

I. “KLIEM BEJN TNEJN”

KITBA MHIX MAGĦRUFATA TA’ M.A. VASSALLI

F’dan l-istudju behsiebni nuri li d-djalogu “Kliem bejn Tnejn” li jinqara fil-ktejjeb *Alfabeto Maltese*, ta’ tmien paġni, li la jgħib data, la minn fejn hareġ u lanqas isem l-awtur, aktarx—biex ma nġhidx żgur—li nkiteb minn Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764—1829).

Qabel xejn insemmi xi tagħrif ġenerali li nġhata minn haddiehor dwar dan il-ktejjeb. *Fil-Labour Opinion* tas-16 ta’ Ottubru, 1924 Ġużè Gatt qal li l-*Alfabeto Maltese* hareġ fis-sena 1805, u li kien ta’ Ġużè Martin Canolo. Izda ġimgha wara, fil-harga tat-23 ta’ Ottubru, Gatt reġa’ lura milli kien qal u kiteb hekk: “Dal-ktieb li semmejna u li għedna li hu ta’ Canolo għednieh għax hekk sibna f’lista ta’ kotba li qieghda għandna, u li dil-lista kienet tappartjeni lill-mejjet orjentalista Ant. Emm. Caruana, għax mill-bqija dal-ktieb li għandna la jgħib min hu l-awtur tiegħu, lanqas is-sena li ġie stampat fiha...”

Eqreb lejna, il-Professur Ġużè Aquilina fl-1961, u warajh Carmel G. Bonavia fl-1979, fissru l-fehma li, mill-karta li fuqha huwa stampat u mis-simboli proposti għall-alfabett Malti, wiehed jista’ jwassal lura dal-ktejjeb sa żmien Vassalli¹.

Mingħajr ma nwarrab jew inčekken is-siwi tas-simboli ta’ l-alfabett, nixtieq nuri li l-aqwa argument biex wiehed jipprova li Vassalli kien l-awtur jinsab fid-“Dialogo tra il Maestro e il Discepolo” li jinqara fil-pubblikazzjoni li qed insemmu (pp. 5—8). Għaldaqshekk jaqbel li ngħib mill-ewwel id-djalogu, bl-isem Malti kif mogħti fil-ktejjeb. Għall-heffa ta’ min jaqra, fit-traskrizzjoni ġibna l-forma grammatikali korretta tal-kliem tad-djalogu, miktub bl-ortografija ta’ l-Għaqda. Biss, fejn kien hemm xi djalettizmi bl-ittra vokali *e* flok *i*, bħal *ent*, *eżda*, *netghallem*, *essa*, hallejt il-forma djalettali kif tinqara fl-original. L-ittra kapitali D tfisser “Discepolo”, u l-ittra M “Maestro”.

Kliem bejn Tnejn: L-Imghallem u t-Talamid

- D. *Mghallem sidi, nixtieq netghallem elsien el-Malti.*
- M. *Jien irrid nġhallmek bel-qalb kollha, u l-aktar għaliex donnok bdejt ettemtem xi kelma bel-Malti kif nara.*
- D. *Għandi tas-sewwa xi ftiit tal-bidu, u għaldaqshekk jien irrid netghallem tajjeb, u nġhaddi 'l quddiem.*
- M. *La tnehx ħsieb ta’ xejn għaliex bet-triq li nagħtik, u mill-bedu li nibdielek u nġhallmek, ent titghallem tajjeb u fi ftiit taż-żmien, nġhidlek ukoll ta’ tabelhaqq li meta ent tkun tghallemt elsien el-Malti ma tkunx għamelt ġid ftiit u jkollok għajjnuna mhix ċkejna 'ma wisq hi kbira, u għandek tagħraf ukoll li lsien el-Malti hu mahruġ minn wisq elsna tax-Xerq li jiġifieri mnejn tohroġ ex-xemx. U wara wkoll bosta taħwid ta’ elsna hu baqa’ hedan el-lsien dejjem mahfud sal-lum fejn tidher l-eżjed haġa sabiħa u qadima, li jisthoqqilha et-tiftixa kollha ta’ l-għorrief, biex minnhom ikun imnoqqi mill-ġhelt, u mahdum.*

- D. *Ezda ma nifhemx kif hu hekkda għażiż dan el-lsien kellu jibqa' hekk imħolli minn kolhadd, mingħajr l-ebda ktieb, u minn hadd ma kien miktub u mfettex.*
- M. *Għandek tagħraf ukoll li mhewx koll haġa li tara mħollija, u mingħajr miftuxa għandek essibha dejjem kerha, u ma tiswiex, u lanqas koll haġa li thenni u tfarraq lel bosta wħud hija tkun l-aktar sabiħa; għalhekk elsien el-Malti jekk ma kienx imfittex, u miġjub minn kolhadd, mhewx għaliex ma kienx dejjem sabiħ, u ta' min iġibu tajjeb, ezda għaliex kien imħolli, u ma kienx qatt maħsub el-ġid li kien jiġi lel hedawn el-gzejjer ta' Malta, belli jiktbu, u jaqraw el-lsien tagħhom, u belli jitkellmuh tajjeb: 'ma essa donnhom raw ta' tabelhaqq u bed-dieher kemm hu sewwa, u tajjeb li hu jarga' jitrafa' minn ġdid; u għalhekk ahna essa bdejna mill-aħjar li nistghu nifmu, ngħadduhulkom 'el quddiem bħalma taraw.*
- D. *Mgħallem qalbi, u ruhi, nitolbok bel-hniena li tghidli kif behsiebek tagħmel biex tghaddi 'el quddiem el-lsien tal-Maltin.*
- M. *Fl-ewwel meken tarax f'idejk hedan l-alifelbe li jibda jagħtik l-ewwel bidu ta' lsienna, urajh ikollkom minn l-aktar fis ed-diqduq Malti, li fi ftiit kliem jagħtikom et-tagħlim kollu li jinħtieġ, u jurikom el-qies u t-taqsim li bih għandkom titkellmu tajjeb u tiktbu aħjar; u mbagħhad nagħtukom el-qamus li hu ktieb tal-kliem el-Malti li jkun maqsum f'żewġ kotba: l-ewwel wieħed ikun bet-Taljan w el-Malti, u t-tieni jkun bel-Malti u t-Taljan, u wara hedan kollu meta naraw li n-nies tibda tithenna b'dan el-lsien tagħna fuq et-tagħlim li nkunu tajna ma nibqgħux ma nagħtukomx ukoll xi ktieb jew bet-Taljan w el-Malti, jew bel-Latin w el-Malti.*
- D. *Niżżikħajr wisq, mgħallem, u ma hemmx għaliex toqgħod tghidli xejn ezjed; jien irrid netgħallem f'hedan el-waqt jekk jogħġbok, mgħallem; u wara li jien inkun tghallemt inwiegħdek li għandi ngħinek f'dan ex-xogħol ta' lsien el-Malti li ent għedtli.*
- M. *Jekk ent tghidli li 'l quddiem tieqaf miegħi f'dan ix-xogħol ta' hedan el-lsien, jien ngħallmek b'qalb l-eżjed kbira, u ngħallmek hedak kollu li jinħtieġ biex tfittex tasal bel-ġiri fed-daqs li tista' tkun tghinni, u mhewx biss dan, 'ma għaliex meta tkun tagħrfu dan el-lsien ikollok dawl kbir biex tista' tighallem el-lsien el-Lhudi, es-Sirjani, w el-Għarbi.*
- D. *Mgħallem, smajthom dejjem jghidu li fel-lsien el-Malti jinsabu wisq kelmiet bel-Lhudi, bes-Sirjani u bel-Għarbi, u wisq oħrajn huma mxejkin ma' l-ilsna ta' hedawn en-nies; essa nixtieq nagħraf minnek jekk biex inkun nagħraf el-Malti tajjeb għandix l-ewwel nidres fel-Lhudi, w es-Sirjani, u Għarbi?*
- M. *Xejn minn dan li għedt u jekk mhewx ukoll bel-maqlub; jien inharrgek fel-lsien el-Malti bet-tagħlim kollu ġdid u li ma bħalu, u ngħidlek bel-haqq li meta tkun hadt tajjeb hedana, ent ikollok ukoll aktar minn nofs et-triq għall-elsna el-kbar li ent semmejt. Għalhekk bħalma qiegħed tara mmur neqaflek kemm nista' fuq l-egħruq kollha tal-kliem mill-bidu tagħhom, u nfittex li ma tintelefx l-ebda kelma li għoddha nthalliet u ntsiet imħabba fet-tiġrija l-kerha li għamel minn bosta żmien s'assa el-lsien qadim tagħna. Ed-diqduq li jkollok wara ftiit taż-żmien iehor, w el-qamus tal-kliem el-Malti juruk bid-dieher dan kollu li għedtlek: dawn ikun*

fhom dak kollu li jinħtieg biex hedan el-lsien jarga' minn gdid, u jghaddi wkoll 'el quddiem. Dak imbagħad li jingħamel fel-werqa min-nies u minn ħbieb oħrajn tagħna jkun ukoll, bħalma niġhem, maħżuż u mfitteż minn kolħadd kif fel-blied hekk fer-ruħula, biex jiktbu bejniethom, u jaqraw el-ketba tagħhom; għalik ikun kollu bħal taħriġ u bħal tagħlim l-eżjed qawwi ta' hedan el-lsien hekkda sabiħ u qadim, li saħansitra mil-lum qagħad imħolli u mixħut għall-art mingħajr ma sata' qatt jifitteż.

Jekk wiehed jgħarbel sewwa l-fehmiet li hemm imfissra fid-djalogu "Kliem bejn Tnejn", malajr jintebaħ li huma, bejn wiehed u iehor, marbutin mat-twissijiet ta' M.A. Vassalli f'"Lill-Malti li qieghed jaqra" – stampati l-ewwel darba fl-*Alfabet Malti mfysser byl-Malti u byt-Talyan*² (Ruma, 1790, pp. 11–13) u wara kwazi kelma b'kelma fil-grammatika *Mylsen* (1791, pp. 235–236). Jintrabtu wkoll, f'sens generali, mal-fehmiet sbieħ fid-"Discorso Preliminare" tal-*Lexicon* ta' Vassalli (1796).

Fid-djalogu, l-Imghallem (i.e. Vassalli) jgħid li biex jgħaddi 'l quddiem il-Lsien Malti kien jeħtieg, qabel xejn, (a) alfabet, (b) grammatika, u (c) dizżjunarju. Imbagħad wara johorġu xi kotba jew bit-Taljan u l-Malti, jew bil-Latin u l-Malti. Tneħħi l-alfabet, iż-żewġ ħtiġiet l-oħra ssemmeż ukoll, bi kliem xort'oħra, fl-*Alfabet Malti* ta' l-1790, kif nistgħu naraw minn dawn is-siltiet:

Kliem bejn Tnejn

Fl-ewwel meken tarax f'idejk hedan l-alifelbe (i.e. alfabet) li jibda jagħtik l-ewwel bidu ta' lsienna, urajh ikollkom minn l-aktar fis ed-diqduq Malti (i.e. grammatika), li fi fiit kliem jagħtikom et-tagħlim kollu li jinħtieg, u jurikom il-qies u t-taqsim li bih għandkom titkellmu tajjeb u tiktbu aħjar; u mbagħad nagħtukom el-qamus (i.e. dizżjunarju) li hu ktieb tal-kliem el-Malti li jkun maqsum f'żewġ kotba: l-ewwel wiehed ikun bet-Taljan w el-Malti, u t-tieni jkun bel-Malti u t-Taljan, u wara hedan kollu meta naraw li n-nies tibda tithenna b'dan el-lsien tagħna fuq et-tagħlim li nkunu tajna ma nibqghux ma nagħtukomx ukoll xi ktieb jew bet-Taljan w el-Malti, jew bel-Latin w el-Malti.

(*Alfabeto Maltese, s.d., pp. 6–7*)

Lill-Malti li qieghed jaqra

...u wara li ktibtlek dan il-ktejjeb li f'idejk, u għamilt il-Grammatika tagħna mfissra bil-Latin, qieghed issa naħdem u ninseġ oħrajn għal-Latin, u għat-Taljan imfissrin bil-Malti kif jiġi minnu; u qieghed nagħmel ukoll il-ktieb tal-kliem, li jkun maqsum fi tliet kotba. L-ewwel wiehed ikun Malti, Latin u Taljan, it-tieni Latin u Malti, it-tielet Taljan u Malti. Mingħajr dawn il-kotba li jinħtiegu bħall-ħobż għal min irid jingħarref, u jgħaddi 'l quddiem, ma tista' tagħmel xejn...

(*Alfabet Malti, 1790, pp. 11–12*)

Ninnutaw li fid-djalogu hemm imfisser il-hsieb li l-alfabett “jibda jaghtik l-ewwel bidu ta’ lsienna”, waqt li f’“Lill-Malti li qiegħed jaqra” l-ewwel kelmiet huma: “Wara li inti tharriġt dan il-ftit fil-qari b’ilsienek, u wara li titharreg ftit iehor f’dawn il-kelmejn...” Għandna mela gradazzjoni fil-hsieb li tressaq u tqarreb sewwa ż-żewġ xoghlijiet. Izjed importanti hija l-bidla fil-hsieb tal-kittieb – dejjem, fil-fehma tagħna, awtur wieħed ta’ żewġ xoghlijiet żgħar li jgħibu isem jixxiebah – dwar id-dizzjunarju, imsejjah *qamus* fid-djalogu “Kliem bejn Tnejn”. Waqt li fl-1790 Vassalli kien diġà wasal għall-fehma illi d-dizzjunarju kellu jkun maqsum fi tliet kotba, i.e. Malti-Latin-Taljan, Latin-Malti u Taljan-Malti, hawnhekk naqraw il-hsieb oriġinali tiegħu illi l-ktieb tal-kliem kellu jkun maqsum f’żewġ kotba – Taljan-Malti u Malti-Taljan³.

Nosservaw żewġ elementi oħra li jinsabu sew fl-*Alfabeto Maltese* fejn jinqara d-djalogu kif ukoll fl-*Alfabet Malti* ta’ l-1790. Fit-tnejn hemm referenza għall-grammatika li kellha toħroġ fi żmien qasir, waqt li l-*Alfabeto Maltese* jagħlaq bi kliem jixbah hafna lil dak li bih jagħlaq il-*Mylsen*, kif jidher minn dawn is-siltiet:

Alfabeto Maltese (s.d.)

..urajh (i.e. alfabett) ikollkom minn l-aktar fis ed-diġduq (i.e. grammatika) *Malti...Ed-diġduq li jkollok wara ftit taż-żmien iehor...* (pp. 6–7)

...di ciò (i.e. il-bdil fil-hoss ta’ l-ittra **gh** f’nofs il-verb, eż. **blajt**, minn **bala**’) *si parlerà più a proposito nella grammatica...* (p. 4)

Fit-tmiem:

Tarf el-ktieb, u aktar u ngħaddu ’el quddiem ikun ferħ, hena u gid.

Alfabet Malti (1790)

“...*molti simili esempj...si potranno incontrare nella nostra Grammatica Maltese...* (p. 16)

...*tutte queste ragioni l’abbiamo espote nella nostra Grammatica Maltese, dalla quale abbiamo estratto questa breve Spiegazione Maltese e Italiana per render a tutti più agevole l’intelligenza.* (p. 24)

Mylsen (1791)

Fit-tmiem:

Tarf il-ktieb, u ’l Alla gieħ.

Din ix-xhieda interna tiswa biex twassal għall-konklużjoni illi ladarba ż-żewġ pubblikazzjonijiet anomini żgħar, i.e. *Alfabeto Maltese* (s.d.) u *Alfabet Malti...* (1790) it-tnejn jirriferrixxu għall-grammatika li l-awtur kellu lesta biex toħroġ fi żmien qasir, għandna quddiemna mohħ wieħed li qed jaħdem u jirsisti biex iġib it-tagħlim tal-Malti ’l quddiem u dan il-bniedem kien għalhekk M.A. Vassalli, l-awtur tal-*Mylsen*.

Nerġgħu issa għad-djalogu *Kliem bejn Tnejn*. F'dak li hu stil, wiehed malajr jagħraf illi f'haġna bnadi dan huwa iebes, u, kollox ma' kollox, nieqes mill-hlewwa u mill-heffa. Jidher ċar illi l-awtur fittex wisq illi ma jdahħalx kliem li m'huwiex Malti; kif semma l-Imghallem fid-djalogu: "...bħal ma qiegħed tara mmur neqaflek kemm nista' fuq l-għeruq kollha tal-kliem mill-bidu tagħhom u nfittex li ma tintelex l-ebda kelma li għoddha nthaliet u ntsiet imħabba fet-tiġrifa l-kerha li għamel minn bosta żmien s'issa el-Isien qadim tagħna."

