque giorni
a questa parte ritrovarsi carcerato ne i
Carceri di U. E. Roma ad Ista di Francesco
Borg per il pagamento di 150. in circa €
perche G. e Rom. fig. il povero supplicante
ritrovarsi indiposto con discapito della
sua salute come costa dall'attestato del
Medico Ordinario qui consegnato. (V. p. 110)
epi Ore mostrato a Dieci di U. E. Roma
similne sup. degnarsi aggraziarlo con lasciar
lo ne i limiti di questo suo sacro regio
per recuperare la sua salute e della
grazia

Intimidat Carta. Re. in in Palatio nro Apu. hac die 10. Martii
a indadani 44. b. d. f. l. g.

211

ad. d. n. ut, et est p. applicatio per carcerand.

April 1780 the *Gran Fontana* and *l-Għars* were leased for the next six years to Michele Gambin of Siggiewi.²⁶

This incident is of paramount importance to the understanding of Vassalli, who at that time was a lad of sixteen. Firstly, it shows that his connection with the Inquisition began much earlier than 1785 when he was a student at the School of Arabic. Secondly, his step-father's imprisonment must have left a deep scar on him. This psychological hardship drove him on irresistibly to the role of the revolutionary he was to become later on. To describe Vassalli as a scholar living in an ivory tower is only a figment of the imagination. He was a revolutionary at heart, who dreamed of turning medieval Malta upside down. The orphan whose step-father knew what the dungeons of the Holy Office meant, and who even experienced the stigma that this entailed, avenged himself on a retrograde society.

It is only through such research that a good biography of Vassalli must ultimately and painstakingly emerge. Facile assumptions must be disregarded not only because – to repeat J.S. Mill – the infidels demand your proofs, but also, and largely, because statements call for elaboration.

et recept. notif, de ea Francisco borg cui etiam fuit praefixus terminus horarum viginti quatuor ad respondendum, ut constitit per Aloysium Damato cursorem. Die II Martii. Attenta partis contumacia fiat ut petitur. Datum ex Palatio Apostolico. Die XIII Martii 1780. A. Zondadari. Thanks are due to Canon John Azzopardi for helping me transcribe this Latin text. It may be noted that in a previous article Canon Azzopardi had produced a document describing the selling of two heifers by Gaetano to his step-son, Michel'Antonio. See '5 Dokumenti godda fuq Mikiel Anton Vassalli', *Sagħtar* 62, March 1979, 20.

26. *AIM, RAC, C6, ff. 290r-294v.*

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