F'din il-ħaġa l-kittieb esagera fi kliem bħal *ed-diqduq* flok "grammatika", *el-qamus* flok "dizzjunarju" u f'xi espressjonijiet bħal *fl-ewwel meken* flok "l-ewwel nett", u *fel-werqa* flok "fil-karta". Aktarx li l-awtur innifsu għaraf dan in-nuqqas, għax dawk il-kelmiet li l-iżjed jinhassu mgebbda biex jingiebu minn għeruq Semitiċi u li forsi wkoll fi żmien u ma kenux mexxejja, mhux talli nbidlu f'kitbiet oħra li Vassalli hareġ wara, iżda lanqas biss jidhru fil-*Lexicon* (1796). Dawn huma: *mahfud* (fir-raba' paragrafu tad-djalogu), li bil-Għarbi tfisser "ippreservat", u li Vassalli ma reġax niżżel fil-*Lexicon*, *talamid*,⁴ li flokha fl-1829 Vassalli nqeda bil-kelma "dixxiplu" fil-*Vanġelu skond San Mark* (xvi, 7); *ed-diqduq*, li fl-1791 bidel f'*Mylsen* kif ukoll fi "grammatika" (*Mylsen*, p. 236), u *el-qamus* li nbidlet l-ewwel fi "ktieb tal-kliem" fl-1791 u wara fi "ktieb il-kliem" fl-1796.

Dan li wrejna jwassal għall-fehma illi l-"Kliem bejn Tnejn", kif ukoll il-ktejjeb *Alfabeto Maltese* fejn jinqara, jista' jitqies bħala xogħol ta' M.A. Vassalli fl-ewwel żmien ta' meta kien jistudja f'Ruma (1788–1790). Fl-aħħar snin ta' haġtu Vassalli nnifsu semma li huwa kien sawwar l-ewwel alfabet Malti tiegħu fl-1788⁵. Għall-ewwel kien jinqeda b'din l-ortografija għall-użu tiegħu privat sakemm lesta u qassam bl-ordni xogħol li kien jinhtieg. Imbagħad ressaqha quddiem il-pubbliku Malti meta stampa l-*Alfabet Malti* fl-1790 u l-*Mylsen* fl-1791 u mill-ġdid meta hareġ id-dizzjunarju tiegħu fil-1796⁶.

Kieku s'hawnhekk ir-raġunamenti jidhru kollha f'waqthom u jiftiehm u ċar. Haġa waħda biss thallili dubju, ċkejken kemm hu ċkejken. Vassalli semma wkoll illi huwa baqa' jżomm prinċipju wiehed ta' alfabet imfassal minnu mis-sena 1788 u li fuqu mexa fix-xogħlijiet tiegħu, ukoll f'dik it-tieni edizzjoni tal-Grammatika tal-1827⁷. Iżda kulhadd jista' jara li ż-żewġ alfabeti m'humieq l-istess haġa. Jekk m'hix haġ'ohra, (i) l-alfabet tal-1790 u tal-1791 (*Mylsen*) fih 33 ittra, waqt li fl-*Alfabeto Maltese* huwa magħmul minn 30 ittra, u (ii) xi whud mill-ittri fil-ktejjeb *Alfabeto Maltese* huma msawrin xort'ohra minn kif imbagħad dehru fl-1790 u fl-1791.

Min-naha l-oħra, għandi mnejn—jew, aktarx li qiegħed irreqq iżzejjed għaliex, wara kollox (i) Vassalli kien qed jikteb fl-1827–39 sena wara li kien sawwar l-ewwel alfabet fl-1788 u seta' fil-wisa' nesa jsemmi xi rqaqat, u (ii) kif wera Silvestru De Sacy fl-istudju tiegħu dwar ix-xogħlijiet ta' Vassalli fil-*Journal des Savans*, f'April 1829 "għalkemm jgħid li żamm prinċipju wiehed, iżjed 'il quddiem jistqarr li f'dik it-tieni grammatika kellu jagħmel xi tibdil f'dan l-alfabet....; kieku wiehed ixebbax iż-żewġ alfabeti għandu jinduna li t-tibdil huwa wisq iżjed milli seta' jahseb."⁸

Kollox ma' kollox, mela, din li Vassalli m'ghamel ebda tibdil fl-alfabett nistghu ninsewha u noqogħdu minflok fuq ix-xhieda ġewwinija li hrigna mid-djalogu "Kliem bejn Tnejn", kif ukoll mix-xebh mal-*Mylsen* li wrejna biex inqisu lil M.A. Vassalli bhala l-awtur ta' l-*Alfabeto Maltese* li fih jidher d-djalogu "Kliem bejn Tnejn".

1. Ara J. Aquilina, *Papers in Maltese Linguistics*, University of Malta, 1961, p. 85; u Carmel G. Bonavia, *Bibliography of Maltese Textbooks 1651–1979*, Old University, Malta, 1979. p. 20.
2. Jidher li fl-1790 dan il-ktejjeb kien stampat darbtejn bl-istess tipi – darba b'format *octavo* (8vo) u wara b'format iżgħar *sextodecimo* (16mo). Fit-tieni tiratura, wara l-kelma "Fine" fl-ahħar paġna 24, fejn kien baqa' iżjed minn nofs paġna vojta, ġiet stampata linja hoxna u taħtha lista ta' żbalji ta' l-istampa, bil-korrezzjonijiet kif iridu jiġu. Il-fatt li hemm l-istess żbalji fiż-żewġ ħarġiet juri biċ-ċar li l-ktejjeb kien stampat it-tieni darba bl-istess tipi ta' l-ewwel imma fuq karta iżgħar, u mhux li kien hemm edizzjoni oħra ġdida: Fil-Biblijoteka Nazzjonali wiehed jista' jara kopja ta' l-*Alfabet Malti* fiż-żewġ formati, wahda fil-Miscellanea Bf. 1. 12 u l-oħra fil-volum immarkat P. 1083.
3. Wara żmien, Vassalli ħareġ żewġ manifesti stampati bhala karta volanti, i.e. (i) il-manifest tal-*Lexicon* bl-isem *Associazione al Dizionario Maltese-Italiano-Latino*, Malta, 1792, u (ii) il-manifest ta' l-1796 dwar l-*Appendici Etimologica u Komparattiva u Żewġ Indicijiet tal-Kliem Latin u Taljan*, li jġib l-isem *Avviso dell'Autore*. Ara t-testi taż-żewġ manifesti, miġjubin fil-ktejb ta' Dwardu Fenech, *Vassalli u Ktibietu*, Edizzjoni P.A.M., 1977, pp. 54–64.
4. *Telamid* (L. "discipulus") tinqara fil-lista ta' 381 kelma miġburin minn Philip Skippon f'Mejju, 1664 bhala eżempji tal-lingwa Maltija meta qatta' ħamest ijiem f'Malta. Ara J. Cassar Pullicino, "Seventeenth Century Englishman visits Malta" fis-*Sunday Times of Malta* tat-30 ta' Settembru, 1956. C.L. Dessoulavy ikkommenta wkoll fit-*Times of Malta* tas-27 ta' Novembru, 1939 dwar dil-lista ta' kliem ta' Skippon u semma li "...the Maltese word for 'disciple' is *telamid*, another word that unluckily seems to have since gone quite out of use." Jista' jkun li kienet għadha tinstema' 'l hawn u 'l hinn meta nkiteb id-djalogu *Kliem bejn Tnejn*.
5. M.A. Vassalli, *Grammatica della Lingua Maltese*, 2a ed. Malta, 1827, p. v. Għal dokumentazzjoni dwar il-qagħda ta' Vassalli f'Ruma bejn l-1788 u l-1790, ara C. Sant, "M.A. Vassalli's Sojourn in Rome (1788–1790)" fis-*Sunday Times* tat-3 ta' April, 1983.
6. M.A. Vassalli, *Ktjib yl Kljġm 'mfysser byl-Latin u byt-Taljġn sive...Lexicon Melitense-Latino-Italum*, Romae, 1796 – Discorso Preliminare, pp. xxxi–xxxii. Is-silta li għandha x'taqsam tinqara hekk: "*Questa* (ortografija) *mi servi prima ad uso mio privato, finchè detti sesto a un'opera che si desiderava. La proposi poi al nostro pubblico colla mia Gramatica, e coll'Alfabeto che diedi alla luce un lustro fa perchè l'esaminasse. Or la ripropongo col Dizionario presente...*"
7. Fil-Prefazzjoni "L'Autore ai Lettori" Vassalli kiteb hekk: "...una sola Ortografia ben ponderata e capace a condurci alla meta prefissa de' Letterati le abbiamo assegnato nel 1788, alla quale invariabilmente abbiamo proseguito ad attenerci con esperienze incontestabili in altre opere e nella presente" M.A. Vassalli, *Grammatica della Lingua Maltese*, 1827, p. v.
8. Ċitat minn A. Cremona fil-ktejb *Mikiel Anton Vassalli u Żminijietu: Bijografija*, Malta, 1937, p. 73.

II. M.A. VASSALLI IN 1798 – 1799

Every bit of additional information about Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764–1829) helps to complete the record of his life and activities. Over the past few years Mgr. Professor C. Sant has documented certain aspects of Vassalli's work as translator of the Gospel¹, while Fr E. Fenech has thrown interesting light on the lexicographer's long-lost etymological dictionary². A typescript thesis on Vassalli and the cotton industry by P. Pace is available for consultation at the Malta University Library. These works, together with some commemorative addresses delivered in recent years, not to mention various articles appearing in the press from time to time³, testify to a healthy re-awakening of public interest in Vassalli and his work.

The recent appearance of Dr. P Cassar's profile *The Quest for Mikiel Anton Vassalli* (1981) and the publication by Dun Ġwann Azzopardi in the March 1979 issue of *Sagħtar* of five hitherto unknown documents bearing on Vassalli prompt me to add my own contribution regarding some obscure points in the life of Vassalli.

There is no doubt that A. Cremona's *Mikiel Anton Vassalli u Żmenijietu*, published serially in *Il-Malti* between 1932 and 1937 and first collected in book form in 1937, is the main source for the known facts about him. Cremona, however, was very much aware that there were still lacunae to be filled and he openly admitted that in respect of certain episodes of Vassalli's life he had to rely on second-hand information for lack of original sources. One such episode refers to Vassalli's imprisonment in Fort Ricasoli.

It is known that in May 1797 Vassalli, Censu Barbara and others were arrested for conspiring against the Government of the Order. No complete documentary record of the trial that followed has been found so far, but in the sentence, confirmed by Grand Master De Rohan on June 12, 1797, we read that Vassalli was condemned to be imprisoned for life in the Castello Ricasoli. Quoting from G.A. Vassallo's *History of Malta* (1890 edition, p. 612), Cremona wrote that "...Vassalli (was) shut up in Fort Ricasoli whence, after a short time, he was smuggled on board a Greek vessel. The Captain showed him the greatest kindness and disembarked him secretly at Salerno..."⁴ Later on Cremona commented that "there is little detailed information concerning the imprisonment suffered by Vassalli in Fort Ricasoli... It is not known how long he remained in prison... What became of Vassalli from that time until the French occupied Malta... is not exactly known and, despite search and investigation, no success has been had in obtaining any information."⁵

Other questions also come to mind. To what extent can we rely on the historian Vassallo's account, which is the only one mentioning Vassalli's escape? Is it true that the Order connived at Vassalli's escape from Ricasoli? How long did Vassalli actually spend in prison? Did he, like Barbara and others, return to Malta with Napoleon's troops when they occupied the island?

It is not easy to answer these questions with any degree of certainty. However, Vassalli himself, in a petition presented to the French Commission of Government in July, 1798, asserted that he had been persecuted by the old Government of the

Order for his political opinions and that he had spent ten months in prison whilst serving a sentence of life imprisonment which had only been brought to an end thanks to the valour of the French soldiers. The relevant part of the document reads as follows: "*Le Citoyen Michel-Antoine Vassalli, ... persécuté par l'ancien gouvernement pour ses opinions politiques et dévoué depuis dix mois à une prison perpétuelle, dont il ne doit la fin qu'à la valeur française* (sic)...

If we accept Vassalli's wording literally, it is possible to argue that he could have escaped from Ricasoli in April, 1798, ten months after the sentence passed on him on June 12, 1797. Such an explanation could be reconciled both with G.A. Vassallo's account and with a statement, contained in a document dated September 28, 1799 and reproduced by Cremona⁶, that Vassalli re-entered Malta with the French. However this would certainly conflict with Vassalli's own declaration in the document we are referring to that he was released from prison by the French, which could not have happened earlier than June 13, 1798, when Napoleon's troops took possession of Fort Ricasoli⁷.

There is no reason to doubt Vassalli's word that he was freed from Fort Ricasoli by the French but, one may ask, why did he use the words *dix mois* in his petition, and not *douze mois*, which would have been more correct? Could it have been a *lapsus calami* on the part of the clerk who, the French Commission had decreed on June 26, 1798, was to register all petitions received and enter relative extracts, together with the Commission's decision, in the Register kept for the purpose? We shall never know, for Vassalli's original petition was, in accordance with the procedure laid down for dealing with such petitions, returned to him with the Commission's decision copied on it.

In his petition Vassalli had applied for the vacant Chair of Arabic at the University, justifying his claim on the grounds that he was the author of a Maltese Grammar and a dictionary which had been well received in scholarly circles both locally and abroad. The holder of the Lectureship drew his maintenance from the proceeds, amounting to between 1,000 and 1,200 francs, of an *ad hoc* foundation made up of immovable property. The Chair had been rendered vacant by the death of the holder, Rev. Giuseppe Calleja of Tarxien.

This document bears the number 337 in the National Library's Ms. Arch. 6524c entitled *Registre des Petitions*. I came across Vassalli's application many years ago and I passed a copy to my old friend A. Cremona who was at the time working on a study, *L'Antica Fondazione della Scuola di Lingua Araba in Malta*, which he read before the Malta Historical Society on January 25, 1952 and which subsequently appeared as an offprint from *Melita Historica* in 1955, where Cremona reproduced the document, with due acknowledgement to my help, as Doc. P. The following is the full text of Vassalli's application:

Le citoyen Michel-Antoine Vassalli, auteur d'une Grammaire et d'un dictionnaire maltois (sic); *accueilli par les connoisseurs, tant nationaux qu'étrangers; persécuté par l'ancien gouvernement pour ses opinions politiques et dévoué depuis dix mois*

à une prison perpétuelle, dont il ne doit la fin qu'à la valeur française (sic): expose qu'il existe dans l'île de Malte une fondation en immeubles, du revenu de 1000 a 1200 francs destine à l'entretien d'un professeur d'Arabe: il demande cette chaire vacante par la mort du dernier Professeur Joseph Calleja.

Vassalli was referring to the public school for the teaching of Arabic established in 1637 by the Sacred Congregation of the *Propaganda Fide*. This was supported by the benefice, known as *Ta' l-Isqof*, on land existing in the limits of Ghajnsielem, in Gozo. In 1795, following a petition by Grand Master De Rohan Pope Pius VI decreed that the lecturer holding the benefice should thereafter deliver his lectures at the University. The Rev. Giuseppe Calleja, who had been appointed in 1774, became the first Lecturer at the University under the new arrangement. He died on May 19, 1798⁸ and Vassalli applied to fill the vacant post in mid-July, 1798.

Financial considerations apart, there is no doubt that Vassalli was keen on getting this lectureship for reasons of personal prestige as a scholar. In 1785 he had studied Arabic under Rev. Giuseppe Calleja in the school of the *Propaganda Fide* in Malta and later, from 1788 to 1790, at the *Sapienza* in Rome⁹. Professor Simon Assemani, of the College of the *Propaganda Fide* in Rome, called him "Master of Oriental Languages" in an approbatory letter written in October, 1790 which follows the Preface of Vassalli's Maltese grammar *Mylsen*, published in Rome in 1791. In 1793, when Vassalli published a translation of three Arabic epitaphs entitled *Tria Monumenta Lapidea Sepulcralia*...he called himself Professor of Oriental Languages on the title page—"a point", as Cremona suggests, "that leads one to think that while he was in Rome he most likely used to teach these languages or was known as a teacher of them". On April 22, 1798, when Vassalli was still imprisoned in Fort Ricasoli, Assemani referred to him as Professor of Oriental Languages, "probably after his return from Rome about 1796 or a little before."¹⁰

This teaching experience, coupled with the publication of the two scholarly works on the Maltese language mentioned in his application, i.e. his Grammar (1791) and Dictionary (1796), must have led Vassalli to believe that he stood a very good chance of being appointed to the vacant Chair. On July 17, 1798 the French Government Commission decreed that his petition be referred to the Commissioner of the French Government appointed by Napoleon, i.e. Citizen Regnaud de Saint-Jean d'Angely. D'Angely, as we shall see later on in this study, was well disposed towards Vassalli. But it was not to be! Vassalli was doomed to disappointment, and his hopes were dashed to the ground when the Maltese took up arms against the French on September 2, 1798 and the troubles and the Blockade that followed put an end to the French Government's schemes for educational reform, which envisaged the establishment of an *École Centrale* to replace the University, and having a Professor of Oriental Languages on its teaching staff¹¹.

In the same *Registre des Petitions* there is another request by Vassalli (Petition No. 26), which links up with four of the five documents published by Dun Ġwann Azzopardi in the March, 1979, issue of *Sagħtar*. From this petition it appears that the French may have been contemplating some modification, or restriction to the rights of testators in order to eliminate any possibility of abuse of such rights. Pending these reforms—which were never carried out—Vassalli requested that he and his brother Saverio be authorised to inherit their only first cousin, who was at the time dangerously ill, solely according to the marriage contracts, notwithstanding all subsequent dispositions made in favour (a) of her stepmother, (b) of the Church or (c) of other pious places.

The document in question reads as follows: “*En attendant qu'on remédie à tous les abus attachés à l'étendue de la faculté de tester, Les Citoyens Michel-Antoine Vassalli et son frere demandent d'être autorisés à succéder, d'après les seules conventions matrimoniales, à leur unique cousine germaine, actuellement tres dangereusement malade; nonobstant toutes dispositions ultérieures en faveur de sa belle-mère, de l'Église ou autres lieux pieux, etc.*”

The cousin mentioned in this document was Maria Abela, daughter of Battista and of Saveria, who was sister to Vassalli's father Gabriel. Battista had passed to a second marriage after his wife's death. Like his daughter, his second wife was named Maria.

Although it is not clear to which marriage contracts Vassalli was referring, there is no doubt that he was trying to ensure his, and his brother's succession to their cousin's inheritance notwithstanding the fact that she had already directed by will how her property was to be disposed of mainly in favour of her step-mother and a few other relatives, of the Żebbuġ parish church and of the hospital that had been set up in the same parish some time before.

One has to keep in mind that Vassalli presented this petition about one week after his cousin Maria Abela had re-instated him in her will in the Acts of Notary Giuseppe Bonavita dated June 26, 1798. Fr Azzopardi has shown that three months before, i.e. on March 25, 1798 when, as we have seen, Vassalli was still confined in Fort Ricasoli, she had excluded him and his brother Saverio from the inheritance of a small part of her property specified in her previous will of February 19, 1797, i.e. before Vassalli had become involved in the attempt to overthrow the government of the Order¹².

It is possible that this political involvement on her cousin's part may have influenced Maria Abela in two directions, (a) to exclude Vassalli from her second will and later (b) to change her mind and rectify matters when the French faction to which Mikiel Anton belonged gained the upper hand after the Order surrendered Malta to Napoleon on June 12, 1798. Maria Abela's assets amounted to some 15,000 *scudi*¹³, quite a considerable amount by the standards of those days.

On July 2, 1798 the French Government Commission decreed that the Courts should take cognizance of the case presented by Vassalli, but no decision on it has been traced. Bonaparte's order of June 13, 1798 specified that the Civil and Criminal

Courts of Justice were to be organized so as to approach as near as possible the system operative in France. Pending such organization, however, it was deemed expedient that the administration of justice should be conducted as in the past¹⁴. It is most unlikely that any consideration was given to Vassalli's submissions. In fact, in an application addressed to Archbishop Mattei in March, 1822, Vassalli requested the strict observance of his cousin's will of June, 1798 and stressed that on his return to Malta after an absence of 23 years he found that his deceased relatives had left their property partly to distant relations and partly to the Żebbuġ church and hospital¹⁵.

During this period Vassalli's name is mentioned in connection with a French scheme for the emigration of Maltese agriculturists and skilled persons to settle and form a colony in North Africa. Our source this time is a Report on the Colonisation of the Maltese prepared by Dr Cleardo Naudi and forwarded under cover of a letter by Dr Thomas Hodgkin to Sir George Grey, Parliamentary Under Secretary, for transmission to the Colonial Secretary, Lord Glenelg¹⁶.

Dr Naudi (1781 – 1837), who held the Chairs of Chemistry and of Natural History at the University, knew Vassalli very well¹⁷ and it is reasonable to suppose that the information regarding the French period was supplied to him by Vassalli himself. Early in the report, which was received at the Colonial Office on March 30, 1836, Naudi stated: "There is certainly no country, whether continental or insular, which, in proportion to its extent, is more thickly inhabited than the Island of Malta. The constitution of the celebrated Order of the Knights of Jerusalem, the cultivation and manufacture of cotton and the central situation of the Island in the Mediterranean Sea are the causes of this exuberant population."

He continued by referring to the French plan: "The French in the year 1798, in which they invaded the Island, seeing that it could not support its population, judged it expedient to transfer a portion of the people to a particular spot on the north coast of Africa, viz. to the Pentapolis of Cirene, a tract of country which, though very fertile and salubrious, remains uncultivated and neglected. They committed the plan to Mr M. Vassallo, a very intelligent Maltese, well acquainted with the proposed situation. This plan, however, could not be carried into execution, on account of the shortness of the time which the French remained in quiet possession of the island."

Naudi went on to say: "Under the English domination, an undertaking of the kind continued to be contemplated, but the commercial prosperity which, until the fatal plague of Malta, was enjoyed in the island rendered such a measure almost useless."

One can infer from the above (a) that the French were actively considering such a project during July or August, 1798, and (b) that up to 1813 the plan was still considered as being quite suitable for Malta. Naudi himself was, in effect, reviving the earlier scheme of Vassalli to re-people the Pentapolis and recreate the surrounding territory called by the ancients "the Garden of the Hesperides." We learn from his report that the Pentapolis, formed by the city of Cirene and four other cities "...is a tract of very fertile land, lying between the Western coast of Egypt and the Eastern coast of Tripoli." Naudi's plan, however, was not favourably entertained as it did not conform to the emigration policy followed at that time by the Colonial Office¹⁸.

It must be pointed out that, although Naudi wrote in his report that the French “committed the plan to Mr M. Vassallo”, it is clear from the photocopy in my possession that, before being amended, this part of the text read “they consulted the plan of Mr M. Vassallo”. The change is not without some importance, but perhaps one need not attach undue significance to the correction in the English text. After all, the copy of Naudi’s proposals received at the Colonial Office was a translation from the Italian original, which is not available to us.

All the same, one might well ask: Did the French draw up the scheme themselves and then entrust Vassalli with its implementation? Or had the plan, prepared by Vassalli beforehand, been consulted and approved by the French? Whichever way it was, the French must have known that Vassalli had first-hand practical experience of agriculture before deciding to place him in charge of the project.

It is interesting to note that one of Vassalli’s sons was, like him, actively interested in the problem of Maltese emigration. In 1867 M.A. Vassalli Formosa de Fremaux published a booklet in which he stressed the need for the Maltese to emigrate and settle in Barbary, chiefly in Tripoli¹⁹. Among the places in Tripolitania where, he suggested, the Maltese agriculturist might settle and cultivate the land, he included Cirene. Although the author stated that he spent nine years on the coasts and interior of Barbary²⁰, his interest in emigration planning could have been influenced by recollections of his father’s pioneering efforts in this field.

We have seen that Vassalli’s hopes of being appointed Lecturer in Arabic vanished with the rising of the Maltese in September, 1798 and the ensuing blockade of the French which lasted two years. How did he fare during the siege of Valletta? Not an easy question, for this obscure period of his life is not sufficiently documented. The only information so far has been that on September 28, 1799 he is mentioned as an Adjutant in the Battalion of the National Guard that had been raised following Napoleon’s order of June 16, 1798. However, it is not known when he joined the National Guard.

Some references to Vassalli in the official records of the French Occupation period show (a) that his life in Valletta besieged was one of great suffering and privation, and (b) that it is most unlikely that he joined the National Guard before the last days of May, 1799.

On September 23, 1798, i.e. more than two months after his application for the Chair of Arabic, the French Government Commission received a communication from the French Commissioner, Regnaud de Saint-Jean d’Angely, inviting the Commission to approve a sum of 20 *scudi* by way of temporary relief to Vassalli, described by D’Angely as an unfortunate patriot (*patriote malheureux*). The Commission agreed, and accordingly issued a decree authorising the Treasurer, Citizen (formerly Count) Jean François Sant to pay to Citizen Michel Antoine Vassallo the sum of 20 *scudi*. The decree itself was to serve as voucher for such payment.

The relevant extract²¹ reads as follows:

Seance du 2^m Vendemmiare, An 7 (September 23, 1798)

...Le même Commissaire a prié la Commission de faire donner un Secours provisoire de 20 écus au Citoyen Vassallo patriote malheureux.

La Commission a pris sur cette invitation l'arrêté qui suit:

“La Commission du Gouvernement vu la lettre que lui a écrit aujourd'hui le Commissaire du Gouvernement Français pour l'inviter à fournir un Secours provisoire de vingt écus au Citoyen Michel Antoine Vassallo patriote malheureux

Arrête:

Le Citoyen Tresorier Sant payera au Citoyen Michel Antoine Vassallo la somme de vingt écussc. 20.

Le present arrête tiendra lieu de Bon.”

This notwithstanding, Vassalli continued to live in utter poverty. Seven weeks later the French Commissioner emphasized the dire need in which Vassalli still found himself and on November 15, 1798 the Commission instructed its General Secretary to ask the Almoner to provide him with three loaves every two days. The minutes of that day's sitting of the Commission²² record this decision:

Le Commissaire du Gouvernement ayant exposé les besoins du Citoyen Vassallo, à qui on a déjà accordé un secours provisoire de sc. 20: La Commission du Gouvernement a chargé le Secretaire General d'écrire a la Pitanciere de donner trois pains tous les deux jours au Citoyen Michel Antoine Vassallo.

For six months Vassalli continued to receive this *pain d'aumone*, or ration of bread as charitable relief. Then, on May 27, 1799 he renounced this relief on entering the service of the French Commissioner. The following extract²³ refers to this change in Vassalli's position:

Seance du 8 Prairial (May 27, 1799)

...Le Citoyen Michel Antoine Vassalli renonce au pain d'aumône, parce qu'il se trouve au service du Commissaire du Gouvernement, qui le met en état de s'en passer.

From this document we learn that, as from May 27, 1799 Vassalli was employed in the department of the French Commissioner, at the very centre of the whole administrative machinery of the civil government. The Commissioner, as explained by the late Sir Hannibal Scicluna²⁴, “was entrusted with the discharge of the Commission's decisions...which decisions became law only upon a formal request made by the Commissaire.”

The above extract from the Minutes of the Commission's meetings does not specify in which capacity Vassalli joined the staff of the Commissioner, who most probably took him on out of sheer pity for the unfortunate circumstances in which he had found himself. This he could probably do because by Napoleon's decree of June 18, 1798 the office of Commissioner carried with it, besides other emoluments, a special provision for his establishment²⁵.

One cannot, of course, rule out the possibility that Vassalli carried out the duties of Adjutant in the Commissioner's department. This seems all the more plausible if one considers that he could hardly have qualified for enrolment in the National

Guard before September, 1798. In accordance with the conditions laid down by General Vaubois on June 20, 1798 members of the National Guard were to be chosen from amongst the wealthiest inhabitants, from business people, etc., and from others who showed the greatest interest in the maintenance of public peace²⁶. On August 25, 1798 Vaubois further decreed that, with the exception of the members of the French Government Commission, of the Justices of the Peace and of certain other public officers, no one could be exempted from such service unless one was a family man whose poverty had been well established²⁷. This “means test” automatically excluded Vassalli from service in the National Guard during July and August, 1798.

When the Maltese rose in arms on September 2, the French felt that a battalion of 900 armed Maltese within the capital was too much of a security risk. Members of the National Guard were therefore assembled on the Palace Square and there disarmed by French soldiers. It was not before February 9, 1799 that Vaubois again set up the National Guard, this time open only to French residents employed with strong Francophile sympathies²⁸.

From the above, and until documentary evidence to the contrary becomes available, it is possible to suggest that Vassalli may have joined the National Guard after his employment at the French Commissioner’s department on May 27, 1799.

One final comment on the persons who sympathised with Vassalli in his misery and tried to mitigate his want. We have already seen that it was the Government Commissioner himself, D’Angely, who intervened with the French Commission on September 23, 1798 to alleviate the suffering of the “unfortunate patriot” M.A. Vassalli. On November 9, D’Angely left for France and Pierre Ovide Doublet, General Secretary of the Commission, succeeded him as *Commissaire Français* on November 11, 1798²⁹. Doublet had been living in Malta since 1779 and by 1798 he was occupying the post of Chief of the French Secretariat of Grand Master Hompesch. He may have had something to do with the plot of 1797 with Vassalli at its head³⁰.

Doublet helped to secure the bread relief for Vassalli. For this he deserves credit, although it has to be pointed out that this measure of charitable relief was being issued to hundreds of other persons in need. It is inconceivable that former associates in the plot against the Order, who now held key positions in the administration of Malta, could have allowed Vassalli to sink into a humiliating state of poverty for so long. This is not to belittle Doublet’s well-meant initiative, however late in the day, in employing Vassalli in his department. However, one cannot help quoting Cremona’s strictures in this regard: “...they (Bosredon Ransijat and other former associates) could not boycott Vassalli altogether and, therefore, they were obliged to shut his mouth by conferring on him a small civil post such as that of Adjutant of the National Guard, although for his brilliant qualities and for all his work on behalf of the French in order to release the Maltese from the rule of the Order, he deserved to have been rewarded by something better.”³¹

To sum up. From the documents discussed in this study it is possible to establish some points and to reach certain conclusions concerning Vassalli during the period of the French Occupation. By his own admission, Vassalli did not escape from Fort Ricasoli but was released from imprisonment by the French. It follows that he could not possibly have returned to Malta with Napoleon's troops in June, 1798. There is every reason to believe that, were it not for the rising of the Maltese, he stood a good chance of being appointed Lecturer in Arabic. The French must have thought highly of Vassalli's managerial ability and practical experience to entrust him with the project to form a Maltese settlement in Cirenaica. Very likely Vassalli joined the National Guard following his employment in the department of the French Commissioner on May 27, 1799. Both during the French period and for many years after, until his death in 1829, poverty dogged his steps wherever he happened to be. Therefore his achievement as scholar and patriot emerges all the more clearly as a triumph of spirit over matter. Further research is necessary to complete the record of Vassalli's life and activities.

1. C. Sant, *It-Traduzzjoni tal-Bibbja u l-Ilsien Malti 1810-1850*. University of Malta, 1975. See also, by the same author, "Taghrif ġdid fuq M.A. Vassalli", *Lehen il-Malti*, 1980, 22, p. 5; "M.A. Vassalli and the Church," *The Sunday Times*, August 12, 1979 and "Myth Making", *The Times*, May 2, 1980.
2. E. Fenech, *Vassalli u Kitbietu*. Malta, 1977.
3. See, *inter alia*, J. Aquilina, "Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764-1829)", *Times of Malta*, August 30, 1977; M. Costa, "Mikiel Anton Vassalli", *It-Torċa*, August 12, 1973; O. Friggieri, "Saghtar" isellem lil Vassalli f'egħluq il-150 sena minn mewtu 1829-1979", *Saghtar*, March, 1979 and E. Serracino Inglott, "Vassalli's Lexicon", *The Sunday Times*, December 13, 1981. Another useful publication is Lawrenz Cachia's *Mikiel Anton Vassalli: Hajtu fil-Qosor*, 1988.
4. A. Cremona, *Vassalli and His Times: a biography* (translated by May Butcher from the revised and amended original Maltese text). Malta, 1940, p. 31.
5. *Ibidem*, p. 59.
6. *Ibidem*, p. 216.
7. C. Testa, *Maż-zewġ Nahat tas-Swar-L-Ewwel Ktieb*. Malta, 1979, p. 68.
8. A. Cremona, *L'Antica Fondazione della Scuola di Lingua Araba in Malta*. Offprint from "Melita Historica" Vol. I, Nos. 2-4, 1955, pp. 13, 30-32. See also Dwardu P. Fenech, *L-Istudju ta' L-Gharbi f'Malta* (Typescript) Royal University of Malta, 1972, p. 14.
9. C. Sant, "M.A. Vassalli's Sojourn in Rome (1788-1790)", *Sunday Times*, April 3, 1983; F. Ciappara, "M.A. Vassalli wins a prize for Arabic", *op. cit.*, June 19, 1983; "M.A. Vassalli studied for the priesthood", *ibid*; March 9, 1986.
10. A. Cremona, *Vassalli and His Times*. 1940, pp. 10-11, 158-159.
11. Hannibal P. Scicluna, *Actes et Documents pour servir a l'Histoire de l'Occupation Française de Malte pendant les années 1798-1800*. Malta, 1923, p. 99.
12. Ġwann Azzopardi, "5 Dokumenti Ġodda fuq Mikiel Anton Vassalli", *Saghtar*, March, 1979, pp. 16-20.
13. *Ibidem*, p. 17.
14. H.P. Scicluna, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
15. Dun Ġwann Azzopardi, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.
16. PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE, London: Ref. CO 158/94.
17. For Naudi's and Vassalli's contribution towards the translation of the New Testament in Maltese see C. Sant, *It-Traduzzjoni tal-Bibbja u l-Ilsien Malti 1810-1850*. University of Malta, 1975, pp. 23-29.

18. Charles Price, *Malta and the Maltese: a Study in Nineteenth Century Migration*, Melbourne, 1954, pp. 43–45. This plan is also mentioned in P. Pace, *Vassalli u l-Industrija tal-Qoton*, Typescript Thesis, University Library, Malta, pp. 17–18
19. M.A. Vassalli Formosa De Fremaux, *Suggestions in accordance with Mr Amabile Bonello's Project of Emigration in the Coasts of North Africa*. Malta, 1867, see especially pp. 5, 14.
20. A. Cremona, *op. cit.*, p. 123.
21. NATIONAL LIBRARY (Valletta), Ms. Arch. 6523 c. p. 128.
22. *Ibidem*, p. 249. There is a passing reference to the relief received by Vassalli in C. Testa, *op. cit.*, It-Tieni Ktieb, 1980, p. 278.
23. NATIONAL LIBRARY: Ms. Arch. 6523d, p. 70
24. H.P. Scicluna, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
25. *Ibidem*, p. 95.
26. *Ibidem*, p. 229.
27. *Ibidem*, p. 245.
28. C. Testa, *op. cit.*—It-Tieni Ktieb, 1980, p. 477.
29. *Ibidem*, p. 351–352.
30. A. Cremona, *op. cit.*, p. 46.
31. *Ibidem*, p. 56.

III. “LA VALEUR FRANÇAISE” AND VASSALLI’S RELEASE FROM FORT RICASOLI

In his application for the Chair of Arabic M.A. Vassalli stated that he had been persecuted by the Government of the Order for his political opinions and that he was “condemned to life imprisonment, whose end he only owed to the valour of the French”. The phrase “la valeur Française” used in his petition was taken to refer to the French troops who took possession of Fort Ricasoli on June 13, 1798, and in 1982 the present writer asserted that, on the evidence available so far, “there is no reason to doubt Vassalli’s word that he was freed from Fort Ricasoli by the French”.¹

In 1988 Mr Frans Ciappara expressed some doubt about this, suggesting that “in December, 1797 various Maltese, including the cleric Giorgio Grognet... fled from the Island on two French frigates” and that therefore “Vassalli may well have been one of the fugitives, in which case the phrase *la valeur Française* to which he owed his freedom...would refer to this incident, and not to the arrival of Napoleon in 1798”.²

Mr Ciappara would have us believe that, had Vassalli really been one of the fugitives on board the French frigates in December, 1797, this would have been such an unusual act of bravery on the part of the French as to justify a reference to it in his petition seven months later—naturally hoping thereby to favourably dispose the members of the French Government Commission and thus improve his chances of obtaining the Chair of Arabic. This hypothesis, however, is not supported by documentary evidence.

Vassalli was a staunch partisan of the Revolution and his case was well known to the French authorities, including Napoleon. In the *Correspondance de Napoléon I, publiée par ordre de l'Empereur Napoléon III* (Paris 1859, Pièce No. 2642) there

is a direct reference to him in the “Exposé de la conduite de Malte à l’égard de la France pendant la Révolution” – a statement drawn up at the French General’s Headquarters in Malta on June 13. The relevant paragraph, as reproduced by H.P. Scicluna, reads as follows:

“...Tous les partisans de la Révolution ont été persécutés, plusieurs d’entre eux exilés sans formalité, et dans le mois de mai 1797, un grand nombre arrêtés et emprisonnés comme des criminels: Vassallo, un des hommes les plus recommandables du pays par ses profondes connaissances, condamné à être renfermé pour sa vie”.³

This reference to Vassalli in the *Exposé* drawn up on the very day (June 13) that the French troops took possession of Fort Ricasoli, strengthens the impression one gets on reading it that Vassalli was still serving his sentence at the time of the French invasion.

As regards Inquisitor Carpegna’s mention of the cleric Giorgio Grognet as one of those who fled on the French frigates in December 1797, this in no way justifies the inference that “Vassalli may have been one of the fugitives”. If anything, it may support the view that he was not one of the fugitives, for Carpegna was well acquainted with Vassalli’s involvement in the recent plot and one would have expected him to single him (Vassalli) out once more in the same way that he referred to him in his report to Cardinal Busca as one of the few Maltese of note who had made the abortive attempt to overthrow the Order in May, 1797.⁴

One has to seek the real meaning of Vassalli’s phrase “la valeur française” in the light of the events and circumstances prevailing in Malta when he applied for the Chair of Arabic in mid-July, 1798. The French Government Commission considered Vassalli’s petition on July 17, 1798. This means that, according to the Commission’s own decree of June 26, 1798 Vassalli must have filed his application on or about July 15, because a period of not more than two days was allowed for a report to be prepared and laid before the Commission when petitions came up for consideration⁵.

This date (July 15) almost coincides with July 14, 1798, when the country was agog with expectation and excitement over the official celebrations held to mark the Feast of the Tree of Liberty. The word Liberty was on everybody’s lips. Everywhere the new French masters were spreading and dinning into the people’s ears Napoleon’s message that the French had come as liberators. The celebrations were all the more significant “in view of the participation of the Maltese who had become their brethren”.⁶ General Vaubois was present with them on that day “to assist the Maltese in commemorating worthily the Liberty the enjoyment of which France had assured them”.⁷ In the Proclamation relative to the Feast of the 14th July the Maltese were thus exhorted: “...Celebrate to-day with enthusiasm the Feast of Liberty; show to the French Army your gratitude for the Hero who led it so many times to Victory, that its name may be on the lips of everyone and may ever be inscribed in your hearts”.⁸ Thanks to the French liberators despotism had

disappeared from the Island. In his address to the people of Malta Vaubois declared that the Feast of Liberty was “an occasion [that] had arisen when the French, your liberators, may show you the satisfaction they feel in adopting their new brethren”.⁹

It was in keeping with the general atmosphere thus created by the new rulers and with his own Republican beliefs that Vassalli recorded the fact of his release from imprisonment as being due to the valour of the French troops.

At the centre of all this euphoria stood Pierre-Ovide Doublet, the General Secretary of the French Government Commission “who was the factotum of the Commission and drew up its acts and orders” and whose duty it was to ensure that all petitions received by Commission members or by the French Commissioner Regnaud de Saint-Jean d’Angely were duly registered at his office.¹⁰ Doublet’s remarkable memory for details enables us to establish a convincing analogy between Vassalli’s imprisonment in Fort Ricasoli and that of Don Gaetano Mannarino, who led the Rising of the Priests in 1775 and, like Vassalli, had been sentenced to life imprisonment, in Fort Manoel. Recalling this episode in his *Memoires* Doublet used language very similar to that used in Vassalli’s petition, specifying that Mannarino could only leave his prison after the entry of the French in Malta: “...*Un cinquième prêtre aussi, nommé Mannarino, fut condamné à un emprisonnement perpétuel dans le fort Manhoel, d’où il ne sortit très infirme qu’après l’entrée des Français dans Malte*”.¹¹

The above considerations should be enough to dispel the notion that Vassalli may have fled from the Island with other Maltese on two French frigates in December, 1797. In the absence of specific documentary evidence linking that incident to Vassalli, the present writer feels justified in re-asserting that “there is no reason to doubt Vassalli’s word that he was freed from Fort Ricasoli by the French”, i.e. in June, 1798.

1. J. Cassar Pullicino, “M.A. Vassalli in 1798–99”, *Sunday Times*, February 21, 1982.

2. F. Ciappara, “M.A. Vassalli in the Correspondence of Inquisitor Carpegna”, *Sunday Chronicle*, October 2, 1988. See also, by the same author “Mikiel Anton Vassalli – A Preliminary Survey”, *Melita Historica*, Vol. X, No. 2 (1989), p. 153.

3. H.P. Scicluna, *Actes et Documents pour servir à l’Histoire de l’Occupation Française de Malte pendant les années 1798–1800*, Malte, 1923, p. 139.

4. F. Ciappara, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

5. National Library, Valletta: Ms. Arch. 6524c–*Registre des Petitions*–Arrêté of June 21, 1798.

6. H.P. Scicluna, “Actes and Documents relating to the French Occupation of Malta in 1798–1800–The Feast of the 14th July, 1798 in Malta”, *Archivum Melitense*, Vol. V, No.1, 1921, p. 13.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

10. National Library, Valletta: Ms. Arch. 6524c–Arrête of June 26, 1798.

11. Pierre-Jean-Louis-Ovide Doublet, *Mémoires historiques sur l’invasion et l’occupation de Malte par une Armée Française en 1798*...Publiés pour la première fois par le Comte de Panisse-Passis. Paris, 1882, p. 7.

IV. TWO UNKNOWN WRITINGS BY M.A. VASSALLI

The publication in this issue of *Melita Historica* (Vol. X, No. 3, 1990) of two hitherto unknown writings in French by Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764–1829) calls for some comment to place them in their proper perspective.

The twenty years between Vassalli's deportation to Tunis on January 15, 1801 and his return to Malta from France on June 19, 1820¹ constitute the least documented period of his life. In the basic biographical work *Vassalli and his Times*, A. Cremona pinpoints the various lacunae in our knowledge of his exact whereabouts and movements following his banishment from Malta: "We do not know whether Vassalli stayed at Tunis for any period or proceeded on his way for any other destination, but it is quite certain that eventually he found his way to France where he hoped to find some means of earning a living. Evidently he had no better haven or refuge where he could be welcomed... We can approximately calculate the length of time he remained in France, but in which district or town he passed this long period amounting to twenty years, we do not know."²

Elsewhere in the same biography Cremona stresses that "it is not known for certain in which town or province of France Vassalli was during the time he was absent from Malta, but it is obvious that in 1814 he was living at Marseilles."³

Related to this obscure period of Vassalli's exile is a statement by one of his sons. M.A. Vassalli Formosa de Fremaux, who published a small book in 1867 entitled *Suggestions in accordance with Mr Amabile Bonello's Project of Emigration in the Coasts of North Africa*. On the very first page of this pamphlet the author proudly mentioned that he was the son of a man to whom the great Napoleon had given the title of "Le Fondateur du Coton en France," and that this title was also to be found in some of his father's documents, written by the French authorities, and others extant in some of the archives of France.

Cremona unsuccessfully tried to trace these papers. "So far," he wrote. "I have been able to find out nothing at all about these documents of his father and Schlienz makes no mention of them among all those which he found in the house of the elder Vassalli after his death."⁴ There the matter rested for a very long time, and everyone seemed to have accepted the fact that it was utterly impossible to lift the shroud of darkness surrounding Vassalli's activities between 1801 and 1820.

After more than half a century from the publication of the original edition of Cremona's pioneering work,⁵ and as a result of long years of intermittent, at times discouraging search it has now become possible, with the help and cooperation of friends and archivists both locally and in France⁶, to make a small but concrete contribution towards the elucidation of this obscure chapter in Vassalli's biography.

The material which it has been my good fortune to obtain consists of (i) a letter dated March 24, 1810, addressed by Vassalli from Marseilles to the Prefect of the Département du Gard and enclosing five copies of (ii) an 8-paged pamphlet entitled *Instruction abrégée sur la culture du coton*, dated June 25, 1809 and written by

Michel-Antoine Vassalli, described on the title-page as “Agent du Gouvernement chargé de la dite culture.” The purpose of the pamphlet was “pour servir aux Agriculteurs des Départements Meridionaux de l’Empire Français.”

A close examination of these two hitherto unknown documents, preserved in the Archives du Gard (Ref. 12 M 44), makes it abundantly clear that, besides their agricultural interest, various points of biographical importance emerge from their contents. These may be briefly listed here:

- (i) From 1787 to 1791, when he was still studying in Rome⁷, Vassalli carried out small-scale experiments in cotton-growing in that city⁸;
- (ii) In the years 1803, 1805, 1806 and again in 1807 he carried out similar experiments, but on a much larger scale, in the two departments of the island of Corsica⁹, Napoleon’s birthplace;
- (iii) In April 1808 Vassalli also made such experiments in Marseilles, besides other large-scale tests in the territory of Salon, in the Department of Bouches-du-Rhône. Moreover, he had seen and observed the results of cotton cultivation in the Departments of Liamone and Var¹⁰.
- (iv) By 1808, or 1810 at the latest, Vassalli was definitely stationed at Marseilles. This antedates by four to six years the year of birth of his eldest son, Grabiél, who according to his death certificate registered in Malta on July 30, 1863, was born at Marseilles in 1814. Cremona rightly considered this fragmentary piece of evidence as “insufficient, however, to fill the blank in this large part which comprised almost the quarter of Vassalli’s life... in that year, therefore, (1814) his (i.e. Grabiél’s) father was living in that French town (Marseilles). How long he had been there we do not know; whether it were ever since he had left Malta or years later, nor what he was doing there.”¹¹

The text of Vassalli’s letter dated 24th March, 1810 reads as follows:

Direction Marseille, le 24 mars An 1810
Des Cotonnières
dans
Le Département
des Bouches-du-Rhône

MICHEL-ANTOINE VASSALLI, AGENT
du Gouvernement pour la culture du Coton,
Professeur des Langues Orientales

A Monsieur le Préfet du Département du Gard

Monsieur le Préfet

Délégué par le Gouvernement pour faire des expériences sur la culture du Coton, d’après les essais faits en grand dans le territoire de Salon, ceux que je fais à Marseille l’année 1808, et tant d’autres que j’avais faits pour mon compte auparavant, je suis parvenu, Monsieur, à connaître quelles sont les espèces qui prospèrent le mieux, dans les Départements méridionaux de l’Empire.

Son Excellence le Ministre de l’Intérieur, qui a toujours approuvé les procédés de ma culture, et ensuite l’instruction succincte que je poubliai l’an dernier, vient d’expédier en divers Départements, différentes espèces de graines du Coton, pour

y être cultivées dans la courante année; ainsi je me hâte de vous envoyer, conjointement à celle-ci, cinq exemplaires de mon instruction sur cette nouvelle culture: afinque vous puissiez, dans le tems opportun, faire connaitre aux propriétaires et cultivateurs de votre Département, les espèces de graines du Coton qui puissent prospérer dans leur respectifs terrains, les époques variables, et les operations relatives à leur culture.

Agreez, Monsieur le Préfet, l'hommage, avec lequel je suis

Votre très humble serviteur,
VASSALLI

Both in the letter addressed to the Prefect of the Gard Department and in the pamphlet containing his instructions for cotton cultivators Vassalli is designated as "Agent du Gouvernement pour la culture du Coton" and as "Agent du Gouvernement chargé de la dite culture". In the letter this description is followed immediately by the words "Professeur des Languages Orientales". Different interpretations may be given to the second title. Taken literally, it could mean that Vassalli had been teaching these languages in Marseilles to earn his living and was known as such. However, we cannot say whether he taught such languages privately or at some college or higher institution. Further research is therefore necessary to clarify this point. The above literal interpretation, however, seems highly questionable and perhaps the real reason has to be sought elsewhere.

Vassalli attached great importance to this designation. In 1788 he applied for a lectureship in Oriental Liturgy and Syro-Chaldaic at the University of the *Sapienza* in Rome and later he was "possibly, a member of the Staff at the *Sapienza*."¹² In October, 1790 Antonio Simone Assemani, Professor at the *Sapienza* and at the College of the *Propaganda Fide* in Rome, called him "Master of Oriental Languages" in an approbatory letter which follows the Preface of Vassalli's Maltese Grammar *Mylsen* (1791) (...*ab eruditissimo Viro Michaeli Antonio Vassallo Melitensi Orientalium Linguarum Magistro*...) ¹³. In 1793 he called himself Professor of Oriental Languages on the title page of his *Tria Monumenta Lapidea Sepulcralia*. Again, in the documents relating to a court case instituted in Malta against Vassalli in 1795 he signed his submissions of September 4, 1795 and styled himself "Professore di Lingue Orientali."¹⁴ In July, 1798, in a petition presented to the French Commission of Government he applied for the vacant Chair (Lectureship) of Arabic at the University of Malta.¹⁵ One may conclude from the above that Vassalli set great store by this academic title of "Professor of Oriental Languages" and quite understandably therefore he might have continued to use it after his name for reasons of prestige on certain occasions such as the one we are referring to.

Vassalli's letter was issued on paper bearing a printed official letter-head reading "Direction des Cotonnières dans le Département des Bouches-du-Rhône." One notes that it was addressed to the Prefect or chief administrative officer of another Department, that of Gard, and there was an unmistakable tone of authority about it. In fact the letter clearly stated that the Minister of the Interior had approved the

procedure for cotton growing explained by Vassalli in his pamphlet. Moreover, the same Minister had just sent different samples of cotton seeds to various Departments, to be cultivated during that year (1810). Five copies of Vassalli's *Instruction abrégée* were forwarded under cover of the letter so as to enable the Prefect of the Gard Department to ensure that landowners and farmers under his jurisdiction familiarised themselves with the new guidelines for cotton cultivation described in the pamphlet. One may safely infer from this that Vassalli may have addressed a similar letter to the Prefects of other Departments in the South of France. This inference is reinforced by the fact that Vassalli's pamphlet, as we read in the heading just before the opening paragraph, was intended to help agriculturists in the Southern Departments of the French Empire.

It is possible that Vassalli may have been connected somehow with an earlier attempt in 1807 to promote the cultivation of a Maltese variety of cotton in the same Department of Bouches-du-Rhône. In a letter addressed to Mr P. Pace on September 29, 1969 Prof. F. Crouzet, of the Université de Paris – Sorbonne, wrote as follows: "...from 1806 – 7 to 1812 the government attempted to encourage cotton growing in that area (Bouches-du-Rhône). In a circular letter to the Prefects, of 13 February, 1807, the Minister of the Interior announced that a bounty of 1 Franc per kilogram of clean raw cotton ready to be spun, would be granted. The prefects were told to persuade the farmers to grow cotton, especially a variety which came from Malta. Instructions and seeds were distributed, but these attempts eventually failed, because the climate was unfavourable. Vassalli played an important part in them."

One notes that Vassalli made a similar appeal in his letter to the Prefect of the Department of Gard. It also seems that this was the standard policy followed in countries or states forming part of the French Empire. We read, for example, that in Italy, "*Il Governo di Roma nel 1810 e 11 oltre a pubblicare e diffondere istruzioni per la coltura e distribuire gratuitamente il seme, istituì un premio di un franco per ogni chilogramma di cotone pulito e pronto per essere filato.*"¹⁶

In the light of the above the additional title "Professeur des Langues Orientales" at the head of the letter may be interpreted as yet another sign of Vassalli's authority. His academic record and linguistic attainments, coupled with the fact that he had been authorised by the French Government to carry out experiments in cotton cultivation, that he formed part of the "Direction des Cotonnières" and that his functions as "Agent du Gouvernement chargé de la dite culture" were not limited by any mention of a particular French Department would therefore distinguish him from ordinary Agents appointed for specific Departments.

Among other duties, a Government Agent was expected to provide or hire the necessary labour and carry out the various stages of the cultivation process. We can get an idea of what this involved from the details of the work carried out between March 4 and May 5, 1810, in the property of a Monsieur Cameron by a fellow-Maltese, Zammit, who was Government Agent in the neighbouring Department of Var from November 4, 1809 up to and including the first three months of 1811¹⁷.

The three months between March and May 1810 coincide with the period during which the instructions contained in Vassalli's pamphlet were to come into effect. The preparation of M. Cameron's land and the sowing process entailed a total of 349 man-days comprising the breaking of the clods, the levelling of the soil, the construction of water conduits, the digging of holes and their manuring, covering, and moistening, as well as the actual sowing and the covering of the cotton seeds. Other work included holes dug at the circumference of the plantation for the "coton vivace ou taillé" and the raising of platforms supporting the whole plantation for the conservation of the manure in case of heavy rainfall or to facilitate irrigation in case of drought.¹⁸ On the basis of the available material one can say that Vassalli had higher responsibilities, for as Director in charge of cotton cultivation he must have exercised a good measure of control over various Departments of the South of France.

As if to underline his expertise in this field, Vassalli concluded his *Instruction abrégée* by expressing his intention to publish a more complete and detailed treatise on the subject of cotton growing: "*Je sais que ces instructions ne sont pas suffisantes à tout agriculteur; aussi suis-je déterminé à donner tous les détails nécessaires et bien plus amples dans un ouvrage qui contiendra le cours entier de la culture du cotonnier, dans lequel toutes les opérations annuelles, en commençant par le choix et la position du sol, par la première préparation jusqu'à la dernière reprise de la récolte, seront indiquées et traitées, époque par époque, avec toutes les règles, les exceptions et les variations possibles.*"

One also notes that, as Government Agent and Director of Cotton Plantation, Vassalli took his duties seriously. To reassure those who, on account of an unusually long winter, despaired of the chances of ever introducing successfully cotton planting in France, he wrote as follows in the penultimate paragraph of his pamphlet: "*Pour obvier à cet inconvénient d'une saison extraordinaire dans ces belles contrées de l'Empire, j'ai cru de mon devoir, en ma qualité d'agent du Gouvernement, chargé de la culture du coton, de donner pour le moment au public ces instructions, qui, quoique très-succinctes, serviront cependant à tout homme qui possède quelque connaissance en agriculture. En indiquant les espèces de coton qui ont réussi ou qui peuvent prospérer dans ces climats; car l'objet le plus essentiel est la connaissance de ces espèces, qui sont celles qui donnent une floraison hâtive et par conséquent une récolte précoce, j'ai voulu en même tems faire connaître les opérations principales de cette culture, que j'ai pratiquée avec succès sur divers points du Continent.*"

There is no doubt that Vassalli's pamphlet made some impact in cotton-growing circles in the South of France. In fact, in February 1810 M. Paris, "Sous-Préfet de l'arrondissement de Tarascon, département des Bouches-du-Rhône, correspondant de la Société d'Agriculture du département de la Seine", refers to it in his *Mémoire sur la culture comparative de diverses espèces de cotonniers*.¹⁹ M. Paris gives the information that Vassalli's pamphlet appeared in the series *Bibliothèque Physico-Economique* on September 1, 1809. This could mean, in effect, that the pamphlet to which M. Paris referred was a second edition, or reprint, of that dated June 25, 1809 which we are reproducing as an Appendix.

Moreover, one finds that *L'Académie de Marseille* had undertaken the distribution of Vassalli's pamphlet and issued the reprint made up of 600 copies. This is what we read under the heading "Cultures Industrielles – Coton" in an encyclopaedic work on Les Bouches-du-Rhône, published in 1928: "*Parmi les cultures industrielles le coton est celle dont l'introduction hanta le plus les imaginations, tout d'abord sous l'Empire, alors que les guerres, puis le Blocus continental firent sentir durement la privation de cette matière première. Les premiers essais furent tentés en 1808 et l'Académie de Marseille répandait une Instruction populaire sur la culture du coton qu'elle faisait réimprimer en 1809 à 600 exemplaires.*"²⁰

Vassalli was thus directly involved in the French Government's import-substitution efforts which were necessitated by the Continental Blockade. By the Berlin Decree of November, 1806 Napoleon had declared that "the British Isles are in a state of blockade"; all commerce with them and all trade in goods coming from Great Britain and her colonies were forbidden. This meant that all commerce was prohibited between the British Isles and the lands over which Napoleon had power or influence. In retaliation, in January and November, 1807 the British Government laid down by Orders in Council that if Great Britain might not trade with Europe, neither should the neutral powers, and the French lands were placed under blockade. Her Navy cut off French Europe from trade with the rest of the world and as a result the price of such necessities as cotton and other products of Britain's colonies or of the tropical countries with which she traded rose enormously.²¹ To remedy partly the situation, France decided to expand its import substitution policy and to promote locally the growing of cotton.

Attempts to find alternative ways to import cotton had been made but were unsuccessful because of the resulting prohibitive prices. In 1863 Monsieur Barthet, Vice-President of the "Société Départementale d'Agriculture" recalled how some speculators from Marseilles in 1811 tried to import cotton overland. He wrote: "*J'avais alors vingt ans... Une maison de Marseille eut l'idée de faire venir le coton par voie de terre. A cet effet, elle établit une ligne de bureaux de roulage qui s'étendait jusqu'en Dalmatie. Il arriva, en effet, une certaine quantité de coton, mais il était tellement grevé de frais que, le prix de revient, rendu en France, dépassait 1.200 francs les 100 kilos. Cette spéculation ne réussit pas...*"²².

The French Government then conceived a project to try and grow cotton in Provence. In 1811 an experiment was carried out on a piece of land in the neighbourhood of Salon, a town in the department of Bouches-du-Rhône where, as we have seen, Vassalli had already carried out large-scale tests in 1808 and from where he had issued his pamphlet in 1809. It is almost certain, therefore, that Vassalli was the 'cultivateur maltais' entrusted with the project to which the above mentioned M. Barthet referred at some length: "*Le Gouvernement conçut alors le projet d'essayer la culture du coton en Provence: à cet effet il fit venir un cultivateur maltais avec une certaine quantité de graines de coton... C'est dans les environs de Salon qu'une pièce de terre de bonne qualité, exposée au Midi et pouvant à volonté être*

arrosée, fut convenablement préparée... Grâce à des conditions atmosphériques favorables, ces graines levèrent fort bien: les jeunes plantes furent l'objet des plus grands soins et, l'été de 1811 ayant donné une somme de chaleur suffisante, la récolte du coton fut fort bonne... On en fit 8 balles qui pesaient ensemble de 11 à 1.200 kilos... Soumis à l'appréciation des négociants... ce coton fut trouvé de qualité supérieure... '23

In spite of this successful attempt, however, the experiment was not repeated. More pressing problems, the military setbacks resulting from the invasion of Russia and the disastrous retreat from Moscow in 1812, not to mention the fact that the Continental System was more or less abandoned by Napoleon in 1813²⁴, pushed back all thought of further experiments with cotton growing, while Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo in 1815, the return of peace and the resumption of normal cotton trading made it possible for regular commerce with the Levant via Marseilles to be resumed.

Summing up, the veil surrounding Vassalli's whereabouts and activities after his exile in 1801 has been partly lifted. His presence in Corsica, for varying periods of the year, if not continuously, between 1803 and 1807 has been established on the basis of his own statements. From 1808 to 1815, and possibly later, he was living at Marseilles or other towns, such as Salon, within the department of Bouches-du-Rhône. Vassalli's active role, during the Continental Blockade up to 1811, in implementing the French Government's policy of growing cotton locally in the Bouches-du-Rhône and neighbouring Departments has been defined and documented, although no actual reference has been traced to support the younger Vassalli's claim that there exist documents to prove that Napoleon had given the title of "Le Fondateur du Coton en France" to his father. Much, much more remains to be done. We still do not know for how long Vassalli stayed at Tunis after his banishment from Malta. It is also important to ascertain whether Vassalli remained at Marseilles after Napoleon's downfall or whether he left that town for a safer place when the Bourbon Louis XVIII was restored to the throne of France in 1815, after Waterloo. Clarification of this point might help eventually to trace the exact place and date of birth of his second son, Mikiel, so far assumed to have been born probably at Marseilles in 1815. We also need to know when Vassalli left France, whether it was his experience of the cotton industry that led him to make his way to Spain—maybe to Barcelona where Maltese cotton merchants had settled and set up business since before the Revolution²⁵—and in which town of Spain he was living when his youngest son, Savier, was born, probably in 1817²⁶. Another lacuna in our knowledge is how and when he went back to France before he finally embarked at Marseilles on board the English brigantine *Saint Francis* and returned to Malta on June 19, 1820 after a journey of five days²⁷.

These are the main lines of investigation which will no doubt engage the attention of other researchers in the future. Every bit of additional information concerning Vassalli helps to build up a picture of the full personality of this extraordinary and

unfortunate Maltese genius born before his time, with a clear vision of Malta's national identity. In this spirit these two hitherto unknown writings by Vassalli are being published, and in the same spirit we augur that others will successfully continue the search for Mikiel Anton Vassalli.

1. The date of Vassalli's arrival from Marseilles on June 19, 1820 has been established by Frans Ciappara in his article 'M.A. Vassalli in the Correspondence of Inquisitor Carpegna', *Sunday Chronicle* (Malta), October 2, 1988.

2. A. Cremona (Transl. May Butcher), *Vassalli and his Times*, Malta, 1940, p. 69.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 126. Christoph-Friedrich Schlienzy was a Lutheran from the College of Basle who later became an Anglican priest. He spent fifteen years in Malta (1827–1842) as Director of the Church Missionary Society's printing press: K. Sant, 'Wahda mill-ahhar ittri ta' M.A. Vassalli'. *Sijon*, (Malta) Vol. 6, No. 4, 1973, p. 96a, footnote 4.

5. A. Cremona, *Mikiel Anton Vassalli u Żminijietu*, Malta, 1937.

6. It is my pleasant duty to thank those who have helped with advice or material in the preparation of this study. First and foremost I am indebted to Mr P. Pace, at present occupying the post of Education Officer in the Department of Education, who in 1969 passed on to me the initial results of his research on this subject undertaken on my suggestion, when, owing to circumstances beyond his control, he could not pursue the subject further and changed his field of study for the degree of M.A. In 1968, with the approval of Prof. J. Aquilina, at that time Head of the Department of Maltese at the University of Malta, he had prepared under my supervision a dissertation for the degree of B.A. (Hons.) in Maltese about Vassalli's interest in the Cotton Industry as it emerges from his *Lexicon* (1976).

Since then I have tried, through long but intermittent correspondence with the Directors of various archive departments in the South of France, to widen the area of research concerning Vassalli so as to include his wife and her family—the De Fremaux—his three sons as well as his stay in Marseilles and his movements in other localities between 1801 and 1815. Much of the material I was looking for eluded the search, but, as if to compensate for this disappointment, information was unexpectedly obtained concerning another Maltese cultivator, Zammit, who like Vassalli was engaged in cotton growing activities in the neighbouring department of Var.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to the many Directors of archival services in France who gave much of their time to attend to my numerous queries during all these years. As regards Vassalli, I wish particularly to express my thanks to M.F. Rebuffat, Archiviste, Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Marseille, to M. Robert Debant, Directeur des Archives du Gard, and Mlle Madeleine Villard, Conservateur en Chef, Services d'Archives des Bouches-du-Rhône. From M.F. Dufitel, Directeur des Services d'Archives du Var, I received valuable help in tracing documents relating to Zammit's activities in that area in 1809–1811. Enquiries made through the Archives Départementales de la Corse. Ajaccio, for documents on Vassalli's presence in Corsica between 1803 and 1807, proved fruitless. A special word of thanks is also due to Prof. F. Cunén, former Head of the Department of French at the University of Malta, for his encouragement to continue the research when disappointing results were causing my interest to flag.

7. Recent research has shown that Vassalli was already in Rome in July, 1785 and that he was a registered student at the *Sapienza* for the biennium 1788/90. See Mgr. C. Sant, 'M.A. Vassalli's Sojourn in Rome (1788/90)', *Sunday Times*, (Malta) April 3, 1983, and F. Ciappara, 'M.A. Vassalli studied for the priesthood', *Sunday Times*, (Malta) March 9, 1986.

8. M.A. Vassalli, *Instruction abrégée sur la culture du coton*, Salon, Département des Bouches-du-Rhône, 1809, p. 3. These experiments in Rome were carried out at a time of increasing cotton cultivation in Calabria and of a corresponding decline in Apulia, Sicily and other Southern Italian regions: G. Mangano, *La Cotonicultura nel Mezzogiorno*, Firenze, Istituto Agricolo Coloniale Italiano, 1912, p.8.

Vassalli's practical experience of cotton cultivation dated back to childhood in his native village of Żebbuġ. He was born into a family of farmers in 1764. His father grew cotton in his fields, which he leased to others in 1766 when he felt that his end was near: F. Ciappara, *op. cit.*, and Mons. L. Cachia, *Mikiel Anton Vassalli: Hajtu fil-qosor*, 1988, pp. 1–2. In 1770 his mother married another farmer and thus from an early age Vassalli could familiarise himself with the terminology and various processes involved in cotton growing. In fact, no less than 97 words relating to the cotton industry figure in his *Lexicon* (1796), reflecting his practical knowledge of its techniques: P. Pace, *M.A. Vassalli u l-Industrija tal-Qoton...* unpublished thesis, University of Malta. By the second half of the 18th Century this labour intensive industry had become one of the main foreign currency earners in these islands. According to a report on the economic situation of Malta in 1776 cotton was the principal crop sown for export purposes, providing employment for the majority of workers in Malta and Gozo. "One third of the island was taken up by cotton cultivation, even stony fields and abandoned lands were leased for the purpose": J. Debono. 'The Chamber of Commerce and the Cotton Trade of Malta in the Eighteenth Century', *Melita Historica*, Vol. X. No. 1, New Series, 1988, p. 32.

9. M.A. Vassalli, *op. cit.*, pp. 2–3.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 3. Liamore is a river in the west of Corsica. From 1793 to 1811 the river Liamone gave its name to one of the two departments of Corsica: *Larousse du XXe Siècle en six volumes...* Tome Quatrième, Paris, Larousse, 1931, p. 437.

11. A. Cremona (Transl. May Butcher), *Vassalli and his Times*, 1940, p. 70.

12. F. Ciappara, *op. cit.*

13. M.A. Vassalli, *Mylsen Phoenico-Punicum sive Grammatica Melitensis*, Romae, 1791, p. 55.

14. Carmel G. Bonavia, 'M.A. Vassalli's Commercial Activity', *Sunday Times*, (Malta) October 30, 1988.

15. J. Cassar Pullicino, 'M.A. Vassalli in 1798–99', *Sunday Times*, (Malta) February 21, 1982.

16. G. Mangano, *op. cit.*, p. 10. P. Pace (*op. cit.*, pp. 36–37) quotes from C. Ballot's *L'introduction du Machinisme dans l'Industrie Française*, Lille, 1923, and mentions similar incentives offered to Italian farmers by Richard, an influential entrepreneur: "...*Son activité décorante s'était étendue à la production de la matière première. En 1808, il entreprit de cultiver le coton dans les environs de Castellamare avec des graines recueillies dans les balles de cotons américains: pour développer la culture, il donna à chaque cultivateur, des graines et 100 francs par arpent, et lui achets d'avance sa récolte, à 20 sous la livre: en 1809, il essaya de cultiver le coton dans le Var; en 1810, il fit des essais dans les environs de Rome et demanda au gouvernement une avance de 300,000 l. pour faire cette culture en grand.*"

17. In his *Instruction abrégée* (p.3) Vassalli mentioned that he had seen and observed the cotton cultivated by agriculturists in the departments of Liamore and of Var. During the years of the Continentale Blockade there were various attempts to encourage cotton growing in Var, Zammit's name figuring as one of the Government Agents for cotton cultivation since 1809 at least, well before the date of Vassalli's circular letter of March, 24, 1810. I owe this information to the kindness of the Directeur des Services d'Archives du Var, who wrote to me as follows from Draguignan on June 13, 1980: "...*Dans le Var, les essais de culture de cette plante furent nombreux. Un dossier assez important figure dans nos collections concernant l'agriculture à l'époque Impériale. De l'examen de ces pièces il ressort que le gouvernement français a fait de gros efforts pour inciter les cultivateurs à planter le coton, regardé comme un source nouvelle de profit et un moyen de concurrencer les laines et les chanvres. Il existe une correspondance important sur le sujet et j'ai trouvé une pièce du Ministère de l'Intérieur, adressée le 31 mars 1811, à M. le Baron d'Azémar, Préfet du Var. Cette lettre autorise l'autorité Préfectorale à ne pas poursuivre en justice le sieur Zammit pour une pièce considérée fausse, mais à réduire ses comptes d'une manière juste et raisonnable. Une lettre de la main de Mr. Zammit est jointe au dossier, adressée au Préfet du Var, pour le remercier...*" Copies of the correspondence concerning Mr Zammit were later forwarded to the present writer.

18. Details of the various stages entailed in the cultivation process are contained in a statement attached to Mr Zammit's letter addressed from Hyères to the Prefect of Var on the 24th April, 1811. Two declarations at the foot of the statement, signed at the Mairie de la Ville d'Hyères on the 23rd April, 1811, 'pour servir et valoir a ce que de droit' certified that Zammit had duly paid the sum of 550 francs to cover labour wages, and that a further 100 francs had been paid to Mr Cameron for the transport of manure to the plantation.

Zammit had called at Draguignan, the capital of the Var department, before proceeding to Hyères, to pay his respects to the Baron d'Azémar and thank him for his help in connection with the regularisation of some accounts he had presented relating to his work as Agent. Zammit asked the Prefect to address the acknowledgement of his letter to Marseilles, care of Castillon, wig-maker, at No. 1, Rue de la Loge, where he would be staying as from the 25th of the month.

Considering that both Vassalli and Zammit were engaged on cotton cultivation activities during 1809–1811, and that they both had connections with Marseilles, one wonders whether Vassalli knew, or had met Zammit between 1809 and 1811.

19. Paris, Imprimerie de Madame Huzard, Février 1810, p. 65, footnote 1.

20. '*Le Bouches-du-Rhône*,' Encyclopédie départementale, publiée sous la direction de Paul Masson, Tome VII, Le Mouvement Economique: L'Agriculture, Paris, Marseille, 1928, p. 583.

21. A.J. Grant and H. Temperley, *Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (1798–1938)* 5th ed., London, 1939 pp. 136–137; F. Markham, *Napoleon and the Awakening of Europe*, Pelican ed., 1975, pp. 112–115; C.D. Hazen, *Modern European History*, Rev. ed. London. Bell, 1919, pp. 215–217, 232–235.

22. P. Masson, *op. cit.*, p. 583. M. Barthet's article was published in the *Bulletin de la Société d'Agriculture des Bouches-du-Rhône*, 1863, pp. 36–39.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 583.

24. F. Markham, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

25. J. Debono, 'The Cotton Trade of Malta', *Archivum—Journal of Maltese Historical Research*, No. 1, 1981, pp. 95–102.

26. A. Cremona, *op. cit.*, pp. 117–118.

27. F. Ciappara, 'M.A. Vassalli in the Correspondence of Inquisitor Carpegna', *Sunday Chronicle (Malta)*, October 2, 1988. The articles by F. Ciappara quoted in this study have been substantially reproduced in *Melita Historica* (Vol. X., No. 2, 1989, pp. 145–155) under the title 'Mikiel Anton Vassalli: A Preliminary Survey.'

INSTRUCTION
ABRÉGÉE
SUR LA CULTURE DU COTON,

*D'après les Expériences réitérées faites
par Michel-Antoine VASSALLI, Agent
du Gouvernement, chargé de ladite culture,*

*Pour servir aux Agriculteurs des Départements
Méridionaux de l'Empire Français.*

Je distingue toutes les espèces de Coton en trois classes; savoir: Coton *Arborescens*, Coton *Arbuste*, et Coton *Herbacé*. Dans les climats chauds, toutes y sont vivaces.

L'arborescens, comme celui du Brésil, de Fernamboue, de la Georgie, etc., ne réussit pas en plein champ dans nos départements méridionaux: car, comme il demande plus de temps que les autres pour pousser les branches à fleur, l'hiver les tue avant de fleurir. J'ensemenciai de ce coton, à Marseille, le 24 du mois d'avril de l'an dernier, et il sortit de la terre à la mi-mai. Aux premiers jours d'octobre, les plants étant parvenus presque à la hauteur d'un homme, poussèrent les boutons à fleur; mais huit jours après ils furent desséchés par le froid, avant de fleurir. L'espèce du coton de la Georgie, dont les plants étaient plus élevés à cette époque, n'avait encore que de belles feuilles.

Dans la classe du coton arbuste, il y a des espèces qui réussissent très-bien en France, telles sont celles du Siam Blanc à graine verte, du Siam Nankin, du Gallipoli, et toutes les autres espèces de coton arbuste, dont la plante et les feuilles ressemblent à celles de Siam ci-dessus mentionnées; comme le coton à courte soie, le coton à filoselle, etc. Mais le coton à graine lisse, brune ou noire, comme celui de Cayenne, qui a été acclimaté en Espagne et dans l'île d'Iviça, réussit médiocrement dans les départements les plus chauds, et dans les autres il demeure sans succès.

Les espèces de coton herbacé forment la classe qui, en France, réussit presque tous les ans, comme le coton de Syrie, de Saint-Jean-d'Acre, de Chypre, de Kircagas, de Malte, de Pantalarie, et toutes les espèces de coton barbaresque qui ont les feuilles échanrées.

Cependant jusqu'à présent toutes les expériences que j'ai faites, soit sur le Continent, soit dans les deux départements de l'île de Corse, me font apprécier de préférence le coton de Siam blanc à graine verte. Celui-ci a l'avantage de s'acclimater aisément et de se perfectionner dans nos climats, tant en blancheur qu'en finesse et soyeusité, de manière qu'il m'a donné occasion de l'appeler à tous égards, *Coton Français*.

Le coton d'Acre et celui de Kircagas acquièrent aussi de la perfection dans nos départements.

Outre les espèces ci-dessus mentionnées, toutes celles qu'on cultive aux environs de Symrne et dans la Turquie européenne, comme le Souboujac, le coton de Salonique, etc., doivent pareillement réussir en France.

Au surplus, de toutes les observations que j'ai eu occasion de faire en plusieurs lieux et circonstances, soit sur les petits essais de culture de coton que je fis à Rome, depuis l'an 1787 jusqu'en 1791; soit sur les grands essais que je fis en Corse, dans les ans, 1803, 1805, 1806 et 1807, et à Marseille, l'an dernier; soit sur les cultures faites par d'autres agriculteurs que je vis et observai dans les départements du Liamone, du Var, et dans celui des Bouches-du-Rhône, j'acquis et formai des dates aussi certaines que sûres. Ainsi je trouve constante et invariable la suivante règle générale:

Toutes les espèces de coton, dont la plante pousse les branches avec les boutons à fleur à la cinquième, sixième et au plus tard à la septième feuille caulinaire, réussissent, sans exception, dans les départements méridionaux. Toutes les autres espèces qui tardent plus à sortir leurs boutons à fleur, réussissent moins, principalement dans les lieux où l'été est de courte durée.

Après avoir donné connaissance des espèces, il faut maintenant parler des époques et des opérations relatives à leur culture.

L'époque du semis du coton varie dans nos climats. Elle doit se faire ordinairement vers la mi-printemps, et quand on s'aperçoit que l'hiver est fini. Ainsi, si la saison est tardive, on retarde l'ensemencement, et si elle est hâtive, on l'anticipe. La germination bien développée des arbres fruitiers d'été, et la fermentation de la terre, nous assurent que l'époque est propice et véritable.

Pendant les espèces de coton de Siam à graine verte, celui de Gallipoli et celui à courte soie, si on anticipe un peu leur ensemencement à l'époque ordinaire, végéteront en tout ou en partie: car la graine de ces espèces n'est pas si facile à se pourrir; tandis que toutes celles du Levant et les espèces du coton barbaresque ne peuvent rester dessous la terre sans végéter, car autrement elles pourrissent de suite.

Quand le semis s'anticipe, il ne faut pas tremper la graine, l'humidité pouvant lui causer de la putréfaction, la terre n'étant pas assez en fermentation pour lui communiquer à l'instant les premiers mouvements de la germination.

Pour être assuré que la graine de coton germe et sorte de la terre, il faut que celle-ci soit légère, meuble et dans l'état de fermentation.

Mais il ne faut pas couvrir la graine avec beaucoup de terre; la quantité de deux doigts lui est suffisante.

Pour que le coton atteigne facilement le point nécessaire de sa maturité dans nos climats, il doit être clair-semé et les vaseaux éloignés de manière que les plantes, dans leur croissance, ne s'entre-touchent pas. Ainsi on tâche que chaque vaseau soit placé loin de l'autre à la distance d'environ un mètre, si le cotonnier est des espèces de Siam, à graine verte, ou d'espèces semblables; et de deux tiers de mètre seulement, s'il est des herbacés.

On sème dans chaque vaseau six à huit graines, pour s'assurer de deux ou trois plantes, et on place ces grains ensemble, et unies sur un même point, pour s'entraider à lever la terre; alors elles auront la force de pousser et de sortir vigoureusement, même quand la superficie de la terre se formerait en croûte par la pluie. Quelque motif qu'on puisse opposer à cette assertion, l'expérience le détruit car nos climats et nos sols différent beaucoup de ceux de l'Amérique, du Levant, etc.

Un vaseau contenant un, deux ou trois pieds de coton, est toujours considéré comme une seule plante.

Si toutes les graines qu'on a mises en terre sortent, on les éclaircira deux fois; la première, dix jours après la partance, c'est-à-dire, quand les plantes auront poussé la quatrième feuille, et alors on laisse quatre plantes par vaseau. Le dernier éclaircissage sera nécessaire, quand les plantes auront bien développé la cinquième feuille, non comprises les deux séminales: alors on ôte un ou deux pieds, pur n'en laisser en place que deux dans les terres grasses et de bonne qualité où la végétation est plus vigoureuse, et trois dans les terres médiocres ou maigres.

A l'égard du cotonnier de Siam à graine verte et d'espèces semblables, il faut observer que lorsqu'au milieu des vaseaux, il meurt quelque pied, il fait toujours avoir l'attention, en éclaircissant, de laisser deux pieds seulement dans les vaseaux circonvoisins, mais jamais davantage.

Lorsque les plantes des espèces à feuilles échanrées commencent à fleurir, et que la tige devient rouge jusqu'à la moitié au moins, il est nécessaire alors de les étêter.

Quand le coton arbuste est ensemencé dans des terres grasses et fraîches ou irrigables, l'étêtement est également utile; mais aux espèces à graine lisse et brune ou noire, cette opération est plus tôt nuisible.

Comme l'entre-touchement et les humidités sont contraires, dans la saison automnale, à la maturité des cocons, et mettent en pure perte tous les soins et toutes les dépenses: en conséquence, on doit prendre toutes les précautions possibles afin que les plantations vers la fin de leur végétation ne deviennent pas trop gênées. Cela arrive quand elles sont épaisses; car le coton, pour mûrir parfaitement, demande un air libre et ventilé.

Ainsi, à l'approche de la maturité, on cessera tout arrosage, et si le cas l'exige, on effeuillera les plantes les plus vigoureuses pour donner de l'air aux gousses, et empêcher la putréfaction en cas de longues pluies et de vents orientaux, qui ordinairement causent des humidités très-nuisibles aux cocons prêts à mûrir.

Il ne faut jamais récolter le coton avant qu'il ait mûri. Ceux qui, par ignorance de cette partie de culture, coupent les cocons non ouverts et les forcent à s'ouvrir et dessécher au four, en recueillent une très-petite quantité, faible et mauvaise, et ils se voient contraints tous les ans d'avoir recours à l'étranger pour avoir de la graine.

Le coton récolté s'expose de suite au soleil pendant l'espace de quatre heures ou plus, opération qu'il faut renouveler avant de l'égrainer. Au défaut de soleil, on l'expose sur le moment dans les lieux secs, ventilés et couverts.

Le coton des espèces d'Acre, de Kircagas, de Malte indigène, et de toutes les espèces barbaresques, ou qui ont les feuilles échanquées, est naturellement d'une qualité très-forte et très-adhérente à la graine: ainsi, pour bien l'égrainer, il faut faire usage de cylindres d'acier.

Le coton de Gallipoli, toutes les espèces de Siam, celle à courte soie, le coton à filosselle peuvent être égrainés par le moyen de ces cylindres et par ceux en bois dur. Mais ces derniers suffisent pour le coton à graine lisse, la graine n'ayant qu'une faible adhérence.

L'hiver de cette année ayant été long et par conséquent la terre étant entrée en fermentation très-tard, la majorité des personnes qui ont ensemencé le coton à l'époque ordinaire, ne se sont pas aperçus que la saison était très-reculée, en sorte que la graine n'a pu lever. Cette circonstance a donné lieu à plusieurs de croire et de dire que la culture du coton en France est presqu'impossible à réussir.

Pour obvier à cet inconvénient d'une saison extraordinaire dans ces belles contrées de l'Empire, j'ai cru de mon devoir, en ma qualité d'agent du Gouvernement, chargé de la culture du coton, de donner pour le moment au public ces instructions, qui, quoique très-succintes, serviront cependant à tout homme qui possède quelque connaissance en agriculture. En indiquant les espèces de coton qui ont réussi ou qui peuvent prospérer dans ces climats; car l'objet le plus essentiel est la connaissance de ces espèces, qui sont celles qui donnent une floraison hâtive et par conséquent une récolte précoce, j'ai voulu en même tems faire connaître les opérations principales de cette culture, que j'ai pratiquée avec succès sur divers points du Continent.

Je sais que ces instructions ne sont pas suffisantes à tout agriculteur; aussi suis-je déterminé à donner tous les détails nécessaires et bien plus amples dans un ouvrage qui contiendra le cours entier de la culture du cotonnier, dans lequel toutes les opérations annuelles, en commençant par le choix et la position du sol, par la première préparation jusqu'à la dernière reprise de la récolte, seront indiquées et traitées, époque par époque, avec toutes les règles, les exceptions et les variations possibles.

*Fait à Salon, Département des Bouches-du-Rhône,
le 25 juin 1809 VASSALLI.*

Tul is-Seklu Dsatak f'Malta jinhassu għaddejja żewġ kurrenti li jahkmu n-nies u jinsġu l-hsieb u l-hajja tal-poplu. Min-naħa l-wahda kien hemm il-ġlieda biex jiġu magħrufa l-prinċipji demokratiċi li xterdu ma' kullimkien bħala tranja tar-Rivoluzzjoni Franċiża u li f'Malta hadu s-sura ta' taqbiida għall-ghoti ta' rappreżentanza popolari, u mill-ohra t-titjib fil-qagħda tat-tagħlim f'Malta, it-twaqqif ta' sistema ta' edukazzjoni tal-poplu li tixraq għaż-żminijiet. Il-kostituzzjonijiet mogħtijin lilna bejn is-sena 1835 u tmiem is-seklu, l-ghoti tal-helsien ta' l-istampa fl-1839, il-ftuħ ta' skejje primarji mill-1839 'il quddiem, il-hidma ta' edukaturi bħal Panzavecchia, Pullicino u Savona, kif ukoll il-proposti ta' nies bħal O'Malley u Keenan, kollha kellhom l-influenza tagħhom fuq il-ġrajja u l-kitba ta' l-ilsien Malti fis-Seklu Dsatak, xejn inqas mit-twaqqif ta' soċjetajiet u għaqdiet xjentifiċi u letterarji, jew mill-kitbiet letterarji ta' hafna patrijotti politiċi Taljani li sabu kenn hawn Malta fit-taqbib politiku ta' dak iż-żmien.

Habbâr tal-moviment letterarju Malti sa minn qabel ma rifes Napuljun u perpret fuq Malta l-bandiera tat-tliet ilwien kien M.A. Vassalli li fassal programm shih għall-iżvilupp letterarju tal-Malti, i.e. (i) ftuħ ta' skejje fl-irhula u l-ibliet ta' Malta u Ghawdex, (ii) hrug ta' kotba bil-Malti għat-tagħlim tal-poplu sew ċivili kemm ukoll religjuż, u (iii) koltivazzjoni ta' stil letterarju u fuq kollox tal-Poezija Maltija.

L-għajta ta' Vassalli biex inqisu l-Malti bħala l-ilsien nazzjonali għamlet il-hoss li għamlet aktar għax kien għadu hadd ma tkellem hekk bil-miftuħ taht il-Gvern ta' l-Ordni milli għax fil-fatt kienet xi idea rivoluzzjonarja u ġdida għal kollox għall-Maltin u l-mexxejja tagħhom. Fi Frar, 1809 il-Ġurati tal-Belt u ta' l-Imdina pprotestaw bil-qawwi quddiem il-Kummissjonarju Ball kontra l-attentat li kien qed isir biex xi kawzi tal-kummerċ jibdeu jehduhom fl-Ingilterra halli jinqatghu mill-Qorti tal-Viċi Ammirall. Il-Ġurati semmew kif, sa mill-1419 il-Maltin kienu qalghu l-privileġġ li ma jkollhomx għax johorġu mill-gżira biex jiddefendu ruħhom fil-kawzi u kif wara, fis-snin 1428, 1439, 1504 u 1520 kienu saħħu dan il-privileġġ fis-sens li lanqas ma setghu jintbagħtu kummissarji minn Sqallija biex jiddeċiedu kawzi hawn Malta jekk ma jkunux jafu bil-Malti "...per altra lettera Regia delli 15 Settembre 1520 si ordinò che non potessero delegarsi persone, le quali ignorano la lingua Maltese."¹ Inqas u inqas, mela, žiedu l-Ġurati, għandhom jiġu miksura dawn il-privileġġi meta, flok pajjiż fil-qrib bħal Sqallija, u lsien mhux għal kollox barrani bħal ma hu t-Taljan, ikollhom il-Maltin jitbiegħdu lil hinn mill-Mediterran u jmorru l-Ingilterra quddiem Qorti b'lsien barrani għal kollox u mhux magħruf minnhom. F'dan id-dokument, li s'issa ma tantx issemma, jekk tifliħ sewwa għandek issib li r-rappreżentanti tal-poplu ta' dak iż-żmien kienu qed jgħidu dak li kien ġa qal Vassalli. Kienu qed jgħidu, f'dawk l-ewwel snin wara li l-prinċipji tar-Rivoluzzjoni kienu qanqlu l-kuxjenza nazzjonali ta' bosta popli, illi l-Maltin ukoll kellhom l-individwalità tagħhom bħala nazzjon u li għalihom l-ilsien Malti kien it-tifsira hajja ta' din l-individwalità.

Il-fehmiet u l-kitba mdawla ta' Vassalli baqghu jsaltnu wkoll wara mewtu f'imhuh il-kittieba u nies ohra mheggin biex igibu 'l quddiem l-ilsien Malti. B'xorti hazina ma nafux min kienu dawk li bejn Frar/Marzu ta' l-1825 u Mejju tas-sena ta' wara kienu marru għall-lezzjonijiet tal-Malti li Vassalli kien ta fl-Università, lezzjonijiet li mbagħad, bi flus John Hookham Frere, għabar fi ktieb fl-1827 bhala grammatika tal-Malti bit-Taljan².

Kienu jew ma kenux studenti ta' Vassalli, ma nistghux ma nsemmux tnejn minn nies li, waqt li ma jaqblux miegħu fil-mod kif għandu jinkiteb il-Malti, zammew għoli fil-kitba tagħhom l-ideal li halla Vassalli u giebu argumenti sodi mibnijin fuq tiegħu biex juru l-għaliex għandu jigi miktub u mghallem l-ilsien nazzjonali tagħna. Dawn kienu Francis Vella u l-Abbati Salvatore Cumbo. Dwar Vella sa ngħidu kelmtejn hawnhekk; fuq Cumbo nitkellmu aktar 'il quddiem f'kitba ohra³.

Francis Vella, li fl-1831 hareg *Maltese Grammar for the Use of the English*, stampat f'Livorno, jidher li kien ammiratur kbir ta' Vassalli. Fost hwejjeg ohra li naqraw fil-*Preface* ta' dan il-ktieb insibu li hu qed jikteb imheggeg mill-*ardent desire of seeing the vows of Vassalli accomplished*. U jissokta jghid: *Many causes have contributed to render abortive the efforts of Vassalli towards making literary the Maltese language, and his employing the semi-oriental system has been the principal... Nothing is more absurd than to maintain that without the oriental system every effort to render the Maltese idiom a literary one will prove fruitless... Vassalli will pardon us, we hope, if by partaking in the opinion of our fellow citizens we have been led to diverge, in some particulars, from his system, in order to approach nearer to the Italian one. By doing so we do not intend to lessen, or deprive him of that glory which will ever exalt his merit. Our purpose aims at adding some materials only to the edifice of which he can, with justice, claim the right of having laid the greatest part of the foundation. We should think ourselves happy, indeed, could we, by our labour, contribute our share to the great work by which we hope to see our fellow citizens attain the benefits of literature, of which they have, till now, been deprived...*⁴. Tnax-il sena wara l-istess Vella, meta fl-1843 hareg f'Livorno *Dizionario Portatile delle Lingue Maltese, Italiana, Inglese – Parte Prima*, fil-kelmtejn qabel, wara li qal li l-hsieb tiegħu tnissel mix-xewqa tal-Maltin li jdahhlu l-Malti fl-iskejjel tal-poplu, u li għall-kliem tad-dizzjunarju kien mexa fuq dak ta' Vassalli, spicča b'dal-kelmiet: *Se le mie fatiche saranno da voi gradite, cesserà l'interminabile questione alfabetica; la lingua Maltese avrà adito nelle scuole, e l'opera del Vassallo riceverà lo sviluppo che attende da mezzo secolo!*

Biex nifhmu ahjar kif kien jaħsibha Vassalli li għandu jigi 'l quddiem l-ilsien Malti bhala letteratura, nisiltu dal-bicċtejn mid-*Discorso Preliminare* tad-dizzjunarju tiegħu li deher fl-1796:

Io nel descrivere la lingua nostra ho a tutto potere procurato di evitare ovunque gl'invalsi difetti per formare l'uso e lo stile letterario: egl'è desiderabile ch'ella in tal modo si coltivi. Qui m'accorgo d'aver tralasciato di parlare della nostra Poesia, che per non tradire l'assunto mio devo accennare, benchè non possa far trattato.

Questa nella lingua Maltese spicca mirabilmente, e con genio particolare. La vivezza dell'espressione, le sentenze prodotte dal fervore della fantasia maltese, la semplicità, e la naturalezza attrattiva unita alle doti naturali della lingua, benchè l'idee siano qualche volta ristrette, formano il bello delle nostre canzoni. Sarebbe impresa molto degna che alcuno de' nostri si mettesse ad illustrare questo articolo: ma per riuscirvi dovrebbe tenersi lontano dagl'usi poetici di quelle nazioni eterogenee di lingua riguardo alla nostra, dei quali non credo che sia troppo suscettibile un'antica lingua orientale...⁵.

...Per renderla ben culta nel principio bisogna scrivere in essa opere originali, e non tradurre opere servilmente, ma spiegare i sentimenti formati e meditati in Maltese senza ombra di servile imitazione. La lingua Maltese non può facilmente adattarsi a traslazioni di lingue moderne; piuttosto da lei trasportare in un'altra, o al più tradurre in lei da qualche lingua orientale antica. Soprattutto contribuisce alla sua coltura la Poesia⁶.

Interessanti wkoll din is-silta mill-grammatika tal-Malti *Mylsen*, stampata Ruma fl-1791, fejn naraw il-fehma ta' Vassalli dwar kif ghandha tinfetah it-triq ghall-kitba bil-Malti bhala mezz ta' taghlim ghall-poplu:

Lill-Malti li qieghed jaqra

“Wara li inti tharriġt dan il-ftit fil-qari b'islienek, u wara li titħarreg ftit iehor f'dawn il-kelmtejn, għandi nwissik qabel xejn illi, biex ma tinsieq dak li tkun tgħallimt, jahtieglek qatt ma thalli l-qari u l-ktib, u għalhekk kull daqqa jisthoqqlok tharreg lilek innifsek billi taqra u tikteb xi haġa, jekk mhux kuljum, għallinqas darbtejn fil-gimgha. Trakek immela issa fi żmien qasir u mingħajr tbatija tgħallimt, u tista' titgħallim dak li oħrajn qablek fi żmien twil tas-snin il-kbar ma setgħux lè jifhmu u lanqas jitgħallmu.

Imbagħad li wiehed tgħallim jaqra u jikteb bi lsienu, jekk irid jgħaddi 'l quddiem fl-għerf, jew jixtieq ikun jaf ilsna oħra barranin, jahtieglu jibda jitgħallim jaqra b'dak il-lsien li jixtieq jitgħallim; ngħidu aħna bil-Latin, bit-Taljan, jew b'islieni iehor. Dan għandu wiehed jagħmlu billi jiehu jaqra kotba imfissrin bil-Malti, jew billi għallinqas ifissirhom, biex jifhimhom; u hekk jifhem x'jaqra u x'jikteb. Inkella sa ma wiehed jitgħallim haġa jkollu jbati wisq, bħalma batew mn'issa lura oħrajn minn tagħna, u jegħreq biex ngħid hekk il-għaraq tad-demem, u aktarx jibqa' ma jaf xejn. Minn dawn il-kotba bil-Malti, jew imfissra fih, bil-għajnuna t'Alla jibded isiru, u wara li ktibtlek dan il-Milsen li f'idejk, li hu l-Grammatika tagħna mfissra bil-Latin, qieghed issa naħdem u ninseg oħrajn għal-Latin, u għat-Taljan mfissrin bil-Malti kif jiġi minnu; u qieghed nagħmel ukoll il-ktieb tal-Kliem, li jkun maqsum fi tliet kotba. L-ewwel wiehed ikun Malti, Latin u Taljan, it-tieni Latin u Malti, it-tielet Taljan u Malti. Mingħajr dawn il-kotba li jinhtiegu bħall-hobż għal min irid jitgħarref, u jgħaddi 'l quddiem, ma tista' tagħmel xejn, u dak li għandek titgħallim gewwa erba' snin, ma titgħallim f'għoxrin sena thawtel u tishar kemm tishar; u qatt ma titgħallim u tkun taf haġa sewwa u wisq hwejjeġ jidhirlek li tkun tafhom, u inti tkun

anqas ghadek sellimtilhom biss. Din il-hidma hekk kbira u qawwija ghax l-ewlenija thaffef lil min jigi wrajja, billi jsib it-triq mibdija u miftuha; u aktar ma jghaddi 'l quddiem il-ktib bil-Malti, iżjed taghlimna jhiff u jiqsar, u aktar ma jonqosx min jaghmlilna kotba ohra, li nahtiguhom f'wisq hwejjeg''⁶.

Milli tghid sa ma taghmel dejjem hemm qabza kbira. U z-żmenijiet kienu ghadhom mudlama wisq meta Vassalli fassal il-programm li fuqu kellu jimxi 'l quddiem il-Malti. Illum, fid-dawl tal-grajjiet kif saru, nistghu nghidu liema xorti messet lill-fehmiet ta' Vassalli.

(a) *Il-Ftuh ta' Skejjet għall-Poplu*. F'dil-haġa z-żmien tah raġun lil Vassalli u s-Seklu Dsatax huwa sewwa sew is-seklu li fih għaddiet 'il quddiem din l-idea, kif ukoll il-hidma għat-tagħlim tal-Malti fost it-tfal tal-poplu fl-iskejjet.

(b) *Kitba ta' Poezija*. Ma' tul dan is-seklu l-biċċa l-kbira tal-kittieba fil-versi tagħhom imxew fuq il-metru tal-vers popolari tal-ghana, ta' tmien sillabi, kif donnu ried ighid Vassalli meta kiteb: *ma per riuscirvi dovrebbe tenersi lontano dagli usi poetici di quelle nazioni eterogenee di lingua riguardo alla nostra, dei quali non credo che sia troppo suscettibile un'antica lingua orientale*. Imma mill-ewwel bdew jitbiegħdu minn dil-massma. G.A. Vassallo innifsu kien fisser fehma tixbah lil ta' Vassalli meta kiteb illi *la lingua si presta mirabilmente alle poesie erotiche, ed il verso ottonario è ad essa naturalissimo. Qualunque poesia in lingua maltese, che non sia in quel metro, è, almeno nella sua forma, spuria. Ed abbenchè siasi a sufficienza comprovato, che la poesia maltese si possa felicemente enunciare in tutte le forme italiane, essa ciononostante, uscendo dalla sua forma naturale (il verso ottonario) potrebbe piacere bensì, giammai però riuscire popolare...*⁸ Imma mbagħad, bħalma naraw fil-kitba tagħna dwar G.A. Vassallo⁹, dan il-poeta hareġ 'il barra sewwa mid-djieq tal-versi tat-tmienja u fetaħ it-triq għal metri ohra. Bħalu mxew kittieba ohra fuq il-mudell tal-poezija Taljana, u fis-seklu tagħna l-poezija Maltija laħqet wkoll livell għoli f'idejn poeti ta' żewġ ġenerazzjonijiet fuq motivi u metri ta' poezija Taljana u Inġliża li xerqu tajjeb fuq il-vers bil-Malti, għalkemm imnissel mill-ilsna semitiċi.

(c) *Kitba ta' Opri Originali*. Hawnhekk Vassalli wera ruhu tassew bniedem ta' qabel żmienu. Għalkemm f'it laħqu ħarġu opri originali tul is-Seklu Dsatax, meta bdew jinkitbu għall-bidu ta' dan is-seklu tagħna, il-Malti għadda wisq 'il quddiem u libes sura letterarja sabiha, bħalma basar Vassalli.

(d) *Traduzzjonijiet*. Bil-maqlub ta' li xtaq Vassalli, l-iżjed li nkitbu fis-Seklu Dsatax kienu traduzzjonijiet. Vassalli nnifsu tana bosta traduzzjonijiet li fihom wera ħila kbira fit-thaddim tal-Malti. Biċċa minnhom saru minn jew fuq ix-xehta ta' l-ilsna orjentali, kif qal li għandu jsir Vassalli; imma hafna ohrajn, fosthom qlib ta' rumanzi, saru tajjeb hafna wkoll mill-ilsna moderni, mit-Taljan, mill-Franċiż u mill-Inġliż, u b'hekk urew li Vassalli kellu fehma hażina li *la lingua maltese non può facilmente adattarsi a traslazioni di lingue moderne*.

Naraw mela li fejn iż-żmien ma tahx raġun lil Vassalli kien biss fid-dettall; kollox ma' kollox nistghu nghidu li l-holma ta' Vassalli twettqet. Haġa li żgur ma satax jobsorha meta kien għadu ħaj kienet l-influenza tal-kitba letterarja bit-Taljan hawn

Malta fuq l-istil u l-kitba tal-Malti sa tmiem is-seklu li fih miet. F'pajjiż fejn il-koltura u l-produzzjoni letterarja, ċkejna kemm kienet ċkejna, kienet ilha s-snin li hadet sura Taljana, ma setax jonqos li l-kurrenti letterarji Taljani ma jkollhomx ukoll sehem qawwi fit-twelid tal-kitba letterarja bil-Malti. U fis-Seklu Dsatax Malta kellha għadd gmielu ta' poeti bit-Taljan, bħalma kienu l-Markiż Giuseppe Testaferrata Viani (1767–1837), il-Markiż Gioacchino Ermolao Barbaro (m. 1844), Carlo di Cristoforo (1769–1851), Giovanni Antonio Micallef (1787–1840), Cesare Vassallo (1800–1882), l-Abbati Giuseppe Zammit "Brighella" (1801–1890), Lorenzo de Caro (1817–1853), G.A. Vassallo (1817–1868), il-Baruni Augusto Testaferrata Abela (1826–1885), Ramiro Barbaro (1840–1920), Zaccaria Roncali (1840–1918), Paolo Cesareo (1844–1928), Giuseppe Muscat Azzopardi (1853–1927), Salvatore Castaldi (1857–1904), Alfonso Giglio (1860–1934) u oħrajn. Fost il-kittieba storiċi mbagħad insibu 'l Onorato Bres (1753–1818), Fortunato Panzavecchia (1797–1850), G.A. Micallef (1787–1840), il-Baruni Vzo. Azzopardi (1783–1857), Giuseppe Depiro (1794–1870), Ferdinando Giglio (għex f'Malta 1848–1860), Antonio Schembri (1811–1872), G.A. Vassallo (1817–1868), A. Ferris (1838–1907) u oħrajn¹⁰.

Harsa lejn dawn l-ismijiet hija biżżejjed biex wiehed jagħzel xi hames jew sitt ismijiet li l-hajra li kellhom għall-kitba għagħlithom jiktbu bil-Malti biex hekk ikollhom il-mertu wkoll f'isien art twelidhom u jwittu t-triq għal oħrajn warajhom. Fost dawn insemmu lil G.A. Vassallo (poezija u storja), A. Testaferrata Abela (palk), Ġ. Muscat Azzopardi (poezija u proża), Fortunato Panzavecchia (storja), u A. Ferris (storja u tagħlim popolari).

Dawn l-istess kittieba bit-Taljan servew ukoll ta' mera għall-iżvilupp tar-rumanz Malti. Ir-Romantiċiżmu hawn Malta baqa' jahkem bosta snin wara li f'pajjiżi oħra kien safa fix-xejn, u hekk insibu s-sensjela ta' rumanzi u rakkonti bit-Taljan fuq argumenti storiċi ta' Malta li bihom għadu sal-lum jitgħaxxaq il-poplu Malti. Fosthom insemmu 'l dawn il-kittieba: R. Barbaro: *Un Martire* (1878); Ferdinando Giglio: *(La Bella Maltea Ossia Caterina Desguanez – Romanzo Storico – Patrio del Secolo XV* (1872); G.A. Vassallo: *Alessandro Inguanez* (1861) u *Wignacourt* (1862); Carmela Augusta Cassar (*nee* Testaferrata): *Leonilda* (s.d.); N. Zammit: *Angelica o La Sposa della Mosta* (1862, 1880) u G. Gauci: *Il Condannato al supplizio del Rogo* (1905), *L'Ultimo Assalto del Forte S. Michele* (1907), *Maria Valdes* (1909) u *Notte di Dolore* (1915). Hemm rabta kbira bejn dawn ir-rakkonti storiċi u l-ewwel rumanzi bil-Malti ta' Gużè Muscat Azzopardi, ngħidu aħna *Ix-Xbejba tar-Rdum*, *Matthew Callus u l-Għarusa tal-Mosta*, biex ma nsemmux kittieba oħra wkoll li nisgura r-rakkonti tagħhom fuq argumenti bħal dawn.

Sar kif sar l-iżvilupp tal-kitba letterarja bil-Malti fis-Seklu Dsatax, mill-produzzjoni ta' dak is-seklu jidher kemm kellu raġun Vassalli meta fid-*Discorso Preliminare* tiegħu fl-1796 wera illi, jekk tiehu hsiebu, l-ilsien Malti huwa għodda tajba biex jithaddem bħala lsien letterarju għax, kif qal, *sembra ella è vero rozza e piena di barbarismi a primo aspetto... ma si coltivi prima, anchè per un poco, e si vedrà che più d'ogni altra è suscettibile di coltura*.

1. Barone V. Azzopardi, "Rappresentanza dei Giurati della Notabile e Valletta riguardo alcune pretese della Corte del Vice-Ammiraglio", fil-ktieb *Raccolta di varie cose antiche e moderne utili ed interessanti riguardanti Malta e Gozo*, 1843, pp. 273–275.
2. A. Cremona, *Vassalli and His Times*. 1940, pp. 100–107.
3. Ġ. Cassar Pullicino, "Fehmiet ta' Salvatore Cumbo dwar il-Malti 1839–1841", *Forum*, Ghadd 3, Marzu–Mejju 1971, pp. 3–4.
4. F. Vella, *Maltese Grammar for the use of the English*, Leghorn, 1831, Preface, pp. 4–6.
5. M.A. Vassalli, *Kifbyl yl Klfym Malti mfysser byl-Latin u byt-Taljan...* Romae, 1796–Discorso Preliminare, p. XIX.
6. M.A. Vassalli, *op. cit.*, p. XXXVIII.
7. M.A. Vassalli, *Mylsen Phoenico-Punicum sive Grammatica Melitensis*. Romae, 1791, pp. 235–6.
8. G.A. Vassallo, *Għal Chitarra ossia Collezione di nuove Poesie Maltesi sul gusto delle Popolari*, 1851, p. 6.
9. Ġ. Cassar Pullicino, "Il-Poezija ta' Ġan Anton Vassallo," fil-ktieb, *Kitba u Kittieba tal-Malti*. It-Tieni Ktieb–Il-Poezija sa l-1870 (It-Tieni Taqsima), 1964, pp. 73–113.
10. V. Laurenza, "Il contributo di Malta alla Letteratura Italiana", *f'Il Giornale di Politica e di Letteratura*, Anno X, Fasc. 11–12, 1934, pp. 548–559.

VI. VASSALLI'S SECOND SON Arab hospitality; a pretended robbery?

Mr Frans Ciappara's article on Mikiel Anton Vassalli's children (*The Sunday Times*, September 27, 1992) prompts me to publish some additional information concerning Vassalli's second son, named Mikiel Anton after his father but whose surname appears as Vassalli Formosa de Fremaux in a pamphlet published in 1867 on the advantages of Maltese emigration to North Africa¹.

In this pamphlet Vassalli's son included certain autobiographical details which are worth reproducing here as they reflect his adventurous spirit. He wrote: "...I have travelled a good deal in North Africa and its interior, where I spent nine years in excursions, frequenting many nations here, and especially with the Arabs of the different populations and tribes: and being favoured by the gift of the Arabic, Maltese, Franch, Italian and English languages I could, by these means, learn and be informed of many things requisite for the proposed emigration" (p. 3).

Further on in the same publication the author mentioned that "he went several times in the interior, and twice in the Great Desert where he always met with respect and love, because he knew from childhood how to respect and love the customs and manners of all classes and creeds of men" (p. 11)

By way of illustration he recounted one of his experiences: "...When one day I was travelling in the interior of Africa, having nothing to eat, but I had money, I approached some tents of the Arabs where I was very kindly received, and I asked them to sell me something to eat; these good men took me into their tents, washed my feet, brought me coffee, then some sweets of theirs till they prepared a hen with *cuscusoo* and a *taboonah* (bread baked under an earthenware made of baked clay), with milk, dried figs and dates; having finished from dinner, which was simple but heartily bestowed, I had a long conversation with the *Sheekh Beit Esh-shaar* (the Chief of the hair tents) and surrounded by the rest of the tribe as a family surround their common father.

“After having finished, we went round the country, the Sheekh with us, and when we came back, the Sheek asked me to remain the night with them.

“On the morrow (*sic*) morning they brought me coffee and prepared provisions for my journey, sent with me a man, very polite, and a boy came with us too, for a certain distance; then on leaving them I wanted to know what was my debt towards them; the men answered that what they had done was that which they would others should do to them being in a strange country; then I wanted to give some money to the boy but he was prevented by the man, saying: what will we do with money? I answered, to buy all those things which you cannot do yourselves; that, said he, can be done by bartering several of our articles with those things we require, for God gave us all we want for food and raiment; but, said I, when you require pistols, guns, powder and many other things, what will you do? He said, we will go to the town and barter hens or other objects with these, and so we are provided with what we wanted...” (pp. 16–17).

However interesting, this information leaves many lacunae in our knowledge of the younger Mikiel Anton’s biography. The exact period which he actually spent in North Africa is not available. Nor do we know whether he remained there uninterruptedly for nine years.

No specific date has been put forward so far to corroborate Cremona’s generic statement² that two of the Vassalli brothers, Savier and Mikiel Anton, “do not seem to have remained in Malta.” Insofar as Mikiel Anton is concerned, we can now safely assert that he did, in fact, leave Malta in 1843, bound for Algiers. His name appears in the list of passengers who left Malta on the English brig *Sansone* on September 1, 1843. There were 58 other passengers, of whom 31 were Maltese, presumably emigrants³. Here again this useful bit of information leaves unanswered the two all-important questions: How long did he stay in Algiers? And when did he return to Malta?

From another source we learn that in 1858 Vassalli’s second son was living at Pietà and that late in the spring of that year he had moved to Qormi, where he seems to have found himself in great distress. The circumstances leading to his predicament were explained in a petition dated July 22, 1858, written in French and addressed to Sir John Gaspard Le Marchant, who had been sworn in as Governor of Malta a few months before, in April 1858.

In his petition M.A. Vassalli informed the Governor that he resided at No. 29, Don Mario Street, Qormi and that his house had been burgled. Robbers were ravaging the countryside and the villages. They had broken into his house between 1 p.m. and 3.30 p.m. and he had been robbed of 50 gold sovereigns, a box full of old coins and medals, tools, clothes, bedspreads and many other objects. In less than three hours he had been reduced to utter misery!

He had immediately reported the theft to the authorities, and the syndic (mayor) had gone to his house, accompanied by a sergeant. On the following day the inquiring magistrate had called, together with a clerk, and he had established that the theft

had been carried out by several robbers, well equipped for their evil-doing. The syndic had done his utmost, but what could he do with only two constables? There were not enough policemen in the villages, especially at Qormi, one of the biggest villages, with 7,000—8,000 inhabitants, where there were only two constables and a sergeant. To find these officers one had to traverse the whole village, and at the police station sometimes one had to wait because they would be out, performing their duty elsewhere.

During the night one constable would be on patrol while the other stood in the guard room. The one on patrol was all alone, and armed with only an ordinary pistol, without powder, so that if he happened to meet two robbers he would be obliged to hide in order to avoid falling a victim to them, being alone and unarmed.

Other shortcomings and some serious allegations were mentioned in the petition. Vassalli finally informed the Governor that he had called three times at the Palace to try and speak to him, but he was never lucky enough to find him there. He had therefore taken the liberty to address his petition to him (*Le Marchant*) personally (i) firstly because he could not leave his house for fear of finding it burgled again on his return, and (ii) because he was reduced to extreme poverty and in such unfortunate circumstances that he had decided to throw himself upon his clemency.

On July 24, following receipt of Vassalli's petition, Captain Wilford Brett, Acting Chief Secretary to Government, directed that it be referred to the police "as to what truth there is, in this man's statement of his robbery". On July 30 G. Giappone Testaferrata, syndic of the 5th District which included Qormi, reported to Frederick Sedley, Superintendent of Police, "that on the evening of June 11 last the said Vassalli presented himself at this police station complaining to Sergeant G.B. Bonello of the theft described by him in his petition."

Giappone Testaferrata further stated "that the said sergeant having immediately reported to me the case, we forthwith repaired to the spot, where I found that Vassalli had been but a few days living in a room, situated within a yard of an enclosed spot of ground looking like a garden, amongst the remotest houses of the village, the door leading into the street, and in an unfrequented part of the country."

The syndic went on to report that "upon observing Vassalli's habitation I was struck at what he had been asserting in reference to the alleged theft because, as stated by him, the articles mentioned as missing were placed in a little trunk which still had the key attached to it; exposed in the room in front of the door, the ingress into which would be easily obtained, either from the interior part communicating with other gardens and fields, or through the door being in a bad condition; and having the shutters worn out and falling into pieces, which caused the room to be evidently in an insecure condition..." These and other related circumstances raised serious doubts in the syndic's mind as to the veracity of Vassalli's statements regarding the valuable articles of which he had been robbed, especially bearing in mind "the known want of means of the complainant."

As already stated, Vassalli had pointed out other serious defects in the Police system. The syndic refuted these allegations, commenting that “the memorialist has dared to make use of words asserting facts that are quite untrue, and others exaggerated, because the asserted ravaging of the country from thefts and breaking into houses is entirely false, as is also false the alleged indulgence of idle and vagrant people about the village, and of gambling in contravention of the law.”

On July 31, 1858 the police superintendent forwarded the syndic’s report to higher authority. He endorsed the syndic’s opinion that “it is far from clear, indeed very doubtful, if any robbery took place at all, and this is also the general opinion of the public of Casal Curmi, in which I fully concur.”

Mr Sedley’s assessment of Vassalli’s character and situation is quite revealing: “...this man has no means whatever and gains a scanty livelihood by teaching, when he can find pupils, reading and writing to the inferior classes and by writing out accounts for servants. Indeed, a short time previous to this pretended robbery, the Petitioner, who was then living in a very remote part of Pietà, came to me stating that he had seen some men trying to get over a wall in a neighbouring garden, and requested to be allowed to carry firearms, *not*, as he himself stated, *that he was apprehensive of being robbed as he had nothing to be robbed of*, but for his personal defence if assaulted”.

Government was satisfied with the result of the police investigations. By letter dated August 3, 1858 Vassalli was informed that “His Excellency the Governor has carefully investigated into all the statements contained in his communication, and cannot find any grounds on which he could interfere.”

In fairness to Vassalli one has to point out that, independently of the doubtful veracity of his statements regarding the pretended robbery, his strictures on the Police Force were not unfounded. In his *British Malta* (Vol. 1, 1938, p. 235) A.V. Laferla writes that, on taking office, Governor Le Marchant found that “the Police Force was in a worse condition than any other branch of the service and imperatively called for an entire revision throughout its whole system. The Chief Officer—Mr Sedley—had lived beyond his means and was hopelessly in debt with almost every shopkeeper and merchant in the town. His badly-paid subordinates were in a similar predicament and levied a sort of blackmail on the public. Sedley had, consequently, to be got rid off on pension...” Small wonder that Vassalli decided to address his petition direct to the Governor, or that the police reported so unfavourably on him!

1. *Suggestions in accordance with Mr. Amabile Bonello’s Project of Emigration in the Coasts of North Africa*, by Mr M.A. Vassalli Formosa de Fremaux, Malta, 1867.

2. A. Cremona, *Vassalli and His Times*, 1940, p. 122.

3. National Archives—Santo Spirito, Rabat; Arrivals and Departures Vol. 64 (from July 26 to October 29, 1843), Fol. No. 520.

4. National Archives—Santo Spirito, Rabat: Le Marchant—*Petitions*, Book, 2, 1858—Petition No. 348 (July 22, 1858). I am indebted to Col. Claude Gaffiero for kindly drawing my attention to this petition and accompanying papers. My thanks are also due to Mr J. Caruana, of the National Archives, for facilitating access to the original documents mentioned in this and the preceding reference.

It is not clear why Vassalli wrote his petition to Governor Le Marchant in French when he had an adequate command of English. It seems that he was rather proud of the streak of French blood in his veins, which probably also explains why, at the age of 52 in 1867, he chose to use the composite surname “Vassalli Formosa de Fremaux” as the author of his pamphlet on Maltese emigration.